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Short Stories

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HIGH COUNTRY 'by Peter Dawson

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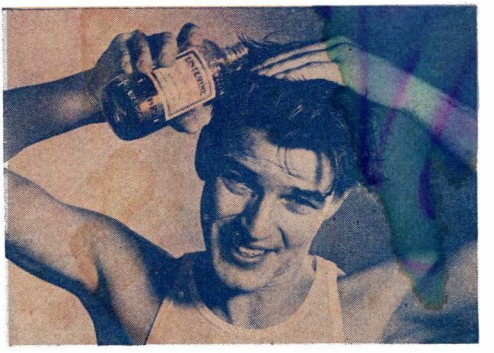
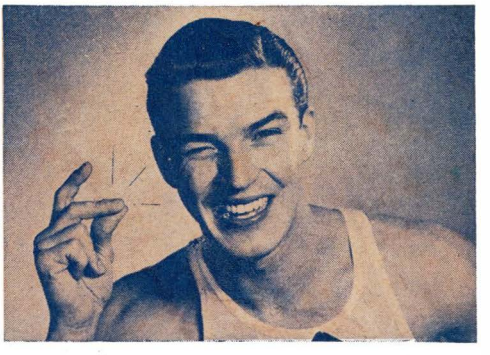
"**You bet I use Listerine Antiseptic** and massage every time I wash my hair! I'm no dummy! I know how common and how catching infectious dandruff can be, and how hard it is to get rid of. And, in my book, Listerine Antiseptic is a jim-dandy precaution as well as a slick twice-a-day treatment. Nothing complicated about it at all . . . it's as easy as it is delightful.



"**It's really fun to use Listerine Antiseptic;** no greasy salves, no smelly lotions—just good clean Listerine Antiseptic doused on full-strength. Right away the old scalp gets a real antiseptic bath that makes it feel simply great. And, get this: Listerine Antiseptic kills the stubborn 'bottle bacillus' by millions. That's the baby that a lot of top scalp experts say is a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

"**Next comes vigorous fingertip massage.** That's to loosen those ugly flakes and scales that embarrass a guy. I let Listerine Antiseptic stay on as long as I can. Boy, is my scalp clean! And does it feel wonderful! No wonder men go for this routine! And don't think the little woman overlooks it either. She knows a good thing when she sees it.



"**No kidding! It's a grand and glorious feeling** to realize that your scalp and hair look fresher and are fresher. It's satisfying to know that you've taken a swell precaution against the infectious type of dandruff which can be such a doggone nuisance. All I can say to every man is, try Listerine Antiseptic. You'll like it!"

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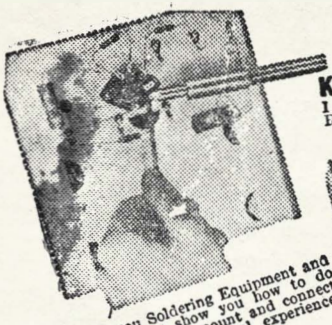

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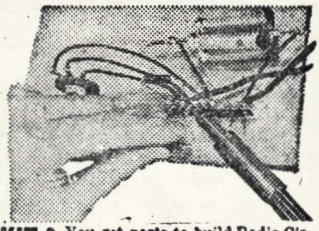

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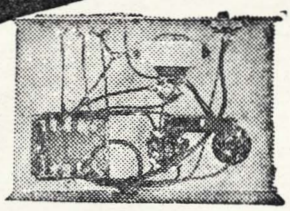

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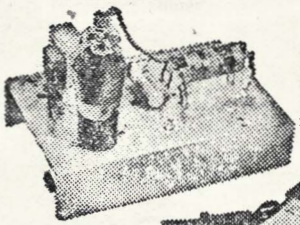

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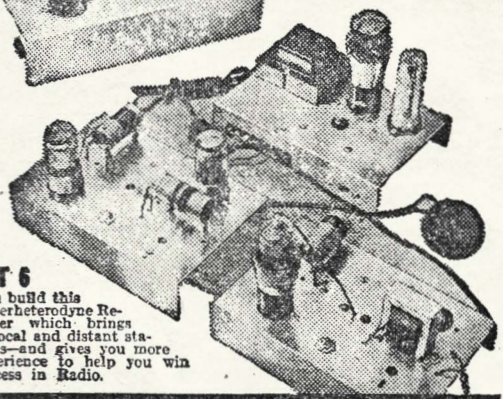

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

March 10th, 1947

CONTENTS

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*

The Story Tellers' Circle

The Wild West in France

"*A SIDELIGHT on 'High Country' is its strange beginning,*" writes Peter Dawson.

The author of our new serial in this current issue of SHORT STORIES elaborates:

"*In '44 while serving in France as an intelligence officer with advance headquarters, I was sent down to an airfield near Dijon to contact a reconnaissance wing of the Seventh Army, then moving in on the Belfort Gap. My first view of this airfield, its still-smoking ruins and cratered runways, was at dusk, through a cold steady rain. Things were pretty much in a mess.*

"*The C.O. of the group, a Colonel, I caught just moving his belongings and records into the small room of a nearby chateau, up to his ears in work. Our business finally finished by candlelight, he asked me about London. He had been away two years. I soft-pedaled my answers on how badly Wimbledon and Croydon were messed up by the buzz-bombs, on how the people were making out on their slim rations.*

"*Then, out of politeness, he asked about my home. I told him it was Santa Fe, New Mexico, and his eyes lighted up with enthusiasm. This man was fascinated by our West. For years he had read histories, novels, anything he could find that dealt with the West. When he learned I was a writer of Western fiction stories he was as delighted as though he had been a child who had found a toy he'd never hoped to possess. So for a good hour we forgot the war and were transported back in our thoughts half a century to times we thought more stirring.*

"*Of all the country he had read about and hoped one day to see, Montana, and particularly that vast primitive area of The Breaks intrigued him most. It was a hard drive back north that night. The downpour held steadily, the roads were slippery and littered with burned out vehicles and occasional roadblocks of Maquis with itchy trigger fingers. Yet I found the night quite pleasant. It had been ages since I had talked with anyone so enthusiastic about that part of the world that was my home. He had started me thinking of home the way I liked to think of it, seeing my wife and children against a background rich in color and legend.*

"*I found myself more homesick than at any time since the* Queen Mary *had carried me away from the States. Before I finished the long drive that night the Colonel's tales of Montana had given me an idea for a story. A year later, home again, I got to work on that idea. And it became 'High Country!'*"

Peter Dawson

Is the Devil All Devil?

WE HEREBY accuse Caddo Cameron of being a philosopher (along with a lot of nice things) and . . . but wait a minute! He admits it himself. And he lets his good stories and the following paragraphs speak for him.

You see, when Caddo Cameron sent his character, the Gunman, riding in to see us, we did some thinking. We liked the Gunman, we liked the stories and the way Cameron wrote them (just as we know you do) but there was one point. How all right is it to dilute your hero with several parts villain. Even the dunce-in-the-corner caught on mighty quick that Mr. Cameron's Gunman "weren't no lily-white" but somehow was always running away from the Texas Rangers or U. S. Marshals himself.

Now that goes against many of the dearest concepts built up concerning what a hero should be.

"Gol darn," argued Cameron in effect, "I've known guys like the Gunman."

So you've been reading the stories—and liking them. And here's the author to shoot you some mighty straight talk and common sense, we think, on heroes and villains and stuff.

Get your six-gun out, Caddo Cameron!

"*One of my acquaintances packs a pretty heavy load of religion and he is definitely opposed to giving the devil his due, so to speak. In his estimation if, for example, a man robs a bank that man is so infernally wicked he can't possibly have a good quality in him. This ain't my brand of religion, but I figure it's his business and don't argue with*

him about it. However, the other day he crawled me for sometimes treating my fictional badmen with sympathy and I took issue with the gent. Aided by four twenty-foot shelves and books and forty-odd years of diversified experience in the high and low society of my fellowman here and yonder, I undertook to show this sanctimonious cuss that very few badmen are all *bad. Of course, I didn't show him. I maintained that without condoning their wickedness or spilling any maudlin tears when they are being punished for their misdeeds, we should look for the good they have in them—if any, and give them credit for it. Naturally, he didn't agree with me. Leaving out what the books tell us about badmen I'm going to give you a few examples I cited to this intolerant acquaintance, all of which are drawn from personal experience and observation. I'm writing facts now—not fiction.*

"First off—let me tell you that there's a man now living who had a lot to do with shaping my philosophy of life and he doesn't know it, doesn't even know me. He's Al Jennings, formerly leader of the Jennings Band of outlaws. Last time I met him was in Hollywood in 1925 or '26. The first time I saw him was when a kid in Lawton, Oklahoma, in 1907. Mr. Jennings was a brilliant criminal lawyer then and it was my good fortune to sit through a murder trial in the old Lawton courthouse, listening to his defense of a young fellow just starting out—not a whole lot older than I, who had shot a well-known man in Lawton. In his plea to the jury Judge Jennings called upon his profound knowledge of humanity in general and the frontier underworld in particular and traced the movements of Fate in the making of a Western badman. Citing episodes in the lives of badmen who were then contemporaries or not long dead, he showed how devilish easy it is for a boy to come to a fork in the trail and through impulsiveness or bad judgment, take the wrong road. From there, employing illustrations from his own life and the lives of others, he painted a vivid picture of the difficulties that boy would encounter in his efforts to turn back and find the right road. Continuing with incidents from the lives of outlaws whom he had known intimately, he proved—to me, at least—that no man ever becomes so completely bad as to have no good left in him. From that day to this, whenever I've met a guy who appeared to be a thorough scalawag I've always tried hard to find out whether there isn't some *good in the cuss. And I've never yet failed to find it.*

"Like the fellow who ran that clip joint in Chicago. It was right across the street from the entrance to one of the great passenger stations where it caught travelers who thought they'd save money by eating outside rather than in the railroad dining room. You know how those places operate. Menu says ham-and, two-bits, (or they used to), so you order ham-and-eggs and the waiter asks you if you want coffee, bread, butter, potatoes, maybe some nice jelly, and you want 'em and get 'em and they're good, too. When you get your check it says $1.50! You squawk to the boss behind the cash register and he shows you all those extras on the menu at so much per, (in very small print), so you shut up and pay up.

"Early one March I landed in Chicago with seven dollars, no job, friends or acquaintances. Went to work in this passenger terminal. Bought a three-dollar meal ticket from George, boss of the joint. Ate three meals a day in there, each no more than a dime—coffee and a sinker, or a bowl of soup. When that meal ticket was punched out the situation looked bad. In those days railroads held back a month's pay on you, so I thought I'd have to quit and draw my wages in order to eat. Hated to do it, too, for jobs were scarce. I told George about it. Didn't ask him for anything—just told him. He pulled down a five-dollar ticket, punched it and handed it to me.

" 'When that's gone,' he said, 'you get another one, all you need. And, look! I've been watching you. You haven't been eating enough. Eat! You can't die of starvation in my place.'

"Not long afterwards the law ran George out of town. Maybe he was crooked, but don't try to tell me that he didn't have a lot of good in him.

"And then there was that beggar-pick-pocket friend of mine. He was from your home town, Mister Editor, New York City. We were shipmates, Dippy and I, worked together, went ashore together, raised hell together and everything. I didn't know anything about his past—wouldn't have made

(Concluded on page 95)

Part I

Jim Sherril Wasn't Going to Wait for the Law to Recover His Stolen Horses

HIGH COUNTRY

By PETER DAWSON

I

HE KNEW now where he had made his mistake. He had turned up this canyon late yesterday, and they had let him come. He was seeing the reason as he looked up through the crests of the pines to the sheer two-hundred-foot rise of granite at this dead end of the box.

He could hear one of them moving through the brush up there along the rim. Only an hour ago he had caught a glimpse of the second, leisurely following him. So now he rode back to the margin of the trees, wound the reins around the horn, swung

wearily aground and slapped the steeldust across the rump, watching the animal trot out into the open. Then he called:

"Hold it. I'm coming out."

He unbuckled the shell-belt and, with it hanging from his left hand, followed the horse.

The muscles along his wide back tightened in fear until shortly a voice called down from the rim, "Drop it and keep

goin'," and he did, a dozen paces. Then he sat down and rested his arms across his knees and laid his head against them. He had never been so tired.

He heard the man up there whistle shrilly and it was maybe three minutes before a slow hoof-thud sounded close by and he lifted his head to see the lanky rider on the sorrel coming toward him from the trees down-canyon. He watched while this one rode over to the steeldust and caught the reins. Then he was no longer interested and dropped his head again, drowsily listening as the man rode around him and stopped, probably to pick up his Colts.

Jim Sherill must have dozed then, for later he came violently awake at something jarring his shoulder. Looking up, he saw the second man close beside him, thrusting boot back into stirrup after nudging him.

This one, stocky and barrel-bodied and with a face darkened by a black stubble of beard, said, "Time to move."

Jim Sherill got up and trudged stiffly across to the steeldust, a tall and big-boned man whose wide shoulders sagged in exhaustion. He wondered if they'd think it strange he didn't ask where they were taking him, decided finally they wouldn't.

They spent the better part of an hour working out of the drybed of the canyon, finally climbing a deer-trail he hadn't spotted on his way up. Two hours later at dusk, and ten miles lower in the heavily-timbered and canyon-shot foothills, they rode down across a long grassy meadow toward a light winking out of a stand of jackpine.

Jim Sherill had slept through most of this long interval and now, as they came to a creek winding through the meadow, he pulled in and climbed from the saddle and knelt at the stream's edge, laying wide hat aside as the steeldust eagerly nosed the water. He cupped his hands and drank as fast as he could swallow and, his day-long thirst finally slaked, threw water over his blond head and scrubbed his face.

The thick-set rider drawled, "Brother, you must've needed that," as he climbed back into leather.

Sherill gave the speaker an impassive look, his deep brown eyes humorless, and they went on. He was feeling better now, refreshed even more by the sleep than by the drink, and he took some pains to look carefully about him in the fading light as they rode in on the light. What held his eye longest was a big half-acre pole corral holding maybe fifty head of horses and, abreast it, the dying coals of a fire. The rest—a smaller corral closer in, the sheds, the sideless hay barn, the big bunkhouse and smaller cabin beyond—was the usual for a hill ranch.

The five men loafing at the bunkhouse door paid them a strict and silent attention as they approached. The stocky one called, "Boss in?" and the nearest man tilted his head toward the small cabin beyond, saying, "Yeah," his eye upon Sherill as he asked, "Where'd you pick him up?"

He got no answer and shortly they came aground and racked their horses at a tie-rail in the trees directly below the cabin. Then Jim Sherill was following the stocky rider through the cabin's door and into a room crammed with the necessary odds and ends to running a ranch.

THERE was a desk littered with ledgers and tally book and several copies of the *Stockmen's Gazette.* Two saddles were rope-hung from roof joists, and there were bridles, ropes and a disorderly heap of saddle-blankets and bear-skin chaps in a back corner. A rack above the desk held three carbines and a shotgun. There was a swivel-chair and two other battered chairs held together by bailing wire. There was a man.

This man standing behind the flat-topped desk facing the door was perhaps a couple of inches shorter than Sherill, which put him close to six feet. He was thin almost to gauntness. His hair was salt-and-pepper and his eyes were of the palest gray, icy. Across his flat open-vested middle ran a heavy gold chain with a bear's-claw pendant hanging from it. He wore a Colt's butt-foremost and high at his left side. The eyes and his long-fingered hands tied in with the weapon in Sherill's inspection of him. He was perhaps forty but looked older.

He said, "You're a day late, Lockwood," his glance incuriously touching Jim Sherill and then settling on the stocky man. In speaking, his lips barely moved.

"Here's our reason." Lockwood jerked a thumb at Sherill.

Now those pale eyes settled full on Sherill and the boss drawled, "Well?"

"We cut his sign four days ago," Lockwood told him. "Up at the border shack. That blue was missin' from the corral and a bay branded VR had been left in his place. He and Slim got to wonderin' why and followed the blue's sign. We'd finished what you sent us up for."

"Got the money, Mitch?"

Mitch Lockwood drew a leather pouch from inside his shirt and laid it on the desk, and the other said, "Go ahead."

"Well, we finally caught up with this jasper late last night. He got away and took a wrong swing up Six Mile Canyon. We played with him the rest of last night and today, took turns keepin' him on the move. Two hours ago he wound up in the box. So we brought him on in. That's all of it, Ed."

The boss reached down to the desk and picked up the shredded stub of a cigar, musing, "VR." He lit the cigar. "Victoria Regina, eh?" He eyed Jim Sherill through the billowing fog of smoke." The Queen's brand. So you're a Mounty."

"No," Sherill said.

Ed eased his angular frame down into the swivel-chair and cocked his boots on the desk's scarred edge, saying with scarcely a movement of the lips, "We got all night for this. How come the VR?"

"Had to leave a certain place in a heck of a hurry."

"In Canada?"

Sherill nodded.

Slim, the lanky one, now stepped over and laid Sherill's holstered gun and belt on the desk, saying, "It's a Colt, Ed. If he's a Mounty, he didn't swipe the Queen's hardware."

Ed moved his dark head from side to side. "He wouldn't if he was smart. And if he was smart he wouldn't ride a Canadian-branded horse into this country. Which he didn't." He looked up at Sherill, said, "Talk, stranger."

"Suppose I did steal your horse?" Sherill asked.

Mitch Lockwood chuckled softly and with enough meaning to draw a thin smile from the older man, who drawled, "Suppose you did. And you stole the first one, too? The one with the VR?"

"Yes."

"Prove it."

"I can't."

"Where were you headed?"

"Across the Missouri and up to Whitewater. Further maybe."

"Then why'd you pick this way to come? Fifty miles west you could've made it easy. The same goes for over east. Instead, you head into country even the Sioux used to keep shy of."

"Figured they wouldn't bother to follow. Or, if they did, that I could lose 'em."

Ed narrowed an eye against the cigar's curl of smoke. His glance held coldly to Sherill for perhaps a quarter-minute.

At length he drawled, "You didn't steal that VR jughead. You're with the police and you're no deserter. If you were runnin', you'd pick an easy way across the line. Which you didn't. You were sent down here. This is the place you were headed. How do I know? Because this is the only big outfit in the Breaks. The only thing you'd take a beatin' crossing the Breaks to come in on this way."

Sherill looked at the others. Lockwood's face was set enigmatically. Slim avoided his glance. He wished it had been the other way around, for Mitch Lockwood was the best man of the pair. He looked back at Ed again, letting out a slow sigh, drawling tiredly.

"Finish it in a hurry, will you? I'm dead on my feet."

"And that ain't no lie, Boss," Slim put in.

"Maybe it isn't," Ed stated softly and with more meaning than either Sherill or Slim had put to the words. He took his boots down now and leaned forward. "Know where you are, stranger?"

"Somewhere north of the Missouri."

"But exactly where?" When Sherill shook his head, Ed went on, "I'll tell you. And do you know why I'll tell you?" He again waited for that shake of the head, again supplied his own answer.

"Because you're not leaving here. Not ever."

The silence that followed his clipped words was unbroken for long seconds, until Sherill said, "That's a strong dose to hand a man when he's down on his luck."

"Is it?" Ed tapped the desk with a crooked forefinger. "You were sent down here by the Royal Northwest Mounted. Because a few VR branded horses have disappeared down this way."

"That's news to me."

ED SMILED and lifted his hands in a gesture of mild helplessness. He looked at Lockwood. "You know what to do with him," he said. He was through talking, his mind made up.

Over the short silence, Mitch Lockwood drawled, "Not me, Ed."

Ed's eyes betrayed their first real show of emotion. They showed a live anger as he looked at Lockwood. Then, strangely, he shrugged his bony shoulders, saying, "Suit yourself. Go tell Purdy I want him."

Lockwood stepped around Sherill and went out the door. And now Ed's glance avoided Sherill. Slim fidgeted nervously near the door, as though anxious to be out of this. The silence ran on heavily.

Finally Sherill stepped over to the desk, close to the wall and an inner door, the bracketed lamp directly over his head. "Look," he said, leaning with hands on the desk's edge. "I'm on a lonesome. I need help. Give me a job and watch me if you want."

Ed tilted back in the chair and clasped his hands behind his head. He closed his eyes and smiled faintly in boredom. "No dice."

"Then have a man take me out of this country. Clear out."

"Hunh-uh." The eyes remained closed, the bored smile held.

Sherill sighed, the sound of his exhaustion slurring against the stillness. He straightened lazily and reached up and snatched the lamp from its bracket, hurling it.

Ed was coming up out of the chair and trying to dodge when the lamp smashed into his chest. Sherill caught the image of Slim lifting his hand fast along his right side as the room went suddenly pitch-black.

He swung on Slim and pain lanced through his wrist as his knuckles crushed in the side of Slim's face. He lunged and collided with Slim's collapsing weight and his groping left hand closed on Slim's Colt and wrenched it free. He sidestepped and threw his shoulder hard against the door, falling headlong through it as the latch tore loose. He had time to think, *Fast, make it fast!* before he hit the ground on his knees, letting his weight go forward and rolling.

A gun exploded deafeningly from the room behind and a burning pain scorched across the thick muscles of his back. He rolled to a crouch and turned and threw two quick shots through the door's black rectangle. On the heel of his shots, someone shouted down by the bunkhouse. He got to his feet and ran as hard as he could for the tie-rail.

He jerked loose the steeldust's reins and was lifting boot to stirrup when a gun winked rosily from the shadows before the bunkhouse. The horse's forelegs buckled and he went down, rolling into Sherill and bringing him to his knees, knocking his hat off. Sherill pulled his leg from under the thrashing animal and ran in on Lockwood's frightened rearing black.

He tore the reins loose, missed the stirrup and hung onto the horn as the mare wheeled away. He pulled himself up and went belly-down across the saddle, the animal breaking into a run. Guns were blasting the night behind him and he could hear Ed's voice as the wildly pitching mare carried him into the pines. He had a leg over when the black hit the creek. He had found the too-short stirrups by the time she ran through a gate and headed out the dimly visible line of a trail.

Lockwood's mare had covered many miles today. An hour short of midnight she was completely played out. By that time she had carried Jim Sherill deep into a tangle of hills to the west.

He staked out the black mare and, taking quick inventory of the things in Lockwood's bedroll, he ate some cold biscuits before pulling the tail of his shirt and running his hand along the bullet-burn on his back. It had stopped bleeding but was smarting painfully, enough to keep him awake a few minutes after he wrapped himself in the thin blanket and lay back against the saddle.

His last conscious thought was a gladness of being alive.

BY NOON of the next day, Jim Sherill was riding down out of the last gaunt tier of the badlands to the muddy banks of the Missouri, having covered better than forty miles since dawn. He waded the black across the wide stream and, in a grove of cottonwoods on the south bank, spent a solid hour.

First, he stripped and waded into the shallows and scrubbed himself as clean as he could without soap, gingerly washing his

back-wound clean. He scrubbed most of the bloodstain from the tear at the back of his shirt. He shaved with Lockwood's straight-edge, grimacing with pain as the razor pulled at his stiff three-day-old beard. Then he built a fire.

Lockwood's bedroll produced jerky, more cold biscuits, little else. He broiled several strips of jerky on the end of a green willow-branch and, with the biscuits, managed to dull the edge of his hunger. When he rode on he knew that the missing hat was the only thing that would call attention to his appearance.

That late afternoon, as he rode the main street into Whitewater, a tall and willowy girl did notice that he was hatless. But it was the black's shoulder-brand, not Sherill's bareheadedness, that first took her attention.

Studying this strange rider closely, she asked herself, *Have I seen him before?* She knew she hadn't.

Sure of this, a small excitement was growing in her as she hurried on along the walk. She had little difficulty keeping Jim Sherill in sight, for he was walking the black, taking his first look at the town.

HE TURNED in to the tie-rail in front of the Emporium, took his time tying and glancing along the street, then crossed the awninged plank walk and went into the store. Coming along behind him, she noticed that he had to duck his head going through the door.

She followed him on back to the clothes-counter and stood behind him while he asked for a denim jumper, large size. Then a panic took her and she tried to think of something. In the end, she hurried up front and bought half a bolt of calico which, with the packages she was already carrying, more than filled her arms. She was back at the clothes-counter in time to see Sherill wearing the new jumper and trying on a wide gray Stetson with a curl-brim.

He bought the hat and paid for it and as he took his change and left the counter she came on past him and purposely let the bolt of cloth slip from under her arm.

It thudded heavily to the floor and when she turned, pretending to be startled, he was already reaching down for it. She smiled helplessly, trying to shift her packages to one hand, not succeeding and finally lifting an elbow, telling him, "Thank you. Please put it under my arm."

"Sort of loaded down, aren't you?" he asked with a broad grin.

He put the bolt under her arm and she let it slip again and he caught it as it fell. She laughed now and he liked the throatiness of her voice and the liveliness of her golden-brown eyes.

She shook her head and said half-angrily, "If I could only hold it tight enough. I really don't have far to carry it."

"Then you'd better let me help."

"Would you mind?" Her look was at once relieved. "It's only down the street."

He followed her out onto the walk and there, as they turned down-street, she told him, "You're very kind. I should have made two trips."

"Glad to help," he said.

THEY passed a bakery, a big livery lot, a saloon where playing cards littered the plank walk, a barber-shop. He liked the way she lengthened her stride to match his and a couple of times he looked down at her, wondering if the slight uptilt to her nose heightened her prettiness or lessened it. She had a fine and sensitive face, and he decided he was wrong in thinking her pretty. Her good looks went beyond that. Her hair was the color of a sleek chestnut he had once owned. Her eyes were a lighter brown than his, her skin the golden color of rich cream, had seen something of the sun.

They were coming up on a spired building he judged must be the courthouse when she asked, "Would you mind stopping in here with me for just a moment?" looking up at him with a half-smile.

"Anything you say, Miss," he drawled, and followed her in off the walk and through the building's nearest door.

It was an office, the back wall of which was centered by a heavy steel door. A graying spare man with a nickeled five-pointed star pinned to his open vest came up out of a chair at a roll-top desk alongside the street window, saying cordially:

"Now this is a nice surprise. How are you, Jean?"

"Hello, Fred." The girl laid her packages on the desk and turned to Sherill, holding out her hands, saying, "I'll take that now. It was nice of you to help me with it."

She lifted the bolt of calico out of his arms. She also lifted the Colt from the belt of his waist-overalls.

She stepped quickly away from him, saying, "Sheriff, I want this man arrested."

SHERIFF FRED SPENCE had given the youngster a quarter to find Ned Rawn. Not only the amount of money, but what he had seen back there in the sheriff's office had convinced the kid that his errand was important. So he hurried. He stopped at four or five places, first at Ned Rawn's office at the livery-lot, then at several saloons. He was out of breath when he looked in at the crowded bar of the River House.

He spotted Ned Rawn down at the far end, talking with a couple of men, and ran over and gave Rawn the sheriff's message, adding, "You'd better hurry. Looks like trouble," in a wide-eyed way that made Rawn set his glass down without even waiting to empty it.

Ned Rawn gave the youngster a dime and hurried out. The courthouse was at the second cross-street above the river and on the way up there half a dozen people spoke to Rawn and one man tried to stop him. But he made his excuses pleasantly and went on. He was more accustomed to riding than walking and was breathless when he turned in at the door of the sheriff's office.

He saw Sherill first of all and the worried set of his thin face broke before an open-mouthed wonder. "Jim!" he breathed, grinning and coming over to shake Sherill's hand. "By God, it's good to see you!"

Only then did he see the girl standing a little to one side, and the pleasant smile he gave her and the way he touched his hat, saying politely, "How are you, Miss Ruick?" was in keeping with the neatly-pressed gray suit and his general well-groomed look.

He turned to the sheriff then. "So you'll have your fun, will you?" he said relievedly. "That kid had me worried, Fred. Said there was trouble."

"There is," the sheriff stated quietly. He looked at the girl. "Tell Ned what you just told me, Jean."

At Rawn's look of puzzlement, Jean Ruick's head tilted up a little in defiance, as though she sensed that the odds were no longer in her favor. "This man rode one of our horses into town," she said, looking at Sherill. "He can't say how he got it or he won't. I'm having him arrested."

Ned Rawn looked at Sherill, who drawled, "To begin with, Ned, it's a mare and not a horse."

Rawn saw the anger that flared in the girl's eyes and quickly said, "Jim Sherill a horse thief?" He laughed. Then sobering, he went on, "There's been some mistake. I've known Jim for ten years. We rode for the same outfit."

"Which proves nothing," Jean Ruick said coolly. "Make him explain why he was riding the Major's horse. Or mare," she added, glaring at Sherill.

Rawn looked at his friend. "Go on, Jim. Tell her."

"I already have. She won't believe it."

"Let's have it again," the sheriff said mildly.

He eased down into the chair at the desk now, obviously reserving judgment in a way Ned Rawn knew was typical of him. Old Fred Spence was a shrewd man and pretty generally a straight thinker.

"It's like I said," Sherill stated. "Last night a pair of hard cases hit my camp down along the river, held a gun on me and went through my things. They took around forty dollars, a watch and my gelding, a bay. The bay was in good shape and this mare they left me was done in. They hadn't found my forty-five hid in one of my boots. I made the mistake of pullin' it too soon as they went away and got this for my trouble." Turning, he lifted the back of his new copper-riveted jumper and showed Rawn the tear and the faded bloodstain on his shirt.

"Where was this?" Fred Spence wanted to know.

"Twenty, twenty-five miles down the river."

"It took you a long time to get here."

"It took the mare a long time, not me, Sheriff. She's been used pretty hard."

Spence folded his arms on the desk and looked across at the girl. "Well, Jean?"

"Do you believe all this?" she asked uncertainly.

HE SHRUGGED his spare shoulders. "Think I do. Chiefly because Ned knows him."

"That means nothing to me," she said defensively.

"If it don't, then swear out a warrant. I'll hold him."

"Miss Ruick," Rawn put in patiently, "this man's a responsible person. If necessary, I'll put up his bail. Now why not be reasonable?"

She avoided his glance, looking at the sheriff, undecided and now more embarrassed than angry.

Fred Spence told her, "Suppose I keep an eye on him? If he skips town, we'll go after him."

"That's ridiculous, Fred," Rawn said. "Jim's doin' business with the Army. Suppose he has to go somewhere? Fort Selby, for instance."

"What kind of business?" Spence looked at Sherill.

"Freight," Sherill blandly answered, and the lawman missed Rawn's hastily concealed start of surprise.

"You could drop in here and tell me when you were leaving and how long you'd be gone, couldn't you?" Spence asked.

Sherrill nodded.

"That suit you, Jean?"

The girl gave a reluctant nod and Spence, much relieved, picked up the bolt of calico and walked with her to the door, telling her, "Maybe you ought to be thankful you got the mare back and let it go at that, Jean." They stepped outside and Rawn and Sherill didn't catch her reply as the street noises blurred her voice.

Rawn shot his tall friend a frowning glance, acidly drawling, "Freight!" and Sherill's lean face took on a sheepish grin.

Shortly, the sheriff came back into the room, went to his desk and picked up Sherill's gun. As he handed it across, he said, "She's leaving your saddle at Kramer's livery." He glanced at Rawn, adding, "Sorry about this, Ned. But she was pretty steamed up. How's horse tradin'?"

"So-so," Rawn conceded.

Spence followed them as far as the door. "Better stop around tomorrow, Sherill. Someone else may have bumped into that pair. Make it around eight if you're up this way."

I'll do that," Sherill said, and he and Rawn went on down the walk.

These two were old friends and now, as they approached the corner below the courthouse, Sherill impulsively threw an arm around Rawn's shoulder and good naturedly shook him, drawling, "Still the same shad-bellied, fancy-dressin' son of a gun. Ned, you look prosperous."

Rawn shrugged the hand away, trying to look serious but not quite managing it. "Freight—" he said acidly, using the same tone he had in the jail.

He looked up at Sherill, trying to tell if there were changes in him. There were none he could notice beyond a certain maturity of the face. This Jim Sherill was still the same, a man generous in every physical proportion and, Rawn knew, also generously gifted in the qualities that drew others to him. There was a fine-drawn look about him, a rawhide toughness that Rawn remembered well and envied a little.

Just now Sherill laughed softly, saying, "You should've seen the way she roped me in there, Ned. Prettiest thing you ever saw. Who is she?"

"Jean Ruick." Rawn was faintly amused. Quite a catch. Brains. And looks, as you saw."

"And plenty of fire." Sherill spoke almost gravely. "Who's the major she mentioned?"

"Caleb Donovan, her uncle. He runs the outfit for her." Rawn was thinking of something else and added wryly, "Fred Spence can check your story on the freight. How much of the rest was the truth?"

"You saw my shirt."

"Was that all?"

Sherill looked around, chuckling softly, saying, "Just about."

"I thought so," Rawn said in disgust.

THEY were now abreast the River House's broad veranda. Beyond a lower warehouse, Sherill could see a broad expanse of the cluttered levee and the river. The paddle-wheel and then the after-decks of a stately river boat gradually came into view. Sherill guessed her name even before he left Rawn and walked on a few steps, far enough to see the towering twin stacks and the wheel-house with the legend *Queen* lettered along its side.

A wide smile was on his lean face as he came back to his friend. "So they're still here?" he asked.

Rawn nodded. "Right here. Upstairs."

His seriousness relaxed at seeing the ex-

citement that brightened Sherill's look as he followed his friend up the steps and into the lobby, asking in mock-seriousness, "What's the rush?" For Sherill was walking fast now.

They crossed the ornate lobby and climbed the stairs, Sherill two steps at a time and then impatiently waiting at the upper landing as Rawn purposely dawdled.

"Which room, Ned?"

"Front end of the hall."

Rawn waited there, leaning on the bannister as Sherill went along the dark and uncarpeted hallway. He heard Sherill's knock up there.

"No one in," Sherill called disappointedly after a few seconds.

"Try the other two, twelve and fourteen. They've got the whole front end."

Rawn listened as Sherill knocked once more, then presently again. Finally Sherill came back along the narrow corridor saying, "No luck."

"They're probably out eating. We'll go down to my room."

"I could stand some soap and water," Sherill said. He followed Rawn to a room at the back of the hall and, as his friend pushed the door open, asked, "How is she, Ned?"

"Fine." Seeing the look on Sherill's face, Rawn added, "Thank God, the bug's never bitten me."

He took a towel from a hook behind the door and nodded to the pitcher and basin on the marble-topped washstand. "Help yourself," he said, and crossed over and sat on the bed, his thin frame all angles.

"Now let's have it," he said. "From the beginning."

Sherill pulled off his shirt, the white skin of his ropy-muscled shoulders and arms a decided contrast to sun-blackened face and neck and arms. "What happened at this end?" he wanted to know.

"I paid off your crew two weeks ago and they pulled out the next day after one hell of a sweet spree. The horses were delivered and collected on, except for your two geldings. Kramer's holding them. I banked the money for you."

"That helps."

Rawn sighed audibly. "All right, keep me guessin'! You wind up with a quarter of what you should've had and all you say is it helps. Talk, man! Your foreman said you'd gone up into the Breaks alone. What took you so damned long?"

"Riding a stage up to Canada and coming into that country the back way."

"What good did that do you?"

Sherill was lathering his face and neck as he replied, "Don't know yet."

"Then you're just where you started. A guy who's lost sixty horses and thinks he can get 'em back without any help—" Rawn was plainly disgusted.

"Maybe it'll pay off." Sherill reached for the towel. "I bought a cast-off horse from the police up there. They put me onto a hideout near the line that they've been watching and I lay over there two days, keeping an eye on it. Finally a couple of jaspers showed up at this place. That night I swapped my spavined jughead for one of theirs."

"Then what?" Rawn was sitting up now, intent on what Sherill was saying.

"They lit out after me and I tolled 'em down through the mountains a couple days. Yesterday they corraled me and brought me down to their layout. It was too dark to be sure, but I think I saw my horses."

"You think?" Rawn's tone was deflated. "Then you're not sure of anything. Why didn't you go in from this end and save all that time?"

"After swingin' a sticky loop on a big bunch of horses, wouldn't they be expecting someone from this end?"

"All right, I can see that," Rawn said grudgingly. "But you're here and your horse-string is still up in the hills."

"I'll go back."

"Alone?"

Sherill nodded. He was pulling on his shirt.

"Can you? Did they just let you walk out of there?"

"Not quite." Sherill was half smiling and he repeated, "Not quite."

Rawn shook his head worriedly. "I'd go to Fred Spence and tell him the whole thing, Jim."

"Why? From what those outfits down south had to say, the law up here has never dared to take a posse into that country. And plenty of cattle and horses have strayed in there. Not on their own, either."

"So you handed Spence a trumped-up

story. You're wrong about him. He's a good man. Honest."

"And careful."

Rawn smiled crookedly and said in a dry way, "You're still the same. You'll get the bit in your teeth and never let go."

"Should I?"

"This time, yes." Rawn leaned forward now, wagging a finger in emphasis as he said, "Give it up, Jim. There's a dozen easier ways of making up your losses. I'm your friend, so use me. In ninety days I make another remount delivery. Spend that time combin' the country, buyin' horse-flesh. I'll pay you a hundred and ten a head and take every sound animal you can lay hands on. In the end you'll be ahead. Way ahead. And," he added significantly, "alive."

Sherill's level glance was still on him. "You've made other commitments for that contract, Ned."

"Suppose I have?" Rawn shrugged. "What do those men mean to me? Not a damned thing. You do. So I reject enough of the others to handle your stuff."

A wondering look crossed Sherill's face. He turned away, afraid that Rawn might see how he felt. He picked up his jumper and put it on. A lot of his elation over seeing Rawn was gone now.

"Well, how about it?" Rawn asked.

SHERILL had a bad moment trying to think of something noncommittal to say, something that wouldn't hurt Rawn's feelings. Finally it came, and he drawled, "if you were short on this last delivery because of me, why wouldn't the Army let you make up the shortage next time?"

"They would. But we're talkin' about another thing. About a damn' sight more than the sixty head you lost. You'll really cash in."

Sherill wasn't liking this and was trying not to show it. He was embarrassed and irritated at the change he saw in Ned Rawn. Three years ago, when he'd last seen his friend, Ned would have been even more red-headed than he over a thing like losing these horses. Ned had been wild and a born gambler and maybe a little casual at times. But he'd also been straight as a string. And there was nothing straight about this.

From the hallway just now sounded the unrhythmic tread of someone, more than one person, coming up the stairs out of the lobby. Sherill was thankful for the interruption, for the excuse it gave him to go to the door and open it and look up along the hallway.

He hadn't expected it would be them. But there they were, just turning out of the head of the stairs.

He called, "Ruth!" and she and her father stopped.

He walked quickly along the corridor and up to her, laughing softly and delightedly at her look of utter surprise.

He took Ruth Lovelace in his arms and lifted her from the floor and swung her completely around. Then he kissed her full on the lips, while beside them George Lovelace beamed proudly and said in a voice that boomed, "Son, we thought you'd forgotten us. Let me shake your hand."

Ruth pushed her shoulders away from Sherill, laughing and saying, "Jim, you're cutting me in two!" He put her down and then shook hands with her father.

Commodore George Lovelace, the origin of whose title was somewhat obscure, pumped Sherill's hand and affably said, "This is a great day for us, son. God A'Mighty, you're big! Must've grown a couple inches this past year."

"He's just right, Dad." Ruth pressed Sherill's arm that was about her waist, giving him her brightest smile.

The Commodore looked on past them now at Rawn, who stood in the door to his room. "Ned, we've got something to celebrate," he called. "Come along and we'll find a drink."

"You three go on and have your fun," Rawn answered. "See you after supper."

"Sure you can't come?" the Commodore asked. He caught Rawn's shake of the head and told him, "Then we'll count on after supper."

The Commodore was turning away when Rawn called, "Hang on a minute, Jim." He stepped back into the room and a moment later reappeared and came along the hallway carrying Sherill's new Stetson. When Sherill came on a few steps to take it from him, he said low-voiced, "You lucky devil!" and was broadly smiling as Sherill rejoined Ruth.

"Now come along, you two." George Lovelace led the way up the hall.

HE WAS a short and rotund man, silver-haired, tonight wearing a black suit with polished brass buttons. Whiskey, not the sun, was responsible for the redness of his full, round face. He had a pompous, hearty manner that now prompted him to make a small ceremony of opening the door and ushering them into the over-furnished living room of his suite.

"Tom!" he bawled as he closed the door. Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Ruth. "Where's that good for nothing nigger?"

"Comin', suh. Comin'," a husky voice answered from beyond an archway leading off the front of the room, and shortly a colored boy of twelve or thirteen appeared in the thickening shadows there.

"Tom, this is Jim Sherill. From now on he's one of the family. And don't you forget it." Lovelace used his most imperious tone on his servant.

He waited until the boy bobbed his kinky head and then, with a wave of the hand, told him, "Now hike on down to the boat and bring us two or three bottles of champagne. Cold, mind you. And I'll thrash your black hide if you don't hurry."

"Yes, suh!" The boy gave Sherill and Ruth a toothy grin and hurried out the door.

"Now, Jim. Tell us about your trip." Lovelace slapped Sherill on the back.

"There's not much to tell," Sherill said.

His eye was on the girl, his year-long hunger for the sight of her making him momentarily ignore the Commodore. She was golden-haired and had a round and pretty face, full-cheeked like her father's. The blue dress that so closely matched the color of her eyes was tight-gathered at the waist, showing the strongly feminine contours of her small body.

She seemed quieter than he remembered, less a girl and more a woman.

"Ned said you wouldn't be back till you'd found the horses and hung the thieves," Lovelace said, insistent at having Sherill's attention. "I trust you've banked all that gold and aren't letting it lie around somewhere under your saddle."

He caught the sober look that touched Sherill's face and drew back a little, at once asking, "Something wrong, son?"

"Not much, Commodore. I've found the horses, but they're still up in the hills."

Lovelace was startled. He laughed uneasily. "But ready to bring down, of course?"

"Not quite."

"Then those cutthroats still have them?"

Sherill nodded. "They do. But not for long, I hope."

The Commodore's worried look eased somewhat. "You'll call on the sheriff this time, won't you, son?"

"No. Thought I'd give it another try on my own first."

"Jim, you can't!" Ruth breathed, alarm in her eyes. "That's taking a dreadful chance."

"This is worth taking a chance on, Ruth."

A glance Sherill didn't understand passed between them and Lovelace turned away and walked to the front of the room and began pacing back and forth before the dusk-darkened window overlooking the street. Ruth stepped over to the table alongside a heavy horse-hair sofa and lit the pink-globed lamp there and then sat down.

As the light drove back the shadows, Sherill sensed a change of feeling in both of them, a change that flattened the heady enjoyment of this meeting. He said, a little awkwardly, "This will work itself out. If it doesn't, there's still enough left to pay back that loan, Commodore."

"That thousand be damned!" Lovelace flared angrily. "The profits from it were to have been a wedding present to you two," he announced bluntly. "I wasn't going to mention it."

"There's still a good chance I'll get the herd back, sir," Sherill told him, warned to mildness by that danger-signal of Lovelace's rising temper.

"But suppose the horses are gone for good?"

Sherill lifted his wide shoulders. "I can try again next year."

THE Commodore ran a hand over his face, thoughtfully studying Sherill. "Next year Ruth will be twenty-two. You're nearly thirty."

"Twenty-seven."

Lovelace nodded. "Time you two were raising a family. Ruth's mother had her when she was eighteen."

"Dad, don't be course," Ruth murmured.

"It's the truth, isn't it? A southern girl can't be far in her twenties and have many eligible young men very interested in her."

"Ruth isn't having to worry about that." There was an edge to Sherill's voice.

"Don't be too sure," Lovelace said, his face redder than it had been. "This was to be the year you made your money. You were to put the ranch in the hands of some good man and come back to Hannibal with us. You were to buy into the business and start learning it so you could take over from me."

"That can still happen, Commodore."

"Can it? You've been gone three weeks, the Lord knows where, since we had the word you'd lost those horses. What've you done? You're back here now without a thing."

"Give me a few more days," Sherill said evenly, crowding back his anger. "Say a week."

"But suppose you don't have any luck?"

"Then I still have enough to get along on. A little in the bank, a few head of cattle down in Wyoming on the layout. We'll be all right, won't we, Ruth?"

She looked up at him with a smile that wasn't convincing. "I hardly know what to say, Jim."

Lovelace laughed in a dry way. "Have Ruth come out here and live like some filthy Cree squaw? Not on your life."

"What's wrong—"

"She couldn't stand this life," the Commodore cut in. "Why, man, she's been raised to have everything. Spoiled rotten, she is. And it's my fault. But facts are facts and there they are."

"Isn't that up to her?" Sherill asked evenly.

A livid anger flushed Lovelace's face to tell Sherill, too late, of his mistake.

"It damn' well isn't up to her!" the Commodore burst out. "Sir, I'll have you know I won't stand for such talk! Here I've offered you everything but the shirt off my back, practically handed over my business to you. And you have the gall to question my authority!"

"No one's questioning it. But Ruth should have something—"

"Ruth's my daughter, Sherill. She's been raised to mind her elders."

"She's of age, Commodore," Sherill said, thinking, *He can't do this to me, to us,* and he went on, "She's able to decide this for herself."

Lovelace's look became apoplectic. He was about to say something when the door opened and the colored boy came in, three big bottles filling his skinny hands.

GEORGE LOVELACE swung around, saw who it was and bellowed, "Take that damned stuff away!"

The boy, frightened, hastily backed out of the door. Then the Commodore faced Sherill again, his jaw set tightly. "So you're already trying to run my household, are you?"

"Look, sir," Sherill said with all the patience he could command. "All I'm asking is that you wait and see how I make out. If worst comes to worst, Ruth and I can still get along."

"I won't allow Ruth to marry an ordinary cowhand and live in this God-forsaken country."

Sherill eyed the man levelly, drawling, "We'll see."

"You'll see what?"

"We'll see how my luck runs." Sherill looked at Ruth now. "Do I get another chance?"

"I—I think we should wait," she said, quite helplessly. "Can't we talk about it later, Jim?"

"We'll talk when Sherill shows up with those horses." Deliberately, Lovelace crossed over to the door and picked up Sherill's hat from the chair alongside it. His look was narrow-eyed and angry as he extended the hat. "Not before, Sherill. Is that plainly understood?"

Only now did Jim Sherill fully realize the corner into which the Commodore had crowded him. Fear struck through him, a fear of nothing physical but of realizing that his future lay in the balance, weighed against this man's unreasoning and unstable temper. Tonight was setting a pattern for the rest of their lives. Lovelace wouldn't soon forget this, would never forgive a thing that had been said. He should have humored the man, Sherill knew, should have let him have his own way, taken his abuse without standing up to it.

Knowing all these things, he took his hat from the Commodore, nodded to Ruth and opened the door.

"We'll expect better word from you next time we see you, Sherill," Lovelace said, adding pointedly, "Or there won't be a next time."

His words goaded Jim Sherill over that last edge of reason and into real and unforgiving anger. Sherill stood there in the doorway with a smile slowly coming to his face. Finally he laughed.

"Do you see anything amusing about this?" Lovelace asked in an aloof, cold-angry way.

Sherill nodded. "You can't keep her shut up under lock and key, Commodore."

He turned away and walked to the head of the stairs, Lovelace calling after him, "We'll see about that!" He was halfway down the stairs when he heard the door slam with a violence that thundered along the corridor.

Standing in the deepening dusk on the veranda, he absent-mindedly rolled a smoke and then stood without lighting it, feeling his anger cool, regret beginning to crowd him. He asked himself tiredly if he and Ruth were ever again to be together in that carefree and utterly happy association that had been theirs until now. He doubted it.

He wondered about eating but relished the thought of food even less than he had that of the tobacco. He took the cigarette from his mouth as he heard someone open the screen door behind him. He edged over and away from the head of the steps.

"Jim!"

Ruth's voice softly calling his name brought him swinging around. She was standing close and now she came against him with a violence that crushed the cigarette in his hand. Her arms were around him then, and she kissed him with a gusty and passionate abandon.

Afterward, she drew away quickly, saying with a careful emphasis on each word, "Jim, don't ever take what Dad says as being what I think."

Then, before he could recover from his surprise, she turned and left him.

II

YESTERDAY, in the late afternoon, shortly after Lockwood and Slim had made Sherill their prisoner, Jake Henry's curiosity had been roused by stray sounds shuttling up out of a ravine directly below him. The sounds Henry soon identified as belonging to several horses on the move and, out of curiosity at encountering anyone in this isolated spot, he rode on to a point where the ravine opened out, all the while keeping high along the timbered ridge flanking it.

So presently he had watched three riders come out of the trees below. He knew all three. One he had frequently seen on his occasional prowls through these southward hills. The second belonged with the first, although he was a comparative stranger. The third, Jake hadn't seen for two years. It was this third man, Sherill, that his glance clung to unbelievingly at first, then in anger.

He had kept his distance as he went on and an hour later widely circled the high meadow above the big corral, which he guessed rightly to be the destination of the trio. He and his mule made camp several miles below the hill-ranch and therefore he didn't hear the shots. His bleak mood would have been a good bit relieved had he heard them.

As it was, thinking about Jim Sherill stirred the bile in him to the point where he couldn't sleep for better than an hour after hitting his blanket, casting back over certain things pretty strongly imprinted on his keen memory.

This morning he'd still been thinking about that third man and finally, after breakfast, he saddled the mule and headed south through the timber in the general direction of the river. He had farther to ride than Sherill and it took him longer to reach Whitewater. He rode into the town at dusk, a long-haired and rangy, buckskin-clad shape astride the big mule.

He spent half an hour in the Merchandise buying supplies, paying in gold-dust, arranging to call for his goods the following morning. It was dark when he rode on up and turned his mule into Kramer's corral and afterward entered the first saloon he came to along the street, the Fine and Dandy.

The place was crowded and noisy and the air reeked of stale smoke and of whiskey. From the rear sounded the tinny din of a piano and the talk and laughter were pitched to a high note. Jake considered the long crowded bar only momentarily before his pale eyes took on an amused glint.

Without further ceremony, he made his way forward through the crowd by using hands and elbows and shoulders, urgently moving men out of his way. Two or three

protested violently before thinking better of it. Jake Henry was a full head taller than any man in the room and he ignored all these complaints with an unaffected boredom.

"Whiskey. A jug," he told one of the aprons.

He paid and made his way toward the back of the room, the half-gallon crockery jug dangling from his left hand. He found a small table unoccupied beyond the back poker layout and took it. He uncorked the jug and drank thirstily, grimacing at the bite of the fiery liquid.

PRESENTLY the piano stopped its discordant beat and the couples on the dance-floor drifted away from it. One medium-tall man and heavy-set and with a coarse face brought a housegirl over to Jake's table and, scowling down, said gruffly, Move out. That table's ours."

Jake moved no more than his eyes, which lifted to stare impassively at the man a long moment. "Go 'way," he finally drawled, and dropped his eyes again.

The other's blunt jaw thrust out and he took a step toward Jake. But this put him within view of the long-barreled Navy Colt and the knife hanging from the belt bisecting Jake's long buckskin jacket. He hastily revised his intentions, said to the girl, "Hell! Let's drink," and turned and took her over to the bar.

Jake had another long pull at the jug, then another, relishing this sop to a conceit that told him he could still, having just turned forty, outwalk or outride or outfight or outshoot any man he had ever known, white or Indian. He would sometimes qualify this blanket assumption by uneasily remembering one exception to it. But generally it was his belief that he was the best man alive.

His profession called for such certainties, for he was of that seldom-seen breed known as the "wolfer." A preference for his own company, plus a liking for solitude, plus the Territory's generous bounty on wolf heads had led Jake Henry into his way of life.

A KENTUCKY upbringing had given him an extraordinary skill with firearms, successfully deserting the Confederate Army and hiding out for a year had strengthened his natural distrust of most men, and roaming the uninhabited regions of Wyoming and Idaho, and now Montana, had made him independent as a crow. He had been hunted by the Indians and in turn had hunted them. Seven years ago he had burned his collection of scalps as representing something he had gone stale on, a sport for which he no longer had any zest.

Four or five times each year he would leave the hills and come down to trading post or settlement, buy supplies and ammunition and get drunk. Each of these visits sickened him to the point where he foreswore any further contact with his fellow man. But loneliness and his appetite for drink always drew him back again.

Now, consuming whiskey as fast as the muscle-spasms in his stomach would let him, he idly kept an eye on the man who had tried to take his table. Presently he noticed that that individual had left the girl and was standing near the front of the bar talking with a barrel-chested houseman and two less savory characters. Occasionally one of them would glance back at him and quickly away again.

Jake was delighted at the prospects. For the first time in twenty-four hours his reason for going on this spree was forgotten.

A quarter-hour later, when the quartet began slowly working its way toward him through the crowd, half the whiskey in the jug was beginning to explode in his brain. He didn't watch them now.

They split into pairs, each pair unobtrusively edging in his direction, one or the other now and then stopping to listen to the music or to look in on a poker game or simply to stand idly staring at nothing in particular.

When the houseman stood ten feet away, within easy range, Juke suddenly lunged erect, picked up his chair and threw it.

They rushed him then. All but the houseman, who couldn't.

Jake met their rush by kicking the table into them. One man went down, bawling loudly in pain at a pair of scraped shins. A ripple of excitement ran along the room and someone up front let out a shout.

The next moment the more timid element in the crowd headed for the swing doors and boiled out onto the walk, causing a jam there. Then, gathering courage and num-

bers, they turned and tried to push their way back into the saloon again. The stream of movement along the walk slowed, stopped and finally spilled into the street.

By the time Jim Sherill came along, just having left the River House, wheel-traffic was snarled and the driver of a high-bodied freight had his six teams tangled with those of the Arrow Creek stage stalled in front of him.

Sherill left the walk, ducked under the tie-rail and was winding his way through the crowd when a roar of voices rolled out of the saloon. Only mildly curious, he stopped and looked over the churning mass of heads and through the saloon's wide-open doors.

He saw Jake Henry's shaggy head towering over the others at the smoke-fogged room's back wall and instantly recognized the wolfer. A strong urgency hit him at sight of a bleeding gash on Jake's right cheek. Just then Jake's mighty bellow sounded over the general din and he saw the wolfer step out and swing a chair-leg club and dodge quickly back to the wall again.

Sherill didn't wait for more but pushed roughly into the crowd, his long arms sweeping men aside. Once he said, "Sorry, neighbor," as he wedged a shoulder between two men and twisted them roughly apart. He elbowed aside a man leaning against one of the doors and then, braced against it, forced his way into the saloon.

Another strident yell of Jake's wiped out the last of Sherill's caution and he went the length of the room not caring who he jarred or shouldered aside. One man swung on him, missed, and a second later backed quickly away with a face stinging from an open-handed swipe. Sherril used elbows, boots, shoulders and fists and shortly, wellwinded, he stood among the men who blocked off the corner in which Jake Henry stood.

It was worse than it had looked from outside. Four men faced Jake inside the fifteen-foot space ringed by the crowd. The houseman was definitely out of it with a badly sprained shoulder which he gripped tightly with his good hand. Of the remaining three, the burly one whose table Jake had stolen stood spraddle-legged and with the jagged neck-end of a broken bottle in his fist, a skinned cheek-bone and a swollen eye the only marks on him. Of the other pair, the shortest and stockiest had a scalp-cut that was bleeding down the back of his neck, a ripped vest that hung in tatters, a mashed mouth. The remaining man stood as far as he could from Jake, hunched over with both arms across his middle and not the slightest trace of color on his face.

SHERILL had seen Jake looking better. But nevertheless Jake now wiped the blood from his cheek and brandished his club with a reddened arm that lifted from the ribbons of a torn buckskin sleeve, saying dryly:

"Quit the dancin' and let's mix it, boys."

He seemed to be having trouble focusing his eyes, which were bright with a glaze easy to recognize. Nearby, in the splintered remains of a table, lay the broken shards of Jake's jug. His moccasined feet stood in a puddle of whiskey. From an empty lamp-bracket on the wall behind him hung his wide belt, knife and gun dangling from it.

He's having his fun in the same old way was Sherill's thought. A tingling anticipation ran through him as he looked at the wolfer. Strangely, the energy he had spent fighting his way the length of the room seemed to have burnt out the deep core of depression he had carried away from his meeting with Lovelace. He was feeling good now, more alive and at ease with himself.

The crowd was quiet, tense and waiting. The burly man, still looking at Jake, spoke out the side of his mouth and quite softly said, "This time, Black," and a shorter thick-chested individual close to Sherill answered just as softly, "Let 'er rip, Sid."

Shortly Sid took a quick step at Jake, then dodged sideways and in. Jake's club swished down and the crowd let out a roar. Jake missed and so did Sid's sudden stab with the jagged bottle. But now Jake's side was to Sherill. Black, seeing his chance, lunged in.

Sherill reached out with a boot and tripped Black, calling, "Watch it, Jake!" as the man sprawled headlong. The wolfer turned and Black scrambled back out of the way.

Sherill half-smiled as he looked down at Black, drawling, "Better wait your turn."

Black picked himself up, glaring at Sherill, and Jake sidled away from Sid and looked this way, asking loudly, "Who yelled then?"

"I did, Jake."

The wolfer squinted and finally saw Sherill. A glad smile touched his hawkish face. But then a quick reserve settled over it and his voice intoned, "Who the hell're you?" in a rough-edged belligerence.

"You remember," Sherill stepped into the cleared area beyond the crowd.

Jake's attention was altogether on Sherill. Sid saw that and lunged. At the last moment Jake saw him coming and lifted his club. Sid let out a howl of pain lost in the crowd's excited roar as the club caught him under the wrist, knocking the bottle from his down-sweeping hand. Then Jake swung with his left and his fist caught Sid hard on the ear and knocked him into the wall. But for a moment Jake's back was exposed, and now Black and the one with the torn vest rushed him.

Sherill caught Black by the arm, swung him around and hit him solidly at the hinge of the jaw. Black's weight collapsed into him as someone jumped him from behind. A man darted from the jam-packed fringe of the circle and tried to pull the interloper off Sherill and still another onlooker hit this one.

