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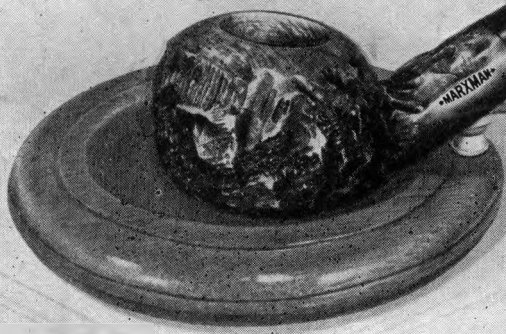

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Vol. 116, No. 1 for November, 1946 Best of New Stories

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THE FACT STORY

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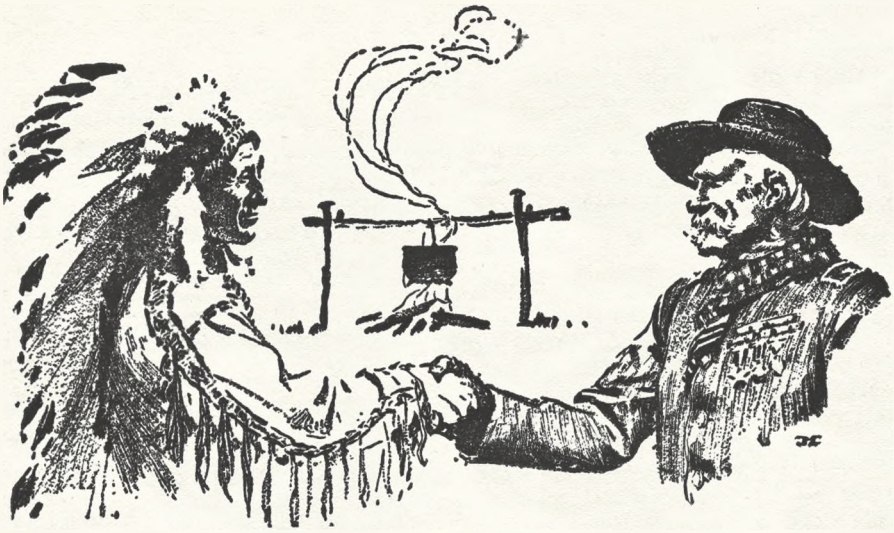


THE CAMP-FIRE

Where Readers, Writers and Adventurers Meet

T. C. McCLARY, first of the quartet of recruits to the ranks of our Writers' Brigade this month—his "A Blade of Green" appears on page 38—confesses—

I don't know precisely where my interest in the old Western cavalry originated, but it was prior to my familiarity with that barroom classic, *Custer's Last Stand*—and it has held.

I think the thing that first caught me was the unceasing conflict and testing of a man which formed the basic character of the cavalry. It was something more than just rough and tough; a man had to be in love with the guidon clean to the molten core of his fighting heart in order to tolerate the life at all. There were, of course, the Indians and the constant threat and danger which they presented. But beyond this apparent danger were other things of a more nebulous yet more nerve-jangling order. There was, for instance, the corruption and damned foolishness of the Indian Bureau, working, almost, it seemed, to create fresh troubles for the cavalry. The eastern Army "brass" itself sometimes connived in the political skulduggery, and the instances of such orders as, "Pursue and engage in action, but do not fire," were so common as to be standing jokes. Then there was the little matter of giving hostile Indians better rifles than the carbines designated for the cavalry, and overlooking furloughs and advancement, and sending wagon loads of brooms to some frontier post, but withholding medical supplies or food or field gear with some flimsy explanation that appropriations had run out or transport facilities were short. Finally, there was always the unceasing boredom of a frontier post . . . the intense heat and cold, sometimes in the same day's march, the flies, the fever, the dust, and the complete lack, at smaller posts, of any relief from monotony between periods of action.

A man had to be tough, right clean through his bones, and that kind of toughness is not generally associated with discipline or respect. In order to maintain the peculiar rough discipline that existed, the gap between officers and troops had to be such as to entirely eliminate the least possibility of familiarity. But in spite of severity and harshness the troops had certain advantages . . . all of their officers were actual fighting officers, and could lead their men under fire only by the actual power of leadership. An officer who couldn't bring instinctive respect from his men was as good as a dead cookie the minute battle started. It was not unknown for an officer to be shot in the back, but more common was for troops simply to ruin the officer by a silent truculence and disrespect which ultimately broke his self-confidence—a vital need for a fighting man.

When the wills or characters of an officer and a trooper clashed, one or the other had to give way. Under the rigors of frontier life and the severity of cavalry discipline, this often took a harsh form, but it was not easy to subdue the spirit of a fighting man who could lift a scalp as coolly as an

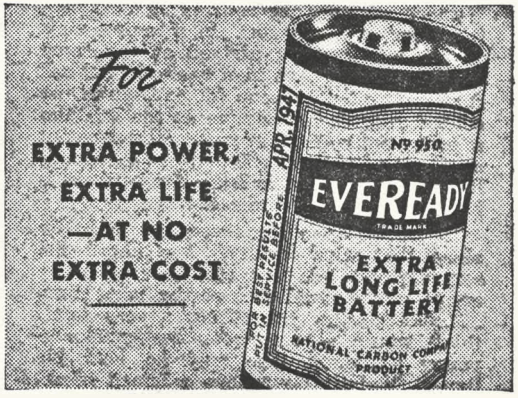
(Continued on page 8)

WHAT TO DO IF LOST IN THE WOODS AT NIGHT

Common sense and your flashlight can bring you through, says Adirondack guide Edwin Young, of Star Lake, N. Y.

1 First—take it *easy!* You're never really *lost* until you lose your head! *Don't travel at night.* Instead, use your flashlight to gather boughs and leaves for a bed, near a stream if possible. Build a signal fire; it will warm you and protect you. Then—

2 Flash the S.O.S. signal with your flashlight—three short, three long, three short—to guide searchers. Long-lasting "Eveready" batteries will send *hundreds* of such brilliant, penetrating light signals. Save your strength for daylight. Then—



3 Stay where you are until help comes. But, if you *must* travel, put out fire, head *downstream* along *any* running water; it will generally lead you to safety. When out of the woods, resolve: To *always* carry matches in a waterproof case, a compass, and an "Eveready" flashlight on *every* outing!

4 When you need a flashlight for emergency use—in the woods, at home, in your car, you *need* it! That's why it's wise not to compromise with anything less than "Eveready" batteries. Their longer life of brighter light has justly made them the *largest-selling flashlight batteries in the world.*

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(Continued from page 6)

Apache, and every junior officer soon learned that. The Western cavalry trooper was apparently impervious to breaking. His loyalty and respect had to be won, and if the officer failed to achieve this, it was more often the officer who broke. If he did achieve it, if he proved to the troops' satisfaction that whatever his harshness, it was something he would lay equally upon himself, his men would usually follow him to hell.

The harshness of thought and feeling characteristic of the old cavalry seems to have been part outlet for suppressed anger and boredom, and partly a kind of game or challenge. It was a constant test of a man's ability to take it; a crude but effectual test if his nerves were steady or if, in some critical moment, he might "blow his top." Whatever its bad points from the standpoint of the proponents for a democratic army, it seems to have developed a toughness and esprit de corps which made the Western cavalry outstanding both within our own Army, and the armies of the world. It also developed a peculiar relationship between officers and men, and the troops do not seem to have been at a disadvantage. A few cases on record show unreasonable abuse of authority, but in the case of officers of that type, the records more often show an eventual "request for transfer," resignation, or death.

I had in my own family two older relatives, both of whom served with the old Western cavalry, one retiring as a colonel, the other as a sergeant. In spinning their yarns, both usually arrived at the same common point . . . a man has to be rubbed raw and tested to keep fit, and while the colonel regarded discipline as the medium to achieve this with the troops, the sergeant could match up with a few tricks the troops had for the officers, and the story herein is based upon one of these conflicts.

"It is not an officer's courage in battle alone that wins loyalty," I've heard the sergeant say. "A man can be very brave and a gol damned fool at the same time . . . like Custer. Sometimes a very small thing would give a troop respect for a young shavetail. The way he held his liquor. Walking to relieve a lamed horse. Putting himself through the same sweating drill he put the men through. You had the strict disciplinarians, and you had the don't-give-a-damn tough kind, and you had the plain lax officers, but what the troops wanted to feel, chiefly, was that an officer was not using his authority to inflict a discipline he would not place upon himself. If they were sure he could take what he meted out, they would still grumble plenty, but they were kind of secretly proud of it. Fighting men like to feel they're tough enough to take anything, and prove it, if it isn't laid on too thick."

"A Blade of Green" shows, I hope, one of the smaller things by which troops might judge an officer, and in their acceptance of him, turn from a rough mob of fighting men into a deadly and disciplined fighting unit with the synchronized power that comes only in voluntary acceptance of leadership.

As for myself, I've drifted around at quite a few odd jobs—the wheat harvest, lumberjacking, construction (a stretch as ironworker on the Bear Mountain Bridge), police reporter for various dailies and syndicates, and latterly freelancing for the magazines. Nothing very exciting but I have met some real adventurers in my driftings and have discovered that all of them have had two or three things in common, from Wall Street plungers to gem thieves. Paradoxically, pursuing an unorthodox and often lawless existence, they almost invariably had a very strict, and within its peculiarities, very honest code of their own which they adhered to. They were men of imagination who lived for the pleasure of varied experience; they did not kid themselves about themselves; they were really brave, by which I mean they knew from experience what fear is and, capable of feeling it and knowing it, still surmounted it at critical moments; and most of them were soft as mush when it came to animals, children, or those less able to take care of themselves. And having plenty of real experiences to tell about, which they seldom do, they are colossal liars about the stories they cook up for themselves.

To me, the great adventure is people. The social students can have 'em as masses and classes and income and racial brackets. I find them all individuals, and interesting, and full of adventure in their personal problems and idiosyncrasies and ways of thinking. My friend George, for instance, a small time crook who could have been a reasonably successful lawyer, but would rather spend a week's time trying to figure how to do you—or me—out of fifteen dollars than go out and work and make a hundred or two. George used to pickpocket my money whenever I was drunk and then loan it back to me very seriously when I got sober. He always extracted precisely five dollars from the "loan," considering that a legitimate commission for having kept me from spending my money. Or Beach, the tunnel hog, who can't stand to cross even an empty street against the lights. Or Manny, who was with Carlson's Raiders, and will carry his drink down-bar if a neighbor gets wide with his elbows. Or Patty, one of the country's really crack homicide detectives whose passion is reading the most impossible bang-bang murder mysteries and goes into a cold sweat at the hero's predicaments. And then myself. . . . I even find that bird amusing too.

JIM CHAPMAN, whose "The Exile of Three-Foot" you'll find on page 66, writes succinctly, by way of stoking the

(Continued on page 141)

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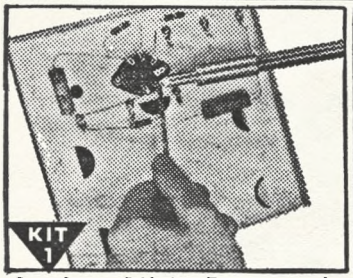

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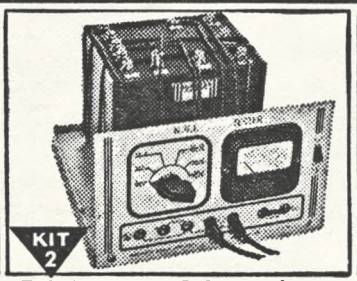

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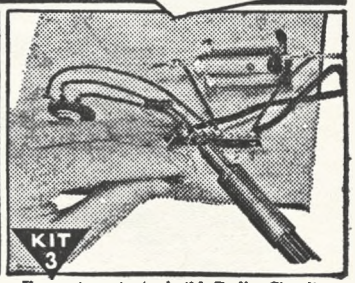

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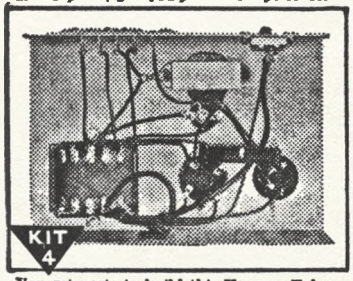

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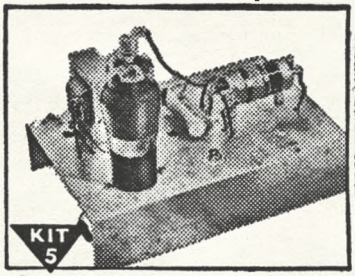

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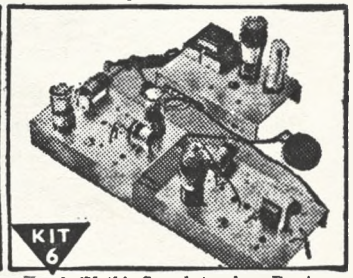

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FRANK KRAMER

COCK O' THE

"Now who could you be?" the little man demanded snappishly.

CAP GITCHIE came out of the Kentucky woods almost eight miles ahead of the posse that was chasing him. He walked among the log huts, houses, and various other buildings which sheltered the three hundred inhabitants of Louisville, and went out to take a look at the river. The sun had not yet climbed over the eastern horizon, and a fine mist hovered above the falls where the Ohio dropped its twenty-two feet in two miles. But, at this flood season, the white water that thundered over those falls when they were low was hardly in evidence. Cap Gitchie walked down to Bear Grass Creek, where the keel and flatboats were anchored, and from the bow of the biggest flatboat—fourteen feet wide by fifty long—a black and white dog rose from the coil of rope where it had been sleeping.

Cap Gitchie drew back his right foot, the one that had kicked many a clamoring dog from

RIVER

By JIM KJELGAARD

"Could be George Washington," said Cap, "or the King of France. But I ain't."

his path, and experimentally snapped it forward. A wide grin split his mouth, that was almost hidden by a straggling mustache above and by a bristling beard that trespassed from below. He had traveled a hundred and forty miles in two days, and there had not been much time for sleeping. But there was enough

zest remaining in his foot so that the dog would have been sent howling back to the flatboat had he dared come on shore and pit himself against this buckskin-clad stranger. Cap shifted the long rifle, a bare ten inches shorter than his own six feet three inches of slim muscle and brawn, from his right hand to his left. And it was just at that moment that the red rooster perching on his right shoulder came awake.

It was a small rooster that weighed, and Cap Gitchie knew this, exactly four pounds nine ounces. But his sweeping length, that started in a slim, snake-like, combless head, and terminated in a gracefully curved sickle of tail feathers, lent an impression of much greater size. The butts of his wings were thick and strong. He was solidly-built, well-muscled in the chest, thighs, and neck. His legs were of medium length, and the inch and a quarter long spurs that grew upon them had been carefully sandpapered to a needle point. But it was his fierce, proud eyes that set him apart from the ordinary cock found prowling about the barns and manure piles of the settlers who had gone down the Ohio and Mississippi. They were the eyes of a thoroughbred gamecock, and when the rooster came awake it flapped its wings. Standing erect on Cap Gitchie's shoulder, it sent its challenging crow echoing over the river, and from one of the anchored flatboats another rooster answered.

The red cock settled down, turning its head from side to side and blinking in the half light of early morning while it sought to discern the exact source from which its invitation to battle had been answered. It clucked throatily, and made as if to crow again. Cap Gitchie reached up with his left hand, and twined his fingers softly about the red rooster's throat.

"Suppose," he suggested, "that you shut up. Ain't you got me in enough trouble?"

AS THOUGH suddenly remembering he glanced back at the dark trees out of which he had come. It was exactly a year and a half ago that he had landed at Baltimore. It hadn't been deserting, or jumping ship, because to go back on the *St. John* would mean only to be clapped in irons while the vessel sailed back to England. There he would stand trial. Captain Marritt, of the *St. John*, was a hard driver of men. But it had been his mistake when he chose, after the anchorage in Chesapeake Bay, to use his lash on Cap Gitchie. Certainly it had been a fair fight; Captain Marritt had even used a marlinspike. But he hadn't used it well enough, and he had been lying on the deck in an undetermined state of disrepair when Cap Gitchie landed.

Going ashore, Cap Gitchie had seen the red rooster scratching about a refuse heap on the waterfront, and he had called that refined poaching technique, which he had learned on the estates of English lords, into play. With the rooster in his shirt front, he had started towards Pittsburgh. Ten miles out of Baltimore, with every intention of wringing its neck and roasting it, he had taken the rooster from his shirtfront—and started in to laugh the while he stroked its neck with a soothing forefinger.

When a man stole chickens in broad daylight he had time for a few swift glances at his intended quarry, and the rest of his faculties must be devoted to looking for possible owners of that quarry. After he stole it speed was essential. But, when he had time for a good look, and saw that he had a gamecock, it was essential that he arrive at the natural conclusion of all good Englishmen. It was a sin for any gamecock to die anywhere except in the cockpit. For half an hour Cap Gitchie sat beside the road fondling the rooster, and letting it scratch about for such bugs, seeds, and worms, as it wanted to eat. America was no longer an alien land, welcoming another penniless stranger by the back door route, for the red rooster brought a warm touch of home.

As a boy he had never missed a cockfight, attending them in schools and schoolyards, where the schoolmasters presided and for a reward received the dead cocks. He had witnessed game birds battling to the death in churches and churchyards, and had even sneaked in to the cockpits on Drury Lane. He had seen the famous Battle Royal, where a dozen or more cocks were tossed into the pit and the last one alive declared the winner. Not being especially interested in history, Cap didn't know that Englishmen had been handling and fighting cocks since long before the time of Julius Caesar, who was himself a famous cocker. Cap did know that, as far as looks and body conformation were concerned, he had seldom seen a better cock than the one that fussed beside him. Furthermore, when he resumed his journey towards Pittsburgh, the little red rooster was entirely satisfied to ride on his shoulder.

Cap conditioned him on the way, stroking him constantly, talking to him, throwing him up in the air and letting him flutter down to strengthen his wings, forcing him to run back and forth—doing this by grasping his wings and making him go. When they reached Pittsburgh Cap scraped the bottom of his purse, and bet the two pounds five shillings he had left that the red rooster could whip the gray that a Pittsburgh merchant brought against him. And, conceding four ounces and fighting with natural spurs, the little red killed the gray in seven minutes. But, after he had defeated the town's champion, it was impossible to get any more fights in Pittsburgh.

Cap snatched the rooster up and raced toward the waterfront.

By slow stages, sleeping where night overtook him if he happened to be in wild country, and bedding between blankets whenever he came across one of the infrequent inns, Cap and his rooster fought their way down the Ohio. Two of a kind, they accepted and defeated all comers. But it was not until they came to Limestone, another raw Ohio River frontier town, that they met with real trouble. Cap had wagered all the money he had picked up since Baltimore—some twenty-five pounds—that his red rooster was better than the dominick brought against him at Limestone. And it had been.

But how was he, Cap Gitchie, to know that the Limestoners were hard losers, or that, without settling their bets, they'd threaten him with a long rifle and order him to leave town at the first opportunity, which he himself had better create within two minutes? And how was he to know that, after he'd taken the rifle away from the one who held it, and collected his winnings, he'd have to race into the southern forest with a posse of Limestoners right behind him? A man couldn't possibly guess such things in advance. All he could do was run—fast.

The rooster stretched again, flapped his wings, and a second time sent his ringing crow rolling over the assembled flat- and keelboats. The other cock answered, and there was motion on a keelboat that was anchored to some willows a bare twenty feet away. A brisk little man dressed in a suit of white woolen underwear emerged from the cabin to stand on the deck.

Swinging back and forth, a ponderous silver brooch suspended on a silver chain bumped against his chest. A fringe of gray

hair clung almost precariously to the sides of his otherwise bald head, and his chin was adorned by a defiant beard that resembled nothing so much as a handful of chopped-off gray-colored straw.

"Now who could you be?" he demanded snappishly.

Cap Gitchie folded his arms, cradling the long rifle in the crook of one of them.

"Could be the King of France, or George Washington."

"Yes, an' you could be Thomas Jefferson, or anybody else who fights cocks, just 'cause you got one on your shoulder!" the little man snapped. "Where ye from?"

"From every place but here, and I'll soon be from here."

The little man stamped to the bow of his keelboat, and bent his head in a belligerent gesture. He doubled his fists. Then, thinking better of it, he smiled.

"How old are ye, mister?"

"Old enough"—Cap was twenty-four—"to know enough to mind my own business."

The little man's smile widened. "Ye talk like a boatman; moreover ye talk like a keelboatman. Ever think of goin' to N'Yurlens?"

"Now what would I be doing in New Orleans?"

"Do I have to tell ye everything?" the little man snapped. "How should I know what ye'd be doin' there? All I asked was did ye ever think of goin'. If ye do I can use another boatman—fifteen dollars an' found for the trip. See me, Abijah Ezekiel Primpton Crabbe, owner an' cap'n of the *River Belle*, cargoes to an' from N'Yurlens an' tradin' done, if ye change your mind."

Cap Gitchie wandered back into Louisville, and the rooster flew from his shoulder to scratch vigorously about in a patch of green grass. He picked up and swallowed the various bugs and worms he uncovered, and Cap Gitchie stood gazing at an inn. It was too early for it to open, and he was hungry. But a kick on the door might awaken the proprietor, and Cap was just ready to deliver that kick when motion back at the edge of the forest caught his eye. Eight tall buckskinned men broke out of the woods, and with long rifles held ready marched grimly into town.

Cap snatched the rooster up and raced towards the waterfront. He paused momentarily beside the *River Belle*, a fifty-foot long by eight wide keelboat loaded with furs for New Orleans. Then he leaped from the bank and landed on the deck. Almost instantly Abijah Crabbe was beside him, a bell-mouthed blunderbuss loaded with buckshot in his hands. Cap Gitchie smiled pleasantly.

"I decided to take your offer," he said, "if my rooster gets passage and found too."

"That'll cost ye a dollar," Abijah Crabbe said.

"And, of course, we'll have to get off right away."

Abijah Crabbe glanced toward the shore. He'd had previous experience with men who made up their minds suddenly to go to New Orleans and had to leave right away.

"That'll cost ye four more dollars," he affirmed.

"Let's move."

CHAPTER II

THE FLAG OF SPAIN

CAP GITCHIE took his place at one of the two starboard oars and timed his stroke to that of the man ahead of him. Directly across, on the other side of the same seat, sat a lanky Kentuckian with a solemn face and sad eyes. Ahead of Cap, handling the other starboard oar, was a blithe Irishman who rowed as though keelboating down the Ohio River was a merry and entirely delightful experience which no man should miss. His seat mate was a lithe Creole who moved like a cat, and purred like one when he talked. The Creole had helped bring a keelboat up from the Louisiana swamps and was now going back. Abijah Crabbe stood on top of the cabin with the handle of the long steering sweep—it extended for ten feet behind the boat—in his hands.

They moved slowly down the creek and into the Ohio. The eight armed Limestoners appeared on the bank and scanned the boat. As though it was a necessary part of steering Abijah Crabbe maneuvered the *River Belle* to hide Cap Gitchie. Cap grinned. The lanky Kentuckian said lugubriously, "They must be lookin' for somebody."

"Could be," Cap agreed. "There's a lot of scoundrels back in the woods."

"But not near as many as there is on this river," the Kentuckian said. "And the Spanish is the biggest scound'erls of 'em all."

"How do you make that out?"

"I don't make it out. It just is. Ohio's crowded with all the immigrants as has been comin' to her since the war ended. And what can they use for a road? The old Mrs. Sippi, in course. And where is their market? N' Yurlens, in course. And who owns N'Yurlens? The Spanish, in course. And what do the Spanish do? Charge a high duty on everything goin' through their port, in course. Or else they make this law, and they make that law, and a boat can't sell its cargo without it's at their prices. Or they keep it waitin' so long that the owner's profits is all eat up anyhow."

Cap Gitchie shrugged. He had been hired to help take a boat down the river, and not to worry about what happened to its cargo after it got there.

"Well," he said, "if there's so many settlers along these rivers, why'n't they just take their guns, march down to New Orleans, and tell the Spanish where to head in?"

"Heh, heh," the Kentuckian laughed dryly. "The Spanish is fearful lest they're goin' to try just that. That's why they leave Wilkinson's boats go down."

"Who's Wilkinson?"

"Prob'ly the worst of all the scound'erls. He went down to N'Yurlens four years ago, in 1787, with a lading of tobacco. The Spanish confisticated it, and Wilkinson dared 'em to keep it. 'Tis claimed he said he's a general in the American Army, and he'd like 'em to keep his boat and cargo on account that'd give him an excuse for goin' back, gettin' his Army, and bringin' it down to clean up every greasy Spaniard. Anyhow he scare't 'em, an' they says, 'Well, Wilkinson, we got each other where the hair's short. S'pose we talk turkey? You do what you can for us, and we'll do what we can for you. You swear allegiance to Spain, and go back upriver. Tell ever'body who wants to bring a cargo boat down here that, as long as they swear allegiance to Spain, they can get by with fifteen per cent duty 'stead of twenty-five. Tell anybody as wants to settle on Span-

ish land that they can do it.' Lemme tell ya, them Spanish is scare't we're goin' to come down and just kick 'em out."

"And did Wilkinson swear allegiance to Spain?"

"Sure. Ever'body, that is most ever'body, as goes down does that."

"What about the United States?"

The Kentuckian shrugged. "That's a long ways off. Besides you don't have to stay Spanish. If'n you take a flatboat down the river, nacherly you can't row it back up on account flatboats don't row up current. So you sell or give the boat away after you sold the cargo, and walk up the Natchez Trace. If'n you go down in a keelboat, you row back up. You can allus onswear after you're out of Spanish country."

Cap Gitchie chuckled. The situation was not too replete with either ideals or morals, but it did have its practical side. The Kentuckian shook a solemn head.

"It's no laughin' matter. This country, no matter if it teams up with Spain, England, or the United States, has got to have not only a open but a free ol' Mrs. Sippi."

"Well, I sure hope they get it. Are there any fightin' roosters down the river?"

"Huh! Sometimes you'd think there wasn't nothin' but! All them Spanish got 'em, and most of the settlers has. Can your rooster fight?"

"Can he fight! He's the red-roarin'est, peel-hailin'est, scrappin'est, maddest, fastest, fightin'est thing what ever grew feathers. He can lick his weight and that of a coop full of hens in hound dogs, wildcats, and maybe even a couple of Spanish tossed in."

TWO men in a small canoe paused beside the *River Belle,* and the red rooster stood on the rail looking contemptuously down at them. The canoeists waved and passed on. The Creole licked his lips.

"You'll have the chance to fight the Spanish," he said, "eef your cheec-ken lives that long."

"What do you mean, if he lives that long?"

The Creole rippled his shoulders. "The settlers, they weel want to match their birds with yours too. They want to do so weeth every fighting bird that comes down on a boat, and there is no cheec-ken so far that has fought at Weelow Bend and lived to go on. The man who leeves there, Monsieur Slattery, has the finest fighting bird thees side of Spanish country."

"We'll give him four ounces and take him on," Cap Gitchie said quickly. "What about these Spanish roosters?"

"Ah-h!" The Creole's eyes glowed with the memory of some of the great cockfights he had witnessed in New Orleans. "They are the magnificent birds! And of them all, *El Soldado Poco,* The Little Soldier, is the grandest! He is the best fighting bird in the stud of Governair Gayoso himself. Of course the Gover-nair, who cannot himself stoop to matching cheeckens with a boatman, does not go een the pit himself. There is a Sergeant Cortez whose only duty is to watch and take care of The Little Soldier."

"Going to fight him, rooster man?" the Irishman asked.

"Unless the Spanish are scare't," Cap Gitchie said blithely. "Me and my rooster, we've took on everything between Pittsburgh and here. We'll take on anything that lies ahead."

"We'll have some fun," the Kentuckian said, as though that were a very sad thing.

The red rooster walked nonchalantly around the deck, hopped up on the rail surrounding it to look into the water, and hopped down. He flew to the cabin's top, investigated Abijah Crabbe thoroughly, and flew from there to cuddle up beside Cap Gitchie. The feline Creole followed his every move, and his eyes reflected the love of a good fighting cock that had been born in his heart. He turned to smile shyly at Cap Gitchie.

"That is fine bird," he purred. "I, Baptiste Amante, say so."

The Irishman said blithely, "My old father told me when I left Dublin, 'Mike, never bet on a fightin' rooster.' If I had not done so I could be sittin' in a palace of my own today. But I guess I have a lot of my father in me."

"Have you got any money to bet?" the Kentuckian asked.

"No. But a man might always hope to have some."

"You will not get it," the Kentuckian said gloomily. "You are not the kind to have it."

The Irishman laughed, and struck up a song:

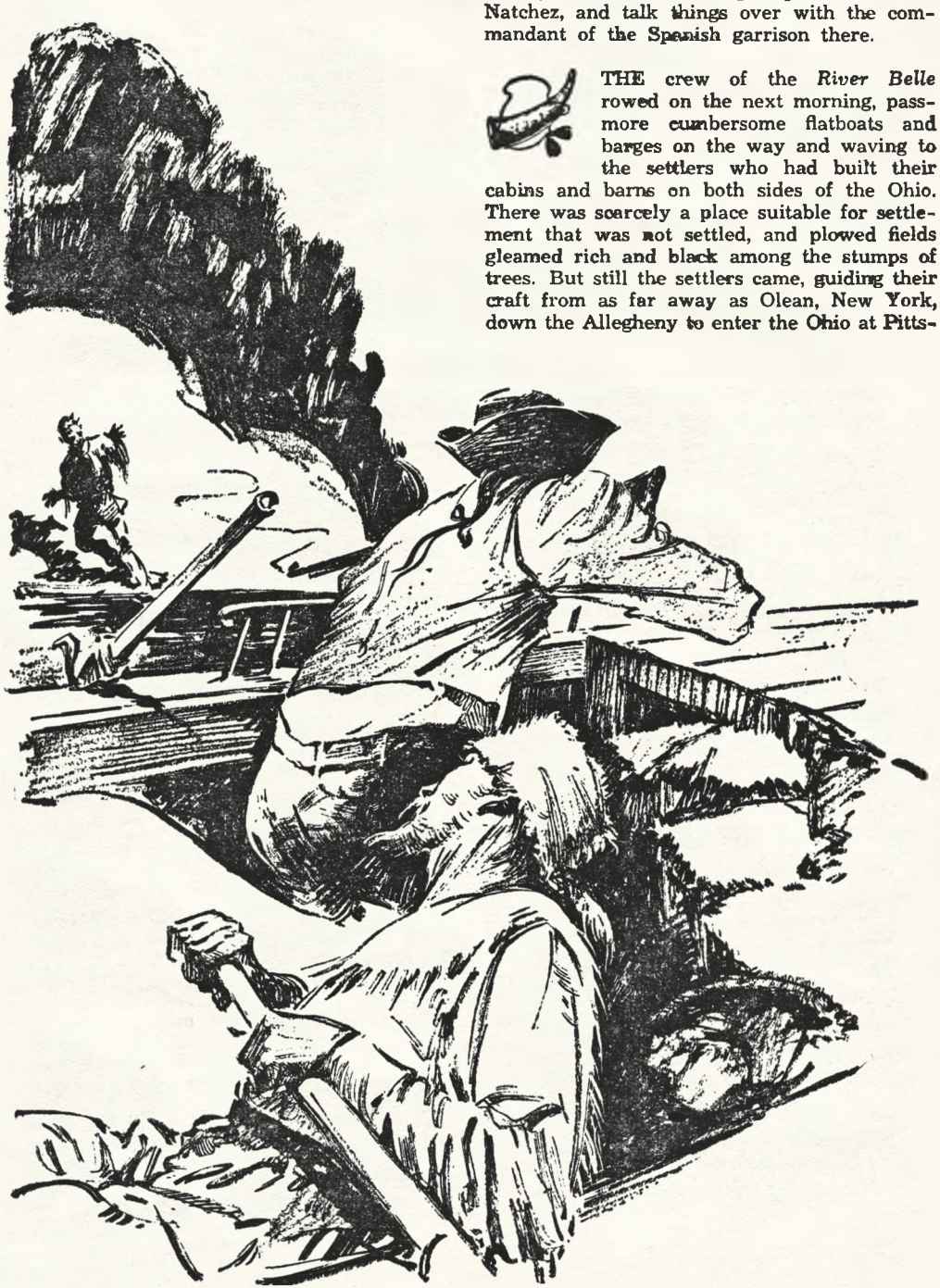
"The boatman is a lucky man,
No one can do as the boatman can,
The boatmen dance and the boatmen sing,
The boatman is up to everything.

Hi-ho, away we go,
Floating down the O-hio . . ."

They moored that night to some willows below an outjutting headland. Abijah Crabbe seized some of the bushes, pulled the boat in and tied it. Then he shoved it out into the river—a sudden fall of water could leave it stranded if it was too close to the shore—and the big keelboat strained like an eager horse at its moorings. The five man crew cooked their supper, ate, and lay down on the deck to sleep.

But, down in New Orleans, Governor Gayoso could not sleep. His was the task of holding this empire for the Spanish king, and not too

Without flicking an eyelid, the Kentuckian picked up his rifle, took careful aim over the railing, and squeezed the trigger.



far up the river was a host of hard-bitten, straight-shooting men of all nations who had no respect for the Spanish or any other king. For half the night the governor paced his bedchamber. Then he made a decision.

Very soon he would go up the river to Natchez, and talk things over with the commandant of the Spanish garrison there.

THE crew of the *River Belle* rowed on the next morning, passmore cumbersome flatboats and barges on the way and waving to the settlers who had built their cabins and barns on both sides of the Ohio. There was scarcely a place suitable for settlement that was not settled, and plowed fields gleamed rich and black among the stumps of trees. But still the settlers came, guiding their craft from as far away as Olean, New York, down the Allegheny to enter the Ohio at Pitts-

burgh. Men, women, children, horses, cattle, hogs, sheep, chickens, and farm implements, occupied these floating arks impartially, and all used the river to arrive in this promised land to which they were journeying. But the *River Belle* was a fast boat, bound for New Orleans with a perishable cargo, and could not tarry long to pass the time of day. They were some days out of Louisville, and well within high stone cliffs that bordered both sides of the river, when Abijah Crabbe left his place at the steering sweep to place an extra horn of powder and pouch of bullets beside each man.

"What's coming?" Cap Gitchie asked.

"Cave-In-Rock," the gloomy Kentuckian asserted, as though that in itself was explanation enough for everything.

Abijah Crabbe climbed back to the top of the cabin, and used the steering sweep to guide the *River Belle* out to the center of the river. Cap Gitchie pulled on his oar, keeping perfect stroke with the man ahead of him, when from the west bank floated a shrill, agonized appeal.

"Help! For God's sake, help!"

Cap Gitchie turned his head to see a white man running along the riverbank. His buckskin clothing hung in ragged shreds from his gaunt frame. A breech cloth was draped about his thighs, and his beard fluttered as he ran parallel to the keelboat. Again the agonized, heart-wringing cry floated over the water.

"Help me! Please help me! Take me on board! I've escaped from the Indians!"

Without flicking an eyelid or changing his melancholy countenance even slightly, the Kentuckian let his oar rest in its lock. He picked up the rifle that lay beside him, took careful aim over the railing, and squeezed the trigger. The pleading man on the bank took two more running steps, then two slow ones. He pitched forward to lie motionless. Cap Gitchie rose in his seat, and hot anger inflamed his eyes.

"Why you—"

"Sit down and pick up your oar!" Abijah Crabbe's beard waggled as his jaw moved.

There was a wild yell from the bank, and a long canoe with twelve Indians in it bore down on the *River Belle*. Sitting calmly on top of the cabin, Abijah Crabbe picked up a musket and shot. The foremost Indian dropped his paddle to slump backwards in the canoe. A rattle of rifle fire came from the rest, and the bullets thudded against the stout hull of the *River Belle* or splashed in the water nearby. Cap Gitchie rose, knelt along the railing, sighted on another Indian, shot, and saw him fall into the canoe. He was aware of other rifles cracking beside him, and the canoe put back towards shore. The red rooster stood on top of the cabin, flapped his wings, and crowed.

"You!" Abijah Crabbe called imperiously. "You, roosterman! Come up here!"

Cap Gitchie rose, and climbed the ladder leading to the cabin roof. Abijah Crabbe's beard worked up and down in outraged indignation. His mild blue eyes glowed hotly.

"Is this your first trip down the river?" he demanded.

"Yup." Cap Gitchie let his hands hang loosely, ready to fight if fighting was necessary.

"I thought so!" Abijah Crabbe sputtered. "Lemme tell you somethin', young-un—"

"Could you sort of gentle yourself down before you tell it? I never did like being hollered at."

"Well—Well— That white man was a renegade. He wanted to toll us into the bank so's them Injuns could climb our hump for us. They try the same thing ever' time we pass Cave-In-Rock, and other places too. Don't never pick up nobody what hollers at you from this riverbank!"

"I never will," Cap Gitchie said mildly. "But don't those Injuns sort of run out of white men?"

"Huh!" Abijah Crabbe's beard wriggled violently. "A man's got to go down the river a couple times to know better'n that! There's plenty of white would rather be Injuns and pillage their own kind! Lots of boats would of landed!"

"I reckon so," Cap Gitchie said.

He returned to his seat to find the red rooster standing on its edge, clucking to himself. The lean and panther-like Creole was gazing at him with frank admiration.

"It is a good luck rooster," he said softly. "Nev-air before did I pass Cave-In-Rock without somebody being killed or wounded."

The Irishman, who had been leaving his oar to make frequent trips to the cabin, sat unsteadily down in his seat. The rooster sidled up to him, and brushed the Irishman's horny hand with the tip of his bill. A little wind sighed up the river, and sent a succession of tiny wavelets lapping against the *River Belle*. The Irishman hiccupped, and laughed. He tickled the rooster's neck.

" 'Tis the luck of the Irish you have with you, me bye," he sang happily. "And that luck rode high on Saint Patrick's day of all days!" He turned to face Cap Gitchie. " 'Tis now that I'd put my last copper on this fowl's spurs."

"Those spurs won't let you down, Irish," Cap Gitchie said.

The Kentuckian said, as though it was a decision he had achieved only after long and ponderous thought, "I think that's a real fighting rooster, too."

The little wind blew harder, then died of its own accord and the river was calm again. The *River Belle* floated on, down the current towards New Orleans and the market for its fur. They camped that night below another headland, and it was the middle of the next

day when they came to a place where, for a ways on either side, no forest existed. Lush green willows lined the shores, and the river curled into a quiet bay where flatboats, keelboats, and other river craft were moored so closely that they formed a floating raft for a quarter mile down from the head of the bay. Chickens fluttered about, and various animals were grazing on the shore grass. An unconcerned boatman was scraping a pig which he had hung on a tripod. Other boatmen lounged on their craft, or were on the shore where people of all ages and both sexes were dancing about a fire while a bearded, one-eyed giant who looked like a pirate coaxed music from a violin. A man on one of the nearest boats looked around, and promptly shouted, "Here comes the *River Belle*!"

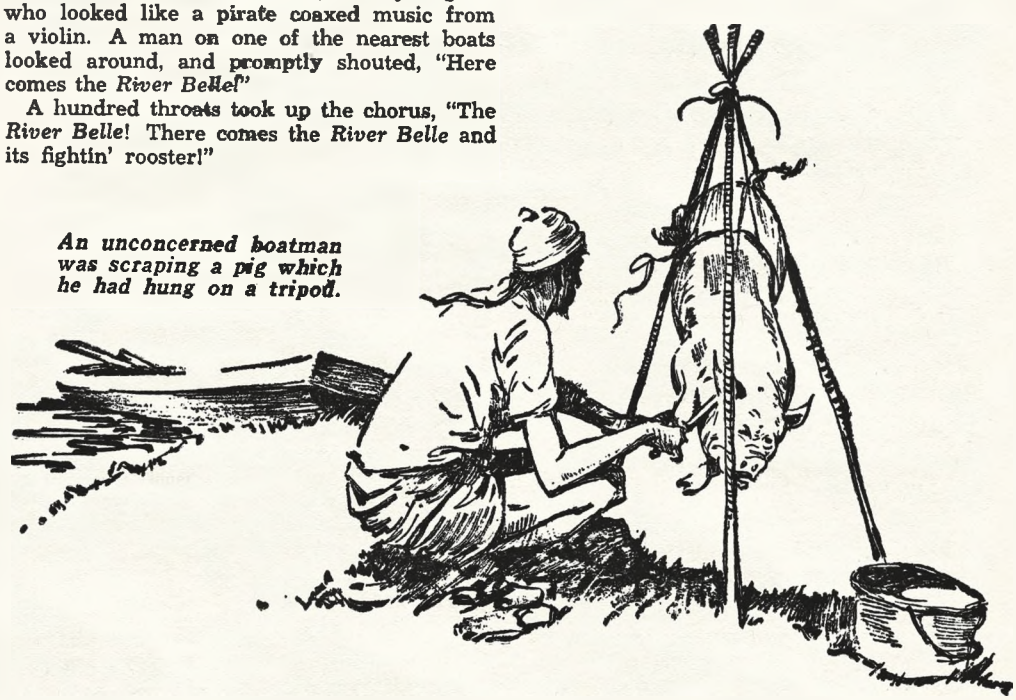
A hundred throats took up the chorus, "The *River Belle*! There comes the *River Belle* and its fightin' rooster!"

The Kentuckian shrugged. "Nobody knows jest what it is. But it sure 'nough is. Folks two hunner't miles down the river knows about your business 'most as soon as you do. I suspicion that the two men in that canoe—remember?—knowed your red rooster and brung the word on."

"What about it?"

"This is Willow Bend, and there's a dominicker rooster lives here. No rooster what's come down on a boat, and fit him, has lived to go on to N'Yurlens."

The other three oarsmen were looking at



An unconcerned boatman was scraping a pig which he had hung on a tripod.

CHAPTER III

EL SOMBRADO POCO

CAP GITCHIE pulled slowly on his oar, looking around at the crowd on the bank while Abijah Crabbe expertly steered the *River Belle* to a mooring between another keelboat and a flatboat. As far as he knew there had been no one except the crew on board since they left Louisville. Yet, the waiting crowd seemed not only to be expecting them, but knew all about the red rooster they carried. The Kentuckian, studying Cap Gitchie's face, laughed dryly.

"Heh, heh. I guess you never did hear tell of the river grapevine?"

"What's that?"

him studiously, appealingly, as though the expressions on their faces alone could help persuade him to let the red rooster fight the dominick. Abijah Crabbe stood apart, apparently absorbed in the silver ornament that hung about his neck. But he, too, was surreptitiously looking at Cap Gitchie. The honor of their boat, and all boatmen, was at stake. A settler, not even a boatman himself, had a rooster that had killed all the river roosters brought against him. When and if a river rooster finally killed the dominick, or at least fought him to a standstill—

Cap Gitchie turned again to look at the crowd, and he saw a short, stout man with a ruddy face threading his way through them. The short man, for all his weight, leaped lightly aboard the flatboat next to the *River Belle* and made his way along it to the *River*

Belle. He peered over, squinting against the sun's reflection in the water.

"I'm Pat Slattery," he announced, as though that in itself was enough of an introduction to mark him anywhere, "and I hear you got a fightin' rooster on board?"

As though in answer the red rooster flew up to the railing, flapped his wings, bent his head, and crowed. A laugh rippled among the assembled river folk who had come here or stopped here for the express purpose of seeing the fight that must take place. Pat Slattery smiled superciliously, and looked at the red rooster.

"My mistake," he said apologetically. "I understood it was a fightin' bird."

"It is a fightin' bird." Cap Gitchie's voice was pitched low, and angry overtones trembled through it.

"Maybe it's what they call a fightin' bird up north." Pat Slattery was now openly sarcastic. "But of course you want to pass by without matchin' him? Of course you admit that he's not as good as mine?"

"Nope," Cap Gitchie spoke again. "I think he's better'n yours, but we ain't givin' more'n four ounces weight."

"What's yours weigh?"

"Four pounds nine ounces."

"The dominick's in at four eleven. Now, boatman, money talks."

"I got fifty pounds says my red's better'n your dominicker."

Behind him he sensed, rather than saw, the intense jubilation of the Creole, the Kentuckian, and the gay Irishman. Glancing aside, he saw Abijah Crabbe try to conceal a satisfied smile. The now silent crowd, wishing to miss no word, pressed in a little closer. The Irishman broke the silence with, "Abijah, give me now the wages you promised for the trip! I haven't a copper to bet on our rooster!"

Abijah Crabbe said sternly, "You get paid in New Orleans."

"Ha!" a lanky boatman dressed only in ragged trousers taunted. "What else you got to bet?"

The Irishman rushed into the cabin, and emerged waving a full bottle of whiskey. "This!" he raged.

"I'll cover it!"

"Money talks," Pat Slattery said smoothly. "But it's also got looks. Where you gettin' fifty pounds, boatman?"

"Here." Cap Gitchie unbuckled the money belt that was slung around his waist. "Now are you just talking with a big mouth? Or have you got fifty pounds to match it?"

"I've got it. Now—"

"I'll put twenty pounds on that red rooster's spurs," the Kentuckian said unexpectedly. "Anybody want it?"

"Even?" another boatman demanded suspiciously.

"Even."

"I'll take it."

There was a sudden clamor in the crowd, as those who wanted to bet placed their money or goods. There were odds, five to three on the dominick.

Pat Slattery waited for quiet. Then, "As I was sayin', boatman, what rules do you want to fight under?"

"Me and my red rooster ain't particular," Cap Gitchie said airily. "You want rules to protect your dominicker, you go ahead and make 'em."

Pat Slattery smiled understandingly. This was talk such as he understood, and liked.

"Put 'em down bare-spurred and let 'em fight until one wins," he said. "Good enough?"

"Good enough."

Cap Gitchie picked up the red rooster, put it on his shoulder. He walked over the boats to the riverbank, and the hushed crowd gathered silently around. Pat Slattery took his dominick from the crate where he kept it, and walked slowly forward. The two roosters' necks ruffled, they pecked viciously at each other when they were brought close together. Pat Slattery retreated six feet and held his rooster on the ground. He waited for Cap Gitchie to get ready. Then, "Let 'em go!"

The two fighting cocks came together in the center of the pit and rose into the air. Then, in less than a second, the dominick thudded heavily to the ground and flapped his wings wildly. One of the red rooster's needle-sharp spurs had penetrated his skull and reached his brain. The crowd gasped. It was a lucky stroke on the little red rooster's part and they all knew it. Just the same, the dominick had long been champion. Pat Slattery smiled, and began counting out money.

"Good rooster, boatman," he said.

THE weather became hot, and the river dropped a little. The banks that it had flooded bore mute testimony to all the things aside from boats that this mighty water carried. Trees, buffalo carcasses, great fish, small fish, wrecked boats, and all the other flotsam that a river will bear lay drying on the suddenly water-forsaken banks. And, watching it, the Kentuckian's gloom deepened.

"You'll see many a thing cast up there," he said prophetically. "Maybe, before everything's finished, all the men and women who have come to settle along this river will be there too."

"Don't be so happy about things," Cap Gitchie admonished. "You're such a gol-darn optimist, Kentucky, that a man would think no bad things ever happened to you."

The Irishman guffawed and the Creole chuckled, while up on the cabin roof Abijah Crabbe stood with the steering sweep in his

hand and studied the river ahead. He had been down it many times, but it was never the same river twice in succession. There were always new islands born where none had been before, and islands swept away that had stood for years. It was a changeable river, a restless and ever-searching one that must ever try new things and directions. And, while he stood on top of the cabin steering the *River Belle,* Abijah Crabbe also thought a great many things.

Back in Philadelphia, so many years ago that it now seemed as though it never could have been, he was a schoolteacher. The world had been a bright and well-ordered place while he visited the various Main Line families and made their sons and daughters ready to further their education in France or England. Every morning he had started out from his own modest little home, and every night had returned to find his wife and daugher waiting there. But that had been before the plague swept Philadelphia and . . .

Abijah Crabbe shrugged his shoulders and tried to put such thoughts from his mind. His wife and daughter were no longer there so he hadn't been able to stay either. He fingered the massive silver brooch that hung around his neck. It had been the favorite of the girl wife he remembered, and was the only link with the past that he wanted or needed. The frontier, a whole world away from Philadelphia, was the place where a man could find forgetfulness. And there seemed to be nothing taken away without some compensation. In the years Abijah Crabbe had been traveling up and down the western rivers he had had his rewards. For he had seen a continent grow.

First there had been silent, buckskinned men who would never even venture out the door unless they carried their long rifles. Then had come wild and roaring men, sober and industrious men, futile men, men with initiative, men stained with every crime in the calendar of sin. And, no matter who came, a woman was either with him or else one followed him. Abijah Crabbe shook his head. Regardless of their other characteristics, the men who came into this roaring country had one thing in common—the courage to try something new. And they were not only trying it but were doing it. They raised their crops, and gathered their fruits, and trapped their furs, and sent them all down to New Orleans. Down there the Spanish sat across their outlet to the sea, and if the Spanish tried to impose too many restrictions . . . ? Abijah Crabbe shook his head again. The river would have to be open and free, and if the Spanish did not know that, he did. For he knew the breed of men and women who were settling this Ohio country.

Abijah Crabbe thought back to an expressive phrase whose origin he had forgotten. "Men who neither believed in a God nor feared a Devil." That was it, and it was perfectly descriptive of some of these Ohio settlers—but not all. There were a great many who believed in God. But there were all sorts among them. Some didn't care whether Ohio belonged to England, the United States, Spain, or anyone else, so long as they could take their boats down the river and make a profit on the cargoes they carried. They'd swear allegiance to Spain, or to the chief of any Indian tribe, or almost any ruler at all, if they were unimpeded in their trading. But they were men of little vision because the marked path was very clear, and one had only to look in order to see it. For a moment a trace of worry lingered in Abijah Crabbe's face.

There were some among them, himself included, who knew which way must inevitably be followed. It was impossible for even an unchecked imagination to imagine the roistering settlers of the upper Ohio under staid and decorous Spanish rule. It was impossible to imagine them as anything save free people who knew no domination or restrictions save what they themselves willfully imposed. And the boatmen who took their obligations seriously, those who refused to swear allegiance to

Spain because they did not believe in Spanish Rule . . . The *River Belle* would certainly encounter many difficulties when she finally came to New Orleans. There would be unexpected tariffs, and duties, and pretexts, and evasions. And all his personal fortune was tied up in the *River Belle's* cargo.

ABIJAH CRABBE looked down over his crew, and a shade of softness crept across his hard face. If the men who came here were courageous and daring they were also simple. That youngster with the gamecock who had been in such a hurry to get away from Louisville, the glum Kentuckian, the Creole, the gay Irishman. Their fetish was a red rooster, which was all the more precious since it had killed the river's hitherto undisputed champion. Their aim was to see what happened when and if they reached New Orleans. The day was the thing, and so long as the sun rose all was well. But—

Abijah Crabbe's eyes were deep with wonder. They were a special breed of people, these folks who had gathered from every corner of the earth to make a highway of this broad river. The world had never seen their like, and probably never would again. Simple, they still had smoldering passions that a careless word or gesture could fan into leaping fire. Then God help whoever or whatever got in their way. They counted only upon themselves and whoever might stand beside them, and the cost of anything they wanted was never counted.

Abijah Crabbe wrinkled his brow thoughtfully. Perhaps these men were right in pinning their faith to something of tested courage and undeniable fighting qualities. A man the world would never forget, one whose name would ring down all the centuries, might have saved civilization through the medium of a fighting cock, five hundred years before the Christian era began. Themistocles, leading his pitiful little Grecian army against the Persian hordes of Darius, had noted two cocks fighting along the way. Halting his army, he had addressed them, "What ambitious animals! They suffer and stain with blood and strike only for the sense of honor, solely not to retreat one before the other and not to divulge to their equals that they are defeated. Imagine what they would do if they were fighting for Fatherland, for religion, for glory, for liberty, for their children!" And with that living concept before them the Greeks had gone on to repel the barbarian hordes who would have overthrown them.

Some peace came to dwell in Abijah Crabbe's troubled eyes, and a faint smile played about the corners of his lips. Maybe that's the way it was meant to be here. These people had a job, and they were capable of doing it. No doubt the rooster would fight again at New Madrid, and at Vicksburg, and at whatever settler's cabin was near to where they tied up. If he won all those fights he would be a mighty creature indeed and the boatmen would boast of his prowess for so long as any of them might live.

The rooster did fight, and won his fights, and almost a month after they left Louisville Abijah Crabbe steered his craft into the bustling port of Natchez. He saw the governor's ornate barge anchored beside a heavily-armed gunboat and two provision boats. The *River Belle* moored, and a half hour later a small boat with five Spanish soldiers in it put unobtrusively out from the barge. They boarded the *River Belle*, and the Creole said almost sheepishly, "Let me handle thees."

"Why?" Cap Gitchie asked.

"Because," the Creole purred, "that is Sergeant Cortez, the personal attendant of The Little Soldier. They are here to arrange a fight—and their purpose is to get some easy money from us. Do you not, on any account, interfere with anything I say."

CAP GITCHIE rose up in his seat and looked carefully at the five swarthy little soldiers. There was wonder, but no contempt or disparagement in his eyes as he watched them approach the smiling Creole. As far as looks were concerned these soldiers didn't rate at all highly. But you couldn't tell by the spots on a frog's pants how far he could jump, and it was well to remember that these five men were representative of the mighty warriors of Spain. The Creole bowed elaborately and Cap Gitchie stared. On the *River Belle* the Creole was just another crew member, a man who knew how to do the right thing at the right time. But he seemed to fit in here equally well, and to understand the rigmarole by which these Spanish transacted their affairs.

The leading Spaniard addressed him in English. "Have I the honor of speaking to the owner of the so-great red gamecock, the one that killed Señor Slattery's rooster at Willow Bend?"

"The honor is mine," the Creole said gracefully.

The Spaniard smiled smoothly. "It is so good to meet you, and I greet you as a brother would!" he said. "Is it that you may comprehend the elation I experienced, the great pleasure I felt, when I learned that at last a real fighting cock had come down the river?"

"I comprehend," the Creole stated.

"Good!" the Spaniard said. "I do not doubt that yours is the finest fighting cock ever to be on the river. Yet, were I not to arrange a

The Creole was talking to the Spaniard again. "The fight must occur on this boat," he said, "and be under English rules."

match between himself and a cock I have, I should be forever tormented by wonder as to whether mine might not have won. May we arrange that match?"

"I am sorry that we cannot," the Creole said, with a genuine tone of regret lingering in his voice.

"So?" The Spaniard arched his brows. "You are perhaps afraid?"

"No! By the Great Horn Spoon, no!"

Cap Gitchie spoke. He had been sitting, listening to the exchange of pleasantries between the Creole and the Spaniard, and sensing the sinister undertones. He had been amused by the Creole's inference that he owned the red cock, and puzzled by this new manifestation of the river grapevine, which could bring news of a fighting cock long before they themselves got to Natchez. Then, when the Spaniard had said the rooster was afraid to fight, hot anger had risen like a fire in Cap Gitchie. He strode forward.

"Look, mister," he said bluntly, "that red rooster is mine and he'll fight anything you got to show. But we ain't givin' more than four ounces."

The Creole nudged him with a warning elbow. Cap Gitchie thrust his jaw out, bending his head so that his eyes were even with the Spaniard's. The Spaniard smiled pleasantly.

"So-o-o! You are the owner of this mighty fowl! And you will match mine?"

"I'll match him."

Without seeming to move the Creole thrust

between them, and with a backward shove of his foot sent Cap Gitchie staggering across the deck. Cap picked himself up, and doubled his fists. Anybody who pushed him around had to fight for the privilege. But the bland Creole was talking to the Spaniard again.

"It has been spoken and so it shall be," he said. "But the fight must occur on this boat, and be under English rules."

"Agreed, señor." There was a tinge of disappointment in the Spaniard's voice. "And shall the battle take place tonight?"

"Yes," Cap Gitchie said quickly.

"No," the Creole corrected. "Tomorrow afternoon. And none shall attend with the exception of those who are now here."

"Agreed," the Spaniard murmured. He said, as though it were a matter of no importance whatever, "Would you wish to make any wagers?"

"I'll put a hundred pounds, even, on the red rooster," Cap Gitchie said.

"I'll put forty pounds on the same," the glum Kentuckian asserted.

"I've been dry since Willow Bend," the Irishman mourned. "But I'm glad I have been because I got something to bet. Two bottles of good American whiskey against four of your lousy Spanish wine."

The Creole hesitated. Then, "I weel wager two pounds on the red cheec-ken." He looked apologetically at Cap Gitchie. "It is all I have."

The Spaniard bowed again. "Agreed. And shall we make them gentlemen's wagers?"

"No," Abijah Crabbe grunted sourly. "I'll hold the stakes, and see that you bring yours with you."

"Ah. Yes." The Spaniard smiled. But he looked Abijah Crabbe over very carefully. "*Adios* until tomorrow afternoon, señores."

They climbed down to their small boat and rowed back towards the barge. Cap Gitchie watched them go, and the soft-walking Creole touched his arm. "You, monsieur, are the one big fool," he said.

"Why?" Cap Gitchie demanded.

The Creole sighed. "These Spanish, they know all the ill tricks of cock-fighting. Whether you know it or not, you have matched your cheec-ken with The Little Soldier. Most certainly he weel fight with metal spurs, and where are you going to get any?"

"Does this governor let that flunkey fight his prize cock any place?"

"The gover-nair will not know it," the Creole explained. "We do have the advantage in that they are fighting on this boat, and there will be but five of them. Were there more, they might overpower us and take all if the battle seemed going against them. Ah, monsieur! You are the one big fool! But I like you!"

"Can't we buy spurs in Natchez?" Cap Gitchie demanded.

"No," the Creole stated. "If you go into the shops and inquire they weel know you have made a match with a Spaniard, and refuse to sell you any. We are now in a predicament."

Abijah Crabbe picked the red rooster up and took it into the cabin. Cap Gitchie lay down on the shady side of the *River Belle* and closed his eyes. A cock with natural spurs hadn't one chance in a hundred against a rooster wearing steel, and he hadn't any steel. To call the match off . . . ? There rose in his mind the memory of the Spaniard as he had looked when he had intimated they were afraid to pit the red cock, and Cap Gitchie tightened his jaw. Sitting on Abijah Crabbe's lap inside the cabin, the red rooster clucked contentedly. There came the tapping of a light hammer. Cap Gitchie shook his head irritably, and sat up.

"I'm going into Natchez and buy some spurs," he announced.

"It is a useless mission," the Creole said softly.

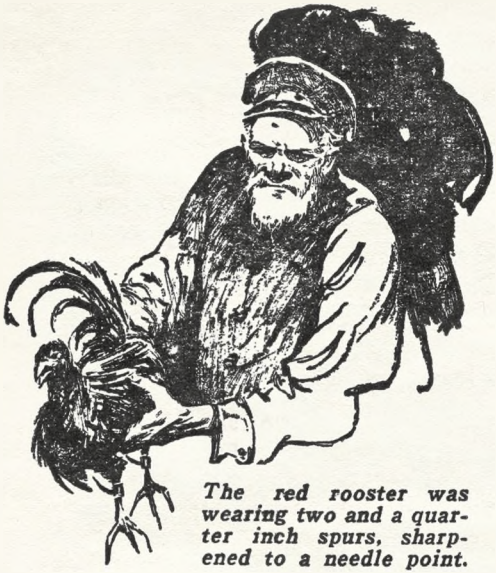
CHAPTER IV

THE SILVER SPURS

CAP GITCHIE stepped ashore and walked into Natchez. He went from shop to shop, stopping at the street stands in between. But, if anybody there had heard of steel gaffs for a fighting cock, they were not divulging such knowledge. Anger stirred within him, and he put his hand on the counter of the last shop he entered, preparatory to vaulting over it and seeing if there were any steel spurs on the other side. But a slight noise at the door distracted him, and he looked around to see a squad of Spanish soldiers under the command of a fussy little corporal. Sergeant Cortez was leaving nothing to chance. Glumly, alone in the darkness, Cap Gitchie returned to the *River Belle*. He glanced inside the cabin, where Abijah Crabbe was working by the light of a tallow candle, and lay down on the hard deck.

