

H. H. KNIBBS — MURRAY LEINSTER — THOMSON BURTL
A Complete Western Novel by Jack Bertin

Short Stories

July 25th

Twice A Month

25¢

See in Canada



"Black Mutiny"
by
**H. BEDFORD-
JONES**

**Inside Front Cover
Missing**



Short Stories

Title
Registered
in U. S.
Patent Office



July 25, 1930

R. de S. HORN
Editor

FREDERICK CLAYTON
Associate Editor

CONTENTS

BLACK MUTINY (Novelette)	H. Bedford-Jones	4
<i>A mutinous prize crew in Oriental seas</i>		
HIC! PERICLES	Henry Herbert Knibbs	22
<i>That old hoss oughta be retired, huh?—He'd show 'em he could still buck!</i>		
HE KNEW THE COUNTRY	Sinclair Gluck	36
<i>And he knew those marsh Arabs too damn well!</i>		
BOOMLESS TOWN (Novelette)	Thomson Burtis	46
<i>Even a boomless oiltown can be tough—as Slim and Sleepy and Tex find out</i>		
SLUICE HIM DOWN	Jacland Marmur	73
<i>Horny fists and hard heads on the open seas</i>		
THE ONLY TWO LEFT	James Stevens	82
<i>Stag Sharkey K. O.'s his old log pirate enemy</i>		
STRAIGHTENED TRAIL (Complete Novel)	Jack Bertin	92
<i>A lost trail and a smoky one in the roaring West</i>		
THIS FUR GAME	H. S. M. Kemp	126
<i>Not a soft game in the cold North, either</i>		
JIMMIE DALE AND THE BLUE ENVELOPE MURDER (Part III)	Frank L. Packard	133
<i>Jimmie Dale, private detective, in new adventures with city gangsters</i>		
THE HAND OF GOD	Murray Leinster	162
<i>A Western mob—and the wrong man</i>		
THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE	170	OUTLANDS & AIRWAYS
THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUE		175

COVER—Gerard C. Delano

Vol. CXXXII, No. 2

Whole No. 590

YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE, PAYABLE IN ADVANCE

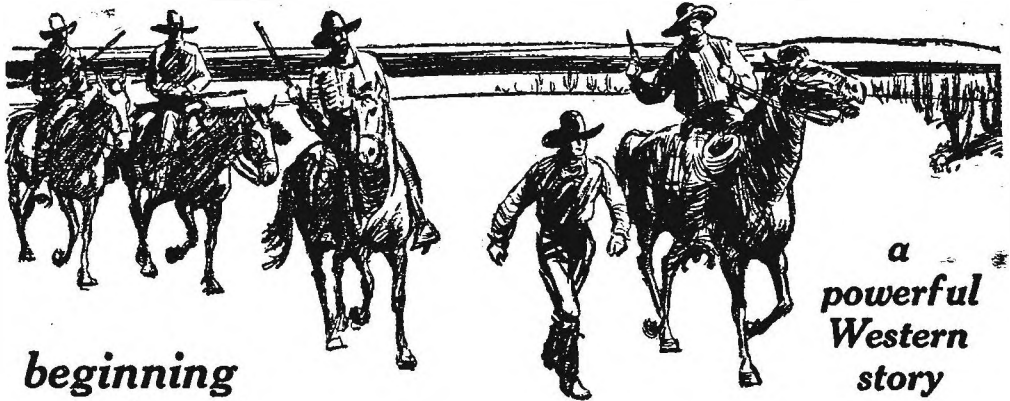
Postpaid in United States, and to all Possessions of the United States, and Mexico \$5.00
 Postpaid to all Foreign Countries 6.50
 Postpaid throughout Canada 5.80
 The entire contents of this magazine is protected by copyright, and must not be reprinted. Entered at Garden City Post Office as second-class mail matter. Issued semi-monthly by Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., Garden City, Long Island.

NELSON DOUBLEDAY, President
 GEORGE E. DORAN, Vice-President

F. N. DOUBLEDAY, Chairman of the Board
 RUSSELL DOUBLEDAY, Secretary
 JOHN J. HESSIAN, Treasurer

LILLIAN A. COMSTOCK, Asst. Secretary
 L. J. McNAUGHTON, Asst. Treasurer

N E X T I S S U E



beginning

*a
powerful
Western
story*

“A Cowtown Frame-Up”

by

RALPH CUMMINS

In the same issue, stories about every kind of adventure, by writers you know and like:

SIDNEY HERSCHEL SMALL
(The Orient)

THOMSON BURTIS
(The Oilfields)

FRANK L. PACKARD
(Gangsters)

KARL W. DETZER
(Fire Department)

RALPH R. PERRY
(The Sea)

LADD HAYSTEAD
(The West)

T. T. FLYNN
(Railroading)

SHORT STORIES

TWICE
A
MONTH

Short Stories

JULY
25th
1930

Old Devil Dog

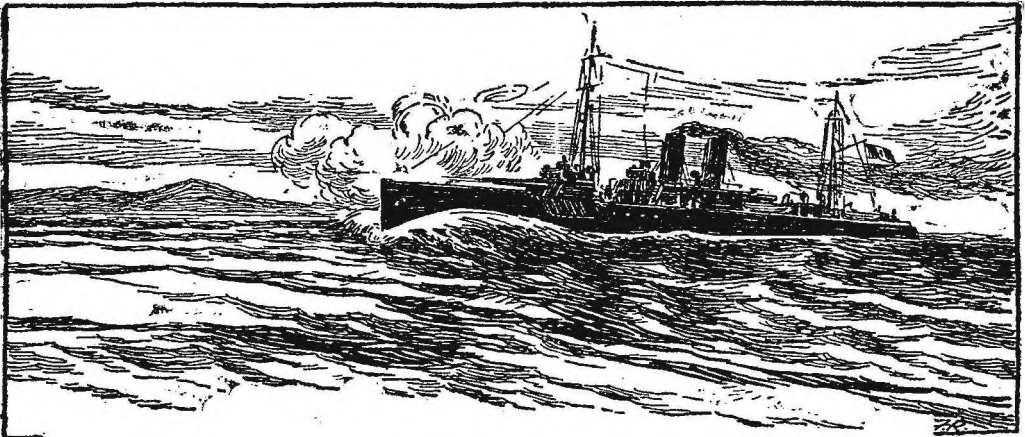
IT'S been a long time since we've thought about the Spanish American War. Too many other wars of one sort or another have intervened since peace was finally signed at the end of the war between the United States and Spain. And for that reason we were the more surprised to learn the other day that William H. Savage, the "oldest Marine," had recently died in Los Angeles. He had been a private in the Marines, according to the newspaper account that we saw, when Admiral Dewey was an ensign; and when the two of them were shipmates on the war sloop *Mississippi*, the craft was sunk in the Battle of Port Hudson during the Civil War. Savage swam ashore and was captured and imprisoned by Confederate troops, and later he was awarded the Farragut Medal for his bravery on this occasion.

And yet William H. Savage was only ninety-two years old when he died!—Time passes, and yet it does not pass; for so much seems to have happened during the years in which our own generation has been growing up that we are all too prone to forget the valorous deeds of those who have just preceded us, and many of whom are still among us.

Take a glance at Savage's record. He was born as long ago as 1838—nearly a century before the present year—and when he was twenty-eight years old he went to California to fight Indians with the 12th Infantry, being stationed in the drum barracks on the site of what is now Los Angeles Harbor. Later he was admitted to the bar and practiced law for a time; and during the days of the Arizona gold rush he edited the famous *Tombstone Epitaph*. He even served in the State Legislature of California. And he was the father of one of those good, old-fashioned families—eight children, seven of them daughters—such as the late President Roosevelt used to urge the citizenry of the country to foster.

What a grand old figure! And what a lifetime of adventure and loyalty and service to one's country. It is due to such men as he that this country had been hewn out of its original rough material and into the solid, magnificent structure that it is today.—Why even the name of the man—William H. Savage—is a fitting one for a fighting Devil Dog!

—The Editor.





BLACK MUTINY

Hell Breaks Loose on the South China Sea when a Hardboiled

CAPTAIN BARLOW, of the China Sea coaster, *Anna M. Cane*, looked at the derelict through his binoculars and then swung around with a bellow. "Hey, Mister Wallace! Look alive, blast you! Where you been all this while?"

"Looking at her," returned his chief officer. "What d'you suppose, huh?"

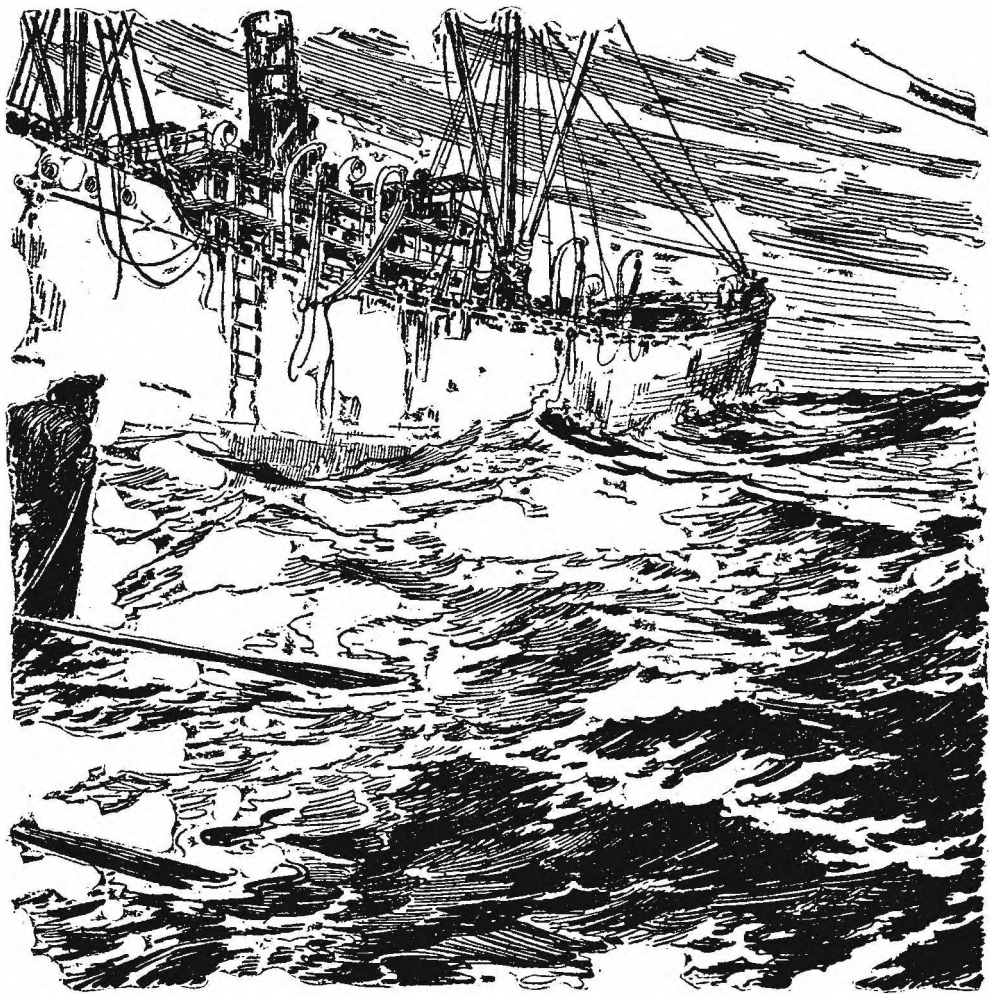
"Know what she is?" the skipper barked.

The mate nodded. He was a powerfully

built man, was Tom Wallace, with a hint of Irish in his wide, steady gray eyes.

"Sure. She's a Chinese-owned coaster out of Hongkong, and by the looks of her she was taken by pirates last night and they tried to sink her and didn't know how to work the valve. I expect they blew a hole in her for'ard but the bulkhead held. She ought to be sound."

Captain Barlow grunted, as he took another look at the derelict upon which his own coaster was bearing down rapidly. He



By **H. BEDFORD-JONES**

Author of "The Loot of the Vesper," "The War Lord's Gold," etc.

Prize Crew Finds Liquor and Gold Aboard a Derelict Steamer

could find nothing wrong with his mate's diagnosis, and it tickled him pink, as it well might. He was a half day's steam out of Hongkong himself, and it would be no trick at all for his first mate, Wallace, to fetch in the derelict and collect heavy salvage. In fact, this was a gift from the gods, right in his open hand.

"She's still got some steam on her," observed Wallace. "Boats all gone. She ain't far down by the head—ought to handle all right."

"She's your gravy, mister," stated the skipper. "Take the Number One boat and five men and go aboard her. If you can fetch her in, wave your arm; if not, then —"

"Save your breath," cut in Wallace disrespectfully. "I'll get her in under her own steam, if she ain't slipped her propeller or blown out her engine room." Then the big mate turned away from his captain and shouted, "On deck, all hands!" After which the mate went down to his cabin

to get a few things before setting off for the derelict.

Now the *Anna M. Cane* was nominally under American registry, and thus, being unable to use cheap skilled seamen, her crew was composed of high priced riffraff with whom the officers had long labored in prayer and fasting. With salvage money in sight, all hands were eager to compose the prize crew, and Tom Wallace picked his men in unholy glee. For a day or two he would have the five of them all to himself, and the job would be no easy one.

So, when he had shoved a gun and some brass knuckles into his pocket, Wallace came up on deck and selected the five men who had caused most trouble aboard. The skipper and second officer, meanwhile, looked on in grim comprehension, for they knew Tom Wallace very well indeed. Tom had not battered his way up to the place of first officer in steam without being able to take care of himself in an emergency.

Ten minutes later Wallace, with four men at the oars of one of the *Anna M. Cane's* smallboats, was holding his course for the derelict. In the bow crouched "Limey," a Liverpool dock rat with the build of a young gorilla and brain to match. At the oars were Michel, a Frenchman whose passionate thirst was equaled by his tremendous mustaches; "Bugs," a hard-jawed American seaman given to argument when sober and insect visions when drunk; Hardesty, a dour Nova Scotian of incredibly vicious disposition, and Kelly, a hulking fellow with immense shoulders who was reputedly wanted for murder in San Francisco. A choice lot, a hard lot—men who could pull off an impossible job unless they first murdered one another.

As they came in under the derelict's quarter, Wallace sighted her name; the *San Gun* of Hongkong. He bore up along her starboard side, where dangling falls showed that her boats had been lowered.

"Hook onto them falls," he ordered. "Look alive there, Limey! Then swarm up, the rest of you, and stand by. We're going to take this hooker in."

"Right y'are, sir," spoke up Bugs. "What if her engines ain't going?"

"Then we'll rig canvas. By Godfrey, you

wharf rats are going to step around this trip!"

Hardesty, who had the after oar in front of Wallace and facing him, grimaced.

"You better rec'lect we ain't dogs but men," the Nova Scotian growled in his nasal manner. "If you aim to——"

Wallace's right hand drove out. The brass knuckles he had slipped on his hand caught Hardesty across the mouth and sent him sprawling backward under Michel's feet. Wallace seized and held the oar.

"You rats recollect just one thing—that I'm boss," the chief officer said calmly. "Take your oar and lay over it, you dog!"

Hardesty wiped the blood from his lips and got back on his thwart; his eyes of steel blue were vicious, but he held his peace.

There was very little sea on. The boat came in under the *San Gun* and dangling falls were caught and made fast, and the six of them went up over her rail. A glance around the decks showed everything in confusion, with the body of a dead coolie sprawled in the scuppers.

"Limey, take a look around for'ard and report to me on the bridge what you find," said Wallace. "The rest of you bring in that boat and stow her ship-shape."

The big mate looked at the coolie, saw that the man had been shot through the body, and then made his way to the bridge. Once there, he wasted no time but faced the *Anna M. Cane* from the rail and waved his arm to the watching skipper. Captain Barlow waved back, and a moment later Wallace saw the other ship's head fall off to her regular course.

He got out his pipe and filled it, with a certain grim satisfaction. Now, whatever might betide, he was monarch of all he surveyed; and with this comforting reflection he turned to find out more about his charge, the derelict *San Gun*.

II

INVESTIGATION about the bridge revealed little except much confusion and a few blood stains near the wheel. Wallace went to the break of the bridge

and saw Limey, below, just emerging from the forecandle hood. The forward hatch was off, though the booms were stowed.

"What luck?" called Wallace, and Limey looked up.

"Another dead Chink, sir. Nothink else."

"Look down that hold—things in confusion?"

"Blimey!" ejaculated the man, after a look down. "Smashed crates——"

"Well, haul up the Chink and throw him over, and the same with the first," the mate ordered. "Take a look aft and let me know what she looks like there."

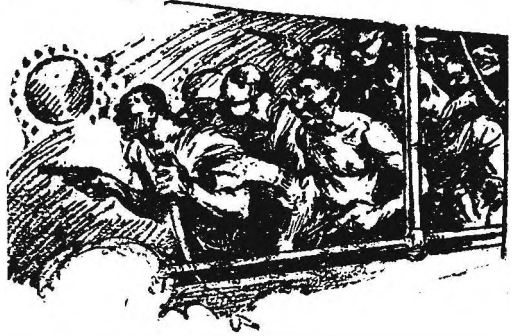
Wallace turned aft to the boat deck abaft the bridge. There he saw his own boat stowed, but beside it his four men were talking earnestly, heads together. The mate strode toward them and they faced him sullenly, but he decided to give them a square chance.

"Bugs, you know something about engines. Go down to the engine room, see what's wrong, and report to me. Hardesty, take a look around the for'ard hold, see if she's making water, and take a squint at the bulkhead for'ard. Find out where the damage is. Kelly, you and Michel lend Limey a hand with those dead Chinks; get the decks cleaned up a bit, and be ready to clap on that hatch when Hardesty comes up. Move sharp! You'll have to pitch in to get steam up in a few minutes. You'll act as cook, Michel."

The four men dispersed, and Wallace went below to the officers' cabins under the bridge. He had seen quite enough to know that the derelict had been set upon by coast pirates, no doubt from the Bias Bay district. The gang had come aboard, probably the evening previous, and had been aided by confederates in the crew; a part of the cargo had been taken out, the ship looted, and by dawn they had cast her adrift to sink—but she had not sunk. A ship, in cold reality, is a very hard thing to get rid of except by gunfire.

Even so, Wallace was not prepared for the ghastly scene that greeted him when he came into the passage that held four cabins to a side. In this scene he read, not only what had taken place aboard here and why, but a dreadfully sure presage of

what was going to pass before he got this ship into Hongkong port. Evidently



the pirates had slipped aboard very quietly, had caught the officer and watch on deck off guard, and then—had accomplished their work here, or part of it. Hardened as he was by two years of China Coast work, Wallace felt a little sick.

In the passage itself lay a tangle of half a dozen bodies; two were those of white men in night attire, the others were Chinese. All were grotesque and horrible, blood-smeared, faces set in death grins. Six of the eight cabin doors swung open; nearly all had been shot open, and after a brief glance inside two of them, Wallace shivered and stayed out. The *San Gun* had been taken, but her officers had sold their lives at a good price.

The big mate went to the first of the doors still shut. From top to bottom it was rent and splintered; axes had been used on the heavy teak, bullets had been slammed into it, and deep dents showed where crowbars or firebars had exerted pressure—yet the door had held, though so shattered that a good push would have sent it in. Then the reason became apparent. Set in the casing beside the door was a slit, a loophole, blackened by powder.

"Strong room, eh?" thought Wallace. "And somebody in there kept plugging away at 'em, kept spraying lead out here. Maybe they saw our smoke and cleared out in a hurry. Well, we might as well have the agony over with."

He caught up an ax that lay on the floor, dried blood smeared over its haft, and with the first stroke sent the cabin door smashing inward.

Here he found the rest of the story—and an amazing one it was! This had

been, evidently, not only the strong room, but the captain's cabin as well. In the bulkhead wall was set a large safe, its door now ajar. Lying before it, amid a shower of gold coins that half covered the floor, was a Chinese whose magnificent garments of embroidered black silk showed that he was a man of position—perhaps the captain of the pirates. He had been shot through the back as he stood clawing gold out of the safe.

Wallace looked around, and wiped the sweat from his face. The captain, a gray-haired man, had been knifed in his sleep and his body lay half in and half out of his bunk. Seated in a chair before the loop-hole, still wearing the oil-smearred dungarees he had worn in the engine room below, was the chief engineer, or so Wallace took him to have been. He had bled to death from a wound under his arm. Two automatics had escaped from his relaxed fingers, a half empty box of cartridges was in his lap, and empty clips at his feet completed the story.

"By Godfrey!" Wallace shoved back his cap, scraped a match, and relighted his pipe. "This Chink slid in here, knifed the skipper, and went after the safe. Either it wasn't locked or he had the combination—sure, that was it! The Chink steward aboard here was in on the deal. While this bird was gettin' the gold, along comes the chief, shoots him, locks the door and sits down to fight it out. The poor old chief had got a knife stab on his way up to the cabin, and it finished him—but not before the pirates had cleared out. Losing their chief must've queered their game. Hm! I'd better leave things here just the way they are, bodies and all. Better get the gold back in the safe, though——"

"Blimey!" exclaimed a startled voice. "Blimey, if it ain't gold!"

Wallace swung around to see the gorilla-like figure of Limey, arms swinging loosely, in the doorway.

"What is it?" the mate snapped. "What the hell you doin' here?"

The man touched his forelock and blinked rapidly.

"Come—come to report, sir, like you ordered," he stammered. "Wasn't nuffin' wrong aft, sir, only I found a couple

sticks o' dynamite below decks. There was a fuse and it had been lit but gone out. I heaved the bloody thing overboard, sir."

"All right. Get down to the engine room and tell Bugs to give me a whistle on the bridge in five minutes. You stay there and the others will join you. Get up steam—that's the first job, and the big one."

Limey touched his forelock again and shambled away, and Mr. Wallace swore softly and fervently to himself. Not for anything would he have had one of those men vision this spilled gold, but now the worst had happened and they would all know about it in no time. So thinking, Wallace started for the bridge. Limey's report had explained why the *San Gun* was still afloat—the charge set aft to blow out her stern had not gone off.

So occupied was his mind with all this, that Mr. Wallace completely forgot about the eighth cabin door, which was still closed.

III

WHEN the mate got to the bridge, Hardesty was waiting and the tube was whistling away, so he attended to the latter thing first. Bugs reported that the engines were in perfect order and the fires could be built up in short order, though there was no head of steam. Wallace told him that the others would be down at once, and turned to Hardesty.

"Well?"

"Ain't makin' water, anyhow," drawled the seaman. "For'ard compartment's filled, looks like, but she'll hold. Ain't down by the head enough to throw her screws out o' water. Looks like they set off a charge clear down in her nose."

From the bridge rail Wallace glanced down at the well deck. Kelly and Michel were getting the hatch cover in place.

"All right, let it be," called Wallace to Kelly and Michel. "Get down to the engine room and get up some steam—you too, Hardesty. Bugs is actin' engineer. Strip out anything that'll burn and make steam enough to turn her over, then build up the fires in good shape. Sharp about it, lads, and we'll all see the Peak looming up tomorrow morning!"

The three seamen obeyed without de-

mur, and Wallace did not know whether to think this a good sign or a bad one. Then the mate recalled the shambles below, and checked Hardesty as the latter was descending.

"Wait, Hardesty—you'd better lend me a hand first. We've got a nasty job to take on, down below. Come along."

Wallace led the way to the passage, where Hardesty grunted at the scene but said nothing. Having already swung the shattered teak door of the strong room into place, Wallace cared nothing about what else might be seen, and mate and seaman fell to work getting the dead yellow men lifted out and tossed over the rail. In twenty minutes they had cleared the passage and the cabins, placing the bodies of the officers in berths until the morrow, for Wallace was confident of raising the Peak within twenty-four hours at most. He did not touch the three dead men in the strong room—he wanted to keep that place just as it was.

"All right," said Wallace, when they had finished the unpleasant task. "Get below now and pitch into the job down there. You're a good seaman, Hardesty—too good to make any more trouble. Put your back into it, keep those rats lined up, and you'll not lose by it."

Hardesty gave him a sidelong look, then turned and stared, slack-jawed. Wallace, in astonishment, swung around; then a dismayed ejaculation broke from him.

"Oh, the devil—on top of everything else! Get below, Hardesty."

Hardesty went, but grinned as he went. For the door of the eighth cabin had swung open, and Hardesty had seen the girl who stood there looking at them.

IV

SHE was woman rather than girl, and Wallace knew that he was in for trouble the minute he set eyes on her. When it came to women, Mr. Wallace was no fool.

A full-blown blonde, clad in embroidered Chinese silks of flaring colors, she betrayed no panic or fear but stood holding a pistol as though she knew how to use it. Her bobbed light hair and lightly

touched-up features were in careful order.

"Oh!" she cried out, and dropped her pistol—in the cabin behind her. "I woke up and heard voices. Is it all over? There was shooting——"

"Yeah," said Mr. Wallace drily. "What actor company are you with, girlie?"

Her eyes dilated. They were blue eyes, very wide and altogether too innocent.

"What—what do you mean?" she gasped.

"Listen, sister, just figure that I ain't interested," said Wallace rather wearily. "You see, I seen you looking out o' that port before I got alongside o' this tub."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, then drew herself up. "Well, that wasn't any crime, was it?"

"Nope." Wallace chuckled in delight. "But you didn't need to play dead so long, and get yourself all spruced up on account o' me. You ain't running no happy surprise party. You're durned lucky you ain't dead like everybody else aboard. I reckon they figured on taking you along, but they got in a hurry and you had locked your door, and you weren't worth the time and trouble. Now, you go back inside and set down——"

"How dare you!" she snapped, a flame of anger in eyes and voice. "I'll do nothing of the sort. I want to see Captain Combs. Where is he?"

"He's in there," and Wallace jerked his thumb toward the battered door. "What's your name, huh?"

"Eveline—Mrs. De Costa, if you must know."

"All right, Eveline, you go right in if you want to see the skipper. I got no objections whatever."

With a sniff of disdain, Eveline swept past him and shoved at the riven door, which fell away to her push. She saw the skipper and the dead Chinese, and without a sound she merely crumpled up. Wallace caught her before she hit the floor.

"I reckon it is a sort of unpleasant spectacle, even for her," he muttered, as he half carried and half dragged her back to her own cabin. "English, from her way of talk. Probably come out as a nurse or something and married some half caste Portuguese from Macao. Yeah, that's about

it. Well, Eveline, I got no time to waste on you—and I hope to hell you don't start any monkeyshines with my hand-picked gang of dock rats! I wish the Chinks had taken you along, I sure do."

With which practical, if uncharitable, reflection, Wallace lifted her to the bunk and so left her. The pistol she had dropped was a small, but ugly, little automatic, and this he stuck into his hip pocket as he departed. Under the circumstances Mr. Wallace was not in the least inclined to be romantic or sympathetic.

"Gold and a woman—my good Godfrey!" muttered Wallace, as he climbed to the bridge. "And them five devils down below, with only me between 'em and what they want. Huh! I'd have thought twice about it all, if I'd suspected what we've found here. But those rats below know about the gold, now, and they know about the woman, too, by this time, so that's that. If she was a nice little school teacher or homebred doll like the ones you find in stories, it'd be different. She ain't, and it's no use blinking the fact. She'd take a go at that gold herself, if she had the chance. Well, thank the lord Hongkong ain't far away!"

With which philosophic reflection the mate whistled for Bugs; he had no intention of going down into the engine room himself without someone to guard his back.

"Comin' all right, sir," reported Bugs. "We got quite a head o' steam on the way and the fires is okay. I don't know much about these here engines but I can stop and start her anyhow."

"Start her, then," ordered Wallace, "and keep her going. Send Michel up here."

Bugs was as good as his word. Within another five minutes the *San Gun* was heaving slowly along through the water, and Wallace set her course for Hongkong. It was three in the afternoon.

The mate considered grimly the possibilities. His own ship, the *Anna M. Cane*, was long since out of sight, but there was a thread of smoke on the southern horizon; they were in the traffic lane, and would undoubtedly sight other ships on the morrow, if not before nightfall. He was tempted to have a go at the wireless, or to hoist a signal for help; but the smash-

ing impact of his pride shattered that temptation almost at once.

"I undertook to get this hooker in, and I can do it," he reflected. "I'd be a fool



to holler for help just because there was a lot o' coin and a woman aboard. I can just hear old Barlow askin' w a s n't I weaned yet or what? No use splitting the salvage money, either. Oh, by Godfrey! What a blasted fool I am!"

The head of Michel had just appeared on the ladder, but it was not this that sent a cold chill down Tom Wallace's spine. It was the memory of his own folly. The dead men down below had held weapons; there were pistols and cartridges by the body of the dead chief engineer—weapons for the taking, if any one of the five seamen had wanted them. And Wallace had no illusions about this crew of his.

Wallace gave Michel the course.

"I'm going below and will be back up soon," he said. "Then you can get busy in the galley. There's a lady passenger aboard. Hardesty told you?"

"Yes, sir," said Michel. "Ze galley, she is aft?"

Wallace nodded and started below. He had his own pistol and that belonging to Eveline, which by rights he should return, but he did not consider that she was in any particular danger. She was quite capable of taking care of herself, he reflected dryly. So Hardesty had told about her, eh? And Limey had told about the gold strewn over the cabin—no doubt about that!

WHEN he came into the blood-smearred passage below, Wallace paused suddenly. His worst fears were realized when he caught the sound of excited voices from the open door of the dead skipper's cabin. Well, so much the better—he could make them do the work for him! He strode rapidly along and halted in the doorway. Limey and Hardesty were there, scooping up gold pieces

and filling their pockets. Hearing his step, they had swung around to face him, snarling at the sight of him there.

"What are you doing here?" snapped Wallace.

"Fires are all built up, sir," growled Hardesty. "Thought you wanted this place cleaned up, like——"

"You lie," said Wallace. "You're stealing gold. Chuck it into the safe, and chuck all that gold on the floor in after it. Move sharp, you rats! Empty your pockets and then clear up the gold from the floor."

He saw them hesitate, weighing their chances of overpowering him, and a laugh broke on his lips as his gun swung out.

"Try it, you blasted rats—try it!"

With sullen oaths, the two seamen hauled the coins from their pockets, then bent and scooped up those on the floor around the dead Chinese, flinging them by the handful into the open safe. Wallace darted a quick look at the floor. Both the pistols which had lain beside the dead chief, had vanished; so had the half empty box of cartridges.

Wallace did not mention the matter until the two men had finished their work. Then, at the mate's sharp command, they swung the door of the safe shut with a clang. Short of being opened by force, it would not be disturbed again until Hong-kong.

"Now, you two birds listen to me, and pin your ears back," said Wallace. "That money ain't for us, see? And nobody's going to touch a bit of it, except the salvage; there'll be plenty of that for all hands. You'd better savvy that point plenty good, because if you don't, I'll sure as hell drill you! Limey, you step over here; I'll just make sure you ain't hid a few coins. Start something if you want, because I'd like the chance to blow a hole through your belly. Put your hands up."

Limey stood with his hands in the air and the pistol against his stomach, while Wallace searched him. Then Hardesty obeyed likewise and was searched. No pistols showed up, nor did the two men speak; but their eyes left nothing unsaid.

"Get below—and stay below," said Wallace. "Except when I send for you from the bridge, all five of you men stay in

the engine room—no, count Michel out. He'll supply the grub. The rest of you stay down. If I find one of you up on deck, it means mutiny. Savvy that? Then get back to work—and lord help any of you I find on deck! Tell the others. Bugs is included."

With a sullen nod the two seamen swung off and were gone. But Wallace grimaced as he snapped on the safety catch of the pistol. He had been too late. Three had come up here from below—Kelly, perhaps, had been the third—and one had sneaked down with the guns. Five men, with at least two pistols, and an avid craving to get one man out of the way.

"Looks to me," murmured Tom Wallace, as he went about retrieving any other weapons in sight, "like it was going to be a wild night on the China Sea. By Godfrey, I hope I live through it! I'd sure hate to disappoint that girl in Hong-kong."

And he went on back to the bridge, after making sure the safe could not be opened. It did not occur to him that Kelly might have taken more things below than pistols, for Wallace seldom drank, and he never thought to look for any liquor in the cabin.

V

AS HE stood on the bridge that afternoon and held the limping *San Gun* on her course, Wallace became more and more firmly convinced that he was very badly up against it in more ways than one. For this very reason, perhaps, he became the more obstinately set in his purpose not to call for help. It would, admittedly, be a very expensive call, since the salvage would have to be split, and his owners would not be pleased.

Having spoken with Bugs, whose voice was thick, Wallace found himself effusively assured that steam was mounting fast and all was lovely.

"Liquor, huh?" said Wallace to himself, as he turned from the tube. "Better and better. Gold and women and booze—good glory! Where'd they get it? I might have known, though. Should've locked up Limey, and Hardesty; trouble is, I've got to keep 'em going on the coal pile. Hm! If they

get soused, they'll let the fires die down and come busting up here, which will mean more shooting."

He smoked a pipe over this, then turned to the tube and ordered Kelly up. Kelly was a bad egg and pretended to be badder, but in reality he was the best of the lot. What was more to the point, he was something of a simple soul. The others would do murder for what was in it, but Kelly would not reach that point except through sheer drunken fury.

Presently Kelly came lumbering up the ladder, stripped to singlet and shorts and much bedaubed with dirt and coal dust. He was apparently none the worse for liquor, and Wallace concluded that the huge, round shouldered giant had not absorbed very much.

"Come in and take it easy, Kelly," said Wallace. "I want a straight talk with you. How much booze have you put down?"

Kelly grinned. "Not enough to wet me whistle, sir," he returned in his Liverpool brogue—a matter of inflection rather than pronunciation. "They ain't got but a couple bottles or so, and them hellions drunk most on it before I found out."

Wallace lighted his pipe. "They told you about the gold and so on?"

"Well, sir, there was a bit o' talk, I'm not denying that," and Kelly hesitated. "Divil take it, when poor sailormen like us hear tell o' gold all over the floor—well, I dunno, for a fact."

Wallace met the perplexed, sullen eyes, and laughed a little.

"Come on, Kelly—out with it! You've got two pistols down there; you know about the gold; you know about the woman passenger—"

"And that's the nub of it, sir," broke out Kelly, flushing. "Them hellions are thinking about the woman; and more shame to them! I'd be in on it for the coin, aye, but I'd not be planting a bullet in your back to be mistreating a woman, I would not!"

"Good; I believe you there, Kelly. Now, suppose that you and I were to rig up a little scheme between us—not about the woman, but about the gold. Eh? Would you be in on it?"

Kelly met his gaze for a moment, with

a look of blank astonishment and dawning comprehension. Then, at a wink from Wallace, he broke into a wide grin.

"What, sir, d'ye mean it? Just the two of us, huh?"

"Just that, Kelly. That gold is supposed to have been taken by the pirates. Nobody ashore knows anything about it. If we didn't go to Hongkong at all, but to another port, and if we put the gold in the small boat and slipped away—eh? No use splitting with the other four, is there?"

"Divil take me, if that isn't the identical thing they're sayin', sir!" and Kelly burst into laughter and clapped Wallace on the shoulder with his hamlike fist. "Will you listen to that, now! Take the small boat, says Limey, and put the woman and the gold into it, and who's to know the differ? And now, says you, do the same thing but leave the woman alone—and more power to you, says I!"

"Yes, but it's no easy job, mind you," said Wallace soberly. "If they quit coaling and let steam go down, we're dished—all of us. They figure on getting me tonight, eh?"

"Aye, about midnight," responded Kelly promptly.

"Fair enough, then," and Wallace chuckled to himself. "Now, Kelly, just how far can I count on you?"

"By the saints, you can be countin' on me clear through!" exclaimed Kelly with enthusiasm. "You can that, sir, and divil take me if I'd be lyin' to the likes of you."

Wallace believed him. Kelly's unexpected hesitancy over any harm coming to a woman had been a surprise, and he was not deluded into thinking that the man was any sort of saint, but he knew that by accident he had uncovered a real vein of gold, and he did not hesitate to take advantage of it.

"Then it's understood between us, Kelly, that no harm will come to the woman—eh?"

"Right you are, sir."

"And you'll take my orders—willingly?"

"I will that." The tone of this response was eloquent enough.

"Then it's a go," said Wallace. "I'll have

to depend on you to keep them lined up to work on the fires, for one thing."

"Little trouble you'll have there, sir. Sure, they know they've got to keep steam on her till we sight the coast anyhow."

"Who has the two pistols?"

"They're hid down below. Bugs has one, I think, and Limey has spoken for the other one. It was me took 'em down, sir."

"I know that," said Wallace, and produced Eveline's pistol. "Here's one you can stick out of sight until you need it. No danger of them breaking out on me before midnight?"

"Not unless they do be getting more liquor, sir."

"Good. Get down with you now, and



tell 'em you've got to come up and stand watch by six bells—I'll call Bugs to send you up. Growl about it and so on. If they decide on anything desperate before then, don't fight 'em but slip up and let me know. Here's luck."

Wallace looked after the lumbering fellow with an odd smile. Big, heavy shouldered Kelly, who boasted of his crimes. Well, why not? There was a simple brain in that hard skull, and simple men are seldom hardened criminals. It is your clever rascal who is the most dangerous.

THE *San Gun* was now hitting a good clip, the engines were turning over well, and despite her dip forward, she handled fairly enough. Michel reported that he had found the galley in good shape and would serve a first-chop dinner before dark. From the Frenchman's exuberant manner, Wallace guessed that he also had located some liquor, but the mate forebore comment. Michel was a distinctly bad actor, and Wallace was not hunting any explosion before it came naturally—which would be soon enough.

From the skipper's cabin Wallace had secured the log, which, however, threw no light upon the tragedy. Being none too

certain of what might happen, the mate employed his time in entering up the conditions as he had found them since coming aboard. He had just finished this task, with the sun close to the western horizon, when he heard a step and turned to see Mrs. Da Costa approaching from the ladder. She had flung a coat over her light silks, and advanced upon him with determination in her strong features.

"Young man, I want an understanding with you," she began without preamble. "I want to know where we're heading for and what's happened. You've treated me in a most disrespectful fashion, and I demand an apology."

"Yes'm, I apologize," said Wallace, his eyes twinkling. "So that part of it's settled. What's happened is that pirates cleaned out this ship and I was put aboard her with five men. We're heading for Hongkong, and I expect we'll get there sometime tomorrow."

He turned his back and whistled down the tube. Bugs responded thickly.

"I expect you have the switches down there, Bugs," said Wallace. "Better try 'em out and switch on the lights; if anything's wrong we'll have to rig oil lamps. Everything going right?"

"Yeah, we got a full head o' steam, sir," returned Bugs. "Funny thing about them engines though. They's a lot o' big yeller spiders in among them piston rods; one of 'em mighty nigh bit my hand a while back. The boys want to know can they come up and sluice off a bit, sir. We don't need no more stoking right now, only with them spiders——"

"You do any more drinking and I'll bite you worse'n any spider," snapped Wallace. "As to coming on deck, my orders stand; the whole gang stay below until I send for you." He turned from the tube to find Mrs. Da Costa watching him intently. "Good Godfrey, you still here, Eveline? What's on your mind now?"

"I want my pistol," she snapped. "You took it out of my cabin. Where is it?"

"Where it'll get used, I reckon. You go sit in your cabin, Eveline, and you'll be safe enough; I'll guarantee it. If you don't, anything's liable to happen."

She smiled suddenly and laid her hand on his arm.

"Now don't be cross, Captain!" she said purringly. "You and me ought not to have any fuss. If we could work together, it might be profitable. There's a lot of specie down below——"

"I thought so, by Godfrey!" exclaimed Wallace, and shook off her hand. "Listen here, Eveline. I ain't no captain and we can't work together, and that there gold stays where it is; and if you want any straighter talk than that, I can sure as hell give it to you. Now, beat it! I got enough on my mind without having a woman hanging around gumming things up. You'll get some supper right soon."

Pale with anger, she compressed her lips and departed. Wallace shook his head; he had a hunch that there would be a hurricane yet from this quarter, since her hints about the gold were indicative of how her brain was working. Five minutes later, however, he forgot his troubles when Michel showed up with a tray of steaming food and a pitcher of hot coffee. The Frenchman was beaming and voluble.

"Got a tray for that woman passenger?" asked Wallace. "All right, get it to her and don't have any gab on the way, either. What about the boys down below?"

Michel had already taken supper to them, and reported everything going well in the engine room; which, reflected Wallace, was probably a lie. In fact, so amiable and subservient was Michel, that this alone was good ground for suspicion—the man was naturally a trouble maker and openly rebellious against all authority.

However, the excellent supper put Mr. Wallace in much more hopeful mood, and when he found the lights working first-chop, he lighted his pipe and faced the gathering darkness with increasing confidence that all would work out well.

This confidence was abruptly shattered. At a whistle from the tube he responded, and heard Kelly's voice, low pitched but vibrant.

"Look out for Hardesty, sir! He's gone up above, after more liquor. He's got Limey's gun, bad luck to him——"

Abrupt silence. Kelly had evidently stolen to the tube, unobserved by the

others, but dared say no more. Wallace grunted, laid down his pipe, and with gun and knuckleduster ready, started for the cabins below.

"I'm getting sort of tired of this business," the big mate muttered grimly, "so we might as well give them rats a lesson and get it done with."

VI

WHEN Wallace got down to that blood-smeared passage, he found all the lights blazing full on, and hesitated briefly; no one was in sight. Then he caught a murmur of voices, and saw that the door of Eveline's room was slightly ajar, at the further end of the passage.

He started toward it. A growling oath startled him, checked him abruptly—it came from one of the officers' cabins on his right. He shoved open the door and saw Hardesty busily rummaging through the locker.

Wallace had no chance whatever to speak. The Nova Scotian heard him or sensed his presence, and swung around with gun jerking up, blue eyes glittering like those of a madman. It was no time for hesitation; Wallace fired twice, and to the bellowing reports Hardesty stumbled backward, was knocked against the wall, and fell in a crumpled mass. The pistol from his hand struck the floor and exploded harmlessly.

"You wanted it and you got it," observed Wallace, and leaned over to pick up the fallen weapon.

As he did so, he heard a sound and glanced back over his shoulder. Into the doorway Michel was coming, a knife in his hand and an ominous snarl upon his lips—and he was coming fast! Like a flash, Wallace remembered the half open door of the woman's room. Michel had been in there, then, talking with her. . . .

Michel dived forward. Disdaining to shoot the man down, Wallace flung himself aside, evaded the mad rush, and swung about, with a kick that took the Frenchman full in the ribs and jolted him sideways. Before the seaman could recover balance, Wallace was upon him with both fists pumping mercilessly.

The wretched Michel dropped his knife and crouched against the wall, both arms about his head, while Wallace punished him. Then, with a final kick, Wallace started the Frenchman for the door and propelled him into the passage.

"Get below and stay there," the mate ordered. "Any one o' you that leaves the engine room gets what Hardesty got."

Michel departed, hammered and terrified by this whirlwind of fists and boots, all the badness momentarily jolted out of him. Wallace looked around to see Mrs. Da Costa regarding him with her mouth wide open.

"Get back in your cabin, blast you!" the mate said, and stalked toward her. With a frightened whimper she slid back into her cabin and tried to close the door, but Wallace shoved it open violently and reached inside for the key.

"You're too durned friendly, Eveline," he observed. "You couldn't work it with me, so you tried the raffle with my men, huh? Well, you stay right here now, whether you want to or not. By Godfrey, there's one less obstacle in my way!"

With which, he locked the door on the outside, pocketed the key, then retrieved the knife of Michel and the pistol of Hardesty before going on deck. The knife he flung overboard, the pistol he took into the strong-room, tucking it away under the pillow of the dead skipper.

Wallace stamped back to the bridge, growling curses on everything in general. It began to look as though he would have



to use rockets after all and call for help—and yet, with Kelly's aid, he must pull through. Silly to holler before he was hurt! There would be one sharp scrap at midnight, unless he could forestall those devils, and then all would be clear.

"So long as there's enough hands left to keep steam on her, I'm satisfied," he reflected, as he came up the ladder to the empty bridge. "That hellcat down below

won't make any more trouble, which is one thing gained——"

The mate had reached the bridge, and came to the open door of the pilot-house, when shadows moved to right and left, and something fluttered in the air above him. As Wallace looked up, a tarpaulin fell over his head. A figure caromed into him and long arms swept around him, binding his elbows tightly to his sides in a terrific hug. That was Limey, of course. They had dropped the tarpaulin from the roof of the pilot-house. . . .

For an instant Wallace remained motionless, getting his balance. He heard Limey's growl at his ear, sensed another man in front of him, trying to pass a line around the tarpaulin and his arms. Then, abruptly, the mate's foot shot up and there was a howl of anguish; his heel drove back and took Limey under the knee. Amid a storm of oaths, yells, wild orders, Wallace thrashed around and was borne to the deck; but he could not get rid of the stifling grip around him nor of the tarpaulin that blinded and hampered him.

None the less, he fought with the frantic desperation of a trapped wild beast, until something smashed over his skull again and again and the folds of canvas shut out the air from his gasping lungs.

Two minutes later Kelly had cast aside the tarpaulin and was passing a line of hemp around the arms and body and legs of the unconscious officer, while Limey gleefully disarmed him. Bugs was leaning against the door, groaning and gasping oaths and holding himself about the middle in a posture of agonized torture.

"Two guns, the blighter had!" exclaimed Limey. "Here y'are, Kelly. Hurt, Bugs?"

Kelly took the weapon handed him, and said nothing of the one Wallace had previously given him. Presently Bugs came erect, with a weak blast of curses, and drove his foot into the bound figure on the deck.

"I say finish him!" snarled Bugs. "Damned near killed me, he did——"

"Belay that!" Limey swung on him savagely. "Kelly has the right idea, blimey if he ain't! This bloody fool can take us into a Chinee port, all right, and swing

us off the course for Hongkong. Hey, who's that?"

Michel came into the circle of light, and a guffaw went up at sight of his battered face.

"By gar, she's not for laugh!" he cried out angrily. "Got heem, huh? She's make for keel Hardesty——"

"So that was the shootin' we heard!" exclaimed Bugs. "All right, one less to split the money with."

Limey, blackened with grease and coal dust, swung his long arms. His hairy chest was bare to the waist, and he looked more than ever like a gorilla. He glanced at the steam steering gear, then grinned.

"All right, let the bloody hooker drive—she's headin' for Chiny anyhow. Bugs, you stay and keep guard while we go look up some 'baccy and liquor——"

"Like hell I will!" snarled Bugs. "Come along, all that's going!"

The four men lurched away to the ladder, and swung down to the deck below, leaving the unconscious Wallace fast bound and helpless.

NOW for the moment, the presence of a woman aboard was forgotten in a rush of far more important business. The bodies of the Chinese and the heroic chief engineer were unceremoniously dumped into the bunk atop that of the skipper; there was a hurried ransacking of chests and lockers, and presently all four men gathered with their loot in front of the locked safe. Cigarettes were lighted, bottles were opened, and after a hearty drink all around, the problem of the safe was discussed.

As Limey said, it was all very well to talk about blowing the safe open, but no one knew how to do it, and there was nothing to do it with. Bugs had boasted of his skill with safes, but this particular one resisted all his lures most stubbornly. At this juncture, Michel recollected the lady in the cabin, and with a howl of delight, Limey projected himself into the passage and attacked her doorway. Finding it locked, he proceeded to smash it down, which he did very effectively.

Now it must be admitted that, what with natural impulses and the backfire of liquor,

Limey was in no mood to recognize a lady when he saw one. Eveline's first panic-stricken scream brought Kelly on the scene; and Kelly, straightway forgetting the pistols in his pocket, drove his fist into Limey's ear.

The combat that ensued was a battle of giants—a give-and-take slugging match from the first, with neither evasion nor parrying. The crunching impact of fists on flesh, deep grunts and oaths, the hoarse panting and scrape of feet—these punctuated the frenzied loosing of wild brute passion. Within three minutes the cabin was wrecked, and Michel, rescuing the screaming Eveline, patted her back and led her into the skipper's cabin, where he poured a drink between her lips and placed her in a chair. She clung to him frantically, while outside in the passage raged the noise of battle.

The strife had degenerated into the blind and brutal worrying of two dogs. Neither man had the advantage; streaming with blood, tearing at each other with fist and boot and knee, Kelly and Limey were locked in a grapple of sheer ferocity. Bugs tried to separate them, and for his pains got a smash in the face that dazed and all but knocked him out. He came staggering into the cabin, seized a bottle, and put down a drink.

"Leave the two fools be," he gasped. "Limey's got a knife in his boot anyhow——"

At this instant a deep and terrible cry rang from the passage—the death scream of a man, so incredibly blended of horror and wild rage that it fetched all three of them to their feet. Then, at the very doorway, sprawled the body of Kelly—so torn and blood-smeared as to be nearly beyond recognition. He heaved himself to one elbow, gripping at the haft of a knife that projected from his side, beneath the armpit.

Limey, with a hoarsely panted laugh, booted the fallen man to one side and stood in the doorway, rocking on his feet, wiping blood from his eyes.

"Gimme a drink, one o' you!" he gasped, and Michel sprang to him with a bottle in hand. He gulped down the liquor avidly.

"Blimey, that's what puts guts into a

lad!" he cried. "Anybody else want to try it on, huh? I'm the lad for 'em, blimey if I ain't! Crawl, Kelly, crawl—blast your hide, you louse, you're done for anyhow!"

And, with a wild laugh, Limey collapsed on a chair and held the bottle of liquor again to his lips. Nor, for a space, did he speak again; he remained there, half stupefied.

Bugs went into the passage, tried to assist the battered Kelly, got a cursing for his pains, and came back into the cabin with a shrug.

"Naw, he's done for," he said to Michel and the wide-eyed woman. "He's crawlin' off to die and bleedin' like a stuck pig. Got that long knife Limey found clear through his gizzard. Let's have a drink. Here's how, miss, and long life! Give her a drink, Michel. She needs it."

Eveline needed, and took the long drink that Michel handed her. She seemed to have an odd confidence in the Frenchman, and under his soothing flow of talk had more or less regained her poise. She could even regard the fearful figure of Limey with a certain wondering air, as though she had quite lost her terror of him.

"The captain—the officer?" she inquired suddenly, looking up. "Where is he?"

"He's safe enough," and Bugs laughed boisterously. "Hey, Michel? You bet, miss. He'll do what we want, you bet. How we going to get that gold out o' there, Michel?"

Michel pulled his long mustaches, twisted them into a semblance of their usual ferocious twirl, and shook his head sadly.

"I'm not know for sure," he returned.

"What's that?" Eveline sat up abruptly. "Where's the gold anyhow?"

"In there," said Bugs and pointed to the safe. "That blasted fool shut the door and turned the knob, and durned if we can get at it: If we could, then we'd have a cinch, see? We'd take the boat and go—that's what I say! But we can't get the blasted safe open."

Eveline came to her feet, a flush of excitement in her cheeks.

"Leave it to me, lads," she exclaimed stridently. "I know the combination, see? All my jewels are in that safe, and the

captain worked the combination right in front of me when he locked 'em up. We share it four ways, is that right?"

"Aye," exclaimed Bugs. "Four ways it is, miss. That goes for you, Limey?"

The sodden figure of Limey nodded in silence.

Eveline gathered her flaring silks around her and went to the safe. Under the touch of her fingers the knob clicked rapidly, surely. One gathered that it was not the first time she had manipulated such a combination.

A moment later the safe door swung open.

VII

WHEN Tom Wallace opened his eyes and found himself lying trussed and helpless on the bridge, his first feeling was one of relief that he had not been badly damaged. True, someone had hammered him over the head with a spanner so that his skull now bore several very sore bumps, but the tarpaulin had broken the blows in some measure.

He lay on his back, looking up at the stars, and bitterly cursed his own lack of caution in letting himself be thus easily trapped. Why had they not killed him outright? For some good reason, no doubt. Perhaps they had need of him.

"What a blasted fool I was, to believe they'd wait till midnight!" he reflected. "Kelly was in on it, too. He told me Hardesty was in the cabin—or perhaps he didn't mean to decoy me after all! I believe Kelly was straight. They heard him tell me that, and then they came up here and got me."

He tried in vain to get clear of his bonds; there was no slack in the rope



that wound around him from elbows to ankles. He could make out, however, that the pilot-house was empty, and as he lay, he thrilled to a sudden noise from somewhere below—a riotous chorus of voices all in one, a wild shout of maudlin rejoicing and exultation.

This, had he known it, signified that the ruddy glint of gold was no longer concealed by doors of steel. What he did not know, he could, none the less, pretty well guess. Still, was Kelly in on this affair or not? He found it hard to credit. Poor simple Kelly would never suspect that he had been tricked into decency by a false lure; probably he would be along as soon as he could slip off from the others—

Another sound startled Wallace, this time a closer one; a slow and uneven grating sound, which he found hard to identify. He lay with senses straining, until presently a clink of iron gave him the clue. Someone was on the ladder, climbing heavily and slowly, probably with liquor-dragging feet. Turning his head, Wallace could indeed see a dark bulk rising against the stars, ten feet away at the break of the bridge. Then, even as he looked, it came plunging to the deck with a sobbing groan, and lay quiet.

"That you, Kelly?" demanded Wallace in a low voice.

He had no answer, and concluded the man was drunk, until another groan and then a movement came to him along the deck. Once more the mate spoke, and this time had a gasping answer in Kelly's voice.

"Aye, it'll be me—or what's left o' me."

The words died in a groan. That ten feet of deck was covered inch by inch, by slow and incredibly painful crawling; Wallace knew now that something was definitely wrong, but to his questions there came no answer except the hoarse, sobbing breaths of the other man. At last Kelly paused, lay there resting.

"It was Limey—put a knife in me, he did—I'm done for, that I am!" he uttered brokenly. "But for me—they'd ha' shot you down—I says to make you guide us ashore. . . . Devil take it, it's a dyin' man I am this minute. . . ."

Kelly rose and painfully dragged himself forward another foot, and his outstretched hands groped at the bound ankles of Wallace. The officer lifted his head, and in the light from the pilot-house glimpsed the frightfully battered and bloody torso of Kelly. An exclamation burst from him; he

saw that Kelly was holding a long knife—both hand and knife were blackish and wet with blood.

"My Godfrey—what happened?" burst from Wallace's lips.

"Scrap with Limey—can't make it—no use!"

Kelly's head fell forward as the words died out. His hand, however, still reacted to his brain, and sawed hard with the knife at the rope which bound the mate. The keen edge sheared through a fold of the hemp, through a second fold—then, abruptly, a spasmodic shudder seized upon Kelly, and the knife tinkled on the deck as his fingers relaxed in death.

He had carried on even to his last breath.

Wallace rolled clear of the dead man, working with knees and arms to loosen the rope that was wound several times about his body and legs. His arms he could not get clear; but after repeated efforts he felt the coils loosen about his legs, and this heartened him. He tore at the hempen folds, strained and wrenched and kicked—and then felt them give around his knees. A few more frantic kicks, and the severed line was dangling from his waist. His legs were free, and he came to his feet.

AND, at this moment, Wallace heard voices and the scrape of feet on the ladder. He dared not linger now—one glimpse and he was lost. Not even to get his arms free, for he was weaponless. He could not hope to get clear of the rope, still wrapped around his arms and chest, and searched the body of Kelly for a possible pistol, all before they got here or sighted him.

He was gone, silently—gone even as the figure of Limey swung up into sight, with Bugs close behind. Gone, around into the darkness of the boat deck behind the pilot-house and lockers, like a shadow, there to wrestle desperately with the folds of the line about his arms that loosened so gradually.

"Blimey, wot's this, huh?" Catching sight of Kelly's body, Limey peered around and then jerked out a pistol. "Here's that blasted Kelly—and the bloom-

in' mate's gone, clear gone! Not a bleedin' sign of him!"

Bugs, joining him, peered around into the shadows.

"Kelly passed out tryin' to knife him, savvy?" he sought to explain. "But it's a cinch he didn't walk away from here—he was tied up proper, let me tell you! Here—hold on!" The speaker stooped and picked up the bloody knife. His voice came more shrilly. "Look here, Limey! Kelly cut him loose, by gosh! Look at this knife—cleaned half the blood off the blade, it did!"

"Get out o' the light," snapped Limey, moving swiftly to one side. "Blimey, this is a ruddy mess—now we got to get him all over again!"

"Aw, t'ell with him," said Bugs in disgust. "Listen here, Limey! We got guns, and he ain't, so that fixes him. We don't need him nohow. He's got her headed for Hongkong, get me? Shift the course to the south'ard and we'll make the coast sure as hell—prob'ly raise it before sunup. They's all kinds of islands along there. We can run her in, beach her, and take off in our old boat, get me? Or we can split up then and there, according as we want. Get me, Limey?"

"Uh-huh," grunted Limey. "But I want to get this here bloomin' mate first off."

"All right, run him down," said Bugs. "No hurry, is they? Listen, we got to keep steam up and it's time we fed them fires. I'll watch out up here, and you and Michel coal up, or we can all go below and coal up. Then we'll hunt Wallace off this here deck, and run him down in the morning. No use tryin' to find him at night."

"Right enough," assented Limey. Both men were obviously unsteady with liquor, but not to the exclusion of caution. "See if Kelly's got a gun on him—felt like one swinging in his pocket, down below."

Bugs stooped, made a swift search, and grunted.

"By gosh, here's two, Limey! The son of a gun had one all the time and never let on, blast him! Well, we're set for him now. I'll give one o' these to Michel _____"

"Get a drink and go to stokin' and stow your jaw," growled Limey. "All of

us. Blast Michel—and his woman, too! Soft 'un, he is, makin' up to that broad—the blasted frog-eater! I'll do him like Kelly, if he don't look out. Well, are you comin' or not?"

Bugs stayed only to pluck up the knife that lay on the deck, and sent it hurtling over the rail, then followed the long-armed Limey down the ladder.

From the shadows of the boat deck came the figure of Wallace, now free and unhampered; also unarmed. He stepped quickly into the pilot-house and reached for the two electric lights there. The *San Gun* was French built, and the globes un-snapped in a jiffy instead of unscrewing, leaving the place lighted only by the dull glow of the binnacle light.

Reaching for the coffee pitcher on his tray, Wallace found some lukewarm coffee remaining, and drained it. Then he considered the situation, a slight smile playing on his lips. In the lockers were rockets, and a few of them might bring help, granted he had time to send them up; but even now, did he want help?

He had three men to deal with—desperate men, well armed—not to mention a woman; and he had to reckon with the woman, no doubt of it. Still, rockets would hardly do the business. Too much noise about them; he might get off one or two, but then they would be on top of him, hunting him down like a rat. Better to play safe and—

Like a flash of light across his brain, came the memory of that pistol he had tucked away under the dead skipper's pillow, down below.

VIII

ODDLY enough, when Wallace walked into that grimly stained passage below, the first thing he heard was a woman singing; and this, more than anything else possible, showed the type of woman she was. For Eveline Da Costa sat in the cabin of the dead skipper, sat there and sang in the presence of three dead men, as she played with the lustful piles of gold pieces heaped upon the extended lid of the desk. She had taken her jewelry from the open safe, and at her ears and neck glinted diamonds.

Wallace stood in the doorway, and she had her back to him, so that for a moment he watched her unseen. Even when he stepped into the room, she did not turn, but spoke in a rich and mellow voice.

"You're back quickly, my Michel! Do you know there are a thousand sovereigns here? A thousand pounds, think of it! What a pity it must be all divided!"

"Yes, a great pity," said Wallace dryly.

She swung around and her face went a terrible dead white at sight of the officer. So great was her fear, that she could not even scream, though her lips were hanging open. Wallace went to the bed and, from under the pillow, took out the pistol. He examined it, then gave the woman a long, slow look. His level voice drove reality into her.

"Now, Eveline, you'd better stop thinking about all this money, and about Michel, too. I expect you've had a right hard passage down the Coast, ain't you? Well it'll be a durned sight harder if you land up in court, as you're liable to if you don't watch your step. You got to make a real difficult decision, Eveline—and I advise you to make it quick. You got to clear forget about this here money and so forth. If I was you, I'd grab that there bottle of squareface and lock myself in my cabin, and go to sleep—just like that. I mean it, see? Anyhow, you do it."

The eyes of Wallace drove into the Da Costa woman for a long moment, and under his cold and deadly stare she grew whiter and whiter. Wallace meant exactly what he said; she did not know why, could not understand why—but she comprehended that he meant it. And in this moment she was mortally afraid of him.

She came to her feet, at all events, reached out mechanically for the liquor,

and sidled out of the cabin, not taking her eyes from him until she was in the passage. Then she uttered one long and piercing scream, and next instant her cabin door slammed.

"Good riddance," muttered Wallace.

He got out of there quickly. He had made up his mind now—it was win or lose all. He must call for help with daylight, sure enough, but not for any salvage operation. If he pulled through, there was the signal locker to draw on; any ship would send him a few men, and the owners could settle the claim readily enough. Yes, this thing had to be ended, and it could be ended in just one way.

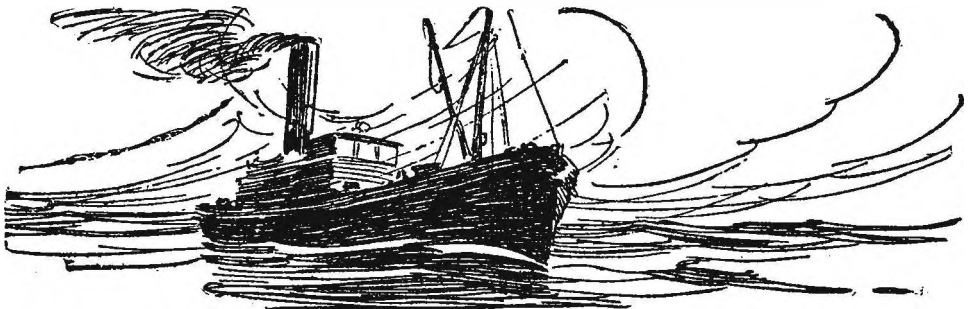
The pistol he had found contained only three cartridges.

He stalked out on deck, unaware whether his crew were aloft or aloft, and almost at once had his answer. A dark shape was on the port ladder above him, and he heard the voice of Bugs cry out to those above.

"I tell you, I heard her holler! I bet he's down there now——"

"You win your bet," said Wallace, and lifted his weapon. As Bugs swung around, he fired.

