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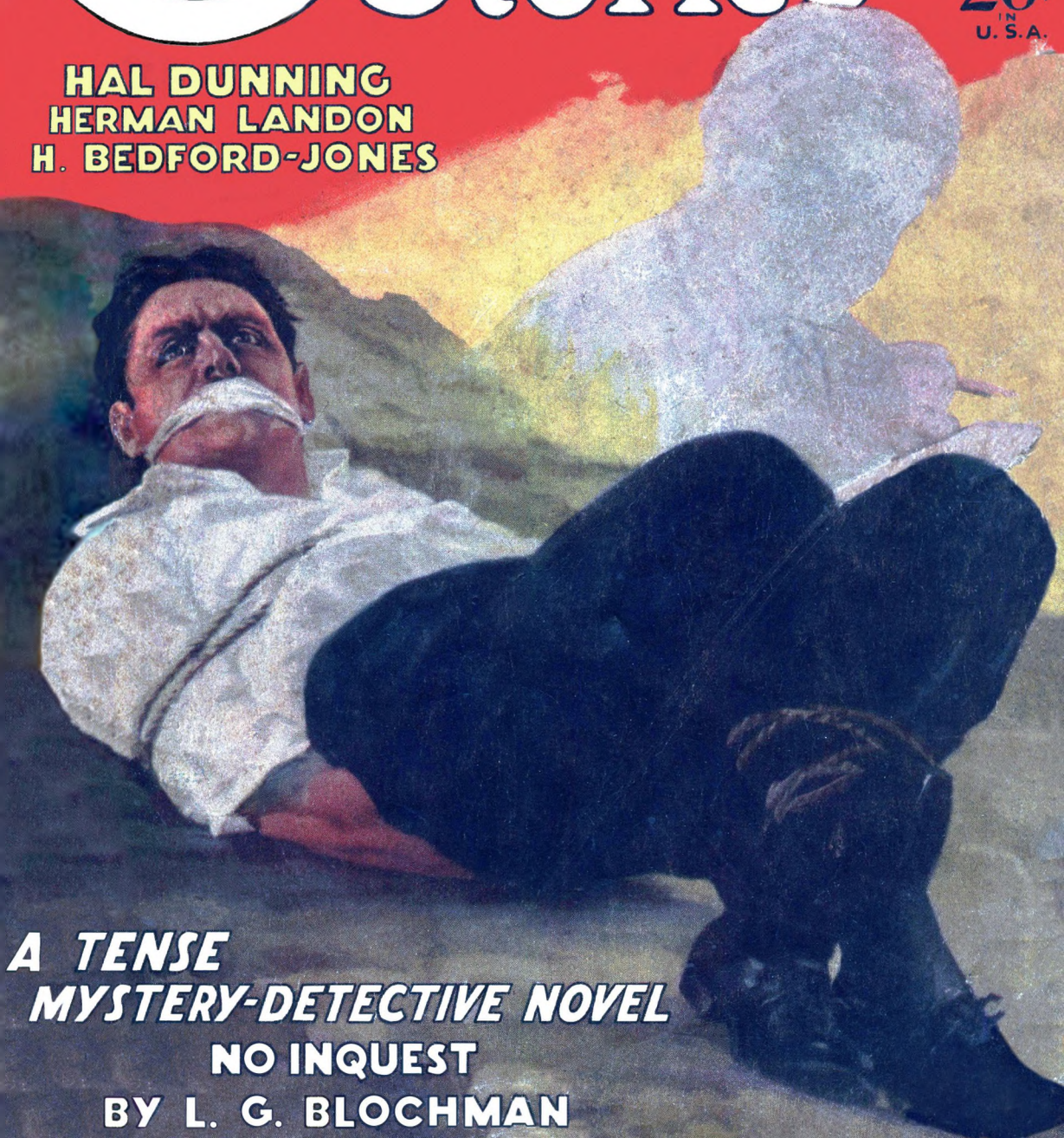
TWICE A MONTH

SEPT. 15th 1932

Complete Stories

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**HAL DUNNING
HERMAN LANDON
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**A TENSE
MYSTERY-DETECTIVE NOVEL
NO INQUEST
BY L. G. BLOCHMAN**

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Ads

THIS MAGAZINE PRODUCED ENTIRELY BY UNION LABOR
On sale the second and fourth Friday of each month

STREET & SMITH'S

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\$4.00

Complete Stories

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SEPTEMBER 15th, 1932

VOL. XXIX, No. 2

CONTENTS

A Novel

- NO INQUEST *L. G. Blochman* 2
The coroner's office and the reporters play a fast game of "Find the body."

Two Novelettes

- QUICKSAND *Hal Dunning* 80
The White Wolf, a coyote, and—apple pie!
- DEATH IN THE DESERT *H. Bedford-Jones* 126
Unwelcome visitors to this deserted ranch get a fiery reception with a skeleton as host.

Five Short Stories

- THE DEVIL IN HIS FIST *Herman Landon* 58
A straight to the chin is as good as detecting to Rufus Brent.
- JAWA *Jack Hulick* 71
Black magic and a white devil.
- FROGS GOT NO FUR *William Bruner* 106
But a "rar's" hide brings a good bounty.
- TIMBER TERROR *Kenneth Gilbert* 116
It takes a killer to "get" killers.
- LAZY DEE LEARNS HOW *Conrad Richter* 145
An old waddy with old tricks; an unbeatable combination.

- YOUR HANDWRITING TELLS *Shirley Spencer* 156
What about yours?
- GET TOGETHER! 159
Where good fellows get together.
- COVER DESIGN *S. Stone*
Illustrating "No Inquest."

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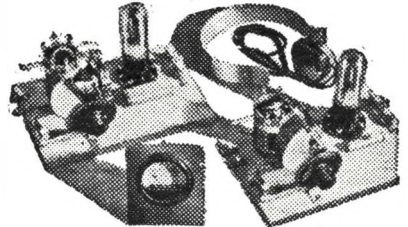
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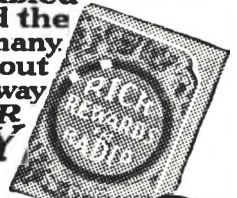
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NO INQUEST

CHAPTER I. FOR THE CORONER.

WHEN a call came from Zonelli, Doctor Walter Fathom was busy at one of his rare periods of accounting. That morning he had received a notice from his bank that his account was overdrawn. Damn nuisance! He supposed he would have to make an

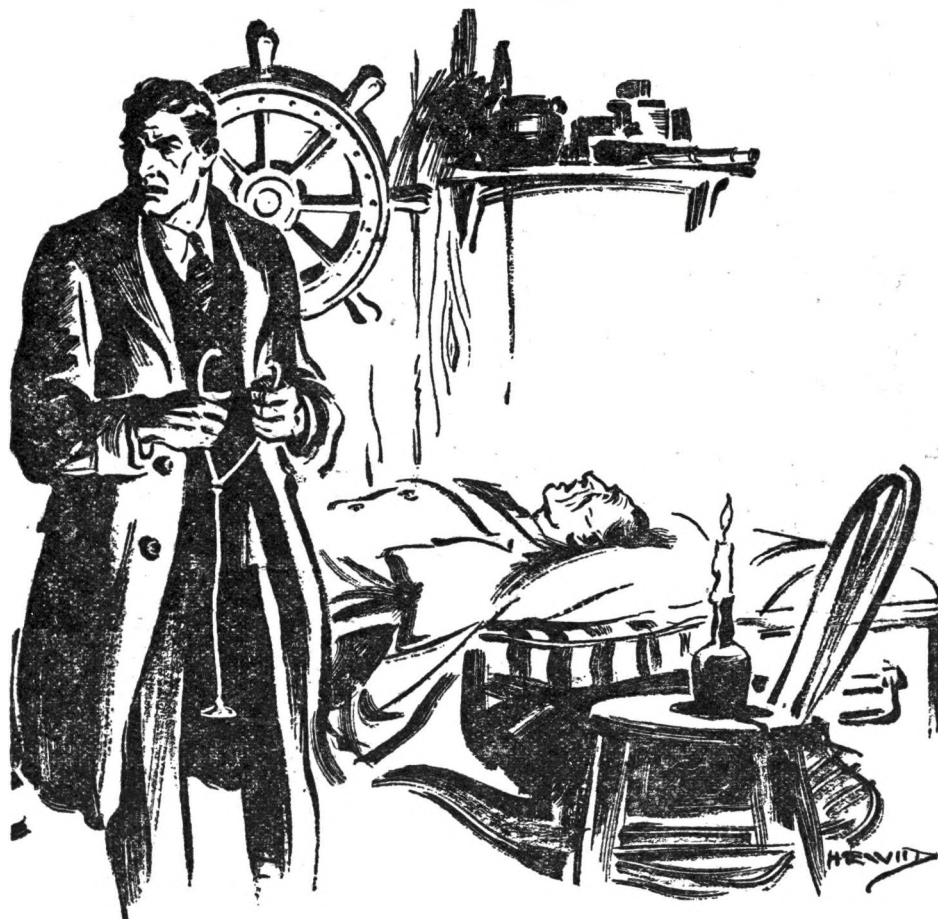
effort to collect his host of outstanding bills, as Miss Dwyer had been gently suggesting for some months now. He hated asking people for money.

Doctor Fathom looked up as the telephone rang. He was a young-faced man despite his quite gray temples.

"Would you answer that, please, Miss Dwyer?"

A small, dark girl in a nurse's uni-

Crooked politics in the coroner's office and a doctor who defied the public enemies in order to reveal a new and terrible racket in death!



By L. G. Blochman

form came out of the laboratory and entered the office.

Fathom's sharp nose went down again into his accounts. His sensitive mouth was puckered in annoyance. He worried his small mustache with his thumb and forefinger.

Miss Dwyer stood before Fathom's desk. She was a pretty girl, self-assured, yet apparently in awe before the doctor.

"A man named Zonelli calling, doctor," she said. "He wants you to come immediately. He says his brother is dying."

"Who's Zonelli?"

"You don't know him. He says you treated a friend of his named Alvarez."

"Another charity case!" Fathom exhaled audibly and made a gesture of annoyance. Yet the probability that Zonelli had no money meant

that he would answer the call. He said he would rather help the poor, who couldn't pay, than the rich, who didn't.

"What's the matter with Zonelli's brother?" he demanded.

"I don't know, doctor," said Miss Dwyer. "The man seemed very excited and he has a foreign accent. As near as I could make out his brother has been unconscious for several hours."

"What time is it?"

"Nine o'clock."

"All right, tell him I'll come," said Fathom, getting up. "I'll have time to finish this mess when I get back. I expected to work all night, anyhow. I've got plenty to do on that paper I'm going to read before the Medical Society."

Miss Dwyer placed a stethoscope in the doctor's bag and met him with it in the hall as he was drawing on a light coat.

FATHOM climbed into his car and drove across town through the starless night. There was a smell of rain in the air for the first part of his journey. As he approached the address Miss Dwyer had given him, the smell changed to a blend of the odors of poverty and the water front. He was driving through a district inhabited largely by foreign laborers.

The doctor stopped his car in front of a ramshackle cottage. There was no light in the house. He took a flashlight from his bag, to verify the house number. As he snapped out the light, the door opened. A small man, whose short neck was hidden in the collar of a dark sweater, stood there with a candle in his hand.

"Mr. Zonelli?"

"Come in please, doctor. Excuse no electricity please, doctor, but

electricity company close up lights yesterday. He say, 'No pay bill, no lights.' We got no money, doctor. My brother sick long time. I got job only last week."

"Let me see your brother."

"This way, doctor. Very, very sick, doctor. Maybe too late. For two, maybe three hours, not move. Just like sleep. This way, doctor."

Fathom followed Zonelli through the gloom of a short corridor, into one bare, musty-smelling room, then another. The flickering candlelight revealed almost no furniture in the rooms, no carpets on the floors that creaked under his feet.

On the threshold of the last room, Fathom paused. In a corner of the room, a man was lying on a cot, his head back, his eyes closed, his mouth open. A candle stuck in a bottle on a chair beside the cot wavered in a chilly draft, cast a changing, eerie glow on the waxen features.

Fathom took off his hat. One glance told him that the man was dead.

"He not move, doctor," Zonelli repeated, holding his candle higher. "For two hours, three hours——"

Fathom walked slowly to the bedside, put his hat on the floor, took his stethoscope from his bag, and listened for the man's heartbeat. This was merely a formality intended to impress the surviving brother that he was not too cursory in announcing anything as final as death.

"I'm afraid we've lost him, Mr. Zonelli," said the doctor.

ZONELLI muttered something in a foreign language under his breath. He might have been praying. During this time Fathom was looking with extreme interest at the dead man's face. He put down his stethoscope, took up

his flashlight, and one after the other rolled back the closed eyelids.

"Poor guy," said Zonelli, suddenly stopping his muttering. "Well, he been sick long time. He got T. B. He knew he gonna finish like this pretty quick. You gimme paper, so I can call church and undertaker. I get poor fellow good funeral, best kinda funeral can afford."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Zonelli," Fathom said, "but I won't be able to give you a death certificate right off. I don't think your brother died of tuberculosis. He seems to have been poisoned."

"No, no! No poison, doctor! He got T. B. long time. He sick many years. You give me paper so I can have funeral very early to-morrow morning, go to work after. I got to go to work to-morrow or I lose my job. I got to have funeral early."

"Sorry," said Fathom, "but there will have to be an autopsy to determine the cause of death. I'm required to call the coroner in a case of this kind. Have you a telephone?"

"No. No phone."

"From where did you go to call me?"

"I call from groceries store on corner. But you don't got to call nobody, doctor. My brother he got T. B. Nobody poison him. You give me paper, doctor."

Zonelli was crouching behind the doctor. He had moved the doctor's hat to avoid stepping on it. Fathom felt the man's breath on the back of his neck as he repeated: "You give me paper, doctor."

"Possibly the autopsy will show no poison at all," Fathom said, standing up. "In that case the coroner can give you a permit for burial right away, and there won't be any delay. But I can't possibly give it to you."

DOCTOR FATHOM reached for his hat. He raised it, was about to put it on, when something caught his eye. He lowered it slightly, verified the fact that there was something dull green in the crease. With his thumb and forefinger he extracted a wad of currency tightly folded the long way. He stared at the greenbacks, noting that the outside bill was a hundred dollars, estimating that there were at least ten similar ones in the sheaf. His eyes shifted to the waxen face of the dead man, traveled quickly around the barren room, settled upon the slightly smiling face of the surviving Zonelli.

"My brother he got T. B. You give me paper, doctor."

Fathom was trying to reconcile this thousand dollars he held in his hand, with the poverty-stricken aspects of the house and Zonelli's story of financial hardships.

"Here! Here's your paper!" With a sudden movement Fathom pushed the wad of greenbacks toward Zonelli. He stuffed them into the man's sweater when Zonelli made no move to take them, picked up his bag, clapped on his hat, and strode toward the door.

Zonelli stepped back. His grin faded in dark astonishment. He knocked over the candle, which winked out. Fathom heard him following in the blackness.

Fathom snapped on his flashlight to show him the way out of the house. He did not turn around to look again at the man he knew was at his back.

Zonelli did not come out on the porch. The doctor got into his car and drove away. At the corner Fathom slowed down and peered out. The corner grocery was dark. He would phone the coroner when he got home.

He was more than nettled at having to communicate with the coroner under these conditions. He and the coroner had been at swords' points these last few days. Yet he did not want to give the impression that he was afraid of the man. He would not have Miss Dwyer telephone him; he would do it himself.

He would give almost anything to watch the coroner at the Zonelli house. If Zonelli offered the wad of currency to the coroner, that official would certainly think it was a put-up job, for this was exactly the sort of misconduct in office of which he was being accused. Under the conditions, of course, he wouldn't dare to accept the bribe. He couldn't do otherwise than perform an autopsy, and, if poison were found in the organs, call an inquest.

Rain had begun to blur the windshield. Fathom reached out to turn on the electric wiper.

CHAPTER II.

A SECOND CALL.

FATHOM had only recently been swept, in spite of himself, into the complex and none-too-fragrant currents of Sunset City politics. He had lived in Sunset City for nearly ten years without making political or social contacts. He met his patients on a professional basis only. He was known as a distinguished-looking person, a little eccentric, who lived alone and would probably give the world a great scientific discovery some day.

It was his scientific reputation, based entirely upon his own reticence, his connection with the medical school, and his love of being closeted at all hours of the night in his mysterious laboratory, that had influenced the *Star* to call him in its

campaign against Coroner Crockett. The *Star* was a newspaper that had been fighting for years against municipal corruption. And recently, the *Star* believed it had found something crooked about the coroner.

Crockett had been coroner of Sunset for twelve years. There had been occasional doubts raised regarding the validity of his medical diploma, but nothing had ever come of any of them. It was generally believed that he stood in with certain undertakers in a business way, but this was considered more or less legitimate. The *Star*, however, had long suspected that it was possible for a murderer, if he had done an artistic job, to go directly to Coroner Crockett and, for a cash consideration, get a certificate of death from natural causes, with no possibility of investigation or inquest. Fathom did not know of these suspicions the day that Jack Powers of the *Star* had come for him, asked him to accompany him to a morgue—which they entered by a rear door—and asked an opinion regarding the cause of death of a certain body which had just been brought in.

After a brief examination, Fathom said he thought that death had probably been caused by either concussion of the brain—a fracture was easily perceptible to the finger tips—or strangulation, since the marks of fingers could be seen.

"Thanks," Jack Powers had said. "The coroner said that death was accidental, caused by choking on a chicken bone, and that no inquest would be necessary."

NEXT morning the *Star* had landed with both feet on Coroner Crockett, and Doctor Fathom saw his opinion quoted opposite a photostatic copy of Coroner Crockett's "chicken bone" death

certificate. In the glare of publicity, the coroner could only give ambiguous interviews in which he said something about a clerical error in his office. He announced an inquest, however. The *Star* demanded that Doctor Fathom be subpoenaed for the inquest, which was set early in the following week.

It seemed ironic to Fathom that with the inquest only two days off, he should again find himself involved with the coroner in a case which bore all the earmarks of being the very sort of mysterious affair the coroner was used to dabbling in.

It was annoying, Fathom said to himself, as he turned into his street. This would probably mean more publicity, more pestering reporters, and all at a moment when he needed all his time and all his privacy to himself. The Medical Association was holding its annual convention in Sunset City next week, and Fathom was presenting a paper which would establish him either as a great man or a fool.

He applied his brakes, switched off his ignition, climbed out of his car, and ran through the rain into the house. He always left his car at the curb, in case he was called during the night.

The front door of Fathom's house opened into his reception room. In the rear were his offices, his X-ray cabinet, and a small operating room. In a small left wing was a laboratory, which absorbed all of the doctor's liquid cash. In a right wing were quarters for the two nurses and laboratory assistants who lived at instant call, since Fathom was likely to get up in the middle of the night to work in his laboratory. He himself lived upstairs.

Raindrops glistened on Fathom's coat as he hung it up. Ruth Dwyer handed him a telegram which had

come during his absence. He tossed it to his desk unopened, and picked up his telephone. He called the coroner's number.

"I believe I have a case for you, coroner," said Fathom when he had Crockett on the wire. "Dead man at No. 5015 South Harbor Street. His name is Zonelli, and I believe you'll want to perform an autopsy. I won't tell you what I think caused his death, coroner, because our diagnoses don't always agree. Good night, coroner."

Fathom was smiling to himself as he hung up the phone. He absent-mindedly tore open the telegram, and was still smiling when he started to read it. As his eyes ran along the text, the smile vanished. The color faded quickly from his face. With fierce movements he ripped the telegram to shreds. He tossed the pieces into an ash tray, leaned back, lighted a cigarette, and carefully placed the burning match on the bits of torn telegram.

He looked up suddenly, as though he had just remembered that Ruth Dwyer was standing by his desk. He smiled again.

"I went over those accounts for you while you were gone, doctor," she said.

FATHOM'S eyes turned to his desk. He noted that the papers which had been scattered over the desk top when he had left were now arranged in neat stacks.

"You owe nearly a thousand dollars on these," said Miss Dwyer. "The outstanding fees amount to three times that much, but I don't suppose you can collect many of them right now. Why don't you send a bill to Bernard Edmonton? That would solve everything."

"I can't bill Edmonton," said the doctor.

"Why not, doctor? You saved his life. Other doctors gave him up more than a year ago, but you pulled him through and have him on his feet."

"I know." Doctor Fathom shook his head. "But, after all, I used old Edmonton as a subject for an experiment. He did me more of a service than I did him. He came along at the very time when I needed confirmation of my laboratory tests. He might have died."

"But he didn't," said Miss Dwyer. "And he's got more money than he knows what to do with. Why shouldn't he further medical science with it, instead of buying flashy roadsters for that rattle-brained nephew of his?"

"I don't want Edmonton's money," Fathom repeated. "At least not until the Medical Association agrees with my results and I'm sure I'm on the right track. By the way, did you make slides of those last cultures? Good! Stain them, and I'll come in to look at them under the microscope."

Ruth Dwyer went into the laboratory to carry out the doctor's instructions. Five minutes later she returned to the office to find the doctor sitting where she had left him, staring straight ahead of him with unseeing eyes.

"The slides are in the microscope, doctor."

"What? Oh, yes, of course." Fathom got up as one aroused from a deep sleep, and walked to his microscope. He had barely started to focus his instrument, when the telephone rang.

A moment later the nurse announced that a woman was calling for Doctor Fathom because her husband had fallen out of the window and broken his leg. It was a compound fracture.

"Tell her to call the police emergency hospital," said Fathom.

"I told her that," said Ruth Dwyer. "She said both police ambulances were out on call and the surgeons with them. She also tried a dozen other doctors before she called you. Couldn't raise one of them."

"Naturally," said Fathom, still at his microscope. "My colleagues work union hours."

He continued to watch the antics of bacteria under the lenses until Ruth Dwyer asked:

"What shall I tell her, doctor?"

"What?" Fathom looked up. "Compound fracture, eh? How in Heaven's name could a man fall out of a window, anyhow? Oh, well, tell her I'll come."

As he took his bag, he said: "It's after eleven. I don't suppose I'll be back for an hour. When I get back, I'll want a beaker full of that catalytic solution. Will you mix it for me, Miss Dwyer, and heat it?"

When he opened the door, a gust of cold rain blew into the house. Huge drops filled the night, driven before a gusty wind. The rain beat a tattoo on the top of his car.

WHEN the sound of the doctor's motor had faded into the roar of the rain, Ruth Dwyer closed the door and returned to the laboratory. She mixed the solutions the doctor had asked for, then sat down to read. She found it difficult to concentrate. Something disturbed her—either the sound of the storm, the banging of an unfastened shutter somewhere, or a vague internal uneasiness of a premonition of evil. A slight draft ruffled the papers on Fathom's desk and scattered the charred scraps of the telegram from the ash tray. Ruth arose to pick them up. As she was brushing them across the desk top, her eye

fell on a corner of paper that had not burned. It was apparently the signature to the telegram the doctor had destroyed. It read:

"LOVE, MABEL."

The nurse stood a long moment looking at the half-burned bit of paper in her fingers. As far as she had known, during her several years in the doctor's service, there was no woman in his life. Not even a female relative had as much as showed her nose in Sunset City, the day nurse had told Miss Dwyer. And the day nurse had been with Fathom for nearly ten years. Miss Dwyer found a match, touched it to the last scrap of telegram, dumped the whole trayful of ashes in the waste box in the laboratory. Then she lighted a burner to heat the catalytic solution. It was after midnight.

At one o'clock Miss Dwyer extinguished the burner to keep the solution from boiling away.

At two o'clock she nodded over her book.

She awakened with a start, cold and stiff from having slept in a chair. She went quickly to the laboratory. There was no one there. The solutions she had mixed were untouched.

Fathom had not yet come back, for his coat and hat were not hanging in their accustomed place.

Miss Dwyer looked at her watch; the hands marked twenty minutes to five. It was still raining.

CHAPTER III. SHENANIGANS.

JACK POWERS of the *Star* shuffled into the press room of the Sunset City police station and greeted the only other occupant with a: "Hello, Foxy. What's on the squawk sheet this morning?"

"Why don't you read it and find out?" grumbled Fox, police reporter for the *Gazette*, bending his hunched shoulders a little further over his typewriter. He was a big man, with heavy-lidded eyes that never seemed quite open, and jowls that were eternally dark.

"My dear Mr. Fox," said Powers with mock politeness, "you flatter me by assuming that merely because a man is a newspaper reporter he knows how to read."

Powers sat down at a desk on the other side of the room from Fox. He used to work at his side, but his nose objected to the pomade which Fox used to anoint his sleek black hair, but which did not quite blend with the general odor of corduroy trousers that Fox wore.

"Oh, by the way, Powers," mumbled Fox, "Kew was in here looking for you. He wants to see you right away."

"What's Kew want with me?"

"The captain of detectives didn't confide in me," said Fox. "But if you feel strong enough, you might drag yourself as far as his office and find out."

Jack Powers shuffled upstairs to the detective bureau, and found Captain Quentin Kew getting ready to go out.

"Howdy, cap," said Powers, sitting in the captain's swivel chair. "Why don't you stay a while and tell me your troubles? Fox tells me you have need of my superior intellect."

Kew bestowed a disdainful glance upon this tow-headed youth in a battered hat, threadbare coat, and baggy trousers. Kew was an imposing-looking man with a pinkish, poker face set off with silver hair. His frame was young and athletic, although it bore several bullet scars and one lead slug that physicians had thought best to leave inside. He

was obviously annoyed by the reporter's attitude of irreverence.

"Listen, Powers," said the captain. "Your paper's using Doctor Fathom as a sort of Don Quixote to fight the windmills of civic corruption, ain't it?"

"Fathom's going to testify at the coroner's inquest to-morrow at the request of the *Star*, if that's what you mean," said the reporter.

"Well, what's the idea of these shenanigans you're pulling with the doctor in the meantime? That's what I want to know."

Powers unceremoniously poked about among the papers on Kew's desk until he found some cigarettes. He lighted one and blew a large lazy ring before he replied with another question:

"What shenanigans, cap?"

"Just this," said Kew, leaning against his own desk and shaking his finger under Powers's nose. "Fathom's nurse phoned in here half an hour ago to say that the doctor went out on a case at midnight last night and didn't come back, and that she's worried about him. I sent a motorcycle man out to the address in East Sunset, where the doctor was supposed to be treating a busted leg, and there wasn't a house in the block. Now what are you and the *Star* doing with the doctor? I ain't going to send twenty men out looking for Fathom if he's just hidden in your newspaper offices somewhere, writing his memoirs."

POWERS sat up suddenly. His habitual air of lethargy abandoned him like an old cloak falling from his shoulders as he looked at Kew.

"This is straight, cap," he said, puffing nervously. "The *Star* hasn't got a thing to do with Fathom's disappearance. But I wouldn't be so

sure about the *Gazette*. Have you talked to Fox?"

"No," admitted Kew.

"Then call him," said Powers.

Captain Kew docilely lifted the phone and asked Fox to come up from the press room.

"Why do you think I ought to talk to him?" he asked when he had hung up.

"Because the *Gazette* has been trying to whitewash Crockett ever since we got Fathom to punch holes in one of the coroner's death certificates. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if they would try to keep our witness out of the way until after the inquest. Everybody knows the *Gazette* smells to——"

"Oh, is that so?" said Fox, entering without knocking. "And I suppose the *Star* is a bouquet of roses."

"Sit down, Fox," said Captain Kew. "Do you happen to know the penalty this State provides for kidnaping?"

"Why don't you call up the district attorney?" grumbled Fox.

"I was hoping maybe you'd tell us where you've hidden Fathom, so I wouldn't have to call up the district attorney. Because I swear, Fox, that, newspaperman or no newspaperman, if you've been trifling with the law——"

"Come on, now, Kew, can that!" Fox's heavy-lidded eyes were almost completely open. "Break down and tell us what's happened. Is Fathom missing or something?"

"He is."

"Well, for the love of——" Fox reached for Kew's phone, but the captain of detectives drew it out of his reach.

"You got your own phones down in the pressroom," said Kew. "I don't want you tying up department lines with newspaper lies. And, anyhow, you'll have to be getting out of

this office now. I'm going up to Fathom's house."

"So am I," said Powers.

Fox went along.

RUTH DWYER received the three men in the doctor's office. She was obviously upset and nervous, and her face bore some signs of lack of sleep. Yet Jack Powers appraised her immediately as more than ordinarily good-looking. The gray eyes beneath the long lashes were decidedly intelligent, yet in an unworldly way. The girl obviously knew more about making a blood count in the laboratory than parrying the banter of a police detective.

She told the story of Fathom's evening as she remembered it—all but the telegram. For some reason that she did not quite understand herself she withheld that.

Captain Kew cross-examined the girl relentlessly.

"Did the doctor answer the telephone himself?" he demanded.

"No," replied the girl. "I answered the phone."

"Did you recognize the voice of the women who spoke?"

"No, I don't remember ever having heard the voice before."

"She was a foreigner, wasn't she?"

"No. She spoke perfect English."

"You couldn't have made a mistake in the address she gave you, could you?"

"I don't think so. I asked her to repeat it twice, and I wrote it down and checked it back. I always do that when I take an address over the telephone."

"Then you have the paper you wrote down the address on?"

"Yes, of course. I always keep a record of the addresses to which the doctor is called. It's right over here." The girl brought a sheet of

paper on which each phone call was listed, with the time marked opposite each. Captain Kew appeared to be studying the sheet.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Dwyer," he said. "You made up this address out of your own head, didn't you?"

The girl's mouth opened in surprise, then closed quickly.

"Why no, of course not," she said.

"Then how do you explain that there is no house within a block of this address?"

"There's only one possible explanation." The girl was becoming obviously provoked by the accusing tone of the detective captain's questioning. "The woman gave a wrong address, either accidentally or deliberately."

"Then why didn't Fathom come back here, or phone you, when he found there was a mistake in the address?" demanded Kew.

"If I knew the answer to that, I certainly should not have called the police," declared Ruth Dwyer. She was learning rapidly how to cope with police detectives—at least verbally.

Jack Powers was more interested in the girl's reactions than in Captain Kew's questioning, which he considered rather stupid. Fox was hardly listening. He had left his chair and was walking aimlessly about the room, examining the walls and the objects on a table.

The doorbell rang. A few seconds later the day nurse came into the room. There was a frightened frown on her forehead.

"It's Coroner Crockett, asking for Doctor Fathom. What shall I tell him?" she inquired querulously of nobody in particular.

"Show him in here," ordered Captain Kew.

Fox stopped walking. Jack Powers showed signs of interest.

CHAPTER IV.
MYSTERY.

CORONER HARRY CROCKETT came lumbering into the room. He was a burly, bull-necked man. He kept his hands in his trouser pockets, keeping his coat open sufficiently to show the beginnings of his suspenders. Coroner Crockett had never been known to wear a vest.

"Howdy there, Cap'n Kew," was the coroner's greeting. "How are you, Fox?" He nodded curtly to Jack Powers. When he saw Ruth Dwyer he awkwardly removed his wide-brimmed black hat. "Good morning, ma'am. Are all you gentlemen taking treatments from Fathom, or is this just a rehearsal for the inquest to-morrow?"

The coroner laughed boisterously.

"Did you have an appointment with Fathom this morning, coroner?" asked Powers.

"Well, not an appointment exactly," said the coroner. "I just dropped in to find out something about a wild-goose chase the doctor sent me on last night."

"You mean the Zonelli case, coroner?" Ruth Dwyer asked.

"Yes, I guess that's it," drawled Crockett. "Fathom phoned me there was a dead man at No. 5015 South Harbor Street, and I'd better go out and make an autopsy. Well, I went out, all right, but I'm danged if I could find a dead man. The house was dark and locked up. There wasn't nobody in it. My chauffeur and me got in through a window, and looked all through the place without finding anybody, dead or alive. I got the neighbors outa bed, and they said nobody'd lived in that house for three months. I called the doctor back about eleven thirty, but somebody told me he was out on a

call. I guess he gave me the wrong address——"

"That was the right address," Ruth Dwyer insisted. "I took it from Mr. Zonelli himself on the phone. Doctor Fathom went there and found the man dead—Mr. Zonelli's brother, he said it was. He said he called you, because it looked like poisoning, I believe. The man had been dead several hours."

"What time was this?" demanded Captain Kew, turning to Ruth Dwyer.

"About nine o'clock," said the girl.

THE captain of detectives again studied the paper on which the phone calls were carefully written out.

"Then I thought maybe Fathom changed his mind about the diagnosis and signed a death certificate after all," said the coroner. "I made the rounds of the undertakers, but they didn't have any new arrivals that corresponded. So I dropped around to see what Fathom had to say about the mystery."

"Well, you've dropped right into the middle of another mystery," mumbled Fox.

"It's probably the same mystery," commented Powers.

"Fathom's disappeared," said Captain Kew.

"He disappeared?" The coroner made a gesture of surprise with hands that might have belonged to a pick-and-shovel man.

"But he's expected back in time to testify at the inquest to-morrow," said Powers dryly, watching the coroner closely.

"Where did he disappear to? Haven't you any trace of him?" the coroner wanted to know.

"I will have before the morning's much older," said Kew. I expect to

hear that some of the boys have picked up traces of the doctor's car any minute now. I've sent the alarm all over the State, and of course he can't go far if he crosses the Mexican border."

"Danged strange," the coroner muttered. "First the doctor's corpse disappears; then the doctor himself. Well, I got work to do. Can I give any of you boys a lift downtown?"

"Thanks," said Fox. "I think I'll go down and have a look around that shack on Harbor Street."

"I think we might all take a look around there," said Powers, "until we hear something more from your men, cap."

"I want to talk to this girl some more," said Kew. "I haven't a clew to go on as yet."

The doorbell rang again.

From the office, a woman's voice could be heard talking with the day nurse.

"Doctor Fathom isn't in," the day nurse was saying.

"That's all right. I'll come in anyhow," said the other woman. Her voice was a little brassy and carried clearly.

"But I have no idea when the doctor will be back," the day nurse protested.

"Doesn't make a particle of difference," said the other woman. "I'm in no hurry. I can wait indefinitely."

"I'm sorry, but I can't—"

The voice of the other woman could be heard calling to her taxi driver to bring up her bags.

Immediately Captain Kew, Fox, and Powers trooped from the room. Ruth Dwyer followed them.

IN the doorway they saw a flashily dressed woman of medium height, with a white fur about her neck, and suspiciously blond hair protruding from under a bright-

red, close-fitting hat. The woman was probably older than she appeared, as her skill with cosmetics was strikingly successful in retaining much of her youthful beauty.

"Do you know Doctor Fathom?" Captain Kew demanded of the woman.

"Do I know him?" The woman laughed. "I'll say I know him. I'm his wife."

"That's not true!" Ruth Dwyer protested. "Doctor Fathom's not married."

The self-proclaimed Mrs. Fathom coolly eyed the night nurse from head to foot. There was an inexplicable contrast between the child-like blue eyes of the newcomer and the tight sophistication of her carefully rouged lips.

"Of course he'd tell *you* he wasn't married," she said, looking Ruth Dwyer in the eyes. "But he is. He married me ten years ago in Denver, Colorado."

"But you—but the doctor never —" Ruth Dwyer found herself stammering.

"No, of course he wouldn't be likely to mention my name—which is Mabel Hardy Fathom, by the way. You see, he ran off and left me only a little while after we were married."

"And how do you happen to breeze into Sunset just at this juncture, Mabel?" demanded Jack Powers.

"Mrs. Fathom' to you," said the blonde haughtily.

"Don't get high-hat with the press, Mabel," Fox chimed in, "or we won't put your picture in the papers."

"Shut up, you!" snapped Mabel.

"No wonder the doc ran away," Fox leered.

"You haven't answered my question yet, Mrs. Fathom," said Powers.

"How do you happen to be showing up to-day after all these years?"

"I just found out where he was," said the blonde. "I had no idea where he'd gone until I happened to see his name in a Sunset City telephone book. I was with a friend of mine who was making a long-distance call yesterday, and I was just looking through the Sunset City book. So I came right down."

"You're about twelve hours late," said Captain Kew.

"Late? What do you mean?"

"The doc has been lost, strayed, stolen—or murdered," volunteered Fox with a snuffle.

MURDERED?" The blond Mabel made a grimace, accompanied by appropriate gestures, to indicate that she might be on the verge of hysterics. Then she thought better of it. She smiled. "But, of course, he's not murdered. He's just run away again. It's my own fault, I suppose. I shouldn't have sent him that telegram."

Captain Kew whirled to face Ruth Dwyer.

"Did Fathom get a telegram last night before he left?" the detective demanded.

"I don't know," said the nurse without hesitation. "I'm merely Doctor Fathom's nurse and laboratory assistant. I don't know anything about his private affairs."

"But you answer his telephone for him and keep the record of the calls. How is it you don't take care of his telegrams, too?"

"Doctor Fathom very seldom transacts any business by telegraph. I know nothing about this telegram of last night."

"Well, I wired him, all right," said Mabel. "I told him how glad I was I'd found him again, and that I'd be giving him a big hug and kiss just as soon as I could get down from Los Angeles. I suppose that's where

I made my mistake. Well, I'll wait here till he shows up."

"No, you won't," said Captain Kew. "You'll come with me. I'll put your bags in my car."

"I like your nerve," said Mabel. "Who do you think you are?"

"I'm captain of detectives," said Kew, "and I'm taking you to police headquarters to ask you some questions."

As Kew took the blond's arm, the telephone rang. Ruth Dwyer answered it.

"Somebody wants to speak to Captain Kew," she said.

Kew strode in to the phone.

"Hello. . . . Yes. . . . Where did you find it? . . . There is, eh? . . . Well, stick right by it and don't let anybody touch it till I get there. I'll be out soon as possible with a finger-print man and a photographer."

Fox and Powers were hanging over the police officer's shoulder as he talked. He had hardly hung up when they hurled questions at him. He put up his hands in a gesture of impatience.

"Fathom's car was found about three miles out of town on the Mesa Road," he said. "No, I don't know anything more than that. There's no trace of Fathom. But there's blood spattered on the windshield."

CHAPTER V.

DOCTOR FATHOM'S PATIENT.

POWERS and Fox were back in the press room of the police station. There was a lull between editions, and they were both looking for Kew in order to check on new developments in the Fathom story. Neither of the reporters had seen the captain of detectives after the confusion of cameramen, detectives, identification experts and

other reporters at the scene of the discovery of Fathom's blood-spattered car. When the discovery revealed no clew as to the whereabouts of the doctor himself, Powers had gone to the house at No. 5015 South Harbor Street, while Fox had appropriated Mabel Hardy Fathom, temporarily left at a loose end by the shifting of Captain Kew's interests.

The morning activities of the two reporters were reflected in the early editions of their respective papers.

Jack Powers snorted as he held up the front page of the rival *Gazette*. Across the eight columns screamed the headline:

**ECCENTRIC M. D. VANISHES AS
ABANDONED WIFE ENDS 10
YEARS' QUEST.**

The page was largely given over to a three-column cut of Mabel Hardy Fathom, photographed in a pose calculated to display her charms. The story featured Mabel's recital of her love that endured through the years, despite the doctor's cruel desertion. The *Gazette* left no doubt that Fathom's disappearance "on the eve of the doctor's testimony in the muck-raking campaign against Coroner Crockett" was motivated solely by his desire to escape Mabel. The blood on the windshield of the car was explained as "probably from minor cuts incurred when Doctor Fathom, in his haste, drove his car into a ditch and was forced to abandon it in his mad flight." The Zonelli case got bare mention as a "probable move to" up more questionable evidence. Doctor Fathom's inspired "Coroner Crockett."

"Congratulations," said Fox, as he dropped the wastebasket. "I could write the w news stories, but I'd

such a complete and brilliant distortion of facts as this Fathom yarn. Did Crockett dictate it to you?"

"It's probably a damn sight closer to the truth than this Sherlock Holmes thriller you've cooked up," grumbled Fox, leaning back in his chair in a gesture of mock admiration for the front page of the *Star* spread out on his typewriter before him. The *Star* headlines read:

**STAR WITNESS IN CORONER'S
PROBE MISSING AFTER FAKE
PHONE CALL; FOUL PLAY FEARED**

Powers's story linked Doctor Fathom's disappearance with the disappearance of the Zonelli corpse from the Harbor Street shack. It printed Coroner Crockett's version of finding the house unoccupied for months, but it also quoted two neighbors as having seen dim lights in the deserted house the night before. The *Star*'s own investigation found candle drippings, several sets of footprints in the dust of the bare floors, open window in the back, and a track in the dust as though something had been dragged to the window. The corner grocer told of overhearing a man telephone to Doctor Fathom, repeating the conversation reported by Ruth D. The *Star*'s story concluded:

The
Fatho
m

in some gin mill, tight as a tick, waiting for this blond Mabel to go back where she came from."

POWERS got up without a word and sauntered from the press room as though he were insulted. Once outside the door, he sprinted up the stairs. He had seen Captain Kew go by.

He managed to get one foot inside the door of the detective bureau and grinned at Captain Kew's florid scowl.

"What's the idea of busting in here like a burglar and a rough-neck?" bellowed Kew, as Powers applied his shoulder to the door and slipped into the room before the detective captain could prevent it. "You go out again and knock like a gentleman if you want to come in here."

"Don't kid me, Kew," said Powers grinning. "You got something up your sleeve. Go ahead, spill it."

"Suppose I have you tossed out of here by the seat of your shiny pants?" bellowed Kew.

"Go to it," said Powers, making himself at home. "If you do, I promise you the *Star* won't mention your name again, not if you found Doc

_____"

"Sit down, Jack,"

detectives passed the reporter a dollar bill. Then he let in Fox.

"Sit down," said Kew. "I was just going to send for you. This is strictly confidential, but I'm telling you newspaper boys so you won't break it if you get it from some other source. I got a hot tip of this Fathom case. I'll give you an even show when the story does pop. Can I count on you to keep this dark?"

"Sure," said Powers.

"What's the dirt?" demanded Fox.

"Just this," said Kew, sitting on the edge of his desk. The two reporters were occupying his only chairs. "You saw the crossroad where we found Fathom's car on, didn't you? Well, it happens that's a private road. It runs about half a mile farther to a little house in an orange grove. The house belongs to a man named Sidney Edmonton."

"Any relation to the rich Bernard Edmonton?" asked Fox.

"His nephew," said Kew.

"Sure, everybody knows Sid Edmonton," added Powers. "He spends the old man's money on flashy roadsters, and the usual things."

THAT'S the bird," agreed Captain Kew. "He owns this little house in the oranges, but he doesn't live there. Comes there for occasional week-ends, or parties he doesn't want any publicity on. There's a Japanese couple lives there to take care of the place. I talked to them this morning. They told me that young Edmonton came to the house last night a little before midnight and stayed until three in the morning. He wasn't alone, because I could hear him talking to somebody. They didn't get up, so I couldn't see who it was."

"The name," volunteered

monton at his uncle's house, where he lives," Kew continued. "He didn't want to see me, of course, but I walked in anyhow. He was just getting up.

"Where were you last night?" I asked him.

"None of your damned business," he came back.

"I told him it was plenty of my business and not to get so fresh or I'd bust him one. Then he told me he was home all night curled up with a good book, until about one, when he went to bed. I never before saw a guy get a hangover from reading a book, but he was sure-enough bleary-eyed.

"You don't walk in your sleep, do you?" I asked him. "You didn't dream you went out to that place of yours on the Mesa Road, by any chance, did you?"

"He said he hadn't been to the Mesa Road house in a week.

"That's funny," I said, "because the Japanese couple out there said you were there for about three hours last night."

"Those Japs are crazy," he said.

"What about Fathom?" I shot at him all of a sudden. He looked at me kind of funny. Then he got up and poured himself a drink of water. Said he had a mouth full of cotton. 'Probably that good book upset your stomach last night,' I said. He gave me another funny look. Then I came back with, 'Where's Fathom?'

"Sid Edmonton looked at his watch. 'Doctor Fathom's probably downstairs right this minute, if you're so damn interested,' he said.

"I asked him what he was doing downstairs. He said the doc always came every day about this time to see the old man, Bernard Edmonton, this guy's uncle. When I tried to get out of him what the doc was treating his uncle for, this young

Edmonton shut up like a clam. So I went down to see the uncle himself.

"The old man didn't want to see me, because he said he was expecting Fathom any minute. I told him that the doc probably wouldn't be around to-day, and he got all excited, practically went all to pieces. Old man Edmonton seemed to be quite a nice old geezer, and he thinks Fathom is all aces. He didn't want to tell me what the doc was treating him for; said it would be a violation of confidence, or something. So I told him that I had to know everything, or maybe the doctor wouldn't ever come back. Then the old man got scared to death and told me that if the doc didn't ever come back, it would mean Bernard Edmonton was done for. It seems the doc has been keeping the old man alive by giving him some kind of injections every day. Old Edmonton was given up as a goner by about a million dollars' worth of doctors two years ago. He came out here to die. Then Fathom got hold of him. It seems Fathom has been experimenting with something he calls synthetic end-o'-cream extracts, and he found that by shooting old Edmonton full of this endo-what-ever-it-is every day, he's saved the old man's life. He can't stop the injections, though, because it seems they take the place of something or other in the old man's insides that don't function no more."

"So if Fathom doesn't come back, the old man dies—is that the idea?" interrupted Fox.

"Exactly," said Kew.

"And I suppose young Edminton is the old man's sole heir?" asked Powers.

"With the exception of about a hundred thousand left to the medical school for the continuance of Fathom's research, Sidney Edmon-

ton inherits the whole damn business—which is I don't know how many millions," said Kew, very pleased with himself.

"Then why don't you throw Sid Edmonton in jail?" asked Fox.

"I got a couple of men watching him," said Kew. "I ain't going to arrest him until I know whether to charge him with kidnaping or murder. If you birds will lay off for a little while, and give him the idea I'm looking for somebody else, I think he'll give himself away. Meanwhile, I got a plane and about twenty men scouring the hills around Mesa. And, of course, the alarm is out all over the coast."

Kew's phone rang.

"Hello. . . . Who? . . . All right, send him up, sergeant."

The captain of detectives hung up slowly. There was an expression of triumph around his mouth as he announced: "It's Sidney Edmonton. He wants to see me." There was a timid knock on the door. "Come in," Kew bellowed.

CHAPTER VI.

NOT A PHONY.

A YOUNG man of slight build and fair complexion entered. He was a rather handsome, though, through a combination of dissipated blue eyes and bored mouth, he appeared older than his years. He was dressed expensively.

"I'd like to speak to you alone, captain," he said, looking at Powers and Fox with obvious displeasure.

"Meet the press, Mr. Edmonton," said Captain Kew. "This is Powers of the *Star*, Fox of the *Gazette*."

"Howdy," said Powers. Fox merely grunted. Edmonton nodded.

"What I have to say, captain, is decidedly not for the ears of the press. On the contrary——"

"Then by all means tell the reporters," said Kew. Let me tell you, young man, that if there's anything you want kept out of the papers, the best way is to tell it to the reporters—in confidence. When you tell a reporter information ain't for publication, you're safe. A good reporter doesn't violate a confidence. But if you try to hide something, he'll find it out anyway, and, since he's not bound by his word, he'll spread it all over the paper. Now what is it you've got to say?"

"I've just seen the papers, captain," said Sidney Edmonton. "I didn't know what you were driving at when you asked me about Doctor Fathom a little while ago. I do now, and I imagine that I put myself in a rather peculiar light, the way I answered you. I've come down to try to—well, sort of clear myself."

He paused. When Kew did not say anything, young Edmonton took an envelope from his pocket.

"This is a special delivery letter that came to my uncle just after you left the house this morning," said Edmonton. "My uncle insisted that I show it to no one, particularly not to the police. But he doesn't know the jam I talked myself into. I want you to know, captain, that I have nothing to do with Doctor Fathom's disappearance."

The detective held out his hand.

"Let's see the letter," he said.

"You'll let me have it back?"

Kew nodded. Edmonton handed him the letter. Fox and Powers looked over his shoulder. The note read:

If you want Doctor Fathom back to give you your daily shots, it will cost \$20,000. Get the money in currency and keep it ready. We will tell you when and where to deliver it. Don't show this to the police or anybody or the doctor will never come back.

The note was written on good bond paper with a stub pen. The handwriting was obviously disguised.

KEW pushed a button and handed the note to a uniformed policeman who appeared. Sidney Edmonton protested.

"You promised to give it back to me," he said.

"You'll get it back in three minutes," said Kew. "I'm having a photostatic copy made."

"But we don't want police interference," said Edmonton. "It was just to clear up any suspicions that you may have had on my account that I even showed you this letter."

"Sorry, Mr. Edmonton," said Kew. "But kidnaping is a crime under the laws of this State, and I've taken an oath to enforce the laws. And if you don't cooperate with me, I can file charges of complicity against you."

"But don't you see that twenty thousand dollars means nothing to my uncle, in comparison to his life—which is in grave danger if Doctor Fathom doesn't return in a few days? He's quite ready, even anxious, to pay the ransom."

"Listen, Mr. Edmonton," said Kew. "I'm just as anxious as your uncle to see Fathom released safely. I'm quite willing not to interfere with his return. But I insist on having something to say about the way it's done, so we will have a chance of catching the kidnapers afterward."

"What do you propose, captain?"

"Two things. First, you communicate with me immediately you hear anything regarding the ransom and do nothing until I give you instructions. Second, that you make up the twenty thousand in hundred-dollar bills, and that you record the numbers of all of them. That's all. Wait,

here's the original of your letter. Good-bye, Mr. Edmonton. And remember, I want to be notified immediately."

As soon as Sidney Edmonton had gone, Captain Kew lifted his phone and called the general manager of the telephone company.

"This is Quentin Kew, at police headquarters," he said. "I'm sending you one of my men who is to listen in and make a transcript of all messages passing over the line of Bernard Edmonton. I want your help in tracing all incoming messages to the Edmonton phone. . . . Thanks. . . . I'll give my man a letter to you. . . . Good-bye."

Captain Kew then telephoned the identification bureau chief.

"This is Kew, Mac. Will you rush me in the mugs of all the kidnapers or suspected kidnapers you got on file in there? . . . Hurry it up, Mac."

"Lot of good that's going to do you," sniffed Powers, as Kew hung up. "This isn't a job by a professional kidnaping gang. That ransome note's a fake, cap, and you know it."

"What makes you think so?" asked Kew.

