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The Island of Lost Men

by

MALCOLM WHEELER • NICHOLSON

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"Oh, Jack," she told me, "I'm nearly sick. Everybody is having a terrible time. We can't dance or anything."

"Well," I offered, gathering my courage, "I'll play for them to dance."

"You!" she exclaimed. "Why, you can't play, Jack. It's awfully sweet of you, but . . ."

"Watch me," I said. I faced the room and called out: "Folks, I'm going to play."

There was a chorus of good-humored hooting.

"Did anybody else hear what I did?" Ed laughed.

"Jack's a magician," Bill announced. "It's all done with mirrors."

I played up to the farcical mood, swept my hand over my hair and made a few grotesque flourishes. There was a gale of laughter.

Suddenly I swung into the joyous notes of "Happy Days." This was real playing, and suddenly the laughter ceased. At last I felt the thrill of being able to entertain, of *contributing* to the party.

When I stopped there was a moment of silence, and then I was deluged with questions. *When had I learned to play? Where had I studied? Who was my teacher? Where had I been hiding my talent all these years?*

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I told them the whole story, how I had always longed to be able to play the piano but had never had the patience to sit down for hours and practice. Besides I could not have afforded to pay a private teacher.

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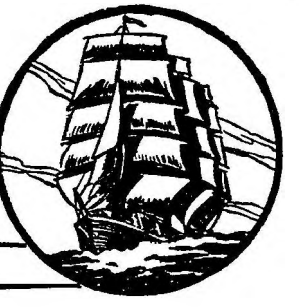

June 10th, 1931

R. de S. HORN
Editor

FREDERICK CLAYTON
Associate Editor

CONTENTS

Cover——Edgar F. Wittmack

Vol. CXXXV, No. 5 — Whole No. 611

The "Major" Returns!

A Story of Diamond Mining in Africa

The "Major" Faces a Wily Chinese Crook

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TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

JUNE 10th 1931

The Die-Hard

THERE is something deeply moving about a die-hard. It doesn't matter whether he is a discarded reactionary politician; a defeated prize fighter; a polar explorer who has failed in his grim determination only because of factors outside of his control; or a gallant war ace who is being shot down. Something about the indomitable fighting spirit of these types is inspiring, whether you believe in what they're aiming at or not.

More remarkable still is this purposefulness when it is exhibited, not by a man but by an animal, or—even more so—by an inanimate object. We're thinking about a ship.

Many ships have gone down manifesting a spirit of gameness to the end; but none, as we see it, has ever struggled and fought so gamely as the tough little destroyer *Torrens* that was sunk last fall by the Australian fleet. It was a gallant little craft; it had participated in the most thrilling and spectacular night attack by the Germans upon the Australian fleet during 1918. And it had earned glory for its men on that occasion. But toward the end of 1930, twelve years after, it was decided that the *Torrens* was obsolete—unfit for the conditions of modern warfare. As is customary in such cases, the fleet determined to use the little craft for target practice. The guns of two great super-battle-vessels bore down upon the *Torrens,* and poured shells into her—but the *Torrens* refused to sink. A number of salvos from both battleships had found their mark on the old vessel, but still she floated!

In the end it took an enormous charge of explosives which the admiral ordered planted aboard her to do the work. These were set off; and what two battleships had been unable to do was done with dispatch. She was blown to bits.——But we'll bet that she laughed in the admiral's teeth as she sank below the waves!

No, it doesn't make any difference what way you look at it; there's something admirable about the die-hard spirit. Homer sang its praises. The religions of every age have clustered their beliefs about this sort of heroism. Today we admire the same quality in the natures of men like Andrée, who perish in order to further the cause of modern science; we stand in awe of it when it reveals itself in the careers of philanthropists and Captains of Industry.

The world can use a lot of it!

THE EDITOR.

Part I

THE ISLAND OF LOST MEN

By MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

CHAPTER I

A CERTAIN MYSTERIOUS ISLAND

IT WAS only a dot on the map, that island, a dot at the extreme tip of the Tawi-Tawi group, which as any regular army man knows, is the southermost group of the Philippine Islands.

"I tell you, Johnson, we've got to stop that foolishness! That's the second detachment disappeared from that island, leaving no trace!" By the tone of his voice, the general was upset. "First it was a sergeant and ten men, sent out from K Company on Tawi-Tawi. They disappeared without leaving a sign. Then K Company sent out a lieutenant with twenty men, to find the first detachment. No word came from them and in a few days it was found that they had also disappeared. Damned if I can figure it out!—— Didn't they even find any signs of the second detachment?"

The colonel tried to show that he was perfectly calm when he replied. "Ye-e-s, they found everything in place for a meal, food in the plates, coffee in the pot, broiled bacon on the stove and water in the cans."

"And not the sight of a single member of the outfit?"

"Not a sight."

The general looked at the map again, unbuttoning his khaki blouse and swabbing the perspiration from his neck as he frowned. He had right to frown. Placed here in the Southern Islands with two

Alone, a Young Lieutenant Faces Moro Savages, the Superstitious Fears of Black Soldiers —and a Heat-Crazed Captain!

A New Story by the Author of "The Golden Dragon"

skeleton regiments, under orders to pacify the most warlike people in the world, the Mohammedan Moros of the Philippines, his was no easy task. The Philippine Insurrection raged farther north and he had not succeeded yet in relieving all the Spanish garrisons on these distant islets.

"Do you suppose the Moros are up to some unusual tricks on that island?" he asked.

"It doesn't look like Moro work. You know in what a mess *they* leave things—everyone chopped to pieces and blood all over the place," the colonel shook his head, then looked up, "why do you want that island occupied at all, General? It's of no importance and it's away off the line of travel."

The general lowered his voice cautiously.

"It *must* be occupied. In the treaty between the United States and Spain, just signed at Paris, they forgot to include this island. And there is another Power only too anxious to grab any unattached bit of land in the Pacific. I have strict orders from Washington to keep that island occupied and to allow no other nation to get a foothold between us and the British at North Borneo, just beyond. Do you understand?——All right, keep that under your hat! And this time send a full company down and take over the place——!"

"I haven't got a full company, general —about sixty men is the biggest outfit I can muster. We're pretty badly shot with dengue fever and malaria right now."

"Um-m! Which is your biggest company?"

"M Company, under Captain Jennings."

"What sort of a file is he?"

"Ex-soldier, serious, no sense of humor, strict, good soldier—a little too solemn, but dependable so far as I know."

"Any lieutenant with that company?"

"Yes, sir. Yancey, a Southerner. He looks lazy and careless, but he doesn't let much get by him."

"Good top sergeant?"

"Sergeant Carter, one of the best niggers I ever knew in my life. About twenty-five years' service."

"All right. Send for this fellow Jennings and let me look him over."

In a few minutes there was a knock at the door. A lean, pale-faced, sandy-haired man of about forty entered. His khaki uniform hung on him in baggy and dispirited fashion, there being nothing about him either in bearing or clothing to denote that he was an officer except the tarnished sil-

ver bars of a captain on his sloping shoulders.

The general looked him over as he saluted, noting the close-set eyes and narrow forehead, the heavy, sandy eyebrows through which peered, suspiciously, a pair of pale blue eyes. The general did not miss the worried lines about the mouth and across the forehead, giving the newcomer an air of being perpetually puzzled by life's surprises.

"Captain Jennings," said the general., "I'm going to send your outfit down to Tawi-Tawi and across to the last island. You've heard of the two detachments that have disappeared there?——Yes? Well, see that *your* outfit doesn't disappear. Your colonel will give you orders to move out in the morning. That's all. Good day!"

The general sat in thoughtful silence after the door had closed, then he shook his head.

"Looks too blame serious to me. A man needs a little humor to keep his balance in these days and times. I don't like the looks of that fellow, I'll tell you frankly. I've seen his kind do queer things before now."

The colonel shrugged his shoulders.

"He's the only one available—there isn't much choice."

The general sighed—then bent over the map again.

"Well, send him along and we'll hope for the best. Maybe this fellow—his lieutenant——what's his name? Yancey? Well, maybe he can leaven things up a bit. Otherwise it's liable to be a sour mess."

"This fellow Yancey" was occupied with very much the same line of thought at the moment. He was packing his field kit. Tall, lean and sparely built, he had the lines of a greyhound, compared to Captain Jennings' slight frame. The difference extended even further than that. Sleepy-eyed and seemingly lazy as he was, Yancey had inherited from certain cavalier ancestors the ability to look on life with a certain cheerful levity, taking nothing very seriously, least of all himself. Yancey was feeling at the moment, however, that this Captain Jennings who never smiled—whose mind worked slowly and with painful exactness over the simplest as well as the gravest problem, and who wore himself and his subordinates to a nervous impatience with the observance of every petty and unimportant detail—that this captain was not going to prove any too gay a companion on a lonely islet on the Sulu Sea. The two of them would be the only white men with a company of negro soldiers, and surrounded with Malay savages.

The soldiers were gay over the prospect of moving out, singing and laughing in their barracks as they packed haversacks and made ready. Sixty negro soldiers can produce a lot of joyous clatter and racket if they are light-hearted; and these men were feeling more than gay. The orderly room was at the end of the building, and Captain Jennings, ensconced therein, was busy making lists of equipment to draw before the departure. The noise from the barracks floated in and he frowned. Rising, he strode to the door.

"Atten-shun!" the word rang forth from the men nearest the door. Silence, heavy as a pall, fell on the squad room. It was broken by Captain Jennings' querulous voice.

"I don't want no more o' this noise," he ordered, "get busy and get your stuff ready and stop this laughing and horse play. We're leaving on serious business, and it ain't no laughing matter!"

The black men, standing stiffly at attention, rolled their eyes and looked grave. Jennings returned to the orderly room, leaving silence and glum faces behind him. Considering the fact that his ancestors had been serious and God fearing men who had sailed to the rockbound shores of New England, grimly and dourly determined forever to ban from their future homes the ungodly levity of the cavalier followers of Charles the Second, Captain Jennings was not to be blamed for his severity.

"Captun shoh lookin' pow'ful glum,"

whispered the soldiers. "Mus' be a mighty bad place we's headin' foh!"

IN A few minutes another cry of "Attenshun!" brought everyone to his feet again. This time it was Lieutenant Yancey who entered the opposite door. He had stopped and studied the solemn-faced soldiers a minute before coming in.

"What's the matter here, Sergeant Carter?" he called, "looks like a storm cloud in this room. Has everybody got religion in this outfit all of a sudden? It wouldn't do some of them any harm."

He passed through the room, closing the orderly door behind him.

A quick, responsive grin went around the room at his last remark.

Yancey, once inside the orderly room, was listening to his captain, trying hard not to show his weariness.

"The place we're agoin' to, Mr. Yancey, is a place where you have to be on the job ev'ry minnit," Captain Jennings mopped the sweat from his pale face and peered out at his lieutenant from beneath bushy eyebrows. Yancey looked back into the narrow, close-set eyes of his superior and found, as usual, that they shifted in the way that the eyes of an animal will flicker and shift when stared at by human eyes.

"We got a big responsibility down there, Lieutenant," Captain Jennings went on, peering now at some point in space above and beyond Yancey's right shoulder. "We gotta keep on the job day and night, and you gotta pay more attention to regulations. You're kinda careless o' regulations, Lieutenant Yancey."

"Yes sir," returned the lieutenant wearily, trying hard to repress a yawn. He'd heard all this many, many times before. And the captain was working himself up into a fever of excitement again. It never did for a white man to let himself get too excited in the tropics. Nature took her toll too quickly from such a one. Much better to follow the line of least resistance.

"And I notice you're crackin' jokes with the men again, Lieutenant. Soldiers won't never respect an officer who jokes with them. I've told you that before.——Another thing, it'll never do to let these superstitious blacks think too much about these mysterious disappearances."

"Yes Captain," a great lassitude always descended upon Yancey whenever Jennings started on one of these interminable lectures. The voice droned on and on, and he heard it as from a great distance. At appropriate intervals he answered "Yes sir," and "Yes Captain."

Jennings, for his part, continually fought a sullen desire to do something that would make this heedless lieutenant of his look respectfully serious and properly impressed. The nearest to this he had been able to achieve so far had been a politely bored attention on Yancey's part. There was always a faint suspicion in the stodgy captain's mind that Yancey was secretly laughing at him, just as he laughed at everything and everyone, refusing to be angered by anything that juniors or seniors saw fit to do. Yancey's habit of joking about such serious things as the regulations had long been a thorn in the side of the sober minded, earnest souled captain.

When he saw Yancey attempting to conceal a series of jaw-breaking yawns behind a polite hand, he gave up.

"Try to remember all these things I ben tellin' you"——the captain's voice was irritated and there was a trace of savagery in his glance——"and for Gaw's sake, try to take things a little serious. That's all!"

"Yes Captain," returned Yancey and went out, moving with a certain effortless greyhound grace that the captain secretly envied. On his face there was the suspicion of a smile that the captain deeply hated. Jennings peered after him for a moment, then jammed his pen savagely into its inkwell and resumed the making out of his requisition forms.

Yancey, after giving the barrack room "At ease!" lazily asked Sergeant Carter about the extra ammunition and the kits.

"Yas suh, lootenant, dey's all ready—everything been fixed, suh lootenant."

"Yes?——How comes it that Grundy down there, has only one pair of socks in his kit?" Yancey pointed out a little yellow soldier with a mouth that took up a good two-thirds of his face.

"Grundy?——Private Grundy!" a dangerous glitter came into the first sergeant's eyes. Grundy shambled forward, sullen apprehension writ large on his countenance. He was a "young soldiah" with only ten years or so of service to his credit.

"No, I don't want to see Grundy," stated Yancey easily, "I want to see Sergeant Washington——"

A big negro non-commissioned officer with a phenomenally black and shining face came up saluting, sweating with concern.

"What's the matter with your platoon, Sergeant?" asked Yancey. "Here Sergeant Carter tells me everything is ready, and I find that your outfit still has its shirt tails hanging out!"

"Foh Gawd, suh lootenant, it's dat no-account Grundy. 'Pears like nobody can make him soldiah, suh lootenant!——He's jes triflin' worthless and no account—and dat's Gawd's truth, suh lootenant!"

"Well, he's your man. You make him soldier or else break his thick head—don't bother me with him, that's your job!"

"Yas, suh lootenant. Ah shuah will, suh lootenant," and Grundy quailed under the malevolent looks that both stern looking non-commissioned officers shot at him.

SERGEANT CARTER accompanied his officer to the barracks entrance.

"Hop on those non-commissioned officers, Sergeant. You're working too hard yourself, and they're laying down on the job. The line of least resistance is to make everybody earn his pay, Sergeant Carter," he said as he moved away towards the temporary club the officers had fixed up.

Several voices hailed him as he came up.

"So you're going down and do some sleuthing, eh?" asked one man. "That's a queer business down there. Where do you suppose those birds disappeared to, Yance?"

"It's too damn hot to suppose.——I wonder if we'll ever get any ice in this God forsaken hole!"

"You'd better carry along some ice and pack it on your captain's head every night. I was on guard with him yesterday, and of all the busybodies I ever ran into! The whole guard is about all in. He had everybody up every minute of the twenty-four hours, sending out patrols, making inspections and bothering people to death generally. How the dickens do you stand him for a steady diet?"

"Oh, he means well—he's just afflicted with pernicious activity. He'll get over it when he gets his first good touch of sun!"

The other looked skeptical.

"Not that bird! I never saw a man whose eyes were set as closely together as his are, whom you could pound any sense into with anything less than a sledge hammer. He's looney as a jay-bird, I tell you!——Do you know what he did on guard the other morning? Well, after having had everybody chasing all night long, he organizes a lecture on guard duty and makes everybody stand at attention for half an hour while he lectures them. Those poor tired niggers were asleep on their feet!"

Yancey shook his head and took the warm whisky and soda that was offered him.

"How!" he toasted solemnly. "Here's to old Pernicious Activity. I think he dreads to be stationed off there, alone with me, as badly as I hate to be with him. The only advantage is, I've managed to get on his nerves worse than he has on mine. One of us is bound to reform the character of the other!"

"Yes," spoke up another lieutenant, "outside of Moros, strange disappearances, tropical heat and loneliness, you birds will

be all right—I don't think! One of you will come back on a stretcher if you don't look out!"

The little group of khaki clad officers sipped their drinks and nodded in grave affirmation.

Yancey lifted his glass in mock seriousness.

"Here's to the dead already! Hurrah for the next man who dies!" he quoted the song of other days that had been sung by other officers girt about by sudden swift death.

But these officers did not smile as they lifted their glasses. They had seen too many of their classmates and friends pass gaily out of the gates of Jolo, never to return.

Chapter II

A DESERTED BLOCKHOUSE

CLAD in khaki trousers stuffed into lace leggins, blue flannel shirts and felt hats, and heavily laden with blanket rolls, haversacks, canteens, cartridge belts and rifles, the sixty negro soldiers of M Company followed their two white officers into the big native *praus* commandeered for the last stage of their journey. Their black faces were grinning in spite of the heat.

The big craft—supported by outriggers and carrying huge square sails, floated gently through the warm seas, the men crooning melodiously together. Another fleet of vessels crossed their bows soon after they set forth; thatched catamaran houseboats, these, with fishing dugouts trailing at the stern. They were manned by long haired Bajau Moros, the fisher folk, the sea gypsies, not at all to be confused with the fierce Mohammedan Moros who inhabited the islands set all about them.

On the excuse of keeping an eye on the rear of the fleet, Yancey had managed to place himself in a *prau* other than that occupied by Captain Jennings, of whose interminable conversation he had grown heartily sick in the past few days of unrelieved companionship.

At noon they sighted a small naval gunboat, which rapidly drew up on them. A lieutenant, clothed in spick and span white linen, called to them from the bridge, inviting the officers to lunch when they had arrived at the small island just ahead.

The *praus* were drawn up on the beach, water was located, the men busied themselves with their preparations for lunch while the two officers were rowed out to the gunboat and clambered aboard to be heartily welcomed by the navy file in command.

Cocktails were quickly forthcoming. Captain Jennings refused his with an air of conscious disapproval which made both younger officers stare at him a second; but both men chatted along gaily enough, disregarding the disapproving silence of the older officer who sat at table with them

in the wardroom, sniffing occasionally as some particularly raw remark was made.

Talk veered to their destination, the mysterious island. A puzzled look came into the naval lieutenant's eyes.

"Damn queer," he shook his head, "I met Foster, the K Company lieutenant who went over there with the second outfit and disappeared completely. Saw him just before he left.——Funny thing about it was the way everything was left untouched,

just as though they'd all walked into the sea during a meal. You know, we've been looking up and down the islands for them. Even went over to Borneo—it's only nine miles away—but never a sign of them did we find. How the dickens to explain the complete disappearance of two groups as big as that I don't know. Nobody had ever been seen on the island except an old German trader, who disappeared years ago. Not even the Moros ever went near the place. The first American outfit was a sergeant and ten men, the second an officer and twenty men. Altogether thirty-two able bodied men have just disappeared as though the earth had swallowed them up! There's something damn queer about that island.——And you're going there with nigger soldiers! They'll be in a panic if anything spooky occurs. ——Do they know anything about what happened to the other two outfits that have preceded them?"

"No, thank the Lord!" answered Yancey, fervently. Captain Jennings cleared his throat importantly.

"I feel it my duty to tell 'em all about it before we get there, though naturally I don't want them to think very much about it. That might be dangerous," he stated in measured tones.

Yancey looked up quickly.

"Aren't you afraid it will make them pretty hard to handle, Captain?" he asked quietly, "you know negroes are a damn sight more superstitious than white men."

"Lieutenant Yancey, whenever I want any advice about niggers from you, I'll ask for it," retorted Jennings.

Yancey and the naval lieutenant cast a swift look at each other, then stared straight ahead, saying nothing.

"No, men should always figger beforehand on what they're up against, and I'm always for tellin' 'em," Jennings droned on. "Niggers or white men, it don't make no difference. They're all the same."

As he finished, there was a moment's silence, broken at last by the voice of their host.

"Well, I'll be cruising around these waters, and I'll drop in on you once in a while," he looked directly at Yancey, disregarding Jennings completely. "Any time things get too impossibly dull, I'll grab you off for a drink and a dinner on board the gunboat," he finished, and let his gaze travel incuriously over the captain, who sat staring in frowning concentration, nervously crumbling bread in his fingers.

The last mouthful of food had scarcely been finished when Captain Jennings rose from his seat, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Gotta be goin'," he remarked, and nodding curtly in response to his host's goodbyes, clambered into the rowboat.

"My condolences," whispered the naval lieutenant to Yancey. "You're in for a tough time of it, with *that* big-hearted rough diamond.——What's the matter with him? Has he got bats in his belfry?"

"No, he's just a simple, sincere-souled boy captain from the back pasture, trying to get along." The naval file shook his head as they pulled away. He stared after them, still marveling.

The soldiers were lolling about in great contentment, their bacon and beans stowed comfortably away, their rich laughter rising in gales as they sang and crooned, swaying together to the rhythms of their song.

ALL this changed immediately as the captain set foot on shore. True to his word, he told them of the previous happenings on the island they were to occupy, talking to them for nearly half an hour as they stood at attention in the hot sun.

When he finally gave word for them to re-embark, it was a silent company of negro soldiers who took their places in the *praus* and shoved off with the aid of the native boatmen. The little fleet plowed noiselessly through the purple sea, toward that island where awaited so much of mystery and inexplicable horror.

They had not proceeded more than ten

minutes when Yancey raised his head sharply as the men in his *prau* rose and crowded away from the side, their eyeballs rolling and their teeth chattering.

At first he could see nothing, then something bumped gently against the outrigger. It was a corpse—evidently the body of some native, distended and bloated out of all recognition by the influences of quick decay in that warm clime. It bumped and slid along the outrigger, its sightless eyes turned upward, and then dropped behind in their wake, as though disheartened at its failure to re-establish contact with human kind.

Yancey heard the men whispering to each other—and the words, "Hoodoo!" and "Bad Luck!" and an occasional muttered "Oh Lawd!" came to his ears.

"Nothing but a dead Moro," he called, "the deader a Moro is, the better he is! ——It's the live ones that cause all the trouble," he attempted to comfort them. But there was no flash of smiles in answer.

"Moro or no Moro, he's a daid man, and dey don't bring nothin' but bad luck, nohow!" Grundy, the little yellow soldier grumbled in a low tone.

"Bettah be a daid Moro than alive and wuthless like whut you is!" retorted Sergeant Carter with some asperity.

"We all gwine be daid mighty soon, Sahgent. You done heerd whut de Captain say? 'Pears like evvabody whut go on dis heah island gits carried off mighty quick. Ain't nobody cain figger it out——"

"Grundy, hush yoh grumblin' and yoh mumblin'. I nevah heerd annybody whut could waggle his jaw so much as you. Any hoodoo whut carries you off dat dere island am shuah goin' to git a powehful bad bahgain!" Sergeant Carter shook his head, ruefully.

A chuckle went up from the men around them.

"Hee-hee! Dat kinda fetch ole Grundy up sholt!" chuckled one man; and Grundy, sensing the weight of public opinion against him, subsided into a glowering silence.

Yancey listened idly, watching the sun go down and the tropic twilight descend over the Sulu Sea as they sailed slowly toward their destination.

IT MUST have been about eight o'clock in the evening when they first sighted the island, and silence fell over the little fleet of *praus* as the men studied it soberly. It lay before them, a broad, low bulk resting on the face of the waters, vaguely mysterious in the moonlight. Another hour found them close up against it—with the beaches gleaming white against the background of palm and betel trees and the thick jungle growth beyond.

A low, rocky promontory jutted into the sea, and they skirted along this until finally they found a sandy beach that gave a good landing place. On the promontory, a round bulk of masonry reared up, dark and coldly aloof and black in the shadows — the ancient Spanish blockhouse. The warm wavelets from the Sulu Sea rustled and whispered up the narrow beach and then fled precipitately back, hissing as though in sudden fright.

The *praus* moved in gently, their keels grounding on the sand. The moon was rising higher and made a track of molten silver on the sea. The sand was turned into gleaming ivory but the jungle beyond stood silent, black as ebony.

Yancey and Captain Jennings were the first ashore, followed by Sergeant Carter. The rest of the company landed more slowly, casting many a worried glance at the silent jungle and grim blockhouse.

Nearly all the men were ashore now and had begun to pass their equipment along from hand to hand, stacking it on the beach. In a few minutes the *praus* were unloaded and drawn up, and the soldiers were waiting in a huddled clump for their

next orders. Yancey strolled a few yards along the beach, looking for a camping place. A sudden movement near at hand made him stop and drop his hand quickly to his revolver butt. Then he smiled as the huge and ungainly form of a land crab scrambled awkwardly away and lost itself in the jungle.

A quick call coming from where the soldiers were grouped made him turn. He found them all staring and pointing at the blockhouse some fifty yards away. Even his equanimity was disturbed as he followed the direction of their pointing finngers and saw a reddish glow shine for a moment in an upper window or loophole.

According to all accounts, that blockhouse and most of the island were deserted, except for a Moro village on the far side. Striding back to the company, he found Captain Jennings walking nervously back and forth, trying to figure out where he could place the camp.

"Looks as though somebody's in the blockhouse, Captain," he remarked, "shall I go and investigate?"

Jennings nodded absently. The men watched their lieutenant in a species of fascination, none offering to accompany him until he had gone some ten paces. Then he heard rapid footsteps behind him and turned to find Sergeant Carter and two other non-commissioned officers striving to catch up with him. The four moved quickly to the door of the stone building, and paused a moment to stare up at its silent walls and vacant loopholes.

"It certainly looks deserted enough now!" remarked Yancey. "Let's try the door."

So saying, he pushed his weight against the large iron-studded affair, finding that it gave readily enough to his pressure.

The interior was pitch black except for the bands of moonlight which filtered through the narrow portholes. Striking matches Yancey advanced inside followed by the non-commissioned officers, their rifles in hand.

MAKING his way cautiously along the wall, with frequent pauses to listen, he came at last to a narrow stairway leading to a gallery above—probably the firing gallery which gave out upon the upper tier of loopholed windows. He climbed this, followed by the silent negroes, and found himself on this upper gallery. It seemed vacant as well. But on the side from which he had seen the reddish glow in the window, there was a small room, its walls extending to the roof. The door to this opened easily; and striking another light Yancey entered, the sergeants clustering anxiously behind him.

The tiny flicker of light disclosed a small square room. Against one wall was a cot, and a table stood in the center. In comparison to the unkempt state of the rest of the blockhouse, this room was comparatively clean. A rough blanket lay on the bed. Stooping, Yancey picked up something from the floor. The sergeant heard him whistle softly to himself, and craned forward to see what caused his astonishment. He was holding a cigar butt in his hand.

This was not an astonishing thing to find there.——But the cigar butt was still warm!

Dropping it, Yancey went to the window and found that, unlike the others, this one was closed by a pane of glass. From it he could see the huddle of soldiers on the beach and the form of Captain Jennings walking backwards and forwards. The men were all staring up at this window. It was undoubtedly the one from which he had seen the reddish glow. Gazing up and beyond the men, his eyes traveled through what seemed an opening in the jungle, to the edge of a distant hill.

"Oh!" he said to himself and nodded. Of course that explained the reddish glow. For a large fire was dying down into red embers on the hill top. It had been the reflection of the glow of that fire which they had seen in the pane of glass.——Yet that didn't explain the warm cigar butt.

Then he began to wonder why a fire should be in that particular place at that

particular time—so conveniently situated at the head of that long path through the jungle, where it could be seen from the blockhouse. Studying this for a moment, he suddenly walked out of the room and went around the circular gallery to the opposite side, giving upon the water.

Peering through the open loophole, he searched the surface of the sea. After a moment he nodded again. Far off—so far that he could not tell whether it came from another island or from the sea itself, a faint reddish pin point of light announced a companion fire to the one on the hill on this island.

"Damn funny!" he grunted to himself. Who could be signalling from the island out to sea, and what were they signalling about? Could it be a warning of the arrival of new American victims? He climbed down the stairs again, silent and thoughtful, followed closely by the three sergeants, who cast many a backward furtive glance over their shoulders and heaved a vast concerted sigh of relief once they were outside.

But as they came out once more on the beach, Yancey noticed the main group of soldiers frozen into immobility, rigidly intent, watching or listening to something. Instinctively he and the men with him followed their example.

At first Yancey and the three sergeants could see nothing except the moontrack across the sea, the silvery sand of the beach and the dark jungle. Then, above the increasing whisper and hiss of the wavelets, they heard another sound—a faint pulsating beat that might almost have been the throbbing of a fevered pulse, except that its note was more steady and unhurried, more fateful and sinister. It came from within the jungle. He recognized it at last.

It was the beat of a distant war gong.

Chapter III

Danger at the Jungle's Edge

CAPTAIN JENNINGS still walked about in nervous indecision. The negroes were plainly frightened, and had commenced to sway imperceptibly to the distant notes of the war gong. Yancey strolled up to the group.

"Looks as though we might find shelter for the night in the blockhouse, Captain," he suggested. "It might be safer there for the first night, seeing we don't know our way about yet, nor who's here."

"Yes, good idea, good idea," replied Jennings, secretly relieved to have the decision made for him. Yancey noticed that his hands were twitching spasmodically, and wondered if the eerie atmosphere of this silent island had already affected the captain's nerves. It was the work of a few minutes to pack the equipment into the blockhouse and to bring out the few candle lanterns they had brought with them.

But the negro soldiers did not take kindly to the new quarters. They glanced about them fearfully and sniffed at intervals, keeping huddled close to each other and staring askance at walls and ceiling. Yancey wondered idly what subconscious and primitive instinct was working on their fears. Then he suddenly remembered the story of the blockhouse and of the massacre of its garrison of Spaniards by the Moros—twelve men and an officer, cut to pieces between dark and daylight. But he knew the negroes had heard nothing of this, and he wondered what was worrying them. It was a remark made by Jerrold, a long-armed, long-legged, lanky brown negro which enlightened him.

"Boy!" he overheard him say to Grundy, "Ah shoh ain't intendin' to do no sleepin' around this heah place. No suh! Lawdy! They musta been a powahful lot of killin' been goin' on heah. Smell dat blood!"

The soldiers sniffed and wrinkled their noses as at something distasteful, and Yancey wondered if the negro has been so recently uprooted from the swamp of

jungle fears that he cannot be happy in a place of death. On the other hand, the lieutenant thought, perhaps the negro is so unspoiled by civilization that he is correspondingly more sensitive to the unseen than a white man. For certainly Yancey himself could detect nothing unusual about the deserted blockhouse, try as he might.

Yet there was one thing that he could sense very strongly—an intangible menace that seemed to brood over that silent island, a threat and a horror of something, he knew not what. Through the open loopholes floated the cloying scent of ylang-ylang, and the sea murmured musically below them, a fitting accompaniment to the rare beauty of the tropic night. But it was an unwholesome beauty, and contained a lurking threat, like the loveliness of some tropical flower whose touch is poisonous, or the beauty of the jungle where a riot of colors hides the deadly fang of the reptile.

The distant beat of the war gong pulsed and throbbed, a sinister monotone that hammered steadily upon the ears of the black men, driving them to frightened whispering amongst themselves. They rocked back and forth in time to the unvarying note of the gong, as they squatted on the floor and platforms of the blockhouse interior.

"How about locating drinking water, Captain?" asked Yancey, his voice very matter of fact. "Shall I take a couple of men and go out?"

"Why, er, yes—but be careful!" Jennings glanced apprehensively out the open door at the white beach and at the solid wall of the jungle.

Choosing Sergeant Johnson, Grundy and four others of the nearest men, Yancey sallied forth. He strode briskly across the beach to the jungle edge, the little group of soldiers, laden with canteens, following along. At the edge of the jungle he cast about until he found a partially overgrown trail leading into the heavy growth. In a moment they were out of the white radiance of the moonlight and deep in the forest trail, dim in the filtered light from the moon, checkered and arabesqued with queer designs. On all sides they were surrounded by silence. Overhead and all

about them, the rank tropical growth formed an almost impenetrable wall behind which they felt an intense and brooding watchfulness following their every movement. The dim trail wound and twisted its way to a shallow well. A sudden crash in the underbrush brought Yancey's hand to his revolver butt; but a quick investigation convinced them that it was only some prowling night animal, and they filled their canteens unmolested.

Yancey led them back to the blockhouse, and then suggested to the captain that some sort of guard system be established. Jennings, who sat frowning, his pale blue eyes peering out in a vacant absent sort of stare, nodded agreement. Sergeant Carter had found a chimney and a crude masonry stove in which a fire was soon started, and had the preparations for the evening meal well under way.

With the odors of coffee and frying bacon perfuming the air, Yancey set out his sentinels—two men forming a double sentry post. They stood there in plain view, black shadows against the white sands near the blockhouse entrance. Captain Jennings' dull eye spotted them and he rose, shaking his head.

"They're too blamed easy to see," he complained. "I'll move 'em back under the edge of the trees."

The two sentries rolled frightened eyeballs at the blackness of the jungle edge, that silent jungle out of which came the unhurried throbbing note of the war gong, like the pulse beat of some huge malignant animal. Nevertheless they followed the cap-

tain, looking back longingly as he left them and returned to the lights and comfort of the blockhouse.

Yancey, from the blockhouse door, could see nothing of the two men lost in the impenetrable shadows. After a moment's thought, he rummaged in the box of medical supplies, bringing forth two white, square bandages, and safety pins. Finding the sentries in the gloom, he pinned one of the squares on each man's back, instructing them to keep faced toward the jungle and to make no sound or movement that would disclose their presence. Returning to the blockhouse, he looked back and nodded in satisfaction. Dimly, out of the darkness of the jungle edge, loomed two pale blurs of white that a keen eye from the blockhouse could check up on at intervals.

The supper was ready, and Yancey ate his bacon and beans, munched on his hard tack and drank his coffee absent-mindedly, his mind working on the problems presented by this island, occasionally assuring himself of the continued presence of the two sentinels by glancing at the two white blurs made by the cloth bandages.

His thoughts ran to the beacon fire that he had sighted inland and the answering red glow at sea, and then to the small room in the blockhouse where he had found the still warm cigar butt. What it was all about he could not figure out, but that all these things had some bearing on the disappearance of the previous detachments of men from the island, he was certain.

He glanced at Captain Jennings, then his eyes grew more alert as he noted the bearing and the attitude of his senior officer. Jennings was seated just inside the door, his head resting on the palm of his hand, his gaze blank and unseeing as he stared at the wall opposite, his lips moving silently. The negro soldiers, cleaning up after their evening meal, from time to time cast worried and anxious glances at him, and past him through the open door, to the jungle out of which still came that distant, monotonous throb of a war gong.

IT WAS a far from cheerful place, and Yancey rose and strode briskly to the door in an effort to shake off the depression that was slowly settling upon him. What with the frightened whispers of the negroes and the strange mutterings of the captain, he began to see that there was need for him to keep a tight rein on his own nerves.

The light of the moon was waning. A cold chill came in over the sea, making him shiver in his thin khaki. Walking over to where the two sentries were posted, he found them silent and absorbed, listening to the faint sounds coming from the darkness of the jungle before them.

"What is it?" whispered Yancey.

White eyeballs rolled in his direction.

"Suh, lootenant, we all is lissening. Peahs like dey's a powahful lot ob noise and ructions in dese heah trees. Us cain't figger it out nohow," the nearest soldier whispered in return.

Yancey shook his head, after listening a moment.

"Probably nothing but some wild animal, but keep your eyes and ears open all the same," he told them.

Walking back to the blockhouse, he saw again a tiny glare of light far out at sea, and stopped to stare at it for a moment. It flickered, disappeared from view, and reappeared again at regular intervals, finally disappearing altogether. Turning, he searched the jungle behind him for an answering signal from the beacon inland; but could see or hear nothing. There was only the steady beat of the war gong, which had become so much a part of the tropical night that he had ceased to notice it.

Captain Jennings was seated in the same position as when he had left, his eyes still dully staring at vacancy. Some glimmer of recognition came into them as Yancey entered. The captain rose, and indicating by a jerk of his head that the younger man was to follow, he made his way outside. Yancey, curious, watched while the captain looked all about him carefully, as though

fearing to be spied upon. Then he leaned close to the lieutenant.

"I'm gittin' scared o' them niggers," whispered Jennings. "I've jest found out they are a plannin' to kill me!"

Yancey tried to show none of the effect this statement had upon him. The captain's eyes were intently fixed on his face, those pale eyes that peered out from behind their thatch of eyebrows like some animal peering from its lair.

"Why Captain," the lieutenant remonstrated, "those men are not planning to kill anybody. They're good soldiers; a little worried and nervous over the queer, inexplicable doings on this island—but I'd answer for their loyalty with my own life."

Again Jennings peered at him, and suddenly Yancey felt as though a film had dropped over the captain's two pale eyes. It was as though a curtain had suddenly fallen between these two white men, so shutting off the one from the other. The eyes shifted. Jennings nodded, and smiled; but something about that smile chilled Yancey for a second—it was so compounded of slyness and low cunning.

"I guess you're right," mumbled Jennings, his eyes looking everywhere except at his lieutenant. "Mebbe I ben imaginin' things."

He turned without another word and went back into the blockhouse, resuming his former seat; although this time Yancey noticed that the flap of his revolver holster was open and that he kept one hand in place over the revolver butt, watching the soldiers with a wary and attentive air.

"The heat is getting that bird, and no mistake!" Yancey said to himself, a worried frown on his forehead. He watched Jennings' hand on the revolver butt, a hand that twitched and jerked spasmodically as the captain stared about him; and Yancey noticed that Jennings peered at him with the same blank intentness with which he watched the soldiers.

The negroes were whispering and muttering among themselves. Their white eyeballs shone out of the shadows cast by the dim rays of the candle lanterns, shadows that loomed grotesquely large in the dim interior of the blockhouse, wavering and receding against walls and ceiling, and assuming weird shapes only to shift and break into still more impossible forms. They seemed sinister and threatening shapes that were the reflections of men's fears, symbols of the unknown that hemmed them in, impalpable as Fear itself, and as disturbing to men's souls.

It was certain that few of the negro soldiers would do any sleeping that night, and Yancey, realizing this, felt that it might be just as well. No one could foretell what horror might descend upon them all before the night wore away and dawn drove the shadow of fear back to its secret lair.

Wondering if the beacon light was still shining from the interior of the island, Yancey mounted the ladder-like steps to the second floor of the blockhouse, and once again found himself in the small room against the roof—that small room with its single pane of glass in the window. Staring out, he searched the darkness for some sign of that reddish glow that he had seen early in the evening, but there was not the slightest indication of it. Nothing seemed to move or stir on the island; the jungle loomed up before his gaze dark and mysterious. Only that devilish war gong, still keeping up its steady beat, pulsed out of the wilderness from all points of the compass at once, making it impossible to locate the direction from whence it came.

Inspection of the seaward side of the blockhouse yielded no further sign of the signal light he had seen before. Whoever the unknown who had been signalling to the island was, he had evidently concluded its task.

Down the stairs again the lieutenant

went, puzzled and feeling a vague disquiet resting heavily upon him. The soldiers looked up anxiously as he appeared, and then subsided into their silent and watchful brooding. Captain Jennings still sat by the door, his hand twitching at his revolver butt, his eyes ceaselessly watching the soldiers.

Suddenly Yancey thought of his sentinels, and strode to the door to examine again those two blurs of white in the darkness at the jungle's edge. Reaching the door, he peered out into the darkness. His head jerked up suddenly as he stared, and he made a half step forward; his eyes narrowed in an intense effort to pierce the darkness.

There was no sign of the two white squares!

His first instinct was to call the nearest soldiers to accompany him, then he thought better of it, and loosening his revolver in its holster, he moved quickly and silently toward the place where he had last seen the two sentinels.

ARRIVING there, Yancey stood stock still, listening and peering into the jungle about him, his revolver now drawn and cocked. The two soldiers were not at their post. From where he stood, he called out their names in a low tone. There was no response.

Again he called their names, this time in a slightly louder tone. The result was the same; the silent jungle gave back no answer except the maddening distant beat of the war gong.

With all his senses on the alert, crouching low and moving like a shadow along the edge of the jungle, he sought the two soldiers among the trees and along the beach. Five minutes of this search resulted in nothing but a growing conviction that the men had been spirited away by some unknown attacker, for nowhere was there the slightest sign of footprints, of a struggle, nor of bloodstains.

It was a case of acting quickly, and of making one last effort to find them. Hurrying back to the blockhouse, he touched Captain Jennings on the shoulder. Jennings rose swiftly, revolver in hand, a wild glare in his eyes as he looked up at the tall lieutenant standing over him.

"Sh-sh, Captain," whispered Yancey. "It looks as though our two sentnels have disappeared. We'd better turn out the men and organize a search. May I take them out?"

Jennings recovered from his sudden fright and nodded, his eyes dull again.

"The damn niggers are probably asleep," he growled. Yancey shook his head, and turned towards the soldiers, who were watching them curiously.

"All right," his voice was steady and assured, "turn out with rifles and bayonets and line up!"

Sergeant Carter moved immediately into action, hurrying and chivvying his slow moving and somewhat unwilling charges out of the shelter of the blockhouse and to the beach outside, where they formed up in rank and counted off. In a few words, Yancey told them of the disappearance of the two sentinels. The negro soldiers stared fearfully at the jungle before them.

"Third platoon remain in reserve," ordered Yancey, "First and Second Platoons —as Skirmishers—March!" The designated platoons moved forward, the thick double ranks merged and thinned out into a narrow line of men which flowed towards the jungle like a black wave, Yancey following along in the center, with the clump of men of the third platoon at his heels.

Pushing the skirmish line into the heavy growth, he raked the jungle edge as with a fine-toothed comb, moving the line of men to right and left, and backwards and forwards, until every inch of ground up to some fifty yards into the jungle had been thoroughly covered. It was after nearly twenty minutes of this that he withdrew the men.

Not a trace of the missing sentinels had been found. It was as though they had dis-

solved into thin air, so complete was their disappearance.

The men muttered and whispered amongst themselves as Yancey led them back to the blockhouse.

"Dis am jest de beginning!" he heard one man say, "by 'n by dey gwine to git us all!"

Chapter IV

THE MOROS ARRIVE

IT WAS with a heavy heart and a worried countenance that Yancey returned to the blockhouse, the men breaking ranks and stumbling in after him, casting many an anxious, backward glance over their shoulders at that dark and sinister jungle so near at hand. The silent horror that brooded so mysteriously over this island had struck at last. There was an unspoken question on everyone's mind, and the men looked fearfully at each other, wondering who would be the next victim and what would be the manner of his taking off.

While they had been preoccupied with the search for the missing sentinels, Yancey had forgotten Captain Jennings. It was only as he entered the blockhouse that he stared about the place, looking for the captain. He was nowhere to be seen. With this fresh worry added to his other worries, the lieutenant called out loudly, shouting Jennings' name. There was no reply. The soldiers huddled together, silent and frightened. Yancey went outside again and looked up and down the beach that gleamed dull white in the darkness. There was no sign of Jennings. Returning, the lieutenant bethought himself of the upper floor of the blockhouse, and hurried up the stairs.

He was brought to a sudden stop at the top. A revolver was shoved into his face, and in the dim light cast by the lantern he found Captain Jennings barricaded behind several rolls and bundles of equipment that he had evidently carried up there by himself.

"Why—what's all this, Captain?" asked Yancey.

"That's all right, what this is!" Jennings spoke in a hoarse whisper.

Again Yancey saw a peculiar, hunted look come into the captain's eyes. Then a cunning look spread itself over his countenance.

"I don't like the looks of these niggers," he whispered. "I ain't aimin' to be killed by no crazy coons!"

"But Captain, they're not going to kill anybody. They're pretty badly frightened. ——Our two sentinels have disappeared!"

Jennings expressed no emotion at this statement, which made Yancey doubt that he had understood the purport of the news.

"I ain't aimin' to be killed by no coons," repeated the captain; and straightened out one of the boxes to strengthen his barricade, frowning in immense concentration over the task.

"But did you understand, Captain?—— I said that our two sentinels have disappeared. They've been swallowed up—grabbed away. God knows how or where!"

Jennings looked up, his eyes dull, but still crafty. "You can't fool me, Yancey," he whispered, and patted his revolver reassuringly. "You're sidin' with the niggers agin' me.——But I'll tell you this, young feller. I'd jest as leave shoot you as one o' them, and don't you fergit it!" He glared into the lieutenant's face.

Yancey stood stock still for a full minute, staring at Jennings. Finally he spoke, his eyes alert for surprises.

"You'd better try to get some sleep, Captain," he said in a level tone; and turning, he climbed back down the stairs. Behind him he heard a chuckle come out of the darkness above, a malignant sort of chuckle that sounded like the laughter of some demon from the pit.

The men were muttering together as he came down, but grew immediately silent

as he arrived on the lower floor. Their eyes avoided his as he glanced over them, and the fact vaguely worried him somehow. It was as though a sudden gulf had opened between him and his men, and they suddenly had become faintly hostile strangers.

But there was no time for vain imaginings.

"Sergeant Carter, get two more men out as sentinels"——a stir and muttering rose again amongst the men, and Sergeant Carter glanced about him nervously—— "but this time, put them right outside the door, where they are within instant call," Yancey concluded.

The muttering died down. It came over the lieutenant suddenly that had he ordered two more men to the former post where their comrades had disappeared so mysteriously, he would have been faced with flat disobedience.

The two sentinels, nervous as horses in a burning stable, were duly placed outside the door, where they were within view of the interior. Yancey placed two more men on duty inside, their jobs being to keep a sharp look out through the loopholes. With these precautions taken, he ordered his men to stop their whispering and get some sleep; and he attempted to find some rest himself.

But there was little sleep had in the blockhouse, men's nerves were at too fine a tension, and the occasional moments of half-unconsciousness Yancey was able to achieve were broken in upon by tortured dreams and his worries. Every little while he would awake with a start, to sit bolt upright, his heart hammering in his chest, at some fancied disturbance.

THE rest of the night wore through in this fashion, and dawn came at last —the quick tropical dawn, with a brisk and business-like sun rising out of the sea as though intent upon a full day's work and anxious to be at it.

Daylight brought one startling fact to the lieutenant's attention.

A cry came from one of the sentinels at the door, and Yancey hurried out to see what it was all about, staring at the beach in consternation, and scarce able to believe his eyes.

For every one of the *praus*—those long native boats with outriggers and sails that his men had drawn up on the beach and had so carefully anchored the night before —had completely disappeared during the night.

It must have been done between the time he had searched for the missing sentinels and the coming of daylight, for he remembered seeing the dark bulk of the boats as he had returned to the blockhouse with the soldiers after that unsuccessful search. Who had taken them, and why, were things he could not puzzle out, although he searched the sand of the beach carefully for tracks and studied the marks that had been left when the boats were shoved into the water. The situation had been bad enough before, but now it was genuinely alarming. Without their boats, they were marooned on the island and were absolutely dependent upon outside help should it become necessary to sail away.

He gazed at the place where the boats had been, and then returned to the blockhouse in somber silence, feeling that the net was tightening about him and his men. Without doubt, the disappearance of the men last night and the boats this morning was all part and parcel of the same sinister evil that had worked against the previous forces that had been sent to the island. And it was now working against this outfit.

With the coming of daylight, the men had become less morose, and went cheerfully about their duties, preparing breakfast with more life to them and showing less fear than they had all night. But there was a difference in their attitude this morning; what it was Yancey could not define. An intangible barrier had risen between his men and himself, and it worried him almost more than anything that had occurred so far.

The daylight gave him some opportunity to look about him and again he examined the place where the two sentinels had disappeared. But there was no more trace of them this morning than the night before. With Sergeant Carter, he searched along the beach some seven or eight hundred yards on either side of the blockhouse but succeeded in finding nothing except two huge sea turtles, both of them nearly four feet across. They waddled into the sea before the two men had time to capture them; but Yancey, poking about in the sand, came across a nest of small eggs, hundreds of them. Men were sent for, and the eggs were scooped up for breakfast. Farther along, a wild pig broke out of the jungle and scurried along the beach a few yards before losing itself again in the heavy growth. There was plenty of food on the island at any rate, a fact which did not succeed in cheering Yancey very much, considering the other strange attributes of the place.

Captain Jennings remained in the upper room of the blockhouse, behind his barricade, and Yancey took him some breakfast of fried turtle eggs, bacon, and coffee. There were also some mangoes that the men had found nearby, delicious succulent fruit with a rare perfume and smooth flavor. Jennings accepted the breakfast without a word, and retired from view behind his barricade as Yancey returned to the lower floor.

"The captain's not feeling very well," explained the officer, noticing the men's glances resting curiously upon him as he returned from this duty. The men gave no sign as to whether they believed or disbelieved him, but went on about eating their breakfast.

The meal was carcely finished before a call came from one of the sentinels at the loopholes, the man on the sea side of the blockhouse.

Hurrying to his side, Yancey followed the direction of the man's pointing finger, and saw the white hull and polished brass of the naval gunboat waddling toward the island. It stopped off shore, and a boat was lowered away and came rapidly on towards the beach.

Yancey was there to meet it as the naval lieutenant of the day before leaped out on the sand.

"How are things going?" asked the newcomer. "I thought I'd drop in and see if you had disappeared yet."

"Not all of us," returned Yancey gravely, shaking hands; and as they strolled toward the blockhouse, he told the naval man of the happenings of the night before.

"And your captain?" asked the spruce naval officer.

Yancey shook his head.

"He's barricaded himself up in the top of the blockhouse and won't let anyone come near him."

"Whe-ew!" The naval officer whistled his astonishment. "He must be balmy, that bird. You know, I thought I'd spotted an awfully queer look in his eye. Why don't you put him in irons and ship him out?"

Yancey shook his head.

"Not in this man's army," he stated. "He may be as crazy as a bedbug, but he's my K. O. And believe me, what a court martial would do to me if I did what you suggest would be nobody's business. Before I could put him in restraint, he'd have to kill somebody or run *amok* or do something that would prove him nutty beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Yes, you're probably right," agreed the navy file thoughtfully. "But Lord Almighty, what a fix to be in!" he added.

"Yes and no," Yancey grinned. "As long as he doesn't take a shot at me or the men, and lets me run things, it won't be so bad."

"*If* he will!" nodded the navy man, "but

if he begins any form of pernicious activity and insists on running the show, you're going to have your hands full—and don't forget it! But here's some news for you. I can't figure it out, but Tommy Richards, who's commanding the *Cristobel,* another gunboat like this one, semaphored me today that he'd picked up one of the men who had disappeared from this island. One of the original outfit that came here with the sergeant and ten men. He didn't have time to stop, he was rushing the fellow to a doctor. But here's the message. See if you can make it out. I can't figure out much sense in it——" and he handed a message sheet to Yancey, who read the neat script aloud.

"Hurrying to doctor with Judkins, soldier who was lost with Sergeant Rethers and other men sent from Tawi-Tawi. Picked up Judkins half dead with thirst and wounds on reef near Sibitu. Can't make sense out of his words; keeps raving about an albatross. Doubt it he can live. Be back this way Tuesday. So long."

Yancey saw that the message was signed "Dick."

"An albatross?" Yancey stared at the message again. "What does he think he is, the Ancient Mariner?"

The Navy file shrugged his shoulders. "There must be some of those men alive somewhere, or this fellow wouldn't have been floating around on the high seas. But I'm blamed if I can figure out where the albatross comes in.—— Anyway, maybe you can dope it out, and I figured you ought to see this message anyway.——But there's another thing. I am supposed to keep an eye on the Moros in these parts. Old Datto Deffol is the high Muck-a-Muck around here. He's overlord of Kangao, this big island next door, and he's got about three hundred warriors, more or less. He's been quiet so long that I'm beginning to get worried about him. But he's your charge, not mine. All I'm supposed to do is to report on his activities, while you're supposed to rule him with a steel hand. Next in rank to him is Panglima Djenal who is lord of this island under old Datto Deffol. The two of them are as fine a pair of rascals as you'll find around the Sulu Sea. Don't trust them any farther than you can throw a box car by the hind wheels!"

WHERE'S Panglima Djenal's bailiwick?" asked Yancey.

The naval lieutenant pointed inland.

"Across on the other side of the island. He's got a walled village there, ten-foot walls made out of coral, a tough nut to crack without field guns. It's too far inland for my little old barkers to reach."

"Do you suppose he's behind this mysterious disappearance stuff?" asked Yancey.

The Navy man shook his head.

"I don't think so. I think the old bird would be friendly if you'd give him half a chance. I wouldn't say so much for his overlord, Datto Deffol. But I don't think he's mixed up in this business. Spiriting people away without a trace isn't a Moro habit. They like lots of gore and chopping, and everything's messy when they go into action. No, you'll have to look elsewhere. At least that's my opinion.—— But I've got to be moving on. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, you can take a letter to headquarters for me, also tell them at the nearest outpost that my boats are all stolen and that I need a new fleet. Also, next time you come, bring me some dynamite, a couple dozen sticks. Can do?"

"Can do," agreed the naval officer and waited, examining the negro soldiers curiously, while Yancey wrote his letter. This finished, the two shook hands, and Yancey watched while the sailors rowed out to the waiting gunboat. They saw the ship move out with much outpouring of black smoke from the funnel, and watched it until it disappeared from view behind a distant island.

Not until all trace of the ship had vanished, did the lieutenant turn, walking slowly back toward the blockhouse, his

head bent low, his feet dragging. As he reached the blockhouse, he straightened up and threw his shoulders back, taking a deep breath before he entered.

The negro soldiers were moving restlessly in the dim shadows of the interior. When he entered they came to a halt and grew silent, watching him with expressionless faces. Again he had that feeling that these men were detached from him, as though some unbridgeable gulf had come between them, ranging him on one side and his men on the other.

Captain Jennings had not yet seen fit to descend from his stronghold on the second floor, and Yancey climbed up to see him, finding the captain peering out of one of the loopholes, where he had evidently been watching the gunboat sail away. He turned, startled, his revolver in hand as Yancey's head appeared above his barricade.

"What the hell do you want?" he snarled. But before Yancey had a chance to reply he went on, "You think you're pretty smart, don't you?" he jeered. "I know your game; you can't fool me. I seen you talkin' with that stuck up navy officer. You get the hell outa here before I take a shot at you——!" He raised the revolver threateningly.

"But Captain," protested Yancey, "I only want——"

"Git outa here!" the captain's voice suddenly rose to a menacing pitch, and he clicked back the hammer of his revolver. Yancey backed out, having no desire to end his brief span of life at the hands of a madman with a gun.

At the foot of the stairs he found all the soldiers listening, their faces graven into ebony masks. They had all heard every word of the loud talk.

And then a curious silence fell over land and sea. Every man lifted his head in startled attention.

It took Yancey several seconds to figure out what was wrong. For the first time since their arrival on the island, the Moro war gong had ceased its pulsing note. So long had they heard it, and so long had their ears been attuned to its vibrant clamor, that the sudden cessation of its ringing made the ensuing silence fairly ache, the morning was so poignantly empty of sound.

The silence hung heavily over the group of men in the blockhouse by the sea, lowered itself like a heavy fog, a somber blanket of foreboding that stifled men's souls and made the negroes glance haggardly and fearfully about them.

It did not endure for long. The heavy silence was cut as with a knife by an unearthly shriek coming from the second floor of the blockhouse. The negroes moaned in terror as shriek after shriek tore the silence.

Yancey, his revolver drawn, ran at the steps and started up them. He had scarcely mounted the first step when the sentinel at the loophole shouted and pointed out to sea.

"Moros!" he yelled, and looking past his shoulder, Yancey saw the surface of the sea covered with *praus*, their decks covered with warriors, driving in towards the beach.

Chapter V

THE DEATH THAT LEAVES NO MARK

THE shrieks from above had stopped suddenly. In the silence, Yancey heard the beating of countless Moro gongs and the chanting yells of the warriors as they neared the land.

"Call in the two sentinels!" His voice snapped out like a whiplash, and the negro soldiers stumbled quickly to obey. "Stand by the loopholes, close and bar the door, load and lock pieces—don't fire until ordered! Snap into it!" His voice put fresh courage into the men, they scrambled

quickly for their places, rifles in hand. The great door was sut and bolted as the two sentinels hurried in.

Not until these things had been done did Yancey mount the stairs, two at a time, wondering what grisly horror would face him at the top. With one bound he cleared the barricade and stared about in the dim light seeking for the captain. A groan fell on his ears and he strode to where a shapeless bundle lay on the floor.

It was Captain Jennings. Yancey knelt down beside him and struck a light, recoiling as the flickering rays of the match lighted up the captain's face. It was scratched and torn as by the talons of some great bird. Blood was pouring from the open wounds.

The captain's eyes opened as Yancey knelt there.

"It's gone!" whispered Jennings weakly, and pointed to the open window. "A bird, a big bird, with claws——" The captain raised himself on one elbow.

Yancey leaped up quickly and hurried to the window, gazing out at the sandy beach and the jungle below.

As his eye scanned the stretch of white sand, some movement caught his attention and he concentrated on an object which was just disappearing into the shadows of the jungle. At that distance its outlines were dimmed, but Yancey received a quick impression of some great white or grayish thing with huge fluttering wings. It half flew, half hopped out of sight into the jungle growth as he watched.

He turned, disbelieving the evidence of his own eyes, and saw the captain now staggering to his feet. A brief glance showed him that Jennings had not been seriously harmed by his huge bird-like attacker, whatever it was.

"Damn you! You're in on this somehow!" Jennings muttered ominously as he staggered about like a drunken man, wiping the blood from his eyes.

Yancey hurried down the stairs again, hearing the beat of the Moro gongs and tom-toms steadily growing louder. The mystery of the attack on the captain might better be left until some other time.

The soldiers were stationed around at the various loopholes, fingers on triggers, watching the approaching savages with breathless interest.

A man at the nearest loophole made way for Yancey, and he gazed out on the scene.

Closing in on the beach was a fleet of

some forty *praus,* crowded with men chanting Moro war songs to the beat of the gongs and the high pitched yells of the boatmen. Spears and barongs and bolos, shields and guns bristled from the crowded boats.

The great fleet of *praus* swept grandly in until at last their keels furrowed the sand, and the horde of warriors leaped ashore, sun gleaming on bronze skins, glittering from spears and barongs, and blazing from the mirror-like surface of the shields of polished brass. Yancey glanced around at his men and thrilled a little to note that they were not fearful of this display of strength, but on the contrary were eager for fight.

They tensed instinctively and cuddled cheeks against rifle stocks as the Moros leaped ashore. Obviously the men thought that now the combat would start; but they relaxed again as the spearmen and barong men stood in place, a thick and heavy fringe of dark skinned warriors set along the water's edge, waiting for something.

From among them there came two men. The first was a leader; of that there could be no doubt, for old and fat as he was, authority rested on his shoulders like a cloak. He strode to the front of that great pack of sea wolves, looking neither to the right nor the left, and all men's eyes followed him. It did not need the gold embroidered jacket and the skin tight

silk trousers, the heavy gold buyo box in his sash or the gold inlaid ivory kris at his waist, to announce that men obeyed when he commanded.

The second man with him was of even heavier build and was greater in stature just as a cart horse is heavier of build and greater in stature than a race horse. Dressed in odds and ends of Western costume, his skin lighter than the average of Moros, it was his bearing alone, with that innate self-conscious, half arrogant, half humble and totally unhappy manner, that proclaimed him a half caste. As such he very likely possessed many of the vices and few of the virtues of either of his parents.

For a moment the chief stood in silence before his men and silence fell upon them so that one could hear the whispering of the waves. Then he spoke, saying little but that little very forcefully. Whatever the words, they were met with a roar of high pitched yells and much clamor from barongs and spears, beaten resoundingly against shields. The chieftain, followed at a few paces by the half caste, turned and walked composedly towards the blockhouse while his men stood in place.

Yancey nodded to himself, and going to the door, unbarred it. Stepping outside a few paces, he waited quietly until the chief arrived before him.

SEEN at close view, the Moro leader was not a prepossessing looking specimen, in which particular he did not differ much from the rest of his race. The Moro is an unhandsome brute, being afflicted with a particularly villainous countenance, with a scaly skin, small shifty eyes and an ugly mouth with teeth blackened with betel nut.

The interpreter stepped forward as the Moro inclined his head and came to a halt before Yancey.

"Thees iss Datto Deffol, overlord of Kangao and this island, master of three hundred spear men——"

Yancey turned to the door behind him.

"Sergeant Carter, send me a seat, immediately!"

"Yas, suh lootenant," came the rich voice of the first sergeant, and in a second he brought forth a seat, a rough chair left in the blockhouse. Quietly seating himself on this, Yancey turned his attention again to the Moro chieftain. The man's eyes flickered for a moment.

Ordinarily, a man does not seat himself in the presence of a ruler unless he wishes it to be understood that he himself is a ruler of even more exalted rank. Such was the Moro reasoning, good so far as it went; but it failed to take account of the fact that Yancey had not slept all night and was simply tired.

"Yes?" he inquired as the interpreter faltered. Being sleeply as well as tired, Yancey put up his hand, and with the greatest difficulty partially succeeded in suppressing a vast and jaw-disturbing yawn. To the Moro chieftain, that yawn alone argued a surprising indifference to rank, power and armed forces, and he set his course accordingly. He gave the interpreter some more instructions in sibilant Moro dialect.