A shuddering scream broke from the man. His hold relaxing, Bugs plunged from the ladder and struck the deck head-first, and lay there. From the starboard side of the bridge spat a tongue of flame, and another. Wallace was jerked around by the impact of the bullet; then, deliberately, he threw up his pistol and fired. Another spat of flame from the bridge—and the mate felt the wind of that bullet on his cheek. Then he fired his second shot. There came a groan in response; and what had been Michel at the rail above was now a limp bundle of rags.



"Blast your bleedin' eyes—I'll get yer for that!" came the roar in Limey's voice.

Wallace scarcely heard it. Almost mechanically, he had moved; he knew he was hit somewhere, but he could move well enough. Limey was not on the bridge at all. He was there at the foot of the starboard ladder, and his pistol was blazing away as Wallace withdrew into the shadows opposite.

He saw the Liverpool seaman's hulking figure come raging forward into the light—stooped shoulders, long dangling arms, shambling stride. And, feeling that he must not, could not miss, he threw up his pistol. He scarcely realized that he had fired, until he felt the jar of the pistol, heard the empty click as he pressed the trigger again—"

And Limey, with a bestial roar, plunged at him.

Wallace tried to meet the rush with a blow, but he was hurt and numb, something had gone out of him, all his side was wet and sticky. He went down under the impact and rolled sideways, into the light from the passage. Helpless for the moment, he saw Limey tower up above him, saw the pistol leveled—

And then, suddenly, without warning, the hulking figure collapsed in a sprawling heap on the deck. That third bullet had not missed, after all.

IX

CAPTAIN BARLOW stood beside a cot in the Marine Hospital at Hong-kong and looked down at Mr. Wallace, who grinned amiably.

"Huh!" said the skipper. "Mister, you ain't seen the papers about it, I expect?"

"Not yet," said Wallace. "Haven't seen a newspaper at all. Why?"

"Well, now," observed the skipper, "about you and that there woman aboard—seems like the newspapers think there was a lot o' romance about it, get me?"

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Wallace in a startled voice.

"Now, now, mister, you don't need to be afraid o' me," said the skipper, with what he meant to be a confiding smile. He waved his hand at the large pitcher of flowers on the table. "I don't blame you a mite, mister, not a mite! After what she told about how you had saved her from them dock rats and so forth—well, mister, I'm durned proud of you, I sure an! Quite a piece in the paper about it all, too. But what I want to know is just this: How far has this here romance gone?"

Mr. Wallace lifted himself on one elbow.

"Romance?" he repeated in a strangled voice. "Romance? By Godfrey, when are you leaving port anyhow?"

"We're clearin' tonight, and that's what I wanted to see about," said the skipper in some perplexity. "You can be moved, but if you're aiming to set around here and hold hands in this here romance game—"

"Not by a damned sight!" and Mr. Wallace threw back the bedclothes. "I'm sailin' with you tonight, and I don't mean maybe. Romance—romance! Hell!"

And sail he did.

CORPORAL DOWNEY of the
Mounted
in an exciting story of
the great Northwest by **coming back**
soon

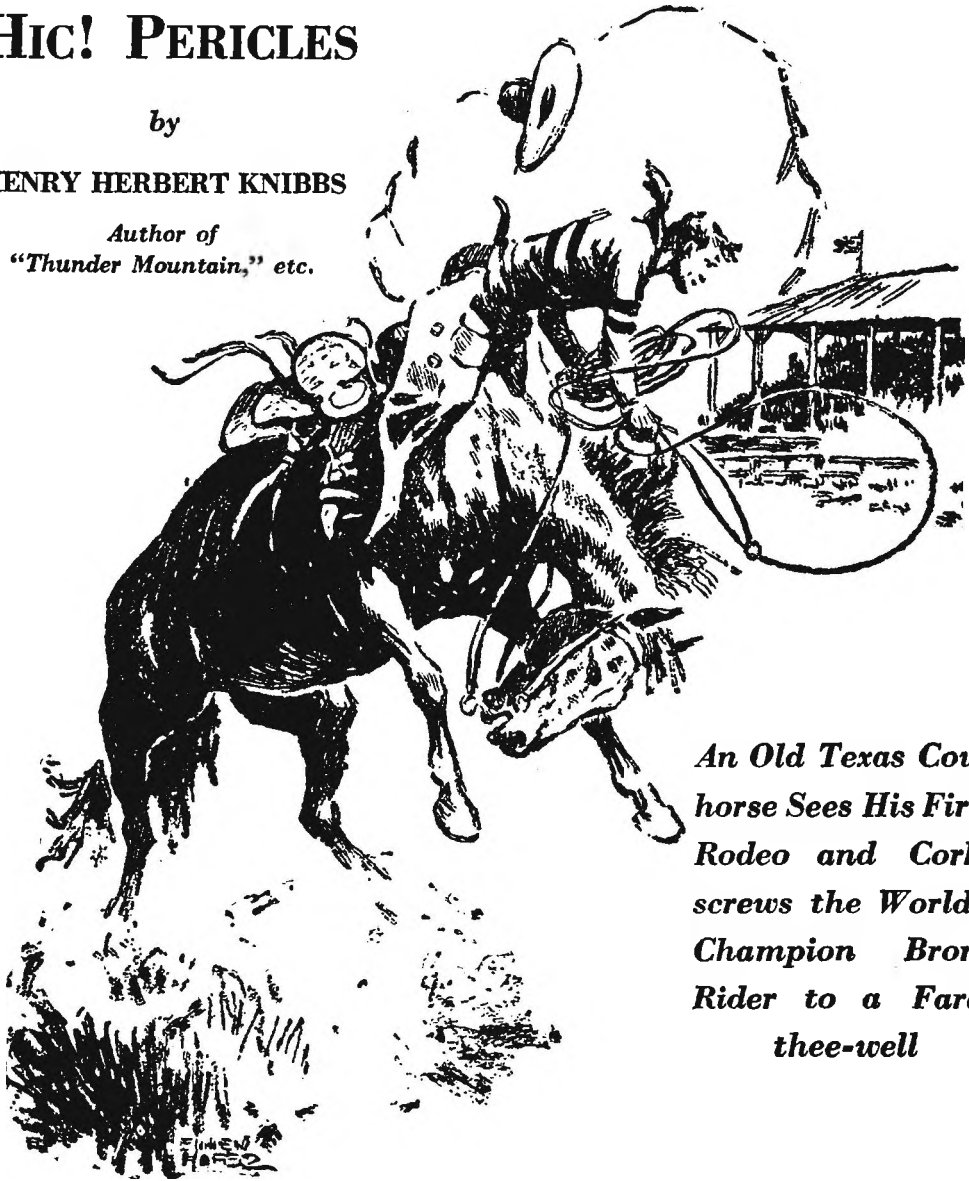
JAMES B. HENDRYX

HIC! PERICLES

by

HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS

Author of
"Thunder Mountain," etc.



*An Old Texas Cow-
horse Sees His First
Rodeo and Cork-
screws the World's
Champion Bronc
Rider to a Fare-
thee-well*

DOZING in the pole corral, Perciles switched flies and ruminated. Fat and sleek in his retirement from active service, nevertheless the old cowhorse was not happy. The great Annersley ranch, once ranged by lean, vicious longhorns, had become an Old Ladies' Home; dairy cattle. Tame cows that didn't know the difference between a reata and a clothes-line!

Other innovations distressed Perciles: a malodorous gasoline engine. Electric lights. An electric churn and separator. And though hesitating to believe it, he

had heard that the cows were milked by machinery. Alfalfa, Guernseys and electric lights! Longhorns, lanterns and bunch grass had been good enough in his day.

Perciles gazed pensively at the distant southern hills. He and the boss had worked on many a roundup at the foot of those hills. Then, the boss seemed to think he couldn't get along without him. But now when Peter Annersley wanted to inspect the stock he climbed into a roaring contraption on wheels and whizzed down the Malibu road instead of stepping up on a proper cowhorse and doing the job in a dignified manner. Yon-

der in the lean-to hung Peter's saddle, chaps and rope—dusty mementos of romance gone to seed.

Yes, times and the shape of men's legs had changed. Once you could see a right extensive stretch of range between almost any pair of legs that happened along. But you couldn't even see daylight between most of the legs that visited the rancho now.

Everybody seemed to have forgotten what a horse was made for. Looked as though the next generation would be born with wheels in place of legs.

Pericles heaved a sigh. He, Pericles, one time top-horse and pride of a wild unfenced domain had become a mere corral ornament, a nose-bag pensioner.

Yes, the importunate buzz wagon had at last triumphed over the bronco.

PERICLES pricked an ear. A strange motor truck was rolling solemnly up the driveway. Huh! One of the Guernseys just back from a trip to one of those fashionable health resorts, eh? These feeble-minded dairy cattle were always being doctored for insomnia, highblood pressure or melancholia, or something!

And that truck! Pericles glared. Clumsy, snoring contraption. No head or tail to the thing! Just barged right into the premises like a runaway box car.

As a matter of habit, Pericles sniffed. Cow in that truck? No, that wasn't cow! His head came up with a snort. It was horse! Horses riding in automobiles! What next?

A pair of fancy boots swung out of the truck. Long legs, crimson shirt and wide Stetson followed. Pericles stared. What was this? Not a mail-order dude, and not a regular cowhand. Legs of a bronc rider, but didn't look like a cattleman. Voice, as he inquired for Peter Annersley, undoubtedly originated in Texas.

Pericles stared suspiciously at the crimson-shirted intruder. Was the flaming Texan some new kind of veterinary? Lord! The present one was bad enough.

Old "Bleak" Saunders came from the ranch-house—shook hands with Crimson Shirt. Bleak was lean, leathery and about as talkative as a cliff. The stranger was

tall, heavy-muscled and smooth of face. Strong, steady talker, too.

"Pete said to see you . . . south pasture . . . Grain 'em once a day. Yes, Rodeo in Rainbow the fifteenth. . . ."

Slowly it dawned on Pericles. The visiting broncos in the truck were not honest cowponies, but renegades and outlaws. He knew the breed! Unfit for decent society and too lazy to do a day's work, they toured the country from rodeo to rodeo, giving exhibitions of violence that would make a self-respecting cowhorse blush.

A gesture from Crimson Shirt and the truck wallowed down the lane toward the pasture gate. Scorn in his eye, the smell of strange horses in his nose, Pericles saw the unloaded broncos spread over the south pasture, grazing eagerly. The empty truck returned to the water tank. Pericles curled his lip. Trucks! Couldn't even drink when they were thirsty. Had to have it poured into 'em!

Crimson Shirt and his truck driver sauntered over to the corral. Pericles flattened his ears. Crimson Shirt, looking at him, laughed.

"Looks like he might have been a horse, once."

"I'd say he was a whole lot of horse, right now."

Crimson Shirt favored his truck driver with a contemptuous smile.

"Oh, he'd do to haul eggs."

Pericles glared.

A sleek, fawn colored roadster swept sinuously up the lane, stopping just back of the truck. Pericles recognized Mary Annersley gazing round the windshield.

"Would you lamp the skirt!" said Crimson Shirt to his truck driver.

Lamp the skirt! Pericles was puzzled. Whose clothing was going to be set on fire now?

Mary leaned from her roadster. "Good morning, everybody! But why the blockade?"

Hat in hand "Curly" Smith, he of the crimson shirt, moved gracefully up to Mary's car. "My string of broncs, ma'm. We show in Rainbow the fifteenth."

"But this is only the twelfth."

Pericles saw that Mary was staring at Mr. Smith's ornate riding boots. He saw

also that Mr. Smith was immediately conscious of his highly illustrated footgear.

"If you don't like them boots, ma'm, I'll throw 'em away."

"It isn't just the boots." Mary accelerated the motor. But Curly Smith merely smiled an eighteen carat smile.

Mary glanced toward Pericles, who had turned his back in disgust. "Why, what in the world is the matter with Perry? Is he sick?"

Curly Smith shrugged a contemptuous shoulder. "Reckon there's nothin' wrong with the old crowbait except he's got a little age on him."

"Is that so?" said Mary coolly. "Are those your horses in the south pasture, Mister Smith?"

"Yes ma'm. I got a contract with Pete Annersley to pasture 'em till the show. You know Pete?"

"Yes, I know Pete. He was my father, once, Mister Smith."

"Yes, ma'm. I'm Curly Smith, if you don't mind."

"Not in the least, if you don't."

Pericles chuckled to himself. So did the truck driver.

"There was a little dirt in that one," the latter mumbled. "Curly lamps the skirt and gets an eye full of soot!"

Mary smiled at Mr. Smith. "As the rodeo won't be until the fifteenth," she said, "would you mind moving your truck out of my way?"

PERICLES noted that Curly Smith's color blended nicely with his shirt. Got a little excited, too. Jumped in the truck and started up the lane without waiting for the driver. But the driver didn't seem to mind. Just stood there and watched Mary's roadster shoot past the truck, and then grinned.

"Had it coming to him at that! The big stiff is so stuck on himself you'd think he was twins!"

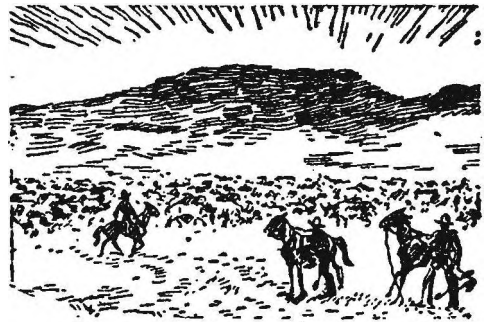
Pericles gazed indifferently at a fly on his shoulder. Wasn't any zip left in the flies, nowadays. Of the great army of flies that had once bivouacked in the corral only a few weak-kneed and toothless veterans remained. Hardly had gimp enough to hang on after they landed on you. And

no wonder! Stables, barns, corrals—almost everything around the place except the boss, sprayed with creosote twice a week. That was the new veterinary. Might be a good cow doctor, but he wore horn-rimmed glasses and a white collar, and smelled too antiseptic to be true.

Now old Doc Leadbetter, *he* was a horse doctor. Fat and human and smelled of whisky. Knew horses and respected their feelings. When you had a touch of colic he didn't scare you to death in a foreign language, but called it bellyache and gave you a medicine ball.

Pericles jumped and kicked himself in the stomach. That one was a wasp! Well, thank goodness wasps weren't all dead yet. Kept you interested in life. Speaking of wasps, hadn't Mary handed the Big Stiff a hot one! Wonder he hadn't jumped and kicked himself in the stomach.

Pericles gazed out across the noon fields. Eight head of star-trompers in the south pasture and a rodeo in Rainbow the fifteenth? Rodeo, eh? Mighty fancy name, that. Roundup used to be good enough. And a roundup meant something. Chuck wagons, cattle, dust, top-hands and top-



horses and plenty of hard work. The hands didn't wear their Sunday clothes and smoke cigars, either. It was sowbelly, hot bread, beans, coffee and beef—and curl a brownie when you got the chance. But these rodeos! Had heard plenty about them even if he hadn't seen one. Professional contest stuff, like actors in a show. And everybody but the hot-dog man a world's champion. And probably not a horse there that had ever seen a real old fashioned roundup.

Stirred by a recollection of old times, Pericles circled the corral and shot a wild hoof skyward. Ouch! A bit starched where

that longhorn had got him, years ago. Well, maybe there was something in what the Big Stiff said. But you didn't like to admit it, even when someone came along and told you.

Age—that was the trouble. You worked hard most of your life, and then, when you could take it easy on three legs and chuckle about your wild oats, along comes rheumatism, or your hearing isn't so good, or your eyes go bad. Felt just as young as ever until you tried to scratch your ear with your hind foot. Then you sure knew that Time had slipped up on you without blowing the whistle.

Pericles had just begun to doze when Mary came down from the house and handed him a sugar-coated doughnut.

"Poor old Perry!"

Old! There it was again. Mary meant well. But somehow the "old" grated.

Pericles accepted the doughnut as a matter of politeness. But as soon as Mary was gone he let it slide out of his mouth. Yes, Mary meant well. But what were endearments and pastry to one who had known the wild thrill of the chase, the whistle of the rope, the bite of the cinch as a thousand pounds of live beef turned over in the air and you circled and held while the boss hog-tied?

A SHAFT of moonlight struck through the corral cottonwoods. Pericles could hear the dairy hands snoring over in the bunkhouse. Having had his first sleep, he sniffed at the water trough, strolled to the feed box and nosed down into the hay. Wasn't thirsty or hungry. But when you have been raised on the range you don't overlook any bets. And you don't let anything slip up on you and surprise you—even an old friend.

Pericles' ears stiffened. Someone was stealing out of the moon shadows. Looked like Mary. Midnight—and a young lady! He nickered confidentially.

But that other shadow stealing out from the sycamores? Pericles sniffed. Oh, Bleak Saunders! And what was that old Texas whickerbill doing, prowling around the ranch at this time of night?

Submerging his curiosity, Pericles turned his back. For sixteen years a slight

coolness had existed between Pericles and the foreman, following Bleak's attempt to break him. All that got broken in that engagement was a leg—and it wasn't Pericles' leg.

Mary's voice reached him.

"Poor old Perry! I think it's a shame he has to stand around and do nothing all the time. Don't you, Bleak?"

"Did you get me out of bed just to tell me that, Miss Mary?"

"No, indeed! There's a lot more. I want you to enter the calf-roping contest and ride Pericles. I'd like to surprise father."

"It would surprise him, all right!"

"You know it's a shame, Bleak, that the Annersley ranch isn't represented at the rodeo. And you're a perfect figure on a horse!"

"Now ain't you crowdin' me into the fence a little, Miss Mary? Besides, Perry ain't the hoss he used to be."

Pericles turned his head and gazed sternly at Bleak. That was the way Bleak talked, nowadays, was it? Hm!

Mary's voice again. "I believe he can work just as fast as ever if he's warmed up."

Warmed up! There it was again. Nobody used to speak of warming him up. Thought he was hot enough to handle with tongs, those days.

"Let's throw a saddle on him and try him out a little, Bleak. You understand him."

"Plenty!" Bleak sighed. "Well, I'll go git my spurs and chaps."

Mary approached the corral. But Pericles stared somberly into the shadows.

The gate opened and Bleak came back, hunched under a stock saddle. As he and Mary entered the corral Pericles sniffed. Either Mary had been drinking or Bleak kept his spurs and chaps in a demijohn.

Pericles stood with forelegs braced as they bridled and saddled him. Work just as fast as ever if warmed up, eh?

"Hadn't we better lead him down the lane a piece?" suggested Mary.

"No. Just open the gate and I'll kind of ease him out."

Ease him out, eh? Leave his corral at this time of night? Pericles snorted. He

went up in front, dropped and went up behind. Had a little age on him, did he? Well, just get this one! And he threw a double-jointed whing ding that sent Mary scurrying for the top rail of the corral, and made Bleak wish he was sitting there, also. Bleak hooked his spurs in the cinch. Pericles bogged his head, bunched and hit the ground like a trip-hammer. Bleak's teeth snapped like a bear trap. What? That old whickerbill there yet? Holding his breath, Pericles went up again, all four off the ground. At the top of the arc he turned on his specialty, the famous double corkscrew. Out of the tail of his eye he saw Bleak rise and take to flight like a gigantic bat.

Bleak sat up and fumbled with his mouth. "Git the wimmen and children out first," he mumbled. Pericles shied over into a corner.

Mary hopped down from the top rail. Pericles blinked. What on earth were they doing? Bleak was lighting matches and crawling about the corral on hands and knees and Mary was walking along beside him. Pericles caught an occasional word: "Like your paw said—can't tell what the ole fool'll do next—have to wait till mornin', I reckon."

"You won't need the teeth till breakfast time, will you?"

"Mebby I won't," said Bleak a trifle caustically. "But I kind of like to have 'em around so I won't have to be introduced next time I use 'em."

MARY'S voice seemed the least bit anxious. "But this won't keep you from helping me with Perry if we take him to the rodeo, will it? You *will* lend a hand, won't you?"

"Both of 'em. But no laigs."

Bleak began to unsaddle Pericles. Mary gazed at Pericles reproachfully.

"Looks as if that settled the calf roping," she sighed.

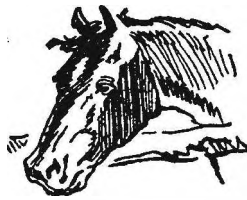
"Far's I'm concerned it settles everything. That hell-fed catamount bruk one of my laigs, sixteen years ago. This time he shakes me loose from my uppers. I don't aim to let him scatter me no more."

Pericles spent a gloomy night. Disappointed Mary, had he? But what could she expect, saddling him up for a try-out at that hour?

Waking feverish and a trifle stiff he moved out of a patch of early morning sunlight and stepped to the water trough. Gosh! What was that! Eye wide, nostrils stiff he glared down at Bleak's uppers in the bottom of the trough. Nice place for a man to leave his teeth! Pericles nosed the surface of the water. The submerged uppers danced and wiggled. He jumped back. Human teeth in his private drinking trough! What next?

About eleven o'clock that morning a strange figure breezed up in Mary's car, sitting beside Mary as if he had known her a hundred years or even longer. The strange figure was wearing a purple shirt, fawn colored pants and a pair of riding boots that would give a range cow the blind staggers. But Pericles pierced the disguise. It was the Big Stiff, alias Curly Smith. Mary waved at Pericles as they drove past the corral. The Big Stiff grinned. Pericles ignored them.

The car stopped just below the corral. Mary and her escort sat looking at the broncos in the south pasture. Jealous, disillusioned, Pericles turned his back at this incredible sight. Mary, his Mary had driven past his corral with a mere nod and wave of her hand. But she could



sit gazing as though her life depended on it at those low-browed contest horses.

With a polite sequence of clucks about the weather and the crops, Pericles' old hen friend Featherbritches fussed her way into the corral to do a little gleaning amid the alien corn.

Pericles laid back his ears and ran her off the premises. Had a little age on him, did he? A hump, a jump, a snort and he launched a wild kick at the audible but distant hen.

"Plumb loco!" mumbled Bleak Saunders as he fished his uppers out of the water trough.

But neither Mary nor Curly Smith paid

any attention to Pericles. He knew it because he watched them out of the corner of his eye.

The sun poured down upon the corral cottonwoods. Nels, armed with screw-driver, oil can and monkey wrench, attacked and silenced the deep well pump. Through the buzzing stillness came the sound of voices.

"Bear Cat, Whing Ding, High Chin, Undertaker—any of 'em can be rode by the right man if he has luck. But Dynamite there"—Pericles saw Curly Smith gesture toward the broncos—"he's unloaded every bronc stomper that ever tried to scratch him. Crippled more riders than all the rest of my string put together."

"He looks gentle. I think he's the most beautiful horse I have ever seen."

Was that Mary's voice? Pericles raised his head and stared. He had to believe his eyes.

"Lead him down Main Street with a piece of string," continued Curly Smith. "But the minute you screw a saddle on him, he's poison."

"Hasn't anyone ever ridden him?"

Pericles saw Curly Smith shrug a purple shoulder. "Nobody except me. I got his number. I aim to ride anything that wears hair."

Pericles' nostrils quivered. Purple-chested Gila Monster! Ride anything that wore hair, eh? And Dynamite, there, was the most beautiful horse Mary had ever seen? Pericles stood with his head in the corner. Mary and the Big Stiff drove back up the lane, talking and laughing as they passed the corral. But Pericles paid no heed. Henceforth he would trust neither male nor female. Mary, his Mary, had gone over to the enemy.

NELS next appeared at the corral gate, pushing a little red tank on wheels. Pericles unclosed an eye. Spray day again. Nels entered the corral. The spraying machine hissed and sizzled. Pericles unclosed the other eye. What? The gate open? Really, that Norwegian fly-hound was taking too much for granted.

Pericles strolled casually through the gateway and on down to the south pasture fence. From behind him came the sound

of Nels' voice. Pericles chuckled. Maybe that would teach Nels to pay a little more attention to his gates.

His head over the fence Pericles surveyed the grazing broncos. A run-down-at-the-heel, out-at-elbows lot, to be sure! Rough coated, rowel scarred, reared in iniquity and schooled in viciousness.

Grazing far out in the pasture the black stallion, Dynamite, raised his head. What was that old blaze-face stranger staring at, anyway? Ears flat and each nostril a red fury, Dynamite charged the invader. Pericles snipped the top off a milkweed and chewed placidly. That black devil was charging down like a thunderbolt. But Shucks! No dark stranger was going to run him off his ranch, especially when there was a barbed-wire fence between them.

Dynamite slid to a stop. Pericles mumbled his milkweed, but a baleful light shone in his old eyes. Dynamite was both wicked and wise. Evidently the old gentleman dieting on milkweed was a native—possibly the owner of the ranch. Judging by *his* eye, you couldn't run a whizzer on him.

Curious as to what it was all about, the young bronco Whing Ding strolled over toward the fence. Preening a glossy shoulder, Dynamite paid no attention to Whing Ding until he was within striking distance. Even Pericles was astonished by the snakelike swiftness of the black stallion's lunge. With a coltish squeal, Whing Ding tucked his tail and fled. Dynamite followed, nipped him on the rump, and, dodging Whing Ding's heels, snorted a challenge to the world at large.

Pericles wandered back up the lane. Had to admit that the black stallion was a handsome animal. Clever, too.

Pericles stopped, stared. The corral gate was closed.

Locked out of his own corral, was he? Whirling indignantly he came back at the gate on the run. Cleared it, too! Had a little age on him, eh? What would his detractors have said if they could have seen that one?

PERICLES awoke with a start. The water in the drinking trough shimmered in the morning sun. He sniffed.

Some peculiar quality in the air disturbed him. Something was going to happen. What was it? He shuffled uneasily.

Past breakfast time, too. Seizing a wisp of hay Pericles mumbled it. He ceased chewing and cocked an ear. A huge motor truck zoomed up the driveway, swung past the corral and stopped at the south pasture gate. Pericles let the hay slip slowly from his mouth. Curly Smith's truck had come for the broncos. The big day had arrived!

Amazed that these renegades tamely submitted to being loaded into the truck, Pericles circled the corral, head high and tail up. Trembling with excitement he stopped and watched them as the truck rolled past—Leave Me Alone, Sky Scraper, Dynamite and the rest of 'em—stolid as so many head of dairy cattle. In fact they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

So that was the way they got there, was it? Mighty easy way, riding instead of walking your legs off. Renegades and outlaws got a ride. But a proper cowhorse? No one had ever invited *him* to take a ride anywhere.

Pericles stood staring at the empty south pasture. Well, the broncos were gone. A shiftless lot, mixed ancestry, lived from hoof to mouth—Pericles sighed heavily—but they were going to the rodeo. And he had never even seen one.

Everybody on the ranch was getting ready to go but himself. Bleak Saunders, over in the bunkhouse window, lathering his face. Sure sign Bleak was going to step out. And the hands, scurrying like rabbits, borrowing neckties and lending shirts.

Did they expect him to stand on three and carry one all day?

In his old-time black suit, string tie, Stetson and riding boots, Peter Annersley hastened down to the corral. Quivering with anticipation Pericles thrust his nose over the top rail. High time the boss showed up!

"Well, how's the old side-winder today?"

Pericles whinnied confidentially. Understood why Peter's hand trembled and his voice sounded husky. Felt the same way himself.

"Just honin' to go, eh, old-timer?" said Peter.

Honin' to go! Just let the boss fetch out the old terrapin shell, cinch her down and step up, and wouldn't they hightail it over to the fair grounds and show those candy colored contest riders what a real cattleman and a proper cowhorse looked like.

The boss yanked out his handkerchief, grabbed his nose as though he was mad at it and blew a mighty blast. Pericles was puzzled. The boss seemed mad about something. Yes, he walked mad.

Crossing the corral, Pericles watched Peter disappear through the garage doorway.

Hurting out of the garage like a maroon thunderbolt, the big town car careened down the driveway, mowing a wide swath through the bordering geraniums. Pericles could smell hot rubber as the car stopped in front of the house.

The family thunder wagon, and the boss driving, if you could call it that. But what about the rodeo?

Pericles' lower lip sagged and his ears drooped as he saw Mrs. Annersley glorify herself on the back seat of the limousine; saw Peter glowering behind the steering wheel, and Bleak beside him, as solemn as an undertaker and as stiff as the undertaken.

A shower of gravel—and Pericles' last hope of attending the rodeo went glimmering down the driveway in a cloud of dust.

THE deep well pūmp coughed spasmodically. Flies buzzed in the noon heat. Everybody gone to the rodeo but the night watchmen and two or three of the hands. Pericles paced nervously up and down the corral like an old gentleman with his hands behind his coat-tails waiting for a delayed train.

The big, white cow ambulance stood backed up against the landing stage. A wild idea struck Pericles between the eyes. His stride became a gallop. Twice round the corral and he went over the gate and out into the middle of the yard. Cautiously he approached the big white truck. Mighty

gorgeous contraption! Blue and gold letters on it like a rainbow. And under the rainbow the picture of a cow. Huh! Nobody had ever painted his picture on anything! So this is what the cows rode in on their trips about the country?



Pericles walked up onto the landing stage. Sniffed. Nothing dangerous in that cow ambulance. Now if he were to step into the thing without saying a word to anyone, he *might* get a lift over to the rodeo. Heard the driver of the cow-ambulance say he was going over as soon as he washed up and changed his clothes. Pericles took an experimental step. Floor sounded hollow, but seemed solid enough. Another step—and nothing serious had happened. Well, he was inside the thing. And, judging by the rodeo horses, all you had to do to ride one of these contraptions was to stand still and mind your own business.

Pericles could hear loud talking over in the bunkhouse: "Well, if you want to ride with me, get a move on! Oh, come on, have another one? No, I got enough. Well, one more—and I'm on my way. Show starts at one-thirty. We're late now."

Driver of the cow ambulance going to take a couple of the hands over to the rodeo, eh? Rodeo? Pericles glanced nervously over his shoulder. Well, that's where he wanted to go.

Five minutes, and the ordeal of waiting for he knew not what, got on Pericles' nerves. The ambulance was uncommonly like a stall, and he had never liked stalls.

"What's the big idea?" The truck driver's voice!

Pericles whirled, bumping his head against the roof of the ambulance. Yes, there he was—blocking the way with outstretched arms.

"Stand still, you old fool!"

The driver seemed almost as surprised as Pericles; but he unhooked a rope from

the rear of the truck. Pericles froze in his tracks. No use trying to go against a rope. Learned that, years ago.

Grumbling because of this further delay, the driver led Pericles down the landing stage and tied him to a corral post. Pericles' heart sank into his hoofs. They wouldn't even let him ride in their blamed old cow ambulance!

Muttering something about "Father's pet," the truck driver got into the ambulance and tooted the horn. Receiving no response to this summons, he called out to his two prospective passengers in the bunkhouse. But nothing came from the doorway but the sound of voices lifted in song. With a muffled explosion at both ends of the truck, that glittering vehicle departed in a cloud of blue smoke.

Pericles shot a wild glance over his shoulder as the two figures lurched out of the bunkhouse doorway, stared for a moment at the place where the cow-ambulance had stood and, releasing a wild cry of surprise, began to run toward the driveway. Half way across the yard they halted and had started back toward the bunkhouse when they observed Pericles.

Again they halted, and, standing at attention, held a kind of wobbly consultation. Finally they broke ranks and advanced on Pericles. "Horse," said the smaller of the two in a pleased tone.

They separated and, going their several ways, returned, one with a harness dangling round him like a mess of sea-weed; the other dragging an ancient top-buggy. A grave suspicion chilled Pericles. But, no! Even in their condition they'd hardly dare harness him, let alone hitch him to that ramshackle old hack. He felt that his gaze alone should have warned them. Yet in spite of their occasional wild digressions, Pericles saw that he was the goal toward which their legs were bent.

"Ho!" said he with the harness.

Pericles quivered. Harness *him*? Could he be dreaming. No. The one who had introduced himself as "Ho" didn't smell like a dream. Pericles trembled as a tangle of harness fell across his back. But Ho didn't seem to notice; kept right on unbuckling and buckling straps and breathing to himself in a loud undertone.

"Whup!" said he of the buggy. With Ho's assistance he managed to draw the shafts up on either side of Pericles without impaling him.

PERICLES would have demolished Ho, Whup, and the buggy impartially, but he feared the inch rope round his neck. Just let them loose that rope, and—Pericles trembled. Ho was untying the neck rope. Pericles' hams flattened and his eyes bulged. Having exhausted his ingenuity in untying the rope, Ho left it hanging across Pericles' neck, got into the buggy, and slapped him on the rump with the reins.

Pericles lashed out behind. He heard a crash. He lunged. Something gave way. Another lunge and he was half way across the yard. A faint "Ho!" came to him as he rounded the corner of the stable. Hitch *him* to anything on wheels, would they? Wheels? From the tail of his eye he saw a wheel spinning merrily along just behind him on the left. A wild glance backward to the right—and there was another wheel, traveling at the same gait. He lashed out as he ran. Follow him, would they? Pericles turned on a little more speed. So did the wheels. Something spooky about that! What did the blamed things want, anyway?

Maybe he could shake them when he made the turn into the highway.

But although one of them shed a tire, and a loose spoke flew out of the other, they came along right behind him. Never saw such an inseparable pair of wheels in his whole life!

Above the whirr and clatter of his wild flight down the highway came the sound of a motor car from behind. What? Somebody else trying to catch him? What Pericles thought had been his best, became a mere pasture promenade as he fled from the onrushing motor.

The fenced road gave way to the open acres surrounding the fair grounds. Pericles ignored the onrushing curve and struck straight out across the open. Sand, hummocks of dead grass, arroyos, grease-wood—his kind of country. The bouncing wheels struck a rock. A sharp tug, a rending of wood and leather, and he was free!

Winded, also.

Pericles came to a trembling stop. Whew! What an experience!

Directly ahead of him was a high board fence. He surveyed it with suspicion. Understood wire fence, but this thing looked like some kind of a trap. Yes! And that figure, over there? He turned and faced the oncoming figure.

"Perry!" Mary's voice. But who would have expected to find her, out there on foot and alone?

With sharpened ears Pericles watched until he was sure it was Mary. Then he nickered shrilly. Even if she had gone over to the Gila Monster, it was no time to worry about that.

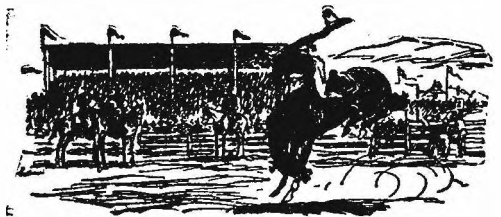
"I should think so!" said Mary as she walked round him. "What a mess!" She unbuckled the remnant of a broken buggy shaft and tossed it away. "Something's going to happen if I find out who hitched you up," said Mary.

Pericles nuzzled her shoulder. If something hadn't happened already, it wasn't his fault.

Leading him cross-lots to her roadster, Mary stripped off the broken harness and took a saddle and bridle out of the car. "I've got a little surprise for you," she said as she bridled and saddled him.

Well, it was a surprise that Mary should know right where he was and have a saddle and bridle handy, so she could ride him back to the ranch. Pericles sighed. Now he *knew* he'd never see the rodeo.

Pericles felt a bit dubious as Mary led him toward that high board fence. Someone opened the big gate in it. Pericles heard Mary's voice telling him nothing would bite him. Well, nothing would, if he saw it first! But how could you pay attention to anything that might bite, when your eye was crowded with toy balloons, flags, banners, big hats, cattle pens, horses,



automobiles, and a wild confusion of motion and color? And yonder, packed to

gether on that kind of a hillside with a roof over it, more people than you had ever seen in all your life!

PERICLES stared round with a white rimmed eye. Across the backs of the broncos near the chutes he caught a glimpse of the black stallion, Dynamite. So this was the rodeo!

Hello! There was Bleak, too; looking like Sunday, solemn as a cliff. Through the confusion of sounds and noises Pericles heard Bleak's melancholy voice; "Your maw is wonderin' where you are, Miss Mary. Your paw told your maw he would go look for you. Then your maw sends me to look for your paw. Your maw is settin' in that second box-stall, down in front, if she ain't out lookin' for me and your paw."

"Yes, Bleak. I was delayed. I was on my way back to the ranch to get Pericles. Happened to see him tearing down the old west road, so I took after him." Mary lowered her voice. Bleak nodded. "Thanks," said Mary, handing the reins to Bleak. "Watch him when the band starts to play." And Mary disappeared in the crowd.

Pericles sidled up to Bleak as they stood in the runway between the pens waiting for the grand parade—slowly forming from a conglomeration of cowboys, cow-girls, stagecoaches, trick mule and clown riders.

Who were those men over there, sitting all huddled together as if they were up to something. Dressed like policemen, too. Must be up to something. Each one of 'em had something in his hand that looked like a brass spittoon. And one of the policemen was trying to use his, but he didn't seem to know how. Kept turning it upside down and looking into it. Pericles gave a start as one of the policemen—looked like the chief—jumped up and waved a little stick. Suddenly the rest of the policemen raised their spittoons and made faces at each other. *Brrr! Blump!* Pericles almost jumped out of his shoes.

"Steady!" said Bleak. "That's nothin' but the band."

Pericles sighed. Band, eh? Well, they acted like policemen, anyway.

And the parade! Never saw a parade before. But the idea seemed to be, arch your neck, swell up and strut, just as though you were going to explode any minute, but never did. Just marched right along till you got back to the chutes. And the Big Stiff leaned sideways on his paint pony and says to a cowboy in short skirts, "I guess we hooked 'em that time!"

Pericles wondered why some of the cowboys wore short skirts. He had never seen punchers dressed like that. He paid special attention to one of these peculiar creatures, riding a crop-eared buckskin and wrangling a wad of chewing gum. Had long hair, just like a woman. And a face like a wolf-trap if it had gold teeth. "Never seen such a bunch of hill-billies in my life!" declared this person. "Can you feature any crowd givin' her and the Big Stiff a hand, and passin' us ladies up cold?"

"I can, Adeline," said another of the leather-kilted cowbunnies, "as long as you stick with the show."

Then the announcer said there would be a relay race.

A lean, half-crazy thoroughbred lunged out onto the track with a man in overalls dangling from the bridle. Swiftly another mount followed with a similar human attachment. Relay horses, eh? Pericles stared. By the time the sixth relay mount had appeared the track in front of the grandstand looked like a cyclone in a chicken yard. And the riders! Weasel-faced little runts in silk shirts, caps that were mostly peak, and pants that looked like underwear!

Won by a rangy sorrel with front legs like stilts and hindquarters like a jack rabbit, the relay race was applauded about ten cents' worth. Pericles sighed.

"That goes double," said Bleak mournfully. And Pericles felt the awakening of a better understanding between them.

AS AN experienced rope horse, Pericles thought he might enjoy the trick roping. But the high-speed snake-charmer with the falsetto voice and the varnished hair, who threw fits all over the ground, accompanied by a rope which, when he

wasn't crawling through it, crawled all over him, simply made you dizzy. And now this trick-roper was standing on his head and spinning a loop around his legs! Amusing. But what if a real, old moss-horned bosky should catch you at it?

And that trick riding? Well, the boy was clever. And as limber as a wet rawhide. The performance was trick, all right. But Pericles couldn't understand why they called it riding. The boy seemed to be trying to keep out of the saddle instead of in it.

Pericles glanced at Bleak. Imagine Bleak at a roundup, standing on his head in the saddle and tearing past a bunch of pop-eyed longhorns! Might amuse the cattle, but chances were it would take the outfit the rest of its life to gather 'em again.

And now folks were on their feet, all looking toward the chutes. Awful rumpus going on there as three or four big hats screwed a saddle on Whing Ding, to be ridden by "Pinhead" Harper—so the announcer said. Pericles could feel his own back begin to kink.

He watched Whing Ding hump out of the chutes. Apparently quite willing to live a single life, Whing Ding pitched straight, hard and fast. Pericles held his breath. A little more curve to that one, now! Simply couldn't unload a rider pitching straight, like that. But shucks! Whing Ding was just a good, honest day laborer. Pinhead Harper stumped over to the chutes trying not to appear self-conscious. Pericles mouthed his bit.

Leave Me Alone, a big, heavy roan, came out of the chutes like a wildcat on fire. Leave Me Alone hit the ground twice, threw her into reverse—and the boy, oh, where was he?

A little better, reflected Pericles. But nothing to limp about. And why didn't the crowd applaud the horse a little? Horse did a clean, workmanlike job. But the crowd was hooting the unfortunate rider. Curious how folks who had never sat on anything wilder than a red rocking-chair could tell other folks how to ride a bronc.

Pericles curled a scornful lower lip.

"Same here," said Bleak. Old Bleak was getting real human.

Undertaker. Hah! Sounded promising. But the bronc with the long shovel-face wasn't making any fuss as the big hats screwed the hull down. That's one of the kind, mused Pericles, that gets you when you ain't looking.

Undertaker left the chutes, head down and pitching in a three-cornered style that amused the crowd. But it didn't deceive Pericles or Bleak. "Spades is trumps," murmured Bleak. "Makes a business of laying 'em away. And there he goes!"

His right leg extended as far north as possible, Undertaker went into the air, bunched the rest of his legs under him like a cat with the stomach-ache, and suddenly shifted his equilibrium. Landing on that same right foot, he sent his rider on a journey that ended in the middle of the bandstand.

After the band had been reassembled, the glossy little black stallion, Dynamite, with Curly Smith in the saddle, hurtled out of the chutes like a tornado. Pericles held enough breath for both himself and Bleak. Never had he seen a creature so quick, so viciously graceful! Lunge, sunfish, corkscrew, yet Crimson Shirt stayed. Applause for the rider was drowned in shouts of "Dynamite! Dynamite!" Pericles trembled from hocks to muzzle. That



bronc could pitch! Dynamite went up like a thunderhead and came down like a cloudburst. But Curly Smith was there, not so red of face, now, and his mouth a

straight line, but he was there, just the same. Dynamite did a spin so fast that Pericles grew dizzy watching; and still the Crimson Shirt flaunted aloft. Dynamite reared until the grandstand gasped. An inch, a hair more and he would be over backward and Curly Smith under him. But, somehow the little black stallion never quite went the limit.

A whistle blew. Curly Smith's herders lifted him out of the saddle. Pericles saw him drop to his feet, bow and disappear.

That was what you might call a high-class performance.

Pericles was a bit startled to see Mary and Curly Smith coming along the paddock rail. Mary was talking earnestly. The Big Stiff had a saddle on his shoulder. "Mebby he was, in his day," Pericles heard him say. "But it takes a right smart horse to catch one of these calves."

PERICLES adjusted his ears to the immediate conversation. Mebby who was in his day? And what? Seems he had heard something quite like that, recently.

Curly Smith nodded to Bleak. Pericles felt that something portentous was afoot. Mary spoke in a low tone to the foreman. "You won't mind if someone else rides Perry, will you?"

Pericles saw Bleak's eyebrows rise like a couple of uneasy caterpillars. "Keepin' off Pericles won't hurt my feelin's none. But you better kiss him good-by, right now. And I don't mean the hoss."

The next thing Pericles knew, the Big Stiff had unsaddled him, slapped his own saddle in place, and was sitting in it. Before Pericles could recover from his astonishment, the announcer stated that the World's Champion Bronc Rider, Mr. Curly Smith, would give a special exhibition of calf-roping—by request. Mr. Smith would use as his mount the last of the famous Annersley cowhorses, Pericles.

Someone far back in the grandstand rose and waved his sombrero. "Hooray for the only—hic!—real, rip snortin', honest-to-blazes cowhoss in the whole dem show. What I mean!—hic!—Pericles!"

"Hic, Pericles!" echoed a voice. The crowd took up the battle cry.

A calf bawled. Pericles pricked his ears. That meant business! Last of the famous Annersley cowhorses, eh? His reputation was at stake. Big Stiff or no Big Stiff he couldn't disgrace the old ranch.

Forgetting everything but the job in hand, Pericles took after the husky little Hereford calf that bounced out of the pen and high-tailed it down the track. "And the band playin' 'Kiss Me Again,'" muttered Bleak.

The crowd held its breath, anticipating

something extra snappy in the calf-roping line. Pericles saw Curly Smith's loop shoot out just as the calf bumped to a stop. The loop fell limply across the calf's back.

Pericles' eyes bulged. An easy throw, and the Big Stiff had spilled his loop!

"*Baw!*" said the calf. Pericles watched him as Curly Smith retrieved his rope. Mighty accommodating calf! Stood there as though waiting for the Big Stiff to build another loop and hang it around his neck like one of those floral wreaths.

"Kiss Me Again!" wailed somebody in the grandstand.

Something struck Pericles across the side of the head. He stood for an instant trying to collect his wits. The Big Stiff had slashed him over the eye with the coiled rope. A rowel seared his shoulder. The Big Stiff was taking it out on him, was he? Pericles left the ground, all four feet bunched. Somehow he got a foreleg over one of the reins. When he came down the rein snapped. Now he could really go to work!

Pericles dropped his head and went into the air. From shoulder to flank the rowels tore and stung. Twisting as he came down, Pericles landed hard. But the Big Stiff was in the saddle, jerking the remaining rein until Pericles' mouth bled. A lunge, a succession of stiff jumps that made Pericles' shoulders ache—and still the rowels ripped and seared.

Pericles' off hind leg began to bother him. Somehow he couldn't bunch himself and explode like he used to when a colt. Worst of all, his wind was getting short. Had to unload the Big Stiff mighty quick, or lose his hard earned reputation as a one-man horse. Last of the famous Annersley cowhorses spurred to a stand-still by a cheap, professional bronc-stomper!

Fighting mad, yet Pericles knew what he was doing. Nose to flank he whirled, spinning until he was dizzy. The weight on his back only grew heavier. He started pitching again. A rowel scored his neck. Never in his life had he been kicked that far forward! Breaking into a run, he went into the air and stopped dead as he hit the ground. And still that clinging weight lashed him with strands of flame, roweled him with splinters of fire.

Dully Pericles heard shouts of encouragement, hoots, jeers, hysterical laughter. He flung himself up, corkscrewing from right to left. Through the wild surge of battle pierced a voice—Peter Annersley's voice, out of some dimly recollected past. "Go it, old side-winder!"

Pericles heard Curly Smith laugh, felt the sting of the coiled rope across his eyes. Something thundered in Pericles' brain. Flashes of red streaked across his vision. Sweeping out from the frenzied audience came vibrations of hate, bloodlust and mockery.

The center of a black whirlpool of sound and fury, Pericles went blind mad.

He felt as though he were being hurled aloft, swept into a bottomless abyss, jolted, battered, flung from side to side by some mighty force outside himself. Deaf to everything but the maddening thunder in his ears, sightless with rage, insensible to pain, Pericles fought the Thing that was mastering him—fought with head sideways and neck curved like a snake's. He felt his rider's weight shift—an instant off balance. With a mighty leap Pericles went into the air, corkscrewed to right, to left—and the saddle was empty!

The black whirlpool dissolved. Pericles knew sunlight again, smelled the hot dust settling around him, saw a long, crimson-shirted figure sprawled on the track. The black hillside of people had become strangely silent.

Trembling with fatigue, Pericles walked over and smelled of his fallen enemy. The Big Stiff wasn't dead. Plenty stiff, all right, and not so big. But he was alive.

Pericles raised his head. What was the matter with all those people? Sounded as though they had gone loco. What was there to howl about when you merely took a sniff at your rider to see whether you had killed him or not?

The crowd rose and poured out onto the track. Pericles peered sideways with a wary eye. Perhaps they thought he had killed the Big Stiff. They were cheering.

But you never can tell what a crowd may do. Whirling, Pericles charged down the track, tearing past startled horses, staring cattle, bawling calves and exclaima-

tory cowboys. There was nothing left now but Home! The Old Corral!

PERICLES yawned and stretched. Ouch! That off hind leg was as stiff as a crutch. Hadn't had a wink of sleep all night, either. Hands coming home at all hours. Bleak and the boss hadn't set such a wonderful example—wandering in about two o'clock in the morning and falling over the remains of that old top-buggy.

Letting his hip sag, Pericles tried to get a little morning sleep.

Sleep? And Bleak out there in the yard fairly singeing the hide off Ho and Whup for getting drunk and wrecking that old top-buggy? Pericles snorted. What? Ho and Whup trying to lay the blame on *him*? Just let either of those Scandinavian bottle-babies try to clean his corral again, and somebody would climb a tree!

Sleep? No use! This time it was the driver of the cow ambulance. "Cross me heart, Bleak! I steps up to close the tail-gate of me truck, and there was Pericles standing inside, just like he was trying to bum a ride to town. Sure I ties him to a post! Did you expect me to sit and hold his hand till somebody comes along and tells me the show is over?"

Bum a ride to town, eh? Huh! Mebby the cows paid their fare!

The cow ambulance had hardly turned the corner when Nels, back from delivering a load of fertilizer, informed the stable hands that that Curly Smith feller bane on bed over a dislocated shoulder and a busted collar-bone, by golly.

Pericles sighed. Another wreck laid at his door.

The veterinary didn't mend matters, either. It was all right for him to rub liniment on your hocks and grease your spurcuts. But even he couldn't leave well enough alone. "You ought to have seen the show, Jimmy. You missed something," he said to his helper.



"Why, I heard they ran about half of the program when the crowd quit and went home."

"That's right. The crowd was all fed up on Wild West after this old horse pitched Curly Smith and broke up the show."

Broke up the show? Pericles hung his head. All that was needed to complete his misery was a lecture from Mary.

Pericles dozed and dreamed.

"Perry!"

Unclosing his good eye, Pericles saw Mary standing on the corral bars. He shook himself. She was offering him a sugar-coated doughnut.

"Come here, old-timer!"

That didn't sound like a lecture. Mary put her arms round his neck. Pericles mumbled the doughnut. Her breath tickled his ear. What was she whispering? Something very confidential, it seemed. Mary laughed. "And I'm glad of it!"

Glad? Pericles felt a slow tear trickle down his nose. Confound that injured eye, anyway! Mary was glad? He could hardly believe his ear. Mary kissed him on the nose. Another tear trickled from his good eye as he watched her walk briskly toward the house.

After dinner Bleak and the boss strolled up to the corral. Bleak looked like a complete funeral. But the boss seemed to be feeling pretty well. Had an old, rusty king-bolt in his hand. Looked as though it might have fallen out of a top-buggy. Pericles experienced a sudden chill. Well, let them do their worst! Might as well get it over with.

The boss gazed at Pericles and puffed his cigar. "Looks like hell, eh?"

"Well, ain't he?" said Bleak, mournfully.

The boss puffed hard at his cigar. "He sure wiped the dust off the sky with one world's champion bronc peeler!"

Bleak nodded. "That there Curly Smith may be a right fair bronc rider. But he handles a rope like an old woman throwin' out the dishwater."

The boss nodded. Seemed to be thinking of something else. "I figured to ride old Perry over to the show, myself. But the missus—and that new car—you know how it is yourself, Bleak."

"Only from the outside of the brandin' pen, Pete."

Peter's mustache twitched. "Speakin' of pens, you can turn Perry into the south pasture and leave him there. If the dairy superintendent says anything about running any of his cows in that pasture, you can tell him I said it is Pericles' private stompin' ground as long as I own the ranch."

Pericles quivered as the boss reached over and patted him on the neck. "Cows!" said Peter, who had made his fortune dealing in cattle, "I wouldn't swap this old side-winder for all the dairy cattle in the state."

Pericles turned and walked away. Cigar smoke made his eyes water.

BEES droned in the flower-bordered driveway. The deep well pump chugged. His head in the shade, his hind-quarters in the afternoon sun, Pericles dozed and dreamed. From the pens back of the stables a motherly cow gazed out at him.

*If you enjoyed "Hic! Pericles" then get
acquainted with the most likeable
hard-luck cowboy ever created by*

HENRY HERBERT KNIBBS:

"Young Pete"

A New

"Young Pete" Story Soon!

*It May Be Quiet on the Blazing
Arabian Desert, but Danger
Is Never Far Away*



SINCLAIR GLUCK

Author of "The Green Blot," etc.

gives us

HE KNEW THE COUNTRY

CAPTAIN JIM BRETT, of the British forces in Mesopotamia, flung his book at the sanitary white wall of his quarters and swore. It was hot in Amara, even for June—a hundred and twenty-eight in the shade outdoors; over a hundred in here behind thick stone walls.

The heat was a mere detail. He swore because departing, the World War had left him a square peg in a neat, round, smooth hole. He swore because he was

anxious. Uneasiness lifted him out of his chair to the barred window.

In front of headquarters the muddy River Tigris whispered and gnawed at her banks with the vicious caress of the tropics. Another Sikh funeral was crossing the pontoon bridge. He could hear the shuffle of feet on the boards. Bound in white from head to foot, the narrow corpse swayed on the litter held aloft by his bearded comrades.

The declining sun lanced through the

palms on the opposite bank and struck Brett's eyes. He stepped back out of range. Even toward sunset the direct rays could knock a man over like a bullet.

He stamped out of his room and along the balcony above the compound. The staff major's door stood open. Writing letters in his own room, Major Winton looked immaculate as usual. Polished shoes, trim puttees, creased shorts, buttoned tunic and Sam Browne belt encased his bony figure. A speckless white sun helmet lay close to his thin brown hand.

Captain Brett grunted impatiently. Major Winton looked up and took cool stock of him.

One side of Brett's face was pitted and blue-black from a powder burn. An old scar lifted one eyebrow mockingly. What little he wore was neat enough. But he lacked belt and tunic. His shirt was open, revealing a wet, muscular neck and hairy chest.

Ugly and difficult, thought the major. Hardly dignified to let the men see him like that. No sense of fitness.

The War developed two good types of officer: the smooth-running cog in the machine which was Major Winton, and the fighter personified by Captain Brett. They did not always blend. Winton's disapproving glance tipped over the rickety edifice of Brett's discretion.

"Write me a chit for the tin lizzie, will you, Winton?" Captain Brett asked the major. "Haven't a pencil. That old buzzard Murray we bowed out of here may be scragged by now. I'm going up the line to keep an eye on him and the youngster with him, while they are on the prowl for oil."

"That's entirely unnecessary, Brett. Mister Murray carries carte blanche from the War Office to conduct his search for oil," Major Winton stated. "His route is patrolled and quiet——"

"Quiet be damned! Quiet wherever we happen to be—with enough men. Fat lot you know about this country!"

Major Winton was one of those rigid men who show no anger. "In the absence of Colonel Davidson——" he began.

"Oh, right! *These things must be done through the proper channels!*' Somebody's

forgot to send us orders, so we fold our hands and die!"

Captain Brett hated all the red tape that throttled an officer at headquarters. He had been given staff work during convalescence from a serious wound received in battle with the Turks. The brass hats found him a disturbing element. They detested his democratic roughness with the men—who jumped to his orders—and his blunt disrespect for themselves.

And Captain Brett knew it. He waited for unseen wires to demote or demob him from the only game he knew—fighting. In the meantime, pride never lowered a hackle. He knew the country—had fought his way from Basra to Ptesiphon of the magic arch. To hell with red tape hounds! Stalking into Mesopotamia with their ledgers after the fighting men had wrested it from the Turks with machine guns and spilt blood.

Major Winton was ruffled—quite. He knew the kind of thoughts that were running through his junior officer's head. But rather than argue and possibly show anger, he took the easiest way out with this wild-cat fighter, Brett.

"Very well, Captain," the major shrugged. "Here's a chit to Mullins for the Ford. Mister Murray must be somebody at home. Hope he's glad to see you. The responsibility is yours."

"Not afraid of a little," Brett retorted. "Thanks."

He strode out on the balcony, shouted an order to the dispatch rider on duty and flipped the chit down to him. The youngster saluted with a smile and jumped for his light motorcycle. The captain slammed into his room to dress.

Major Winton bent over his letters, frowning.

THE staff car pulled up in front of headquarters, and Captain Brett came out. Private Mullins, the driver, came to attention at the wheel. Brett returned the salute.

"Got plenty of petrol?"

"Full up, sir."

"Everything in shape for a long run?"

"Right as rain, sir!"

The Ford was a touring car of 1914

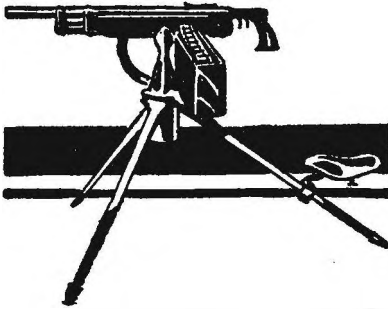
vintage with cushions discouraged and badly blistered paint. Mullins had lowered the top for night driving. Old puttees, wound about each spoke, lent the wheels a dropsical appearance.

Brett stooped and found these damp. Without that protection, the heat dried the wooden spokes loose.

"H've brought rations along, sir," announced Mullins, "just to be on the safe side."

They drove to the ordnance office. Brett borrowed a machine gun and some belts of ammunition. It was his way to follow hunches and play a lone hand. The habit had brought him reprimands and citations in about equal numbers.

Where the Tigris enters Amara the main stream bends sharply south. It is cleft here by a point of land faced with



big yellow bricks. The smaller stream, continuing straight on, branches almost at once into two canals.

Since these curve around the town to parallel the Tigris, Amara stands to all traffic purposes on an island and the road to the north crosses both streams on pontoons.

Mullins knew the route well. He tore through the town and out the back where he bumped over a squealing donkey. Its owner gamboled in front of the car and waved his arms.

"Get on," said Brett.

The Ford charged. The Arab leaped aside. Mullins drove in a long sweep north and west to the first pontoon bridge. It was open. A dozen clumsy *mahaylas* were poling lazily through, their lateen sails lowered and their masts unstepped. The canal was also spanned by a stationary footbridge.

Brett waved his hand impatiently. "Take

her over that," he ordered the startled Mullins.

The footbridge was made of two-by-fours and thin planks. It curved from bank to bank in a sharp arc, Japanese fashion, narrowing at the top to a bare five feet. The level, plank approach began with a four-inch vertical step not far from the steep ascent. The handrails were flimsy and negligible.

Lacking orders from a superior of his own corps, Mullins knew that he need not obey such a command—knew that the captain knew it. But he liked that ugly officer.

"Lumme," he grinned, "I'll take 'er over, sir, if you'll walk—to lighten 'er, like."

Brett stared belligerently, grunted and got out.

The sun dropped below the horizon. On the desert floor, dancing heat waves changed from phantom water to a shimmering haze. The palms that fringed the distant banks turned black against a lemon-colored western sky.

Ancient odors of the East seemed to sharpen in the brief twilight. Heat and dust—a whiff of charcoal gas. From the edge of the town behind Mullins an Arab cur yelped in sudden anguish. The distant, age-old protest came to him with the flat echo peculiar to the desert. The heat increased—closing down with darkness.

He watched the captain's shadowy figure mount the incline and bob down out of sight. Then he bumped up the step in low gear, brought his front wheels to the bridge and opened his throttle wide.

The Ford reared and went squealing up the slope. The tires mounted edging boards, brushing the rails outward. The bridge cracked and gave, then straightened, swaying, as Mullins shot down the far side. He jounced along the other approach, squattered crazily through a bit of marshy land and gained the road again. Captain Brett got in the back.

"Put the wind up you?" he asked with relish.

Mullins settled himself and mopped his face. He had not expected the bridge to hold. He could not swim.

"'Ell cawn't be no 'otter, sir," he parried.

"Off you go!"

THE pontoon bridge that spanned the second canal to be crossed was in place. Mullins clattered across and headed north over a very fair stretch of road. The burning wind of his passage began to sear his throat and lungs. His headlights, juiced from the flywheel magneto, grew brighter as the Ford gathered speed, stabbing the sullen darkness like blind fingers of pain.

He felt the two large canteens at his side, cleared his throat and spat his cockney contempt upon an ancient land.

Captain Brett was thinking steadily while the sweat oozed and dried on him.

Mesopotamia *was* pacified—for military purposes. Army cars went up and down the line unmolested. Marsh Arabs knew they'd get more kicks than pennies out of these.

But Murray was different. Looking for oil, probably. No trouble to find that. Desert was soaked with it in great patches. Whether it went deep enough hereabouts was up to civilian smoochers.

Murray and his son, all complete with letters from the War Office, were the first. Barging around in a Rolls-Royce with equipment enough for an army! Folding tents and sporting rifles; netting and rugs and a folding bathtub; boxes and bags to fill the car—like a ruddy rajah on the move! No sense of fitness. Hardly safe to show the Arabs.

Brett was working round to his point—the swift impression which had driven him to act.

He recalled his first glimpse of the Rolls-Royce in front of headquarters, with the usual crowd of Arabs looking at it. Later he had gone out to see it himself. There wasn't an Arab anywhere near the car. Crowd had melted away, men and women—even the kids. The marsh Arabs were always about. Couldn't tell 'em from town blighters when they dressed the same.

One good look and the whole mob had vanished.

Brett swore under his breath. Colonel Davidson had offered the oil seeker an

escort. Brett himself had urged one and got snubbed for his pains. Murray wouldn't even wait for daylight.

"We shall camp in the open. Obligated to you, Captain, for your—er—advice."

Brett had kept his mouth shut after that. He could still hear the dry crackle in Murray's voice.

Now the stiff-necked old bargee was pottering around on the open desert with a youngster fresh from home, a green driver from India and a car full of loot. Too bloody temptin'! Nomads had their own ways of sending news swiftly.

Nice youngster, that son of Murray's—the silent kind he liked. No good letting the Arabs toy with him—bleed him to death—other things first! Too much clean young blood spilled already.

Nothing for Captain Brett to do but carry on.

Mullins knew the instant that Brett stopped ruminating and leaned back in the tonneau. He turned his head.

"A shame the War's over, sir," he observed blandly. "Wot with old stutterin' Jenny along?"

"Want to get your paws on her again, eh?"

"This ain't arf a cushy job, sir. But I was a machine gunner before they gimme the chuck."

"I know you were. Stick that light straight up and switch it on and off again quick."

Since the headlights were of little use when Mullins slowed to turn a corner, a small searchlight had been attached to the windshield frame. A spare battery, sent up from Basra and installed on one runningboard, supplied the current.

Now a shaft of light shot skyward and vanished.

"She's working. Carry on," ordered the captain dryly. Many Tommies had tried to pump him—with no better success.

The white road wound in and out, following the Tigris. For coolness and water, Murray would camp under one of the palm groves that lined the banks here and there.

The river advanced and receded endlessly on their left, an intermittent black

line of mystery under the stars. Brett ignored it. The civilians had three hours' start. Not likely they'd camp much before dusk.

IT WAS late when Mullins reached Sheikh Sa'ad. A sharp order halted the Ford. Brett leaned forward into the lantern light to let the bridge police take a good look at him. The sergeant saluted and stepped back, with a shadowy smile.