"They only ask for twenty grand," Powers explained. "Whoever wrote that note knows all about Bernard Edmonton—knows that the old man can't live long without Fathom's treatments, for instance. He certainly must know then that the old man's got a potful of money, and would be just as quick to loosen up with half a million as with twenty thousand. That note's just a blind to cover up something—maybe murder."

"I agree with you that it don't sound like a professional gang," admitted Kew. "A professional would ask for the money in small bills so

the jack could be passed afterward without people looking at the numbers. Still, it might be amateurs sent that note."

"If you ask me, I think the doc wrote it himself," mumbled Fox.

"Well, I got to get to work," said Powers. "I'll keep in touch, cap. I'll let you know what edition to read to find out who kidnaped the doctor."

"Get t' hell outa here, both of you!" ordered the detective captain.

JACK POWERS spent the afternoon running down clues on his own theories. He had a talk with Mabel Hardy Fathom, who was receiving press photographers and sob sisters in a room in the Sunset Hotel. Immediately after that, Powers telegraphed to a friend on a Denver paper to conduct a private research among the files of the county clerk's office.

The end of the afternoon found him at Fathom's office, talking to Ruth Dwyer. The girl was telling him about the doctor's experiments in the synthesis of certain endocrine extracts, experiments which had apparently saved Bernard Edmonton's life, and which were to form the basis of the doctor's paper before the medical convention next week—if the doctor came back in time.

"Haven't you any news at all?" asked the girl, with more than mere curiosity in her eyes.

Before Powers could answer, the telephone bell rang.

"It's for you," said Miss Dwyer. "It's your office calling."

Powers wedged the receiver in between his shoulder and his ear as he answered.

"Hello. . . . Yeah. . . . A telegram? . . . Open it and read it to me. . . . Yeah. . . . Yeah. . . . What was the last word?

O. K. . . . Thanks. . . . Tell the city desk I'll call back in half an hour."

As Powers hung up, he sat for a full minute staring at the instrument.

"Bad news?" asked Ruth.

Powers got up, walked to the window, and lit a cigarette.

"Not exactly," he replied. "Just part of my theory gone up the flue, that's all." He smoked a moment before he continued. "You know, I've had an idea that the blond Mabel was phony, from the minute I laid eyes on her. I wired to Denver for a check on her story. That was the answer to my wire." Powers blew a ring.

"Well?"

"Well, she isn't as phony as I thought. My friend has checked the county clerk's records, and he finds that a marriage license was issued on February 13, 1922, to Walter Fathom and Mabel Hardy."

CHAPTER VII.

THE CALL FOR RANSOM.

CAPTAIN KEW'S telephone rang.

"Hello!" snapped the detective. "Yes, Edmonton. . . . By telephone, eh? . . . A man's voice? . . . He did, eh? . . . Wait a minute till I get a pencil. . . . All right, say that again so I can write it down. . . . Wrap currency in newspaper. . . . Drive across Balboa Bridge from west to east at exactly eighty thirty. . . . Leave currency in last culvert opening on right, near east end. . . . Continue to drive through park. . . . I get it, Edmonton. . . . Eight thirty—that's in fifteen minutes. Can you make it, Edmonton? . . . All right. . . . No, I won't interfere. No, there won't be any-

body near when you leave the package. . . . We'll let it be claimed. . . . Sure, we'll watch from under cover. . . . Thanks for calling, Edmonton."

Kew grabbed his hat, hurriedly verified the fact that the automatic in his holster was loaded, and had his hand on the doorknob when the phone rang again. With an oath of impatience he answered.

"Hello!" he shouted. He recognized the voice of the man he had assigned to listen on Edmonton's telephone line. He did not sit down. "Yes, Martigan, I know what you're going to say. . . . You're at the telephone exchange and you just listened in on instructions to Edmonton on where to leave the ransom. Yeah, I just got the dope from Edmonton, and I'll have to hurry to plant my— . . . What? . . . Nine o'clock. . . . Hold on a minute, Martigan. That doesn't check with Edmonton's story at all." Kew slipped into a chair, pushed his hat back from his forehead, took pencil and paper, and ordered: "Now read me that transcript from the beginning. . . . Read slow so I can copy it. Go ahead."

Kew's pencil flew across the paper. The captain of detectives grunted, as each line brought out some new detail that contradicted the message given by Edmonton. The transcript of the call reported by the detective at the telephone exchange read as follows:

Listen carefully, Edmonton, and don't interrupt. I'm not going to repeat. Take that twenty thousand in bills, wrap it in newspaper, and get in your car. At nine o'clock start down Walnut Avenue till you get to First Street. Cross over to Cedar and come back to Thirty-fifth Street. Cross over to Elm and come back down to First Street. Keep working east on the avenues until nine thirty. Somewhere along the road you'll see a

car parked with red cowl lights burning. When you see it, don't stop, but throw the package out on the curb and keep going straight ahead for ten blocks. If you do this, the doctor will be home by midnight. If you don't, or if you try to stop, we'll cut his throat.

"I'll be damned!" exclaimed Kew, as he finished writing. "That's at the other end of town from the spot Edmonton gave me. By the way, Martigan, did you have that call traced? . . . From where? . . . The hell it did! . . . Well, that house is watched now. I'll have the boys go in and search it. Stay on the job, Martigan!"

Kew slammed down the receiver, burst into the next room where half a dozen plain-clothes men were loafing, awaiting assignments. Kew barked several orders, then went downstairs three steps at a time, jumped in a car, and headed for the park.

IT was twenty-five minutes past eight and Kew had two miles to go before he reached Balboa Bridge, an ornamental concrete affair that spanned one of the canyons traversing Sunset City's municipal park. He did not go directly to the bridge, however. He drove to the road leading to the eastern approach to the bridge, drew up alongside the road about a hundred yards from a fork, stopped his car and switched off his lights. From where he was parked, he could see the eastern end of the bridge. His engine was idling quietly.

He had been waiting only a few minutes before he saw a car come across the bridge and stop. He saw the shadow of a man get out, stoop over as though he were placing something in a culvert, get back in the car and start off again. Kew leaned forward over the wheel as the headlights came toward him. His

foot was poised above the accelerator, ready to drop as soon as the other car would choose one road of the fork.

The headlights passed the fork, rushed on, roared past Kew in a cloud of gasoline fumes.

Kew's foot goaded his motor into screaming action. The car ground into gear, swung around, leaped ahead.

The tail light of the first car was flying through the night, a spot of ruby receding through the darkness at a mile a minute. Kew's police car was equal to the chase and succeeded in closing up the gap somewhat as he sped in pursuit along the road that ran through the park toward the heart of the town. Before he left the park, he was within fifty yards of the other car—close enough to ascertain for certain that it was Sidney Edmonton's sport roadster. Kew could bide his time, now.

At the first red traffic light, he pulled alongside of Edmonton, leaned over and shouted at him. The young man seemed somewhat surprised to see him.

"Drive to the station; I want to talk to you," shouted Kew, as the light turned green. "I'll drive behind."

Five minutes later Sidney Edmonton's roadster was parked in front of police headquarters, and the young man was going upstairs with Captain Kew.

"I thought you wanted to watch the ransom pick-up," said Edmonton.

"I've left some of the boys to watch it," said Kew. "Just hang up your coat and hat in the anteroom here."

"I won't bother," said Edmonton. "I can only stay a minute."

"Hang it right here," insisted Kew, peeling off Edmonton's fawn-

colored overcoat in spite of his protests. He also took his pearl-gray hat and hung it on a hook before ushering the youth into the detective bureau.

"I promised to report to my uncle as soon as I'd made the delivery," said Edmonton.

"You took the wrong road out of the park, in that case," said Kew.

"I always get lost in that park," Edmonton explained. "They ought to mark the roads better."

"You've got plenty of time, at any rate," said Kew. "It's only ten of nine."

"What did you want to talk to me about?" asked Edmonton, with just a touch of impatience.

"Sit down," said Kew, with a leisurely gesture toward a chair.

EDMONTON sat, but in by no means a leisurely manner. He was perched on the edge of the chair and he leaned tensely toward Kew.

"Well?" he asked, as Kew made no sign of beginning the conversation.

"Have a cigar," Kew offered.

Edmonton made a curt sign with his head to indicate that he had no desire to smoke.

"You'll pardon me if I light one myself," said the detective. He took his time about selecting a cigar from a box on his desk, bit off the end, studied it a moment, then lighted it with exaggerated care. He smoked pensively for a moment.

"What did you bring me here for?" demanded Edmonton with increased irritation.

Kew's eyes narrowed.

"Guess," he said.

"I've got no time for riddles," snapped Edmonton. The color mounted to his cheeks. "I've got an important engagement."

"Mr. Edmonton," drawled the detective with incongruous sweetness, "do you believe in Santa Claus?"

Edmonton stood up.

"I'm goin'," he said. "I'll come back when you're ready to talk sense."

"Sit down!"

Kew's affected sweetness had vanished. His bulky form stood between Edmonton and the door. Edmonton took a step backward. There was a moment of silence, filled by the ticking of a clock on Kew's desk. The hands crept toward nine o'clock.

"You lied to me!" thundered Kew, pointing at Edmonton with his smoking cigar.

"Lied? I——" Edmonton started to protest. Kew cut him short.

"Yes, damn it! You lied! That little hocus-pocus of yours at eight thirty was entirely for my benefit." Captain Kew snatched a paper from his desk. "What was actually said to you over the telephone was this: 'At nine o'clock start down Walnut Avenue till you get to First Street. Cross over to Cedar——'"

"Clever, aren't you?" interrupted Edmonton.

"Much cleverer than you think," said Kew, putting down the paper. "It's just one minute to nine. In one minute your own gaudy roadster will start down Walnut Avenue and run over the course prescribed. You remember, I suppose, that you left the roadster parked in front of the station twelve minutes ago. One of my men is driving it now—a man about your build and general appearance. He's wearing the nice gray hat and fawn overcoat that you so kindly left hanging in the anteroom. You can count on him playing the part of Sidney Edmonton with great talent."

"And I suppose he'll pay the twenty thousand dollars ransom out

of his own pocket?" Edmonton was pale. His effort to be facetious fell flat.

"Oh, no," said Kew. "He'll use your money. He fished that package out of the culvert on the Balboa Bridge."

Perspiration stood out on Edmonton's forehead.

"There's only about thirty dollars in that package," he said. "The rest is newspaper clippings."

"You rat!" barked Kew. "You were going to steal the twenty grand ransom money on top of letting old man Edmonton die to inherit his millions. What's the idea? Afraid of having the estate tied up in lawsuits, or did you need a little pocket money in a hurry?"

"You don't understand——" Edmonton began.

"I understand plenty," Kew declared. "And I don't want any more lies out of you until my man calls in about the ransom."

EDMONTON sat down sullenly. He extracted a cigarette from a gold case, snapped a flame from a jeweled lighter, and smoked furiously. His lips were colorless. He continued to smoke in tense silence, lighting one cigarette from the stub of another.

Captain Kew spoke to him just once.

"By the way," he demanded, "have you got a good lie thought up to use as an alibi for the night you said you weren't at the cottage in the orange grove? You're going to need a damn good one."

Edmonton exhaled smoke sharply through his nostrils, but he said nothing. After that Kew appeared to ignore him. He puffed busily on a cigar, and fussed with papers on his desk.

At nine thirty-five he got his

phone call. After a brief conversation he turned to Edmonton.

"Your car, your hat and coat will be downstairs in five minutes," he said. "Maybe you'd like to know that the parked car with the red cowl lights didn't show up."

"Thanks to your clumsy help," said Edmonton, scarcely moving his white lips.

"Go on down and wait for your car outside," ordered Kew. "I'd throw you in jail to-night, only it ain't necessary. You're just as good as arrested from now on, so don't try to pull a fast one on me. You won't be out of sight of my dicks from now until I've got my case cold against you. Now get out!"

When Sidney Edmonton reached home, his uncle's butler greeted him with a worried frown on his usually imperturbable English forehead.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but some one just telephoned for you, sir, not two minutes ago."

"Who was it, Perkins?"

"A gentleman, sir, about a ransom."

"What did he say, Perkins?"

"I took the message, sir. I thought it best not to communicate it to your uncle, sir, until after you'd come in. The gentleman said that you might be—begging your pardon, sir—a bloody fool, but that *he* wasn't one by a long ways. He says he didn't keep the appointment to-night because he knew the police were in on the game. You're to have one more chance, he says, but the price has gone up five thousand on account of the way you acted to-night. When you get his next instructions, you're to act promptly and without telling a soul, he says, lacking which the doctor will be shuffled off. Will that be all, sir?"

"That's all, Perkins."

"Good night, sir."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CELLAR DOOR.

THERE was a small crowd on the sidewalk in front of Doctor Fathom's house when Kew pulled up in a police car. Kew got out, pushed his way through the ranks of the curious, nodded to several of his own men, and was immediately surrounded by a group of newspapermen, who raised an indignant chorus.

"Hey, what's the idea, Kew?" "Your dicks won't let us in the house." "We want to talk to that nurse." "Why the embargo, Kew?" "Give the morning papers a break, Kew."

Captain Kew paused on the steps of the Fathom house, turned around and scanned the faces of the reporters. Several of them were news-agency men he saw only on rare stories. Most of them were from the morning papers.

"Sorry to shut you out, boys," he said, "but I've got to do it for half an hour more. Stick around and I'll give you all the dope then. It looks like it might be pretty hot. By the way, where's Powers of the *Star*?"

Some one in the crowd laughed. A dozen answers were volunteered.

"You don't catch an evening paper reporter working after dark, cap." "He's probably pie-eyed in some speak." "He works union hours." "He always lets the morning papers cover a story for him, anyhow."

Kew singled out the face of one evening paper reporter.

"What are you doing on the night trick, Fox?" he asked. "The *Gazette* publishing a morning edition now?"

"I got an assignment from a paper back East," Fox mumbled.

Captain Kew entered the house. In the reception room he found Ruth Dwyer, highly indignant, sitting in

a chair across the table from a police detective. The girl was dressed for the street in a tailored costume. Kew had never seen her before except in the white uniform of a nurse. He touched his hat in an instinctive gesture of admiration. The girl got quickly to her feet and stood before him, her lips trembling.

"What does this mean, captain?" she asked in a voice tight with emotion. "This man refuses to let me leave the house."

"My orders, Miss Dwyer," said Kew. "Sorry. Sit down."

"But you can't keep me in here like this," insisted the girl. "I've got to go out."

"Sit down," repeated Kew gruffly. "Where are you going?"

"To Mr. Bernard Edmonton's."

"Edmonton's, eh? What for?" Kew looked at the girl curiously.

"I—I want to get some data," the girl explained. "You see, Doctor Fathom has been treating Mr. Edmonton for more than a year now, and this is the first time that Mr. Edmonton has been without his injections for more than a day in all that time. I'm going to take the patient's blood pressure and make various other tests. I'm sure the doctor will want to know the patient's reactions when he returns."

"Oh, so you've heard from the doctor, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then how do you know he's coming back?" Kew's voice was growing hard.

"Why, I—I don't know for sure. I'm assuming he will. If he does, he'll certainly want the Edmonton data, because he's using the case as a basis for his paper before the medical convention next week."

"I don't believe your Edmonton story," said Kew, putting his hands into his pockets.

"Well, that's your privilege, of course."

"Who are you hiding in this house?" Kew barked.

"Hiding?" Ruth Dwyer's eyes widened. They glistened a moment on the verge of tears. Then she recovered control of herself as she said, "I'm not hiding any one."

"You're a little liar!" Kew exclaimed.

"You're a big boor," countered the girl, "and an extremely unpleasant person."

"You lied to me once to-day," continued Kew, "about a telegram."

The girl's face changed.

"Why—I——"

"Don't try to deny it," said Kew, "because you'll only get in deeper. You told me you knew nothing about the doctor receiving the telegram Mabel Hardy Fathom claimed she sent. I checked with the telegraph company, got a copy of the telegram, and found the messenger who delivered it. He said that you were the person who accepted it."

RUTH DWYER was speechless. Kew pursued his advantage in a voice that was calmer, yet his words were sharp-edged.

"You lied to me then, and you're lying to me now. I'll tell you why. This evening a man telephoned the Edmontons to demand ransom for Fathom. I had that call traced. It came from this house!"

Kew paused to watch the effect his announcement made on the girl. Her lips parted a moment. Then she exclaimed:

"Why, that's impossible! One of your own men has been sitting by the phone all evening."

"No extensions, I suppose," said Kew with an ironic smile.

"Well, yes. There's an extension phone in the nurse's wing, and one

upstairs in the doctor's private apartment."

"Then some man used one of them. The only man that has left the house this evening has been Jack Powers, the reporter. Unless it was Powers who made the ransom call, the man is still in the house."

"But——"

"Don't," interrupted Kew. "I hate to hear a pretty girl like you lie. Come on, Chadwick, we're going to turn things upside down. You'll come with us, miss."

Systematically and with great thoroughness Kew and his assistant searched the house. At the conclusion of the examination, Kew pushed his hat to the back of his head, and, standing with his feet wide apart in the center of the doctor's reception room, wore an expression that for anybody else would have denoted great perplexity.

Detective Chadwick glared at Ruth Dwyer as though still convinced she was hiding a man somewhere. The girl was quietly elated.

All three were startled by a noise that seemed to come from under the floor. The sound was a hollow clang. It might have been made by a blow against an empty gasoline can.

Captain Kew immediately pushed his hat forward to the front of his head.

"There's a cellar in this house, ain't there?" he demanded.

Ruth Dwyer nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"There's no telephone in the cellar," Ruth's eyes flashed.

"Where's the stairway?" demanded Kew.

"The door is in the back of the broom closet at the end of the hall there," said the girl. "But it hasn't been opened as long as I've been here. Doctor Fathom doesn't use

the furnace, and as far as I know, the key has been lost."

Kew was in the closet with a flashlight. Dust and cobwebs across the door confirmed the girl's story. He tried the knob. The door was locked.

"Let's kick it in," suggested Chadwick.

"If there's another entrance," Kew objected, "he'd be able to get away."

"There's an outside door," volunteered Ruth Dwyer, "where the gas and electric men go in to read the meters."

"Where is it?"

"I'll show you," said the girl.

She led them through the house and out the back way into a little garden. There, close by an arbor, was a small door half hidden by vines. The door was slightly ajar.

CAPTAIN KEW stood close to the hinges and cautiously pushed the door wide open, a few inches at a time.

Carefully he pushed his head around the corner of the door frame and peered into the darkness. He saw nothing, heard nothing.

Detective Chadwick tugged at his sleeve.

"Take my flashlight," he urged the captain.

Kew drew back from the doorway and turned on his subordinate with an air of scorn.

"If I go there with a light, he'd pot me before I could say 'Swiss Family Robinson,'" whispered Kew. "Wait a minute, now."

Again Kew advanced his head cautiously. This time he thought he saw a glimmer of light in the far recesses of the cellar darkness. He was sure he heard a noise as of the scraping of a shoe on concrete.

He came back to Chadwick, who was standing beside the girl.

"Go around front," he said in an undertone, "and get the tear bombs out of my car. And tell Morley to come back here with the machine gun."

He resumed his vigil. He could see nothing in the cellar, and felt a sense of security in the fact that the darkness also cloaked him, standing in the shadow of the vines. He heard unmistakable sounds in the cellar now; not rats, either.

He would have an advantage on the man in the cellar, in that he, Kew, was aware of the other's presence, while his own ambush was probably unknown to the man in the dark.

Men came around the corner of the house with a machine gun and a portable searchlight. Chadwick pressed a tear bomb into Kew's right hand. Kew shifted it to his left and drew his automatic. He quickly and silently superintended the installation of the light at a spot from which it could flood the entrance to the cellar and the interior adjacent. He stationed his machine gunner at a commanding position. Then he shouted into the darkness:

"Come out of there, whoever you are!"

His command echoed briefly and died in a whisper. A tense silence followed. He could hear footsteps in the cellar, but there was no reply to his order. Kew grunted.

The searchlight flooded the cellar entrance with sudden brilliance. Kew gripped his automatic tighter, prepared to pull the pin out of his tear bomb. The machine gunner leaned forward.

"Come on out of there," Kew shouted again, "or we'll smoke you out!"

"If you're referring to those cigars of yours, Kew," came a bored voice from the cellar, "I'll come running."

JACK POWERS sauntered lazily into the glare of the searchlight and stood a moment, blinking. His battered slouch hat was more disreputable than ever. His coat was covered with dust and cobwebs. Grime streaked his face. He grinned at the martial reception he was being accorded.

Kew put up his automatic and seized Powers's arm.

"What the hell were you doing, snooping around in that cellar?" he demanded.

"I was just working on a little private theory of my own," said Powers. "I must confess I'm not getting ahead very fast."

"What's that in your hand?"

"That? That's a key I dropped when you scared me by yelling at me so brutally. I'd been using it to scrape some dirt off the electric meter a few minutes back. I——"

"That looks like the key to a safe deposit box," said Kew.

"Your perspicacity is amazing, for a detective," said Powers, putting the key into his pocket. "And now, if you don't mind, I think I'll wash my——"

"You'll come back into the cellar with me," broke in Kew, "and show me what the hell you were doing."

"I'll be glad to show you around," said Powers, "but I'm afraid you won't find much of interest. I'm sorry to report that Fathom is not hiding here. On your right you'll see a furnace, in a state of disrepair. On your left you'll find six abandoned ash cans, five of them upright, one lying on its side as the result of an encounter with my shins. Straight ahead you'll see an old stairway."

While Powers was facetiously playing the guide, Kew and Chadwick were peering into every nook and cranny of the cellar with their

flashlights. Apparently they found nothing out of the ordinary, for Kew suddenly declared: "Come on upstairs, Powers. I want to talk to you."

Again in the reception room, Kew paced the floor as he questioned the *Star* reporter. Powers seemed very intent on cleaning his coat with a brush that Ruth Dwyer had furnished. He answered the detective captain in an offhand manner.

"Powers, you were the only man in this house this evening, before I sent my men in."

"What of it?" asked Powers.

"A demand for ransom was phoned to Edmonton to-night, and the call was traced to this telephone."

"I know all that," said Powers, affecting boredom.

"How do you know that?"

"Why, I dropped in at the telephone exchange to-night, and I told Martigan that you'd sent me over to——"

"Damn your crust! And I suppose you rode in the parade east on the avenues, too."

"I did," said Powers, "about fifty to a hundred yards behind the dick you had dressed up to look like Sid Edmonton. Only I think I got more out of the show than he did, Kew. I got an idea. And I was just working on my idea when you so rudely interrupted me a moment ago."

"What are you holding out on me, Powers?"

"Not a thing, captain," said Powers, handing the brush back to the night nurse. "All the facts that I've got are available to you just for the looking. I imagine, as a matter of fact, that you know them anyway. Of course, if you get any meaning out of facts, you're at a slight disadvantage, being a detective. But don't worry, Kew. I won't hold out on you. If you don't

find out anything before I do, you'll be able to read all about it in the *Star*."

THE doorbell rang. One of Kew's men opened the door for a uniformed messenger.

"Telegram for Miss Dwyer," announced the messenger.

The nurse and Kew arose simultaneously. The detective at the door snatched the telegram and scrawled a signature on the messenger's book. He handed the envelope to Kew.

"That is mine!" protested the nurse.

"You'll get it," said Kew, ripping open the envelope. "No hurry."

His eyebrows drew together almost imperceptibly as he read the telegram. He folded the blank as Powers approached in an attempt to read it over his shoulder.

"Do you know Doctor Gerald Winter?" Kew demanded suddenly of Ruth Dwyer.

"Why, yes," the girl replied after a moment of hesitation. "Is that wire from him?"

"Who is he?"

"Doctor Winter claims to have been one of the country's first endocrinologists—long before glands became fashionable," said the girl. "He has almost no practice. I believe he gives a few elemental anatomy courses at the medical school. He's rather a pitiful old man."

"Is he a friend of Fathom's?"

"I wouldn't call him a friend, exactly. Doctor Fathom knew him casually at the medical school, of course. The only time he ever came here, as far as I know, there seemed to be a very definite antipathy between the two men—at least on Doctor Winter's part."

"When did he come here?"

"Let me see." The girl took a memorandum book from a drawer in

a desk. "It must have been about two weeks ago," she said, as she turned the pages. "I remember it was just after Doctor Fathom announced the subject of his paper to be read before the medical convention. If I'm not mistaken, Doctor Winter came over expressly to talk about that subject. He wanted to see what Doctor Fathom was doing in the laboratory, and he seemed very resentful over something."

"Then what does this mean to you?" demanded Captain Kew, unfolding the telegram and thrusting it suddenly toward Ruth Dwyer, "beside the fact that Fathom is in Los Angeles—which I suppose you knew already?"

The girl took the telegram with eager, trembling fingers. She read:

DURING MY ABSENCE SUGGEST
DOCTOR GERALD WINTER CON-
TINUE BERNARD EDMONTON
TREATMENTS STOP DOCTOR WIN-
TERS WORK IN THIS FIELD PAR-
ALLELS MINE STOP HE COULD
DELIVER ADDRESS MEDICAL CON-
VENTION SAME SUBJECT IF MY
RETURN DELAYED

WALTER FATHOM

The message had been filed at Los Angeles.

CHAPTER IX.

A CLEW FROM THE AIR.

BOTH police and newspapers pounced on the new clew.

"Search for doctor shifts to L. A." screamed the headlines next morning. Within a few minutes of the arrival of the telegram signed "Walter Fathom" at the doctor's residence, Sunset City police had asked the cooperation of Los Angeles detectives in tracing the sender of the wire. Before the morning papers went to press, Captain Kew was informed that the telegram had been filed from an office near the Los An-

geles airport. A clerk was found who remembered taking the message. He remembered because the man who brought it in paid with a dollar bill and didn't wait for the change. The man was young and wore the uniform of one of the air lines; the clerk didn't remember which, but thought he was a pilot.

Immediately a circular telegram went out to all airports within an overnight flying radius, seeking the pilot who had sent a wire signed "Walter Fathom."

Powers scoffed at the telegram as a hoax. All day the newspapers and the police had been receiving crank letters and post cards, telegrams and telephone calls. Most of them were obviously the work of slightly disordered minds, the type always stimulated to activity by news of some sensational crime. The *Star* reporter was ready to class the Los Angeles telegram with the rest—although granting it did not read like the work of a crank—because it did not fit in with his private theory. Captain Kew, whose long police training had taught him that every possible clew must be accepted and run down until proved false, who solved crimes by leg work, rather than head work, by dogged persistence and great patience rather than theories, accepted the telegram at its face value.

He first placed Ruth Dwyer technically under arrest. He suspected she knew much more than she told and was exasperated by his failure to make her talk. He pretended to compromise with her on her wish to place Bernard Edmonton under observation. She could go to the Edmonton home. Kew stipulated, on condition that she remain there until he gave her permission to leave. In that way, he could economize on men—have both young Edmonton and

Ruth Dwyer watched with the same shift, and he would have a freer hand to probe the mysteries of the Fathom house, which, he was still convinced, held some clew which he had not yet found. He was greatly puzzled by the mystery of the ransom telephone call, and he was just as intrigued by Jack Powers's expedition to the cellar. Powers, he was convinced, knew something he was not divulging. If he were not just the least bit afraid of Powers's keen mentality and his ability to turn a serious bit of police work into something utterly ridiculous when it appeared in print, Kew would have put the screws on the reporter until he talked.

As it was, Kew went to see Doctor Gerald Winter.

Winter was a white-haired old man with stooped shoulders. He greeted Captain Kew in a few words, scarcely opening his tight lips, as though he were afraid of changing the form of his mouth, which expressed complete dejection. Only the fire of his black eyes, burning with a light akin to fanaticism, prevented the aged Doctor Winter's face from being an unrelieved picture of a hopeless and futile life.

When Kew spoke of the telegram mentioning his name, Doctor Winter nodded his head gently, looked out the window absent-mindedly, and seemed not a bit surprised.

"I'm always glad to help a colleague," he said. "And doubly so since Doctor Fathom is my friend and a fellow member of the medical school faculty. How long did he say he expected to be out of town?"

CAPTAIN KEW did not reply at once. His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized the wrinkled face of the broken-down professor. Winter's last question seemed put in utter innocence, yet

Kew saw a glitter in the old man's dark eyes that he did not quite trust.

"Fathom will be gone indefinitely," said Kew. "He will undoubtedly let you know when he expects to get back."

"In that case," Winter said, "he'll probably want me to substitute for him at the medical convention. That will be simple enough, since I have all the data at my finger tips, having worked in the field of endocrinology for thirty years and more. However, in regard to treating his patient——" Doctor Winter paused.

"Can't you carry on for Fathom with this new treatment of his?" Kew demanded.

"Oh, yes, yes, perfectly," protested Winter. "I know Doctor Fathom's technique perfectly. He not only explained it to me himself in his own laboratory, but I have developed practically the same technique as the result of independent research. However——" Again Winter paused.

"What's the rub, doctor?" Kew asked.

"Just this: the preparation of the endocrine extracts is rather a painstaking and tedious process. It would take me several days to get them ready for injection. Several days would be an unfortunate delay, as far as Doctor Fathom's patient is concerned. If Doctor Fathom had some of the extract already prepared in his laboratory it would be a time saver for me and a godsend for the patient."

"That's easy," said Kew. "Come along with me, doctor, and we'll find out."

Kew took Winter to the Edmonton house, where they questioned the nurse regarding the extract that Fathom had left behind him.

Ruth Dwyer heard Winter's proposal with glacial silence.

Then she broke into a violent refusal to turn over any of Fathom's preparations to Winter.

"But my dear girl," pleaded Winter gently, "you can't jeopardize the life of the patient with such unreasoning stubbornness.

"I'm not jeopardizing the life of the patient," the girl insisted. "I'm keeping close watch on his condition. Since Doctor Fathom left enough extract for only three injections—his experiments haven't yet shown that the preparation will keep—I'm going to make them last as long as possible."

"You're going to make them last?" demanded Kew in astonishment. "You mean that you are treating the patient?"

"That's impossible, my dear girl," said Winter. "Even if you don't do the patient irreparable harm, you'll certainly get yourself into trouble. You could be prosecuted for practicing medicine without a proper diploma."

"I'm a graduate nurse," Ruth Dwyer insisted, "and I've a perfect right to give hypodermic injections."

"Only on a physician's instructions, my dear."

"But I have instructions on this case from Doctor Fathom," the girl retorted.

"Fathom has instructed you by telegraph to turn this case over to Winter," argued Kew gruffly.

"I don't believe the telegram!" declared the nurse.

Kew smiled sarcastically.

"You always had a peculiar attitude toward telegrams," he said.

"I have a feeling that the message isn't genuine," she continued. "I don't know why, exactly, except that a telegram is such an impersonal message. You don't know yourself who sent it, captain."

"It seems perfectly clear to me," said Winter.

Kew did not insist further. After all, the girl was right, in a way. He was not a partisan to either Winter or Edmonton. He had better hold off until the aviator who sent the wire had been located.

"Let it go, doctor," he said to Winter. "Sometime during the morning I'll have all the facts on that telegram. I'll telephone you at your home and we can come back to convince this girl. And if she's hard to convince then—well, I'll convince her."

RETURNING to the police station, Captain Kew found an excited group in front of the entrance to the detective bureau. Reporters were surrounding a callow young man wearing a uniform cap. Several of the reporters pushed the youth toward Kew.

"That's the man you want to see," Fox told him.

"I've been reading the papers," said the youth with the uniform cap, "and I guess I'm the man you're looking for. I sent that telegram from the Los Angeles airport last night."

"Who gave it to you?" demanded Kew.

"I'll start at the beginning," said the youth. "I'm a steward on a Pacific Airways passenger plane on the Sunset-Los Angeles run. Late yesterday, on our last trip of the day from Sunset City, a man came on the field just before the plane took off. He asked me if there was a telegraph office near the field in Los Angeles. I told him there was. He handed me an envelope and a five-dollar bill. The money was mine, he said. All I had to do was to hand the envelope to a clerk in the telegraph office. I did that. As I left,

I noticed the clerk opened the envelope and took out a piece of paper and a dollar bill."

"What sort of a looking man gave you this envelope?" Kew asked.

"He was an old man with white hair."

"Stooped shoulders?"

"Yes. He was rather a seedy-looking old man."

"Winter!" exclaimed Kew. "You'd recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Sure," said the youth.

"Come on, then," said Kew, taking the youth's arm and starting down the stairs. "We'll pay a little call on the old bird."

The reporters trooped after the detective and the airplane steward. Only Jack Powers remained behind.

At the first landing, Fox turned and saw Powers standing alone.

"Not coming, Powers?" asked Fox.

Powers shook his head.

"It's not important," he said. "I can check on it afterward."

When the sound of motors indicated that the caravan was on its way to Winter's house, Powers walked slowly to the press room. More than ever, his clothes looked as if he had been sleeping in them, but his red-rimmed eyes gave the impression that he had not slept at all during the night. His face was covered with a reddish stubble.

He sat down, looked at his typewriter a minute, then lifted the telephone receiver and gave a number.

"Hello, Doctor Winter? . . . Well, never mind. Just tell Doctor Winter that the young man he gave the telegram to at the air field yesterday is on his way to see him, in company with a police detective and a couple of car loads of newspapermen. . . . Got that straight? . . . Good! Be sure to tell the doctor right away."

Powers smiled to himself as he hung up.

When Kew and the reporters reached Winter's residence, they were greeted by a red-faced, big-bosomed housekeeper on the verge of hysteria.

"I knew something like this was going to happen," she cried, ignoring Kew's inquiries for Doctor Winter in her determination to tell her own story. "I knew it was going to happen, I could see it coming for two weeks. For two weeks he hasn't been himself—moping around, not eating, nor sleeping."

"And just who are you talking about?"

"Doctor Winter. Who do you think?"

"Where is the doctor?"

"Not eating, not sleeping half the time, getting up in the middle of the night to go over to the college, talking to himself, mumbling to himself about this Doctor Fathom the papers have been so full of. I said to myself, the poor old man is fixing to lose his mind. Then last night and to-day he seemed better—until about five minutes ago, when some gentleman phoned to say that the doctor's young man from the air field was on his way up with a carload of detectives. Are you the detectives?"

"So somebody phoned, did they? Who was it?"

"I'm sure I don't know. But when I gave the doctor the message, he turned purple and went completely off his head, poor fellow. He started screaming and waving his hands—all but froth at the mouth, he did. He ran out the door, yelling bloody murder."

"Where is he?"

"Who knows? He's gone, that I can tell you. The last I saw of him, he was running down the hill, there."

CHAPTER X.
THE DEAD ZONELL

CAPTAIN KEW stormed into the press room at the police station, followed by Fox. The captain's face was red as he bore down on Jack Powers, who sat studying a topographical map of Sunset County, apparently unaware of their entrance.

"What's the idea of tipping off my man?" roared Kew angrily. "You damned meddler, you warned Winter in time for him to make his get-away!"

"Who told you I warned Winter? Fox, here?" asked Powers.

"Anybody could see it was you phoned the old man," muttered Fox. "You were here when the kid from Pacific Airways told his story, and you were the only one that stayed behind when we went to Winter's place."

"How was I to know Winter was your man?" asked Powers, with a great display of innocent amazement. "In the last twenty-four hours you've suspected at least half a dozen men, and one or two women. When you finally make up your mind who kidnaped Fathom, I'd like to——"

"Cut the apple sauce!" barked Kew. "This isn't the first time you've crossed me. I've got a good notion to have you thrown in the jug for obstructing justice."

"Throw ahead," said Powers, "I'll be out again on a writ of habeas corpus in half an hour."

"I told you yesterday that I'd stand for no shenanigans from you or the *Star*," Kew said. "Are you or are you not going to tell me what you meant by calling Winter?"

"Sure, I'll tell you," Powers replied, looking at Fox, "privately."

"All right, spill it," said Kew a
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moment later, when he and Powers were closeted in the captain's office. "Why did you phone Winter?"

"So you wouldn't waste your time following a false scent," said Powers. "But I see I'm wrong. You'll follow it anyway. You're convinced that Winter kidnaped or murdered Fathom, aren't you?"

"It's none of your damn business what I think," said Kew. "As a matter of fact, there's a pretty strong case against the old man. The motive's there—professional jealousy."

Powers nodded, smiling.

"You've got just as strong motives for young Edmonton, for a man named Zonelli, to say nothing of Coroner Harry Crockett, and the possibility of voluntary disappearance to avoid the blond young lady named Mabel."

"I suppose you know who kidnaped him, then, and just where he is?" suggested Kew with a touch of irony.

"No," admitted Powers, "not yet. But I will know in twenty-four hours—if I live that long."

"What do you expect to die of?—heart failure."

"If I die," said Powers, "it'll be from brain failure, complicated by lead poisoning. Read this." He tossed a folded piece of paper in front of the detective. "You might compare the handwriting with the photostatic copy you made of that ransom note to Edmonton. It looks the same to me, and both are written with a stub pen."

"Huh!" snorted Captain Kew, as he compared one note with the copy of the other and immediately saw the similarity. The letter to Powers read:

Powers, you are young, too young to die, but old enough not to act like a damn fool. You have been acting the damn fool for the past two days and you stand

an odds-on chance of dying in the next twenty-four hours if you don't lay off this Fathom job. Let the cops do the best they can, it's their business, not yours. Remember, if you don't quit trying to be a smart detective, the doctor will get his and you will get more than you are looking for.

There was no signature.

"Please observe," said Powers, "that Fathom is still alive, if we accept this note as authentic."

Captain Kew reread the note, scratching his head as he did so.

"You got any idea what brought this on?" he asked.

"Yes. I imagine my activities of last night had something to do with it," was the reply.

"What were you doing last night—after you got out of the cellar?"

POWERS helped himself to one of Kew's cigars, and lighted it before he explained:

"I was running down an angle of this case that seems to have been practically overlooked since the first day. You may remember that a short time before Fathom disappeared, he was called to treat a man named Zonelli—who was dead when he arrived. You may also remember that when the coroner called at the same address, perhaps an hour later, the dead man had also disappeared."

"Of course I remember," said Kew. "We've been working on that angle all right, but we haven't been able to get much on it."

"Then I've had a little more luck than you have," said Powers, puffing big clouds of cigar smoke. "I found Zonelli last night."

"The hell you did!" Kew leaned forward in his chair. "Which one? The live or the dead one?"

"The dead Zonelli."

"I'll be damned!" Admiration, tinged with resentment, marked Kew's tone. "Where?"

Powers blew a ring before he replied.

"I'll tell you," he said, "because that end is outside your jurisdiction now, and I think I can trust you not to tip off the sheriff's office until I'm ready. Zonelli is buried about forty miles from here in the churchyard at Santa Juliana under the name of Monici—which is his true name."

"How the hell did you find him?"

"I spent a couple of hours on the phone yesterday, calling up every village in the county that had an undertaker. I confined myself to the county, because I had a theory that Mr. Zonelli-Monici had a burial permit from the coroner of Sunset County. My theory was only part right, but I located three back-county burials yesterday, and last night I got a car and drove out to investigate them."

"How'd you know Monici was Zonelli? Dig him up?"

"Nope." Powers cocked one foot on Kew's desk. "It's only a guess, but from the circumstances, it's probably a sure guess. The undertaker at Santa Juliana didn't want to talk at first, but when I broke down his resistance, he said that the corpse had been brought in just before dawn yesterday riding propped up in the back seat of an old Ford driven by a man who said he was the brother of the deceased."

"The undertaker was suspicious at first, but the brother had a burial permit signed by the coroner and he told a good story. Monici, he said, had committed suicide, and consequently was not entitled to be buried in consecrated ground with the rites of his church. For that reason he had brought the body to Santa Juliana, where this undertaker had been recommended to him. He offered the undertaker all his sav-

ings if he would conceal the character of the death certificate and arrange for a holy burial. Apparently the amount of savings involved was sufficient to persuade the undertaker to pull the wool over the eyes of the village ecclesiastical authorities. Monici was buried——”

“And you rushed back to Sunset to shake your finger under the coroner’s nose?”

“Right,” said Powers, “I admit I thought I had Crockett cold. It looked as though he’d followed Fathom to that South Harbor Street address, written a certificate and then reported that he had found no body. I was all wet on that score. The coroner had written the certificate for Monici’s death at about six o’clock that evening—three hours before Fathom was called. It seems that Monici had been found drinking poison in the afternoon, and had died on the way to the hospital. I checked on that by the records in the coroner’s office, and by the police ambulance-call sheets. Officially, Monici’s body is still in the hospital morgue. How it got from the morgue to No. 5015 South Harbor Street is what I want to find out. It may be a key to the whole mystery.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Kew lighted a fresh cigar, and narrowed his eyes as he waved the smoke away from his face. “It might be just as simple as the story this man’s brother told the Santa Juliana undertaker. All people ain’t roughneck unbelievers like you, Powers. It looks to me quite likely that the brother sneaked the body out of the morgue and took it to that empty house, hoping to get a new certificate from Fathom. When that didn’t work, he pulled out for Santa Juliana with his dead brother before the coroner showed up a second time. Don’t you think

the brother’s story might be true, Powers?”

“It might be,” said Powers, “if it wasn’t for the fact that there is no brother. Before he swallowed poison, Monici left a note saying that he hadn’t a relative left in the world.”

“I’ll be damned!” said Kew.

K EW stared at the ash on his cigar for a long moment. “I’ve got it!” he exclaimed suddenly, jamming the cigar back into the corner of his mouth. “This ties in perfectly with my case. It points straight to Winter!”

“How the hell do you work Winter in on this?” asked Powers.

“You’re blind,” declared Kew. “Winter gives courses in anatomy at the Medical School. The anatomy lab buys stiffs from the hospital for the medical students to cut up and see what makes the heart tick. Winter must have facilities for getting corpses out of the morgue for this purpose. He’s the one that sneaked Monici over to Harbor Street!”

“What would he do that for?” drawled Powers.

“I ain’t made up my mind yet just exactly the reason,” said Kew, “but if Winter kidnaped Fathom, this Harbor Street stunt was probably part of the scheme. Something went wrong, that’s all, so they had to rig up the second call. The second call was a woman’s voice, wasn’t it? That fits, too. Winter got his housekeeper to make the call. *Cherchez la women.*”

“Well——” said Powers dubiously.

“I’ll find out soon enough. I’ve got the boys looking for Winter. They’ll probably have him down here for questioning before the day’s over.”

“Have it your way,” Powers got

up, yawning. "I got to be going over to the coroner's inquest. It won't amount to anything, with Fathom still missing, but I've got to cover it anyhow. As soon as it's over, I'm going to find Fathom for you."

"Do you want a couple of plain-clothes men to go with you?" offered Kew, with a glance at his desk where the threatening letter to Powers still lay.

"No, thanks."

"What are you going to do about this warning you got?"

"I've already done everything that's necessary," said Powers. "I bought me a brand-new popgun." He displayed a .45 automatic which he quickly slipped back into his pocket with a wad of copy paper. "And look at this." He flipped up the bottom of his vest to reveal a full cartridge belt surrounding his middle.

CHAPTER XI.

KEW MAKES A PROMISE.

THE coroner's inquest was a routine affair. Although an attorney representing the *Star* made some attempt to have the hearing put over until Doctor Fathom could be present, Coroner Crockett easily explained that while it was unfortunate that the doctor could not be there, adjournment would advance nothing, since he, Crockett, was in full agreement with Doctor Fathom's deposition, and had always been. The "chicken bone" certificate had been a mere clerical error, caused by his failure to be more careful in distinguishing two similar names. No doctor could have given any opinion other than that the deceased died through concussion of the brain, or strangulation, or both. Unfortunately, clues in the case had grown cold. The few witnesses called could throw no

light on the death. The coroner's jury brought in an open verdict, finding that the deceased came to his death "at the hands of person or persons unknown."

After the inquest, the coroner called the newspaper reporters. His tiny, piglike black eyes set very close together, singled out Jack Powers.

"Any news about Fathom?" asked the coroner in his bluff, hearty voice.

"Not unless you can give us some, coroner," said Powers.

"I hope I won't be called professionally to attend him," he said. "Is it true that the *Star* is putting up ten thousand dollars reward for his safe return?"

"That's right," said Powers. "And Bernard Edmonton is offering fifty thousand."

"Then put me down for five thousand more," said the coroner. "I don't bear Fathom any grudge. I'm not a rich man, but I'd gladly give that much out of my own pocket to see him back."

"How'd you enjoy your ride last night?" Fox demanded of Powers, a sneer hovering about his thick lips.

"Ride?" The coroner turned on Powers. "Where've you been, Jack, old man? You look like you been riding all night."

"He was," volunteered Fox. "He was sleuthing in the back country—Donville. Ague Negra and Santa Juliana."

"Santa Juliana? That reminds me," said the coroner, "I got a tip from Santa Juliana this morning that I'll pass on to you newspaper boys. In case you been worrying about that Zonelli angle in the Fathom story—you remember the dead man that disappeared?—You can forget it. The mystery turned out to be just a pious old geezer trying to hide the fact that his

brother committed suicide, so he could get the church to bury him. I got word from the village undertaker——”

“The dead man claimed not to have any brother,” broke in Powers.

“I know,” the coroner explained. “That was one of his delusions. The poor guy was cracked—melancholia, we call it. Thought he didn’t have a friend or relative left in the world, so he poisoned himself.”

“And then got up and walked from the hospital morgue to South Harbor street, I suppose,” suggested Powers.

“What do you mean?” the coroner asked.

“There’s no record of the body having been removed from the morgue.”

THE coroner shook his heavy head and made clucking sounds with his tongue.

“They’re terrible, at the hospital,” he said. “Damn careless. Sometimes they’re forty-eight hours behind in their records.”

“Better tell them to fix the records in the Monici death,” said Powers, “because the grand jury is apt to be curious about the matter when they start indicting people for the kidnaping of Fathom.”

“Jack, you’re a nice boy, but you shouldn’t always go around with a chip on your shoulder,” said the coroner. “What’s all this talk of grand juries?”

“Read about it in the *Star*,” said Powers, sauntering away from the group.

He first telephoned the story of the inquest to his paper for the late editions. It was a mild story, compared to what he had hoped for. If Fathom had been there, he was certain that the deputy district attorney present at the inquest would have

called a grand jury hearing on the strength of the doctor’s testimony.

Powers returned to the press room at the police station, and found a record of a telephone call on his typewriter. He called the number, and talked to Ruth Dwyer. Then he typed a few lines on a piece of paper, put the paper into an envelope with a small key that might have opened a safe-deposit box, and climbed the stairs to the detective bureau.

“Cap,” he said, as he sauntered into Kew’s office, “I’m going to go out and bring home Fathom tonight.”

“You been smoking dope again,” said Kew.

“I have a couple of leads to clear up yet in town,” continued Powers soberly, “but I haven’t time to lose. While I’m gone, if you’ll run down the points I’ve enumerated in this memo, I’ll split the reward with you.” He tossed an envelope to Kew’s desk. It fell with a clink.

“Thanks,” said Kew. “I’ll go right out and order a new car on the strength of that.”

“I’m serious,” Powers insisted.

Kew looked at the reporter in the eyes for a moment before he said, “All right, I’ll take you seriously for a change. But I’m damned if I can understand why a great and beautiful intellect like you stoops to ask a mere police dick for help.”

Powers took a cheap nicked watch from his pocket and flourished it. “Time,” he said. “We’ve got to rush this thing through. I just got a call from Ruth Dwyer, Fathom’s nurse, at the Edmonton place. She says old man Edmonton is in a bad way. Beginning to sink, and that sort of thing. She has enough shots the doctor left to keep him going for thirty-six hours, maybe more, but she’s not sure——”

"What do you think about Winter's claim to be able to carry on the treatments?"

"You think of Winter. I'm going to think of Fathom. I'm going to have him back here within twenty-four hours. Old man Edmonton was panic-stricken to-day and offered a reward of fifty thousand dollars if the doctor is returned in that time."

"And you're going to cut me in, are you, big-hearted?"

"Yes. But listen. Will you do me a favor? Sure, I know you will. Call off your dicks that are guarding the Edmonton house. There's just a chance that the ransom note was real. In that case, give the crooks a chance to get in touch with the Edmontons to arrange the finances. The old man says you police are killing him by keeping him cut off from the highbinders. He'd gladly pay what they ask, he says, only he's sure the crooks are afraid of the police. Will you call off the shadow detail for twenty-four hours?"

"I ain't sure of that Sidney Edmonton," protested Kew. "He won't explain his presence at the Mesa Road cottage the night of the kidnaping. And that Dwyer girl knows a lot more than she's telling."

"I'll vouch for the Dwyer girl," said Powers, "and I think we can take a chance on young Edmonton for a day."

"We can take a chance?"

"Sure. We're partners since I cut you in on the reward." Powers pushed the telephone along the desk toward Kew. "Play ball with me, cap. Call off the watchdogs."

Kew narrowed his eyes and squinted at the instrument for several seconds. Then he picked up the receiver and gave instructions for lifting the guard on the Edmonton house.

"Thanks," said Powers when he

had finished. "Run down those leads I left for you in that envelope. If you win, you'll know who to look for in case I lose. And if I'm not back by this time to-morrow, have the sheriff's office look for me somewhere between here and Santa Juliana. So long, cap."

POWERS got into the car which his city editor had put at his disposal for the duration of the story, and drove to the Edmonton house. He drew up to the curb right behind an expensive roadster that undoubtedly belonged to Sidney Edmonton.

The butler hesitated about admitting a young man with stubble-covered face and wrinkled clothes, but Powers slipped past him, and, once in the hall, asked for Ruth Dwyer. While the butler was trying to maneuver the reporter out into the street again, the nurse appeared. She ushered him into a luxurious drawing-room. Powers took off his shapeless hat.

"You can tell the old man I've had the guard lifted," he said. "Kew promised he'd play ball, and as I drove up I noticed that the gumshoes had all gone. If there's a chance in the world of the ransom deal being pulled off, the road is clear."

"Thank you so much," said the girl.

"And now I want a favor from you in return. Tell me all you know about this kidnaping."

"But I've told you everything."

"You held out on Kew the first time we talked to you about it. Tell me what else you've been holding out. I need all the information I can get, because I'm going to gamble all or nothing to-night."

"I've told you all I know. I swear it."

"What has Sid Edmonton told you?" Powers lighted a cigarette and dropped his match into an ash receiver.

"Nothing." The girl passed an ash tray. "Young Mr. Edmonton has scarcely said a word since I've been in the house. He mopes around all day, and answers in monosyllables when I ask him anything."

"Where is he now?"

The girl pointed to a door on the other side of the room.

"That's his study in there," she said. "He went in to take a nap about an hour ago."

Powers stood up and held out his hand.

