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SEAN O'LARKIN

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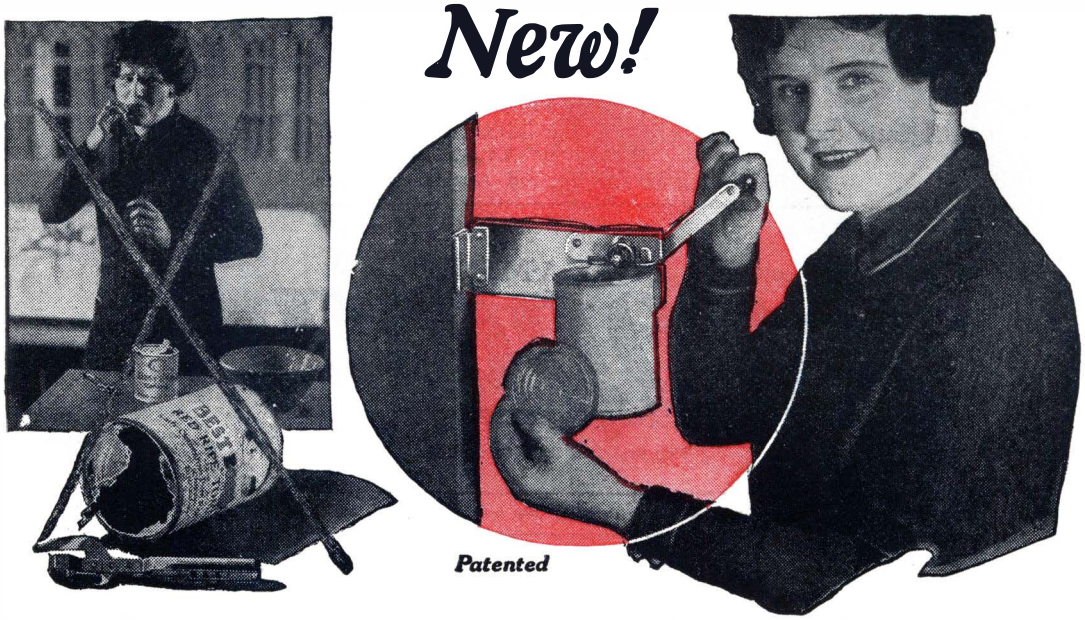
BAT MEN!

MORGO the MIGHTY

By SEAN O'LARKIN

Three men plunge variously to nightmarish caverns, vaster than the plains of Kansas, at the Himalayas' core—Zorimi, evil god of the Bat Men; Morgo the Mighty, magnificent in combat, primitive yet strangely modern; and McRory, the aviator, who follows the lovely Nurri Kala through the crackling perils of sacrificial fires and the venom of fabulous monsters.

Beginning in the Second August Issue, Out July 20th



Just A Twist Of The Wrist

Banishes Old-Style Can Openers to the Scrap Heap and

BRINGS AGENTS $5 to $12 IN AN HOUR

WOMEN universally detest the old-style can opener. Yet in every home in the land cans are being opened with it, often several times a day. Imagine how thankfully they welcome this new method—this automatic way of doing their most distasteful job. With the Speedo can opening machine you can just put the can in the machine, turn the handle, and almost instantly the job is done.

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You undoubtedly know what a nasty, dangerous job it is to open cans with the old-fashioned can opener. You have to hack your way along slowly—ripping a jagged furrow around the edge. Next thing you know, the can opener slips. Good night! You've torn a hole in your finger. As liable as not it will get infected and stay sore a long time. Perhaps even your life will be endangered from blood poisoning!

You may be lucky enough to get the can open without cutting yourself. But there's still the fact to consider that the ragged edge of tin left around the top makes it almost impossible to pour out all of the food. Yet now, all this trouble, waste and danger is ended. No wonder salesmen everywhere are finding this invention a truly revolutionary money maker!

AGENTS!

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"Here is my record for first 30 days with Speedo:
June 13, 60 Speedos;
June 20, 84 Speedos;
June 30, 192 Speedos;
July 6, 288 Speedos.
Speedo sells to 9 out of 10 prospects."
M. Ornoff, Va.

PART TIME

14 Sales in 2 Hours

J. J. Corwin, Ariz., says: "Send more order books. I sold first 14 orders in 2 hours."

SPARE TIME

Big Money Spare Time

Barb, W. Va., says: "Was only out a few evenings, and got 20 orders."

New "Million Dollar" Can Opening Machine

The Speedo holds the can—opens it—flips up the lid so you can grab it—and gives you back the can without a drop spilled, without any rough edges to snag your fingers—all in a couple of seconds! It's so easy even a 10-year-old child can do it in perfect safety! No wonder women—and men, too—simply go wild over it! No wonder Speedo salesmen often sell to every house in the block and make up to $10 an hour.

Generous Free Test Offer

Frankly, men, I realize that the profit possibilities of this proposition as outlined briefly here may seem almost incredible to you. So I've worked out a plan by which you can examine the invention and test its profit without risking one penny.

Get my free test offer while the territory you want is still open—I'll hold it for you while you make the test. I'll send you all the facts about others making $75 to $150 in a week. I'll also tell you about another fast selling item that brings you two profits on every call. All you risk is a 2c stamp—so grab your pencil and shoot me the coupon right now.

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By SEAN O'LARKIN
A Gigantic Superserial Drama of Bat Men in a Cave World Beneath the Himalayas' Crust
Beginning in the Second August Number

Volume C Number 4

TWICE-A-MONTH
The Popular Magazine

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GOOD READING

BY

CHARLES HOUSTON

Give all to love;
Obey thy heart;
Friends, kindred, days,
Estate, good-fame,
Plans, credit and the Muse—
Nothing refuse——

—EMERSON.

One need not take the command of the poet too seriously—poets must have their licenses—and "to give all to love" might cut considerably into one's time. There is, however, this much truth in the sentiments expressed above—namely that for those in love, there is little else in the world that matters.

And for those who choose love for their theme, it is indeed necessary to give all they have in the way of artistic ability to the achievement of recapturing "the first, fine, careless raptures" of young hearts in deepest love.

It is this ability to put down on paper those emotions which romance evokes that singles out the authors of the love stories which bear the famous name of Chelsea House, the oldest and best established publishing house in America.

Chelsea House love stories have about them a flavor and charm which make them altogether different from the usual run of romantic fiction. They breathe the very spirit of the times. The characters who come to life on their pages are flesh and blood human beings. Their problems are those which might any day confront you. You feel with them, go adventuring with them, suffer their defeats, share in their triumphs.

Go to-day to your dealer and ask for any one of these titles or scores of others which bear the Chelsea House trade-mark on their jackets. These are full-length novels, between book covers for the first time, selling at the low price of seventy-five cents apiece.

THE DANCER IN THE SHADOW, by Mary Frances Doner. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price, 75 cents.

The music stole through the dimness of the studio and there came the dancing figure of Ursula Royle, the daughter of a proud old family, who could snatch away men's senses by the sheer magic of her art. They called her dance "The Moth and the Flame," and to her flame there came the moth, Glenn Mortimer, one of her own people, aristocratic, sophisticated, madly in love with the beautiful girl.

But there was still another moth, whose wings had carried him into an atmosphere far different from that which surrounded Ursula and Glenn. This was Andrew Cameron, the vaudeville singer. He, too, loved Ursula, and for his sake she left the luxuries of her Washington Square home to take up with Andrew the fantastic life of the road.

And then there came into their lives adventure that carries the reader along in breathless pace to the thrilling climax.

"The Dancer in the Shadow" is a story of New York of not so long ago and of love and of high romance with a quality about it which is indeed distinguished.

BLONDY'S BOY FRIEND, by Leatrice Homesley. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price, 75 cents.

"A dizzy blonde." It was this flip epithet which Irene applied to herself.

But a lot went on beneath her golden hair that escaped the notice of the casual passer-by, and when the real test came with Irene's awakening to love, she rose to a tremendous crisis in magnificent fashion.

Irene finds herself in a strange out-of-the-way estate in Connecticut, surrounded by a sinister group of men and women. These have a common object of hate in the shape of an overbearing Englishman, who on a night of storm is found dead in his bed. Murdered!

Continued on third page following

Not one out of ten escapes this social fault

Can you be sure that you never have halitosis (unpleasant breath)? Are you certain at this very moment, that you are free of it?

The insidious thing about this unforgivable social fault is that you, yourself, never know when you have it; the victim simply cannot detect it.

Remember, also, that anyone is likely to be troubled, since conditions capable of causing halitosis arise frequently in even normal mouths.

Fermenting food particles, defective or decaying teeth, pyorrhea, catarrh, and slight infections in the mouth, nose, and throat—all produce odors. You can get rid of these odors instantly by gargling and rinsing the mouth with full strength Listerine. Every morning. Every night. And between times before meeting others. Listerine halts fermentation because it is an antiseptic. It checks infection because it is a remarkable germicide.* And it quickly overcomes odors because it is a rapid and powerful deodorant. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

*Though safe to use in any body cavity, full strength Listerine kills even the Staphylococcus Aureus (pus) and Bacillus Typhosus (typhoid) germs in counts ranging to 200,000,000 in 15 seconds (fastest time accurately recorded by science).

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GOOD READING—*Continued*

And any one of seven or eight might have done the deed. Swiftly the suspicion fastens upon the man who has found the way to Irene's real self, and as swiftly Irene undertakes the desperate task of tracking down the culprit. The complications pile up, the story gathers pace and momentum until at length you come to the astonishing climax and reluctantly set down the book, convinced that here you have come upon that rarest of combinations, a real love story and a stirring mystery yarn.

PARTY GIRL, by Vivian Grey. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue. Price, 75 cents.

The title of this book has already become a part of the vocabulary of the modern youth. "Party Girl," one who pets and runs away—all froth and glitter and veneer.

"Party Girl" was what they called Carol Sprague, and, of a sudden, she awakened to all the implications surrounding that title. It was love that had awakened her, but the awakening was too late. The man to whom she surrendered her heart was Kent Mayburn, and he would have none of her.

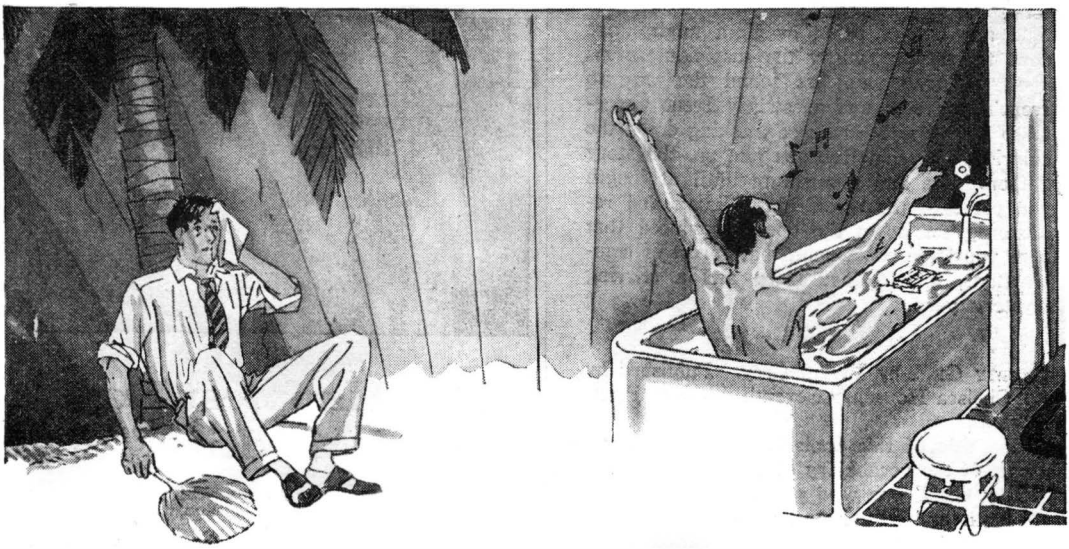
For poor Carol, spurned by the man she loved, turned away from her luxurious home by her irate father, things were dark. For a breathless moment it seemed as though she would accept the hand of "Broddy" Estabrook, superficial scion of a wealthy family, but then came her chance to make a supreme sacrifice, a sacrifice which she knew would intensify Kent's distrust of her. Bravely she accepted fate's challenge. And in the end there came real happiness far different from the gayety that she knew in her "Party Girl" days and far deeper.

Here is a love story that is as modern as your morning newspaper, and yet is as eternal as the hills. "Party Girl" is a genuine work of art.

THE HUSBAND HUNTER, by Beulah Poynter. Published by Chelsea House, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City. Price, 75 cents.

"Supposing." Supposing you were a highly eligible young woman, without a cent to your name and of a sudden you were left enough money to travel in quest of a wealthy husband. And you set out deliberately to ensnare the unsuspecting male. And then supposing you found that you were in love in spite of yourself and with a man who by no means met the qualifications of your quest. What then?

That's the fascinating theme of this unusual book, which takes its readers to Algiers and Cairo and through a world of colorful adventures.



Fair *and* Cooler!

When it's too hot to stir and your skin seems to ooze and your clothes feel too tight and your feet fit no shoes—

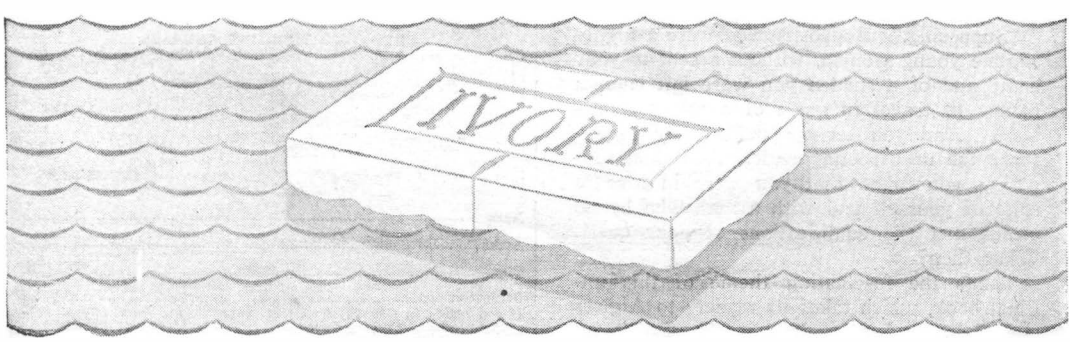
Then steer for the nearest bathtub! Disengage yourself from every clammy stitch of this summer's fashions. Renounce all worldly possessions except the purest thing you know—it's white and it's big and it always floats!

For immediate relief, go right into a heart-to-heart consultation with Ivory Soap. Spread a snowdrift of Ivory foam richly over your entire architecture. You will instantly feel as cool as a sprig of mint in a tinkling glass of iced tea! Then duck your shoulders under the water as a hint for every Ivory bubble to rinse away.

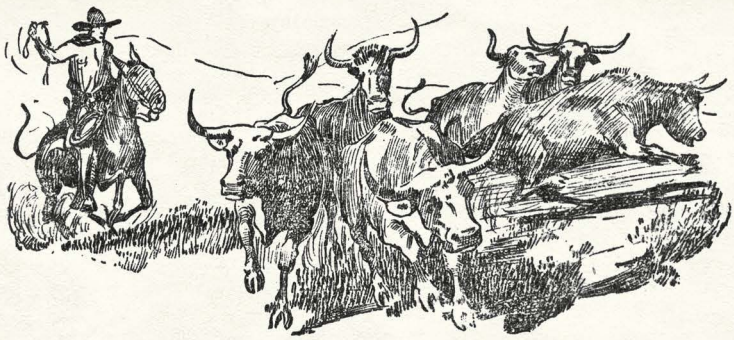
And then, take your choice . . . stretch out for a 10-minute rest cure . . . or splash about as if the tub were your old swimming hole. In either case the results are the same—a completely revived American!

And when you have swished your towel for the last time over your dry shoulders, how cheerful and smooth-tempered and refreshed your skin feels! That's because Ivory's par is always the same—99 44/100 % Pure!

. . . kind to everything it touches · 99 44/100 % Pure · "It floats"



POP



EPITAPHS *of the* WEST

By *JACK ASTON*

HERE lies "Slick Sam," the cattle thief,
Who borrowed from his neighbors' stock.
They caught him changing brands one day—
And now he sleeps beneath this rock.

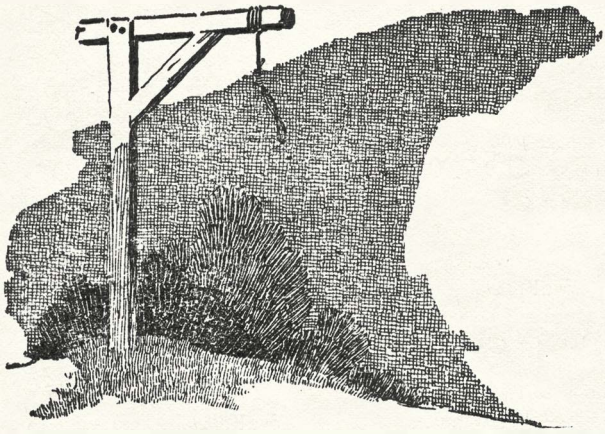
We buried here a reckless man—
His six-gun took the place of law.
He believed in arguing with lead—
And came out second on the draw!

This lad was slow in everything—
To quick commands he gave no heed;
He failed to move when thunder crashed
And sent his herd into stampede!

Here's what remains of young Tom Hood—
A bandit chief he thought he'd be.
The gent he killed was hardly cold,
Before they stretched him from a tree!

This man was good at stud and draw—
He quit this world on sudden leave.
Three aces lay upon the board
When two more fell from out his sleeve!

Here lies a stranger to our town;
He stopped one day to rob the bank;
He led a posse for seven hours—
They shot him by the water tank!



RED

CHAPTER I.

LOST: ONE SIX-GUN.

SIX—two kings and jack showin'—against three—two queens. I'm bettin' that six-gun after all, partner, and she's the last throw for me. Deal 'em!"

"Slim" Allen sat back and watched in entire nonchalance while the man opposite him fingered the card and dealt the last two pasteboards for stud. He had already shoved in what he declared would be his last bet—one of the two six-guns which he had worn so arrogantly when he walked into the Last Call Saloon that afternoon.

The others had dropped out under Jeff Masters' game. Slim had stuck, and he was beginning to be sorry; though there was no sign of regret on his lean, hard-tanned features. He watched. That six-gun was his last bet, and he had a real affection for it.

If those queens of Masters' were good—it was over. What lay in the hole decided it.

Then Slim watched with the same indolent nonchalant while Masters' hole card was revealed. A queen! That made three of them, and at the same time it ended the game, Masters wore a triumphant leer. His big yellow teeth

Just a Wandering Cow Poke—but When They Cheated Him of His Gun—the Red Wolves Snarled Their Last.

WOLVES

By NORTON L. JAMES

shone against a heavy black mustache which only partially hid a knife scar, and his bulldog, swarthy features.

"I reckon that finishes this game, if you're all set to quit, stranger," Master said. He raked the gun and the silver into his pile. "Yuh got another gun."

"Yeuh. It's all I have got," Slim Allen returned, in his soft, south-Texas drawl. "I'm keeping it. Might need it for skunks, yuh know—along the trail."

Masters flashed him a quick look that was full of meaning. Slim had added "along the trail," but it had taken him a few seconds to make the addition. Masters, however, did not know that Slim had been regarding him with puzzled intensity all during the play.

"You're hittin' the trail, then?" Masters said.

"Yeuh." Slim sighed. "I figured I was due for a holiday; but I hear there's a lot o' folks on a holiday that don't get no farther than this town o' Rago. Seems like the Injun sign sure is fixed on it."

"On a vacation?" Masters murmured. His was not a simple friendly interest, such as he tried to make his words imply. There was suspicion in Masters' manner. Back of his chair stood another man — silent, of Masters' own build and manner, except that he seldom spoke.

Slim paid scant attention to the other. He knew him for Masters' foreman and range manager, "Kite" Eagan. Masters had recently appeared in Rago—within the last two years—and had bought up the property of the old Box M, outside the town. It had been for sale for some time. This was all that was known of the newcomer and his crew—all of whom were cow pokes who came drifting into Rago and were unknown.

Of Slim Allen, though, even less was known. Slim had arrived here the day before. He had proceeded to drink considerably and announce that he was a wandering waddy making up for a long-tried thirst and willing to pay for his amusement. The amusement came to rather an abrupt end in the stud game the following night.

Slim was cleaned.

He retained, he reflected, his mount and saddle—the saddle that was the apple of his eye. He was grateful that he had not staked that on the play. Or the other six-gun. Something told him now that, had he staked as far as his shirt and socks, the result to-night would have been the same.

"I *was* on a vacation," he corrected. "You've brought it to what they call an untimely end, Mister Masters. I thank yuh for a lesson in right smart poker."

There was not the faintest sign of resentment in Slim's voice. He had played and lost; that was all. He'd paid for his fun. Somewhere in the graveness of his eyes there might have been a faint puzzlement, an effort at recollection; but it had nothing to do with the game.

Masters was still watching him. "If you're lookin' for work," he said, "maybe we could put on a new hand. We don't exactly need one, but——" He turned. "How about it, Kite? What do you think?"

Before the foreman had time to reply, Slim shook his head.

"No! I'm right obliged to yuh, Mister Masters, but I don't reckon I'm stayin' on here in Rago. I'm too plumb set on playin' poker pay times, and I'm scared o' my wearin' apparel!"

Masters' black eyes narrowed. Slim's words had been provocative, but that was all. Slim's eyes were too innocent and his lean face too calm.

As the owner of the Box M was shoving his winnings away—others had been in the game earlier—the comparative quiet of the Last Call was interrupted by the arrival of two men. A loud, hearty laugh echoed from the doorway; and on the heels of it a tall, handsome man of powerful physique flung himself in.

A single glance was sufficient to prove that the newcomer had been drinking. There was a flushed red under the tan of his cheeks. Almost Indian, he looked—tall and powerful and arrogant, with high cheek bones and dark eyes and hair. Not more than twenty-two, Slim considered—and in the same instant, the drifting cowboy could sense the strain that the entrance of this newcomer produced.

"Jack Connor—and r'arin' for trouble!" he heard one man say. The man moved ostentatiously away.

A strange look had come over Masters' face—a look of hatred mingled with contempt. Kite Eagan had stiffened, and now he stood erect, in a position of waiting. The man who had come in with Connor was smaller; and he looked around in rather a nervous manner. At sight of Masters, a startled look leaped to his eyes.

He said something to his companion. Connor turned, saw Masters—stared for an instant, as though measuring him. Then he laughed—that loud, careless laugh, and gripped the arm of the man with him.

"Get goin', cowboy!" he commanded. "I'm on a party all by my lone self to-night, and I don't want any crape."

He pushed the other toward the door. "Tell the ol' man you done your best to make me behave, but I just plumb wouldn't."

Probably the shove which he gave the cowhand was meant to be gentle. Certainly it was not unfriendly. At any rate, it was sufficient to carry the man to the door, where, after an instant of consideration, he went out reluctantly.

Connor turned to survey the interior of the saloon: the long bar at which three or four men stood, the drinking tables, and—beyond—the card and faro tables. The latter were vacant.

The black eyes, mocking and slightly bitter, rested on Masters as the latter was getting to his feet. Slim still lay back in his chair and watched.

Trouble was in the air. Slim sensed it as a desert-trained horse can sense water. And his sympathies, strangely, were with the youth who had just come in. There was a quarrel here, and a serious quarrel—one which, his senses told him, could break out any moment into blood and murder. Slim had seen so much of trouble and excitement that he knew every sign of it—and he could sense, too, when he was going to be in something himself.

This, he felt, was one of those times, somehow.

Connor had walked slowly, a lifting swagger about his huge shoulders, toward Masters and the latter's foreman. He halted a little way off. His mocking eyes were first for them, then his gaze swung contemptuously upon Slim Allen.

"More friends o' your'n gettin' into town, Masters?" he asked, deliberately insulting in tone. "I thought this range was bad enough right now."

Slim did not move; except for a straight, unblinking stare at the newcomer, he might not have known that Jack Connor was in the room.

It was hard to provoke Slim Allen to anger, harder to make him evidence resentment. He worked differently. When he started, he was more than dangerous, but even he could rarely tell what started him. There were only the stories of him told from one end of the border country to the other, to judge by. The men who did not know these often lived to regret they had not heard —others did not live to regret, it was recorded.

But Connor's attention was drawn back to Masters. The rancher spoke in a low but menacing voice.

"I'd be plumb careful about any wild talk, Connor," he said. "You're not in any position——"

"And I'm drunk, too!" Connor cut in. "Don't tell me stories, Masters—you skunk! Yo're beatin' me. Beatin' the old man, and you've got him to where he won't fight any more. But just because yo're winnin' out on the range ain't changin' things, man to man. Savvy that?"

Connor stepped up close. His face was furious in its sudden transition from rather bitter contemptuousness to rage.

Masters probably did not lack a certain courage. Beside, he had a companion with him—a man, Slim suspected, whose use was principally in situations such as this one. But there was a certain calculation and cunning in Masters' eyes. He did not, for some reason, want to risk an open gun fight here. Rather he preferred a conciliatory attitude, in public.

"I savvy everything, Connor," he said. "Mostly that you're talkin' too much. Why, you're even fightin' with your old man 'cause he told yuh to lay off pickin' fights with me. I'm an honest ranch owner, and that's all. If you've got any quarrel with me or my business, take it to the courts."

Honest talk—on paper. Slim sniffed. It sounded good enough, but Slim suspected something. For some purpose of his own, Masters seemed anxious to

get certain facts over to whoever might be listening.

Connor swore. "Take it to the courts that I'm losin' a hell of a lot o' mavericks since the Box M's in new hands? Or that I ain't got water rights any more since you swung over on the creek? Or that fourteen cows died this mornin' with some poisoning after they'd been pastured down by the creek? What do I prove—except that my old man's a fool?"

He broke off, warned, perhaps by the hush coming over the place at a new arrival. The newcomer was old, rather bent, more than grizzled. His eyes had lost all of the fervor and daring that in youth they must have had. Slim knew instinctively who this was, this man who had evidently been riding hard and fast. The watery eyes fell upon Jack Connor.

Amid dense quiet, the old man walked over to the group. As Masters stepped back, he planted himself between the owner of the Box M and the furious youth. But there was authority in his mien, an authority that still lived from other years.

"Git out o' here, Jack—and git ridin'," he commanded. His voice was steady, harsh. "Yuh had my orders before yuh started out to-day, but I reckoned where you'd finish up. Git goin'!"

For an instant the youth's face was twisted. His lips whitened, his eyes blazed. He started to speak.

"Pop, just because you ain't got——"

"Git goin'!" came the gritting voice.

A long moment Jack Connor hesitated. Then, his eyes blazing murderously, he swung on his heel and flung himself through the door. It was noticeable that the loungers between him and the portal made haste to clear his path for him.

Quiet again. "Old Man" Connor turned slowly to face Masters and Eagan.

"It'll be a good thing," Masters said, "if you can keep that pup off me, Connor. Some o' these days——"

"I'll take care o' my kid!" Connor broke in. "And I won't need no advice from you, neither, Masters. Jest because I don't want to see him killin'—where it might be deserved, even—don't mean that I can't handle him. And it don't mean that you and me are friends, neither. Remember that!"

"The killin' is liable to be closer to home than the Box M, Connor," Masters said, with a confident smile. "Me—father or no father—I wouldn't like to be ridin' through them hills in the dark with him to-night."

He turned away. Slim Allen had the feeling that he had placed his words carefully, and that, having gained his effect, he was satisfied for the present.

"I'll take care o' the dirty washin' on my own range!" Connor flung at him. "You jest watch yourn, partner!" With that, the older man turned and stamped through the door.

Masters moved toward the bar, Eagan following. The talk was quickly resumed, hostilities were ended for the night. In a moment Masters was laughing over some loud joke, and the tensity was relaxed.

But Slim still sat where he had been, fingering absently the deck of cards which had cost him all he had. Wondering, perhaps, over what he had heard. Thinking about his pistol—but it was not even thought of that beloved gun which held in those gray, careless eyes a light of speculative thoughtfulness.

Slim had not noticed the man who had dropped into one of the chairs at the card table, while the argument was on. Now he turned casually at a low, drawling voice beside him. A voice that held kinship to his own, in that lazy drawl—there were parts of Texas that stamped a man's birthplace on him for life, in his voice.

"Right hot there for a minute, huh?

That kid's a killer if he's ever let loose. He shore is."

Slim looked into the stranger's eyes. Hard, keen eyes they were, with deep crinkles around them, deep sunk. The eyes of a man who has seen little of the indoors but much of the sun—drenched open. His look met the response of a quick, winning smile, a smile that changed oddly the hard-lipped, grim mouth.

"I'm Lewis," the man went on. "Lot o' folks hereabouts know me; you must be a stranger. Ranger. Powell Lewis."

Slim mentioned his own name. "Yeuh, I'm a stranger," he admitted. "This ain't your country, neither, I'd place a bet."

"No. Mine's same as yores. In fact, I heard tell of you down there around Orotura way once or twice. I knowed yuh when I spoke."

He looked thoughtfully toward the bar. Masters was getting ready to go.

"They's some plumb funny workin's around these diggin's," the Ranger said. He shook his head. "That Masters, now, he sounds plumb all square, don't he? Yet I'll swear it's only since he and his gang bought over the Box M that Connor's range began slippin' right to the edge o' bankruptcy."

"I figured Connor owned a range near by."

"The Quarter-Circle-C," the Ranger supplied. "Good outfit—once. Rustlin'. Water troubles with Masters. Masters gets richer and the Quarter-Circle-C gets poorer. And—and that's all, until that young kid gets too mad some time and either kills Masters or lands in a smash-up row with his old man."

There was a lot, Slim could feel, that Lewis might have said but that he wouldn't say. They sat after Masters had gone out and long after the sound of their horses' feet had been dissipated by distance and the night. The bartender extinguished two of the three lights over the bar, suggestively; and one of the half-sleeping men at a near-by table arose, stretched prodigiously, and said good night.

"I reckon I'll be driftin'," Slim sighed at last.

He did not move, however. Drifting meant going a long way—he wasn't even sure of the direction. And over his head hung that prescient feeling that something should have happened this night—something which, by all rights, should still happen. He stared down at the cards running through his fingers. Slim Allen hated to miss trouble and excitement, even more than he hated to lose one of those two precious guns.

"Driftin' out o' town?" Lewis asked, with casual interest.

"Figure I got to. I'm cleaned—gotta get me a job rustling cows around right pronto, or not eat."

"South—back our way?"

"I suppose——"

Slim broke off sharply, with a low exclamation. He jerked up in his chair and his head darted forward. His eyes had been on the cards. Now he spread them and his fingers traced their backs unerringly. Powell Lewis leaned forward. Slim Allen's air of natural, indolent laziness made any sudden movement on his part seem of importance.

And this was. He cursed softly!

"And I talked about needin' that other gun for skunks!" he exclaimed. "I sure was right. Take a look at them there cards, partner, and tell me if you know finger-nail markin's when you see 'em!"

Lewis had need only to glance cursorily over the sprawled-out deck on the table. He looked up gravely.

"Not a doubt," he said. "And a damn crude job, if yuh ask me. No expert's work. They sure must 'a' taken you for a tenderfoot at stud, amigo."

"Masters ain't no expert," Slim re-

turned. "It ain't his game; but he ain't above playin' it if he gets the chance. A man ain't figurin' on watchin' an honest-to-God rancher like he would some tinhorn, is he?"

Lewis nodded agreement, watching Slim's eyes. They changed color and appearance several times in a few swift seconds. Then Slim Allen got slowly to his feet and hitched his belt with its one filled holster. There was no indecision in his face.

"What now?" the Ranger wanted to know.

Slim did not look at him. He did not appear angry.

"He can keep the money. I figure gamblin's like any kind of a spree, and I pay for my fun. But my gun—inlaid silver in that walnut, and it first belonged to a pal. That's too much! Goin'? I'm goin' to get back my gun from the skunk that took it. I was right when I smelled excitement in the air to-night!"

CHAPTER II.

KILLERS AND ROPES.

SLIM saddled without too much hurry in the light from a smoky lantern in the Last Call stables. "Gent" was a black pony that had never belied his name. From gentle, inquiring nose and pointed, aristocratic ears, to swift, twinkling high heels, the black was a "gent."

"He's sure a mean hombre," Slim grumbled, half to himself and half to the horse, as he tightened his cinch. "Plumb mean. Not our style a-tall, Gent. Playin' a cheap little game like that on a wanderin' cow poke that's just lookin' for a chance to drift around lazylike. And—and takin' Tomaso's gun! Figure that! If it wasn't for that gun, no sneakin' hombre'd get me saddlin' up and streakin' out in the hills to-night!"

For Slim knew that his errand was likely to be dangerous. He recognized that he would be up against odds, and that Jeff Masters would not hesitate to use the odds. He knew these things, but they did not trouble him, more than to give him a passing thought.

Underneath Slim Allen's outward laziness was a calm, assured confidence—which he did not think about, either. It was just that. That, and the knowledge of a dangerous, full-lived past and many violent scenes. The scenes were gone, but he was still alive. That proved enough for him.

Yes, he was due for trouble. Even against men of Jeff Masters' stamp, it was hard to hurl the word of card cheat. It was not done in this country. Or, if it was done, guns were ready. Masters would have with him other men—men of his own breed, if the sullen Kite Eagan was any example.

All these things Slim considered; but that was all.

After saddling, he stopped in the bar doorway, and inquired the route to the Box M.

The Ranger, Powell Lewis, flung a languid hand to him as he started out again. "Luck, son—and be plumb careful!"

Slim flashed a white-toothed, lazy smile, and was gone. Lewis sat on there, his eyes thoughtful, staring out at the black rectangle of night which had swallowed Slim, as though his mind were following the wandering cowboy through the dark. It was a long while before Lewis at last got to his feet—tall, lean and rangy—and started out. He, too, made for the stables.

By that time, though, Slim had left the town of Rago a good distance behind him. The moon had long since descended, and there was only the light of millions of stars to illumine faintly the shadowy darkness enveloping the quiet earth. A breath of sage came from the sloping hills on a cooling breeze.

This was not Slim's country. But he knew it—as he knew the ruggedness

of Montana, the biting winters of the northern ranges, the shifting coloring of Wyoming. He had covered them all, in his drifting, careless way, and they were all one to him. Next them, by contrast, was the blazing sun and the fierce yet not vitiating heat of his own border country. He was not far from there now; but even this far was "north" to him.

He rode on. The trail was easy to find, from the directions he had received. As he rode, his ears and senses were alert as only the ears and senses of a man of the open can be. But no sound of stirring life, no indication that men rode abroad, came from the pregnantly silent reaches of that range land.

First that gun. Then he'd head south. Direct line down through here—sort of an inverted watershed in geography, he remembered. He'd hit the border ranges and get a job until the lust for "drifting" struck him again.

But first there was Jeff Masters and some excitement which might have consequences. Masters was outwardly an honest ranch owner. He, Slim Allen, was nobody in these parts. Yet he was grateful to his own senses to remember that his sympathies had been with the wild-eyed, reckless young Jack Connor in the boy's quarrel.

And there was in the back of his brain that same puzzlement which had been in his gray eyes when he had sat looking at Masters earlier, at the table. Somehow, the man's face, his manner, were familiar. And the faint savor of memory had nothing pleasant about it.

He frowned. This had been open range when he had been last in this country. He had vaguely gathered tonight that the Box M had been committing enroachments on its neighbors' land since Masters had become established there.

Water rights. That had been one for all and all for one in other days. Yet he supposed that—quite legally—Masters might in some way have diverted an important stream. It might be part of his plan to freeze out the Quarter-Circle-C. Sounded that way, Slim reflected.

Yet all that was not new to the range. Feuds had come before. Men were always ambitious. It was none of his affair—nor did it enter his life—if Masters was outplaying the Quarter-Circle-C in a private range war.

Masters was cheap; that was all. Mean, as Slim had told Gent. He'd learned a few cheap gambling tricks, and even as a ranch owner he was not above using a tinhorn game in order to take the last few dollars from a wandering, quite harmless cow poke.

"*And* my gun!" Slim had to add, aloud.

That was the unforgivable thing.

Slim pulled in a trifle as Gent crested a long rise which commanded the view of a wide stretch of range land. The land lay visible under the stars for miles in every direction—serried, of course, here and there by patches of tree growth and gullies. He had been setting a fast pace, he told himself; there was no need to wear out the pony. It would be just as well to meet up with Masters in his own corral.

His trail was lost, ahead of him, in a blanket of trees and thick foliage which marked a deep dip in its progress. Off to the right was another trail. On it was a man.

Even at that distance, the lone rider was distinguishable. It was Jack Connor, sloping along at an idle lope. The young son of the ranch owner rode alone.

And then—startling and sharp—just as Slim had picked up his reins again, there came the crack of a revolver shot. Gent had already started down the slope. Jack Connor rode on unheeding, but Slim had ceased to be interested in him.

For, on the heels of that shot, came another, equally as sharp. Somehow it

was unduly savage and cruel in the cool night and under the serene stars.

Slim Allen touched his spurs. Those shots—he had vaguely seen the stab of flame from the second—came from the dark patch in the trail more than half a mile ahead of him.

His warning senses had been true. Excitement, yes, but more than that, he knew—murder and death rode the range to-night!

Gent understood. Those shots meant almost as much to his trained intelligence as they did to his master. He covered the hard-packed trail in long, smooth strides, effortless, while Slim leaned forward. It had hardly been necessary for him to touch his spurs, even slightly. Gent knew, and together horse and man sped like a long, running shadow over the trail. Sparks flew from the hoofs of the black.

Down into the gully they rode, where the trail dipped and became enveloped in the thick foliage that bordered it. The furious sound of the black mount's progress drowned out any other sound; Slim expected to hear nothing.

But he saw nothing, either. As he swept into the real darkness among the bordering trees, he felt that he was quite alone. Yet here, he knew, had been the origin of those shots. Slowly he pulled in on Gent's furious stride.

They came to a walk. They were at the bottom of the depression now. Slim intended to stop and listen.

But there was no need to wait. Even before the pony under him had come to a full halt he heard. A low moan sounded from ahead of him, a curiously gargled moan that was more a gasp of mortal pain. Slim knew what that sound meant.

He could trace it. With one bound, he had swung his mount off the trail and was out of the saddle. Gent stood obedient while his master's long legs tore for a spot where underbrush came up out of a little ditch.

A second later—even as he ran—Slim saw the outlines of a tall horse loom out of the gloom. He stumbled on.

Then he was kneeling by a fallen body, almost at the feet of the lone horse. A body that twisted slightly in its last mortal agonies, for death was coming swiftly. And even before he had bent to one knee beside the fallen man, Slim knew this, and more—that the man was Jack Connor's father!

He lifted up the head, strangely gentle. "Where is it? Can yuh talk, pop?"

He felt the head move in a gesture of negation. "No—use. Lung—heart. I'm done. Tell—the kid I——" A horrid, rasping cough that Slim was sure would be the last. He felt the old, withered body tighten in a mighty effort.

"Kid's all right. It—was——"

Slim bent his head until his ear almost touched the blood-flecked lips. But no more words were to come from them. He knew, when the last word died in a whisper, and he could feel the withered, yet hard figure in his arms tighten in one last convulsion before it relaxed forever.

Old Man Connor had been murdered.

Murdered! No doubt of that. There had been two shots, and Slim could have sworn they both came from the same gun. Instinct made him look about quickly. Plenty of hiding place here for bushwhackers.

Skunks! To lay hidden here, in the dark, to pot an old man! It was the work of skunks, all right. Mean men, like——

Slim broke off sharply. Skunks, and mean! And he was riding on the trail toward Masters' ranch!

Gently he let rest the white head. His face was grim. It took a lot to disturb Slim Allen, who has seen much blood and much of death, who had dealt much of both. Yet this was the work of the lowest kind of coyotes.

He became aware, suddenly, of horsemen. They had not come from any great distance, he was certain, else he would have been able to detect their approach earlier. Even this scene had not the power to make his keen faculties slumber.

Riding hard, and almost upon him. Slim got to his feet in a single, supple movement.

"Here it was!" cried a voice that he recognized as that of Jeff Masters. "Here we are!"

"Hold up!" Slim cried. "There's a murder here!"

A trio of men reined in with muffled curses, just above him. "Murder?"

Masters bent to peer down into Slim's face. Behind him was Kite Eagan, and another man.

"Murder!" Masters exclaimed. "What—them shots?"

"I heard 'em, too," Slim agreed. "Here's the body. It's the old man who owns the Quarter-Circle-C."

Eagan swore; but it was Masters who swung from his horse in one quick movement. And a second later, his gun jabbed into Slim Allen's stomach.

"Stick 'em up!" he commanded. "If they's murder along this trail, I reckon we turned back just soon enough to find the sneakin' hombre responsible. Up, yuh coyote!"

Slim raised his arms, his hands to the height of his shoulders. Through the short distance separating them, he could see the malignant, triumphant gleam of Masters' eyes.

"Come on, boys!" the owner of the Box M commanded over his shoulder. "We got him, all right. All cleaned out at stud and thinkin' he'd recuperate. Afraid to tackle you and me, Kite, so he picks on the old man and figures some one else'll get the blame. If it's murder, stranger, you're swingin', and pronto!"

Eagan and the other man, who was obviously one of the Box M hands, made a perfunctory examination of the old man's body on the ground. They swore softly several times. Slim waited, thinking rapidly, a faint, inscrutable smile on his thin lips.

Masters continued to glower at him, and the gleam of triumph never left his eyes. Slim shifted easily.

"I don't reckon you better start talkin' about anybody swingin', Masters," he said quietly. "To kill a man—to put two slugs in him, requires shootin' a gun, accordin' to all the rules. And my gun ain't been shot. I'm right willing to go back to Rago and face any jury on that."

Masters was taken aback, momentarily. "We can fix the gun business, all right," he said, after a moment. "I'm takin' care o' you, partner—and like I said, it's pronto!"

He half turned to Eagan, who had arisen, and the other man. "Git one o' them ropes, Lawes," he commanded. "If you two 're satisfied Connor's dead, there's no sense o' wastin' time with this coyote."

Slim thought fast. He knew, now. He had a certainty, in those swift seconds, that Old Man Connor had been done to death with the .45 which Masters had won in that final deal. And Masters wanted him out of the way—fast. He could justify himself afterward—and from Masters' words, Slim suddenly realized how the justification could be accomplished.

After he was dead, who was there to prevent Masters' substituting the gun he had won for the unfired revolver in Slim's holster? Losing that gun was sure bad luck.

No, this was no place for Slim Allen. In any event, there were three men who would swear to his guilt—two of them, at least, with their own guilt to cover up.

This was the time to slide. Afterward, perhaps, he might return and straighten out things. Right now, he

was in a tight position, and his place was not here—if he could get out!

Masters had turned only slightly to talk to his two companions. But it was, Slim recognized, the best chance he would have. The man called Lawes had gone toward the horses. As yet, they did not know where Gent was; they had forgotten to notice the absence of Slim's horse.

Slim's hands were at the height of his shoulders, the elbows were bent. The arm muscles tightened now, quickly, until they were steel bands. The fists clenched.

Masters had small time to realize what was happening. Slim's right fist came across and downward in a chopping, deadly movement. The blow had some fourteen inches to travel, and in those inches it gathered all the momentum of arm strength and the weight of one shifting, kick-packed shoulder.

Slim's fist came down across Master's jaw and cracked it. The oath that started to Masters' lips was never completed. His gun was discharged and made a red, vicious streak in the dark, but Slim's body was out of the way of it, half over Masters'.

Masters started to crumple, but in the same movement, Slim's left was released. This fist came over and up, and joined to the force of it was the way in which its victim's head was being propelled into its path by the weight of that first blow.

The crack sounded like the wrench of a big bone. Masters knew no more.

Slim jerked the gun from his victim's hand, crouched, and whirled just in time to see the crimson tongue of flame that leaped from Eagan's gun. He fired—twice—at the streak. Then, still crouching, running, he whistled softly, and heard the pad of Gent's feet along the edge of the road.

"Lawes—Jeff! What the hell——" Eagan's voice.

Slim gained the saddle. He swung Gent in a single quick movement. At the same time, he sent two more slugs ripping into the dark where his enemies were. Whirling, the black pony streaked across the roadway, shots kicking up dirt at his little heels.

Eagan was swearing a wild, sweating streak of profanity. But Slim Allen did not hear. Horse and rider were tearing up the turf of the unknown, streaking south from the trail and into the open country.

Anyway, conceded Slim Allen, he was heading south.

CHAPTER III.

STIFF TRAILS.

SLIM did not hurry, after the first few hours of his flight. Little as he knew the country, his sense of direction was infallible, and he had no fear of getting lost. The desert was off far to the west of the trail he had chosen, if it could be called a trail.

It was not a man-made trail, except as he made it for himself. Open range, with few signs of fences. Far beyond, he knew, he could find the edge of Arizona and a country he knew better.

Eagan and the other cowboy had not followed far. They must have had to leave Masters there in the roadway. Slim was certain that the owner of the Box M was in no condition for a long ride through the dark. And the two henchmen would want to get back to their boss. Consequently, Slim, though he was aware that they had come a few miles after him, never caught sight of them in the rear, and knew, before long, that they were shaken off.

What they would do next he could not figure. Would Masters turn in the alarm and would he be branded as an escaped murderer?

A natural optimism, however, a carelessness as to what the next trail in any road might bring, rode with Slim Allen in his saddle.

It was toward daybreak that he ran across a small stream and made camp. He slept dreamlessly for a few hours and wakened to remind himself that he could not linger long within posse distance of Rago.

He had not eaten since early the night before—the poker game had lasted since just after sundown. But the water of the little stream was clear and cool, and Slim had long since learned how to tighten his belt on an unforgiving stomach.

The most disappointing part of the adventure came upon examination of the gun he had taken from Jeff Masters. For Masters must have used his own gun on Slim's stomach. The boss of the Box M still retained the inlaid weapon that Tomaso had bequeathed to his pal, Slim Allen, before he died.

Somehow, that knowledge had a real meaning to Slim. The Rago episode was not over. No, not even though he was riding away from the town and its people. Masters still had that gun; and that would bring Slim back some day. Some day, too, this strange fight would have a finish. Meantime, Slim considered it only logical that he should preserve his body and his neck—especially his neck—for that show-down.

He decided to follow the creek. Before noon he was crossing a trail. But the way led in his direction, and he decided to follow it.

Shortly thereafter, as he trotted along, he came in sight of ranch houses or small farms sprawled at odd distances from the trail. He was hungry, thirsty, slightly worn. But he was still too close to Rago.

Another stream afforded him and Gent opportunity to quench a thirst that was being tortured by the hot sun. He kept on until nightfall, however, without food.

The horse had the short grass which was abundant in this country. For himself, wearied bodily and feeling the pangs of hunger keenly, there was only sleep. To-morrow, he promised himself, he would forget his caution. And he wondered, as sleep finally came, whether he would ever have been so cautious were it not for a thought forming in his brain which was coming to be a driving need: he must get back that gun and even up with Masters!

He knew, then, that that covered it all. To turn back now would be to lose everything. Beyond, somewhere, he knew he would pick up some thread.

Slim seldom forgot. Somewhere in his wandering life was a memory of Jeff Masters, though the name meant nothing. Powell Lewis, the Ranger, had mentioned Orotura, and recollection of the place stirred a glimmer of memory. Slim wanted to drift down in that direction, anyway.

Slim was off with sunrise, but Gent developed a slight limp within the next two hours. So Slim led him, over the hot, untraveled trail, until, just before noon, he came within sight of a small ranch building.

He had no money to pay for food, but he knew the range. He was able to eat, in the ranch kitchen, to a surfeit. No questions were asked of him, though he waited eagerly for some word from Rago. But neither his host nor the funny, wizened little Chinese cook evidenced any interest in that town.

"Yuh'll run into Minerite along the way, ef yuh foller this here trail," the ranch owner said, when Slim was ready to go. "Oughta find work there, though it ain't such a promisin' place. I reckon yuh knew better than to ask for it here," he grinned deprecatingly. "I jest got one hand, besides Ling here, and that's a second cousin."

Slim thanked him. He was quite content that the small owner took him for a mere wandering cowboy in search of a bunk house in which to hang his saddle. Certainly there was nothing like suspicion in this quarter. He felt well

fed and equal to the task of carrying on south.

Minerite he knew, largely by reputation, but the reputation was none too savory. A tiny ranching center, it had been known, nevertheless, as a rendezvous for some bad crowds.

A bad crowd was the least of Slim's worries, though. What he feared was that the Law in Minerite by this time was awaiting his coming.

He had to chance it, though; he knew that. Gent, by midafternoon, could carry him for a while while he rested from the racking of his high-heeled boots. But neither horse nor man could go much farther at once. A few hours of rest would be enough; meantime, money had to be raised in some way—for food, at least.

Slim looked ruefully at the gun he had taken from Masters. That could be pawned. And it would; it was all he had. It seemed that one of his holsters was certainly due to remain empty until the Rago affair was completed.

Dusk was deepening into darkness by the time Slim arrived in Minerite. In that half light, the tiny town looked even less inviting than it really was. There had been a light rain and the single thoroughfare was muddy. Grayness surrounded the line of unprepossessing board shacks which lined the streets. Few people were about. There was a straggling air about the place.

Slim limped. He found a livery establishment, however, immediately. The black's limp was almost gone. Slim left his mount there in the care of the owner, who professed to be somewhat of a veterinary and who diagnosed Gent's condition as far from serious.

Then the wandering cow poke dragged his high heels down along the street toward where a few pallid yellow lights promised whatever the town might offer. The office of the sheriff was on his way. He stopped before a notice board there, and read. Inside a saffron light glowed, but he scarcely bothered to look in.

Outside, the light was poor. Slim squinted to read the signs. Most of them were faded, tattered, stained by wind and rain. To these he need pay no heed. But among them all, he saw nothing pertinent to himself.

He drew a deep sigh. If he knew this town, word that he was wanted here would have caused some excitement on the bulletin board. He drew back, and became aware that he was being watched.

A lean, angular man in a faded vest and wearing a slouched, high-peaked hat, held himself propped up in the doorway. The individual had a scraggly black mustache, altogether too long, and a pair of ever-suspicious, unpleasant eyes. More, those eyes were fixed upon Slim intently—and upon the faded vest was a star.

Slim and the lounging sheriff looked at each other for a long moment. Then Slim smiled.

"Hullo!" he ventured.

The sheriff nodded. "Find what you're a-lookin' for there?" he drawled, with a nasal whine.

Slim shrugged. He doubted that the sheriff knew, or even suspected him for who he was. But at the same time, he was open to suspicion. He knew he must look bedraggled; he was broke; he wore two guns but had no horse.

"It's a habit o' mine, that," he confessed, nodding toward the board. "Seems like every town I hit I got to see who's bein' wanted now."

The sheriff's black eyebrows drew down nastily. "I reckon maybe in some o' them towns yuh find the name yo're lookin' for, too. And them places maybe yuh don't stay long," he ventured.

Slim knew resentment. But he knew, also, that he could not stand up under investigation.

"Maybe," he shrugged, with his disarming grin. "But, anyhow, I don't see

none o' them names now. So I'll stick around till I get my horse fixed up for travelin' some more."

"Sure yuh got a hoss?" the sheriff drawled, as Slim turned away. "Or do yuh figure yuh'll have one before yuh leave?"