The stars shone very brightly in the pale sky, and the Milky Way cast its white length across them. For a long while Cap Gitchie watched them. But his thoughts were with the red rooster, and the inner torture he felt was like a twisting, stabbing knife in the vitals. Gamecocks were meant to fight, and die, in the pit. That was all right. But the man who put them in that pit was morally responsible for giving them every means of defending themselves and . . . It was nearly daylight when Cap Gitchie finally slept.

When he awoke the sun was high, and he peered across the deck to see the little red rooster strutting importantly about. Cap Gitchie sat up and rubbed his eyes. He gasped. The red rooster was wearing two and a quarter inch spurs which had been sharpened to a



The red rooster was wearing two and a quarter inch spurs, sharpened to a needle point.

needle point. Cap Gitchie rose, and walked across the *River Belle*. He picked the red rooster up, glancing at the spurs—which had been expertly bound on—and from them to Abijah Crabbe. There was something in the eyes of the *River Belle's* captain that had never been there before, something sad and at the same time jubilant. The heavy silver brooch no longer swung at his neck. Abijah Crabbe looked defiantly at Cap Gitchie.

"I used to be a passable metal-worker," he said. "I made that brooch. It was— Anyhow I worked with my hands in my spare time, and those spurs fit. They bend to exactly the same curve as the natural spur." Abijah Crabbe relaxed into the vernacular. "If'n that red rooster hits anything with them, he'll hit sartain hard. The Creole done this."

He spread the rooster's wing. The Creole had trimmed the very ends of the flight feathers, and sharpened the exposed points so that each in itself was a driving spike. That would be very handy when it came to driving for any opponent's eyes. The afternoon wore on and it was the Creole who first said, "Here they come."

Abijah Crabbe met the Spanish as they boarded the *River Belle*. "Come on," he said, "gimme your bets or get out!"

CAP GITCHIE looked with immediate interest at the cock in the hands of Sergeant Cortez. Its general body conformation was the same as that of the red rooster—most gamecocks are similarly shaped. But The Little Soldier was a deep blue-black in color, and as soon as he saw the red rooster the ruff on his neck bristled. The red rooster, straining forward in Cap Gitchie's arms, tried instantly to get at his enemy. Sergeant Cortez laughed.

"They will fight, yes?" Almost carelessly he indicated a soldier standing beside him. "My good friend, Alphonse, has consented to referee the match."

The Creole said softly, "I stand by as second referee."

"I—I do not understand."

"It is just that we wish to be formal," the Creole purred. "I know that you weesh thees to be a fair fight. With two of us watching, we surely shall apprehend any foul play."

"Ah yes." Cortez laughed again. "Shall the fight proceed?"

"It shall, after I have examined your bird."

He stepped forward, caught one of The Little Soldier's legs, and looked carefully at the spur attached to it. The Creole stepped back.

"Doubtless it was an oversight on your part," he said courteously. "You forgot that we fight under English rules, and you have slasher spurs on your cheec-ken."

"Alphonse!" Cortez scolded. "How could you do such a thing? Such a terrible thing! They shall not trust us!"

"I sure wouldn't," Abijah Crabbe murmured.

The Spanish referee looked keenly at him. "It was a natural mistake," he said.

"Ah yes," the Creole agreed, "a natural mistake. But change those gaffs."

The Creole stood by while the slashers—knife-edged spurs—were changed to gaffs which were round to the point. Under Cap Gitchie's cautious eye the Spanish referee examined the red rooster, and gave the order, "Bill your birds."

Cap Gitchie walked forward, stroking the red rooster as he walked, and Sergeant Cortez advanced to meet him. The two roosters slapped viciously at each other when they were brought close together, and the handlers walked apart. Cap Gitchie looked at the red rooster's eyes, to make sure that they had not been damaged, and sighed in relief. The red rooster was too smart a fighter to let another cock get his eyes in the initial billing. The referee said, "Get ready."

Cap Gitchie knelt at one end of a six-foot space on the *River Belle's* deck, holding the red rooster in his two hands and letting his feet touch the deck squarely. He looked across at Sergeant Cortez, and when the referee said "Pit," he let the little red rooster go.

They came together in the center of the pit and rose. Their flying feet, too fast for the eye of man to follow, sought for the opening that had to be there. A driven spur, aimed at The Little Soldier's brain, caught him on the comb instead and blood bubbled over his black neck feathers. Then they were a tumbled, fluttering

They came together in the center of the pit and rose, their flying feet too fast for the eye to follow.

mass on the deck. One of The Little Soldier's spurs had caught in the binding of the red rooster's gaff.

Cap Gitchie picked his rooster up and retreated to the six foot line. He looked carefully, and ran his hands over the gamecock's burnished plumage in order to find any wounds. Sergeant Cortez sucked The Little Soldier's bloody comb with his mouth, and spat on the deck.

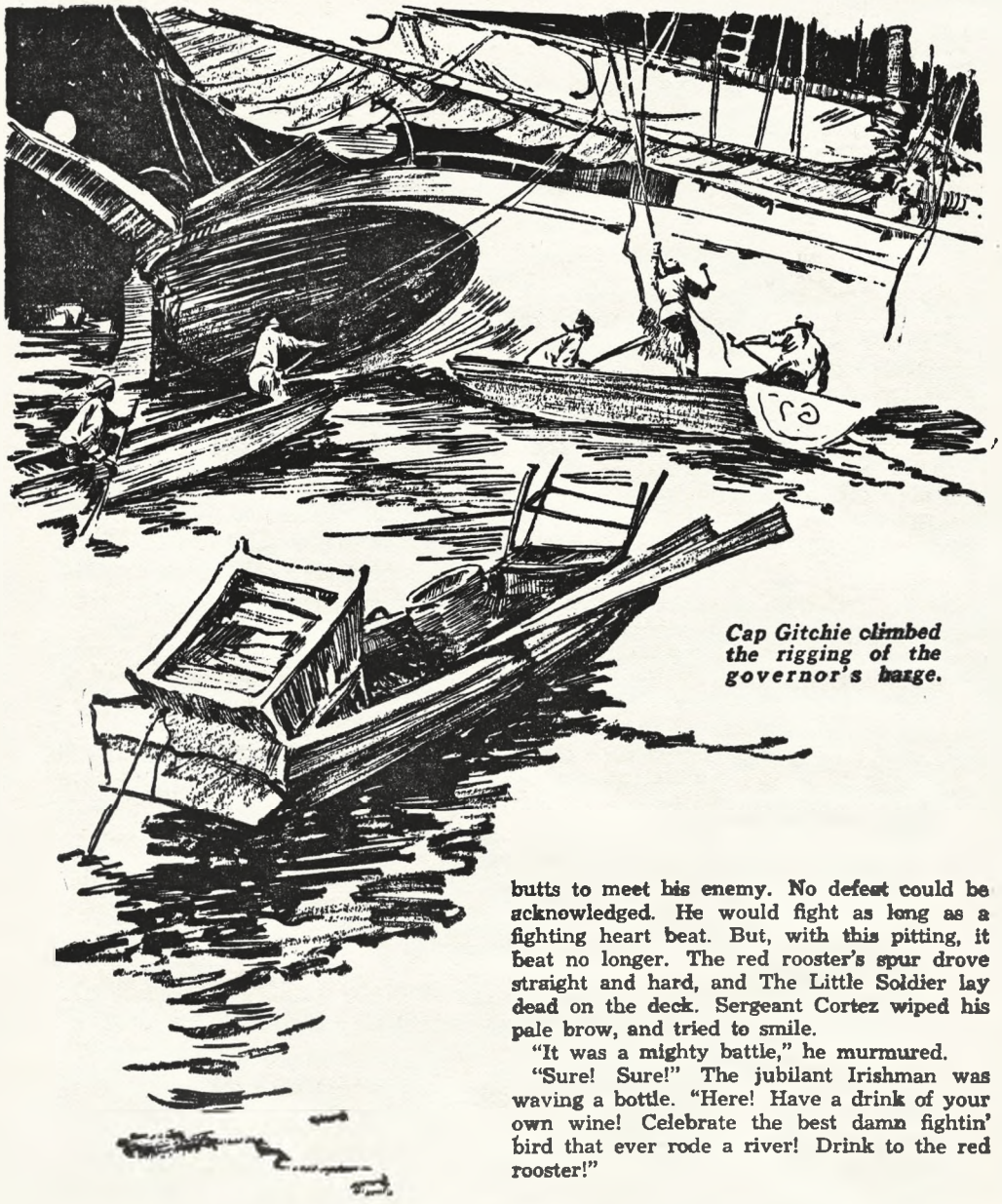
Again came the referee's order, "Pit."

The two circled cautiously now, each looking for the opening that would enable a blow to be driven home. Again they rose in the center of the pit, flailing with furious wings and driving with armed spurs. It was another test

flight. They came down to circle again, while each warrior sought the weak points in the other's defense. The Little Soldier dashed in, made a quick turn and a little hop, and sank his spur in the red rooster's breast. It hooked there, and Sergeant Cortez went in to part them. But the Creole was playing with a foot-long knife.

"Draw it out straight," he suggested. "It would be so unfair to twist it."

Cap Gitchie picked the red rooster up and washed his head with cool water. The little cock strained forward, anxious only to be back in the fight. He ran across the pit and met



Cap Gitchie climbed the rigging of the governor's barge.

The Little Soldier on his own side. They sparred for a minute, and rose again. When they parted, The Little Soldier's right leg dragged helplessly. Sergeant Cortez began to sweat. The two roosters went in again, and again, and a third time. One of the red rooster's wings was dragging now, but The Little Soldier sat on the deck. Both his legs were broken. But, at the referee's monotonous "Pit," he dragged himself across the deck on his wing butts to meet his enemy. No defeat could be acknowledged. He would fight as long as a fighting heart beat. But, with this pitting, it beat no longer. The red rooster's spur drove straight and hard, and The Little Soldier lay dead on the deck. Sergeant Cortez wiped his pale brow, and tried to smile.

"It was a mighty battle," he murmured.

"Sure! Sure!" The jubilant Irishman was waving a bottle. "Here! Have a drink of your own wine! Celebrate the best damn fightin' bird that ever rode a river! Drink to the red rooster!"

CAP GITCHIE picked the red rooster up and carried him inside the cabin to the box Abijah Crabbe had prepared for him. He left him there, clucking to himself, and went out on deck to join the celebration. One of the downcast Spanish soldiers wandered curiously about the *River Belle,* and Sergeant Cortez raised the bottle.

"To the red rooster." He smiled. "He won a fair fight. And now, *adios.*"

They launched their boat in the gathering

evening shadows and pulled away. Cap Gitchie watched them until they were only an indistinct blur in the darkness, and stood over the rail for a moment. He went into the cabin, and stood stock-still while anger crawled like a sinuous serpent up his spine. Cap Gitchie picked up a tomahawk and went on deck. The *River Belle's* crew looked at the tomahawk, and at the governor's barge. Without a word Abijah Crabbe led them into the cabin, and they still did not speak when they stepped from the *River Belle* to the bank.

For one split second Cap Gitchie stood on the dark shore, looking towards the governor's barge. He started down the river bank to where half a dozen pirogues were drawn up. Slowly, so as to make no noise, they launched one and climbed in. The Creole, handling the paddle in the stern, dipped it as softly as a cat flicks out its sheathed paw to catch a mouse. The dark mass of the governor's barge loomed above them, and a sharp Spanish voice said, "*Hola?*"

Cap Gitchie climbed the rigging, and peeped over the deck. Just before him, scarcely a yard away, a uniformed sentry stood with one hand on his cutlass and the other warningly raised. But the night was hot, and he had taken off his helmet. Cap Gitchie swung the flat of his tomahawk, and with a tiny thud the sentry melted down to mingle with the black shadows on the deck. From the other end of the barge an excited voice cried, "Juan! What is happening?"

Running softly on moccasined feet Cap Gitchie, the Creole, the Kentuckian, the Irishman, and Abijah Crabbe entered the dimly-lighted cabin and swung the door shut behind them. The Creole dropped the heavy latch into place, and for one split second stood with his ear to the door and a grin of sheer delight on his face while he listened to the sudden uproar outside. The Kentuckian turned and, still not changing expression, wrapped his arms about another soldier who appeared before them. Dropping his captive suddenly, the Kentuckian swung a fist to his jaw. The Spaniard bounced back, and his sword licked forth like a long tongue. Blood stained the Kentuckian's shirt. The Irishman swung the flat of his tomahawk and the soldier dropped heavily. They raced through the cabin into a larger one with a closed door at the far end, and Cap Gitchie sprang delightedly forward to close with the first of the five soldiers who rose to bar their path.

INSIDE that closed door, Governor Gayoso had for the past hour been in conference with four of his chosen officers, and he was just finishing a speech: "The interests of Spain must at all time be nearest my heart. But how shall those interests best be served? Pinckney, of the United States government, has lately sent to me a courier saying that the American settlers on the upper river must have an open, duty-free port in New Orleans. The traders who bring goods down must have whatever rights of trans-shipment they wish. The river is vital to the prosperity of the upper country. Acceding to his wishes would rob Spain of much revenue. I do not greatly fear the United States, or anything they may do. The real problem is, if we continue to exercise this port as we see fit, and charge such duties as we desire, will the frontiersmen on the upper river march?"

"They wouldn't dare," a bulky colonel with a vividly-scarred face said contemptuously. "And suppose they do march? We'll drive them back soon enough."

"My good Colonel Perez," Gayoso said, "have you ever fought Kentuckians?"

Exactly at that moment the thudding gun butts of those soldiers who were trying to break down the outer door rumbled through the room. An excited voice shouted in Spanish, "Open up! I command you!" There were sounds of a scuffle in the adjoining room. A second later the door of the conference room burst open and five blood-streaked Americans with tomahawks in their hands stood there. As one man the assembled officers rose and drew their swords.

Cap Gitchie spoke. "Just keep your shirt on, Governor, and tell your lacy-pants friends to do the same. There ain't any sense in gettin' yourselves massacreed unless—"

"This is an outrage!" Gayoso sputtered.

"So's stealin' chickens!" Cap Gitchie snarled. "Do I get him back? Or do we bust up your barge for you?"

"Do you get what back?"

"My red rooster. The one your tin-horn sojer, Cortez, swiped off the keelboat, *River Belle*, this afternoon."

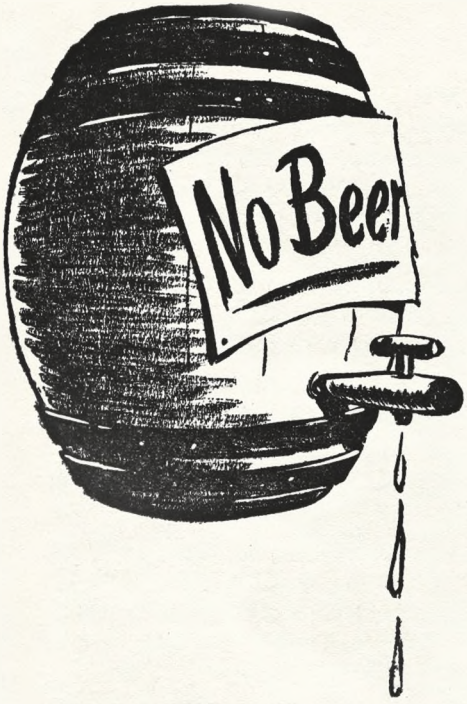
"Did a Spanish soldier steal from you?"

"Yup. Make up your mind. We ain't got all night."

"Colonel Perez," Gayoso directed, "investigate all soldiers who had leave this afternoon. Find whoever stole this man's property. Return the property, and punish the soldier."

Governor Gayoso sat for a long while after the boatmen had gone. He needed a long while to decide that this was not the long-feared invasion. Obviously, unless they had an army at their backs, only five madmen would dare attack the state barge of the governor of Louisiana. But five men had done it, and if that army ever came— Governor Gayoso sent for his secretary and dictated a note of state that was to be sent by fast courier to the government of the United States.

The river would be open.



ILLUSTRATED BY
JOE FARREN

MUTINY ON THE MONTE

By
HARRY
BEDWELL

YOUNG Mel Hatch trailed Bill Lowden through the crowded Silverton yard with apprehensive tenacity. They were a contentious pair of boomer trainmen, just then in the grudging employ of the Monte Railroad, up here on the jawbone of the continent, and they were at the moment bent upon cutting each other's throats. Bill was in furious search of Clinker Ward, the trainmaster. Mel

The car flung up its rear end as it rolled through the breach in the wall.

hoped Bill wouldn't find him, but he wanted to be present to defend himself if he did.

Silverton is sunk in a deep granite bowl which funnelled the blazing noon sunlight into its windless depths. Down here at the bottom it felt as if the rays had been focused under a magnifying glass.

They came at last to the Mint Saloon, a long structure backed up to the brink of a precipice at the edge of the fanned-out sidings. They paused to peer into the cool depths beyond the swinging doors. The place was deserted. This was an ominous condition considering the hour and the temperature. The bar should have been lined with a crowd of thirsty lunch-time miners.

Warfare between the miners and the railroad crews wasn't uncommon. Both outfits were

lusty and delighted in the feud. This silence might even mean an ambush.

"You don't reckon they've massacred our trainmaster, do you?" Bill muttered, vexed. He had a grievance to present and he didn't want Clinker Ward destroyed until he had presented it to him.

Mel tested the hot quiet with a wistful ear, searching hopefully for sounds of strife. A disabled trainmaster might delay consideration of Bill's claims.

A commotion developed and approached through the lines of freight cars. A switch engine smoked down the ladder track, shoving a refrigerator car before her. Men swarmed over the car and clung to all parts of the locomotive. A switchman sprinted ahead, inspired by shouted threats from the mob. He opened the switch to a stub siding. The engine kicked the car into the stub and backed off, shedding miners. The refrigerator dripped water from its iced bunkers as it grumbled down the siding toward the entrance to the Mint. Under the bind of handbrakes it grunted to a stand before the wide doors. The men tore open the car and began to roll cool kegs of beer into the dim cavern of the saloon.

The Monte's switch crew had willfully delayed delivery of the beer, while the Mint's supply became exhausted in the heat spell. Reproaches of the parched miners hadn't availed, and so in overpowering numbers they had forced reluctant and immediate delivery.

Clinker Ward, a moody man of considerable bulk, came down from the top of the car, where he had been attending the handbrakes. Amiable sounds floated from the cool gloom and the Clinker tramped heavily through the swinging doors. Bill followed and Mel crowded close behind.

Mel observed an attendant open a door in the back wall and toss out a box of trash. Long seconds later a faint crash came up from below. He peered down. The doorway edged a chasm that fell away to misty depths.

"Very convenient," Mel admitted. "Nevertheless, that swamper'd better never neglect to let go when he makes his cast."

The Clinker retired to a table to soak his ulcers. Bill stated his grievance.

LABORIOUSLY the Clinker brought the situation into focus. Calamities develop quickly in mountain railroad operations, and in a crisis Mel was afflicted with brilliant ideas. At a critical moment he was likely to become inspired. The trouble was that all of his lustrous schemes the Clinker had ever endorsed under the spur of impending disaster had turned out unfortunately. They sounded fine but they didn't work well. He would gladly have bounced Mel off a high crag long ago, except that the law of averages had come to his aid. One of his flashes had prevented a wreck, and the general manager in appreciation had forbidden the Clinker to fire him under any circumstances, reserving that right to himself.

Driven to desperation, the Clinker had assigned Mel to a job of flagging a work train on the branch out of harm's way. Now they had pulled off the work train.

"And he comes back," Bill concluded his remonstrance, "and bumps me off the parlor job on the local and makes me take to the smoky end."

The hind brakeman rides the caboose. The head brakeman rides the locomotive and assists the fireman with the coal. Mel was exercising his rights to take the hind end job on the local away from Bill and send him up to the engine.

The Clinker scowled at Mel's tight, stub build and open, freckled face. Months had elapsed, and the G. M.'s gratitude should by now have become blurred. Maybe, with a little clandestine persecution, Mel would quietly remove himself from service.

"I guess I'd better look into your rights to bump," the Clinker passed judgment. "You take the smoky end till we decide."

"And I'd just rented a shotgun," Mel protested, "and was all fixed to knock over some sage hens to cook for supper on the way."

The Clinker snorted in his glass and set it down and wiped his face. "Cook!" he said with rising emotions. "Are you a good caboose cook?"

Mel bounced. "Am I a good caboose cook?" He didn't restrain himself. "Mister, I'm so good that them freight skippers up on the Great Northern, where I last worked, would get their hind brakemen laid off if they could persuade me to come aboard and fix meals."

The Clinker leered. "You wouldn't try to fool an old-timer that's been eating grub off a caboose stove since the days of the link-and-pin, would you?"

Mel took a quick breath. Vividly he there and then cooked a meal of stewed sage hen and hot, brown biscuits so succulent that he had the Clinker drooling.

"Seems to me," Bill interjected glumly, "there was talk, up there on the G. N., how once when you couldn't produce a mess of squirrel as promised, you substituted prairie dogs."

"That libel," Mel scoffed, "was started by some brakemen that got set down by their skippers account of my cooking."

The Clinker wavered. Sage hens, at this season fat and tender, were specially kind to his pet ulcers. He reversed himself.

"We won't make that change this trip," he resolved. "I'll ride back to Gloria with you this afternoon and see can you manage a sage-hen stew." An echo of Bill's slur tinkled in

the back of his mind. "But no jack rabbits," he warned. "They're pure poison to me. It's got to be sage hens."

NUMBER 72, mixed freight and empties, clattered out of the Silverton yard and began a slow struggle up the twisting grades. Mel put his shotgun together in the caboose and went forward over the top of the sluggish train. He let himself down onto the tank of the engine's tender and motioned Bill back from the cab.

"I hired out as a carhand," Bill explained bitterly, "not as a bird dog." He pitched his voice to a coy falsetto. "You ought to make some good man a sweet and lovin' wife—you and your cooking!" He climbed to the top of the head boxcar. "If you knock 'em down off the right-of-way, I won't retrieve 'em. And I won't chase cripples." He moved back three cars and sat on the roof with his feet dangling.

Mel stood braced on the swaying tank, his shotgun poised. Number 72 blasted along at six miles per hour. The racket of her progress flushed a pair of brown fluffs from the undergrowth ahead. Mel tumbled one with a quick shot at close angle forward. The engineer ducked from his cab window as fine shot whispered past his ear.

Bill slid down the iron rungs of the ladder. He ran out and retrieved the bird, then swung aboard farther down the train. As he regained his original position, Mel knocked down another sage hen. From then on he kept Bill going down and coming up till they had seven birds. As they topped the steeper grade, Mel went back to sit beside him. Bill was panting like a setter pup.

Bill held up the birds in a cluster and eyed them malevolently as Number 72 pounded through the Durbin yard. The engineer took a tuck in the throttle as the grade eased a little, and Bill swayed precariously as the train lurched to the added power. He tilted sidewise and clawed the air. The sage hens slid from his grasp and fluttered to the station platform. His clutching hand fell upon the barrel of the shotgun and held it down firmly against Mel's efforts to bring it up and turn it on him.

"A pure accident," Bill pleaded. "I'd of fell off if I hadn't let go the birds."

As most of Bill's working life had been spent on the uneasy tops of rolling equipment, Mel considered this a loose statement.

A pair of jack rabbits came out of the brush and loafed along just ahead of the engine.

"Now, there's a chance to do a little substituting," Bill tempted him.

Mel shook his head.

"You'd better start shootin'," Bill urged. "This drag will soon be moving too fast to do any more retrieving."

"Jack is poison to the Clinker," Mel reminded him virtuously.

"Haw!" said Bill.

The train ducked into a tunnel and came out onto a long meadow. A ranch house came up alongside. A big red rooster sprang upon the top pole of the fence. He flapped his wings and arched his neck and clamored his raucous scorn of the lumbering train.

Mel performed to that challenge with one of his instant stratagems. The shotgun nestled against his shoulder. His glance swept beyond the arrogant cock and snapped a picture of the sunlit ranch yard. No one was in sight. His eye slid along the barrel and the gun blasted.

Mel faded down the ladder and pulled the inert rooster through the pole fence.

"That fowl," Bill decided critically as Mel came forward over the top of the train, "is pretty big and plenty old. You won't be able to fool the Clinker into thinking he's a tender mess of sage hen."

"The way I cook 'em," Mel stated, "all he'll do is ask for more."

He lugged the rooster into the cab. He doused it with hot water from the squirt hose and picked and cleaned it. He jointed it and wrapped it in a piece of burlap and returned to the caboose.

The Clinker napped on a cushioned bench. Conductor Dodd was writing up his wheel report at his little desk. They paid Mel no heed as he built a fire in the stove, slipped the fowl into a water bucket and set it to simmer.

Wistful odors began to mingle with the dusty smells in the caboose. They grew through the afternoon. The quick mountain dark wheeled in. Mel added spuds, onions and noodles from the larder. He made up a batch of biscuits.

The Clinker aroused and became pensive as the odors grew more pungent. Number 72 ambled cheerfully through the chill dark of the altitudes. Mel at last signaled Bill back from the head end with his lantern. They crowded the table. Mel dealt hot biscuits and ladled stew.

The Clinker blew on a morsel, and tasted. His forbidding countenance relaxed. He dug in. He cleaned up his plate quickly and held it out for more. Grudgingly he acknowledged Mel's art.

Bill wasn't impressed. He admitted that he'd tasted better fowl.

"There's a slight flavor of old age," he said, frowning, "and a faint tang of rust, like it'd subsisted on nails. And it gets tangled in your teeth."

The Clinker dismissed that as understandable envy.

LAMPS glowed in the battered caboose. Firelight chased shadows across the walls as the train swung on the curves. The subdued chuckle of the line of running wheels was soothing. The Clinker lit his pipe. He ruminated pleasantly.

"That ranch back there in the first meadow we come through," he reflected. "Old man Beckett's place. He come here forty years ago with a yoke of bulls and started freighting for the mines."

Bill reached for his lantern and headed for the door. Mel restrained him firmly with a suggestion that he help with the dishes.

"Then the railroad come and cut into his business." The Clinker puffed a gurgle out of his pipe. "He fought the iron horse like a wildcat, 'specially when the railroad condemned a right-of-way through his ranch."

The Clinker chuckled with sage malice.

"Once we run over a bull of his'n. Old Beckett claimed he'd imported the critter at a cost of five hundred dollars, and sued for that amount. We proved it was another animal he'd imported, and the court awarded him fifteen bucks. He stomped around about that."

The Clinker stenched the caboose with a cloud of smoke.

"One of Beckett's mules once got out on the line, and a drag going down the grade caught up with the donk inside the tunnel."

The Clinker considered darkly.

"Beckett made us pay for that one, though," he gloomed. "He produced papers to show he'd brought him in from Missouri at great expense. From then on he made it a point to have papers covering all his livestock, and every time we injured one, we paid high." The Clinker chewed his pipe stem. "The general manager has got out flat orders that any employee that harms any of Beckett's beasts has to pay for it himself, or walk out of the mountains."

The Clinker breathed heavily.

"Why, Beckett's got a big red rooster that's been a temptation to our caboose cooks to knock over and put in the pot for six years that I can remember. And he dares 'em to do it. He's got papers—what's the matter, Mel?"

Bill dried his hands, took up his lantern, and started for the door again.

"All I got to say," he said, "is I'm willing to go on the witness stand and testify that the old red rooster you refer to would be overpriced at six-bits—as grub."

He opened the door. The crisp air and the high jingle of running wheels swept through the caboose. He closed it and the sounds became a subdued murmur.

The Clinker took his pipe from his mouth. He caught the edge of a vague suspicion and worried it to the front of his mind. His craggy face turned a light lemon tinged with green. He laid a hand on his stomach.

"That wasn't old Beckett's rooster we had for supper, was it?" he pleaded.

Mel stowed pie plates and coffee pot in the locker.

"Well," he decided at last, "it might have been. I never saw the bird before. Anyhow," he flared, "how was I to know he was so expensive? You ought to keep your trainmen instructed on all hazards of operation."

Four mileposts squirmed by before a gleam of cunning struggled to light on the Clinker's baffled countenance. The general manager's protection had long prevented him from separating Mel from the Monte's payroll. Now the G. M. would do it himself. The crevice of a smile cracked his granite expression.

But Mel had caught that implication and he challenged it hotly. "You've got to remember," he pointed out, "that all of us criminally consumed that cock, and it'd be hard to explain there wasn't collusion among us to do it. Seems to me," he argued, "the less we say, the harder it'll be to prove we did it."

The logic of that filtered slowly through the Clinker's gloomy mind. His sandstone expression returned.

"Anybody that even mentions that rooster to me is in trouble," he brooded like an impending thunderstorm. "And just so it won't happen again, you go forward and take the smoky end and send Bill back here."

The Clinker burped.

"Your sage-hen supper don't set quite as well as I thought it would," he grumbled.

SUNLIGHT poured over the peaks as Number 72 unwound from the Gloria yard and began to climb. In the engine's cab, Mel shoveled coal onto the scooping apron while the fireman flung it into the firebox of the muzzle-loading locomotive. Bill and the Clinker rode in the cupola of the caboose at the hind end of the drag, while Mel choked down leaking steam and burning air and endured the compound heat of the boilerhead and the scorching sun.

There had been days of thunderstorms, with resultant washouts. This was the first train out since the rains came. The mining camps along the way had been isolated for a week. There were tons of supplies to unload and all the hot day the train dragged from station to station, while Mel alternated between nourishing the engine and trucking freight from the merchandise cars. The Clinker, in a hurry to reach Silverton where dissatisfied and destructive customers waited impatiently for delayed supplies, rawhided him all the way.

They rattled into Durbin at the end of dusk. There was some switching to be done, which the Clinker tried to supervise. He barked and grumbled and got in the way.

During a fit of jaded melancholy, Mel thoughtlessly waved the engine through a switch, neglecting to close the derail beforehand. The engineer, tired and resentful of the Clinker's prodding, let her out down the siding in response to Mel's lantern signal. He was traveling at speed when the locomotive went through the derail and began a shortcut across the yard, on the ground. She tore out a section of the main line just behind the caboose. She leaned over the edge of a fill and subsided.

A quick inspection showed that it would take the big hook to get her back on the iron. Number 72 was tied up at Durbin for the night.

The Clinker walked blindly away from the disaster before he could yield to the temptation to commit an act that might cause him to be unjustly hanged. He blundered into the station and flung himself into a chair by the telegraph table.

Mel and Bill sat on the baggage truck just outside the open window and conferred in furtive whispers.

Eddie Sand, the telegrapher on duty, had been in communication on the Morse wire with the agent at Silverton, and he reported the conversation to the Clinker.

"The agent says they've seen your headlight from down below," Eddie told him, "and there's a considerable crowd met to welcome you. Seems like they've run out of most of the necessities of life since we quit operations. The agent says they're becoming a little impatient and somewhat inflamed, and he's anxious to know when Seventy-two will get there."

The Clinker strangled.

"Tell him," he moaned, "that we've got our engine on the ground and we won't be down there till tomorrow."

Eddie looked startled. "You sure you want me to tell him that?" he inquired skeptically. "Those miners do take things apart when they're balked of their keen desires."

The Clinker opened his mouth and then closed it. He nodded.

"Ho-kay," Eddie sighed.

He touched the telegraph key and sent with regret, then listened with respect and sympathy to the agent's valiant response.

"He says," Eddie reported, "that he'll lock all the cash and small valuables in the safe, and he looks to the Monte to care for his widows and maybe an orphan or two. His guess is that it'll take about three days after those miners have destroyed all railroad property in the vicinity before their blood lust will have abated enough so you can safely send a reconnaissance party."

The Clinker closed his eyes.

Five minutes later, the agent at Silverton

was desperately back on the wire. Was there any beer in the train?

The Clinker said hopelessly that there was one car of beer.

Eddie sent briefly on the key. He listened to the lamenting sounder and came back with the ultimate terms of the miners.

"He says," Eddie related, "that unless that car of beer is down there at the front door of the Mint Saloon within an hour, or maybe a little better, they're going to tear up what track is needful to connect the town up with that other railroad that comes down to about five miles of Silverton. They ain't foolin'."

"What do they want me to do—toss the car down to them?" the Clinker moaned plaintively.

It was on occasions such as this that Mel was sure to be hit by an inspiration.

"It's down grade all the way," he spoke up blithely. "A little crooked, but if you get the car started it will sure arrive."

The Clinker flinched at the sound of that irritating voice flitting in from the outer darkness. He bowed his neck.

"That car is right on the head end of the train, too," Mel persisted. "All we got to do is start it with a pinch bar, and it'll get there in ten minutes. Mebby less."

"That's a four-percent grade," the Clinker pointed out dismally. "If the car got to rambling, it'd sure take to the tree tops on one of them muleshoe curves."

"With me at the brake wheel?" Mel jeered. "Why, I could stand that reefer on its nose at any given point down that grade."

The Clinker muttered behind his granite facade.

"How can you lose?" Mel urged. "They'll tear up your railroad if you don't, and anyhow you ought to gallop down there and save that agent for his widows."

The Clinker yanked himself out of the chair. "Get the pinch bar," he instructed.

MEL climbed to the top of the refrigerator and checked the handbrake. The Clinker thrust the point of the pinch bar under a rear wheel and levered. The car hung back stubbornly. He put his bulky weight on the bar and rode it down. The center of dead weight shifted. The car took off. The Clinker grabbed a rung of the ladder and climbed to the top.

The refrigerator car took the initial slope at an easy glide. Mel wound the slack out of the brake chain. The four-percent grade laid hold at the first curve and the glide mounted quickly to a sustained swoop. The mountain scenery blurred as it streaked by. The sparse timber seemed all at once to have grown up into a dense forest all along the line. The telegraph poles flickered past against the stars like a picket fence. Mel tightened the brakes. The car grunted resentfully under the hard restraint of brakeshoes and gathered no more speed. It staggered as the flanges bit and squawled on the curves and it leaned out dizzily over dark and vacant space. A piece of soft track fell out from under it and vacuum seconds elapsed before they felt the wheels on solid rails again.

"She does pretty well at a running broad-jump," Mel yelled.

"Tighten them brakes!" the Clinker bellowed back.

"The way she bucks," Mel informed him, "I can't get set to put another notch on the wheel."

He sat down on the running board beside the Clinker and held on with both hands as the car twisted wildly through a reverse curve. The odor of scorching brakeshoes came up through the rushing air.

"Ought to make it easy in ten minutes," Mel gloated.

The Clinker said, "Glub!"

They darted along the lip of a giddy blank wall and rocked across a cringing trestle. They revolved on a series of muleshoe twists. The lights of Silverton swirled at the bottom of the granite bowl. The grade gave the car a final shove and the yellow flecks of light down there seemed to come looping up through the empty dark in a glittering swarm.

Then the refrigerator car plunged from the curves and straightened out into the upper end of the yard.

"This ought to make the Clinker very happy," Mel congratulated himself privately.

Yard lights crowded in. Clustered lights bloomed in a misty glow at the Mint Saloon, and he made out a restless swarm of expectant miners. He waved his lantern exultantly and a lusty cheer came back. Sure'd been a gallant ride to the rescue.

Someone had opened the stub switch. The car swerved over the points with a considerable slam. The parched citizens parted as the reefer nosed in among them. The saloon loomed up and swam at Mel in the uncertain light. The wheels clattered briskly at the rail joints. The momentum hadn't been subdued enough to spot the car at the unloading point. The crowd was suddenly silent.

Mel slipped his brake club between the spokes of the wheel. He bunched himself. The car had lost its rock and sway and he could set his feet. He put a sharp swing of his body on the club. There is a trick to it, the way you set your muscles to get those last two notches on the brake. He exerted all his cunning in a shrewd twist.

Something gave way below. The universe came apart and dropped from under him. Stars spilled over the edge of the granite bowl as he

sat down heavily. That last ounce of effort had snapped the chain on the brake shaft and released the brakes.

The speed inched up. The front trucks shoved aside the tie bumper at the end of the stub. The car waddled across the granite ledge. The swinging doors yawned at the drawhead and Mel flattened on the roof and shut his eyes. The Clinker went down the rear ladder of the car with bulky alacrity.

The car widened and heightened the doorway and crowded into the bar-room. Mel opened his eyes as he cleared the shattered woodwork. Flooring splintered and moved aside in windrows. The wheels grunted in the granite beneath. Dim figures flitted below.

The reefer nudged the bar aside. A door in the back wall came up to the drawbar. Mel suddenly remembered the swamper who had thrown a box of rubbish out of that doorway, and the dizzy time it had taken to reach the bottom of the ravine. He went down the ladder in a quick drop.

The car nuzzled the back wall and it blew out with a dull explosion. The car bowed politely and began to hurry. It rumbled with sober regret and flung up its rear end as it rolled through the breach in the wall and ducked and plunged. There were straining seconds before a crash echoed from the bottom of the chasm. Then in the ensuing silence the far, tantalizing hiss of cold beer escaping from broken containers came up clearly from the deep dark.

The Clinker stood at the breach in the back wall, peering gloomily into the effervescent depths. A low moan ran through the crowd of miners. It sounded like the wind before the hurricane came. Convulsed faces drifted through the smoky light. The crowd moved forward across the broken flooring with an ominous clump of heavy boots.

Mel tugged at the Clinker's arm. "We'd better get out of here before they begin to massacre us," he urged.

The Clinker swung a brief glance at the swarming miners. Then he turned a melancholy eye upon Mel.

"You start running," he instructed somberly, "and don't stop till you're clean out of the mountains."

"Ho-kay," Mel agreed eagerly. "Come on. Let's go."

The Clinker shook his head and waved him away.

"Not me," he muttered, more in sorrow than in anger. "I'll be safer with the mob than I would be with you."

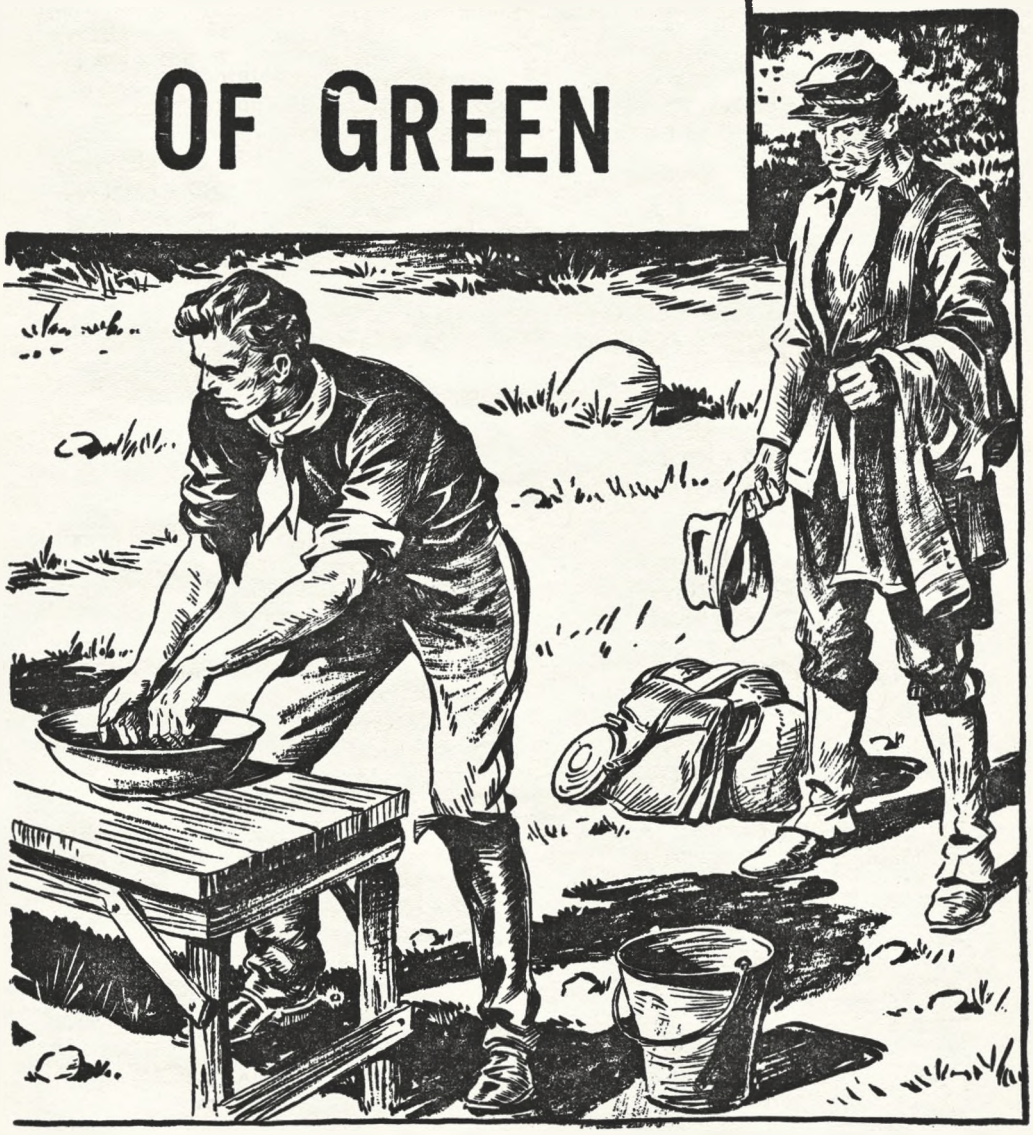
By T. C. McCLARY

MIDWAY of afternoon, Junior Lieutenant Linklater drew rein upon the Gila Trail and sitting forward in his saddle, squinted into the harsh and colorless glare ahead. Fort Bayard formed vague and dancing out of the running sea of heat, hot and dusty and desolate looking as the country; not even a full stockade, and a "fort" only by virtue of its name.

For a long space, the lieutenant sat staring at it with tight lips, the dancing image a background for vivid memories of the War College, and the two green eastern parade posts where he had spent his first two hitches. That he had been sent out here by way of Frisco to stale-rot in a womanless Indian country was an irony of honor. It was due to his having restrained himself from sweeping the

A BLADE OF GREEN

★ ★



willing young wife of a colonel off her feet. In his mind, he used that exact phrase bitterly . . . it explained precisely what he had not done, and which out of pique, she had accused him of trying.

"They will have heard some rumor by post, of course," he thought, and his long, lean jaw hardened. "And they will be trying to find the crack in my mettle."

Linklater was conscious of the effect his clean linen made on the eavesdropping men.

●

ILLUSTRATED BY MONROE EISENBERG

For an instant, his wide drawn eyes narrowed to bare silver slits, and his broad lips pulled into a single line. Then he sucked in a long breath through gleaming teeth, and felt filled with the cold, clear sound of rapier steel and a combative eagerness to meet the challenge.

"But they will find no crack, from the captain to the lowest yardbird!" he told himself. Touching his horse, he put it off trail and down into the drybed until he found a waterhole by some willows.

He had been two days without a shave, eleven without a full scrub. For nineteen days he had ridden with his clothes and flesh soaking up the hot alkali dust. Now he stripped and beat out his clothes upon a rock, and with a hard brush from his kit, scrubbed off the dust stains as best he could. His underclothes had received more attention along the trail, but he washed them fresh and put them in the sun. He got into the hole himself and soaked. Except for its stale smell, the water might have been a warm bath.

He had the build of an athlete and fox hunting man; no flabby flesh, broad in the shoulders, flat in the stomach and narrow at the hips. Long, lithe muscles rippled beneath his skin, a fact not observable when he was dressed.

He had shaved carefully in his small bit of mirror, and now he dressed and remade his kit as the harsh desert glare softened into evening light. As he moved toward the fort, the wall of haze drew back. The fort showed worse and the country more beautiful than he had thought.

A SLOPPY sentry was dozing at the gate, a burned, hairy chest showing through a dirty tunic opened to the belt. His fatigue cap was pushed back upon a dark orange head, and an unkempt red beard had not been attended to for a week. He watched the officer's approach curiously, and presented a sloppy salute.

He said, "You'll be the relieving officer . . . junior." A slight scorn ran beneath his tone.

"*What?*" Linklater snapped, and his eyes bored into him.

"The relieving officer, junior grade," the trooper bettered.

"When you speak to me. say *sir!*" Linklater told him, and saw the mocking deviltry break up onto the surfaces of the sentry's rebellious Irish eyes. "Have an orderly present my compliments to Captain Anger."

"Yes . . . sir," the sentry answered, but he left the slight pause, and truculence beat out of him like a smell. He did not call for the corporal of the guard; he simply sang out, "OD's orderly at the gate!"

The officer sat casually in the saddle, but the stiffness of parade training and pride in cavalry deportment was something that struck like a discordant sound against the slovenliness of this dirty outpost. He gave no further heed to the sentry, yet he was conscious of the man's scornful inspection; a deep and undying contempt and truculence for him, mixed with a horseman's admiration for his mount.

An orderly had appeared out of a log-and-'dobe hut, crossing the small square without hurry, a hand in one pocket. Except that he was shaven and not of a rebellious nature, he looked about as stale and flabby and undisciplined as the sentry. He came to a decent, but lax, salute, and said, "It will be Lieutenant Linklater, sir?"

The officer nodded. "My compliments to the captain when he is ready to see me."

"I will take you now, Lieutenant," the orderly said. Humor lurked behind the stolid mask of his brick-burned face. "Unless you would care to tidy up first?"

"I could do with a stretch and a washbasin," the officer said, and the orderly took his bridle and led him across the yard. In front of the commissary the orderly stopped and nodded above. "Your quarters will be up there, sir, with Lieutenant Diggs. But he is out on long scout and quarters have been closed for ten days."

He made a question of the statement. Although he wore no visible sign of service, Linklater rated him as a three striper who had learned the ways and would probably be a master sergeant except for drink. "Suppose," the lieutenant suggested, "I use the outside basins while you see to the quarters later?"

"Yes, sir," the orderly nodded, and looked relieved. The man sang out for officer's orderly, who rolled out sleepily from some hidden siesta, and bug-eyed at Linklater's spruce appearance, almost forgot to salute. The OD orderly said, "This is Loree, sir, who will take care of you."

"My gear will be up next supply train," Linklater told him. "I want clean floors, clean blankets, clean windows, and plenty of air."

"Yes, sir," Loree grunted with a wheeze. His face paled a shade as his eyes flicked toward the upstairs quarters.

The lieutenant dismounted smartly with a jump, for all the pain it cost trail-sore muscles. He stretched the kinks out of him, conscious of the post's intense curiosity over the new shavetail, and hearing snatches of some of the mixed ribald and sour remarks. He followed the first orderly, who gave his name as Ringo, around to the troop wash bench, and taking off his knee-length tunic to wash, was conscious of the effect his clean linen made upon the eavesdropping men. Thereafter, he was escorted to captain's quarters, with the

subdued but raw laughter of the post following like a sea of ridicule.

In all that mockery and truculence that rouses up against a new junior officer, he caught only one note of doubt as to how he'd soften. It was an Irish voice with an old sergeant's quality, and it was in answer to some insolent remark from the sentry at the gate. "Never be too sure of yerself, O'Reilley. A man who brings a horse clean over the Gila and it is as little gaunted may have a surprising ring to him."

CAPTAIN ANGER was lounging back in a decrepit chair with one thigh-boot hooked beside a bottle of whiskey on a table. He nodded without rising, returned the salute, and gestured toward a chair. "Sit, Lieutenant, and pour a cup of that rotgut."

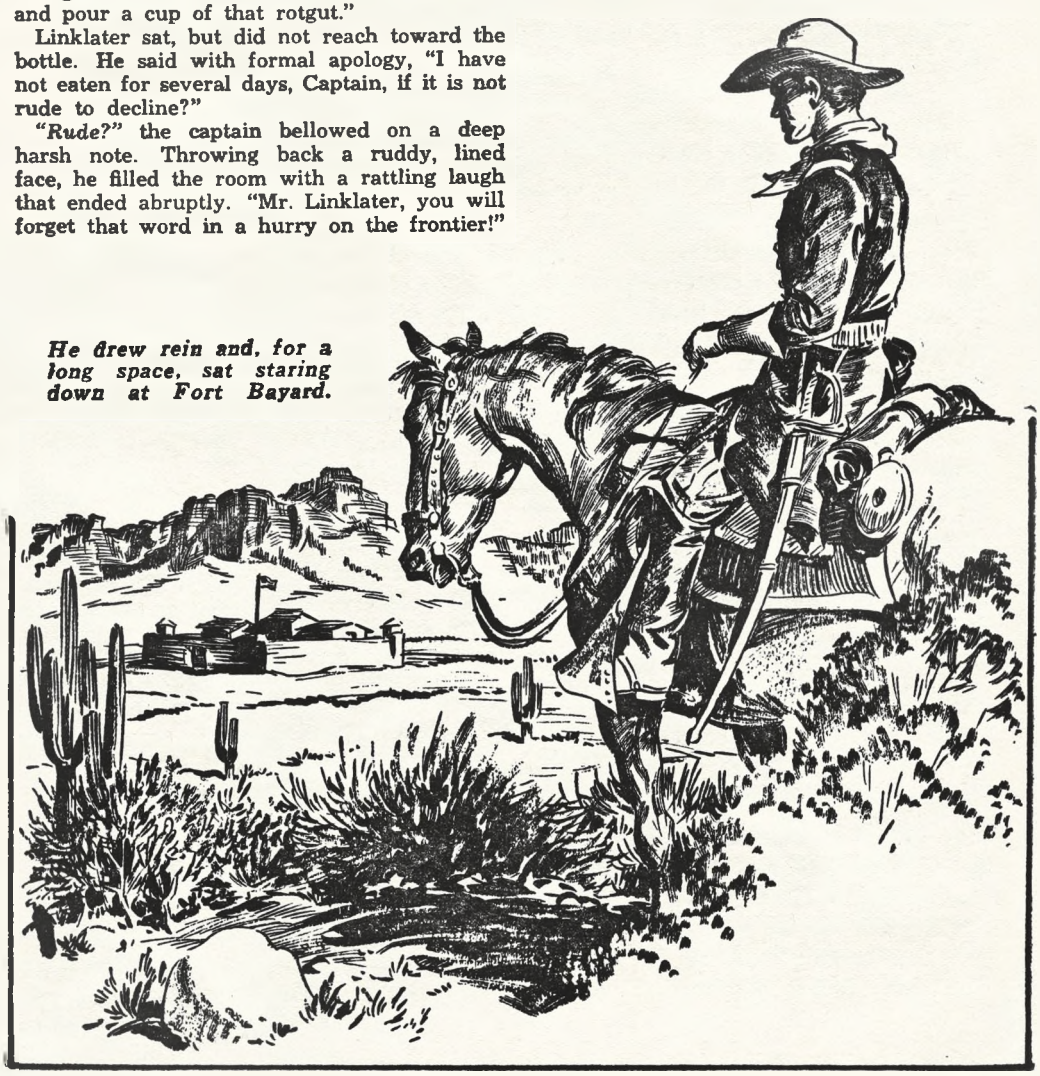
Linklater sat, but did not reach toward the bottle. He said with formal apology, "I have not eaten for several days, Captain, if it is not rude to decline?"

"Rude?" the captain bellowed on a deep harsh note. Throwing back a ruddy, lined face, he filled the room with a rattling laugh that ended abruptly. "Mr. Linklater, you will forget that word in a hurry on the frontier!"

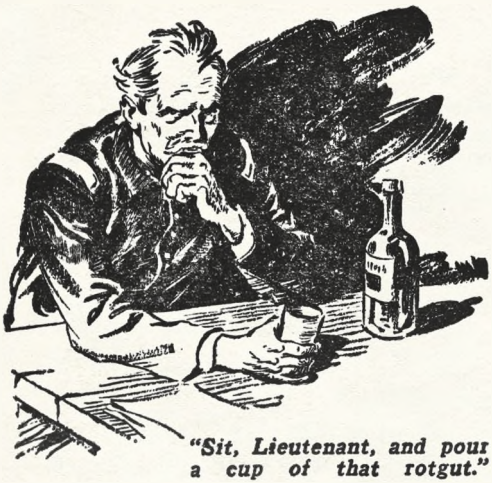
He had rheumy blue eyes that might have once been sharp as ice, but now were filled with rancor at the world in general, and the bitterness that comes of being marooned in western deserts waiting for promotion years beyond his time. He took the lieutenant in from top to bottom, face inscrutable, but resentment of him increasing with every inch.

Perhaps, Linklater thought, he is remembering an eating injustice that got him shipped out here. But there is no kindness in him because of it; he will hate me for the comparison that reminds him how he has gone to seed and failed.

"This is not a fancy post, Mr. Linklater," the captain stated finally. His tone did not request an answer. He leaned forward and



He drew rein and, for a long space, sat staring down at Fort Bayard.



"Sit, Lieutenant, and pour a cup of that rotgut."

flicked a soiled letter out of a drawer. Glancing through it, he said with a sharp twang, "Friends have written of you. It seems you have quite a gallant reputation."

His eyes shot like lightning across the top of the letter. The junior officer fought against a flush. He said stiffly, "There is always gossip, Captain. I was credited with being in love . . . but it was with the cavalry."

"Ah?" Captain Anger breathed on a suddenly soft note. But there was no softness in his eyes. He locked a horseman's square, muscular hands behind his head and leaned back. "Of course, the cavalry means one thing in the East, and something else to a dashing man like Custer who can take his wife almost into the field of action with him, and something entirely different to a forgotten, fleabitten, souring post in a desert. There is little romance or martial pomp out here, Mr. Linklater. You will learn that quickly."

He was silent, and then leaned forward with a bang. "You may not be aware of it, Mr. Linklater, but by Washington's almighty wisdom, we do not even fight Indians out here! We make reports on what they steal and who they murder, and pursue them, and as long as they keep running, we cannot even fire a shot."

"No fighting, sir?" the junior asked with amazement.

"None!" the captain bellowed through his teeth. "Unless they attack us first!" He leaned on the table glaring at the junior. "Now, Mr. Linklater, would you care to have that drink?"

After the drink, the captain came to business. He had not softened and he said abruptly, "You should not have arrived looking quite so . . . trim. You are going to have to live it down, or bring the entire post up to your—ah—idea of cavalry deportment, esprit and discipline, sir. There have been juniors who tried it before. In my recollection, all of them asked for transfer, or resigned outright, or . . . were mysteriously shot in battle. *In the back.*"

He regarded Linklater bleakly. "Troops can be tougher than officers, in their way, Mr. Linklater. They have ways that no officer's discipline can match."

"I have never given discipline except where it was needed, sir," the junior said.

Captain Anger grunted and looked suddenly bored even with cursing. He looked as if he wanted to sink back into his black and eating memories. "It is needed here," he muttered wearily. "Suppose we give you the job of adjutant, Mr. Linklater, and see what you can do with a post where there is not even a blade of grass?"

It was the test, and a vicious one conjured up by a long-fevered and bitter-rankling mind. It was meant to break him in the most inglorious way possible—to let him steep in his own inability to bring discipline and respect out of a tough troop of sullen and hardened fighting men.

"If I could have six weeks, and then a tough field assignment, sir—"

"And after that?" the captain asked.

"There will be grass on the post and the men will not walk on it, or I will request transfer with your permission."

For a long instant, the captain sat there looking at him as if it were a poker game and he was trying to read his hand. He said abruptly, "Mr. Linklater, you are either a superb actor, a fool, or the kind of cavalry officer the politicians will send to his glory, if the Indians don't. Make good at this and I will pull something out of the past and you will not be sitting here, moldering and sick, in twenty years, as I am."

"But you will not help me?" the junior ventured.

"Not one damned inch. And if you fail, I will see that your career is smashed as mine was. I don't like you, Mr. Linklater. You revive things I have spent twenty years forgetting. But if you whip respect into these men, you will have my hand."

He watched the junior officer with distaste and anger for a space, and then nodded that the interview was over.

CHAPTER II

THE CHALLENGE

THE outside stairs to captain's quarters ran in the deep shadows between two buildings, a fact for which Linklater thanked his stars. Near the bottom he stopped and made a show of looking at some papers, but

actually to still the crimson and white streaks flushing across his face in waves For an instant, he was conscious of the tension self-control had put into his jaws and neck, and then he sucked in a long breath and had himself in hand.

Ringo attached himself and led him to adjutant's quarters, which proved to be a litter of maps and unfiled reports, empty whiskey bottles and dust. Linklater gave it one distasteful look and sent for Stebbins, troop clerk, to take charge of a bucket detail to sluice it down.

Linklater moved out and stood with hands locked behind his back in the hot shadows of the narrow awning. His dressing down of the sentry, O'Reilley, had already reached barracks and he could hear the roars of mirth and mimicking "Sirs!" that floated out For a full five minutes he stood there with the enmity and deviltry of the troops coming like a hot fire from one side, and knowing he was watched with bleak malice from captain's quarters on the other.

"It will be fighting the whole post," he thought, "and I will lick it, or I will break, but I will not bend an inch!" With that decision, he said to Ringo, "Sergeants' call."

Ringo moved and this time he did not saunter with one hand in a pocket Shortly, the crackling notes of a trumpet ripped upon the air, and the rough joy of a trooper foreseeing sergeant troubles rang in every note In two minutes, five sergeants appeared, lined up by a grizzled and leather-faced master named Mulligan Mulligan presented sergeants, adding, "All accounted for except Athens, who is on scout, sir."

Linklater recognized the voice he had heard answer O'Reilley at the gate, and took special note of the tough-grained wisdom in Mulligan's jet black eyes He nodded and gave at ease, and looked the lot over. Scarred and weathered and tough of hide, all had the smell of real fighting men—and including Mulligan, all had gone to seed in this unkempt post.

He took their names, studying the caste and stance of each man, catching the curiosity behind their inscrutable expressions, but deeper than that, their tough resentment of a new junior with polished boots, and their instinctive determination to break him—unless he was a tougher man than they were. He took his time, asking the duties of each, listening coolly to the things the words did not say, showing nothing of his reactions, holding himself isolated, inscrutable.

He had just finished when the trumpeter called Retreat without warning. Pivoting into salute, Linklater watched the flag come down against the gold and crimson sky, conscious of surprise that the post did not even go through the formality of standing for the flag. Turning back to the sergeants, he saw that they had read his surprise; their reactions were in the half truculent, half shamed, expressions of their eyes. But in Mulligan's gaze was a faint thread of humor for the others. Linklater decided that Mulligan was the only one who had refused to form a decision upon him. To the rest, he was a bark and tinsel martinet with no real core.

"All right, Sergeants," he said. He felt grim, but he held his voice cool, aloof "You may be good fighting men, but you are not cavalry men at all. You look like a bunch of tramps and your troops look worse Mulligan, you will take them out in detail behind some hill and march them afoot three hours daily under full pack until that flabbiness is sweated off of them."

Not even Mulligan's years of stolid mien could keep back the grin that touched his lips. "And you will march with them," Linklater added.

He could feel the impact of their outrage, their balking hatred He would have given a year's pay to turn away right then. But they would have read the weakness in him as panic; he had to make them feel the full iron of his authority. "First man who goldbricks," he said, "will get severe discipline If you are as tough as you think you are, you will not break. If you do break, you have no business with those stripes."

He nodded at Mulligan and returned the explosive salute, and watched them march off into the bleeding purple shadows thickening out from the stockade He turned in to inspect adjutant's quarters, and felt the sullen hatred of the bucket detail. He walked around slowly feeling for dust, looking for missed places under the smoky yellow light of the big oil lamp.

"I trust everything is in order, sir," the post clerk said. "Mess call will be shortly."

Linklater stood with his boots wide and his hands locked behind his back and looked at their grim and resentful faces one by one. Then he looked at the clerk and said on an emotionless, flatted note, "Corporal, you can send word to the cook to hold warm mess until this job is done, and do every inch of it over again. The walls have not been swabbed, and not even a broom has been run across the ceiling."

"The ceiling?" the corporal repeated with a gaping look.

"You know the word's meaning?" Linklater inquired tartly.

"Yes, sir!" the corporal choked out, and took out his own failure in snapping at the men.

"I will be back for inspection," Linklater said. He stopped abruptly at the doorway and turned his head, catching their baleful looks upon his back. "There is a solitary here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the corporal said through set teeth. "It has not been used for some years."