"Good-by, Miss Dwyer," he said. "Next time I see you—if I do see you again—I'll have Doctor Fathom with me."

"You know where he is?" The girl grasped his hand eagerly in both of hers.

"I have a theory," said Powers.

"Good luck," the girl said.

As the street door closed on Powers, the door to Sidney Edmonton's study opened. The sound of Powers's motor beat on the air. Edmonton quickly walked to the window to note the direction taken by the reporter's car.

Edmonton ran back into his study and emerged a second later, wearing a cap and carrying a heavy coat in his arms. The muzzle of a rifle protruded from the collar of the coat. Without a word, he opened the street door.

"Where are you going, Mr. Edmonton?" the nurse called anxiously.

Edmonton did not reply. The door slammed. A second later his roadster roared away in the direction taken by Powers. The last glow of a flaming sunset flashed on his windshield as he turned a corner and disappeared.

CHAPTER XII.

AMBUSHED!

JACK POWERS drove due east through Sunset City. In twenty minutes he had put behind him the last whitewashed shacks and frame buildings that made up the straggling outskirts of the town. He sped along the Mesa Road, a broad ribbon of concrete that wound over rolling hills redolent of sage. Straight ahead were the dim purple outlines of the coast range.

As he came to the crossroad leading to the orange grove and cottage belonging to Sidney Edmonton, he stopped his car, got out, and with a flashlight, examined the entrance of the other road. It was hopeless. The mud had been churned by the feet and tires of police and press until nothing was distinguishable.

He got back into his car and again examined his map. A dozen cars passed him as he studied the roads. For the next ten miles, all the crossroads were paved, according to the map, and it would be useless for him to stop. He snapped on his headlights and started the car.

Passing through the little town of Mesa, he did not notice that another car, apparently waiting for him in a side street, swung into the main highway behind him as he rolled along.

Once out of Mesa, he let his foot grow heavy on the accelerator. He let himself relax as the car rushed over the smooth pavement between walls of tall, fragrant eucalyptus trees. Not a car passed him.

He watched the figures click and shift on the dial of his mileage indicator. Approaching the ten-mile mark, he slackened his speed. When the blue-and-white lozenge of an auto sign shone in the glare of his headlights, he stopped. There was

a dirt crossroad here, and he walked along it for fifty yards, examining ruts. Auto tracks were plainly marked in the ground, still soft from the rains of two nights previous.

Walking back, he remarked that there was not much traffic on the highway. Not a car had passed him while he was parked there.

He climbed back into the car and sped on toward the next dirt crossroad.

He was taking a long chance, he told himself. He was seeking the old car that carried the body of Monici, alias Zonelli, to Santa Juliana. He argued thus: The corpse of Monici had disappeared from the Harbor Street house sometime between ten in the evening, when Fathom had seen it, and eleven, when the coroner called. It did not show up in Santa Juliana until after four in the morning. The trip to Santa Juliana should take two hours at the most, even in a rickety flivver. What, then, had happened during the other three hours? In the reasoning of the *Star* reporter, this same crowd had been employed in the kidnaping and hiding of Doctor Fathom.

Since the doctor was obviously not in the car when it drove up to the undertaker's house, he was probably disposed of earlier. Therefore, he should be sought somewhere between Sunset City and Santa Juliana. He would not likely be concealed anywhere near the highway, or even on one of the concrete roads that were tributaries to the highway. He should therefore be sought on a dirt crossroad. And since the rain had stopped at about the time the car had come into this part of the country, there was a chance that its tracks would still be visible.

And those tracks would be easily distinguishable. The Santa Juliana

undertaker had told Powers that the car in question had a sprung rear axle, because he noted the left rear wheel was wobbling as Monici's "brother" drove off. A wobbling wheel leaves a definite, regular pattern—a wavy line. Thus Powers was seeking the track of a narrow tire, gently curved like the path of a snake in the dust.

POWERS was disturbed in his reverie by the sound of a distant roar, which grew louder before he realized what it was. Headlights danced a moment in his rear-vision mirror, then a hurtling thunderbolt whirled past, leaving a wake of gas-scented wind, a diminishing roar, a receding tail-light. A powerful car, Powers reflected, to have passed him as though he were standing still. It must have been going at least eighty miles an hour, probably more.

The highway was upgrade now. One winding grade had carried Powers to mesa lands, and now the road was mounting into definitely mountainous country. Santa Juliana lay only ten miles ahead, and as yet Powers had found no trace of what he was seeking. Every two or three miles he got out to examine secondary roads.

Crossing a bridge about eight miles outside of Santa Juliana, Powers pulled up for the fifteenth time. He hopped out with his flashlight and began walking along a side road that cut through a clump of cottonwoods toward the dark masses of Diablo Spur. He had not gone a hundred feet before he was stooped double, his light close to the ground. He had seen a stretch of the tracks he was seeking!

He was not sure the wobble of the tire rut was caused by the sprung axle, because shortly after he had

picked up the tracks, they had been practically obliterated by the broad tread of the tires of some heavy car that had passed later. Powers went farther along the road at a trot until he again picked up the snakelike rut. This time there was no doubt of it. The pattern in the mud continued for fifty yards, perfectly regular. Powers ran back to his car, stepped on the starter, and swung off the pavement to the dirt byway.

The road ran through cottonwoods until it began to climb away from the creek bottom toward the spur. It was a narrow road, not wide enough for two cars to pass, and had apparently not been dragged for years. At intervals Powers stopped and got out, walking ahead a short distance to make sure he was still following the tracks of the wobbly wheel. He was still on the trail when the road reached the crest of the ridge.

AS he started down the other side of the ridge, Powers stopped his engine and set his emergency brake. He listened intently for sounds that might indicate another car on the road. He heard nothing but the chirp of crickets and the distant howling of a coyote, sounds which only heightened the silence of the night. He reached into a side pocket in the auto door, and pulled out a bottle and a sandwich wrapped in paper. He finished the sandwich in exactly five bites, and washed it down with a long drink from the bottle. He stretched himself briefly as he contemplated the path of the road he was to take. He could see about a mile of it, slipping down into a narrow valley, gleaming faintly like a long crooked scar on the hillside. The slopes of the valley were covered with chaparral and clumps of live oak. Silver

night mists lay in the bottom of the valley and crept into the transverse canyons. The points of tall sycamore trees poked their tips up through the mist at frequent intervals.

Powers slipped off his brake and began coasting down the grade. The air was decidedly cooler on this side of the ridge. He shivered slightly at a gust of wind that swirled up from the canyon bottoms. There was a damp smell of sumac on the breeze, a cold fragrance that filled Powers with an inexplicable sense of foreboding. He switched off his headlights.

There was a wisp of moon riding above the uneven silhouette of the opposite ridge, and gave barely enough light for Powers to pick his way. He was sliding along slowly, standing on his brakes to ease himself down steep stretches, hugging the bank on the numerous sharp curves. Suddenly, rounding a U-turn, he pulled up sharply. When he saw both brakes were insufficient, he turned his wheels into the bank. He stopped, his front bumper resting against the fender of a big sedan.

As his car came to rest, Powers jumped out, instinctively thrusting his right hand into his coat pocket for the comforting touch of steel. Automatically he ducked behind the engine of his car, as though for some reason he was expecting a fusillade of bullets to ring out from the parked sedan. When, at the end of several seconds, nothing happened, Powers raised his head cautiously, then laughed to himself. The sedan was apparently empty.

Powers drew his gun, slipped off the safety, and walked toward the other car. First he peered through the windows, then stepped behind the sedan. It was definitely abandoned.

The sedan was stopped across the road on a bias. The front wheels were deeply embedded in the soft clay of the bank, while the rear wheels rested within a few feet of the precipice. There was nothing wrong with the tires; lack of gasoline or mechanical difficulties would not likely have been discovered during a downward climb. The sedan had evidently been stopped in this position for no other reason than to block the road.

POWERS put his hand on the hood and withdrew it quickly. The radiator was hot. The motor had been going only a short time ago.

He tried the doors of the sedan. They were locked. He flashed his light into the driver's compartment in an effort to read the ownership certificate which the State law required to be displayed permanently. The sedan belonged to a renting agency which let automobiles for hire without drivers.

Powers had no idea of how many men had come out in the sedan, nor who they were. Yet the position of the car indicated to him that they had gone on ahead, that he was near his goal—good news; and that he was probably expected—bad news. He thought of the warning letter he had received that day.

Gun in hand, Powers continued down the narrow road on foot. He walked close to the bank, his feet heavy with the sticky, claylike mud. He was jumpy, he found. He started at every noise in his ear from the dark, overhanging brush on the bank above his head. He stopped when a bulging expanse of boulder loomed suddenly out of the night.

He had gone two hundred yards when a turn in the road revealed to him a group of buildings directly op-

posite, across a small gully. The buildings were obviously what was left of an abandoned gold mine. The derrick raised itself from the head of the old shaft like a gaunt, somber skeleton in the faint moonlight. The tailings dump spread down the hill in a fan of spectral gray. The corrugated iron roof of the deserted stamp mill was rusted and warped, and fallen in at one end.

The road reached the mine by running to the head of the gully and doubling back on the other side. Powers decided to reach it by cutting directly across. If the mine was his goal, and if he was expected, this method of approach would be less conspicuous. Even if he was being watched now, he would have cover until the last minute. He plunged off the road into the shoulder-high brush.

In fifteen minutes he was skirting the tailings dump, and crawling among the timbers under the mill. He stopped to catch his breath and to listen. He heard only an owl hooting somewhere in the night.

He climbed among the underpinings until he stumbled upon a ladder which led up to the stamp levels of the mill. He climbed cautiously, groping his way over missing rungs, nearly losing his footing when one rotten rung cracked under him. After that he waited a full minute, his heart beating wildly, listening to a possible response to the noise of the wood splintering. Then he went on, and pulled himself out on the floor level.

A FEW shafts of pale moonlight pierced the gaps in the ruined roof, filling the vast deserted interior of the mill with a strange gloom, in which the batteries of silent stamps stood in ghostly ranks. Powers took a few steps

along the floor and started a regiment of rats scampering heavily toward the deep shadows. Bats squeaked in the darkness above and wheeled out into the open. There was no sign of any human beings here.

Powers tiptoed across the empty mill, climbing up to the level of the ore bins, listening often, hearing nothing. He found the track along which the ore had been brought into the mill in bygone days, and followed it to the entrance. There was a level clearing between the mill and the derrick. To the right of the derrick frame the shack that once housed the hoist machinery still stood. To the left was a one-story building that probably once contained the mine offices. The clearing, faintly illuminated by the moonlight, presented a complete picture of desolate abandon, with its rusty cables, its broken machinery, and twisted tracks.

For a moment Powers began to doubt his theories and his hunches. There seemed to be no sign of humans here, no trace of the car with the sprung axle. He fished in his pockets for a cigarette, and was on the point of lighting it, when he suddenly stiffened to attention. His spine tingled. He sniffed. He sniffed again. Yes, he was sure of it now. He had smelled wood smoke. There was, or had been, a fire here. Some one was in one of the abandoned buildings.

Realizing he made an excellent target standing in the doorway, Powers dropped to his haunches. The unlighted cigarette fell from his lips. He grasped his automatic, as he quickly formulated his plan of campaign.

There was no light visible in any of the old buildings, so the fire he smelled had undoubtedly been ex-

tinguished not long before. He would have to look in all of them. The abandoned mine office would be his first stop, as it was a little detached from the rest. Then he would have to cross the clearing in the other direction to look into the hoist shack and the group that probably made up the bunk house and the mess hall.

FOR half the way to the office, Powers could crawl behind an overturned train of five or six ore cars which lay on their rusty sides near the track. He got to his hands and knees and crept along slowly. When he reached the last of the overturned cars, he paused. Straight ahead of him rose the derrick. He would have to oblique to the left for about a hundred feet beyond the last car to reach the office. He raised himself to a crouching position, moved a few feet into the open, and debated with himself whether or not to get to his feet and walk. After all, perhaps his precautions were foolish.

Before he could make a decision, an explosion beat upon his ears. A bullet clanged against the metal ore car beside his head. He could hear it whine as it ricocheted out into the canyon. The echo of the shot thundered back from the mountainsides.

Powers had instinctively sprung back into the cover of the ore car he had just left. He felt a strange weakness in his joints, but he remarked with satisfaction that the hand which grasped his gun was steady. He found a hole that had rusted through the bottom of the car, and through it he could see the deserted office building which had suddenly been demonstrated as no longer deserted. He peered through. The flash of the gun that had fired at him he had seen only out of the

corner of his eye, and he knew only that it had come from the office. He did not know from which of the three windows it had come. He would wait before returning the fire.

He poked the muzzle of the automatic through the rusted hole in the car, and found that by working it around gently, he could enlarge the hole enough so that he could aim and shoot through it. Then he took off his hat, perched it atop a support made from copy paper rolled lengthwise, and raised it above the edge of the car, moving it slowly.

Another shot roared from the office. Powers fired twice at the flash. There was a pause. Had he scored a hit? He had not. Four shots poured from the end window. Two of them struck the bottom of the car with a terrifying clangor, spattering Powers's face with rust particles. His adversary was not using steel-jacketed bullets, at any rate. Neither of the hits had pierced Powers's armor plate.

Powers ripped open his vest to get at his cartridge belt.

A dozen shots were exchanged in the next five minutes. The man in the office building was alternating between two windows. Powers remained behind his convenient shield, waiting for a break, wondering by what strategy he could outflank his adversary. This shooting at each other in the dark wasn't getting anywhere.

The man in the office building must have thought the same thing, for he suddenly blazed away for six consecutive shots. The succession of flashes illuminated the upper half of his face showing above the window sill. It made a good target. Powers emptied his magazine at it.

When the last muttering echo of the volley had died away, there was a long silence. On the hillside an

owl hooted. Powers shifted his feet slightly, to ease his cramped position inside the ore car. He did not take his eye from the loophole as he reloaded his magazine. He slipped his gun back into position, waiting for fresh signs of battle from his unknown enemy. No signs came.

AFTER what seemed an interminable wait, Powers fired once, hoping to draw a reply. He got none. Apparently one of his .45 slugs had found its mark, but Powers continued to be wary. He was afraid this pause in hostilities was a trap. He waited another five minutes.

Then, cautiously, he crept out from behind his improvised fortress. The moon had gone down behind the ridge by this time, and the darkness was thicker. He could still make out objects, however. He could still see the old mine office and he was watching it anxiously. He raised himself slowly. He stood up. Not a sound broke the stillness. At last confident that he had put his adversary out of commission, he walked toward the corner of the building with long strides.

When he was about forty feet from his destination, flame burst almost in his face. He could feel the breath of the projectile on his cheek. He flung himself to the ground. He fired twice, cursing himself for having been duped so easily.

At the same moment he heard a sound behind him that sent chills coursing through him—the staccato chattering of a machine gun spitting fire and lead from the hoist shack.

As soon as he realized the deadliness of the trap into which he had been lured, Powers twisted his body around so that he could fire at both his attackers.

It seemed a puny, futile gesture, as he felt definitely outmaneuvered and certainly doomed. Yet the very desperation of his position seemed to calm him. The cold had vanished from the pit of his stomach and the numbness left his limbs. He found he could aim with great deliberation at the sinister flicker in the hoist shack, where the machine gun was barking furiously. He fired three shots into the hoist shack while the machine-gun bullets were spattering him with dirt. The machine gunner was firing low and to the right. Now he stopped altogether.

Four shots cracked from the mine office. Powers's gun thundered in reply. He swore to himself as he refilled his magazine.

The moon had gone down, luckily, he told himself. In bright moonlight he would have been dead long ago. As it was, even the machine gunner was shooting wide. The deadly stutter began again. The leaden hail was still going a little to the right. In a flash of comprehension Powers knew why!

The trap which seemed so perfect had been sprung a fraction of a second too late. It had obviously been intended that he should be caught between the two guns at a point where their crossfire was most dangerous, most harassing, and yet the angle of fire should be sufficiently great so as not to endanger the gunman opposite. Powers had come a trifle too far forward, apparently. The machine gunner was afraid his hail of bullets would rake the office.

When he saw the proper move to offset the enemy's strategy, Powers sprang forward eight feet. Immediately the machine-gun fire stopped. The gun in the mine office went dumb. They were afraid of shooting each other.

Powers calmly fired a salvo at each of his assailants, then scrambled to his feet and ran like mad for the shadows of the derrick. Instantly both his adversaries reopened fire.

As he reached the deep gloom of the massive framework that towered above the mine shaft, Powers's foot crashed through a piece of rotten planking. He pitched forward in the dark. In the brief second of his fall, the idea flashed through his mind that if something gave way he would tumble five hundred, perhaps a thousand feet into the abandoned shaft. The impact of his face against something hard, was a comforting sensation. The force of his fall against solid planking discharged his pistol, but he retained his hold on the butt. He got to his feet, bruised, a little stunned, but not seriously harmed. His ankle hurt when he stepped on it. He reloaded his magazine. The barrage stopped.

CHAPTER XIII.

UNEXPECTED ALLY.

THE heavy timbers of the derrick afforded Powers plenty of cover from both his adversaries. He had a fighting chance now. With his fingers he rapidly verified the amount of ammunition still left in his cartridge belt. He estimated he had another fifty or sixty rounds. He was a poor target now. If they wanted him, they would have to blast him out from the shadows and timbers that were now his stronghold.

They must want him, all right. The deafening stutter of the machine gun began again. Powers flattened himself against a huge beam. He could hear the impact of the bullets in the thick wood all about him. The gunner was spraying the whole

width of the frame structure on a chance of hitting his target. The air was filled with flying splinters. Then the bombardment ceased.

Powers reached around his protecting beam and poured five bullets into the hoist shack. He was saving the sixth for an emergency, although the man from the mine office had given no sign of life for some time. The machine gun resumed its tattoo. Powers squeezed himself against a timber and refilled his magazine. A flying sliver of wood gashed his cheek.

The exchange of salvos was repeated several times without apparent result. Then Powers spotted the man from the mine office.

He was a small man, but, judging from his movements, an agile one. Powers had not seen him leave the office. He was halfway to the derrick before the reporter saw him. The man had gone obliquely out of the cone of machine-gun fire, and was now approaching Powers's stronghold from a safe angle. He lay close to the ground for several minutes, then would get up and run stealthily and quickly for several yards, then crouch again. When Powers saw him, he emptied his magazine at him. It seemed hopeless shooting in the dark. The man sprang up and took cover behind a rusty boiler. Then he returned Powers's fire.

Again it was two against one. Powers had to move about now, to maneuver for cover from both directions. His gun was getting hot. He had only twenty or twenty-five shots left.

An idea came to him as he was loading his magazine. At his elbow was a ladder running to the top of the derrick. About twenty feet above the ground was a platform, formerly used for dumping ore

skips. If he could reach that platform, unseen in the darkness, he could lie prone, wait his chance, and shoot to kill. Hand over hand he went up the under side of the ladder.

He paused several times to shoot at the man behind the boiler, to make him keep to cover, to harass his aim. He had his back to the machine gun, but he was assuming that his movements were as yet unseen by the man in the hoist shack. He put great trust in the darkness and the protection of the heavy timbers between him and the machine gun.

As he came level with the ore platform, he released his hold on the ladder and stepped off. He immediately dropped to his stomach, wriggled himself into an advantageous position, and began to load at leisure. He was through with this wild shooting at random. He was going to make every one of his last cartridges useful. He raised himself on one elbow and drew a careful bead on the flicker of the machine gun, still strained on the lower level. He squeezed the trigger.

He heard a clang as his bullet struck metal in the hoist shack. It had not put the gun out of commission, however. On the other hand, it had revealed his new position. The deadly stutter continued, aimed now at the platform. Again the air was full of flying fragments of wood.

ONCE more Powers raised his automatic to take careful aim at the spurts of flame in the hoist shack. This time he did not squeeze the trigger. He felt a smashing, numbing shock of impact, and his hand was suddenly empty.

He could hear a series of thumps as his gun spun away, striking timbers and protruding planks on its downward course into the shaft.

He could smell the sweetish odor of blood.

At last a stab of pain pierced the numbness of his hand, and he could feel a warm stream of blood trickling down his fingers.

A sound of rapid footsteps made him turn his head abruptly. The man behind the boiler, seeing what had happened, had left his cover and was boldly trotting toward the gallows frame, gun in hand. The man shouted something that Powers did not understand. The rattle of machine-gun fire stopped.

Powers got to his knees. He had an impulse to spring for the ladder, but checked himself. He was too late. The man below was only a few steps from the foot of the ladder. Powers's retreat was definitely cut off. A feeling of helplessness surged through him, for the moment obliterating the pain of his wounded hand.

Powers cast about him for some means of escape. Suppose he allowed his adversary to get to the top of the ladder, then jumped off the side of the platform? It was a twenty-foot jump. Even if the fall did not lay him out, there was the possibility of hitting another piece of rotten planking and going on through for another five hundred feet or so. He heard his adversary's feet on the bottom rungs of the ladder.

Powers crawled to the far end of the platform. About six feet away he could see a cable dangling. It was the cable that had once raised and lowered the cage in the shaft. It used to pass over a pulley at the top of the gallows frame. The cable was just out of reach. He might jump for it. But suppose the cable were not fastened at the top of the frame? It was impossible to make out more than the outlines of the

structure; he could not tell. If the cable gave way, he would drop into the shaft. The man was climbing the ladder, rung by rung.

Suddenly Powers got to his feet. He had an inspiration. He would rip loose a plank from the floor of the platform and club his adversary as he came over the edge; but he would have to hurry.

Throwing all caution to the winds, he left himself completely uncovered as he moved about the platform, leaning over to try one plank, then another. He found one that was loose, grasped the end with both hands, yanked frantically. He suffered agony through this brutal use of his wounded hand, but his desperation was stronger than the pain. He pulled and jerked. The plank was slow in yielding under his attack. Rusty nails creaked, but the plank would not give.

He saw a head appear over the edge of the platform.

He jumped at the sound of a rifle shot. He saw the flash from the corner of his eye. It had come from the entrance to the mill. Was he besieged by still another adversary? He gave a supreme tug at the plank. Still it did not give.

A second shot crashed from the mill.

The head disappeared from the edge of the platform.

BEFORE the echo of the shot had ceased pulsating between the walls of the canyon, the sickening thud of a limp body striking the ground came to Powers's ears. He dropped the end of his plank and ran to the edge of the platform. Looking over, he saw his one-time enemy sprawled at the foot of the ladder.

At the same moment he heard the sputter and rattle of a cheap auto-

mobile engine. The sound seemed to come from beyond the hoist shack, near the buildings Powers had taken for the bunk-house group. The rattle rose to a scream, accompanied by a tinny vibration.

A man came running from the mill, a rifle in his hand.

The tone of the screaming engine whined a note lower as the car was suddenly thrown in gear. The sound grew rapidly less as the car raced away on an unseen road.

The man from the mill stopped, put his rifle to his shoulder and fired. The auto sped on into distance.

Powers came down the ladder. He bent over the man who lay motionless at his feet—a small, wiry man, with a dark, sharp-featured head protruding from the neck of a black sweater.

Then he looked up at the approach of the man with the rifle.

"Thanks, Edmonton," said Powers casually. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I followed you," said Sidney Edmonton. "I overheard you telling Miss Dwyer that you were coming out to get Fathom, so I thought I'd come along in case you needed help."

"I guess I did," Powers admitted.

"I heard the shooting as I came down the hill. I watched for about five minutes before I came in on the fight. I had a hard time telling in the dark who was who. And who is this man I shot, anyway?"

"I never saw him before," said Powers, "but I imagine he's the bird that passed himself off as Zonelli when he called Fathom a couple of hours before he was kidnaped. He's as dead as last week's news."

"And I suppose his partner carried the doctor away, in that car?"

"Probably," said Powers. "Let's give a look, anyway. That was a clever stunt of theirs, blocking that

road so we couldn't park close enough to give 'em a chase. Unless that big sedan was yours?"

"No," said Edmonton. "The sedan held me up, too. Say, your hand's shot to hell, man."

"Not bad," said Powers. "Just tie this handkerchief around my arm to stop the bleeding. Thanks, that's better. Now let's go."

POWERS and Edmonton found nothing in the mine office but broken windows, bullet holes, and empty cartridges. The hoist shack contained only the machine gun. It was the old bunk house that had served as living quarters for the kidnapers.

There were still the embers of a fire in a rusty stove. A water bag hung on the wall. Beans, rice, flour, and canned goods stacked on the floor indicated that the occupants had been prepared for a long siege. But the occupants had gone.

"Funny the doctor didn't yell or try to get through to you," said Edmonton.

"He was bound and gagged, don't worry. They expected me."

"But where have they gone with him?"

"That road leads over the ridge into the desert," Powers replied. "It joins the Imperial Valley Highway about thirty miles from here."

"Let's get going and send some telegrams then," said Edmonton.

"Wait a shake." Powers had been peering into corners and under dusty tables with his flashlight. In the middle of a dirty blanket he placed his treasure: One bottle of ink, a pad of note paper, a stub pen, a blotter, and a nicked telephone instrument, such as linemen use for testing, with a short cord attached. He handled them gingerly in order not to make fresh finger prints on them.

"All right," he said, gathering up the corners of the blanket, "let's shove."

"How about the dead chap?"

"That's none of our business," said Powers, "yet. It's against the law to move him until the coroner's seen him. Come on."

CHAPTER XIV. POWERS'S THEORY.

THE old car bearing Doctor Fathom groaned and rattled over the rough mountain roads at top speed.

The doctor was seated alone in the back seat, tied hand and foot, and gagged. He had no idea who was driving or where he was.

The ropes and gag chafed the doctor, for he had been wearing them since late that afternoon. Up until that time, his captivity had been irksome, naturally, and mental torture since he was constantly thinking of Bernard Edmonton and his address to the medical convention in Sunset, but not physically difficult—except for the initial kidnapping.

The night the woman had called about her husband with a broken leg, while he had stopped his car, looking for the address, some one had stepped on the running board and struck him a terrific blow on the head. He must have been unconscious for some time, because when he came to, he was sitting in the back of a car, speeding through the country. He was aware of a splitting headache, of the fact that it was still night, and that another man was sitting beside him in the back seat. At every other curve, the other man would fall over heavily on him. The third time that happened, the doctor realized that he was riding with a dead man. As he was tied, it was difficult for him to escape

the clammy familiarities of the corpse.

This discovery explained much. Even in the dark, the doctor thought that he knew the dead man. He recognized the man in front driving as Zonelli. When he tried to talk he found he was gagged.

After an hour and a half, the doctor was lifted from the car and locked in a deserted bunk house. A little later Zonelli had come back, without the dead man, to serve as jailer for the next two days.

Another man had come to the abandoned mine every night of the doctor's captivity. Fathom did not know who he was, as he came only at night, wore a cap pulled down over his eyes, dark goggles, and a handkerchief across the lower part of his face. He never spoke in the doctor's presence, always giving his instructions to Zonelli outside the bunk house.

It was this mysterious man who to-night, at the abrupt conclusion of the long gun battle, had run into the bunk house, his clothes smelling of burned powder, picked up the bound doctor bodily, thrown him into the car, and driven off.

As the car climbed the ridge and started down the other side, Fathom wondered vaguely what was going to happen next. He didn't care much any more. The acute anxiety of the first hours, the helpless rage at being snatched out of his daily life, the chagrin at being out of touch with the patient he had been keeping alive, had all subsided to dull resignation. The monotonous days of his captivity, and the exasperation of trying to get information from the uncommunicative Zonelli, had subdued his fighting spirit.

The first signs of dawn lightened the sky as they rolled down the last mile of mountain into the desert.

An unreal rose tint, inappropriate to the ruggedness of the desert, touched the gray expanse of brush and cactus. Joshua trees were silhouetted sharply against the eastern horizon. The car rolled on to a concrete highway and sped into the dawn.

Just before the sun came up, the man with the handkerchief over his face lifted the doctor from the car, carried him deep into the brush, dropped him, helpless, where he could not be seen from the road. Then the man returned to his car, and drove off.

CHAPTER XV. THINGS POP.

KEW had a disturbing night. After Powers had gone, he had read the reporter's memorandum, looked curiously at the key Powers had left, then disappointed his wife, who had expected to be taken to the movies, by telephoning to her that he was going to stay on the job, even though he was officially off duty.

"That 'Crimson Clew' picture is going to play for the rest of the week anyhow," apologized Captain Kew, "and I've simply got to finish up an important case to-night. We will go some other night."

"Oh, you and your important cases!" said Mrs. Kew petulantly into the telephone. It was very boring to have a husband so tied up with his business that he couldn't take his wife to see an exciting detective film!

For several hours Kew went out alone, interviewing a score of men, digging out facts that both puzzled and upset him. He came back to his office for a quiet cigar, to study the discoveries he had made, to fit them into circumstances that were becom-

ing more and more confusing as he went along. He had hardly lighted his cigar, however, when his phone rang.

"Yes, Chadwick. . . . Who? . . . Doctor Winter? . . . I'll be right up. . . . All right, try to stand him off. . . . I'll bring an ambulance and the riot squad. . . . Sure, right away."

Kew slammed down the phone, grabbed his hat, and shouted several orders on his way down the stairs. Two minutes later he was on his way to the campus of Sunset University. Other cars followed him, convoyed by motor cycles with sirens shrieking. A clanging ambulance drew up in the rear. Winter had been discovered, barricaded in one of the laboratories of the medical school. Efforts to get him to come out peacefully had been answered by curses and a shower of glassware.

When Kew and his reinforcements had arrived, the laboratory had been surrounded. There was no way for Winter to get out, but, on the other hand, there was no way for the policemen to get in. Two detectives had tried to climb in windows. One had been burned with acid thrown at him. The other had come out coughing violently from some powder sprayed on his face. They hesitated to shoot, because Kew's orders were that he be taken alive, so that he could be questioned.

Two tear bombs hurled through the window, broke down the doctor's resistance. He came leaping through the window directly into the arms of Captain Kew himself. He struggled frantically for a moment, until his arms and legs were seized by some of Kew's men. Then he became suddenly docile. He sagged in the captain's arms, his white hair in wild disorder, his dark eyes star-

ing at nothing, his pallid face expressionless. When Kew questioned him, he muttered incoherently in reply.

"He's turned out to be a blathering idiot, ain't he?" asked Kew of the police surgeon who walked over from his ambulance.

The police surgeon nodded without saying anything, took Winter gently by the arm, and led him to the ambulance.

"I'll keep him under observation for a while," said the surgeon. "He may come around all right. It's probably just the result of some shock or series of shocks."

That, as far as Kew was concerned, was the end of Winter. He hated to give up the theory which he had pursued so determinedly, but there seemed no doubt, now, that Doctor Winter's actions had been those of a man, crazed by the disappointment of seeing the fruits of his life work grafted on the tree of another. He had been an opportunist, seeking the advantage of Fathom's absence, but he was not the kidnaper. That cocky reporter, Powers, was going to turn out to be right after all.

At eleven o'clock, Ruth Dwyer called up for news of Fathom. Told there was none, she said that Bernard Edmonton was sinking rapidly.

At midnight, Kew went home to his sulking wife. He had scarcely got into bed when his phone rang. It was Powers calling from some back-country town.

"Well, is Fathom with you?" asked Kew.

"They got him away from me," Powers admitted. "Will you tell the sheriff's office the doctor ought to be somewhere along the road that runs from Santa Juliana over the ridge to Imperial by way of the abandoned Hondo mine? Better have the Imperial County sheriff's

office notified, too. I hate to split this reward any more ways than we can help it, cap, but there doesn't seem any other way out."

"Who's the doctor with?"

"I don't know. I only know he's in an old car with a sprung left rear axle. The license plates should read 9X-99-01, but, of course, they may have been changed. Did you look up my leads?"

"I did."

"If you found what I think you've found, I hope you've taken proper precautions."

"Listen, you ain't going to teach me to run my business."

"All right, all right. I'll see you in the morning—unless I call you sooner. So long."

POWERS showed up at the police station next morning later than usual, despite the fact that the day promised to be one of surprising developments. He had taken a few hours to sleep, and had shaved for the first time in several days. His right hand was bandaged as he walked briskly into the press room. The dark face and then the bright blue tie of Fox emerged from behind the morning papers.

"Hello, Paul Revere," said Fox, "been riding all night again?"

"Why sure, Foxy," replied Powers, "I go riding every night. It's fine for my insomnia. Doctor's orders."

"What doctor? Fathom?"

"That's right, Fathom. By the way, I suppose you've heard he's back?"

"Fathom back? No. Where'd you get that yarn?" Fox sat up.

"Maybe I just dreamed it, then. What's Kew got to say this morning?"

"I just came from seeing him," said Fox, relaxing again. "He don't

know much. He's kind of glum over Winter turning out to be just an old lunatic. What'd you do to your hand?"

"Nothing much, tried to bust the neck off a bottle when I couldn't get the cork out. Well, I think I'll go up and talk to Kew."

Powers climbed the stairs to the detective bureau.

"What'd you do to your hand?" asked Kew, as Powers locked the door behind him.

"Machine-gun slug," said Powers, yawning.

"Who did it?"

"I was just going to ask you," said Powers.

"Ask me?"

"Yes. You've been keeping an eye on Sunset for me. Where was the coroner last night?"

"He was home all night," said Kew.

Powers nodded.

"Then I know who shot me," he said slowly. He picked up the phone. "Get me Coroner Crockett's office," he said to the operator.

A moment later the bell rang. Powers wedged the receiver between his ear and his shoulder.

"Hello, coroner. . . . This is Powers of the Star. I've got a customer for you, coroner. . . . Yeah, a dead man at the old Hondo mine near Santa Juliana. . . . That's right. I don't know his name. I think he's known to some people as Zonelli, but I'm not sure. . . . Yeah, a hunting accident. . . . Uh-huh. A fellow shot him for a skunk. Listen, coroner, why don't you send a deputy out to the mine? Then you can meet me here in town, and I'll give you all the dope I've got so you can get ready to call the inquest. . . . Sure. Meet me at Doctor Fathom's house in, say, twenty minutes. Good-by."

As he hung up, a uniformed policeman placed a strip of yellow paper on Kew's desk. Kew grunted as he read it.

"Look what the ticker brings us from the sheriff's office," he said, passing the paper to Powers. "Kind of knocks your Imperial Valley theory for a row of ash cans, don't it?"

Powers read:

ADD GENERAL ALARM WHEREABOUTS WANTED DOCTOR WALTER FATHOM: CAR LICENSE 9X-99-01 DESCRIBED POLICE BULLETIN AS KIDNAPING CAR FOUND BY DEPUTY SHERIFF ORTEGA ABANDONED AT TINTO NEAR MEXICAN BORDER THIS MORNING. NO SIGN OF DRIVER OR OCCUPANTS. CONTINUE SEARCH ALL CARS.

"That fits in perfectly," said Powers. "Tinto is near the highway from Imperial to Sunset. The driver deliberately left the car there on his way somewhere else."

"To Mexico, I'll bet," said Kew.

"Maybe," said Powers. "But what I came in for was to show you this. Here's a wire from our Imperial Valley correspondent. I got a copy of it as I dropped by the office."

Powers passed over a sheet of paper bearing the following lines:

Valley City, Friday. A man believed to be the missing Doctor Walter Fathom appeared and later disappeared mysteriously near here to-day.

L. G. Smith, a motorist of this city, driving into town on the highway early this morning, saw a man crawling painfully out of the brush. The man was bound and gagged, and from the condition of his clothes and skin, had dragged himself for some distance across the desert.

When Smith stopped his car and cut the man loose, he was evidently suffering from thirst and could not speak. Smith gave the man a drink, put him in the back of his car, and drove at top speed for Valley City.

When Smith got into town, the man had disappeared.

"I'll be damned!" said Kew. "What do you make of that mystery, smart guy? Was it the doctor, or wasn't it?"

"It was," said Powers. "But it's no mystery. You know how the highway comes into Valley City, don't you? Just before it comes into town, it skirts the airport. The doctor, if I'm not mistaken, would be in a terrible rush to get back to Sunset. Seeing the air field, his first impulse would be to hop out and grab a plane." Powers looked at his watch. "If I were you," he said, "I'd get in a car and rush down to Sunset Field. It's my guess that if Fathom isn't aboard the regular morning passenger plane, from the Valley, due here in twelve minutes, he'll come fluttering down in a private ship. Go on out, captain, and protect our interests in the rewards. I suppose the pilot will be wanting a cut. Then there's this bird, Smith."

"Maybe you're right," Kew said.

"Of course I'm right. I'll see you at Fathom's house. I'm going up now to meet the coroner."

On the way out Powers stopped a moment in the press room.

Fox was busy writing the fifth chapter of "Confessions of an Abandoned Bride," allegedly written for the *Gazette* by Mabel Hardy Fathom. He squinted at Powers through his heavy-lidded eyes.

"Things are popping," said Powers. "Sheriff's office just found the car Doctor Fathom was kidnaped in, and they think they have a sure clew to the driver. Then Zonelli, the man who first called Fathom on the night of the kidnaping, has been found dead near Santa Juliana. Hop to it."

"Where you going now?" Fox flicked a cigarette stub across the room.

"I'm going up to Fathom's place to meet the coroner on the Zonelli angle," said Powers.

"See you there later," said Fox, getting up. "I'll check with the sheriff and call my office first."

CHAPTER XVI. BRAINS FOR RENT.

IN five minutes, Powers was in Fathom's reception room. Ruth Dwyer was there, too. Her eyes were red and swollen.

"What's the matter, nurse?" asked Powers. "Patient getting well?"

"Mr. Edmonton's in a coma this morning," said the girl. "There's nothing I can do for him right now. I came over here to see if there wasn't one more injection of Doctor Fathom's extract in the laboratory. I found one test tube, but I'm not sure it's ready for use. If the doctor were only here."

"Cheer up," said Powers. "He will be."

The girl shook her head sadly.

"Young Mr. Edmonton told me you were not successful last night."

"What's he mean, not successful?" protested Powers. "We may not have knocked a home run, but we scared the outfielders so badly they've dropped the ball. It won't be long now."

The doorbell rang. Harry Crockett strode in.

"Well, well," the coroner began in his usual hearty manner, "what's all this mystery about the dead man at the Hondo mine, Powers? I sent a deputy out to see the body. Tell me all you know about it."

"Before I begin," said Powers, "I want to remind you that yesterday you offered five thousand dollars re-

ward for the return of Doctor Fathom."

"My offer still stands," said the coroner.

"Then you'd better write your check right now," said Powers, "to save time. The doc'll be along pretty quick."

"I wish I could believe you," said the coroner. "I suppose you think you've solved the mystery of the kidnaping, too."

"I have," said Powers. "Do you want to know the man who had him carried off?"

"I suppose you think it's the chap Zonelli who's dead?"

"The man," said Powers, "is Harry Crockett, the coroner of Sunset County."

"Me?" The husky coroner threw back his head and emitted a long peal of boisterous laughter. Before his laughter had subsided, it was drowned out by the shriek of sirens.

Powers, the coroner, and Ruth Dwyer reached the window together. They saw several automobiles stop at the curb, convoyed by motor-cycle policemen. They saw Captain Kew and two plain-clothes men jump out and run up the steps with a middle-aged man, who, despite his unshaven, bedraggled appearance, still maintained a vestige of the distinguished bearing that was Doctor Walter Fathom's.

THE next few minutes were filled with confusion. Plain-clothes men kept back the reporters, photographers, and crowd of idly curious who had trailed the motor cars from the air field. Doctor Fathom had pushed aside the coroner's noisy congratulations and Ruth Dwyer's almost hysterical greetings to go directly to his laboratory.

"Let him alone," ordered Kew. "We're going to rush him to Edmon-

ton's." He walked over to Powers, who was phoning his paper the flash of the doctor's return. "You were right again, damn your eyes," he said, pounding the reporter on the back.

When Doctor Fathom and Ruth Dwyer emerged from the laboratory and headed for the front door, Kew gave orders to his men.

"Go along, Martigan," he directed. "Rush 'em through traffic and then bring back Sidney Edmonton when you come."

The door slammed, motors started, sirens resumed their screaming.

"If you're still bothered about young Edmonton's lack of alibis," said Powers to Kew, "I can furnish all you need. He told me last night that he lied to you about his presence in the Mesa Road cottage in order to protect the name of a—of a friend of his who dropped in with him for a glass of orange juice. He lied to you about the ransom call, because he thought the presence of the police would hinder his communication with the kidnapers, and, despite the fact that he is old man Edmonton's sole heir, he sincerely wants his uncle to live. As for the finding of Fathom's car near the Mesa Road cottage, that was planted by the kidnapers deliberately to send you off on a false scent. Now Edmonton says——"

"If you'll pardon me, gentlemen," interrupted the coroner, "I've got my own work to do. Suppose I see you at noon, Jack, to get your story on that Zonelli matter. I'll bring my check for the five thousand——"

"Don't go, coroner," ordered Captain Kew.

"What's the idea, captain?"

"I'll have a warrant for you, in a very few minutes, and it would save me a lot of trouble if I knew exactly where to serve it."

"A warrant for me? Charging kidnaping, I suppose." Crockett again laughed boisterously.

"You guessed right," said Kew.

"But you ought to know I've had nothing to do with this," laughed Crockett. "The two of you have been watching me close enough ever since the doctor first disappeared. And I have a perfect alibi for every minute of the night he disappeared."

"Sure, sure," said Kew. "You didn't do the dirty work yourself. But it happens I found the undertaker that transported Monici's body from the hospital morgue to South Harbor Street at your express request. And the undertaker talked."

"So Davis talked, did he?" The coroner's bravado was suddenly gone. He was pale.

"He not only talked, but he wrote. And he was wise to listen to reason. I promised him immunity——"

"But what's that got to do with Fathom?" The coroner protested. He was on the defensive now. "I was just doing a favor for a suicide's brother."

"Can that stuff, Crockett!" Powers broke in. "A suicide's brother doesn't rig up a hide-out in an abandoned mine to ambush curious reporters with gats and machine guns."

THE coroner made a gesture of protest. The telephone rang. Kew jumped to answer it.

"Kew speaking. . . . Yeah, Chadwick. . . . Good! . . . He wanted to fight, did he? Good. . . . Good. . . . That's the stuff. . . . No, just throw him in the can till I get down."

Kew was smiling as he hung up.

"Well, coroner," he said. "The case is about washed up. I just arrested your hired brains."

"What do you mean?"

"Chadwick just grabbed that rack-

eteering *Gazette* reporter, Charlie Fox, coming out of the safe-deposit vaults of the Sixth National Bank. I guess he was fixing to take a little trip somewhere. He had seventy thousand dollars' worth of bonds and currency in his pocket."

"Seventy grand is a lot of money to have stuck away in a safe-deposit box," commented Powers, "by a reporter who makes forty dollars a week."

The coroner started to say something but Powers ignored him.

"I should have suspected Fox from the first," Powers went on. "I always knew that you weren't burdened with an overweighty intellect, Crockett. Like most dumb politicians who want to be crooked on a big scale, you'd have to hire somebody to do your thinking for you. And what's handier than an underpaid reporter? I guess Fox rented his brains to a number of your fraternity, if he had seventy thousand salted away. At that, he might have got away with it if he didn't make the mistake of losing his safe-deposit key in Fathom's cellar.

"Of course it was a cinch for me to trace the key to the Sixth National Bank vaults," Kew volunteered, "and to put a man in the bank to wait for the owner to use his duplicate in getting his stake—which he did this morning."

"Finding the key in the cellar, Crockett, ties Fox into the kidnaping pretty definitely, in case you're figuring some loophole," said Powers. "Because I found that Fathom's telephone wires had been tapped in the cellar. That must have been about the second step, after you'd decided that Fathom was a thorn in your side and had hired Fox to remove him for you. Fox's first step, I found, was to wire some one in Fathom's old home town, Denver,

to dig up some dirt on the doc. Result: The blond Mabel. The second step was to tap the wires so he could listen in on the doctor's business and make his plans accordingly. At the Hondo mine I found the instrument he used—a testing phone that had been stolen from the telephone company. By the way, it was pretty nifty of Fox to sneak back into the cellar to phone Edmonton from there regarding his fake ransom scheme, so that the tracer would show the call as coming from Fathom's own line. Pretty clever. Of course, that arbor in the garden helped him to come and go without being seen."

THE coroner, deathly pale, broke into a violent cough. He was perspiring profusely. Taking a small bottle from his pocket, he swallowed two white tablets. Then suddenly he was very calm. He made a gesture of good-natured capitulation.

"You win, boys," he said. "I suppose you've got enough evidence to hang both of us."

"Damn near," said Kew.

"We haven't yet been able to prove that Fox was the man who stole the sedan to drive to the Hondo mine last night," said Powers, "but I don't think that will be hard. I've got the pen he used in writing the fake ransom note and the threatening letter to me. By the way, coroner, would you mind answering a few questions? I'm curious, that's all. Of course, Fox dug up the blond Mabel to discredit Fathom. But having paid her, I imagine you got her to help on other details, didn't you? She was the woman who phoned the doctor to treat a man with a broken leg, wasn't she?"

"She was," said the coroner.

Kew phoned headquarters to order

Mabel's arrest. "And just what was the idea of the corpse in Harbor Street?" he asked after he had hung up.

The coroner smiled.

"I may as well tell you," he said, "since you'll find out the missing details from the doctor, now that he's back. The idea was Fox's. It was to work two ways. We knew that Fathom was hard up for money. We offered him a thousand-dollar bribe to write a death certificate without calling the coroner in a suspicious case. If he had accepted, the bills were marked. Since he didn't, the whole affair was to act as a possible motive for kidnaping, a motive to throw you a little farther off the scent."

"And how the hell did you get Winter in on your red herring party?"

The coroner shook his head. He seemed to have difficulty in breathing.

"We didn't," he said. "The old man acted all on his own, after reading in the papers about Fathom's disappearance. And since I'm telling you everything, I may as well point out that Zonelli was a professional killer. He helped us with the Monici corpse, because he was under obligations to me. As a matter of fact, that chicken-bone murder was his work."

The coroner half rose from his chair, then fell back. His breath came in gasps.

"I'm telling you all this," he went on, "because I want to get it off my chest—before I die. I've just poisoned myself."

Powers sprang to the phone.

"That's right," gasped the coroner. "Get a doctor in at the death. Get Fathom, and he can write the certificate. That'll save the deputy coroner work. There'll be—no inquest."

CROCKETT closed his eyes and was silent. Kew opened his collar and tried what general first-aid measures he knew. In five minutes, the unshaven Doctor Fathom appeared.

The doctor looked at the coroner, felt his pulse, smelled the tablets left in the bottle in his pocket, then snorted disgustedly. When he had administered a hypodermic injection and forced a solution between the coroner's lips, he said:

"He's done a bad job of it. If he'd been at all smart, he'd know that for the past eight years we've had a perfect antidote for this poison. He'll be all right in an hour."

The phone rang. Kew answered it. He came back smiling.

"By the way, Doctor Fathom," he began, "about that wife of yours who——"

"What wife?" The doctor was startled.

"Why, the blond Mabel," Powers prompted.

The doctor's brow clouded.

"Mabel Hardy," he said, "was never my wife."

"How about the county clerk's records in Denver?" queried Powers.

"I once asked Mabel to be my wife," said the doctor. "I even went so far as to get the marriage license. Luckily I discovered in time that she had a legal husband living and serving a five-year sentence in the penitentiary. She was so provoked at my allowing a mere husband to come between us, that she ran off in a huff, and I hadn't thought of her

in ten years, until I got a wire from her the other night. She's in town, of course."

"She was," said Kew. "But she cleared out early this morning. Left the hotel without paying her bill, and we haven't the slightest trace of her yet."

A look of great relief spread over the doctor's bearded face.

"In that case," he said, "I'll run back to the Edmontons. The old gentleman has regained consciousness, and I'd like to watch his reactions as he responds to treatment. Of course, Miss Dwyer could watch him. She's kept invaluable records for me. Thanks to her, I'll be able to present conclusive results to the medical convention in a few days."

"Listen, doc," said Powers. "I don't want to seem to be butting in or anything, but—— Well, Miss Dwyer is a swell girl, and if I were you I'd get me a shave and a clean shirt first, so you talk to her right."

The doctor smiled almost sheepishly.

Kew took Powers's arm.

"Come on out and have a shot of sarsaparilla," he said. "I'll leave a couple of men here with the coroner."

"Not me," said Powers. "I'm going to stay right with the coroner till he comes to. He hasn't written that check yet, and I always believe in holding a man to his word. Besides"—he glanced at his watch—"I've got to phone in a new lead on this story for the next edition."





THE DEVIL IN HIS FIST

By Herman Landon

Rufus Brent packs a mean wallop to a kidnaper's chin.

STANDING at the open window of the farmhouse, Minnie Norton saw the rural carrier come along and deposit some mail in the box.

Old Andy Ferguson, the handy man on the farm, put his saw aside, trudged over to the mail box, removed its contents, and started for the house. Old Andy's life was geared to a turtle's pace, and to-day he seemed even slower than usual.

Minnie, being impatient, met him on the porch and fairly tore the newspaper from him. Soon she was

gazing at the biggest and blackest headlines she had ever seen:

Body Of Little Billy Chatland
Washed Ashore On Jersey Coast

Minnie smiled strangely. She was slim and dark-eyed, with a brave chin and masses of shimmering hair piled high on her shapely head. She did not seem deeply shocked. On the contrary, the gruesome announcement appeared to fill her with a grim satisfaction. Now she lowered her eager eyes to the subheading:

Minnie Norton, Baby's Nurse, Collapses
After Identifying The Body As That
Of Missing Infant

Her lips twitched oddly at that, then she made a wry little face as she saw a likeness of herself with the Chatland baby in her arms.

"No, Minnie," said a calm voice, "the picture doesn't do you justice. You're really a very pretty girl."

Minnie's eyes widened. A man had suddenly appeared in the doorway. He was straight and tall, not exactly young and not exactly handsome, but he had strong, tanned features, a winning smile and friendly gray eyes.

"Oh!" Minnie exclaimed. "Mr. Brent! Where—where did you come from?"

"The attic. Been there since three o'clock this morning. Stole in like a thief in the night. Let's go inside. The house may be watched."

He cast a searching glance over the sunlit fields and woods, the latter bright in their autumnal garb, then stood aside to let her enter. She led him into a pleasant though plainly furnished living room.

"Wanted to be on the scene early," he explained. "No telling when those hyenas may jump. May I have some breakfast?"

"Of course. Come into the kitchen. Then we can talk while I show you what a fine cook I am."

Soon the fragrance of coffee and frying bacon was tickling his nostrils.