The sudden violence was like a tonic to Sherill. He was relishing this moment and let his pent-up feelings boil over in a furious burst of energy that seemed instantly to cleanse him of all the poisonous disappointment and frustration and humiliation this evening had brought him.

AN ANGRY roar rolled back across the room now. At the bar an apron, understanding this telltale sign, went pasty-faced and reached under the counter to swing up a sawed-off Greener. He lifted the shotgun, pulled both triggers and the thunderous double-concussion blew the lid off. Violence spread like a grass fire before a high wind.

Men with no thought of a quarrel turned and started clawing and gouging and kicking their way to safety. They were slugged and before they knew it were slugging back. Both bar lamps were shattered by thrown bottles and the long bar mirror splintered and came down in a heavy jangling that rode musically over the din. Voices roared in profanity and fear and just plain exuberance.

In that back corner, Sherill had spread his boots wide and bent far over, arching his back suddenly to throw the man who had jumped him. The man's cartwheeling frame slammed into Sid and they both went down and Jake deliberately turned and with a roundhouse swing flattened the last man of the original quartet who had hesitated too long near him.

A broad grin of sheer enjoyment was on Sherill's face as he saw a man coming at him from the side. He wheeled in alongside Jake, yelling, "Let's beat it, friend!" The wolfer swung his club viciously, flooring Sherill's antagonist. Suddenly a chair hurtled over the heads of the crowd ten feet away, bringing down the shaded lamp over the back poker layout and throwing this corner in near darkness.

Beside Sherill, Jake growled, "Get the hell away from me, stranger!"

"Wake up, Jake. You know me," Sherill answered. He vaguely saw a shape diving in at the wolfer and threw himself at it, his knees catching the man in the chest, bringing the wind from his lungs in a choked groan.

Someone piled into Sherill and he threw a savage uppercut that missed. A down man's swinging legs tripped him and he sprawled full length. He lost his hat, found it again. He had to fight his way to his feet and as the last lamp up front guttered out he had a fleeting glimpse of Jake slugging and working his way out of the corner and up along the wall.

Sherill fought his way quickly to the wall and shortly came abreast a waist-high window, calling loudly, "Here we go, Jake!" He made out the wolfer's high shape directly ahead against the feeble light shining in from the street. He got a hold on Jake's arm and felt it jerked away.

Jake was drunk, evidently too drunk even to remember him. The wolfer had started this near riot and, enjoyable as it had been, it was now time to be getting out of here.

Knowing this, Sherill did what he thought he had to, very deliberately, carefully.

He stepped over to Jake, took a hold on his arm and suddenly pulled him off-balance. Then he hit him, hit hard. His blow was low and merely staggered the wolfer. He

swung again, and this time his knuckles ached against the shelving slope of Jake's jaw. He saw the tall man's shape melt down and out of sight.

He stooped and there Jake lay. He gripped him under the arms and lifted him toward the window, staggering into the wall as someone collided with him. At the window he kicked the glass from the lower sash, threw Jake belly down across the sill and shoved him on out. Then he went out after him, falling against the adjoining building.

Jake lay there huddled in the trash of the narrow alleyway. Sherill awkwardly lifted the wolfer across his shoulder and walked back from the street. He reached the back alley and turned up along it, hearing the muffled roar of the fight through the saloon's thin wall. Something kept slapping the back of his thighs. It was Jake's belt and gun and knife. Somehow, in the confusion back there, Jake had managed to remember them.

A hundred yards up the alley Sherill stopped to rest. Now most of the noise was coming from the street. He picked Jake up again and went on. The wolfer was out cold, breathing loudly, a dead weight.

He came to a darkened cross-street, saw that it was clear and lurched across it. Behind the street-fronting buildings was a barn and corral with a windmill on its alley side. There was a log trough inside the corral and Sherill dumped Jake's loose weight through the poles and then tiredly climbed through. He dragged the wolfer over to the trough and pulled the belt from his hand, tossing the weapons aside.

Then he got Jake to his knees and sloshed water into his face.

Jake gagged but didn't lift his head. So Sherill hoisted him higher and pushed his head into the trough and held it under the water a few seconds. When the wolfer began thrashing and pushing, Sherill let him go and stepped back out of the way.

JAKE sat there looking up at him dazedly a moment. Then the wolfer reached up and pulled himself to his moccasined feet. He had to spread his feet wide to stand. Even so, he was taller than Sherill.

"Better now?" Sherill asked.

In this faint light he could see Jake's shoulders hunch over. Suddenly Jake stepped in and swung at him. He easily dodged the blow and watched Jake stumble and go to his knees.

He laughed, drawling, "Brother, you must've taken on a load."

"Not too much to keep me from handlin' you." Jake's tone was brittle with anger. With some difficulty, he came to his feet again, breathing, "Y' licked me once. But never again. Not this time!"

"Jake, you're out on your feet," Sherill said patiently. "The Law's lookin' for you. I can't turn you loose this way."

"The Law!" Jake scoffed. "What the hell should you know about the Law?"

"Not much, Jake."

"But you will," the wolfer breathed in seeming irrelevance. "The whole damned rotten pack of you will, some day. Ed Stedman! You're travelin' with a high-grade outfit, Sherill. Now I'll beat some sense into your head."

Suddenly Sherill understood what was the matter with Jake; or rather, he understood part of it.

A long laugh welled up out of his wide chest and when Jake, angrier than ever now, took a lurching step toward him, he let the wolfer almost reach him and suddenly ducked down and wheeled in behind him. He straightened with his arms around Jake's waist. He lifted Jake and tilted him sideways and threw him on his face.

There was a three-second interval when he let go his hold and Jake seemed about to thrash free. But finally he had his knees on Jake's shoulders and the wolfer's arms drawn up behind his back, wrists crossed.

"Who was goin' to beat sense into whose head?" Sherill drawled.

Then he proceeded to tell Jake a few things.

THE next morning, in the loft of the barn alongside the windmill where Sherill had given Jake his soaking, a hostler's loud whistling of *Tenting Tonight* brought Sherill awake. He lay there unmoving in the darkness, listening to the tune and the swishing of the hay as the hostler pitched his forkfuls from the loft door down into the corral. Shortly, a lantern's light laid sweeping shadows against the roof's planking and Sherill heard steps going down a ladder. Then the loft was left in darkness.

Sherill sat up, stifling a groan as pain

stabbed at his side. He pulled on his boots, taking inventory of the damage to his big frame. In addition to the sore ribs and the bullet-burn along his back, the knuckles of his right hand were tender and there was a kink in his left side. He grinned into the darkness, musing, *fair enough,* warmly thinking back upon last night's heady excitement.

He could hear Jake's even breathing off there in the blackness to his left and considered waking the wolfer, finally deciding against it. He remembered that somehow he had managed to hang onto the new Stetson throughout the brawl and now, groping around, he found it and slid down into the empty end of the loft.

He went to the big door and looked out across the roofs of the town, seeing a faint grayness beginning to show along the uneven horizon to the east. The stars were beginning to pale out, gray banners of smoke lifted from a few chimneys and a rooster's crowing echoed in from the edge of town. He climbed down the outside ladder from the loft door and headed for the alley and the windmill trough, shivering a little against the chill yet needing to feel the sting of cold water against his face.

Five minutes later he spotted a lighted window far down the street and made for it. He was the restaurant's third customer. As he came in and sat at the plain pine counter, the sleepy-eyed waiter behind it suddenly came wide awake and answered his order for steak and eggs and coffee with a cordial, "Won't take a minute, stranger."

Sherill noticed that the waiter winked broadly at a pair of wide-hatted individuals further along the counter, noticed also that these two were eyeing him with some amusement and a quite open respect. He ignored all this and when his plate came he at once began wolfing down the food.

He had half-finished eating when the door opened and a cadaverously lean man entered. A gold shield was pinned to the buckle of the newcomer's shell-belt. He stopped just inside the door, looking kitchenward and calling, "Seen that wolfer yet, Hank?"

The restaurant man came through the curtain at the end of the counter, wiping his hands on his grimy apron. "Not yet, Marshal," he said.

"How about the other one?"

"Nope," Hank shook his head, his face a blank.

The marshal sighed tiredly, said, "Give a yell if you do," and went out onto the walk again. As his steps faded along the planking Hank's face broke into a wide grin and with a pointed look at Sherill, he returned to his kitchen.

SHERILL was having his second cup of coffee when one of the punchers down the counter caught his eye and asked him, with a straight face, "See the fight last night?"

"Where?" Sherill asked blandly.

"At the Fine and Dandy."

"Was it any good?" Sherill queried.

The puncher nudged his neighbor. "Was it any good, he wants to know." He laughed. "Mister, the doc spent half the night settin' bones and sewin' cuts. That was the damnedest free-for-all I ever seen. They wrecked the place."

"I should've been there." Sherill smiled a little, then made a point of changing the subject, asking, "You with one of the outfits around here?"

"M on a Rail."

"Any range for lease out your way?"

"Not any."

The speaker's partner leaned over the counter now so that he could see Sherill, asking, "How much do you need, stranger?"

"Three or four sections anyway. Ten if I can get it."

"He could try Donovan, Bill."

"Who's Donovan?" Sherill wanted to know.

"Major Donovan. Bosses Anchor. Last winter a blow piled most of their stuff up against a drift fence. You can't see the fence for the bones. Stink, my God! Until a month ago, you couldn't ride that country."

Sherill was remembering Donovan now, thinking of Jean Ruick and what had happened last evening at the sheriff's office. *Why not?* he finally asked himself. Then, "Where is this outfit?"

"Cross the river, take the road east and ride till you come to it. Two hours ought to get you there."

Sherill thanked them, paid for his breakfast and went on down to the River House. The lobby was deserted and dark except for

a night lamp over the desk at the foot of the stairs. The door to the bar stood open and clink of glasses sounded in there where a swamper was beginning to straighten up.

Upstairs, Sherill found Ned Rawn sprawled across the bed still dressed in the gray suit, now badly rumpled. The window was closed and the air stale and heavy. Sherill threw up the window and momentarily considered waking his friend. But then he gave up the idea, remembering something of Ned's too-frequent mornings after.

He had come for his gun, Slim's .45, and now he found it lying on the chair beside the washstand. He pulled aside his jumper and thrust it through the waistband of his denims and presently, with a last glance toward the bed, he left the room.

Going along the hallway he glanced up into the blackness at its head, for a moment wondering about Ruth and then forcing himself not to think of the Lovelaces.

He remembered the big livery lot he had passed as he came down the street with Jean Ruick yesterday afternoon, now guessing that it might be Kramer's. It was, a combination stage station, freight yard and livery. As he came up on it, a battered mud-wagon rolled out of the gate, laying a hollow thunder against the stillness as its two teams hit the plank ramp, the sound of its going at once muted by the street's heavy dust.

The night man hadn't heard about the saddle but remembered Sherill's geldings. So they went on back to the barn, found the saddle and Sherill watched the hostler rope one of the pair, a sorrel.

He rode on down to the levee and waded the river below the ferry landing in the first cold dawn light, his glance going to the *Queen* and clinging to it, unpleasantly interrupting his thoughts of Jean Ruick and his errand.

How long, he wondered, would it take him to know river boats and freights and bills of lading as well as he knew grass and leather and the good and bad points of a horse? *Years,* he told himself, for the first time really questioning his goal, this future the Commodore had forced on him last year during his visit to Hannibal.

The prospect wasn't pleasing and as he put the sorrel up the far bank and pushed on at a steady jog, he told himself, *One thing at a time,* and for the second time in this barely-begun day he forced his thoughts away from something that had to do with Ruth.

CALEB DONOVAN finished his breakfast in Anchor's cookhouse and left the table before the others. He went to the door and stood there idly working at his strong teeth with a quill toothpick, looking out across the creek willows to the hazed bulk of the far Sabers.

Presently, without turning, he said, "Better work that upper tank today, Phil," and Phil Hust, Anchor's strawboss, replied, "We'll do that, Major." It wasn't long before Rust and the two others filed out past Donovan, heading for the wagon-shed and corral.

He watched them hitch the team and load the scoop and presently take the trail to the south.

He was irritable over this daily chore of having to think up enough work to keep three men busy where last spring there had been too much for six to handle, and now, hearing the cook clearing up in the room behind him, he dryly asked, "Brick, what did you put in those flapjacks this morning? Sand?"

He got no answer, hadn't expected any. He seemed to forget the toothpick, working it to the side of his mouth. Shortly, he trudged across to the short office wing of the big log cabin, plainly not enjoying the walk. He was heavy without an ounce of fat on his bearlike frame, his two hundred and twenty pounds making him appear shorter than his five foot nine. His cavalryman's boots and close-fitting breeches were, in these surroundings, incongruous. But over the years he had flatly refused to break the habits of an Army upbringing and wear a high-heeled boot or sit anything but a McClellan saddle. To heighten this appearance of individuality he wore his mustaches close-clipped, unfashionably.

He was climbing the step to the office door when the sound of a trotting horse shuttled in across the draw. He came back down across the graveled yard until he could see around the L-shaped cabin's corner. By that time a tall rider on a sorrel was already through the gate and climbing into the yard. Seeing him, the rider angled this way.

"Mornin'," Jim Sherill said as he came up. "I'm looking for Major Donovan."

"That's me."

Sherill came aground and they shook hands. Then, without preliminary, Sherill announced the reason for his visit, asking if there was any chance of leasing range.

Donovan's look brightened, although his tone was dry as dust when he said, "What do you think? You came along that fence."

Sherill nodded, feeling no little pity for the man. The sight of that half-mile long scattering of bones would have impressed any stockman. He wouldn't soon forget it.

"What's your offer?" Donovan asked.

"What's it worth?"

They began talking it over, Sherill not committing himself, Donovan fishing for an offer and occasionally reaching up and absent-mindedly working the quill around his teeth. He was occupying himself in this fashion when he heard someone approach beyond the corner of the cabin and turned in time to see Jean Ruick walk into sight half a dozen steps away.

SHE saw Sherill and stopped, surprise and a quick embarrassment touching her finely-moulded face. Sherill touched his hat to her and she nodded, on the verge of smiling, and hastily said, "I didn't know you were busy, Major."

She was turning away when Donovan stopped her. "Jean, this man's come out to ask about leasing those eight sections along the river. You ought to be in on it." He looked at Sherill, telling him, "Miss Ruick's the owner. You can talk to her."

Jean Ruick appeared reluctant to join them, asking, "Can't you decide it without me?"

"We can," Donovan said. "But it's a little out of the ordinary, Jean. Sort of hard to know a fair price to ask."

Sherill saw her hesitation and said, half-smiling, "Maybe you don't like it, Miss. But my money's printed by the same outfit that prints yours. And I'd pay in advance."

"Did I say I didn't like it?" There was a faint edge to her voice, although he could see that she was deliberately trying to keep from showing him any animosity. She looked at Donovan now, telling him, "Major, this is the man who rode the mare into town yesterday."

"So?" Surprise was strong on Donovan's blocky face and he looked at Sherill oddly, in a wary way.

Sherill misunderstood both his word and his look and told the girl, "If I was here, you and the sheriff could both keep an eye on me." He let his smile broaden.

She started to smile, didn't, instead said carefully, "I've said nothing about wanting to watch you. If you and the Major can come to some agreement, that's between the two of you."

Sherill saw the pride that was in her, a pride that wouldn't let her openly admit yesterday's mistake although he sensed she was feeling differently about him today. He was struck by the thought, *She's damned handsome,* and was a little annoyed by it. He had been prepared not to like this girl. Yet the fact remained that her looks were quite striking just now, the early sunlight edging her head with spun copper and laying sharp highlights across her sensitive face. She was taller than he remembered, her rust-colored dress subtly revealing the graceful contours of her figure.

It was plain that the Major didn't want to decide this on his own, for now that he saw she was trying a second time to leave them he said, "He's offered two hundred for ninety days. I'm askin' three."

Jean Ruick looked at Sherill again, "Make it three hundred for four months."

"Ninety days is all I'd want it."

"Two hundred and fifty then."

"Two and a quarter's as high as I'd go."

"Take it, Major," she said.

Donovan nodded. "Sounds good all the way around. Unless you've got some reason for objectin', Jean."

"Let's say I had a reason," she said.

SHE gave Sherill one more measuring glance, then turned and disappeared around the wall-corner, and Donovan drawled, "She's calmed down considerable since last night. The mare barely made it out here, tied to the back of her buckboard."

"The mare had taken a beating."

"Just what did happen?"

Sherill gave the Major the same story he'd given the sheriff and evidently satisfied his curiosity. They talked over the details of the lease, Sherill agreed to call at a lawyer's office in Whitewater to sign the agreement and they shook hands.

From the kitchen window, Jean watched Sherill ride down and through the gate and go out the trail. After he had dipped out of sight beyond a far rise, she stood there a long moment, for the first time consciously realizing that she had made the effort to be nice to him. She couldn't analyze her contrariness, why it was that yesterday she had been so sure of one thing about him and today was equally as willing to be sure of the opposite.

But there it was, and because she was so completely honest with herself she admitted now that there were many things she liked about this Jim Sherill. Her curiosity about him was so strong that finally she turned from the window and left the kitchen, crossed the living room and went along the short bedroom hallway to the office.

She found Caleb Donovan at his desk writing a letter. He looked up as she entered, leaned back in his chair and laid his pen aside.

"Jacobs over at Sands is offering ninety head of culls at twenty-five apiece, Jean," he said. "They're sound and average a hundred pounds under weight for the reservation herd. Do we buy?"

"Culls? Not at twenty-five, Major. Offer him twenty."

"And lose 'em? Jean, we've got an empty range. How do we get back in business?"

"By buying carefully." She let it go at that, knowing that the matter was settled. Lately the Major rarely pressed an argument with her.

SHE went to the room's far corner now and pushed a pair of saddle-bags from the deep leather chair there, asking as she sat down, "Did Sherill take your offer?"

"Yours, you mean. Yes."

She smiled, musing, "I wonder."

"You wonder what?"

"How wrong I was about him yesterday."

He had no opinion to offer and sat waiting, knowing she had something more to say. At length her look changed to one of faint alarm. "He isn't using the bunkhouse, is he?"

"No. He wanted the shack on the river."

"Because of me, I suppose."

"He didn't say."

"He wouldn't." Her good humor held as she looked at Donovan. "You know, I don't for a minute think he knew he was riding a stolen horse."

"Probably not."

"Why don't you go on into town today and see what you can find out about him?"

He gave her an amused look. "Purely for business reasons, of course." She at once sobered and he laughed, saying, "All right. I was going in anyway to have Whipple draw up the papers. And as long as I'm that far I might as well go on up to Sands and look over those culls."

He wasn't looking at her and didn't see the quizzical glance she gave him as he went on, "No, I'll be back sometime tomorrow."

Over the next half-hour, until the Major rode out the town trail, Jean tried to puzzle through the answer to his trip to Sands, not wanting to doubt him but unable to keep from it. He had been gone only ten minutes when finally, in desperation, she went to her room and took a letter from beneath the things in the bottom bureau drawer. Then she left the cabin, walking across to the cookhouse.

She found old Brick Chase scouring his counter at the range end of the long room. He looked up as she came in, said simply, "Hello, youngster," and went on with his work.

She sat on the end of one of the table benches, hardly knowing how to begin what she wanted to tell him.

In the end, he saved her that trouble. For his brief look at her had told him something. He had known her long enough—all of her twenty-three years—to be well acquainted with her moods. So now he asked, "Somethin' on your mind?"

"Yes, Brick." She sighed her relief. "Brick, sound underweight reservation culls are simply culls, aren't they?"

He turned, favoring his game leg, and drawled, "Sure thing. Why?"

"The Major is going over to Jacobs' place, at Sands, to look over ninety head of culls they're selling. He seemed to think he ought to see them before we buy."

Brick's bushy brows lifted but he didn't say anything. Studying his long and narrow face with its heavy mustaches, graying in the same shade as his thinning hair, Jean found enough assurance to go on, "We've never learned where he was during the blizzard last winter, have we?"

"Nope." The old cook's tone was strictly neutral.

She and Brick alone shared this secret. Last winter they had gone out into that storm together and cut fence on Brick's hunch that the cattle would drift that way during the blow. They'd been driven in finally by the fury of the storm and during that shrieking, bitter-cold night the cattle had hit the fence beyond the cuts and piled up there and died.

Jean had never forgiven the Major for leaving her alone with one lame man on the place, for being away himself during the blizzard.

It was Brick, driving the buckboard to Whitewater the same afternoon the Major returned, who discovered no tracks in the deep snow along the town trail. He hadn't mentioned it until days afterward, until it was too late for Jean to question her uncle's story of having waited out the blizzard in Whitewater. So she had filed away that item of information along with several others that were puzzling her, and neither she nor Brick had since spoken of it.

Now she took the long, official-looking envelope from the pocket of her dress, unfolded it and held it out to him, saying, "See what you think of this, Brick."

He wiped his hands on the flour-sacking apron before he took it, drew out the single sheet and read it.

Jean could remember every word of it.

Miss Jean Ruick,
Whitewater, Montana.

Dear Miss Ruick:

Regarding your recent inquiry, Caleb R. Donovan, Captain, Cavalry, resigned his commission 4 February, 1875. There is no official record of any irregularity having terminated this officer's career.

The letter was signed by the Adjutant General. "So it's captain, not major," Brick drawled.

"That's just one more thing, Brick. I wish I knew more about him."

"But you don't."

"You hate him, don't you?" When he made no reply, she asked, "What would you do if you were me?"

"Get rid of him. He's damn' near ruined you, Jean!" For the first time, real emotion showed in the old man's face.

"How can I? He's Mother's brother. You know how she felt about him."

"She was afraid he couldn't look after himself. Your old man would never let him set foot on the place."

"Dad must have known something about him that we don't."

"Maybe."

IT HELPED to talk to Brick, who knew her better than any person alive. And she knew him well enough to appreciate that, although he willingly shared her confidences, he seldom pretended to give her advice. Even when she asked for it, he would let her reason things through for herself, now and then prodding her with his sparse-worded wisdom.

She knew that she couldn't do what he had suggested. She also knew that she couldn't change his mind, that it was up to her to come to some sort of a decision.

"How's he been treating you?" she asked.

"I look after myself."

She went to the door now, knowing only that she lacked any real facts upon which to base her suspicion of the Major.

She said, "We won't mention his really being a captain, Brick."

"Not on your life. From now on he's 'Colonel'."

"Don't you dare, Brick!"

He turned serious then, hobbling across the stand in the door as she stepped out. "I'd forget it, Jean. You got enough else to think about."

"You'd be the first one not to forget it, Brick," she said as she left him.

SHERILL reached the river at nine that morning and, crossing it, took a wetting to the knees when the sorrel struck a tricky stretch of quicksand and shied into deep water.

He wasn't sure that he could find his way into the hideout from this point. But yesterday morning on the way out he had pretty accurately marked a low bald peak some ten miles north of the river, knowing he had passed it the previous night and that the trail he had ridden lay several miles east of it.

He spotted the peak now and, the river behind him, headed into a tangle of near-

barren canyons and mesas and buttes. This torn and myriad-colored country lifted after some miles to the foothills and finally he was riding the timber, breathing the cool pine-scented air drifting off the peaks.

There was a subtle change in him now, an alertness that cocked his big frame further forward in the saddle, that made him unnaturally impatient at any lagging or misjudgment of the gelding's. His glance roved ahead restlessly and with a constant shifting from one bit of cover to another. Time and again he paused before crossing an open stretch of ground. If there was a way around it, he took it.

This was far different from his last ride into these hills. Then he had wanted them to find him. His chief worry had been to hide that fact, first of all by appearing genuinely surprised at meeting anyone, next to make a convincing yet unsuccessful attempt to get away. He had quite convinced Mitch and Slim, for they had appreciated how thoroughly beaten he was when they finally took him. Ed's strange suspicions had been something different, something he couldn't have anticipated. But, regardless of Ed, he had succeeded in keeping from them his identity as owner of the horses being worked in the big corral. That was the important thing.

THERE was another difference between this ride in and that first one. Then he had been simply trying to recover his horses. Now a great deal more was involved. His horseherd had become the whole core of his future. To lose it would be to lose his hold on that future.

He was expecting anything and as another hour passed, then still another that put him abreast the granite shoulder of the bald peak, his vigilance strengthened rather than easing off. He had counted eight men up there at the hill ranch. Eight men could cover a lot of country in looking for him and Ed would see that they did.

He was fairly sure that they would still be hunting him. He had taken a lot of trouble to hide his sign on that hard night ride down through the hills that nearly killed the already jaded mare. Until Ed was sure of what had happened to him, he would reason that, hunted and riding a worn-out animal, his quarry would try and lose himself in this hill wilderness and not go beyond the river until he was in better shape to travel.

SHERILL was sure of one more thing in the light of Ed's suspicions. That crew would be riding with orders to shoot him on sight.

So as he struck east from the peak, now following a high line through the aspens, he made several detours that took him around low-lying and open ground. He was going generally east, knowing that if he was careful and had average luck he could spot the trail. It would lead him up to the long meadow and he was going to try to come in on the layout from the timber to the north.

Finally the trail came into sight far below as he was taking a chance he knew he shouldn't. He had left the timber to ride to the edge of a high rim and inspect the country below it. The risk he ran in briefly skylining himself consequently paid off. But as he went on he was nervous about it.

He rode north now, paralleling the trail. Shortly a higher barrier of rimrock drove him down into the lower country. On the way down there were long stretches of open ground. He crossed these as fast as he could, sometimes punishing the sorrel with the spur in his urgency to stay out of sight.

He was no sooner in the timber of these lower hills than, rounding the wall of the rim that had blocked him, this depression narrowed and ran along a canyon. Abruptly, he came to a stretch where the tall lodgepole pines thinned, giving him no choice but to cross four hundred yards of the open canyon bed to gain the shelter of the timber above.

He held the sorrel to a fast trot all the way across, his nerves tight-strung and his glance warily studying what lay ahead. He was entering that upper stand of timber, the tension in him easing away, when the gelding suddenly lifted his head and whickered, looking off to the right. Then a voice shuttled down out of the trees off there, sharply saying:

"Not so fast!"

(Part II in the next SHORT STORIES*)*

"Front" Is a Good Thing to Have; But Behind It One Needs a Back

THE PRECIOUS METAL

By RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

JIMMIE planted his feet in the snowy road. He waved his last five-dollar bill at the approaching delivery van.

"Masterful, that's me!" he muttered. "Dominating—I hope!"

Pete Hunt, the lean, horse-faced driver, jammed on his brakes. The chain-shod wheels skittered in the snow. Hunt's eyes, squinted against the sun glare, licked avidly at the bill.

"Reporter?" he asked. "I seen you in the dog wagon. Go ahead and interview me." His fingers almost grabbed the bill.

Jimmie Welland saved his bill at some risk to his dubious dominance. Hastily he puffed up his chest, stuck out his jaw and deepened his voice.

"J. Barr Welland," he said and tried to look as if Pete had better know the name. "I wish to see Harrington Inness at Tomahawk Point. Uh—this five is yours if you'll let me deliver your groceries at the Point."

Pete Hunt guffawed. His eyes hit Jimmie hard.

"What for?" he asked.

You can't confide to a strange delivery man: *"I'm shy, see? So to cure myself I*

took on a job that would embarrass a brass monkey."

No, you can't do that. Nobody could. Instead Jimmie waved the bill.

"Want to lose me my job?" Hunt growled. "I bet Mr. Inness is still suspicious of me though he frisked my truck last night before he let me out the gates." His long neck swivelled to survey the road from town. "Old Bassett, my boss, is comin' over today to tell Inness I wouldn't of swiped his gold c'llection. Not me!"

Hunt let in his clutch. Chain-shod wheels spurted wads of snow at Jimmie as they rolled toward Tomahawk Point.

"He out-dominated me," Jimmie Welland conceded gloomily. "For a grocery juggler this Pete Hunt is sort of masterful himself."

He sank the five in his overcoat pocket. Through the eight inch snow he faded back to a stand of pines. Flakes from Laden branches tickled as he peered at the lodge gates of Harrington Inness, that stiff-necked, old-fashioned rich man who stubbornly refused to act poor. Inness had his nerve, collecting gold *objets d'art,* disdaining bank vaults.

Pete Hunt's van had stopped outside the gates. Three reporters left their huddle around a fire. Apparently Hunt refused volubly to talk. He drove through the gates as soon as old Grogan, the lodgekeeper, swung them open. The reporters went back to their fire. The private detective beside the gates never moved.

The van climbed the heights of Tomahawk Point. It passed policemen and private detectives searching the grounds nearer the invisible house out on the Point.

WAITING, Jimmie started pumping himself up again like an inner tube. "You're trying but, kid, you need a patch," he told himself. "Buck up."

He studied the neck of land barricaded at its narrowist part by Harrington Inness' stone wall and lodge gate. At each end of the wall a fan of steel spikes spread sharp points. One fan reached out over gray water in Long Island Sound; the other over slush ice covering Tomahawk Cove. Jimmie squinted speculatively at the mushy ice, shivered, then raised his head alertly.

A bright yellow plumber's truck was rolling down the curves of Harrington Inness' ploughed driveway toward the lodge.

Grogan, the lodgekeeper, opened the gates. This time the detective moved. He walked around to the rear of the truck. Art Kennedy, the plumber, got off and opened up the back door. The dick thrust head and shoulders inside the van and searched it.

The reporters tackled the plumber. Art Kennedy shrugged his shoulders and climbed up behind the wheel as soon as the detective slammed shut the door.

Jimmie Welland high-stepped back to the road. He stamped his feet and shook the snow off his socks.

"Plenty of crust now!" he coached himself. "Pretend you're a reporter."

Art Kennedy slowed before Jimmie lifted a diffident hand. The plumber's protuberant gray eyes worked over Jimmie's hopeful face, his flat pockets, his passable clothes.

Kennedy's forehead puckered. "What paper you with, Bud?" he asked.

"L-Let me ask some questions," Jimmie said. "I haven't much time. Is Mr. Inness out supervising the search of the grounds with his own detectives and the police chief?"

Kennedy nodded. "Why ain't you got much time, Bud?"

The intent eyes were centering on Jimmie's red face now.

"The stolen stuff was all gold?" Jimmie pressed.

"Nothing else was good enough for Inness's curio gallery. Ancient plaques, coins, medals, dining service, snuff boxes, statuettes—all like that."

"Wouldn't a thief be crazy to melt down that sort of thing?" Jimmie's thin face was thoughtful.

"All that's been stolen wouldn't bring thirty thousand by weight. What it's worth the way it is—" Kennedy whistled.

"Of course Inness wants the loot recovered before the crook destroys its identity," Jimmie said.

"A dick told me he's putting up five thousand reward."

Kennedy's eyes sharpened. "You look sort of cold," he said solicitously. He patted the seat beside him. "You need a

cup o' coffee at Ben's dog wagon. Ride back to town with me?"

Jimmie grinned. "You might drop me off at the jail instead of the dog wagon. I'm not the burglar."

Art Kennedy scowled. His eyes glowered sourly at Jimmie. He slapped the truck into gear and drove off.

Back among the pines Jimmie's slitted gaze brought up against those inhospitable steel spikes overhanging the cold ice of the cove. The sun glare hurt his eyes.

Pete Hunt's van descended the driveway. Hunt drove through the opening gate, took a carton of groceries off the seat beside him and carried it toward Grogan's little lodge. Grogan slammed the gates and followed him in. They remained inside long after the detective had finished searching the van.

A car from town whisked past Jimmie's hiding place. He made out the gaunt features and derby hat of William Bassett, dignified proprietor of the market for which Pete Hunt made deliveries. Bassett looked upset.

At the gate Pete Hunt bolted out of the lodge. Grogan was at his heels. Pete ran around to the open window of Bassett's sedan. If his boss had anything to say to him it was no more than a word. The reporters got short answers from the old man.

Grogan waved Bassett's car through the gates. The detective, back at his spot in the sun, thrust his hands into his pockets and stared glumly at the reporters' fire.

"Oh, heck!" said Jimmie Welland. "Put out, you, or quit altogether!"

He glanced up at the winter sun. It blazed to the south of Tomahawk Point. A blinding glare would hit eyes turned this way from the Point.

He threaded a way among the trees, lifting his cold feet over the drifts. Ten feet from the end of the wall he stopped beside the last pine. The menace of that steel *cheval de frise* projecting beyond the wall was emphasized by coiling strands of barbed wire woven in among the spikes. One length stretched down eight or ten feet to disappear into the slush ice on the cove.

Jimmie peered back. The detective was still warming his eyes at the reporters' fire. Jimmie glided into the open and flattened himself against the wall end. Wire barbs took hold of his coat.

From the slopes of Tomahawk Point a voice roared out.

"There's your man! Get him!"

Jimmie was spotted. Far up on the driveway a man standing beside a black sedan was stretching out an arm, pointing down at him. A man in a derby hat. Bassett, Pete Hunt's boss.

Jimmie whirled and ran for the pine trees. The detective beside the gate came to life. Jimmie heard the man yell and then a shot screamed past. Bassett's sedan rumbled down the drive, horn clamoring at the gatekeeper.

Jimmie stopped. He faced the charging detective. He kept his head up; tried to look poised, confident, amused.

The detective's grab ruined his attempt at dignity.

"I wanted to see Mr. Inness," Jimmie said.

THE detective tightened his grip. Other dicks arrived with the lantern-jawed Bassett, then the police chief, panting heavily.

Jimmie repeated his statement.

"Is he a reporter?" Chief Schofield asked the newspaper men. They repudiated him. Jimmie stood silent under the rattle of accusations and questions.

"I'm taking this man to headquarters," the chief said, scowling at the private detectives.

As the police car passed Bassett's market Jimmie caught a glimpse of Pete Hunt and Art Kennedy standing by the plumber's truck. They went into an excited huddle

At the police station in the basement of the town hall Jimmie's voice and story sounded thin even in his own ears.

"I wanted to arrange an interview between Mr. Inness and Rockford Ballantyne, star of a crime play being tried out—"

"A press agent!" Chief Schofield said. Jimmie winced under his harsh laughter. "I've seen a press agent. Joe, go get the producer, this Vincent Spain. He's probably around the theatre."

Spain came and bit his cigar as if it were Jimmie.

"Haven't I got enough trouble?" he asked the world with a spreading gesture. "Sure

I said if he'd hit up the papers for a story on the show we're trying out here, 'The Crime of Clissold' with Rockford Ballantyne, I'd maybe hire him. How'd I know he'd use a couple words out o' me to go burglaring?"

Another spreading gesture. "He's all yours, chief. I don't want any part of him. I got to get back."

He paused. "'The Crime of Clissold' with Rockford Ballantyne," he said loudly enough to carry beyond the chief's office. "Opening in town Wednesday at the—"

"Sure, sure!" said the chief, grabbing the door knob. "Tell it to the reporters yourself; this is no broadcasting studio."

When Spain had gone the chief made a mug at Jimmie.

"Welland," he said, "you can save yourself years and me hours by telling where you bunked the stuff."

"I've told you the truth," Jimmie said.

"The stuff is in the grounds," the chief said. "It's heavy. No car left without being searched. No boat could get through that ice in the cove. And no boat could have come near those rocks on the Sound side in that wind and snow."

"Mr. Ballantyne is noted for his detective roles," Jimmie said. "In private life crime has been his hobby—"

"Don't give it to me again," Chief Schofield snapped.

"Look," said Jimmie desperately. "I—I'm a white collar man. I've always been handicapped by—you'd call it bashfulness. It's bothered hell out of me. I thought I might cure myself if I got a job that required terrific crust, a thick-skinned—"

"Ham acting!" Schofield barked. "Lousy! We'll find the stuff as soon as the snow melts. Why not save yourself a few years? They'll send for me when you get sensible."

He called a cop, jerked a thumb toward the cell block and walked out.

Jimmie Welland paced the cell. "I'm a funnier clown than Pagliacci," he growled at the bars. "Any moment now I'll start laughing at myself."

His face was taut. Suddenly he stopped pacing to listen.

Out in the big room where a sergeant sat behind a desk somebody was roaring like a bull. Next moment somebody came storming through into the cell block.

"I know you have him here! Where is he? Jimmie!"

"Mr. Ballantyne!" Jimmie said. "Here I am!"

Rockford Ballantyne, his friend of four hours' standing, spotted him. The tall old actor's mobile and wrinkled face erased high wrath and replaced it instantly with beaming joy. Stick tucked under his arm, he was stripping off his gloves as if about to do something drastic.

"Jimmie, my lad!" he cried. "Outrageous!"

HE WHIPPED around just in time to prevent the angry sergeant from seizing his arm.

"Are you taking on your head responsibility for refusing to allow me to confer with my client?" Ballantyne stormed. He flung his gloves into his hat. "Ridiculous! You are not a stupid man!"

He thrust his hat straight at the sergeant. The cop's fingers closed on it automatically. At once Rockford Ballantyne spun away from him and in a stride was close against the bars of Jimmie's cell. Over his shoulder he said:

"When the chief returns I'll see him, lieutenant. Jimmie, they have yet to place a charge against you."

For a taut moment the sergeant stood still. Then he respectfully secured Ballantyne's hat between the bars and went out.

Ballantyne chuckled at the admiration on Jimmie's face.

"And some of them have the impertinence to say the old man is through!" he whispered. He slanted his head in amusement.

"You certainly aren't!" Jimmie said.

"That appendage to a cigar, Vincent Spain, told me you were here, Jimmie. The old college try didn't fructify? They can't really charge you with burglary?"

"My crime is diffidence," Jimmie Welland said. His voice went dead. "I'm guilty, too."

Rockford Ballantyne's solicitous face invited confidence.

"I don't blame the chief," Jimmie said. "How could anybody believe I was a press agent or wanted to be?"

Ballantyne nodded. "A bit odd. Not the type, my boy."

Jimmie's hands closed on the bars of his cell.

"I've got to cure myself," he said. He spoke through clenched teeth. "It's always been bad. Now when I try to defy it, taking on a job that requires brass, it lands me in jail. Jail!"

Rockford Ballantyne's face continued receptive.

"I never set foot inside Inness' place. But the chief honestly sees no wrong in chucking me into jail. It's gotten bad—mighty bad. I'm so bashful I'm an object of instant suspicion. What can I do, Mr. Ballantyne?"

Ballantyne bent his stick against the cement floor. His face crinkled in thought. He nodded earnestly. "A front is delightful and necessary," he said. "You can do miracles with it."

He jerked his stick suggestively at the door through which the overborne sergeant had retreated. "Miracles," he repeated.

His voice dropped. "Of course I can't help wishing sometimes, Jimmie, that behind that front I had a bit of back."

Jimmie's hands dropped from the bars. He stared with popping eyes at Rockford Ballantyne.

"Great Peter!" he said. "You—you've got *it*, too!"

Rockford Ballantyne straightened up. He flung his lean shoulders back so suddenly that his well made coat flapped.

"Diffidence? Certainly not!" he snapped. "Utterly ridiculous! How could I, Rockford Ballantyne, have gotten where I am without a decent amount of self-appreciation?"

He dismissed the idea with an emphatic shake of the head. "Now about you. I'll have a go at talking you out—"

"No," said Jimmie. "You've done plenty. I'm going—"

"Going where?" Rockford Ballantyne was still twittery.

"On," said Jimmie. "Harder! I'll keep brazing." He grinned at Ballantyne. "I'm in so deep it's more than a publicity stunt now. I've got to crack this mystery. And I've been straining my skull about one angle. Thanks for coming!"

The dismissal stung the old actor. He whipped his hat from between the bars and flipped out the gloves.

Then he weakened. "I'll be back tomorrow, if you're not out, son," he said. He saluted with his stick and walked out.

JIMMIE went back to pacing his cell. "Verve—crust—brass," he muttered. "Heck, man, you've been all over this before. You'll never—" He laid his hands against the cold bars of the cell door. "If he had it—has it—if he did it, I can!"

He lifted his voice and let it go. It was a roar as close to Rockford Ballantyne's bellow at the desk sergeant as he could make it.

He rattled the cell door violently.

The sergeant and the jailer came on the run.

"Now, what?" the sergeant demanded.

"There's no charge yet?"

"No," said the sergeant uneasily. "But—"

"I'll talk," Jimmie said. He put on his hat and slung his coat over his arm.

"Now you're bright." The sergeant nodded and the jailer unlocked the door. "Into the chief's office."

They marched him in. The sergeant sat down with throat-clearing authority behind the chief's desk.

"Go ahead," he said. "What'd you want to say?"

The jailer was leaning against the inner door.

Jimmie cleared his throat, too, and spoke loudly:

"I wanted to say—Goodbye!"

He flung his coat in the jailer's face. He wrenched open the outer door and dashed into the room with the high desk. The sergeant's yell beat him to the main door. Jimmie plunged headlong into a cop running in and fell with him. The cop had dug for his revolver; as he went down the gun slid out of his hand.

Jimmie scrambled up. The cop was already stretching toward his revolver. Jimmie scooped up the gun and bounded up the steps to the street.

It was snowing, swirling flakes mocked scattered street lights in the increasing darkness of a late afternoon. The snow gave cover—but not enough. Jimmie burrowed head first under a car parked at the curb. The pounding feet of the pursuit reached the street, paused, went running and slid-

ing toward the nearest corner of the big town hall building.

Jimmie squirmed from under the car. A truck was grinding cautiously along the slippery street. He waited behind the car, grabbed the tailboard and scrambled over it. The truck crawled on, agonizingly slow.

Jimmie scowled at the ugly revolver in his hand. Quickly he broke it and unloaded. He tucked the gun under a burlap bag and dropped the cartridges into his pocket to get rid of them. After a few minutes he swung off the truck. He looked at his watch. Ten of six.

He shoved hands into pockets and took the road to Tomahawk Point. His forehead was wet. Four times, when headlights gleamed through the swirling snow, he hit the ditch. He was shivering before he saw the dim lights of the gatehouse.

The reporters' fire was a dull glow in a blackened patch defying the falling snow. The reporters were gone. Another detective pounded his feet in front of the closed gates.

Jimmie took cover by the nearest trees. His eyes strained along the wall.

Car lights showed on the driveway inside the gates. He waited. The detective stopped stamping and turned around.

Jimmie thrust cold hands into his coat pockets. He touched the cartridges from the cop's gun. He gripped one with sudden tensity. Quickly he opened his jackknife, pried out the bullet and let it plunk into the snow. He eased over to the fire, dropped the cartridge in the smouldering embers and slipped back.

Old Grogan came out of the gatehouse. He jerked up a hand to the driver and then swung open the gates. The detective inspected the car. Grogan walked around to the driver's side. The three began talking.

Jimmie glided over to the shadow of the wall and edged toward the gates. He waited hopefully, flattened against the stone.

The cartridge exploded. The sound seemed to crack the night. Glowing chunks of charcoal leaped from the fire. Jimmie went creeping through the gates on the right side of the car.

Nobody challenged. Inside, he glanced back. Grogan stood rigid, petrified, beside the driver. The detective was advancing toward the fire with his arm crooked alertly.

Jimmie bored on up the drivewy into the swirling veil of the storm. Further up the road pock-marked shadows in the snow showed where the feet of searchers had plodded. No men searched now and the holes were filling up.

The house, aglow with lights, rose in front of him. Near it he deserted the drive and approached along trampled snow in the lee of a leafless privet hedge. He stopped.

On the terrace, silhouetted against lighted French windows, a couple of overcoated men were standing. Jimmie worked toward them. They were staring in the direction of the gates. Their attitude indicated they were listening intently.

Jimmie's progress became a wary crawl. He got up close under the retaining wall of the terrace and lifted his head.

One of the men, thin, straight, said petulantly:

"Even if it were a bullet in the fire, as your dolt 'phoned, someone put it there. Go down. Investigate. Then call me."

"A good idea, sir," the other man groaned. He turned up his coat collar and reluctantly moved toward the steps.

Jimmie waited, ears following the dick's departure, hands wiping sweat off his face. The man above knocked snow from his feet.

Jimmie stood up. The watcher was turning toward the nearest French window. Jimmie spoke softly:

"Mr. Inness! I've come about your stolen things."

"What? Who?" The man was poised to run.

Jimmie lifted his arms to indicate his unoffensive purpose. His knees were wabbling.

"Do you shout or do I talk?" he asked gruffly and scrambled up on the terrace. Harrington Inness recovered. He did not move. *Noblesse oblige* stuff.

"Mr. Inness, the cops are sure the thief never got his loot out of the grounds," Jimmie said rapidly. "I've guessed why he didn't. The man who robbed you knows you'd pay much more to get back your stuff than any fence or buyer of gold."

Inness jerked his silvery head, a startled

movement. He bent forward to peer intently. Jimmie laughed softly.

"You've already been approached," Jimmie ventured.

Abruptly Inness thrust his hand into his inner coat pocket. Jimmie sweated. Inness drew out only a folded paper.

Inness' voice was low:

"Are you the anonymous gentleman who wrote suggesting I offer thirty thousand dollars reward for the return of my things?"

"So that's how he wants it handled," Jimmie muttered.

"To keep the matter hypothetical," Inness said with querulous sarcasm, "this gentleman doesn't realize how difficult it would be for him to collect such a sum from me without the police or my private detectives finding out."

Jimmie nodded. "Yet I'd say this crook knows his way around," he said slowly. He meditated. "Have you offered this reward?"

"Yes. This evening when the search failed I raised my offer from five to thirty." His voice rasped. "You wouldn't understand how I feel about these things. But if you have them—"

Inness was moving with casual stealth to get a clearer view of Jimmie. Obligingly Jimmie turned toward the lighted windows. "I've already been detained, as they call it, once," he said. "My name is J. Barr Welland."

"Oh—that one," said Harrington Inness vaguely. "I heard. You escaped. But have you the—"

"No. All I have is a theory only a little better than a hunch about where they are and who stole them."

"Well, then!" cried Inness. "Why do we not—"

"No! If I were right about where they are and showed you, you and the cops would figure you had the thief cold. Me."

He shook his head at Inness. "It's going to be played my way. You want your things. Well, I want the thief. Not just because I don't like penitentiaries. Another reason."

"What's that?" Inness asked.

"Let's say that I've made a bet with myself that I could get on top of this mess. I can't afford to lose."

He rubbed his jaw. "D'you feel like taking a few orders?"

"If they seem reasonable." Inness' voice was eager.

"Call up and have Pete Hunt drive his delivery truck here at once," Jimmie said briskly. "He's to park inside the gates where he was stopped after the burglary. Tell your dicks and any stray cops that arrive to stay outside by the lodge. Then lend me a warm coat and a flashlight. We're going treasure hunting."

Inness hesitated. "You really think—"

"I really do think," Jimmie interrupted crisply. "I had time to, behind bars. I'll trust you. I'll wait here."

Inness made up his mind. "Right," he said and vanished.

Jimmie huddled against the wall, shivering. Ages passed before Inness came hurrying out. He carried a long fur-lined coat.

"Hunt is coming immediately," he reported.

IN SILENCE they started down the driveway. The snow was already filling Jimmie's tracks with silent persistence. They had trudged halfway to the gate before Inness spoke petulantly:

"My things can't be hidden this far from the house."

"Why?"

"The time element doesn't permit. I saw the items in their places at 5:45. They were stolen not later than 5:55. The search was on and Grogan, the gatekeeper, was warned by six o'clock."

Jimmie grunted.

"The only outgoing vehicle, Bassett's van, was halted inside the gate while Hunt, the driver, was making a delivery at the lodge. I searched it thoroughly."

His voice became sharp with finality.

"It was impossible for a man or men to run this far with their loot. As for hiding it—the ground is frozen."

"That makes it simpler." Jimmie bore down on the mystery.

On the slope down to the narrow neck of land guarded by the lodge they made out through the snow the white glare of headlights. The lights backed and turned. Pete Hunt had arrived.

They approached in silence. The truck was standing inside the closed gates, facing toward town. Jimmie pulled his head down inside the upturned coat collar. Two detec-

tives outside peered in and saluted when Inness hailed them.

"That's where the van stood," Inness said, coming back.

"When Hunt delivered the groceries up at your house last night did he linger in the kitchen talking to the servants?"

Inness nodded. "He did—as usual, the servants say. Driving the truck gives him plenty of opportunities to gossip."

"While Hunt was in your kitchen couldn't the thief have loaded his haul into the van and climbed in himself? Then at the gates here, he could wait for Hunt to take Grogan's grocery order into the lodge, unload his loot and vanish."

Harrington Inness caught his breath. "Yes!" he exclaimed. "But—No! No! He couldn't have done that. Hunt would have seen him when he opened up the back to get out Grogan's groceries."

"Not Pete Hunt. To save work he takes your stuff and Grogan's stuff out of the back up at your house. He carries Grogan's order down here on the seat beside him. He did just that this morning."

Inness groaned. "The gates aren't locked till eight o'clock. The thief could have slipped through and gotten away!"

"He could if you weren't the man he meant to deal with," Jimmie said. "One thing's certain. He must work fast now. Come."

He turned abruptly to the left. Under the shelter of the wall he moved in the direction of Tomahawk cove, a hundred yards away. His hunched shoulders were tense and he put his feet down softly in the yielding snow. Inness followed as warily.

A few feet before the wall came to an end in the unpleasant fringe of steel spikes and barbed wire Jimmie stopped. He pulled out the flashlight, handed it to Inness and spoke softly:

"A loose strand of barbed wire runs down into the slush ice. Haul it up. No noise. Keep the light shielded."

Inness seized the flashlight, cupped a hand around the lens and turned a narrow beam on the strand. He braced himself by the end of the wall, laid fingers gingerly on the wire between barbs, pocketed the flashlight and gripped with his other hand.

He began to pull on the wire, lightly, at first; then with increasing effort. He put his back into it, heaving hard. The wire began to come up in his hands.

Jimmie stood very still in the shadow, watching.

In the blur of snowflakes a shadow took form on the outer side of the wall. Thick gloved hands gripped at the spikes. A man swung himself out recklessly around the projecting points and dropped down on Inness' bent back.

Inness went sprawling with the newcomer on top of him. Instantly the stranger gave tongue.

"I've got him!" he roared into the snowy sky. "Got him—and the stuff! You detectives! Here's your burglar!"

WITH a rush Jimmie Welland clamped his lean fingers on the man's shoulders. He flung him over onto his back. The man landed hard. Jimmie knelt on him, knees hitting heavily.

Panting, Inness got up and turned on the flashlight.

William Bassett lay there, derby hat and all, with wind and voice knocked out of him.

"I was betting on Bassett," Jimmie said as Inness stared down at the market owner. "It was Bassett who spotted me here today. To have seen me in this obscure corner he had to be looking deliberately into a sun glare strong enough to blind him. Why?"

"That might have been chance," Inness said grudgingly.

"No. Instead of quietly warning the cops he yelled to make me run. That would switch them away from this spot."

"And this wire? My things are down there in the slush?"

"They're there," Jimmie said. "A respectable gent like Bassett wouldn't deal with fences. He'd want to deal with you. But he couldn't just baldly discover the loot and claim the big reward he'd demanded in that anonymous note."

"That would be too thin for the police," Inness agreed.

"Yes. But if he invented and pretended to surprise and chase off some non-existent thief as *he* uncovered his loot it would be more plausible. And if Bassett could collar me, whom he suspected of getting onto his cache here, he'd be even further beyond

suspicion. I think that's why he waited this long. Of course he mistook you for me."

The detectives floundered up with Chief Schofield at their heels. Frigidly the chief ignored Jimmie Welland.

But Bassett got back his breath. He hurled accusations at Jimmie while the dicks hauled up two canvas bags bulging under the weight of Inness' cherished gold trophies.

"Your tongue's digging you deeper," Jimmie warned Bassett calmly and Chief Schofield tightened his grip on the man. "Who knew Pete Hunt's delivery route better than his boss? And I think you'll find that slush is much too cold to have dissolved your fingerprints on the stuff. A technical point."

Bassett closed his mouth.

IN THE lobby of the theatre Vincent Spain touched Jimmie Welland's sleeve with importunate fingers.

"You could get a nice little hunk of this show for that reward money, Jimmie," he suggested.

"J. Barr Welland," said Jimmie. "I pick my own investments."

He turned two cool eyes on the producer of *The Crime of Clissold*. "Make up your mind, Spain. Do I do a piece for the papers handing much credit in this case to Rockford Ballantyne, the amateur criminologist? Or do you keep your three hundred dollars?"

"Three—hundred—dollars!" said Spain, truly aghast.

Jimmie Welland kept his face stony. It was easy. But his eyes twinkled at old Ballantyne. He spoke, genially:

"Well, all right, Spain, we'll make it four hun—"

"Start typing," Spain growled hastily. "You got more crust than a loaf of French bread."

Jimmie grinned. "Thanks!"

"I did make a suggestion or two," Rockford Ballantyne said, negligently throwing his weight on his bending stick.

"You did, Rock, old horse," Jimmie said gratefully. "And it's because of your example that I'm going in heavily for a metal more precious than Harrington Inness' specialty."

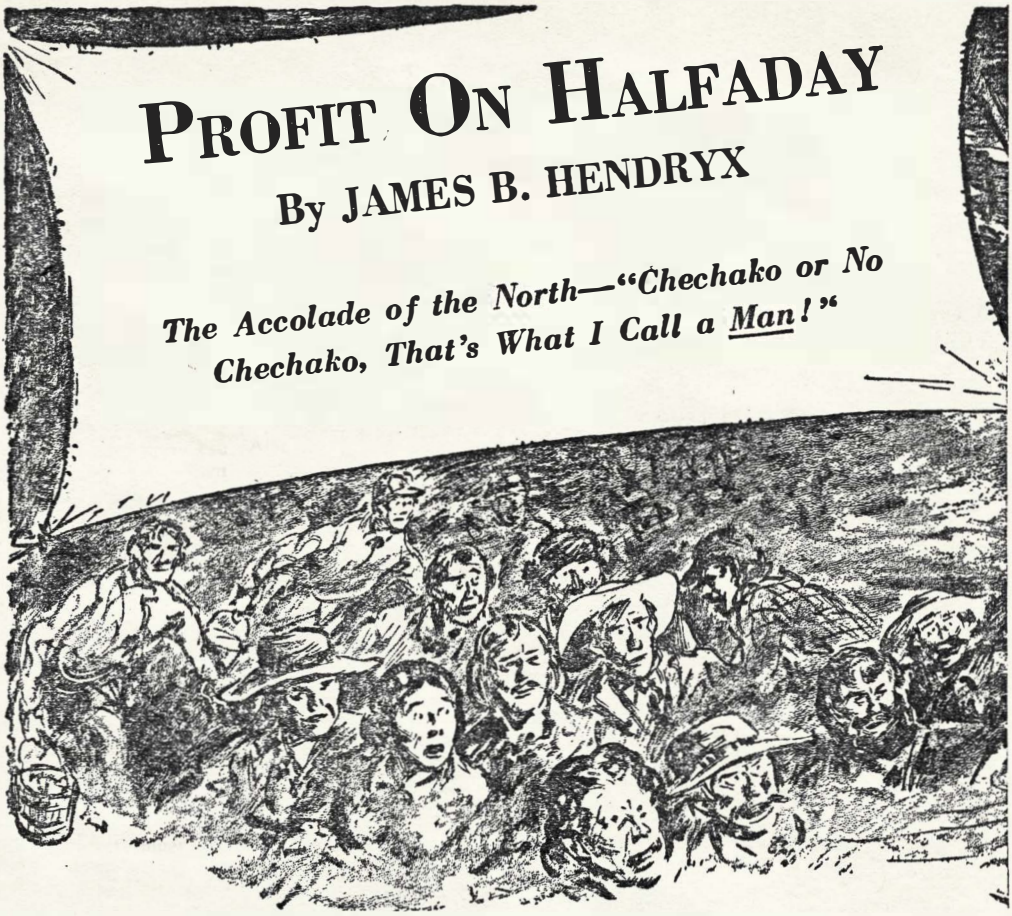
"More precious than gold?" said Ballantyne. "Platinum?"

"Brass," said J. Barr Welland. "Brass."

PROFIT ON HALFADAY

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

The Accolade of the North—"Chechako or No Chechako, That's What I Call a Man!"



I

WHITE teeth flashed behind the heavy black beard as Black John Smith stepped from the canoe he had beached before the door of a cabin on Sixtymile, to be greeted by a girl who stood in the doorway. "Well, if it isn't Uncle John! Whatever are you doing on Sixtymile—and Dominion Day only three days off?"

The smile widened as the big man's eyes took in the trim, overall-clad figure, the mass of dark hair above a face whose sparkling blue eyes smiled back at him—a face that fairly radiated the keen joy of living. The checked flannel shirt, open at the throat, revealed arms tanned a rich brown below sleeves rolled to the elbow. "Well, dog my cats, it's Margy Benton! Browned up the way you be, I thought for a minute Steve had got him a klooch! An' at his age, too!"

"What do you mean—at my age?" cried a man who emerged from the cabin as the girl stepped aside. He was a tall man—lean, with the sinewy leanness of physical strength. Strong, too, was the smooth-shaven face, whose lantern jaw, and weather-lined features might well have been rough-chiseled from a solid block of copper. "Why, damn your hide, I don't feel a day older than you—if as old!"

"Well—so what? If I could find a klooch as good lookin' as Margy I might even be tempted myself."

"Why—Uncle John!" laughed the girl, shaking a finger in mock admonition.

"I jest said 'maybe'. Fact is, I tempt hard. By gosh, but you've grow'd! Cripes, it don't seem no time at all since you were a little kid down there on Birch Crick. Let's

see—that was quite a while back. Why, you must be crowdin' twenty!"

"Nineteen the tenth of January. Daddy says I brought on a spell of the strong cold."

"You tellin' me! Cripes, it was me an' Bettles that made the dogsled run to Forty Mile to fetch Father Judge. There wasn't a doctor in the country then. But believe me, Father Judge is as good as any doctor."