Linklater nodded. "Take this same detail tomorrow morning and see that it is put in order."

HE PIVOTED and moved out into the gathering night, knowing there was not a one of them who would not gladly have put a knife in his back. The scrambled sounds of a ruckus came from back of barracks. There was silence, and then Mulligan's hot-tempered growl, "Ye'll give me no more of your lip, Stoltz, or I will sweat that double gut off you with my own fists! I am taking no chances on light packs!"

Linklater stood for a moment in the soft, thick dust of the small square, feeling the cool of night break softly on the fevered heat of his face. He had not one man in all that post to count on if anything went wrong, and he had only begun to give the discipline that was needed. He might have felt his way along, treading easily by degrees, but the men would remember it and mock him for not daring to do it all at once. And yet it took heart to risk an open outbreak. For a space, he stood balancing the wisdom of the two courses; for a moment, almost deciding upon the safer. But then he felt the grim truculence of the men stabbing out at his solid shadow from a dozen quarters, and knew the intrigue and planned insubordination in the offing, and his teeth locked together.

He turned up the flight of stairs to his own quarters and found Loree sweating furiously with a scrub-brush. The orderly said apologetically, "More dust than I thought, Lieutenant. I have just begun the scrubbing."

Linklater's eyes darted to a soap smear on a section of floor beyond Loree and knew that the man had done the whole job once and started to knock off when the incident in adjutant's quarters made him think better of it.

He said, "You can let it go until tomorrow, Loree."

"Yes, sir," the orderly answered with mixed gratitude and anger.

"I want the man O'Reilley at change of guard."

The orderly vanished, hauling away a large hamper of empty bottles which suggested to Linklater, who was no teetotaler, that the first lieutenant must find his long scout very dry. There was a bookcase holding some excellent reading, but showing signs that the books had not been touched for several years. The crash of dumped bottles drifted through the open window, giving the answer, and a tightness came into Linklater's eyes. "I will not let it happen to me!" he murmured, but a terrible uncertainty ran through him . . . so many before him, the first lieutenant, must have said that same thing when they first came.

The tread of boots sounded on the stairs, giving him an instant of panic before he was able to draw the cool mask back upon his face. Insolence was in the very way O'Reilley knocked and reported. Again, he left a time lapse before the "sir."

Linklater turned and looked at him across the pyramid of yellow lamplight and knew that in this trooper he was going to find the very peak of trouble. There was a special trouble-maker in every troop, and O'Reilley was likely the one in this, but beyond that, he had taken personal affront at his dressing down. He was going to make this a personal battle.

The officer said, "O'Reilley, you don't seem to like the title of rank."

The Irishman's eyes mocked him. He said with a truculence beneath his tone, "It has never been a point of issue with junior officers at this post . . . sir."

"There is more to it with you," Linklater told him.

O'Reilley had at some time been a prize-fighter and now his face held that taunting smile that infuriates an opponent. "You could give me solitary for talking out of turn, Lieutenant," he reminded.

"You will not get it for a straight answer," Linklater told him.

For a moment, the trooper took his measure, speculation drifting behind the mockery that floated in his eyes. "I think I would give it anyway," he growled finally. "I have always felt that an officer was not entitled to it until he proved he was a better man than me."

"And you mean to wait until that is proven?" Linklater asked coolly.

"There is not much way I can wait . . . sir," the trooper said. "An officer has the authority of caste."

Oh, he knew the book, this O'Reilley did! He could throw the insolence of the devil at an officer, but in such a way that there was not quite excuse for discipline. He knew it, and knew Linklater was thinking that, and he was challenging him—silently dancing like a boxer before an opponent—daring him to do it.

The officer said severely, "I have seen men ask for trouble until they got it, and then go over the hill, O'Reilley."

The trooper nodded. "There are some of those right here. But I am not one of them. You know what is in my mind, and I know what to expect. But the discipline has not been made that will break me . . . sir."

"There is insubordination and disobedience," Linklater pointed out sternly.

The man contrived to laugh at him without moving his lips or uttering a sound. He said, "This is not my dress tunic, Lieutenant. My dress tunic holds the ribbons of five cam-

paigns and fifteen honors where I have served under fighting officers . . . sir."

It was a threat and a bold one. When a junior officer without battle honors began to lay on the lash, Headquarters was liable to look at a disciplined man's fighting record to find out what was wrong. Usually, it stacked up against the officer's record.

O'Reilley had still not dressed his tunic nor his cap, and he had come here intentionally that way, challenging Linklater to discipline him for it first day. The officer let the opportunity pass, but his eyes were cold and severe upon the trooper. He said, "If you have served that long, O'Reilley, you know the regulations. See that you obey them after today."

"Polished buttons, Lieutenant?" the trooper asked.

"Just that," the officer nodded. "I am going to ask for you in my command."

The Irishman's face hardened and he showed a flicker of surprise. Linklater nodded at him, and caught the taunting precision of his salute, and the intentional martial precision of his steps going out. He heard the smashing click of the man's boots as he pivoted sharply along the line below, and then the steps faded into the conglomerate sound of the post.

Linklater's breath let out with a rasping grate. His brow was chilly, and he felt the sudden sweat in the palms of his hands. "That," he thought, "will be my man. He will set himself to make a fool of me, until one of us is licked."

HE HAD been accounted by troopers a tough but a fair officer in the East. Out here, and new, and under the conditions, toughness and fairness held different values. For a long space, he stood unmoving just where O'Reilley had left him, feeling the abysmal uncertainty of himself and the loneliness which only an officer hated by his men can know.

There was a bottle of whiskey upon a shelf, and he found he had been staring at it with a terrible nervous thirst within him for a strong raw drink. Loree's voice broke his black reverie, asking, "Shall I pour you a drink, Lieutenant?"

Linklater stiffened. The man's voice put iron back into his veins. "Not tonight, Loree," he said. "I will have dinner and turn in."

He spent the week bringing minor order out of the confusion—straightening accounts, getting the files in shape, checking reports, putting the men to policing up the post; the countless small duties that fell to the lot of a frontier adjutant. There was no slightest sign from Captain Anger as to what his reaction was. Occasionally, Linklater would see him standing at his window watching the activity, or have a noncommittal word with him as he went out on his daily ride.

On the third day, Stoltz and Mulligan had it out again behind barracks, and Mulligan did not come off so well. He packed a pair of black eyes like sandstorm sunsets. He turned sour and sullen and burning at his partial defeat, and spent the rest of the week taking his mood out in the drilling of the other sergeants and himself. For one hour of their daily drill he had them on the double, this being particularly hard on Stoltz, who had acquired a sizable girth as stable sergeant with few field duties.

That same evening, Lieutenant Dyers brought his scout patrol back in, a solid, thickset, muscular man, born for a fighting officer, but in whom something had gone dead. He came up to officers' quarters bringing the smells of sweat and dust and stale discontent with him, reaching for the bottle before even taking off his campaign hat.

He poured a slug and then threw his hat and heavy yellow gloves upon the table, and turning, lifted the cup of deep red liquor with a gesture. "So you are the new junior and the old man gave you adjutant? My condolences, Linklater—it is the cavalry's form of hara-kiri."

He threw down his drink and poured a fresh

one, and then threw off his coat. He looked Linklater and the room over with faintly ironical amusement. "No doubt you found our homey little post somewhat short on discipline and esprit de corps, and are set to tidy up? Take a word of advice, Linklater—don't try it. The dust and disorder here has soaked a lot deeper than men's tunics."

"Didn't you try?" the junior asked.

A twitch passed over Dyers' face and left it cold and immobile with an endless weariness. "Of course. We all do. And we all end up like this." He made a gesture toward the bottle. "It is the damned boredom without a break, the damned spirit-throttling duties of being nothing but report writers. A good brush with the Apaches would keep the post on its toes. But it is three months since we had even a foray, and you may have noted we are so unimportant we do not even rate a telegraph."

"This is a strategic spot. Why was the post given fifth grade rating?" Linklater asked.

A spark of bitter humor showed in Dyers' sun-bleached eyes. "Why were you transferred here?" he asked. He gave a brief chuckle at the other's suddenly hard expression. "I am not prying, Linklater, I'm just giving you the answer to your question."

He took a long draught and banged down the tin cup. "Nothing you can do here will last. This is a cavalry grave, and it has proven that for more officers than troopers." He scowled across at the bottle. "In the end, you will find that the solution."

CHAPTER III

WAR OF NERVES

FIVE days later, Mulligan marched his sergeant detail back from a full seven days' drill, a toughened and hardened and angry lot of men, keyed to a fine physical point, and ready to take on the devil. He dismissed them at quarters, and dropping his own pack, led the way behind barracks with Stoltz and the others following.

There was dead silence for this fight. Only the thick solid smash of fists upon bone and flesh broke upon the quiet, until the rack of spent men's breaths began to grow and finally the smashing ceased. "Sluice a buck on the big tub, and when he comes to, tell him to get back in his place!" Mulligan boomed out. He came around the corner with a new glint in his eye and a big grin on his face.

He disappeared and came back out a few moments later stripped, a square-hewn giant of toughened bone and muscle, a magnificent-looking fighting man. He swaggered back to the showers and was twice the usual time at mid-day mess.

Sergeant Mulligan

He reported afterward, "The sergeants are in top trim, sir."

"And you?" Linklater asked.

"Ha!" Mulligan growled, rubbing skinned knuckles with pleasant recollections. "The week was tough, sir, but it stripped fifteen years off me!" He blew against thick, scarred lips and looked past the officer. "I have been thinking, sir, a full strip-down inspection might be a good thing for the men."

"The men . . . or the sergeants, Mulligan?"

"Well," Mulligan admitted, "the sergeants are in a mood to make the most of it."

"Order it." Linklater nodded, and felt the cool comfort of Mulligan's satisfaction thread the knowledge that the sergeant major had not yet come to a decision about him.

As Mulligan started to leave, the officer

added, "You might give the sergeants two days to get their men in order, Mulligan."

Mulligan's eyes filled with lights of Irish humor as he saluted again and wheeled out. At mess, Dyers watched Linklater for a long time with speculations in his eyes. "I suppose," he said abruptly out of his train of thought, "there were more boots and black eyes given in post today than in any one week I can remember."

"They will heal," the junior said.

"But not the memory of who caused them," Dyers grunted. "Some of the men are still down at the river scrubbing, Link. Have you ever had any active fighting experience?"

Linklater looked at him through the cone of smoky oil light. "You know I haven't. What is the point, Dyers?"

"If you are lucky, the men may wait to see if you are as tough in battle as on post. It is pretty hard to be tough even in your third battle, Link." He poured a drink and swirled it around the sides of the tin cup.

The junior officer sucked at his upper lip. "What would you advise?" he asked finally.

Dyers gave a short, impersonal laugh. "It is a week too late for what I would have advised! You killed that when you rode in from a nineteen day trail with a clean shirt and fresh shave." He lifted his cup and gestured toward the bottle. "Care to join me?"

Linklater's hands were motionless upon the table edge; he did not dare to move them. The clammy moisture of uncertainty was on his brow, and the palms of his hands were wet. There was no friendliness nor approval in Dyers for his actions; there was merely a cynical curiosity as to how it would work out. In all that post, the solitary friendly thing he might find would be a drink.

O'Reilley's malevolent glee floated through the window from barracks, chortling, "What's wrong, Sarge, my equipment in too good order for you?"

A burst of cursing came in Sergeant Reed's deep voice. "In five years, it is the first time it has been! What are you up to, O'Reilley?"

"Lieutenant's orders," came the Irishman's mocking laugh. "Do you think I'd give the damned brass polisher the satisfaction of finding one button out of place? No, me bucko, he'll not catch O'Reilley that way! I want to be on hand right by him when he gets his first smell of an Injun's stinking breath!"

Linklater darkened clear to his neck. Need in him for the friendly warmth of liquor was like a man's desert thirst. But the cynical speculations were dancing in Dyers' eyes, and he shook his head. "No thanks," he said to Dyers' offer.

The first lieutenant shrugged and drank. "Best fighting man in the troop—O'Reilley," he grunted. "But a hellion in his hates. He has broken three officers single-handed, and he has noised it around that he already has you buffaloed."

THE inspection was something historic. Even Captain Anger turned out. But he had given Lieutenant Dyers special duty, and he made it clear that Linklater was to proceed as inspecting officer upon his own judgment. Not a solitary man, saving noncoms, had full order excepting only O'Reilley.

O'Reilley stood at attention, gleaming like a parade ground drillmaster. Linklater went over his equipment with a wary eye, catching the insolence veiled by the Irishman's well-schooled expression. Suddenly, he paused, catching a change in the rhythm of the troops' hot hatred. It did not vanish, but it hung suspended while some indefinable interest took its place. There was a trick here and they all knew about it. Something very obvious was wrong in the trooper's equipment, and he was on the verge of overlooking it, and the men were waiting.

But not a solitary thing that Linklater could see was out of order. O'Reilley's saddle was burnished, his boots soaped and rubbed. Linklater even gave extra examination to his mount's hooves. A feeling of chill defeat washed through his veins as he found the Irishman's carbine spotless and gleaming. He threw it back with a violence that surprised himself . . . his nerves were popping like a gatling gun.

The Irishman's eyes held pools of biting scorn as he caught the gun with a hard, practiced hand. A man might easily have fumbled from the violence—but not O'Reilley! He rammed home the bolt and dropped the carbine to his side.

The smooth sharp metallic click of the bolt still rang in Linklater's ears. Before the whole post, and the captain, this devil had contrived to put contempt into the sound! Then suddenly Linklater realized the sound had a different tone from the others, and realization came to him.

He said with cool casualness, "You have been in the Territories some years, O'Reilley?"

"Eleven . . . sir," the Irishman answered, with that bare pause. "Enough for five campaigns."

Linklater nodded thoughtfully, then suddenly his eyes snapped glacial fire. "Then you know your carbine is too tight, O'Reilley!"

The thing that happened to the man's eyes gave the answer. He knew it, and he had tightened it purposely. Not one officer in a hundred fresh from the East would have known that the Western cavalry carried its guns loose so that sudden action would not heat jam them by sealing the bolts.

O'Reilley said with a note of burning hatred

for being bested, "I will see to it . . . sir!"

"You will have five days to practice assembly," Linklater said. He turned to Mulligan. "See that he is permitted to carry his gun and tools into solitary, Sergeant."

The suck of the file's indrawn breaths held the quality of a rising tornado. O'Reilley went gray beneath his burn. From the corner of his eye, Linklater looked expectantly at Captain Anger, but Anger was squinting meditatively into the churned yellow sky without any expression of reaction to this stiff discipline.

That week the sergeants got their chance to work off their spleen heavy-drilling the troops, and atop of it, Fort Bayard experienced the quaint procedure of having every wall and floor not only sluiced, but sanded down. Daily inspection was put back into routine, three non-coms were broken, all but five men were put on bounds. Four men from Dyers' troop sneaked across the river after dark one night, and found Mulligan on their tail before they had finished their first drink.

Mulligan growled with an anger that was close to mayhem, "Ye'll give me none of yer sassy lip and come along! I am here by orders."

Trooper Kane opened his mouth to say something and Mulligan's fist cracked him like a thunderbolt before he spoke. The men returned in grim silence and went to the guardhouse.

Linklater said to their officer, "With your permission, I will give them a week pounding rock."

Dyers swirled the cup in his hand. He said, "They are my men and I should by decency defend them."

"They have needed it," Linklater answered. "This is not the first infraction."

Dyers cursed and hurled the cup across the room. "All right, but make it clear where the discipline comes from!"

"I think they will know that all right!" Linklater ground out through set teeth. He did not like doing it. But he did not dare let down.

He had O'Reilley report on release. The man had been on bread and water, actually stifling in the solitary cell, a small sweatbox with only one high barred window through which almost no air came. The man was weak and pale around the gills, but rebellion was an angry fire deep in his eyes.

"The time did not change you any," Linklater noted.

"It changed me . . . sir," O'Reilley rasped. "I am sure of something now!"

Linklater watched him steadily. Hot murder was in the man's heart. But he would not come unpegged to commit it. He meant to stick it out and break the junior officer by sheer stubborn conflict. Linklater found himself unconsciously envying the unyielding iron of the man.

"It is customary," he told him, "to give a man two days off after solitary. But you are an unusual man, O'Reilley. You will return to duty in the morning."

The pupils of the trooper's eyes drew to bare pinpoints of burning hatred. He said, "I had a lot of time in that sweatbox to think . . . sir."

Linklater met his gaze and saw what was in his mind. Even weakened, his insolence was undimmed. It was a challenge he was giving now—a challenge of whether or not Linklater had the toughness to listen.

"And what did you think about?" the officer asked coolly.

"I was wondering if you would give yourself the same discipline you can give others by your rank, Lieutenant."

"Or if I have a bellyache in my first battle, O'Reilley?"

"So you heard that?" the Irishman grunted.

"I did. And I will see you are relieved of discipline to find out for yourself when the time comes."

He terminated the interview and listened to the fading tramp of the man's steps through the thick ochre dust outside. The hatred of the post pressed in upon him like a weight. But O'Reilley's doubts of him pierced even that, because O'Reilley's doubts were the doubts he had of himself. Would he give himself that punishment—could he take the tough discipline if he did—or was he being a damned tyrant remembering the cavalry's eastern ways and abusing better men only by virtue of his rank?

FOR three weeks, rebellion and mutiny ran like a fever beneath the surface of the post, and then abruptly and without explanation, a surprising thing happened: two platoons got into a violent fight as to which was better at horse drill. It was the first thing that had broken the solid and rising hatred of him, and the first sign that the troopers of this post even gave a damn.

It was a break, but it was not success. It was only a hope and a temporary distraction. Dyers said as much, as Linklater stood at one of their windows looking out at the walks he had ordered outlined in whitewashed stones, the small squares of daily wetted ground where men had recently planted grass.

Dyers said, "If it had not come this week, you'd have been murdered or the whole post would have walked over the hill. But don't count on it too much, Link. They are only waiting for the six weeks."

"They know about that?" the other asked without turning.

Dyers gave a snort. He started to pour a drink, and then scowling at it, passed that one by. "The men know everything in a post this

size. They can smell it without being told."

Retreat crackled out, and Linklater snapped to attention, and an instant later, heard the click of Dyers' spurs behind him. After the last note he turned and caught a peculiar expression of boyish memories in the senior officer's cynical eyes.

Dyers said, "This post stood Retreat until the year of the Mescalero wars. Then things got too hectic and men were sick and needed rest on post . . . God knows, we had little enough of it! And after that, somehow, we never got back to turning out. When they reduced the post two grades in rating, it knocked the last morale out of us."

He took his drink then. Pouring it, he said, "I can't blame the old man for not giving a damn! He has been skipped on five promotions, and should have been rotated out of here twelve years ago."

"What's back of it?" Linklater asked.

Dyers gave a dry laugh. "He tried to get his troops as modern carbines as they issue the damned redskins. It caused an investigation and some politician got burned—but it didn't get us the carbines. It just got us stuck here forever."

"There is a way out, some way to get attention," his junior said. "It may be tough, but there has always been fairness in the cavalry!"

That deep and bitter cynicism came back into Dyers' eyes. "Wait until you've grown white hair here," he said. "When I came out, I was going back to get married, first furlough." He looked into his cup and snorted. "I got leave in eight years, instead of three."

THE row between the two platoons was to the good providing it didn't get out of hand, but the key to that was in the post's opinion of Linklater, and O'Reilley saw to it the post opinion did not change. For all that he had put some pride and spirit back into the soured men, they were spoiling for trouble, and he did not have their respect. They knuckled under, but sooner or later that would explode in resentment against him—not so much at his tough discipline, as in their outright disbelief that he would have the guts to apply the same measures to himself.

"I have seen his kind before," O'Reilley kept telling them. "Hell on a high horse for deportment and shined buttons, but put 'em in the field, me lads, and that's a different story! He may have buffaloed you that he is tough, but he has not bulled me. If he has guts at all, which I doubt me, they are not red!"

At least part of that was in every man's mind. A spirit of anticipation almost akin to a grim carnival swept the post with reveille on the day that began the seventh week of Linklater's adjutancy. It was something physical, that he could feel like heat. It made him think of that wild, brutal spirit that wells up through a crowd as a prizefight goes into its last rounds.

He saw O'Reilley loitering against a post as he went to captain's quarters by request, and the Irishman's bright eyes held wicked devils of mockery. It was the first time he had been called to Captain Anger's since the day of his arrival, and he found no greater friendliness than then.

The captain said, "Luck has thrown a tough job at us, Linklater—and I am happy to recollect you asked for it."

Linklater felt the heat of the captain's cold dislike and disapproval—and worse, his deep distrust of his manhood. He scalded and hoped the color did not show, and felt the nerves tighten at the back of his neck.

"Some miners up Rose Gorge decided to flog an Apache chief and considerably mistreat his wives. The last time that happened was with the chief Magnas Colorado, and it has cost hundreds of white lives. The general has sent personal word to move that mining camp out bodily and destroy the workings."

"I have heard that is a tough outfit of miners," Linklater said. "I suppose there will be shooting?"

"Almost certainly," the captain agreed. His

eyes grew very sharp for an instant. "Which makes things difficult, for our orders are to use force if necessary, *but not lay a hand upon any of the miners!*"

He laid the dispatches on the table, and drummed his fingers and then ordered curtly, "Take a full platoon and two sergeants and obey those orders to the letter."

"Yes, sir," Linklater answered him, somewhat hollowly.

The captain looked up at him with a mixture of rough amusement and wholehearted dislike, and yet with a faint curiosity as to the outcome.

"The miners," he said, "will all be free to go where they like. It will probably be Silver City. You might be sure they arrive safely, Mr. Linklater, and let your men wet their gullets there if you are still alive. That will be the termination of your mission and you may consider yourself relieved of duty at your discretion."

"Yes, sir," Linklater answered again, suddenly conscious of a junior officer's enormous lack of experience.

The captain nodded and he saluted and pivoted out. O'Reilley's mocking gaze followed him clear across the yard. He gave orders for assembly and went up to his quarters. He moved to the mirror and looked at his reflection, and it was not a pleasant thing for him to see.

The tight drawn lines of long strain lay deeply etched into his face. But deeper was something else, the grimness of a man who has built his own fight and suddenly realizes he is walking forth to take a licking.

He stiffened himself and took a pair of new gloves for the occasion, and went out for inspection. O'Reilley's eyes flicked to the new gloves instantly. Indefinable scorn touched his lips.

Linklater nodded at Stoltz and got into his saddle, and led his platoon through the gates in double file.

CHAPTER IV

SHOWDOWN

HIS men were in order, but he felt their distrust and hatred beating like the sun upon his back. For six weeks they had waited to see him put to a test where discipline and polished buttons and smart drill would not be the measure of a man. Now the test was here and they would wait to see the way he met it, and then turn upon him in a pack. He had no slightest doubt that at the first sign of weakness or indecision, his men would offer insubordination in a block.

Midway to Rose Gorge he called back,

"When there's weakness in a man," O'Reilley said, "it shows at the working end of a gun."

"O'Reilley, here!" and could feel the man's scorn and premeditated deviltry before he caught the blur of his horse's head. The Irishman reported with the mockery bright in his eyes. He knew the assignment, of course. The troopers always did.

Linklater said without turning, "This mission can very well end up in shooting, you know, O'Reilley?"

"That it can . . . sir," the man taunted. "The miners have never read a drill manual or been disciplined with solitary."

"You asked for that," Linklater reminded.

"I am not weaseling," O'Reilley growled. "I asked for it and took the punishment when I got it, and made no excuses afterward." He looked at the junior officer with burning contemplation. "All that I have ever said was that you would not dare to be as tough upon yourself."

"And today you expect to see the test of that?"

The trooper sucked in a deep breath of satisfaction. "One way or another, we all expect it. When there is weakness in a man, it shows at the working end of a gun. And there will be guns, you can lay to that!"

Linklater's jaws locked, and he had difficulty loosening them. He could feel his heart beating like a tom-tom.

"What happens when a man is not as tough as he thinks he is, and faces a task like this, O'Reilley?"

A devilish chuckle ripped out of the trooper's chest. "He pulls too fast or his hand freezes on his gun. He rushes in when he shouldn't, or he hesitates when he should rush. He grows fearful and cold and rattled, and whatever he should do, he does something else. He goes

to pieces, or he freezes solid, Lieutenant. Solid and yellow. He may walk into the bullets or he may run, but either way he is frightened clean out of himself."

O'Reilley looked around into his face. and black malevolence was in his eyes. "Sir," he added mockingly.

Linklater reached clear down into his boots for calm.

"O'Reilley," he stated very icily, "it is *you* I am worried about!"

"*Me?*" The Irishman bristled, and then caught the gist of it and laughed. "Never a fret on me, Lieutenant! I would not spoil the pot by forcing the hand! The same for the other men. We will get our fun after you have shown yourself . . . sir!"

"I will expect that," Linklater told him on a flatted note and nodded that he could drop back.

He rode on in dark and dismal thought. Never had he felt as solitary as riding ahead of his own men, knowing they distrusted and hated and scorned him.

"It was not so much the dislipline they resented," he thought, "as that I was abusing the privileges of my rank. They do not believe that I would have the guts to be as harsh in correcting myself."

His jaw set and his lips pulled flat and hard against his teeth. He could feel the nerves strain and knot at the back of his neck. The column moved in a long circle toward the Burros, and climbed up through creases in the dark brown hills.

Suddenly the column turned away from the flood of golden sunshine and dropped into the chill, black shadows of Rose Gorge.

Instantly, he felt the alertness and anticipation rise in the men. He lifted his hand to signal column halt and turned in the saddle to look at them. Not on a solitary face did he find friendliness or help. There was no single sign, no shred of feeling, that they were his men. The cavalry ordered them to follow, and they did. Otherwise, they might have been strangers, grimly gloating in anticipation of a gory combat in which some hated person would prove yellow.

He said, "You know what we've come to do. We will do it the cavalry way—orderly, dispassionately, a job. No man will use gun or boot, fist or saber, until he hears me give the order."

Amused contempt was the only answer in their eyes. They did not expect he would be able to give an order. They expected his tongue would be frozen, or he would be dead, before he could.

He turned back and signaled forward and they pulled up the long pitch of the gorge. The calls of miners at work grew clear. Then they rounded a bend and passed the first workings, and the curious miners began to stream down from the gulches and gullies that gave into the gorge.

LINKLATER called a halt and looked for the ringleader. The men were about as tough and low a caliber as he had ever seen. There were some forty of them, all armed, all coming with rifles across their middles, and with truculence in their eyes. They had an idea why the cavalry was there, and they didn't mean to move.

"Who's the mayor?" Linklater asked, looking at the motley group.

A giant with stooped shoulders and a wicked mouth stepped forward. He was chewing, and he put a hock at Linklater's feet before answering.

"You mean head man, that's me."

The man felt something wrong in the troop and had been sensing them out, and reached a pretty accurate conclusion. The troops were ready enough with fight, but they did not ride behind their leader. And troops without a leader were easy enough, orders being what they were.

Linklater considered an elaborate, formal explanation, and then at the amused contempt in the miner's eyes, a violence he had never suspected rose up through him in a surge. He snapped briefly, "Pack up and move. You are ordered out of this gorge by Governor of the Territory."

"What if we don't aim to hear them orders?" the giant grunted.

"That is why the cavalry is here," Linklater said coldly.

The man's eyes narrowed and a vicious look came upon his mouth. He dropped his gun in line across Linklater's chest. Linklater saw that, and felt instinctively the man would risk an "accidental" shot, but he forced himself to turn his head back.

"Stoltz!" he called, and the shot sounded. The breeze of it fanned his neck. He felt the pit of his stomach knot and his lungs ache for breath, but he forced himself to continue, "Fan out the men and keep these miners out of the rocks!"

He looked back at the undecided miners then. That shot would be put down to an accident but it had been to test him, to force the play and make him show his hand. "And disarm that man," he added. "He hasn't learned how to handle a gun yet."

"Why you . . ." the giant opened up, and then fell into insult that might have driven a saint mad.

Stoltz quickly disarmed him, but still the man went on, directing his vituperation at the cavalry in general, but especially at Linklater, and it was personal.

By some miracle of control, Linklater kept the color from his neck. He gave orders, dispassionately, calmly, not even giving sign he heard the man. The miners grinned, then lost their grim humor at his coolness. Grumbling, set to packing up.

In less than an hour, camp was broken and they were straggling out, but the giant was still taking Linklater's ancestry apart.

The troops regarded this with mixed humor and puzzlement. They were not quite decided if Linklater was scared of the man or containing himself with iron self-discipline. There were many things he might have done to shut the man up. Tell Stoltz to see to it, for instance.

But he rode on with an icy calm upon his face, and apparently, a deaf ear.

Only O'Reilley had no slightest doubt in him. The last shred of indecision had left his face. The officer's front had not broken at that shot, it was true, but no man with guts would listen to what he was taking without personally doing something to shut the man up. What the Irishman had thought was true. Linklater was the kind of an officer who would whip the heart out of a ranker because he was protected, but would not raise a hand in his own self-defense. In a similar circumstance, O'Reilley had seen the captain himself have a man held while he smashed his mouth to bloody pulp—brutal, perhaps, but the way of a real fighting man.

With Silver City in sight, the officer called up the sergeant. He said stiffly, "Stoltz, until dawn the men have freedom, off duty. But I want no brawls, and at dawn I want every man back."

Stoltz gave him a sergeant's inscrutable look. "It is going to be hard, sir," he said. "They are—uh—a thirsty pack."

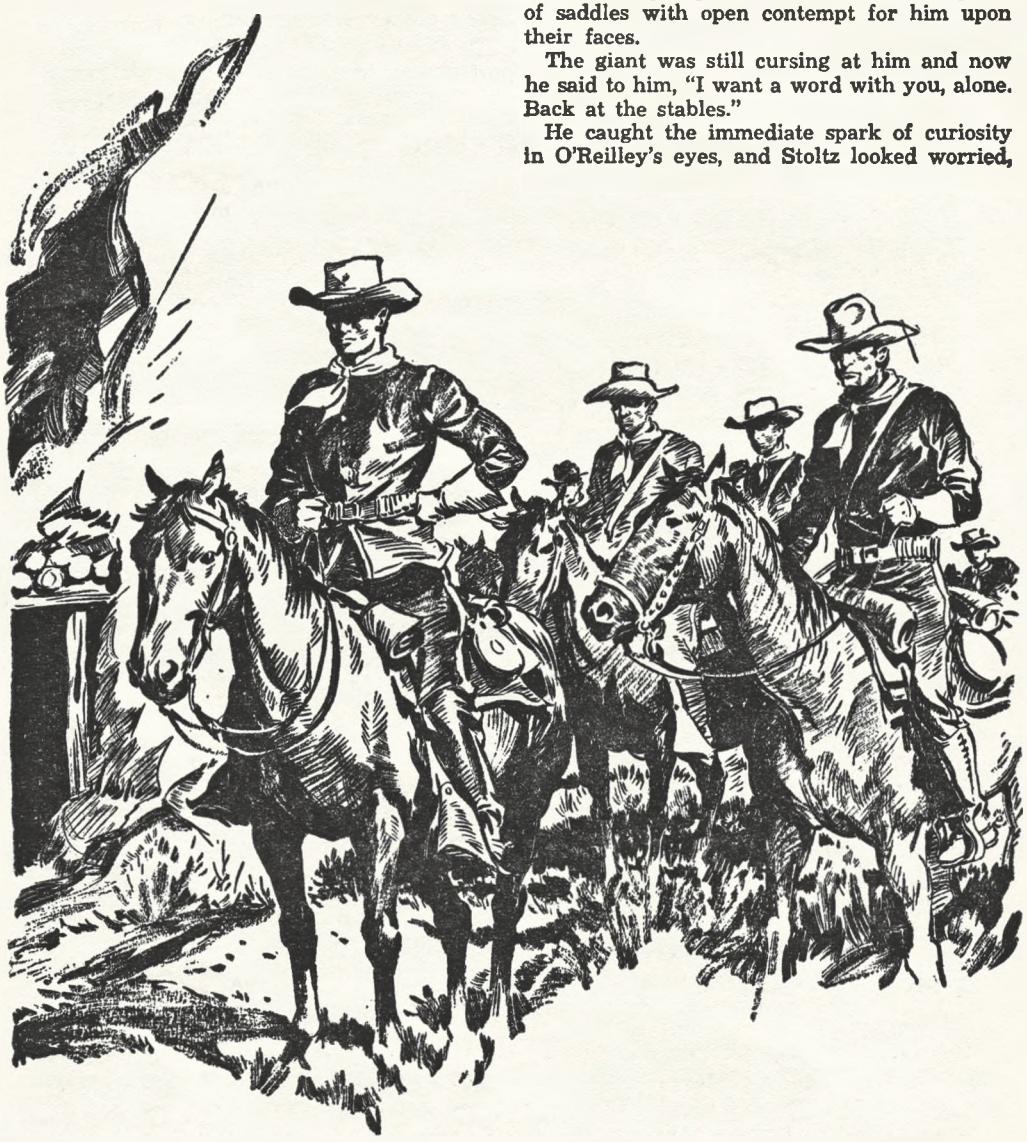
What he meant was in the edge of his tone, the lights that flowed beneath the mask of his eyes. The men were just plain ready to tell the lieutenant to go to hell. What discipline he had commanded was now dead.

OFF to the side Linklater caught the devilish malice on O'Reilley's face and knew he was already planning the first brawl that would put the troop against the mining town en masse. Odd things out of the past cascaded through his mind as the trail swamped into the thick dust of the street. More than anything, he heard again and again, the voice of the colonel at the war college forecasting he would have a brilliant career. Now, except for the machinery, his career was dead. Possibly, if the troops got too out of hand, he was in for courtmartial as well.

He called halt alongside the alley into Ryder's Stables. The miners drifted up to the walk to spread the gossip. His men were coming out of saddles with open contempt for him upon their faces.

The giant was still cursing at him and now he said to him, "I want a word with you, alone. Back at the stables."

He caught the immediate spark of curiosity in O'Reilley's eyes, and Stoltz looked worried,



"Who's the mayor?" Linklater asked. . . . A giant with stooped shoulders and a wicked mouth moved forward. He was chewing, and he put a hock at Linklater's feet before answering. "You mean head man, that's me."

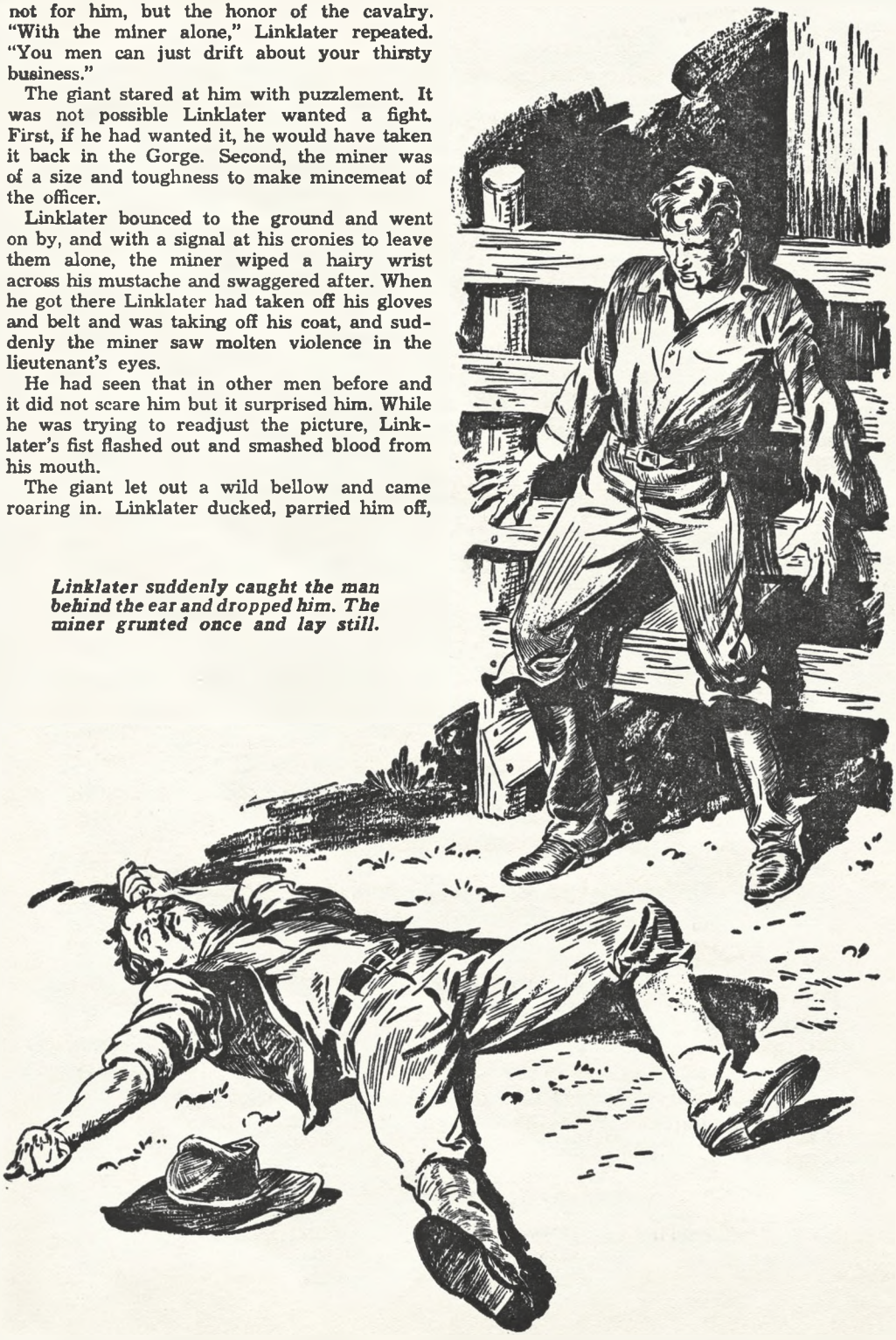
not for him, but the honor of the cavalry. "With the miner alone," Linklater repeated. "You men can just drift about your thirsty business."

The giant stared at him with puzzlement. It was not possible Linklater wanted a fight. First, if he had wanted it, he would have taken it back in the Gorge. Second, the miner was of a size and toughness to make mincemeat of the officer.

Linklater bounced to the ground and went on by, and with a signal at his cronies to leave them alone, the miner wiped a hairy wrist across his mustache and swaggered after. When he got there Linklater had taken off his gloves and belt and was taking off his coat, and suddenly the miner saw molten violence in the lieutenant's eyes.

He had seen that in other men before and it did not scare him but it surprised him. While he was trying to readjust the picture, Linklater's fist flashed out and smashed blood from his mouth.

The giant let out a wild bellow and came roaring in. Linklater ducked, parried him off,



Linklater suddenly caught the man behind the ear and dropped him. The miner grunted once and lay still.

boxed against the giant's sweeping blows, and was finally cornered. With vicious mayhem in his eyes, the miner lifted him and sent him crashing to the ground. Then he was atop of him with all the power and anger and every dirty trick he knew.

For fifteen gruelling minutes, Linklater took a murderous trouncing, and then the condition of his disciplined body began to show. The giant was wide in his bone-breaking haymakers and missing the dirty holds that he knew. But Linklater was sending in jabs and kicks that counted, and suddenly caught the man behind the ear and dropped him. The miner grunted once and lay still.

Linklater leaned back against the yard fence gasping, wiping blood from his eyes. Somebody dumped a bucket of water over his head, and he recognized O'Reilley's voice through the pain. The Irishman growled, "That was a damned good fight, for a greenhorn, I've got to admit, Lieutenant."

Linklater blew free of the dousing and glared at him. "I thought I ordered you to go along with the rest?"

"Insubordination," the Irishman admitted, grinning. "It was more than worth the discipline, sir."

The trooper used the "sir" automatically now. The pause of insolence was gone. Linklater tried to fathom the expression of his face. "That *sir* comes easy with you now, O'Reilley. But it is not just because of the fight. What did it?"

"You're the better man," O'Reilley admitted candidly. "And cool. That fight was in you ever since the miner opened up his lip, but if you had taken it out there in the Gorge, all hell might have busted loose. You put the discipline of listening to his insults on yourself, sir. It is more than I could have done."

"Tough enough discipline to convince you, O'Reilley?"

"Tougher than I'd want to take!" The Irishman nodded. "Tough enough so you can lay on me what you like, Lieutenant. From dawn tomorrow, I'm your man . . . and there'll be no brawls in town tonight, sir."

"Will that go for the post?" Linklater asked. He felt hollow and afraid now. The reaction was setting in.

"I think so, sir," O'Reilley told him. "It will go for the men."

That left only Dyers and the captain, but the captain was a haunting specter on his mind as he rode through the gates next day under a high sun.

CAPTAIN ANGER watched the column file in, his senses reaching out and soaking in the feelings of the men. He saw the way they straightened in the saddle as they came through the gate, the truculent pride about them, the discipline of good soldiers.

He signaled Linklater into headquarters room for report. The lieutenant looked at his granite expression and had to force the words through his stiff face. The captain nodded inscrutably and barked suddenly, "Well, how does it feel to ride at the head of your own men, Mr. Linklater?"

He got up and walked by the junior without waiting for an answer, without Linklater knowing if it was sarcasm or a compliment. The captain stood in the door looking out at the neat drill square, the way the walks were whitewashed, the general orderliness and esprit of the post. Without turning, he said gruffly, "Mulligan has reported the first blade of grass, Lieutenant." Then he turned and jutted out his head, and snapped almost violently, "We'll stand Retreat today, Mr. Linklater, and every day hereafter! By God, we will make the braid rate us a first grade post yet!"

The captain strode out into the streaming golden sun, fierce and cussed and filled with a surge of vitality he had not felt for many years. He spotted O'Reilley bending his big ear nearby and cursed him roundly. "I am going to kick you up a rank for the sheer satisfaction of breaking you, you Irish scoundrel!" he roared at him.

"Yes, sir." O'Reilley grinned, and felt the fight in the captain's voice rip through him like a trumpet sound. "Is it correct we're going out after Magnus Colorado?"

"And if it were?" Captain Anger snapped.

"I was in the captain's command, sir," O'Reilley said. "With your permission, sir, I would like to stay under the junior lieutenant."

"Hmph!" Captain Anger snorted. "I think you're chained there with him sitting atop of you! He is the first junior officer you haven't broken, O'Reilley." A grin flicked his dour mouth and a twinkle came into his bilious eyes. "Take care of him, O'Reilley. He might have you slated for sergeant major when he takes command."

The trooper saluted and looked after the captain with a broad Irish grin. The captain was going across the square whistling *The Girl I Left Behind Me.* It was the first time the trooper could remember his whistling in all these years.

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

AS the tuna boat rolled lazily in the glistening swells, Frank Harmon braced himself in the crow's-nest and squinted into the searing sun rising above the Costa Rican mountains. Off to port the flattened promontory of Cabo Blanco was etched against a fiery sky, but south of the cape the barren white rock of Isla Blanca was only a silver blaze on the dazzling sea. Between cape and island was a moving smudge, and it troubled him that he couldn't decide whether it was a hull-down boat or a flight of birds that might indicate a school of tuna.

Navigating the *Coronado Belle* was his job, and he was aware of his shortcomings as a lookout. But he had better eyesight than any man aboard except Manuel Rodas, and while the lookout was recovering from light-blindness, someone must try to find tuna.

Turning aft to rest his eyes, Frank scanned the bait-tank at the stern, with its open-sided overhead protecting small fish from the direct

When Tony grunted and staggered back, Frank swung with fury for his brother's jaw.

sun, and the 'midships fish wells, now "buttoned up" and still far from full. In the shade of the superstructure a group of fishermen sat laughing and talking as they secured feather lures on barbless hooks or molded hand grips on short bamboo poles. He envied them their freedom from responsibility. Then, realizing a decision must be made, he turned forward again to study the dark pall with marine glasses. But the distance was too great.

Below on the port wing, steering with the manual device, was his older brother Tony, skipper of the *Belle*. Tony, resembling their mother's people, the Serianos, was short and powerfully built and brown as mahogany. He glanced up when Frank called, a mild frown on his flat, moon-round face.

"Looks like a swarm of birds over the cape, Tony."

"Probably gulls after a school of chums,"

ILLUSTRATED BY
V. E. PYLES

Tuna Trouble

said Tony. "Tuna wouldn't likely be feeding so far inshore."

"Tuna are where you find them. We'd better see."

"Too bad Rodas isn't up there," Tony said, his face expressive of weary patience. "He'd be sure."

Frank's throat tightened. "Rodas is a lookout, and I'm not."

Tony sighed. "I guess you do the best you can, Frank, but you don't take after the Seriano side."

Frank felt the old flood of frustration washing over him. "The Navy didn't object that I wasn't a Seriano!" he flared; but immediately he felt ashamed of his anger, for Tony was patient with his mistakes.

Now the older brother laughed. "That wasn't tuna fishing!" Then, moving the steering device, he added, "We'll see, but I hope you aren't making us waste Diesel oil."

As the boat turned, Frank studied the dark smudge with glasses, but half his mind followed an independent course through the maze of self-doubt that had plagued him since the death of his adventurous father.

DAN HARMON had sailed the seven seas before coming to San Diego to be captain and navigator of one of old Antonio Seriano's "tuna clippers." Then past midchannel, Harmon was still youthfully slim and quick of step, with a wild thatch of raven hair. A lusty man with a zest for life, he never avoided a fight, a friend down on his luck or a beautiful woman. In time he married old Seriano's youngest daughter, a dark-eyed beauty named Maria, and not long thereafter owned his own tuna boat. Tony was born a year after the marriage, but eleven years and five daughters followed before Dan Harmon had a second son.

Harmon loved his six older children, though they were stocky and dark like the Serianos and quite unlike him. But his affection for his younger son was something special. As Frank grew older, he bore a striking resemblance to his father, for he was tall and slender, with an unruly shock of black hair and a spring to his step. The kinship between father and son grew stronger when Frank was old enough to make summer cruises with Dan Harmon. Then one day the *Coronado Belle* sailed into San Diego harbor with her flag at half mast; when the fishermen described how Dan Harmon had been swept overboard in a chubasco, Frank had a chilling sense of loss and he knew his life would never again be the same.

From then on he felt like a stranger among the Serianos, the most famous clan among tuna fishermen. Of the hundred-odd tuna clippers sailing from San Diego, ten were Seriano boats —boats often manned entirely by blood relations. It was said there were "able Serianos" and "lazy Serianos," but it was hard to tell which was which. Sometimes uncles, nephews, cousins and brothers pooled their savings to buy a boat for a lazy Seriano and he grew prosperous and paid them large earnings on their shares.

Frank and Tony inherited equal shares in the *Coronado Belle*, and Tony, known as an able Seriano, became her skipper. Both brothers took examinations for navigator's papers, but Tony had a bad cold and failed to pass. Frank urged Tony to take another examination, but he said, "One navigator is enough." When Frank went into the Navy, Tony had to sign on a navigator.

Tony was patient with Frank but tactless. Bluntly he explained, "The old man was lenient because he liked you, Frank. But he must have known you'd never make either a good navigator or a good fisherman. You don't take after the Serianos who were fishermen for generations. I'll try to remember that as long as you do the best you can."

Frank suffered from such a feeling of inferiority by the time the war started that he was astonished when the Navy not only accepted him but gave him a warrant rating and placed him in charge of a former tuna boat. As skipper of this "Yippee boat," Frank found that Dan Harmon's adventurous nature had not passed him by. He carried high-octane gas for the planes at Midway; ran the "milk run" from Guadalcanal to Tulagi, transporting ammunition, fresh meat and airplane wings; and even made several cruises to New Zealand. He received a citation for ramming and sinking a submarine off Midway and another for refusing to abandon his boat when it was badly damaged and under heavy Jap fire near Tulagi. Superior officers tried hard to dissuade him from leaving the Navy when the war ended, but Tony advised differently.

"You'll put your foot in it some day, Frank," he said. "Then you'll be a busted officer who's forgotten all he knew about tuna fishing."

TENSION tightened Frank Harmon's muscles as the boat approached the sharp cliffs of Cabo Blanco. Hundreds of pelicans and cormorants wheeled excitedly or plummeted in swift dives for morsels of food. Others, drifting on the water, uttered a mournful clamor that almost drowned the whisper of the seas against the skin of the boat and the throttled throb of the engines. Here and there the dark and ruffled water blazed with streaks of gold or silver.

"Tuna ahoy!" Frank yelled.

The electrifying response awakened by that cry was an old story to Frank but it never

failed to quicken his blood. As he descended the rigging, the boat came to life. Fishermen who had run forward saw tuna streak across the bow. "Skipjack!" someone called; and another voice cried, "One-polers! Sport fishing today, boys!" Other fishermen had gone aft to lower the grilled fishing racks from the port side. Almost immediately fishermen climbed over the port rail and dropped to the racks. The racks were water-level, with a seaward rail against which the men braced their knees—particularly helpful when they were landing two-, three- and four-pole tuna; working as teams, with separate poles attached to a single piano-wire leader.

The chummer, who reached his station late, now hurriedly scooped anchovies and sardines from the bait-tank with his long-handled dip-net and cast them over the port side. In wriggling, flashing iridescence the small fish splashed the glassy sea. Only surface riffles at first puckered the water as the chums swam toward the boat for shelter. Then, for hundreds of yards off the port beam, the sea rippled and seethed until it was suddenly shattered with explosive force. Foaming and boiling, it was shot with gold and silver and purple blazes as skipjack fought for the bait-fish.

Frank found a pole and dropped to a rack. Before he could begin fishing, Donti Bernardi made the rack quake with his tremendous weight. He chuckled at Frank's expression of surprise and alarm. He was a buffoon, this Bernardi, with a button of a jaw above chins that hung in accordion folds to his enormous neck, but his small black eyes were bright and intelligent and his shipmates took all their troubles to him.

Winking at Frank, Bernardi slipped an anchovy on his hook and swung it over the water. "Four-pole tuna, men!" he bellowed, pretending to strain at his pole. Fishermen laughed and hooted.

Tony Harmon regarded the jester sourly. "Stop clowning, Bernardi!"

Beaming at Frank, his little eyes twinkling, Bernardi removed the chum, cast his hook into the mass of milling tuna and trailed it so that its feathered lure would more nearly resemble a squid. His line suddenly went taut. Using the force of the skipjack's strike to assist him, the big Italian sent his wriggling catch spinning in an overhead arc. It thumped the bait-tank and, dropping from the hook, struck deck and began drumming with its tail.

Frank landed his first tuna, and Tony struck too late and lost a fish. Then Tony swung a skipjack overhead but it dropped to the rack and slipped back into the sea. Frank had the same experience with his next tuna, but he threw down his pole, grabbed for the fish as it was slipping from the rack and flung it over the rail behind him.

"Bravo!" Bernardi yelled, and laughed.

"You got to strike harder," Tony said.

"I got my fish," said Frank.

"O.K." And Tony sounded hurt. "I just try to help you."

"Sorry," Frank said in a tight voice.

The old feeling of being a misfit came back. He'd caught two fish and Tony none, but the point was that the man whose technique was right eventually caught the most fish. That was what eluded Frank: what he did wrong. When they fished as partners, Tony said it was Frank's co-ordination which was bad.

But Frank soon had something else to worry him. As the fish piled up on deck and slime and blood flowed from the stern, gray fins began slicing through the school of tuna. Every so often a fisherman cursed or wailed as a shark snatched a portion of a hooked tuna. One small shark was especially annoying, and it was Tony's bad luck to have this shark take his lure.

Tony was not braced for so much weight and he was catapulted over the rail. Churning fish closed over the spot where he'd vanished before Frank could shout. Even Bernardi's face had a scared expression, but he reacted quickly. He'd been raising a fish, but now he lowered it and towed it back and forth to attract the sharks and give Tony a chance. Other fishermen jabbed with their poles at every shark that broke water near the rack. And Frank removed his rubber boots and stood poised with one foot on the rail.

He could do nothing, however, until he saw his brother. And he suspected that Tony had made the mistake of clinging to his pole. Then Tony's head broke water far off the port side. Frank immediately went overboard into the slithering press of bodies. Tuna gave him no concern, but as he swam toward Tony, who was scarcely keeping his nose above the seas, he momentarily expected a shark to attack.

Tony raised his head briefly. "Get out of my way, you fool!"

He didn't seem to realize he was making no progress. Ignoring the request, Frank dived. Finding that in his excitement Tony had failed to remove one of his boots, Frank pulled it off. Tony promptly kicked him, and then swam toward the boat in a frantic crawl. Miraculously they reached the rack without being attacked. Horny hands swung them to safety.

Tony stood panting and glaring. "Why'd you get in my way?"

"You still had on one boot, Tony," Frank said, taken aback.

"Calm down, Tony," Bernardi said, laughing. "You splashed enough to cause a tidal wave, without making any headway."

When Tony climbed the rail and stalked away, Bernardi slapped Frank good-naturedly. "Tony's just excited."

"Sure," said Frank, but privately he wondered whether he'd ever do anything to please his brother.

Tony did not sulk long, the fishing was too good. By dark, when the last of their hundred-ton catch was stowed away, there was space left in the last fish well for less than thirty tons of tuna.

"I'm for starting north, Tony," Frank said. "This school of 'skips' will be gone by morning, and even if we don't find enough tuna on the way north to fill our last tank, we've got a good haul."

"Only full tanks are a good haul, and we'll find this school again in the morning. Move into shelter between Cabo Blanco and Isla Blanca."

"That channel's no place to lie to."

"Who's captain? I fished these waters when you were in knee-pants!"

As he made his way to the bridge, simmering with anger, Frank recalled times when Tony had lost days and had mounted their expenses to stow an extra twenty or thirty tons in the fish wells. Dusk was settling and the moon had not yet risen as he logged slowly toward the opening between promontory and island. But, distrusting the narrow channel, he backwatered well off the cape in preparation for anchoring.

Tony came topside and said brusquely, "Sail in closer."

"But the charts—"

"Damn the charts! Do you think I don't know these seas?"

Frank's lips tightened as he signaled the engine-room for slow speed ahead. He was too close to the channel entrance to feel comfortable when Tony ordered him to backwater. After Tony had helped him to let go the forward anchor and had gone in silence to the galley, Frank stood watching the moon rising over the mountains and the stars growing more brilliant in the clear sky. Then, when the inner turmoil had subsided, he went in to eat.

THE grating of the keel and the slight tremor of the boat awakened Frank. When he propped himself on an elbow, he wondered if he'd been dreaming, for he heard only the slap of the seas against the hull and the faint booming of surf. Then a grinding impact shook the *Belle*. He sprang from his bunk and collided with someone.

"That you, Frank?" asked Bernardi. "Did we slip our hook?"

They stepped out onto the moon-bright deck, followed in a moment by other fishermen from their cabin. The boat was not adrift. Whitewashed by moonlight, the promontory and island were in the same approximate position. But the boat had swung on her anchor-chain so that her stern now pointed toward Isla Blanca.

Another jarring concussion shook the boat. Frank shouted at the engineer to hurry below, and he ran along deck and climbed the bridge companionway to Tony's cabin aft of the wheelhouse.

"Tony," he shouted, opening the door, "we've grounded."

Tony's broad face had a coarse, stupid expression. "The charts show no reef. Did you let go the stern hook last night?"

Frank's jaw dropped. "You didn't tell me—"

"God preserve us! Must I tell you everything?"

Frank swallowed and, turning abruptly, walked into the wheelhouse. The anchor chain rattled as it was heaved up. A rasping sound at the stern stopped abruptly. Guessing that they'd had the misfortune to strike a pinnacle rock, Frank allowed the boat to drift a few yards before starting the engines.

When he did, the harsh clanking astern set his teeth on edge. The boat shook as if she were being twisted in heavy cross-seas. Reducing speed lessened the clatter and vibration, though it was still bad.

Tony entered the wheelhouse, clad in shorts. "Now you've twisted our screw!"

"It was my idea to sail north last night," Frank grimly reminded his brother. "Sounds more like a cracked propeller hub or a twisted shaft. I can't throttle down any more."

"Well, don't stop. Try to reach Puntarenas."

Frank slowly rounded Isla Blanca and, with the last spur of the Herradura Mountains supplying a landmark to eastward, passed through the wide entrance of the Golfo de Nicoya. He made out the Isla Caño Light, and later the steel tower of the Islas Negritas Light. When it bore west at a distance of three miles, he turned north toward the light on the Puntarenas Mole. In the steely radiance of the approaching dawn, the stack of the salt factory stood out bleakly above the sleeping city. Presently, for the first time in hours, the harsh clanking, grinding sounds ceased and the *Belle* lay rocking at her anchorage.

Several hours passed before a pilot boat approached with the captain of the port, and the customs and health officers. They were sympathetic when Tony explained the trouble, and supplied a pilot to take the boat into the landlocked inner harbor and alongside a pier.

Frank descended the pier ladder to determine their damage.

"The propeller hub is cracked," he reported, upon reaching deck.

"With a couple of machine shops and a foundry here, it would be easy to replace the hub," Tony said, "providing there were a dry-dock."

"Maybe we could build a cofferdam around her stern," suggested Frank.

Tony climbed to the dock and disappeared. An hour later the foundry manager appeared with two men. After considerable discussion with them, he told Frank that he thought the boat could be backwatered onto a small boat ways and repaired without building a cofferdam.

"We will refit the old propeller blades in a new hub, *señor,*" he explained. "But for this work we will require at least two weeks."

Frank authorized the work. The tuna boat was backwatered up to the ways until her keel struck. Then she was lashed to piling on both sides so she wouldn't roll over with the receding tide.

For the first time Frank noticed the abnormal quiet. When he realized the reason, he went below and found the sad-eyed little Italian engineer working on the ammonia refrigerating system.

"What's the matter, Mattuone?"

Mattuone angrily struck a pipe with his wrench. "Frank, I am an engineer—not a magician. We are three months overdue for our overhaul. I keep telling Tony this salt-brine coil system needs repairs."

"Tony's trying to make money while tuna prices are high."

"O.K., O.K.," said Mattuone wearily. "I got a wife and kids and I like big tuna checks, too. But now we got maybe two hundred twenty tons of tuna that will spoil in heat like this. What does that make?"

"Better than thirty thousand dollars, counting half as skipjack."

"Plus expenses of the cruise," added Mattuone. "That's what your smart brother is paying for this overhaul!"

"Can't you get the system working before the fish thaw?"

The engineer's sad eyes met Frank's. "Only if a miracle should happen. And this," he added despondently, "I do not expect."

FRANK went ashore in the skiff and, after trying the machine shops and the foundry without success, at length picked up Tony's trail in a *cantina*. But Tony had left an hour before with four drinking companions and the proprietor did not know where they'd gone.

Returning to the boat, he found Mattuone already dismantling the brine-coil machinery. Bernardi, who had some engine-room experience, was helping.

"It's worse than I thought," the engineer said. "Better start figuring how to dump our fish without making trouble with the health authorities."

"The tuna haven't thawed yet," Frank said.

"They will," the engineer predicted gloomily.

The sun was shriveling when Frank again went ashore. He visited the remaining *cantinas* of Puntarenas without finding Tony.

Something must be done quickly, so he called on the manager of a small cannery on a wharf. Luckily for Frank, the cannery was temporarily idle for lack of fish, which improved his bargaining position. The manager, a small, neatly dressed man with a trim black mustache, offered him $100 a ton for his bait-fish and tuna. Though secretly delighted, Frank pretended to be shocked at the price and insisted on $140. They compromised on $120 a ton, subject to Tony's approval.

Frank now hired a taxi and again made the rounds of the *cantinas*, but without any luck. A group of Costa Rican girls waited outside the cannery when he returned.

"I can't find the skipper," Frank told the manager.

"*Señor,*" the manager said firmly, "I am willing to buy your fish because this is a slack time. I have already, as you see, called my girls to work night shift. By tomorrow, maybe the next day, the local boats will return with fish and then I must decline yours at any price. There is no one on your boat with authority to act?"

"I'm half-owner." Frank hesitated. "Yes, I'll accept your offer."

"*Bueno!* I will have papers drawn up immediately, arrange to discharge the fish, and give you a draft when the bank opens tomorrow."