"What did you think of the story in the morning paper?"

"It would have been horrible if it had been true."

"Yes; but you and I and the Chatlands and several other persons who had to be taken into the secret know it isn't. You are still game to go through with it, Minnie?"

The dark head nodded.

"There may be a little excitement."

"The more the merrier. I'd do anything for little Billy."

Rufus Brent grinned. His profession of free-lance sleuth brought him up against all kinds of sordidness, and it did his heart good to see a girl like Minnie Norton.

The "sob sisters" of the metropolitan press had written many columns depicting Minnie's devotion to the baby whose nurse she had been. Twenty-two days had now passed since little Billy Chatland was stolen from the nursery in the family home just east of Fifth Avenue. The kidnaping, followed by a demand for ransom, had gripped the imagination and shocked the heart of the world, for John Chatland, the baby's father, internationally known adventurer and explorer, was the public's hero and idol, while his wife, daughter of a famous general, was as noted for her grace and beauty as for her quiet work among the poor.

"And if any one can find little Billy," Minnie added hopefully, "you can, Mr. Brent."

"You're a rank flatterer, Minnie. Now don't be too sure. It's only a gamble, and a desperate one at that."

But Minnie was not to be daunted. She had fine spirits, an alert brain, and lots of pluck. Following the kidnaping, she had gone to her father's farm to recover from shock and mental strain.

RUFUS BRENT attacked his breakfast with relish. In the course of his career he had tackled all kinds of queer game—counterfeiters, smugglers, swindlers, dealers in dope, international trouble-makers. His present task was not strictly in his line, and he had

tackled it for two reasons only: because young John Chatland, multi-millionaire and globe-trotter, was his friend, and because kidnapers were the object of his special loathing.

"And we mustn't forget," he added, "that this plan of mine is so wild and crazy that when I broached it to a certain high official he thought I was a lunatic. I pointed out that wise men had tried and failed and it was high time to give the lunatics a chance."

"More coffee, Mr. Lunatic?" asked Minnie gayly.

"Thanks. Then I had a time with the newspaper editors of the six or seven big Eastern cities where the hoax had to be published in order to make absolutely certain that the kidnapers would see it. They said it was too outrageous. Millions of people would be horrified. I convinced them that the end justified the means and that a desperate situation required a desperate remedy. And so—well, here we are."

Minnie fetched the newspaper from the living room.

"Don't read it," he advised. "It isn't edifying. The story—all a string of lies—boils down to this: The body was found by lobster fishers. It had evidently been in the water for some time, rendering identification difficult, but it was immediately assumed that it was the missing Chatland baby and that the kidnapers, either in a panic or a rage, had murdered him. The authorities were reluctant to break the news to the parents until positive identification was established, so they sent for you, the baby's nurse. You were positive it was little Billy, and then you fainted."

He glanced out the window as if suspicious that a shadow might be prowling in the warm autumn sunshine.

"That's the gist of the yarn, Minnie. All lies; but plausible lies."

"But there's one thing I just can't get through my head," Minnie confessed. "Little Billy is with the kidnapers. They know he is well and alive, so they must realize the story is a fake."

"Must they, Minnie? Try to see their point of view. They have been promised immunity if they will bring the baby back. Fifty thousand in cash is waiting for them. They are either afraid to come out and get it, or else they are playing for higher stakes. They see the story in the morning papers, and it almost knocks them over. It's evident, from their point of view, that the body of some infant has been found. They know it can't be Billy, so they will assume that a mistake has been made. Mistakes of that kind have happened before."

"And so," Minnie summed up, "they will think as we want them to think."

"Yes, because they can't think anything else. And now they are in a stew. The whole country will be a howling mob clamoring for their blood. Their pot of gold will be lost. They can't collect ransom on a child whose parents believe, rightly or wrongly, that the child is dead. And so the rats will have to make a quick jump. And they can jump only one way."

"Straight into the trap?"

"Yes; and you are the bait, Minnie."

The telephone was ringing. Minnie started for the door.

"Careful," he said.

Minnie paused and turned. Their eyes met.

"I'll be careful," she promised, and left the room.

She was excited and breathless, when she returned.

"It was Mr. Chatland," she said, but she rolled her eyes knowingly. "He wanted to know if there were any developments of the kind we were expecting."

"Oh, he did?" Rufus Brent was thoughtful. "Fairly clever. The vile curs are feeling their way. What did you say?"

"I pretended I didn't know what developments he was talking about. Then I sent my love to Mrs. Chatland."

"Wise little lady! That phone call means that they are nosing out possible snares before they jump. Something will pop soon."

BRENT'S gray eyes were hard and bright. He had lots of red blood, and it boiled easily. It had been seething ever since the kidnaping of little Billy Chatland.

"I've just one regret," he growled. "Wish I could plant a good hard fist in their faces before we hand them over."

"Maybe you'll have your wish. I'd like to see you."

"We have to catch them first. And we mustn't fool ourselves. These vultures have brains. They——" He broke off with a grim chuckle. "Ah, we've smoked them out!"

Glancing out of the window, he saw a sleek, black sedan bumping over the dirt road, reducing speed as it approached the farmhouse. He caught a brief glimpse of the two occupants, one at the wheel and the other in the rear seat.

"It's passing," said Minnie regretfully.

"Yes, but did you notice how closely the man in the back seat was watching the house and grounds?" He rose from the table. "It was a grand breakfast, Minnie. Now I'm going to fade out of the picture for a while."

Her small face shone with excitement.

"Remember what you promised. I'm going with you all the way."

"Wish you wouldn't insist. It may be a rough performance."

"I do insist. Unless you let me come along, I'll back out right now."

"Oh, all right. Let wild youth have its way."

He disappeared through the living-room door. She stood at the window, partly concealed behind the curtains, and saw old Andy working at the woodpile. Presently she started and craned her neck. The black sedan was coming back!

She retreated farther behind the curtain and watched. The man in the back seat climbed out and went up to old Andy. Andy pointed, and the man started toward the house. He had a broad face and a broad body and walked with a slight limp. An inch and a half of gaudy handkerchief protruded from the breast pocket of his rather showy brown suit. The other man had remained at the wheel of the sedan. There came a knock. She tried to compose herself and opened the door.

"Good morning, Miss Norton," said the caller, with a mincing smile. He had a blunt nose and small, beady eyes. She would have disliked him even without her strong suspicion that he was one of little Billy's abductors. "I'd like to see you for a minute."

"Come in," said Minnie without cordiality.

The man sat down and chewed a dead cigar while his small, shrewd eyes glanced in all directions.

"My name is Koppler," he announced. "Is your father about?"

"He's working in the pasture."

"You all alone?"

"Old Andy is outside. Maybe you saw him at the woodpile."

"I did. Funny old goat!" Keppler rolled the cigar in his mouth. "I came to see you about the Chatland baby. Got a surprise for you. You made a mistake. So did the Chatlands. The baby is alive."

She stared at him hard and suspiciously.

"I'm giving it to you straight," said Keppler ingratiatingly. "The story in the papers is all wrong. Everybody is wrong. You see, the body had been in the water a week. And you were all upset and worried. No wonder you made a mistake."

Minnie's cold incredulity changed to scorn.

"Why do you tell me such ridiculous things?"

"Think I'm a liar, don't you? Well, I'm not blaming you. All I'm asking is a chance to prove what I'm telling you."

"How can you prove that Billy is alive when I saw his poor little body last night? Mr. and Mrs. Chatland saw it, too."

"Yes, you saw a body. And it had been in the water for a week. Now, Miss Norton, let's not argue about it. Just come with me. I'll show you the kid, and that will settle it."

Minnie regarded him with disdain and distrust, and she felt Rufus Brent would have applauded her acting.

"I don't believe a word you say," she declared. "You're up to something. If you don't go at once, I'll call father."

"No, you won't." He took her arm and jerked her roughly to him. "You're coming with me, whether you like it or not, so you might as well like it."

With a nasty chuckle he lifted her in his arms as lightly as if she had been a kitten. She squirmed and kicked and scratched. Though Rufus Brent had warned her that some-

thing like this would happen, she was beginning to feel uneasy. Now she was being carried from the house and out to the car. She saw the man at the wheel and heard the humming of the engine. Suddenly she wondered where Rufus Brent was. Had something gone wrong?

She started to cry out, but Keppler clapped his hand over her mouth and heaved her through the open door in the tonneau of the car. She caught a glimpse of Andy standing at the woodpile and watching this strange proceeding with a stupid stare. Keppler climbed in after her and slammed the door shut.

"Step on it, Joe!" he shouted to the driver.

THE car glided away. Minnie moved as far away from her captor as she could, pressing her slim body against the side of the car. She was almost certain now that matters had gotten out of Rufus Brent's hands.

The car picked up speed. It had a soft, luxurious motion, but Minnie's heart was beating in her throat. And Keppler, gross and beastly, sickened and frightened her.

"Ah, don't be scared, kid. Nobody's going to hurt you."

She pressed more firmly against her side of the car. Her hand groped nervously along the edge of the cushion. Suddenly her body stiffened. Her fingers closed around an object that sent an exhilarating flash to her brain. Who could have left it there, where she was sure to find it? The astonishing Rufus Brent?

"Keep away from me!" she said hotly.

"Now, baby, don't be stagy. Just a little——"

He choked and jumped and stared at the revolver that had suddenly appeared in Minnie's firm hand.

"Packing a rod, eh?" Recovering from his surprise, he edged away from her. "Well, you don't get far with that. Joe," he yelled to the driver, "pull up!"

But Joe did not hear him. There was no slackening of speed. They swung out on the main road, traveled some distance along the macadam, then turned into another side road.

"Hey," Keppler bawled, "where are you going?"

A muffled laugh sounded in front. Minnie fixed a puzzled eye on the driver. His shoulders were hunched down and he was wearing a soft hat pulled well down over his forehead as a protection against the sun's glare. Now, of a sudden, he was no longer the same man. He straightened up his shoulders and seemed instantly taller.

"Keep the bead on him, Minnie," he told her. "If he gets rough, plug him."

Keppler squealed out an oath. Minnie's brain and heart seemed to stop, then she laughed exultantly. Rufus Brent!

"Hear that?" she taunted, looking hard and straight at the man beside her. "I have orders to plug you if you get rough, and I'll do it!"

Keppler saw the blaze in her eyes, her steady grip on the revolver, and he shook inside his flashy brown suit.

"A plant!" he mumbled. "It was a plant!"

After a while the car climbed a steep hill in second gear and turned sharply to the left. They were entering a wild, wooded section, but Rufus Brent was driving as if he had looked over the ground beforehand and knew exactly where he was going. Minnie watched alertly every flicker in Keppler's broad face. The man had recovered from his first

shock. Now there was a look of sullen cunning in his eyes that made her take a firmer hold of the weapon.

The car pulled up. A big frame house stood in a grove of tall pines. "Hunters' Haven" said a sign formed of oak twigs, but the place seemed deserted.

Rufus Brent jumped out and relieved Minnie of the pistol.

"Out," he said to Keppler, holding the door open, "and watch your step."

Keppler, looking quite puzzled, stepped out.

"Straight to the door," Rufus Brent directed. "Then walk in. It's unlocked."

Keppler leveled a sly glance at the gun and moved on. Minnie and Rufus Brent followed. The room they entered looked like a small hotel lobby, and the interior was as deserted as the outside. Rufus Brent motioned the big man to an armchair. Keppler sat down heavily. His crafty little eyes darted everywhere.

"What did you do to Joe?" he asked sullenly.

"Poor Joe knocked his head against the butt of a gun—this gun." Rufus Brent flourished the revolver. "He is resting peacefully in the woodshed."

"Great!" Minnie applauded. Her dark eyes shone. "And I thought you had gotten into trouble, Mr. Brent."

KEPPLER'S mouth dangled open at the mention of the name.

"So you're Rufus Brent," he said with unwilling respect. "And that stuff in the papers was all a fake. Well, what do you think it's got you?"

"I've smoked a bunch of rats out of their hole."

"Yes," with a sneer, "and where do you go from here?"

Rufus Brent looked with repugnance into his leering face, then turned to Minnie.

"Just as I thought," he said with disgust. "This creature is only a flunky. Just look at him! He runs small errands for the big fellow, who is probably a man of some brains."

"Bigger brains than yours," Keppler gibed. "Don't you suppose he was smart enough to see that the stuff in the papers this morning might be all hooley?"

"Of course. The big fellow is no fool. But he couldn't afford to take chances. He wanted his pot of gold, and he didn't want to be torn to pieces by a howling mob. There was only one thing to do, and that was to convince everybody that Billy was alive."

"Yeah?" Keppler grunted, but his tricky eyes flickered uneasily.

"And there was only one way to do that," Rufus Brent went on. "A letter wouldn't have been convincing. The only convincing proof was little Billy himself."

"Go on," Keppler jeered. "You're doing swell."

"But the big fellow couldn't take little Billy to his parents, or the parents to little Billy. Either way would have been too risky. So he did the same thing—the thing I expected."

"Oh, you expected it?" said Keppler, a little crestfallen.

"Yes, there's nothing like getting inside the other fellow's mind and then keeping two jumps ahead of him. The big boy decided to bring Miss Norton and the baby together. If she wouldn't come willingly, she was to be brought by force. Afterward she was to be turned loose so she could tell everybody that Billy was alive."

Keppler's sneer returned to his thick lips.

"It was a swell plant," he admitted, "but I don't see what it's got you. You didn't think I was going to lead you to the place where we're keeping the kid?"

"No, the big fellow is too wise for that. There's the telephone, Keppler, and I know it's connected. Do as the big fellow told you."

Keppler's jaw dropped. His sneer was a sickly shadow.

"I—I don't get you."

"Don't stall." Rufus Brent spoke softly, but with a hint of thunder. "The big fellow told you to convey Miss Norton to some safe and quiet place. He wisely left the choice of place to you, not knowing what obstacles you might run into. As soon as you arrived at the place of your choice, you were to telephone him that all was well."

Keppler's mouth flopped open.

"Say," he blurted out, "how do you know that?"

"Didn't I tell you that I always keep two jumps ahead of the other fellow's mind? Don't keep us waiting. Tell the big fellow that you and Joe have brought Miss Norton to Hunters' Haven on the old Seabury Turnpike and that you want to know what to do next."

Keppler lowered his head and glowered.

"Tell him yourself," he growled.

Rufus Brent handed the revolver to the girl. Then he went over to where Keppler sat and seized his right arm just above the wrist. With his other hand he felt the muscles above the elbow.

"You're getting soft, Keppler. You ought to—"

A yell of pain interrupted him. A slight twist made Keppler squirm in awful agony. Another made him shriek and double over.

"The Japs have a name for it," said Rufus Brent. "Want more?"

"No! Don't!" the big man bleated. His broad face was white and beaded with the perspiration of agony. "I'll do it."

"Now you're sensible. But compose yourself first. Your voice mustn't sound as if you had just escaped from a torture chamber."

He paced the floor while the big man, breathing hard, watched him with a poisonous glare. Minnie jumped up on the counter and sat there. Several minutes passed.

"Ready?" Rufus Brent inquired. "Then get it over with."

KEPPLER dragged his pain-racked body to the telephone and called a number in a fairly steady voice. A wait ensued.

"And remember this," Rufus Brent warned him. "If you try any tricks, you will get a bigger and better dose of what you had before." He turned to Minnie. "It would be beautifully simple if the number Keppler just called was connected with the place where they are keeping little Billy. But it isn't, of course. The big fellow knows better."

He lighted a cigar as Keppler began to speak.

"Hello! This is Keppler. . . . Me and Joe pulled it off in swell shape. We've got the dame in Hunters' Haven. It's on the old Seabury Turnpike. . . . What's that? Sure I get you. . . . O. K."

He hung up and bent a look of venom on the investigator.

"Thanks, Keppler," Rufus Brent murmured. "It was well done. I hope you do as well when the big fellow calls you back in a few minutes."

"Oh, you heard what he said."

"I heard nothing. But I'm still keeping two mental jumps ahead

of the other fellow. Naturally he wants to check up and make sure that you are really at the place you mentioned. And right now he is consulting maps to find out where the old Seabury Turnpike is."

Keppler gulped and slumped down in the chair. Minnie sat on the counter and swung her shapely legs. Soon the telephone rang, and the big man answered, but he spoke only in monosyllables. Most of the talking was done at the other end.

"Where?" Rufus Brent asked when Keppler had hung up.

"Where—what?"

"The big fellow told you to keep traveling, of course. You are to take Miss Norton to some specified place where she is to see little Billy. What place did he specify?"

Keppler hung his head and sneered.

"Say, Mr. Rufus Brent, you aren't as smart as you think."

The investigator gave him a long, piercing look.

"My mistake," he murmured. "My mind must have jumped off the track that time. So the big fellow is bringing little Billy here. That simplifies matters, of course, but—"

He paused and frowned and stood lost in thought.

"Queer!" He gazed absently at Minnie. "The safe way would have been to move on. Oh, well, we shall see." Turning to Keppler, he asked: "Did he tell you how soon he would be here?"

The big man shook his head morosely. Rufus Brent turned to the window and looked out at the tall pines.

"I suppose he feels safe," he mumbled. "He has no reason to feel otherwise. We can do nothing but wait."

It proved a long wait. In the pine grove the shadows lengthened. Ru-

fus Brent tried to keep Minnie amused, but the strain was telling on her. Now and then he cast a doubtful glance at Keppler. On occasions he caught a sly, knowing expression that made him wonder. After watching him for a time, he went over and touched Keppler's arm.

"Come with me," he said. He gave a playful little twist to the arm, and Keppler squirmed. "Come quietly and you won't get hurt. I'll be back soon, Minnie."

THE big man glowered and growled but did not resist. It was almost dark when Rufus Brent returned. Minnie was still seated on the counter, her face a pallid glint in the dusk.

"I bound and gagged him and put him to bed upstairs," he told her. "He was up to some kind of trickery. Now——"

The telephone rang, and he scowled at the instrument. After a moment's hesitation he stepped up and answered.

"Hello," he said, imitating Keppler's voice. "Yeah, everything's fine. Sure, she's here. O. K." He turned to Minnie with an expressive lifting of the brows. "Here, kid, somebody wants to talk with you. Snap out of it."

She jumped down from the counter, and he whispered in her ear:

"It's the big fellow. Do your stuff."

She nodded and took the receiver.

"Hello," she said in a tone of mingled indignation and timidity. "Yes, this is Minnie Norton. I—I think you're beastly. You're only lying to me. Little Billy is dead." She choked back a sob. "Oh, all right, but I don't believe a word you say."

"That's perfect!" Rufus Brent applauded as she hung up. "You did

that just right. The big fellow ought to be satisfied now. What did he say?"

"He said he has been delayed, but that he will be here with little Billy in a short while."

Rufus Brent found an oil lamp and lighted it. There was a groping expression in his gray eyes.

"That voice?" he mumbled. "I've heard it before. I rarely forget a voice, but that one—— Can't place it." With a thoughtful expression he moved about the room. "Well, Minnie, it looks as if we would have our excitement on empty stomachs. No lunch, no dinner. Wish you would be sensible and withdraw."

"Not on your life!" she declared with a flash of dark eyes.

He regarded her admiringly, but with a preoccupied air, as if still trying to identify the voice on the wire. The revolver was lying on the counter, and he examined it and dropped it in his pocket. Then he stood motionless, gazing into space with a far-off expression. Suddenly he started.

"Got it!" he exclaimed. His brow cleared. "Siggy Dockerman! That's the big fellow's name."

"Yes?" said Minnie in a tired voice. "And what's in a name?"

He stepped to the door and looked out. It was quite dark now and the sky was overcast.

"The last time I ran into Siggy," he explained, closing the door, "was five or six years ago. Siggy was one of the slickest counterfeeters in the country. Now he seems to have changed his racket. I'll be glad to meet him again."

"And I hope you punch his face," said Minnie feelingly.

Rufus Brent looked at his hand and doubled it into a fist. For a time they waited in silence. Presently he looked out once more. It was

growing darker and the wind was moaning dismally in the pines. He was about to close the door, then hesitated and looked intently into the gloom.

"Some one's coming!" he whispered.

Minnie, all alertness of a sudden, slipped down from the counter. Rufus Brent drew his revolver and glanced sharply about.

"Sit there, Minnie." He indicated the armchair. "Look as if— But you know how. I shan't be far away."

Silent as a cat he disappeared through an inner door. Minnie trembled with excitement, but she summoned a blaze to her eyes and a mutinous lift to her lips. Soon she could hear footsteps on the graveled walk. They ceased, and she started sharply as she saw a face against the windowpane. It vanished in a moment, and then some one fumbled outside the door. It was pushed open.

MINNIE'S heart was jumping inside her, and then she was strangely calm. In the doorway stood a youngish man, nattily dressed, with a long scar across his cheek. He was thin-lipped and shifty-eyed, and he looked at her in a way that sent a shiver through her body.

"Where is Keppler?" he asked, coming forward.

"He just stepped out," was her glib lie.

The newcomer, with a cigarette drooping from the corner of his weak mouth, glanced suspiciously in all directions. Something told Minnie that this was not Siggy Dockerman. He looked treacherous and mean, but not important enough for the big fellow's rôle. Presently he left the room and she heard him

moving about upstairs. His return, after what seemed a long time, was noisy and hurried.

"Say," he snarled at her, "what's been going on here? Keppler is upstairs. Somebody has shoved a towel in his mouth and roped him to a chair. Acts as if he'd had a shot of dope, too. And where's Joe? Speak up, sister."

"I don't know what you mean. Let go my arm."

"Aw, quit your stalling!" He squeezed her arm harder. The scar across his cheek quivered like a thin snake. "I know how to make you talk. I'll—"

He broke off with a startled squeal. Straight as an arrow and almost as swift, some one leaped on his back and flung him to the floor. He rolled over, whined out a curse, and reached for his gun pocket, but in an instant he was jerked to his feet and shaken so his head lolled and he gasped for breath.

"You are losing your manners, you rat," said Rufus Brent quietly, pulling him out where the light was brighter. "Let me look you over. Don't believe I have the honor of your acquaintance, Scar. You're Siggy Dockerman's scout, of course. Siggy is certainly watching his step. Where's he?"

Disheveled and breathless, the man designated as "Scar" stared in astonishment at his assailant.

"You'd like to know, wouldn't you?"

"I would, and I intend to know."

"Well," with an insolent shrug, "try and find out."

"I know one thing," said Rufus Brent with conviction. "Siggy isn't far away. Hiding somewhere in the woods round here. And he has little Billy with hm. He'll come along as soon as he hears from you that everything is all right."

"Take a tip, fellah." Scar leered at him. "You think you're a wise guy, don't you? I don't know how you found out that Siggy is bossing this racket, but Siggy is wiser'n you. You're trying to put over a swell plant, but you can't get away with it. You're licked right now." He turned to Minnie with a sneer. "And you, too, sister."

"Licked?" Rufus Brent was amused. "Licked by a rat like Siggy Dockerman? We'll see. First of all —" His hand shot out and jerked an automatic from Scar's pocket. He tossed it at Minnie's feet, then flung the man with the scar into a chair. "You are going to tell me something, Scar."

"Just try and make me."

"Siggy told you to send him a certain kind of signal if all is well and it's safe for him to bring the baby."

Scar gaped for an instant, then snickered derisively.

"Keep right on guessing, fellah."

"I'm not guessing. I'm just keeping a few mental jumps ahead of Siggy. I want to know what sort of signal you were going to send him."

"Yeah, I bet you do! You'd like to see Siggy stick his head right in the trap, wouldn't you? Why don't you go out and look for him if you think he's in these woods?"

"Because of my cussed laziness. The woods are deep and thick. I could spend all night looking for him. It's easier to give him the signal."

"Sure, if you know what the signal is."

SCAR leaned back with an air of gloating satisfaction and lighted a cigarette.

"Better tell," said Rufus Brent grimly, "or you may get hurt. Keppler almost yelled the roof off."

"He did, eh? Well, you can't work that stuff on me."

Rufus Brent's hands made a quick play. The other doubled over and yelled.

"That was nothing, Scar. Only a small sample. There is worse coming, unless you tell."

Scar whimpered and straightened up. A nasty grin wrinkled his repulsive, twitching face.

"Don't try that again," he growled. "I faint easy."

"Go ahead and faint. You'll come to again."

Scar glowered savagely, then he looked at his watch.

"Get this," he snarled. "Siggy has got you blocked on every turn. If he don't get my signal in the next ten minutes, he'll know something is wrong, and that will be just too bad for the kid. So you hadn't better make me faint away."

Rufus Brent glanced at Minnie, who stood tense and white at the counter, then fixed Scar with a piercing look. In the malevolently grinning face he saw something that gave him pause. Scar was not subtle. If he lied, his face would betray him. But he was not lying now. Not all the way, at any rate.

"Bunk!" said Rufus Brent, hiding his real thoughts. "Siggy isn't going to kill the goose that may lay a golden egg for him."

"Sure he isn't. But he may wring its neck or poke out an eye or two just for fun."

Minnie gave a half-stifed cry. Rufus Brent's face darkened.

"Get me, fellah? If Siggy don't get my signal, he'll beat it away from here with the kid, and in the morning mamma and papa will get a surprise package in the mail. Inside will be one of the kid's fingers, or maybe one of his toes. It'll teach 'em not to try any more tricks."

Minnie cried out in horror. Rufus Brent gave her a forced smile of encouragement. Siggy, he well knew, was capable of the abomination Scar had suggested. It would be a piece of brilliant strategy from Siggy's point of view.

"So you'd better keep your paws off me," Scar advised with a triumphant sneer, "and let me go."

Rufus Brent regarded him with loathing and contempt.

"Blockhead!" he said with disgust. "You've given yourself away. Letting you go wouldn't save little Billy. It would only——" He paused and turned away. Scar sickened him. The minutes were passing, and he needed a cool brain.

He glanced at the windows. Somewhere out there in the black jungle was Siggy Dockerman. He was waiting for Scar's signal. What kind of signal? Most likely one that would be either audible or visible at some distance. A given number of pistol shots would do. Or the sending up of a rocket. Or one or more shrill blasts from a whistle.

He felt Minnie's anxious eyes scanning his face. In a moment, seized with an idea, he whirled round and yanked Scar to his feet. Quickly, with an expert touch, he searched the thug's pockets. He gave an exultant cry. He pushed Scar back in the chair and held a police whistle to the light.

"So that's it!" He spoke in a tone of elation he was far from feeling. The problem was not half solved, and the seconds were racing. "How many blasts?"

"Yeah, that's what you want to know." The thug gave a loud, jeering chuckle. "How many long ones and how many short ones? Just try and find out."

Rufus Brent fixed him with a steady gaze that showed none of the

tormenting suspense he felt. He wanted to drive a fist into the thug's leering face, but he resisted the impulse. His plan was tottering, and little Billy was at the mercy of fiends.

He turned away. Scar sickened him, and his heart was heavy. His brain worked in lightning flashes. A brief backward glance showed the thug straightening up in his chair and leveling his shifty eyes at the brick fireplace. Rufus Brent's lids drew together. He stood motionless, waiting.

It came in a moment. There was a movement light as a cat's leap, and Minnie uttered a frantic cry of warning. Rufus Brent jumped, but he was a second too late. A stinging blow caught him above the ear, and as he spun crazily he heard Scar's gloating cackle and Minnie's cry of despair. He staggered drunkenly and fell like a dead weight.

WHITE as death, Minnie jumped down from the counter. The thug, grinning hideously and triumphantly, sprang forward and snatched up the pistol Rufus Brent had thrown at her feet. He cast a wary glance on the recumbent man, lying as still as if he would never move again, then backed to the door.

"Take it easy, sister," he warned her, covering her with the weapon, "and you won't get hurt."

A sob of rage and despair caught in Minnie's throat. Scar was at the door now. Still facing her, he reached behind him and opened it. Another step, and he was outside. With a horrible grin he brought something to his lips.

Shrill sounds dinned in Minnie's ears. Her heart was crawling up in her throat. She heard a long, tearing blast, then three short ones, fol-

lowed by one long and two short. The signal! She glanced hopelessly at the motionless form on the floor, and then she cowered back against the counter as Scar stepped into the room.

Straight up to the unconscious man he went. In his hand was the gun, and he was holding it by the barrel. Spite and malice stood out like blisters on his face. He swung the weapon, and Minnie closed her eyes. A terrible tension was racking her body. She knew what Scar meant to do.

A loud howl, then a sudden crash, and the terrific, heat-stifling tension snapped. She opened her eyes again. The thug was on the floor, squirming like a dying pig, and Rufus Brent was struggling dizzily to his feet.

"Well, it worked," he said unsteadily, rubbing a spot above his ear. He looked down at the thug and grinned. "Didn't expect to have your feet pulled out from under you, did you, Scar? Get up."

The thug did not move, and he reached down, took him by the collar, and jerked him to his feet. Then his fist shot out, and Scar dropped.

"That did me a world of good," he confessed with satisfaction, picking up the gun the thug had dropped. "Were you frightened, Minnie?"

"Awfully. Did he hit you hard?"

"Harder than I meant he should."

A wince of pain twisted his gratified smile. "It was all I could do to keep from passing out."

"You—you meant he should hit you?"

"I knew he was coming at me with the poker, and I did nothing to stop him. It was our only chance. Those whistles were sweet music, weren't they, Minnie? I don't know how far away Siggy may be, but he's within whistling distance anyway. He ought to be here soon."

He stood up straighter. An agreeable prospect seemed to banish his dizziness. He looked at the revolver, then at his right hand, doubled into a fist.

"I'd rather meet Siggy with my fist," he said wistfully. "I have a terrible longing to squash his face."

"There's a devil in your fist tonight, isn't there?"

He laughed and went out. Minnie walked restlessly back and forth. Presently she stood stonily still. From the outside came a startled cry followed by sounds of a violent scuffle. The commotion ceased, and Rufus Brent's smiling face appeared at the door.

Minnie gave a jubilant cry. Awkwardly but very gently Rufus Brent carried a baby in his arms.

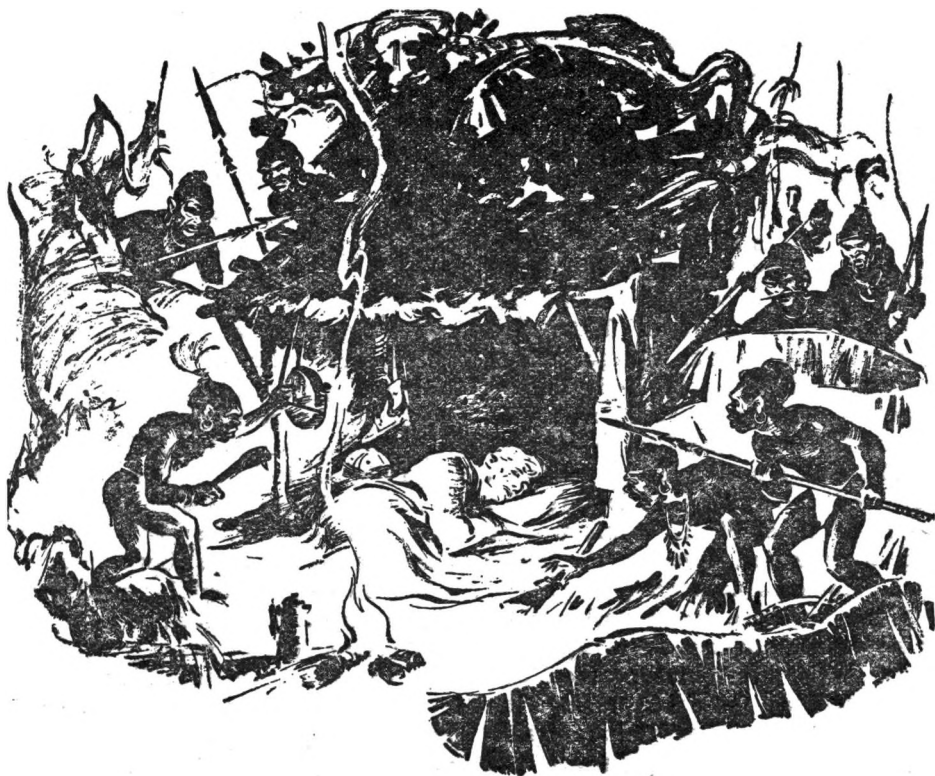
"Little Billy—darling!" she exclaimed.

With the air of having been relieved of a tremendous responsibility he handed her the child.

"Take him and tickle his pink little toes, Minnie." He heaved a sigh of complete satisfaction. "Siggy went to sleep," he added. "My fist did it."

CAMELS TO THE RESCUE

THE Cape-to-Cairo mail plane was recently forced down among the rocky hills south of Wadi Halfa, Egypt. Surrounded by a sea of sand and without fuel, passengers and mail were stranded. A wireless message broadcast the situation of the plane. In a short time, camels were loaded with cans of gasoline and sent to the scene of the stranded plane, which then proceeded on its way.



DAWA

By Jack Hulick

Magic may help against evil spirits, but what about a flesh-and-blood enemy?

THE little bag hung down against the bulging muscles of Krake's chest. It was a *dawa* bag, made of hippopotamus hide. Just what was in it, no one knew except the black magician who had given it to Krake. But the magician had claimed that it contained certain ingredients whose combination made very potent magic. So long as Krake wore it no harm could befall him.

Krake believed this. The simple truth was, that though he had unlimited physical courage, this white man was so saturated with black Africa, that his mind was a prey to all manner of native superstitions. And like all superstitious people, he was inconsistent in his beliefs.

Weeks before, in British East Africa, Krake had made up his mind to kill Westcott. Westcott was a millionaire sportsman, hunting big

game, and Krake was conducting his *safari*. Since making the decision, Krake had had many opportunities to kill Westcott. Granting the potency of his magic, Krake could have killed him at any time without fear of consequences.

However, Krake did not test the strength of his *dawa* by rash action. He had the good sense to wait until the *safari* was well into the wild, jungle region west of Lake Edward, in the Belgian Congo. Then to wait until Westcott and himself, together with only three natives—tracker, porter, gun bearer—were a good six hours away from the main body of the *safari*, following the spoor of an elephant. This was as safe a time and place as he would find. He acted accordingly.

With no more compunction than if he were shooting so many monkeys, Krake drew his revolver, and as swiftly as he could swing the muzzle around, he sent slugs crashing into Westcott, the tracker, the porter, and the gun bearer. His aim was unerring; the men died with a single shot each. They died without knowing why, almost without knowing how.

Such violence became Krake. He was an enormous man, in height and in bulk, with massive shoulders and thick, corded arms, huge thighs, and knotted calves. His face was bony and brutal; his hazel-gray eyes had the slow, steady stare of an animal. He looked capable of tearing his way through the jungle, and if necessary, of engaging its denizens in barehanded conflict.

Krake immediately sought the cause of the quadruple killings; a belt inside Westcott's shirt, which contained a sheaf of bank notes. Unfortunately for him, Westcott had been that smug type of rich man who thinks that money will solve any

difficulty, whether in a city, a jungle, or on the high seas. He carried an amazing amount with him at all times—"for emergencies," he had confidently told Krake once. Krake remembered that boast now.

"Better, my friend, if you had had something like this," he said aloud, and flipped out the little hide bag. "Magic, not money, is what you need in Africa. I know."

The pack of food and equipment the porter had been carrying, Krake now slung across his own enormous back. Then he stripped the bodies of all marks of identification, which, together with Westcott's rifles and cartridge belt, he carried far down the trail before flinging them into the center of a dense thorn patch.

As he struck rapidly northward, Krake was at ease both in mind and in conscience. To his way of thinking, the four men had died natural deaths; their end was the end of all creatures of the wild—tragic, and violent. The motive which had prompted the killings strengthened this belief. It is the way of Africa that the strong takes from the weak. The lion snatches the antelope's young; native forages against native, and the stronger spear wins; white man dominates black man, by brute force if necessary. Krake had obeyed the law of the land—his conscience was clear.

He did not worry about the white man's law, either. It would be days before an official investigation began. Then what? Five men had been swallowed by the jungle. How? When? Where? It was not likely the police would ever know.

KRAKE had shrewdly made no attempt to conceal the bodies. This wild country was the home of the cannibal Bahuni. Some one of them was certain to have

heard Krake's shots. A cautious investigation would be made, the tribe swiftly and secretly assembled. They would then summarily dispose of all evidence of the crime; for the white man can prohibit, but he cannot alter an appetite. After that, the police would learn nothing from the Bahuni.

Krake's goal was Abyssinia, well over a thousand miles away as the hawk flies. Before he reached the safety of that barbaric empire, he must face manifold dangers and endure incredible hardships. But Krake had the courage and endurance of a young elephant, and in a lifetime spent in Africa, he knew it as few men ever knew it.

Thus Krake trekked northward, fearless and confident. Beyond Lake Edward, he skirted the lower slopes of the snow-capped Mountains of the Moon, and dropped down into the great Rift Valley. At the end of a week of hard travel, he crossed the lower Semliki River and entered British Uganda.

Having come this far, it seemed that the greatest danger was past. In reality, Krake's troubles now began. In a land where tooth and claw rule, nothing is easily gained; or, once gained, is easily held. Krake had proof of this when, within rifle shot of the tumbling Semliki, he came upon Hawkins.

Hawkins was a Britisher; a lean, hatchet-faced veteran of the land, even as Krake was. The two men greeted each other casually. They asked no questions; each knew the other was an outlaw, else he would not be in this desolate strip of land, deserted by man and beast before the ravages of the tsetse fly. The scrappy meal that Hawkins provided was eaten almost in silence.

However, with pipes alight, Hawkins loosened up a bit. He was, he

admitted, an ivory poacher, just returned from an unsuccessful foray on the Belgian side of the river. The police over there were uncommonly active; he had thought it prudent to clear out until they quieted down a bit. At this information, Krake pricked up his ears, and bluntly inquired the cause of the police activity.

"They're on the lookout for a killer," said Hawkins casually. "A white man and three natives were murdered down Lake Edward way last week."

"So?" returned Krake. "That's news."

"Is it?" Hawkins paused oddly, and touched match to pipe before continuing: "I heard the story from a native tax collector. It seems this murderer chap didn't bother to hide the bodies; left 'em right on the trail, in fact. That's Bahuni country down there, you know, and some of them came along in time to finish where the chap left off. Which would have been all right for both parties, only the Bahuni chief took a fancy to the white man's teeth and made a necklace out of 'em. But the teeth happened to have some gold fillings, and that gave the whole show away to the police."

As Krake realized his crime had been swiftly revealed to the police, and his guilt immediately fixed, he was suddenly filled with a great uneasiness. Did this mean that his *dawa* had failed him? That it had somehow lost its potency?

"The Bahuni," went on Hawkins, after eying Krake intently for a moment, "had the choice between telling the truth or taking the blame for the killings. Luckily for them, perhaps, but unluckily for the killer, some natives of another tribe farther on, told of seeing a white man pass that way. He was trekking north."

THE two men sat on opposite sides of the blazing fire. They could just see each other's heads. Krake, looking over, saw that the other's hatchet face had undergone no change. But looking down, he saw that Hawkins's chest was rising and falling rapidly. Krake knew the symptom: the man was trying to get up courage to do or say something.

Krake's momentary touch of superstitious fear passed out of him instantly. He knocked out his pipe, refilled and lighted it.

"Bah! The police are a lot of monkeys," he grunted scornfully. "There's a reward on the fellow's head?"

"Five thousand francs."

"That's a lot of money," murmured Krake. "Me, I would like to catch that fellow. Eh, my friend—you, too?"

Hawkins hesitated; then his voice leaped out with the lash of a whip in it.

"I've got him! Take it easy, Jan Krake. You're covered."

Hawkins sprang erect, pistol in hand. Then like a bolt from the blue, Krake's revolver thundered across the blazing fire. A look of amazement passed over Hawkins's face, the pistol dropped from his hand. Then abruptly his lean body relaxed and he collapsed. With the fire between them, he had not seen Krake draw his revolver when he had refilled his pipe.

Krake leaped to his feet, his brutal face twisted with rage, his eyes shot with animal fury. Cursing like a madman, he smashed shot after shot into Hawkins's body, until the weapon clicked empty. Then he whirled, jamming cartridges into his revolver, to finish off Hawkins's quartet of porters.

Too late! The natives were al-

ready bolting into the tall elephant grass surrounding the camp. Krake dashed in after them, cursing and roaring at the top of his voice, firing blindly this way and that. But the terrified natives scattered and vanished.

Krake returned to the camp, and stood over the bullet-riddled body of Hawkins. Gradually the sinews in his barrel chest relaxed.

"So, you jackal, you would take me across the river and collect the blood money on my head, eh?" he said aloud; then, flipping out the little hide bag. "Not while I have this, you won't."

Krake looked contemptuously at the dead man, then turned away. Forthwith, he dismissed the incident from his mind. As with Westcott, so with Hawkins: it was the way of things in Africa.

KRAKE did not overlook certain practical details involved in the incident, however. He had killed a British subject on British territory. Knowledge of it was certain to reach the police either directly or indirectly from the native porters who had escaped. The British as well as the Belgian police were after him now.

Krake was not alarmed by this fresh threat to his safety, but he cursed the inconvenience involved. He had meant to strike northeast across Uganda to the Abyssinian border. That route was untenable now. After brief consideration, he decided to go straight north before turning east. It was longer and it was much more arduous, but it was safer.

Krake's next move was full of guile. He took two pieces of burlap, meant to incase stolen tusks. Making sure that his boots left a visible track, he marched along the

path he had meant to take across Uganda. When he came to a small stream some two miles from the camp, he waded in and tied the burlap around his boots. Retracing his steps to the camp, he left no tracks. The British police would puzzle long over that vanishing trail.

After helping himself to Hawkins's supplies, Krake recrossed the Semliki River, and entered Belgian territory again. Boldly, confidently—for had not his *dawa* proved itself potent by saving him from Hawkins's treachery?—he circled within half a dozen miles of the police post at Boga. He laughed aloud as he pictured the commotion that would ensue on both sides of the river when it was learned that Jan Krake had slipped into their districts, killed, and vanished.

"Those fools will never guess what I did. Never!" Krake assured himself confidently.

Beyond Boga, he discarded the burlap. Then he left the main path, and struck northward into the barren, mountainous country west of Lake Albert. There were no paths through that country; only a maze of animal trails that led everywhere and nowhere. The police, suspect what they might about Krake's disappearance, would hardly suspect that he had gone that way.

An unerring sense of direction, born of years in pathless lands, kept Krake going ever northward. He worked around precipices, swung himself over yawning chasms; he traversed ravines and forded brawling, icy streams. Fogs blinded him and thunderstorms drenched him by day. Raw, gusty winds chilled him to the bone by night. His scanty food supply soon gave out and game was scarce. What game he did bring down, was more often than not eaten raw, for dry material could seldom

be found to build a fire. He slept cramped and miserable in the crotches of trees, while leopards made the nights hideous with their hungry cries.

A weaker man than Jan Krake would have collapsed from sheer despair if not from exhaustion. But Krake forged on, undaunted by the constant perils, undismayed by the hardships. He forgot the police, forgot Westcott's money belt; he forgot everything but the distant goal he had set for himself.

Then one day he stood upon a ridge crest, and looked out over a lush green sea of treetops. That, he knew, was a part of the Forest of Always Night. Somewhere down there was the border between the Congo and Upper Uganda. His journey was half over. He would turn eastward and in a few weeks more would be in Abyssinia, rich and forever beyond the reach of British and Belgian police. Spurred by the thought, Krake hurried down the mountainside.

Entering the forest, he paused for food and rest. He built a beehive-shaped bivouac with branches and leaves. He shot a fat forest hog, and cooked it over a blazing fire. Then his hunger sated, he crept into his bivouac, and slept warmly and soundly for the first time in many days. The hooting of owls, the wails of a hyena pack that had smelled the hog's blood, the horrible chest-thrumming of a giant gorilla—these sounds did not disturb Krake. He snored on, at peace with himself and with the world.

While he snored, vague, gnomelike figures issued from the gloom and cautiously closed in on him. They were Wambutu pygmies. Poison-tipped arrows were strung in their bows, the bows poised for instant use. But these primitive, stark-

naked creatures moved with the silence of wraiths, and the white man did not awaken.

DAWN filtering through the tangled treetops awakened Krake. He stepped from his shelter, blinked about in incredulous astonishment for many moments, then let out a savage roar. Everything but the clothes he wore was gone—rifle, revolver, pack, even the half-devoured forest hog. With merciless thoroughness, the Wambutes had cleaned him out. Did they thus leave him stranded and defenseless, fair prey to man and beast alike? Then they, creatures of the wild, had only obeyed the law of the land.

Krake understood instantly what had happened. In all Africa there was perhaps no other people who would have robbed a white man as he slept, without first driving a spear through his heart. Terrible anger flared in Krake. Grabbing up a club, he rushed hither and yon, beating the bushes, shouting and roaring until the forest rang and echoed.

As well try to trail a monkey as trail a pygmy. At once as shy as a chamois and as bold as a lion, the pygmy is invulnerable in his own environment. Krake soon gave up the chase, and, his anger spent, took sober stock of his situation.

Calm reflection soon showed him that he was not as badly off as at first he had appeared to be. Across the Uganda border was the old Lado Enclave, once famous as a base for gentleman-adventurer ivory poachers; now the refuge of outlaws of quite another sort—Krake's sort.

"There's a buster's camp north of Wadelai," Krake remembered. "I've got money. I can get an outfit there of some sort."

Krake felt immeasurably relieved

by this simple solution to his difficulties. Truly he had a good *dawa*. Without it, he would undoubtedly be dead now, instead of merely temporarily inconvenienced. Krake's relief was short-lived, however.

As he rose to go, he found himself facing a quintet of native soldiers, garbed in the red tarbooshes and khaki shorts of the Belgian Colonial Military. They had approached silently on the moss-grown path, and were now staring at him in pop-eyed wonder. This gaunt white giant, seated meditatively in the vast forest, must have seemed to them more like an apparition than a living man.

Krake was startled, but not frightened. All natives, in uniform or not, were mere shadows to him. When, however, he remembered he was unarmed, he was at once profoundly disturbed. He was quick to realize the far-reaching consequences if these men knew or even suspected his identity. Instinctively Krake took refuge in cunning.

He waved a careless hand at the group, whereat the native sergeant recovered sufficiently from his astonishment to step forward and salute.

"Good day, sar," he said. "We hear noise, a great many shouts."

"That was me," admitted Krake.

"I sar," stated the sergeant, "am from police post at Mahagi. Am on patrol duty. You are in trouble?"

"What makes you think I'm in trouble?" countered Krake, vastly relieved to see that the sergeant did not as yet suspect his identity.

"You have no *safari*," pointed out the native simply, for he was accustomed to seeing white men accompanied by many porters and boxes of equipment.

Krake forced a laugh.

"My *safari* follows me," he said

vaguely; then swiftly seizing upon an observation, he made a shrewd, bold bluff: "And if you're from Mahagi, you'd better clear out of here in a hurry. Don't you know this is British territory?"

The soldiers were Bangala, men whose home was far to the west. Observing this, Krake had taken a bold chance on the men not being familiar with this alien territory. The shocked look that spread over their oily faces indicated that his bluff had a fair chance to succeed.

"That—that is impossible, sar," stammered the sergeant.

"Is it?" Krake laughed again. "Well, you let a British patrol catch you here, and you'll see if it's impossible. There's a boundry cairn a mile or so down this path. Better go take a look at it."

KRAKE hoped that the matter would end here, and the soldiers would go their way and let him go his. His hopes were soon shattered.

Though Krake's matter-of-fact statement had made the sergeant feel very uncertain about which side of the border he was on, he was also feeling increasingly uncertain about this lone white man, who had neither gear nor firearms. He finally compromised his doubts by sending two of his men to look for the cairn. Krake's ruse had failed.

"You kindly will wait here, sar, until my men return," the sergeant requested Krake, politely but firmly.

Krake knew the inevitable had happened. There was only one thing to do now. At his feet lay the club he had used when beating for the pygmies. Krake waited until the two natives had disappeared down the path. Then swiftly he swept up the club and sprang upon the remaining three men.

His attack was pantherish. The soldiers were taken completely by surprise. Before they knew what was happening, the white giant was in among them, flailing savagely with his club. Their rifles banged out once each, harmlessly. Then two of the men lay stretched on the ground, and the third was bolting in terror.

Krake paused only long enough to take possession of a rifle and cartridge belt, before bolting likewise. It would have been a waste of valuable time to try to hunt down the three men who had escaped; he might get them, he might not.

Swinging rapidly across the Lado Enclave, Krake knew that now it was to be flight or fight for all he was worth. The natives may not have recognized him. But when they reported the incident to headquarters, there would be no doubt in the post commander's mind who the white giant had been. Soon the wires would hum in all directions with the warning that Jan Krake was in the district.

Krake was undaunted. He had a rifle and plenty of cartridges, his shoes were good, and his *dawa* had again proved its potency.

"Let 'em come," he challenged as he strode along. "I'll show those monkeys. I'll show 'em!"

Krake gained the outlaw camp on the banks of the White Nile without incident, but he received a very different reception than he had anticipated. To his unbounded anger and amazement, a delegation of the inhabitants met him as he swung into the settlement. They carried rifles and their eyes were cold and unsympathetic. A tall Frenchman made blunt explanation.

"A runner just brought word that the police are coming this way, looking for you," he said. "There are

some of us here who can't afford to see the police. You'll have to keep right on going."

For a few minutes the air was thick with oaths and insults as Krake spoke his mind. The Frenchman waited patiently until Krake had calmed down. Then he went on suavely:

"We didn't intend to let you down completely. We have a canoe ready. While you run for the Sudan, we'll get word to the police that you've doubled back west and are heading for the Ubanghi. We'll see that you have everything you need in the way of food and arms, too."

THUS, within an hour after arriving, Krake pushed off in a dugout and headed down the White Nile. He had not gone many miles, however, before he turned the canoe into the bank and got out. He knew the outlaw breed. They meant to sell him out to the police, as the price of their own safety. Already, no doubt, a runner was ahead of him, carrying warning to the first police post down the river.

"The hyenas," muttered Krake. "But it's good just the same. I'll be halfway across Uganda before they learn I've given them the slip."

Krake struck due east for Abyssinia in high spirits. There was not a shadow of doubt in his mind that he would make it safely. His *dawa* had saved him from Hawkins, from the pygmies, from the native patrol, and lastly from the treacherous outlaws. Come what might, it would save him again.