Brett shot a question at him.

"Rolls-Royce, sir? Passed through toward sunset and took the road again, like a ruddy comet, sir."

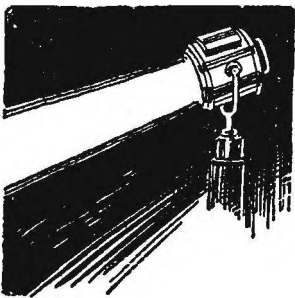
"Get on," said Brett to Mullins. "'Night, Sergeant."

They crossed the bridge and continued north along the west bank of the Tigris. A heavy dew had moistened the desert. The air was cooler. Brett filled his lungs with it.

"Watch the road for tracks turning off," he ordered.

Fifteen, twenty miles of jolting and still no sign of Murray's camp. Brett grew restless. The smelly old bird looked as if he had sense enough to camp before sunset—not blunder around after nightfall.

Ahead, and on their right, the palms



by the river thickened to an ebony pool. From beneath them, a red eye winked at the captain, glowed brighter and died.

"Somebody's campfire," Brett exclaimed sharply. "Let's have that light over here."

The brilliant white beam of the searchlight swept round in an arc. It flashed from a polished surface, swung back a little and steadied on the Rolls-Royce standing under the palms.

Brett got out on the runningboard and sent the bright shaft probing among the trees. After a moment he depressed it to the deep ditch beside the car, then switched it off.

"Don't see their tents! Pull on a bit

to where they left the road. We'll have a look-see."

Mullins sent the car forward. Suddenly he applied his brakes. The Ford came to a shuddering stop. He raced his motor to brighten his headlights and pointed ahead.

"Bunch of Arabs crossed 'ere, sir, Look."

The fine sand, hardly more than dust, which surfaced the road was scuffed with hoofprints and the marks of many feet, some bare, some sandaled, crossing from right to left.

"We got 'ere too late, sir," cried Mullins, who knew the country also.

Brett flashed the searchlight downward. The roadside ditch was shallower here. He swung into the car again.

"Drive over there," he ordered quietly.

Between road and river the land was cultivated, broken by little irrigation ditches. Mullins bumped over these toward the grove. He stopped close to the Rolls-Royce, his headlights full on it. The big car seemed undamaged.

Brett got out to examine it, the headlights revealing his uniform. Front seat and tonneau were empty.

"Sahib! Officer sahib!"

The yell from the river bank was shrill with excitement, audible above the racket of the Ford. Mullins shut off his engine. The noise died and the lights with it.

"Come quickly!" called Brett in Hindustani. "We are friends. What has happened here?"

The two Englishmen heard the patter of bare feet running, stumbling toward them. A tall, turbaned figure loomed at Brett's side. He caught and gripped a thin arm. Mullins switched on his searchlight and brought it to bear. The captain recognized Murray's Sikh driver.

"The Arabs, sahib!" he panted. "They come by night." The Sikh tried to free himself, straightened with dignity.

Brett released his arm. "Tell thy tale," he ordered softly.

"It is Murray sahib who has chosen this place of devils!" the Sikh explained. "I make the motor car walk hither. Then comes, sahib, a patrol of soldiers, asking many questions. Murray sahib answers

in a voice of displeasure. They depart. We prepare the camp. I myself see to it that the tents are well placed for the English sahibs and that all is removed from the great motor car, even the guns because of the dew.

"I prepare the evening meal and the sahibs dine. They retire to rest. I seek repose within the back of the motor car, lacking all shelter. So am I saved from the fate of the sahibs!"

"That fate was what—and how long since, *wallah?*" Captain Brett questioned.

"As it might be an hour since, Officer sahib!" the Sikh answered. "The Arabs come without warning, silently, by hundreds. They fall upon the tents and these are not! Murray sahib makes furious outcry. His voice is hushed. The young sahib utters no sound. I lack arms and remain hidden, hearing them run to and fro like jackals, with eager cries. The *soors* steal all!"

"Sahib, they seek me also, I think, but dare not approach the motor car. They depart in silence—making haste!"

"Where are the bodies of thy sahibs?" demanded Brett savagely, "O skulker in safety?"

"I make search, Officer sahib, but find nothing."

"There came no—water sound from the river?" Bret asked hesitatingly.

"Nay, sahib, no splash of bodies. But much grunting and a strangled cry as the *soors* retreat. I think my sahibs are gone with them. I am without weapon. . . ."

BRETT was silent, thinking hard. The nomad raiders never took prisoners. They killed. Impossible to identify and punish them. Since 1916 the British had used other methods. After a raid—a few Tommies knifed in their sleep for the rifle bolts inside their shirts—every nomad sheik for miles around had been heavily fined, guilty or innocent. That had stopped it—most of it. But why prisoners? Hostages?

Hostages against unexpected pursuit, that was it! It came to Brett in a flash. The Arabs would make for their temporary camp and share out the loot. If that was pulled off unmolested, they'd

kill Murray and his son—unpleasantly—bury them and scatter.

An hour's start. The nomads 'ud likely squabble over the loot. Say the prisoners had four hours to live—three anyway—since most of their captors traveled on foot. The desert camp wouldn't be so far off.

Captain Brett looked at his wrist-watch. Eleven-thirty. Last night the moon rose—when? Eleven or thereabouts. Noticed the light on the palms across the river when he got into bed. Ought to show in about ten minutes tonight.

"Mullins!" Brett ordered. "Put your windshield up straight and knock the glass out of it with a spanner. Set up that Maxim in the front seat. Lash the tripod down with your tow rope. Shove the muzzle through the windshield frame. Jump, damn you!"

Mullins jumped. The Sikh jumped to the crash and tinkle of shattered glass.

Brett went to work on the machine gun.

With the short front wheel vertical on the floorboards, he wedged the longer trail foot horizontally against the front seat. Mullins installed the gun with the muzzle out over the hood and filled the water jacket from one of his canteens. They lashed the tripod down by opening both doors and passing the rope clear under the car. The gun itself must have play.

When it was done, Brett turned on the Sikh.

"We follow," he explained tersely. "Stay thou here in hiding, close to the road. If a patrol should come, tell all and send them after us. *It is an order!* I am Captain Brett. Do not fail thy sahibs—a second time!"

"Captain sahib, I shall not fail. I lack arms—"

"It is understood in thy favor," Brett broke in on the Sikh. "Hide—and watch!"

Mullins jounced back to the road in low gear, the bright headlights showing up the Arab tracks at once.

Beyond the road, the rich, alluvial soil was uncultivated, stretching in front of them as flat as a billiard table, firm and resilient. But Arab feet had scuffed the surface dust while the hoofprints showed deeper.

It was a plain trail, leading straight away southwest into the vast mystery of the Arabian Desert.

Behind them, the moon topped the long rampart of the distant Persian hills. It was almost full. Soon the white light began to pick out the hoofprint rims against tiny pools of shadow. Mullins switched off his headlights, found that he could see the trail farther ahead and make better time.

A mile of smooth running and the ground began to change; lifting, undulating more and more perceptibly. They hit patches of soft sand where the footprints showed deeper. These were brief. The Arabs had chosen the easiest walking. The Ford plowed through.

THEY had covered almost three miles when Brett called a halt. Rolling drifts loomed all about them now. The trail writhed like a snake, invisible for more than a few yards ahead. A wandering wind through this wilderness to cover their tracks and they would never find their way out again. But the air was lifeless, the heat stifling.

"Ought to be getting warm now," grumbled the captain with unconscious humor. "Get in beside that Jenny and put a belt in her. God help you if she jams! I'll take the wheel."

"'Ow about this tunic?" Mullins inquired bitterly as he hopped out. "It ain't arf tight, sir——"

"Take it off then! Fancy you won't need it anyway, after tonight. Want to go back?"

"Me, sir? With Jenny under me 'ands again? Them A-rabs are nippy with a knife but they cahn't shoot—what with Jenny combin' their whiskers."

Mullins was working on the gun as he talked, adjusting the heavy belt of cartridges with hands that caressed.

"What did the Sikh say, sir? Lumme, I can talk a bit of Hindu, only 'e went too fahst."

"Nothing you haven't guessed. Arabs took his two civilians prisoner. Ready?"

"She's ready, sir!"

"Keep your eyes open. Don't fire until I tell you!"

Bret drove with a heavy hand, wrench-

ing the car around corners and skidding in sand soft as dust. In bad going he opened the throttle wide and stayed in high speed. The engine knocked. The Ford shuddered and bucked. But these were better than the racket of low gear to announce their coming.

Mullins clung and watched. Once he spoke. "'Ow about the prisoners, sir? If we open up on 'em with Jenny 'ere, they'll likely cop it——"

"They'll have to take their chance. Shut up now."

Brett had all he could do to keep the car from capsizing, while a world of hills reeled past.

They seemed to take wings as the trail dipped. Two loftier sandhills, carved by the wind, swung into sight. From the top of one of them a tongue of pale fire spat skyward—a rifle shot fired as a warning.

Brett opened his throttle wide. The Ford careened around one hill in a smother of fine sand, banked up another, dropped down between the two higher drifts and shot out into a great flat basin like the bed of a vanished sea.

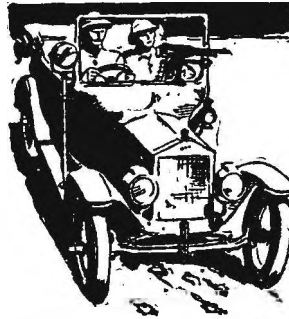
Far ahead lay the Arab encampment, long low tents black against the sand. The sentry on the sandhill had dropped down the steep bank like a stone to reach his horse. He galloped not twenty yards ahead of them, low on the animal's neck, silent and fleet as a shadow in the moonlight.

"Get his horse," said Brett.

The Maxim chattered, rending the silence. Horse and rider seemed to rise in the air and dissolve into chaos. The horse lay kicking. The Arab was up in a flash.

Brett drove at the man. A knife whizzed past his ear. *Tut-tut-tut!* reproved the machine gun. The sentry dropped his arms and stood swaying. The Ford caught him and hurled him aside.

Mullins glanced back at his huddled carcass.



"One!" he chanted.

From the camp ahead, little pinpoints of light began to flash close to the ground, like fireflies. To left and right and in front of the car, the desert blossomed with spurts of sand. The air was full of brief whispers.

"If they get our tires," observed the captain, "we'll be all unbuttoned——"

A bullet went *spang!* and screamed overhead.

"Hold your fire, young Mullins," said Brett gently.

Another bullet ripped through the radiator, luckily just at the waterline. Mullins crouched over his Jenny as a third leaden missile whispered close enough to stir his hair.

THE Ford raced on over the level ground. Now they could see the Arabs prone on the sand before their camp. The firing grew more rapid and less accurate.

The tents seemed to spring at them suddenly. Brett slowed the car, switched on his searchlight and swept the line of riflemen with it. In the sudden glare, most of them jumped to their feet, shielding their eyes.

"Let 'em have it!" roared the captain exultantly.

Mullins knew his business. The shuddering Maxim swept slowly along the line, spitting death as it passed. The Arabs broke, scattered and fled. Half a dozen lay still. The tents spilled women and children, screaming with fear. They looked and ran after their men.

The Maxim fell silent.

Brett drove up and stopped before the first tent.

"Stay here and watch," he ordered Mullins. "Take the Arabs half an hour or so to make sure we're alone and come back for us. Sing out when they do. Put a fresh belt of cartridges in her."

The tents were lighted by cheap kerosene lanterns. Brett found the prisoners in the second one, trussed up like fowls but still alive. Murray sat erect, pallid and glaring. The boy lay huddled on his side.

Brett freed the older man first.

"You came just in time, Captain!" Murray groaned. "The women had knives. Too

old for this sort of thing——" He keeled over, panting for breath, his face gray.

Brett untied the youngster and laid him flat. "Steady, sir," he advised Murray over his shoulder. "We've got to get out of this yet—— Hello!"

He had looked down to find his right hand crimson. The boy's arm was sodden with blood. Their Maxim had found him through the tents.

The captain unfastened the chin strap of the boy's sun helmet, removed it, and gasped. A pile of long yellow hair tumbled out. Murray's "son" was a trim young girl!

Brett turned to find Murray watching him, frowning. "You fool!" the captain roared. "To bring her out here!" Swearing under his breath, he dove out of the tent, found the first-aid kit that Mullins kept in the Ford and returned to the prisoners.

With swift fingers Brett tore open the sleeve of the girl's tunic and bared the wound in her smooth arm. The bullet had ripped a furrow above the elbow without shattering the bone.

Ignoring Murray, he mopped the gash with iodine. Then he applied a wad of clean gauze to the arm wound, binding it in place with a bandage.

She stared up at him, quivering, noticed his uniform.

"Oh! You the doctor——"

"Of course. Now lie still. We're pressed for time."

"Carry on. . . ."

The words were no more than a whisper as she collapsed.

Captain Brett had finished his task, gave the bandage a final pat, pulled the sleeve down and buttoned it, when distant rifles began to bark outside.

The voice of Mullins reached him, muffled by the tent.

"'Ere they come, sir! But they ain't in no 'urry."

Brett swept the girl up in his arms and flung her over his shoulder. With his free hand he yanked Murray to his feet and hustled him out of the tent.

PALE spurts of fire winked at them from a wide circle out on the moonlit desert. Bullets were whipping through the

tents here and there. One clanged against the Ford.

Mullins had found a rifle with a full magazine. Not all the fallen Arabs had been killed. Mullins had spent the interval knocking the wounded tribesmen on the head, before they could crawl up and knife him. He lay now behind a little rise of ground, returning the Arab fire.

A bullet tugged viciously at Brett's ear, clipping a neat half moon from the edge of it. He laid the girl flat on the sand and fingered his wound thoughtfully.

To hold the camp was impossible. There was no shelter. Any bullet might put the Ford out of commission. Nothing to do but charge through the ring at once. That meant running into a concentrated circle of fire. Girl might be killed. Must be a better way.

He stepped aside. Back of them, between the tents, he glimpsed running figures not a hundred yards away.

"Come on, Murray," he said quietly. "They're on us from behind. Mullins, get back to your gun! Jump!"

He caught up the girl, ran to the car and dumped her in the back of it, on the floorboards. Murray followed. Brett thrust him into the back seat as Mullins ran up, his rifle at the trail. Snatching the rifle away from him, Brett jumped into the driving seat and turned on the switch.

"Wind her up, you young fool," he ordered Mullins cheerfully and turned to face the camp.

The hot engine roared at the second attempt. Mullins jumped back and wedged himself beside the Maxim.

An Arab popped into sight between the tents. Brett raised the rifle and fired. The man flung up his arms with a hoarse scream, toppling sideways.

"Makes ten for the visitin' team, sir," said Mullins.

Brett handed the rifle back to Murray, butt first, put the car in low gear, swung sharply and careened between the tents toward the back of the camp. He was in high gear and gaining speed when they shot into the open again, to see half a dozen nomads running straight at them and not ten yards away.

Mullins set the Maxim leaping at point-blank range. The vicious spray of bullets mowed the bunched Arabs like grain. Brett swung the car to avoid their sprawling bodies.

Since those Arabs at the rear of the camp had run up, only a half circle of enemies now hemmed in the tents and the Ford. But these cut Brett off from his only possible line of retreat—the way he had come. To leave the valley at any other point would



mean losing themselves among the sandhills, stalling the car probably—ultimate destruction by thirst or the Arabs.

The flash of a rifle showed him approximately the near end of the arc of advancing Arabs. He drove straight for it.

Murray touched him on the shoulder. "The way we came lies over there, I think, Captain!"

Brett was enjoying himself. "Right you are, old top," he agreed. "But it's no good runnin' into a crossfire and gettin' riddled by dumdums! We've got the legs of 'em. I'm goin' to take 'em on the flank and crumple their bloody line. Keep that girl flat——"

A rifle spat from the ground dead ahead and the Ford swerved. The Maxim spoke briefly. An Arab leaped up, then crumpled.

"Seventeen!" said Mullins. "Get you, sir?"

Brett nodded and swung the wheel a little, driving dead on the Arab flank. Bullets whispered close, clanged on the fenders, set the sand spouting. The nearer Arabs began to scramble up and run for it.

"Now! Let 'em have it again!" shouted Brett.

The machine gun rattled a long tattoo. Nomad after nomad plunged on his face. Suddenly the entire line bounded up and fled for the camp, all the fight out of them.

Brett caught sight of the Arab sentry's dead horse and swung the car toward the lofty hummock of sand that marked their road, opening the throttle wide.

An instant later the sandhills closed about him.

"Oh, well done, sir!" cried Murray. "We owe you our lives, my—er—son and I!"

"Not at all, sir! Bit of luck," muttered Brett. "Cowardly lot of blighters!" he added moodily. "They didn't put up much of a fight."

Out on the level desert floor again, Brett gave Mullins the wheel and tied up the hole in his own arm where the end man had drilled him. They reached the river road unmolested. The Sikh driver ran to meet them. Murray sent him for the Rolls-Royce, having decided to follow the captain back to Amara.

Brett reported the affair to the commandant at Sheikh Sa'ad and slept through the rest of the drive.

In Amara, Murray left his "son" under the care of the matron at the Rawal Pindi hospital and drove on to headquarters.

Arriving later, Brett was driven to the hospital to have his wounds disinfected. He was not present at Murray's early morning interview with Colonel Davidson and Major Winton.

When the captain did reach headquarters he was too sleepy to notice that both officers looked white about the gills and the men moved about their duties in a heavy silence. He slept the clock round.

THREE or four mornings later, an orderly knocked on the captain's door to say that Mr. Murray wanted to see him.

Brett grumbled and got dressed, stamped down to the compound and found the two civilians waiting for him there.

"Good morning, Captain!" Murray's voice had an edge to it that surprised Brett.

"Morning, sir! Good morning—er—"

"Good morning," nodded the girl coolly.

Murray advanced and lowered his voice when he spoke. "Captain Brett, I am General Murray from the War Office. I came out here for a semiofficial visit of inspec-

tion, unannounced. That is strictly between ourselves, *sir!*"

Brett had started to come to attention and salute. He straightened his sun helmet instead.

"I have found," added Murray in a dry tone, "that you are handling the situation admirably—er—some of you. Let me see, you called me a fool, I believe—"

"By Godfrey, sir, I had no idea—"

"I was one!" snapped General Murray, "to bring this child!"

"You didn't!" explained his daughter. "I came! Don't be old-fashioned! I would have come anyway."

"She starts for Bombay tonight," said Murray in some haste. "I shall continue my inspection up the line. In the meantime, I understand from your colonel that you are in line for discharge or demotion—devil knows why! You are a born soldier. Do you wish to remain in the Army?"

"I do, sir," Captain Brett snapped.

"This war is over. The best I can offer you is a job as my assistant in London. It carries the rank of lieutenant-colonel, however. I shall be glad to have you, Captain!"

Brett stared and stammered something.

"Thank this baggage!" retorted General Murray. "She wants to speak her piece to you for saving her life. Heaven help you! I'll see you later, when I have had time to arrange your transfer." He turned on his heel and left them.

Brett found himself staring into a pair of wide-set blue eyes that met his frankly. They *were* like a boy's eyes. Only now they betrayed to him the fugitive, feminine charm that stirs all men's senses.

"Thanks for breaking up the Arabs' party," she said. "I thought I was going to be first prize. I want you to accept the pater's offer and come to see us in London."

"D'ye mean come and see *you?*" asked Brett.

Murray's "son" colored attractively. Her glance met his with unruffled composure.

"It is an order," she flashed—"Doctor!"

Brett stared after her with a light in his eyes.

BOOMLESS TOWN

*An Oilfield Crook Finds
It Hellish Hot in Texas
When He Bucks "Slim"
Evans and His Buddies
of the Border Flight Patrol*



DIRTY weather, mates, very dirty weather.

It happened in the dark of moon with the wind in the east, and the opposition played a dirty game. Very much so, even for the oil game. And oil has smeared many an assorted individual and company, not to say country, as it has squirted bilthely from the ground at divers times and places.

As I—I being Lieutenant Slim Evans of the McMullen Flight of the Army Air Service Border Patrol—came fanning and fogging toward Gonzara, Texas, in an army DeHaviland, I didn't exactly expect any quiet and refined week-end. Not in view of the fact that I had a wire in my pocket—a squawk for help from George Groody, who had once been an army flier and a member of that same McMullen Flight. If I'd stopped to think of it then, I probably would've decided that there was no reason why this trip should break the record of Lieutenant Slimuel X. Evans. Having been knocked from a great many

pillars to most of the adjacent posts during my thirty odd years of what I jokingly call living, I have come to the conclusion that I was destined to fall into trouble, flop around in it awkwardly, and, as a rule, finally emerge from it bruised, bent and broke, but still all together, even if a little punch-drunk.

As it turned out, I made my first mistake in taking time to circle the town of Gonzara, thereby letting some of its residents know I was there. In front of me there was a map of what had been a famous old cattle town in Texas history, and as I sent the four hundred and twenty horse power D. H. squarely over the center of town, I raised this said map and made cryptic motions at it for the benefit of Lieutenant Tex McDowell, who was in

By THOMSON BURTIS

Author of Many Fine Yarns of the Oilfield Flyers



the back seat. What I was doing was to outline some fifteen hundred odd acres of land that Groody, Tex and myself, along with two or three friends of Groody's, had under lease.

A few months before, under Groody's leadership, we'd snagged on to that land in the fond hope that it would turn out to have as much oil under it as the Atlantic Ocean has water. Two weeks before, a wild cat well not so far from our land had come in for five thousand barrels a day, so our acreage became important.

Tex nodded his understanding, and then proceeded to study the ground closely. He'd never seen his own land, but I had, so I devoted myself to some concentrated squinting at the town itself. And it presented an amazing sight.

Gonzara had been a town of close to six thousand people as I had known it, and the exact center of it was a big square on which were ranged all the business structures of the town. Now it looked about as much like Gonzara as it did like Constantinople.

Its vacant spaces had sprouted tents, unpainted frame buildings and shacks of all kinds, like weeds in an untended garden. Considerable experience with oil towns made me realize that those new structures were designed for everything from hot dog stands to saloons, dance halls and gambling joints, all of which were destined to resound with the laughter of drunken roughnecks and the clink of chips.

But the building boom wasn't the thing that made my neck, already giraffe-like in

its natural beauty, grow longer and my eyes widen.

Gonzara had the layout of a boom town, but the streets of it, comparatively speaking, were about as busy as a church aisle on a Monday night.

"The racketeers and joint keepers must have come barging in by boat and by train as soon as that well came in," I reflected, "but where in hell are all the rest of the oil gang?"

Right then and there the significance of the sight penetrated even my mind. Something smelled bad about that scene below. And as this goofy flier—meaning me, who'd been one jump ahead of the sheriff all his life, recollected the fact that fifteen hundred acres of oil land meant millions of dollars, I wasn't precisely overjoyed at the fact that a booming town was dying on the vine. I turned around to Lieutenant Texas Q. McDowell and gestured at the town. He nodded.

HE WAS a six-foot-one Texan with wide shoulders and a bronzed face in which were wide-set, gray eyes that were now glowing softly with the perverse spirit I knew so well. It was a saying along the Border that Tex got himself into jams when business was slack for the pure pleasure of getting out of them again. He was the son of a wealthy cattleman father, excitement was the breath of life to him, and he'd walk a mile for some trouble any time.

"That son-of-a-gun's delighted that something's going wrong with us," I told myself disgustedly as I swung the D. H. around and went into a half power dive toward the field Groody had specified in his wire.

It was on our property, incidentally, and a small tee marked it. Our land lay to the west of the town; and five hundred yards or so north of the long narrow field I was diving toward was the derrick of Groody Number One—the single well we were drilling to prove up our property. A full mile west of the field was the derrick of the wildcat well, surrounded by three fifty-five thousand barrel storage tanks. Off in the distance two more wildcats were going down.

While the D. H. is staggering and stumbling down under my awkward hands, I might as well introduce myself and thereby clear the decks for action. Get a mental picture of a bird who's very close to six feet six tall and arrayed at the moment in in his customary Texas flying costume of overalls and undershirt. I look even taller than that because I'm so thin that my normal sized Adam's apple looks like a goiter. My hands and feet are so far from my brain that the orders given them often don't reach them in time, resulting in the well-known Evans awkwardness, and my thin face is garnished with as prodigious a nose as ever was seen on anything that moves or breathes, with the possible exceptions of an elephant and a wart-hog. My dad used to tell me that if I had my nose full of nickels I could retire.

You gather that I never posed for any advertisements and that even in the War days when a flier was a freak I never climbed out of my ship to receive the adoration of village belles gathered round about it. I'm just a bool-buster from the wilds of Utah who was able to get into the air service because of an uncle who went to the dogs and became a Senator. I've stayed in because if I ever got out I'd starve to death.

The few times I'd made a little money dabbling in oil, fifty per cent of my friends went broke, approximately twenty-five per cent more got married or got out of the Army, and the remainder also needed money for one reason or another. Consequently, every time I made five thousand I woke up to find myself deeper in debt. As a result, I had come to the decision that it was about time I prepared for the day when I was living in the old man's home and might need a new pair of crutches occasionally. I aimed to be able to buy them, and Gonzara, Texas, was going to provide the dollars.

Consequently, brethren, as I straightened out my ship to glide into the field, my interest in the phenomenon of Gonzara was adulterated considerably by premonitions, misgivings and fears. I was looking over the dozen or so men who had just arrived in the vicinity of the field, via

several automobiles, and were streaming toward it. I couldn't spot Groody among 'em, but he might have been there for all I knew. I was devoting most of my attention to the problem of landing.

What kind of a flier am I? Well, I'm still alive, and that means I'm good, although when I get down alive I congratulate myself, and when I get down without so much as scraping a wing skid, I congratulate myself heartily.

THIS field was long and narrow, and regular rows in it, through which some species of fruit, vegetable or grain was sprouting, warned me of the fact that it was probably soft. Consequently, I drifted in slow over the fence, stalled the ton and a half bomber five feet above the ground, and fought to keep it in the air as long as I could. This little balancing feat occupied my exclusive attention until the time when the ship dropped to the ground in a slow stall landing. The soft earth dragged at the wheels, but nevertheless we were scuttling across the ground at forty miles an hour or so when I suddenly moved as though a hornet had stung me.

Looming up in front of my left wing, running toward it to escape the speeding ship, there was a man. I got a brief glimpse of a youthful face contorted with fear



as I snapped the stick to the left and jammed on full right rudder. I was too late. I got the impression the swinging left wing had cut him down as a sickle might a blade of grass, although I felt

no jar. My right wing skid dug into the ground in that ground loop, and for a second I fought the ship to keep it from turning over.

As it came to rest, I unsnapped my belt and stood up in the cockpit in time to see some ten men clustered around my victim, motionless on the ground.

"Where the hell did he come from?" I yelled jerkily to Tex, and the grim faced Southerner shook his head.

"We're certainly starting out with our right foot forward," I told him as I vaulted out of the cockpit.

Tex shoved up his goggles and followed me. Four men had started to carry the motionless figure toward a small, weather-beaten house a hundred yards away next to the road, where the automobiles were standing.

"How badly is he hurt?" I yelled, and, as though that had been a signal, the entire group of men who were left turned to confront me.

I stopped dead in my tracks as I saw a half dozen pairs of eyes that were about as pleasant to meet as those of a wounded lion.

"I wouldn't be surprised if his neck was broke," rasped a squat, dark faced, heavily mustached man.

"If it ain't, he's bad hurt, anyway," growled a slim, ferret faced fellow.

Suddenly, one of the four men who were carrying the youth's body toward the house broke away and came running toward us.

"I'll go ovuh and take a look," Tex drawled very slowly. "I've seen a lot of hurt fliuhs in my time, gentlemen, and maybe I can tell——"

"You won't get within a mile of him, mister," came a booming voice, and a veritable giant of a man, one eye almost closed because of a scar that seemed to have passed right through it, elbowed his way forward.

Tex and I both stiffened with astonishment.

"Why not?" Tex drawled very deliberately, and I could see the well known flame shining in his gray eyes.

"It wasn't our fault!" I exploded. "We're sorry as hell and we'll do anything we can, but he had no business running in front of the ship!"

"Oh, he didn't, huh?" came a gasping voice, and the man who had left the body of my victim arrived like a wheezing tornado.

He was of medium height, and sweeping, lifeless-looking mustaches hung de-

jectedly over a lantern jaw which was now quivering with what might have been rage, or maybe grief, or both. Close-set, washed-out gray eyes met mine, then dropped to the ground. He stood there with his chest heaving, preparatory to giving birth to some words which I realized instinctively would be far from pleasant.

SUDDENLY he raised his eyes again, his furrowed face working, and took a step forward. As though moved by the same impulse, those half dozen men began closing in on us. Tex and I backed away slightly.

"I suppose me and my boy ain't got any right on our own land," he burst forth. "What right have you to land here, spoil my crops and hurt my boy, anyway? Why, you——"

"Just a minute, mister," I said, and my hand was on the Colt, which was swinging in its holster at my side. "I'm Lieutenant Evans, and this is Lieutenant McDowell, and I understand that we're part owners of this very land."

"Well, you got another think comin'," snarled the man, his gnarled fists clenched, and somehow he gave the impression of a weakling who, even under the present conditions, didn't quite have the guts to say or do what his fury prompted him to.

"Now listen, everybody," yelled Tex. "And don't keep pushing us eithuh," he broke off suddenly, shoving a squat little man in oil-stained clothes back from him. "We told you we were sorry and we told you it isn't our fault. We'll pay for medical attention for him, and do anything else within reason. Furthermore——"

"Is that so?" a voice I couldn't identify sneered. "Think because you're Border Patrolmen you can get away with anything, hey?"

"Keep back!" I shouted, and by this time my temper, which is about as reliable as the weather in mid-Atlantic, started giving way.

That big man with the snarl, pretending to be pushed, had driven his elbow into my ribs none to gently. In a second I had taken him by the neck and thrown him to one side.

"Let's teach 'em we don't want 'em

around here—right now!" piped a shrill voice, and instantly our welcoming party went into action.

This big fellow, mumbling curses, leaped toward me, but Tex McDowell shoved his foot out and tripped him. A second later Tex and I were the center of a milling mass of men, and my elongated arms were working like piston rods as I gave ground. My reach was several inches longer than anyone else's, and for a few seconds I was doing nothing but sock at blurred faces in front of me. McDowell was giving an excellent imitation of an octopus with a shot of oxygen. He seemed to have a dozen arms and fists.

It was all a sort of nightmare to me. A dozen blows hit me, but I scarcely seemed to feel them. A man was on my shoulders now, and instantly I had to bow my head before a storm of blows. My nose was bleeding and my jaw was sore. I grabbed the arms that were choking me, tore them loose and bent forward like a jackknife. The man on my back went hurtling into the circle of my enemies, and for a second they gave ground. As I straightened I saw four men bearing Tex to the ground, and I guess I went loco. I jerked out my gun. Before I used it, a thought shot through my brain. If one shot was fired, there'd be a hundred.

So I didn't fire. But I did bring the muzzle of my gun down on two heads, and the men hit the ground with soul satisfying thuds.

"Thanks, boy," gasped Tex as he brought his knee up under a crouching man's chin and knocked him cold.

The Texan, flaming eyed and white lipped, his mouth twisted in a mirthless smile and his brown hair standing up in all directions, was like a smiling maniac. Then two pictures sprang up before my eyes, and I won't soon forget 'em.

Out of nowhere came a short man with a length of fence rail. He was behind Tex, swinging the club at him. A split second later, as though materializing out of thin air, another fellow leaped forward. He caught the club in his hands, wrested it from its original owner, and with a swift kick had swept the man's legs from under him and dropped him to the ground.

"Cut out this nonsense, or by God I'll shoot!" he bawled.

I WAS about as clear headed as a guy that's just been socked on the chin with a pile driver, I guess, and before I saw anything I had to look through a lot of red haze, so don't take my word as being a hundred per cent good. But I'll swear that two guns must have been floating in the air around this bozo. There they were in his hands and I couldn't tell where he'd got 'em. They were just there.

Tex staggered backward and so did I. Five of the Gonzara reception committee were in various postures on the ground and the remainder seemed to be highly impressed by the two arguments in the stranger's hands.

"What's the trouble?" snapped this armed angel from heaven.

Our victim's father mumbled his story shamefacedly, and as he did so I proceeded to take a series of peeks at our rescuer.

He was about Tex McDowell's size and build, which means that he was long-legged and wide-shouldered and built for both speed and power. In gray flannel shirt open at the neck, riding breeches and soft leather field-boots stained with black, he looked as though he could handle himself in any brawl that might come his way. His hair curled crisply and it was so red it made the blood gushing from my bezer seem a pale pink by comparison. A few freckles shone through his bronzed skin, and his face as he stared down at the mob's spokesman presented a curious contradiction. I was able to spot it even in my condition, which was half way between a swoon and a sweat.

Technically, the stranger's face should have been handsome. Straight, sun-bleached eyebrows shaded a pair of half-closed blue eyes that seemed almost black at the moment. His curved nose was well cut and the thin nostrils of it looked as though they had been chiseled by a sculptor. His thin lips gave the same impression of being cut precisely from stone, and his jaw was clean lined and fleshless. But, gentlemen, hush—if I ever saw a face that

repelled you, it was his! I don't know why, unless because it was so uncommon *hard*.

"Well, you damn fools!" the stranger snapped suddenly, and as those lips widened with a sort of sneering smile dozens of wrinkles sprang into view around his mouth and eyes.

They were like cracks suddenly appearing in its surface, as though a sheet of ice had suddenly broken up. His face did not seem pliable or the wrinkles to deepen gradually—they were like so many cuts suddenly made in a bronzed stone surface.



About that time the lathlike George Groody, author of the wire in my pocket, came over the ground toward us in a series of kangaroo leaps.

"What happened?" he asked breathlessly, and as I turned toward the hawk faced fier I held up a hand warningly.

"Wait a second," I admonished him.

Somehow, I didn't want to lose a second of the performance going on in front of me. The red headed, hard faced man's eyes flickered toward Groody.

"If it's any news to any of you," he said in that deep, husky voice of his, "I'm the new deputy sheriff in these parts, and I'm telling you hombres to pull in your necks and get away from here or I'll throw you in the jug. Is that clear?"

Surprisingly it was. They started to melt away, mumbling.

"Wait a minute there, Sheriff!" snapped Groody.

He walked forward and as he did so he inserted one of the special Groody cigars in one corner of his one-sided mouth. From tip to tip the weed was fully ten inches. His sloping, heavy lidded eyes were like two glinting lines, and his saturnine face was more Mephistophelean than it usually was, which is saying a lot. His eyes flickered over the group quickly.

"Were you in this, Casey?"

He was addressing the father of the boy we had cut down.

"I'll say he was," Tex said very deliberately. "His boy ran in front of our ship, got hurt, and he set the mob on us."

"Incidentally, he claimed we had no right to churn up his turnip patch in the first place," I inserted.

AS A matter of cold fact my wrath was growing and, as it flourished like the green bay tree, my sorrow over having hurt the boy was decreasing for reasons which will presently be made plain to you. Not that I am a seventh son of a seventh son born without kale, but a few details of that whole performance were suddenly becoming of more importance in my mind.

"How badly was the boy hurt?" Groody snapped.

"We don't know yet," drawled Tex, lighting a cigarette.

Groody's eyes seemed to hold the father's as though they were two magnets. Fifteen feet away the muttering crowd, sporting assorted cuts and contusions, was gazing at us balefully.

"As a matter of cold fact," Groody rasped, "you knew, Casey, that McDowell and Evans were going to land here. Sorry as I am that your son was hurt, it must have been his own fault. An airplane doesn't sneak up on anybody without warning."

"And there was nobody on this field when we started down," I said flatly.

"And furthermore, what's the idea of telling them they had no right to land here?" Groody went on. "We have this land under lease."

Casey was fingering his long, spindly mustache nervously. He straightened, and his washed-out gray eyes seemed to be half-defiant and half-fearful as he spat out:

"You mean you *think* you got this land under lease, mister!"

Abruptly he spun around on the heels of his scoffed cowboy boots and proceeded to set one down before the other with great speed and precision. The others followed him, straggling along behind him, and for the moment no one of us seemed to have any idea of stopping them. The red headed sheriff stayed with us.

"Well, what does that mean?" I asked

stupidly. "Have we leased fifteen hundred acres here, or we mistaken and is it in Keokuk, Iowa?"

Ex-Lieutenant George Groody didn't answer. As he chewed on his cigar silently, his heavy lidded eyes resting on the retreating crowd, he looked like a man who had just received a sock between the eyes. In fact, the expression on his hawklike face made him seem like a bird of prey with indigestion. At the moment, however, whatever meaning lay hidden in the lantern jawed Casey's remark was secondary in my mind. It is seldom that more than one idea can find residence therein, and it is only when said idea is not too big a one.

"You'll pardon me, gents," I said quickly, "but my curiosity's got the better of me. I'm bound for yonder shack."

"Why?"

That question was whipped out of the red headed sheriff's mouth and seemed to crackle through the air.

"I want to inquire after the health of our victim," I told him, "and I want to do it before that bunch get there."

"Don't!" snapped the redhead. "There'll be no more mob scenes around here!"

His eyes were very cool and his bold face very hard as he said that, but I was in no mood to do anything but make my own mistakes without interference right then. As I said, I've got a one-track mind, and it's narrow gauge.

"Listen, Sheriff," I told him. "You've done plenty for us and we're damn grateful and I hope I know you better, but nevertheless and notwithstanding, two Border Patrolmen have hurt somebody and they aim to find out how much, sheriff or no sheriff. Just in case of trouble, boys, come on. I've got an idea."

Without another word I was under way in one fawnlike leap. Groody and Tex followed instantly. It was not the custom of the old Border gang to have long arguments with themselves, where one of their gang had something in mind. No pros and cons stewed in a pot at a time like this.

WE RAN silently toward the house. We were within fifty feet of the crowd of men before they were aware

of what we were up to. At that same second I noticed something else. My legs are so long that I don't have to work them very fast to cover a lot of ground, and Tex and Groody were no cripples, but ranged alongside us and gaining with every smoothly flowing stride, was the red headed sheriff. For a second the thunder-struck group of men merely gazed at us with wagging jaws and flopping ears. By the time they had prepared to make ready to begin to start to do something, we were even with them and splitting the wind toward that cabin, and now the sheriff was well in the lead.

We were twenty-five feet from it when yells came from the reception committee behind us. Just then the human jackrabbit ahead of us stumbled and fell. He was still getting to his feet, cursing, when I hit the side window of the cabin in two seconds less than nothing. I had deliberately led my confreres on a course toward the cabin which would hide us from the side window of it, and our approach had been further hidden from any observers in the cabin by a back porch covered with vines.

"Watch out, boys!" came a shout from the men behind us, but the warning had not penetrated to the four people in the house.

As I hit the window a surprising sight met my eyes, although it wasn't a complete shock to me.

Lounging against a table within was the eighteen- or nineteen-year-old-bird whose back we had presumably broken, and he was inhaling a cigarette with proud enjoyment. More than that, he was just receiving some panic stricken advice from a scraggly bearded bozo who was just turning from the window as the end of my nose thrust itself into it.

"Git back on the bed, Hal!" were the words this egg was straining through his tobacco-stained muff. "Them guys are on their way here!"

II

FIFTEEN minutes later, we had left the shack and were engaged in such wholesome details as staking down the ship and giving instructions to the young fel-

low Groody had brought along with him to guard it. The sheriff, whose name remarkably enough turned out to be Bradley, was along with us.

"The more I think about it the more I think it was a swell idea for us not to give a sign that we figured anything was wrong," I announced as I held the stake for Tex McDowell to pound it. "As far as they're concerned, they think that we still believe we hit that kid. That was masterly acting, our showing great relief that the kid had come to, unhurt."

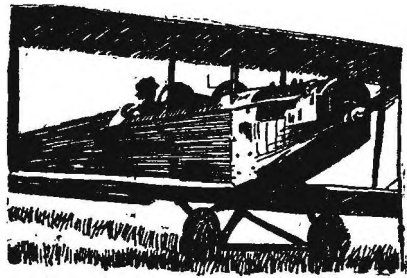
"Thereby," drawled Tex with enjoyment, "leaving the way wide open for them to indulge in such furthuh skullduggery as they may have in mind."

"It's a cinch," Groody stated thoughtfully, "that the stunt was a deliberate frame-up to excuse a mob scene which was designed to force you boys to leave Gonzara in a hurry. By the way, Sheriff, I guess we never have got around to thanking you for saving our bacon."

The redhead's face cracked in a friendly smile.

"Glad I happened to be here," he said in his harshly resonant voice. "I just hopped out to have a look at the ship."

He walked a step or two to the cockpit



and fiddled with the stick, watching the ailerons and elevators move, with great interest.

"What do these flippers do?" he inquired, and I undertook to explain how the aileron resistance operated to bank the ship and so on.

"You know," the lean officer said, "I've got a notion to try to cash in on any help I gave you by asking for a ride when you get time."

"You can sure have it," I stated.

"And I guess it'd better be fairly

quick," Bradley stated, a sardonic smile on his face as he rolled a cigarette quicker'n I can take a ready-made one from a pack. "I don't imagine you boys will be wanting to stay around here very long."

"You interest me strangely," I told him as every eye was bent on him.

The more I saw of Mr. Bradley the more that strange interest of mine was intensified. I wondered why he had overtaken us with such speed on our run to the shack. Was it to help us or stop us?

"Well, let's get going," Groody said, "and we can talk."

"Okay," I said, "and listen, *caballero*—" I was addressing the stoical young guard whom Groody had vouched for—"for the time being you are an ex-officio member of the Border Patrol. Get me? You're here with the definite commission to see that no son-of-a-gun gets within ten feet of this wagon here, and you're not carrying a gun to pick your teeth with. Don't get tough if you can help it, but, if any of these bozos try to get fresh, tell 'em where they get off. You've got official backing as long as you don't use it to excess. Get me?"

HE NODDED silently and smiled a slow smile. As I said, Groody had vouched for him absolutely, so I had no more worries as we plowed with the sheriff toward the car in which Groody had arrived.

"I'm suffering with a case of ingrowing curiosity," I stated as we got out of ear-shot. "I crave to know why Gonzara's apparently got four shacks, tents and buildings to every inhabitant, and why, in the opinion of this red headed minion of the law, we won't stay long."

"I think Bradley will agree with me that it all comes down to one thing," replied Groody. "But there are several ingredients in that one thing. In the first place, our fifteen hundred odd acres, in the opinion of the geologists, are almost the exact center of the pool. So far as can be told, at this time, we've got most of the good acreage tied up."

"My, my," grinned Tex. "When you were sending out those hurry calls for help, and Slim and I were borrowing at the

bank and doing everything but cheat at pokuh to shoot dough to you, I nevuh figuhed I was doing anything but shooting it at the moon."

Groody grinned his one-sided grin, and suddenly his eyes were soft. It always affected him when the old gang came to the rescue without asking questions.

"Well, it looks as though we hit the moon right in the face, then," I put in.

We had paused in our march, for a minute, and Bradley was listening with absorbed attention as he leaned nonchalantly against a fence post.

"Right," grunted Groody. "But this whole town is wise to the fact—just how I don't know—that we've used all our dough to collect this acreage and that as matters stand we'll be lucky if we've got dinero enough to finish sinking the one well we could start, to prove up the territory."

"And that's not so hot," Bradley interjected quietly.

"You're right it's not so hot!" barked Groody. "So what's the situation, I ask you?" he went on oratorically.

"It's just this, and you'll find it out within fifteen minutes after you hit town," Bradley interrupted evenly, and he was looking at Tex and me. "As soon as that wildcat came in, the way I understand it, joint-keepers and parasites of all kinds came streaming in here, and most of them spent all the ready cash they had to get their places of business ready and be on the ground floor. Big company geologists and a lot of free lances all agree that the main fault lies at the eastern edge of your territory and that the pool runs west through your land. They believe the oil that the wildcat is drawing on is just the shallow fag end of the real pool.

"So there isn't any boom until your fifteen hundred acres is thrown wide open to drilling. They know you haven't got the dough to do it. You won't sell out, and consequently, from every last local merchant to every racketeer, dying of lonesomeness in his place of business, they're accusing you of keeping them from making money."

"Well, if that isn't one for the book," breathed Tex, his good-looking face very

thoughtful. "What do you mean—we won't sell out, George?" he asked Groody.

"Big companies aren't interested enough in proven territory to offer anything but a fraction of what she might be worth, and the small fry might boost the price to a dime an acre if we'll throw in our shirts along with the land."

"Well, I can imagine it," I told him, "where a whole town is all set for a big boom and the land's just laying idle. A whole field, practically speaking, tied up by a bunch of raggedy fliers who couldn't draw a check for a thousand dollars between 'em."

"And are they sore?" Groody said soulfully.

"Plenty," Bradley nodded. "I haven't been here but a little while and I'm frank to say I came to be in on the ground floor of the new boom. Boys, I'm telling you something. The gang that's invaded this town is one of the toughest bunches I ever saw, and there's a bunch of business men here that are relics of the old days when it was necessary to use direct methods. I don't want to get blood and thundery, but don't be surprised at a few bullets in the back. Unless you can lay your hands on a quarter of a million or so, I'm telling you you're bucking the toughest proposition any gang ever bucked."

His light gray eyes flashed over us as he said that.

"I don't get scared of my own shadow," he added, "but I'm telling you this. I've come to know this town pretty well in the last few weeks, and discretion is the better part of valor."

SUBCONSCIOUSLY I was noticing that his inflection and choice of words were not exactly what one would expect from an oil field deputy sheriff. His face and eyes indicated a veteran of a dozen life-and-death emergencies, but his speech was that of an educated Easterner. I'm frank to say he was growing on me to a considerable extent.

Groody turned to Tex and me and with an apologetic grin on his face.

"Before we get down into town, something might as well be decided," he said. "I don't know exactly how much coin you

and Tex have put into this, and your shares haven't been given to you—"

"Who the hell cares?" I inquired.

"Be youhself," Tex drawled. "The more I think of the fight you've put up, the less I'm going to take any profit out of what little dough I put in. I just came for the ride, big boy, and I aim to ride 'er till we break 'er. Furthermore—"

"Don't be silly," Groody barked gruffly. "You guys are part owners, whether you like it or not. Anyway, here's the thing. We're broke and we're in a tough spot, but personally, I'll be damned if I'm going to get bluffed, kicked or beaten out of a real fortune until the last cat is hung."

"You and me, both," I stated. "Here's fifteen hundred acres that may be worth millions. We should curl up and wither away because we're temporarily broke!"

"Why!" drawled Tex, his eyes glowing with enjoyment. "The mere idea is worse than sacrilegious—it's ry-diculous."

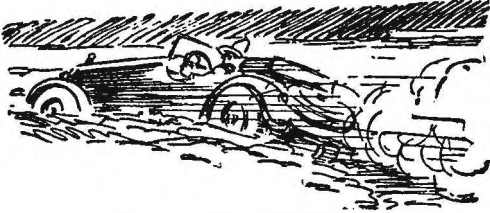
For a second there was silence, and subconsciously I could feel Bradley's eyes appraising us speculatively. Groody, the hawk faced, mahogany skinned, outwardly hardboiled adventurer o'er the ends of the earth; Tex McDowell, laughing, devil-may-care playboy, whose audacity had no limits; me, myself, in person, a sort of loose-jointed, disconnected, mentally and physically awkward terrier, wagging his tail eagerly at almost any prospect without knowing quite what to do about it—there we were.

For some reason the silence grew until a tender fifteen seconds must have ticked off. It was as though we were all weighing the decision we had made. Finally, I interrupted it in my customary elegant manner.

"Now that we've all united in silent prayer," I stated, "I want to say my say. I know that you, George, have been running around the country with a flying circus, taking chances on splintering your spine every day, to get coin for this thing, and I say with Tex that as far as we're concerned, we ride 'er to a finish. And I don't care whether we get a dime or not. Now let's cock an eye at this municipal mistake over here and see if we can figure

out how we can get money enough to buy our dinner."

That oration seemed to break a considerable amount of ice, and a minute later we were climbing into Groody's battered car and were leaping from hump to hump



along the rutted road, followed in file by Deputy Sheriff Bradley in his car.

"It seems funny to me," Tex drawled thoughtfully as he bounced gaily around on the back seat, "that the capital can't be got to prove up our tract with a dozen or so wells."

"Plenty can be got if we want to give up our right eye and mortgage the family's gold teeth," Groody told him. "Everybody knows our situation, and it's a game of freeze-out."

"What will we need?" I asked.

"A cool three hundred thousand dollars, minimum," Groody grunted. "We ought to sink wells at all corners of our acreage, and a few scattered around the middle. Prove it up and we can sell it to a big company at a fair price and for cash, plus maybe a royalty, although the really big boys prefer to own it lock, stock and barrel."

A MERE three hundred thousand," grinned Tex. "And the last note I got at the bank mortgaged my army salary for six months to come. And my rich papa won't lend me a penny as long as I'm in the Army."

"What about the town bank, or has this town got a bank?" I inquired.

"Yes, it has," Groody acknowledged, "and that's just about our last chance. No use going to private capital, because private capital will want the earth, and we'll end up with about twenty per cent of what we fought for a couple of years to get."

"You mean you fought for a couple of years to get," I told him.

"Well, any way you like," Groody said.

"Smaller companies will buy at starvation rates, likewise. Our only out is to get at least three hundred thousand on interest, with a bonus that won't total too much, if we're going to shoot for the millions that I believe are here."

"Oh, hell, they're not here," grinned Tex. "Aren't we fluhs, which means we were marked with bad luck at birth and were slightly crazy, besides? We'll end up bruised and battuhed, with heads bloody but unbowed, get three hundred thousand if we have to rob a bank for it, and then find out that all the oil's on somebody else's land. But we'll have fun."

A sort of sacred silence fell on us after that, broken only by the loud flapping of our arms and legs as we bounced along toward town. Even I felt a curious sense of depression when we clanked and clattered down one side of a square which was the heart and gizzard of the town.

The hands of the town clock were abutting on four P. M., and it was hotter than a blast furnace's breath. Yawning doorways, gaping at us like elephants waiting for someone to toss 'em a peanut, lined the square. Streets empty of pedestrians led in all directions to the wide open spaces. There she was, set to take care of seething mobs of free spenders, day and night. A hastily constructed restaurant, with at least two hundred tables in it, was occupied by one waiter who looked like a fly on a banquet table. And maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed to my popping optics that about half the woebegone people we passed looked at us with intense disappointment because we were alive.

"Let's have a drink," Groody suggested. "Then maybe we'll go down to the bank and see what's what. They made arrangements to stay open day and night a couple of weeks ago, and haven't changed it yet."

We went into a big saloon. On one side of the door was a hundred-foot bar with a single bartender who was very busy cleaning his fingernails. On the left of the door dozens of gambling tables were covered with cloths, and in the rear the floor of the big dance hall looked as though not a single fantastic toe had ever been flung over its surface.

Groody ordered the drinks, and the fat bartender with thin, gray hair and a pasty face, ambled slowly toward us.

"He's the proprietor tending his own bar for the present," Groody whispered.

The bartender-proprietor's bulging eyes rested on us with no friendliness in their bloodshot depths.

"Gettin' extravagant, ain't you?" he wheezed.

"What do you mean?" Groody snapped back at him.

The bartender set out the bottle and the glasses, and any attempt at camouflaging the humor in his last remark disappeared as he said sullenly:

"Oh, nothin', 'cept accordin' to what they say around town, you'd have to tap the Groody Development Company's treasury of all its capital to get money enough to buy a drink."

For a second Groody seemed to freeze, then he relaxed.

"Have it your own way," he said with a saturnine grin.

WE DRANK off the drinks and at my suggestion stopped at that big restaurant for a bite to eat. No use of going into detail, but the vegetables in the three bowls of soup were practically stuck in the ice, and when we demanded some sustenance that had a speaking acquaintance with the fire we were informed brusquely that orders couldn't be changed. So we stalked out of the place, returning the soup to its rightful owner with no apologies.

"Now you got a rough idea of how a town feels when it figures you're doin' 'em out of a fortune," Groody informed us.

"I reckon there's nothing in the whole wide world, unless it's love," Tex drawled, "that can turn a man into a monkey as quick as seeing a fortune go by him."

"I see what Bradley meant now," I said very thoughtfully, and somehow the whole thing didn't seem as much of a lark right then. "If many people are feeling like that around here, it looks as though we better go around with guns cocked."

Groody nodded grimly.

"I think maybe we can crack that bank,"

he stated. "There isn't a single reason I can think of why bankers shouldn't advance money on our proposition."

"Funny you haven't tried 'em before," I said.

"I thought, up until I wired you, that I had the money from other sources," Groody told us. "Here we are. There's the high mucky-muck himself there in the rear."

He pointed through the big front window at the figure seated at a desk in the rear of the small bank.

"And unless I'm mistaken," I said as we entered the door, "there's Mr. Bradley."

It was. He had added a white sombrero to his costume now, and he was walking from the rear of the bank toward the door. As he saw us he turned to the depositors' desk at his right and picked up a check. Then he glanced back at the president, whose office was separated from the floor of the bank by a railing, and beckoned to us. We stopped beside him. In the rear of the bank the president was bent over his desk. The sheriff's gimlet-like eyes were staring into Groody's.

"I know why you're here," he said in what he tried to make a whisper, but which carried clearly to all corners of the bank.

"That wouldn't be hard," grunted Groody. "Money."

"And I believe you'll get it," he stated in that strange whisper.

"How come?" barked Groody.

"And how come you know anything about it?" I seconded.

"Simple as A B C," Bradley said, leaning against the desk and looking at us boldly.

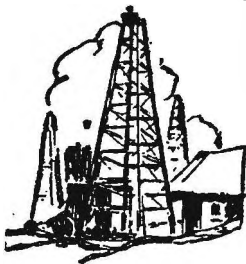
His chiseled face, seamed so closely, was more arresting than ever. I got the impression that there were exactly the same number of lines on each side of his mouth; that his eyebrows, high cheekbones and nostrils would have measured exactly the same on each side. It was as though that hard, clean-cut face had been laid out with calipers. His eyes now had a different look in them than I had noticed there before—not that I'm much of an observer. It was as though for the first time every resource in him was concentrated on his

objective and that most of the dynamic force which I suddenly felt in him was concentrated in his eyes. The stony surface of them seemed to be warmed by an inner fire.

"I'd like to talk business with you boys, and it won't take four sentences," he said slowly.

"You've earned that much of our time, certainly," Groody said in quizzical mockery. "Shoot."

"I've been around the oil fields considerably," Bradley said deliberately, "and I didn't come here to be a deputy sheriff. I came here to make dough, and I haven't got any to make it with, so I'm looking



for a spot. It so happens that I've got a drag with Crane up there, the president. I saved his home from being robbed a week ago, and damn near got killed doing it. Furthermore, by a lucky break, he

knows that I know oil. My idea is simple. I believe I've put you right with him to get the capital you need. If it works out that way, I expect and want a small cut, and in return for it I'll work as hard, take as many chances as any of you, and will know more about what I'm doing maybe than any of you."

"The answer to that is simple," Groody said without hesitation. "If we get the money and it proves to be through your efforts, you'll be treated fairly."

BRADLEY nodded, and again his tight-appearing skin seemed to crack as he smiled.

"I'll wait outside for you," he stated. "I hope I've done something for you, and I wouldn't mind throwing in with you. I like guts. *Adios.*"

And he lounged out, sombrero on the side of his head and his shirt bulging slightly under the arms. He wore his guns in shoulder holsters, I decided suddenly.

"It strikes me that we could use that hombre," I stated as we descended on the president in force.

Groody nodded.

"One good turn deserves another," he stated.

"Before we get tangled in this mesh of finance," I said, stopping them twenty feet from the absorbed president's desk, "let's get one thing straight. At the moment I don't know where we can raise a dime, except here. Do either of you two?"

Both shook their heads.

"Then we can't be too rough. Is that right?"

Groody nodded.

"That's all I wanted to know," I stated. "That won't keep us from bluffing, though, will it?"

"We can't bluff a bankuh," Tex grinned. "Let's go."

As we approached the desk, all three of us were giving the president of the Gonzara Bank and Trust Company the once-over, the up and down, and likewise the side to side. The main thing visible about him was a shining dome of a head over which a few lonesome gray hairs were plastered, coming around over his forehead in a spanking curve, and ending up with what I believe is known as a cowlick. They were spaced evenly, like hurdles for a flea race. Below his corrugated forehead, bushy eyebrows, each one of which contained more cubic feet of hair than his head, hid his eyes like eyeshades. His body seemed small from what we could see of it with the desk in his way, and an old-fashioned, stiff-standing white collar was like a rest for his chin.

"Could we see you for a moment, Mr. Crane?" Groody asked, and the president raised his head.

Round eyes peered owlshly at us through gold rimmed eyeglasses. His eyebrows sloped upward, which gave him a look of supercilious inquiry. There were deep furrows in his saggy face, and extra chins sloped away from the mother chin in receding terraces. His head was too large for his body and that choker collar made it look like a good sized pumpkin set on a stick.

"Certainly," he said in a deep, cultivated voice, and waved a rather small hand at the swinging gate that gave ingress to the throne room.

As those round, unwinking eyes gazed

at us, I was suddenly conscious of the fact that the shirt I had put on was splotted with oil and that a necktie might have added to my beauty. Groody, in a flannel shirt, khaki breeches and boots, looked about as much like a capitalist as he did one of Singer's Midgets, and only Mr. Texas Q. McDowell, in tan silk shirt, black tie and whipcord breeches, lent tone to the trio.

"I presume you know who I am," Groody stated, and the unblinking banker nodded.

His hands were resting on a ridiculous little stomach that protruded from his spare frame like my Adam's apple did from my neck. Groody went on to introduce us, and, as far as I could tell, Mr. Crane was not particularly thrilled at the ceremony. When Groody mentioned who McDowell's father was, Crane nodded coolly. A subtle chill started to penetrate my bones. I had a feeling that I'd feel more comfortable if I could catch him winking.

"What can I do for you?" he asked in that musical bass, and Groody told him forthwith.

CRANE listened without a move or a sign, his eyes resting on his desk.

"I believe there are three things in its favor," Groody concluded. "It will start development on a big scale immediately, and bring hundreds of thousands of dollars into town. Second, it's secured by land that the geologists are ultra-optimistic about, and which is worth, at acreage prices right now, much more than we ask. Third, every dollar of it is to be used to develop the natural resources of this State, and this particular section of it, and if by any chance there should be any loss concerned, it does not seem that your stockholders had any kick coming. Unquestionably, every one of them would directly or indirectly make a fortune if we bring in a field here."

"Suppose there should be no oil?" Crane asked without looking up.

"Is there any reasonable basis for believing that?" Groody shot back at him.

"You men have little knowledge of the

oil business, and no other assets than this land."

It was an emotionless, uninterested statement, likewise made without a glance from those puffy eyes.

"We're willing that a new corporation be formed to see to it that the business is administered properly and that the best talent procurable be hired," Groody told him, while I felt the blood slowly congealing in my veins and the saliva forming icicles on the roof of my mouth. Crane affected me that way more and more every minute.

"Mr. Bradley mentioned the matter to me," Crane went on, still without a move.

"He's a competent man, and we can use him," Groody said.

Groody thrust a new cigar, unlit, into the corner of his mouth, and the old Groody glint in his heavy-lidded eyes seemed suddenly electrical as he leaned across the desk.

"Mr. Crane, we're not going to give up our land, regardless, and this whole town is losing a hundred thousand dollars a day, easy, because we can't get financing. Think of what it would mean to your own bank to have a field here! Our leases run for a long time. And, by God, the land will lay there spouting onions instead of oil for years to come, before we'll give up an acre of it!"

Crane raised his eyes and took a long look at Groody, and then at McDowell. I could fairly feel the whole deal trembling in the balance. I moved restlessly, endeavoring desperately to look intelligent.

"You seem determined," Crane said, those eyes looking at us like a cat's at night. "It will have to be taken up with the directors, but under the circumstances I am inclined to believe that some arrangement can be made."

My hair rose and waved gently. Tex grinned like a Cheshire cat, and the taut Groody seemed to relax in his chair. At that second the telephone rang shrilly, and I jumped a foot, knocking over the ink bottle as I tried to get my hand out of the way. I caught it before more than half the papers were ruined, and Crane looked down with some annoyance as he picked up the phone. A voice at the other end

started talking, and it sounded like continuous machine gun fire. Crane's face did not change, nor did he say a word until the end. Then he said quietly, "I see. Thank you."

He hung up the phone and his eyes met Groody's.

"Gentlemen, I have some bad news for you," he said without emotion.

All three of us stiffened as though planting ourselves for a shock.

"That was Mr. Bradley. He has just learned that the two dozen or more negroes, Mexicans and whites, who are the lessors of the land to you, have unanimously accused you of obtaining their land by fraudulent and coercive means, and that your leases are illegal for that reason."

"What?"

THAT word was like a pistol shot from Groody. Tex leaned forward like a panther about to spring. I was numb and I guess I just sat there and looked stupid.

"Furthermore," Crane went on like some remorseless fate, "they've all signed new leases with a company known as the Border Operators, Incorporated. The proper court actions have already been instituted, and Border Operators, Incorporated, is believed to be an extremely wealthy corporation."

"But, great Hell!" Groody blazed. "There isn't one single basis for that. Every word of that stuff about our methods is a damn lie, and ——"

"Doubtless," Crane interrupted smoothly, "but it will take years in court to decide——"

"Oh—that's their scheme!" Groody exploded. "They've got these white trash and spigs and negroes together, given them money, and are deliberately tying up the land with the idea of forcing us to compromise for nothing."

"You may be correct," Crane said quietly, and still he did not move. "Under the circumstances, however, even granting for the sake of argument you were in the right, it would be suicidal to develop the property. No big company would touch it until it's free and clear. Every barrel of oil you might obtain would be tied up,

and doubtless injunctions would prevent your going ahead at all. If you are in the right, you have my sympathy, gentlemen, but the Gonzara Bank can do nothing for you. Good day."

AN HOUR and a half later, at a point some mile and a quarter from the Gonzara Bank, one Slimuel X. Evans, accompanied by Mr. Rufus Bradley, was taking a stroll toward my DeHaviland. As we walked along I was taking a good kick at every furrow and stone in the way, because I still had plenty of feelings that needed relieving. I was going to take Bradley for his ride because, for the moment, there seemed nothing else to do. For the nineteenth time the redheaded sheriff was pointing out some fact to me.