The last of the fish were being unloaded the following morning when Tony reached the boat in a dory. His bleary, wavering eyes didn't seem to comprehend what was happening until he was aboard.

Then he roared hoarsely, "What the hell's going on?"

Frank caught his arm and fairly dragged him to the wheelhouse.

"The brine-coil machinery broke down, Tony, and I sold bait fish and tuna for $120 a ton to avoid a complete loss."

A flush darkened Tony's swarthy face. "You crazy? Even skipjack brings one eighty—"

"Not spoiled skips."

"The system will be repaired before the fish could thaw!"

"Mattuone says not. I tried everywhere to find you, Tony."

"I'll bet you did! Minute my back's turned, you take charge and let that Costa Rican rob you! Won't you ever have half the sense us Serianos was born with?"

"I'm getting damned tired hearing about the Serianos! Rosario said he'd make me navigator of either of his boats any time I wanted!"

Tony's jaw sagged a little and his broad face had a surprised look of stupidity as he blinked. Then, throwing back his head, he roared

"What's so funny?" Frank asked sharply.

"Ho! ho! Navigator of a Rosario boat! Rosario joke with you—"

"He wasn't joking!" But already Frank felt chiling doubts.

"Listen, you know what Rosario tell me about you?" Then Tony sobered. "No, I will not repeat these things and hurt your feelings . . . You do not bargain well with this Costa Rican, but I will say no more."

Frank's eyes stung as Tony staggered to his cabin. Rosario had been his secret refuge if Tony completely lost patience with him. Now there was no refuge. He thought as he often had of trying something else. But all he'd known since high-school days was tuna fishing. While he was apparently not good at it, Tony was more patient than an outsider would be. Frank's confidence had never been at so low an ebb.

IT WAS a full week before the brine system was working, and then Mattuone discovered that the water-circulating pump in the bait-tank was on the point of breaking down. He found parts at a ship's chandler and with a crew hired at the machine shop not only fixed the pump but made other long-neglected repairs. Meanwhile a new propeller hub was cast and refitted with the old blades, but installing it on the shaft was slow work because there were no proper facilities for a boat the size of the *Coronado Belle* at Puntarenas and the foundrymen could make their adjustments only during low tides. A month in all was squandered.

After the loss taken on their tuna, Tony was unwilling to pay taxes for bait-fish caught in Costa Rican waters, so another week was wasted searching for bait beyond the coastal limits. In the end they paid taxes.

Then, with a full bait-tank, the search began for tuna. Rodas was again in the crow's-nest. But for days they sailed under a brassy sky, across shimmering, glassy seas, without any cry from him. Once they passed a boat owned by Joe Seriano, and though it sat low in the seas and obviously carried a large catch, her radio operator answered their query by reporting poor fishing. So intense was the rivalry between the Serianos that they would never tell one another where fishing was good.

At dusk one night a small cloud of cormorants and pelicans flew over the boat. Frank thought they might be attracted by a school of tuna. Anchoring during the night so they might start searching for the school at dawn was inadvisable because of the heavy ground swells west of San José de Guatemala. So Frank placed a man on watch, with orders to zigzag slowly and to report any approaching vessels.

The day had been insufferably hot, but a soft westerly blew into the cabin when Frank turned in, so that he fell into the drugged sleep that so often follows a tropic day.

In the background of a dream he grew dimly conscious of the deepening throb of the engines, but it was a long time before it aroused him. His cabin mates were snoring, and from outside came the slap and swish of the seas along the hull. The throbbing, creaking, driving sounds of a boat in motion brought him to full consciousness.

Angrily he threw off the sheet and swung his legs over the bunkboard. The man on watch wouldn't have disregarded orders, so Tony must have taken charge. Like other captains who had no navigator's papers, Tony loved to take the wheel. At times this was necessary when Frank needed relief, but sailing without a navigator ready to take over was asking for trouble if a disgruntled fisherman ever wished to report it.

Frank pulled on his dungarees, and was lacing his shoes when the boat struck with an impact that hurled him to the deck. Two fishermen were thrown from their bunks, and others, apparently bruised or lacerated, began cursing. The rending and splintering of timbers was followed by rushing waters belowdecks.

Without waiting to learn whether anyone was hurt, Frank dashed out and ran forward. He was appalled to see two large sheds and a cluster of nipa shacks a bare two miles off the starboard beam. He searched his memory for such a village north of San José. Then, when he guessed its identity, he knew the *Coronado Belle* must have been under way for hours. For this was San Luis, on the Rio Samala, and the boat had struck the six-mile reef abreast of the river's mouth.

Peering down, Frank saw foam seething around the cutwater, and breakers creaming over the spine of the reef. Then the throb of the engines was intensified and the boat ground harshly and trembled until a ground swell lifted her slightly from the reef and she began back-watering. Water boiled around the bow, and the quickening rush into a hole below the water line was plainly audible.

Frank ran up to the bridge. In the light of the binnacle lamp, Tony's round face had a grayish tinge. "The coast runs almost due east from San José," he said hoarsely. "I found myself at sea. I must have made too easterly a correction in sailing northward. When I saw San Luis, I remembered we'd found safe anchorage here several times at this season."

"Not two miles offshore! You know damned well you have no navigator's papers, Tony! Why didn't you call me?"

Tony flared, "I can navigate as well as you can, any time!"

"I've never run aground! What in hell were you trying to do?"

"Those cormorants and pelicans—they were flying northwest. That meant, if there was a school of tuna, it'd be farther north along the coast. Thought I'd save some time in the morning—"

"You saved time—and lost our boat! Look how the bows are settling! I can't beach her here, with this reef—"

"*Beach her?* Are you crazy? When the pumps start working—"

"Get 'em started," Frank interrupted curtly. "But they won't handle the water we're taking. Rout out the radio operator and see if he can reach another boat that can take off our crew if necessary. Then see if you can drop a patch over the hole. But I'm afraid it's so low in the bows that it won't hold."

Tony's jaw had a flabby slackness; he stared at his brother as if unable to believe the extent of their damage. There was something in his behavior, something behind his words, that Frank couldn't fathom. Nor did he have time to puzzle it out.

He shoved Tony roughly from the wheel. "Show a leg!"

Tony lumbered out.

Frank backed into deeper water. Then, after a moment's thought, he went out to steer by the bridge device. He could watch his course as he turned parallel to shore, and he continued backwatering. By reversing direction, water wouldn't be forced into the hole in the bow as it would be by sailing ahead. This might more than compensate for the slower speed.

A FEW minutes later Bernardi came to the bridge, his dark face sober, but his small bright eyes showing no alarm.

"On my own authority, I had the men swing the skiff overside, Frank, ready for launching. Then I went below. We're taking water fast."

"Think we'll reach Champerico?"

"We might," said Bernardi, "if the skiff doesn't sink."

Frank looked at Bernardi and saw he wasn't joking.

"Empty the bait-tank, Bernardi. That will increase our buoyancy."

Bernardi went aft to open the valves and the bait-tank started draining. The stern lifted appreciably as the tank emptied. This made the bows settle more, but the list was less important than the extra buoyancy.

Glancing forward, Frank saw that Tony and some of the fishermen had already prepared a crude patch. They had secured lines to the seine net, made a mattress fast to the center, and had weighted it with various pieces of heavy gear. The weights, however, were not sufficient. For when the patch was lowered, it was swept back by the backwash. Additional weights were added, and this time it was pulled into position and the lines made fast to the rail. But the bows continued settling.

A bosun's seat was brought and Manuel Rodas was lowered, then quickly hoisted again. He spoke excitedly to Tony.

Tony started toward the bridge but was stopped by the radio operator. He nodded several times as the operator spoke to him.

When Tony reached the bridge, he said, "Rodas reports that seams, as well as a hole, have opened. The patch won't do much good." Then he added, somewhat more cheerfully, "But the radio operator contacted Uncle Ruigi's boat as she was transferring a sick fisherman to a lighter at Champerico. He's sailing south to our assistance."

"His *Mission Belle* makes twelve knots?"

"Fourteen under forced draft."

Sun spokes had appeared in the eastern sky, and the seas grew lighter with the approaching dawn. To the east the ground swells broke with fury below a mangrove jungle, and the shifting sands suggested a powerful undertow. It was some comfort to Frank to know that Ruigi Seriano was speeding southward, so they wouldn't have to try to row a skiff through such vicious combers.

Tony, who was scanning the seas beyond their stern, suddenly pointed. Frank made out the familiar lines of a tuna boat.

"He's not over six miles north of us," Tony cried with relief. "We're settling fast, but he'll take us off before we sink."

"*Take us off!* You're not going to try to save the boat?"

Tony gestured impatiently toward the crashing, tumbling surf.

"We can't keep afloat, and what good would it do to beach a boat here? She'd break up within twenty-four hours! Even if she didn't, the insurance company covering us would find it cheaper to take their loss than to send a salvage vessel so far south."

"But we're not over eight miles from Champerico!"

"What of it? No shelter there! Only an open roadstead and a pier."

"I'm half-owner of this boat. I'm not giving her up without a struggle!"

Tony's expression became hard and sullen. "I'm captain and you'll do what I say!"

"If you won't fight to save our boat, will you sell your share?"

Tony's eyes narrowed as he stared at the settling bows. "Half the insurance will be mine. For another two thousand, I'll sell."

"Put it in writing, and have Bernardi witness it. I'll give you two thousand now, and pay you the remainder if I save the boat. The insurance company will pay you the balance if I don't."

Tony called, "Bernardi, come topside," and then walked into the wheelhouse. While they were inside, Frank stared aft, but he could scarcely see the approaching tuna boat through the mists that swam before his eyes. The *Coronado Belle*, built by his father, was his last link with a happier past and everything in him rebelled against losing her.

"Here," Tony said.

It was a moment before Frank's eyes cleared enough to see that the agreement was satisfactory, and witnessed by Bernardi. Frank signed the check for $2,000 his brother handed him, and Tony tucked it in his wallet.

He laughed, a short, hard laugh. "I'm two thousand ahead."

Bernardi's bright little eyes were inquisitive. "Are you now owner and captain, Frank?"

Frank nodded.

"Then," said Bernardi with relish, "I can tell this fat pig what has long been on my mind. You are one of the lazy Serianos, Tony, and so thick-witted that even after four times taking a navigator's exam—"

"*Four times!*" Frank cried. "What are you talking about, Bernardi?"

"The three times he failed when you were in the Navy, of course. Tony forbid us to mention this, but now that he's no longer captain—"

Tony's face went scarlet. "Bernardi!" he roared. "You'll never get a chance to sail on a Seriano boat again!"

FRANK'S mental image of Tony as a strong and able man had been formed in childhood and he'd never questioned it. Tony had gained the ascendancy then, when he was a grown man and Frank a boy. Never had Frank doubted that Tony could have navigator's papers if he wanted them. But if that part of the picture was false, wasn't it all false? For the first time Frank saw his brother with clear eyes—a stocky little man who was stupid because he was too lazy to make the effort to do things well or to learn.

The idea was so startling that it was several seconds before Frank could grasp it. "Now I know why we're sinking," he muttered, his voice thickened by emotion. "You sailed without calling me to prove you were as good a navigator as I am. *You were jealous!*"

"And why should he not be?" asked Bernardi. "At everything, you are better than Tony. You are smarter, a better fisherman, a better navigator, wiser at knowing always what must be done. The Navy gives you medals, but will not accept Tony. At Puntarenas you salvage many thousands from tuna that Tony would have let spoil. Only by making you believe you were the stupid one, Frank, could he remain captain."

"Who's stupid?" asked Tony, with a trace of his old belligerence. "Did *I* buy a sinking boat?"

The years of badgering at Tony's hands made Frank see slightly red. Tony saw Frank's hands leave the steering device, he saw them lock until the knuckles were white. Without waiting, he swung. But a slower man than Frank could have evaded the blow.

Weaving to take it over his shoulder, Frank sank his left, then his right, into Tony's stomach. When Tony grunted and staggered back, Frank swung with fury for his brother's jaw.

Tony was hurled against the rail and fell. Dazed and shaken, he lay on the deck, not even attempting to wipe away the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. Tears of humiliation ran down his plump cheeks. The anger went out of Frank in a rush. He felt he should pity his fat, dumb, hulking brother, but he felt only intense disgust.

"Do you think it was easy for me?" Tony's voice was heavy with defeat. "Easy to see my kid brother breeze through navigation when I couldn't get it through my head? Never was I quick enough even to make a good fisherman. Also, my judgment was bad, and I knew it. If you should buy a boat, Frank, I'll fish for you—"

"I'm going to save this one!" And Frank pulled Tony to his feet. "But you won't fish for me. You'll be happier with your mother's people. They know there are 'able Serianos' and 'lazy Serianos' and will make allowances."

As Frank returned to steering, Tony said, "Uncle Ruigi comes just in time."

The *Mission Belle*, now only a few hundred yards distant, was closing water fast. A heavily-built little man with a bristling black mustache stepped from her wheelhouse as she came alongside. At that moment the *Coronado Belle's* engines went silent and she began wallowing.

"I tow you out where you won't roll so much," Ruigi Seriano shouted. "Then you can transfer your men."

Frank glanced northward toward the long iron pier jutting out from Champerico and judged that it was less than four miles distant.

"Tow us to the pier," he shouted back. "It will be easier to take the crew aboard there than in these swells."

Bernardi and Tony descended to the main deck, and Bernardi threw a weighted ball to the afterdeck of the other tuna boat. A hawser was heaved aboard the *Mission Belle* and after it was secured, she began towing the bow-heavy boat.

The *Coronado Belle* lurched heavily, as if about to take her final plunge, then steadied and began moving slowly. Frank shouted at the men to stay near the skiff, which was now being towed alongside.

Mattuone came to the bridge and regarded Frank sadly. "I could keep the engines running no longer. The engine room was flooded... Is it true you're now our captain?"

"Captain of a sinking boat!" Frank said wryly. "I was sentimental about her because she was my father's. Now I'll pay for it. I considered at first lashing her to lighters at Champerico. However, that would only postpone matters. I still couldn't get her to any protected port."

"You always come up with something," Mattuone said confidently.

Frank still had no solution when the *Mission Belle* towed his boat alongside the Champerico pier. There ship's passengers could be transferred from lighters by a cargo winch which hoisted them on a seat resembling a bosun's chair, and Frank intended to transfer his crew to the pier in this chair and then to Ruigi Seriano's boat. But as the tuna boats plunged alongside, he saw a huge pile of oil drums stacked along the dock, and his heart lifted with the birth of an idea.

He called up to a *cargador* in Spanish, "Get the official in charge of the dock *muy pronto*." Then, turning, he shouted at a fisherman on the stern of the *Mission Belle*, "Report to your skipper that I won't be transferring my men immediately. I have a job for them to do first."

It was, in fact, several hours before the crew were transferred to the pier, and then Bernardi, surprisingly, returned to Frank's boat. He remained on the *Coronado Belle* during the long, wretched weeks when the *Mission Belle* was towing her to San Diego.

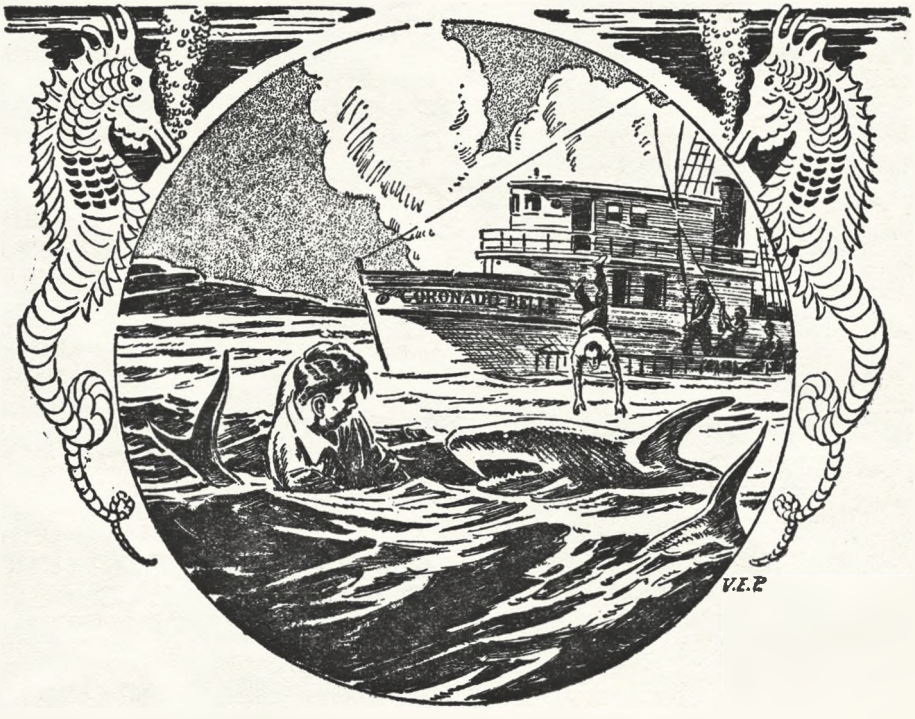
When the two boats passed Point Loma to enter San Diego bay, Frank knew he'd won his gamble. The boat was his! He had nearly enough in the bank to buy Tony's share, and he'd have no trouble borrowing the remainder. He turned to Bernardi with a broad grin.

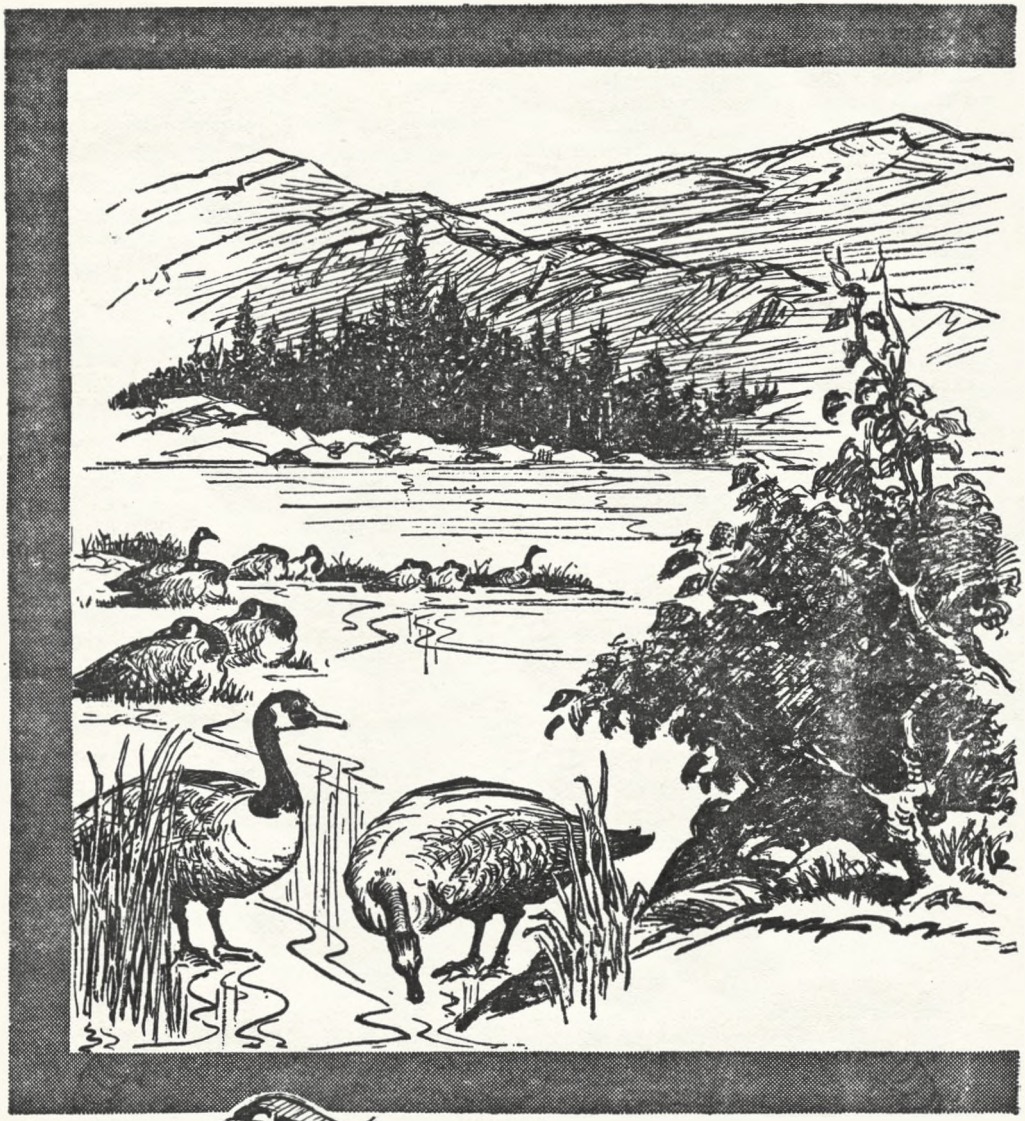
"What ever made you decide to remain on the *Coronado* when you could have had a comfortable passage on Seriano's boat?"

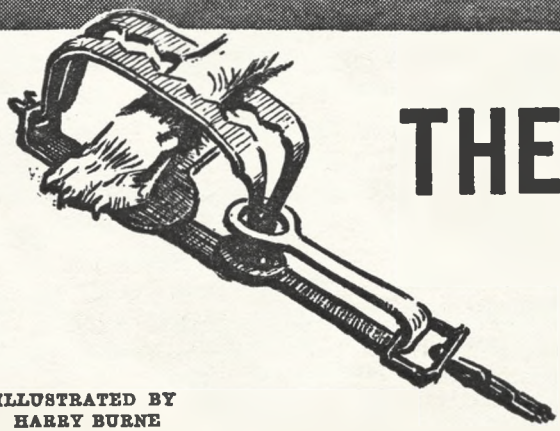
"The men insisted on it." Bernardi's small eyes twinkled. "I am the one man strong enough to throw you overboard if the *Coronado Belle* started sinking and you tried to remain aboard too long. We didn't want to lose a captain who can find tuna."

Frank laughed. "No chance of that! After we stowed all those oil drums below decks at Champerico, we had so much buoyancy that it would have taken a six-inch shell to sink this boat."

"That's what I tell the men," said Bernardi. "But they are not taking chances."







THE EXILE

By
JIM
CHAPMAN

ILLUSTRATED BY
HARRY BURNE

The old coyote moved stealthily nearer, a step at a time.

OF THREE-FOOT

THE sun sank behind the prairie ridges, tinting the yellow grassland with gold. Blue shadows crept into the hollows where the buck brush, with the first frosts, had turned from its summer green to the red of autumn. A flock of prairie chickens rose from a little plateau where they had been catching grasshoppers and hurried away over the gently rolling countryside, their wings whistling, bound for some deep dry thicket where they would spend the night. Meadowlarks chirped to one another, and a mile away in a little prairie slough, a duck quacked brazenly. Abruptly, shattering the peacefulness of evening, there came a foreign sound. It was the baying of hounds.

Old Three-Foot, the she-coyote, rose swiftly from the grass on a prairie hill. Her body quivered as she stood poised for flight, and into her yellow eyes there crept a stricken, hunted look. Slowly the dark ruff above her neck and shoulders began to bristle, showing black in contrast to the silken smoothness of her brownish coat. With sharp ears pricked forward she listened to the fading sounds of the chase.

Of all the weapons which man had used against her she feared these most of all. Only by her great cunning had she survived since the winter night long ago when she gnawed her own foot from the jaws of a steel trap. Not once in those five long years had the hounds ever been loosed on her trail. Her wisdom was great and she knew all too well that her three-legged speed was limited. One error in judgment and her pelt would be drying on some hunter's stretching board.

IT WAS not for herself alone that she feared. In the hollow behind her, not a mile from the den where they had been born, her three pups tested their strength. Already they were growing large, showing much of the dark fur and sturdy build of their father, who, before their puppy eyes were open, had been shot while raiding a farmer's chicken yard. She on the other hand was small, being finely limbed and furred, with a long intelligent face like a collie dog's.

But although they were large, the pups were still soft and round, like the goslings of a gray goose when learning to fly. Even the expressions on their puppy faces were naive, like infants.

The largest one, a male, trotted up to where his mother stood tensely on the hill. For an instant he gazed about, then, hoping that she would play, nipped mischievously at the old coyote's heels. With a snarl she spun and snapped at him, her eyes flashing with anger. There was no doubt in his mind as to whether she meant it, and with tail between his legs he scuttled back toward his brother and sister. On the hilltop the old coyote resumed her vigil.

Through all the long summer Three-Foot had done the work of two, hunting incessantly. She became gaunt, her muscles grew tough, and she had the endurance of a lion. At first a prairie hare or a fat prairie chicken had been sufficient, but her needs increased as the pups grew. Soon she was forced to kill twice, then three times as much. Except when she got them easily or by accident the old coyote stopped catching ground squirrels and small birds. It took too many of them to fill her needs. Instead she concentrated upon hares, antelope fawns, and similar game. Even then the pups were often hungry.

At last the pups began to shed their puppy fur and one night she took them with her. They found an antelope doe and her two half-grown fawns. With the chase well under way, Three-Foot left the pups and cut across the prairie. Here she ambushed the doe and her fawns as they circled back, and succeeded in dragging down one of the young. But now the hounds had begun to run and the old coyote dared no longer remain in this country which she knew and loved.

The stars came out, and still old Three-Foot stayed on the hilltop, testing the breezes and nervously moving about. Far to the north she heard a flock of geese, their jangling calls coming plainly over the silent land. The wedge passed overhead, and finally the cries faded to nothingness in the southern distance. Only then did the old coyote lope down the hill to where her young were impatiently waiting.

Soon she also was moving southward, guiding her pups through miles of ranch land, across stubble fields which still carried the smell of the reaper, and past farmsteads where yapping dogs told her that their scent had carried far on the evening air. By daylight they were in strange surroundings. Instead of the rolling country which the pups had known all their lives, there stretched on all sides great hills and coulees. In search of safety their mother had come to this place, for in a wild region coyote hounds are seldom run. Running by sight alone they often lose track of their quarry and sometimes become lost themselves.

Even now in this rugged country the old coyote was not satisfied. Sunrise found her traveling toward a high flat-topped hill, known as Tynrock Butte, almost two miles away.

The pups had not eaten for many hours, and more from instinct than experience they ranged widely in search of food. Their mother watched them anxiously, all too conscious of their innocence. Suddenly they surprised a jackrabbit and raced after it, yapping in reckless abandon. Three-Foot loped along behind, keeping always to higher ground and watching for danger. The pups straggled out in a long line, with the strongest one staying closest to the fleeing rabbit. But each pup finally gave up the chase and came panting back. The small male, runt of the litter, quit first, then the female, and last of all the large dark male who was the strongest one.

Three-Foot hurried on, angling to pass around the base of Tynrock Butte and into the river valley beyond.

JAKE MacQUAND slammed the door of his shack and closed the padlock in the hasp. Then he hid the key on a ledge near the eaves. There were too many illegal furs in the attic to leave the place open. He checked

his Winchester to make sure that the magazine was full, tucked the gun under his arm, and angled away toward Tynrock Butte. He'd seen deer tracks leading that way and was out to get some meat. The fact that the deer season was not yet open bothered Jake not at all. To him, fair play and sportsmanship were jokes.

It was some time later, after he had scouted out the hills near the Butte and found them empty, that he heard coyotes yapping. Quickly he hurried up the hill and stole behind a boulder. Here his head rose stealthily, like a rattlesnake peering out of a ground squirrel's hole. He saw the four coyotes and a smile played on his lips when he discovered that they were coming his way. Jake MacQuand recognized old Three-Foot at once. She had systematically sprung his traps for a good many falls, and here was his opportunity to kill her. Even if none too prime, this pelt would indeed be a prize. He settled back to wait. . .

In a little patch of buck brush where she had caught mice the year before, Three-Foot sniffed about, aided by the female pup. But this time it seemed barren. The big male smelled inquisitively in the mouth of a nearby gopher hole.

All at once there was a loud screech and the big pup tumbled backward in his haste to escape, landing in the middle of a sage bush. A moment later, shamefaced and foolish, he picked his way out, looking with disgust at a small gray weasel which was still screeching at him from the hole.

The old mother's mouth opened in a dog-like grin as she watched the antics of the big pup. Then, without further waste of time she trotted away from the bushes. Three-Foot wasn't hungry enough to try and catch the little animal with its tainted flesh, and, unlike the pup, she knew that it was useless to hunt for mice in a region where a weasel was found. It was such things as this that experience had taught the old coyote, and in the course of many years had contributed vastly to her survival.

A half mile further on, not far from the base of Tynrock Butte, the old coyote stopped dead in her tracks, bristling with hate and fear. She sniffed the ground, then scanned the country through narrowed eyes. The pups stopped, too, then moved nearer to their mother, glancing about nervously. At last Three-Foot trotted on, but at right angles to her original course. The pups followed closely, gazing back over their shoulders every few yards toward the place they had left.

Near the top of the Butte, Jake MacQuand cursed under his breath. He'd forgotten that the old coyote would have to cross his tracks. Now he could see that she intended to skirt the Butte and see if she could get his scent.

Jake MacQuand was a cunning stalker, and still far from beaten. He stole off the ridge, and keeping it between himself and the coyotes, hurried down the hill. Near the bottom he peered stealthily through the branches of a sage bush, then dropped behind the ridge again and trotted another hundred yards. The next time he crept up the ridge his Winchester was held ready to fire.

A flash of disappointment passed over his face, for the old lame one had just trotted into a hollow and he could see only her back. The three pups were in plain sight but a long way off—at least two hundred yards. One of them stopped to bite a flea and Jake MacQuand brought his sights to bear on its form. He pressed the trigger skillfully, taking care not to spoil his aim.

Only luck saved the runt, for it was he who had stopped. Quite by accident he stood up just as the rifle spoke, ready to move on. With a yelp of surprise and pain he whirled, bit at his back leg where the bullet had stung him, and then began to run.

Three-Foot zig-zagged to make herself a difficult target, then led the way behind a sheltering rise of ground. Almost before the echoes of the first report had ceased to chatter, the gun spoke again, and this time a fountain of dust rose under the runt's nose. Badly frightened now, he scurried behind the rise and limped after the rest.

Three-Foot hurried into the valley and on into the heavy trees and undergrowth. Two miles away, in a small clearing close to the river, she stopped. The open space was covered with tall yellow grass and here and there it was studded with poplars. On a sand dune the old coyote lay down to rest and the pups did likewise. The runt licked his wound.

IT WAS dusk that evening before the old coyote left her resting place and went to the river bank. All day she had heard familiar sounds and now she gazed for many minutes up and down the stream. At last she made up her mind, jumped down, and trotted along the shore, followed by the fascinated pups. Half a mile away, on a bar which jutted into the water, the old coyote found what she sought. In the half-dark a flock of geese were dozing, settled too near to the bank for safety. Only one sentinel stood guard, huddled low to keep warm.

With a soundless warning to the pups, the old coyote began her stalk. She was securing food and also giving an object lesson so that they could soon hunt on their own.

The old coyote's coat seemed to blend with the sand as she moved stealthily nearer, a step at a time. Her ears were flat and her body hung low. When the sentinel moved, the stalker froze, only to glide forward once more after long moments had passed. Now the old

coyote's claws dug deeply into the sand, ready for a sudden rush should the alarm be given. Saliva dripped from her jaws and her pale yellow eyes were fixed savagely upon the nearest bird.

Her leap was swift and sure. In an instant the goose was pinned beneath her forepaws and shining white fangs sank into its back, just behind the wings. This is one of the most vulnerable spots on a goose and the bird fluttered a moment, quivered, and lay still. The rest of the flock leaped into the air with a chorus of startled cries and flew down the river in a disorganized mass.

It was the first of many such stalks. The pups learned quickly, although they sometimes bungled, and the little band did very well for itself. But every night the hunting became more difficult as other coyotes arrived, having also fled from the terror in the rolling country above. As competition increased, the waterfowl grew wild and scarce. And this was not all, for Jake MacQuand had been busy.

One evening Three-Foot found a trap on their favorite trail. She smelled it just in time and backed up, stepping in her own footprints. Then she made a little detour and came in from the side of the trail. Cleverly she uncovered the chain and then the jaws of the hidden thing. The old coyote sprang the trap, then allowed the pups to smell this machine of steel; a danger which they must learn to avoid.

On the very next night they found a strange coyote struggling in another trap which had been set along the shore. Three-Foot uncovered more traps on the bars. The river was no longer safe, so that night they returned to the thickets not far from the clearing. Here the old coyote taught her young how to chase the cottontail and snowshoe rabbits from their coverts, one coyote lying in wait near a runway to pounce on the unsuspecting animal when it fled ahead of the others.

More days passed, and the pups began to spend a lot of time hunting by themselves. Then one morning the runt, the small male which had been wounded, did not return. Hours later Three-Foot tracked him down and found his body hanging limply in a steel snare. The story was easy to read. Racing down a trail in pursuit of a rabbit he had run blindly into the loop.

Taking in the scene in one sad glance, Three-Foot turned and slowly picked her way from the fatal spot. On her way back to the clearing she found two more loops of steel hung cunningly on the trail. Jake MacQuand had indeed been busy. Now the thickets, like the shores of the river, had become too dangerous to be hunted.

Not long afterward, with her two remaining pups at her heels, Three-Foot left this place which for a time had been their home. It was a cautious journey which she made through the brush and out into the open country where they could move freely again.

But in the hills food was hard to find, because here too the influx of coyotes had almost exterminated the small game. As a result Three-Foot and the pups were forced to hunt farther and farther afield. They began to make long expeditions out into the rolling ranch land at night, returning to the wild country near Tynrock Butte to spend the daylight hours.

One dark night they successfully ambushed and killed a lone antelope buck, and ate their fill. As a result they were late in returning. Three-Foot knew that she should not have allowed the pups to gorge themselves because now they traveled slowly and would have preferred to curl up on some sheltered hillside, nose to tail, and sleep. But she urged them on. The first light of dawn found them several miles from safety. It was soon afterwood that Three-Foot heard hounds baying over the next rise.

With fear-stricken eyes she plunged into a sheltering hollow and stopped to listen. The pups, instead of following her example, trotted to higher ground and gazed curiously in the direction of the cries. Then as suddenly as the sounds had begun, all was quiet. Three-Foot knew what that silence meant. Some other coyote, also late in returning to the hills, had paid with his life. With the utmost caution she led the way back to Tynrock Butte, staying always in the hollows.

THE next day the wind blew out of the north, and by the time they returned to the Butte after a night of unsuccessful hunting, the old coyote sensed that a storm was coming. Gray clouds hung low, almost touching the hilltops, and the air smelled of snow.

In an attempt to fill their bellies before the storm began, they continued to hunt on the sheltered valley side of Tynrock Butte. It was then, when least expected, that disaster struck again.

Three-Foot heard the motor first and moved off the valley floor. The pups heard it, too, but were not in a hurry. While the old coyote loped up a gully to safety, the pups stood on a ridge near the foot of the Butte and gazed curiously at this strange thing in their domain.

From her lookout Three-Foot saw the car with a box on the back come crawling down the winding trail through the valley. Opposite the pups the car stopped and a man got out. The box opened and four great hounds jumped to the ground. Instantly they saw the pups on the ridge and began to bay, their long legs swallowing up the distance between them. Far up Tynrock Butte, old Three-Foot bristled, and a terrible fear came into her eyes.

The pups ran a little way, then stopped and

looked back. The sight struck fear to their hearts and this time they ran for their lives. They tore off around the Butte, through the valleys and ridges. Relentlessly the hounds followed, and the distance between them rapidly lessened. The female pup, being the weakest, began to lag behind her larger brother. At the same time a large dark hound drew ahead of the others. The pup tried to run faster than ever, but in her wild haste she bungled a leap across a gully. On the farther bank she stumbled.

Terror paralyzed her muscles and her running became labored and uneven. At the top of the next ridge she swerved and raced down it. This was a fatal mistake, for the hound seized his opportunity and cut off the corner.

With her pursuer close on her heels the female pup began to run an erratic zig-zag course. She made a last desperate turn, but the hound leaped and pinned her down. High on the Butte old Three-Foot turned away.

The big male pup raced up the hillside and near the top he turned and saw the end of his sister. Then with fear-filled eyes he fled on. Three-Foot was fleeing, too. On the further side of the Butte she met the pup and they fled together.

As the two coyotes ran on, the first flakes of snow began to tumble from the leaden sky. Winter would soon be here; the thing for which Three-Foot waited. If she could leave these hills, where danger lurked at every turn, she and her pup might live to welcome the wildfowl in the spring. But until the deep snow came she must remain, for only then, when the hounds could no longer run, would she dare return to her prairie home.

But fate seemed to have decreed that Three-Foot and her family should not live; that they were destined never again to return to the country that they loved.

With the wind behind them, neither Three-Foot nor the big pup noticed Jake MacQuand. They were running through coulee country, where the ridges between lay a hundred yards apart. Three-Foot was ten yards in front, and when she did see the man it was too late. His head and shoulders were over the opposite ridge directly ahead of them. Like a flash the pup spun about and fled back in the direction they had come. Behind the ridge he turned toward the river and the sheltering trees.

But Three-Foot was already too far over the ridge to turn back. It would have meant certain death from Jake MacQuand's rifle. So, cunningly she ran on, straight toward her dreaded enemy. It was a gamble, and a very great one.

Yet it worked. As Three-Foot had hoped, Jake MacQuand thought that she had not seen him. He waited for her to come into sight again on the ridge where he was hiding. Here he would be certain of killing her with one shot from his rifle.

But instead of running on, Three-Foot swerved sharply down the coulee. Like her pup she was racing toward the river and the shelter of the trees. Too late, Jake MacQuand realized that he had been fooled, and ran forward so that he could see down the coulee. Through the falling snow he saw the old coyote scurry around a bend to safety.

At the edge of the trees, where the undergrowth began, Three-Foot found the pup waiting. A mile away they selected a dense thicket and crept into its heart. Soon the trees shook under a rising wind, and when darkness fell even the sheltered nook where they were sleeping had felt the power of the blizzard. The whirling, sifting snow fell everywhere.

All the next day the storm continued, and into the night. The valleys and hills were piled with great drifts, and every hollow was filled with many inches of powdery snow. Then toward morning the wind dropped and high overhead the clouds began to break. A star peeked down on a cold and wintry world.

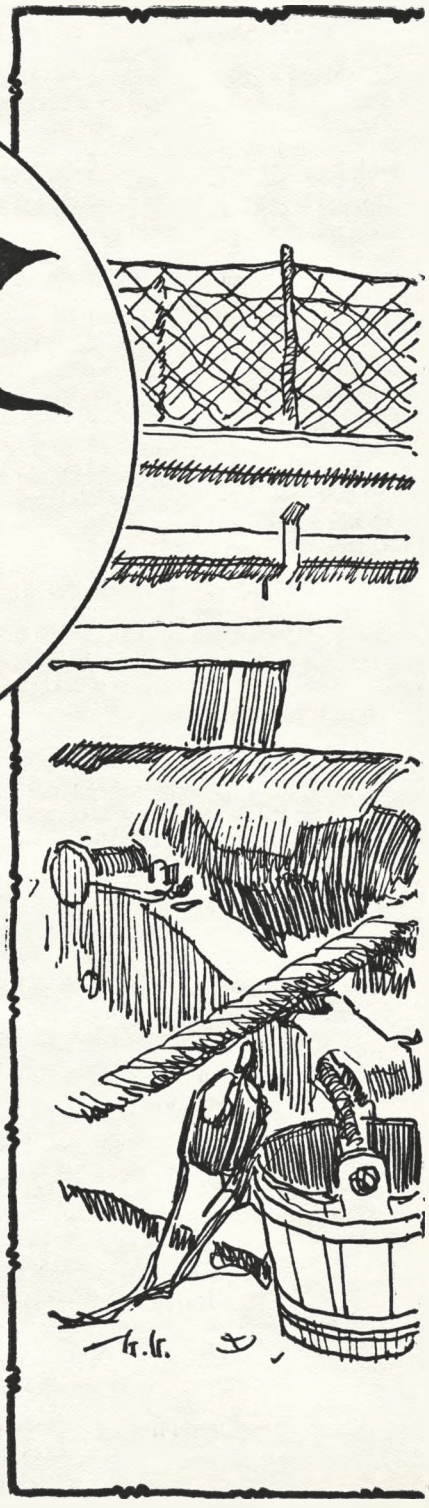
The fear had left Three-Foot's eyes, for the hounds would run no more that year. Soon she and her pup would be back in the safety of their own ranges. Moved by a common impulse the two coyotes moved up onto a little hill at the edge of the valley. Then they sat on their haunches and howled their joy and melancholy defiance to the moon.

ILLUSTRATED BY
GORDON GRANT

FEAR

By

R. W. DALY



AFTER a decade spent at sea, John Hopley Everad was afraid. He had fought with Duncan at Camperdown, he had survived a West Indian hurricane, he had raided an enemy shore at night. Through these and similar experiences he had carried himself with the aplomb expected of an officer in the Royal Navy, and while on occasion he may have felt uneasy, in large part his adventures usually went into a fund of conversation he was laying away against the day he married. And now, he was afraid.

In person, he was not impressive, being rather

Meredith helped the cooper by bending in his bare hands the iron for the water casks.

small, with a thin body and the face of a Suffolk squire. In intelligence, he represented the typical wardroom officer. He was well qualified for his duties, would someday be a captain, and ultimately one of those admirals England was obliged to carry on half pay in order to promote through the rigid ranks of seniority those few leaders actually needed and desired. His contemporary, Nelson, had little reason to consider him to be a competitor for glory, but on the other hand the Nelsons could do absolutely nothing without the Everads.

Standing beside his captain on the quarterdeck of his Majesty's twenty-four gun sloop *Reliance*, Everad was fully armed with hanger and pistols. Drawn up at the lee rail, thirty seamen were inspecting the locks and pans of unfamiliar muskets, while their companions whipped out the two boats which were to enter the Dutch roadstead. Everad looked at the line of waiting seamen.

Boldly, one stared back. He was a huge, stout-limbed man, black of hair and red of complexion. His face wore an expression of simple hatred, and he was the cause of Everad's fear.

Actually, of course, there was little reason for a lieutenant to be afraid of an ordinary seaman, and at one time, Everad himself would have been the first to criticize an officer who manifested any concern for a seaman's opinion. That was prior to the day when Meredith had been flogged. Everad knew he had only done his duty in telling the captain about Meredith's slovenly work in splicing a mooring line, since an occasion could easily arise when the strength of that line would be all between the *Reliance* and destruction. Nor had he thought the captain harsh in punishing Meredith with twelve lashes. That was the system.

Unfortunately, Meredith failed to appreciate the system. A schoolmaster, he had been violently induced by a pressgang to leave the comforts of a landsman's life. In justice, it could not be said he had made a good sailor. From the first, he had displayed an amazingly unpatriotic lack of interest for an educated man in England's current war with Napoleon's France. He might have perceived the need to fight the tyrant, but he was selfish enough to want to leave warfare to other Britons. Without the income of a gentleman, and sprung from a lower middle class family, Meredith nonetheless had in his erstwhile profession a claim to some gentility, enough to make him resent bitterly a flogging, and enough to prevent him from trying to prevent a recurrence of the degradation.

All this, Lieutenant Everad had learned since the man had begun to scowl at him. The knowledge made him unhappy, as he became slowly convinced that Meredith had sufficient character to retaliate and sufficient perspicacity to recognize an opportunity to do so. Aboard the *Reliance*, Everad knew he was safe, but he could not forever remain aboard a sloop. Without a spoken word, Everad felt that the schoolmaster intended him mortal injury. Being small, he had nervous respect for physical power, and with bare hands, Meredith was capable of breaking his every bone. Of this, Everad had begun to dream.

During his daily work, Everad, as first luff, was usually too busy to worry about a vengeful seaman, but when the dog watch ended, and the boatswain piped down hammocks, and the *Reliance* was readied for the night, Everad had leisure, and with leisure, he had worry. Meredith wasn't sullen, nor had he been stupid enough to make threats, or if he had, none had been reported to Everad by the spies among the crew. Meredith was educated, and not given to airing his mind below deck. He associated only with the other unfortunate men in the crew, who, ashore, had been respected in society. These, of course, were men raised in a reticent tradition, and so Everad had only imagination to feed his fear.

He recalled the dark tales told of officers who unaccountably vanished during a night watch. He brooded about the narrow escape Rear-Admiral Bligh had had in the reaches of the Pacific. He looked for any sign of the mutinous spirit which had seized the ships at Spithead and the Nore. In his stateroom, snug beside a twelve-pounder, he lay awake until the ship was silent, yet awoke instantly when new footsteps fell on the boards over his head, as the watches changed. His dread approached a mania; Meredith began to assume the aspect of Nemesis.

EVERAD was powerless to do anything about the schoolmaster. The fellow was scrupulously correct in word and action, only occasionally permitting himself the luxury of a malevolent look at the object of his grievance, and that only when no one else could intercept it. The captain of the *Reliance* would flog a man for carelessness, but not for an expression, and Meredith was safe, so long as he kept his dislike within bounds.

Everad was certain that the schoolmaster was deliberately torturing him. There was no reason for the man to persist in working half-naked, unless he wanted the thick, powerful muscles of his torso and arms to be seen. Why else would he help the cooper by bending in his bare hands the iron for water casks? If Meredith intended to give the lieutenant a few pictures for his dreams, he was successful. Everad was conscious of the schoolmaster's great strength, and was rarely permitted to forget it.

Fortunately, none of the wardroom officers

were aware of their companion's trouble. If he seemed nervous and ill, they attributed both to the strain of navigating in the treacherous waters off the coast of Holland. As first lieutenant, Everad was responsible to the captain for the safety of the ship. and that was a sufficient burden for anyone, especially when the charts were cluttered with the mysterious Dutch language. To his messmates, Everad had good reason to become pallid and lose weight. And, had he told anyone about his dread of the schoolmaster, he would not have been believed. An officer neither had nor admitted to such emotions.

Thus, when the captain of the *Reliance* spied a small privateer lying against the dim lights of a shallow roadstead, Everad was unable to decline the honor of going in to cut her out. It was rightfully his job, and he could neither in conscience nor propriety pass it down to the Second. He did not want to go, for the schoolmaster had been almost the first to volunteer for the foray. The moon was a slender crescent, and the stars were shrouded by mist, and there was darkness enough for murder. He did not want to go, but his desires were not consulted.

Lieutenant Montgomery, who was to have the black cutter, came up to Everad. "Everything correct, sir."

"Very well," Everad said mechanically, and turned to the captain. "Permission to shove off, sir?"

The mizzen and mainyard lifts were taut with the strain of the boats hanging whipped from their ends. "Permission granted," the captain said. "You should have an easy time of it. If I know the Dutch, a good half of their crew will be carousing ashore."

"I hope so, sir," Everad said, saluted, and gave the order to lower away. The coxswains brought the boats to the ladder, and with some misgiving, Everad went over the side. Settling in the sternsheets, he sat face to face with the schoolmaster, whose burly physique naturally made him stroke. Resolutely Everad ignored him, occupying himself with the business of getting the boats safely away from the *Reliance*, as she drifted on an ebb current.

Sails backed, the sloop moved noiselessly. She showed no lights, for her captain believed that her presence was unknown to the enemy. After sighting the brig during the afternoon, he had with fine skill returned to the roadstead after sunset, and waited for a tide favorable to his purpose. In the hours before the sea changed its flow, lookouts on the *Reliance* had found the sheen of moonlight on the brig's polished brightwork, and would have seen her clearly even if the lighted shore had not silhouetted her. Reasonably, Everad assumed that the sloop was equally conspicuous, and he hadn't any illusions about avoiding combat through surprise.

He did not worry. A fight was a fight, and only God knew the ending. The Dutch were courageous, stubborn antagonists, indeed, throughout the whole war. the English would never lose more men in a sea battle than they had at Camperdown when Duncan defeated Winter. Everad was prepared to die in battle, and had long ago resigned himself to such a fate. However, he was unready to be the victim of an assassin.

He looked at Meredith, and found the schoolmaster's eyes upon him. In the darkness, the fellow bulked even larger, and his work with the heavy oar was impressively effortless.

Everad shuddered, and quickly said to the coxswain, "'Tis a cold night for June."

"That it is, sir," the coxswain replied.

The schoolmaster chuckled. Everad did not need to ask why.

Aboard the privateer, keen eyes peered through night glasses, and tried to sight the English boats. Everad knew they would be seen, and dismissed the trouble that would entail. The Dutch captain would have a choice between solid shot or grape. The spread of grape from nine-pounders might sink the boats and would certainly kill some Britons. The solid shot, if accurately fired, would unquestionably sink the boats. and automatically kill through exposure to the sea all of the attackers. At maximum depression, the cannon would fire the grape to a distance of less than a hundred yards, whereas the solid shot would travel further. In the dim light, the greatest range gunners could be trusted for any semblance of accuracy, was about four hundred yards. The Dutchman had a choice between all or some; he couldn't miss entirely with grape, but he could with solid ball.

Everad, placing himself in the Dutch captain's boots, knew that he would use grape. Therefore, he hoped that the Dutchman would reason otherwise. He had cause for cheer: the Dutch were unpredictable. Everad wasn't motivated by any humanitarianism when he regretted the possibliity of losing men. To him, a sailor was a valuable property, solely because at least a year of training was necessary to convert a salt from a landsman.

He studied the schoolmaster, and permitted a sudden idea to blossom in his mind. In the confusion of boarding, it would be possible for a pistol shot to rid him of his Nemesis. Infrequently, regrettably. men killed their friends in combat. No questions were asked, for killing has to bave a motive to be murder.

THE more Everad thought, the better he liked the idea. It would serve the schoolmaster right. No doubt Meredith had the same plan and relished the forthcoming opportunity. He had a pleased smile on his lips,

and his eyes never left Everad. The settlement of their score would have somewhat the character of a duel. Both parties were fully determined to slay the other. Both would exploit a chance. Both were ready.

Everad fingered a pistol butt. He had the advantage of weapons. Meredith's musket would be an encumbrance. So much the worse for him. This quarrel was of his own choosing, and he had to accept any inequalities involved.

Curiously, Everad felt happy. The imminent resolution of his fear was almost as good as though the deed were done. He was in complete command of himself, and for the first time in months, stared back at Meredith without throttling an inner qualm. The evening's adventure seemed almost a boyhood game. As fear of the schoolmaster left him, fear of the Dutch captain seeped into his brain.

With a start, he realized that the work-hardended muscles of his oarsmen had pulled the boats well into range of the privateer's guns. Distance at night is especially deceptive, but he guessed that his quarry was less than a half mile away. He suppressed a command to urge the men to greater exertion, for with Meredith as stroke they were pulling lustily. Indeed, astern of his boat, Lieutenant Montgomery was quietly but feelingly cursing the devilish haste.

As the cutters approached the critical range of five hundred yards, Everad forgot about Meredith. He pitted his eyes and experience into gauging the precise instant before the privateer would fire, and in a voice whose calmness surprised him, he put his reputation up as a stake. "Steer ninety degrees right, coxswain."

Lightly, the boats quickly moved to the new course, and were headed parallel to the privateer when her battery flamed. Everad was elated. The Dutchman had been too confident of his gunnery, and had made the choice advantageous to the English. Everad had drawn the fangs of the battery. At eight knots the cutters could reach the privateer in less than two minutes, and it took the Dutch three to reload.

"Steer for the brig," he ordered calmly as the shot thrashed the water at a point the cutters would have crossed on their original course.

"Aye aye, sir!" grinned the coxswain. He regarded his leader with admiration. A man had to have a respectable combination of skill and judgment to escape cannonading.

"Now, Meredith," Everad said tersely, "get us there in a hurry."

The schoolmaster grunted in reply and set a murderous stroke. The boat hissed through the water, leaving a gleaming wake spuming under the dim stars. The gap to the privateer closed precipitately. Everad could see men on her deck, and was prepared for the bright red flashes that spasmodically flared along her rail.

"Under her counter," he ordered, and the coxswain made it so.

The Dutchman had prudently rigged boarding nets, but Everad had not traveled three miles to be that easily discouraged. Drawing his hanger, he stood in the sternsheets and hacked at the ropes, while Montgomery hung back a few yards to cover the assault. This was the moment of greatest peril, and Everad blithely assumed the post of honor. The Dutch leaned over their rail to empty muskets at point-blank range. The Britons, nervously anticipating such a move, were ready to shoot at every figure to appear, and their muskets answered shot for shot.

Unperturbed by the crackling din, Everad and the coxswain hacked at the boarding net, until the sharp blades had cut an opening. The little lieutenant turned to his huddled men. "Quick!" he cried to Meredith. "Give me a leg up!"

Promptly, the schoolmaster seized him about the waist, and lifted him like a child to the dangling ropes. In the excitement, Everad thought the man had learned the lesson of duty, until he heard the whisper, "Don't get yourself killed, Lieutenant."

Somewhat shaken, Everad let his sword dangle by its lanyard, clutched at the ropes, and hauled himself to the brig's deck. He would be alone for the few seconds it took a man to follow. Necessity gave him the power to wriggle convulsively aboard, and self-preservation gave him the speed to draw a pistol and snap a shot at a fellow who was about to bayonet him. In a second, he was on his feet, a second pistol at hand, swinging his hanger in a whistling half-circle to ward off the furious Dutchmen.

The few seconds were eons of loneliness.

Back against the rail, he faced the foe alone. He could not move forward or to either side, and counted himself lucky to be able to deflect the bayonets that clumsily searched for his body. Then, at his feet, another Englishman boarded. Everad moved his legs to give the man room. Without a command, the coxswain assumed half of the fighting, until a pistol shot abruptly dropped him, and left Everad again isolated.

He cursed. It was clear that if the coxswain could be shot, the Dutch captain wanted a British lieutenant alive both as a trophy and a possible source of information. Otherwise Everad could have been pistoled where he stood. Bitterly, he ceased to flatter himself upon beating off the bayonets, for the Dutch obviously only wished to tire him into surrender.

Sweat-drenched, he swung at the jabbing steel until a friendly hand touched his coat, and a seaman joined him on deck. Suddenly, in the relief of the seaman's coming, he bethought him of Meredith, who had a musket

with which to shoot Dutchmen. What was to prevent the schoolmaster from coolly shooting his lieutenant in the back. In the struggle, no one would question such a lamentable error, even if it were noticed. Everad wrestled with an impulse to turn and shoot the fellow down, for that could not be considered an error.

He was at Meredith's mercy, and the thought paralyzed him. His weary arm refused to wield the hanger, and he stood helplessly, awaiting death.

Another and another seaman joined him. Numbly, he watched them throw their strength into the tricks of cut and thrust. The English poured like a flood onto the privateer's deck, and with well-trained dexterity beat down the willing but less able Dutch. His seamen formed ahead of him, Everad leaned against the rail, panting for breath and life. Blearily, he searched for Meredith, who had swept past him. The schoolmaster had clubbed his musket and was zestfully bowling over Dutchmen.

Everad caught his breath and wet his lips. Carefully, he cocked his pistol. Eyes narrowed on his target, he slowly raised his arm. At twenty feet, he could not miss. A slight squeeze on a trigger, and the schoolmaster's great body would be food for the sand fishes.

Then the second boatload of Englishmen boarded, and momentarily thwarted him. Montgomery leaned over him.

"A fine show, sir," Montgomery said cheerfully. "I'll finish it."

THE Dutchmen struggled desperately, stubbornly, but the English battled for survival, and so, gradually, began to win. The brig's deck was a slippery, confused battleground, on which seamen fell, quietly or writhing. When the English had pressed the defenders forward of the mainmast, Everad knew that the privateer would soon be his. He glanced at the lighted shore, where most of the Dutch crew had gone to relax. There was not too much time left.

Slowly, he walked forward, pistol ready, eyes intent upon the schoolmaster. He would settle the score quickly, while Montgomery was forward cutting the cables, which held the brig against the sweep of the ebbing tide.

Had John Hopley Everad been asked to name the primary requisite for a naval officer, he would have answered, alertness. In this, he would have been condemning himself, for he was so concerned with Meredith, ten paces distant, he failed to anticipate the Dutch captain who suddenly appeared at his side. His sword arm was clamped by a crushing hand, and he was helplessly whirled about to face his doom. The Dutch captain, grieving over the impending loss of his fine brig, intended to strangle the Englishman who was seizing her.

With great presence of mind but woeful lack of strength, Everad raised his pistol, only to have it deflected harmlessly away by a sweep of the Dutchman's paw The pistol threw a ball into the air Then a vise settled on his throat. Everad dropped his useless weapons and feebly plucked at the Dutchman's wrists. The flesh beneath his frantic fingers felt like steel.

This, then, was the death he had dreaded, death by brute force. The Dutchman laughed down at him. Laughed and tightened his grasp.

Everad's limbs weakened, and he remained standing only because the Dutchman wished it so. He closed his eyes, while blackness swept into his consciousness. Then he felt no pain, only an exquisite tingling of sense. Before he ceased to think, he laughed in his heart. If nothing else, Meredith was cheated.

Patiently, he waited to experience the life after death, where there was only peace, and no fear, except of God. He had heard sermons on the beauties of heaven, whence he knew he was bound, and was disappointed in the earthly sound of the voices he heard. Indeed, they were familiar, quite like those of the men in his boarding party. Had all been slain? He rather hoped not. The brig was a respectable prize, and his share from the proceeds of her sale would go far to ease his parents' grief over his loss. He had only one regret, that he had not personally seen to the end of Meredith, and selfishly, he hoped the schoolmaster would not accompany him to heaven.

Not wishing to open his eyes upon the celestial scene until he was quite rid of mundane concerns, he tried to remember those people he intended to see. However, Montgomery's voice incessantly urged him to speak, and at length, reluctantly, he left the privacy of his soul to enter upon his reward.

He was not, like a true Briton, in Heaven. He was lying on his back on the deck of the brig, which, under full sail and in English hands, was headed out to sea and the waiting *Reliance*. With genteel anxiety, Montgomery was kneeling beside him.

Everad was strangely disappointed. "Well, now," he said weakly. "She's ours?"

Montgomery nodded. "Thank God, you're alive!"

"Thank God," Everad repeated piously. He did not know why he should feel bitter.

"You can bless Meredith," Montgomery said. "He virtually tore that Dutch chap apart."

Everad froze. Terror flooded every fiber of his being. He fearfully turned his head. Lighted by the binnacle, the huge schoolmaster impassively watched him. He shuddered. Return to the *Reliance* would be living Hell, for now he knew what it was to be strangled and Meredith would not let him forget. He shuddered again. "It's cold," he muttered, and wished the Dutchman had killed him.

ILLUSTRATED BY
JOHN MEOLA

The black buckled under the impact of the bay filly.

Promised Land

By GILES A. LUTZ

EDDIE MARTIN let out a wrap as the big black colt swung into the stretch turn. This dash was for a nice little purse, and old man Kirkland needed it. He should get it, Eddie thought. The colt was laying fourth, and the long straight run for the wire was ahead of them. He had an armful of horse left, and when Eddie was in a driving finish it reminded old-timers of Snapper Garrison.

A bay filly loomed up on the outside of Eddie, and Eddie turned his head and frowned. Gene Wright was pumping with hands and heels, driving the filly on, and that part was all

right. He and Eddie were neck and neck for the riding championship of the year, and there had been many a terrific duel through the stretch behind them, and there were more ahead of them before the year was finished. He and Gene were close friends despite harsh words and a few flying fists in the past over a disputed piece of riding.

When you were a horse-backer, you expected that. It was part of the game, and after the heat of the race was over, you forgot it. What Eddie couldn't forget was seeing Gene talking earnestly last night to Acey Bailey. Neither of them had seen Eddie, and he hadn't heard any of their conversation. But even if dogs could talk, they wouldn't speak to Acey Bailey—he was that bad. His reputation was as black as the inside of a Hallowe'en cat, and he had ruined many an up-and-coming kid with his crooked talk and deals. Eddie hated dishonesty in man or horse with a deep and unending intensity. And honest jockeys simply didn't talk to the Acey Baileys.

Eddie's nose twitched as though he were smelling something rotten. He almost could, and it was forming right here in the stretch. Old man Kirkland always said Eddie was a little fey. Fey people had an instinct, an insight other people didn't have.