"The Datto, he say he coom as friend, verree good friend," explained the half-caste interpreter.

"Why not?" rejoined Yancey, suppressing another yawn, thereby throughly convincing the Moro and the interpreter that they had to deal with an exceedingly high ranking and undoubtedly powerful person whom it would be wise to conciliate. There was more talk in Moro.

"The Datto he say he very glad if the Tuan be friends with heem," the interpreter spoke, humbly.

"Sure!" agreed Yancey. "Tell him as long as he behaves himself and obeys the orders of my great chief who has sent me to rule over all the Dattos hereabouts, he can be as friendly as he likes."

This was translated. There was an interchange of question and answers between the two visitors. Finally the interpreter spoke up again.

"My Datto, he want to know eef your great chief is bigger man than the Sultan of Sulu?"

"My chief rules over a hundred chiefs that are greater than the Sultan of Sulu," returnded Yancey promptly. The two listeners looked vastly impressed. Yancey leaned forward, having some questions he wished to pose in his turn.

"Ask the Datto what became of the white men who were here before?"

The interpreter looked startled and uncomfortable. He translated the question, and there was another rapid fire of query and answer before he cleared his throat and answered.

"The Datto Deffol, he say he swear on the Koran he know nothing about the Tuan's soldiers who come before."

"Ask him if any Moros know anything about them?"

After a minute's talk, the interpreter came back.

"He say no Moro know anything. He say white soldiers come and white soldiers go, he know nothing but he think maybe devils on this island."

Yancey grunted skeptically.

"Perhaps so and perhaps not," he answered, "but tell the Datto that my ruler is very angry because his soldiers have disappeared, and that if any more disappear he will send so many soldiers that the seas will be black with their ships and they will lay fire and sword to the islands."

The Moro received this information in silence for a moment, then made an impassioned speech to the interpreter who translated it in halting words.

"Datto Deffol say that he very sorry soldiers gone. He say it iss not men but a devil who take them away. He say this devil like big bird."

Yancey leaned forward eagerly. Here was a definite clue to the mystery of those lost men. He started to ask more questions. Just then a yell came from above his head, and he looked up startled to see Captain Jennings' bloody face peering forth from an upper window of the blockhouse.

"Tell those dirty pigs to get away from here!" yelled the captain, and shoved his revolver through the window to reinforce his order.

The interpreter caught the word "pigs" and translated it to his chief. The Moro chieftain, hearing the most insulting word it is possible to apply to one of his race, dropped his hand to the hilt of his kris, his eyes glittering dangerously.

Yancey, thoroughly worried, rose up and started to remonstrate with the captain. But Jennings was past all remonstrance. Leveling his revolver at the group below him, he pulled the trigger.

There was the sharp crack of an explosion. The Datto put his hand to his turban, which had been neatly drilled through by the bullet, though by some chance it had missed the head beneath. The interpreter turned tail and ran. The Datto stared for a moment at the convulsed face of the white man in the upper window, looked long at Yancey, then turned about and strode away with much dignity.

"Now the fat's in the fire, sure enough!" Yancey swore to himself.

A long drawn out, piercing yell rose from the beach where waited the Datto's warriors. The yell was followed by an angry humming, like the sound made by a disturbed nest of wasps. The Moro warriors hurriedly launched their praus and clambered aboard, shaking spears and barongs at the blockhouse. The fleet moved slowly out in ominous silence, the sun gleaming and glittering on spears and shields, with no sound of war gongs or singing to mark the departure.

Yancey looked after them, his heart heavy. This meant that in addition to his other troubles, the full force of the Moros were now active enemies of the small

American garrison. And Jennings' stupidity had achieved this—just when everything was going so well and Yancey's efforts to line the Datto up as an ally were promising to bear fruit. The worst of it was that the interruption had come at the very moment when he was about to learn something about the mystery of the island, and when he had heard again word of some incomprehensible great devil bird, in connection with the disappearance of the soldiers.

The captain was still peering out of the window. Yancey studied the window and its height from the ground. It was large enough to admit a man. Below the window the masonry was irregularly spaced, and he saw that jutting blocks would have provided a precarious foothold so that a man might have made his way to the second floor of the blockhouse unseen by the sentinels at the door around the corner. Yet he could not connect the idea of a man with that queer, whitish or grayish shape that he had seen half fluttering, half hopping its way into the jungle as he had looked out of the window above. It had looked like nothing so much as a huge ungainly bird, and he vaguely wondered if the Datto might not have been telling the truth in saying that it was a bird.

Inside the blockhouse again, he found that the fighting enthusiasm of the negro soldiers had been dulled by the quick departure of the Moros. They had sunk back into their apathetic indifference. A matter of talk had quickly died down on his entry, talk that he knew had been unfriendly.

WHATEVER happened—or didn't happen—there was one thing that must be done, and done quickly. That was to establish some sort of a camp out in the sunlight and fresh air. Sixty men were crowded into this small blockhouse, too closely for either comfort or health, as the stale, foul air of the place already heralded.

To ask the captain would merely be to precipitate another scene. Making up his mind quickly, he called Sergeant Carter.

"Turn out the company. We're going to find a camping place.—— Leave a guard of ten men and a non-commissioned officer here," he directed.

The men moved sluggishly and unwillingly. From the outside, where he stood waiting for the company to be formed, he heard Grundy complaining in a loud and aggrieved tone, and heard no voice raised in answer to his grumbling.

Under Sergeant Carter's steady voice, the ranks were quickly formed, however. The men counted off, and at a sharp command rifles were brought up with a snap, breech bolts were drawn back with a steely rattle and closed again to the same sound. Then the rifles were brought to the order.

"All present an' 'counted foh, suh!" came Sergeant Carter's brisk report.

Yancey returned his salute and glanced down the double rank of silent men, standing rigid at attention, their black faces impassive, their eyes straight to the front, the line of rifles sloped at the same angle. The ranks were as straight as though they had been laid out with ruler and compass.

"Load and lock pieces!" he commanded. As one piece, the line of guns swung forward and downward. Breech blocks were snapped open and there followed the steely tinkle and rattle of cartridge clips being crammed into magazines, the snap of the breech bolts closing and the click of safety catches being put on.

Expecting every second to hear the voice of the captain forbidding him to take the company out, Yancey forbore to glance at the window above; and it was with a sigh of relief that at last he gave "Squads right—march!"

They moved out towards the jungle, the compact column of black soldiers clumping along steadily in his rear.

The column wound along like a solid black snake, plunging into the jungle where the dim trail led to the water hole. Passing this a few yards, they came out into a clearing on slightly higher ground. Here Yancey halted the column and looked about him. The place was high and dry, near

to water and shaded well from the heat of the afternoon sun. It would do.

In looking over the ground he found a dim trail leading from the water hole across the clearing and followed it into the jungle. He had not gone ten yards before he came to a halt before a small hut set among the trees, its roof thatched with nipa, its rafters bound with bejuco vine, bamboo palings had been put up about it to keep out the wild pigs. He could see no one about, and deciding that it was the hut of some Moro recluse, he started back to his company. Turning, he found himself being steadfastly regarded by an incredibly old and withered man, leaning on a staff. The man, as nearly as could be judged under the dirt which covered him, was white—or partially so.

"Who are you?" asked Yancey.

"I am nopody—undt I have nefer been nopody," returned the old fellow, speaking with a strong German accent but in a weakly senile voice. His dull eyes stared out at the young officer before him and he shook his head sadly, then went on speaking.

"It iss too bad. You vill go like der oders. Dey haf gone—*ja,* young fellers shust like you——"

"How did they go?" asked Yancey Yancey quickly. The old man stared at him in dull surprise.

"Don't you know? Dey haf gone mit der death dot leaves no mark. *Ja,* all der young men!"

Chapter VI

BIG GRAY DEVIL LIKE A BIG BIRD!

"THE Death that Leaves no Mark!" Yancey repeated the words after the old fellow, trying to understand what he meant.

"*Ja.* Here, dere, eferywhere." The old man pointed all around the jungle, down at the ground and up to the tree tops. "One it vill take—von mann efery day—until all are gone, *ja wohl!*"

"But what is it, this Death that Leaves no Mark?" Yancey asked.

But the old man had lost all interest in him; he had turned away and moved into his cabin, shaking his head and mumbling to himself in German. Yancey stood there irresolutely a second, then decided that it was high time to be back with his men. The Death that Leaves no Mark—the death that took one man every day until none were left! It sounded fantastic, and yet after the queer things that had recently happened on this island, he was prepared for almost anything. Certainly this old man was as queer as any of them. It was a strange out-of-the-way place for an aged white man, one who was a German. Looking back as the old fellow entered the hut, Yancey caught a glimpse of a neat room and books and bundles of herbs hanging on the walls and ceilings. The old man was perhaps some old half-cracked naturalist, Yancey figured, and determined to look into the matter more thoroughly when he had less on his mind.

He was back in the clearing again where his men waited, standing in column, leaning on their rifles. Sergeant Carter, always punctilious, called them to attention and they snapped rigidly into firm ranks until Yancey gave them "Rest!" again. Giving a final look about the clearing, he gave the command to march, and set forth to return to the blockhouse, the men moving silently along behind him. He didn't like the way they acted. Something had been lost, an intangible bond that heretofore had been between him and his men. They were sullen; and this experience with negro soldiers was a new and an unpleasant one to him.

Once back at the blockhouse, he had tools brought forth—axes and shovels and saws and retraced his steps—without however having had a glimpse of Captain Jennings. Arriving once more at the clearing,

he established a line of sentinels, stacked arms, and divided his men up into working parties. The first thing to do was to provide for defense, and this he accomplished by immediately setting men to digging hasty shelter trenches, which he outlined on the sod. Other parties he set to placing obstacles, sharp bamboo stakes set upright in the ground, exceedingly uncomfortable for barefooted Moros. Within the line of shelter trenches, he laid out a company street and set still other men to cutting bamboo saplings and bejuco vines and piling them up for use in the building of huts.

The work went ahead swiftly enough, the men temporarily forgetting their worries under the stimulus of labor and of seeing something accomplished, a result for which the lieutenant had hoped.

Noon found them all enormously hungry and work was stopped for the noon meal and a rest. He was surprised to find the men going back to their labors without command, as soon as they had eaten.

While they were working during the afternoon the old German came to the edge of the clearing and watched them for a while, leaving after a few minutes and disappearing into the jungle, shaking his head. The afternoon sun waxed and waned and the work went forward. The outlines of the camp began to assume form and shape. The company street was now outlined by the double row of hut foundations and corner posts that had been set up and lashed with bejuco vine.

No word or sign had come from the captain as yet. About four o'clock Yancey began to wonder what might have happened to Jennings. He sent a man down to see if everything was all right at the blockhouse, a lanky negro soldier staggering under the heavy pseudonym of Mortality Standfast Jackson. He slouched away on his errand without causing much comment.

The sun was beginning to lessen its heavy downpour of heat, and the men began to slack off in their labors. In other words, it was nearly quitting time; the shovels and axes were not being wielded with the same enthusiasm of the earlier hours. Yancey kept them at the task, however, being anxious not to have to spend more than another night in the blockhouse. Occasionally he glanced up at the entrance to the trail leading back to the blockhouse. He momentarily expecting the return of Mortality Standfast Jackson, who unaccountably failed to return.

It began to worry the lieutenant after a while, until, he decided to investigate on his own account. As it was nearly quitting time anyway, and the men had put in a good hard day's work, he gave orders for the march back. The men fell in cheerfully enough, carrying rifles and tools and straggling along, keeping up an undertone of chuckles and laughter. Yancey, in the lead, was the first man to see some dark object on ahead and, in the grass at the side of the trail.

He quickened his step, and came to a full stop over it. It was the body of Mortality Standfast Jackson, already growing cold, the sightless eyes staring into nothing, the hands clenched and the form rigid. There was no mark of bullet or steel on the body, no trace of blood nor any other sign to show how he had come by his death.

Laughter died suddenly out of the soldiers as they halted, without waiting for an order.

"The Death that Leaves no Mark," Yancey whispered softly to himself, and looked about him at the dusk settling over the silent jungle, that jungle that guarded its secrets so well. The soldiers were huddled together in a scared group, staring at the body and frightened by what had occurred so swiftly. They glanced at the jungle

growth nearby as though expecting a new horror to appear at any second.

At that moment of intense silence, a sound broke on their ears. It started as a faint murmur, swelling gradually into an overpowering sound that shook the black men to the core. It seemed to come from all sides at once, a reiterated metallic beat that broke on their ears like the hammering of some giant hammer on bronze gates. The Moro war gong had started its steady booming again.

It was neither taunting nor sinister in its beat, merely possessed of an enormous certitude and confident power. It was as though the jungle itself had become audible and was voicing its contempt of this group of alien men cowering in its midst.

Unconsciously, the negroes began to sway and groan to its unvarying monotonous beat. Yancey shook himself together and barked out a swift command. The habit of obedience broke the spell for a moment, and men made ready to carry the body of the dead soldier back to the beach. The march was resumed, slowly this time, and they came out on the sea shore, bearing their burden.

They buried him just before dark, a tense and silent group of men, their natural fear of death enhanced by the uncanny mystery of this place and the danger that lurked so close at hand. Then they returned gloomily to the blockhouse and crouched among the shadows in the corners and against the walls, silent and morose, their bodies still swaying to the beat of the war gong that kept up its unvarying beat hour after hour.

STRANGELY enough, Captain Jennings seemed to have recovered a little normalcy. He came down and joined Yancey at supper, his torn face washed and bandaged. He ate his food solemnly seated on one side of a provision box while the lieutenant sat on the other. Yancey reported the day's happenings, but Jennings made no comment, simply peered about into the shadows at the negro soldiers surrounding them, and went on chewing his food like some ruminating animal working over its cud.

So great had been the strain on Yancey throughout the past day and night that he was grateful for even the meager comfort of Jennings' society. As he spoke of the work done on the new camp, the captain interposed no objection, and Yancey wondered if the man were listening at all. To tell the captain of the statement made by the old German recluse, that the Death which Leaves no Mark would strike down one man a day until all were gone, did not seem wise at this time. Jennings had enough to brood over without bringing up this uncomfortable possibility.

They were about half through the meal when the captain broke his silence. He leaned over, his pale eyes peering from behind their thatched eyebrows, and spoke in a low tone.

"Don't forgit that I'm on to you, young fellow," he said hoarsely, "I ain't so dumb that I can't see what's goin' on under my nose. And when I git ready to hit, I'm agoin' to hit hard, and don't you fergit it!"

Again that strange flare came into his eyes as he leaned back in his seat and stared around the blockhouse, his glance taking in every soldier who could be seen in the dim light, and at last returning to rest on Yancey.

The lieutenant sighed to himself and said nothing, only gazed out the open doorway near which they sat. Outside he could see the shoulder of one of the two sentinels on duty at the door, and beyond him the dark edge of the jungle across the white sand. A heavy cloying perfume came forth from the jungle this night, the perfume of the ylang-ylang blossoms. The tropic moon was rising, lighting up the beach; and the warm southern sea was lapping softly against the sand.

To make the picture complete, it only needed the liquid notes of a guitar throbbing in harmony with the ripple and splash of the wavelets on the beach, and—somewhere—a girl, dark eyed and dark haired

and mysteriously alluring. Instead of the guitar, there was the steady, reiterated note of the invisible Moro war gong, bong-bonging through the night; instead of an alluring girl he had for sole company this half-crazy captain who never could have been good company even though totally sane. The worst of it was that instead of the thrill of romance there brooded over everyone the fear of death, lurking in the shadows and waiting to strike again as it had struck before.

Yancey smiled wearily as he thought how some prosaic clerk, sweating over his books in a stuffy office in the States might have envied him out here on the edge of the world, and what a sad awakening the clerk might have had if he could have changed places. Captain Jennings' voice interrupted his thoughts.

"You can grin all you please," he croaked, "but you'll be grinning on the other side of your face 'fore I'm through with you!" His face was contorted in anger. Yancey glanced over at him in surprise; but before he had time to reply, both men leaped to their feet, startled, as a yell came from outside.

Something whirred viciously past and between the two officers, landing in the wooden floor with a slight thud; and both men stared at a long, black-handled, steel-bladed spear that still quivered with the force of its impact. The two sentinels came piling through the door, their teeth chattering. Yancey leaped towards them and slammed the door shut, dropping the steel bars in place.

"Who's out there? How many men?" he asked the sentinels.

"We didn't see nobody!" they answered. "Fust thing we knowed, that there spear come swishin' by us!"

Yancey turned to the men and ordered them to their places at the loopholes. Then, swinging open the door, he slid out and moved quietly and swiftly out of the patch of light shining through the door and crouched in the shadow at the side of the entrance. Gazing up and down the beach, he sought for some sign of the man who had cast the spear, but could find none.

As far as he could see the beach and jungle were empty of human life.

After several minutes of watching and listening, he went back inside and examined the spear again. It was a broad bladed affair, deadly sharp at point and on both edges. It must have been cast from at least twenty paces away, judging from the velocity with which it had arrived.

"Who heaved that thing in here?" demanded Captain Jennings loudly.

"The Moros," returned Yancey, his forehead knit in thought.

"What did they wanta do that for?" pressed Jennings, a note of surprised grievance in his voice.

"You fired on them without warning this morning. They've retorted. This is the Moro way of declaring war," Yancey returned grimly.

Captain Jennnigs made no reply, only examined the spear again, nodding his head and mumbling to himself.

There was silence in the blockhouse as the men digested this unpleasant information.

No further sound came from outside except the steady beating of the war gong. Captain Jennings made his way to the stairs leading to his den above. Yancey spoke up again.

"Captain, these men are pretty crowded down here, can't we put some of them up there to sleep on the second floor?"

Jennings stopped, his foot on the bottom step, and turned around. "You keep these niggers down here where they belong!" he snarled, and went on his way.

There was an uneasy stirring among the soldiers, and a low, vague muttering—a muttering such as one can hear before an approaching storm. The word "nigger"

can be used by certain white men to members of that dusky race, but only certain white men can use it without leaving resentment behind. Jennings was most certainly not one of those white men.

Yancey did not like the sound of that growling undertone. Captain Jennings had disappeared above. The steady growling increased in volume.

"Sergeant Carter," called Yancey.

"Yas, suh Lootenant?"

"Looks like the captain doesn't want our company. Can't say I blame him much. Of all the mumbling, grumbling, sad looking niggers I ever saw, this gang is the worst. How about cheering up a little? Where's Sergeant Baker's banjo, and that concertina that somebody had around the barracks? Did you bring them along?"

"Yas, suh Lootenant, suah did!"

SLOWLY and sluggishly at first, the music started. But no African soul can withstand the magic of melody; within a few minutes those black men, huddled in that lonely blockhouse, were crooning in rhythm, swaying contentedly to the strains of the banjo and the concertina, pouring out their hearts in the words and music of "Mary, Don't You Weep, Don't You Moan." Song after song followed, crooning melodies that made them forget their fears and loneliness for the moment and that soothed their spirits, torn by too much contact with the unknown.

It was while the music was at its height and the black faces were shining with the fervor of their songs that Captain Jennings' voice rasped from above the stairs.

"Stop that goddam racket!" he shouted.

The music died down instantly. The banjo and the concertina were folded away regretfully. In the shadows the soldiers resumed their silence and glum misery. There was something wistful and pathetic about their poses, so that Yancey grew hot with anger at the stupidity of the man who had denied them this little surcease to so much of horror.

The men dozed fitfully through the night; Yancey caught such snatches of slumber as he could, inspecting the two sentinels outside the door every half hour or so and looking over beach and jungle at each inspection. After that spear hurled into their midst, the Moro attack could not be long delayed.

Dawn—the dawn of their second day on the island—came at last. Yancey roused himself from the few minutes' nap he had managed to snatch, and rose to make arrangements for the detail to bring in water. The movements of this detail were carefully planned. A party of six men, carrying all the canteens and buckets and protected by ten men armed with loaded rifles, moved out toward the water hole. They were followed by three men, one of whom took up a position at the edge of the jungle, one farther in among the trees and the third in the rear of the detachment, with orders to pass back instant word of any thing unusual.

Yancey did not accompany them as usual, fearing to leave the blockhouse without his presence at this dangerous hour just after dawn, a favorite hour for attack. The thing he expected was a powerful Moro attack from the sea, and he scanned the surface of the waters anxiously, watching for the great fleet of *praus* that would be the forerunner of battle. He varied this occupation by casting an occasional glance at the jungle edge, where he could see the nearest one of the three connecting files attached to the watering party.

Thus engaged, he suddenly hurried out of the blockhouse, revolver in hand, arriving outside the door in time to meet the sentry at the jungle edge, who had raced to the blockhouse. The man was too breathless and frightened to speak for a few seconds, but he kept pointing back at the jungle.

"Suh, Loot-loot-lootenant, somep'n done kilt Private Barstow—Yas, suh, he's standin' dere in de trees not fifty feet from me. Ah—Ah seems him fall down—an'—an' a big gray devil comes and leans ovah him a second——Yas suh, As swears on a stack o' Bibles—big gray devil lookin' like a big bird. Yas suh, de old devil flaps he wings and fly away when Ah hollers! Barstow, he layin' dere daid naow——" And without another word, the badly frightened negro broke past Yancey and ran into the shelter of the blockhouse.

Several yells came from within the jungle. Yancey hurried toward the opening, but stopped as he saw the soldiers of the watering party burst suddenly out of the jungle and onto the beach, carrying a body with them and stumbling in their hurrying. Frightened, they looked backward at something within the trees.

Making as rapid progress as they could with their burden, they came on. Yancey ran to meet them.

The sergeant in charge turned anxious eyes on him, pointing back over his shoulder.

" 'Bout a millyon dese here Moros comin', suh Lootenant!" he panted.

Yancey looked back in the direction of the jungle edge in time to see it darkened by the shadows of a mass of brown bodies spilling out on the white sands of the beach like a wave. Bearing down upon his little group were several hundred Moros warriors coming on swiftly and silently with spears and barongs flashing in the early mornnig sun. They were like a pack of wolves closing in on the quarry.

Chapter VII

THE HORNS AGAINST EVIL

SO QUICKLY had things happened that there was no time to take counter measures. Yancey glanced swiftly about him. A picture of that scene became indelibly impressed in his mind as a result of that brief glimpse—blue sky, blue sea, white sand and luxuriant jungle, his handful of men breaking to the rear behind him, and ahead of him that dark mass of Moros, rolling down upon him like an irresistible wave—so near now that he could see their eyes filled with the frenzy of blood-thirsty slaughter and their spears poised for the throw.

There came over him a queer feeling of fatality, an indifference to death, a resignation to fate such at that which nature mercifully gives to the hunted quarry about to succumb to the power of the hunter.

In the little time left him, he found himself marveling at the nearness of death and at his absolute indifference to it. His brain worked with remarkable clarity, and he found time to wonder, in a detached sort of way, at the disinterested fashion in which he leveled his revolver. The nearness of the rapidly advancing Moros was a bestial looking specimen with a lip that had been split in some encounter, his face hideously scarred. Yancey's hand was steady as he raised the revolver and held it unwaveringly. He remembered to sight with both eyes open, to take up the slack of the trigger gradually, to compress his whole hand instead of only the trigger finger, and lastly to hold low, aiming at a man's navel instead of at his head. All these habitual aids to accurate shooting recurred to his mind in a calm and orderly fashion, as though he had a paper target before him instead of a charging mass of slaughter-crazy Moros.

The savages were so near now that he could see the betel blackened teeth, the scaly faces, and the oiled hair of the nearest of them. The Moro with the hideously scarred face was some four or five yards in advance of his fellows. His arm was swinging upward, ready to cast his six-foot, broad-bladed spear. Yancey stood calmly, his feet spread slightly apart, his whole being concentrated in driving forth the shot that might stop his enemy. He leaned forward, tightening the trigger until it reached the point where the inevitable explosion was due.—— And then his hand relaxed.

He stared in puzzlement at the fierce looking savage before him. For the Moro with the hideously scarred face had leaped into the air like a stricken tiger and had fallen heavily to the sand, where he rolled over once, twitched spasmodically, and lay still.

The warriors behind him checked their stride, the foremost ones stumbling and falling, the men behind tripping over the bodies of the others, some of them driven so far forward by the impetus of their charge that they slid head first along the ground, their shoulders and heads plowing up furrows of sand.

A yell of terror went up from the Moros in rear. Some of them pointed at the jungle edge at their left, their eyes wide with fright and horror. Like cattle, they turned and stampeded, fighting and clawing to get away. In a few more seconds they were streaming back into the jungle in blind panic. As Yancey watched, stupefied, he saw five or six of the rearmost ones fling up their hands, drop their weapons from nerveless fingers and one at a time pitch heavily onto their faces in the sand.

In the space of fifteen or twenty seconds, that beach was cleared of all living men except Yancey, who stared at the still, brown forms that lay scattered in grotesque attitudes along the sand. Turning at last, he scanned the jungle edge at which the Moros had pointed so fearfully. As his eyes rested on the heavy undergrowth, he thought he saw a bush tremble slightly, its leaves quivering as though disturbed by the passage of some heavy body.

Instinct told him that this was no time in which to stand gaping, and he moved quietly towards the blockhouse, watching the jungle edge from the corner of his eye without seeming to do so. Without knowing why, he felt that he was being warned not even to investigate the strange deaths of the Moro warriors.

He had covered about five yards, expecting every second to feel the impact of the same mysterious death that had struck down the Moros so silently, when his eyes caught another flicker of movement in the jungle.

Without increasing or decreasing his pace, he turned his head slightly and glanced keenly at the spot where the movement had registered itself on his consciousness. For one swift second he saw the green-gray trunk of a jungle tree eclipsed by the shadow of something gray and formless. It was no more than a glimpse. As he watched the tree trunk, turning his head farther as his footsteps carried him on, he saw the bark of the trunk uncovered again. The vague, grayish shape had disappeared again!

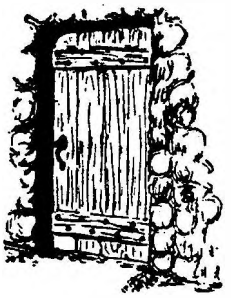
He was surprised, when he set foot on the stone step of the blockhouse, to find that he was no more perturbed. His hand was steady as he returned his revolver to its holster. Death, which he had expected, had passed him by. Life, to the loss of which he had resigned himself, suddenly seemed a very commonplace affair, lacking now the keen thrill of the ending that had been so close a moment earlier.

Turning for another look at the beach, he saw it as he had left it, its white smoothness broken by the grotesquely huddled bodies of the dead Moros scattered over it. The ceaseless wavelets were still lap-lapping on one side, and the eternal jungle, silent and sphinxlike, loomed darkly on the other.

The Death that Leaves no Mark had worked silently and well, this time against his enemies, strangely sparing him and all his men but one. But he felt that in that unexpected mercy a more sinister threat. It was as though a lesser enemy had been driven away in order that some jealous and greater power might attack gloatingly and without need for haste. He felt as though he and his men had been saved from quick and merciful death by steel, only to be saved for an infinitely more lingering death by some vague and terrible means.

Pushing open the door, he strode into the blockhouse. Two steps he took into the

interior and stopped. A queer tenseness in the atmosphere was the first thing he noticed. Captain Jennings was evidently above, for he was nowhere to be seen. The men were there, every negro at his post, lined up at the loopholes, rifles in hand. Sergeant Carter was in charge at his post in the center of the circular room. The eyes of every one of the soldiers were upon Yancey as he entered. As his gaze traveled from man to man, each soldier looked hastily away, only to resume staring at him as soon as his glance had traveled on. They stared at him fearfully and wonderingly, with something of horror in their gaze. Even Sergeant Carter avoided his eyes.



It gave Yancey a sudden empty feeling, as though he had been cut off from them and set outside of the blockhouse in the flesh. It was as though he were undergoing the experience in a dream. There flashed through his mind a sudden picture, that of the return of Lazarus from the dead. Just so must Lazarus have been regarded by his friends and family after his resurrection from the dead.

These superstitious negroes had seen him grasp the edge of the shadowy robe of Death; had seen him, alone, face the attack of some two or three hundred Moro warriors; had seen the savages smitten down by some unseen agency and had watched their sudden rout. All this had been seen through the astounded eyes of the negroes, and now the white man who had wrought this dark magic was in their midst. It was no wonder that their simple minds explained the seeming miracle after their own primitive ways of reasoning.

This did not occur to Yancey until after he had spoken to Sergeant Carter and that loyal non-commissioned officer had left his post and approached his officer, unwillingly and slowly, with eyes averted. Even then, Yancey could not explain the attitude of those soldiers and of this sturdy old non-commissioned officer.

It was only as Yancey's gaze traveled down the sergant's frame to where the black right hand rested, that sudden light dawned on the white man. For Sergeant Carter's hand was not pressed close against the seam of his trousers as laid down in military regulations for the proper pose of a strict soldier addressed by an officer. That hand was queerly twisted.

It took Yancey a second to puzzle out the meaning of that bent hand and its twisted fingers, and it was only as he raised his eyes to Sergeant Carter's face again, finding that good non-commissioned officer averting his gaze, that quick comprehension came to him. He recognized the position of hand and fingers for what it was, the age old and world wide gesture, as common to the African savage and the Siberian peasant of today as it was to the Tuscan peasant in the time when Rome was a village. The sign of the Ram, the Symbol of the Horns against Evil. Fingers crossed and twisted into a charm against black magic.

It came over Yancey suddenly that his negro soldiers were convinced that he was the possessor of that malignant and supernatural power supposed to reside in the Evil Eye.

The first realization of this belief of his men shocked him—for it meant the end of all ties between him and his soldiers. It chilled him to know that he was set apart from his fellow human beings as a leper is set apart, and it filled his mind with foreboding, for he understood that he was as a man marked for slaughter. They would undoubtedly kill him at the first opportunity that presented itself.

TO BE alone in the midst of one's fellow men is the supreme loneliness. As Yancey looked about that circle of averted faces he knew that no words of his could bridge this chasm that had so suddenly appeared before him.

For the first time in many minutes, the notes of the Moro war gong began to beat on his consciousness and he was aware that it had been booming forth without cessation since before the attack of the Moros. But now the beats were sharper somehow, and pierced his hearing with more power than heretofore. So much so that he found himself shrinking inwardly from their steady, unhurried, hammering. He wondered if the war gong had grown louder in the interim or if he had grown more sensitive. He hoped that the latter was not true, for he knew that increasing sensitiveness to noise betokened lessened nervous resistance; and he needed all his faculties to meet the difficulties that lay ahead.

These difficulties were pressing with more and more weight against him; the loneliness, the unsolved mystery of the disappearance of other bodies of men from the island; the swift, relentless horror of the loss of his own men; the mysterious evil force arrayed against his company of soldiers on the island; the growing resentment of his captain, the only other white man; the needless enmity of the Moros; the swift and silent death dealt those same Moros; and now the further and total alienation of his soldiers from him by their superstitious belief in his possession of the Evil Eye. All these things made an array of forces that might have beaten a less courageous man to his knees, defeated.

Yancey raised his head sharply and gazed sternly at his soldiers.

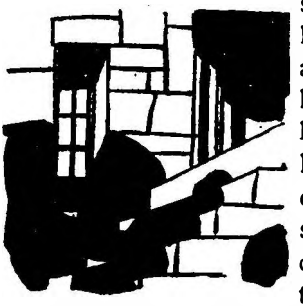
"If I die before we leave this island," he announced, "no man of you will ever see Jolo again. Don't forget that.—— No evil can befall a man who shows no fear! I showed no fear, and look what happened to the Moros who tried to kill me! If any of you men show fear or run away from danger, you will have worse things happen to you than happened to those Moros!"

He stopped, his eyes fixed somberly on the negroes huddled there in the blockhouse. A groan went up from them, the groan of completely hopeless men frightened to the core of their beings.

Yancey nodded to himself. After all, if he could not rule them by discipline and reason, he could rule them by fear—although he well knew the unreasoning mass fear of men in a group, especially negroes, and of the blind horrors which such fear could perpetrate.

It was time for food, and he gave orders that a meal should be prepared, allowing no man to go outside of the blockhouse until that silent menace which lurked on the jungle edge should have either shown itself or gone away.

From his position inside the door, the sun prolonged his shadow across the blockhouse floor and he noted bitterly that, in spite of the confined space and crowded state of the interior of this building, every negro avoided stepping on his shadow, going to great pains in order to walk around it.



Gazing out of the open doorway, he saw that great black birds had floated down out of the sky and were fighting over the bodies of the slain Moros, gorging themselves to heavy repletion as they flapped their huge wings and hopped about awkwardly. They had not fed for more than a few minutes before there was a great commotion from amongst them, and they lifted themselves on clumsily outspread pinions and launched themselves into the air. Yancey studied sea and jungle and sky for the cause which had forced them into flight, but could find no sign of anything nor any trace of movement within the jungle.

THE day wore on and night came at last, clouded and overcast. Still Jennings had not appeared from above, and still the war gong kept up its steadily re-

iterated beat. Again Yancey placed the two sentinels outside the door, this time erecting a protection for them in the form of a barricade of boxes and provision sacks. He seated himself within the open doorway behind them, half turned toward the danger from without, and half toward the danger from within.

The men stirred and moved about restlessly, unable or unwilling to compose themselves to sleep. Yancey's many sleepless nights were beginnnig to tell on him, and he found his head nodding again and again. He went through tortures of effort to keep himself awake. It was during one of these dozing spells that Sergeant Carter's voice fell on his ears and he awoke startled, to find the black non-commissioned officer standing before him, his face worried.

"Suh Lòotenant, dey's a powahful lotta whisperin' goin' on outside—and dese heah men, dey t'ink it's ghosts!"

Yancey roused himself and walked outside to the barricade, where the two anxious sentinels were holding vigil. Listening intently, he could at first hear nothing but the war gong's booming notes and the lap of water against the shore. But as he stood there holding his breath, another sound fell on his ears, a fitful half-heard murmur that rose and fell. It sounded exactly like the voices of many men at no great distance, whispering and talking in low tones.

Chapter VIII

THE ATTACK ON THE BLOCKHOUSE

LISTENING, Yancey imagined that he could hear broken phrases of Moro dialect; but so distant was the sound that he could not be sure. But someone else was listening as well, for he heard Captain Jennings place himself at the window above him.

Jennings was mumbling to himself, his voice falling at times to a whisper and again rising to an angry mutter. This kept up for several minutes. Yancey was certain that he heard the clatter of *praus* somewhere in the darkness at the water's edge. It was as though *prau* after *prau* was landing, discharging its load of warriors and being drawn up on the sand.

The faint stir and movement of many men made the thick darkness alive with danger. Yancey turned to Sergeant Carter behind him.

"Have the men stand to their posts—load and lock pieces!" he ordered.

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before the whispering silence of the night was shattered by a revolver shot. It was Captain Jennings firing out into the darkness from the window above.

That single shot stilled all other sounds. In the silence that followed, Yancey ordered the two sentinels within doors, and followed them, closing the entrance and locking it. There were no lights within the blockhouse, but in the pitch blackness he sensed the tense watchfulness of his men at their loopholes.

Making his way to the nearest embrasure, he pushed aside the man who occupied it and peered out into the gloom of the night.

The whispering of many voices had died down, but a new and more disquieting sound had replaced it—the slight noise made by many men advancing cautiously over the sandy beach. It came from all sides at once, that sound.

Yancey listened in nervous indecision for a moment. To allow his men to fire might relieve their over-wrought nerves; but it would waste precious ammunnition and accomplish little good, for no one could possibly see the targets.

Any sort of action was preferable to the strain of waiting. An idea came to Yancey. Leaping down from the firing platform, he fumbled around in the impenetrable gloom until he found what he sought, the stacked kitchen utensils. Amongst these was a can of bacon drippings, saved by the careful cook. Next, he sought and found some billets of wood, the fuel for the cooking fires. Seizing the axe he chopped lightly at one of these

sticks, making many projecting shavings of wood. Once the stick was well roughened, he dipped it into the bacon drippings, thoroughly coating it with the grease.

With this in his hand, he hurried up the stairs to the second floor. The dark shadow of Captain Jennings blocked the window to the front, but Yancey climbed silently over the slight barricade and made his way to the window giving on the beach. Here he struck a match and lighted his torch, turning it rapidly as the flame took hold. The darkness of the tower room was instantly dispelled as the flames licked hungrily into the grease-smeared shavings. Captain Jennings turned and came towards him, revolver raised. Disregarding him, Yancey flung the blazing torch out of the open window as far as he could send it.

It described a fiery parabola through the darkness, landing on the sand, where it blazed up fiercely. Its flames lighted up the beach to the water's edge, on one side, and to the jungle edge on the other.

Yancey had time to catch a swift glimpse of hundreds of dark forms crawling towards the blockhouse, when a stab of flame spat at him out of the darkness of the tower room. His hat was brushed off his head by what seemed a puff of wind.

Leaping towards the staircase, he vaulted the barricade. Another shot spat at him out of the darkness above as he was halfway down the stairs, the bullet striking the handrail not six inches from him. Jennings was shooting to kill, but there was no time to worry about that.

"Fire at will!" Yancey ordered as he landed amongst his men below.

A roar of rifle fire answered him. Every soldier began to pump lead into the Moro forms swarming on the beach.

A defiant yell rose from the enemy, but none of them had sense enough to put out the blazing billet of wood which flamed away luridly, lighting up the whole scene and outlining the attacking Moros. On the beach beyond were revealed the gunwales of their *praus*.

The cool and steady fire from the blockhouse was having deadly effect in the close-packed mass of the attackers; but their numbers were so great that still they came on, closing up the gaps as man after man went down. The Moros had few guns, evidently; and these either antiquated or defective. Most of their shots went wild, and the idea of shooting at the loopholes seemed far from their minds.

The blockhouse was ringed about with spurts of flame stabbing into the night from every loophole. Yancey had again taken post at one of these, and rapidly loaded and fired a borrowed rifle, watching anxiously as the flames of the billet of wood began to die down. Then he stopped his firing suddenly as a new anxiety overwhelmed him.

The leading Moros were dragging bamboo ladders forward.

"Pick off the men with the ladders!" he shouted into the ears of the nearest soldiers. Sergeant Carter carried the word around the firing platform, shaking each man by the shoulder to attract his attention.

The command began to take effect. The Moros carrying the ladders began to stumble and fall. The bearers of the nearest ladder were all down in a few seconds, but other Moros leaped to their places and dragged it forward a few paces, only to go down in their turn and to be succeeded by fresh carriers.

Meanwhile, Yancey had busied himself preparing a fresh billet of grease-coated wood; and he flung this out the loophole just as the first beacon flickered and smouldered out.

The interior of the blockhouse was hazy with smoke and powder gases, and the men were coughing with the fumes. The un-

ceasing roar of rifles now drowned out all other sounds.

IT WAS plain to Yancey that the Moros had come prepared to storm the upper windows of the small fortress, and it was also plain to him that in spite of their losses, so great were their numbers that within a very few minutes some of them would succeed. As he watched, one group of the enemy succeeded in placing a ladder against the wall. Unfortunately for them, they had placed it within range of a loophole; and as fast as the Moros swarmed up they were tumbled off. One of them was caught on the rungs of the ladder and hung crazily head downwards, as his companions tried to make their way up. But other ladders were being put in place. It was only a matter of seconds until some of the Moros would succeed in gaining a foothold and entering the upper windows.

The floor above was the danger point—it was imperative that men be put there instantly to defend it.

Yancey started up the stairs again. As he mounted step by step, there was no sign of Captain Jennings. It was not until his head was on a level with the flimsy barricare above that he saw Jennings near the window.

"Captain!" Yancey called above the noise of firing. "We'll have to put some men up here——"

That was as far as he got, for at the sound of his voice Jennings turned and fired. Yancey ducked as the bullet struck the ceiling above his head. Slowly he went back downstairs as Jennings turned again to watch the enemy.

There was only one thing to do—short of shooting Jennings—and that was to concentrate on the ladder men, hoping that the fire from below would prevent them from gaining an entry through the windows above.

A second and a third ladder were now in place. Yancey saw one of these, loaded with a swarm of scrambling Moros, pushed out from above and fall backwards. The other ladder was in place, but the soldiers within developed a crossfire on it and effectively cleared it of attackers. By now the Moros had brought all their own rifles into play, and bullets thudded into the outer walls. One found a mark in the soldier nearest Yancey, and he fell backwards, groaning loudly, one arm hanging limp. From the other side of the blockhouse a scream of pain arose as another bullet tore its way through the shoulder muscles of a defender.

The men became more cautious, partially closing the inner shutters, without diminishing their rate of fire. Yancey paced back and forth, watching the enemy through the loopholes, now on this side and now on that, steadying down the more excitable of the soldiers, and watching the ammunition expediture. More flaming billets of wood had been hurled out, and the scene was now well lighted. The ground was covered was Moro dead and wounded, but still they came on in fanatical frenzy, stubbornly attempting to place their ladders so that they could scale the blockhouse walls.

It was not long before Yancey began to detect another odor above the smell of burnnig powder. He also heard a brisk crackling sound.

A wild yell came from outside, and the Moros rushed, with new impetuosity to the attack.

It was Sergeant Carter who brought the bad news.

"Suh Lootenant, de captain done set de roof afiah!" he announced.

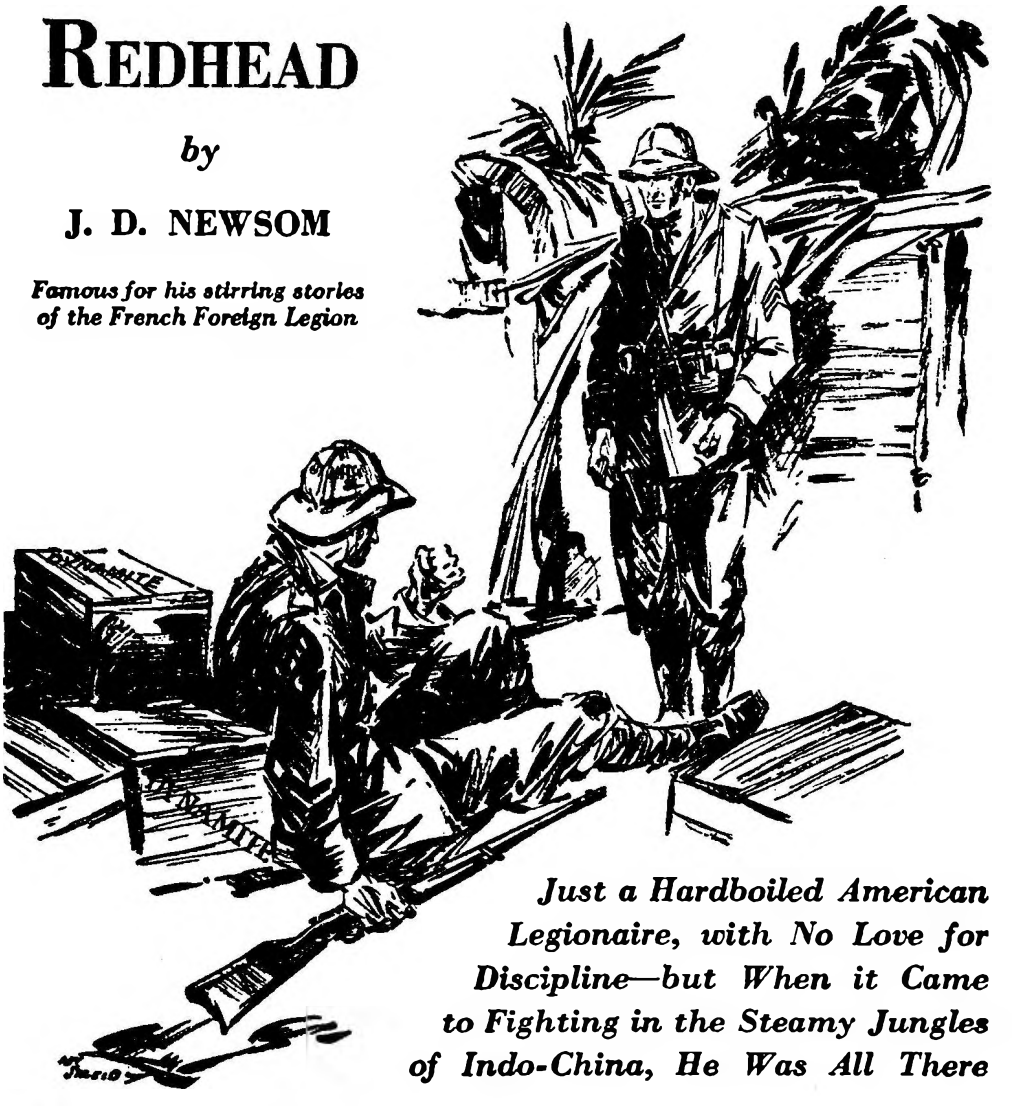
(*To Be Concluded in the Next Issue of* SHORT STORIES——*Don't Miss It!*)

REDHEAD

by

J. D. NEWSOM

Famous for his stirring stories of the French Foreign Legion



Just a Hardboiled American Legionaire, with No Love for Discipline—but When it Came to Fighting in the Steamy Jungles of Indo-China, He Was All There

AMERICANS? No, monsieur, you will not find many in the ranks of the French Foreign Legion. Most of our men are Europeans: Germans and Russians and Poles. Stolid, dependable men, without too much imagination. With them you know where you stand. If they are steady on parade you may be sure they will be steady under fire. It is all a matter of training, of discipline.

That is the most important thing of all: discipline. Courage comes of itself if the recruit has been properly trained and has been taught to respect his chiefs. A European understands such things. They are bred in his bones. But Americans! *Mon Dieu,* they are altogether incomprehensible. I speak from experience. I had one in my platoon some years ago, during the Song-Kai campaign and, as God is my witness, monsieur, I hope I never have to deal with another one. Twenty such men would of a certainty destroy the morale of any battalion.

Judge for yourself:

The man I speak of came to us with a reenforcement draft a month before we left the concentration camp at Bao-Lac. I have forgotten his real name. He was known to us as "Redhead" because of the incendiary color of his hair.

You have never seen such a man: very big and bony, with his long arms and even

longer legs, so that he seemed to be mounted on stilts. He stood head and shoulders over the tallest man in the battalion. No uniform could be made to fit him, and the regimental tailors at the base depot had given up the task in despair. They had dressed him in the usual tropical outfit of gray flannel eked out with patches of blue cloth sewed on in the most unexpected and conspicuous spots. His tunic was too big across the shoulders and too short in the sleeves, which rode up to his elbows, exposing his hairy forearms covered with outrageous drawings tattooed in red ink.

From his knuckles to his elbows there was not a square centimeter of skin that had not been tattooed. On the inside of his right arm was printed a list of dates which attracted the colonel's attention while he was inspecting the incoming draft.

"What may that be?" he inquired, touching Redhead's arm with the tip of his cane. "Are you memorizing the kings of France?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," said this extraordinary American, who did not seem to know the meaning of the word "respect." That's my prison record—in case my conduct sheet should be mislaid. I'm proud of that record. I've been in every military penitentiary in Africa and Tonkin, except Mers-el-Kebir, and I'll get there yet or bust."

Mers-el-Kebir is the prison to which are sent the very worst offenders—those who are considered unworthy ever again to bear arms and have been drummed out of the Legion.

An impossible creature, this Redhead! You should have seen him standing there with his dirty sun helmet cocked over one eye, chewing betelnut like a native and spitting out streaks of juice which had stained his teeth and gums bright red—as red as his hair. And what a face! All lumps and bones, with a wide, loose mouth and a turned-up nose covered with freckles.

As soon as I set eyes on him, even before he spoke so insolently to our colonel, I was prejudiced against him. I have handled many men in my time, and I can spot a troublemaker by the very way he walks onto the barrack square. I would have given a month's pay to have kept this Redhead out of my platoon, but Weiss, our adjutant, would not listen to me.

"Somebody must have him," he said. "Your platoon is the only one in A Company which is not up to full strength. Take him and do the best you can to hammer some sense into his thick skull before we go into action. He came out of Hanoi prison three weeks ago, and from the way he acts I think he must be homesick."

"Eh bien," I suggested, "why not put him out of his misery at once? He has insulted the colonel on parade, and there is nothing to keep you from starting court martial proceedings. I know his kind: he is going to spoil the appearance of my platoon and infect my men with his own shameless insubordination."

But Weiss took me aside and whispered in my ear: "The colonel has spoken to me about this Redhead. He does not want to send him to prison again if it can be avoided. Prison means nothing to such a lout. He is incurable. Not once since he has been a Legionaire, has he been in action. As soon as he finds out that there is any fighting to be done, he manages to have himself court-martialed and goes to prison instead of doing his duty. *I* think he does it deliberately and that is the colonel's opinion also. He has cost the government far more than he is worth. Do the best you can until we go up country next month. When the fighting starts, perhaps he will run into a bullet or commit some crime for which he can be shot."

Such cases are not as infrequent as you might believe. I have known a good many soldiers who preferred five years of hard labor to a bayonet charge which might last five minutes. And it seemed to me that Redhead belonged to this despicable category of cowards.

I DID not love him, you may rest assured, and though I am not as strict as some of my fellow sergeants, I did my best to make this Yankee understand that he could not take any liberties with me.

I made him sweat blood, drilling him four hours at a stretch in full marching order, with thirty-seven kilos of kit and equipment hanging from his shoulders. I grew hoarse shouting at him, and the more I shouted the more nonchalant he became. He acted, this specimen of a stubborn camel, as though he were humoring me. Did I tell you he was slow and clumsy? He was worse than that. He tripped over his feet, he dropped his rifle, he would make a left turn when ordered to make a right turn, and always, no matter what was said to him or done to him, his mouth was twisted in a smile of derision and contempt.

He wore me out. Cheerfully I could have killed him and he knew it, which increased his amusement. I tried everything I knew to break his spirit, but he was as strong as an ox. Neither rain nor sun nor heat nor fever had any effect upon him.

Off parade he drank like a fish. When he had no more money someone was always at hand to lend him some, for he was very popular with the men who admired him all too much for my peace of mind.

I gave him as few opportunities as possible to be in the barrack room, keeping him whenever possible in the guardhouse under lock and key. He stood it for three weeks then, monsieur, of all things, what should he do but go on strike!

He was doing defaulter's drill at the time. It had rained all night and the parade ground was ankle deep in mud. I had told him to perform the *pas de gymnastique*—the double-quick march. He took two steps, slipped, and went down on his belly in the muck. He lay there, quite contentedly for about half a minute, resting his head on his crossed wrists.

"Get up!" I shouted at him. "Is it that you have gone to sleep like a hog wallowing in its sty?"

Eh bien! After a while he raised himself off the ground. Black and dripping, he was, from head to foot—one mass of filth.

"Double-quick—march!" I ordered.

"Double-quick nothing," he retorted, squirting betel juice through his teeth. "*J'en ai marre.* I've had enough. From now on, Sergeant, my love, I'm in a state of open insubordination. I refuse to obey your orders. You can give me three summonses or fifty thousand. It's all one to me—and if you'll take your hand off that revolver of yours I'll bust you one on the coco that will keep you in hospital for the next year."

He spoke without anger, as I am speaking now, but I realized by the stubborn look on his face that he meant what he said, and it angered me to think that a hulking, great *salopard* such as he was should have the soul of a rabbit.

"I know what you're after," I warned him. "Nothing would please you better than to be safely tucked away in a prison cell when the column leaves for the Song-Kai country next week. That's a habit of yours, isn't it?"

And I called him several names which one may use on a parade ground, but which I would not care to repeat in the café within earshot of so many ladies.

REDHEAD grew livid as I talked. The freckles stood out in dark spots on his gray skin and his eyes were the eyes of a madman. He would have murdered me had I not had a gun in my hand.

"Sergeant," he said at last, and his voice shook as he spoke, "Sergeant, you're a bigger damn fool than I thought you were. If you think I'm a coward, meet me any night you like behind the stables—you and any other half dozen sergeants you want to bring along—and I'll whale hell out of the whole bunch of you."

"I wouldn't dirty my hands on filth of your species," I told him. "Talk is cheap. You know you're safe even though you were to challenge the whole sergeants' mess. If you aren't a coward, how does it happen that you have been in the Legion almost eight years and not once have you been in action?"

At that his anger subsided and he began to laugh. "It's no fault of mine," he said. "I never could stand this forming fours and presenting arms and saluting by numbers. I can endure it just so long, and then I break loose. I'm not a machine and you can't make me over into one."

He was striking, you see, at the very roots of the system. A man *must* behave as automatically as a machine before he can hope to become a good Legionaire. Otherwise, how can he be expected to obey orders at all times and under all conditions no matter what the cost may be to himself? That is the essence of discipline as we understand it.

"What made you join the Legion if you will not abide by its laws?" I asked. "If all our men thought as you do the regiment would cease to exist. We'd be no better than an armed rabble."

Redhead shrugged his shoulders as he said: "I didn't know what I was letting myself in for. That's the long and short of it. The devil take your cock-eyed Legion! It's too full of loud-mouthed sergeants like yourself, with nothing to do but yap at my heels and pester the life out of me. Do you think I care what happens to the Legion after the way I've been made to prance about in the mud? I'm sick of it. Call it a day. Send me to the cells and be done with it. I like the vermin and the moldy bread better than I do the sight of your face. If you had a sprig of parsley in either nostril you'd look like one of those boiled calf's heads you see on the butcher stalls in Paris."

I should have sent him to prison. It was my duty to do so. No other Legionaire has ever dared to address me in that disrespectful manner. But I controlled my temper, for I had not forgotten the colonel's orders. Moreover, I was anxious to see what this Redhead would do when the bullets began to buzz past his ears.

"You're out of luck," I assured him. "Unless you murder me or assault the company commander you are sure to go upcountry with the column—and if you so much as bat an eyelash I'll be right beside you ready to put a lead pellet into your heart."

I was almost certain that this would be his fate for, as I was saying, a man who will not obey willingly on the drill ground usually goes to pieces when he is face to face with the enemy. And I knew what lay ahead of us when we reached the Song-Kai jungle.

Redhead thought this over for quite some time. "When do we leave?" he inquired finally.

"In about five days," I explained. "You'll have to work fast if you want to squirm out of it."

He spat a streak of red juice out of the corner of his mouth. *"Ça colle,"* he drawled in that slow way he had of talking. "It's a bargain. Listen here, Sergeant. As noncoms go in this damned outfit I've met worse than you. You're the one and only sergeant who's sort of talked things over. All right, let's fix it this way: if you lay off me for the next five days I'll promise to go straight. I wouldn't mind a little trip upcountry myself for a change, but for the love of all that's holy, quit making a jackass out of me. Being messed about like this is driving me nutty."

I did not trust him at all, and I thought that he was merely trying to gain time to work out some new way of breaking the law.

"All right," I agreed, "we'll cut out the extra drills, but just to be on the safe side, my friend, we'll keep you in solitary confinement until the column pulls out."

A FORTNIGHT later we were in the thick of the Song-Kai country, heading northward toward the Chinese border,

clearing up the rebel posts as we went along.

It was tough going all the way. Thick jungle: ferns up to your breast, chrysanthemums, geraniums—a hothouse full of flowers you've never heard of and thorns as big as tailor's shears. It was like hacking your way through a flower show, with the smell so strong it made you sick, and the sweat pouring down in your eyes. A scratch never healed in that climate; it would fester overnight, and the next thing you knew, blood poisoning would set in. I lost a third of my platoon before we saw a rebel. They sniped at us from behind their bamboo stockades and skipped out as soon as we came close enough to give them a volley.

Redhead? Don't you worry; I had one eye on him all the time, and do you know, that confounded Yankee worked like a horse. I swear, he seemed to enjoy it. Most days he was out in front with a machete, clearing a trail for the rest to follow.

"You guys don't know the first thing about roadmaking," he used to jeer. "Prison's the place to learn all about this job. Give me a gang of jailbirds and I'll cut a trail through to China while you're still spitting on your hands and thinking about going to work."

And I've seen him, in that moist heat that was like a steam bath, toting three rifles and as many packs for troopers too exhausted to drag themselves along. At night, instead of sleeping, he would go out foraging and come back loaded down with ducks and bags of rice and cans of boned chicken, not to mention wine by the bucketful. A good deal of that loot, I am positive, came from the headquarters' mess; but I kept my mouth shut. On the line of march the less said about that sort of thing the better, for you can't make any Legionaire understand that looting is a serious offense—and the extras Redhead brought in helped to keep my platoon in good fighting trim.

Even then I had no confidence in him, and I was sure that as soon as we came up against the main rebel positions he would not have the guts to stand the gaff. But I had an inkling of the stuff this customer was made of some days later. He had been pricked by a thorn, or it may have been by one of the insects you find up in that filthy country. At all events, when we bivouacked at nightfall and I called the roll, Redhead's arm was puffed out like a purple balloon. It was enormous. His fingers themselves were so swollen that they looked about to burst.

I said, "Redhead, you imbecile, I do not want to lose you until the jungle pirates have had a chance to bounce a few bullets off your skull. Why the devil didn't you report sick sooner? As it is, I shall have to waste half the night wandering about in the jungle with you, trying to find the ambulance section."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he retorted. "I have no confidence in your French surgeons, and, anyway, they're worked to death just now. I'll look after this myself."

You see! He still had no idea of discipline or civility—but he cured his arm. How? He took a knife, slashed open the flesh of his arm where it was puffed out, poured some black powder into the wound and fired it. *Pfff!* I can still smell the stench of his roasting flesh, but he didn't even wince. It worked, too, for the burn went deep, and ten days later Redhead was swinging a machete as though he had never been poisoned.

We were in the foothills by that time, and the jungle pirates were hanging onto our flanks, peppering us at every step. In that thick jungle they could run rings around us. All day and all night we'd hear their war horns braying and bullets would come crackling through the leaves, but not a yellow face did we see. We were losing men right and left. It made Redhead frothing mad.

"I'm losing my beauty sleep with all their hootings and bellowings," he complained. "Why don't they fight it out, if that's what's ailing them?"

"Wait a while," I promised. "You're going to get all the fighting you want, Redhead, and maybe a little more than you bargain for." But I had misjudged my man.

WE REACHED the Chow-Pei position the next morning. A hard nut to crack; halfway up a hill, surrounded by moats full of sharpened bamboo staves and half a dozen stockades one inside the other. The place was alive with pennants and banners, and all the horns in creation seemed to be concentrated in the fort. As soon as we moved forward, the jungle pirates let drive with everything they had.

I was half expecting Redhead to cave in, for A Company was in the lead and we were cut to ribbons before we could fix bayonets. But you couldn't faze that confounded Yankee. As soon as the bugles sounded the charge, he was off, galloping up the slope like an antelope, dragging what was left of the company behind him.

Did I say he was clumsy on the parade ground? *Sacré bleu!* I have never seen a better bayonet fighter in my life. Thrust and parry and thrust again! A master-at-arms could not have done better, cleaner work. He plowed his way through those rebels as a knife slides through soft butter.

When it was all over I shook him by the hand. "Redhead," I said, "if you keep this up you'll win the Legion of Honor before the end of the campaign. But, man alive, why did you wait eight years to show what was inside of you?"

"Forget it," grunted Redhead. "I don't want your medals, Sergeant. As sure as night follows day, I'm bound to get into a jam as soon as we get back to barracks, and you'd have to go to the trouble of yanking the tinware off my chest."

But we were not back in barracks—not by a long, long way. Chow-Pei was only a foretaste of what lay in store for us when we came up against the inner zone of fortifications the jungle pirates had erected around their main stronghold at Lang-Han.

The country was thick with trenches and bastions and redans tucked away in the jungle or perched on the crest of hills five hundred feet in the air. We had to grope our way along like blind men, for those yellow devils had dug pitfalls across the trails, and we never knew when we might crash through the matting of moldy leaves into a hole with a sharpened spike set up in the bottom.

It will take an army corps to subdue that stronghold at Lang-Han, and we were less than two thousand: hungry, in rags, riddled with fever. Two thousand. And of these less than half were Legionaires. The others—what will you, monsieur?—they had courage, no doubt, but they lacked our staying power. There were several companies of Colonial Infantry, conscripts, not one of whom had even eighteen months service to his credit; and a half battalion of Tirailleurs Anamites, native troops who had no stomach for that kind of fighting.

Our losses had been heavy and General Castoche—an optimist, that one!—issued orders to break through at all costs.

Je t'en fiche! It was easy to say "break through at all costs," but not so easy to do.

We lived on the run for the next four days, scaling mountains to capture forts at the point of the bayonet, sliding down the reverse slope and on up the next. It was a nightmare, monsieur, a fantastic nightmare! A Company was down to forty-three men commanded by a lieutenant. We lived on the food we found in the redoubts we captured, and because we were short of ammunition we husbanded our bullets and, whenever possible, did our work with cold steel. There was not a whole pair of shoes among us, for the porous rock had cut the leather to shreds. But we went on, according to orders.

IT WAS on the second day that Redhead was hit; a stray bullet smashed his water bottle and tore its way down his thigh almost to his knee. He bled like a stuck pig, but there was no stopping him. He made a bandage out of the remains of his undershirt and came on, stumbling and limping and cursing through his tightly clenched teeth. He was still with us at nightfall when we camped among the dead at the foot of a cliff we were ordered to scale the following morning.