"I got one. Go over to the livery stable and ask 'em, if you don't believe me."

Slim swore under his breath as he continued on his way. He was not the man to take things like that. Yet he was not a fool, either. He had time only to curse the bad streak of luck which seemed to have started with that stud game the day before. Until he got that gun back, Slim Allen had to change the style that had made him famous and feared along the border for years.

"Daw-gone! I gotta get plumb far south," he told himself. "I need a dose of folks respectin' me again before I start back for them hombres around here!"

There was a gleam in his eye—a gleam that even the sheriff would have respected, at that moment. For, while Slim was obeying the dictates of his common sense and the need for caution, there was a considerable part of his make-up that resented caution extremely and had no use for common sense.

There was nothing like a place to pawn anything, but Slim talked with the town storekeeper, a rather mild-eyed and not unkindly old individual who wore rimmed glasses. Masters' gun finally passed over the counter in one direction, and back toward Slim there slid a few silver coins and a few packages of smoking tobacco.

Slim decided to risk testing his hopes still further.

"Just drifted over from Rago way," he said carelessly. "Not much of a place to look for work in."

The storekeeper, he figured, would hear any gossip that came over the trail. But the old man was unaffected.

"Yeah, I reckon it ain't such a good town," was his only comment. "Quiet, these parts, anyhow, around now."

Thereby did Slim Allen become certain that no call had been sent out from Rago to apprehend him. And he wondered. Certainly Masters was not shielding him. There was no remote possibility of that. He could not conceive, either, of Masters' not taking advantage of his disappearance and his presence at the scene of the crime, to hang the full blame on him.

Why, then, since there had been ample time, did this comparatively neighboring town have no word that he was wanted?

He was to become further puzzled.

A few dollars in his pocket, cigarettes for the making, Gent being cared for—for the present, Slim Allen was not inclined to worry too much. He glanced in at the saloon. It was a small one, smoke-filled and without much ventilation. Yellow lamps hung from the low rafters at intervals failed to penetrate the smoke quite completely.

Slim decided to save the saloon for a grim dessert to supper. He was tired enough, but he knew that weariness would not stifle his curiosity and his eagerness to see things.

The small restaurant across the street had dirty tables and was run by a Chinese. But the smell of food was appetizing, even if owner and customers were not. Slim ordered plentifully.

He paid small attention to his neighbors. They were a rough lot. Only a few of them looked like honest cowhands. What every one in this town did for a living he could not imagine; but it did not interest him during the massacre of his steak.

Gravy and potatoes and corn—and then his interest was aroused by a figure that loomed before him unavoidably. A huge man, with at least a day's stubble on his swarthy, heavy cheeks and jaw, and bloodshot eyes. The new-

comer carried two guns and gripped the back of the chair opposite Slim's in an unmistakable manner.

Slim had to look up. Without interest, however, he met the dark eyes boring down at him. For a moment, the glance held, then the stranger abruptly pulled out his chair and sat down.

"Mind if I squat here a minute?" he asked, after he had taken his seat.

Slim considered. "I suppose," he drawled, "if there ain't any other chairs, it's all——"

"They's other chairs," the stranger interrupted easily. "Besides, I ain't eatin' right now. Plannin' on leavin' this town right soon." He shot an abrupt look across the table. "Ain't you known as Slim Allen?"

Slim hesitated. But he had never been willing to deny his name; it was a fetish with him. He nodded, recalling that there was something vaguely familiar about the other's face.

"Thought so. My name's Boyce. I reckon I must 'a' run into yuh somewheres down close in the border country. Ain't yuh from around there?"

Again Slim nodded. "Around there," he agreed.

"Thought so," said Boyce again. "This ain't no place for folks hailin' from that direction. I don't reckon yo're aimin' to stay on here long?" It was a question, and not a casual one; Slim knew that. Boyce tried, though, to appear careless.

Slim hesitated a bare second, but he could see no reason for deception in this matter.

"No. I'm trailin'. Right soon," he added.

"South?"

"I reckon so."

Boyce made an elaborate effort to appear warm and friendly. It suited him not at all.

"Maybe we could trail along together," he said. "Me, I like company on a long ride, and I reckon we're both goin' a long way. And I ain't bad with these." He patted boastfully at the two heavy guns. "In case o' trouble," he added meaningly. "I'm leavin' in the mornin' or thereabouts. How about it, Allen?"

Slim considered. Boyce would be the last man any one would choose for a road companion. He had deliberately sought him out, forced this conversation. Slim had the certainty that he would not like this new acquaintance even two feet behind him on the trail.

So he shook his head. "We probably wouldn't be goin' the same way," he said lazily. "Of course, we might meet up on the road. But my plans ain't for any definite spot."

"Hell, neither's mine!" exclaimed the other. "In fact, you could probably make my plans for me. 'Cause I'm jest headin' generally south, toward the line."

There was nothing casual about the eagerness with which he watched Slim's face for his reception of all this. He tried to maintain a disarming smile, but it was not too successful.

Slim wondered, and then shook his head again. He pushed back his coffee cup and pulled the makings from his pocket.

"Nope," he said decisively, yet carelessly, as though the thing did not matter. "I'm plumb broke to trailin' by myself, partner, and I can't get out o' the habit. When I zigzag on the trail I sure like to feel there ain't nobody carin' why I'm doin' it."

Boyce's brow darkened, his genial mask disappeared. He got heavily to his feet.

"So yo're that way, huh? Trailin' alone! Too plumb proud to take on company! All right, Allen, maybe you'll live to wish yuh had company, where yo're goin'. And maybe, without it, yuh won't git so far over that trail, after all. I'll be seein' yuh, I reckon, before yuh leave!"

Spinning the chair away from him, Boyce threw himself out through the doorway. The screen slammed heavily after him. His exit was the occasion for a good deal of curiosity. Slim alone appeared unmoved.

Slim licked the edge of his cigarette paper and felt for a match. Across the way, he could see the faded lights of McQuade's Hotel & Saloon. Boyce vanished into them.

Shortly, Slim was going to visit there, even though he had just decided to leave Minerite before he had expected to. In fact, he was leaving to-night.

He knew, without even formulating the thought in his own mind, that he would not get far along the trail with the companionable Boyce from the border country. No farther than the first and most convenient spot on the trail. No, he had no uncertainty there. The faint, puzzled crinkle between his eyes was caused by another thought.

The Law didn't want him, for some reason—at least, not yet. But somebody else did!

Slim got to his feet lazily, paid his check, and strolled out through the screen door. He made for McQuade's place opposite.

CHAPTER IV.

RIDIN' LONE.

SLIM hated the interior of the place. He knew, moreover, that the prudence which had been guiding his actions should keep him outside its doors. But Slim was getting slightly bored with prudence and caution.

He liked the open. Except for his occasional wandering sprees, he was seldom inside a saloon. McQuade's place was all he detested, and more. The atmosphere reeked with the smell of men, whisky, beer and tobacco comingled. With it was the stench of smoky oil lamps.

No one paid him any particular attention at first, however. It was a rough crowd, more uncouth than the usual gathering of this sort. Yet Slim felt that cheapness, rather than plain badness, drew these men together. And, too, they were not all of one stripe, nor was it all one crowd. There were several varied elements represented here.

At the bar, Slim ordered a bottle of beer. He saw Minerite's sheriff standing only a few yards away, leaning against a table and talking to two men there. The sheriff saw him, too, and favored him with a scowl.

Boyce was not visible at once. Then Slim picked him out talking with a scar-faced individual at the farther end of the bar. Boyce, too, was aware of his presence. Next to Slim stood an inconspicuous individual who wore wide chaps and a checked shirt. Their elbows touched as they drank.

Slim half turned. The other nodded good-humoredly as he set down his glass.

"Reckon yo're a stranger here, ain't yuh?"

Slim admitted he was. "Just rode in this evening," he added. There was nothing of the sheriff's suspicion nor of Boyce's eager curiosity in the man's voice.

"Been over through Rago way?" And then, before Slim's quickly formed suspicions could bristle, the man added, in a conversational tone, "I hear they's been trouble over there."

"Yeuh?" Slim tried to look mildly interested. "I come through, but I didn't stop to get acquainted much. What's up?"

"Ain't sure. We heard about a shootin'—murder, it was, I reckon. That's about all we heard. Thought there might be more to it."

Slim considered.

"They lookin' for the hombre?" he managed at last, pouring out the last of the bottle before him.

"Reckon not, or we'd 'a' heard that first," his companion said. "In fact, I kinda gathered that they got him, whoever he was. Drink?"

"Not now. I just finished dinner, and needed to wash it down with a bottle, that's all." Slim stood staring at his glass. If he had been faintly puzzled before, he was now frankly confronted with the impossible.

Old Connor was dead, there was no doubt of that. He would have been the logical culprit, had he stayed. Yet he knew it had been Masters' doing—whether he could prove it or not, Slim was certain of that.

Certain, too, he was, that no hue and cry had gone out for him. Just as certain as he was that for some unknown reason, others wanted him.

Had those two terrible crashes into Masters' face unsettled his reason, so that he had confessed the crime?

Slim looked up from his musings. He had forgotten where he was, and the circumstances; now he was recalled with a jerk. One elbow had been akimbo in his hip pocket as he stood at the rail. Now this elbow was violently jarred. He was jerked slightly away from his position.

He had a swift vision of Boyce's face, not friendly, but saturnine, now. A flashing, malevolent grin. And behind Boyce, the man he had been talking with at the end of the bar.

"Yeah," laughed the two-gun man. "This is the hombre. Too proud to ride out with company. Likes ridin' alone—and why?"

The other man laughed meaningly, watchfully. Harsh though Boyce's voice had been, it had not carried far, and few people seemed interested in the scene. Slim's companion, however, moved away unobtrusively, and Slim knew that he was up against what he had half expected when he came here.

He was not perturbed, however. Rather, he was conscious of a certain exultation. He was tired of hiding and running and accepting slurs. He knew his own powers—had tested them often enough in the past. He knew his own deadliness when he struck. The fierce strike of the enraged panther.

"Yeuh, I like travelin' alone," he agreed calmly. "Yuh can't always pick your company, so solo is better."

Boyce had leaned his arm on the rail, along the spot vacated by the cowman to whom Slim had been talking. It was more than evident that he intended to force proceedings. He wore a smile which advertised his intentions, as he glanced along the bar. Slim interpreted that smile without any uneasiness.

"Meanin' what company, jest?" Boyce purred menacingly.

Slim hesitated for the briefest second. Here, Boyce knew he had a few friends, and that the lone rider had none. Slim could not know the reason, but he was certain of the facts—that Boyce did not intend him to move on alive!

Boyce was toying with him, like a cat with a mouse. He evidently felt that he had the game safely in his hand. Slim was in a trap and he could not get out. Slim was due to follow his tormentor's lead.

But Slim had other plans.

"Meanin' the company o' hound-dawgs and skunks!" he leaned forward slightly to say, in a low, hard voice. "Meanin' the kind o' company I've already turned down in this man's town!"

Boyce caught his breath. He was unprepared for having the scene he had staged so carefully brought out of his hands and the action forced into his own territory.

His heavy face reddened. His eyes flamed—contrasting curiously with the steady gray of Slim's eyes.

"Why, yuh damn sheep-herder, if you travel anywhere from where yuh are, it'll be feet first! I'm aimin'——"

"Aim faster and talk less, *compadre!*"

cut in Slim's voice—as hard as the granite of his eyes, now. It was low and it carried only a few feet, but a man moved swiftly away from the bar at the sound of it.

It was all the warning the bar habitués had, that one man's movement. For suddenly the buzzing monotone of various conversations was cleft apart with the fury of blazing six-guns.

Tables and chairs overturned in clattering confusion. Men ducked for cover like scurrying prairie dogs into their holes. Curses of amazement, fear, disbelief shattered themselves upon the air. The drifting layers of thick smoke whirled and eddied with the sudden impetus of movement.

Slim could feel the impact and the splintering of the bar at his ribs, as a shot hot from the mouth of Boyce's gun tore under his right arm and passed him. But already his gun was out—it had come from nowhere. In the nonchalant pose he had taken, it appeared impossible for him to draw swiftly. Actually, the single six-gun was out before Boyce's.

The other man had stepped swiftly aside in a quick, crabwise movement that Slim could easily interpret.

Two of Slim's shots in quick succession had stopped a second discharge from the mouth of Boyce's revolver. The two leaden messengers tore their way into Boyce's chest, and the big man staggered backward as though he had been struck by some powerful instrument.

In the same split second, Slim had jerked himself sidewise, and his own gun ripped out an answer to Boyce's companion even as the latter fired. Slim's shot tore across his man's chest and ripped through his right shoulder.

It spoiled the other shot completely. Slim never even knew where the bullet he had been expecting went. His man was thrown sidewise and his gun went flying from his hand. Slim leaped just as a .45 barked from somewhere in the rear of the barroom.

"Stop shootin' wild, yuh fool!" cried some one. "Stop or we'll all——"

His words were drowned in the uproar. Men were stampeding. Slim could not even tell if the stampede was toward him. Then, into the confusion, as his gun circled the place, waiting for the next move, the harsh voice of the sheriff broke in. The voice rang with authority.

"Stop shootin'. And get that hombre! Don't let him get outa here alive!"

And Slim knew that he would not get out alive if the truculent sheriff could stop him.

There were too many people, and Slim was not minded for wholesale slaughter, particularly with himself as one of the victims. Friend or foe—he could not distinguish. For the moment, the close-packed, dodging and whirling figures were saving him from the vengeful bullets of Boyce's friends, which he knew must be there among the crowd.

He saw the sheriff, pistol out, make a rush for him. Through the rift in the smoke eddies, the Law's face took on a malignant, hateful look. He had his gun out. It gleamed in some dull reflected light. And from an opposite tangent, another man was rushing upon him.

Still it was hazardous to shoot. The scene was like some mad inferno, with everything in confusion, and scared or angry men dodging in every direction.

Slim had just one factor in his favor. Enemies or not, he was certain that he had not a friend here. He did not dare to give himself up and submit to the law, even though his had been a cool case of self-defense.

There would be no proving that, once he was in the hands of Minerite's sheriff and Boyce's scattering of friends, especially the man he had winged, about the only other living ear-witness to the quarrel.

No, he had to get out—and fast. No matter what the cost, he could not be risking anything. It was a toss-up. He cursed the anger that had overcome the prudence which he had been wearing for days. And he cursed the luck which had cost him his other .45

He saw the gun of one of his attackers raised in his rush. The sheriff was directly in front of him. Slim made up his mind in a split second.

He did not wait. Instead of standing there and shooting or fighting it out, he dove straight forward. His teeth gleamed against drawn-back lips and his eyes were narrow slits of fury. Between him and the door was the oncoming charge of the sheriff of Minerite.

He did not hear the curse of astonishment which marked his sudden lurch from the bar rail. He propelled himself outward with his free left hand. He was scarcely conscious of the uproar.

He heard a shot crack out from the left of him, but his sudden movement had saved him. As he started, he fired, scarcely aiming, at the man who had made for him.

More confusion, scraping feet and scattered chairs as men hurled themselves out of the path of excitement. Two lights went out. And then he and the sheriff met!

Slim did not want to shoot again. For one thing, he knew he had just two cartridges left, and no time to reload. Besides that, however, he did not want the shooting of Minerite's sheriff added to whatever else might be slated against him.

He gave a swift, sideward movement in his rush just before he and the representative of the law met. It saved him. For the sheriff, seeing the way clear, let loose with his trigger. His shot grazed Slim's neck, but it was enough to burn him into action.

In the next second Slim's gun had come up, and as they collided, the flat of it swung into his enemy's face with full force.

Bone and muscle crushed under the fury of that blow. The sheriff's fierce oath was drowned in a snarl of anger and pain. He fell backward, stunned and winded. Slim's knee, coming up, had caught him in the stomach.

The impact of the two bodies had been one of stunning force. As the sheriff was thrown backward, he hurled over a man who had vainly sought to avoid the charge. With the man went a half overturned table, and a chair that cracked and splintered under the hurtling weights. Glasses crashed, and in the half dark that now existed, the place became a turmoil.

Like a charging buffalo, Slim kept his impetus, hurdled his victims and the débris they created; and before any one had spotted him, he had reached the door.

One single lunge, and he was through. With his free hand he slammed shut the door behind him. In the same instant, the crack of two guns came from inside, and lead embedded itself in the door frame.

Slim had no time for consideration. No time to get to his own horse, up the street. Gent must wait, for the moment.

Slim picked the saddled horse that was nearest to him at the hitching rack. It was a fine big bay, and fortunately it looked fresh, though the fugitive could not have halted to examine it. The same bound which had carried him through the doorway now sent him in a flying dive which landed him in the saddle.

The reins were only loosely drooped over the rack. He lifted them, and as the mount started to rear at his sudden movements, Slim whirled him none too gently, dug his feet into the flying stirrups, and the bay tore off, frightened and panicky.

That, however, was what Slim wanted. He could afford, for a while,

to let the preëmpted mount run as wild as he liked. For, even as he got started, the door had burst open.

Fortunately, it took the crowd which rushed there a moment to see what was happening. They were in each other's way, too, the men from inside. Some were not even too anxious to rush after the fugitive. A tangle ensued in the doorway before it was fully realized that Slim Allen was mounted and tearing with every ounce of the big bay's speed for the farthermost reaches of Minerite.

Headed south.

Shots barked then through the dark. But beyond the reach of the faint lights from McQuade's place, there were only patches of haphazard illumination along the street. Through these the heels of the bay skipped—ghostlike—and then horse and rider were gone.

"After 'im, yuh ground hogs! After him!"

"He's got my hoss. Lend me——"

"Git 'im before he hits the washout down at the creek, or he ain't to be got!"

Slim tore on, fully conscious of his danger, fully aware that he must take advantage of every second granted him by the few moments of confusion behind him. For they would follow, he knew. He prayed, incoherently, that his steed's feet would stay on the trail, and that no obstacle loomed in the uncharted dark ahead. For he did not know one inch of the way ahead of him.

The bay, however, appeared to know the trail. They tore on. Moments. Then wild whoops and the firing of guns from the edge of town behind him, told Slim that the posse had got under way. Some sort of organization, anyway.

He turned to look back over his shoulder, but he could see nothing but the glimmer of faint lights marking Minerite. The night was moonless. The stars, however, hung low and were luminous. By their light he was just able to piece out the larger chunks of landscape which loomed out of the dark in spots. The trail itself he could scarcely see.

He had not yet swung forward in his saddle when the trail turned. He was almost thrown off balance by the speed at which his still-frightened mount rounded a curve and burst through into low growth and trees. They were on some kind of roadway, narrowing though it was as they sped on. Slim decided to let the stolen mount continue to take the lead.

Then, far ahead, through twisted and low-lying growth, it seemed that the stars were meeting the earth. A huge hump of land hove into sight above this. It was toward this place that the bay and the road seemed heading.

Behind him, Slim could hear the noise of the pursuit at intervals. They were hammering on.

And then, as he thundered onward. Slim saw in a flash that what he had first seen through the growth had been water, with the stars mirrored in its not-too-placid surface. His heart leaped with sudden apprehension. The water body looked large, and he knew nothing of a ford in this country—had never heard of a river this far west. Had he thrown himself into a trap?

There was no avoiding it, however, whatever it brought. The posse was hot on his heels and he could not afford even a second of delay. The bay, too, still thundered on. its first panic not yet quieted.

Slim's anxious eyes scanned the lump of land which jutted out. Then, once again, his heart skipped a beat. There had been a washout at this spot, and recently. What had been only a narrow creek, swollen high by the rains, had broken through up above the promontory and swept down into this broad river!

Jagged and cold that break of land looked, as Slim swept on toward it. Broken, misshapen. It shelved down

in incongruous breaks toward the wider body of water, forlorn as it was merciless.

Slim took in what he could in the dim light, as he swept on, nearer and nearer to—what?

Then the grim, tight look came about his lips. His eyes narrowed in their old arrogant fearlessness and purpose. His grip on the reins tightened, and the bay—at that feeling—knew that its rider had taken over the mastery, after all.

The turbulent water loomed ahead. They were upon it now. Gone was the sound of pursuit in the rear.

Slim suddenly leaned sidewise, and the bay felt the bit caught by a master's hand. He swerved, under pressure of rein and spurred boot. In the next second, horse and rider were charging for the black shoulder of land which had caved in with the flood.

It was a mad ride, that charge. The bay never had time to refuse it. Impetus carried the horse on, and brute instinct obeyed the mastery which directed the impetus. Up the rough, broken slope they charged.

The rider alone knew how slim the chances were. But he knew, too, that he would be cut off on the banks of the stream below, where the washout had widened it. For certainly the men of Minerite knew of the washout and would plan to trap him there.

A patch of soft earth almost threw horse and rider. A second later, the steel hoofs were kicking up loose stones lying on soil frozen hard. A miniature avalanche had already started behind them. A sudden depression—the bay lurched—and Slim had to grab leather to keep from being thrown headlong.

But the horse's wildness had only increased. He recovered, wild-eyed and red of nostril, lunged upward, and they were forcing their mad way once more.

Slim scarcely heard the crack of a shot from below him, he was only faintly aware of the whine of lead as it whistled past. He had too much to attend to, keeping his seat.

Then, lurching and wild-eyed, the bay suddenly drew up his hind legs, and one final bound carried horse and rider onto a low plateau. Beyond, Slim saw in his first glance, the fury of the washout had spent itself. Half-dried silt and muddy earth surrounded the narrow, original bed of the creek, placid and smooth now.

Slim looked back, bringing the spent and still quivering horse to a halt. His hand went out reassuringly and stroked the sleek, sweating neck. He voiced soft overtones that the horse seemed to understand. He loosed the tight grip on the reins.

Back over his shoulder, Slim could just make out a group at the base of the land he had hurdled. They were not attempting that ascent. Slim grinned.

"Only a crazy fool and a crazy hoss," he told his beast. "Crazy enough to want to live and not carin' what means is took to assure the fact!"

Then, still smiling, he pointed the nose of his mount for a narrow spot in the original creek. The horse made no objection.

Slim wanted to stop and rest—both himself and the beast which had carried him out of the first danger. But though he had gained a momentary safety, he knew that that was all. There were other ways of crossing that stream, below somewhere. The posse from Minerite would know them.

And by dawn, more angry than ever, they would be scouring these hills for him. He knew what mercy he could expect if he were caught now.

CHAPTER V.

A GUN-SMEARED ROAD.

NOW I'm jest askin' myself again. What's it about?"

Slim looked at the open country and sky as though some inanimate thing

might have some answer to his grievance.

Slim had a certain amount of belief in luck. Gent and two guns were always with him. But since the loss of that one gun, trouble and bad luck had followed his footsteps.

And they were still following—that was the worst. Now, Gent was gone. And through the Tampino hills which were strewn south of Minerite to the border lands, men searched for him and a stolen horse.

Slim had no compunction about the horse. He would have been more than glad to turn the bay back to its owner, if he only had Gent. But he'd had to abandon Gent. That hurt.

He had made good his get-away. All through the night he had ridden, knowing nothing except that his general direction was southward. Along the border he was known; there might be some chance of recuperating there—of getting back his head and figuring out what was to be done next. They might give him a chance to catch his breath.

For Slim had not even argued the one important question with himself. He was going back, and he was going to get his gun and his horse. Those things were settled facts.

But first he had to evade the gang from Minerite. He had stirred up a hornets' nest there. Fast and hard as he had traveled, by noon he had seen searching parties three different times —fortunately from a good distance. Once he had been spotted, but he had evaded the trio after him.

But why had Boyce been so intent upon his life? Why had he not been sought for the crime back at Rago—instead of merely heckled by folks who didn't like him and wanted him out of the way for some obscure reason?

Slim shook his head. He was squatted in a little hollow, where mimosa grew in spots, and greasewood. A short distance away, the bay horse cropped the grass, its girth loosened. Slim had slept a little, but his weariness did not assail him now. With more than little to go on, he was certain that he was involved in some kind of a mystery—a mystery that was making of him a pariah.

His reflections were brought abruptly to an end. Only the quick upward jerk of his head showed that he had heard a sound. But somewhere, not far away from the little glade, a horse's hoof, treading the soft turf, had struck a stone.

It was enough for Slim. A horse or a rider in these hills to-day—he was not looking for friends.

Unstirring, he listened, his every sense on the alert. A moment later he was certain that he could hear the strain of saddle leather. At least one rider was coming, and traveling at a walk. Looking around, probably—one of the posse, or maybe two, making for the lip of the rise beyond which the hollow was.

Slim's long legs uncoiled gently, quietly. Holding his breath, he commenced to make a slow progress, on hands and kness, toward the edge of the hollow. It was only a few yards away, but he was taking no chances.

More than one rider would mean that he must either trust to his poor concealment or fight it out at odds.

And Slim knew that one shot in these hills would bring the pack of manhunters around his ears.

Slim parted the grama grass at the top of the rough slope. A soft exclamation parted his lips. The gun slipped easily from its holster and came up. Riding toward him, shooting glances right and left, was a single man.

Slim's gun leveled, resting along the ground. Then the lone rider was only a matter of yards away, and his breast was across the sights.

"Reach for the ceilin', partner—yo're covered!"

The voice was enough—cold and drawling with certainty. The posse member caught sight of the muzzle of the gun, and complied with the command.

Slim got to his feet, smiling a grim little smile at the fear and astonishment which crossed the young puncher's features at sight of him. He didn't remember this man especially, but he'd had scant time to register a photographic memory of faces in Minerite.

"Loosen yoreself from that saddle," he said quietly, moving up to his captive.

The puncher obeyed. Slim jerked loose the Smith & Wesson from his holster. It was a good enough gun, but its owner had failed in attention to it. Slim regarded it with distaste, jerked it open and emptied it. Then he relieved his man of a cartridge belt.

"If you was huntin' for me, partner, yuh sure found me, didn't yuh?" he said grimly. "Got any pals close by?"

But the look of apprehension on the young cowboy's face was enough reassurance. There was nobody close enough. He tried defiance.

"Go ahead and shoot, why don't yuh?" the captive demanded—though his eyes belied his effort. "I won't be the first that gun's spilt blood from. Damn it, get it over with!"

Slim shook his head slowly, and with the muzzle of the .45, pointed to a boulder.

"Sit down," he commanded. "And get them fool ideas outa yore head, son. When I shoot it's because I'm bein' shot at! Fix yoreself a cigarette—yo're nervous!"

The other watched him defiantly, troubled, as Slim proceeded to roll a cigarette for himself with his one free hand. A little breeze rippled across the thick grass. The first lungful of smoke blew gratefully through Slim's lips.

"Get one thing straight, waddy," he said at length. "Yo're plumb safe with me as long as yuh behave. Evidently you didn't see that little party last night, but there was more than one hombre out to plug me before I started shootin'. Now maybe yuh can tell me just why yo're all after me?"

The cowboy's eyes met his. "Ain't murderin' a man enough?" he demanded.

"Murder, yes. But I shot a man out to get me. And he had help, too. What's more, even before it happened, I wasn't wanted in that town, nor anywhere around here. I figured maybe yuh'd heard somethin' that would give me an idea why I got so danged unpopular lately."

He waited. For quite a long moment his captive sat on the boulder staring at him, as though trying to fathom his game. At length the cowboy shook his head.

"If yo're talkin' straight, I can't help yuh none," he said. "I was drafted on this posse—out to get the hombre who murdered this Boyce, shot another man and danged near killed the sheriff——"

"Did I?"

"He's in plumb bad shape. Face pretty near caved in. Yeah, he's riled."

Slim laughed.

"That's some good work done, anyhow!" he conceded the Fates. "That sheriff sure needed his face changed, quite a heap." Then quickly he was serious. "Yuh mean that, though? Never heard tell o' me before to-day?"

"Never! For that matter, I don't even know your name now."

Slim sighed. He was certain that his captive was telling the truth. He got to his feet.

"All right. I'm lettin' yuh trail back to yore friends," he said resignedly. "Reckon I'll jest cut a piece outa this cinch o' yourn, so yuh won't get to 'em too fast. And that gun—I clean out yore ammunition, I reckon. Where's the next town?"

"Which direction?"

Slim thought quickly. "West, o' course—unless I meet some o' yore friends that make me change my mind. In that case, I'd sorta like to know the general location of any towns hereabouts—except Minerite!"

"Waterton's west, but a good ways. Sorta south, there's Triple Forks—that's the next below. And behind is Minerite."

Slim nodded. "News gone out to them places, about me, I suppose?"

"I suppose so. They want yuh bad."

"Yeuh." Slim sighed again.

"They sure do—somebody does! But who?"

There could be no answer to this. The puncher vaulted into his saddle, which slipped considerably. It would not be easy riding, since Slim had a good foot length of the band in his hand, but it was obvious that Slim's captive was, if possible, even more grateful than he was amazed.

"Get goin'!"

Slim had lost interest. His erstwhile prisoner tried to smile as he obeyed.

"Right! And I'm kinda wishin' yuh luck, amigo!"

Slim grunted.

"I'll need it, till I get that gun back. And somethin' tells me I ain't gonna have it. Adios!"

In which Slim was a prophet.

He realized though, that, whatever the danger, his present hiding place was untenable. He'd have to dodge through the hills and take chances, and he had to get near some town. He had not eaten again, all day, and that, he reflected, was getting to be too much of a habit, too.

West or south, even if he changed his direction, there would be small difference. Both towns would be waiting for him, he assured himself, as he rode on. His only hope was in skirting them, but meanwhile he had to eat. And though all this territory was taken up, it was only in comparative proximity with the towns that he might hope to find a casual ranch house where he could buy or beg food.

All that day he managed to evade the men seeking him through the hills. As the afternoon waned, he came to realize that he had successfully eluded the pursuit posses which had set out for him from Minerite.

But as the sun sank lower, too, he became more and more conscious of the pangs of hunger. The bay showed signs of having been ridden hard, as well. However, Slim knew that he had been bearing steadily southward. Triple Forks could not be too far, and about it must be ranch houses or settlers' cabins where he could get food. Certainly every one could not be on the lookout for his coming!

Toward sundown he found what he was looking for. A squatter's cabin stood at the base of a low cliff, a cliff front serried and raw red in the late sun that washed it, marred by outcroppings of jagged rock and growth of piñon that thrust out from its many fissures. In the hollow, almost at the base, was the cabin—a low, mean-looking affair of logs and clay, and beyond a tiny spring trickled. There was a fire before the house.

Slim rode up and saw two figures straighten from before the fire, indistinct in the gloom that the tangled growth made here at the edge of the clearing.

The taller figure was gaunt and lean, unarmed, bearded, and out of a drawn face, suspicious eyes took in every detail of the arrival. The second was obviously the son of the first, a ragged, unkempt lad with matted hair and the same suspicious eyes—only more furtive, if possible.

Slim Allen, however, was in no position to choose his hosts overcarefully It seemed reasonable to suppose that such folk as these would have no in-

terest in the affairs of other towns, or in his.

"Howdy!"

He raised his hand as he rode up. He was answered with a grunt, while every detail of him was carefully scrutinized.

"Ridin' south, and I needed some chow. I'll buy it or beg it," he added cheerfully, for these people seemed exceptionally poor and therefore might not subscribe to range-land's code of hospitality.

The older man thought for a moment, shot a quick, meaning look at his son, and wiped his bearded lips with the back of a long, hairy hand.

"Reckon we can fix yuh up," he said. He tried to be cheerful, but it was an effort. He motioned to the fire, over which a kettle hung, Slim saw. "Got the remains o' some sheep a-stewin' there, if yuh want t' squat with plumb poor folks."

Slim slipped down out of his saddle. "Anybody's rich to me, if he's got food," he said cheerfully. "How far's it to Triple Forks?"

"Right close." The squatter looked Slim over with more careful appraisal. "Headin' that way?"

"Yeuh; but I ain't hit a place to eat since this morning," Slim said cautiously.

Actually, he intended to give Triple Forks a wide berth, and for that reason wanted its location, but to say he was going there might allay suspicion. "I'm plumb tuckered out. Musta lost the main trail."

"Reckon yuh musta," the squatter observed. Then he added, "Yuh look plumb tuckered out. Yuh might take about forty winks inside the cabin there—sonny and me's alone, yuh see—while I git this concoction t' where it's fit t' eat."

"Thanks."

Slim shot a swift look around. He was suspicious, on his own account; he measured the chances. But it seemed reasonable to suppose that this ignorant outlander would not even be interested in him, even if he suspected his identity. And Slim did not think news could have reached here. There was only an off-chance that men had come out from Triple Forks to look for him. And some one must want him mighty bad to get Triple Forks law on him before he arrived there. It was not the way of this country.

The boy was watching him. The older man saw his hesitation.

"Might jest as well," he drawled. "Sonny kin take care o' yore hoss a bit, and it'll be a little while 'fore this food's ready."

Slim nodded. "*Bueno.* A half an hour'll look good to me right now."

He turned up toward the dark cabin. Reaching the door, he heard the squatter's voice, twanging and idle.

"Take care o' the gent's hoss, sonny. And then yuh might take a look at them sheep and see they're all right for the night. You'll jest about have time before chow's ready."

Slim thought nothing of this, except, especially as he entered the squalid and dirt-ridden cabin, to wonder how many sheep this poverty-stricken camp could own. He found a low cot formed of boxes, and dropped down on this wearily.

Vaguely he heard the bay horse being walked past the glassless window of the cabin. That was all.

All—until his senses suddenly aroused him to danger. Only dimly he had been aware that, at least once, the squatter had entered the cabin. Now, though, his eyes started wide apart and he sprang to instant wakefulness. Except for tensing, not a muscle of his body moved for the outward eye to see.

There were voices, but the hut was empty. Farther down. He placed the fire. He could see only dimly beyond it, by raising his head a trifle. He knew

that there were more than two figures there.

Then he caught the gleam of some metal on the far side of the blaze. The sheep pot had been removed and the flames had died down considerably. But as his vision accustomed him to the dark, Slim became certain that there were strangers down there.

He thought rapidly. He had been asleep for some little time; actually, he had no way of knowing for how long. But he remembered that his horse had been walked back here, and that the older man had sent the boy off. To look after sheep was a logical excuse for a disappearance—long enough to get to Triple Forks!

And there was probably a reward!

Clear enough now. As a stranger stepped to where he could be seen in the firelight, Slim got to his feet like a cat and made for the door. There he crouched for an instant.

There was no uncertainty now. Other men were down there. For an instant he caught a glimpse of the squatter, as one lean arm was stretched out in a gesture toward the cabin.

Then Slim Allen slipped like a shadow out of the doorway and vanished into the dark at the side of the house. He had not been seen.

He remembered the reddish cliff face that he had noted upon his approach to the place. The squatter and a posse—he could not guess how many—out in front, and that wall of cliff in the rear! But even as he scuttled toward the back of the cabin, among mesquite that still grew close to the walls, Slim heard the sound of men approaching the door.

In the dark, he found himself at last at the base of the short cliff. His hands went out and found it sloping and crumbling at the base. He moved along.

A voice broke out of the dark behind him, a rasping voice.

"Wake up an' come outa there, Slim Allen—or take some lead tonic!"

Silence followed. Dead silence, broken only by the faint scuttle of men moving about. Slim knew the movements. They were getting into strategic position to rain lead through the doorway.

Crack! The smash of a revolver shot abruptly erupted the silence. Another!

"Reckon that's wakin' yuh, Allen. Come out here and come out with yore hands reachin'!"

CHAPTER VI.

A JINX RIDES HARD.

WHEN only silence followed the second command, whispering broke out among the men who had come from Triple Forks. Slim, working his way along the cliff wall, strained to hear, but unavailingly. One voice, heavier than the rest, made itself heard from time to time. It was the same voice which had called for him to surrender.

Trapped though he believed himself to be, Slim could not fail to have a certain grim amusement over the prospect of his would-be captors yelling inside that hut.

By the time the confused murmurings in front were growing into a concerted need for action, Slim had come to the conclusion that his one hope was gone. There had been a faint idea in his mind that the bay horse had been brought back here in the rear somewhere, and that he could make a dash for freedom. But he had not found it—and he knew that he had small time now.

He knew, when he heard the next shot, what it meant. Its detonation was muffled—some one had crept to the door of the cabin. It was followed by a second. At any moment now, they would be rushing the interior and finding him gone.

Slim's hands felt longingly over the cliff botton. Then his eyes lighted with

that fierce, reckless look, and his jaw tightened in the grim way it had. Once before he had attempted altitude.

The stone seemed unusually soft, fissured by streaks of earth in many places. And the jutting piñons——

As twin revolver cracks roared and reverberated inside the cabin, Slim was making his way upward. It was not too difficult going for the first few moments. But if they found him here—spread-eagled and helpless against the revealing light face of the cliff——

He cursed, dug in his nails, and slid on. Halfway to the summit, he found a shelf, which supported his body for a breathless, life-giving moment, while he stared below.

An oath burst out from the dark. A hasty pistol roared, and a man's voice choked out the command to stop firing.

"He's got away! Not here!" some one cried.

"Damn you, squatter, if this is——"

"No, I tell yuh. Look—this way—it's the only way he coulda took!"

The whining, twanging voice was silenced by a volley of contrary commands and miscellaneous oaths.

"Outa here! Around back!"

Slim stood up to his full height. His fingers were bleeding at every tip, his nails were torn and painful. To stand thus erect on his ledge was a dangerous thing, but now was a time for long chances. Even though he might hold out for a moment on his ledge, he would be completely at their mercy.

Straightening, he was able to grasp the ledge of a fissure which was not far from the top. The stone crumbled, but his fingers dug in. Almost up there, if he could get his feet up that high, was a vein that ran crosswise and seemed to offer good traction.

Rock spattered downward, but it held. The men below were making so much noise now that the sound went unheeded. Slim gained the next groove.

He began working himself perilously upward, at an angle now, but an angle that held in its way. He neared the top as the sound of his pursuers came more clearly to him. The squatter had persuaded them to search in the rear of the cabin.

Sweat stood out in pearllike beads on his forehead, and his two-day growth of beard stubble was damp with it. His teeth were clenched and his lips drawn back. Every muscle in his body was strained tense and taut with the mighty effort. There was almost no foothold—he felt like a fly, flattened there—and as helpless.

He was close to the top now—bitterly close. He strained on. How soon would it be inevitable that they see him?

The inch-wide foothold had commenced to crumble under his soft-toed boot. Desperately he clung on, fingers and wrist strength alone keeping him where he was. But it could not last; human strength could not endure further. Yet the will to live was strong. The thought of dropping now, of landing, a beaten, broken corpse, among those wolves below him, sent a surge of red fury through the fugitive.

It carried him just long enough for him to sight the scraggly piñon growing hardily out of the rock fissure above him. And above that was another, anchored to the earth at the top of the cliff. Slim grasped the growth in a last effort—and by the strength of it, moved upward and over a trifle more.

Then the other one. His eyes were half closed. One last mighty effort and Slim found himself lying on the ground at the top of his cliff, panting in long, sobbing breaths.

The excited voices from below came at last to his consciousness, through a misty haze of weariness and pain. His face was pressed to the warm earth. It was good there, but he could not stay. The driving will to live still held him

"He must 'a' gone up the cliff!"

"Hell, no! It'd take a fly to make that. Squatter——"

"He couldn't 'a' gone up the cliff!" came the squatter's whining rejoinder. "He couldn't, I tell yuh. And he couldn't get out. Look! We got his horse here, ain't we? No horse! And he didn't come in front. He's in here somewhere, and he'll be a-pottin' at us any minute!"

Slim crouched, trying to calm his quivering limbs and muscles. He could not be seen from below. Quick eyes—unfailing even in his present weakness—took in what there was to see. And senses that were trained to fight for life—to decide quickly and surely—made his decision.

Beyond where he was, westerly, the summit of the cliff sloped downward. Forward of this, trees grew, high and thick. In between, however, the rock formation jutted out in a long wedge toward where the trail must be. The searching party was looking for him in the hollow of land formed by the outward wedge. They would not believe that he could have crossed that. And he could not have—from below.

Slim sped along the summit, well out of sight of his pursuers. In a moment their voices and the sound of crashing underbrush was behind him.

He passed the wedge of land. On the farther side it sloped crazily into the massed trees. Without hesitation, Slim took the slope. He was sliding into the unknown and any number of perils, he knew, but there was small choice. Certain peril lay behind him, certain doom. He relished it less than the cavernous, twisted dark into which the slope carried him.

Stones were dislodged, and the rock formation slipped under him as he made his half-sliding, half-crouching way downward. But he was certain that the sound of these could not be heard by the men on the other side of the broken land.

As the slope grew steeper, he proceeded more cautiously. At any moment, he knew, he might plunge off into the dark and an abyss.

Tree branch fringes had been striking his face for several minutes. Now a heavy limb appeared only a few feet from his chin. He brought up; his eyes lighted.

For a few seconds he maneuvered cautiously. Then he was able to reach out and grasp the limb. Both his hands found a hold as he tested it carefully. It was solid enough, though.

So, with a little, half-stifled prayer, Slim Allen let his feet loose and slid off into the further unknown.

The limb held well. He was able to bring himself half astraddle of it, but the branches were too thick to permit of working his way along in that fashion. Twigs, leaves and vines clung at his face and seemed to be stabbing for his eyes.

But minutes later, he could grasp the trunk with his hand, and he was on his way downward.

At last his feet touched the ground again. He was at the base of both the main cliff and the wedge of rock which ran out toward the trail. On the other side of the rock formation, his enemies were searching for him.

Slim's smile was grim and hard, there in the dark. He felt his way carefully along the base of the rock. The trees and tangled foliage opened out. In five minutes he was within view of the road—and of something else more important.

Standing there, idly cropping grass and undisturbed by humans or their doings, were the four saddled mounts belonging to the posse which had been brought up from Triple Forks!

Slim was not going to betray himself by any lack of caution at this stage, but as—creeping forward—he neared the saddled and hobbled beasts, he recognized that too much caution was wasted.

His enemies were talking loudly enough to be heard—conferring, somewhere in the rear of the cabin.

Slim loosed the mounts one by one. His bay was not there. Just as well, he thought: the bay was worn, anyway, and these mounts were fresh. He picked the most likely looking one—a brown pony with spots of gray on his flanks. The reins of the other mounts in his hand, he got into the saddle.

At a slow walk, he made for the trail, the three captured animals following him docilely. The grim smile on his face grew broader and happier as, at the same slow pace, more and more space was put between him and his would-be captors.

A little later, he remembered to turn off the road. If they expected him so definitely in this territory, sight of him with three led horses would lead to certain trouble. In the open country once more, he forsook caution and started his mounts at a free gallop.

South!

Somewhere over there to the left of him lay Triple Forks. He could skirt that easily. At the moment, he had some riding to do.

Far, far behind him, he heard a pistol shot ring out. Then another. Then three in quick succession. The wind swept against his face. The quartet from Triple Forks had found what sort of man they were dealing with—and the squatter was probably going to pay heavily for what they might believe was treachery.

This coup over his enemies gave Slim new life. It made up for a great deal, even the bleeding hands and the tortured muscles—to say nothing of those long minutes of fear, of waiting for death and wondering only at what form it might take.

But Slim did not stop riding. He did not even see the lights of Triple Forks, if there were any to see. At a steady gallop, broken by jealously guarded periods of walking for a rest, he pushed on.

With dawn he was far south of any pursuit from the town he had outwitted. Pursuit could not have started after him for a long time, and he had traveled fast in the interim.

He made camp at a water hole and searched the saddles and accouterments of his captured beasts. He was rewarded by the sight of saddlebags on the back of one—its rider evidently had been on the herd before he started out. Inside the saddlebags were the remains of a prepared fare. There was dried stripped beef, some corn bread, and half a tin of beans.

Slim ate wolfishly, devouring the last crumb. Then he drank from the water hole, and rolled a cigarette. With the last puff of it, he squashed it out in the sand alongside him, glanced up at the paling stars, and decided that he had earned an hour of sleep.

The hour was all that he took, almost to the second. Then he was off, and riding southward again. At the first prominent rise in the terrain he halted to look back. But there was no sign of pursuit in the early morning.

A ravine ran below him. He loosed the three riderless horses and sent them clattering off westward. Then he took up his way again.

He had time to think now. More than that, he was heading into his own country—and in spite of the jinx that rode so hard on his saddle horn, he was still alive.

All that day he rode, and thought—for there was no sign of pursuit. He found a trail and stuck to it, meeting only one individual on the way—an old man bearing supplies in a buckboard who gave him only a casual "Howdy!" in passing.

Slim was not a desperate criminal—he could not even be thought that by the men back at Minerite. Yet Triple Forks, on hearing of him, had sent out

posses scouring the country for him. And the Minerite men were probably still looking for him.

The more he thought, the more Slim became convinced that there was something ominous and connected about his adventures—the adventures which had begun with the loss of his gun in that poker game, where he had sat across from Jeff Masters. Even first-class criminals were not pursued by law and trouble hunters impartially the way he had been.

And of all the trouble, the original crime—where he could concede they might logically suspect him—had faded into insignificance. Nobody seemed to want him for that. The Triple Forks posse had been stirred up by the folks at Minerite, and Minerite had no grudge against him for anything that had happened at Rago.

When Slim went to sleep that night, in a clump of sage that fringed a small depression in a countryside growing ever more open, he knew that he was close to Orotura and his own country. Orotura he did not know well, but he had lived and worked and fought there. It was a point from which he could stand and look back—get a gasp of breath, probably, before he decided what to do next.

He had to do something—and soon. He was broke, and there was no prospect of any money at all until he got a job. He could not sell his horse and he would not sell his last gun. Even the saddle that carried him was not his own.

Yes, he'd strike for a job first—any kind of a job which would afford him a moment of respite and some food. As he went to sleep, head across his saddle, Slim reflected ruefully that his "vacation" had not been a great success.

In the morning, though, he felt better, even though his belt had to be tightened another notch. To-day he'd eat; he was sure of that. He might even hit Orotura by nightfall, and he still had one or two silver dollars in his pocket. When he thought of how much bacon and eggs that would buy he groaned aloud and touched the brown horse with nervous spurs.

He was more fortunate than he had hoped. Toward noon, cutting across the open, rolling country and avoiding the regular trails, he sighted a line rider's hut with a wisp of smoke coming up from a small fire outside.

The lonely man on outpost there did not know him, and was glad of company. But his larder was low; he was expecting supplies any time. However, he shared what he had, and Slim was grateful enough to conceal the fact that he could have eaten much more.

"How far to Orotura?" he asked over a cigarette.

The puncher shook his head. "Yuh won't strike it by to-night, unless yuh stick at a stiff gallop all the way. But they's places along the road I reckon yuh could put up. Some places that ain't so danged nice, either."

"Meanin' what?"

Again a shake of the head, this time more quizzical.

"They's doin's around here that ain't much spoken of. You been to this country before?"

"Yeuh."

"Maybe yuh heard tell of that outfit from across the border we busted up more'n a year ago—we used to call 'em the 'Red Wolves.' They holed up in Pancros, jest across the line."

Slim started suddenly; his fists clenched. The Red Wolves of Pancros! And now, in a vivid flash, he knew why he had been so set on getting to Orotura. The connection was plain. Jeff Masters was one of that extinct band of rustlers and raiders from across the line.

A couple of years ago the Wolves had

been wiped out. It had got down to a pitched battle that took days—after the cowmen all through this section had banded together and got the outlaws at last into a carefully prepared trap. Slim had been in that mêlée; he still carried the narrow scar of a Mexican knife as a result.

The Red Wolves, after years of depredation across the line, had been beaten and broken up. Their leaders had been either killed or scattered. Here and there two or three of the original band still roamed. Some had drifted south into the interior of Mexico—most of the natives who survived had taken that way. Others of the survivors had simply become absorbed in the West, lost.

But some, it was rumored, still held out, a slim remnant of the former guerrilla band. Though scattered for the most part, their mass power lost forever, it was still believed that some of the Wolves carried on in unison.

And Slim knew suddenly that Jeff Masters of Rago had been one of the Wolves. "Jericho Jeff," then. No other name. Now, a cattle owner in Rago.

Slim did not move for a long moment. What did this discovery mean, after all? Nothing, perhaps, on the face of it, but it strengthened the feeling he had—that all his troubles and woes were connected by some sinister chain.

"They's sure plenty o' them Wolves left," the rider's voice drawled on. "Not like they used to be, but they's a bunch of 'em that headed north a ways. I'd advise yuh to travel light hereabouts, waddy—especially if yuh got any *dinero* on yuh."

Slim arose with a grin. "That's one bet I'm safe on," he assured. "The *dinero* I got on me wouldn't buy an appetizer for a canary bird. But I must have something that folks want plumb bad!" he added thoughtfully.

CHAPTER VII.

TRAIL HERD.

SLIM knew, as the sun reached closer to the western horizon, that he was not due to make Orotura that night. He had not tried to push his mount, because the horse had already carried him well, and neither steed nor rider had put in much rest.

There was time. He felt that he could afford not to rush now. Somehow, he was getting at the bottom of things. And Slim Allen was of a peculiarly curious nature. Not for one instant during the progress of the chain of events which had carried him here from Rago, had he even considered that anything was finished.

It was not an easy matter to find the main trail which ran south into Orotura. He had contented himself with a narrow trail which ran through the heart of the grazing country. Lonely and aloof this country was—only at long intervals and at great distances did Slim espy here and there signs of herds and riders.

But thought of the Red Wolves drove him on now. What a war that had been—the embattled cattlemen and the infuriated, frustrated rurales from the other side of the line—in a last, smothering stand against Los Lobos Rojos, the Red Wolves of Pancros! The fight was over, but some of the pack remained!

Yes, the trail was getting warm now. From Rago, it was leading him to where it had begun at the first. Not so much coincidence, after all, when he thought of it—only the reason for hunting him so desperately must be cleared up.

The little house alongside the narrow trail was a welcome sight as dusk began to come over the rolling terrain. A thread of smoke oozed comfortably from the chimney of an added kitchen in the rear, and a yard littered with refuse, pigs, cans and miscellaneous

clutter was enough sign for Slim that this place was some kind of inn or shelter.

Riding toward it and noting the yellow, sickly glow which was exuded through the dirty, stained windows and the partly opened door, Slim told himself that a man had to be hungry and dog-tired to really look forward to such a place. It was a typical cantina of the poorest class, he guessed. Across the line there were many such, and a few had permeated into this country, though not very far northward.

In a shed near by, as he passed, Slim saw three or four horses and two mules stabled. Men's voices came from indoors.

Before he pushed open the door, he had a glimpse of a short-length, greasy bar opposite the opening, and of the man who was evidently owner of the place—a dark-visaged, mustached Mexican, leaning thereon. The place was lighted by candles stuck in the necks of whisky bottles.

Slim went in. He was hungry, and he wanted a place to sleep; if these could be offered, it was enough. He looked for no trouble this far south—so far as his adventures of the past few days were concerned.

Four men were inside the cantina, beside the barkeeper. They presented a rough-looking crew, half bearded, unkempt, two-gunned and hard-eyed, there in the flickering light of the candles and against the squalid background. They all looked up at Slim's entrance, and talk seemed to stop.

Slim heard only a few words as he pushed open the door. These made no instant impression upon him, and he gave no sign of having heard them, but he remembered——

"If they're really closin' in that hard, somebody's got t' take the chance—and it might as well be——" The name that followed was unintelligible.