Steve Benton, the girl's father, nodded. "You spoke a mouthful there, John. If I was ailin', right now, I'd sooner have Father Judge than any doctor. By God, there's a man! Us old sourdoughs, we know!"

Black John winked at the girl. "There he goes again—tryin' to make out I'm as old as he is. I might be, at that. Maybe he jest looks older. But you ain't helpin' out any. If you go 'unclein' me before folks, they might get to thinkin' I *am* as old as Steve. When you were a little kid it was fine, but when a grow'd up woman 'uncles' a man—it kind of makes him feel old, himself."

"Yer headin' fer Dawson, ain't you?" Steve Benton asked.

"Oh shore. Got a kind of a late start, so I cut acrost by way of Miller Creek. It saves a couple of days, an' I figure I ort to hit the big river in time to sort of practice up on my drinkin' an' stud playin' before the festivities begin."

STEVE grinned. "From what I hear, you boys up on Halfaday don't git none rusty, on either drinkin' or stud."

"Ondoubtless mere hearsay," the big man replied. "Why, we're the moralist

crick in the Yukon. I'll leave it to Downey."

"So when we get to Dawson, I'm not to call you Uncle John? Okay. If I meet you on the street I'll say 'Good evening, Mr. Smith'."

The big man scowled ferociously. "Listen, brat! One 'Mr. Smith' out of you, an' I'll take you acrost my knee, if it's right there on Front Street—an' the parade goin' by!"

"Lay over with us tonight, an' we'll pull out in the mornin'," Benton invited. "We'll stop in an' pick up Tommy Dean, an' all go down together. You an' me'll team up, an' Margy kin paddle the front end of Tommy's canoe. We kin fetch Dawson day after tomorrow night easy."

"I can paddle the front end of your canoe, or Uncle John's just as easy as I could paddle the front end of Tommy Dean's," the girl said, with a toss of the head.

"Who's Tommy Dean?" Black John asked.

"He's a young fella that's located on a dry gulch couple miles below here. Seems like a likely lad. Takin' out a little better'n wages. I offered to let him work a lay fer me on a good proposition I bought above here. But he's got faith in his own location. Says he'd ruther be on his own. Figgers, I reckon, that I was sort of favorin' him on account of Margy."

"You don't need to favor him on my account," the girl cut in. "He's nothing but a chechako, and he's stubborn as a—a mule! No one but a dumb chechako would locate in a dry gulch. Suppose he is taking out better than wages out of the top gravel? When winter comes he's going to have to burn in and sink a shaft the same as anyone else. Then in the spring how is he going to sluice out his dump? When the break-up comes the snow water will come roaring down the gulch so fast it would rip out a sluice if he had one—and then in three or four days the gulch would be dry again."

"Gold's where you find it," Black John reminded her. "It wasn't so long ago everyone was laughin' at Side Hill Frank Berry over on Eldorado. But they ain't laughin' at him now. Fact is, Frank could buy out most of the ones that laughed."

"That's right," Steve agreed. "An' there's be'n plenty more in the same boat. By God, I've got respect fer a man that's got the guts to stick by a proposition he's got faith in. Us sourdoughs don't know it all."

The girl sniffed. "We know enough not to stake a location on a dry gulch without a chance of any water for more than four or five days in a year."

"He kin git water, when he gits around to it," Steve replied. "He found a little spring lake half a mile above his location that'll give him all the water he could use —an' more, too. It lays clost to the top of the rimwall with nothin' but a rock dike between. Onct he taps that lake he kin git all the water he wants—an' control it, too."

"Yes," the girl replied, "but when will he ever be able to tap it? Pipe and valves cost money. And it'll cost money to cut through that rock dike—plenty of money. At the rate he's going it will take him years to save up enough to tap that lake—and you know it."

"He could borrow the money," Steve said.

"He could. But he won't. He's too stubborn. You know what he said when you offered to lend him enough to finance the job. He turned it down flat. Said his father lost a mighty good farm by borrowing money on it and running into a couple of crop failures, and he wasn't going to take any chances. He's got a horror of going in debt."

Black John grinned. "It ain't a bad horror to have," he opined. "If he's got a good proposition he'll be better off, in the long run, if he handles it himself."

Steve Benton grinned and winked. "That's the hell of it. You see, Tommy an' Margy be'n pretty thick—an' he's asked her to marry him. But she figgers, the way he's goin' the long run will be too damn long. Tommy's a likely lad. Like I told her, she could go a damn sight further, an' do a damn sight worst."

"I won't marry a man that's content to work a location that only pays a little better than wages, and I won't marry one that's willing to wait maybe ten or twenty years to develop it, and I won't marry one that's so stubborn he'll stick to a proposition like that instead of ditching it and taking on a

better one. Daddy offered him a lay that would pay good money right from the start. I don't have to marry Tommy Dean. There's someone else I can marry the minute I say the word—and he's got plenty of money, too!"

Steve Benton's rugged face clouded slightly, as he glanced at Black John. "Yeah," he said. "Clyde Barto's be'n pesterin' Margy to marry him fer the past year."

The big man nodded. "Oh. Him, eh?"

The girl flushed and the blue eyes snapped defiantly. "Yes—him! He's got plenty of money in the bank, and he's got good propositions on a dozen cricks."

"Yeah, that's what the talk is," Black John admitted. "But you got to remember, Sis—it ain't always what a man's got, but how he got it, that counts."

"What do you mean by that?"

"It's true, ain't it?"

"Sure it's true! But what's that got to do with Clyde Barto?"

The big man smiled. "If it's true, it's got jest as much to do with Barto as it has with anyone else. Jest think that over, Sis. I ain't got any more to say."

II

SUPPER over, Steve Benton and Black John seated themselves on a bench beside the door, filled their pipes and talked over old times on Birch Creek and Forty Mile while the girl busied herself with the dishes. Knocking the dottle from his pipe, Ste e stood up and glanced at the sun well above the western rim. "It's early yet," he said, "Tommy Dean's got a pretty good foot trail wore acrost to his gulch. 'Spose we walk over an' tell him we'll be gittin' an early start in the mornin', so he kin be waitin' fer us at the mouth of the gulch."

Margy appeared in the doorway, dish towel in hand. "Wait a few minutes and I'll go too," she said. "I'd just like to see what Uncle John thinks of a chump that will turn down a good proposition to fool away his time on a dry gulch. Web Foot Hartz and Howard Franklin have seen his location, and so have Gene La Porte and Bob Henderson, and they all told him he was fooling away his time there. They're all sourdoughs—and they know. But he wouldn't listen to them. They told it around, and the last time Tommy was in Dawson everybody was kidding him about it."

Black John nodded. "Yeah. They would. But—like I told you a while back, Sis—gold's where you find it. I rec'lect that both Web Foot Hartz an' Bob Henderson was amongst the ones that laughed the loudest when Frank Berry staked his location on that hillside. There's an old sayin' about him laughin' best who laughs last, or some sech wordin'."

"I think those old sayings are dumb," the girl scoffed. "'Gold's where you find it.' Of course gold's where you find it! So is everything else. But the place to look for it is where it's most apt to be. You don't see the sourdoughs wasting their time on dry gulches when there are plenty of cricks left to prospect. How many times would Frank Berry have made a strike staking out on a sidehill?"

The big man grinned. "A man wouldn't have to strike it but once—the way he did. An' I rec'lect that a good many sourdoughs passed up that moose pasture before George Carmack made his strike on Bonanza. Yup—plenty of sourdoughs tromped acrost that flat without botherin' to scratch it—too wide, or too flat, or the crick run too slow, or the willers bent the wrong way. All of 'em had good reasons for passin' it up—all except Carmack, him bein' a squawman, he wasn't s'posed to know nothin'—so one day he begun shovellin' around amongst the grass roots—an' turned up the biggest strike that e er hit the Yukon.

"An' down to Forty Mile we all laughed an' kidded hell out of him when he showed up in Bergmans with his first poke of dust. You see—we was sourdoughs. We was the wise ones. We know'd it all. We know'd that Larue was in the upper country, an' we figured it all out—he'd staked out a townsite, an' slipped Carmack that poke of dust to flash around Bergman's, claimin' he got it on Bonanza to start a stampede so he could sell off his buildin' lots. An' if I remember right," he added, "Carmack done a little laughin' on his own hook—later."

"Just the same," the girl retorted, with a toss of the head, "you know as well as I

do that a good many more strikes have been made on likely locations than on unlikely ones."

"Oh shore. But, at that, a man ain't necessarily a fool because he stakes one of them onlikely claims. Tellin' you about me, Sis—I'd ruther be a rich fool than a poor wise man."

The girl smiled in spite of herself. "You make me tired, Uncle John! I guess nobody can accuse you of being a fool, or a poor man either—from what I've heard."

"Ondoubtless mere hearsay," Black John returned the smile. "Up on Halfaday we work hard for what we get—but we're happy."

Steve Benton laughed. "Well, if you two've got through scrappin' let's get goin'. An' talk about workin' hard, John—I'll bet some nights yer right arm's damn near wore out shakin' dice with Cush fer the drinks!"

THE three crossed the divide, following a well worn foot trail, and descended into a narrow gulch, running parallel to the Sixtymile, whose opposite rimwall was a high perpendicular rock cliff. A quarter of a mile below, the gulch made a sharp right angle turn toward the river, and on a narrow gravel flat at the foot of the slope in the crook of this elbow Tommy Dean had built his cabin.

"Hi, Tommy!" Steve greeted the young man who stepped from the doorway. "I want you should meet up with my friend Black John Smith, prob'ly the orneriest son of a gun that ever hit the Yukon."

The younger man smiled. "That's not the way I heard it," he said as he shook the big man's hand. "The Broncho Kid told me all about how you saved him from being hanged for a murder he didn't commit. And later how you made it possible for him and his sister to develop their claims by cutting her in on some kind of a deal you had with Cuter Malone and a fellow by the name of Morocco."

White teeth showed beneath the black beard as the big man returned the other's smile. "My benefactions has ondoubtless be'n greatly exaggerated," he said. "It ain't no particular credit to a man if he saves an innocent man from gettin' hung. An' as for cuttin' the kid's sister in on that deal—hell, it was the least I could do, seein' she was the one that slipped me the information that made the deal possible. As I rec'lect the incident, it netted us a profit of fifty thousan' apiece, or some sech matter. Nice little layout you've got here," he added, glancing at the neat log cabin. "How's she pannin' out?"

"I'm taking better than wages out of the top gravel," the young man replied. "And I'm cutting wood to burn in with this winter. I'm going to sink a shaft or two and maybe I can figure some way in the spring to hold back snow water enough to sluice out my dumps with. When I get going I'll have all the water I want—and have it steady. There's a little lake up the crick a piece that lays on high ground just back of the rim. When I tap that I'll have all the water I need."

Black John nodded. "Yeah, Steve was tellin' me about it."

"And I told him I think you're a fool to stick here on this dry gulch when daddy has offered you a lay on a good location!" the girl exclaimed.

Young Dean smiled. "Sure, I know how you feel about it, Margy. And I'm sorry you can't see it my way. I've got faith in this location. I believe it's going to pay out big. And it's mine. I'm going to develop it myself. I'm not asking odds from anyone—not even Steve. Nor Clyde Barto either. When I get water in here, I'll show you I'm right."

The girl shrugged. "By the time you get water in here I won't care whether you're right or not," she retorted.

Black John filled his pipe. "I'd like to take a look at this lake," he said. "I ain't a minin' engineer, but I've be'n around some."

The young man's eyes lighted. "I'll show it to you. It's only half a mile." He turned to the Bentons. "You coming along?"

Margy, who was peering into the cabin, shook her head. "No, I'm going to stay here and wash out your dishtowels, and shake out your blankets, and sweep out. You men go ahead."

"I've saw the lake," Steve said. "I'll jest set here an' take a smoke. I knocked my right knee agin a rock yesterday, an' it's botherin' me a little. We'll wait here till you git back."

Ascending the rimwall, some half mile above the cabin, the two reached the shore of a spring fed pond some half dozen acres in extent, and separated from the gulch by a rock dike of varying width. Young Dean led the way to a point where this dike was only about five feet in thickness. "I figure if I could drill through the rock here, I could put in pipe and a valve that would give me all the water I'll need—and I'd be able to control the flow."

The big man nodded. "Yeah. But outside of some of the big outfits, I don't know of a diamond drill rig in the country. An' it would be a hell of a chore to drill a pipe hole through that rock by hand."

"That's right," the other admitted, "but I've been wondering whether I couldn't drill in from the top and then shoot off a face—maybe a foot or so thick—and keep on doing that till finally I could drill through?"

BLACK JOHN shook his head. "Any one of them shots might blow the wall out, an' you'd have the whole damn lake down onto you all to onct! I saw a proposition of this kind worked with a siphon onct. But the pipe an' valves would run into money."

"I believe it would be worth it, though," the other replied. "I believe I've got a good proposition there in the gulch." Reaching into his pocket he withdrew his hand and extended it, palm upward. Black John's eyes widened at sight of the half dozen big yellow nuggets.

"Where in hell did you get them?" he asked.

"Down on my location just below the cabin. I happened to be in the Tivoli Saloon one day where some of the sourdoughs were talking, and a fellow by the name of Moosehide Charlie showed some nuggets that he'd found on a location he'd recorded. He said he dug them out just above a rock dike that ran crosswise to this little crick he was prospecting. The top of the dike didn't show above ground, nor above the surface of the water, and these nuggets lay close against the dike right in the crick bed. You see, they'd washed down and the dike held them there. All the other sourdoughs agreed that he has a swell location—and several of them named other strikes that had been located behind transverse dikes.

"Well, in digging around in my gulch, I located just such a dike—and I got these nuggets, just as Moosehide Charlie did, right up against the dike, and almost on the surface. I've never mentioned this to a soul—not even to Margy or Steve. They think I'm foolish for sticking to my location—and I'll let 'em think so till I can prove beyond any doubt that I'm right."

The big man nodded. "You stick to your proposition, son," he advised. "Don't let no one talk you out of it. Fact is, I happen to have a few thousan' that ain't workin'. I could let you have enough to finance the siphon proposition."

The other shook his head. "Thanks," he said, "but I want to work it out alone. Steve offered to lend me the money to drill with, and Clyde Barto offered me a loan, too."

"Barto! Does he know about your proposition?"

"Not about the dike down at the cabin. He was through here about a month ago, and he saw the lake, and offered me a loan. But he wanted fifteen percent interest, and a partnership. I told him to go to the devil."

"You done right," the big man approved. "Barto's a man whose ethics is open to question."

"He's smart, and he seems to have plenty of money."

"Yeah, he's well heeled—in an onderhanded sort of way. I wouldn't know how smart he is. Maybe sometime I'll find out."

The younger man's face clouded. "The hell of it is," he said, "he's making a play for Margy Benton. I—er—Margy's the finest girl I ever knew. We—that is—I—I want to marry her. I think she would marry me if I'd take Steve up on a partnership proposition he offered me. She thinks I'm a fool to stick to this location. She hasn't got faith in it, like I have."

"Why don't you show her them nuggets, an' tell her about that cross dike?"

"No." There was a stubborn, almost a defiant note in the other's voice. "If she hasn't got faith enough in me to marry me, I'll be damned if I'll bribe her to with a handful of nuggets! I want to know she's marryin' me—not a gold mine. She'll have

the gold mine, all right. We'll have it together. She'll know I'm right about this location, but she'll find that out later."

"Yeah—but s'pose she finds it out too late? She might get tired waitin', an' marry Barto!"

Tommy Dean shrugged. "That would be my hard luck," he said, "and hers, too."

Black John shook his head in resignation. "The ways of young folks in love is too devious fer my limited comprehension. By God, if ever I wanted a woman bad enough to marry her, I'd get her—an' I wouldn't give a damn how. We'd better be movin' along. Steve's knee's kind of botherin' him, an' he'll be wantin' to get back to his place before dark."

Back at the cabin Black John seated himself beside Steve. Tommy glanced in as the girl was returning the broom to its place behind the door. "Gee, that looks swell, Margy," he said, his eyes sweeping the smoothly made bunk, and the clean floor. "That's the way it would look if—if you'd—if you'd marry me and move in—everything nice and clean—and just us two. We'll be hitting out for Dawson in the morning and we could get Father Judge to marry us. It would be the biggest Dominion Day celebration we'd ever have."

"I'll marry you, Tommy," the girl said, "if you'll quit this location, and take up that proposition of dad's."

"I can't do it, Margy. This is my location, and I've got to stick with it. And some day you'll know I'm right."

Steve rose from the log where he and Black John were seated and knocked the dottle from his pipe. "We better be gittin' along," he said. "We'll be pullin' out, come daylight, Tommy. We'll pick you up at the mouth of the gulch. Better throw a couple of clean shirts in yer pack. What with the Fourth of July crowdin' Dominion Day like it does, we won't be hittin' back fer a week er ten days."

III

TOMMY DEAN was waiting as the two canoes swept around a bend of the Sixtymile shortly after daylight the following morning. The girl waved to him from her father's canoe as Black John swerved to the bank. Tossing his light pack amidship, Tommy took his place in the bow and the two light craft slipped smoothly downriver.

Toward noon they beached, boiled a pail of tea, and devoured the sandwiches the girl had prepared.

"There'll be a hell of a crowd in town this year, what with the way the damn chechakos has be'n crowdin' in on us," Steve opined, between huge mouthfuls of his moosemeat sandwich.

Black John nodded. "Yeah, an' every damn one of 'em'll be tryin' to get drunker'n the next one."

"The hotels is goin' to be full up," Benton said, "I stopped in to the Northern the last time I was down an' ordered a couple of rooms fer a week, startin' today."

The big man grinned. "They always save me a room. They figure I'd take their damn hotel apart if they didn't."

"Guess I'll have to sleep standing up," Tommy said ruefully. "I haven't engaged any room."

"You'll make out all right," Black John said. "Me an' Steve won't be usin' our beds much at night. We'll be too busy tryin' to figure out the relative merits of two pairs an' three of a kind."

AS STEVE had predicted Dawson was a madhouse of milling chechakos. Hotels were turning them away, and every saloon in the big camp was crowded to capacity, with extra bartenders on all three shifts.

When Margy Benton stepped into the room that had been engaged for her she uttered a gasp of surprise. "Oh look, Daddy! A huge bouquet of flowers! And a box of bon bons! Why—who could have sent them?"

Steve Benton, who had tossed his pack into the adjoining room, glanced over her shoulder from the doorway. "There's a paper sticking out from in under that vase," he said. "Mebbe it'll say."

Withdrawing the folded note, the girl opened it and read aloud:

> "Welcome to Dawson! May I have the pleasure of your company at the grand ball tonight? Will see you, I hope, at dinner.
>
> "Devotedly
> "Clyde Barto."

Steve grunted. "Huh. Wants you to go to the dance, eh?"

The girl nodded, her eyes on the vase of flowers. "Yes, that's what he says."

"You goin' with him?"

After a moment of hesitation she nodded slowly. "Yes," she answered. "He's asked me, and I'm going." Then with a toss of her head and a hint of defiance in her tone she added. "Why shouldn't I?"

Steve shrugged. "Suit yerself," he replied. "I sort of figgered mebbe Tommy would be wantin' you to go with him."

"Why didn't he ask me, then?"

"We jest hit town. Chances is, he ain't heard about no dance."

"I've known Tommy for quite a while, and he's never yet sent me any flowers, nor given me any candy."

Steve gave a snort of disgust. "Flowers an' candy—hell! Tommy knows the hills is full of flowers you kin pick fer yerself, if you wanted 'em. An' where would he git any candy—there in his gulch?"

"That's just it—there in his gulch!" the girl cried. "And if I'd marry him that's where I'd spend the rest of my life—right there in his gulch!"

"Not if she pans out like Tommy thinks she will," her father retorted. "Not if I know Tommy Dean, you wouldn't."

"His location never will pan out like he thinks it will—and you know it! He's just a—a stubborn fool to stick with it! You don't see Clyde Barto holing up in some gulch fooling away his time on a worthless location. He's made money, and he keeps on making money because he's got sense enough to look around and buy in on good propositions. And he's got sense enough to live here in Dawson where there are people—and things to do, and see. And he's got sense enough to know that a woman likes little things like flowers and bon bons—not because they're flowers and bon bons—but, they're sort of—of symbols—"

Steve interrupted her with a snort of disgust. "Well, if you know what yer talkin' about, it's more'n I do!" Turning on his heel, he called over his shoulder. "I'm goin' down an' hunt me a drink. I shore as hell need one after listenin' to that line of guff. Flowers an' candy an' symbols—cripes!"

Downstairs he encountered Tommy Dean and Black John, who had returned to the lobby after depositing their packs in the latter's room. Together they stepped out onto the street and made their way to the Tivoli Saloon to be vociferously greeted by Swiftwater Bill, Bettles, Moosehide Charlie, and several old sourdoughs. Tommy Dean was introduced, and a round of drinks downed.

"Fill 'em up agin!" Bettles ordered. "It'll take half a dozen er more to steam John up fer the dance."

Black John grinned, and winked at Swiftwater Bill. "Bettles is no damn fool. He figures if he can get enough licker down me to get me dance minded, I wouldn't be settin' in the stud game tonight—figures what he put out for the drinks would be a damn good investment."

"Contrary as you be," Bettles chuckled, "the shorest way to toll you into the stud game, is fer me to try to steer you to the dance. Tellin' you about me—I don't know no better investment than gettin' you in a stud game—after what we done to you last time you was here. Remember them three kings you draw'd to yer pair of aces, an' then tried to make me lay down my four feeble little treys? I don't want no better investment than that. Cripes, I ain't got that pot spent yet—an' it was a good three months ago!"

As the bottle reached Tommy Dean he shoved it along. Black John glanced at him in surprise. "What's the matter, kid? Don't you like our brand of firewater?"

The younger man smiled. "One's plenty for me, thanks. I guess I'm not much of a drinker."

"If you're quittin' at one drink, I'd say you made a damn good guess," the big man laughed. "What I claim, one drink ain't worth a damn. Two or three is what you might call an appetizer. From three on a man's conscience has got to be his guide."

"Yeah," grinned Swiftwater Bill, "an' yore conscience, backed up by yore capacity, is what keeps the distilleries runnin' three shifts."

A couple of drinks later Steve Benton shoved back his glass and glanced at Black John and pointed to the clock. "Ten minutes to six," he said. "We better git back

to the hotel. The clerk said they throw'd open the dinin' room at six, an' what with the crowd they've got, if we ain't there on the dot we ain't goin' to git no table. I'm hungry as a wolf, an' damn if I want to wait around fer an hour an' then fill up on leavin's!"

"That's right," the big man agreed, and turned to the others. "We'll be seein' you later. An' I'm warnin' you, Bettles, that play I give you on them four treys was only a come-on. Sometime durin' the evenin', I'm hopin' to get you in a real pot."

As they entered the hotel lobby Tommy Dean saw Margy talking with Clyde Barto, who turned to greet the three as they stepped through the door. "Hello, Steve! Hello, John! And you, too, Dean! Wait just a minute—I've got an idea!" And turning, he wormed his way through the crowd to the desk.

Tommy stepped close to the girl. "There's a dance tonight, Margy," he said. "Will you go with me?"

She shook her head. "Can't do it, Tommy. Sorry—but I've already promised to go with Clyde Barto."

Barto rejoined them rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "It's all set," he announced. "Money sure talks in this man's town. I slipped the clerk a twenty, and he's reserved a table for the five of us. The supper's on me. Fact is, I feel kind of flush today—just cinched a good proposition on Hunker Crick."

"An' the other fellow?" Black John asked dryly. "Is it a good proposition for him, too?"

Barto grinned and winked. "He thinks it is. When he wakes up and finds out different, he's going to be sick. It's every man for himself in this world—and the devil take the hindmost."

The big man nodded. "Ondoubtless a comfortin' philosophy," he admitted.

Barto laughed and nudged him in the ribs with his thumb. "It's a philosophy that you're a past master of, if some of the things I've heard are true."

Black John smiled. "Prob'ly like most rumors—half lies an' half truths scrambled up together. Fact is, though, if a man's got it comin', I ain't in nowise loath to see that he gets it."

"That's the idea! If a man isn't smart enough to hang onto what he's got, he ought to lose it."

"If a *crooked* man ain't smart enough to hang onto what he's got, he ought to lose it," the big man amended with a laugh. "An' once in a while, he does."

Toward the close of the meal Barto glanced at Tommy across the table. "How about it, Dean? You remember I looked your location over a while back. You've got a good proposition there, if you'd put a little money in it. The way you're going, though—just a little better than wages, there's nothing ahead of you but a lot of hard work, and damn small profit. I'll put up enough money so you can tap that lake and clean up the whole gulch in a couple of years at a good profit for both of us."

Tommy shook his head. "No, I'll keep on the way I am, Barto. I'm making a living there, and if I should strike it lucky, it'll be all mine."

The other shrugged. "Suit yourself. You're one of these birds that have to learn the hard way that stubbornness never gets a man anything."

IV

THE meal over, Black John and Steve Benton rejoined the sourdoughs in the Tivoli.

Tommy Dean avoided the dance. For an hour or more he roamed about mingling with the drunken rowdy chechakos, his heart heavy within him. Finally in disgust he returned to the hotel. To hell with it all! To hell with Dawson, and Dominion Day, and Fourth of July, and the drunken chechakos! Making his way to Black John's room where he had left his pack, he pulled off his shoes and threw himself on the bed. He'd get a few hours sleep, and when the big man returned from the stud game, he'd get up, throw his pack and a load of supplies into a canoe, and hit back to his gulch on the Sixtymile. If Marjory Benton wanted Clyde Barto she could have him. If they all thought he was a stubborn fool—let 'em think so. He slipped a hand into his pocket and fingered his half-dozen nuggets. They didn't know about those nuggets—Margy, and Barto and Steve. Only Black John knew—and

he had approved his determination to stick by the claim.

For a long time he lay there staring straight up into the dark. Idly his attention riveted on a faint play of light on the ceiling. Pale and scarcely noticeable, at first, it increased in brightness, writhing curlicues of light that formed ever changing patterns. Swinging his feet to the floor, he crossed to the window and glanced out. At first he could see nothing. Then a flicker of light caught his attention. It came from a window of a two-story house on a side street a short distance back from the hotel. The whole window glowed a dull ominous red, and he could see little tongues of bright flame reaching out from its upper corner and licking up the outside wall.

Fumbling for his shoes in the darkness, he hastily drew them on and rushed from the room and down the stairs. "Fire!" he yelled, "Fire! Fire! Fire!" The lobby was deserted save for three or four obviously drunken chechakos asleep in chairs, and the night clerk, who dashed past him and ascended the stairs to look for the fire, as Tommy catapulted into the street and around the corner, still yelling "Fire" at the top of his lungs. Many men were on the street, most of whom glanced at him and grinned —just another drunk trying to start something. A few followed, however, and these were joined by others as the flames that licked up the wall of the doomed house leaped momentarily higher and brighter. Men were swarming about the building, now, milling about and yelling senseless orders. Someone kicked the door in, and the crowd fell back as a blast of flame burst outward and shot up the wall to the eaves. Close beside Tommy a woman, who had dashed out of a house across the street, started shrieking: "Oh, the baby! The little kid! My God—they went to the dance and left him alone in there! I told 'em——"

Tommy grasped her by the shoulder and shook her roughly. "In where?" he demanded. "Where is the kid—what room?" The woman pointed hysterically to an upstairs window at the gable end, over a leanto that was evidently the kitchen. "Up there!" she screamed. "And he's all alone!"

Two men appeared, dragging a short ladder. Jerking it away from them, Tommy raised it against the leanto, and scrambled to the roof. Dragging the ladder after him, he raised it to the upper window. Loud yells reached his ears as he ascended the ladder. "Look out! Come down! You can't make it! The front wall's bulgin' already!"

Reaching the window, Tommy smashed in the lower frame with a blow of his fist. Smoke billowed out, stinging his eyes, and half choking him. Could he make it? Could anyone make his way through that smoke and find a bed in that room—a bed with a little kid in it. Below him the yelling was redoubled. Tommy hesitated. Then distinctly to his ears came the words. "Come back down—you damn stubborn fool!" There it was again—stubborn fool. All right, if he was a stubborn fool he'd play his string out. Drawing a deep breath, he crawled over the sill. Thrusting his head far out the window for a lungful of fresh air, he saw a man scramble onto the roof of the leanto by means of a plank. Turning, he groped across the smoke-filled room, holding his breath, water streaming from his eyes. His knees struck an obstruction, and reaching downward with both hands he felt bed clothing, and the next instant his fingers closed about the shoulders of a tiny form. Raising the infant in his arms, he grabbed up a blanket and wrapped it around the baby, and staggered across the floor to the window. Below him he could see two men on the roof of the leanto. "Catch the kid!" he cried, in a voice that was a choking croak. He tossed the infant into their upraised arms—and the next instant there was a dull roar, a blast of intense heat, and the world went black.

V

A SHORT distance down the street from the hotel the dance was in full swing when a man dashed through the doorway. "Fire! Fire!" he yelled in a voice that penetrated to the farthest corner of the hall. The music stopped abruptly as dancers and orchestra stared at the man in a moment of hushed suspense.

"Where's it at?" someone cried.

"It's Joe Saunders's house, an' when the walls went down the sparks ketched the roof of the next house afire, an' they want help to keep it from spreadin'."

At the words a young woman uttered a piercing shriek: "Oh, my baby! My baby!" Her husband, who had been dancing with her, plunged through the crowd, knocking people right and left and, with wide staring eyes and set lips disappeared through the doorway. Her face paper white, the woman sought to follow, but was held back by the rush of men who were already crowding the doorway. The man who had sounded the alarm, reached the side of the sobbing woman and shook her roughly by the shoulder. "Shet up, mom—an' listen! Yer kid's all right—nary a scratch on him! Yer house is gone—but yer kid is safe. A guy drug a ladder up on the shed roof, an' clumb up it an' smashed in the winder an' crawled in the room through smoke so thick you could cut it with a knife, an' found the kid an' wropped him up in a blanket an' tossed him down to a couple of fellas on the shed roof, an' they tossed him to some folks on the ground—an' when they onwropped the blanket off'n him, damn if he wasn't laughin'—like it was some game he was playin'! An' before the guy could get back out through the winder the fire musta et up through the floor an' touched off a gas pocket, er somethin', 'cause there was a kinda dull roar, an' a hell of a bust of flame, an' the guy got blowed out through the winder an' hit the shed roof an' rolled off. An' the next minute, the walls caved in an' the roof fell an' sent the sparks flyin' that ketched the roof of the next house."

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!" the woman was sobbing and laughing hysterically. "I don't care about the house—if my baby is safe!"

Most of the men and some of the women had dashed from the room to help fight the fire, but a few remained on the outskirts of the crowd of women who surrounded the sobbing woman and the narrator. "The man who saved the baby?" someone asked. "Who was he? Was he killed?"

"No, mom, he worn't killed. Scorched up pretty bad, an' mebbe bunged up some, what with hittin' the shed roof an' then the ground. They've took him to the horspital. They say his name's Dean—some chechako from up Sixtymile way. He's sure got guts! Stubborn as hell, to boot. Keepin' on goin' up that ladder with everyone hollerin' at him to come back—an' the smoke pourin' out through the winders, an' flames lickin' up the walls! Cripes—there worn't a chanct in a thousan' he could of got in that room through all that smoke—let alone findin' the kid after he got in there! But—he done it! An' he got the kid! An' chechako, er no chechako—that's what I call a man!"

Clyde Barto was among those few men who had not gone to help fight the fire. At his side on the edge of the crowd, he heard Marjory Benton gasp. "Tommy Dean!" she cried. "Oh, is—is he badly hurt?"

"Couldn't say, mom," the man who had mentioned his name answered. "They'll know to the horspital. If he ain't, he'd ort to be—gittin' blow'd out through a winder, an' hittin' a shed roof, an' then the ground."

The girl turned to Barto. "Take me to the hospital right this minute!" she cried, starting toward the door.

Barto laid a detaining hand on her arm. "Hold on, Marjory. There's no hurry. You can't do any good there. It's his own fault if he got hurt. That kid was nothing to him. Why didn't he listen to 'em when they tried to call him back? I warned him that he'd learn the hard way that subbornness don't pay. It's probably cost him his life."

The girl shook off the detaining hand, whirled and faced the man, her eyes flashing. "You—you cur!" she cried as the words left his lips, then turning abruptly, she disappeared through the doorway.

Apparently unperturbed, Barto smiled into the outraged eyes and scornfully curled lips of those women who had overheard his words. "Hero worship," he said lightly. "If that fool dies she'll forget all about him in a month's time. But whether he lives or dies, I intend to marry that girl. I like her spunk."

Some of the women sniffed scornfully, others turned away. "You don't hate yerself none, do you?" one taunted. "Why ain't you out with the rest helpin' fight the fire?" Then she, too, turned away.

In the small waiting room at the hospital Marjory Benton paced the floor restlessly, pausing now and then to throw herself into a chair, pick up a magazine, and turn the pages, staring at the illustrations with unseeing eyes. A nurse had promised to let her know when they brought Tommy Dean from the operating room. Oh—wouldn't

the doctors ever finish? He must be terribly hurt! Or—or maybe—maybe they would never bring him from that room—alive! Why did they take so long? It seemed that hours passed before the uniformed nurse appeared in the doorway. "They've finished now," she said. "He's in Number 18."

"Can—can I see him?" Margy asked.

The nurse nodded and smiled. "Yes. But not very much of him. He's pretty well bandaged."

In the hall the girl accosted young Doctor Sutherland. "Oh, doctor," she faltered. "Will he—is he badly hurt?"

"He ought to be hurt a good deal worse than he is—judging from what the men who brought him here said. I'd say he got off mighty lucky. Superficial burns—multiple bruises—not a broken bone in his body. He's a tough one, all right. Be good as ever in a couple of weeks. Go on in, if you want to."

IN THE doorway of Number 18, the girl paused and gasped. Two arms, bandaged to the fingertips lay stiff and inert as a pair of white stovepipes on the counterpane, and on the pillow a head bandaged so as to leave only a narrow slit for the eyes, and another through which the lips and nostrils were visible. Beyond the bed stood a nurse, who smiled. "He looks a lot worse than he is," she said. "He won't come to for an hour—and even then he won't be able to do much talking through the bandage. You can sit here, if you like. I've got some other patients to look after. If you want anything just touch that button. We've got the electric bells installed at last."

Slowly the minutes dragged past as Margy sat there beside the still form on the bed—a form that looked more like some hideous mummy than a man—her man. Yes—her man! She knew now that she loved him—had loved him all along. Her face flushed with shame at the recollection of her persistent pestering him to give up his location and take the lay her father had offered. She had called him a fool, and headstrong, and stubborn. Others had called him stubborn, too—her father, and those men who had yelled at him as he climbed into that burning house and rescued the baby. He was brave—braver than any of the others. She realized now that his stubbornness was a cardinal virtue and not a fault. Because he was stubborn enough to disregard those warning cries he had saved that baby's life—and because he was stubborn enough to stick to his location against her wish, maybe his claim would pay out as big as he thought it would. She felt a growing resentment within her against those who had called him stubborn—her father, and those men at the fire. Clyde Barto had called him stubborn, too—at supper and again in the dance hall. At recollection of his words a flaming anger surged up within her—"his own fault if he got hurt"—"that kid was nothing to him."—"Why didn't he listen when they tried to call him back?"—"I warned him he'd learn the hard way that stubbornness don't pay—"

"He learned the hard way, all right," she muttered to herself. "But if he could have had just one glance into that poor woman's eyes when she learned her baby was safe—he'd have learned that stubbornness *does* pay! That *damn* Barto—how I hate him! There was positively a gloating note in his voice when he said 'it's probably cost him his life.' The dirty lowdown coward—he wouldn't even go and help the others keep the fire from spreading. And—only to think—I turned Tommy down to go to the dance with *him!* But—if I hadn't—that baby would have burned up in the house. I—I'm glad I did turn him down—the way things turned out—and I'll have all my life—all our lives to make it up to him."

The bandaged head on the pillow turned slightly, a bandaged arm moved stiffly and leaping to her feet she bent over the bed, her eyes peering into the slit in the bandage. "Oh, Tommy—it's me—Margy! I'm here—and the doctor says you're going to be all right!"

The eyes staring up through the slit lighted with recognition. The lips moved. "Margy. I—I'm all right. But—where am I?"

"You're in the hospital—and they've got you all bandaged up—but everything's all right. The doctor says so. And—oh Tommy—as soon as you get well we're going to get married and live on your claim—there in the gulch!"

The bandaged arms raised as though to

encircle her, and the lips moved. "That's swell, Margy! It's a good location—it'll pay out big—when we get the water. We'll stick to it Margy—no matter what they say."

The nurse came in and glanced at the patient. She turned to Margy. "You'd better go, now, and get yourself some sleep. He'll be all right. You can come back this afternoon."

VI

THE stud game in the Tivoli broke up suddenly at the cry of fire, and the sourdoughs joined the hastily formed bucket brigade that soon had the fires on several adjoining roofs under control. The story of Tommy Dean's rescue of the Saunders baby was told and retold a hundred times as men and women milled around the smoking embers. As the sourdoughs returned to resume their game, Black John accosted Clyde Barto entering the door of Cuter Malone's notorious Klondike Palace. "What's the matter, Barto?" he asked. "Get tired of the dance?"

The man scowled and passed on into the Palace. Lotta de Atley, one of Dawson's professional dance hall girls, who happened to overhear the question, snickered. "You'd of got tired of it too, John—if your girl had told you off in front of all the folks like his did when she heard about this young Dean savin' that kid. But he didn't answer—jest claimed the girl was a hero worshipper, bragged he'd marry her whether Dean lived or died. Maybe he will—but if he does, she's a damn fool if she don't feed him rat poison for the weddin' supper!"

Black John laughed and joined the other sourdoughs in the Tivoli. The game lasted all night and along toward breakfast time, as the big man was making his way toward the hotel, he saw two men come out of Scougale's store. Both were dressed for the trail. Both carried packs and his brow drew into a frown as he watched them make their way toward the river. Then, casually, he sauntered into the store and accosted Scougale. "Seen Clyde Barto this mornin'?" he asked.

"Clyde Barto? Hell, he was in here not more'n five minutes ago—him an' that damn Slim Aker that hangs out around Cuter Malone's. They can't be very far off."

Black John grinned. "Birds of a feather, eh?"

Scougale glanced about and nodded. "You said it. I wouldn't trust neither one of 'em as far as a one-legged frog could jump. Barto, he's got plenty of dust, an' claims to be respectable. But Aker is nothin' but a damn bum."

"Might be useful, though, if Barto was figurin' on pullin' off some kind of a shady deal somewheres."

"Could be. Barto, he buys a couple of weeks' grub, an' three, four rock drills, an' fifty sticks of giant, an' some caps an' fuse, an' they hit out with it. Claimed they was hittin' out on a prospectin' trip. Looks to me like Barto aims to fool around with some kind of a hard rock proposition."

"He might, at that."

"He's a slick one," Scougale continued. "I know several deals he's pulled off an' got away with 'em. He's crooked as a dog's hind leg, but he's smart enough to always stay within the law. He took some British minin' company's agent for a hundred thousan' not long ago, an' I happen to know that he's got better than two hundred thousan' in the bank right now."

"H-u-u-m. The amount is worth contemplatin'," Black John said. "The minin' company's loss don't give me no pain in the neck—but it shore irks me to know that a damn tinhorn like Barto got it. Well, so long. I got to go ketch me some sleep."

In the lobby of the hotel he came face to face with Margy Benton. "Hello, Sis!" he greeted. "Just gettin' in from the dance?"

"Just getting in from the hospital," the girl replied. "Oh Uncle John, didn't you hear about the fire? And about Tommy Dean climbing in through an upstairs window and saving a baby with everyone yelling at him to come down?"

The big man grinned. "Oh shore—I heard all about it. Stubborn cuss, ain't he? Just like you claimed. I rec'lect you told me he's stubborn as a mule. Guess you're right, at that."

"I was a fool. But you don't have to rub it in!" the girl said. "I'm glad he is stubborn. He's the only man in Dawson who had nerve enough to save that baby,

and I'm going to marry him as soon as he gets out of the hospital."

The grin behind the black beard widened. "What—him an' Barto both! You better keep about four jumps ahead of Downey, if you do. It's bigamy, er poligomy, er some sech matter."

"I hate Clyde Barto!" the girl cried. "I never did intend to marry him. I just said that to try and make Tommy give up his location on that gulch and take dad's proposition. But now I don't want him to. I'm going to marry him and we'll stick to that location till we make it pay out—just like Tommy believes it will."

Black John nodded. "You ain't makin' no mistake there, Sis."

"Oh, do you really believe he's got a good thing in that gulch?"

"I know damn well he has."

"You were the only one who stuck up for him—everyone else, even dad, said he's a stubborn fool."

"Um-hum. Well, Sis—just let 'em keep on sayin' that. The longer I live, the more convinced I am that stubbornness is more often a virtue than a fault. Run along now. By the looks of yer eyes a few hours sleep ain't goin' to hurt you none. I'm goin' to hit the hay myself."

VII

ON THE day after the big Fourth of July celebration, Black John accosted Steve Benton and Margy in front of the N. A. T. & T. store. "Hi, Steve! How you feelin' this fine mornin'? An' Sis, here—she looks happy as the cat that et the canary, as the sayin' goes."

"I am happy, Uncle John!" the girl exclaimed. "I just came from the hospital and Doctor Sutherland says Tommy can go home in two weeks! Daddy and I are pulling out today. Tommy and I are going to be married in a month, and I've got a lot of sewing to do between now and then." She turned and flashed a smile on Steve. "Poor daddy—he isn't feeling so good, this morning."

"I'll say I ain't," Steve growled. "Time was when a four, five days drunk would roll off me like water off'n a duck's back. But not no more. Gittin' old, I guess. I shore feel like hell."

Black John laughed. "Cripes, Steve—a week from now you'll begin countin' the days till the Christmas jamboree!"

"Not me—not no more. I've be'n sayin' that fer the last four, five year, but this time I mean it! There ain't no jamboree worth the way I feel this mornin'."

The two entered the store and Black John passed on down the street and stepped into the Tivoli Saloon to see Clyde Barto standing before the bar. The man greeted him, "Hello, John! I'm just about to enjoy my morning's morning. Won't you join me?"

"Don't care if I do," the big man said, ranging himself beside the other, and filling the glass the bartender slid toward him. "Just be'n talkin' to Margy Benton. Her an' old Steve is hittin' out for home today. Margy told me that she an' Tommy Dean are getting married in a month."

"They are, eh? Well, I wish 'em luck—and all the happiness in the world. This Dean seems to be quite a fellow, made quite a hero of himself at that fire, I hear. Sort of a grandstand play—but he got away with it. Talking with Doc Sutherland last evening, and he says Dean will be out of the hospital in a couple of weeks."

"Yeah, that's what Margy claimed. Well—have one on me, an I'll be on my way. Guess all the excitement's over. I'll be hittin' for Halfaday Crick."

Later in the day, he ran into Bettles, who wanted him to go to Bonanza with him and inspect a proposition he was thinking of taking over. Several days later he headed up the Yukon, but instead of continuing toward Halfaday Creek, he turned up the Sixtymile, cached his canoe near the mouth of Tommy Dean's gulch, and proceeded to the rock dike that held back the waters of the little lake, high on the rim. As he stealthily approached the spot he could hear the sound of a hammer on a drill. Worming his way through a thicket, he lay concealed by the closely knit spruce boughs and watched Aker at work on the narrowest part of the dike. Presently, when the man knocked off for the evening, and went to his tent, some distance back from the rim, the big man waited till the smoke from his supper fire curled above the spruce tops, and slipped to the dike and inspected the work. "The rock's a damn sight soft-

er'n it looks," he muttered, "or he'd never have got all them holes drilled. Cripes—they're all loaded, an' tamped an' connected up! He's just finishin' the last one. Another hour an' she'll be ready to shoot."

TURNING away, he cut across the ridge toward the Benton claim on Sixtymile, a distance of only a couple of miles. On the way he pondered the situation. "When that shot lets go, an' that lake comes roaring down, every damn thing in the gulch is goin' to be swept out into the Sixtymile—trees, cabin, the whole works. An' Tommy Dean along with it—if he'd happen to be in the gulch when she went off. It'll be three, four days before he'll be out of the hospital an' a couple of more before he gets home. Barto's scheme is to wait till Tommy gets here, then touch off the shot—an' there won't be no more Tommy Dean to stand between him an' Margy. An' the hell of it is, he might get away with it because lots of folks know that Tommy intended to let the water out of the lake into his gulch, an' no one—not even the Bentons—know how far he might have got with his drillin'. They'd figure he tried to blow a hole in the dike an' overdone the job.

Barto, he'll have to trail Tommy up an' then slip the word to Aker when to shoot. I'll lay around an' be on hand about the time they're ready to touch her off. I'll queer their game all right—but hell, long as Tommy don't suffer no loss, they can't do nothin' to Barto. The damn onderhanded cuss would claim he put in them shots on a prospectin' venture—an' I guess a man's got a right to prospect hard rock if he wants to. An' I can't let him go ahead an' shoot it, without wipin' Tommy out. Recollectin' that two hundred thousan' Scougale claimed Barto's got in the bank, I'd shore like to figure a way to make some slight profit out of the venture—but I guess I can't."

He stepped into the little clearing before the Benton's door to be greeted by Margy, all excitement—her eyes shining like stars. "Oh, Uncle John! Have you seen Tommy? He just left here about an hour ago! He got along faster even than the doctor figured he would, so he let him go home. And he's looking just fine. His face and hands look sort of red and peeled—but the burns have all healed."

"Where'd he go?" Black John asked, in a voice he strove to make sound casual.

"Why, he went to his cabin. He only stopped there for a few minutes, coming up. Then he came on here—to tell me he was back."

"Guess I'll saunter down an' see him," the big man said, turning abruptly away

"Hey! What's the big idee of hittin' down there now?" Steve Benton called as he stepped from the cabin. "Stop here over night an' we'll all go down in the mornin'. You had supper?"

"Oh, shore. I et down the river a ways. Thought you folks would be all through supper."

"Where's yer canoe?" Steve asked, eyeing the other.

"I left it down where I et. Snagged it on a rock, an' come on up a-foot. Got to patch it in the mornin'."

"Cripes—it'll be dark agin you git to Tommy's!" Steve exclaimed. "Stop over with us tonight."

"Nope. Much obliged. Fact is, I want to talk over a proposition with Tommy. Figgered on sort of hangin' around till he got back. Be seein' you in the mornin'. So long."

The moment he was out of sight, Black John broke into a run.

MARGY turned perplexed eyes on her father. "Uncle John acted—somehow—kind of queer. It's funny he wouldn't stop overnight with us. He always has before. And what kind of a proposition would he want to talk over with Tommy that couldn't keep till tomorrow?"

Steve shook his head. "Ain't no one ever figgered John out yet. He's apt to up an' do the damndest things at the damndest times without no apparent reason—but I take notice he's generally got a reason—an' a damn good one. You don't never want to be surprised at nothin' John does. He's allus about two jumps ahead of other folks."

"Especially the police," the girl laughed.

"Yeah—about four jumps ahead of them."

But despite his admonition Steve Benton would have been surprised at Black

John's use of the word "saunter" if, at the moment, he could have seen him dashing across the ridge, crashing through brush, leaping over rocks and fallen logs in the fast gathering darkness.

AT THE shore of the lake he paused momentarily, then skirting the edge of the water, plunged through the spruce thicket toward Aker's camp. Suddenly the ground trembled slightly beneath his feet, a thunderous explosion rent the air, followed by the dull roar of rock and water crashing into the gulch, and then the sound of rock fragments that had been blown high into the air splashing into the lake and crashing through the spruce boughs as they fell. Halting in his tracks, with the rock fragments crashing about him, Black John stared at the surface of the lake. The air was filled with the roar of water cascading into the gulch. Before his eyes the shoreline was rapidly receding, while stumps and the limbs of fallen trees seemed to be rising rapidly out of the depths, like eerie denisons of the underworld emerging from an age-old captivity.

He plunged on and came upon Aker's camp just as the man was swinging a stampeding pack to his shoulders. The man whirled as Black John broke from the surrounding thicket and stared wide-eyed into the muzzle of the big man's forty-five.

"Goin' somewheres, Aker?" Black John asked.

"What—what the hell you doin' here?" the man gasped.

"Who—me? Why I thought I heard a slight noise a few minutes back, an' figured I'd better investigate. Take it, livin' out in the bush like us fellows do, it don't pay to ignore them stray noises. Throw off yer pack an' set a while."

His eyes on the forty-five, the man swung the pack from his shoulders and sat on it. "What—what do you want?" he asked, in a low wooden voice.

"You know who I am, don't you?"

"Sure. Yer Black John Smith, the king of them outlaws that hangs out on Halfaday Crick."

"Yer information is accurate, if a bit garbled. But seein' you've got the gist of the matter, I s'pose you've heard how we hang damn miscreants like murderers, claim jumpers, thieves, dike-blowers, an' other skulldugs on Halfaday."

"Yer damn right I have—but this here ain't Halfaday."

"A feeble argument, at best—a mere quibble, as a lawyer would say. I'll explain that accordin' to our construction of the eternal verities, our jurisdiction extends beyond the confines of Halfaday Crick to include any an' all contiguous an' subtendin' territory, which, *pro bone publico,* involves this gulch an' its rims."

"By God, you can't hang no one fer shootin' down a rock face!"

"The hell we can't! You wait an' see. When the boys hears how you blow'd out this dike an' let that lake into Tommy Dean's gulch an' sent Tommy an' his cabin roarin' down the Sixtymile, they'll pass sentence before Pot Gutted John can get the proper knot tied."

"Mebbe this here Tommy Dean ain't dead."

"A mitigatin' circumstance, but hardly worth bringin' up as a defense. Dike-blowin' with intent to defraud would be sufficient to win you a hangin' without the murder, not to mention cabin-smashin'."

"By God, if you hang me you've got to hang Barto, too!"

"Barto? What's Barto got to do with it?"

"He's got plenty to do with it! It was him paid me to do this job. He give me two thousan' dollars to blow this dike an' let that lake into the gulch on account he hates this here Tommy Dean. He figgers if he'd git rid of Dean, he'd git Steve Benton's gal, an' then locate Tommy's claim hisself. He looked the claim over, an' he knows it's a good proposition when he got water onto it. He even kinda give me the creeps when he says 'if it's water Dean wants he'll git it—an' it won't cost him a damn cent, either.' He know'd damn well that when this dike let go Dean would go whirlin' to hell in the flood."

"So that's your story, eh—tryin' to drag Barto into it. Well it don't quite jibe. Fer instance, Tommy Dean's be'n in the hospital in Dawson on account of some burns he got in a fire Dominion Day evenin', an' the doctor claimed he wouldn't be out fer two weeks. Bein' right there in Dawson, Barto would know that—so if he aimed to kill Dean, why would he tell you to blow

this dike before Dean was out of the hospital?"

"That's right," Aker agreed. "Barto know'd that, all right. So he tells me to hold off on firin' the shot till he let me know. I jest finished the job this evenin'—got everythin' all ready, an' figgered on waitin' till Barto give me the word. Well, he give it to me—not more'n a couple of hours ago. He come here an' says how Dean has got well an' is back on his claim, an' I should wait till jest about dark an' then touch her off—an' that's what I done."

"Where's Barto now?"

"Damn if I know—he didn't hang around—jest paid me my two thousan' an' beat it. He's prob'ly camped in the bresh, about two hours along his back-trail to Dawson."

"H-u-u-m—an' interestin' complication—if true."

"It's true—every damn word of it!"

"An' in case we was to involve Barto in this hangin', would you be willin' to tell the boys about his part in it, at the miner's meetin'? I ain't makin' no promises—but it's just possible that sech procedure might induce the boys to hang Barto an' turn you loose with a warnin'. After all, there's only one murder."

"Yer damn right I'll tell 'em—an' I'll prove it, too! I know some of them boys on Halfaday, an' they know me. I'll show 'em the money Barto passed me. They know I never had no two thousan' dollars at one time in my life. Hell, if I had even a hundred dollars, I wouldn't be hangin' around the Klondike Palace cleanin' spitoons, would I?"

"W-e-e-l-l, yer argument seems sound. I never heard of spitoon cleanin' bein' a hobby of the wealthy. Where was you hittin' out for jest now—Dawson?"

"Not by a damn sight! I never want to see Dawson agin. I was hittin' fer the Dalton trail. I come in that way—helped Jack Dalton fetch in a bunch of steers, an' I aimed to go back out. To hell with this hull country! I was headin' back to the States."

"Okay. You wait here till I go down the gulch to Tommy Dean's cabin—er where his cabin was, an' ascertain the extent of the damage. I'll be back in the mornin'."

"I'll wait."

"Yer damn right you'll wait. Lay down while I tie you. You look to me like a man whose word should be augmented by a few turns of good stout rope." A few minutes later he rose to his feet, and looked down at the man, bound hand and foot with babiche line.

"Cripes," the man whined, "it gits cold up here, nights! An' besides, the mosquitoes'll eat me up!"

"I'll throw a couple of blankets over you—what few mosquitoes gits under 'em won't hurt you none."

VIII

PICKING up Aker's lantern, Black John lighted it, and made his way down into the gulch. The lake bed was completely drained, and as he proceeded he noted that most of the small spruce trees had been swept away by the flood, and the sand and soil along with them. He walked, for the most part on hard rock and boulders. As he rounded the last bend, the flicker of a fire caught his eye, and the bobbing light of a lantern. The bobbing stopped as the one who carried it evidently saw his light, and Steve Benton's voice cut the silence. "Who's there?" he yelled.

"It's me—Black John!" the big man answered, and hurried on to the fire, where Margy stood sobbing and wringing her hands. He was quickly joined by Steve, who had been searching with the lantern below the site where the cabin had stood. "Oh," cried the girl. "It's terrible! Oh—why did he do it? Why didn't he tell us he was going to try to get that water from the lake? We didn't even know he'd done his drilling. He knew nothing of such things! Why didn't he ask daddy—he would have told him it was dangerous!"

Steve nodded. "Hell yes! By the sound, he must of put in enough giant to blow the hull damn ridge down! All he needed was a few sticks, an' shallow shots, at that."

They tossed more wood on the fire, and the yellow flames shooting skyward disclosed an eerie and unfamiliar scene. They stood on the edge of the little plateau that had been the cabin site. But the plateau was now a deep pit, and a solid rock dike rose a full fifteen feet above the floor of the pit—a dike that ran transversely across

the gulch from rimwall to rimwall. Against the upper side this wall, lay a mass of twisted tree trunks. Steve pointed at the obstruction. "Look, John—that there dike never showed before. By God, the top of it was in under the surface. It was filled in clean to the top with sand an' gravel that's all worshed out now. I've be'n here a hundred times, an' I never know'd that dike was there."

"Maybe you didn't," Black John replied. "But Tommy did. He told me about it the time we went up an' looked at the lake. He'd heard about that cross dike where Moosehide Charlie made his big strike, an' he heard about others, too. He knew he had a good thing, here. He showed me some big nuggets he'd picked up behind that dike. He didn't show you folks—he was keepin' it for a surprise."

The girl was sobbing aloud. "And—oh—I called him a fool—and stubborn—and—and—now he's—"

"He's right here! And doggone glad to get back."

"Tommy," the girl cried. "Tommy Dean!" And the next instant she was in his arms, sobbing against his breast.

"How the hell did you git out of it?" Steve asked, eyeing the younger man.

"I wasn't in it," Tommy grinned. "When I left your place I didn't stop here. When I came up from Dawson today I was in such a hurry to see Margy that I left my stuff at the last portage on the river and went on up light. When I left your place I went on back to the portage, and was packing my supplies to the head of it, when I heard a roar like thunder and the water in the river began to rise so fast I dropped my stuff and hit for high ground. It rose for a while, and then went down as fast as it rose, and when I climbed down to the river again, I didn't have any canoe or supplies, or anything. I've been making my way back a-foot and it's some job—dark as it is."

"Oh Tommy—nothing matters, now I know you're safe. But—we've lost everything—even the cabin is gone."

Staring out into the firelight Tommy Dean's eyes widened as they fixed on the rockwall. "Good God!" he cried suddenly. "My rock dike!"

Leaving the girl, he snatched the lantern from Black John's hand, dashed to the edge of the jambpile, dropped to his knees and began to work his way beneath the loosely piled tree trunks. Five minutes passed—ten, and the girl called to him. "Where are you, Tommy? What are you doing down there? Come on out—you can't find anything from the cabin! It's all gone down the river."

"Be there in a minute," came the voice from the jambpile, and a few moments later Tommy Dean wriggled free of the logs. He approached the fire, his hat grasped by the two brims to form a bag. As he approached his singed head gleamed red in the firelight. Stepping up to the girl, he extended his hands. "Hold my hat a minute, Margy," he said.

THE girl reached for the hat, her fingers closing about the brims, and as Tommy let go, she exclaimed loudly as the hat dropped to the ground. Then all four stood speechless, staring down at the heap of yellow nuggets that lay at her feet. "Oh—it was so heavy I couldn't hold it!" she cried. Then, staring at the yellow pile. "Tommy! Why—Tommy—it's—it's gold. Nuggets—great big ones."

Steve Benton was on his knees staring at the two handfuls of nuggets he had picked up. "Fifty pound of nuggets in ten minutes—out of a jambpipe," he cried, in an awed voice.

"That's right," Tommy grinned, "and believe me there's plenty more down there. I only picked up what I could find right on top among the gravel and the logs. When I get that jambpile moved, I'll really show you gold!"

"But," the girl cried, "what happened? If you didn't shoot down that rock dike that held back the lake—who did?"

For a long moment the four glanced into each other's faces. Steve was the first to speak. "It's beyond me. John—do you know?"

"W-e-e-l-l, just cast yer wits around amongst the folks you know, an' see if any one of 'em would like to see Tommy wiped out."

"Clyde Barto!" cried the girl. "Oh, he tried to kill Tommy! He ought to be hung."