The ambulance was too far back to be of any use to us then. We didn't even know where it was, for the column had been split up into small sections, each working more or less independently and keeping in touch with headquarters—if it could.

It looked bad. The longer the show lasted the more rebels we had in front of us. We were close to the Yunnan border, and all China seemed to be pouring across the frontier to take a hand in the fighting. Frontiers and neutrality meant nothing to those people. They swarmed everywhere, thousands of them, and more thousands, and they fought for every inch of that upended, jungle-choked country.

I don't know how the Yankee stood it. He must have been suffering abominably but he never once whimpered. He was down to skin and bones—a walking skeleton with a chew of betelnut bulging out his cheek, and a flaming red beard bristling on his chin.

"Better stop, *mon garçon,*" I told him when we were about to break camp in the morning. "You have come quite far enough. And there is something I want to tell you," I added, for I knew I was talking to a dying man; the grayness was in his cheeks and a film was over his eyes. "I take back what I said, Redhead. Crazy, you are, without a doubt, but a coward you are not. You are as brave as they make them . . . Now crawl back and find the ambulance. What you need is a shot of morphine."

But that amazing, altogether incomprehensible American, even then managed to insult me and ridicule my authority—for the lieutenant had died during the night and I was in command of A Company.

"I'll go where I please," he croaked, "and I'll do what I like. From now on, Sergeant, my love, this is a personal war. I'm going to a hotter place than the Song-Kai, but not until I've settled my account with these wall-eyed heathens. You let me handle this in my own way and we'll part good friends."

I did not care to argue with a dying man and, I confess, I could not trust myself to speak. There was something magnificent about his truculence and his utter contempt for discipline. Outwardly he had never had anything in common with our Legionaires, but the spirit was there, unquenchable, burning bright in his glassy eyes.

It carried him on all that day, through the drenching rain and the heat, up a hillside so steep that we had to claw our way up on hands and knees in a storm of bullets. And when at last I gathered my thirty men together and gave the order to close in after we had reached the crest, Redhead was there, swearing dreadful oaths because at every step his leg buckled beneath him and he got in too late to make use of his bayonet.

It was a stronger place than I had anticipated. If those jungle pirates had been better men they could have wiped us out. They had an arsenal up there; repeating rifles by the hundred and a huge stock of ammunition, not to mention about a hundred cases of dynamite which they used to blast their defenses out of the solid rock. From the stockade we could almost spit straight down onto the rooftops of Lang-Han. But that was as far as we got.

WE HADN'T been there an hour before the heliograph away back at headquarters began to flash. I won't forget that message in a hurry:

TO ALL INDEPENDENT UNITS OF THE FIFTH BATTALION OF THE REGIMENT ETRANGER: URGENT. ENEMY ATTACKING IN FORCE

ALONG LEFT FLANK REAR. ABANDON PRESENT POSITIONS AND FALL BACK WITHOUT DELAY UPON CHOW-PEI. DESTROY CAPTURED WORKS BEFORE EVACUATION.

That meant the end of the campaign. I found out later what had happened. The Tirailleurs Anamites had been held up by a line of forts, and while they were marking time, letting us do the dirty work, the jungle pirates had slipped in behind them and smashed the supply column to pieces. After that, the Colonial Infantry had been badly mauled. Both its flanks were up in the air and it didn't know whether it was coming or going. There was nothing left for General Castoche to do but call us in and fight his way out of the trap. We were ringed in front, flank and rear.

And there we sat on top of the world within rifle range of Lang-Han! Still, orders are orders, and back we had to go. We could hear the roll of the rifle fire over on the left, and, as night closed in down in the valley, we could see spurts of fire flickering all along the road we had traveled. We didn't even stop long enough to eat the rice boiling in the pots the jungle pirates had left behind.

But Redhead wouldn't budge. Not an inch, although we meant to carry him along with us in a blanket slung from a bamboo pole. He sat propped up against the cases

of ammunition and threatened to shoot the first man who touched him.

"I'm through," he declared, "and I know it and I don't give a whoop. Clear out! I'm a reception committee of one, specially appointed to welcome the 'Black Flag' pirates when they come breezing home again."

I tried to say something but I couldn't.

"This is my party," he went on, smacking the boxes of dynamite with the flat of his hand. "And for once in a way, Sergeant, I'll be obeying orders. We're to destroy this dump when we retire. All right, you leave it to me. I'm going to hell, and I mean to take along a whole flock of pirates for company. I'll make my entry in style!" What could I do, monsieur? The man could not live. To transport him as we had meant to do would merely have caused him great pain. It was only a question of hours before his end came. A few short hours.

"Have it your own way," I agreed.

His last words were: "That's a filthy custom of yours—wishing your cooties on a defenseless man. Hop along, Sergeant, and good luck. I'll shoot the works when my guests arrive. It's going to be some celebration!"

It happened at daybreak. I can imagine that Redhead, waiting in the darkness, fighting off his pain, letting the jungle pirates come swarming into the fort, then grinning to himself as he shoved the muzzle of his rifle against the dynamite and pulled the trigger.

We were down in the valley at the time, and I was beginning to believe Redhead had either fainted or lost his nerve, but he was strong to the last. The blast of the explosion was like a clap of thunder rolling and echoing among the hills. For long minutes afterward, as we slogged along, stones and débris rained down through the leaves onto our heads.

And that was the end of Redhead, monsieur—a brave man indeed, but I never want another one of his breed in my platoon. Never, as long as I live!

Such men are in prison when they could be earning a chestful of medals, and earning medals when they ought to be in prison. It is much too complicated. In the Legion the most important thing is discipline. But yes, monsieur: *discipline.*

He'd Trade a Wild Blow for a Slow Count Any Day!

A Box-Fight Story by the Author of "The Long Count"

WHAT'S SOCKS FOR THE GOOSE—

By SAMUEL TAYLOR

LADIES and gentlemen!" boomed the little bald-headed, carnival man, in the elaborate, grandiloquent spieler's voice. "Spike McGurl offers one hundred dollars for any man who can stay six rounds with him in the ring! One hundred dollars, gents! *One hundred dollars!* The offer is for anyone who stays in the ring with Spike McGurl, the logical contender for the heavyweight boxing championship of the world! Six rounds, folks; over sixteen dollars a round; five dollars and a half a minute! Who wants——"

"I do!" broke in a cool voice. Blondy Deane shoved aside a plant who had started to arise, and leaped to the rude platform.

The little bald-headed man looked at Deane's slim figure with a half smile. "Gents! Another man will cross swords with the mighty Spike McGurl for the one hundred dollar prize!"

The veteran battler, Spike McGurl, surveyed his next opponent. His lips, thickened by the impact of countless gloves, twisted into a sneer.

Blondy stripped off his shirt and waist-overalls, and revealed a pair of blue silk fighting trunks. Blondy was a fighter. He wore gym shoes. Early in the spring he had decided that if he was to become a great fighter he must put on some muscle. Four months of the hardest kind of work had, he felt confident, accomplished the desired result. This was the test.

Spike's small eyes narrowed as he ap-

praised the muscles disclosed under the white skin, and as he watched the professional way Blondy Deane was limbering up on the ropes. He clenched his gnarled hands inside the damp gloves.

The referee—a sporting man of the town—called them together. "No fouling!" he warned. "No dirty work from either of you. Break clean!"

The men went to their corners. The crowd, surprised and pleased by the aspect of Blondy, waited expectantly. sensing a struggle.

Gong! Blondy Deane danced out cautiously. Spike feinted with his left, then crashed a right cross that would have taken all the sap out of the smaller man had it landed over the heart. He was taking no chances with the stranger.

Blondy twisted his shoulders the mere space of four inches, and Spike's smashing swing merely grazed the white skin. There was no elaborate dodging or leaping away. Blondy knew his ring-technique—he was smoothed, honed to a razor edge in the science of swat. As he twisted, his left fist travelled in a line from his shoulder and smacked stiffly against Spike's exposed short-ribs.

Spike grunted. Enraged, he swung a vicious left hook that jarred Blondy to the ankles when it landed just above the eye. Spike came in with another right cross, then he closed in, backed Blondy up against the ropes, and rained into his body a tattoo of short, grunting, shoulder-rolling smacks.

Deane felt the heels of Spike's driving hands. The referee could not see Spike was fouling. The golden haired fighter clinched, hung on. As the referee parted them Spike flung out a stinging left. He was not breaking clean. Well, Blondy decided, as long as he knew what to expect——

At the end of the round, Blondy's shoulders were aching painfully. He was tired and hungry. He had walked eleven miles to fight Spike McGurl. He wanted that hundred dollars. For ten hours he had tossed sacks of newly threshed wheat onto an endless stream of empty trucks; then he had taken a slab of side-beef in his hand, and tramped over eleven miles of rolling stubble and unbroken prairie, nibbling slowly on his makeshift supper. He wanted to fight Spike McGurl.

The bell sounded for the end of the round. A hard-faced man with a squint right eye leaped into Blondy's corner. "I'll second ya', kid!"

"All right," assented Deane.

The second began kneeding Blondy's trim legs. His fingers sank deep into nerve centers—ju-jitsu!

"That's enough!" snapped Blondy. The whole layout was crooked. "Give me some water!"

The squint-eyed man sullenly handed a bottle. Deane raised it to his lips, then spewed it across the ropes. It was warm—and salty. He narrowed his blue eyes. A fat chance of anybody getting that hundred!

His hard-faced second was waving the towel violently, but not a breath of air came to the fighter's lungs or his hot body. Blondy kept silent; it was perhaps best not to stir up a fuss in such a place.

The second round wore on. The third. By the start of the fourth, Deane's shoulders ached painfully from the long day of throwing grain sacks and the bruises of Spike's sledgehammer blows. Spike was using every trick he had—and he knew every dirty gouge in the game. Blondy was in good trim, but he was out of practice, and he was tired and hungry. He kept out of the furious Spike's way, smashed through blows as often as opportunity presented, and hung on. He was not trying to win; he wanted to last six rounds.

THE fifth round was a nightmare to Blondy Deane—but he got through it. The fans in the big tent were howling hysterically. Bets were made that he would go the full six rounds—even money.

Deane sank in his corner. His squint-eyed second began swinging the towel, with

the air being forced to each side of the panting battler.

"You're a big hearted bunch!" Blondy ground out. "Here! Slap my legs a little —and none of your ju-jitsu!"

The second dropped to his knees and began slapping at Deane's calves. Blondy sat back, exhausted, and watched the scowling visage of Spike McGurl across the ring. Spike was boiling mad, furious that this golden-haired, blue-eyed young fighter had held off his crushing rushes.

Blondy's throat was parched. He knew the salt water would only intensify his thirst. He was burning up.

He shot out a hand, gripped with his boxing glove the wrist of his hard-faced second. The other jerked away, but not before Deane glimpsed a small yellow ball palmed in his hand.

"Get out!" Blondy gritted. "Get out of this ring before I kill you!"

The second shot a swift, frightened glance, his squint eye opening as wide as the other, and ducked through the ropes. Blondy skuffed his gym shoes on the canvas. They slid smoothly. Tallow! The second had tallowed the soles of his shoes. Anything—anything to win the bout. What chance had a man against a carnival fighter? Blondy pushed his toes under the corner of the mat and ground his shoes on the dust covered planks beneath. He wondered what would happen next, what lengths would be gone to prevent his staying six rounds. Perhaps the lights of the tent would go off at a pre-arranged time; perhaps—the bell!

Sixth round. One hundred dollars. Blondy Deane glided out cautiously; Spike roared out of his corner and rushed the white skinned youth. He bored in, intent on making a kill. Blondy hung on, clinched, rode the blows, hung on.

The referee broke them. They circled each other. Blondy knew, hot and tired though he was, that there was still the old knockout punch hidden in each soggy glove. Spike knew it, also. The battered veteran waited for an opening to finish off the other. Another five seconds elapsed.

Spike slashed out with a left, stopped it within a half inch of Deane's guard, and dove in with a right. But Blondy had expected just that. He was tensed, and as Spike's feint stopped and began drawing back, Deane followed it with his shoulders, and slung a steaming smack into the advancing solar plexus of the veteran, shot over a short hook to the heart, and danced away.

Spike seemed dazed, then a crafty look came into his scarred face.

He made a wild lunge at Blondy that a child could have evaded. Deane sidestepped and missed Spike's jaw as the other ducked. Then Spike checked and whirled—and his outflung right fist, traveling in a swift circle, crashed against the side of the referee's face, knocking him to the mat. The mob screamed.

Blondy knew that apparently wild swing was not an accident. It had been planned for just such an emergency. He tensed in his already straining half-crouch and waited for some trick he knew would come.

But he was not prepared when Spike rushed him, and in close quarters, lashed out a savage kick that bruised his ankle bone. A spring-steel inner sole to Spike's right fighting shoe was for just this purpose.

The blond haired fighter flinched involuntarily, lowered his guard as the excruciating pain shot up his leg. A hard fist crashed against his chin——

The referee was counting over him, swaying unsteadily from Spike's backhand blow. "Six! Seven!"

Deane got to one knee. "Eight!"

He bit his tongue as his weight rested on the fast swelling ankle. It made him

limp frightfully—but he was on his feet, fighting.

Then, through the air sailed a towel from his corner. The squint-eyed second was insuring that the hundred dollars would be safe. Blondy scooped the towel up, flung it over the ropes—and, wide open, Spike smashed through again to the jaw.

BLONDY came to in a bed with sheets on. The bed was in a hotel room, and just outside could be heard the discord of the carnival brass band.

"Of all the blue-eyed damfools! You're the prize specimen!"

Beside the bed, dressed in a loud checked suit, white vest, and with a horseshoe stickpin in a shrieking tie was a wizened little man with a flea bitten face. The derby cocked on one ear and the hands on his narrow hips gave a complete picture of exasperation.

"What's the matter, Skip?" asked Blondy Deane with the best grin he could manage from swollen lips.

Skip Goins had followed Blondy for four years through the ups and downs of professional fighting. He was trainer and manager, and he seconded his idolized, blue-eyed baby when that supreme one was in the ring. It was with vigorous objections that he had followed Blondy into the country for the summer's strengthening activities.

"What's the matter?" he shrieked. "What's the matter! Why, who do you think arranges for your fights, anyway? Huh? And what do you mean, goin' all this goshawful ways on foot and without any supper after throwin' wheat sacks all day, just to git beat outta a hundred bucks by a second-rater like Spike McGurl! And," he added, "sneakin' off and leaving me behind!"

"Spike's no second-rater, Skip, and you know it. He's not the contender for the crown, like he is ballyhooed; but he's on the first string."

"But why did you fight him tonight?" asked the little trainer helplessly.

"Because I had to see how strong and tough I am, and what chances I would have against a good man. He knocked the tar out of me tonight—but I was tired and out of practice, and I could stay the full time with him, and maybe lick him, in a fair fight and on even terms!"

Skip laughed. "You'll never git a fair fight with even terms against Spike McGurl!" He raised his voice hopefully, his eyes glowed. "Then, Blondy—then you're at last satisfied with yourself? You ain't gonna quit fightin' no more to condition you'self or nothin'? You're goin' to drive for the top?" The pinched face was pleading.

"Are ya', Blondy? Are ya'?"

Blondy took the gnarled hand of the little trainer. "Sure thing, Skip. I'm at last sure of myself! I wanted that hundred to carry me over a training period this winter."

"Whee!" the little man yelled. "I'm doggonned glad, Blondy—cause I made a fire outta all our work clothes before I left that farm!"

TRUST Skip to give the story to the newspapers. The next morning even the big New York papers carried the story that out in the sticks there had appeared a man who had jolted the mauling Spike McGurl to his heels—and almost K. O'd. him. With the condition the heavyweight situation was in, with elimination matches and what-nots, sporting writers grasped eagerly at the straw—remembering the old days when a certain young battler named Jack Dempsey had risen out of Manassa.

The incident of Spike's supposedly accidental knockdown of the referee added interest to the story. By one of those inexplicable twists of Fate, Blondy Deane found himself in the sporting public's eye. Not glaring in the eye; but nevertheless there enough so that whenever Spike McGurl was mentioned, the talk turned to Blondy Deane.

Within six weeks Blondy and Skip were quarreling—at least, Deane quarreled with Skip. This meant Blondy was in condition. Skip liked to see the good-natured battler with a scowl on his face. If he could keep it there, Skip knew there was nothing to stop them. Blondy was young—and he had guts and a fighting heart. Eager.

Skip arranged for a setup with a young boiler maker to polish off Blondy's training. The blue-eyed one ate the fellow up and sent him back to his air hammer in one round. Skip was satisfied. He drummed up three other bouts with second-raters, and let Blondy learn his distance judging, the exact length of his arms, and hone his defense and offense to a needle point. He sent Blondy against men he knew he could whip—and so instilled confidence. Skip knew his fighting—and he knew his psychology.

With each bout, Skip saw to it that the press was well represented. By an accumulation of sentiment, gradually the public began to expect a battle between Blondy Deane and Spike McGurl. Spike returned from his barnstorming tour, and found that a slim, yellow haired young fighter had to be overcome before he, Spike, could be considered of a caliber for big bouts.

Then one day Skip popped into the gymnasium with a shout. "Blondy! I got the big news! I got Spike McGurl!"

Blondy executed a rapid shadow box. "I'm ready for him! With these cheeses you have been sending me against—I'm aching for a real fight!"

"Good boy!" approved the wizened trainer. "But you know what Spike will do to win—he's not above any trick. You gotta be unbeatable—and I've a mind to teach you a few dirty tricks for yourself!"

Blondy flared. "I'll go to the top honestly, or stay where I am! Spike won't do any raw stuff like kicking me, in a big town like this—and all he can get past the referee, I'm prepared for!"

Skip put his skinny arm around the smooth, powerful shoulders of the fighter. "Kid, if they was all like you, there wouldn't be any use for referees!"

BLONDY DEANE and Skip Goins were in a taxi, weaving through traffic on the way to the boxing arena. The bout was to be held in Morgan's gymnasium, a large building into which could be crammed fifteen thousand rabid fans. The fight between Spike and Blondy was scheduled for ten rounds, with Spike guaranteed a sixty percent cut of the receipts, and Blondy getting sixty percent of the remainder. Skip had not haggled unduly over terms, knowing the chance to prove his fighter's worth was the big thing.

"Listen, Blondy," Skip was saying, as the taxi stopped for a traffic light. "Don't let the big bruiser put anything over on ya! If he tries any funny stuff—and he will—why you just howl to the referee—see? It's easy enough to do a lot of nasty tricks so's the audience won't catch on—but a referee in the ring'll see 'em most every time if he's watchin'."

"I hate to squawk," protested the fighter. "But if he tries some of that kicking stuff he pulled on me in that carnival tent——" Blondy gritted his teeth.

Watching the scowl on his darling's face, Skip sat back in the taxi, a cigar in his mouth, and smiled vastly.

From inside the dressing room the two could hear the crowd warming up on the preliminaries. It was a big night. Time to go out. Skip led the way through the mob hanging around the door. It was the biggest crowd Blondy had seen at a fight of his. He was just a little confused.

He climbed through the ropes. Then he clutched Skip's arm so tightly the little man cringed.

"Who's that referee!" he hissed.

"What's the matter, Blondy?" asked Skip, startled. "That's Ted Lion. He's

been refereein' around here quite a bit this winter—why?"

Blondy Deane peered intently. His blue eyes focused on the official across the brilliantly lighted ring.

"I know him!" he muttered. "He's got on a loud suit instead of overalls, and his hair is black instead of gray—but I'd know that squint right eye anywhere! Skip! That's the guy who seconded me in my first fight with Spike McGurl!"

"He's—he's the guy that give you salt water to drink, and put tallow on your shoe-soles? He's the guy who threw the towel in the ring that made you take the K. O. when you picked it up to throw out?"

"Not so loud!" cautioned the fighter. "It"s him all right! We're framed! That guy draws money from Spike McGurl!"

"We can quit!" whispered Skip. "You can fall and hit your head on the stool, or——"

"We got every dime put into the guarantee, Skip. The customers've paid their money. We've got to go through with it. This fight means everything. Can't we change referees?"

"Not a chance, now. I could have made a kick before the prelims started—but ——" For once Skip had no answer to a problem. "What'll we do, Blondy?"

"There's just one thing: go through with it. I'm as good as Spike; it's only a question if I'm as good as Spike, plus a crooked referee."

Skip moaned. "I wish this State had three judges for a decision, instead of just the referee—you gotta win by a knockout, Blondy. That guy'll give Spike the decision, no matter how raw it is!"

Spike McGurl made his appearance, accompanied by a frenzied howl from the audience. Spike was a fighter; he was a bruiser, so the mob liked him.

Blondy Deane tried to look unsuspicious as the referee instructed them in the center of the ring. "I'll disqualify either of you that fouls!" he warned. Blondy knew the admonition applied only to himself. He knew that the slightest excuse would serve to throw the bout to the older man—and that, however unpopular the decision was, still it would hold, and be set down against him in the records. He knew Spike could do anything to him that was not too obvious to the casual crowd. The scarred veteran could open his complete bag of tricks, if he was careful not to do it too brazenly —and Spike knew the art of fouling slyly.

During the first round Blondy found his surmises were right. The fight wore on, with Blondy at no time daring to hit lower than the heart—playing safe, and taking all that Spike could slip over.

NINTH round. The bell. Blondy came out of his corner warily. The fight was telling on him. The mental strain, coupled with the physical exertion of keeping up his end of the fight against odds, had tired him. Spike seemed comparatively fresh. He had but to wait, and the fight was his. Blondy must knock him out—and must not do anything to be construed as a foul in the meantime.

He grinned tantalizingly at the golden headed opponent. "Where's your mama, kid?" he sneered.

Blondy grinned back, and let his left hand reach out in a soft playful manner. "I left her home, Spike."

Spike instinctively met the glove with his own. "Did you leave your guts there too?" he taunted.

Blondy reached out again and met Spike's glove. "Sure."

He pushed his mitt out again softly. Spike let his glove go out to meet the other, began to say something—but the gloves did not meet. When Blondy's mitt was within an inch of Spike's, he suddenly shot it past the lowered guard and smashed it against the side of the veteran's jaw. The crowd whooped, as Blondy crashed over a right to the same spot, then stepped in and slung an uppercut that barely missed its mark, and in missing tore an eyebrow loose.

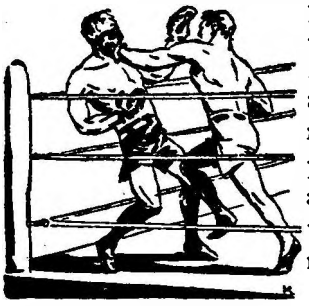
Spike reeled backwards. Blondy crowded him back. The veteran was in a corner

against the ropes, dazed, confused. The blue-eyed fighter bored in—right, left, right left. The smooth white shoulders worked rapidly, beautifully; the piston-like fists drove with scientific force.

The squint-eyed referee shoved Blondy to one side, rushed between the fighters.

"Break!" he roared.

The crowd howled its disapproval. Blondy kept his head. He rushed the groggy Spike again. Once more the referee pulled him away and passed between the two men. "Break!"



The mob was booing. Deane snarled in the official's ear: "You skunk!"

The referee sneered. "You second-rate plugger! One more like that and I'll throw the fight to Spike! It's good for you nobody but me heard that!"

Blondy clenched his jaws. There was nothing to do. He was framed. Spike recovered enough to defend himself, and covered up the rest of the round.

Skip worked frantically at his fighter's legs, at his shoulders and arms, as if the very effort of his labors would change the inevitable result of the bout. "God! We can't lose, Blondy. We can't! It's our big chance, Blondy. We can't miss out! The dirty rats! The crooked, sneaking vermin! We can't lose now, Blondy!"

The fighter slapped him on the face. "Shut up! That won't do any good—acting like an old woman!"

Skip was crying, like a small boy who is being tormented by larger ones. "But, Blondy! Think of the dirty crooks! Look at Spike—grinning over there, sure of the fight! You've outpointed him every round but two, newspaper count. You had him out on his feet last round, and then that dam referee broke in! Think of it!"

"Shut up!" Blondy was thinking.

"Listen, Skip!"

"Yeah?"

"Did you ever hear of the boomerang?"

"Huh?" Skip peered anxiously at the fighter. "Say—what's you' name?" he demanded.

"Oh, I'm all right in the head. I'm not off—I'm just thinking, Skip."

The gong. Skip watched anxiously, wondering what it was his Blondy was thinking of. It would have to be clever—well done—if Blondy was going to try some of Spike's tricks with the crooked referee in the ring.

Blondy was battling frantically, knowing this was the tenth and last round. He rushed the now cautious Spike, and pounded unmercifully at him, never hitting below the ribs. He could not keep it up long; but Spike was weakening.

The young fighter forced the veteran to the ropes again, pounded him furiously—and then broke away as the referee charged through, taking unnecessary time in getting between the fighters, so as to give Spike time to gather himself.

Blondy Deane dove in again, sank low and rolled all his strength in a smash over Spike's heart. The sock drained the vitality from the scarred veteran—but Spike was desperate and experienced enough that, when Blondy's head was close, he crashed down an elbow just behind the young fighter's ear.

The crowd saw the golden haired fighter boring in, smashing down the veteran's defence—then, suddenly, Blondy reeled back, groggy, and it seemed as if he would fall to the mat. The referee hovered near, ready to begin counting.

Blondy knew it was the finish. He was dazed. Now or never. He staggered a step. Spike straightened up, still weak, but with the intention of finishing him. The young fighter weaved uncertainly, crazily, from side to side—then made a lunge—a wild, reckless, wide and unreasoning haymaker swing.

The blow missed the bigger fighter a half foot—but the momentum carried the

hard clenched fist onward and down, and it sank half to the wrist in the solar plexus of the referee!

The crooked official slowly sank to the canvas, writhed, and lay still; writhed again, crawled to the ropes and pulled himself to his feet.

Meanwhile, Spike rushed. Blondy's body was twisted, stretched around where it had been with the last wild blow. He ducked, brought his elbow even with his shoulder and rolled his torso back again. His right glove shot out, and just as the elbow straightened the whole stiff, crushing impact of the momentum centered directly over Spike's heart, where already there was an uneven red blotch. Spike wilted, and with one last effort, Blondy sank his left mitt just below Spike's cauliflowered ear, and staggered to a neutral corner.

The squint-eyed referee swayed on the ropes. He stalled for time, took a long while to get to the fallen man, began counting slowly. There was a full half minute before the round was over, however, and Spike was cold, so eventually he was counted out.

Skip leaped into the ring, hugged Blondy. "Kid! Baby! We licked 'em!"

Blondy grinned. "Yeah; both of them."

Then Skip asked, puzzled: "What was that crack you made about the boomerang? I thought for sure you was punch drunk!"

"There's an old saying, Skip, that 'What's socks for the goose, is socks for the gander.'"

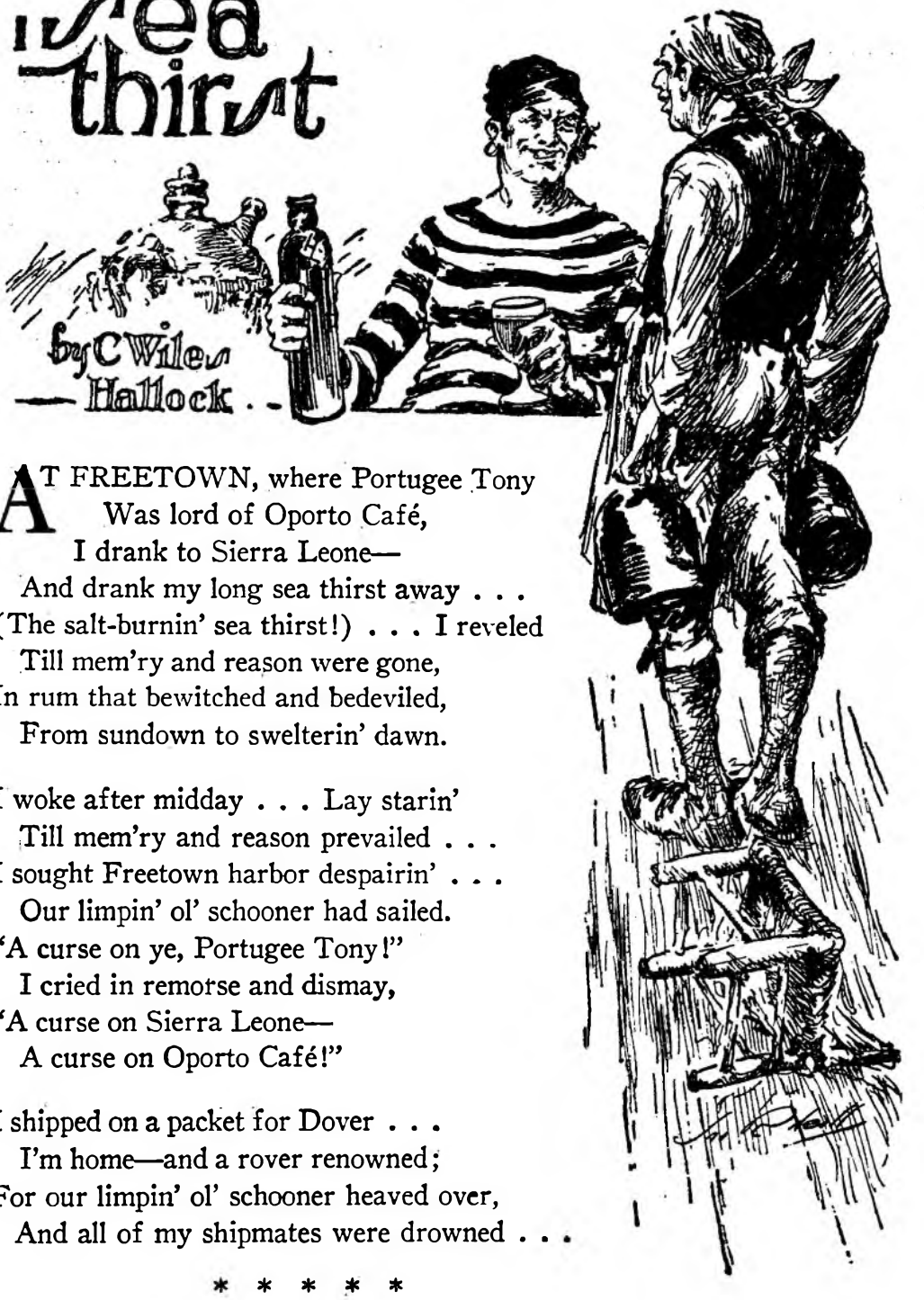
"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm the gander."

Watch for "Something About Cossacks" by Eddy Orcutt, Next Issue

Sea thirst

by C Wiles Hallock



AT FREETOWN, where Portugee Tony
Was lord of Oporto Café,
I drank to Sierra Leone—
And drank my long sea thirst away . . .
(The salt-burnin' sea thirst!) . . . I reveled
Till mem'ry and reason were gone,
In rum that bewitched and bedeviled,
From sundown to swelterin' dawn.

I woke after midday . . . Lay starin'
Till mem'ry and reason prevailed . . .
I sought Freetown harbor despairin' . . .
Our limpin' ol' schooner had sailed.
"A curse on ye, Portugee Tony!"
I cried in remorse and dismay,
"A curse on Sierra Leone—
A curse on Oporto Café!"

I shipped on a packet for Dover . . .
I'm home—and a rover renowned;
For our limpin' ol' schooner heaved over,
And all of my shipmates were drowned . . .

* * * * *

'Twas Freetown—and Portugee Tony . . .
One revel bedeviled my brain . . .
One night in Sierra Leone . . .
The sea thirst is on me again!
The salt-burnin' sea thirst—again!

THE BLACK CLAN

By ERNEST HAYCOX

Who Wrote "Guns of the Tom Dee," "Bully McGrane," etc.

CHAPTER I

"All good things come to an end and here's the sad end of a still sadder story. We split up, break the ties that bind, ride four ways from this spot. Let there be no moanin' at the bar, our job's done, and so are we."

——Partial remarks of Jeff Rawlins

THE weird, howling chant of a coyote trembled across the silence of the badlands to westward. Out of the ink black night pressing down upon the prairie emerged the definite thrum and beat of horses travelling with a speed hardly short of recklessness. For the briefest of moments the sound diminished and the howl of the coyote rose triumphant into the dark world; but when the sound of horses came again it was with a swell and a rush. A shod hoof struck fire against the earth, leather squealed, metal work jingled and the labored breathing of ponies hard pressed shot forward. Dim and swaying shadows broke through the pall, shadows leaping out of mystery and plunging forward to mystery again.

A short and drawling voice said, "Pull up!"

In response, the riders came to a sliding halt and sat abreast each other like cavalrymen. There were four of them; and a different voice cut crisply into the overwhelming stillness.

"What's the caper, Jeff?"

"Time to camp," said the unseen Jeff.

The four dropped to the ground and

Out of the Gunflashing Murk of a Western No Man's Land Two Men Win to a New Life

moved with an ease and speed betokening perfect understanding. The horses were led off and picketed. One man went away, stripping up greasewood clumps. A purple-yellow spiral of fire burst like an explosive bomb through the black. Canteens struck together, water gurgled into a coffee pot and the pungent odor of bacon rose from a battered pan. Horse tender and wood gatherer returned to the flame, settling beside a third partner engaged in tossing up a snack. The fourth walked rapidly back from the Western darkness, chuckling.

"Even been in this scope of country before, Jeff?"

Jeff Rawlins, the impromptu cook, raised a face quite lean and bronzed and bearing upon it the mark of habitual thoughtfulness. It was the face of a young man who had passed his years in the open. There was the air of supreme health about him and a cool, sure self-confidence. Even in a land of tall men his height was noticeable and his body had the deceptive flatness of one whose muscles were whipped down to close-woven sinew. When the fire light flashed against his level gray eyes a serene, half-asleep humor was visible.

"Nope, Carny. Never dragged my picket thisaway."

The aforesaid Carny's chuckle deepened. "Well you sure guessed right about stoppin' here. Another fifty feet and we'd piled into a square-sided canyon that don't seem to possess no bottom whatsoever. I dropped a rock and I never heard it hit. There's a trail, but we'd of missed it a mile. That's luck."

One of the other partners dissented. "Don't call it luck. Jeff's got feelers on him like a cat. Ain't you seen it work out thataway before? How about the time he held back from goin' around the street corner that night? We didn't know they was a line o' guns waitin' to blast the air full of small holes. Nev'less Jeff didn't fall into the trap."

"We admit we're good," drawled Jeff Rawlins. "Come and get it, brethren."

He scooped the bacon between slabs of bread, poured coffee into outstretched cups; and the four sat back and ate. Added twigs of greasewood sent the curling flame higher, one lone core of friendly radiance in an utterly dark universe. By the light of it these four seemed cut from the same pattern; they were all young, all loose-jointed and soft-speaking men. The stamp of the open was on them, their movement was equally lazy and diffident.

"Think we're safe?" mused the smiling Carny Peters.

"From immediate and instant overtakin,' yes," reflected Jeff Rawlins.

"These sudden departures I don't like," said one of the others. "I leaves behind most of my possibles."

Carny Peters grinned. "Nothin' to prevent old man Hope's little boy Jim from goin' back to get 'em."

The fourth, whose name was Bob Gunsight, laid down his plate. "It's a country none of us will be returnin' to for a stretch o' time."

"Till memory dims and the duly constituted order of things changes," added Jim Hope.

The cheerful Carny Peters shook his head and grew wistful. "Hell of a nice country, too. I could've drifted into respectable old age there, if let alone."

"Well, we did the job up brown, didn't we?" grunted Bob Gunsight.

"Just so. We're good. But what comes next? I rise to ask."

The three looked silently toward Jeff Rawlins. And as time dragged on, a frowning, regretful expectancy came over them all. Rawlins' slim face was inscrutably sober and his eyes looked directly into the amber fire flame as if attempting to read the future. His cigarette drooped and he spoke with a gentle drawl.

"Sure we're good. Too damned good. I tell you, boys. There's an end to all good things and here's the sad end of a still sadder story. This is our last camp together. It's got to be. We split up, we break the ties that bind. From this exact spot we ride four different ways tonight. Let there be no moanin' at the bar. Our job is done, and so are we."

The rest accepted the decree with the air of having long expected some such unpleasant turn of fortune. Carny Peters looked about the circle and slowly shook his head. "I reckon so, but why? Why not just keep on goin'? Shucks, there's always more hills to the west."

"As long as we ride together we'll be easy to spot," said Jeff Rawlins. "And if we're caught, what's the answer?"

"Necktie party for four," was Bob Gunsight's prompt answer.

"You sure got a disagreeable way o' speakin' the truth," grumbled Jim Hope.

Jeff Rawlins went on. "It ain't only that I'm afraid of. We've pulled a large job and got away with it. We're none too moral and we like excitement. Pretty soon we'll be thinkin', why not the same sort of business again? See, what I mean? The primrose path. No, we've got to split and live it down for a while. We've got to forget what we've done and we've got to sober up to the point of considerin' a forty-dollar job once more."

"You're the doctor," muttered Carny.

Jeff Rawlins looked around him, hand sliding along the earth. Presently he spread four stones on the ground in front of him, each differing in size. "The man that gets the largest stone has first choice, and so on." He took off his hat, yellow hair suddenly shining in the light, and dropped the stones to the bottom of the crown; he shook it and held it forward. Carny Peters put in an arm and drew; Hope and Gun-

sight followed suit. Jeff Rawlins upset the hat—and the largest stone dropped to the ground. It was his first choice.

"Well?" challenged Peters.

"I'll stick around here a few days," decided Rawlins. "Maybe hit for the nearest town and hole up."

Gunsight said, "There's only three directions open to us. The back trail is out. I'll go north. The Hole is thataway."

"South into the Red Desert for me," declared Jim Hope.

"That means I got to keep flaggin' right on westward," said Carny Peters. "O. K."

"Do we sleep on it?" asked Hope.

Rawlins shook his head. "Now or never. By mornin' our trails will be far apart. No posse will ever again find us herdin' together."

"Here, hold on," muttered Carny Peters; and then a dull, pensive quiet overtook them. They were all young, they were alike, and they had worked the home ranges together for years. No four brothers born could boast of a firmer blood call than these men who had ridden, camped, roistered and fought side by side for so long a time. And now that the end of the trail was reached and their separate paths

ran into the deep, lonely dark of the night a dispirited depression settled around them. Carny Peters swore.

"Look here," said he abruptly. "I'm bound west. The end of my trail is Pocatello. No use bein' fools about this. Supposin' we kick up the dust behind us, each on his own trail. For sixty days. At the end of that time we'll meet in Pocatello. How about it?"

"Now you're talkin'," approved Gunsight. And Hope looked up from the fire with quick eagerness.

But Rawlins held his words, still absorbed in thought. The rest watched him anxiously, waiting his approval or negation as they had been doing ever since some long forgotten occasion had banded them together. For there was in Jeff Rawlins the magic of leadership; trouble seemed to ride lightest on his shoulders and the cool, casual manner of the man concealed a mind and a will not to be overborne.

Presently he nodded.

"I see nothin' against the idea. Sixty days then, in Pocatello."

He rose. The others followed suit, and Hope retreated through the darkness, to reappear with the horses.

"I got a still better idea," said Carny Peters. "If any one of us gets in a jam and needs help, write a letter to General Delivery, Pocatello. It'll catch the rest of us sooner or later—and we'll come on the lope."

"Letter addressed to who?" Gunsight wanted to know.

A slow smile appeared on Jeff Rawlins' face. "A letter addressed to that sterling figure Mr. Smith Jones. To be claimed by the first of us reaching Pocatello."

There was nothing more to be said, but still they stood, uneasy and disturbed—four men ashamed of emotion and holding it back like the knowledge of sin, yet still loathe to break the association that had claimed their loyalties for so long. In the mind of each was undoubtedly some memory of the bright and gay days now past and a haunting doubt concerning the future. Sixty days was no long separation, yet that spell of time might stretch into infinity. For they were all quick tempered, they loved the zest of living and the quick changes of fortune. It was not in any of them to be discreet or to avoid trouble. To each might come, on the separate pathway, the final adventure. Thus they knew they were quite possibly saying the last farewell. and the foreboding of the possibility held them rooted and melancholy. Out of the Western wastes still floated the ancient and dismal chant of coyotes com-

plaining to the dark heaven; the embers of the campfire faded to dull red and when Jeff Rawlins spoke again their faces were indistinct to each other.

"*Adios,*" said he in an even, slow drawl. "*Adios*—and luck, till we meet again."

There was no handshake. Hope vaulted to the saddle, whirled and went pounding to the south. Gunsight obeyed the example, soon lost to sight in the abysmal gloom on the north. Carny Peters tarried a moment longer. Then he too mounted and turned. His solitary call came back, husky with feeling. "See you sometime, Jeff." The clack of his pony's cautious hoofs sank into the unseen chasm to the west. Sank and died. The last sound of the other partners diminished, and presently Jeff Rawlins was left alone in the vast loneliness of the prairie. There were a few broken fragments of greasewood remaining, and these Jeff threw into the waning fire. Afterwards he walked to his horse, unsaddled it, and made a bed a few discreet yards beyond the flickering circle of light. He fashioned another cigarette, pillowed his head on the saddle and drew the blanket tightly around him to check the flowing, penetrating chill of the night. Staring up to the unbroken sky he mused softly.

"Good boys, all of 'em. The sixty day idea was an easy way to break off. We'll never meet again. That particular hand is played out."

The tip of his cigarette glowed and died. Wind strengthened from the west, bringing up the scent of sage. All about the deep pall seemed to intensify, nowhere relieved. In the utter blankness the perspective of mountain and far rolling plain was cut from view, and nothing came to him but the chanting murmur of night creatures. He threw the cigarette away, settling against the earth. But sleep evaded him.

"Mighty funny way life has of lettin' a man alone for twenty-five years—and then risin' without warnin' to kick him in the pants. Here's all four of us, goin' along in the even tenor of our ways. We round a corner, all hell opens up—and it's good-by to everything. One minute we're legitimate citizens, the next we're outlawed and the pack bays on our heels. Reputations gone, past labor wiped out. Nothin' left now but regret, and mighty little time to indulge in even that."

Suddenly he rolled over, kicked the blanket free and rose, stepping deeper into the darkness. Out of the north emerged a warning tremble foreign to the tempo of the night.

"Damn Gunsight," muttered Rawlins, "what's he comin' back for?"

The steady pound of a lone pony's hoofs surged nearer, bearing straight down upon the remnant of fire. Rawlins retreated still farther and dropped a hand to the butt of his gun; then rider and pony piled up to a tempestuous halt twenty yards away, near enough for him to hear the labor of the beast's hard breathing. A rough and impatient voice came on.

"Who's nursin' that fire?"

"Weary traveller," said Rawlins. "Light and rest."

The unseen one considered the answer briefly, and put a cautious question. "Anybody I might know?"

"Not unless you're acquainted with more territory than I figure."

"Alone?"

"Ahuh," drawled Rawlins, and guessed the reason for the man's wariness. He stepped toward the fire, pulling up a few stems of greasewood on the way. The fire, freshly fed, threw out a white and widening glow. Rawlins stepped back, waiting. The stranger said, "Nope, I don't know yuh a-tall," and rode directly into the light. He slid to the ground, dust rising generously from his clothes, and tipped back the brim of his hat. Rawlins saw a dark face studying him—a face with quick black eyes, a beak of a nose and lips that were wide and full. There was Indian or French-Canadian blood in the man, without doubt, and a certain sardonic yet debonair attitude. For even as he scanned Rawlins with a swift, nervous glance he found it fit to grin frankly.

"Either yuh don't know about this country," he remarked, "or yo're on the dodge. Why sleep here when town's only six miles off?"

"The answer is, both reasons fit," said Rawlins.

"Then why advertise with the campfire?" the stranger wanted to know.

"I'm just a hundred miles beyond the point of nervousness," explained Rawlins.

The stranger rolled a cigarette and smoked it with deep drags of air. "Well, yuh look like you know the alphabet, all right. I took a chance and——"

He dropped the cigarette and sprang back from the light. "Damnation, I'm bein' crowded too close for comfort. Listen, you seem my style. I've got to shake off some visitors."

Rawlins already had made up his mind. The frank grin appealed to him. "Over there a few yards," he said, "is some sort of a canyon. Suppose you visit it. I'll sit here and meditate."

The stranger was already departing. "If anybody asks you about a no-account buster by name of Pete Casteaux," he called back from the shadows, "why I'd appreciate——"

HE WAS swallowed by the canyon. More riders were abroad in the night, and apparently adjusting their course to the beacon fire. "Regular lighthouse," mused Jeff Rawlins, feeling a preliminary crawl of excitement along his nerves. "Blamed poor start on a life of peace. I should of moved. This is——"

Quite a party surged toward him. Without warning he was ringed around. A gun gleamed dully and half a dozen sharp and severe faces stared down at him. "Gentlemen," he drawled, "good evenin'. Light and rest."

"You know better," was a thin man's blunt reply. "We're in no humor to do same."

"I judged," agreed Rawlins. "But I never forget my manners."

The thin man's glance was like the blade of a cutting instrument. "Been here long?" he asked.

"Hour, mebbe."

"Where you from?"

Rawlins pursed his lips. "Rather not say. I'm here, what else matters?"

The thin man jerked out an order to one of the group. "Look at his horse."

A man moved away and presently called back. "Not cold, but not warm from right recent ridin' either."

The thin man nodded, apparently dissatisfied. "See anybody pass here lately?"

"Can't say that I have."

"Hear anybody pass?"

"Can't say that either.

The thin man scowled. "And wouldn't tell if you had, I reckon."

"Not my policy to butt in," agreed Rawlins.

A match flared off by Rawlins' horse and presently the searcher spoke again. "He's had company. Mess of tracks around here."

The thin man bent toward Rawlins and pointed an admonitory finger. "Quit sidesteppin'. You wasn't alone. Somebody's been here recent."

"Three somebodys," agreed Rawlins, unmoved. "Been here and gone. Friends of mine."

"Where to and what for?" demanded the thin man.

"We'll draw a charitable curtain over that part," countered Rawlins.

Another of the group broke in testily. "This is all a lot of monkey-doodle, Tarrant. He's connected with the business somehow, else why would he be sitting right across our trail and lookin' foolish about it?"

Rawlins looked up to the speaker with a swift and narrowing glance. "Do I look as foolish as you look, brother, or is it

just a case of one fool recognizin' another?"

"Take him to camp!" snapped the speaker. "If he won't talk, put him somewhere to cool off awhile."

The thin man considered the suggestion at length and again questioned Rawlins. "Nothin' more to offer?"

"Information department's closed," drawled Rawlins. "I only work eight hours a day."

"Eight hours a night you maybe mean," suggested the thin one. "Collect your plunder and saddle up. You're going for a ride with us."

Rawlins accepted the news equably. "My turn to get inquisitive. Who are you?"

"My name," said the thin one, "is Rome Tarrant." He shoved back the lapel of his coat and a star shone against the waning firelight. "Sheriff of East County, which you're now campin' in. Any objections?"

"Nope," said Rawlins, rising, "but you really ought to label these mugs ridin' with you. They'd scare the fat off any livin' beast."

A rising murmur of anger ran around the circle which Tarrant checked with a sudden uplift of his arm. Rawlins strolled after his saddle—a man riding behind him—and clapped it on his pony. Cinching up, he collected the cooking utensils, rolled them in his slicker and lashed it to the cantle strings. "What," he inquired, "is the name of this town you're so anxious for me to see?"

"Seven Sleep," said the sheriff. "Let's go."

Rawlins mounted and fell beside the sheriff. The others paired off to the rear and so they rode past the fire and soon left it behind. The pace increased. They swept southward through the tricky darkness, following some unseen trail that wavered from left to right and at last straightened directly upon the faint wink of distant town lights. Far back of them a gun sent up one muffled shot. Jeff Rawlins smiled grimly believing that shot to be Casteaux's signal of defiance and understanding. But the posse galloped on, appearing to take no recognizance of it; and in Rawlins' mind a slow, hard suspicion began to form.

"If the sheriff's lookin' for a goat and ain't particular, what sort of a jackpot does that leave me in?" he asked himself. "And that ain't only half of it. Supposin' this bunch has had telegraphic warnin' about me and knows who I am? For a man tryin' to stick to the straight and narrow path I sure am in a haywire situation."

The sheriff's pony crowded nearer and the sheriff's hand dropped against Rawlins' gunbutt and jerked the weapon free. "Just in case," said the official calmly, "you get stage fright. No hard feelin's."

Half an hour later the group crossed a railroad track, went through a narrow and noisy street and turned into a slight yard leading back to what evidently was a cow country courthouse. Being prompted, Jeff Rawlins dismounted and entered a door. The posse followed. Lights were turned up. Within the count of sixty seconds the place was filled by townsmen who stood along the walls and eyed Rawlins with a steady, cold-eyed curiosity. He was trapped and he recognized the fact. Nowhere was there a glimmer of friendly feeling. Instead, he felt the rise of hostility and the approach of a situation evidently long prepared for and long expected. He reached for his cigarette papers and watched them all with a sleepy-eyed regard that concealed the sudden boil and leap of his feelings; and through him ran the old, familiar sensation of desperate and half-savage pleasure. It was thus that the tall, gray-eyed Westerner always faced trouble.

Chapter II

"It looks like a crooked job and loaded with dynamite. It looks like a job that'll bring grief to the fellow that tackles it. . . . So, I'll take it."

——Jeff Rawlins speaking.

THOUGH the sheriff's office was nearly full, that official sat in a chair and held his peace, seeming to wait. The

reason was presently explained when another man entered, rather impatiently shouldering his way through the crowd, and came beside Rome Tarrant. The latter rose with a touch of deference. He pointed to Rawlins and said, "This is what we found, Killifew."

Killifew turned a pair of direct and searching eyes on Rawlins, saying nothing at all, for a moment, but giving the tall puncher an appraisal such as he had never before experienced. Killifew was obviously a rancher of some authority and consequence. More than that, he bore about him the air of a rough and tumble fighter who plunged in regardless of opposition. He was about fifty and built of heavy bone and muscle. His hair was an iron gray, his face broad and blunt, his eyes a pale violet. A scar ran down one temple, and the bridge of his nose had been broken; and this, combined with an extraordinarily bold chin, gave him an implacable, bulldog aspect. Nor did his voice change the effect. When he spoke, it was curt and challenging and to the point.

"Never saw you before. Stranger here? What's your name? Where you from?"

"Rawlins. New country to me."

"Where from?" pressed Killifew.

"He wouldn't answer the question," put in the sheriff.

Kililfew snapped out: "Why not?"

"My personal business," said Rawlins quietly.

Killifew considered this in silence, eyes meanwhile continuing to bore through Rawlins. The latter felt as if he were being photographed. Killifew abruptly pressed on with his questioning.

"What were you doin' out there?"

"Campin' the night."

"Passin' through the country?"

"Yes."

"Where were you goin'?"

Rawlins smiled slightly. "Anywhere at all."

The sheriff saw fit to break in. "We was stationed up where the Black Range trail goes through the badlands. A spread of beef come down right after dark and we tried to trap the night hawks, but they were scary and broke. We followed one of 'em and came on this fellow's camp."

Killifew turned his attention to the sheriff. "Was his horse warm? Would he have had time to light a fire and settle down, if he was your man?"

"Well," said the sheriff, with a touch of reluctance, "I can't say about that."

"Find any acid around him or runnin' irons or bent wire?"

"No-o."

Killifew's powerful eyes narrowed. "Then what makes you think he was with the wild bunch?"

"He was right there, across our trail," answered the sheriff, plainly on the defensive.

"On that basis of reasonin'," grunted Killifew contemptuously, "I suppose you'd arrest a jackrabbit if you found him across your trail. This gentleman's obviously a stranger who's got sucked into the wrong play. I'm not interested in strangers at all. It's the home product I'm after. I think you've made a damn fool out of yourself, again, Tarrant. The rightful parties have give you the dodge, as usual."

The sheriff flushed. "Now look here, Killifew, that's unfair. I'm doin' my best. This man is all-fired close-mouthed about his affairs. It looks suspicious to me."

"Anything would look suspicious to you," retorted Killifew. "A man's got a right to keep his own secrets. It ain't anything against Rawlins. You jump too fast and too far on circumstantial evidence."

The sheriff was nettled. "There was a whole smear of tracks around his campfire. Fresh ones. He's admitted three other men camped with him and then disappeared. How about that? What's the answer?"

"Answer is you're too anxious to catch somebody, or anybody, who'll do for a peg to hang this business on. You're wrong."

"Well," snapped Tarrant, "what you want done with him?"

"Let him go," said Killifew, and walked from the room.

The sheriff looked sourly at Rawlins and said, "You're free. Hope it pleases you. But I'll say this. If I catch you so much as battin' an eye around here, I'll put a padlock on you for further orders. Here's your gun."

Rawlins accepted his artillery and turned out of the place. In the doorway he paused and turned to smile gently at the crowd. "Justice must be served. I reckon you-all went through the motions. No hard feelin's, and thanks kindly for the escort into Seven Sleep." Chuckling, he went to his horse and led it back along the street. There was a stable adjacent to the courthouse. Here he left the animal. Then, pursuing a natural curiosity, he strolled onward to see what Seven Sleep was like.

As far as Western habitations went, it was an old town and constructed with the usual lack of conformity. The street was long, crooked and narrow. Building fronts joined each other irregularly, second story porches overhung the sidewalk and poplar trees grew up from the very boards. There were no intersecting lanes, but at occasional distances an alley led back, scarcely wide enough for a horse to turn in, and black as pitch. Down these he guessed he might find saloon side doors and rear corrals—and treachery. Passing on he came to the tracks and Seven Sleep's only other street which showed a few dim lights and then petered out in the general direction of loading corrals. Returning on his course, he cut across the street to the imposing mullion-windowed front of a saloon, pushed the generous doors open and entered.

Considerable magnificence was here. Plate glass and mahogany glittered under the light of brilliant crystal chandeliers. Paintings studded the walls, a stage held one end, and throughout the place were the gaming tables of a wide open town. These Jeff gave a passing glance, then centered his attention on the bar. Pete Casteaux stood by it, grinning with a full and cynical humor. A bottle and extra glass rested near him. Beckoning Rawlins, he poured a drink and offered it.

"Been waitin'. Knew you'd hit this joint before long. Settle the dust, brother."

Rawlins drank, feeling a slight irritation. This loose-lipped fellow with the devil's own brand of humor, took things almost too lightly.

"Been here long?" asked Rawlins.

"Got here before you hit town," drawled Casteaux. "And saw the whole parade."

"Appear to view the situation with confidence," observed Rawlins briefly.

Casteaux threw back his head and guffawed. The heat of the saloon brought beads of sweat to the surface of his dark and homely face, accenting the animal shrewdness of the man, intensifying his air of sardonic disregard. "Me? Hell, I been chased so long I could go through the motions in my sleep. I always reach town before the posse. Someday I'll hire a brass band to meet it. Say, I crawled back from the canyon and was within ten yards of the bunch when they hauled yuh away. I thought I'd laugh m'self sick. Hear me give the salute?"

"Funny as hell wasn't it?" muttered Rawlins. "And I was the goat."

"You'll get over it," said Casteaux tolerantly.

Sudden antagonism poured through Rawlins. He set his glass carefully down and with equal care picked his words. "Your brand of humor, brother, seems kind of sad."

"Feelin' hostile, uh?" queried Casteaux, the dark eyes squinting up to Rawlins' face. There was a gleam of mockery in them. "Forget it. They's always got to be a sucker, and you was it this time. Forget it. Won't do you no good to cherish any tough notions against me."

"And why not?" inquired Rawlins, as soft as a summer day.

Casteaux looked his man up and down. "You're tall as hell, but you'd break easy in the middle. You're tough. Sure, I know you're tough. So'm I. Just a little bit tougher. And I'd rather fight than eat. Forget it."

"Seems just too bad I ain't able to," reflected Rawlins. "In fact the situation sort of grows on me. Would I bend in the middle, or wouldn't I? And is it a true statement of fact that you're so tough you could bust a rock by spittin' on it? Mister, you interest me."

Casteaux frowned. "I been offered to step outside and fight in lots of different languages, but yore brand of palaver just naturally defeats me. Am I bein' invited to settle the argument or is it the time of the day yo're askin'?"

"I'd write it in a letter," said Jeff Rawlins, "if I thought you could read."

Casteaux suddenly bellowed with laughter. He tossed his head back, great lips spreading back and dark eyes shining. "Damned if the man ain't!"

"Pick a private spot," said Rawlins casually. "I don't like to furnish public entertainment."

Casteaux beckoned and strode for a side door that let them out to a black and tunnel-like alley. Twenty yards onward it gave way to a compound in the rear of a stable. Lantern light dimly glimmered through an open door, and from a second story room above the saloon shone the rays of a lamp. Casteaux wheeled, stripped off his belt and coat, and struck his heels into the soft dirt. "Listen," said he, "you asked for this. Don't blame me."

"Blessed are those that give," murmured Rawlins. "And when you're all through pawin' the earth let me know."

That touched Casteaux's pride. The grin left him. He scowled massively at Rawlins. "Is this a fight or a debate? Take off yore belt."

"What for?" countered Rawlins. "I'd just have it to pick up again. If you think you're finished with the high jumpin' exercises, let's proceed to commence to begin."

Casteaux bawled like a bull, swept off his hat and lowered his head. He sprang forward as if to batter Rawlins off the earth. Both fists came swinging on. Rawlins seemed to float beside Casteaux from another part of the yard and the impact of his fist echoed flatly through the gloom. Casteaux's neck cracked and he swept backward, landing flat on his spine.

"Don't sit on that damp ground," crooned Rawlins, "or you'll catch cold. Do you feel tired?"

Casteaux rose, stepping around Rawlins till he had made a complete circle. The humor was out of him, and by the shabby light seeping into this cleared area Rawlins saw the man's face drawn savagely. "If that's the best yuh got," panted Casteaux, "I don't think much of it!"

"The best is yet to be," murmured Rawlins. "Dammit, quit waltzin'."

"By God, I'll crush yuh!" roared Casteaux, and plunged forward again. Rawlins attempted to sidestep and suddenly found himself matched and smothered. The night exploded in a riot of crimson light and his ears roared. Casteaux's great, granite fists crushed against his temple, his jaw, his neck and actually battered the senses out of him. Then the roaring ceased and he heard the man laughing, ironic and malicious. "Wake up and roll over! Had enough?" Rawlins found himself grovelling on his face. He shook the fog out of his mind and rose. Casteaux was a weaving shadow, nothing more, over against the stable wall. "Had enough?"

The killer's instinct sent a hot fire through Rawlins. He advanced doggedly on Casteaux, saw the man step forward to meet him; he saw the great arms swinging up and then in a mighty leap he closed the distance, knocked those destructive fists aside and battered the face leering at him. Casteaux grunted and was carried back to the stable wall. Boards squealed with the weight of his impact. Somebody ran through the stable door, holding up

a lantern, and the fresh light gleamed on Casteaux's crimson cheeks. Rawlins feinted, drawing Casteaux's arms down; once more he smashed the man's face with a double blow. Casteaux reeled aside and in retreating caught Rawlins a full blow on the ribs. Then the both of them, misjudging the other's intent, advanced and collided. Casteaux laced an arm about Rawlins and jolted him in the flank unmercifully until Rawlins tore free and launched another attack. They went careening across the yard, sparring for an opening, fists spatting and slapping together. Casteaux struck another wall and looked aside, and at that moment Rawlins swung everything into a blow that tore through Casteaux's guard and exploded on the corner of his chin. Casteaux dropped as if shot through the heart. Rawlins leaned against the wall and fought for wind.

THE fellow with the lantern came across the compound with two others eagerly following. "Nice fight. Beeyu-tiful fight. I'll jest hold the lantern so's you two can see——"

"Get back out of here," breathed Rawlins, "before I throw you through the boards!"

The trio scrambled away. Casteaux groaned and sat up with effort. "Which buildin' fell? Say, I only agreed to fight one man at a time. Why bring yore gang?" Rising up, he came nearer Rawlins and the latter heard the man suddenly chuckle. "Listen—if yuh don't want to be bent double, that's all right with me. I've had enough of this damn foolishness. Next time I cross yore bow I'll whistle as per regulation. Shake on that?"

"Agreed," said Rawlins and extended his fist. They shook. Casteaux pulled himself together and led the way back to the saloon. When they got inside, Killifew, the rancher stood at the bar. The two took a position a few yards down from him, but he casually shoved his bottle in their direction and moved nearer.

"Help yourself," said he. "Got the little difficulty ironed out, I see."

"You're waitin' for us?" asked Rawlins, straight to the point.

Killifew's hard, pale eyes rested unwaveringly on Rawlins. "Don't miss much, do you?"

"Can't afford to," suggested Rawlins.

Killifew's mouth pressed into a straight, decisive line. He looked at Casteaux. "Pete, did you say you had some business to tend to right about now?"

Rawlins waited for the explosion. But Casteaux only grinned and winked a bloated eyelid. "Ain't I honest enough to listen in, Killifew?"