Slim glanced idly at the speaker, who appeared to be the leader of the quartet. There was something more than vaguely familiar about the lean, mule-like countenance with close-set eyes. A glimmer of recognition, too, lighted the other man's face, and his brows drew down.

Slim called for a drink, seeming to ignore the occupants of the place, and then announced that he wanted food—and stacks of it! The Mexican hastened to oblige him.

Slim dropped down at a table opposite the four men, taking his drink with him, and waited. Their talk had died down; it was carried on in hoarse whispers, and only at infrequent intervals could the lone traveler catch a word. These men, he noted, however, looked as though they had been riding hard and working arduously.

The proprietor came in with a steaming plate.

"Got a place to flop around here?" Slim asked.

"*Si,* señor—such as it is! A little room in the back, wit' one bed. That is," the Mexican added, half turning to his four customers, "if these *caballeros* do not stay. They were here first." He manifestly held the quartet in respect.

The mule-faced man heard him. He shot a sharp look at Slim Allen. "Naw, that's all right, Jorge. We won't be needin' much sleep. And it wouldn't be doin' four of us much good, anyhow—in this rat hole!" The others laughed and looked at Slim.

Jorge seemed pleased that they should even deign to insult his place. He grinned at Slim, hovering over the food.

"You go to Orotura, señor, to-morrow?"

"Reckon so," Slim nodded briefly, his mouth full of food. "Headin' that way." He was wondering what could be the meaning of the words he had heard upon entering. And who was the long-faced leader across from him?

The Red Wolves? He remembered

the line rider's comment, and recalled what he knew himself. These looked the breed.

The four heads opposite him were drawn together now as one of their number gave a quick exclamation, abruptly smothered. Slim wondered if he had heard his own name. He rolled a cigarette with nonchalance and drank the remains of his watery coffee out of a thick cup that was none too clean. But he felt better.

"Reckon yuh better take care o' that hoss o' mine," he told Jorge, through a smoke cloud. "See that he's plumb well put up for the night."

"*Si*, señor."

As the proprietor scuttled out, a chair shifted, and the leader of the four men opposite got languidly to his feet. First he went to the bar, while the others remained silent, then, turning, he saw Slim—as though for the first time.

He lounged toward the single table. There was no hostility in his manner as he halted. Rather, he seemed disposed to be friendly.

"Maybe I'm wrong, and if I am it don't matter," he said, "but I'm thinkin' you look a lot like a hombre known as Slim Allen, from these parts."

Slim did not take long to make up his mind. The mere fact that he was back in country that he knew gave him a feeling as of some sort of a wall at his back, anyway, in a show-down.

"Yeuh, I'm Slim Allen," he said calmly. "I reckon I seen you somewheres, too, maybe."

He did not like the look of the stranger, in spite of the latter's outward affability. There was nothing to trust in that long face and in those close-set eyes.

"Maybe yuh do know me," the other said. "I reckon we might 'a' met up somewheres. I'm known as 'Mule' Carsten." He slid into a seat opposite, at the small table. "Me and my boys're trail herdin' a bunch o' longhorns up through t' the north. For the Diamond M, down south of Orotura," he added. "That's why that room o' Jorge's wouldn't do us any good tonight."

Slim wondered at all this prelude. "Mule Carsten" meant nothing to him except that it was a name he knew he had heard somewhere in the past. But any scrap of information on any subject was welcome just now. Slim felt that he was getting closer to a hot trail.

"Trail herdin's tough work," he agreed sympathetically. "Got far to run the critters?"

"Almost up t' Rago, if yuh know where that is."

"I do!" Slim agreed, with feeling.

"Know the country between here and there?"

"Pretty well. Why?" Slim's suspicions were suddenly on the alert; he froze. In the range country, men were not so promiscuous with questions to a stranger. Not without reason.

Mule Carsten saw him stiffen. He raised a hand in protest. "Don't git excited, partner!" he hastened to say. "If yuh don't want to answer me, yuh don't need to. The fact is, I could use another hand with my outfit, and it'd be fine t' git one that knows that trail better'n I do. If yo're lookin' for work ——" He paused.

Slim hesitated, wanting time. "I'm out of a job," he temporized, thinking fast.

He wanted work, all right. But he had been heading down into this border country simply to get it. To retrace his path now, even with a job as trail nurse to a bunch of calves, would be folly, he thought.

But there were other thoughts, too—and Slim had never followed any straight line of logic. These men were certainly anxious to get him, and they knew his name. He was more than suspicious. On the face of it, the thing

looked clear enough, and logical. But there was something else. He wondered if it was worth while to try this angle.

"The pay's good," Carsten insinuated —but not too strongly. "More than regular wages—there's a bonus, 'cause we're sorta pushin' fast."

Slim decided that the trail was indeed hot, no matter in what direction it led.

"Bueno!" he said. "I'll take yuh. When're we startin'?"

"Yo're startin' right away," Carsten smiled. "Maybe they's a catch in it, but the boys've all been workin' pretty hard, and we all need a rest. Yuh'll have to ride night herd to-night and relieve 'Skinny' Powers, who's out there now. Fact is, I stopped in here hopin' to pick up some wanderin' waddy—I promised Skinny that somebody'd relieve him to-night. The cows've been run plumb hard, and they needed a halt. We're pushin' off jest about daylight, or maybe a little before."

Slim nodded. Still logical—but still suspicious to him, as well. He had started this thing, though—he had made his choice, and even though he was tired, he would go through with it.

"Bueno," he said again. "Lead me to yore herd and I'll start workin'."

He appeared to be studying the flame of his match at the end of a new cigarette. Actually, he saw quite distinctly the quick light of satisfaction which flared into Carsten's eyes at his decision.

When he met the other three men, a moment later, he watched for that same look. There could be no doubt about it—they were certainly all more than eager to welcome him to their crew. Slim wondered if the addition of simply another hand could account for it.

He rode out with Mule Carsten, and Carsten talked most of the way. There was a cool breeze and the night was pleasant. To reach the coulee in which Carsten's herd rested took almost an hour of riding. But it was still early evening. Skinny Powers could get in some good sleep—and a few drinks, Slim suspected.

"Yo're sure fillin' in the right spot," Skinny told him. "I'm plumb cold and tired and needin' a couple o' Jorge's life-bringers." Powers wore a coat that was strapped tight up around his neck, and his bandanna shielded the lower part of his face, so that his countenance was not particularly visible.

Slim watched the two men ride away, back toward the cantina, and he fell to wondering again.

At any rate, he'd got himself a job —a respectable one, he gathered, and it was heading him back over the old trail he had just covered so rapidly. He thought he could keep out of trouble along the way, and he wondered if there was any trouble to look forward to at Rago—beyond the recovery of that missing gun, of course. That was very much in Slim's mind. Perhaps if he let Jeff Masters know how much of his past he was now aware of, he could bluff the ex-bandit into restoration of the .45 that he had won on the strength of marked cards.

With that gun back—— Slim heaved a long sigh. Perhaps he was unduly superstitious, but he knew his troubles were due to end when Tomaso's gun was back in its old holster.

It was cold. Well he remembered these cold nights under border stars, after blistering days. He reflected that he did not blame Skinny Powers for having had his coat collar up. His own raiment was none too warm.

Slim stood his mount on the crest of the little hollow and looked down over his charges. The herd seemed to be wavering this way and that, down there shoulder to shoulder in the dark—the way of cattle since time began, he supposed. Ripples ran through them, as though some electric thought was trans-

mitted from one to another, and then to the whole dark mass.

He watched them carefully. Well he knew how one of those ripples, for no reason, could start a stampede. And he was alone. If anything happened, he had to handle it by himself.

He could not exactly blame Mule Carsten for preferring the nebulous comfort of Jorge's place, but he reflected that had he been in the trail herder's shoes, he would be taking better care of his charges. The whole crew should be sleeping out here—with its boots on.

Mule Carsten! Yes, there was something odd about it all. Not odd that Mule should know his name—Slim was known in spots all through this country. Nor that, under the circumstances, Mule should be willing to trust him with the herd, for Slim had never had a crooked whisper against his name.

No—but the whole thing smelled funny. He knew that he would never trust Carsten. He'd had ponies with faces like Carsten's, and his insight judged men and ponies by the same rule.

He shook his head, moving his horse a little, just so the beast would not get stiff standing still. The glow of his cigarette made a red stab in the dark. Below, the herd kept on its grunting, contented monotone.

"Somethin' plumb wrong, somewhere —I got that feelin'!" he told himself aloud—and a second later, knew he had been right.

He heard the clink of a bridle chain from the darkness, the strain of saddle leather—a moment later, the soft but unmistakable sound of horses' feet. One of the crew was coming back.

Then the sounds ceased.

Slim stirred uneasily, striving to pierce the blackness, but without avail. There had been men there, he knew. Of course, there was a possibility that he was sitting near some used trail, and that ranchers had simply been passing on the way home from town. But it was a long distance from town, and it would take a lot to bring men riding home at this hour of the night.

The feeling that something was wrong grew as the minutes ticked by. Slim started to ease his animal down the gentle slope for a casual survey. His pony had gone no more than a few paces before he was brought up by a sharp command.

"Reach for the stars, waddy—or take a lead bath! Yo're covered from three sides!

CHAPTER VIII.

DUE TO SWING!

SLIM knew that the information was true. He even thought that he recognized the voice. But he knew that he was silhouetted against the sky line, and that his challenger was in the dark below him. One man was enough—three were superfluous.

He raised his hands slowly, careful not to stir from his position. Hard luck again! From where did it come this time? If these men were raiders, they had the herd right enough. He could do nothing; the only question remaining was: What would they do with him?

But he was quickly disillusioned. From three sides men came toward him, their guns gleaming under the cold stars. Slim's heart leaped, for something else gleamed, too—a star-shaped badge on the vest of the man in the center of the triangle!

The Law!

They kept him well covered. There were four men in the party. The sheriff halted at the head of Slim's horse.

"Get his gun," came the crisp command. "See he's not got another one under his coat."

"Right!"

In a second, Slim was disarmed, and at a motion from his captors, who were all dismounted, he got out of the sad-

dle. He had already recognized the sheriff, from his voice. He knew him —Giles Latimer, a square shooter and a deadly one.

Latimer stepped up to him. He gazed deeply into Slim's face, puzzled.

"Seems t' me I know this hombre somewhere," he said.

"One o' the Red Wolves, probably," put in a gruff voice.

"You know me, well enough," Slim returned. He gave his name. "And if yuh remember, I wasn't on the other side when the Red Wolves were running!"

"Slim Allen—well, I'm damned!" the sheriff burst out. "And yo're running with this kind of an outfit now, huh?"

"I don't know what yo're talkin' about," Slim returned. "I figured up to now yuh'd made a mistake. I'm jest night herdin' for the hombre who gave me a job. Yuh got anything else on me?"

He waited for news of his other escapades. But, strangely enough, there was none forthcoming. His statement was met by a guffaw of laughter from his hearers.

"Night herdin'—is right! Where's yore pals?"

"Yes." The sheriff was puzzled, but he was businesslike. "Where's yore pals, Allen? Streaked?"

Slim hesitated. More bad luck, that was all. And he was in it deeply, this time. Mule Carsten had got him into a trap ready to be sprung. He had to forget his first hopes—that there had been a mistake. If one had been made, he had made it!

Jest what," he demanded slowly, "are yuh throwin' these guns on me for? Tell me what I've done, and maybe I can answer yuh better?"

The sheriff studied him, while his men moved impatiently. After a moment Latimer spoke:

"Y' insist on foolin' that a way, Allen?"

"Yuh heard me, I reckon, sheriff. I don't know what this is about yet. Even if yuh don't believe me, maybe yuh'll recite it for me, anyway. The condemned man's last request, sort of."

Latimer nodded. "All right, if yuh want it that way. Yo're arrested, Slim Allen, for bein' found ridin' herd on a pack o' rustled cows, half of which is from the Diamond M and half from a ranch that sits right on the line. We figured on roundin' up the whole crew —bein' pretty sure the herd was bein' driven hard for some place north o' here. That's all. Where's the rest of yuh?"

"So that's it!" Slim hesitated a long moment, while they watched him. Then his shoulders drooped. "Yuh won't believe me, sheriff, but I'm innocent. I just come from up north, and I took the first job handed to me—by a man named Mule Carsten. Met him in a place called Jorge's with his pals, and they said they was trail herdin' some critters back along my route. That's all."

"At Jorge's, yuh say?" Latimer cut in.

"Yeuh." Slim sounded resigned. "But I reckon yuh won't find 'em there now. I reckon they've dusted plenty. They had an idea you was comin', but they wasn't sure. So they figured that, if they left me here, they'd be safe, either way."

He remembered the words he had heard spoken as he entered the cantina. He understood them now. Had he not come along, Carsten would have left Skinny to take the punishment. As it was, the whole gang would get away clear. The mule-faced leader—if he could laugh over losing his stolen cattle —would be having a good laugh on Slim Allen by now.

The sheriff turned to two of his men. "Streak it for Jorge's place, boys," he said. "Pick up anything yuh can find. We'll run this hombre into town."

"Why not finish him off here?" one

of the posse demanded. "He's guilty as hell—we can see that. We got him with the goods. What's the use of extra baggage into town?"

There were words of approval. But Latimer shook his head. "We can finish him off fast enough, but the boys are waitin' in town. Have been, ever since we got the information. He'll get a quick trial—jest as soon as we hit there, and it'll be done proper. But there's no lynch law in this county while I'm sheriff!"

His words were crisp and decisive. Latimer had already proved his nerve and determination. The other men shrugged, and the two he had detailed mounted and rode off in the way Slim had come. The rest made for their horses.

"Git into the saddle," Latimer commanded. "I never knew yuh for a fool, Allen, but yuh sure started playin' one this time. If the country wasn't so stirred up over all this rough business, there might be a chance for yuh on yore record in the Red Wolves war."

Slim made no reply. There was nothing to be said. That the sheriff had spoken the exact truth was unquestionable—he hadn't a chance!

This was the end of the trail. Mule Carsten and his pals were undoubtedly remnants of the Red Wolves of Pancros. And Jeff Masters certainly was one. Perhaps these stolen cattle might eventually have been destined for Masters. It did not matter now. Mule Carsten had known him and had pulled an easy trick. It was bold and audacious enough so that Slim could even appreciate it.

Not a chance! Slim was resigned to it even before he and his captors reached Orotura. Honest as he was—known as he was—no one could possibly believe a story such as he had to tell. Not unless one of the gang was captured and made to talk—and he had small hope of that!

He had been found riding night herd on stolen cattle. Beyond that there was nothing to say. Naturally, a captured rustler would lie. And just as naturally, the men who heard him would have no sympathy and no ear for one of the gang harrying the border, whom they had fought for so long. That Slim had fought alongside the honest ranchers once only made him the more culpable—he was a traitor to his own kind.

It was a long ride into Orotura. Late when the trio arrived there. A crowd was collected in front of the combined jail and sheriff's office. Slim noticed without interest that the structure was more up to date now than it had been.

Mutters of anger and threats and imprecations filled the air as the crowd parted unwillingly to let through the deputy, the sheriff, and the prisoner. One or two of the hard-faced men there recognized Slim with smothered exclamations.

But no moves were made yet. Latimer's deputy gave out the only news to the crowd of ranchmen and cowboys.

"Jest got this one of them—he was ridin' herd. The rest skipped, I guess—we'll know soon. That's all."

"Well, we'll make damn sure o' this one!" some one shouted heavily. A chorus of harsh-voiced agreement followed.

Latimer looked worn. He appeared not to like his task. From time to time he looked at Slim Allen in a puzzled manner. But Slim was stoical now. He was almost resigned. Almost—but not entirely.

The same stubborn belief in luck which had resigned him to hard times until the recovery of his gun, the knowledge that he would win through all barriers down here, the fatalistic certainty that he would return to Rago—these feelings were quite as strong now. The game was not yet played, somehow, he felt. He wanted to be in on the finish of it.

But to the hard-faced men who were his jurors the finish was here. Latimer's detail, which he had sent to Jorge's cantina, returned empty-handed. Jorge knew nothing, except that Slim Allen had seemed to be a friend of the four men who had disappeared during the night.

Silent and grim, the yellow light from a long-hung lamp in the center of the sheriff's office illuminating his lean features, Slim Allen faced his accusers and judges—the town banker of Orotura, the express agent, four of the biggest ranchers, and the sheriff.

He repeated his story simply, having no hope of its being believed. He made no reference to his past, nor to what had happened in Rago and on his way south. His reticence therein did not help him particularly—but then, nothing would have helped him.

The sheriff only looked disbelieving in his guilt. But Latimer voted for his conviction—there was nothing else to do.

"Hangin'!" demanded the express agent.

The others nodded deeply. No mercy was on their lined, bronzed faces. No cruelty, either, but they were carved of granite—men of the soil exacting payment from a natural enemy of them and all their kind. Justice. Slim understood it.

The sheriff stood up, his hard eyes dark.

"He'll swing at daybreak," he stated. "I'll lock him up. You-all can tell the crowd."

They got up, satisfied. Slim followed the sheriff's gesture and was led out of the room. One of the deputies followed with gun drawn.

Two cells had been built in the rear of the place. They were substantial and well made. Into one of them, Slim was thrust. And then there was only a small grated window for his view of what remained of the world.

Through this Latimer peered, unwilling to turn and leave immediately. He waited until the roar of the crowd outside quieted down. The news was out. Slim managed a grin.

"Not too anxious to pull the rope on a man yuh know in yore heart is innocent, eh, Latimer?"

Latimer shook his head gravely. "Y' ain't innocent, Allen—that's pretty plain. I'm wonderin' what got into yuh."

"Hard luck, that's all—for me!" Slim returned. "My story's true. You'll find it out some time, but it ain't gonna do me no good. Pass me the makin's, will yuh, sheriff?"

Latimer complied. "Keep 'em," he said. "Anything else yuh want? It ain't long till daylight."

"Nothin' else." Slim rolled a cigarette. Before he lighted it, he looked up to find the sheriff still staring at him. "Yuh know, Latimer, I wouldn't 'a' been surprised if you'd have got me for something else. For days I been chased for things I didn't do and never for the one thing that I figured folks might 'a' thought I did."

"What's that?"

"There was a shootin' up at Rago a couple o' days ago. I lit out. I didn't do it, but it might 'a' looked like me."

"At Rago? Yuh mean the old feller —Connor?"

"Yeuh. Heard about it?"

"Sure. But they got the hombre who did it. He's due to swing Saturday."

Saturday! How had they got Masters, and how convicted him so quickly. Masters would fight——

Slim was brought up sharply.

"What did you have to do with that?" Latimer was demanding interestedly. "From what I hear, it was a clean case against the kid."

"What kid?" Slim caught his breath.

"Connor's son! They had a fight in a saloon, met out on the road—kid drunk—shot the old man. Some riders

from another outfit close by rode up just about as it happened."

Connor's son! For a moment Slim was so dazed that he could not speak. He was staring at Latimer but he was not seeing him. He stood there, jaw agape.

Then suddenly he gave a leap forward, and his hands, reaching out, got a violent grip on the bars of his cell.

"Damn it, Latimer, I saw that shootin' and I know the kid's innocent! I know he was ridin' the trail at least a mile away when the shootin' happened! I was there!"

Latimer stared at him. Perhaps he understood, but he did not seem to, in that moment. Slim shook the cell door.

"Don't yuh savvy? I gotta get back there and save that kid! *I* can tell 'em. I can prove—— Oh, hell, Latimer, I got to get back to Rago! Yuh can't hang me!"

If his words sounded absurd and incongruous, neither he nor Latimer seemed aware of it. Slim was tense and fierce. He gripped the cell bars.

Latimer slowly shook his head. "Maybe yo're right, Allen, but I reckon yuh can see that it won't make any difference. Not all hell could save yuh from the rope when daylight comes. Suppose I believed yuh—maybe I do—do yuh think I'd have any chance of keepin' yuh from that mob out there? Did yuh hear 'em yell?"

Slim had heard that yell. He had heard it before. The cry for blood, for one chalk mark of vengeance on a long score. Yes, well he knew it. His frame seemed to go limp. Argument was of small avail. He took two slow steps and sank down on the narrow bed.

"Do something, Latimer," he said, in a dead voice. "You've got to do something. Yo're hangin' one innocent man to-day. For God's sake, don't let it be done twice."

Latimer looked at him, then turned away.

"I'll do what I can," he said, "but there's nothing I can see. Yo're due to swing, Allen, and that's all this county cares about. Me—I'm employed by the county."

He went away.

Slim did not move. He sat there with his head in his hands, his brain revolving with a succession of scenes and events.

Slowly—slowly, it was all becoming clear. They had not wanted him at Rago. Anything but him. Masters was only too glad he was out of the way. Now the feud was ended, and young Connor would swing for his father's murder.

They wanted Slim silenced—or at least out of the way until the thing was over, because Slim could tell the truth!

No wonder he had been halted at Minerite—chased, not by the law at first, but by men who were manifestly outside the law. More of the Red Wolves! Masters had sent out the word, and his cohorts had responded. Slim Allen, with what he knew of that shooting, had to be disposed of. Jack Connor had to follow his father to the grave. There would be no more Quarter-Circle-C, and an old range feud would be ended.

Slim groaned. It was all clear enough, now that he knew. And he had learned too late!

It hadn't needed Latimer's quiet words. Well enough he was aware that the blood-hungry mob would never surrender him now. Words or pleas would avail nothing. They would not even hold him until the truth of his statement could be proved. For that matter, there was small time.

Saturday Jack Connor would swing. And the morning that was about to dawn was Friday!

Strangely, Slim Allen forgot his own fate in those lone moments. It became rather insignificant. He was an innocent man and due to swing. But, after

all, he had lived a reckless and daring life. Other men had gone down under the smoke of his guns. Perhaps he was only paying the due price.

But young Connor was patently a youth—a wild one, but a fine one, Slim thought. His father had been killed by the murderers who were the remnants of the Red Wolves. That murder would not only go unavenged, but the innocent son was to pay for it. The thought made Slim writhe, there in the narrow cell.

He leaped to his feet, crossed to the window. He was not through—he couldn't be through! There must be something—some last stand to be made—some chance to fight, and if necessary, to go down fighting.

And there, in the east, was that the first faint promise of dawn?

CHAPTER IX.

RANGER LAW.

SLIM made no effort to sleep. His philosophy might have resigned him, under other circumstances. But not these. He paced the little cell, dreading to look through the barred window for fear of finding his apprehensions true. Dawn meant death.

A door slammed, far away. It was the first sound of life that there had been in that dead place for nearly an hour, he realized. But he only listened dully. A faint light that was partially reflected in the jail corridor told him that vigil was being kept in the sheriff's office without.

Latimer was all right. He was only doing his duty, and Slim felt that the duty was not too pleasant.

No, Latimer could do nothing——

Slim broke off. There were footsteps coming down through the corridor. They halted before the cell door. Slim stood there vibrantly alive, hollow eyed, waiting. Should he make a break for it? Any kind of death was preferable to the one that was coming to him—mixed with the agony of his thoughts.

The door swung open. Latimer's deputy stood there, gun in hand, wary.

"Come on out," he commanded.

"Yo're ready—for me?"

"Not yet. Latimer wants to see yuh. Be careful, Allen—one move, and I got my orders!"

Slim nodded. He passed the alert deputy and preceded him down the corridor.

There were two men in the sheriff's office. One was Giles Latimer. The other—Slim's eyes widened. It was Powell Lewis, the Ranger.

Both were looking at him. He halted, two steps inside the doorway. Latimer was watching him intently. There was no expression on the Ranger's face, but at last, the sheriff turned to his visitor.

"This the man?" he asked.

Lewis nodded. "That's him."

"He's due to swing—here—at daybreak."

Lewis shook his head. "Yo're wrong, sheriff. He's due to swing in Rago—for murder. My authority is higher than yores. I reckon I don't have t' tell yuh that."

Latimer nodded. "Maybe yuh don't. And I know yuh, Lewis. But yuh can't take him—he's wanted here."

"Can't take him?" Lewis' eyes froze. "Not with a warrant, sheriff?"

"Yuh got a warrant?"

"Blank—but it won't be long."

Lewis flipped out a folded paper from his pocket, flattened it on the desk, and grabbed the pen there. In a few strokes he had filled in a blank space. His eyes hard, he threw the sheet open before Latimer.

"I reckon that's enough—a warrant for murder for John Allen. Unless yo're ready to contest with me, sheriff!"

Latimer looked at the sheet, then up at the Ranger. He showed no sign of being afraid.

"I reckon yuh know I wouldn't stop

before tacklin' anybody, Lewis," he said calmly, "as long as it was duty. This is better than any claim I got, and gun fightin' with Rangers ain't part o' my job." He turned to Slim. "This is a warrant for yore arrest for murder—in Rago. Is yore name John?"

Slim hesitated. "Yes," he said.

Latimer sighed. *"Bueno!* Maybe it holds yuh off for a day or so, Allen, and maybe yuh like the ropes up in Rago better than yuh do here. That's all. He's yore prisoner, Lewis."

The sheriff carefully folded the paper and placed it in the drawer of his desk table. He seemed rather relieved than otherwise. Lewis was looking at Slim with cold, hard eyes. He drew his gun and motioned with his head toward the door.

"Yo're my prisoner, Allen. We're goin'. Get started out!"

Slim obeyed. Things were happening fast. But he was aware of one thing—he had a reprieve. It might only be momentary, but he was not going to swing in Orotura.

He and the Ranger stepped into the strange dark that just precedes dawn. "They's two hosses down at the hitchin' rack," Lewis said. "Step for 'em."

He motioned Slim into the saddle when they reached the beasts. He turned their heads, keeping Slim in front of him, and in a moment the two were bearing out of town and northward.

Slim glanced at the eastern sky line. There was no doubt about it now—dawn was approaching. A dull saffron stained the horizon. He shivered, and wondered if it were the cold. Then he looked at Powell Lewis and saw that the Ranger's guns were out of sight.

Lewis caught his look—and grinned.

"We got ridin' to do, so set yoreself to it," he commanded. "Say, Allen, is yore name really John?"

"No." Slim stammered, blushed. "It's—it's—Aloysius!"

Lewis guffawed. "I took the chance. Reckoned yuh'd follow my play. That was my last blank warrant, and if yuh hadn't taken me up on that name—well——" He, too, glanced at the sky line. "I reckon folks're gettin' ready for the rope-stretchin' act."

Slim looked at the hard, bronzed profile that swayed in the saddle beside him.

"Yuh saved my life all right, Ranger," he said. "But I'm still wonderin' what the idea was, and how yuh got there when yuh did."

"I just followed yuh—that's simple enough. All the way from Rago. And I wanted yuh, so I took yuh away from Latimer."

"Oh! So I *am* wanted fur murder."

"Hell, no! Yo're wanted to save an innocent man from swingin'—that's all. I don't know what got yuh into this mess in Orotura, but yuh sure was in. And I'm jest as sure that, whatever it was, yo're on the level. And I'm sure, too, that you know Jack Connor didn't kill his ol' man."

Slim drew a deep breath. His hands tightened on the bridle. "Can we get to Rago in time?" he asked.

"Maybe. We're tryin' damn hard. Towns ain't goin' to be too easy—I hear yuh cut up some on yore way. But I've still got some authority." Lewis hesitated. "Yuh see, figurin' it was pretty simple. I saw Connor, the old man, Jeff Masters, and you—I saw yuh all leave the Last Chance that night. I knew you'd have no reason for spottin' the old feller. And I figured the kid wasn't that kind, even if things did look bad for him and Masters had four of his hands to swear to the shootin'. And I knew plumb well that you was in that vicinity somewhere just when it happened—and that you'd know!"

"You've got it figured out," Slim nodded. "It was Masters who did the shootin'—I'm sure of that, but I can't prove it. What I can prove, though, is

that Jack Connor was more than a mile away when the shots were fired!"

"That's enough—if we get there on time!" Lewis said tensely. "Jest to stop the kid from takin' somebody else's medicine. The rest of it—well, there's a lot more before I'm through. I didn't go to Rago just on a sight-seein' tour."

Slim looked at him, but did not question. "Tell yuh about it later," Lewis added.

The Ranger looked again at the sky. Dawn had broken now. He turned over his shoulder.

"I reckon those Orotura folks'll be pretty mad," he vouchsafed. "But I don't think they'll do any following. Not this far, anyhow. We gotta get a couple of hours o' rest in somewheres, and it might as well be here."

They camped. While he was loosening the saddle girths of his big mare, the Ranger spoke further.

"I been after the Red Wolves—that gang from Pancros that was supposedly busted up," he said. "Most folks've forgot about it, but the Rangers haven't. We're still trailin' what's left of 'em—them that we've got things on. And I went to Rago because I heard one of 'em was there. He was. It was Kite Eagan."

"Masters' foreman?"

"Yeah. The same. I found him, all right."

"Have yuh arrested him?"

"No. That's just the point." Lewis scratched his head, pushing back his worn sombrero. "Things got t' smellin' bad, waddy, and I waited. Just between you and me, there's bigger game than Kite Eagan in Rago!"

"There is!" Slim assented grimly. "There's his boss. Masters was a member of the Red Wolves. I helped to fight 'em!"

"Yo're sure o' that?"

"Plumb positive. He can be recognized well enough in Orotura, and Pancros, too. The last o' the Wolves are driftin' up that way, I'm thinkin', Lewis."

Lewis lay down, and through narrowed eyelids, his calm eyes were speculative.

"The last of 'em ain't going to drift much longer," he pronounced. "I'm cleanin' 'em. That's part o' my job. But first we got to get the first job over. Hell and high water can't stop us from gettin' to Rago in time to save that kid!"

The time they allowed themselves for rest was small. Slim had been living thus for some time, and the Ranger was a man accustomed to hard and dangerous living. Under the broiling sun they pushed on all that day.

South of Triple Forks there was a small sheep ranch. Here Lewis had procured an extra pony, which Slim rode. And it was here that they were enabled to change their mounts. On fresh horses they pressed on.

"We're avoidin' Triple Forks," Lewis said. "No use chasin' trouble, and yo're plumb in wrong there. We'll have t' hit Minerite, but we can go through it fast."

"And maybe I can get back that horse o' mine," Slim added. "It'll give me half my luck back."

Lewis looked at him. "It's liable to be dangerous. "You didn't leave what could be called a good impression in that town, yuh know."

Slim nodded.

"I know. This ain't yore game, Ranger. But when I go through there, I'm aimin' to come out ridin' Gent. I'll catch up to yuh on the road if necessary. That animal can travel, and I'm plumb lost without him."

Lewis shrugged. "I reckon yuh know yore game," he said. "Yo're my prisoner, but I'll give yuh a parole that long."

"Thanks. And yuh might give me a gun, too—if we get to where we can get one. Something tells me we're both

going to need guns before we stop Jack Connor from swingin'."

"Got a gun for yuh, in my saddlebags," Lewis grunted. "Meant t' give it to yuh before. Holster, too. We'll need all the lead we got."

When they halted again, it was near nightfall and they were close to Minerite. They used none of the regular trails. Lewis had prepared in advance a route across country that would cut out any deviation from their course. Part of the time they were on roads where others had traveled, but mostly they were streaking across the hills and the open.

Lewis produced the gun and Slim buckled on the worn belt. He tested the draw. The weapon was a .44, and it moved with ease in and out of the holster. Slightly lighter than his customary weapon, he found it easy to handle, and swift.

"Speakin' o' guns," said Slim, while they sprawled on the grass near a water hole, "there's another question. Did anybody ever find out what kind of a bullet killed Old Man Connor?"

Lewis shot him a quick look. "That, like I said before, is part o' my job, waddy," he returned. "I found out. I got the lead. Steel jackets, and with a groove in 'em that can't be missed."

"Uh-huh. That's what I was waitin' for—jest somebody with sense enough to've looked at them bullets. The fact is, Connor was shot with *my* gun. The gun that a lot o' folks saw weaned away from me at the Last Chance by Mister Jeff Masters!"

Lewis sat up with a jerk. "That's proof!"

"Plenty proof. My gun's just that way, and that's all. It's in the way the cartridges fit in the chambers. Tomaso fixed that—he was a plumb bad hombre, even if he was my friend and willed me his gun when he died. Plumb bad, when he got riled up. And he used to want to leave his mark clear. Vanity, that was. Tomaso had lots of it. But that drilled bullet idea was a new one with him, and it was his mark. Any time yuh find a steel-jacket with a streak along its top, yuh can count on the fact that the man who had Tomaso's gun done the shootin'."

Lewis swore. "We've got it on Masters, then. I've got the bullets, and he's probably still got the gun. If he'd be a crook to win it, he wouldn't throw it away."

"Too danged mean t' do that—even to save his hide," Slim agreed.

Lewis got up nervously. "Let's get goin', waddy," he said. "They're probably figurin' on young Connor's party for noontime, makin' it sort of a holiday. And we're not to Rago yet!"

On they pressed once more. Both men were tired, both were worn from long riding and lack of sleep. Slim, especially, had gone through much since his last decent rest. But the years of hardening and hardship told.

It was a grimmer ride now. There was little conversation. Each man knew all that was necessary, and there was nothing more to talk about. They had to get to Rago—fast!

A man's life was at stake. A brutal murder might go unavenged. And between them and their goal loomed dangers and obstructions that they would not even give themselves time to think of.

The faint lights of Minerite twinkled through the darkness. They forded the now placid stream. "I don't know a way around this town," Lewis confessed. "Besides, we need food. You rustle that animal o' yourn, and I'll collect some grub."

They were approaching the outskirts now. Slim Allen's eyes were dark, his lips were set grimly.

"Do yore collectin' fast, partner," he said quietly. "One way or another—we ain't going to have a lot o' time in this town!"

They parted before McQuade's place The street was reasonably empty. It was early evening, but there were signs of activity inside the saloon. The two avoided it, however. If Slim was seen and recognized he caught no sign of it. Men passed and looked at them as they rode in, but their looks were enough to occasion interest, anyway. Hard-bitten and hard-ridden they appeared, with their beard stubbles, dust and sweating mounts.

Slim sought the veterinary where he had left his mount. That individual—an old man—had taken no interest in the events which had marked Slim's time in Minerite.

"But I ain't got yore hoss, partner," he said, shaking his head. "Heard yuh went on quite a rampage here before yuh left."

"Who's got the horse?" Slim demanded quickly.

"Sheriff. Sheriff Breed himself. Took it the next day. He said yuh owed it to the county for damages—and besides, bein' a felon, yore property was con-confiscated by law."

Slim swore softly. "He ain't ridin' it, is he?"

"I reckon maybe. I see him yesterday——"

But Slim waited for no more. Gent—ridden by that swarthy-visaged coyote! The horse that knew his every whim and humor, that responded like a child to his voice—in the hands of Sheriff Breed of Minerite!

Slim was already on his way. He remembered well the location of the sheriff's office, where he had first met Breed on his entry into Minerite. He made for it. Powell Lewis would be along in a minute, but he had almost forgotten the Ranger.

Rounding the corner into the main street, his first vision was of Gent!

The black mount stood outside the sheriff's place, saddled. Slim gave a glad little cry and leaped from the back of his hired pony. At a run, he made for his own horse.

But the door of the office was just opening. Breed was coming out. With him was another man. Slim slowed his pace, hesitated. Breed was talking. Then, with a final wave of his hand, he grasped Gent's bridal, gave it a jerk, and started to swing into the saddle.

That jerk was enough for Slim. Even as Gent's head went up in nervous protest, the wandering cowboy had darted forward.

CHAPTER X.

WAITING ROPE.

THE sheriff's left foot was in the stirrup. His left hand held the reins; but he never completed the swing upward that might have landed him in the saddle.

Slim's arm and wrist caught him from behind, and Breed was whirled in a dizzy circle. It had been a powerful wrench, and it left the erstwhile fugitive free—free, and with body bent half forward for his next movement.

Breed, as he swung clear and gathered himself, revealed a plaster half across his face, hiding the mark that Slim's gun had made on their former meeting. Now he started to reach for his own gun. It was an instinctive movement, and impetus was lent to it as he caught his first glimpse of the man who had assailed him.

A curse started from his lips. Slim's first impulse, upon seeing his enemy's move toward his gun, was to draw his own weapon. Had he obeyed the impulse, the sheriff would have died.

But a gun and a lead slug were not enough for this quarrel, somehow. Slim leaped forward, his hands free of encumbrances.

As he leaped, he swerved. The roar of Breed's gun was in his ears, yet he scarcely heard it. Red was before his eyes, and he was a lashing, driving maniac, for the moment.

The sheriff never fired a second shot —the first had skinned along Slim's thigh, but he did not feel it. Both the cow-punchers' fists began to land just then.

One—two! And the gun dropped. The sheriff, an oath smothered on his lips, reeled backward into the wall of his own office. He caught himself and threw his powerful shoulders forward. But he was only in time to meet Slim's dive upon him.

Again they came together. Slim's left arm was straight, and behind it was the weight of his body. Teeth crashed into his hand and the sheriff's mouth was split wide open. Even as his enemy reeled, groaning, under the blow, Slim's shoulders swung and up came his right hand in a half circle.

Crash! The blow caught Breed just under the jaw. It lifted him the merest trifle, smashed him once more against the building wall.

Slim felt a blow descend on the back of his shoulder and became aware that he and his enemy were not alone. Another! But he could not heed them.

Breed was slumping. The air was filled with shouts. But the sheriff did not get completely to the ground before Slim's left fist had landed once more. It caught the beaten law officer as he had half completed his dive earthward. It sent his head snapping back, crashing again into the wall, and it dropped him like a felled log.

The same movement brought Slim in a quick, vicious circle with his right hand swinging. A pistol shot rapped out from somewhere. His hand connected—a powerful blow, with the weight of his swing and his body behind it.

A dim form collapsed and smashed backward against a wabbly fence rail. Two others were running up. A second man was upon Slim, cursing as he came.

Slim met the rush. A wild blow glanced off his chin and slightly dazed him. But it had come from a heavy hand. Not heavy enough, however, to interrupt Slim's swing—wilder, if possible, than the one he had taken.

But his landed flush—and even as it landed, he heard a voice he knew. Powell Lewis' commanding yell broke through the tumult that was arising, and his own fog——

"Slim—get clear and get comin'!"

The Ranger was across the street, half obscured by the shadows there. Slim caught a glimpse of his gun, but he knew that Lewis would not shoot until the last second.

Slim followed up his last blow with a second that sent his already dazed opponent reeling drunkenly. But he followed no farther. Escape was cut off on both sides by the men running up.

Slim dove headlong, and straight out from the door of the office—toward Lewis. A shot tore into the dust. Over his shoulder he yelled:

"Gent—here!"

The black's head jerked up like that of a puppet. The black horse gave a lunge. Down the street men were tearing toward the scene of the fight. But Slim was running.

Lewis sent a shot kicking up the dust in front of the foremost of Breed's friends. And as Slim ran, Gent ran. The two were suddenly together, just as Lewis got under way. One foot in the stirrup—a quick, yet curiously soft word —and Slim Allen was in his own saddle again and streaking out of town.

Gent threw up his head as though he had been suddenly released of some unwanted weight. His slim legs straightened out. His master's voice was low in his ears and behind him was the sound of pistol shots. It was enough. Lewis had to spur hard to keep the black horse and its rider within distance.

Confusion reigned behind, though, on the main street of Minerite. Probably the thing that saved Slim and his com-

panion was the fact that no one knew what the turmoil was about, in those first few moments.

On through the black night the two men rode. They were riding against time now, but still they pulled in a trifle when it became apparent that—if there was pursuit—it was far to the rear. They had a heavy pound ahead of them and they would need everything that their mounts could give before it was over.

As they rode, Lewis looked across at the man by his side. "He pulled his gun. Why didn't yuh shoot?" he demanded.

Slim shook his head. "I'm not shootin' till I have to," he stated. "And I ain't chalkin' up any sheriff killings on my record. I'm satisfied. My hands craved action, and I reckon that hombre's paid off for every time he jerked Gent's head that a way!"

"He's paid off for a lot," Lewis grinned. "I don't imagine yo're ever goin' to be popular in Minerite, partner."

"And Minerite ain't ever going to be popular with me! The feelin's plumb mutual. Are we gonna make Rago in time?"

Lewis looked up at the stars, and nodded. "We'll make it now. It's what's going to happen after we get there that I'm thinkin' of."

"So am I. But it ain't unwelcome."

They talked little after that. Simply pushed on, forcing tired mounts and tired bodies into the blackness that had taken the whole world. Rago was ahead, and a man might be dying there if they did not succeed in reaching it in time.

Dawn came, and with full daylight, they knew they had won. At the end of the twisting road from which Slim had begun his long flight, lay the town of Rago. They could not see it, but they knew it was there.

Slim looked over his shoulder as they struck the road. There was a reluctant look in his eyes.

"I hate to be passin' up Masters' place," he said.

"Time enough for that," the Ranger told him. "Besides, Masters'll probably be in town. The whole county'll be turnin' out for this fiesta."

"And it's gonna be a different fiesta from what they expect," came grimly.

By mid-morning, their horses lathered and weary and themselves dusty and worn, they saw Rago out of red-rimmed eyes. Leg muscles and backs ached and cried for relief. Their throats were parched. They made an odd pair as they came on. But when they caught sight of the town, each turned to look at the other.

There was no need for words. They knew they had made it. White teeth flashed grins against bearded, dust-covered faces. The rope was waiting—they knew not what else confronted them—but they knew that the rope would be cheated, in some way. They knew that they could not be beaten now!

The county, as Lewis had predicted, had turned out. A hanging, in this country, was unusual. Legal killings were few; it was seldom a man survived to face the rope. Here public opinion held sway. And though Jack Connor had been properly convicted and sentenced, there were still many men who wondered. Good or bad he might be, but as Lewis had said, he was not the type of man to murder his own father.

Many buckboards stood in the main street as Lewis and Slim rode down through it. Many more than the usual number of people were in sight, too. It was still early in the morning, but Rago looked almost like a rodeo day.

At the farther end of the street, past the office of the sheriff, was the public watering trough. Beyond this, a crude platform had been erected, and a gallows.

"We're just about in time," Lewis said quietly. "Keep on goin', Slim, and hold up proceedin's at the sheriff's. I'll collect a couple o' hombres who can represent what they like to call public opinion."

He dropped off before the bank. The arrival of the two had gone unnoticed. Slim threw his reins over Gent's head in front of the sheriff's office, where there was somewhat of a crowd, and pushed his way to the door.

In the doorway a deputy held out a detaining hand. "Can't come in—sorry, pardner."

"Yo're not as sorry as I am, waddy," Slim returned. "Because I'm comin' and it's on business—and I reckon yuh'll agree with me that one killin's enough for this town to-day!"

The deputy's eyes narrowed. Slim was far from prepossessing. He had not shaved since he left Rago. He was clean enough, but that did not show. There was only the stubble of beard, the haggard, red-rimmed eyes, and the dust that covered his shoulders and hat brim.

"How soon's the kid due to swing?" he demanded.

"Right pronto. We're jest a-goin' for him."

"Well, I'm here to prove he didn't do the shootin'," Slim said. "Maybe that's enough. If it isn't, we'll have to talk some other way!"

"You can——" The deputy stepped back, looking at Slim queerly. "Come on in, waddy. Yuh can tell it better inside."

The sheriff held big keys in his hands. A cigar was twisted at an odd angle in his mouth. He was talking with four men in front of his desk when Slim entered, the deputy on his heels. He looked up in annoyance.

"I come here to prove that Jack Connor didn't do that shootin'," Slim said directly. "I want yuh to hold up these festivities till it can be proved that the kid's innocent."

They stared at him open-mouthed. "You can prove——"

"Like I said. I was in Orotura when I heard about this, and I ain't stopped ridin' since. Jack Connor was a mile away when his old man was shot. I saw him, and I saw the shootin'."

In a few swift words, he explained what he knew. The men listened. The sheriff finally handed his keys to the deputy.

"Git Connor," he said succinctly. Then he turned again to Slim: "And who are you?" he demanded.

"Nobody. A wanderin' cow poke, that's all—and I get into trouble wherever I go. But I found out——"

"How'd yuh find out?" the sheriff put in.

"Through me!"

They all turned as Powell Lewis shoved his broad shoulders through the doorway. A silence fell. The deputy had brought Connor from the cells in the rear, and the two halted there at the doorway.

"Hullo, Lewis," the sheriff grunted. "What——"

"I trailed this hombre down to Orotura, because I knew he must 'a' seen the shootin'," Lewis said. Briefly he went over the scene in the Last Chance, and Slim's departure from there. "I can guarantee all that. We've done a lot of trouble-dodgin' to get here," he said. "And we're aimin' to see that this kid don't swing for what somebody else did."

"Know who did it?" one of the men asked.

"We know," Slim put in grimly. "But that's another story, and a private matter. Want to take my deposition, sheriff?"

For a moment it looked like a deadlock. Connor stood white faced and wondering—pale, now, and not the assured, hard youth who had faced Masters in the barroom. He was near death.

But Lewis had brought men with

him. They were powerful men—ranchers, bankers, business men of Rago. They held the power in this town.

"There's nothing to be denied," the Ranger said. "Slim Allen saw Jack Connor a mile away from the shootin' when it happened—and if yuh know that hill there, yuh can see how he could've seen the shots fired, too. You've heard the story—and if the hangin' ain't off till we can prove it more, I'm here to state that you've got to take me and the kid at the same time!"

"And me!" Slim stated.

The sheriff frowned. "That's hard talk, Lewis—but we know yuh, I reckon. And it sounds straight. I don't want to hang this kid—it ain't the kind o' job I looked for when I took over sheriffin' in this county. But how yuh going to prove any more than yuh have? Who shot Connor?"

Slim was tensed, narrow eyed. He looked at Lewis. The Ranger looked perfectly at ease.

"I got a couple of arrests t' make, and my pal and I got some business. Jest be sure there ain't no hangin'. We'll bring in the real murderers—dead or alive—*muy pronto!*" He turned to Slim. "Come on, *compadre!*"

Without questioning, Slim pushed through the crowd that had commenced to gather, and followed the Ranger outside. They were regarded curiously; but as yet the news had not spread. Some few knew Lewis' identity.

When they were clear, the Ranger pulled up. His hand rested on the butt of the gun at his right hip.

"Yo're .44 workin'?" he drawled.

"It's full."

"Masters is in the Last Chance—and his gang is with him. Yo're a deputy Ranger."

"*Bueno!* Let's go!"

Masters in the Last Chance! To Slim, his work in Rago was done. Jack Connor, he knew now, would not swing. Gent stood placidly at a hitching rack. Only one thing remained—that lost .45 which Tomaso had given him.

And Masters had the .45.

More and more people were in town. Back at the sheriff's office, both Slim and Lewis knew, there was considerable discussion. But Lewis had impressed the men he had brought there. Connor would be vindicated, as he had been condemned, by a jury of his peers.

They wouldn't know, of course, until it was all over. They would be completely confused just now, and there were a number of questions that would have to be answered—things that had to be settled. If Connor hadn't done the cold-blooded shooting, who had?

Slim could answer that. He hadn't answered it yet, but he could. Those steel-jacketed bullets would tell the story.

But no other word passed between the Ranger and his companion before they entered the wide doorway of the Last Chance. Odd, how well they knew each other, Slim thought. Never before had they been shoulder to shoulder; but he felt that he knew and could count upon every move that the Ranger would make—just as he knew that Lewis would count upon him.

One glimpse was enough. The barroom was rather crowded, but in a knot at the end was Masters and his crew. Slim could not repress a glance at the table where he had lost his gun—this scene was a fitting ending to it all. Here it had started, and here he was to bring Masters to justice.

It looked, though, in that second, as though the bringing of Masters to justice would be a real job. For Masters was in company.

Desperate company, too. Slim's eyes narrowed—he caught his breath. Beside Kite Eagan, he saw the man who had trapped him so neatly outside Orotura—Mule Carsten had fled to his pals!

A quick hush fell upon the barroom as Lewis and Slim Allen walked

through. Masters did not see them until they were almost upon him. Then his eyes widened—his jaw dropped—and he shot a quick word of warning to his companions. Glasses were held in midair and lowered slowly to the bar.

Lewis halted. Slim touched his elbow.

"That's the hombre," Slim said. "What's more, while we're at it, Lewis, we better take this mule-faced individual along with us. He's wanted at Orotura—the sheriff told me!"

If he felt humorous, his slow drawl betokened none of it. Carsten's eyes were glassy, his expression was unreadable.

Lewis spoke:

"In the name o' the State, Jeff Masters, I'm arrestin' yuh for murder—here, and south. And in the same name. Kite Eagan, I'm arrestin' you for murder, and for complicity in the killin's of the Red Wolves. And you"—Lewis pointed at Carsten—"we're takin' yuh into custody——"

He got no further. Masters snarled a warning. A cowboy from the Box M stepped in.

Masters knew, suddenly, that the end of the long game had come. How or why, it did not matter, but Slim Allen was back, and Allen knew! That gun—some dim thought in the back of his mind undoubtedly connected it with everything that had happened—that was to happen.

He knew the Ranger and, most of all, he knew his own past and his culpability. Mule Carsten was with him, and Mule had given the word that in the south their pals were destroyed. They were being hounded, and they were facing the last stand.

The last of the Red Wolves snarled!

With the snarl, like a thunderclap, came the avalanche. Masters stepped back and the hand from the Box M drew his gun. The cowboy was a split second too late.

Lewis had known what would happen before he was through. These men were guilty—they would not submit to arrest. Too much could pile up on them, now they were known. The game was over—and Lewis had been aware that the word of the law would not be enough, even before he had finished. Here was needed the guns of the law, as well as the word.

In that split second he had jerked himself away from the bar, and his own guns were in his hands.

Flame spat. Men recoiled from the scene of the close fighting. Bottles crashed, and the interior of the Last Chance became a wild mêlée.

At close quarters they fought it out. In Slim's mind was the same thought which had been with him for days. This man was mean—mean enough to cheat in order to take a wandering cow-poke's gun. And that gun was spitting flame at him!

His own gun!

The thought inflamed him. He saw Masters' hand go down under the twin tongues of flame that leaped from Lewis' guns—down, and crumple inward, like something folded carefully.

He saw Mule Carsten's gun leap out, and heard the roar of it as his own .44 went into play. Confusion reigned. A bottle sailed half the length of the room and crashed into the face of Masters as he essayed a second shot.

Slim's first bullet caught the bottle just as it was about to strike. In a shower of whisky and broken glass the fight went on. No one could have told afterward accurately just what had happened. Slim found himself angered by a blow which drove everything but what was red out of his eyes. He found himself leaping forward with a wild curse—leaping for the hated face of his enemy.

Guns were crashing in his ears. Blows rained upon him. But he held something in his hands—something

powerful and huge, that he hated. A throat was under his fingers, his gun gone.

Downward he crashed, while another form lurched against him and sent him and Masters sprawling.

Another shot—a moment of quiet—and Slim knew, of a sudden, that the body under him was quite still.

Slowly his hands relaxed their grip. Masters lay under him—dead. Above him stood Powell Lewis, his twin guns smoking, his knees bent, the whole length of the bar his territory.

But no one moved. "I'm a Ranger," Lewis announced, "and I'm takin' charge here. Is there anybody contestin' that?"

Three men stood against the wall with their hands in the air. The others had ducked for cover. Quiet reigned.

"I reckon," said Lewis over his shoulder, "that it's about finished. Hurt, Slim?"

"Not that I feel yet. I probably am, but it won't be serious enough," Slim returned.