Even so, Krake crossed Upper Uganda with the stealth and caution of a hunted animal. He traveled mostly at night. He avoided the beaten paths. He skirted all native villages—except for such times as he raided them for vegetables—and

he circled wide of any white habitations. He killed only small game for food, so there would be nothing left to draw a telltale flock of vultures overhead.

It was roughly four hundred miles to the Abyssinian border. Krake was a marked man, with everything against him but his own fierce energy and indomitable will. It seemed impossible that he could gain the refuge he sought. Yet only once was his success seriously threatened, and he was then actually upon the border. Here he stumbled onto a British border patrol, in command of a white lieutenant. They shot it out, six against one. Now if ever Krake's life seemed charmed. In a running fight, he escaped unharmed across the border.

WHAT few treaties Abyssinia has made with European powers, do not include extradition treaties. Once within the Ethiopian empire, Krake was forever beyond the reach of British and Belgian laws. He was no longer a fugitive and an outlaw. He was a free man, and, once he got to where Westcott's bank notes could be converted into gold, a comparatively rich man.

Krake's spirit was, if possible, more buoyant than ever. He almost swaggered up the first of the series of wide shelves that rose steplike to the main Abyssinian plateau. When he came upon a rambling cluster of wattle-and-daub huts that comprised a Galla settlement, he approached with a joyous shout, eager for the sound of a human voice, for sight of some sort of civilization, however crude.

The fierce, nomadic Gallas greeted him with mingled awe and astonishment, but without any of that obsequiousness customary with the

Bantu Negro in other parts of Africa. For Krake was no longer a lordly white man in a country ruled by white men. He was a foreigner in the last independent kingdom of Africa.

After an irksome wait, Krake was led into a large hut that stank of ill-cured leopard and serval skins. The head warriors crowded in after him, their seven-foot spears glistening in the light of smoky torches. The chief sat on the far side of the hut, beneath a shield of rhinoceros hide on which was embossed in gold a single spearhead, the symbol of his rank. He was an old man, his face grizzled with scars.

"I come from the Congo," Krake said.

"That is far, very far," murmured the chief, his birdlike eyes darting suspiciously over Krake. In reality, the chief had only the vaguest notion where the Congo was. But Krake's appearance told him that the man must have come far.

SLAVES brought food and sirupy coffee. While the warriors stood silently by, the two men ate and talked. Rather, Krake talked, and the old chief listened. In trekking alone from Lake Edward to Abyssinia, Krake had done something few men could have done, and he knew it. There was a boastful note in his voice, a swagger in his manner, as he recounted his journey.

"Thou art an elephant for endurance, and a lion for courage," commented the chief, when Krake had finished.

Krake flipped out the little bag of hide.

"Nay," he said. "I have good magic."

The chief had been very much impressed by Krake's narrative. Any man who had done what Krake had

done, must have had strong magic indeed. The chief stroked his ragged beard thoughtfully.

"Where art thou bound?" he inquired presently.

"Adis Abeba, the capital," replied Krake.

"Then thou wilt have no need of thy *dawa*," said the chief. "Give it to me. I am an old man, and the dangers that beset me are many."

Krake laughed.

"Nay, old man. I would not part with this *dawa* for a hundred times its weight in gold. With it, all things are possible."

The chief continued to stroke his shaggy beard. He eyed first the bag, then Krake, then the bag again. A gleam stirred in his eyes.

"Thou wilt not give it to me, then?" he asked presently.

Krake merely laughed loudly, and reached into the stew pot for another mess of the sticky stuff. The chief waited a moment or two for Krake to reply. Krake continued to stuff his hungry mouth.

The chief made a barely perceptible motion. A tall spearman stepped out of the line behind Krake. His spear flashed as he swiftly poised it. It flashed again as it drove forward. Krake gasped once, and was dead.

The chief hung the little *dawa* bag about his own neck.

A fire was built immediately, to drive out the white man's evil spirits. When Westcott's money belt was handed the chief, he examined it with a puzzled frown. He knew the value of gold coins, but he knew nothing of these squares of colored paper. He regarded them curiously for a moment, then tossed them into the fire.

The chief sat back, smiling contentedly. He had obeyed the law of the land—his conscience was clear.



QUICKSAND

By Hal Dunning

Jim-twin Allen baits a trap with apple pie!

CHAPTER I.

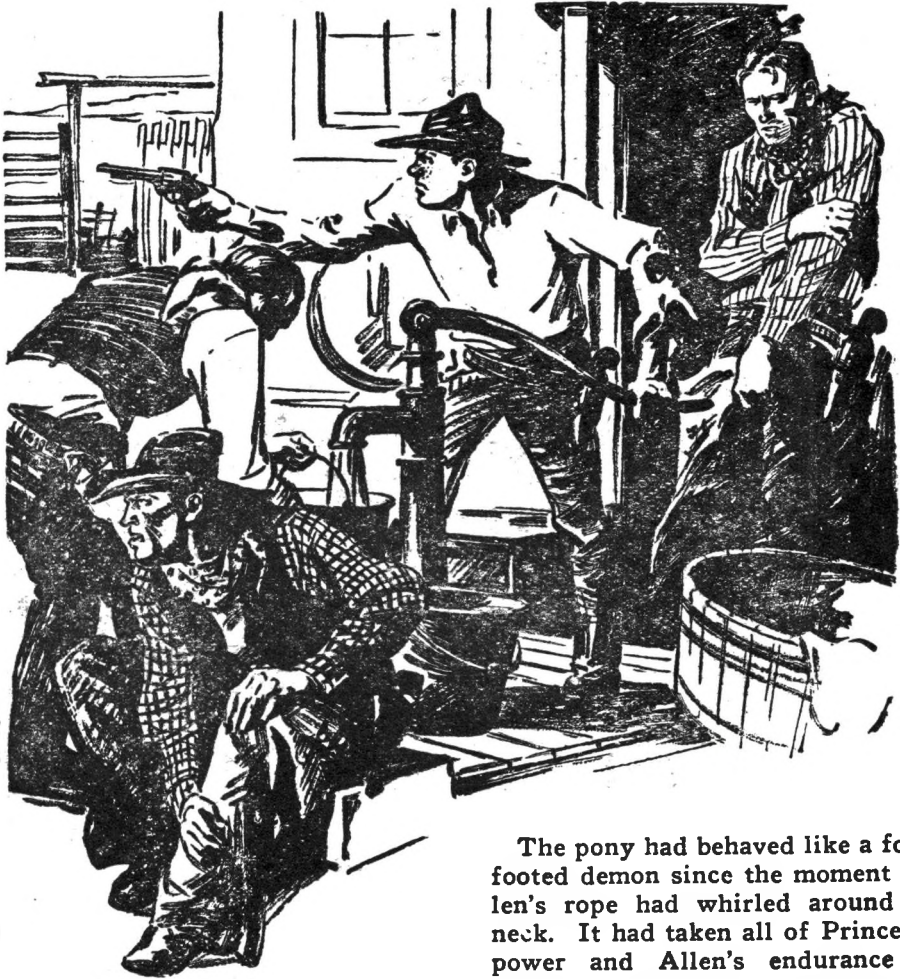
A PRESENT FOR SNIPPETS.

WHEN "Jim-twin" Allen rode to the Ladder H Ranch with the snow-white pony following at the end of a rope, it was after an unexplained absence of two days. Less than a week previous he had come to the ranch to visit "Snippets" MacPherson, whose uncle, Zack Hudkins, owned the spread. After a short stay he had ridden away again without giving any definite reasons. Now he was

returning with the colt as a surprise present for Snippets.

There was not a spot of color on the pony's sleek coat. Its build was powerful and its lines trim. It was the finest of all the wild horses Allen had ever seen. It was an ample reward for two long, hard days of searching.

Riding on Princess, his legs dangling Indian fashion, Allen jogged through the gate of the Ladder H, grinning broadly. Suddenly the pony ceased trotting along behind and reared, pulling savagely on the lasso looped around its neck. The



other end of the rope was snubbed around the horn of Princess's saddle, and the old gray showed her teeth wickedly in resentment at the violent jerk. She whirled, and for a moment there was a vicious tug of war between the two horses. Princess's superior strength soon told. The white colt stopped struggling and trotted along again, tossing its head angrily.

"He's sure a fine hoss, old lady, but he ain't a match for you yet. You just keep him comin' along," Allen remarked proudly to the old mare.

The pony had behaved like a four-footed demon since the moment Allen's rope had whirled around its neck. It had taken all of Princess's power and Allen's endurance to overcome the colt's savage attempts to escape. Allen had begun to break the pony carefully, and by degrees he had accustomed it to the blanket, and even had managed to saddle it. He had climbed then on its back and taken the first ride across a broad mesa, with the white colt rearing and trying in every way possible to throw its rider. Allen had stuck to the saddle like a plaster, grinning broadly all the while, and at last, with a grip on one of the colt's white ears, he had ended the battle and dismounted. He was bringing the horse to the Ladder H about half broken, and almost worn out himself.

As he neared the ranch house he heard a shout, and three men hurried toward him. The biggest of the three was Zack Hudkins. He was a thick-bodied man with a huge head which seemed even larger than it really was because of the thick crop of flaxen hair covering it. The other two Allen recognized as Clay Ryan and "Chubby" Phelps. Ryan was Hudkins's foreman, and Phelps was a cowhand on the Ladder H.

"Allen, what's that you got there, a jack rabbit?" Ryan shouted as he ran near.

"Nope, it's a billy goat," Chubby Phelps sang out. "Look out, Allen, he'll butt you clear over the house if he gets a chance."

Allen grinned good-naturedly and said nothing. With the appearance of men whom it did not know, the white pony broke into another attempt to pull free, but Princess lurched and jerked at the rope until it subsided. Allen dropped out of the saddle wearily, and walked toward the pony. It shied away from him, but finally allowed him to stroke its neck.

"Gosh, that's a good pony you've got there, Jim," Zack Hudkins exclaimed. "Where did you find him?"

"Shucks, he looks good, all right. I ain't so well acquainted with the country around here, but I roped him over by a kind of swamp," Allen answered.

"You must mean Cottonwood Seeps. That's a dangerous place for strangers to go, Allen," Hudkins remarked with a wag of his bushy head. "It's full of bog holes and quicksand, and you might have got caught. More'n one man has tried to cross the Seeps without knowin' how, and never has showed up again."

"Shucks, it was worth the danger to get me a fine pony like this one.

I never ran into any bogs," Allen answered, without taking his eyes from his prize.

ATHIRD and a fourth man came from the corrals to join the group around the pony. "Red" Maxwell had received his nickname from his rusty hair. He was one of the hands on the Ladder H, lean and strong, with hips as narrow as a boxer's. The other puncher, "Frisco" Yaples, was heavier, with thick black eyebrows that shadowed his eyes, in which there was always a sullen expression. He was taciturn, and said nothing as he regarded the colt, though Red Maxwell broke into a laugh.

"Where'd you get him, Allen, out of some bone yard?" he asked jokingly.

"Nope, he was out ridin', and this hoss got tangled up in his rope and Allen couldn't get him loose again," Chubby Phelps explained with a smile.

"Yeah, and now the colt's here, Allen's goin' to have to find a growed-up man to break him," Clay Ryan chimed in. "Breakin' a hoss sure ain't a job for a runt to tackle."

"Sure not, because a wild hoss won't stand still long enough for a ladder to be leaned up against him, so Allen could get on him," Phelps added with a guffaw.

Allen continued to pat the pony and grin at the banter. He looked around for Snippets, but the girl was not in sight. He noticed, however, that Frisco Yaples was already returning to the corrals, after having given the colt only a glance and saying nothing. Red Maxwell also noticed this and remarked:

"Frisco's plumb disgusted, I reckon. A bronc breaker like him wouldn't have no truck with an under-growned hoss like this one."

Allen knew that in spite of their remarks, they thought the white pony was a fine specimen, so he made no retort. Just then the door of the house opened and Snippets MacPherson came out on the porch. She gave one glance at the pony, and ran forward eagerly.

"Oh, Jim, where did you find that beautiful white colt?" she asked excitedly.

"I saw him runnin' around out by the Seeps lookin' for you, so I thought I better bring him in."

"Lookin' for me?" Snippets asked with a puzzled frown.

"Sure, he's yours," Allen told her.

She gave a glad cry, and came closer. The pony shied away, but she patted it gently, and it grew calmer. Snippets knew how to approach a skittish horse and win its confidence. Allen's eyes became wistful and sad as he watched her.

Once Snippets MacPherson had saved Jim-twin Allen from capture when he was helpless. In this way she had repaid her debt to him for saving Mac MacPherson, her father, at the cost of the life of Red Queen, the pet gray Allen had owned at the time. Though his horses and Snippets were all in the world that Allen cared for, and though she loved him in return, there was a gulf as wide as the world between them. In spite of the fact that he was temporarily acting as a captain of the Rangers, and head of the Outlaw Legion, he must sooner or later return to the long trail, hunted by the law, and he could not ask her to share that with him, though she would have willingly done so.

"Jim, you mean he's really mine?" Snippets asked excitedly.

"Sure, I went out and got him for you. I wanted to make you a little present," Allen answered softly.

"He's magnificent. Jim, how can

I ever thank you?" Snippets asked breathlessly.

"Shucks, you don't need to do that. Ever since you told me that the gray colt I gave you broke its leg, I've been wantin' to give you a new hoss," Allen said. "He's only about half broke, but I'll break him to saddle right quick, so's you'll be able to handle him."

"Ho-ho! When you try it, that pony'll run away with you, and we'll never see you again," Chubby Phelps exclaimed.

"Yeah, that's right. It's gettin' dark, too, and you better get him into the corral, or he might make a mistake and think you're a bunch of grass and eat you," Red Maxwell boomed.

SNIPPETS defended Allen indignantly. "That's not so. Jim may be small, but he can tame any horse that ever lived, and he understands them better than any of you do," she flared up.

They roared with laughter at this, and Snippets's eyes flashed. Allen seized the opportunity to step close to her and whisper in her ear. She flashed him a smile, turned, and hurried into the house. Allen untied the rope from Princess's saddle horn, and tried to get the white pony to follow him to the corral.

When it bucked and reared, the punchers roared all the louder. Dust rose in clouds from the slashing hoofs of the white colt, until Allen almost completely disappeared. He kept the rope tight and came hand over hand toward it, and held its head down. As he did so Snippets hurried out of the house again, carrying something in her hands. The men who were watching went off into another roar of laughter when they saw that Snippets was bringing Allen an apple pie from the kitchen.

"Shucks, let 'em laugh. They don't know what a sweet tooth most hosses has got," Allen remarked to Snippets.

He broke off a bit of pie and held it close to the white colt's nose. It sniffed, backed away, and nickered. Allen did not move. In another moment the colt came closer, smelling the pie again, and then it gingerly bared its teeth and snapped at it. Without fear Allen let it take the pie. As it munched, the cowhands became quiet with wonderment.

"Jim, you sure know what they like," Zack Hudkins exclaimed in surprise.

Allen broke off another piece of pie and dropped it to the ground. The colt sniffed it, then ate it voraciously. A yard away Allen dropped another fragment, and the pony moved toward it and ate it. While the men watched in quiet surprise, Allen quickly made a trail of bits of pie to the inside of the corral. The colt, though it was loose, showed no signs of wanting to run away. It moved from piece to piece of the pie. When it passed through the gate of the corral, Allen quickly closed the way, barring it in.

"Well, I'll be danged," Red Maxwell blurted. "That's the first time I ever seen a hoss shied into a corral with pie."

Allen turned with a grin. "Now he's had a taste of it, he'll never forget it. Snippets, you just give him some pie now and then and he'll never leave you. He'll be like a bear with honey taste in his mouth."

"I wouldn't lose him for the world," Snippets exclaimed, looking at the pony admiringly through the bars of the corral. "Jim, what shall we name him?"

"I thought maybe 'White Man' would be a good name for him," Allen suggested.

"White Man it is, then," Snippets declared.

Allen flashed a triumphant glance at the cowhands, who were still chuckling over his stunt of enticing the pony into the corral with pastry, and hurried back to Princess. The old gray was tossing her head angrily, but Allen knew what was the matter. He hurried into the kitchen and out again with another pie. He hurriedly fed this one to Princess, taking a huge bite now and then himself.

"So that's why you asked the cook to make a mess of pies when you left, Jim," Zack Hudkins remarked with a laugh.

Allen began to answer the remark, but he was interrupted by a disturbance near the outbuildings. Red Maxwell was running in their direction, waving his arms excitedly and shouting:

"Boss, the barn is on fire. It's burnin' around at the rear end. If we don't stop it, it'll be gone before you know it!"

THE shout was as startling and dismaying as the clap of doom. Fire on the range, where water is scarce, and the means of fighting it primitive and ineffective, usually means disaster. Fire and rustlers are the two enemies most feared by the rancher. The instant he heard Red Maxwell's shout, Zack Hudkins spun around and started racing for the barn.

"Where's it burnin'?" he yelled.

"Around in the corner stall, right under the hayloft," Red Maxwell screeched.

Darkness was settling fast, but black smoke could be seen rising into the air from the rear of the barn. A flash of flame came out the door as Hudkins and Allen raced toward it. Through one of the win-

dows thicker smoke and darting tongues of flame were visible. Red Maxwell rushed past them from the well, carrying a brimming bucket of water, and ran through the door.

Hudkins began shouting orders frantically.

"Get the hosses out of the stalls, quick! All of you that can, begin carryin' water from the well. One of you pump and the rest carry. Hurry up with the water, or the whole ranch may go!"

Fortunately, the fire had been discovered before it had gotten far under way. It was burning in one corner, where the bedding of a stall had evidently caught. There was not a moment to be wasted in trying to discover how it had started; every effort must be bent toward putting it out. For, if the flames managed to eat through the floor of the hay-loft, the structure would be doomed.

Hudkins's shouts aroused every person on the ranch to frantic endeavor. Clay Ryan rushed back to the pump and began to work the handle desperately. The other punchers grabbed up every possible vessel that might hold water. Most of them were able to find buckets; two of them had a tub between them; two more were struggling with a small wooden trough. The cook rushed from the house carrying the largest pots and pans he had, and joined the water line. Even Snippets MacPherson joined in, working as hard as the men.

In a few moments the line had formed between the pump and the door of the barn. Brimming buckets and tubs were passed from hand to hand, while the empty receptables were handed back. Clay Ryan labored like a slave at the handle of the pump, keeping a steady flow of water spilling into the buckets. Men shouted, urging each other to the

highest possible speed in handling the water, as the fire within the barn began to roar.

ALLEN, Hudkins, and two other men worked desperately to get the horses out of the barn. The animals were snorting and rearing, and hard to handle. The air inside the barn was blistering hot, and the work was exhausting. Allen was most successful in getting the horses out of the zone of danger; though he was a stranger to them, they seemed to be more willing to obey him than their owner. Once the barn was cleared of the animals, Hudkins ran to join the water line, and Allen followed him, working on the end and rushing inside whenever a pail or tub was put into his hands.

"Keep fightin' it, and we'll lick it," Hudkins shouted hoarsely. "It ain't reachin' the hay yet."

"Shucks, we'll stop it if the well don't run dry," Allen answered breathlessly.

He moved with lightning speed, darting into the barn, emptying the bucket into the heart of the flames, then dashing out again as Hudkins entered. The light played into his yellow-flecked eyes and made them gleam like a wolf's. They were making headway against the flames, though the smoke and fumes were almost overpowering. Darkness had settled rapidly, but the glare of the fire was bright and hot.

"Keep 'em comin', she's goin' down," Hudkins shouted hoarsely along the line.

Allen was hurrying outside again, with an empty bucket, when he heard a loud crash. It did not come from inside the barn, although it sounded as though the flames had eaten away a support and something had fallen from the loft. Dashing

aside for a moment, he saw the poles of the corral shaking. Even as he looked several bars dropped under the slashing of a pair of hoofs, and a white form streaked away.

"Allen, there goes your hoss," shouted Chubby Phelps, who was laboring at the end of the line.

"Shucks, it looks like he's headin' back for the hills, and there's no way of stoppin' him now," Allen gasped regretfully.

White Man sprang out of the corral, stopped once and tossed his head, then broke away at a full gallop. The excited shouting of the men in the water line, and the glare and roar of the flames, had frightened him beyond endurance. With all the power he could summon, he had broken down the barrier that kept him close to the flaming danger. Now he raced away, and disappeared into the darkness with mane flying.

"Ho, ho, there goes Snippets's jack rabbit," Chubby Phelps found time to shout.

"Shucks, we've got to stop this fire afore I can do anythin' about gettin' him back," Allen gasped as he staggered into the smoke-filled barn with a brimming tub of water.

CHAPTER II.

ALLEN TAKES THE PUMP.

CLAY RYAN worked the pump rapidly and kept a steady stream of water gushing from its snout. At the same time he helped put the empty buckets and tubs in place, and hand the full ones to the first man in the line. It was back-breaking work, but Ryan labored without a moment's stop.

Suddenly he gripped the handle of the pump with both hands, and slumped over it. As he rolled away his grasp broke, and he spilled to

the ground. Sprawling on his back, he made an attempt to get up, but he dropped again, gasping and trying to speak. It was dark around the pump, and a moment passed before the first man in the water line noticed that something was wrong.

"Clay, what's the matter?" exclaimed "Buzz" Wheeler as he turned for another bucket of water and found that none was forthcoming.

Then he caught sight of Ryan lying on the ground, and jumped toward him. Ryan was laboring for breath. Wheeler grasped his arm and tried to help him up, but Ryan did not respond. Suddenly Wheeler jerked upright and stared at his hands. He was dismayed to find them covered with blood.

"I'm hit," Clay Ryan gasped out.

"Hit? I don't figger that. What hit you, and where're you hurt?" Wheeler demanded quickly.

Ryan blurted breathlessly: "I got it in the leg. Somebody potted me with a gun."

"Shot you?" Wheeler exclaimed. "Who'd do that, and why?"

"I don't know; but I'm sure punctured. Don't waste any time on me. Keep that pump goin'," Ryan ordered.

Quite bewildered, Buzz Wheeler grasped the handle and began to work it. The delay had already caused a break in the flow of water down the line, and men were shouting impatiently for more. In a moment Wheeler had a bucket filled, and swung it along, then grasped another. He filled the second, and then began the task of filling a tub. He suddenly gasped, and staggered back.

He felt a sensation like a brisk pinch in his arm, and then a burning pain. Staring down, he found blood flowing down his arm.

Numbed and shocked by the bullet that had hit him, he stumbled off a few steps, grimacing with pain. Seeing him leave the pump, one of the other men hastened toward him to help, and grabbed the handle.

"Stay away from that, you'll get shot," Wheeler shouted.

"What? Who by?" the astonished puncher demanded.

"I don't know, but somebody's pickin' off whoever takes that pump," Wheeler answered swiftly. "He shot Clay first, and then he got me. He's hidin' somewhere in the dark."

The puncher let go of the pump handle as though it were red hot, and fearfully backed away.

"What's that? Who's been shot?"

Zack Hudkins thundered the question as he strode toward Buzz Wheeler. Allen followed close on his heels. The sudden lack of water had stopped their endeavor to put out the fire, and they had hastened to see what had interrupted the supply. Wheeler turned quickly, and blurted out his story.

"Somebody's sure shootin' at whoever touches that pump," he exclaimed, clutching his wounded arm. "You better stay away from it."

"The fire's about out, but it'll start again if we don't get more water. We got to keep that pump workin'," Zack Hudkins declared grimly.

He made a move toward it, but Allen grasped his arm and pulled him back. Even in the darkness Hudkins could see Allen's strangely shaped eyes gleaming with yellow. That was sufficient warning to make him change his mind. Allen turned quickly to Buzz Wheeler.

"I had a hunch there was somethin' wrong with the way that fire begun. Somebody's wantin' that barn to burn down. Where'd the bullets come from?" he demanded.

"I ain't sure—they just come out of the dark," Wheeler gasped. "Whoever's shootin' is a dead shot."

ALLEN peered through the deepening gloom. His face seemed old and hard. His small hands moved unconsciously toward the twin Colts tied to his thighs in true gunman fashion.

"He might be behind the house, and he might be hidin' in the orchard, or he might be over there behind one of those rocks," Allen said in a flat voice.

"We've got to do somethin' quick, or the barn'll go. The fire's comin' up again," Zack Hudkins cried. "Some of you hunt for the skunk that's shootin'."

As several men hurried away, Allen stepped toward the pump. As he reached the platform and started to grasp the handle, a frightened cry came from behind him. He turned quickly to see Snippets MacPherson hurrying toward him. She had overheard the talk about the shooting, and had seen Allen go near the pump.

"Jim, Jim, you'll be shot next. Don't touch it," she cried.

"Shucks, the pump's got to be used or the barn'll burn to the ground. Whoever did the shootin' wants it to burn, and that's why I'm aimin' to save it. I'm only peanut size, and hard to hit. I'll take the chance."

Allen stepped back on the platform and gripped the handle. He began to pump, but he did so automatically, keeping his head up and peering through the surrounding darkness. Water gushed into the tub while two men waited anxiously to carry it away. As soon as it was full, and removed, a bucket was substituted. Allen continued to peer around, and suddenly he shouted:

"Keep back!"

He leaped aside with the agility of a wild animal. At almost the same instant a slug struck the handle of the pump and glanced off. Snippets cried out again, and Zack Hudkins shouted. Allen, paying no attention to them, began to run toward the corner of the house, zigzagging bewilderingly. As he moved, a flash of flame came from the gloom, and a bullet whistled past his head.

Allen's twin Colts came out of his holsters like two darts of lightning. Fire and smoke poured from them in a steady stream as he danced from side to side. When he ceased firing he crouched, his wolf eyes gleaming with yellow. His movements were slow and deliberate as he walked toward the corner of the house. He came to a stop, his guns pointing at a squirming figure on the ground.

"Hang on your ears and get up, you ain't hurt bad," he ordered in a hollow tone.

The man on the ground made no move to obey. Zack Hudkins and Red Maxwell rushed to Allen, followed by Snippets. Seeing the prone figure, they grasped the man and jerked him to his feet.

"Frisco Yaples," Hudkins exclaimed wrathfully.

"Yeah, and there's the rifle he was usin'," Red Maxwell declared, picking it up from the ground. He added with a gasp. "The butt of it is shot to pieces. Allen, your bullet must've done that."

"Yeah, I wasn't figgerin' on killin' him," Allen answered flatly. "I'm curious about why he wanted the barn to burn down."

Hudkins gripped Frisco Yaples's shoulders and shook him as a dog shakes a rat. "You skunk, you're the one who set that barn on fire. I never trusted you, and now I know you're plumb bad. Allen, you keep him covered and take him into the

house while I see that the fire's put out."

"Yeah, I'll take care of him," Allen promised grimly.

Yaples's dark face was twisted with pain, and he was holding one of his hands in the other. Allen's bullets had knocked the rifle from his hands. Red Maxwell, noting the effects of Allen's shots on the weapon, was amazed that any man could see clearly enough in the dark to shoot so accurately. There was no time to think about that, however; the fire in the barn must be put out. Hudkins and Maxwell hurried back to the pump while Allen forced Yaples around to the front of the house.

ALLEN was in the sitting room, covering Yaples with his guns, when the door opened and Zack Hudkins strode in. Red Maxwell followed with Snippets MacPherson. The girl was white-faced and almost exhausted. The two men were gasping for air, and their faces and clothing were covered with soot.

"The fire's out at last, Allen. If you hadn't found this coyote that was shootin' at us, the barn might've burned to the ground," Zack Hudkins declared with a sigh.

"Yeah, he could have shot more of us and then got away in the dark, the skunk," Maxwell declared, glaring at the culprit.

"Clay Ryan and Buzz Wheeler are gettin' themselves fixed up in the bunk house now. Neither of 'em is hurt bad, but they'll be disabled for a time. They might have got killed," Hudkins declared grimly.

Allen remarked to the girl: "Snippets, you sure worked like a soldier to put out the fire. It's too bad that White Man got away when we didn't have any chance of stoppin' him."

"Maybe you can find him again, Jim," Snippets said hopefully. "It would break my heart if I never got him back."

"I'll sure try," Allen answered. To Hudkins he said: "This skunk had some reason for settin' the barn on fire and wantin' it to burn, all right, but he ain't talked to me any. Have you got any idea what's behind it?"

"I got Chubby Phelps lookin' through the barn now, tryin' to find something that might tell us the reason for it. Anyway, I'm aimin' to make this coyote speak up right now." Hudkins declared grimly.

Frisco Yaples recoiled from the ranch owner and whimpered. "I never set the barn on fire. It was somebody else shootin' at you, not me."

"You're a double-barreled liar, Frisco," Hudkins snapped. "I'm aimin' to make you tell me the truth about this afore I tell Allen to go ahead and handle you proper. You ain't forgettin' he's a captain of the Rangers, and you're in his hands now."

"You can't prove I set the barn on fire," Yaples whined.

"You did it, and there's no doubt about it," Hudkins retorted sharply. "You got your choice of talkin' now, or havin' it beat out of you," he added shaking his great, clenched fist.

"I won't talk," Yaples asserted.

Zack Hudkins took a threatening step toward him; but at the same moment an interruption came. The door was opened and Chubby Phelps hurried into the room. His full-moon face was pale, and his eyes were popping. He was holding a lantern in one hand, which he had used to search the barn.

"What's the matter, did you find somethin'?" Hudkins demanded impatiently. "Hurry up and tell it."

"Boss, I found somethin', all right," Phelps blurted. "There's a dead man up in the hayloft."

"Dead man?" Hudkins echoed. "Who is it?"

"Kansas Turner," Phelps gasped. "He was knifed, and he's sure enough plumb dead."

Hudkins turned in surprise to Allen. Countless wrinkles had formed around Allen's eyes, and his face looked bleak and old. His yellowish eyes shot a glance at Yaples, and Yaples backed away fearfully.

Recovering from his astonishment, Hudkins exclaimed: "It can't be Kansas Turner you found, Chubby. Why, he left the ranch about dark last night, headin' for Colorado."

"I thought so, too, but I reckon we're all mistook. He's up in the hayloft right now, what's left of him," Phelps said breathlessly. "He's cut up bad, like he was in a fight," he added.

"Gosh, then that's why this skunk set fire to the barn. He killed a man and wanted to cover it up," Allen declared suddenly.

Yaples's face had turned deathly white. "No, no. I never done it," he whimpered.

"Allen, you hit the nail on the head," Zack Hudkins declared. "That explains everything. And I reckon Kansas Turner was robbed after he was killed!" He turned to Red Maxwell. "Red, search Yaples."

RED stepped grimly toward Yaples, and Yaples backed into the corner of the room. He begged to be let alone, but his pleas had no effect, except to make Red Maxwell's search all the more thorough. Allen's guns covered Yaples as Maxwell went through his pockets. Almost immediately Maxwell turned back, and threw a handful of money onto the table.

"That don't belong to Frisco," he declared flatly. "I know Frisco lost all his money playin' poker last week, and he never had a cent left, not even for smokin' tobacco. In fact, I'm holdin' his I O U on half his next month's pay as it is."

"Then this money belonged to Kansas Turner," Hudkins exclaimed.

"I reckon it did," Maxwell declared. "Kansas was a big winner at poker, and he took most of Yaples's money away from him. Last time they played, Yaples accused him of cheatin', and there would've been a gun fight over it, if the rest of us hadn't stopped 'em in time. Yaples was plumb ugly about it, and he was wrong. Kansas Turner won lots of money playin' cards, but he played 'em straight."

"Did he have this much winnin's?" Hudkins demanded.

"Yeah, about that much," Maxwell declared.

Chubby Phelps spoke up excitedly. "I looked through Kansas Turner's pockets afore I come in here to tell you, and there wasn't a cent left in 'em."

Zack Hudkins glared at Yaples. "Go on and finish searchin' him, Red," he ordered.

Maxwell turned back to the job. Yaples seemed to realize that further protest was useless. His narrow-set eyes blinked quickly as he was searched. In the lamplight his dark face looked murderous. Red Maxwell went through all of Yaples's pockets; then, stooping, on sudden thought, he pulled a long, gleaming knife from Yaples's boot.

"There, that finishes him," Maxwell declared flatly.

Zack Hudkins's face was hard as rock. "I reckon it does. We got the money he stole from Kansas Turner, and now the knife he done it with. That's all the evidence we

need to hang him for murder. Only, I'm still puzzled about Kansas Turner bein' in the barn. I would've sworn he left the ranch last night."

"Come to think of it, I never saw him go," Red Maxwell spoke up. "He come and said good-by to all of us in the bunk house, but that's the last we seen of him."

"That's right. We seen him go out the door, but not after that," Chubby Phelps agreed.

"The same goes for me, too," Zack Hudkins asserted. "Kansas come in to say he was sorry he had to go back to his old man's ranch, and I just supposed he was leavin' right afterward. He must've met up with Yaples afore he could get away."

Allen was peering at Yaples fixedly, his yellow eyes glinting. "I reckon you better speak up and tell the truth. There's nothin' can save you from hangin' now," he declared.

"I ain't talkin'," Yaples whined.

"It'll go easier with you if you talk, but you don't need to," Zack Hudkins said threateningly. "It's clear as day what you done. You had it in for Kansas Turner, and you wanted the money he had. Afore he could get off the ranch last night, and when nobody else was lookin', you must've got him to go into the barn with some excuse, and then you knifed him. You killed him and took the money offn him, and then hid him under the hay in the loft."

"It ain't so," Yaples protested weakly.

"You know it's so," Zack Hudkins roared. "You thought he wouldn't be found up there for a long time, and by then maybe you'd have lit out of here and nobody would know where you was. Only, when you got to thinkin' about it, it begun to hurt your conscience. Every time a man went into the barn, you worried for fear Kansas Turner's body would be

found. You begun to want to do something to cover over the crime so's it would never be discovered."

ALLEN spoke up softly. "Maybe bringin' in White Man worried him some, too. He probably thought I'd be goin' up to the loft for fresh hay to bed down a stall for White Man pretty soon."

"Like as not, that's what he thought. He figured that burnin' down the barn would destroy the body, so he'd never be caught for it. So he set the fire, and hoped the barn would burn down—but we discovered it too soon. Hudkins added: "Come to think of it, I never saw Yaples handlin' any water."

"Me either," Red Maxwell declared.

"Or me," Chubby Phelps agreed.

"That means he wasn't lendin' a hand," Zack Hudkins went on. "Then when he saw we were goin' to put the fire out, he got his rifle and started to takin' pot shots at the men at the pump. That makes a murder and a robbin' and two attempted murders pinned on him. And if the fire'd got away from us, the whole ranch would've burned, and maybe more, too. Hangin's too good for a skunk like you, Yaples."

The ranch owner shook his big fist in Yaples's face.

"Allen, it was sure lucky for me you was here when it happened," Hudkins said sincerely. "Yaples might've succeeded if it hadn't been for your quick shootin'."

"Shucks, it wasn't much," Allen answered gently. "I just plain figured. There was somethin' wrong about that fire from the beginnin'. Your barn ain't hurt much, and you can rebuild it. It helped us catch a killer who would have got away otherwise."

"I reckon we can patch it up all

right. I'm goin' to see to it that Yaples gets what's comin' to him. Allen, you're a Ranger. You keep him in hand and see that the law deals justice to him."

"Shucks, I reckon the sheriff over in Stilwell can handle the case from now on," Allen answered. "I got to be gettin' back to Carson right soon to work on the dope-runnin' gang case. The sheriff'll lock Yaples up and hold him for trial."

"Yeah, I reckon it's better to keep him close to where he committed the crime," Hudkins declared. "Somebody better be takin' Yaples to town, then."

"Nope, it would be better to keep him here and bring the sheriff," Allen said. "The sheriff'll want to look at Kansas Turner's body, and the barn. After that he'll take Yaples to town himself, and lock him up. And you'll need all your hands to round up your hosses, Hudkins, so I'll go after the sheriff myself."

"Shucks, Allen, you're all wore out from chasin' wild hosses and fightin' the fire. Likely you ain't had no sleep at all. I better send Red," Hudkins protested.

"Nope, you'll need Red here, so I better go," Allen declared. "Bein' a Ranger, I can tell the sheriff about the case better than anybody else."

"All right, then, Allen. We'll keep Yaples under guard here till you come back," Hudkins stated.

RED MAXWELL drew his Colts and covered Yaples as Allen returned his twin guns to his holsters. Allen stepped toward the door, and Snippets MacPherson followed him. Princess was still tethered at the rack near the porch. As Allen reached for her strings, Snippets asked anxiously:

"Jim, do you think we'll ever be

able to get White Man back? He's wild, and nobody may ever be able to rope him again, since he's been caught that way once."

"Yep, that's right," Allen agreed seriously. "Sight of a rope will sure send White Man dustin' it for far country after this. There's a chance he may never be caught again, but I've got a hunch that I'll be able to get him."

"Oh, I hope so, Jim. It would break my heart to lose him," Snippets said sincerely.

"Well, then, I'll start lookin' for him as soon as I can, first thing tomorrow mornin'," Allen answered. "While I'm gone, you can do somethin' to help, if you want to. Fix me up a sackful of plenty of grub. Put all the rest of the apple pies in it, so's Princess and me can have a treat. I'll start out early, and maybe when I come back I'll have him."

"I hope so, Jim. I'll have the pack ready for you when you come back."

Allen grinned, and thumped his heels against Princess's ribs. The old gray had been dozing, but she awoke with a start, and whirled. Snippets stood on the porch, watching Allen ride down the ranch road. The moon was rising, and its glow was spreading over the range. When Allen passed through the gate, Snippets turned and hurried into the kitchen, eager to comply with his request.

Allen turned Princess toward Stilwell, and the old gray began to run like a tireless machine.

"Old lady, you and me've sure been on the prod lately," Allen remarked to her. "Neither of us's had any rest since we set out lookin' for a hoss to give to Snippets, and now all our work's gone for nothin'."

Princess tossed her head angrily, as though the loss of White Man

was as annoying to her as to Allen. She continued to run through the darkness noiselessly, heading toward town.

Suddenly Allen pulled on the old gray's reins, and she came to a quick stop. He twisted in the saddle, staring back toward the gleam of light which marked the Ladder H ranch house. A sound had come on the wind. It was so faint that it would have been inaudible to an ordinary man, but Allen's ears were as keen as those of a wild animal. He sat very still in the saddle, listening, and suddenly he heard the sound again.

It was the faint report of a gun. Allen's eyes gleamed as he realized it. Then, while his gaze was still on the lights shining through the windows of the distant house, he saw one of them go out.

Quickly Allen whirled Princess around.

"Get goin', old lady, there's trouble back there," he exclaimed.

Princess promptly broke into a swift gallop, heading back toward the Ladder H.

CHAPTER III.

THROUGH THE SEEPS.

WHEN Allen pulled Princess to a stop near the porch of the Ladder H ranch house, he found the place in a turmoil of excitement. Zack Hudkins was standing on the steps, shouting angry orders right and left. Punchers were riding about. The door was open, and Allen could see a man stretched out on the cot, with Snippets bending over him.

"What happened, Hudkins?" he asked quickly.

Seeing Allen, Hudkins hurried toward him. "Yaples got away, Allen," he answered hoarsely. "He grabbed Red Maxwell's gun and shot

him, and made a break for it. He grabbed a hoss, and now I reckon he's got off the ranch."

"Is Red hurt bad?" Allen demanded, and his eyes glinted with yellow as he asked the question.

"He got hit in the chest, and I don't know whether he'll pull through or not. Yaples is as mean a killer as ever lived. He waited till I went out to the barn to look things over, then he jumped Maxwell and shot him. Snippets was in the kitchen, and heard the fight. When she come through the door, Yaples took a shot at her as he went out. He missed her by less than an inch; but she's a game girl, and she's takin' care of Red now."

Allen's strange eyes gleamed with a yellow light, which grew deeper as he turned and gazed at Snippets through the doorway. His face became indescribably old and bleak. Zack Hudkins shuddered when he saw Allen's inhuman expression.

"Yaples had his hoss all saddled and hid behind the house, ready to light out," Hudkins went on explaining breathlessly. "It happened so quick that nobody knows just where he's headin'. Some of the boys are out lookin' for him now, but he's got the jump on us and he'll likely get away."

With slow, deliberate movements, Allen stepped on the porch and passed through the doorway. Hearing his step, Snippets MacPherson straightened and turned. She was pale and trembling. She took an impulsive step toward Allen, but stopped, terrified by the wolfish gleam in his eyes.

"Are you all right, Snippets?" Allen asked in a flat tone.

"Yes, Jim," she answered breathlessly.

"Hudkins says Yaples took a shot at you."

"Yes, he did."

Allen's face became even older and harder than before. He knew that Yaples was a heartless killer and might have wounded Snippets or killed her. Of all breeds of skunks, Allen hated worst of all any man who would try to hurt a woman. He looked down at Red Maxwell, who was lying flat on his back on the cot, his shirt open, disclosing an ugly wound in his chest.

Allen's knowledge of wounds was vast. He rapidly examined Red Maxwell's injury, then turned to Snippets and told her that a doctor must be brought at once. As Snippets ran out to the porch to tell Hudkins, Maxwell looked up at Allen imploringly.

"That skunk ain't fit to live, Allen," he said with difficulty.

"You hang on tight and take it easy, Red," Allen answered gently. "I'm headin' out right now to hunt for him."

"I sure hope you get him," Maxwell gasped. "It was all I could do to keep myself from drillin' him when I had him covered. I wish now I'd done it. Kansas Turner was a good friend of mine."

Snippets hurried back into the room with the information that Hudkins had sent one of the hands to town for the doctor. Allen merely nodded and started for the door. He stopped before reaching it, however, and turned back to the girl.

"Did you have time to get my sack packed?" he asked her quickly.

"Yes, Jim, it's out in the kitchen. I was just finishing with it when Yaples broke away," she told him.

Allen hurried across the room and into the kitchen, which was located just behind the sitting room. On the table was the pack. Allen carried it outside. Snippets gazed after him pleadingly as he passed and called:

"Jim, please be careful. Yaples hates you now, and he might be lying in wait for you somewhere, to pick you off."

"Shucks, it wouldn't be the first time I run into that," Allen said over his shoulder as he hurried on.

AS Allen came onto the porch, a rider dashed toward Hudkins, who was still standing on the steps. It was Chubby Phelps, on the back of an unsaddled pony. Yaples's escape had come so suddenly that he had mounted the first horse he could find.

"Boss, it looks like he's got away," Phelps exclaimed to Hudkins. "He headed out through the orchard, and then cut off somewheres. It's hopeless tryin' to follow sign in the dark."

"Where're the rest of the boys?" Hudkins demanded wrathfully.

"Out tryin' to pick up Yaples's trail, but none of 'em have had any luck," Phelps answered swiftly.

Allen jumped down the steps and stopped beside Hudkins, the bulging pack still in his arms. He made a ludicrous picture, for it was almost as large as he was, and so heavy that he could hardly hold it.

"Hudkins, you better call the boys back in. Ridin' around blind like they are, they're probably destroyin' the tracks Yaples left. You keep your men here, and I'll go out after him myself," he told the ranch owner.

"Gosh, Jim, you're taken' on a hard job, tryin' to trail Yaples through this country. It's all strange to you, but he knows it well," Hudkins answered.

"I reckon that won't make any difference if I can pick up his trail," Allen answered. "Besides, you better keep your men guardin' the buildin's. Yaples is mean enough to

come back and try to wipe you out by settin' another fire if he gets the chance. If he did that you'd have a tough job fightin' the fire, for you're minus three men now."

"Maybe you're right, Jim. I'll call 'em back so's you'll have a clear trail. But mind you, some of the country around here is dangerous, and Yaples will try every way he knows to shake you off. Maybe he's headin' for Cottonwood Seeps, and if he is you'll never be able to follow him through without gettin' bogged down."

"I'll take a chance on that," Allen replied, turning quickly to Princess with the heavy pack.

While Hudkins ordered Chubby Phelps to round up the punchers and call them in, Allen strapped the pack in place. He swung into the saddle, and glanced back to see Snippets standing in the doorway. His face was wistful and sad as he prodded Princess away. The old gray trotted around to the rear of the house while Chubby Phelps shouted orders to the other riders.

Zack Hudkins hurried after Allen and saw him drop from the saddle and examine the ground.

"Yaples had his hoss right back here. You better be hurryin', Allen, or he'll be clear across the border afore you know it," he said anxiously.

If Allen heard, he paid no attention. He made a deliberate, sure search of the bare earth before he rose and again climbed into the saddle. Then, as though to make up for lost time, he dashed away at top speed. Hudkins went to the spot Allen had examined and looked around, but he could see nothing in the faint moonlight, and he wondered what Allen had found. He turned just in time to see Allen disappearing past the orchard.

"Gosh, I'm glad it's not me he's trailin'," Hudkins said to himself, and a cold shiver passed through him.

AS he rode swiftly over the grassy slope, Allen bent low against Princess's neck, watching the ground. The old gray lowered her head as though smelling the trail, like a bloodhound. The dim light of the moon, which would have been baffling to ordinary eyes, was sufficient to show Allen that Yaples's trail led through the orchard to the crest of a hogback hill.

When he reached the top of the rise, Allen suddenly pulled Princess to a stop, slipped down, and examined the ground more closely. A moment's inspection was enough to tell him that Yaples had shrewdly swung aside here, and cut back across part of the Ladder H. He sprang into the saddle again, and Princess broke into a gallop. The ranch house was still in sight, and Allen could see the riders returning as he raced past the rear of the barn.

Yaples had made a cunning and dangerous move by shifting back, within sight of the house and the men who had been searching for him. The dryness of the ground made the trail hard to follow, but Allen kept Princess moving at a steady gallop, following it closely. In a few minutes he reached the fence which marked the boundary of the Ladder H, and there he shifted toward the north, as Yaples had done.

The rising moon gave Allen more light as he followed the fence out on the range for more than two miles. When he reached a gate he slipped down, examined the ground again, then opened the way for Princess. Mounted again, he hurried through, closed the gate, then sped on. From here eastward the ground sloped

steadily downward, and it was frequently broken by dry creek beds. Princess jumped them as nimbly as a mountain goat and Allen kept her running at top speed.

Another fence loomed out of the darkness, and again Allen slowed down. This time, as he discovered after a short search, Yaples's trail cut back again, turning southward. Allen guessed that Hudkins was right and Yaples was heading for the dreaded Cottonwood Seeps. The spread of swamp was low in the valley, in a region through which few men ever passed.

Soon Allen reached the main highway, found Yaples's marks leading across it, and followed. It was a long ride to the Seeps but, once sure that his man had headed for them, Allen forced Princess to a swifter speed. Sometimes the slope was smooth and grassy, and sometimes it was broken by outcroppings of rocks, which made the going treacherous. Princess wound her way nimbly through the jagged rocks and then, reaching smooth ground again, raced on.

The night was half gone when Allen reached the border of Cottonwood Seeps. The gnarled trees looked black in the moonlight, grotesquely twisted and interlaced. A single, narrow trail led into the swamp. As Allen followed it, darkness closed over him, though here and there a patch of moonlight managed to find its way down to the bed of stagnant water. Princess reared her head protestingly at the vile odor which filled the air, and Allen pulled his kerchief over his nose.

Though Princess moved silently, the swamp creatures took alarm at her passing. Things that Allen could not see splashed into the rank water. Strange birds uttered star-

tled cries from the matted foliage overhead. The wild grass rustled near the edge of the trail as snakes slid away. Sometimes the darkness was so thick that even Allen could see nothing as Princess felt her way along the trail.

NOW and then the path was covered by water, and Princess's hoofs sucked through the clinging ooze. She struggled on without urging from Allen. Allen knew the bad lands and the desert better than any other man in the West, but this swamp was a new, strange experience to him. He mistrusted every foot of the way through it. He would never have risked entering the rotting jungle in the darkness if Yaples had not preceded him. But once Allen took a trail, he never left it, and not even the dreaded Seeps could make him turn back.

In a patch of moonlight which pierced the rank growth overhead, Allen saw that the path curved back abruptly. He slipped out of the saddle, into a foot of water, and groped his way forward, testing each step. The slimy stuff crept almost to his knees before he was able to climb onto an area of dry ground, from which the trail led outward again. There he paused, and examined the soft earth for sign. When he rose he knew that Yaples had not gone back, but had plunged deeper into the Seeps, working toward an outlet on the opposite side.

Allen splashed back to Princess and pulled into the saddle, shuddering.

"Old lady, we got to go on. The only way we can ever get Yaples is to go the way he went," he declared grimly.

Princess tossed her wicked head in protest, but obeyed Allen as he

touched her ribs and urged her forward. Vile water, covered with a film of stagnation, spread all around. The moss hanging from the half-rotten branches of the trees brushed against Allen's face like wet hands. He peered around constantly, hoping to find some sign of Yaples's passing. A bit of moss, floating on the dark water, broken from one of the overhanging limbs, told him that Yaples had passed this way.

Princess struggled quite valiantly against the sucking mud she was forced to cross. Sure-footed as she was, she was blinded by the darkness and the water which covered the deceptive holes and fissures in the earth. Once she stumbled and fell to her knees, almost throwing Allen off her back into the muck. She jerked up again in terror and bounded forward, thrashing the slime with her forefeet. Allen allowed her free rein, fearing every moment that she might drop into a sink hole. But always Princess managed to tear herself loose and fight her way on.

Animals continued to scurry out of the way, splashing through the water with bewildering suddenness. The Seeps were full of poisonous snakes, which might strike at Princess as she felt her way along. The old gray reared back once, and refused to budge, but Allen did not make the mistake of forcing her to proceed against her will. Trembling all over, snorting, her eyes white, she stood in the water. She did not retreat, however, and in a moment went on, when the water rippled and something moved away in the darkness.

"Keep your feet, old billy goat," Allen urged her softly. "We can't turn back now, we got to keep on goin' till we sight Yaples. We ain't lettin' a skunk like that get away."

As though she understood, Princess nickered, and hurried on. She kicked her way through a treacherous bog, then clambered onto a ridge of dry ground. Allen promptly slipped off the saddle, dropped to his knees, and examined every inch of the hump. Breathing hard, he rose, and patted Princess's neck reassuringly.

"He come this way all right, old lady. No matter if this swamp leads plumb to the gates of hell, we're goin' right through after him."

SOME winged creature, as though startled by the sound of Allen's voice, launched off one of the low-hanging limbs and flapped past his face. It fluttered through the darkness and came to rest as Princess jerked away. Allen held the old gray's reins firmly and comforted her. She was half covered with slime. Allen felt her legs and found a giant leech clinging to one of them. He tore it off and flung it away, while Princess shook with fear. Then, with a sigh, he climbed back into the saddle.