Gene's wild yelling jerked Eddie's thoughts sharply back to the race. The bay filly was coming over as though some huge, unseen force was catapulting it. Eddie was against the rail and he knew what Gene's yelling meant. It meant, take up, or I'll put you through the rail. Eddie couldn't take up quickly enough to avoid this coming collision. He thought again of Acey Bailey and Gene engaged in serious conversation, and a despairing thought struck him. Gene must want this race pretty bad to pull a trick like this right in front of the stands.

Then the black was buckling under the impact of the bay filly. It was knocked off its feet and through the infield rail. A thought rang in Eddie's head—it rang above the splintering of the wood—this is going to be a bad one.

HE CAME to and moved his arms and legs gingerly. He was a little surprised they answered his demands so promptly. He felt himself all over and couldn't even find a bruise. He grinned, and his serious, harsh face glowed like the radiance of a new morning. He always was a lucky one. He stood up and looked about him. He couldn't see the track and stands. He wasn't even in a hospital, and he had to be in one of the two places.

He looked down at himself, and he was still in his silks. I'm out of my head, he thought. I'm dreaming. I never saw this country before.

He admitted he had never seen prettier country. The grass was long, almost to his knees, and the green of it had a translucent sheen. He reached down and felt of it. "Blue grass," he muttered. And as far as he could see there wasn't a weed in it. This would certainly be a horse's paradise.

He could see gentle, rolling hills in the distance with masses of flowering trees on them. The blue of the sky would have made a California Chamber of Commerce bite itself out of pure jealousy. It was wonderful country, all right, but he was lost, and he couldn't stop the rising surge of panic. He started to run, and it took no effort at all. He seemed to just float along, and it didn't help his panic. Running was always hard work. Eddie knew—he had hit too many roads to run off weight.

He ran for miles, and he wasn't even breathing hard. He was alone in this vast, beautiful, empty country, and sheer terror filled him. He managed to stop running. You can't lose your head, Eddie, he told himself. You've got to think this out.

A voice said, "Hello, Eddie," and Eddie jumped straight up. He looked around, his heart beating like mad. He saw the speaker, and his heart beat slowed. There was nothing frightening in the speaker's appearance, in fact it was rather comforting. His long, soft, gray beard indicated age, but there was nothing old about his face or eyes. Eddie thought, he could be fifty or a million years old. He was dressed in a funny costume, a long, wispy-looking robe woven with the colors of the morning sky.

Eddie asked, "Who are you? And where the hell am I?"

The man said reprovingly, "We don't swear here, Eddie. Just call me Pete."

He brushed aside Eddie's hurried questions and said, "Follow me, Eddie." He started off, looked back over his shoulder, and smiled assuringly.

They went up a long hill, and climbing it wasn't any harder than the running had been. That climb should have killed the old gent halfway up, but he beat Eddie to the crest. He stopped there and waved his hand at the valley below.

Eddie drew in a great breath of relief. There was the race track. He couldn't figure how he had gotten so far away or account for this old fellow with the odd get-up. But it didn't matter. He was back, and his old assurance returned.

He looked at the track again, and his eyes widened. He had ridden on every major track in the country, but this one was new to him. It had a beauty and grace he had never seen before. It was nestled in the green valley, the soft, blue hills rising all around it. Its buildings were white with a gold trim, and they sparkled and shone in the sun. The infield was a mass

of lakes, with flowers blooming in great profusion around their shores.

Eddie felt the terror coming back, the panic of the unknown, the unfamiliar. "Where am I?" he asked again.

Pete's eyes glowed with soft sympathy.

Eddie saw his answer there. "No," he said hoarsely. Then, "No," again as the full implication hit him. "I never figured this."

Pete said, "The finalness of it is rather shocking at first, Eddie. But you'll be happy. Everyone here is."

Eddie asked curiously, "How'd I get in? I never gave it much thought back there. I just went along—"

"Remember the thousand dollars you sent Jockey Smith's widow? You didn't sign your name to the letter, Eddie. Remember the day you cried when High Hopes broke his leg and had to be destroyed? Remember all those sure-looking rides you turned down in big purse races? You accepted worse horses trying to get a portion of those purses for small owners. Little things, Eddie. Little things. But adding up to a pretty fine picture."

JOY bubbled up in Eddie, and he threw back his head and laughed with sheer gaiety. "I feel fine," he said to Pete. "Can we go to the races?"

Pete smiled at him. "We can. The first race is going postward now."

They went down the hill with that effortless ease. They approached the track, and the beauty of it almost took Eddie's breath. The grandstand and lawn were jammed with laughing, happy people. Eddie looked around, and he didn't see a single lined or care-marked face. The feel of the place was spreading inside him, and he felt that same joyousness.

The first race was at the post, eight, sleek, beautiful thoroughbreds. Every one of them was a champion in appearance. Eddie breathed deeply and said, "They have race horses here."

The field broke as one, and they ran that way all the way around. They came down the stretch in perfect alignment, and all eight noses hit the wire at once.

Eddie stared in amazement. That was something for the books. An eight horse dead-heat. None of those eight horses could possibly pay more than $2.10 on a $2.00 ticket.

The prices went up on the board, and Eddie's eyes popped. Every one of those eight horses paid $42.40 to win.

"No," Eddie said. "No. The track will go broke paying those kind of prices. There wasn't that much money in the mutuel pool."

"The track doesn't pay it," Pete said. "Here anyone can do anything he likes. Most people do what they used to do."

He pointed to a large box, and Eddie guessed there were a hundred men in it. Their faces were long and mournful, and tears streaked their cheeks.

"Those are bookmakers," Pete said. "They wanted to make book when they came here. So we let them."

He grinned, and Eddie saw a satisfaction in his eyes.

Eddie's eyes gleamed. "Pete," he asked, "did you use to play the horses?"

"Hrrr-rumph." Pete cleared his throat. He said severely. "We don't ask unnecessary questions here, Eddie." But his eyes danced.

They watched the second and third races, and the results were the same. Every horse in the race won, and every win price was 20 to 1 or better.

The grief in that large box increased.

"Don't feel too sorry for them," Pete said. "They get a new supply of money every night. If you're wondering how they got in, they're the bookmakers who didn't use unfair advantages in beating a horse-player. They just used the natural percentages. We don't have the other kind here."

Eddie grinned and said, "Some system." His fingers were itching to hold a set of reins again. "Can I get a license here?" he asked.

Pete said, "You already have one. It's in your pocket."

Eddie reached a hand in his pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. No, it wasn't paper. It had the richness and feel of gold but the softness of fine silk. Eddie couldn't tell what it was. But his name was on it, in letters that seemed to stand up a quarter-inch high, and the rest of it said Eddie could ride at any track here.

Pete nodded. "Oh, yes. We have two tracks here. This one is mostly for maiden jockeys and boys who didn't have too much success. Those kind of boys are hungry for winning. So all of them win."

Eddie thought, it would be nice to win every race, but it could get a little monotonous. "How about the other track?"

"It takes pure riding skill to win there, Eddie. You can get left at the post or run into a blind switch. You'll find Halliday and Wormser, Delbert and Romans there." Pete named a dozen more, and Eddie knew them by reputation at least. All of them were past champions.

Eddie said softly, "I want to ride on that track."

Pete nodded. "The good ones always say that."

EDDIE won one race his first afternoon. A slight mistake in judgment cost him another. A coachman didn't dare make a mistake against this galaxy of stars. If you did, you were lost, just as quick as snapping your fingers.

Eddie felt pretty good about that one win. Halliday slapped him on the shoulder and said, "Nice ride." That was high praise, and Eddie knew it. He noticed one thing during the running of all these races. There was never an attempt at fouling or rough riding. The results were cleanly fought, and it was a swell way to decide a horse race. Sometimes a boy beat a horse with a mistake in thinking, but that was natural and to be expected.

It should be like this everywhere, Eddie thought fiercely.

"You're not happy, are you, Eddie?"

Eddie looked up, and Pete was standing beside him. The old gent sure got around silently. And he was pretty good at sensing what went on inside of you.

Eddie shook his head. "I left so dam—darn," he corrected hastily, "much unfinished business. I keep thinking—"

"They're black thoughts, Eddie," Pete said quietly. "You can't stay here long with that kind of thoughts."

Eddie's face grew scared, and Pete said, "Let's talk about it."

Eddie told him of seeing Gene Wright and Acey Bailey earnestly talking. He told him of old man Kirkland needing purses. "He's a fine old boy," he told Pete. "But he's always been a sucker for a touch. I wanted to win him a few purses so he could pay off his farm. Then, at least, he'd have that much to sit on in his old age."

"You've always been a sucker for a touch, too, haven't you, Eddie?"

Eddie flushed at the approval in Pete's voice. "Gene and I were pretty close," he went on. "We were neck and neck for the jockey championship. I think I was a win or two ahead. And he shoved me through the rail, Pete. He did that to get me out of the way and win a lousy bet for Acey Bailey."

Pete's face was sober. "This is pretty bad, Eddie. It's got to be straightened out." He was silent a moment with his thinking. "Would you like to go back?"

"Could I?" Eddie asked eagerly.

"It's unusual, but I think in this case it might be arranged. But if you don't get rid of the black thoughts, Eddie, you can't come back. You've got a tough job. You won't be able to talk to anyone. And people won't know you're there."

Eddie thought, it's funny how much he stressed the word *people*. He said, "I guess I understand, Pete," then surprise spread across his face. Pete wasn't there. It wasn't even the same place. He was standing on the lawn of Broadacres, the track where Gene had shoved him through the rail. He was still in his silks, and he thought, the stewards will be mad as hell—heck. They didn't allow jocks in silks to mingle with the customers.

No one seemed to notice him. He spoke to a couple of men, and they didn't hear him. It gave him a funny, all-gone feeling, then he remembered Pete's words. "People won't know you're there."

The fifth race was at the post, and Eddie watched the start. Gene Wright was on the favorite, and he turned in a poor job in getting him off. His ride, the entire trip around, was a listless, poor effort. The favorite was a well-beaten fifth when the race was over.

"That Wright," the man beside Eddie shouted savagely, as he tore up a ticket. "He hasn't turned in a decent ride in a month. He oughta be kicked off." He yelled fiercely at Gene as the jockey walked down the track, and Gene didn't even lift his head.

Eddie knew where the trouble lay, and his resentment was fierce and keen. Acey Bailey never liked to see a favorite win, and Gene was riding for him now.

Eddie wandered over to the shed-rows, and there was old man Kirkland with the same stall space. A little lump choked Eddie as he saw him. A pretty fine old boy. Eddie spoke to him, but of course the old man didn't hear him.

Old man Kirkland was talking to one of his grooms, and Eddie listened shamelessly. "Tomorrow, Joe," he said, "we take the National Handicap. I need that purse."

Eddie was startled. The National was tomorrow, old man Kirkland said. Why, a month had passed since— He shook his head. Time certainly didn't matter when you were with Pete.

Joe growled, "We should have taken the last two purses we shot at. You going to let Wright ride Trustworthy again tomorrow?"

Old man Kirkland said gently, "Since Eddie's gone, Gene's the best rider in the country. Something's bothering Gene. He'll snap out of it."

"He'd better," Joe growled. "We haven't much time left."

Eddie guessed old man Kirkland was being pressed for money. Tomorrow's National was a big purse. Winning it would set the old boy up in good shape. He said fiercely, "Pop, take Gene off tomorrow. He won't ride for anyone but Acey." It wasn't any use. Old man Kirkland couldn't hear him.

He walked away, his heart heavy. Pete said this thing had to be straightened out, and Eddie didn't have the slightest idea as to how he was going to do it.

He saw the evening papers, and Trustworthy was even money. The closest thing to him was Slam-Bang at five to one. Eddie knew Slam-Bang was a nice colt, nice enough to win tomorrow's race, if Trustworthy wasn't in it. The thought struck home with a jar. He said aloud, "Acey Bailey might be interested in this race. I'd like to know."

THE words were no sooner out of his mouth than he was standing in a room. He looked wonderingly around. You could certainly get around fast, if you happened to know the right people.

Two men were in the room, Acey Bailey and Vedder. Vedder was a small-time trainer with a spotty reputation. Eddie didn't remember if Vedder had a horse in tomorrow's race or not.

Acey Bailey was sitting behind a table, his fat hand just putting down a phone. His little pig eyes gleamed with smug satisfaction as he said, "Vedder, I just got the last bet down. We're spread all over the country. It's the biggest killing I ever made."

Vedder's hands shook as though he had a nervous chill. "If we don't win, Acey, we're broke. And Trustworthy—"

Acey Bailey leered at him. "Wright's on Trustworthy, ain't he? And ain't Wright taken care of?" He leaned back in his chair and put his feet on the table. "You know I wouldn't be a bit surprised if Slam-Bang wins tomorrow."

Eddie wanted to go over and kick the chair out from under him. The fat slob, running races the night before. It was guys like Acey and guys like Gene who put racing in a bad light.

He walked out of the room, and his thoughts were bitter. He looked up and said, "Pete, I sure need some help." Half hopefully he waited, but nothing happened. He sighed wearily. It was up to him, and he didn't have an idea.

He spent the entire night wandering around, and by morning he was no nearer to a solution. Even if he could make Kirkland hear him, he doubted if the old man would listen. Pop was a gentle, straight person, and he believed everyone else was the same.

Eddie looked in at Trustworthy, and the colt looked fine. Eddie saw him throw up his head, saw his ears go back, then erect again, saw the quivering nostrils. Why, Eddie thought, it's just like he knows I'm watching him.

The stands started filling before noon, and by first race time there wasn't sitting or standing room. Most of these people would be betting Trustworthy in the big race. That would tickle Acey—knowing all these people would lose because of his meddling.

Gene didn't have a mount until the National. Eddie didn't go into the jocks' room. He didn't want to see Gene any more than he had to.

The early races dragged along, and Eddie thought they would never pass. But finally big race time was here, and he walked into the paddock. Gene was talking to old man Kirkland.

Pop asked gently, "What's bothering you, Gene?"

The solid, hard mask of Gene's face seemed to break into a million pieces. "I've tried to whip it, Pop. But I can't. I keep remembering Eddie's eyes before he went through the rail."

Eddie nodded with satisfaction. It did him a lot of good to hear Gene was suffering.

"He thought I put him through the rail, Pop. I saw it in his eyes. The night before it happened Acey Bailey talked to me. He tried to buy me off in that race. When I wouldn't listen, he threatened to have me taken care of. Hodges, on Boomtown, came over on me during that stretch run. He was trying to get me on Acey's orders. My filly was knocked into Eddie's mount. They got Eddie, and I could see it in his eyes—he thinks I was the one." He made an effort and put his face back together. "You should have gotten someone else, Pop. I tried to tell you. I'm quitting riding after this race. It just isn't the same without Eddie—"

EDDIE squeezed up his eyes tightly. He had to, or someone would think he was crying. He was a damn fool. This time he didn't correct it. He didn't care if Pete heard him. He had seen some things, added them up, and gotten a completely wrong answer. It wasn't hard to know Gene was telling the truth. It was in his face, the anguish of his voice. Besides, he didn't even know Eddie was here.

Eddie cried out, "Gene, Gene, I hear you. I was all wrong." But Gene couldn't hear him.

He couldn't stand here, just looking at Gene, and he walked around the paddock. He noticed horses dance and snort nervously as he passed. He remembered the stress Pete had put on the word *people*. The horses acted like they knew he was here. They might know. They were simple animal mechanisms without the complex mental machinery of a human being.

He saw Vedder talking to Hodges. Vedder held Boomtown's reins. Eddie's eyes sparked. So Boomtown was running in this race. And Hodges was riding him. It was the same old set-up. He moved closer, and Boomtown's ears jerked nervously.

Vedder whispered, but Eddie heard his words. "Keep up with Trustworthy. I'd make it on the back-stretch."

Hodges nodded.

Eddie stepped toward him, fists raising. Then he stopped, his hands falling to his side. He could hit Hodges all day, and Hodges wouldn't even know it.

The paddock judge called, "Up riders," and jockeys were lifted into their saddles. The horses were beginning to file out onto the track, and on sudden impulse Eddie vaulted up behind Hodges. Boomtown went crazy. He reared and plunged, bucked and twisted. Hodges did

some nice sticking to stay in the saddle. Eddie stroked and soothed the horse, and it finally quieted. He was always good at calming an upset horse. But Boomtown was still nervous. It showed in his jerky step, the way he kept twitching his ears.

The lead-out rider led the field down the track and into the gate. Hodges was an alert boy at the barrier. He was going to try and break with Trustworthy.

Eddie sensed a start coming and kicked Boomtown in the ribs. Boomtown reared just as the gates flew open. Hodges finally got him back on the ground. He was swearing savagely as he took out after the field. Trustworthy had the rail, Slam-Bang was near the middle of the track. Eddie nodded in approval. Trustworthy always did like to run in front.

The field went around the club-house turn, and Trustworthy still led. Hodges drew his bat and lashed Boomtown savagely. He had to get him up even with Trustworthy, and that poor start had cost him a lot of ground. They went down the backstretch and made the far turn, and Boomtown, under the whip, passed Slam-Bang. He was a length behind Trustworthy, and Hodges was still whipping.

The field approached the stretch turn, and Trustworthy still led. Boomtown was closing on him, but he was a tiring horse. Hodges never let up with the whip. He was literally running Boomtown off his hoofs. In a moment, the horse would fall apart, but Hodges didn't care about that.

Slowly, Boomtown drew up on Trustworthy. Trustworthy was against the rail, and as Gene looked across the tiny gap, Eddie saw the dawning knowledge in his eyes. Gene knew Hodges intended knocking him into the rail.

"Take up that horse!" Gene yelled.

HODGES snarled back at him and jerked savagely on the left rein. He was going to bring Boomtown over in one fierce lunge, knocking Trustworthy into the rail. Maybe he could get out of it by telling the stewards he couldn't control a tiring horse on the stretch turn. And maybe he couldn't. With all that money at stake, it didn't much matter.

Eddie reached out and took hold of the right rein. The harder Hodges jerked, the more pressure Eddie exerted on his rein. Eddie always had tremendous strength in his hands and wrists. He never saw a horse he couldn't turn. Boomtown's head was pointed at the outside rail. Then his body followed, and he was drifting out toward the middle of the track. Hodges fought desperately to rein him back, but he couldn't make it.

Eddie took the horse clear out beyond the oncoming field, clear out alongside the outside rail. For a moment he thought of steering the horse through the rail—Hodges deserved that—then he couldn't. The horse couldn't help this. And Hodges would have to answer to Acey Bailey. Answering for losing all that money was punishment enough.

Hodges quit riding. He slumped in the saddle, letting Boomtown run as he pleased.

Eddie watched the finish of the race. Gene was pumping with hands and heels, driving Trustworthy on. Slam-Bang couldn't gain on him. He tried, he was a honest colt, and it was beautiful to watch, those two thoroughbreds fighting it out, but he wasn't quite the colt Trustworthy was. Gene drove his mount under the wire a length to the good.

Eddie drew in a deep breath. That was the way a horse race should be decided—the best horses fighting it out without outside interference.

Boomtown followed the field across the wire, and Eddie jumped to the ground. Old man Kirkland was already on the track, tears of joy sparkling in his eyes.

Eddie was shouting too, and it didn't matter that the old man couldn't hear him.

Gene brought Trustworthy back, waved at the stewards with his bat, and they nodded in return. He slipped down from the saddle and stood beside old man Kirkland.

Eddie walked over and put his hand on Gene's shoulder.

Gene's face had a queer transfixed look. "Pop," he said, and his voice rang, "maybe I'm not through. I found something during that race. I feel different now. I feel just like Eddie knows."

Old man Kirkland said stoutly, "Sure, he knows."

Eddie walked away. Acey Bailey had lost a great deal of money today Maybe enough, as Vedder said, to break him. Gene was all right, old man Kirkland was all right. Eddie looked up and said, "Pete. I think it's all taken care of."

The track and all its shouting people were gone quicker than you could snap your fingers. Pete was standing there, in the midst of that beautiful field, a broad smile on his face. "The black thoughts are all gone, aren't they, Eddie?"

Eddie nodded. "Everyone will think Boomtown bolted to the outside on the stretch turn. Maybe he did, Pete. It feels swell," he added gravely, "not to have those black thoughts."

They walked along together through those wonderful fields.

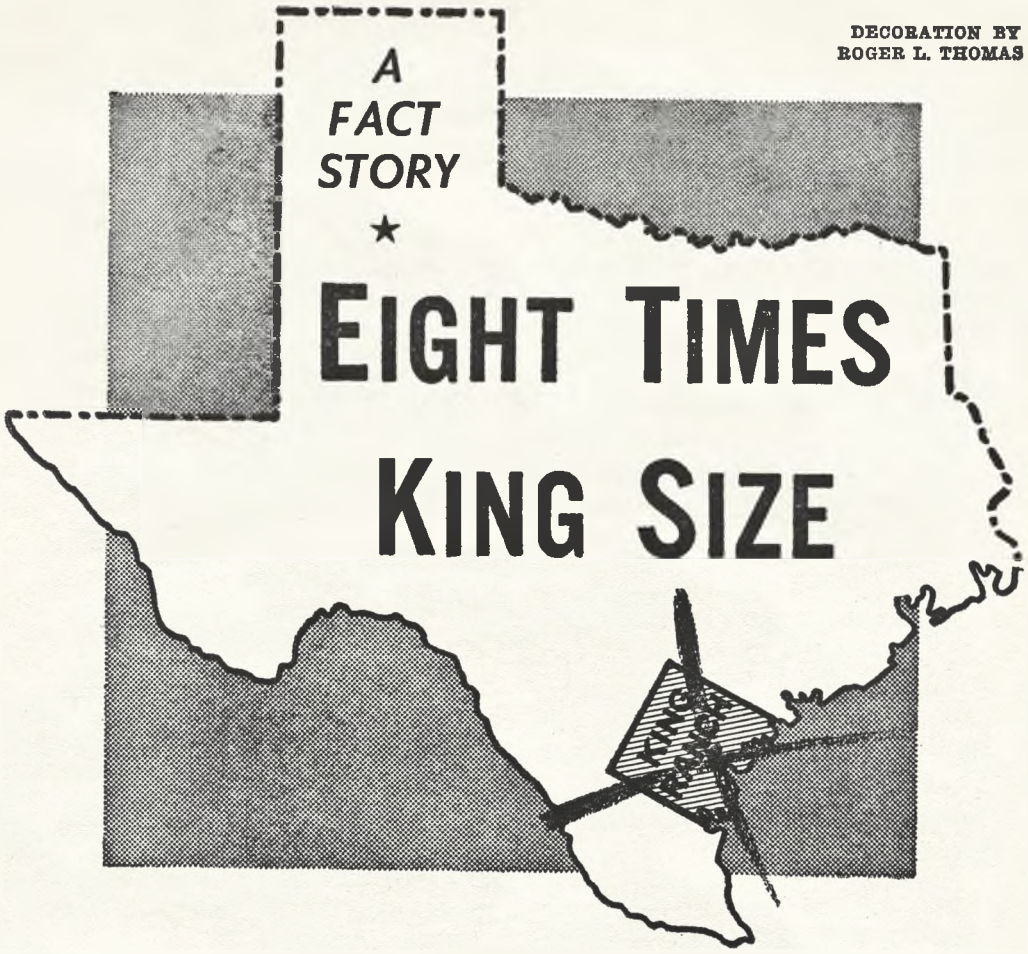
Pete asked, "Why so silent, Eddie?"

"I was just thinking, Gene and I never did get to settle that riding championship. Will he be here someday so we can?"

Pete nodded. "He'll be here, Eddie."

Eddie breathed deeply. "I guess I'd better ride today. I've got to keep in shape." He grinned at Pete. "Gene's a pretty tough boy."

DECORATION BY
ROGER L. THOMAS



By
CURTIS BISHOP

IT WILL come as a shock to avid readers of Western magazines, and Texans particularly, to learn that the world's largest ranch is not the famed King Santa Gertrudis; the biggest and most dangerous roundup of all time was not in the '70's when John Chisum's "Jingle-bob" brand was rounded up and sold; and that the rustler fights along the Texas border read like Sunday School yarns compared to the accounts of how the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company of Sao Paulo organized its own army of Rangers to fight off banditos.

The great King ranch included, at its zenith, approximately 1,250,000 acres; one division of the huge Sao Paulo spread is nearly four times that large, and the entire acreage of the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company is estimated at 10,000,000 acres.

John Chisum delivered 65,000 head of cattle to the St. Louis commission firm of Hunter and Evans in 1880 after what is claimed to be the West's largest roundup, lasting two years and accounting for the lives of at least a hundred men as Chisum's "protection men" headed by the famous Billy the Kid swept into Lincoln County, New Mexico to fight off rustlers and homesteaders.

The *Descalvados* division of the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company, a unit of some 4,500,000 acres located along the Bolivian border, staged an annual roundup of wild cattle that for 10 years averaged 140,000 outlaw steers each spring.

And, in the *Descalvados* division alone, the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company employed a unit of "protection men" larger than the entire force of the famed Texas Rangers.

However, Texans, after recovering from the

first shock of such an exposition, can quickly come back with:

A Texan was chosen to organize the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company.

Texas foremen were placed in charge of each of the four units.

A Texas ranch, the same King Santa Gertrudis, served as the model for organization.

Texas cattle were shipped to Brazil to interbreed with, and finally dominate, the wild Sao Paulo herds.

And, after two years of seeing profits driven off by native banditos, a Texan was sent for to organize the "protection men."

It was true that the Texan who was the first superintendent of this colossal spread came to the Lone Star State from Scotland, but all Texans came from somewhere, and once arrived in the *Llano Estacado,* he shed all his previous affiliations.

Murdo Mackenzie was born at Balnagown, Scotland, graduated from the Academy of Tain at the age of eighteen and entered a law office as an apprentice. After eighteen months, however, he became a bank teller, then assistant to the Factor of the Balnagown Estate where he was born. This was Scotland's biggest estate, including a half-million acres which fed 12,000 sheep. Young Mackenzie, who was the Scottish equivalent of a foreman, no doubt thought he had the biggest job in the world. He might have thought it ridiculous to dream of supervising a ranch twenty times as large.

At thirty-five, Mackenzie left Scotland to become manager of the Prairie Cattle Company. British financiers had turned speculative eyes upon the broad American West a score of years earlier, and reports of their profits had thrown Scots and Britons into a fury of energetic promotion and investment. This was the first Scottish company to invest capital in Texas land and cattle.

In 1891, Mackenzie became manager of the famed Matador. This is the only Scottish-financed ranch in America which is still in existence, and under Mackenzie's management it grew to be one of the country's biggest ranches, running at one time 100,000 head of cattle on its million acres. The company was in rocky financial shape when Mackenzie took over, but by reducing their cattle to 70,000, by shipping two-year-olds to Montana and Dakota pastures for maturing, and by introducing pure-bred Hereford bulls to bolster the pedigree of the Matador stock, Mackenzie not only staved off bankruptcy but set a pattern other ranchmen were quick to follow. In these closing years of the nineteenth century, when the days of the swashbuckling cattleman were drawing to a close, the Matador was one of the few spreads to come through with a flourish.

Mackenzie's success with the Panhandle ranch attracted the attention of Percival Farquhar, who approached him with an offer to head a cattle company he and other international financiers were organizing in Brazil. Mackenzie then was sixty-one years old, and felt he was too old to accept such an adventurous assignment. However, he agreed to travel with Farquhar through the West and advise the financier as to the organization of this company.

The King Ranch was selected as the outstanding pattern of large-scale ranching efficiency, and Mackenzie and Farquhar travelled the length and breadth of the 1,250,000-acre Santa Gertrudis, studying its cattle and horse strains, and purchasing, on the spot, a herd of breeding bulls of the Santa Gertrudis blood type, which had been achieved by careful cross-breeding of Shorthorn and Brahma cattle.

When Farquhar placed a credit of $25,000,000 at Mackenzie's disposal, and promised him absolute freedom from interference, the sixty-one-year-old Scottish Texan could not resist. He signed a contract to manage the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company for five years and started purchasing American cattle to ship into the Sao Paulo interior.

THE nucleus of the ranch was in the State of Matto Grasso, a mere 1,000,000 acres. Headquarters were established on five divisions after two years of hectic land buying had increased the size of the company's holdings to 10,000,000 acres—three divisions in the state of Matto Grosso, one in Minas Geraes, and one in Parana.

Mackenzie chose Texans to assist him. Dave Somerville was his chief ranch supervisor, assisted by E. L. Roberds, Homer Vivian, James R. Burr and J. G. Ramsey. T. G. Chittenden was office manager, with John Mackenzie as the superintendent's personal assistant. Dr. J. H. McNeil had full charge of the imported cattle, the first of which were shipped from the United States in 1915.

Brazilian cattlemen had advised against introducing American breeds into South America, but Mackenzie had chosen his blood strains from American cattle expertly bred to climatic and soil conditions similar to those in the interior of Brazil. Only five of the first 495 head shipped died in passage, and the success of this cross-breeding was instant and startling. The South American cattle and the Hereford were perfect mates. Their offspring had the sturdiness and "meatiness" of pure Herefords.

But Mackenzie's troubles were just beginning. Bandito chieftains pressed the company for bounties and when Mackenzie refused to pay one milreis of graft, slaughtered whole herds of cattle in their anger. Organized rustling did not plague the company to any great extent, but thousands of native families

depended upon the company cattle for their meat, and this petty thievery swelled into large-scale proportions.

Mackenzie had the answer—they had fought Indians and cattle rustlers on the Texas plains. He sent back to the United States for John C. Ramsey of Miami, Texas, Jack Ramsey of Southwest legend, and shortly afterward, tall, thin-lipped, hard-eyed men began to arrive in Sao Paulo.

By 1915 there were more "protection men" riding the range of the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company than there were in the whole force of the Texas Rangers! That body of Texas law enforcement agents had, meanwhile, undergone an almost complete transformation. Nearly all of Ramsey's riders talked with a Texas drawl.

These men rode a range wilder than the plains of the United States before the Civil War, for the Apaches, Comanches, Kiowas and Cheyennes were no more savage than the Indians along the Bolivian frontier, where Mackenzie's cowboys rounded up 140,000 wild cattle each spring under the protection of Ramsey's guns. Few are the tales that have drifted back from Ramsey's men.

Mackenzie managed the huge ranch until 1919, when he resigned to become associated with Thomas E. Wilson to further better understanding between packers and producers. Three years later he returned to the old Matador, where he ruled until 1937. He was succeeded by his son John. Mackenzie died May 30, 1939 at the age of eighty-eight. As a ranchman, his history is unique. He managed the biggest outfits of two countries—Scotland and Brazil, as well as one of the largest in the United States, the Matador.

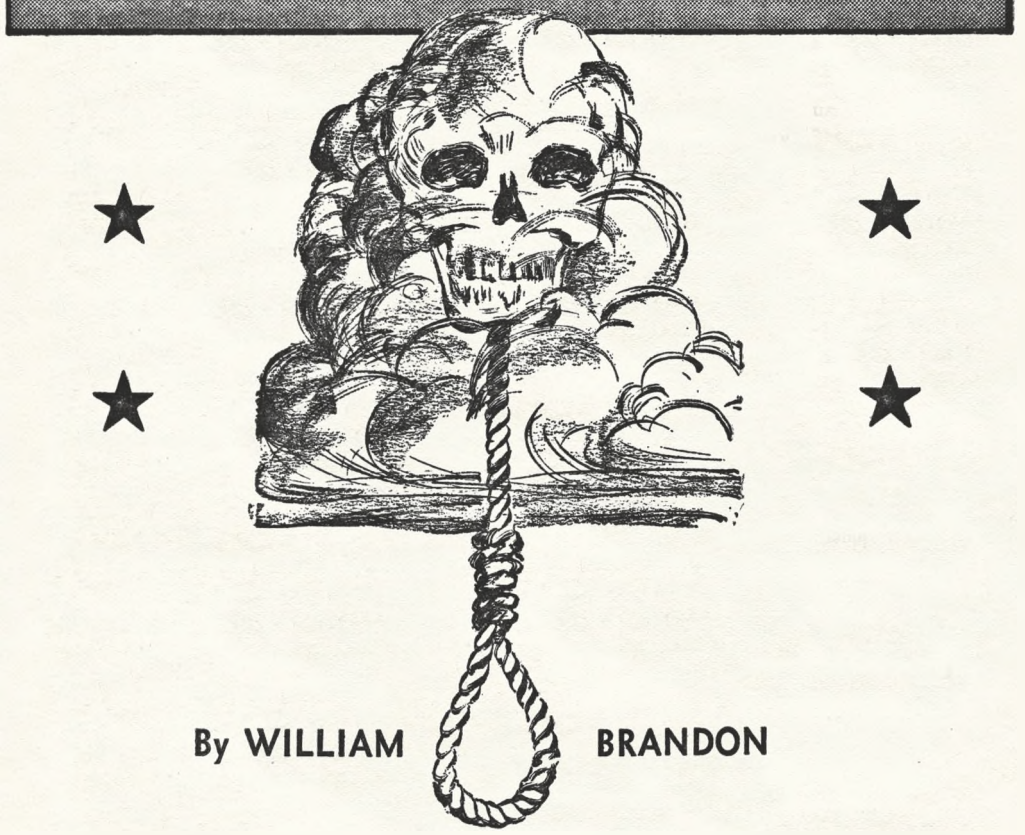
The Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing company continued under J. D. Fleming, another Texan, and today ships to market some 350,000 cattle annually, far more than the annual yield of the King Ranch.

An estimated 5,000 windmills dot its broad acres, with enough barbed wire fencing to enclose the world, enough corral rails to build a bridge across the Atlantic Ocean. In its entirety it is bigger than any of forty-one of our states. A thousand stockholders own it.

Most of the Texans who rode with Jack Ramsey after the Brazilian rustlers have returned to the States, and the force of "protection men," as such, has been abolished. Ramsey never returned to his native Texas.

Yes, Texas will have to admit that the Brazil Land, Cattle and Packing Company is bigger than anything in their native state. But they have this consolation: It took Texans to make it work!

DEATH OLD WOMAN



By WILLIAM BRANDON

THERE wasn't a tree in sight on the mesa but the Dutchman was determined to make it a hanging. He had his bullwhackers and mule drivers turn one of the empty wagons up on end and a man in buckskins clambered up to test the wagon tongue as a gibbet. It bowed to his weight and the wagon swayed this way and that, and the Dutchman decided it wouldn't do.

They dropped the wagon back on its wheels and the Dutchman held a confab with his people. The Dutchman was a vigorous, red-faced man who gesticulated with his arms when he talked and kicked grass with the toe of his boot while he listened. At last he sent one of the drivers trotting for a horse and called to the guards to bring over Danny and the Indian. The Indian went alone, hopping ludicrously, his feet hobbled and his hands tied behind him. Danny let the guards lift him up and carry him.

They put him down in the middle of the bunch of men by the wagon. Danny felt smothered. The noon sun burned down on him and sweat rolled in little rivers around his neck. The drivers and the Dutchman were full of business, as if a hanging were no more than another job of hitching up, but the two trappers in the party were excited and were extremely curious to see how Danny was taking it.

One of them said, "Where's Johnny Fourteen, kid? Don't he like a party?"

DECORATION BY JULIAN G. CHAMBERS

"I guess he's backward about this kind of a dance," Danny said from his dry mouth. The two trappers whooped and laughed. Their eyes were eager and bright. This affair, Danny thought, was a wonderful holiday in their monotonous lives. He could hear them, in his mind, talking about it in their camps on the Arkansas, for a lot of sundowns to come, long after he was gone. He wanted to impress them favorably. He wanted them to say, "That boy was a cool one. Stood and cracked jokes with us, and never turned a hair."

The Dutchman moved between the trappers, pushing them back. Danny lifted his eyes and saw that the Indian was standing in the tail of the wagon. The loop of a riata was around the Indian's neck and a rider waited on a claybank horse, the rope snubbed at his saddle horn. They were going to drag the Indian, since there wasn't anything to hang him from. Danny's scalp tingled. He looked away from the Indian and sought the trappers in the knot of waiting men, with some feeling that he would be all right as long as they watched him, but their attention was on the Indian.

The Dutchman said in a loud voice, "He got anything to say?"

The trapper with the red beard relayed the Dutchman's question in the Indian's dialect.

The Indian raised his face to address a white cloud in the sky. He prayed forgiveness that there was no feather in his hair nor white paint on his forehead to speed him to the Cloud People that he might return with tiers of rain clouds to bless Our Mother Earth, as every departing spirit should. He made quite a speech to *'okuwa,* the cloud, and to Our Father Sun and Sky Old Man and Rain Old Woman, and concluded by blowing his breath in the six directions, again asking forgiveness for being unable to do his part in fetching rain. He then called upon Death Old Woman and requested her to come to him on running feet, as would befit his mother. The trappers enjoyed all this immensely, nudging one another while the Indian spoke, and when he had finished the red-bearded one shouted, "You'll do, Short Grass!"

The Dutchman said, "Shut up, will you?" and motioned for the Indian to turn his back to the man on the horse. The Indian swung around and tilted up his head and waited. The Dutchman waved his arm and the man on the claybank screamed, "Hi-yee!" and spurred the horse into a wild leap. The rope snapped taut and the Indian was jerked off the wagon, sailed in a flat arc and hit the grass with a cracking thud. The rider pulled down the claybank, and the Dutchman walked to where the Indian lay and took out his pistol. The Indian was dazed but still conscious, flinging his upper body from side to side. The Dutchman got a foot under him and turned him over and pointed the pistol at the back of his head and fired.

THE Indian's white cloud sailed across the face of the sun and the day turned gray. The sweat on Danny's skin had changed to beads of ice. He could see nothing clearly except the red-faced Dutchman blowing the smoke from the barrel of his pistol. He knew suddenly that he would do anything, literally anything, to get away.

He said, "Tell the Dutchman to come here." One of the black-bearded men guarding him moved off, a shadow on the gray ground, and talked to the Dutchman and the Dutchman came walking over, still concerned with his pistol. When he was near, Danny said in a high, rapid voice, "Will you let me go if I tell you where Johnny Fourteen is?"

The Dutchman looked at him with a frown and said, "Why should I?"

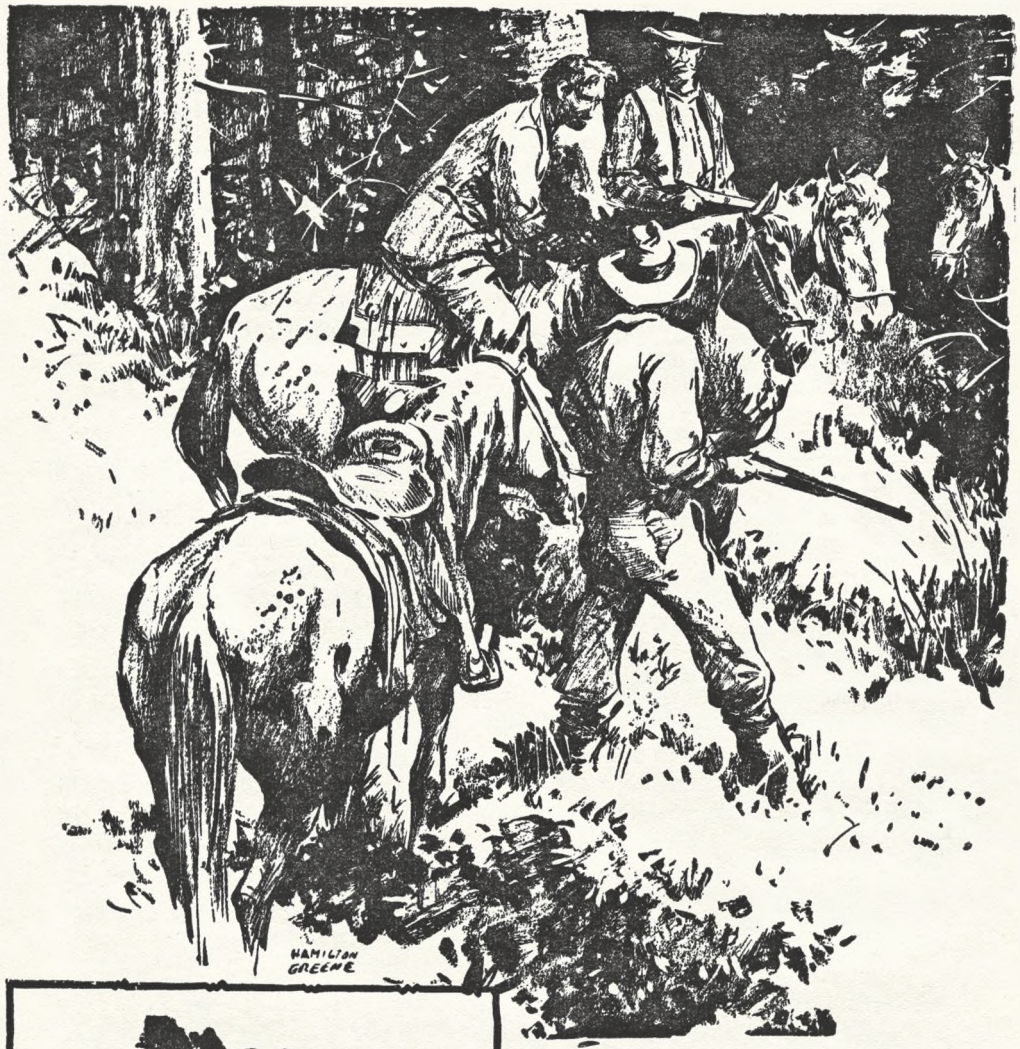
"He's got your freight we stole. That's what you want, ain't it? I know where he is and I know he's still there, because he's got a busted leg. Will you let me go?"

The Dutchman reflected, studying him coldly. "All right," he said, "we let you go when we bring him back."

Danny told them how to get to the place at Seven Rivers. He told them how to approach the place so as not to be seen, and who was probably there with Johnny Fourteen. The Dutchman picked eight or nine of his men and they made up a war party.

The sun came out and Danny felt a warm security, a shattering relief. He bent his head and took in a long breath like a sob. When he raised his eyes he found himself looking at the two trappers, and when he looked away from them he saw the Indian's body face down in the dusty grass, and his vision ran from that and fastened on the Indian's white cloud in the sky. He was amazed to see that it had not moved far since the Indian had prayed to it. It was astonishing how little time the whole thing had taken. Now that it was over, it seemed that it must have been easy because it had been so much quicker than he had realized.

The Dutchman and his men rode away and Danny watched them go. Curiously, he found himself envying the Indian.



HOME

By

R. G.

EMERY

McQueen, Hargis and the others stood at the timber's edge, looking down at the dead man in the grass. Jameson chuckled. "Looks right nat'chel, don't he?"

IS THE WARRIOR

THE STORY THUS FAR:

WAR-WEARY ex-bomber pilot JOHN McQUEEN has come to Alaska in search of peace and quiet. He has built himself a cabin on Lake Tustumena, fifty miles above Homer on the Kenai Peninsula—and with his two dogs, Nora and Hobey, he plans to spend a lazy, uncomplicated year, hunting, fishing, and forgetting the things he has seen in combat.

Needing supplies, he goes to Anchorage on Cook Inlet—a brawling boomtown, swarming with cheechakoes and sourdoughs, infantrymen from Fort Richardson and pilots from Elmendorf Field, Aleuts from down the Chain and Knicks from the reservation at Eklutna. In an Anchorage saloon, he runs into KENCY GOWEN, a hot-tempered redheaded man, and his pretty wife, AASIE, a girl McQueen had known in Fairbanks several years before. Aasie tells him they are homesteading near Homer.

ILLUSTRATED BY HAMILTON GREENE

Back at his hotel, McQueen finds a friend waiting, RED-EYE JAMESON, old-time prospector and now agent for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Jameson tells him that MORSE MIXON—ex-racketeer with whom McQueen had had a run-in on a previous visit to the Territory—wants a talk with him. McQueen goes to see Mixon, who says he wants to start a big "cow ranch" down around Homer and tries to hire McQueen as his agent, to buy up the claims of the homesteaders in that section. McQueen turns him down cold.

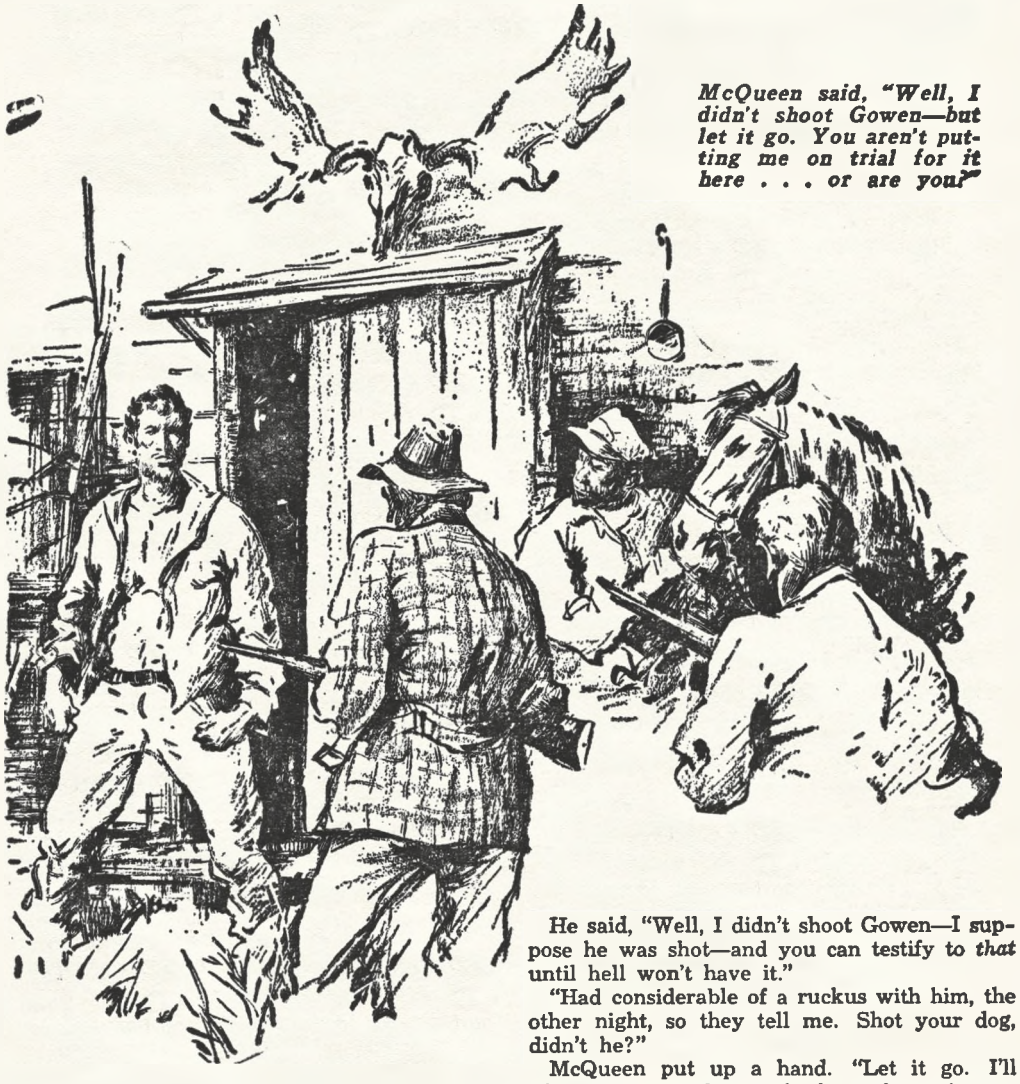
Returning to Tustumena, afte· ·icking up his jeep and the two dogs at the cabin of JAKE JOHNSON on the way, McQueen finds intruders at his place who identify themselves as FORD ODOM and TEX COLVER. Suspecting they are Mixon's men, McQueen kicks them out.

There are rumors of trouble among the homesteaders around Homer—mostly ex-servicemen who have accepted Uncle Sam's offer to settle in Alaska. Houses have mysteriously burned down and livestock is being killed off. Apparently, someone is trying to run the homesteaders off their land. McQueen goes to Homer to investigate. A man named KELVEY takes him to a meeting at Kency Gowen's, where Aasie introduces him to JOE HOOVER, the two LARSEN brothers, MULCAHY and other homesteaders who have gathered there to discuss the crisis. Gowen himself is not at home but while they are talking, a shot is heard outside and Gowen comes in—announcing he has shot one of the wolves, which are suspected of killing livestock. When McQueen discovers that the dead "wolf" is his huge Siberian, Hobey, he knocks Gowen down and quits the meeting in disgust.

Late in the afternoon of the third day after his return to Tustumena, McQueen sees a cavalcade of riders approaching the cabin. He recognizes Morse Mixon in the lead, followed by Joe Hoover, one of the Larsens, Odom and Colver, Aasie Gowen and Red-Eye Jameson. And the last horse bears a body—Kency Gowen's. The riders draw up before the cabin, and McQueen listens in utter bewilderment as Jameson informs him that Gowen has been killed and that, as Deputy U. S. Marshal, he is arresting McQueen for his murder.

PART II

McQUEEN started to laugh, then thought better of it. He looked again at the red hair trailing at the side of the packhorse. It was Gowen, all right, and he was certainly dead. From the grotesque position of the rigid body, he had been dead for some time. It was no laughing matter for Ken Gowen, nor for his wife. Nor, McQueen realized as he read the expressions on the faces surrounding him, for one John McQueen.



McQueen said, "Well, I didn't shoot Gowen—but let it go. You aren't putting me on trial for it here . . . or are you?"

He said, "Well, I didn't shoot Gowen—I suppose he was shot—and you can testify to *that* until hell won't have it."

"Had considerable of a ruckus with him, the other night, so they tell me. Shot your dog, didn't he?"

McQueen put up a hand. "Let it go. I'll admit I was mad enough, for a few minutes, to kill him. But why waste our breath? You aren't putting me on trial for it here." He glanced around him. At the rifle in Mixon's

hands . . . the look on Aasie's face. "Or—are you?"

Red-eye said, "Nope. They'll take care of that down to Anchorage. But I do aim to see that th: t rope goes around your doggone elbows. Go ahead, Larsen."

The big blond homesteader stepped up with a length of halter rope. McQueen let him do as Jameson ordered. He said, while Larsen was working at his back, "Well, so far I've found out that Gowen was killed. When and where?"

"Down the trail a couple of miles, is where. An' I reckon ye best know when."

McQueen nodded. "I might. Two days ago, I guess. I thought I heard a shot, from down in that direction."

Aasie had been silent as long as she could. Now she burst at him, in white-lipped fury, "You thought you heard a shot! You murdering louse! To shoot a man from the brush!"

"So that's how it was done?" McQueen said quietly. He thought a moment, then asked, "What was he doing up this way?"

Mixon pushed his horse ahead, blocking McQueen off. The big man climbed down, said, "Enough o' this chatter. What are you going to do with him, Jameson? As far as I'm concerned, we could take care of him right here, but as long as you're the law, we'll do it your way. Just so long as he's taken care of."

"He will be, don't fret about that," Red-eye promised. "To git down to details, I rec'mend we light and eat somethin'. She's a long way down the mountain. Then I'll take the pris'ner an' Mrs. Gowen down to Homer in this yere jeep contraption I understand McQueen's got."

"Oh, no, you won't," Mixon objected. "I want to use that, myself."

"Oh, yes, I will." The old man's voice was gentle but it carried a tinkle of ice. "We ain't confiscatin' his property, just yet."

"No, I didn't mean that," Mixon retracted, hastily. "I was only thinking about gettin' the body down to Homer. I figured to use the jeep for that."

"There'll be an extra hoss. Fact is, the one Ken's on right now belongs to Hoover. Larsen and Joe will take him down with them. They have to ride back, anyways."

Larsen said, "Sure. We'll get started as soon as we eat." Joe Hoover nodded agreement.

The rest dismounted. Red-eye gestured toward the cabin door and McQueen turned to go back inside. Ford Odom, Colver, and the stranger led their mounts, with Mixon's, around to the rear of the cabin. Evidently, the newcomer was another of Mixon's men.

Odom caught McQueen's eye, once, with a leer that promised dire things, should the opportunity occur. McQueen hoped his hands wouldn't be tied when it did. Odom obviously had not forgotten that rifle-butt in his face.

CHAPTER VI

NO TIME TO FIGHT

JAMESON followed McQueen into the cabin, Aasie and Mixon at his heels. Hoover and Larsen remained to look after the rest of the horses. McQueen kicked a chair around and lowered himself into it, his roped arms hooked over the back.

He said, "Red-eye, there's a chunk of moose in the box down in the creek. You might as well eat it, since I'm on my way to jail."

"Well, now, that's right white o' ye. More'n I'd look for from a dummed murderer."

McQueen glanced at him sharply. The old man's face was blandly expressionless. Aasie took the chair across the table and listened woodenly. From the look of her eyes, she was holding herself in with terrific effort.

McQueen made an attempt at distracting her. He turned again to Red-eye, said, "I'm glad you think so. In return, can I ask you to do something about this other dog of mine? After all, she hasn't killed anybody."

Aasie rose to it. She said shortly, "We can take her down with us when we go. I'll look after her. I agree with you, it's not her fault if her owner is a—"

Ford Odom had stepped into the room as she spoke. He guffawed. "Not the bitch's fault if her owner's a sonuva———"

Red-eye Jameson rounded on him with a violence startling in his spare old frame. "That'll be about all of that, Odom!" he snapped. "Ye don't talk like that in front of women in Alaska. If ye didn't know that, learn it now!"

McQueen thought, "So? I wondered where that lug came from. So Mixon has imported a crew, has he?"

Odom was taken aback. He glanced uncertainly at Mixon. The big man's face was as sternly disapproving as Jameson's. Odom fingered his lips, said, "Aw, excuse me. I was jes' makin' a joke. I jus' don't happen to like this feller that shot your husband, lady."

His piggish eyes gleamed at a sudden thought. He looked at McQueen and took one long step to stand in front of him. He said, "Well, there ain't nothin' insultin' to no wimmin about *this!*" and swung.

He launched the blow before anyone in the room, including McQueen, had guessed what he intended. It was aimed squarely at the center of McQueen's face. Sitting there, he had time and freedom, his arms tied behind him and over the chair-back, to do no more than drop his head far enough to take Odom's fist between his eyes rather than on the bridge of his nose.

Even so, he had a fleeting glimpse of what a pole-axed steer's sensations must be. The force

of the blow toppled him over backwards. He fell upon his two arms, twisted in back of him, and he thought for a time that both of them were torn from their shoulder sockets.

He managed to take it without a murmur, but it needed an effort. He kept his eyes closed, afraid they'd stream if he opened them. He could hear considerable commotion in the room but words were indistinguishable through the red curtain of pain which engulfed him.

He didn't relax until he felt a wet cloth pressed gently against his forehead. He looked up then, as soon as the cloth was moved, into Aasie Gowen's face. He grinned a little, thankful for the concealing beard, and told her, "Thanks, Aasie. I'm all right. They'll still have to hang me. I *know* they will, if I ever get my hands on *that* character."

As soon as he spoke, she straightened and turned away. For a moment, her mask seemed to have slipped. He thought that that one expression he had surprised on her face hadn't been quite so vindictive. McQueen shook his head, against the floor. Probably Odom had knocked him cross-eyed.

That reminded him, and he looked about for Odom. He was nowhere to be seen. Old Red-eye bent over him, almost anxiously. "You all right, son? That was quite a wallop."

"I'm all right. You can't hurt a head as thick as mine. Where's Odom?"

"He left," Red-eye told him shortly. "Which we will also, as soon as I rustle some grub."

Morse Mixon stood back a step or two at the old man's side. He looked at Red-eye, down at McQueen, and back to Red-eye. He chewed his lip, said slowly, "Jameson, you're a little too friendly with this fellow. I'm just wondering . . ."

"Friendly? Because I'm sorry that thug o' yours hit a man whose hands was tied?"

Mixon nodded. "Yeah, sure. I don't believe in that, either. You heard what I told Odom. But . . . I'm still wondering. I'd hate for McQueen not to get to Anchorage. To jail in Anchorage. I kind of think I'll be going down to Homer and waiting for that boat along with you, Jameson."

"Ye c'n go where ye please, I reckon, Morse. She's a free country. At least, she always has been up to now."

"I mean, I think I'll ride along with you."

"Well, now, I dunno about that. There's me an' the pris'ner, here, an' Aasie. Oh, and McQueen's duck dog. That about fills her up, as I rec-lect the capac'ty o' these jeeps. 'Fraid there won't be room for you, Morse."

"We'll skip the dog."

Red-eye scratched his chin. "We cain't hardly do that. She prob'ly wouldn't follow Hoover an' Larsen. They can't lug her on hossback. An', like Aasie said, it ain't the pooch's fault her owner's a killer. I reckon she goes."

Odom launched the blow before anyone in the room guessed what he intended.

MIXON stared at the old man his black eyes wide and unblinking. "You wouldn't be trying to pull anything on me, Jameson?"

"On you, Morse? What d'ye mean by that?"

"I told you I'd hate to hear that McQueen didn't get to Anchorage."

"Well, now, I figger that's atween me an' the gov'ment, Morse. Where would you come in? Unless it's that you jest don't want to hear of a killer escapin' justice. 'Cause I know you're on the side o' the gov'ment . . . these days . . . Morse."

The big man stared at him for another moment. Then he laughed. "All right, Red-eye. You know your business, I guess. You're right, I only want to make sure that the man gets what's coming to him for killing Aasie's husband."

"Course," Jameson said. "That's what we all want. And the man shore will. ve c'n depend on that."

Mixon's forehead wrinkled again but Jameson had turned to Aasie Gowen. "Aasie," he was saying, "suppose you an' me stir up some supper, so's we c'n be on our way. I'll go git that moose McQueen's donated. Fust, though, we ought to git the man off the floor. McQueen, do ye feel like sittin' up again?"

He and Mixon boosted McQueen to his feet. Red-eye said, "If ye'll stay here with him while I go for the meat, Morse, I think I'll untie his arms f'r a bit. That fall must've give him quite a jolt."

"I'll watch him," Mixon agreed.

McQueen sat down and Jameson went out. Aasie busied herself at the stove on the other side of the room. Mixon took a chair facing McQueen and studied him, grinning faintly.

"The tomcat farming isn't panning out so well, is it, McQueen?"

McQueen grinned back. "Pretty well. Seems to me I've attracted some big ones. Although that's probably an insult to a tomcat."

Mixon shook his head. "Always jokes. I'm afraid you're a bad 'un, McQueen. When you killed my man Wasilla, that time durin' the war, I believed you when you said it was an accident. I guess I was just a sucker for a good story. It'll be a little harder for you to sell this one for an accident."

"I suppose it would."

"Sure would. When did you say you heard that shot—about noon? You shouldn't have admitted that. I wasn't sure I took any stock in the story, when I heard it. Seemed funny you would have taken a chance like that in broad daylight. Did you know you had a witness to that shooting?"

"No! A witness? I'll be damned."

"That's right. It was poor business, McQueen. Very poor business. No matter how mad you were at Gowen you should have been smarter. Now, after this, you wouldn't be any good to me, at all."

"Well, I wouldn't have been much, anyway." McQueen was paying more attention Aasie Gowen at the cookstove than to Mixon. Her back was to them but there was something about the way she held her head that told McQueen that she wasn't missing a word.

There was still a good deal that was strange about the whole situation. It was obvious enough that Mixon had somehow framed McQueen with Gowen's murder. A witness! Hell, Mixon could produce a dozen. Ford Odom's kind of witness. But how had he managed to convince Aasie Gowen so thoroughly? She knew Morse Mixon of old. Why had she fallen for this, so completely? There was no doubt she had. The expression on her face every time she looked at McQueen was evidence of that.

Probably the shock of her husband's so sudden, violent death was enough to stifle any woman's reasoning powers. But . . . there was Red-eye Jameson. He was no woman, and Kency Gowen had been nothing in particular to him. His nephew, but not a very popular one with him. And he believed it.