Lewis did not look at him. Masters and Mule Carsten were quite dead. The cowboy might live, but it was doubtful. Blood spattered the floor and the bar rail. Slim was still half crouched over the motionless Masters.

It was in that moment that the sheriff of Rago stepped into the doorway, behind him the men who had comprised the hastily summoned jury. The sheriff's gun was drawn, but he halted at sight of Lewis.

"It's all right, sheriff," the Ranger said. "Here on the floor is the hombre who killed old Connor. The other two was set to be my prisoners for something else, but they objected a little too much."

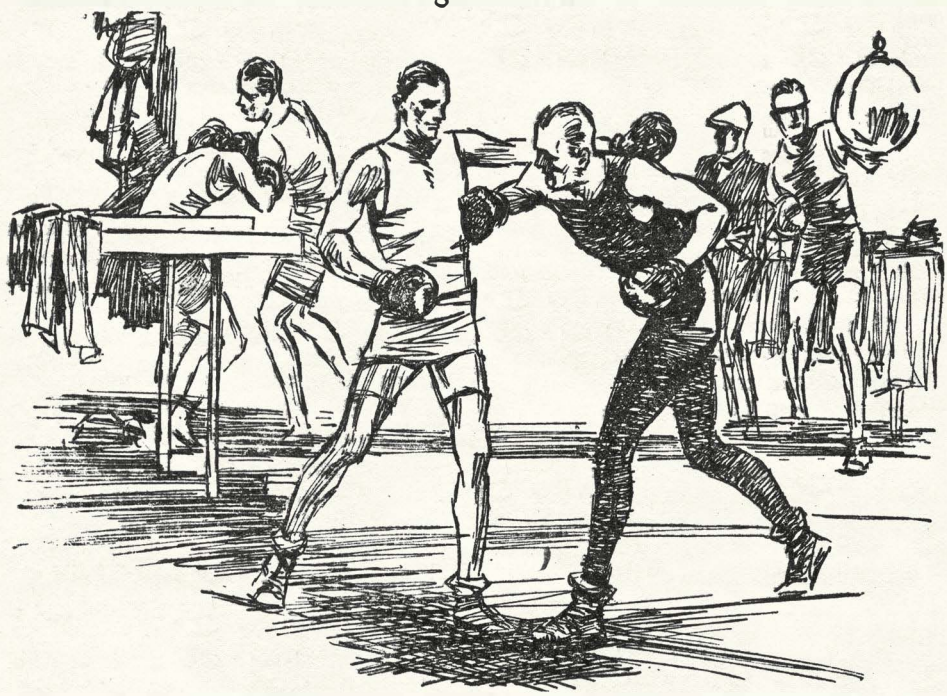
As the sheriff and his party came in, Lewis restored his guns to their holsters. He gave only a brief explanation to the men who crowded into the saloon.

"And among other things," he finished, "we cleaned up the last o' the Red Wolves o' Pancros—me and Slim Allen. If yuh ask me, that's the most important thing of it all!"

Slim had got to his feet. He was busily fitting cartridges into familiar chambers. He looked up.

"That—like yuh said before, *compadre,* is part o' yore job. But it ain't mine—it's incidental. What's most important is this here—I got back my gun!"

"The Kid" Had Everything Wrong With Him—Except a Right Hook.



WATCH THAT RIGHT!

By PHIL RICHARDS

THREE hundred and twenty-five ring fights had left little Billy Farr with cauliflower ears, a cigar stand, a bitter heart, and an overwhelming desire to develop a world's champion.

For fifteen years he had fought valiantly—and always on the square—without getting for himself and family more than a hand-to-mouth existence. But the veteran could name Broadway big shots with purring, twin-six motor cars and penthouses high above the city's grime, whose fortunes had sprouted in his ring-earned blood money.

Billy had never thrown a fight, had never pulled a crooked deal; and that, coupled with amazing skill and an ability to fight equally well from orthodox or southpaw stance, had caused the wary topnotchers of his day to sidestep him and his challenges. Never beyond training distance of the flyweight limit, Billy had fought bantams, feathers and lightweights. His opponents had been hand-picked for their toughness.

Once he had had his chance at the bantamweight title—with his own manager betting against him. In the clinches the champion had fouled him

a score of times with low jabs deftly placed. But none of the blows had been tallied against the title holder, nor was he reprimanded. Blinded by the succession of fouls, his head tossing in a sea of sparks, Billy had been on the verge of sinking to the floor when his fighting instinct asserted itself and he lashed out. The blow caught the champion on the leg. Instantly he plunged to the resin, writhing in mock agony, squawking to the referee.

Then and there the fight ended with the title holder still in possession of his crown and Billy Farr's ring career finished.

Out of his scant earnings he had just enough to furnish a tiny East Side cigar store. In the back room he had equipped a small gymnasium where he trained street urchins and young toughs, with the fond hope of finding a champion among them. Dressed and with their gangs, the aspiring fighters were as hard-boiled as they come, but in ring togs and under the arcs, they stood white faced and ready for the canvas.

Discouraged a thousand times, Billy Farr's patience never failed. His hope refused to die. Night after night he took his boys to the different amateur clubs where they developed last-minute illnesses and decided that they could carve out better careers working in factories.

And when he did find a likely looking prospect, one of the Broadway sharks would steal him after the rough edges had been worn away and the biceps began to bulge. Billy never could understand why ill luck dogged his heels without a let-up. But there was a reason.

Perched on a high stool back of the cigar-store counter, the bull-necked, battle-scarred little veteran shook his blond head mournfully over the sporting section of the *Journal*. The night before the flyweight champion had been paid fifteen thousand dollars for three rounds of fighting!

"An' six years ago I knocked him out twice in a row," Billy mumbled dejectedly. "I could take him now, without trainin'."

He sighed deeply. It was a tough lay when lesser men shot to the top, and he who had always given the fans a thrill and a run for their money, eked out a livelihood that barely equaled the wage of a day laborer.

"Hello, Billy. Give me a pack of cigarettes."

The old-time fighter looked up from his paper at a frail, dried-up, anæmic-looking youth who stood at his counter. He was Jimmy Griffin, one of the neighborhood boys, a frequent visitor at Billy's stand. His skin was yellow and drawn tight over the cheek bones, giving a skeletonlike aspect to his face. The greenish, bilious circle around his mouth, the pouches and dark rings under his eyes and the crow's-feet at the corners, made one wonder at his age,

Billy frowned. "You lay off the smokes, Jimmy," he said, looking at the other's lackluster eyes. "You're a sick kid."

The youth nodded somberly. "I sure am," he replied with a droop to his shoulders. "I'm good an' sick. Gosh, I feel awful. I think I'm goin' to kick the bucket!"

"You're skin's yellow as a banana," went on Billy. "Say, kid, I know what you've got. You've got yellow jaundice. Yes, sir. I'll bet money on it. You're a sick guy!"

Jimmy looked frightened. "Yeah! It must be blamed bad stuff, whatever it is, 'cause I feel pretty bad. Say, ain't there anything I can do? I don't want to die!"

"Aw, get that idea out of your dome," said Billy. "You won't croak if you ain't afraid of work an' really want to get well."

"Get well!" exclaimed Jimmy, a dull

gleam coming into his faded, watery eyes. "I'll do anything in the world to get well!"

"O. K.," replied Billy. "To-morrow you come around to my gym. I'll sweat and biff all the bugs out of your hide. Yes, sir, kid. You're puttin' yourself under my glove now, an' you got to toe the mark."

In a gym suit Jimmy Griffin looked like a scarecrow. The other fighters stared contemptuously. What was the idea? Had Billy Farr turned his gymnasium into a sanitarium? Everything the youngster did would have been funny if it were not pitiful. After fifteen minutes Billy sent him to the shower. And then he put on the gloves, one after another, with the boxers who had openly ridiculed the youth's painful efforts. Some were lightweights, some welters, others middleweights. To each he administered a severe lacing, smashing the fellow about the ring until he either climbed through the ropes or dived to the canvas.

"Now, then," he said after the ceremonies were completed, "if you palookas think you've got a right to talk, go ahead and talk. But be sure you know what to do with your own dukes before you start handin' the bird to a sucker who needs your help."

As a parent becomes more attached to a crippled child, so Billy developed a strong liking for the physically incompetent, but hard-working youngster. Despite the torture of the exercise, Jimmy refused to give in, and never did he voice the misery patently written across his drawn face. Billy kept him on light calisthenics for a month, told him what to eat, and made him go for long walks in Central Park. Gradually, as the weeks passed by, he increased the youth's work-outs, until Jimmy was going to the shower dripping with sweat.

The old-timer started him shadow boxing, bag punching, and sent him out every other morning to jog around the big reservoir in the park. In three months he was climbing into the ring with the youth and sparring easily.

After one work-out he asked the youngster, who had lost his gaunt appearance and was beginning to get chesty and supple, if he ever thought of becoming a fighter. He was apprehensive about it, a little fearful of a negative answer.

"You got a good left," he said, "an' you're built just right. Don't know whether you can take 'em, but we'll find that out in another month when I start whammin' 'em into you."

"Sure," replied Jimmy. "I made up my mind to be a fighter the first day I come in here an' all these fatheads poked fun at me. I couldn't give up now. I'm goin' to be a world's champion!"

Billy's eyes lighted. This was the kind of talk he loved to hear. "Say!" he exclaimed. "We'll start you goin' it heavy from now on. By golly, we'll show these mirror-fightin', loud-mouthed gazooks what a real left hook and right cross look like. Kid, I want you to come over to the flat for supper tonight."

Jimmy met the old fighter's daughter, Virginia. She was a lovely girl of sixteen, whose wavy blond hair, big, childish eyes, and apple-blossom complexion had already sent most of the neighborhood boys out to take the world apart to discover what made it tick, so they might win her sweet favor. In keeping with their East Side training, neither young man nor girl suffered from shyness. Fifteen minutes after they met, the two were chatting like old friends.

"You don't want to get any cauliflower ears like daddy has," Virginia told Jimmy at dinner table, wrinkling her pert Irish nose.

"He won't," put in Billy quickly. "I never wore headgear till after I quit the ring. An' most of my fights went

twenty rounds. Jimmy won't get no marks a-tall."

Billy's wife, once a slender, beautiful girl, had grown fat and matronly after many weary, monotonous years in the East Side flat. She took to Jimmy as much as her husband did, and in the months that followed, the young boxer became like one of the family. The friendship between the girl and himself grew.

"Come on, kid," Billy said one day, as Jimmy finished off two rounds at the heavy bag. "I think you're ready for the amateurs. I'm goin' to put you in a four-man elimination at the Brooklyn A. C. day after to-morrow night. I want you to stick on the gloves with me an' get rough."

Jimmy, now a fighter with a rosy glow to his skin, a thick neck, broad, muscular shoulders, a washboard stomach, and slim legs, was in nowise the sickly youth that had first come to the gym. His hard punching, clever footwork, and weaving tactics had won the reluctant praise of his mates. He was ready to be rushed along through the amateurs, and then nursed upward toward the professionals.

Gloves tied, the two jumped into the ring, and another boxer called time. Instantly Jimmy shot three lightning jabs to Billy's jaw, side-stepped a vicious uppercut, and then hooked twice to the old-timer's ear. Others in the gymnasium, punching bags, skipping ropes, exercising on the mats, turned to watch as they worked. The novice was putting up a pretty exhibition against the veteran who had fought the best in his day. And the old master was trying to slam them in.

The "Kid"—he was the Kid now—weaved in under Billy Farr's shifting guard and drove a solid left to the midriff. At the same moment his right swept overhead and crashed against the veteran's jaw. Billy Farr snorted and tore after the Kid, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. An insolent grin on his face, the young one leaped away, and crouching low, sprang at his opponent again. His head bobbed free of Billy's whizzing punches, as though he were nodding to boxers out on the gym floor. And his own gloved fists were shooting out like the pistons on a fast express.

Billy retreated under the heavy barrage. And the Kid, stalking like a tiger stealing down on a gazelle, kept his fists relentlessly pounding at Billy's face and body. He was accurate in his timing and murderous in his punching, bloodying the old-timer's face and making the cauliflower ears lop over like those of a great Dane's.

A straight left threw the veteran off balance and two hard rights staggered him back on his heels. Billy stepped away and shook his head violently. And then he shifted lightly to southpaw stance. The Kid came in weaving, and swerved into a hard left hook that sent him reeling across the canvas and against the ropes. Instantly Billy was on top of him, slamming home body punches that brought winces of pain. Already a fair ring general, the Kid broke away and rode his bicycle around the ring.

Snorting like a bull, Billy bounded after him. The Kid began weaving again, and came up flush against another left hook. Dazed and baffled, he tried again, but Billy, from southpaw stance, had the Indian sign on him. Battered and bleeding from the mouth, he stood off, his gloves on his hips, and stared Billy in the face.

"Say, fella, who do you take me for—Young Griffo?" the Kid demanded. "I can make you say 'Uncle' when you fight me right-handed, but I'm your sucker when you shift to southpaw. Expect me to scrap two men at once? Give the little guy a break. He's tryin' to make his way in the world."

Billy took the glove string between

his teeth and jerked it. "Um—my mistake," he said, grinning. Then his face grew solemn. "That shift of mine is bad medicine. The topnotchers shied away from me because of it, an' I only got one shot at the championship. There ain't any of the fighters usin' it now. I won't try it again. Get on the mat, Jimmy, an' then take your shower. I'm puttin' you on day after to-morrow night."

A triumphant grin spread over his battered features as he jumped out of the ring. He watched Jimmy a moment as the Kid went through his calisthenics, and then as his protégé bounded to the dressing room, the veteran squinted derisively at a welterweight skipping rope.

" 'Round-heel,' " he said, "you saw the Kid in there sparrin' with me. Well, don't laugh out loud if any one rides up on a horse an' tells you he's a future champion, 'cause he is."

The welterweight continued his monotonous skipping. He gazed indifferently at Billy and grunted. "Looks good," he said grudgingly.

Tilting a water bottle, Billy choked over the words. "Looks good!" he snorted. "Say, mister, you'll be walkin' on your heels when the sport writers are givin' him full columns."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah!" The old master sneered at the fighter. "You an' the rest of these resin sniffers wise cracked about me runnin' a health farm. You said the Kid needed a nurse, not a trainer. Well, you can bet your bottom dollar that there won't be no call to get him a keeper. You lookin'-glass sluggers call yourselves fighters! That's a laugh. You put on the gloves, get knocked on your face, an' then go around to the dance halls an' think you're kiddin' the girls with your shiners an' busted lips. Great big he-men. Whoopee! I've been tryin' to wean you canvas backs away from plain an' fancy divin' for three years. But now I've got my man, an' I'm stringin' with him right through to the end."

Billy was often guilty of these outbursts. He loved the fight game. It was his very life. And he had a huge contempt for any aspirant to fistic honors who couldn't give and take. He had no reason to think well of the game, save that it was in his blood. His managers had been crooked, he had been duped time and again, rushed along brutally, overmatched, and shortended on the purses.

He had staked everything on that one championship match. Home loving, his hopes of a place of his own and a future of middle-class ease had been vested in his chance to win the title. It was due to his attachment to his wife and daughter that he had kept clear of the silk-shirt brigade that ran the game, the big-jowled politicians, the manicured sheiks, the weisenheimers, the sure-thing, know-it-all boys who call aldermen by their first names.

The fistic directorate knew that a crooked deal could not be broached to Billy Farr. So they didn't play ball with him. He went his way, and they went theirs, with the lion's share of the gate receipts. Billy had always been a crowd pleaser, but the gods of the game kept him pleasing the patrons in obscure spots. He had been allowed the championship match, because the mob offered odds on the challenger, and the big shots knew thereby that a little money spread along the line would set them up for a killing. They had made their stake, and Billy had got his—in the neck.

At the Brooklyn A. C. Jimmy "Kid" Griffin stopped "Spats" Feeney and "Rush" Weston in the hundred-and-eighteen-pound class, four-man elimination. He did the work in two rounds apiece. The crowd liked him as it did in the ten amateur bouts that followed. Jimmy won eight by knock-outs and

decisioned two old armory fighters, who were through with the professional ring, but back in the amateurs to keep their fists in and perhaps win a watch now and then.

The amateurs began sneaking out the back doors when they were matched with Jimmy Kid Griffin, so Billy Farr put his fighter in the professional ranks. The Kid was a whirlwind. He had all the attributes of a champion. What he didn't come by naturally, he easily learned. He could box, slug, take punishment and hand it out. The matchmakers were always eager to get Billy's protégé on their cards. Jimmy fought thirty six-rounders at ten dollars a round, and then he began to notice that fighters whom he had knocked out were climbing ahead of him, getting semi-windup bouts and main events in the small clubs.

"Billy," the fighter complained one day, "I'm not goin' ahead right. Look at Spats Feeney. He's just a punchin' bag. I took him twice, an' I can take him any time without even gettin' up a sweat. He's under Dan Divine's management, an' Dan landed him a fight in the Garden. Do I have to keep on workin' for ten dollars a round the rest of my days?"

"Of course not," replied Billy quickly. "I'm nursin' you along, Kid, nursin' you along. You're goin' to be a champ. Yes, sir. But don't be in a hurry. It takes time. You'll get there."

But Billy wasn't so sure. He had tried to wheedle a main event out of every fight promoter in New York, but the best offer he got was a special. Billy had no social standing with the crowd. He belonged in the "take it or leave it" class. The promoters wanted his fighter, but if they could get him for sixty dollars, there was no use giving him a fat percentage of the gate. They were shrewd business men. Jimmy Kid Griffin was a topnotcher—no promoter ever denied that to himself. But Billy Farr was easy to handle, had always been so. And they could build up an otherwise weak card by having this main-eventer fight in a preliminary.

On the other hand, Dan Divine had been around a long, long time. He was a pillar of cauliflower society, and had the right formula for every situation. He played poker with the newspaper boys, broke bread with the Beau Brummels who governed the price of liquor, and knew whom to do business with and whom to pass up. He understood when a man was lying and when he was dealing out straight information. He lived true to his own code—never double crossed, never welshed, never gave a sucker an even break. And how he could get his boys the fights!

Jimmy won two more bouts via the knock-out route in low positions on the boxing cards. He was beginning to wonder. A young fellow sees more than an older person. Billy Farr had accepted ill fortune for so many years, that he never questioned it, never probed for the reason, never did anything but rant and rage when some one went ahead of him who shouldn't have gone. At dinner table one night Jimmy put the question straight to his manager.

"Billy, I want you to get me a top spot!" he demanded. "I've won thirty-two fights, an' there's a lot of the fellows I've licked who are gettin' main events."

"Yes, daddy," put in Virginia, "you've got to get Jimmy out of the preliminaries. He has to fight every week now, and he isn't making much money. Some of these bantamweights are getting more in a single fight than he's made so far. I don't want Jimmy battered up fighting every week!"

Billy opened his eyes wide. "You don't, huh?" he grunted.

Oh, ho! so that was the way the sun

was shining. Pretty gol-darned good, if any one should ask the old master. The two kids had a crush on each other. Billy's beaming eyes made Virginia blush. Jimmy took her hand under the table.

"No, I don't!" replied the girl haughtily in answer to her father's question.

"H'm," mused Billy. "I don't neither. Well, I'll take him around to the Garden to-morrow an' get him a bout." He said that as if it were the easiest thing he did. But in his heart, Billy felt doubtful. He wasn't much of a hand at talking, he admitted to himself. But there was one thing—he would try hard.

Pro or con, Billy's wife had nothing to say. She smiled motherly on one and all, and tended to her housework. Married eighteen years to a prize fighter, she had yet to see a boxing match. She lived in a world apart.

The next day Billy took Jimmy to the Garden. The matchmaker shook his head almost as soon as the old-timer broached the question. No, he had no spot to offer Billy's fighter. Sorry. Discouraged, the veteran started out with Jimmy trailing behind, when Dan Divine entered with Spats Feeney.

"Hello, Billy," Dan greeted pleasantly. "How are things going? Hello, Jimmy. Still putting the boys on ice?"

Spats nodded to Billy's fighter somewhat contemptuously. He could afford to do so. Miles from being a fighter of Jimmy's caliber, Spats was getting better shots by virtue of having tied in with a manager who realized that success in the racket depended largely on hobnobbing with the potentates of the game. Dan Divine's social life dovetailed with his business carer.

"Billy," Jimmy said when they reached Eighth Avenue, "there's something wrong. I bet Spats Feeney gets in the Garden again. An' I can lick him with one hand tied behind me."

"I'm doin' the best I can, ain't I?" Billy defended himself. "You saw how the matchmaker treated me. Gosh, I want you to get the big shots as well as you do."

"Yeah!" was Jimmy's only comment.

At dinner table that night the chief topic of conversation was Jimmy's slow rise in Fistiana. Billy tried to argue that sooner or later everything would come Jimmy's way, but both the fighter and Virginia indicted the old-timer for not doing his share in the partnership. Finally the debate threw Billy in the sulks, and he moped around the kitchen all evening, while Jimmy and Virginia held a long and earnest conversation in the front room.

The next day Jimmy disappeared. Billy was frantic. He thought something had happened to the youngster. When the fighter didn't show up on the following day, Billy made the rounds of all the hospitals and went to the police station. There was no trace of Jimmy Griffin, nor did any one at the various gyms know where the fighter was.

Three frightful days of suspense followed. Billy couldn't eat. He pitched and tossed on his bed. He gave patrons the wrong change and the wrong article at his cigar counter. The old veteran loved the little fighter like a son, and beyond that, all his dreams and hopes were centered in Jimmy Griffin's chance to win a championship.

Too old to make a comeback now, his day finished, there was still a possibility of Billy's living a champion's life vicariously in the person of Jimmy. Every trick and move and punch the young fighter knew, Billy had taught him. And if he had slugged his way to a title, it would really have been the old master who won, fighting through the young muscles.

And then came the end of the world! Glancing over the sport section of the *Journal,* Billy found listed under "Fight

Results"—Chicago, Jimmy Griffin, New York, knocked out Willie Clark, Philadelphia. The veteran couldn't believe his eyes. When the horrible significance of the item did sink in, he nearly went crazy. There had never been a contract between the two. Billy had worked on a friendship basis. Jimmy had taken advantage of it, and signed under some other manager.

On another page, the old-timer read:

Jimmy Griffin took a definite step toward a championship when he signed a contract with Dan Divine. We have been watching this Griffin kid a long time, and wondered why he stuck with Billy Farr. If some of the other boys after fistic honors would learn that a fighter without a good manager had better hunt himself a job, we'd have less punch-drunk palookas hanging around the gyms.

Keep your eye on Jimmy Griffin. Divine has put him in fast company already by matching him with the ring phantom, Willie Clark, at Chicago. What Jimmy did to the speedy Clark, he'll do to all the rest of the so-called contenders. Jimmy's right hand will make them wish they had been born five years later.

Though he had never been knocked out in three hundred and twenty-five fights, a wave of blackness swept across Billy's eyes, and he thought he was going to swoon. His mouth went dry, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

A man came after a cigar, and Billy absently thrust a whole handful out to the customer and told him to fade from sight. Of all the dirty dealing Billy had ever been victim of in his life, Jimmy Griffin's double cross was the worst. The world was rotten clean through; square shooters were mythcal creatures one reads about. The veteran had taken a sick youngster in hand and developed him into a crack fighting man only to have a Broadway slicker steal him!

"I'll show the dirty little rat!" exclaimed Billy, as he closed his cigar stand. "If he won't make money for me, he won't make it for any one else. I ain't got many fights left, but I've got enough to knock him back into the palooka class. He never could savvy my shift, an' he won't be able to figure it out when I get him in the ring with me."

Billy caught a subway to Park Row and went in to see the sport editor of the *Express,* a man who had always shown a friendly interest in him. Jack Campbell greeted him cordially.

"What's on your mind, Billy?" he asked. "Want me to put a line in about young Griffin?"

Billy handed him the clipping from the *Journal.* Jack Campbell read it and shook his head. "Sorry, Billy," he said sympathetically. "It's a raw deal. You should have had a contract. I didn't think Dan Divine would play a trick on a fellow like you. He can get plenty of good boys. And he knows the secret of getting them fights, even when they don't deserve them. I'm sorry, Billy. Wish there was something I could do about it."

Billy stood up. "You can—plenty!" he exclaimed. "I treated that guy like a son, an' then he plays me dirt. The rat! Didn't even tell me! Just took a powder. Big-hearted Billy Farr! All my life I never got anything but the crooked end of the stick. But now I'm goin' in for a little of the dirty stuff myself."

He told Jack Campbell how he had taught Jimmy Griffin everything he knew, how the youngster had never been able to fathom his shift to southpaw stance.

"I'm an old has-been," he said bitterly, "but I can take Griffin. I can fix him so he'll be a bum business proposition for Dan Divine. I want a grudge fight, Jack. I want to get that darn kid in the ring with me!"

Jack Campbell raised his eyebrows. He pursed his lips and tapped his pencil on the desk. "Well," he said finally, "I

don't know what will come of it, but I'll give it a play, Billy. It's a good story, anyway. And there isn't much doing now. Yeah. I'll see what I can do."

The story was taken up by the other sport writers. Within a week, a public demand had been made for the fight. The news of course went over the press association wires, and soon Billy got a telegram from Chicago. The veteran knew whom it was from and tossed the message in the stove. An air-mail letter went the same way.

White-faced, Virginia stood before her father and told him that he mustn't fight Jimmy.

"I mustn't, huh?" he grunted. "Well, we'll see about it. After me workin' with him all this time—I'll show him. I'll fix him right—good an' right!"

"But daddy, Jimmy and I——"

"Don't hand me no talk, young lady!" Billy ordered. "I know what I'm goin' to do. An' believe me I'm goin' to do it! Takin' a powder on me, takin' a powder on the best friend he had in the world. I'll show him a thing or two."

Virginia tried to remonstrate further, tried to explain something, but Billy refused to listen. And when his wife, who usually let Billy solve all the problems but the business of housekeeping, took up the plea, the veteran grabbed his cap and left the house, saying that he'd see them again after he knocked out Jimmy Griffin. The last glimpse he caught of his wife and daughter, the two of them were crying in each other's arms.

Billy slept on the cot in the dressing room of his little gymnasium. He went into rigid training, boxing with the toughest man around his size that he could go up against at Lou Stillman's.

So much newspaper publicity was given to the proposed match, that the promoter at the National offered Billy a main event. The veteran snapped it up, and the next day Dan Divine arrived from Chicago to make arrangements for the fight.

"I'll show you what happens when you steal one of my men," Billy snarled at Divine. "I'll knock him out so quick that the fans will put him down for a bum, an' never come to see him again!"

"Yes," replied Divine calmly. "It'll be a good fight, Billy, a blamed good fight. It ought to pack 'em in to the rafters. You'll make a neat little pile out of this match. I'm mighty glad you brought it up."

Billy blinked. "Huh!" he grunted, nonplused. He'd never been able to understand the ways of these Broadway fellows.

The National was sold out three days before the fight. When Jimmy Griffin and Billy Farr weighed in before the boxing commission, the young pugilist tried to offer an explanation to the veteran.

"Don't tell me nothin'!" exclaimed Billy. "You cheap little four-flusher, all I want with you is to give you a workin'-over in the ring. Don't try to talk to me!"

When Jimmy showed signs of persisting, Dan Divine called him to one side and spoke to him in low tones. The youth subsided, but there were tears in his eyes.

That night Billy Farr entered the ring first, dressed in the faded gown and soiled trunks he had worn when he had fought for the bantamweight championship. It thrilled him to hear the roar of the crowd again. The fans gave him a good hand. He felt in the pink, ready to put up the best fight of his life. He'd show that little ingrate a thing or two.

Jimmy came in a moment later, wearing a glistening robe of black silk fringed with red. The front was open and a snow-white towel had been spread over his broad chest. Parted in the middle, his thick hair had been slicked

down with a shellacking of pomade. Billy could not help but feel a thrill of admiration at the sight of the bronzed, bright-eyed youngster. He remembered that time when Jimmy had been a sickly kid in need of a friend. And then his face set grimly. This wonderful transformation had been brought about by him. The reason he was in the ring now was because the Kid had shown his gratitude by signing up with Dan Divine. A wave of heat swept up Billy's back. He'd put the kibosh on this young upstart!

The veteran went through the preliminaries as though he were in a dream. The first thing he took cognizance of was Jimmy's voice.

"Billy, I—I'm awfully sorry this happened," he said. "I tried to explain, but you wouldn't listen. An' now I've got to fight—hard. I'm goin' to knock you out." There was a catch in his voice as he said it. "I've got to win a championship, so I'm goin' to knock you out!"

Billy sneered. "Sayin' an' doin' are two different things, brat!" he exclaimed. "You mean you're goin' to try to knock me out. By the third round I'll have you hangin' on the ropes."

The two were sent to their corners. A moment later the gong rang. Billy came out carefully, his fighting face set, his mouth a thin, straight line, his eyes gleaming cold fire. Wistful faced, Jimmy bounded out and began circling the veteran. His left glove shot out a dozen times before Billy got in one blow. There was no getting around it, the Kid was fast. But Billy had been in three hundred and twenty-five fights, and such a thing as his head snapping back from left jabs was something that worried him not at all. He had the battle all planned; he knew what to do, and when to do it.

It was evident that the Kid was working for a quick knock-out. He went after Billy, weaving and bobbing, and shooting hard lefts and rights to the old-timer's head and body. In the first half round, Billy got in just two punches, a wicked left hook and a right uppercut that glazed Jimmy's eyes. The crowd yelled for the young one, bellowing for a one-round knock-out, offering him all manner of advice on how to handle the cagy veteran.

"Under the heart, Kid, under the heart!"

"Slam him in the bread basket!"

All the shouting was for the Kid. He was in the line coming up, and the old master was fading out. The world belongs to the young. Still grim of face, Billy's heart warmed over the wonderful stand the Kid was putting up against him. That boy was a natural; he took to the glove racket with the ferocity and viciousness of a Terry McGovern. The terrific right to the chin had not changed his expression in the least. The Kid would do.

"Throw that right more!" he exclaimed when they came in close. "Don't telegraph! 'Member how I showed you."

Then Billy caught himself. He recalled his business again. No longer was the relationship one of master and pupil. He was in there to knock the Kid out, to ruin his career. And there was only one way to do that. He had to shift. The Kid would weave into a left hook that would make his toes tingle. Billy smiled grimly, wolfishly. He was ready to give him the works. A cruel gleam in his eye, the old-timer jumped back. With a beautiful movement of his feet and a deft twist of his body, he came in again, fighting from southpaw stance.

In the heat of the battle Jimmy didn't see the change. His mouth pressed together in a tight slit, his eyes blazing fire, he walked into Billy weaving, his fists flying.

A hard smile played on Billy's lips as

he rolled with the lefts and rights. Suddenly he shot a murderous, six-inch left hook to Jimmy's jaw when the youngster weaved into it. The Kid dropped on his face. Billy ran to a neutral corner.

The crowd stood on its toes, crying for the youth to take a nine count, and then to get up and knock Billy Farr out of the ring. The old master saw the Kid making a tremendous struggle to rise, and a mist filled his eyes. As game as they come, this Jimmy boy, a credit to the racket. The Kid was a champion already. To wear the crown, he but needed a title match. Billy's chest swelled with pride. It was all on his account. Then his face darkened. Peering up through the ropes from Jimmy's corner, his fat face worried, Billy saw Dan Divine.

The veteran's teeth ground together. This fine little fighting machine was no longer his charge. He belonged to Divine, who never in his whole soft life had drawn on a glove! Billy resolved to knock the young ingrate into Divine's lap.

At nine the Kid stood up, groggy, backing away, half out on his feet. Springing across the ring and fighting from orthodox stance, Billy slammed terrific jolts to Jimmy's jaw. The Kid circled to the left. Suddenly he stood his ground and slugged with the veteran. At that game Jimmy was the master, his young body more able to stand the pounding. Two chopping rights made Billy's knees sag. A few more and he would be dropped for the first time in his long career.

He knew his business. Backing away, he shifted again to southpaw, and the next moment the Kid swung into another devastating left hook and sprawled out. The bell saved him, though Billy went to his corner with the idea that somehow Jimmy would have climbed to his feet at nine.

His thoughts had mellowed under fire, and Billy felt less revengeful now. As his hired second worked over him, he pictured Jimmy's remarkable first-round fighting. The Kid was just like he had been in days long gone by. In truth, the Kid was himself. And he was living a fighter's life once again in Jimmy Griffin. That thought startled him. But before he had a chance to dwell on it further the gong rang, and Jimmy was on him again, hammering for a knock-out.

The Kid took the second round by a wide margin. Billy's torso was scarlet with blood spilling from his cut face. It seemed to the spectators that the old-timer had expended his scant supply of energy in a one-round spurt, and that now it was only a matter of a few punches before he would be flattened. Again and again the Kid staggered him.

His mind in a daze, Billy fought like an automaton. Conflicting thoughts stood at swords' points with one another. Maybe he was all wrong. Maybe it was his place to have forgiven the Kid. A young person is easily influenced by a glib tongue. That might have been what happened to Jimmy—signing up with Divine on the inspiration of the moment, on top of a mound of promises, and then regretting his deed.

The crowd stood on the seats. The Kid had the old-timer against the ropes, socking them in, a mile a minute. It could not last. Veteran ringsiders, who had seen Billy in his prime, started to leave. They hated to see the slaughter. The Kid was winging them for all he was worth. He had beaten the old-timer's face to a bloody mass, beyond recognition.

In another moment Billy would crash to the canvas and be carried from the arena. Youth would win—as always.

The veteran did not feel a punch. He knew what was happening. He was on the verge of a knock-out—his first. Then through a blur he saw Dan Divine grinning and shaking his head over

Jimmy's furious attack. It seemed as though new strength shot up Billy's spine. He'd wipe the grin off that sleek crook's face. With a snort of rage he tore away from the ropes and tottered sidewise, free of Jimmy's slugging fists.

Out in the center of the ring, he dived into a clinch, and held on until the referee pried them apart. His head cleared rapidly. Back-stepping until he was sure of himself, he shifted again, and caught Jimmy with a left hook that had every bit of his strength behind it. The Kid hit the canvas so hard that he bounced. In two leaps Billy was in a neutral corner, watching the youngster trying to get up. He had him now!

There was something glorious in the way the little fellow fought to gain control of himself. Most fighters would have quit under that punch. But not Jimmy! The Kid would act just as Billy had always acted—like a first-class fighting man. The whole house grew silent. It looked as though age and experience had turned the trick. The crowd didn't like that. They wanted Billy Farr whipped. He had no place to go. But the whole world lay before Jimmy Griffin.

At seven the Kid balanced on one knee. At nine he stood up. Billy approached him slowly. He hated to hit Jimmy again. It was like taking a punch at his own jaw. Why fight himself, when most any one else in the world would fight him? Let the Kid go on to his title. What of it if he got nothing from the proceeds? He wouldn't starve.

And he could sit back and know that when Jimmy Kid Griffin downed the champion, it was really himself, Billy, who won the victory. Just as a father sees himself living over again in his son, so Billy would see himself gain the world's acclaim and the highest fistic honor of his weight through Jimmy.

But he had to keep going. Never in his life had he ever thrown a fight. He had never dived, never faked a punch. And he was too old a dog to learn. He was paid to slug and maul and give the fans a show, and he had to go through with it. It felt as though a pair of hot tongs fastened around his heart as he shot a hard left toward Jimmy's jaw. The blow never landed. Jimmy, posing as being out on his feet, hit him like a sledge hammer.

The blow sent Billy reeling backward. Before he could recover his balance, Jimmy slashed over a volley of punches that made the veteran wilt. The old-timer fought back valiantly. But the two were slugging toe to toe again, and at that procedure, Jimmy ruled. The blows thudded against Billy in an incessant rhythm. He knew that his only hope was to shift to southpaw and box his opponent.

Billy felt his head whirling. Shift, shift, or take the consequences! No man could stand up long under those solid punches. Step back and shift, an imp in his brain kept calling to him. Shift and put this upstart on the canvas! Billy couldn't do it. He elected to slug it out. And he knew full well that his slugging days were in the dim past.

Jimmy never ceased. The crowd was beside itself. Shouts froze in people's throats. Never had they seen such milling, such viciousness, such hand-to-hand, body-to-body mauling and tearing and ripping. It was a fight to put one's hair on end. The referee's gray-flannel shirt was splashed crimson. Both fighters were drenched in a scarlet bath. And they fought—like two wild bulls, two tigers, two of anything that fights hard and to the death.

They stood in the center of the ring, under the arcs, sinking punch after punch into each other's face and body. The youngster was throwing five punches to the old-timer's one, and the veteran's gloves were flashing out as

fast as the eye could follow. And then came a crashing right. Billy went down. The crowd found its tongue. A mighty roar came from hoarse throats. The old-timer was on the floor! Youth had vindicated itself.

But the veteran battler stood on his feet at nine, his guard down! *Crash!* A right-hander sent him spinning again. He tumbled to the canvas and immediately climbed to his feet without taking the count. The crowd knew what that signified. Billy Farr was out on his feet.

Therein the mob erred. Billy had possession of his senses. He was dazed and in a fog, but in that condition he had often put up his best fights. And his mind was working, He knew perfectly well that he could have taken nine, knew that he could clear his head in a clinch, that he could shift to southpaw and catch his opponent with that wicked left hook of his. But he still determined to slug it out to the finish.

Jimmy Griffin fought like a maniac. He fairly threw his weight behind his punches. Billy began to sway. There was a wild light in his swollen eyes. A thin smile flickered on his bloodied lips. Everything was getting black. *Bam!* A terrific right uppercut crashed him into darkness. But in the split second of light between the impact of the blow and oblivion, Billy knew two things—that in all his hard career he had never thrown a fight, and that he had just won his greatest victory. Then he ceased to know.

Billy came to in his dressing room. The club doctor, Jack Campbell, his second, and an attendant had been working over him. The veteran sat up. It was five minutes before he was able to talk.

"If any one should ask you gents," he said with a faint grin, "I've been in somethin' of a fight."

"It was wonderful—wonderful," said Jack Campbell.

Billy took a quick shower and then donned his street clothes. Just as he finished, Dan Divine came in.

"Billy," he said seriously, "come with me."

"Huh!" grunted the old-timer. "What's botherin' you?"

"Come with me," Divine repeated.

Billy followed the manager into Jimmy Griffin's dressing room. There the veteran found the young fighter, his head buried in his arms, sobbing like a child. The Kid looked up at Billy's approach.

"What are you bawlin' about?" Billy demanded gruffly. "You won, didn't you? An' it was a good fight, only you want to watch that right hand of yours."

"Billy," Jimmy sobbed, "I had to do it. I had to! It was for you an' Ma Farr an' Virginia. I signed with Divine because he could get me the big shots, an' you can't. But, gosh, I'll have enough money in three months to build you a home over in Jersey. An' I knew if I mentioned Divine to you, you'd make me sign a contract with you. Billy, I—I had to knock you out to-night. An'—an' I know what you did, Billy. You stopped shiftin' to southpaw. You could have taken me."

"Shut up," said Billy, frowning. "Don't go shootin' your face off so much."

"Billy," said Jimmy, "I—I'm goin' to marry Virginia just as soon as I win the championship, an' Dan says that'll be in less than a year."

"Yes, sir," put in Divine. "I'm starting the ballyhoo already. Your grudge fight touched it off. Sending the Kid to an outdoor camp this week. Wish you'd go along and train him. You've forgotten more about fighting than I'll ever know."

Billy didn't know which way to turn. He looked first at Jimmy and then at Dan. "Virginia! Train the future champ!" he exclaimed. "Say, is this

a dream, or are you guys kiddin' me? Gosh, you're goin' to marry Virginia. I'll be the father-in-law of the future champ! Well, by golly, fella, you've got to toe the mark. Yes, sir. Get into your clothes. I know ma's just about havin' a fit. Say, Divine, we've got to watch the Kid's right. See how he missed with it to-night?"

Divine nodded. "I'll leave all of that to you, Billy," he said. "I'll handle the business end."

A few minutes later the two fighters who had been trying to tear each other apart in the ring walked out of the arena arm in arm.

"Daddy! Jimmy!"

The two swung around and looked into Virginia's tear-stained face.

"Oh," she sobbed, "what have you done?"

"Done?" grunted Billy. "You should have seen! Me'n' Jimmy had the crowd standin' on its ears. We sure handed 'em a show. They went wild over us. Mebbe they'll have us on for a return match."

"You fought each other!" cried Virginia, horrified. "How could you?"

"Say, honey," went on Billy jubilantly, "you should have been there. We put on a sluggin' bee that had 'em huggin' one another. An' listen, honey," he said to Virginia, "don't think I ain't wise, 'cause I am. I know all about it. You're goin' to be the boss of the fightin'est champion that ever lived. Yes, sir. Come on, now. We got to hike home and calm ma down. She'll be takin' them headache powders again, an' I told her to lay off of them for good an' all."

Swinging his arms between Jimmy's and Virginia's, the veteran of three hundred and twenty-six fights went marching down the street, battered to a pulp, but with his head up, jaunty, cocky, the axis around which the universe revolved. God was in His heaven. All was right with the world.

Another story by Phil Richards will appear in a forthcoming issue.

ARE WE MICE OR ARE WE MEN?

AS far as we can discover, no considerable stir has followed the decision of scientists that the skull found near Peiping, China, recently, is not that of a man, but of a woman. The skull was found in a quarry, and the task of chiseling away the rock will take some time. At the last report, only the eye sockets had been reached, but it was possible, nevertheless, to determine with fair certainty the sex of the subject.

To go back to the stir we mentioned. We've never become excited at the idea of digging up the dusty bones of men. Those primitive men were hardened to all kinds of things while they lived, and a little chiseling after a million years or so somehow doesn't seem much of an indignity. But a lady! The present skull, they say, belonged to a young female adult. There's something tragic in that. There was a girl. She probably sat in her cave and made baskets and crooned. She saw the sun go down and the moon—the same moon—come up over the horizon.

And then she was stricken with appendicitis or its primitive equivalent, and passed into the land of her fathers. Now, a million years later, they dig her up and chisel coolly around her eye sockets. It ain't right! Men of the land, arise in the cause of chivalry. Are we mice or are we men!

The CAPTAIN WAS CRAZY

Barongs Glittered in the Red Rim of the Jungle—Facing a Madman and His Men.

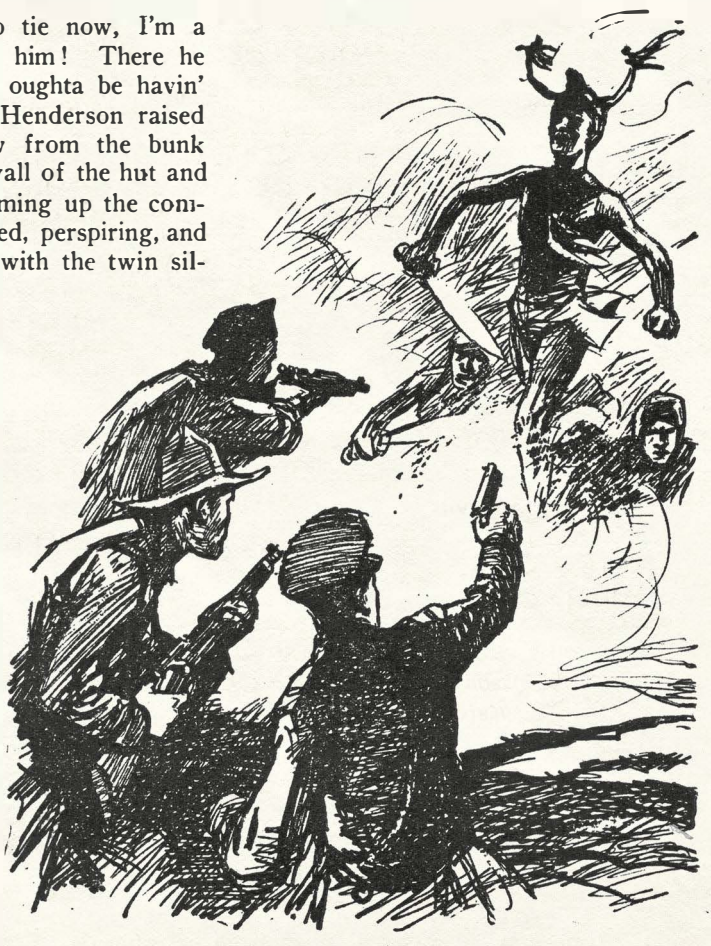
I'M tellin' you, he'll go around in this here sun, with his hat off, just once too often and he'll be fit to tie." Sergeant Kelly rose from his bunk and stared out from under the nipa-thatched hut at the company street, baking hot under the full impact of the Philippine sun.

"Ef he ain't fit to tie now, I'm a Dutchman! Look at him! There he goes now, when he'd oughta be havin' a siesta!" Sergeant Henderson raised himself on his elbow from the bunk against the opposite wall of the hut and pointed out a man coming up the company street, a red-faced, perspiring, and worried-looking man with the twin silver bars of a captain on the shoulders of his blouse.

It was no time for a white man to be abroad in the tropics. Wise white men know that the tropic sun punishes the unwary sooner or later, and the wise white man keeps under shelter during the heat of the day.

But whether Captain Brasser was a wise white man in the face of tropic heat was a matter of doubt, especially to the men in his company.

"And the way he's ridin' our lootenant ain't nobody's business," Sergeant Henderson went on, watching the form of the captain disappear within the one-room shack at the head of the company



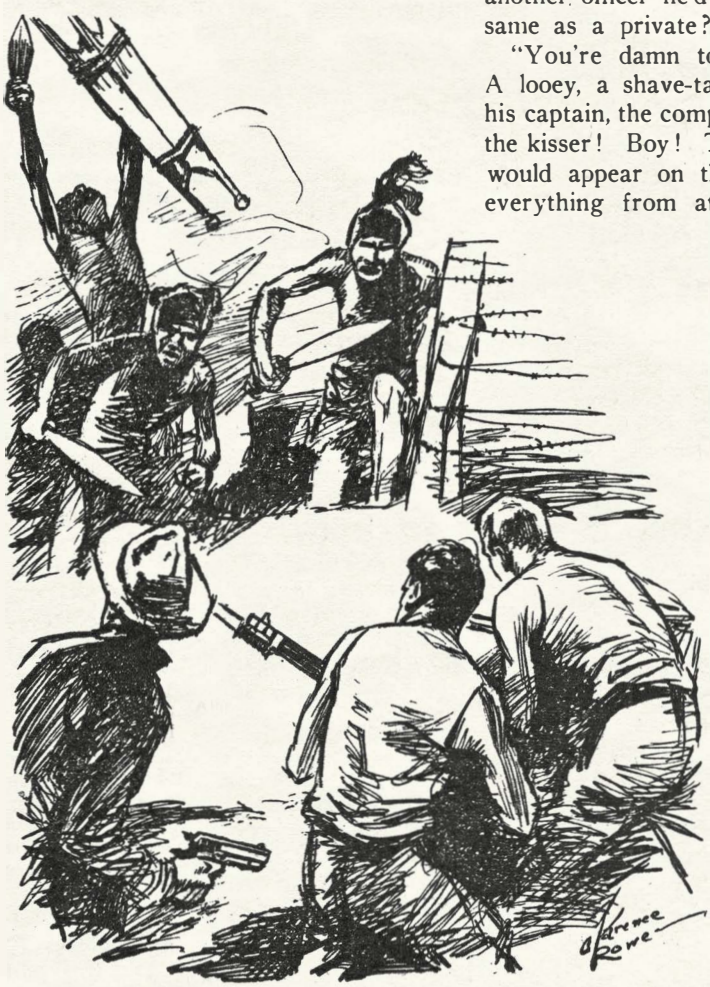
By

Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson

A Two-part Story—Part I

street. "Day and night he's pickin' on him. 'Sa wonder Lootenant Bird don't rise up and poke him one in the jaw. I would if it was me!"

"Yeh, you would! Like hell you would! You'd look pretty makin' little rocks outa big ones for the rest o' your life at Bilibid." Kelly was openly skeptical.



"You mean to say if a officer swats another officer he'd get court-martialed same as a private?"

"You're damn tootin' he'd get his! A looey, a shave-tail, up and smackin' his captain, the company commander, on the kisser! Boy! That one little smack would appear on the charge sheets as everything from attempted murder to mutiny, insubordination, disrespect, and everything else on the program. Don't you know the punishment for doin' any of them things in the face o' the enemy is death!"

"You mean he could be tried and shot for it?"

"You're damn tootin' he could be tried and shot for it."

"But supposin' the captain was crazy?"

"Don't make no difference. That's just a tough break. In this man's army the senior is always right, crazy or no

crazy," Sergeant Kelly gave this piece of information from the height of his superior knowledge of the service gained in soldiering in the regular army for the past twenty years.

Henderson, the younger man, who had come in just because there happened to be a little war on down in the Philippine Islands, digested this information in silence.

"But what in blazes is goin' to happen around here, anyways?" he went on. Sergeant Kelly shook his head. In the silence of the afternoon the monotonous cry of a lizard came from behind the nipa hut somewhere.

"Gecko! Gecko! Gecko!" complained the lizard mournfully. No other sound disturbed the silence except a distant murmuring sound, the swish and wash of the waves of the Sulu Sea against the coral beaches of the island.

"I'll tell you what's goin' to happen around here," Kelly spoke up at last, "somebody's goin' to get hurt, that's what's goin' to happen around here. Where are we? Miles away from the nearest reënforcements at Jolo. What was we supposed to be doin' here? Pacifyin' the Moros. How we been pacifyin' 'em? Our nutty, sunstruck captain's been rubbin' 'em the wrong way ever since we been here so that now we're no better than prisoners in our own camp.

"And what a camp! Stuck way out here in the open with no more protection 'n a jack rabbit, and anywheres from four hundred to a thousand Moros on this island and the next, jest waitin' to hop on us, with *juramentados* runnin' amuck every half hour. What's the answer? Plenty trouble, with hell liable to bust loose any second! That bein' the case, if you had soldiered as long as I have, you'd grab off what sleep you could while the sleepin' was good, for there ain't no tellin' how long it'll be 'fore you get another chance to do any bunk fatigue." And like the old soldier he was, Kelly turned his face to the wall and followed his own advice.

Sergeant Henderson, being younger and more imaginative, could not sleep quite so easily. As he closed his eyes visions of fanatic Moros, villainous-looking people, with scaly faces, small shifty eyes, and awful mouths filled with blackened teeth, came to disturb his rest. He didn't blame the captain for being nervous and worried, especially not after seeing the results of the last encounter with the Moros. He shuddered as he recalled the ghastly mess the Moro *barong* man had made of Stithers, Stithers standing guard all innocent of the crawling death so near him in the high grass.

And the other two men, one of them with his head severed from his body by one flick of the razor-edged *barong,* the other chopped into unrecognizable shape so that pieces of him lay scattered all over the ground.

Sergeant Henderson closed his eyes firmly against these horrors. Kelly was right, he must get what sleep he could, for there would be hell to pay and plenty of it before long. The rest of the company scattered in their nipa shacks were taking what advantage they could of the lull. The sentries on post and two men around the cook shack were the only signs of life astir except that voices were sounding from the captain's shack. Two officers faced each other in the semigloom of its interior, Captain Brasser and his lieutenant.

"This ain't any kind of a place to go around asleep on your feet, Mr. Bird." Captain Brasser mopped the sweat from his red face and hitched uncomfortably at the collar of his blue-flannel shirt, glaring at his calm-looking lieutenant as he did so.