Tommy Dean laughed and, throwing his arm about the girl's shoulders, drew her

close. "Why hang a man for doing you a good turn? Look," he pointed to the rock dike, "he's done in half an hour what it would have taken me years to do with a controlled stream of water. Just think, Margy—we can clean up the whole proposition in a month or two—and you won't have to spend your life in a dry gulch, after all. I think we owe Barto a vote of thanks!"

"Well," Steve said, "we can't do no good here tonight. Let's go on up to my place. Come on, John—you've got to go with us—it's a cinch you can't spend the night with Tommy, now."

The girl glanced into the big man's eyes. "Uncle John," she said, "I'll bet you know a lot about this business—showing up just when you did. And I thought you acted kind of funny, when you refused to stop overnight with us. I know, now, what that proposition was, you were in such a hurry to talk over with Tommy. You wanted to warn him!"

The big man grinned. "You guessed it, Sis—part of it, anyway. I had an inklin' Barto was up to some sort of skullduggery, an' when I swung around an' looked that dike over, I knew it. So I figured to warn Tommy about Barto, an' then I was goin' to try to argue him into makin' a loan off'n me to finance his proposition here. I knew it was an A-1 investment, an' I'd have to let him have it at a low rate of interest. First an' last, Sis—I'm a business man. An' I was tryin' to promote a deal that might show some slight profit. I figured I had plenty of time. But when you told me Tommy was back, I knew I had to hurry."

"It's too damn bad that Barto knocked you out of that profit John," Steve grinned.

IX

THE four proceeded to the Benton cabin and spent the night. In the morning, Black John said good-bye.

"Where you headin'?" Steve asked. "Up to Halfaday?"

"No, guess I'll swing down Dawson way. Fact is, seein' how Barto knocked me out of my profit on this venture, I'm goin' to enjoy seein' his face when I tell him how his little scheme of murder worked out. So long. It's a good thing I cached my canoe on the river above the mouth of Tommy's gulch, er I'd had to hit out for Dawson a-foot."

Instead of going directly to his canoe, Black John crossed the ridge to the place he had left Aker. Throwing the blankets off the man, he cut the thongs and seated himself comfortably while Aker built a little fire and prepared his breakfast. With his teapot nested against the flame, and salt pork in the frying pan, the man asked a question. "Was you down there—to Dean's shack?"

"I was down to where Dean's shack was before you fired that shot last evenin'. There is nothin' there now—no shack, no Dean, hardly even a tree left in the gulch."

"Like I told you last night—it's Barto's fault. I never figgered out the deal. I jest worked fer him."

Black John filled his pipe and lighted it. "Aker," he said, "yer nothin' but a lowlived murderer, an' my conscience shore pricks me fer turnin' you loose on society."

"What do you mean—turnin' me loose?" the man asked, a gleam of hope in his eyes.

"I mean I've be'n doin' some thinkin' since I was talkin' to you last night. You'll have to admit that both you an' Barto richly deserves a hangin', an' all the trimmin's that goes with one. But then I says to myself, 'John,' I says, 'who are you to judge these men? You ain't a policeman. They didn't harm you.' So—I decided to go about my business an' forget the whole thing."

"You mean yer goin' to turn me loose!"

"That's right—under certain conditions. The first one bein' that you'll hit for the Dalton Trail, an' keep on pickin' 'em up an' layin' 'em down as fast as God'll let you till you get plumb over into American territory, an' agree never to set foot in the Yukon agin."

"By God, I'll do it!"

"Okay. You claimed, I believe, that Barto paid you two thousan' dollars to pull off this venture. Is that right?"

"That's right."

"An' have you got it on you?"

"Sure I have."

"It strikes me that one thousan' will be entirely sufficient for your needs an' requirements on your journey back to the States, so I've decided to split that two thousan' between us—fifty-fifty."

"You mean, I've got to hand you over half my money?"

"Certainly. Cripes, you couldn't expect me to go to all this trouble without makin' some slight profit on the venture, could you?"

"Okay. I'll pay it," the man said, and handed out ten one hundred dollar bills, which Black John pocketed. Then he rose to his feet. "So long, Aker," he said. "If I was you I wouldn't lose no time gittin' out of the Yukon. Steve Benton's girl is liable to put up a hell of a squawk about Tommy Dean bein' murdered, an' Downey's liable to be on yer trail."

PROCEEDING to Dawson, Black John headed for the Tivoli Saloon, glancing through the window of the little office where Barto carried on his business, he saw the man was busy at his desk. In the Tivoli he joined Bettles at the bar. After a couple of drinks, he inquired, "You rec'lect that location on Dewar that you picked up, last year, off'n that chechako—what was it you paid for it?"

"You mean that Number Ten Above Discovery? I give fifteen hundred for it. Why?"

"What'll you take for it?"

"Take fer it! Hell, you can have it if you want it. It ain't worth a damn."

"I'll give you what you paid."

"You'd be a damn fool to. What do you want of it?"

"I want to sell it to a man. I figure I might make some slight profit on the venture."

"Cripes, John, you wouldn't stick some pore devil with a worthless claim, no more'n what I would!"

"Not some pore devil. A well-heeled devil."

"Who."

"Clyde Barto."

"Him! Say, if you kin work that claim off on Barto, take it fer nothin', an' welcome! He's the crookedest crook in the Yukon! I'd shore be proud to donate the claim, if I thought you could soak him with it! But—they claim he's smart, John. Damned if I believe you kin do it!"

"Won't hurt to try. It's the smart ones, an' the well-heeled ones, if they're also blessed with larcenous souls, that I like to go after."

"It's a deal! I'll go get the papers an' make 'em over. Meet you at the recorder's in ten minutes."

HALF an hour later Black John strolled into Barto's office. The man greeted him genially. "Hello, John. Pull up a chair and sit down. What's on your mind? As the sayin' goes—what can I do you for?"

"Well, that's accordin'. I just come down from the Sixtymile. Hell of a thing happened up there couple nights ago. A rock dike that held back the water of a little lake on the rim above Tommy Dean's cabin let go, an' the whole damn lake went roarin' down his gulch."

"It did! My God, man—is Dean safe?"

"Safe! Hell's fire, he's gone! His cabin's gone! An' damn near every bush an' tree in the gulch is gone along with 'em! How the hell could he be safe—with a wall of water hittin' his cabin—an' him in it?"

"Oh—that's too bad! I'm sure sorry. And that poor girl—Margy Benton—and they were to have been married soon, according to reports."

"Yeah, so I heard. But getting down to business—what I come in for, I've got a proposition up on Dewar I thought you might like. You deal in locations, don't you?"

"Sure I do. But Dewar—where 'bouts on Dewar is it?"

"Number Ten Above Discovery."

Barto laughed. "No go, John. Hell, I wouldn't give a dime a dozen for any claim on Dewar between Five Above and Thirty-two Above. You'll have to shove that one off on someone else."

"Just thought you might be interested," Black John said. "Speakin' of that there disaster on Tommy Dean's gulch, I run acrost a fellow up there name of Slim Aker. Know him?"

Barto's eyes went suddenly hard. "Never heard of him," he snapped. "What are you driving at?"

"Only that Aker done some talkin'—there was jest me an' him. I happened along just about three minutes after he touched off that shot—caught him red-handed, you might say. He spilled his guts, Barto. In other words, he sung like a canary. An' what's more, he's promised to tell it to the judge an' the jury when the time comes. He figures he can save

his own neck by turnin' Crown's evidence, an' swearin' a rope around yours. Your scheme for gettin' rid of Tommy Dean so you could get his girl an' his location was a clumsy one, Barto. Looks like it kind of back-fired on you, don't it?"

BARTO'S face had gone paper white, and his lips moved stiffly. "What—what did you mean about that Dewar location, John?" he said, his eyes meeting the big man's gaze.

"W-e-el-l—to tell you the truth, Barto, the claim ain't worth a damn to me. I sort of figured maybe you'd be interested in it. Of course, in case you *are* interested, Slim Aker, an' what he said could be considered irreverent an' immaterial—an' forgot."

Barto was silent for several minutes. "But—there's the Bentons?" he said. "They'll be sure to put up a squawk about what happened to Dean."

"Nary squawk. I was talkin' to Steve an' Margy both. They think Tommy blow'd up that dike himself, tryin' to get that water into his gulch. They knew he talked of it—an' they figure he overplayed his hand—put in too big a shot."

"And Aker? What about him?"

"I'm holdin' Aker incommunicado, as the sayin' goes, until I find out how you feel about buyin' this claim. If you feel that you need the proposition, I might let you have it—for a consideration—in which case Aker will disappear up the Dalton Trail, never to show up in the Yukon agin'. He knows his own neck ain't much safer than yours."

"How much do you want for the claim?"

"The price is two hundred thousan'."

"Why—you damned outlaw! That's more cash than I've got."

"No it ain't. I happen to know that you've got more than that in the bank, right this minute."

"How do you know that?"

The big man grinned. "The ways of us outlaws is entirely too devious for your limited intellect to grasp, Barto. Are you goin' to take it, or leave it? If you ain't interested, I'll slip over an' have a chat with Downey."

"You damned crook!" Barto said, in a hard, grating voice, "I'll take it. You've got me. There's no other way. How do you want it?"

"Spot cash," Black John replied. "First though, we'll slip over to the recorder's an' enter the transaction on the books—just in case you might try to make out at some later time that I tried to use coercion, or blackmail, or some such onderhanded scheme. It's better, in a deal of this kind, that everything should be open an' above board."

From the recorder's office they proceeded to the bank, where Barto drew a check which Black John presented for payment. The cashier took the check and consulted a book. "How do you want it?" he asked.

"Thousan' dollar bills will do," Black John replied. "I like to have a little loose change in my pocket, in case them old sourdoughs would want to start a stud game."

"I sure hope I can depend on you to keep what you know under your hat," Barto said, as they left the bank.

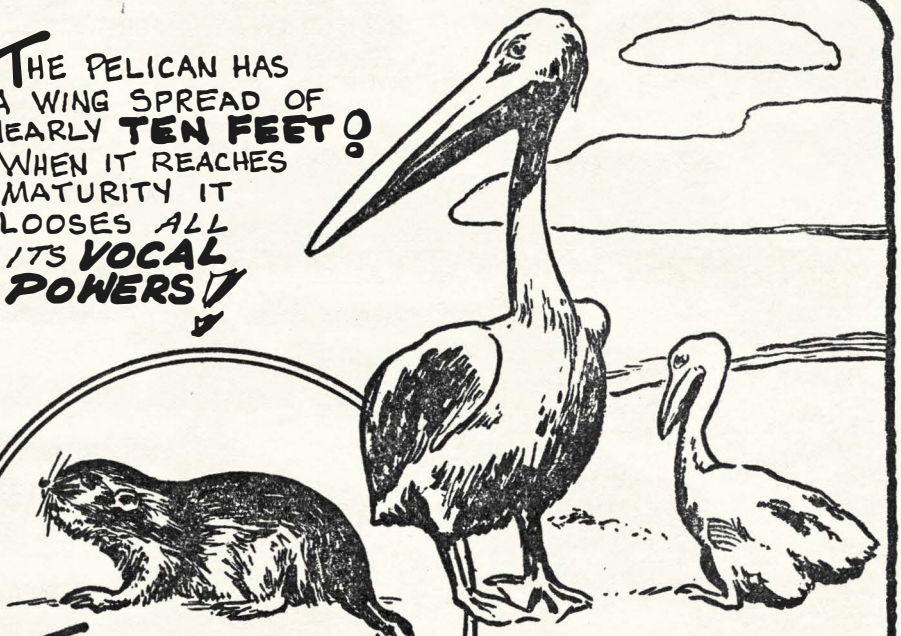
"You can. I'm a man of my word. Honest John, they should be callin' me—instead of Black John."

"Some crazy guy might," Barto said bitterly. "You're the damndest crook in the Yukon. You've put me in a hell of a fix, gouging me for that two hundred thousand. I haven't got enough left to operate with!"

"Cheer up, Barto," the big man grinned. "There's a sucker born every minute—you ort to know that, you're one of 'em. Look! Yonder—comin' up the street—damned if it ain't Tommy Dean, himself. He must have come down to replace them supplies he lost in the worshout!"

Curioddities By Weill

THE PELICAN HAS A WING SPREAD OF NEARLY **TEN FEET!** WHEN IT REACHES MATURITY IT LOOSES *ALL* ITS **VOCAL POWERS!**

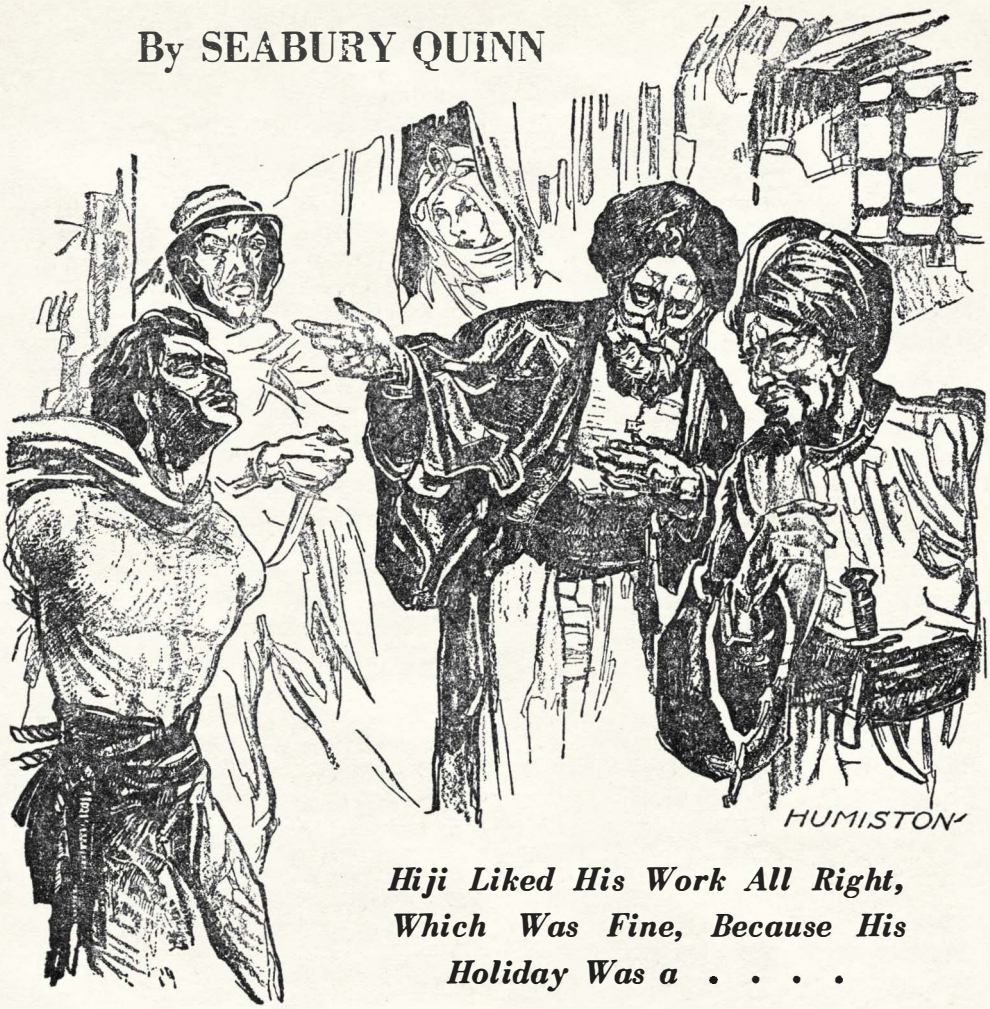


THE POCKET GOPHER'S HIND LEGS ARE ABOUT THE SAME LENGTH AS THE FRONT ONES AND IT CAN RUN AS RAPIDLY **BACKWARDS AS FORWARDS!**

CABBAGE WAS THE CHIEF MEDICINE OF THE ANCIENT ROMANS FOR **SIX HUNDRED YEARS!**

TRUNKFISH ARE COMPLETELY ENCASED IN "ARMOR" OF A SOLID SERIES OF HARD PLATES AND THIS PROTECTION HAS BEEN THEIRS FOR ***50,000,000 YEARS!***

By SEABURY QUINN



Hiji Liked His Work All Right, Which Was Fine, Because His Holiday Was a . . . .

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

THE bus conductor takes a nice long ride on his day off, the postman celebrates his day of rest with a long walk. If Captain Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jameson Ingraham—familiarly, but not always affectionately, known as Hiji from the Gold Coast to Gambia—had not chosen to do a bit of police work on his vacation, Morley Reynolds, Esq., of Washington, D. C., might not now be a nabob in the State Department, and Mrs. Wallace Crashaw of Long Island (formerly Miss Clovis Trenbath) might be—perhaps it would be better not to speculate on what might have happened to that lady.

Hiji had been serving as commander of a company of Houssa policemen and acting as resident commissioner in the Reserved Forest Area of British West Central Africa for almost five years, and he was fed up with it. Things were seldom dull around his station, and he liked his work, but sooner or later the time comes when a bloke can't stand much more of it; when he longs for pines instead of everlasting palm trees and for a country where you don't have St. John's Day weather at Christmas, and where you have something

besides five months of blistering heat and seven of torrential rain. He'd have time and to spare for an air-trip north to Algiers and then across to France. He'd like some time in Paris, visiting the places he had known in '17 and '18, breakfasting on the sidewalk of the Rue d'Harcourt, lunching at St. Cloud, dining at Maxim's. For two whole blessed weeks he would do just as he pleased, spending money like a Pittsburgh millionaire, getting up when he jolly well pleased and going to bed the same way, forgetting all about such things as boundary disputes and hut taxes and malefactors to be chased through the jungle.

He packed his duffel, made out his final report, wished young Penderbury who was going to relieve him luck, and thumbed a ride with an RAF chap as far as Bathhurst, went over to Dakar by packet, then took a commercial plane for Algiers. "And that," as he said afterwards, "was where the fun began."

THE plane began to limp a hundred miles or so north of Kenadza, just where the Atlas Mountains shoot an up-current like the draft of a chimney ten thousand feet into the air. When they made a forced landing two hours later it was groggy as a pheasant with a charge of shot in it, and there was no connecting flight for five days.

Five days is not much in a lifetime, subtracted from a three-week leave it seems like a millenium, and Hiji raged and swore as only Englishmen in similiar conditions can, getting nothing by his eloquence but shrugs and smiles of apology and an indifferent, *"C'est fâcheux, mais c'est impossible, m'sieur."* So, faced with the inevitable, he settled down to pass the time as best he might.

The little coastal town where he had been forced down was typical of all French African places in that it had a fair harbor, a hotel where the sheets were clean and the service deplorable, a *grand boulevard,* and a firm determination to be as much like Paris as possible, which wasn't much.

Hiji wasn't having any of the imitation, he'd been in hundreds of French towns, both at home and in the colonies, and they held small interest for him, but the *kashbah* —the old native quarter—was another matter. All day he lounged through its dark, narrow streets, and by the time the muezzin had chanted the call to evening prayer he had made some old acquaintances. The first was a *moghassil*—a washer of the dead, or, as he would have been known in the West, a mortician. He met him in a café filled with more—though vastly different!—odors than a rose garden, played dominoes with him, bought him endless cups of thick, sweet, feculent coffee—and listened. What he heard would have proved interesting to *Monsieur le Préfet de Police,* for in Algeria as elsewhere the rôle of the mortician is a waiting one, and while he waits he has an opportunity to acquire information and gossip such as few men have, and in the course of active duty he acquires still more, since people the world over are made garrulous by grief.

His second friend was much more glamorous than Mohammed Yeleb the *moghassil.* She was a member of the *Ghawázee,* that almost fabulous tribe of dancing women from the lower Nile country who have plied their trade since Khufu wore the crown of Egypt, and profited mightily by it. He met her in the Street of Perfume Sellers in the *souk* when he had stopped to listen to the sales talk of a vendor: *"Parfume ravissant, yah Sidi? Mais oui.* Here is attar of wild roses gathered from the Prophet's gardens—on him the Salute!—essence of carnation from the always snow-clad summits of the Atlas, orange blossom and sweet jasmine, musk and ambergris, the veritable scent with which Queen Sheba charmed wise Solomon, the Son of David, on whom be Peace! Ambergris to stir the passions as evening wind stirs up the dry dead leaves, *yah Sidi!"*

"Kodesh, baba?—how much, my father?" asked a soft voice at his elbow, a voice almost deep as a man's, yet softly feminine, and there sounded the *clink-clink* of silver bracelets as a slim white hand with henna-stained fingers and gilded nails extended past him.

The perfume seller's small eyes narrowed and his dark face went a shade darker with a flush of anger. He had been on the point of asking Hiji five hundred francs for the flacon of scent, now a native woman thrust herself into the transaction. Shrill outcry would be instantaneous if he demanded any such price from her, if he asked her no more than the usual tariff the *feringhee* could not

be cheated—Allah make the woman's face black at the Last Day!

Hiji read the situation at a glance. Also, he read something more. The woman wore an overgarment of fine wool with broad stripes of violet and green which covered her from head to foot. Her face between the hood of the burnoose and the top of her muslin veil showed nothing but a broad white forehead and two eyes, sloe-black and heavy-lidded, almond-shaped and almost expressionless, but there was something else. Between the finely penciled brows that rose like circumflexes over the dark eyes there was a series of small purple dots, the tattoo-spots that marked her as a *Gházeeyeh,* a public entertainer with a social status roughly corresponding to that of a London chorus girl in Queen Victoria's day. *"Wah! Ullah ijjiblah rehba radma!"* exclaimed the perfume dealer impolitely. "May Allah send an earthquake to devour thee, O countenance of great misfortune! I talk business with the English milord, and thou must thrust thy nose into it! O calamity, O most enormous shame!"

The insults had no more effect on her than raindrops on a duck's plumage. She chuckled throatily and gave it as her considered opinion that the scent-merchant was the brother of at least a dozen naughty sisters, that his mother had no nose and all his male ancestors had been vendors of unclean pigs' tripe. Then she was gone, walking with a cadenced, sensuous swinging of the hips and breast, her heavy silver anklets sounding a defiant *cling-clong* from above the trod-down heels of her bright yellow slippers. But not before her prune-black eyes had flashed a long look at Hiji, the sort of look that by its very lack of all expression was an invitation not to be mistaken.

She made her way out of the *souk,* threading through the narrow streets that twined their sinuses arabesques between the flat-fronted limewashed houses. Once or twice she looked back, not coquettishly, but interestedly, to see if he were following.

HE WAS, and when at length she reached a little house above whose garden wall there showed the green tips of fig trees and drew a huge wrought-iron key from underneath her *haik,* he caught up with her. "Peace be with thee, lady!" he said softly, raising his hand to the brim of his sun helmet in a semi-military salute.

She stiffened almost as a British spinster might if spoken to by a tipsy sailor. *"M'sieur* is a stranger here, *n'est-ce-pas?"* she asked in a cold voice. "The French have stringent laws to deal with those who speak to veiled ladies—"

He grinned at her engagingly, and his teeth were very white beneath the pencil line of his small black mustache. *"Wah,* Dispenser of Delights"—his Arabic was perfect, though he spoke it with the Coastal intonation—"monsieur is never very long a stranger anywhere. Besides—" once more he grinned, and the quick charm of twinkling gray eyes in his lean brown face was more than any normal woman could resist—"I am not certain you're exactly what we'd call a lady. Therefore, I let the perfume seller cheat me handsomely and brought this offering to thy matchless beauty." He extended the small green-glass vial filled with attar of wild carnation he had paused to purchase in the *souk.*

The serious dark eyes regarded him a long moment, then little wrinkles etched themselves about their outer corners and he knew she was smiling. *"Dites, mon petit,"* she told him, and a note of laughter lay beneath her words, "I think that you have right. You are not one who stays a stranger long in any place, and you are also very beautiful. Me, I have pleasure in this meeting." She turned the great key in the lock and thrust the garden gate open. "Enter into my poor house, *effendi."*

THE house was small, compact, but somehow had an air of spaciousness. Its main room opened off the tiny garden where fig and apricot and lemon trees were growing and through which a small streamlet trickled. The floor was paved with umber tiles, the walls were whitewashed, the ceiling vaulted. Besides a rug in which breath-taking reds and greens and heliotropes were blended like colors cast by a prism in the sunlight there was no furniture save soft round cushions, and he stood awaiting her next move.

She turned on him again and gave him a long, speculative look, then with a laugh that had a hint of half self-conscious giggle in it, she took off her loose, enveloping burnoose and dropped the muslin veil

from her face. "Look, *Sidi,*" she commanded, "am I not beautiful?"

She was no longer very young, but her face was lovely with an odd, uneven sort of beauty. Her forehead was both broad and high, and her cheeks wide, sloping abruptly to a pointed chin. Her skin, which never had been exposed to the sun, was smooth and creamy-white, and its perfection was enhanced by the deep purple of the tattoo marks upon her brow and underneath her lower lip. Her eyes, large, dark and heavy-lidded, were rendered larger still by the kohl rubbed on their lids, and their lashes were so long and silky as to appear almost artificial. She was little, almost childlike, but her figure was a woman's, not a child's, and the costumes she wore enhanced her seductiveness. It consisted of a loose chemise of fine white muslin, voluminous trousers of canary-yellow satin, very tight and ruffled at the ankles, a short zouave jacket of pale green velveteen laced with silver braid and fastened with small jade-and-silver buttons, and a waist-shawl of fine cashmere drawn tight about the hips and tied with a coquettish knot in front. "Behold me, *Sidi,*" she repeated, as she pirouetted on her henna-stained toes and raised both arms above her head. "Am I not beautiful?"

"You're what we'd call a bit of all right in my country," he admitted, "but—"

"La, la!" she broke into quick, eager French. "I have it! It is that you are hungry, *n'est-ce-pas!* Dolma! Fatoum! Bring couscouss for the English milord, and fruit and sweet fig wine!"

The stew must have been on the fire, for in a moment two young colored girls came in, one with a flat dish of brown earthenware and a wooden platter of flat bread, the other with a wine glass and a cruet filled with a light amber liquor.

He raised his brows at sight of the single glass. "You are not drinking?"

"I am a Musslim, *M'sieur,*" she replied simply. "Wine is forbidden us."

Fruit followed the couscouss, golden kumquats, scarlet oranges, dried figs and purple grapes, and when they had washed their hands in scented water poured by the servants and dried them on wide napkins of white linen she leant back on her cushions with an air of exquisite langor. "Now what shall it be?" she asked almost sleepily. "Shall I dance for thee the dance with which Queen Balkis charmed the heart of Suleyman ibn Daoud, on whom be Peace? Or shall I sing thee songs of love, or tell thee stories—the tale of *Lalla Aziza*—the Beautiful Lady—and the Barber's Seventh Son, who was also a drunkard—"

Hiji shook his head. "How art thou called, *aziz?*"

"Fathma Mabrouka, by the grace of Allah, *effendi.* It means the Fortunate. And thou?"

"Hiji."

"Hi-ji?" The sound of *h* came with difficulty, and there was a pretty, broken wait between each syllable. "What does that mean?"

"In the country where I serve my king I'm known as He-Who-Comes-When-No-Man-Thinks-Him-Near."

"Awah, thou art a hunter, then?"

"Quite."

"Then shall I tell thee old tales of my people, Hi-ji? I have a store of stories greater than those told to Shahryar by Shahrazad for a thousand nights and a night—"

"Nay, O Female Pilgrim, Dispenser of Delights," he denied, "tell me rather stories of thy neighbors; whose wife is untrue to whom, who spends his substance riotously, who has traffic with the money-lenders—"

"La, la!" she trilled and clapped her little hands delightedly until the silver bangles on her wrists rang like sleighbells. "You like the *babillarde*—the gossip?"

"Quite," said Hiji, and for the next hour drank in scandal retailed by an expert. Dancing women were regarded as so much furniture, tongues were unguarded in their presence as before so many stools and cushions, and Mabrouka's ears were sharp and memory long. When Hiji left the little house in the Street of the Coppersmiths he had absorbed the *dossiers* of half the pillars of society in the *kashbah,* and Mabrouka had heard tales of the Reserved Forest Area that made her clasp her hands and lift her eyes and call repeatedly upon the Glorious Name of Allah. They parted on the best of terms, and with mutual assurances of high personal regard.

NEXT morning as he breakfasted on the sidewalk before the Hôtel du Nord Hiji spied a familiar figure. He was a very

neat young man in stiffly starched white drill, and by the fact that he wore a Panama instead of a solar topi you could tell he was American. By the expression on his face you knew he was unhappy. "Reynolds!" exclamied Hiji. "Morley Reynolds, what the pop-eyed devil are you doing in this backwater?"

The young man turned at the hail, frowning in perplexity, then the frown gave way to a grin of incredulous delight, "Hiji!" he ejaculated as he put a hand upon the iron railing separating the café from the footpath and vaulted the barrier. "You darned old horned-toad—long time no see!"

NOT since we tried to drink up all the champagne in Paris Armistice Night—and had no luck with it," agreed Hiji as the other dropped into the little iron chair across the table from him, looked for a spare coffee cup, failed to find it, and asked plaintively, "Order me a drink, will you? A big one."

Hiji beckoned to the waiter hovering a discreet six feet away. "Whiskey-soda, *grand modèle,*" he commanded, then to the young man, "Ain't you rushin' it a bit, me lad? It's just past nine o'clock, and here you're on the drink—"

"So you'd be, if you had my troubles," Reynolds broke in morosely. "Talk about Belleau Wood and the Marne—I'd trade a nice wet shellhole for my present berth, and no questions asked."

"Aye?" Hiji nodded sympathetically. "Things tight with you?"

"Tight? You ain't heard nothin', Mister. Listen: I thought I had my big break when I passed my exams for the consular service, and when they sent me here as deputy I knew I had it. Only five years out o' service and already a deputy. Then the old man—Mr. Frobisher, the Consul, you know—goes home to have his gallstones cut out or something, and I'm made consul *ad interim.* Pretty nice for little Morley, eh? Like hell! This Trenbath dame has queered the whole dam' show. I'm sunk."

Hiji made small deprecating noises with his tongue against his teeth. "Too bad, old trout. Threatenin' to blackmail you, is she?"

Young Reynolds' face went blank, then he laughed shortly, hollowly. "No such luck. If it were nothing but a case of blackmail I'd know how to deal with it. Extortioners don't get far in Algiers. Too many willing little workers with the steel, you know." He raised his finger to his throat and drew it transversely across his larynx in a gesture not to be misunderstood. "A thousand francs—fifty bucks in real money—is the standard price for a neat, tidy job of murder in this town, contractor assumin' all risks. Blackmail? Who's afraid of blackmail? This is serious. Miss Trenbath—Clovis Trenbath of Long Island, U. S. A.—came here six months ago to be a governess for Enifar Bey's brats, teach 'em to play "The Maiden's Prayer" on the piano and eat with knives and forks instead of their fingers. Then what happens, I ask you?"

"All right, what happens?" Hiji asked as his companion made no effort to enlighten him.

"She disappears, evaporates, vanishes."

"Aye? How's that?"

"I wish I knew. Nobody's seen or heard of her for almost two months. Mail sent by her family has been returned. Now her folks—and the State Department—want to know what's happened to her, and I'm supposed to have the answer. They've served notice on me that they'll have the girl alive an' kickin' in a week, or my head on a silver charger."

"What's this Enifar bloke say about it?"

"Nothing. Not a word. Tells us she went for a walk one evening and never came back. That's his story, and he sticks to it. Nothing we can do will punch holes in it. We can't go to the police—this is Algiers, you know, and the *haremlik* is sacrosanct. Can't get a search warrant for his house, can't do a thing but take his word for it that she ran out on him. So—"

"What makes you think he's lyin'? The sort of girl to whom a governess' berth in an Arab household would appeal is likely to be flighty—mad for adventure in the 'Romantic East' and all that sort o' rot. She probably had some sort o' suppressed desire, and when she saw one of these Arab johnnies with a flower tucked behind his ear she came to heel like a lost dog when someone gives it a kind word—"

Reynolds raised a finger to enjoin silence and reached into the inside pocket of his jacket. "Give this the once-over," he ordered, and fished a scrap of soiled paper from his wallet.

Hiji spread the bit of grimy parchment on

the table and studied its smudged penciled message:

To any American, Englishman or Frenchman:

I am held prisoner in Enifar Bey's house. For heaven's sake send help before it is too late. Please, please hurry!

Cl——

"U'm?" He brushed his small black mustache with the knuckle of a bent forefinger. "Where'd you get this?"

"A beggar from the *kashbah* brought it to the consulate night before last. Said he picked it up in the Street of the Five Swords."

"U'm—h'm. I don't suppose you recognize the writin'?"

"No. Of course not. But it seems to have been hastily scribbled, and the first two letters of the signature might be the start of Clovis. Clovis Trenbath, of course. She might have been discovered writing it and had to throw it from a window, or a carriage, or wherever she was, in order to escape detection."

"Sounds reasonable. Been to the police with it?"

"I'll say I have, and got just nowhere. They think that it's a *mauvais tour*—a practical joke. It seems that peddling phony appeals for help from kidnaped women is a standard racket here. Usually they try it on the tourists — get anywhere from five to twenty francs per message—then disappear into the night, as the fellers say. This is the first time it's been tried on the consulate, but the police just simply can't be worried with it. Their hold here isn't too secure at best, and if they were to search Enifar's house and not find the girl—or if they found her, for that matter—they'd see the green flag of the *jehad*—the holy war, you know—broken out from every mosque in the *kashbah*. You just don't search an Arab's harem in any circumstances. Besides, the fact that fake appeals for help are pretty standard merchandise among the local gold-brick artists gives them an out."

"U-m—h'm." Hiji closed his eyes reflectively and searched the files of his memory. "Seems to me I've heard about this Enifar bloke. Lives in the Street of the Five Swords, you say?"

"That's right."

"Has a big house and a lot of money and a son who is the apple of his eye, also a bit of a rotter—got in trouble over one of Sadik Pasha's women some time recently and cost the old man a capful of *backsheesh* to hush the matter up?"

"You've got his number, absolutely, but how you did it I can't imagine. You've been here less than twenty-four hours, and all this stuff is strictly hush-hush, yet—"

"Easy on, young feller," Hiji soothed. "Remember, I'm a policeman—what you Yankees call a cop—and the first duty of a policeman is to know something to everybody's discredit." He sobered suddenly and fixed a questioning glance on Reynolds. "How much is it worth to you to get this dizzy dame back?"

"Good Lord, my job's at stake, man. I'd give a thousand dollars cash to have her at the consulate—"

"That ought to do it; maybe we can shave the price a little."

"What the devil are you ravin' about? Enifar Bey's rolling in the stuff. A thousand bucks would be small change to him. We couldn't ransom her for twenty times that much, and besides—"

"And besides we're wastin' time," said Hiji sharply. "I just thought up a scheme that *might* work. Anyhow, it's worth tryin', but first I have to talk it over with a couple o' friends, Mohammed Yeleb the *moghassil* and Fathma Mabrouka the *Ghâzeeyeh*—"

"Lord save us!" Reynolds burst in. "A body-washer and a lady of—"

"Tut, tut, young feller," Hiji reproved. "No insults, if you please. They're both practitioners of old and honorable callin's, and from what I could observe I'd say each is at the top of his respective list. Finish your drink and get back to your invoices and passports. Dinner here at eight tonight? Righto!"

THE little house that huddled in the shadow of Enifar Bey's big place had been vacant almost two years. Its former tenant had been murdered in his bed and his killers neither apprehended by the French police nor done to death in a blood-feud declared by his heirs, in consequence of which his ghost was said to haunt the place and no

one could be found to occupy it, even at a nominal rental.

But the day after the conference between Hiji and Morely Reynolds a string of porters halted at its garden gate and laid down household goods proclaiming their owner a man of taste and substance, if not of actual wealth. There were brass bedsteads in tolerably good condition, oil lamps of the kind popular in the West fifty years ago, an infinite array of kitchen utensils and much gilt furniture which bore the stamp of having been acquired from French second-hand stores. Also there was a retinue of servants, white, black and somewhere in-between, a band of Jewish musicians to play welcoming music, and two closely shuttered carriages from which descended several women muffled so voluminously in *haik* and *yashmak* that none could say if they were young or old or fat or thin or white or black.

Now in the cool of the evening a woman came out on the roof, a woman young and comely dressed in a long violet silk *kaftan* with an overdress of cobweb-fine lace. In one hand she held a native guitar, with the other she put back the *yashmak* from her face. For a long moment she stood still as something painted on the backdrop of the sunset, then dropping cross-legged on the rug placed on the roof began to pick a melody upon the strings of her instrument. The plucked strings sang with tremulous distinctness, and presently she joined her voice to theirs, a full, rich contralto with a note of yearning in it:

"Thy brethren's swords are loosed against me,
And on the face of the earth am I a fugitive . . ."

Mohammed Ibrahim, the first and only son of Enifar Bey, heard the voice as he lounged on his father's roof, heard and was interested. Inch by cautious inch he raised himself until he looked across the parapet and down on his new neighbor's house. The woman seemed oblivious of his interested inspection. With head thrown back to show the sweet curve of her throat, she threw her love song up into the gathering twilight, and there was a pathetic, longing note in her voice.

Mohammed Ibrahim smiled broadly at the singer, tweaked the ends of the diminutive mustache which he wore waxed in the French fashion, and felt his heart skip a full beat as the woman suddenly became aware of his stare, and instead of reaching for her *yashmak* and drawing it across her face, smiled back at him. Then, seemingly all at once aware of her boldness, she drew the veil across her chin and mouth, cast him a lingering glance above its edge, and hurried from the roof.

Mohammed Ibrahim was greatly pleased with himself. That he had made a conquest he was certain; how to follow up the lead that Fate had given him was the next question. He clapped his hands and when a black slave answered the summons, ordered: "Find out who our new neighbors are, Abdalla; find out whence they come, how long they propose to remain, and find out, above all, how soon the master of the house will join the family."

"Hearing is obeying, *yah Sidi,*" Abdalla made a profound *tamara* and hastened on his errand. Half an hour later he returned and what he had to say pleased Mohammed Ibrahim immensely.

THAT evening when the moon came up Mohammed Ibrahim heard the voice trilling from the rooftop once more, and in a little while he rose, put on the turban he had laid aside because of the heat, let himself softly from the house and knocked discreetly on the gate of his new neighbor's garden.

"*Meunhoo*—who is there?" a soft voice challenged.

"One who would have converse with the Little Tree of Jewels, the Sweet Dispenser of Delights, she who sings the love songs of the Bedawin—also one whose hand is heavy with the gold coin of the French—Allah make their faces black!—and eager to transfer it to the palm of one who has discretion."

"How much?" The voice behind the gate was eager, yet reluctant. "A dead man sings no love songs, and there are no pockets in a shroud. If Si Mohammed Zaid, my master, hears of it my life ends suddenly and most uncomfortably."

"What sayst thou to a hundred francs?"

"Alas, I have been deaf from birth, *yah Sidi.*"

"Three?"

"I catch the music of thy voice, but cannot hear thy words."

"Five hundred—no more!"

"Thy voice is as the song of the bulbul, *Sidi.* Be pleased to enter, but keep silence. The walls have ears, and for each ear there is a tongue to carry gossip to the master."

The door creaked back on rusty hinges, there was a clink of gold as coins changed hands, and the soft thud of a *kourbash*—a foot-long strip of hippopotamus hide—as it came into violent contact with bare flesh, then a crash in the marigold plants as Mohammed Ibrahim fell face-forward into them. "*Yah hazati*—O filth and son of filth," came a soft gleeful whisper, "this was written from the beginning of the world!"

"ALLAH prosper thy greatness, *effendi!*" Enifar Bey salaamed before the master of the little house that adjoined his. "Your magnificence desired to have converse with me?"

His neighbor returned his salute punctiliously, but there was something in his bearing that suggested trouble, and a great deal of it. He was a big man, and uncompromising in appearance. His bushy beard and superciliously upsweeping mustache were dyed a violent red with henna, his turban, in which showed the strand of green that marked him as a man who had made Pilgrimage to Mecca, was large as a sofa pillow, and for the rest he wore a suit of snuff-brown velveteen with short tight jacket and loose baggy trousers. Also across his knees he held an unsheathed Afghan sword, four inches across the blade.

Fifteen minutes earlier a little man whose face was almost hidden in a thicket of whiskers dyed with henna in the Afghan fashion had knocked at Enifar Bey's gate, and the sharp, incisive sound of his knocking was more the summons of a conqueror than a neighbor's friendly request for admission. When Abdalla had answered the imperious signal the visitor commanded, "Bid your master come to talk with speed to Si Mohammed Zaid who has deigned to enlighten the darkness of this squalid neighborhood with the effulgence of his presence. Tell him he must hasten if he wishes to behold his first-born living, for in the dead of night, like a thief plying his unsavory trade, one stole into the master's *haremlik* and would have held forbidden converse with the one who is the breath of life to the master—"

"*Ahee!*" Abdalla interrupted shrilly. "O monstrous calamity! O enormity of misfortune! What will not a goat eat of a young fool in love do? My master's son has gone to the well once too often and his jar is broken!"

"Silence, species of an uncouth cockroach!" ordered the visitor. "Thy master's son hath been taken red-handed in the harem of my lord. By Allah and by Allah, he shall die the death—unless," he added in a confidential tone, "thy master can prevail upon my lord to compromise his claim for cash."

Still lower, he added, "Did not Sadik Pasha do as much when the young master was discovered with the *lalla* Janna in a highly compromising position?" The whispered question was punctuated by a dig in Abdalla's ribs, and the playful poke was accompanied by a low, meaningful laugh.

"*Ahee! Ahoo!*" Abdalla matched the visitor's chuckle with one of his own. "Has it not been truly said that Allah never closes one gate without opening another? And is not gold the key that unlocks every door—"

"Save only that of the grave," interrupted the caller grimly. "Make haste, O friend, and bid thy master call on mine—with his pockets well weighted."

Now Enifar Bey bowed before his new neighbor and while his manner was polite and formal he was raging inwardly. This was the second scandal that his scapegrace son had caused within a year, and from the looks of his host it was likely to prove more expensive than the first. "It seems my son has trespassed upon your excellency's land," he murmured. "He is a good and kindly lad, albeit a little silly, and suffers much from short sight. It may well be that he mistook thy gate for mine—"

"Did he mistake my *haremlik* for thine, also, O luckless father of a luckless son?" the other interrupted. "If so it is an error he will not commit a second time, for as the firmament was set up without pillars by Allah—"

"Nay, be not over-hasty, friend," protested Enifar Bey. "By thy own words he has not done thee actual injury, and has it

not been written that a fitting fine is full requital for all hurt? Thou art a man of great taste and refinement. Mayhap a thousand francs—"

"O Allah, Thou All-Knowing, Thou All-Merciful!" the other lifted pious eyes to heaven.

"Two thousand?" Enifar had little hope the bid would be accepted, but *fi aman 'illah*—we are all in Allah's keeping, and the wise man does not lay his cards face-upward on the table.

"*Ramet Ullah*—Lord have mercy! Am I a Greek, a Hebrew, an Armenian, that I should put my honor and the honor of my house upon the auction block? Twenty thousand francs in gold—no less!—shall be the price of thy son's life, or may my face be blackened at the Last Day—"

"Extortioner! Oppressor of the poor!" Enifar Bey's voice became shrill in its turn. "Am I the Frankish Governor of the Province that I can raise such sums?"

"I know not who thou art, or what thou hast," the other cut in coldly, "but twenty thousand golden francs is the price of thy son's life, and if it be not paid—"

"So be it," Enifar Bey's answer was forthright and businesslike. "I have the money here"—from under his burnoose he drew a buckskin bag and flung it to the floor at his host's feet—"take thou the gold—and set my son at liberty—"

"And the *feringhee* woman thou holdest in thy *haremlik*," the other added as he picked the bag of money up and undid its fastenings. "I have a notion to add her to my garden of sweet-scented blossoms—

"*Yah Allah!*" Enifar Bey shrieked. "Who hath told thee this great lie? It is a false and baseless slander. I know nothing of the foreign woman. As Allah shall judge me at the Last Day, she ran away two months ago and I have no idea where she went. Belike she took a lover or was murdered in the *souk*. How should I know?"

"How, indeed, protector of the fatherless?" his host returned imperturbably. "These matters are too deep for my poor understanding. I know only that unless the woman be brought here before these sands have run thy son shall die the death." From the tabourette that stood beside him he picked up a miniature hour glass, and reversed it so that the sand in its upper section began trickling quickly to form a small pyramid in its lower globe. "The woman 'ere these sands run out, or thy son dies, O man," he promised in a voice as menacing as a snake's hiss.

The curtain at the far side of the room drew back as he concluded his threat, and in the room beyond, as on a stage, Enifar Bey beheld his son gagged and bound with rawhide thongs to a gilt chair, while a small man with very bushy, very red whiskers stood behind him whetting a six-inch dagger on a length of hippopotamus hide.

Enifar Bey's pale face went greenish-yellow as he looked. He drew his tongue across his lips to moisten them, and sweat poured from his forehead like beads of moisture on a water-cooler. "Dog!" he muttered thickly. "Dog with a dog's heart! Bid thy man withhold his steel; the woman shall be thine," and Enifar Bey was gone.

THE woman Enifar Bey dragged after him might have been pretty if she had not been so completely terrified. Against her absolutely bloodless face the rouge stood out with startling sharpness, giving her almost the grotesque look of a clown. Her costume was a single garment, an ankle-length, rather closely fitted tubular dress of silk brocaded with pink flowers, bound at the waist with a length of plaid ribbon. Bangles of flat silver wire were strung upon her wrists and ankles and a necklace of discolored silver coins was round her throat.

"Take her, may thy bones lie in a grave defiled by dogs!" Enifar Bey shouted as he dragged the half-fainting woman forward and flung her to the floor before his son's captor.

"Go! Leave my house, O father of ten thousand cockroaches, and take thy unclean offspring with thee!" roared the other, and at his signal Mohammed Ibrahim was released and ran to join his father.

The girl crouched abjectly before her new master, her face hidden in her hands, her shoulders shaking with deep, almost silent sobs. At last, as the man said nothing, she ventured to look up between her fingers. "Wha—what are you going to do with me?" she begged piteously. "Oh, please—"

Amazement struck her dumb, for he replied in English. "I ought to give you a jolly good spanking, but I suppose I'll have

to take you to the Yankee consul instead. You and your fool notions of 'The Romantic East'! Stop groveling. Get up from there and go to the next room and get some clothes on. You'll find everything you need, I think.

"Mohammed Yeleb," he called to the small man with the red beard, "come quickly, friend of my heart. Here is money. Pay the people what we owe them, and let us go. Enifar Bey will not be long in learning how we've tricked him, and presently he will be back with his servants. It behooves us to be far away when he returns."

When Miss Trenbath returned dressed in the European clothes which she had found in the next room a big young man who was as unmistakably English as Yorkshire pudding was plucking handfuls of false red whiskers from his face.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, then paused, then began again. "Oh, I think you're perfectly wonderful!" Half weeping, half laughing, she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him on his rather sticky lips. "You darling!"

Fathma Mabrouka, who bore a startling resemblance to the "wife" Mohammed Ibrahim had seen that evening on the housetop —came into the room in time to witness the embrace. *"Mithil esseyed!"* she remarked, which was her way of saying that the women of the West were without modesty or morals, and that Miss Clovis Trenbath in particular was a forward hussy.

"AND now, let's have an accountin'," said Hiji to Morley Reynolds at the consulate next morning. "You said you'd give a thousand dollars for her safe return, and trusted me with that amount. Eight hundred and thirty-nine dollars was the over-all cost. Here's your money." He laid a pile of gold and banknotes on the table.

"How in blazing hell did you put it over?" Reynolds looked at him in round-eyed amazement.

"Simple, young feller, me lad. Quite simple. I made Enifar Bey pay the shot."

"You made—"

"Quite. You see, when you told me what you suspected and showed me that appeal for help—which, unlike the French police, I did not think a practical joke—I took counsel with Fathma Mabrouka and Mohammed Yeleb, of whom you said such disrespectful things. We cooked our little scheme up together.

"Yeleb knows everyone in the *kashbah* who's worth knowin', and quite a few who ain't, and as for Mabrouka, she's a positive wonder. Between 'em they took care of everything—rented the house next door to Enifar, hired a troupe of supers for my household servants, bought a lot of beat-out second-hand furniture and stage-managed the production for me.

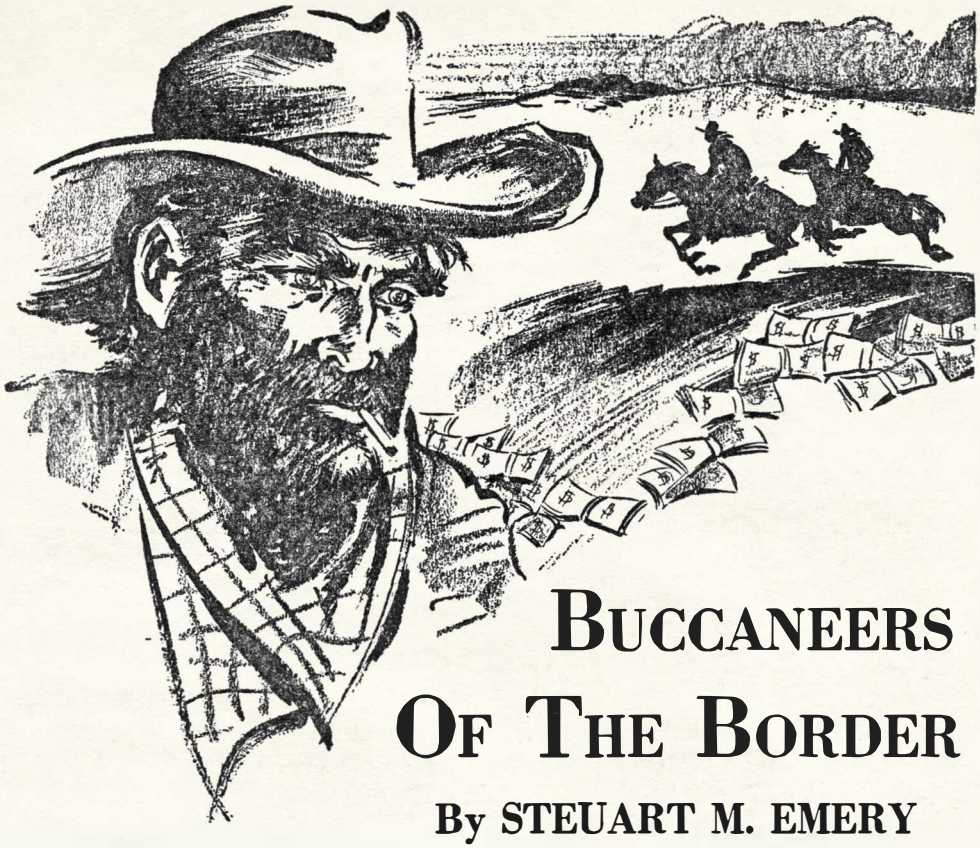
"Mabrouka, who's a winsome wench if there ever was one, took on the rôle of siren, went out on the housetop at sunset, sang one of her prettiest songs and gave Mohammed Ibrahim the glad eye, then when his servant came snoopin' around the premises, Mohammed Yeleb, all made up in false whiskers, told him that the master of the house—that's me, of course—was not expected for a fortnight. The rest was positively shamelessly easy. Mohammed Ibrahim fell like a lorry-load of brick, Yeleb knocked him flatter than a sole with his *kurbash,* and trussed him up like a fowl. Then he slipped the word to Enifar Bey that if he wanted to see his precious son alive he'd best be callin' on the injured husband (that's me, *again*) with a fistful of *backsheesh.*

"I played the blighter like a salmon, and waited till I'd sunk the gaff in him before I demanded Miss Trenbath's return in addition to the twenty thousand francs I'd already screwed out o' him in order to defray the costs of our private theatricals—plus a reasonable *pourboir* for Mabrouka and Yeleb, of course."

"But, good Lord, man, you took a chance!" expostulated Reynolds. "Why, that was rank extortion—"

"The police have another name for it," corrected Hiji with a straight face. "It's technically known as the badger game, I believe."

Reynolds looked at him admiringly. "Now I know how forty million English on a dinky little island no bigger than Virginia can control three-quarters of the earth's surface and population," he declared. "It's because they've got guys like you workin' for 'em."



BUCCANEERS OF THE BORDER

By STEUART M. EMERY

I

"HIYA, Postoffis Pete!" bellowed Blaster Breen, stamping in orange-bearded, orange-thatched and rollicking bulk through the postoffice door. "What United States mails have you got fer me today in the Gineral Delivery?"

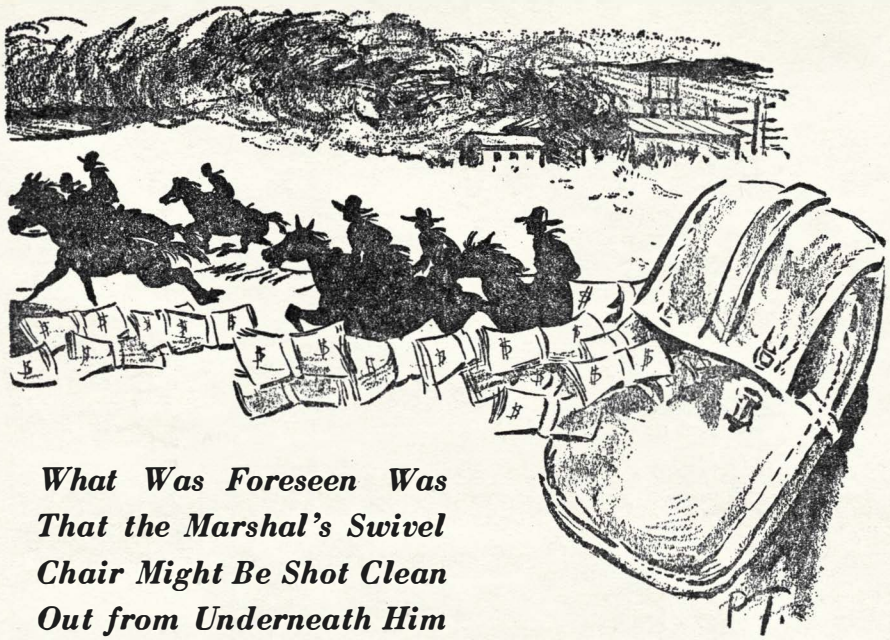
The ace dynamite expert and leading hardrock man of the Silver Princess Mine brought himself up in front of the counter. He was vastly built, with huge bones and huge muscles, and when he bellowed, which was frequently, all of Eureka, the desert mine and range town, knew it. His red-flannel shirt blazed like a bonfire and the buckles of the big fireman's suspenders that held up his trousers sparkled also. Blaster Breen of the mighty frame and the boisterous disposition was not only somebody to look at but to give way before. He was a hellion.

Behind the counter a lathlike, stoop-shouldered clerk with a green baize apron and a green eyeshade looked up, grinning. Reluctantly he removed his nose from the startling pages of such a magazine as Eureka had never seen before.

"I will say that you have got mail, Blaster," pronounced Postoffice Pete. "I am still a-reading of it but I shall be through in a minnit.

"My grief, what they publish in Paree, France! I am frankly awed. Lookit the hussy on the cover, shameless in her silk tights and a-kicking away at a gentleman's hat with champagne wine in her hand!"

"Postoffis Pete, you gimme that magazine!" roared Blaster. He could descry its amazing cover from where he stood and the title spread over the page: *Les Folies Parisiennes*. "That is the Paree picter paper my littul pardner, Hippolyte Petitpois, o' the Maison Petitpois, artist tonsorial, has sent all the way ter Noo Orleans ter buy me a subscription to outa our friendship. You are



What Was Foreseen Was That the Marshal's Swivel Chair Might Be Shot Clean Out from Underneath Him

tamperin' with the mails again, Postoffis Pete."

The clerk got up and came over to the counter with the magazine. "Oh, oh, Blaster, you at your age! Getting a thing like this ordered for you!"

"Ah!" gurgled Blaster Breen.

"Ah, it is!" echoed a dry, drawling voice. "Shame upon yuh, Blaster, in the name of the United States Government."

FEDERAL DEPUTY MARSHAL JOHN PENNYPACKER, who had just entered the postoffice, surveyed the picture paper in Blaster's hand with his customary air of casual and wry humor. His face was a weathered crimson from sun and sand and his hair and eyebrows had been whitened by the arid desert. Blondish white also were the splendid sickle mustaches that adorned his upper lip, sweeping down above his long, somewhat equine jaw. He looked like a red-and-white pinto and he was often called one. But all Eureka knew that there was no faster, more able lawman with a gun or in any decisive moment than Marshal Pinto Penny.

"Blaster, you have committed an offense against the United States Government. Receivin' salicious and improper material through the mails."

"It is art!" howled Blaster. "You have got no soul, you ole paint-hoss! An' the United States Government kin go ter—"

"Steady, Blaster," warned Marshal Penny. "Yuh go too far. Cursin' of yore government is anarchy. Pete, yuh got any mail for me?"

"In your box, Marshal," grinned Postoffis Pete. "I'll get it for you."

He slipped behind the array of mailboxes and was back with an envelope which Marshal Penny deliberately ripped open. The crinkles around his eyes grew deeper as he read, his fast mind plainly was working.

"Pete," he said, "this is from the government office at the capital. The not inconsiderable sum of $150,000 in hard, cold cash is bein' shipped to the Marshal's office here for me to sit guard on. It should be in by this mornin's stage. The Indian agent will be in Eureka to buy the beef and other supplies for the reservation, it seems. Also the expenses of the Federal Circuit Court are to be paid from here plus claims awarded by it."

"One hunnerd and fifty thousand bucks in your safe, Marshal," remarked Postoffice Pete. "And Arkansaw Blount has crossed the Border and is headed north for this town with his desprit riders at his back. A mighty

upset Mexican was in here with the news 'bout half an hour ago."