"It'll come out sooner or later, as I've said," he stated in a hoarsely vibrant voice. "In my estimation, there isn't a chance that this sudden new company isn't backed



by a lot of big bugs of the town. These hombres that have double-crossed you on the leases and sworn to a bunch of lies didn't do it on their own. I don't believe they did it because some outsider came in and propositioned 'em. It wouldn't be unanimous in that case. They did it because people they respect and fear, right here in town, told 'em to do it."

"I wish to God we could get our hooks on some of 'em," I told him for the twentieth time. "Imagine a bunch of niggers and spigs and white trash without an extra shirt all socking us on the dome at once, as it were."

"Whoever is behind the Border Company just whisked them all away." Bradley told me as we came to the ship. "That leaves you fellows helpless and forced almost to take any proposition that may be offered to you."

"It may be cutting off our nose to spite our face," I said with a total lack of sweetness and light in my voice, "but I

agree with Groody and Tex that the land can rot before we'll give in. First they try to scare Tex and me out of town so they can operate on Groody alone. Okay. But when they bribed the lessors, they kidded themselves out of a wad of money, and you can lay to that."

"Well, as you say," Bradley told me with a mocking smile on his face, "there's no need of biting off your nose to spite your face."

"And my nose would be a considerable chunk," I inserted.

"But a hundred thousand or so is better than nothing," Bradley finished. "And by the way—don't work off your feelings on me in the air, will you? Remember, I'm a complete and total amateur and I don't care to be turned inside out."

"Don't worry," I told him as I pulled up the stakes. "There's kick enough in merely going up in this somewhat battered machine without actually pulling St. Peter's whiskers by stunting it."

I PRESSED the self-starter and gave the Liberty a three-minute warm-up. Groody and Tex were prowling around the town, endeavoring to get some dope about the lawsuit. I was so disgusted with the whole business that I was glad to get off the ground for a while. A few minutes later we were in the air. I didn't bother to turn around to see how Bradley was taking it. I was immersed in a sea of thought that was extremely stormy.

To be truthful about the matter, I could see no way out but one. There was just a chance that we could bluff, bully or kick one of the land owners into giving us the dope on who had approached him. Then, if we found out it was somebody big, we might get to him, uncover the crookedness behind the whole deal and have some good people so dead to rights that they would be forced to back us to save their reputations. Catch 'em in their own trap, you might say.

Thinking thoughts like these, I suddenly discovered that the altimeter was reading three thousand feet, and I hadn't yet thought to throttle down the twelve-cylinder Liberty, which was bellowing along wide open. I throttled down to fif-

teen hundred and looked around for the first time.

What I saw was mildly interesting. Three battered looking airplanes, all of them Jenny "H's," were spiraling down for a landing in a pasture lot south of town.

"Some more people coming to scrape a little gravy off the boom town," I thought to myself, with my best effort at a sarcastic snigger.

Those ships bore the mark of gypsy fliers, somehow, and of late years airplanes had become a prominent factor in the oil business. Quick trips are frequently necessary when hundreds of thousands of dollars may depend on who gets to a certain point first and snaps up acreage or closes a deal.

I was skirting the western edge of Gonzara, occupying myself largely with gnashing my teeth and dreaming dreams about having my hands around various people's necks and squeezing them. I don't pretend to be as pure as the pinfeather in an angel's wing. There are certain types of frank, straight-from-the-shoulder skull-duggery that don't arouse any large amount of repugnance in my system. But I hate a sneaking, big business hypocrite. The dirty work that was wrecking our project was the kind that puts a wry look on my handsome visage. I knew I'd have as much mercy on any bird I caught as I'd have on a rattlesnake.

I was flying toward the three ships that had just landed, and was about half a mile from them when I felt a grip on my arm and turned to look at Bradley. He was pointing off to the left. I followed his pointed finger, but could see nothing unusual. As a matter of fact, I didn't have more than a split second to do any low and lofty looking.

Suddenly it seemed that the DeHaviland was being crushed between giant hands. There was a terrific crash, and instantly the roar of the Liberty rose to a hellish scream. The ship quivered like a shimmy dancer and flying missiles filled the air.

"Prop broke," I thought, and then some flying fragments hit me a terrific blow, on the temple.

I went out like a light. I wasn't totally

unconscious, now that I look back on it. It was more as though I was physically paralyzed and in a delirium. I knew, somehow, that I was slated either for hell or a halo, and that there was something I ought to do about it. My subconscious self realized that I was up in the ship, unable to fly it, and with a non-flying passenger in the back seat. In my nightmare, though, I didn't know what the situation was or anything about it, except that I should do something, and could not. Then I went blank.

IT WAS half an hour later, I discovered, when I came to, soaking wet lying under the wing of my own ship, on the very turnip field we had taken off from. Standing over me was Bradley as self-contained as ever. For a moment my brain couldn't even hit on its customary two cylinders. Then, as the whole thing came back to me and as I gazed up at the slightly smiling countenance of the sheriff, I tried to sit up.

"Well, how in the world did we get down?" I asked stupidly, suddenly conscious of a bump the size of an apple on my temple.

"Don't ask me," Bradley said, and he staggered slightly as though in sudden reaction.

The last two minutes had made me two years older than Methuselah. I looked at the ship. One tire was flat and one elevator looked like a cracker box thrown into a buzz saw.

"By the eternal, man, you didn't bring this baby down, did you?"

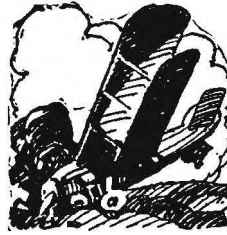
"By the grace of God," Bradley said levelly, "I did. And the ship did more stunts coming down than you ever did on purpose."

"And they claim there are miracles in the Bible," I said weakly. "Tell me what happened."

"I got the hang of how the controls worked while you were flying," Bradley said slowly, as though still in the grip of what must have been moments of prodigious possibilities in the air. "She was diving and I took hold of her and I pulled her up, then she dived again and we just

kinda flopped down. We went through that fence back there. See where she's down? I swear I don't know how we got level close to the ground and I had no more idea that we'd land on this field than anything in the world."

"Well, the Royal Air Force used to solo their fliers in a couple of hours," I said, as I found myself able to sit up. "If they'd ever had you for a pupil, they'd probably decide just to stick their cadets in the ship without an instructor. Anyhow, thanks."



"Here comes Groody and McDowell," Bradley said grinning. "I'll bet they'll get a kick out of it."

And they did. A thousand questions poured from them and by the time they'd got through, Bradley had told the story approximately fifty times with the complete prefaces, prologues and conclusions. At the end of it I was feeling practically myself.

"Prop just went to pieces," I said as I got to my feet, "and, of course, one of the pieces had to hit me."

"Evidently so," drawled McDowell. "Bradley, I don't reckon we'll evuh get out of youh debt."

"Don't mention it," Bradley said, with some slight embarrassment. "Well, I'm going to town, gents. How about having dinner with me? I've got to get back to the court house, but I'll be free at seven."

"We'll see you there at that time," nodded Groody, and Bradley made off.

My eyes followed him with considerable awe. He moved with a sort of easy, swift grace, red head held high, and one could fairly see the muscles rippling beneath his flannel shirt.

"Quite a lad, boys, quite a lad," I stated.

"More of a lad than we think, maybe," snapped Groody, with a sudden change in manner that surprised me. "Listen, Slim. You were out cold, up there in the air, weren't you?"

I nodded, mystified.

"Well, Tex and I saw the whole thing," Groody went on swiftly. "He came down

in dives, side slips and what-not, and if I'm not a liar, that bird can fly."

I snapped to attention so fast that my bones cracked.

"Yes?" I said slowly.

"As sure as I'm a foot high," Tex drawled, his eyes like two gray embers in his face.

SUDDENLY what I commonly call my mind began to function. I began to remember details.

"You may be right," I said quickly. "For instance, how does it happen that one elevator is smashed? That's an unusual thing to happen to a ship that's gone through a fence."

"And unless I'm a liar, there isn't one single sign on the undercarriage or the front of the ship that it even knocked a fence over," Tex drawled. Always, when action grew faster, his speech grew slower.

"He's out of sight now. Let's have a look."

In two minutes the very probable truth was exposed for all to see. That section of fence was never knocked down by this airplane, I was sure. The air was let out of the tire—it hadn't gone flat in any ground loop. The elevator was deliberately bashed in and wasn't the result of any crack-up.

"All of which means," Tex said with joyous contentment, "that Mr. Bradley has been deceiving us, that he is with the enemy, and furthermore that he doesn't want this ship able to fly."

"And another thing," I cut in, the words fairly tumbling out like popcorn, "he had me look around when the prop broke. He could have thrown a wrench into it to deliberately break it——"

"But he couldn't figure on your being knocked out," Groody finished for me. "Do you know what I think? I think he just aimed to ruin the prop to keep the ship on the ground. Knocking you out was God's own idea, and he was forced to show his hand."

For a while we all talked so fast that we made a sewing circle seem like silent prayer, by comparison. Finally, Groody summed up the speculations, deductions and conclusions that we'd arrived at.

"This whole thing has been staged to make Bradley a man we'd trust," he stated "The chances are fifteen to one that he's in cahoots with the bank and that Crane is in this plot up to his neck."

"They're not so dumb as to figure that we wouldn't have the propeller flown over from McMullen until tomorrow," Tex added, "so they wreck the elevator. The object of the whole thing is to keep us out of the air tonight."

"And furthermore and in addition," I stated, "wanting us out of the air probably means that other planes are going to be used for something this very night. Take those three mangy and misbegotten old Jennies that have just hit our fair city!"

Well, between us, we began to figure that we might run into something right soon that would nail the big boys right to our cross. We were a considerably pepped up crew by the time we hopped into the battered bus and started on a series of teeth-shaking jolts into town.

Groody, the saturnine old buzzard, had suddenly become a sort of living flame. He exuded vitality from every pore, and those sloping narrow eyes of his were literally shining. Tex was in the seventh heaven of bliss and even this old hulk felt a considerable thrill of life along his keel.

"Now here's what we do," Groody said swiftly. "And I believe we can get away with it without them knowing about it. The more I think of it the more I believe this redheaded Bradley guy is the most important bozo around here. He's got to be shadowed, and Crane's got to be shadowed, and we've got to make the wires sing in various directions."

It was five-thirty in the afternoon, and McMullen was a hundred miles away. The telephone wires from the hotel started singing within twenty minutes, and it didn't take more than two minutes for me, as spokesman, to have the situation clearly in front of Captain Kennard at McMullen. His rasping voice had a laugh in it when I'd finished, and there came shooting over the wire a bellow of delight.

"Okay, boy. Consider it done," the best squadron commander along the Border told

me. "Sleepy Spears and Bob Hickman are right at the phone now, fighting to be sent, and we'll be on our way pronto."

As I hung up the phone I grinned at Groody and Tex.

"That whole damn flight will be in an uproar to get here within two minutes," I said. "The lads will be loping this way before I get out of this damn booth."

Believe it or not, George Groody for one second let down his hardboiled guard. He'd been out of the Army and out of the Border Patrol for a couple of years.

"You have to get away from the gang," he said slowly, "to realize that a life of clock-punching doesn't breed the kind of guy that will shoot the works, any time, anywhere, for one of the bunch."

"Is that news to you?" I inquired oratorically. "You have to be a little crazy to be a flier, and to stay on the Border you've got to be absolutely nuts."

Tex grinned.

"Check," said he. "Now, let's have a drink to the boys of the old brigade, God bless 'em; anothuh one to the oil game, God bless it; and anothuh one to the ruination of these Gonzara guys, damn 'em. Then we can eat. I can't have a good time on an empty stomach."

IV

IT WAS after sunset when Groody, Tex and I, astride three spanking steeds, reached a field some fifteen miles west of Gonzara. We had had dinner with Bradley, and about the only mental fodder we found to add to our rations was more or less definite proof that Bradley was subtly trying to persuade us to give up, compromise, and get out. We'd borrowed the horses through him on the excuse that we just wanted a ride in the evening air, and he seemed relieved to get rid of us. So far as we could tell, there was absolutely no suspicion in his mind, that we were on to him.

We'd scarcely reached this field, which was seven miles from anywhere, when a far-away drone came to our ears, and a minute or two later, motors cut, two D. H.'s were spiraling more or less silently down over the field. It was a pasture that Groody had picked, and we marked it with

flashlights for 'em. They landed safely in the light of the moon, and the first one to tumble out of his ship was Captain Kennard.

"Greetings!" he said in his rasping voice.

HE WAS a short, stocky, bow-legged chap with a stiff brush pompadour, his face scarred by a couple dozen airplane wrecks. He was possessed of a ribald eye that was now flashing at us with great interest. Bob Hickman, a big blond ox that looked every inch the all-American guard he once had been, was with him. Sleepy Spears fell out of the pilot's cockpit of the second ship.

Sleepy was a stocky guy who always seemed dead to the world, but in moments of extreme emergency, arose from the dead with

vigor. He came toward us with a rolling gait, and his customary wide, gentle, apologetic smile was on his square face. Following him was his observer, Pop Cravath, a baldheaded and irascible old coot who constantly tried to hide the fact that he got a great kick out of flying and pretended that having reports perfect was his object in life.

"Well, here we are," stated Kennard, "complete with portable radio set and rock-ets. What ho, you three buzzards, what ho?"

"Good cheer, Cap'n, good cheer!" I answered him. "I'm glad to see that you guys didn't forget to wear civilian clothes."

"This had better be good," Sleepy Spears said gently, "because I've got oil all over my Sunday suit."

"It is good," I told him, and proceeded to explain why.

When I had finished, Captain Kennard ran his hand over his hair. I always had the feeling if he didn't look out he'd get a splinter in his finger.

"It's a cinch they're up to something and that the planes are here for a get-away," he agreed. "Well, if we're going



to sleuth around the town, gents, we'd better mount these donkeys and get under way. You say we'll find Bradley at the court house?"

"Right," Groody told him, "and Crane lives at 322 Baxter Street. Better take a look at the bank first and see whether there's a light in it."

"You ought soon to be receiving some stuff over the radio," Kennard told us as he swung aboard his superannuated horse. "Just about every government department in Texas is at work on the past history of Bradley and Crane. It'll be relayed to you. Pretty soft for you, Groody."

"Don't I know it?" Groody grinned.

Our signals all arranged, the captain, Pop Cravath, and Sleepy Spears galloped away into the night. The rest of us—Groody, Tex, Hickman, and yours truly—gathered around the portable radio, out there in the field, and proceeded to wait.

"Damned if I don't feel sort of silly," I stated, "squatting here in the dark with all this Diamond Dick stuff going on. I'd feel better if I was sure it was going on!"

The words were scarcely out of my mouth before I changed my mind. The radio set began to splutter. Being able to send or receive the International code was part of every flier's education, and the three of us sat silent as the grave while it ticked off its message. It was from McMullen, and I wrote it down as follows:

Bradley answers description of ex-flier and oil man named Haddon. Was town marshal of oil town Kennedy in 1924. Has been on trial three times since then for killings and acquitted each time in self-defense. Reputed to have made considerable amount of money in the Tampico oil fields last year. Crane's reputation is spotless but it is rumored in San Antonio that he lost a fortune speculating at Mexia. It is supposed, but not proven, that he was principal backer of syndicate which bought up a thousand acres close to the Mexia field, which never proved up. How are you, you so and sos? Wish I was there. Jimmy Jennings.

"Now, that's more like it," Tex drawled ecstatically, and that blond giant of a Hick-

man began to get downright interested.

"Now all we got to do is wait for rockets," he stated, and for three long hours that stretched on to four, we waited.

WE WARMED up the two D. H.'s every half hour, in order to be prepared for any eventuality. When one o'clock came and found us still lying around under a million stars and a high-riding moon, I commenced to get restless. Kennard was going to keep an eye on Crane, Sleepy do the same for Bradley, and Pop Cravath was going to operate in general in the vicinity of the bank. I began to think our hunch had been all wet, and that the night was going to be as peaceful as a quiet evening in a cemetery.

Then, at one-ten, all four of us came to our feet like a flock of rubber balls. Shooting upward into the sky was a rocket. We waited like so many statues. One rocket meant something, but two—

"There she goes!" yelled Tex. "Let's go!"

It seemed as though that four hours wait had stored up a million dollars worth of energy in me. It didn't take fifteen seconds by the clock to have both Liberties roaring away, and a few seconds later Hickman was in the back seat of the ship I was flying and Tex and Groody were in the cockpits of the other one. I gave my D. H. the gun without more than a casual glance at the instruments and was off in a cloud of dust.

One rocket would have meant that something had happened, but was under control. Two meant that we were to hot-foot it toward the town and see that those Jennies never got anywhere.

"Ten to one we were right," I was telling myself exultantly, and suddenly this vale of tears took on a more benign aspect.

It hadn't taken much Sherlock Holmesing, at that. Anyhow, no real prodigious intellect had been necessary. If our enemies wanted us on the ground it was to keep us from interfering with something of a criminal nature and that, it would seem, would be only a big robbery in which the persons planned to get away by airplane. It was logical to think of the bank in that connection, and if you will add

connivance between the president thereof and Bradley, you've got the picture that was in my mind's eye as I sent the D. H. roaring wide open toward the spotch of light against the sky that represented Gonzara.

"Maybe Crane embezzled money for his oil deals," I was thinking, "and a fake robbery is being pulled to cover him up."

Suddenly I leaned forward. A third rocket showed against the sky. That was the final clincher. It meant that now it was an absolute certainty that the airplanes were being used. I was three miles from Gonzara, the Liberty turning up a frantic eighteen hundred and fifty revolutions a minute and the D. H. vibrating under the thrashing of the propeller, when I looked back for the first time. The other ship was not in sight.

"Groody and Tex had a forced landing," I thought stupidly. "Lord Almighty, what luck——"

Then it didn't seem so bad after all. Those other three ships were only Jennies and were unarmed. Maybe it was my overstimulated state that suddenly started me to laughing. I could just hear Groody and McDowell cursing as they came down. I could see the air filled with blue oaths for miles around the scene of the forced landing. Then I forgot everything.

I was only a mile from the town and now I could see plenty. Streaking along the ground in a combined take-off were the three Jennies. A quarter of a mile from the field a line of racing automobiles and headlights, like bugs with glowing eyes, were in abortive pursuit. The town square, from my height of twenty-five hundred feet, was a seething mass of people, and around the bank there was a solid mass of men. There must have been at least thirty cars racing along toward the field.

"That's damn silly," I thought tersely. "They might as well get on a bicycle to chase a bird."

I ambled south to intercept the fleeing planes. The Border was thirty miles away, and my quivering D. H. would do at least forty miles an hour more than those "H's" that I was chasing. That last rocket was my authority from Kennard, so to speak,

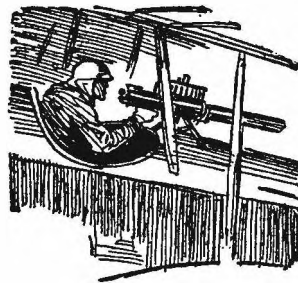
to knock those ships down, but I didn't want to do that. The bank had been robbed I felt sure, and the money was in those ships, and it wouldn't do us so much good to have it consumed in a fire.

I was two thousand feet higher than they were, for they were scuttling along, losing no time by gaining altitude. I wondered if they saw me. If they did, I didn't envy their feelings. The next two minutes of that wild ride through the cool night air I won't forget if I live to the age where my only problem is whether to sleep with my beard inside or outside the blankets.

NOW I was diving, the motor still wide open and the needle at one hundred and seventy-five miles an hour. That cracker box of a DeHaviland was quivering like a bowl of jelly in a lumber wagon. The struts were doing a tap dance in their sockets, and the landing and flying wires were wide blurs of light.

"I'll let Bob shoot a few times to warn 'em back," I thought, and the job seemed so simple that I was thinking ahead to what ought to transpire at the town square or somewhere else after we'd herded the black sheep safely home.

I was a thousand yards from the fleeing ships now, a thousand feet higher than they were, and we were plunging down out of the sky like a ton and a half projectile. I turned to look at Hickman, and the terrific air blasts swerved around and tore the very breath from my lungs. I had



to bury my oversized beak in my hand to breathe, but nevertheless I found Hickman standing up in the back seat, his observer's belt strapped around him,

grinning viciously at our prospective prey. I signalled what I intended to do, and he nodded, patting the double Lewis on its scarf mount in his cockpit lovingly. That baby could handle a gun. It had been decided that we wanted to kill no one or crack up any ships.

Now we were within a comparatively short distance of them. Suddenly that formation of three, scuttling along, low, toward the Rio Grande, started acting peculiar. The leading ship kept on straight south, but the ship on either side of it went off on a tangent from the leader's course.

"Damned if they're not separating," I thought to myself. "I wonder which ship the dough's in or whether it's been distributed between all three."

Then suddenly Hickman gripped my arm. Just as he did so, a bullet snapped past me. I looked down at the floor of my cockpit stupidly. A hole had appeared there. We were almost directly over the nearest ship now and as I looked down, banking automatically, I saw a man crouched in the rear cockpit of the Jenny and a machine-gun without a mounting in his hands shooting almost straight up.

"They haven't got front guns, but they've got machine-guns hidden somewhere," I thought dazedly.

For just a second, flying level now but still with terrific speed, I couldn't decide what to do. Then it came to me. If one ship was armed, probably they all were. Maybe two of them, though, were just guards for the main money ship. Nevertheless, I wanted them all.

Right then and there I settled down to fly.

We had all discussed the strategy to use, if necessary, before we started, but we had not figured on guns. Nevertheless, one signal was enough for Hickman. The leading Jenny below us was fogging along straight south now, and the man who had split to the left was sort of hovering around perhaps three hundred yards away, waiting for us to chase him. I wondered briefly why he didn't join the merry *mêlée*. The ship that had shot at us was off to the right about two hundred yards, and I was still diving my D. H. to its limit.

It wasn't pleasant to run the gauntlet of that machine gun, but it was the only thing to do. I was traveling close to two hundred miles an hour as I reached a point one hundred feet higher than my prospective victim. The pilot was banking south-

ward as I banked west. The roar of the Liberty, added to the chorus of the three Jenny motors, seemed fairly to split the night as the DeHaviland streaked across the course of the Jenny. Its pilot banked west to give his back seat man a clear shot at us.

At that second I banked north and just as the observer in the back seat was getting his unmounted gun into position for a shot at us, Hickman took a careful bead. As I said, he was a shot. The next second his guns were spitting fire, and I could see the tracers going just over the Jenny. I banked again to the left and for a second was paralleling the course of the Jenny perhaps fifty feet behind it. Again the observer in the back seat had to swing his gun, and this time Hickman's aim was accurate. The propeller of the other ship burst into a thousand pieces, and so far as I could tell neither passenger was harmed.

I WENT upward in a mighty zoom, and as I did so, it seemed that a hot iron had been pressed to my left arm. I looked at it stupidly. A bullet had torn its way through the flesh of my upper arm. That made me see red. I hurled the D. H. around to find a second Jenny, higher than I was now, shooting across us perhaps a hundred feet higher. Hickman gripped my arm, and I knew what he meant.

The back-seat marksman of the other ship could not fire now because the tail of the Jenny was in his way. A second later, as his pilot banked to give him a shot, I had swung around until I was almost directly underneath the other ship. Hickman, on the floor of his cockpit, his guns pointing almost straight up, fired again. Bullets ripped upward through the propeller and radiator, and another Jenny had bit the dust.

The first one was landing now. They were ten miles from the Rio Grande and northward I could see automobiles rushing along a winding trail that led to the river perhaps half a mile west of the scene of battle. There must have been three or four dozen horsemen, as well. The town of Gonzara was going to be in at the death. My sleeve was soaked in blood and my arm was like an aching tooth, but I knew

that the wound was not serious, as I banked the quivering DeHaviland south and set sail after the other ship.

"Ten to one that's got all the dinero in it," I thought to myself, and very proud of myself I was, too.

Those other ones had split so that we wouldn't know which one to chase. Somehow I had a hunch that there was no gun in the third ship. It would have seemed more natural for its pilot to take a chance on helping to knock me down if he had a gun, than to leave his pals behind. His deliberate flight southward seemed to me to prove that he was 'unprotected and wanted to get the money south to Mexico. If I had any doubt of it then, I didn't two minutes later.

We were barely a mile from the snaky Rio Grande, which looked like a silver ribbon in the moonlight. As I reached a point a few hundred feet behind him and slightly above him, I could see that the back seat was empty except for a sort of sack in it.

"That's the dough," I told myself exultantly, and one look was sufficient to tell me that there were no guns on the cowlings in front of the pilot.

For a moment I sat back, forgetting my wound, and shook hands with myself enthusiastically. Then, the motor all the way on and the Liberty bellowing triumphantly, I eased to one side of him, still fifty feet above him. He was flying with his head turned, watching us closely. I made a spacious gesture back toward Gonzara, and patted the guns in front of me significantly. Hickman was making motions to the same effect, also. Still that pilot flew on south.

For a moment I could scarcely believe my eyes. Did he believe we wouldn't shoot? It would save such a lot of trouble if he'd just be good and turn around and fly home—I looked at Hickman and shrugged my shoulders. Then I decided to make one move before we peppered his radiator and brought him down. I felt sorry for him popping along in that superannuated Jenny. He certainly had his nerve with him.

I tilted my ship forward until my guns were pointing twenty feet over him. There

was no particular sense in what I did, but there was no reason why I shouldn't, either. I pressed the gun control and a stream of bullets passed across the outlaw plane a safe distance above it. I was barely fifty feet from him in order to lend force to my argument. Then, all of a sudden, as the DeHaviland shot ahead of the Jenny, the Liberty went haywire as the propeller splintered in a thousand pieces. The c. c. gear synchronizing the gun with the whirling propeller had gone wrong. I ducked as I cut the motor.

SUDDENLY all seemed very peaceful. As that Liberty went dead and only the drone of the Jenny's motor vibrated through the night like a mellifluous croon.

Then, in a split second, I realized the spot we were in. There was the money escaping us, and me with a propellerless ship—and only three hundred feet high. I took one look at Hickman as I shoved the stick all the way ahead. The Jenny was even with us now and suddenly I realized that we were but a hundred yards or so from the Rio Grande.

Now the DeHaviland was diving earthward, picking up speed rapidly. The Jenny banked away from us, flying eastward parallel to the river. Desperately I swung my motorless ship around and my excess speed was sufficient to overtake the other ship. I was but fifty feet high and directly underneath it as it started to bank northward to get away from us.

At that moment Hickman took a last desperate shot. No fine beads on the propeller now. He poured bullets into that Jenny. We were fairly scraping a clump of mesquite trees as I saw the Jenny falter. I looked around desperately. Those trees would mean bad injuries, almost certainly.

To this day I don't know how I kept the staggering D. H. in the air that last twenty feet as I swung toward the river. It sort of mushed through the last trees and as its undercarriage caught in one, it flipped the tail up. We plunged into the Rio Grande like a kingfish after a minnow. I just had time to throw my arm in front of my face as we hit with a smack, and enough water was thrown into the air to

make it look as though Niagara Falls was flowing backward. That wounded arm of mine protecting my head hit the protruding compass on the instrument board with terrific force. Water eddied up above me and vaguely I felt the D. H. turn over on its back.

Half conscious, gulping water, my head touching the bottom of the shallow river, I tore at my safety belt like a mad man.



I grasped the edge of the cowlings with my hands and drew myself down. For the moment I was a maniac, as it seemed to me that there was no room for my submerged body to get between the ship and the river

bottom so that I could get loose from the cockpit. I felt myself stuck half way through. My lungs were full of water it seemed, and I still don't recollect any moment of such utter torture.

Then I felt myself being pulled and dragged. A moment later, reeling and half drowned, I was above water in Hickman's arms. The rear cockpit had not been submerged as far as the front and he had gotten loose. There I stood up to my shoulders in water, my mouth filled with mud, my lungs full of water, and weeds in my hair. I opened my mouth and dredged out the mud. Then I sort of staggered around, water pouring from my ears and mouth, and the river must have raised a foot.

"He came down in the river, too," I heard Hickman bellowing in my ear, and it seemed as though that brought me to.

I gazed stupidly at the tail of a ship projecting from the water a hundred feet away. Hickman started out, half swimming, half wading toward it. I joined him, scarcely knowing what I was doing. I was still scraping mud off my tonsils and combing slimy stuff out of my hair with my fingers as we splashed toward that silent,

lifeless ship like a pair of hippopotamuses. I guess if we'd been many seconds more, it would have been just too bad for the unconscious pilot in that submerged plane. Hickman got him out limp and unconscious, a bullet through one side of his neck and another one in his leg, and I dived for the dinero.

"I'll take him to the bank and work on him," gasped Hickman.

HE PICKED up the other pilot as though he had been a baby, and waded toward shore. In a moment I had the gunny sack out of the upside down rear cockpit. I took one look. Packages of water-soaked bills met my eyes, and I carried more money to shore, right then, than I'd ever heard about. I collapsed on the bank weakly and spit up four more buckets full of water. Hickman was working on the pilot, kneading him enthusiastically.

"Is that the dough?" he gulped breathlessly.

"Right," said I. "If you'd like to borrow a hundred, I can let you have it."

Hickman grinned.

"Wait till this baby comes to," he gasped. "Observe, he moves—he breathes—he seems to feel the thrill of life along his keel!"

Which was the truth. I didn't have any life to spare myself, but I sort of crawled over as the scrawny, sandy haired, sharp faced little fellow stirred in the puddle of water that Hickman had got out of him. The little pilot looked up at us out of small green eyes.

"Listen, squirt," I told him, suddenly conscious of a pain in my arm. "If you don't come clean, we're going to heave you back in the water and hold you under. Was Crane in on this bank robbery?"

The pilot nodded weakly. He was too far gone to bluff.

Five minutes later, just as the advance guard of cars reached a point a half mile away from us and men began streaming toward us, he was willing enough to talk.

"And you'd better say plenty," I advised him. "You're in the box, deep."

"Sure I will," he coughed, his freckled face pinched and drawn. "Why should

I hold the sack? Hell, we ain't really bank robbers. We was just hired to carry the swag away."

"Crane and Haddon, the latter known as Bradley around here—were the real ones, huh?" I said.

He nodded.

"I expect to get off easy for this," he told us, a cunning look in his eyes, and I nodded. "Crane wanted his own bank robbed to cover up money he stole, according to Haddon," he said in a quick rush of words. "We weren't to rob it. We just called at the bank to get it. Where did you guys drop from?"

"That isn't important," I told him, and turned to Bob. "Listen, Bob, let's get going now. A stitch in time is worth two in the bush. Opportunity knocks, and you've got to strike before you leap. We may have this town right by the left ear now if we work it right."

V

IN A half hour I found out that Captain Kennard had a good hold on one ear. The job was completed in the following manner, i. e., viz., and to wit: As Hickman and I escorted the bag of money and our prisoner into the Gonzara landing field, followed in file by several dozen men who had been down at the river, we found Captain Kennard, his bow-legs wide apart, on the top of a sedan, his felt hat down over his right eye, and his rasping voice holding the rapt attention of the crowd. Included in the crowd were Groody and Tex. Kennard spotted us coming and his raucous voice split the night.

"Got the dough?" he bellowed.

"Right," I yelled back.

"Hear that, you Gonzara goofs?" bellowed the square faced and cocky little captain. "Now you listen to me. In this crowd there are a lot of substantial people of this town. And included in that bunch, as sure as hell, are men who fought these boys and kept your town starving to death. I don't know whether Crane was your leader or not, but if I were some of you eggs, I'd follow his example and shoot myself."

I looked at Hickman wordlessly.

"So that cold potato up there in the bank couldn't stand the gaff," I breathed.

Our prisoner safely guarded, Hickman and I made our way toward Groody and Tex. We didn't have much trouble. One touch from our wet bodies and people jumped aside. The captain was going on:

"You all know that these boys own the acreage that'll make this pool, if it's going to be made, and that they need dough. They don't need as much as Slim, there, has got in that bag. They've saved your bank, which was probably almost on the rocks from Crane's embezzlement, and there's only one sensible thing for white men and business men to do—that is, chuck in a couple of hundred thousand dollars of the bank accounts you'd probably have lost if it wasn't for these boys, back a company and help develop their field for your own good. What say?"

For a moment dead silence hung over those three hundred excited people.

"Where's Bradley, or Haddon?" I whispered in Groody's ear.

HE SHOOK his head and didn't answer. Suddenly a gray haired old man with a sweeping gray mustache pushed his way to the front.

"You're right, Captain Kennard," he roared in a voice that would make a fog horn feel ashamed. "I don't believe there's scarcely anybody except Crane behind this new Border Company. The rest of us have been laying back. If everything's okay, I've got forty thousand dollars that I can invest in our own home-town field, and I've got friends that can raise the ante to a hundred. If it's agreeable to Mr. Groody and your other boys, here, let's have a meeting in my office tomorrow morning at ten o'clock."

"Where is that?" Groody barked from the crowd, and every eye turned toward him.

"I own the cotton-gin here," the old-timer informed him, "down by the railroad tracks."

As though that had broken the ice, the crowd underwent a transformation that had my eyes popping out until you could knock 'em off with a stick. Men were climbing aboard the band wagon so fast

that it damned near tipped over. Money! All of a sudden there was money enough in that town to cover the oil field with a blanket of ten dollar bills. Not until later did I think how funny it was for me to be standing there, my mouth open, a wet weed draped over my right ear, holding on to a bag that had more than a quarter of a million dollars in it and nobody thinking anything about it. I soon turned it over to three policemen and then, along with Hickman, got slapped on the back until I had to stop it on the plea of my bandaged left arm.

All the fliers eventually piled into the leonine old cotton-gin owner's flossy limousine and joined the procession back to town.

"Boys, it won't be two weeks before you'll be sinking wells around this town, and you can lay to John Houston's word on that."

"What about this fake case in the courts?" barked Groody.

"Hell, old man, Crane confessed everything while he was dying in his own bank," Kennard told him. "Those poor guys you leased from were just black-jacked into doing what they did."

"We form a company with you boys getting fifty-one per cent of the stock for your land, and we'll get under way," the mustached old-timer bellowed. "We've been blind fools in this town! As I said before, you can lay to that!"

I felt at peace with the world, but a muscle or two sort of twitched as Tex drawled: "I'd like to lay my hands on this Bradley guy. Where is he?"

"Disappeared somewhere," Kennard said. "But he'll be caught, I reckon."

"Did Crane say anything about him?" I asked.

"Plenty," Kennard answered. "He had a hundred thousand in this deal, or was to have. He and Crane have been together on some deals that lost money for Crane in other fields."

Just then everybody's face started getting a little white. Our cotton-gin friend clamped on the brakes and the whole procession of the townspeople stopped. It was the roar of an airplane that had caught everybody's attention. I'm telling you, I felt a funny feeling as I saw a little scout ship, barely fifty feet up, come hurtling southward like a shot out of a gun. As though in mocking scorn it flew low over that long line of automobiles and in the light of the exhaust flames, grinning scornfully down at us, was Bradley, Mexico bound.

"Had a ship hidden somewhere," Tex drawled slowly. "Theah's no way of catching him now."

I SHOOK my head. There wasn't, but somehow I had a hunch that the Border Patrol hadn't seen the last of Mr. Bradley.

"I guess we got enough prisoners for one night, at that," I said. "They rounded up the other fliers, didn't they?"

"Every one of them," Kennard said with satisfaction. "Gonzara turned itself into one big police force this evening. Boy, you should have seen their faces around that bank!"



We were coming into the outskirts of the abnormally illuminated town. Almost every dwelling house and some of the stores were illuminated, despite the fact that it was after two o'clock in the morning. The bank robbery had certainly ruined Gonzara's sleep for that night.

"Well, boys," drawled Tex. "Look at 'er. A week from now she'll be on the boom plenty."

"And if you don't think I'm applying for a leave, Captain," I stated, "you're due for a rude shock. I'm in a terrible physical condition, entirely unfit for active duty. My dandruff is unusually painful, my stomach doesn't feel right at all. Every rib I've got is floating in Rio Grande water, and as far as my liver is concerned, I don't think that anything but a two-months' sick leave could ever fix it up."

"Me, too," sighed Tex. "Lordy, I feel terrible. My heart doesn't act right, my eyes have gone back on me, and when I try to fly a ship I get dizzy somehow. A month or two off and I'd be myself again."

Captain Kennard's battered face flickered in a grin.

"Want to help this baby boom, do you?" he growled. "All right. But pick out a

house to live in that's got a guest room. Personally, I like a three-quarter bed and I expect to see an improvement in you both every week-end."

By the time Pop Cravath, Hickman and Sleepy Spears got through making reservations, I stated, "The hotel is under lease right now."

I looked over at the silent Groody who was sitting there like a brooding eagle. Tex glanced at him and met my eye and grinned. Suddenly I realized that Groody was not only about to watch a town go through a boom he had built up, but that the well known golden fleece that an old maid school teacher used to talk about back in Utah was hanging right on Groody's wall. There was a prospect that made even my aged joints crackle with anticipation.

"Well, how does it seem, Groody?" I asked him.

His lips widened in a sardonic grin, and his eyebrows rose mockingly above his sloping eyes. He bit the end of his cigar contemptingly.

"This is going to be a gamble that is a gamble," he stated. "Gents, I don't know but what I feel pretty good!"

Another Novelette In This Same Series

**Slim
Tex
Sleepy**

**next
issue**

CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

by

THOMSON BURTIS

*With Death in the Scales
against Him the Best
Damned Coal Burn-
ing Fireman Stokes
His Ship to the
Refuge of a Tor-
rid Red Sea Port*



SLUCE HIM DOWN!

By JACLAND MARMUR

Author of "Sentinels of the Sea," "Blood or Steam," etc.

SAIL, eh? The tough, iron-men days of sail!" Mocking and scornful, "Hellfire" Chris Marlow's roaring voice echoed in the cavernous depths of the fire room. A loud hiss of steam rose in a cloud as he plunged the end of his slice bar savagely into its drum by the bulkhead. "Did you hear 'em, Charley?" he boomed on at the sweat and coal dust streaked back of his watch-mate. "Did you hear 'em from the fiddle, Charley—they damned, deck-swabbin' mates, talk-

in' about what a hell of a tough time they had in sail! An' this," he ended in a jeering roar—"this here is just a damned schoolboy's picnic, hey?"

"Liverpool" Charley made no answer. Small, shriveled, all back and shoulders and bulging arm muscles, with a face like a year-old, wrinkled apple, Charley had no breath to waste on idle talk. He let go his hold of the handle of his shovel and it fell clattering to the floor plates. Then he leaned against the bulkhead, plucked the

end of his sweat rag from between his teeth, and mopped his face and the bald pate of his head.

"Gimme a smoke, Chris," was his only reply. "Blarst me, I gotta have a blow."

Heat—scorching, blazing heat was the only god known down there. Heat and the stench of unburned gases and live steam hanging still in the breathless atmosphere of the freighter's fire room. Ten livid, insatiable maws there were for these two men to feed. Ten mouths bursting flame out of the fire doors in their lust for coal—coal—coal! They stood closed now for a moment, those ten iron maws—massive, jowled like the closed mouths of a row of Senegalese idols. And in front of the boilers the needle of the steam gage fluttered impatiently.

The bunker door clanged open and a trimmer staggered into the fire room, dragging his shovel behind him. His face was pasty white—all except the forehead and the temples where burned livid red patches through the thick coal dust and sweat-streaked grime. He stared wild eyed about him for an instant and then, without a word, pitched face forward onto the floor plates.

Hellfire Chris Marlow thumped his great clenched hands to his hips.

"One more down, Charley!" he growled grimly. "Pete's out." Then he stepped forward. "C'mon, Charley, lend a hand! Up the ash ventilator with him. Give 'em a shout on deck." He stuck his head up into the open mouth of the hoist, "Sluice 'im down, on deck there—sluice 'im down!"

Through the well named "Gates of Hell"—Bab el Mandeb—the ship had passed three days before. They were in the Red Sea now—the blazing, scorching, killing Red Sea. No breath of air came down through the deck ventilators. Sweat poured in steady dripping streams down the hairy chests of the two men—the one of giant stature, massively built, and the other a wizened product of the coal-burning fire room.

An old, familiar shout that, to those who remember their apprenticeship in coal—"Sluice 'im down, on deck there!" The toll of the ship's daily progress. But that was beside the point. Steam was what was

wanted—steam! And you can't make two hundred and fifty pounds of steam on rags and old papers. Behind the bulkhead the barrows rattled slowly over dirty floor plates. In the fire room Hellfire Chris Marlow straightened up again before Liverpool Charley.

"Sail days was the tough days, Charley my boy!" the roar of his voice jeered again. "This? Hell! This here's no more'n a schoolboy's picnic!"

Charley picked up his shovel and lunged viciously at a fire door under the starboard boiler, and, in the clanging noises of iron on iron, Chris Marlow did not hear the fire room door open and bang closed. Rawlins, the second assistant engineer stood under the swaying, dust covered electric light bulb.

"Pour it in, Charley!" Chris was shouting, "A damned schoolboy's—"

"If you'd lay off the jawin', Marlow, and fire, we'd all get a damned sight further!" the engineer's voice interrupted surlily. "Steam's what I want," he continued grimly. "Steam! C'n you read a steam gage? Well, I want 250 pounds of—"

Chris Marlow dropped his shovel. Liverpool Charley let fly a heap of coal at the open door before him. A shot of yellow flame leaped out at him, then was suddenly blotted out as he slammed the door closed with a clang. Hellfire Marlow advanced deliberately toward the stocky, powerfully built Rawlins, second assistant engineer of the round-the-world freighter, *Dawson City*.

"We ain't gonna be at sea all the time, *Mister Rawlins*," Hellfire breathed meaningfully between his teeth. "Some day we'll be alongside a dock—East River, ain't it?"

"Yes. Pier twenty-one," Rawlins answered harshly. "And until then—fire! Steam's what I want—not damned fool talk. You understand?" The engineer turned without another word and disappeared into the depths of the engine room.

And Liverpool Charley and Hellfire Marlow fired. With naked, sweat-streaked backs bent double, they toiled like men before a serried row of flaming maws, in heat that clamped down on a man's back like an unbearable weight. At two bells—ten minutes before the end of the watch—they

rested, panting heavily, gnarled hands still grasped on shovel handles. Liverpool Charley mopped his face with his sweat rag again.

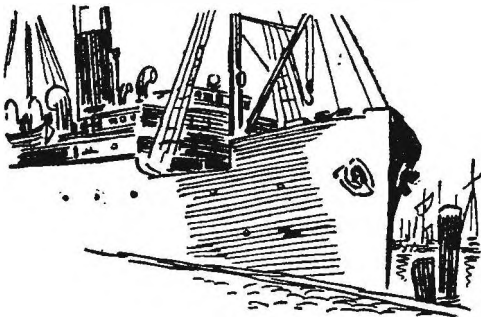
"What's the idea, Chris?" he grunted, as he turned for the ladder leading up to the fiddley. "Rawlins 'as been riding you all trip. Been shipmates with 'im before? What's——?"

Hellfire Chris Marlow straightened up, towering above the small frame of his watch mate. Then he burst into a tremendous roar of laughter that rang metallically through the dirty cavern of the stokehole.

"You bet we have!" the big stoker thundered in his explosive mirth. "There's a girl in Singapore, Charley my boy—a girl from Brooklyn, she is, that strayed out East to find 'Romance' and wound up working in the shipping office on Keppel Harbor Road, Singapore. Me an' Rawlins—excuse me, *Mister Rawlins*—both think she's——" He broke off in another torrent of that infectious laughter. "You've just been seeing Rawlins's manner of showin' his displeasure at my courtin' her. That's all, Charley, my boy, that's all!"

Eight bells clanged surlily from the depths of the engine room. The new watch came climbing down the ladders into that hell of heat. Liverpool Charley grinned a broad, mouth-splitting grin and followed Marlow up the ladder.

IT WAS a month later that the engine room telegraph of the *Dawson City* jingled "finished with engines." Quiet and still she lay now after her long journeying,



alongside her pier in Brooklyn, a wanderer of the waters of the world come home for a short respite. The busy shipping of New York's great harbor swam past her, tugs

hooting patiently for right of way, the ancient municipal ferries waddling insolently in the path of mighty trans-Atlantic liners.

On the deck of the *Dawson City*, Hellfire Chris Marlow stood on the iron bulwark of the after well deck. He reached down, lifted up his sea bag and tossed it to the dock. Then, with his coat flung carelessly over one shoulder, he too leaped from the ship to the wharf.

"All right, Chris!" Liverpool Charley waved his hand from the alleyway. "I'll have 'im on the dock some'ow in 'arf a moment." Then he disappeared in search of the second assistant engineer.

Chris tossed his coat on a dolphin and waited carelessly at the foot of the after gangway. A few moments later engineer Rawlins ducked under the low overhead of the open cargo port and came quickly down the gangway, Liverpool Charley, a broad grin splitting his homely face, following close behind. Rawlins stopped at the foot of the plank and looked curiously up and down the busy dock. Marlow was leaning idly on the handrail of the gangway.

"Lookin' for someone, Rawlins?" he drawled.

"Charley says someone out here to see me. Seen any one asking for me, Chris?"

"Yea."

"Who?"

"Me!"

"Oh, for Pete's sake! You! What t'hell do you want? Pay off's at nine tomorrow." The second assistant engineer turned away in disgust. Hellfire Marlow's hand touched his forearm restrainingly as he started up the plank.

"Wait a minute, *Mister Rawlins*," he said quietly. "We're on the dock now—not in the fire room."

"Well, snap it out!" the engineer barked. "What do you want?"

"Put up your dukes," Hellfire Marlow commanded calmly.

The engineer looked up at him quickly, frankly puzzled. "What's the idea, Chris?"

Marlow straightened up and hitched at his belt. "This here's the idea, Engineer," he explained deliberately, that slow, characteristic grin spreading across his face. "You've been riding me for four months. Girl or no girl, second trip or no second

trip, no man can do that to Chris Marlow! Because I know I can fire, and I can't stand being pestered. You're a good fellow, Rawlins, and a damned good engineer; but this trip I—don't—like you! Put up your dukes!"

"Oh!" The second assistant engineer grinned broadly back at the massive man before him. "So that's it, eh? 'Hellfire' Chris Marlow—champion fireman and heavyweight. Come on then," he ended grimly, "let's get it over with. I got a pump job to finish down below today before I knock off. Let's go!"

"Watch his left, Engineer, if you want to make another trip!" the shrill voice of Liverpool Charley shrieked from the gangway as the two men squared off and faced each other with raised fists.

IN AN instant a crowd had formed a small ring for the pair on the dock. Charley climbed the handrail to clear his view of the heads of the crowd. His arms flailed the air excitedly as Chris landed the first blow, a staggering right to the body. Then the two men fought close in and the excited crowd of stevedores and dockmen, jabbering loudly, pressed close on the pair and shut the fighters from Charley's sight. He shrieked imprecations of rage on them. No one heeded him. Now the swift, dull thuds of rapid body blows being exchanged came to his ears. They parted and squared off again, weaving watchfully about each other and the crowd scattered back to give them more room.

"Watch his left, Engineer!" the Liverpool man shouted jeeringly. "Didn't I tell you to watch his——"

Little Charley ended up in a shriek of delight as Chris landed a terrific left jab that thudded sickeningly against the engineer's ribs just below the heart. Rawlins staggered back. Charley yelled madly.

"Give him another, Chris! Give him another. He's out on his bloody feet!"

But just as Rawlins, recovering his balance, leaped out of Marlow's reach, a grayhaired, officious looking man pushed his way authoritatively through the crowd and stepped between the now thoroughly enraged pair. It was Bill Halliday, port engineer for the steamship company that

owned the *Dawson City*. He stood between the two, staring quietly for a second from one to the other while the crowd scattered quickly.

"Go aboard and get cleaned up, Mister Rawlins," he said calmly, at length. "Then I'd like to see you in my office." He turned to Marlow then and jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Get off the dock, you!" Then the port engineer turned on his heel and walked away.

Chris Marlow pressed a hand to a small cut at the corner of his mouth where the second assistant engineer had landed an effective blow, and with a broad grin on his face he walked to the dolphin to recover his coat. Rawlins, on his way up the gangplank, stopped and faced him.

"I still don't think your half as good as you think you are!" he snapped out to his fireman.

"No?" Hellfire grinned back up at him.

"No! Not if it costs me my job, which I know it has already, the way Pop Halliday talked."

"Well, we can finish the fight any time you like."

Rawlins turned away and disappeared into the darkness of the ship's hold. Chris Marlow tossed his coat carelessly over his shoulder and waved an arm up to where Liverpool Charley stood mopping the bald pate of his head with a dirty handkerchief.

"See you tomorrow, Charley my boy!" he called. "Pay off's at nine."

"S'long!" Charley waved back.

And Chris, whistling softly to himself, disappeared around the corner of the dock.

A WEEK ashore was plenty long enough for big Chris Marlow and his wizened, little friend Liverpool Charley. They weren't made for the beach, those two. And it was plenty long enough also, incidentally, to see the last of their pay day from the *Dawson City* trip. So that, just a week to the day after Hellfire Marlow had jumped ashore from the deck of the *Dawson City*, the two coal-burning firemen clambered up the shore plank of the freighter *Henderson*, sea bags perched high on bent shoulders.

Once on the iron after well deck, little Charley dropped his sea bag from his back with a grunt of relief.

"Well, that's that," he growled, and spat placidly over the rail.

"Yea," Chris answered. "But don't stand there gapin'. Let's rustle aft and pick ourselves a halfway decent bunk in the fo'c'sle of this here hooker. C'mon, Charley."

Charley grunted again and stooped down wearily to pick up his sea bag.

"Blow me if it don't beat all hell!" he complained in a growl. "Ev'ry damned hooker we signs onto the last year and a half has got to be bound east for all that heat and hell. Ain't you ever gonna get tired o' it?"

"Charley, my boy," Chris Marlow thumped the little fellow a resounding whack on the shoulder, "it's Singapore! Singapore is where we're bound! Singapore an' my little hometown girl friend. Sure you wouldn't want me to disap-point—"

"Aw t'ell with you an' Singapore both!" Charley mumbled over his shoulder and stumped aft to the forecabin under the poop.

That night the *Henderson* sailed. And the second day out from Ambrose Light, they parted Hellfire Chris Marlow from his mate, Liverpool Charley, and shifted him over to the mid-watch. Marlow was puzzled—but not for long. On the first watch of his new trick he found the answer—the answer being Rawlins himself, the late second assistant engineer of the *Dawson City*, and now second assistant engineer of the *Henderson*, standing with widespread feet in the center of the gloomy fire room, arms folded calmly across his barrel chest.

Marlow, coming down the fiddley ladders to relieve the watch, stopped short on the last rung and stared. Then slowly he stepped to the floor plates, lifted his head up to the intricate meshwork of iron ladders overhead, and bellowed out that roaring, infectious laughter of his. At last he stepped up to the second assistant engineer.

"Ho!" he shouted. "My old friend, *Mister Rawlins!* Glad you liked me well enough to have me swung over to your watch."

"Glad to be with me, aren't you, Hellfire?" Rawlins asked with a half mocking smile on his broad, good-humored face.

"You're damned right, I am, Rawlins!" Marlow answered promptly. "Last time we met you sort of—of intimated that you still thought you could—lick—me—"

"Still think so, Chris," Rawlins interrupted quietly.

"That's why I'm so damned glad to be with you—'cause I don't think you can! See? And I'm nervous and impatient. Can't stand the strain. Now we'll maybe have a chance to find out, hey? On some likely dock."

"Suits me right smack down to the bilges, Chris Marlow!" Rawlins grinned broadly. "And now let's see some steam! Steam!"

Rawlins turned and disappeared through the door into the engine room. Marlow laughed aloud again, kicked open a lower fire door and plunged a slice bar into it viciously. His watchmate, leaning idly on his shovel handle near by, straightened up and spat reflectively at a mound of ash.

"Know the second, mate?" he asked curiously.

Marlow turned on him with a grin. "Know him? Plenty!" Then he turned again and peered into the open fire before him, its eerie light glowing a livid red on the man's square-jawed face. "Who t'hell cleaned this here fire last?" he bellowed suddenly. "Damned fools!" He flung out his arm in a fierce gesture of complaint. "Look at that, I ask you! Just look at that!" Then he lunged savagely on the long handle of the protruding slice bar. . . .

STEADILY the *Henderson* ploughed her way across the stormy western ocean, slid past Cape Spartell and that lonely rock of solitary strength, Gibraltar. Then across the placid, purple waters of the Mediterranean she swam until, suddenly she found herself in the midst of that riot of color, that bedlam of strange, exotic noises that is Port Said. Then the Suez Canal closed on her with the desert on one



side and the courageous green patches of stunted growth on the other. And finally she passed into the Red Sea again—the blazing, blinding Red Sea.

Across those enormous stretches of water they had brought the freighter, feeding great shovelfuls of coal to the insatiable maws of gaping, fire-belching mouths. And now once again was heard that bellow up the ash ventilator: "Sluice 'im down! Sluice 'im down, on deck there!" The toll of their daily progress.

Stripped to the waist the stokers toiled in the fire room, Hellfire Chris Marlow towering above his watchmates like a tireless giant. No breath of air stirred. Heat! Only heat—heat that was the only god known down there! And the first inkling Marlow had of the trouble was when an oiler told him of it. Rawlins, the second assistant engineer, toward the end of the last mid-watch had been bending over a stop valve in a tight corner and it had burst open in his very face. He was in the makeshift hospital amidships, horribly scalded. In the loud noises of the fire room they had heard nothing of it. Eight bells had been made directly after the accident. The chief engineer was taking Rawlins' watch. . . .

Chris Marlow found the two of them, the chief and the third assistant engineer talking it all over in the narrow passageway alongside the port boiler that led into the engine room. Chris, stripped to the waist, strode up to them, dragging his shovel behind him.

"How is he, Chief?" the third assistant engineer was asking.

The old chief engineer shook his head sorrowfully.

"Just saw him and the Old Man, Larry," he muttered mournfully. "Rawlins is sure in a bad way; half out of his head with pain. And the skipper—well, he can't do very much for him. He wants to rush into Aden with him. Wanted to know if I could give him ninety-four revolutions. It's the only chance there is to save him——"

"Ninety-four! Great snakes, Chief, we can't make more than six knots on this——"

"I know it, Larry," the chief engineer interrupted, staring down suddenly at his

carpet-slipped feet. "I told the Old Man so. We can't open her up any more on two hundred pounds of steam. And we've all we can do to keep that! Two men out in the fo'c'sle now with this damned heat. If we could get Rawlins to Aden in even eight hours, he'd have a fighting chance! And we could, too," the old chief finished savagely, "if this cursed heat would let men fire!"

It was at this moment that Hellfire Chris Marlow stepped forward and tapped the chief engineer on the shoulder, his eyes blazing strangely.

"Is Rawlins, the second, that bad?" he gritted out. "An' no one told me——"

The chief engineer looked up quickly at the fireman and smiled sadly. Larry, the third assistant engineer grinned openly.

"Told you! Why, who the hell are you?"

"I'm Marlow," Chris answered deliberately. "Chris Marlow—fireman in Rawlins' watch."

The third assistant engineer turned away in disgust. The chief engineer turned to follow him into the engine room, but Marlow laid a restraining hand on his arm and the veteran engineer looked up curiously.

"Listen to me, Chief. Please!" There was a grim note in the half pleading tone of that voice that made the chief engineer stop short. "Will he—will Rawlins live if we get him into Aden in, say eight hours?"

The chief engineer looked up, frankly puzzled, at the sweat-streaked, intense face above his own. But he knew ships, the old chief of the *Henderson* did, and he knew men, and he sensed, somehow, the subtle bond that bound these two strange seafarers, Marlow, the fireman, and Rawlins, his second assistant, together.

"There's no telling, man," he answered sympathetically. "But we can't get him there in eight hours or in ten hours—unless that steam gage needle's at two hundred and fifty pounds. No human fireman can do that in this hellish heat. And if we don't——"

"To hell with 'if we don't'!" Chris thundered suddenly, "No man can? Well, I can!" Again he grasped the chief engineer's arm. "Chief, listen—please! Gimme Charley from the eight to twelve watch—Liverpool Charley I want down here. Please!" His voice rose to a roaring bellow.

"Liverpool Charley an' me—we'll fire! Tie down the safety valve, Chief—gimme Charley an' I'll bust the damned thing wide open!"

The chief engineer looked up, amazed, startled at that wild outburst, but the look he saw on the face of Hellfire Chris Marlow silenced the mocking answer that was on his lips. The giant fireman was bent forward in the intensity of his plea, and the massive chest heaved slightly with his breathing, the sweat trickling steadily down it in rivulets in the awful heat of the stoke-hole.

"All right," the chief engineer snapped out shortly, "try it—if you want to kill yourself! Charley can come down if he wants to. And if you can carry two hundred and fifty pounds of steam in this weather you're the best damned coal-burning fireman I ever layed my eyes on!"

He turned and vanished into the depths of the engine room.

SO THEY fired—Hellfire Chris Marlow and Liverpool Charley, pitting their human strength and endurance against the devils of heat and exhaustion, with a helpless man's life as the stake.

At six bells they sent a fireman and a trimmer up to the deck.

"Sluice 'im down! Sluice 'im down, on deck there!"

Chris Marlow and Charley were alone now in the fire room, in a death's grip with inhuman heat and eight belching, stinking

fires. The steam gage needle hung fluttering at two hundred and ten pounds. Before the water glasses the shaded, grimed electric light bulbs swayed fitfully

with the vessel's slight motion. Coal dust and dirt hung heavy in the thick, foul air of the stokehole.

Liverpool Charley tore a slice bar out of the red heart of a fire and slid it clanging across the floor plates toward the far bulkhead where it buried its glowing end in a mound of hot ash. Silently, in a grim and

deadly silence, the two stokers toiled before the belching maws of the boilers; and above the scraping of shovel on iron and the clatter of falling coal lumps to the floor plates, the deadened drone of the draft fans sounded like the dull undertone to some muffled symphony of hell. With naked backs bent to their task they labored, the sweat rolling steadily down grim, begrimed faces and chests. The fine coal dust covered them from head to foot and oozed in black pools out of their soggy boots.

Two hundred and thirty pounds on the pressure gage!

Hellfire Chris Marlow straightened up, his massive chest heaving. For a moment he paused to wipe the sweat and grime from face and breast. Then he swung his shovel and slammed it against the bulkhead.

"Coal—coal—*coal!*" he bellowed.

The black lumps poured out of the chute and dwindled beneath the vicious lunges of Charley's shovel. Chris joined him, moving from fire to fire. And as the doors clanged open and the flames belched out with each heaping mound flung into the insatiable maws, the vivid light flared out upon the two crouching men, glowing fantastically on bulging chest muscles until they looked like two obscene demons feeding the very fires of hell.

Eight bells were made. Chris Marlow paid no heed. Charley staggered back against the bulkhead.

"C'mon, Chris," he gasped, "let's take a blow. Eight bells."

"Go on, Charley," Marlow growled. "I'm stickin'. They want a *fireman* down here for this job. These damned greaseballs aren't worth a hoot! You go ahead."

"You go to hell then!" Charley snarled out of that queer, wrinkled-up face. "You stick—I stick!"

Marlow made no answer. The new watch came down into that awful heat that clamped down on a man's chest inhumanly. Marlow whirled on the two new firemen.

"Two hundred and fifty pounds of steam I want—no back talk! Fire—understand? . . . Charley!" he whirled on the little fellow, "go into that bunker an' show 'em how to pass coal. Coal! Let's have some coal—*coal!*" . . .

Two hundred and fifty pounds! There it



was at last! Steady! Behind the dirty face of the gage the needle fluttered. Six bells in the first night watch. One fireman and a trimmer lay crumpled against the bulkhead. Marlow had no time to send them up on deck. He was staggering slightly now in his unsteady gyrations between the bunker chute and the iron maws of the fire doors that leered mockingly at him. The first assistant engineer came into the fire room.

"Take a spell, you hell's own fool!" he shouted at the tottering giant who refused to know exhaustion. "Take a spell before you kill yourself!"

"Go to hell!" Marlow thundered back at him. "Get out of here to where you belong! This is *my* job!" He straightened up for the fraction of an instant. "No human coal fireman can do it, hey?" he bellowed like a man gone mad. Then he lifted back his head and roared out that defiant, tempestuous laughter. "Well, *I* can do it! Hellfire Chris Marlow can do it! Look at it! Look at that steam gage! Two hundred and fifty pounds you ordered and you got!"

AN HOUR later the needle of the steam gage fluttered and fell slowly. Liverpool Charley was staggering out into the fire room from the bunker hatch. Chris Marlow whirled on him, pointing his uplifted shovel to the gage and his face, coal begrimed and wide in that bellowing laughter, looked like the horrible face of a Benda mask.

"Blowin' off! By God, Charley! She's blowin' off!"

Then he turned and dragged open the engine room door. The first assistant engineer was at the throttle. The telegraph rang for stop. Then slow astern. Then stop again. A moment later it clanged again into "finished with engines." The speaking tube from the bridge whistled and the chief engineer at the log desk, sprang to answer it, as Hellfire Chris Marlow staggered into the engine room, his shovel dragging on the floor plates. Behind him tottered little Liverpool Charley.

"Righto, Chris!" Charley's high-pitched voice shrieked. "Blowin' off! We got the damned thing blowin' off!"

Then quite suddenly he staggered forward for another step, swayed like a drunken man and pitched forward to the floor plates, utterly exhausted. Down the speaking tube, in the sudden silence of the engine room, the skipper's voice came from the bridge.

"All right, Chief. We've done it! Anchored in the roadstead. I wired for a launch. Hospital launch be alongside in a moment for Rawlins. I think we've saved the man, Chief!"

The old chief engineer, standing beside the speaking tube, turned his head just in time to see the swaying form of Hellfire Chris Marlow. The big fireman passed his great, gnarled paw across his massive chest, leaving five ghastly white streaks where the fingers passed across the coal grime that lay thick on the naked ribs. He staggered forward and on his dirty face there was the shadow of that triumphant, bellowing laughter. The next minute he collapsed to the floor plates. The chief engineer turned grimly toward the speaking tube.

"*We* didn't do a damned thing, Cap!" he barked into the gaping mouth of the tube. "There's two fool firemen down here half killed themselves getting her in. Hold the launch! I think we had better send these two with Rawlins to the hospital. *We* didn't do a damned thing!" he repeated abruptly. Then he turned to the first. "Help these two men to the deck," he ordered quietly.