It certainly was no place to go round asleep at the time on this islet, set way off in the Sulu Sea at the far southern end of the Philippines. The company of the Nth Infantry sent to bring its tur-

bulent inhabitants under the rule of Uncle Sam had already lost three men, chopped to pieces by furtive-footed Moros who slid out of the jungle noiselessly and disappeared again, leaving horror behind them.

"'N' another thing we gotta watch is these here damn *juramentados*, Mr. Bird. There ain't no sense leavin' one o' them crazy fanatics gettin' into camp and killin' a couple o' men before he gets what's comin' to him. I tell you we gotta watch 'em, Mr. Bird!"

Bird reflected that the captain let himself get too excited, considering the tropical heat. It never does to get excited in the tropics. Although the *juramentados* were bad business, there was no doubt of that. Crazy, religious fanatics, Mohammedans, individual Moros who would suddenly decide to win Paradise, a shade tree, a white horse and unlimited houris for eternity by killing off as many infidels as possible before meeting their inevitable end. They were particularly hard to kill, for one of these half-naked savages would come leaping out of nowhere, crazed with drugs and priestly incantations, and wield his murderous, razor-sharp *barong*, or creese, with deadly effect before he could be brought down.

Captain Brasser was undoubtedly too nervous and excited. His irritation at the calm, philosophical bearing of his lieutenant had grown into a fixed obsession. Bird was never known to get excited. "Weary" Bird they called him at college, and "Weary" was the soldiers' name for him in the company, it being his settled rule in life to put no more energy than was absolutely necessary to achieve his objective at the moment.

The captain glared at him, his choleric blue eyes far from friendly as he surveyed the lean, tall form of his lieutenant, slouched against the wall of this nipa-roofed shack at the head of the company street. Brasser had a wild impulse to do something to wake up his quiet-voiced, slow-moving aid, make him stand to attention and salute or something equally sudden and startling, anything to wake him up and make him come to life.

Bird waited, sleepily but politely, trying hard to repress a yawn, and not showing his worries over this choleric and fussy captain of his who was slowly but surely losing his grip on himself. Of course Captain Brasser got on his nerves badly. He got on the nerves of the whole outfit, with his increasing pettiness and querulous insistence upon annoying nonessentials. The man was rapidly becoming a psychopathic case and Bird had, when talking to him, that feeling of talking to some one not quite sane. This was disquieting enough at any time and place, but it was especially sinister considering that Brasser was out here fighting Moros with a whole company of men to handle. All that was extremely worrying but as nothing in Bird's mind compared to the fact that he was keeping his overtired lieutenant at that moment from a well-earned siesta after a night of inspecting sentinels.

"Yes, sir?" inquired Bird a little wearily, after the silence had lasted nearly a minute, glancing to the next nipa shack where his cot lay stretched out invitingly.

The captain swabbed his red face savagely again, started to say something, then thought better of it.

"Aw, that's all right, go on, try to get some snap into things," he blurted out finally. And again Bird noted that peculiar flare in the captain's eyes, a flare that was not quite human, somehow.

Bird rose from his seat on a packing box and walked out, looking longingly at his bunk as he stood in the doorway a moment. Then some other idea came into his mind and he sighed and strolled down the company street. The soldiers had been there about a week

and had replaced their tents with nipa and bamboo shacks, lined up neatly so that the camp had the air of a small village. There were few in sight, the broiling sun being reason enough for men to keep under shelter. At the end of the street he could see the woven bamboo fence and gate that he had erected in spite of Brasser, the sharp-pointed bamboo stakes pointing outward. Strung along the top were lengths of rope and wire on which were suspended tin cans and old bells, pieces of metal and tinware which could be depended upon to clatter loudly should a *juramentado* try to work his snaky way into the camp.

Halfway down the company street, Bird bethought himself of a smoke and halted lazily, moving back between two soldier shacks in the shade, where he drew forth a booklet of brown papers and a bag of tobacco, its contents damp and soggy from the hot, moist heat. From where he stood he could see the entrance of the camp, a narrow gate, in which stood a sentinel armed with a rifle. The sentinel had been nearly two hours on post and glanced backward every minute or two to see when that "blankety blank" relief was coming.

Not fifteen feet away from the sentinel was a luxuriant tropical flowering shrub. There was something queer about that shrub, for it crept forward a few inches every time the sentinel turned his back. During the man's many longing glances toward the guard-house shack, the shrub had crept up to within ten feet. When the sentry espied the tall, lean form of the lieutenant wending its way toward him he turned halfway to the direction of the officer's approach. Then the lieutenant disappeared and the sentinel turned all the way around, his neck craned toward the place he had last sighted the slow-moving form.

At that precise second the flowering shrub burst into sudden fruit.

Some instinct warned the sentry that all was not well to the rear, for he turned just in time to see the sunlight reflected on oiled skin and gleaming *barong.* He had a fraction of a second to realize that a Moro *juramentado,* red-eyed and evil, was upon him. By a convulsive jerk he raised his rifle. So short was the time that it became purely an instinctive gesture to protect his head.

The *barong* descended with a vicious whir and swish, struck the rifle barrel, deflected and crashed sidewise, striking the sentry above the ear with its rear edge. The soldier fell without a sound, his rifle flinging itself out of his grasp as he hit the ground. The *juramentado* raised his *barong* for another cut at the senseless body when his attention was distracted by some movement within the camp, the gate to which now lay open before him.

With a single bounding leap, he was inside, his *barong* raised to strike the first person he should encounter. At the far end of the camp a red-faced, choleric-looking officer came out of his shack.

The Moro knew as the result of long vigils outside the camp stockade, that this man was the chief, the *datto* of these infidels. There would be a great reward in Paradise for the true believer who died slaughtering a *datto* of the infidels, a reward taking the form of an amazing increase in the number of beautiful houris assigned to the lucky individual in those Elysian fields.

The Moro made straight for Captain Brasser, rushing down the company street in long leaps. Brasser shouted something and ducked into his shack for his revolver. Men ran out of the guard shack in time to see the Moro speeding up the company street.

Lieutenant Bird had finished rolling and had lighted his cigarette. Some note of disturbance fell on his ear. He moved out from between the two sol-

dier shacks. At that precise instant the wild-eyed *juramentado* leaped into his field of vision, speeding past under forced draft.

Bird quietly lifted his foot, drove it between the flashing ankles of the hurrying Moro and watched curiously as that individual shot forward through the air and landed on his face.

Sighing to himself, the lean lieutenant made a single stride forward, dispassionately kicked the *barong* from the fellow's hands and then administered another kick somewhere in the region of the Moro's head which effectually drove all thoughts of houris from his mind.

By that time the sergeant of the guard arrived with several men, and on the principle that a good Moro is a dead Moro they assured his entry into Paradise by plunging their bayonets into him with all the vigor at their command.

By this time the camp was boiling like an angry beehive. Men in all stages of undress, roused from their siestas, came running from their shacks. Captain Brasser arrived on the scene, flourishing his revolver and shouting, trying to make his voice heard above the clamor of the men. The damp tobacco of Bird's cigarette necessitated another match. He touched the shoulder of the sergeant of the guard and pointed to his unlighted smoke.

The sergeant pulled forth some matches.

Bird took them, nodded his thanks, lighted his cigarette, then looking over the men's heads, frowned. Again he touched the sergeant's shoulder, pointing toward the gate and the fringe of the jungle.

The sergeant gave one look, shouted to the men around him and ran rapidly in the indicated direction. His influence was contagious. The other men gave one horrified look and rushed after him, Captain Brasser puffing along in their rear.

Bird followed without seeming to hurry, in time to arrive at the gate as the men of the company rushed out, bayonets fixed. There was a group of some twenty or thirty Moros advancing, cautiously, from the jungle edge and halfway to the gate where lay the unconscious form of the sentry.

The half-clothed soldiers, bayonets gleaming, rushed at the natives, yelling like fiends. The Moros broke, and ran before the bulk of the company was out of the gate. The soldiers stopped their pursuit at the edge of the trees and returned, straggling in the gate, where Bird was kneeling over the form of the sentry.

"Just a knock-out," he stated, rising; "he'll come to in a few minutes." And designating several men to carry the unconscious man into the inclosure, he stared back at the jungle.

"Better hurry," he said.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before the woods began to erupt Moros, coming from all sides, yelling and screaming like all the devils let loose from hell. They came on, their half-naked bodies gleaming with oil, their *barongs* glittering evilly in the afternoon sun.

Bird picked up the rifle dropped by the sentry and swung around facing the rush. The nearest men joined him, forming a compact little group, fringed with a line of sparkling bayonet tips, moving steadily backward as the rest of the men rushed through the gate and commenced firing from along the inside.

The Moros were rapidly nearing the little group of bayonets as the rifles from inside rose into the roar and racket of rapid fire.

The savage-looking natives began to drop here and there, but the bulk of them came on. The leading Moros were upon them as the little group headed by Bird reached the gate.

Barongs and creeses snaked forward

hungrily and were beaten down by bayonet and butt. The men edged back through the gate one by one, until Bird was the last man.

He stood there smashing with his clubbed rifle until the roar of shooting behind him told him that his men were firing over his shoulder and past him. With one last smashing blow which knocked out a big Moro wearing a green turban, Bird slid through the gate; it was shoved shut behind him, full in the faces of his attackers.

The rifles were doing frightful execution on the close-packed bodies of the Moros at that close range. Some of them clawed at the bamboo stockade, attempting to drag it down. These were bayoneted or shot while the pitiless roll of rifle fire kept up, until suddenly the attack lost heart and the survivors fled back to the jungle, pursued relentlessly by the vengeful bullets of the defenders. The ground was strewn with writhing bodies which were stilled one after another as the soldiers caught sight of them, until after a few minutes there was no sign of a living Moro.

The rifle fire had died down completely. Bird strolled to the gate again, opened it and looked down at the form of the green-turbaned Moro he had knocked out. The man began to stir. One of the men raised his bayonet. Bird stopped him.

"Tie him up and drag him in," he said: "we need a prisoner to question." And in a few seconds his orders had been carried out, and the half-conscious Moro trussed up like a pig and dragged inside.

Captain Brasser was still puffing and blowing, enormously excited, and the men, catching his mood, were babbling like a monkey cage at the zoo. Bird, finding a shady spot under the guardhouse porch, sat down, yawning, and very obviously bored.

Near him lay the trussed-up body of the captured Moro. Glancing over in his direction, the lieutenant saw the man's eyes open and glaring at him balefully.

"Habla Usted español, Hajji?" inquired the white man calmly.

The Moro looked at him in astonishment. The baleful glare went out of his eyes. Here was a white man who knew the significance of that green turban and addressed him by his proper title.

The Moro studied him with interest. The white man looked exceedingly bored and unexcited.

Another white man came up, red-faced and hot. This white man waved his arms and shouted something in the incomprehensible language of these infidel dogs.

The Moro noted swiftly that the high-born one, calm one, paid little heed to the undignified shoutings of the red-faced man of baser blood. The captive nodded to himself; this was as it should be.

As the Moro watched the pantomime it became clear to him that the red-faced one sought his life and that the tall, calm one held out against it. The captive watched calmly until finally the red-faced one departed. No, he did not like that red-faced man. He waited for what should happen next.

"You have not answered my question," the tall one spoke to him. It would be well to placate this one, reflected the Moro.

"Yes, *tuan,* I speak Spanish," he replied. This white man was like all Great Ones he had seen, speaking in that same tired, extremely bored fashion, his eyes glancing sleepily at lesser mortals.

"Are you a *datto?"* came the next question, the white man glancing indifferently at the gold-inlaid, ivory-handled creese taken from the Moro—a creese that denoted fairly high rank on the part of its possessor.

"No, *tuan,* a *panglima,"* responded

the Moro simply, betraying his status as that of a lesser chieftain.

"Who is your *datto* and where does he live?"

"*Datto* Bawissil, overlord of Mamik-Manka, where he lives." The Moro jerked his head in the direction of the narrow strait across which lay the island of Mamik-Manka.

"Why does he send his warriors to disturb my rest?"

"Because he is overlord of Mamik-Manka and the lesser islands," returned the Moro, his tone slightly arrogant.

"He is not."

The statement was made flatly and without heat.

The Moro grinned. This was something he could understand. No argument, simply a bald statement. The white man, paying no more attention to him, rose and walked away.

The hubbub in the camp had died down a little although Captain Brasser was holding forth at length to a group of noncommissioned officers. Bird strolled down toward his own shack and dropped on his cot, sighing contentedly. The voices of Brasser and the noncommissioned officers came dimly to his ears as he closed his eyes and drifted into slumber. It seemed that he had scarcely closed them when he heard the rattle of rifle fire around the camp, followed by hurried shouts and commands. He sat up on his cot, swearing angrily, in time to see Captain Brasser hurrying down toward the gate. Still swearing, Bird arose and followed. The Moros had returned and were keeping up a steady annoying fire against the American camp, without showing themselves.

The men were in position as he arrived. Brasser was nervously peering out at the jungle fringe whence the firing was coming.

"Hadn't we better stop this foolishness, captain?" asked Bird.

"Stop it! How stop it?" Brasser glared around astonished.

Bird shrugged his shoulders.

"Why, go out and capture the chief of these fellows and make him behave himself," said Bird.

Brasser stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Go out—and make him behave himself? Are you crazy?" he grunted and then turned abruptly away from his junior and walked toward the trench that flanked the gate.

Bird looked after him reflectively, then shook his head and turned to the porch of the small nipa-roofed guardhouse. On the porch, still bound, lay the *panglima*. He grinned up at the officer, showing a row of teeth blackened with betel nut.

"Your chief is mad," he stated, jerking his head toward where Captain Brasser shouted and waved his arms by the gate. Bird looked up startled. The remark came so very aptly and coincided so sharply with his own conviction—that his company commander was not quite sane. But it would not do to permit this Moro captive such liberties of speech.

"Are you then quite sane to lay there, bound, and criticize my chief?" The Moro shook his head.

"No, I am not mad, *tuan*. But your chief is a little mad now. Soon he will be more mad. Why don't you kill him?" he asked calmly.

The naïve directness of the question amused Bird all of a sudden and he laughed, then his face became graver again as he saw Brasser striding rapidly toward him, his red features convulsed with anger. The captain started to shout before he arrived at the porch.

"I've stood about alla this I'm goin' to!" he yelled. "I told you I wanta have this Moro shot and I intend to shoot him." And he tugged at his revolver.

Bird rose to his feet silently, with something pantherlike about his swift motion. In a second he was standing

before the prone form of the bound Moro.

"He's my prisoner, captain!" His voice was even but there was a tense, electric quality about it that caught the captain's ear in spite of his rage. He faltered and drew back a step. Bird followed him up, gazing into his eyes, surprised to find how large the pupils were and what a flare of wild and increasing rage there was in their depths.

"I can't let any one shoot him, captain, not even you," he went on steadily.

Brasser stepped forward, his face livid.

"Damn you!" he shouted. "Do you think you're running this outfit? I can have you shot for mutiny!" And he shook his fist under Bird's nose. The lieutenant grew white. He leaned forward like a prize fighter crouched for a swing.

"Take your fist down, sir!" his voice cracked like a whip. "You are going too far, captain! I'm not being damned or threatened by you or anybody like you, no matter what your rank! Do you get that?" His eyes were blazing, his fists clenched. Brasser, who had never seen this quiet-voiced lieutenant of his show any traces of excitement or anger, realized suddenly that he had gone too far, and backed away hastily, his eyes shifting.

Muttering something under his breath he turned on his heel and strode away. Bird was still breathing heavily when the captain disappeared from view into the orderly shack. The Moro watched the scene with impassive face, well knowing that his own life had hung in the balance during those brief few seconds. The firing from the edge of the clearing had died down to a desultory shot or two. The muzzle-loading guns of the Moros, firing slugs and nails, could not be depended upon to do much execution and no shots were coming into the inclosure.

"Those are *Datto* Bawissil's men?"

The *hajji* nodded.

"They will make a big attack to-night with three hundred spear men and *barong* men," he stated flatly.

Bird did not betray by a sign that this was important news.

"Is this true?" he asked casually. "At what time will they attack?"

"After the moon goes down," answered the *hajji.*

Bird remembered that the moon had set about midnight the previous evening. The attack was scheduled then for a little after midnight. Three hundred Moros! That could be a serious business. He studied the Moro *hajji* reflectively.

"Why don't you go over, *tuan,* and capture *Datto* Bawissil?" asked the *hajji.* Bird's eyelids flashed open quickly. It was the very thing he had suggested to the captain. Again he studied the Moro, rolling a cigarette and lighting it.

"Who is next in rank to *Datto* Bawissil?" he asked.

"I am," he returned.

Bird nodded. He was beginning to see things.

"And if *Datto* Bawissil was—ah—removed—you would be *datto* of Mamik-Manka?"

The Moro nodded.

"Of course," continued Bird, "we would allow no *datto* to rule who was unfriendly to the Americans."

"I would be friendly to the Americans," the *hajji's* reply came without a tremor. Bird studied him again.

"That remains to be proven," he stated flatly.

"Prove me, *tuan!*" begged the Moro; then with more dignity, "Twice you have saved my life, *tuan;* am I a dog that I should prove false to you?"

Again Bird studied him, then nodded.

"No, *hajji,* I do not think you are a dog." Bird glanced at the heavy growth of jungle encircling the clearing. "I am going to trust you."

The Moro nodded soberly.

"But first you must swear by the beard of the Prophet that you will never again raise hand against an American."

"By the beard of the Prophet I swear it!" returned the Moro gravely.

"Good! I will arrange your escape. And together we will capture *Datto* Bawissil!"

The Moro blinked his eyes at this sudden calm announcement, then grinned joyously.

"Together we will capture him, *tuan!*" His eyes glowed. But Bird's attention was attracted elsewhere. The first sergeant, Sergeant Kelly, had approached and was standing near by—a pained and worried look on his usually calm features.

Bird looked him over in one quick glance.

"What is it, sergeant?" he asked. Kelly hummed and hawed, immensely embarrassed. Bird smiled at him.

"The captain has told you to notify me that I'm in arrest, is that so, sergeant?"

"Yes, sir!" Kelly was relieved that his task had been made easy for him. He stood there awkwardly a moment, trying to say something else.

"Lootenant—I—we — the men——" he stuttered, then with a rush, "I'm sorry, lootenant!" he blurted out.

"Thank you, sergeant," returned Bird gravely; then, looking up quickly, "Did the captain give any orders about having this Moro shot?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," returned Sergeant Kelly promptly. "We was to let the captain know as soon as you left him and the captain will shoot him himself."

Bird nodded and absently returned Kelly's salute as the first sergeant executed an "about face" and went away.

That was a nuisance! The officer considered matters for a moment. So the Moro was to be shot! Not so good, seeing that he had given his word. But being in arrest he could give no commands. Brasser was certainly getting to the stage where he could not be held accountable for his actions. Bird had seen that crazy flare in men's eyes before. It was not an unusual thing with overzealous white men in the tropics. A crazy captain, a badly exposed camp, the only other officer in the company in arrest, no possible chance of reënforcements and a great Moro attack scheduled for the coming night!

The prospect was something to make one stop, look and listen. The prone Moro watched him from where he lay bound on the porch. The first thing was to carry out his promise.

"You'll have to get out of here right away," stated Bird, and reaching into his pocket he drew forth a pocketknife, opened it and quickly cut the ropes that bound the captive's hands and ankles. The *hajji* flexed hands and legs a moment, then looked up, awaiting orders.

"Wait for me on the trail that leads to the beach—I may be several hours!"

The *hajji* nodded.

"You have my leave to go," continued Bird.

"Thank you, *tuan,*" returned the Moro and crept to the end of the porch. Here he dropped to the ground, crawling like an eel through the *kogan* grass. In another minute he had disappeared from view.

Bird walked over toward the gate. A small group of soldiers were gathered about some one just inside the inclosure. Closer inspection showed it to be a barefooted man dressed only in dirty white shirt and drawers. Coming still nearer, Bird saw that the fellow was a white man. Men stepped aside as the officer came up, leaving the newcomer face to face with the tall lieutenant.

His first impression was of an extremely unprepossessing individual, a slightly built person with eyes of so light a blue that they seemed almost white, with sharp-pointed nose, long

ears and a face that looked like nothing so much as the face of a fox.

"Who are you?" asked Bird.

"Mein name iss Schmidt," returned the fellow.

"Where did you come from?"

The man explained volubly that he was a trader living on another island, married to a Moro wife and accepted by the Moros as one of themselves, speaking their language and knowing all about them.

"Yes?" answered Bird. "Well, what do you want of us?"

There was a stir and movement from the rear of the group of soldiers. Bird felt rather than saw the approach of Captain Brasser who elbowed his way officiously into the group.

"Here now, what's all this about?" Brasser's voice broke forth in a high-pitched hysterical note that made every one look at him strangely.

"You heard me!" Brasser's face grew red with anger, "who the hell are you and what do you want?" he addressed Schmidt. The frightened beach comber shrank a little, then, picking up courage, repeated what he had said and went on.

"Dem Moros, dey ask me coom here undt say dey iss tired of fightings undt vill go avay——"

"Very sensible of them," interrupted Brasser. His eyes rested for a moment on Bird and again the lieutenant saw that mad flare in their depths. The sight chilled him momentarily.

"Yah, dey go away undt dey don't fight no more. Dey say all iss peace now mit der Moros undt der Ameriganos undt dey vill be friends."

"Who sent you to tell this?" asked Bird. But Captain Brasser's voice broke in.

"Mr. Bird, don't forget you're in arrest and you ain't supposed to shoot off your face around here!"

Bird shrugged his shoulders and stared out at the fringe of jungle that encircled this exposed camp so closely, wondering when that inevitable storm would break, the storm which was brewing against this little handful of Americans, set out here under the command of a crazy captain, with the spear and bolo men of *Datto* Bawissil gathering against them on all sides. But Brasser's high-pitched and querulous voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Who the hell sent you here?" the red-faced captain addressed the beach comber again.

"*Datto* Bawissil," returned the fellow. Bird looked closely at the speaker. This information certainly did not jibe with the statement made by the captured *hajji,* that *Datto* Bawissil would attack after midnight that night.

As the little group of men listened to Brasser questioning the beach comber, a shout came from the direction of the guardhouse. Bird turned, watching impassively as a soldier came running in great excitement.

"The Moro prisoner has made a getaway!" yelled the man. Captain Brasser hurried to see for himself, forgetting about the beach comber for the time being. The group of men followed the captain, leaving Bird and the civilian standing alone together.

"What are these lies you are telling and why do you tell them?" asked Bird coolly.

The beach comber gave back a step. His eyes roved to the rear of the wall of jungle so near. For a second Bird was certain the fellow meditated flight, but evidently he thought better of it, for he faced the officer again.

"Lies? Lies? I aind tellin' lies, Mister Officer!" he whined, flinging his hands outward, palms up, in an abject motion. Bird examined him steadily.

"You're a blankety blank dirty renegade," he commented at last. "I've got a good notion to shoot you. I think I will——" and before the beach comber knew what had happened, the officer's

revolver was out and pressed against his stomach. The man nearly died from fright then and there.

"Tell me you are lying before I blow your belly clean through your backbone," Bird's voice came, deadly and menacing. He shoved the revolver, steadily, into the man's middle, his finger on the trigger.

"Yah, *Herr Gott,* I vas lying!" the words broke forth from the beach comber who felt the sweat of death on his forehead already and counted every second his last; "don't kill me Mister Officer, don't shood me!" The fellow dropped to his knees.

Bird touched him contemptuously with his foot.

"You're not worth wasting a good clean bullet on," he stated, "but I'll spare your life on one condition."

"I vill do annything, annything, Mister Officer!" the beach comber was tearful, his hands were raised in supplication. There was something infinitely ludicrous about his appearance as he knelt there.

"All right!" Bird leaned over him, "you serve me hereafter—you will be interpreter and if you try to double-cross me, you yellow dog, I'll kill you with my bare hands! Get that?"

"I svear I von't double-cross you!" he cried. Bird tried to keep the disgust he felt from showing in his voice.

"Good!" he snorted. "Now get out of here and wait for me on the trail that leads to the beach—by the big banyan tree! I'll be along in half an hour or so."

"Yah, yah," nodded the man eagerly as he scrambled to his feet. Then he looked from Bird to where Captain Brasser was hurrying toward them, carrying in his hands several pieces of cord. Bird turned and saw the savage glare in Brasser's eyes and looking at what he carried, recognized the pieces of cord which had bound the *hajji.* He shrugged his shoulders and waited.

The captain was nearly frothing at the mouth. His face was working like a madman's.

"This is your work—don't try to lie to me—this is your work——"

If he expected Bird to cringe he was doomed to disappointment.

The lieutenant took one swift step forward.

"You'll kindly stop talking about lying, Captain Brasser, and I've warned you once before about swearing at me. Of course that's my work!"

Brasser halted as though he had been shot. His mouth worked foolishly, there was a dazed look in his eyes.

The beach comber watched the scene curiously.

Bird turned on him.

"Here you, get out of here!" he ordered.

The beach comber started to shamble away when Brasser found his voice again.

"Nothing of the kind!" he shouted. "Stay where you are. I've had all I'm going to stand from you, Mr. Bird. Sergeant Kelly! Sergeant Kelly!" he called. Kelly came up and saluted.

"Confine Lieutenant Bird in the guardhouse, keep a strict guard over him!" yelled the captain.

The sergeant's eyes opened wide. He stared from one officer to the other as though not believing his ears. Bird caught his eye, nodded imperceptibly. The sergeant saluted and half turned, looking back for the lieutenant to follow him.

"Take his gun away! Take his gun away!" screamed Brasser. Sergeant Kelly paused uncertainly. Bird loosed his revolver and drew it from its holster by the barrel. Kelly took it gingerly, looking from the gun to the officer, bewilderment in his eyes. Of them all Bird was the calmest.

"All right, sergeant, let's go!" he suggested calmly. The beach comber watched the scene, his eyes alight with

a queer interest as Bird quietly followed the noncommissioned officer toward the guardhouse.

Brasser came along behind, talking to himself, his hands jerking spasmodically, his eyes glaring. The men of the company gathered silently in little groups, watched the scene and marveled, their faces drawn, tense, and the picture of immobility.

Reaching the guardhouse Kelly stepped aside apologizing, to allow Bird to precede him into its interior. It was a two-room affair, the front room used for the guard while the rear room was used as a sort of catch-all. A cot, a bucket, two or three haversacks, some blankets and a few other odds and ends made up its furniture.

"Shove him in there!" Brasser's high voice directed, pointing to this rear room, and Bird, without a flicker of emotion showing on his face, strode into the place.

"Lock the door, keep two men on guard over him day and night."

Bird could hear the captain's voice through the bamboo door which was softly closed upon him. He heard a bar being put in place and then the voice of Captain Brasser diminished in the distance and he was alone.

(*To Be Concluded*)

BYRD'S FIRST "EXPLORATION"

THE explorer, Rear Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd, who has just returned from a two-year stay at the south pole, commanding an expedition which is unique in the annals of exploration, began to explore the far corners of the earth at an age when most youngsters are translating Cæsar and thinking about their first pair of long trousers.

Dick was fourteen years old when he left his home in Winchester, Virginia, and set out to visit friends in the Philippine Islands. His father, for whom Dick is named, was a distinguished Virginia lawyer who sensed that Dick, Jr., was incurably afflicted with wanderlust, and he gave his permission for the trip. Better, he helped stake it.

The winning personality and dogged determination which have made him a legendary hero in later years won him a host of friends along the route—railroad and ship's officers, sailors and stevedores, soldiers of fortune, and others—so that when finally the young adventurer unwound himself from a steamer at Manila, he had in reality concluded his first triumphal tour.

Governor Monreal immediately invited him to visit the gubernatorial mansion, and Judge Carson, formerly of Front Royal, Virginia, then occupying a post on the bench in Manila, welcomed him officially, as well as an old friend of the family, to the Islands.

The story is told that the judge was holding court one hot afternoon in Manila while the future rear admiral was visiting the Islands. Open windows failed to relieve the oppressive heat in the courtroom, and the case in progress was a dull piece of litigation. Suddenly a terrific din arose outside, which drowned out the voices of the lawyers and witnesses, so that the trial could not proceed.

The judge, incensed, ordered the culprit arrested and fined one dollar. When the "culprit" was brought in, it proved to be Richard Evelyn Byrd, Jr. Whereupon, the judge reached a hand in his pocket and promptly paid the fine himself.

GUARDED JACK

By JOHN WILSTACH

Clark Jones, Secret Unit Operative, Smashes Into a Payroll Ambush.

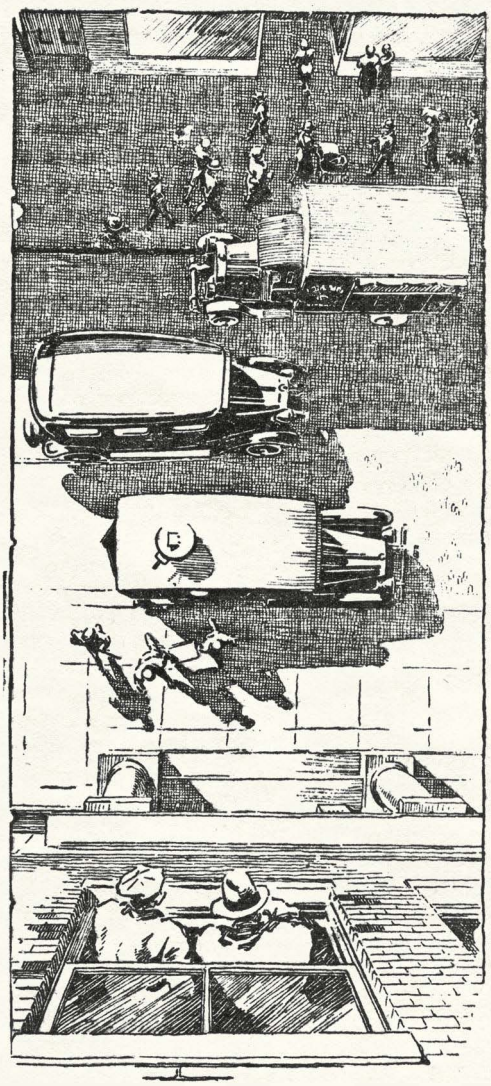
"SHAKE 'em up again, bartender." Clark Jones smiled broadly, and nodded slightly toward the only other customer in the place, who stood frowning over a daily racing form. "Ask that gentleman if he wishes to join me?"

The white-aproned attendant breathed softly upon the side of a glass, rubbed it, and held it up to the light before adding to a shining row that awaited the after-theater rush.

"Try one yourself, George," added Clark genially.

No, he couldn't drink on duty, but he tucked a quarter cigar in a pocket of his vest.

"Come out of it, 'Brownie,' or has the dope sheet got you? Gent wants you to surround a drink. 'Orses, 'orses, 'orses, and the bookie buys his sweetie another five-carat rock."



Brownie smiled vacantly, murmured that he would go a drop of Mountain Dew, tucked the sheet into a side pocket. He waited until Clark's cocktail had been mixed, shaken and poured into a fluted glass before allowing a trickle of Scotch to cover the bottom of his own.

"Here's luck," murmured the host, "down the channel."

A nod, and the silence of appreciation.

"Ever play the ponies?" asked Brownie idly. "I have a hot special for to-morrow on a two-year-old

they've been holdin' back to get a good price. They're gettin' ready to let her go, and I exject to clean up plenty. None of the handicappers give her a chance, but I got a wire."

Clark shook his head. "No, the nags don't owe me nothing. I gave 'em up before I started. Now give me a couple of galloping dice to bet on, and if they're not cold I'm right at home. I feel lucky to-night, but I don't know where to break into a game."

He made the motion of making a pass on the bar, snapping his fingers as he did so. Then he pulled at his knuckles, warmed a pair of imaginary dice, and let them slide from his palm.

"Read 'em and weep, brothers," he said softly. "Read 'em and weep."

Brownie glanced at him sharply from under brows that shaded his slate-gray eyes. The other had every appearance of careless prosperity. He glanced at the bartender.

"Regular feller," muttered that individual, from the corner of his mouth.

Without invitation Clark went into an account of how he had cleaned out a game in Chi, letting them ride and making his point seven times running. The usual dream, true or untrue, of every gambler who shoots crap. Brownie listened, showing quiet interest.

He was a steerer for a high-class floating crap game, and received his steer-per-cent on any newcomer whom he introduced, a percentage on what he lost. Still, he had to be sure of his man. He had seen this chap a dozen times in the speakeasy, and did not suspect that the pleasant stranger had waited, in patience, for just this occasion.

Brownie nodded to the bartender to repeat. Hijackers always worked in pairs. This bird must be okay, if he wasn't a tinhorn.

"I know of a game," he said doubtfully, "but no place for a piker."

Clark Jones flushed. One swift motion planked down a sheaf of yellow bills encircled by a thick rubber band on the bar.

"More where that comes from, friend. Besides, was I asking you any favors?"

"Well," said Brownie defensively, "I just didn't want you to wander in over your head. Wonder if you know anybody I know?"

Clark Jones, Secret Unit Operative, thought quickly.

"Listen," he exclaimed. "I don't explain my connections to any one. An' it's dangerous to try and make me open up. Take your game, and keep it."

He pocketed the bank roll, his mouth drawn in a sullen line. Brownie saw that he had made a mistake. Here he was letting regular money walk away from him. The other's reticence hinted he must be in on some racket. Naturally he would be suspicious of questioning, which confirmed the idea of important dough. So the steerer tried to smooth the youngster's feelings. He explained how very careful he had to be. Police and hijackers were both the same. The "book" always lost the house roll.

"Well, let's be going," said Clark dryly. "I'm aching for action. I crave a strong game. When I put down a grand I want to take a chance on winning two."

The bartender grinned. He would get a ten-spot for this. The thought cheered him as he watched the man on the door let out the two customers.

Brownie stepped to the curb and a taxi drew up. Clark Jones allowed him to get in the seat first. The operative kept silent on the ride to an uptown hotel. For a week he had tried to "rope" Brownie, ever since a chance remark at the bar had given him the info that Brownie was a steerer for "Wild Dan" Marden's game. This had been his first chance, the two of them the

only customers in the speakeasy. A "roper" had to move by indirection.

Of course Brownie was merely a means of getting to Marden's game. A week previous, on the phone, Inspector Coughlin had told the Secret Unit Operative that Curry Larkins was figured to be the lead-off man in several spectacular pay-roll robberies. Yes, and while the newspapers hollered and demanded results, he knew right along where he could pick Larkins up at an hour's notice. But why show his hand for some petty publicity, when he had nothing on the mob leader? Worse than foolish.

The only hint he had to give Clark was that the gangster was a heavy crap plunger and frequented Marden's shifting headquarters.

A party who told part of what he knew, keeping a reserve, might get the gunman's confidence. A devious route had to be taken to gain it.

The "capper" for Marden was likewise silent as the taxi turned and twisted a way uptown. He might speak out of his turn and alarm the sucker to be taken. Besides, you don't have to sell to a gambler. He sells himself.

The car stopped at an uptown residential hotel. Brownie gave the office to an outside man, lounging in a padded chair near the elevator. Clark Jones went along to a suite on the top floor. His guide gave a double rap on the door. It was opened by a ruddy-cheeked guard whose heavy body blocked the way.

"Okay," said Brownie, "I stand for him."

The two men went down a short hall, emerging into a large sitting room. Furniture had been pushed against the walls. In the center a substantial, collapsible table was the object around which lounged a dozen men, several of whom wore evening clothes. A wooden wall, perhaps ten inches high, inclosed the framework, rising from the level of the table, and against it a player was throwing his dice. A thickset, white-haired "book" noticed Brownie's entrance, followed by Clark Jones, but he only motioned the latter toward a gap in the line of gamblers.

Suddenly the player made his point, a six, and let his original stake and winnings ride.

"Eight hundred dollars to be covered, gentlemen," said the white-haired "cutter," whom Clark took to be Marden.

It was taken by one player. The holder of the dice flicked over five dollars to the kitty, and started to rattle the dice. The men grouped about the table waited until the dice were thrown. Six. Then they wagered, with Marden, and among themselves, as to the outcome.

Six was an even bet, since it could be made three ways—three and three, four and two, or five and one. Seven, too, could be made with three different combinations. Clark bet fifty bucks that he wouldn't, his eyes on the table. He hadn't yet even glanced at the faces to see if Curry Larkins was present.

On the third throw, the red, transparent dice clicked back from the board and five and one were read. The player pocketed all his winnings except a century note, on a hunch, perhaps. On the next toss he threw a seven and lost the dice and the hundred. The man next to him picked them up, rolling them, for warmth, in his hands, trying to make 'em hot.

Before the dice reached Clark Jones there were at times four or five thousand dollars on the line. But no excitement. Voices were not raised and there was little talking to the dice. Losses and winnings were accepted with composure

Clark laid three hundred to be covered when the dice came to him. Seven. He drew in his winnings and left the three hundred. His point was five. He made that, let the six hundred ride, lost on a seven. He was even—and satis-

fied—as the next player asked for new dice; and they were supplied to him from a brimming glass pitcher. For Curry Larkins stood at his left, a thin, wiry individual distinguished by light-blue eyes, the left one marred by a slight, almost unnoticeable, cast. It was a good thing Inspector Coughlin had given him a minute description, for names weren't mentioned.

Now and again a player passed, instead of taking the dice, paying five to the kitty, and wandered to the bureau for a drink. The guard acted as bartender. Refreshments were on the house.

Clark waited his chance. Larkins finally slipped from the group, and he joined him. They were both served high balls in tall glasses.

"I felt lucky to-night, but the dice are cold when I get 'em," murmured Jones.

"That's the way it goes. Me, I don't know enough to quit when I am ahead. A wise guy walks out when he doubles his money."

"You said it. But you always think it's your night to make a cleaning."

"Well, Marden runs a good game. No squawking, and nothing on the cuff. It's those memo winnings that cause trouble."

Both men thought of "A. R.," the so-called "brain" of the underworld.

"Dice are always regulation, too," continued Larkins, finishing his drink. "None loaded with quicksilver, no clipped edges, and no 'no' dice."

"Guess we'll be getting back. But excuse me for butting in, 'cause if I do it is just to do a favor. I got a load of inside for your ears—later on. Something passed to me—don't mean nothing in my life—but it does to you, C. L."

Larkins eyed him narrowly. Clark drew him toward the window.

"I was with 'Big Bill' Nalty when he was taken. Escaped from the bandit car. Check me back if you want to—but there's darn little time."

"Nobody does nothin' for me for nothin'," stated Larkins quietly.

"I ain't no charity worker myself," retorted Clark dryly. "It takes heavy sugar for me to circulate."

"That's better. I'm leery of these do-something-for-you guys. We'll breeze in half an hour. What name are you using?"

"Clark Jones."

"All right, Jones, I'll give you a chance to wise me up."

They returned to the green table. When they left it both were slight losers, though there was no objection to winners walking out. Marden held out night after night, at a spot designated only an hour or so ahead of time. The same gamesters would return.

Nothing was said on the way to a taxi. Or after Larkins had given the driver an address and they were seated inside the car. Clark Jones had no idea of blurting out his information. His companion asked no questions. The Secret Unit Operative puffed a cigar as the machine went south and crossed the city through the park.

Beside him sat a gang leader who had beaten fourteen raps, including four for murder, yet he felt no fear. Larkins wanted to hear what he had to tell him. The slouched figure at the wheel might be his own driver. Some men didn't like to have, openly, a private car. But the man who hadn't spoken held the winning hand.

The car finally stopped, near the river, in front of an old-fashioned brownstone front apartment house. Larkins told the man to wait. Clark followed indoors, to a flat on the second floor. The outer door was opened with a key. From inside came the murmur of low voices, the high, shrill laughter of a woman.

"They're playing cards," said Larkins. "I'll take you to the front room."

They passed down a long hall. In the dining room four men were playing cards. They did not look up, but a tall, vivid blonde, in a long dressing gown of blue and gold, started forward, her hands on her hips.

"Did you win, daddy?"

"Can that, Winnie. I got business on."

"Yeah, I can wait. Best thing I do."

She turned her back, pulling the gown tight over a supple figure.

"That's always it," grinned Larkins apologetically, as he pressed an electric button, and closed the door, "did you bring home the bacon? Or if not, why not? But Winnie is a good kid, just likes to act hard boiled. She's put in her rocks many a time for me."

"Women are out of my line," said Clark dryly. "That gimme stuff has pushed a lot of good guys into stir."

Larkins shrugged. "They ain't got me yet. Now, feller, I brought you here 'cause the coppers know my hangout. You can't have a hideout and a broad at the same time. I'm not under cover with my three squares a day and where I flop. You acted mighty mysterious. What's on your mind?"

"Sorry, Larkins, if I seemed to act spooky to you. But it was *your* affairs I wanted to give you a low-down on."

"How do you edge in?"

"I don't. Furthermore I ain't going to explain where I got this inside. My connections are my own. But for what good it'll promise I can do a bit of fortune telling. You remember the Fontella pay-roll job?"

"They haven't anything on me, on that."

"I didn't say they had. But the police, mebbe, think they know something; anyway they have to make a showing. You are due for a pinch to-morrow by headquarters dicks. Perhaps just a sweating and the line-up the following morning. I don't go that far. But you may want to lay out some lines, or be where they won't find you. You see I'm merely being friendly, Larkins, and I don't need any of your dough, either."

Clark Jones arose to his feet, as if he didn't relish Curry Larkins' hospitality —or the lack of it.

"Aw, sit down, Jones. You can't expect me to act like a buddy to a guy I've only met up with. Your info finds me sittin' pretty—but you couldn't know that. Winnie! Winnie!" he called.

The tall blonde threw open the door, and walked in, one step in front of another, in the mincing manner of a suit model.

"Winnie, I want you to meet my friend, Clark Jones."

She thrust out her right hand and shook like a man.

"Girlie, your sugar daddy is going to the old hoosegow to-morrow."

Larkins smiled as the color slowly drained from her cheeks, leaving two high spots of rouge.

"All in fun, kid, the bulls have to make an arrest, and they think my name looks good. Ain't that so, Jones?"

"Something like that, I guess."

"Then it is just the regular runaround?"

"Sure, Winnie, but you better take a sneak to your sister's to-night."

"You're going to stand the pinch?"

"Sure. No disrespect to Mr. Jones' ear, but the commish might merely be urgin' me to leave town. I'm going to fool him. Stay here and muscle in stronger than ever."

"Going to tell the boys?"

"They might as well be in the clear. Come in, Jones, and I'll give you a knockdown to the gang."

Larkins led him by the arm into the dining room. He was introduced as the guy who'd been along with Big Bill Nalty, and escaped handcuffed, from the bandit car. Three men, whose names were slurred over, greeted him affably. The fourth was the only one not to shake hands, a thin, pale man, two

long creases down either cheek giving him a sinister look, together with slit lips puckered inward, as if he were sucking on them.

"Nalty wasn't lucky enough to escape," he whined, in a low voice.

No one paid any attention to him, except Clark, for Larkins was explaining the expected pinch.

"You boys better scatter," he concluded, "they might make it to-night. I'm going to make the bulls sorry for breaking up my little home. Winnie is leavin' to-night for her sister's. She'll take along the Thompson chopper and the sawed offs. No law against 'em—they ain't concealed weapons, but they'd look bad here."

Chairs were pushed back, and solongs said. Winnie went into the bedroom to pack. Larkins poured a drink for his guest. He was, strange to say, secretly gleeful about something or other, and there came into his voice a note of cordiality.

"I've been waiting for a chance like this, Jones," he said, slopping whisky in his own glass. "You'll find out. An' when this is over I want you to get in touch with me. I can always use a good man—and he can make plenty."

"Thanks," said Clark impassively. "You have a rep for clean hoisting."

This was what he had been aiming at, but he took the invitation as a matter of course.

"Of course," he continued, "you'll act surprised when they bust in. The guy who steps for me—downtown—mustn't think. I——"

"Trust me. I'll act as if I woke up from a bad dream—and saw a lot of coppers to prove it was true. An' come back, Jones, after they drop me—like a hot potato."

Larkins was laughing as the Secret Unit man made his departure. Though Clark had succeeded in his immediate objective, getting himself in solid, he was curious to know just what Curry Larkins would have up his sleeve after being lagged by John Law.

II.

Clark Jones was making a midnight telephone report.

"So you succeeded in getting close to Curry Larkins," commented Inspector Coughlin, in a satisfied tone of voice.

"Yes. He naturally thought I got a wire from a crooked headquarters detective."

A surly grunt greeted this slur.

"But he thinks he has something to put over on the police."

"Well, I'll try to throw a scare into him, get the judge to hold him for forty-eight hours on a short affidavit, to get evidence. They got to the pay-roll messenger's mother, and the lad is afraid to identify, but if the pinch gets you close to Larkins it'll pay, even if we are a little more unpopular in the newspapers."

Clark said good night, and rang off. The newspapers would give him the rest of the episode. They did—and how.

Curry Larkins was arrested the following afternoon by two members of the Safe and Loft Squad.

He must have tipped off the reporters. They were waiting at police headquarters.

Before he was hustled away Larkins told them he was framed, and expected to be given the works.

He had no idea of opening up. Inspector Coughlin knew that. His interview with the gangster was perfunctory, an exchange of compliments.

The following morning Morley, the district attorney, was on hand at Grand Market Court, before Magistrate Cooley, to ask that Curry Larkins be held, without bail, for forty-eight hours, to give the police time to dig up evidence on Fontella pay-roll robbery. The prisoner was led in from the adjoining county jail.

A low gasp went up from the majority of those assembled in the old building. The reporters were like hounds at leash, anxious to beat it to their telephones and break the story. Curry Larkins' appearance alone was important—telling as it did a tale of police brutality in the use of the third degree.

Larkin's left eye was almost closed, and what could be seen of it was blood red. Under it was a puffy, sickening smear of wounded flesh. Such a black eye had seldom been seen, even in the prize ring. His lower lip was cracked, and dried blood was caked upon his chin. There was a black bruise on his forehead. Only his right eye, and nose, were undamaged.

Larkins' lawyer, Pete Tanney, was on his feet.

"Your honor," he shouted, "I demand to put on record this astonishing case of police methods. Is this how a prisoner is treated, when the police have nothing on him, and stoop to third-degree brutality to make him confess? Is this what an innocent man may expect who refuses to have a confession forced into his mouth? In this so-called modern city may a citizen be so subjected to the dreaded third degree that he needs hospital treatment? This places a blot on the fair name of our great city which will darken it from coast to coast.

"Let me ask if justice is to tarry in order that a prisoner can be beaten by these modern Cossacks? Will you allow the police to get away with it?"

District Attorney Morley was dazed.

"There is no proof," he exclaimed, "that Curry Larkins was the victim of police violence. He might have received these injuries in a drunken brawl. If you'll hold him for forty-eight hours we can——"

"You may collect witnesses to perjure themselves," snapped Tanney.

Magistrate Cooley banged his gavel for order.

"I can prove that the police beat my client into insensibility," continued Tanney.

"Proceed," said Magistrate Cooley. "Under the circumstances he demands every consideration."

"The facts, your honor, are these. Mr. Larkins feared, to use a vulgarism, that he would be given the works. He even warned the newspaper reporters. But he decided to be forearmed by evidence. Early yesterday morning he proceeded to the photograph gallery of Basil Carroll, now in court, and had some clear and distinct pictures taken. I have them here to produce. Also Mr. Carroll, his secretary, and a notary, holding a receipted bill, for cash, accepted in advance."

Magistrate Cooley examined the photos—and Larkins—and it was all over. All save some scathing remarks from the bench, on the shame of certain members of the police force. He would hold Curry Larkins for forty-eight hours—but not in custody of the police. Not after this outrage. He would be admitted to bail—and a low one at that.

Outside the courthouse Curry Larkins obligingly posed for the cameraman, and his lawyer distributed copies of the photos taken the previous morning—for a "Before And After" layout. The exhibition of police lawlessness would cause a tidal wave of sympathy to rise for the victim.

The worst of it was, thought Clark Jones, as he read the account, the police had nothing with which to back up the arrest. He was puzzled, darn puzzled. He had been persuaded to believe that un-called for rough stuff, the rubber hose, and the vise that pinches a man's finger nails until he screams, were a thing of the past. This was an outright assault.

At noon he got an almost incoherent chief of detectives on the private wire.

"No wonder the idea of a pinch tickled Larkins," Coughlin stormed. "I've just talked to a prisoner in the next

cell. But what's the use—we'll never be believed. We didn't touch Larkins—treated him as polite as hell. *He beat himself up!* Waited ten minutes before court time. The bird in the next cell heard what sounded like a fight, or scuffle, in his cell. Why, he swung with his right and gave himself a fine shiner in the left eye. Then he managed to cut his lip by a nasty slam that almost knocked him down. Bruised his head against the wall of the cell—and there you are—evidence of police strong-arm maulers. But havin' those pictures taken showed genius. It's the police that get the black eye! Jones, you're getting in with a cunning fox."

"So I see," murmured the Secret Unit Operative doubtfully.

III.

The true version of Larkin's self-inflicted beating never reached the press. But the underworld buzzed, gleefully, amused at the mob leader's posing as a police victim for the tabloid sheets. Every one was pleased except Ed Wilson, the cheek-creased gangster who had made a disparaging remark about Big Bill Nalty not being lucky enough to escape.

He continued to eye Clark Jones suspiciously, as the other began to drop in now and again at Larkins' apartment. Larkins himself, and his two remaining retainers, "Fry" Patten and Pete Kelsy, muscle men, not thinkers, accepted him as one of the boys.

No one except Curry Larkins received aught save cold tolerance from Winnie Adams. In return she wasn't exactly ignored, yet was seldom addressed in person. To meddle with a rod-man's skirt was bad business.

Clark had to take things easy. He had no idea whether he would be taken into Larkins' confidence and possibly participate in a future job. Finding a lay that would prove a big proposition wasn't too easy. One evening Larkins expressed his annoyance at the way everything good seemed sewed up.

"Me, I can't locate," he complained, "so I'm goin' to pay a 'finder.'"

"Who's the spotter?" growled Ed Wilson, pushing his face forward, looking for trouble.

"I don't know. Working through Storberg, the fence."

"Sight unseen, eh?"

"Aw, he wouldn't give me a bum steer. Ed, you make me sick. Always beefing, looking for grief."

"Storberg is all right, they say," put in Clark Jones placidly.

This was the first time he had heard of the receiver, but it was always well to appear to be in the know.

Ed Wilson turned on him quickly. "Who asked you to edge into this? You're the guy that has a wire at headquarters, eh? I don't like it, none. Smells stooly to me."

There was a heavy silence among the group about the table.

"Who's runnin' this outfit?" growled Larkins.

"Didn't I first point the finger at 'Fat' Evans?" screamed Wilson, half rising from his chair.

The mention of a gangster whose riddled body had been found out in the Hobalen swamps brought Clark to sudden action.

He jumped from his seat and threw himself across the table at Wilson. Grabbing him by the left hand behind the neck, he pulled Wilson forward, and struck with his right, holding the man in a position from which he couldn't escape, raining blows on his face—the old "hold-and-hit" of the gas-house gang. Wilson's hands clawed at his hip pockets.

Clark suddenly released him and drew his own revolver from a metal clip that formed a shoulder holster.

Larkins grasped him by the wrist and threw the rod upward.