"Arkansaw Blount—" said Blaster, "that name sorter ignites a fuse in my head."

His forehead also corrugated in sudden, frontier-alert thought. Arkansaw Blount, as all Eureka and all the Border knew, meant stark depredation and six-gun smoke. Big as a grizzly, bearded, hot-eyed and ruthless, he rode with his men leaving flaming haciendas and stripped herds and looted banks in his trail. Arkansaw Blount these years past had ridden the Border—roaring, shooting, cruel for cruelty's sake—but always he had kept his killings south of the International Line, driving his horned plunder north into the Territories for sale and mad celebration. And now he was headed for Eureka with his killers.

"Marshal Pinto," said Blaster, "here we are gonna have that lobo Arkansaw Blount an' a hundred an' fifty thousand bucks in cash in this town at the same time. I foresee where yore swivel chair may be shot out from under you."

"I happen to be shy two deputies, one on leave and one down sick," said Marshal Pinto. "Blaster, yuh are off from the Silver Princess for a week while they repair that gallery cave-in. I shall have to have me more men to guard that hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Yuh want to be sworn in as a Government temporary deputy to protect that hundred and fifty thousand dollars for five bucks a day?"

"I will protect nuthin'!" roared Blaster. "I will work for no ungrateful United States Government fer fi' bucks a day!"

MARSHAL PENNY shrugged and grinned. "Pete, you and I should better go inter a confabulation on this money-guardin' bizness. Blaster, yuh have had yore chance to serve yore government and failed. I fear I had better confiscate that Paree magazine before you corrupt the morals of Eureka. Gimme."

"Why, you—" Blaster's face suffused like a desert sunset and words failed him. Muttering raggedly in his vast orange-red beard, he burst out of the postoffice and stormed the board sidewalk of Continental Street, the magazine shoved into his hip pocket. "That damn Marshal Pinto Penny, which is usin' the entire inflooence o' the United States Government ter git the fust look at my Foleys Parisiennes fer hisself!"

Eureka's citizens, passing along the sidewalk, gave way hastily before the infuriated charge of Blaster Breen. In the street the usual frontier traffic boiled and streamed with ore wagons, spring carts and buckboards jostling each other and mounted men picking their way through. The brazen sun poured down its streaming heat and the dust eddied and swirled, impregnated with alkali.

"*Bon jour, camarade!* 'Allo, Blastair! Blastair, 'ow are you?"

The gay and merry face of Hippolyte Petitpois, artist tonsorial to Eureka, beamed with the spirit of friendship. His superb handlebar mustaches, curling up before his round and rosy cheeks, seemed to vibrate in welcome. His alert black eyes snapped as he rose to his diminutive height of five feet two, clad in a lavender frock coat whose skirts flared like a sail, and lifted his gleaming silk hat to his friend Blaster.

Hippolyte Petitpois was the drink-buyingest and the fightingest Frenchman since Lafayette, Eureka proudly claimed. Along the ancient leather settee that stood against the front of Maison Petitpois lounged a company of ore-wagon drivers and miners with beautifully-shaved features or lustrous, oiled beards and locks. Before them stood small, home-made, wooden tables and in her gilded cage behind the plateglass window Clothilde, Hippolyte's prized canary, fluttered her wings and chirped.

"Hippo, you amaze me!" ejaculated Blaster. "You are in yore royal raiment in which you promenade the booleyvards of Eureka like you done the booleyvards of Paree. You have quit yore tonsorial endeavors?"

"I make ze 'oliday!" caroled Hippolyte joyously. "Eet ees ze christening of ze new barber's pole! *Regardez,* ees eet not *magnifique!*" He gestured toward the shining red-and-white striped pole that rose at the boardwalk's edge amid the cactus plants, set there to serve as urban greenery. "Ze boulevard café and open-air reading room of Hippolyte Petitpois' customairs 'as now its own symbol of ze gracious living and ze loving beard care. We make ze christening wiz champagne! *Vite,* Monsieur Benjamin One Gallus!"

Grinning from ear to ear, One-Gallus

Benny, the gap-toothed swamper of the Mesquite Saloon, was shambling across the street. In each hand he held a zinc pail, filled with watery ice from which the necks of bottles protruded. His too-big trousers held up by a lone suspender were threatening to fall every second.

"Grab 'em quick, Blaster, my pants are betrayin' me! Sorry, Musso Hippo, but they ain't a champagne glass in Eureka."

"I 'ave ze champagne glasses!" shouted Hippolyte. "*Attendez!* I go! He darted into the gleaming interior of Maison Petitpois and plunged for the shelves. He was back, slapping gold-lettered white china mugs on the tables, his smile triumphant. "Ze individual shaving mugs of ze customairs! Ze glorious frontier champagne glasses! Open, Monsieur One-Gallus! Forget ze treacherous pants!"

The champagne corks popped and the golden liquid foamed into the shaving mugs. No one had noticed the sinister file of horsemen who had trotted out of a narrow lane giving onto Continental Street from the south and were swinging rapidly toward Maison Petitpois.

"Nossing, nossing is too good for my customairs!" exuberated Hippolyte.

"And here are some more customers," grated a rough, harsh voice. "Ho, ho, ho, is it a French froggie barber or is it a littul jumpin' jack?"

The big bearded man with the brutish face sat the saddle of a tall-limbed horse whose coat, like its rider, was thick with the desert alkali. His close-set, reddish eyes gleamed with a mingling of ferociousness and coarse humor. There was a menace in every line of him and in the fifteen armed men who rode in a cluster behind him and now pulled up by the sidewalk in front of the Maison Petitpois. They were killers, horsed buccaneers of the Border, come to Eureka.

II

"I AM Arkansaw Blount," snarled the big, bearded man. "And there are my boys. We have done some profitable bizness down Mexico way. It was a dusty place down there—" his yellow-fanged mouth opened in a grin, "so we all of us kin do with a bath and a haircut."

"Maison Petitpois eet ees closed today," flashed Hippolyte. A tiny flame was beginning to burn in his eyes. Blaster looked around him quickly. There was not a gun on one of the company at the boulevard café. There were thirty-two guns on the riders who loomed above the sidewalk. "I make ze 'oliday."

"Froggie, you will damn well open your barber shop!"

Swift rage twisted Arkansaw Blount's face. From him there emanated an odor of tequila brandy and from most of his filthy followers as well. Blount swung suddenly from the saddle and landed on his feet, three yards from Hippolyte. His hand swept to his belt and a notched-handled six-gun ripped out. He aimed it at Hippolyte's glistening patent-leather shoes.

"Froggie, go climb that barber's pole to show you are cooperatin' then open your store. Climb, blast you, climb; you littul jumpin' jack!"

The first shot cracked an inch from Hippolyte's toe and Blaster shuddered. A roar of vicious mirth went up from the rank of outlaws. Over the mirth rose another sound, a clear high trilling. Clothilde, the canary in her cage inside the big plateglass window, was bursting into sudden song. Arkansaw Blount looked up at the ball of yellow fluff on its tiny trapeze.

"A damn canary! I do not like canaries!" he snarled.

The six-gun came up and he fired. Its slug crashed through the glass and into the cage. From the trapeze dropped a bloody lump that had been a singing, feathered creature.

"Clothilde! You 'ave keeled Clothilde, my friendly leetle bird!"

Hippolyte's hand went back under his flaring lavender skirt to his belt and Blaster knew what hung there, the long, incredibly keen-bladed dagger in its tooled sheath with which Hippolyte Petitpois, former Lieutenant in the French Army, could fight as though it were a small sword.

"Killair! Savage beast! I come for you!"

Deadly fury rode the words.

"Hippo, Hippo, fer gaw sake, don't!" shouted Blaster. "He has got his gun on you! They all have guns!"

Hippolyte plunged forward, steel in hand, and Arkansaw Blount's six-gun swung

to level at his heart. Blaster swept the champagne bottle from the table at his side and flung. As Arkansaw Blount's finger curled on the trigger, it struck with all its weight against his butt-gripping hand. A yell of pain and shock burst from him, paralyzed, his fingers dropped from the butt and the gun hit the sand.

"The mugs, the shavin' mugs! Throw 'em, boys!" howled Blaster. "At the hosses!"

He grabbed the nearest china mug and hurled it into the flank of Arkansaw Blount's mount. It reared in fright, plunged madly and caromed into the next horse and rider. A barrage of white china streamed through the air, hurled by Hippo's customers, and it was striking the horses in necks, and flanks; sending them into a boiling, out-of-control mass.

Blaster had dived with the first fling and he had Arkansaw Blount's six-gun, scooped from the sand. Past him like lightning Hippolyte launched himself in a fencer's move, his thin steel flickered up for Blount's bearded face and came down.

"You 'ave 'ad ze beard trim from Hippolyte Petitpois, former Lieutenant in ze Eighth Imperial Hussars in ze Franco-Prussian war, murderair!"

ARKANSAW BLOUNT gaped at the alkali-stiff brush of hair that lay at his feet, sliced from his face in a single flash of Hippolyte's blade. He put his hand to his chin; half his beard was gone. He looked a figure of comic, lop-sided clownishness.

"Zat could have been your throat as well, 'ad I weeshed," said Hippolyte. "But I geeve you ze chance you would not geeve my lettle bird. Arkansaw Blount, you 'ave ze knife at your belt. Draw and fight!"

Arkansaw Blount's uninjured left hand fumbled for his knife. "Mow him down!" he screamed, his face writhing in fury. "Mow them both down! Sixteen men's guns agin one!"

"Keep on firin' the mugs, boys," ordered Blaster. "When they give out continue with the tables."

The small tables whirled into the melee of horses and men, who could not shoot with the slightest hope of accuracy from their bucking mounts. Blaster raised his six-gun.

"It is not sixteen men's guns agin one," he snorted. "I have got the fust six shots what will be fired right in my hand. Then it will be ten men agin one. I have bin fer a sojer in my day. At this range I am gonna miss nobody."

"*En garde,* killair!" came Hippolyte's command.

"And on yore good behavior the whole caboodle of yuh!" A hard determination and a steely authority threaded the voice of Federal Deputy Marshal Pinto Pennypacker, rising from a few yards away. "It ain't any sixteen or any ten guns against one man any more. Yuh are covered by plenty."

Marshal Pennypacker stood with feet braced on the sidewalk close to Blaster and he had his gun out. Postoffice Pete, with a grin on his face under its green eyeshade, leveled a deadly-looking sawed-off and to his rear the lambrequin-whiskered "Pop" Dorgan, aged but trustworthy retired government employee, held a Winchester at his shoulder.

"Hippo, cease the carvin'," went on Marshal Pinto. "Arkansaw Blount, drop yore sticker. Hands up, the lot of yuh!"

"Plenty more reinforcements a-coming," announced Postoffice Pete. He moved to the sidewalk edge and waved his green eyeshade in a beckoning sweep. "Here comes the morning stage with Leatherface Hanks a-driving, and Bangaway Jake Rudd riding shotgun."

Hardly two hundred yards away to the east the four-horse coach was spreading its dust and rolling fast. There were answering waves from the armed figures on the box.

"You win, yuh blasted marshal!" snarled Arkansaw Blount.

"Do not buck the United States Government," said Marshal Pinto drily. "It is a large firm. When I heard the shootin' at the postoffice, I commandeered Pete here and Pop Dorgan, whom I have summoned out of his retirement for a special guard job. Arkansaw Blount, I have heard plenty about yuh and all of it is bad. Yuh are going to cause no trouble in this town."

"Collect their hardware an' fire it away in yore offis," suggested Blaster jovially. "Send One-Gallus Benny with the champagne buckits ter collect 'em. Let 'em throw their smokepoles in the buckits."

"Not a bad idea, Blaster," said Marshal Pinto.

Grinning, One-Gallus Benny emptied the ice from the zinc buckets and advanced on the riders, now sitting stilled mounts and snarling. One after the other they tossed their forty-fives into the metal pails.

"Whoa, whoa!" yelled the gnomelike Leatherface Hanks, who had brought his two teams to a halt on the edge of the crowd. His Winchester was ready and so was the sawed-off of Bangaway Jake Rudd beside him. "What is goin' on here, Postoffis Pete? This a hold-up, Marshall Penny?"

"I am damn well seein' to it that this is no hold-up," said Marshal Penny. The last of the forty-fives clashed into the pails and One-Gallus Benny lugged them back to the sidewalk. Blaster tossed his own weapon into a bucket.

"Speshul government treasure aboard fer you, Marshal Penny!" shouted Bangaway Jake. "One hunnerd an' fifty thou' in green lettuce money consigned straight to yore offis. You want we should drive you up there, it ain't but a couple hundred yards beyond our stage barn?"

"You might do that thing once I have laid a little more law down to these hombres," drawled Marshal Pinto.

"You are the United States Marshal?" came a voice from inside the stage. Its door flung open and Blaster goggled at the passenger who emerged. He was a full and muscular six feet in height, clad in an old corduroy shooting jacket that had cartridge loops instead of pockets on its breasts. A black slouch hat crowned the passenger's head, shading a firm, high-boned, authoritative face with an acquiline nose. He was about fifty years old and his blue eyes were brilliant with vigor. "I am United States Circuit Court Judge Henry Tracy of Washington, D. C., arriving in Eureka a week before the opening the court. Marshal, I imagine you and I are going to work together."

He glanced at Marshal Pinto Penny's drawn gun and at the outlaws, seeming completely unsurprised.

"Outlaws?" His cool blue eyes focused on Arkansaw Blount.

"Yah!" said Arkansaw Blount. "A United States jedge! I was put in *el calaboza* by a Mexican jedge once so my gang busted me loose and I blew him in his hacienda."

"You," said Judge Tracy, and he said it firmly, "and your type of gang are going to be cleaned out of this Territory, which is one of the reasons why I am here."

"Jedge Tracy," said Marshal Pennypacker, "I reckon yuh and I are goin' to git along together right good. No charges against this crew; bein' disarmed and laughed at by the whole of Eureka will be enough." On all sides the spectators grinned and guffawed at the empty-handed outlaws whose faces contorted in rage. "Arkansaw Blount, yuh and yore gang can stay in Eureka only as long as yuh behave yoreselves. Now, git yoreselves off this street. I'll keep yore guns."

Hippolyte Petitpois stepped forward and faced Arkansaw. "Go, *sale cochon!*" he ordered. "Killair of leetle birds!"

Arkansaw Blount's filthy face became a mask of fury. He spat out a foul oath, pivoted on his feel and stalked for the Mesquite, leading his horse to its hitchrack. The other outlaws followed him. On the porch of the Mesquite Arkansaw Blount suddenly turned, snarling like a wild beast.

"You have won the fust deal!" he yelled hoarsely. "But I shall even up with you yit from that carrot-haired hunk of miner," he leveled a finger at Blaster, "all the way through that froggie jumpin' jack to the marshal and the jedge."

HE VANISHED through the swinging doors of the Mesquite and Judge Tracy shrugged.

"Threatened men live long. I have seen plenty of shooting in my time. And, speaking of shooting, Marshal Pennypacker, it happens to be my hobby. I have gone for big game in Africa, India and the Rockies and in my guncase on the back of the stage is one of the newest and finest high-power sporting express rifles ever made. Its flat trajectory is terrific. Could we go together after cougar here before court opens?"

"I can get yuh some shootin'," grinned Marshal Pinto. "But I do not know whether it will be cougar or what. I think, things bein' as they are, that I had better stow that United States $150,000 into my office safe-box pronto. Shall we go? Yore hotel is only down the street a piece."

"Very well," nodded Judge Tracy, and his keen gaze flickered over the crowd on the sidewalk. A smile curved his firm-set

mouth as he surveyed the lavender-clad, silk-hatted figure of Hippolyte Petitpois.

"Bon jour, monsieur," he said in perfect French. *"Vous êtes le proprieteur de la Maison Petitpois, sans doute?"*

"Mais oui, Monsieur le Juge!" exclaimed Hippolyte delightedly. "I follow ze great beard rush to ze American frontier. Today I make ze 'oliday but for *Monsieur le Juge —je suis a votre service!* Ze famous Judge Tracy 'as traveled long and far. May I 'ave ze honair of shaving ze famous United States Judge Tracy in 'is 'otel apartment and removing ze stains of travel? In my maison in Paree, I 'ave shave' ze dukes, ze generals, ze diplomats, ze judges, ze counts, ze—"

Judge Tracy rubbed his fingers over a dusty, darkish chin and his smile grew broader, turning the corners of his mouth upward.

"I should greatly appreciate the services of a true Parisian artist, Monsieur Petitpois." His glance swept to Blaster's orange-bearded, perspiring bulk.

"And you, my friend, a miner? With that build in the ring you would be a heavyweight champion."

"Well now, Jedge Tracy," admitted Blaster modestly, "I do pack a pretty good wallop when it is called for. As fer bein' a heavyweight champion—"

"That is Blaster Breen, and he is a heavyweight champeen, all right, Jedge," cut in Marshal Pinto Penny, drawling. "He is a heavyweight around his middle and a heavyweight around his shoulders, and above his shoulders he is heavier and more solid still. He is the champeen upsetter of Eureka and its most prominent red-anarchist and defier of the United States regulations. He actually thinks the government is goin' to tax his wages some day! Jedge Tracy, maybe we had better be rollin' along. One Gallus, sling those buckets of smokepoles on the stage roof. I shall keep them in the office."

Leatherface Hanks cracked his whip and the stage creaked off. Blaster glared after it, mopping his perspiring forehead.

"Calls me a red anarchist ter defame me ter the jedge, does he?" he snorted. "Well, I do feel all red an' overheated after that throwin' exercise an' excitement. I shall seek me a nice place I know of ter cool off in while I read my Paree paper safe from the snoopin' hands of that damn Marshal Pinto Penny."

III

THE lantern, set on top of an old packing case, illuminated the hunched figure of Blaster Breen, who sat on a second box with his eyes fascinatedly glued to the pages of "Les Folies Parisiennes."

"So this is Paree!" he chortled.

Around him hovered the dim shadows of Eureka's solid-walled icehouse out back of the Mesquite. Ice in great cakes was piled high about him, the coldness of the temperature was unbelievably pleasant in this oasis amid the sweltering, sun-baked desert.

The icehouse door swung open, admitting the small figure of One-Gallus Benny bearing a wooden bucket. He set it down in the narrow, sawdust-strewn passage between the walls of ice. "More champagne wine, which Hippo requested me to bring you, and the materials fer a champagne cocktail." He gave a hitch to his falling pants, producing a thick, small volume of smeary type. "I must peek in the Bartender's Guide, which is two hundred pages of fine print, fer how to mix a champagne cocktail. Enjoy yoreself, Blaster, before trouble descends. That lop-bearded Arkansaw Blount and his unjailed boys look like they are cookin' up some brew. They are now crouched at a rear table in the Mesquite, glowerin' and otherwise makin' strange faces, and two of 'em has left the crowd for some unknown place and purpose."

"Ter hell with Arkansaw Blount." Blaster sneezed as the bubbles and the bitters struck him full in the nose. "All his hardware is in yore pails. I shall resume my readin' with puffect peace an' Paree pop."

"Me next on that picter paper, Blaster," said One-Gallus. "The hull of Eureka would foller you down the street beggin' fer a look should you appear with it. Eventually, I shall return here and in the meantime, you keep the Bartender's Guide fer a side card when you come to mix yore own."

Blaster hardly glanced at the smudged volume but shoved it loftily into his left-hand shirt pocket.

"It is too much doofiddle trouble ter mix

me up them cocktails. I shall drink this weak but soothin' littul Paree pop as is."

In gulp after gulp he disposed of the champagne and set the empty bottle down. An odd expression began to dawn on his face and he put a hand behind his ear, listening.

"How did the bees git in here? They are a-buzzin' all around. What makes the icehouse waver? Great cryin' cougar, Blaster Breen, you are bein' overcome by nuthin' but a quart o' champagne wine drunk bottoms up in a frigid icehouse!"

He lurched to his feet and lifted the lantern and the magazine onto the shelf of ice directly above him. It was a square of empty space, running back into the main mass of cakes and floored with a movable lath platform on which the ice handlers stood as they wranged the big cubes.

"Up there I shall rest my frame while the American frontier returns ter normal,"

he gurgled and hoisted himself from the packing case onto the platform. A pile of dry burlap bags for the handlers' use rested on a lone cake of ice and he bundled them together. "I shall lay me out on the safe floor where I kin not fall."

Stretching himself on the platform, Blaster reached out and blew out the lantern. His whirling head was at rest on the burlap pillow and the bees ceased to buzz as Blaster, relaxed at full length in the shadowy icehouse, completely passed out.

THERE was no sound for a long time in the icehouse and then the door opened softly. The figures of men, shadowy and menacing, slipped quickly through it and it closed behind them. There were fourteen of them and they filled the narrow corridor beneath the platform on which Blaster lay. A hoarse voice spoke.

"You know any cosier little hideaway in which fer us to do our talkin' in private? Ha, ha. I picked me out this one from the Mesquite's back winder."

A babble of rough tones answered and Blaster's eyelids opened. His head had gone clear and cool in the atmosphere of the ice walls, his vast body pulsed with strength. He was coming awake, almost in an instant, with every sense functioning.

"Arkansaw, you are a bright individual," said one of the newcomers and Blaster stiffened. "We go fer that marshal's $150,000, hey? So yuh sent Mexican Phil up to scout the joint?"

"In a nice, bright serape and a Mexican grass sombrero he bought in the nearest store," grated Arkansaw Blount. "No one is goin' to remember all our faces and Mexican Phil looks enough like a greaser vaquero to pass. And here he comes. That you, Mexican Phil?"

The icehouse door swung open and a square of sunlight poured in. Blaster noiselessly wormed his big body across the platform and peered down. Feet from him only, Arkansaw Blount and his desperadoes stood in the shadows. Serape over his shoulders and grass steeple hat riding his head, a lean, swarthy man with slits of eyes stood in the doorway.

"It's Phil, Arkansaw," he said in a peculiarly snarling tone and closed the door. "The marshal's joint is a dead easy knockover. Nuthin' but an old dodderin' fool with waterfall side whiskers guardin' it. It has front and back doors. I walked in an' made me an inquiry as to possible ridin' jobs on the spreads around here, in a broken English lingo that took him in completely. The cash is in a tinpot of a safe against the wall and it is an old tinpot but it is heavy. Our six-guns are still in the pails. I could not try for them with no gun. So how do we

git us some arms, Arkansaw, and how do we git that money outer the safe with no dynamite?"

"The arms are comin', Mexican Phil," returned Blount. "I sent Curly ridin' back to our last night's camp in that canyon this side the Border where we left the spring wagon and our extra artillery. He will drive the spring wagon back up here to this icehouse with blankets throwed on top of those six-guns. In an hour or so we shall all have fireirons in our hands again, and then Gawd help that marshal's offis. We don't need no dynamite, we shall hoist the safe in the wagin and hell-hoot back inter Mexico."

A chorus of exultant oaths broke out.

"Front and back doors to the marshal's offis, you say, Mexican Phil?" asked Arkansaw Blount. "Does that arroyo we crossed run all the way up behind the offis?"

"It does. And fer a long ways further."

"Then the whole thing's a dead cinch. We ride outer town to the west in public shame and humiliation with all of Eureka jeerin' at us and our empty holsters. But we have got our smuggled six-guns inside our shirts. In the Mesquite to the west, we turn and ride hellbent back up the arroyo behind the marshal's joint. Five men and the wagin wait in its cover facin' the back door. Ten men and me—we break outer the arroyo at the end of town and come chargin' down the main street to take the offis by the front at the same time the wagin and the arroyo boys come from the rear. Mow down the guard, load the safe in the wagin outer the back door and off for Mexico. Got it, boys?"

"We got yuh, Arkansaw!" rose the clamor.

"I am sorry we shall not have time to look up and cut down that big hunk of miner and the half-pint froggie jumpin' jack, to say nuthin' of the marshal and the tough jedge, who'd like to throw the book at us— What's that?"

He raised his head. Every man's face stared at the door that was opening.

"One-Gallus Benny!" The thought raced through Blaster's mind. "Comin' back. They will kill him with their bare hands!"

"It's Curly, Arkansaw," said a voice. "Back with the spring wagin an' the hardware."

"Guns!" yawped an outlaw. "Six-guns agin! Leave us git at 'em!"

"You will have them in both hands pronto," said Arkansaw Blount. "We are on our way and there is nuthin' to stop us. Git ready to ride!"

SOFTLY Blaster wormed himself to the rear. The weight of his big body pressed backward as he half-raised on his hands, and suddenly they slipped and shot forward, thrusting against something that lay on the edge of the platform. He gasped in utter horror.

Fluttering, with pages widespread, the gaudy Paris picture paper that he had laid on the shelf was winging its way to the floor.

Arkansaw Blount's head came up, trained and wary. "Somebuddy up there!" His roar rang. "Guns! Lights!"

Matches flared and Blaster heard the scraping of the packing boxes. Desperately he looked around for a weapon and there was only one—the single cake of loose ice, perhaps forty or fifty pounds in weight, still wrapped in its burlap. He wrested it up.

Over the lip of the platform rose the steeple hat and the swarthy face of Mexican Phil and he had a six-gun leveled.

"Ah!" he shouted hoarsely and fired. "Man here!"

The bullet tore through Blaster's shirt-sleeve as he flung the cake of ice. Full on top of the steeple hat it crashed and Mexican Phil plunged backward off his improvised perch. But Arkansaw Blount's lop-bearded face was rising over the ice shelf and his six-gun too was out and aiming. A second outlaw sprang onto the box Mexican Phil had fallen from and his gun threw down.

"The big hunk of miner!" roared Arkansaw.

His six-gun crashed a spurt of flame and the other six-gun spoke in the same second. Along the side of Blaster Breen's head ran flaming pain and something struck him squarely in the chest with a blow of deadly force that knocked all breath, all life, all sense out of him. Limply he pitched forward on his face and lay still, the hole of a bullet driven straight through his shirt over the heart.

IV.

GASPING, and with the left side of his head throbbing fire, Blaster Breen fought his way back to consciousness. He lay with his face pressed into the open slats of the platform and the hard floor of ice under it for an indefinite time had been wafting its cold upward, closing the wound and bringing back his senses. His hand rose to the stiff blood along the side of his head.

"Grazed and knocked out," he panted, "but I am alive. How come? I was hit in the heart." Fumblingly his fingers went to his breast, where a vast ache pulsed. They emerged from his breast pocket holding the small, thick volume of smeary print from the rear of which protruded the ugly nose of a slug. "Saved by the Bartender's Guide! It hit the Bartender's Guide an' penetrated its two hunnerd pages from kiver ter kiver! Thank glory, they are so many drinks in the world!"

Blaster swung to the floor. In front of him lay the collapsed figure with the serape still draped about its shoulders, the grass sombrero hurled to the side. Mexican Phil's head was a shattered ruin from the impact of the big cake of ice that had hit it and crushed it with a single blow.

"No tellin' what time it is," gurgled Blaster. "No tellin' where Arkansaw Blount an' his slumgullions are by now. But if they have reached the main street and see me, they will shoot me down remorseless." Bending forward he ripped the serape from Mexican Phil's body and slung it around his shoulders. The grass steeple hat went onto his cranium. "I have got me a chancet, lookin' this way like any of a hunnerd Mexes paradin' Eureka. Marshal Pinto Penny and yore offis, here we come!"

He plunged for the door and flung it open, blinking. Only a few yards in front of him loomed a beefy, bearded miner just dismounting from a mule.

"Howdy, iceman!" he greeted Blaster. "I am callin' fer fifty pounds of your ice!"

Blaster surged forward, pushing the miner aside. His foot hit stirrup and he lifted into the seat.

"Me, I am callin' fer yore gallopin' mule!" he howled. His heels drove into the mule's flanks and the animal was off. Behind at the icehouse the miner raised his voice in a furious shout.

"Stop thief! Stop thief! There he goes! Shoot, shoot!"

Blaster went rocking past the rear of Eureka's buildings on a beeline for the marshal's office. He could see the rim of the arroyo running a hundred yards or so off in the desert and far up it, beyond the marshal's office, the betraying plume of alkali dust showed.

"I bin out a long time," he gasped. "They have already rid outa town an' cut back."

Blaster crouched low in the saddle, pulling the sombrero well down and hauling up the serape to hide his orange-red beard. A head showed in the shadow of a clump of mesquite on the arroyo's lip directly behind the marshal's office. That would be the watcher for the wagon ambuscaders. The next few seconds would tell whether Blaster was going to make his goal or go plunging out of the saddle with outlaw lead in him. Now he could see in the far distance the file of men that trotted up out of the arroyo for the end of Continental Street.

In a last driving spurt he pulled up the mule behind the marshal's unpainted frame office. He flung himself to the sand, tensed for the shock of the expected bullet from the arroyo, but it did not come.

IT WAS a barrenly furnished, plain room into which Blaster burst. In one corner bulked the black iron safe, and on the wall for decoration was a large golden-oak framed photograph of a group of gentlemen in frock coats and white lawn ties, among whom whiskers and stiff, statesman-like dignity abounded. At a wooden table in a swivel chair hunched the ancient Pop Dorgan, his flowing lambrequins practically brushing the pages of a tattered newspaper. His Winchester lay on the table. In a chair perched One-Gallus Benny.

"Pop Dorgan!" roared Blaster. "Quick! Quick!"

"Oh, so it is you, Blaster," remarked One-Gallus looking up. "Me, I have come up here ter recover my swamper's pails without which I am outer a job. What is all this 'quack, quack!' Have you become a duck?"

"Arkansaw Blount!" shouted Blaster.

"He and his men are hittin' this joint fer the safe. Six-guns, where are they?"

An empty packing case held the confiscated irons. Its bottom was strewn with cartridges, the cylinders of the pair of guns Blaster grabbed were bare.

"I unloaded them," cackled Pop Dorgan. "They should be rendered unlethal. Arkansaw Blount, Blaster? He kin not be attackin' us. Those air his guns."

"He has regunned. One-Gallus Benny, kin yuh run fer help? Git Marshal Pinto, warn the hull town!"

"Me, kin I run fer help?" inquired One-Gallus. "Listen, Blaster, I kin run like a jackrabbit if I got a mind to. But with my own eyes I seen Arkansaw Blount and his gang ride out of town with vacancies in their holsters."

"Come here!" Thrusting cartridges into his Colts, Blaster made for the porch and One-Gallus followed him. Far up the street, coming in from the east past the corral trotted the cavalcade of sinister figures and Arkansaw Blount and his lop-sided beard were plainly visible at their head. The trotting horses broke into an easy canter, Arkansaw Blount's hand rose with a gun in it and it spoke twice into the air. A shot in answer rang from the arroyo to the rear of the office.

"Signal, that was! One-Gallus Benny, run an' yell yore head off while you are runnin'!"

"Watch me jackrabbit!" gurgled One-Gallus. "But I kin not run faster than a turtle in these falldown pants." He snapped at his single suspender and the button blew off. In a second the shapeless pants had fallen to his ankles and he stepped out of them, a small, trim figure in old sweater and short underwear, moccasin-footed. "You watch my dust. Gaw, lookit them outlaws come!"

In a wild and furious crowd of storming men and horses Arkansaw Blount led the rush that galloped now. He sighted the half-clad figure that leaped onto Continental Street's sand, sensed its purpose and lifted his gun. It roared and a spurt of dust kicked up behind One-Gallus.

"Startin' gun!" howled One-Gallus Benny. "Benny, you are off!"

Already he was in a running start, going like mad down the center of the hard-packed street with three more bullets hitting the sand behind him. One-Gallus Benny, stripped to racing attire, could run; he not only could run but he could yell. His shout rang over street and roofs.

"Guns out, Eureka, guns out! Marshal's offis is raided!"

Blaster jumped back from the porch and slammed the rickety door, turning its key.

"Take the rear window, Pop," he blurted. "Five of them and a spring wagin will come chargin' outa the arroyo. Git those spring

wagin mules so's they kin not haul off the safe, if you don't git nuthin' else. Ten men are attackin' from the front which it is my job ter hold off."

"Git yore guns, Eureka!" drifted One-Gallus Benny's yell from far down Continental Street. "Marshal's offis!"

"So we air totally surrounded," quavered Pop Dorgan. He rolled the swivel chair up to the back window and sat down in it, rifle jutting on the sill. "Despite my advancin' years I kin still shoot good from a rest."

Blaster flung a last glance out the rear window. Over the arroyo's lip boiled the onset of the five mounted men with the two-mule spring wagon lurching behind them. Pop Dorgan's shot cracked and the nearest rider pitched from the saddle.

"Yes, sir," wheezed Pop. "I am absolutely trustworthy."

Blaster was furiously shoving cartridges into the cylinders of more six-guns. He laid the guns on the floor under the nearest window and pulled its roller shade down to wthin six inches of the sill. In a bound he crossed the room and drew the second win-

dow's shade all the way down. Then he crouched by the first window, waiting. Outside, to the rear of the office, shouts and obscene curses rang, Colts crashed and lead splintered through the back door and the walls.

"That is Pop Dorgan's worries," snorted Blaster. "Here come mine!"

THE flying cavalcade of outlaws reined to a halt in front of the office and men flung themselves from saddles and tore for the front door. Sitting his mount, Arkansaw Blount loomed, bellowing his orders with a gun in each hand.

"You are not attackin' no Mex bank this time, you buzzard!" howled Blaster. "You are attackin' yore feller citizens inside the United States, you dirty renegade!"

He fired over the window sill, loosing shot after shot at the men who rushed the porch. Smoke and flame jetted from under the lowered shade and Arkansaw Blount saw it.

"He is back o' that shade! Mow him, boys!"

The outlaws who still sat their saddles as reserves leveled their weapons and a sheet of flying metal poured into the window. But Blaster was no longer crouched under its sill, he was in the center of the room, upending the heavy pine table that crashed to the floor. He crouched behind it with two half-spent guns in his hand and two more on the floor.

He heard the thud of bootheels on the porch boards and began to trigger with both hands, straight for the center of the front door. Through its frail wood the bullets rocketed and he caught the sound of bodies being hit, of insane oaths. It was a blind, mad fight with both sides shooting at targets they could not see.

"But I know where they are," muttered Blaster. "An' they do not know where I am."

The door burst open, almost torn from its hinges by the weight of men thrown against it, and three men charged into the room, guns in hand. Flame jetted and lead slugged into Blaster's improvised fort as his own Colts crashed to the end of their cylinders. Riven, two of the men crashed forward onto the floor but the third plunged on, firing. A bullet whistled past Blaster's cheek, his own triggers clicked on empty chambers.

Raising his hands he flung the shot-out Colts squarely into the ugly, charging face and saw the man reel back blindly with blood cascading down his forehead.

"Charge him!" howled Arkansaw. "I'll hold him under while you take him from the side!"

More men in reserve swung from their saddles and raced for the building. While Arkansaw Blount's gunfire sleeted through the door and Blaster scrabbled for his extra guns, two men crashed through the shades of the windows and hit the floor of the office. They drove at Blaster from the flanks. In a last glimpse he saw Arkansaw breaking open his six-guns for a reload, his covering fire halted for an instant, and rose to his feet. Bracing one big, booted foot against the top of his breastwork he sent it driving for his attackers. Again the guns in Blaster's hand went mute.

"Last pair!" he gasped.

Toward him plunged a snarling outlaw, his own gun raised high, and Blaster hit him first. He dropped his own left gun and gripped the falling body around the waist, holding it as a shield just in time. He caught the howl of agony as the bullets hit his man, heard the thuds and felt the body in his arms go limp. Desperately he backed to the wall.

"Blaster Breen's last stand!" he panted.

"Shoot him through Blackie," rasped an outlaw callously not three yards away. "Blackie is cashed in. Never mind Blackie."

Blaster brought his empty gun up to hurl it. It struck an object on the wall and glass tinkled in a shower. He flung his weapon as flame leaped from the outlaw's gun and its slug tore past his head. The outlaw ducked and the Colt went harmlessly past him.

"Ha, ha, you big hunk!" gibed the outlaw. "You air a dead rabbit now."

Blaster dropped the lifeless form, turned and grabbed at the only weapon in sight—the big oak-framed picture of the frock-coated group that hung just over his head and whose glass he had splintered. Roaring, he stormed forward for his last stroke, the picture torn from its nail and held high above his head. Again gunfire flashed and missed and in a great, driving blow, Blaster

brought picture and frame down on top of the outlaw's head. In a welter of broken glass, the golden oak frame driven down clear onto his shoulders the man went floorward.

"Back, boys—back and git away!" thundered the shout from Arkansaw Blount. "We have stirred up a hornet's nest!"

Out of the smoke-fogged office raced the last of the men who had tried to take it by storm. Arkansaw Blount had been beaten back, and he knew it. Already the yells of Eureka's aroused citizenry were sounding and pistols were beginning to crack.

Arkansaw Blount looked to the west, in the direction from which he had led his charge, and cursed. He looked east and his cruel face hardened.

"We are blocked one way, we are open the other. Come along, boys!"

He spurred deep and started westward along Continental Street and his men prepared to follow him. Blaster lurched for the door, incredulous that he still lived. He, too, looked east and his eyes lit up jubilantly. Out of the Lincoln Corral and Livery Stable the mixed procession of rigs and vehicles was spreading. Mule teams with carts, a lumber wagon or so, everything that was hitched up and movable was jostling onto Continental Street and forming a barricade clear across it through which no horsemen could pass. There was only one way left out of town and Arkansaw Blount and his men in a tight-packed bunch, just starting to travel, were taking it.

"Eureka knows how ter fight," husked Blaster. "We got brains in this dump."

Screaming, a bullet howled the length of Continental Street and knocked an outlaw clean out of his leather. Five hundred yards away squarely in the center of the road, stood three figures. A jet of smoke eddied from the barrel that protruded from the shoulder of one figure, tall, clad in brown corduroy. Screaming even more shrilly than the first, a second bullet came and a sombrero whisked off a head. This was terrible, deadly shooting at a range of practically a third of a mile.

"Jedge Tracy!" gasped Blaster. "Federal Jedge Tracy and his flat trajectory big-game rifle, holdin' court in the street! Gaw, he is hittin' 'em at a powerful distance!"

"Git that jedge!" howled Arkansaw Blount and drove furiously forward, sand flying under the hoofs of his mount. "Git that jedge and git that marshal and git that froggie jumpin'-jack in the white coat!"

Beside the corduroy-clad figure of Judge Tracy stood Marshal Pinto Penny waiting with his six-gun out and Hippolyte Petitpois, in his white coat, was a couple of paces to the rear. Down onto them at racing speed rushed Arkansaw Blount and his riders.

"Spread out, boys!" roared Arkansaw and the men behind him moved into a line of galloping horses that stretched from sidewalk to sidewalk, yards apart, each man a separate, low-bent target hard to hit in the saddle.

Judge Tracy fired on steadily, with a cool-spaced punctuation of his shots. A horse, struck in the chest, plunged onto its knees and its outlaw rider flew over its head. Another saddle emptied to a screaming low trajectory bullet. Marshal Pinto had his gun up as the charge came inside a hundred yards and was beginning to let go.

Blaster stared at the battle, his jaw dropping. "Jedge Tracy, he is trimmin' the men behind Arkansaw," he muttered. "He is leavin' Arkansaw ter Marshal Pinto."

Out of the leather rocked an outlaw, his head almost torn off by the big-game rifle at eighty yards. Then suddenly the crash of gunfire ceased. Circuit Court Judge Tracy had his magazine levered open and was reaching up for the filled cartridge loops on his shooting coat. Marshal Pinto's six-gun spoke for the last time and got his man. Then he, too, broke open his gun and went for more bullets in his belt. Alone, with both his Colts reloaded, with twelve shots in his hands to none in the hands of the men who faced him Arkansaw Blount charged his targets.

"By God!" he roared. "I have got you, Jedge! I have got you, you damn marshal! I have got all three of you!"

A white-coated figure swung suddenly from the hitch-rack astride a roan mustang. It crouched in the saddle with the seat of a light cavalryman. It spurred the mustang and it leaped past Judge Tracy and Marshal Pinto Pennypacker in the center of the street.

"It is Hippo!" ejaculated Blaster. "It is Hippo aboard a hoss he grabbed! It is Hippo chargin' ter meet Arkansaw Blount single-

handed! Goin' in ter the fire o' two six-guns with what?"

Straight for Arkansaw Blount stormed the white-coated, diminutive rider on the roan. Something glittered in his right hand, held forward in the position of a thrust as though it were a saber. This was not Hippo Petitpois, artist tonsorial, in his linen barber's coat, as Eureka knew him; it was former Lieutenant Hippolyte Petitpois of the Eighth Imperial Hussars in a gleaming white tunic, charging his enemy, steel in hand.

"Goin' in with his littul toad-sticker! His dagger which he kin use like a small sword! Hippo, Hippo, watch out!"

Blaster's agonized yell echoed along a silent Continental Street, hushed by the sight of what was coming. A wild curse burst from Arkansaw Blount as the two racing horses closed in upon each other.

"Here is where I blow you to hell, froggie!"

The fully-loaded six-guns roared. Arkansaw Blount was firing with both hands And Hippolyte Petitpois was coming on, not swerving an inch. The lead screeched over his low-crouched form, he stormed into a cloud of flame and gunsmoke, he was up to Arkansaw Blount, then onto him and the tiny flashing steel went forward and in.

Arkansaw Blount stiffened with shock in his saddle and the six-guns fell from his lax grip as his mount galloped on, passing Judge Tracy and Marshal Pinto. For a full fifty yards he rode the leather, held upright by the instinctive grip of his thighs and the weight of his feet on the stirrups. Then he began to rock, as a dead man rocks, and went sidewise out of his seat, his big frame sprawled and spread-eagled. It hit the sand and lay still.

Blaster surveyed the battlefield that was Continental Street. The whole mad, gun-crashing business had not taken more than a single minute. Two outlaws, wounded beyond further resistance, groaned on the street, three more lay lifeless—spaced fifty yards apart and at the end of the farthest point the charge had reached the form of Arkansaw Blount splotched the sand.

"It's over!" Blaster drew his hand across his huge forehead that dripped with sweat. "Hello, Hippo, you done sooperb!"

Hippolyte Petitpois pulled his mustang to a halt in front of the porch. Federal Circuit Court Judge Tracy and Marshal Pinto were advancing up the street toward the office and Eureka's citizens, shouting, were following in a crowd. Hippolyte flicked out a handkerchief, wiped the blade in his hand and thrust it back into its sheath.

"My friendly leetle Clothilde, she can sing 'Appy now w'ere she 'as gone," he said. "I steeck ze peeg of an Arkansaw Blount as I steeck ze peeg of a Prussian Uhlan captain at Sedan. But, Blastair, Blastair, *mon ami!* You look like 'ell!"

V

"CARRY 'em out," ordered Marshal Pinto Pennypacker. He stood surveying the wreckage of his office and the casualties on the floor, two of whom snarled through mouths of pain. Eureka's citizens moved to the task and the office was clear of the remnants of Arkansaw Blount's gang. Blaster Breen still panted heavily, his shirt half-torn off his body, Circuit Court Judge Tracy stood in the center of the room, his big-game rifle cradled in his arm.

"No Eureka casualties, it appears," he said. "We are fortunate."

"I air a casualty," rose a plaintive voice. Pop Dorgan still crouched in the swivel chair in the window and beyond it on the sand lay two dead outlaws with the spring wagon standing on the arroyo's rim, a dead mule in its traces and the second mule mixed in with the harness. "My rheumatic back it has got me agin, from sittin' all bent for-

ward in that chair, which was not a cozy rockin' chair."

"Zere, *le bon* Pére Dorgan," caroled Hippolyte, "you are free! I leeft you up."

He helped the ancient guard to his feet.

"Mister Dorgan," said Judge Tracy, "you are a brave man."

"I had ter be," wheezed Pop Dorgan. "When you air my age, and have got my ailments, you kin not flee. Blaster Breen, now, he fit like a demon. Lookit what he done ter them outlaws he slung around the offis."

Marshal Pinto Penny coughed drily. "And lookit what he done to the offis!" He leaned down and picked up the shattered picture which, with its frame and glass, had been wrapped around the outlaw's neck. The group of whiskered, frock-coated statesmen had been torn apart and devastated beyond hope of repair. "Blaster, you have destroyed the President of the United States and his entire cabinet!"

"Those whiskered old doofunnies was the President o' the United States and his cabinet?" howled Blaster. "How in heck did I know or care who they was? I jest cracked the outlaw's skull with 'em because they was handy."

"Did I not tell yuh, Jedge Tracy," said Marshal Pinto, "that Blaster here is an anarchist?"

"I give my life's blood ter defend the Government's hundred and fifty thousand dollars which is in yore safe an' this is what I git fer it?" thundered Blaster.

Marshal Pinto shook his head sadly. "I hate to inform you, Blaster, but you did not give yore life's blood defendin' any Government hundred and fifty thousand dollars in that safe. Lookit!" He stepped over and twirled the ancient dial; it clicked and the door swung open, revealing an odd assortment on the almost bare shelves. "You were defendin' my extry toothbrush and my second-best shavin' tackle, to say nothin' of my long red winter underwear, stored in here where it is moth and cockroach-proof."

Balster's eyes goggled in a face gone an apopletic tinge. "I'll buh-be—a cryin' cougar!" He got out hoarsely. "I bin swindled!"

"I smuggled the package with the hundred and fifty thousand dollars off the stage at the hotel with the jedge's luggage and it went right under Jedge Tracy's bed in his care. Then I came back from the office and the pair of us sat in the room, discussin' affairs. One-Gallus Benny is recoverin' his breath from his romp up there right now, sittin' on the bed with a six-gun to his hand When Arkansaw Blount and his pleasant crew heard about that hundred and fifty thousand dollars consigned to my office, I put it elsewhere until they should leave town. Tomorrer, by the jedge's orders, it plunks into the bank. No, Blaster, I have never trusted that old government tinpot there with anythin' of value. Yuh are jest plain outa luck again. Yuh refused to be deputized so yuh are jest a pugnacious bystander which mixed in."

"I give my life's blood defendin' yore long red winter underwear! Warrgh, Gloof!"

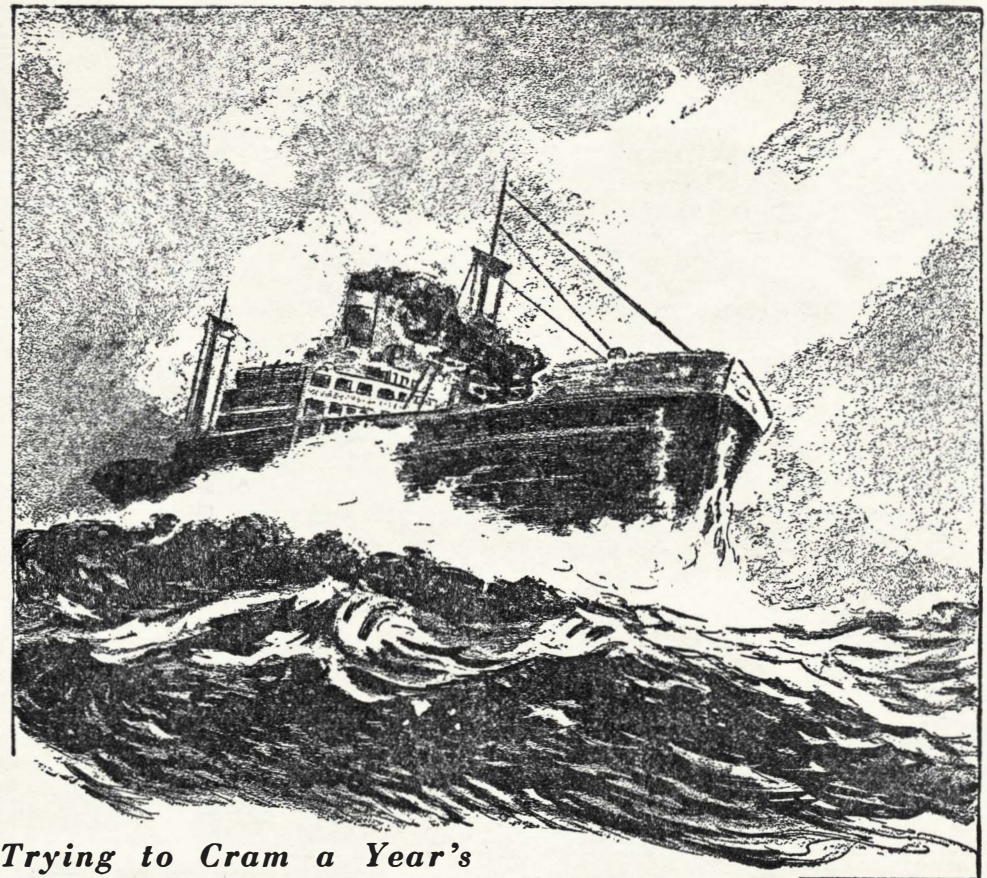
"For which I congratulate you, Blaster," said Judge Tracy, smiling. "I am prepared right now to offer you, in return for your part in this affair, the position of chief bailiff and sergeant-at-arms in my court. I need a man of ability and proved courage. Your duties will be to maintain order in the court, armed if necessary, as a Federal Judge makes many enemies; to carry out such orders as the Court may give you and to make arrests of Government regulation violators. Fifteen dollars a day, Blaster. Raise your right hand in the air and I shall swear you in this minute."

" 'Ip, 'ip, 'ooray for Bailiff Blastair Breen of the United States Government!" cried Hippolyte joyously.

"I will raise no right hand in the air! I will swear no allegiance to no ungrateful government, fer fifteen dollars a day, when I kin make ten dollars a day as an honest dynamiter an' be my own government! I will—I will——"

Blaster Breen's voice lifted in a gigantic bellow.

"Yes, I will raise my right hand in the air an' swear ter love, honor an' obey the United States Government, fer better or worse, till death do us part, bein' of sound mind an' body! I will take the job of United States bailiff! An' my fust official act will be ter arrest that damn renegade Pinto Penny fer usin' Government property fer privit storage purposes!"



Trying to Cram a Year's Experience into a Kid-Seaman in One Trip Is About Like Stowing Away a Month's Grub at One Eating

THE BRIEFING OF SAMMY PEEL

By FRANCIS GOTT

CAPTAIN HORNBY'S tired features showed the tranquility of deep thought. He was getting along, close to retirement, and the long war years had not been easy ones, nor the months of peace that followed. Even though Captain Peel was his lifelong friend the favor that he asked was indeed a weighty one; after all, the signing on of his best friend's youngest son would be a heavy responsibility to raise to his already overworked shoulders.

"It isn't that I don't want the boy, Cy," Captain Hornby mused, rubbing his ruff of white hair. "No, it's not that. We want to do what's best for him—and I'm not sure that I want to see him on the *Edgemont* during the coming trip. Confidentially, just between you and me, the finger of suspicion is on my ship. Some of the brass hats think that a percentage of the jewelry looted in Europe has been smuggled into the States by some member or members of my crew."

Captain Peel chuckled, "A little smuggling hadn't ought to bother an old hand like you, Tom. Personally, I think that the best thing for Sammy is to make his first trip with you."

Captain Hornby squirmed uncomfortably. It irked him that his good friend was making such an issue of the matter. It was his secret thought that Captain Peel was living in the pre-war years, with no conception of the greed that was whipping the world in these post-war months. Captain Hornby sighed. If Peel knew that he had taken to wearing an automatic lately, doubtless he would consider him an old fool.

"It would be the favor of my life, Tom," Captain Peel begged, long body bent forward anxiously.

Captain Hornby's frigid jowls softened. "Even for my wife I wouldn't do it, but for you, old shipmate—"

"Then you will, Tom?"

Captain Hornby nodded.

Captain Peel's pent-up emotions gave way with a long drawn-out sigh, "I'd got the horrors that I'd have to take the boy with me aboard the *Laily.*"

Captain Hornby stiffened. "Is the boy that bad?"

"Worse! He's such a trustin' young'un."

Captain Hornby moved his squat bulk of weathered gristle as the ship listed under the weight of loaded cargo booms. Perhaps, after all, he had acted too hastily, but he wouldn't back down now.

"Brief him, Tom," Captain Peel advised.

"Brief him?"

"Yes. Try to cram a year's experience into him in this one trip. Next trip I'd like to take him with me aboard the *Laily.* My crew would think kindlier of the old man's boy if he should, at least, know his way around."

"I see," Captain Hornby grunted, wide jaw set. "But ye know my mates and bos'n, all hand picked. Already I feel sorry for the boy."

Captain Peel smiled, "You needn't."

Tucking Captain Peel's cigar into a vest pocket, Captain Hornby ushered his friend ashore. He watched Captain Peel step from the gangway and stiff leg it across the pier, and mount to the master's bridge of his own great ship the *Laily.*

GREATLY troubled, Captain Hornby waddled into his warm quarters to escape the clutching December cold that was pouring down the Hudson River valley as if being drawn through a gigantic syphon. Captain Hornby reflected that it was easy to grant a favor yet not always so easy to carry it out. However, it might not be too bad; if the boy were strong and healthy and had his wits about him, he would make a sailor. Why, then, had Peel been so anxious to palm him off on someone else?

Captain Hornby's own boyhood was lost in the mists of time. At best, he only had a straw or two of memory to clutch at, and these made little sense. Although he had never had any children of his own, nor missed them, it had always been his vague contention that a son should be beside his father. Captain Hornby's own career in ships had started that way.

Any little thing that breaks up the monotony of life on shipboard is welcome. Even Chief Engineer McKenna's buying of a derby hat several trips previously, he, who, at sixty-five years of age, never before had worn a derby, was cause for ceaseless comment. Even Sammy Peel was welcome.

Nevertheless, Captain Hornby wondered at himself that he should feel a little touch of pride when Sammy stepped aboard. Where he had expected only interest he was touched by this little imp of pride. Why this should be so was one of those inexplicable mysteries of the sea; for they were in no respects alike.

Red headed Sammy Peel looked down upon his mentor, "Pa says we gotta start it right," he blurted, complete candor in the confiding depths of his blue eyes. "Pa says that if I can survive a trip with you, sir, you bein' the crustiest skipper afloat, that I'll never suffer none upon another ship.

He says you're a hell twister of a cap'n, sir, and that you'll learn me right."

The handshake that Captain Hornby had meant to be strong became a feeble thing. For the first time in his life Captain Hornby was facing a great soul; a great soul because Sammy Peel was so very simple, as crystal clear as the waters of a mountain spring. Captain Hornby was confused; here was something nice and he wondered where it lay and what it was, for he couldn't see it, yet. He felt a little hurt as if, somehow, he had fallen down.

While Boatswain Brennigan took Sammy aft, Captain Hornby entered his quarters to mull it over. So he was considered a hardcase skipper, eh! Well, this was news. Still and all it was not surprising that he had learned so late; there were some things in this world that officers and crew simply didn't tell the master.

Captain Hornby sighed. He led a lonely life, a truly lonely life. In his mind's eye he gravely inspected his license that lay framed against the bulkhead in the pilot house; there was the number 7 in a corner, the seventh issue. For thirty-five years he had had a master mariner's ticket; and for thirty-three years he had sailed under it as master. No wonder that he had had the sneaking wish that there would be a bit of friendship between him and Sammy Peel, just a touch of friendship to bridge the gap of those lonely years. Well, that friendship couldn't be; the odds were too great against him. Already officers and crew were briefing Sammy Peel.

So the *Edgemont* put out to sea; one gusty morning she slipped down Ambrose Channel and put out to sea. The *Laily* had gone the day before. Captain Hornby stood upon the *Edgemont's* bridge, wrapped to the ears in his ninety-dollar great coat as if he had been dumped there. His feelings were mixed this trip, all quite confused; and one of them was jealousy, a trait nearly foreign to his nature. He was jealous of his good friend Captain Peel, for Cyrus Peel had three tall sons to send to sea, and Captain Hornby couldn't even touch at a straw of friendship from one of these. The dumpy little skipper's eyes were bleak; that boy looked upon him as a hard case god.

Well, tobacco chewing Brennigan was briefing Sammy Peel; that boatswain and mates and crew. The word had got around, for Sammy Peel had told them so. Such a guileless boy there never was.

THEN the first unbelievable bombshell broke, three days out upon the sea. It was then that Captain Hornby's jealousy became mixed with sympathy, a heady brew. He came closer to understanding now the sweat that had beaded Cy Peel's thin lip and brittle brow; for some good angel, good if mayhap not so wise, had proffered to Sammy Peel at birth the brimming cup of truth to drink.

To Sammy Peel the world was one grand truth.

The ship was in an uproar before Captain Hornby heard the first tinkle of the clamor. He sent for Sammy Peel.

Sammy Peel came in, awed in the presence of the master. His sea-blue eyes were big with worship; his cap was fisted in his hand. Captain Hornby rubbed a burning ear, coughed and felt embarrassed. The word had got around that Sammy Peel had confided in the boatswain that Captain Hornby was the smartest master that ever sailed the seas. Yes, Sammy knew for sure. Sammy's own father had told him so.

Captain Hornby wished that Sammy would be the first to speak, the first to break the worshipful silence that lay like an impenetrable bulkhead between them. Captain Hornby wiped his forehead, trying desperately to think of the right word to say. Lord! This boy. So bright and fresh with the clean sea smell upon him. A lanky boy with rumpled hair and freckles that gleamed like sun dogs.

"Now tell me, Sammy," Captain Hornby wheezed. "What's this awful thing I hear ye did to Chief Engineer McKenna? Sit on the settee, Sammy boy, for ye make me quite dizzy swayin' there to the rollin' of the ship."

Which was not quite true; nothing ever made Captain Hornby dizzy. What he wanted was friendship, to bring himself a little closer to Sammy Peel, to find out, if possible, how it would seem to have a son. Captain Hornby felt the crying need; his days were running out. He breathed a bit freer when Sammy sprawled out upon the wine red leather of the settee.

"So ye didn't catch the moon birds,

Sammy," Captain Hornby mused, without as much as the batting of an eyelash.