Princess gingerly felt her way into the water again, and went on. Allen kept looking around, hunting for any small sign he could find. A broken branch of a bush told him that Yaples had come through here. In the patches of moonlight, the twisted trunks of the trees looked like deformed, living things watching them as they passed. Sharp, broken twigs on the lower limbs poked at Allen's face and body as he clung to the old gray's back. Several of the stabs broke through his skin, and blood began to flow down his cheeks. Princess lowered her head, as though to fight the darkness as she went on, struggling for each foothold.

Suddenly something struck out of

COM-7B

the gloom and knocked Allen off the saddle. He fell backward, flinging his arms out blindly for support. It was a low-hanging limb that had knocked against him. Its slippery bark gave him no handhold, and in spite of all his efforts his fingers slid off. With a splash he fell into the stagnant water, and it closed over his head. He was up again in an instant, gasping for breath, struggling toward Princess.

The old gray could not stop in the soft mud, for fear of becoming stuck, and Allen was forced to exert his utmost to catch up with her. At last he caught one of the stirrups of the saddle, and pulled himself up. Princess lurched and jerked in spite of herself, as he dragged himself across her back. Allen's clothing was soaked, and water ran off him in streams. Disgustedly he spat the vile stuff out of his mouth and cleared his eyes and nose. The stench was nauseating, and the cuts on Allen's face and shoulders began to sting with the ooze that had got into them.

"Lucky a snake didn't grab onto me that time, old lady," Allen gasped.

The shrill cry of a bird came through the air, and a winged form swept past Princess's head. She reared back, whinnying with fear, and Allen clung tightly to her back. After a moment the fluttering in the air stopped and Princess plunged ahead. The trees grew so thickly in this part of the Seeps that there was only a narrow lane through which it was possible to pass. By this Allen knew that he was still following Yaples's trail.

"He's sure led us through worse country 'n any other skunk ever did," Allen exclaimed as he peered around at the apparently endless spread of swamp.

Then ahead he saw a patch of moonlight shining on higher ground which seemed to be dry. The trees were fewer around it, and several lanes opened up beyond, but Allen chose the direct way of reaching the clear area. Seeing it ahead, Princess was spurred to more strenuous efforts to reach it, for it meant a chance to rest after the long, struggle through the water-covered slime. The high ground was as appealing to Allen as an oasis to a desert traveler.

When she was almost at the edge of the mound, Princess lurched forward, squealing with fright. Suddenly Allen found himself enveloped in water again, with Princess struggling madly beneath him. The old gray went under, except for her head, which she threw high with a desperate effort. Allen realized that his weight on her back would make it more difficult for her. He flung himself off and tried to find a footing, but the ooze gave way under his feet.

PRINCESS thrashed and jerked as Allen flung his arms out for any support within reach. All of Zack Hudkins's warnings raced through his mind as he realized that the old gray had stumbled into a bed of quicksand. The slime rose to Allen's shoulders while he tried to kick his feet free. With a tremendous effort he managed to throw his body toward the edge of the dry ground. He fastened his hands on a bush and pulled. Thorns bit into his palms and fingers, but it was his only hope of getting out of the quicksand and he held on. With another strenuous effort, he dragged himself close enough to throw his arms out of the rim of the quicksand pit.

He hung there a moment, gasping

for breath. He could not look around, but he heard Princess struggling in the slime. The commotion had stirred the life of the swamp. Birds cried shrilly, and creatures slid into the water all around, scurrying away. Allen dragged himself forward again, then rolled over and pulled himself entirely out.

"Gosh, old lady, try and make it," he gasped to Princess.

The gray mare was throwing herself about, but to no avail. The brackish water covered her back, and only her head was above it. Tears came into Allen's eyes when he saw the plight of his horse. It looked like she was hopelessly bogged, and that she would sink out of sight in another moment. The quicksand pit must be virtually bottomless. Yet Princess was so near the edge of the dry mound that it seemed incredible she could not reach it in time.

Quickly Allen flung himself flat, reached out, and grasped Princess's bridle. With all the strength he could summon, he pulled in an effort to help her extricate herself. He was handicapped because there was nothing onto which he could hold to assist his pull. Though Princess tried her utmost to respond, she could make no headway. Allen was forced to give up the attempt.

"Gosh, Princess, I'll never let you drown," he sobbed suddenly.

He pulled his twin Colts from his holsters, ready to end the old mare's life before she went completely under. At the mere thought of having to kill the horse that had saved him from death and capture so many times, Allen began to cry like a kid. He turned the guns toward Princess and tried to summon the strength to pull the triggers, but he could not bring himself to do it. Then, suddenly, as he stared at the gray, he gave a glad shout.

"You ain't goin' down any more, old lady. You ain't dropped any since I got out of there," he exclaimed jubilantly.

Either Princess had found a solid footing, or something else was holding her up. Allen quickly studied the pit, eager to do anything possible to save the horse's life. Holstering his guns and throwing himself flat again, he reached out and tried to grasp the lasso tied to the saddle, but it was a foot beyond his hand. Then, testing the strength of the bush by means of which he had pulled himself out of the quicksand, he slipped off the edge of the dry mound and lowered himself into the muck.

Half covered with water, his feet hanging in the sucking sand, he clung to the bush with one hand and reached for the lasso with the other. He managed to detach it, and scrambled back up the slope. Quickly he unlooped the wet rope, and tossed the noose around the pommel of the saddle. Throwing his full weight back on it, he tried again to help bring Princess closer to the edge. Though he struggled for long minutes, and almost exhausted himself, he could not succeed in helping the old gray a particle.

GOLD and shivering, gulping in air, Allen helplessly looked at his horse. As though she realized that she could do nothing, but must depend wholly on Allen's efforts, she ceased struggling. She was breathing like a bellows, and her eyes showed rings of white. Then again Allen gathered his rope together, shaking it off the saddle horn, and looked across the pit.

"She looks like a job, but I'm goin' to get you out of there if anybody can, you old pie eater. We went and fell into a trap, that's what we did.

Yaples knew enough to circle around that bog, but we headed right into it. Likely that's what he was countin' on when he come this way. He's sure a homicidous gent, tryin' to kill women and hosses as well as men."

On the opposite side of the bog stood the stump of a tree that had rotted through and fallen. Allen swung his rope, and the loop fell around the stump. Drawing it tight, he tied it around a small tree growing on the dry mound. Then, holding onto the rope, he lowered himself into the water again, and worked his way toward Princess.

When he was at the old gray's side, his feet struck something solid in the muck. Testing it, he found it strong, and decided that it was the root of one of the trees growing around the edge of the pit, and protruding through the sand. It was this which was holding Princess up, and she was straddling it, unable to move off. Her legs hung in the insupportable ooze, and she was helpless. Holding onto the rope and standing on the root, Allen tried to comfort her.

"There's more ways 'n one of gettin' out of a hole, and we ain't tried 'em all yet."

Quickly he reached under Princess's belly, while the water surged over his chin, and managed to unfasten the cinch strap. Once the saddle was free, he worked himself backward on the rope, dragging it after him. It was a strenuous struggle, but finally he reached dry ground, pulled himself up, and pulled the saddle after him. Freed of its weight, Princess tried again to move forward, but she made no headway, and subsided in her efforts.

"It's no use of you tryin', you old bag of bones," Allen gasped at her. "We got to have help to get you out of there. I reckon the nearest

ranch is too far away from here to even think of walkin' back to it. And all the time Yaples is gettin' farther away. She sure looks bad, old lady."

CHAPTER IV. SWEET-TOOTH TRAIL.

ALLEN looked around ruefully. The dry ground he was standing on branched away in two directions. He had passed the worst of the swamp, and the Seeps which lay beyond were more passable. It was evident that it would be easier to find a way out the other side, without having to fight through the slime and water. At least two trails led from the high mound to the outside. On one of them Allen found, after a short search, the tracks left by Frisco Yaples's horse.

Suddenly Allen stood still, listening. Through the flutter and rustle of the swamp he could hear another sound, a faint thumping. Dropping flat and pressing an ear to the ground he could hear it more clearly. When he rose his eyes were shining eagerly with a new hope.

"Gosh, Princess, there's a hoss loose around here somewhere," he explained. "I just heard him movin' around."

Princess remained motionless in the quicksand, cocking her ears to Allen's soft voice. Allen began to run along one of the trails, moving as silently as a shadow. Stopping, he dropped to the ground and again listened. Once more he heard the faint thumping that told him a horse was near.

He hurried along the trail, jumping rotten logs that had fallen across it, causing quick disturbances in the water as he passed. He was surprised to find that he was near the border of the Seeps, and realized

again that Frisco Yaples had deliberately chosen the dangerous way through them in order to trap any one following him. Beyond the trees Allen could see the moonlight shining on the slope. At the very edge of the Seeps he moved quietly across the mushy ground, peering all around.

For a long while he stood there. Then his eyes lighted again as he sensed that something was moving through the moonlight not far away. He glimpsed a white form that seemed to drift through the night like a small cloud against the ground. He began to glide toward it with the utmost caution, making no sound whatever. The white form came closer, and it was all Allen could do to suppress a joyous shout.

"It's the white colt came back to his old stampin' ground," he thought jubilantly.

He knew that wild horses were to be found in the region around the Seeps because it was seldom visited by punchers. It was here that he had succeeded in roping White Man. It was only natural that the colt should return to the country it knew. That the white pony grazing on the slope was White Man, Allen could not doubt. There could not be two pure white, young horses in the same region.

Allen remained as still as a statue, watching the pony move slowly. The wind was blowing toward him, and White Man had not been able to scent him. The colt was about fifty yards away, unaware that any one was near.

"Yes, sir, it's White Man, come back to where he was roped," Allen told himself gladly.

He moved toward the colt slowly, hoping that it would show no fear of him. But his hopes were in vain. Suddenly White Man whirled. His

head came up and he stood a moment with nostrils dilated and eyes shining fearfully. Then Allen took another step toward him, and that was enough to send the white pony galloping away. Its unshod hoofs drummed rapidly on the wet ground and, with mane flying, it disappeared over the crest of the hill.

"Shucks, now he's gone, and it's no use tryin' to chase him afoot," Allen lamented aloud.

A GAIN Allen stood still, hoping that White Man would come back. He knew that the pony was waiting on the other side of the hill, ready to speed away again if he dared show himself. For a moment the problem of recapturing White Man seemed hopeless. Then an idea struck Allen, and he turned back. As rapidly as he could, he hurried back along the trail.

When he reached the dry mound, he was relieved to see that Princess was where he had left her, almost completely covered by the quicksand. He spoke to her soothingly as he untied his rope from the small tree, loosened it, then tied it again. Once more he lowered himself into the sucking ooze, and pulled himself hand over hand until he could curl an arm about the stump to which the other end of the rope was fastened.

He quickly unlooped the lasso and then, quickly, pulled himself back across the pit, lying as flat as possible. Dripping wet, he unfastened the rope from the other tree. With a broad grin, he stooped, unfastened the pack from his saddle, and opened it. The oiled silk with which it was lined had kept the contents dry except for a few trickles of water.

From the pack Allen removed two pies. He was hungry enough to gulp them down whole. Princess smelled them and, precarious as her

position was, whinnied appealingly for a piece. Allen chuckled, and started back along the trail.

"I can't give you none now, old lady. This pie's goin' to get you out of that hole if anythin' will," he declared as he ran off.

When he reached the edge of the Seeps he paused again. White Man was not in sight. Allen began to climb the slope and, when he neared the crest, moved with great caution. Lying flat on the ground, so as not to show himself any more than necessary, he looked down the other slope. White Man had wandered off, but Allen could see him faintly in the distance.

Rising quickly, he ran down the slope, breaking off a large piece of the pie. Stopping, he flung it with all his might toward White Man. When the bit of pastry struck the ground White Man reared and raced away again. Still grinning, Allen threw another piece, and then dropped a third at his feet. Turning back, he trotted toward the edge of the Seeps, strewing fragments of the sweet behind him as he went.

When he came to a stop, both the pies were gone, and a trail of the pastry led from the other side of the hill toward the beginning of the trail into the Seeps. Allen began a period of watchful waiting.

"White Man must be hankerin' for more pie by now, and he won't be passin' it up," he told himself hopefully. "He's got a sweet tooth as bad as my grays and me."

As he waited, he looped his lasso, and made it ready. For a long time he stood in the shadow, watching the crest of the hill. Now and then he heard the faint thumping of White Man's hoofs as the colt moved about, but it was impossible to tell whether he was coming nearer the bait or moving farther away.

An age-long period of waiting passed before Allen felt assured that White Man had succumbed to the lure of the pastry. He heard the pony move, then stop for a long time, then move on again. His grin grew broader.

"Shucks, he followed a trail of pie right into a corral once, and he'll follow it again," Allen assured himself.

Then he saw White Man come to the crest of the hill, peer over it, and whinny. The pony lowered its head and moved closer. He stopped, nuzzled at a bit of the pie on the ground, then went on to the next. Allen did not move a muscle as he watched. It was all he could do to keep himself from rushing out and slinging his loop at the pony, but he knew that if he failed in the attempt it would be impossible to get near enough again, and it would mean the death of Princess. The closer the pony came to him, the less afraid it would be.

NOW White Man was halfway down the slope, moving toward Allen cautiously. The pony raised his head and looked into the shadows. Allen stepped into the light and stood where the colt could see him clearly. White Man whirled and bounded away a few yards, then stopped. When he saw that Allen was not following, he turned, nuzzled the ground again, and slowly walked back to the bit of pie he had left.

Allen picked up the last fragment he had dropped, and stood holding it. White Man jerked suspiciously at the moment, but did not rear away. He came closer, then closer again, until he was within ten yards of Allen. There he stopped, tossing his head, undecided whether to go on. For a moment Allen's heart was pinched by the fear that the pony would abandon the sweet stuff and

run off again. But after a moment of hesitation White Man came forward, one short step after another.

Near Allen he paused skittishly, then nibbled at the last bit of pie that lay on the ground. Three times, before he ate the last of it, he flung his head high and seemed to be on the point of bolting. Allen slowly raised his hand, and the pony regarded him curiously. Then he began to talk soothingly, while White Man's ears twitched. Inch by inch the colt came forward, stretching out its fine neck to smell of the sweet in Allen's hand, now and then backing away.

"Come on, pony, you ain't got your fill yet. You just be friendly and you can have all the pie you want for the rest of your life."

Cautiously White Man moved nearer, teeth bared. His lips extended for the pastry in Allen's hand. He scraped some up, backed away, then came forward for more. As he nibbled, Allen glided closer. He carefully patted White Man's neck and smoothed it. Knowing that the colt would bolt when the last of the pie was gone, he made a slow, even movement that brought the loop of the lasso over White Man's ears.

Then, when the pony felt the rope around his neck again, he squealed and whirled. Allen fell back, gripping the lasso for dear life. There was a struggle that lasted long minutes, with White Man trying to tear away, and Allen throwing all his weight against the colt's rushes. Trembling and breathing hard, the pony was halted when Allen managed to snub the rope around the nearest tree. Then, cautiously, he went toward White Man again.

Impatient as he was to get back to Princess, Allen took time to allay the colt's fears. After a while

White Man stopped trembling, though he still showed signs of bolting. When he lowered his head in an attempt to find more pie, Allen knew that the worst of the fight was over. The lure had been too strong, and the pony had succumbed.

Allen loosened the rope, and began to draw the pony toward the start of the trail. Each step White Man took was a separate achievement for Allen. When the colt saw that it was not going to be hurt, he came more willingly. He shied at the noises in the Seeps, but Allen coaxed him along, foot by foot and yard by yard. At last they were within sight of the quicksand pit.

QUICKLY Allen tied the rope around the tree, as White Man whinnied loudly, scenting Princess. Princess snorted in return, as though to chide the colt for his fright. Allen took up his saddle blanket, wrung it as dry as possible, then cautiously slid it upon White Man's back. The strange thing made the colt rear and buck, but Allen replaced the blanket again and again, until at last the protests ceased.

Then he took up the saddle, and dropped it in place. White Man promptly bucked it off, squealing. Allen put it back again and again, patiently, all the while talking gently. The fact that he had partially broken the colt before taking it to the Ladder H weighed heavily in his favor now. White Man already knew the nature of a blanket and saddle, although he was not yet accustomed to the pressure on his back. Working quickly, Allen grasped an opportunity and drew the cinch strap tight.

There followed another period of bucking and rearing, and Allen let the colt play itself out. Breathing

hard, White Man at last ceased his efforts to get rid of the saddle. While he comforted the colt, Allen quickly detached the rope from the tree, looped it around the bush close to White Man's head and then, with the free end, got ready to lower himself again into the quicksand.

The rope supported him as he slid into the muck. Working close to Princess, he grasped her and began working around her rump, tightening the rope as he did so. He tied it quickly at her chest, then pulled himself rapidly back to dry land. White Man was pulling frightenedly at the bush. Allen steadied the colt, then tied the rope tightly around the saddle horn. As gently as possible he eased into the saddle.

White Man lunged away, which was exactly what Allen wanted. The rope snapped tight. Princess nicked, and White Man snorted with rage. Allen slapped the pony's rump, urging it to still more strenuous efforts. White Man was attempting to escape the bondage of the rope, but all his power was going into dragging Princess slowly toward the edge of the quicksand hole. Princess struggled and fought for a footing as the rope pulled her.

Suddenly Allen heard a mad scamper behind him and twisted around to see Princess crawling onto the dry ground. With a glad shout he leaped down and rushed to the old gray. Princess threw up her wicked head and whinnied loudly. She shook herself like a dog to rid her coat of the dirty water, and gratefully nuzzled Allen's hand. Allen patted her nose as tears came into his eyes.

"I sure thought you were a goner that time, old lady. I sure thought I was losin' you," he sobbed.

White Man was still straining at the rope. Allen quickly loosened

him, then tied the lasso around the tree. It was only a few moments' work to transfer the saddle from the colt to Princess's, and once his back was cleared, White Man's protests subsided. With tears streaming down his cheeks, Allen pulled onto his old gray's back.

"Old lady, you need lots of rest, but we can't stop now. We got to head off Yaples afore he crosses the border if we can. We got no time to waste. Get goin', you old billy goat."

Delighted to be free again, Princess started down the dry trail at a brisk trot, White Man trotting meekly behind.

CHAPTER V. WOLF JUSTICE.

DAWN was breaking when Allen emerged from the fringe of the Cottonwood Seeps. Ahead of him lay rolling territory, gray and brown, the hills burned by the sun. Toward the right a rough road curled around the bases of the hills. Yaples's trail had led straight through the Seeps, and a moment's inspection of the ground told Allen that he had turned toward the road.

"Gosh, it looks like our man's gettin' away from us this time, Princess," he said breathlessly.

Princess immediately broke into a gallop that took Allen rapidly toward the road. The old gray ran as though she did not know the nature of fatigue. Allen had often been ridiculed because of his old mare, for she was tall and gaunt and looked fit for nothing except drawing a buggy, but he would not have traded her now for the finest thoroughbred in the world.

Reaching the road, Allen jumped from the saddle, inspected the dust a moment, then climbed back.

"Go it, you old bag of bones. Yaples come this way, all right, headin' for the border."

For miles the old gray kept up the pace, while Allen made sure that Yaples had stuck to the road. The rising sun threw its light into the valley. Allen made a disreputable picture. His uniform, usually in a state of disgraceful tatters anyway, was now caked to his body with dried slime. Princess herself was like an image of mud. Allen looked like a tramp on a worn old nag, instead of a Ranger captain trailing his man.

Suddenly he pulled up short, peering down at the road. There were no signs of Yaples here that he could see. A few yards back he had seen the tracks made by the killer's horse, but now they were gone. Allen jumped down and scurried around, looking for sign, but without result. Then he glanced up at the bank of the hillside rising above him.

"Looks like he cut off up there, Princess. I reckon we'll be climbin' right after him," Allen declared grimly.

Then, without warning, the report of a gun echoed from above, and a bullet sang into the dirt past Allen's head. Princess leaped ahead, and Allen whirled. His twin Colts came from his holsters like lightning as his gaze swept the hillside. Even as he moved another bullet whined through the air, and the report echoed back from the surrounding hills.

"He couldn't be sure the Seeps would get me, so he hid up there intendin' to pick me off if I come through," flashed through Allen's mind.

Suddenly another report rang out, and the bullet passed so close to Allen's cheek that he could feel its wind. His eyes were shining with

yellow and his face was bleak and hard as he leaped aside again. With the report he saw a faint movement in the bushes above the road, and knew instantly that Frisco Yaples was hidden behind them. In an instant his guns began to pour out fire and smoke.

Bullets came from his Colts in a steady stream. Allen jumped away from the cloud of powder smoke as he heard a hoarse shout from above. The bushes parted, and the form of Frisco Yaples fell through them. Yaples's gun dropped from his hand as he sprawled forward and tumbled down the slope. Loose rock was dislodged and fell with him into the road. Yaples rolled halfway across the road, then lay motionless, staring up at the sky with sightless eyes.

"You could've got away across the border if you hadn't stayed back to bushwhack me," Allen said in a tired, flat voice.

WHEN Jim-twin Allen rode onto the Ladder H, he was riding White Man. The colt jogged along peaceably, as though he had always known a saddle and a rider. Princess followed a few steps behind, tossing her head indignantly because Allen had abandoned her temporarily in favor of the colt. Zack Hudkins was on the porch of the house, the first to see Allen returning.

"Hey, Allen's comin' back!" he shouted, as he came down the steps.

His freckled face split by a wide, loose grin, Allen turned off the ranch road toward Zack Hudkins's. Through the door came Snippets MacPherson, her eyes shining happily. As Allen slid off White Man's back, she rushed to him and impulsively threw her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. Allen blushed furiously and tried to

get away, but he had to struggle to do it.

"Oh, Jim, you're back," Snippets exclaimed joyously. "And you brought White Man with you."

"Yeah, I said I'd bring him back if I could," Allen stammered.

Zack Hudkins grasped Allen's hand and shook it warmly. Punchers came hurrying from the corrals and the bunk house toward Allen. Among them were Chubby Phelps and Buzz Wheeler. As they eagerly crowded around him, Allen asked about Clay Ryan and Red Maxwell, and learned that they were both doing well. Ryan was resting with his wounded leg, and Maxwell was being cared for by Snippets and fast recovering.

"Why, Jim, White Man's all gentled," Snippets exclaimed, tugging at Allen's arm. "He won't run away again, will he?"

"I thought I better break him proper afore bringin' him back again," Allen answered, grinning. "I reckon we better be feedin' him and Princess some pie right soon, though, just to keep 'em satisfied."

"I'm goin' to ride him right away," Snippets cried. "Jim, I'm so glad about the horse, and I'm so relieved to see you back again."

"Shucks, I had to come back so's you could have the hoss," Allen answered confusedly.

Zack Hudkins took Allen's arm and asked quietly: "What about Frisco Yaples, Allen? What happened to him?"

"I reckon I got him," Allen answered in a flat voice, his eyes showing flecks of yellow again. "He's down below Cottonwood Seeps, eatin' daisy roots."

Though Hudkins and the others pressed him for a full account of the chase, Allen never said any more about it.

FROGS GOT NO FUR

By William Bruner

But some hombre's pelts bring a darn good bounty.

SHERIFF WINGATE was not happy. His was the dissatisfaction of a man whose best has failed. Stroking heavy jowls, which were black and bristly, he scowled at Hal Emerson.

The boatman leaned back from his job on the motor of the *Powell* and grinned up at him. Emerson's shirt, trousers, and canvas shoes—the only clothes he wore—were greasy. He had even contrived to get a tarry blob in his carrotty hair. His gray-green eyes were mocking. The sheriff scowled.

"Don't see what's so damn amus-

in'," the officer muttered irritably. "I come here to ask you a favor."

"That'd make a goat hilarious," Hal Emerson said. "Everybody in Nevada knows you got a bloodhound beat when it comes to trackin' some one down. You been after those stick-up men three days, yet you figure I can do you some good."

"Nobody knows the other side of the river like you do," Wingate persisted. "They've gone across, sure as I'm standin' here."

"You must think they got wings." Emerson stooped over the motor again, making a final carburetor adjustment with blunt, skillful fingers.



"It ain't easy to swim the Colorado. Likely, if they tried it, they're now covered over with silt."

"Look here," the sheriff protested, "men don't take chances drownin' when they got a couple hundred thousand. Their car was found on that road beyond Searchlight. We been over the country between the Big Bend and the California line until we know every blame lizard in it. Only place them fellas *could* 'a' got without us knowin' it is over to Arizona."

Unconvinced, Emerson looked up, pulling on his oil-stained yachtman's cap. He glanced across the muddy stream, wide here before it swerved into Black Canyon and rushed down to the dam site. On the Arizona side, sage-dotted hills reached up to brilliant red cliffs, which in turn lifted to a black, sheer-sided, table-topped mountain. The whole country over there was like that—wild, and known to few men.

Consequently, the boatman was inclined to put little faith in the sheriff's theory. Men who were smart enough to stick up a bank and get away with it would be smart enough to avoid such utter waste land.

"Can't do it," Emerson said. "Even if those three fellas are over there, it'd be just dumb luck if I found 'em. Anyhow, I got work to do. How's Mr. Hoover's dam gonna get built if I don't stick around?"

"I thought you'd help me out," the sheriff said doggedly. "I thought——"

Hal heard no more of the officer's complaint. Out in midstream a good-sized branch with a shred of blue cloth flapping from it had caught his eye. He stooped to give the flywheel a turn.

"Throw off the lines," he told the sheriff, "and hop in!"

Sheriff Wingate obeyed wonderingly, shoving the *Powell* away from the mud and jumping aboard ponderously. The motor throbbed and the boat shot out into the current. Hal headed for the branch. When something odd floated past, the boatman was instantly alert, curious. Edging the *Powell* cautiously alongside the branch, Emerson reached out and snapped off the rag-bearing twig.

"What the hell?" the sheriff growled.

"Here—take the wheel."

Unknotting the sodden rag, Emerson spread it on the floor boards. The cloth was a dark-blue cotton, dotted with white, and about a foot and a half square. The floor boards showed through wide, rough slashes in the fabric. When it was smoothed, those jagged cuts spelled a single, startling word:

HELP

Wingate craned his neck. "What do you make of that?"

Hal's muscular shoulders went up in a shrug.

"Anything," he said slowly, "can happen upriver."

HAL EMERSON'S thoughts went back to the fall, when he stood on the mud flat, waving at a gaunt old figure in an outboard motor boat which bobbed bravely against the thrust of the stream. The old man had waved back cheerfully. There would come a time, Hal had then reflected, when the old trapper would go upriver and not return.

"You remember Dad Pruitt?" he asked. "Dad always wore shirts made of stuff like this."

While Hal took the wheel and sent the boat back to the mud flat, Wingate examined the cloth.

"This word was hacked with a knife. Likely somebody's idea of a joke."

"I'm goin' up and see."

The sheriff swore. "Why, you sorrel-topped son of a gun! Here you'll chase off because you fetch a piece of shirt out of the river, but you won't even help me look for some men you know are on the other side."

"This is different. Them robbers don't need help—not if they got two hundred thousand. I figure Dad Pruitt does."

"You're loco," Wingate said flatly. "You ain't sure this rag's offn one of Dad's shirt. Shucks, for all you know, it may 'a' come from the other side of Grand Canyon."

"Ain't likely it'd last that far. Anyhow, I'm goin'. I got a sure-enough hunch."

So Wingate, disgruntled, went back to Las Vegas. Emerson piled blankets and grub aboard the *Powell*, eased a drum of gasoline into the cockpit, and started upstream. Had the sheriff foreseen what Emerson was to encounter on that trip, not even the river at its angriest flood could have kept him from going along.

The *Powell* plugged doggedly against the strong current, making little better than two miles an hour. Often, where rapids roared, the boat barely forged ahead. Progress seemed exasperatingly slow to Emerson, with worry for "Dad" Pruitt on his mind. He wondered constantly what sort of a jam the old trapper had got himself into.

Dad went up the river every fall, his little boat loaded dangerously full with traps and supplies. In the spring he returned, laden with furs if the season had been good, usually two jumps ahead of high water. Dad was a more dependable harbinger of

spring than any robin ever dreamed of being.

If Dad himself suspected that sometime he wouldn't come back, he didn't let it worry him. He was a philosopher, as a man who traps the Colorado for a living must be; and last fall when he put into Emerson's cove, he had been as optimistic as a boy with a flivver.

Dad Pruitt was a small man, amazingly agile, whose age might have been anything over sixty. His eyes were bright and clear blue under shaggy brows; and a short, peppery beard covered most of his face, which was about the color and texture of old leather. He had the endurance and the simple tastes of a mountain sheep. Plenty of solitude, mixed with considerable rock, was what Dad Pruitt liked. Consequently, this era of change was getting on his nerves.

"Gettin' so there ain't no place fit for a solitary man no more," Dad had growled. "Few years back you could float along here and figure no man had ever seen it before, it was that lonesome. Now"—he shrugged—"now, with this damn dam, they got bridges and tunnels and what-not. General Jackson! There's enough blastin' goin' on to scare any self-respectin' animal clear past Steamboat Springs. Only thing left self-respectin' animal clear past for trappin' 'll be frogs—and frogs got no fur!"

The high sun poured broiling heat into the canyon. It was almost possible to imagine that the mounting granite walls were red because they were hot. A strip of earth appeared now and then, where trees and brush grew in a tangle, offering welcome rest for glare-smarting eyes. It was in some such place that Hal expected to find Dad Pruitt—if he found him at all.

SHARP bends in the canyon never permitted more than a short view of red rock and red water. The *Powell* bobbed like a tiny chip in a great flume. It took quick handling at times, especially when reverse rapids dragged treacherously at it, or where big, submerged rocks showed their presence only by an oil-smooth hump on the surface.

Hal was deep in Boulder Canyon when he saw another bit of white-dotted blue cloth go past on a drifting branch. More of Dad's shirt! His hopes bolstered, Hal pulled down on the throttle and shoved ahead a bit faster, keeping as close inshore as he dared, for there the drag of the current was less.

A bend unfolded around a vertical cliff, revealing a strip of land. Desert willows grew luxuriously on those narrow acres, reaching over the stream. About fifty yards back from the water's edge, a sheer back wall lifted abruptly for several hundred feet. A deep fissure made ascent possible in one place, but no man could scale the overhanging cliffs beyond. In the lower wall a black hole, partly overgrown with brush, showed where some one had once worked hard and hopefully at a mine.

Hal noticed these things swiftly, by force of habit. The object that caught and held his attention, however, was the shattered hull of Dad Pruitt's outboard motor boat. It rested high on the sand beach, practically halved by an enormous, jagged hole. Scattered near it were traps and cooking utensils and pelts of small animals, but there was no sign of Dad Pruitt himself.

Nosing the *Powell* against the beach, Hal jumped ashore with a line. Having seen that second piece of shirt only a few minutes ago, he

was sure that Dad must be close by. It was odd that he didn't make some signal. Hal made the boat fast to the trunk of a tree and scrambled aboard again to shut off the motor.

It was then that he heard a loud, high-pitched cry of warning. He wheeled and glanced up to see the grizzled head of the old trapper thrust cautiously above the cliff rim.

A pistol roared. Rock dust spurted just below Dad's nose. He vanished. Hal darted for his rifle. Before he could reach it, a bullet kicked splinters off the *Powell's* gunwale. Two men, carrying automatics, broke from the sheltering willows.

"Easy!" one of them snapped. "Hold it, brother!"

Hal rather foolishly put up his hands. He stood on one of the thwarts with his back to the river, staring at the two men and trying to explain their presence here. They just didn't fit. Cunning and suspicion were blending on their hard, unshaven young faces. Their fancy shoes were scuffed, their hands torn and raw. They looked as if they had seen some pretty tough going in the past few days. One was slender, tanned; the other stocky, swarthy. Behind all their gun play, Hal sensed a gnawing apprehension. They were afraid; they might do something rash.

"Hop ashore, fella!"

The command came from the slender one. His shifty eyes were disagreeably appraising. Hal did not move, but his mind raced, trying to get around an unwelcome conviction. If these were Sheriff Wingate's bank robbers—

Beyond any doubt, Hal felt that they were. That explained the shooting, the plight of Dad Pruitt, the rush to hold him up. Any men but guilty men would have welcomed

the boat's arrival with hearty shouts. And there were three of them. The third, still concealed, was the one who had made Dad Pruitt dive for cover.

How they came to be here, Hal could not guess; but they had certainly put one over on the sheriff, leaving their car at Searchlight and doubling back upriver. Dangerous men, he concluded gloomily, with whom to deal.

"Step on it!" The slim man jerked his automatic menacingly. "We got to get going, see? You're taking us to——"

"Hey, look out!" It was Dad Pruitt, shouting from the cliff rim. "Them fellas'll double-cross you, sure as——"

A few yards inshore, a man heaved out of the bushes. His automatic roared. Hal saw the trapper's bony body jerk; heard his anguished cry. Then he slumped down while rumbling echoes of the shot came back to blend with the harsh, triumphant laughter of those three, ratty men.

HAL felt sick. The third man turned to leer down at him. There on the bank he seemed as large as both his companions put together. His face was hideously blistered by exposure to the sun. He snarled at the other men:

"Get that guy ashore!"

Still Hal did not move. They had him, all right, if a man were inclined to be reasonable. Somehow, being reasonable was not one of the boatman's chief virtues. There was no chance to grab his rifle, no chance to cut the *Powell* loose. But the river, heavy with silt and at least sixteen feet deep, gurgled a promise at his back.

Experience had taught Hal that going overboard in the Colorado was

apt to be attended by fatal results. Some one had said of the river that it was too thick to cut and too thin to plow; certainly it was no sort of a stream to swim in if a man had clothes on. The suspended sand, quickly gathering under the cloth, was likely to weigh a man down before he had much chance to haul himself out.

But these men had shot Dad Pruitt—maybe killed him. Hal couldn't hope for better treatment. In the river, with his light outfit, he might have several minutes. In much less time than that the swift current would whirl him around the jutting cliff just below, beyond which the bank robbers could not follow.

Suddenly throwing himself backward, Hal plunged over the side of the *Powell*. Two shots crashed as he hit the icy stream; but the rolling echoes were drowned out, leaving only the grind of the river loud in his ears.

When Hal struggled to the surface, he was already around the bend. The current had thrown him close inshore. He caught at the water-smoothed rock, but the stream swept him along, battering him against the cliff. Already, he could feel the downward pull of mud which filled his shoes, settled in his clothes.

It got increasingly hard to hold his head above water. The granite, too smooth for a good hold, had enough sharp particles to slice deep into his groping fingers. He was slammed against a jagged slab. He fought to hold himself there. After a short, bitter battle, he was hurried on relentlessly.

He felt sorry, briefly, for Dad Pruitt.

Things got hazy. That was the muddy water in his eyes, of course. A man couldn't keep his eyes clear

when his head was under more than half the time.

A terrific, bone-bruising jolt restored Emerson's wandering interest. He found himself wedged between a mighty boulder and the canyon wall. It didn't take much energy to crawl out on top the enormous stone—which was a good thing. With his eyes closed and dripping cocoa-colored water, he lay there and panted luxuriously.

A little later, Hal was aroused by the sharp, staccato throbbing of the *Powell's* exhaust. Then there were some muffled shouts. Hal felt sold. He should have guessed that those bank robbers would be smart enough to run a boat.

He wondered if they'd head upstream or down. If they came down and passed him there, like a lizard on a rock, he wouldn't have much chance. They'd shoot him as quick as they'd shot Dad Pruitt. Too, the boat, speeding with the current, in all probability would end up on a hidden rock. Running a boat on the Colorado was a lot different from just running a boat.

Still, if they went upstream, Hal hardly expected to see the *Powell* again, anyhow. Those men would be the sort to set her adrift, providing they got to where they were going.

The shouting ceased, and the tone of the exhaust changed; began steadily to diminish. Upstream it was. Maybe the *Powell* wouldn't have any more chance, but certainly he would. And he realized, now, that he didn't want to lose that boat. It was his means of livelihood. Rage grew in him until it was wide and deep as the river. He stood on the boulder and wildly shook his fist. They'd steal his boat, would they, and shoot down Dad Pruitt? Like hell they would!

His anger faded when the last

faint popping of the exhaust was gone. Back of him, he noticed now, the canyon wall sloped gently. A man could scale it.

Starting with the bend just above, Hal knew, the river made a sharp curve. The distance around was three miles or better—a good hour and a half for the *Powell*. Up and across, as a bighorn might go, it couldn't be much more than a mile.

STILL dripping, Hal started to climb. It was hot going, and though long shadows were creeping into the canyon from the Nevada side, the air was still and furnacelike. Hal scrambled up and up, reckless of his footing, reckless of all save the necessity of making speed.

Remembering details of the river on the other side of the bend, he began to believe he had a chance. Sand bars and rocky points up there would force the *Powell* to hug the Nevada shore. If he could get across in time—if the crooks came in close enough—

Hal was breathless when he reached the top of the mountain, but he took no rest. The hardest going was still ahead. He could pause to catch his wind when he got his boat back; when he had done what he could for the old trapper.

The way was blocked by soaring cliffs, cut by steep-sided washes. Hal's feet chafed inside his wet canvas shoes, and the rubber soles began to shred with the harsh footing. He fell frequently. It got so he didn't know how he could get up and run another step.

But he did, somehow. His muscles ached, his heart throbbed, and his body was sore when he looked down on the river again. The *Powell* was not to be seen!

"Got 'em!" he panted. "I got 'em!"

A gully provided fairly easy descent to the water's edge. Near the bottom Hal picked up a piece of driftwood which made an admirable club. He crouched down behind some fallen slabs to await the *Powell's* coming.

Minutes dragged after Hal got his breath back. He began to fear that those three men had already cracked up and gone to the bottom with the bank's two hundred thousand dollars, when finally he heard the faint putter of the boat's exhaust.

He squatted lower, waiting quite tensely. The element of surprise, he knew, was going to be his greatest asset, though the club might come in handy. A reasonable man might not consider these enough.

Hal was hardly prepared, when he caught his first glimpse of the *Powell*, to find only two men aboard. The big, sunburned one who had shot Dad Pruitt was missing. Hal couldn't understand it, and wasted no time trying to figure it out. Two men would be easier to fight than one. The slim fellow was steering; the other sat in the stern, staring at the frothy wake.

Emerson gripped his club. Avoiding rocks in midstream, the *Powell* drew near the Nevada side. The man at the wheel was using some sense, as Hal had hoped he might, keeping close to the cliffs where the water was deepest and the current least strong.

The *Powell* forged closer, laboring valiantly against the thrust of the mighty stream. Not in vain had Emerson named that boat for the first true explorer of the Colorado! But of more importance, right now, was the fact that the *Powell* held a course not more than a yard from shore.

When he could see the nose of the boat without craning his neck, Hal

crouched for his spring. He had no plan of action; no time to waste in forming one. The slim man did not look his way.

Hal jumped. With one good leap he cleared that narrow lane of water, landing in the boat just behind the motor. The wheelsman turned, shouting at his companion. Hal vaulted the motor housing. While the slim man, one hand still on the wheel, fumbled for his automatic, Hal struck him over the head with a smashing blow.

The fellow's knees buckled, he staggered and fell, catching vainly at the wheel with nerveless fingers. The *Powell* veered abruptly, striking nose-on against the cliff. Rebounding, it vibrated a moment to the motor's wild racing, and struck again.

Hal grabbed for the wheel. Before he could bring the boat around, the man in the stern, screaming a curse, opened fire. Bullets drilled into the woodwork, splattered on the granite wall. Hal dropped in front of the motor for the scanty shelter there. The *Powell* rasped along the cliffs, turning as it swung clear, and raced madly downstream.

Hal kicked out the clutch. The speed slackened somewhat, but the current gripped the boat and drove it on dangerously. With his back to the bow, Hal could not see where they were going; but the uplifting canyon walls, close enough to touch, were a constant menace as they reeled crazily past.

The man in the stern stopped shooting. Peering around a corner of the motor housing, Hal groped over the slim man's body for a gun. The other was creeping toward him across the thwarts. He fired point-blank. Hal jerked his head back in time to escape bullet and flying slivers.

He found an automatic in a shoulder holster. As he wrenched it free, he saw the other man rising above him. Hal swung the automatic and fired, the crash of the bank-robber's gun blending with that of his own.

Both bullets went wild, for at that moment the *Powell* struck a jutting shoulder of the canyon wall with terrific force. Hal was thrown back, half expecting to see water come pouring through broken seams. The stocky man lost his balance and pitched headlong beside his unconscious companion.

EMERSON threw himself on top of the robber like a leaping panther. The fellow squirmed, twisted, tried vainly to get his gun in play. Hal crashed the automatic on the side of his head. The man's straining muscles went lax. Hal snatched his gun, threw in the clutch, and reached the wheel just in time to steer the boat from a jagged reef where white water bubbled and snarled.

For a moment, then, Emerson had a breathing spell. The boat went along docilely in a mirroring stretch of tranquil water. He made the most of it, looping a line around the unconscious man and tying him securely to his still-dazed companion. When the light of reason came back to the swarthy man's eyes, he gazed at Emerson sourly.

"How the hell," he asked, "did you get up here?"

"I ain't the kind that brags," Hal said, "but I swum it underwater." He poked a rock-torn finger at the swarthy man. "I got more questions to ask than you, mister. What become of the big fella?"

"Ike Stanley? We left him behind. He was getting too bossy, see? He went up to look if the old fossil was dead, and we shoved off.

COM-8B

He couldn't get a shot at us because we headed for the other side and squatted down in the boat."

"Real nice hombres, ain't you?" Hal demanded sarcastically. "Suppose you tell me all about it?"

The swarthy man shrugged. His name, he said, was Tony Latto. The unconscious man, who was just beginning to stir, was "Slim" Devins. After the three of them had robbed the Vegas bank, they drove across the desert to Searchlight, where they abandoned their car and took another machine which they'd hidden near there. A map they had showed a road which followed the river; they thought they could drive up that way into Utah. The road ended in a gully. They smashed up. After that, they walked.

They walked. They climbed high mountains and fell down them, keeping as close to the stream as they could for fear of getting hopelessly lost. They took turns carrying a bag which was filled with currency and securities.

"We thought he knew something about this country," Tony Latto went on. "He kept telling us what a smart guy he was, and we had to believe him. We didn't know what he was getting into. We burned up in the day and nearly froze at night, and we were hungry all the time. We thought it was a lucky break when we heard a motor early this morning.

"We hurried down to the river and found that old trapper. I guessed he was nuts, right off, or he wouldn't been away up there by himself trying to catch things."

DAD PRUITT was surprised, but not overjoyed to see his visitors. They pulled a gun on him right away and ordered him to take them up the river. Dad told

them the outboard motor boat couldn't buck the current with four men in it; that it would sink when it hit rough water. Slim Devins suggested that they leave Dad behind—an idea which appealed to Stanley, providing Dad was first rubbed out.

Latto didn't want to kill the trapper figuring he'd die, anyhow, before he could reach civilization. While they were fighting it out, Dad slipped away. He was almost up the cliff before they noticed him. They fired. Dad went through the fissure like a jack rabbit, disappearing over the rim.

Ike Stanley was all for following. Dad stuck his head over the edge and threw something. It was a stick of dynamite with a sputtering fuse attached. It struck near the boat and blew a big hole in it.

Dad hollered down that he had a lot more powder up there, because he was doing some proving work on a mine claim, and that he'd blow them all to hell before he let them get away with his boat, or come up after him.

"We was afraid the old fool would do what he said, so we stayed on the beach. Ike Stanley was sore, and said he wouldn't move until he'd put that dried-up buzzard on the spot."

Tony Latto shook his head sadly. Slim, now conscious but mighty sick-looking, muttered a protest. Tony went on.

They discovered that Dad was trapped on the rim, for the only way out was exposed to their gunfire. Dad tried to make a break for it, and Stanley nearly got him. Pretty soon, Dad started throwing branches in the river from the lower end of the cliff rim, which almost overhung the water. The three men down below couldn't do anything about it.

"I noticed 'em," Hal said. "Dad must 'a' been countin' on the simple

fact that blue cloth don't grow on trees, and that there's a lot of men workin' down on the dam. The trouble with people like you," he added, enjoying himself, "is that you don't give others credit for havin' much sense. Take me, for instance. I wouldn't be dumb enough to leave a couple hundred thousand in that suitcase. Not in an open boat on this kind of a river."

While they glowered at him, Hal dragged the bag from under the seat. It was crammed with bills and impressive-looking papers. Hal transferred them all to an empty carbide can and hammered down the top. He kidded the bank robbers, but his mind was dark with the thought of what had happened to old Dad Pruitt.

"What you going to do?" Slim Devins asked.

"We're goin' after your friend, Ike Stanley," Hal answered grimly. "It ain't nice to leave him there like that."

It was nearly dark when Hal nosed the *Powell* against the sand strip a second time that day. The current swung the boat around, but it stuck. Hal crouched down, listening, searching the deep shadows under the trees. Tony and Slim, still tied in the bottom of the boat, were silent. There was no sound save the purl of the water, the rustle of night wind through the willows.

A faint, wavering cry came from up on the cliff rim. Dad Pruitt? Hal's heart hammered. He had a real affection for the trapper. If he was still living—

The cry came again—pained and a little querulous. Hal vaulted ashore with a line, an automatic ready in his free hand. He made the boat fast and cautiously started up the beach.

A branch rattled. He stopped

short. Wind lifted the fine sand and hurried it along the strip. It looked like rising steam. Hal told himself it was foolish to believe Ike Stanley was still around. He went on, ducking under low branches, pushing toward the cliffs.

As he started up a low bank, a shadowy figure reared above him. Hal slipped in the loose sand, went down on one knee. Sparks exploded from the middle of that looming bulk; a gun crashed. Hal felt a sharp, burning nick on his left shoulder. He sprawled flat on the bank and fired. The figure fled, smashing through the trees.

Hal jumped to his feet. The man broke from shelter, raced across the strip toward the *Powell*. Hal pounded after him, shouting for him to halt.

Ike Stanley kept on going. When Emerson fired into the air, Stanley turned to send a wild bullet snarling back. In the dim light, with that raw face of his, he looked monstrous, inhuman. He splashed into the river, threw himself over the boat's side.

For a moment, Hal feared that he had lost the *Powell* again. But the big man made no effort to cut her loose. Instead, he stooped, caught up something, and mounted to the gunwale. The thing he held was the empty bag.

HAL divined his intention, shouted a warning. Ike Stanley leaped. Hal stopped in his tracks. A splash mushroomed up, settled. Hal stared at the simmer of bubbles, following their swift course downstream. A corner of the bag appeared, and Stanley's head. Hal yelled at him. The man struck out for midstream, towing the bag and swimming with one arm. He had on a lot of clothes, heavy shoes;

he labored with that empty bag, the gun, and with the far greater weight of rapidly settling sand. He went down slowly, as though he didn't realize what was happening to him. He disappeared in less than a minute, without a cry, and the dark river swept serenely on.

Hal shrugged and climbed up to the cliff rim. He found Dad Pruitt with a nasty wound in his side. Dad looked at him scornfully, through pain-hazed eyes.

"You sure took your time about gettin' here," he growled.

Hal picked Dad up. The back of his shirt was all gone, and he squawked about his sunburn. He was like a bundle of bones. No bullet in the side was going to kill Dad Pruitt. He was growling on all six when Hal put him in the boat.

"I told you that guy, Ike, was an awful double-crosser," Tony Latto said. "Look how he tried to get away with all that money. Say, if you hadn't put it in that can——"

"Served him right," Dad muttered testily. "He made me blow up my boat and lose darn near all my skins. For all the fur I got left now, I might as well 'a' spent the winter trappin' frogs."

Hal chuckled as he cast the *Powell* loose and started the motor. It was nearly dark; but he was familiar with the river, and pretty soon a moon would be showing. The Colorado was all right when you knew what to expect from it.

"I wouldn't worry about them furs, Dad," Hal Emerson said. "You got a couple pretty good pelts right here, and on the hoof. Seems like Sheriff Wingate ought to pay right smart bounty for 'em."

"Do you reckon?" Dad asked hopefully.

"I wouldn't be much surprised," Hal said.

TIMBER TERROR

By Kenneth Gilbert

The big woods guards a secret that only a "killer" could solve.

STANLEY LINDSEY got to his cabin in the fir-matted valley at dusk, although the lofty peaks were still gilded with the mellow, golden light of the sinking sun; but in the lowlands the shadows were long and the thickets gloomy. He was almost at the door of the cabin when the thing happened.

On the roof there was the light rasping of claws, then a lithe, tawny body flung itself at him. The ranger stepped nimbly aside, and the furry projectile missed him by inches, struck the ground and crouched

there, a cougar nearly full grown. With ears flattened to skull, it gathered itself for another leap, muscles twitching, tail whipping from side to side. But Lindsay stood his ground, nor did his hand go to the six-shooter that swung at his hip. Instead of leaping, the cougar reared on hind legs, dabbed at him with playful forepaws, then rubbed against his legs and purred like a pleased kitten.

Lindsey chuckled.

"You big bluffer!" he chided. "Glad to see me, eh? Bet you're hungry, too. Like some milk, Buff?"



At mention of the word "milk," the young cougar purred louder and moved toward the door. Still chuckling, Lindsey lifted the latch and went inside, followed by his pet. His first act was to open a can of condensed milk, which he thinned with water and placed in a dish. Purring delightedly, the cougar advanced and began lapping up the milk after the fashion of an ordinary cat. Lindsey grinned as he watched.

He had raised the cougar from infancy, since the day when he found the kitten, spotted, and with its eyes scarcely open, mewling plaintively among the rocks at the foot of old Storm King. What had happened to the mother Lindsey did not know. Cougars were death on deer and the ranger's hand was against the breed, but in this helpless youngster he had found an appeal which he could not resist. He had brought it home, nourished it on milk, and it had responded by showing him all the affection he could have expected from a faithful dog. "Buff," he named it, because of its tawny color, and as it grew larger, thriving on the milk diet which Lindsey varied occasionally with cooked meat—never raw—the bond of friendship between the two became stronger.

Lindsey did not believe that Buff had any desire to return to the wild. Although the cat undoubtedly had killing instincts which would not be denied, Lindsey, who understood much about wild animals, knew that Buff had never been taught to hunt and kill by his mother; and, of course, he had no fear of man. It was the ranger's hope to keep the cougar as a pet. All day long Buff remained at the cabin, but when night fell he was awake and restless to be abroad. At first, Lindsey feared that the cougar would go wild and leave, but after a time this fear

vanished, for Buff was always at the door when the ranger awoke the following morning. Even now, filled with milk, the big cat walked to the door and stood there expectantly. When Lindsey opened the panel, the cougar melted noiselessly into the thickening gloom.