The anger at Morse Mixon and his man Odom which had been growing on McQueen for days—ever since he had listened to Mixon in Anchorage—and which had become a vast, black rage which blotted out every other thought from the moment Odom knocked him off the chair, began to fade a little. Enough to let him wonder, for one thing, just how he was going to go about getting out of his present predicament. At first glance, he could see no very promising exits.

Red-eye came back with the meat, and the others ate. When they had finished, the old man prepared to get under way. Nobody mentioned it, particularly, but it was obvious that Mixon and his gang intended to stay at the cabin. McQueen promised himself that, when rent-day came, the price was going to be high. However, he said nothing. He was past the stage of making threats.

The old man arranged the seating of the jeep to put McQueen at the wheel and Aasie beside him. Mixon objected but Red-eye paid no attention. "Ye don't think I'm goin' to drive the durn contraption, do ye? Not on y'r tintype. We'll jest tie Mr. McQueen to the driver's seat, so's he can't jump out on me, an' me an' the pooch will ride in back where I c'n keep my rifle on the back of his neck. He'll be a good boy don't ye fret about that."

THE going was very slow. The jeep's poor lights punched their way through the blackness just about far enough to show the faint trace of the old wheel tracks. Even in first gear, McQueen had to strain his eyes to keep from running over stray boulders and bouncing them all overboard. He was beginning to think seriously about doing just that when Jameson, behind him, laughed.

"Funny, isn't it?" McQueen sneered.

"It has some o' the elements, son," Jameson told him. "But I wasn't thinkin' of anythin' funny, to tell the truth."

Aasie turned half toward them, her profile white and set in the dim glow from the dash. "It wasn't very funny to Ken," she said, her voice breaking a little.

"Now I know that, Aasie," Jameson assured her. "I reckon Johnny, here, feels the same as I do."

Speaking of funny, McQueen thought, now that was a queer thing for the old billygoat to say. Aloud, he said, "Something occurred to me awhile back, Red-eye. If you're interested."

"I'll listen. First, though, I should tell Aasie what it was I was giggling about. It was Mixon.

I was just thinking that it certainly does cramp a man like Morse's style when he tries to pretend he's honest. Morse managed to do pretty well as long as he was an out-and-out hoodlum, and made no effort to appear like anything else. Now that he's begun to worry about his reputation, it's thrown him all off stride. A ten-year-old Aleut would have known better than to turn you loose to ride down the mountain in the black dark with Aasie and me. Morse knew better, too, but he just couldn't decide how to fit any downright objections into this new act of his."

McQueen digested that. He said, uncertainly, "Well . . . what *I* was going to say was that Mixon happened to mention to me—in the cabin while you were out after the meat—that I shouldn't have admitted I heard that shot about noon the other day. But I'm pretty sure I didn't say I heard it *'about noon.'* I didn't say when I heard it."

Aasie said, suddenly, "That's right. Morse did tell you that. I remember, too."

Surprised, McQueen continued, "Now supposing I did shoot Gowen—and supposing I did shoot him around noon—how did Morse know it?"

"That's easy," Red-eye informed him, equably. "Ford Odom told him. That is, if Morse wasn't actually on the scene himself."

"Huh? What was that again?"

"Odom told him. Odom should know. He's the one that did the shooting."

"Oh, he is?" McQueen exploded at last. "Then what the hell do you think you're pulling? What the hell is this rope doing around my belly? And put down that damned gun before I jam it down your throat and—"

"Easy, son, easy," the old man chuckled. "Remember what I told Odom about how we talk in front of ladies in Alaska."

McQueen pulled up and stopped. "Sorry, Aasie," he apologized briefly. "But Red-eye . . . you talk!"

"Sure, I'll talk. But you better get to driving. We ought to be farther away. Who knows how many people Mixon's got around or where they are."

McQueen got the jeep under way again. "All right. Now suppose you start by explaining this 'deputy marshal' act of yours."

"That's no act. I always was a deputy. Time I caught some feller with a couple dozen too many beaver skins in his pack, it was handy to be able to put the law on him right then and there. I'll admit nobody ever had an idea I'd be using the office to catch me any murderers."

"Well, why don't you? Instead of abusing it by man-handling innocent bystanders."

"Meaning you, I take it. Johnny, I'm sorry about that Odom wolverine. I never meant to let you in for anything like that, believe me."

"Two days later, Ken's horse came home. There was blood on the saddle."

"Maybe I'll believe you. Right now, I'm pretty damned mad. I'll wait until I hear the rest of the story. Particularly, I want to know why this fool business of arresting me."

"It was that or fight, Johnny. And it was no time to fight. Our side wasn't quite ready."

McQueen snorted in disgust. "What fight? What side? Stop giving me riddles. What in hell are you talking about?"

"Same thing we talked about in Anchorage. You and me, and you and Morse Mixon. Same thing as Aasie tells me you came down to Homer to talk about, the night Ken shot your dog."

AASIE GOWEN spoke then, her voice flat and dully expressionless. "I'll tell you, McQueen. We were burned out, the night you were down at the cabin. Somebody set a grass fire on three sides of us. There was nothing we could do. Ken thought you set the fire. Nobody could tell him different. He borrowed a horse and started after you. I tried to stop him but the rest of the men wouldn't help. They thought you had done it, too. Two days later, the horse came home. There was blood on the saddle."

Aasie Gowen

Her voice broke. Sympathetically, Jameson took up the story. "I was in Homer. Had just come down on the gas-boat. Morse Mixon had come, too. We were both going moose-hunting, so we told each other. There were about a dozen more 'hunters' on the boat. I didn't know most of 'em, but I think Morse did."

"His men, you mean?"

"That's right. Well, Aasie told me what had happened. Hoover and one of the Larsen boys were just about to start up into the hills. They lent me a horse and I went along. So did Mixon. We found Ken's body, lying just beside the trail. Hoover and Larsen thought there was a good chance you had done it. Mixon said there was no doubt of it."

"And Aasie," McQueen said bitterly.

"I'll tell you what I have to say, in just a moment," Aasie promised, just as bitterly.

"So—" Jameson went on, "there was nothing to do but go on up and get you. You see, I hadn't yet seen this Odom. He and Colver joined us about where the turn-off is into your valley. Then it was too late. They had us outnumbered, even if they'd have give me a chance to convince Hoover and Larsen."

"Talk plainer."

Red-eye chuckled grimly. "Morse Mixon ain't much of a woodsman. He's spent most of his time back of too many bars. One thing, Ken Gowen wasn't killed with a rifle. I knew it was a hand-gun of some kind when I saw the wounds. Probably a .38. I made an excuse to go out in the bushes—lady along—and I didn't have to go far to take my look around inside of revolver range. It was easy to find where Odom had been hid out, waitin'."

McQueen said, "That's right, I had taken Odom's and Colver's rifles away from them. But how did you know that?"

"I didn't. I didn't mean I knew it was Odom, right then. But did you ever happen to read a story about old Sherlock Holmes, Johnny—the one where he catches a one-legged murderer by noticing that the footprints the feller left behind the tree where he was lurkin' were deeper on one side than the other? This was even simpler than that. The left shoepac was slashed across the bottom. Looked like he'd stepped on a sharp piece of shale or something. So I just set out to look for a man wearing that shoepac.

"Well, we picked Ken up and put him on the spare horse, then rode on up to your place to nab you. On the way, we fell in with Odom and Colver. When we got down at your place, I happened to notice the same footprint in the dirt around your door. For a minute or two, I had to wonder who *had* made that print."

McQueen said, "Don't tell me you arranged with Odom to bat me over so that you could get a look at the bottom of my left foot."

"No, but I'll admit I looked. It didn't take long, though, to find out who made the mark. That's the first I knew it was Odom."

"Why didn't you call him, right then and there?"

"I told you, Johnny. It was no time to start a fight."

"Why not? If you had turned me loose, there was four of us and four of them."

Jameson started to say, "Well, there was Aasie—" but the girl beside McQueen interrupted. "How could we know you'd fight, McQueen?"

MCQUEEN said, "Look, Aasie. There's one thing about this you and Red-eye don't know. Who do you think Odom was really trying to ambush, down there? Well, I think I know. And it wasn't your husband."

He heard himself say it, and thought over how it sounded. "Come to think of it, though . . . if it was at pistol range in broad daylight, I wonder how he could have made the mistake."

"I don't think it was a mistake," Red-eye said. "From his actions at the cabin, I figured that Odom doesn't like you much, for some reason. But he killed Gowen for the same reason he chased Ken's horse back down the mountain. Just as a lesson."

"A lesson for whom?"

"The rest of the homesteaders."

"So we're back to that again, are we? All right, the Gowens were burned out—Gowen was shot—I admit all the rest of the stories are probably true, too—but what does it mean? Mixon is behind it, but why? Do you know?"

"Yeah, I know. It's simple. The Navy's going

to build a big service base for storage and supply at Homer. The whole valley will be condemned. It means the ten-strike Mixon's always dreamed of, if he can get the right claims down there registered in the names of his own people."

"If that's true, why did they ever open the valley to homesteading?"

"That's the thing that started the whole mess. It was a family squabble in Washington. The old Secretary of the Interior didn't get along with the Navy Department. Maybe you remember?"

"I read some stuff in the papers. The Secretary you mean was—"

"That's right. The old curmudgeon. Well, he said the Navy didn't need this place. He used to run things to suit himself up here, and so he got it thrown open to homesteading the way he wanted. Now there's a new boss, who'll listen to reason, and the Navy's going to get it. How Mixon found out about it is anybody's guess."

"Even so, where does the strike come in? They'll condemn the valley at their own price."

"Oh, no, they won't. She's a democracy, son. The claimholders—Mixon's lads—will fight. The fight will be in court at Anchorage, and the juries will be Alaskans. Maybe even a few more of Mixon's boys. He'll make anywhere from a quarter to a half a million out of it, at a short estimate. It's worth his time, all right."

"Yes, I guess it is." McQueen considered. They were coming now into the open country bordering Tustumena Lake and a middle quarter moon had risen. He pushed the jeep a little faster.

He said, at length, "Well, why don't you bring down the law and take care of him? Get yourself some reinforcements and go to work."

Red-eye relapsed to character. "Good idee. I aim to do jest that. Where you suggest I git 'em?"

"The homesteaders. They're the ones who're concerned, aren't they? And most of 'em are vets. Swear them in as a posse and turn 'em loose."

"Good idee," Red-eye repeated. "I'll start right now. Ye're a homesteader, ain't ye, Johnny?"

"I'm a homesteader, all right," McQueen grated. "But I'm going to be busy. I have a bit of a personal score to settle with Morse Mixon. He probably isn't interested in my place, anyway. I doubt if the Navy will spread up that far."

"Ye go settling any scores of any kind with Mixon, ye better git some help," Red-eye told him.

"I don't know. He's got three men with him. You're going to arrest Odom, whenever you get around to it. Colver doesn't count. That leaves only one other. I'll take a chance."

"I told ye I rode down from Anchorage with a dozen more. An' Hoover tells me there's a good many strange, rough-lookin' characters been goin' through Homer."

"Well, anyway, we'll see."

Aasie Gowen said suddenly, "*You* won't see, McQueen. You'll be in jail. And they don't take bail for murder."

Startled, McQueen said, "I'm not your murderer, Aasie. Haven't you been listening to a damned word we've said, all the way down?"

"I've been listening. And all I've heard is talk. Charley Jameson can think what he pleases. I still think you might have killed Ken. If Charley won't take you to Anchorage on my complaint—with every other homesteader on the flats to back me up—I'll radio to Anchorage for someone that will."

"Aasie!" McQueen pleaded, half sorry and half in anger. "You don't honestly think I killed your husband, do you? Even after what Red-eye has said?"

"I know this. You had the chance and you had a motive. Every man who was at our place that night will say so. If you didn't do it, they probably won't convict you. But you'll be lying in jail for a long time before they make up their minds."

"Oh-ho," McQueen said slowly, "I think I begin to get it. Blackmail, is it? Red-eye, would you fall for that?"

"I dunno, Johnny. There's a lot in what Aasie says. I dunno what else I could do, with all them people on my neck."

"All right," McQueen gritted, furiously. "Better tie me up again, though."

AASIE turned and spoke directly to him, for the first time. She said, "McQueen, I've lived in Alaska nearly all my life. It was my doing that Ken and I came back up here. This is my country and I love it. Because I love it, I know how badly it needs people like us down on the flats. It's never had any people like us before. Not men who come here only to pan for gold or kill fur or catch fish—anything that means quick money to take away with them. Or store-keepers and saloon-keepers who work six months to be able to live fat Outside for the other six. But people who want to build homes—and raise kids."

She stopped. McQueen had nothing to say, at once. When she went on, her voice was low and flat again. She only added, inconsequently, "Those two cows of ours that burned in the fire—Ken was milking them both. There are a dozen kids living within a mile of us who depended on those two cows for milk."

McQueen said slowly, "Well, suppose we do stop Mixon. Who'll stop the Navy?"

"Nobody has to stop the Navy. If some of the land is condemned there'll be a fair price paid. Those who have to go, can take the money and start again somewhere else. They'll have some-

thing to start with. And not all of us will have to move. If the Navy puts in a base, truck farms and dairy farms will be needed here. But, if Mixon drives us all out, most of us will have no place to go. Or anything to get there on."

"Red-eye," McQueen asked abruptly, "do you guarantee everything you've told me? Do you really believe Mixon's moved in an army to clean these vets off the flats?"

"Well," Jameson said dryly, "I saw what's left of Aasie's house. And I reckon you saw Gowen."

"All right," McQueen said. "Damn it! Can you deputize me?"

"Shore can. Consider it done."

"I won't say 'good,' but . . . well, I guess I'm stuck. Aasie, where did you plan to bury your husband?"

The blond girl's chin came up. "At Homer."

"I suppose you would. I imagine Mixon thinks you will, too. He'll probably wait until the funeral before he makes another move, counting on the effect that seeing it will have on the rest of the settlers. So we should have that long to get ready for him."

"Not if Morse hears you're still around, we won't," Red-eye said. "If'n he hears that, he'll be apt to pull his trigger, right off."

"I'm not as sure as you are that Mixon's got so much respect for me. But there might be something in it, at that. I'll lay low and you and Aasie can do the recruiting."

"I think I got a better idee. The gas-boat's goin' back today. You an' I'll be on her. We'll step down at Ninilchuk tonight, an' come back cross country. Aasie knows the fellers to see amongst the homesteaders. Soon's Hoover an' Larsen git down here with Ken, they can help her. Somebody's got to pass the word that you didn't bushwhack Ken Gowen, you know."

"That's right, come to think of it. After the build-up you and Aasie have given me. Do you think you can do it, Aasie?"

"I can do it," she said evenly. "You can plan to turn loose your dog the moment Ken's funeral is over."

CHAPTER VII

OPERATION FRONTIER

GOWEN was buried from the windowless shell of a building which the homesteaders had thrown up, during the summer, as a community project. By snowfall, the Lord and Morse Mixon willing, it would be a schoolhouse. Pastor Hesla, from the Lutheran mission at Seldovia, was there to say the words which would put Kency Gowen finally to rest in this wild land into which he had never completely fitted while living.

After the ceremony at the grave, twenty men followed McQueen and Red-eye Jameson back into the school building. McQueen stayed on his feet and moved up front to face them. They watched him. Joe Hoover . . . Kelvey . . . the Larsens . . . the ones he knew, showed him a tough, reserved waiting. The others looked him over curiously.

McQueen told them, with no preamble, "The thing is simply this. How bad do you want to stay here?"

"We don't aim to be run out," Nils, the older Larsen, answered just as briefly.

"You can always sit and take it, you know. Hang on and hope that something will happen. And it probably will. Like it happened to Gowen."

A new voice broke in. "Now, just a minute!" McQueen heard that high, querulous tone and looked around, a little astonished to see the fat little man here. Mulcahy stood up and continued, "I don't see the point of all this bloodthirsty talk. As I understand it, this man Mixon wants to buy us out. Well, it sounds like a business deal to me, pure and simple. Why don't we invite him in and hear what he has to say? If the price he offers is attractive, well—each of us can decide for himself."

Red-eye Jameson said quietly, "The price Ken Gowen got wasn't so good. Five cents' wuth o' lead, 'r mebbe ten."

Mulcahy rounded on the old man. "That's a matter for the law to handle. And you're the law here, or so I understand."

"I'm the law," Jameson admitted. "An' I c'n go git Odom, I shouldn't wonder. If that's the way ye want it. Mixon'd prob'ly settle for throwin' Odom to the wolves, in order to git this law ye're talkin' about off his neck. But it wouldn't help the rest o' ye any."

Mulcahy said, stubbornly, "I don't believe—" but McQueen cut him off. He said, "Let's not waste time. Either you know what you're up against, or you don't. If what's happened so far hasn't convinced you, I don't intend to try. That was no part of my bargain with Mrs. Gowen."

A lean, brown-faced man sitting close by said, "Maybe we're convinced all right, but we don't know for sure what comes next."

McQueen looked down at him. "You're on a frontier, friend. You know that. You were hell-bent to get here because you thought that, on a frontier, everything comes for free. Well, you're learning that it doesn't, not by a damn sight. It's going to cost you some things you can't sit down and write a check for. 'Frontier' always means fight. You sound as if you didn't know that, or maybe you just forgot it. But it always has and it always will."

Mulcahy complained, "I, for one, am not satisfied with what this man who says he is the United States Marshal—"

McQueen broke in on him. "I apologize for my manners, Mulcahy. But I didn't come here to argue with you about whether or not you want to do something about this. I thought you had decided that, or you wouldn't be here. Have you or haven't you?"

The brown-faced man said slowly, "I guess you remember that crap they used to give us, overseas. All about what we were supposed to be fighting for. I figured, then, that it was a lot simpler than they made it. I knew what I was there for. I was fighting to make sure I'd always have a chance to live without being bothered. Well, I did it once; I can do it again. Is that your idea—that we're going to have to?"

McQueen said patiently, "That's my idea. Mulcahy, there, is muttering about law and order. Well, that's what I'm talking about, too. Jameson has made me an assistant deputy U.S. Marshal or something. Anyway, I'm legal. I know he is. We're the law. We're all the law you're going to get. Trouble with you, Mulcahy —and any of the rest of you who think like Mulcahy—is that you want somebody to walk up in a brass-buttoned uniform and chase Morse Mixon out of the country for you. Risk his hide for you, so that you won't have to risk yours. Well, nobody like that is coming, because there ain't any brass buttons to be had. Alaska, up to now has had only what law has been needed. They haven't needed much. Now you want—you need—more. But you aren't going to get it by sitting on your tails and hoping."

He paused a moment said plainly, "Talking that way, you make it clear enough to me that you don't want law, you just want protection."

The brown-faced man said instantly, "I get the picture. I'll put in. The name's Hargis."

A MURMUR of agreement ran through the room. McQueen said, "That's fine. But let's make sure. As I said at the beginning, we can sit here waiting for Mixon's next move, hoping that something will happen to take him off our necks. Or we can go get the bastard and make *sure* he's off. As far as I'm concerned, that's the only way to do it. According to what Mrs. Gowen and Jameson told me, that's the way all of you feel, or you wouldn't be here. If any of you have changed your minds, I suggest you check out right now."

There was a little silence. Several men stirred, but nobody rose. When the silence ran out, McQueen asked, "All right. Now let's get down to cases. How many of you were Infantry? Combat Infantry?"

A dozen hands showed. Hargis' was one. McQueen asked him, "What outfit?"

"Third Division. Platoon leader."

"Oh-oh! You're the field force commander, from here on, Hargis. What else have you got?"

Hargis grinned faintly. "A good deal of trouble for this backwoods badman, I think. Hoover, there, was in the Fourth all through Normandy The Larsens were Rangers. Jergens, over by the wall, was in the Tenth Mountain. There's more."

"Good. It's a thing Mixon may have left out of his calculations. I wouldn't be surprised but what he's got the common habit that all old Alaskans have of low-rating all cheechakoes together. Maybe he's about to get startled. What about horses? We'll need some to be able to keep even with his raiders."

"We can round up about a dozen, I guess."

"Sounds like enough. There are some other things. The women and kids had better be moved down close around Homer. There's no telling what may be going to happen up in the hills. They'll have to be looked after. Round up all arms and ammunition. There'll have to be fire guards. And we'll need a base echelon to see to it that people get fed, and that anybody who gets hurt is taken care of. All of us have had to learn all about how to fight a war, whether we liked it or not. We might as well use the knowledge."

McQueen looked at Mulcahy. "Captain," he said, "how about you taking charge of all that?"

There was more to the fat little man than he had shown. He said, a little wryly, "Seems to be my fate to always be bringing up the rear. But somebody has to do it. I'll take over."

"Good. We'll use the jeep to run chow up into the hills. That way, we'll never have to build a fire. And we'll rig a litter on it to bring down any possible casualties. Kelvey, you can take that over."

"Wait a minute!" Kelvey objected. "When did I get elected rear echelon?"

"Right now. Remember," McQueen reminded them grimly, "this war won't be fought with spit-balls, either. In the wild west books, gunshot wounds heal overnight. But you and I know that they don't, quite. We are going to lose nobody unnecessarily. Hargis, you have your gang mounted and ready to go by dark. You'll have to lend me and Jameson a pair of horses. And I suppose I should have some kind of armament."

Jameson said, "Look under the back seat of the jeep. I stowed that shoulder gun o' yours there, the other day."

THE MOON was drawing to its full and it was another bright white night. The head of the little mounted column came abreast of the canyon up which the Fox had its source, just after midnight. They had been

paralleling the river along its west, less traveled bank to this point. Here, at the canyon mouth, they forded over and followed the trail toward Tustumena for a few hundred yards, as it left the timber to cross the open, rolling slope lifting to the darkling foothills ahead.

Moonlight filtered through the black, ghostly spruce in faintly luminous patches, drifting about them like smoke. The horses, their hooves muffled on the thick forest litter beneath, moved almost without sound.

McQueen, riding second behind Hargis, muttered, half to himself, "This is like flying through cirrus on a bad night over the North Sea."

Hargis turned and chuckled. "Must be nerves. Me, I was just thinking that the moonlight looked just like this in those damned olive groves below Volturno."

The light spaces widened as the spruces thinned out. Just before they reached the timber's edge, Hargis pulled up. McQueen stopped his horse beside him. A hundred yards ahead, Alex Clark, the husky, grinning youngster Hargis had put to riding point, made a dark blotch against the sun-cured grass. The outlines of both horse and rider were indistinct in the tricky light. Only the circular white patch which these night-wise fighters had stitched to their jackets before setting out showed clearly on Clark's receding back.

Close beside McQueen, an Arctic owl hooted softly, once. McQueen started and Hargis laughed again, a muted murmur. "I don't know why I picked that up. Alex, out there, probably couldn't tell you why he recognized it, either."

McQueen saw then that the point rider, out on the red-top slope, had stopped. Hargis went on, "I guess we've all taken on some habits that we'll be a long time breaking. Well, what comes next? I suppose we better not push too far into the open until we know what we're going to do."

McQueen considered. They were now ten miles above the flats and Clark, whose scouting eyes and ears had been sharpened by six months on the Kokoda Trail before Buna, had so far seen nor heard nothing.

Hargis asked, "Where do you think we'll be likely to run into these characters' outpost line? Or will they have one?"

"It's a question," McQueen admitted. "My idea was this: Tustumena Lake is ahead on the left. This canyon on our right is pretty rugged going. When Mixon starts to sending his people down, the chances are better than good that they'll be coming down between the two."

"I get it. South of us, it's all enemy country, eh? How far to Tustumena?"

"Two miles, or a little more."

"If we cover that, we've got the bottle corked."

"Not exactly. He's outside your bottle, not in it, remember Once he knows we're blocking him off, he can always go around."

"If he does that, we can push ahead and be on his back."

"Unless he holds us here and flanks us."

"We'll undertake to see that he doesn't get away with that. First, we better get to work and plug this gap. At night, we'll patrol it. In the daytime, though, we ought to have a place where we can catch a little shut-eye, part of us, and from where a couple of observers can see across it. Know of such a spot?"

"I think so. Do you want to go there now, or wait until it's light?"

"Better move up now. We need a base point for patrolling, anyway. That'll do as well as any. You lead out. Don't worry about Alex. He'll guide himself on you."

McQueen lifted his reins and pushed his mount forward into the open meadow. Ahead of him, he saw that the point did not move out in concert. The black mass of horse and rider grew larger as McQueen approached. When he was close enough to distinguish details, he saw that Clark had reined his mount across the trail facing north and was watching something in the distance.

McQueen stopped abreast of him and looked for what held the other man's attention. Far down below them, the tips of the intervening spruce were touched with a faint glow. There was fire, somewhere on the flats. As he watched, he could locate the edges on either side of the reflection on the timber tops.

He estimated, judging the angle from which they watched, that it must be more than a mile wide. The sky, all across the flats, had a dull pink tint.

"Another grass fire," he said to Clark. "Looks like the damned lice beat us to it."

"It's more than that," Clark said bitterly. "There's buildings burning, too. You watch."

Gazing down the slope, McQueen saw what he meant. In several places along the tinge of color on the spruces, tiny points of brighter hue ebbed and swelled in little jagged flashes.

Clark grated, "That's the whole upper flat, goin' to hell! A dozen farms, altogether. And mine's one of 'em. The dirty bastards!"

HARGIS and the rest had come up to them. The dozen riders lined up alongside, each man watching the far-off glow, and guessing at the scene below it. Hargis said, at last, "Well, at least our families are safe. Thank God for that, anyway. Now we know for sure what these sons-of——— are up to. And we've got 'em split."

McQueen exclaimed, in sudden comprehension, "That's right! Those buzzards will be coming back straight through here. If we'd been on the trail, east of the river, we'd have

run right into them on their way down. Too bad we didn't!"

"I don't know," Hargis said. "Bumping into each other in the dark, somebody would have got hurt. This way, we can pick out a position and have the ground in our favor. We can always re-build a few shacks. Now, what about that C.P. you were going to show us?"

McQueen turned and led the way toward the dark mass of the mountains at their backs. He put his horse at the slope in a fast, driving walk. They passed through another belt of timber and finally came out on a long, bare nose, rising like a ramp toward the first shoulder of the hills. To the eastward, the water of Tustumena glinted in the moonlight, close enough so that they could hear the sleepy talking of the waterfowl along its margin.

He reined up on top of the nose and waited for Hargis. "Here," he said. "There's a pocket of timber in a ravine down to the left, for the horses. That's Tustumena, over where you hear the ducks. And, as I remember it, in daylight, we can see clear across that meadow we crossed."

Hargis wasted no time. "O.K. Jergens, you're elected horse-holder. Find a place for 'em down there where McQueen says. Clark, you go help him, then come back here. Let's see—that leaves us eleven men. McQueen, you and Jameson can stay with me here, or else do what you want. That's still eight, counting Clark. Hoover, suppose you and big Jansen go over towards the lake and cover that flank. I'll put three more two-man posts on your left, between you and the canyon over yonder."

Hoover asked, "Fire at will?"

"That's right. Knock down any horses you see. No friends of ours will be riding, tonight. Capture the riders, if it isn't too risky. But don't take any chances."

There is nothing like knowing your business, McQueen thought, as he watched Hargis build his wall across the defile. He had four pairs of men and it was two miles from the lake to the canyon rim. Yet when he had them placed to suit him, there was not a yard which couldn't be covered by the fire of at least two rifles, and most of it by four.

McQueen followed Hargis along the line as he constructed his trap, and then back to the knoll. The moon was waning and gray tendrils of mist wavered above the black spruces. The still cold pre-dawn hush held a sense of expectant waiting. McQueen felt tiny fingers of tension plucking at the short hair at the base of his skull.

He had wondered, many times, what the feelings of ground fighters must be. The men whose enemy was a breathing, flesh-and-blood one, seen face to face. A bomber's crew was a fighting unit built of human pieces, but the antagonists it met were still vast, inanimate mental masses. It was hard to personalize them, to visualize the face and form of the actual men who were trying to kill you. It took its courage, he remembered that, but it was a different kind.

This, he now discovered, was mostly a matter of waiting. And it wasn't as easy as it sounded. Somewhere out in the shadows, Mixon's riders were coming toward them. How many of them there were and where they would emerge from the timber was a gambler's guess. McQueen's imagination began to fashion the shape of a horse and rider out of every clump of brush.

Old Red-eye Jameson broke a little under it. He muttered in his beard, said finally, "Johnny, I b'n thinkin'. Where do ye suppose Morse's set up his base camp?"

McQueen rolled back over the crest of the knoll and stopped beside the old man on the rear slope. "I don't know. Unless he's using my place."

"I wonder if that ain't a little far back."

"Could be. We couldn't be so lucky, though, as to have gotten in behind him."

"I don't think he's come down quite this far. But I bet he's come partways down. I ain't b'n accomplishin' much here. I think I'll mosey on the mountain a piece and see what I c'n see."

McQueen considered. "That will help," he said. "Don't take too many chances. But we'll have to move by tomorrow night, no matter what happens here. We'd ought to have some idea where he is with the rest of his gang."

"Ye'll stay here, ye think, until tomorrow night?"

"I think so. If these people down there at those fires are going to come back this way, they'll have hit us certainly by then."

"Good," Jameson said shortly. "I'll see ye here."

CHAPTER VIII

RED-EYE PULLS A RAID

THE old man had been gone an hour. The sky was lightening to a translucent pearl and the pink of false dawn was tinging the spruce tops when Hargis stirred suddenly. McQueen, beside him, saw that the brown man had gone rigidly alert. Listening, McQueen heard the same faint, far-off sound. Straining, he heard it again, the unmistakable tinkle of bridle metal.

From its direction, it seemed plain that the raiders were coming on the trail, in a bunch. In the space of a long-held breath, Joe Hoover, in position with a man named Strange over on the canyon flank, gave them proof. The flame of two rifles lanced orange red through the murky light. The sound of the shots carried

to McQueen a couple of seconds later. By that time, Nils Larsen and his partner in the next outguard to the right had found targets and the smash of the firing was a sustained, drumming echo off the folded hills.

Hargis, beside him, cursed in a drawling ceaseless monotone and stared across the meadow. Once a horse ran out into the open and spurts of fire showed above the racing shape. Other points winked now from along the fringe of the timber, down low.

"They're on the ground, buildin' up a line!" Hargis exclaimed. "I wonder if they can take it."

Fire was plunging now into the timber from three of the two-man posts up ahead. Only the pair on the right, the lake end, could not bear around. Hargis set his sights at seven hundred and began pumping spaced, harassing shots of his own into the dark timber below. McQueen saved his ammunition.

Hargis muttered, "Ought to be movin' down on 'em. Fire with no movement ain't worth a damn."

"No," McQueen told him. "No, I wouldn't. We'll play it safe, as long as we can. Anyway, you'd be wasting your time. Those characters have broken back through the timber, long since. They didn't sign up with Mixon for any pitched battles. They're on their way, right now."

Hargis cradled his rifle in his left arm and they listened and watched. It was true there seemed to be no more shooting from the timber. There was the spaced, regular firing from the outpost line but no more dots of light flicked along the dark margin of the spruce below.

"Don't you think they might cut around and try to join him up above?"

"It's more than likely they will. Even though this much shooting may have convinced them that they better let Mixon kill his own snakes—and I don't doubt that it has some of them—they'll hardly try to leave the country by way of Homer. They'll have to come this way in order to cross the Pass and reach the railroad."

"Well, then . . . ?" Hargis waited.

"I think we'd better stick here until we hear from Jameson. Red-eye may run onto that base camp."

A LITTLE while before the firing began, old man Jameson came to a place where the spruce thinned out at the foot of a long slope lifting up to a rocky, twisting opening in the hills. An old game trail turned off and wound upward through patchy alders. In the faint light beginning to filter down, Red-eye thought he saw the marks of shod hooves turning off, too.

He was on his hands and knees, studying

Hargis began pumping spaced, harassing shots into the dark timber below.

them at close range, when a cow moose blatted from a nearby clump of buckbrush. A questing bull, higher up, answered her, and she came plowing out. She passed by Red-eye so closely that she almost bumped him. And startled him not a little.

"Now what in tunket got her so excited?" Red-eye muttered complainingly. "Shore wasn't me. She didn't pay no more attention to me than if I'd been an ol' spruce snag."

He froze there, kneeling in the trail. At once, he heard what had upset the cow. The early morning breeze was freshening and blowing down the mountain. Carried by its cat's paw puffs, he heard the clicking of shoe steel against shale outcroppings.

Red-eye faded into the brush. In a very few minutes, the riders, two of them, filed down through the jumbled boulders at the entrance to the gut and passed him along the trail. One of them, though it was hard to be sure in that light, he thought to be the youngster, Colver.

The old man squatted there and gnawed his lip for a moment. He took another look up at the rock-strewn passage and reluctantly let it go. It wouldn't do for these two to be allowed to ride up on the backs of McQueen and his

men. Two unexpected rifles from cover could do a lot of damage, and young Colver, the one look Jameson had had at him at McQueen's cabin that day, had all the appearance of a natural-born bushwhacker.

So Red-eye set out after them. They were, by this time, a quarter mile down the trail but they weren't hurrying. The old sourdough's deceptively loose-jointed lope kept him from losing any more distance. Particularly since they kept to the trail and it was all down hill.

The riders were about that far—a quarter mile—above Hargis' horse park in the ravine near Tustumena when the first shots came from the timber below. Jameson could see them jerk their horses up and listen. He took advantage of their attention elsewhere to keep on coming. Daylight was strong about him and the shooting had settled to a distant, steady hammering by the time he had gotten within fifty yards of them. At that point, he stopped and waited, stepping a little aside. He could hear only tags of the excited conversation up ahead.

" . . . damn what it is, I ain't goin' . . . blunderin' into it!"

That was a high, whining voice, probably Colver's. The other was deeper and slower. "I dunno, kid. We'll look like damn fools . . . tellin' Mixon we heard . . . not knowin' what it was. We'd oughta . . ."

" . . . you damn please! I'm goin' back."

He reined around and came up the trail, kicking at his horse's ribs. The other waited, uncertainly, then turned to follow.

Red-eye waited until Colver was almost dead even with him before he stepped from the brush. The blond man pulled up his mount with a panicky yank. Jameson gave him the corner of an eye but he reserved most of his attention for the other, older man.

He said, "Reach, friends! An' quick!"

Colver dropped his reins forthwith. The man behind stared down at Jameson from either side of a red, beaked nose and said, "Do tell! An' who the hell might you be, pilgrim?"

Red-eye hoisted the rifle in his hands a little higher. "I'm the feller behind this here gun. The one with a nervous twitch in my right hand. Git them hooks o' yours elevated!"

The eagle-nosed man was still disposed to argue. He had a rifle in his hands, too, lying muzzle foremost across his thighs. He began to lift the muzzle, ever so slightly, so Red-eye shot his hat off. After that, he had no trouble.

He added the two ponies to Jergens' string in the ravine and herded his two prisoners ahead toward the knoll where he had last seen McQueen. There was nobody on the knoll. It was now full light. The firing had stopped, some time ago. Jameson could see a knot of people at the edge of the timber across the swale to his left front so he pushed his captives over that way.

He came upon McQueen with Hargis and some others, at the timber's edge, looking down at something half-hidden in the red-top grass. Jameson spared a glance and chuckled.

"Looks right nat'chel, don't he?"

McQueen threw him one dark look. "Hello, Red-eye. Why, do you know him?"

"Never saw him before in my life. What I meant to say was, that's the way all these here pole-cats would look best in my pitcher gallery."

He made an elaborate face at McQueen, indicating the fascinated interest young Colver and Eagle-beak were showing in the dead man in the grass.

SOMEWHERE in the timber, not very far off, a horse was screaming—a gasping, unearthly sound. There was the flat crack of a rifle shot and the screaming stopped.

McQueen said, "What's the score now, Hargis? That makes four, doesn't it?"

The brown ex-Infantryman nodded. "Four horses, two men. Not counting the wounded that made tracks. Hoover says he hit at least one horse he can't account for."

"Tough on the horses," McQueen said shortly. He turned to Jameson. "What did you find out, Red-eye? Where'd you get these two prizes? Didn't pull a one-man raid, did you?"

"I didn't find out nothin', n'r have a chance to raid nobody. I was up-country a piece when these two came ridin' by. Takin' one look, I knowed I never see two more onmistakable horse-thieves in my born days so I figgered I better take off after 'em before they run into them cayuses of our'n. Mebbe you've seen this long, yellow-headed mistake before. I think he was with Mixon, up here the other day."

"Yes, I've seen him before. Twice, in fact. Incidentally, Red-eye, you announced yourself, some time ago. How about speaking English?"

Jameson chuckled. "Jest habit, son, jest habit. But, if you insist, I apprehended these two individuals after having trailed them from a place which I suspect to be at least the entrance to Mixon's lair. As I said, I had to decide whether to follow them or investigate and decided to follow. We might see what *they* know about it."

"It's an idea," McQueen agreed, grimly. He rounded on the blond youngster. "Where's Mixon's camp, Colver?"

The sight of that dead man in the grass had shaken Colver clear to his shoe-pacs. The effort he made to dredge up the last of his pride was pitiably obvious. But he said, "Why don't you go ask Mixon?"

McQueen took one long stride and cuffed him once with an open hand. The cold, killing temper in the big, black-bearded man was

The eagle-nosed man began to lift the muzzle of his rifle ever so slightly, so Red-eye shot his hat off.

plainly ready to break loose. "We're not playing games, Colver. Take a look at your two friends there on the ground. It's your choice. Talk or get ready to join 'em!"

No one of the men around him, even Red-eye Jameson who knew McQueen best, could have been sure that he was bluffing. Certainly not Colver who did not know him, and who had no more than the sound of his voice and the look in his eyes to go by. And that was enough to convince Colver.

Sullenly, the blond chewed his loose lip, muttered, "I dunno where he is. I ain't seen him since yesterday."

"Where was he then?"

"Up at the cabin. Your cabin."

"Did he plan to stay there?"

"I dunno. There was some talk about him comin' down to where we was."

"Where was that?"

"In a canyon a ways down the mountain. I slep' there last night."

Jameson said, "It's probably near the place I first saw these two, this morning. I've got a rough idea of where it is."

"All right. Hargis, suppose you put these lugs under guard. We'll send 'em down to Homer in the jeep when Kelvey comes up with chow. The dead ones can wait. Come on, Red-eye."

McQueen led the way back to the horse park. On the way, he said, "You and I'll ride up and take a look at this canyon."

"Wel-l—all right. If you say so. That might be a right unhealthy place to be fooling around today, son. Remember they could have heard the shooting this morning, too."

"We can keep to cover, can't we?"

"Not much cover. The canyon mouth, if it's the place I think it is, is above timberline and pretty clear. If Mixon's keepin' any kind of a

watch at the open end, we wouldn't be likely to get very close."

"Well, what do you think?"

"Me," the old man said, rubbing his nose with a thoughtful finger, "I think I'd wait for night and move up with all we got."

"I don't want to do that," McQueen rapped impatiently. "By that time, the ones who got away from us here will have made their way around and told Mixon what happened. Whatever he decides to do, he won't hold still. When he moves, we'll have lost him again."

McQueen tugged at the black beard, as if he hoped to yank the answer loose. It seemed to work, because all at once he thumped his head with the heel of his hand and swore, ruefully. "Damn my stupid soul! McQueen, you dummy! Fine, fat fly-boy you are! I know the answer, Red-eye. All we need is an airplane."

"Might help," Red-eye agreed, immediately. "Where you goin' to get one?"

"Won't there be a bush flight into Homer today?"

"Is most every day, I guess."

"Can't we commandeer the plane, in the name of the law and the U. S. Marines, or something?"

"Reckon so. I don't exactly remember the heading in the book it would come under. But I guess we could. If there was enough of us."

"You and I can do it. You'll have to go, because you've got the badge. We'll take the jeep, as soon as Kelvey shows up, and bust on down there."

CHAPTER IX

THE TWO-MAN AIR FORCE

KELVEY drove up the trail just before noon, with food and news. He said that the fire had burned off about a thousand acres but very little which had been planted. And only a half dozen cabins had gone. The firefighters had done a good job. There had been a little long range shooting but nobody hurt.

McQueen and Jameson returned to Homer with him. They put the prisoners in the rear seat and McQueen took the wheel, Kelvey and Red-eye riding prison guard beside him. McQueen drove with one eye on the track and one on the sky. They were still short of the Army's strip which served Homer for an airport when he saw what he was looking for. Far out over the Inlet, to the north and east, he saw sun glint on wings.

The plane, a souped-up Piper which had once seen service as an Army reconnaissance plane, came in to land as they drove onto the strip. It belonged to one of the little bush outfits which served as feeders to the main airlines, and as pick-up and delivery service to trappers and prospectors all over the Territory.

The pilot wasn't hard to convince, when told the story. He only complained, but bitterly, when he learned that he wasn't to go with the plane. McQueen said, "There's apt to be shooting."

"I been shot at," the pilot told him. "Who hasn't?"

"Not many," McQueen agreed. "But nobody but damn fools volunteered for it."

"You got something there," the man conceded. "Well, all right. But don't you go bustin' up that airplane."

"Don't worry. The government'll pay you if we do."

"Yeah! So you say. Listen, I lost a foot locker full of clothes on Bougainville and I . . ."

They left Kelvey on guard at the plane and took the pilot into Homer. They left him at Garry's, then hunted up Mulcahy's rear echelon headquarters. The little man had it running like clockwork. McQueen had to sign his name only twice in order to get the two shotguns and the half dozen boxes of shells which had been a recent inspiration. He didn't know exactly how he was going to use them but he had hopes.

Returning to the strip, he turned the jeep back to Kelvey. Red-eye settled himself in the rear seat with audible misgivings. However, McQueen got the unfamiliar little plane off the runway with no trouble. In fact, he startled himself with the speed and ease with which he left the strip. The L-5 was a hundred feet in the air before it had reached what he considered good taxiing speed.

However, as a mode of travel, it was far superior to even the jeep. They were over Hargis on the knoll in the meadow in ten minutes. McQueen buzzed him and waggled a wing signal, then took Red-eye's directions toward the foothills.

Jameson pointed out the canyon mouth. McQueen flew on past, cutting a long loop to the south and climbing for some altitude before he crossed the rim. As he banked around and started back, he muttered, "Red-eye, did you ever happen to hear what it was that bothered strafing aircraft the most?"

"Dunno's I ever did. The sudden stops?"

"Small-arms fire from ground troops. I hope none of these characters know that. Or, if they do, that they forget to lead us enough."

The canyon was a small, grassy box, split by a narrow stream down the middle. There was a wavering streamer of smoke from a cook fire but they were too high to see much more. McQueen flew on north and west, dropping lower. When they turned back for their second pass, he was down to not much more than treetop height.

Old Jameson glued his nose to the plexiglass

on first one side, then the other. McQueen had to watch what he was doing—the light ship bounced in the updrafts more than he was used to—but he scanned the terrain ahead, also. The canyon of the Fox was now on their left, paralleling their course. McQueen noticed that the country directly below, west of the river, was a smoothly rolling timberland. There were no barriers, so far as he could see, to travel along the west side of the Fox, as far up as at least the rim of the pocket where they had seen the fire. That meant, if the box canyon was really the place Mixon had set up his headquarters, the survivors of the morning's raid were going to have no trouble making their way back.

BY THIS time, they were close again. Flying at this height, they were over and across the narrow little depression in a roaring rush. Both McQueen and Jameson strained their eyes in one glance which they tried to make as photographic as possible. But when they were past, McQueen had a clear remembrance of smoke from the fire, one rider moving towards the downward opening, and not much else.

He asked Red-eye. The old man said, "That's where they are, all right. I saw plenty of sign."

"You sure?"

"Sure. There's new tracks all over that grass. And a half dozen horses grazing up under the south wall."

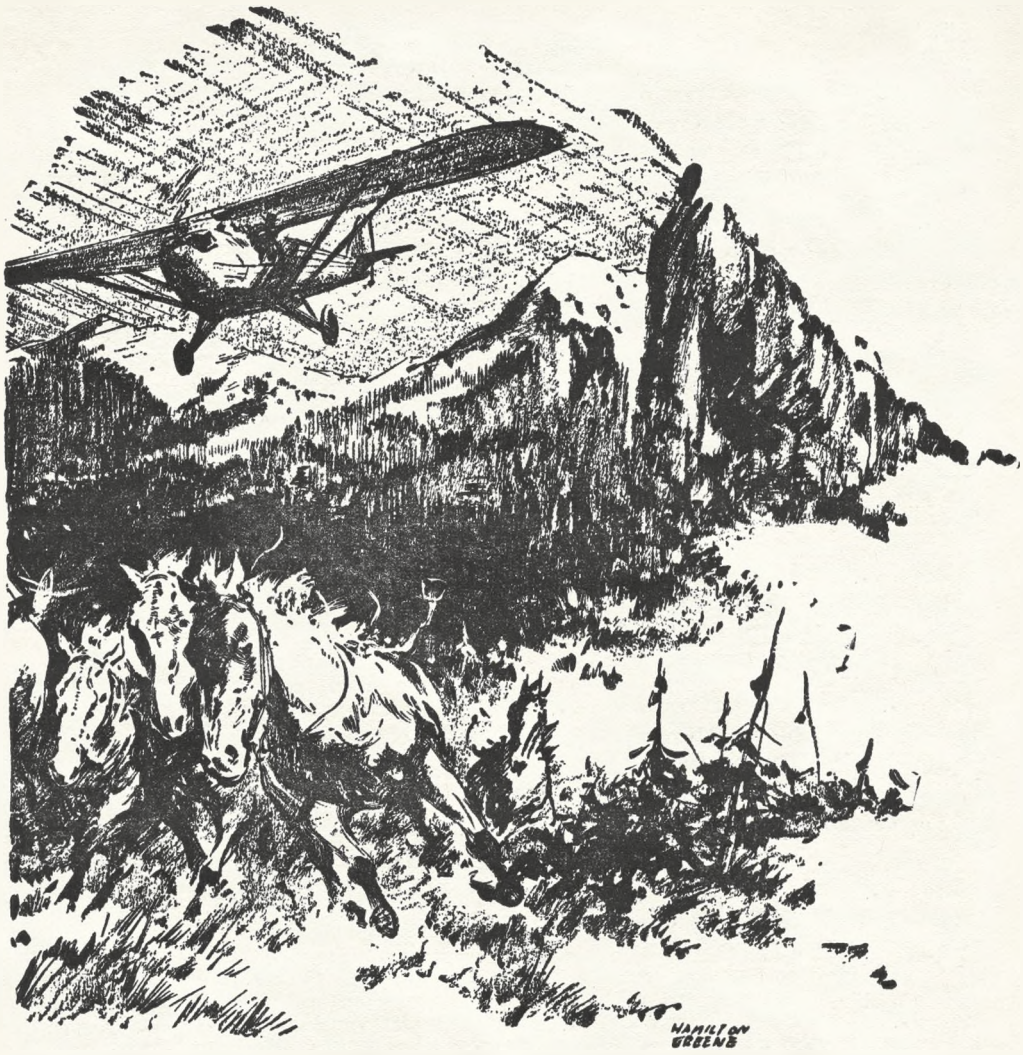
"I only saw that one rider."

"I saw him, too."

McQueen was turning, on his way back to Hargis' command post. He completed the turn, thinking. He said, "Red-eye, if those plugs got stampeded, which way would they run?"

"Depends on where they were spooked from. I'd say, though, that they'd pretty near have to line out down the valley and out the end. I didn't see any other place for them to go."

McQueen nodded. He chuckled grimly, said, "O.K., roll your window back and grab onto



As they finished the turn, he saw that the horses were in motion, streaking for the opening downstream . . . Red-eye gave them another blast.

one of those shotguns. We're about to herd some horses."

Red-eye pushed back the window and chamber-loaded a twelve-gauge. He said sadly, "We drive 'em down into them rocks, there's going to be some busted legs."

"I expect. Too bad it can't be Mixon's, instead. Or that bloody Odom's."

He set his flaps for maximum drag just before they crossed the canyon rim again. The little ship sat back on its haunches as if it had been lassoed. McQueen flew with drafting board precision, cutting his outside wing around inside the cliff forming the valley's south wall, with inches to spare. As he tipped into the turn, he saw the little bunch of horses below and yelled at Jameson.

Jameson already had the shotgun out the window on the low side of the bank. He blasted away as fast as he could pump. Inside the tiny cabin, the roar was deafening.

The plane passed over the horse herd and masked it from sight. McQueen stayed in the turn, coming around to give Jameson another chance. Halfway around the circle, he saw men standing and running at the edge of the brush on the other side of the creek. As they finished the turn, he saw that the horses were in motion, streaking for the opening downstream. He swooped down on them, flying straightaway for

the defile, and Red-eye gave them another blast. There seemed little doubt that Mixon had been set afoot, at least so far as his headquarters string was concerned.

Out in the open again, McQueen pulled up and flew down the mountain towards Hargis. He saw the little knot of men on top of the knoll and circled while he scribbled a message to the brown man.

"What d'ye think?" Red-eye asked.

"I'm going to give him a sketch of the layout and tell him to go on in after them. We'll sit down someplace to save gas while he's moving. Maybe up at the cabin. I'd like to go up there and see if Mixon's burned me out yet."

"What do you think Hargis'll do?"

"That's his business. That ground stuff. He knows it better than I do. We'll come back down and give him a hand from topside. Give him some observation, anyhow."

The way the tiny plane had reacted to the setting of those flaps in the box canyon had made McQueen think it would probably land on a handkerchief. Now he eased it in through the mouth of the home valley,. set the flaps again, and found that it would. They hit, bounced once or twice, and rolled practically to the cabin door.

The place looked to be intact. At least, it hadn't been burned. Jameson said, "I think I'll mosey out and look up and down the trail a bit. Jest to see what I might see."

He set off across the meadow and McQueen went in his front door. He stopped for a moment, in half amused dismay at the amount of dishwashing and housecleaning he was going to have to do. While he stood there, taking stock of the damage, he took out tobacco sack and papers and built himself a cigarette.

A faint, scraping noise on the threshold behind him jarred the quiet. Awareness, cold and plain as a breath of wind, touched the back of his neck. Tension jerked at the nerves of his fingers. Holding the heaped grains of tobacco steady as he finished the cigarette, his back to the door, was the hardest thing McQueen had ever made himself do.

The effort and his guess paid off. The man behind him had no compunction about shooting another in the back. But he wanted McQueen to face him first, and know who it was that shot him. So Odom said, "Turn around, McQueen!"

McQUEEN had built the cabin. He knew it was twenty feet from threshold to the rear wall. From where he stood, it was twelve feet to that wall, as best he could estimate. If Odom was in the door—or on the sill—it would leave them something less than eight feet apart, after he had turned.

So he came around slowly but used the motion as the beginning of a headlong drive, half rush and half falling dive, at the man in the door. It was not what Odom had expected and he backed away to keep his shooting room. He had been just inside the door. As he stepped back, his heel caught on the sill and he tumbled backward off the step.

McQueen, himself, landed on his knees in the doorway, too far away to reach the man, and with no footing to help him follow. Odom had kept his revolver well gripped in his hand and the long barrel was level as he came again to his feet.

One half of McQueen's mind told him, as he watched Odom's lips writhe back from snagged, discolored teeth, and the black gun come up, "He's going to shoot!" The thought seemed to come in some surprise.

The other half, however, was seeing to it, at the same time, that he was pulling the .380 from its shoulder holster and whipping it down.

There were two shots, sound running into sound. The shortened target McQueen, on his knees, gave Odom saved his life. Odom's bullet ripped past him, overhead, and smashed into the pipe above the stove.

McQueen's hit Odom with a thudding, muffled sound. He doubled over and fell, face first, the gun dropping from his loosened fingers the instant before he toppled.

McQueen came to his feet, then sat down again on the doorstep. He built himself another cigarette and watched old man Jameson come running back across the meadow. Red-eye came up wheezing and checked himself suddenly as he caught sight of Odom's body.

He stared a moment, said, "Johnny, I'm sorry it had to be this way."

McQueen grunted. "Rather it was me over there?"

"I mean I'm sorry it had to be you that killed him."

"Me, I was afraid for a minute that it wasn't going to be."

"What did he do, just up and jump you?"

"That's right. He hasn't spoken but once to me, yet. That was when he called my name from behind me."

Jameson looked down again and shook his head. "He must have been hiding out here. He was probably behind the cabin in the brush some place when we come in, just waitin'."

"For me? That's funny. I slugged him once with a rifle-butt, that's true enough, but he certainly got even for that."

Red-eye puzzled over it. "I dunno. I think it's most likely that Morse told him to get out of the country, after he killed Gowen. Probably told him to go over the Pass and go out on the railroad. That'd make it less likely for the truth about Gowen's killing to ever come out. But Odom must've got another idea."

"He must have," McQueen agreed dryly. "To

The shortened target McQueen, on his knees, gave Odom saved his life.

kill me. I think you're all wet, Red-eye. Mixon left him here to take care of me if I happened to get loose from you, one way or another, and came home. I am beginning to pile up more and more things to say to Morse Mixon, when I next catch up with him."

"Could be." The old man heaved himself up. "If that's so, Odom wasn't walkin'. If there's a cayuse around, it'll doubtless prove you're right. I'll go take a look."

He disappeared around the corner of the cabin. McQueen sat still and finished his cigarette. Red-eye came back leading a haltered black gelding and dragging a saddle in his other hand.

"You're right. He had a siwash camp back there in the brush. I expect, if a coffee pot and some other stuff turns up missing, you'll find it back there, too."

McQueen dropped the cigarette butt and ground it out with a vicious twist of his heel. "How about hobbling the nag and turning him loose?" he suggested to Red-eye shortly. "Let's get going."

"What about Odom, there?"

"He's all yours. You wanted him, dead or alive, didn't you?"

Jameson said, "Wel-l, not in my lap in no airyplane, I don't."

"Never mind him, then. I'll throw a tarp over him and plant him when I come home. If I ever get to come home again."

McQUEEN gave the little plane full throttle at the head of the valley and she lifted off the bumpy grass with half its length to spare. It took them less than fifteen minutes to fly back to the neighborhood of the box canyon above Tustumena. McQueen had gained about two thousand feet by then, and he put the ship into a wide, lazy circle, well out of rifle range from the canyon mouth.

As he and Jameson looked, they saw a flash of white from an alder clump facing the opening. It was an agreed-upon signal from Hargis. Evidently, he had gotten at least that far. As they continued to watch, they caught a flicker of movement in the timber up towards the canyon rim on the right. It looked like riders.

McQueen said, "Looks like Hargis is blocking the entrance, and sending some people up on the right to get above 'em."

"On the left, too," Red-eyed agreed. "I see a feller up there, now. Less'n Mixon's got a cave or an overhang up that gully to get under, it'll be a hot spot in a little bit."

McQueen kept the Piper in its circle. The early September dusk began to darken the ground below, the shadows of the spruce reaching out along the ground. McQueen had begun to watch his gas gauge pretty closely when they saw the puffs of firing along the southern rim; then on the northern side as well. He dropped down lower, staying well behind Hargis' road block at the mouth of the defile.

McQueen and Jameson were low and close enough to see the figures of Hargis and the two others with him when they opened fire at something moving in the rocks choking the opening above them. Jameson yelped. all at once, "It's over, son! It's all over! See that white rag waving over the top o' that boulder? Mixon's quit."

McQueen saw it, too. He waited until he saw Hargis stand up and wave in answer to the file of men on foot who emerged from the rocks. He buzzed Hargis, once. dipped a wing, and straightened out for the airstrip at Homer. If his gas gauge was accurate, they would make it with about five minutes to spare.

The gauge was all right. Kelvey and the pilot had evidently been watching for them, for a little cloud of dust rolled rapidly out from town as McQueen came in to land. The jeep pulled up beside the plane as they were climbing out. The pilot walked around it once to satisfy himself there had been no damage.

"Where do I send the bill?" he asked Red-eye.

"Ye can roll it up egg-shaped and do yer dumdest to hatch it," Red-eye told him pleasantly.

"Well, what about my gas? I ought to get something for that, anyhow."

Kelvey grinned. "Don't let this character bother you. We got ten gallons of high octane, that I talked Cameron at Standard Oil out of, right here in these jerricans. That'll fly that puddle-jumper clear to Nome and back. And I also bought the guy six drinks at Garry's, while we were waiting. We don't owe him nothing."

The pilot cursed them, amiably. "Damned if it ain't gettin' hard to make a livin' in this country. Well, anyway, did you have a good time? You can at least tell me that, can't you? And did she really get shot at? Is she really not no virgin, no more?"

McQueen said, "There was some shooting." He turned toward the jeep. "I hope to hell you two didn't clean Garry out. I don't know about you, Jameson, but I feel a quart of whiskey calling me."

Red-eye said, "That's a call I never fail to hear, son. Never."

CHAPTER X

THE MAN FOR THE JOB

McQUEEN rolled the jeep to a stop in front of the Inlet. He noted that its tank was full and asked Kelvey, "Mind running back up the mountain after Hargis? And tell him I said that if he has got his hands on a double-sized son of a ——— named Morse Mixon, I'd appreciate it if he'd bring him down here."

Kelvey said, "Sure enough. I'd like to get a look at that character myself."

McQueen said "Good" and turned toward the Inlet's door.

Old man Jameson followed him in. The barkeep glanced at the two of them and set out a bottle and a pair of glasses. McQueen filled his brimful and left it there on the raw plank counter for a moment. studying it. Red-eye watched him with mounting concern.

When McQueen had made no move to drink, at the end of a long five minutes, Red-eye ventured, "I'll tell ye, son. Let's toss these off quick, then climb upstairs an' ketch us some shut-eye. Pussonally, my tail is 'way down."

"Go ahead."

"Wel-l . . . I was also thinkin' about a little something to eat first."

"Go ahead."

"Don't tell me you ain't interested in eatin', son? Me, I could handle a boiled mule."

McQueen picked up the glass at last. He said, "To blood and battle, Red-eye. Let's have no more talk of such sorry things as food and sleep." He drained the glass and set it back.

Jameson said "Sure" and drank his drink, a little more judiciously. Watching McQueen refill the glasses, he asked quietly, "Still got that pop-gun in your arm-pit, son?"

"Certainly. Why?"

"Mixon won't have a gun, when Hargis brings him down. At least, I don't expect he will."

McQueen looked at him, then. He laughed. "I'm not planning to shoot Mixon, Red-eye."

"I jest wondered."

"Well, don't. Here." McQueen pulled the pistol from under his jacket and handed it to the old man. "You keep it, if you want to."

Jameson took it and dropped it in a pocket. "Thanks, son. I'll mind it fer ye."

McQueen laughed at him. "What if Mixon walks in and pulls the same thing on me that Odom tried to?"

"Don't ye worry about that." The old man laughed, but his eyes were level and serious. "I'll have my eye on Morse."

"Well, I don't suppose I have to worry, at that. If Hargis knows his business—and if he doesn't, I don't know who the hell does—Mixon won't be packing any shooting irons when he comes in. All I'm asking you, Red-eye, is that you don't make the pinch until I have a chance to say a word or two to the gentleman."

"I won't," Jameson promised. "Provided that ye agree to comin' in and settin' with me while I eat a piece off that mule I was referrin' to a short time back."

McQueen picked up the bottle and followed the old man into the dining room. Bertha, the half-breed cook, waddled to the kitchen door, announced, "Fried moose. Fresh tenderloin. Big 'r little?"

"Big for me," Red-eye said. "Biggest you got. An' twice that for my friend, here. He's figgerin' on some vi'lent exercise, later in the evenin'."

McQueen said, "Skip it, Bertha," then reconsidered. "All right, Red-eye. I'll compromise on the little. I'll eat, to please you, but I'll take it easy for just the reason you mentioned. I aim to lick that guy, but I don't want to drown him."

"Then you better likewise take it easy with that bottle."

McQueen pushed it across the table. "O.K., coach. Put it with my gun and save 'em both until I'm through with him. Or—better yet—bust it over his head in case it turns out I can't handle him."

"I'll do that," Red-eye promised. Bertha planked two steaming platters down before them and the old man went to work.

McQueen ate slowly, his eye and his mind on the door. If Hargis started as soon as he got Kelvey's message, and ran into no delays, he should be down very soon. Kelvey could easily have made the head of Tustumena before black dark.