"I know a lot about you and none of it's much good," was Killifew's blunt retort. He waited until Casteaux ambled to the far end of the room and sat down to a table. "I like your style," said Killifew. "You don't do any extra talkin'. Also, you seem able to take care of your own front yard. Just the kind of a man I'm lookin' for this minute."

"As to honesty and such small details," mused Rawlins, keeping careful watch on the ranchman, "what do you know about me?"

"Nothin', and care less," was Killifew's prompt answer. "You may be crooked as a dog's broken hind leg. I'm not the one to

inquire and this country can't afford to be too damned particular anyhow. What I want is a hard number, which I think you are. As for morals, they ain't so all-fired important on the job I have in mind. What is important is that I think you're the kind of a dude who would stick to his agreement."

"You might be guessin' on that item," reflected Rawlins, trying to get behind Killifew's words.

"Think not," said the man bluntly. "You

give Casteaux a boost out there on the prairie. He comes here and rubs you wrong. So you settle with him in private. No squawkin'. Didn't think I knew it, uh?"

Rawlins smiled. "Madame Horoscope in person. What's the job?"

"I own a ranch up in the hills. The K horse ranch. There's three men on it and about four thousand animals. I want you to go up and run it."

Rawlins' glance grew speculative. "To just nurse the nice little horsies?"

"That is the least part of the job," grunted Killifew. "You're to take care of whatever comes up—and believe me that'll be ample. Yes or no?"

Rawlins looked around the room and met Casteaux's glance. The latter slowly shook his head. "Well," reflected Rawlins, "it sounds like it's actually an honest job."

"Uhuh," said Killifew. "That's the trouble."

"I begin to see daylight in the swamps," murmured Rawlins, and tipped back his hat.

Killifew nodded. "Sure you do. You've got brains enough to figure. Yes or no?"

A gleam of excitement began to rise in Jeff Rawlins' level eyes, and a slow grin wreathed around the corner of his mouth. "It looks loaded with dynamite. It looks like a job that'll bring grief to the fellow that tackles it. It's somethin' I shouldn't touch with a ten foot pole. No sir, I'm a fool if I bit. So—I'll take it."

Killifew displayed neither satisfaction nor approval. In fact the man's face seemed slow to register any kind of emotion. He only nodded to close the agreement, turned and started from the saloon. An afterthought struck him and he paused to call back. "You've got to spend a few months somewhere, so it might as well be in the hills. We'll run up early in the mornin'." And he passed from the saloon, leaving Rawlins quite thoughtful.

"What in thunder," he muttered, "was the meanin' of that last remark?"

Casteaux strolled over. "Now don't tell me yuh bit."

"I bought a job," said Rawlins briefly.

Casteaux groaned. "Great guns, I thought yuh was trouble-burnt enough to know the smell of grief! Here, listen to the advice of a friend. Go tell Killifew you've changed yore mind."

Rawlins shook his head. "I can't turn that kind of a handspring. What's this all about?"

"And Killifew never told yuh?" muttered Casteaux. "You buy the dog unsight, unseen? Boy, yore a bearcat for action. Now I suppose I've got to hang around and help yuh listen for lead. When yuh goin' up?"

"Morning."

Casteaux nodded. "I'll string along. Got to go on to Outlaw Pass anyhow. Now, feelin' somewhat fatigued from the events of the day, I believe I'll retire to recombency."

He grinned cheerfully at Rawlins and strolled out of the saloon. Rawlins took another drink, tasted a free-lunch sandwich and decided he was in need of a square meal. So he presently followed in Casteaux's footsteps and turned toward the restaurant. Passing along the street he saw Casteaux step from an alley and pluck a black and hulking puncher on the arm. Then both disappeared from sight. Rawlins went to his supper very thoughtful.

CHAPTER III

"What side of the fence am I on? Who, me? Hell, I'm the guy they chase when nothin' else occupies their minds. Maybe I'm crooked, maybe I'm straight. But since nobody's found out yet, what difference does it make?"

——Casteaux.

BY SUN-UP the three of them, Rawlins, Killifew and Casteaux, were high on the bench, with the still higher hills rolling away in front of them. Far behind and below lay Seven Sleep, nothing but a blur against the golden floor of a

prairie that ran without a flaw into the hazy southern horizon. To eastward was the same picture, excepting for a tangled mass of badlands that stretched from the foot of the hill country a distance of perhaps three miles before leveling off. Brilliant white cloud puffs stood still in the bright sky and the fresh sun poured a full, sharp light over the earth.

The three stopped on an eminence a moment to rest the horses; Killifew, who had spoken less than a dozen words all the way from town, briefly explained the more prominent landmarks to Rawlins and then pressed on. In a few minutes sun and view disappeared and they were riding through the ranking rows of yellow pine, going steadily up-grade.

"From here on," said Killifew, "the timber gets heavier. It's a black country and Black Range is the name."

Casteaux grinned and winked at Rawlins. All during the trip Casteaux had ridden with an open display of buoyant spirits. He sat loose and easy in the saddle, too restless to keep still. At times the very vigor of living boiled over and he wheeled and raced on toward some mythical objective, to presently rein in and wait the approach of the others; and always his black eyes roved to the farthermost points of the horizon. He seemed perpetually to nurse some ironically amusing thought, to be chuckling over knowledge hidden from the others. Killifew accepted the manner with close-mouthed silence, plainly irritated, and it would have irritated Rawlins as well had he not felt in Casteaux a certain frank generosity that removed all malice from the apparent cynicism.

"Yeah," said Casteaux, feet fiddling in the stirrups, "a black country is right. And a black clan in it. Why don't yuh tell Rawlins about that bunch, Killifew?"

"You know 'em a damned sight better than I do," was Killifew's significant retort. "You tell him. Why in thunder don't you stop fidgetin' around that saddle? You'll gall your pony and wear him to a frazzle."

"Plenty more ponies," said Casteaux cheerfully.

"But none of your own," grunted Killifew.

They pushed deeper into the thickening timber. The cool half-light of the forest dropped about them and the trail began to zigzag along the spine of a suddenly formed ridge. At intervals small canyons tipped down grade and Rawlins vaguely detected the presence of some great gulch ahead. Meanwhile his mind turned over the puzzling problem of these two men and their relationship. Killifew stood obviously for order. Being an owner of property that was his inevitable outlook. Moreover, his present mission was in the nature of a desperate attempt to protect his property. Casteaux, to the contrary, obviously had little respect for private rights. Whether the man actually embraced thievery or whether he was one of those hair-line edge people who applauded a lawless conduct he himself would not indulge in, Rawlins couldn't tell. Nor did Killifew's treatment of the man give much of a hint. The cattleman plainly distrusted Casteaux, yet he seemed to attach no particularly definite harm to the man. Otherwise, Rawlins knew he would not have accepted Casteaux's company at all.

The trees in front of them fell aside and left them standing on a kind of parapet from which they could view, five hundred feet below, the extended line of ranch structures. There was a round, green meadow, a bunch of horses grazing, and a creek that charged down from the farther side of the miniature valley in a series of waterfalls. Small wisps of morning fog still clung to the surrounding walls, a funnel of smoke came from the main house. All in all, it was a hemmed-in and isolated place.

"No range there for stock," observed Rawlins. "Where'd you run these four thousand head of horses?"

Killifew pointed to northward of the valley. "A trail climbs out of the hole yonder and comes to a scope of territory fairly

flat and free. I've got twenty thousand acres around here. But never mind the horses. I ain't hirin' you for that. Come on."

He led the way down a grade that set the ponies on their haunches. Loose rock flew before them and the sundry sounds of approach ran across the gulch with a startling clarity. A pair of men came out of the ranch-house and stood waiting. Presently the trail leveled and Killifew galloped impatiently around the corrals and up to the ranch yard, abreast the pair.

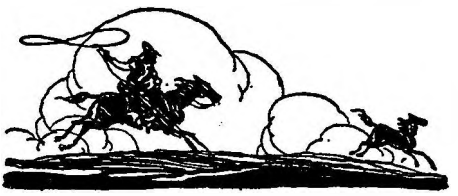
"Where's Bones?"

"Up on the flats," said one of the men, indicating the north.

"He must be runnin' somebody else's ranch instead of mine," grunted Killifew. "I never found him on hand yet. Well, you three wranglers have got a new boss now. This man is Jeff Rawlins. You'll take his orders and like 'em—or roll your blankets. Rawlins, this is Whitey Ray. That's Tex. There's another jasper around the woods someplace who calls himself Bones. He's been foreman."

Whitey Ray was a thin, small man of middle age with the strained and burnt out face of one who had busted too many horses and stayed in the saddle too long. Tex was young and rawboned and poker-cheeked. Both of them looked at Rawlins with a reserved watchfulness in their eyes, saying nothing at all. Killifew wheeled around and started away, beckoning Rawlins to follow. When they were well out of earshot the rancher reined in.

"Well, there's the layout. You've been



around considerable and I won't take time to explain what you can see without trouble. I've got a lot of irons in the fire and it looks like this K ranch is just one too many. Got no time to fool with it. There she lays—and consider it yours. Act like it was. Anything you do goes with me. If you don't like your crew, fire 'em—if you can. Hire anybody you see fit—also if you can."

"So I step right down and start it?" queried Rawlins.

Killifew stared at the surrounding hills belligerently. "Unless I'm a heap mistaken, you won't have to start. Somebody else'll start—and leave you to finish. Up there"—motioning to the northwest—"about seven miles is Outlaw Pass. If there's any hell raised around here, that's where it'll come from. Every time the sheriff flushes a bunch of rustlers in this country he finds some K horses. My horses, understand? I seem to be a remount depot for all the scoundrels in these hills. Trust nobody."

"Trust the crew?" pressed Rawlins.

"I said nobody," replied Killifew.

"Casteaux?"

"Casteaux is——" began Killifew, and bit off the rest of the sentence. Casteaux loped toward them, irrepressibly cheerful.

"Listen," broke in Casteaux, "don't leave this Rawlins on the premises without givin' him the dope. He's half-ways white, Killifew."

"He's bought the job," snapped Killifew, "and I never said it'd be gravy. He understands what he's up here for—to stop what's been goin' on."

"That's all?" jeered Casteaux. "Want him to stop the moon from shinin' and the earth from turnin', too."

But Killifew only pressed his lips together, looked at his watch, and prepared to go. "She's yours—good luck," said he to Rawlins. Cantering across the meadow he went laboriously up the slope and presently attained the high point. Without glancing back, he disappeared from sight.

Rawlins turned to Casteaux with a sharply roused interest. "What's this black clan hocus-pocus?"

Casteaux's grin barely covered a cast of countenance that seemed evasive and uneasy. "I never like to bring a man bad news, not if I want to be his friend."

Rawlins replied softly, "If a man is my friend, Casteaux, I want to know what side of the fence he's on."

"Who, me? Hell, I'm the guy they chase when nothin' else occupies their minds. Maybe I'm crooked, maybe I'm straight, but since nobody's found out yet, what difference does it make?"

There was no withstanding Casteaux's expansive grin and Rawlins' face relaxed a little.

"I'm on my way," continued Casteaux. "Got to hit the brush. See you later." Then, as if overcoming some point of principle, he blurted out a more definite warning. "But don't go nosin' around too much up by Outlaw Pass. I'll say that much concernin' the clan—and I reckon I've said too much." And he turned and galloped past the house to tackle the stiff western slope. Rawlins watched until the man reached the parapet, saw him twist to wave an arm and fade from sight. Then a fragment of some roistering song came echoing back and diminished and died.

RAWLINS rode to the house and dismounted in front of his two hands who sat on the steps with a guarded indifference. His first impression had been that neither of them meant to be in any hurry about accepting him on the terms Killifew had laid down; and since he believed in clearing up the schedule as he went along, he aimed straight at his target.

"Don't know how you boys like this deal, but my idea is usually to get along peaceably."

The shrunken Whitey Ray and the stolid Tex fixed their gaze at an object three inches to one side of Rawlins and appeared to ponder the affairs of the universe with a common sadness. Rawlins reached for his cigarette papers, level eyes sharpening slightly. Into the enormous silence he cast a gentle afterthought. "That is, if I get cooperation."

"I dunno," mused Whitey Ray and squirmed on the steps.

Tex accepted the cue. "Have to see what Bones thinks."

"I see," drawled Rawlins. "You do your thinkin' by platoons, is that it? Well, I won't deny it saves some strain on the intellect, if any."

The shot bounced off these weary gentlemen and left no trace. Rawlins ignited his smoke and strolled into the house. There was a sizable living room full of dirt and litter, a number of bedrooms leading off from it which he forebore inspecting, and a kitchen. The kitchen was directly behind the living room and hardly better than a refuse heap in its present condition. Rawlins went back to the porch.

"Which one of you fellows does the cookin'?"

"We-all take turns," sighed Tex. "I guess it'd be yore turn next."

"Yeah?" was Rawlins' dry rejoinder. "When you see this foreman cookin' for his crew there'll be snow in hell."

As before, there was no response, and Rawlins, gradually acquiring a head of steam, crossed the yard to a corral in which he saw several horses. The scheme of things was not yet wholly clear to him, but he judged the absent Bones to be a key figure. Climbing the corral, he further judged Bones would not particularly care for him, in which event something in the line of fireworks was due to take place. However, he dismissed the idea temporarily and considered horseflesh. Whatever the slackness of the existing K crew, they had undoubtedly combed the range for the best it could offer. The three dozen animals in the corral were all good, and some downright magnificent, as for example a tall buckskin with a sweeping silver tail. Rawlins had a weakness for solid colors and he mentally laid out his string of ponies, weighing each animal carefully.

In the midst of this business he heard a call from not very far away, and presently a single rider came beating by, to draw up beside the house porch. Bones, without doubt, for he heard the man dis-

mount and rap out a string of questions. Suddenly the talk softened down to an indistinct muttering. Bones swore and said something else angrily. Rawlins, studying the horses with a serene absorption, heard the man tramping up to the corral. A curt and unfriendly voice said:

"Yo're Rawlins, huh?"

"Yeah," murmured Rawlins, ignoring the man completely.

The other's announcement was nothing less than a challenge. "I'm Bones."

"Ahuh," grunted Rawlins and continued his close inspection of the ponies. He heard Bones let out a sharp breath and kick the bottom of the corral with a boot. It was hard to pick a quarrel with a man's back.

"I'm foreman here," said Bones.

"Was you?" drawled Rawlins. "Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, thirty——."

"Am!" snapped Bones.

"Nope, was," contradicted Rawlins and turned from his perch to look down on the man. Bones was reddish brown as to general complexion and had greedy little gimlet eyes stuck like buttons to either side of a sharp nose. A sweeping, reddish mustache almost covered his mouth, stained with tobacco juice. Rawlins weighed him carefully and decided the ex-foreman had possibilities of being dangerous. "Sorry to disturb your dreams of glory. You ain't king any more. I am now."

Bones grew ruddy. "Why didn't Killifew tell me that person'lly? What's the matter with the way I run this ranch? What in thunder does the man want? He can't treat me thataway!"

Rawlins snapped up the challenge. "Well, I wouldn't want a man to work under me if he wasn't satisfied. Sorry to lose you."

"Don't be too previous about that!" grunted Bones. "I'll make up my own mind without help. When I decide to quit I'll tell yuh."

"Now that's just fine," drawled Rawlins and turned back to the horses. "One big happy family. Just climb up here and give me the dope. Why so many ponies in the corral?"

Bones hoisted himself beside Rawlins reluctantly. "I believe in havin' plenty of fresh stuff to ride. This is hard country. Yuh wear out horse flesh fast."

"These are all K horses?" queried Rawlins.

"Yeah."

"Well, I might as well pick my ridin' string right now. That buckskin with the silver tail——"

"Too bad," interrupted Bones, "but that one's in my string."

"Fair enough," agreed Rawlins. "I don't want to butt into your stuff. So I'll just pick the gray geldin'——"

"Nope," grunted Bones. "That's mine, too."

"How about the strawberry?"

"Mine."

A slight crease formed on Rawlins' forehead, but he continued evenly. "Tough luck for me. I guess the leggy black over yonder will carry me well enough."

"Sorry," stated Bones, "it can't be done."

"Then," went on Rawlins with a telltale sleepiness of manner, "there'd be that bay with the heavy withers."

"I'm usin' him today," said Bones quickly.

Rawlins slid down from the corral, Bones following suit. The other two hands had come up and were standing by, and Bones drew back toward them. Thus the three made a solid front against Rawlins—a significant attitude. Rawlins hooked his thumbs into his belt and drawled gravely. "Bones, you spread out over more ground than your shadow is able to cover."

"You know the custom," muttered Bones

stiffly. "Every man picks his own string. Mine is mine."

"Bein' foreman, the choice of the best is mine," said Rawlins definitely. "I could probably pick horses all day long and you'd claim 'em. The ones I mentioned are the ones I'll take. Catch yourself another string."

"You can't work that high-handed stuff around here!" shouted Bones.

"She goes as she lays," replied Rawlins. "Whitey, go rope out that buckskin for me. I'm ridin'."

Whitey took one halting step and was stopped by Bones' outstretched arm. "Stay put," he commanded. "Listen, Rawlins, this is a poor country for strangers. I don't care what Killifew says about it. He's a fool for tryin' to disturb things up here. I got more drag in these parts than he has. Just think that over. It's me that keeps on good terms with the people in this country. If it wasn't so, Killifew wouldn't have any horses."

"Maybe," Rawlins said gently, "he thinks your terms are too friendly. Whitey, go rope out that horse."

"If yuh want to make a showdown right here," cried Bones, "I'll call it! Yuh'll take no horses and give no orders! Stand pat, Whitey!"

Rawlins took two long steps backwards, a brightly cold flare of light in his eyes. "Get goin', Whitey. Bones, make another play to cross me and I'll consider it time to go to the smoke."

The three faced him sullenly. He knew then that Tex was wholly Bones' man, but there was a kind of troubled uncertainty about Whitey Ray indicating other thoughts. Whitey moved tentatively away from Bones and cast back a sidewise glance at the pale and silent ex-foreman, who had nothing to say. Whitey went another step, seemed to listen for advice, and finally passed to the corral gate. The creak of hinges broke the spell; Bones cursed with a bitter malevolence, wheeled on his boot heels and strode for the house. Tex followed like a dog.

"Bluffed but not convinced," observed Rawlins, going to his horse. Whitey Ray led out the buckskin which Rawlins saddled and mounted. On the point of departure, Rawlins glanced at the gloomy-eyed Tex loitering on the porch.

"I'll be gone a little while. When I get back I want to see this dung heap swamped out. There's twenty years' dirt in those rooms. I'm talkin' to you, Tex. If it ain't done when I come back, you can figure to go down the road mutterin' to yourself."

Bones strode from the house. "Listen," said he, gruffly, "just forget what I said. I got a vi'lent temper. Just forget the talk. What you say goes with me."

The man's cheeks were drawn smooth and expressionless, yet there was a hooded danger in his greedy, narrow-set eyes to betray him. Rawlins nodded casually. "Fine. Stick around till I come back." And turning, he cantered to the foot of the northern trail. It took him five minutes to work his way to the top; when he looked back he saw all three standing in the yard watching him.

"Figurin' to knife me when I come back," he mused. "Bones turned too quick a handspring. From which I judge he'd used most any means handy to get me."

The trail ahead was heavily wooded, though broad with travel. Proceeding along it Rawlins found lesser trails leading off frequently, most of which fed into the north. In that direction the timber thickened and the slopes reared ruggedly to high peaks and domes. The farther he progressed the more did the soft earth beneath him display marks of travel. And the marks indicated that riders seemed to run out of the side alleys, pursue the main trail a while, then dart for the higher ridges. Rawlins considered this manifestation with interest; meanwhile he rehearsed the scene at the ranch.

"High-handed? Sure I was. They were waitin' to bluff me off the map. If I let up, they'll try it again. Better get hard-nosed right off the bat, which brings up

the fact I'm tryin' to swing a pretty big bull by a damned small tail. Those dudes are no help to me. They belong in the other camp. And where is the other camp? What did I barge into this grief for?"

It was the first time he had asked himself the question; and it shocked him to discover he could supply no ready answer. This was the sort of business he was running away from. Because of this very kind of fighting he had retreated two hundred miles, broken up friendships and sent his boon companions off to solitary places. Yet within two hours he had hired out again, hired out his wits, his experience, and his gun. The last thought hit him squarely in the face. "Tasted blood and liked it," he muttered somberly. "The primrose path. I'd give a thousand dollars to take back my word. Too late now."

The thing that deflected his train of thinking was a sudden falling away of trees. The path ran into open country, into a long valley with a grassy floor and rising sides. Horse stock browsed throughout it, running away back into the encompassing forest; and in the bright sunlight the sight of all this made a pleasant picture.

"Can't be all of it, though," he reflected. "Must be more valleys around here. This side trail——"

THE side trail came out of the north in a rounding curve; it was churned deep with travel. And when he bent down to scan the multitude of hoof indentations he saw that some of them were fresh; the ridges sharply defined, the hollows stamped clean and not yet filled with crumbling earth particles. Without more thought about the matter, he turned his pony and followed up around the bend, quartered along a ridge, crossed it and cantered through a cramped ravine. The light of day came through the virginal pines in fragments, an ancient silence clung roundabout, the smell of the air was damp and fragrant. High on the slopes he saw an occasional horse browsing and as the ravine ascended to a transverse ridge which presently led him down to another ravine he saw more K stock scattered between the trees. Always the trail tended upward; and perhaps three hours from the ranch he came without warning to the edge of a shale precipice and discovered houses below.

A definite gap appeared in the tangled hills through which ran a shallow river whose banks were strewn with glacial rubbish. Along it was a narrow meadow, fending off on either side the ever encroaching trees. From the southeast appeared a wagon road which paralleled the river, formed a kind of street between the houses of this isolated settlement, and went on to traverse the river at a ford. Half a dozen dwellings, a long horse shed, a tumbledown water power grist mill, a great corral, a store—these made the settlement. And from the ford roads seemed to strike out into the different angles of the hills like spokes from a hub.

"Outlaw Pass," decided Rawlins. "And I've missed the trail leading into it. One thing's sure, there's a lot of traffic between this joint and the K outfit."

Two men walked indolently from the store and went for their horses. At this distance their features were not to be identified, but about one was a swagger and a carriage faintly familiar—and as they rode southerly along the road, coming beneath the point of the shale precipice, Rawlins identified Pete Casteaux. The other was that great lowering lump of a man he had seen Casteaux conferring with in Seven Sleep the night before. A little later the pair followed the road around a bend and disappeared. Back in Outlaw Pass a woman came from a house and began stringing up a washing. Rawlins turned to retrace his road.

He was not greatly surprised to find Casteaux in these surroundings, but the actual fact left him both perplexed and a little resentful. He had lived in the West all his life and he long ago had learned better than to place his trust in passing acquaintances. Moreover, he knew Cas-

teaux's type perfectly well. Even so, the man had made an offer of friendship and in that ironic smile there had been something appealing, something that cut below the surface marks of outlawry. Casteaux had seemed to ask for a lenient judgment. Yet here he was, riding away from what Rawlins had been warned was headquarters for the wild bunch.

He dipped into one of the numerous canyons and followed it without his usual observation, beign plunged in the maze of contradictory impressions. The K hands were on some sort of terms with Outlaw Pass. There was evidence of travel between the two places. Killifew both tolerated and suspected Casteaux, who in turn had offered Rawlins a warning concerning Outlaw Pass. And here was Casteaux riding out of the Pass as if it were friendly soil. Nothing seemed to square up right.

"Only one thing certain," he reflected. "I play a lone hand. And I wish the boys were here. What in thunder did I take this job for? No answer to that one, none whatsoever. But now that I took it, I'll have to ride it out. And I'm not denyin' it's a fine lookin' country. Yeah. Be just my style to want to camp in a territory full of grief."

The horse beneath him threw up its head and whickered. On impulse Rawlins sank his spurs full into the beast's flanks and went ripping for his gun. The horse sprang along the trail. Lifting his hard glance along the sun-mottled canyon side Rawlins caught the shift of a body from one tree to another. Something flashed, and then a shot's echo broke the dreaming peace of the hills and went rolling and rocketing from wall to wall. The pony grunted, lost its footing and fell, hind quarters rising up and catapulting Rawlins headfirst through the air. He struck a deadfall neck and shoulder; and before the echo of the gunshot had died down the length of the canyon the light of consciousness faded from him.

Chapter IV

"Rawlins, don't let the sun shine on your face in these hills tomorrow!"
——Warning of the Cordrays.

WHEN Rawlins woke he thought something had happened to his eyes, for the canyon was clouded in a queer kind of twilight and nowhere did he see the filtering rays of the sun. Long shafts of pain ran through his chest and a trip-hammer ache beat against his head. For a little while he rested where he had fallen in the manner of one spewn up on a beach after near drowning, half unable to move and half afraid to test himself. Out of a corner of his eyes he saw his horse lying dead on the trail. On the other side of him was the log against which he had collided, both cutting off his view of the canyon slope and protecting him from another bullet; and such was his error in time that he thought the hidden marksman must now be ejecting the spent shell and waiting for a second shot.

This thought also held him quiet, but presently he saw a drop of blood on his own hand, darkly congealed, and it came to him then that he had been unconscious a long while and that the twilight of the canyon was due to the sun sliding westward. Through an aperture of the trees he saw a remote cloud glistening in a bright sky, and by that he knew it was still day, even though the canyon was shadowed and the dampness of the earth chilled him.

The blood on his hand alarmed him to action. Tentatively he rolled his head and found it sound. His arm responded. Turning, he shook his shoulders, passed a hand across his face and brought it away stained crimson. And as he moved again he felt some light thing pressing on one temple. Reaching for it, he draw away a woman's handkerchief sodden with blood.

The very astonishment of that discovery

brought life sweeping back to him. Rising a little he saw the print of a small boot, a woman's boot, in the soft earth beside him. He saw, too, a piece of skirt ripped into a kind of bandage and lying useless nearby; and afterwards he discovered his own canteen lying a short distance from the dead horse. This unknown woman had sought to find water, had apparently given up or been frightened, and had gone away.

There was, just beyond the log, a thicket dense enough to conceal him. Lifting his head over the log's surface he scanned the whole higher slope carefully and located that spot where he had caught one fleeting glance of the ambusher. Nothing was to be gained by the inspection, he realized. And with realization came an angry burst of energy. He slid over the log and into the brush, half expecting to hear the smash of another bullet. Instead there was the heavy, whirring drum of a pheasant flushed from covert and the clinging after-echoes. Encouraged, Rawlins crept on upward, varying his progress with the underbrush and presently attaining a high enough point to look down into the hollow where his horse lay. Twenty more yards brought him to trees, and here he rose and discarded part of his caution. Building a smoke, he crouched under a pine and considered.

"If it was that woman, she's regretted it and departed. Otherwise, why did she essay to patch me up? If it was a man, he had ample time to come down and finish his masterpiece. But he didn't. So would it be likely he'd stick around? Answer seems to be no. If he's departed, which way would he go? Probably toward home—and in this case home might easy be the Pass. And I've got no business headin' back there on foot. I can wait. I've done a lot of it in my time and I can do this much more."

He took two short drags on the cigarette, ground it under his heel and proceeded east in the general direction of the K ranch and range. The contour of the land forced him higher for the ensuing twenty minutes and this labored pedestrianism added immeasurable fuel to his temper. Like all riders he hated to be put afoot; and the death of the buckskin was to him a miserably wanton act. Actually, he would rather have taken a bullet in his arm, such being his love of fine horseflesh. So, with an ever increasing pressure of wrath, he tramped through the trees and without notice stepped to the brow of a fairly clear slope, at the foot of which was another trail. On second glance he fell to his stomach and reached for his gun.

Halfway down to the road and concealed behind a gray boulder lay a man as silent as a sunning snake. Apparently all his interest was turned downward for he made no motion of having seen Rawlins; and apparently, as well, he expected travel on the road, for he had a rifle loosely trained in front of him. One arm propped up his chin and at this distance, which was no more than sixty feet, Rawlins got a fairly good view of a dark and sly and pointed face; a weaselly face, the face of a spy and a trickster.

Rawlins considered the situation with swift thoughtfulness. "It might have been him. And maybe he thought I was playin' possum down by that log when I fell, and so he retreated and decided to wait for me at another angle of the trail. Maybe —but where in hell does the women enter this mess?"

The man had not stirred. In fact the moments went dragging by without so much as the visible twitch of a muscle on his part. He seemed to have a reptile's fixity, he seemed to be without sense of strain. As Rawlins continued to watch, his eyes began to tire and man and gray boulder and green earth tended to merge together. Rawlins was even considering throwing a stone below to start the fellow when he was saved the trouble by the sound of a single horse advancing along an unseen part of the trail. The man by the boulder settled closer to the earth, the point of the gun lifted and stiffened. In

another moment a rider swept into view, head bent down at the tracks in the dirt, coming from the direction of the K ranch and pressing on toward Outlaw Pass.

It was Bones, and as quickly as he appeared he rode on to become hidden by another bend of the trail. Rawlins looked back at the prone figure and found the gun dropped.

"Not the game he wants," muttered Rawlins. "This Bones appears to have no enemies round here."

SUDDENLY the man by the boulder crawled to his knees, stood up and turned, breaking into a shuffling lope. He came on toward Rawlins' hiding place, veered and aimed for a more distant part of the trees. On his face was a smirking, humorless grin; and so he disappeared. Hardly had he gone when Bones returned, flashed around the curve at full spur, and left the hoof beats trembling in the air.

"Mystery so thick you could cut it with a case knife," grunted Rawlins. As for himself, he descended the slope more circumspectly and reached the trail via a secretive alleyway. The shadows were turning to a deeper blue all about him and once, an hour later, he saw what appeared to be the upper end of the K range, through a long vista of pines. The sun had definitely gone. When at dusk he limped down the stiff decline leading to the ranch-house the night wind had begun to cut through his shirt and the owls were hooting from the deep timber. No light beckoned to him.

Crossing the yard, he called cautiously: "Bones."

There was on answer. But by the porch was the shadow of a waiting horse. Wary and warned of something gone wrong, Rawlins stepped against the corral, watching the yard narrowly. In the corral the sound of ponies impatiently moving about was missing and he stepped up to look—and to find the compound empty.

The animal by the porch looked like bait to Rawlins, and in obedience to instinct he crept beside the corral wall until he reached the corner nearest the house. The horse whimpered softly and from that general direction also emerged a queer groaning sob. Rawlins lifted his revolver and challenged again.

"Hello, house."

The groan rose a second time and died abruptly. Something fell against the porch and woke a dull echo that raked across Rawlins' nerves. Over there was a man. . . .

Rawlins slipped to the house wall and padded silently around to the rear, pausing at an open door. It was the kitchen door and the smell of coffee and bacon still clung to the air. Two dim red eyes of fire glowed out of the grate. A rat scuttled across the floor. Otherwise he made out nothing and acting on the impulse of a rising impatience he slipped inside and halted again. Against the black was the rectangle of an open inner door which he recognized as leading to the forward room. Slipping toward it he listened for the telltale shift of bodies, the rise and fall of breathing. But only a blank, dismal quiet reigned. By now the impatience had gotten the best of him and he approached the front door aperture almost recklessly, to stop dead on the threshold. Blocking it was the prone figure of a man.

Rawlins hauled back the hammer of his gun, the click of the catch falling flatly through the utter mystery. "I'll give you five seconds to rise up from there," said he.

There was no answering move. Crouching down, gun oustretched, he failed to catch even the sigh of breath. Warned of the truth, he lowered the gun's hammer softly, reached for a match and struck it. The cupped flame glowed down on the pallid, staring cheeks of Whitey Ray; and

Whitey Ray was dead beyond a doubt.

"That groan I heard," muttered Rawlins, "was him drawin' his last breath. He was the weak one—the one who wanted to be reasonable, and it's my guess Bones got him—and pulled out with Tex, takin' the stock as well."

Some of his caution vanished. Stepping over the dead man, he crossed the porch to where the waiting horse was tethered. A glow of something white appeared beside the saddle; when he touched it he found a sheet of paper suspended from the horn on a thong. He ripped it clear, meanwhile observing the beast to be a frail sawbacked shadow, and retreated to the house. Going to a corner, he lit another match and by the momentary light saw this scrawled warning:

"Here's a trade for yore Buckskin. Take it and git. We knowed every move you made and its a game you ain't able to beat. This country don't belong to strangers. Don't let the sun shine on you in these hills again. Travel. The Cordrays."

The light went out, leaving Rawlins scowling through the blackness. "They move fast. Bones has gone to the wild bunch, takin' the ponies with him. I've got my walkin' papers, and a swayback horse probably afflicted with asthma. I'm warned. The risk is all mine. For what? For buttin' my nose into a job I had no business acceptin'."

Irritably, he rose and groped his way back to the kitchen. Another match showed him a lamp on the table, still warm from recent use. He lit it and set it on a window ledge to place the glow in front of him rather than behind. By now he had mentally climbed into his armor and was disregarding some of his previous carefulness. In the unwritten book of prairie strategy was one clear rule: the winner could play safe, the loser had to take the chances. He had lost the first skirmish and could not longer afford to count his steps. "I'm in a hole and it's up to me to do some tall climbin'."

There was kindling in the woodbox. He built up a fire, took off a lid and set a greasy skillet over the opening. The coffee pot was half-full of grounds. Adding a little water he shoved it over the warmest section and went foraging in the cupboard. There still remained part of a slab of bacon. Somebody had made biscuits. He sliced off strips of bacon and dropped them in the pan. The biscuits he ate on the spot, and likewise a section of cheese which he later discovered.

Going back to the porch he moved the dead Whitey Ray inside and closed the door. When he came again to the kitchen the bacon was crisp and ready and he topped off the meal with a long drink of feeble coffee from the pot. Whisking out the light he returned to the porch, climbed on the horse and turned away from the meadow, once more going up the slope on the north. From here he followed his previous trail all the way to the high meadow and came at last to the trail's end. Onward a few hundred yards he flushed a bunch of horses that ran away from him. But a little later he found an animal following him patiently and when he turned it came docilely alongside, blubbering.

"You're it," mused Rawlins. "Anything's better than the animated boneyard which I'm astride. Come to papa."

The animal stood while he made his change of gear, offering only a desultory crowhop when he tightened the saddle cinch. Mounting, he swung back to the trail and halted to consider.

"Well, this is poison. But I can take it or leave it alone. Nobody's forcin' it down my throat. If I strike south from here, I'm out of it. If I stick, I'm just a fool, just a solitary fool buckin' the whole country. Still, wasn't that what I might've expected when I give this Killifew my word?"

Suddenly a grim, sardonic amusement swept over him, bringing with it a flare

of reckless energy. "Law and order, that's the ticket. Hell of a funny situation. The exact duplicate of what I just got away from by the skin of my teeth. Fightin' for law and order without the shadow of authority and open to every kind of cross-play. Same thing over again. And I bite a second time! Well, if that's the kind of a fool I am, then that's the kind of a fool I am. Step along, pony."

An hour later he stood on the shale precipice and looked down upon the sullen, glimmering lights of Outlaw Pass.

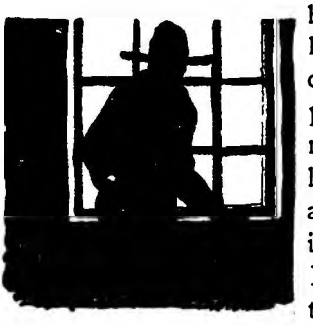
HIS first move was to dismount, throw the pony into some brush beside the trail. Afterwards he returned to the precipice and studied the lay of the settlement. All the houses had lights in them, but nearer the ford was one quite ablaze and this he judged to be the general store. Probably a saloon as well as a store. "Undoubtedly the place is full of sharp-smellin' hounds," he reflected. "And they'll have some sort of guard out. Neverthless, I'm curious. What are they up to?"

The answer to the question was a step forward and down. He let himself along the slope with considerable caution, fearing to let loose an avalanche of loose rock. When he had reached the bottom, he kept close to the cliff wall and well away from the road. There was a wind coming out of the west, against him rather than away from him. If the place held dogs, this was an advantageous circumstance and he made the most of it, gradually drawing around the east side of the settlement until he had arrived at the river. The store was another hundred yards on and to reach it he had to make a three-quarter circle of the Pass. Stretched beside the water he considered his surroundings.

So far, no dogs. But his prying glance halted in a particularly black angle of a farther building to detect something that seemed a stationary man's figure. Almost at the same time a dwelling door opened and the outflung light passed over the road and illumined the building. A voice said angrily, "What in thunder are yuh doin'!" And then another figure came in from the direction of the shale precipice, trotting like a dog. Rawlins recognized him as the skulking figure of the earlier afternoon. Recognized him with a sudden sharpening of uneasiness.

"Forgot about his habit of snoopin'," he whispered to himself. "Now—has he smelled me or not?"

The man whirled and halted. A second came from the dark shadows of the building—as Rawlins had suspected—and joined him. There was a moment's low talk; then both went back toward the shale precipice. Rawlins rose from his flat position and crept to the rear of the store. A set of high steps led up to a door; treading them, he found neither light nor sound coming out. Apparently some rear store room lay between him and the gathering in front. Poised and thoughtful, he was abruptly aware of footsteps coming along the margin of the river, crunching in the gravel. Somebody said: "Well, it won't do no harm——" and choked off the rest of the sentence. Rawlins turned to go down the steps and saw a pair of shadows break through the deep dark. Thus trapped, he swung to the door and softly tested the knob. The door gave way quietly and he passed into a black cell smelling strongly of hides, and closed the portal behind him.



Immediately the rumble of talk rose and along the far wall were streaks of light seeping through the loose boards of a partition. One round glow gushed out of a knot hole fairly high up; toward this Rawlins gingerly groped, threading among piles of loose boxes and kegs. Just short of the partition he found himself blocked by a solid barrier of sacked stuff, over which seemed to hang a stiff covering, such as

a tarpaulin. Testing the pile, he found it solid enough to hold him and further braced by being shoved against the partition. Feeling around, he at last discovered one end of the pile, the sacks being thrown up in step-like formation. Accepting the satisfactory situation without question, he began to climb toward the knot hole.

In the adjoining room was a sudden entry of men and the tramping of restless feet. A door slammed, silence fell swiftly; and in this silence grated a nasal, angry-pitched voice.

"I went there, all right. He come back, et a snack and went agin. I follored. He's around here."

Chair legs banged against the floor. Somebody boomed out in a vast and barrel-like tone: "Here? Hell, he wouldn't dare! Yore crazy as a louse, Jubal!"

"I said he was here!" yelled the one named Jubal. "Don't contradict *me!* I don't miss nothin' that creeps or crawls. He come down that shale slide and he's here!"

"By God, if that's so he'll never get out!"

"Mort, go get the dogs!"

"Swarm out of here! Spread around the houses and see——"

A cool and taunting voice cut across the confusion. "What's the matter with you buzzards? Gettin' nervous? Sit down —sit down! He don't even know where the Pass is, and he's too wise to lay himself wide open. How about another keg of beer?"

Rawlins reached the top of the pile and flattened. A partition door flew open at the other end of the room, letting in a light that spread over half the place and touched Rawlins dimly. A man came in, capsized a keg and rolled it back front, never thinking to shut the door behind him. A call came, strong and mandatory, from the yard, and in response it seemed that most of the crowd went swarming out. A couple stayed behind, however, for he heard them speaking slowly and without excitement and he bent toward the knot hole to have a look. Further warning stayed the act. Instead, he lifted the tarpaulin covering the sacked stuff and slid himself beneath it at about the same time dogs began to bay out in the rear. Feet ground into the river gravel. More shouts went up, and somebody came crashing up the back steps, smashed into the storeroom and began to shout.

"This is where the houn's bring up! Get a lantern!"

The place filled on the moment from front to rear. Rawlins, never daring to move a muscle, heard them knocking aside boxes. Apparently a lantern had been brought, for he caught a flittering glow on the partition wall beside him. It was bedlam, men brawling around, boxes falling to the floor and half a dozen mongrels yelping at a scent that now certainly must be wiped out by the tramp of other feet. A body leaned against the hanging edge of the tarpaulin, slightly sliding the upper edge across Rawlins. Venturing to twist his nearest arm, he seized the covering and held it from further withdrawal.

"Who's cock-eyed, I want to know? What started this damfool play?"

Jubal's high-edged snap came back. "Damfool, am I? That fellow can't fool me! He's here some place."

"Rats!"

The deep and guttural voice rolled out a dubious assent. "Jubal's clever thataway. He don't miss much. If he says the stranger is around here I'm inclined to believe it."

The fellow who had spoken so ironically before, tried again. "Somebody give Jubal a rattle so he can make a lot of funny sounds to amuse himself. This dump gets crazier day by day. Where's that beer?"

This time Rawlins recognized the voice beyond a doubt. It was Pete Casteaux; and as he realized it he began to feel a faint hope. The man's counsel might turn them back and give him leeway to retreat. It seemed, in fact, that Casteaux was leading part of them to the front room when disaster struck Rawlins like a bolt of lightning. There had been somebody leaning

against the side of the pile ever since the ruckus began; now, with the partial exodus, this fellow appeared to push himself away from his resting spot. The pressure unsettled a sack on the end; it turned and fell. The canvas slipped from that part of the pile and then the weight of the hanging section pulled the whole thing to the floor, leaving Rawlins exposed. It was the ferret-like Jubal who detected him first and raised a shout. Rawlins saw a gun come ripping out; afterwards things moved swiftly and he caught only the highlights of this sinister scene. The important thing was that Casteaux, rapidly swinging around, walked directly to the pile with his own gun raised and so masked Rawlins from fire. Casteaux's face was lined with anger.

"Get down from there, yuh damned, long-legged spy!"

"Stand away, Casteaux!" yelled Jubal.

"Wait a minute," broke in Casteaux, "this jasper is my meat. Get down from there, Rawlins. I told yuh in Seven Sleep to stay clear of these hills. Climb down and march to the front."

Rawlins slid to the floor. Casteaux caught him roughly by the arm, pushed him to the door and through it. In another moment he was standing in the bright yellow light of the front room, ringed around by the crowd and feeling the red-heat of their antagonism.

Chapter V

"I have dreamed of a man like you. But now that you're here in this trap, I wish you were a thousand miles away."

——Anita, sister of the black Cordrays.

IN THE room was an even dozen men with the print of their profession on them like a banner. In the eyes of each was the glinting, roving wariness of the hunted, and on the face of each was the common expression of lawless discontent. Sullen and hard and quick to display vengefulness, they were clearly of the tribe of Cain. Bones stood among them and stared at Rawlins with a greedy pleasure. Tex lounged a little behind the others. Rawlins also recognized Jubal, the ferret-faced man who had skulked on the hillside that afternoon; and the great hulking figure of the fellow Casteaux had talked to in Seven Sleep. Casteaux still held tightly to Rawlins' arm as if afraid of losing the prize he had claimed; meanwhile the anger dissolved from him and he began to display his familiar ironic grin.

"Seems to take a lot of words to get an idea into yore head, Rawlins. I tried to do yuh a favor by warnin' yuh away from here. But no, that didn't penetrate. Yuh had to come. Mebbe it dawns on yore intelligence about now that Outlaw Pass can't be visited without invitation."

The mean and pointed features of Jubal glowed with suspicion. "Mighty friendly with him, Casteaux." And the towering giant nearby nodded in agreement. "Seems so to me, too. Yuh got to figger yo're taken on parole around here, Pete. How come?"

Beside the giant stood a youth somewhat short of voting age. There was a downy fuzz on his cream-colored cheeks, his eyes were ink black and his mouth quite cruel. "I never did like Casteaux and I don't trust him!" he jerked out. "You fellas make a mistake in lettin' him hang around here. As for that——" and he ripped Rawlins with a series of vile oaths, "let's waste no time on him. Smash his head and throw him in the river."

Coming from one so young, the suggestion had a cold terror about it. Casteaux's grin grew rigid. "Yuh never like nothin' at no time, Mort. Not even yoreself. What's the matter here? You eggs puttin' me under the gun? *Me?* Rawlins ain't a friend of mine and never was. But he pulled a posse off my trail last night and I tried to do him a return favor by telling him to keep away from the hills. I like to pay my debts. But he ain't the kind to listen, I guess. Anyhow, the score's even and I ain't wastin' pity on him."

"Then whut'd you git in my way for?"

demanded the unsatisfied Jubal. "I was goin' to kick him off and yuh stood in front of the gun."

"Because I don't like cold turkey killin'," grunted Casteaux. "You'd be a fool to pull it. Never plug a man just for the fun of seein' him wiggle. Dammit, do a little thinkin' once in a whle. There's plenty of other ways."

Jubal made a sound of contempt and disgust in his throat, adding, "You got no guts, Casteaux."

Another man came in the outside door and pushed the group aside. Instantly silence came to the room, silence and a kind of unspoken deference. This fellow was slim and tall. There was a lithe swiftness to his movement. A manner of absolute authority. Heavy lines ran down from temple to mouth corner and the high cheekbones gave to his eyes a narrow and slanting cast. A curt, level, "Get out of here," sent the spectators swiftly through the door and presently there was left only Rawlins, Casteaux, the newcomer and the three who had done the talking. "Now," said the newcomer, "we'll figure this out."

Rawlins stirred. "What is this," he drawled, "a board of directors meetin'?"

Casteaux chuckled. "Yuh wanted to know what this place was, didn't yuh? Well, yore lookin' at the four Cordrays. Jubal's the one that smelled yuh and wanted to put a slug in yore frame regardless. Mort's the lad with the bright idea of lettin' yuh float down the river. The young mountain yonder is Boone. And this fellow"—pointing to the newcomer—"is Cree. May the Lord have mercy."

Cree scowled. "You talk too much, Casteaux."

"I don't trust him!" snapped Mort, the kid.

"Shut up," said Cree Cordray. "You talk too much, too. So does Jubal. The only one of this family with sense enough to keep still is Boone."

"Sure," muttered the great-shouldered Boone, "I'm just dumb. I know. All I'm good for is to move barns and lift horses."

"I didn't say that," replied Cree Cordray impatiently. "Casteaux, you responsible for this Rawlins comin' here?"

"You know better," said Casteaux.

"I'll be judge of what I know," said Cree, cold and sharp. "I asked you a direct question."

"No," replied Casteaux, and it seemed to Rawlins that the mocking, fitful-humored Casteaux mended his manners quickly enough. There could be no mistake about Cree Cordray. The ruthless, unemotional voice cut like a knife. The hulking Boone was a creature of muscle only, Jubal fox-like, Mort but an unbalanced youth. But Cree Cordray, Rawlins knew instantly, was a man of steel and flame. Even as he thought it, Cree turned on him.

"Killifew sent you up to this country?"

"To the K ranch," said Rawlins.

"To spy on us?"

"To run the ranch," countered Rawlins evenly.

Cree brushed aside the unessential answer. "Same thing. It amounts to buckin' us. That's the whole thing in a nutshell. Killifew wants the Cordrays smashed. He couldn't get any native of East County to even write us a letter. So he turns to a stranger. You look like you got judgment. Didn't you know what he was drivin' at?"

"Yeah," agreed Rawlins.

"So you, a complete stranger, figured to horn into the hills." Cree's talk suddenly took an edge of dry sarcasm. "Bright. Very bright. Like a goat, you want to butt in. And you don't even pack a deputy's star to justify yourself."

"How would you be knowin' that?" asked Rawlins.

"I know," said Cree abruptly. "I make it my business to know whatever concerns the Cordrays. You was spotted the

minute you hit Seven Sleep. Listen, Casteaux warned you. You had a horse shot from under you, which seems like a plain enough hint. A note was delivered to you this evenin'. Still you nose round. What's the matter with yore head?"

"The question ain't a new one," reflected Rawlins casually. "I have asked myself same. Never mind the answer. The point is I undertook a job of managin' the K outfit. I like to do what I say I'll do."

"And raise hell with us," said Cree Corday.

"Your thinkin' is crooked," broke in Rawlins. "I'm on no manhunt. My intention was to run the ranch. If let alone, that is what I'd do. You boys brought trouble to me, not the other way around."

"Mean to say you'd mind your own business if we let you?"

"To the dot and comma," agreed Rawlins.

"Optimistic, Mister Rawlins," said Cree. "But you won't be let alone."

"Which," opined Rawlins, "interferes with the peaceable runnin' of a horse ranch. Now we're back where we started."

"The plain fact is," went on Cree, "Killifew's got no business in these hills. He's not to our taste. He might as well consider his ranch lost. We're makin' it so. This is Cordray country, and we want no one around here in our way. I'm burnin' the K quarters tomorrow."

Rawlins said nothing and after a long, hard appraisal Cree spoke again. "I know. Yo're pretty set in yore ways. Runnin' loose you'd gum up the works. Which wouldn't do. You'll run no more ranches around here. Or anywhere."

"I started to take care of that," spoke up Jubal petulantly, "and Casteaux interfered."

Cree looked at his watch and scowled again. "We're late. Get goin', boys."

"Let's end this now," said Mort, the kid, nodding at Rawlins.

"Yo're a cursed fool, Mort," grunted Cree. "Never had sense and never will. There's a better way. He killed Whitey Ray, didn't he? Whitey was liked around Seven Sleep and it won't set well to know a stranger got him. I'll have Rome Tarrant up here in the mornin' with a posse. They'll take care of Rawlins."

"I was wonderin' where the sheriff came into this business," said Rawlins softly.

Cree studied him at length, and in the thin, slicing glance was something infinitely cold and conscienceless. "You'll talk yourself into premature death yet, Rawlins. I don't like yore kind of a man anywheres around."

"Then," drawled Rawlins, "you'd better make sure I'm put out of the way. For if I ever come back——"

"You will never come back," said Cree and swung around to face the door.

A woman stood there; a woman whose jet black hair and dark eyes set off the pale oval of a face infinitely wistful and sad by the lamplight. It struck Rawlins like a blow to find her here, a cameo against a drab and grimy and sinister background. At that moment her eyes fell on him and remained a brief interval. There was a flash of feeling; and he knew then who had come beside him on the trail and damped her handkerchief in his blood. But the scene lasted only a moment. She turned toward Cree, speaking in a voice that was clear and vibrant. "Cree, will you bring a sack of sugar to the house?" Then she turned and was gone. Casteaux suddenly left Rawlins' side, calling out, "I'll bring it, Anita."

"Good dog, Tray," jeered Jubal malevolently.

Casteaux swung, fist doubling. "Keep yore tongue quiet, yuh snaky night creeper!"

Jubal started forward and reached into a side pocket. Rawlins suspected him of carrying a knife and the very thought of it swept away his last lingering scruple concerning the justice of his own attitude toward these people. For a white man to pack a knife was a confession of utter, degraded faithlessness. It meant denying a

point of manhood below which even cutthroats were reluctant to go; and in the length and breadth of the West nobody was more despised than he who chose cold steel.

Cree snapped out a warning. "Stop that, Jubal, or I'll break yore neck!"

"If you don't, I will," said Casteaux. "I'm tired of this business."

"You'll stay behind tonight, Casteaux," added Cree. "Don't want you ridin' with the gang. And don't go away till I come back. Rawlins, step in front of me."

Rawlins obeyed, marching out of the store and down the porch. The four brothers walked closely behind him, crossed the yard and paused before some darkly towering structure. Cree fumbled with a lock, threw open a door and took Rawlins by the arm. Somewhere in that pitch-black darkness was a lesser room. Cree pressed him onward and suddenly backed away. A lock turned. Ten minutes later he heard a party of horsemen sweep by and pound down the road to southward.

HIS first act was to roll and light a cigarette; his second was to carry the match around the walls of the room. There were no windows, but from somewhere came a steady stream of cold air that suddenly blew out the flame. He tried again, cupping the light. It was an odd-shaped room, more like a shaftway than anything else, for it was quite narrow and quite high and in the ceiling there seemed to be a small opening where once some kind of a pipe or shaft had gone through. In a corner was a piece of abandoned machinery.

"Must be the grist mill," he decided. "And this is an inside room. Maybe a part of a corridor boarded up to take care of jaspers like me."

The second match went out, leaving him to stare tight-lipped through the dark. Judged by results, his exploration trip to Outlaw Pass had been extremely successful. He had wanted to find out what kind of people lived in the settlement, and he certainly had gratified his desire. There could be no doubt at all as to his position. He was among knife throwers, cold turkey killers; he was neatly caught by a clan that meant to rule or ruin. As for himself, he was to be the burnt offering. The sheriff would take him, a wrathfully righteous jury would hang him. Cree Cordray had seemed pretty positive of the result and Rawlins, recalling the clan leader's impassive and stony calm, was not disposed to doubt.

"There's some sort of a hookup between the sheriff and this bunch," he reflected. "No doubt of that. And here's a funny proposition. The sheriff chases Casteaux, Casteaux is friendly with the clan, and the clan has an understandin' with the sheriff. Nigger in the woodpile. And I'm to be the burnt offerin'."

The long repressed temper of the man began to burn with a white heat. Whatever his lack of propriety in taking the original job from Killifew, that had certainly been balanced by the Cordray sins against him. There was nothing in the Constitution prohibiting a man from pursuing the even tenor of his ways or from seeking his fortune wherever he saw fit. Christian charity was a garment of ample folds, but in the present case it seemed to have shrunk in the wash. The Cordrays had voted to wipe him out.

"Which naturally is against my own inclinations," he muttered. "If I can wiggle through a hole and hit for the hills, I'll still be fair game. All right. We'll consider the Cordrays fair game and no questions asked. Now——"

He went to the corner where the machinery had been piled and essayed to stand on it. Lighting another match, he calculated the size of the overhead opening carefully. "Might squeeze through that, if I could reach it."

He ground out the match and pushed the machinery nearer the wall. Climbing up, he stretched his long arms over his head and found himself still short of the mark. There appeared to be no hooks nor

indentations on the wall by which he might hoist himself, and so he dropped to the floor and tried another match, seeking some additional object to pile on top of the machinery. Nothing presented itself to view. However, a closer appraisal of the mill machinery revealed it lay on the floor with its long end horizontal. Taking that as a cue, he boosted it upright against the wall and prepared to try again. Getting a foothold, he once more raised his arms and touched the rough edges of the ceiling aperture. On the verge of chinning himself and thereby hooking his armpits through the opening, he was warned. The doorlock rattled. Dropping to the floor, he stood in a corner and waited. The door opened softly. Somebody came through, approaching in apparent stealth.

"Rawlins."

"Yeah."

"Don't talk so damned loud. This is Casteaux."

"Come into my parlor and take a chair."

"Shut up," muttered Casteaux. "If it was me, I'd let yuh stay here and rot. You've simply raised hell in these hills. I warned yuh, didn't I? Well, I washed my hands, but——"

"Some day," drawled Rawlins, "I wish you'd give me a chart outlinin' your state of mind. I make no headway tryin' to figger you. None whatsoever."

"Neither do I," grunted Casteaux. "Listen, here's yore gun. Now follow me and be quiet about it."

Rawlins crossed over and collided with Casteaux's outstretched arm. He took the offered gun and slipped it securely in one palm. Casteaux turned, murmuring, "Keep touch of me. Don't trip on nothin'. The bunch is gone, but they always leave a couple men behind. These fellows are in the yard."

Rawlins put his finger tips against Casteaux's broad back and thus was towed down some dismally black passageway. The cold night air swept against his face. They crept through a door, down steps and around the side of the building, Casteaux halted a full minute while a man walked from the store across the way and went to an adjacent house. A dog over by the river howled, the sound of it putting Casteaux into more rapid motion. He led Rawlins along the side of the mill, came to another corner and advanced more openly toward the looming shadow of the shale bluff. Suddenly a slight and sibilant breath escaped him and he shook his shoulders. Somebody came toward them, boots grinding into the gravel. Directly toward them. Rawlins dropped to the earth. Casteaux walked on, challenging the other man.

"That you, Henry?"

"Casteaux," said the man, a trailing suspicion in his voice, "what you doin' out here?"

"Rawlins must've left a horse some place in this neighborhood. I want it."

"No," grunted Henry, "he didn't. I scouted all this side. There ain't nothin'. Come back to the store."

"To hell with you," swore Casteaux. "I'm after that horse. It's mine if I find it."

"You'll do no moochin' around this mill," contradicted Henry. And he raised his voice to carry across the yard. "Ray—come here a minute!"

A door opened yonder and another fellow came out on the run. Rawlins turned on his side and lifted his revolver. Casteaux was laughing ironically. "It won't buy you two buzzards nothin'. That horse is around here and I mean to get it."

Both the guards were now side by side. "He won't do what I tell him," complained Henry.

The newly arrived Ray said, "Well, what of it? Pete, yuh always was a stubborn cuss. What difference does one horse

make. You know where they's plenty more."

"Maybe," maintained Casteaux, "but I want this one. I think Rawlins carried a fine Remington in a boot. That's what I'm after."

The more genial Ray advised his partner. "Let him fool around, Henry."

"All right," muttered Henry, "but I think it's a fool idea. And I'm tellin' yuh somethin'. Keep clear of the mill. I'm campin' at the front till the gang gets back."

The two guards walked off. Casteaux's boots began to grind in the gravel, back and forth. Rawlins rose, aimed for the sounds and presently touched Casteaux who muttered under his breath: "Worse an' worse. I'm cooked now. When they find yuh gone, it's me that'll suffer. Hurry up."

They veered from the bluff and reached a softer underfooting. Casteaux moved rapidly to the south, crossed the road and at the end of two hundred yards recrossed it. Once more he struck toward the bluff. A trail began here. Casteaux went up, breathing heavily. Rawlins lost him in the dark but continued to climb. Perhaps it was five minutes later that he reached the top and heard a woman's voice saying, "I'm asking you to do it for me!"

"Rawlins," said Casteaux, "don't thank me for nothin'. I'd of let you rot. But Anita got the key and brought these horses here."

Rawlins saw a vague shadow bending toward him. A hand brushed his shoulder. A quiet question came to him. "Are you much hurt?"

"None," said Rawlins, strangely and profoundly moved. "Ma'm, I'm carryin' your handkerchief in my pocket."

"What handkerchief?" demanded Casteaux roughly. "What's goin' on here. You've met this Rawlins before, Anita?"

She was talking directly to Rawlins. "I heard that shot this afternoon. I was riding nearby. I saw Jubal running up the slope, away from you. I tried to bring you back, but before I could help much I heard some of the rest of the boys coming along the trail, and I knew I didn't dare be found with you. Would it help to say there is at least one Cordray sorry for what happened? I'm making amends now, as best I can."

"I won't be forgettin' it," muttered Rawlins. "Not in a thousand years."

"Neither will I," grumbled Casteaux. "I'll be dodgin' Cree the rest of my life. I don't dare show up in Outlaw Pass any more. It's poison for me to be in the hills from now on. Or in East County. See what I get for doin' what you want, Anita?"

"It is better for you never to see any of the Cordrays again, Pete," said the girl. "They spoil everything they touch. They are destruction and death. You'll ride out with him won't you?"

"I said I would," answered Casteaux bluntly. "I'd ride to hell if you wanted it. But what're you worryin' about Rawlins for? He's only a stranger. He comes and he's gone."

But she had come nearer Rawlins, the touch of her arm still on his shoulder. "I have often dreamed of a man like you coming here. To make the hills a decent place. To break up the lawlessness, to beat down the brutality. I—a Cordray—say that. But now that you are here I wish you were a thousand miles off. You are alone and they will kill you as they have killed the rest. The hills will always be black and so will my family. Pete, take him to Seven Sleep by the low trail. Take the next train out—both of you. I know my brothers. They will never rest, never sleep until they have found and killed you."

"I'm under obligations to you," said Rawlins, picking his words with infinite care. "And that makes it hard on both of us, for there is just one thing I can't do, no matter how much I owe you, ma'm."

"What is that?"

"I can't run away," replied Rawlins, abrupt and dogged. "I took a job and it's

my intention to see it through. I'm going back to the K ranch and fort up."

"Like fun yuh are," contradicted Casteaux. "I'll put sense in yore head if I got to beat it in. Listen to him, Anita. And he's the egg you want to save."

The girl's grip tightened on Rawlins' coat. "Never, never! You can't do it and live!"

"Why should you care?" demanded Rawlins.

Silence fell, the girl's shadow seemed to sway nearer. The dogs were all in voice down by the mill. A shot exploded and a man's voice began to call: "Casteaux—Casteaux!" The girl's reply came faintly. "Why should you ask that? What does it matter? I'll never see you again."

Rawlins spoke swiftly. "I think you will. Listen. I'm going back there. I don't doubt they'll come after me. They opened this fight and I'll keep it goin'. You'd hate me for all of everlastin' time if I killed your kin, wouldn't you?"

But there was no delay in her answer to that. "If I thought it would end and wipe out the stain on the Cordray name, I'd willingly die! I hate this life! I hate the things we do!"

"That wasn't an answer to my question," Rawlins said gravely.

"Oh, don't you see!" cried the girl. "How can I answer?"

RAWLINS moved toward one of the horses and swung to the saddle. He guessed she was holding back tears and at thought of it all the old reckless rage of his nature swept him like a torrent of flame. "I shouldn't have asked. I'm sorry. Maybe it will come to that. Nobody knows. But I've got to go back. Casteaux, take the straightest way to the K ranch. When we get there you can duck and run."