Sammy hung his head. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't even see one, although I hid under the mast table to watch nigh half the night. But I didn't mind not seein' 'em so much, sir. What I minded was when I climbed to the crow's nest this mornin' and didn't find sign of nary egg."

"In the chief's new derby hat?"

"Yes, sir. I guess I didn't put enough lard and feathers in that hat, sir."

Captain Hornby winced. "What makes ye think there are really moon birds, Sammy boy?"

Sammy looked up, surprised. "Why, they is, sir, because the bos'n told me so."

"Hm'n! The bos'n." Captain Hornby made a mental note. "What else did the bos'n tell ye, Sammy?"

"He said for me to collect the moon bird eggs on the full of every moon, that it 'twas up to me, me bein' the cap'n's boy. I don't mind, only too glad to do it, sir. He warned me that some green cap'n's boys can't make the moon birds lay because they don't go about it right. Nowadays the birds'll on'y lay in a derby hat, padded with lard 'n feathers, the lard to make the feathers stick, it bein' pretty windy up aloft. In the old days 'twas whale fat and a beaver hat, not now, as you know yourself, sir."

NOW Captain Hornby, being a generous man, began to chuckle to himself. Chief Engineer McKenna was such a tight old wad. He'd moaned through every meal at mess that his derby had set him back twelve good dollars. He'd sell his soul for a two-bit piece, that man.

Sammy rumpled his hair, quite crestfallen. "I wanted you to have a big moon bird egg for breakfast, sir. So I took the chief's derby hat from his room. The Bos'n said the chief wouldn't mind, but I'd better wait until the chief was below decks as some times he got awful touchy. The cook was glad to let me have the lard, said he was glad we had an up and coming boy aboard as you liked moon bird eggs for breakfast. I got some feathers from my pillow. But I guess I didn't do it right, sir, and the chief he got so awful mad."

Sammy got up to leave. He stood there awkwardly beside the swaying curtain. Captain Hornby watched him go, not having the heart to tell him not to believe everything he heard. Instead, with wonder filling him that a boy could drink so deep of the words of men, he crammed his gold braid on his head and took the inside companionway to the bridge.

Shortly after, McKenna stormed up, and faced Captain Hornby in the starboard wing.

"See that," he burned, little eyes snapping with rage.

"Yes, I see it," Captain Hornby said mildly. "Looks like ye been drinkin' too much o' that black rum and was took sudden and couldn't find a pail handy. I got to admit, though, chief, I never suspected ye was lined with feathers."

Chief Engineer McKenna's voice strummed like a mainstay in a high wind, "Ye fathead! I see now ye're at the bottom of this filthy jokery. 'Tisn't sympathy I'm wantin', but twelve guid American dollars for this hat, or I'll take ut out of your hide —after we get ashore in Piraeus."

"Ye ought to be ashamed," Captain Hornby said, wiping the chief's hot spittle from his glasses. "A grandfather like yourself in a hundred ports from Kiel to Kobe tryin' to weep on my shoulder. Ye wore that hat aboard in broad daylight, and now ye ought to stand up like a man and take your medicine."

Chief McKenna knocked the gold braid from Captain Hornby's head. He pulled the well-greased and feathered derby down over Captain Hornby's ears. Captain Hornby was so taken by surprise at this profane act that he could only blink in mounting astonishment. Thus they faced each other, the two high potentates of that ship, taut little men, both knobbed out in queer places by a life of hard knocks at sea.

"Ye get off this bridge!" Captain Hornby choked.

"Sure I will," the chief agreed. "'Tis no place for an honest man."

"Honest? Ha!" Captain Hornby snorted. "If I had your conscience, I'd been dead o' insomnia forty year ago."

The chief left that bridge, threatening, "And don't think I'll be forgettin' that ye owe me twelve guid dollars."

Going into the pilot house, Captain Hornby ordered the astonished quarter-

master to pull the derby from his head.

During the days that followed, Captain Hornby watched Sammy closely. Sammy was too good a boy to be the butt of so many jokes; yet, in a way, the boy's innocence was his best armor. Captain Hornby screwed his face up in a forlorn pucker; if Sammy would only loosen up in his presence, stop treating him like a gosh awful god.

LIKE the loom of a light house's distant beam, seen miles to windward on a stormy night, Captain Hornby began to realize the suffering, consternation, and general feeling of futility that Captain Peel would have gone through had he taken Sammy with him on this, the boy's first trip at sea. The boy needed a wet nurse, but the only wet nurse a man got at sea was the sea herself. Would she accept Sammy as one of the shell-backed breed?

Captain Hornby chewed his cigar in misery, drinking an ever brimming cup of responsibility for Sammy Peel. Luckily, he had a good crew albeit a hard bitten one, but even the best of them delighted in taking a hand in Sammy's apprenticeship in hair raising ways. However, to offset the good qualities of the crew, there was the grudge that Chief Engineer McKenna took no pains in hiding. Chief and captain were no longer on speaking terms, except in the line of duty, and even then Captain Hornby had become distrustful.

"Soured he is, sir," the Boatswain spat, talking to captain and mate upon the boat deck one bright day. "I never heard a man rave so over a derby hat. Why, I'd 'ave hove the domn lid overboard after seein' what I'd bought in a drunken fit."

"Not 'im," the mate grunted, gazing in blocky fashion at an island of the Azores fast slipping into a blue haze astern. "Mac's retirin' this trip. He'll do his damnest to pull a fast one to chuckle over durin' his dyin' days ashore."

"Not if I can help it, he won't," Captain Hornby promised, keeping a watchful eye upon Sammy Peel slinging a soogee rag on the maintop. "How's Sammy doin' now, Bos'n?"

Brennigan shrugged beefy shoulders. "Not a lazy bone in that boy, sir, but I 'ave to watch 'im awful close. He's so trustin', sir, and ain't afraid o' nawthin'. What he needs is one domn good maulin' by the sea to teach him full respect. And I'm after hopin' to be there to catch 'im on the bounce so's he won't get hurt."

"Has he learned about the moon birds yet?"

The boatswain had the grace to blush. "I ain't had the heart to tell him, sir. Everything is so fresh and new to 'im that none of us wants to see 'im spoiled."

The captain looked at the hard-faced mate. "Were you and I ever so green as that Sammy lad, Mr. Vogt?"

The mate's face softened. "A man never forgets his first trip at sea, sir. If you were as green as I was, you were pretty green, but I doubt if we swallowed the sea whole anchor and all like Sammy has. Those moon birds, ha!"

"Thank ye, Mister," said Captain Hornby warmly. "The ship's a cleaner ship because of Sammy Peel."

However, as the *Edgemont* churned on toward Morocco and the swells that beset that African coast, Captain Hornby became more and more uneasy. Hunched up in a deck chair in lonely vigil upon the master's bridge, he spent hours on end watching the ever shifting pattern of the sea, of sunrise and sunset, and moonrise and moon set, too. There was so much beauty in the world; yet, for the first time in his life, he mourned because he had no son. If Sammy Peel would only talk to him without that embarrassing god shine in his eyes. It was nice, awful nice, to be so respected; yet to be worshipped made a man uncomfortable.

This was quite the most confusing trip that Captain Hornby had ever had. His mind became a balance scale with Chief McKenna on the one side and on the other, Sammy Peel. In his dreams the chief became a prickly burr with a derby hat on top ever trying to reach across to push Sammy off the scales. And Sammy, trusting Sammy, listened to the chief's dour blandishments to jump into the sea and tip the scales.

Then, one night, five hours from picking up the Casablanca pilot, the increasing depth of the swells forced Captain Hornby to leave his bed, climb the ladder and cling to a stanchion on the navigating bridge.

The big seas caught the freighter on her counter, lifted high her stern and drove her bow in deep in sickening surge on surge. At times, her stern flung high, the screw would race. Captain Hornby cut down the RPM.

SHORTLY after, he turned his head, surprised to see McKenna braced on his cork-like legs behind him. Beside him stood Sammy Peel, and, behind them both, the boatswain. Something plopped inside Captain Hornby; likely he had lost his liver. He braced his dumpy body as if for a cruel blow; for what he read in the faces of the three jarred him right down to his neat black shoes.

Against the star-swept luminosity of that African night the guile that Captain Hornby read upon McKenna's spidery features became an accepted thing. So, too, the puzzlement in Brennigan's hard eyes and the wondering air that rode Sammy's shoulders.

The boatswain's voice was brittle, " 'Tis an evil auld man he is, sir."

The captain coughed, "Ye mean the chief?"

"Aye! When Sammy, all of a sudden, acted so sleepy on his day work, I figured I was drivin' the lad too hard. So I eased up on 'im a bit, but it made no difference. Then 'twas I got a wee mite suspicious; usually I hits me bunk 'bout eight bells as the four to eight watch is changin', sir, but this night I woke up 'bout midnight and decided to take a prowl about the ship. I had a feelin' in me bones that all was not quite right. Nor was ut."

McKenna raised a scoffing voice, " 'Tis a pipe dream the bos'n's been soppin' up. The lad's got a right to pick his friends."

"Friend, me eye!" the boatswain snarled. "Let ye talk! Ye're keepin' the lad up more'n half the night, fillin' him full o' wild sea tales so's he'll lose his sleep."

"I enjoy talkin' to the b'y," the chief made haste to say.

The boatswain spread his hands. "Cap'n, I dunno, but ye're after knowin' as well as me that the old coot ain't never been friendly in the past."

"That's so," Captain Hornby agreed, suspicion knifing at him. "So Mr. McKenna tells ye tales, eh, Sammy lad?"

The boy nodded in confusion. "Mr. McKenna treats me fine, sir, telling me stories of the windship days at sea. Every night, all nice and cozy, we sit in the mess room over a mug o' coffee and some cold meat sandwiches. He says he's sorry he got cranky about the derby hat, that every boy makin' his first trip at sea ought to catch a moon bird."

"Windship days, arragh'h!" Brennigan snorted. "Domned liar! I'll 'ave ye layin' off me men, Mr. McKenna. Ye stick to your own black gang and the ship'll be the better for ut."

Captain Hornby's voice carried softly upon the windless night, "How late does the chief keep ye listenin' to his tales, Sammy lad?"

The boy's eyes brightened. "Oh, till 'bout four bells, sir, o' the twelve to four."

"That only leaves ye four or five hours for sleeping, lad. A growing boy needs more'n that; in fact, most sailors get all the sleep they can while at sea. Ye need stored up sleep, Sammy, to carry ye through the awful storms that always come."

"Aye!" the boatswain cut in. "The old coot pounds his ear all day while Sammy boy be workin' his guts out. Mr. McKenna, due respect to his four stripes, sir, has something up his sleeve, I'm thinkin'."

THE *Edgemont,* stern bounced high by a monstrous swell, drove her bow in deep. Captain Hornby clung to the stanchion while the ship's buoyancy brought her bow staggering up again. He watched, bleak faced, as hogsheads of brine spilled down upon the well deck and swirled in racing eddies against the bulwarks. Like the boatswain he was possessed of the firm conviction that McKenna's sudden friendliness toward Sammy Peel was no good thing. It was hard for any man to guess at the secret machinations of McKenna's canny mind; still and all, it was a safe bet that his motive was nothing altruistic. The fact didn't quite make sense that McKenna should overcome not only his own unbending dignity but also the most ancient rivalry that existed between the engine room and the navigating bridge in order to become on friendly terms with an ordinary seaman.

Captain Hornby turned upon them wearily. "If Sammy wants to listen to the chief and if the chief wants to talk to Sammy

of an evening, I can't see what harm'll ever come of it. I do say, though, bein' responsible to his father for the boy's health and safety, that he's got to get to bed by eight bells, midnight, as long as he continues on day work."

Captain Hornby turned his back. He heard them shuffle from the bridge, heard the chief's dry cackle and Sammy's answering laugh and the boatswain's muttered swearing by the saints. It was Sammy's laughter that cut Captain Hornby to the quick. Somehow, that boyish laughter turned a key, made Captain Hornby conscious of his own swift jealousy; in resentment he had to acknowledge that McKenna had accomplished what he had been unable to do himself, secure the boyish confidences of Sammy Peel.

Captain Hornby nodded gloomily at the distant sheen of the horizon where the inky swells lumped up to hiss at the rustling velvet of the night. Perhaps therein lay McKenna's purpose—to hit at Captain Hornby through Captain Hornby's open and professed liking for the boy. And Sammy, being Sammy, would swallow any tom fooleries that the old chief should shove down his throat. Well, time would tell.

And so it did. The old sea shook her hoary back. Wild winds shrieked from pole to pole. Weak ships sank and stronger ships were pawed and mangled. The *Edgemont,* shaking down on the homebound crossing, was caught between Cape Saint Vincent and the Azores. For three full days the sea hags spat their fury, and for weeks thereafter bits of wreckage were tossed about.

Captain Hornby spent watch on watch upon the bridge, catching cat naps by wedging his tired body upon the settee in the chartroom. Seemed so there was so much to worry him this trip. At best, they'd be two days late this trip. Two more days in which McKenna would have further opportunity to lie to Sammy Peel.

Captain Hornby watched the *Edgemont* limp on under a wind-shredded blanket of brine. Day followed day, the gray pall never ending. Reduced to slow speed, the ship barely kept steerage way. At times mountainous seas would list her far over. Captain and mate and quarter-master would stare in fascination at the plumb disc upon the bulkhead. The metal disc would start arcing, thirty-five, forty, forty-five degrees. It would hover there, in appalling indecision; then, at last, it would start back to zero, slowly, ever so slowly, as the laboring ship righted herself like a stricken whale in calf.

Captain Hornby would wipe the clammy sweat from his eyes. With steady hands yet quivering liver he would take cups of coffee from the pallid cheeked mess boy. These cups of scalding coffee were beads of hope upon this dreary waste of waters.

Captain Hornby's nerves were as taut as the standing rigging. If it wasn't one thing to pester a man, it was another. The trouble and suspicion he had met in half the southern European ports up and down the Mediterranean still rankled. The United States army had stamped aboard, searching and grilling, after the royal jewels of looted castles. Ha! As if such stuff could be on his ship. Still, a man had to watch every angle.

The mess boy would pause at the break of the inside ladder, big ears sticking out. "Are we gonna sink, Cap'n?"

"Praise God, no," Captain Hornby would mumble, thinking of the Greek freighter that only he and Sparks knew had gone down the day before.

THEN, one awful afternoon when man's poor senses could hardly tell where sea left off and wind began, Captain Hornby's anxious glance swept the boat-deck from the chartroom ports. What a mess! Three boats washed away and the fourth a splintered wreck. Several seamen were working there, bent double against the gale, clothes strapped tight to straining bodies with rope yarns.

As Captain Hornby watched he saw Sammy Peel claw up the steep ladder from the well deck aft. The boy stood there a moment in the partial lee of the wireless shack. He shook spray from head and shoulders and started pulling himself against the wind along the heavy weather rails of the fiddeley. Abreast a port, he stopped, a grin breaking over his freckled face.

Captain Hornby, twisting closer above the hot pipes of the radiator, a jet of escap-

ing steam biting into his nostrils like ammonia, craned his short neck to see the better. Aye! 'Twas that old fool, the chief. Whatever did Sammy see in the man? There he was, head sticking out of the port, nodding at Sammy, a smirk riding the lips that never smiled, pinched face a map of guile.

The chief's face disappeared. Sammy pulled himself along to a steel door where a white painted dog began to turn. The door swung open. Just as Sammy entered that yawning honeycomb of pipes and ladders and catwalks, the boatswain swung around from the weather side. His leathery lips bubbled in a malediction. He chased in after Sammy.

A few minutes later, as the freighter labored to an even keel once more, Sammy came out, wearing a crestfallen air. The boatswain followed, dogging down the door with a brawny hand. He flung an arm across Sammy's shoulders and pointed forward.

Sammy unknotted a handy billy from a ring bolt in the deck and struggled forward, passing under the bridge and on down to the lower decks. The boatswain followed as far as the port bridge ladder, up which he swung. A few seconds later, wet and wind blown, he stepped into the chartroom.

"Excuse me, sir," he rumbled. " 'Tis wantin' to see the chief's derby hat, I am, sir."

Captain Hornby blinked. Did he hear aright? Poor Brennigan must have gone daft from the tearing strain.

"The chief's new derby?"

"Sure, sir. Ye 'ave it, eh?"

Captain Hornby was baffled. "Yes, it's in my room. It's a good hat. I had the steward clean it with the intention of giving it back to the chief when we get home."

The boatswain's face was grim. "I'd like to see if ye really have it, sir."

Captain Hornby became a trifle nettled. "Ye may go below and take a squint at it, bos'n, if ye wish. It's in my clothes locker. Don't be long. The men need ye out on deck."

A minute later the boatswain returned, lips pinched tight. "As I feared, sir, 'tis gone."

Captain Hornby became uneasy despite himself. Followed by the boatswain, he went below. Sure enough, the derby hat was gone.

Captain Hornby's pudgy face became flushed with red. "Bos'n, did ye ever see such a screwy trip?"

The boatswain rubbed a bewhiskered cheek. "Maybe a moon bird stole ut for a nest."

" 'Tis no great loss."

The boatswain's eyes narrowed. "That chief be hatchin' somethin' more'n moon birds, sir."

"What, for instance?"

"I dunno, sir—but I got a feelin' ag'in that man. The chief was whisperin' to Sammy about that derby, sir, as I come into the fiddeley and caught 'em."

Captain Hornby snorted, "Don't let your Irish ride ye, bos'n. Ye're all worn out, strong as ye be, from lack o' sleep and worry. We mustn't let our imaginations get the best of us."

The boatswain's jaw set stubbornly. "Just the same, sir—"

"If McKenna has got some notion rattlin' around in that egg-shaped skull of his, 'tain't no more'n an old man's rancor at bein' laughed at."

"I don't believe ut," the boatswain muttered.

The *Edgemont* took a sickening list to port. Seas rattled up over her exposed starboard side like a carload of ten ton boulders. She hung there, water rolling over her, as if she never would come back to an even keel. Piercing the maddening drone of wind strumming past the superstructure and all taut rigging, Captain Hornby heard the brittle sound of breaking glass. A hogshead of brine came roaring down the companionway from the pilot house above. He met the boatswain's eye. Full sixty feet above the waterline that great sea had struck.

Hunching his bull neck, Brennigan dove out into the storm. Captain Hornby clawed up the ladder to the deck above. Three thoughts tore at him—his ship, his crew, and Sammy Peel. That sea would have completely buried both well decks.

IN THE pilot house he found a mess. Two ports had been shattered and the weather door stove in, through which the gale drove shafts of brine like silver lances.

The magnetic compass was whirling madly in close affinity to the struggling ship; its mate, the gyro repeater compass, was dead and wall eyed.

Stover, the second mate, lanky body wedged in against the useless mike, turned a cheek that had been gashed by flying glass. He said, blankly, "Biggest sea I ever saw."

The ship was in hand steering. At the wheel Brock, the quartermaster on the twelve to four, a half snarl on his pallid face, was fighting to bring the *Edgemont* back on course.

"That boy?" gasped Captain Hornby, wading through swirling brine toward the ports.

The second mate's cheeks became puffed in consternation. "That ordinary seaman, sir? He and an A. B. were using a luft on that tank to gripe down the for'ard end that had shifted."

Captain Hornby looked down upon the well deck. The war tank, a thirty ton mass of metal, was safe enough, gripped down with wire straps drawn taut by turnbuckles. At its forward end two sets of falls had been used between eyepads and the tank to keep it from slipping aft.

Then Captain Hornby's anxious eyes caught sight of Sammy and an A. B. stepping out of the forward storeroom and dogging tight the door behind them. Captain Hornby groaned in both relief and wonder. What was that fool boy up to now? There he was standing still, water sucking about his rubber boots, not following the A. B. aft like he should. Quite oblivious to wind and wave, he was trying to knock dents out of McKenna's derby hat.

Suddenly Sammy plucked something from the hat, a bed bug or cockroach maybe, and held it up against the greenish light. After that, he started aft, just scrambling up the port ladder to the amidship's superstructure to escape a wild sea that tore across the deck. A minute later, to Captain Hornby's surprise, Sammy entered the pilot house. His attitude was strange for Sammy Peel; for Sammy's eyes, somehow, had become man hard. His chin was set. No longer was there any boyish tremble to the lips.

Praise be—Captain Hornby's thought was like a ray of sunshine stabbing down upon that molten sea—'tis a real sailor I'll be handing over to his father. Captain Hornby choked down the lump in his throat. He couldn't help feeling envious of Captain Peel; two fine sons at sea as mates and now another one to bless him.

"I'd like to see you a minute, sir," said Sammy. "Alone."

He preceded Sammy to his cabin and smiled, "Ye've stoutened considerable, son, since last ye were in this room, stoutened in both body and spirit. Your dad'll be quite proud of ye. Ye've become an asset to the ship, my boy."

Sammy's wide shoulders straightened. "Ain't nobody like Dad, sir. I'm glad for his sake, but I guess I been awful green, eh! Still am. Those moon birds, tush! They ain't really any moon birds, be they, sir?"

CAPTAIN HORNBY'S hard face had long since softened. "Moon birds, Sammy boy? The bos'n swears he's seen 'em. So maybe someday you'n me'll see 'em, too; and maybe we've had a glimpse of 'em already. Maybe they're the hope and faith and charity that we have to cling to out here when things go wrong. The sea suffers man, Sammy, and that is all. In nigh a half century at sea I've seen some mighty strange things, past all meaning."

Sammy nodded his tousled head. "I think I see now what the bos'n means. He's treated me awful good, despite his jokin' ways. Anyway, the same as Dad, he told me to be sure, and never forget, if anything that bothered me awful much came up, to come straight to you, sir. He says you're the whitest skipper that ever spat to wind'ard."

Captain Hornby nearly bit his cigar in two. "That bos'n! I cal'ate I been too easy on him."

A frown webbed Sammy's forehead. "This storm has sort of taught me things. I see now that we all gotta put our trust in each other at sea, sir. If there should be a man who wasn't trustworthy, well—"

"What's botherin' ye, my boy?"

"Just this." Sammy's sea-roughened left hand came out of his dungarees. His right hand came from behind his back, holding McKenna's derby hat. He opened the fin-

gers of the left hand to show, nestled in his palm, a dozen glistening gems. "What are these, sir? Diamonds?"

Captain Hornby's lips tightened. He winked at petty smuggling, a silk handkerchief, a bottle of wine, or a piece of lace perhaps, but these—

He nodded. "Diamonds, Sammy. Diamonds pried from platinum settings. Diamonds hot as the hinges of hell. Where'd ye get 'em, boy?"

"You know, sir, the chief got me to feelin' that I was quite a man—until the old sea cut up and slapped me down a couple of times. Mr. McKenna said he wanted me to have a bang up dinner with him ashore in a cabaret the night we dock in Jersey. He wanted me to wear his derby hat ashore that night along with my new suit and top coat so's I wouldn't be out of place."

"Did ye take that derby out of my room, Sammy?"

Sammy looked blank. "No, sir. I didn't know you had it. Mr. McKenna let me have it several days ago, advising me to keep it hid so that the crew wouldn't crack wise. I kept it in a barrel of sand in the storeroom, but this awful spell of bad weather set me to thinkin'. I come to the conclusion that I wasn't worth a damn as a sailor, and that the chief wasn't interested in talking to me so much just for my own sake. So when I was in the storeroom waitin' for them big seas to pass, I fished out the derby, but I couldn't see anything wrong with it until that big wave struck us and sent me on my beam ends. I squashed the derby flatter'n a pancake, and when I got outside I seen that it had a trick top."

Captain Hornby set his lips against one of the brass speaking tubes beside his bunk. He blew.

"Hallo?" came Stover's voice.

"Have the bos'n report to me in my cabin, Mister."

"Aye, sir."

Captain Hornby nodded at Sammy. "Now we'll get the chief. I never did like the man, but it's pretty hard for me to believe he'd do a job like this."

Again Captain Hornby blew, this time through a different tube. "Chief?"

"Yeah," came a sleepy voice.

"Come to my cabin right away, Chief."

"Now, listen, Cap'n, I ain't slept for two days—"

"I ain't either. I won't keep ye long. It's important."

The other end of the tube clicked shut on a grunt. However, shortly after, McKenna appeared, clinging to the door frame as the ship took a steep plunge. He was bleary eyed, unshaven, and carried the smell of rum on his breath. Captain Hornby watched him narrowly, saw him stiffen, saw him veil his eyes when he caught sight of Sammy and the derby hat.

"There's a little story here, eh, Chief," Captain Hornby stated.

Sammy held out his hand, opened his fingers. Captain Hornby moved his glance away from the crystal fire that blazed in his eyes. He saw a gray pallor spread over McKenna's face, reached for the automatic in his pocket as McKenna jumped. McKenna caught at Sammy's wrist and tried to rake away the diamonds.

"Stand back, Chief!" Captain Hornby barked, fumbling for the automatic that had stuck somehow.

McKenna had shown him all he wanted to know. Fuddled by lack of sleep and too much rum, McKenna had shown his hand. However, McKenna stiffened as his canny brain whipped his body back in line. His own gun came out fast, covering both Captain Hornby and Sammy Peel.

"Those stones!" McKenna rasped, eyes gone beady. "And don't shoot through your pocket or I'll plug the boy."

Fearful of Sammy's safety, Captain Hornby took his hand from his pocket. "Give him the diamonds, Sammy."

Diamonds in hand, McKenna backed toward the door. "These stones are takin' the deep six. Then, my fancy skipper, you'n this fool of a boy can talk yourselves blue in the face. Nobody'll ever believe ye."

Captain Hornby hoped that he didn't show his suspense as he watched a pair of brawny arms encircle the curtain and reach for the chief engineer. Ah! Brennigan had him. A startled look spread over McKenna's face when he felt those powerful arms. His gun was tipped toward the deckhead.

THEN the *Edgemont* shook her back under a sudden assault of wind and wave. The boatswain swayed, received an

elbow punch from McKenna, and went tumbling in a heap, tangled up in the very curtain that had momentarily concealed him.

McKenna gave Captain Hornby no chance to reach for his own gun. He dumped the diamonds in his pocket and reached for the door, ready to step outside, shut it and snap the lock. Just then the door to the captain's toilet, ajar six inches on its weather hook, was opened. Captain Hornby stared in surprise. His chief mate, Mr. Vogt, stepped out. The mate took the chief from the side, tapping him smartly with a blackjack. The chief slumped. The mate eased him down on the settee.

Vogt grinned ruefully, "I'm navy, Captain Hornby. Over a year ago, after the ending of the war, a fortune in jewels were being kept in custody, temporarily, aboard one of our cruisers. Somehow or other the jewels disappeared, absolutely, while the vessel was in Naples. McKenna was serving aboard that cruiser in a reserve capacity at that time. I was one of the men called in to help crack the case. Evidently McKenna's been smuggling 'em into the States from Naples a few at a time. I was giving your washroom the once over for the twentieth time when Sammy boy here came in and laid the case in my lap."

"Well, I'll be a white feathered moon bird!" Captain Hornby muttered. "Good or bad, ye navy birds sure do get around."

"I'll take care of Mr. McKenna," Vogt promised. "Whether it's his real name or not, I don't know. He's traveled under several alias."

"Arragh'h!" came a smothered exclamation as the boatswain staggered to his feet trying to peel the curtain from his face. "The old ship sure wrapped me up that time, but 'tis worth ut, gettin' Sammy boy out of that old devil's clutches."

Ten minutes later, McKenna, manacled and in his room under the supervision of the ship's doctor and the chief mate, began his confession. Captain Hornby didn't remain to hear the shaken man's testimony. The whole thing made him a little sick. Instead he sought out Sammy Peel, helping the boatswain baten the broken ports on the bridge with canvas and boards.

"Well, Sammy," Captain Hornby said glumly. "I cal'ate we've give ye what your dad wanted, a year's experience in three months. He'll be glad to have ye on the *Laily,* boy."

Sammy scratched his head. "I been thinkin', sir, I'd like to stay aboard the *Edgemont* with you, sir, and work up sort of, you helpin' me."

Captain Hornby smiled. Life seemed bright and worthwhile once more, even despite the storm. Yes, even his bothersome liver seemed to be in place. Having Sammy with him would almost be like having a son of his own. It was a pretty good old ocean, after all.

The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Concluded from page* 5)

any difference if I had—until one night in Kingston, Jamaica, when he got half-tight and put on a show for us. We were in a public house—a saloon. He sat down out in the middle of the floor and went to disjointing and twisting himself out of shape—even his face muscles and eyes, and pretty soon he was the most pathetic-looking creature you ever saw. He held out his hat and I'll swear my hand was in my pocket before I knew it. He had made lots of money that way. Sometimes he'd get bored with the inactivity of begging, so he'd untangle himself and go to picking pockets. That night in the public house he gave an exhibition that made you want to sew your money in the lining of your coat, if you had any money, like my mother did with my three dollars the first time I went away from home on the train.

"So Dippy was a crook. He had gotten too hot, even for New York, and had to ship out for a spell. But he was the most loyal and appreciative man I ever knew. When convinced that you were really his friend, he'd give you anything he had, he'd do anything for you. I'll always claim that Dippy had his good points and not to recognize them is intolerance, pure and simple. And that's the lesson for today."

Caddo Cameron

How Was a Small Boy to Know That Canada Geese Mate for Life?

TIME OF TRIAL

By JIM CHAPMAN

GABBLER, the big gray gander, watched dawn creep slowly over the valley of the Saskatchewan River. He stood on the point of an island sandbar, motionless as a driftwood root, his long black neck stretched up and eyes alert for danger. A few yards down the bar his mate and six goslings preened their feathers, confident and secure under his protection.

He spoke to the goose, and his voice was like the croak of a giant bullfrog, but softer and with a bugle's tone. She answered and came to his side. He caressed her neck with his bill and uttered soft gaggling whispers of affection.

Like all Canada geese they had mated for life in their third year. Nine seasons had passed since the first family hatched; seasons filled with ceaseless peril. Many young had died before their eyes, but the old gander and goose had been fortunate.

Gabbler waited until the sun cast golden fingers of light across the gliding water before he led his family into the air. In another week the goslings would be strong enough to fly out to the fields for grain. Now he took them to their usual feeding

place. It was a patch of green alkali grass which fringed the mouth of a tiny streamlet. On this salty diet the young had grown large—until they could scarcely be distinguished from their mother.

Gabbler brought them down onto the water. His head went up. Warily he gazed at the little meadow beside the river, swimming meanwhile so that he would not be carried downstream by the current. Willows and thorn bushes hedged their feeding place, shadowing it in the morning light. Satisfied that all was well he led the way ashore and the young began to feed greedily.

Fifty yards away, hidden deep in the willows, a twelve-year-old boy was watching. His hands fidgeted with a braided snare and by his side lay a .22 rifle.

THE gander's head rose continually as he fed, watching the fringes of the willows and the sky above. He found some choice tufts of grass and called his mate. She ate and afterward came to him and touched his cheek with her own.

With the edge off their appetites, the young played. They bowed low, their long necks stretched out and bills open in mock ferocity. They hissed and snapped at one another, then mutually forgot their quarrel.

An hour later Gabbler led his flock into the water. They swam downstream, and half a mile below reached the sandbar which was their resting place.

The boy came out of hiding and skillfully set the snare in the grass where the geese had fed. He concealed the cord where it led up into the undergrowth.

Gabbler and his family spent the morning sunning themselves on the sand. At noon they swam along the shore to where reed-like willows grew on the bar. Here the side of the bar was being washed away by the water, leaving a precipitous bank. There was shade below it and a plentiful supply of bugs among the willow roots. The big goslings made a game of catching the insects. Together, Gabbler and his mate watched them. The sun was nearing the horizon before the gander led the flock back to the streamlet.

They had been feeding for half an hour when Gabbler heard the startled honk of his mate and turned in alarm. She was struggling frantically, her black webbed feet trapped in a noose which was pinned to the ground. Gabbler rushed to her side. He honked loudly and beat at the cord with his wings.

The old gander didn't see the boy until he was out of the willows which bordered the streamlet. He'd seen this young man-thing before. It was less than a month since he'd tried to capture one of the goslings. That time Gabbler had beaten him off, using his powerful wings. But now the boy carried a rifle!

Gabbler ran toward the river, flapping his wings, then rose into the air. Already the six young were swimming away, their long necks stretched up as they looked back at the creature who was approaching their mother.

In answer to his mate's frightened cries, Gabbler circled back, then careless of his own life, attacked.

The boy threw up his gun. A bullet hissed past the gander's neck. He flinched and veered. Driven by his mate's frenzied cries he attacked again. This time the boy used the rifle for a club and almost knocked him out of the air.

Gabbler knew when he was beaten. He circled above the streamlet at willow-top height, craning his neck and uttering deep agitated honks.

The boy seized the goose, tied her wings and placed her in a sack which he threw over his back.

AS THE boy entered the willows, Gabbler heard the captive cry out. He dropped low and swung back and forth, beating the willow-tops with his wings. But the boy had disappeared. Already he was far away, carrying what he believed to be one of the goslings and intending to tame it for a pet.

The gander circled the spot where his mate had disappeared and honked emptily. Had one of the young been taken he would have been grieved, but they could have carried on as before. The loss of his mate meant that his very life was gone.

He spent his days flying up and down the broad Saskatchewan, searching always. His voice took on a mournful note, like a bereaved mother. The young came to look after themselves more and more, although Gabbler was with them part of the time.

His brain became obsessed with one

thought—the place where he had last seen his mate. He haunted the streamlet, calling, then listening for her reply. He even walked deep into the willows in his search, risking death at the teeth of skulking wildcats and coyotes.

Torn by grief he neglected to eat and grew thin.

One silent night he thought that he heard her cry. He leapt into the air and flew to the streamlet, honking with new hope. But the shadows and the rippling waters were silent. An hour later, sadder because his memory had been stirred, he returned to where the young were waiting. He'd scarcely arrived when he heard the cry again and rushed off on another fruitless quest. Four times it happened that night, and repeatedly on the nights which followed.

One afternoon a poacher placed decoys on one of the river bars and hid in the willows. Normally Gabbler would have been cautious, but now he led his family of six low over the bar, hoping that one of the motionless decoys might ptove to be his lost one. A gun thundered, Gabbler felt terrible pains, but he flew on. Behind him two of the young faltered and fell. He saw them thud onto the sand and lie still.

A mile away he coasted down onto the bar where they had so often rested. For many days he was too weak to fly, but at last his remarkable strength prevailed and he recovered.

Geese from the north began to arrive, moving southward in their gradual migration. Even in his weakness the gander forced himself to meet each flock and search its ranks.

Indian summer came to the valley. Except for the stirring of the wild things and the thunder of hunter's guns, it lay mute and still. Frosts became frequent; the leaves turned crimson and fell.

Gabbler, because of his encounter with the poacher, was more cautious than usual. He led his surviving young out to the fields, but he flew high, and all suspicious objects were carefully spurned.

Snow fell, and Gabbler's instinct to migrate was strong. He fought against it, knowing that he soon must go, yet dreading the finality of leaving the valley.

November arrived with its incessant frosts. Most of the geese were gone, with only a few late migrants straggling through. They were the hardy ones; the last guard.

Gabbler and his four young, huddled on the exposed bar, felt the northern winter closing around them like a trap. Every morning the narrow channel of open water was smaller. The ice, creeping out from either shore, would soon meet.

One night when the wind was from the north the old gander felt an approaching storm. The time had come to leave the northland, and the other geese felt it too. They became restless, babbling to one another and flying up and down the ice-bound river.

It was midnight when the first flock rose into the starlit sky. They circled once, calling to those below, then turned their long necks toward the south.

Soon all the remaining flocks rose in a body. A hundred shrilling throats cried their farewells to Gabbler and the frozen land. They climbed higher, formed ranks, and turned to follow the markless trail through the skies.

The four young stirred nervously and looked at their leader. The instinct was in their blood, although they had never flown the long migration road of their ancestors.

Slowly Gabbler turned into the wind and gave the command. They rose off the sand, passed over the ice, then the tree-tops. He swung above the frozen streamlet, called his last farewell, then with a heavy heart turned southward. They overtook the larger flock and blended with it. Below them the prairies rang with their clarion calls.

HALF an hour later confusion broke the ordered ranks. Gabbler, the great gray gander, was turning back! The flock cried out its protest and milled uncertainly. Gabbler's young turned with him but he ordered them back.

Soon the figure of the big gander was alone as he fought the north wind. He was going back to the Saskatchewan; back to the hallowed spot where he had last seen his mate. So strong was his loyalty that Gabbler was prepared to die rather than forsake her memory.

Snow whipped against his breast and the wind had turned into a gale before the old gander was able to fight his way back to the Saskatchewan. He gabbled eagerly as he

dropped toward the icy river. He circled the streamlet, then coasted down to the sheltered side of the bar. It was full of comfortable memories and he huddled down to wait out the storm.

Snow fell all the next day and part of the following night. Except for his head Gabbler was buried. He dozed, for the snow formed a warm blanket and hid him from his enemies.

At sunrise on the second morning the old gander stood up and stretched his wings. He was desperately hungry and immediately flew in search of a field where there might still be standing heads of grain. He crossed above the streamlet and went north, his voice echoing over the snowy land.

A mile away the gander passed over a range of hills into a tributary valley where he'd seldom gone before. He saw snow-covered wheat stubble and beyond it the dwelling of man.

Suddenly a familiar cry reached him. Faint but unmistakable came the voice of his mate from the distant buildings.

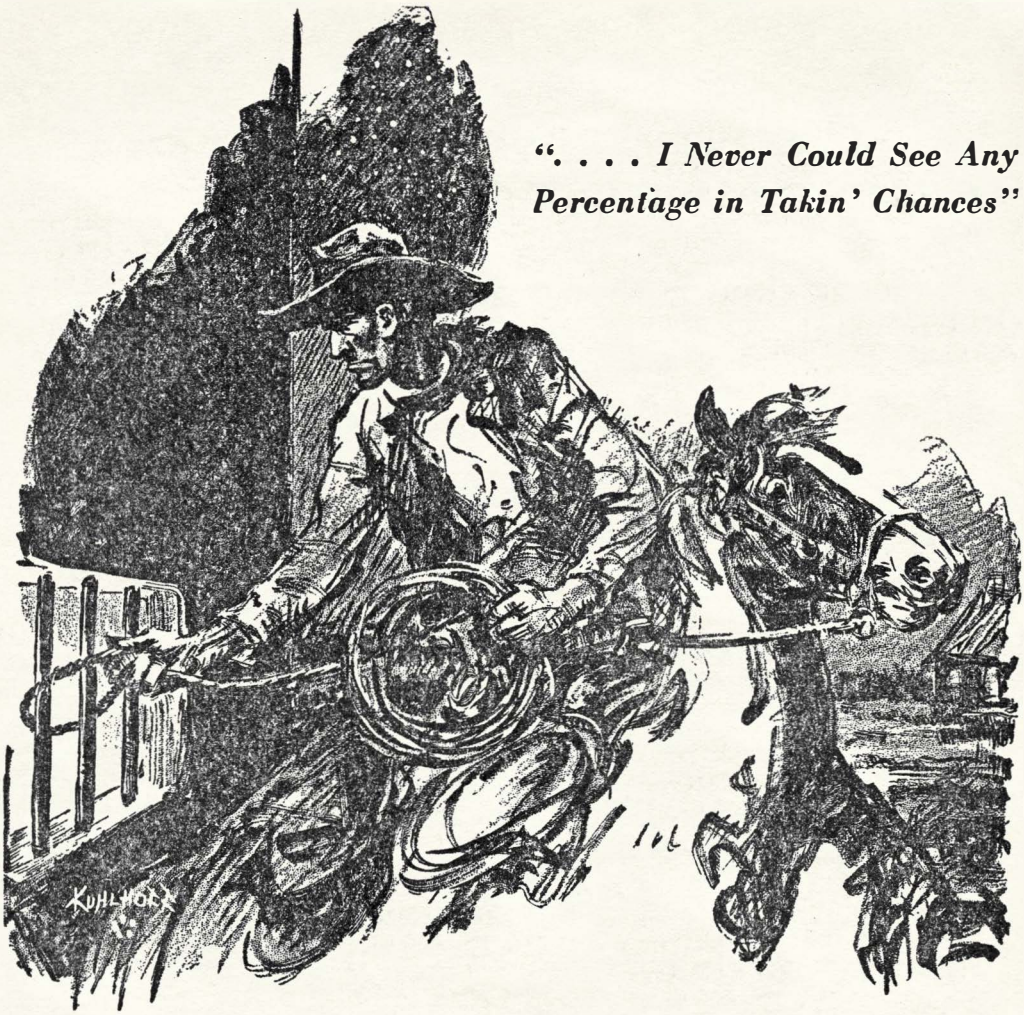
Careless of personal danger, Gabbler flew swiftly toward the sound, honking loud and often. Guided by his mate's answering cries he sailed directly to where she was frantically beating the woven wires of a big chicken pen. Gabbler dropped to the snow and thrust his head inside the enclosure. They rubbed their necks together, gabbling and honking in excitement.

Then a door slammed and Gabbler saw the boy coming. He leapt up, crying out in an agony of fear for his mate. He circled above the pen and begged his mate to follow. She tried, flinging her body at the wires in a frenzy of excitement.

The boy gazed at the scene in wonder. "It must be her mate!" he muttered incredulously. For a moment longer he listened to their mournful, love-sick cries, then tears filled his eyes. He ran to the pen and jerked open the door.

The goose backed into a corner; raised her wings and struck at the boy. She hissed and honked in terror as he seized her wings, stumbled through the door, and dropped her to the ground.

For a moment the goose was bewildered. Then she flapped to meet her mate. Again they babbled to one another and pressed close together. Suddenly the old gander spoke. There was utter silence while the two of them looked searchingly at the boy. Then they rose swiftly into the frosty morning sky and flew side by side toward the river.



". . . . I Never Could See Any Percentage in Takin' Chances"

A GUNMAN'S GAMBLE

By CADDO CAMERON

SOME folks say that we're all gamblers, but a lot of us won't admit it. They say that we've been gamblers from the time our mothers handed us our first bottle and we went to feedin' because even then we were gamblin' that we wouldn't swallow the nipple and choke ourselves to death, or get excited and bat our brains out with the bottle. Maybeso, and I'll admit that I'm a gambler. Many's the time when I've taken fool chances just for the fun and excitement of the thing when I could have gotten the same results in a safer and sensible way. Like, for instance, that Kansas cow-town doin's a while back.

It happens like this.

Last time I had seen him he was half tight and doin' a step dance in a Texas saloon. There was a circle of men around him a-whoopin' and hollerin' and I was there, a-clappin' time for his Number Four boots and when he'd go up in the air like a fightin' banty rooster and pop his heels together three times I'd sound the long yell to keep him company. That was ten year ago. He

was cow foreman and trail boss for the Drumm and Draper outfit. I was a kid bronc twister on the D and D home ranch then and a swing rider when he trailed their cattle north. I'm speakin' of Shorty Wilson. He was all of fifty then and looked older'n Methuselah to us young colts, but we had to admit that he could stay on top of the rough ones mighty nigh as well as the best of us and he could keep his saddle warm longer than the toughest man in the outfit. A-huntin' lost stock he has rode me into the ground more'n once.

And now, one night ten year later, I amble into the Glory Road saloon in the Kansas town of—maybe I'd better change its name and call it Whangtown because of what I've got to say about it—and out in the floor there's a circle of men around a little cuss who is most a foot and a half shorter than me and he's doin' a hoedown in a way that makes everybody's feet want to follow suit, and the boys are a-whoopin' and hollerin' and the fiddler is a-settin' his strings afire, and then this white-haired little wildcat jumps mighty nigh as high as his own head and cracks his heels together and cuts loose with a good old Texas yell, and I can't stand it no longer. Shore—it's Shorty Wilson, a little older outside, maybe, but just as young as ever inside. He's done carried me back to happier days. One second I've got the feel of a fightin' bronc under me and the next second I've got the smell of a herd in my nostrils. It's a better smell than gunsmoke, boys, a sight better. It goes into my blood and gallops through my veins and I lift a long yell that rattles the shingles on the roof.

I ain't yelled like that since before I swum the Red with the law's bullets a-splashin' round me, close onto ten year ago. I was a fool to do it tonight. Never can tell where or when I'll run into a warrant for somethin' I did or didn't do and it pays for me to keep myself in the background wherever I go. But I can't help it tonight. Nearly everybody turns to look at me, a lot of 'em know me and they tell the others, and before I realize what I'm doin' they've opened a path for me and I'm hunkered down inside the circle like the old days, a-clappin' out time for Shorty's flyin' boots.

My old boss knows me right off. Without missin' a step, he howls at me, "Hot damn! It's Slim! Old Slim, my ridin' fightin' fool from the Frio! YeeeOWWW!"

With that he pulls his six-shooter and puts two bullets through the ceilin'. The explosions blow out some of the lights and fill the room with smoke, but Shorty always pays for damages and nobody is hurt and everybody hollers and laughs fit to kill. The fiddler piles on more coal. I speed up and little old Shorty's boots fly to the time of the music and he dances like he'd never get tired. Damned if my throat ain't tight. I can't help it and I ain't ashamed of it, for I'm back on the range again a-ridin' straight up and a-celebratin' high, wide and handsome, and the law ain't a-doggin' my tracks no more.

All of a sudden a murmur runs through the crowd around us and it splits and sort of fans out. That jerks me back to the present like a singin' rope would bust a steer. When a crowd behaves like that, look out for trouble. I'm on my feet and watchin' the door, at the same time backin' toward the nearest wall. Shorty Wilson is a-sidin' me, breathin' hard and sayin' nothin'. The fiddler is gone like a rabbit in the brush. One of the bartenders is holdin' a sawed-off shotgun and the other'n has a bungstarter. The faro dealer and his lookout are standin' up behind the layout. This all happens in a few seconds time. I'm a-wonderin' what the hell when the reason swaggers through the front door. Somebody must have brought word that they were comin'.

IT'S City Marshal Clay Jones and his three deputies—Bob Little, Ollie Walters and Simp Sedgwick. This big, yaller-headed marshal is bad. It is said that he's first on one side of the law, then the other, and he's bad on either side. The three deputies are every bit as ornery as he is. I know for a fact that it ain't been *too* long since Clay Jones was a road agent in the Montana and Dakota minin' country. A justice of the peace here in Whangtown got him this marshal's job—Judge Rankin Blaine, when the town was havin' trouble findin' and keepin' peace officers who could control the wild and woolly citizens that came with the railroad and trail herds.

Clay Jones and his tough deputies have done a job of controllin', all right. They're the kind of lawmen who shoot first, then

yell "Hands UP!" whenever they get a chance. It has turned out that this Judge Blaine is just as crooked as the marshal, that the two of 'em used to be pardners, and now they're on the way to gettin' control of Whangtown itself. That's what the underworld says about 'em. They say that the judge and Clay Jones have bought out for a song or horned into several of the biggest payin' joints in town, that the others pay for "police protection" or else, and it's rumored that a good cut of the fines collected from evil-doers is kittied by Blaine for himself and the marshal.

Far's I'm concerned now, when Clay Jones and his gunslingin' deputies walk in I wish I was someplace else. It ain't been very long since this tough marshal told me to stay out of Whangtown and havin' plenty trouble without lookin' for it, I've taken him at his word until tonight. So this looks like the showdown and I'm cussin' myself for the fool I've been. I've sorta drawn a four-inch circle around the third button on his vest and I'm just waitin' for him to make his play.

But the marshal springs a surprise on me. "Shorty Wilson," he growls. "Was it you that done that shootin' I heard?"

Shorty answers right off, "Shore was, Marshal. Me and my boys have been on the trail close onto four months and I was just celebratin' a little. No harm meant and I'll pay fair and square damages to the owner of this place."

Right here I want to say that there ain't a bad hair on Shorty Wilson. In all his sixty years I betcha he ain't never started a fight or mixed into one if he could get out of it, throwed off on the job or given a man the short end of a deal and he's got more friends south of the Red and east of the Pecos than anybody I know. So I figure that Clay Jones is a-pickin' on Shorty just because he's a Texas man.

Anyhow, the marshal snaps back, "I own this place! The damages are fifty dollars. Pony up!"

Shorty goes to diggin' into his pocket. "Seems to me that's a mite steep, but I'll—"

"You'll pay it or go to jail!" barked Jones in that mean way of his. "You damned Texas men are——"

"Hold 'er, Shorty!"

I'm doin' the talkin' now. I won't take that stuff from Clay Jones. There wouldn't be a Whangtown if it wasn't for Texas men and their herds of Texas cattle.

"Don't you pay that dirty crook fifty dollars," I tell Shorty. "It's a stick-up, that's what it is."

Several men in the room grunt like they been hit. Anybody with a brain in his head is supposed to have better sense than to call the marshal of Whangtown a dirty crook. Everybody backs away a little farther.

Shorty is a-whisperin' to me plumb excited, and I imagine everybody hears him say, "Stay out of this, Slim! You can't afford to get into any more trouble, 'specially in *this* town."

"You're dead right, Wilson," says Clay Jones, sarcastic. He *can't* afford to. I told him to stay out of Whangtown and he'll be sorry that he didn't."

"I'm here, Jones, and it's your move," I tell him quiet like. "I said you're a dirty crook. Five dollars would be fair damages. Give him five, Shorty, then tell him to go to hell."

THEY say that Old Satan watches over his biggest and best fools when he wants to save 'em for more deviltry. Maybeso, and it sure looks thataway tonight. Clay Jones ain't shy of nerve and neither are his deputies. They're tough, hard men and mighty handy with their guns. They know that the four of 'em are more than a match for me, so why don't they haul off and cut me down? Maybe I can answer that one. Clay knows that they can't drive enough lead into me quick enough to keep me from throwin' one shot, at least, and he knows that I'll get *him* if I don't get anybody else. When I made my bluff I gambled on that. Now I win.

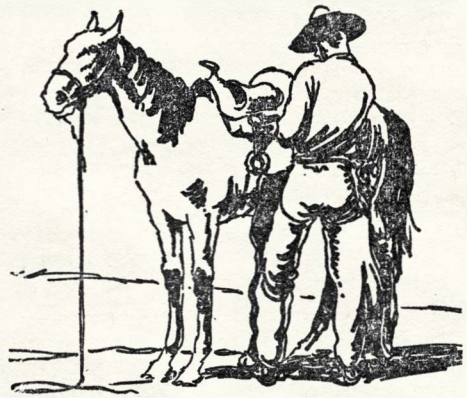
For the marshal says, "I ain't ashamed not to call your hand, Mister Gunman. It wouldn't be smart for me to do it here. I'm a law officer with the welfare of my community at heart. Everybody will say that I did right by not shootin' it out with a man like you in a crowded place. You'll take a lot of killin' and you'll throw a lot of lead before you die, which means that innocent people will get hurt if I let you prod me into a fight in here. Of course, if you touch off the fireworks I'll have to defend myself and—"

"I ain't touchin' off nothin'," I tell him. "I'm bone tired and I'm a-hittin' my blan-

kets as soon as I can get there. Give him his five and come along, Shorty."

NOW, this Clay Jones has got some brains and no conscience. The talk he made was slick. If he got a chance to catch me when I wasn't lookin' and down me quick and sudden, he'd likely convince a lot of people that he did it to avoid a big shootin' scrape—for the good of the community. So I'm mighty careful as I go to pass him and his men on my way to the door with Shorty behind me. When the old cowman stops to pay the marshal I halt and partly turn my back to the three deputies, and I do this on purpose just to see. I've still got an eye on 'em, though. Sure enough —Simp Sedgwick, the closest one, starts his draw if you could call it a start. All I see is a muscle tighten in the right side of his neck, but in a case like this that's enough for me.

My six-shooter crunches down on his head hard enough to drop a bull. He wilts in his tracks. Simp got his gun out, all right, but dropped it before he hit the floor. This is one of the few times I ever draw with both



hands, left a split-second after my right, but Ollie and Bob are within four feet of me and I'll never know why they didn't back Simp's play. One or the other of 'em would've been certain to get me.

Marshal Jones looks plumb disappointed, but hides it like a flash. So I tell him, "Too bad, Marshal. When you signaled your man to cut me down from behind I reckon you did it for the good of the community. So 'long, boys."

I shove Shorty behind me and back through the door.

When we're safe out of the Glory Road, the old cowman whams me on the back. "Hot damn! It was worth ridin' from Texas to Kansas to see Clay Jones eat crow. But, Slim, you was a damned fool to do it."

"Shore. I been a damned fool for years."

"Come in here, boy, and I'll buy you a drink—a *big* drink."

"Much obliged, Shorty, but no drinks for me tonight."

"Hell, man! We'd oughta celebrate."

"I'd like to, but I dassn't take a chance. I look for this to be a long, hard night."

The old man does a double-shuffle on the sidewalk. "The longer the better. I ain't got me a good start yet."

"Pious idea to stop before you start," I tell him. "Clay Jones ain't started yet, either. Came up with a herd, didn't you?"

"Yep. Fifteen men, a hundred horses and three thousand head of D Bar D's."

"Delivered yet?"

"Nope. Waitin' for cars."

"Where you holdin'?"

"Five mile south."

"Then, Shorty, my advice to you is to fork your bronc and go five mile south *right now.*"

THE old cowman swears that he ain't done nothin', don't aim to do nothin', and he figures to stay in town long enough to stretch the wrinkles out of his belly with city grub and maybe h'ist a few more to cure his saddle sores before he hits for camps. One of his men shows up about then and I soon see that it ain't no use to argue with these fun-starved trail drivers. I know how they feel. I been there myself.

"Well, so 'long, fellas," I tell 'em. "I'm beddin' down in a manger at Barker's corral tonight, right handy to my horse. Send for me if you need me, but I hope you won't."

* * * * *

I'm a-sleepin' with one eye open and both ears cocked. Every time a horse draws a long breath or stomps a hoof I wake up, so I quick hear the night corral boss a-talkin' to somebody.

"Yes, the durned simpleton is in the empty stall by that tall sorrel over yonder with the white stockin's," says the boss. "Must've tied knots in his long legs to get 'em in there."

I'm up and out of the manger and clean out of that stall in no time. Can't tell who'll

come a-huntin' me tonight. A little ways out in the yard in bright moonlight I see the boss and four men and—yes, it's a girl, all right. One of 'em turns his head and I recognize Tommy Hanks, the boy that was with Shorty Wilson. Somethin' has gone wrong, sure as hell. I go out there.

It's Tommy and three D Bar D hands with a girl from the line and they're all lookin' mighty serious. Not bein' sure of the corral boss, I take 'em over by the fence where we can talk private.

"They've arrested Shorty!" Tommy bursts out. "Got him in jail now."

"What for?"

"Murder!"

"Murder! Huh! Go ahead."

IT SEEMS that these four hands and Shorty Wilson were in the Alamo Bar and Bob Little, the deputy, was in there, too. He'd been traipsin' along behind 'em ever since that ruckus in the Glory Road. The D Bar D boys are behavin' themselves, havin' a few drinks and such, and they've been there quite a while when in walks Marshal Clay Jones. Before anybody knows what's up, the marshal jabs a six-shooter in Shorty's belly and arrests him for the murder of somebody by the name of Homer Sand. The killin' took place in a narrow street behind the Alamo and north a little ways. The old cowman swears that he don't know nobody by the name of Sand and that he's been with his D Bar D boys ever since he left the Glory Road. Then Deputy Bob Little horns in and says that he seen Shorty go out of the Alamo's back door and stay away for ten fifteen minutes an hour or so ago, and the old man recollects that he did do that. So the marshal taken him off to the calaboose.

When the boys finish their stories, Tommy says, "Slim, this is Lily. She works at the Prairie Rose and it fronts on the alley that runs behind the Alamo, about forty feet east of the saloon. Homer Sand's body was in the alley halfway between the Alamo and the Rose. Lily saw the killin' and when she heard that they'd arrested Shorty, she up and told Fred here what she knew. Now, we want her to tell you."

Lily is a puny little thing and she's scared most to death. "I was alone in one of the upstairs rooms and its window looks down on the alley. Hearing the front door close downstairs, I went to the window to see whether it was someone leaving the Rose. The moon was bright. I saw Homer Sand start down the alley. Before he had gone far I saw another man jump out from behind an outhouse and stab Homer in the back. . . . Ugh-h! He struck Homer three times. I saw the knife gleam in the moonlight. . . . The man who did the stabbing was Marshal Clay Jones. I know him well and saw him plainly."

The girl stopped for a minute, then went on to say, "Memphis Mamie owns the Prairie Rose. Maybe you don't know it, but Homer Sand and Clay Jones have been quarreling over Mamie for months."

"We're shore thankful to you, Lily," I say. "Well, boys, strikes me there ain't nothin' much for us to do tonight. Her testimony will clear old Shorty in jig time. You'll testify, won't you, miss?"

The girl is tuggin' and twistin' at a little handkerchief she's holdin'. "Ye-yes, I will if they kill me for it! And maybe they will. Jones owns this town. But, when that nice little old man was here with cattle last year I met him at breakfast in the Chinaman's and—and we got to talking, and he said he'd pay my way to a town in Texas and get me a—a decent job if I'd go. I . . . well, I didn't go."

I look at the D Bar D boys. They look back at me, then I tell her, "Well, Lily, 'tain't too late yet. Soon as ever we get old Shorty out of jail on your testimony, you'll be headin' for Texas — new clothes, expenses and feed bill paid, job guaranteed and everything. Won't she, fellas?"

"I'll tell a man she will!"

"And you ain't talkin', mistah!"

"You betcha, Slim!"

"What I mean—she's as good as on her way!"

The girl is a-cryin' her eyes out now and none of us like that.

"All right, boys," I tell them. "Make shore to stand a guard over Lily until we get her out of town. I'll be seein' you-all in the mornin'. Roust me out if you need me before then."

AFTER they've gone I lay there in the manger, listenin' to horses a-chompin' hay and I'm callin' to mind some of the things I've been hearin' about Whangtown.