AS the ranger closed the door, the telephone bell on the wall jangled harshly. He took down the receiver and heard the voice of his chief, Dennison.

"Any clew as to the identity of that timber thief?" asked Dennison.

"Not a one, chief," Lindsey replied. "They were at it again last night. This time it's airplane spruce. Must have got away with a hundred logs; floated 'em down the Ohanepecosh!"

"What's that?" demanded Dennison, and when the ranger had repeated the words, the boss ripped out an exclamation.

"Isn't there anybody up there you suspect?" insisted Dennison. "Those thieves must be hanging around pretty close. They can't go deep into a country like that, steal logs and then pull out again. They must have a hang-out near by. Have you been patrolling regularly?"

Lindsey flushed. He knew Dennison's temper. Besides, the steady theft of fine, merchantable timber from the national forest was not only a reflection on Lindsey's capabilities, but it also cast doubt on the service as a whole, particularly Dennison's district. But Lindsey had been patrolling faithfully; indeed, he had gone without sleep for several nights, hoping to catch the thieves at work. Yet, as he watched one place, they would operate in another.

"I've done the best I could, sir," he replied stiffly.

"Your best evidently isn't good

enough," retorted the chief testily. "Frankly, I'm warning you, Lindsey. That thievery has got to cease. Don't you suspect *anybody*?"

"I do," answered the ranger, "and I'm working on the case. There's a bounty hunter up here, a man named Jergens, who lives in that old cabin on Squack Creek. Has a pack of dogs."

"A bounty hunter," repeated Dennison witheringly. "What has he to do with it?"

"I don't know," acknowledged Lindsey, "but I aim to find out."

"Listen," rasped the chief, "you quit following your hunches and get down to business. If you can't handle that job, I'll send a man up there who can!"

Lindsey bit his lips, not trusting himself to reply.

"One thing more," went on Dennison, "you have a tame cougar, haven't you? Report just came in that Blinn, that sheepman on the edge of the forest, has been losing a lot of stock lately. Cougar has been killing his sheep. There's been a number of calves killed in the lower valley. You can solve *that* mystery, can't you?"

The ranger's teeth clicked. He liked his job, but Dennison was carrying things too far.

"Certainly I can solve it," he replied heatedly. "Buff isn't killing stock. You'll find it's the work of bears or——"

"But it's being done by a cougar," cut in Dennison sharply. "I'm giving you a straight order, Lindsey. Get rid of that cougar. The service is in bad enough now, without adding to our grief. It seems that we can't stop these timber thieves, and at the same time we are harboring a stock killer. Figure it out for yourself, *but get rid of that con-founded cougar!*"

THERE was a sharp click as Dennison hung up the receiver, and Lindsey turned away with flushed face. He went to the door, opened it, and called:

"Buff! Oh, Buff! Come here, boy!" Although Lindsey hadn't fully made up his mind, there seemed but one thing to do: obey orders. That is, unless he wished to end his career with the forest service; and thought of doing that almost broke his heart. He was a born woodsman, and to give it up was something he dreaded to consider. Yet he knew Dennison meant business.

He called again, but the cougar did not appear. Buff was already on another of his nightly forays, and was doubtless beyond sound of his master's voice. Lindsey turned back, gloomy and sick at heart.

"Buff didn't kill that stock," he told himself. "But there's no way of convincing Dennison otherwise. As for this Jergens——"

He paused, as decision came to him. It had just occurred to him that Jergens might be useful, and it was odd that he hadn't thought of it before. He had seen the man only once, and because the bounty hunter appeared to be surly and taciturn, Lindsey had not sought to cultivate his acquaintance. Besides, the ranger's work was arduous enough during the summer to keep him going from dawn until dark, and he was usually too tired to be lonely for companionship.

"Think I'll pay a visit to Jergens," he declared suddenly. "He does plenty of traveling up here. Maybe he has a clew. Anyway, if he knows what I'm after, he can be helpful!"

Weary though he was, for he had been on the go since dawn, Lindsey strapped on his gun and struck off through the night. In his coat

pocket was an electric flashlight, but he did not need to rely upon it now, for he knew the trails well, even though it was now almost pitch dark. It could not be more than three miles to Jergen's cabin.

The woods were strangely silent as he moved along. A man less accustomed to the forest might have been uneasy, as though he felt himself being watched by unseen things in the underbrush; but Lindsey was at home here, and felt no fear. As he went on, he saw the peaks, which had become black with the sinking of the sun, gradually become bathed with pale light. The moon was rising. He was within half a mile of Jergen's cabin when he stopped suddenly, and listened.

The sound was a weird, bell-like note which went echoing through the hills. As Lindsey listened, he heard it again, far to the left, and he knew it for the voice of a hound. Indeed, there was more than one dog, for the call was answered in different keys. He gave an exclamation of impatience.

"That means Jergen isn't at home," he decided. "He's out hunting wild cats."

His impulse was to turn back, for it seemed useless to go on now, and he doubted whether he could locate the bounty hunter in the woods, even though the song of the dogs would guide him. He decided, however, that he would carry out his original intention, counting upon the fact that Jergen might return home soon. What Dennison had said still rankled in Lindsey's mind, and he felt that the situation called for action.

As he moved ahead, the clangor of the pack seemed to be drawing away. Whatever the dogs were chasing had evidently set off in another direction.

"Anyway," reflected Lindsey, "I can tell Jergen about that stock killing. That will give his pack something to work on, and he might be glad to repay the favor by working with me on this timber-thief job." Down the rough trail to the bottom of a gully he went, and was in the act of climbing the opposite side when he wheeled abruptly and looked back.

At that instant he could have given no reason why he did so; there was no apparent justification for that swift glance behind him. And yet he had a feeling of uneasiness.

All he could see, however, was the dark forest and the moon-washed glades. After a moment he started on, convinced that he had suffered one of those inexplicable attacks of "nerves." This was odd, because Lindsey had long felt that he was not troubled by such things.

As he climbed to the edge of the rim, he turned to look back once more. It seemed, then, that he caught a glimpse of a shadowy form just vanishing in the trees. So quickly did it disappear that he could not be certain he had seen it.

By now he heard the dogs again, and it was plain that they were coming nearer. Their cries were more eager, too, the drawn-out, bell-like yelping of the leader echoing through the night, and answered by the more excited calls of those following. But Lindsey gave them no heed, convinced that the game they were playing did not interest him. He came out at last to the clearing where Jergen's cabin stood and saw that it was dark.

ALTHOUGH Lindsey had expected as much, because he knew the dogs were abroad and their master doubtless with them, he felt disappointment. Jer-

gens might not return for hours. Still, Lindsey reflected, he could at least leave a note for the man, to stop at the ranger's cabin the next time he passed that way. He went on up to the door and knocked loudly, on the chance that Jergens was asleep inside.

As he listened, he thought he heard somebody stirring within, and he lifted his hand to repeat the knock. But as he did so there was a noise outside at the corner of the cabin, and he wheeled to see a dark figure confronting him. Moreover, the moonlight glinted dully on a rifle that was held low, but straight at him.

"What yuh want?" demanded the newcomer.

Eyes on the gun, Lindsey replied: "You're Jergens, aren't you? I'm the ranger from below here. Came to see you on a little business."

"What business?" asked the other, unmoved.

"Why," explained the ranger, a little nettled and mystified at the actions of the man, "several things. There's somebody been stealing timber——"

"Yuh figger I did it?" The man's voice was cold, menacing.

"I'm not guessing at anything," retorted Lindsey. "I came to ask you for help. I knew you've been running a pack of hounds up here. I thought you might have stumbled on a clew as to the identity of these thieves."

The other relaxed a little, but he continued to eye Lindsey steadily. Finally, he said:

"Don't know nothin' about it. I tend to my own business, and all I ask is that folks tend to theirs. Anyway, I'm too busy, huntin' cougar and wild cats. You play your game and I'll play mine!"

"All right, Jergens," Lindsey re-

plied. "If that's the way you feel about it, I'm satisfied. But I'll leave this thought with you: Don't let your dogs run any deer. I saw a buck lying in a creek yesterday. He was all in. Something had been chasing him. You know the law—a deer-running dog is a fair mark for anybody's bullet!"

The other took a step forward. As the moonlight fell upon his bearded face, Lindsey saw that it was contorted with sudden and terrible rage.

"Put a bullet in my dog and I'll put a bullet in yuh!" Jergens cried. "Now, get out of here! I don't want any snoopin' government ranger around me, not now or ever! Get out!"

"All right, Jergens," Lindsey answered steadily, turning away. "Don't forget that what I said about deer-running dogs goes!" He vanished in the gloom, nor did he reply to the outburst of profanity that sped him on his way.

THE moon was high in the heavens as Lindsey reached home, and the hour was late. He could still hear the dogs, but the chase was taking them deeper into the woods. Once more he had the sensation of being under the scrutiny of baleful eyes, but he saw nothing.

Tired, he went directly to bed. It seemed that he had no more than closed his eyes when he opened them again, to find the cabin flooded with sunlight. Moreover, there was tumult outside.

He heard his name called by a voice which he knew well.

"Hi, Lindsey!" It was Dennison, his chief. "Come out and kill this blasted cougar of yours! If I had a gun I'd do it myself. He's got me treed!"

Startled, wanting to laugh and yet fearing to do so, and at the same time troubled by the unexpected arrival of his chief, Lindsey flung open the door. At sight of him, the tame cougar wheeled and bounded toward him, purring loudly. Dennison, perched on the lower limb of a great cedar, dropped to the ground. He was ruffled, his clothes awry, and his face flushed with anger.

"Didn't I tell you to get rid of that animal?" he demanded hotly.

"But I haven't had time," answered Lindsey. "I haven't seen him since you telephoned me. He's been away all night!"

"Certainly!" declared Dennison. "He's been down killing sheep again. I stopped there on my way up, and Blinn told me that six more of his choicest ewes were killed last night. He's wild about it, and I don't blame him.

"Why, look at that cougar!" and he pointed to the tawny cat who stood beside the door, its topaz-jade eyes fixed adoringly on Lindsay. "There's blood on him now—sheep's blood!" He pointed to Buff's muzzle and throat, which were stained darkly. "There's the damn killer, all right.

"Take your gun and shoot him now, Lindsey. Or, I'll do it, with pleasure. He's——"

"Wait a minute, chief!" the ranger broke in quietly. His face had become grimly sober at sight of the incriminating marks on his pet. He stepped forward, lifted the cougar's head, and examined the stains. Then he faced Dennison.

"That's not sheep's blood," he announced. "It's his own. He's been fighting. There's teeth or claw marks on his throat." Suddenly a new thought came.

"Jergens's dogs!" he exclaimed. "They were hunting him last night.

They must have cornered him and he fought them off!"

Dennison gave an exclamation of impatience.

"What has that to do with it?" he inquired. "If Jergens's dogs killed him they'd be doing a good job.

"You get rid of him, Lindsey; I'm giving this to you straight. But that isn't all I've come up here to see about. Some of those stolen logs showed up in a little mill down on Twin Forks Creek. They were floated down the Ohanepecosh from the forest, then hauled up the creek to the mill. Two men could have handled the job down to the mouth of the creek, while a logging truck could have taken them up to the mill. We know they're our logs because this mill has no spruce on its stand. We're holding the logs now, but we haven't caught the men who did the job, although we found their tracks in the mud where they went ashore after riding the logs down the river.

"The thing is, why haven't you got a line on them? Here it is broad daylight, and you should have been out on patrol two hours ago! Why is it they seem to know where you are, then strike in a new spot?"

"Somebody is keeping tab on me," Lindsey replied. He told of his visit to Jergens, and his unwelcome reception.

"Most of these old hunters are crabbed and touchy," Dennison asserted. "Jergens wouldn't be running a pack of dogs if he was mixed up in this timber steal. I'm going out now to check things over myself. I can't believe that you're watching the situation as closely as you should, Lindsey!

"Just one thing more. When I get back this afternoon, that cougar must be dead. We've got to show Blinn that we're willing to cooperate with him. He's paying grazing fees

and he's entitled to our protection!" He might have added something, but Lindsey cut him off.

"I'm getting fed up, chief," he said shortly. "Enough is enough, and you've given me plenty. You're a good man to work for in some ways, but you're too hot-headed and quick with your tongue. I'm quitting!"

"Why," blazed Dennison wrathfully, "you can't quit now while we're in a jam like this! It would take another man a month to familiarize himself with the situation. You mean to say you'd give up everything for the sake of a yellow cat?"

"For a yellow cat—and my self-respect," asserted the other. "But I won't leave until this job is finished. And nobody is going to kill Buff until he's proved guilty!"

IT was night again, and Lindsey was alone in the woods. Not since issuing his ultimatum to Dennison that morning had the ranger seen the chief. Dennison was somewhere in the hills, trying to solve the puzzle in his own fashion. Nor did Lindsey doubt that Dennison's investigation would be thorough, for the man was a veteran forester.

Lindsey traveled now as a man who has a definite objective. What he had discovered that day might mean nothing or everything. It would be his duty to report the facts to Dennison, if he could find the man. In the meantime, he would play the game alone. For the idea which he had conceived the previous night when he had visited Jergens, seemingly was beginning to bear fruit.

Now and then he paused as though listening, but the woods to-night were unusually silent, the quiet unbroken by even so much as the call of a lonely wolf. Slowly he went

on, while the full moon climbed above the tops of the great firs. Suddenly he stopped to listen, then smiled in grim satisfaction as he heard the mournful wail of the dogs.

He fixed the direction whence came the sound, and began moving swiftly toward it. The dogs were perhaps a mile distant, but so loud were their cries and so still the night that the sound carried clearly to him. He swung along more rapidly, sometimes fighting his way through the brush and at other times almost running across parklike glades. For more than ten minutes he went on; then, as he came out of the woods at the edge of a meadow, he caught sight of a shadowy form skirting the timber on the other side.

Involuntarily his hand went to his gun, then he grinned understandingly. For, what he saw was the lanky form of a cougar, slipping furtively through the coverts.

"Hi, Buff!" he called. "Here, boy!"

Abruptly the animal stopped and stared at him. The cougar was less than a hundred yards distant, partly in shadow, but Lindsey could make him out. As the cat turned, the moonlight struck full in its eyes, so that they glowed with opalescent flame.

"Here, Buff!" called Lindsey.

But the great cat, after that single look, vanished in the woods with a long leap which carried it over the top of a clump of shrubs.

Lindsey frowned perplexedly, then shrugged. He understood the ways of the wild kindred enough to know that at night, under the moonlight, they obeyed primal impulses, forgetting kindnesses that might have been shown them by man. Buff was tame ordinarily, but at night he was a different creature entirely.

Yet Lindsey did not immediately

go on, for he no longer heard the dogs. Then their chorus broke forth again as though the trail, momentarily lost, had grown hot again. At the lower end of the meadow was a crashing of brush, and the ranger guessed that it was a deer, startled into panicky flight.

To his astonishment, however, he saw a man, running at top speed, break from the woods, cross an open space and go hurrying on before Lindsey could so much as shout. Wondering, Lindsey stared after him, conscious that there was something vaguely familiar about the fleeing figure, but the distance was too great and the light too uncertain to be sure of the identification. Nearer came the bellowing of the dogs.

The ranger understood. The dogs were not trailing game but were following the man he had just seen. Loosening the gun in its holster he stepped forward, determined to meet the pack as it came out of the forest. At the same time he knew exultation, for he saw his theory being worked out just as he had expected.

Midway across the glade he stopped, for he knew that the pack was very near; and with drawn gun he waited. Then, roaring in triumph, they appeared, four mixed-blood beasts which he instantly surmised to be bloodhounds crossed with mastiffs or some other large breed, for while they chimed like true hounds, they were half again as large. He lifted his gun and fired twice in the air, certain that he would frighten them.

AT the shots they wheeled abruptly, lifted their heads, and stared at him for a moment, then, bellowing afresh, they came at him. And Lindsey saw that he had made a terrible mistake, that

these were no ordinary dogs, harmless toward man no matter how savage they might be in hunting the great cats. He had no time to reach a tree. At twenty paces, then, his third shot dropped the leader, and as the others spread around him he fired twice more without result, but the last shot dropped another of the beasts. Intimidated, the two dogs remaining, fangs bared and snarling ferociously, circled about him while looking for an opening. Hurriedly he snapped the empty shells from his gun, and reloaded. Again he was ready for them, but they continued to circle him, cutting in closer and closer.

He held his fire for the reason that he could not afford to risk a shot at random. At the same time he had no desire to kill the dogs, even though they were dangerous outlaws from whom he could expect no mercy. Still they drew nearer, and he knew that they were forcing their courage for the charge. Coolly he waited, gun in hand, trying to watch both foes at once. But, when it came, their craft matched his. The dogs, accustomed to pulling down a cornered deer or elk, or tackling an embattled wild cat, were wily.

For, of a sudden, one leaped at him from behind, but purposely fell quite short. Nevertheless, Lindsey wheeled and shot and the dog went down. But the instant the man did it, he heard the snarling roar of the other dog, quick to seize its advantage. Half-turning, the man fired, but the bullet went wild. Before he could shoot again, the beast struck him. Lindsey had time only to throw up his right arm to guard his throat, then the impact of the heavy dog carried him off his feet.

His head struck something, a stone or projecting root, and the world wheeled dizzily, yet he still strove to

cover himself against the savagely slashing fangs of the enraged beast. His gun had been knocked from his hand in the fall, and he could only seize the furry throat and endeavor to hold the powerful jaws away from his own neck. Yet so strong was his foe that Lindsey, dazed as he was, felt himself going; but as his grip relaxed a new sound smote his ears.

It was a purring snarl, the significance of which was not apparent at once to his befogged brain. Its effect, however, was magical on the dog, for the latter tore loose from the man's grip, and Lindsey heard the beast's own whining challenge. "Buff!" screamed the man intuitively, as realization struck home. He would have called again, but the word was choked off in horror for, almost over his body, two great animals, savage at the core and their fighting instincts roused to fury—the age-old hatred of cat and dog—were battling to the death.

He tried to roll clear, but it seemed that each time he did so the fight was carried to him again. He felt their feet spurning his body, heard their blood-chilling screams and yelps, and in self-defense he could only flatten himself and cover his face. He knew that Buff was fighting in defense of him while the dog was striving to protect its "kill," which it believed that the cougar was trying to take from him. At any moment he expected to feel fangs in a misdirected bite by either animal. If only he had his gun he could have ended the battle in a jiffy, but he dare not move trying to find it. Suddenly, through the turmoil, came the bitter, clapping report of a rifle, and a bullet whined like an angered hornet just over him.

Lindsey knew who had fired the shot even without raising his head.

And he knew he must risk all now, for Jergens was trying to kill the cougar. Still covering his face, Lindsey whirled himself over, away from the fighting animals. Some hard object pressed painfully against his ribs, and as his hands groped for it, the fingers closed over his gun. Again he rolled over, and this time came to a sitting position, ready to spring to his feet. Less than thirty yards distant in the moonlight he saw the figure of the bounty hunter, saw the glint of the rifle as it was steadied again. Moreover, he saw that the gun was pointed not at the cougar, but at himself!

There was scarcely time to raise his own gun and fire, even if he had been permitted to do so, for another element entered the situation. The dog, having temporarily beaten back the cougar, thought that he saw his prey escaping. Leaving off his attack on the cat, he wheeled and leaped for the ranger's throat.

But in mid-air he sagged oddly, while the report of the rifle echoed through the woods. In that infinitely brief instant, Lindsey had seen the dog's body flash between him and Jergens, and as the animal fell, it was with the bounty hunter's bullet in him. Then rifle and six-shooter spoke simultaneously, and to Lindsey blackness came like a thunderclap.

LINDSEY awakened with the realization that somebody was shaking him; then he fancied that he was being drowned, for a wave of water hit him in the face and left him gasping. Sputtering and choking, he opened his eyes to see Dennison bending over him, holding a dripping hat.

"You all right, Lindsey?" demanded the chief. "There's a bullet crease along the side of your head,

but there doesn't seem anything else wrong with you except shock."

"Jergens!" stuttered the ranger. "Where is he? He's got a gun——"

"And he won't use it for a time," cut in the chief grimly. "You dropped him with a bullet through the shoulder. I saw the whole thing from the edge of the woods. Came back when you first started shooting. If you hadn't stopped those dogs, they'd have got me!"

"Don't let Jergens get away!" urged Lindsey. "He's the head of the timber thieves. Trailed him today when he didn't have his dogs with him. Saw him meet Smoky Joe Fallon and a half-breed named Killdeer. They had saws and axes. Going after more airplane spruce to-night. But Jergens gave me the slip afterward. Went home and turned his dogs loose. They're trained to trail men, as well as cats. He let 'em run at night to keep him warned if anybody should come poking around; they give tongue as soon as they hit a man track. That's why they took your trail. You ought to carry a gun, chief!"

He weaved unsteadily to his feet.

"Come on!" he cried. "We'll make certain that Jergens can't get away. Then we'll round up the pair cutting timber; I know about where we'll find 'em! They'll be easy now. Could have taken them myself before, but I wanted to get Jergens, and I knew I'd find him with his dogs!"

But he turned then as a tawny shape moved close to him and rubbed

against his leg. Although the light of battle had blazed but a few minutes before in the eyes of the cougar, those same eyes now were soft with affection. Lindsey stroked the cat's head, marked the grievous wounds about the chest.

"There were too many dogs," he told Dennison. "If it hadn't been for Buff, here, you'd have needed another ranger, and maybe you wouldn't have got out of the woods yourself.

"And I'm still betting he didn't kill those sheep. There's another cougar in these parts. Saw him to-night. Thought he was Buff at first, but he lit out as soon as he spotted me. Maybe Buff fought him, or maybe Buff and the dogs got tangled up before, which accounts for the blood we saw on him. Anyway, he's not a killer. And, when we've finished this job to-night, Buff goes with me. I owe my life to him!"

Dennison grinned.

"When we get Fallon and Killdeer," he asserted, "you're not going anywhere, Lindsey! You're going to stay right on the job, and there'll be no more foolish talk about quitting!"

"As for your pet cougar, why, he's part of the picture now. He stays with you. Any sheepman who says that we're harboring a killer, is going to hear from me!" He reached over and patted the sleek head of the big cat, and Buff's pur deepened with pleasure, as though he understood that all was now well with the world.



DEATH IN THE

CHAPTER I.
DESERTED.

A skeleton in the closet is

WHAT a broken oil line will do to a car is plenty. With Placer City still twenty miles away, Corcoran recognized the sound when the knock began, and let out a yell.

"Shut her off, Tremaine! Bearings burned out!"

They had been making a week's trip through the abandoned mining

camps and ghost cities, seeking newspaper feature stories. Corcoran was an expert photographer. Tremaine knew the country, and they had a week off.

A glance at the oil gauge told Tremaine that the line had broken sometime in that week of rough driving, and now was the toll to pay. He shut off the gas. The car was headed down a long arroyo in the open



DESERT By H. Bedford-Jones

the host at this ranch house.

desert, with sunset at hand and the nearest water ten miles behind. A sweet prospect!

For half a mile they coasted down the long, rough canyon trail, hoping to reach the highway, four miles ahead. No such luck, however. The canyon curved, then forked. The left fork ended nowhere. The road followed the other fork, upgrade. The car stopped.

Tremaine looked up. On the hilly rise between the forks, he saw what looked like the ruins of an old and abandoned prospector's shack.

"We're up against it, feller," he observed, climbing out. "Four miles to the highway."

"Desert highway, too; no county pike," said Corcoran. "May not find any humans for another six or eight miles after reaching it."

"Plenty of cars, aren't there?"

Corcoran shook his head.

"Sure, but too many holdups and

hitch hikers. Cars wouldn't stop at night. Well, think fast! With a gallon of oil, we could get the car into Placer City, providing the oil line would hold. Patch up the break with adhesive tape. There's water, grub, and blankets in the car. One of us must stop here, patch up the broken line, and see that no desert rat plunders the car. The other must go hiking. Dunno which job is worse. Take your pick."

"Not me," said Tremaine, and grinned. He was six feet two, freckled and cheerful. He pulled out a silver dollar. "Heads to you, tails to me. Whichever falls uppermost, hikes. Does that suit you?"

"Shoot the works, you big stiff," rejoined Corcoran.

Tremaine flipped the dollar high in air. It fell in the sandy dust, heads up.

Corcoran shrugged and reached into the car for his water bottle, buckled on his pistol belt, and turned away.

"Watch out for sidewinders," he said. "They don't come out till after dark, you know. And they like to follow road tracks. So long, and good luck!"

With this farewell, he went striding away.

Tremaine got out the adhesive tape and then crawled under the car, which was unpleasantly hot. He located the break in the oil line and fell to work. It had joggled loose in two places and was only hanging on at all by sheer luck. He patched up the breaks, then crawled out, wiped the grease off his hands, and took a look around.

Having food, water and blankets, he was not worried. The situation seemed quite prosaic, if pleasantly adventurous, almost matter of fact. There was nothing to give any indication of aught amiss. This lonely

desert landscape, red and purple in the sunset, offered him not the least hint of any waiting presence, of unseen eyes watching.

Leaving everything in the car, he climbed up the rocky slope at his left for a look at the old shack above. The sun, by this time, was below the horizon, the swift night of the desert threatened momentary descent. The sky was still a glory of crimson and gold, the San Gorgonio Range to the south was deeply purpled, the buttes to the east were scarlet and sinister. As Tremaine came to the top of the rise he halted abruptly, regarding the scene before him.

At first glance, he found it puzzling. The place gave him a quick impression of unreality for which he could not account. Here were mesquite brush, several Joshua trees or yucca, and not one building but three. Two were mere shelters for animals, one of which had been visible from the road below. The third, surprisingly, was a long, low dwelling of adobe.

Tremaine was struck by a sense of mystery, of something very wrong, just as one notices the waving of a bush where there is no wind. He felt as though something was about to happen, yet there was obviously nothing to happen. He paused, his cool, challenging gray eyes sweeping the place. His rangy, powerful figure, his bronzed and strongly carved features, expressed suspense—yet all was calm and deserted.

What was so odd, then? Everything. The Joshua trees being here, for example, when there were none in all the expanse of desert. There at one corner of the dwelling was a huge barrel cactus, something rarely found north of the Mexican line. Then he perceived that the

Joshua trees were not haphazard. The five of them stood at the four corners and center of an imaginary rectangle. They had, like the cactus, been brought here and planted deliberately.

TREMAINE fumbled for a cigarette and advanced toward the nearest tree, still puzzled. Then, against the bole of the tree, on the ground, he saw something that distinctly did not belong to the scenery. It was a torn bit of rag, and it was dabbled in blood—blood so fresh that it still glowed dull scarlet, had not yet turned black.

Tremaine passed on, watching that silent house. It was long and low, containing a series of five rooms, into each of which opened a door, as in the old-time desert hotels. The roof was carried down on a slant to shade the space before the doors, making a floorless veranda, which was fronted by a growth of manzanita. The odd thing was just this: that there was a roof at all!—a shingle roof, and apparently in good repair.

After looking for a week at roofless shacks and ruins, this had struck him subconsciously. The place had all the air of old desertion. The windows were boarded up, and so were three of the five doors. One was gone. One stood open, half ajar, hanging crazily by half a hinge. Tremaine did not, at the moment, attach any importance to the fact that this one door opened outward. He was wondering about that rag with the fresh blood.

It was an ominous greeting to this apparently deserted place. Nor had the hard sand revealed any footprints.

All this had passed in a short moment of time. He lighted a match

and held it to his cigarette. Then he observed that this abandoned house and one of the shacks in the rear stood in a depression. The other shack was on higher ground, making it visible from the road below. Behind all three structures piled up naked rocky heights in the background.

As he advanced toward the house, Tremaine had the odd feeling of having been suddenly transported to another sphere. Passing one of the Joshua trees, he descended sufficiently to shut out the road, even the canyon trail along which he had come, from view. He was alone there on the face of the desert, all the world cut off, with the first stars twinkling in the eastern sky. No more solitary dwelling could be imagined than this one, so singularly situated. It conveyed an eerie and unearthly sensation.

Realizing that darkness impended, however, he stepped forward briskly, came to one corner of the dwelling, and went on for a look at the back. Some prospector had lived here, perhaps an old mine had existed. He could see nothing up the hillside like a prospect hole, however, and the back of the structure was quite blank. Five windows, one for each room, had been long ago boarded up. The boards, like all the other woodwork in sight, were stained by uncounted years of sun and wind into a dingy grayish hue. He turned back, came around to the front, and started along under the overhang of the roof toward the open door. On his right was the tangle of manzanita like a porch railing, the twisted, blood-red, barkless wood quite grotesque in shape. Suddenly Tremaine halted.

"Shades of Robinson Crusoe!" he muttered, staring down. In the sand before him was a footprint.

Although the darkness was deepening swiftly, he saw it there plainly. The sand was smooth and level as a floor. In the center of the space between the house wall and the manzanita, was this one foot-print. Not two—just this one, alone. For any human creature to have made this solitary print, without leaving others, seemed a physical impossibility. Yet there it was.

And it was the print of a woman's or child's small foot.

Tremaine lifted his head. "Anybody home?" he called out. "Hello, folks! Any one here?"

Sheer madness to call like that, when the place was so obviously deserted. His voice rang in hollow tones under the roof, and died away. There was no reply.

Tossing away his cigarette, he walked on to the partly open door. Darkness had rushed down swiftly now, as it does in the desert. When he peered into the room, all was pitch blackness. He shoved back the sagging door slightly, stepped inside, and fumbled for a match. Striking it, he held it aloft and looked around in the yellowish flare.

The room was quite empty, except for a tattered blanket hung across the lower corner, a room eight by ten feet in size. Then, turning, Tremaine saw the glaring black-and-white sign on the door, painted on two boards and nailed there. Its meaning was quite clear:

PRIVATE PROPERTY
NO WATER
NO GRUB
GET OUT—GET GONE

He stared at this sign for a moment. His first thought was that, being on the inside of the door, it had been placed here by the occupants years ago as a grim jest. Then

he looked closer, saw that the paint was not old and weathered, but comparatively fresh. And the door opened back readily, but its sagging edge struck the floor in closing. It must have been opened clear back, with this sign showing to any chance arrival. Perhaps a gust of wind had blown it partly shut.

At this instant, before the match went out, Tremaine distinctly glimpsed two fiery eyes outside the door. Then the flame burned his fingers and was extinguished.

Astonishment, incredulity, held him spellbound for an instant. Eyes? Impossible. These had been at the height of a man or more. No animal could have been out there. Nothing was there now. As he stared out, he saw no object, no life, no moving creature. An owl? Perhaps, if there were owls here in the desert, which he strongly doubted.

"No, by glory! It was a man," he muttered, and strode outside. He knew that the eyes of certain people possessed this quality, supposedly belonging to animals alone, of reflecting the light.

Reluctantly, he came to the conclusion that he had deceived himself, for the whole place was assuredly deserted. The chill of the desert night was already settling down. He struck another match and looked into the room again. The hard earthen floor was clean. He could get his supper, lock the car, and fetch his blankets up here for shelter until Corcoran showed up with oil, which might be in one or ten hours.

There was no trace of bats or doves or other desert life. Therefore the room must have been shut up, after all. His theory about the door must be wrong. Bewildered, perplexed, he let fall the match, and turned to go. Then he froze.

A soft, sleepy sigh broke upon the

room. Unmistakably, it was a human voice!

Tremaine backed out of that empty room, with a muttered oath. Outside, beneath the cold stars that now blazed in the sky, he shook off the weird feelings that oppressed him, and a laugh came to his lips. He was well aware how any trivial sound, in an abandoned place, can be magnified by the imagination into a human voice.

"This place is getting on my nerves," he muttered aloud. "Snap out of it, you fool! An owl or a rat was in that manzanita tangle, and you took it for a man. One of those shingles on the roof moved in the wind, and you took the squeak for a sigh. Come out of it!"

There was no wind, however, as he realized on his way back to the road.

CHAPTER II. APPARITION.

SWITCHING on the car lights, Tremaine got out what was left of the lunch, his own water bottle, and the thermos of hot coffee. He kept carefully in the light of the headlamps, for he had an active distaste for sidewinders—those tiny, deadly rattlers that follow the roads of the desert by night.

He had just finished his meal and was rolling a cigarette when he discerned the glitter of car lights approaching somewhere ahead. Good! Corcoran had found some one and would be along in a few minutes. The approaching lights dipped, vanished, reappeared, drew steadily closer, and the canyon road echoed presently to the chugging of an ancient flivver. Twenty feet away it drew to a halt.

"That you, Corcoran?" called Tremaine.

"No, it ain't," came the response.

Two figures came within the range of the headlights. One was tall, bearded, unkempt, and a thoroughly bad actor if Tremaine ever saw one. The second was smaller, stooped, and red-haired, with furtive, cunning features and roving eyes.

"Who are you?" demanded the tall ruffian. "Car broke down?"

Tremaine gave his name. "Yes. My partner's gone to get help. Have you got any spare oil?"

"No," came the answer. "And I didn't see nobody this side the highway, neither."

"If you came from Placer City you must have met him!"

"Didn't come from Placer City," and the red-haired one snickered. "Come tother way. Headed down the gulch, are you? Say, seen anything of any Mexicans up this way?—with burros."

"Nary a soul," returned Tremaine, "with or without burros. Who are you?"

"We," said the big fellow, eying Tremaine, "are plain gents traveling." With this curt and even hostile utterance, which gave the lie to the most ordinary courtesy, he turned to his companion and jerked a thumb upward.

"Say, Red! Ain't it here that old Panamint lived in that coaching house he patched up? Remember, the old rat who died at Centerville last year?"

"Yeah," agreed the stooped gentleman. "It was somewheres up above. Suppose they're there, do you? It'd be a likely place for 'em to hole up, Steve."

"There's nobody up above," said Tremaine, wondering at the pair, and nettled by their discourtesy. "I've just been looking the place over. I'm going to camp up there till my partner gets back. Why are you looking for Mexicans?"

"To find 'em," said the tall man, Steve. Then, as he met the angry, challenging stare of Tremaine, he changed his attitude. "No offense, stranger. I'm Steve Halloran, and this here is Red Ferris. We've been tryin' to run down a Mex thief."

"Oh, I see." Tremaine laughed and held a match to his cigarette. "So this place up above was a stage house, eh? That explains it. Who was this Panamint gent?"

"He was an old, crazy desert rat," said "Red" Ferris. "Lived here by himself and chased off anybody who showed up. Drifted into Centerville one day with a bullet hole in him, and cashed in. He'd been crazy for years, but harmless."

"Well," said Tremaine cheerfully, "what's the chance of you boys giving me a tow to Placer City? I'd be glad to pay you well."

"Nope," said Steve with prompt decision. "We got to be on our way. We heard this Mex was seen headin' up this way, and we got to find him. You ain't got no reason to worry. Your partner can hoof it to placer City and be back by mornin' with a tow car. So long."

The two of them flung him a nod, turned, and strode back to their car. At first inclined to hasty anger, Tremaine shrugged and watched their car chug past him and along up the canyon trail, and shrugged. They were merely two of the countless queer characters to be encountered in the desert—rough and independent, intent upon their own affairs, with an aversion to all strangers. And, if weapons had sagged in their pockets, that was nothing extraordinary.

"Just the same, they were two bad hombres," thought Tremaine. "And I feel sorry for that Mexican thief if they locate him!"

Taking his blankets from the car,

switching off the lights and locking the car doors, he turned again to the rocky slope. He chuckled at recalling his own startled surmises and fancied mysteries; the touch of human relations had dissipated all these hazy alarms.

Now that he knew the truth about this place, it looked entirely different in the starlight as he approached it. An abandoned stage stop, repaired and made habitable by a solitude-loving desert rat, reduced it all to very prosaic equations. That is, most of it. The single footprint he dismissed with a shrug. Any woman's footprint here was impossible. Panamint had no doubt affixed that warning sign to the door; he had only died last year, or thus it appeared.

So, whistling cheerily, Tremaine strode up to the open doorway, tossed his blankets into the room, and followed them, lighting a match. The ragged curtain at the far corner caught his attention. He lifted one corner, found to his surprise that it held no dust and seemed quite fresh. Then, as the match light revealed what lay beyond, he started.

He was staring into the sightless sockets of a skeleton.

A LAUGH broke from Tremaine as he eyed the rudely articulated bones, many of which were lacking. Here, of course, was one of Panamint's tricks to discourage visitors. Tremaine knew to what lengths some of these old desert dwellers would go to assure their solitude. Panamint had no doubt assembled this skeleton and put it carefully in place here, seated upon two huge adobe bricks. Why, then, the curtain formed by the tattered blanket? Why had that curtain gathered no sandy dust if it had

been here for months, unless the room had been closed?

With a shrug, Tremaine dropped the match, dismissed these troublesome queries, and in the darkness spread out his blankets. He closed the door, having no liking for the intrusion of rattlers or scorpions, and, quite careless of the proximity of the skeleton, rolled up for the night. He was tired, and had no great hope that Corcoran would get back before morning.

He was asleep in five minutes.

He awakened with a start. The door, which he had left closed, stood ajar. Outside was a flood of moonlight; therefore he had been asleep for about three hours. A startled cry had awakened him. Now, at once, came another. There was a rush across the floor, a figure dashed through the doorway and was gone. Tremaine sat up; then stiffened.

The tattered old blanket across one corner of the room must have been jerked down. There sat the skeleton in the darkness, softly outlined in luminous paint. For an instant Tremaine stared at it, wildly startled, then sprang to his feet in comprehension. This had been part of Panamint's stage show, of course; but what about that prowler? Who had been here?

Tremaine turned to the door. From outside he caught one light, low trill of delicious laughter in a woman's voice. Then, outside his partly open door, appeared the woman, clear-cut in the luminous reflection of the moonlight on the rocks beyond.

Woman or vision? She was young, strikingly beautiful, her face filled with laughter and framed in two long braids of hair that fell to her hips. She wore a robe that seemed of woven moonlight; some thin, silvery tissue.

"Hello!" exclaimed Tremaine. "And where did you come from—"

She was gone, abruptly. Gone, with a faint, low cry as of fear. Tremaine heard a soft sound as of a closing door. He darted outside, stood there looking around. There was nothing in sight.

The moonlight illumined everything clearly, beyond possibility of error. She could not have reached the end of the portico before he got outside. The yucca trees stood ghostly and grotesque in the silvery radiance. There was the great barrel cactus at the end of the house, and Tremaine ran to it. Nothing in sight. He made a circuit of the building, incredulous and bewildered, staring suspiciously at the boarded-up doors and windows.

Outside, only sand and rock, with no place that would have sheltered a rabbit. Had that girl dissolved into thin air? He halted. A sound reached from off to the right, toward the rim rocks of the depression marking the descent to the road—a clattering, as of loose stones rolling under foot.

Tremaine tried to steady himself, tried to call that vision of a girl utterly absurd. Some prowler had preceded her, rushing away in mad fright from sight of the grinning, luminous skeleton. Then, laughing, she had come to look inside, and had vanished from sight. Had he imagined her there?

"No, by glory! I'm wide awake," he muttered angrily. "No such thing as ghosts, either. Haunted house? Rats! Ghosts don't laugh. And I'm sane, too. When I spoke to her, she ducked, and she's hiding somewhere. No place to hide except on the roof."

In his perplexity he actually stepped out through the manzanita tangle and looked up at the roof, but

saw no ghostly vision there. He laughed at his own action. If he could only find it there must be a very practical, logical explanation of all this mystery.

Marks in the sand outside his door? He came back to it, stooped, but realized that his own feet had spoiled his chance of finding anything here. There came no further sound from the direction of the road. For a long time he stood intent and motionless; until, as he stood there, a slow realization came to him. His own door opened outward. Therefore, these other three doors would open outward also.

His feet noiseless in the sand, he approached the next doorway. It was boarded up, true, but a startling idea had come to him. He had tried none of those doors. Boards might well be nailed on the outside, giving the appearance of long abandonment, and yet the doors might open just the same.

A pistol exploded from the direction of the road. It was followed instantly by the keen, penetrating crack of a rifle. The two shots volleyed up in echoes, and the high, shrill yell of a man, cut short abruptly, followed after. Tremaine thrilled to that yell, for the agony of death rang vibrant in it. Then there was silence.

Close at hand, he caught a muffled cry. He stood motionless, hardly breathing, his gaze fastened intently on that boarded-up door. Nothing ghostly about those shots or that cry, he told himself grimly. And it was into this doorway, if anywhere, that the girl must have vanished. He remembered the slight sound, like the jar of a closing door.

The boards there in front of him, the whole door, began to swing softly open. The effect was eerie and unreal.

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE STORY.

TREMAINE perceived that the door was opening against him. He remained immovable. The boards touched him gently, came to a stop. Through the opening floated a white figure. It was that of the girl whom he had seen.

He pushed the door shut and set his foot against it.

She whirled, stared at him, made an involuntary movement as though to jerk open the door, then checked herself on finding it useless. Tremaine had forgotten those shots, everything else, in the absorption of his present pursuit.

"Don't be afraid," he said quietly. "You don't have to run away from me. Who are you?"

He perceived that she was trembling as she stared at him. Or was she merely shivering from cold?

"Get something warm on you," he said, as she made no answer. "I'll run over to the road and see what's happened. Don't worry; I'm a friend."

"You are not one of them, that is true," she answered. Her voice was low and flutelike.

Tremaine laughed. "True, young lady. I'm not one of them, whoever they are. Get on some clothes. I'll be back shortly. And don't be afraid."

It had just occurred to him that Corcoran might have returned.

With this in mind, he left the girl and started off toward the road. He had solved the mystery now, and only details remained to be straightened out. They mattered little. Before him had arisen the greater question: what was such a girl doing here, alone?

"Hey, Red, where are you?" lifted

a resonant voice from the road. "I got him, I tell you! I got him! Where are you?"

Red! And Tremaine recognized that voice, too. The precious pair had returned. Then, as he came to the center Joshua tree, he halted beside it. A figure was stumbling toward him from the rise above the road—a queerly staggering, reeling figure. He knew it for that of Red Ferris, the stooped stranger. As it came closer, Tremaine saw blood pumping from the man's open mouth. Then, suddenly, Ferris pitched forward and rolled over, and lay quiet, not six feet away.

Tremaine leaped to his side, knelt, touched something hard. A knife had transfixed the man's chest, plunging in from above. Ferris was dead. The knife was buried to the hilt in his body. Gripped in his hand was an automatic pistol.

Disengaging the dead, limp fingers, Tremaine snatched up the pistol, rose and looked around. He could see no one. Whose hand had done this work? Not that of Steve Halloran's, certainly. Who was it Halloran had "got"? There was none to make answer. He realized that it was the shots which had drawn the unknown girl from her hiding place.

"Something damned queer about all this!" he thought. "Started out like a haunted house, and now it's knives and bullets."

He started back to the dwelling. Coming to the barrel cactus at the end of the building, he paused in the moonlight to scan the sand and rocks anew. Something plumped into the cactus beside him; a rifle crack whipped out. That fool Halloran had mounted the slope, was shooting at him!

With a leap, Tremaine was back under the porch roof, sheltered by

the darkness. Another bullet whistled past his head. He ducked along the building. The door of the girl's room was open and she seized his arm.

"Who was it? Who is shooting?" she exclaimed quickly. "Did you see Hernan?"

Tremaine urged her back inside, followed her, and pulled the door shut.

"I don't know any Hernan," he said. "It's a pair of rascals who came along here earlier to-night and——"

"Who was the man out there? The one who fell?"

"Saw that, did you? He's named Red Ferris. Know him?"

The girl caught her breath at the name.

"Yes, yes! He is one of them. It was he who shot my uncle. But where is Hernan? He looked into your room and saw the skeleton and ran. He was afraid. I came to see if it was really a skeleton, then you saw me——"

Tremaine went to the door, opened it a tiny crack, and looked out. He could see from here any one approaching from the direction of the road. The body of Ferris was an indistinct lump in the moonlight. There was no sign of Halloran.

Reaching out, his fingers encountered the hand of the girl. He pressed it reassuringly.

"I'm Dick Tremaine, newspaperman," he said. "Let's get this straightened out. Who are you?"

"Rosita O'Donoju," she said. "Hernan was our old vaquero. He was always crazy about gold, always looking for it——"

"Wait a minute," broke in the puzzled Tremaine. "Where are you from? You're not Mexican?"

"Of course not," flashed her voice. He could imagine the proud fling of

her head in the darkness. "We are Spanish! And, long ago, Irish. My father was the great O'Donoju."

"Never heard of him," said Tremaine, keeping an eye on the space outside, watching keenly for any indication of Halloran's approach. "Where do you live?"

"Over beyond Los Piños, in San Gorgonio County," she returned. "We have a little ranch there. Since my father died, my uncle has run it. Two weeks ago Hernan found the gold in the hills, a whole pocket of it. He took some to Los Piños. Those other men heard about it. He came back to the ranch to get the burros, because our car could not go where the gold was. He said the gold was for us all. He loved us, you understand? He had been with my father many years in Mexico, before we came north and settled here. Uncle and I went with him to help load the gold on the burros——"

WHEN was all this?" demanded Tremaine, only half listening to her breathless story. His attention was fixed on the space outside.

"Four days ago. The hills are this way from our ranch, so we could not get back to Los Piños after those men found us. There were five. They had followed us, and the one with red hair shot my uncle. Hernan fired at them and one fell off his horse. This was just at dark. Hernan and I got away that night. We tried to get down to the highway, but Hernan had been wounded and could not go any farther. They got ahead of us, you see."

She paused an instant. Tremaine remembered that bloody rag he had seen by the tree.

"Day before yesterday," she pursued, "we came down this canyon road and found this place. Hernan

knew about it. He sent the burros away, after hiding the gold here, to lead those men away from us. Yesterday one of the men came and looked over this place in the morning. We were hiding. I hoped a car might come along to take us. When you first came, we were asleep. Hernan waked up and tried to brush away all tracks and leave nothing showing, but you came to look at the place before he could quite finish and——"

"Hold everything," said Tremaine curtly. She fell silent at once.

He had discerned a movement outside, by the farthest tree. A figure came forward and dropped beside that of Ferris. He dared not attempt to use the pistol at this distance, for in the moonlight objects were indistinct. And for the present, his best weapon was silence. Halloran might come and search here, and welcome!

"Hey, Steve!"

A faint voice lifted. The figure beside Ferris lifted, broke into a sharp run, darted back to cover of the rocks. Again came the call. Halloran made response this time.

"Come on here, you fool!"

"Where's Red?"

"The Mex got him. Stop gabbing and come on."

Tremaine cursed under his breath. The two had picked up a third man, doubtless another of the five.

Incredible and astonishing as it was, he did not doubt the girl's story in the least. As for finding gold, even a pocket of nuggets, that was by no means impossible. Combed over by prospectors as these desert ranges had been in times past, there was still gold for the finding, and rich strikes were occasionally turned up, even of alluvial gold.

Whether or not Hernan had actually found gold, however, those others thought he had, and had

trailed him. Five unkempt, hardy rascals shadowing him from this little, lost town of Los Piños, men who did not hesitate to shoot down the people they despised as mere Mexicans, murdering the girl's uncle, then outwitted by the old vaquero. A sordid story, the kind that seldom reaches the newspapers, for the best of reasons, and the oldest: Dead men don't talk.

"Still two of them out there," he said. "Well, princess? Have you dressed yet?"

"No," came her voice. "And I'm cold. All I had was this——"

"For the love of Mike!" exclaimed Tremaine, beginning to doubt his senses. "Do you mean to tell me you've been running around the desert in that?"

"Of course not!" she retorted indignantly. "But this evening Hernan took my khaki shirt and breeches to clean them. You see, when uncle was killed he fell against me, and blood got all over my clothes. Hernan was going to wash it out."

"You poor kid!" Tremaine broke in softly, suddenly perceiving the hideous wealth of detail that had lain behind the bare skeleton of her story. "Wash?" he added suddenly. "Wash in what? There's no water here."

"There is," she corrected him. "Up the hillside. There's a tiny little spring. Hernan found it last year when he saw doves heading for it. He was bringing down water all day, as fast as it collected, to his room. It's the one next to mine, here. And my clothes are in there."

"Good! I'll get 'em for you, then," said Tremaine promptly.

"The gold is in there, too," she added. "You can take some of it."

He laughed. "Thanks! More important things to do right now."

"Do you know where Hernan is?"

"No," he said, and paused, his hand on the door. "No, Rosita O'Donoju, I don't know, but I'm very much afraid one of those men has shot him. You might as well face it."

Remembering that suddenly stifled scream he had heard, he had little doubt in the matter.

She made no response. Confident that both the assailants were out among the rocks and unable to see anything in the shadow of the porch roof, Tremaine shoved open the door enough to get outside. He passed rapidly along the wall to the next boarded-up door, and found that this opened readily to his hand.

Stepping inside, he closed it again and then struck a match. Shielding the light in his cupped hands, he descried two packsaddles on the floor, a number of rawhide bags the size of his head, and a little heap of provisions. Near these lay a khaki shirt and pair of breeches. He picked them up, ignored everything else, and got out of the room.

Outside, with the door quietly closed, he paused, searching the ground beyond the yucca trees. Nothing stirred, but he caught a murmur of voices. He recalled the blazing eyes he had seen on his first trip to the house, and realized they must have belonged to Hernan. But why had the old vaquero been so frightened by the skeleton?

Slipping into the girl's room again, putting the clothes into her arms, he asked this question.

"It was my fault," she said, with a half sob. "When we first came here, I found that skeleton. I hung an old blanket in front of it, because Hernan is superstitious and might be afraid, and I didn't want him to see it. After you had come up here and were asleep, he went into the room. Hernan could see in the dark, like a

cat. Perhaps he was curious to find why I had hung up the old blanket, too. Anyway, it gave him a terrible fright and he went running off. And I thought it was a joke!"

"Well, cheer up," said Tremaine. "It saved us from being surprised by those rascals out yonder. Two of 'em still there. I'm sorry about Hernan; you'll just have to make up your mind to it. Did he have a gun?"

"He used up all the cartridges and threw it away."

Tremaine liked this girl, so close to him in the darkness yet unseen. No silly questions, but a calm, quiet poise in her manner. She had been through a lot, too.

By the sound of her movements, he knew she was dressing. He quickly sketched for her how he had come here, and she broke in with a quick assent.