The outer room began to fill. Mostly, judging by the talk they could hear through the door, with members of Mulcahy's rear echelon. By the time McQueen pushed his plate back and rose, about a dozen had come in. McQueen said, "Let's go wait outside. This is getting noisy in here."

In the bar, the street door opened. Somebody—several men, by the sound of the footsteps—walked in. The talking stopped, voice by voice, and feet scraped on the rough floor as the men already in the room shifted and turned.

McQueen said, "Sounds like it's come," and stepped back through the dining room door, Jameson close at his heels.

MORSE MIXON, in pacs, woods pants, rough shirt and jacket, stood in the center of the floor. His heavy jowls were black with two-day whiskers and the glittering, Indian eyes above were grimly wary. They fastened on McQueen and the glitter grew hot and intent.

Hargis had stopped a step behind him. Kelvey closed the door and stayed with his back to it. McQueen returned Mixon's stare and a faint, reckless grin lifted the corners of his mouth. He said, "Hello, Mixon. Right between me and the door, as usual. Didn't I tell you what would happen to you if you got across my trail again?"

The black eyes shifted to Red-eye Jameson, then back to McQueen. But he spoke to Red-eye. "I thought you were delivering this fella to jail in Anchorage, Jameson?"

Red-eye said, "Why, I'll tell ye, Morse. Seems like it turned out that McQueen didn't shoot Ken Gowen, after all. That skunk ye called Ford Odom did that. So I saw to it that he was put away, instead. Wasn't no call to bother Johnny, after that."

"Odom put away? Put away where?"

"Just where you left him, Mixon," McQueen said. "Right where you left him. He'll still be right there, whenever you get around to looking for him again."

The big man's eyes widened for an instant, then narrowed again. He growled, "Always jokes, McQueen. The hell with Odom. Whose idea was it to bring me down here under a gun? Yours? Or yours, Jameson?"

McQueen glanced at Hargis. The brown-faced man said, "We got 'em all. Eight, altogether. Five healthy ones, and three with leaks in 'em. Joe Hoover's bringin' 'em down."

"All of them with this one?"

Hargis nodded. "Six of 'em were right with him, in that box canyon. We flushed a couple more out of the brush who had evidently been with that bunch of fire-bugs last night."

"So it seems to have been sort of a community project, Mixon," McQueen told him. "We all wanted you under a gun. Preferably under one with smoke coming out of the muz-

zle, but I guess we can't have everything. As far as bringing you down here is concerned, though, it was principally mine. Of course, Jameson has a reservation all made for you in that Anchorage jail you're forever beating your gums about, but he's promised to wait his turn."

The broad man laughed at him. "Jail? Jameson better think again. When has moose-hunting in season been a jail offense?"

A murmur stirred through the homesteaders about the room. Hargis gritted, "You'd better by God be going to jail. If that isn't where you're going, you by damn ain't goin' anywhere. We'll hunt a piece of rope."

Red-eye asked, "Hargis, any o' your people git hurt up there?"

"No. Luckily for this rattlesnake, we didn't get a scratch. Otherwise, maybe we wouldn't even have brought him down out of the hills."

"Wel-l," the old man said, "it's a durned shame, all right. I'll put in with ye there. But did anybody see this one shootin' or burnin'?"

Mixon snarled impatiently, "No, you're damned right they didn't! I haven't done any shooting and I haven't done any burning. I'm a citizen of the Territory, down here with a license in my pocket to kill a moose. An' you small-time vigilantes better be damned careful how much more you try to make me take."

McQueen had let them talk. Now, suddenly, he snapped, "Hell's fire! A minute more, he'll be running for mayor of Homer! I've got my own account to settle with this hog. After I'm through, you can hang him or jail him or marry him. But right now—just give us room!"

The big man stared, then grinned, wolfishly.

Mixon's lips were dribbling blood and his nose was a pulpy mess. But never for an instant did the huge man stop moving forward.

"Me, friend McQueen? Me? Now that would be worth all the trouble."

The bartender yelled, instantly, "Hey! You guys! Not in here you don't! Get the hell out if you want to start something!"

Kelvey looked around at him. "Well, well," he said softly. "Here's another local yokel who ain't heard the word. Yes they do, Garry. Yes, they do. Right in here. Unless you want your fellow citizens—look around at us, Garry—unless you want us to think you got no public spirit. Is that what you want us to think, Garry?"

The man started to answer, stopped. He looked about him at the homesteaders with increasing uncertainty. It seemed that a new arrangement had come to Homer and the proprietor of the Inlet was having trouble comprehending it. At last, he mumbled, "Well, sure, Kelvey. I know what he done to you. I sure ain't sidin' with him. I just hate to see the place busted up, that's all."

McQueen had not moved his eyes from Mixon's face. The big man watched him just as closely. McQueen said, "That's all right. We'll go out. We need more room than this."

Mixon grated, "There's enough!" and surged forward.

HE ALMOST caught McQueen. Almost but not quite. There wasn't space enough to avoid the huge man's rush but McQueen got his arms and elbows up. Mixon's first short clubbing blows landed on his forearms and when the weight of the man's drive car-

ried him back crashing against the bar, he had his balance and his footing.

Mixon followed through with a wrestler's reach, knowing of old that he had yet to see the man who could live within the vise of those thick arms. But McQueen had gotten inside them with his own, and he prevented their closing. Bracing himself against the sturdy planking of the bar, he opened his hands and drove short, stabbing blows with the ends of his stiffened fingers just under Mixon's jaw. He felt his rigid finger-tips sink deep into the soft hollow of Mixon's throat, just above the Adam's apple.

The broad man choked, and McQueen felt the strength momentarily go out of that bear-like clutch. He wasted the breath to murmur, "We'll still go outside!" and drove him backward across the room.

Kelvey yanked the heavy door wide out of the way and Mixon went out headlong, his heels catching on the sill and breaking his grip on McQueen. He rolled away and came to his feet facing the taller man. The men inside flooded out into the street after them, spreading into a wide half-circle. They left the door open and the light flooded the street.

Mixon hesitated a moment. McQueen saw his teeth bared in a snarling grin and the big head dropped down. He moved forward in a shambling crouch, more bear-like than ever, those short, inhumanly powerful arms half crooked forward.

McQueen had had his experience with this man before. There was an animal strength in that big squat body which he couldn't cope with, and he knew it. A clubbing hook from one of those rock-like fists had once broken three of his ribs. He did have reach and speed in his favor. Now he had room to use them.

He drove stiff, jolting punches above those short arms into the broad face, until Mixon's lips were dribbling blood and his nose was a pulpy mess. But never for a single instant did the huge man stop following, reaching and trying. He began to vary that ceaseless shuffle with little rushes, attempting to spoil McQueen's timing of those jabs and get in past them.

McQueen began to be conscious of the weight of his left hand. That was dangerous, and in desperation he dropped back to his heels, giving his full flat-footed weight to the right hands he threw after the jabbing left. Mixon took them all and still kept coming.

Inevitably, as it had happened the first time they had fought, that time years before, he finally got through. Not all the way, but far enough so that the glancing impact of the body blow that didn't entirely miss drove McQueen's wind from his lungs and filled his belly with a sickening, deadening pain.

The big man was after him, instantly. McQueen knew he could no longer jab him off. He had one quick, grim thought, "All right, Morse. Come on in and get it!"

Mixon came bulling in, the great arms pumping like pistons. McQueen dropped his guard to block them and let the man come the rest of the way, getting what he wanted so badly—his hands on McQueen at close quarters.

As they came together, McQueen opened his fists again and chopped down, fast as he could hammer, with the edge of his right hand at Mixon's neck, just below his ear. The short, queer blows landed with the dull *chunk* of a sharp axe in live wood. Mixon staggered and again the strength went out of his arms.

McQueen broke back free and found his footing. He muttered, half-audibly, "Dirty trick! See if I can't finish him like a white man, anyway—" He set himself and struck, a long, straight right hand all the way from his ear. It landed a fraction of an inch too high, on Mixon's big chin just below the left hand corner of his mouth. But Mixon went down.

He fell loosely, as if he had been kicked behind the knees. One elbow, under him, held him off the ground for a breath, then that too collapsed and he fell slackly sidewise. He didn't move again.

Neither did McQueen have the will to move, at once. He had not stirred from the spot he was on when Mixon fell, when Jameson spoke at his elbow. The old Indian agent held the whiskey quart out before his face.

He said, "Ye can have it now, Johnny. Morse won't be needin' any more attention—at least, not from you—for tonight."

McQueen let go a long, shuddering breath. "He wouldn't be getting much more from me. I don't know what the hell I'd do if he did get up again."

"He won't. Morse's finally run into the bull moose with the bigger horns, f'r the first time in his life. There'll be a good many people'll be glad to hear that. But they'll probably want a written affydavit, afore they'll believe it."

McQueen felt his left side, gingerly. "Send 'em to me," he said, with feeling. "I was there . . . Gimme that bottle."

HE LET them drag him into the Inlet and had one drink with Hargis and Kelvey before he asked Kelvey for the keys to the jeep. They carried Mixon in, also, and laid him on the dining-room table. The half-breed in the kitchen worked on him with cold water and, before McQueen left, the big man asked to see him.

McQueen and Jameson walked back. Mixon said, slowly and thickly, "I guess you're a pretty skookum fella, now, McQueen."

"Look," McQueen said evenly, "I told you in Anchorage, Mixon, that I didn't intend to be

bothered. By you or anybody else. Then I told you again what was going to happen if you didn't get out of my hair. Well, it happened. That's all. Stay away from me, from now on, and everybody will be happy."

"I won't be." Mixon looked at Jameson. "What about you, woods rat? You still have some notion you're goin' to take me to Anchorage?"

Red-eye surveyed him with a placid eye. "I wouldn't waste the tax-payers' money, Morse. I don't suppose we could convict ye, at that. An' I already seen ye git about half what was comin' to ye. I reckon we'll let it go at that."

"You better." Mixon turned again to McQueen. "You better take some advice, too, friend. After this night, the Territory ain't goin' to be big enough for both of us."

McQueen stared at him for a long, disgusted moment. He said, "If that's the way you feel about it, Mixon, you leave. I'll be staying."

He turned and left, going straight through the bar and outside. He stepped aboard the jeep, a few yards down the street, and found Red-eye Jameson still with him. The old man said, "What about that there moose hunt you invited me on, Johnny? Season's open and a feller'd ought to be able to git in a little o' that peaceful huntin' now that ye been talkin' about."

McQueen said, "Sure, Red-eye. Climb in. Glad to have you. You can help bury that Odom. But—wait a minute! How can you leave? What about those characters that Joe Hoover and the boys are bringing down?"

"That's all right. The marshal—the honest-to-God marshal—is comin' down to take 'em tomorrow."

"Oh. Then our hands are washed?"

"Clean's a whistle."

"That's the first good news I've had in days. All right. We'll go by Hoover's place, pick up Nora and take off."

McQueen stopped the jeep in the yard before the Hoover cabin and was stepping out when Aasie Gowen opened the door. The black dog came boiling out and charged McQueen, all paws and woofing welcome.

Aasie said, "Johnny! And Red-eye! Come in, quick, and tell us the news. Is it over?"

McQueen said, "You can tell Mrs. Hoover that Joe's fine. Nobody was hurt, at all. And everything's over."

"What about Morse Mixon? And that man Odom?"

Jameson took that question, quickly. "Odom's dead, Aasie. He was killed today. Johnny and I are right now on our way up to get rid of him, once and for all."

"I'm glad to hear that and I'll admit it. But what about Morse?"

The old man chuckled. "Wel-l, I'll tell ye. Morse is down in Homer, this minute, a-sittin' and a-thinkin' about a demonstration o' peace an' quiet—the McQueen variety—which Johnny just give him. I don't think he's assimylated the idee complete, jest yet, but it was shore a honey of a demonstration."

The tall, fair girl came up close to them. "Johnny!" she breathed. "You didn't fight with Morse! Nobody fights with Morse Mixon!"

"Your grammar's bad, Aasie," Red-eye told her, chuckling again. "Nobody didn't use to fight with Morse. That there rule has shore been busted."

"Johnny whipped him?"

"He did no less. Maybe a mite more. In fact, ye might better say he half killed him."

She said. "Maybe you shouldn't have stopped halfway, Johnny. He'll never forget this."

"That was the main idea," McQueen told her irritably. "That's all I want. Just for him to remember it, and stay clear of me."

He could see her smile, there in the half light. "Still looking for peace and quiet?"

"That's right."

"Going to keep looking for it here? Up at Tustumena, I mean?"

"That's right."

"I'm glad to hear it. Even if having you around means bringing Morse Mixon down on our necks again."

" 'Our necks'? You aren't staying here, are you? Why don't you go home?"

"Home is here, for me. I don't like to be run out, either, McQueen."

"Well," McQueen said, thinking it over, "it's probably not too bad a prospect. Most of these characters could use a wife. You can settle down and raise a dozen of those kids you were talking about."

She laughed. "It's an idea, Johnny. I'll pick one out. It would be no quiet life, but I'm not so anxious for that as you are. Will you come down to the wedding, McQueen?"

There was gurgling amusement and a tiny mocking note in her voice which got to McQueen. She hadn't even thanked him for all his trouble, either. He said, "No, thanks. Any time I come to Homer—if I ever do again—it'll be for business."

"Why, that's all right, Johnny," Aasie said. "I'll see you then." And laughed again.

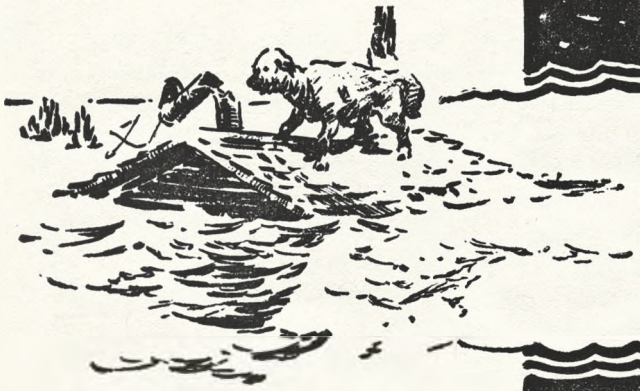
McQueen threw in his clutch and gunned the jeep out into the road with a jerk that snapped Jameson's neck, but he couldn't stop the old man's gleeful chuckling.

"What's so damned funny?"

Red-eye said, "I was just picturin' the amount o' peace an' quiet ye're apt to be havin' surrounded by them dozen kids. That's a pretty boastful projeck, too, come to think of it. Sure ye're man enough?"

THE END

ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE WERT



By
FRED
GIPSON

MY COUSIN OFF GOFF, he got saved at the break-up of that bad drought in the fall of '89.

Cousin Off was a queer-turned sort of man. Even Mama, his own blood cousin, was convinced of that. She'd point out how he'd quit a perfectly good saddle job with that big Jim Cage cow outfit to go into the sheep business for himself. Just to make more money.

"Money's money," Mama admitted. "But there's such a thing as pride and personal dignity, too."

Mama was always mighty strong on pride and dignity and it sure burned her to think any of her folks would sell his soul for money. Anybody knew how weak and let-down in character you were to quit the cow business and take up sheep-raising.

Mama said that Cousin Off had let the love of money get a strangle-hold on him, which was a wicked and sinful thing; and she tried to pass him off as a second or third cousin instead of a first. But of course this didn't work in Cow Horn where everybody knew everybody.

But the womenfolks understood how Mama felt about Cousin Off and sympathized with her. And the menfolks didn't have much use for him any more either and shunned him all they could. And time I got big enough to take notice, I knew Cousin Off as a big silent black-bearded man with a hard shine in his black eyes who'd sometimes go into Dude Hanson's saloon to drink a little, but never to fight his

★ ***Cousin Off whipped the mules through town at a dead run, knocking sheets of muddy water high in the air.***

THE SALVATION OF COUSIN OFF

whiskey to the point of hell-raising, like some of the cowhands did.

That year, the ugly look in Cousin Off's eyes got worse as spring went into early summer and no real rain had fallen yet. That is, nothing more than little scattered showers about saddle-blanket size that'd start the grass to greening but never grow it out long enough for a cow brute to curl a tongue around.

A sheep could bite that short young grass though; and that's what my Cousin Off's sheep did. The range was all open in those days, and every time one of those little showers of rain fell, you could keep a sharp look-out and pretty soon, way off yonder on the rim of the prairies, you'd see Cousin Off and his sheep heading for the spot. Cousin Off would be up in his camping wagon driving a span of little jackrabbit mules and behind him would be his sheep, choused along by two big herd dogs. He'd graze on this fresh spot till the next shower fell, then load up and move again.

Some of the worried cowmen got to telling it around that there might be a little picking for their cattle where these light showers fell if Cousin Off's sheep weren't always on hand to eat the graze right down into the turf. This wasn't true, of course. That grass would never have grown more than an inch high before the blasting sun browned and withered it away, and any cowman in his right mind knew it. But what cowman is in his right mind when every hoof of stock he owns is drawn by starvation till it's nothing but a bunch of bones rattling around inside a loose hide? Especially when a common sheepman can keep his stuff fat as butterballs on the same range?

Was the time they could joke about the dry spell. Mott Langely would tell how he'd seen Miss Salina Greer, our schoolteacher, climbing up on the schoolhouse roof with a sprinkling pot to demonstrate to us kids what falling rain was like. Miss Salina, he said, didn't want us kids growing up ignorant.

And Jim Cage would pull a a sober face and tell about a cow of his that'd been standing guard over the same seep-spring grass bunch for better than a month. "The pore old critter," Jim would say, "she bites that grass and then keeps the balance of the stock horned off, waiting for it to grow out to biting length again!"

THAT was along in the fall of 88, and the cowmen could laugh about it then. But the spring of '89 went into summer with no rain, and the sun burned hotter than a cook stove every day and Cow Horn Creek dried up into scummy holes of water that we boys gave up trying to swim in. And some of the mesquites began to wilt and die, which is enough to give even a harum-scarum kid an uneasy feeling. And night and day the starved cattle walk-bawled on the prairies, stirring the powdery dust and filling the hot air with miserable complaint.

So the cowmen quit making jokes and went to resenting Cousin Off more than ever. And Cousin Off, he resented them right back and started drinking more than was his habit and packing a Winchester.

And then Hurt Vince, the town butcher, he came up with nothing in his meat counter but cuts of mutton.

That nearly kicked the lid off. To cow people, meat means beef, and anybody in the cow business who'd eat mutton is a traitor to his kind and lower than a snake's belly. Hurt was worried, but he had his arguments ready for the bunch of disturbed and angry cow people who ganged his shop the minute the word got out.

"You get me a beef fit to kill," he defended, "and we'll have beef again. But I don't know where in all creation you'll locate one with a speck of tallow on it. I've been down to killing milk calves for the last month and now they're all played out!"

Well, that stumped them. In those days, it wasn't like now; you didn't have refrigeration cars and trucks that could haul fresh meat anywhere. You ate the meat that grew around you, or you didn't eat meat.

When Cousin Off heard about the complaints everybody put up, he told Hurt Vince that the price of sheep had jumped a dollar a head. "And," he warned Hurt, "if I hear tell of any more squawking, you folks can look for a second raise in price!"

Jim Cage frothed at the mouth about that. He swore he wouldn't eat that mutton. "You couldn't hog-tie me and shove that stuff down with a stick," he declared. And he and Ples Johnston hooked a team to a wagon and drove two hundred miles to San Antonio to bring back a load of salt-cured bacon. But at that time of year, the bacon was so rancid that nobody could eat it. So Cow Horn folks ate mutton, Jim Cage along with the rest.

Finally, the Pony Express Club met and voted to take the weather in hand. The ladies of this club had named it the Ladies' Aid Society, but Mott Langely, whose wife was president, had started calling it the Pony Express Club, claiming that among those rattle-tongued women, news traveled faster than the old Pony Express ever managed to carry it. And in spite of all the women could do, the name had stuck.

Well, they met and talked it over and decided something had to be done. They voted to build a brush arbor down on the bank of Cow Horn Creek where the folks could gather and pray for rain. Then they rose and marched

on the menfolks of the town, demanding help to get the arbor erected.

It was our schoolteacher, Miss Salina, who tried to get Cousin Off to lend a hand at cutting mesquite posts and willow switches for the arbor building. Miss Salina was a right pretty little woman, in a prim, old-maidish sort of way. And, in her capacity as schoolteacher, she'd had shoved off on her so many ugly little jobs the other women wouldn't do that when Aunt Dena Malloy suggested that the teacher be the one to contact Cousin Off, Miss Salina didn't even protest. She just went right out and started combing the town for him.

She found Cousin Off in front of the butcher shop, where he'd come to collect a meat bill after having spent a couple of hours bending an elbow down at Dude's place. The drink had put a bold, roguish look in Cousin Off's eyes and now, while hearing Miss Salina out, he grinned a grin at her that came close to being an insult.

"Now, Miss Salina," he said, "why should I waste time building arbors and praying? I'm getting rain enough. My sheep're fat; and as long as you cow people are out of fat meat and have to buy mine. I don't have no quarrel to pick with the Almighty about how he's running things!"

To a church-going woman like Miss Salina, that rebellious sort of reasoning must have verged on the sacrilegious. "Why, Mr. Goff!" she exclaimed, then repeated herself. "Why, Mr. Goff!"

Cousin Off's grin got wider and he bent his head down like he wanted what he said to be real confidential between them. "Now, Miss Salina," he said, "you rustle your little bustle right back down there and tell them high-chinned cow folks that Off Goff will furnish all the fresh meat they need to pray on . . . when they lay the cash on the barrel head!"

Then he reached down and gave Miss Salina a little friendly spank to start her off.

And Miss Salina—I guess she'd never had a man pat her bustle before. The shock of it bugged her eyes and made her gasp. Then she blushed both ways from the neck and took out down the street like a scared little rabbit.

THE weather was sure hot for switch-cutting and the ground hard for post-hole digging. But the menfolks of Cow Horn had learned that when the ladies' Pony Express Club demanded action, they got it before anybody saw a minute's peace; so the arbor construction was started the next morning.

Dude Hanson offered free drinks to the arbor builders if they'd let him off from the actual work. This suited the men, but it stirred up a hot argument among the club members. Some of them expressed strong feeling on the matter of mixing whiskey with religion. But Mott Langley's woman, she pointed out that the whiskey would be drunk anyhow and it might just as well be drunk for a good cause. So Dude escaped blistered hands and possible sunstroke and his refreshments put so much spirit into the work that by Saturday night the arbor was standing on the creek bank, ready for the praying to commence.

Services opened Sunday morning, with a good amount of souls repenting before dinnertime. And by Monday night, ranch folks from 'way back in the brush were arriving to help out. Week days the meetings began in the cool of the evening and lasted till after night, with supper on the grounds.

Cousin Off, he was kept so busy butchering and hauling in meat for these barbecue suppers that he had to hire him a Mexican herder to keep the sheep moving from one shower-wet spot to the next. And while he never offered to take part in any of the services, folks got to noticing how he always hung around as long as the singing went on.

It was mighty pretty camp-meeting singing, for sure. The crowd followed where Miss Salina led, and of a late evening they sure could make those mesquite flats and hollows ring with sound.

Cousin Off, he'd stand out away from the arbor a piece, with his hat in his hands, and gaze off across the sun-burnt prairies and listen till the last note had got lost in the brush. Then he'd go get in his wagon and drive off, with his shoulders hunched and his head down. Like a man with a troubled spirit.

But nobody paid him any mind. Cousin Off had quit the cow business on his own hook and lowered himself to sheep-raising. And now, when folks were desperate for meat, he was charging them two prices for it.

Of course, big fat Aunt Dena Malloy was taking advantage of the drought and charging Cow Horn folks for drinking water. Aunt Dena lived down next to the creek and had the only deep well in town; and when all the other wells dried up till the water wasn't fit for drinking, she'd started selling hers. And now she'd sold enough to buy a second-hand piano. But everybody knew how bad Aunt Dena had wanted a piano all her life and this was the first chance she'd had to pay for one. Anyhow, all her people had been cow folks for as far back as anybody could remember. And that made all the difference in the world.

Miss Salina, though—she must have felt that she'd let the Pony Express Club down the day she'd failed to bring Cousin Off in on the arbor building. I guess that's what made her forgive him for the way he'd insulted her and

go make another try at saving him from his wicked and sinful ways. I don't know what else could have made her suddenly leave the arbor shade the next Thursday and go out to where Cousin Off was unloading fresh mutton at the barbecue pits. She looked a little scared, but she went right ahead.

"Mr. Goff," she said, "our Maker has favored you above all others in Cow Horn. His showers of blessing have kept your sheep fed. Won't you please come show your appreciation and pray that your neighbors may benefit also?"

No matter how it sounded, Miss Salina was sincere in what she said, and it was a crying shame that this had to be another time when Cousin Off was loaded with hard liquor and feeling devilish.

"Now, Miss Salina," he chided. "Me'n the Almighty, we get along all right. I let Him alone and He don't give me no trouble to speak of!"

He lifted his arm and dragged a sleeve across his sweaty forehead, then winked at her. "Now, if a man had him a good woman he could say the same for—"

Poor little Miss Salina, her eyes got big and round as coffee-drinking saucers. "Oh!" she said, backing up. "Oh, my goodness!" And she came rushing back under the arbor, so flustered that it took the third try for her to hit the right pitch on the song she led.

Seemed like Miss Salina just couldn't get over that second run-in with Cousin Off. Right in the middle of the song-leading sometimes, her eyes would leave her book and stray off out to where he stood outside the arbor. And every time they did, Miss Salina's face would pink up and her clear voice would falter.

Jim Cage's woman said it reminded her of a little bird she'd seen once that a rattlesnake had charmed, but Aunt Dena Malloy sniffed and remarked that it didn't remind her of any such a thing.

I listened close, wondering just what it did remind Aunt Dena of, but she never did say.

THEY kept the services going, but the drought held on. The puddle holes in Cow Horn Creek dried up and cattle stood and sucked at the mud till they died of thirst. And Aunt Dena's well began to fail, too, so that folks had to ration themselves to drinking water, with none for washing. And some of them—the "faint of heart," Mama called them—quit praying and started packing their household belongings into their wagons, fixing to quit the country.

Then the next Thursday night the services ended just before moonrise and some of the men sneaked off to Dude's place for a nightcap before going to bed. And that's when the first sign of mercy showed.

Grandpa Maverick Giles discovered it. Grandpa was too old to be much use except for weather predictions and panhandling drinks. He came rushing in, calling for a drink and urging everybody outside to take a look at the moon. Nobody bothered to buy him a drink, but they did go outside. And all they saw was a big lop-sided moon climbing up out of the drought-withered mesquites.

"All right," said Dev Burkett. "We've seen the moon. Now, what about it?"

Grandpa Maverick was amazed at Dev's ignorance. "What about it!" he shrilled. "Look at the belly it's got! Nothing but water would sag that sort of a belly on the moon!"

Dev wasn't convinced; neither was Jim Cage. They both growled at Grandpa Maverick and turned to go back inside. And just then there was a flash in the sky and a second later a heavy rumble sounded in the north.

"Be dog, if that didn't sound like thunder!" declared Mott Langely and he stepped around the corner of the building to take a look in that direction.

"'Course it's thunder!" yelped Grandpa Maverick.

There was a second flash and a heavier rumble. Nobody had any more doubts then. They stood and stared in awe; to a man they knew they were witnessing a miracle. They'd all prayed for rain and now the rain was coming. They knew there was no bluff to a raincloud that would form and move up in the face of a full moon. That cloud meant business!

Nobody slept in Cow Horn that night. Some stayed up to pray and some to drink and all to watch with a sense of joyful deliverance while the rain-cloud moved down upon them, roaring and flashing and rumbling, shutting out the light of the moon. There in Dude's place, the men handed Grandpa Maverick more free drinks than he'd had in months and kept shoving them to him till the old man was staggering and spraddling around like walking was a lost art.

About midnight, a bolt of lightning slashed a rip in the cloud and the rain poured through.

To Jim Cage, who'd watched his cattle die like flies all over the prairies, a chunk-floating, drought-breaking rain like this was too much. A strange look came into his eyes; gently, he set his drink down on the bar and walked outside, where he stood bareheaded in the rain with his arms uplifted, letting the dollar-sized drops pelt him in the face.

Maybe lightning struck Jim Cage. Nobody ever knew for sure. All they knew was that in a flare of lightning, they saw him stagger and fall, and that he lay on the floor like a dead man for hours after Dev Burkett and Dude Hanson dragged him inside.

Later a story made the rounds that the

shock of that much water on Jim's sun-parched hide was what knocked him out and that the only way they could bring him around was by throwing in his face a bucket of dry sand that Dude Hanson ripped up his floor-boards to get. But Cow Horn folks had heard too many of Dude Hanson's yarns to put any stock in that one.

Anyhow, Jim survived, and by daylight, Cow Horn Creek was rolling bank-full and humped in the middle. And still the rain came, a solid white wall of water that drummed on the roofs and hummed through the mesquites like a mowing machine cutting heavy cane.

AN hour later, the rain had slacked off some, but now the banks of Cow Horn Creek couldn't hold the flood any longer and about a foot of water started spreading through town.

Mott Langely took a glazed-eyed look at it and shook his head. "The saints preserve us!" he said. "Them Pony Express women, they've went and over-prayed their hand!"

Here came Dev Burkett's woman, headed for Dude's place. She was trying to run in knee-deep water that kept tripping and making her fall and all the time she was wringing her hands and wailing. Dev's woman was known to be excitable and now she started screaming at Dev. "They're drowning! Hurry and save them! They're all drowning!"

She fell again and Dev ran out and helped her up and wanted to know who was drowning and where, but all she could do for a little bit was just stand and stream water and cry. Then she finally got it out. Down at Aunt Dena Malloy's house there was somebody screaming for help. It sounded like Aunt Dena and a whole bunch of children. And Dev's woman knew it was children because last night at the arbor she'd heard a bunch of little girls talking about going to stay all night there and listen to Aunt Dena's piano playing.

"They're drowning, I tell you!" she shrieked at Dev. "Do something. Don't just stand there while all them poor little helpless things is carried off to a watery grave!"

Cousin Off's wagon and mules were in the wagon yard right close to Dude's place and all the men rushed out and hooked up to go make the rescue. They whipped the mules through town at a dead run, knocking sheets of muddy water high in the air.

Aunt Dena's house was in a low place beside the creek and when Cousin Off pulled up his team beside it, they could see that the flood was already sweeping through the house. And inside, like Dev's woman had said, the men could hear screaming enough for a woman and a dozen kids.

Grandpa Maverick, he leaped out into what should have been waist-deep water—and went clear out of sight. All but his hat; it floated off down the creek. And the men all stood there in the wagon like they were tied, scared to think what might have become of Grandpa. Then, after a full minute, it seemed like, Grandpa's head shot up through the muddy water and he grabbed the spoke of a wagon wheel and held on.

"Thunderation!" he snorted, blowing and wiping the water out of his face. "Aunt Dena's well curb—it's washed clean away!"

Mott Langely jumped out of the wagon where he'd be sure to miss the well and waded into the house to rescue the screaming women and children. Only, when he pushed the door open and looked in, there were no children there. It was Aunt Dena, making all that racket by herself.

She came floundering through the water, screaming at Mott, "Save my pianer, Mott. You've got to save my pianer before I'll let you tote me a step."

The way Dev Burkett told it later, Mott took one look at Aunt Dena's two hundred pounds and offered to save the piano if she'd look out after herself. But Mott didn't really even do that much. He just came back wearing a disgusted look on his face and climbed into the wagon. The men drove off, and Aunt Dena, she stayed right there, screaming and begging for help, while the water came on up and ran right through her piano, ruining it completely.

It was past noon when the flood moved back inside the banks of the creek. And drowned sheep were left scattered all over town. The sheep belonged to Cousin Off; nobody else in Cow Horn would raise them.

THE women of the Pony Express Club felt mighty proud of the rain they'd prayed up. "Braggy as pullets cackling over their first eggs," according to Mott Langely. And when they learned about Cousin Off's drowned sheep, they sure did nod wise heads.

Cousin Off looked at one or two of his dead sheep, then got in his wagon and drove off.

"I guess," Mama said triumphantly, "Cousin Off sees now what befalls them who scorn His love and mercy."

And maybe Mama was right; I never could tell for sure. All I know is that the next Sunday, the folks gathered at the arbor to offer up thanks for the rain. And right in the big middle of the singing, Cousin Off came in, looking spruced-up and mighty sober. He took a seat on a front-row beer keg, close to where Miss Salina led the singing. And Dev Burkett's woman took one look at him and

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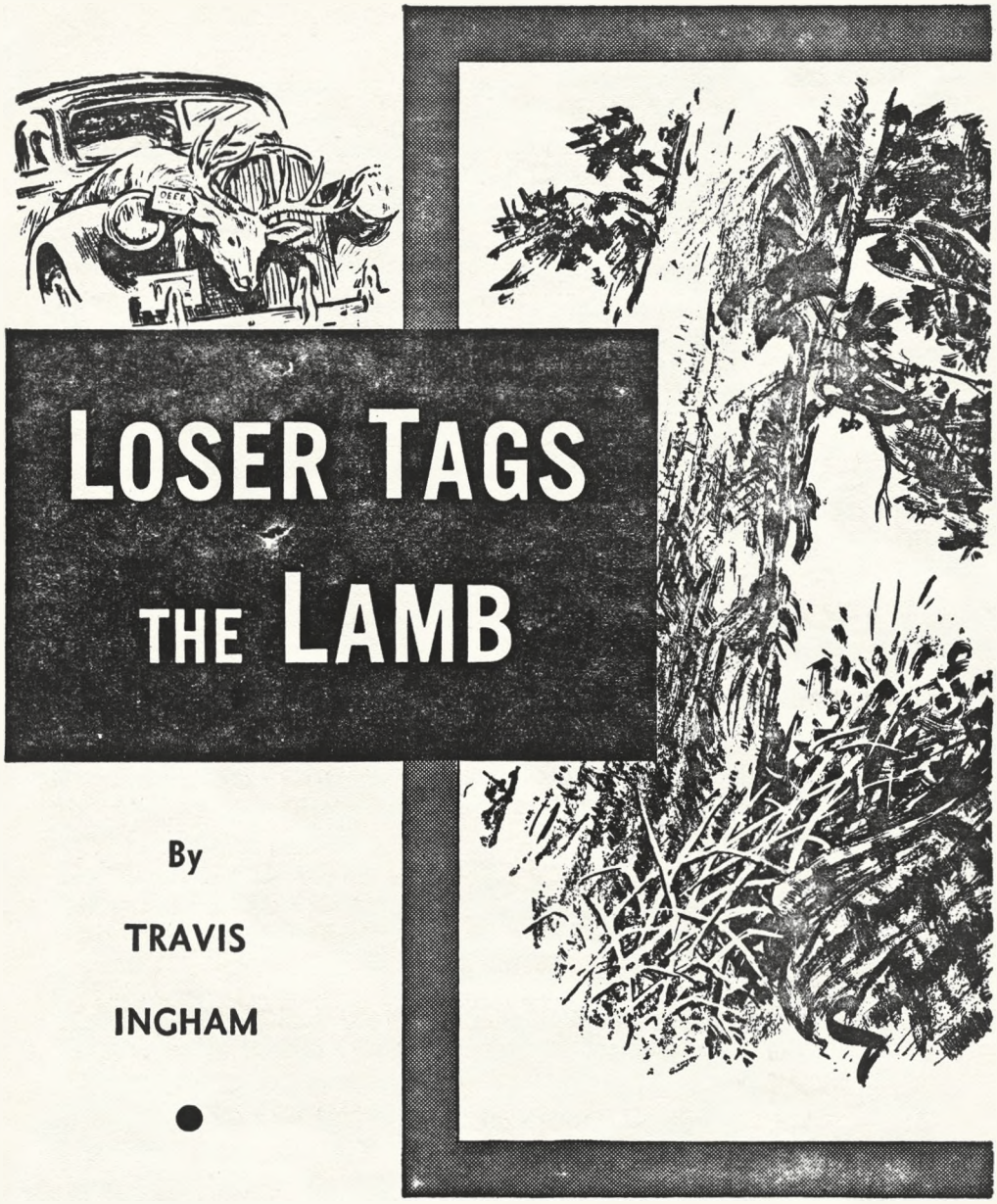


LOSER TAGS THE LAMB

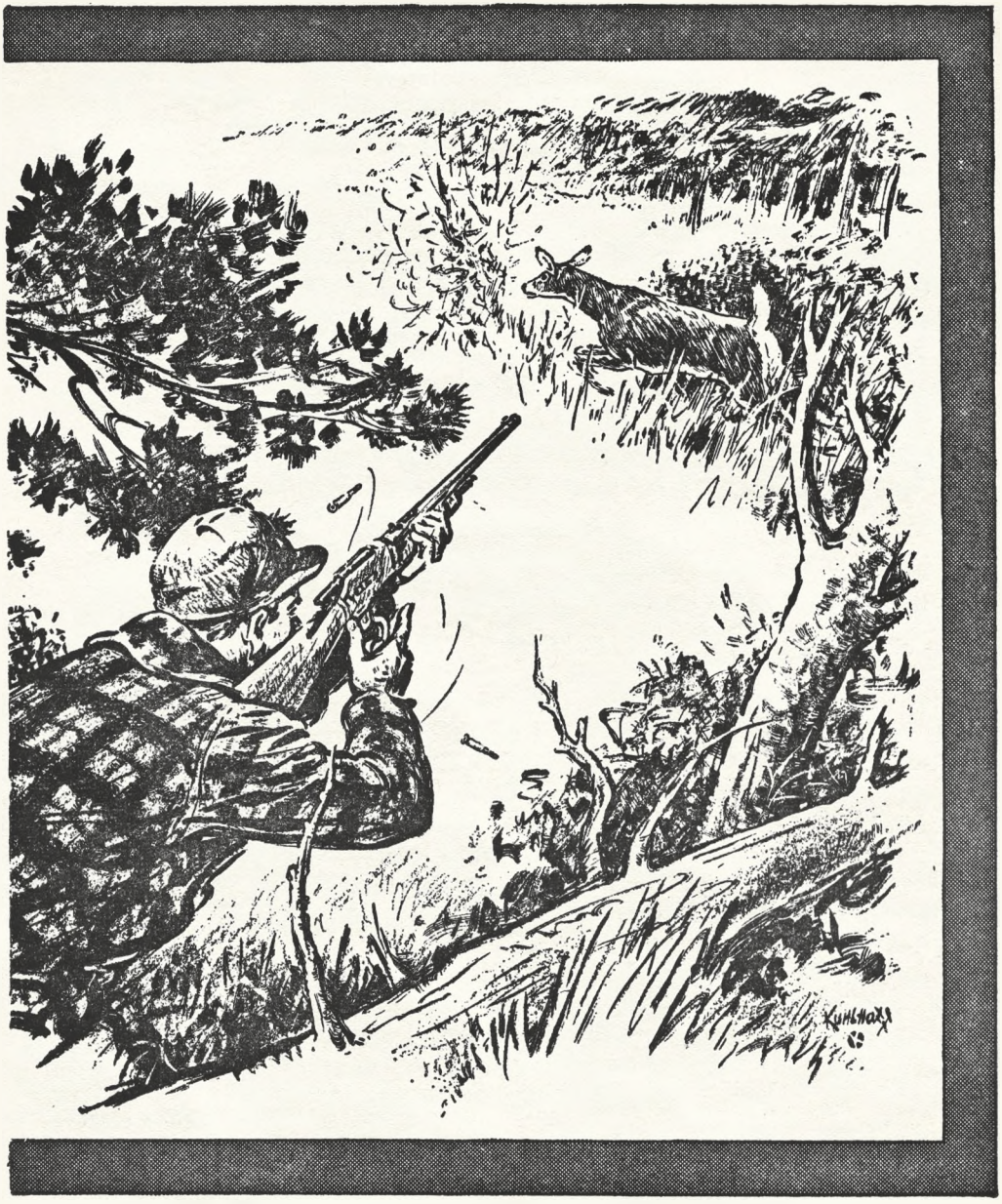
By TRAVIS INGHAM

ALL year long, Mert and Ollie talked of hunting. Not of duck, pheasant, woodcock, or partridge. That was stuff for boys. For old men. For city "sports."

The year, to Mert and Ollie, was seven days in November in which they would walk quietly through the North Maine woods, rifles slung over their arms, seeking the breathless moment when a deer should rise and make his bounding bid for life.

That was "huntin'."

Mertland Carlton was twenty-nine years old, Indian-dark of complexion with powerful shoulders that came from hard work on the farm as a boy, in the quarries as a man. Oliver Haskins, ten years older, had a big, slow body, sandy hair, flickering blue eyes set in a round jovial face. He drove a truck all seasons, carrying chickens, eggs, blueberries and Christmas trees to Boston.



For fifty-one weeks of the year whenever these two met—which was frequent and unavoidable in a four-corners town like Elwin, Maine—they relived the experiences of the year before and the year before that. Boasting of the deer they got, bewailing the ones they failed to get, anticipating the yet unborn creatures they would some day shoot.

It drove their wives crazy.

A year was just fifty-two weeks to Edith and

He had levered three cartridges out of the rifle before he realized he w a s n ' t pulling the trigger!

●

ILLUSTRATED BY
PETE KUHLHOFF

Min, without a break in the endless round of diapers, hungry mouths, dishes, mending. A deer was another item to be cooked, pressed into mason jars, sterilized with boiling water, and sealed away in the cellar for future reference. The deer season to these women was as inevitable as pregnancy and they prepared for it with mending, with baking, and with resignation.

"Some day I'm gonna take you along," Mert said to Edith annually.

He never did and both knew he never would. Hunting was a man's prerogative. It took him two hundred and fifty miles up into Aroostook County, alternately to sweat and freeze. That there were deer out back of the barn in the apple orchard, a good wife did not mention.

Some things never change in men . . . and Maine.

PERRY HEARN of New York City was the last of the summer visitors. His doctor had ordered him to spend six months out-of-doors as penance for too much Manhattan merry-go-round. Perry was thirty-five years old, tall, with a detached, studious air. He was a broker and good at squash rackets. He had come to enjoy fending for himself in a little cabin, rented from Mert, on a nearby pond.

Both Mert and Ollie thought Perry a little peculiar, because he was both city man and bachelor, but they had asked him to go hunting with them. He wasn't a bad sort, they decided—even though he knew nothing about a gun or the woods.

"He probably won't hit anything," Mert decided. "Gives us one more deer to shoot."

"Sure," said Ollie and grinned. "He can tag the lamb."

"No lambs this time," said Mert. "They're all goin' to be big bucks."

Mert's greatest ambition in life was to shoot a buck. He had never fulfilled this ambition. Each year, he promised himself, was *the year.*

They didn't get started until almost midnight of October 31st, because both men held their jobs until the last minute. It took most of the evening to put the square-ended canoe on the trailer, fill it and the back seat of Mert's car with their duffel. Pyramidal tent, stove for cooking and heat, Coleman lanterns, outboard motor, gasoline, case of liquor, blankets, food . . . Everything essential, no gimcracks.

The boys had been hunting together for ten years now.

All three dressed just alike. Rubber boots that laced almost to the knee. Hunting pants of red wool checkered with black, heavy red shirts, rubberized red caps. Perry's outfit was very new. So were his gun and hunting knife. The latter item, to the city man, held a more ominous significance than the former.

"After you knock him down," Mert had instructed, "you gotta run up and cut his throat so he'll bleed proper. Then you gotta gut him out and hang him up where the bears won't get him."

The idea brought Perry a small wave of nausea every time he thought of it. He hated blood.

"I'll meet that when I get to it," he said to himself.

Mert and Ollie kissed their wives fleetingly. They climbed into the front seat, Perry in the middle. Mert started the motor, blasted the horn long and loud. The trailer sighed and lurched behind them. It began to rain.

"Ah," said Mert when the lights of the town had disappeared.

"Ah," said Ollie.

They drew great breaths, and for a moment Perry felt slightly suffocated. Then something of the wordless excitement in the two men hemming him in got through to him.

"Ah," he whispered, almost to himself.

They stopped in Bangor for scrambled eggs and scalding coffee. Red caps hung on the hooks beside the booths all over the restaurant. Rifles were stacked casually in corners. The owners looked tired but all of their faces wore a lean, tense, expectant look. They did not talk much, or if they did, lowered their voices.

This was something more than sport, Perry began to understand. This was serious business. Why, he wondered?

Ollie took the wheel and Mert fell instantly asleep, his head on Perry's shoulder. The latter kept himself awake with an effort, for each time he nodded off, he threw the car out of gear with his knee. The endless black road, slick with rain and spotted with yellow leaves, hypnotized him. The lights of farms, where life had sprung up before dawn, drew farther and farther apart, finally disappeared entirely as the car turned off onto a dirt road and burrowed into the woods.

"Nine miles more to the lake," murmured Ollie.

By and by Mert woke up. He came out of his sound sleep fully awake, like an animal. Rolling down the window, he sniffed eagerly. The wet cold of the woods came in with a rush. Suddenly Mert's body stiffened.

"Hold up, Ollie," he commanded.

Ollie slid the car to a quick stop. Perry could see nothing except the headlights tunneling the night and close grown trees crowding the road.

"Just to the right, under that pine," whispered Mert. "See him?"

Perry saw the eyes, then. They seemed to hang suspended in dark space, slightly green, glowing luminous as two jewels. Then Ollie turned on the spotlight and a big doe jumped into relief. She stood absolutely motionless, without fear, staring into the light. It re-

minded Perry of the iron deer on his grandmother's lawn in Connecticut. He had never seen a live one, outside of a zoo.

"Shall I get her?" Mert whispered, his hand sliding round back of the front seat, emerging with his Winchester. He dug three shells out of his belt, slipped them in with tiny clicks, cocked the lever.

"I don't believe I would," said Ollie, slowly. "Warden lives just round the bend."

Mert sighted the gun while Perry, bracing for the explosion, felt a wordless protest rise up within him. "Ought to shoot her to eat while we're up here," said Mert, his cheek pressed to the stock of his rifle, the deer perfectly circled in the ring on the front sight.

"We'll get one for eatin', later," said Ollie, and shifted gears noisily.

Instantly the deer vanished. One minute it was there, the next the woods had silently swallowed it. Mert let the hammer down with his thumb. Slowly he drew the gun into the car. His face was sulky, like a small boy's.

"I shoulda blasted her," he said reluctantly. "I'm superstitious 'bout lettin' the first one get away."

"We'll get plenty the right way," said Ollie soothingly. "We don't have to jack."

"I hope to hell you're right," said Mert.

Perry found he had been holding his breath. He let it out now, in a sigh. "Gee, she was beautiful," he said.

Mert glanced at him curiously. "Damned beautiful steak, if you ask me."

JUST at dawn, they ran out into a clearing at the edge of a misty lake, and into a fever of activity. Men in bulky hunting clothes were all about, unpacking their duffel from trailers, launching canoes and skiffs, starting off into the fog that lay waiting for the sun. The scene, to Perry, looked like the opening of a new, raw territory.

While he was drinking in these new sensations, he found that Mert and Ollie had lifted the canoe off the trailer, and already had it in the water alongside a low dock. It was bitterly cold and Perry's hands shook with chill and fatigue as he tried, without much success, to help. Both his companions knew just where each object should go and they packed the canoe to the gunwales, leaving an infinitesimal space in the stern for themselves.

They clambered in. Mert gave the outboard a preliminary whir. It caught instantly, with a warming roar. The boat, with about three inches freeboard, skimmed past rowing hunters, zipped by a group whose motor had quit on them. The man in the stern had the hard-bitten, weathered look of the professional guide. The others were big fleshy men, pale of face and quite drunk.

"Sports," said Mert contemptuously and spat overboard.

A sport, Ollie informed Perry, was a city guy who came up to the woods to get drunk, play poker and forget his wife—while the guide did all the work and usually shot all the deer.

"Don't they hunt at all?" Perry inquired.

"Oh, sure. They stumble out, half tanked, and shoot off their guns. They'll blast at anything that moves. Hope we don't have that crew near us."

Perry's nose began to run with the cold. Perhaps the sports had the right idea, he observed privately. He fished out his handkerchief and blew vigorously, hesitating when he saw both men looking at him. Especially at his handkerchief which was linen and white.

"Didn't you bring any red snot rags?" Mert asked severely.

Perry admitted he hadn't.

"Jesusgod," said Mert.

"A white handkerchief," said Ollie, "is the most dangerous thing you can use in the woods. Looks just like a deer's flag—her white rump and underside of her tail. Lots of men have been killed, just pullin' out a white handkerchief while huntin'."

Perry stuffed the offending item away.

"Give you one of mine, later," said Ollie. "I got plenty."

"Thanks," said Perry.

They rode in silence for a while. There were a few cottages at the lower end of the lake. They looked sad and deserted now. Then there were no more and the lake stretched, virgin and untouched, as far as the eye could see. Presently Ollie spoke.

"Ain't that our first marker, Mert?" He pointed shorewards toward a big black rock with a white arrow crudely painted on it, indicating north.

"That's her all right," said Mert. Both men grinned, as with a secret.

"Well, whatcha waitin' for?" said Mert.

Ollie's big hand dove in under the tarpaulin that covered the load and emerged with a bottle of bourbon.

"Always have our first one off that rock," he said and passed the bottle to Perry, who hesitated very briefly.

The doctor had said absolutely no hard liquor. Except possibly in an emergency. This, Perry thought shiveringly, could really be called an emergency. He took a great gulp. His throat was dry from chain smoking to keep awake, and the liquor exploded, forcing the tears to his eyes. He choked.

The two men laughed, let him suffer for a moment.

"Take a chaser," said Ollie and passed him a tin cup. Perry got it almost to his mouth before he realized it was empty.

"Lake ain't salt," said Mert.

Perry scooped up a cupful of water. It was icy and tasted of brown, dead leaves, but it drowned the fiery misery in his throat. God what a plumber I am, he thought, unhappily aware of the half amused, half contemptuous look in Mert's dark eyes.

"You'll catch on," said Ollie, kindly, and Perry felt a burst of gratitude toward the older man. With Mert, he sensed, he was definitely on the spot. Perry felt the barrier that always exists between the country and the city man.

"Perhaps I can break him down," he thought. He had no idea how.

"Bird can't fly on one wing," said Ollie, presently, and passed the bottle again. They had several more drinks as other landmarks came into view. The sun burst through the fog. Perry began to feel better.

"Here she is," said Mert finally, and slid the boat in to a sandy shelving beach. He shut off the motor and the sudden silence was almost shocking. Far down the lake a loon cackled inanely. Off to the right there was the murmur of a brook. Otherwise nothing.

The bow grated on the shore and for a moment the three sat, staring at the unbroken forest that lay silent, enigmatic, waiting. A green bordered page on which the dainty hooves of the deer would write the only kind of history that Mert and Ollie understood or cared for.

Mert stirred first. "My back teeth are clean afloat," he said, and stepping out into the shallow water, waded ashore—a little unsteadily. They had killed the fifth on the way down.

THE TRIO did no hunting that first day. It was Sunday and the law says you may not slay deer, in Maine, on the Sabbath. Besides it took them the better part of the daylight hours to make camp.

Mert and Ollie found their old campsite, on a bluff in the open above the lake, and pitched the pyramidal, pegging down the sides and banking them with dirt against the cold. The small cook stove was installed, its smokestack curling out a hole in the tent wall. Balsam boughs were cut and spread for a mattress over which the men rolled their sleeping bags and quilts. The huge side of pork Edith had cooked was hung in a tree, out of reach of prowling bears, and from the damp and dripping thickets Mert somehow miraculously materialized dry seasoned wood that burned with a roar and crackle.

All these things the two men did with a skill and economy of effort bespeaking long experience. Perry helped as he could. He did nothing on his own initiative, after a few trial efforts which Mert quietly undid. He was learning.

They went to bed with darkness, after a meal of fried pork, potatoes, canned peaches and coffee, laced with rum. Mert and Ollie fell asleep at once, snoring lustily. But Perry lay awake, sniffing the fragrant balsam beneath him, listening to the calls of the loons. The fire died down and chill crept through the canvas of the army tent.

Somewhere out back in the wilderness, Perry sensed, the deer moved softly—great luminous eyes shining, ears ever alert, sensitive nostrils seeking danger. Finding it, everywhere.

They had so many enemies, so few weapons against a savage world. Only smell, hearing, speed. Why should man league himself against such as these, he wondered.

"Softy," he scolded himself and fell asleep wondering if he would be able to press the trigger when the time came.

The next he knew there was the hiss-pop of a Coleman lantern and light flared up, throwing the shadow of Ollie in his underwear huge against the brown tent. It was bitter cold and his breath, as he stooped to stoke the stove, floated around his shoulders like a wreath.

"Don't get up yet," he said as Perry reached for his pants. "It'll be warm as toast in here in a minute."

The fire went briskly about its business, beating back the chill and fulfilling Ollie's prediction. The latter, dressed, pushed Mert gently with his foot.

"You goin' huntin' or you goin' stay abed all day?"

Mert stretched sensuously and grinned. "Damn you, Ollie," he moaned. "It's too soon to get up. What time is it?"

"Five thirty," said Ollie amiably. "We gotta hustle if we're going to get to the Burn by sunup."

AT THE head of a trail, up which they clambered for half a mile, was a clearing in which sat a small log cabin, smoke rising cheerfully from its single stack. Beside the door, pegged through its tendons, a young deer hung head down.

"Hello," said Mert. "Old Harry's been anticipatin' the season." He poked his head in the door. "Hi there, you old hermit, how's tricks?"

An old man immediately appeared, frying pan in hand. His glasses were perched well down on the end of his nose and wispy gray hair stood up all over his head. His mouth wore the alum pucker of the toothless.

"Mertland," he squeaked "Kinda reckoned you was about due. And ole Oliver." He shook hands, looked keenly at Perry. "Who'd you bring along to listen to you boast?" he inquired.

"Meet Perry Hearn," said Mert. "From New York. First time up."

"Has to be a first time," said the guide.

"You got any loose women or rum around here?" said Mert, peeking into the snug cabin, where bunks ringed the walls, and a small cookstove occupied the favored central position.

"Wimmen?" The old man spat. "What you think I come up here for, but to get away from the pesky critters. But I do b'lieve there's a dight o' rum around somewheres."

"We'll sample that later," said Ollie. "See you got you a lamb hung up." He patted the fawn affectionately.

"I gotta couple of hunters comin' in today and they always like a taste o' deer meat soon's they get here. This leetle feller came pokin' round my garden just once too often. So I upped the windy last night and put an end to his thievin' ways."

"Best shot in the state o' Maine," Mert said, aside. "Great old guy, Harry. Comes up here to get away from his wife." To the guide, he said eagerly, "Are they plentiful this year?"

"Thicker'n flies effen you know where to look."

"I'm going to get me a buck this time," said Mert. "Come on, boys. We'll be back this afternoon an' sample your grog, Harry."

"Do that," said the old fellow. "Come in an set a spell, anytime."

They left the cabin, mounted a small rise, and came out on the Burn just as the sun staggered groggily up out of the east. Years ago a paper company had invaded this woodland with an army of axes, saws, bulldozers. They had cut a great swathe, taking everything, sparing nothing. Then a forest fire had consumed what was left. Now, with the exception of small narrow swamps ringed with green, nothing remained except waist-high bushes and saplings with here and there a dead tree raising a gaunt, despairing arm toward the sky.

It was a scene of awful death, desolation.

"Deer like it though," concluded Ollie, explaining this.

In the soft soil were myriad hoofprints, piles of droppings. The tracks ran off down little trails, in every direction. Observing this, the men gripped their guns tighter, instinctively lowered their voices.

"Let's fan out and beat toward the swamp," said Mert. "You take the right, Ollie. You the left, Hearn. Don't get out of sight of us," he warned. "And for Chrissakes, if you jump one, watch where you shoot."

Perry had no intention of getting out of sight in this maze. He walked down the trail several hundred yards, stepped into the brush, holding his gun in the approved fashion—barrel in left hand, fingers of the right on trigger and safety. He felt a tightness in his chest and a quickness in his lungs.

"This is it," he thought.

All morning they hunted in this fashion, without seeing anything but a few rabbits and partridges. Past noon, they converged upon a great rock, ejected the shells from the chambers of their rifles, and lit cigarettes.

Mert looked worried. "Thick as flies, hey?" he growled. "Where are the bastards?" He pronounced his *a's* in the oddly English fashion of Maine.

"They'll be lying down now," said Ollie. "We'll have to walk right up on 'em."

Mert climbed up on the rock, pulled sandwiches from his shirt, and chewed moodily. "'Member when we got two, just sittin' on this rock, Ollie?"

"That was in '38," said Ollie.

The sun blazed, summer warm. Perry was uncomfortable in his double layer of sweat shirt and hunting jacket. His new pants itched.

"Maybe they're in those swamps," he suggested.

"No," said Mert with conviction. "Nothin' in there."

Perry wondered how he knew. The swamps looked ideal, to him.

"Let's try over by the brook," suggested Ollie, when they had finished.

It was terribly difficult walking. Briars snatched at their clothes, bit through the heavy garments into the flesh. Frequently the layers of dead brush gave way and plunged them almost to the shoulders in a mess of brambles. Perry's thighs ached from the unaccustomed strain. He heard Mert curse.

"Fat chance of creepin' up on a deer through this stuff," he said. "We sound like Sat'dy night at East Elwin dance hall."

THEY got better footing presently. Skirting a small bunch of growth, Perry had to make a detour which took him farther away from the other two men than he intended. Just ahead was a glade full of tall, lush grass, beyond which the brook wandered among alders.

"Likely looking place," he thought instinctively, and even as he made this observation, a doe rose effortlessly from the grass, about twenty yards ahead of him. Her leaps were tremendous, seeming like slow motion, and the poetry of this silent movement paralyzed Perry to every other thought.

The animal had made almost a half circle around him, when he remembered what he had come to do. Quickly raising the rifle, Perry took a sight on the doe. He was braced for a brutal report, a sharp kick. But nothing happened.

He had levered three cartridges out of the rifle before he realized he wasn't pulling the trigger! By the time he became aware of this oversight, the deer was in line with the other two men and Perry could only shout, frantically, "There's a doe comin' your way, boys!"

The white flag bounced mockingly at him and was gone. There was a pause, then three shots in vicious quick succession.

Perry started to run, scarcely knowing why.

It had never occurred to him that Mert and Ollie would miss. But miss they had, or at least had not brought down the deer. Perry found them standing staring into a thick growth of pine and fir. Smoke was curling from Mert's gun.

"Heard her grunt," he said, excitedly. "Think I paunched her. Look for stains."

They thrust their way into the thicket. There were no signs of blood. The trail quickly lost itself in a maze of other tracks, all equally fresh. Mert went on, however, crashing angrily ahead, while Perry and Ollie stopped to light cigarettes. He came back after a while and threw his hat down in admission of defeat.

"Goddammit," he cried, his face flushed and disappointed. "I had a perfect chance at her. She was caught in the bend of the river." He looked at Perry. "Ollie couldn't shoot for fear of hitting me. How come you didn't plug her? If you had time to call, you had time to shoot."

"Get a little buck fever, perhaps?" Ollie suggested, slyly.

Perry felt the red creep up his neck.

"I—I was working the damned lever and forgot to pull the trigger," he stuttered. "I guess I got a little too excited," he finished lamely.

"Hell's bells," said Mert, disgusted. "I knew we were goin' to have bad luck when you wouldn't let me blast that first one, comin' in," he said to Ollie. It was obvious that Mert was going to blame everything and everybody except his own bad shooting.

"They're here anyhoo," said Ollie, soothingly. "We've jumped our first and we'll jump more."

"No sense jumpin' 'em if somebody don't knock 'em down," said Mert.

They all felt unaccountably tired, let down.

"Let's hit for Harry's," suggested Ollie. "We're a good hour's hike through this damn puckerbrush and sun's gettin' low."

"I still think I paunched her," said Mert stubbornly.

"Oh, come on," said Ollie, wearily. "There are plenty deer left. Besides I need a drink."

All the way back Mert brooded on his failure.

The old guide offered rum and sympathy. "Don't feel so bad, Mertland my boy," he said. "Sometimes I get my wind up and look at the deer instead of down through the sights. Especially if I haven't been huntin' much. You'll get your bag."