SEVERAL hours later in the ward set aside for emergency marine cases in the Aden hospital. Hellfire Chris Marlow opened his eyes and looked wearily across to the next cot. Rawlins lay there, swathed completely in bandages, only the eyes resting in a fixed stare on the face of his fireman. Marlow grinned weakly. The second assistant engineer's eyes twinkled whimsically. From a narrow slit in the bandaged face the lips barely moved.



"Listen, Chris," Rawlins' voice said weakly. "I—been an awful fool. Lora—out in—Singapore. I don't—"

"To hell with Lora, Rawlins!" Marlow broke in on the engineer.

For a moment both men were silent.

"Chris!"

"Yea, Rawlins?"

"You're too damned good a man to be eating coal. Why don't you go up for your ticket?"

"I was thinking about that just now, Rawlins. It'd look better—you scrapping with an engineer instead of a dirty, good-for-nothing coal heaver. Would—would you give me a hand with some o' the nut-cracker questions they ask when—"

"Would I?" The voice coming from Rawlins' bandaged face was surprisingly powerful for a moment. "Chris—I'd do a hell of a lot more than that—for you!"

An officious interne came bustling quickly over to the cots at the sound of that loud voice.

"Quiet! Quiet there!" he grated harshly. Then he turned away and mumbled something that sounded very much like, "Well—what can you expect? Sailors and dirty firemen."

Hellfire Chris Marlow heard that mumbled complaint. But he made no answer. Sailors and dirty firemen, eh? What did a

hospital interne know about seamen, anyway?

In the next bed Liverpool Charley turned over luxuriously and sighed in deep contentment.

"Chris," he breathed.

"Yea, Charley."

"Chris! A whole month o' this before the *Henderson* comes back to pick us up. Blarst me—it's better'n all I ever 'ear o' paradise!"

Marlow grinned silently and looked across to Rawlins' cot again. He could see nothing but the eyes of the second assistant engineer and these held a strange twinkle, something of gratefulness perhaps, but something much more than that. The chief engineer of the *Henderson*, he who knew ships and men so well—he would have understood!

"Y'know, Chris," the second assistant engineer whispered weakly, "They told me. Y'almost killed yourself and Charley. Why did you do it—for me?"

Marlow laughed aloud. "How in hell could I let you bump off still thinking you could lick me—*me*?"

Second Assistant Engineer Rawlins nodded weakly, but he made no answer. Words were useless things. He closed his eyes wearily. But Hellfire Chris Marlow, still looking at him silently, knew that he understood.

"The Red Globe"

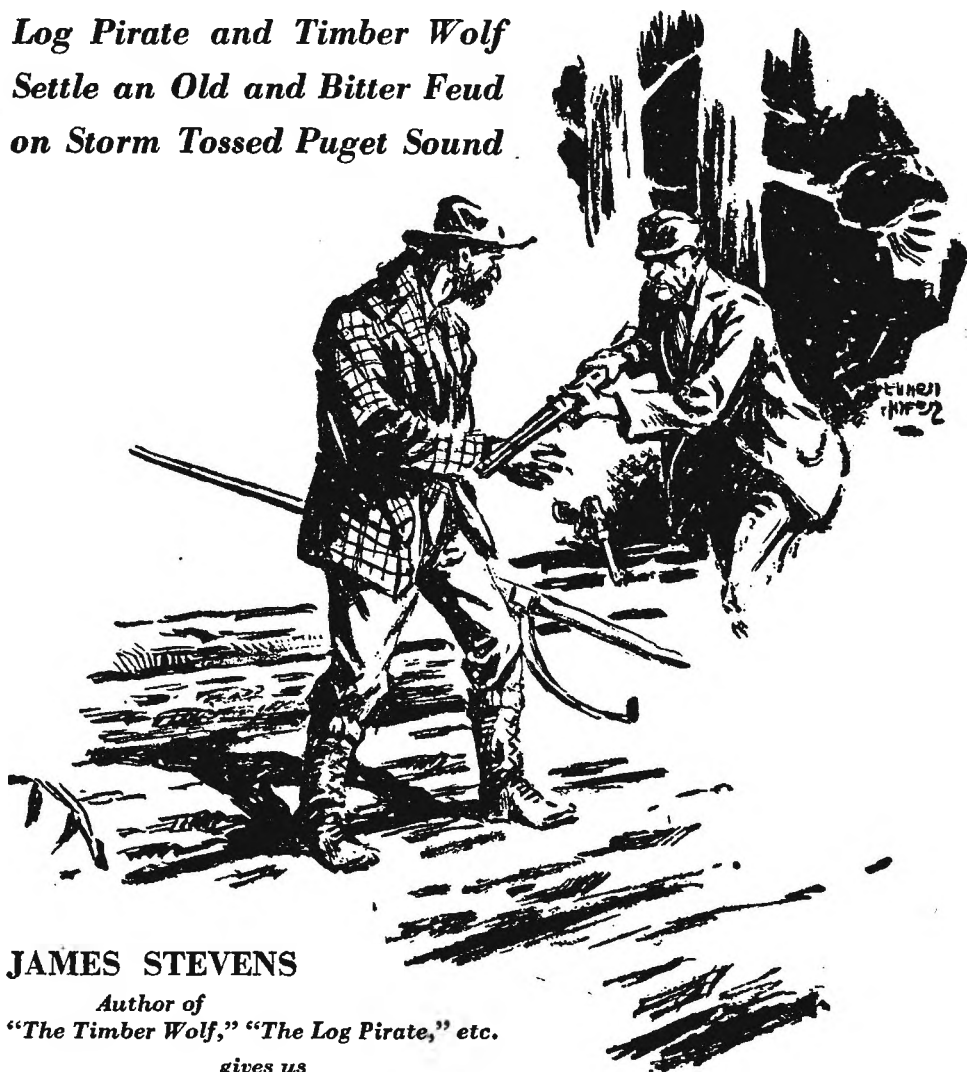
by

Sidney Herschel Small

**next
issue**

**a gripping
complete novel
of the Orient**

*Log Pirate and Timber Wolf
Settle an Old and Bitter Feud
on Storm Tossed Puget Sound*



JAMES STEVENS

Author of
"The Timber Wolf," "The Log Pirate," etc.
gives us

Another "Stag Sharkey" Story

THE ONLY TWO LEFT

FOR ten days and nights the winds from the Pacific had driven the swells up the Strait of Juan de Fuca and into the jaws of Thunder Pass, that lone, forbidding gateway to the shelter of Rugby Island in Puget Sound. On the tenth morning a lull in the blow had allowed four of the five southbound log tows anchored in a sheltering bay above the pass to slip through in low water slack. There was no time for the fifth tug to follow the others before the

flood tide rolled in at a twelve-mile an hour rip. So the *Lemolo* waited, with her eight-section raft of big clear logs, for the slack of the evening ebb tide. But the wind was up again. At twilight the rocky mouth of the pass was smoking with the spume of breaking swells.

Rufus Kallam, czar of seven logging camps, two tidewater mills on Seattle's northwest waterway and a towboat fleet, drove in at this hour in his launch. He boarded the *Lemolo* and roared like a

grizzly into the pilot-house, looking for Slagel, his tug captain.

"A flock of kittens in tidewater, that's what my skippers are!" His growl boomed down the gangway and into the ears of two men by the engine-house door. "Nothin' but a blasted bunch of patty-paws, by the holy old swivel-necked Jonah!"

"Slagel is goin' to need a asbestos hide before this is over," murmured a fireman down the gangway to another man, a visitor aboard the tug, as they heard the skipper trying to explain.

"None of your excuses," Kallam's voice boomed on. "I know all about the foul weather and how each skipper has to take his turn gettin' out of here. Well, it's the other skipper's turn be damned when you're runnin' under orders from me. I've got to make a delivery with this raft of peelers. If they ain't in the Sunset Veneer Company's booms by tomorrow night, I lose the market. Understand, Slagel?"

"The tide rip would have thrown the whole raft on the rocks if I'd tried to follow through this morning," Slagel's voice sounded in a sullen growl. "I'm doin' my best, Mister Kallam."

"You could have horned in ahead of your turn." Kallam had cooled down, but his foghorn tones were hardly lessened in power. "Anyhow, we're goin' through when the ebb slacks an hour from now, even if the swells are breakin' over the funnel. We got to take the chance of pilin' on the rocks. I've been after this veneer market for five years. I'll hold it, or else wreck the raft tryin'."

"You might of told me about that in the first place," complained Slagel. "I ain't a mind reader—and I ain't your slave, neither, Mister Kallam."

That started the timber baron on another flow of blistering language. The fireman down the gangway listened in open mouthed awe and admiration. The other man, the visitor from a small boat moored near the tail of the *Lemolo's* raft, showed little interest. He slouched against the engine-house wall and stared down at his calked boots. He was a shabby hulk of a man. His timberlike legs were encased in patched and pitch-stained "tin" pants. Above them a tattered and faded mackinaw was draped

over huge shoulders and a bulging chest. The grim line of his mouth was shadowed by a black stubble of beard. His hands were jammed in frayed mackinaw pockets. A battered black cap set cockeyed on a thick tangle of hair completed a tough picture.

He was motionless as Kallam again expressed profane opinions of his tide-water men. Slagel and the skipper of the *Sootkum*, the other big Kallam tug, roared the timber baron, had lost two million feet of logs to pirates in the last year. That, by the old Hornspoon, showed them up for a pair of blasted tabbies! He, Rufus Kallam, had been forced to drop his business to fight the pirates himself. And now he had to show these same patty-paw skippers how to run their rafts through tide rips and whitecaps. He was here to do just that, and if it made Mister Slagel feel like a slave, he was free to step out of the *Lemolo's* pilot-house any time he felt like it.

SLAGEL did step out on deck as the storm subsided, but it was not to quit his command. He sent a call down the gangway for the chief.

"Tell him to be all set in an hour," said Slagel to the fireman. "We're pullin' out at low water slack, no matter what the weather is. Get it?"

"Aye, Cap."

The fireman swung into the door. Slagel's scowling gaze was caught by the hulking figure of the *Lemolo's* visitor slouching against the wall. He swung on toward him. The man straightened slowly, his dark face shadowy in the deepening twilight. But Slagel recognized him.

"What the hell you doin' here, Sharkey?" He spoke in a vicious snarl, his resentment against Kallam finding a vent. "After whatever you can bum or steal, hey?"

The burly tidewater man cringed before Slagel's menacing glare and backed away. He spoke in the husky tone of a man whose throat had been eaten raw by waterfront booze.

"Don't get sore, Captain. Trying to get the *Mukilteo* in running shape, and I just wanted to borrow a Stilson——"

"You'll borrow nothin' but trouble here. Overside, you lousy beachcomber!"

Slagel was boiling to hurt somebody. He had no particular grievance against this Sharkey, whom he knew only as an ex-skipper on the skids from liquor. But Sharkey was convenient, he looked harmless, and so the ireful master of the *Lemolo* swung at him.

Somehow the shabby wreck of a man ducked the swing, and was overside before Slagel had recovered his balance. When the swearing tugboat skipper, rubbing knuckles barked by the iron of the engine-house wall, stared over the rail, he saw Sharkey running on a single stick of timber for the log raft with astounding nimbleness and speed.

It was a stray piling stick which Sharkey had poled in to make a bridge between the raft and the *Lemolo* when he came aboard. The timber was no more than two feet at the butt and was some seventy feet long. It rolled and bobbed under the run of his calked boots, it heaved and pitched as he swayed on for the point against the raft, and that point sank until salt water sloshed about his ankles. Yet he held his balance, crouched for an instant and leaped surely to the head section of the raft. Once on the peelers, clear logs five and six feet in diameter, he slouched and ambled along toward the tail of the raft, six hundred feet ahead of him.

"Holy Mackinaw, and who's that?"

Slagel turned sharply as Kallam growled in his ear. The timber baron's stony gray eyes were alight under his grizzled brows.

"Ain't seen a bucko burl a toothpick like that since I left Michigan," Kallam said. "Thought I was the only one left with feet for that trick."

"Name's Stag Sharkey," said Slagel, eager to please the big boss. "He was a skipper on the British Columbia log tows for a dozen years. Went on the skids from booze more'n a year ago. Him and a old beachcomber has a condemned two-man boat named the *Mukilteo*. That's the old tub at the tail of the raft. Broke down. Sharkey was here to bum some tools off us. I just scared some of the old life into him for a minute."

"Sharkey, hey?" Kallam scowled in puzzled thought.

He said no more just then to Slagel. Kal-

lam knew that no booze-wrecked man could run a toothpick timber in tidewater in such perfect style. There was something funny about this tough looking customer. The name had jarred something in Kallam's memory. Sharkey—Stag Sharkey . . .

"What's he doin' here in Bandy Bay?" Kallam asked, as a formless suspicion rose in his mind.

"See that wrecked barge at the end of his towline? He got it from the paper mill people up the island here just for movin' it out of their harbor. I guess he's tryin' to drag it to Seattle to peddle for scrap. Then he'll load up on shark poison again, and——"

"Enough about him," Kallam broke in. "You get your boat ready. I'm goin' out for a look over the raft."

Slagel was only too glad to get away. For some time Kallam's blocky figure was motionless in the thickening darkness, as he stared at the shadowy shape of the *Mukilteo*. Soon the squat craft was only a blur above the tail section of the log raft. Into that blur Sharkey had disappeared.

Kallam swung overside. The stick rolled and churned under the drive of his boots, sending up swirls of white water from the

black tide. Kallam's feet were as swift and sure as they had been twenty-five years ago, when he first came to Puget Sound from the Michigan pineries. Life in the woods and on logs in tide-water still meant more to him than all his millions. When he had sprung to the safety of the big



logs he stared back at the rolling stick with fierce pride.

"Burl a log till the water foams, then run the bubbles to the shore," he growled to himself. "Thought I was the only one left. But there's another—a waterfront drunk, hey?"

Suddenly he remembered where and when he had heard Stag Sharkey's name. From that his suspicion flared up in a living shape. The piracies on the Kallam booms and tows—no other lumberman had been raided—the pirate was some enemy, one who could play a cunning game of concealment ashore as well as a daring one in the winds and tides. . . .

"Stag Sharkey!" Kallam struck his horny left palm with his right fist. It cracked like a mallet blow. "Got him! He's my man! A year ago I stole his timber, and now, by the holy old swivel-necked Jonah, I've found my log pirate!"

At that he turned and headed into the black shadows now closing over the log raft.

NO LIGHTS were on when Stag Sharkey swung aboard the *Mukilteo*, but there were two evidences of life from the deckhouse. One was a smell of boiling coffee, and the other was the voice of old Tom Ruckus, Sharkey's one-man crew. It was quavering up in the strains of an old song, with twangling chords from an instrument which Ruckus called "a geetar." Sharkey paused to listen.

"My mother called me to her deathbed side,

These words she said to me:

*"If you don't mend your careless ways,
They'll put you in the penitencia-ree!"*

"They'll put you in the penitencia-ree, pore boy,

*With stone walls all around,
Behind the bars you'll mourn, pore boy,
Till you're buried in the cold prison ground!"*

The doleful words and moaning tune harmonized with the black weather blowing in from the strait. Above the sheltered bay loomed the rocks of Halgo Peninsula, topped by heavy timber now merging into the shadows of the sky. Its southern point was the northern wall of the pass. Sharkey frowned at the forbidding scene, then stared up the raft. Kallam's blocky figure was outlined against the light from the engine-house door. Presently it disappeared in the thickening darkness. The quaver of

old Tom's voice sounded on. It jangled on Sharkey's nerves. He yanked open the door and swung into the cabin and galley.

"Stow it," he growled. "Light up, and let's have some Java."

A lamp flared on. Ruckus stood up from his bunk. He was white-haired and withered, scars of battles fought before the Gold Rush days slashed his wrinkles, and his bony hands were gnarled with years of labor on toelines and pikepoles, but his eyes were as bright as an old gray gull's and he was as straight as a mast.

"Looks like you sleuthed out bad news this time, Cap'n," he said. "What's upp'in' and scupp'in' now, hey?"

Sharkey slumped down against his bunk. His Indian eyes were dark with foreboding. A spirit in him which made him remorseless in pursuit of revenge and as cunning as any savage in covering his tracks also conjured up images of evil whenever circumstances threatened. In Sharkey's veins was an inheritance from the blood of Saskatchewan *voyageurs*. He had never known fear in action. It was shadows, figures in his imagination, which troubled him now.

"Better quit me, Tom, while the quitting's good," he said. "Got a hunch I've run into my finish. Kallam just boarded the *Lemolo* to take her through the pass."

"Sech gab!" Ruckus yapped hoarsely, turning from the steaming coffeepot to glare at Sharkey. "Hocus-pokus and locus-dokus! After workin' and shirkin' under you for a dozen year, Stag? Me quit? Razzle-dazzle!" He set a cup of coffee and some sandwiches on the table. "Swallow somethin', Cap'n, then you'll feel better. We'll go hellerin'-bellerin' after this tow same as we always do, Kallam or no Kallam."

Sharkey said no more. He scowled in thought as he gnawed at the wedges of ham and bread and poured black coffee down his throat. Ruckus returned to his bunk and "geetar." He strummed soft chords for a time, leaving Sharkey to figure out his problem.

They had set their plans to perform a feat unheard of on the Sound for twenty years, since the days when Rufus Kallam himself was pirating logs to start his saw-mill. That was to steal the entire tow of

peelers, some ten thousand dollars' worth of logs, from the *Lemolo*. The two tide-water men had devised a sea anchor for turning this trick.

This was a log rigged up with wire rope which, when attached to the towline of the *Lemolo*, would drag the log through the water broadside to the boat's stern. A railroad iron, secured to the log by ropes, would be dropped, with a spread of tough canvas wired to the ropes. The drag of this floating anchor would equal the pull of the eight-section log tow. And, unsuspected, Sharkey would be making off with the Kallam logs. Skill and luck and a black night were needed for the exchange to be made without discovery. Sharkey had considered it a good gamble until the advent of Rufus Kallam.

He had been depending on the stupidity and cocksurenness of Gus Slagel for the success of his plan. Kallam was something else again. Twice Sharkey had had desperate escapes from that old timber wolf while pirating log tows from the Olympic Peninsula. He had quit that run to raid the *Lemolo's* rafts. And here was Kallam, on his trail again. Fate. The old luck was turning.

Sharkey glowered at the dark port before him, imagining it as a frame for Kallam's rocklike face. He felt the old fight blaze in his heart. He would not give up. If it came to a showdown, he would shoot it out with Kallam on the logs in tidewater, to finish their feud. He had played this game too far to stop.

THIS log tow would pay him in full for the two sections of timberland stolen from him over a year before. They had been all he owned. Kallam had procured them along with others independently owned, through tax delinquency frauds. Sharkey had simply been another victim for the timber wolf of the Olympic Peninsula. He could get no help from bribed officials. So he had set out to rob the robber for payment, assuming in public the character of a broken man. The *Mukilteo* was also a deception. The dingy and scaly boat had a hull of Norway iron below the waterline, and her Diesel engine had power for a tug of twice her tonnage. Yet no one dreamed that the waterfront drunk and the

hobo of a towboat had anything to do with the daring piracies of Kallam logs.

This was to have been Sharkey's last piracy. A grand finish—that was the program. Sharkey had a market for these top-price peelers. For two weeks he had worked to turn all suspicion from himself. His only break had been to run out on that toothpick timber when Kallam was watching. But he had not been able to trust himself any longer with Slagel. Had he turned loose on the *Lemolo's* skipper with fist and boot, he would have given his game of pretense entirely away.

But should he back up and turn tail now from Rufus Kallam? That was the question. Every instinct urged him to risk all and fight. Yet—

*"The iron gate clanged behind him,
He heard the warden say,
'Ten long years for you, pore boy,
Ten years to waste away!'"*

Ruckus was singing dolefully again. Sharkey swayed to his feet. His black eyes blazed with a desperate light from under the battered, cockeyed hat and tangle of hair. His right hand was jammed in his mackinaw pocket, gripping the thick butt of his Luger automatic. His imagination was picturing his one fear in fiery shadows. To be shut away from the free, open life of the islands and the tidewater—the thought of that aroused all the savage desperation of his nature.

What if Kallam was here just to trap him? What if the old timber wolf had dug up evidence from somewhere that he was the pirate? They might be slipping up on him—even now—

He whirled and slammed through the door and ran up deck to the bow of the *Mukilteo*. To his eyes, just out of the light, the night was thick as mud ahead of him. He strained his gaze toward the Kallam raft. A wet breeze slapped around him. He could hear only the mutter of the tide through the logs, the rush of wind up the timbered shore and the roll of the surf on the rocks. Then his ears picked it up—the thud of calked boots running over logs.

He caught himself just as he was squeezing the trigger to fire a gunbuttful of lead at the sounds. He knew that was Kallam,

and that the wily old timber wolf had been spying on his boat. And he knew that Kallam knew now that the *Mukilteo* was not waiting here for any repairs.

But Sharkey was resolved to go on with his plan. He had sworn never to give up until he had wrested full payment from Kallam. There was still a desperate chance for him. And at the worst he would go down fighting. Kallam should never take him alive.

Now it was time for action. The ebb was slacking. The raft might be moving any minute. Sharkey swung back to the deckhouse.

"Warm up the engine," he ordered Ruckus. "If you're bound to stick with me, we've got some merry hell coming soon."



"Rollin' an' bollin', Cap'n," said Ruckus, "I was gittin' the dolefuls, you acted so glum-my and rummy. Talkin' of quittin'!" he snapped peevishly, as he shoved on his cap and jumper. "You, Stag Sharkey, of all people. Only man left on the Sound who makes life excitin' an' fightin'. I'd jest fade out if you quit."

"There's Kallam," Sharkey reminded him. "Not so tame."

"A wolf," snorted Ruckus; "while you're a tidewater man."

Sharkey said nothing to that. He was imagining things again. The two of them, himself and Kallam, head to head and fist driving against fist, while they rode the logs in a tide rip.

The Diesel was rumbling below. Outside it was low water slack in the tides of the Sound. It was time for the start of a finish fight between the log pirate and the timber wolf. So Stag Sharkey sized it up as he made ready for action.

THE scow was moored to a dolphin, three old pilings bound together with wire rope, near the shore. The *Mukilteo*, in turn, was tied up alongside the scow. Between the two was hidden the sea anchor, almost submerged with the weight of iron and canvas, now lashed on the big log. It

was rigged on a towline so that it would drag endwise. When later its center rigging was clamped on the *Lemolo's* line and the lashings cut from the ropes, allowing the railroad iron to drop, the log would turn broadside to the line and the drag would be that of an entire log raft. But as it was now, the *Mukilteo* could tow the outfit with ease.

The *Mukilteo* throbbed with the rumble of the engine. All was ready for rough water. Sharkey doused the lights in the deckhouse, cast off the line from the scow and set himself at the wheel. Slack water. Yet Kallam's big log raft was not on the move.

Sharkey reached for the throttle and eased the propeller into reverse, to hold his tugboat from its slow drift away from the scow. Then he yanked open a window and stared out into the blackness ahead.

The lights of the *Lemolo* were shining dots far up at the head of the raft. They showed no movement. The Kallam tug was still holding back. There was nothing for it but to wait and take things as they happened. Ruckus was up on deck now, singing dolefully to himself.

*"The foamin' water tore and tossed
The logs from shore to shore,
And here and there his body lies,
A tumblin' o'er and o'er."*

Sharkey smiled grimly in the darkness. They might sound foolish, these old ballads, but the stories they told were true, and the threat of sudden disaster rose out of them for him. He had seen a dozen men lost on the logs in nights like this, to be tossed ashore by the running whitecaps in a stormy dawn. He might be the next one himself. Fair enough. He had always been ready to risk everything. He wanted no more now than a chance for a finish fight.

He stiffened to the alert as his gaze pierced the shadows and he saw the blacker shadow of the Kallam raft's tail section moving ahead. The pinpoint of light further on were swinging. Sharkey felt his heart leap in an exultant beat. Now there was nothing to think about but action. He would carry out his plan, run without lights behind the raft until it was in the shelter of Rugby Island. Then he would make his

grand attempt for the piracy of the entire Kallam tow. A run with it on to Strip Island, and into the hidden cove where he had stowed all his pirated logs. Then, back in the flood tide before daylight to the scow. In the morning he would finish his "repairs" and innocently lug the wrecked barge he had gotten from the paper mill people on to Seattle's northwest waterway.

Doubts and fears faded as his big-knuckled hands took a fighting grip on the wheel, after a yank on the throttle that started the engine into a heavy rumble. Kallam's tugboat, the *Lemolo*, was running out in a wide sweep to swing the raft around the point. Sharkey pointed the *Mukilteo* directly out into the strait. Taking a still greater circle than the *Lemolo* took, his purpose was to cut back in and speed down on the log raft the Kallam boat was towing when it was fairly through the rocky walls of Thunder Pass.

Open water. The heave and roll of the old *Mukilteo* told him that, though the clouded night was too black for him to see more than blurs to show that the swells were capped with tufts of white. Ahead was a deep water track, one plowed by the ships of the world since the early days of Vancouver: Yankee clippers, side-wheeled steamers, the ships of the Gold Rush, and now the great freighters after lumber for Europe and the Orient.

A bully life. He would have no other if he could live his own again, thought Stag Sharkey. And if this trip was his finish—let 'er go! He'd had high and mighty days and this would be going down in a brave tidewater fight. His hand swung to the throttle and he gave the Diesel the gun. The stout old tug pounded into the swells, wallowing sturdily on. Spray whipped out of the darkness and lashed the pilot-house windows. Sharkey spraddled his legs, dug his calks into the planking and hunched his shoulders over the wheel.

THE lights of the *Lemolo* were now between him and the pass. The Kallam tug was in the open water, turning in between the flickering lights which marked the walls of the pass. Sharkey could imagine the log raft sections riding the swells, seeing them as plainly as though daylight

had broken along their length.

Heavy going. The weather was certainly too rough for them. Slagel's judgment had been right, and Kallam was taking a long chance. Each of the eight sections of the log raft was made up of four seventy-two-foot boomsticks linked together in a square, with fifty thousand feet of huge logs enclosed, packed side by side, lying lengthwise with the tow. Top-riders would be chained over them—boomsticks lying crosswise to keep the logs of each section from being washed out of their squares of boomsticks by the swells.

They would have to stand a stiff strain and a hard battering to ride out his water. Sharkey feared a breakup before the raft was in the pass. That would mean the wreck of his own plans. He cursed Kallam and the weather together, as he swung the *Mukilteo* about and headed east. The old boat pitched and listed as the waves hit her broadside, but she lifted steadily and drove on.

"Sousin' an' dousin'!" Old Ruckus was in the pilot-house now, grumbling peevishly. "What'd you run out here for, Cap'n? Jest to give us a bath? I'm all soaking in' an' chokin', yes, sir."

"If Kallam is on the lookout for us, he'd figure us to be inshore," said Sharkey. "So we're slipping up on him out of open water."

"And 'tain't no use, I bet," declared Ruckus. "This water'll have the raft lifted an' bifted all over the rocks in no time."

Sharkey made no reply. The *Lemolo* was now in the blackness of the pass, beyond the lights at the mouth. Another five minutes would tell the story for the log tow, with the head section dragging from two hundred feet of steel cable, and the tail section heaving in the swells six hundred feet behind. Sharkey gauged his distance, and throttled the engine down to slow speed. He gripped the wheel again and waited, saying nothing. Ruckus was also silent. The two men stared ahead, while the *Mukilteo* heaved on in the darkness.

So far Kallam had made his boast good. They soon learned that, after the pass lights were astern. The top-riders had held the logs from a breakup in the swells. The *Mukilteo* nosed the tail section of the big

raft. Sharkey gave Ruckus the wheel and swung on to the bow. He leaned overside. The big logs, showing dimly in the black water were riding evenly. Far ahead the *Lemolo* was swinging to starboard, changing course to pass Shaggy Reef and run into smooth slack water east of Rugby Island.

Now it was time for the log pirate to take his big chance. The turn from the narrows of the pass left the entrance lights hidden behind the cliffs. The *Lemolo*, laboring slowly along in the slack water, was



being steered toward the Blaney Island light ten miles away. She was heading southeast. The drive of the flood tide would be northeast, past Shaggy Reef and toward

Strip Island. Sharkey's perilous job was to get the log raft free and under way for the island cove before the tide ripped into him.

Sharkey tramped back to the pilot-house and gave Ruckus his orders.

"Run easy along the raft and nose in where her towline'll be lifting from the water. We can't be seen, and they ain't likely to hear nothing in this wind. I'll throw a line from the bow and tie us on. Then we'll let the *Lemolo* drag us, while I go out on the head section with a pikepole. I'll work the sea anchor in ahead of the section and clamp its rigging to the towline. Then I'll work our line around the boomstick, and at a whistle you cut the bow line free, then give the Diesel the gun. When you've tightened up on the raft, I'll throw the *Lemolo's* line off and cut the lashings on the sea anchor. She'll head southeast with that drag, thinkin' she's still haulin' the logs. But we'll be swingin' them logs into the tide northeast. Get it, Tom?"

"It sounds like a pile of geeoggerphy, but I figger I can blunder an' sunder through it," said the old Sound crab. His voice was shaky with excitement. "Ain't had so much fun since I helped wreck and rob a sternwheeler on the Yukon," he went on. "Talk about fightin' an' excitin'—"

"Stow it," said Sharkey. "This is now. Fall to."

"Fallin' an' brawlin'," said old Tom good-naturedly. "I'll be on the dot for every trick, Cap'n."

SHARKEY left him at the wheel. He went out and up to the bow again, and waited for Ruckus to run to the head of the raft. The old-timer made it without a hitch. He was as much at home in the Sound as a sock-eye salmon, and the blackest night could not lose him. Sharkey watched the lights of the *Lemolo* grow larger. At last he could see two dark blotches in the wheelhouse windows—Slagel and Kallam—if they only stayed inside now. . . .

But here was black water overside. The *Mukilteo* was easing in ahead of the raft. There was a grating sound from her bow. Sharkey reached down with a gloved hand. It gripped the dripping towline, a steel cable which even his big fingers could hardly enclose. He hitched a heavy line around it, then made the line fast to the bow bitts. The *Mukilteo* was in tow. Sharkey headed down the deck on the run.

The stern was bumping against the boomsticks of the head section. Sharkey went over with his pikepole. Everything was clicking into place, just as he had planned. With the feel of the big sticks underfoot, with black water hissing up at him from the heaving logs, with the thick weather clouding about him and a desperate job at hand, Sharkey felt every force in his body surge up to carry him on. This was the old life. Nothing else mattered. He even felt a fierce desire for Kallam to see him now. A finish fight on the logs, Timber wolf and log pirate having it out. . . .

But here was danger enough, as it was. He must turn the trick before the tide rushed into the tow. Sharkey swung over to the outside log of the head section and speared the sea anchor with his pikepole. He labored it along in the slack water, leaning almost horizontal as he dug his calks into the log, braced himself and pulled.

Slowly the weighted timber of the sea anchor was forced ahead of the raft and twisted so that it floated broadside, pushed

by the leading boomstick. Sharkey unhooked the *Mukilteo's* towline from the rigging and wound it around the boomstick. He worked in a crouch, his calked boots fixed solidly on the stick. Next he clamped the rigging of the sea anchor to the *Lemolo's* towline. Now Ruckus must cut the line at the bow and pull up on the raft until the *Lemolo's* line had enough slack to be cast free.

Sharkey whistled. It might have been the call of a sea gull skimming the water. But Ruckus caught the signal. In a moment the *Mukilteo* churned slowly ahead. Sharkey ripped a knife through the slashings of the sea anchor, which bound the railroad iron to the log. It sank, the roped canvas spreading into the depths, and the burden of it dragged on the *Lemolo's* towline just as the *Mukilteo* got a strain on the raft.

Sharkey was ready, with both hands like hooks of iron over the towline chain. As it slacked, he grabbed for it, and in an instant it had clanked free. He was straightened, stifling an instinctive yell of triumph. Ruckus was swinging the *Mukilteo* to the northeast, with the Kallam log raft in tow. The *Lemolo* was plowing unsuspectingly on, with the sea anchor made out of a log, an old railroad iron and some canvas furnishing the load on her towline instead of a log raft. Slagel and Kallam would not discover that until daylight. And by then Sharkey would be back above the pass, making "repairs." In a week he would have the pirated raft of logs sold.

Kallam would have paid in full. Sharkey laughed at his imagination now and the doubts it had conjured up. Certainly Kallam had only come down the raft back there in Bandy Bay to see that its top-riders were in shape. Nothing else. All was well. There went the *Lemolo*, and here—

A muffled beat, the sound of a motor boat out of the darkness, drove all thought from Sharkey's mind. Kallam! The name hammered through his head. Kallam had waited for this, to trap him, to catch him with enough evidence to convict an army of men. Bearing down with Slagel, maybe with the whole towboat gang, to capture the log pirate with the goods. It was his finish. Nothing else.

SHARKEY'S thoughts raced in a desperate circle as the beat of the motor sounded close. He could see it now, a blurry streak cutting past the bulky shadow of the *Mukilteo*, heading directly for the raft.

The first surge of the flood tide was sweeping through the big sticks. The huge timbers rolled and pounded in its drive. Sharkey swayed in a precarious balance as he crouched and turned for the tail of the raft. The launch was nosing into the head boomstick. Let them follow him now!

Spruts of spray dashed into his eyes as he leaped the heaving logs, but he lunged on from one timber to another, half-blinded, keeping his footing by instinct alone. He half fell as his toe caught in jumping a top-rider, and a foot slipped into black water as he came down; then he was up again, leaping along the logs. At last he was on the tail section. Only black water was beyond.

He hauled up on the center log of the section, a huge butt at least seven feet thick. As his calks gouged into its thick bark he whirled, at the same time jamming his hand into his pocket for his Luger. He would drop behind a top-rider and shoot it out with Kallam and his men as they came down the raft.

But even as he turned, a blocky shape swayed suddenly out of the darkness, loomed before him and rammed the steel of a rifle barrel into his ribs.

"Hold up," growled Rufus Kallam. "You ain't the only one who's a white water bucko. And don't make me squeeze this trigger till I'm through talkin'. Another minute of livin' won't hurt you none. Steady and listen—"

But Kallam, the timber wolf, might as well have growled that at the wind booming out of Thunder Pass. Sharkey's legs were braced in a crouch. He lunged backward, knocking the rifle barrel up with his left hand. Even in the desperation of the moment he experienced a wonder that Kallam had not sent a bullet blasting through him. But Kallam did not fire—not until Sharkey's right hand jerked up with his automatic. Then Kallam fired; and as he was blinded by the red blaze of the shot, Sharkey felt a numbing blow in his right

arm; and then his head reeled amid popping stars from a crash on his head.

Yet the old timber wolf had not fired at the log pirate. What had struck Sharkey's arm was a crack from the steel barrel, and Kallam had followed that with a sideswipe from the gun butt. Still Sharkey did not go down. He staggered on the log, he swayed forward, with his right arm dangling, but it was to swing with his left fist. That struck Kallam with amazing force squarely on his rock of a chin. He went down, with Sharkey on top of him.

"Here we go together," snarled Sharkey. "The two of us—our finish—down in the black water. . . ."

They were slipping down the side of the log. Kallam clutched desperately at a ridge of bark with one hand, while he forced the other arm in a stranglehold around Sharkey's neck.

"Goin'—the two of us!" Sharkey choked that out from the hook of iron about his neck. "A finish in tidewater—the only two left. . . ."

With that defiance it seemed that the tide closed over him. But Kallam's hand had a stronger grip on the ridge of bark, and his other arm tightened like a vise until he had pulled both himself and the log pirate to the top of the heaving log. He rested for a moment, then swung up on his feet, shouldering Sharkey like a buckled timber. Then he started up the raft not for his launch but for Sharkey's boat, the *Mukilteo*.

WHEN Sharkey came out of it he was in his own bunk on the *Mukilteo*. A light was on, and in its glow he saw Rufus Kallam bending over him, with a flask in his hand. Sharkey knocked that away and sat up, the old fire flaming in his Indian eyes.



"Saved me to lock me up, hey?" he growled. "She's no go. He'll never be locked up alive, not Stag Sharkey."

Kallam set the flask down. He stood back, setting his knotty fists on his hips. He looked at Sharkey with a rare gleam in his stony eyes. He spoke in his grizzliest roar.

"Now you'll listen to me, by the old swivel-necked Jonah! I'll tell you why I didn't shoot, why I just laid you out and packed you aboard your own boat. I need seventeen fighters like you in my outfit, but I've got to get along with two. I'm one, you're the other. Get it? You're goin' to boss all the Kallam booms and tows from now on. It'll be a battle. I'm in a fight with the Seattle-Coast people. They've bribed Slagel—bought him off. That was why I had to come after him. Well, he's running on with that sea anchor to the end of his job. We're towin' in the peelers with your boat. And hereafter we fight together. Let's drink to that. What do you say?"

"Funny," said Sharkey dazedly. "Funny business." He recalled everything that had happened back on the raft. Kallam could have finished him then. Must mean what he said. A man of his own kind. The only two old white water men left. They'd make a pair! But there was something else. "There's a matter of some timber," the log pirate said. "You're paying me in full. I've sworn on the book to that."

"Cash for balance due. You'll get it tomorrow same time you sign up with Rufus Kallam." The gleam in the stony eyes of the old timber wolf grew brighter. "You've earned it. Nobody's pirated a whole raft with that sea anchor trick since I done 'er twenty years ago. I spotted your game back there in the bay. Wanted to see if you could get away with it. You did. And now, by the swivel-necked old Jonah, you're Rufus Kallam's! Let's drink to it."

He hoisted the flask.

"Here's to you, you lousy log pirate!"

It was Sharkey's turn.

"To you, you damned old timber wolf. She's been a good fight."

Tom Ruckus had left the wheel to stare in on the scene.

"Hocus-pokus and locus-dokus!" he marveled. Then he mumbled peevishly to himself. "Won't be no more excitin' an' fightin'. Got to go to livin' honest again. 'Tain't no ways right for me."



CHAPTER I

A HELPING HAND

WARBLING LOU" Madrigan reined in his horse firmly, and firmly protested the point with his fellow rider, "Cactus" Lorrimer. Warbling Lou admitted that it was the devil's own country for judging distances and even added descriptions of his own. The Mojave Desert was truly a loose section of hell. But still, his eyes were too good to mistake a mirage for the real thing, Warbling Lou maintained. The town below them was real—a scattered collection of

shacks at the tip of a dark fringe of vegetation that thrust out into the shimmering sand from the low, rounded hills to the north. On all sides of it lay the glaring white wastes, hostile to every living thing. To the west was a gossamer, faint outline of mountains against the molten sky.

At top of a rise of sand, sitting saddle with the careless ease of their kind, the two riders stood gazing down at that unexpected cluster of dwellings. It was hot. Desert heat, dry, burning, radiating from above and below. The horses shifted, shook weary heads.

With his slow drawl, Cactus Lorrimer delivered his opinion.

*Six-gun and Rifle Thunder on the Blazing Mojave Desert
as a Wandering Waddy Meets Up With Ruthless Rustlers*



STRAIGHTENED TRAIL

By JACK BERTIN

"I ain't sayin' it ain't a town. I'm sayin' you reach it quicker by cuttin' around those soft sand piles. Looks near—that place, eh? But I'm bettin' it's a good fifteen mile, mebber more. An' once down in that hollow, in those li'l hills, you won't know which way is which."

"Well—I'm bettin' on it," calmly persisted the younger man. "You go around, keepin' to the high places, an' I'll cut straight down an' acrost. That way you'll get there tomorrer, an' wake me up from a long night's sleep. Cactus, mebber I oughta not say it, but yo're gettin' old."

Cactus spat a copious stream of tobacco juice over his mount's left ear, and

grunted. He was a man of few words, and because of this economy of expression, every one of his grunts meant things. The younger man grinned.

"Bet's made! If I get there first, we'll go *my* way from there on, which is back to grass country fast as these broncs can take us. If you win, we'll roast along to California—always pervided this *is* the way to California.

Cactus grunted again.

"Yo're *in* California, Warbler," he informed. "Off to the west, somewheres, is Death Valley. An' that cloud line of peaks off there—them's the Panamints." A passing shadow of somberness showed in the

speaker's seamed face. "That's where I lost 'em, boy."

"Well—call it a bet?" The younger man changed the subject at once. "We try for that town—me headin' direct for it, you keepin' high an' safe. Last one in pays for drinks, an' takes the travelin' orders."

Cactus smiled indulgently.

"Yo're the craziest maverick I ever herded with," he complained. "But there's none like yuh, Lou—to keep a man's mind from some things. Go on—it's a bet."

SAND again, in low, wind-rounded mounds cutting off the view—augmenting the furnacelike heat. Warbling Lou tried to whistle, gave up in disgust, and began to think instead.

He was thinking that Cactus never *would* get that tragedy off his mind. Twenty years was a long time to brood. But some men had tenacious memories. Warbling Lou, or the Warbler, as he had been styled in several cowcamps by appreciative punchers, gave up thinking, and began to whistle again. He was very young, the Warbler, and very lighthearted. Cactus had been father and buddy to him for the last year and they had shared some ticklish moments together; but he could not share the older man's sorrow over what had happened in the Panamints twenty years before. Yet, dimly, it troubled him—he found himself wishing for developments of some kind—any kind—to turn the older man's thoughts to the present.

Jig-jog of riding gait—creaks of saddle leather—the flash and roar of his Colt as he instinctively decapitated a sidewinder gliding around a cactus clump. The Warbler's whistle dragged. He was too young to care for deserts. The solitude oppressed him—and the molten sun, and the furnace of sand.

A rider heaved up into view to his left, making a sudden appearance between two low, rounded dunes. Another appeared. Then a third, some twenty yards to the north, on the opposite side of the twin sand mounds.

"Three humans, bronc," muttered the Warbler, interested. "Maybe some of these desert rats Cactus tells about. Or maybe from that town we can't find. But in

any case or event, bronc, they're human. An' humans genrally carry the makin's, which I'm out of. Hello!" he answered their hail.

The three reached him, regarded him through the settling haze of sand-dust, and Warbling Lou forgot the makings. He was gifted with ability to feel character, and what he felt now rang tiny warning bells of alarm in the back of his thoughts.

Aloud, he casually answered casual greetings, but his right arm went lax and loose, a curious looseness that was not lost on the three men. Beneath the surface talk the exchange of feelings went on, and both sides measured each other through the word screen.

"Thought California was a oasis, eh?" One of the three, a squat, fleshy man, laughed with his voice alone. His eyes, black, beady as a rattler's, went over Warbling Lou's figure and riding outfit. "Prospector?"

"No." The Warbler grinned, and edged the horse forward to muzzle contact with one crossing to his other side. "Just a loose puncher, wanderin' in this vale of tears."

"Vale of tears?" A momentary puzzled questioning died quickly in the fat man's eyes—they grew beady again. "We ain't eddicated, cowboy. But we're wanderin' ourselves—goin' back to Arizona—celebratin'—eh, pals?"

"Uh—huh!" said the pals. Warbling Lou was glad to see the one in front remain there. It was a ticklish situation, anyway, for plainly they meant to get him. Had they shouted their intention aloud, it could have been no plainer.

"Yeah—celebratin'," repeated the fleshy man. "We cleaned up at poker back a ways. Say—you ain't got change for a twenty—gold eagle—have yuh?"

"I ain't got a cent, buddy," lied Warbling Lou, and his eyes carried cold, dancing little flecks in their depths.

The fat man read the warning and shrugged, thereby giving a sign to his companions.

"Tough way to be, waddy—broke. Oh, well—guess we'll be amblin' along. Don't keep that bronc off his regular grass too long," he advised, smiling, as he turned

the head of his mount. "Come on, boys." Warbling Lou rode on, but he looked back, and he kept looking back. The fact saved his life, for the three who had cleaned up at poker showed marked ability at another game. When perhaps fifty yards away they suddenly pivoted their horses, and split up, one coming directly toward him, the other two arcing around the low sand hills. Rifles they had jerked from saddle scabbards spat pale, small licks of flame.

The Warbler moved, and that his reflexes were good was shown by the way he moved. He was forced to leave the saddle quickly in any case, for his mount



was hit and plunged violently away from under him. The Warbler struck on his feet, his side-sweeping left arm retrieving his rifle while he was still in the air. A quick dive and a roll brought him to a depression in the sand. His Winchester snapped angry reply to bullets thudding in the soft surface around him—a reply effective enough to topple one of the three from his horse, and send the other two hunching their mounts for cover among the low dunes. They vanished from sight with abrupt suddenness.

But the Warbler's thoughts as he waited in his shallow dip were hardly elated. They would get him anyway. He lay in plain view—too far from his dead horse to cover the distance. One could draw his fire, with little risk, from behind the low hills, the other drill him easily. No, Warbling Lou decided—it was not a pleasant situation.

BUT where were the two? The heated sand simmered in the desert silence. To the left, still running, was the horse of the one he had hit, but sight or sound of the two remaining men did not come to the Warbler. The suddenness which marked their disappearance told of a slope behind the sand hills, and, taking advan-

tage of that slope, they might well have passed him entirely—might be lining their sights on him from behind.

The Warbler swore earnestly, his flesh crawling at the thought. Yet his will checked the impulse to rise and run. Perhaps they were just waiting. Or perhaps one was circling to his rear—the other waiting.

The Warbler swore again. And his impulse to rise from his sand-pit and move grew. If he—

The tension broke. A rider broke it—an entirely new arrival, his horse in plain view, laboring through the sand at a dead run. The other men were leaving their positions in a hurry. The Warbler sensed the way of things, and jumped up, pointing to the low hills as the rescuing rider swept by. And he himself ran in the horse's tracks. But by the time he gained the dunes, at the top of a long, gradual slope, the two holdup men he very much wanted to see plainly were no longer plainly visible, were just distorted bulks in the heat shimmer, and rapidly growing vaguer. The Warbler emptied the Winchester, for the sake of satisfaction, swore, and then grinned a very wide grin of relief.

"Stranger," he said earnestly to the man sitting in the saddle not ten paces from where he had himself stopped, "stranger, I seen purtier faces, but none near as good lookin' as yours. Reckon you kin figger that out."

"Reckon," replied the other. He was a young man, as young as the Warbler himself, one moment, but at next glance he seemed years older—his eyes hard, cold, suspicious. "They'd 'a' got you, sure," he added.

"I ain't startin' no debate!" grinned the Warbler, then he sobered as memory swept him. "Damned rats! Too yellow to make their play when they was close to me—where I could 'a' used my Colt!"

The other's gaze went to Madrigan's low hung holster.

"Like to work a Colt, eh?"

"Like it!" The Warbler's reaction carried him along. "It's my play, an' I can play it, sayin' it myself! I ain't any good with a rifle. How'd they guess it?"

"They didn't, prob'ly. Sized you up for

a draw artist, mebbe, an' tried the other way."

The man on the ground flushed a bit. He was sensitive about having boasted openly and loud, in approved fourflush fashion. That the boast was well founded did not excuse it. He grinned resignedly at his own break.

"I ain't no draw artist—but I was so cussed mad I could 'a' become one, right on the spot. The play them hombres was figgerin' to make was one of the meanest I ever heard of, seen or read about. They didn't know whether I had more'n ten cents in my pockets, but ready to kill me on the chance that I had." The little, cold flecks changed the speaker's eyes, and the man on the horse noticed it.

"Yeah," he said evenly. "It was a pore deal. They could 'a' stuck you up, well as not, but they ain't that kind."

The Warbler's attention focused.

"You know 'em?"

"By sight. But how we gonna fix this now?" The man on the horse discarded the subject. "Was you goin' or comin', speakin' of Agua Fria? That's the town, 'bout five miles south of here," he explained. "Mex for cold water. There's a spring bubbles out with a fair amount, an' it's made the place."

The Warbler put a lid on certain questionings, and thought of Agua Fria, or cold water. He touched dry lips with his tongue.

"Goin', buddy—I was goin'. Got to meet my partner there."

"Well—I'll give you an' yore saddle a lift," accommodated the stranger. "An' you can pay me by buyin' a few drinks at Mescal Pete's. Aw—all in a day," he dismissed Madrigan's gratitude. "My name's Tex Newton—puncher off an' on—prospector—an' other things."

"Call me Lou, or Louis. No, I ain't French. Just an accident. Lou Madrigan, mostly known as the Warbler 'cause I can't whistle. Puncher most of the times, gettin' punched in between. An' Tex, to repeat, yo're sure a friend in need. Even without bullets, a five mile walk in this stuff would 'a' finished me."

"Let's go," said Tex.

Ten minutes later they had left behind

the still figures of the dead ambusher and the horse in the white, hot sea of sand. Far above, in the brazen, unflecked sky tiny specks wheeled slowly, growing larger—spiraling down to the feast. Looking back, from rising ground, into that large hollow dotted with small dunes, Warbling Lou saw the spiraling carrion birds hover and wheel over the thicker, ground hugging haze of heat.

Cactus was right. Queer things happened in the Mojave.

CHAPTER II

THE KILLER

AGUAFRIA, a collection of dobe huts and false-fronted structures, formed to view in the haze. The double burdened horse loped along a single deserted street. It was noon, and even the dogs had sought shelter from the heat. The swinging doors of Mescal Pete's bar-room admitted them into a relievingly cool interior.

The Warbler sighed his satisfaction, wiped a moist and dusty brow, and ordered drinks. Two men snored, out of tune and heartily, by the farther wall. Otherwise the place was deserted and silent, save for Mescal Pete himself, who, roused from his midday reverie, looked at the two entrants and shocked awake at once.

"No, Señor Newton," he replied to a question put by Madrigan's opportune friend. "I have not seen the Señorita Alice. But I have heard she is at the company store," he added with the indirectness of his race.

Newton tossed down the raw, amber liquid.

"The company—that's the borax people—that hauls mineral stuff from the sinks north of here," he explained, as if making idle talk while debating something important with himself. The Warbler noticed the attitude. They were both faced around, elbows on the imitation marble bar, gazing ahead at the sun splashed interior of the empty saloon. With a bored grunt Madrigan turned to pour himself another drink, make his excuses, and depart. Evidently Tex Newton had some troubles of his own and should be left to settle them.

Troubles with some señorita named Alice. The Warbler grimaced. Women to him were an alien land, unenticing.

Turning, he surprised a look on Mescal Pete's swarthy face, of a kind that caused him, in turn, to look curiously at Newton. But he saw nothing out of the way in Newton.

"Well," he remarked, wiping his lips, "here you are, Pedro ol' hoss—a cartwheel—genuine silver. No, Newton," he dismissed the other's offer to treat. "I got enough—too much, on an empty stomach. Besides, I gotta find my partner, an' pay his drinks. It's payin' all around for li'l Lou. Well—I'm thankin' you once more, Newton. Prob'bly I'll never have the chanct to even up, but if it comes my way——"

"O' course. Forget it," advised the other, moving away from the bar. "If yo're goin' downtown, I'll walk along. Yore friend's prob'bly put up at the Havelock—sounds like class, don't it?"

"They all do," grinned Madrigan as the two passed out. "I once paid for a bed in the Empire Hostelry, back in Arizona—an' slept all night on the roof, 'count of the fleas. Names don't mean much, some places. You gonna leave the bronc?"

"Yeah. I'll prob'bly fog out before night. No use stablin' him. Here—I'll help you tote the saddle."

Together they went down the street, the saddle swung between them. Abreast of the Havelock they stopped, and exchanged casual partings. The Warbler shook hands.

"Glad I met you, Newton——" He broke off, surprised at the look which swept over the other's face. One moment he was all eagerness, then bitterness, plain to see, intruded into his whole expression—with a trace of sullen anger. The Warbler saw the cause of it all—a slim, female figure, clad in homespun skirt and a loose, white blouse, a girl who passed by without a sign of recognition, her features hidden from view by the enclosing brim of a wide straw hat. Newton moved out a step, intercepted her.

"Alice—I'm sorry!" he said hoarsely. "Listen to me!"

The girl walked on, without pause, but the Warbler caught a sense of hesitancy in

her. Newton looked as if he had passed through a painful ordeal. It was only by plain effort of will that he hid the bitter hurt in his eyes. But hide it he did, and well. His tone was even again.

"Well, Madrigan, sorry we're splittin'. I'm wishin' you good ridin'. *Adios.*" Without haste he turned, walked after the girl.

The Warbler thought of his ignorance in some things, and shrugged. He had to find Cactus—tell him of the three who had waylaid him in the desert.

UP in the room he had rented—a small, not too clean chamber with a window facing the street and the desert beyond, Cactus listened to the Warbler's tale. And at its end Cactus put in an apparently irrelevant question.

"How far'd you judge them two fellers were down that slope when Newton reached the top of it?"

Lou shrugged. "Hell! I don't know. Mebbe—say, they musta been pretty clost,



at that! It took me some time, runnin', to get t h e r e, an' I could still see them. But what of it? Newton had no call to shoot—he said he knew 'em,

anyway—by sight. Might be even friends of his'n, for all I know, or care. He pulled me out of a bad hole, that's sure."

"I ain't denyin' that," replied Cactus, leaning over to get better aim at a spittoon beyond the bed on which he reclined. "Which only proves, Maverick, it ain't safe yet for you to ride around alone. Only, it strikes me queer—them two fellers, hid behind the dunes, with Newton a clean target, up on a hoss, and yet beatin' it so fast. Course I wasn't there—an' them polecats might be just yellow. An' anyway," he concluded, "it ain't our business. Our business, just now, is travelin'. You takin' my orders?"

"Reckon," grinned the Warbler shamefacedly. "You won yore bet. But how we gonna travel—me without a hoss?"

"That's yore lookout. I got mine. An'

I'm sleepy. Bein' wise, I figger on enjoyin' the fruits o' my wisdom, an' recline right back here while you search this wart town for a cayuse. An' don't come askin' me to advice yuh on his points. If you buy a crowbait, it'll be lesson number one in hoss tradin'."

The Warbler grinned. "I ain't ever picked a hoss wrong yet," grinned the Warbler, "an' anyway, I can't find one worse than the one *you* got, right now!"

"That bay——" began Cactus.

"Oughta have two blankets put on him nights, an' herded real careful so he won't wet his feet. He's near as lazy as you, which is as clost to lazy as anythin' livin' kin get, an' still be livin'." The Warbler rose from his chair, his face showing proper anger. "Stay in yore bed, snorin' yore snores, while I go out an' buy the best in these parts. An' tomorrow you'll eat my dust!"

"Go on!" grinned Cactus. "Reckon I ain't got much to worry about the best in *these* parts. An'—hey!" he called as the Warbler opened the door. "Be careful, now! Don't buy a jackass outa feelin's o' kinship—or—listen!" he called after the unpolitely departing youngster. "Don't you go an' get *that* one shot from under you! Yore travelin' expenses——"

But the slammed door cut off his words. Relaxing, Cactus Lorrimer laughed heartily, free of presentiment, unaware of the grim ordeal awaiting him.

THE Warbler found no horse worthy the name for sale in Agua Fria. He could not even have stolen one, had he been given to such unlawful tastes. Horses were sometimes plentiful in town, on the rare occasions that punchers from the ranges south of the desert rode in to celebrate, but otherwise mules and burros were the staple burden carriers, and these alone were to be bought. Of course, a Mexican livery man explained, there were horses to be found, but it was hard to buy those horses. There was the Milligan herds, the finest in many a mile, on the Milligan ranch past the sage flats, five or six miles south, where Lost Creek was still a fairly wet stream bed, and there was

grass. But no one could buy the Milligan horses.

"No?" asked the Warbler with impatient curiosity. "Then why tell me about 'em? I'm lookin' for to buy. An' I ain't buyin' no jackass!" He grinned, thinking of Cactus' warning. "No siree! I'm buyin' a hoss. But where?"

The Mexican did not know.

"Why won't this Milligan sell his horses?" growled the Warbler, tired of his aimless search. "Mebbe he'll *lend* me one, cuss it! I'd make him *give* me one, if I could get to him an' tell my sad story. But how to reach this Lost Creek? Say, lend me a jackass for this afternoon, will yuh?"

The Mexican did not understand. But sight of a green banknote cleared his faculties at once. There was a good strong mule in one of his stalls. He trusted the young *vaquero* would bring it safely back. He, Juan Cabenza, was a very trusting man.

"Yeah, yeah!" agreed the Warbler, watching the greenback whisk into Juan's pocket. "I know it. Just get me that mule, an' help me saddle the cuss. Out of sight o' that hotel winder, though," he added, grinning again as he thought of Cactus.

"So you go to Milligan's?" Juan appeared troubled about something during the saddling operation. "Milligan ees——"

"Is what?" asked the Warbler, watching a pair of flattened ears as he drew up on the cinch.

"Huh!" Conflicting emotions brought forth a grunt from the Mexican. He was a gossipy soul, but there was danger in gossip.

"Milligan ees—sometimes——"

"What? What's on yore chest? What's the matter with Milligan? His name?"

"No! No!" Habit tripped Juan's tongue. "Milligan ees bad man, señor. Everyone know he ees bad man. Some say he rustle, steal. *Dios!* Eef he know I tell you this, he would keel me—him or Tex!"

"Tex?" Idle coincidences ran together in Lou Madrigan's thoughts. "Tex what?"

"Newton," surprised Juan. "Tex Newton—*el diablo nero*—the black devil, señor. He has keeled many men."

"Say!" The Warbler forgot the disgrace of riding a mule. "What are you talkin' "

about? Tex Newton—a young feller—dark—black shirt an' pants—wears two guns—an' rides a roan horse with a star on its forehead?"

"*Si—si!*" Juan was half frightened. "You, señor—you know Señor Newton?"

"Sure I know him! So he's killed a lot of men? Well, I'll be damned!" The Warbler's surprise was genuine. "But what's all this *diablo nero* stuff? You don't mean he's killed anybody outside of gun fights?"

But Juan was become a human clam, a very frightened one. This white man was a friend of Tex Newton's! Mentally Juan cursed his pernicious habit of talking about the affairs of others. Aloud he said he had been joking—that he did not know Tex Newton, nor, in fact, did he know Milligan. He had heard of them, from the cousin of his wife's brother, who had

"Yeah," interrupted the Warbler, sensing the man's very real fear. "Never mind, Juan. I don't care if he is a *diablo nero*. He got me outa a tight squeeze, an' for that I'm his friend. Which is business that's all over—less'n I see him up at Milligan's. Milligan is my tangle. If he won't sell, I can't buy. An' I gotta buy. How we gonna figger it?"

Juan was a poor man at figures. Memory of the Mexican's frightened face remained with Lou Madrigan as he rode the mule out of town, and his thoughts were so occupied with the obvious implications of that fright that he forgot to look to see if Cactus was observing him, grinning, from the hotel window. Lou's thoughts were on Tex Newton. So Newton was a killer. Maybe that was why the two dry-gulchers had fled so quickly at Newton's coming.

"Hell—he don't look it!" muttered the Warbler. "*Diablo nero*. Sounds real craggy—but every man who can shoot fair to middlin' is a *diablo* to the Mexes. An' me blowin' about my Colt speed! Wonder what *he* thought?"

He dug heels into the mule's sides. "Oh, well—it's all over. It's a hoss *I* need. Come on, you long-eared cow—move! We gotta buy a hoss off a man who won't sell it. An' get back 'fore night. Get along!"

CHAPTER III

HOSTILITY

THE sun was well started on its westward dip when the Warbler reached Milligan's ranch. Three hours is a long time to employ in traversing six miles, but the animal carrying Lou had stopped often on the way, for no visible purpose save to uphold the traditions of his race. The Warbler had tried swearing and other things, but the progress of the mule followed a certain steadiness, impervious to the impatience of men. The rambling ranch-house, set in front of a grove of stunted cottonwood trees, was a welcome sight to the mule's rider.

"I'll swap you for somethin' real, if I have to rustle it!" he vowed to the music as he dismounted by the banks of a twisting, shallow stream, throwing the reins carelessly around a clump of mesquite. "This must be Lost Crick. Fall in it, an' get lost yoreself!" he growled pugnaciously over his shoulder to the mule. "I ain't draggin' you back to Agua Fria. I paid that Mex more'n yo're worth anyway!" Turning, he moved toward the house, fording the creek by means of a line of stones evidently dropped there for the purpose. The house itself was of the usual dobe construction, sprawled in the usual



style. The houses of ranchers in the desert country always sprawled. But the ground about surprised the Warbler. Flowers around the building's base, for one thing—the hedge ending in two great clumps of serviceberry bush, forming an arched, small gateway. There was a woman at the Milligan ranch, that was sure.

He walked along a well kept path, up side stairs of stone slabs squared off with dobe, and knocked at the side door. It was always polite to knock for admittance at side doors. If the ranch was big, the side doors generally led into the kitchen, where

peaceful cooks plied their trade. The Warbler felt the need of peace. No man without a horse could afford to be independent.

He knocked again, and was answered by undisturbed silence. Waiting, he watched the sun through very narrowed eyes, as it hovered over the distant Panamints. Watching, he thought of his partner Cactus, twenty years before, and of what he had lost somewhere among those faint, illusive mountains. The hush about was peaceful, serene—a direct opposite to that tragedy.

THE Warbler roused himself. Voices, angry, loud, broke the quiet—a sudden injection of sound that startled him. There came the thud of a closing trap-door and the voice of one of the newcomers saying:

"Well, what are you gonna do about it? It can't go on this way, Breaker, an' you know it! If it was only me he was ridin'— But it's you, too. He's goin' crazy, I tell yuh! Me an' Limpy an' Dill got him down on us fightin' for yore ideas, see? Yore orders was to get them cows, anyway. But he says, 'No shootin' fellers who ain't expectin' it!' *Him*, talkin' about shootin'!"

The Warbler had grown rigid. Every word, clear and unmistakable, came up to him. The stair top was rudely enclosed and the voice came from the ground behind the enclosure. Evidently these men had just emerged from some sort of cellar beneath the house. But details were lost to Lou Madrigan. He had heard that voice before, somewhere—and only lately. He could not place it, yet, curiously, he felt the slow pound of blood at his temples, a hardness about his jaw. He did not like that voice.

The answer of the other man came in a voice that had no sound of familiarity, and though it had a peculiarly cold, cruel tone, it affected him less.