Something was afoot down below. The baying of the dogs came strongly toward them. Three spaced shots rolled across the night, and Casteaux sprang to the saddle, swearing. "Anita, you get to the houses in a hurry. Rawlins, yuh fool, come on!"

The girl had already disappeared. Casteaux went galloping down the trail into timber and through a darkness that was like a smothering blanket. Presently the sound of the dogs died and to either side of them the lifting walls of a canyon rolled back the trembling echoes of their ponies. Casteaux set a breakneck pace for a full quarter hour; at the end of that time they shot into a kind of glade and slowed to a walk. Rawlins came beside his partner.

"This way to the ranch?"

"Damn yore hide, yes," snapped Casteaux, and plunged into timber again. The ground began to roll and slide beneath them. Once Rawlins saw the beginning of some wide alley off to his left that reminded him of the K range, but, as good as his sense of direction was, the continual curving of the trail shuffled the compass points and not until they halted again, this time on the margin of a deep chasm in which the night fog rolled like the waters of a great river, did he recover his balance.

"K house below," grumbled Casteaux and slid down the stiff grade. Half along it he drew in to listen and reconnoiter. "Safe, I guess. They're way up to the

north tonight." And he went on. Together they reached the level floor of the gulch and approached the huddled outline of the ranch quarters. Rawlins, mindful of his previous return, cautioned Casteaux. "Easy. Go behind the house."

"Oh, so yuh do think of yore hide once in a while?" inquired Casteaux gruffly. But he obeyed the injunction and rode past the rear door. Rawlins stepped to the ground, paused beside the door and slipped through to repeat his earlier survey of

the house. Coming back from the front room he heard Casteaux murmuring uneasily, "Somethin' damned funny about this place."

"Dead man in the house," was Rawlins' laconic answer. Casteaux began to swear again, moving from corner to corner. Rawlins struck a match to the lamp. The light glowed into the dismal reaches of the room and revealed a changed Casteaux. The man's face was lacking its usual sparkle of roistering humor and there was instead a bitter rebelliousness.

"You and me have got to do some talkin'," he muttered. "My luck changed when yuh crossed my path. Why in hell did yuh ever come to this country?"

"I don't figure you at all," said Rawlins. "But I'm askin' no questions. You did me a couple of good turns over there at the Pass, first in maskin' me from Jubal Cordray's gun, and second in draggin' me from the barn. I'll acknowledge the debt. Casteaux."

"I got yuh out of the mess only because Anita asked for it," muttered Casteaux.

"I'm guessin' that's why you ride with the Cordrays," said Rawlins quietly.

Casteaux's scowl blackened. "That's what we got to thresh out. You talked mighty soft to her tonight, fella. Cut that out. She's my girl, understand? I've took a lot of dam' nonsense from the men of that family on account of her. I've lost what little reputation I might of had in Seven Sleep, I've got sucked into a lot of funny plays and I've been chased all over the map. I'm not regrettin' it, see? I'm not even regrettin' the fact that the gang's goin' to hunt for me from now on. But I'm tellin' you, don't try to horn in. She's my girl."

Rawlins was rolling a cigarette, eyes fixed on his moving fingers. "She's told you that, Casteaux?"

Casteaux took a deep breath. "No," he grunted. Then he flung back his head and swore with the intensity of a man condemned. "What in hell's the difference? The clan's against me now! I'll never get back around this country. I'm through! I've lost my chance!"

Rawlins studied his partner soberly. "She'd never forget a man that hurt one of her brothers."

Casteaux brought up short. "Who said so? Listen, she's been straight with that bunch of mutts. She's stuck with 'em. What's she get for it? A lot of dirty treatment. Jubal hates her, so does that little rat of a Mort. Cree's afraid of her. The only one that ever give Anita a civil word is Boone—and he's too dumb to count. Still, I reckon she'd been beaten bodily before now if he hadn't been around. He'd crush the life out of any that tried. I dunno. Maybe it'd grieve her bad to see that bunch wiped out. But mebbe it wouldn't. She's never forgotten there was a time when a Cordray was respected. Her dad was a first settler here, and an honest, clean man—like Killifew. But all the kids went bad, except-in' her. She ain't the kind to forgive that. Anyhow, you'd never think she was a sister to 'em if you stuck around the Pass awhile and saw the way they treated her."

"Blood is blood," said Rawlins, shaking his head. "She wouldn't go back on her own kind."

"What difference does it make to you?" challenged Casteaux.

Rawlins stared at the flickering lamp. "I'm goin' to play the hand through. Somebody's got to die. I like this country and I'm stayin' as long as my guns are good."

"You'll last about as long as a snowball in hell," retorted Casteaux. But the cast of his countenance changed and he watched Rawlins with a mixture of puzzlement and interest. "Sure the stubbornest guy I ever collided with. Don't you know when yo're licked?"

Rawlins pulled out his watch. "Two-thirty, a. m. If you expect to get clear of the hills before daylight, you'd better haul out now."

"I'll take care of that," said Casteaux irritably and began to walk around the kitchen again. "Anything to eat in this

house? I'm cold as hell and twice as hungry."

"Look around. I'll get the fire going."

For the next twenty minutes neither of them said a word. Rawlins went out, found the ranch woodshed and split up an armful of fuel. He started the fire in the stove, emptied the coffee pot grounds and put on a fresh brew. Meanwhile Casteaux had discovered some quick pancake batter. Presently they sat down to a before-dawn breakfast. Some queer ferment was working in Casteaux, leaving his irregular features stormy. The pendulous lips were pouted, heavy seams cut into the narrow brow, and the smoke-colored eyes held an angry gleam. Rawlins, respecting the man's troubles, walked out and scouted the yard carefully. When he returned, Casteaux seemed to have fallen into a deep pit of thought. The signals of anger had subsided and instead there was a kind of bleak sorrow, a compressed despair.

"After three," observed Rawlins. "Better make tracks."

"Let me alone," snapped Casteaux. "I know what I'm doin'."

"Sure," agreed Rawlins. "But seein' you ain't in any hurry, help me do a chore. I've got to bury Whitey."

Casteaux rose without comment. The two of them went to the front room, hoisted the dead man and carried him down the meadow. Rawlins went back and spent nearly a half hour finding the ranch toolshed. Out of it he got a pick and a spade and a lantern. He brought these back, lit the lantern and set it on the ground; and in continued silence they fell to work. It was a long and tedious job, a dismally depressing job. When the grave was dug Rawlins walked to the house and found a blanket. Together they wrapped Whitey in it, lowered him and began spilling the earth back. Casteaux suddenly struck his pick into the soil. "Hold on. This ain't any way to put a man to rest. Ain't we got nothin' to say?"

"You know him," said Rawlins. "I don't."

Casteaux shook his head. "It's a hard world when a man lives forty years just to be buried like a dog in the bowels of the night."

"His troubles are done."

"Yuh must be made out of iron," muttered Casteaux.

"I've buried men before. Good men. It used to hit me pretty hard. But I got to considerin'. The world goes right on, grief and trouble continues. The sun shines, the leaves fall, and water runs to the sea. In time dead men's mounds level off with the earth and there's nothin' left to show where they rest. There's a meanin' to all this, but fellows like you and me can't stop to figure it out. All I reckon is that mortal man was meant to run out his days in labor, die, and go to a better land. Why should we grieve? Makes no difference who dies, nature continues everlastin'."

"Pour on the dirt," muttered Casteaux. "We'll consider them remarks to be Whitey's sermon. I've heard worse."

THERE was a paling streak in the high eastern sky when they finished and walked back to the house; and the night creatures had ceased speaking. The night wind had stopped and even the dashing of the waterfalls seemed to diminish in tone. Over the dark world lay the hush preceding dawn. Rawlins looked to his watch again.

"Four-thirty. Maybe I'll never see you again, Casteaux. Thanks for your help."

"Don't rush me," grumbled Casteaux. "How much ammunition you got?"

"My own belt's full. I've got Whitey's to add that much more."

"Ain't enough," opined Casteaux. "You'll be right in the middle of hail and thunder before noon, or I'm a left-hand fiddler." He walked from the house and presently came back with a rifle and a box of cartridges. "I always ride with this in my saddle boot. Here, you need it worse than me." Laying the gun on the table he turned back to the door.

"So-long," said Rawlins.

The remark seemed to be the final piece of fuel for Casteaux's uncertain temper. He swung on his heels, dark cheeks glowing with wrath. "Yuh want to see me run while you stay, huh? Yuh want to let the girl see what a hell of a hero yuh are, while I tuck my tail! Yuh'll die for it, Rawlins, but yo're so confounded stubborn yuh don't care! Listen, I'm just as tough as you are and don't forget it! I played my cards and lost all around! That crowd's got me marked! The girl's not mine, and there ain't a damned thing that matters! You go to hell, I'll stay and sling a little lead, too!"

"If you stay——"

Into the gulch came the echo of a horse falling down the western slope. Rawlins seized the rifle and ran through the front door with Casteaux galloping behind him. A call came toward them, a call in a woman's voice. Rawlins plunged on across the yard, cold with sudden fear and hearing Casteaux burst into wild, crazy epithets. Horse and rider appeared in the milky shadows. Casteaux, risking his neck, leaped up, caught the horse by the bridle and was dragged twenty feet. Anita Cordray swayed in the saddle, saying, "They came home early and found out. All of them—all of them—will be here any time!"

Rawlins sprang beside her, but as quick as he was, Casteaux was quicker. The latter caught the girl as she fell and carried her to the house. When the light of the kitchen lamp fell on her face Rawlins saw the long and angry mark of a hard blow across the pale skin. And she had fainted.

Never in his life had he seen a man crying. But he was to see it now, for Casteaux's unlovely face was lined beyond belief, and out of this rough, hardened and careless fellow came a great racking sob. Rawlins turned and hurried from the room. He ran to the back of the house, caught up the pair of horses standing there and led them into the woodshed. Going to the front he caught Anita's pony and brought it back likewise. There was a rifle hanging to the saddle horn which he took; crossing the yard, he stood for a long five minutes, sweeping the rims of the gulch and watching the serene, cold violet of dawn trickle like water through the trees.

In this interval an indescribable peace seemed to hover over all things, the tang of damply aromatic vegetation fell pleasantly on his nostrils, and throughout the air was the sensation of a world swelling and about to burst into the riotous vigor of a new day. Looking about him he felt a sudden longing to stay here, an actual pride of possession; and it appeared impossible that trouble should ever break into this calm and secure isolation. But as he raised his eyes to the frowning parapets he shook his head regretfully. Trouble was only a little ways off; and K ranch sat fully exposed. Moreover, retreat seemed practically impossible.

He went into the house. The girl had revived and was sitting in a chair with both hands folded, looking straight at him, eyes dark with trouble.

"How many?" asked Rawlins.

"All," said she. "All twelve. They will never stop now. Never!"

Rawlins shook his head. "I'm sorry you're here. If there's shootin'——"

She moved one hand in a curious gesture of futility. "Where else should I go? I am an outcast now. They have turned against me. Even Boone. Cree—" and she raised a hand to the bruise on her cheek—"did that. I barely got away. I can never go back."

Casteaux's face was glowering, glaring. "Hear that, Rawlins? Damn my soul, I'll see they pay for it!"

But Rawlins was still holding her eyes. "If there's shootin', some one of them may be hurt. It's dog eat dog now. You understand. And you're a sister."

She lowered her head and Rawlins thought she was about to break down. After a long time she looked back to him, cheeks composed and very pale. "I can't afford to care. Better dead—all of us—than to live on so brutally. I——"

Almost as if the gates of a dam had

been opened wide, the sound of charging horses poured into the gulch; the sound of horses, of men's deep and full throated crying, and the explosion of a single gunshot. Anita Cordray never moved. Casteaux sprang to his feet and slammed shut the back door. Rawlins ran to the lamp, extinguished the flame and raced for the front. The fog had lightened and from the eastward a stronger glow broke the shadows. Day was coming. Out of the northern trail—that trail leading to the K range—advanced the Cordray clan, hurtling downward in single file. More guns began speaking. Rawlins threw a shell into the chamber of the rifle and cradled it, waiting.

"Here they are."

Chapter VI

"I will pray for you, Jeff Rawlins."
——Anita Cordray.

CASTEAUX raced through the front room and flung up a window a few feet from the door. Rawlins heard him breathing hard and fast, muttering black prophecies in a voice that was rough with excitement. "We're dead men if they get into this house! We're dead men anyhow! Rawlins, don't stand there—they'll blast hell outa yuh!"

Rawlins knelt inside the door casing and steadied his rifle against it. The Cordray riders had reached the bottom of the grade and were shifting into a fanwise line. He heard a cold, still voice say, "Come ahead," and then they were in motion, leaping at the house and all guns drumming out. The boards of the porch began to rip and splinter. "Hold it a bit," said Rawlins. "Waste no lead." Men and beasts darkened and took definite form against the fog; the whole line of attackers swung around like a whip to face and smother the house.

"Now," breathed Rawlins and let his first bullet go. The hit was direct; a foremost rider rolled to the earth and was overwhelmed in the passing confusion. Jamming another shell home, he picked a second target coolly and deliberately. Casteaux was opening up, firing twice as swiftly; and one remote and impartial cell of Rawlins' mind told him that his partner had buck fever. The man's bullets were low and playing havoc with the horses. At one end of the line was a snarling confusion, ponies and outlaws piling up in a mad tangle.

Out from this mêlée charged twin figures side by side; they reached the very edge of the porch before Rawlins squeezed his trigger. One reeled from the saddle and dropped on the boards directly in front of Rawlins; the second turned wide of the door, the muzzle of his gun making consecutive wreaths of purplish bloom as he tarried and tried to silence Rawlins. Lead tore into the casing and a bullet plucked the brim of Rawlins' hat; involuntarily he flinched, then recovered and smashed the man to silence. The riderless horse careened away.

The near wing of the line was already flanking the house. And the same deadly calm voice rose again: "Get around there—back door!"

"Casteaux—get to the kitchen!" muttered Rawlins.

The attack wavered and split up. Out across the yard Rawlins saw four men bunched and apparently waiting another surge of the attacking tide. Behind, he heard Casteaux's gun filling the rooms with a sultry roar and accompanying it was the crash of a door going down. He wanted to swing and help Casteaux, but he dared not, for a man on foot was making a wide circle of the yard with the apparent purpose of reaching one of the windows on the south side; at the same time he caught a rising glow of light on the north, over by the barn. They were playing a trump card. He cast another glance at the creeping figure to the south, calculated the distance, and flung himself

toward a window on the other side of the house—one opening toward the barn.

They were igniting a pile of straw in the yard and someone had found a pitchfork and was tossing the blazing stuff against the structure. Rawlins dropped to his knee, poked the muzzle of the gun through the glass and fired at the twisting shadow. The man went down, rolling over and over into the deeper darkness; and for answer a fresh hail of shots burst the window panes into jangling fragments that sprayed down on his prone body.

He crawled to the nearest corner. In that instant his back was to the door; and when he swung about it was at the behest of a new warning. The solitary scout had arrived at the house, had flung himself to the porch and was now swinging like a cat through the opening. There was a flicker of firelight coming through the broken window and thus the man saw Rawlins at the same moment Rawlins saw him. The latter's rifle muzzle was up and the man, recognizing the fact, elected to bring the fight to close quarters. He yelled, "All right, come on in!" and threw himself at Rawlins. Rawlins dropped the rifle and swung his fist, catching the outlaw in the chest, setting him back. The outlaw twisted and started to fall; his arms swept out to strike the adjacent wall and by this means he pushed himself up and around, and though still off balance he caught Rawlins around the waist and dragged him to the floor. It was then that Rawlins heard the rest of the tarrying attackers suddenly come galloping inward.

The thought roused in him a white hot flame. The outlaw had thrown himself atop Rawlins, covering the latter's cartridge belt and his hands were gripped around Rawlins' arms with a vein-bursting tightness. Rawlins rolled, brought back his knees and capsized the fellow. It left his gun arm free and he reached for his revolver, to bring it out just as the other, now aware of the losing game, sought to rise. Rawlins hauled back his gun, kicked the man's feet from under him and smashed the head that came pivotting down, smashed it with the barrel of his weapon. The others were already at the porch and about to break through; without waiting to rise up he started to plug that breach with lead.

Whether the slanting fire struck home he didn't know; but by the time he had risen and thrown himself to the nearest window he saw four of them racing away. The target was poor and his body unsteady from fighting; he sent three low shots after them and saw a horse go down and a man strike the earth like a ball, visibly bouncing. Then this figure crawled on out of clear sight and the rest were altogether beyond view somewhere behind the barn. Another rider shot from the back of the house and circled the barn to join what was left of the outlaw group; and a kind of lagging, breathless silence fell over the ranch quarters, broken only by the snap of fire catching hold of the brittle-dry boards of the barn wall.

He swung around. "Casteaux!"

His partner's voice came back strangely depressed. "Yeah."

"Hurt?"

"No."

Rawlins went into the kitchen. The back door was off its hinges and resting on the floor. Some kind of a plank battering ram protruded through the opening and there was a man lying on his stomach, breathing hard. The firelight flickered in, crimson and weird; and in one corner Casteaux stood with his weapon still raised. Anita Cordray crouched behind him. On Casteaux's drawn cheeks was a widening crimson patch.

"They got you," muttered Rawlins. Hold up your face and let me see——"

Casteaux growled and tried to draw away.

"Cut it out. I'm just creased."

He was groggy from the shot, stunned and stupid; as for the girl, there was no color in her cheeks and against their chalk white her eyes glowed. Rawlins touched her, led her out of the corner; and as he put his arm around her body to support her he felt a trembling start through her rigid muscles. He knew then that the next move of this desperately drawn out game was up to him—to be accomplished without loss of time.

Kicking a chair out from the table he sat the girl in it and went to the back door. The firelight was strengthening; and along the rim of the gulch day slowly filtered through the pines. In another quarter hour the shadows and the night fog would be dissipated; and the K house would be surrounded. Venturing a glance beyond the door he saw none of the Cordray clan and he suspected they were holding a war conference under the sheltering lee of the barn, which by its position also sheltered him. The shed wherein the horses stood was only ten feet off; gauging his surroundings, he suddenly shot out of the door and ran across the open strip, pushing himself into the shed and finding all the three horses still sound. It was all he wanted to know and he ran back to the kitchen. Casteaux was taking a pull of cold coffee out of the pot.

"Listen," said Rawlins, "this is a man-trap and no place for the lady."

"I knew that before we come," grunted Casteaux. "What yuh goin' to do about it?"

"The wild bunch is takin' a spell of thought. We've impaired some of those boys——"

"But none of the four brothers," broke in Casteaux. "Didn't yuh see 'em lumped off by themselves, watchin' for a break? The rest of the crowd got hurt, but not Cree or Boone or Jubal or Mort. Don't fool yoreself, the fun ain't started."

"The trail to Seven Sleep is still open," reflected Rawlins. "Nobody on top of it. Will be before long, but not yet."

"Yuh want to break and run?" inquired Casteaux. "They'd knock us off the side of the hill before we got to the top."

"Get organized," snapped Rawlins. "You're takin' this girl out of here—now. I'll stick and throw a little dust up while you run for it."

"Thataway it might be done," assented Casteaux, casting a worried glance at Anita Cordray. She had said nothing, nor even evinced a flicker of interest. "But not by the hill. Look here, there's another way out. The creek cuts a grade between the hills just as it leaves this gulch. No trail at all. We'd have to take to the water. But I've dodged down there a couple of times and I know where I could take a horse up—after a half mile or so."

"All right," said Rawlins. "Do it. Now. Once you get out of the canyon——"

"Nobody'll ever find us in the timber," finished Casteaux. "I'm a wolf for dodgin'. I'll get to Seven Sleep. But I'm wantin' one of the rifles."

"Take it," agreed Rawlins. "And here, I'll give you something better than that." He went into the front room, to find the man he had knocked out with his gunbarrel stirring around. Bending down, he got the fellow's belt and weapon and threw them aside. He lifted the man and shook him until the latter's eyes began to take on a sparkle of life. Half supporting him and half shoving him into the kitchen, Rawlins caught a momentary glimpse of a familiar face; it was Tex. Tex pulled himself up, fitfully struggling. "Here——"

"Shut up or I'll put you to sleep again. You're through. Casteaux, we'll tie this egg hand and foot and set him in a saddle. Put the girl in front of him. He'll make a good shield when you're crossin' the meadow. After you get into the canyon and out of sight, push him off."

Casteaux's stained face began to wrinkle up in a normal grin. He chuckled. "Mister, yuh must of cut yore teeth in trouble. Ain't there any of the tricks yuh don't know?"

Tex said doggedly, "Bones is dead, and

I don't want no more of this. Don't tie me. I'll go through with it."

But Rawlins, oppressed with the fact of a brightening sky, hauled Tex roughly around, stripped him of his coat and literally tore the man's shirt from his body. Out of the shirt he ripped several lengths of fabric, wound them together and with this improvised rope made a swift tie of the ex-K puncher's hands. "Ready, Casteaux?"

"O. K.," grunted Casteaux and looked at the girl. In answer to it she rose and started for the door, to turn back.

"Wait a moment." She came directly to Rawlins. "What are you going to do?"

"Stay."

She watched him closely and one hand rose to touch his shoulder, softly and quietly. He could see words framing on her lips and in the dark, deep eyes was a small glow that seemed to be struggling through emotions long frozen and crushed and denied. A woman had never looked at him like that, not this kind of a woman; and never had a woman's glance released in him the sudden flush of pride and high, reckless hope such as now warmed his blood like actual fire. He heard her say, half under her breath, "What is your name?"

"Jeff—Jeff Rawlins."

The hand on his shoulder tightened. "I won't ask you to do what I know you wouldn't do. I'm afraid for you. I'm a Cordray and I know my brothers. And I won't ask you to be slow in raising your gun against them, for I know they would only take advantage of it—and kill you. There is no mercy in them." The glow in her eyes died before infinite tragedy and despair; her last words fell almost inaudibly through the room. "I will pray for you, Jeff Rawlins."

She swung away. Rawlins raised his head, to discover Casteaux's homely cheeks hard on him. The man had missed nothing, neither word nor gesture. Rawlins had to break forcibly into Casteaux's absorption. "Let's go. Another five minutes and we'll be too late."

Casteaux jerked up his head, muttering. "A fool plays a game beyond his understandin'." He seized his rifle, thumbed in a fill of cartridges from an open box on the table and closed the chamber.

Rawlins rapped out an order to Tex. "Walk on the left of Casteaux. I'll bring up the rear."

Casteaux took the girl's arm and together they slid through the back door, breaking into a run with Tex lumbering beside them. A rising sheet of flame shut off the barn and so shielded them from observation on that side as they passed the interval and reached the shed. Rawlins wheeled to watch his other flank. Casteaux called back to him softly, "All set?" and Rawlins lifted his hand in assent. Casteaux came out first and wheeled as the other horse, bearing both Anita Cordray and Tex, walked into the open.

"Good luck," said Rawlins.

Casteaux's broad hand came down resoundingly on the flank of the second pony. It shot onward; Casteaux followed, reins wrapped to the horn and only his knees guiding the beast. He sat stiff and watchful in the saddle, a slight twist to his shoulders that he might command the yard side, and the gun held high in both hands. And so Rawlins saw him fading into the mists. As for himself, he was in motion again, racing back through the house and to the front porch. The echo of the departing three returned sluggishly in the damp air; as Rawlins dropped to his knees on the threshold of the door he saw five riders flash around the barn and spread out in pursuit.

They were within fifty yards of the porch when he opened up. A horse buckled at the knees and went down, hind quarters describing a high arc through the air. He thought it was Mort Cordray sprawling in the dust but he couldn't be sure, for his eyes were fixed rigidly along the notches of his gun and absorbed in the violent turning of the other four. He tried twice

again, seeking for a direct hit on one of those wheeling torsos; but he missed and then his chance was gone. They were back behind the barn. Relaxing, he took the chance of rolling a cigarette. Morning broke all at once and a long shaft of sun passed like a golden bridge over the gulch. Blue sky showed through the thinning mists; looking back down the meadow he saw that the fugitives had vanished within the knife-like crack of earth where the waters of the creek spilled out of the hills.

INSIDE of five minutes he was sure Casteaux had passed to safety. At the end of five more he was certain his own chances of survival had dwindled to one lone, perilous possibility. In those ten minutes his mind had covered every possible accident to his fortune, favorable or otherwise. Daylight was the same as half a hundred men circling the house, and though he had not seen any movement on the part of the Cordrays he believed they would not be idle. Probably they were gradually retreating and spreading out to catch him from varying angles, blocking off his escape.

Considered solely by itself, his location in the house was admirable. They could not take him. It was no great trick to wear away the day and, if he so chose, run the line at night. But what made this reasoning wholly without value was the ever-present and increasingly certain possibility of the arrival of Rome Tarrant, the sheriff. Cree Cordray had mentioned sending for the sheriff on the previous night. Under present conditions this would be a trick Cree would never overlook. The sheriff had an understanding with the Cordrays; if the man came booming into the gulch with a young army there was nothing left but surrender. And once Rawlins stepped outside the house a single shot—which afterwards could be regrettably ascribed to mistaken zeal—would end the contest. Rawlins was entirely too well versed in prairie warfare not to know the various sad refrains to the same old song. Casting a glance through to the open back door, he brooded thoughtfully over his case.

"Even if Cree hasn't sent word to the sheriff, the arrival of Casteaux and the girl in Seven Sleep will put Mister Tarrant on the road. He'll read the story without need of questions. Maybe it'll put Killifew on the road likewise. Casteaux will make a point of findin' that fellow without delay. But you can bet your boots Tarrant will see that he himself gets here first."

There was a fighting chance here, but Rawlins ruled it out. A greater hazard and a more immediate one threatened him. By now the barn was a roaring furnace, the heat of which puckered Rawlins' cheeks uncomfortably even at his distance from it. Through the broken windows on

the barn side came the acrid smell of smoking wood and the sharp snap of boards curling up on the house wall. There was no withstanding the fact of combustion; the house was apt to catch any time. And as he reasoned himself down to this last bald fact he rose, closed the front door and walked to the kitchen. He halted here to fill up his rifle and stuff the extra shells in his pocket; he took a drink from the coffee pot, scanned the woodshed through the back doorway and tightened up his belt.

"That pony will go bughouse in a minute from the fire. Then I'll have no transportation. I'm hipped, but I'll have to break. Down the creek is no good. Don't know it like Casteaux. Got to tackle the trail up toward Seven Sleep. Well, the good die young."

He drew up on the doorsill, surveyed his flanks and leaped out. His second stride brought him inside the woodshed where he found, as he had surmised, his horse half wild. There was no time to gentle the animal; he untied the reins, fought around

the plunging beast and barely missed being crushed against the side of the shed. One hand holding the rifle, the other gripped to the pommel, he was towed into the open. The horse shot along the back of the house, heading for the meadow; and it was only by using the old relay rider's trick of throwing both feet forward and using the impact as a diver would have used the recoil of a springboard that he finally reached the saddle. He was beyond the house and half across the meadow; to his rear was the protection of the flames, but to either side of him and in those pockets and patches of earth where the morning's shadow lingered was the ambush he feared.

He swung the horse sharply to the left, reached the foot of the grade and dug in his spurs. The horse lunged at the incline, hoofs casting back gravel. Rawlins let go the reins and raised the rifle, glance flashing along the slope.

It was odd that no immediate bullet report had come crashing across the air and that no group of pursuers had come lunging around the fringes of the sheeting flames of the barn. He was fifty feet upward, the meadow silent and the slope bereft of concealing spots. His thoughts went singing ahead to a fresh conviction.

"They took that ten minutes to spread and climb. They'll be along the rims—one man at the top of this grade waitin' for me."

The top of the grade was a hundred yards off and the pony, stung by the steel raking his flanks at each jump, bit into the distance and devoured it. The fringe of trees was ten yards back from the edge of the bluff and thus offered no protection for a man who wished to stand on the very margin. Belly-flat proposition. But Rawlins could find no rifle canted down on him from above. He was beyond the halfway point and once more glancing back he saw the same empty scene behind him. There was a crackling report in the air; a fresh streamer of fire licked up the side of the K house. Turning his gaze he saw himself within a few short lunges of the top, and there came into his mind a picture of the ferret-faced Jubal Cordray lying behind a gray rock waiting.

"His style. Their style. I better guess right on this. If nobody's waitin' to meet me, it'll be some trick play on down the trail."

He leaned far to one side of the saddle and raked the oncoming rim with two gambling shots; then he rose level with the surface of the bluff and found only the yawning trail beckoning him through the trees. Nothing else. Some ancient voice screamed in his brain. He never stopped to doubt it. Wheeling the horse he ran directly for a thin screen of brush north of the trail, and instantly flushed game. Up from the earth sprang Jubal Cordray, the lantern faced ferret of the clan.

Jubal's lips were crawling back from his teeth and in that flash of time Rawlins saw the exultant and crafty savageness of expression slide off to dawning fear. There was no time for gunplay. Jubal's gun was rising, but too slowly to be effective. Rawlins could not bring his piece swiftly enough down. All he saw was Jubal's body capsizing backward and the thrust of the pony's front feet. He felt the shock come up through the animal and when he turned Jubal lay writhing on the ground.

Rawlins never stopped. He had escaped the trap and the lust of battle was racing in his veins. Smashing past the brush he reached another trail running beside the edge of the gulch and took it eagerly. Below him was the flaming pyre of the K quarters, the house freely burning and the barn nothing now but a glowing and dismembered skeleton. The destruction was about complete and some man's thoughtful labor wiped out as if it had never been.

The thought quelled the last of his doubts, the last remnant of caution. Good horses and staunch structures ruined—and a blackened trail to mark the evil of the outlaws. Nothing had greater power to harden this man who, reckless and high

riding as he was, loved the sweeping beauty of the land, its rugged honesty, its open-handed and stout people. Actually there was in him a kind of crusading zeal to check or destroy whatever ran contrary to these elements. Without knowing it, this was the emotion in him that had set him off on a strange job; it was, moreover, the reason he had so abruptly left his own home strip.

"They're scattered and disorganized. Why should I run now? With a fresh pony——"

He had drawn completely around the gulch and was nearing the main trail leading back to the K horse range. Ahead lay a division of paths. When he reached this point he accepted that one leading away from the main trail and struck into timber again. Within five minutes his course intersected another of the innumerable alleyways in the forest. The new route appeared to strike directly for the open range. He took it, and at the end of a winding half mile came out upon the upper meadow. It appeared to him he was halfways down the meadow and a considerable distance from the main trail's point of entry. Thus there was some leeway of time in which to perform a needed chore —swap horseflesh. Across the meadow was a sizable band of stock grazing along the edge of timber. Slipping the rifle into its boot, he uncoiled the lariat hanging down from its thong, shook out a loop and started across the open area.

The width of it was not more than five hundred yards. He travelled casually, not wishing to stampede the bunch. Even as it was, some of the nearer and more isolated ponies lifted their heads and cantered away from him. This sent on a warning; the flanking brutes drew in and presently the whole outfit began to shift. The horse herd made a magnificent, animated picture—heads up, manes rippling. Silver and tan and roan and yellow, all the colors blended into a barbaric beauty. For a moment Rawlins was lost to caution. On the edge of the band stood a solid black and when he spotted the animal his arm began to sweep the loop into a widening circle. His pony, feeling pressure, broke into a stiff-legged gallop, aiming straight at the black. The whole outfit increased its speed of drift, and suddenly went thundering off to the south, dust rising in rolling jets. Rawlins grinned from pure pleasure and swung his mount also to the south. It was the first time he had scanned that direction for several moments. Now, raising his eyes, he saw a pair of riders shoot from the main K trail and make directly for him.

HE WHEELED away from the herd. Immediately one of the two veered and cut diagonally across the meadow, leaving the other to come straight on. Rawlins wheeled again, this time toward the horses. Lifting himself in the saddle he sent out a high, thin shout, passed behind the bunch and began to press in on the flank. There was a break and a turning. The whole outfit swung and went careening over the meadow, straight at the man who had changed his course with the idea of cutting off Rawlins. The maneuver accomplished two things; it placed a wedge between the pair of outlaws and it served to break up the second man's advance. Rawlins saw him turn and swing with the tide of the oncoming band, thus breaking the impact; and when a great, barrel-like torso rose and began weaving in the saddle Rawlins recognized Boone Cordray. It was the last sight of the massive creature he dared take; for the full-gaited charge of his own pony carried him pell-mell toward the other man who never had varied his course.

The cold and set and clay-colored cheeks of Cree stared at him; the rigid body of the man seemed immovably riveted to the saddle. Cree's hat was off and the clear sun lay across his features, to sharpen the thin crease of lip and nostril, to intensify that implacable and fierce will that seemed to dominate his life. There was a gash in the man's shirt, the loose flap hung

down and in its stead was a white and irregular patch of underclothing visible over his heart. A target to shoot for. Rawlins went whipping for his gun, setting his pony on its haunches. But if he thought to catch Cree Cordray on the wing he was to be mistaken. The outlaw came to a swirling halt about a hundred feet distant. His frigid, level voice cut like a knife across the air.

"I'll make a bargain with yuh, Rawlins. We'll dismount and walk together. Shoot at pleasure. I'll signal Boone to keep away."

"Sure of yourself," said Rawlins.

"I want to see yuh die," droned Cree.

"Bargain," was Rawlins' noncommittal answer.

Cree lifted an arm, waving it away from him—a gesture of pressing Boone back. He never let his eyes leave Rawlins. As for the latter, he saw Boone only out of the corner of his vision, still fighting with the horses and carried away down the meadow. Calculating swiftly, he slipped from the saddle and walked ten feet aside. Cree was already dismounting and standing quite still, both hands hanging out from his hips.

"I'm playin' your game," said Rawlins quietly. "Like a still target, do you?"

"Come on!" ripped out Cree, words trembling with feeling. "Come on!"

"Your empire's dust now, Cordray," muttered Rawlins. He was sparring for time, measuring up this man who seemed so dominant and self-assured. "Your gang's shot to pieces, Jubal's broken in the middle and won't ever help you again, my friend. Where's that ratty little kid brother?"

"He cringed—he ran like a yella dawg," said Cree, biting the sentence between his teeth. "Move forward."

"Same old story," murmured Rawlins, feeling a stream of cold run through his nerves. It was a familiar sensation; his mind called for a clear track and one by one the other elements of his body faded out of his consciousness. Even his talk came back to his ears remotely. "Ambition leads proud men on—and pride brings them to ruin. The man that lives by a gun will be destroyed by it. Why didn't you leave me alone, you damned fool?"

"These hills are mine!" cried Cordray. "I'm comin' at yuh!"

"Which was what I wanted you to do," said Rawlins to himself.

Cree came swiftly, without suppleness, without indirection. It was as if he could not endure seeing a man stand before him. The gray face became a thing of sharp lines and the lines dissolved to a single slit that was his mouth—a slit so white and narrow as to seem nothing else than a knife scar. The torn cloth of his shirt flapped with each stride and the white patch above his heart grew to a bull's-eye target. Everything else about the man was lost to Rawlins. But he recognized the tell-tale twist of body at last, the forward launching of shoulders and the streak of an arm flattening and rising. Rawlins felt himself moving with a slow and unbreakable rhythm. One—two. Down, draw, snap! Something touched his sleeve gently. A sharp sound pressed against his drums and became a nearby roar that tore away into the fresh morning's air, then died out altogether.

Cree Cordray stood stiffly on his legs and looked at Rawlins as no man had ever looked. Some invisible hand seemed to pull a mask from the outlaw's face and leave it dull. The gun dropped, the arm dropped and Cordray fell, not forward nor backward, but in his tracks, each joint giving way at once. And the white patch over his heart had turned red.

A call came booming across the meadow.

"Cree!"

Rawlins made a quarter turn and waited calmly. Boone raced on. Boone suddenly

checked the flight of his pony to a walk. Boone leaned far out of the saddle, dark and heavy face staring at the figure of his brother on the dun earth. A hand drew back and the horse stopped. Boone seemed lost to the day, seemed to be locked with inertia. Silence fell. And time passed.

Rawlins shook his shoulders and hauled himself together. He called to the immense and hulking outline on the horse.

"What about it?"

"Dead?" asked Boone, speaking with a wonder and puzzlement.

"He don't own the hills any more," said Rawlins. "Only a six foot section of them, that's all. What about it?"

Boone reached down slowly, hauled out his gun. His big shoulders swung and the weapon went turning through the air to land far away.

"I took his orders a long time. That's all I'm good for—to take orders. Somebody tells me to do somethin' and I do it. I can split a two by twelve plank with a blow of my fist—but I'm dumb. I got to have orders. Well, I took 'em from Cree a long time and see where I am now. See where we all are. I'm not sorry for him. I got nothin' against you, Rawlins. I'm through with this business. I don't want no more of it. What'm I goin' to do? Where's Anita?"

"Casteaux got her clear. She's probably in Seven Sleep now."

"I got to find her," mumbled Boone. "I oughtn't of let Cree persuade me against her. I got to find her, Rawlins."

Rawlins swung up to his saddle and aimed for the southern trail to the ranch. "Stay a couple yards in front of me," said he. "Where's the rest of your gun toters?"

"Gone, dead, disappeared," said Boone dispiritedly. "Cree led 'em to more punishment than they could stand. No more Cordray bunch. What'm I goin' to do?"

Rawlins had no answer for him. He pressed on, entered the trail and pushed through it. Three spaced shots came rolling toward him and a faint call. Smoke floated through the timber and the smell of consumed wood. The trail tipped suddenly into the gulch. In it stood many men and many horses. Rawlins drew back.

"Hold on. If that's your friend Rome Tarrant, he's after my scalp. Listen, Cordray, just how completely through with this business are you?"

"I'll never lift another gun," said Boone. "To hell with Tarrant. He's as bad as Cree. He got a third of whatever we rustled. He picked his posses and chased us to make the thing look right. Once in a while he shot a couple of K horses to show a warm scent. Sometimes we played the game a little neater and let him chase Casteaux around the buckbrush awhile. Just to make it seem right, see?"

A rider came across the yard and started up the grade, tipping his face. It was Casteaux—Casteaux grinning. Rawlins shot a swift question at Boone. "Casteaux was in on the deal, too?"

"Casteaux's a good fella," muttered Boone. "He never split any money on the deal. He knew all about it, but never took a profit. You know why, huh? He just stuck around on account of Anita."

Casteaux reached the rim. Sweat and dust crusted his swarthy cheeks; he shot a glance between the men. "Which is which here?"

"I'm through," repeated Boone. "Cree's dead and God knows where the rest is."

Casteaux swung on Rawlins. "Well, we got to Killifew's ranch and routed out his riders. But we ran into Tarrant's posse. They're all yonder. Listen, Tarrant says he's got yuh hooked on account of somethin' on yore back trail. He's primed to take yuh."

Rawlins looked at Boone. "You'll talk?"

Boone nodded. Rawlins turned to Casteaux. "Bring that egg up here. Him and Killifew. This is a crooked world, but we'll make a dicker."

CASTEAUX slid down the grade and across the yard. Presently he started back with the three others in tow. Rawlins

suddenly swore and pressed his lips together. Anita Cordray was among them. Casteaux reached the summit. The thin faced Rome Tarrant spurred past and wheeled in front of Rawlins, grimly exultant.

"Listen, I've got you!" he grated. "Maybe I can't make a murder charge stick in this county, but I can sure as hell send you back to Red Buttes where yo're wanted on same charge! I looked into yore record, mister!"

Killifew and the girl closed in. "You done the job around here, Rawlins?" asked Killifew.

"It's done," agreed Rawlins, keeping his eyes away from Anita Cordray. But he felt her watching him, felt the weight of her glance.

"Dam' right!" shouted Tarrant. "And he's done! He'll go back to Red Buttes. Him and his gang raised hell there and shot a town to pieces!"

"That right?" inquired Killifew anxiously. Then he added a hurried apology. "Not that I give a continental, but if they smoke you out, I don't see what I can do to help."

"It's right," said Rawlins. "It was a deal like this—only the cards fell wrong and we had to travel. But I'd say Red Buttes had a couple of badly needed funerals. Tarrant, you've written the Buttes where I am?"

"I'll play that card when I get you in the cooler!" snapped Tarrant.

Rawlins straightened. "It's a crooked world, Sheriff, and I guess we're going to make a crooked swap. But it's the easiest way to iron out the dirty sheets. You'll tell nobody what you know, see?"

"And why not?" challenged Tarrant.

"Boone might get talkative and tell things about you," said Rawlins and stared sharply at Tarrant. "You want to do that, or do you want to just forget what you really oughtn't remember?"

Killifew broke in curtly: "You've got the dope on Tarrant?"

Boone raised his head. "He was a part——"

"Stop that!" yelled the sheriff. Fear went skittering across his face. "All right. You win, Rawlins."

"I thought I would," said Rawlins softly. "I reckon you'd call it rough justice—pretty doggoned rough at that. I'm not ashamed of my record, but you'd ought to be. There is a catch in the proposition, Tarrant. You ride straight from now on. Now take your posse out of here just as fast as you can. And don't bother me. I'm a permanent fixture around here. That right, Killifew?"

Killifew had already turned back to the slope. He paused only long enough to say, "I said it was half your ranch once. How many more times is it necessary to repeat? Come and see me at the ranch when you're through here."

"Wait a minute," called Rawlins and took a deep breath. He looked at Anita Cordray for the first time. The dark eyes were watching him. "Wait. Get some of your boys up in the yonder meadow. Cree's there. I had it out with him. Send a couple more to the top of the Seven Sleep trail. See how bad Jubal's hurt."

It was the explanation he had to make to Anita Cordray. And, having made it, he fell silent, waiting for the answer he dreaded to hear. Killifew and the sheriff went away from them. Anita's cheeks were tight and hard, pressing back the tragedy in her. But she held Rawlins' glance, never speaking. Suddenly Boone pushed his horse over the space and put himself in front of her. "Anita, what'm I goin' to do now? Tell me what I better do."

Her head lifted. She seemed to shake off the dark weight pressing around her. "You're going home with me, Boone. The Pass is going to be what it used to be, clean and decent and fit for people to live

in. We're going home—and try to forget."

She moved her horse forward and came to Casteaux, to look up to him.

"Pete," she said, "I shall always remember you as a man gallant enough to waste his life for a woman. A woman who never gave anything back because she couldn't. If you stayed in the hills, you'd never forget, nor would other pepole. It's time to go—ride down the horizon and start fresh. . . . Good-by."

Casteaux's hat brim dropped and concealed his face. Boone had already ridden back into the trees. Anita came on, paused beside Rawlins. Far back in her eyes he thought he saw a stirring of warmth.

"Jeff," she murmured, "I prayed for you and I think my prayers were answered. I'm glad you are staying. We shall be neighbors. But not near enough to see each other. I'll remain on my side of the hills. I shall work. I shall get down on my hands and knees and scrub out the dark stains. And I shall not see you."

Rawlins' answer was rough-edged. "I said there'd be somethin' everlastin' between us, Anita."

Her hand reached out, touched his sleeve gently and fell away. "That long, Jeff? I had thought it might be forgotten, sometime. I had thought that if at the end of a year you cared to come and see me, I'd be waiting there. At the end of a year."

She passed on into the timber, leaving Rawlins sitting sure and upright in the saddle, his hat raised and his face breaking with light. He heard Casteaux moving. Swinging around he saw the man's cheeks indescribably lined. Casteaux said nothing, but he leaned out and offered his hand with a gesture of final farewell. Rawlins shook it, forbearing to speak because he knew there was nothing to say. Casteaux's eyes glowed like live coals and then the man turned away, not descending the slope, but taking the path that circled the rim and went toward Seven Sleep. The broad back swayed a little to the movement of the horse, the hat brim drooped again. Then the trees took this queer contradictory man and Rawlins saw him no more, nor ever again. But presently from afar he heard Casteaux's voice rising with a tune that was gay. The melody lifted, broke and ceased. Long after it came again, clear and strong and at last died in the distance.

Rawlins turned to look down at the gulch, shoulders squaring. Even then his thoughts were moving ahead, embracing the future, and in his mind was the framework of a letter to be sent to Mr. Smith Jones at Pocatello. A letter something like this: "Opportunity for work for an honest man at thirty a month in a peaceful and out-of-way location. Bring your friends."

Long shafts of sunlight fell across the tree tops and the bright cascades of water falling down the western slope seemed like ropes of diamond stones. All around him the world was green and clear and vigorous. Surveying the narrow and contained slash of land below him in the manner of one finding a long awaited harbor, he mentally cast off from the calendar one day of that year of waiting; and started down the trail.

Too Big to Fight?—Like Hell!

A Purty Good Fight

By GILBERT BURCK

AS THE FINN stalked along he reminded you, somehow, of a huge fir tree on the go. He was six feet three and about as straight, too, as one of the pointed firs that grew on the hills. His long, heavily muscled arms hung like a pair of pendulums and his feet were about the size of snowshoes.

He strode at the head of the procession of miners who had come up from the bowels of the earth in the heavy iron skip. The four o'clock whistle, marking the end of the first shift, had just blown loudly and stridently. And now the men were filing out of the shaft house of the Algonquin Copper Company's one and only mine and into the "dry," where they changed their heavy, damp mining apparel for cleaner and dryer clothes.

The Finn captained the gang. His name was Mr. Waino Kalevalainen, but as few of the men knew his name and fewer yet could pronounce it, he was known to everybody simply as "The Finn."

But the Finn didn't go into the dry with the rest of the men. Instead he rambled, with seven-league strides, toward the old weather-beaten building which housed the offices of the Algonquin Company. Scraping his feet carefully on the mat, he stooped down a little as he entered the door. The builders hadn't counted on fellows as big as him.

Inside, seated at a table on which was a profusion of charts and papers, were George Michaels, the president and owner of the Algonquin, and his chief engineer and general manager, Charles Edwin.

"Howdo," greeted the Finn as he took off his hat.

"Hello, there, Waino," answered Michaels as he turned around, "We've got something important to talk about this afternoon."

"Yah?" queried the Finn naively.

"Yep," replied Michaels, "it's about that Royal Copper and Ore Company."

The Finn's eyes narrowed and he lifted up his left arm and carefully felt of the muscle. "I like to get him sometime," he said seriously.

Michaels laughed. "Well, it's like this," he resumed. "The Royal outfit is sore because we refuse to be bought out. They threaten to fix us so we can't operate if we don't join in with them. When they heard about that contract we made with the National Stamping and Smelting Company they got madder than ever."

"Vot's dat?" asked the Finn.

"We've signed up on a trial basis with the National Stamp and Smelt," repeated Michaels. "We've got to deliver ten thousand tons of good grade rock by the first of November. If we don't make it we're sunk and we'll probably have to sell out. But if we do we get a five year contract. Can you do it?"

"Wa-al," mused the Finn, "she's a hell of a lot. But, by golly, I vill do it."

"Not only that," continued Michaels as he puffed at a cigar thoughtfully, "the Royal's out to break us. You know what that means?"

The Finn took out a box of snuff, tapped the cover two or three times, and then reached in and fingered a load of it into his cheek. "Fight?" he asked.

"That's it," replied Michaels. "I have a sneaking hunch we're going to have trouble on our hands. The Royal's run by a bunch of crooks who'd stop at nothing to get control of the Algonquin holdings."

"I take care of them," asserted the Finn.

"I think there's going to be some underhanded work here," put in Edwin. "They wouldn't dare attack us in the open, of course; but they'll do their best to keep us from filling the contract. And you can be sure of a dirty deal in some way or other. Are you sure of all the men?"

"Wa-al," began the Finn. "I vatch 'em close and if anybody try any tricks I fix him."

"That's the stuff," assented Michaels. "There may be some of the Royal men working for me right now for all I know. You do your best and I'll see that you get what's due you." He paused and looked at his watch. "Well, Waino, I'll be counting on you for that ten thousand tons."

The Finn grinned as he rose to depart. "I have no good fight for long time now. Maybe I get one pretty soon, eh?" Then he walked out the door and trudged along up the gully toward the bunkhouse.

MOST of the miners of the Algonquin Company lived in the bunkhouse belonging to the company. It and the messhouse adjoining were situated about a half mile up the road from the mine. A few of the miners—the ones with wives and children—lived in separate houses in the location, about half a mile farther on.

The Finn lived at the bunkhouse with the other men. Nobody knew much about him—where he came from or when. All they knew was that he had, by hard work and dog-like loyalty, risen to be the day shift captain. And although everybody feared and respected him while on the job, he was the butt of their unceasing jokes after hours.

"Hey there, Finland," one of the men yelled as he walked in the door. "You're late. What'd yuh do—fall into one of your own footprints?"

The company of men roared with laughter as the Finn's forehead creased. But he said nothing and walked over to the clothes

rack, where he took off his coat and sweater and carefully hung them up.

"Ya—ah, by yiminy, ve vill ha' a good chew snoo—ose," mocked "Lefty" Andrews, one of the newcomers to the force, as he leaned his chair back against the wall and snapped his suspenders.

"Oh, Finn," yelled "Gold-Tooth" Jorgens, Andrews' pal, "what's that on your shoulders?"

The Finn turned his head and squinted first at one shoulder and then at the other. "I don't see not'in'," he announced.

"Not there," returned Jorgens, "but right above your neck!"

"Yah—hoo!" the crowd yelled and laughed.

The Finn grinned a little and then frowned as he thought over the insult the second time. And then he wrinkled up his nose. When he did that he was getting mad.

Clang! The first bell sounded and the men began to get ready for supper. The joking and fun-making was, for the moment, forgotten. Andrews winked at Jorgens as he sat against the wall near the door to the dining room. Jorgens then came up and planked himself in the chair at the other side of the door.

As the second bell sounded the men rushed for the doorway. Andrews and Jorgens, however, sat there and waited. The Finn, as usual, was one of the last ones to troop into the mess hall. His place at the head of the table was always waiting for him, anyway. And, what was more to the point, the Finn wasn't the kind of a fellow who wanted to be ahead of everybody else. He didn't care who got there first, just so long as he got plenty to eat.

As he tramped toward the door, his arms swinging back and forth, Jorgens winked at Andrews. Suddenly, just as the Finn thrust his huge frame into the doorway, the two men shot out their legs.

Ker-plunk! The Finn fell headlong into the dining room as he tripped over their boots. All the fellows turned toward the door as he crashed to the floor.

"Whoops!" yelled somebody. "The Finland pine comes crashin' to earth!"

"What d'yuh know about that!" suggested another. "The Finn's trippin' on his own toes!"

"Hey there, Finn," yelled a third, "Yuh can't go fallin' around like that. Liable to bust one of the floor boards."

Slowly the Finn got up. He turned around. There, standing in the doorway and grinning, their stained and decayed teeth showing, were the malefactors. The Finn grunted. "What you think you doing?" he demanded. "Want to get in trouble?"

Jorgens and Andrews said not a word, but stood there laughing at the Finn. Andrews rolled his quid of tobacco for a second and then let go a stream of tobacco juice that lit squarely on the top of the Finn's boots.

"Haw, haw!" guffawed Jorgens.

The Finn's nose began to twitch and he advanced on the two men. "I fix you," he grunted. Then he thrust out his huge left paw, and grasping Andrews' face as he would a coconut, he shoved the surprised miner with such force that he sailed clean across the bunk room and slumped down in the corner. It was now Andrews' turn to be laughed at, and the crowd roared at the dumfounded look on his face as he sat, all sprawled out, in the corner.

Meanwhile Jorgens was coming to the rescue. The Finn was too big to stand up against, so he pounced on his back and jumped up on his shoulders. The Finn swung around like an angry bull, but Jorgens hung on and slipped his arm around the Finn's neck. The big fellow threshed around and tossed about but Jorgens hung desperately on as he tried to get his elbow under the Finn's chin.

Andrews had got up and was now coming on to help his partner. He rushed toward the Finn with his fists squared, but before he got near enough to hit, the Finn suddenly snapped over forward and sent Jorgens flying into Andrews' outstretched arms.

The crowd, which had gathered at the door and was filtering into the bunk room, roared its delight and approval. "Attaboy, Finland!" and "Come on there, Pine-tree! Show 'em your sap!"

Andrews and Jorgens scrambled to their feet and simultaneously charged the Finn. But he was getting madder than ever. Grunting with anger, he stalked out to meet his opponents. As they came up to him he stamped forward, and, wading through the hail of blows as if it were so much rain, took each one by the neck and knocked their heads smartly together a couple of times.

Then, letting go of Andrews, he picked Jorgens up as though he were a baby, swung him back and tossed him across the room onto the top layer of bunks. Before Andrews knew what it was all about he, too, was following Jorgens in a short but decisive flight.

The men who were watching stared in amazement, their mouths open. "Hully gee," someone said.

"Nobody else?" the Finn asked, looking around at the group.

"Hell, no!" one of the men expostulated. "I'm not afraid to fight, but I'll be damned if I'm going to take an air ride."

The Finn smoothed down his hair, walked through the crowd and sat down at the long table. "Purty good fight," he said as he grinned and began to attack the food in front of him.

THE next morning the night shift foreman reported that all had not been going so well. The lights had failed, he told the Finn, and they seemed to be hitting an extra hard stretch of rock, for the men seemed to be working desultorily. No pep. No cooperation. None of them had produced more than quota, and usually they ran several tons over.

The Finn wrinkled his forehead when he was told about it. "By golly," he said, "I look into this. It looks like monkey-business someplace, eh?"

So the Finn decided to go down into the earth with the first skipful of men. He walked over to the shaft house and got there just as the last load of the night shift men was coming up. Standing around were the other miners, with their carbide lights burning brightly on their hats, waiting to go down.

Jorgens and Andrews scowled at the Finn as they saw him walk up. "Here comes the big moose," Andrews said as he nudged his partner. But the Finn had noticed, and he kept a wary eye on the two miners.

As the night men climbed out of the skip, the Finn saw one of them walk over to Jorgens and mumble something in a low tone. Turning his head to avoid being noticed, but nevertheless watching the men out of the corner of his eye, the Finn noticed Jorgens mumble a word or two to Andrews, who looked around furtively. Then he talked in a low tone to the other miner, who handed him something.

The Finn nodded his head a little. "Dirty work," he said to himself as he climbed into the skip.

When all the men had climbed into the skip the signal was given the engineer back in the engine house and the skip began to shoot downward into the belly of the earth at a thirty degree angle. The lights on the miners' caps were reflected on the wet, slimy timberings that braced the shaftway. At a terrific speed they sped past level after level. The rumble of the rollers on the oiled runway grew deafening. Finally, after a five minute ride, they slowed down and came to a stop at the forty-fourth level.

The men got out and started to walk to

their work, about a half mile or so up the north end of the level. The lights were still out, but temporary oil lamps had been rigged up. The Finn jerked out his flashlight and began to search along the wiring for any possible break.

At one place he noticed a piece of insulation tape hanging loose. Without thinking about it he reached out and started to roll it back. But the wire seemed unusually limp. The Finn felt of it thoroughly and then began to hurriedly unwind the tape. The wire had been cut and the tape had been rolled back to hide the break!

The Finn slowly shook his head and wrinkled up his nose. "By golly," he said to himself, "somet'ing's rotten."

But he said nothing about it when he joined the men. Instead he spurred them on—showed a rookie how to handle his pick so as to get the most done with the least effort, or another man how to load up his dumpcar in half the time he usually spent at it. Not only did he urge them on, but he also joined in the work himself and thus set a good example.

Whenever his back was turned, however, Jorgens and Andrews stopped working and started loafing, thus throwing the whole crew out of time. Twice the Finn had come upon them sitting down and playing mumblety-peg or simply doing nothing when there was plenty of work to be done.

Then the Finn decided to check up on them. Walking ostensibly around a bend in the level, he hid himself behind some of the timbering and watched the two men. The instant they thought he was gone they left off work and began to joke with the other fellows.

"By golly," the Finn exclaimed, "I t'ink I know vot's rotten."

He came out of his hiding place and walked up to the two miners. "Say," he said, "vot in hell's the matter here? You fellows get paid for vorkin', not loafin'."

Jorgens and Andrews glared at him as they picked up their shovels, but they said nothing.

"I give you vun more chance," continued the Finn. "Next time I catch you monkeyin' around I can you."

For the rest of the day Jorgens and Andrews worked hard enough. And although the Finn expected them to balk on him again, he never caught them deliberately slowing down. In fact, they worked with a will that surprised him.

But he shook his head. "Maybe they don't want to be canned," he said to himself days later. "No vonder somet'ing's up."

And something was up, but it was hard to trace it down. Something was always occurring to slow down production. Little details they were, but they were hard to overcome. Faulty timbering that had to be replaced; delays or breakdowns in the engine house—all pointing to more than a perverse streak of luck. But there was never any evidence of a human hand working against them.

In spite of minor setbacks, the Finn, by dint of hard and strenuous work, had kept things pretty well up to schedule. But he refused to relax his guard.

LATE one afternoon, while walking around the engine house, the Finn noticed Andrews up near the shaft house, stooping over and examining something. Quickly he drew close to the wall and slipped behind a corner. He noticed a bright object flashing in Andrews' hand, but he was too far away to make it out.

He saw Andrews look around him stealthily and then, down on his hands and knees, file away at something with the shiny piece of metal. For five minutes he worked, all the time warily looking around him to see if he were being watched. Finally Andrews got up and walked leisurely up the hill toward the bunkhouse.

As soon as he had gone the Finn hustled up to the spot where he had been. But there was nothing there except some rusty lengths of old, worn-out cable which had formerly been used to haul up the skip. Something bright caught his eye. Stooping over, he examined the cable. There were

steel filings on the grass and in two places the cable had been cut, obviously by a hack saw blade. Andrews had been undoubtedly cutting at the old cable. But why?

The Finn's forehead wrinkled as he stood there. Then it cleared. "Hmm," he muttered to himself, "dirty vork!"

Late that same afternoon Michaels called him in the office. "Things look pretty good," he told the Finn. "We're a hundred tons ahead of schedule, which isn't a hell of a lot, of course. But it shows you're on the job."

"You bet," grunted the Finn.

"But I can't believe that Royal's given up so easily," Michaels went on. "I'm afraid that things will pop in the next couple days. Here we are, within four days of finishing up our contract, and outside of a few attempts to slow us down, there's been comparative quiet. They're not the kind to sit back and get licked without getting in some dirty work. They're probably doing this to throw us off our guard."

"I never off guard," corrected the Finn.

"That's the stuff," said Michaels. "See that you stay that way. All we have to do to lose that contract is to get set back a day. We're up to schedule but no more. A day lost would mean the contract lost."

"I vatch close," assured the Finn.

That night things went smoothly at the supper table. A cold, heavy rain was falling and all the men stayed inside. But the Finn was allowed to sit and doze in peace. Everybody knew how hard he was working and they resisted the temptation to have some fun at his expense. Jorgens and Andrews avoided him, and except for a glance or two in his direction, said or did nothing to indicate that they gave a second thought to him.

After the meal was over most of the men sat around and played cards or read. Jorgens and Andrews got into a game and to every appearance intended to spend the evening at the table. But the Finn kept his eye on them and noted every move they made.

About nine o'clock Jorgens got restless. He searched through his pockets and then got up and looked out the window. "Guess I'll have to go down to the Corners after all, rain or no rain," he declared. "All out of tobacco. Anybody else going? How 'bout you, Andrews?"

Andrews shook his head. "Nope," he asserted emphatically, "couldn't get me out on a night like this for a million bucks."

"Well, I guess I'll have to go it alone," Jorgens said reluctantly.

The Finn was puzzled as he watched Jorgens slip on his heavy raincoat and hat. The corners was a cross-roads store some two miles down the road.

After Jorgens had left, the Finn went into the dark bunk room and watched the miner as he trudged down the road. As the Finn looked out of the window his forehead wrinkled in perplexity. Sure enough, Jorgens was hiking up the gully on the road to the Corners. The Finn thought a moment. Then he walked across the room to the clothes rack, where there was hanging a number of mackinaws and coats. Carefully he went through the garments until he came to one that he recognized as Jorgens'. He went through the pockets of the coat. Reaching into the left pocket, he pulled out a package of scrap and an unused tin of smoking tobacco.

"Hmm," he grunted to himself as he looked at the tobacco. Then he put it back and went into the other room.

For two hours he sat around and played cards as he waited for Jorgens to return. His face was as stolid as ever, and he looked out from under his shaggy eyebrows at the players with a seeming indifference that was galling to them. If anybody had a poker face the Finn did.

About eleven o'clock Jorgens blustered into the room, stamping his feet and shak-

ing the water from his coat. As he slammed the door shut he commented on the weather. "Holy Christopher, but it's a wet night. I'd hate like hell to have to go out again."

But the Finn noticed that Jorgens had hung his raincoat and hat near the door.

Already the men were leaving the living room and filing into the bunk room. They had to be up at seven in the morning, and what with a hard day's work ahead of them, eight hours wasn't too much sleep at all.

Andrews yawned. "Ho-hum," he said. "Guess I'll be hitting the hay myself pretty soon. How about you? Ought to be pretty tired after that hike."

"I'm all fagged out myself," answered Jorgens. "It's a good night to sleep; no mistake about it."

The Finn, however, preceded the two men into the other room. His bunk was just across the way from Jorgens' and Andrews', and in it he could hear everything they said. But he crawled in, covered himself and turned his head to the wall. In ten minutes anyone would have sworn that he was fast asleep.