"Yes, I know," she said, to his surprise. "Hernan followed you back and saw you eating supper. He was going to speak to you when he saw the other car come. He heard what you said about your car breaking down, and saw the other men go on. He came into your room here to wake you up and ask about going on together to the highway."

"So that clears up everything," said Tremaine. "Well, we're out of luck. When Corcoran will get back with help, I can't say. Meantime, we've got two murderous devils on our hands. We might give them the gold and let 'em go with it—only they'd be sure to try and kill us to shut our mouths."

"And I won't give them the gold, either," she said stoutly. "After what's happened? Not much. I'd throw it away, but I'd not let them have it."

"Good for you," he approved.

A voice lifted. "Hello, the house!"

it called. "This is Steve Halloran. You feller with the busted car, speak up! We know you're there."

"Well?" called Tremaine, since concealment was useless.

"I'm coming in. Want to talk. No guns. Meet me halfway, feller?"

"Not much," returned Tremaine. "Not with your partner among the rocks with a rifle! You take the chance and come on. I'm no murderer."

"All right," was the unhesitating response. Next moment, Tremaine saw the tall shape of Halloran striding out into the moonlight, toward the Joshua trees.

CHAPTER IV. VICTORY—DEFEAT.

TREMAINE was forced to admire Halloran. Murderer as he was, killer for gold, he had a nerve of chilled steel to walk forward unarmed after what had happened. Tremaine turned, his hand touched the girl's arm, and he spoke rapidly, softly.

"Here's our chance. Are the windows really boarded up, or are they faked like the doors?"

"They're boarded up," she replied. "Nailed on the outside."

"All right. I'll slip down to the big barrel cactus at the end of the house and talk with him. As soon as he goes back, you get outside and go to the far end and wait for me around the corner. The other man will be watching me and won't see you. Keep close to the house. Understand?"

"Certainly. But why?"

"Get away. Take their car."

"Oh!" Swift eagerness filled her voice, and her hand caught at him. "Good! But what about the gold? I won't run off and let them have it. I won't!"

"I'll attend to that."

"Promise?"

"Of course."

"All right, then," she assented, and loosened her grasp. Outside, Halloran had come to a suspicious halt, halfway to the house.

"Hey, there!" he called. "Coming out or not?"

"Not far enough for your friend to get me, be sure of that," replied Tremaine. "Come on, you're safe enough."

He passed outside. His first idea had been to lie low and let them search, on the chance that they would miss him and Rosita O'Donaju, but he soon realized the fallacy of such a plan. Halloran knew he was here with the girl. Without a rifle, he could not hope to stand off the two men until morning, and Corcoran might not return until then. His present scheme, risky as it was, was none the less much better.

Walking along the shadowed overhang as far as the barrel cactus at the corner, he watched Halloran's approach.

"That's far enough," he called abruptly, when the other was within twenty feet. "What's on your mind?"

The tall, dark man, distinct enough in the moonlight at this distance, halted.

"You're a good liar, feller," he said. "Why didn't you tell us the greasers were here?"

"Didn't know it myself," said Tremaine. "How about your own lies?"

"Never mind that. You hand over the stuff, understand? It's there, right enough."

Tremaine laughed. "Say, Halloran, think you can get away with it? Not much. There'll be posses out for you fellows first thing to-morrow."

Halloran erupted in a blasting

oath. "Think so, do you? Well, feller, you got just one slim chance not to stop lead. The girl's there, ain't she? You tote out that gold and lay it handy for us, and you two can go afoot. We ain't aiming to shoot you up none. With the stuff in our car, we'll take a chance on any posse finding us to-morrow. There's my cards face up. What you say?"

"Think I'd take your word on such a deal?"

"I'm on the level," said Halloran. "To prove it, you can let the girl go over to the hill behind the house, get clear away. Ain't that fair enough?"

It was. Despite everything, Tremaine was inclined to believe that the offer was made in good faith and would be kept to the letter. Halloran and his partner wanted that gold, nothing else. They meant to get it. They knew well enough that the desert always gives up its secrets, and that killing Rosita and Tremaine would merely serve to give them a clear get-away. If they could put the two afoot, they would have a start of a few hours and might reach safety. Also, they knew that Tremaine expected his companion to return.

"Well, is it yes or no?" demanded Halloran.

"Tell you in a minute."

Tremaine was tempted strongly to accept. Left to himself, he would have done so. But, remembering the fierce eagerness in the girl's refusal to give up the gold to these men, he knew she would never assent. And, as though she quite understood his hesitation, her clear voice came floating to the two men; although, as Tremaine glanced around, he could see nothing of her.

"No!" she cried. "You murderer! You shan't have it!"

"There's your answer, Halloran,"

said Tremaine, with a laugh. "I expect our rifles can stand you off until my partner gets back, so run along."

"So that's what you're counting on, is it?" Halloran chuckled amusedly. "Well, think again! Your partner is setting down close to the highway with a twisted ankle. Jim here done met up with him an hour or so after dark and allowed he'd send help, only he came on to join us. That's how come we got two cars here, and your busted one to boot. Want to think twice about it? The offer still stands."

So the third man had another car, eh? Each of them could go, splitting the gold, and be in safety by daybreak. Yes, the offer was probably made in entire good faith.

"Nothing doing," said Tremaine. "Turn around and beat it."

"But—"

"But nothing! Clear out, you damn scoundrel! All you'll get from me will be hot lead, and plenty of it. On your way!"

"All right, then, blast you!" Halloran shouted angrily. "Take the consequences."

HALLORAN turned around and strode rapidly away. As he came to the farthest of the Joshua trees, after passing the body of Ferris, he suddenly hurled himself flat to the ground.

Tremaine leaped to one side almost involuntarily, so closely was he watching. Well that he did. The rifle of the hidden Jim vomited flame, and the bullet plumped into the adobe behind Tremaine. Another bullet and another followed, searching out the shadowy depths under the roof, whistling through the moonlight, spitting into the adobe bricks.

Tremaine made no answer. He had no intention of wasting the few

cartridges in his pistol. Lying full length against the wall, he looked down toward the other end of the building and saw the figure of the girl flicker there and vanish. The firing ceased. He rose, moved cautiously along without a sound, and darted into the room where his own blankets were.

Here he worked swiftly. Going to the boarded-up window at the rear, which was close to the tinder-dry roof shingles above it, he struck a match and held it to the boards that crossed the unglazed window frame. So dry were these, so parched by desert sun and air, that almost at once a tiny flame crept up, gaining swiftly in volume, mounting and reaching with fiery fingers at the shingles above.

His work done, Tremaine left the room and pulled the sagging door nearly shut. The grating sound drew a bullet on the instant—a bullet that shattered the wood beneath his very hand. He jumped away. Both men were firing now, pumping lead at random along the shadowed overhang, and as he moved toward the farther end of the building, Tremaine noted with satisfaction that the precious pair had not spread out. They would think of that soon enough.

He came to the end, slipped around the corner, and found Rosita O'Donoju awaiting him.

"The gold?" she demanded. "Where is it? And are you hurt?"

"Safe. I've set fire to the roof. They'll not see the gold in a hurry! Quick, now; keep the building between us and them! We can get down to the other fork of the canyon and then come around the tip and find their cars. They have two. At worst, my wreck will carry us until the bearings go clear out."

"Fire? You set fire to it? Good!"

she exclaimed, and he heard her ringing silver laugh. What a girl she was!

Having taken his bearings in the moonlight, Tremaine had no great difficulty in keeping the building between them and Halloran. He ran beside the girl. Occasional shots still rang out. Ahead of them now loomed the rising ground, beyond which lay the east fork of the canyon like a vast trench. And looking back as they came among the rocks, Tremaine saw a sudden swift tongue of flame uplift from the building. The tinder-dry roof had burst into fire.

Wild yells indicated that Halloran and Jim had seen the fire. Nothing mattered now. The two of them plunged ahead, as fast as they could clamber among the rocks, and then came to a breathless pause. Before them was the sharp descent into the canyon. They glanced back, and the girl laughed again.

"Before they find the sacks of gold, that place will be a furnace!"

"Exactly," assented Tremaine. "And the gold will still be there if we come back later. Fire won't hurt it. Come along!"

He plunged at the slope, clearly illumined by the high moon. Rosita followed closely. They were half-way down when the girl lost her footing, pitched forward against Tremaine, and as he caught her, they both went sliding and tumbling amid a small avalanche of sand and stones to the bottom of the gulch. Tremaine released her from his grip, rolled over, and sat up to find her staring at him; they broke into a mutual laugh. He leaped up, pulling her to her feet.

"Come along! No time to lose. All their attention will be centered on the house."

This, from their position, was naturally invisible, but as they

headed for the road they could hear the roaring crackle of mounting flames, could see the ruddy glow spreading overhead. Obviously the whole roof of the building was flaming like a furnace.

"That poor old skeleton will be buried at last," exclaimed the girl; then her face changed. "Oh! I forget Hernan——"

"He's somewhere out among the rocks, either dead or alive," said Tremaine. "From what Halloran said, he's dead. Never fear, we'll be back here, young lady! We'll be back with a sheriff and a posse to gather in these rascals, get the gold, and bury Hernan. Run for it!"

Scrambling through the brush of the canyon, they sighted the road ahead, at the fork. The sky was now overspread with the reflected glare of the flames from above, but the parched wood was too dry to give off much smoke. Filled with the prospect of getting away in Halloran's car and crippling pursuit, Tremaine drew away from his companion and broke into a sprint.

In the silver moonlight he could see the three cars ahead, a battered flivver and a small roadster drawn up behind his own car. Above the keen crackle of flames the voice of Halloran reached him, yelling orders at the man Jim; the two of them were probably making desperate efforts to get into the blazing structure and find the gold.

Exultation surged through Tremaine. He flung himself on the roadster, climbed under the wheel, fumbled for the ignition. His wild triumph died in startled realization. He swung from the car just as Rosita ran up, and darted at that ahead. Next minute a ghastly cold hand seemed to settle upon him.

The ignition in both cars was locked, the keys were gone.

CHAPTER V.
FISTS AND KNIVES.

TREMAINE swung on the girl, extricated his own keys, and shoved them at her.

"You can drive? Good! There's the key. Unlock my car and start the engine! We may be able to get away anyhow. How far the car will run, I don't know. I'll disable their cars."

With a nod of comprehension, she was gone.

Tremaine turned, getting out his pistol. Every instant counted now. He knew the difficulty, the delay, if he attacked the tires of those other cars with only a pocketknife, and dared not chance it.

If he had needed any spur, it came at this moment. From the rise above lifted a sharp yell of alarm and anger, followed by a rifle crack. The bullet spattered on the body of the flivver beside him. Their ruse had been discovered.

Tremaine darted to the far side of the two cars. His pistol roared, then a second time. The two cars rocked as a front tire of each was blown out by the bullet. Turning, Tremaine leaped for his own car; the engine was running, Rosita was under the wheel. As he swung in beside her, a bullet smashed the windshield, another went through the rear window.

With a rattle and clank, the car sped away, gathered speed, came into high. A bullet spanged somewhere behind them, two rifles were cracking. But they were moving, and next moment were around a bend of the road, the engine knocking furiously.

"Hurt?" demanded Tremaine, switching on the headlights.

"No. You?"

"Not a chance. Push her. Get as

far as we can—coast wherever possible. That engine sure won't last long."

No matter about the engine, if only it would hold long enough to get them away.

The road dipped, then swung up around a shoulder of the canyon. Tremaine glanced back, and to his dismay sighted a glare of headlights behind. Quite impossible! Yet there were the lights. They must have shot out the other front tire on the flivver, must be coming on the rims in a desperate, mad pursuit, probably thinking Tremaine had got clear with the gold.

The car slowed perceptibly, the engine making a horrible clatter.

"It won't take the gas!" exclaimed Rosita. "We're slowing down."

"No use," said Tremaine calmly. "Frozen pistons. Reach the top of this grade, and we may coast for a bit."

This proved impossible; the grade mounted steadily ahead of them. Tremaine eyed the roadside. To the right, there pitched off a steep descent to the canyon floor. To their left arose a sharp, vertical cut in the hillside.

The car came to a halt.

"Pile out," said Tremaine, and switched off the lights.

"What's the use?" exclaimed the girl. She had caught a flicker of the lights behind. "If they come, they'll know we can't be far——"

"Pile out!"

She obeyed his imperative command, and joined him. He pointed to the slope on their right.

"Climb down. Hide in the brush down there. They'll not know where to look."

"And you?"

"I'll go up the hillside," he said, with a deliberate lie. "Hurry!"

She protested no more, but began

her scrambling, sliding descent. Her figure was quickly out of sight.

TREMAINE stood motionless. In the silence of the night he could hear a banging rattle and an engine roar echoing along the canyon, telling of pursuit. His one thought now was of this girl. For him to climb the hillside above the road was out of the question—it was a sharp, vertical cut. To follow her would mean that two desert-trained men would shortly be on their trail, spreading out, grimly determined to get them. It could have but one ending.

On the other hand, he had one sharp, desperate chance if he remained right here. He knew what it involved, and smiled thinly. Moving around to the front of his car, he stood on the bumper, balanced himself, then crouched.

Headlights swung into sight. The flivver approached with a banging crash of front rims, drew to a wabbling halt as its lights picked up and illumined the apparently deserted car. It stopped twenty feet away.

"Got 'em!" cried Halloran's voice. "Leave the lights on!"

Tremaine stiffened slightly. He knew that three cartridges had been used from this pistol; how many remained, he had no idea.

"They've gone down the slope," said the other man excitedly. The flivver door slammed. "Might be hiding in their car, though—better make sure."

Tremaine stepped down from the bumper, stepped calmly out from the car, faced the two of them. A sharp, startled cry as their rifles swung up. Then his pistol shattered the night.

One shot—and one only. To it, the foremost man pitched headlong down the slope. The hammer clicked emptily. Halloran's rifle

vomited flame, and Tremaine felt the bullet pluck at his shirt. Then, desperate, he hurled the empty pistol.

By good luck more than aim, it flew straight to the mark and struck Halloran across the face as he sighted for a second shot. A wild oath burst from him. His bullet went wild.

Tremaine, following his empty weapon like a whirlwind, knocked up the rifle and closed with the tall desert man. The rifle clattered down. Halloran was fighting for his life now; and knew it.

Tremaine, however, was fighting for more than his own life.

Blow upon blow, hard and fast and furiously. His fists hammered in and might have been smashing against a wooden image for all the effect they produced. Halloran took his punishment, crashed in with terrific return jolts, then brought up his knee in a deadly punch. It drove home.

For an instant Tremaine lashed out in a frenzy of rage. Halloran's head rocked back under a terrific uppercut. A smash square in the mouth followed it, drew blood, staggered the man and broke him. Then a swirl of agony overwhelmed Tremaine, and sharp nausea, from that knee punch. His hands fell. Everything went black before him.

Halloran recovered, yelled something amid a spatter of blood from his split lips, hurled himself on Tremaine. The latter, all but helpless, grappled him desperately, got in one jab that again broke Halloran back, but staggered forward vainly. Halloran swung in, and again Tremaine got his hands on the man, held him in an agonized grip.

Next instant a rush of sand went out from under their feet. Locked together, they pitched from the roadside, fell headlong, struck and

went sliding, rolling, tumbling down the slope until a clump of mesquite brought them up short. Tremaine's head crashed into a rock, and he lay sprawled, arms flung wide, senseless for the moment.

A snarl broke from Halloran, an animallike sound of furious exultation. He came to his knees, straddling the body of Tremaine, and jerked a clasp knife from his hip. The moonlight glittered on the bared blade as it poised in air, struck upon the contorted, bloody, maniac face of the killer.

Squarely into those features smashed a jagged rock, as the figure of Rosita appeared at one side, not a dozen feet away. Halloran pitched over backward and lay motionless.

TREMAINE wakened to the moonlight, to soft hands touching him, pulling him up, aiding him to his feet. Rosita supported him as he stared around, until he glimpsed the figure of Halloran

at one side. He pushed her away, with a swift reawakening of energy.

Coming to his knees, he removed the man's belt, strapped his ankles together, caught up the knife and ripped away part of the frayed shirt, lashed the hard wrists firmly. Then, panting, he came to his feet again and put out his hand.

"Rosita! Good for you, princess! It's over——"

"Yes," she said quietly. "Yes. And there is your partner coming; at least, a car is coming from the highway."

He looked up at the distantly flashing headlights, laughed suddenly, and swung his arm about her shoulders.

"Come along!"

"That's a good slogan," she exclaimed. "A good slogan, the best ever!"

"What?" asked Tremaine.

"What you just said." A laugh touched her face in the moonlight. "Come along!"

STRANGER THAN FICTION

FIVE men at Murray Bay, P. Q., Canada, are now awaiting trial after they had rescued from drowning the two detectives who had arrested them. The five men are held on the charge of an attempted lynching.

In the back bush country near Clarke City a group of lumberjacks became enraged over the methods of the boss culler. The culler is a man who accepts or rejects the logs which the men cut. This particular culler, according to the lumbermen, did not give them a fair measure on the logs they chopped. Accordingly they procured a rope and decided to hang the culler. The culler escaped and fled to Murray Bay where he swore out a warrant for the arrest of the lumbermen.

Two detectives started north and by sleighs and long tracks over icy trails reached the camp. With the men the officers started on the back trail. Near Shelter Bay they had to cross a frozen river. The prisoners crossed safely, but the ice broke under the two officers and they were plunged into the icy water. At once the five prisoners turned to the help of the two officers and rescued their arresting officers.

LAZY DEE LEARNS HOW

By Conrad Richter

AS usual, "Lazy" Dee kept eating long after the others were through. The cook of the Circle B didn't growl, but Mr. Oliver, the new owner, did. He was a short, bustling rancher, all business, always on the prod, even when sitting down as he was now. Lazy Dee said he wouldn't be surprised any day to see the "Old Man" blow up like a setting hen hatching out dynamite. He kept glaring to-night at the slouching cowboy. It was plain that the easy ways of Lazy Dee got his goat.

"Wonder you wouldn't forget to breathe sometime!" he snapped.

Lazy Dee took a few more leisurely bites. He looked up innocently.

"Talkin' to me?"

"I was a couple minutes ago!" barked the owner.

Lazy Dee's jaws went on placidly moving. He was bow-legged and gaunt. His drooping sandy mustaches rose and fell as he chewed. From time to time their scraggly ends held drops of coffee. When he had cleaned up six pieces of steak done to the shade of his black hat, and emptied three enormous cups of coffee, his blue eyes, usually far-away as distant mountain ranges, came back to the here and now.



Old tricks are best for
an old dog.

"I seen to-day where some hombre got away with that pet Three V's hoss a yourn," he drawled.

The rancher jumped from his chair as if it had suddenly gone hot.

"You what!" he barked.

Lazy Dee took a biscuit, broke it apart, and mopped up the gravy remaining on his tin plate. He spoke with the biscuit stuffed in his mouth.

"I only seen the tracks. You recollect that Three V's hoss had a broken front shoe. Somebody had him roped. The other hoss was a stranger to these parts."

The face of the owner of the Circle B became streaked with purple. "You mean to tell me," he shouted, "you found my top horse was stolen, then came back without him and spent half an hour saltin' away chuck before you say 'beans!' And you call yourself a slam-up hand!"

"I reckon," said Lazy Dee apologetically, "I ain't the slam-up kind." He wiped his roan mustaches with his bandanna and yawned. "Besides, my britches is plumb wore through. I kinda figgered I'd go to town tomorrow——"

"Well, just figure some more!" snapped Mr. Oliver. He began to pace up and down the room. His eyes threw off sparks. "To-morrow morning," he announced, "you're getting up before daylight. And you're not coming back till we get that horse!"

"We!" blinked the cowhand.

"You and me!" barked the Old Man. "I'm showin' you how we handle horse thieves where I come from. And if you can't learn anything from me, I've got no job for you on the Circle B."

Lazy Dee looked dejected.

"Now if you want a top hand after hoss thieves," he began, "Bill Flood got me busted wide open. I recollect one time——"

"Never mind what you recollect!" interjected the rancher. "I can let Bill Flood ride all day on the job, but I wouldn't trust you any farther than I could see you."

Lazy Dee's roan mustaches appeared to sag.

"That bein' the case," he mourned, "I might as well get a little sleep." He slouched back to his bunk. Slowly he pulled off his boots and opened his shirt at the neck. His toilet for the night thus completed, he slipped under his old chicken-skin quilt despite the mildness of the evening. Not long afterward, his buzzing snores filled the room.

The Old Man stood with his short legs far apart, listening.

"To-morrow I'm makin' that hombre sweat blood for the first time in his life!" he promised the bunk house. "He's going to learn that no natural-born loafer can hole up with this outfit."

A voice answered. The Old Man glared. In another moment he realized it was Lazy Dee talking in his sleep.

"Let the ole range bull beller!" his soft Texas voice drawled. "Neck him to a pina vita! Tell him he's the smartest rancher west o' the Rio Grande. That'll tickle him on the jingle bob. Once I knew another fella by name of Oliver. He got his neck stretched for cow stealin'——"

One of the hands snickered. Old Man Oliver left for the ranch house, slamming the door as he went until it shook the rafters. Behind him Lazy Dee stopped muttering, and sat up in his bunk.

"Who shot?" he blinked.

A roar of laughter greeted him. Even Riley, the pet foreman the Old Man had brought from Arizona, grinned.

"Reckon that was Ironface Trayner," said Bill Flood, giving the

name of a celebrated bad man in New Mexico.

"Well, next time," informed Dee sleepily, "tell Ironface to file off his eyelashes." He yawned and rolled himself up again in his chicken-skin quilt.

PROTESTING that it couldn't be after midnight, Lazy Dee finally crawled out next morning. After several cups of black coffee, he was ready to accompany the restless and sarcastic Old Man. He led the way to a canyon where blue grass would soon be curing red on the stem. In the faint light a trail could be seen. One horse had had a broken shoe. The other had been freshly shod.

The Old Man examined everything officiously. Then he nodded.

"From now on, you're followin' me!" he barked. "I'm headin' this posse, and I'm settin' no pace of a calf. Savvy?"

Lazy Dee squinted lugubriously.

"I savvy if we run the legs off our hosses, we'll have a hell of a long ways to pack our saddles."

"That so?" shot back his employer. "Well, on this trip, keep your eyes on me. Maybe you can learn something!"

"Mebbe," said Lazy Dee humbly. "I'm allus willin' to learn."

They followed hard on the trail of the stolen horse until sundown, hobbled their mounts, made a dry camp, and were in the saddle again at daybreak. The sun was up several hours when they topped a ridge and saw in the wide flats before them the winding course of a river, fringed thickly with cottonwoods. Halfway down the slope, the Old Man pointed.

"Yonder's our horse thief now!" he shouted. High on the mesa to the west could be seen a small cloud of

dust and a black spot that now and then became two. The rancher threw a look of exultation at his puncher and spurred his big gray into the lead.

Lazy Dee brought up the rear, his sandy mustaches fluttering in the wind. The late summer day was hot, and it was good to gallop out of the sun into the cool shade of the trees. The hoofprints turned directly north under the trees, but the Old Man kept galloping straight toward the river.

"Hey," he shouted a moment later with all the strength of his lungs, "where you figure you're going?"

"Yore Three V's hoss went this a way," Lazy Dee answered, pulling up his roan. "If I was you——"

"Who's runnin' this outfit!" interrupted the rancher. "Nobody but a fool would follow that trail up the river and back again when he could cut across here and save time!"

"I reckon I'm a fool," said Lazy Dee meekly. He made no movement to change his direction.

"All right, go your own way!" yelled the Old Man. "Loaf under these trees all you like. I'm tellin' you right now if you don't meet me at that cedar across the river on the mesa——"

"It's a juniper," called Lazy Dee.

"I don't care what the hell it is!" bellowed the rancher. "If you don't meet me at that tree and no place else, you can turn plumb around and pack yourself back—you're fired!" Scratching his big gray, he plunged on to the river.

Lazy Dee sluggishly followed the trail of the broken shoe. It was mighty pleasant here under the cottonwoods. He took off his hat and let the cool breeze course through his sandy hair. About a mile up the river, the trail turned into the muddy stream where strata of red

rock cropped up and afforded a shallow bottom. Lazy Dee reached down from the saddle to wet his handkerchief as the horse splashed through. With the cooling bandanna in the crown of his hat, he loped his roan back to the juniper, utterly ignoring the shouts that came from the river.

"Hey, you moss-faced idiot! Are you plumb blind?" yelled a voice.

LAZY DEE glanced down where a gray horse and his rider were stuck in the muddy stream. But he made no movement in their direction.

"You good for nothin' jughead!" bellowed the rancher. "Can't you see I'm bogged down?"

"Shore, I can see you good," Lazy Dee called back affably.

"You long-coupled cotton picker!" blazed the Old Man. "Why aren't you down here pullin' me out?"

"Can't do it," Lazy Dee regreted. "You tole me I was to meet you at this juniper and no place else."

From the middle of the muddy river rose a stream of profanity that probably had never before been heard at this remote spot.

"I'm orderin' you to come down!" raved the owner of the Circle B, "or I'm takin' a pot shot at you with my derringer."

Lazy Dee started his mount down the bank.

"If you order me to meet you some place else, that's different," he said.

At the edge of the treacherous stream, the nervous roan's hoofs sank into the silt and sand. Taking the rope from his saddle, Lazy Dee swung it leisurely around his head and sent the noose halfway across the stream where it landed about the bogged gray's neck.

"Plump it under his tail and hook it on yore saddle horn!" Dee called.

"Don't you try to go orderin' me

around!" snapped back the Old Man, but he did as Lazy Dee suggested.

"He ain't in so bad." The cowhand observed the gray critically. "I reckon I can pull him with one rope. If it busts, we still got yourn."

"Pull me out and stop your speech makin'!" enjoined the rancher.

"You don't expect I can pull him out with you on top!" drawled Lazy Dee.

"What you want me to do?—bog down on foot and drown!" shouted Mr. Oliver.

"Hell, you won't drown under a rope." The puncher took several extra dalleys about his horn and turned his mount until the rope had tightened. "If I was you I'd get down in the drink and climb that wash line to shore before he gets in too deep to haul him out."

The rancher swore he wouldn't, but the lapping of the muddy waves on the ribs of his mount finally had its effect. With muttered imprecations, he gripped the taut rope and descended into the shallow flood. At once he floundered deeply into the mud. His grip on the tightened rope saved him. Pulling out one leg after the other, he presently climbed up on dry land, a picture of mud-caked and bedraggled legs.

"You snake!" he flared at the slouching hand who had rescued him. "You knew this river all the time."

"You never asked me if I knew it or not," said Lazy Dee. "This piece of mud and quicksand got the handsome handle of Puerco. They's four Puercos I knows of; the——"

"I don't care how many you know!" snapped the owner of the Circle B.

Lazy Dee's face was unreadable. He leaned down and softly slapped the neck of his roan.

"Stidy now, ole hoss!" he encouraged. "Ack like you was that gray a-haulin' yoreself outa the drink."

The roan had good bottom and a head chock-full of horse sense. He left his weight gradually against his cinches. The saddle rocked backward. Leather creaked. A splash from behind announced that the gray had begun to move. Another splash! The gray was coming faster now, snorting loudly, his front hoofs striking high. In a short time he was out on dry land, trembling from mane to tail and blowing with dilated nostrils.

Mr. Oliver dropped the stick of driftwood with which he had been trying to scrape some of the mud from his legs. Throwing Lazy Dee's rope from his mount, he climbed up into the saddle.

"Pull up that rope!" he growled. "Let's get out of this!"

Lazy Dee took his time coiling the rope.

"If I was you, boss, I'd let him stand a while. He's shakin' like he was struck by lightnin'."

"By Harry," snapped the Old Man, "he's had all the standin' in that river I'm goin' to give him! You comin' with me or aren't you?"

"I'm comin'," said Lazy Dee humbly.

THE mesa on this side of the river was badly cut with canyons. The rider with two horses had disappeared by now, but after several miles the Old Man shouted. He had picked up the broken shoe trail of his stolen horse. He forced his gray into a hard run and kept it up until a figure on foot rose suddenly from one of the lesser arroyos that drained the plateau. He held up both hands, and with an exclamation of irritation, the rancher stopped his horse.

"What the dangnation you want!"

The man on foot answered with a torrent of mixed English and Spanish. He was an unshaven Mexican. The Old Man claimed he could make nothing out of it.

"He says," translated Lazy Dee, "he was drinkin' at a spring in one a these canyons when his hoss got away. He hadn't rid him much afore to-day. He asks if one of us'll rope him."

"Tell him we got no time to-day," snapped the rancher and started on.

"Wait a minute, boss!" drawled Lazy Dee. "Mebbe you've never been afoot in this country?"

"No!" barked the Old Man. "And if he was any kind of a rider, he wouldn't be either!"

Lazy Dee's mild blue eyes resigned themselves.

"Ride ahead, and I'll catch you."

"You will, like hell!" roared the Old Man. "I started out yesterday figurin' I could teach you how to throw yourself in your collar and dig, but I'm beginnin' to see nobody can teach you nothin'. You let me go into that river and bog down while you loafed in the woods. Now you're aimin' to lay down here and snooze after you rope his horse. I'm stakin' you to a last chance. You're ridin' from here with me, or you're plumb fired!"

"You got me hind foremost, boss!" Lazy Dee protested. "I can't leave no hombre afoot——"

"That's settled!" snapped the rancher. "You're not workin' for the Circle B. Go back and tell Riley I dropped you off the pay roll. I wouldn't give you a job now for seven hundred dollars!" Wheeling his gray, the testy rider galloped off.

Lazy Dee blinked after him solemnly. He found the runaway saddle horse grazing in the second canyon

as promised. When he had roped him, the Mexican offered profuse thanks, shaking both hands and calling him *compadre* and *libertador*. Lazy Dee gave a lingering glance at a thick bed of grass that would have been luxurious for a half hour's nap.

"Didn't see a white-footed black hoss to-day?" he asked casually in English.

"No, señor," hastened the Mexican. "Not see any black horse weeth two white feet."

Lazy Dee's mild blue eyes froze.

"You lyin' *pelado*! How'd you savvy he had two white feet? You call me *compadre* and *libertador*, and then you lie to me like a Navajo!"

The young Mexican was instantly abject.

"Dispense me, señor! See him thees morning. But weeth heem a *muy* bad hombre! Not like get in trouble weeth *muy* bad hombre."

Lazy Dee took out his gun.

"I'm a *muy* bad hombre myself," he announced. "Jes' for that, I'm agoin' to bury you here in this canyon."

The Mexican flung himself on his knees.

"No, no, señor!" he begged. "Am *muy* poor hombre! Have wife and three *nicos*. *Muy chicos*, señor. *Muy hungry*." His stormy face brightened with a ray of hope. "Maybe, señor, you like queeck way over thees country. Nobody else he knows thees way. *Muy* bad hombre and black horse go long way around to Carritos."

"This hoss thief from Carritos?" queried Dee.

"Not say he ees thief of the horse," countered the Mexican. "But see heem in Carritos much times."

Lazy Dee put back his gun.

"You take me the short cut to Carritos, and I'll let you off this time."

AFTER a mile or two the slouching cowboy tied his reins together and hooked them over the saddle horn. Pulling his hat well down over his eyes so it would not be brushed off by a tree limb, he dropped his chin on his breast and went to sleep as only the saddle veteran can. His roan, under the guidance of the Mexican, slid down canyon sides, threaded rocky trails on precipitous cliffs, trotted up and down the sandy beds of arroyos, and loped across stretches of smooth mesa. Through it all Lazy Dee slept peacefully. He leaned mechanically forward going uphill, and bent subconsciously backward on the downward slope.

The sun was going down when the sudden silence wakened him. The Mexican was still with him. His brown face held open admiration.

"El señor he ride better asleep than *muchos hombres* awake!" He pointed an earth-colored hand to the adobe walls of a town against a green mountain. "Is Carritos!" he announced. He shook his head. "*Muy* bad place, señor!"

"That's what they tell me," drawled Lazy Dee. He produced a silver dollar which brought out the Mexican's teeth.

Almost immediately the man was gone, vanished into a near-by canyon, and Lazy Dee went on alone. He had been to Carritos once before, but not for long. The town, originally one of the remote Mexican villages scattered through the inaccessible mountain districts of New Mexico, had attracted its quota of white men who were wanted elsewhere. Gold miners went there from the hills when they had dust to spend. The last Lazy Dee had heard of it, Carritos boasted of a marshal whom the Dodge City authorities were anxious to see.

It was one of the few Mexican towns without a church or plaza. A stream of pure mountain water ran down the center of the main street, but the town was far from cleanly. Dee let his roan drink at the stream, then tied him in front of the Long Horse Saloon with the water murmuring at his tail.

"I shore could sleep with that *rio* talkin' to me all night," he admired. "On the other hand"—he drew his hand thirstily across his lips—"when it comes to drinkin', I figger I can do better."

He had been in the Long Horse only a short time when his roan outside gave a nicker. A little later in walked the bustling, energetic figure of the owner of the Circle B. His face was set for business, and his eyes flashed belligerently from beneath his bushy eyebrows.

"Lo, stranger," drawled Lazy Dee companionably. "Where you been all day?"

The rancher glared.

"You musta laid down in one a them canyons and snoozed a spell," Lazy Dee suggested.

The Old Man turned his back squarely. Dee's mild blue eyes grew far away. He pulled on one of his scraggly roan mustaches.

"If makin' time's what yo're after," he tried hopefully, "mebbe I can give you a little information——"

The Old Man whirled around.

"If I'm lookin' for any, I reckon I can get it myself!" he snapped. "You'll do me a favor by not talkin' to me. I don't know you. Never saw you before. And I have no interest to see you again." With that he ordered a glass of whisky, tossed it down, paid for it, and stamped out into the street.

When he had gone, the barkeeper's small black eyes twinkled at Lazy Dee's solemn face.

"Don't sound like he wanted to make your acquaintance, pardner."

LAZY DEE stood at the bar drinking ruefully while the sounds of a commotion came from the street. The barkeeper looked up.

"Startin' a ruckus early to-night!"

The noise came closer. A big man with a marshal's star came into the lighted room of the Long Horse, pulling an indignant and protesting prisoner. Lazy Dee gazed without a change of expression. It was the small, energetic owner of the Circle B.

"Let go of me, you big steer!" he was shouting.

"Hey, Trayner!" called the marshal. "This hombre was startin' off with that new black hoss of yourn when I roped him."

A figure started forward from one of the rear tables. He was as thick through the chest as across the shoulders, but for all his weight he moved with a deadly smoothness. His face looked hard and expressionless as a cliff, but the eyes that peered out from it reminded Lazy Dee of a rattlesnake's.

"I stole nobody's horse!" the owner of the Circle B was protesting loudly. "That black horse belongs to me. I found him hitched up the street, and I took him."

"Ironface" Trayner kept on coming forward. Men got rapidly out of his way. He did not halt until he stood facing the little rancher.

"You aimin' to say I stole yore hoss?"

The Old Man gave him a glance. He swallowed.

"I'm not sayin' anybody stole him. All I'm sayin' is that he's my own horse."

Trayner's eyes narrowed.

"What's yore brand?"

"Circle B," answered the rancher.

"But it's a Three V's horse. I bought him from Charlie Chisum at Socorro."

"Got yore bill of sale?"

"It's at the ranch," declared the owner of the Circle B. "I can get it here in four days if the marshal holds the horse."

"You mean," came back Trayner in a contemptuous voice, "that's how you figger you can get outa this hoss-stealin' scrape?"

"Where's your proof it isn't my horse?" cried the rancher.

Trayner showed the edges of his teeth.

"I can raise plenty men in this town to swear whose hoss it is. If you got any hombre who claims to know you and yore hoss and brand, call him out!"

The Old Man's eyes flew at once to the figure of Lazy Dee slouched up against the bar. Trayner's glance followed the rancher's. He gave a mirthless smile.

"You figger because that sleepy-lookin' waddy at the bar is a stranger in town, he might lie for you. Well, he won't. I heard you claim a little while ago you didn't know him and never seen him before."

Around the saloon a number of listeners nodded. The Old Man's face took on a greenish pallor. Trayner gloated at the change.

"Mebbe by this time," his voice purred, "you can figger out you was mistaken about that hoss?"

The Old Man's temper, always ready to go off at the touch of a gibe, refused to stay down.

"I couldn't be mistaken!" he cried hotly. "The Three V's brand is burned on his shoulder. Any man can see it."

Trayner's eyes became deadly black spots like the barrel ends of a pair of rifles. He shifted his belt, which act caused the scabbards and

their protruding gun butts to sway significantly. He spoke again.

"I give you one more chance to say you was mistook!"

It became very still in the saloon. At the bar, Lazy Dee's slouching posture had not changed, but every second behind those drowsy-looking eyes, his brain had been working. He knew from the hard faces and conspicuous gun butts around him that if he supported the Old Man after what the latter had said, the chances were that neither of them, let alone the horse, would get back to the Circle B. The Old Man was in a tight place. If he gave in and admitted he was wrong about the horse being his, he might be strung up as a horse thief. If he stubbornly insisted on his rights, Trayner would kill him quicker than a horse could twitch his ears.

THE watching cowhand from the Circle B saw slow obstinate persistence returning to his employer's eyes. He knew instinctively that the Old Man was going to insist on his ownership of the black. He saw the rancher glare back at Trayner defiantly. His mouth started to open.

"I been tryin' to figger out," drawled Lazy Dee suddenly, "where I seen this short yearlin' afore." He left his wearied position at the bar and came slouching into the tableau. "I seen him somewheres, but I been so many places and done things I can't recollect."

The rancher closed his mouth to glare at Lazy Dee. Trayner's lips twitched.

"I reckon you savvy," he gloated to the prisoner, "what we do to hoss thieves!"

The Old Man choked. All obstinacy died from his hot face. He seemed powerless to speak.

"Come on, boys!" yelled a pock-faced Swede. "Let's give Ironface's hoss thief a new necktie!"

Light suddenly dawned in Lazy Dee's eyes. He held up a hand.

"Hol' yore hosses, hombres! I jes' recollect now where I seen this son of Satan. I been puzzlin' why he shied away and didn't want to make my acquaintance. Now I got the hull business roped and hog tied. You mind when that Santa Fé train was held up and a couple mail clerks killed by Kid Creasy and that sawed-off varmint, Stumpy McGrair! I used to know Stumpy once when he worked for the Mule Shoe outfit in the Mogollons. And boys, this here hoss thief that claimed he never seen me afore is Stumpy McGrair, the hombre they've been huntin' everywhere, from the Gila to the Nueces."

"Stumpy McGrair!" a dozen men muttered. Although few had ever seen him, his name was notorious throughout the Southwest.

"Cuidado, marshal!" warned Lazy Dee. "Handle him easy! Of all the ornery hombres, he's the orneriest. Shoot you as soon as eat his breakfast!" With a sudden movement, the lanky puncher reached forward and took from the rancher's hip pocket the derringer he carried. "Figgered he didn't have a gun, did you, marshal! About a minute more and he'd 'a' plugged somebody. Stumpy never goes out nights without his derringer." He shoved the short barrel into the speechless prisoner's face. "Where's your side pardner, Kid Creasy, holein' out at? Tell me straight, or by the holy San Pedro, I'll blow yore nose out the back door with yore own lead and powder!"

The mute rancher only glared and swallowed.

"Ain't they got a reward out for

Stumpy McGrair?" asked the marshal with a glitter in his eyes.

"A fortune, you mean!" came back Lazy Dee. "Last I heard the Santa Fé put up enough dust to lay a gold walk down from Raton to Taos." He scowled. "Jes' my luck to have to split it with somebody."

"You split it?" growled the marshal. "Who caught him?"

"Yeah, for hoss thievin'!" derided Lazy Dee. "Where'd you be at without me tellin' who he was! You'd have him strung up on a tree curin' like jerked beef, and the Santa Fé wouldn't give you two bits."

"Hol' on!" came the low hard voice of Ironface Trayner. "That hombre belongs to me. He was stealin' my hoss."

The marshal shifted uneasily.

"We'll split it two ways, Trayner!"

"Three ways, you mean!" corrected Lazy Dee.

Trayner shoved his feet slightly farther apart. He laid his hands on his hips, only inches from the gun butts below. He gazed at the two men who offered to share with him. Cold and insulting contempt was in his eyes.

"He's my man, and I'm splittin' with nobody!" he announced.

The marshal's face showed venomous disappointment, but he made no reply. Trayner scorned him a moment, then turned his hostile gaze on Lazy Dee.

"Yo're ridin' along, stranger, down to the Santa Fé in the maw'nin'. And yo'll shore need plenty of prayin' if this hombre ain't Stumpy McGrair."

THEY fed their horses and left Carritos at daybreak for the Santa Fé offices at Gallup. It was an all-day ride. The Old Man was roped to his own saddle. Tray-

ner rode the stolen black with the two white feet. Lazy Dee rocked along on his roan.

Once they had left Carritos for the Upper Navajo country, all streams disappeared. At the first water hole, Trayner covered the dozing cowboy and took his gun.

"I don't know you, Sleepy," he announced, "and I'm takin' no chances."

"Shore, I'll be much obliged for packin' that hunk a iron for me," yawned Lazy Dee.

"You two keep standin' yore hosses where you are till I get myself a drink," warned Trayner.

He bent to suck water from the small patch of warmish liquid that reflected the blue of the desert sky. Lazy Dee seemed about half asleep, but the moment Trayner's lips touched the water, the slouching cowhand's eyes lost their drowsy haze.

"When you finish swillin' that water, stick 'em up!" he drawled.

At the sound of the last three words, Trayner threw himself from the water. One hand raced for a scabbard. It went no farther. His murderous eyes found a derringer in the lazy cowboy's hand. Moreover the far-away look in those mild blue eyes had vanished. There was something in the set of the face behind those scraggly mustaches that sent both of Trayner's arms in the air.

"You pack more savvy than I grubstaked you with," Lazy Dee drawled. "I'd shore give six bits to see a dead hoss thief hit the water. Fact is, I'd give a hull peso to see how a greedy hawg like you could splash."

Hatred burned in Trayner's eyes. He glared at Lazy Dee and ground out:

"Where'd you have that popgun?"

"This?" repeated Lazy Dee. "Why this kid shootin' iron belongs to

Stumpy McGrair. You recollect I took it from him in the Long Horse last night. Bein' I hadn't any extra scabbard, I packed it in my hat. Like most short-sighted hoss thieves, you neglected to pull off the ole top-piece."

Trayner cursed loudly. Lazy Dee grinned. With his left hand he fetched out a knife and cut the rancher's ropes.

"Stumpy," he suggested coldly, "you might make yoreself useful by crawlin' outa that saddle and shuckin' the gent whose hoss you tried to steal. Any hombre that can't keep track a guns better'n him ain't got right to 'em. Likewise, you might keep standin' clear while you does it. The first wigglin' of a finger outa him, and the hosses in this part a the country'll be a heap safer."

The officious little rancher gingerly removed the two guns from Trayner's belt.

"And you call yoreself a humdinger, Stumpy!" drawled Lazy Dee. "You oughta tend to business better. He's shore got my gun stickin' around him yit, and Pontius Pilate knows how many more. Pat him from hoof to forelock. Look in his boots and toppie. I'll shore have to learn you, Stumpy, how to get down in yore collar and dig. Otherwise I gotta plumb fire you off the pay roll."

When the third gun had been brought to light and appropriated, Lazy Dee addressed his prisoner, a faintly humorous drawl adding a fine edge of contempt to his voice.

"What me and Stumpy oughta do, hoss thief, is hunt up a husky cedar and swing yore feet clear. Bein' we hate to lose a good rope, we're lettin' you go. All you gotta do is roll yore saddle and bridle off that white-footed black that all them hombres in Carritos could swear was yourn.

Mebbe they'll figger they was mistook when they see you hoofin' it home. And mebbe after you pack that saddle half a day yo'll come to the idee that stealin' a good hoss don't pay. Personally, I'm hopin' you keep it up and get hung plenty."

When Trayner, with a scowling face, had taken saddle and bridle off the black, Lazy Dee and the unusually silent owner of the Circle B rode off. No rope was necessary to lead the stolen black back to the ranch. Delighted to be back again with horses of his outfit, he followed eagerly.

IT was about daylight the following morning when, after riding all night, they came in sight of the welcome lights of the Circle B bunk house. All hands including the cook turned out to greet them.

"Hi, Lazy, you ole wampus cat!" called Bill Flood. "D'ye get learned how to cut out hoss thieves and hog tie 'em like seven hundred dollars?"

"Shore did," assured the slouching cowhand placidly. "Stumpy showed me the hull works to a fare-you-well. I got learned so good I'm gettin' off to-morrow to go to town to buy me a new pair of britches."

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Your Handwriting Tells



Conducted
By

Shirley Spencer

If you are just starting out to find your first job; or if you are dissatisfied with your present occupation and are thinking of making a change; or if the character of your friends—as revealed in their handwriting—interests you; or if, as an employer, you realize the advantage of placing your employees, in factory or office, in positions for which they are best suited—send a specimen of the handwriting of the person concerned to Handwriting Expert, Street & Smith's Complete Stories, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., and inclose a stamped, addressed envelope. All samples submitted will be analyzed by Shirley Spencer, and her expert opinion will be given, free of charge.

The coupon, which you will find at the end of this department, must accompany each handwriting specimen which you wish to have read. If possible, write with black ink.

Your communications will be held in strict confidence. Only with your permission will individual cases be discussed in the department, either with or without illustrations. It is understood that under no circumstances will the identity of the person concerned be revealed.

Miss Spencer will not assume any responsibility for the specimens of handwriting, though every precaution will be taken to insure their return.

A. F., California: That vertical, almost backhand slant and the rounded, large lower loops are the

of "Complete Stories"—
I there one saw
let. Would it be pos-
sible to tell me if
my talent for

reflection of a very independent, proud, ambitious, and individual per-

son, with strong material tastes, high standards, and strong dramatic instincts.

Because of your dramatic talent you might succeed in writing, but I suggest publicity work, journalism, or feature writing rather than fiction. With training you might write plays. Constructive ability is shown.

You are inclined to be indolent, and so is your husband, according to his writing which you sent with your own. Tell him that procrastination followed with spurts of combativeness keep him from success. He is naturally lazy and opinionated—which keeps him from mental growth and development.

The inflated upper loops, especially on the *I*'s, tell this story, and those lancelike *t*'s, which occasionally show up among the very short ones, with *t*-bars that don't always

*I'm in my life
I a failure and
I die would like
? out of the rest.*

cross the stem of the *t* are the signs which tell about his love of argument and lack of action. Like you, he is proud and desires personal success and appreciation.

B. A., Los Angeles: There is very little difference in the "different" ways you write. You forget that the eye of the graphologist is trained to discount surface differences and see the fundamental structure of the script. The slight change in slant is due to a more natural expression of your affections. Though you were taught the vertical, upright slant in England, that national reserve does not come natural to you. You are affectionate and kind and these qualities show even in the upright script.

*They taught this way
Sometimes I write this
this, each comes go
to me, does this
in particular.*

Intuition is shown in the breaks in the words. Artistic taste and a love

of form and outline which gives you talent for design are expressed in your printed forms. You didn't say anything about your vocation, but architecture or something similar in the constructive arts or sciences would suit you best.

Geo. C. S., Wisconsin: The desire to write is universal, so one has to discount a little in considering writing as a career. It is a medium of expression which brings great satisfaction, but the financial returns are not as satisfying as one would think. There are some best sellers who do amass a fortune, but most of them are exceptions to the rule. A writing job is something else again. One can earn a living, but usually one is never satisfied and is always wishing for or looking toward the time when he can chuck the routine and do freelance writing.

With that little lecture I am now prepared to tell you frankly, but kindly, that I do not find literary ability in your handwriting. This doesn't mean that you couldn't succeed very well at the type of advertising writing which you have done.

*re appeared in Trade
been compensated.
life I have desired to
writers' fire is now
I want to write for
titles and promote.*

You are essentially the promoter and salesman type, so have been doing the right kind of work all these years. You now have more experience than many and so can write about it. Having something to say is half the battle. However, I advise sticking to business articles. You have business ability and those small,

tight formations show thrift and a sense of values. Though your strokes are jerky and have the age tremor, you still have a great deal of vitality and energy.

James R. O., Iowa: Another with artistic inclination! Well, those circle i-dots place you in the artistic

*a coaching as a
other position wh
ugged and strong
why discuss all
this writing in
you so much*

class, but suggest the applied rather than the constructive arts. I can see the love of sports in those extra long lower loops and it is too bad that your physical injury makes it impossible for you to continue with athletic work.

If you continue your music and drawing studies you should try to concentrate and develop more mentally. Your very rounded script, backhand and slow with tied-up letter formations, shows a deliberate, slow-thinking person, reserved, indolent, and mentally immature.

R. E. R., Saskatchewan: Your letter heading of a fur ranch hardly prepared me for the text of your letter—in which you say you want to be a song and story writer!

The rhythm in your script is indicative of your love of music and the rhymed songs which come so easy to you. Though you do not

write the true literary script, you do have many traits that would help you to develop into a fiction writer.

*to be interested
to the exception
it so far have
with success in
songs are always
and 35. a man*

You have emotion, sympathy, keen perceptions, fine sensibilities, ardor, imagination, and the gift of easy expression. Your faults are that you are too careless and don't bother enough with details. These are natural faults when one is versatile and quick. Take more pains with your writing—don't be content with the first draft or the second. Work for finish and polish. Hold down your visionary nature to more practical routine, and conserve your energies. You have the balance in your favor.

The coupon below and a stamped, self-addressed envelope must accompany each specimen sent in for analysis. Canadians may send loose stamp or coin.

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Name
Address





GET TOGETHER!

Do You Know What You Want?

SOME years ago a much talked of play was called, "They Knew What They Wanted." The trouble with so many people is that they do not know what they want—in life or magazines. This habit of lazy discontent on the part of the average person is frequently a hang-over from childhood. Most of us can recall some occasion in our young life when we have proved a nuisance to ourselves and the rest of the family by a day of long discontent with food, clothes, and playthings. The situation is admirably summed up by the harried mother

when her husband asks, "What's the matter with Johnny again? He won't eat his supper and is sullen and silent." "Everything and nothing," replies his tired wife. "He doesn't know what he wants." Thousands of people go through life, sullen, sour, and dissatisfied because they do not know what they want. Their discontent settles on them like a chronic disease and eventually becomes a habit. In a vague and dissatisfied frame of mind they tell you that all they want is to be very happy, but they never sling their ropes on the neck of happiness.

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Ads

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Inside back cover

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Back cover