"I know he's ridin' me too, Gunner. An' I been considerin' the showdown for a long time. Yo're right sayin' he's gone loco—an' that damned kid of mine's gone loco with him. This ain't the first of our plays he's broke up, either. But how to

get him. Who's callin' his hand in a even break? That draw of his is chain lightnin', an' the talk goin' around has built it up so you can't get a Mex to try for him. That leaves the boys. Which of you want the job? *I ain't takin' it.*"

"What's the even break for? Why can't we all smoke up on him—an' claim he's been stealin' stock?"

"Don't tangle any law officers in this business!" The cruel voice snapped the order. "We get him on the quiet, if we have to get him. I ain't quite sure, yet, that we kin afford to get him. Them guns of his have turned lots of plays our way, Gunner—lots. Maybe I kin talk him out of this balk. Anyway, we try. You get the hosses ready for our amble to town—I hear Alice is there, stayin' with Larkin's wife. We take her back here, an' when *he* gets back, we'll talk to both of 'em together—good."

THE Warbler was interested. Not only were the words interesting of themselves—revealing plans of men engaged in some shady activity—but one of the voices, the voice of the man called Gunner which was somehow familiar to him, rasped curiously on the youngster's nerves. Through a crack in the stair covering he saw movement, and he heard the crunch of footsteps approaching. An appreciation of his position caused some quick thinking to take place in the Warbler's mind. He jumped down the stairs, landing on half flexed legs, lightly, took two long, silent leaps backward down the path, then abruptly reversed, and slouched into a careless walk, humming a low tune.

He was barely in time. A big, red faced man rounded the house corner, and started slightly at sight of the youngster not ten feet away, coming toward him, head down.

The Warbler seemed aroused by sight of booted feet in his line of vision, and lifted his head with proper surprise.

"Well?" queried the cruel voice he had heard from the stairs—the voice of the one called Breaker.

"I'm lookin' for Milligan, owner of this place," the Warbler replied, noticing that the big man's redness of face was due to a stubble of russet beard. Beneath it,

visible through the thick hair, was a long slash, a scar of unusual width, running from temple to chin. Another flurry occurred in the Warbler's thoughts. It was lucky Cactus had not come along. His partner's obsession, his unbalanced hatred of scarred faces, would have caused trouble.

"I'm Milligan," said the big man coldly. "What you want?"

"A hoss. I'm a stranded cowpuncher, buddy—an' besides the fair price I'll give, it's a favor I'll always remember——"

The other's cold gaze held no spark of comprehension, of common human courtesy. The Warbler had met men like that before—cold as reptiles, fixed in some pursuit of their own, and judging all intruders hostile. Milligan was like that. He was also suspicious.

"What happened to yore hoss?"

"He was shot from under me, back in the desert a ways," answered the Warbler, obeying a hunch that grew from a vague guess to a sharp conviction in the space of a few seconds. Milligan's eyes gave the thing away. The Warbler all at once knew what type of body went with the voice of that other man who had gone to saddle two horses somewhere back in the ranch yard. It would be a fat body—also a fat face with little, beady snakelike eyes. The Warbler tensed as the vague memory of the man became clear in his mind.

"Horse shot from under you, eh?" asked Milligan. "Got any idea who did it?"

"No," lied the Warbler easily. His voice was drawling now, unconcerned. "An' I don't care much, now. I got away unsalted, an' the only thing I wants now is a hoss, a good hoss, that kin travel fast to other parts. Meanin' no offense to you, Milligan, I don't like this country. I was near shot——"

"Don't blame you," said Milligan. "This is mighty bad country for that stuff. Sorry I settled here myself. Reckon I kin sell yuh a hoss, at that," he went on. "You wait here."

"How 'bout lookin' 'em over?" suggested the Warbler, still thinking of the man somewhere in back of the ranch yard.

"No. No strangers allowed to see my stock. Remember it's bad country—an' I

can't break the rule. You wait right here."

He turned, went around the house again. The Warbler's thoughts were busy. Certainly, he reflected, a pathway close to kitchen stairs was no place to wait for a horse. It was no place to bring a horse. What was Milligan's game?

The Warbler's eyes went again over the desert plain. The desert country was beautiful. Lou Madrigan gave acknowledgment to Nature's magnificent artistry. It was also somewhat strange. It made men strange—though not strange in the way that Milligan was.

Somehow this place, with the quiet dusk, the low murmur of the creek beyond, the rambling house with its unusual front greens, seemed no place for a man like Milligan—Milligan, with that long, sinister scar on his face.

Lou Madrigan shrugged. Milligan was just a rustler—that much was plain—bleeding the southern herds, perhaps, and driving them across a corner of the desert to rail lines up north. The three who had tried to kill Lou on the desert were part of his outfit. And he was breaking his rule of selling horses in order quietly to get rid of a man who might ask questions if he chanced to see one of the three around.

ALL plain. So plain that the Warbler decided not to wait. Milligan would not come back with a horse. Turning, the Warbler ran down the path. The best thing to do was ride his mule back to town, tell Cactus the whole thing, and together ride away to more hospitable localities. Passing out of the arched gateway, the youngster ignored the mule across the creek, and ran along the house front.

Yes, it was wiser just to depart. Milligan was evidently a difficult customer, also Gunner. Besides, there were the other men of Milligan's outfit, somewhere around—perhaps in the squat bulk he could see past the grove of trees, too obviously a bunkhouse to be mistaken for anything else.

The Warbler dodged quickly from tree to tree, chuckling to himself at sight of the horses in a corral beyond the bunkhouse. His hunch was strong that Milligan would not lead a horse back to the house.

Milligan had gone to talk with Gunner, and they would decide on other means of quieting any possible questions. Evidently the Warbler was dealing here with a gang that did things neatly and without much hesitancy. Apparently the law did not visit Agua Fria often enough to impress them. The Warbler felt little surges of anger, as he paused at the edge of the trees, to watch two figures which had escaped his notice at first. They were talking by the corral. One was Milligan, the other no doubt was Gunner.

The ranch yard appeared deserted save for the two men by the corral bars. The Warbler's roving gaze, intent on finding



trace of others in the half gloom beyond, did not rove far enough to one side, where, not ten feet away, a very interested

man who had been lying on his back regarding the darkening sky still lay on his back—but his turned gaze was now riveted on the Warbler's shadowy figure, a little ahead of him, half crouched beside a tree trunk.

The man reached a decision and acted upon it with creditable success. Had he obeyed his first impulse, and shot point-blank at the prowler, many things might have taken different courses, and his own health been safeguarded. But on the whole his quick, silent rise, the equally silent, quick run and the vicious blow he aimed with a Colt butt at the head of the Warbler were successful.

The whole series of movements, culminating in that quick blow, caught the Warbler by surprise. But instinct jerked him aside, too late to avoid the shock but in time to evade its full force. A scattering of light, bursting, filled his brain, but the shock of his alarm overcame the following sense of nausea. He lurched drunkenly out from the edge of the trees, felt the quick, spasmodic lunge of his own draw of his revolver—and the Colt spat in rolling sequence, wildly, in all directions. One of the forty-five slugs ripped through the

man's forearm, changing his feelings and intentions, causing him to drop the clubbed gun in his other hand and grip the torn flesh.

"Breaker—Gunner—Limpy!" he yelled, his voice strengthened by rage and the sear of pain. "Look out! Get him! A snoopin' coyote!"

Sheathing his empty Colt, the Warbler plunged into a somewhat lurching run back through the cottonwood fringe. Lead whined by him, pinged on stones in the ground mold. But his run took him out of danger—across the house front—across the bridge of stones in the creek.

Yet once across, his troubles began. The mule was no longer where he had left it, something to be expected, since he had not tied the long eared, balky animal any too securely. And already forms of running men had come into view in the dusk—also two mounted men—crossing the creek farther down.

The Warbler obeyed his instincts and remained close to the bridge of stones, not twenty yards from the house. The running men passed him by, prowled a while in the vegetation farther from the bank, answered hails from the riders. One of the latter loped back into view. It was now quite dark, but the Warbler recognized the animal led behind the loping horse. Juan's mule had evidently not wandered far!

"Mebbe the feller didn't cross the crick at all," said a voice so close to the hiding man that the Warbler nearly broke cover. "Mebbe he cut the other way, around the house, an' down that slope. I'm bettin' that's what he *did* do! He's a foxy coyote—fooled us onct already, today."

"All right, all right, Limpy!" Milligan's unmistakable tones replied. "We don't care if the fool did get away; he can't go far. He's afoot, ain't he? An' if we stop him from gettin' hosses here, how's he gonna beat us to town?"

They passed back over the stones in the stream—the Warbler could hear the grating of one unbalanced rock repeated three times. But he did not move—resolutely held himself rigid among the dark mass of bushes.

Once again he had been a fool and paid

for it. So much the Warbler realized as he crouched motionless by the gurgling creek, his head aching savagely, a slow trickle of blood creeping down into his eyes. Just a fool. Riding out to buy a horse, and ending up afoot and hurt, and in danger of being killed. The Warbler's jaws locked as he controlled his feelings. Twice he had been in danger of being killed, by men of the same outfit. Gunner, Limpy, and the other rustlers were playing a shady game in safety on the edge of the hot sands of the Mojave. They were men who killed for business.

A decision came to the Warbler. Cactus could ride on, if he wanted to. But he himself was staying! He had to stay. Every blow, in the code of the Southwest, called for a counter blow—and Milligan and his queer outfit were due on the receiving end.

CHAPTER IV

A PUZZLE

THE moon, a pale curve of light, grew golden, began to paint the world of bush and tree and water, and clothed the plains with hazy mystery. But the Warbler was not noticing. His usually careless soul was in the grip of rage. He could not forget Gunner and Milligan. Cactus wouldn't understand this—he had never heard Gunner talk, never sensed Gunner's quick, coldblooded readiness to kill that had something of sheer animality about it.

As the Warbler crouched in the bushes by the side of the creek, he presently heard the thud of hoofs and gruff orders, and saw a group of mounted men cross the creek below him. They were going to Agua Fria, to finish what they had started. If they didn't run across him on the way, they would wait for him there.

Evidently Milligan feared no interference in town. The Warbler's surprise was not great, for he had seen places like Agua Fria before, forgotten outposts on edge of the hot, bare sands—almost ignored by the law, where the very atmosphere called for brutal directness of life. Milligan and Gunner could safely kill him in Agua Fria, and claim applause for so doing. They could claim he was a night snooper on their

land, trying to steal horses—they could claim he had killed one of the ranch hands, using the truth, a bit distorted, to clear them altogether. The Warbler realized the situation, and his rage grew.

And another thing irritated him. It had been said that he couldn't get horses at the Milligan ranch. The statement was a challenge. And a horse, in any case, was a necessity! The Warbler did not care to trudge six miles toward a town, the approaches to which mounted men were perhaps patrolling. He had to have a horse. And it would be a Milligan horse!

His decision made, he acted upon it, at once. Little, metallic clicks sounded in the quiet as he reloaded the Colt. Then he cautiously stole out from the bushes. Passing around them, he went further from the bank—a moving shadow among many shadows of tree and shrub. Well past the house, past the bunkhouse itself, he went upstream, till the corrals and yard were faintly visible to his left. Then he set about crossing the stream.

An outthrust tip of stone, in the center of the stream saved him time, though his leap to the opposite bank was somewhat short. Crouched in the bank growth, he listened long for indications of alarm. But the sharp splash he had made seemed to have aroused no one.

It was an Indian game the Warbler was playing, a game of silent stalking. He had to locate the men Milligan had left to guard the horses. It took hours of slow, cautious crawling, of listening, rigid with attention, of peering into shadows and half shadows of the moonlit night. At last a sudden shift of body, made by a weary and somewhat disgruntled man, gave the position of a guard away to the Warbler. And the glow of a cigarette tip marked the location of one still more careless.

The Warbler guessed there were no others. He made assurance doubly sure by another careful stalking hour. The two guards, at opposite corners of the corral, were apparently alone in the ranch yard. The bunkhouse might hold others, but no sound would reach the bunkhouse.

The guard who smoked cigarettes made no sound whatever when the Colt barrel and chamber jarred upon his head. He

passed from half sleep to sleep almost gracefully. Fifteen minutes later, his friend, at the corral's other end, whirled around at a sound behind him, but the silencing Colt proved as potent upon him as upon its first victim, and the low gurgle he gave did not carry twenty feet.

THIS second trussing operation performed, the Warbler grunted, and debated. There was a group of horses in the corral, a dark huddle against the farther bars. Low snorts of alarm showed the animals' awareness of something wrong. Leaving the corral side, the Warbler ran, crouched low, to the bunkhouse wall, stole along it, and tried the door. The place was empty.

Grunting again with satisfaction, the Warbler bent to drag out a saddle and mess of gear. Saddles on some ranches were hung up in special shelters, but there was always at least one in every bunkhouse, in process of shining and touching up. And that one belonged to the careful type of rider—its place in the bunkhouse corner was a voucher of quality.

Back at the corral, the Warbler listened a moment, with appreciative grin, to muffled gurgles sounding from the nearest corner, then



threw the rude bar, lifted a shaved end-post clear of the leather bottom loop, and slipped within. In his right hand dangled a length of rein found among saddle gear—a

strip of rawhide narrower than standard, which he hoped would do in place of a riata.

Before the ending of the next ten minutes, Lou Madrigan was forced to use his knack with horses to its utmost. A first flip of the looped rawhide had encircled the neck of his choice, but his choice had spirit and power to match its looks. It took ten minutes of careful handling, low assurances and the careful stroke and patting of hands at the right places to quiet

the big black's balky mood. But once outside, the saddle fixed to the horse's back, and one of the guard's rifles in the scabbard, the Warbler congratulated himself. The black was a horse!

Having headed around the corral and across the stream where the ranch men had crossed, the animal's stride as he stretched out in full run over the plain settled the conviction in the Warbler's mind. The big black *was* a horse. In an amazingly short time the bulk of dwellings showed up among the chaparral—and then the yellow glow of the few lights of Agua Fria.

Agua Fria, and Milligan! The half gloom hid the Warbler's burning eyes. Cactus would call him crazy—but Cactus had never met Milligan—or Gunner.

He slowed the black, rode in warily, his right arm and shoulder relaxed. But no one hailed or stopped him—the little town was mostly dark and silent. It was well past midnight, the Warbler decided. And the men who had ridden to hunt him down had probably tired of the hunt, and gone to sleep, perhaps to renew it in the morning. The big black passed Mescal Pete's, jogged slowly downtown, and its rider turned it into the hotel's side yard. His head was aching dully; dried blood caked his features. He needed sleep himself, and would get it, if Cactus could check his curiosity enough to let him sleep.

The sleepy clerk assured him on this point. Cactus was not in the Havelock. He had ridden out of town late in the afternoon, with Tex Newton. The clerk's eyes gradually widened as he talked, and soon lit with normal interest.

"What you do, Mr. Madrigan—fall off your— Say, did you get a horse?" he finished, choosing a more polite opening.

The Warbler nodded, and frowned.

"Yeah—a good one, too. Stabed him in back. Didn't even notice my pal's hoss was gone. But who's that you say he went with? Tex Newton?"

"Yeah." The clerk hesitated. "Tex is your friend, isn't he?"

The Warbler's frown grew.

"Mebbe," he answered noncommittally, his drowsiness gone. "What makes you think so?"

"I heard him and your pal Lorrimer

talk, right at this desk. Just before supper time it was. Mrs. Larkin and the Milligan girl had just left, after drawing some money we had in charge out of the safe, when Newton came in, looking for Alice—that's the Milligan girl. Well, I told Newton she'd gone up to the Larkin ranch with Old Lady Larkin, and he kinda hung around after that, saying nothing. Then your friend Lorrimer comes in—he had gone out right after you—and they started talking. I couldn't hear much, but they mentioned you and a horse, both of them, and they went away together, to Larkin's place, I think they said. Anything wrong?" The speaker's face fairly exuded curiosity.

THE Warbler looked at the face of the clerk, then looked around the empty lobby. And then he thought of another face—the face of Juan Cabenza, and the fear in it.

"Wrong? Why should there be somethin' wrong? This Tex Newton's all right, ain't he?"

The clerk hesitated. He was plainly puzzled.

"Sure he's all right," he answered slowly. "If he's a friend of yours."

"An' if he wasn't?" The Warbler forced the situation. "Suppose, just to pass the time supposin', I was at buck-ends with a hombre named Milligan—would Tex Newton be all right then?"

The clerk's eyes clouded.

"What are you—a law man?"

"No. I'm a sleepy man, askin' questions. A stranger. I don't know Tex Newton, an' my pal Lorrimer don't know him. Why should they talk about me, an' ride out together? Yore answer is mine—you don't know. But one question you kin mebbe answer—is a stranger with a fair loaded money-belt safe with Tex Newton?"

The clerk moistened his lips.

"Well—I'll tell you straight, Mr. Mad-rigan. I'm new here, so I can't say for myself. But I've heard plenty about this Newton. I wouldn't ride out with him alone."

"You *heard*?" interrupted the cowboy. "Hearin' things is different from knowin' 'em. If he's bad, why don't the town get rid of him—or the sheriff come a-visitin'?"

The other shrugged.

"I can't say. He doesn't steal things in town, and nobody would think of putting *him* out any."

"So he steals? What does he steal?"

The clerk glanced around. He was no longer merely curious now, but nervous. Adventure had suddenly enfolded him, and he was not of the type fitted to take it in the proper mood. The young cowpuncher across the desk had a queer pair of eyes—eyes that held little, forming flecks in their gray depths, and they were staring steadily and very intently at him out of a blood caked face.

"Well—he's never stolen anything of *mine*. But—you know yourself he's connected with Milligan, don't you? That's why you asked that question. Milligan is shady. Everybody knows it, but——"

"Everybody's gonna do somethin' about it—soon's somebody else starts. Is that it? I've seen places like this before. When the showdown comes it'll be the waddies from somewhere else that'll get Milligan—not any in Agua Fria—less'n I get him!" the Warbler suddenly blazed. "I got business with Milligan myself! But about this Tex Newton," he subsided. "How does he stand with Milligan?"

"Nobody knows," answered the clerk. "Some say Milligan's his dad. But that can't be, 'cause he's after the girl Alice—after her openly—and she's Milligan's daughter, stepdaughter anyway. Besides, he says his name is Newton, not Milligan. But he's the backbone of that gang. He's hell on Colt drawing, they say—chain lightning—and no one dares to buck him. He's a queer sort——"

"Reckon he is," agreed the Warbler, satisfied there was little more he could learn from the talkative clerk, and wondering if the conversation he had overheard out at Milligan's was about Tex Newton. More than probably. The whole thing was a puzzle. Yet the most puzzling part was Cactus' riding out with Newton.

"Where is this Larkin ranch?" he inquired. "Seems to me I heard of a Larkin stayin' here in town?"

"Larkin—Old Jed—is in charge of the Arctus Company store below here. But his wife generally takes care of it, and that

girl of Milligan's generally stays with her when Jed's up on his little place—Larkin's Springs, he calls it. He's got about twenty-five cows and a fair herd of horses, watched by a Mexican boy when he's in town. Sometimes his wife and the girl go out there and spend a week."

"Where is it?" asked the Warbler patiently.

"Ten miles or so, southeast. Kinda high ground, they say, fair grazing."

"Reckon I'm thankin' you, buddy," the Warbler replied. "Glad you told me about my partner. That way I won't sit up an' wonder where he's gone. Guess I'll sleep on the problem of why he went with Newton, an' mebbe wake up to find it solved. One thing—yo're off duty tomorrer, early, ain't yuh? Well," he went on as the clerk nodded, "will you do me a favor? Find out if Milligan an' his boys are in town, an' get the news up to me in my room."

"Sure!" agreed the clerk, divided between satisfied excitement and excited uncertainty. "I will, Mr. Madrigan—I will. I'll let you know."

HE DID, next morning. Milligan and his boys were not in town. They had ridden in early the night before, made the round of saloons, and ridden out again. Running a hand through his tousled hair, the Warbler thanked the clerk, and, after the door shut behind him, sat up on the bed, and frowned. His passing fingers touched a large and painful bump above his left ear.

The split in the soiled window curtains showed a view of a blazing sun rising over the desert. For one passing instant he saw himself in midst of that white glare—prone on his face, a rifle cuddled to his cheek, with death hovering for a strike—and he saw again a rider, superb in saddle poise, sweep by. Tex Newton.

With a grunt the Warbler rolled out of bed, and drew on his boots. A quick splashing in the water basin, an equally hasty breakfast in the lower dining hall, and he was outside, striding toward the stables. Ten minutes later Agua Fria lay behind him—a dwindling cluster of dwellings sprawled in the pitiless sun.

The black beneath him headed south-

east, its reaching, powerful stride inducing satisfaction in its rider's breast. He had to get to Larkin's Springs in a hurry. The puzzle of his partner's ride with Tex Newton had grim possibilities.

CHAPTER V

THE GREATER DEBT

LARKIN'S SPRINGS was a travesty of its name. The red 'dobe hut and crazy corral seemed painted blotches on the canvas of a hot and blistering world. Between the corral and the house, farther back, a clump of mesquite and sparse course of green marked the bubbling and flow of water. Miles around, flat and yellow and monotonous, stretched the graze land, its growth unsuccessful and dry.



The Warbler saw a small herd of cattle, strung out across the hot horizon; a mare and a colt pounded away as he approached; and farther along, in the shade of the house, a large brown dog lay apparently asleep.

It was a usual scene in the bad lands, but for the Warbler there was something other than heat in that scene. There was some sense of happenings beyond the ordinary—an almost audible warning which gave significance to the open corral gate—the strangely quiet dog beside the house.

The Warbler dismounted, urged the black through the corral gate, and fastened it after him. Then, gripped by his queer presentiment, he walked to the door of the house.

The door was ajar. From within came a peculiar sound that halted him, rigid. Gradually he recognized it for what it was—a woman's voice, crying, sobbing. The Warbler strode within.

The 'dobe hut was divided into two rooms by a partition of cottonwood boards which served as hanging place for cooking utensils, towels, and various pictures.

Against its center, running its pipe out through the roof, was a squat sheet iron stove. A solid table caught the light from the lone window on that side of the partition. The voice came from the inner room, and the stark emotion it expressed caused little chills to run along Warbler's spine. He knew little of women, but plainly the one crying was in a bad way. With a shrug the Warbler crossed the space from outer door to an opening leading through the partition. But his "hello" froze at what met his gaze.

HE SAW his partner! There was no mistake. Laid out straight on a disheveled cot, in the full illumination from the two windows at back of the house, was Cactus. Cactus—dead. His features were rigid, cold—set in a curiously shocked expression. And the front of his blue shirt was darkened with splotches of red.

The Warbler did not clearly see, after that first stunned moment. He did not clearly see the woman slumped in the room's corner. He heard his own voice as if far away.

He found himself at Cactus' side, hands on the limp shoulders. Gradually that sense of limpness brought a glimmer of reason back to the Warbler. He realized he had been talking, yelling, at the girl—realized that she was Tex Newton's sweetheart, Milligan's daughter.

But Cactus' shoulders were moving, limp as they were—also his lips were moving.

"Lordy!" the Warbler said simply. And then, "Cactus," he muttered, "'course you ain't cashin' in! 'Course you ain't done for, Cactus—you, a desert man, goin' out for a little thing like this! Who done it, Cactus. *Who done it?*"

But though the man on the bed said something, the babble was meaningless. The Warbler caught but two recognizable words—"killer" and "Newton."

"Newton!" he snarled, the room red again. "Newton, the thievin', murderin' skunk!" He suddenly whirled, bent down and gripped the shoulders of Alice Milligan and pulled her erect to face him. "Where is that polecat? Where is he? Tell me or I'll choke it out of yuh!"

The dazed girl fought off her nausea, struggled, tried to speak. Her voice was choked by the horror of what she had seen happen in that room. But the Warbler did not wait—he was back again at the side of his partner, opening the bloodstained shirt, growling in relief again at sight of the wound locations. High up, both of them, over the lung. A forty-five slug could do terrible things to a man's lung. But Cactus was safe. The bullets were high up—perhaps a broken shoulder blade—some danger of infection. But Cactus would pull through.

"A doctor—that's what we need. Where can I find a doc? You hear?" he repeated savagely, returning to the girl and shaking her again. "Where can I find a doc?"

"They've gone for a doctor——" She managed to stand, to face the wild eyed man. "Mr. Larkin and his wife—have gone to Fordton for Doctor Aiken. They'll be back soon——"

"Got water? Some clean cloth? Where are they?"

The girl, half swooning, dazed, tried to tell him what had happened on the Larkin ranch the night before, while she helped in the rude cleansing and bandaging of Cactus' wounds. But the Warbler scarcely paid attention.

"I ain't listenin' to no excuses," he interrupted. "I'm killin' Newton, an' that's flat! He saved my life yesterday, but what he's done here's balanced that, an' gone way over the other side."

Alice Milligan shuddered, grew weak. Hysterically she began to cry.

The Warbler swore. Cactus lay still on the bed, his curiously twisted features in the full light, the clean cloth strips across his chest beginning to redden.

"Take these pans away," the man said curtly to the crying girl. "No use sobbin' like that. I'm goin' to find Newton, an' kill him. That's doin' you a favor. No murderin' coyote is fit to live with——"

Somewhere she found strength to get between him and the door.

"Listen—please listen!" she begged. Her weakness almost overwhelmed her again—she fought it off to cry wildly, "You can't kill Tex Newton! You can't!" Then her senses reeled into chaos.

The Warbler, hard faced, noticed a purple bruise above one of her eyes—saw that failing struggle of her will against her weakness, and the plain terror in every line of her face, as she slumped forward, limp, into his arms. He lifted her, brought her outside the house, by the spring, and laid her on the grass. About to splash water over her pale, drawn face, he thought better of it. She would merely cry more entreaties not to kill Newton.

His eyes holding little, dancing flecks, he arose and left her lying by the thin trickle of water. A momentary debate took place in his mind. Newton, according to reports and evidence, was an unusual personality. The usual killer would have ridden off into the desert after such an attempt, but Newton might well have returned to Agua Fria, or gone to the Milligan ranch. As for Cactus—his partner was in no danger. He could be moved to town on a slow traveling horse, and the doctor could attend to him there. It was useless to wait at the ranch. The Warbler knew he could not wait. The country around Agua Fria had been too consistently hostile. He had to strike back, at once, at somebody.

But the girl? Lou Madrigan, feeling considerably older than he had only a short day before, swore again. Milligan's daughter had nerve. Something was the matter with her. There was that bruise over her eye—and her evident weakness. Probably Newton had struck her when she tried to reproach him for shooting Cactus. Yet she had stuck up for her man. "You can't kill Tex Newton!" He seemed to hear the words again.

"We'll see about that!" he muttered, as if to convince himself.

He went back to her. She still lay inert, in the grass by the trickle of water. The Warbler's gaze, attracted by markings beside her, previously unnoticed, followed the markings up to the spring source a few yards beyond, where they curved around a mesquite clump. Twin lines, irregular, cut into the grass and earth. Obeying an impulse, the Warbler went up to the bushes, around to the farther side and there stopped, a trace of puzzled surprise coming to his cold eyes. The shooting on

the Larkin ranch was not a simple case of robbery. It had trimmings.

A DEAD man lay sprawled in the shadow of the mesquite—a man the Warbler knew. One of the three men he had met the day before in the desert. His left leg had a pronounced crook.

"Limpy, I'll bet!" muttered the Warbler. "Who dragged *him* here? An' why?"

Curious now, and beginning to control his blind rage, he went back to the girl—threw water over her face till the long, black lashes fluttered, opened. But her mind was apparently a blank. The Warbler had the uncomfortable feeling of gazing into mechanically opened eyes. Her answers to his questions were plainly hysterical.

The Warbler swore again. The girl was very sick, was plainly not rational. Her brow was feverish, and beneath the purplish bruise was an appreciable swelling. She could not stand. Yet only the day

before he had seen this same girl walking erect and steady by him and Tex Newton. What could have caused the change? The Warbler had read that wo-

men were weak, but his own observance of the woman he had seen conveyed no warning of such extremes of weakness as were apparent in Alice Milligan. Something had happened—some terrible shock which had completely sickened her.

"It's all right, kid," he soothed, lifting her again. "I know yore dad's been here—where Limpy was he prob'ly was too."

"Dad—don't!" she kept saying. Then "Tex! Tex! Come back, Tex!"

"I'll bring him back," promised the Warbler grimly. "An' dad, too. I'm only sorry a white kid like you is mixed with that pack of coyotes!"

He brought her in out of the glare, sat her on a chair close to the solid table, allowing her head to sink helplessly into arms crossed over its surface.



"There—reckon you won't fall, till Larkin's wife gets back," he said with gruff gentleness, moved to pity in spite of himself. "Keep quiet, right there, while I take a look around. Mebbe signs'll tell me what you can't, or won't."

Signs in the packed ground told him much, and nothing. The man who had dragged Limpy behind the mesquite was the same man who had driven away in a buggy. Wheel tracks, and a shoe with worn sole, in various positions and relations, told him that. Who had ridden away in a buggy? Larkin, more than probably—Larkin and his wife, whose smaller imprints showed beside the mark of the worn sole and its mate that appeared near the wheel tracks and along the trail of Limpy's dragging spurs. They had gone to Fordton for a doctor, according to the girl. Probably had judged Cactus too hurt to be moved.

Larkin and his wife apparently were guiltless elements in the case. Tex Newton and Milligan's outfit—either one or the other, or perhaps both, were responsible for the shooting of Cactus.

The Warbler finally stopped his searching. The quiet dog by the wall was dead—shot through the chest from the front, and had dragged himself there. Before the house was a confused maze of hoof-prints out of which it was impossible to deduct any helpful information.

Rising, the Warbler gazed speculatively at the horizon. When Larkin and his wife returned with the doctor from Fordton the whole story could be told. But when would they return? The Warbler had no idea as to the location of Fordton, or how long it would take horses to cover the distance. And inside the house Cactus was bleeding, slowly but steadily; his limp insensibility was due to the loss of blood more than the shock. Forty-fives, striking from close range, left open, gaping wounds, torn veins. The Warbler swore coldly. He had to get Cactus to town, and do a better job of binding.

HE WENT to the corral and led the black out, stopping him at the house door. Inside, he found the girl still slumped over the table, and her position revealed what had escaped his notice before—the

cause of her utter helplessness. Her white blouse, below the left armpit, was stained, torn and the flesh beneath was bruised and swollen. Something had struck her—a blow of extreme violence, close over the heart, and her faintness was real.

The Warbler was forced to abandon the puzzle. He had to get Cactus out. The girl could be taken to town when the Larkins returned, or he could send help back at once. He found paper and a pencil stub in the dresser by the bed, in the inner room, and scrawled a message which he left on the table beside the girl's limp head. Returning through the partition, he lifted Cactus gently, walked out with him through the door, and by dint of much patience and the use of good muscles, mounted with him to the black's saddle without extreme jarring of the wounded man.

As he rode away, his thoughts roved to the dead man he had found sprawled in the shadow of the mesquite bushes. Who had killed Limpy? Cactus? But Cactus still had his gun in his holster, apparently had not been given time to draw at all, which was a significant fact, for Cactus was no slouch at gunplay. And examination of his partner's weapon further puzzled him. The gun had not been fired at all—unless someone had replaced fresh shells in the chamber. Evidently Cactus had not killed Limpy.

Incidentally, a touch at his partner's waist had revealed the bulge of his money belt. He had not been robbed.

The Warbler gave it up. The main fact was that Tex Newton and the remainder of Milligan's outfit had come close to finishing Cactus. Milligan's outfit had also come close to finishing him the night before, the Warbler remembered. And remembering, the puzzled speculation died out of his eyes, gave place to the steely, little flecks which always marked a formed resolution. Tex Newton had forfeited all claim to gratitude. Those bullets low in Cactus' shoulder could as well have gone lower—they had been shot to kill. And in the code of the Southwest, which called for a return to every blow, intentions were judged as well as facts. A faint sneer touched the Warbler's lips.

"*The diablo nero!*" he mocked, his eyes on the hazed plain ahead. "Chain lightnin' with his Colts! Well—I told you Colts was *my* game, Newton, an' I *could* play it. Reckon a demonstration'll be held when me an' you meet, *diablo*—an' we'll meet soon!"

CHAPTER VI

WARNINGS

IT WAS well past noon by the time the black jogged into Agua Fria, and the Warbler was surprised at the evident commotion in town. Men came to saloon doors to watch him as he rode by. An excited, disputing group before the Havelock's doors grew silent as the clerk pointed out his approach.

They helped to take Cactus from his arms, which dropped with a leaden weariness. But there was no weariness in his eyes, nor the cold snap of his voice. Both were laden with the genuine thing in authority, a quality rare as it is effective, that silenced the chorus of questions.

"Take him upstairs—get water an' cloth," he instructed, then to the clerk, "Why'd you expect somethin' like this? Is Newton in town?"

"No." The clerk was ten years older than the man on the horse, but he felt very childish. "Larkin's Mexican herder got in about two hours ago, dragging a creased leg—said hell had popped on the ranch late last night, and——"

"Where is he?"

"Sleeping. But he doesn't know much—said he was shot at by a bunch of riders when he came in from the plain to investigate sounds of other shots. He didn't stop to look deeper into the matter."

The black's rider surveyed the group around for a moment. Then, "He got in town two hours ago, tellin' of a shootin' scrap at Larkin's," he said contemptuously, "an' you been *stayin'* here? Say, what kind of a cussed country is this, anyway? What you scared of? *The diablo nero?*"

The group of men shifted uneasily. They were not a prepossessing lot, and the Warbler's contempt grew.

"Reckon I'll leave a message with you chair nurses," he stated calmly. "After I

fix my pal up, an' see this Mexican, I'm ridin' out to a ranch 'bout six miles south of here. I'm goin' gunnin' for Milligan, Gunner, an' Newton. If any of them skunks, or any of their trailers, come in town while I'm gone, tell 'em so. Tell 'em to wait for me back here—specially Newton. I got compliments to exchange with him. Get it?"

They got it. His manner convinced, utterly. The question rose in several minds whether the present moment was not the one in which to follow the fearless youngster in breaking up a band which had made the town an object of suspicion among the big outfits of the ranches farther south. But names have certain potent qualities—and Tex would in all probability silence this young stranger as neatly and as well as he had silenced others. The blossoming courage of the Warbler's audience died down.

"While I'm gone," the black's rider continued, with the same cold calmness, "Some of you hombres better ride out to



the Larkin place. There's no more bad men there," he insulted flatly, "just a girl—a girl hurt pretty bad—an' mebbe, by this time, Larkin hisself, an' a doc named Aiken, from

Fordton. If the doctor's there, get him back to town as soon's possible. An' you"—to the clerk—"if Cactus comes to before I get back, tell him I'm gone sidewinder huntin' in the desert. Who'll curry this horse, an' feed him for me? Not too much."

SO THE big black ate, and rested two full hours, while the Warbler did his best for the hurt Cactus. Later, he questioned Larkin's Mexican herder, Battista. He learned little, and the puzzle of Cactus' ride out with Newton was left entirely unexplained by the boy's story of a band of men riding away from the Larkin ranch and shooting him as they rode. Battista

had heard shots, and gone to find out the cause of the disturbance, calling out to the riders as they swept by him. He had been fired at by the first group, and by the one lone horseman behind. The Warbler made sure of the point, though it was perhaps valueless.

There had been one lone horseman, that passed Battista some minutes after the first group of riders. Battista swore to that.

The Warbler went back to the room where Cactus lay, and shut the door in the face of the curious. He took a seat by the bed and tried once more to unravel the tangled series of events. The very look on the wounded man's face was a puzzle. He was still unconscious, muttering as he had muttered in the Warbler's arms, all the way from the Larkin ranch, his lips forming meaningless phrases. But his face showed more than physical shock. There was the set strain of rage on it.

The Warbler did some deep thinking. Milligan had been up at Larkin's. Milligan's face was scarred—and Cactus had an unbalanced hatred of scarred faces. Those who knew the reason understood, but the obsession was a violent one, and had set Cactus apart from most men. Perhaps it had all been Cactus' fault—perhaps he had picked a quarrel with Milligan. The Warbler found himself wondering if Newton was really guilty of the shooting.

"But the gun in yore sheath!" the Warbler said to his unconscious partner. "Milligan *ain't* that fast, damn it! Only one in a thousand is that fast. Tex is the only one *could 'a'* done it, even allowin' you was caught off guard. Tex is the man I want, though, I ain't dodgin' Milligan—not a-tall! An' one thing I'm cuttin' out, right here, is this cussed figgerin'. While I'm figgerin', them polecats might be gettin' clean away. I got a good hoss an' a good gun, an' I know the man who plugged yuh is one of that bunch, don't I? Well—all that's left to do is use the hoss an' gun. *Adios*, ol' boy. I'll wipe out yore debt, or my name ain't Madrigan!"

But all the way to the Milligan ranch his thoughts ran on. And a voice seemed to mingle with the jolt of the big black's gallop, crying a hysterical warning, "You can't kill Tex Newton! You can't!"

"Why not?" the Warbler tried to sneer. "What if he did pull me out of a hole? I ain't smokin' up on him for that. I'm gettin' him for what he did— Oh, hell!" he dismissed his doubts. "Get goin', you black devil! There's them trees."

The dark blotch of vegetation grew, took on distinguishable details. He could see Milligan's rambling ranch house.

After picketing the black securely in the fringe of trees along the bank of the creek, he went down a few yards to the place where the rock tip protruded in midstream. In a moment he was across the creek, listening in the identical place and in the same manner as upon the previous night. But now the view stood out sharp and clear in the hot sunlight—the horses in the corral, the bunkhouse to the left, the cottonwood grove hiding the main building. Gone was the soft silvering of the moon—danger lurked in that harsh, white glare, devoid of the shadows which had sheltered him the night before.

His eyes narrow, the Warbler watched the horses in the corral. Their restless shifting told him things. Purely from habit he had closed the corral gate the night before.

Watching the animals now, he was convinced no one had since opened that gate. No one had fed or watered the livestock on the ranch that morning. The implication was obvious.

WITH a grunt of decision the Warbler straightened, jumped up the bank, and ran along the mesquite fringe till well opposite the corral. He crossed over in a quick spurt to a bush clump, and waited. The harsh white glare lay over a silent, deserted ranch. Another quick run, his Colt hand tensed, toward the bunkhouse wall, and his eyes gave final proof of what he now felt sure of. Twenty yards to the right, at the corral corner, something stirred on the sparse grass clumps, heaved up at the middle, settled. A trussed man—one of the two he had tied up the night before—sure proof that neither Newton nor Milligan had returned. The Warbler made sure, exploring the whole ranch on the chance a cook or other functionary had

been left behind. But evidently Milligan's cook was useful for other things besides cooking.

Fretting at the waste of time, Lou finally came back to the corral, heaved a squirming, gurgling form to his shoulder, and marched with it to the house, where he dumped the man like a sack of grain across the kitchen floor, and then went back for the other man whom he had trussed up last night, and repeated the procedure. Dragging out two chairs to the little room's center, he propped the two men up, one after the other, upon them. Then he went into the back room for another chair, placed it facing his two sweating victims, and sat upon it, rolling a cigarette with great deliberation. The weed lighted, he rose again, strode to the rude pantry beside the stove, and after rummaging on the shelves, returned with a huge carving knife. Handling it with dangerous carelessness, he cut the gagging neckerchiefs from across their faces, and grinned mockingly as the relieved rustlers spat out grass roots and dirt and expressive language.

"What you bellyachin' about?" he asked, seating himself again. "I came back, didn't I? I could 'a' left you there, roastin' slow an' sure, meditatin' on yore sins. But I came back."

"Go to hell!" was the polite answer. "An' yo're goin' soon—soon as Milligan gets in!"

The Warbler studied the speaker's thin face—a hard, sneering face. The other, a fleshier man with drooping mustache ends, was of softer fiber. His vigorous swearing could not cover that. The Warbler felt it.

"So Milligan's comin' back, 'cordin' to you. But supposin' I tell yuh Milligan ain't ever comin' back? Suppose I tell yuh Milligan's dead—Limpy's dead—an' Gunner an' Tex Newton are in for a necktie party over at Agua Fria? What would yuh think of that?"

"That you're a squaw-dog liar," sneered the thin faced man, and kept his sneer as the Warbler's eyes chilled. But the other looked startled.

"What you know about Gunner, Limpy, an' Newton——?"

"Plenty, whiskers, plenty—"

"Shut up, Porky!" snapped the thin faced man. "I'll do the talkin'!"

The Warbler's gaze was now cold.

"You're right, Hatchet Muzzle—you'll do the talkin'. An' you'll talk the way I want—or I'll blow you all over this place. What did Milligan say 'fore ridin' out last night? Where'd he say he was goin'? Come on—talk!"

"He was goin' to look for a snoopin' coyote that came to the ranch here—ridin' a mule. You the hombre?"

"I'm the hombre who's askin' questions here, not answerin' 'em. Question number two—what other place you fellers got beside this ranch—where do you run the cattle you steal?"

"San Francisco," sneered the bound rustler. "We drive 'em in to dip in the ocean every week—makes 'em healthy and — Hell!" he snarled after the echo of the sudden shot from the Warbler's gun. His face had gone livid. "You loco? I felt that bullet!"

"There's blood on yore earlobe," said the Warbler calmly, sheathing his smoking weapon. "I missed. Aimed for one of yore eyes—but I missed. I'll be tryin' again—next time you get sassy."

The thin faced man had nerve, but the

Warbler's gaze was now a freezing thing. A yellowish pallor crept into the face of the other, the mustached Porky.

"Eyes?" Porky asked, his imagination active. "Hell you ain't pullin' trigger, from——"

"No-o?" asked the Warbler with rising intensity. "Well, try any

more rustler jokes about waterin' cattle—either one of you!" he blazed, his anger a real, fear inducing thing. "You rats think I'm here to listen to back talk? You talk fast an' straight, or I'll put an endin' on a pair of bad starts so cussed fast you won't have time to be sorry!"



HE LEANED back again, pulled at the cigarette, and sent a ring of smoke to join the acrid cloud drifting up toward the ceiling. "No use my goin' on a rampage about it. You skunks ain't worth it. I'm just tellin' yuh—that's all. Any more sassy talk, an' I'm lettin' drive, three feet away, for yore eyes. A forty-five——"

"Hell!" snarled Porky, squirming. "Forget it! What you wanna know?"

"What other place would Milligan go, if he wanted to lay low, outside of this ranch?"

"Hell—I don't know!" said Porky earnestly. "The whole desert's a hideout, ain't it? What's happened to Milligan?"

"There's places better'n others in the desert," prodded the Warbler. "Water holes—canyons yuh can't see. You shut up!" he snapped to the thin faced man, "or I'll tap you with a six-gun, same as last night! Porky, where do you fellers drive yore cattle? Where's the stops?"

Porky hesitated. But the Warbler's youthful face could look very disquieting at times, and Porky was cursed with an imagination.

"There's a waterin' place 'bout ten miles straight east," he said at last. "Lots of long ridges, come to a point—a high rise, an' behind it the pool. There's palms——"

"What?" snapped the Warbler, tensing.

"Straight talk," said Porky, his flesh shrinking. "Palms. You ain't ever seen 'em? There's green there too, not much—an' some of it's bad. But the water'll pass. That's the nearest water. The next is way around to the west, over twelve miles from Fordton, an' close to real drive trails again. That's all I know," he told the truth. "Milligan never did much hidin', anyway. An' we ain't rustlers a-tall," he hedged, aware of his trussed friend's murderous looks. "We're runnin' a honest ——"

"Lie number one," stated the Warbler. "Don't finish it. Keep yore mind on questions. Here's one I want answered right. What's Tex Newton got to do with you fellers?"

Porky hesitated. He was caught in the opposing forces of two dreads—one immediate and vivid, the other due to materialize if Milligan came out on top in

the present affair. Milligan generally did come out on top. Porky mentally cursed many things. But he answered.

"Tex Newton's our foreman. He's lived with Milligan for twenty years—knows this end of the desert like no other man ——"

"Glad to hear it," said the Warbler coldly. The little flecks danced in his eyes. "So the first waterin' place, east, is about about ten miles in, at the joint of——" He broke off, listened.

The mustached Porky started—and a quick gleam of triumph shot to the eyes of the thin faced rustler in the other chair. The illusive sound which had stopped the Warbler's words took on positiveness—became the pound of running hoofs, which thudded to a stop beside the house. There came the sound of gruff voices of men, in loud altercation—Gunner's voice, unmistakable—and the crunch of footsteps on the front stairs.

"So Milligan's dead?" sneered the thin faced rustler, snarling at Lou. "Guess again, Mr. Gun Man! Here's Milligan now!"

CHAPTER VII

WARNINGS

THE Warbler's will wrestled with his instinct to move. Like a picture thrown upon a mental screen, he saw the details of the whole situation—saw the sun drenched ranch and yards, the winding creek and the mesquite—his big, black horse picketed well up the stream. Milligan and his outfit would not all enter from the front. The voice of Gunner, carrying clearly, sounded from the big room beyond the kitchen. The Warbler sensed the fact that Gunner was standing in the doorway—his words implied it.

"Change them saddles, quick!" Gunner was instructing. "An' put mine on thet big black stud. Tell Porky an' Red all about it, an' bring the cayuses right here clost to the steps. Hurry up! We'll save a coupla bottles! Come on, Frank," he continued in a different tone. "Move! We ain't got all day!"

The footsteps of the speaker and the man Frank, whoever that was, sounded

nearer. The Warbler slouched, his eyes flashed cold warning, so cold that Red's intentions subsided, and Porky shrank, cursing Red's reckless nerve and what it might bring upon himself.

"Right behind them glass doors"—Gunner's voice was close to the kitchen. "Breaker kept the likker there for special times. If *this* ain't a special time——"

Frank's answer mingled with the tinkle of glass. "Mebbe we pulled a bad play—splittin' like this. We should 'a' stuck with Milligan. Five of us could have finished that damned bobcat——"

"Mebbe—mebbe!" the response was irritable. "But I don't think so. Gunplay like his'n ain't somethin' you kin figger on——" A loud *pop* interrupted his words. The Warbler, still slouched, his Colt holding the two men silent in the chairs, heard the gurgle of liquor being poured into glasses. The Warbler knew he was a fool to wait like that. The men sent to change saddle and talk to Porky and Red would soon be returning, and might well return by the side door, trapping him. But what had he come to the Milligan ranch for, in the first place? The Warbler felt the answer in the slow, steady beat of blood at his temples. He had not come to run from Gunner!

GUNNER was speaking again. "I tell yuh it was Milligan's own fault, cuttin' for Agua Fria! It mighta worked with somebody else, but that damned gun artist Tex knows this country like Red knows horses—he mighta gained on us, past that mesa, for all we know, an' *seen* Milligan turn!" There came another tinkle of glass on glass. "Well, anyway we got the money—an' that herd to collect for in Fordton. After that—who's goin' to find us?"

The Warbler moved, smoothly as a stalking puma, around the chairs, toward the door of the larger room. In passing, his Colt swung on Red, a brief, terse motion of warning. Red was tied, and to yell out was plain suicide. Gunner and the man Frank, caught by surprise, would scarcely try to beat a dead drop.

But Red spoiled the surprise. Red had nerve to spare, and a very malevolent disposition. Scarcely had the Warbler passed

when he straightened with a jerk, hopped awkwardly to one side, and, in a combination jump and fall, struck heavily against the pivoting Warbler. And as he moved he yelled savagely, at top of his lungs.

The Warbler's Colt spat but once, and the shot was instinctive, jerked wide at the last moment by yet a stronger instinct in the man who fired—his inability to pull trigger on a tied man. Red's falling weight threw the Warbler back, in line with the doorway to the front room, in line of the bullets which at once zipped past the framing. A sear of pain went through the Warbler's left arm, as he twisted away, wrapped in the smoke from his working Colt. In that one flash of the room's interior he saw both Gunner and Frank, but not clearly enough to distinguish one from the other. And the quick twist which took him out of range cut off view of the room, so that he did not see one sinking slowly by the side of a heavy table of polished oak holding glasses and bottles.

Once in full momentum of his twist, the Warbler kept moving, ending up at the outside door, and plunged through it and down the steps. His senses were reeling, and he realized the bullet in his arm had either shattered or violently grazed the bone. A flesh wound could cause no such nausea. And Gunner? Had his snapshots killed Gunner?

The house was strangely silent, but running men were coming from the direction of the corrals, shooting. The Warbler fought his weakness, broke into a run down the path, through the archway of service berry bush, and across the bridge of stones. Little splashes flicked up on the water, and the whine of lead glancing from rock told of close shooting. But, protected by the house bulk, he gained the fringe of bushes unhit, and racing upstream under cover of the mesquite and trees, noticed the flashes coming from the front windows. Evidently he had not killed Gunner. But there was little time for thinking. He had to reach his horse while his spurt of strength lasted.

THE Warbler was no sooner in the saddle than the big black horse headed over the plain, aware of something wrong

from the knee grip and rein hold of the man in the saddle. The Warbler's will fought a grim, incessant struggle with his fading perceptions. And gradually won.

Sunset, and a cooling of the day's heat, found him with clearing head, riding alone and unpursued over the vast sea of yellow grass. His weakness wearing away, the Warbler judged himself without mercy.

"Of all the mosshead plays, that one takes the prize!" he berated himself coldly. "Diablo, I'm ashamed to be ridin' you, cussed if I ain't! Didn't we start out to



swap lead with them coyotes? An' when the shootin' started, we ducked out! Duck ed out, leavin' Gunner an' the rest free to travel—to Fordton, wasn't

it? Why'd I duck out? 'Cause I couldn't see straight, that's why. 'Cause I'm an old woman, groggy after one bullet in the arm. What'll Cactus say when he hears it—Cactus, who knows of punchers shootin' with bullets in their lungs!"

His muttering died. But inwardly his thoughts were in line with the clipped, angry words. It was a queer thing. He had been shot before—had once suffered a broken collar bone in a cowtown fracas back in Arizona. Scarcely more than a boy, he had kept his end up, and had not admitted the pain of the wound till hours after the affair was over. Now, man grown, after a year of riding with Cactus Lor-rimer, he came close to fainting because of a bullet in his arm. Swearing slowly, the Warbler halted the big black, and explored his hurt. The wound ached dully. His sleeve was wet on both sides of the arm—the lead had passed entirely through. But though the hurt of touching the wound made him grimace, he felt no sensation of weakness now. His head was clear, his thinking perfect.

The shock had done it, he surmised—some nerve connection jarred—Cactus might understand.

After a time his shame passed. Given the fact of his condition, his instincts had

moved him rightly. Had he delayed to shoot it out, Gunner's men would have killed him. It was a cold certainty.

He veered the black toward the setting sun.

"Come on, Diablo, you ole hayburner! It's no use cryin' over it. Them skunks said things I should 'a' paid more attention to. Said somethin' about Milligan makin' for Agua Fria, an' somebody gettin' him. Who in hell is goin' after Milligan? Newton, I'd say, by that talk. But Newton's been with Milligan for twenty years. It's a cussed tangle, if you ask me. I'd sure like to see Newton—him an' Milligan both!"

The black hurtled forward into his powerful, ground eating run. The Warbler's arm twinged at the increased jolting, but he consoled himself with the knowledge of the fact that Agua Fria was within a half dozen miles. Agua Fria and Milligan! The shame in him leaped eagerly at the thought. Perhaps before the day was over, he could wipe out part of the steadily accumulating debt he owed to Breaker Milligan.

MOUNTED men showed up on the horizon, a picturesque group outlined against the great red ball of sun. The Warbler gradually slowed Diablo, veered him to meet the group.

Cowpunchers, he decided, as they neared. There was no mistaking the easy saddle poises, the keen, lean, sunbronzed faces. They drew to a halt about him—asked if he was, or had seen, Lou Madrigan, riding a big black horse.

"Sure—I'm Madrigan—an' here's the hoss." The Warbler frowned with interest. "I can't place you gents."

"We're riders for the Stearns people, down south," explained the spokesman. "Trailin' a lot of missin' cattle up this way—and aimin' to question a hombre named Milligan real clost. Dropped in to Agua Fria, 'bout two hours ago, an' heard of the ruckus on the Larkin ranch, an' about yore partner bein' shot."

"Yeah?" encouraged the Warbler, his thoughts racing.

"Yeah. We heard you rode out, gunnin' for Milligan an' his outfit. Seein' we

had business with Milligan ourselves, we lit out after yuh." The speaker noticed a dark blotch on the Warbler's shirt. "Hell—what they do—plug you?"

"A little," lied the Warbler. "Grazed, that's all. I'm goin' in to town to tie it up." Inwardly he justified the lie. Milligan belonged to him, not to riders of the Stearns concern. He would turn the big rustler over to them after getting him, but the matter of getting him had become a touchy point with the Warbler. He was glad of the fact that the punchers knew nothing of Milligan's presence in town.

"Say!" he said earnestly. "You fellers down here on *business*? You got evidence connectin' Milligan with yore missin' cows?"

"Evidence?" laughed one. "Duke, here, caught two of 'em redhanded a week back, and chased 'em down this way. A wobbly saddle-rig dropped two irons on the trail—one was a runnin' rod, an' the other a regular J M stamp—Milligan's brand. But we didn't need that—it's open talk about Milligan's rustlin', only we been busy with other things."

"Well, here's yore chance to round 'em up," responded the Warbler. "They made an open break up at Larkin's, like you heard, an' they got away. Shot me, an' got away with it again. But I can set you on the trail. Ten miles straight east, in the desert, a bunch o' ridges draw to a point—there's a rise of land, an' water in the drop behind. Palms—an' plenty cactus probably. Milligan's outfit is makin' for that place. They got fresh horses, too. But your'n don't look tired. If they rest up at that oasis, you kin get 'em."

The Stearns riders debated.

"I ain't got no yearn for the desert," doubted one. "But if yo're sure we'll get Milligan—our orders was to see him. What say, Duke?"

Duke looked at the Warbler, at the splotch on the youngster's arm.

"Sure, we'll go after him. How about you, Madrigan? That graze *gotta* be washed?"

"Yeah. It's a little more'n a graze," confessed the Warbler. "I'm tendin' to it, an' ridin' out right after. An' don't be

surprised if I get there near as soon as you. This black *caballo* is a hoss!"

"There ain't much doubt of that!" muttered Duke, his gaze on the restless stallion. "'J. M,' eh?" he read the brand. "I see Milligan ain't been havin' it all his own way. Well—guess we'll take this trail." A thought struck him as he began to pivot his mount. "Oh, yeah, Madrigan, I got a message for you—got it in town. Hotel clerk told me to tell yuh, if you see Tex Newton—not to smoke up on him. Yore partner's gave that out—"

"What's that?" The Warbler's eyes changed.

Duke repeated.

"This Newton's one of Milligan's bunch, ain't he?" he asked at the finish. "Thet clerk said everybody was figgerin' it was Newton shot yore friend—he said you went out gunnin' for him special. But yore partner, when he came to an' heard you goin' after him, went kinda loco, the clerk said. Tried to get outa bed, an' to quiet him they had to run out an' spread the news for nobody to shoot Tex Newton. The clerk told us just when we was pullin' out of town, an' said he was goin' back into the hotel to find out why yore friend was raisin' hell about Newton. Said there was somethin' plumb interestin' about it."

"It ain't hard to guess at," commented the man on Duke's right. "If any polecat plugged *me* twice, I'd be kinda anxious to keep him safe till I got well—who wouldn't?"

"That's it," said the Warbler, his eyes cold. "Cactus don't want me to plug Newton—he's aimin' to get him hisself. It ain't only interestin', but natural. But I got feelin's of my own that are kinda natural, an' plumb interestin'. If Cactus gets better 'fore I meet Newton, I'll mebbe pass it up—mebbe," he repeated. "Cactus ain't no baby, but this Newton's a gun man!"

"That's what I heard in town. Heard it before, down south," said Duke, his gaze going to the Warbler's Colt. "Mebbe yore partner—" he hesitated.

"Don't finish it." Lou's tone was calm. "It ain't that. Cactus has seen me handle short guns too long to be worryin' about me. Well"—he turned the black—"See you boys again."

"Lots of ridges, drawin' to a point," Duke remembered. "Ten miles east."

"An' if you miss 'em there, fog for Fordton," instructed the Warbler. "An' get set for anythin'. Them fellers don't talk much—their main habit is shootin'."

"That's all right!" growled Duke. "We got some habits of our own. Come on, boys!"

THE group of cowpunchers soon became a single black blotch on the darkening horizon to the east, dwindled to a vague point, vanished. The Warbler sent the big black on his hurtling run, trying to forget certain disturbing things in his own mind. The Warbler was young, and his emotions strong. They justified his lie to the cowpunchers. He had put them on track of the rustlers, but not of Milligan—for Milligan was a private affair. And so was Tex Newton. The Warbler frowned as he recalled the words of the cowboy Duke. Perhaps Cactus' queer actions were due to a fear for his safety. Perhaps Tex Newton's gunplay was something phenomenal that made hunting him a suicidal venture.

The little cold flecks danced up in the rider's eyes. His confidence in his own gun speed was absolute, a confidence rooted in ability. Anyone else might entertain fears for his safety, but not Cactus.

The Warbler dug heels into the black's sides.

"Come on, Diablo! I'm takin' to moonin'



like an old woman, cussed if I ain't! It couldn't be simpler, could it? Cactus wants Newton hissself, that's all!" But all the way back to town the doubt in his mind about

Newton's guilt finally forced a decision upon him. He would go to see Cactus first of all.

But he didn't.

Jogging down the town's main street, he became aware of something out of the ordinary, some commotion of deeper nature than the disturbance of the afternoon.

Men were gathered in groups, watching Mescal Pete's. His own arrival caused a pronounced stir.

"Madrigan!" called a voice out of the dusk. The Warbler dismounted swiftly, went over to the thicker shadows by the building. The man who had called pulled him closer. He was plainly excited.

"You want Milligan?"

"Yeah." The Warbler tensed slowly. "Where is he?"

"Right there in Mescal Pete's. He's been drinkin' up since hittin' town—snarlin' around like a mountain cat. Even the bar-keeps duck him. If you go in there, hell's gonna pop!"

Dark forms converged toward the two, curious men, offering advice. The big black horse stood in street center, obedient to the reins dangling before his eyes. The Warbler felt icily calm.

"Hell'll pop, all right. Thanks for tellin' me, buddy. An' don't get in range."

"Madrigan"—the whisper was hoarse—"I don't know yuh—but you look like a good sort. I'm warnin' yuh—Tex Newton's in Pete's, too! Must be, 'cause Jidkins saw him ride up not five minutes 'fore you, an' turn in the saloon yard. He ain't left since!"

Slow pulse beats throbbed at the Warbler's temples.

"I'm thankin' you again," he said, and his voice was a drawl. "Reckon I'll drop in on Pete myself."

CHAPTER VIII

TWENTY YEARS

UNHURRIEDLY, his stride a prowl, his gun arm loose, Lou moved away toward the saloon. Those nearest caught the sense of force as he passed them—a leashed tension—a warning clear as spoken words.

"Cripes!" muttered one as the groups converged, and moved after him. "It won't be no picnic for none of 'em!"

The Warbler's heels sounded on the board walk—steady, even thumping, going toward the single step before the saloon doors. The rapid thud of hoofs arrested him a moment, but he resumed his walk

at sight of the group of riders sliding to a stop around and behind an overloaded buggy. The Larkins—and Newton's girl—asking questions in the center of the street. Hoarse replies brought more questions—and a cry of alarm from the girl. Cold as ice, the Warbler's concentration closed them out. Even the girl's cry, clearly directed to him, he recognized and ignored. Dimly he sensed her running toward him, heard gruff voices warning her back—was aware of a little struggle. But he had reached the corner of Mescal Pete's, and his thoughts centered inexorably ahead of him. Steadily, without hurry he walked, reached the door step, pushed through the double doors.

MILLIGAN, alone in the poorly lit saloon's cardroom, looked up with a start.

The table before him was littered with glasses and empty bottles—symbols of Milligan's desperate attempt to create the courage he did not have. His eyes were bloodshot, glaring, and the scar on his face showed plainly by its line of thinner beard—a slash that gave the final touch to his ogre like appearance.

He sat hunched over the table, hands hovering over the Colts at his belt as the Warbler slowly moved through the doors, but the terror in his features lessened visibly. Milligan had expected someone else.

"You!" he grunted, his tone a bit puzzled. "What in hell *you* doin' here?" The bloodshot eyes noticed the Warbler's left arm, hanging limp, stained above the elbow. And his gaze noticed other things. The message in the other's attitude gradually percolated through the alcohol fumes in his mind.

"What you want?" he suddenly snarled, tense again.

"You!" said the Warbler flatly. "I want you. Yo're gettin' away from that table, steppin' aside, an' unbucklin' yore gun belts, puttin' them an' the Colts where them glasses are. An' yo're doin' it real slow an' careful. After that, the peerade starts—you headin' it for the Havelock."

Somewhere in the silence a clock ticked, monotonously. A confused babble of ar-

guing voices suddenly started up in the street.

"Get goin'!" snapped the Warbler, his eyes alive with little quivering points of light. "Who you waitin' for—yore friend Newton?"

Milligan simply stared in blank amazement. The Warbler's words, his tone, went inevitably with a pointed gun—but the Warbler's lone Colt was holstered. Slowly the big man began to sneer.

"So I'm peeradin'? Mebbe I am at that!" He began to move out, slowly, from behind the table, his hands poised. "Mebbe there's gonna be a funeral peerade in Agua Fria tonight——"

The Warbler slouched. And as he did so a third voice sounded in the empty bar-room.

"Go easy, Warbler—don't draw!"

The Warbler's draw, as he turned around was a miracle of speed—a baffling flick of arm. His right hip spurting smoke in the very motion of turning, and his first trigger-pull scored a hit. He had seen Tex Newton, framed in an open window beside the bar; and had shot in that flawless sequence of perception and action that had made his gift the talk of many an Arizona cowcamp.

But Newton, jerking back, lights bursting in his brain, also pulled the trigger of his leveled guns, but he shot at Milligan's moving form.

The Warbler's second shot, cut across at Milligan, missed, and his third went wild as a bullet from Milligan's gun ripped into his already wounded arm. The hit was lucky, for Milligan was plunging toward the doors as he pulled trigger. But it jolted the Warbler off balance, and by the time he recovered Milligan's form had reached the doors, and plunged through.

The shutters of the swinging door frames shattered under the cut of lead as they closed behind Milligan, but already the rustler leader was safely out in the half gloom, shooting blindly, jumping forward through the crowd which had been approaching the entrance, a crowd that scattered like frightened rabbits before his wild plunge. Alcohol and stark fear lifted him in one leap to the hitchbar, from the bar to a horse's back. His spurs

jabbed so savagely into the unsuspecting animal's sides that it neighed in panic stricken pain, reared violently, snapping loose from its rein tie on the rail. Next moment it was heading up the street, straining under the savage dig of spurs. Its rider yelled—hoarse sounds of drunken relief and exultation.