Among others, Oily Ollinger the Snake Oil medicine man, told me somethin' a short time back that's sorta interestin' now. He said that the good citizens of Whangtown are gettin' sick and tired of Clay Jones and his killers. No wonder, I'm thinkin'. But Oily said that everybody had to admit that this hardcase marshal was ridin' a close herd on the town, which nobody else had ever been able to do, and for that reason they were slow about kickin' him out. Oily knows how I stand with Jones. That's why he's tellin' me all this. He goes on to say he's got it straight that the first time somebody gives Jones and his deputies a lickin' and really shows 'em up in public, the mayor and other city bosses will jump at a chance to haze the crooks out of town so fast they won't stop runnin' short of Canada. Rememberin' this and Shorty and such, I'm a-thinkin' some. And besides—it sure hurts a fella's feelin's to be told that he ain't welcome in a town where he's always behaved himself perfect, like me in Whangtown. I'm thinkin' thataway when I drop off to sleep.

Seems like I ain't been asleep no time before I hear boots and spurs on the hard ground outside, so once more I'm up and out of that stall quicker than you could say Sam Houston. I'm as spooky as a green bronc tonight. It's Johnny Hanks and the three D Bar D hands and they're sure worked up about somethin'. I shush 'em until we're out by the fence.

"Now, what's a-gnawin' on you sleep robbers?"

"It's Lily! She's dead! They killed her!"

That knocks all the sleep out of me. "I'm a-listenin'."

Johnny talks, "from here we taken her to the Main Hotel. That long-faced psalm-singin' hypocrite wouldn't let her have a room. Lily told us she's seen him sneak into the Prairie Rose more'n once. Then we tried the other hotel and two boardin' houses. None of 'em would let Lily in. So we figured to take her down to camp and we're a-headin' back to where our horses are tied when it happened. We're keepin' her off the streets as much as we can. Goin' down the alley behind the Glory Road we're past the place a little ways when a rifle cracks at one of its upstairs windows. Lily falls. She's dead, We leave her there and swarm into the damned dive and comb it good, upstairs and down, but we don't find nothin' suspicious. Deputy Bob Little was at the bar. We told him about Lily and he said he'd take charge and send for Judge Blaine, the coroner. Then we came here. That's the whole story, Slim."

"Any more of the marshal's bunch in the Glory Road?"

"Nope, but Jones himself came in as we were leavin'."

"Did you happen to see anybody a-trailin' you while you were takin' Lily around?"

Fred Smith answers, "I seen Ollie Walters comin' down the sidewalk when we were leavin' the first hotel and I caught sight of him two, three times while we were trapsin' round town."

"See anything of Little or Sedgwick?"

Chuck Anderson says, "Shore! Just after we stopped in front of the Far West to talk it over after we left the last boardin' house, I did see Little leave through a side door. He was in a hell of a hurry, too."

"Uh-huh, and he probably heard you say that you'd take to the alley."

"Betcha he did," declared Johnny, " 'cause we'd been talkin' about that."

"Didn't see Sedgwick anywheres?"

"Nope," says Johnny. "But I heard that after the doctor stitched up his head, Jones put Simp on guard at the jail 'cause he ain't able to get around much."

The boys wait for me to say somethin', but I'm a-thinkin' hard. Strikes me that it's all as plain as day now. When these four kids and the girl left here they went down the street a-talkin' fit to kill, somebody heard 'em and tipped Clay Jones off and he put two-and-two together quick, so Lily is dead. Likewise, little old Shorty faces a murder charge that might stick when backed by crooked eye-witness testimony.

I'm mad and gettin' madder. That's bad. It don't never pay for a man in my business to get mad. It's worse than gettin' tight. I've learned never to do anything while I'm mad. A man ain't got a lick of sense when he's mad. So I've got to get shed of these boys and take it easy until I cool off.

"I wish you fellas would amble around town for maybe thirty minutes," I tell 'em, "then come back here and let me know who the mayor is and where he lives, where Judge Blaine lives and whether he's gone home yet and I'll need to know where Jones,

Little and Walters were the last time you saw 'em. Make shore that you don't start no ruckuses any place. Fetch me Shorty's horse when you come."

By the time the D Bar D hands get back I'm myself again as far as bein' white-hot mad is concerned; but, in a calm and peaceable way I've done made up my mind to raise plenty hell in Whangtown before mornin'. The boys have got Shorty's little bay and they tell me what I want to know.

Then Johnny says, "Now, Slim, we know that you're an old hand at a game like this. Just you tell us what to do and we'll do it. We'll foller you through hell and forty mile beyond."

That listens good to a man who has been a *ladino* for years, always trailin' alone and dodgin' ropes and bullets nearly everywhere he goes. I look at these four boys. They're wild and reckless kids, maybe no better or worse than I was at their age, but they're clean strain and they'll do to ride the river with. They ain't never tangled with the law serious. They don't know what it means to do that. They don't realize that if they ride with me tonight the news will travel from here to Texas and they'll be burned with the same brand that I am. Of course, bein' salty kids they won't give a damn and maybe they'll even brag about it. *That would be bad.* Give a young cuss a calf-size reputation for bein' tough and he'll feed and water the thing until it grows to the size of a buffalo bull. I'll be needin' help a-plenty tonight, but I'd rather gamble on goin' it alone than to gamble on givin' these kids their start down the long and crooked trail.

So I tell the boys that I don't need 'em, can't use 'em and don't want 'em underfoot. That makes 'em sore. I figured it would. It's better for them thataway.

THIS is an all-night town. It's long after midnight now and the place is a-boilin' big, lettin' off plenty steam so that a shot or yell don't attract much attention. From what the boys said, even the two mysterious killin's didn't cause any excitement. Whangtown grew up on killin's. All this fits into my scheme. I've got a lot to do, it's got to be done damned fast and I may have to make a little noise. There's a marshal and three deputies against me. They're all mean and I'd be a fool to take on more'n one at a time. This means that if there's a hitch in handlin' one of them the others may double up on me.

Naturally, my first and most important job is to get Shorty out of jail and out of town. Ridin' my sorrel—Blaze—and leadin' his bay I cut a circle from the corral through the outskirts of the town and back to the courthouse and jail at the upper end of Main Street. This is a long, low frame store building. Most of it is taken up by the courtroom and county offices, but the city marshal has his office all the way across the back end of the building and the jail is tacked onto that—one large cell made of two-by-six's spiked flat, barred windows on its north and south sides, its only door openin' into a narrow hall that separates it from the marshal's hangout. There's an outside door and window in either end of the marshal's office, each of these doors bein' about twenty feet from a jail window.

I look the place over cautious and good. There's a light in the marshal's office. The blinds are down, but the one at the north window curls up a little and I can see under it. What I see don't look good. Instead of findin' Simp Sedgwick in there alone nursin' his sore head, I find Ollie Walters with him and they're playin' cards at a table against the south wall. This sorta upsets my plans. I had intended to rampse in on Simp if he was alone and take a chance on shootin' it out with him if he showed fight, but I ain't a-hankerin' to tie onto both of these gunslingers simultaneous. Besides, it ain't never smart to run the risk of havin' to kill a lawman, no matter whether he's good or bad. But I ain't got no time to think it over. The marshal or Bob Little or both of 'em may show up any minute. So here goes, double or nothin'.

I take down my ketch rope, knot the honda end around two of the jail window bars, leave the right amount of slack and tie fast to my saddlehorn. Watchin' through the crack under the blind, I pull Blaze ahead slow and easy. When that big sorrel leans into the hardtwist rope somethin' has to give. Those bars draw and creak in the deep sockets that anchor them in the wall, wood cracks and it sounds like the whole side of the jail is comin' loose. Simp and Ollie jump up from the table. They look all around excited, then locate the noise and

make a run for the door that opens onto the jail. I drop my reins and try the marshal's outside door cautious. It ain't bolted—wouldn't be with two deputies in there. The next second I'm inside and tiptoe to the wall alongside the door where Sedgwick and Walters went out to the cell.

SIMP is growlin' at Shorty, "What the hell are you tryin' to do in there?"

"Huh? What's that? Notin'. I been asleep."

"Who made that noise?"

"Durned if I know. It woke me up."

Then Walters whispers hoarse, "Looky yander, Simp! Two of the bars on that north window are bent."

They come bustin' back into the office, Ollie in the lead, and they don't see me until they're clean past me. Then they're a-lookin' my six-shooter square in the eye.

"H'ist 'em!" I say. "Quick, damn it!"

They're caught flatfooted and plumb flabbergasted. Their hands go up and there ain't any argument about it. Folks say that my long, hawk-face looks sorta mean when I'm in earnest and I'm in dead earnest now.

"Lay face-down and stretch out on the floor, arms wide."

Sedgwick goes down right off. His sore head has taken some of the salt out of him. But Ollie Walters is still plenty tough. He hangs back. He's figurin' the odds and he may take the gamble.

I tell him slow and easy, "Don't chance it, Walters. You dirty crooks are fixin' to frame a friend of mine. I ain't got many friends, so I think a heap of what I have got. I'll kill you to get him out of here. Lay down!"

He takes me at my word, growlin', "Yes, *you* would."

In no time at all I've combed 'em clean—guns, knives, one pair of handcuffs, keys, money, everything but their clothes. Two minutes later they're locked in the cell, I've found another bunch of keys in the office, made certain that a man can't get out of the window with the bent bars and Shorty Wilson and me are ridin' away.

The little old cowman is bound and determined to stay in town and help me finish whatever I've got to finish, but I give him a good cussin' and send him back to camp.

I never could see any percentage in takin' chances just to get square with some cuss for somethin' he has done to me or said about me. Even if you do win the pot, you don't win. Whoever is a-bankin' this gamblin' game called Life, is one banker who won't cash a chip marked "Revenge." While tryin' to round up these Whangtown crooks I ain't after revenge. I've got two mighty good reasons for doin' it. In the first place, Shorty Wilson will have a murder charge hangin' over him as long as Clay Jones and Judge Blaine are bossin' things and Shorty has to come here with cattle; and in the second place, it ain't smart for me to let anybody chouse me out of a town where I've made it a point to keep my slate clean. I'm short in enough towns where I deserve to be short.

Judge Rankin Blaine is the man I go to huntin' now. With his brains and education this shyster lawyer is a sight more dangerous than the marshal with his guns and I've heard that it was the Judge who told Jones to order me to stay out of town—Blaine bein' afraid that I might sometime show his marshal up. He's a middle-aged bachelor. The boys tell me that he lives at the Main Hotel—the guest of honor, so to speak—where they wouldn't take Lily in, and yet this crook is gettin' his cut from places like the Prairie Rose. Johnny says the judge has two rooms across the rear end of the second floor and there's an outside stairway against the back wall of the hotel.

Not long after leavin' the jail my horse is tied at the foot of those stairs and I'm a-knockin' soft on Blaine's door.

"Who's that?" he calls out, groggy with sleep.

I answer low, "Clay Jones sent me. Got some word for you, Judge."

I hear him strikin' a match to light his lamp, then the door opens halfway and there ain't nobody in sight which means that he's behind it with a gun more'n likely. I've got to chance some noise. I give the door a quick, hard shove so as to knock him off balance and at the same time I jump through. Blaine shows that he ain't no gunfighter. He's got a long, double-barreled scatter-gun and slammed back by the door thataway he's all tangled in his nightshirt and that clumsy weapon. It's a wonder the thing didn't go off and wake up the hotel.

"Take care, Judge!" I tell him quiet. "You'll hurt yourself with that blunderbuss. Gimme!"

He takes a quick slant at my six-shooter and a good look at my face, then hands me the gun. Blaine is smart enough to know that talkin' tough to me won't pay off and he probably figures that I'll beef him if he hollers for help. He don't say a word, but I can see that he's a-thinkin' fast and ain't missin' no bets. I watch him close for he's a husky cuss and plenty mean-lookin'.

This is once when I've got to talk a fella into doin' what I want him to do without makin' trouble if I can. "Looky here, Judge. Keep your damned mouth shut and I won't hurt you. Make a racket or get tough and I'll buffalo the hell out of you with my gun barrel. We're takin' a ride. My horse carries double. Down the back stairs, Judge. Move!"

He's got shrewd, keen eyes. They sort of narrow now, and he says, "I've heard a lot about you and mean as you are, I like your looks. You and I can get along. Throw in with me and make your money the easy way. You can have the marshal's job. Jones ain't in your class. What say, Mister Gunman?"

I grin down at him. "Much obliged, Judge. But for me, easy money don't spend easy. Let's go."

"Can't I get into some clothes?"

"Nope, Judge. It's a warm night and you won't be callin' on the ladies. Move out."

It ain't long after that before I lock Judge Rankin Blaine and his nightshirt in the cell with the two deputies.

THE boys said that Deputy Bob Little was playin' poker in the Kansas Bar, a little ways down Main Street from the Glory Road where the marshal makes his headquarters while patrollin' the town at night. I ride down the alley, leave my horse behind the Glory Road and go into the Kansas through its back door. Bob is still there, a-settin' at the end of the table in a five-handed stud game. I walk straight over there and stop at the other end, facin' him.

"Little," I tell him. "Come out back. I want to talk to you."

There are maybe ten men in the room besides the poker players. The noise drops when I come in and when I speak to Little it stops altogether. Men like these are quick to catch the scent of trouble. Here again I'm gamblin' that Jones and his deputies ain't got many friends in town who'd fight for 'em. Bob doesn't say anything right off. He sort of tilts back in his chair and although his hands stay on the table, I know that he's makin' room for himself.

"You still here?" he growls. "You've been warned to get out of town and *stay* out. What d'you want?"

So he's fixin' to make a fight. Pretendin' that somethin' had suddenly caught my eye or ear, I turn my head and look away toward the back door. Most sneakin' killers never get wise to this trick and they can't resist the temptation to throw down on you when they think you ain't lookin'. Little goes for his gun. Standin' with my thighs against the end of the table, I jerk up a knee quick and hard and shove at the same time. Bob topples backward to the floor with the table on top of him, chips, cards and hard money spillin' over him. Three of the other players fall out of their chairs and the fourth just sits there, froze stiff. The deputy no more than hits the floor before I'm around there. His gun explodes, but the table is pinnin' his arm and his bullet crashes bottles on the backbar.

"Drop it!" I snap, "or I'll give you what I gave Simp. Drop it!"

He wriggles loose from the table and comes up empty-handed, cussin' like a wild man. I flip out his second gun and toss it away. It takes just about five seconds to jerk Bob's arms behind him and snap Ollie Walters' bracelets onto him. He don't struggle none. He shore don't want what Simp

Sedgwick got. Some men fear a gun barrel more than a bullet. I give him a shove toward the front door like he'd push a prisoner around. Meanwhile, I'm watchin' everybody else close as I can. It sure looks like what I've been hearin' is true. The mar-

shal's bunch ain't got no fightin' friends in here.

At the door, I stop and tell 'em, "Mighty sorry to bust up your game thataway, boys. This is just a private quarrel between me and Little and I shore hope none of you take it to heart."

I don't see signs of anybody doin' that, but I do see several faces that look like they're fixin' to bust out laughin'.

The shot hasn't drawn more than passin' notice and we only meet one man between there and the Glory Road. He's tight and a-talkin' to himself and don't pay us no mind. Keepin' away from the light I take a quick look into the saloon. It's got a pretty fair gatherin' of men and Clay Jones is leanin' against the long bar not far from the back door. He looks mighty big and important and you'd grade him up to the reputation he has made for himself with the two guns he's a-packin'. Right here I sorta hesitate.

What I'm fixin' to do is a grandstand play, pure and simple, and I never have liked grandstandin' or fairgroundin' as we used to call it. That fool stuff don't pay off once in a hundred times. But this is *one* time when it looks as if it might, the town and its citizens and Clay and his bunch bein' what they are, so I'm takin' the gamble.

BOB LITTLE ain't dumb. He's got an idea what I'm thinkin' about doin' and he wants me to try it, figurin' that I'm bound to make a fool of myself. When he sees me kind of holdin' back, he rowels me in the flanks with "Gettin' cold feet, Mister Gunman? Bit off more'n you can chew and you ain't got the guts to *try* to chaw it."

I spin him around and shove him through the front door. "Git in there!"

Pushin' Little ahead of me, I walk him fast the length of the room to where Clay Jones is a-standin' up straight now. Poker checks stop clickin', the faro lookout gets down from his chair, the dealer stands up and there's a lot of mumblin' and surprised cussin' while we're crossin' the floor. As for the big, yaller-headed marshal—you could've shot his eyes off without nickin' his hide. Before he comes to, I've moved past him so that my back is to the wall.

Then I tell him, "Howdy, Marshal. Here's one of your man-eatin' deputies. The other two are locked up in your own jail with your shyster pardner, Judge Blaine."

I stop for a second just to see whether Jones will do or say anything. He don't. He stands there stock-still with his hands hooked on his belt and his hard cold eyes a-drillin' me through and through. What I said sets the room to buzzin'. Every fella seems to be whisperin' or mutterin' to the man nearest him.

I go on, loud enough for everybody to hear, "You and your bunch of crooks tried to frame a friend of mine, little old Shorty Wilson. You slapped him in jail and hung a murder charge on him, so I'm a-roundin' up you dirty lawmen 'cause *you're the real murderers!*"

I thought sure he'd make a break when I said that. But he don't and that bothers me. I know he ain't afraid, so what's he cookin' up? Then it strikes me sudden. He's damned smart and tricky. He knows that he's throwin' me off balance by gettin' me puzzled thisaway. And besides, he wants me to keep right on talkin'. A smart gunfighter don't do much talkin' for fear it will take his mind off'n his business and slow him down that one split second which decides whether he'll walk out or ride out feet first.

At last Jones says somethin', and he says it cool and easy, "You're doin' the talkin', Mister Gunman. I'm a-listenin'."

That's his game—keep me figurin' what I'll say when I'd ought to be watchin' him and figurin' what I'll do. I ain't got much more to say, and I say it quick, "Jones, *you* killed Homer Sand! That girl Lily saw you do it, so you—!"

Gunsmoke and the roar of forty-fives cut me off. A bullet does its damnedest to jerk my left leg from under me. Clay Jones slams back against the bar, then slides down slow in front of it. His knees are crumplin'. It's the shock of a forty-five that's paralyzin' him thataway.

He ain't dead and he won't die. I was a fool to take the extra time to place my shot and it mighty nigh cost me, but I don't aim to have no lawman's scalp a-hangin' on my belt.

I'VE got a flesh wound in my left thigh and Mayor Charley Robinson notices the blood on my britches when I meet him at the door of his home a little while later.

"Man, you're hurt!" he says. "Come in! Come in!"

This here Chuck Robinson is an old friend of my friend, Deputy U. S. Marshal Heck Henderson, if you could rightly call any lawman my friend. I don't know Robinson, but it's plain to see that he knows me. Heck has been talkin' to him, I figure.

"Much obliged, Mayor," I tell him, "but I gotta be ramblin'. I just want to let you know that Clay Jones is over at the doc's with a bullet in his shoulder. Simp Sedgwick, Bob Little, Ollie Walters and Judge Blaine are locked up in jail. Here's the keys if you ever want to turn 'em a-loose. So 'long, Mayor."

Before he gets his breath I'm climbin' aboard my sorrel. He hollers for me to wait up, but I make out that I don't hear him. As I'm goin' away five riders come a-foggin' up the street. They rein in at the mayor's and I ramble on.

A-joggin' down Main Street on my way to the D Bar D camp south of town, I'm passin' the Glory Road when I recollect somethin' that Oily Ollinger told me. Clay Jones owns the faro bank in there. The box is crooked and the dealer is crooked and many a Texas man has left his wages in there. So I step down at the rack and go in, just to see.

When I come out those five riders are a-boilin' down the street from the mayor's. I'm movin' a mite fast now, but one of 'em catches up with me as I'm swingin' away from the rack.

"Hold on, mister!" he hollers. "Got a letter for you from the mayor. Here 'tis."

This ain't no fit place for me to stop to read a letter, but the five of 'em are all around me now so I take the paper and bend down to where the light catches it, and read:

Whangtown needs a new marshal. Take the job and clean up this place.

I can't help but grin at the boys, meanwhile keepin' a sharp eye on the door and windows of the Glory Road. "I'm shore much obliged, fellas," I say to 'em. "Tell the mayor that I can't take the job, but I've already cleaned out part of Whangtown—about three thousand dollars' worth of it. So 'long, gents!"

FORMULA FOR MURDER

By JOHN MURRAY REYNOLDS

I

THE paneled library at Carterscliff had the musty odor that comes from many old books, lying untouched on their shelves for dragging years on end. Jim Forbes had switched on the light as the dull afternoon grew darker with the first hint of a New England fog drifting in from the sea, but the lights only accentuated the big room's faded dreariness. Silas Carter's gaunt face was sallow and expressionless as he stood near the door. One hand, the twisted left hand he always tried to keep out of sight, was thrust in the pocket of his coat. His sparse gray hair lay dank and moist around the edges of his oddly pointed skull—like seaweed on a rock—and his gray eyes were so pale that they were almost silver.

"Just consider yourself a guest here, Mr. Forbes," he said, and his flat tone robbed the words of any real cordiality or human warmth, "Take as many days as you like to go over the books, so that your firm can offer us its best price. It has been a momentous decision to offer the family library for sale, and the thing cannot be done in a hurry."

When Silas Carter had gone, Forbes shook his shoulders irritably. It was hard to explain the feeling of depression that had gripped him ever since he first saw this place, a few hours before. In some subtle way this house was both decadent and ominous—completely lacking the vitality that pervaded the nearby fishing village of Port Haven. He laid down his notes, and went upstairs for a fresh supply of paper, and as he came back to the library he saw the door at the far end clicking softly closed.

For an instant Forbes hesitated. Then

he shrugged, and walked across the room to the small table that held his notes, beside the book-cases at the point where he had been working. The gloom of this place must be getting on his nerves! What if someone else *had* been in the library? It was a regular part of the house, open to anyone.

Forbes' notes and fountain pen had been pushed aside, as though someone had used the small table to hold a book while looking something up. He replaced his working materials the way he wanted them, reached up to take another book from the shelves, and then hesitated once more. One of the books on this shelf had been taken out and replaced since he left the library! If it had been any other book in the place, Forbes might not have given the matter a second thought, but this happened to be a rare and little-known seventeenth-century treatise on black magic and poisons.

There was no doubt about the book having been examined by someone within the last few minutes. This was a shelf of old books where Forbes had been examining each one individually, and this volume was a half inch out of line from the way he had left it.

Catching a glimpse of a small piece of paper thrust between the pages as a marker, Forbes took the book down and opened it. There, faintly marked in pencil, was a paragraph which began:

There Is a Theory That a Certain Combination of Sounds and Smells and Circumstances Is Bound to Arouse the Murder Instinct

Among ye venoms now much in use by those who fail to accomplish their ends by the pricking of wax images, is curare. A venom discovered by the savages of ye southern Americas, and used to poison the tips of their arrows, it brings death whenever . . .

Jim Forbes replaced the book on the shelf. It was just one more coincidence, of course, that marking of a paragraph concerning a deadly poison. Nothing significant. Then he started violently as he heard a quiet voice say behind him:

"There'll be a murder in this house before midnight, young man. Mark well what I tell you."

II

FORBES spun around with an oath. His fists instinctively clenched, but no one could have been less alarming than the man who stood across the room. He was a shriveled, white-haired little gnome with a face as lined as a dried apple, and a pair of snapping black eyes. He was in his shirt sleeves, wearing a stained canvas apron, and he was smoking a calabash pipe so large that it seemed as though its weight must strain his skinny neck.

"Good afternoon," he said, through a whirling cloud of smoke.

"What—what did you say?" Jim gasped.

"That there'll be a murder in this house before midnight. The formula is complete. I've been watching for this thing to happen for forty years, and this afternoon is the first time that all the conditions have been present."

To Forbes there came a sudden conviction that this man was mad. There was no trace of mania in his quiet, cheery voice or smiling face, but his eyes had a tendency to go out of focus when they met a steady glance.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Forbes said. His visitor suddenly hopped up to sit on the edge of one of the big tables, his short legs swinging clear of the ground like a child's, and his wizened body hunched up so that he looked more like a gnome than ever.

"I'm Rufus Clayborne, a cousin of the Carters," he said, "I'm the only really sane person in the house, by the way. The Carter strain has run to seed these last generations, and the whole kit and biling of 'em is a mite teched in the head. Don't pay any attention to what any of 'em say, d'you hear?"

"I won't," Jim promised with a grin. Rufus might be insane, but he was a very cheerful sort of maniac. The little man blew out another huge puff of smoke.

"I'm a chemist. Silas has let me rig up a laboratory in the cellar, and nobody pays any attention to the way I putter away down there. Just between us, they think I'm cracked, but I'm getting close to some of the secrets of the old time alchemists. . . . But you wanted to know about the murder formula."

Jim lost his grin. Offhand, a crazy chemist and a volume on poisons did not seem a good combination for even a gloomy and old-fashioned New England mansion. Rufus held up one gnarled and stained forefinger.

"The old students of black magic understood some things better than we do now," he said, "They knew that there are certain combinations of circumstances that have a queer effect on the human mind. Just as music does. There is a certain combination that creates murder. The smell of moist earth—a salt wind in from the sea—the mustiness that only comes to an old house after many years—there are many ingredients, and they must all be just right. But this afternoon, for the first time, they are all correct here at Carterscliff except for one thing—a deep and distant booming. The sound of the fog-horn at Twin Lights should provide that, and from the way the fog is rolling in, that should start at any minute. This murder won't be done by me, young feller! Don't misunderstand me there. I'm a student of the Black Arts, but I don't practice them. Somebody is going to run amuk before this night is over, but it won't be old Rufus. I've insulated myself against the formula. Interesting, isn't it?"

"Absorbing!" Forbes said. He felt uneasy in the presence of this cheery old maniac, and began to edge toward the door. Just then Rufus noticed that his pipe had burned to the heel.

"I'll just cop some of cousin Jabez' tobacco," he said as he opened a heavy

humidor that stood on the table beside him, "and I'll tell you something more. I've got a theory on just *who* it is that will be affected by the murder formula and run amuk. And it's not the one ye might think, either, because——"

Rufus Clayborne broke off in the middle of a word. His face grew flushed, his eyes staring, and his lips writhed back from his teeth although no sound came from between them. An instant later he toppled to the floor. He twitched for a few seconds, even as Forbes knelt beside him, then rolled on his face and lay still. It did not take an expert eye to know that the little chemist was dead.

III

HALF a dozen people came in at Forbes' call. Members of the family and a thin-faced butler, they simply stood and stared until Silas Carter's dry voice cut through their hesitation.

"Poor Rufus!" he said, "It's heart failure, of course. His heart had been troubling him for a long time. Josh, you and Ringdon carry him up and lay him on the bed. Better phone Dr. Wehle as a matter of form, though of course there's nothing he can do."

"He was talking to me when it happened. Talking rather oddly," Jim said.

Silas Carter shrugged. "Rufus' talk was always odd. He was cracked."

"But the thing hit him so suddenly. Do you think there's any possibility—that—someone or something killed him?"

"Nonsense!" Silas snapped, "Ridiculous idea. But Dr. Wehle is coroner as well as our family physician, so he can take care of everything."

The bustle in the library subsided as quickly as it had arisen. The frail body of the little chemist was carried away, and the others hurried off with the air of people intent on returning to whatever they had been doing before the interruption occurred. There did not seem to be in any of them the slightest flicker of regret for the passing of an old man who had at least lived in the same house. Maybe Rufus had been right when he said that the Carter stock was running stale! The whole thing left a bad taste in Forbes' mouth.

For a moment Forbes walked to the window. The afternoon was gloomier than ever.

Before him was a lawn that was close cropped although thickly overgrown with the weeds of neglect, and beyond it was a pitted expanse of bare rock that swept up to the edge of the sheer cliff. The sea beyond the cliff was oily and gray, smooth surfaced above the slow lift of the ground-swell, and it was now nearly hidden by the thickening fog. Dark pines encircled the house and lawns on all sides except for the cliff edge to seaward. It was only two miles from Port Haven by the road along the cove, but the place was as lonely as though set in the center of a wilderness.

JUST then a girl came into the library, a tall girl in slacks and a silk shirt. Her dark hair had metallic tints in it, and she was smoking a cigarette in the unfeminine manner of one who really likes the taste of the smoke.

"Hello," she said, "I guess you're the book man?"

"That's right," Forbes said, "Are you one of the Carter family?"

"In a way—but don't hold it against me." There was a sudden flash of humor back of her blue eyes. Forbes was not sure whether the eyes were faintly slanted, or whether it was just that her eyebrows turned a little upward at the ends. In any case, the effect was intriguing. "I'm Jean Beldon, and I'm sort of a distant cousin of the Carters, and I live on their charity whenever I'm out of a job—as I happen to be at present. Does that answer your question?"

"No offense," Forbes said. The girl clinched out her cigarette and lit another one. The flare of the match highlighted her oval face, with its generous mouth above a slightly cleft chin. She threw the match on the floor.

"Don't mind me," she said, "I happen to have liked old Rufus, for all his queerness, and I happen to resent the way the others take his death as calmly as though it was the servants' cat that had died. Want to drive down to town with me? Dr. Wehle doesn't answer the phone, so Uncle Silas wants me to take someone along and drive down to town to look for him. I'd just

as leave have someone who's *not* a member of the family go along."

"I'll be glad to go," Jim said.

As they passed through the musty entrance hall, the girl took a plaid jacket from a hook and then a printed silk kerchief that she tied over her head with the knot beneath her chin. As soon as they were in the car, she settled back behind the wheel with a contented sigh.

"Thank God I'm out of that house for a while!" she muttered as she stepped on the starter. "It's beginning to get me."

"I've found it pretty gloomy."

"You ought to live there for a month or so!" the girl threw him a half-amused, half-deprecating glance. "Lord knows I'm not basically the nervous type, but I've lately been getting a bad attack of the willys."

"Tell me, Miss Beldon——" Forbes began.

"Call me Jean," she interrupted. "Everybody does. I'm one of those girls that people instinctively call by their first name after five minutes. It must be my lack of glamor."

"You certainly don't lack that."

"Never mind the gallantry!" she snapped with a sudden change of mood, "I've had more than enough of that around here lately!"

THEY were both silent as the car rolled along the graveled drive that led down to the main highway. Forbes quietly studied the girl beside him. She had a clear-cut profile, a face that was vivid and alert between the framing folds of the silk scarf, but there were lines of strain around her eyes and mouth. Nervousness showed in the occasional quick movements of her hands as she shifted them about on the wheel.

"How many people live at Carterscliff anyway?" he asked.

"Oh Lord," she laughed, "it's a regular menagerie. You'll meet them all at dinner. There's Uncle Silas, and Beatrice who is his new second wife and a lot younger. There are two sons, Jabez and Josh, and a daughter called Pat. And half a dozen other inmates. You'll meet them all, soon enough."

"How large a town is Port Haven?" Forbes asked.

The girl shrugged irritably. "You don't need to bother making light conversation!" she snapped.

"Really!" Forbes said, and fell silent. Jean suddenly laughed, though there was little mirth in the sound.

"I know," she said, "I can go to hell. Always say what you mean when you're around me. *I* do. It's a bad and unsocial habit, but it's my own."

The road was now winding between dark ramparts of foliage, and thin streamers of fog were beginning to drift between the trees. The smell of salt was stronger than ever. A moment later they rounded a bend and rolled into the first streets of the village.

Port Haven was full of the smell and atmosphere of the sea. It was still primarily at heart a fishing village, for all that an artist's colony had moved in and many people from Boston had adopted it as a summer home. Jean drove the car down a narrow, winding, very peaceful little street. There were no sidewalks most of the time, and the grass grew right down to the edge of the pavement, which was at the same level as the lawns. The neat frame houses were built close to the street, behind white picket fences. They passed jersey-clad fishermen along the way, and summer-folk in sports clothes, and art students ostentatiously carrying the tools of their trade. Forbes noticed that most of the girls wore slacks and a shirt as Jean did—it was obviously a regular uniform on Cape Ann.

The brakes squealed as Jean brought the car to a sudden stop. They were passing a small carnival, one of those vagrant affairs that tour innumerable small villages in the summer, with a shooting gallery and a small Ferris wheel and a tent where young people were dancing to the discordant but enthusiastic music of a three-piece orchestra.

"If I know anything of Dr. Thaddeus Wehle's gregarious habits," Jean said, "this is the first place we should look for him."

As they alighted from the car, the girl suddenly turned to Forbes. In the glow of the lights from the carnival, he could see that her face was pale against the framing silk of the scarf.

"Sorry if I've been a pain in the neck, Jim Forbes," she said, "I'm not at my best tonight. You see, I have a strong hunch that old Rufus Clayborne did not die of

heart failure as Uncle Silas claims. I think he was murdered."

IV

THE carnival was a cacaphony of noise, where the Ferris wheel creaked hoarsely, and half a dozen radios blared different tunes from the various booths, and the efforts of the sweating orchestra in the dancing tent formed a steady background. It cost a dime to get in, and—from the crowds clustered around those stalls that held assorted wheels of fortune—it probably cost most people a lot more than that to get out. Then Jean waved to a middle-aged man who stood leaning on the rail of one of the booths with his hands in his pockets and a stubby briar in his mouth.

Doctor Thaddeus Wehle was the ugliest man that Forbes had ever seen. He had a shock of iron gray hair that was badly in need of cutting, and that formed an unkempt thatch above a lined and craggy face where all the features seemed out of proportion.

"Jean here is my favorite patient," he said in a booming and resonant voice as the girl introduced them. "Now what's wrong up at the cliff? Josh Carter on the verge of the DT's again?"

"Rufus is dead," Jean said. "Uncle Silas thinks its heart failure."

"Rufus? Heart failure? Unlikely!" One of Wehle's shaggy eyebrows was cocked quizzically, and Forbes suddenly realized that he liked this man. Thaddeus Wehle was a shaggy and overgrown gargoyle in his unpressed and threadbare tweeds, but his deep-set eyes held a wealth of understanding and power. When you really looked at them, you forgot about the rest of his face. "Very unlikely! Old Rufus was more than a shade on the balmy side, which is perhaps the reason I liked him better than most of the tribe, but his heart was as strong as mine. Just wait till I leave a couple of messages with a friend here, and then I'll go right up with you."

Standing between two of the booths with Jean, Forbes thought that half of Port Haven must be at this carnival. The place was jammed with eddying crowds, who sometimes patronized the attractions and just as often stood around to gossip. Though it was still daylight, the thickening fog was giving the unshaded electrics a misty appearance.

"Why do you think old Rufus was murdered?" Forbes asked.

"Oh—it's hard to say." The girl's voice was moody, and she was staring abstractedly at the passing crowds as she spoke. "It's just that I've been expecting some kind of an ugly emotional blow-up for some time. The house is so full of suppressed passions of assorted kinds that you can almost *see* the tension. I'm not surprised that there has been a death—though I'll admit that I wouldn't have expected old Rufus to be the victim."

"Maybe it was a natural death," Forbes suggested. The girl shook her head stubbornly.

"You heard what Doctor Wehle said about the old man's heart," she said, then broke off to point across the way, "There's Jabez Carter, doing a little quiet slumming."

AS SOON as he saw the man that Jean indicated, Forbes realized that he would have recognized him anywhere for one of Silas' sons. Jabez had his father's intolerant face, his thin lips, his oddly pointed skull. He was a younger edition of the leader of the Carter clan except for one thing—an inherent weakness. There was none of the old man's grim strength on Jabez Carter's face, and his jaw was almost feminine. He was playing a wheel of fortune, putting up a dime each spin for the chance of winning packs of cigarettes, and his luck was running well. Then Jean touched Forbes on the arm.

"Come over here with me a minute," she said quietly.

A crowd of young people was pouring out from the dancing tent as the orchestra paused for one of its brief rests, and Jean moved quickly toward one couple in the throng. They were oddly assorted. The man was a wide-shouldered young fisherman, sun-tanned so heavily that his blond hair looked white and his eyebrows were two chalky smears across his forehead, but the girl was wearing a plain black dress and turban. A heavily meshed veil covered her face down to the lips.

"That pin gives you away, Pat," Jean said quietly as the couple passed them, and

the girl in black hastily lifted one hand to cover the pin that was the only ornament on her plain black dress. "Also, your brother Jabez is here. Across the way, at the third booth. Better leave."

"Thanks," the girl said, and turned her escort quickly toward the outer gate. Jean smiled at the sight of Forbes' puzzled face.

"Just a little more of the family dirt," she said wearily. "That veiled girl was Pat Carter. She's been running around with that Clem Mills, who's a nice enough boy when he's sober but is only the son of a fisherman. Pat was a fool to come here with him tonight, even with that veil on! Uncle Silas has threatened to disinherit Pat and throw her out of the house if she ever sees Clem again, and there's nothing Jabez would like better than to report to their father that he saw Pat with Clem. The Carter inheritance has been shrinking badly of late years—you know, or you wouldn't be here appraising the library—and the elimination of another heir would leave that much more for Jabez."

"He must be a louse!" Forbes said.

The girl shrugged, her eyes shadowed. "Jabez is a pretty low form of humanity—but after all, this is all none of your damn business!"

"You started the conversation!" Forbes said hotly, "Of all the women I ever met—"

"I know. I'm the worst. It's a gift. In the meantime I'm going to wander around a little."

FORBES watched the play at the nearest booth for a few minutes, then again looked across the way at Jabez Carter. He had left off playing the wheel and was now talking with someone who stood just out of sight behind the corner of the next booth. From Jabez' swift gestures, Forbes guessed that he was having an argument. Finally Jabez turned away, pulling a pipe from his pocket and jerking open the zipper of his pouch.

There was a brief lull in the noise of the radios at that moment, and the voices of the crowd formed a metallic dissonance. A man had just jostled Jabez as he hurried past. Carter was rubbing the fingers of his right hand as he stared angrily after the man.

He now held a narrow strip of white paper in one hand. Just then a deep and dismal sound drifted in from the sea. It was mournful and somber, a pulsating vibration that was like the wail of a gigantic bass viol somewhere far off-shore.

"Good Lord—what's that?" Forbes gasped. Wehle, who had just come back to rejoin him, grinned broadly.

"It's easy to see you don't come from Cape Ann, young feller! That's 'Moaning Mary,' the fog-horn at Twin Lights off Gloucester. It may sound gruesome to you, but it's welcome as the whisper of God to any guinea-boat trying to feel her way into Rockport or Gloucester or Port Haven through a fog!"

The fog-horn! Forbes' memory went back an hour before, to the moment when Rufus Clayborne had sat on the library table like a wizened gnome and expounded his weird theory of there being a certain fatal combination of sounds and smells and other sensory stimuli that was bound to arouse the murder instinct in someone. Rufus had claimed that the deep and distant booming of the fog signal was the only thing needed on that gloomy afternoon to set the formula in motion—and now the horn had started!

THE whole thing was fantastic, of course. Forbes knew that. Such things were part of the Black Magic of the Middle Ages, when men imagined a demon lurking in every shadow, and in this modern age such a yarn was merely a figment of a fertile imagination combined with a disordered mind.

A moment of such logical thought put the whole thing back in its proper perspective, and it was comforting in cold sort of way—but it did not help Jim Forbes shake off his uneasy feeling of impending disaster.

He glanced across the way at Jabez Carter—and then felt the short hairs begin to prickle all across the back of his neck!

There was something wrong. Jabez Carter had stopped, to stand with one hand gripping a post to steady him as he swayed unsteadily on his feet. His face had taken on a darkly ugly flush, the pipe and tobacco pouch slipped from his failing fingers. An instant later he pitched quietly forward—to lie motionless on his face!

V

THEY had carried the body into an unused booth, while a uniformed constabule arrived to hold back the curious crowd. Thaddeus Wehle, a huge and misshapen gargoyle in tweeds, squatted beside the dead man while Jean had not moved and stood leaning against one of the posts supporting the tent.

Her face was pale against the framing silk of her scarf.

"First Rufus, and now Jabez!" she said dully. "The luck of the Carters seems to have run out at last."

"This man had been poisoned." Wehle spoke heavily, dispiritedly, the slow and deliberate voice of an ageing man who encounters unpleasant things. He held up the dead man's right hand. "And here is where it was done. This pin prick——"

"Curare!" Forbes said suddenly. Wehle straightened up and spun around to face him.

"What made you say that?" he snapped.

For the first time, Forbes really sensed the power inherent in Thaddeus Wehle. No longer was he merely a middle aged country doctor, who happened to be also local coroner but disliked the discharge of such duties. His deep-set eyes blazed at Forbes, and his voice was as sharp as the crack of a whip.

"What do *you* know about curare? Speak up!"

"Only this," Forbes said, "someone came in the library for a few minutes this afternoon while I was upstairs, and looked up the paragraph about curare in an old book about magic and poisons. They didn't put the book back quite the way I left it, and the page they had been reading was marked by a slip of paper."

Wehle sighed and turned away, thrusting his hands deep in his pockets and staring down at the dead man.

"Poor Jabez!" he said moodily. "He wanted so badly to really amount to something, and somehow he never did. He had all the faults of his turbulent ancestry, with none of the virtues. I've never claimed to view Silas Carter with undiluted approval, but at least he's a man, and Jabez was never more than an ineffectual imitation of one! It seems somehow ironically fitting that he lies dead in the midst of a cheap little carnival."

"Don't speak ill of the dead," Jean said unsteadily.

"Why not?" Wehle snapped. "It can't hurt them. Besides, this is murder, and we can't tell just what unpleasant corridors we may have to explore before we're through. What I want most to know is just how the murderer managed to make that prick in the hand and get the venom under the skin. A good dose of curare acts very quickly."

"He had been having an argument with someone I couldn't see, someone who was standing just behind the corner of the booth," Forbes said. "Also, I saw a man brush against him just as he walked away. A man in a dark suit."

"Would you know him again?"

"Not possibly. All I had was a hasty glimpse of his back."

"You're a big help!" Wehle grumbled. "Where are the things Jabez dropped as he fell?"

From his pocket, Forbes took out the dead man's pipe and tobacco pouch, and a slip of white cardboard. It was a visiting card that bore the name: Harvey Grant.

"Grant!" Jean exclaimed. "He's one of Beatrice's guests up at the house. Do you think he killed Jabez?"

"Sure—and left his card behind to prove it!" Wehle said with heavy sarcasm. He straightened up.

"Bring those things along, Forbes. Now listen! I've got to get hold of the State Police, of course, but the position of coroner carries a lot of authority in some of these small towns, and a good deal of this is going to fall on my shoulders. I want to break the news of this, up at Carterscliff, in my own time and my own way."

"We'll do anything we can to help, of course," Jean said.

"You two drive back, and report that you found me and that I'll be up in a little while. That's all. Don't say anything about Jabez till I mention it myself."

Followed by the girl, Forbes pushed his way through the curious and staring crowd outside the booth till they came to Jean's parked car. It was dark now, and the thickening fog formed a white wall in front of the headlights as they drove back along

the cove, so that they had to go slowly with their eyes on the side of the road. At regular intervals the boom of the fog-horn crept shudderingly inland.

"I hate that sound!" Jean said in a low tone, the tenseness in her voice betraying the taut condition of her nerves, "I've come to hate this whole bleak coast! As soon as this mess is straightened out, I'm going to go back to the city and revel in bright lights and the noise of traffic."

"The investigation of this matter shouldn't delay *you* long," Jim said.

"No—if there isn't any more to come."

"What do you mean?" he asked. She turned to glance at him for a moment, and even in the dim glow of light from the dashboard he could see the fear in her eyes.

"I told you once before that Carterscliff is so full of clashing human emotions that I've been expecting some kind of a blow-up. It has come—murder! I'm just wondering if anyone else is to die before this mess is cleared up."

VI

THE family and guests were gathered in the big living room at Carterscliff when Forbes and Jean came in. A dozen people, standing or sitting around the room with glasses in their hands, they nodded casually to Jean and scarcely glanced at Forbes when Silas Carter mentioned his name in introduction. Their treatment of a newcomer was casual to the point of discourtesy, but at this particular moment it fitted in perfectly with Forbes' mood. He wasn't sufficiently sure of his histrionic ability to enjoy any attempt at animated and superficial conversation while the others were still unaware of the fact that an accustomed member of the group was now lying dead in a fog-filled tent a few miles away. He walked gratefully across to the table where Ringdon, the imperturbable butler, handed him a cocktail.

Jean came across to join him a moment later, and the two of them stood leaning against the wall near the door. All about them were the dark paneled walls of this essentially somber house, walls hung with the portraits of long dead generations of Carters and with the varigated trophies they had accumulated from all over the world. None of the other people in the room was paying any attention to Forbes or Jean.

"Charmingly inhospitable household!" she said with quiet sarcasm.

Forbes was glancing from face to face as he looked around the room. "Suppose you tell me who everyone is," he said.

"The youngish looking blonde in the print dress, with the fixed smile and the agitated hands, is Beatrice—Uncle Silas' second wife," Jean said. "She's not quite as young as she looks, but she works at it hard. The man with her is Harvey Grant."

"Handsome looking brute," Forbes said. "Like a movie version of a prize-fighter! What does he do?"

"At the moment I don't think he does anything except live off the Carters. Beatrice has a habit collecting odd people for long visits, and Grant is one of her present crop. Dolores Capanelli over there is another of her finds."

"The snaky looking dame in black satin?"

"With the net turban and the long fingernails!" Jean smiled. "That's the one. She's supposed to be a spiritualist, but I think she's phony. Next to the left—"

Jean went on, quietly naming them all. Josh Carter, younger son of Silas and brother of the murdered Jabez, had the typical family characteristics of an angular face and intolerant eyes, but there was weakness in the lines of his slack mouth. His sister Pat, the black dress she had worn at the carnival now discarded for the inevitable slacks and shirt, was stamped with a sullen petulance. Elaine, Jabez' wife, was talking to Silas at the moment, but all the time her slate-gray eyes kept straying across the room to Harvey Grant.

"I KNOW they're mostly your relatives and I'm sorry," Forbes said, "but I think they're phony." No other word quite so well described the general impression of insincerity, of studied pose. It applied to them all, from the theatrically dramatic Dolores to the blonde and indolent Elaine. The only two people in the room who seemed completely normal were Ringdon, the self-effacing butler, and his equally colorless daughter who was acting as maid.

Then Thaddeus Wehle came in. For a moment he stood in the doorway, a

bulky and massive figure with cold eyes, before he stepped fully into the room. He looked grim, and old, and the lines in his face seemed to have deepened since Forbes left him at the carnival. As the others looked up, and the hum of conversation died for a moment, Wehle's deep voice cut sharply across the room.

"Have any of you seen Jabez lately?" he asked.

The reaction varied. Knowing what he knew, watching them all closely, Jim Forbes could not see any sign of nervousness or alarm in any of them. Silas shook his head absently, and Josh looked annoyed, whereas Elaine only gave a bored and contemptuous shrug. Wehle's deep-set eyes flickered once around the room, and then returned to the dead man's wife. He spoke to them all, and his tone held them, but he watched Elaine.

"I just wondered," he said, "I asked about Jabez, because it may become very important to know who it was that spoke to him last. You see—Jabez was murdered, less than an hour ago."

There was an instant's dead silence, a silence so deep that the ticking of the ormulu clock on the mantel rang loud, and the distant wail of the fog-horn was a throbbing thunder. Silas had gone pale except for a single spot of color in each cheek, and Elaine was standing motionless with her glass lifted halfway to her mouth, but it was Beatrice Carter who spoke first.

"How—how ghastly!" she said. An instant later there was a shattering crash as Agnes the maid dropped a full tray of cocktail glasses on the hearth.

VII

THE tension broke—in a sudden babel of words. Questions volleyed at Wehle from all of them, but he had not taken his eyes off Elaine Carter and he did not seem to have heard the others at all.

"When did you last see your husband, Elaine?" he asked.

"Shortly after lunch," she said slowly. The others had drawn a little away from Elaine, and now she suddenly turned to face them all. Her smooth, straight blonde hair flashed in the light, and her red dress was a vivid touch of color in the somber room. Bitter lines ran down from her nose to the corners of her mouth. "I know what you're all thinking!" she flung at them, and her voice was a metallic rasp. "The whole lot of you! You're thinking that I'm not sorry that Jabez is gone. Well—you're right! I won't deny it. You've made my life a hell, the whole lot of you, ever since I married into this damned and decadent family, but Jabez himself was the worst of the lot. I'm glad he's gone—and you can make anything out of that you like!"

"Well—really!" Dolores drawled coldly. "This seems to be one of those little family scenes from which any outsider should withdraw." She started for the door, but Wehle merely pointed at her with one blunt forefinger.

"Sit down!" he barked. The spiritualist glared at him for an instant, then dropped into a chair without another word. The old doctor's grim glance swung back to Elaine.

"You're frank, Elaine, so I'll be equally so," he rumbled. "How am I to know that you're not involved in your husband's murder?"

IT WAS as brutal as a slap in the face. Elaine went pale to the lips, and Forbes heard Jean gasp in sympathy, but as the woman turned to face Wehle her voice was almost calm again.

"I don't suppose you do know it," she said. "All I can say is that I don't know anything about the matter at all. How was he killed?"

"By being pricked in the hand with something sharp that had been smeared with a South American poison called curare. Where had you been for an hour previous to the time the family gathered in this room for cocktails?"

"I'll answer that question!" another voice cut in.

Harvey Grant stepped forward from where he had been standing by the fireplace. A broad-shouldered figure in checked tweeds, with the bearing of a cavalryman and a heavily tanned face, he stood facing Wehle with his hands on his hips and hostility written in every line of his body.

"I'll answer that question," he repeated. "Elaine was with me, walking out there on the terrace, for well over an hour before Ringdon came into this room with the cock-

tails. And what do you think of *that,* my sour-faced friend?"

"So now we hear from the outlying counties!" Wehle drawled. His manner had abruptly changed. He had been trying to force an admission out of Elaine by the sheer brutality of pounding questions before she had time to recover from the shock of his announcement of Jabez' death. Now his craggy face had become quizzical. "Since you're so anxious to talk, my fine-feathered friend, you can go ahead and talk a little more. Just who are you, and what are you doing in this house?"

"And who are *you* that has any right to ask questions?" Grant snapped.

Wehle shrugged. "We're getting nowhere fast! I happen to be not merely the Carter family physician, but also the local coroner. I want everyone to tell me exactly what they have been doing for the past two hours. In detail! We'll begin with you, Silas."

"Aren't you being unnecessarily officious, Thaddeus?" Silas Carter's flat and toneless voice was unchanged. Forbes would have thought the old man completely untouched by his son's death, except that a small muscle was twitching in the left side of his face. "It's unthinkable that anyone here could have had anything to do with this terrible thing."

"Murder is unthinkable in itself—so we'll just have to go ahead," Wehle persisted dryly.

Silas shrugged. "I was in my study with Josh the whole time," he said. Wehle's thoughtful eyes flickered over to Pat Carter.

"And you?" he asked. The girl bit her lower lip for a moment.

"I—I was walking through Port Haven," she said in a low voice.

Wehle nodded. "I know. With Clem Mills. I recognized you through the veil," Wehle said.

A sudden touch of angry color appeared in Silas Carter's thin cheeks. "Clem Mills again! I've forbidden you to ever see him!" he snapped, and for a fleeting instant there was emotion in his flat voice. Pat faced him with a sort of panicky defiance, but it was Josh Carter who answered before his sister could speak.

"Leave her alone!" he said hoarsely. "What if Clem is the son of old man Mills, who happens to be your worst enemy? At least Clem has none of our rotten Carter blood in him!"

"Be silent!" Silas snarled through thin lips, his voice a venomous hiss, but Josh rushed on.

"Leave Pat alone! You've ruined *my* life, and now you want to make a mess out of hers!"

"*I* ruined your life?" Silas' voice was knife-sharp with scorn. "You whimpering whelp! If you and your precious brother and sister had ever been capable of doing a stroke of work for yourselves, any one of you, we might not now be so near the verge of ruin that we're selling the library and the other family valuables."

"Hold on, Silas," Wehle interrupted soothingly. "We've a nasty job on our hands at best in this thing, and we won't make it any better by bickering among ourselves. While I go upstairs and see if old Rufe died the same way Jabez did, you folks pull yourselves together so we can have an orderly investigation afterwards. By the way—I don't see any way that the robbery motive could enter into this picture at all, but does there happen to be anything of value in the house at the moment? Would either Jabez or Rufus have access to it?"

SILAS CARTER walked slowly across to one of the smaller portraits on the wall, and swung it aside on hinges to reveal the round door of a wall safe. He spun the knob a few times, carefully standing so that no one could see the figures he used, then opened the door and took out several flat boxes covered with faded velvet.

"There they are," he said wearily, and the lamplight shone on the flashing brilliance of diamonds as he opened the covers. "The Carter diamonds. The last relic of what is left of the family fortune. The gems that Captain Caleb Carter brought back from the Orient when he returned to build this house, over a hundred years ago. I brought them up from a safe deposit box in Boston yesterday, to be ready when a jeweler comes to appraise them tomorrow. But they couldn't be involved in this thing. Neither Rufus nor Jabez even knew they were here."

As Silas replaced the jewel boxes in the safe, Wehle turned toward the door.

"I'll be down to ask my questions in a few minutes," he said. Dolores Capanelli suddenly pointed across the room at Harvey Grant.

"There is evil in this room, Doctor!" she cried, "I am psychic. I can tell such things. Why don't you question *that* man? He is a penniless adventurer. He recently came from South America. You said it was a South American poison that was used. There is your man!"

Dolores was a dramatic figure in her unrelieved black, standing there with one arm outstretched in an accusing gesture. Grant looked at her with a twisted grin.

"You always put on a good act, sister," he said. "Too bad you're such a fake. Guess you've never forgiven me for giving you the brush-off the other night! As far as the Doc here is concerned, I'll answer any questions he asks. I'm thirty-eight years old, I weigh a hundred and seventy pounds, I've kicked around the world a hell of a lot, I'm probably not much good by some standards, but I have a lot of fun. I'm allergic to spinach, bad liquor and fake spiritualists. Anything else that anyone would like to know? That's about the story, except that I'm one person in this house who has no possible connection with the murders."

"A very comprehensive statement of facts, Mr. Grant," Thaddeus Wehle drawled, and it was hard to tell what lay behind his heavy lidded eyes. "It's a pleasure to have such an informative witness. However — I wouldn't be quite so sure about your having no possible connection with this crime. You see—your calling card was in Jabez Carter's hand when he died!"

VIII

WEHLE had gone upstairs to examine Rufus Clayborne's body. The rest of the household, suddenly showing a marked disinclination for each other's society, had scattered until such time as Wehle might summon them again. Forbes was looking for Jean Belden, who had momentarily disappeared in the confusion. He looked in the empty library, started into a small room across the hall, and then veered off again as he saw that Silas and Josh were inside. The voices of father and son were both pitched to a low whisper, but there was a sibilant venom in their tone and he could tell that the two men were again quarreling. He would have felt better about this whole place if there had been any sign of sincere grief for the dead! A moment later he met Jean returning down the stairs, and the two of them walked out through the side door to the terrace beyond the living room.

The fog was wet in their faces. Its pale mistiness distorted everything, so that the stunted cedars near the house were weird and grotesque shapes in the glow of light from the windows. The girl took his arm as he closed the door behind them, and he heard her draw a long breath of relief.

"It's good to get out of that place, even if only for a few minutes! Jim—do you really think that someone in this house, someone with whom we will be sitting down to dinner in a few minutes, is the murderer?"

"Probably so. Jabez' death was carefully planned by whoever did it, not done in the heat of a sudden quarrel. Probably planned by someone who had been thinking about it for a long time! It takes a good deal to prod a man into committing a murder."

"I wonder if it takes as much to prod a woman into doing something of the sort!"

"Why did you say that?" he asked.

Jean pressed her hands to her eyes for a moment. "Oh—I don't know. Don't pay any attention to me, Jim. Let's walk a little further."

They were both wearing rubber-soled shoes, and their feet made no sound on the wet stones of the terrace as they rounded the corner of the house. Then Jean's fingers tightened on Forbes' arm, and they came to an abrupt halt. Two people were standing there, a man and a woman. They were partly concealed by the stunted cedars below the library windows, but the glow from inside was enough to pick out the vivid red of Elaine Carter's dress as she stood with Harvey Grant's arms around her.

"But, darling," Grant said hesitantly, "you don't understand. It's just that I don't want to seem—well—rushing things too much."

"Why not?" Elaine's voice was crisp, with a hint of hardness, and yet it was now a warmly human voice. There was in it

none of the mingled hauteur and boredom, none of the artificial elements, that had earlier been present. "Why not? There's no use my pretending a sorrow I don't feel for the loss of that cold-blooded sadist that men called Jabez Carter! Nor am I ashamed of the fact that I love you, even though I had to conceal it while Jabez was still alive—"

Forbes and Jean went quietly back the way they had come, around the terrace and in the living room door. Thaddeus Wehle beckoned them into the library.

"As I expected, old Rufus is dead of the same thing that killed Jabez," he said, "curare poisoning. Show me just where he was standing when it happened."

Forbes looked about the gloomy room, with its long shelves of books and its stained ceiling. The fog was now turning to rain outside, but within the library there was still a faint mistiness that gave the lights an aureate effect and seemed to lurk heavily in the corners. The dampness, and the musty smell, were crawling, tangible things in this chamber. Forbes shivered. His own working papers still lay on the small table across the room where he had left them a few hours before, but two men had died since he had made the last entry in his notebook. It was in this same room that old Rufus had expounded his bizarre theory of the mysterious combination of events that brings the murder madness into the brains of men, and it was here that the Dark Destroyer had struck down the old man as he talked.

"He was sitting right there, on the end of that table," Forbes said, and it took a definite effort to hold his voice steady.

"Were there any windows open?"

"No."