In the meantime Jorgens and Andrews had come into the room and were getting into bed. A word or two between them and they, too, were silent. Soon they were breathing heavily. The Finn was puzzled. Except for the rain on the tin roof and the heavy breathing of the sleepers, not the faintest sound of any out of the way noise was audible. But he kept on simulating a snoring man. Turning over on his side, as if in his sleep, he watched the two men across the way. Nothing happened. He began to get a bit tired himself.

All of a sudden, just as though he had been strangled in his sleep, Jorgens stopped snoring. Silently he rose up in his bunk and looked around. Fully dressed except for his shoes, he sat up and listened. He grabbed up his shoes and, after looking around furtively, tiptoed out of the room. The Finn could hear him moving about in the next room. Then the door opened and closed and quiet reigned again.

Still breathing heavily, the Finn waited, listened and watched. Andrews was still lying in his bunk. Suddenly, however, his snoring ceased. He sat up and looked around. Pulling the covers back, he stealthily put his feet on the floor, picked up his shoes and tiptoed out of the room, first stopping to take his coat from the rack.

THE Finn waited until he heard the door in the next room close. He jumped up, hastily jerked on his boots, donned a heavy coat and hurried to the door. He could just see Andrews making his way, through the mud and rain, down the gully to the shaft house.

The Finn slipped out of the door and followed him, keeping to the side of the bunkhouse until Andrews had got down the road a ways. Then he followed him down the gully. It was very dark and rainy, but the Finn took no chances. Stalking Andrews like a huge beast of prey, he stayed to the trees along the side of the road.

Approaching the shaft house, Andrews left the road and cut across the woods to the right, heading, apparently, for the engine house. The Finn frowned for a moment. He hadn't expected Andrews to do that, but he nevertheless followed the miner as he took the short-cut across the woods.

The exhaust steam of the huge engines broke the sound of the falling rain with hoarse, ghost-like barks. The heavy cables creaked on their pulleys as they hauled up tons of copper rock. The noise carried a note of foreboding, and the Finn shivered as the cold rain beat upon his bare head.

By this time Andrews had reached the edge of the clearing and was hastening out across the open space toward the engine house. The Finn, from a vantage point behind a tree, watched him as he disappeared around a corner of the building.

As soon as Andrews was out of sight the Finn broke into a trot and jogged across

the clearing to the wall of the engine house. Slowly creeping up to the corner, he peered around the edge. There was nobody there, but it was plain that Andrews had entered the door which led into the engine house supply room. It stood half open.

The Finn slid around the corner and silently squeezed in through the door. Hearing the indistinct murmur of voices in the room beyond, he flattened himself against the wall of the dark ante-room. Then, as nobody came out, he carefully tiptoed across to the door which led into the supply room proper. It was open a few inches and through the fissure the light streamed out. Stealthily the Finn approached it, and standing to one side, he peered through the opening.

In the small room ahead were Andrews and Jorgens and two other men. Jorgens was examining a revolver, while Andrews was rolling up a piece of rope. The other two men were looking over a couple of hack saws and fitting some blades on them.

"Here, Tony," Jorgens spoke in a muffled but none the less distinct tone, "you two take those saws and artillery and hike up to the shaft house. Andy and I'll go in and get the engineer. But for the love o' Pete don't begin until me and Andy've had time to get back to the bunkhouse."

"All right," replied Tony. "We'll give yuh fifteen minutes to get the engineer tied up and tail it for the beds."

"Better make it twenty," suggested Andrews.

"All right," assented Tony.

"Wait," commanded Jorgens as he put his cupped hand to his ears. "The engine's stopped now. They're probably loading up on level forty-four. They'll be there a good ten minutes. Now's the time to get the engineer."

"All right, let's get going," snapped out Andrews.

The Finn drew back into a corner as the other two men started for the door. They walked through the dark ante-room and out into the night. The Finn could hear them sloshing through the mud and rain as they walked up toward the shaft house.

Meanwhile Andrews and Jorgens had fastened red bandanna handkerchiefs over the lower part of their faces and were silently stealing out through the doorway into the engine room. Looking into the supply room, the Finn saw that Jorgens and Andrews had gone. He dashed across to the engine house entrance, too.

The engineer had been sitting on his platform watching the level indicators and waiting for signals. The giant drum on which the cables were wound was motionless in front of him. It looked like a monstrous spool of equally monstrous black thread. Just as the Finn was entering the room Andrews had crawled up behind the engineer and was bringing down a blackjack on his head. Jorgens was standing to one side watching for any possible intruders.

With a shout of anger and defiance the Finn burst out upon the two men. As the engineer slumped down in his seat Andrews turned around and skipped off the platform. Jorgens came in brandishing his gun and commanding the Finn to put up his hands.

But the Finn turned toward Jorgens and reached out for the revolver. Jorgens pressed the trigger twice. The Finn felt a stinging pain in his left side, but he piled on the miner and before he was able to press the trigger again, had wrested the gun away from him and thrown it across the room. With a single bone-crusher the Finn keeled the miner over on his back.

Andrews, however, was now in action, and he hopped up on the big fellow's back, wielding his blackjack lustily. One of the blows hit the Finn in the shoulder. With a roar of pain and anger he wheeled around and swung Andrews off.

Then, as Jorgens charged again, he led out with both fists and broke down the miner's guard. Before Jorgens could back up the Finn had wound up and was swinging for his jaw. *Crack!* The impact sounded like the report of a gun. Jorgens was carried back ten feet by the force of the blow and he sank to the floor in a heap.

Andrews scrambled to his feet and faced the Finn, but before he had a chance to collect his wits the big fellow had grabbed him by the neck with one hand. He swung back with the other fist and hit the squirming miner squarely on the jaw. Andrews slumped down dead to the world.

The Finn grinned. Then he grabbed up the rope Andrews had brought along and quickly trussed up the two men. And two minutes later he was trudging hurriedly out the door and across the clearing to the shaft house. As he trotted along his fists were clinched and a grin of delight was stamped on his face. "More fight," he said to himself.

Inside the shaft house the other two men were examining the heavy cable which hauled the skip up and down.

"We better go up on the platform and cut," said one of the men as he fingered the hack saw. "I don't like the idea of leaning over this here hole and sawing at the rope." He peered down into the shaft, over a half mile long, with a shudder.

As he finished speaking the Finn came rushing in.

"What the——" began one of the men as he pulled out a gun.

The Finn charged into him. Instantly there followed two sharp reports, but the bullets buried themselves in the timbers of the shaft house and the revolver clattered to the floor and rolled down into the shaft.

The other fellow charged the Finn from the back. Then the three of them went down, kicking and clawing. Fists shot out and thumped on mackinaw-covered bodies. Fingers sought eyes and teeth bit at fingers. Suddenly there was a teeth-shattering crack and one of the thugs ceased fighting and stiffened out on the floor. The Finn and the other fellow now fought it out alone.

Rolling over and over, each one tried to get on top. The Finn's size handicapped his movements, but the other fellow's muscles were no match for those of his opponent. They flopped over again, this time dangerously near the shaft. Breaking away, the two of them suddenly jumped to their feet. Then the Finn's pile-driving fist shot out and planted itself squarely in the thug's face. There was a crunching of bone and the thug fell to the floor.

The Finn stood with legs apart as he looked down at the two prostrate men. Then he grinned broadly. "Purty good fight," he said.

He picked up one of the men and hooked him under his left arm. Grasping the other by the collar with the other hand, he walked down across the clearing toward the engine house with no more effort than if he were hauling a couple of logs.

IT WAS four days later. A big spread, with white linen and real napkins, was in the last stage of preparation at the mess-house. Dressed in their Sunday best, all the men were seated at the table. At the head of the board was the Finn. His hair was neatly slicked down and his big head stuck up stiffly from out of a high, white collar. His face was as broad as a harvest moon.

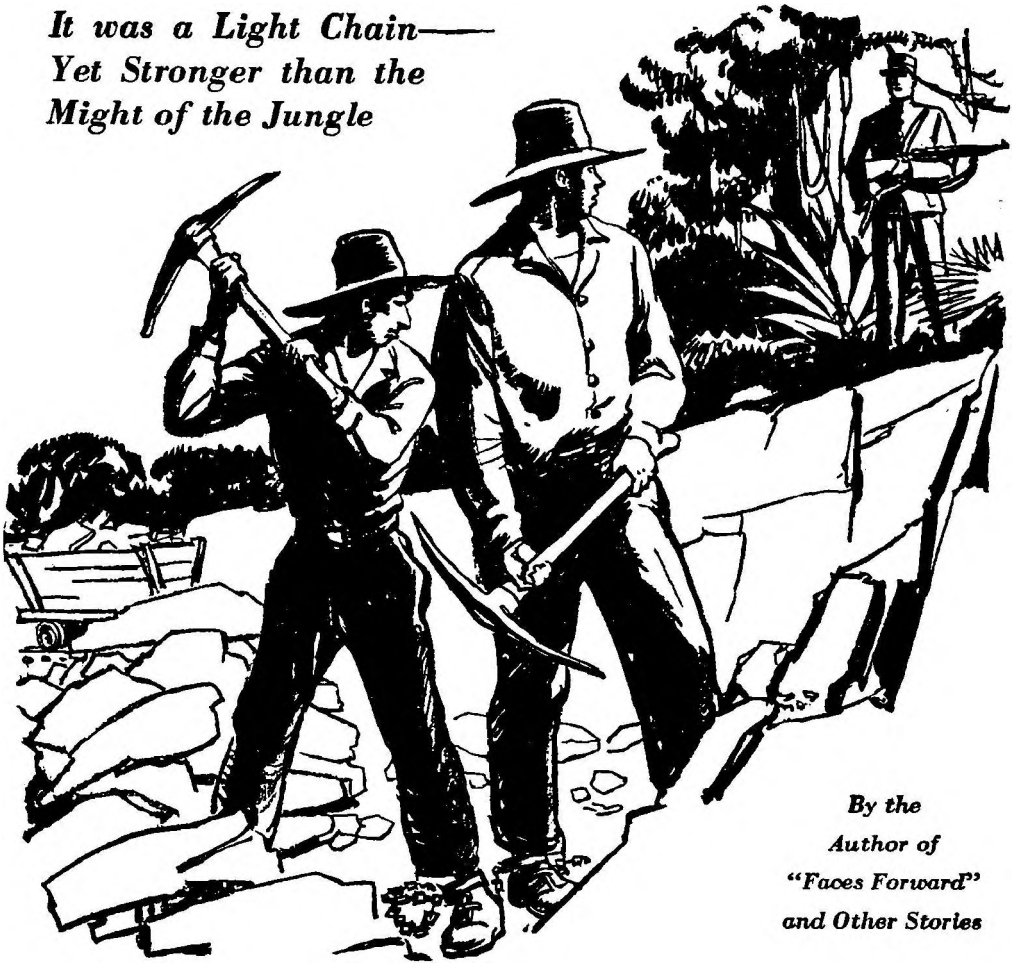
On his right sat Michaels and on his left Edwin. Michaels got up and called for silence. "Boys," he began, "before we start to eat, I want Mister Waino Kalevalainen to get up and tell us how he saved the day for the Algonquin."

"Hooray," shouted the men. "The Finn!"

His face redder and his smile broader than ever, the Finn awkwardly rose to his feet. He looked at the men and then looked at the food, steaming hot and waiting to be eaten.

"By golly," he said, "it was a purty good fight!"

It was a Light Chain—— Yet Stronger than the Might of the Jungle



By the Author of "Faces Forward" and Other Stories

CHAINED

By WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

"POISONED," said Slade, his thin lips twisted into a snarl of hate. Beneath the shade of the mangy screw pine the guard clung to his rifle and struggled to keep from falling while he clawed at his throat with his free hand. "Balinga did it. Put it in his canteen this morning." Slade watched McGowan out of the corner of his hard eyes and spat significantly at the chain which lay in the dust between them.

"It's our chance to make a break but it's got to be both or neither."

Slade hated McGowan; hated him with a hate which was stronger than that six foot length of steel chain which bound his own right ankle to the left ankle of the big, moon-faced man beside him. For five blistering years Slade had worked by McGowan's side in the chalk pit and tossed uneasily beside him in the smelly, whitewashed barracks while a blood red moon rose over New Caledonia and the other convicts turned and groaned in their sleep. Five years is a long time for a man to live in the chalk pits, but life still burned fiercely in the breasts of McGowan and Slade for each lived for a purpose. Mc-

Gowan waited to return to his tiny plantation down Ontong way and the six year old son he had left when they took him away fourteen years ago. Slade lived to kill McGowan.

McGowan's had been a pretty plantation with the coconut palms swaying along the blue lagoon and the scarlet thunderheads climbing out of the sea at sunset. McGowan remembered it well. He had been very happy there with his black haired wife and his chubby son. Then one day he had found his wife in the arms of French Ladue, the skipper of the trading schooner *Dusing*. It had been incomprehensible but it had been so and McGowan had choked out the life of French Ladue with his two great hands. Afterward they had come and taken him away from the plantation and the chubby-legged boy, and after much talk which McGowan did not understand, they had told him that he must go to prison. That too had been incomprehensible. He had waited seven years for them to allow him to return to the coconut palms along the lagoon but the hard faced guards only laughed and touched their foreheads when he asked. Then he ran away and they brought him back and had him beaten and when he ran away again they brought him to New Caledonia and chained him to Slade, the murderer.

So McGowan labored beside Slade, for whom the guillotine had been too good; labored with the half inch chain clanking at his ankle and always close behind was the guard with his rifle and his lead filled club. Eleven times in the five years had McGowan seen men go mad in the chalk pits and rush at those guards only to be clubbed down mercilessly. The sun did it; the sun and the madness which comes to men who have nothing but death to look forward to. Slade was a young man, twenty-nine at the most, but his hair was a stark, dead white and his face was a crafty, yellow mask. The pit had done that, too, but Slade did not mean to die in the chalk pit. That was why he hated McGowan for McGowan helped to hold him there—big, awkward McGowan with his mild eyes and his dreams of a plantation and a chubby boy; moon-faced McGowan at the other end of a steel chain.

Slade watched the guard while his short upper lip lifted from his teeth in a cat-like snarl. The sun was directly overhead and the guard mopped his wet forehead nervously while he leaned on his rifle and watched the two men. He was young, little more than a boy, and he was sick. He had been all right at breakfast but now there was a terrible clawing at his stomach as though a cruel hand twisted at his vitals—and there would be no one to relieve him. This was a holiday. Four days a year the other convicts did not work, but these two worked every day. They were *incorrigible*. The boy groaned and cursed the luck which had sent him to spend the holiday watching two chained men labor beneath the red hot sun. He wiped his face again with a hand which shook and moved into the shade of the screw pine while Slade's cruel eyes watched him from beneath half closed eye lids.

Slade had planned this for a long time and Slade was clever, very clever. Last night while McGowan slept uneasily on the narrow board which was his convict bed Slade had whispered his final instructions to Balinga, the bush boy who served in the house of the commandant. For many nights Balinga had crept past the sleepy sentries and listened to the words which Slade whispered to him. It had been quite simple; Slade smiled wolfishly to himself while he waited for the guard to die. A mile away the water lay like a sheet of purple glass in the lifeless air; in front the jungle clad slopes of New Caledonia stretched up to where wisps of cloud clung to the volcanic peaks. Once beyond those peaks Slade would be safe.

McGowan swung his pick steadily in the white sunlight. He had noticed nothing amiss with the guard for his mind had been miles away beside a crystal clear lagoon. Slade spoke in a guarded voice and the big man looked at him with slow sur-

prise in his faded eyes. Slade had not spoken a dozen sentences to him in the five years the chain had been there. The guard's rifle clattered to the ground as the boy reached blindly for the supporting trunk of the screw pine. Slade jerked his head and grinned viciously, a cold gleam in his nasty eyes.

"Poison is too good for them. The swine! I wish to God I could poison them all." The chain rattled under his uneasy movements. McGowan's pick rose and fell while his brow wrinkled with the effort of thinking. It is hard to break the habit of five years.

"We'll make it," said Slade softly. "It's going to storm soon now and they won't be able to use the dogs. The storm will wash out our tracks." The guard was very sick. His face was a pasty green and he tried to speak while a nameless fear arose in his eyes. McGowan nodded his great head slowly.

"Yes," he said at last, "It is going to storm. I remember now. Old Injun had the ache in his bones this morning. It will surely rain." Slade jerked at the chain impatiently and his eyes were cold and sinister like those of a snake. He must not antagonize this fool now. That would come later. He laughed harshly, taking no care to be quiet now.

"The guard will die soon now. It is best to wait. He might fire a shot and bring the rest." McGowan looked incuriously and as he watched the guard sank to his knees, gasping for breath.

"But this?" The big man shook the chain which trailed from his ankle. "It will not be easy to travel so." Slade threw down the heavy pick which he had held and watched the prostrate form of the guard intently.

"I am not a fool," he said curtly. "Balinga will be at the Devil's Rock above the mangrove swamp. He will have tools to cut them off and he will take us across the island." Slade smiled again, his lip lifting over his protruding teeth. He did not say that McGowan's head had been the price which he had promised Balinga in return for the bush boy's services. It had been a clever trade; one which only a Slade could have made. His liberty in return for the head of the man he hated. He licked his thin lips and waited. McGowan nodded finally and his mild face was placid.

"It is good," he said. "It has been a long while since I saw my little boy. I don't suppose that he still has curls though. Let us go now."

WAIT," ordered Slade harshly and he led the way to where the guard lay. The boy sprawled horribly with his limbs stiffening and the death film already clouding the terror in his eyes. Those who die by native poison do not die easily. Slade's icy calm broke as he looked down at the dead man. Suddenly the blood flooded to his yellow face and his eyes went black with suppressed fury. He kicked twice and the dead man's head rolled from side to side.

"Swine! Son of swine!" He spat the words venomously as he fought to regain control of himself. McGowan looked on incuriously as Slade went through the boy's pockets. He was a good looking boy and it was a pity that he had had to die but then one died sooner or later anyway. He, McGowan, had wondered sometimes if he too, would die before he got back to the plantation down Ontong way but he hadn't. He was going there now. The sudden breeze riffled the coarse leaves of the screw pine harshly and a mile below in front of the white-washed barracks the palms swayed gently. A harder gust roughened the bay as Slade pocketed the few trinkets which he had found on the dead man. There was not much; tobacco, a pipe, a heavy watch and a few copper coins. Slade grunted angrily. There was no knife and he wanted a knife in case he should not find Balinga. He didn't mean to make the trip across the mountains with McGowan bound to him. He rose to his feet and picked up the rifle which the guard had dropped.

"Come on," he said shortly. "We've got

about five hours before they'll miss us. With any luck we'll be loose and well away by then." With quick hands he ripped strips from the dead man's shirt, and tossing two to McGowan, he stooped and bound the chain up about his knee. McGowan did the same. They could walk freely now though the chain was shortened so that they went shoulder to shoulder.

They ran awkwardly across the clearing and plunged into the jungle. The afternoon was quiet as Slade stopped and watched for a sign that they had been seen but the white shell in front of the barracks was deserted. The guard sprawled where they had left him beneath the screw pine and far up in the blue a black dot circled slowly. Another joined it and then another. Without a word the two men turned and started into the odorous twilight of the rain forest. It was hard going. A dozen times Slade was jerked forward onto his face by the clumsy strides of the larger man and a dozen times he pulled himself to his feet, his thin lips white with suppressed fury and his fingers twitching. McGowan didn't notice. His mind was on a lagoon down Ontong way.

The sky darkened and at four o'clock the storm came with a sudden deepening of the gloom beneath the trees. There was a long hollow sigh as the wind beat its way through the tangled mat of jungle; suddenly rain roared on the leaves above them and dripped sullenly through the creepers. Slade's thin lips twitched with an exclamation of satisfaction as he leaned against a tree and caught his breath. There would be no pursuit while the rain lasted and they were close to the spot where Balinga waited. They started again and the going was becoming more difficult. Together they hauled themselves through dense walls of creepers. Inch long thorns clawed at their hands and faces and the rain chilled them to the bone but they plunged on. It was almost dark now. A faint distant *boom* drifted to their ears and they went on faster. Their escape had been discovered but the big rock which Balinga had picked as a meeting place was close.

"Here's the place," said Slade shortly five minutes later. Before the two men a great rock reared its head out of the jungle in the gloom. It was Devil Rock, a landmark for miles around. McGowan hesitated. He had a vague feeling of something impending. There was something ominous about that black rock in the jungle. Slade jerked impatiently on the chain.

"Come on, you clumsy ape," he growled harshly as he shouldered the big man towards the face of the rock.

"I am no ape, Slade," said McGowan in his mild voice. Slade grunted and muttered under his breath. Cautiously the two men went forward, the chain between them clinking softly. It was dry under the overhang and at Slade's gesture they crouched down side by side, Slade with the rifle in his hands. In front of them the wind whistled mournfully through the rain forest and the rain dripped through the leaves with a monotonous beat. Slade shivered suddenly and then cursed, low, bitter curses which were as black as the night around him. McGowan said nothing as he sat with his labor-twisted hands hanging between his knees and his white face staring into the rain.

"Talk, damn you," said Slade suddenly as he whirled on the other. "Say something, you white-faced fool. Don't sit there like a crazy mummy. Talk before I put a bullet through you." The night and the storm and the hate which he had borne McGowan for five years were becoming too much for Slade. McGowan turned his head slowly and stared at the other with his mild, faded eyes.

"What do you want me to say?" he

asked deliberately after a minute's thought. The wind howled down on them with fresh fury. Back in the jungle giant fingers flung trees down with a crash. Slade's voice was high and shrill.

"What do I care what you say?" he snarled. It should have been here by now —a silent, deadly arrow flitting out of the blackness to deliver him from the man he hated. "Where in hell is that damned nigger? Where is he, you fat fool?" McGowan thought in silence.

"That boy," he said at last as though pondering a weighty problem, "that boy was a pretty good looking young fellow." Slade glared at him.

"Who you talking about?" he asked and there was a note of deadly menace in his voice. McGowan was looking ahead into the night again and didn't notice.

"That young fellow back there." He gestured vaguely with his right arm. "It was sort of a pity to kill him." Slade sprang to his feet angrily but the chain jerked him back again. With a tremendous effort he controlled himself; it was not yet time to be rid of McGowan.

"You open your face about him again," he said finally, "and I'll slit your gullet like I would a pig's." McGowan leaned his chin in his scarred hands and watched the rain drip in front of him.

"He was a right nice looking young fellow," he went on in his even, toneless voice. "I shouldn't wonder if my boy didn't look something like that when he gets bigger." Slade's eyes gleamed cruelly and he shifted the rifle in his hands, but after a moment he dropped it back into the crook of his arm. The storm was getting worse as the night wore on. Slade didn't like that. He should have been ten miles from here by now. Daybreak came with more rain and more wind. The gloom under the trees lightened to a hazy twilight. Slade got to his feet and shivered. There would be fever and he must not get the fever. He cursed Balinga with black, terrible curses.

Suddenly there was a sharp *twang* from the matted jungle and an arrow spat sharply on the rock behind Slade. He dropped out of sight and his thin lips tightened into a straight, hard line as he reached for the rifle which he had taken from the guard. With a quick hand he motioned McGowan to be quiet. A shadow appeared among the trees, a shadow which crept cautiously forward while beady eyes searched the face of the rock. It was Balinga and he carried a short bow in his hand. Slade cursed morosely to himself. Balinga had almost made a fatal error; he had almost shot the wrong man. Cautiously Slade got to his knees and Balinga stopped.

"Balinga! What made you shoot'm me? Me fella Slade. You savvy? You no shoot'm me. Me good fella along you." Balinga moved suddenly. There was the soft whine of a bowstring again and Slade felt hot pain shoot through his left arm and shoulder. Then he knew the truth. Balinga intended to collect two heads instead of one. The white man screamed aloud and threw his rifle to his shoulder.

"You dirty double-crosser," he snarled hoarsely. The rifle spat flame and the bush boy crumpled in his tracks. With an oath Slade yanked the arrow from his shoulder and threw a new cartridge into the rifle. "Come on," he gritted. "They heard that shot down below and there'll be half a hundred of them after us in fifteen minutes." With McGowan stumbling beside him he rushed at the slope in front, clawing at the slippery vines and fighting the tangled mat of creepers which clung to his arms and legs. The chain tangled often and always it dragged at ankle and knee. Too late Slade remembered that Balinga might have had a knife with which he could have cut himself loose from the white-faced man who struggled by his side.

THE rain stopped that afternoon but the drenched trees dripped steadily and both men shivered with the dampness which had crept into their bones. The wound in Slade's shoulder throbbed pain-

fully but he made a poultice of mud and McGowan bandaged it in place. Once they heard the sound of dogs far below and at the sound they ran, falling often, getting up and going on until the baying was lost in the steaming jungle. McGowan's face was scratched and swollen but his pale blue eyes were placid. He was going home. When night fell again they had gotten up to where the forest was thinner and the going easier but Slade's face was gray and drawn when they finally huddled under a broken ledge to wait for daylight.

"The dirty double-crossing sneak," he muttered again as McGowan helped him put on a new poultice and a fresh bandage ripped from the big man's tattered shirt. The chain rattled as he moved and Slade cursed savagely, deep, hoarse curses as he yanked at the steel links. The shackle bit into the raw flesh of his ankle and he cursed again while McGowan lay on his back and watched with his mild, faded eyes. The big man's body was bare to the waist and his chest and back were covered with dried blood; the rags which he had bound about his ankle where the chain rubbed were stained with blood, too, but he said nothing as he watched the other man pull and twist at the steel. It was useless. The chain was strong and tough and the shackles had been secured with heavy rivets which could not be shaken. Slade worked frantically for half an hour, sawing back and forth with a bit of rock and then gave it up when the stone crumbled in his hand and no scratch appeared on the steel.

Slade groaned and twisted in his sleep and the rubbing of the shackle on his ankle awakened McGowan. Slade was muttering under his breath, but the big man paid no attention as he lay on his back and looked at the roof of the jungle above him. He was at peace. He was going home where he would see the boy he had left ten—no thirteen years ago. A cloud of insects hummed over his head and stabbed at his face but he didn't mind for this was the day he had been waiting for. Dawn came and Slade sat up stiffly.

"Well, let's get on," he said in his harsh voice. His eyes were red and bloodshot and his hands shook as he tightened the knot in the rags about his knee. "We've got to get the mountains between us and this place." He gestured back along the way they had come the day before. "We're leaving a trail which a blind man could follow and they'll cut it sooner or later, the swine!" He picked up the rifle and got to his feet slowly.

"Yes," said McGowan after a minute. "I would not want to go back. Then, too, there would be the matter of the boy." He looked at Slade with a queer light in the back of his eyes. "You said that the bush boy poisoned him, eh? He was a sort of good looking young fellow." The red flamed up in Slade's eyes and he jerked the rifle forward in his hands.

"Shut up, you ugly sow!" he screamed. "By God, I told you not to talk about that fool again!" The hammer of the gun clicked sharply as he took a step forward, his eyes murderous and his pale lips working with passion. The muzzle of the rifle pressed against McGowan's chest but the big man stood quietly, his hands hanging limply at his side and his pale eyes blinking incuriously. He was not afraid. Slade would not kill him. Slade was almost a friend of his. Slade's fingers tightened on the trigger and the hard lights crackled in his bloodshot eyes.

"For five years I have hated you, you chalk-faced monkey," he said in a cold, emotionless voice. "For five stinking years I have hated you and now I'm going to leave your nasty carcass for the ants to pick." McGowan smiled slowly.

"But why should you do that?" he asked. "That would be murder and besides there is the chain." Slade's face suddenly grayed to the color of old ashes. There was a shadow of fear in his hard eyes.

"I can't do it!" he shrieked. "God! I can't do it! For five years I've waited and

planned to kill you and now I can't do it because of a filthy chain. I planned to kill you because of that chain and now it keeps me from it!" He dropped the rifle and tore madly at the iron until his finger nails spurted blood and then he lay face down on the sodden ground while he fought to regain control of himself. There was a look of bewilderment on McGowan's moon shaped face.

"You wanted to kill me?" he asked. "That is strange. I have not wanted to kill you." He sat beside the prostrate man and pondered this fact. He had killed a man himself but he had not wanted to. He had never wanted to kill a man.

"Why have you wanted to kill me, Slade?" Slade sat up and once more his face was a cunning mask back of which his eyes glinted with their old time craftiness.

"Never mind," he said thickly. "We've got to travel and if we ever get out of this we've got to travel fast. We can't go back. They'll slice our heads off in a minute if we do. We've got to go on, you and I. Forget what I said a minute ago."

The sun was overhead and the sky was brassy when the slope in front of the two men gradually became less steep. Finally it flattened and then they were going downhill beneath the tangled mat of the jungle which hid everything. McGowan smiled to himself and Slade's step began to quicken. They had passed the summit and were on the down slope. Slade laughed once, harshly.

"Fools," he said. He was thinking of the others back there in the chalk pit. It had been easy. "They are all fools, but Knife Slade is no fool," he muttered. He spat and stared at McGowan as they sat and rested with the chain between them. McGowan's face was haggard and bloated poisonously from stings of insects and slashes of creepers but his eyes were calm and inscrutable. Those eyes infuriated Slade. Without a word he got to his feet and led the way down through the thickets of creeper and thorn which tore at their faces and hands and the glades of *upang* grass which slashed at their naked backs with razor edges. The jungle thickened as they went deeper and the bright daylight became gloomy twilight again.

It was mid-afternoon when they stumbled out into the sunlight once more. They were on a rocky promontory which jutted out a hundred feet above the sea of green tree tops and what Slade saw made his stomach turn to ice. Below lay the jungle flowing without a break down into a valley, and across the valley, climbing up into the brazen sky, was the mountain range. Facts which another man would have known struck Slade like a blow. They had not crossed the range—they had not even started to cross the range. Four thousand feet above them the peaks which they had seen from the chalk pits still rose into the sky, rose with the wisps of cloud still clinging to their peaks, and between those summits and the two men, lay mile after mile of jungle and swamp.

"It's a long way," said McGowan staring thoughtfully, but the blind faith that he was soon to be free was not dimmed in his eyes. He rubbed the tangled mat of reddish brown beard on his face and scratched aimlessly at his armpit. "I guess we might as well go."

SLADE recovered his composure while he studied the big man with calculating eyes. Two men would never reach those peaks he knew. One man must stay. That would be McGowan. One man could go on and that man would be Slade. He cursed himself for a fool for not getting the bush boy's knife back there at Devil Rock. With the knife it would be simple. A quick shot in the back, a few slashes

of the knife and he would be free. It was harder now, but he would find a way.

"All right, Ape Face," he said as they turned back into the forest.

They camped at the edge of the valley where the jungle floor was dry and Slade made a fire with the powder extracted from a cartridge. As the flame shot up and the wood began to crackle Slade's eyes narrowed. Fire! Why hadn't he thought of that before? Fire would free him. He laughed suddenly, a long, gurgling laugh in which there was no mirth. Free! He was as good as free. McGowan looked at him curiously as the night closed down.

"Why do you laugh, Slade?" he asked. Slade sat up and his face again dropped behind its expressionless mask. His eyes were crafty and he licked his thin lips with his tongue.

"I was thinking about that guard," he said slowly while he watched McGowan out of the corners of his eyes. The fire threw dirty shadows on his white, unnatural hair. "I was thinking of the look on his face when his belly began to hurt." McGowan's pale eyes were puzzled.

"I did not see that it was funny," he said. "He was very young and a good looking fellow. You wanted to kill him and you wanted to kill me. I do not understand. I have never wanted to kill anyone. No, I do not see what is funny." Slade's half closed eyes hid the hate and the triumph which burned there. There was an expression of vicious affability on his dirty, bearded face as he replied.

"Oh, you don't eh? Well, maybe someday you will. Help me get enough wood to keep this fire going, Ape Face." Together they crawled about on their hands and knees gathering dead sticks. Slade chuckled from time to time as he worked. There was something ludicrous in big, moon-faced, clumsy McGowan gathering wood for his own funeral pyre. It tickled Slade's sense of humor. Slade was an artist in his own way. When it was done Slade propped his back against a tree and with the gun at his hand he began to talk. He held the whip and it pleased him to see how McGowan would squirm when he found that he had been cheated. The night would be long and there would be plenty of time to do what had to be done. He laid the gun across his knees and watched the big man across the fire. He remembered the watch which he had taken from the dead guard and pulled it from his pocket. For one hour he would amuse himself.

"Ho," he said. "Why did you go to New Caledonia, McGowan? What would a spineless jellyfish like you ever do to be sent to that hell hole?" McGowan rubbed his head with his torn and bleeding hand. He was very tired and it was good to rest.

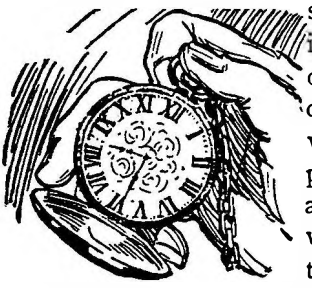
"I don't remember well," he said slowly. "It has been a very long while ago. There was a man and I killed him. I did not want to kill him. I have never wanted to kill anyone. I was very happy on my little plantation with my wife and my little son. He was just six years old then and he had yellow curls. That I remember. It was so long ago." Big tears streamed down McGowan's dirty face. Suddenly he knew somehow that he would never see the boy with yellow curls again. Slade watched with the hard light in the back of pitiless eyes.

"I remember well enough why I went," he said grimly. "He was a fat sow just like you and I cut him—so and—so." He made quick movements in the air with his right hand but McGowan wasn't watching for his eyes were on the watch which dangled from Slade's fingers. At the sight of the trinket something stirred in McGowan's memory. The placid veil which had hung over his eyes for thirteen years suddenly fell and with it fell the scaffold of hopes which he had built in those thirteen years.

"Give it to me," he said thickly, stretching out a dirty, hairy hand. Slade drew back suspiciously and then, with a hard laugh, he tossed it to the other. With awkward fingers McGowan picked up the

watch while memories flooded into his newly awakened brain. The other man watched through narrow eyes while the red fire light glittered on his wolfish features. The black jungle closed in around the two men and the night was alive with uneasy noises. The chain clinked as McGowan moved restlessly and against the tree Slade ran his raw finger tips along the cold breech of the rifle.

For McGowan the black forest had faded. He was in Sydney; they had gone there for a holiday, the three of them. He remembered distinctly now. There had been a new dress for his pretty, black-headed wife and a woolly dog for the curly headed boy and the watch for himself. Like a man in a trance he opened the back of the watch. It was there — a picture of a man and a pretty girl with a boy between them. He sat quite still for a long time as his brain began to piece the parts of the puzzle together. He remembered the youthful guard with the yellow beard lying back there under the screw pine tree. Slowly he raised his great head and studied the man across the fire from him. His eyes were no longer pale and mild but had become polished bits of cold steel.



"Where did you get this?" he asked softly. Slade sneered.

"From that guard, Ape Face," he answered. "Not that it's any of your damned business. Give it back to me."

"You bribed the bush boy to poison him, Slade," said McGowan speaking slowly and distinctly. "You bribed a stinking bush boy to poison my son." At the sound of the big man's voice a shadow of fear came into Slade's crafty eyes. He laughed harshly to hide it and shifted the rifle in his hands.

"Hell!" he said. "Your son. That's good, that's justice for you. Your son to stand over you with a club in the chalk pits." He laughed again but there was no humor in his eyes. Cautiously he stirred the fire with his foot and it flared up for a moment throwing big shadows on the trees and creepers. McGowan made no move but his face had set in grim lines which were terrible to look at.

"Sure I bribed the nigger to poison him." All the stored hate of five years was in Slade's voice. "Sure I bribed him and you want to know what was the price I offered him? I'll tell you, Fat Swine. Balinga was to get your head!" He swung the gun up so that it covered McGowan. "I've hated you, McGowan, hated you for five years and I bribed Balinga to poison the guard and he was to let me free when he had taken your head at Devil Rock. The swine double-crossed me and I killed him. Now I'm going to kill you, McGowan. I'm going to kill you and then I'm going to drag what's left of you into the fire until this is free." Slade's face was livid with hate and his eyes were red with madness, as he rattled the chain viciously. McGowan sat quite still but his eyes were terrible. Slade laughed, a horrible, ghoulish laugh which echoed hollowly against the black wall of jungle outside the fire light.

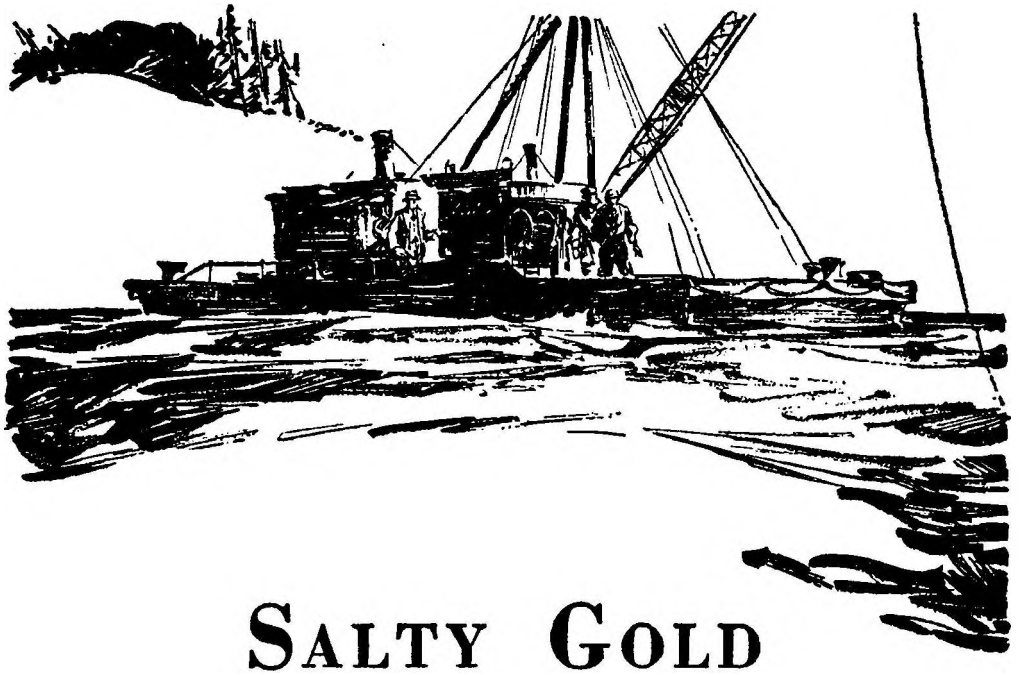
"I am going to kill you, McGowan. In a minute I am going to shoot you there." He swung the rifle to cover the big man's chest. McGowan unclasped his huge, scarred hands. He knew now why one man should wish to kill another.

"Murderer," he said in a clear, hard voice. "You killed my son." Slowly he rose to his feet and Slade rose with him, his lips drawn back from his teeth and the rifle pointed unwaveringly at the big man's chest. Slowly still, McGowan took a step forward and with a scream Slade pulled the trigger. The rifle roared in the still night and the flame burned the shreds of shirt over McGowan's chest but he didn't stop. There was a terrible light in his eyes, a light of grim, implacable jus-

tice. Wth one great hand he tore the rifle from the other's grasp and flung it far into the tangled creepers.

Slade screeched and clawed as he felt the big man's hands on him and then he was lifted in arms of steel and carried forward. He felt the warm moisture of blood from McGowan's chest and then he screamed again. He would live many days there and every day would be a day of torment and every night a night of horror as he lay chained to McGowan and waited for death. Slowly but invincibly the big man strode forward; Slade heard the splash of water under the other's feet. He struggled frantically and then, just as black unconsciousness flowed over him, he felt the big man's arms relax limply and he was falling, falling down a terrible black shaft to the bottom of the world.

Slade dreamed that he was in hell and that a million devils pried and tore at him with red hot hooks. He opened his eyes slowly and felt sudden, grateful relief that it was only a dream. It was day and he was lying on his side in the swamp. Then he remembered and with cold fear at his heart he clawed his way to his feet and started to run. A hand of steel clutched at his ankle and he was pulled back. The chain clanked softly. He screamed again and then he fell face down into the stinking water he caught a last glimpse of the man he had hated and killed; the man who had brought him to justice. It seemed to Slade that the lips of the dead man twisted in a grim smile as he fell.



SALTY GOLD

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON

Who Gave You "Hell's Noon Whistle Blows," "The Hell Benders" and Other Northern Tales

THEY talked of everything except the thing itself, those three men on the big scow. They discussed winches and cables and stresses and buoyancy, tackle and gear and air pumps and gas engines, and they toiled on all these as they talked. But they never mentioned the object of it all. Seldom did they even think of it directly. A million dollars in gold!

It lay beneath them, beneath fifty fathoms of cold Alaskan sea water. It had been lying there nearly thirty years, since the *Dora Alton* had struck in a thick snow storm and gone down with everyone and everything aboard her.——And with the gold!

The wreck of the *Dora Alton* caused a sensation, and was forgotten. Thought of the gold lingered a little while. It was not only gold, but it was Alaskan gold; and the romance of the Klondike was still fresh. But no one knew where the ship had struck. She was bound south from Skagway, direct for Seattle, and there were dozens of reefs and pinnacle rocks that might have ripped the bottom out of her.

The insurance people searched for a time. Tides and currents and wind were used as the basis for countless deductions as to where the *Dora* lay. There was much dragging and sounding. What few pieces of wreckage came ashore gave slight clues, for they had drifted into queer places. The best opinion narrowed the spot down to twenty-five miles of channel. The insurance people gave it up and paid. The ship and her dead and her treasure had lain forgotten for thirty years.

THE three men on the scow were absorbed in the splicing of a steel cable attached to a huge truncated cone. Heavy rivets dotted the cone's sides, and eyes of thick glass gave it a grotesque appearance that was heightened by two sets of metal arms and a nose that had the curved lens of a searchlight for a tip.

"You can sure splice 'em, Nels," Bruce

Mason said with frank admiration when the job was completed. "A sheave will never know when that passes over it."

"I ought to know how," Big Nels growled. "I spoiled miles o' cable learnin' how. But Uncle Sam paid for it."

Bruce and Teddy Blaine grinned. Big Nels never failed to get in a reference to his service in the Navy.

"You didn't overlook any diving tricks either," Teddy said.

"If you want to learn the best about anything worth knowing, from timing a gas engine to blacking your boots, join the Navy," Nels answered. "There's some who never learn anything but how to shoot craps and sell spark plugs and gasoline and blankets the week before pay day, but I guess every navy's got to have its scum."

"All I can say is, we're lucky to have you on this scow," Bruce commented warmly. "Now, you two get after the winch."

As Bruce turned away, a low hum came to them from down the channel. They looked above the water, searching for an airplane, until Teddy Blaine's eye caught the white bow wave of a swift craft. The boat was coming almost directly toward them, and all three watched in silence

A Million Dollars in Gold—Fifty Fathoms Under the Surface of the Icy Waters Off the Alaskan Coast!

"Who you suppose that is so early?" Nels muttered, and he glanced at his watch. "Not yet five o'clock."

"Fish scout," Bruce suggested.

"Booze boat," Teddy said. "And they're cockin' it to her. All power and cargo space in those things."

The strange craft sheered off, passed in mid-channel. The three turned to their work.

They had said little about it, but all three found the task a little disheartening. It hadn't been as simple as they had expected.

"Think of it," Teddy grumbled, a worried look on his face at sight of the strange boat. "We've spent two years trying to lift that old safe out of the *Dora,* and every nickel we could raise. We've gone without everything but grub. It's beginning to look like we'd go without that, too. And like three boobs, we figure on hauling up that safe and setting it here on this scow for anybody to take a crack at."

Bruce Mason turned to the grotesque machine on the scow.

"You two get after that winch," he said.

The safe still lay fifty fathoms down, right where it was when they had begun operations two years before. They had considered only the raising of it, the complicated problem of reaching it through wooden decks and steel frames, of getting tackle about it, breaking it loose from its moorings and hoisting it aboard the scow. Further than that they had never had time to think.

Bruce Mason walked across to the truncated cone and climbed through a square opening in its side. A moment after his feet had disappeared, the metal arms of the weird machine began to move. Slowly, at first, with jerky, awkward motions. The grotesque mechanical beast was stretching its jointed limbs.

A metal finger reached down, picked up a piece of chain. Another finger caught a bight. There was a flip, a clanking of steel links, and the chain had been tossed over a bitt, a hook slipped into a link and the whole drawn tight.

The metal arms were then lifted, as a magician exposes his bare hands to the audience, and then they reached down, released the hook, drew away the chain, wrapped it twice around the bitt and made it fast again.

"Bruce is getting so handy with that diving bell I'll bet he could throw a knot in a necktie for you—if you had a necktie," Teddy laughed, speaking to Nels.

"He needs to be handy. Working them arms up here, in the air and with a good light, is another thing from working 'em fifty fathoms down. When I was diving in the navy——"

THEY were silent when they ate the noon meal. Usually they talked with much animation, argued out their problems. Now each man seemed conscious of his voice, and a bit afraid of it. Instead of asking to have things passed, they reached; and toward Bruce an unaccustomed deference was shown by the other two.

Bruce's concern was not theirs. The diving bell had never been tested at great depths. Teddy and Nels had hopes, and speculated; but Bruce had confidence. The thing was his own, from the first idea to the patent finally granted in Washington. He knew each rivet and each engineering problem that entered into its construction. He knew those long metal arms from their birth in his brain through the succession of laths and bits of wire and metal that had finally evolved into the present complicated arrangement of levers and tightly packed pistons and uncanny tentacles. Bruce was sure, though he had never been far below the surface in the bell.

After luncheon they walked together to the big cone. Bruce crawled inside, adjusted a set of ear phones, and then the heavy door was set in place, the gasket inspected and the big nuts turned down. Teddy cranked the gas engine that operated the air pump, waited until it was running to his satisfaction, and then

started the bigger gas donkey. Nels put on another pair of ear phones, connected with those Bruce was wearing inside the diving bell. At a signal from Bruce, Nels nodded his head. Teddy, his heart thumping, tugged at levers; and the diving bell rose two feet from the scow. Nels heaved on a rope, and the boom swung the bell out over the water.

"All right, lad?" Nels spoke into his phone.

"Lower away," Bruce answered from within the bell.

Slowly the strange diving machine descended. It touched the water. After a moment the water closed over it. Only the steel cable and the air and electric lines were to be seen.

"Slow, boy," Nels cautioned Teddy.

Teddy's eyes were on the drum. "Five fathoms," he called. "Ten."——"Fifteen."

"Hold her there," Nels commanded; and then, into his phone. "How is she?"

"Fine," Bruce answered. "Everything tight so far. Let her go."

When Teddy called "Thirty fathoms!" he looked anxiously at Nels. Nels was talking to Bruce and only nodded his head.

The cable ran out. "Forty!" Nels raised a hand.

"No sign of her," came over the phone from Bruce. "Everything's tight when I work the arms. Lower away!"

The cable ran out slowly. Suddenly it went slack.

"He's on bottom!" Teddy shouted.

Nels nodded, listened to Bruce, then spoke.

"And no sign of the *Dora!* What you make of that?"

THEY did not know what to make of it in the days that followed. They had won a victory, and there was no reward.

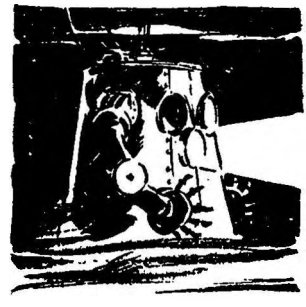
The diving bell worked. Down there on the bottom, Bruce had lifted sea growth from the rocks, had groped in the slime and picked up stones. Despite the terrific pressure, he had been able to operate the levers and to wave the beam of his searchlight across the floor of the sea with only a little water seeping in. He was comfortable in air only slightly above normal pressure.

But there was no wreck. For two years they had prepared, confident that the *Dora Alton* lay there. Bruce had contrived a means of getting at the treasure. They had planned to meet countless problems. Little thought had been given to the possibility of failure.

They verified their shore bearings. They ran out a heavy sounding lead on thin wire. They tightened the line attached to a buoy and which they had always believed, was made fast to the wreck by a grappling hook. And with no result.

"It's the tide," Bruce insisted one night. "These channels are deep, two and three hundred fathoms in places. We know about surface currents but we've never thought of currents down below. They might run in the opposite direction."

In the end Bruce proved to be right.



Strong currents swept the diving bell off its perpendicular course. The cables by which they had anchored the four corners of the scow were lengthened and shortened, thereby moving the lowered bell across the bottom.

One day Nels let out a whoop. "He's on the wreck! Sitting on the fo'c'sle head!"

They moved the scow until Bruce had traveled more than half the length of the *Dora.* Currents swept him against masts and wheel house, spun him about; but his strong searchlight permitted him to see well in the darkness, and he obtained a clear idea of where and how the wreck lay.

Nels listened on the phone and shouted happy directions to Teddy. At last the two above received orders to drop the bell and

hold it there. A long silence followed.

"I can hear him jerking those levers, workin' his iron arms," Nels whispered to the anxious Teddy.

"Suppose he's found the box already?"

"We've some luck comin' to us. We deserve it after all that we've done."

They waited in terrific suspense, did not dare glance at each other. Then came Bruce's command to lift him up.

"His voice sounded kind o' funny," Nels reported, and he walked to the edge of the scow and waited.

At last the diving bell broke the surface. Its searchlight appeared, then the long metal arms. Clasped in these arms was a big glass-eyed diving helmet of the usual kind, to which were attached shreds of a diving suit.

Teddy stopped the winch and stared.

"Somebody's tried to beat us to that box!" he cried.

II

"IT LOOKS fresh to me," he said, when he had set the helmet down on the deck of the scow and had emerged from the bell.

"Somebody's trying to beat us to it!" the excitable Teddy exclaimed.

"Anybody's got a right to it since the insurance people abandoned it," Nels countered.

"Yeah, but we—we've been working two years! We've got some sort of rights."

Bruce and Nels were examining the helmet and the shreds of diving suit.

"It's fresh," Nels said. "Hasn't been under water more than two months. I mind once when we were working on a submarine off——"

"Somebody's tried to get in ahead of us," Teddy complained.

"Well," Nels said, "They've got one man less—" Thinkin' they could go down fifty fathoms in a diving suit!"

"The bell is the only possible way," Bruce said. "We found that out the first year. But this fellow—what do you suppose happened to him, Nels?"

"Where'd you find it?"

"Just abaft the wheelhouse."

"Lines caught in the davits?"

"Yes."

"Guess he didn't die any too easy. Going down that deep—deeper'n any man's gone—that finished him. Suit couldn't stand the pressure, and he died and got foul. When they couldn't get word from him, they hauled up regardless, ripping everything loose."

None of them spoke for a few moments. It was not a pleasant thing to think of, the death of this man down in the black water. They themselves took chances—or Bruce did—even in the diving bell. If a current should sweep the bell aside and the cable get fouled, there would be no escape for him. He could live so long as they pumped air to him, but they could never get him out.

Bruce knew that, but he did not permit himself to think of it. The diving bell was his own invention. It alone could do the work. No man had ever devised a similar method of working below normal diving depths. His ingenuity in contriving the metal arms, and his skill in manipulating them, permitted him to do most things a diver could do, and to do them under normal air pressure and in comparative comfort. He could come up immediately. He could even smoke down there, and there was no danger of "the bends."

The gold did not belong to anyone, of course. Once the wreck and its cargo had been abandoned by the insurance companies, the treasure was common property until lifted to the surface.

"Teddy's right," Bruce said at last. "Somebody has tried to beat us to it.—— Probably knows what we're doing."

"Everybody on the coast knows it, from San Francisco north," Nels scoffed. "Look at all the newspapers had to say, and their pictures of the bell."

"There's enough men who'll do anything for a crack at a million dollars," Teddy said. "And anybody who'd try this hasn't quit."

He looked over the channel, then shoreward. The scow was just off Shipwreck Point. "Wouldn't surprise me if there isn't someone watching us from the brush right now," he added.

"How'd you find things?" Nels asked of Bruce.

"She's down by the head and with a big list to port. Woodwork's about shot. I bumped into the wheelhouse and it crumpled and disappeared."

"Then you can get through the wooden decks?" Teddy asked eagerly.

"I can rip the planking off with the arms of the bell. The question is, how close together are the beams? And how much work will there be in getting them out of the way? The bell's got to drop down into the hold. Let's look at the layout."

The steamship company which owned the *Dora Alton* had failed soon after the wreck; and the vessel, built on the east coast, had been so old that there was no hope of getting her plans from the construction company. But at last they had found an old seaman who had come around the Horn on the *Dora* and whose memory made it possible for him to sit down and draw plans of each deck.

These plans they now studied.

"Steel doesn't rust much down there," Nels said. "The safe being amidships, we can look for same heavy beams right over her. If you cut them with a hacksaw, lad, those metal arms of yours are going to get mighty tired."

"If there's much of it," Bruce said, "we'll have to wait until the underwater torch arrives."

AGAIN they were silent. The torch, developed by Navy men as a result of a marine disaster, had been ordered, and was due in Juneau any day. But it was coming C. O. D., and they did not have the money to pay for it. Nels and Teddy glanced doubtfully at Bruce.

"There's a couple of hours of the day left," Bruce said. "I'll go down for another look."

They lowered the bell, and again Bruce had difficulty in finding the wreck because of the currents. Once he did, however, he began tearing at the superstructure with his long arms. The woodwork was worm eaten and rotten and came away easily. Supper time passed before he asked to be raised to the surface again.

"It's the torch or nothing," he said as soon as the hatch had been removed from the side of the bell.

Nels and Teddy did not comment. It was a tough situation, and it would not be easy to raise the money. But Bruce would raise it. He had done everything, from getting the first clue to where the wreck lay, to designing the bell and raising the funds. Bruce Mason never quit. Nothing dismayed him.

Men in Juneau had scoffed. Fishermen, passing the scow, had shouted derisive remarks.

"We'll have to go to Juneau!" Nels blurted out at the supper table.

Bruce laughed. "I didn't come up here without leaving some strings out," he said. "There'll be mail in Juneau, and a check."

The Chinese cook appeared in the kitchen door. "Boat come," he announced.

Nels looked out a window. "Yacht," he said scornfully. "Keep hid. They'll only ask eight million questions that their eyes could answer, if they knew how to use them."

The yacht tied up at the scow and soon there was a knock at the door. Bruce threw it open.

A strapping big fellow stood outside. He was smiling in a most friendly manner.

"I'm sorry, but the chart doesn't show decent anchorage near here, and I wonder if you'd mind giving us a mooring for the night"

"It's all right if you leave early in the morning," Bruce answered. "We can't have anything tugging at the scow while we're at work."

"That's very decent of you. You're fishing, I presume."

"You could call it that," Nels said drily.

"I thought so," the yachtsman laughed. "In fact, I win a bet on it. My friend said you were setting out buoys because there is one on the scow."

No one answered that. They had finished supper and had gone outside. Each night until dark they spent in going over the equipment, testing and adjusting. Nothing was too much trouble for Teddy and Nels if it eliminated any possibility of accident for Bruce. The bell itself was Bruce's task. The glands on the pistons which operated the arms and the searchlight must be kept tightly packed, or the terrific pressure would force water into the bell. Gaskets must be in perfect shape.

While the three worked, the stranger watched for a moment, and then approached Teddy and Nels.

"You've got me guessing," he laughed. "What on earth are you fellows up to?"

Nels' cold blue eyes stared the man over, then shifted toward the yacht, which bore the words *"Miramar,* San Francisco," on the stern.

The yachtsman hastily apologized for his curiosity. "It's none of my business what you're doing," he said. "But I remember now. Read of it in a newspaper.——You're the men with the diving bell who are trying to raise the gold that went down with a ship a long time ago. Well, you have my best wishes. I hope you get it!"

He seemed sincere and frank. He introduced himself as James Slaughter, and explained how he had shipped his small cruiser to Seattle by steamship and then sailed it to Alaska.

"I have a friend with me," he explained. "We share the work. It's his day to cook and wash dishes, and he'll be at it until midnight.——So that's the diving bell with the human arms. I've heard you're quite a genius, Mr. Mason; but what I admire is your ability to stick to a thing. Mind if I look at your invention?"

They showed him the entire apparatus, told of their disappointments, of the problems they had met and solved. Slaughter's engaging personality was reassuring to all of them. Nevertheless, one thing they did not speak of, the financial difficulty.

Slaughter did not overstay his welcome. As soon as the three had finished their work he said good-night, and the next morning the yacht pulled out early.

All that day the diving bell was at work on the wreck and by night they had succeeded so well that Bruce announced that they could do nothing more until they had the underwater torch.

Bruce was in high spirits. The diving bell and its arms were working far better than he had expected. Down there in the black water he was able to do things he could not do with his bare hands. He was confident that they could reach the safe and get the tackle about it. Once that was done, it was as good as up.

Nels and Teddy could not share his exuberance. They could work long hours. No physical task was too difficult. But a financial problem left them helpless and depressed.

They ate supper, and again the cook appeared in the doorway. "Boat come."

They recognized a small charter vessel from Juneau. It drew alongside and a man jumped onto the scow.

"You Bruce Mason?" he asked when Bruce opened the door. Bruce nodded.

"I'd rather be kicked than do this," the stranger said. "Looks like dirty pool to me, but I got to do it. Somebody down in Seattle has attached this outfit for debt, and as Deputy United States Marshal, I've got to take it over."

III

BRUCE and Teddy went to Juneau in their gas boat, arriving at noon.

"I'll learn first just where this thing stands," Bruce said. "Those people in Seattle promised to carry me until fall. Get the mail and bring it to me at the marshal's office."

A block farther on, Bruce met James Slaughter. The yachtsman was about to pass him by, when he recognized the diver.

"Thought you fellows were too busy to come to town!" he exclaimed.

"We've got to eat and get our mail," Bruce answered.

"That's right, but—what's the matter with you, man? Something gone wrong on the job?"

Bruce did not realize how his face betrayed his emotions. He remained silent.

"I was telling my friend about you boys," Slaughter continued. "You're a game lot, and you deserve to win. I'd hate to think of anything happening to your work."

"The work's going all right," Bruce said stiffly.

"That's good. Your job interested me tremendously and I want to see you get the gold. I almost hoped that there might be something I could do to help out. I'd pass up cruising in a minute in order to be in on the kill. When that old safe is set down on the scow—talk about drama! I'd give a good deal to see it."

His friendliness softened Bruce. "We'll set it there," he said curtly. "We're blocked just now, but nothing's going to stop us."

"Trouble, eh? I thought so as soon as I saw your face. Now listen here, son. Isn't there something I can do? Out with it."

He laid a hand on Bruce's shoulder, and again Bruce melted.

"We're tied up on a debt," the young man blurted out. "U. S. Marshal took over the works last night."

"What! That's a shame, adding such a thing to all you've done. How much is it?"

"Only two thousand. And we stand to win a million."

"Tough! Mighty tough! But how do you boys stand on this, and how have you worked out the shares?"

"A halibut fisherman discovered where the Dora lay," Bruce explained. "He was lost, out to the westward, that fall. He told me about it, never thinking it was worth going after, but when we got started I decided I'd give his family ten per cent of what we found. I hired Teddy and Nels at first, and they're both fine workmen. When the going got tough I offered each a five per cent share in addition to wages."

"Decent of you—— But your equipment cost a lot."

"I had some money, and borrowed more. Then I had to raise ten thousand. Got it I decided I'd give his family ten per cent cent of what we find."

"That's thirty per cent, three hundred thousand. The rest yours?"

"Yes, and I stand all the expenses. A friend in Seattle promised me a loan and I'm expecting the check in the mail now. It will take care of us."

Teddy Blaine appeared and handed Bruce a few letters.

"Nothing doing?" Teddy demanded anxiously as he watched his friend's face.

"All bills," was the answer. "I was sure——"

Bruce Mason was beaten for the moment. He toiled fifty fathoms below the surface of the sea, took all risks, and was untouched. Now money, an intangible thing to a mind obsessed by physical problems, brought a sensation of helplessness. No one in Juneau would listen to him. They thought he was crazy.

"This is the moment when Jim Slaughter steps to the front and does the rescue stuff," the yachtsman laughed. "Get your faces straightened out, you two. You look as if you were going to be hung. How much you need, Mason, to see you through the summer?"

"Five thousand will settle everything

and give us something for emergencies," Bruce answered.

"That's easy. I want to see that old safe sitting on the scow. I'm going to gamble." He took out a check book and a fountain pen and wrote a check for five thousand dollars.

"I'll go to the bank and see that they cash it for you," he said. "Then you can settle that Seattle debt and by night you'll be back aboard the scow. Perhaps by tomorrow night you'll have those beams cut through, and the next day get hold of the safe. And I'm going to be there!"

"It's mighty fine of you, Mr. Slaughter," Bruce said. "We were up against it."

"No charity on my part, boys. I like to gamble—take long chances. Besides it was not my intention to give you this money."

"Of course not. We'll give you an interest," Bruce offered warmly.

"Sure, and we'll draw up a little agreement right now," said Slaughter. "I'm not even loaning this to you. I'm buying a share in the enterprise."

"That's only fair," Bruce nodded.