But the exultation was brief. Out past the town's last buildings, he headed for the open plain—apparently unpursued. Yet doubts grew upon him. He had squeezed clear of Death's grip by aid of a lucky complication—two men had come to get him—and had got each other instead. Or perhaps they were again on his trail—Newton and the other, whose draw baffled sight. The big man's exultation died. Racing across the plain, he looked back, again and again, and at last saw his fears justified. Behind him, a small black spider in the strengthening moonlight, was a pursuing rider.

AT THE conclusion of the gun battle in the saloon, the Warbler, his mind filled with doubts, his Colt empty, had tried to spring forward after Milligan, but had



ended up against the wall, his forward lurch missing the door entirely. The black, sense reeling nausea of the afternoon was upon him again. His knees buckled, pitched him to the floor. Rolling over, he fought to rise, and had partly succeeded when a crowd of men surged through the entrance, and helped him up. Through the haze of his blurred senses the Warbler saw the face of the Havelock clerk. The man's eyes were wide, his voice excited.

"Madrigan—where's Newton! You didn't—"

The Warbler's groping mind remembered seeing the man at the window, with Colts drawn, who had not shot at him

as he pivoted, but who had shot at Milligan after being hit. With a growl the Warbler shook clear of the supporting arms about him.

"I got Newton," he said coldly, steadying himself. "By the winder—"

He saw the clerk's wide eyes widen farther with a shocked sort of horror. But the look passed at a renewed hubbub from outside.

"Tex! Tex!" a girl's voice was crying. "Come back, Tex!" The sound of running hoofs came faintly to the listening man.

The Warbler lurched forward. But the clerk, his timid soul carried out of himself, dragged him back.

"Madrigan—listen—for God's sake, listen! You can't shoot Tex Newton!"

"Why can't I?" snapped the Warbler, his senses clearing. "What's all this mess about?"

"Tex Newton didn't shoot your partner, Cactus Lorrimer. Newton is Lorrimer's own son! Hear that? Lorrimer's own boy! Milligan's the man who jumped Cactus Lorrimer's claim in the Panamints twenty years ago, and left him for dead, and was supposed to have killed Lorrimer's two kids. But the youngest never died! Milligan took him away when he found the claim worthless—before Lorrimer came back. Don't you know the story?"

The Warbler merely stared. "Tex Newton's one of Cactus' kids? Are you loco? Cactus found 'em drowned!"

"He found one drowned. The other he never found, but thought the stream had sucked him under somewhere along the bank. Your partner's saying this himself, Madrigan! He's come to—I waited till ten minutes ago to get the whole thing clear, and ran out, to be told you were in here with Newton and Milligan!"

The Warbler could not think. "What's that girl hollerin' Tex for?" he asked slowly. "He ain't hurt bad?"

The doors buckled inward again, to allow passage of a short, portly medical man carrying a small valise and with him were Mrs. Larkin and Alice, and Jed Larkin. The Warbler stepped forward to meet them, pushing the crowd aside with his one good hand. Alice Milligan's face was a death mask—only her eyes were alive,

dark with suffering and dread. The Warbler spoke slowly.

"Girl, yo're mebbe lookin' at the biggest damn fool in the cow country. All I kin say is I didn't know. Is Tex hurt? An' what is the straight of this?"

"Tex is gone after Milligan again," she replied, apparently standing up by force of will alone. "Oh, I tried to tell you—in that cabin at Larkin's Springs—but I was too sick. Tex found his father. My own father had killed——" she was plainly at the limit of her strength.

"Better let me tell it," said Jed Larkin brusksly. "Take her away, Jane," he addressed his wife who was supporting the girl. "We'll settle this. It's a deal for men."

"Jed—you'll bring him back?" The group shuffled uneasily at the emotions in the girl's tone.

"Sure—sure," said Jed. "Take her away, Jane."

HE TURNED to the Warbler. "I'm Larkin—owner of the place where yore partner was shot. I seen the whole thing. Yore friend Lorrimer an' Newton rode in on us together—lookin' for a hoss for you, they said. Lorrimer was takin' it as a joke—said he'd have the laugh on you when you'd drop in on him with some crowbait you picked up in Agua Fria. Then he'd show yuh the hoss he bought. The way I see it, Newton took him up to my place for an excuse to see Alice—Alice an' Tex had had a spat, an' both were feelin' doggone bad about it. My wife told me that. Well, anyway, we got to talkin', after dark, in the cabin, all of us together. Newton an' yore partner seemed to take to each other. The talk swung around on the old days when men dribbled into this country one by one, an' one by one fit Injuns, rattlesnakes, an' thirst. An' yore partner told of how his wife had died crossin' the desert, but how he stuck to prospectin' with his two kids. Struck pay gold up on a Panamint ridge, on a big creek he called the Midas——"

"That's right!" the clerk's voice corroborated through the tense silence. And the Warbler's mind went back to many campfires on plain and hill, and Cactus'

story of the claim jumping in the Panamints, that had soured his life.

"Lorrimer told how a bunch of craggy customers dropped in on him one day," Larkin went on, "an' he was foolish enough to show 'em the dust he'd washed out of the creek bottom. Late that same day, after they'd gone on, he was walking down a slope side to the canyon where he'd put up a hut, when the bullets got him. Lorrimer said he went down, an' stayed down—playin' dead by instinct. An' the four claim-jumpers came out of the brush, walked over to him, looked at him, kicked him, an' went on. His kids, comin' up from the cabin, were hollerin' for their pap. One was thirteen, an' near as big as a man. He musta put up a fight, 'cause Lorrimer heard shots down in the canyon. Lorrimer dragged hisself away—and for two days an' nights fit off death, goin' down the slopes toward the flat land. A desert rat found him, and pulled him through. A coupla weeks after that he came back, alone, to fight for his claim, an' see what the jumpers had done to his boys. One he found drowned, full of bullet holes, an' the other, the small kid, he never found."

"That's right!" said the clerk again, his voice still awed.

"Well," continued Jed. "That's the story yore partner told up in my cabin. It made us all set quiet, listenin', after he was through, to the kiyotes yappin' out on the plain. But it hit Tex more'n anybody. His face was like a ghost's—an' he was starin' at somethin' not in thet cabin a-tall. An' yore partner, kinda made gloomy by his own mem'ries, went out, sayin' he was goin' for a smoke. Tex just sits there an' stares a while, then he ups an' follows him. An' while we waited for 'em to come back, Milligan an' five riders pounded in, lookin' for the girl—an' Newton."

Larkin paused, moistened his lips. "Hell—I need a drink," he said simply. "What I seen ain't seen every day."

The drink was brought him, and after disposing of it in one swallow, Jed went on.

"Milligan was kinda drunk—so were his men. They raised a ruckuss right

away—Milligan swearing' at the girl, and swearin' at my wife an' me for puttin' her against him. Said he wanted to see Newton, for a showdown on somethin'. The girl begun cryin', afraid of gunplay between Newton an' that bunch. She knew of doin's she would never tell Jane or me about. An' as we was all bunched just outside the door, the moon makin' it pretty light, yore partner Lorrimer comes back. Natural like, he asks what the trouble is, but when Milligan answers, an' steps out in plain view, Lorrimer went loco. Hell!" Jed shook his head.

"Boys—I never want to see a man's face change like *that* again. Lorrimer wasn't a man no more—he was just an animal, making noises like an animal, but we caught words enough to tell us that right there was the claim jumper of his story. Breaker Milligan was the man who had killed Lorrimer's boy twenty years ago! Why they met up at my place I dunno—nobody knows things like that—but in a way I'm glad. I seen somethin' not everybody sees. Milligan looked kinda puzzled at first, but he remembered, too, after a few minutes. Yuh could see it in his face.

"Newton came runnin' around the cabin. He must've heard the endin' of Lorrimer's words. Then the mixup started. Milligan shot Lorrimer, who didn't draw a-tall—shot him as he jumped for a throat hold, his reason plumb gone. My dog was shot as he came runnin' from the smoke shed. One of Milligan's riders threw a quirt into Tex's face, spoilin' his first shots, an' savin' Milligan's life. Two others jumped Tex, but he shook away somehow, an' got Milligan's rider Limpy, who crossed before his boss as they both made for their horses. One of the two beside Tex slugged him with a Colt butt, an' he dropped. But he didn't stay down. He got to his hoss, an' was headin' after the whole bunch when the girl, scared out of her right mind, jumps before the hoss, an' gets knocked down. Stepped on, too, though me an' my woman didn't know that till two hours ago. Anyway, Tex stopped to bring her back to the cabin, yelled for us to take care of Lorrimer—Tex thought sure Lorrimer was fatally

wounded—an' went out after Milligan an' his bunch."

THE Warbler nodded slowly. "It fits, piece by piece," he muttered. "After they was gone you put Cactus on the bed, dragged Limpy out of the way, an' went for a doc, not knowin' the girl was bad hurt."

"That's right—they didn't know. Just found out on our return." The short, portly man spoke for the first time.

"You're Doctor Aiken?" asked the Warbler.

"Yes. The girl's all right—her heart's a little affected by the heavy blow, but only temporarily."

"Doc—kin a bullet in a man's arm knock him plumb out?"

"Well—if it strikes or scrapes the bone—it's quite a shock to the nervous system."

"Reckon it is," grinned the Warbler. "No, I'm all right. You go an' see Cactus, will yuh?"

"Why—where are you going, Madri-gan?" asked the clerk. "Your partner's been asking for you all the time. Besides, better hear the story from his own lips."

"I've heard it," the Warbler replied, drawing an empty Colt from its sheath. "Who'll load this for me? I got a bad left hand. That story, buddy," he went on calmly, "is true. I heard Cactus tell it many times.



The reason why Cactus trailed most in lonely places was 'cause he hated men with scars, an' was afraid to meet 'em, on account of his

trouble. Reckon he met the man with the right scar up at yore place, Larkin. Cactus told me how he saw that claim jumper's face good, when he lay plugged on that slope, in the Panamints, an' the skunk was kickin' him—he said that face was burned in his mem'ry then like a brand on a steer's hide. But he never figgered on meetin' him—the desert an' range are big.

"Now I'll tell yuh why I can't go to see Cactus. He's been like a father to me for over a year—learned me things I'd mebbe never know if 'twasn't for him. He gets plugged by the same man who killed his boy twenty years ago. I had that man settin' twenty feet away from me not a half hour back, an' that man got away. What's more, I shot Tex Newton when he was gunnin' for Milligan—I hit him—I seen his head jerk when I pulled trigger. Newton's gone after Milligan, an' I'm still here, makin' mouth noises. Gimme that Colt—an' take care of Cactus. When I come back to him, it'll be clean. Savvy? Besides, Tex'll be needin' me."

"We'll all go!" shouted someone, and the shout was at once taken up. "Milligan's a dirty thief, anyway! Let's clean that gang up!"

The Warbler smiled thinly.

"About time you hombres was making a little war talk. But it's too late, I reckon. Posse up, if you wants, but don't figger to be in on Milligan's funeral. Cactus thought I'd get a crowbait, but I got a *hoss*. You fellers won't see me any more tonight. But if you ride out, come after me straight east. Straight east across the desert."

The next moment he was past them, going out the door. They surged after him, came into the street in time to see a big black rear up in the moonlight as its rider vaulted to the saddle—saw it settle into a run toward the town's northern end.

Other horses were rapidly gathered, and the posse pounded out. But the truth of the Warbler's claim was proven as they veered east across the plain. The big black was a horse. Animal and rider were already a vague dot in the moon-misted night—a dot that soon vanished completely.

On the big black's back, the Warbler rode, lifting with each lunge of the great body laboring beneath him. He scarcely thought. It was all too strange for thought.

Twenty years. Cactus' boy—Tex Newton—was fogging after the man who had killed his kid brother!—Was riding after the man who had doubtlessly brought him up from boyhood to ride crooked trails.

Swearing softly, the Warbler urged the black on.

"Spread out, Diablo! Mebbe I hit Newton hard an' it's only plain nerve keepin' him up. Mebbe Milligan's got a good chanct to come out more'n second best, at that." The thought brought grimness to his face, hardened his voice. "Come on, Diablo—yo're *runnin'*, this trip!"

CHAPTER IX

DESERT LAW

DIABLO ran. His shadow flitted over sage clumps, stretches of bunch grass, finally over desert sand. And over the soft, lung killing waste he proved himself. The moon dipped serenely across the arch of sky, and the flitting shadows of horse and rider lengthened, became grotesque. Minutes merged to hours. But still Diablo ran, a great, powerful machine of speed, into a weird land, yellow-white and still under the light of the moon. The level desert floor became buckled into waves—low hills rose—fantastic formations abruptly thrusting up out of the soil.

The Warbler swore coldly. Deserts in moonlight were queer places. Illusive shapes and forms seemed to be moving among the low hills, stirring at the tops of the small, distorted buttes. In the maze of shadows and pale light it was hard to distinguish separate objects. But the silence, utter, a palpable thing closing around the lurch and pound and blowing snorts of Diablo, aided him. For the silence carried the sound of shots—faint, poplike, ghost noises in the ghost land of yellow-white rises and dips ahead of him and to his left.

Diablo veered without breaking stride, settled low in his headlong, beautiful run. Appreciation was at the back of the Warbler's mind—appreciation of the power in that great, lathered black body. But his attention focused ahead.

They topped a rise of sand, and as Diablo headed down its opposite side, the Warbler saw clearly. He was riding down into a bowl-like depression surrounded by a pale white rim broken only to the east. And in the center of the craterlike bowl

was a dark blotch—a man behind a fallen horse. Another, mounted, was riding in an arc around him, his intention plain. And the man on the horse was Milligan.

The Warbler sensed rather than saw the identities of the two men before him. And he sensed the details of the situation. Just for a moment he wondered. There was a sort of poetic justice about it all—about what he was going to do. And the palely lit bowl in the desert seemed a proper setting. Yelling to Diablo, he leaned down, drew his rifle from scabbard.

The rider beyond abruptly broke the chord of the arc he was making, and turned in a straight run for that opening in the long, soft slopes of sand. He was a little to the Warbler's left, yet much nearer to the opening. But Diablo's speed cut him off. The big black carried the Warbler within range before the other could gain the opening and the harder, baked soil beyond.

Deliberately the Warbler pulled trigger on the Winchester, once, again. The horse ahead seemed to spring forward in a spurt, but his stride wavered, broke and the second shot sent him down. His rider sprang clear, knelt, and returned the fire.

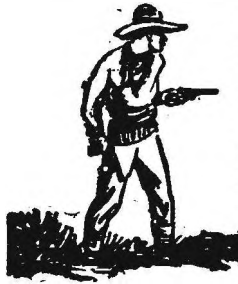
The Warbler heard the whine of lead as he veered his plunging horse. With calm purpose he headed Diablo straight away, without looking back, headed him up toward the long slope of sand to his right. Veering again, he ran the black at the base of the circular rise, gradually slowing him, finally pulling the iron jawed, lathered stallion to a halt. Diablo's work was done. And his own. Another had a prior claim to Milligan.

Memory of how the other settled his claim was to remain long with Lou Mad-rigan. And, watching it all, he felt no pity for Milligan. He had given Milligan more than an even break, for the big rustler was armed with a rifle, while Newton had no rifle. The Warbler had sensed the fact the instant Diablo topped the rise. Milligan had been circling about Newton, out of Colt range, forcing him to shift about the dead horse, playing as a cat plays with a mouse, deliberately missing, perhaps, and waiting till Newton, realizing the hope-

lessness of his position, would break out into a run toward his tormentor, and be shot.

The advantage in guns was with Milligan still, but unless he got Newton in the space of a very few moments, that advantage would disappear. And somehow the Warbler knew that Milligan would lose in the grim game played out on the white, wan lit desert floor. Newton was now moving away from the bulk of his dead horse.

Milligan had a mortal fear of the other man. He was shooting wildly, because of the very realization that he would die if his bullets did not stop Newton before the younger man got within Colt range of him. The Warbler could see the tiny puffs of sand spurt



up where Milligan's bullets struck—to one side, or in front of the man who ran, with splendid courage, over the yellow-white sand.

Swerving swiftly from side to side, but always moving ahead toward Milligan's spitting rifle, Tex Newton closed in on Milligan. The Warbler saw the big rustler rise, fire a final shot, then hurl the rifle away, and turn to run from the man behind. The Warbler swung Diablo around. But his yell to the big black was withheld. Milligan would lose that race.

The rustler must have sensed the fact himself, for he turned, and stopped. He was too far away for the Warbler to see him draw—but the lick of flame and the shot Lou saw and heard clearly. With equal clearness he heard the rolling fusillade of Newton's Colts—almost a ripple of sounds—and the pale light gave view of Milligan slumping down—becoming a motionless, black blotch on the white sand.

THEY camped on the desert that night, Tex Newton and the Warbler. And, after the exchange of explanations, they said little. The stars swung on their vast, slow wheel across the heavens, the moon went down behind the peak tips to the

west, and a coyote chorus wailed and barked along the rim of the bowl, waiting for those alive to leave the dead. Neither man slept, and both thought much, till a flush rose and gold painted the east, and long streamers of light came to the desert floor, glinting from the rims of sand. An hour later all was white and glaring, and the air began its daily heat dance.

Diablo snorted protest as he was headed out, under a double burden, to climb the slope which he had hurtled down at a dead run several hours before. Newton's forehead was wrapped in a blood-stained bandanna, and the Warbler grinned sheepishly as the other related once again how he had received the head wound.

"Warbler," Tex finished, "I seen gun-play—too much—but I never seen anythin' like that. The day I saved yuh from Gunner an' Limpy an' Dill you told me Colts was yore game, an' you could play it. Reckon there's nobody'll ever question that after seein' you play——"

"Aw, hell!" growled Lou. "It was a piece of damn foolishness—an' come clost to bein' worse. About the speed—I hears yo're good at the draw yoreself."

Newton shrugged.

"Never saw my equal, Warbler—till you snapped around on me in Pete's. Milligan kept tellin' me I had no equal. He kept groomin' me—workin' up the mem'ries I had of a killin' in the hills when I was a kid—tellin' me I'd get the man some day. An' him the man, all the time! Damn it—why was I blind?"

The Warbler rode in silence for a little while.

"Schemed it right, I guess," he said after a time. "You bein' three years old, an' not seein' clear who shot yore brother, the mem'ries of ridin' away with Milligan couldn't buck his explainin' how he found yuh up there, after the killin'. What man remembers things clear what happened when he was three years old? I lost my dad when I was ten, an' my mother a couple o' years later, an' some details about 'em are real hazy already. But explanation or not, you an' Milligan didn't mix. I know that."

"No. He made my trail crooked, Warbler—I admit that. But he couldn't keep

me on it—not lately. Last week we split on a question of shootin' men—those three who tried to hold you up in the desert knew I was gunnin' for 'em, that's why they ran. An' then there was Alice—— Warbler, I'm hopin' no one'll hold it against her 'cause she lived with Milligan an' his rustlin' bunch. That girl's clean, Warbler—an' I'd fight——"

"Nobody'll question *that*," assured the Warbler and kicked Diablo to a trot. "You kin tell she's straight, with one look—an' she acts real worried about you. 'Course women are things I don't know much about——"

"Worried, eh?" Newton grinned suddenly, and the grim shadows seemed to lift from his face. "Warbler," he confided, "it's been hell—me an' the girl fightin' all the time—and lovin' each other all the time. Alice always hated Milligan—he took her mother down here four years ago. Alice wanted me to quit, I wanted to quit, but since I was a kid I'd rode with a running iron under my saddle flap—and Milligan an' Gunner were books an' school to me."

"I savvy," the Warbler said. "It's all over, Tex. You win, all around. You win the girl, you find yore dad, yo're all set to head out on a straightened trail. Comin' down to cases, yo're better off than me," he complained with deep sorrow. "Me—I'm a pore, lost calf. I lose my partner—'cause he's gonna settle with his boy o' course. I lost the chanct o' gettin' Milligan, an' Limpy, an' Gunner—— What's that?" he broke off. "Riders?"

"Ye-up," said Newton, and squinted. "Comin' from that way, they can't be the boys from town—less'n they rode all night."

"I didn't tell yuh," explained the Warbler, "but they're prob'ly a bunch of waddies down here to get Milligan. I sent 'em after Gunner an' the rest"—Lou peered over Newton's shoulder—"an' they got 'em, too! Go on, Diablo!"

NEWTON'S keen eyes surveyed the approaching riders.

"There's Frank, Porky, an' Duster. Gunner ain't there."

Duke and the other Stearns riders explained matters briefly after pounding to a stop about the two.

"We found five at that oasis—gettin' ready to pull out. We didn't hanker after gunplay," explained Duke modestly, "but they started it, real serious, an' we had to plug a couple. Red-headed feller started it off, his nerve was better'n his speed —"

"That would be one Red," grunted the Warbler. "Reckon he had plenty of nerve, all right. Who was the other—feller named Gunner?"

Duke shrugged. "What was the other hombre's name?" he questioned his sullen prisoners.

"Porky—what was his name?" prodded the Warbler, his eyes chilling.

Porky shrugged. "Slim Polk. You got Gunner up at the house. What you gonna do with us?" he questioned anxiously, his puzzled gaze on the Colts at Newton's hips. "They got you, too, Tex?"

"Yeah," said Newton slowly. "They got me."

A while later, riding well ahead of the others, the Warbler laughed at the question put by Tex.

"Lock you up? What for? Forget that, Newton. After yore story's told, there ain't a peace officer in the country would lock you up. All you gotta think of," he grinned, "is to duck the celebration Duke an' the boys an' me's gonna hold in Agua Fria. You got responsibilities—ain't that a wow of a word—responsibilities. A

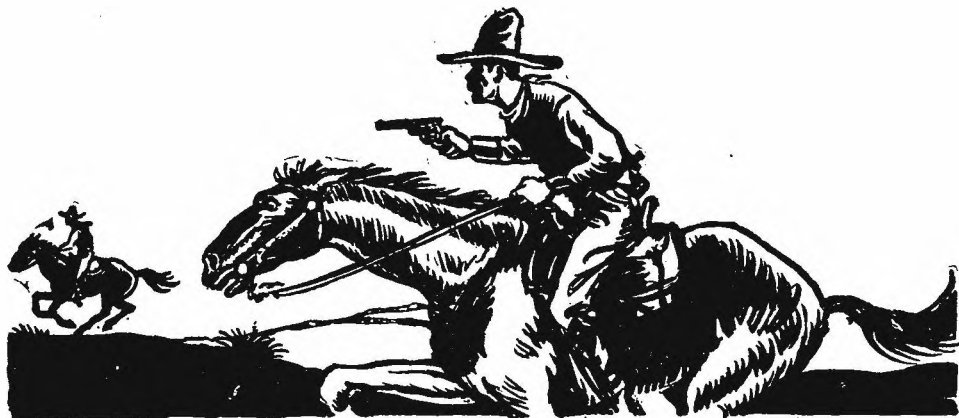
father an' a woman. Me—I got nothin'."

"Yo're young yet," grinned the man who was emerging into a new world. "Yo're about three days younger'n me, easy. An' with a face like your'n, you won't scare women away for long. My dad an' me don't let you go, anyhow. We need punchers with a gun hand that can't be seen workin'! An' as for bein' happy—you got Gunner, didn't yuh? An' his hoss, too—this stud you call Diablo. Only Gunner could ride him—sometimes. But for the man who *kin* ride him—"

The Warbler urged Diablo forward.

"I ain't had trouble with him, a-tall. But speakin' of luck, reckon there's hombres worse off than me," he continued half seriously. "I got my health, an' appetite—an', like you say, a hoss. An' the last, like the second, ain't got no match in the cow country. Watch me prove it."

Tex Newton, his soul serene, free of the struggle that had soured his life and that of the girl he loved, felt the sweep of the desert wind as the big black settled to his stride, and grunted affirmation. Warbling Lou Madrigan was a unique character, somehow rounded out and made complete by Diablo. Newton, aged beyond his years, knew that the man behind him was happy. Young and carefree and possessed of a matchless horse, the Warbler's prospects were as serene as his own. The whistles of the two men blended as they rode the big black across the glaring desert to Agua Fria. Ahead of both stretched a straightened trail.



THIS FUR GAME

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Chances Even," etc.



*To Know the Fur
Trade of the Snow-
bound North, a Man
Has to Have Brains
as Well as Fists*

OLD DAVE McCALLUM—the McCallum Trading Company of Burntwood River—knew three things: how to handle Indians; how to get fur; and—by the Lord Harry!—how to put the fear of perdition into competitive “free traders.”

And not free traders alone.

“Bring on yer Hudson’s Bay! Bring on yer French Company!” he would roar in his periodical cups. “When I crack m’ whip, they all lay belly-up!”

A trader of the old school, McCallum; two-fisted, barrel-chested he-man from his moccasin-toes to his graying head.

“Bring ’em on! And the bigger they are, the louder they bust!”

So when young Morrison pulled into Burntwood River with a couple of loaded York boats and gave out his intention of staying and trading, McCallum grinned wickedly.

That had been in the fall; but by Christmas the old buckaroo’s grin had turned to a frown. Later, at Easter, the frown became a black scowl, and he ground his grizzled jaws and swore savagely. For Morrison, instead of being down and out, was still very much alive.

“But I’ll get him! I’ll teach the young

whelp what the fur trade means!"

McCallum glared across the ice-locked river to where Morrison's tiny store nestled under the shelter of the pine hills.

"I'll teach him!"

There was a footstep behind him. McCallum turned to meet the girl who had entered the room.

"Were you speaking, dad?"

"Was I speakin'?" he gritted. "I was! And I was sayin' that I'm goin' to teach that young whelp of a Morrison where he heads in at."

The girl smiled teasingly. "When, dad, does school open?"

"Right now!" he roared. "And none o' yer lip! I sent Bucktooth and Louis to Dog Lake——"

Again the girl laughed. "What on earth for? Every Indian at Dog Lake is a Morrison man. He gave them over a thousand dollars worth of debt last fall. Those Indians won't do much trading with your precious Bucktooth."

"No?" A sneering chuckle wreathed the leathery face of McCallum. "But will they play poker? Bucktooth and Louis don't figure on doin' much tradin', but they *do* figure on a few hands o' draw. And Bucktooth's kinda flossy with a deck o' cards."

For a moment the girl was silent, and in that moment the relationship between the two was plainly evident. Each had the same level eyes, the same dominant poise to the head, and the determined sweep of McCallum's jaw was, somehow, duplicated in the girl's.

Then: "What a despicable thing to do!" she blazed.

"Hey?"

She repeated the words. "You should be ashamed of such underhand methods! The way you're hounding that boy about is positively wicked. In the fall you tried to burn him out; this winter you destroyed his caches on Loon River, and you even went so far as to try to poison his dogs. Now to cap all, you send two men of the caliber of Bucktooth and Louis to gamble with the Dog Lake Indians and practically steal the fur that is owing to Morrison from the Indians on the debt he gave out. It isn't fair. It's petty; it's mean!"

McCallum's eyes were smoldering.

"See here, you!" he bellowed. "Ever since that pup pulled into Burntwood ye've never lost a chance to take him under your wing. But little good it'll do ye! I'll break him, and break him right. And the fact that he's a son of old Pete Morrison's gives me all the better satisfaction in doin' it!"

McCallum paused, the breath whistling through his nose and his teeth champing savagely on a cud of Niggerhead.

"Is that pup a *very* particular friend of yours?" he demanded.

"And suppose he is?"

The corded fists of McCallum bunched involuntarily.

"Then," he said with slow deliberation, "I've just one more reason for smashin' him!"

OUTWARD bound for the camp of two white trappers, McCallum met his returning henchmen, Bucktooth and Louis, on the Lynx River portage.

They built a fire, cooked a meal, and over it McCallum broached the matter of the trip that had been made.

"How'd ye make out at poker?" he asked.

Bucktooth chuckled. No prepossessing individual, this. Tall and gangling, a mean eye went well with a horse face. But McCallum did not hire his men for their looks. Their charm lay in a readiness to obey orders.

"How did we make out? Say, if there's enough fur left in that camp to buy a plug o' chewin', me, I'll join the ministry!"

McCallum gave a satisfied grunt.

"Yup," continued Bucktooth. "We drug down over a thousand bucks worth. The Indians claimed they owed Morrison more'n that, so I sure admire his chances of collectin'."

"Good!" McCallum's jaw snapped like a bear trap. "But did ye see anything of Morrison himself?"

"No," grinned Bucktooth. "Wisht I had. Liked to seen his face when he found out about it."

"He'll be peeved," predicted McCallum. "May take a round out of ye."

"Him!" Bucktooth hooted in derision; exchanged a grin with the halfbreed who was his companion. "Say, if he ever tries it, it'll be good!"

The man chuckled again; speared a curl of bacon from the frying pan—then went suddenly stiff.

In the silence there was the sound of the wind in the tamaracks; the crackle of the fire and the snore of a sleeping dog. But there was another sound, the unmistakable thudding of a sled coming down the trail from the direction of Dog Lake. And thirty seconds later Morrison swept around a twist in the road.

"Sweet bells o' Edinboro!" breathed McCallum to himself.

But the newcomer paid no attention to him until he had hitched his dogs to a nearby tree. Then he walked across towards the fire.

He was a tall, slender youngster, almost as dark as an Indian, and clad in a caribou parka and otterskin cap. More than ordinarily good looking, now there were tired



"How do."

McCallum grunted, a suspicious old he wolf sizing up a rival.

"Some little stunt, that one up at Dog Lake," observed Morrison, his eyes flicking from one to the other. "The work was the work of Bucktooth, but the brains were the brains of McCallum. That it?"

McCallum grinned patronizingly. "Say, kid, if I have yer company for a little longer, ye'll know quite a bit about the fur game. And ye'll learn that tradin' means more than talkin' Cree and chasin' a string o' dogs."

"It means anything short of murder," suggested Morrison.

McCallum shrugged. "All's fair in love and the fur game," he said.

"H-mm." Before the wondering gaze of the three men, Morrison began to shed his parka. "But one pays for these little tricks," he remarked dreamily. "And I'm out to collect in the only way I can."

Amazement leaped into McCallum's eyes. "Ye mean—" he gasped.

"Yeh," Morrison answered shortly. And to the horse-faced one: "Bucktooth—come and get 'er!"

Slowly the significance of it all seeped into Bucktooth's head. He frowned, wiped his mouth with the back of a grimy hand, turned to McCallum.

"Does this—this scissor-bill mean to fight me?"

The trader shrugged again. "Looks that way."

"Then—lemme at 'im!"

Bucktooth made a bull-like rush, and flailed the air two feet from Morrison's head. The latter grinned faintly and slapped him with his open palm. Again Bucktooth turned, roaring an oath of rage. Morrison ducked, but his fist came up in a spiteful jab. Bucktooth, the horse-faced, went sailing backward, tripped over a sled, and fell atop four badly frightened dogs.

McCallum, now past his first surprise, howled delightedly.

"Ye're a prophet, Bucktooth. This is good!"

But for the next minute or so, neither McCallum nor Louis could see just what did happen. They had a vision, and a kaleidoscopic one at that, of Morrison rushing in and out, ducking and feinting, and of Bucktooth wallowing like a derelict barge. Then, before they were aware that the fight had more than starfed, it was all over—Bucktooth on his back, gargling between his yellow teeth, hands clawing at his stomach.

McCallum gasped. Louis tore at his parka strings.

"*Sacre bleu!*" yelled the latter. "You can leeck o' moose-cow lak heem, but not me!" And in another second the halfbreed's coat was off and he made a spring.

But the massive arms of McCallum grabbed him.

"Hey, you!" bawled the trader. "What's this? One to one's fair enough, but the devil with two!"

To one side of the whimpering dogs, Morrison waited, panting slightly, a thin smile on his lips.

"Let 'im go!" he mocked. "I've only collected half my debt."

McCallum looked at him sharply; then almost heaved the breed into Morrison's arms.

"Then take 'im!" he snapped. "And I hope to the Lord Harry he kills ye!"

AFTER the clumsy rushes of Bucktooth, the actions of the breed were almost catlike. He was everywhere at once; in and out, up and down. Twice he landed ineffectual blows in Morrison's ribs, and the latter, a half amused, half puzzled smile on his face, waited. Suddenly Morrison side-stepped, drew back a pace—then lashed a wicked jar full into the teeth of the breed.

"Ah!" from McCallum.

The breed spat a mouthful of blood; rushed in again. There was another crack, and the breed's head rocked on his shoulders. But this time Morrison followed it up with lightning speed, beating a tattoo on the other man's body.

Bucktooth, an unnoticed spectator, got to his knees. He looked about him warily and grabbed up the ax from beside the fire. Another second and he would have been at Morrison's back, but in that second McCallum turned.

"Hey! ye murderin' scut!"

The trader swung with all his might, a terrific blow over Bucktooth's heart. And the man dropped like a log.

But to this the other two gave no heed. Toe to toe they stood, the breed slugging gamely, Morrison outfighting him with swift science.

Suddenly the white man fainted, then caught his adversary a stinging blow under the ear that dropped the latter to his knees. But only for a moment, for the breed shook his head dazedly, and rushed once more.

But it was for the last time. Morrison went into a clinch—pushed him backward a step—then launched a merciful uppercut that landed squarely on the other man's jaw.

The breed went flat on his back. Knocked out.

"By the Lord Harry!" gasped the grizzled old trader. "That was the finest scrap I ever saw. Two to one—and ye licked 'em both!" Suddenly he grinned. "Look, kid; we've had our little troubles in the days

gone by, but those bygones are past. I'm ready and willin' to forget all that's happened, and—here's my hand to prove it."

For a second or two Morrison looked at the offered hand in amazement. Then he laughed mirthlessly; mockingly. "By gad, that's good! All the dirt you've handed me, and all the crude ones you've pulled on me. Now you want to forget!" The grin was suddenly wiped from his face. "Forget if you want to!" he snapped. "But I'm making it my business to remember!"

And with that he turned on his heel.

McCallum stood as one stunned.

"I offered him my hand—the whelp laughed at me!" He walked back to the fire, shoulders hunched, muttering to himself. "—He laughed at me!"

FOR days and weeks McCallum brooded on vengeance for the insult given, but it was not until the ice became near-honey-combed in the spring that his chance came.

A man drew into the post from the south, stayed half an hour in conversation with him, then returned the way he had come. After that McCallum went into the house, was there for an hour, then he went down to the store.

He found Bucktooth and Louis preparing for a trip to the north. They were using eight dogs and one flat sled to which was lashed, in case of need, a sixteen-foot canoe. McCallum called them into the office.

"There's no need to go to Pipe Portage. I've another trip for ye."

"Yeh?" from Bucktooth.

"Feller pulled in here a while ago with some mail fer Morrison. Morrison's away, so he left it with me." The old man lowered his voice. "There was a telegram in the bunch, and telegrams sent up to this country mean somethin'. I opened her up—and listen to this." And he read:

"LOOK OUT FOR SQUALLS STOP ALL FUR DOWN STOP BEAVER DROPPED THIRTY PER CENT LAST WEEK'S SALES STOP DON'T BUY IF YOU CAN HELP STOP TRY TO SELL WHAT YOU HAVE STOP FIFTEEN DOLLARS TOP PRICE FOR NUMBER ONE LARGE STOP UNLOAD ON M C STOP WISH YOU LUCK

DAD"

McCallum looked up.

"Unload on M. C." he snarled. "Me—McCallum—that means! Yeh, let 'em try and do it! Pete Morrison's overstepped himself this time!" Suddenly he addressed the two men present directly. "We bin buy-



ing beaver at twenty dollars average, and we've got three hundred of 'em anyway. Now then, if fifteen is the top price, the average won't be more'n ten. That means there's a big,

black hole all ready to swaller up three thousand bucks."

Bucktooth grunted. "Yeh. She's happened before, and——"

McCallum was in no mood for reminiscences. "Listen here to me: if ye birds are lookin' for a summer's job, ye've got to hustle—and hustle heavy. And here's how she stands: Morrison don't know the market's gone flat, but we do. Providence has given us our chance—and that means to unload on Morrison before he gets wise."

McCallum paused to read the faces of his two trappers. Suddenly the breed laughed aloud.

"By Gollee!" he crowed. "You are ol' devil himself wit' hees tail off!"

The trader grunted his appreciation of the compliment, then went on.

"D'ye understand? Have ye got it into yer heads? I'll tell ye once more. Hit for the Kawapak—Morrison won't be there for two days yet—and plant the beaver skins with our best Indians. Tell them to stick out for what they can get, but I doubt for cash that Morrison'll pay more'n fifteen straight. But anyway, when ye've finished and Morrison has passed, backtrack and pick up the dough. I'll pay the Indians that handle the stuff a commission, and ye'll make a piece of change for yerselves if ye handle the job right." He paused. "Now then, have you got it?"

"Sure," grinned Bucktooth. "But," he amended, "what'll Morrison say when he finds yuh bin openin' his mail?"

"He won't know. I'll seal the envelope

down again, and send the whole thing over to him. Anyway, the young squirt's got to learn what this tradin' means."

And when his henchmen pulled away an hour later, the smile on McCallum's face was one of crafty benediction.

BUT a day or so before they were due to return, McCallum had a greater worry than the market value of beaver skins. For to the south, in a tangle of birch and lodgepole pine, a bush fire started up.

At first he had given it scant attention, putting it down to a winter campfire still smoldering under the moss. But when the wind swung from the north to the south he altered his opinion.

McCallum climbed a hill near by, and was startled at what he saw,—a five-mile front of flaming forest, barely three miles from the post.

All that day the wind strengthened, and at night there was a rosy glow in the sky.

"Any danger, dad?" asked the girl.

He shrugged, but did not make light of it. There was no need to; each knew the North.

"If the wind don't change, something'll happen."

A month later a bush fire would not have been serious. For then the village would be complete with its summer population, and a hundred men could have been called out to fight the blaze. But now, the only people in the place were McCallum, his daughter, and the Indian storekeeper for the trader.

Two more days went by, and the fire crept up on the tiny settlement, its only check being the soggy nature of the ground from the winter's snow. McCallum knew that the post was doomed, unless he could find some desperate expedient.

Behind the post buildings and the Indian houses ran a footpath, paralleling the river. It came up from the shore a half mile to the east, turned back to the shore again an equal distance beyond the post.

"Maybe," observed McCallum, "if I can rake that path clean of dry stuff, I can backfire it from there."

He began; worked all day, the sweat running down his face and soaking his shirt. And by night there came the first dull roar of the burning forest.

There was something terrifying, awe-inspiring in that sound. It was like the rush of an express; like the distant thunder of Niagara. McCallum heard it. He set his jaw and worked like three men. Aiding him were his daughter and the old Indian storekeeper. These filled pails, buckets and kettles; strung a line of watery ammunition the length of the trail.

By night the fire was a scant quarter mile away, but the wind dropped to a faint breeze. McCallum, his raking completed, knew the test had come. He ordered the girl away to the far shore, and began his backfiring. But the girl refused to leave.

"There are only three of us—you can't do without me."

McCallum grunted. Armed with a wet sack for a shield, and a kerosene soaked broom for a sword, he carried the fight into the camp of the Red Enemy—burning; beating out; burning ahead again.

By midnight they were winning through, but the girl and the Indian, unused to the heavy labor, showed signs of desperate fatigue. McCallum did not notice this. Hat pulled down to protect his face, jaw set savagely, and eyes bloodshot, he drove himself like a slave, bawled profane encouragement.

"Wade into 'er! 'Nother ten minutes, and we've got 'er dead!"

But then, suddenly, the night wind sprang up. There was a column of sparks whirling high in the air; a crackling roar, and the fire was on them,

No need now for backfiring. That which had been burnt might hold. The point of combat was that unfinished strip of a hundred yards.

McCallum grabbed a fresh sack, dipped it into a pail of water, turned—and bumped full into Morrison.

For a moment he was staggered; his jaw fell.

"How the devil——" he began.

"Gimme a sack!"

The words were spat at him. Automatically he obeyed; picked up another sack for himself.

"Then, come on!"

Three men, faces streaming with sweat, tongues swollen, legs trembling, fought for the salvation of the village; fought to save

the post of the McCallum Trading Company. Time and again, before the terrific heat, they fell back; rallied again. Once the flames crossed the narrow trail and began to eat their way into dead grass and ragged willows, only to be beaten back after a desperate fight. The smoke was thick; strangling. The three men and the girl, the latter hauling water from the river, risked their lives a dozen times.

But gradually, so gradually that none of them noticed it, the wind began to veer. In fifteen minutes it was blowing back again towards the south. The tide had turned.

AT DAWN the smoke began to clear. Across the river, the buildings of Morrison showed through a dull haze, but when the sun rose an hour later, it was only faintly tinged with blood. Behind the post lay a desolation of fire-killed sticks; a soggy mist rose like steam. Yet down



by the shore the bushland was untouched, and the Indian houses and the post itself looked as they had done twenty-four hours before.

At the door of the house, Mc-

Callum spoke to Morrison.

"C'mon in and get a cup o' tea."

"Guess not," replied the latter shortly. "I'll poke on home."

"Come on in, damn ye!" roared McCallum; seized the younger man by the shoulder and half-heaved him up the veranda steps.

Inside, a hasty meal had been set, but there was no sign of the girl nor the Indian storekeeper.

"They've hit the hay," grunted McCallum. "Don't blame 'em."

He hauled two chairs up to the table; sat down in one; shoved Morrison into another. Then he poured coffee, and pushed grub before his unwilling guest.

"How d'ye get in?" he suddenly asked.

"Hoofed it through the bush from the Narrows. Saw the fire miles away, so I left

my dogs with old Wuchusk—and here I am.”

They were a hard-looking pair. Each was blackened; faces scorched and peeling; their clothing badly burned.

“Ye came in the nick of time,” observed McCallum at length. “Couldn’t have done without ye. . . . But what d’ye do it for?”

“Just what I’ve been asking myself. Must have been because you were Betty’s father.”

McCallum grunted; got up from the table; pointed out a couch.

“Take a flop, kid. There’s blankets and cushions, so help yerself. See ye in the mornin’. G’night.”

BREAKFAST for three was on the table the next day when Morrison awoke. He endeavored to clean himself up, then was shown a place by the girl.

At first the air was decidedly strained, till McCallum broke the ice.

“You ’n’ me,” he said abruptly to Morrison, “don’t seem to gee.”

“We don’t just hit on all four,” answered the other judicially,

“H-mm.” After a pause McCallum tried again. “Seems like we’re goin’ to scrap a long time——” He hesitated; stirred his coffee; swore. “The devil take it. . . . What I mean is, kid, that ye’re white. I’ve never done ye nothin’ but dirt, but ye jumped into our stew like a good ’un. I done a lotta figurin’ last night, and seems to me ye caught me with a bobtail flush.”

Morrison did not reply; ate for a moment in silence. McCallum went off on a new tack.

“The fur market’s gone flop, and ye’re goin’ to lose heavy. What the devil,” he demanded, “made ye go tradin’?”

“It’s all I know. Why?”

McCallum gritted his teeth. Thought carefully.

“This everlastin’ scroppin’ is goin’ to put us both in the hole. Couldn’t we make a deal to kinda—kinda get together?”

Morrison looked up to see the color suddenly flushing the cheeks of the girl.

“Not this year,” he replied. “I’ve got a nice bunch of beaver that I want to keep for myself.”

Three times McCallum tried to say what

was on his mind. Finally he took the bull by the horns.

“Listen here,” he growled. “I guess I got to go down on m’ belly and crawl like a snake before ye’ll hear. . . . I got a confession to make. After ye pulled out for the Kawapak, a feller come in here with some mail for ye. There’s a telegram in the bunch, and the flap wasn’t stuck down right. I took a look at what it said! Yes, sir, I did! The fur market’s gone flat, and beaver are ’way down. May the good Lord forgive me, but all them hides ye bin buyin’ up the last week or two is me own—I salted ’em on ye, and ye bit.” He hurried on. “Now, if we kinda get together on this thing——”

The girl gave a choking little cry. Morrison alone seemed unperturbed.

“I’ve got a confession to make, too,” he offered.

“Yeh?” from McCallum, interestedly.

“That wire was a fake.”

“What?”

“Not just a fake, exactly. Fact is, I sent it to myself, and had a friend bring it in while I was away. I also figured,” grimly, “that the flap wouldn’t be stuck down. But anyway, beaver are ’way up, as it happens; forty per cent and more. And thanks to your selling out, I stand to make five thousand berries on the little deal.”

McCallum was speechless. He opened his mouth; shut it again on the words that wouldn’t come. Finally he sprang to his feet, leaned across the table.

“D’ye mean, ye young whelp,” he roared, “that ye made me sell all them skins on a fourflushin’ gag. . . .”

Morrison smiled at the girl opposite him.

“A chap,” he remarked innocently, “once told me that all’s fair in love and the fur trade. Isn’t it?”

THE McCallum Trading Company of Burntwood River has ceased to exist. But Burntwood is not recommended as a suitable opening-up place for one interested in the fur game. For there’s a new concern there now, the McCallum-Morrison Trading Company, and they’re reported bad medicine.

And what makes it extra tough, is the fact that it’s a three-way partnership!

JIMMIE DALE

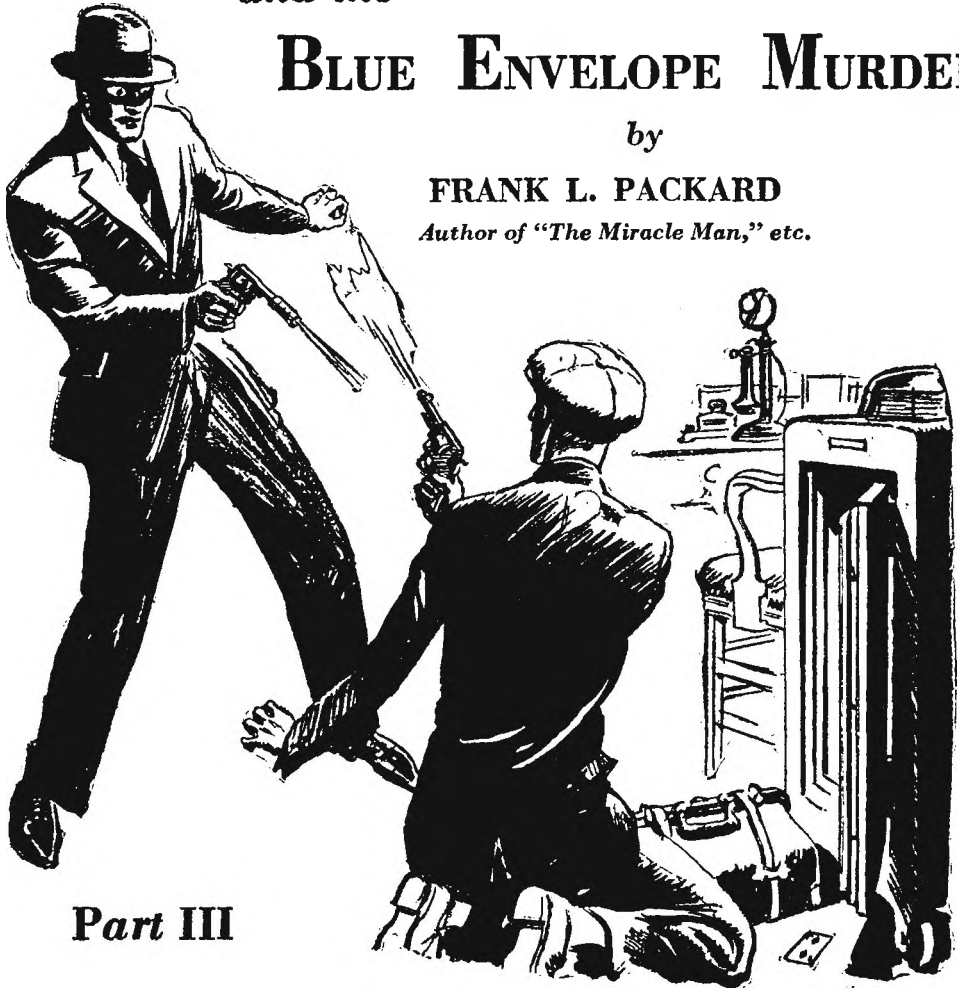
and the

BLUE ENVELOPE MURDER

by

FRANK L. PACKARD

Author of "The Miracle Man," etc.



Part III

The Hounds of the Law Yelped on Jimmie Dale's Trail, the Electric Chair Yawned for Him—Yet He Risked All to Avenge the Murder of Ray Thorne

THE STORY SO FAR

JIMMIE DALE, millionaire clubman, little thought he ever again would be venturing into the underworld as a foe of crime, never dreamt he would once more be leaving his little trade-mark at the scenes of his "crimes"—one of the little, diamond-shaped, gray paper seals, pasted where it could not be overlooked, showing that the notorious Gray Seal, never yet

trapped nor identified, was at his tricks again.

And yet, barely a week before Marie La-Salle was due back from a visit to Paris, barely a month before their wedding day, had come from Marie one of those old-time summoning letters, signed, as in the old days, the "Tocsin!" Once again it was the old-time Call to Arms for the Gray Seal!

By merest chance the Tocsin had learnt

in Paris that the life of their dearest friend in New York, Ray Thorne, was in deadly danger—and would continue so as long as a mysterious blue envelope that had been sent to him remained in his possession. Therefore the Gray Seal must steal it from Thorne's house-safe at once—leaving behind him at the scene of the theft one of the little diamond-shaped "trade-marks" that would convince *everybody* that it was a genuine, bona fide theft. The Tocsin herself was already back in New York—living under cover near the Bowery.

For Jimmie Dale the theft was only the work of an hour, but scarcely had he stolen back from the Thorne house to his own home when the voice of his friend Caruthers of *The News-Argus* was phoning him that Ray Thorne had just been murdered by the Gray Seal! Already Detective Sergeant Waud was on the case—had been grilling, among others, Thorne's dissolute valet Beaton—and in vain.

And when Jimmie Dale, in the secrecy of his own home, opened the purloined blue envelope, he found in it only a blank sheet of paper!

The night of the following day Jimmie Dale met the Tocsin at the "Sanctuary" in the depths of the lower East Side—the squalid room that Jimmie Dale so often used to inhabit, in the past, as the broken-down artist Smarlinghue or as Larry the Rat, and where the Tocsin used to come as old Mother Margot or Silver Mag. This night she was the haglike Mother Margot.

Into the news she brought him trooped figures of the old days—Boston Bob, Pinky John—both as yet still back in Paris, and their ally in New York, Connie Gowan, alias the Ferret. Also—and distinctly not allied to these men—that king of the New York underworld, old Daddy Ratzler, for whom Mother Margot was now acting as a sort of housekeeper. Mother Margot said that just before the murder of Ray Thorne the Ferret had gone to Thorne's house to steal the blue envelope himself before Daddy Ratzler's messenger could get it.

The Ferret was not Thorne's murderer, though! This much Jimmie Dale learned later in the small hours of this morning from the Ferret himself, when, as Smarlinghue, he soothed the Ferret's last minutes as he lay dying from a gangster's

bullet. But all the Ferret could say further was that Thorne had been slain before his eyes by somebody "with black hair." And Thorne had recognized his slayer!

Terrified lest the Gray Seal track him down, through learning something from the stolen blue envelope, Daddy Ratzler fled to his house on Long Island, attended there by his old retainer Pascal and Mother Margot. And already, according to Mother Margot, he had "another hen on." And while talking over with his sinister lieutenant Silky Hines and three other gangsters the plan for this new project—which was to take the form of an unannounced midnight visit to Big Steve Barlow's Long Island roadhouse called The Two Oaks—Daddy Ratzler felt moved to pay a feeling compliment to the Gray Seal.

"The swine!" he raved when Silky started to make light of the theft of the blue envelope and its possible results. "We got other plums worth stealing, haven't we? The Gray Seal will be picking them, too, you fool, if we don't get him—and get him good!"

Life was plenty cheap to Daddy Ratzler! And speaking of life and death, what was the meaning of that old scrap of paper found in Daddy Ratzler's desk?—the scrap of paper that bore the words: "*Who killed Blotz? One grand.*"

Well, time might tell. And, anyway, Mother Margot's news of Daddy Ratzler's designs on The Two Oaks roadhouse gave Jimmie Dale a new idea. At the time Daddy's men were due at The Two Oaks, around midnight, Jimmie Dale would pay a little visit there himself. Daddy Ratzler might be right! Who knew? The killer of Ray Thorne—the real killer—might be there too—seeking another of the plums that Daddy Ratzler so feared the Gray Seal would be after. The man with black hair! It was worth a bet!

CHAPTER XII

THE TWO OAKS

IT HAD been half past twelve when Benson had brought Jimmie Dale's car to the club, and, being told to leave the car, had been dismissed. It was after two o'clock now, and Jimmie Dale, from the shadows of the grove

of trees that surrounded the place, stood frowning speculatively at the low, rambling Long Island structure once known as "Big Steve's," but which, in its change of heart from the sale of chips to the more lucrative sale of bottles, had been rechristened The Two Oaks.

Except for what seemed to be a sort of annex in the rear which was in complete darkness save for a single window in the second story, the establishment blazed with light. Through the open windows there floated out to him on the still air of the hot night the sounds of a jazz orchestra, shouts of hilarious laughter, and the clatter of dishes. The Two Oaks was obviously doing a roaring business in late suppers—and illicit beverages. One of these days, of course, the place would be pinched; but meanwhile, in the expressive language of Steve's kind, Steve should worry!

Yes! Quite so! Sometime or other that would probably happen; but tonight something far removed from an official raid was going to happen here—at four o'clock!

Jimmie Dale pushed his hat back from his forehead. It was a sticky night, and the quarter-mile walk from where he had discreetly parked his car had not added any to his comfort. What was it that was bringing Silky Hines and his companions here tonight? And why at four o'clock? He shook his head. He could not answer either of those questions.

Well, what was the first move? For an instant he debated the advisability of entering The Two Oaks and ordering a "late supper" himself—and then promptly decided against doing so. A place of this sort required an "introduction," and, though he had no doubts about being able to satisfy Steve Barlow as to his being all right, he did not propose, in view of what might transpire later on, to have it known that one Jimmie Dale had even been near The Two Oaks tonight. And, besides, what could he hope to gain by occupying a table in there? But with a little caution, he could see everybody in there quite as well from the outside without being seen himself!

"Damn it!" exploded Jimmie Dale savagely to himself. "What *is* their game, anyway? It's only a long chance, of course, but I wouldn't like to *miss* that 'plumpicker' with the 'black hair' if he *does* show

up—and if I don't want to find myself off-stage when the curtain goes down, I've got to call the turn before the racket starts! It's not just a bald holdup, that's certain. Anything like that is far too crude for Daddy Ratzler. He would never lay his plans ahead and marshal his gang merely for the sake of whatever cash The Two Oaks takes in tonight, particularly when it might prove to be an 'off' night for Steve's business—in which case the receipts would be practically nil."

His eyes swept critically again over the scene before him—the motor cars, a dozen or more of them, parked around the front entrance; the boisterous crowd that he could see through the open windows, nearly every one in evening dress; the annex with its one lighted window in the upper story; and, trailing off in the darkness, another small building, unlighted, at the rear of the annex.

"There must be something queer about the place itself," he muttered. "That seems to be the only answer. There's nothing to do but explore a bit—that annex there, for instance, as a starter!"

Intending to skirt the edge of the grove until he came opposite the annex where, beyond the range of the glare of light from the open windows, the shadows lay deep across the intervening open space, he took a step forward in that direction—but only to halt almost instantly again.

A car had turned in from the road, and was rattling up the driveway. Instinctively he stood still and watched it. It was a small, closed car of a cheap make, he could see, a long way from being one of the high priced models that so far had been attracted to The Two Oaks that night, and, from the noise it made, was in a decidedly run-down condition. It drew up at the entrance, where, leaving the engine running, a man got out and disappeared through the doorway of The Two Oaks.

JIMMIE DALE'S dark eyes held now intently on the scene. He was only a few yards away and he could see quite clearly, for the light from one of the windows fell full upon the car. The man who had got out of the car had been as shabby in appearance as was the car itself. Not at

all the sort of person to be ushered into the presence of Steve Barlow's well groomed "guests!" Nor had he been! He was back now beside the car, and was standing there talking to someone in the rear seat.

Perhaps a minute or two passed, and then Jimmie Dale recognized the big, burly form of Steve Barlow as the proprietor came hastily out of The Two Oaks and went up to the car. A moment more and Big Steve had taken a valise from the interior, and was helping an old, gray haired and poorly dressed woman to alight.

The car turned and rattled back to the highway. But Big Steve and the old woman did not enter The Two Oaks. Instead, carrying the valise, and with his other hand supporting the old woman, who, whether ill or feeble, seemed to walk with tottering steps, Steve Barlow started slowly along the outside of the building in the direction of the annex at the rear.

Jimmie Dale pursed his lips. At this hour, or at any hour for that matter, what he was witnessing certainly fell at least within the category of the unusual—and, Heaven knew, it was the unusual he was looking for tonight! His interest was quickened an instant later as, in lieu of a saxophone number that had just ended with a final blatant squawk, the old woman's voice reached him in a sudden, plaintive cry.

"Oh, Steve, what have they done to him? They haven't hurt him—not that bad, have they? He—he isn't going to—to die, Steve?"

Had this anything to do with Daddy Ratzler? Jimmie Dale, keeping just within the fringe of the trees, was paralleling his steps now with those of Big Steve and the old woman. He had not caught Big Steve's low toned reply. Was this the "lead" that he had hoped would break for him? Something told him that it was.

Big Steve and the old woman had passed out of the light flooded area now, and had reached a door at the far end of the annex.

It was too dark here to see distinctly, but Big Steve had laid the valise on the ground and appeared to be unlocking the door. Yes! The door opened. Big Steve picked up the valise and the two went inside. The door closed again, and almost immediately a light came on in the room adjacent to the doorway.

But Jimmie Dale, running now in the shadows across the open space, was not far behind them. He found himself in a little porch, the door of which Big Steve had just unlocked, and in front of him an inner door, glass panelled. Through the panels he saw Big Steve and his companion disappear through an unlighted doorway at the farther end of the room.

Jimmie Dale took out his black silk mask from its pocket in the leather girdle, slipped it on—and the inner door opened and closed again behind him without a sound. His glance swept around the room—a safe, a roll-top desk, a high-backed easy-chair in the corner, a center table, an inviting-looking leather couch. Obviously Steve Barlow's private office, and—Jimmie Dale nodded approval—obviously Big Steve had done himself rather well in the matter of personal comfort!

Jimmie Dale's pause had been little more than momentary. He moved swiftly now to the threshold of the unlighted doorway. Here the light from the room behind him disclosed a long, narrow passage that undoubtedly led into the pantry or kitchen in the main building, for, from a closed door at the far end of the passage, the faint rattle of dishes was distinguishable. There were also two doors, he noted, opening off the right-hand side of the passage, while immediately at his right was a staircase which, a short way up, made a right-angled turn. From somewhere at the head of the stairs he caught the rumble of Big Steve's voice.

There was no creak of stair-tread, no single sound as Jimmie Dale began the ascent.

THE upper hall was in darkness, he could see, save directly in the path of the open door of a dimly-lighted room a few feet away from the head of the stairs—the one, it was apparent, whose window had already attracted his attention from

without. He gained the landing, then edged forward a little to a position where, flattened back against the wall and hidden in the darkness, he could see into the room beyond.

The light came from a lamp, turned low, that was burning on a bedside table. The old woman, her shoulders shaken with sobs, was bending over some one in the bed. Big Steve, standing in the center of the room, was talking.

"Don't take on like that, Mrs. Meegan," he said soothingly. "I'm telling you the Kid hasn't never been hurt at all, and that he's all right."

Jimmie Dale involuntarily leaned a little forward. Kid Meegan! He had heard quite a lot about Kid Meegan in several joints last night. And so, too, probably, had some of Daddy Ratzler's gang! But he had put most of it down to exaggerated rumor. Perhaps there was more truth in it than he had thought. A light began to break dimly in upon him.

"Yes; but—" Mrs. Meegan's eyes were streaming as she faced around from the bed—"he's like he was unconscious."

"The doctor had to give him something," explained Big Steve as he put his hand on the old woman's shoulder. "Come on, now, Mrs. Meegan, sit down in that chair there and let's talk it out."

"Yes," she said tremulously, sinking into the chair indicated. "Yes; I—I want you to tell me about it."

"Well, you've got it all wrong to begin with," stated Big Steve reassuringly. "I was hoping you wouldn't hear anything about it till it was all over. Who told you, anyway?"

"Mrs. Snelling, a neighbor of mine, who came in to tell me how sorry she was."

"Humph!" grunted Big Steve. "One of them sympathy cats that hates to miss anything! I know the breed! And at this hour!"

"It wasn't so late then, Steve," protested Mrs. Meegan loyally. "It takes a long time to get over here from Jersey, and I didn't get started right away because I couldn't find anybody at first to drive me over—not anybody that I could afford to pay what it was worth, I mean."

Big Steve cleared his throat, reached awkwardly into his pocket for a cigar,

glanced at the bed—and thrust the cigar back into his pocket again.

"Sure! I see!" he said. "And what was it this Mrs. Snelling handed you?"

"She said—" Mrs. Meegan twisted her hands anxiously together in her lap—"that somebody heard about it in New York, and that now everybody in the neighborhood was talking about nothing else, and that if I didn't know anything about it, then, being his mother, I'd ought to."

"She said there'd been a terrible row in some place in New York, a club of some sort, and that Danny there—" Mrs. Meegan nodded piteously toward the bed—"had got into trouble and had been so badly hurt that you had to carry him out in your arms, and that you'd taken him away to your home out here."

"Isn't that nice?" observed Big Steve caustically. "And me being originally from the old home town over in Jersey was life size too in the picture! Anything else?"

"No. I—I was frightened. I hadn't heard anything from you. I was afraid he was so bad that—that you didn't want to tell me until—until you had to."

"You could have telephoned," Big Steve suggested.

The tears came trickling down Mrs. Meegan's cheeks again.

"I didn't think of it," she said. "All I could think of was to get to Danny just as quick as I could."

BIG STEVE paced the length of the room; then, his hands thrust into his trousers' pockets, he planted himself again in front of the threadbare and pathetic little figure in the chair.