"Then there's another theory gone to hell!" Wehle sighed, and moved across the room to the table where Rufus met his death. "Curare may be administered by a thorn shot from a blow-gun, and I'd been wondering if that could be how Jabez and Rufus were killed. A blow-gun is accurate for quite some distance, and I thought that Rufus might have been killed that way through an open window. The main thing that puzzles me is the fact that both men were pricked in the fingers of the right hand when they were poisoned."

"Coincidence?" Jean suggested.

Wehle shook his head. "Coincidences of that sort don't happen. What was Rufus doing when he was stricken?"

"Sitting there talking," Forbes said slowly, "Smoking. Wait a minute—he had just said something about borrowing some of Jabez' tobacco, and had just filled his pipe from that humidor beside you."

"This one?" Wehle lifted the cover from the heavily carved humidor and stared at the tobacco inside. His eyes were grim. "Both men were poisoned through a prick in the right hand, both men were in the act of filling a pipe when they were killed. That's too much of a coincidence! There's nothing but a lot of tobacco in this humidor *now*, of course. Where is Jabez' pouch?"

"Why—I put it right over there on the table just before you came downstairs!" Forbes said. "The pipe and the pouch and the calling card."

"You ought to know better than to leave any piece of evidence lying around that way!" Wehle said wearily. "Someone has been here before us."

The dead man's pipe lay on the table where Forbes had placed it, and the calling card was propped against the pipe, but the pouch was gone!

IX

WEHLE dropped into a chair, and momentarily tugged at his shaggy hair with the fingers of both hands.

"Just one more thing to make it all harder!" he said. "The answer to the method of killing lies in tobacco in some way, but I can't figure it out. Y'know, I don't think the murderer meant to kill old Rufus at all. It would be pretty hard to think up any motive that anyone might have for wanting to kill *both* Rufe and Jabez—but if Rufe's death was an accident, the picture becomes a little clearer. This was Jabez' humidor, after all, the thing that happened to Rufus was probably intended for the other man. When that scheme went astray, the killer tried something else."

"But don't you think it was Harvey Grant?" Jean said.

Wehle glanced at her with a wryly humorous smile. "Grant? Not necessarily,

child. The finger of suspicion points a little *too* directly toward him to suit me. I think I smell red herring. And don't forget that *someone* had been reading up on curare while Jim here was out of the library. It could have been anyone in the house. Even you."

"Me?" Jean exclaimed, and all the color suddenly drained from her face.

Wehle's eyes crinkled at the corners. "Even you. Don't forget, that about a month ago you told me that Jabez Carter had a tendency to forget the cousinly relation, and make what are commonly termed passes at you."

"But—but—" the girl said.

Wehle grinned, and reached over to pat her hand. "Don't mind my perverted sense of humor, child. I hate cases of this sort anyway, and they do things to my otherwise sunny and kindly disposition. Besides—" He broke off as the door-knob rattled. The door opened, and Harvey Grant came slowly into the library.

"Can I bother you for a moment, Doctor?" he said hesitantly. "There's something I want to get off my chest."

"Do you want Jean and me to leave?" Forbes asked.

Grant shook his head. "No. You might as well stay. There's nothing confidential or concealed about what I have to say."

For a long moment Grant hesitated, leaning against the table with his hands in his pockets and a twisted smile on his handsome, reckless face. Seen at such close range, Forbes realized that the other man was older than he usually appeared. Grant's hair was beginning to be shot with gray, and there were heavy lines around his eyes. Then Grant turned to Wehle.

"I guess there's nothing to do but come out with this flat-footed, Doc! I didn't kill Rufus or Jabez! I know I'm the number one suspect—but I have no idea how Jabez came to have that card. I've just looked for my card case in my room, and it's missing. You see, I just don't happen to be a murderer, Doc. Oh—I admit I'm not much good! Never have been. Too unstable, I guess. Too much of a drifter. Too fond of living by my wits, and on the hospitality of anyone with whom I can strike up a friendship. Ever the rolling stone, that gathers neither moss nor worldly goods, nor even much respect from his fellow men! I'm a moocher, if you like, but I'm not a killer."

For a long moment Grant paused. His eyes were distant now, staring off into distant times and places, while his smile had become merely a grimace of self derision. Forbes sensed that Grant was having one of those moods of honest introspection that come but very rarely to men of his type. Then Grant shrugged, and brought his glance back to Wehle.

"I know things look kind of bad for me, Doc. I'll even admit something you don't know and that makes things look a little worse—I'm in love with Elaine Carter. Just one of those things, with both of us, I guess. From what she's told me of Jabez, it's not hard to imagine someone getting sore enough to kill him! As far as I'm concerned all I can say is this: I'm a pretty useless member of society—but I'm not a murderer. When I really get sore at someone, I slam his teeth down his throat without any messing around about it! Now—is there anything you want me to do?"

"Not just at the moment." All the iron was gone from Wehle's voice now, and his tone was friendly. "I'll talk to you again, later. But—you forgot to mention the most convincing thing of all in your own defense. If you were going to kill Jabez Carter, you would scarcely arrange to have your own calling card in his hand at the time!"

When Grant had gone, Wehle looked after him with a twisted smile.

"Poor devil!" he said. "I know that breed, and nothing comes harder than for a man of that sort to admit he's just a glorified bum—instead of the glamorous figure he's always trying to pretend."

"So Grant didn't do it after all!" Jean said.

WEHLE grinned again, and ran one hand through his mop of shaggy gray hair. "Not necessarily, child. How you do jump to conclusions! He *might* have simply been very careless about that calling card. It's possible, though it looks more to me as though it was someone else trying to lay the blame on Grant. But let's get something to eat! I see that Ringdon has set out a buffet supper in the dining room.

After that I want to ask everybody some questions, and then phone the State Police to come up here and stand by."

Ringdon was standing in the dining room, as imperturbable and colorless as ever, when they came in. There were none of the family present at the moment. Ringdon moved to serve them from the buffet—but, after a quick glance around, he suddenly bent toward Wehle.

"There's something I ought to tell you, Doctor!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Begging your pardon, sir. I think it's quite important, sir. About the murders."

Forbes smothered a grin. Ringdon's hoarse tone and furtive manner, the sudden gleam in his pale eyes, held all the melodrama of a man who encounters something stark and elemental for the first time in his narrow life. Ringdon was enjoying himself.

"What is it?" Wehle asked. Ringdon's whisper reached an even lower pitch.

"I hesitate to say this, sir, having been with the family for so many years. But justice must be done, and all that sort of thing. Isn't that right, sir?"

"Yes, yes, go on!" Wehle said. Ringdon moistened his colorless lips.

"It's something I overheard last night, when I happened to go by the study. Mr. Silas Carter and Mr. Jabez—may the Lord rest his soul!—were both in there. I heard the Master—that is, Mr. Silas—threaten Mr. Jabez."

"Threaten him?" Wehle said sharply, the amusement fading from his eyes. "Are you sure? Can you give me exactly what he said?"

"I can give you his exact words, sir!" Ringdon said. He bent forward, and with an unsuspected power of mimicry his whisper took on some of the qualities of Silas Carter's flat voice. "I'm warning you, Jabez! Try that sort of thing just once more, and by God I'll kill you as I would poison a rat!"

X

THADDEUS WEHLE sat hunched over the wheel of his car, with Forbes wedged in the front seat beside him. The doctor was one of those people who cannot drive a car with either grace or relaxation, and he was an awkward figure in the dim light from the dashboard as he sat bent forward with both big hands gripping the wheel as though he feared it might jump away from him at any moment.

"I'll drive you back to the Hall again a little later on," he rumbled. "There's a lot of angles to this case that I want to think about, and I can always think better at home. You're elected because I want company."

The fog from the sea hung wraith-like in every street in town as Wehle's car rattled slowly through the narrow lanes of Port Haven. They stopped before a big and ugly old house on a corner, a rambling place that had been built sometime in the Eighties and had apparently only been repainted once or twice since then. Wehle plodded slowly up the graveled walk and opened the front door with a push of one big hand.

"Don't you ever keep it locked?" Forbes asked.

"Nothing here that's worth stealing anyway," Wehle rumbled, and switched on the light.

THEY were standing in a dim hall that was filled with fog and furnished with some very old-fashioned furniture. In some subtle way the house and its fittings managed to look as disorderly and unpressed as Thaddeus Wehle himself. The air was musty, and rank with the smoke of strong tobacco burned long hours before, but at the same time a bowl of fresh flowers stood on one of the rickety tables.

"Come on in here," Wehle said, switching on the light in a room that opened off the hall to the left.

The room seemed to be the doctor's study. It was cluttered and disorderly, with many of the attributes of a junk shop. The desk was buried under assorted piles of papers, the table was loaded with books, while the book-cases were crammed with odds and ends. Yet, for all its messy chaos, the room had a very genial and home-like flavor.

"Make yourself at home," Wehle rumbled hospitably. "Sit down. Chuck some of that stuff on the floor to clear a chair."

Forbes literally had to put a pile of junk on the floor in order to clear a chair to sit

in. Some of his surprise must have shown on his face, for Wehle chuckled.

"Go on, boy, say it!" he drawled.

"Say what?"

"That I live in a pig-sty. I know it, and I simply hate order and neatness. The only thing that's ever orderly around here is my garden, where I dig at all hours. Probably looking like an old fool as I go poking about! Well anyway, let's go to work."

Wehle pushed some books aside to make a clear space on the table where he spread out his notes.

"Let's take stock of what little we know and what guesses we can make," he said. "First off, do you have any good theories on who could have done all this?"

"Has everybody up at the house got an alibi?" Forbes asked. Wehle shrugged.

"An alibi? Oh, yes. Doesn't mean a thing in a poison case like this, as whoever planted the poison could have been far away when the victims encountered it. I only asked all those questions up at the house to see if I could catch anyone in any inconsistencies."

"What about motive?" Forbes asked. Wehle sucked noisily on his pipe, and rumpled his shaggy hair.

"Motive? That's a little thing that doesn't help us much in this case, either. Practically everybody in the place had reason for strongly disliking Jabez Carter. Grant was in love with Jabez' wife. Elaine hated her husband. Josh was jealous of a dwindling heritage. That Dolores woman is up to no good, whatever her game may be. Your girl-friend Jean hated Jabez, and right now she's acting like a girl with something very heavy on her mind. And so it goes! The thing that troubles me most of all—" and now a grim note crept into Wehle's voice to replace the half-amused exasperation, "—is that I'm afraid the skein of death is not yet all unraveled. Somehow, it doesn't yet look like a completed picture to me. I'm wondering if someone else is yet to die."

"Good God—why?" Forbes asked.

Wehle's heavy shoulders moved restlessly. "Call it a hunch, if you like. Call it a presentment. Call it what you prefer. There's something evil afoot up there on the fog-shrouded bluff at Carterscliff, something unclean, and it worries me. I wish we knew just how Rufus and Jabez were given the poison that killed them! I wish we knew who took Jabez' tobacco pouch out of the library—and why."

"What about Silas Carter?" Forbes asked. "What about Ringdon's tale of having heard him threaten to poison Jabez?"

"Oh—that!" Wehle sighed. "I don't doubt Ringdon heard it. In a moment of anger, any of us may say something we don't really mean. I'll admit that the mention of poison makes the thing a gruesome coincidence, but I don't think that the incident means any more than that. I've known Silas Carter for more than forty years, and —while he has never filled me with any great amount of admiration—I can't quite picture him as capable of killing his own son. I don't think it's in the cards. Besides——"

Wehle broke off as there came a sharp knock at the outer door. It was an urgent and insistent rapping, and as soon as Wehle shouted a summons they heard the hasty opening of the door and then the tread of heavy feet in the hall. A moment later Silas Carter stood in the door of the study.

"I had to see you at once, Thaddeus," he said. "There are some things I want to tell you."

XI

SILAS was wearing a raincoat, an old black affair that was worn and cracked around the pockets, but he had forgotten his hat. The whole top of his dome-shaped skull was glistening with the wet, and his thin gray hair hung lankly down over his forehead. His eyes, those pale eyes that were normally serpentine in their lack of expression, were now the haunted eyes of an agonized and tortured man.

"The diamonds are gone, Thaddeus!" he gasped. "The Carter diamonds. They've been stolen!"

"*What!*" Wehle had been sprawled languidly in a battered armchair, but now he came to his feet with a jolt. "Are you sure?"

"Someone drilled a hole right through the combination of the wall-safe. The diamonds are gone, the safe is empty."

"Aren't the State Police there?"

"There was a trooper on guard by the front door, but he didn't hear anything."

"I don't understand it. I don't understand it at all!" Wehle was shaking his big head slowly from side to side, and his eyes were smouldering beneath their shaggy brows. "That sort of thing just doesn't fit into this picture at all. We'll go right back up there with you!"

Wehle snatched his own raincoat, which was flung across a smoking stand, and struggled into it with all the heavy haste of an elephant. Then, as the phone rang out in the hall, he went off to answer it. When he came back there were grim lines about his mouth.

"That call was from George Mills, father of young Clem," he said. "George says that he's still no friend of the Carters, but that he doesn't believe in killing, and that there's one thing I ought to know. The person with whom Jabez was talking behind the booth, just before he was killed, was Jean Belden."

"Jean!" Forbes exclaimed. Wehle nodded. Silas had taken a small object from his pocket.

"There's something else, Thaddeus," he said, holding out one hand. On his moist and dead white palm rested a small china jar, of the sort often used to hold cold cream or other toilet preparations. Only, when he lifted the cap, they saw that the jar held a dark and gummy substance.

Cautiously Wehle lifted the jar from the other man's hand, and carried it over to the light. He looked at it, sniffed it, and then carefully locked the jar in one of the drawers of his massive and old-fashioned desk.

"Pending actual analysis, I think that is curare," he said. "There's enough of the vile stuff in that jar to poison half of Port Haven! Where did you find it?"

"In one of the pantry drawers. The one that is used by Agnes, the butler's daughter, for storing some of her personal trinkets."

"Agnes Ringdon?" Wehle said. "I'd have thought she and her father were the only two people at the house I didn't have to worry about at all. Probably someone planted the jar there."

"I thought of that," Silas said. "I tried to find her, to ask her about it before I came down to see you, but she didn't seem to be anywhere about the house."

"We'd better get right back."

Again they drove through the night, around the rim of the cove and up the pine-flanked road where the mist choked the beam of the headlights and their only guide was often the white line painted down the center of the macadam. The density of the fog was irregular.

Sometimes it thinned out so that they could see the dark trunks of the trees lining the road, other times they dipped into a hollow where the ghostly vapor poured up and over the windshield like an inverted waterfall and they had to slow down to a crawl to hold the road at all.

"The wind is making up. This will be gone in a few more hours," Wehle said, and that was the only word spoken until they turned into the graveled drive and a state trooper in glistening oil-skins stepped out from the shadow of a tree.

"Anything new, Harkins?" Wehle asked as the trooper touched the dripping visor of his rubber-covered cap.

"Not a thing, Doctor. But, as far as the theft of the jewels is concerned, I'm certain that no one except Mr. Carter here has left the house since you drove away yourself, a couple of hours ago. As you told us, we have a ring of men surrounding the place."

"I didn't know you had the place surrounded," Silas said in his flat voice.

"Do I have to tell you everything I do?" Wehle snapped irritably. He turned back to the trooper.

"Anybody come in?"

"A man came up the road on foot a little while ago. It was too dark to see who it was."

"Good Lord, you might have taken the trouble to find out!" Wehle growled.

"But you told us not to stop anyone coming in!" the trooper protested.

"I didn't tell you to be blind about it at the same time! Never mind, we'll find who it was when we get inside."

Ringdon opened the front door as soon as their feet sounded on the stoop. The butler's thin face, relaxing its accustomed mask for the second time that evening, showed an expression of profound relief.

"I'm glad you're back sir!" he said.

"So am I!" snapped Wehle, tossing his raincoat over the bannister as he strode down the hall to the living room. "Who came here?"

"No one has come since Mr. Silas left to look for you."

"No one?"

"No one at all."

"Where's Miss Belden?"

"I don't know. She's not to be found. Mrs. Beatrice wanted her a little while ago, but she can't be located."

Wehle hesitated, pulling at his square and pugnacious chin. Beatrice Carter and Dolores were sitting on a divan at the far end of the room, staring curiously at the newcomers, but Wehle ignored them. Ringdon coughed apologetically as he edged forward.

"Begging your pardon, Doctor, there's something else that's worrying me," he said, "it's my daughter, Agnes."

"What about her?"

"She's disappeared. Since before Mr. Silas left to drive down to town. I can't find her anywhere about the house, and that isn't natural."

"She can't have gone far," Wehle said absently. "The cordon of police would have stopped her."

All of them stood silent, waiting for Wehle to speak further. Forbes, looking across the room, suddenly saw Beatrice Carter's eyes widen while her cheeks went deathly pale under their rouge.

"Look! Look there!" she screamed. Following the direction of her rigidly pointing arm, they saw a dim white blur at one of the living room windows. It was the face of a man, a man who peered in from the outside!

XII

THERE was a moment's tense stillness! There was something horrible and grotesque about that dim white face at the window, something ominous. Then, as Wehle leaped to his feet with an oath, the face vanished.

"Come on!" Wehle shouted. "Get him!"

They pounded across the living room, and out the side door onto the terrace. A dim-seen figure was streaking across the lawn as it fled through the misty darkness.

"Have you got a gun?" Forbes shouted as they ran. Wehle shook his head.

"Never carry one," he panted. "Hate the damn things. Always going off and hurting somebody."

The fleeing figure was headed straight for the sheer cliff at the far end of the lawn. Suddenly, as though realizing that his path would end in a few more yards, he wheeled sharply to the right and darted for the shelter of the trees beyond the lawn.

"The police will get him now!" Wehle said.

It happened a few seconds later. They heard a crashing in the underbrush, and sudden shouts. The darting beam of a flashlight flickered between the trees. A moment later a pair of State troopers pushed their way through the bushes to the lawn, leading between them a disheveled young man in a bare head and sodden sweater.

"Is this your murderer, Doctor?" one of the troopers asked, flashing his light in the prisoner's face. It was the young man who had been at the carnival with Pat Carter that afternoon!

The young fisherman was panting, and his expression was a mixture of surprise and chagrin. His freckled face, now seen in the glow of a trooper's flash, looked very normal and healthy. Far different from the way it had appeared through the fog-smeared window pane of the living room a few moments before! Forbes supposed that it was the unexpectedness of the apparition that had made it look so frightening at the time. Wehle had pushed his hat to the back of his shaggy head.

"Clem Wills!" he said. "What the devil are you doing here?"

"Just walking around. Is that a crime?" Wills' square jaw was stubbornly set, and Wehle tapped him on the chest with a heavy forefinger.

"Snap out of it, Clem! We're dealing with a murderer in this thing, and anyone who goes sneaking around in the darkness has something to explain. What were you doing here?"

"I'm not talking," Wills said.

"Trying to protect Pat Carter, Clem?" Wehle's voice softened, grew confidential, and he dropped one hand on the young fisherman's shoulder. "If that's it, you don't need to worry. The whole matter

about Pat still going around with you came out in a discussion a little while ago, so there's nothing to hide. Better come clean, boy! Did you come up here to see what was going on because you were worried about Pat?"

"I'm not talking," Wills repeated. Wehle turned to the trooper.

"Lord keep me from a stubborn Cape Ann fisherman!" he growled. "There's nothing more pig-headed in the world. All right, Wilson, take him up to the house and keep him there till I'm ready to see him again."

Several others had followed Wehle out of the house in response to Beatrice Carter's scream, and dim figures were milling about the lawn.

"What do you think about Clem Mills?" Forbes asked as they turned back to the house.

"I think he simply came here to learn what was going on and try to see Pat, but is too stubborn to admit it. If he was up to anything more serious, he would have seized on that comparatively harmless reason as an excuse when I suggested it," Wehle said. Forbes was watching a bent figure that moved across the lawn with a flashlight held close to the ground. The man went along a few feet further, then stopped and picked something up. An instant later Ringdon's apologetic voice came out of the darkness.

"Oh Doctor! Would you look at something, please?"

The butler was holding a woman's purse, a cheap affair of imitation leather that had been well worn along the edges. He opened it, and glanced inside, and closed the purse again.

"This belonged to Agnes," he said, and even the trained repression of years could not keep the shrillness of agitation out of his voice. "It is my daughter's. I know it well, sir. What could she have been doing here, so far across the lawn and so near the cliffs? I don't like it at all, sir. That I don't!"

Without a word Wehle turned and moved across toward the edge of the cliff, the beam of his flashlight constantly sweeping the ground ahead of him. They found nothing more on the lawn, but the soil ran out against a rim of bare rock that rose perhaps a foot above the level of the lawn before it dropped into space. There, lying on the rock, was a woman's rain-wet coat. Ringdon's voice came hoarse and frantic.

"Oh my God, it's her coat!"

"Steady, man!" Wehle snapped, and then he gripped Forbes by the elbow. "Come to the edge of the cliff with me," he muttered, "on your hands and knees, for the rock is wet and slippery. Careful!"

A rising sea-wind flung rain in their faces as the two men lay prone on the rim of the rocky shelf with the sheer drop of the cliff below them. They could hear the slow rumble of surf on the shingle below. The fog was thinning fast, and though there was enough of it to dull the beams of their flashlights, Forbes could see a light colored blotch lying at the base of the rocky wall.

"It's a good sixty feet down there!" Wehle muttered. "There's a path off to the right, where the cliff is lower. Come on!"

It was a strange troupe that stumbled down the path that led to the beach through a cleft some way along the cliffs. Thaddeus Wehle was in the lead, lurching along with his raincoat flapping about his knees, muttering under his breath in a tone too low for anyone else to catch. Silas was there, and Beatrice clutching a fragile feminine umbrella that was no protection at all against the windy rain, and half a dozen others. They all reached the narrow strip of shingle that lay between the cliffs and the sea, and turned to the left.

They did not have to go very far. At the foot of the cliffs directly in front of the house, sprawled across the broken rocks that had fallen from above through the years to lie heaped at the base of the rocky wall, lay the shattered body of Agnes Ringdon.

XIII

IT WAS like a scene from a nightmare. The beams of the flashlights drilling through the darkness of the misty rain—the thin streamers of fog that drifted in from the sea and the glistening wet of the rocky wall behind them—the group of somber figures gathered around, and the pitiful body of the dead girl. The low mutter of the surf formed a requiem, and the deep blast of the fog-horn still came

drifting through the night like a voice of doom.

"Another death!" Wehle muttered under his breath.

Forbes wiped the rain from his face. "God!" he muttered. "I don't see where this poor girl could fit in at all. Do you think—is there any possible chance—that there could have been any truth in Old Rufus' theory of a horrible formula of events that leads to murder?"

"Don't be a fool!" Wehle growled savagely. "I've been one tonight, and that's enough."

Ringdon, his head bared heedlessly to the rain, had dropped on one knee beside his daughter's body. He had not spoken a word, but his thin shoulders shook. Beatrice moved toward him.

"I'm so sorry, Ringdon," she said, with a banality that was grotesque. "What a terrible accident!"

"I'm afraid it was no accident, ma'am," the butler said dully.

"No, it was no accident," Dolores Capanelli said, moving a little forward into the glow of the flashlights. Even under these circumstances she managed to look theatrical and striking, in a gleaming rain-cape and with a scarf wrapped around her head and face like a medieval wimple. "Don't forget that she left her coat on top of the cliff. She must have jumped."

"But why? Why?" Beatrice said. Ringdon rose slowly to his feet. His face was twisted into odd bunches of muscle and his voice was horrible in his hopeless grief.

"I think I can explain that, ma'am. It was Mr. Jabez. I told Agnes that she could never hold more than a passing interest for him, that she was a fool, but she wouldn't listen to me. It was only two days ago that he told her that he was tired of the whole thing, and that she should stop bothering him or he would give us both the sack. She—she took it badly to heart."

"And I did find the jar of poison among her things!" Silas Carter lifted his hands in a gesture of finality. "Poor girl! I guess that explains the whole ghastly mess. Jabez throwing her over probably unhinged her mind so that she poisoned him, and then tonight she threw herself off the cliff out of remorse."

"I think we should all go back up to the house and have a cup of hot tea," Beatrice said firmly.

Thaddeus Wehle had been standing motionless with his hands holding the lapels of his coat, his big head thrown forward as though deep in thought. At last he shook his shoulders.

"Yes, there's nothing more we can do now," he said. "It was Agnes, all right. The case is closed except for the matter of the missing diamonds."

"But I don't think Agnes could possibly be guilty—" Forbes began. He had spoken in a tone too low for anyone but Wehle to hear, and the doctor wheeled on him.

"Shut your mouth!" he snarled in a venomous whisper.

XIV

MOST of the household had gone to bed by the time the ormulu clock on the living room mantel struck midnight. Wehle had ordered the State Troopers to withdraw their cordon about the house, and much of the atmosphere of tense strain had lessened. Forbes was alone in the living room when Wehle came in and closed the door behind him.

"Sorry to have snarled at you down there on the beach, Jim," he said. "I wasn't at my best just then. What's more to the point, I didn't want any of the others to overhear your vote of protest. They were all so busy falling for the theory that Agnes Ringdon killed herself in remorse for having planted the poison that killed Jabez and Rufus, falling for it with such haste and enthusiasm, that I wanted to help the little act along."

"Then you don't believe it?"

"Do I look like a fool?" Wehle snapped. "The idea is fantastic. Agnes was no more the murderer of Jabez Carter than you are! And I don't believe that anyone else believes it, either. It was simply such a nice, comfortable way out of the whole scandal that they all leaped at the idea."

"Then why do you think Agnes jumped over? Simple brooding over the fact that Jabez had given her the gate?"

"Possible, but I don't think she jumped at all," Wehle said stubbornly. "Neither do I believe that she slipped and fell over the edge. I think she was pushed over!"

Forbes' voice was hoarse. "But why?"

Wehle's wide mouth twitched. "God knows, Jim! I don't. Perhaps she was in on the deal in some way and the partners in crime fell out, perhaps she had simply blundered on the truth and was killed to keep her silent. I don't know. The worst of it is, I feel that it's *my* fault that the poor girl is lying dead out there, at the foot of the cliff."

"Your fault?" Jean gasped. "But how?"

Wehle crossed the room to the tray of glasses that still stood on one of the tables, and poured himself a long scotch and soda.

"There's no ice left," Forbes warned.

"Don't need it," Wehle said absently. "I bummed around South America a good deal when I was young, and got used to taking my drinks warm." He sipped at his drink a moment, then returned to sit slouched in one of the big chairs with his legs hung awkwardly over the arm.

"All this business of murder and passion and crime is a queer sort of thing for a man to deal with," he said. "God knows I've often regretted that I ever got mixed up in it in the first place. Sometimes I don't sleep well o' nights, for thinking of dead faces. Faces of all the murder victims I've seen. Sullen faces of the murderers I've helped send to the chair. That sort of mood doesn't get me very often, thank God, but when it does it gets me good! Well—that's aside from the point at the moment. I blame myself for Agnes Ringdon's death, because I delayed action too long. Though I meant well enough by the delay. Y'see, I think I know who the murderer is."

"You know the killer?" Forbes gasped. Wehle nodded.

"I think I've known the answer for several hours. But—there's a big difference between knowing something in your own mind, and being able to prove it to a jury. Particularly in a situation like this one! The trouble with a poison case, barring utterly inexcusable carelessness on the part of the killer, is that there's no evidence from fingerprints, or ballistics, or proximity to the scene, or any of those matters of circumstantial evidence where science comes in to help you prove your case."

Wehle took another sip of his drink, and pushed his unkempt gray hair back from his forehead. He had the manner of a man who expounds a cherished theme.

"A lot of people have the wrong idea about modern, scientific crime detection," he continued. "They have ideas that are romantic and erroneous and entirely contrary to the facts. Modern methods haven't made it any easier to catch your man or woman in the first place. The scientist and his laboratory make it easier to *prove* whether or not a certain suspect committed a crime—but you still have to catch your suspect. That is still done by the old-fashioned method, which is a combination of hunches and stool pigeons, and of infinite patience in seeking for the inevitable slip that the criminal always makes somewhere along the line."

"Inevitable slip? Is it true that there is no perfect crime?" Forbes asked. Wehle searched for a match in one of the pockets of his capacious vest.

"*I* think so," he said. "After all, a crime is an irregularity in itself. It's abnormal. Contrary to the regular pattern of civilized life. The person guilty of a major crime is either mentally unbalanced, or highly anti-social, or at least driven to some violent action by a suddenly awakened and irresistible emotion. In other words, any major crime is an irregularity from the normal pattern of human behavior, and as such it leaves traces that the patient investigator can find if he looks long enough and in the right places."

"But Agnes Ringdon—" Forbes said.

The lines in Wehle's craggy face deepened, and his eyes again became somber. "I'm afraid that *I* am responsible for her death, because I let things go for too long without taking any action. I have been giving the killer plenty of rope in the hopes of a betraying slip."

"But this man you suspect—" Forbes began.

"Did I say it was a man?" Wehle interrupted with a slight grin. "Don't go jumping to conclusions, young feller! This could just as easily be a woman as a man, you know. It doesn't take any degree of physical strength to place a poison-trap where someone will run into it. Or even, for that matter, for one woman to push another off a slippery cliff edge in the windy darkness."

"Where is Jean Belden?"

"I've been thinking about her," Wehle said. "Jean suffers from a sharp tongue, but she's a real person at heart. Her disappearance worries me. Anyhow—" He broke off and rose to his feet, prowling slowly around the room. "I've been hearing a faint and intermittent tapping ever since we've been in here," he said. "And I'm going to run it down before we go any further!"

THREE-QUARTERS of the way around the room Wehle went, then he strode over and pulled open the door of a storage closet in the far wall. Inside, gagged with her own scarf and tightly bound with pieces of electric wiring pulled from a pair of old table lamps, was the subject of their last discussion, Jean Belden herself.

It took the girl a few minutes to recover. She sat huddled on the edge of a chair with her head in her hands while Forbes mixed her a drink, but after gulping half of it down she looked up with a faint smile.

"Thanks, old dear," she gasped.

"What happened? Who tied you up?"

"I wish I knew!" The girl's voice grew steadier. "I came in here in the dark, and started to feel along the wall for the light switch—and then someone hit me on the head. When I woke up I was in the closet, tied up like a Christmas package."

"Any idea who did it?"

"None at all," she said. She pushed back her hair and took a deep breath. "Doctor—I have something to tell you."

"I know. That you were talking to Jabez just before he was killed," Wehle nodded.

The girl gaped at him. "How did you know?"

"No miracle of deduction in this case," Wehle said. "Old man Mills saw you, and phoned me about it. But why didn't you tell me about it before?"

"I was just rattled, I guess." Some of the haunted expression came back to the girl's blue eyes. "You've no idea what I've been through in the past few hours, from thinking about it and being afraid I'd be accused!"

"I knew there was something on your mind," Wehle said dryly.

"You see, Jabez was propositioning me again. He's made my whole stay here a nightmare! Then, when he walked away from me and suddenly keeled over a minute later, I was too rattled by the whole thing to think clearly. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," Wehle said. "Hello! What's this?"

He reached down to pick up a folded white paper that lay on the floor, behind a chair and directly below the rifled safe. The paper must have been pulled from the safe with the jewel cases, only to fall unnoticed to the floor between the chair and the wall. Forbes saw Wehle's shaggy eyebrows move upward in surprise as he read the paper. He went through it slowly, folded the thing in its original creases, and stowed the paper carefully in his inner pocket.

"*That* is an interesting side-light," he said. "Probably no more than a side-light—but still interesting. The paper I just found, doubtless dropped by the jewel thief when he rifled the safe, is Silas Carter's will. It opens with a bitter condemnation of all three of his children, and then leaves everything to Rufus Clairborne as the member of the family least driven by self interest. Only if he died before Silas would what is left of the family money go to the sons, or to the surviving one as the case might be."

"Then Josh Carter—" Jean began, and hesitated.

Wehle nodded. "Then Josh, if he happened to know of this will in some way, had a real motive for killing *both* Rufus and Jabez. Greed is the most common motive in all the world."

XV

THE rain beat steadily against the windows of Carterscliff, while a rising wind flung the surf ever more loudly against the shingle at the foot of the cliffs. The voice of Moaning Mary was stilled, the somber blast of the fog-horn having ceased as the last of the fog dissolved under the thresh of the rain, but the moan of the wind and the rumble of the surf now formed an undertone to the intermittent creakings of an old house. The three in the living room were still talking in low tones, but between their words the ticking of the

clock and the occasional rattle of the windows sounded as loud as the instruments of a macabre orchestra.

"I wonder if the spray from the surf ever gets up here," Forbes said once, breaking a long pause. Wehle answered him, shaking his shoulders and coming out of a deep fit of brooding in which he had been sitting with his gray eyes fixed on distant space and an empty pipe clutched between his teeth.

"I've seen it happen. Once every three or four years, in a winter storm when the tide is high and the wind a nor'-east gale. Then the surf rises high above the shingle and pounds at the cliff till the ground shakes, and sheets of spray rise above the rim to drift clear across the lawn to the house. The early Carters were of the sea, the sight and sound and smell of distant waters was in their blood, and they had that thought in mind when they picked this spot for their house. They must have been a lusty and positive lot, those early Carters of Carterscliff, even though there was a strong strain of madness in all of them."

"Madness?" Forbes asked.

"Aye, insanity," Wehle said, and pointed across the room to an old portrait of a thin-faced and hawk-nosed man wearing the high collar of a long-ago generation. "That was Cap'n Caleb Carter, who brought the Carter diamonds back from the Orient and built this house on the cliffs. He was a hard-fisted Yankee trader—but the tradition is that, when the moon was full, he would sometimes go out in the woods and howl like a timber wolf. That unstable strain has grown less with each generation, though, and there doesn't seem to be any of it in the present Carters. They're an odd lot, but that's all."

"But if Josh poisoned Rufus and Jabez—" Forbes said.

"I haven't yet said that he did," Wehle replied quietly. "We can't accuse a man just because we now know that he had a possible motive. There are plenty of others with motives. Grant and Elaine, Silas, Clem Mills, Agnes—even old Ringdon himself."

"Ringdon?" Jean asked.

"Certainly. *His* story is that he was simply a saddened spectator of his daughter's affair with Jabez, but he's just the sort of repressed and frustrated character that sometimes flares up into a mess like this one. Particularly if he happens to be a religious fanatic! It's entirely possible that Ringdon considered himself God's deputy in acting as executioner of Jabez and his daughter. I haven't forgotten that it was *he* who first put forth the theory that Agnes had committed suicide out of remorse after having killed Jabez! Well—so it goes. Really, the only one in the place who seems to have no possible, remotest connection with the thing is Beatrice Carter, Silas' wife."

"But you said that you know the identity of the killer!"

"I think I do," Wehle explained patiently. "I just mention all this to show you the need for more than my own personal conviction before I can take any action against anyone."

"But what about the theft of the diamonds?" Forbes asked.

Wehle lifted both hands in a helpless gesture. "God knows, Jim. That angle of the case has me stumped. The most logical explanation is that the killer took the jewels to confuse the issue, and to try to bring the robbery motive into the picture somewhere. But *that* won't stand up because no amateur would have the equipment and the technical knowledge to drill a combination lock as that job was done. It's got me buffaloed. Well—it's getting late. Why don't you folks get some sleep?"

"What about you?" Forbes asked.

Wehle's heavy shoulders moved in a shrug, and he began to fill his pipe. "Me? Oh, I don't need much sleep. Anyway, I'm sticking around for a while because I have a hunch that something is going to happen."

"Then I'll stick with you," Forbes said. "But there's no point in Jean staying up."

The girl looked up with a faint smile. "I'm tired, but I'd rather wait till the end. Once this thing is settled, I can get away from Carterscliff, and if I never come back it'll still be too soon. What do you expect to happen, Doctor?"

"I'm not entirely sure," Wehle said frankly, "but I think that something is due. Perhaps—"

At that moment it happened! From somewhere outside the house, out in the darkened grounds where the rain was now

steadily falling, came a shout. Another shout—the sharp report of a pistol—and then the shrill and long-drawn blast of a police whistle! Wehle stood up.

"At last!" he said. "I thought someone was due to try to slip out and get rid of something incriminating. Now we ought to see our killer!"

Forbes and Jean had also risen to their feet. Wehle was chuckling as the front door slammed, and hasty footsteps sounded in the hall. A moment later a pair of State Troopers appeared in the doorway with a handcuffed prisoner—but the captive was a sullen looking, brown-haired woman that Forbes had never seen before!

XVI

THE woman was somewhat disheveled, with her cheap cloth coat torn at one shoulder and her felt hat all awry on her stringy brown hair. She was still twisting furiously at the steel cuffs that held her wrists together in front of her. Turning to look at Thaddeus Wehle, Forbes saw his emotion change from astonishment to chagrin, and then a sort of wry amusement. The doctor plunged his big hands in his pockets.

"Well, well," he rumbled. "Fancy meeting you here! Dolores the glamorous—without the make-up and black wig!"

Dolores! Forbes had known from the start that there was something hauntingly familiar about this woman, but he had been too busy noting unfamiliar features to think about the resemblance. Of course it was the woman who had been going by the name of Dolores Campanelli! Discarding the black wig that had covered her own brown hair, leaving off the heavy make-up, and the liberal use of eye-brow pencil that had changed her own brown brows to startling black ones, she had completely changed her appearance.

The change from her glamorous and theatrical style of dress to cheap and undistinguished garments, had completed the transformation.

"Dolores!" he said aloud. The woman gave both Wehle and Forbes a sardonic glance.

"Think you're a couple of smart guys, I suppose," she sneered. "I thought I heard you say the surrounding cops were being pulled off the job."

"You did hear me say it, sister," Wehle said complacently. "For the benefit of anyone who might be planning to make a break. I wanted to encourage them to try it. Though I'll admit I didn't expect to catch *you* in my net!"

THE others of the household were streaming into the room. Silas was there in a faded blue dressing gown, and Harvey Grant in his shirt sleeves with a pipe between his teeth, and all the others. The sound of the shot on the drive had awakened them all. They stared at the troopers and their captive in wide-eyed surprise, and they broke into a babble of confused questions, but it was Beatrice who first recognized the captive.

"Dolores!" she exclaimed. "Why darling—you look so different! What has happened?"

Dolores glared at her former patroness with obvious dislike. "Nuts!" she said, and again relapsed into silence. Wehle looked up with a grin.

"Our ethereal spiritualist has undergone a bit of a metamorphosis," he said. "When her fingerprints are checked, we'll probably find that her real name is Maggie Smith, alias Safe-cracker Mag, or something of the sort. All right, Harkins, open the bag."

One of the troopers opened the bag that Dolores had been carrying when she was caught on the drive. It held some compact drills, and a few other items of safe cracking equipment, a blackjack, and the velvet cases that contained the Carter diamonds.

"And that's that," Wehle said. "Really, Dolores or Maggie, the stage lost a good actress when you decided to go in for the gentle art of safe cracking. It should stand you in good stead when you go on trial for murder, though!"

Dolores' thin lips curled in a tight, sardonic smile. She lifted her manacled hands in order to point one forefinger straight at Wehle.

"Nuts to you on that score, brother!" she said. "I'll admit that your gag of pretending to call off the cops fooled me into trying to make a getaway with the ice. I'll admit that I've been pulling that phony spiritualist pose around here for several

weeks, waiting for the old guy to bring the rocks in and give me a chance at them. I'll admit that I drilled the safe to get them out, and that you've got me dead to rights on that charge. I slugged this Belden dame when she came in and was nearly caught at it.

"But I had nothing to do with any of the killings, and if you're as wise as I think you are, you know it too. I know there's no possible evidence to connect me with the murders, and I'm not worrying on that score. Get me?"

"All right, boys, take her away," Wehle said. One of the troopers had been examining the diamonds, and slid the boxes across the table.

"These rocks are paste," he said. "I used to be a diamond salesman once, and I know."

"Paste!" Dolores exclaimed, and her angry glance darted across the room to Silas Carter. "Why, the cheap-skate!"

"Paste!" Wehle said, and he looked at Silas with a grim glance in which there was no mirth at all. "These jewels were insured, of course. Was it for blackmailing you about your intended swindle of the insurance company over these diamonds that you threatened to poison Jabez the night Ringdon overheard you?"

XVII

SILAS CARTER licked his thin lips twice before he spoke. His pale eyes had something the look of a hunted animal.

"I—I never intended to do it," he said. "About the diamonds, I mean. That was Jabez' idea, but I never intended to do anything dishonest about them. I had to sell the real diamonds a few years ago, but I wasn't going to do anything about these paste imitations."

"With the insurance kept up after the real stones were sold, and a supposed diamond-appraiser due here Monday, I think we may view your intentions with a jaundiced eye," Wehle said judicially, "but that is beside the point at the moment. Attempt to defraud is no concern of mine as Coroner, thank God! We come back to the question of the murders. Dolores' attempt to slip away with her loot spoiled my hope that the killer would lose nerve and make a break into the hands of the waiting police. Now I want you all to help me. First—I want each of you to give me any ideas you may have as to who is guilty. Suppose we begin with you, Grant. Who do you think killed Jabez and the others?"

"That's a hard question for me to answer," Grant said slowly. He thrust his hands in his trousers pockets and stared up at the ceiling, with his handsome, dissolute face furrowed by deep lines of thought. He sucked at his pipe, found it was empty, and started to grope in his pockets.

"Here's some tobacco," Wehle said, suddenly taking a pouch from his pocket and tossing it across to the other man. It was the missing pouch that had been in Jabez Carter's hands when he died! Startled, Forbes glanced at Wehle, but the doctor's craggy face was impassive. Then Forbes looked at Grant.

Harvey Grant seemed hesitant. He half opened the zipper on the pouch, then shrugged and started to lay the bag aside.

"It's too late to smoke any more tonight," he said.

"Fill your pipe from that pouch!" Wehle barked, his voice suddenly as harsh and sharp as the crack of a whip.

ALL the others looked up in sudden surprise, startled by the change in Wehle's manner. Probably only Forbes was close enough to Grant to really see what happened.

He saw the other man's mouth narrow to a thin line, and saw him hesitantly open the zipper of the pouch the rest of the way. He was even standing near enough to see the little cluster of poisoned thorns that lay on top of the tobacco. A cluster of thorns—with each needle-like tip smeared with the deadly curare! Still Grant hesitated, and now Wehle's eyes were blazing, while his voice was as brittle as steel.

"Put your hand in that pouch, Harvey Grant! *What are you afraid of?"*

Then Grant moved. He leaped for the door! With a strangled snarl, he bounded across the room toward the outer hall. He almost made it, for the pair of troopers were impeded by their custody of the handcuffed Dolores, but Josh Carter thrust out his foot to trip the fleeing man and Grant

crashed to the floor. They had him before he could get to his feet again.

A little later, Wehle was leaning against the mantel with one of his big paws wrapped affectionately around the glass containing another highball. His thatch of gray hair was more rumpled than ever, but his ugly face was creased by a pleased smile.

"Grant was the most logical suspect all along," he said. "A suspect based on the sort of simple, rudimentary passions that lie back of most crimes of violence. He had laid a trap to kill Jabez Carter because he wanted Jabez' wife, and poor old Rufus got caught when he happened to reach into Jabez' pet humidor where Grant had planted the poisoned thorns. That trap having gone wrong, Grant managed to borrow Jabez' pouch and shifted the thorns to that."

"What about Agnes Ringdon?" Jean asked. The fear was all gone from her eyes now, and she smiled as she met Forbes' glance.

"Agnes?" Wehle said. "She was killed to keep her quiet, because she had stumbled on Grant's guilt. Remember that she was in love with Jabez! I'm not sure of the details yet, and won't be until Grant makes a full confession, but my guess is that Agnes found the jar of poison wherever Grant had hidden it, and transferred the jar to her own pantry drawer, and then got killed for her pains while trying to play detective."

"When did you first suspect Grant?" Forbes asked.

"I suspected him from the start, but then he threw me off the track by his apparent frankness, and by a couple of things like that trick of leaving his card in Jabez' pouch. He was pretty clever about that! He knew that his love affair with Elaine must be known to someone, and that he was bound to be suspected, so he arranged a clue pointing to himself in a way that was too obvious to be convincing. Just the sort of thing that someone else might have done, in an attempt to throw the blame on him! Also, *he* knew about curare, but he was smart enough to take out that old book and mark the place so that it would look as though someone less familiar with the poison had been reading up on it. His scheme nearly worked, too. It probably would have worked—except for one little slip that Grant made."

"You mean when you told him to reach into the pouch a few minutes ago?" Forbes asked.

Wehle shook his head. No. I had him on the spot then, of course.' Refusal to reach into the pouch at that moment was a confession of guilt—and he didn't know that I had previously substituted a harmless cluster of thorns for the ones that had been smeared with the poison! I took the pouch and made you think that someone else had lifted it because I wanted the means of Jabez' death to be unknown to anyone but the murderer and myself until I was ready to spring my little trap. But I would never have tried that little stunt if I hadn't been sure in my own mind that Grant was the murderer."

"But how did you know?" Jean asked.

Wehle grinned. "That, my children, is where the peculiar and twisted mind of the trained criminologist comes into play! You were both present when Grant made his fatal slip, and neither of you noticed it. When Grant came to us in the library to put on his act of frankness and innocence, I was fooled by him until just at the end. Then I told him that he had failed to mention the biggest point in his own behalf, that if he had killed Jabez he would scarcely arrange to have his own calling card in Jabez' hand at the moment he died—and he let the remark pass. *Grant let the remark pass!* Any innocent man would have been curious enough at that point to ask some questions about where we found the card, if Jabez was actually holding it, and so on. Grant knew—and so he forgot to ask about it. That was his fatal slip."

"God help the murderer who runs afoul of you!" Forbes said. Wehle grinned, and looked down at his worn clothing.

"If I was as good at collecting my bills as a doctor I'd be a lot better off!" he said.

. . . Elks Is All the Same as Sacred in That Part of the West

ARBEY HOLDEN RIDES AGAIN

By JIM KJELGAARD

NOW if Butch Brannigan, the warden of Black County, knowed one thing for sure, he knowed that in time even the smartest outlaw has got to slip. But Butch never expected that Arbey Holden would make the dumb move he did.

Arbey Holden lived in a shanty near the river, and his favorite pastime was sittin' on a stump—his thinkin' stump, Arbey called it. Of course, Arbey didn't always sit on a stump. Sometimes he went here and sometimes he went there, and when he went he done just about what he pleased. Arbey had thought a lot of things while sittin' on his stump, and one of the things he had thought was that there wasn't no special reason why he shouldn't take what game and fish he needed when he needed it.

Naturally, that didn't set too good with Butch Brannigan. He knowed that Arbey broke laws whenever he had a mind to. The trouble was, while Arbey was sittin' on his thinkin' stump, he also thought up ways not to get ketched. Butch had lost track of the times he had set out to ketch Arbey and been fooled, but he hadn't lost track of the idea that he still wanted to put Arbey in jail. Then come a chanct.

It was the tail-end of the mushrat season.

Butch was sittin' in his office at Deer Crossin', lookin' out at the aspen trees what, in spite of snow drifts all around, was tryin' their best to leaf out. He saw Weasel Slammer crossin' the street towards his office.

And, somehow, Butch had a hunch that the time he'd bided to get somethin' on Arbey Holden was all bode.

BUTCH had such a hunch for a good reason of his own, and the good reason was that he knowed, last fall, Weasel Slammer had hit a line of Arbey Holden's mink traps. He had stole one trap, and the mink what was in it, when somethin' jumped out of the brush and hit him like a bob cat hits a snowshoe rabbit. Weasel had never been able to swear that what had hit him, and left him lookin' like a bear-mauled cornfield, was Arbey Holden. Just the same he knowed that it was, and ever sinst Weasel had been waitin' for a chanct to get even. He come in Butch Brannigan's office.

"Hi, Mr. Brannigan," he says.

"Hi," says Butch.

"I know somethin'," says Weasel.

"What do you know?" says Butch.

Weasel Slammer looked all around, and it seemed that he wanted to make sure nothin' that could jump on him was layin' on the rafters or behind a closet.

"Arbey Holden come in town today," says Weasel.

"Arbey often comes in town," says Butch.

Weasel leaned clear over the desk, and breathed in Butch Brannigan's face, "But I know where he's been and what he'd been doin'," says he.

"Where's he been and what's he been doin'?" says Butch.

Weasel's voice sunk so low he didn't hardly whisper. "He's been trappin' mushrats on the Killigan Cricks, and he put a bullet through one of them elk what been hangin' around there."

If Butch had been a young warden, without too much savvy about outlaws and outlaw ways, he would of jumped like a shot-stung buck. Five years ago, in the hope that by and by there'd be enough to furnish huntin', the state had planted fifty elk on the Killigan Cricks, which was a wild country twenty-two miles from Deer Crossin'. But they just hadn't increased, there was still

only about fifty, and the wardens caught this and that every time one got killed. If Arbey Holden had killed one—

"How do you know Arbey done it?" Butch says, sort of easy like.

"He told me he done it," says Weasel Slammer.

That, as far as Butch could see, didn't hold water. Abey Holden busted lots of game laws, but he wasn't fool enough to shoot off his trap when he busted 'em.

"Sounds to me like somebody's talkin' through their hat," says Butch.

"You got me wrong," says Weasel. "Arbey was full of mountain dew when he told me. I been trappin' mushrats on the Killigan Cricks, too, and 'twas yesterday mornin' when Arbey blew into my camp higher'n a kite. He was carryin' a coyote he had shot, and grinnin' all over the place. 'Weasel,' he says, 'I just put a bullet through a elk. Right up there in Five Shank Gully, it was.' "

"Tell me all about it," says Butch.

Weasel told him all about it, and Butch Brannigan went out to hunt Arbey Holden.

BUTCH found Arbey eatin' his dinner in the Northern Delight Tavern and eatin' house, and because he knowed too much to jump Arbey in front of other people, Butch waited until he come out. He backed him into a alley and says:

"I hear you're trappin' mushrats on the Killigan Cricks?"

"Yup," says Arbey Holden. "Whyn't you visit my camp?"

"Reckon, I will," says Butch. "In fact, I was thinkin' of runnin' out this afternoon."

Arbey grins. Then, "Butch, you just natcherally got a suspectful mind. Don't you trust your fellowmen at all?"

"Not," says Butch, "when elk are feedin' up Five Shank Gully."

"What do you know about Five Shank Gully?" Arbey asks.

"I know," says Butch, "that you shot an elk up there yesterday."

"Well, well, well," says Arbey Holden. "News sure gets around. Was Weasel Slammer in town today, Butch?"

"Haven't seen him," Butch lied. "Are you comin' peaceable, or am I goin' to make you come?"

"Oh, seein' as you're set on it I'll come peaceable," says Arbey Holden. "What you aim to do, Butch?"

Butch frowned a little. This thing was goin' too easy. But every law-breaker, when he finally stumbles, stumbles all the way.

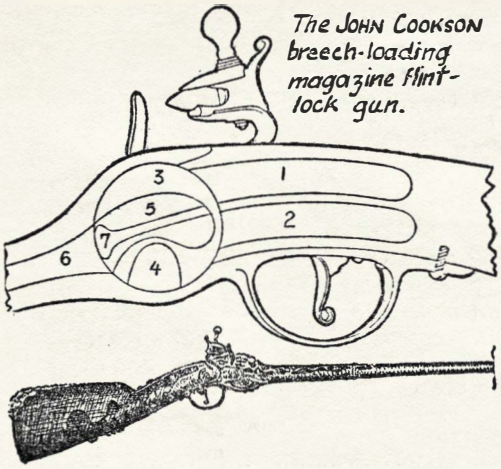
"I aim to clap you in jail, Arbey," says Butch, "which is where you should of been twenty years ago. And I had aimed to get you on every count I can. Save me the trouble of findin' that elk carcass and I'll ease off a bit."

"All right, Butch," says Arbey Holden, "it's a deal."

They walked down the street together. Arbey threw his duffel in Butch's car, and they started for the Killigan Cricks. If he'd been a singin' man Butch would of sung through every mile of the twenty-two. At last he had Arbey Holden. They bounced along the dirt road that snaked through Killigan Cricks, and Butch drew in at the mouth of Five Shank Gully. They climbed the gully. Arbey Holden swerved into a grove of pines on a side hill and Butch Brannigan sat down on a stump, too mad even to swear. He looked at the withered pile of elk bones layin' on the side hill, and at the grin on Arbey Holden's face.

"Next time you see Weasel Slammer," says Arbey, "remind him that what I says was that I put a bullet through a elk. I did; there's the hole right through the skull. A coyote I shot was nosin' around them bones. I forgot to tell Weasel it was a winter-killed elk.

"Thanks for the ride, Butch. I was wonderin' how I'd get back home."



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF

Flintlock Repeater

READER C. B., who lives out in California, wants to know if there were any repeating guns invented before the development of fixed ammunition; that is, regular cartridges as we know them today.

Yes, there were many. The various types of guns having a revolving cylinder (the number of shots depending on the number of chambers bored into the cylinder) were in common use for years before the development of the metallic cartridge.

Perhaps the best known of these short and long guns are the ones manufactured by Colt. Thousands of cap and ball revolvers are in use today by muzzle loading enthusiasts. Target shooting with these old guns is indeed a fascinating sport.

Going back to the days before the percussion cap we find quite a number of re-

peating guns based on the revolving principle as well as several others.

One of the most interesting types of repeating mechanism is represented by the John Cookson breech-loading magazine flint-lock gun.

This gun was in the collection of the United States Cartridge Company, and where it is now I have no idea.

It is interesting to note that this gun was brought to a gunsmith, Richard Heinze, in Baltimore, Maryland, for repairs and conversion to cap-lock in 1888. Mr. Heinze examined it and considered it of no particular value and not worth the necessary repairs, and so informed its owner. He finally bought the gun for a small sum and placed it on his gun rack where it remained for some time.

Several months later he again examined it and started removing rust. Becoming very interested he spent about two weeks laboring at its restoration.

It turned out to be a beautiful gun; the workmanship being excellent and the engraving of exquisite Spanish and Moorish design.

Due to this fact it is surmised that the gun, although made by a person with an English name was of Spanish origin.

Practically all of the metal is engraved showing flags, drums, cannon being fired, piles of cannon balls, stacks of muskets, boarding-pikes, etc. JOHN COOKSON, FECIT, appears on the top of the barrel. Also the maker's name is in a scroll held up at the left by an angel and at the right by a female figure supposedly intended to represent Queen Elizabeth.

The stock is made of a rare wood that, to the best of my knowledge, has not been identified.

The arm is a magazine smooth-bore gun with a flint-lock ignition system.

It fires a spherical ball, weighing 260 grains in front of a charge of about 125 grains of black powder, and has a capacity of ten rounds. A magazine is fitted to the lock for a similar number of priming charges.

The old gun has been loaded and fired several times and has proved to be surprisingly accurate.

The charging is done from the left side

through an opening with a hinged flap. The bullets are poured into one compartment (1) (see sketch) and the powder into another (2).

By cylindrical passages these compartments connect with the central chamber in the frame in which is located a solid cylindrical block (3) with its axis from right to left.

This cylinder forms the recoil or breech-block and is fitted with two cavities large enough to hold a ball and a charge, and located so that when it is revolved the cavities will be opposite the passages from the magazine.

During the actual loading process the muzzle is held down.

The ball drops into cavity (4) and the powder into cavity (5) and by revolving the cylinder to the front the passages are closed and the ball and charge are brought in front of the rear end of the bore (6) which is slightly enlarged so that the ball will not fall through the bore proper.

The ball drops into the bore as cavity (4) passes (6). The powder stays in its cavity (5) which is fitted with a diaphragm (7) to prevent the bullet from dropping into it.

The pan is connected to the powder cavity (5) by a vent through the axis of the block and revolves into the lock in front of the priming magazine where at each revolution it scoops up a charge and revolves, closing the opening in the magazine and carrying said charge in place to receive the sparks from the flint as the trigger is pulled.

This cylindrical cylinder or breech-block is turned by a lever located on the left side of the gun, which also cocks the hammer and closes the pan.

The barrel, front sight, and trigger guard are all made in one piece.

It takes very little time to charge the piece as the balls and powder are just dumped into their respective compartments with no counting or measuring necessary. And the ten shots can be fired almost as rapidly as a modern lever-action rifle.

This gun was far in advance of its time and I can't imagine why it didn't become popular.

The design, workmanship, beauty and rarity of the gun make it a very desirable collectors' item of great value.

A New Way to Skin a Cat

J. C., a smart character, who hangs up his hat out Oklahoma way, sends the following nifty:

I needed a new target rifle and as the little lady put up a terrible squawk—maintaining that I already had way too many guns, and besides she had absolutely nothing to wear—I had to do some fast and furious figuring.

Here's the way it worked—perhaps some other of the brethren may work such a deal.

I had a chance to buy a brand new Winchester Model 52 .22-caliber target rifle complete with Lyman sights for an even seventy dollars.

Now $70 in one lump is considered quite a sum in my neighborhood, especially when it is to be expended on what some people call a plaything.

If this price of a new fowling piece was reduced to cost per day of actual use it wouldn't seem so high, in fact, quite negligible, especially in view of the satisfaction and confidence that good equipment affords.

A good target arm with good care should give satisfactory service for at least fifteen years (many have done better than this) and have a salvage value of at least ten dollars. I figured this was too low and made it fifteen.

Now for the actual days of shooting in each year: 52 Sundays, 52 Saturdays, 10 vacation days exclusive of Saturdays and Sundays) 1 New Year's Day, 1 Decoration, 1 July 4th, 1 Labor Day, 1 Armistice Day, 1 Thanksgiving Day, 1 Christmas Day and 1 Jeff Davis Day (I mention this last for I take it on my own) 122 total. Our local shooting club meets every Thursday evening which brings the total to 174 days in which the gun will be in use per year. For fifteen years we have 2,610 days which brings the per day cost to $.021.

Now who wouldn't pay a little over 2 cents a day for the use of a fine rifle?

I got the gun!

THE SHOOTERS'S CORNER
in every issue of
SHORT STORIES