"I'm glad you agree. Without this, you'd be up against it, wouldn't you? So I think it is only fair that, to take a chance on a losing proposition, I should get a fifty per cent interest in the gross as my share."

Bruce did not speak. Teddy stared an instant, then shouted, "You're crazy! We've done all the work."

"You think that safe is exactly where it was when the *Dora Alton* went down," Slaughter said. "You haven't even seen it. For all you know, someone may have been in ahead of you. Perhaps a diver got down to it."

Even Teddy was silenced then. He thought of the helmet Bruce had brought up.

"There's five thousand dollars," Slaughter continued. "I'm risking it. The odds are a hundred to one. Going to give them?"

Bruce did not speak. He stared at Slaughter with hard eyes, and then his hand shot out and grasped the check, and tore it in two, tore the pieces.

Slaughter was smiling at him. "Keep your shirt on, and think it over. I'll be aboard the *Miramar* all day, and I'll write you another check if you decide that you want me to."

Again Bruce's hand shot out, and this time he ripped the check book in two and scattered the pieces on the ground.

"Come on, Ted," he said harshly. "I'm going through this town again, and I won't quit until I find someone who's got the money for us."

Bruce had tried Juneau before, and without success. The word spread that he was again seeking money, and snickers followed him down the streets. Another mail boat arrived from the south and brought word that there would be no check from Seattle. A day passed, and another, but Bruce found no shred of hope.

"It's licked us," Teddy said one night. "We can do the work, but this financial part's another game."

"It hasn't licked us yet," Bruce said quietly.

He tried the third day, and went back to report failure to Teddy. An old man was standing on the float alongside their gas boat.

"You the diving bell chap?" the stranger asked. "I been waiting two hours."

"Sorry, but I've been busy," Bruce answered.

"Tryin' to raise some money, eh? I've heard about you, trampin' the town from end to end and getting laughed at. They laugh at you today?"

"Not to my face," was the savage answer.

"That kind waits until you're gone. How you stand? Right up against it?"

"Exactly."

"Give up yet?"

Bruce did not like the old man's impertinence. "No," he retorted hotly.

"You've tried every man in town, from what I hear."

"What of it?"

"Nothing much, except that you ain't asked me for five thousand dollars yet."

"All right," Bruce said, about to turn away. "Let me have it."

"Sure!" and the stranger drew out a thick wallet and began counting big yellow bills.

"A bit ago I was right down where you are," he explained. "I'd been that way for ten years. But I kept on, and I won out, up on the Taku. Sold my prospect to a millionaire, and now I got to find ways to get rid of all he paid me. When I heard about you, keeping right on when everybody said you was crazy, I said, 'There's my chance. He's in the same boat I was.' Sure this is all you'll need? 'Cause I'm going down below tonight and there's no telling where I'll land."

"Come aboard so I can write a receipt and sign a contract as to your share," the astonished Bruce said.

"Ain't got the time, and what good's a contract. I know guts and honesty when I meet 'em on the trail. So long, lad, and good luck. Taku Billy Greer's my name, if you need any more."

And that was all Bruce knew when he went back to the scow at Shipwreck Point the next day.

"Damn it, that's great!" the deputy marshal exclaimed when he read the signed order releasing the equipment. "Hop to it, boys. Hope you win."

"We'll win," Teddy assured him. "But here's what's worrying us. Once we get that old box up, what's to prevent anybody coming along and taking it away from us?"

"Nothing much but yourselves; though that's a chance I wouldn't worry about. Any Alaskan would be so glad to see you win he'd be ashamed of himself to take a dime," said the marshal as he left.

"We won't have any trouble," Nels growled.

Not long afterward Teddy jumped to his feet. "Listen to this, you two!" he exclaimed. "It just hit me. Remember, Bruce, how Slaughter told us we didn't even know the safe was there? Said someone might have beaten us to it for all we knew. Said maybe a diver had."

"No diver could live down there," Nels snorted.

"That's not the point. Nobody knows that Bruce found the helmet. Nobody knows anyone worked on the wreck. How did Slaughter know it?"

"He was only bluffing," Bruce said.

"He was not. He knew that diver had made a try. I'll even bet he was backing him; and when he lost out Slaughter thought he could force himself in on us."

Nels grinned. "I suppose you think Slaughter was back of the marshal coming."

"From the way everything was timed, of course he was!" the excitable Teddy cried. "And if he'd do all that, he'd go further. He's the hijacker we've got to watch out for."

IV

THE three men on the scow were in an exalted state when they went to work the next morning. Not only were they free from financial worry but they were nearing the culmination of long months of preparation. Within a few days they would know whether their ideas were sound, whether or not they were always to be laughed at because of their million-dollar dream.

Nels had gone over the entire equipment while the others were in Juneau and they could begin work at once. The underwater torch was rigged, Bruce climbed into the bell and was lowered. By night the heavy steel beams were entirely cut away.

A week passed with more terrific labor. But the safe did not come to light. It was no easy task down there in the diving bell, working the long arms by means of the

levers inside, and there was always a strain for Nels and Teddy so long as Bruce was beneath the surface. They had faith in the bell, but not Bruce's faith. They had strength and determination, too, but not the grit of their leader.

"If he doesn't get it, it's only because the box isn't there," Teddy said.

There was much bad weather, days when the wind was in the south and a swell forbade work beneath the surface. But one morning after Bruce had been lowered into the hold, Nels caught his breath as he listened on the ear phones. Teddy's gaze never wandered from the big man's face.

"He's got it," Nels stated at last in a calm voice. "Says he can feel the knob of the combination lock with them steel fingers of his. Bet he could pick it, too. He's sizing things up. I can hear him working the levers slow, feeling around. Bet we get the tackle on her before dark."

They did more than that. They lifted the safe to the surface, set it on the scow and blew the door open. The safe held rotted papers, a few moosehide pokes of gold, some jewelry, and nothing more.

No one spoke. Teddy and Nels dared not. They stole furtive glances at Bruce's face, tried desperately to think of a comforting word, and realized there was none.

Bruce turned from the safe at last and looked at them.

"Tough lines," he said quietly, "but we're not licked yet. There was a shipment of gold on the *Dora Alton*. I made sure of that before we started work. And I've found out how much space that much gold would fill. This safe isn't big enough. There's another safe down there—or some sort of strong box. I'll go down in the morning and find out."

Teddy found food for a new thought in Bruce's statement, but he did not have the heart to voice it except to Nels alone.

"Maybe the crew took that stuff and wrecked the ship?" he demanded. "There always was a lot of mystery about it. No one was saved."

"You can think of more crooked things happening!" Nels exclaimed. "I'll skin you alive if you peep that to Bruce."

Bruce went down again the next morning, and for two days he felt about in the muck and mire that had collected in the old wreck. It was slow work, for when he stirred things up he could not see through the murky water, even with the aid of his powerful searchlight.

He cut a hole in a steel bulkhead. He removed more woodwork and beams. Patiently he kept at it, with little comment. But there was little encouragement as the days passed. Nels and Teddy, despite their loyalty, were worn and frayed; they had lost hope. The *Dora* was more than two hundred feet long, filled with muck carried out to sea by glacial rivers, and they knew that Bruce, in his relentless efforts, was taking more and more chances.

He almost never talked at night now. He went down early, would not ask to be lifted until late. He would not even come up for lunch, but took some sandwiches down with him.

He did not find a trace of the gold.

"It was never aboard the *Dora!*" Teddy exclaimed in despair.

"I know it was or I'd never have started this," Bruce answered quietly. "We'll find it yet, because it's there."

THE next afternoon he called over the telephone that he wished to come up. Nels glanced at Teddy. "He's had enough at last," the big man said in a flat voice. "Anyhow, he's got this rig to try some place where they're sure of treasure."

The diving bell broke the surface and was swung in over the scow. As Teddy lowered it he saw that one of the metal arms clasped a small object in its claws.

The claws were released and the object fell with a heavy thud.

Nels and Teddy stared. They made no movement toward the bell to open the hatch for Bruce. At last Nels licked dry lips.

"Lead's the only other thing as heavy," he whispered, "and this ain't lead."

Bruce was rapping on a thick glass window and they ran to release him.

"There's a lot more where that came from," he grinned as he thrust out his head. "Scrape off the muck so we can see what color it is."

Nels had whipped out a knife, and its blade soon dug through mud and crust to a dull yellow metal.

"Lad," he whispered as he turned slowly to Bruce, "this is a reward that's earned if one ever was."

"I was taking chances, bringing it up in the arms," Bruce said, "but I had to have a look at one."

"How many are there?" Teddy demanded.

"Couldn't count 'em. Found several boxes beneath the berth in the purser's room. Metal-bound cases but easy to tear apart. We'll have to rig some sort of sling to bring 'em up."

They talked over ways to meet that problem. Nels began meshing light steel cable.

"Can't let any slip out," he said. "We've earned every last bar of that stuff, and the lot weighs more'n a ton and a half."

Nels was excited, but he did not neglect his task. The late northern darkness had come before he finished, and then they found they could not sleep. At dawn they were up, and Bruce had crawled into the diving bell. The sling was attached to the arms to lead its own cable into the depths and the bell was lowered away.

Fifteen minutes later the first sling load was lifted to the surface, swung in and set on the scow. Nels was grinning broadly. Teddy's hands trembled on the winch controls, and in that cold dawn his forehead was wet.

"We've licked it! We've licked it!" he repeated again and again. "At this rate, we'll have it all up by breakfast time."

They lifted the slimy, dripping, muck-encrusted bars from the sling and piled them on the scow; then rigged a slip loop on the diving bell cable and again dropped the sling to the bell.

There, with his searchlight upon it, Bruce set it in a place conveniently near the metal claws and began lifting more bars and placing them in the sling.

It was slow work, for each movement stirred up the muck and clouded the water. But he had learned to feel with those metal fingers. The long hours of practice on the scow had given him an uncanny ability. He handled the underwater torch as easily and as accurately as if he gripped it in his own flesh and blood hands. Working farther below the surface than any man had ever worked before, again and again he thrust the metal claws into the muck, closed them upon a bar of gold, and lifted it into the sling.

He was not unobserved. Brilliant red cod peered in at the glass windows, and strange fish such as he had never seen, all attracted by the brilliant beam of the searchlight.

Yet down there in the cold, black depths, with the terrific pressure on the diving bell, Bruce was intent only upon his task. His movements were almost unconscious. Sometimes he stopped to light a cigarette, and the smoke was whirled into the exhaust line. Nels, who kept the mouth of this line just beneath the surface that he might be constantly informed of air conditions by the bubbles, always grinned when he saw smoke burst through the water.

"I've spent half my life diving," he would say to Teddy, "and I never believed I'd see a man working at fifty fathoms and

more, and smoking while he did it!"

The sling came up twice more. The pile of gold bars was insignificant. Teddy found himself staring at them without belief. It did not seem like much after two years of effort. The little mechanic was excited. His hands were sure enough on the controls, but they trembled. As he talked, repeated ecstatic remarks, he grinned at Big Nels, who hid an equal excitement beneath scowlingly intent features.

A half hour was required to fill the sling the last time, for Bruce was groping about in the muck to get every bar. At last he was satisfied, and told Nels to take it up.

It came, dripping muddy water. Nels swung in the boom.

"A million dollars!" Teddy whooped as he lowered the precious sling load to the deck of the scow. "Wait until we laugh at those Juneau wise crackers!"

"We'll have it in the bank vault by noon," Nels chuckled. "I'm going around town with my thumb glued to my nose and my fingers waggin' like a streamer in a breeze.'

"We'll hire a band!" the delirious Teddy shouted.

NOW you've had your little celebration, try listening to me," a cold, sharp voice sounded behind them. "High as you can—and any funny move is fatal!"

They spun around. A man with two automatics in his hands stood twenty feet away.

Nels' eyes swept past. There was no boat in sight.

"How'd you get aboard?" the big fellow expressed his astonishment.

"I'm aboard," was the curt reply. "My next move is to lock you in the house. Step lively now."

They only stared at him. The two automatics snapped up, and the fellow's eyes glittered. "I mean it!" he snarled.

"Mean it and be damned!" Teddy retorted. "We've got a man down below, and we're not going to leave him there."

"He's better off where he is," the stranger said coldly. "And I want you two locked up. Move!"

Teddy fumed, and then with a deliberate reckless movement he turned to his winch, grasped the levers, threw in the friction clutch, opened the throttle.

The gas engine roared and drowned the sound of a shot, though Nels saw the weapon jump in recoil.

"You dirty rat!" the big fellow shouted. "If I had a hand on you!"

He turned in consternation toward Teddy. If a bullet were to hit Teddy the winch would run wild. The diving bell would be brought swiftly to the surface, there to smash the boom and cable and drop back into the sea.

Teddy was down, but as Nels looked he got up again, gamely. He wavered an instant, then grasped the levers, held the winch under control.

The stranger grinned, lowered his pistols. All three waited, and at last the diving bell broke the surface and rose, dripping and grotesque, until it was two feet above the scow.

Teddy set his brakes, closed the throttle, then toppled to the deck. Nels started toward him.

"Stand still!" the stranger barked. "I'll not be easy on you like I was on him. Yank those ear phones off and walk to the house. I'm taking no more chances for a mere thousand grand."

"Ain't you going to let Bruce out of the bell?" Nels demanded.

"I've got enough of you to handle. Let him stay there."

Nels stared at him, and read death in the fellow's eyes. Bruce was safe enough for the moment, and it would be folly to act now. The big fellow walked slowly to the door of the house at the other and of the scow.

As he entered, a pistol clipped him on the back of the head and he dropped. The stranger looped rope about arms and legs,

soon had him bound securely. Nels stirred, opened his eyes.

"That's the three of you," the man laughed. "I wish I had your back to load that ton and a half of gold, but it's safer with you here."

He went outside, walked over to the heap of gold bars on the deck, stared at them a moment, then turned toward the heavily wooded shore of Shipwreck Point, less than two hundred yards away. The man raised both arms above his head, lowered them again.

V

BRUCE MASON had been busy examining the packing of a piston while being raised to the surface, and even when the light of day had blazed through the heavy glass windows he had continued his work, knowing that Nels would swing the diving bell aboard and that Teddy would lower it to the deck before they opened the hatch.

But the bell had continued to swing there, with the gentle motion of the scow, and after a moment he had straightened and looked out a window. He had seen Teddy lying beneath his winch and Nels walking slowly away, followed by the man with the two automatics.

Bruce, since the beginning of the idea for the diving bell, had made countless plans to meet various emergencies, but none to cope with a situation like this. He was suspended above the sea. If the brakeband of the winch were to be released, he would drop like a shot to the bottom, never to come up again.

Instinctively he reached for the levers which operated the metallic arms. They had become his own arms, in the weeks that he had toiled so far beneath the surface, and like a man who swings out over a cliff, he tried to grasp something which would draw him in to safety. That was all he thought of then, except the body of Teddy Blaine, lying so still beside the winch.

But the long arms could not reach the scow. Once, as the bell swung in a few inches, the nearest almost touched. There was no hope there.

Bruce looked out a window. A little way to the right a projecting timber bore a fairlead for the air and electric lines. These, because Nels had not drawn them in when the bell came up, hung down in the sea.

A long arm could reach them, where they led down from the bell, and Bruce hauled in a few feet of hose, caught it with the other arm, lifted some more.

It was a heavy weight, and a long line. Swiftly he calculated that there was more than two hundred and seventy feet between the bell and the scow, and this must pass through the metal claws a yard at a time. With an eye on the door of the house, he set to work.

The man with the gun might reappear at any moment, but this was the only chance. Never before had Bruce worked his levers and controlled the steel claws so swiftly. The dripping hose was lifted, gripped, dropped back into the sea.

To Bruce, it seemed half an hour. He could not understand what the man was doing with Nels in the cabin. He hoped the big fellow had surprised his foe, that they were fighting there in the house. No sounds came to him through the steel walls of the diving bell.

Suddenly the kitchen door opened and the Chinaman peered out, then darted across and into a little tool house.

Bruce toiled on, and at last reached the end of his task. He saw the hose straighten out of the water. A little more slipped overboard, and and then it tightened against the inboard fastenings. Pulling carefully at the levers, he exerted pressure, and the bell, swinging with the boom, began to move in over the scow.

It was close to the winch, and close to the pile of gold bars, when the door of the house opened and the man with the guns reappeared.

Bruce looked from him to the body of Teddy, lying so near. One of the mechanical hands grasped a lever. He wanted to lift his friend, at least touch him. So accustomed had he become to those steel fingers, he was sure he could feel a heartbeat through them. Then the absurdity of it struck him and he turned to watch the stranger.

Gold was the only thing that held the man's attention. He walked directly to the pile of bars and looked down at them with an interest that made him oblivious to the bell that had only swung in over the edge of the scow.

Then the man lifted his arms to signal to the shore. His guns were in his pocket now.

Bruce missed the signal. The man had raised his head and Bruce ducked for fear he would be seen through the window of the bell. When he peered out again, the stranger was looking at the gold, and grinning.

Again Bruce's hands reached instinctively for the control levers. An arm was lifted. It shot out, and the steel claws at the end closed about the gunman's throat.

He screamed, but Bruce did not hear. He only tugged at one lever, closing the jaws more tightly, and then he heaved at another with all his strength. The man was lifted clear of the deck and hurled into the water.

From a window on that side, Bruce saw him sink, rise, sink again. There was no struggle.

When they had been building the diving bell, Bruce had insisted that the hatch be tightened down on bolts which could be turned from the inside. Nels had laughed at him.

"You couldn't get the hatch off because of the pressure, if you were down," the old diver had said. "And on top there's always us to do it for you."

"I don't like the idea of being cooped inside," Bruce had insisted. "And we can rig gaskets to keep out the water."

Now he picked up one of the wrenches that he always kept near him inside the bell, and began turning the bolt heads. It was slow work, for when he had loosened one the nut on the outside turned, too. And there were ten bolts.

It was warm in the diving bell. The gas engine which operated the air pump was still running, still pumping air into the bell. Bruce barked his knuckles. A nut stuck. At last he released all except one and could swing the hatch aside. In a moment he was out on the deck of the scow.

No one was in sight. The current swung a small boat out past the end of the scow. That explained to Bruce how the man had come aboard, rowing up behind the house while Nels and Teddy were intent on lifting the gold.

Bruce picked Teddy up and carried him into the house. Nels lay cursing and tugging at his bonds. He stared at Bruce.

"I believe you could pick a man's pocket with them steel fingers," he remarked calmly.

Bruce lay Teddy on a bed, cut Nels' lashings.

"Your head's all blood!" he cried. "You shot, too?"

"Only a tap on the head. How's the boy?"

Bruce leaned over Teddy. "Shot in the head. "Was there only one of them?"

"One was enough. How'd you get him?"

"Never mind. If Teddy's——"

"I've seen a lot of men hurt, some shot."

Nels took charge. He brought water, sponged the blood away, while Bruce watched anxiously. The two gas engines with open exhausts were clattering away outside, the air pump working, the winch idling. At last Nels finished his examination.

"Scalp," he said. "Maybe only a concussion. He got up once. Four hours to Juneau and——"

The room darkened. Both men whirled toward the door. Jim Slaughter stood there, a big automatic in each hand.

"Outside, you two," he said crisply. "I need a couple of strong boys to help me load some stuff."

Slaughter was grinning. Bruce stared at him, and all he could think of was the offer of money in Juneau.

"Why did you risk the five thousand?" Bruce demanded harshly.

"Would have made it easier, and surer. But this seems to have worked even better."

Bruce was silent. He knew that the noise of the gas engines had drowned the approach of the *Miramar,* and had permitted Slaughter to come alongside without their hearing him. The other man must have rowed out to the scow, keeping behind the house and concealing his presence in the same way, under cover of the noise from the engines. But Bruce wondered if Slaughter knew what had happened to his confederate. If he did not——

"It didn't work for your pal," Nels growled. "He thought it was sure enough."

Slaughter glanced at the big fellow. "Where is he?"

"He didn't like it here, so he left," Nels answered indifferently.

Slaughter's eyes flamed, and then a cold gleam of exultation flashed from them.

"I'm getting the breaks," he chuckled. "No divvy. But it's tougher for you two. I don't take any sort of chance now.—— Outside!"

They obeyed. There was nothing else to do. The man was a killer. They could see that in his eyes. He played for a million dollars, and his life. Bruce marveled that he had been so deceived by the genial yachtsman who first had visited them and who had offered the loan at Juneau.

The *Miramar* was moored to the scow. She was the modern type of small cruiser; a fairweather craft, but with a world of power and consequent speed. Bruce remembered how Teddy had praised her motor on the yacht's first visit, and the speed with which she had departed.

That speed, Bruce now understood, was essential to Slaughter's scheme. Southeastern Alaska is dotted with salmon canneries, each equipped with wireless. A message can be broadcast quickly. In a few hours every cannery tender and fishing boat in thousands of miles of waterways can be on the lookout for a certain craft.

BUT southeastern Alaska is also a network of channels, bays, inlets, islands and innumerable mountain recesses into which the sea finds a way. Many of these are rarely if ever visited. Hiding by day and running dark at night, a swift boat could dodge and double and play hide-and-seek for days; and in the end, could escape into British Columbia and on to the States.

There was more than this. Slaughter was not the sort that would make careful plans to steal a million dollars and leave his escape to chance. The man was clever and ruthless and determined. He might have another craft ready, one that could go anywhere unsuspected. He might have found a place in which to cache the gold, or he might even have a big airplane ready for use in escaping with the treasure.

All these things occurred to Bruce as he looked at the yacht. Alaska wasn't organized to compete with big time crooks from the States. Fishing boats did not carry arms. No government craft could run down the *Miramar.* If Slaughter pulled away from the scow with the gold aboard, there would be no chance to get it again.

Bruce stood there, staring at failure. It had come, and from a direction he had never considered. He had beaten the terrific pressure of the depths. He had beaten the sea and the tides and storms. He had thrust his iron fingers into the very locker of old Davy Jones, had escaped with a million dollars. Now a lone man with two small but deadly guns thwarted him.

"Get moving, you!" came the command from Slaughter in a vicious tone. "I want

to get out of here, and I'm taking the stuff with me."

Big Nels turned slowly to Bruce.

"How about it, lad?" he asked calmly. "We going to load this for him or watch him do it?"

Slaughter's rage flared with terrible force.

"You'll load it—and be glad to!" he told them. "If you think your lives stack up against that pile of stuff, guess again. Here's your last chance."

Nels considered the gunman calmly, and Bruce saw that the big fellow's loyalty would carry him into anything, just as he saw that Slaughter's ruthlessness would likewise sweep him past every obstacle.

"Don't be a fool, Nels," Bruce said quietly. "He's got us, and he's bad. Grab a brick, and we'll load it for him."

Slaughter grinned. "You're wise, kid. And grab a brick yourself."

His caution was not relaxed. When Nels and Bruce, each carrying a bar of gold, approached the *Miramar,* he directed them toward the stern, then stepped onto the after deck and herded them down the companionway into the cabin, where a hatch had already been removed.

Never for an instant were they out of his sight. The automatics followed each movement, followed them back onto the scow for another precious load.

Bruce and Nels moved slowly but helplessly. Their quick eyes and alert minds grasped the entire situation. There was no hope. The gold was lost.

VI

ANOTHER trip was made into the cabin of the *Miramar,* and two more bricks placed in the hold.

"Snap into it!" Slaughter commanded, for they were moving as deliberately as possible.

Bruce glanced at Slaughter. The man's excitement grew. Sight of the gold actually being transferred to his craft had a tremendous effect upon him. He licked his lips and his eyes were no longer cold, but ablaze wtih stark greediness.

A third time they deposited bricks beneath the hatch in the yacht, Slaughter watching with feverish vigilance, the muzzles of the automatics at their backs.

Twice he had followed them back onto the scow, standing close while they picked up the precious burden. But the pile of gold bars was only a few yards away, beside the diving bell, which still hung from the boom, and after the third trip into the cabin the gunman remained on the after deck. He commanded the situation from there.

A fourth journey was made. The bars were heavy and difficult to handle. Once Nels stumbled at the edge of the scow, and a stream of curses burst from Slaughter's lips.

"Cheat me out of a single piece of that, and I drop you!" he shouted.

They went back for the fifth load. Slaughter was watching, but as Bruce stooped to pick up a bar he saw that the automatics had dropped. The man's vigilance had relaxed for an instant.

It flashed through Bruce's mind that Slaughter guarded himself only from attack and from flight to the house at the other end of the scow. He feared nothing from them, but he was anxious to get away. It was now five o'clock.

Bruce thought of all this as he stooped for a bar, and he thought, too, that Slaughter's position was impregnable. Unarmed, Nels and he could do nothing in the way of defense or attack.

He looked in the other direction. The bell swung almost above him, and its very nearness brought a sense of strength and security.

The diving bell had withstood the tremendous pressure of the depths. With its metal arms he had done miraculous things. It had been his habitat through weeks of toil and accomplishment.

Bruce knew all this, but he had no plan. As he stooped there over the pile of gold bars he saw Slaughter turn his head to

look down channel, and with that movement Bruce leaped. Not toward Slaughter, not toward the house, but toward the diving bell. He was behind it before the gunman could raise a hand and fire.

A shot struck the bell itself, producing a deafening *boom*. The open hatch was on the far side and Bruce sprang for it, drew himself up and in. A bullet cut the sole of his shoe as he disappeared, and when scrambled to his feet he was stunned by the roar of a shot within the bell itself. He looked up to see an automatic's muzzle searching blindly for him. Again it was fired.

Bruce saw his chance. He reached up with a wrench, struck the weapon. But he was too slow; Slaughter's finger caught in the guard and the gun fell outside.

A moment of silence followed. Bruce heard Slaughter laugh.

"All right!" the gunman called exultantly. "Stay there!"

He walked away. Bruce arose and peeked through a heavy glass window. Slaughter was approaching Nels.

"You know how to work that winch, so work it," was the command. "Swing him overside and drop him."

"Guess again," Nels retorted.

Slaughter glanced up at the boom. He was studying the mechanism. Nels watched him.

"It's you or me," Slaughter said. "The bell would make a grand coffin. Drop him, or I shoot you and do it myself."

His excitement had vanished. He was cool and deadly. The gas engine that operated the winch was still running. Nels continued to stare.

"You hear me!" Slaughter exclaimed viciously. "Drop him overboard if you want to live."

Both automatics came up, and Nels looked into the barrels. He stared a moment, and his big body slumped. Bruce was watching breathlessly, and he heard Nels say, "All right. I'll drop him."

It stunned Bruce. Nels was the last man on earth of whom he would have expected such a thing. Bruce stared as his friend walked to the winch and grasped the controls.

HE STOOD there a moment, glancing up at the boom, speeding up the engine. Suddenly he moved a lever, and Bruce felt the diving bell rise slowly.

It went up a foot, paused, then sank swiftly to the deck, was checked just in time to prevent a crash.

"Now let's see you move it!" Nels exclaimed contemptuously.

He flung his body to one side, and an arm ripped the ignition wires from the hoisting engine, hurled them into the sea.

The clatter of the engine ceased abruptly, and as abruptly a shot sounded. Nels swayed, crumpled to the deck beside the winch.

Slaughter swung toward the diving bell, both guns ready. Bruce was looking at Nels and he dodged, almost too late. But the bullet missed the heavy glass, struck the steel shell beside it.

Bruce waited. He feared the heavy windows would be shattered and that the flying glass might blind him. But there were no more shots.

He was trapped, but he did not feel that he was. As he stood there in the diving bell, where he had stood for so many hours that summer, a sense of safety and of power came to him. After all, he was a part of that strange mechanism, and it had become a part of him. Unconsciously his hands went to the levers and he looked through the heavy glass of a window.

Slaughter was staring at the bell. The man was baffled, but as he stared he began to grin. Nels still lay beside the winch, and after a searching glance at the big man, Slaughter again looked at the bell. His grin expanded.

"You've saved your hide and nothing

else, Mason!" he shouted. "I've got what I came for."

He thrust both guns into the pockets of his coat and started confidently toward the pile of gold bars, which lay within the shadow of the big cone, and almost beneath the long steel arms.

Instinctively, Bruce tightened his grip on the levers, and the very feel of them did something to him. He became wholly himself again, became the inventor of the diving bell, the man who had torn the deck from a wreck fifty fathoms beneath the surface of the sea and had groped in the muck for lost treasure. The bell was no longer a refuge. It was, in his hands, a thing capable of defense and attack—if only the other engines would continue to run smoothly so that he could operate the arms.

Slaughter came on confidently, with a swagger. The grin was still spread across his face as he looked up at a window. The open hatch was on the other side, and evidently he could not see through the thick glass, and into the dim interior, for he seemed unaware that Bruce watched. Obviously, too, he believed that the arms were now powerless to move. The gold alone interested him, and he stooped to pick up a bar.

A long steel arm shot out like a shaft of light, straight for his neck. A shadow must have warned Slaughter, for he threw himself to one side. The iron fingers missed his throat, but closed instead on the padded shoulder of his coat.

The other steel arm darted out, its claws spread wide, and Slaughter shrieked as he strained backward. The claws closed in his face, came away empty.

Bruce clung to one lever, retaining the grip on the coat. He began to draw Slaughter closer, that he might reach him with the other arm, and at the first tug the gunman whirled like a wild beast in a trap. He twisted, pulled against the compounded strength of Bruce's levers, but he was drawn closer.

Frenzied now, he strained away from the reaching fingers of iron. The coat ripped, his arm came out of the sleeve, and in an instant he had slipped free.

The automatics were still in the pockets of the coat. Slaughter, sensing defeat, felt the need of them as never before, and he sprang back to tear the coat from the metal claws.

But Bruce, too, knew that the guns were there, and while with one arm he reached out to ward off the attack. With the other arm he drew in the garment, clutched it against the side of the bell.

The arms were too far from the hatch

to pass the coat around to it. Had that been possible, Bruce might have obtained the weapons, might have been in complete command of the situation. And now, as long as one of the steel arms was occupied in holding the coat, it was useless for anything else.

Slaughter had drawn back and was studying the situation. He, too, saw that Bruce could not get hold of the automatics, and he laughed. Then he glanced swiftly about. There was no mistaking what he had in mind. He sought a new weapon of attack.

Bruce lowered the arm that held the coat, tucked the garment against the gold bars that lay nearest the bell, and then began to lift other bars and place them upon it.

He sought only to free both steel arms, and to prevent Slaughter's regaining possession of the pistols. But the action had an astonishing effect on the man. The calm and deliberate manner in which the metal arms handled the coat, the certainty with which they reached out and picked up bars of gold, aroused the gunman.

Clearly he felt that this gold was his. He had been on the verge of possession and flight, and now this hulk of rusty steel had

disarmed and thwarted him. It was incredible that a mechanical thing could be more swift and more clever than a man. Yet he knew that for all its strength, the arms could be jammed and rendered useless by heavy blows.

Slaughter retreated and glanced about. Suddenly his anger vanished and he laughed. There was a way to reach the bars without danger to himself. A scantling with a cross piece nailed to the end could not only fish them away from reach of the arms but could recover the coat as well.

He found hammer and nails, a board, and soon came back with a simple contrivance. He hooked the cross piece over a bar of gold, tugged at it. But an arm shot out, gripped the board and jerked it from his hands, then struck at him with it.

Slaughter received a glancing blow as he rolled clear. The arm tossed the scantling overboard with a deliberate, maddening motion, and came back into a position of defense above the gold.

A new and compelling rage now possessed Slaughter. This devilish machine had to be wrecked if he were to get at the gold; and as he looked about he saw, beyond the winch, a big hammer which Nels had been using the previous evening. He picked it up, swung it over his head to test its weight and feel, then slowly approached the diving bell.

THERE began then as strange a battle as two men ever fought. Bruce and the bell were deadly, but their movements were restricted to a small area. Slaughter could move about at will, but he could not touch the pile of gold bars. The diving bell stood guard, a thing grotesque and impregnable. His only hope was a blow on one of the steel arms that would jam or crush the mechanism.

He circled for an attack from the side. Suddenly, and with a desperate recklessness, he charged in, swinging the hammer.

An arm darted out, clutched for his wrist, and missed only because Slaughter stumbled. He rolled clear, again charged in.

Instinctive and automatic as his movements in the bell had become, Bruce was pressed as never before. The arms were heavy, and though the leverage had been cleverly worked out, all his strength was required for the swift movements.

And he was fighting a man now wholly desperate. Slaughter charged again, weaving and side-stepping as he came. He was not swinging the big hammer, but holding it in readiness for a blow. He was a big man, and strong, and he was quick on his feet. His sudden agility caught Bruce napping. The lever of Bruce's left hand vibrated and his palm stung from the blow. When he tried to operate the left arm he found it had jammed.

Slaughter rolled clear of the right arm and leaped to his feet, his lips twisting in a snarl of delight.

"Now!" he yelled. "Think a thing like that can whip a man?"

He darted in again; but Bruce, tense and desperate now, was not to be fooled. He anticipated the blow, struck Slaughter full in the chest and sent him rolling across the scow.

Fresh rage possessed the man. He picked up the hammer, darted first to one side and then to the other. His movements were swift, and apparently without purpose. His heavy weapon was swinging wildly, in wide arcs.

The bell's steel arm and its claws were motionless. It was ridiculous to think that they were alert, ready for offense. The big bell, rusty and discolored by its long hours beneath the sea, seemed powerless to attack. It did not have movement or life. The uninjured arm was folded in as if at rest. The other hung awry, useless.

Something of this must have impressed the desperate man who darted about before it. Perhaps he even wondered if Bruce had been reached by one of those blind shots inside the bell and was now incapacitated. For Slaughter charged, swiftly, recklessly. The hammer swung up. He was al-

most at the bell. Yet there was no movement. The heavy tool started down in its crushing arc. It was above Slaughter's head. He stood stock still, put all his strength into the blow. The hammer started down. Still there was no movement.

Within the bell, Bruce Mason was forcing himself to wait for the precise moment. He had calculated this instant, this fraction of a moment. Like Slaughter, he felt it to be the crisis, the instant of determination of the strange battle. He saw the hammer start down, and waited. It seemed an hour, but he waited. Then with his whole strength he jerked back on a lever.

The steel arm shot out beneath the hammer like a live thing. Its claws were folded tightly, not ready to grasp, and as a compact mass of metal they darted into Slaughter's face. The iron hand caught him at the same instant that the hammer struck the base of the steel arm. The arm was wrecked. Bruce's palms stung from the shock.

But he saw the big man outside, caught as he was coming in with all his weight and strength. He had received a blow, compounded by the levers, full in the face. Slaughter's head snapped back and he was hurled all the way across the scow.

Bruce was outside as soon as he could crawl through the hatch. He fell upon his hands and shoulders, rolled over and ran around the bell. He did not even glance at Slaughter, for he knew that that blow had ended the fight. Instead he ran on and knelt beside Nels.

"It's me—Bruce," he whispered. "How bad are you hurt, big fellow?"

Nels opened his eyes and grinned, weakly. "I saw part of it," he said. "Did you get him?"

"I got him," Bruce said harshly. "Here! let me help you. Where you hit?"

"Shoulder. I faked some of it. Waited a chance at him. Go look after Teddy."

Bruce found Teddy sitting up in bed and staring about in bewilderment.

"Thought you was in the bell," he muttered.

"I've been in, and out and in again," Bruce laughed. "A lot's happened while you were asleep, feller. But I'm going to take you to Juneau now. Lie down until I come for you."

He ran back to find Nels sitting up beside the winch.

"I was thinking," the big fellow said, "that you could use this fast boat of Slaughter's to take Teddy to Juneau."

"Take Teddy!" Bruce repeated. "I can do better than that, Nels. I can take you, too."

"But there's the stuff. We can't run any more chances o' that lyin' loose."

"I'll take Teddy and you to a doctor.—— The gold! I'll hustle that aboard. With a fast boat—two hours, Nels! Two hours and you and Ted'll be in the hospital and the gold will be in the bank. We're washed up, big fellow. The job's finished."

Nels considered his friend with kindly speculation.

"Washed up," he grinned. "Iron fingers and iron guts! Boy, you're the *key* to Davy Jones' locker."

"Then the only thing left to do," Bruce went on, ignoring Nels' remark, "will be to find old Taku Billy Greer and give him his cut of this."

DOG LOST

By

FOSTER-HARRIS

By the Author of "Horse Driller" etc.

No Oilwell Came too big For the Runt!

THE look of a lost, starving dog was on Ken Douglas' face as he started around the second great well in the long line. The West Texas wind, icy cold, was driving against his body with a savage, numbing force. He had walked a long way today, hunting work. His last meal had been day before yesterday.

These first wells, giant rotary derricks, were completed producers, cold and deserted. But on down the line the white puffs of steam from the fifth, sixth and seventh wells showed that they were drilling. Crews would be working there. Douglas might find the farm boss. And, possibly, there might be a job they would let a little man do.

Ken Douglas, the runt, had been born in an oilfield shanty. For the most of his lost-dog life he had lived in the oil country. He knew the treacherousness of rotary well slushpits. So undoubtedly it was that numbing wind, plus the fact that Douglas' last meal had been day before yesterday which caused him to try that foolish short cut.

Squarely in his path was the second well's big slushpit, the earthen pond in which the drilling mud fluid is handled. This slushpit had been full of liquid mud, water and oil but the mud had stood until its surface had solidly caked over and dried. The wind had swept dust and sand across the top so that it appeared absolutely dry and firm.

Numb, dazed, head down, Douglas started across that pit. And in about the middle, without warning, the inevitable happened.

The surface had dried but only into a thin crust. Underneath that crust was liquid, slimy mud, seven feet depth of it in the center of the pit. The crust broke beneath Douglas' feet and down he went.

He realized his danger as he dropped and tried frantically to throw himself forward. His wildly clutching hands just

touched the edge of the unbroken crust. That edge crumbled in his fingers and he splashed down, over his head in liquid mud.

Fighting like a fury he got his face above the surface again, somehow, and screamed his thin plea for help. But those wells where men were working were three hundred yards and more away, across rushing wind. In the instant he screamed the runt knew that there was no one to hear, knew also that he was, in all probability, at the last moment of his life.

The mud was like clutching quicksand. Impossible to swim, impossible to wade and over his head, sucking him down with a merciless relentlessness.

But there were fighting strains in the runt's starved body. He was down, drowning alone like a rat, but he was fighting for his life and fighting hard.

By some miracle he did make it to the edge of the crust again. And again that crust broke. The mud closed over him. Still fighting, he felt himself hurtling down into warm, fathomless darkness.

He was still struggling faintly when "Big Nasty" Tolliver, driller, gathered him into his arms. Just chancing to see from a distance and coming on the dead run, Tolliver had picked up a long plank, tossed it across the slushpit surface, raced along it and then, as the crust caved, had made a wild and successful grab for his man.

BIG NASTY TOLLIVER was a giant, six feet five, superbly proportioned and muscled like an elephant. But even so and even with the aid of the plank it was a furious struggle he made before he reached solid ground with his still faintly squirming burden.

He stopped on the bank of the slushpit, holding Douglas up, wiping off his face, then bending the little man double and shaking him heartily. It was thus Ken Douglas came back to life, folded over Big Nasty's arm like a cloak, the arm jigging furiously up and down.

"Come alive?" Tolliver asked, straightening his victim and peering into the small face. "Crazy little runt, you got no better sense than to try to walk across a slushpit, huh?"

Indistinctly and as though from very far away the words reached the little man's ears. But, far gone as he was, the runt caught the slur in tone and words. He squirmed harder.

"Put me down!" he gasped. "I can—take care of myself! I'm—all right, you big—ham!"

The giant stared into the runt's face

searchingly. Abruptly, without a word, he tucked the little fellow under one arm, very much as he might have carried a small dog, starting at a brisk trot toward the drilling wells.

"Put me down! Put me down, darn you!" raged Douglas futilely.

"Shut up!" advised the giant. "If I don't take care of you, you'll likely catch pneumonia or something." From his tone, he might have been talking to a small, troublesome child.

Gathering the thin remnants of his strength, the runt started to fight savagely to free himself. He might as well have tried to break a steel drilling cable with his bare hands. Tolliver hardly appeared to notice his struggling. At a swinging trot he went on, down the line of wells and into the derrick of the fifth one.

The rotary was grinding steadily inside that boarded in derrick floor and a makeshift stove was burning, in one corner. Hooking over a bench with his foot, Tolliver deposited his burden on it, beside the stove and turned.

"For cryin' out loud!" blurted a harsh, amazed voice. "What's that?"

"Found him in the Number Two slushpit," explained Tolliver. "Just happened

to be passing by and saw him break through, so I run over and pulled him out. You got some dry clothes around here?"

"Not his size! Whose kid is he anyway, Nasty?"

Waveringly, Ken Douglas got to his feet. He tried to wipe the mud out of his face and eyes. His voice snapped out ragingly.

"I ain't a kid! You guys think you're funny, huh? I'll show you who's a kid! I'll choose any one of you!"

Somebody gasped. Tolliver had found a towel and was starting to wipe the runt's face, clearing his eyes so that he could see.

"Good gosh, it ain't a kid, either!" exclaimed the voice which had spoken first. "It's a dwarf!"

"Cut it out, you guys!" warned Tolliver sharply. "He's in bad shape—doggone near drownded when I got him. Here, Tandy, what'd you do with that bottle you had? Gimme!"

One of the roughnecks passed over a pint bottle, half-filled with a brownish liquid. Holding Douglas with one hand, Tolliver forced some of the liquid down the little man's throat. It tasted exactly like triple distilled hell fire, so Douglas thought. While he was choking and gasping from the treatment, the driller had stripped off his wet clothes, inserted his short legs in a huge pair of overalls and wrapped his body in an even larger sheepskin coat.

"Now you sit there and get warm, you hear!" Tolliver admonished. "Take another swallow or two of this!"

"Nix!" snapped the runt. "I won't! Ah——" he got it anyway, two more forced swallows. It burned. But he began to feel stronger.

"There!" observed Tolliver, stepping back. "You'll be all right in a little bit, feller. Just sit still 'til you feel like telling us about it."

"I feel like telling you aplenty right now!" observed the runt venomously. "Treating me like a kid—even if you did save my life. But I'll pay you for that sometime, you—you big ox!"

Big Nasty Tolliver grinned tolerantly. "Aw, forget it, kid," he advised. "What's your name? What was you doin' in there, anyway?"

The runt leaned back and wrapped the sheepskin closer around his thin body. "I was comin' to look for a job. I—need work pretty bad, I reckon. My name's Douglas."

"Dog lost?" mimicked the harsh voice that had spoken first. "Funny name! You mean your dog's lost or you're a lost——"

Big Nasty Tolliver turned sharply. "All right Buster, cut it out!" he interrupted. "That's a damn poor joke!"

The other man bristled. "You think so, huh?"

"Yeah, I think so. Like to do something about it?"

WITH a growl the other man subsided. Big Nasty turned back to Douglas, staring kindly down at him.

"Need a job, huh? You ever worked around oilwells, Douglas?"

"I'll say I have!" affirmed Douglas proudly. "I was born in an oil lease shack, big feller. I can do anything around a drillin' rig. Just try me and see."

Disbelief was patent on the big driller's face. But he did not voice it. His gaze took in the pinched, taut look around the little man's mouth. He swung toward the stove, trying to wipe mud off his breeches and coat with his great hands, soaking in the heat.

"Maybe the old man will have come kind of job loose, Douglas," Tolliver said, with elaborate casualness. "Soon as you and me get dried off a little we'll go over to the office and see him. I was just headin' over toward my shack anyway. My old lady's got a hot meal waitin' for me." He grinned. "We'll get somethin' hot inside us and then I'll take you over to see the boss."

The runt swallowed hard. "I—much obliged, big feller. I can make you a good man. I ain't a bum and I—I——"

"Lean closer to the stove," commanded Tolliver awkwardly. "Now keep still and try to get warmed up. You don't wanta catch pneumonia."

The runt obeyed, luxuriating in the warmth. Slowly he stared about the derrick. Evidently his rescuer did not work in this well, for a full crew already was present. The big man, Buster, who had laughed and mockingly distorted the runt's name into "Dog lost," was handling the draw-works and obviously was the driller in charge. The runt stared at Buster without favor and Buster returned the compliment.

All big men. Douglas, fighting hard to survive in a game where big men are supreme, had an instinctive antagonism for the big fellows. They patronized him. And it always made him fighting mad.

"Well, come on, Dug." Tolliver dropped a big hand on Douglas' arm. "I guess we're dry enough. Let's go get something to eat."

Ken Douglas started to discard the borrowed clothes.

"Oh, wear 'em," advised Tolliver carelessly. "Here, I'll take your other clothes. The wife'll dry 'em for you. Come on." He half picked the runt up bodily and together they went out of the derrick.

If it had seemed a long way from the fence to these wells, it was even farther from the wells to the little group of gray and white painted lease buildings, toward which they were heading now. Douglas set his teeth and plodded grimly. Tolliver was holding his arm. The driller was talking, very casually, but before they reached the lease buildings he was practically carrying his companion, appearing not to know it.

They turned into a small, two-room building, where a woman was waiting in the door. Not a pretty woman. Even in his semi-stupor Douglas noticed that. But clean and fresh looking and somehow distinctly wholesome. She looked at her husband, then at the runt and there was sympathy and question in her eyes.

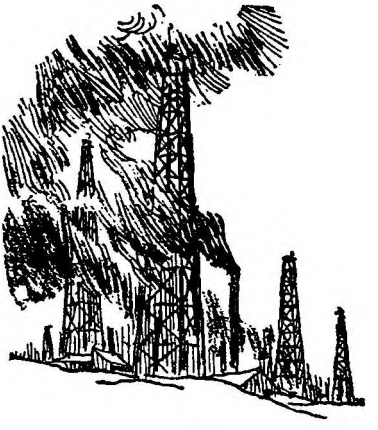
"Madge, this here is Douglas, friend of mine," said Tolliver quietly. "Got caught in a slushpit and near drowned before he got out. You got some hot soup to sorta warm us both up?"

Quick, generous compassion showed in the woman's face. She swung the door wide open. "Have I? Come in, the both of you and I'll be fixin' the both of you up, to a king's taste!"

She had only the tiniest trace of a brogue. But the runt did not need the sight of the red headed toddler who came just then to clutch his mother's apron, to know that Tolliver's wife was Irish. She swept both of them in, and with swift dexterity set to at her task.

It was mid-afternoon before Douglas and Tolliver marched over to the lease office to see Kent Coburn, the farm boss in charge. By that time Douglas had eaten enough for two men, full size at that. He had made friends with Bud, the redheaded two year old. And he had made friends with Madge.

AS THEY shuffled into the farm boss' office, Kent Coburn was studying some well "logs"—long strips of yellow cardboard showing the formations each well had drilled through. He was a middle sized man, sandy haired, turning gray, and



with a face resembling that of a bulldog. He looked up and snarled ferociously.

"Yeah? Well, Tolliver, whatta you want? Who's this?" He looked at Ken Douglas.

"Kent, this here is Douglas," explained Big Nasty awkwardly. "He—well he fell in the slushpit over on the Number Two and darn near drowned and—and he wants a job. He's a good man and I've knowed him a long time and, and——" Tolliver was floundering.

The farm boss glared at Douglas. "Oh, yeah?" he barked. "You think fallin' in a slushpit entitles you to a job with this outfit, huh?" Then he sniffed.

The runt had accepted the sarcasm meekly. But the sniff got under his skin. He swelled angrily and stepped forward.

"Listen, Mister!" he bristled. "I may be little, but I'm as good a man as any you got. Includin' you! I was born in an oilfield and I've worked around oilwells nearly all my life."

"Yeah? What can you do?"

"Anything! Put me on and see."

"That's right, Kent," interjected Tolliver. "He's a good man."

"Too little," said the farm boss curtly. "Only job I've got open is for a derrick man in your crew, Tolliver. He's too little."

"So's a monkey little!" returned Douglas boldly. "But he gets around. You never saw an elephant hangin' by his tail in no tree did you? I'm a good derrick man!"

Coburn glared. "Well, he—he is!" put in Tolliver stubbornly.

"Oh yeah?" snapped the farm boss. "You want him?"

Tolliver hesitated. "Yeah, I want him," he agreed slowly.

"All right then. Douglas, you're hired, and Nasty, you're responsible. But get this, Douglas! On this lease drilling, crews produce! Anybody that don't measure up, full size to his job, gets fired. You understand?"

Douglas nodded. "Yes, sir, I understand. Thanks, Mr. Coburn."

"Go around and give your name to that four-eyed guy in the back office. Tolliver'll show you where to bunk. You're responsible, Tolliver, don't forget that."

"No, sir," agreed Tolliver, backing out. "Much obliged, Kent."

OVER in the unmarried workers' bunkhouse, Big Nasty Tolliver introduced Douglas to the big fellows who would be his crew mates. There were three of them, all over six feet and a hundred and seventy-five pounds. Beside their bulk Douglas looked like an infant. But they were all young and good natured, and, besides, something in Tolliver's eye warned them against any jocular comment. So they accepted Douglas for the time, without comment and he accepted them on a similar basis.

"We're to spud the Number Nine Holbein well tomorrow," Tolliver explained. "It's all rigged up and ready to go now. We're just running one tower on these wells, and we're it."

Ken Douglas eyed the other members of the crew. "I see. Well, you got a tower that oughta make lots of hole, Tolliver." He squirmed uneasily in his oversize clothes.

"You better come over with me now and get your own duds," Tolliver suggested. "They'll be dry. Come eat supper with us. You seem to have made a big hit with that kid of mine."

They went out of the bunkhouse. One of the roughnecks looked at his companions and grinned wryly.

"Nice, ain't it?" he observed. "Having a peewee like that wished on us. I reckon the rest of us will get to work."

The tallest roughneck, who rejoiced in the name of Halitosis—"Halitosis" Harper—swung around and looked the speaker over.

"Big boy," he drawled, "when you get as old as I am, you'll learn, maybe, that you never can tell nothin' about a man, just by lookin' at his size. It ain't the size of the dog in the fight that counts. It's the size of the fight in the dog."

UNDER Big Nasty's expert handling the Number Nine Holbein spudded the next morning, starting its grind down to the pay. It was a rotary rig, of course, like its brothers. It drilled with a heavy bit,

screwed on the bottom of rotating drillpipe, through which mud fluid was circulated to keep the hole cleared of cuttings. Whenever the bit grew dull, which it did only too frequently, it was necessary to take all that drillpipe out of the hole, replace the bit and put it all back in again.

There was where Ken Douglas' special job would come in. After the well had attained some depth the drillpipe would be handled not in single joint pieces but in three and four joint sections, called thribbles and fourbles. Perched on a platform high in the derrick, Douglas would take care of the upper end of those great fourbles, locking and unlocking the collar-like elevator which gave the hoisting mechanism a grip on the pipe and doing the other things a derrick man must perform.

It was a hazardous job. The working platform or "fourble board" was some eighty feet up. Sometimes a man would have to lean far out and strain on slick, muddy iron. And if he fell—well, when his body hit the derrick floor it would be just too bad.

There was a safety belt up on the fourble board, a ponderous, leather affair which the derrick man was supposed to, but quite often, did not wear. When the runt climbed to the fourble board the first time, Big Nasty went with him. Carefully the giant driller cut down the belt until it fitted Douglas snugly. He calmly ignored the runt's indignant protest that he could do all this for himself.

"Now, you wear that," Tolliver ordered. "Every time you come up here, you put that on, very first thing! That's an order, understand?"

The runt bristled. "You think I'm a baby, huh?"

"That's all right." Big Nasty shepherded the runt down the ladder again. Down below one of the roughnecks grinned covertly.

Douglas was not strong the first couple of days. He had missed too many meals. But, eating and sleeping regularly now, he was fast getting back to normal. And normally he was tough, necessarily so, also amazingly strong for so small a man.

Big Nasty babied him. Kent Coburn had said he was responsible and the big driller was taking that statement seriously. The giant driller was about as subtle as a forty-five automatic, so his favoring was immediately obvious, not only to the three remaining members of the crew but to Ken Douglas as well.

The runt bitterly resented this. He had all the very small man's touchiness and in an exaggerated form. But the first three days he simply had to accept. Still weak, he could not keep pace with the giants who were his crew mates. Had it not been for Tolliver doing about half of Douglas' work and placidly shifting half the rest onto the shoulders of the other three roughnecks, the runt would have dropped in his tracks.

Kent Coburn came over and watched proceedings for awhile, without comment. Then, casually, he drew Tolliver aside.

"That runt ain't going to make a roughneck, Nasty," he said bluntly. "You and the other three boys are doing his job for him. He's just too little."

"Aw, he'll be all right soon as he gets some grub sticking to his ribs," dissented Nasty. "Leave him a day or two more and see. Poor little devil, he was pretty near starved to death."

"Somebody appointed you his nurse?" inquired Coburn sarcastically.

Big Nasty scratched his head. "Well, you said I was responsible. And I sorta feel that way, anyway—it was me pulled him out of that slushpit, remember. Leave him a day or two more, Kent and then see how he's getting along. He's quick and he does know oilwells."

Kent Coburn sniffed. "Well—if you want to do your work and his too, all right.

But if the rest of your guys start kicking——"

"They won't," promised Big Nasty blandly. Down at his sides his hands doubled into fists about the size of depth bombs. "They—they like him swell, Kent."

Kent glanced at the fists and grinned. "Oh, yeah?" he said innocently, and marched off.

THREE days later the farm boss made his regular trip by his drilling wells and stopped at the Number Nine. Big Nasty happened to be absent for the moment and Halitosis Harper was running the rig. Halitosis saw Coburn coming and turned toward Douglas.

"Just about time to change bits, Dug," he observed. "Hike yourself up to your roost. Here comes Coburn, so strut your stuff."

The runt went up the ladder like a hungry monkey ascending a cocoanut palm and put everything he had into his job. Coburn parked over beside Halitosis and observed in silence. Finally he turned to the big roughneck and gestured guardedly up toward Douglas. The noise of the engine effectually prevented their voices rising any distance in the derrick.

"He getting along all right? Overworking you boys any?"

Halitosis spat tobacco juice, a long, amber stream. "He's all right, Kent," he drawled. "Big Nasty, he seems to think he's gotta baby him along, but he needn't to. Dug's little, all right, but he's plenty fast and strong. He's a roughneck."

The boss grunted. "Oh, all right. If you're satisfied."

Ken Douglas continued to improve during the succeeding days as the well ground steadily downward, and he continued to eat regularly and to find himself still with a job every morning. He tried. He was desperately eager to satisfy and, although his tiny size always would handicap him, he was, as Halitosis had observed, plenty fast and strong.

But whenever he tried anything the least bit reckless or overtaxing, Big Nasty Tolliver would bawl him out properly.

That was one of Ken Douglas' major troubles. Big Nasty's attitude toward him. The giant driller seemed to have gotten the idea immovably fixed in his mind that Douglas needed taking care of and he, Tolliver was the one to do the caretaking. There was not even a hint of intentional insult or patronizing in Nasty's attitude. He just considered himself responsible for the runt and he looked after him, very, very properly.

Ken Douglas bitterly resented this, but under the circumstances there was nothing whatever he could do about it. His protests never touched Tolliver. Douglas couldn't do anything else or even protest too much, because Big Nasty not only had gotten him a job, he had also saved his life. Douglas was deeply indebted and realized it.

Ken Douglas had another trouble in the form of "Buster" Carmody, the driller on the Number Five. Buster had been the man who had mockingly distorted Douglas' name into "Dog Lost." Like Tolliver, Buster Carmody was a giant, standing six feet five and weighing over two hundred and fifty pounds. He was somewhat muscle bound and slow on his feet, like all exceptionally big men, but he was tremendously strong. Also he had a twisted sense of humor and for some reason he had disliked Douglas from the start. He took out his dislike in cruel horseplay.

Douglas endured it for awhile. After all, Carmody was a driller and the runt had no desire whatever to lose this job he had found and thus far managed to hold. Which he might do plenty quick if he mixed it with a driller, because drillers are quite important gents in the oilfields.

It was Big Nasty Tolliver's son, two year old Bud Tolliver, who, innocently enough, brought the trouble between Douglas and Carmody to a boil. Bud, not being able to talk plain yet, couldn't quite say Douglas' name. He mangled it into something resembling "Dog lost," and Carmody, hearing him, considered it a tre-

mendous joke, mainly of course because he had thought of it first himself. He went around for a couple of days mimicking Bud's high treble, calling for Douglas with exaggerated gusto. "Dog los'! Oh, Dog los'! Tum out and fight! I lick 'oo, Dog los'!"

Douglas hated that and hated it with a virulence that surprised even himself. He stood it as long as he could. But the second evening, in a red flare of rage, he called Buster.

"Listen, you big hunk of spoiled cheese!" he challenged. "You cut that out, you hear? If you don't——"

Buster laughed. "Oh, I 'fraid!" he mocked. "I so 'fraid!"

DOUGLAS whipped up his fists and started to jump forward. A big hand swept quickly from behind him, gripping his shoulder, stopping him. He jerked about and saw that it was Big Nasty Tolliver, glaring over his head into the face of the other driller.

"You're a fine specimen of a he-man!" snapped Tolliver icily. "Picking on a little guy. Well, you yap, here's where you learn better."

Buster Carmody straightened. His face changed instantly.

"Yeah?" he snarled. "And what are you gonna do about it, huh? Why, you——"

"I'm going to beat your damn head off!" announced Tolliver coldly. "Here!" He shoved Douglas gently aside and started after his foe.

"Here, wait a minute!" protested Douglas furiously. "This here's my fight! Tolliver, I'm doin' this! Oh, you damn, big ham!"

He might as well have sworn at the moon. Neither driller paid him the slightest attention. Big Nasty launched a swishing blow, like the kick of a mule. It grazed Carmody's face. Carmody roared in wrath and countered. And the battle was on, while the runt danced and swore in consuming, futile rage on the sidelines.

Both men were giants, about equally heavy and tall. Neither knew overly much about scientific boxing, but both had won their mastery in the far more brutal style of fighting of the oilfields, the kind of rough and tumble battling where anything is fair.

Giants, they were slow but tremendously strong. When they struck out, if the blow landed, it landed with very much the force and general effect of a nice, big sledge-hammer. They stood toe to toe and slugged.

It was Carmody who got it. He failed to duck a smoking surge that came clear up from Big Nasty's belt. Tolliver's huge fist landed with all Tolliver's muscle behind it, square on the side of Carmody's head. And Carmody went down cold.

Big Nasty turned, breathing a little hard, but grinning. He was marked, but only by a bloody nose and a cut lower lip. He looked down at Douglas.

"Don't reckon he'll be botherin' you any more, feller," he said. "If he does, you just tell me. Why, what's the matter?"

Bright tears of hopeless rage glittered in the runt's eyes. He glared up at Big Nasty. "You—you——" he blared. "Oh, you——" Whirling he turned and fled. Big Nasty scratched his head bewilderedly and stared after him.

"Boy! I guess Buster must have got him mad!" exclaimed Tolliver softly. "Couldn't even talk. Poor little guy!" He looked down at the slumbering Buster, then went over and got a bucket of cold, dirty water to slosh over him.

IT WAS worse after that. Buster Carmody bothered Douglas no more, but, as far as squelching the "Dog lost" nickname was concerned, Big Nasty might as well have saved his trouble. The other youngsters picked it up from Bud and in a trice it was running through the camp. Everybody was calling Douglas "Dog lost."

Halitosis Haines absentmindedly yelled out for Dog Lost in the derrick one day and was saved from a walloping at Big Nasty's hands only by the runt's prompt intervention.

"Listen here, big boy, you let him alone!" Douglas bristled. "He can call me Dog Lost if he wants to! Everybody calls me Dog Lost. Your own kid does, he started it!"

Aggrieved, Big Nasty stepped back. "Aw, little Bud, he can't talk plain, Dug!" he protested. "He does the best he can to say Douglas."

"He can call me anything he wants to!" snapped the runt tartly. "Yeah and that goes for everybody else also—if I want 'em to."

Big Nasty frowned in angry amazement. For a moment it seemed he was going to spank the runt for this audacious defiance. But then he restrained himself, with very pained reluctance. "Oh, all right," he acquiesced stiffly. "If that's the way you feel about it."

An hour later Halitosis and Douglas happened to be alone together for an instant, out near the boilers. Halitosis rubbed his jaw and stared thoughtfully over toward the distant Tolliver.

"Never saw anything like it!" Halitosis remarked thoughtfully. "Way Big Nasty treats you, I mean. Why, Dog Lost, he tries to treat you like you was about two years——"

The runt picked up a large wrench. "Listen, big boy!" he interrupted truculently. "As far as you're concerned, Nasty can treat me anyway he darn pleases, see? But if you call me Dog Lost just once more, I'm gonna bust you with this wrench!"

Halitosis' jaw dropped. He was a big man himself and probably with no great difficulty he could have folded the runt neatly down the middle and tucked in both ends. But he didn't. Instead he swallowed his astonishment and grinned placatingly.

"Forget it, Dug," Halitosis pleaded mildly. "You know I like both of you. I didn't mean anything."

Douglas dropped the wrench and the bristle went out of his spine. "Aw, I know it, big boy," he agreed. "Forget it yourself. You can call me any darn thing you want to. I don't mind."