"Don't plug him, Jones," he ordered, "though he deserves it for as much as sayin' you are a rat."

"He can't get away with that stuff," stated Clark grimly.

Patten and Kelly had jumped to hold Wilson's arms, but the fight was all out of him, though he was whimpering in rage. His features were a sight, one eye closed, upper lips twice natural size. He allowed himself to be disarmed of a blunt automatic, which had a knife blade lying flat along the barrel so that it was in reality a bayonet.

"Go wash up," spat Larkins. "You look like a preliminary pork-and-beaner after a bad night."

As he slunk from the room the boss apologized to Jones.

"That guy has lots of guts, but he is always seeing squealers. Next thing he'll blow his top and start to think he is shorting himself."

"He's lucky," said Jones shortly, dismissing the subject of Wilson. "When I'm in on a charge I go along, myself. An' I don't lay back if it is a case of stick and slug."

Patten and Kelsy voiced their approval. A stooly never wanted to go along, and take the worst, or best, of it.

"I'm goin' to get the hot box in the morning," continued Larkins, "an' if it's right I'll declare you in."

"All right with me," said Clark, thrilling inwardly.

Ed Wilson returned from the washroom. He had painted several spots with iodine and the swellings were worse than ever.

At Larkins' insistence he murmured that he had spoken out of his turn, and the matter was dropped. Jones knew, however, that he had some one to watch.

The following evening Larkins declared that he had paid five hundred down, and promised a ten-per-cent split, on information supplied by a professional "finder," through Storberg, a jewelry fence. Service had been supplied, in addition, by the rental of a furnished office on the third floor of the Medenheight Building. Five floors above were occupied by the Medenheight Office Appliance Company.

Jones tried to appear cool.

"Did they tell you of the armored car delivery of the Bankers' Guardian?" he asked, as if not at all pleased.

Larkins winked.

"Think I'm a sap? This is O. K. as can be, kid. They pay all the branches from there—a ninety-grand pay-roll on the first. Something worth snatching off. You, Jones, are going to open the office, and mark time. You look more like a business man. This is a 'plan, execute, and plan' job, and no slip up."

No one asked further questions. Clark Jones restrained his curiosity. His natural conclusion was that the scheme would be to allow the armored car messengers to deliver—and nab the pay-roll after they had departed in the all-steel car, guns mounted in the turrets.

Not hard, he figured, to spike that. Not hard, unless Larkins was thinking a jump ahead.

Clark Jones reported the proposed raid on the Medenheight pay roll to Inspector Coughlin early in the morning.

"Looks to me like the old game," he said, "waiting until the guards from the armored car bring the cash, and leave, then hopping up to the office and take it—like taking candy from babies."

"I guess that's how it lays to Larkins—several other pay rolls have been touched off just in that manner. But we wised up the Bankers' Guardian outfit, and they have been setting a trap. You know the schedule. The guards enter the building, walking up the stairs, so there's no possibility of being trapped in an elevator. They deliver the money sack and leave. Three men—and they will be counted, you can bet, as they go out to the car and it moves off.

"That's all according to Hoyle. The three guards come out, all right, but *they aren't the three guards who went in*, though they'll be of the same hefty build and wearing identical uniforms and Sam Browne belts. The first men hide in the office, waiting for a raid on the pay roll. The second three, who depart, have gone in to work in civilian clothes, in the morning, and changed in time to make the switch.

"Clever, eh? The trap hasn't caught any rats, yet, but Larkins and his gorillas will receive a hearty surprise. Try to be on the tag end, Jones. There'll be some bullet swapping."

"Never mind me. But what if the pay-roll holdup fails to materialize?"

"Why, the three guards wait thirty-five minutes and then call it a day. A lot of envelopes can be filled and distributed in that time. A raid always takes place instantly, so time isn't given for the dough to be put away in a safe."

"Gee, that's some plan," said Clark Jones. "We'll be counting 'em coming down—and count the wrong three."

"You said it," retorted Inspector Coughlin, "and if there's any compliments to be given I'll tell you where to send the flowers. One thing—try and take good care of yourself."

"I always try," admitted the Secret Unit Operative.

He hung up.

"Sometimes it isn't any too easy," he murmured, half aloud, and swung out of the last booth in the all-night drug store, half stifled. There wasn't much air circulating in one of those cubby-holes.

In this case he knew that he would be up against it. Ed Wilson's suspicion, or instinct, had not played him false. He sensed in Clark Jones the man hunter; though Jones might deceive more intelligent crooks, he had failed there. So he couldn't lag behind when it was time for the fireworks.

He knew that Larkins and his guns would be walked into an ambush of hot lead, yet he must trail along. Some one once said that bullets play no favorites.

That might be—but he wondered if he mightn't be given an opportunity to display some discrimination in using the six in the cylinder that nestled under his left armpit?

IV.

Clark Jones occupied the furnished offices of The Irma Importing Company for nearly a week preceding the first of the month. They consisted of two small rooms, the outer door opposite the iron stairway. A peephole was scraped in the letter I, of the golden lettering on the glass square in the upper panels; an eye pressed to it could distinguish clearly people walking up and downstairs.

At various times, Larkins and the other three members of his mob dropped into the building, took the elevator, and made what seemed to be business calls, for the benefit of an inquisitive elevator man and the starter.

The last day of the month Larkins smuggled in his subcaliber Thompson chopper, with a detachable stock, keyed to fire three hundred bullets a minute, of .45 caliber. A machine gun bootlegger had also sold him the Cutts compensator; attached to the muzzle it lessened the tendency to lift, and fire high, during automatic shooting.

Clark hadn't handled one, before, and was surprised to find it weighed less than ten pounds and was only thirty-three inches long. This particular weapon had been billed originally, with a dozen others, to the police chief of a town of two thousand inhabitants! From there the choppers were readily introduced into the underworld trade. Larkin said he had paid eight hundred dollars for this one.

For the first of the month everything was all set. Kelsy would be on the side street in the get-away car. Headed by

Larkins, Clark, Patten, and Ed Wilson would be in the office at nine sharp.

The copper on the beat rang his box every hour. Leaving it at nine o'clock he would encounter a wild, unmanageable drunk whom he would be forced to arrest. That would remove him from the neighborhood.

Inspector Coughlin was informed of this pretext to remove the policeman on the beat. What instructions, if any, would be given to the harness bull, Clark Jones was not informed.

In fact, he would see just so far, and no farther. It wasn't particularly pleasant, the prospect of getting in the line of fire from the guards, when they walked into the cashier's office on the fifth floor.

He didn't lose any sleep over this, but on the first of the month he awoke before dawn, and tossed for an hour or more, before arising, trying to pierce the veil of possibilities.

That was one way to lose your nerve. He jumped out of bed, took a cold bath, shaved and dressed. He was out of Mrs. Carey's by eight o'clock, ate a hearty breakfast in a near-by lunch room, and bridged the time by taking the long walk to the Medenheight Building, a block from the railroad tracks and the river. He arrived ten minutes before nine o'clock. Not the only one on edge, either. Larkins strolled in a minute after he had opened the office, and Patten and Ed Wilson followed.

"Last month the pay car didn't draw up till near ten," said Wilson jerkily, "but you can't tell. Best to be ahead of the gong."

He took charge of the chopper, which he handled expertly, and Clark at last realized why Larkins put up with his uncertain temper.

The Secret Unit Operative stood at the window, in a position from where he could see any cars that drew up at the curb. He was to signal the arrival of the armored car.

Larkins lighted one cigarette after another, rolled them in his lips for a few puffs, then snapped the butts in half. Patten sat in a chair tilted against the wall, whistling to himself. He was an unimaginative type of thug, Clark thought; this was all in a morning's work to him.

Wilson stood eye against the peephole, as if figuring the range, though he had spent hours doing exactly this same thing during the last few days. Must have something to do during this strained pause of waiting. He hadn't spoken to Clark since the night he had been beaten up. The latter had his mind made up in one respect: Ed Wilson would not be *behind* him, whatever happened, if he knew it.

"Ninety grand," Larkins kept muttering, "Ninety grand! Come to papa. Ninety grand! Come to papa!"

"Aw, can that," sneered Wilson, from the door. "You sound nuts, chief."

Larkins snapped another cigarette between his fingers.

"I don't mind the chargin'," he muttered, half aloud, as if self-apologetic, "it's this damned waiting that gets me."

It was getting every one in the office, except Patten. His features expressed nothing, unless boredom.

Suddenly Clark Jones spoke crisply from his place at the window.

"One is enough—looking out—don't crowd over here—the armored car is swinging into the curb."

"How many guards are gettin' out?" panted Larkins.

"Nobody yet—give 'em time. Yes, one guy has jumped from the front seat and circled the car. The back doors are being opened. Two more getting out. Some one inside is handing them two canvas bags, leather handles."

"Gee, chief," begged Wilson, "can't I rake 'em on the way up before they deliver? What a chance! It'll be all over in ten seconds, boss. Won't you let me open up?"

He was clutching at the Thompson chopper standing in a corner by the door.

"Lemme bust 'em," he pleaded.

"No," snapped Larkins, "I'm running this show. Wait till they deliver. You fool, there's two men still in that armored car, and they have automatics, too. Can't you ever learn any sense?"

Wilson stood, trembling, his eye glued to the peephole. A half minute passed.

"They have gone by," he whispered.

"Yeah, and they'll be out of here in five minutes."

Larkins had lost his restlessness, now. He was master of himself, and of the situation.

"I'll show these coppers," he said, to no one in particular, and no one answered him.

Time passed slowly, but Wilson whispered again as the three empty-handed guards passed down the stairs.

Clark Jones spoke up when the armored car started away.

"All ready, chief?" asked Wilson, turning from the door.

"You fools!" snarled Larkins, "again I have to show you that you need a leader. Or you'd be walking straight into a death trap. Ed, notice the faces of those uniformed dummies, who walked down?"

"No—why?"

"They ain't the same three guards. The original bunch is upstairs waiting for a holdup. It is the new dodge tried now and again by this Bankers' Guardian bunch. They'll get tired in half an hour, call it a day, and *try* to leave the building."

Clark Jones trembled at his position at the window. Larkins didn't realize the ambush was especially prepared for *him*—but that didn't matter—he wouldn't step into the snare.

The lead-off man's aspect changed. He was entirely in command.

"Have that door ajar, and your chopper ready. But don't shoot till I give the word. Remember, not till I give the word. When you see what's up, you'll know what to do."

The group crowded toward the door—and waited. The air in the room was sultry, though the window was open.

Clark stood in a position so that he could peer over Ed Wilson's shoulder, for the latter was half crouched, his weapon, stock detached, at his hip.

He could see the winding stairway to a platform halfway down the next floor. His hand was on the butt of his weapon, and his palm was moist. This waiting, for he knew not what, seemed endless.

Then he heard a snatch of conversation. A man in olive uniform, a revolver sagging from his Sam Browne belt, came into his line of vision. Another was behind him. They joined one another and started to descend the steps.

The third guard was perhaps six feet behind. He was acting queerly. With a slow motion he was drawing his black-handled revolver. Now he was aiming it at his comrades ahead of him, three or four steps down.

Instantly, shots rang out. One of them was from Clark Jones' weapon, in an effort, too late, perhaps, to warn the guards with backs turned to a traitor.

But the shot from a side angle, from another gun, must have startled the third guard. He turned, in uncertainty, and Clark pushed Wilson forward, out of the door, still clutching his automatic.

He stumbled and fell flat in the hallway.

"That was on purpose, rat," he screamed.

One of the leading guards was clutching his shoulder, the other had his revolver out and gazed in perplexity at his comrade in uniform, whose gun was smoking, but pointed in his direction.

They started shooting as the first guard slumped to the stonework. But he rolled over, drew, and started throwing lead, holding himself on both elbows.

The door thrown back, Larkins and

Patten had jumped forward, joining the mêlée. Ed Wilson was fumbling at the Thompson subcaliber, and just then he fell forward on his face, jamming the weapon under him. The traitorous guard was wounded, and had enough, for he kept screaming at the holdup men to stop firing. Both of the other guards were down, the second in a sitting position. They reloaded and started firing again.

A bullet caught Larkins in the chest as he lifted the automatic from under Wilson's prone body.

Pallen fired two telling shots, stopping the fire from the guards on the platform, then he, too, toppled over.

Only Clark and the traitorous guard were now to be reckoned with. As the crook in disguise tried to drag himself toward him, the former fired his last bullet. It caught the thug fairly in the center of his forehead.

He stumbled and fell, rolling over and over down the stairway, landing on top of one of the guards he had betrayed.

It was no time to stay for explanations or post-mortems. Clark felt something wet at his left shoulder he hadn't noticed. That could keep, also. He never knew how he managed to make his way so quickly downstairs, leaving by the fire exit, and sprint around the corner.

Kelsy was waiting, motor running. He jumped in beside him.

"The job is rumbled," he exclaimed, "everybody's down. I'm wounded. Left shoulder. Take it on the run. They've heard those shots upstairs. We'll be lucky to miss the bandit cars."

He slumped back in his seat as the machine lurched forward. They missed the red roadsters of the police by a full minute.

In that time they were ten blocks away, headed toward a friendly physician whom Patten knew, and Clark was giving a version of the mess that conveniently left out the fact that he had killed the guard who had been planted.

V.

The extraction of the bullet was painful, but the doctor told Clark Jones, as he bandaged the wound, that it would give no trouble—if infection didn't set in. The shoulder, of course, would be sore, and need dressings for several weeks.

He had Patten drop him near Mrs. Carey's, and stayed indoors until late afternoon.

The newspapers had spread heads and double-column write-ups on the shooting that had ended in the death of two armored car men and the serious wounding of a third.

Patten and Ed Wilson were both dead, the last named perhaps from suicide, as he was shot in the side of the head.

Curry Larkins, bullet riddled, who lay in the hospital, refused to talk. His chances of recovery were fifty-fifty.

The true story, which Clark telephoned to Inspector Coughlin, would never reach the newspapers. He told of how he had tried to warn the two guards when the third started shooting them in the back, by firing, himself. How he had managed to kill both Ed Wilson and the renegade in olive uniform, and escape.

"Ed Wilson had me suspected from the start," he explained. "I started shooting against orders, and he knew I sent him sprawling over the Thompson chopper."

Inspector Coughlin chuckled over the wire.

"You needn't have worried over Wilson. But with him rubbed out there will be no peep from the underworld. You did your bit, stopped that machine gun at the right instant and accounted for two gunmen. I only hope Larkins goes under, so it'll be coffins for four!

"I talked to Curry Larkins in the hospital. Still I'm glad death stifled Wilson's belch. Larkins admitted one of his mob got away—and was glad of it. You must have made a hit, gat throwing in the thick of the fight. Jones, you say you got Wilson and the disloyal guard, set to plug his comrades. Larkins must have seen—you aimed to kill. How about those other shots in the chambers?"

"I switched an old gag—that of loading with blank cartridges. Figured that was okay—to a degree—not entirely. I played safe, you might say. I could fire my original *four* charges—only noise and flame—blanks! But my last *two* bullets were regulation .38 longs, cut to dumdum. They cut down Wilson and that sell-out guard."

"So that's the how of it? Too bad you'll be minus credit. Anyway we'd keep it dark that a pay-roll guard was bought to turn. It would hurt public confidence to know those babies weren't all one-hundred-per-cent loyal."

"Yes, and the trap was hushed up, of which Larkin knew the pay-roll guards awaiting a holdup, while apparently leaving in the armored car. But say—what about that cop on the beat. Did you let 'em take him off?"

Coughlin laughed.

"Sure, I had to protect you a bit, even if it didn't look that way. Patrolman Kelly arrested the drunk. Couldn't take chances of your meeting him—for he's the crack shot of the department. I take enough chances on curtains for the best Secret Unit man under me."

The Secret Unit Operative Becomes a "Bump-off Artist" in Wilstach's Next, Out July 20th.

A CHINESE PUZZLE

A PERTURBED Chinaman walked into the Alexander Avenue police station in New York one afternoon and explained to Lieutenant Burke, the officer in charge, that he and his belongings had been ejected from his laundry because of nonpayment of rent. The Chinaman asked the police lieutenant's permission to store the laundry in the police station until he could figure out some way to get it back to the customers.

Burke said, "Sure!" So in due time a hundred or so bundles of brown paper, identified only by bright orange slips of paper marked in black with Chinese characters, were left at the station.

The Chinaman disappeared, and later customers began to call at the police station for their laundry. They exhibited laundry tickets to the puzzled police officers, but the tickets were as cryptic as the markings on the laundry.

Several Chinese laundrymen were summoned and requested to translate the labels, but apparently these hailed from different provinces, for they couldn't read them. After several days passed, and a mob of laundryless New Yorkers began to mutter and threaten race riots, the original Celestial returned and, blandly smiling, matched up the slips as the customers called.

CAFFERTY'S STRATEGY

By SEAN O'LARKIN

Detective Cafferty Had Promised Not to Kill Cavieri, but Something Had to be Done.

THE dying man's fingers fluttered like tired birds up and down the sheet. Then his eyes—those eyes of Paddy Cafferty—tried to focus on a tall, massive youth who sat beside the bed with two steel fists doing their best to break each other.

"I'll get him, by God! I'll get the dirty rat!" The youth's voice was low, fierce, fighting to keep from breaking. "I swear to God, pa——"

Paddy's voice found itself. "You'll do no such thing, son. You listen to me, Tom——"

"But, pa! He got you—in the back—when you weren't looking. That's the way with Cavieri. No witnesses! No chance for a conviction! It's up to me to take the law into my own hands——"

Paddy growled, "Shut up! I'm talking to you! Yes, he did get me in the back—for keeps, I guess. But we're not killers, Tom. We don't take the law in our own hands. We're sworn to uphold it!"

"Hooey! And those rats raise hell exterminating us——"

"We're not killers, Tom. Self-defense is one thing, but to go out gunning—well, we leave that to Cavieri's kind." Paddy's hand found one of Tom's and closed over it. "You look out for your ma and Joe. That's your main responsibility."

"I know. I know. But to let Cavieri get away with—with what he's done—— Hell, pa! It isn't human!"

Paddy breathed harder and did not speak for a while. Then his ebbing strength tarried for a few moments, before he spoke again.

"Listen, Tom—there's laws—let them take their course. There's ours and there's Cavieri's. If he doesn't go to the chair one of these days—well, then, he'll fall with a steel-jacketed gift from some mob or other."

"Not that baby!"

"You must promise me, Tom, you won't go after Cavieri—you won't play killer to even a killer's score!"

The massive youth dropped his head and closed his burning eyes.

"Tom!"

"Oh, all right! I promise, pa."

A few hours later First-grade Detective Tom Cafferty listened to the family doctor murmur something about hemorrhages and his father's release from human pain. His mother and brother were in the other room—with Paddy. And now it was up to him, Tom, as head of the house of Cafferty, to summon the undertaker.

The wake, the church service, the cemetery! Through these scenes, Tom Cafferty walked with a grimly set jaw. There was a dullness in his eyes; a general air of callousness about him that caused comment. People wondered if Tom really cared for his old man the way Paddy used to boast.

Fellow cops recalled Paddy's inevitable remark when Tom was mentioned. He would hold up two fingers close together and say: "Tom and me are like that!" He had long stories about Tom's crack-brained, youthful incorrigibility, and Tom later turning out to make such a fine cop. Paddy loved his son like a mother. And this is in no way derogatory to Mrs. Cafferty. She worshiped the ground Tom trod, but his father's love was better known, because it had been given louder voice.

And new friends of the family wondered. They had not seen Tom shed so much as a single tear. Nor had he referred to his father in any way when condolences were clumsily offered. A nod of the head, a handshake, and that was all the satisfaction they got out of him.

How could they know what was going on—what was seething in First-grade Detective Cafferty's brain?

That scene—that night—as it had come from his father's lips!

Paddy had been one of the long arms of the homicide bureau. He was working on the Wally Muller case. Wally, a gun from Hurley's mob over by the gas houses, had been found one morning flat on his back in a vacant lot, watching the clouds roll by with unseeing eyes and a stiff, dropped jaw. There were the usual hole and powder marks beside the navel.

Now Paddy knew that Wally was one of Hurley's muscle men and that it was Wally's job to keep Cavieri out of the gas-house beer zone. Cavieri had a way about him. Having popped out of nowhere a year earlier, he became an underworld power in less time than it takes to pull a rod, and was ambitious to satisfy all the thirsts around the gas house.

Wally had been seen with Cavieri in the Elite Poolroom, where Cavieri transacted business and received social callers. There had been angry words, threats and counterthreats. But then, when two such gentlemen as Wally and Cavieri get together, conversation is never dull.

All this came from a stool pigeon, who could not go on the stand and swear to it, because his own record was so bad that his unsupported testimony wouldn't have been worth anything.

So Paddy had gone out for a few additional details. He even broached

the subject to Cavieri himself over two shots of fair rye in the back room of the Elite.

"I suppose you think I slugged him?" Cavieri laughed. "Get that out of your nut, Paddy. The last man I killed was in the trenches and I had Congress behind me! Say, listen, do you think I'm piker enough to bump Wally Muller? Hell, I'd go straight for Hurley. But I'm not a killer, Paddy. You ought to know that. I believe in peace—no matter what my racket is. The boys higher up know that, and that's why we all get along in this burg. Just one great big happy family!"

"I'm not saying you did or didn't do it, Cavieri. I'm just asking questions."

"Oh, that's perfectly all right," Cavieri sneered. "I'm always ready to help the cops."

"Could I see your rod?"

The cop and the detective let their eyes meet. Paddy's were inquisitive; Cavieri's held insulted virtue.

"Why—why, Paddy, you ought to know I don't carry one!"

"Let me frisk you—just for fun," Paddy laughed.

Cavieri grunted. "I'm—I'm ticklish—and I'm not feeling playful."

Paddy, knowing the Elite was no place to argue with Cavieri, took his leave and walked around the block to Suter Street. Somewhere on that block, he had heard, Cavieri had a rear entrance to the Elite—a get-away door. There was a time before Lam Coxe got a headstone when Cavieri had to evaporate from the Elite and the get-away door on Suter Street came in handy.

It was an odd street, Paddy observed. The only house on it was a ramshackle, boarded up rookery three floors high. That was probably part of the get-away. The other buildings, on both sides of the street, were abandoned factories and warehouses.

Cavieri!

He had appeared from nowhere—on the opposite side of the street, and was walking briskly up Suter toward Clarey. He had not seen Paddy, who had taken the precaution to be in a deep doorway while he did his thinking.

"Hey, Cavieri!"

The mob man turned and the smile of greeting that came to his lips came with great effort.

"I've been thinking over that frisking. How about it!" Paddy smiled when he said that, but his tone meant business.

"I'm on."

Expertly, while Cavieri raised his arms from his sides, Paddy's nimble fingers patted the man's sides, hips, legs, ankles—his back, stomach and finally the armpits. Nothing doing.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Paddy," Cavieri said. "I told you so before."

Paddy nodded, hiding his disappointment. Fool that he was! He had warned the mob man and the rod was probably in its nest in the Elite. They walked through Clarey Street to Hulster, where there was some traffic and an occasional street car.

"I hear you've rubbed Canning's nose in the mud," Cavieri observed—"made him close up the Empress Dance Palace."

"Wasn't it about time?"

"Not for me to say. But let me give you a tip. He's after you."

"Canning!" Paddy burst out laughing. "He isn't that kind."

"Don't kid yourself."

Paddy went to the station house, reported his lack of luck, and decided to stroll home for dinner. He was within twenty feet of the flat when five slugs of lead were ripped at him from a dimly lighted passing taxi. Four of them got him in the back—spine and lungs. As he rolled over, still conscious, he saw a face—a familiar face—in the taxi's back window.

They took Cavieri in and questioned him, of course. But they didn't rubber hose him. He was too big for that—

without pretty good supporting evidence. And they didn't have a thing on him.

The shooting of Paddy Cafferty was filed with the unsolved murders. The fireproof cabinet for such cases was a large one.

Tom went about his business, making good, though aware that Paddy's friends watched him strangely, critically. They wondered why he didn't do something about Paddy's death.

Joe Cafferty was graduated from high school and found a berth in a shipping office where there was promise of a future desk job.

Hurley's head was blown off one summer's night—and that case was filed near Paddy Cafferty's.

The thirst of the gas house was now catered to by Cavieri, who modestly remained enthroned in the Elite Poolroom.

Babies were born; noted citizens died. There was a Naval Conference in London; and prohibition views were aired before congressional committees.

All these events were duly recorded in the local newspapers.

And then, with crashing suddenness, Tom Cafferty received a blow that made him feel as if the world had caved in and all the pieces were flying at his head: His brother Joe was arrested for stealing an automobile. By the time Tom reached the house where Joe was booked, he learned that his brother had been bailed out. Connigan, who made the arrest, was awfully sorry; he didn't know Joe was Cafferty's kid brother or things might have been different.

Cafferty's first thought was of his mother. Had Joe gotten to her for bail money? How had she taken the arrest?

"Who put up the bond?" he asked the desk lieutenant.

The other made a wry face. "Malagi."

Cafferty ripped out a string of heated oaths. Malagi was Cavieri's bondsman.

Cavieri again! Cavieri had something to do with his kid brother!

"Reporters know about this?"

"Dunno. Maybe. There was one around."

Cafferty raced home. His mother was getting supper ready for her two sons. She had no idea what time Joe would be in.

The detective then called the shipping firm where Joe worked. Luckily, he got the foreman before he knocked off for the day.

"Joe Cafferty? No, he isn't here. He doesn't work here any more. Not in two weeks."

Cafferty slammed down the receiver. Then he phoned the leading newspaper.

The city editor was disinterested. "Story about a Joseph Cafferty? Oh, the cop's brother. Sure we're using it."

"Can't you kill it? This is Tom Cafferty."

"It's news. And you know we don't play ball with this administration."

"It'll—it'll kill—his mother."

The wire became disconnected. Cafferty knew the city editor had broken the connection; that he couldn't be called back.

The next best thing to do was to keep the papers from his mother for a few days. As for the case against Joe, that could be fixed. But the hell of it was that Cavieri was helping Joe.

Joe did not come home that night. His mother started to worry—Joe had never done such a thing before. Tom did his best to humor her, suggesting that the kid was on a party and staying with friends.

The next morning Cafferty set out to locate Joe. He went directly to the Elite Poolroom, a place he had never been in before, and asked for Cavieri, whom he had never laid eyes on.

"Cavieri," the proprietor said, "never gets up this early. Come back at two. Are you a friend of his?"

"Not yet."

On phoning home, Cafferty learned that Joe had called his mother and given an account of his whereabouts the night before. Furthermore, he was thinking of taking a job in Boston. He had a swell offer. Tom made no comment and went about his day's work—with one eye on the clock, waiting for the hands to point to the twelve and the two.

When Cafferty returned to the Elite, the first person he noticed was Joe. The youngster wilted but forced a grin and a sneer of bravado to his lips.

"What you doing out here, Tom?"

"You know damn well! What about the pinch?"

"Oh, it's all a mistake. It can be explained."

"What are you doing here? At this time of day?"

"Dropped in for a little Kelly. Lunch hour. Want to play?"

"Not with a lying rat like you! You've been out of a job two weeks. And playing with Cavieri's mob longer than that, maybe!"

"You know a lot!"

"Get out of here! Go home and wait for me there!"

"Listen to who's giving orders!" Joe turned his back on his brother.

Cafferty wheeled the kid about till they were face to face. Then he smashed his fist into Joe's jaw, pulling his punch just a little. The boy fell back against a billiard table and glared, frightened, at his brother. Bravado had been knocked out of him.

"Go home, I said!"

Joe pulled his cap over his eyes, avoided the snickers of the other hangers-on in the place, and slouched out. Cafferty lighted a cigarette and sat down to await Cavieri's arrival.

Presently Cavieri came in. Cafferty recognized him at once from his manner of authority and importance and from descriptions he had heard. Short, swarthy, stocky, somberly dressed, with a black derby over one eye, Cavieri sailed through the poolroom with a convoy of five men about him. In the others, the detective recognized some troublesome characters—but men on whom the police always failed to put their finger. Cavieri was as elusive as the proverbial eel and he endowed his men with the same characteristic.

After the mob man had retired to a room in the rear, Cafferty was summoned into his presence.

"You want to see me?" Cavieri inquired, surly and blunt.

Twin points of steel gray light peered from under bushy eyebrows. The hands of two loiterers in the room were tucked under their armpits.

"Yeah, I want to see you. My name's Cafferty."

Cavieri's jaw fell, and then a smile broke on his thick mouth. "Cafferty. Not Paddy Cafferty's kid. Sure am glad to know you."

The detective ignored the proffered hand by lighting another cigarette from the butt of the first. "You know my kid brother, Joe?"

"Oh, casuallylike. He comes to the Elite for a game now and then."

"You went his bond yesterday."

"Oh, that's nothing. You'd do it for a kid like that!"

Cafferty was satisfied. Joe, he was convinced, was tied up in some way with Cavieri's mob. Tied up to the extent that he warranted the mob's protection—bail, a lawyer if necessary. That meant only one thing. Joe had turned some jobs for the mob man, was in with him—was a crook.

Not satisfied with having shot down the father, the beer runner had corrupted one of the sons—had made a tool of him. And Paddy had made Tom swear by all that was holy that he wouldn't kill such a rat! God, what a joke that was on him!

"Well, Cavieri, I'm selling advice this afternoon. You'd better buy some. Lay off Joe. Keep him away from here

—if you know what's good for you. Keep him away with a ten-foot pole!"

Cavieri sneered—but spoke pleasantly enough. "Thanks. I see that you don't like me. But I'm not Joe's keeper nor his brother."

That crack hurt. Cafferty realized that he had not kept too good an eye on his brother. He was partly to blame for the kid's downfall, maybe.

"You wouldn't think of framing me, would you?" Cavieri leered. "You're not really threatening me, are you?"

"You heard me. Good day." Cafferty started for the door.

"And you wouldn't kill me, by any chance, would you?" Cavieri flung after him. "Not after all you promised your old man!"

The detective spun around and spread his legs to balance himself; blood was pounding in his ears; his face was aflame with the toxins of rage that boiled within him. His eyes transfixed the mob man's as his hands flattened themselves over his hips.

Cavieri watched those hands while one of his slipped under his coat.

So Cavieri knew even that—of his promise not to kill. Joe probably had told him. What a rat Joe was! The kid had reason to believe that this man murdered his father and yet he was hooked with him. How could Joe——

Suddenly a hope was born in the detective.

"What have you got on Joe?" he demanded.

"You think Joe doesn't like me of his own free will?" Cavieri chuckled. "Why, Joe just wants to make a man's wages, and I'm putting him wise."

"That's a lie! You've got something on him. You've scared him into playing with you."

"Have it your own way. Good day!" Cavieri turned to some letters on the table in front of him.

Cafferty accepted this dismissal and walked out of the Elite with something of the poor coördination of a drunken man. He was staggered by what he knew.

There was a message for him at the station house. He was wanted at his home immediately.

New fears assailed him as he bumped over cobblestones in a rickety taxi.

Joe opened the door to him. His face was wet with tears. Behind him were the doctor and three women, the latter dabbing their eyes.

And Tom Cafferty understood.

Cavieri had taken his mother's life, too.

The story came out in pieces. Mrs. Cafferty had finished her housework early and wanted to see a newspaper. There was none in the house, so she borrowed a neighbor's. She saw the story of Joe's arraignment and collapsed. By the time the doctor turned up, he muttered, "Syncope and weak heart," and pronounced her dead. Into this scene, Joe had walked. He was grief-stricken.

It was all so clear to Tom Cafferty—Cavieri's part was. His hold over Joe had made a thief of him. Joe's hard luck resulted in arrest and the knowledge reaching his mother, the shock of it killing her. If Joe hadn't played with Cavieri——

Every nerve in his body cried out for vengeance. Man's desire to destroy his enemy held Tom fast in its grip. But superimposed on this to the point of torture was a matter of honor. He had made a promise to his father. He must not kill Cavieri; he must see to it that the law took its course.

But Cavieri was beyond the law. He had been arrested many times but had never been convicted. No jail ever held him.

And now the mob man couldn't be arrested for what he had done to Joe and his mother. That was a matter to be settled between Tom Cafferty and Cavieri.

Cafferty went through the formalities of his mother's funeral with his wrath well leashed. He even ignored the floral offering sent by Cavieri out of friendship for Joe. He would bide his time.

A few days later, Tom had a heart-to-heart talk with his brother. The shock of his mother's death and the realization that he was wholly to blame had softened Joe. He confessed that one of Cavieri's men, not known as a Cavieri man to Joe, had persuaded him to come in on a little bootlegging job. There was no backing down then. The mob man gave the kid his choice—playing ball or exposure—and, weakling that he was, Joe took the former alternative.

The confession wrung Tom's heart, hurt cruelly; but it made him happy, too. His brother had not voluntarily allied himself with their father's killer. There was still some hope for Joe.

And then the way out of his dilemma dawned upon Cafferty.

In the hours that he spent with his thoughts, he recalled the aspirants for mob rule in the city. Besides Cavieri, who had the town pretty well sewed up, there were Gavan—"Big Mike" Gavan—Sam Scance, Gus Wegmenn and "Monk" Birney. Wegmenn, Tom knew, hated Cavieri like poison.

That night Cafferty planted himself opposite Gus Wegmenn's place on Hunter Street. An alley ran behind him into Fordon Avenue. He watched the people flock into Wegmenn's speakeasy; he watched them stumble out. The hour grew late.

Along about two in the morning, Wegmenn came out, surrounded by his men, and made for an automobile halfway down the block.

Cafferty drew his gun, and, taking careful aim, smashed a window over Wegmenn's head. Then he darted down the alley toward Fordon, as a fusillade of shots came from Wegmenn's guns. Instead of inquiring into the cause of the shooting, he walked briskly home and went to bed.

The following night, Cafferty repeated his vigil, this time in front of the Elite Poolroom. A similar alley afforded him a clean retreat to Meganey Street. About midnight he saw Cavieri alight from an automobile and make for the door.

The detective potted the transom over Cavieri's head with an easy shot and fled toward Meganey Street. This time no shots were directed at him. And again Cafferty went to a peaceful night's sleep.

Meaghan, Cafferty's superior, called him to his desk the next afternoon.

"Looks like a little war was on," he said. "Wegmenn is a nasty customer and he has it in for Cavieri. The Elite boys say Wegmenn sent a few slugs at Cavieri last night. I can't fathom it all out but something has been stirred up between those two gangs. Now what with an election coming on, and the mayor wanting another term, we've got orders to do some house cleaning."

"It's about time," Cafferty said. "But what's this about Wegmenn and Cavieri?"

"We got it from our stools. Somebody shot at Wegmenn night before last. He says the only guy that'd do that is Cavieri. Then last night, Cavieri was shot at. He says Wegmenn was retaliating for something he never did. He yammers about peace and there being business enough for every one. But Wegmenn is nasty. He's afraid of Cavieri and says one or the other must take it in the neck. I say it looks like there's going to be a little shooting up of the town—or the Elite. But it's only a hunch!"

Cafferty smiled to himself. There might be killings, but as long as no innocent bystanders took a dose of lead, his conscience would be easy. Rats were rats and when they killed each other it was nobody's business.

It was up to him to see to it that only rat killed rat. And to take Cavieri red-handed, dealing death in this synthetic feud.

Meaghan broke in upon his thoughts. "Suppose you keep an eye on the Elite. Use Hogan, Blake and Monnie. We can't afford a gang feud these days. Stop the fireworks, if you can."

"O. K."

Cafferty called the three men assigned to him and told them to hang around the Elite. His instructions were vague. He would join them later.

It was a quarter to eight when he finished dinner with Joe at a one-arm joint. The kid was back at another shipping job and apparently behaving himself.

Three blocks from the poolroom, the detective went into a cigar store, and, closing the door of a pay phone booth, gave the operator a number.

"Wegmenn there?" he asked in a low voice.

"Who's this?"

"A friend. Put him on."

A few minutes later, Wegmenn's voice was heard. "Yeah? Who is it?"

"Listen, you dirty rat! We'll get you for that shot last night!"

"Yeah! When?"

"To-night!" And Cafferty hung up.

He wondered if Wegmenn was smart enough to see through the trick—to reason that Cavieri's crowd would never warn him of impending trouble. But he was putting a lot of stock in blind fury. If he was not mistaken, Wegmenn would——

Reaching the Elite, he paid no attention to his men loitering in neighboring doorways but burst right into the place. Cavieri, in his shirt sleeves, resplendent in purple silks, was about to make a cushion shot on a far table. The detective got a nasty shock; he caught sight of a face—Joe's face—vanishing behind the door of the back room.

"Well, fly cop, what's up to-night?" Cavieri grinned. "Coming around to be sociable?"

"Get this and get it straight!" Cafferty said. "Get out of town! Wegmenn is coming over to pay you a visit. We don't care who gets killed, so far as you babies go, but we don't want trouble—nor stray lead in the streets." His voice was crisp, terse.

"Oh, yeah! Thanks for the tip?" Cavieri nodded to his men and several disappeared into the rear room. To raid the arsenal, Cafferty figured. The poor fools, they were playing right into his hands. In another hour he'd have the lot of them—including Cavieri.

Curt orders came from the mob leader. The lights were doused. The poolroom quickly presented the aspect of being closed for the night.

"I told you to clear out of town!" Cafferty snapped.

"I heard you. But do you think I'm yellow?"

Cavieri sneered and lighted a cigarette.

Cafferty glanced into the street beyond. He was thankful that nobody lived in the rookeries that lined the pavements. Unless a stray man, woman or child entered the block—and that wasn't likely, in view of its reputation—no decent citizen would be hurt. His own men were, as he had instructed, protected from cross-gun fire.

"I guess you'd better leave things to us, Cafferty."

The detective would have left; that had been his intention. But Joe's presence in the building presented a new angle to affairs. He couldn't leave without the kid.

Cafferty said nothing to the mob man but walked over to the door of the back room and kicked it open. Joe stood beside Cavieri's table, quaking in his boots.

"Come on out of there, you double-crossing little sneak!" Cafferty blazed. "Snap!"

"He made me come to-night," Joe tried to explain.

"See here——" Cavieri began, advancing on Cafferty.

He was cut short by the roar of a racing motor entering the block.

Cafferty threw himself on the floor like a man hit.

A fury of roaring guns cut the stillness and the windows of the Elite were smashed to bits. A man in the poolroom cried out. A body fell heavily. The walls opposite the windows were peppered badly and falling plaster continued to drop to the floor long after the motor's hum died away.

Cafferty prayed that his man, Hogan, in the opposite alley, had sense enough to run for the phone he spoke of on Meganey Street. The reserves would be out in twenty minutes—giving Wegmenn's death car time to retrace its steps for another volley.

Cavieri, shrieking curses, sputtered incoherent orders.

A machine gun was brought from the recesses of the backroom and barricaded by tables, trained on the now open windows.

"They'll be back," Cavieri said. "Let them have everything."

He stepped into the back room and Cafferty followed him.

"Get the hell out of here!" the gangster cried.

There was no one else in the room but Joe.

"You're under arrest, Cavieri!" Cafferty said in a low, eager voice. His gun was out and pressed in the mobleader's stomach. "I wanted to get you with the goods for a killing. But I'm not going to take a chance. I've got all I need to hang a lot on you for to-night. Carrying concealed weapons and toting a machine gun! My men are across the street."

The hum of the returning motor grew louder and louder.

Cavieri paled. "For God's sake, let's get out of here. This room can be raked from the street."

"Drop on the floor, then!"

Instead, the gangster pushed open another door revealing a clothes closet. It was devoid of apparel. But in its back was a second door.

Paddy's words now struck Cafferty sharply.

There was a get-away door on Suter Street. Cavieri was making for it.

"No, you don't!" Cafferty cried as the mob leader darted through the closet and tried to slam the door behind him.

Cafferty was with him, the gun in his back. He hollered to Joe to follow, and no sooner had the door closed on him than the roar of guns on the street reached their ears. They could hear the plaster in the other room being nicked.

The car had stopped or stalled in front of the poolroom and Wegmenn was fighting it out with Cavieri's men. Blast after blast of machine-gun fire rolled into them. Cafferty pictured it all in a flash. One mob was intrenched behind the oaken tables. The other was behind the cover of the car, using riot guns or their gats.

He took stock of his surroundings. They were in a small room with a door leading to the back yard.

"I'll get you out of this," Cavieri said breathlessly. The man was in mortal terror.

"Go ahead!"

The Caffertys followed the little man across the dank back yard to a loft building. Doors opened at Cavieri's touch. There were lights, dim and weird, in a crate-lined corridor that ran the length of the loft. At the far end was a bolted door.

Slowly, cautiously, Cavieri made for it.

Cafferty sensed that something was wrong. Courage had returned to the trapped rat.

The man turned, smiling. "You can't shoot me, can you, Cafferty?"

The detective said nothing. An enigmatic smile settled on his lips.

"You wouldn't fire even if I resisted arrest! I know your holier-than-thou type! A promise is a promise."

"Don't be too sure about that!"

"Hell, I'll take a chance."

Was he going to reach for his guns, Cafferty wondered.

To kill in self-defense was a way out! Paddy Cafferty had said so! And Tom did want to kill this man!

The firing in the poolroom ceased. Police whistles echoed faintly in the night. Running footsteps approached the door through which they had just come.

"Lock that door behind me, Joe!" Cafferty snapped without removing his eyes from the mob leader. He heard the lock click, and, at the same moment, some one tried the knob and pounded on the door. One of Cavieri's men was trying to get through.

If Cavieri would only make a draw!

The gangster stood close to the bolted door. Suddenly, he faced it, pulled a packing case from the wall, and switched off the lights. Cafferty held his fire, listening.

He could hear Cavieri fumbling with the bolts. But he dared not betray his location by a sound. To draw Cavieri's fire might mean death—and being cheated of his vengeance.

The hum of a motor, purring like a hidden kitten, reached him. Was he hearing things? There was a car in deserted Suter Street!

Suter Street! Suter Street!

He knew. Wegmenn's men were onto the Suter Street get-away door. His own men didn't know about it.

The bolts on the door slid open with rasping sounds. Cavieri's hard breathing could be heard.

The door was flung open, admitting the cool night air and a patch of blue night.

Cavieri's footsteps sounded on the wooden steps beyond, as the door banged shut.

Cafferty held his breath—made no move. There was something better than arrest facing Cavieri.

The patter of running shoe leather on the pavement grew fainter—fainter.

The purring motor gave way to the grinding of gears. An automobile passed the door.

A shot! A *rat-tat-tat* of shots! A scream, high pitched and awful.

The motor vanished in the distance.

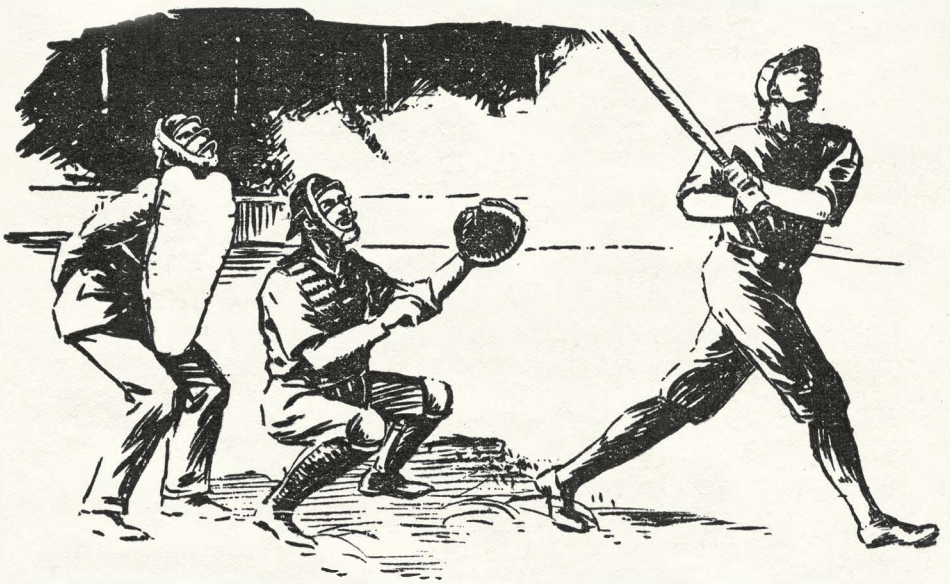
A fierce sense of peace pervaded Tom Cafferty. He knew whose scream that was.

THE WORLD'S GREATEST EMPLOYER

UNCLE SAM heads all individuals and corporations as an employer. According to the new official "Register of the United States for 1929," he has on his pay roll under the civil-service regulations five hundred eighty-seven thousand six hundred and sixty-five workers.

Of these sixty-three thousand nine hundred and four are employed in Washington, while the remaining five hundred twenty-three thousand seven hundred and sixty-one are scattered "in the field," that is in all parts of the country. Of the grand total, more than eighty-two thousand are women. The post-office department hires the greatest number of workers, with three hundred fourteen thousand under civil service. The war and navy departments each employ approximately fifty thousand.

A New Kind of a Shake-up in the Big League.



By Hek

By

JACK CASEY

IF you're one of those average reader guys I suppose you'll read this yarn and say: "Bunk—pure and simple." If you do, then you deserve to be an average reader. If you're a wise guy, and you just say "Piffle," kind of quietlike, and then think it may be so, but it reads flowerylike, why I'll say you're right. It does read as though some member of a Ladies' Aid Society had hemstitched a few yards of fluffy lace around it, but that's because one of them newspaper guys wrote it. I told him the story, and it's gospel truth, but of course he had to change the names.

I don't blame you for sniffing suspiciouslike at that layout. I'm only an ivory hunter myself, and know my limits in the literary business. I know a good baseball yarn, and got to know the general make-up of an obituary notice when six of my relatives died in one winter, but that was several years ago. It was the year I started to scout for a club in Class C. I got so I knew the best bushes where the ivory crop matured, and just like a ball player with a lot of stuff I was promoted until Johnny Dorr made me such an offer I came to the conclusion the life of an explorer was a calling. I've been with Johnny eight seasons now, and every pennant he has grabbed has been with the help of some roughneck I uncovered in the woods.

It was the third year I was bushwhacking, and the only time I ever went South with the team, that this story happened. I remember the first time I saw her; it was in the diner. I put four lumps of sugar in consommé soup and tried to stir it with a pair of sugar prongs. She was just what a doctor would order for a heartsick bach with a million dollars. I can't describe her

'cause that ain't my business for one thing, and for another the words that would describe her ain't never made my acquaintance. To say she was pretty is like calling a cannibal a meat eater.

She certainly caused a near riot in the club. That was one year Johnny Dorr expected to finish at the top of the other end of the league. Every rube on the team forgot what a baseball looked like and laid awake nights—but here, I'm not supposed to tell this story. I tipped off the newspaper guy—I could tell you his name—to the yarn, and he wrote it up. You'll have to take it just as he wrote it, frills and all. But there's one thing he didn't tell. Don't think she just walked out of the house and her father sat still and let her go. Not by a jugful; he hired the best detective he could grab and told him to go the limit on the loose change. The "dick" had a conference with Johnny at Tampa, and the next day he appeared in a uniform, and the bunch was told he was a millionaire pal of Johnny Dorr's who was on a vacation. He kept pretty close tabs on "Bright Eyes," and every night he wired a report into her dad. The night operator, the little one with red hair and the cheerful grin, tipped me off to it.

Then on that five-thousand-dollar poodle stuff you can suit yourself, Personally I ain't never seen anything on four legs worth five thousand dollars; that is, in the canine line. And that perfumed-bath business and French maids; now I know her dad had all kinds of mazuma, but I think all this dope originated in the mind of the newspaper guy. They're all descendants of Ananias in that line.

Then again he don't tell you how she got her job on the paper. Well, the dick wised me up to that. She went to the owner of the sheet, a family friend, and he just naturally dictated a note to a secretary, who wrote it on crested paper—I think that's what the newspaper guy called it—and when she slipped it to the mgr. ed., she could have carried off the big color press and he'd have voted yes on it.

The rest of the yarn is gospel truth, so now I think it's safe for you to go on with the story.

THE STORY.

Helen Elsby Kerchew did two things in one day that were decidedly unladylike, but characteristic of the young woman. She unceremoniously "canned" Walter Ludlow Brooks, her Wall Street suitor, and shocked her wealthy father by informing him she was quitting home that evening to make her own living in the world.

Brooks pleaded in vain, and then retired to one of his clubs to drown his sorrow in beverages with fancy names and impressive qualities. Nobody paid any particular attention to him because he was generally found at a club when he wasn't seeking Helen—his Wall Street office and his seat in the Stock Exchange having been willed him along with several millions of dollars by his father. The money Brooks found quite indispensable, but the office and Stock Exchange bored him to tears, so, rather than cry, he often said, he kept away from both.

Daddy Kerchew lived up to his name, fumed and sputtered, and then sneezed several times in wrath.

"You've been 'finished' at the best school in the country, you have your own car, a five-thousand-dollar bulldog, two maids, and everything money can buy," he said. "All you have to do is pick out hats, drink tea, and go to Europe. What more could any girl wish for?"

"That's the best argument anybody could make for my leaving home," said Helen Elsby Kerchew, smiling a most bewitching smile which was lost on her rumpled parent.

"Daddy, dear," she said as she stroked his gray head, "you've been the best old scout in the world to me. I love every hair on your head, but I'm sick of this life of nothingness. I'm sick of pink teas, cotillion dances, indigestible suppers, tango parties, and catty women. These spineless, spike-tailed, cigarette-perfumed creatures in 'our set' called men drive me to distraction. Their rotten conceit and languid 'bore-me-some-more' attitudes make me want to swat them. And you would marry me, daddy, to a man who lives to spend money and drink booze. I'm sick of it all; the maids, the perfumed baths, motor cars, ribboned bowwows, and liveried flunkies. I'm through!"

Helen Elsby Kerchew stood up to the full height of her five foot four inches. She looked dazzlingly pretty as she faced her disappointed father, her fists opening and closing, her big black eyes flashing, and her brown, frumpled head nodding in a determined manner.

She went to him and kissed him. "You'll hear from me through Miss Addams at the school, but I'll not let you know my address or my business, and you must promise not to make any kind of a search for me. You can send your love, daddy, dear, whenever you wish, and I want you to write me some nice letters."

Managing Editor McKay read the crested note, frowning at being interrupted at the busiest time of his five-hour day.

"Show her in!" he said curtly.

Helen Elsby Kerchew, tailored spick and span, and with a flush to her usually pink cheeks, went in. In so doing she caused fourteen reporters in the city room to stop pounding typewriters and gasp with admiration. The city editor at the telephone unthinkingly hung up on an Atlantic City correspondent with a society elopement, so he could get a better eyeful. Then he came back to earth and bawled out a copy boy to soothe his own feelings.

Only the big boss was unimpressed. He had seen the Kerchew name in the society columns so much he immediately branded the mission of his fair caller as a whim to learn newspaper work. He let her remain seated while he marked "kill" on a theatrical story with a press-agent touch to it. Then he faced her, but refused to melt under the sunshiny smile.

"I can put you on the society page as assistant to 'The Wanderer,' our society editor," he said.

"Don't want it. Wouldn't think of it. Sick and tired of society. Too fussy," came her crisp retorts.

"Well, whaddye want to do?"

"Baseball," was the quick reply.

The managing editor unfolded his legs with a start.

"Baseball!" he ejaculated. "What do you know about baseball?"