Mert poured himself another slug from the old man's bottle. Something of his old bravado returned.

"Never went back empty-handed yet," he said.

The guide took a sharp knife, stepped out the door and expertly snipped the hide away from the deer's haunches. He peeled the skin back over the dark red meat, sliced off three generous steaks.

"Better have a taste of what you're after," he said, handing them to the visitors. "It'll put lead in your pencil for tomorrer."

The fresh venison was wonderful. Ollie was inclined to overdo it, but Perry managed to salvage his steak before it was dry. The meat tasted like marvelously juicy tenderloin. The meal, the drinks and a clear frosty night put them all in a good humor.

They ate outside and sat long over fortified coffee.

"Tomorrow's another day," said Mert, mollified at last.

Ollie blew on his coffee. "No sense shootin' all the deer the first day. Leaves you nothin' to do but sit around and drink rum the rest of the week."

Mert glanced toward the rack between the trees, empty except for the pork. "Still an' all," he said, "I'd sure like to see that old doe hung up there." He turned to Perry. "Next time you be sure you've got a ca'tridge in your chamber—and then don't forget the trigger. You got just as good a chance to pop one as we have."

Perry felt unaccountably pleased. It was the first near admission by Mert that he was anything but a tolerated onlooker. "I'll do that," he said. "I'm sorry about this afternoon. I really had the best chance of anybody."

"I stood and looked at my first three when I began," said Ollie. "Kinda gets you, don't it, way they go?"

"Yeah," said Perry and would have expanded the theme, but thought better of it. Later, snug in his sleeping bag, he mused on the great Nijinsky-like leaps of the doe. He was somehow glad she had got away. He wondered if Mert had really "paunched" the animal, if some hidden thicket was even now witnessing her final agony.

Perry decided not—because he wanted to believe it so.

TUESDAY and Wednesday it rained. Not hard, but steadily, drearily, as though Nature bewailed the undeniable end of fall, the beginning of winter. Hunting in a November rain is a miserable business, but they put in a full day on Tuesday—for the dubious pleasure of seeing a white flag frisk into a bush.

Mert fired wildly, six shots in all.

On Wednesday, Ollie came down with a cold and begged off after half a day. Mert and Perry went grimly on. Although they walked all day, they saw nothing except a few partridges and a porcupine, unoffendingly munching bark up in a tree. Mert, expressing his mood, blew it to pieces.

Supper that night was a silent affair—inside, with the steam of drying garments, the seep of rain on the canvas roof.

"We just gotta get one tomorrow," said Mert as they turned in.

Perry eased himself achingly into his sleeping bag. "Men are fools," he decided. Nevertheless when Thursday dawned fair and fine, he felt the excitement of a new day, a new possibility. It was impossible not to catch the ardent sense of necessity which filled his companions.

"Deer'll be out today, sure," said Mert as they reached the Burn. "They have to eat like anybody else."

For two hours they clung to this hope, walking slowly through the brush with frequent halts to case the surrounding countryside. The soft mud showed beyond doubt that the deer had been about earlier, but were gone now to some mysterious hideaway beyond the ken of their hunters.

Alongside one of the narrow swamps, the men took counsel.

For three days these swamps had haunted Perry. They were cool, damp, dark—perfect cover, as he conceived it, for creatures who dislike and distrust the noonday sun.

He therefore brought his idea up again, not so timidly as at first. The other two men were obviously stymied for suggestions.

"Why don't I go in and beat this swamp?" Perry said. "You boys get on each side and a little ahead of me. I'll make quite a racket and if I see one, I'll yell which way he's heading."

"O.K. by me," said Ollie.

Not by Mert. "I tell you there's nothing in there," he said, stubbornly. "I drove this same swamp four years ago and all I did was get my feet wet. You'll sink to the hip." He saw that Perry and Ollie were against him, and capitulated. "What the hell," he concluded, "we might as well try this as stand here arguin'."

The swamp looked like something primordial, forgotten. Great tree roots curled up out of dark pools of water like anguished snakes, moss yielded to the foot and sank into mud. A latticework of close woven branches made it difficult to walk upright.

Deer tracks showed here and there, some of them very fresh. Perry felt a boyish sense of excitement rising in him. "Be here," he prayed, and sloshed on through. He had gone perhaps halfway when he happened to see a bleached bone lying by a stump ahead. Perry picked it up, wondering about it, when a slight movement caused him to look up—almost directly into the eyes of a deer.

They were not more than five yards apart, and for a full ticking second stared at each other in fascination. Then the deer made a snorting whuff, whirled, made off to the right.

While Perry was hesitating, wondering if his shot would hit Ollie, the doe had vanished.

"Coming out, to the right, Ollie!" he yelled.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when another deer—a buck this time—rose in almost the same spot, took off to the left. Perry's rifle caught on a twig as he raised it. He fired anyhow and yelled to Mert. Guns promptly answered him from both sides of the swamp.

Beating his way to the end, Perry emerged—muddy and breathless—and met Ollie first. The big man grinned ruefully. "Maybe I should practice up at the shooting gallery," he said. "That ole doe came out and even stopped. I gave her three and she took off. Let's see how Mert came out."

They found Mert standing in a sort of daze.

"A buck," he said. "Son of a ———! I gave him everything I had, but it wasn't enough."

They lit cigarettes with fingers that still trembled.

"Guess they were in there all the time, laughin' at us," said Ollie.

"Yeah," said Mert. He did not look at Perry, but took three or four quick puffs at his cigarette, threw it down and ground it with his heel. He picked up his rifle. "I'm goin' to get that buck if it's the last thing I do," he said, roughly, over his shoulder. "See you back in camp."

Again that curiously guilty feeling, as though he had done something wrong, assailed Perry. He fought it, knowing it was illogical, nonsense.

"Mert acts as if he were sore at me," he said, at last, to Ollie. Might as well find out how he stood.

"Mert's not sore at you," said Ollie. "He's just sore at himself. He's worried to death 'cause we don't get any deer."

"But we're having a good time," Perry objected. "Aren't we?"

"Sure, but it's not enough." Ollie rolled a cigarette, expertly. "We're on the spot, Perry. We just got to come back with deer, and Mert knows it." After a little he expanded the statement. "You have to live in a small Maine town to understand that, I s'pose. When you're a kid, the Elwin Fair is the biggest thing in life, and after you're grown, it's the huntin' season. A man who don't get his deer is kinda looked down on by the fellers. 'Specially guys like Mert and me who come way hell an' gone up here to get ours." The blue eyes surveyed Perry gravely. "Does that make any sense to you?"

Perry thought it did.

"'Course I'm older'n Mert and I don't take these things so serious," Ollie concluded. "I sure hope he comes back with that buck, just the same."

It was after dark when Mert finally showed up in camp. He had obviously stopped long

in old Harry's camp, and was lurching with liquor and fatigue.

"Follered his trail clear up Bear Mountain," he said. "Lost it in the pines." He unbuckled his cartridge belt, let it fall with a clatter of hunting knife and canteen. "I'm goin' to bed," he said.

"We kep' your supper warm," said Ollie. "Better eat somethin'."

Mert went on into the tent without answering. He did not start to snore for quite a while, however.

"Tomorrow's Friday and the next day's Saturday," said Ollie.

AS THEY were eating a silent breakfast, the next morning, Mert suddenly dropped his coffee cup and stared out across the lake. Without a word, he scrambled down to the lake, leaped into the canoe, and paddled frantically out into the water.

They saw his paddle rise and fall with a great splash. In a few moments, he returned, grinning, carrying a small brown animal by the hind legs.

"Mink," he said. "Ain't he a beauty?"

Perry had almost forgotten that mink lived elsewhere than on the shoulders of ladies in the Stork Club.

"That's a prime one," said Ollie. "What you goin' to do with him?"

Mert's eyes were evasive. "Dunno yet."

He carried the mink with them when they went hunting and at the top of the trail drew the old guide outside his cabin and engaged him in earnest conversation.

"Mert's makin' a dicker for a deer," Ollie whispered. "He's really in a bad way when he'd do that."

They hunted together in the morning, separated in the afternoon. Mert perched on the great rock from which he had shot deer before. They left him chewing his lip and staring defiantly out over the Burn.

Perry stalked the lush grass around the brook. Once he heard a deer go off on the other side of a thicket, without giving him a shot. Returning, he found that both Mert and Ollie had sighted and fired on deer. Ollie had actually wounded a buck, but though they followed the trail as long as the light held, they couldn't find him.

"Hate to paunch 'em like that, but he didn't give me a fair shot," said Ollie.

When they returned to the cabin, old Harry was cleaning his rifle. He glanced at Mert, and then at his companions.

"It's all right, Harry," said Mert. "We're all in this together."

"One old doe is the best I could do fer ye, Mert," said the old man.

Mert's eyes lighted. "One's one anyway. At least we go back with somethin' on the fenders besides mud. Where is she?"

"Hung up in a tree down by Finger Swamps. I'll show ye in the morning."

After supper that night, Mert resolutely rose and put on his belt. His face was grim.

"I'm goin' up the brook in the canoe," he said, almost defensively. Both Perry and Ollie knew what he meant, even before he asked, "Who's going to hold the light?"

"I will," said Perry.

"Keep your ears open for the warden's outboard," warned Ollie.

"Warden's least of my worries," said Mert.

At the foot of the falls, they sat in the canoe for two long, chilly hours, playing Mert's powerful flashlight on the little beach where the deer came down to drink. Fish jumped and off in the distance a bear racketed. No deer came.

"Not thirsty tonight," Mert finally decided.

Saturday was their last day of hunting, and it started badly. The deer, which old Harry had shot, was gone. They found the spot where he had hung the animal and tufts of brown and white hair, lying about. The soft earth told the story.

"Bear," said the guide, "and a monstrous one, too. I hung that old doe way up out of reach of all but a whopper."

"Can't we trail him?" Perry inquired.

The guide shook his head. "He may be ten miles off by now. I'm turrible sorry, Mert. I'll do my best to get ye another."

"That's all right, Harry," said Mert, listlessly.

At noon, Ollie gave up.

"I'm all tuckered out," he said. "Guess I'll go back to camp. Good luck to you boys."

They watched him go. Then Mert said, "Ollie's gettin' old. Never gave up like this before." He looked at the sun. "We got three hours—to get three deer. That's a lot o' shootin'."

There were no deer on the Burn, none in the swamps. That left only the forested hills, hard places in which to get a shot. Nevertheless they climbed the biggest to get a look. The Rangers had cut a fire trail up the hill and the walking was not difficult.

At the top, the trail led out to a flat rock, with a sheer drop of several hundred feet. Here the sun was warm, the view magnificent. The whole Burn was visible, a scar deep inset into the heart of the woods. The brook ran like a blue thread, suturing the scar. Closing in around the Burn was the endless, eternal green of pine, fir and balsam, extending as far as the eye could see.

But Mert was not concerned with this splendor. "I just don't understand it," he said at last. "The place is lousy with tracks and droppings. All we've seen is," he counted silently, "six deer. Worst hunting we ever had."

"I'm afraid," Perry ventured, "I must be a Jonah."

"Naw," said Mert. But, Perry thought, not too convincingly.

They went on down the trail. Frequently Mert stopped and listened—Perry, too, but without hearing anything.

"There's somethin' moving down toward the Burn," said Mert in a whisper, "just ahead of us. I can hear little small sounds, like twigs cracklin'."

They continued on. When they got to the edge of the Burn, they paused. Ahead of them lay another small swamp, one they had not seen before.

"You go round to the left, I'll take the right," said Mert, talking fast. "I'm positive we're gonna jump one."

Perry caught Mert's suppressed excitement instantly. In just a minute, he told himself, something's going to happen. He had had that impression all week, but this was different. Just to be sure, he moved the cocking lever of his rifle, caught the gleam of the shell in the chamber.

Directly ahead of him a deer shot up out of the brush, bounded toward the swamp.

Perry had no memory, afterwards, of raising the rifle, or sighting. He only heard his gun go off, saw the deer stagger like a roped calf and fall.

"Got him," he cried—only to see a second deer, bigger than the first, leave cover and soar toward safety. "There's another, Mert!" he yelled.

Their rifles spoke almost together, twice. The deer vanished into the swamp.

Mert came tearing up from the right, running along a great fallen tree like a squirrel. Color flamed in his dark cheeks and his eyes flashed. He knelt very briefly by the fallen doe.

"Deader'n a doornail," he said. "That's nice shootin'." He got up. "I think we hit that buck. I'm goin' in and see." He pointed to a little hillock, commanding the swamp. "You go up there where you can get a crack at him if he comes out."

PERRY hurried to the point designated, stood gripping his rifle. His chest heaved and a warm glow suffused him. He had shot his deer, and with Mert as witness. Generously, he hoped that Mert had killed the fleeing buck.

The crashing in the swamp drew nearer. Mert emerged, looking puzzled. He came toward Perry and when his head and shoulders were just visible, threw up his hand.

"The lamb's headed your way," he shouted. "Get him."

Startled, Perry brought his gun waist-high. A young deer, hardly more than a fawn, bounded up the slope, not more than fifteen yards away. Without aiming, Perry pointed the rifle and pulled the trigger. The little deer collapsed on its side, as though suddenly weary, and lay very still.

Mert came up on a run.

"Jesusgod," he cried, "ain't this somethin'?" He looked at Perry curiously. "Sure you ain't been holdin' out on us? You shot that one like a circus performer."

Perry laughed. "I couldn't very well miss at that distance."

Mert slit the deer's throat, expertly. "Let Junior lay," he said, "and let's get after that buck again. I think we got the whole family. Gee, won't Ollie be tickled?"

They went back to the swamp and proceeded cautiously down the side. Suddenly Mert uttered a cry and jumped into a little gully. Perry saw his knife flash, saw him rise slowly—a big grin on his face.

There lay the buck, a trickle of crimson coming from his throat.

"We both hit him, I think," said Mert. "You got him twice." He indicated two bullet holes in the rough fur of the left side of the deer, one near the shoulder, the other farther back. "And I . . ." Mert turned the deer over.

He never finished the sentence for the right side, the side from which he had been hunting, was unblemished. Mert's grin faded. His hands ran over the deer again, found nothing. His lips moved and as though Perry were not there at all, Mert said incredulously, "He got all three of 'em."

"I couldn't have," said Perry, momentarily stunned. The evidence, however, was undeniable. "Gee, I'm sorry about this, Mert," he said contritely.

"Sorry?" Mert sniffed. "What the hell? I had just as good a chance as you." He rallied against his disappointment. "We got three deer anyhow. That's what we come for. Don't make any difference who shot 'em."

But that, Perry knew, was not true.

Without more ado. Mert went to work with his hunting knife and within half an hour had the three deer cleaned and hung high above any bear's reach. When he had finished, his arms were red to the elbow. He did a sketchy job of washing up in the swamp, lit a cigarette with stained fingers and surveyed the three carcasses, hanging so still in the trees.

"We'll bring the canoe up the brook first thing in the morning and lug 'em out. Which one do you want to tag?" The dark eyes fixed Perry firmly, waiting.

"I'll take the little one."

"You got your choice," said Mert.

"I couldn't use all the meat in the bigger ones. You boys have families."

Mert shrugged his shoulders. He took the tag attached to Perry's license and clipped it

in the ear of the small deer with a thorn. The buck he tagged with his own card.

"We'll leave the buck for old Ollie," he said.

They made their way back to camp in almost complete silence. Toward the actual killing of the deer, Perry felt no emotion at all. That he had killed them all was a pure fluke of fortune. "He'll never forgive me, just the same," Perry decided, and the feeling of failure in his relationship with the other man spoiled the joy of his victory.

Finally Mert spoke.

"You better not tell anyone in Elwin you shot all three," he said, as though the words cost him an effort. "It's 'gainst the law to shoot more'n one and the warden might cause you trouble."

"I won't say a word," said Perry.

"That's good," said Mert, as though a load were off his mind. He entered camp with a hallaloo that brought Ollie immediately from the tent.

"What luck?" he asked.

"Three," said Mert. "Young buck, big doe and lamb."

"No!" said Ollie, in astonishment. "Well, what do you know about that? Who got what?"

"He got 'em all." Mert jerked his thumb. "In fifteen minutes. Damndest shootin' you ever see."

"Beginner's luck," said Perry.

Ollie's pleasure was apparent and genuine. He clapped Perry on the back. "An' we thought you was just comin' along for the walk. Calls for a big drink."

Mert told the story, then, without sparing himself—while Perry sat apart. He had gone in their estimation, he realized, from rank amateur to champion without any of the intermediate stages. He was still in a class by himself.

"That buck's head will look swell mounted," Ollie said, when the story was concluded and the victor toasted. "I'll get old Parsons to do it for you, if you say."

"Hearn ain't takin' the buck," Mert said. "He's takin' the little one."

Perry felt called on to say something. "I . . . we want you to have the buck, Ollie," he said. "You've got the biggest family."

"That's awful decent of you, Perry," Ollie said, gratefully. His face clouded. "I guess Perry don't realize what it means when a man tags the lamb?"

"I guess he don't," said Mert. "You better tell him."

"The guy who don't shoot anything on a huntin' trip usually tags the smallest one, if there's enough to go around. You're likely to get a bad ribbin' from the boys in the general store."

"I guess I can take it," said Perry, whose six months were very nearly up.

"I should think you could," said Mert, "under the circumstances."

THEY got back to Elwin after dark the next day and Mert blew the horn stridently as befitted victorious warriors returning from the fray. The door opened and his kids rushed out and pounced upon the deer on the mudguards. Edith came slowly down from the house.

"Thank God you're back," she said. "The baby's got croup and the watercloset's on the blink." She kissed Mert and looked at the deer. "Kinda puny this year, ain't they?" she said. "Who tagged the lamb?"

"You can read, can't you?" said Mert. He turned to Ollie. There was a little pause. "Well," he said, "that's huntin' for another year."

"That's it," said Ollie. He threw the buck on the mudguard of his own car. Shook Perry's hand.

"Sure glad you came along, Perry," he said. "More ways'n one."

"You stayin' for supper?" asked Mert.

"No, thanks, Mert," said Ollie. "Min's waitin'." He drove off and Mert turned to Perry.

"How about you, Hearn? You got no place to go."

Suddenly Perry wanted to get away, by himself. He had a sudden hunger for New York, for its roar and lights and mass loneliness. "Tomorrow," he thought, eagerly. . .

Aloud he said, "I'm rather tired, Mert. Thanks just the same."

"Suit yourself, but you're welcome."

Perry nodded. "I've had a wonderful trip, Mert. I'll never forget it. Thanks a million for . . . for taking me."

"Thank *you*," said Mert. "You won't forget?" He looked significantly at the deer.

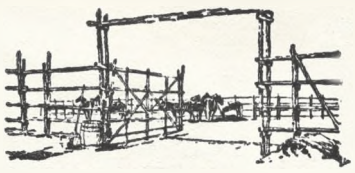
"Don't worry."

Mert turned toward the house, carrying Edith and the children with him. The light silhouetted his figure, the warmth of the kitchen billowed out. "Now what in hell is wrong with the watercloset?" Perry heard him ask.

The door closed.

ASK ADVENTURE

Information You Can't Get Elsewhere



A horse of another color.

Query:—Thirty-five years ago when I was a small boy in the Western Dakotas, there were very few remudas in that country that did not have one or two "Buckskin" horses. Now, when I say "Buckskin" I do not mean a "Palomino" but a horse of deep yellow color with a neat, narrow black stripe running from poll to croup, with a black splotch across the withers forming a cross with the stripe which we used to call "The Devil's Cross." The mane and tail black, the legs trim and Zebra striped, the hooves round and hard —an excellent foot indeed—the back short, the head small but very wide between the eyes and the ears small, sharp and well curved. These horses were noted for their endurance—we used to say of them "Mean as hell but, yu' can't kill 'em". That these horses, so alike in color and marking and endurance, are descendants of a strong, distinct breed (tho perhaps ancient) there can be no doubt—at least as far as I am concerned.

We used to own an old broncho buckskin mare that came up from Southern Colorado with a wild bunch. She was tough as whalebone and smart as a whip but she had to be fresh broke every spring. After a few days work tho she'd wear out two average range ponies. She weighed about ten-fifty and was marked exactly as described above. She has great-grandsons and -daughters scattered around that country and more than half of them are as much like her as peas from the same pod. That is, as far as coloring and marking go but not for size, because her blood has been mixed with everything from Percheron to Thoroughbred.

If you are able to furnish it I would appreciate the following information:

1. Do the horses that I have described have a history as a distinct breed and if so where can I obtain books containing such data.
2. Is there any relation between the real "Buckskin" and the present day "Palomino"
3. Is there an Association in this country devoted to the Buckskin such as have been organized for the Palomino, the Quarter Horse & etc.
4. Where can I obtain a history of the origin of the Cleveland Bay.
5. Can you furnish me with the addresses of several of the best known breeders of the Cleveland Bay. We do not have any of them out here that I know of.

E. C. Cleveland
P. O. Box 996
Nogales, Arizona

Reply by John Richard Young:—(1) The linebacked buckskins such as you describe have no history or recognition as a distinct breed, so far as I know. But you are by no means alone in your admiration for those horses; many other horsemen of the West agree with you that they are generally about the toughest animals on hoofs that ever roamed the plains. I have known some horsemen who even went so far as to declare without any *ifs, ands* or *buts* that there never was a linebacked dun of the Mustang strain that was not tops or very near tops. Most of them also would agree with you that these buckskins were also tops in limbering the kinks out of their spines—and their rider's—on frosty mornings and every spring, not to mention whenever else they felt frisky, which was often.

Exactly what makes zebra duns so hardy and enduring no man, of course, can say for certain. My personal opinion is that they usually are so primarily because they have in a greater degree than most horses many of the characteristics of the primitive horse. The dark dorsal stripe, the shoulder mark and the horizontal stripes on the legs are characteristics of Prjevalsky's horse, which, with the tarpan, was probably the last truly wild horse in existence. The tarpan, the zebralike quagga, the onager, the kiang, as well as various wild asses, likewise all shared the characteristic of the dark dorsal stripe. The hardy Norwegian dun ponies show both the dorsal and leg stripes, occasionally even zebralike stripes on the face. Most authorities are pretty well agreed that the primitive wild horses were probably either dun or mouse-gray (*grulla*, blue-roan, whatever one chooses to call it) with the dorsal stripe and very likely striped legs. I think this explains why your old mare's offspring all inherited her coloration. It's quite common and evidently she was herself a dominant type of broodmare.

(2) Yes. Palomino breeders occasionally get palomino colts from buckskin mares—but not as frequently as they would like! However, if by "real buckskin" you mean the linebacked dun type of horse you have described the chance of getting palomino colts is slim, indeed. Sometimes two palominos (mis)produce a buckskin foal, but

not, so far as I know, striped buckskins, your conception of the real McCoy.

(3) Not that I know of. However, there is a ranch in Texas which specializes in producing buckskin horses as some outfits specialize in producing palominos, albinos, etc. I do not know, however, whether any of the horses are commonly for sale. The late Frank M. Patton, founder of the ranch, originally aimed at producing his ideal of the cow-horse. As foundation stock he used Mustang-type mares and Thorobred stallions. His widow continued the ranch after her husband's death. Whether the stud has since been sold I do not know. If you wish, you might try writing to Mrs. Frank M. Patton, Benjamin, Texas; or to the editor of "The Cattleman" magazine, Forth Worth, Texas. I'll be interested in knowing what results you get.

(4) (5) Write to Mr. A. Mackay Smith, Farnley, White Post, Virginia; secretary of the Cleveland Bay Society of America.

Not much is known for certain about the foundation of this breed, except that Thorobred blood very likely played an important part in giving the Cleveland Bay his pronounced Thorobredlike appearance—tho the appearance of a very *big* Thorobred——and activeness. The breed has been known as a distinct type for several centuries in Yorkshire, where it originated. It is the oldest breed of general purpose horse, known in earlier times as the Chapman Horse. Probably Yorkshire cart mares cooperated with the Thorobred in founding the breed. The only correct color is bay, with only a very small amount of white permitted, such as a small star and a few white hairs on the heels. Mane, tail and legs are black.

In temperament, Cleveland Bays are steady and docile. They make excellent farm horses, quick and active, especially well able to stand heat. Stallions weigh up to 1,500 pounds, stand up to 17 hands tall; mares proportionately less. Being essentially coachers in conformation, with an excellent trot, rather heavy in the forehead and relatively light in the loins, purebreds lack the qualities of a good riding horse; but when crossed with medium-sized Thorobred stallions, they command very high prices as handsome weightcarrying hunters.

In this country the Cleveland Bay and the Yorkshire Coach horse are registered in the same studbook, but in England the Yorkshire Coach is considered to be a distinct type and has its own studbook. The Yorkshire Coach originated from breeders' desire to infuse more speed into the old Cleveland Bay and their resultant crossing with Eastern and later Thorobred blood.

ARCTIC thunder.

Query: Can you tell me if thunder storms occur in Baffinland or Greenland? If they do, please let me know how often they occur. What is the average summer temperature there inside the Arctic Circle?

—Oscar Axley,
Route 2, Box 139,
Dongola, Ill.

Reply by Victor Shaw: I have no mention in my diaries of trips to both regions of thunder storms in either Baffinland or Greenland, nor can I find mention of them in annals of explorers of my arctic library. I feel sure therefore that they are very rare, or seldom occur. This is also true, by the way, of Alaska, where I lived for a dozen years, so can state that they are rare in northern Alaska, and seldom known in the southerly parts although I've seen *some* in the south at widely spaced intervals.

The reason for this rarity in Greenland and Baffinland is too technical for a letter like this, but I'll say that it probably has to do with the great inland ice sheet in Greenland, coupled with the fact that Greenland is comparatively narrow and has the sea on both sides. This high inland ice mass has over it a dry high-pressure condition of atmosphere as a rule; though slightly less dry in the southern part, where annual precipitation is a bit higher

The air, however, over the sea is moist and warmer, although the difference in summer isn't very great and lessens in winter months. But this difference is enough during the few summer months to create a lot of fog, and also rains often accompanied by hail or snow. There is, of course, heavy snow in winter too. This is more or less true in the Baffinland region although there are occasional bad storms in the fall. I think though that the lack of electric storms results from the fact that proper meteorological conditions are rare. At least, the charted world-storm paths pass in the Atlantic well south of southern Greenland and also pass easterly through Labrador on the northern limits.

The earth is charged with negative electricity, while clouds have the positive type, so when atmospheric conditions are right there is an electric discharge from positive to negative, and the vacuum produced makes the noise we term "thunder." Clouds act as condensers and if they pass close enough to the earth there is a discharge; but if the high-pressure dry cold air over the Greenland ice cap disperses electricity there would be no discharge—which may or may not explain.

At any rate, there are gales and hurricanes up there especially in winter months, but also often during the summer; and also there is rain, sleet, hail and snow even in summer, as I've seen and experienced, but that is due to cold air off the Cap hitting the warmer moisture-laden air of the sea.

Not enough is known even yet of polar meteorology, although we've been learning much since World War Two started; but when we know all about the move-

ments of polar air masses, weather forcasting will be a cinch and possibly we'll know why thunder storms there are rare.

In re summer temperatures: these vary greatly for southern, eastern and western, and northern Greenland; this being due to the Ice Cap, also the amount of snow-bare land along those coasts. It is warmest at Cape Farewell (its southern tip) in July, with an average of 50°; but it is around 40° in the same month at Godthaab up the west coast, and 45° at Disco Island farther north because a sea current around Farewell carries floe ice up around Godthaab. Also Disco Island has more ice-free land exposed. This goes too for N. W. Greenland, where many miles of ice-free ground are bare between the Ice Cap and the sea of Smith Sound and the average temperature is listed at about 40° in mid-July, but I've seen 100° there recorded on my thermometer in the sun, the first week in August. The whole east coast has much lower temperatures, for the Cap comes right to the sea edge, and the winds from the east blow over solidly packed ice floes.

Only about half of Baffinland is north of the Circle. but it has little inland ice and the July average is around 45°, though I've known it often to be from 75° to over 100° in the sun.

CAT as catch can!

Query: I live in good catfish country and have always considered myself a very good fisherman when it comes to catching catfish with hook and line, using bait, but this year I have been a complete failure. My belief is that it's the bait I'm using or me being out of practice for over three years.

I know the nature of the catfish very well—that is to say where he feeds at night, lays up during the day and the streams where they are likely to be found, but my question is: What are the best baits to use?

Any information will be greatly appreciated.

—J. G. Wisner,
Wilkinson. Miss.

Reply by John Alden Knight: It seems to be the common feeling that earth worms are about as good as any of the baits. Catfish fishermen agree that the hook should be loaded with worms, a half dozen or so not being too many.

In some sections of the country, fishermen have evolved the system of tying a short piece of woolen yarn about the top of the hook. This yarn is then saturated with one of the essential oils, such as oil of anise. Then the hook is baited with half a dozen or so earth worms and the bait fished as usual. I have not used this method, but I have received glowing reports of its workings.

Some fishermen make a practice of baiting a back water in a stream, or a certain spot in a lake or pond with such things as fish heads, rancid meats etc They do this by enclosing the bait in a net bag and anchoring the net bag in the desired spot This will attract fish and keep them in the general vicinity.

In the event that you make use of my suggestion about the essential oils, I would be interested in hearing from you as to the results.

THE rabbit scourge.

Query: I am growing an acre of carrots on river bottom land near a lake. Jackrabbits eat the tops off level with the ground. I have tried electric fence; also setting five No. 2 traps in a circle around a pile of dug carrots; also poisoning with strychnine carrots, apples and potatoes. None are effective. I get only an occasional animal. I dare not let my dog loose at night because of sheep and goats on adjoining farm. Can't get a shot except when it's too dark to shoot.

Perhaps you can tell me of something rabbits would like better than vegetables which I could poison. Or perhaps some lure or better trapping method? I have tried for two years without much success.

—W. H. Pendell,
Crow Stage Route,
Eugene, Ore.

Reply by Raymond S. Spears: Your jackrabbit problem seems to call for a Government Trapper. Write to Wild Life Service Dept. of Interior, Washington, D. C., and ask for interview with the Government Trapper covering your region. And tell in the letter what you tell me.

There is a pen-trap you can make that will let jackrabbits into an enclosure about two rods square. Have gates that will let them in, but which won't open outward Several stiff wires with sharp points facing in around a hole; jack comes in, but points won't let him get out. Or a swing gate, opening inward but not outward

The fact seems to be the jackrabbits come to you from a wide area. There probably is no bait to equal your growing carrots. Still, apples or other fruit—pears, etc.—might serve to lure.

You can do night shooting if you wire a flashlight along your gun barrel and throw the beams at the rabbit and then pull the trigger—you need a long-beam flash, probably with a lens instead of a glass over the bulb. Shotgun work.

Oregon has a poison-squad from the Wild Life Service (Federal). You can get the address at the Forest Ranger's office in Eugene for the regional office—Government poisoner. The poison service is for just such cases as yours.

THE ASK ADVENTURE SERVICE is free, provided self-addressed envelope and FULL POSTAGE for reply are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries must enclose International Reply Coupons, which are exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union.

Send each question *direct* to the expert in charge of the section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. **Do Not** send questions to the magazine. Be definite; explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question. The magazine does not assume any responsibility. **No Reply** will be made to requests for partners, financial backing or employment.

✱*(Enclose addressed envelope with International Reply Coupon.)*

Notice: Many of our *Ask Adventure* experts are still engaged in government service of one kind or another. Some are on active duty in the Army or Navy, others serving in an executive or advisory capacity on various of the boards and offices which were set up to hasten the nation's war effort. Almost without exception these men consented to remain on our staff, carry on their work for the magazine if humanly possible, but with the understanding that for the duration such work was to be of secondary importance to their official duties. This was as it should be, and when you didn't receive answers to queries as promptly as we all wished, your patience was appreciated. Foreign mails are still slow and uncertain, many are still curtailed drastically, but now that the war is over we can hope for a more expanded, smoother functioning *Ask Adventure* service very soon. Bear with us and we'll continue to try to serve you as speedily as possible.

ASK ADVENTURE EXPERTS

SPORTS AND HOBBIES

Archery—EARL B. POWELL, care of *Adventure*.

Baseball—FREDERICK LIEB, care of *Adventure*.

Basketball—STANLEY CARHART, 99 Broad St., Matawan, N. J.

Big Game Hunting in North America: *Guides and equipment*—A. H. CARHART, c/o *Adventure*.

Boxing—COL. JEAN V. GROMBACH, care of *Adventure*.

Camping—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

Coins and Medals—WILLIAM L. CLARK, American Numismatic Society, Broadway at 156th, N. Y. C.

Dogs—FREEMAN LLOYD, care of *Adventure*.

Fencing—COL. JEAN V. GROMBACH, care of *Adventure*.

First Aid—DR. CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, care of *Adventure*.

Fishing: *Fresh water; fly and bait casting; bait casting outfits; fishing trips*—JOHN ALDEN KNIGHT, 929 W. 4th St., Williamsport, Penna.

Fishing, Salt water: *Bottom fishing, surf casting; trolling; equipment and locations*—C. BLACKBURN MILLER, care of *Adventure*.

Fly and Bait Casting Tournament—"CHIEF" STANWOOD, East Sullivan, Maine.

Health-Building Activities, Hiking — DR. CLAUDE P. FORDYCE, care of *Adventure*.

Horses and Horsemanship—JOHN RICHARD YOUNG, 3225 W. Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee 8, Wis.

Motor Boating—GERALD T. WHITE, Montville, N. J.

Motorcycling: *Regulations, mechanics, racing*—CHARLES M. DODGE, care of *Adventure*.

Mountain Climbing—THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 6520 Romaine St., Hollywood, Calif.

Old Songs—ROBERT WHITE, 918 W. 7th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Rifles, Pistols, Revolvers: *Foreign and American*—DONEGAN WIGGINS, 170 Liberty Rd., Salem, Oregon.

Shotguns, American and Foreign: Wing Shooting and Field Trials—ROY S. TINNEY, Chatham New Jersey

Small Boating: *Skiffs, outboard, small launch, river and lake cruising*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif.

Swimming—LOUIS DEB. HANDLEY, 115 West 11th St., N. Y., N. Y.

Swords, Spears, Pole Arms and Armor—MAJOR R. E. GARDNER, care of *Adventure*.

Track—JACKSON SCHOLZ, R. D. No. 1, Doylestown, Pa.

Woodcraft—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

Wrestling—MUEL E. THRUSH, New York Athletic Club, 59th St. and 7th Ave., N. Y., N. Y.

SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL SUBJECTS

Anthropology: *American, north of the Panama Canal, customs, dress, architecture; pottery and decorative arts, weapons and implements, fetishism, social divisions*—ARTHUR WOODWARD, Los Angeles Museum, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

Entomology: *Insects and spiders; venomous and disease-carrying insects*—DR. S. W. FROST, 465 E. Foster Ave., State College, Penna.

Forestry, North American: *The U. S. Forestry Service, our national forests, conservation and use*—A. H. CARHART, c/o *Adventure*.

Forestry, Tropical: *Tropical forests and products*—WM. R. BARBOUR, care of U. S. Forest Service, Glenn Bldg., Atlanta, Ga.

Herpetology: *Reptiles and amphibians*—CLIFFORD H. POPE, care of *Adventure*.

Mining, Prospecting, and Precious Stones: *Anywhere in North America. Prospectors' outfitting; any mineral, metallic or non-metallic*—VICTOR SHAW, care of *Adventure*

Ornithology: *Birds, their habits and distribution*—DAVIS QUINN, 5 Minerva Pl., Bronx, N. Y.

Photography: *Outfitting, work in out-of-the way places; general information*—PAUL L. ANDERSON, 36 Washington St., East Orange, N. J.

Radio: *Telegraphy, telephony, history, receiver construction, portable sets*—DONALD McNICOL, care of *Adventure*.

Railroads: *in the United States, Mexico and Canada*—R. T. NEWMAN, 701 N. Main St., Paris, Ill.

Sawmilling—HAPSBURG LIEBE, care of *Adventure*.

Sunken Treasure: *Treasure ships; deep-sea diving; salvage operations and equipment*—LIEUTENANT HARRY E. RIESSEBERG, care of *Adventure*.

Taxidermy—EDWARD B. LANG, 14 N. Burnett St., East Orange, N. J.

Wildcrafting and Trapping—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif.

MILITARY, NAVAL AND POLICE

Military Aviation—O. B. MYERS, care of *Adventure*.

Federal Investigation Activities—*Secret Service, Immigration, Customs, Border Patrol, etc.*—FRANCIS H. BENT, care of *Adventure*.

Royal Canadian Mounted Police—*Its history, duties and tradition*—H. S. M. KEMP, 501 10th St., E., Prince Albert, Sask.

The French Foreign Legion—GEORGES SURDEZ, care of *Adventure*.

State Police—FRANCIS H. BENT, care of *Adventure*.

GEOGRAPHICAL SUBJECTS

Philippine Islands—BUCK CONNER, Conner Field, Quartzsite, Ariz.

★New Guinea—L. P. B. ARMIT, care of *Adventure*.

★New Zealand, Cook Island, Samoa—TOM L. MILLS, 27 Bowen St., Welding, New Zealand.

★Australia and Tasmania—ALAN FOLEY, 243 Elizabeth St., Sydney, Australia

★South Sea Islands—WILLIAM McCREADIE, No. 1 Flat "Scarborough," 83 Sidney Rd., Manley N. S. W., Australia

Madagascar—RALPH LINTON, Dept. of Anthropology, Columbia University, N. Y., N. Y.

Africa, Part 1 ★*Libya, Morocco, Egypt, Tunis, Algeria, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan*—CAPT. H. W. EADES, 3808 West 26th Ave., Vancouver, B. C. **2** *Abyssinia, Italian Somaliland, British Somali Coast Protectorate, Eritrea, Uganda, Tanganyika, Kenya*—GORDON MACGREAGH, care of *Adventure*. **3** *Tripoli, Sahara caravans*—CAPTAIN BEVERLY GIDDINGS, care of *Adventure*. **4** *Bechuanaland, Southwest Africa, Angola, Belgian Congo, Egyptian Sudan and French West Africa*—MAJOR S. L. GLENISTER, care of *Adventure*. **5** ★*Cape Province, Orange Free State, Natal, Zululand, Transvaal, Rhodesia*—PETER FRANKLIN, Box 1491, Durban, Natal, So. Africa.

Asia, Part 1 ★*Siam, Malay States, Straits, Settlements, Java, Sumatra, Dutch East Indies, Ceylon*—V. B. WINDEL, care of *Adventure*. **4** *Persia, Arabia*—CAPTAIN BEVERLY GIDDINGS, care of *Adventure*. **5** ★*Palestine*—CAPTAIN H. W. EADES, 3808 West 26th Ave., Vancouver, B. C.

Europe, Part 1 ★*The British Isles*—THOMAS BOWEN PARTINGTON, Constitutional Club, Northumberland Ave., London, W.C. 2, England. **2** *Denmark, Germany, Scandinavia*—G. I. COLBRON, care of *Adventure*.

Central America—ROBERT SPIERS BENJAMIN, care of *Adventure*.

South America, Part 1 *Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile*—EDGAR YOUNG, care of *Adventure*.

★West Indies—JOHN B. LEFFINGWELL, Box 1333, Nueva Gerona, Isle of Pines, Cuba.

Iceland—G. I. COLBRON, care of *Adventure*.

Baffinland and Greenland—VICTOR SHAW, care of *Adventure*.

Labrador—WILMOT T. DEBELL, care of *Adventure*

Mexico, Part 1 *Northern Border States*—J. W. WHITEAKER, 2903 San Gabriel St., Austin, Tex. **2** *Quintana Roo, Yucatan, Campeche*—CAPTAIN W. RUSSELL SHEETS, care of *Adventure*.

Canada, Part 1 ★*Southeastern Quebec*—WILLIAM MACMILLAN, 89 Laurentide Ave., Quebec, Canada. **3** *Ottawa Valley and Southeastern Ontario*—HARRY M. MOORE, 579 Isabella, Pembroke Ont., Canada. **4** ★*Georgian Bay and Southern Ontario, National Parks Camping*—A. D. L. ROBINSON, 103 Wembly Rd. (Forest Hill), Toronto, Onto., Canada. **5** ★*Yukon, British Columbia and Alberta*—C. PLOWDEN, Pelwden Bay, Howe Sound, B. C. **6** ★*Northern Saskatchewan; Indian life and language, hunting, trapping*—H. S. M. KEMP, 501 10th St., E., Prince Albert, Sask.

Alaska—THEODORE S. SOLOMONS, 6520 Romaine St., Hollywood, Calif.

Western U. S., Part 1 *Pacific Coast States*—FRANK WINCH, care of *Adventure*. **3** *New Mexico; Indians, etc.*—H. F. ROBINSON, 720 W. New York Ave., Albuquerque, N. M. **4** *Nevada, Montana and Northern Rockies*—FRED W. EGELSTON, Elks' Home, Elko, Nev. **5** *Idaho and environs*—R. T. NEWMAN, 701 N. Main St., Paris, Ill. **6** *Arizona, Utah*—C. C. ANDERSON, Holbrook Tribune-News, Holbrook, Arizona. **7** *Texas, Oklahoma*—J. W. WHITEAKER, 2903 San Gabriel St., Austin, Tex.

Middle Western U. S., Part 2 *Ohio River and Tributaries and Mississippi River*—GEO. A. ZERR, 31 Cannon St., Pittsburgh, 5, Penna. **3** *Lower Mississippi from St. Louis down, Louisiana swamps, St. Francis, Arkansas Bottom*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif.

Eastern U. S., Part 1 *Maine*—"CHIEF" STANWOOD, East Sullivan, Me. **2** *Vt., N. H., Conn., R. I., Mass.*—HOWARD R. VOIGHT, P. O. Box 716, Woodmont, Conn. **3** *Adirondacks, New York*—RAYMOND S. SPEARS, 11331 Burin Ave., Inglewood, Calif. **5** *Ala., Tenn., Miss., N. C., S. C., Fla., Ga.*—HAPSBURG LIEBE, care of *Adventure*. **6** *The Great Smokies and Appalachian Mountains south of Virginia*—PAUL M. FINK, Jonesboro, Tenn.

THE TRAIL AHEAD

Jim Silvers unpinned his badge and stared at it a moment—a nice-looking *simbola,* as the Mexicans say, about the size of a dollar, with an eagle crouched atop and a small shield in the center and the words: *Patrol Inspector, Border Patrol, U.S. Immigrations Service* on it. Silvers liked it and had been proud to wear it—but he wasn't going to wear it any more. It cramped his style, as his boss, Senior Inspector Gaines Kerby of the Yucca City Post, would say. What Jim's style was you'll get a chance to see next month in—

"THE CROOKED MILE"

By John H. Knox

—an exciting novelette about the men who guard our borders by an unusually talented writer who is a newcomer to these pages.

Plus another great novelette about Captain Carter and the irrepressible Sergeant Grady, back once more in the swampy 'Glades of the Floridas after their "vacation"-*cum*-voodoo among the New Orleans fleshpots, tracking the Seminole again in what might be called the "pioneer aerial operation of the U.S.A." "Balloons for Bowlegs" gives you the picture—and don't quibble with us about the date of the birth of our infant air force. William Du Bois has the answer—and this is it! . . . . Ano'her Charley Hoe Handle yarn by Jim Kjelgaard . . . "Winter Drift" by Harold Weight—as powerfully dramatic a story of the cattle country as we've read in many a moon. . . . "Downriver Passage" by Steve Hall—which takes us voyaging on a Sacramento River packet in the gold-rush boom times when Californ-i-ay and Eldorado were one and the same. . . . And the usual unusual assortment of fact stories, features and departments you can expect to find each month nowhere but boom times when Californ-i-ay and Eldorado were one and the same. . . . "Uncle Ned's Teeth" by James Norman Hall—a brilliant story of the Paumotu Islands where he and his writing-partner, Nordhoff, have set so many tales. . . . Georges Surdez, Albert Richard Wetjen and other favorites. . . . And the usual assortment of fact stories, features and departments you can expect to find each month nowhere but in the pages of—

ON SALE NOVEMBER 8th

(Continued from page 8)

blaze at one of these sessions for the first time—

Born 1917 in Western Canada. Spent childhood on a combination farm and ranch. Neighbors were scarce and companions almost non-existent. Entertained myself by riding, studying birds and animals, and later hunting and fishing. School was a headache for a freedom-loving boy and I quit as soon as possible, against my parents wishes. Helped around the ranch for a couple of years, then struck out to make my fortune. Tried various jobs. At age of 21 decided to be a writer if it took the rest of my life. Quit the road and went back to high school and college.

Ran out of money and went farming, with writing on the side. War found me still at it and draft board told me to stay. Farmed until six months ago, then began writing full time.

Acquired a wife in '44 and now a baby daughter. Also possess two typewriters which keep me busy, a dog whose favorite pastime is chasing grasshoppers, and a cat with four kittens.

Favorite hobbies are hunting, fishing, and generally adventuring in the outdoors. I find endless drama and violence in nature and this forms the basis for most of my stories. Have appeared for years in such magazines as *Outdoor Life, Sports Afield, Outdoorsman, Rod & Gun* and now *Adventure*.

Pet peeve is people who think that writers have a soft job. Especially those well-meaning individuals who frequently drop in and stay all day to tell you about it. Writing, like farming, is a job where you've got to cover the ground or you don't raise a crop.

AND GILES A. LUTZ, whose excursion to horse heaven starts on page 78, introduces himself thuswise—

I spent forty months in the Army, most of it as packing and crating officer for the Signal Corps attached to the Air Corps. Shipped literally millions of pounds of equipment to both theatres of war and can proudly boast, that for one exception, every pound of it arrived in good condition. That one exception was when one of my sergeants packed typewriters and bench vises together. The bench vises got there in swell shape. The sergeant was celebrating a new arrival that night and in his delirious condition didn't realize that typewriters and bench vises might not make the best of combinations. Had the swellest bunch of men the Army ever saw. I have a theory about this so-called officer and men relation, and it doesn't jibe with the popular Army conception. Sometime, I'd like to do a yarn about it. *("A Blade of Green" 1944 version?—Ed.)*

Spent a number of years with a commercial telegraph company. Learned operating, maintenance, and managing, but despite the old-timers saying, "It'll get in your blood," it didn't take with me. I think with the passing of the Morse operator, the telegraph business has lost a lot of its romance. It's getting to be a cold-blooded, mechanical business and will be even more so in the future. The tenure of Army service gave me an opportunity to break away from it. I'm hoping to acquire enough of the story-teller's skill to never have to return.

I was quite amused to read Mr. Ralph A. Emberg's letter to Mr. Durphy which appeared in the August *Camp Fire*. It seems Mr. Emberg made a bit of a bobble—which could happen to anyone—but my amusement arose from the fact that regardless of how canny and astute readers of *Adventure* are in regard to facts on a great many subjects, none of them can pin a thing on me in the yarn "Promised Land." True, I was never there, but I can safely say none of the readers were, either. Perhaps in the future, but none at the present. So, I'm almost safe in saying anything I wish in regard to the people, the land, the climate.

I've always had a great affection for horse racing and have even given a little serious consideration to the dreadfully difficult business of maintaining the good ship *Pocketbook* on an even keel when around them. Perhaps the story springs as a wistful aftermath to those hours. Oh brother, how I'd love to get bookmakers in the spot described.

I started rather late on this writing business and was making slow progress when the war interrupted. Have picked up the old typewriter, and it's clattering off a great many words, though not nearly enough good ones. I'm hoping it will get educated in a hurry. In my spare hours, of which I don't have nearly enough for by nature I'm a lazy man, I'm building a house for my wife and me. I wouldn't dare to write about house-building. Too many people know that subject, and I'm learning each day how much I don't.

CURTIS BISHOP, last of the quartet of new names on our contents page this month, is a Texan in his thirties who has been a sports writer as well as author of three Western novels published by the Macmillan Company. A tournament tennis player, Bishop lives in the shadow of the University of Texas' great library, and sells about 400,000 words of magazine fiction a year in addition to his books. One of his football stories was filmed under the title "Hold That Co-ed" and his book, "By Way of Wyoming," which will be released by Macmillan this autumn, has been accepted by the Armed Services Overseas Editions. He is Southwest expert for the *Illustrated*

Football Annual and has written a dozen or more magazine articles about the great football teams which have come roaring out of his native Texas, especially the great University of Texas team of 1941.

YOU'LL recall the letters about Central and South American hammocks that appeared in these pages a few issues ago and our promise to try to help get Mr. P. Schuyler Miller of Scotia, N. Y., who started it all, safely ensonced in one before snowfall. Well—Mr. W. M. Craig of Mansfield, Mo. comes through nobly with the following, and air express to Colombia permitting Mr. Miller, should he feel so inclined, may be able to have that hammock catnap before the first frost after all—

I have read with a great deal of interest the "hammock" letters in *Adventure* and, as an old hammock man, I'll add my bit.

To start, I have spent 18 of the past 20 years in the American tropics from southern Mexico to Brazil and I think I have slept in every type from a grain sack to one made of bejuco, and for real comfort the ones from Colombia can't be beat.

The name of the town up the Magdalena river where the best ones are made is Villamar, about a day up the river from Barranquilla. Peddlers meet all the boats there and the best ones can be bought for 15 pesos or about nine American dollars. They're sold all over the country and can be bought in Baranquilla, Col. from Mogollon y Cia. for about 20 pesos. Other river towns where hammocks are made and sold are, Marangue, on the mouth of the Cauca Nechi, Monteria, Pto. Wilches, Barranca-Bermeja, Pto. Berrio, La Gloria and La Dorado. The hammock I have from Villamar is 15′ long and 6′ wide, it weighs 4 lbs. 8 oz. and can be rolled in a bundle 12″ x 6″. I keep it and my mosquito net in a water proof rubber bag and tied to the cantle of my saddle.

One doesn't sleep cross wise in a hammock, but at an angle of about 45 degrees, you can sleep on either side, back or face, regardless of size tho I've never seen one that was comfortable with two people, and the enormous ones Edgar Young mentions exist only in fiction.

The hammocks of Southern Mexico and C. A. are about the same, made of sisal, abaca cotton cord or wool. They're used principally in the low lands for coolness. The best ones are of a net cord and made in Zacapa, Guatemala and San Salvador, they cost about 20 quetzales. Cheaper ones can be had all over the country. The average Indian or ladino of C. A. sleeps on a petate, a grass mat or rug on the floor.

The bush blacks of the Atrato, San Juan, Escuandi and Baudo all sleep on beds or bunks made of a springy type palm like split bamboo laid on a frame work of poles. Most of the Indians sleep that way too and only the cacique has a hammock.

The Indians of the Llanos from Villavicencio to Peru sleep in a small net hammock about 5′ long, too short for a white man to use. The Indians of the Guajira use larger ones and sleep two to the hammock over a small smudge fire. The only place I know where they *sleep* two to the hammock.

I became so accustomed to using a hammock in S. A. that after several months in the bush when I would return home to Barranquilla I could not sleep in an inner spring bed. I would have to hang my hammock in the patio in order to go to sleep. I still use it here on warm nights.

Hammocks of the various types can be bought from the following.

Guatemala—Dyer Textile Co. Guatemala City, Guat. C. A. Mexico Alexander Rich Co. Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico. Colombia, Guajira area. Abello y Cia. Santa Marta, Col. Colombia, Guajira area. Rafael Fuentes, Rio Hacha, Col. Colombia, Llanos area. Morales y Quintero, Villavicencio, Int. del Meta, Rep. de Colombia.

Upper Atrato Area. Tuflik Meluk Cia, Quibdo, Dept. del Choco, Col. Lower Atrato Area. Morales y Cia. Rio Sucio. Dept. del Choco, Col. Pacific coast area, San Juan, Bajia Solano, from Panama to Tumaco. Gunmar W. Bylander. Bylander Shipping Co. Buenaventure, Colombia.

Peru and Brazil area—(Upper Orinoco, Amazon and Rio Negro) Bohigas-Salat y Ballera, Leticia, Col.

Villi Uribe Argemiro Franco, Villi-Uribe

Hope you get a good one and learn to like it.

Makes us sleepy just to think about it. We don't expect to get a lick of work done the rest of the afternoon!

E. A. KUEHL, Holstein, Iowa, wants *Adventures* March through October 1911 and the January, February, June and August 1912 issues. They must have covers! Will trade 1912 through 1921 issues.

Mrs. N. B. Norman, 380 Riverside Drive, N. Y. C., N. Y., has issues from 1922 on which she wishes to dispose of.

Anyone interested write the above direct.

WE THOUGHT you'd be interested in the following interchange of correspondence anent America's favorite indoor sport. Guy Emery of Monterey, Calif. writes—

Please ask William Du Bois about this matter, in connection with his superlatively enjoyable story "Aces Over Eights" in the August issue. He uses the term "dead man's hand" several times. Many of us . . . one of us, at least, has always thought it one of the tenents of the faith that this expression did not come into the language until the occasion of Wild Bill Hickok's

death, in Lead, Deadwood or wherever it was. *(It was Deadwood, Aug. 2, 1876. Ed.)*

Yet Mr. Du Bois—and it's understood that he knows what he's doing—uses it sometime between 1835 and '45, the time of his story.

I believe that some of your *Camp-fire* readers would be very much interested in Mr. Du Bois' theory as to the earlier origin of the phrase.

We hastened the above along to Bill Du Bois and here's how he answers—

To say that I began my study of our national card-game at grandfather's knee is the sober truth. The old gentleman's quarters were a traditional meeting-place for a group of seasoned players—and, as a small boy, I was permitted to visit there in the early evening. My job, as I recall, was to empty the ash-trays. As a reward, I was permitted to keep any chips that might "accidentally" drop to the carpet, and cash them in at my bedtime.

During these sessions, I remember hearing references to the "deadman's hand" (aces over eights), and seeing it sweep more than one board, at both draw and stud. Much later—when I began to study poker seriously, in a college dormitory room—I was still convinced that the hand could not lose. Grandfather had said as much. And Grandfather (who always raised on an open straight, and never, never called) was a consistent winner.

All this is merely to explain my belief that the expression, "dead man's hand" was of reasonable antiquity. Poker was certainly our traditional card-game long before our frontier Indian wars. It would, indeed, be interesting to learn just when an ace was first called a bullet, the four of clubs the devil's bedpost, and three queens identified by a phrase I shall not use at *Camp Fire*.

I am truly distressed if Carter and Grady were guilty of pirating a bit of Wild Bill Hickok's argot. I'll admit freely that I've ceased to trust two pair since my freshman year—even if they are aces over eights, the "unbeatable" hand.

Any poker players in the house who know something of the history of the game as well as what cards they're holding close to their chests?—K. S. W.

LOST TRAILS

NOTE: We offer this department to readers who wish to get in touch again with friends or acquaintances separated by years or chance. Give your own name and full address. Please notify *Adventure* immediately should you establish contact with the person you are seeking. Space permitting, each inquiry addressed to *Lost Trails* will be run in three consecutive issues. Requests by and concerning women are declined as not considered effective in a magazine published for men. *Adventure* also will decline any notice that may not seem a sincere effort to recover an old friendship, or that may not seem suitable to the editors for any other reason. No charge is made for publication of notices

I would like to locate Alvin U. Hodgdon, known also as Tex Ranger. He plays the guitar, has black hair and slightly protruding front teeth. Anyone knowing his whereabouts, please write Lee Kay, Lake Jackson, Texas.

I would like to contact Jim Langdon of Sault Ste. Marie, who was last known to have been in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1926. Please write E. Langdon, 2010 S. W. 16th Terrace, Miami, Florida.

Want to hear from anyone knowing the whereabouts of Jimmy Black, with whom I served in the Canadian Army in 1940 and 1941. We were stationed together at Sherbrooke Motordrome and Camp Jacques Carter, in Montreal, and later he transferred from Camp Border, Ontario to an ordnance outfit in Ottawa. He had a married sister living at Stoney Point, near Montreal. Write to John S. Bradley, 106 East Isabella Street, Salisbury, Maryland.

I would appreciate any information concerning Eddie Jolly, son of Orrin Jolly, last known to have been in Virginia where his father was a foreman for the E. J. Albright Construction Co. Eddie would be about 21 or 22 now. I would also like to hear about Samuel Baily (or Bailey) and Robert Miller, who lived at Arkport, N. Y., both of whom are about 20 years old. Please write to William L. Morris, R F D No. 1 Arkport, New York.

I would like to hear from anyone knowing the whereabouts of James Cornelius McCloud. He is about six feet tall, thin, has black hair, talks with a slight drawl. Has lived in Texas, Colorado and California and worked as a welder, hotel clerk and boxer. Last heard of in Denver, Colorado. Please write to John D. Reiss, 3726522, USNTC, SCC, Section B6-2, Barracks 301, Great Lakes, Illinois.

I would like to hear from anyone knowing the address of W. F. (Billie) Benz, who used to ride rodeo in California some years ago. He was last heard of in Willits, California. C. R. Douglas, 628 Del Mar, Pasadena 5, California.

(Continued from page 123)

jumped up and shouted, "Glory on high! Off's come to repent!" And she ran down to be the first to shake his hand.

That started a general stampede and before it was over, every man, woman, and child in Cow Horn was crowded around to congratulate Cousin Off. Some of the women cried and some shouted and there were even tears in the eyes of some of the men as they pushed through to wring Cousin Off's hand.

And then it came Miss Salina's turn to shake Cousin Off's hand. And he looked down at her with a sort of scared, pleading look in his eyes. And Miss Salina looked up at him a second and then, without saying a word, she caught his hand and pulled him out of the crowd toward his wagon.

They got in and drove off. And it was a week later when they showed up back in Cow Horn again The hard shine was gone from Cousin Off's eyes, and Miss Salina looked ten years younger. Cousin Off said he was trying to buy him a start of cattle, so he and Miss Salina could go into the cow business.

Cousin Off was short on money, of course, but when a man's got the respect and good will of his neighbors, money isn't so necessary any more. Jim Cage let Cousin Off have all the cattle he wanted on a pay-when-you-can promise. Mott Langely and Dev Burkett went on his note. Everybody pitched in and pulled off a big house-raising for the new couple. And in little or no time, Cousin Off and Miss Salina were paid out and just doing real well.

Cousin Off was whiskey-broke, too. He wouldn't even take a drink when his first boy was born. He passed out the cigars and bought drinks for anybody who wanted one, but he wouldn't touch a drop himself.

"Miss Salina," he explained, "she's convinced the Almighty's on my side now. I sure wouldn't want to do nothing to make her think different!"

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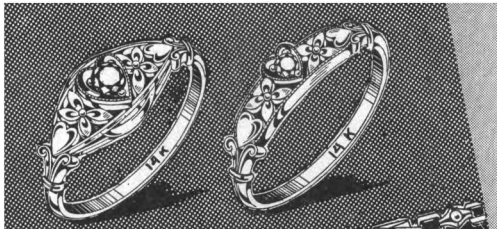

A5/C3-P323
Sweetheart Ensemble. Diamond Engagement Ring and Matching Wedding Band in 14K yellow gold. Ladies' 7 jewel watch, yellow rolled gold plate, with link bracelet. $55. Send $1, pay 17.34 after examination, $5 a month.

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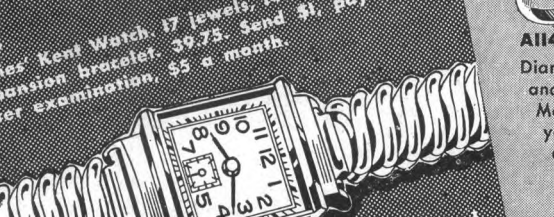
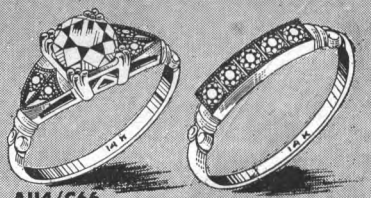


K405
Man's 17 jewel Kent. Waterproof. Radium Dial. Sweep second hand. Chromium Top. Stainless steel back. 29.75. Send $1, pay 8.93 after examination, $5 a month.



A114/C66
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D219
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