Halitosis recovered his cud of tobacco from somewhere back down in his throat and went away. It was his personal opinion that there were a couple of nuts in the Number Nine crew, a big one and a little one.

THE Number Nine Holbein ground on toward the deep, buried oil pay and, under Big Nasty's expert driving, began to hang up some remarkable daily drilling records. Watching without comment, old Kent Coburn kept his grins hidden up his sleeve. It was not hard to see that the Number Nine's speed was simply another manifestation of Big Nasty's solicitude for his runt protegé. Big Nasty, fearing criticism that the runt was slowing up the drilling, actually was speeding it up instead, to escape that criticism.

The Number Nine finished as a producer five days ahead of the expected time, with a proportionate saving, of course, in the drilling expense. Carl Henderson, the field superintendent was present when the well completed. And as the brownish black fluid headed high over the derrick top, Henderson turned to Coburn.

"Saved five days on that one," Henderson grunted. "Good! What you been doing to Big Nasty and those roughnecks?"

The farm boss shook his head. "First time I ever saw 'em work like that. I think it's that damn midget Tolliver insists on keeping. They're afraid we'll fire him, so

they step lively to show what a doggone good crew they are, as is."

The field superintendent grinned. "Oh! Well, put 'em as is on the Number Fifteen tomorrow and see what the midget makes 'em do there."

Meanwhile the Number Five well, where Buster Carmody was driller, had completed and Buster, with his crew, had been leapfrogged on down the line of well locations to the Number Twelve. They had rigged up and had been drilling for several days when Tolliver's outfit started on the Number Fifteen.

The Number Fifteen Holbein was just a derrick. Changing over from the completed Number Nine, it would be necessary for Big Nasty and his crew to tear down the drilling machinery, move it from the Number Nine to the Number Fifteen and then rig up in the new well before the actual drilling could start. This moving, of course, would take several days.

As it happened, the Number Fifteen well was only about half as far from the camp buildings as was the Number Nine. The Number Fifteen derrick, in fact was barely three hundred yards from Big Nasty's own shack. The Number Twelve well, where Buster Carmody and his crew were spudding in, was three hundred yards from the Number Fifteen but it was even closer to Nasty's home and there was only a level, cleared field between the wells and the camp buildings.

IT HAPPENED the third day. Buster Carmody had spudded the Number Twelve down to about two hundred and fifty feet and had set its surface casing. Partly to test the surface water shutoff, but mainly to allow the company geologists and production men to investigate an unexpected shallow gas showing, the Number Twelve had stopped temporarily here and had bailed the hole dry.

There had been a small amount of gas coming into the bottom of the Number Twelve at this depth and also water was rising slowly in the hole. The water wasn't important, but the gas might indicate either a new, very shallow pay which might possibly prove interesting, or it might indicate that one of the adjacent completed wells was leaking, with gas and possibly oil coming up from the deep pay and seeping across through a porous formation into the Number Twelve hole.

The Number Twelve accordingly was bailed to bottom, and shut down. Only Buster Carmody, the driller, was there.

Over on the Number Fifteen, three hundred yards on down the line, Big Nasty Tolliver and his crew were hard at work rigging up. Douglas, the runt, was perched dizzily atop the derrick, helping set the gigantic crownblock in place. Thus Douglas was one of the first to see what had happened and to realize the true, cold horror of the accident.

Little Bud Tolliver, Big Nasty's two year old, had followed his father that morning. Big Nasty had taken him back to his mother. But Bud had come out later to play and again he had slipped off toward that fascinating line of wells. Only this time he had strayed over toward the Number Twelve and was actually in the derrick before anybody noticed him.

It was a clear but chilly, rather windy day. Madge had bundled little Bud's sturdy, square-set little figure into a sweater and a tiny, sheepskin coat, so that he was practically as broad as he was tall. He had a thick, stocking cap on his red head. These details are important.

From his perch on top of the Number Fifteen derrick, the runt caught a glimpse of Bud's tiny figure crawling up and over the edge of the Number Twelve's floor and of Buster Carmody standing to one side, looking at him. Douglas started to call down to Tolliver that Bud was over at the wells again, but the wind was blowing hard, making it difficult to hear, Tolliver was busy, and anyway Carmody was over at the Number Twelve and obviously had seen his small visitor. It never occurred to Douglas that Buster would not take care of the little fellow.

Four minutes later Ken Douglas, glancing again toward the Number Twelve, saw Carmody running wildly out of the derrick, waving his arms and apparently shouting for help. Douglas could not hear him because of the wind, but Carmody's panic was plain in his very motions. Carmody made a grab at something on the ground and leaped frantically back into the derrick. A lashing surge of icy fear went through Douglas' veins. He sensed what had occurred right then. Something terrible had happened to Bud Tolliver.

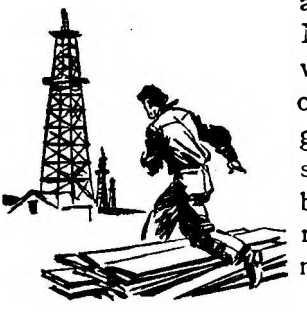
A hoisting line dropped down from the top of the Number Fifteen derrick to the floor, far below. With a flying leap, the runt grabbed it. He went down that line in a whirling slide, flaying the insides of his hands raw. Bright drops of blood spattered over Big Nasty Tolliver's sleeve as Douglas' hands gripped it.

"Bud—he's over in the Number Twelve! Somethin's happened to him, Nasty! Come on!" The runt was chattering with his fear. He spun about, darting out of the cluttered derrick, running as fast as his short legs would carry him. And with grim panic clutching at his own heart, Big Nasty Tolliver sent his great wrench flying and took after him.

THE runt was running as he had never run before in his life. But Tolliver, a father's fear tearing at him, also was sprinting like mad. He passed Douglas before the little man had gone thirty yards. When Tolliver passed the Number Fourteen derrick, a hundred yards closer to the Number Twelve, Douglas was forty yards behind.

Men were running toward the Number Twelve now, from the camp and from the wells on both sides. Douglas could see Madge Tolliver, Bud's mother, running like a deer, already reaching the derrick. Very faint and far away above the wind, he heard her scream, a thin, maddening sound.

The Number Thirteen location as yet did not even have the derrick erected. Piles of derrick timbers were on the site and a gang of roustabouts had been scraping out a slushpit. Big Nasty Tolliver went over a pile of timbers in one giant, flying stride. And far behind him, the runt put on more speed.



Three hundred yards from the Number Fifteen to the Number Twelve. A long way to run at top speed. Black spots were dancing before Ken Douglas' eyes as he started to pass the piles of timbers on the Number Thirteen location.

A pile of great sills seemed to leap squarely into his path, he tried to hurdle over them, slipped and his head struck as he fell, with sickening force. He lay there, a crumpled, insignificant little figure while a woman's screams, hysterical, maddened came thinly through the wind above his unconscious head.

How long he was out cold the runt didn't know. Quite a while, though, twenty or thirty minutes. By all rights the blow should have killed him, but he was tough. He came back, dazed, groggy. Dazedly he got up and staggered on toward that Number Twelve derrick, silent now, but packed with men.

His head cleared as he came up to the boarded in derrick. Men were packed solid in the opening beside the drawworks. A woman was crying inside, slow, gasping sobs. The big workers packed against the draw-works were whispering.

"He's slipped a hundred feet down. Buster said he stuck the first time almost where he could reach him."

"——can't hold onto the ropes they lower to him. Poor little kid——"

"——dead by this time! That well's makin' some gas, you know. If he ain't—the water's risin'. Buster said it must be a hundred feet off bottom an hour ago."

"——no, he ain't dead yet. They heard

him cryin', just a few minutes ago. God ——"

"Lemme through!" The runt was hammering at their backs with clenched fists. "Lemme through, you hear! You big, useless hams, lemme through here!"

For a moment they paid no attention to him. Then they opened a narrow pathway as best they could and the runt fought his way through, doubling and diving between one big roustabout's legs, knifing sideways between two more. He came into a narrow, cleared space around the mouth of the well.

They had lifted the giant rotary away so that now the top of the casing was clear, coming up from the earth in the hole cut in the floor of the derrick. A group of big men were around that silent, black mouth, great muscled giants with ropes and lines in their hands and a horrified helplessness in their eyes.

BIG NASTY TOLLIVER was down on his knees, his two great hands gripping the top of the casing, as though he would pull it up with its precious burden by sheer, superhuman strength. Crumpled on the other side was Madge Tolliver, staring down into that black mouth, sobbing.

"He's dead, by now," said Kent Coburn in a harsh, strangled voice. "We'll have to—use hooks."

Madge screamed. The runt flung himself forward, unceremoniously brushing the farm boss aside. He began to tear at his sheepskin coat.

"Dug, Bud's in there!" said Tolliver hoarsely. "Little Bud's down in there. He fell in! Carmody let him fall in and the first time he stuck just out of Carmody's reach. He's slipped down a few feet at a time and now he's a hundred feet down. We can't get him, he can't hold onto the ropes we drop, and if we use hooks and tear him—God, he was cryin' just a few minutes ago! Madge could hear him!"

The runt was ripping off his coat. He snatched savagely at the end of the line, starting to tie it around his ankles and again around his waist. Tolliver's face changed to an expression of hope, then again to despair.

"You can't get in there, Dug! You're too broad! You can't do it!"

"There's gas," said Carmody. "He's dead by now, runt. You can't get into that pipe. Little Bud stuck in it."

"You big, overgrown, useless hulk! Watch me!" Douglas blazed. "Jump, you bums! You, Nasty, and you, and you! Pay out this rope. Gimme that other line, Coburn. Now I'll tie this onto my arm. When I jerk this line twice, Coburn, you have 'em haul me up and not before! Understand, you big nothin'?"

He lashed them with his voice, and all the time his hands were flying, working to tie those lines hard and fast. Then he dropped down beside the casing mouth, starting to up-end himself and go in, head first. Just for an instant he smiled into the haggard eyes of Madge Tolliver.

"Don't you worry, Mis' Tolliver. I'm the right size to get him. And if he was still cryin' a few minutes ago, he'll still be alive."

He ducked, thrusting arms and head into the pipe, Tolliver caught his ankles and the runt was started down.

That casing was cruelly small, even for a dwarf's body. It was a fight to get into it. The rough, round sides gripped and punished the runt mercilessly, crushing him in iron coils. Thrashing, squirming, he went down. His legs disappeared.

Feet set wide apart and giant shoulders bowed, Big Nasty Tolliver began to pay out rope, foot by foot.

The grim tensity of those moments! The runt was fighting his way down through a rough, iron tube in which his squat body fitted almost as tightly as a bullet in a rifle barrel. Gas fumes were coming up, not much but still a little, enough to make Douglas' head ring. He was fighting upside down, blood hammering down into his brain.

Far down there somewhere was the baby, stuck in the pipe but stuck only by

the slenderest margin. Just a touch might send him on down. A hundred feet or more of water in the pipe below, and that water rising steadily.

The baby might already be dead. But, if Douglas did not get him, he certainly would be dead—yes and his body cruelly torn by hooks and spears before the helpless giants above could recover it. The mere weight of a hook probably would be sufficient to send the tiny figure plunging on down into that water below.

It was dark now to the runt's eyes, such darkness as is never seen up on the surface. His body plugged the casing, he had had no time to get a flashlight. He was wriggling, squirming, taking punishment, plenty of it. And all the time his hands must be stretched straight down before him, fingers outspread, his brain must be alert to act the instant those fingers touched the child. A tiny push might send Bud on down.

How long it took to go down that pipe the runt never knew. A couple of minutes or so, perhaps. It seemed like that many centuries. Then his tense, right hand touched something soft, it started to drop away beneath his fingers and with a desperate jerk Douglas gripped and gripped fast.

He had him!

With infinite caution Ken Douglas worked the little body around so that it hung free in his grasp. His head was roaring now, with a roar like a furious sea. But he thought he heard a little whisper of sobbing breath, infinitely tiny and far away. It thrilled him. Then, suddenly he was conscious of water against his hands, water coming up his arms. The men above were still lowering away and they were lowering the runt and his burden now into the rising water.

Douglas twisted, jamming himself in the pipe, jerking furiously on the signal line. There was an agonizing pause. Then a slow, sustained heave. They were hauling up.

About that return trip Ken Douglas didn't remember such a great deal. It was a long streak of agony. He never knew when his feet reappeared in the casing mouth, when Tolliver's great hands snatched and lifted him high. But he did hear that booming roar;

"Thank God! He's got him!"

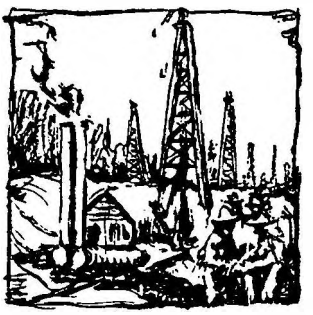
And then the still more jubilant shout a minute later:

"Alive, by God! Don't even seem to have no bones broke!"

IT WAS the next day that Ken Douglas performed what in another locale might have classified as a miracle or something. But in an oilfield you can expect darn near anything to happen, so——

The runt got up that morning feeling a changed man. He was bruised and sore all over, but he was a hero now, with a sure job. He knew it and he felt that conditions were now right for a change. He hunted up Buster Carmody for a starter and inveigled him out to a secluded spot where no well-meaning but misguided giants would be likely to see and lumber out to the rescue.

"Now, you big oaf!" snarled Douglas suddenly, whirling on Buster. "That was all your fault yesterday. It's no thanks to you the kid's alive today. And you been making fun of me, too."



Carmody glared suspiciously. "Well, what of it?" he growled.

With an amazing leap and stab, Ken Douglas planted his left fist very neatly in Carmody's right eye, a twisting, expert blow that cut the eyebrow and brought a blinding trickle of blood. Even then the giant's slow mind simply could not realize that the impossible was happening. So Douglas' next blow did the same to his other eye. And after that——

A big gangpusher, passing down the

camp street, saw the affair from a distance, along toward the end, and let out a wild shout of alarm. An impromptu posse formed on the instant and came springing madly, with ideas of lynching Carmody, or something like that. They came to lynch, but they remained to stare and gasp.

Practically blind in both eyes, Buster Carmody was wildly swinging both fists, in a pathetic, elephantine fashion. Darting in and out, Ken Douglas was doing business like an angry hornet. His fists were whipping into Carmody's body with the smash of thirty caliber bullets and while thirty caliber isn't very large, still it has killed bigger giants than Carmody.

Douglas was too small to knock the big man out. But Carmody wasn't able to hit Douglas at all. Bit by bit, Buster Carmody was assuming the general aspect of a bad traffic accident.

Douglas gave up trying to knock the giant cold and stepped back, evidently studying what to do next. Although he was not within ten feet of Carmody, the giant was continuing to swing blindly. The runt picked up a rock, eyed Carmody's chin for a moment, then, with a regretful shake of his head, tossed the rock away. Apparently he thought that wasn't quite ethical. He danced over, hit Carmody in the short ribs again and called it a day.

Great hands fell suddenly on Douglas' shoulders as he started to turn away. With a sudden, savage wrench he jerked free, whirled and stared into the amazed face of Big Nasty Tolliver.

A joyous light danced into Ken Douglas' blue eyes and he stepped back.

"Listen here, big boy!" he said. "You saved my life, but I saved your boy. That kind of makes us even, doesn't it?"

Big Nasty blinked, entirely puzzled.

"I hate to do this," went on Douglas. "I like you fine, big boy. But it looks like there's only one way to get an idea inside your head. That's beat it in." With a savage leap, Ken Douglas pasted Big Nasty Tolliver in the eye.

Instinctively, Big Nasty Tolliver jerked back and flung up his hands. His eye was seeing stars, but his brain evidently at last was seeing light. He made a wild grab, surprisingly swift for so big a man, and just did manage to catch Douglas' shoulder.

"Turn loose, darn you!" Douglas was squirming ferociously. "Turn loose of me and fight fair! You hear?"

"Wait a minute, Dug. I get what you're driving at. You can take care of yourself!"

Douglas stopped struggling and stared up into the big driller's face. "You sure of that, you big ox?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Yeah, I'm sure." Tolliver nodded over toward where Buster Carmody still was gamely trying to protect himself against a now absent foe. "Anybody that can lick that guy, Dug, is full grown. But how in the heck could you?"

Ken Douglas sniffed. He looked up into Big Nasty's face, then around at the faces of the other men and sniffed again. A very disdainful, patronizing sniff.

"When I was a little guy," said Ken Douglas grandly, "I use to be sparrin' partner for the flyweight champ. The champ, he wasn't big and slow, like you guys. The champ, he was tough!"

To Henry DeVoll, Robbery and Murder Were an Art

THE SPIDER

By IVAN MARCH

Author of "Sky Writers"

HENRY DEVOLL propped the extra, still damp from the presses, against the vinegar cruet and gloated over the headlines.

"ROBBERY! MURDER!"—the two words screamed in a banner of red. Below, neatly decked, were the subheads:

First National Bank Looted of Half a Million; Night Watchman Killed

NOTORIOUS "SPIDER" SUSPECTED

As he read, Henry DeVoll felt his body swell with the inward elation of an actor reading of his own great success, or of a boxer reviewing his gruelling championship fight. He glanced around the restaurant; every man in the room was reading those same headlines. He caught snatches of conversation: "Awful, eh? Naw, they won't get him. The Spider's too smart for 'em." "Fifth job he's pulled. They say, and a murder every time." "Police—dumb—not safe to be alive any more."

Henry DeVoll felt a desire to chuckle. Suppose he rose from his table, called for attention and told the truth? Announced that The Spider was in their midst? That he, Henry DeVoll was the terrible man-killing Spider? They'd not believe him, of course. Does a mouse kill a cat, or a sheep attack a wolf? How could that mild, shabby little man whose blue eyes flickered childishly behind thick glasses be a terrible criminal? No, the Spider was a sinister being, something not quite human, a monster who moved along the trail of death and left no clues. That white-collar slave who

claimed to be the Spider should be sent to the psychopathic hospital for a "nut" test.

That would be the cream of the macabre jest—they'd never believe him. So perfect his crime, he could confess it and be ridiculed.

The waitress approached smiling. "Good morning, Mr. DeVoll. Glad to see you back. Been away, ain't you?"

"Yes, fishing in the mountains. Nice to get back. Read about the robbery?"

The girl's face immediately expressed horror. "Oh, ain't it terrible? Right across the street, too. And poor old Mr. Gannon murdered. I tell you a person ain't safe any more; 'specially a single girl."

Henry DeVoll grinned. The waitress, he thought, was safe enough, at least as far as the Spider was concerned. "Usual breakfast," he ordered. "Orange juice, scrambled eggs, toast and coffee. Needn't hurry. I got forty minutes before I'm due at the office."

He turned his attention to the newspaper again:

"Detective bureau at sea. . . . The Spider's usual method. . . . miracle of luck and coincidence."

With a contemptuous snort, DeVoll reread the paragraph. Luck and coincidence, eh? Hell! It was brains and The System. Yes sir, The System. Infinite pains with infinite details; eight months to prepare for a single coup. Five big jobs in five years, close to a million dollars salted away under various aliases, a half million more last night—and they call it luck! Thread by thread he had woven the fabric of the perfect crime, and now his mind flashed back over his work with the satisfaction of an artist who sees his masterpiece acclaimed.

HIS first step had been to choose the proper bank—an ancient structure which had recently been remodelled. He had opened an account there under the name of Henry DeVoll, a self-effacing, timid little man quite frightened by the ordeal of facing the assistant cashier who handled the "New Account Department."

"Henry DeVoll, did you say? D—e—capital V—o—double l. Good! Eight hundred twenty dollars. Fine. Sign your name here, Mr. DeVoll. Ah, eh, how do you happen to come to us, Mr. DeVoll?"

DeVoll raised his mild blue eyes and smiled sheepishly. "It was your building, I guess," he confessed. "It looks so grand and new."

"New?" The cashier chuckled patronizingly, glad to show how friendly he was. "Does look pretty good, doesn't it? Let you in on a secret, though. The building is 'most thirty years old. Yes sir."

"Aw!" with timid doubt.

"Yes, sir. But remodelled, of course. Let's see—about three years ago now."

Henry DeVoll shook his head. "Can't believe it," he muttered. "You must've got some terrible good architect from New York or somewhere."

"No, not at all," the cashier boasted. "Local contractors did it. McClure Brothers. But they're just as good as any builders in the world."

"Must be," DeVoll agreed. "Well, thank you, thank you." He put his little bank book in his pocket, smirked, and backed from the counter.

An hour later DeVoll called at the offices of McClure Brothers. Were they looking for an expert draughtsman? Apologetically he produced forged letters of recommendation and a genuine diploma from one of the best engineering colleges in the country. Boss McClure examined the diploma and an avaricious light gleamed in his eyes. Not every day could a contractor hire an expert civil engineer at a draughtsman's salary.

"Tell you what we'll do, Mr. DeVoll. We'll make a place for you. Of course the

pay'll be low to start—a hundred and a quarter, say . . . Fine! I'll have Mr. Huggins show you around."

A month later Henry DeVoll stole the plans of the bank building from the contractor's files. Night after night he studied them—rooms, walls, vaults, wiring, burglar alarms, switches, every small detail. When he returned the tracings the following week he had every line indelibly impressed on his mind, knew just how to attack the vault.

There was no hurry. He must first establish his rôle as mild mannered Henry DeVoll, just another clerical slave. This part of the plan took time, but in five months the people at his respectable boarding house, his boss, the bank cashier, even Officer O'Brien, the traffic cop on the corner, were calling him by name. They'd all vouch for the fact that he was a most genteel little fellow.

WEDNESDAY night, the seventeenth of December, he loaded himself with a bag of tools, a coil of thin, strong rope which was to become known as "The Spider's web," food and water sufficient for three or four days, and climbed the fire-escape of the Burdick Building. From the roof he dropped to the top of the First National Bank. At two in the morning, six hours before the first employees came to work, he looped his rope in an endless noose over a chimney at the back and lowered himself to a tiny window. The grillwork was faked and came away with a single jerk; the window opened to his jimmy. He cut the noose, slid it around the chimney and down to him, replaced the grill, shut the window and stretched heavy black cloth across it.

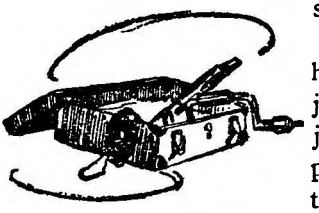
Once inside he knew exactly where he was, thanks to the plans. He found the electric switch, snapped on the light which glowed yellow in a single grime-covered bulb. The old store-room was filled with dust covered files. Perhaps once a month, soon after the first, some one entered that room and jammed more statements into the steel cabinets nearest the door; otherwise the place was not visited.

DeVoll grimaced his satisfaction as he surveyed the heavy coating of dust which covered everything. He sought a far corner and quietly re-arranged the files until he had a hide-out which would not be discovered by a casual filing clerk.

He looked at his watch. Two-thirty. The night watchman would be eating his lunch on the directors' table, far up in front. Time to set to work in earnest. After careful calculation he marked a spot on the floor and, infinitely careful, attacked it with a bit and brace. For three inches he bored. A sharp rasping informed him he had struck the steel ceiling below and he changed to a tempered steel drill. Slowly, using much oil and picking up each curl of metal he cut almost through the plating. Again he changed drills, this time to one the size of a pencil.

His precautions against noise or dropping a flake of metal increased. Suddenly his drill slipped into space; he had punctured the make-shift ceiling with a hole just large enough to see into the banking room below. Not a flake of metal, not a bit of sawdust had fallen to the floor, but so true had been his calculations that a plumb-line lowered from the hole would have fallen exactly three feet in front of the lock of the bank vault—a huge combination affair as old as the bank itself.

Henry DeVoll grimaced his satisfaction before he carefully gathered up the debris and placed a filing box over the hole. Carrying his tools back to his rat's nest among the cabinets, he curled up for a five-hour sleep.



At eight-fifty he was on the job again, adjusting a high-power glass to the hole he had made. Five minutes later the cashier, a pompous fellow with a banker's pince nez, appeared below. Rapidly he twisted the combination lock, pressed a concealed but-

ton, pulled the locking lever, and the ponderous steel door swung open.

It was three days before Henry DeVoll was absolutely sure of the sequence of figures which would swing open the vault door, but he didn't waste his time. Each night he worked at the floor with his bit and brace until he had cut an eighteen inch square which he removed and hid. Next he reamed out rivets until the slightest pressure would release a panel of the steel ceiling.

At precisely two-thirty of the fourth night, confident that the watchman, whose regularity was a byword, would be enjoying his lunch, he proceeded with his attack. First he put an expansion bit through the hole he had cut into the steel ceiling, braced it across the opening. Pushing downward on the plate, chiseling quietly, he felt the panel give. It hung loosely from the bit and he was able to pull it up to him. Now he played a rope through the opening to the floor below, donned rubber gloves, stuck a Colt in his hip pocket, slung his kit of tools over his shoulder and slid down—the Spider crawling on his web.

ON THE floor below he noiselessly slipped off the bag of tools and, catlike, slid to the switch which controlled the burglar alarm. A click sounded. No trouble from that source now and he moved to the main foyer of the bank, concealed himself behind a huge marble pillar.

That vast, semi-dark banking room was spectral, unearthly, the marble pillars cold and clammy to the touch. For the first time Henry DeVoll felt his nerves jangling. He crouched expectantly. Shuffling footsteps sounded—the old night watchman, Mike Gannon, limping his lone beat. The fellow was a black bulk moving through the gloom, his face a white blur.

Henry DeVoll pushed closer to the pillar, his automatic ready. Suddenly the old man stopped and turned as if some uncanny sense told him of the presence of a stranger.

"Hey!" he questioned himself querulously. "Somebody behind that pillar?"

DeVoll did not move while the old man fumbled with an electric torch. The white shaft of its light fingered through the darkness. Henry DeVoll fired five times. There was little noise—the silencer on the nose of the automatic took care of that. The old night watchman coughed wheezily, slumped to the floor.

Instantly DeVoll was over him, ascertained that he was dead, then turned quickly to the bank vault. He spun the combination dial as he had watched the cashier do it: Right five times to fifty-five; left four times to forty-five; right three times to seventy; left twice to twenty-four, and right again to zero. On the second attempt he felt the tumblers fall. He pressed the secret electric button and pulled the lock level. Slowly, ponderously, the vault door swung open.

Inside DeVoll went, almost shutting the door behind him. He approached the money safes. Like the huge vault itself, they were the old-fashioned, crude type, those which safe blowers call "cheese boxes." DeVoll jimmied off the combinations in rapid order, pawed over their contents. He was careful what he selected—currency, great wads of it, negotiable stocks and bonds. Close to half a million! His best and last haul. He could retire now.

Methodically he placed the currency and bonds in his tool kit. Two minutes later he was searching the dead night watchman. He secured Gannon's key ring, dragged the corpse to the vault, placed it inside and left it there with the tools he had used in his work. He pushed the door shut, locked it. A sardonic grin cut his face as he imagined the expression of the cashier next morning when that door swung open. He glanced up at the rope which he had left dangling from the ceiling. He would leave that as his trade-mark, The Spider's web, the final link in that wonderful system of his.

He let himself out the side door with the watchman's keys, returned to his

lodging, hid his loot in a battered old suitcase and quietly went to bed. That was just four hours ago, and now he was reading of his exploit which the dumb newspapers called "luck and coincidence." Henry DeVoll continued to snort contemptuously between sips of coffee.

A shadow darkened the doorway of the Acme Restaurant. Henry DeVoll looked up quickly. It was Officer O'Brien, the traffic cop at the corner, and with him was a stocky man in civilian clothes. The man's face was brick red, his eyes unusually bright and blue, his manner pugnacious. Instinctively DeVoll knew him to be a "dick."

"Hello, Mr. DeVoll," Officer O'Brien called, moving to the next table. "How's the coffee this morning?"

HENRY DEVOLL smiled and nodded. He considered O'Brien one of his oldest friends. Lord, how he'd like to tell him something about that robbery. The other fellow, though, made him nervous. Obviously he was nobody's fool.

"Terrible robbery in the bank last night," suggested Henry DeVoll meekly. "They say the Spider did it."

Officer O'Brien swelled visibly. "Yeah, the Spider, righto. I just been detailed to

the detective bureau. Going to help on the case. Me and Lieutenant Thornton. You know him, don't you? He's the big shot that catches them all."

Henry DeVoll nodded meekly at Lieutenant Thornton. He felt the two glittering eyes of the man bore into him like a gimlet. It made him uncomfortable and he raised the paper, pretended to read. The officers were discussing the crime in low voices but DeVoll could hear every word they said. The two men detailed to catch him, sitting less than five feet away! That showed how perfect The System was.

He peeped over the top of his paper. Lord, the blue eyes of Lieutenant Thornton were on him again, staring intently. Suddenly the dick's eyes widened in surprise, tinged with horror. He half rose from his chair, pointed a finger at Henry DeVoll.

"Spider!" he called sharply, incisively. "Spider! Quick, get him!"

For a split second the heart of Henry DeVoll stopped beating; his brain was lead inside of his skull. What mistake had he made? What clue had he left uncovered? What was the flaw in his perfect crime? Only one thing he knew—that at the height of his triumph he had been discovered.

His hand flashed down to his pocket and flashed up again with the automatic. His teeth gleamed yellow. "Lay off, you dicks!" he shrilled, and the sound was the squeak of a cornered rat. "Lay off or I'll burn hell out of you."

The automatic spat lead once, twice, three times, noiselessly. Officer O'Brien clutched at the pit of his stomach with both hands; he toppled, a puzzled grin still on his face. Lieutenant Thornton roared with pain, spun halfway around, fell to his knees. He cursed as he strove to draw his gun. Once more DeVoll fired, then dashed between white faces toward the door. He reached the threshold, stepped across it. A shot rang out behind him. He felt a cold sliver penetrate his back. He knew he had been shot, shot by the red-faced dick. As he fell he cursed because he hadn't finished the man when he was down.

THREE hours later Henry DeVoll, gray with the fear of impending death, lay in a hospital cot. At the foot of the bed a police captain was on guard and in the captain's hand was a signed confession.

"That's all, Captain," the Spider whispered. "Took you dumb dicks five years to

get me and you had to bump me off to do it. . . . Say, Captain, would you do me a little favor?"

"Sure, I'll try to. Spit it out."

"First I want you to see that the confession of mine gets on the front page of the newspapers."

The police captain grinned. "Front page! Say, they'll get out a special edition. The newspaper boys'll see to that."

A momentary smile of triumph twisted the Spider's thin lips. "Now I want to know how that red-faced dick, Thornton, got wise to me. How'd he know I was the Spider?"

"Have to ask him," the captain declared. "I'll call him." He raised his voice. "Lieutenant Thornton, can you come in a minute?"

The door pushed open and the detective with the red face and gimlet blue eyes entered. His left arm was in a sling and a blood-stained bandage crossed his half-naked chest.

"Lieutenant, the Spider wants to know how you got him," the police captain said. "He's going to check out so you might just as well tell him."

Lieutenant Thornton glanced at the floor. He scuffed with his square-toed shoes. Suddenly he looked up and smiled sheepishly.

"Hell, Cap, I didn't know that little guy at the table was the Spider. Thought he was a friend of O'Brien's. Sure I did. He was sittin' across from us under the chandelier. I happened to look up and there was a big black spider, size of a dime, danglin' over his head from a web. I yells for him to look out. He pulls a gat and starts raisin' hell. That's all."

FIGHTING A RED RATTLER

I HAD never put much stock in the story. In spite of what old-timers had told me, I was rather inclined to doubt that there really was such a thing as a ferocious rattler. I had run across hundreds of rattlesnakes of practically every species except the true diamond-back—which of course is never found west of the gulf swamp lands—and none of them had ever stalked me, or "picked a fight" with me, so to speak. So I put it all down as just one of the tall tales old-timers tell now and then, and forgot it.

But one summer morning I was walking along an irrigation ditch on the Arizona ranch where I was raised. I had a big sombrero on, but no boots. Barefooted, I was on my way to a secluded little swimming hole in the Hassayampa which I knew was free of quicksand.

A peculiar rustling in an arrow-weed clump across the ditch attracted my attention. I picked up a stone and tossed it across. Up shot a mean-looking, triangular head and a copper colored neck. Two beady eyes glared balefully at me for a moment. Then the head disappeared.

I walked on.

Something impelled me to look back. I turned. A ripple of dull red caught my eye. Then the entire length of the snake, fully three and a half feet, slid out of the brush toward me. It stopped as it saw me standing still, and again those baleful eyes looked me over. I was still in my 'teens then, and probably didn't have sense enough to be afraid, though I'll admit a vague feeling that I ought to be going about my business without too much delay came over me.

I walked on another ten feet. The snake followed along the opposite side of the ditch, stopping when I stopped, moving on when I did. All the time those beady eyes stared at me with their unwinking, baleful glare. I didn't like it. It gave me the creeps. I'd seen bigger rattlers, had killed dozens of them, and so I decided I'd attend to this fellow and put an end to his little game of follow the leader right there.

Anyhow, I was curious; because usually a rattlesnake, if left alone, will slither away and not bother one. Oh, they'll all take a good nip out of your leg if you come close enough, or surprise them; but if you stand still they'll uncoil, go about their own affairs and not try to get you. This one didn't at all act like a well-behaved rattler.

I was carrying a long, forked stick; and with that in my hand I strode slowly back till I was opposite Mr. Rattlesnake. He watched me intently, turning his cruel, triangular head slightly with each step I took.

He rattled suddenly. I jumped. It's always a sinister sound—that dry, rasping whir—and somewhat unnerving.

Before I could do anything else, the snake slid into the water of the ditch and

started directly across toward me. I had presence of mind enough to poke him back on the bank again with the forked stick. But he dived right in once more. I used the stick again and threw him entirely out of the water. For a moment he laid there, just eyeing me. He seemed fairly to quiver with rage, and I wouldn't have been a bit surprised if he had begun to froth at the mouth.

I was beginning to get a little scared. I remembered the stories I'd heard about the red rattler, a rare species found only in parts of Arizona and California, and that they were as ferocious as a bulldog. It became increasingly clear that I had run across one of those playful little fellows, and that he was out to "git" me for disturbing him.

For the third time he started at me. I poked him nervously with the stick. Somehow he evaded it, and in another moment was up the bank. He wasted no time. He made a mad rush at me and I struck wildly with the stick. The end hit the ground beyond him and it broke in two!

I leaped backward; but he came on, his wet, coppery length shining in the sun. I struck again. The blow broke his back, but still he tried to wriggle closer to me. A second blow smashed his head, and I sighed with relief. I counted the rattles, and found he had seventeen and a button. He was a beautiful specimen, with a black diamond pattern along his spine. I cut off his head with my knife, stripped the skin back to the end of the tail, and cut that off.

All thoughts of swimming were gone now. Deciding to return home to exhibit my trophy, I jumped across the ditch with it in my hand. My bare foot slipped on the wet bank and I sprawled flat on my stomach. I raised my head and instantly "froze."

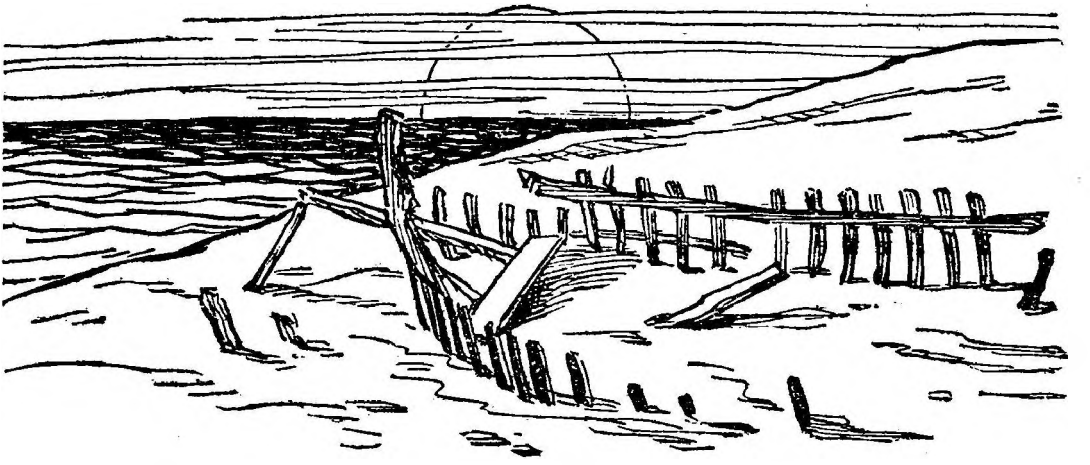
Not more than eighteen inches in front of my face, two beady eyes glared at me above a coppery body. It flashed through my mind that here was the mate of the one I had killed, and that probably it had been following. It coiled swiftly, all the time rattling in a high-pitched, angry sound.

I didn't dare shove backward. Nor could I roll over and hope to be quick enough to escape the bite that I knew was coming. I was too close. There was only one thing to do. I dropped my head to shield my face with the brim of my hat. As I did so the snake struck. The fangs pierced the crown of the sombrero, but were kept from reaching my scalp by the heavy felt.

Without a lost motion, I tumbled backward into the ditch before the snake could strike again, and scrambled out feeling like a half drowned rat. Picking up a rock, I heaved it at this second rattler and was lucky enough to smash its ugly head. Then I took off my hat and looked at the two fang punctures. My hair was wet with a brown, slightly sticky fluid that I knew was venom. I washed it out hurriedly.

After that I skinned the second rattler and went home with two trophies—and a lump in my throat that seemed as big as a watermelon!

J. R. Johnston



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Down to the Depths

THERE is a great deal of fact behind Robert E. Pinkerton's absorbing story of treasure and deep-water diving which appears in this issue of SHORT STORIES. The mechanism of the diving bell, as Pinkerton describes it, is novel; but it is not at all impossible. Pinkerton merely carries the machinery of the bell a little farther in his imagination, and perfects it to the point where it has complete flexibility in the work which it is intended to do. There is little doubt that some day such diving bells will reach this point of perfection. Already they are equipped with stout, clam-shell hooks so powerful that they can tear their way into any wreck.

The advantages of a diving bell over a diving suit are many and obvious. Chief among them being the fact that in a bell a diver can descend to far greater depths, and in comparative comfort and security. The divers on the salvage job of the sunken S-51, for instance, worked under terrific handicaps and almost impossible conditions. They wore suits. The limit to which a diver in a suit can descend safely does not depend half so much on the physical pressure (since that is equalized without and within the suit by means of compressed air) as it does upon the physiological changes in the diver's body when it is subjected to conditions to which it is not adapted. The real explanation lies in the fact that under terrific pressure the tissues of the body begin to absorb the nitrogen from the air supply, until the whole body is charged with it. Then, if the pressure is suddenly lowered when the diver is lifted to the surface too quickly, the nitrogen gas, attempting to escape from the body, passes from the tissues into the blood stream in the form of bubbles. This is intensely painful to the diver, and the condition is called the "bends," a peril that is greatly feared by all professional divers. The symptoms are vaguely like those of intoxication: the diver cannot understand or think clearly, is likely to forget altogether what he is about. If acute enough, the condition will bring about a violent case of pneumonia.——A depth of three hundred feet, or fifty fathoms, is said to be the extreme limit to which a diver can descend with any safety.

All of which explains the necessity for the comparatively new "recompression" chambers which have been established here and there about the world for use in treating divers who are afflicted with cases of the "bends." The diver is placed as soon as possible in one of these chambers, and is subjected to extreme pressure. Very, very gradually, this pressure is diminished, so that his body has a chance to give off

its abnormal supply of nitrogen in a safe, slow manner.

Divers, of course, are not the only ones affected by this strange malady. "Sandhogs," or the men who work under the same kind of pressure in caissons, are just as subject to it. In fact, anyone who descends to any great depth below the surface of the earth or the sea is likely to be afflicted with it.

That, so far as sea diving is concerned, is where the diving bell comes in. By building a steel shell that is capable of withstanding the physical pressure of the water without, normal air conditions can be maintained inside, and the diver can work without the slightest danger of developing "bends." But naturally, if he is to do any work at all, some such device as the clam-shell hooks actually in use, or the mechanical arms such as are used in Pinkerton's "Salty Gold," are a necessity.

There actually was, by the way, a sunken ship that resembled the treasure ship in this story. One night nearly thirty years ago, a man hung his trousers in his stateroom aboard the little steamship *Islander*. Not many hours later that ship was wrecked in sixty fathoms of water off the end of Douglas Island, off the coast of Alaska. Last December a diver, using a diving bell of the clam-shell hook type, found that pair of trousers hanging inside the locked stateroom, and so well preserved by the salt water that they could hardly be torn. In one pocket was found the sum of $6.75 in small change, part of the coins being Queen Victoria and part King Edward issues. That was not the fortune the diver was looking for, however! He was after the ship's strong box, which was believed to contain vast sums in the form of gold nuggets which the passengers had placed in the ship's keeping until they reached Seattle.

Birthday Party

A REAL treat is in store for you if you haven't read J. D. Newsom's grand story "Redhead," in this issue. It's real and hard—and exciting. It could hardly be anything else, being the story of a redhead in the Foreign Legion.

Speaking of the Legion reminds us that just three months ago that hardboiled bunch got sentimental and celebrated its birthday.——Though not with a party; for the celebration amounted to nothing more than the usual strict routine. Although there was no official recognition of it (maybe the Legion didn't like to talk too much about its age!), the world's most famous fighting body was exactly one hundred years old on the ninth of March. In the year 1830 the Swiss and Hohenlohe regiments of professional soldiers were paid off from the service of France. Nearly a year later, the French Foreign Legion was organized in Paris to succeed the two defunct bodies.

But there will be a party—a real one a little later. The French Government will officially recognize the hundredth anniversary of the Legion, and its great service during those hundred years, when the Legion Memorial is unveiled at sun-scorched Sidi-Bel-Abbes. The French Minister of War will be there—as will hundreds of ex-Legionnaires; yellow, black, white and brown; of every race; of every creed. And *then* there'll be a celebration! (We'd like to see it.)

Ever Seen a Sea Snake?

NOT many issues back we published an exciting story about a fight with two sea serpents. Several readers have written in to query this; and because there may be others who read that story and doubted, we're going to print below a few facts about these creatures. E. Hardy, an English naturalist, is responsible for them.

In November, 1928, a sea serpent was caught by fishermen off the east coast of New Zealand, near Auckland. The creature was about seven feet long, with a slender, silver brown body and a thin ribbon-like dorsal fin that extended the whole length of its body. A London scientist, on examining it, found it highly venomous

and possessing formidable teeth which—as with all snakes—were laid back at an angle, making escape of prey impossible. It had a remarkable head, with large eyes set well forward between the jaws. This actual specimen had strayed from its natural habitat in the coastal waters of North Australia.

There actually are true sea snakes, grouped by scientists in the sub-family *Hydrophiinoe,* and belonging to the Colubrine snakes, which include such well-known forms as the cobras and death adders. Sea snakes are recognized, not only by their marine habits, but by their strongly compressed and oar-shaped tails, which are naturally developed for swimming. Except for the broad-tailed sea snakes, these serpents never leave the water. They are all very poisonous, and for that reason are regarded with great dread by the fishermen in whose nets they are often caught. They have relatively small heads, jaws and fangs; and while in some cases the body is broad and thick, in others it is thick only in the region of the tail. The coloration varies greatly, and is often brilliant and beautiful.

Unlike land snakes, the sea snakes do not cast their skin in one piece as a "slough," but let it peal off bit by bit.

In the sea, or in tidal waters, their movements are quick and sinuous; but when cast ashore by a storm they are completely helpless. They feed mostly upon fish, for the capture of which they sometimes congregate in great shoals, a familiar sight in parts of the Bay of Bengal.

Sea serpents are found in the seas of the warmer parts of the Eastern Hemisphere, off the coasts of India, and among the isles of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Their range extends from the Persian Gulf to New Guinea and New Zealand. They are divided into three main groups: the broad-tailed, the parti-colored, and the back-banded.

Although there are recognized animals termed "sea serpents," one must not believe all stories about them. Only when the record of one is verified by a scientific observer, can any truth be put into the statement. Fabulous monsters large enough to writhe around a ship and pull it beneath the waves are absurd, for sea serpents do not grow to a size sufficient to make that possible. Most of the alleged sea monsters are in reality porpoises or squids.

Beginning in a Major Way

JUNE 25th SHORT STORIES, we affirm, will be a "major" event. You ought to see at once what that means, folks;

L. Patrick Greene's famous Englishman is coming back to you—with monocle, pith helmet, boy Jim and all! The Major hasn't been seen around these parts for so long that meeting him again will seem like old times. But wait until you read the story! The Major has got himself a whole bagful of brand new tricks; and a darned good thing, too, seeing what sort of a mess he and Jim get themselves into. They're still in Africa, but most of the business concerns diamond buyers and hijackers and Chinese opium kings.—— Here's a tip, too: you remember the "Major Contest" that SHORT STORIES and Pat Greene conducted last year? Results were announced in the issue for November 10th, 1930. Mr. John Kuhn, of Red Wing, Minnesota, won the first prize with his letter suggesting where the Major should go and what he should do next; and this new story by Pat Greene is based upon that suggestion. We'll tell you all about it when the story is published in the next issue.—— The title of the yarn? "Chinkering Ching"—a complete novel that's as good as anything that Pat Greene has ever written.

H. Bedford-Jones, with his facile pen (which these days is a typewriter with every author we know) furnishes the novelette. One of his somewhat rare Western tales, this time. Usually he's so busy in the Orient or on Oriental seas that he hasn't time to think of the U. S. A.

Nor is B.-J.'s story the only good Western tale in the issue. Ernest Haycox has written a story of a sheriff and six-guns that will make you forget that time passes, once you've begun to read it. He's called it "Star Toter."

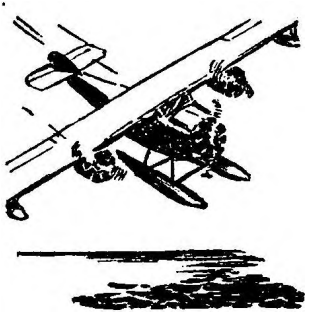
Everyone knows the old saw, "A laugh is the best of sauces."—— That was Eddy Orcutt's idea when he wrote "Something About Cossacks." We're not going to spoil the story by telling you what it's all about, except to say that it's about a boxfight and that it's funny. You surely remember Orcutt's last hilarious yarn, "The Mongolian Mastoid."

Nor can we permit you to forget that Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson's gripping tale of mystery and sudden death in the Philippines, "The Island of Lost Men," concludes next time. It's one of the most enthralling stories we've published in a long while. If you read the first installment (in this issue), you won't be able to miss the conclusion.

Furthermore and moreover, this same issue will carry a diving story, a story of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, a story of the sea and a railroad yarn.

OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.



Revise Your Maps!

NEW islands are always popping up somewhere and making trouble for the cartographers. You just can't keep up with 'em anymore.—— Perhaps it's all a part of this overproduction one hears so much about these days.

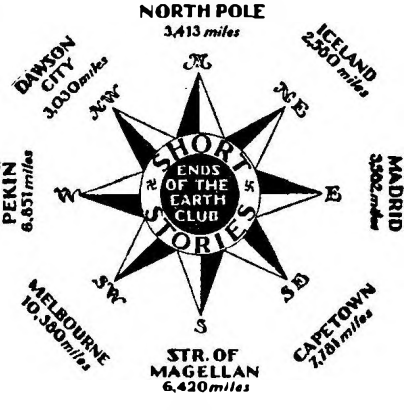
Last January there occurred a sizable earthquake disturbance in Mexico, if you recall. But there were certain results, geo-

graphically, that were not discovered until several months later. It took the captain of the steamship *City of San Francisco* to discover that a new island or volcano—he didn't know which—had appeared in the Pacific, six miles off Puerto Angel, Oaxaca.—— And here's another point to consider; prior to the appearance of the island, and during the time that the mainland was being rocked by the tremblors, the surface of the sea along that section of the coast was covered with oil.

Seadromes

THE establishment of a series of floating islands, to be used in transoceanic air routes, is constantly coming a little closer to realization. A short time ago the Society of Automotive Engineers held an international annual meeting at Detroit, and a good share of the discussion was over the engineering problems and the building and maintenance of a series of these floats, to be established at intervals of three hundred and fifty miles in a line across the Atlantic. The project provides for eight of these seadromes, and the line would extend from a point midway between Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Bermuda on this side of the Atlantic, to another point in the Azores. From the Azores, the line would extend directly to Brest, France, or to Plymouth, England. Models illustrating the various problems of fabrication, assembling, anchoring and so forth were used in the discussion. Several legal questions involving possible international complications were also discussed.—— It looks, however, as though we would soon be able to cross to Europe by plane with perfect ease and security, and with considerable more speed than by ship.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Dear Secretary:

I now take my pen in hand, to do something that I have long intended to do, but for one reason or another never got around to until the present time. And that is, to apply for membership in the Ends of the Earth Club and to meet the rest of the adventure-loving fellows that belong.

I have for the last ten years, in fact ever since I was sixteen, been following the sea, primarily because it is one of the few remaining careers of adventure to be found in this age of machinery and commerce. Ashore, man has been fairly successful in covering up and destroying nature, but the sea remains unchanged and as it always was—kind to those who know her.

While my travels have been of a varied nature, most of my voyaging has been done in Oriental waters, China, Japan, India, Java, Burma, etc. Lands that no matter how often visited are interesting and strange.

Then, of course, I have been to the South and Central American republics a few times, often enough in fact, to grow

quite fond of them and their people.

Contrary to the general order of things, I am one "Yankee" who was always treated courteously and well; and while the contrast between myself and the South Americans (I being over six feet and blond,) was great, yet they often treated me as their own; and as soon as I return from the Gulf of Persia, where I am now bound, I am heading south again.

I write this letter from the barroom of the Metropolitan Hotel. Many of you know the place on Avenida Central, and as soon as I finish this letter (and my glass of beer) I shall take a Victoria, (open air carriage) and ride over to the moss covered ruins of old Panama, and watch the moon rise over the tree tops. Then back to town, and dinner, to be followed by a small bottle of Spanish wine in crushed ice.

Then, in a mood that is mellow, and in the cool of the evening, I shall walk around the Plaza, listen to the music, and gaze upon the Spanish beauties who stroll by. Oh yes, Panama is all right!

However, as soon as I find a suitable partner, I am going to start a little trading and prospecting venture in Baja (Lower) California, one of the least known territories in North America, sparsely settled but as wild and woolly as old Texas. Vaqueros, rancheros, etc.; bear, puma, wild horses, deer, etc. Sure is a great country—and easily accessible to the U. S.

Well, with the last drink in my glass—I salute you. *"Skol!"* Fellow adventurers, here's health, wealth, and happiness to all of you!

Adios, hasta la vista,

J. Swanson

c/o J. Peters,
Box No. 23,
Winfield Scott,
San Francisco,
Calif.

Dear Secretary:

Although I'm not of your people, the spirit of adventure holds me in a fast grip. Have seen many countries, did some fighting in France from 1914 to 1918. Joined the Polish Army to fight the Reds in Russia. Since 1926 I have been in Brazil, where I have had many a trade. Last year, wanting to spend my holidays better than ever, I joined the rebels in this country.—— My, My! Never again. Commissioned first lieutenant, I was assigned to command a machine gun company. The only soldiers in the company were the commander and the sergeant. The rest, people of all classes and social standing, had never seen a gun; though I can assure you they could fight like wildcats. Now, *c'est tout fini,* and I'm selling my books, ink, pencils and other effects and swapping yarns with my friends until a new outburst of wanderlust blows me away.

If you think I'm eligible as a member of your club, send me a card.

Very truly yours,

Eugenio Swardowski.

Rua Lugne di Caxias 454,
Curitiba, Parana,
Brazil.

Dear Secretary:

I want to join the Ends of the Earth Club. I am only twenty, and still have a bit of the world to see. I get fed up with the army life, and I should be very glad if I could write to somebody.

I can swim, play football, ride a horse and shoot, and do other things besides. I will forward a photo of myself and you can judge for yourself.

I will keep in touch with you wherever I go. We go to Palestine in April.

I have not much to tell you, so I will close, hoping to hear from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

Pte. W. I. Holloway.

No. 5105227,
B Coy., 1st. R. War. R.,
British Bks.,
Khartoum, Sudan,
Egypt.

I'll *Show You a Quick Way to Get Money to* Pay Your Bills

"VAN" the man who is loved by thousands who have used his almost magical plan to get money to pay their bills.

If you will look after my business in your locality. No experience needed. Pleasant, easier work, can be handled in spare time or full time. Work pays good money by hour or week.

No Capital Needed

I have money enough for both of us. I furnish all capital, set you up in business, advertise you, and do everything to make you my successful and respected "pardner" in your locality. I will divide with you—give you part of every dollar we take in—yet I don't ask you to invest a single penny in a stock of merchandise. Everything is furnished without risk to you. You simply call on old and new customers and prospects, give them a message from me, follow my trial order instructions, take care of mailing their orders and you make a profit on every one.

Money Comes Quick

Money comes quick this way. If you are in debt today or need money for food or clothes or rent or for any other bills here is the quickest way I know of for you

and have a STEADY INCOME the rest of your life

to get as much as you need. I send you a plan by which you either make $15 cash the very first day you work for me, or else I pay you cash for the time it took you to try.

Either Man or Woman

Doesn't make any difference about your age or whether you are a man or woman. Both have made lots of money with me. All that I ask is that you will be honest with me with the merchandise I send you—that you be ambitious enough to deliver the little message I send to people in your locality and mail me their trial orders. The products are high grade everyday necessities—used in every home—such as teas, spices, extracts, groceries—things people must have to live.

Your Groceries at Wholesale

As my "pardner" you can choose all your own groceries at wholesale from a big list of over 300 items. And the quality of every product is backed by a $25,000 bond.

Four BIG THINGS I DO for YOU AT ONCE

DO I MAKE GOOD? READ THESE!

You Paid the Mortgage on My Home

Says Rev. C. V. McMurphy of Alabama. McMurphy got "Van's" offer. The first afternoon he made $30. He writes, "The notes on the house have been burned—we have a new car—I no longer fear financial problems." He has made as high as $300 in a week.

Mother Makes $2,000 Spare Time

Mrs. S. M. Jones of Georgia, mother of four, says "First hour and half made $36.47." She could only work on Mondays and Saturday afternoon. But with this easy work she has made over $2,000 in a few short months.

$1,457 in Prizes

Besides big earnings every day, says Wilbur Skiles, Pennsylvania. He says, "It is easy to make $15 a day—I have made as much as $15.23 in two hours."

Big Money in Spare Time

C. C. Miner, Iowa, made $74 his first four days—part time. His first 15 days (part time) he made $200! He writes, "Van, I thank God for the day I signed up for you."

Chrysler Car to Producers—No Charge

I give you a car to use in business and for pleasure just as soon as you qualify as one of my steady producers. No contest.

1. I Send You $18 Worth of Food Products [Retail Value]

To start you right I send a big case of my products—over 45 full size packages—which you can turn into money at once if you wish.

2. I Give You 10 Packages of Groceries for you to GIVE AWAY FREE!

These groceries are absolutely Free. You pay nothing for them. You give them away with no strings—just hand them out as I show you how.

3. I Give You 20 Magic Words and Other Instructions

You simply say these words to tan ladies—give them a message from me—give them the groceries Free—and allow them to pick a trial order from your samples.

4. Then if you Don't Make $15 Cash the Very First Day I Will Pay You a Cash Penalty for your Time

AND I go one step further—for I let you give credit to your customers and give you a part of every dollar we take in.

I don't let you take any chances. I have started over 30,000 men and women on the road toward ending their money worries. And I give you my solemn promise that I'll give you the same cooperation and the same plan that enabled them to earn from $3.00 up to $15.00 a day—and some have made as high as $100.00 in a day. I give my "pardners" premiums of furniture, clothing, household furnishings and even give Cars to those who stay with me and satisfactorily build up their territories.

You Can Have Money in Your Pocket

Mail this coupon tonight—right now—I'll answer right away. I'll send my big portfolio and tell you exactly what to do to have money in your pocket next week. Remember I don't send anything C.O.D. It won't cost you a penny now or any other time to get my plan. This is an opportunity that may not come again soon as your territory may be taken up any day. But if you want to get into the big money class at once on my wonderful new plan, write your name in the coupon now and mail it to me at once.

Curtis W. Van De Mark, Pres.,
THE HEALTH-O QUALITY PRODUCTS CO.
Dept. 4065-FF
Health-O Bldg.
Cincinnati, Ohio.

FREE FOOD PRODUCTS COUPON

C. W. Van De Mark, Pres.,
The Health-O Quality Products Co. Dept. 4065-FF
Health-O Building, Cincinnati, O.

Without cost or obligation to me send full details of your amazing big Four-Point partnership plan, $18 worth of groceries and 10 Extra Packages to give away Free. This costs me nothing.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State.....

I'll Finance YOU!

MAIL THE COUPON

I'll help you build your own business selling the Public Service line of guaranteed Shirts, Ties, Hosiery and Underwear. I'll set you up at my risk and expense and furnish you everything you need to go out immediately and collect BIG CASH COMMISSIONS and LIBERAL MERCHANDISE and CASH BONUSES. All I want is the assurance that you are honest, ambitious and anxious to get ahead.

Pres.

BIG MONEY

Taking orders for Public Service Shirts and Ties is the easiest kind of selling. The line sells itself! All you have to do is to show the book.

FREE! KIT

including scientific sales kit and complete selling plan, which opens doors and pocketbooks for you. Send in the coupon today—WITHOUT DELAY—the supply of kits is limited.

PUBLIC SERVICE MILLS, Inc.

515 - 30th Street West New York, N. J.

Canadian Agents write 110 Dundas Street London, Ontario, Canada

Public Service Mills, Inc.
Dept. E18, West New York, N. J.

I want to make big money selling the big Public Service line. Please send me free outfit at once.

Name ..... Address .....

Town ..... State .....

AGENTS: $2 AN HOUR

I want men and women to act as agents for ZANOL Pure Food Products, Toilet Preparations, Soaps, etc. 350 fast sellers. Every home a prospect. Steady repeat business. Dignified, pleasant work. No experience or capital required. I show you how.

$45 First 2 Days

That's Ducat's record. Mrs. Hackett made $33 in 7 hours. Van Allen cleared $125 in a week. This shows wonderful possibilities. Earnings start at once. Be your own boss—work full time or spare time. Ford Tudor Sedan offered FREE to producers as extra bonus—in addition to big cash profits. Write quick for details.

ALBERT MILLS, 7527 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, Ohio

U.S. Firestone GOODYEAR FISK, and other Tires

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These well known brands only slightly used are taken from cars changing to our New Super Service Custom Built Tires. Carefully selected and guaranteed.

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32x4	2.95	1.15	30x4.95	2.90	1.35
33x4	2.95	1.16	28x5.25	2.95	1.35
34x4	3.50	1.16	30x5.25	2.95	1.35
32x4½	3.20	1.45	31x5.25	3.10	1.35
33x4½	3.29	1.45	32x6.00	3.20	1.40
34x4½	3.45	1.45	33x6.00	3.20	1.45
30x5	3.60	1.75	32x6.50	3.60	1.65
33x5	3.60	1.75	33x6.75	3.75	1.75
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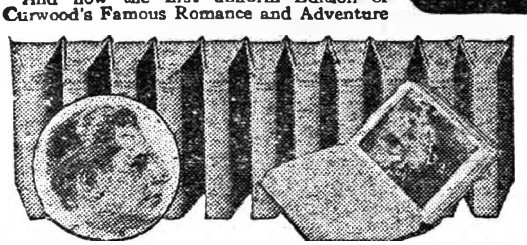

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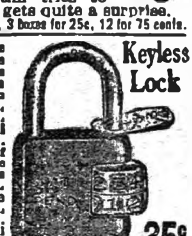

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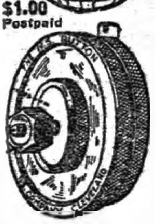

You can easily make a highly sensitive detectophone by using this Transmitter Button to collect the sound waves. You can build your own outfit without buying expensive equipment. It is simple and inexpensive. You can install an outfit in your home and hear conversations being held all over the house. You can connect up different rooms of a hotel. This outfit was used by secret service operatives during the war. It is being used on the stage. It is ultra-sensitive and is the greatest invention in micro-phones. You can mount the button almost anywhere—on sound boxes, stove pipes, stiff calendars, or the wall behind a picture frame, etc. Button is so light and small it cannot be detected. Persons can be overheard without suspecting it. You can listen in on conversations in another room. A deaf person in the audience can hear the speaker. Connected to phonograph, piano or other musical instrument, music can be heard hundreds of feet away. Button may be used to renew telephone transmitters; often makes an old line "talk up" when nothing else will. The ideal microphone for radio use; carries heavy current and is extremely sensitive. Amplifies radio signals. Countless other similar uses will suggest themselves. Experimenters find the button useful for hundreds of experiments along the lines of telephones, amplifiers, loud speakers, etc. Many fascinating stunts may be devised, such as holding the button against the throat or chest to reproduce speech without sound waves. **PRICE $1.00. JOHNSON SMITH & CO., DEPT. 730, RACINE, WIS.**