"Everything. I know a glass arm from a Charley horse and can tell a natural hitter a mile away. And, what is more, I know how to write it."

There was silence for a space. Little dwarfs were running riot through the brain of the M. E. One carried a sign marked: "Would be a whale of a stunt. A pretty girl writing baseball." Another was marked: "Society girl goes South with ball club to write for the *Star*," while a third was labeled: "Read real baseball stories from the pen of the fairest baseball correspondent living."

He studied her face. There was character and determination stamped there. She didn't look like a frivolous, pampered, petted child with a fad. She looked like business.

"Can I use your right name and photograph?" he asked her.

"Not until the world series begins," she replied, without hesitating. "I want to make good under a nom de plume first."

"Whaddye going to use?" asked the boss.

"My initials."

"What are they?"

"H. E. K."

"Oh, I see; going to sign it, 'By Hek.' That's good!" he mused aloud.

Then he straightened up. "Pack up and catch the special at the Pennsylvania. Leaves in the morning at ten. I'll want a story on their departure and one every day from the camp. That's all."

"Just one thing," smiled Helen Elsby Kerchew, "I'm paying my own way in the world now. What's the salary?"

"Fifty a week, if you make good."

Johnny Dorr absent-mindedly watched three late recruits climb into a Pullman car, two of them for the first time in their young lives, and then as the conductor gave the go-ahead signal, he tossed away an unlit and much-chewed cigar, and climbed aboard the already-moving baseball special. Johnny was thinking, which wasn't anything unusual for him, as he was considered about the best manager in the league, and was paid twenty-five thousand dollars or more every year to do that very thing—think.

But just now this baseball czar wasn't thinking about a baseball problem. He was thinking instead of the dashing piece of feminine bric-a-brac a taxicab had dumped at the gate of Track 10. He had attempted to bar her way, and told her gruffly it was the baseball special. To which she had smiled her prettiest and replied: "I am aware of the fact," and had then ordered the porter to put her baggage in Stateroom A of Car B. And with another smile at the important manager, which had the effect of reducing him in his own estimation to the size of a watch fob, she had boarded the train. He had questioned the gate tender, and been told her credentials were "O. K."

He wondered if any of the regulars had eloped or if a busher had displayed nerve enough to bring a young wife along. Then as he thought he shook his head negatively—she looked too smart and classy for a ball player's wife. She was just about the last thing in class, he thought.

Then he entered Car B, and sought Stateroom A. She quickly opened the door in answer to his knock, and beamed another of those smiles at him. He hemmed and hawed considerably for one vested with his authority, but finally managed to ask what she was doing bound for Florida with a bunch of ball players.

When he was told he fled in confusion. He sought Lyons, his coach, and Dearborn, pinch hitter extraordinary, who had formerly been captain and slugger of the league.

"Whaddye think, boys?" he shouted.

"We're not paid to think around you; what is it?" asked Lyons.

Dorr fairly writhed it from him. "There's the prettiest woman in the world on this train, an' she's goin' with us to Tampa."

"Who is she?" asked Lyons.

"Where's she from?" shouted Dearborn.

"She's from the *Star*. I dunno her name."

"What!" said Lyons. "From a newspaper, and beautiful? Johnny, you've gone nuts."

"There ain't no such animal," said Dearborn.

"I wish I thought so," said the worried manager, "but there is. She's on here, and if she stays with us the whole team'll get girl struck. They'll be dreaming about her, fighting about her, nobody'll sleep and nobody'll eat. I'll be coming North with a bunch of lovesick calves and no ball players but a couple of stick-arounds like you guys, too old to make love or play ball, either."

The regulars and recruits stopped talking simultaneously at lunch when she entered the diner. She made her entrance like a grand-opera star, having chosen the right minute when everybody was set and waiting. There was a general bulging of eyes, several muffled exclamations, an emphatic "Ah!" from Dearborn, and a muttered curse from Dorr, who burned his fingers with a lighted match when he perceived the general effect.

The conductor escorted her to a table by herself in the far corner of the car. She was visible to over half of the players facing her, and immediately became so to the rest, who impolitely turned about, inwardly cursing their luck that they had chosen the wrong side of the table to sit at.

She shamed them all by satisfying her appetite on a dainty cheese sandwich, some fruit salad, and a glass of milk. With the air of perfect breeding, and a nonchalant attitude, she left the car with all eyes upon her. They were then starting their third course. As the door closed, Dearborn arose. Placing his left hand on his heart, he raised his right hand in the air and assumed a "hard-hit" attitude, muttering a loud and emphatic "Ah!" There was a general laugh at Dearborn's burlesque from all but "Rah-rah" Jonesy.

Jonesy was the handsomest man in the league, a college-bred player, the find of the previous year, who received more perfumed notes than any three matinée idols in the world. Jonesy's right name was Paul Howland Jones, but the players tacked on a y to the last of his name, and supplanted the first with "Rah-rah" because he was a college man and full of pep. Jonesy didn't even smile.

They expected her to crowd into the hotel bus at Tampa, but she fooled them. She taxied to the swell hostelry, spread out on a hill amid palm and orange trees and overlooking Tampa Bay, from which it took its name. She was getting settled in the last room left with bath by the time the players tumbled out of the bus into the big, spacious sitting room. They crowded around the desk, calling for mail and getting paired off for rooms.

"Now," said Manager Dorr, when the last pair of recruits had left for their room, "I want a room with bath."

"Sorry," said the clerk, looking the part, "I just assigned the lady from the *Star* to the last room with bath I had left."

Johnny Dorr swore, and said something which sounded like the troubles caused by "that woman." He knew if it was a newspaper *man* who had the room he'd demand it quick. But "that woman"! That was different.

Johnny's jolt over not getting a room with bath was mild compared with the shock he received when he bought a New York *Star* at the news stand. He opened to the sport page, expecting to see a variety of description, including such words as nice, sweet, dainty, pretty, lovely, et cetera. Instead, what he saw caused him to run to Lyons and Dearborn. With heads together they bent over the sheet and read aloud:

"Johnny Dorr and his bunch of robins ease away from the Penn Depot for the South.

"Johnny chews on a two-bit stogie and sputters and struts until the last busher grabs the rattler.

"Then he hops aboard himself, and proceeds to take account of stock of his fragile vets and raw-looking hicks."

"Well, I'll be——" began Dorr.

"Read on," interrupted Dearborn.

"If eating will grab a pennant for the Pink Sox this year, they have the old gonfalon won already, and lashed to the mast. From Manager Johnny Dorr down to Eddie Henney Brooks, the youngster from Wayne County, Indiana, they have a street urchin at a pie-eating contest looking like the statue of George Washington in Union Square. From Jersey City to Jacksonville they'll gain

enough weight to make a fat woman desperate.

"But such is the hard life of the high-priced ball player. It's no wonder people have to pay from seventy-five cents to five dollars to get a seat at a game. It must cost thousands of dollars to feed this crew."

"Whaddye think of that?" groaned Johnny. "Why, she's panning me worse than the boss ever dared to. Well, whaddye think of that?"

"Whaddye goin' to do?" asked Dearborn.

"What can I do? I can't beat 'er up."

"Did you make friends with her coming down?" asked Lyons.

"No," said Dearborn, facing Dorr, "you cut her dead, while you entertained the newspaper boys, and now she's handing it to you. Take a tip from me and treat her like Romeo treated Juliet, and have her meet the boys."

"That's just what I wanted to avoid. They'll all go daffy over her if they haven't done so already," interrupted the peeved and worried manager.

"Never mind if they do fall in love," said Lyons, "you'll have to take chances on that. But, believe me, you better treat her white, 'cause I can see she means business. She ain't no fluffy ruffles."

"What's her name?" asked Dorr. "It's over the story."

They read together: "By Hek."

"That's what I say!" shouted Dorr. "By hek!"

Dressed décolleté, and looking striking enough to cause both the checkroom girl and the head waiter to stare, she came in to dinner that night on the arm of the abashed and flustered-looking Manager Dorr. He presented her to every player on the team, happening by chance to reach the handsome Rah-rah Jones last. She favored him with a listless "How do you do, Mister Jones," and passed with Johnny to a table set for two. Her manners, vivaciousness, and polite conversation had the manager sitting on "pins and needles" all through dinner for fear he'd make a break. He would have felt by far more comfortable in a cow shed with a balky mule. But he liked her.

She sat in the press box, and chatted with the newspaper men during the first morning's practice, startling them occasionally by asking if they didn't think Johnny had strained the Bear's wing by pitching him too much the previous year, or if they didn't think he pulled a bone by letting Shavrein get away from him.

In the afternoon she left the hotel with golf sticks, and was seen speeding away in the hired limousine belonging to the place. The chauffeur later told Jonesy she went to a country club and golfed alone all afternoon.

Johnny Dorr's prophetic utterance that Rah-rah Jonesy was "hit" was a good one. Jonesy was "hit" so hard he couldn't eat, and yet he couldn't get within a mile of her. Several well-meaning and good-looking youngsters with nerve had ventured invitations to picture shows or a sight-seeing trip to Yebow City, the big Spanish settlement in Tampa, but they had been turned down cold. Then the tip went around to "lay off," she wouldn't mix. Yet to each one she had a pleasant "good morning" or "good afternoon."

On the morning of the third day, immediately after breakfast, Rah-rah Jones approached her at the desk with an open newspaper in his hands. He looked decidedly peeved.

"I don't like this, Miss—er—er——"

"Miss Hek," she interrupted, with one of her sweetest smiles.

"You say," he said, "that I am conceited, and warn the silly girls not to send me perfumed notes or to idealize me at all. Here you say"—and he

pointed to a paragraph in the story—"that I don't look half so fetching in civilian clothes as I do in uniform with my muscular limbs exposed; that I chew gum incessantly, which is a certain sign of bad breeding, and—oh, there's a bunch of stuff. I'm not conceited or egotistical, and I don't think I ought to be knocked this way. I don't think it's fair."

"Anything is fair, by Hek," was all she would say, and she walked away, leaving the disgruntled Jonesy crumpling the newspaper in his hands.

"I've been panned from New York to Frisco," he confided to Lyons in the clubhouse, "and it never bothered me for a minute, but I hate to have this skirt roast me, because I like her."

The truth of the matter was that Helen Elsby Kerchew liked the handsome Jonesy and could hardly take her eyes off him during the daily practice. But she was decidedly feminine and clever enough not to let Mister Jones see her cast any admiring glances his way. She knew all about his perfumed-note history and felt sorry for the poor girls that had hopelessly fallen to his charms. She also knew from Manager Dorr that Jones was the cleanest and best-living player on the team and a fellow to whom notes from foolish women were a bore rather than a pleasure. He had graduated from Yale and was "well fixed."

But Helen Elsby Kerchew decided it was about time Jonesy was taught a lesson. It was time, in her estimation, that he discovered every woman didn't want him. Although he protested absolute lack of conceit in his make-up, she figured from a woman's viewpoint that, being a man, he couldn't help but feel flattered at so much female devotion. Therefore she became the savior of her sex and was leading Rah-rah a merry chase until the worried Dorr butted in.

"Rah-rah's looking a sight," he said. "He's not rounding into condition, and he can't hit a balloon. There's a reason for it, and that reason, Miss Hek, is you. He's the only man on the team who hasn't stopped making sick-calf eyes at you. He's plumb crazy about you, and unless you either disappear or treat him different, I'm going into New York with a star outfielder and hitter who in his present condition couldn't mind bats in the Cactus League."

Helen Elsby Kerchew didn't raise her eyebrows and pretend to be unaware of the conditions as Johnny tersely put them. She didn't protest in that feigned, flattered way most women have. Instead, she just listened, and Johnny took courage.

"I know you aren't a regular newspaper woman; you're too highbrowy and finished. I know you're out of your class down here with a pack of ball players, and writing stories for a living. I haven't been playing baseball for twenty-two years to have a young lady with your looks and breeding put that over on me. You're traveling under cover, Miss Hek, and this 'by Hek' stuff is all bunk.

"Base ball, with me, Miss Hek, is a business. Jonesy is a business investment. He's a big drawing card with the club and a whale of a player. Now, if he isn't in shape this year, I lose on him; the whole league will suffer. If you wasn't here, he'd be on the job going like a house afire. Here's the answer: Either get away from here or treat Rah-rah Jonesy different or else"—here he lowered his voice—"I'm going to put Pinkertons on your trail and uncover your little game. Whaddye say, Miss Hek?"

Helen Elsby Kerchew said it quickly, and Johnny Dorr got up, smiling at her.

That evening Jonesy took her to a picture show, and the next morning knocked four balls over the left-field fence, the first time even one had ever

sailed over to the knowledge of the oldest inhabitant in Tampa.

They golfed together that afternoon, Johnny being so elated at Rah-rah's sudden reversal of form that he broke a rule and excused him from practice. It was on the green at the third hole she told him of her distaste for conceited men and of her admiration for red-blooded men who did things. Jonesy vowed then and there he'd bat five hundred for the season and field one thousand. He asked her real name, and just because she thought he'd imagine he was progressing too rapidly she rebuked him for his recklessness; and then, to make things worse for the baffled Rah-rah, she said she wouldn't go with him to a picture show for four evenings and that he must be very, very careful, as she was unchaperoned and alone in the world—meaning her business world.

Things for the following week went along swimmingly in the camp. Dorr was as happy over Rah-rah as a kid with a new toy, and Jonesy was in the seventh heaven of delight, kissing rapturously each night, before he retired, a photograph of the beautiful Miss Hek he had bribed a syndicate photographer to take of her one morning on the field during practice. It was accomplished unknown to her; and, so that nobody else on the team would get a picture, Jonesy made the photographer sell him the negative.

Miss Hek herself was having the time of her life. She no longer had to take breakfast in bed, or even look at a perfumed bath. There were no liveried flunkies to be "beggin' your pardon, miss," and her stuff was getting across. She wrote her father through Miss Addams, and had received letters from him in which he styled her a willful minx, unappreciative of the riches of the Kerchew estate. But he always sent his love and said she was desperately missed.

Miss Helen Elsby Kerchew's bubble of joy burst with a bang two days before the team was to leave for the North, booked to play a few exhibition games on the way. Walter Ludlow Brooks, her Wall Street suitor, appeared. The hotel bus discharged him with a valet and five trunks just as the charming Miss Hek was passing through the big sitting room on her way to dinner. She gasped, and he beamed. She gazed quickly about the room when he called her by name. The clerks were occupied, and the players, living up to the reputation she handed them, were already busy in the dining room.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, trying to appear casual.

"On my way to Key West, but in no particular hurry. Wait, and I'll dress and take you in to dinner."

Jonesy was kidded unmercifully when the couple entered the dining room. Brooks was big and impressive, and had that bearing and finish that money, clubs, and society give to a man of his type.

"I told you she was a society doll," said Lyons. "That's probably the guy she's engaged to hitch up to."

"He certainly looks like a million-dollar kid," said Dearborn.

Rah-rah held his peace and looked glum. Dorr looked glummer.

The next day she failed to appear at practice either in the morning or afternoon, and as a result Jonesy misjudged every fly in left and struck out three times. He even walked under the hot shower instead of the cold, and almost scalded himself. Johnny cursed the train that brought Brooks to Tampa.

Rah-rah broke the eleven-o'clock retiring rule that night and loafed on the piazza outside the grand ballroom in which the society of the city were galavanting at a masked ball. Jonesy had a hunch and was seeing it through.

The French windows were all wide

open, and he could see the dancers and hear the music. Lyons left him at eleven and warned him about the rule.

"We leave to-morrow," said Lyons, "so for the love of Mike, Jonesy, don't get Johnny sore by breaking his pet rule."

Jonesy only snorted and peered into the dance hall.

At midnight the hunch came true. Hid in the shadows in a curve in the big piazza, he watched a couple walk toward him. They were talking earnestly, but suddenly raised their voices and came to an abrupt halt so close he could reach out and touch them.

"I'll never marry any man who spends his life loafing and spending money; and I'll never marry you," said the girl, "because I don't love you."

"You will marry me," said the man. "You'll marry me, or I'll write your father and expose this escapade."

"You gave me your word of honor you would keep it a secret," she said.

"I thought I could persuade you to marry me," he replied.

"That's impossible; I don't care for you."

"Then I'll make you care for me," said the man angrily, and he threw his arms about her.

There was a muffled scream, and then Rah-rah Jonesy stepped forth and delivered one of those pinch wallops that had won him fame throughout the broad land. He spilled his victim with his right, while with his left hand he swept the girl behind him. When the man failed to rise, he turned about. A mask was removed, and two black eyes looked up.

"Jonesy," she said.

"By Hek," said he.

When Helen Elsby Kerchew said her stuff was getting "across," she put it mild. It was the talk of New York. Every elevated platform and subway entrance was plastered with "By Hek" posters. Everywhere you looked, the words "By Hek" stared you in the face. Suburbanites, Wall Street brokers, office boys, and traveling salesmen caught the fancy, and everywhere it was conceded quite smart to say: "By Hek."

In his office in Broad Street, Daddy Kerchew unconsciously became enmeshed in the fad. A stockbroker placing an order over the phone—a big order, because Papa Kerchew was a big man in business and personally only handled big things—finished naming the number of shares preferred wanted, and then said: "We want them in a hurry, too—by hek."

Father Kerchew laughed; and that day, sending a letter to his fair daughter through the close-mouthed Miss Addams, asked Helen to give up her idea of earning her own living; to come home to her lonesome five-thousand-dollar dog and her French maids and to reconsider and marry Brooks. At the close of the epistle he wrote: "We miss you, girlie—by hek."

That noon he lunched with an author friend at the Press Club. They were joined by several literary lights, and the talk turned to baseball.

"Who's writing that stuff in the *Star?*" asked one.

Nobody could answer, but all agreed it was great stuff.

"It's so funny, slangy, and original, by hek," laughed one.

"I'm curious about it," said Papa Kerchew's host. "I know all the sporting writers in New York, but this one's a new one on me. I'll tell you what I'll do, friend Kerchew: I'll take you to the opening game, and we'll sit in the press box and we'll meet By Hek."

Father Kerchew accepted on the spot. His fair daughter inherited her love and knowledge of the game from him. If he hadn't been going with his author friend, he would have been occupying Box N, the same box he had reserved for years.

It was a typical opening day, with sunshine and a breeze just cool enough to make an overcoat comfortable. The ball field was packed. Bands blared and crowds cheered. There seemed to be people, people everywhere on the ground, and hundreds clamored outside, unable to get in.

In the press box, baseball writers dictated crisp sentences to telegraphers, who wired them in. They were the "afternoon" men, working for the afternoon papers. The "morning" men sat and smoked, renewing acquaintances among themselves and the actors and other idlers with pull enough to get into the press stand, the most coveted honor in any baseball park to those who have no business there. The morning men would write their stories at the office after the game. They scorned the use of telegraphers and frowned at the clicking of the instruments.

Bundled to the tips of two pink ears in a blazer coat of bright red, and seated in about the middle of the press box, sat Helen Elsby Kerchew, idly fondling a pencil and score card in gloved hands. Her big black eyes were directed toward Rah-rah Jonesy, who, according to the other newspaper men, looked faster than ever. Jonesy was cavorting about like a frisky colt, grabbing every fly ball in left. If actions were a criterion of feelings, then Jonesy felt supremely happy. Anyway, it was a happy smile he cast toward the press box when he came to the bench. A flash of two big black eyes answered it.

Jonesy was stealing a last, covetous glance at Helen Elsby Kerchew over the rim of a dipperful of oatmeal before the game commenced when Papa Kerchew and his author friend entered the press box. They took seats in the second row, several feet to the left of Kerchew's fair daughter. They might have been miles away for all she knew until the ninth inning. Until that time, things went along in an unruffled sort of a way with very little doing to bring the big crowd to their feet.

It was the last half of the ninth, with the enemy three runs to the good and two out, when the explosion came. Cheney, the Pink Sox catcher, scratched a hit through short and took second on a passed ball. Dearborn pinch hit and dropped a dinky Texas leaguer in left, Cheney easily making third. Coyne coaxed a base on balls, and then came Rah-rah Jonesy, the most feared man in a pinch in the league.

There was a hurried consultation between Kerr, the Lambs' twirler, and Boltwood, the manager. Jonesy, in that nonchalant attitude that caused a baseball writer to compare him with an "icicle in Hades," stood at the plate and with the handle of his bat knocked the clay from the cleats on his shoes. He stole a glance at the press box. A flash of pearly white and a pair of dimples told him it was answered. Then he faced the pitcher.

In the stands it was as if the proverbial bedlam was let loose. Jonesy was begged to do it.

"Oh, Rah-rah, deliver!" they begged. "Give us those runs! Clean up!"

Even in the press box all but the staid old newspaper men had apparently lost their senses and been swept into the frenzy of the crowd. Papa Kerchew and his author friend had started for an exit and turned back when the bases filled up. They stood in the press stand with clenched fists raised high above their heads, crying their loudest for "Jonesy boy" to clean up.

The first offering was a ball. The second was a strike which was answered from the bleachers with a groan. Then came two balls and another strike. The next would tell the story. The tension was nerve-racking. The girl in the blazer coat leaned forward and murmured a prayer.

Kerr raised his great left arm, his right foot went up, his body bent back,

and then with the speed of a bullet the ball flashed a streak of white toward the plate.

There was a crash, a scurrying of fielders, a second of deathlike silence, and then, as runners tore around the paths like mad, the white speck dropped into the stands in deep left.

In the press stand, Papa Kerchew jumped, shouted, hollered, yelled, and hugged first himself and then the author. It was while engaged in the latter foolish-looking occupation that the pair tripped and fell against the girl in the blazer coat. She was leaning forward gazing eagerly toward "her hero" trotting over the plate. The impact sent her sprawling to the concrete. Both men, offering profuse apologies, helped her to her feet. In the maddening din she gazed into their faces.

"Daddy!" she shouted.

"Helen!"

And just then a voice at the screen said: "Miss Hek!"

She wheeled about.

"Jonesy!"

Then, as she clasped the fingers stuck through the wire netting, she said: "I want you to meet your future father-in-law."

Papa Kerchew leaned forward. "Glad to know you, sir, but what did you call my daughter?"

"Miss Hek," said the puzzled Jonesy.

"Miss Hek," repeated Father Kerchew and the author in chorus. "Are you——"

Helen Elsby Kerchew dimpled and nodded an affirmative answer.

"Well, by hek!" said Papa Kerchew, and he sneezed.

THE END.

I see he marked that the end, but it ain't. He hasn't told you the real story at all; that is, just why she wanted to write baseball and go South with the team. I thought he would be just about dumb enough to leave that out. Now I'll wise you up.

She was plumb stuck on Jonesy from the season before, when she used to sit in her dad's box at every game and feast her eyes on him. She was too high bred and too wise to write a perfumed note, but she made up her mind she'd get him, and that's the reason she went into the newspaper business. She knew if she could stall off the mgr. ed. on the name stuff until the world's series she'd have Jonesy landed high and dry, and, by hek, she did it.

Jonesy don't know to this day. He's like all men—conceited enough to think he captured her instead of being captured by her. Far be it from me to wise him up, or any of the little Joneses that went South with the team last season.

In the Next Number—"The Scarlet Oasis," by Lieut. Seymour G. Pond, a Roaring Tale of the Foreign Legion.

THE BLUE AND THE GRAY

OLD files of the Richmond papers reveal the curious information that directly after the Civil War, after the demobilization of the Union army, enough veterans of the Federal army settled in the former capital of the Confederacy to form a post of the Grand Army of the Republic.

It was known as Philip Kearney Post No. 14, and met every Tuesday night in a lodge hall. Notices appearing in the press of the '70s show that members of the post sometimes attended picnics and other social gatherings sponsored by the organizations of Confederate veterans, of which many were formed in the years following the war. No members of the Kearney Post are known to be living to-day.

The BROKEN SWORD

By GEORGE C. SHEDD

An Emblem Unlocks the Door of Four Hundred Years.

McPHERSON was a big man, with a big voice, a big fist, and an enormous industry. He could outwork any three ordinary men and outtalk any six; and Mexican workmen whose lot it was to toil in excavations or bear burdens under the shadow of his hand wept weakly and crossed themselves as against the Evil One—not that he was brutal, only Cyclopean. The Smithsonian Institution was McPherson's temple, which, because he moved and had his being in anthropology, he served for love. And yet he would not have been a Scot had he found no fault with his salt.

Inveterate was his grudge, a grudge at the Smithsonian's published reports; which his superiors ignored as a trifling weakness in a most valued scientist. But with McPherson it was a passion: he hated those shiny-backed reports

with a deadly and abiding hate. Merely mention them in his presence and straightway his eyeglasses glittered malevolently, while his beard and bushy mustaches bristled with ire. On the veranda of the hotel where we used to fall into argument over the subject, he would bang the arm of his chair with his big hairy fist, until finally in one mighty, unseeing, all-destroying sweep of his arm he would annihilate his glass of whisky and soda, the while perspiring heavily and reviling those humble reports in language heartfelt and thunderous.

"No wonder they molder on back shelves! No wonder nobody reads them—I don't myself!" he would boom. "By the Great Obelisk, they're worse than nothing, for those fellows in Washington dry the soul right out of our research! Reconstruct an epoch, and they gape at you; speak of the race soul, and they blink up in your face like a cage of boobies! They think all there is to the science is weights and measures, ruins and rubbish. Give them a handful of flints, or a calendar stone, or a cracked pot, or a petticoat, to exhibit in a glass case, and they're happy! But, Lord, don't ever attempt to read anything they print!" And up would go his hands in despair, and he would thrash about anew, bellowing fervid, full-flavored anathemas.

I found McPherson a diversion, though a trifle wearing on the nerves. With the thermometer level on ninety-nine and the heat waves playing jiggers among the tall candelabra cactus stalks, his explosions outraged all decency. But he felt the need, I suppose, of proving his point. Prove it he did, anyway. He related in ringing tones the story he brought forth to clinch his argument.

"Men in the field could tell you things as strange, aye, any man of them," he concluded, vehement as usual and hammering the statement into the chair arm. "Yet what happens in the reports! Our accounts are desiccated, desiccated to death, like the patent eggs they furnish tropical explorers!"

For a clear appreciation of the tale he told as we sat upon the hotel veranda, you must open a certain volume of these selfsame reports, and, with finger on the tenth line of the sixty-seventh page, begin to read.

You will find therein a description of a pueblo in that uncharted and almost unknown region where Arizona and Utah meet—the Broken Sword Pueblo, one not essentially different from scores of others in the Southwest. Shape, size, and approximate location are given, the materials of which it was constructed, and the supposed number of inhabitants it housed. There is a wearisome quantity of data—dimensions, areas, elevations; there is also discussion of its architecture and state of preservation, supplemented by photographs of the pueblo entire, of a characteristic doorway and of a stone corn mill.

Those are the precious facts concerning that particular pueblo as given in the report—but nowhere is there mention of the broken sword! And the rôle played by the sword is the meaty part of the narrative, though considered unproven, and therefore to be rejected by the Smithsonian. What especially brings McPherson to his feet in rage is the lone retention of the name Broken Sword Pueblo. If you would have the whole account, however, then listen to the "undesiccated" tale as imparted and vouched for by my big friend, the Scotchman.

The adventure began the morning McPherson flung down his pick and called his two assistants to council. Since white dawn when they had pulled themselves up to the ruined cliff house, which nested in a niche of the precipitous wall like an eagle's aerie, they had fine-combed the ancient dwelling for some secret, some anthropological treasure, something worth while.

A month now, one mortal, long, hard month, they had been at the same bootless, business labor without profit; a box of photographs, a notebook of hackneyed detail, half a dozen contemptible potshards, were what they had to show after toiling up this creek and down that, and searching the vicinity canyon by canyon. All the time McPherson thirsted for some great discovery, something extraordinary, something to make old Smithsonian sit up and gasp. But the watercourses were shrinking, the dry June season was at hand when they must altogether withdraw from the country. So sitting in the shade of the crumbling house, their feet hanging over the edge of a ledge and above a hundred yards of chasm, they smoked cigarettes and discussed the matter.

"These cliff houses would break the heart of a Chinese image," McPherson declared.

Gresham, first assistant, wiped his smoked glasses. "Only dumb-headed men like ourselves would hunt 'em in the first place. Chinese gods have more sense." He was not happy. Because he was corpulent his shirt was soaked with perspiration, which made nettles of his prickly heat.

"Three different times now I've wasted precious months hunting what never was," McPherson growled, through his long beard. "And, by Heaven, this will be the last!"

"I say a hearty Amen to that!" approved Gresham.

Delano, the third of the trio, a slender, olive-skinned, silky-lashed young fellow new in the service, slowly inhaled his cigarette and fanned himself with his hat.

"If we've found nothing," he said languidly, "I've at least lost my ring twice. That gives life a slight interest."

He crooked up for display the finger which bore the band of gold crested with a coat of arms; it was an old, worn, curious ring, the device unburnished and full of dust.

"What is that thing you're always admiring to yourself?" Gresham snarled, for at that minute the rash on his skin was particularly itchful.

"An heirloom," Delano responded.

"Only a fool would wear gewgaws while crawling over mountains. You'll lose it for good and all yet."

"Then it'll be for the honor of science, like the prickles on your back. Well, Mac, what the devil are we roosting up here for, anyway, like a flock of buzzards? I want to get down to water."

McPherson roused himself and flung away his cigarette.

"We all want to get somewhere," he said. "And it shall be any spot but here. We'll make a last swing round, these remaining days—and may we find something genteel and edifying! Gather up the tackle."

From ledge to ledge they lowered themselves, and finally plowed down a sandy incline sprinkled with cactus and yucca plants to the bed of the creek, where the pair of Mexican packers and the two Hopis who completed the party were asleep in the shadow of a piñon pine.

An hour later the party was headed at random southwest. Breakneck heights and deep erosion of the land made progress extremely difficult. The first day was bad enough. The second, the country where the men found themselves was utterly strange and perplexing, even to the Indians. On the third day, quite lost and seemingly engulfed in stupendous canyons, they arrived at a side chasm discharging a small stream. McPherson waved the party up this. Inspiration he swore led him in his choice; more likely, desperation.

About five in the afternoon of that same day the narrow gorge up which the little cavalcade toiled suddenly expanded into an extensive basin, two or

three miles wide from wall to wall. Far off about the horizon, yet with an illusion of extreme nearness, stood range on range of glassy, chimerical mountains; while in front, perhaps two hours' travel, the horsemen beheld a lone fragment of mesa, rising like an island. Toward it their way led, since they followed up the shrunken creek across the plain of hot sand.

They reached the rock just at sunset. A mile distant on either hand the canyon walls swam in lavender haze, less harsh, less brittle than when seen under the fiery sun of day, smoothed and mellowed and chastened to beauty with the approach of evening; the floor of sand, so colorless, so crystalline, so merciless an hour before, was filled with soft and amber light that transformed the basin into a lake of gold, in the midst of which rose the mesa, vast, immutable, majestic, laying a black shadow eastward upon the plain. A grandeur of isolation invested its form, a brooding silence girt its immense walls; and the little company of men a-halt at its base gazed aloft in profound contemplation.

At last the Scotchman broke the spell and bade the Mexicans fling off the packs from the exhausted horses. The pair of Indians continued to stare intently upward at the rim of the mesa, hands shielding eyes.

McPherson seized his field glasses and focused them on the point indicated. The guides were right. He made out ruins of a communal house.

"Good—good! Something at last!" he cried.

That night the party made their fire where the brook wimpled near by the mesa. Here in some remote time, to judge by the old river bed, had flowed a strong, sure stream, supplying the primitive irrigation works of these ancient rock dwellers. But drought had dried up its sources; it was now but a mere springtime runnel.

It chanced in the course of the evening that Juan, one of the Mexicans, remembered something. Before supper he had collected firewood from the dead piñons toppled off the mesa rim, and while dragging a log to camp had kicked a straight tongue of iron out of the sand. At the time it appeared of no use—now he was of another mind; and he knew the spot exactly. Thither he went, therefore, and, the light still holding, he presently returned with the iron in his hand.

McPherson and Delano were bathing their sand-bitten feet in the creek, Gresham sat on his blanket naked to the waist for comfort, despite the chill of dusk, and the Indians conversed in guttural tones over their cigarettes, so Juan squatted down beside his companion to exhibit his find.

"A knife I shall make of it," he explained, twirling his mustache with satisfaction. "Then, perceive, when mescal-drunken picaros attack me at a dance——"

"What have you there?" Gresham demanded, in Spanish.

"It is nothing, señor, a poor piece of iron which I picked out of the sand, so worthless."

"Hand it to me!"

"Only in the sand, señor, less than nothing."

"Hand it over, I say, and no nonsense!"

With a protesting shrug the Mexican obeyed. Gresham held the piece of metal against the firelight, contemplatively turning it about. It was smooth, retaining something of its original polish so that it gleamed in the play of flame; its thin, even edge gradually inclined to a sharp, rapier-like point, the opposite end being blunt, rough to the touch, as if the twelve-inch piece had been snapped off a longer blade; a narrow groove channeled the middle of each side to within a finger's length of the point; and Gresham,

drawing the metal across his palm, knew that this was fighting steel.

"Oh, you fellows! Mac—Delano—come here! We've found loot!" he shouted.

There was a splashing in the creek, and the men came across the sand, barefoot and with trousers rolled to the knee. He handed McPherson the object, while Delano squatted on his heels close by.

"Part of a sword—and Spanish forged," said the Scotchman presently. "Note the peculiar drift of edges to the point. Sixteenth-century work, that! Hammered out in Seville, too, if I should venture a guess on the groove. Not so good as Toledo."

"I thought to make a knife of it, a very excellent knife, señor," Juan remarked, still hopeful.

"Knife!" McPherson roared. "Away with you!"

"Out of the sand, you say?" Delano addressed Gresham. "I wonder if it has any relation to the pueblo up yonder."

"Well, when one finds an egg under a hen you infer some relation, don't you?" the first assistant derided.

Throughout the early night they discussed the relic and by what strange shift it had come here. The mesa loomed before them, immense in the starlight. Silent, enduring, it stood veiled in mystery, empty through cycles of years, yet sentient with the brooding spirit of a vanished people. Imagination stirred in the men. They rehabilitated the site—warriors moving on the rock, women moving with jars upon their heads, youths moving in the fields, naked children at play—until even the blood of the Indians kindled and the elder Hopi, long in McPherson's service, rising to his feet while the firelight flickered on his coppery face and linen head fillet, stretched forth an arm.

"I can see them. My skin is their skin. My eyes are their eyes. My heart is their heart. Of the desert were we born. They were many and went up and down the mesa like ants on an ant hill. They were tall, they were straight; and the women ground corn with singing. Corn they had in plenty, and the wells were ever full. I behold them. Then came a swarm of grasshoppers out of the north and ate the ants. The victors remained. But the angry Sun Spirit dried up the land with his breath and they were dispersed." He swept to him a handful of sand, tossing it in the air. "Thus the people of the pueblo are gone like a dream. Thus all the pueblos. Their cornfields are no more, their water jars are broken, their roof poles are fallen, the rattlesnake coils in their corn mill." And slowly lowering his arm, he stood motionless, gazing out into the night.

Next morning they were up at dawn. A fresh examination of the sword point made them but the more eager to come at the pueblo. This was not a simple matter. At first glance the walls, soaring upward in a concave sweep that ended in a projecting rim, appeared unscalable; but in one place there was a fissure in the crown, a clean crack in which they could see blue sky, and through this they knew they must ascend. Then began a search along the rubble of rotten stone heaped about the base, until at length a faint path disclosed itself shelving upward to a ledge.

Thence the trail they had to climb would have taxed the ingenuity of a goat. Seam by seam it had been pounded out by its makers, where only a tribe desperately determined on safety could have imagined a way. Crevices had been filled, slanting surfaces buttressed, jutted slabs hollowed back; but in many places the cunning work had since slipped, and only the notched poles which the Hopis carried enabled the men to proceed.

By all odds, it was one of the most ticklish climbs this side of heaven, McPherson declared, with moments when he could see nothing of Gresham below but the peak of his hat, or of the Indian above except the balls of his heels. Perhaps this is putting it pretty strong; but, at any rate, it must have been a stiffer feat than common. And so by crawling and creeping, by zigzagging and warping, using every craft and every device learned in long experience, and when nothing else would serve mounting one another's shoulders, they finally won the split in the rim. Thereafter the path was less difficult.

When the top was gained they sprawled at ease, sweating profusely.

"Lost the trail halfway up, that doesn't flatter us," McPherson grumbled. "An easier path lies somewhere. But, laddies, this sight is worth a little!"

In truth, the cyclorama was magnificent. Five hundred feet below lay the plain, almost under their hand. The surrounding canyon walls seemed but a stone's throw distant, every gash, every corrugation sharply etched by the morning light.

"And what a fortress for a tribe!" Delano exclaimed. "There was rare fighting here, I warrant, before these fellows were wiped out."

One could imagine the conflict that must have raged round the base, and next, the defenders being pushed up by little and little; now a stand on some ledge or angle, now the night creeping of the enemy, now hand-to-hand grapples, down flying of naked bodies, retreat, tumult at the top, and last of all the desperate battle in the pueblo.

"Come, let us go! We're but dirt shovelers, not dreamers," said McPherson, rousing up.

There was something in dirt shoveling, too, for having bid the Indians lower the supply cord to the Mexicans beneath, he presently waxed complacent over the prospect offered by the pueblo. The surface of the mesa, which comprised many acres, was comparatively smooth, elliptical in shape, and here and there studded with growths of sagebrush or piñon pines. Close at hand rose the massive pile of ruins.

It was the conventional pueblo, built of stone about an open court a thousand feet in length, for the most part four stories high with each successive story set back one behind the other, a huge communal house of hundreds of rooms, an old tribal stronghold. In places it had fallen into mere heaps of rubble, but sections there were that defied the centuries and stood intact, roof and wall. One knowing the builders' rude culture, it was the immense achievement of the thing that captured the imagination. What perseverance of hands, what dauntless spirit, what indomitable will expressed in masonry! McPherson, striding in advance of his companion, flung up a palm in tribute, and boomed forth: "Honor to thee, noblest of pueblos!"

As they passed into its open court, so full of burning sunshine and silence, the men felt, despite their habitude with ruins, a certain awe. How long since human foot had trod this rock? How long since man's voice rang about the street? When the trio halted and listened and when their hobnailed boots no longer clashed on the rock floor, not a movement caught the eye, nor sound disturbed the hush. The horned toad, without even eyelid twitching, might have been part of the stone, the lizard a gray shadow on the wall.

Business before sentiment. Because the brook warned the scientists to waste no time—the Hopis upheld seven fingers for that!—thorough exploration of the ruins must await another season. McPherson decided first to make essential measurements, map notes, and photographs, as was customary, then devote the remaining two or three days

to specific research, with a cut-and-run departure at the end. A reconnoissance of the pueblo having disclosed its general arrangement and established the main features, he and his assistants thereupon went at the structure with tapeline and camera.

By the fourth afternoon, they had completed the preliminary survey, and were rummaging places previously marked as likely. A litter spread everywhere, shards and broken bowls were common—the men did not even soil their hands with them, and buried rooms were left in peace. McPherson wanted only the best, and he and his companions sought for it diligently and in a glow. For they had the quick curiosity of first comers, the sharp relish for discovery; they felt the joy of opening a lost city, and moved under the elusive spell spun of centuries; until finally blistered hands and weary muscles and repeated tasks dissolved the enchantment.

However, they were satisfied; they had many good trophies—pity was they could bear away so few. To be sure, the anthropologist's own particular bit of moon madness lurked ever at the back of their minds; to go farther than a look round in cisterns and estufas, than retrieval of utensils and weapons and wall paintings, than trumpery curio hunting; to turn up a chamber that hinted of extraordinary records, glimmered of notable revelations; in a word, to unearth something that would solve the profound enigma of prehistoric America and fix, once for all, the origin of its most ancient people back to whom even tradition does not reach.

They did not find that, of course—but they found something else!

The event had its inception during the noon meal of the fifth day, eaten by a court wall, where camp had been made. An apparently unimportant remark was the start. When Gresham paused over his plate of bacon and beans to say there was a room just above their heads they had not got into McPherson and Delano were scarcely interested.

"There are fifty hereabouts," answered the Scotchman, who was occupied between bites with contemplation of a round jar set before him, a perfect specimen of painted and indented ware which had been uncovered in a corner.

"But, see! The whole wall is blank to the little window up yonder. And, another thing, the room has no door," Gresham continued. "I've wondered about that for a couple of days, now."

"When this people used ladders half the time? Look for a hole in the roof, which I shouldn't have to tell you."

"The point I'm making, Mac, is that there was a door once, but it was walled up. Now, why?"

"You're very fretful this noon, Gresham. Couldn't the poor bodies here block a door if they took the notion? Let me have a glance at your tongue, my boy; you may need calomel."

"All right, make merry—I'll be the goat. But I intend to know about that room, just the same."

"Ah, there spake the spirit of a true scientist," McPherson hooted, and gulped his cup of tea.

The matter, however, did not stop at this stage, for Gresham was obstinate. When he had wiped his lips, he climbed up to the spot, made a careful examination of the filled doorway, and learned that the chamber was roofed tight with long, flat slabs of rock, which precluded any possibility of a ladder entrance. If a person went in or out the room it would be through the single small window full four stories high over the court; and in respect of that, Gresham concluded, the walking up the wall was not good, besides which a fellow to enter must be thin as a lath. Decidedly the case was queer.

After supper that night, when he

again spoke of the room, McPherson halted him, saying: "Presently, presently. I must first finish with this lad." For the chief and Delano were hot in controversy over the abilities of Coronado and of other Spaniards who sought far and wide the fabled treasures of Quivira and of the mythical Seven Cities.

"Mark you, mark you this, my son, had Coronado been a Scot, and canny," McPherson thundered at Delano, with dogmatic finger, "he first would have demanded there be brought him one of the pennies to pinch."

"And if he'd been a Scot, the penny would have satisfied him," Delano retorted. "No, gold wasn't everything with those old blades, those Spanish captains and conquistadores; they played the whole game, and loved every bit of it—the adventure, the conquest, the danger, even the neglect. For they were men of great heart. Look you how Coronado ranged all the way up to the Missouri River, Pizarro deep down into Peru. A Scot would have sat sourly nursing his knees because he couldn't have oatmeal regularly for breakfast—you miss it yourself. Why, the very sword point we found bespeaks Spanish prowess!"

"Alas, how the boy misunderstands the finest breakfast dish ever invented!" the other complained. "By your adulation of those clanking, bloodthirsty old pillagers, one would think you a Spaniard yourself."

Delano smiled curiously.

"I'm of Spanish descent some way back, if you would know."

"The devil you are!" Gresham broke in. "Your name's French."

Delano patted his mouth with a hand to check a yawn, causing his ring to gleam brightly.

"The name Delano is Spanish, not French," said he, smiling. "It's really De Llano Ruiz y Arrillaga. The last part of the string was dropped when our branch of the family came to Louisiana a couple of centuries ago."

His curiosity of the moment satisfied, Gresham all at once remembered his own absorbing affair and began to speak of the walled doorway.

"Man, you'd make your very mother renounce you," McPherson chafed, who was not easily unfastened from an argument. "Is that still heavy on your stomach? Now, Delano, to go back to Coronado——"

But Gresham would not be put off. He insisted upon reporting the new roof fact concerning the sealed room, until at last his companions, giving in, stretched themselves out full length to listen to his account.

Dusk already lay thick in the court. While he talked, the others now and again peered at the high window hole, barely visible by the last dim light that touched the inner edge of the pueblo. Shortly, one of the Indians was led to cast fresh wood upon the fire, the pitch caught, smoke and sparks went up, the flames leaped, and night shut wholly down.

"So you see I was right about the room," was the narrator's significant conclusion.

"It may have been the sacred serpent house," McPherson proposed, unimpressed. "Let it go at that."

"Or an airplane landing station," Delano said, with a wink at his chief.

Gresham snorted his indignation, next scrambled to his feet. After searching among the implements, he drew a fagot from the fire and swung it once or twice about his head until it was burning clearly.

"I'm going to investigate," he challenged. "I'll put a crowbar through that door, and we'll soon learn whether it was snakes and airplanes or not."

McPherson lifted himself on an elbow. "Oh, come back here, Charlie. You'll step on a sleeping rattler first shot, and be bawling for whisky."

Gresham paid no heed to the words, and vanished inside the pueblo, where presently his torch was seen now appearing and now disappearing from place to place, rising higher and higher in a slow, zigzagging ascent to the top story of the ruin. At length the watchers beheld the light in a breach high up; the flame waved once, a whoop came down to them, and then the place grew dark. Soon they heard the dull clink of iron and an occasional thud of stones.

Minutes passed. The two Hopis conversed low in their own tongue. About the fire's glow there loomed the dark, formless mass of the pueblo. Now that Gresham was gone, his comrades felt a growing concern in the lone window and closed room above their heads. Why, indeed, had it been walled up? Why proscribed?

The sound of excavating ceased, and once more the hush of night rested over the great pile. The Scotchman fingered his beard, and waited. Delano slowly and solicitously rolled a cigarette, from time to time raising his eyes to the lofty room. It was while he leaned forward to pluck a lighted splinter from the fire for his tobacco that the torch wavered in view and Gresham's shout burst on their ears: "Ho! McPherson, Delano! Come here, you fellows; come up here, quick!"

The chief and his assistant sprang to their feet, snatched each a burning pine knot from the fire, and plunged into the pueblo. Where Gresham had made his ascent they knew not, but they for their part forced a way where they could, climbing and doubling and pushing themselves up by knee and shoulder, until at length they espied, some way off, Gresham standing, torch in hand, before a black hole.

"It's in there, what we've worn out feet and hands to find!" he greeted hoarsely, and pointing a finger, as they joined him.

"What?" McPherson demanded.

"The most unbelievable thing, the most solemn thing! The first sight of it just about stopped my heart."

"If ye can't name it, ninny, then let me by!" McPherson roared, he himself now unaccountably agitated; and, brushing Gresham aside, he put foot on the heap of rubbish and thrust himself through the hole, the others after him.

It was a narrow chamber, some dozen paces long, and roofed, as, Gresham had said, with flat slabs; and by his first glance about, the archæologist perceived nothing except bare stones. He was moving forward, when Gresham cried out fiercely for him to look where he stepped. So he lowered his torch and suddenly saw what the cell contained. Outstretched on the floor was a human skeleton, the arm bones extended toward the window.

The three men at sight of it remained transfixed. Stillness hung in the chamber. The flames flickered upon the walls and in corners, stirring huge bat-like shadows, while the thin, pungent smoke drifted slowly off toward the window.

"Poor devil—poor, poor devil!" McPherson said, after a time. "And his face to that little hole, to the last tiny bit left him of blue sky!"

No chiseled ideographs were required to lay bare the tragedy. One could read plain the annal of the room. Gone was the mesa's people, passed away, like some driven dust cloud a phantom of tossing spears and troubled hosts and vain endeavors, vanished over the desert's edge forever; but here in this inmost recess of their crumbling city was still inurned a record of the tribe's savage ferocity.

Gresham said: "Look beyond, just there—that gleam!"

The Scotchman went gently forward, and, lowering his light, stood to see. The others came to his side.

"Oh, I cannot speak!" McPherson exclaimed, as if suffocating.

For there, wedged in a crevice of the stone floor, upright, firm, dully shining, was the rest of the sword, blade and barred silver hilt set like a crucifix—set for a crucifix!

McPherson let his chin go down upon his breast, and, with torch idle by his knees, remained in profound thought. This sword, these bones, the long, nebulous centuries! What a satire upon life! One shrank at the insignificance of man, and grew cold before the inscrutability of events. One's spirit was appalled by the inflexible, purposeless annihilation of time.

No more than he could Gresham or Delano speak—the very blocks forbade it. Outside, elsewhere among the ruins, in the places of pots and corn mills and clay images, they might gossip at will; but now and here, at this moment and in this chamber so charged with despair, so hallowed by death, their souls were constricted.

But presently Delano began to stoop nearer and nearer to the sword. He went upon his knees. And finally, with an intake of breath, he put out his hand that carried the ring and let it rest beside the silver hilt.

"My God, do you see that!" he gasped. "Look, you men! The same crest, the same armorial bearing of my family! Are you asleep! Look at them!"

McPherson, too, got down upon his knees and brought his flame close, while his heart, at he knew not what, thumped as if broke loose.

"Unquestionably the same," he said, after a prolonged scrutiny. Putting hand on the floor, he arose. "I shall maintain the truth of it, aye, even against the scribes and the elders and the chief priests of the Smithsonian itself!"

There was no mistake: on ring and on sword hilt the devices were alike. Delano stayed for a time as he was, thinking. Then, with gentle reverence, he placed his palm on the hilt and looked up at his companions.

"To find his bones and sword here in this lost pueblo!" he said softly. "It's as if I had been led to the spot."

"I grant you that not every man meets an ancestor in this fashion after supper," the Scotchman replied, who, now that he confronted a concrete fact, began to regain his spirits.

"It's certainly a most extraordinary piece of luck for us all," Gresham stated.

"Luck—or God's design," Delano murmured to himself.

"Whatever it is, it's most welcome," the chief said. "You had best get off the floor, my boy."

"Very well; and let us go into the air. I'm shaken by this thing." Delano stood up, looked about uncertainly, then gripped the sword hilt and wrenched the weapon free. "This shall accompany us."

The three of them went down out of the house. By the fire, they fitted the pieces of the sword together, and saw the parts were one; they minutely compared ring and hilt, the silver handle of which was beautifully chased, matched point for point the two escutcheons, until the last faint doubt was dispelled. Finally, they laid the sword aside and sat silent. With the vast pueblo about them, indistinct in the starlight, so dark and hushed, so ancient, so full of mystery, so breathing of other days, so shadowed with dead men, human speech was inadequate to utter the burden of the heart. Only, as they stretched their feet to the fire and drew their blankets about them, McPherson rested on elbow, and, gazing up at the stars declared: *"'For a thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday when it is passed, and as a watch in the night.'"*

With morning, McPherson and

Gresham were free of the night's oppression, alert again, bubbling with the discovery. Delano, it appeared, had been up before them and gone with a square of canvas to the chamber. Too, the pieces of the weapon were missing. When he returned, at breakfast time, he sat down to the meal with a corded bundle next his thigh. He told McPherson it contained the broken sword and the bones of the old conquistador.

"You did that without our having made photographs?" the chief said, aghast. "This is terrible. It all shall be replaced immediately. Delano, I can't conceive you in this amazing thoughtlessness."

"You'll probably conceive me worse. It wasn't thoughtlessness; and there'll be no photographs."

McPherson's jaw dropped, as if by a jerk at his beard. "Boy, you're mad!" he cried. "Listen to me! This is the most authentic fact of pueblo history yet discovered; this is the finest spiritual revelation anywhere of the Spanish conquests. No photographs, indeed! We shall put back the bones and the sword in their positions this very minute. Bear this in mind, also, the bones must go to the Smithsonian along with the sword; and if you love your country, which I suspect you do, you'll donate your ring to complete the collection. Ah, I believe we've something now to stir the grubby souls of those fellows back yonder in Washington!"

Delano gave him a queer, strained look. "I expected you to say that, even to the ring, because I'm aware in archæological matters just how fanatical you are. You can't, of course, see this thing in any other way than your way; and I'm sorry my action will displease you. But I know I'm right. So hear now what I say: None of the three shall go to Washington, neither the ring nor the sword nor the bones."

"And why not, crazy man?" McPherson stormed. "Are they not the property of the institution, whose authority you acknowledge, whose bread and salt you eat? You shall keep faith!"

"These are sacred relics," Delano replied firmly, "and will never be displayed for the idle gibes of vulgar sightseers who stroll through the Smithsonian—I've watched the fools and buffoons at it. Last of all, I'm convinced beyond all argument that I'm here under Divine guidance, after centuries, to restore these things to their rightful place."

"Their rightful place is in the Smithsonian, I tell you!"

"It's Spain—and to Spain they shall go."

"Good heavens, what insanity! He's not responsible, he's gone daft. I'll take the articles into my possession without loss of time and discuss the matter afterward, when the boy regains his reason."

He reached forth a determined hand to seize the canvas bundle, but Delano snatched it first, and sprang to his feet.

"Would you steal it from me?" he cried, white with passion.

"Yes, and murder you to boot, before I'd go home now with only an old wives' tale and a daubed pot to show for it! Oh, I can't believe you will commit this sin, Delano, I won't believe it! Well you know I would never lift my hand against you. But I ask you this last time, not as your chief but as a comrade, more, as a stanch and faithful friend, I ask you to give them to me."

"It is useless to ask."

McPherson turned and went a step away to hide his countenance.

Gresham, who during the dispute had effaced himself as much as possible, now spoke a word. "Come, Delano, be a good fellow, and give in. Don't let the chief suffer the disappointment of his life. You're hurting him to the heart."

"It's not for me to surrender these things, for they are an ordained trust. I won't be swerved. I'm but the instrument in a plan of God that must be fulfilled."

The final word.

When his two companions later went to finish their work, for this was the last day, Delano did not join them. He was both suspicious and mortally offended. He rejected Gresham's conciliatory overtures. He refused to talk at all, sitting on a rock some way off and smoking a cigarette darkly, with his precious bundle on his knees. At noon, when McPherson and Gresham returned, they learned from the younger Hopi that Delano had made fast the supply cord at the top of the path, and by its aid gone down. The men hastened to the mesa's rim.

"What is that?" Gresham exclaimed, pointing at a black dot far out on the plain.

McPherson examined it with his glasses. "A man—Delano! By all the gods, he's made a start for Spain! There goes the sword. We must catch him or he'll starve in those canyons. The boy is as cracked as Don Quixote. Collect our traps and let us be stirring."

Little more need be told. Delano did not starve, for he had made his preparations for departure with full understanding of the hardships the flight would incur, picking carefully his horse, his water bottle, ammunition, and food. Nor did the party overtake him, for what with the start he had and what with the broken nature of the country, it is doubtful if by another noon their ways had not completely diverged.

And in consequence, be it said, the youth came to Spain, with his ring and his sword and his bones; for he apprised McPherson of the fact by letter some months afterward, and hoped McPherson was in good health and happy—he himself was, and wondered if he were fired—and supposed that was the case. Well, he was remaining in Spain for a time, anyway. Would McPherson kindly send him a copy of the printed report of the pueblo discovery when it was published? It would be interesting reading. And so forth and so on.

"Yet he did very wrong, very wrong, mind you," the Scotchman said, with a grave shake of his head. "He is too medieval to have the scientific spirit, lacks an open, judicious mind. Now, as for those reports of which we were talking, does not my story bear me out? They wouldn't print a word of that little room, or of the sword, or the ring, unless I showed the objects themselves and pictures made on the spot. Answer me, don't those fellows at Washington extinguish the light in everything? Did they not—and I speak with all compassion—did they not desiccate the soul right out of the account of the Broken Sword Pueblo?"

And I said they did.

Watch for "Morgo, The Mighty," by Sean O'Larkin, in the next issue.

THE CINDERELLA BANDIT

IN the old fairy tale the prince went hunting until he found the girl who could fit the slipper. In Pittsburgh, at this moment, there is a romantic young bandit who has a slipper complex of another variety. He accosts young women and forcibly removes just one of their slippers, then makes his escape without taking anything else, and without making any explanation. He has just stolen his fifth trophy.

OR MAYBE ALASKA

By JOHN RANDOLPH PHILLIPS

A Tense Situation Sends Two Assorted Adventurers Down the Dusty Highways

THE first time I ever saw Wirt Coleman, was the morning he came into "Butch" Cleveland's pool room in Mayesville. I was rack boy in Butch's place then, and I was alone that morning, since Butch never got down till around ten.

"Hello, kid!" Wirt said.

"Hello!" I said.

"Shoot a game?" he asked.

"Sure," I said.

While we played, I watched him. He wasn't a big man—not more than five feet ten inches tall and weighing very little over one hundred sixty-five—but he was lean and hard, and he was a man you'd look twice at. There was something about his tanned face that made you think he'd seen a lot of wind-whipped water and sun-beaten desert, and maybe snow-capped mountain ranges. A fellow that had been about, you know—and been stamped by the places he'd seen.

"Going to stay a while?" I asked.

"Just passing through," he said.

"How do you like our town?" I wanted to know next.

"All right," he said. He had a slow, mellow, lazy voice that could have come from nowhere but the deep South; and his movements, too, were slow and easy—yet lithe. There was something about him that I liked, and something that I didn't understand and, for the moment, therefore, didn't like.

"You're a great talker, aren't you?" I said, with a laugh.

He leaned on the table and looked at me.

"Not kidding me, are you?" he said, and there was something in his voice that suggested that I might as well not kid him.

"Shoot," I said peevishly, for he was beating me.

A moment later he ran five balls and won the game. I racked them up and we began again.

"Spot you the fifteen ball this time," he offered.

"What's the use of spotting the house man?" I said. "You ain't as hot as you think you are, anyway. Shoot!"

He proceeded then to run every ball from the one to the twelve, which gave him the game, since we were shooting in rotation. I got griped and didn't say anything more to him for a while. But I kept wondering who he was, and where he was going. "Just passing through," hadn't told me much.

Butch came in presently and I quit shooting, because Butch didn't like for his rack boy to fool away time. I went over and began to brush off the front table. Butch, the fat old devil, settled at his desk and looked over the two letters that had come. The stranger, Wirt Coleman, flopped into a chair, closed his eyes, and went to sleep. Butch didn't notice him or he would have run him out. Butch didn't like for fellows to go to sleep in his place.

It wasn't long till the boys began drifting in. Butch saw Jim Candler, and he said: "Hello, Jim—want to shoot the old master a game?"

"All right," said Jim. "Spot me thirty-five?"

This Jim Candler couldn't shoot much, but he was just a plain fish made to order for Butch. Butch would spot him thirty-five in a game of rotation, in which the winning count is sixty-one, bet him a dollar on each game, and win anywhere from ten to twenty dollars at one session.

They started shooting that way now, on the first table. A crowd gathered round and I quit work and slipped up to watch. Pretty soon this Coleman guy came up, too. He stood with his eyes half closed and watched Butch, not paying much attention to Jim Candler, who wasn't worth it.

Butch, as usual, went right after Jim's goat. He'd kid the poor devil and laugh when he missed a shot. He'd say: "People, I want to tell you I'm always glad to get this Candler money! I never did see any better money. Folks are always glad to take it." Then he'd laugh that big bullfrog laugh of his and his fat belly would shake like a toad's. Jim would get red in the face and chew his lower lip—and miss the next shot.

Butch won about nine dollars straight. Then Jim said: "Spot me forty this time, Butch."

"What do you think I am—a fish?" Butch said.

"No, I'm the fish," Jim growled.

"Well, take it or leave it," said Butch. "I didn't ask you to play."

They started playing again. "Shoot this game for five dollars," Butch suggested. "I've got some work to do, and I'll give you a chance to win your money back."

That game was pretty tight, because Jim had a little luck. Finally they each had enough so that the next ball would give either one the game, and it was Butch's shot, with the fourteen ball lying not two inches from the pocket, right where Jim had left it on a bum shot. Butch chalked and chalked his cue.

"It looks like rain, Jim," he said. "Boy, it certainly does look like rain for you."

"For God's sake, go on and shoot!" Jim said.

"It looks like rain, Jim," said Butch. He bent over the table, stroked his cue, and grinned. "It looks like rain, Jim," he said again. Then he shut his eyes and made the shot, picked up Jim's five-spot, and started toward the cue-stick rack.

"Want to shoot me a game?" said a voice right beside me.

I looked around and saw that it was Wirt Coleman who had spoken. He walked over to the rack and selected a cue. Butch looked at him in that cool, half-sneering way he always used with strangers.

"I ain't particular about it," he said, "but come on. How'll we play? Five bucks a game?"

Everybody expected Wirt to crawfish then, but he just grinned and said all right. I racked the balls up and Wirt started to shoot. But Butch stopped him and said they'd toss a coin for the break.

Wirt grinned again. "What kind of place is this?" he said. "I thought the house man always give the other guy the break."

Butch glared at him, then told him to go ahead and shoot. Wirt wasn't so hot in that game. Butch beat him easy. The second game was tighter. Butch won it, though, and he began to grin. "I know some more good money," he said. "What's your name, fella, so's I'll know what to call the jack I win from you?"

"It don't matter," said Wirt. "I reckon I'll have it back in a minute."

It took him longer than a minute, but in an hour he had won thirty bucks from Butch, and Butch was madder than all hell. He saw now that Wirt had, as they say in the pool rooms, sucked him along—held back on his shooting until Butch thought he'd hooked another sucker, and then turned loose on him.

"We'll shoot this one game for twenty dollars," Butch said, "and call it a day."

"Suits," said Wirt.

It was Wirt's break—and break is right. He knocked in twenty-five points on that first shot, then he ran twenty-two more. That gave him forty-seven, and he had the eight ball lined up with the fourteen for a combination shot. The fourteen would give him the game.

He turned around, chalking his cue, and looked at Butch. Butch was sweating. Wirt chalked his cue some more. Then he said: "It looks like rain, Butch." He swung around then, sighted his shot, and, just like Butch had done, shut his eyes and made it. When he scooped up Butch's twenty-dollar bill, he looked around at the guys loafing in there and said: "Can you fellows tell me if this Cleveland money is any good in this town?"

The loafers all laughed, and Butch jumped in front of Wirt.

"Are you tryin' to kid somebody, mister?" he said deep in his thick throat.

"Well, no," said Wirt. "I'm just having my little fun. Sorry it ain't appreciated." Then he brushed by Butch and went out the door.

It was a little bit early for my lunch, but I decided I might as well go now as later. When I got to the lunch counter, there was Wirt perched on a stool.

"Have dinner on me, kid," he said.

"I've got money," I said.

"All right," he laughed. "Let's match for it."

So we did and he stuck me for both dinners, and I was a little sore.

"I expect your boss is mad at me," he said. "I'm always butting in where I ain't got any business. But I never did like to see a shark hook a poor fish."

"You hooked Butch," I reminded him.

"That tub!" he said contemptuously.

"I'm liable to hook him some more." Then he stopped eating and looked at me. "What's your name, kid?"

"Steve Walker," I said.

"That's a good name," he said solemnly.

"Sure it's a good name," I snapped. "But who asked you about it?"

He laughed. "Take the chip off your shoulder, kid," he told me.

"You take it off," I said.

He laughed again, and said: "You've got enough spunk to get you into plenty of trouble, all right. Are you going to shave your mustache or keep it?"

I didn't have any more mustache then than a guinea pig, so I knew he was kidding me, and I got sore again. "Aw, pipe down," I said. "I got to eat my dinner and get back to work." I turned my head and began to eat fast. I could feel him looking at me, and I imagined that he was smiling.

"How old are you?" he asked me after a while.

"Seventeen," I said.

"Live here?"

"No—Richmond," I told him.

"Ran away from home, huh?"

"No," I said. "My mother died and my old man married a woman I didn't like. I didn't run away—I just left."

I could hear him laughing far down in his throat, and I went back to my dinner; and as I ate I wondered again who he was, and where he came from, and where he was going. There was still that something about him that I didn't understand—and there was that part, too, that I liked.

"You ain't got any business working for that Butch guy," he said presently. "You're a nice kid. Why don't you go back home and go to school?"

"The deacons will now take up the collection," I said, "after which Reverend Coleman will lead us in prayer."

His grin went all over his face. "Damned if I don't like you, kid," he said. "But you're too hard for a seven-teen-year-old. How'd you know my name?"

"Saw it on your pocketbook when you took it out to put Butch's money in it," I said. I remembered the way Butch had looked and suddenly I laughed. "It did rain after all, didn't it?" I grinned.

"That tub!" Wirt said, and he laughed, too.

Presently, leaving him in the lunch counter, I went back to work, wondering if he had meant it when he said: "I'll see you again, kid, before I leave town," and hoping somehow that he had. I liked that tanned face of his, with its two blue eyes that in some way told you he'd seen a lot of things in his life and had liked most of them.

Work in the pool room was dull that afternoon and Butch was in a bad humor. When he wasn't cussing himself he was cussing me, which was his way generally. I was almost mad enough to quit—but not quite; because Butch and I had a funny financial relation. I had worked for him four weeks and I had got just two weeks' salary. He kept holding the rest of it back and telling me I'd get it as soon as he'd paid some bills that couldn't wait another minute. I was broke now, and I knew I wouldn't have much show if I quit my job and started out that way.

Butch kept grumbling and muttering to himself about how he was going to get even with Wirt. The way he talked, you'd have thought Wirt was lower than a snake's belly and had run the rottenest game over Butch that any one man had ever run over another one. It got tiresome hearing him say the same things over and over again. But I didn't say anything, because I knew how heavy Butch's hand could be.

Wirt Coleman came in about the middle of the afternoon. Butch didn't notice him, and Wirt came down where I was. He dropped into a chair and smiled.

"Hello, roughneck," he said.

But I was looking out the door and didn't answer him. I was watching a girl who had come down the street and was about to go into the drug store. She was a girl with red-gold hair and slim silk legs, and I knew that her eyes were blue—even bluer than Wirt's—and that when she smiled, Greta Garbo could go jump in the reservoir. I had seen her smile at other people.

When I turned and saw that Wirt was half-smiling at me I flushed.

"If you were thinking of a date and kind of broke, I could let you have a ten-spot," he said.

"Aw, shucks," I said, and looked away from him, feeling kind of hot and embarrassed. "She's the mayor's daughter."

"Meaning," said Wirt. "that she wouldn't go out with a rack boy?" I guess I nodded. Anyway, Wirt added: "Well, kid, it's always a good thing to remember that there are several other girls in the world." I nodded again, but since I was seventeen I didn't believe him.

Pretty soon I asked him right out who he was and what he did.

"I'm a bum, kid," he said. "Just a bum. I ramble around and see the sights and then pull out to see some more. Some people would call me a soldier of fortune and others would say I was a hobo."

"Where you going now?" I asked.

"New Orleans, maybe," he said, "or San Francisco, or maybe Alaska. I don't ever know."

"I guess it's a great life," I said sort of wistfully.

"Depends on how you look at it," was all the answer he gave me; and presently he drifted up to the front table and got into a four-handed game of way pool. Butch came over and watched the game. There was a mean look in his eyes when he watched Wirt, and I could tell he was studying Wirt's style. After half an hour he nodded to me and led me back by the washroom.

"What's that guy's name?" he asked me.

I told him and he nodded and went back up front. Pretty soon he was cussing me because I didn't get up there and rack the balls quick enough.

When the four-handed game broke up, Butch walked over to Wirt and asked him if he'd like to shoot some more with him. They started shooting way pool, too, at twenty-five cents a way, which isn't exactly low stakes for a small town when you're shooting five ways—seven, eleven, fifteen, balls and game. They played for two hours and Wirt won fourteen dollars. Butch took it all right this time. Perhaps that was because Wirt didn't kid him, or maybe there was another reason.

That night Wirt asked me to go to the picture show with him, but I couldn't, because I had to work; so Wirt just hung around the pool room and watched the other fellows shoot and talked to me. I found out that he wasn't even sleeping in a rooming house. There was a vacant shack down by the railroad tracks and he used that.

"In this game, kid," he said, "you don't patronize hotels or swell restaurants."

I learned that in the last six months he'd been in Nova Scotia, Ontario, Michigan, and all the States between Michigan and Virginia, where he was now. Just bumming his way along, picking up rides on the highways, beating his way on freights now and then, and just generally drifting about. Adventures had happened to him all along the route, just as they had been happening to him ever since he took to the open road six years before.

As I listened to him I could feel something inside of me that swelled as he talked. I guess it was my heart feeling sorry for me because I had to spend

my time as rack boy in a dingy pool room. When he went away that night, I was afraid I'd never see him again. Very likely he'd be gone in the morning.

But he wasn't. He came into the pool room by eight o'clock and started practicing on the first table. After a while he called me up there and showed me some trick shots that I'd never even heard about, and he taught me how to make three-cushion bank shots, how to figure the diamonds on the table railing, and stuff like that.

I got him to talking about the places he'd been and the things he'd seen, and I just flopped in a chair and listened; and I guess maybe my mouth flew open and I forgot to shut it. I'd never dreamed there were as many places in the world as he told me about. All the time I kept thinking how dull everything in this town was, everything but the mayor's daughter—and it wasn't any of my business whether she was dull or not.

Finally I said: "Take me with you when you leave here!"

Wirt put down his cue and looked at me a long time, and at last he said: "No, kid. I like the hell out of you—but I ain't going to take you with me. It ain't a very lovely life sometimes. You go back home, kid, and get some more schooling. That counts a lot—and don't you forget it. I often wish I'd had more."

I could have hit him for talking about school when all the time my heart was swelling and my brain was reeling at the thought that maybe he would take me. I couldn't think of anything that would be any finer than just bumming over the world with him. There was dust and dirt and dullness in the pool room and dust and dirt and dullness all over the town—and I had been thinking that maybe in a month Wirt and I would be bumming around the water front in New Orleans, maybe taking a notion all of a sudden to hop a boat down to Rio, or to hit out for California.

"You won't take me?" I finally said.

"No, kid," he answered, "I won't take you."

"All right," I said. "I'm not begging you," and I got up and went back to the wash room. I hated him, I told myself—hated him because he could do the things and go the places that I couldn't.

When I came back I saw that Butch had come in and that he was shooting straight pool on the front table with Wirt. They were shooting for five bucks a game and Wirt had suddenly dropped his easy-going air and was shooting as if his life depended on it. Not that he was nervous or strained, but just cool and grim and awfully intent.

Butch was sweating like a horse. The veins were knotted in his fat neck, and his eyes looked like a pig's. He had lost his nerve or something, because he wasn't jockeying and kidding Wirt, as he did with every other man he shot. He smoked all the time. He blew the smoke out fiercely, and lit fresh cigarettes off the butts of the old ones.

They played fifty-point games of "straight" and they played every shot for all it was worth; and Wirt kept on winning. Sometimes he whistled between his teeth, but usually he was silent. I stood there and hated him because he wouldn't take me with him, and hoped furiously that Butch would break him. Yes, break him!

But Butch couldn't. Butch kept getting in the hole. I wondered why he didn't quit, because anybody could see that Wirt was the better shot. I guess it was just his pride that made him stick, like a little bulldog trying to get a grip on a police dog that is cutting him all to pieces.

Finally I went out to lunch. When I came back, they were still shooting and Wirt had a long row of markers

on the score wire above the table. Butch was white in the face, except where the red veins stood out. A crowd had gathered round them.

"Where the hell have you been?" Butch snarled. I told him I'd been to lunch and he used a half dozen oaths in describing how worthless I was. Then he missed an easy shot, and Wirt made a run that gave him the game.

"Rack 'em up," Butch said. "Rack 'em up, damn you!" He reached out and caught me by the arm. "I'll learn you to jump when I speak!" he said, and he twisted my arm.

Then Wirt Coleman said: "Don't be a damn jackass. Let go the kid's arm."

And Butch said: "Who asked you to butt in?"

"Nobody," said Wirt. He said it softly and soothingly, and his eyes were half closed as he leaned on his cue stick.

"Then keep out," Butch told him. He still had me by the arm and his fingers were biting in and bruising me. I tried to twist away. He yanked me up short, and I think he was going to hit me. Only Wirt rapped him over the wrist with his cue stick and his fingers flew loose.

I thought Wirt was going to be killed then. I yelled out something and tried to grab a cue stick from the rack. Somebody pushed me out of the way and I fell halfway under the table. When I got to my feet, two of the boys were holding Butch, and Wirt was standing up in front of him, with a little red streak across one cheek where Butch's fist had raked. But Wirt was as cool as a man could be, under the circumstances.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," he was saying. "Ain't you man enough to take a licking without abusing a kid? Pay me the thirty-five bucks I won off you, and I'll clear out. The hell with this place!"

Butch had got himself in hand now. He gave Jim Candler thirty-five dollars and Jim gave it to Wirt; then Wirt went out.

"Damn his soul!" said Butch.

He said it again.

"Now, Butch," said Bill Mahan.

"You shut your mouth," Butch shouted. He walked over to his desk behind the cash register and sat down. I was afraid of him then, and I tried to sneak out the door. "You come back here!" he said. He wasn't shouting now; his voice was low and cold. I came back into the room.

Butch sat at his desk the rest of the afternoon, and I fiddled around, racking balls, brushing off tables, and retipping cue sticks. Finally he called me up to him.

"Steve," he said, "I'm sorry about this afternoon. I really am, Steve. I don't know what makes me such a damn fool."

"That's all right, Butch," I said.

"Will you forget it, Steve?" he asked.

"Sure," I said; and he reached across the desk and I shook hands with him. What else was there to do?

I went back to rack up the balls for a couple of guys shooting at the back table. When I looked around again, Bill Mahan and Clyde Dorn and "Clipper" Smith were standing around Butch's desk. Butch was talking to them in a low voice and waving his hand every now and then. They were all cronies of Butch's and backed him in everything he did. I didn't like them, because I was afraid of them.

When it came time for me to get my supper, Butch said we'd go out together. He asked Clipper Smith to look after things until we got back. "Where does this Coleman eat?" he said.

"At the lunch counter round the corner," I said.

Butch and I went down there and took one of the tables. Wirt wasn't in sight. I hadn't expected to see him, for I imagined that by now he was on

his way again—to New Orleans, or California, or maybe Alaska. I felt lonely and wistful, and sore at him still, even if he had taken up for me. I thought of all the places he'd be seeing. I couldn't eat much supper on account of thinking of them.

And then he walked in. He grinned at me and looked right past Butch. But Butch went up to him.

"I want to apologize to you," Butch said.

"Let it go," Wirt answered, and turned his back.

"Come on—give a guy a break," Butch said. "I lost my temper. You know what a guy will do then. I've made friends all right with Steve. Come on back and eat with us."

Wirt looked at Butch, then he looked at me.

"All right," he said.

He and Butch didn't say much. They just ate. I didn't say anything, either; I was busy thinking.

Suddenly Butch said: "Just to show that bygones are bygones, will you come up to my room to-night for a round of poker?"

"I guess not," said Wirt.

"Why not?" Butch asked.

"Oh, I just don't want to," Wirt answered.

Butch argued with him about it. He said: "I didn't think you would be a man to hold it against a fellow because he lost his temper." Then he argued some more, in a way that was gentle for him.

Finally Wirt said: "Oh, all right. What time?"

"I'll close early," Butch told him. "Say, ten o'clock. Suppose you be at my room at ten fifteen," and he gave Wirt instructions about how to get there. Then he shook hands with Wirt again, and he and I went back to the pool room, where Mahan and Dorn and Clipper Smith were waiting for Butch. I watched the four of them go into a huddle around Butch's desk, and I wondered at the sudden change in Butch, wondered if after all there wasn't a decent streak in him.

At a quarter of ten Butch called me into the wash room. "I've got something for you to do, Stevie," he said, "and I don't want any argument about it. See?"

"All right, Butch," I said. "What is it?"

Then he told me, told me with his heavy face jammed close to mine and his voice filled with the same hate that glared out of his eyes. When he finished, I said: "To hell with you! I won't do it!"

He hit me hard across the mouth with his left hand, and his right fist slapped against my temple. I fell down on the floor and blood trickled out of my mouth, and my head felt like it was going to fly off. I tried to get up. Butch jerked me to my feet. He slapped me across the mouth again, and there was blood on the back of his hand.

"Don't tell me what you'll do or won't do!" he said. "I'll tear you apart, you little devil. You going to do what I told you?"

I thought of Wirt and his pleasant blue eyes and his lazy voice and his half smile—and then I tasted the blood in my mouth and felt my head throb.

"All right, Butch," I said.

At five minutes after ten the five of us—Bill Mahan, Clyde Dorn, Clipper Smith, Butch, and myself—were in Butch's room, over a grocery store. They had a drink, and I wanted one, too, because I thought it might take the blood taste out of my mouth. But Butch said no, that I had to have a clear head and a quick eye to-night.

When Wirt came in he said: "H'lo, kid—you play poker, too?"

"He's here to run after sandwiches, and drinks, and be a general handy boy," Butch cut in. "We'll let him pinch the pot every now and then." He

whacked me across the shoulders and said: "Steve's a good kid."

They sat down to play. Wirt took a chair that Butch indicated. It was right in front of a wall mirror. I sat to one side of the table and held a magazine as if I were reading it. I could see Wirt's back in the mirror if I looked up, and his hands as they drummed on the table.

The deal fell to Butch. They had agreed to play draw poker—straight draw with nothing wild. Butch dealt. I read my magazine. Pretty soon I saw Bill Mahan rake in the pot. Clipper Smith won the next one, then Wirt won two in succession. Butch cussed his luck and complimented Wirt on the way he had played the second hand.

When the fourth was dealt, I looked around my magazine into the mirror, then laid one of my hands flat out, palm up, on my knee. That meant that Wirt didn't have anything worth speaking of. I hated myself as I never had hated anything or anybody. Wirt drew to an ace and a queen and caught a pair of sevens and a jack. I opened and shut my hand twice, which meant he had a pair; then I stretched out my five fingers, held them that way a fraction of a second, then closed three of them, leaving the thumb and forefinger still stretched out. Five and two. I had signaled that Wirt had a pair of sevens.

I knew that Mahan, Dorn, Smith, and Butch had all, while pretending to be studying their hands, glanced casually at me. I was not surprised when Dorn called Wirt's bluff and beat his two sevens with a pair of nines. Also, I had got over being surprised at myself. Butch had kept close to me ever since he had hit me in the wash room. I hadn't had a chance to run. I didn't have any chance now. The inside of my mouth was still bleeding a faint trickle that tasted pungent on the tip of my tongue.

The game went on. Every now and then Butch and the others would ignore my signals and let Wirt win a pot, so as to keep his suspicions from coming out. I wondered if Butch would ask me to go out after sandwiches or not and decided that he wouldn't. That was just a stall. He knew better than to let me out of his sight.

I wondered, too, how much money they would get off Wirt. I hadn't thought he would have much, since he said he was a bum, but Butch had said there was a thick layer of twenties in his pocketbook. Then, too, he had the money he'd won from Butch—and he'd probably gathered up quite a bit more in various pool rooms on his trip South. But over it all, of course, was Butch's revenge.

The hours slid by. Pretty soon it was one o'clock. They were playing hard now, and Wirt's face had become grim. I knew he was wondering why the others dropped out every time he had a good hand and why they called every time he bluffed. But still, he didn't get griped. His voice was as soft as ever, his half smiles just as warm. I could imagine him smiling that way if he and I, say, were bumming along together through some lonely country and didn't know where we were going to sleep and didn't have money enough to buy a hot dog. It was the kind of smile that would send a glow all over you and make you grin back.

I looked at the stack of bills in front of Butch. Wirt had had money after all. In front of Butch were nearly two hundred dollars that once had belonged to Wirt. Butch was the big winner, but the others had some of Wirt's money, too.

Peeping around the magazine into the mirror, I saw a pair of queens in Wirt's hand. He opened for three dollars. I signaled. Smith dropped out. Mahan boosted it a couple of dollars. Dorn stayed, and Butch shot it up to ten dollars. Wirt met the raise, so did Mahan

and Dorn. I caught a glimpse of Butch's hand. He had two kings.

When they had drawn, Wirt had queens and fours, and Butch kings and deuces. My insides seemed to turn over as Wirt pushed out chips to the tune of ten dollars. Everybody dropped out but Butch. He met Wirt's bet and raised it twenty. There was a grin on his face. Wirt didn't have any more chips. He dug down into his pants pocket, and up came a twenty-dollar bill.

"Here goes my last simoleon, mister," Wirt said, in that soft, lazy voice. "Look here, money, don't you leave me. My last simoleon—but I sure got to call. I can't let these babies——"

I don't know how it happened, but I was on my feet then.

"Grab your money, Wirt!" I yelled. "They're crooking you!"

Wirt's hand closed like a vise on that bill. He laid the cards down. He turned to me.

"What did you say, kid?" His voice rang like steel, even if it were still soft and low. I could feel those other four looking at me, could sense the way they tensed themselves.

But I said: "I've been looking in that mirror and signaling them what you had. I——"

Things happened after that. Wirt jumped to his feet. Butch flung himself over the table at him. The other three bounded up. I started for the door. But Butch hadn't forgotten me. He hit me a back-handed swipe and I fell to the floor, with the blood shooting out of my mouth and nose and my eyes suddenly dim.

I could still see enough, though, to take in the fight. Wirt was working for the door. He knocked Clipper Smith out with the chair he'd been sitting in. With what was left of the chair he put Mahan to the floor, too. He jammed something into his coat pocket, and I caught a glimpse of a thick roll of bills. I was glad that he had grabbed some of the money, at least, when he jumped up from the table.

Butch and Dorn got Wirt between them, just as I was getting to my feet. Wirt knocked Dorn down with an uppercut. Before Dorn could get to his feet, Wirt had picked up another chair and crowned Butch. He was at the door now. He yanked it open. Butch and Dorn dived, but they missed him. I could hear Wirt clattering down the stairs. Butch and Dorn ran out on the landing. I crept to the door.

I heard Butch say: "He's gone now. We can't chase him out in the street." And then: "Damn that boy—I'll beat him to death."

Crouching by the door, I waited for him to come back. Clipper Smith still lay unconscious, but Mahan sat up, with a sick look on his face.

Butch and Dorn came back. I dived for the stairs. Butch yelled out something and his fingers raked a furrow along my side. I thought I had made it, but his hand closed on my belt. And so they took me back into the room.

I stood against the wall and waited for Butch to beat me. Clipper Smith got to his feet. He began to curse. Mahan stood swaying. Dorn stared hatefully in my direction. And Butch moved toward me. He lifted his right hand. His left wound itself into my collar. I looked him in the face and said: "You'd better kill me—if you don't want to see hell soon!"

Then I shut my eyes and waited. But Butch didn't hit me. He whirled around instead, for the door had slammed open. I jerked loose and grabbed a chair. In Wirt's hands, held high, was a section of railing that he had ripped off the banisters down the stairs. He came right into the room, wielding it.

"Run for the door, kid!" he yelled.

But as he had come back for me, I was to be in the fight as long as he was.

I put Mahan back to the floor, just as Dorn and Smith and Butch made for Wirt. Then I swung my chair on their backs. The piece of railing flew to pieces in Wirt's hands. But Dorn was down. And Smith followed him when my chair crashed home again.

Butch, though, had got Wirt. He had him around the body and all his two hundred pounds went into that squeeze. Wirt's eyeballs popped out. His breath wheezed. I banged the chair over Butch's head, and banged it again. He and Wirt crashed to the floor, as the chair splintered in my hands. Wirt whirled over and lunged loose from Butch. I saw him cock his right hand, then it smashed home to Butch's jaw like lightning.

We were running down the stairs next, Wirt and I. We ran to the shack down by the railroad tracks. When we stopped, I took a good look at Wirt. It was the biggest kick of my life to think that he had fought himself bloody for me.

"Can I go with you, Wirt?" I said.

He grinned. "What about the mayor's little daughter?"

"Aw, there's several more girls in the world," I said.

Then he was laughing and holding out his hand, and saying: "You bet you can go with me, kid! Partners, that's us."

And I said: "Where are we going, Wirt?"

In the moonlight I could see a funny, far-away look come into his eyes, as if he were watching something far down a road that led to the horizon, and beyond.

"Well, now, I don't know, kid," he said. "New Orleans, maybe, or California, or maybe Alaska."

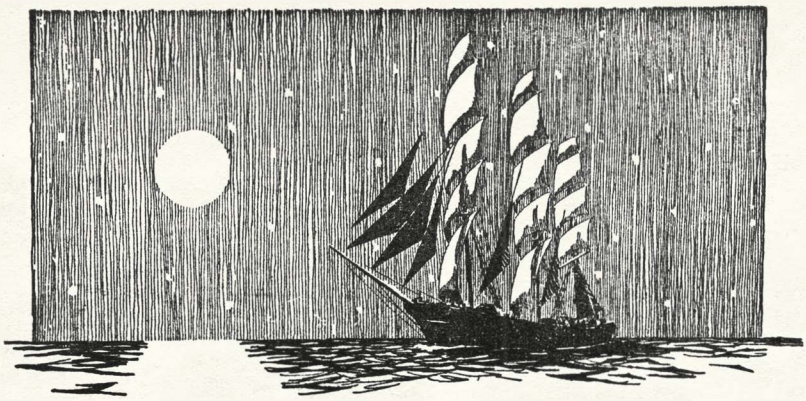
Wirt and Steve go advertising in "When The Road Gets Rocky," in the next issue.

THE MOST TRYING JOB IN THE WORLD

HOW would you like to have nothing to do but sit and smoke and read books, entertain a visitor or so at infrequent intervals, enjoy unlimited peace and solitude—and get paid for it? Swell, eh? Ah, but there's a catch in it.

J. J. Mills has the job. It's at a place called Furnace Wells, located in Death Valley. The heat there is one hundred and forty in midsummer, and water is practically unknown, except for a deep, narrow well here and there, to get water out of which you must lower tin cans on four-hundred foot lengths of barbed wire. Birds that fly into the valley get lost and drop dead. Many men have died there.

Mr. Mills runs Furnace Wells—a sort of desert shelter kept up by the Santa Fe Railroad. He is a genial host, and will set you up to a good meal and show you all his inventions for escaping the heat. The best one is a sprinkler over the house, for cooling it off. The water is piped in from a great distance. Mr. Mills seeks no money for his hospitality, but he may request that you send him a book to read—no junk; he likes adventures or scientific books.



Water Front

By W. E. Solenberger

DEEP shadows shroud the silent docks,
Though moonlight plays on boom and spar;
And loaded scows toss restlessly,
As tugboats whistle from afar.

The harbor waters dance with light
In pathways formed of beaten gold,
Save where some somber craft slips by,
In silhouette drawn black and bold.

The surge of lazy, shifting swells
Makes slapping sounds against the piers—
A ferry leaves the farther shore,
And moans a warning as it nears.

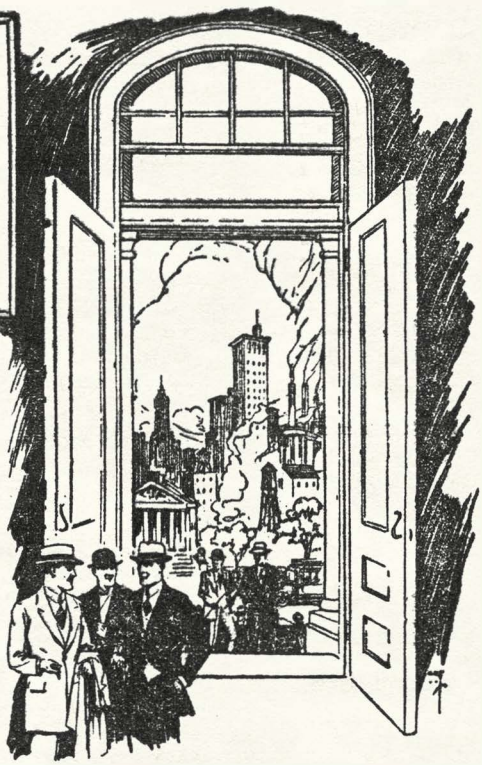
High piled the crates and boxes lie
Where lighters slumber through the night;
And there a silent figure sits,
With cigarette a point of light.

A rakish freighter waits the morn
To start her passage down the bay;
And streamers strew an empty wharf
Where some proud liner sailed to-day.

* * * * * *

A watchman pauses on his beat
To sniff a breeze that smacks of sea—
The silent figure chucks his butt
And slinks away reluctantly.

The POPULAR CLUB



Every reader of THE POPULAR MAGAZINE, man or woman, qualifies as a lover of good stories and as a good fellow, and is therefore automatically and entirely without obligation elected a member of THE POPULAR CLUB.

GLAD in ear muffs, his classic Hibernian nose matching the color of his Titian hair, Sean O'Larkin sends us the following hoarse greeting, between sniffles, from his Paris hotel room:

I went down with a frightful cold on shipboard and I've been in bed doctoring myself ever since coming to Paris.

And Paris is as cold as Commander Byrd's nose! Everybody is wearing topcoats and furs. Too much of a change from the Gehenna called Gotham.

You can imagine how low I am when I tell you that I've been in Paris four days and haven't had a drink outside of a little brandy to warm my icy interior. Heigho! But Paris remains *la ville charmante*, and the taxi horns are as joyous as ever. I must get up and about. More anon.

Cheer up, Monsieur O'Larkin. Think of the Pyrenees climate and keep a hot brick at your feet.

CANADIAN LIKES US.

PAUL SEMMES reads THE POPULAR up in Windsor, Ontario, and takes his pen in hand to inform us:

I'm a new member of THE POPULAR Club. I elected myself one day last month when I picked up a copy of your magazine, and now that I'm in, I'd like to tell you that I think THE POPULAR is the best magazine in the "all-round" fiction class.

I like Lieutenant Pond's stuff, especially, because he writes about a part of the globe I've always had a hankering to see—northern Africa.

Adventure stories are my favorite, and that's why I like THE POPULAR. Excitement appeals to everybody, so I guess I speak for a lot of readers when I advise you to keep your pages chock-full of two-fisted tales, as you have been doing.

You certainly do, Mr. Semmes. We'll do our darnedest to measured up in the future to our current good reputation with you.

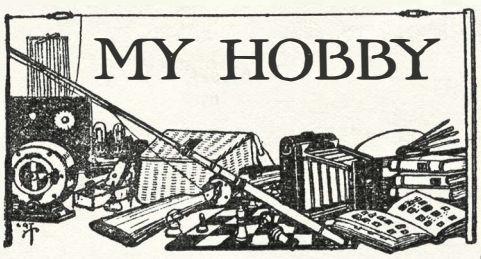
LIKES TO LAUGH.

CHARLES BRITTING, of Oakland, California, a hitherto-silent member of THE POPULAR Club, though one of long standing, airmails us:

I rather think that I am a connoisseur of POPULAR tales, and I've been waiting pa-

tiently for some time now for another of the humorous stories you publish. Also, what's become of Raymond Leslie Goldman? Let's have more rib-ticklers.

Goldman is still a prominent citizen of Los Angeles, Mr. Britting, and we can promise you that he will be in THE POPULAR soon again. A good humorous yarn is refreshing, we agree heartily.



A BAIT PLANTER.
By Marshall Breeden.
(Los Angeles, California.)

A POPULAR reader's hobby. Every reader of this magazine is invited to contribute a sketch of his or her hobby. The manuscripts must not exceed three hundred words in length, and will, if acceptable, be paid for at our usual rates.

R. B. BILKOWSKY, of Alhambra, California, has more than two acres of rich farm land devoted exclusively to the raising of red angleworms. These ignoble beasties are hatched, fed, and fattened to make many a happy, successful holiday for fishermen in many parts of the country.

The process of cultivation is a bit complicated, for a red worm is a queer sort of thing. The soil is plowed, then large quantities of natural humus, such as dried straw and leaves, is scattered over the field. This is harrowed into the soil. The entire plot is then soaked with water, and after the water has soaked in, the seed worms are planted. The planting is done much like the planting of potatoes. A few twisting fellows are dropped into shallow holes and covered up. Then they are left to amuse themselves in the way all good red worms do.

Each week the field is spread lightly with a preparation consisting of ordinary corn meal and humus. This is then irrigated thoroughly into the top soil, after which the rapidly increasing angleworm population has a grand dinner.

If, say, two thousand red worms are planted in the fall, the next spring-fishing season finds a crop of perhaps a million of them, just r'aring to dangle on the end of a hook. The crop is packed, one hundred fat boys to a tin, and mailed to sporting-goods dealers, fishing clubs, zoos, and individuals practically all over the United States and Canada.

These Alhambra red angleworms are known as "sure-strike" workmen and remain alive in the cans for months on end.

CATCHING MOTHS.
By Frank Gifford.
(Brimfield, Massachusetts.)

AS a boy, I used to catch butterflies and moths and mount them on pins, with wings outstretched. Now, although past middle life, this is still my hobby. I have a modest collection of a few hundred specimens, all collected locally, and a large majority of them raised from caterpillars. I consider this a very interesting and fascinating hobby, one that takes one into the open and reveals some of the marvelous workings of nature.

A most interesting phase of this hobby of mine is the rearing of butterflies and moths from the caterpillar, or even from the egg. Those of you who have never watched, let us say, a Cecropia moth emerge from its cocoon, a rather helpless insect, all body, with wings that will hardly cover a dime, and seen these wings grow in the short space of an hour to a spread

of six or even seven inches, have missed seeing one of nature's most wonderful transformations.

I once "hatched out" a specimen of the beautiful Promethea moth. It was a female, and although in a box inside the house, with doors and windows closed, within a couple of hours of the time of its emergence from the cocoon there were no fewer than six moths of the same species trying to get in the window of the room where the moth was confined. What strange power guided those moths, from who can say how far, to the spot where another moth had just come into being?

ANOTHER PRECINCT HEARD FROM.

MAURY WILLIAMS writes from Memphis, Tennessee, that Phil Richards' prize-fight stories contribute to the peace of dusty afternoons in the cotton country. He says:

Even with the thermometer what it is just now, I feel like letting you know that one of your newer writers, Phil Richards, certainly rings the bell every round. He really can write, and, what's more, he knows his fight dope. I'd figure him to be a boxer himself.

Sean O'Larkin and Major Wheeler-Nicholson are two-fisted writers. As for me, stories of the wide-open spaces are my meat. Not just the West, of course. Adventure trails everywhere. I started out to tell you that practically all your stories are O. K., but I got wound up on my favorites. Good luck.

Thanks, Mr. Williams. Since writing us, you've probably seen the Second July number, in which some information is afforded concerning Phil Richards. He's out in New Mexico, inhaling pure ozone and, we hope, busy on more stories for THE POPULAR. You guessed right—he's a pretty strapping fellow and can put on the gloves himself.

A MODEST WIT.

A supercilious nabob of the East—
  Haughty, being great—purse-proud, being rich—
A governor, or general, at the least,
  I have forgotten which—
Had in his family a humble youth,
  Who went from England in his patron's suit,
An unassuming boy in truth
  A lad of decent parts, and good repute.

This youth had sense and spirit;
  But yet with all his sense,
Excessive diffidence
  Obscured his merit.

One day, at table, flushed with pride and wine,
  His honor, proudly free, severely merry,
Conceived it would be vastly fine
  To crack a joke upon his secretary.

"Young man," he said, "by what art, craft, or trade,
  Did your good father gain a livelihood?"
"He was a saddler, sir," Modestus said,
  "And in his time was reckoned good."

"A saddler, eh! and taught you Greek,
  Instead of teaching you to sew!
Pray, why did not your father make
  A saddler, sir, of you?"

Each parasite, then, as in duty bound,
The joke applauded, and the laugh went round.
  At length, Modestus, bowing low,
Said (craving pardon if too free he made),
  "Sir, by your leave, I fain would know
Your father's trade!"

"My father's trade! by Heaven, that's too bad!
My father's trade? Why, blockhead, are you mad?
My father, sir, did never stoop so low—
He was a gentleman, I'd have you know."

"Excuse the liberty I take."
  Modestus said, with archness on his brow,
"Pray, why did not your father make
  A gentleman of you?"

SELLECK OSBORN (1783—1826).

A Chat With You

EMERGENCY! Far down the street a siren screams its terrible warning: "Clear—the—way! Minutes mean life or death! Clear—the—way!" Automobiles swerve sharply to one side, people duck to safety and stand staring with awe and respect as the thundering engines roar by. Emergency! Life or death!

Riot squads, ambulances, fire engines, emergency equipment of all kinds, affect us in the same way. Our nerves snap to attention when the clarion call of vital, imperative, human need is sounded. It's in our blood, a racial instinct quivering in every inch of our flesh.

To your posts! In the army and navy orders of that kind are drilled into fighting men until they respond mechanically. There is no time to lose. You don't argue with your superior.

* * * *

IN the ordinary life that you and we live, we are taught sooner or later by the relentless buffeting of experience that when emergencies come we've got to stand by. And, curiously enough, we usually do our stuff without thinking about it—just instinctively. When you see a kid in the path of a truck you dart forward, thrust it out of the way, and then, after it's all over, you stand with trembling knees and jaw agape, wondering how you ever got the nerve. It wasn't nerve; it was that something we've all got that makes us snap out of the daze and into action when it's absolutely necessary.

* * * *

TWO chaps of our acquaintance went camping out in the mountains one time—out in a rattlesnake country. The more experienced of the two kidded his friend along, telling him gruesomely about what to do in case he got bit. He dwelt graphically and at length on how to slash a cross with a razor blade and spread in the permanganate. The inexperienced chap shuddered and swore that he could never stand having that done to him—nor could he do it to his friend. The very thought filled him with untold horror, and out there around the camp he walked in constant fear of lurking snakes.

* * * *

THEY'D been there several days, and were hiking over to the spring, breasting through the waist-high brush, when suddenly the experienced one gave a howl, sprang back, and reached down to grab his calf. And the timid one, forgetting his fears, reached instantly for the antidote box in his hip pocket, ripped it open, located the little fang spots on his friend's leg, and went to work as coolly as a surgeon—neatly, effectively, and giving a minimum of pain. He saved his chum's life, and the other chap never tired of telling how his savior had come through like a major in an emergency.

* * * *

THAT instinct must go back for countless centuries. It is probably a leftover of the primitive days when men's lives depended every moment on their alertness and swift action. Now, in our comfortable, comparatively safe, civilized world, our acuteness is somewhat dulled. Yet you'd be surprised to see how quickly you could return to that animal awareness, that ability to meet and combat tremendous emergencies faced by our ancient ancestors.

SEAN O'LARKIN pictures such a dramatic human test in "Morgo the Mighty," his latest and finest novel, which starts in the next issue. To emphasize the ingenuity and fortitude of puny human beings in fighting the battle of existence, he takes his people into a gigantic, fantastic world beneath the Himalayas—a system of nightmarish caverns, vaster than the plains of Kansas.

Great bat men, phantasmagoric creatures that could only have been created in the infinite imagination O'Larkin possesses, zoom like ghoulish living aircraft in these weirdly lighted, subterranean caverns.

Swarms of unholy brute denizens crawl in vast migrations, menacing all living things before them; mighty waters turn the caverns into boiling tempests; death in a million new, unspeakable forms faces the men who had the courage to venture into the black maw of that underground world.

* * * *

YET they pit their intelligence stanchly against these monsters of Nature's horrible whims and—— Well, you just dig into "Morgo the Mighty" in the Second August issue and see what happens. Twenty years from now you'll be saying to a friend: "Remember Zorimi, the god of evil, in 'Morgo'? And, say, remember those men like bats! And Nurri Kala, vestal of the Sacrificial Flame! And the Shaft of Light—and *Morgo himself!* Wish they wrote more stories like that!"

TWO WEEKS FROM NOW

In the Second August Issue—Out July 20th

Man To Man — **JACK ASTON**
Verse

Morgo The Mighty — **SEAN O'LARKIN**
A Four-part Novel—Part I

The Scarlet Oasis — **LIEUTENANT SEYMOUR G. POND**
Air Corps, R. F. C.

The Bump-off Artist — **JOHN WILSTACH**
A Two-part Story—Part I

When The Road Gets Rocky — **JOHN RANDOLPH PHILLIPS**

The Muscle Racket — **F. N. LITTEN**

The Captain Was Crazy — A Two-part Story—Part II
MAJOR MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

The Popular Club

A Chat With You — **THE EDITOR**

And Other Up-to-the-minute Features

Precious!

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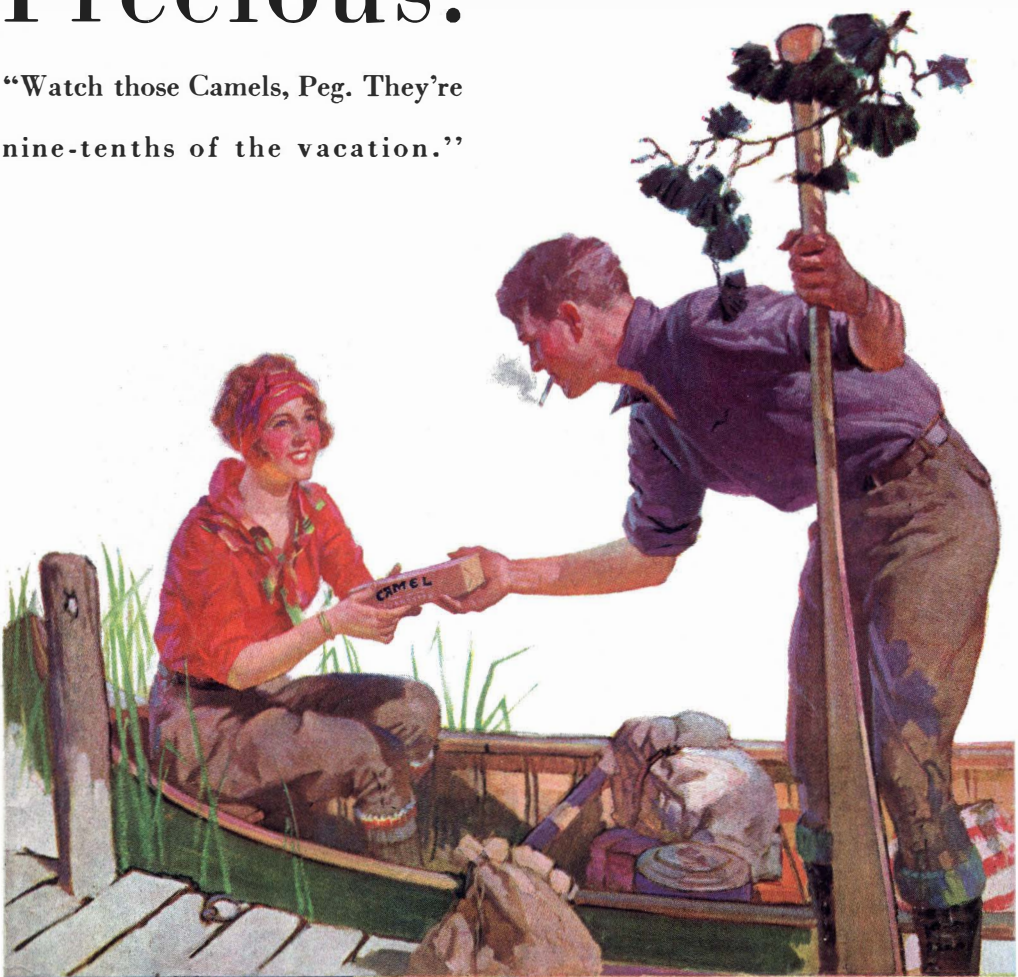

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Camels