"All right!" he said, and patted her shoulder again. "I'm glad you came. I *wasn't* going to say anything about it until it was all over, but now I'm going to tell you the *truth*. But there's something else I got to say first. I was brought up alongside of you, and your old man, and Danny, in that same little town you're living in now. You used to be pretty good to me, Mrs. Meegan, when I was a kid. Do you remember the time I got into a fight and was afraid to go home because I'd got my pants tore—and you sewed 'em up for me?"

A smile came quivering to the *tear*

stained face as Mrs. Meegan nodded her head.

"Sure, you do!" said Big Steve heartily. "Well, I'm going to slip a few years now—up to the time when I'd moved away and Danny was looking for a better job to keep the pot boiling after Dad Meegan died. Danny was ten years younger than me, but we'd grown up together and I guess I'd always looked on the kid like a small brother. But I ain't going to butter my words, 'cause it won't do any good. You know, anyhow, Danny's always had a bit of a wild streak in him."

"Yes, I—I'm afraid that's so."

"At heart he's all right," Big Steve went on gently. "That's what I'm banking on, now. Well, he came around and wanted a job with me. I didn't give him one, Mrs. Meegan—and you might as well know the reason why. This wasn't any place for Danny. I ain't been any saint in business myself."

Mrs. Meegan shook her head.

"Nothing would make me believe that," she asserted flatly. "Why, Steve, what's wrong with a fine hotel like this?"

"Nothing!" said Big Steve, a sudden gruffness in his voice. "But let it go at that. I got him a job somewhere else."

"You got him more than one, Steve."

"Sure! Yes! Well, that brings us down to pretty near last night. The story ain't altogether pleasant, but just you buck up while you're listening, Mrs. Meegan, 'cause the story's going to have a happy ending. Danny got to playing around with a crowd he hadn't ought to have been with. See?

The floating crap game don't mean anything to you, I guess, and I ain't going to try to explain it, except to say that it ain't often pulled off twice in the same place, which is why its called floating. It's well organized; and there's a barrel of money changes hands in them games—thousands and thousands, Mrs. Meegan. Well, Danny started rolling the dice in one of them games last night."

Mrs. Meegan's eyes widened.

"But Danny didn't have any thousands to play with," she said in a bewildered way.

"No; he didn't—" Big Steve chuckled suddenly—"not to begin with. He started on a shoestring. But he had 'em *all* when he quit. He cleaned up. He made one of the biggest killings—and there's been *some* big ones, Mrs. Meegan—that was ever made in New York. I don't know how much he won, because he'd blown in a big hunk of it before I got my paws on him; but I know there's something like eighty thousand dollars left of it downstairs there in a little black bag in my safe."

The shadow against the wall, that was Jimmie Dale, stirred slightly.

Mrs. Meegan's eyes grew wider.

"Steve!" she cried out in a dazed tone.

"Yes," said Big Steve, "that's the straight goods, all right. And now listen to the rest of it, which is the part I'd like to skip over for your sake if I could, but you got to know how Danny came to be lying on that bed there and what's the matter with him. He cut loose. When he walked out of that game with all the dough in the world, I guess he was pretty near crazy anyhow. He headed for one of the biggest and most expensive night clubs in the city. He held a reception, Mrs. Meegan. Do you get me? It was on him! He spent money in handfuls. He gave it away—and there were lots to take it. The word went around outside. Why wouldn't it! Other night clubs closed but *that* one didn't. Everything was free. Danny paid the bills.

"Not living in the city, I didn't hear about it until late this afternoon—that's yesterday afternoon now. Then I went down there and salvaged what was left of Danny and his coin. By this time he was pretty bad, and it's true I had to carry him out. I'm calling a spade a spade now, Mrs. Meegan—he'd drunk himself insensible. He had me scared a bit too after I got him out here, and I called in a doctor. The doctor fixed him up, and then came back around midnight and gave him something to make him sleep like you see him now. The doc says he'll be all right in a day or so."

MRS. MEEGAN was crying quietly. "God bless you, Steve!" she said. "That's nothing at all, Mrs. Meegan!" said Big Steve hastily. "Now about that money. I hope you ain't going to be fussy

about it just because it's gambling money. It was won fair and square enough. It was just luck busting wide open."

"I hadn't thought about the money," she said.

"Well, then," smiled Big Steve. "I'll do the thinking for you. And I'll tell you what's going to be done with it. It's going to mean a new life for you and Danny—and I got a hunch it's going to keep Danny so busy after this that he won't have time to hang around with his old crowd any more. I'm going to talk to Danny. The first thing he's going to do is to buy a nice little place for you and him somewhere that ain't near New York, and where he ain't going to bump into temptation every time he shoves his face outdoors. And with the rest of the money he's going to start himself up in some decent business—and I'll give him a hand to do it. If I know Danny, he'll fall for this hard; but, if it's necessary, I'll help him to make up his mind by busting his nose. Is that all right, Mrs. Meegan?"

Mrs. Meegan's face was transfigured as she rose tremblingly from her chair.

"Oh, Steve!" she sobbed—and buried her face on his shoulder.

"Yes, Steve," said Jimmie Dale softly to himself as he began to move silently toward the stairs. "I think I've got a warm spot in my heart for you, too!"

Jimmy Dale reached the head of the stairs, but suddenly came to a halt again as something that Big Steve was saying arrested him.

"I've been looking in on him every half hour or so, Mrs. Meegan," said Big Steve; "but now you're here, I guess you'll sort of want to take that on yourself. There ain't really anything to do, and there's no reason why you can't lie down on that other cot there and get some sleep. We generally close up here around three o'clock, and if you want anything before then just punch the bell; afterwards, I'll be downstairs in the room just underneath you. I always have a little game of cards with a few friends, every night after closing up time, and all you've got to do is call me. And if there's anything else——"

Jimmie Dale went on down the stairs, cast a sidelong glance at the safe as he crossed the lighted office, opened the glass-

panelled inner door, stepped out into the porch, the outer door of which was still wide open as Big Steve had left it—and waited. He nodded to himself. Big Steve's movements were now the first consideration, and he, Jimmie Dale, could still see into the office.

He had not long to wait. In scarcely a minute Big Steve appeared in the connecting doorway between the office and the passage. Here Big Steve paused for an instant to reach out for the wall switch. The office was in darkness. Then Big Steve's footsteps sounded crossing toward the glass-panelled door—and Jimmie Dale stepped silently out into the night.

CHAPTER XIII

MEN IN MASKS

JIMMIE DALE smiled grimly now as from the shadows he watched Big Steve lock the outer door, light a cigar, and stroll back to his interrupted duties as host of The Two Oaks. Both of his questions had been answered. Eighty thousand dollars in cash! It wasn't often that eighty thousand *in cash* was to be had—outside a bank! His spirits rose. The bait was big enough to tempt the "man with the black hair," the man who was stealing Daddy Ratzler's plums—the *man who had murdered Ray!*

"Something tells me," said Jimmie Dale quietly to the night, "that there isn't so much chance about it, after all, and that he'll be here on the heels of Silky Hines for another bite—and I'd like to see his *face*. But anyway, whether I do or not, I think I'm rather glad I came. The ethics of the whole business may be open to debate, but I'd rather Mrs. Meegan got that money, than Daddy Ratzler and Silky Hines! And I think she will!"

Jimmie Dale returned to the porch door, and opened it with a picklock. The Two Oaks would begin to close up around three. By four the multitude would have departed! It was quite obvious now why Silky Hines was waiting until four o'clock!

"Yes! Quite!" said Jimmie Dale in communion with himself. "Not awfully bright of me, but I was under the impression that The Two Oaks was in full swing *all night*. My mistake! H'm! It's still rather a long

pull to the zero hour, but the time ought not to drag! Big Steve will be starting that private little game of his back here long before that."

Jimmie Dale entered the office, and without pause stepped across to the connecting door on the other side that led into the passageway. He could hear Mrs. Meegan moving about in her room upstairs, and the faint rattle of dishes that he had noticed before was still in evidence. There were no other sounds. He moved noiselessly along the passage. His flashlight came into play. Big Steve's private card room proved to be the second one beyond the stairs.

From the threshold, Jimmie Dale inspected the room as the ray of his flashlight circled the interior. There was little else in the room save a large poker table of orthodox design which was surrounded by comfortable and inviting looking chairs. The window at the rear of the room was directly opposite the door.

"It's a hot night," observed Jimmie Dale; "they'll have to open that."

The flashlight went out. Jimmie Dale returned to the office. But here the round, white ray again became inquisitive. It lingered for a full minute over the face of Big Steve's safe.

"Rather ancient vintage!" he murmured. "It might be worse!"

The flashlight went out again—the Gray Seal was at work.

THE minutes dragged along; now punctuated by the tinkle of the whirling dial, now by a vexed and deep-breathed exclamation that proclaimed abortive effort; now by periods of utter silence as

Jimmie Dale, his ear clamped to the steel door, listened for the tumblers' fall while the dial moved by the barest fraction of an inch.

Mrs. Meegan still moved about in the room upstairs; the faint clatter of dishes

still came from beyond the passage; a black

shape, formless in outline against the surrounding darkness, still hovered in front of the safe. And then there came another sound—the dull, muffled thud of metal meeting metal as the bolts slid back in their grooves.

"Got it!"

The door of the safe swung open. The flashlight disclosed a black leather satchel. Jimmie Dale removed the satchel and opened it. It was nearly full of loose, crumpled banknotes.

"I was afraid so," Jimmie Dale confided to himself. "I couldn't get these in my pockets in a thousand years. Well, there's only one thing for it, and, thank Heaven, there's plenty of time!"

The flashlight swept around the room, and Jimmie Dale reached for a newspaper that lay on the table. A pocket in his leather girdle produced a piece of cord. In a minute more the satchel was empty, and a parcel lay on the floor beside him.

For an instant after that, Jimmie Dale hesitated; then from his girdle he took out the thin metal case that contained the insignia of the Gray Seal. He had no choice in the matter. With the money gone, Silky Hines and his henchmen would put Big Steve through the third degree anent its whereabouts. It would go very ill with Big Steve then, for they naturally would not believe that he knew nothing of its disappearance. It would end up, of course, in Big Steve's being "taken for a ride" unless—well, unless the Gray Seal took upon his shoulders the blame for another "crime!" Jimmie Dale opened the metal case, and, from where they lay in little rows between sheets of oil-paper, with the tweezers lifted out a diamond shaped, gray-paper seal.

He surveyed the face of the safe—and shook his head. No; not there! Big Steve might very naturally come into the office here before he settled down to his game of cards and notice it, in which case he would give the alarm at once. That, of course, would in itself forestall even the possibility of any unpleasantness between Silky Hines and Big Steve, for, with The Two Oaks in an uproar and the money already gone, Silky Hines and his three followers would not put in an appearance at all. But, in that event, neither would the *fifth* man! And it was on that chance alone, the chance that



the fifth man might come, that he, Jimmie Dale, was here.

On the outside of the satchel, then? Again Jimmie Dale shook his head. No; not there, either! If Big Steve happened to open the safe, he would still see it—and the results would be the same!

Jimmie Dale lifted his shoulders as though in self-apology for his hesitation. It was only a detail, but it *was* important. Well, *here*, then! He moistened the adhesive side of the paper seal with his tongue, and, still holding it with the tweezers, reached inside, and laid it on the bottom lining of the satchel. There were no telltale fingerprints! He pressed it firmly into place with his handkerchief, closed the satchel, and set the satchel back in the safe; then he shut and locked the safe, wiped the dial and handle carefully with his handkerchief, picked up the parcel of banknotes from the floor, and, locking the porch door behind him, for the second time that night and from the same exit disappeared into the shadows.

"And tomorrow, Mrs. Meegan," said Jimmie Dale pleasantly as he tucked the parcel under his arm, "we'll slip this over on some bank. But for the present I fancy it will be safer locked up in my car than anywhere else. Also, the walk will help to pass the idle moments."

Jimmie Dale did not hurry. When he eventually returned to The Two Oaks the cars that had been parked in front of the entrance were gone, and the only windows now alight in the main building were upstairs in what was presumably the servants' quarters; those, and two in the annex—the one occupied by Mrs. Meegan, and the one directly underneath, which latter was, of course, Big Steve's card room. The business day—or night—of the establishment was ended.

HE HAD removed his mask while on the highway. He replaced it now as he stepped a little way out from the fringe of trees for a closer view. The card room window had not only been opened as he had anticipated it would be, but, whether through indifference, or deeming the seclusion of the countryside entirely adequate, or for the sake of more air, or for all of these possible reasons combined, the roller

shade had not been pulled down. Five men in shirt sleeves sat around the poker table. Big Steve's customary game after closing hours—he had intimated to Mrs. Meegan that it was a nightly occurrence—was already in full swing.

"And Silky Hines isn't going it blind!" muttered Jimmie Dale tersely. "He'll know about this 'customary' game. The only sure bet is that the curtain will fall with the safe holding the center of the stage! But I wonder what the procedure will be?"

Jimmie Dale withdrew again to the shelter of the trees. Here, at most, he was still but a matter of a few yards away from both the card room window and the porch door, and, with his eyes grown accustomed to the darkness, he could quite easily keep both well in view. There was nothing to do now but wait.

The lights in the servants' quarters upstairs in the main part of the building went out one by one. Occasionally there came gusts of laughter from the card room, occasionally even a word or two that was distinguishable. The time did not pass quickly, but Jimmie waited in grim patience.

"The fifth man!" his mind kept repeating. "I just want to know *who* he is. That's all I want—*tonight*. The rest will come later!"

And then suddenly Jimmie Dale grew tense. A car that he had heard approaching had apparently turned off from the main road a little distance away. And now it had come to a stop. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wristwatch. Three minutes of four!

Five minutes more went by. Jimmie Dale's face set. Yes, here they were! Black shapes, emerging from the denser shadows of the trees and coming from the direction where the car had stopped, were moving swiftly and silently toward the porch door. He counted them. Four!

For a minute or two they stood there, one of their number obviously at work with a skeleton key or picklock, for presently, still having made no sound, they vanished through the doorway. Jimmie Dale's eyes traveled expectantly to the spot where the four men had emerged from the trees. There was no fifth man dogging their footsteps. Perhaps it was too soon. Well, sup-

pose that he, Jimmie Dale, reached the porch first then—if he could do so unseen—and waited *there!* If the fifth man came at all, he——

Jimmie Dale dropped promptly to his hands and knees, and began to crawl rapidly forward. But halfway across the open space he came to an abrupt halt at the sound of a sudden commotion in the card room. He was near enough now to hear what was said; but he raised himself up a



a little that he might see more distinctly. The four men, masked and wearing peaked caps, had crowded into the card room and had covered the players with their re-

volvers.

"Keep your hands on the table, every one of you!" ordered a voice smoothly.

Jimmie Dale, dividing his glances now between the card room window and the porch door, nodded his head. That was Silky Hines' voice. It belied the man, though it had supplied him with his moniker. Beneath the smooth, soft tones was hidden a devil's venom.

Big Steve had been a gambler all his life. He laughed now.

"Help yourselves!" he said. "I was just going to scoop the pot, but I guess you win." He shoved the little heap of bills that were on the table over in Silky Hines' direction as he spread out his cards. "And on an ace full, too!"

"You still win—unless one of these gentlemen has you beaten," said Silky Hines. "We didn't come out here after chicken feed."

THE players around the table, a white faced, uneasy group now, their hands obediently in front of them, were silent.

Jimmie Dale's eyes searched the darkness in the neighborhood of the porch door. There was still no sign of the fifth man.

"What do you mean?" Big Steve's voice had hardened.

"I'll tell you," said Silky Hines, "and it won't take long. This afternoon, meaning

yesterday now, you carried Kid Meegan, who was soused to the gills, out of a swell New York joint; Kid Meegan—and a black satchel. You put the Kid to bed out here, and you put the satchel in your safe. I'll trouble you for that satchel."

Big Steve's voice choked with sudden fury.

"I'll see you in hell first!" he flung out.

"No," said Silky Hines, "I may meet you there later, but I'm busy tonight! Get me? I'm asking you for the combination of that safe."

Big Steve made no answer.

"All right!" The soft purr was still in Silky Hines' voice, but creeping into it now was a deadly menace. "It's too bad to spoil a pleasant evening—and a safe. We can always 'soup' it if we have to; but that'll take a little work, and it don't seem necessary to ruin the safe when there's a lot easier and quicker way—the combination, Steve?"

Big Steve still made no answer.

"All right!" said Silky Hines again—casually. "Will you gentlemen kindly push your cards over toward me? Thank you!"

Jimmie Dale's lips drew together as, after another quick glance in the direction of the porch door, his eyes came back to Silky Hines again. What deviltry was the man up to! With his revolver still menacing the circle, Silky Hines had arranged the disordered cards and had picked up the pack with his left hand.

"I always knew you were a good loser, Steve," Silky Hines purred on, "but you don't seem to get the idea that you ain't holding even enough to chip in on tonight. We're going to get that money—and we're going to get it the *easiest* way! See? I ain't making any threats against—*you*. Some guys get stubborn when they're handed that sort of a spiel. And from what I've heard of you, Steve, you're that kind of a guy. So I ain't sayin', 'Steve, come across, or get bumped off,' because you were born one of those fool birds that'd tell me to shoot and be damned, and tomorrow the papers would be telling how Big Steve died game. No, Steve—nothing like that! I've got your number! I'm just going to deal these cards around to your four friends here, one at a time, leaving *you* out of it. One of *my* friends is handier with a knife than he is

with a rod, and it won't make any noise. The first jack is elected." He began to flip the cards around the table. "The first jack—or the combination, Steve."

A blanched silence had fallen on the room. Silky Hines suddenly stopped dealing as a card fell before the man on Big Steve's right.

"The first jack," said Silky Hines.

A queer sound, like a half-choked cry, came from the man on Big Steve's right as he sat gaping, loose-jawed, at the card in front of him. There was no color in his face. He touched his lips with his tongue. One of Silky Hines' companions was suddenly standing at the back of the man's chair.

"There's no particular hurry, Steve," said Silky Hines; "so we'll say—one minute!"

Jimmie Dale's hands clenched. What price human life with any one of Daddy Ratzler's brood! God! Didn't Big Steve realize that Silky Hines *meant* it! If not, then it was up to him, Jimmie Dale, to—

"This is *murder!*" burst suddenly from Big Steve's lips.

"There are *four* jacks," said Silky Hines.

Big Steve came swaying to his feet.

"I'll open it," he said hoarsely.

"No," said Silky Hines, "you'll sit down in that chair again—and stay there! You'll get no chance to play any tricks or broadcast anything. You won't leave the room—none of you will. *I'll* open it! Take that pencil out of your pocket and write down the combination on this card." He tossed a card from the pack in his hand across the table. "Another jack! That's *queer*—Steve! But there's no room on that. Well, here's the deuce of diamonds. The boys here'll entertain you while I'm gone, so—"

JIMMIE DALE was creeping again toward the porch door. He felt suddenly let down. Moisture that was not from the heat had gathered on his forehead beneath his mask. His thoughts were chaotic. The fifth man! There had been no sign of the fifth man—not likely to be! Not a chance in a thousand now! No fifth man had gone in through that porch door. But there was still left some recompense for the night's work quite apart from the fact that Mrs. Meegan upstairs there wouldn't be the

poorer tomorrow by the sum of eighty thousand dollars. He knew, in anticipation, an unholy satisfaction in watching that silver-tongued potential murderer, Silky Hines, open the satchel. The Gray Seal again! Thank Heaven, for the sake of those men in the card room, that he had not left anything open to question! And perhaps Daddy Ratzler's teeth would chatter a little the harder when he heard the story!

Jimmie Dale slipped into the porch—and at the same moment he saw Silky Hines pause inside the doorway from the passage and switch on the office light. Silky Hines had a playing card in his hand as well as his revolver. The deuce of diamonds.

Inside the porch, but well back from the inner, glass-panelled door which had been left wide open, Jimmie Dale watched. Silky Hines walked to the safe, knelt down before it, laid his revolver on the floor beside him, and, as he studied the playing card in his hand, began to manipulate the dial.

He worked deftly. Silky Hines was deft in everything he did! The safe door swung open, he reached inside for the black satchel—and suddenly Jimmie Dale stood tense and rigid.

Somebody else was in the room!

The door leading into the passage was closing without a sound. A man, masked, was locking the door, still without sound, behind him.

Thought is swifter than word or deed. Jimmie Dale's brain was racing. *The fifth man!* It wasn't one of the three from the other room who had been with Silky Hines. This man wore a slouch hat—not a cap. He must have been hiding on the stairs—had got there somehow, either through the front entrance or the rear, after he, Jimmie Dale, had gone to his car, and before Silky Hines and his companions had entered. Jimmie Dale's pulse leaped. The man had black hair. The weapon in his hand was fitted with a silencer.

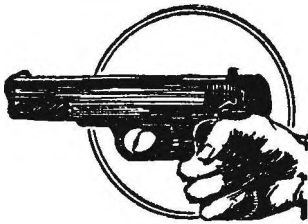
It happened in the winking of an eye. There had been no sound. It might have been intuition, or that out of the corner of his eye Silky Hines had caught sight of the other; but Silky Hines' hand, outstretched toward the satchel in the safe, snatched up instead the revolver from the floor—and Silky Hines fired. The roar of

the report racketted through the room. It was answered by a flash from the masked man in the slouch hat—and Silky Hines, spinning around, pitched to the ground.

Jimmie Dale whipped his automatic from his pocket. Silky Hines' bullet had not wholly missed its mark. It had at least grazed the other. The man, still near the door, was leaning against the wall, his revolver dangling in his right hand, his other hand clapped to his left ear from which the blood was crimsoning his fingers.

Jimmie Dale stepped into the room.

"Drop that gun!" he ordered coldly from behind his outflung automatic; and then,



as the other's weapon clattered obediently to the floor: "Now take off that mask!"

The man made no protest. There seemed no fight left in him. Perhaps he was too badly hit. He raised his hand to the fastening of his mask, and shrugged his shoulders as though in philosophical resignation at defeat—and with the shrug of his shoulders the light went out, and there came a jeering laugh.

The next instant something came hurtling through the air, a chair, that, even as he sprang forward, caught Jimmie Dale on ankles and knees. He stumbled and fell head first against the table in the center of the room. The blow for a moment dazed him, but in that moment, and even in his dazed condition, he heard the other dash across the room and leap out through the porch.

Jimmie Dale reeled to his feet.

"Bilked!" he muttered; and then in a sort of savage admiration: "Good work! He had his shoulder against that wall switch all the time!"

Someone was pounding on the passageway door. Someone was calling Silky Hines' name. From overhead a woman's voice was crying out in alarm. There was no time to lose. Jimmie Dale, with his girdle of burglars' tools and his little metal case of diamond-shaped gray-paper seals, could not afford to be caught here, either!

He was groping around him now on the floor.

"Bilked!" he repeated; "but—" as his hand came in contact with a revolver that was fitted with a silencer—"at least, *this!*" And then Jimmie Dale was gone.

CHAPTER XIV

INSIDE INFORMATION

IT WAS the next night, but Jimmie Dale, though at his club, was not as usual in evening attire. He was wearing a dark and very unobtrusive, though fashionably cut suit of tweed as he entered the reading room, and, selecting an evening paper whose headlines afforded him a peculiar interest, seated himself in an unoccupied corner of the room. He read the headlines again. They were stretched in two rows of lurid type across the entire width of the front page:

GRAY SEAL ROBS FELLOW CROOK OF \$80,000
AFTERMATH OF BIG FLOATING CRAP GAME

Jimmie Dale skimmed over the first part of the text rapidly. His interest began where the "fifth" man had entered the office. The version of the affair was obviously Big Steve's. At the sound of a shot from the office one of the three remaining bandits in the card room had rushed to the office door and had found it locked. He was then joined by another of his companions, leaving one man on guard in the doorway of the card room. The two bandits broke down the office door. On the floor, unconscious, was the leader of the holdup gang who had originally gone into the office to open the safe. The satchel was still there, but it was empty except for a gray seal pasted inside on the bottom.

The Gray Seal had apparently been hiding in the room, had waited until the safe was opened, had then deliberately shot the gang leader, had exchanged the money in the satchel for one of his wretched and despicable stickers, and had made his escape with the loot. Meanwhile, of course, the servants had been awakened by the noise, and the whole establishment was in an uproar. The leader of the gang had, however, regained consciousness by this time, and, aided by his companions, had got away. It was impossible to say whether he was seriously wounded or not. The four

men, like the Gray Seal, made their escape. No one's identity had been established.

"H'm!" commented Jimmie Dale. "Comprehensive, but inaccurate!"

He lighted a cigarette, and, laying the newspaper aside, leaned back in his chair. He watched the blue spiral curling from the tip of his cigarette thoughtfully. So Silky Hines was at least still in the land of the living. And nothing had been said about a certain bank having mysteriously received a certain sum of money in trust for a certain Mrs. Meegan. Just so! The bank was probably quite a little worried, and premature publicity might not have been politic! Whether they opened an account with Mrs. Meegan or not was their affair—and Mrs. Meegan's! The point was that the money, being in their custody, was safe. If they established friendly and cordial relations with Mrs. Meegan, well and good; if not, well, they would have to get a receipt from Mrs. Meegan—and Mrs. Meegan would get the money in any case. So that was that!

Jimmie Dale looked up. A club attendant was standing at his elbow.

"There is a telephone call for you, Mr. Dale," said the man. "The booth on this floor, if you care to answer it, sir."

"Thank you," said Jimmie Dale.

HE ROSE from this chair, and, going to the telephone booth in the hall, picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he inquired.

A voice came tensely over the wire:

"That you, Jimmie?"

"Oh, hello, Carruthers," replied Jimmie Dale. "Yes, Jimmie speaking. Anything new?"

"You bet! The Gray Seal's latest!"

"Some haul!" said Jimmie Dale brightly.

"It must have been lively out at The Two Oaks. I've just finished reading about it."

"Damn it," cried Carruthers excitedly, "I know you can read! Everybody's read it. You don't think I'd call you up about that, do you?"

"My error!" murmured Jimmie Dale apologetically. "Well?"

"Jimmie, listen! Of all the damned nerve! Do you know what the Gray Seal has done?"

"Haven't the faintest!"

"Well, you're going to get a shock. He sent a parcel to Detective Sergeant Waud. It was left at the Homicide Bureau before daylight this morning—hung on the door-knob, Jimmie. The parcel contained a note of condolence adorned with one of his infernal gray seals—and a revolver that was fitted with a silencer."

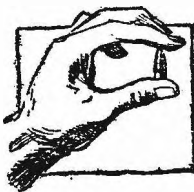
There was a sudden gleam of laughter in Jimmie Dale's dark eyes, but his voice was plaintive as he spoke.

"I wish you wouldn't talk in riddles, Carruthers," he complained. "I'm not very good at them. What is the connection between a note of condolence and a lethal weapon? Was he suggesting suicide to the worthy sergeant?"

"Confound you, Jimmie!" replied Carruthers. "I tell you this is serious. It's hot stuff! Front page! The gall and egotism of that blood-drunk pervert is enough to make Satan himself sick with envy! He consoled with Waud over the lack of results so far achieved by the police in their distracted efforts to apprehend the murderer of Ray Thorne. He ragged Waud unmercifully. Said he realized how deeply chagrined and mortified Waud would be when, if no one held out a helping hand to him, he must finally come to an understanding of his own abysmal, harmless-ness. The note—it was all in printed characters, not a scrap of writing, Jimmie—ended up by the Gray Seal saying that, having no immediate use for the weapon himself, he begged to enclose with his compliments and in the hope that Waud's efforts thereby would be directed into more intelligent channels hereafter, the gun with which Ray Thorne had been shot. What do you think of that?"

"Not very much!" said Jimmie contemptuously. "He's spoofing, of course. He probably picked it up out of some junk pile just to have a go at the police and pull their legs."

"Spoofing—nothing!" Carruthers' voice was at fever pitch with excitement now. "It was the gun that killed Ray. The markings on a bullet fired from it correspond with the markings on the bullet extracted from Ray's body."



"Good Lord!" gasped Jimmie Dale.

"Yes!" gloated Carruthers. "I thought you'd swallow hard before you were through! This opens a new field for investigation. You see where it leads to, don't you? That bird's unholy thirst for vicious notoriety will do him down yet! If that gun can be traced to where it was bought, and a description of the purchaser obtained, we'll have got a long way ahead!"

"Yes, of course!" agreed Jimmie Dale. "Naturally!"

"Well, that's all for now," said Carruthers. "Waud's turned his whole crowd loose on it, and I'll keep you posted if anything new turns up."

"Rather! I should hope so!" exclaimed Jimmie Dale fervently. "Thanks, Carruthers."

There was a quizzical lift to Jimmie Dale's eyebrows as he hung up the receiver.

"Even the police are useful at times," he informed the sound-proof booth whimsically. "I just wanted to be sure. And, besides having black hair, the killer of Ray Thorne has a clipped left ear. We're getting on!"

HE LEFT the telephone booth, chatted for a moment with a fellow-member whom he encountered in the hall, and then sauntered leisurely into the writing room. He glanced at his watch. It was half-past ten. He nodded to himself. That would just about give him time to write a short, but rather difficult note comfortably.

He sat down at a desk and drew a sheet of note paper toward him. He sat there for some twenty minutes, at the end of which time he had written no more than perhaps a dozen or fifteen lines. But they had been written to his satisfaction, for he made no changes now as he reread them carefully; then, enclosing the sheet of paper in an envelope, he tucked the envelope into the inside pocket of his coat—and as he did so his fingers came in contact with another envelope that was already there. A grim little smile flickered across his lips. The night's agenda! Quite so! And if all went well, the meeting would be called to order some time in the vicinity of midnight! It had been a busy day; it would be a busy night! He had left nothing undone that he could think of. He shrugged his shoulders.

Pray Heaven that Fate was in a genial mood during the next few hours, that was all!

And then Jimmie Dale left the club.

Twenty minutes later, with his car parked a block away, he was walking along a shabby cross-street in the lower East Side where evening clothes, had he worn them, would have attracted very undesirable attention. His tweed suit attracted none. And presently he slipped unnoticed into the dark mouth of a lane. A minute more, and, entering by the French window, he was standing in the Sanctuary.

No one had seen him enter, and he had no need of any light that might proclaim his presence now. He crossed the room, and from the opening behind the movable section of the base-board took out a parcel and his make-up box. With these, as unobtrusively as he had come, he returned to his car.

Thereafter, once free of the New York and Brooklyn traffic, he drove at a stiff clip—the Long Island roads were good, and Charlton Park Manor was at least an hour away!

The man with the clipped left ear! Again and again as Jimmie Dale left the miles behind him his mind reverted to the masked figure who last night in Big Steve's office had shot down Silky Hines. Jimmie Dale had had very little doubt that this was the man who had murdered Ray, but between doubt and certainty there had been a wide gulf. He had now bridged that gulf, and there was no longer any doubt on the question. But *who* was this man, and *how*, and *where* was he stealing Daddy Ratzler's secrets? One of the gang? Hardly! From the Tocsin's report of the conversation that had taken place at Daddy Ratzler's bedside, last night, Daddy Ratzler's *intimate* followers would appear to be limited to the four who had been present there, and all four had afterwards been at The Two Oaks together.

Jimmie Dale shook his head suddenly over the wheel of his speeding car. No, there perhaps might be another! He had forgotten—the Angel! A nice moniker! It was the Angel who was to have gone to Ray in person for the blue envelope. But the Angel still might be one of the four. The Tocsin had placed by name only three

of the men last night. But did this matter very much? Whether Daddy Ratzler's group numbered four or five it was almost fantastic to entertain the idea that the murderer of Ray Thorne was one of them.

Well, then, where was the leak coming from that supplied Ray's murderer with the advance information that enabled him to pick Daddy Ratzler's plums? Last night, for instance! It would have been a very juicy plum if the man had had only the gang itself to deal with! The mail? Daddy Ratzler's concern about his letters! Was that the answer?

Again Jimmie Dale shook his head. That also was almost too fantastic to be worthy of consideration. Daddy Ratzler was the brains of the organization. Daddy Ratzler formulated the plans. The gang wouldn't be writing letters to Daddy Ratzler about his own schemes! But why, then, did Daddy Ratzler examine his letters with a magnifying glass?

"Damn!" said Jimmie Dale heartily.

ONE phase of the blue envelope mystery only led to another. One question began a series of questions. He wrenched his mind back to what was for him now the main consideration. There would be no difficulty now in identifying the man with that clipped left ear; what was vital now was to make contact with him again. There was only one way—through Daddy Ratzler—granting, of course, that the man would go on picking plums. Last night the Tocsin, as well as Ray's murderer, had been able to obtain advance information of one of Daddy Ratzler's schemes. She might be able to do so again, and then again she might not! There might be many games pulled off in which the man with the clipped ear would be an uninvited participant, and neither he, Jimmie Dale, nor the Tocsin, know anything about them.

But there *was* one plum, and the biggest of all, still to be picked, which the man he was after now would not fail to snatch if he could—the plum for whose possession Ray Thorne had been futilely murdered. The blue envelope!

Silky Hines in the course of the discussion that the Tocsin had overheard last night had said, basing his statement on the assumption that the blue envelope was

never recovered, and providing of course that the Gray Seal could not read its riddle, that "the pot wasn't lost yet" and that it was only a question of "waiting for openers, which wouldn't be long in coming." Translated into English that meant the loss of the blue envelope spelled only a temporary delay in pulling off what had all the earmarks of being the master coup of Daddy Ratzler's long and nefarious career. Ray's murderer, unless his own peculiar source of inside information had suddenly dried up, would certainly be present on that occasion; but the only way that he, Jimmie Dale, could be certain of being present, too, was to discover in some way or another, and *beforehand*, what the message was that the blue envelope contained.

"And," confessed Jimmie Dale to the headlights' glare along the road, "I haven't had any luck so far with those beastly acids and test tubes! All I've done, I fancy, is make a mess and worry Jason! Most perplexing thing, that blue envelope! It means everything now, if I am ever to get that hound, and keep my promise to Ray. I can't afford to let it beat me; but then—" a sudden cryptic smile crossed Jimmie Dale's lips— "I'm rather sure it won't—before I'm through!"



The miles and the minutes sped away together. Midnight came, and passed. And then suddenly Jimmie Dale slowed his car. The surroundings were very definitely familiar. Charlton Park Manor was just ahead.

Jimmie Dale swung the car into the wagon track that would bring him to the house that Daddy Ratzler had, but he did not follow it for more than a hundred yards. The sound of a motor would travel far on the night air, and Daddy Ratzler was noted for his acute hearing! At the first opening disclosed by the headlights, Jimmie Dale ran the car far enough in among the trees to hide it from sight should anyone chance along the wagon track.

And then the lights went out.

From under the front seat Jimmie Dale took out several strips of heavy, black cloth which he pinned across the windshield and the front windows; then, climbing over into the back of the car, he pulled down the rear curtains. The car had blended into the surrounding darkness.

And now, confident that it could not be seen from without, Jimmie Dale switched on the little dome light overhead and opened the parcel that he had brought with him from the Sanctuary. He laid the contents out on the back seat—the old pair of shoes with broken laces; the mismated socks; the patched trousers, frayed at the bottoms; the disreputable, collarless flannel shirt; the torn and filthy coat; the shapeless and dirt-stained slouch hat. And for a moment he stared at these in somber fashion, and almost as though a puzzled curiosity due to some vaguely familiar sight had been suddenly aroused. He had not seen them for years. He had put them away, preserved them, it was true, against an unforeseen need, but he had never expected to see them again. They brought back unnumbered memories. Here were the clothes of Larry the Bat, the dope fiend, a one-time habitu  of every crooked joint in the Bad Lands, an intimate associate of thugs and criminals, and later known and execrated alike by the police, the underworld, and the public at large—as *the Gray Seal*. Larry the Bat—who was to live again tonight!

JIMMIE Dale began rapidly to make the exchange of clothing, retaining the leather girdle he was already wearing, and transferring the contents of the pockets of the tweed suit to those of the disreputable rags he was now donning. Since that night long ago when the Magpie had stumbled upon the fact that Larry the Bat and the Gray Seal were one, and had spread his tidings throughout the underworld, and the news had swept like wildfire to the police and press, Larry the Bat had virtually disappeared from the land of the living—but the Gray Seal had kept steadily at work. Neither the police nor the underworld, however, were blind fools! The obvious had stared them in the face. It was realized at once that Larry the Bat was only *one* of the characters that cloaked the Gray

Seal—though the guise in which he had still continued to masquerade had never been discovered. And Daddy Ratzler was one of those who had been personally acquainted, quite well acquainted, with Larry the Bat in the days gone by. Daddy Ratzler was one of those who *knew* that Larry the Bat was the Gray Seal. But, also, Daddy Ratzler was a wily and tricky customer!

The makeup box now claimed Jimmie Dale's attention. But he did not work so quickly now, as his wrists, neck, throat and face received their quota of stain, and the shapely, well cared for hands grew unkempt and grimy, artfully black beneath the finger nails. The vision mirror was awkwardly placed and small. The rehabilitation of Larry the Bat could have been more readily and simply effected at the Sanctuary. Exactly! But the risk had been too great. Daddy Ratzler was not the only one who would recognize Larry the Bat on sight. There was many a private citizen, many a denizen of the underworld, and many a member of the police who could do so, too—traffic officers some of the latter were now, probably. Larry the Bat driving in the seclusion of a closed car at night might ordinarily be expected to pass unnoticed, though there was always the possibility of a traffic mix-up and an inquiring officer, or a perhaps trivial incident of some kind that would force him to alight and expose himself; but the greatest danger had lurked in the fact that the Gray Seal was in the limelight again, and wanted for the murder of Ray Thorne! With the police at fever heat, even the glimpse of a suspicious looking character at the wheel of a car might have been enough to trip him up, and bring recognition in its wake—and recognition meant ruin, and disaster, inevitable and swift. "Death to the Gray Seal!" That ugly slogan today was as clamorous as ever! It would have been foolhardy, an act of insanity to have attempted it!

He stared into the mirror as his fingers deftly inserted little distorting pieces of wax behind his ears, in his nostrils and under his upper lip. The features reflected in the mirror were dissolute and vicious now, and from under drug-laden lids the narrowed eyes of Larry the Bat stared back at him.

CHAPTER XV,

WITHOUT REHEARSAL

JIMMIE DALE was ready now! He picked up the battered slouch hat, pulled it well down over his eyes, switched off the dome light, and, stepping out of the car, made his way back to the wagon track. Five minutes later he was standing before the shadowy outline of what appeared to be a large, old-fashioned, two-story house.

There were no lights in the front of the house; but from the angle at which he stood he could see a series of little streaky threads of light stealing through the closed shutters of one of the upper side windows. He nodded to himself. That would be Daddy Ratzler's room. Daddy Ratzler kept his light burning all night. The room next to it was the Tocsin's. Moving a little closer he stared up at the latter for a long minute. The all-important question now was whether any of the gang was in the house with Daddy Ratzler. Again he nodded his head, this time in satisfaction. Even at this distance he was quite sure that anything white on the Tocsin's window would have showed up against the darkness—and he could see nothing. *She* would be there, though, of course!

Jimmie Dale began to climb the outside veranda stairs. His lips were tight now. (This was not the task of last night; there was no carpet here—and no wrangling voices to aid him as there had been for the Tocsin—and Daddy Ratzler's room was just at the head of the stairs. But as he made his way upward there was no sound save the peaceful night sounds of the countryside, dominated by the croaking of a frog.

The Tocsin's deft touch was in evidence. He peered in through the slightly widened slats of Daddy Ratzler's shutters. A single incandescent bulb illuminated the room. Daddy Ratzler lay there motionless in the bed with his eyes closed. He might or might not be asleep, but what was of more interest to Jimmie Dale was a heavy-calibered revolver that lay within hand-reach of Daddy Ratzler on a table beside the bed.

Jimmie Dale moved on to the next window—and from within, low-breathed, a single word reached him:

"Jimmie?"

Jimmie Dale took from his pocket the note he had written in the club, and passed it in through the window.

"Don't make any noise," he whispered, "but turn on your light and read this. I'll give you five minutes. Right?"

"Yes."

JIMMIE DALE drew back along the veranda, glanced in again at the still motionless form in the bed in Daddy Ratzler's room, and descended to the ground. A minute later, having selected an instrument from the kit of tools in his leather girdle, he was at work upon the lock of the front door. It was a massive and intricate lock. The luminous dial of his wristwatch told him that he had already exceeded his stated five minutes when finally it yielded.

He stepped silently into the house, leaving the door ajar behind him. The white ray of his flashlight stabbed through the darkness. He crept up the stairs. A door



at the end of the corridor stood open. Light flooded out from it. Jimmie Dale exchanged his flashlight for his automatic—and stepped over the threshold.

"Hello, Daddy!" said Larry the Bat.

"I heard youse was sick, an' I thought mabbe a visit from an old pal might brighten youse up."

The figure in the bed sat bolt upright, his eyes blinking, and suddenly the sunken cheeks assumed an ashen hue.

"Larry the Bat!" he gulped. "The—The Gray Seal! What—what do you want?"

Larry the Bat's gaze played insolently over the unshaven, pock-marked face, the small, ratlike eyes glowing out of deep sockets, and the sagging jaw that disclosed an almost toothless mouth. As the Tocsin had said, the man was not pleasant to look upon!

"Wot youse scared of?" grinned Larry the Bat.

Daddy Ratzler swallowed hard.

"Nothing," he said—and now his voice

held a wheedling and ingratiating note. "You and me have always been on the level, Larry. Why should I be scared? I wasn't scared. You gave me a start, that's all. I guess you'd have got one, too, if you'd been me. My God!" He wet his lips with his tongue. "How—how did you find out I was here? What—what do you want? I never let you down, Larry; you—you know that."

"Dat's wot I was bankin' on," observed Larry the Bat smoothly. "Youse an' me have always worked well together, an' de idea I got in me nut now is dat we'll do it again. Youse an' me, Daddy—see? A fifty-fifty split. But first, mabbe—" he slipped suddenly across the room to the table beside the bed, dropped his own automatic into his pocket, and, picking up Daddy Ratzler's revolver, pocketed that as well—"mabbe de two of us 'ud feel more comfortable if I wasn't stickin' a rod under yer nose, an' youse wasn't tryin' to make a grab fer yets. Dat's de only way to do business—like friends—on de level, like youse said. Wot?"

Daddy Ratzler's bony fingers plucked at the counterpane.

"What do you want?" he asked for the third time.

"I'll tell youse," said Larry the Bat. "Youse heard about a guy named Ray Thorne gettin' bumped off de other night, didn't youse?"

"Sure!" nodded Daddy Ratzler. "It was all in the papers."

"Sure!" Larry the Bat was smiling coldly now. "But de papers didn't say nothin' about a blue envelope dat was in the safe, nor nothin' about de fact of Daddy Ratzler bein' de one de blue envelope was fer, an' nothing about de big haul Daddy Ratzler was going to make when he got dat envelope."

Daddy Ratzler stared with his ratlike eyes, and his eyes became narrowed. Daddy Ratzler had been in a pinch before, and fear became subservient to Daddy Ratzler's brain. A blank look spread over his face.

"You're in wrong, Larry," he said earnestly. "I don't know where you got that sort of dope from, but it's all bunk. I don't know anything about any envelope, and I never heard of Thorne until I read about you giving him the works."

"Is dat so?" inquired Larry the Bat caustically. "Well, youse're a damned liar, Daddy, an' youse knows dat I knows youse are!"

Daddy Ratzler shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"I'm giving you the straight goods, Larry," he protested, "that's all I can say."

"Aw, cut dat out!" There was a snarl now in Larry the Bat's voice. "We'll get down to cases." He thrust his hand suddenly into his pocket and produced a sealed blue envelope that was slit open at one end. "Wot de hell's in dis? Dat's wot I wants to know!"

DADDY RATZLER shook his head. "I never saw it before," he insisted.

"Mabbe youse didn't!" snapped Larry the Bat. "But youse *knows* all about it. An envelope an' a blank piece of paper don't mean nothin' to me, only dat I knows dere's a message dere somewhere an' dat youse knows how to read it! See? I'm tellin' youse, ain't I, dat I'm playin' square wid youse? De envelope ain't no good to me unless I'm wise to wot youse knows, and wot youse knows ain't no good to youse widout de envelope. Dat's an even break, ain't it? I'm offerin' youse fifty-fifty on whatever dere is in de pot, so come across!"

Daddy Ratzler became suddenly irascible.

"What do you want me to do—fake up something?" he squeaked. "How many times have I got to tell you you're in the wrong street?"

Larry the Bat leaned slightly over the bed.

"Well, den," he said through shut teeth, "suppose instead of comin' clean wid youse on a fair cut I blow yer blasted block off! Is dat wot youse're askin' fer?"

But now Daddy Ratzler laughed.

"That's a bum play!" he cackled. "You couldn't bluff me like that, even if I knew what you were talking about. That's the last thing you'd do. A dead man couldn't tell you anything, could he? But as long as he was alive there'd always be a chance for you to horn in. You don't get anywhere with me like that!"

Larry the Bat straightened up. A look of discomfiture crossed his face.

"I don't want to start no rough-house," he admitted. "All I wants is——"

The sentence was never ended. Mother Margot was standing in the doorway with a levelled revolver in her hand.

"Youse dere," she ordered curtly, "*stick 'em up!*" And then with a gasp: "My Gawd, Larry de Bat! De Gray Seal! Wotya know about dat!"

"The letter!" screamed Daddy Ratzler. "The letter! The letter!"

Jimmie Dale's hands, in one of which he still held the blue envelope, were raised above his head. Mother Margot, her revolver still covering him, advanced into the room.

"Sure t'ing!" she croaked. "Drop it! See? Drop dat letter on de bed!"

The envelope fluttered from Jimmie Dale's hand to the counterpane, and Daddy Ratzler with a snarl of triumph pounced upon it.

"Plug him, Margot!" shrieked Daddy Ratzler. "Let him have it! Kill the——"

Jimmie Dale risked Mother Margot's marksmanship! He made a sudden leap for the door. Mother Margot's shot roared out behind him—and missed! He heard Daddy Ratzler scream with rage, and Mother Margot shrill her execrations. He reached the stairs and took them at breakneck pace, while again and again behind him, from the head of the stairs now, the flashes of Mother Margot's shots split the black. And then the front door slammed behind him.

But he was crouched beneath the window and was peering in through the slats again as Mother Margot re-entered Daddy Ratzler's room.

Daddy Ratzler, still clutching the blue envelope in his hand, was panting with excitement.

"Did you get him?" he cried eagerly.

Mother Margot wiped her face with her sleeve.

"Gawd, I dunno," she said hoarsely. "I must've hit him, but he was able to beat it all right, 'cause I heard him runnin' away outside. I thought I heard some one talkin' in here a few minutes ago—dat's wot woke me up!"

"It's a good thing you did," grunted Daddy Ratzler approvingly. "I won't forget this, Margot, though I wish you'd

plugged him! He pinched my gun, but there's another one in that top drawer over there. Give it to me!"

MOTHER MARGOT obeyed, and Daddy Ratzler laid the revolver on the table beside the bed.

"In case he comes back, we'll be ready for him, curse him!" he snarled. "You turn on the lights downstairs and keep 'em on. And wake up Pascal. He can't hear, but he can keep his eyes open. And you needn't tell him who it was that bust in. I don't want the police nosing around out here. Tell him it was a burglar. And keep your own mouth tight about who it was, too! See? And don't neither of you go to bed again tonight. Get me? Yes, and bring me a lamp up here."

"Sure!" said Mother Margot, and scurried from the room. She was back presently carrying a lighted lamp which she set down on the table. "Want de electric light switched off?"

"No," said Daddy Ratzler curtly. "Is Pascal on the job?"

"Both of us is on de job," said Mother Margot with a vicious smile. "Dat bird won't sneak into dis house again widout us gettin' wise to it! Gawd, I hope he tries it!"

"All right," said Daddy Ratzler gruffly; "only remember what I told you! Beat it—and shut the door! I'll be listening now, and I can take care of myself in here."

The door closed behind Mother Margot. And Jimmie Dale, watching, saw Daddy Ratzler contemptuously toss away the blank piece of paper that the envelope contained, then reach avidly for a knife that lay on the table and begin carefully to slit open lengthwise the top of the blue envelope itself. And now Daddy Ratzler's little ratlike black eyes were glistening.

"Bluffed him!" gloated Daddy Ratzler. "Bluffed him! The Gray Seal! Bluffed him!"

Still using the utmost care he now doubled back as much of the upper edge of the gummed flap of the envelope as would yield to pressure, and, leaning far out over the bed, held this for a few moments over the top of the lamp. The result as he examined it, seemed to puzzle Daddy Ratzler. He repeated the experiment over and over again. His hands were trembling now,

and the puzzlement in his face had deepened into consternation.

And outside the window Jimmie Dale laughed softly.

"Thank you, Daddy!" he murmured as he began silently to descend the veranda stairs. "I'll try that on the original!"

CHAPTER XVI

AT MIDNIGHT

ACCUSTOMED as Jimmie Dale was to finding himself in unexpected places, he wouldn't have guessed that within twenty-four hours of his visit to Daddy Ratzler's in the shape of Larry the Bat he would be in Canada. Still less would he have guessed that he would be lurking on the banks of the St. Lawrence River at midnight. Yet that is exactly where he found himself—that night and the two following nights. And this, the third night, was certainly not in the least a nice night to be on the shores of any river.

The storm had broken half an hour before, and even yet did not seem to have attained its height. On-driven by furious gusts of wind, the downpour of rain swept across the river in weird, gray, misty sheets. The opposite shore was indiscernible, save only at moments when the lightning play made daylight of the night. Here and there the lights of some passing craft showed faintly out of the



blackness, but these were few and far between. There was no other sign of life.

Crouching in a small clump of bushes near the water's edge, Jimmie Dale dashed the rain irritably from his face and eyes. Except for those occasional lights out there he could see nothing. Around him, trees, shrubbery and river bank all blended into a meaningless wall of darkness.

He smiled at himself suddenly in a sort of half-angry, half-pitying way. How many more nights was he going to keep this up?

The chances at best were a hundred to one against him. He knew that, and was quite willing to admit it; and, with every stitch of clothing wet now, his discomfort made the odds after two nights of failure assume even greater proportions.

He shrugged his shoulders. A wild-goose chase? A snatching at straws? Perhaps! But, then—perhaps not! There *was* a chance.

He pushed back his rain soaked sleeve and looked at his wristwatch. The luminous dial marked five minutes to midnight. His eyes strained out through the darkness to the few moving lights on the river. The message in the blue envelope specified midnight, but there was still no sign that tonight would be any more productive of results than those that had gone before. Quite true! But then—and a sort of dogged optimism rose up within him—it wasn't the kind of a night that one would be expected to keep a rendezvous to the minute!

RATHER curious, that message! And rather curious, too, the blue envelope itself! After leaving Daddy Ratzler that night he had lost no time in returning to Riverside Drive and in taking the original blue envelope from the safe in his den. And thereafter, thanks to Daddy Ratzler's enlightening demonstration with the spurious envelope, the rest had been simplicity itself. As Daddy Ratzler had done, so he, too, had slit the top of the envelope open and had carefully doubled back the loose edge of the gummed flap. The simple application of heat had brought out the writing.

He smiled queerly. Sympathetic ink had been used after all! But who would have thought of looking for it under what was virtually another layer of paper! Even pen pressure marks, had there been any, had in this way been covered up. Perhaps that accounted for the use of a blue envelope rather than a white one, the blue colored paper being less transparent than white.

The message had been written with what must have been an exceedingly fine pen, for, though the letters were perfectly formed, he had barely been able to read it with the naked eye. He remembered that his reaction to it all had been one of hesitancy, an uncertainty of mind as to what he

should do, though within an hour of reading the message he had locked the envelope away in his safe again and had left New York.

That was three days ago, and yet here now in the darkness and the storm it seemed as though he could still see the words and letters forming again on the upper edge of the envelope where the flap had been turned back just as they had done when he had watched them first appear :

Send boat Canadian side a mile above Prescott. Midnight, July 16th. Show only starboard light.

An ironical smile crossed his lips as the thought of a moment ago about this being a night when punctuality measured in minutes might be excused recurred to him. If the rendezvous were kept tonight, Daddy Ratzler and his crowd would be a *week* late! Ray had been killed three days before the date specified in the message, and those three days, of course, if the blue envelope had been delivered to the Angel as had been planned, would have given Daddy Ratzler ample time to make his arrangements and conform with the instructions in the message. That was all quite logical; but since then the date itself had not only lapsed, but practically a whole week had passed besides.

Why, then, should he have any hope or expectation that the rendezvous would be kept tonight, or on any other night, now, for that matter? And especially when Daddy Ratzler had never received the blue envelope at all! On the face of it, it seemed absurd. Yes! Precisely! And it would have been absurd except for that remark of Silky Hines that they had only to wait for "openers" which would not be long in coming. And also one other thing. The elaborate and carefully worked-out plan of which the blue envelope was the visible evidence was dependent for its success on *some one*, for some purpose or other, being here at the spot specified in the message.

He did not know how those "openers" were to reach Daddy Ratzler, nor how long it would be before they did; but it seemed at least an even chance that when contact was reestablished the meeting place would still be here as originally planned.

JIMMIE DALE shook the rain from his face. Why not? Those words in the message—"Canadian side"—were extremely significant. It was obvious that smuggling of some sort that was far from petty in its character was being attempted. It was therefore apparently essential that the rendezvous should be kept on the Canadian side. Why then should the locality already selected be changed?

"No," said Jimmie Dale suddenly; "I'm not so sure about that. I'm still gambling with the odds against me. There's Daddy Ratzler. I wish I knew about Daddy Ratzler. Does he think I tried to trick him with a fake envelope, and lost out on it thanks to Mother Margot; or does he think that the envelope was either tampered with in Paris, or that something went wrong with their precious ink? I *don't* think he has any suspicion that he showed me how to decipher the message; but if he gets the idea that it has been tampered with at all, then it's all off here! It's the toss of a coin. I don't know. I only know I'm here, and that it's worth seeing through, that's all!"

A vivid flash of lightning came and went, and disclosed a small boat some distance up the river that he had not seen before. He lost it again in the darkness. Let alone a single green starboard light, the boat was showing no light of any kind.

But still he continued to stare in that direction. The boat might be still too far away to show any signal—and then, again, it might not. There was nothing very definite about "a mile above Prescott." Where did Prescott begin and end in respect of the river bank? One might easily be a quarter or half a mile out. That made little or no difference, of course, so far as signalling was concerned, for the inference was that a boat passing up or down the river anywhere in the vicinity and showing a single green light would receive an answering flash of some kind from the shore. His own position, for instance, was only approximate, but he was near enough to the locality indicated so that no rendezvous could be kept under the prescribed conditions without his being aware of it. A grain of comfort! He had no cause to worry on that score at least.

Doubt surged back on him again. Three nights of watching already; and the days,

so that he might attract no attention in the neighborhood, spent miles away, now in one direction and now in another, his rôle of motorist camouflaging his movements! It would be so simple a matter to dispel all doubt, so easy to discover whether or not the rendezvous was still existent here! He had only to take a boat himself, and, showing a single green light, patrol up and down near the shore, and draw the answering signal, provided there was one to draw. Yes, quite so! Was he becoming childish, or was he merely peevish because he was drenched to the skin? That would be the end of any chance of the man with the clipped ear appearing on the scene! And, also, there was—

The green light!

He stepped out from the clump of bushes, straining his eyes through the darkness. Yes, unmistakably, it was there! In the same general direction in which he had seen the boat in the lightning's flare, but much closer in toward the shore now, a single green light was showing—there was no red light, no port light—just the green.

SO IN some way or other they had drawn their "openers" after all, and the game was on! A sense of grim satisfaction settled upon Jimmie Dale. He had played against the odds—and won! Daddy Ratzler being sick, that would undoubtedly be Silky Hines, either alone or with some of the gang!

Jimmie Dale began to make his way along the shoreline; but, mindful of the intermittent lightning flashes that might at any moment silhouette him against the night, he kept close to the trees and bushes



that lined the river bank. The boat, perhaps some five hundred yards away, was heading in directly now for the shore. But there was no hurry. It was not Silky Hines, or any of Daddy Ratzler's followers that he was after—it was the man who had murdered Ray. The plum-picker! And if the man's apparently uncanny

source of information had not failed him, and if he ran true to form, he would put in an appearance somewhere and from some unexpected source to Silky Hines' undoing—but not until the plum was thoroughly ripe and ready to drop into his hand. And that was the point at which he, Jimmie Dale, proposed to do a little undoing himself.

But now something unexpected was happening, and involuntarily Jimmie Dale paused. Still several hundred yards away from where he stood, the boat appeared to have touched the shoreline and from the shore itself a faint pinpoint of white light, a lantern presumably, appeared. And then there came a tiny flash through the darkness. There was no sound save the howl and sweep of the wind. The lantern seemed to drop suddenly to the ground—and go out.

And then, urged on by he knew not what, Jimmie Dale sprinted forward.

Again a flash of lightning—and again for a moment it was as bright as day. The boat was speeding away from the shore. It held a single occupant, a man who wore a mask, a man who wore a bandage over his left ear, the white of which was clearly defined in the lurid, unearthly light!

Then utter blackness again, and the pelting rain.

And, while he ran, a realization of disaster registered itself on Jimmie Dale's brain. Not Silky Hines! Not any of Daddy Ratzler's gang! How had Ray's murderer come *first*—outplayed them all?

The next instant he was bending over a murdered man at the water's edge.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TOCSIN'S STORY

AFTER the sudden conclusion of Jimmie Dale's midnight vigil on the banks of the St. Lawrence, he had lost no time in starting south for New York.

Engine trouble had delayed him on his return trip, and it was after seven o'clock in the evening when he drew up in front of his residence on Riverside Drive and alighted from a very dirty and mud-spattered car.

Jason, with undisguised relief, opened the door for him.

"It's good to see you back, Master Jim, sir," said the privileged old man. "I trust you had an enjoyable trip, sir."

"Very, Jason, thank you!" said Jimmie Dale pleasantly. "Anything new since I've been away?"

Jason glanced guardedly around the hall in which they were still standing.

"Well, yes, Master Jim," he answered; "and it's in respect to those instructions of yours, sir, that no one was to answer the 'phone except myself."

"Yes?" inquired Jimmie Dale.

"The day before yesterday, Master Jim, a woman—" Jason coughed apologetically behind his hand—"I couldn't exactly call her a lady, sir, for she had a very coarse voice, and, if I may so express it, her English was rather low, rang up and asked for you. I was a bit taken aback at the voice, sir; but I answered that you were away and that I was unable to say when you might be expected to return. I hope I did right, sir?"

Jimmie Dale suppressed a smile. Jason would instantly have recognized the voice of his future mistress, who was supposed to be in Europe! Jason was not acquainted with Mother Margot. Exactly! But this struck a serious note. What had happened at that house out there near Charlton Park Manor? How had the Tocsin managed to get to a 'phone at all?

"You did perfectly right, Jason," he said approvingly. "And what message did this—er—woman leave?"

"None, sir," replied Jason; "at least not on that occasion. But she called up again this afternoon around five o'clock, about two hours ago. I had to assure her over and over again, Master Jim, that I had no idea as to your whereabouts. Then she said I was on no account to forget to tell you the minute you got back that she had left a letter for you, and that you'd know where to find it."

JIMMIE DALE retrieved his hat from the old butler's hand.

"Most intriguing, Jason!" he grinned. "She may have a pretty face in spite of her voice, you know. I'm off! It's irresistible!"

As Jimmie Dale got into his car and drove away, he could still see the old man standing there on the front steps, bare-

headed, watching him out of sight.

Jimmie Dale drove fast; the traffic was light at that hour, and some twenty minutes later, entering unseen by means of the lane and the French window, he was standing in the Sanctuary. Still light outside, it was dark within the dingy room; and now, as he lighted it, the air-choked gas-jet hissed and wheezed into a meager yellow flame. He crossed the room quickly, displaced the movable section of the base-board, and reached into the opening. The letter was here, of course, as he had expected. He stood up with it in his hand, and, about to replace the base-board, hesitated for a minute. He might only have to open it up again! What rôle was he to play tonight? Was Smarlinghue, or perhaps even Larry the Bat, to step out from that hiding-place again? The letter first!

He stepped back under the gas-jet, tore open the envelope, extracted a single closely written sheet of note-paper and began to read the letter rapidly. It bore that day's date, and began as the Tocsin had begun every letter she had ever addressed to the Gray Seal:

Dear Philanthropic Crook:

I know you are away somewhere, but I am hoping that you will perhaps still be back in time to come to me tonight. If not, then tomorrow night—or the next. I shall be waiting for you. Come—as soon after dark as possible!—but do not try to communicate with me unless you see a light in my window. This may seem almost incoherent; but I am writing in great haste, and you do not need any detailed explanation in order to make you understand that it is urgent. I have made some strange discoveries about the country house.

M.

Jimmie Dale reread the letter, then he began to tear it into fragments, and the fragments into still smaller ones. These he dropped into the pocket of his coat. Then he crossed the room and replaced the movable section of the base-board. Obviously, neither the services of Larry the Bat nor Smarlinghue were required tonight. A mask, yes—if even that proved necessary!—but the leather girdle he was already wearing would supply all requirements of that sort. His automatic and a flashlight

were also on his person. He needed nothing that the Sanctuary could supply.

Darkness fell upon the squalid room, the French window opened and closed noiselessly, a shadow hovered for a moment at the mouth of the lane, and then Jimmie Dale, walking casually down the block, turned the corner and regained his car.

Already growing dusk as the car shot away from the curb, it was dark when,



after a little more than the hour's run to Charlton Park Manor, Jimmie Dale swung from the main road into the wagon track

that led to Daddy Ratzler's house, and, diverging again, secreted his car among the bordering trees as he had done in his previous visit here some nights before. Five minutes later, following the wagon track on foot, he was standing in the shadow of the trees, with the house looming up before him.

The only light showing anywhere as he now made a cautious circuit of the house came from the Tocsin's window. It seemed rather curious that there was none in Daddy Ratzler's room—but in any case, from what she had said in her letter, the coast appeared to be clear. He slipped out of the shadows and moved toward the house. A dark form showed suddenly on the veranda, and Mother Margot's voice came through the darkness.

"Who's dat out dere?" she demanded.

"Lady," said Jimmie Dale circumspectly, "I may do you a gross injustice, but my mother told me never to confide in women."

Her laugh floated down to him.

"It's all right, Jimmie," she said. "Everything is perfectly safe. Wait a minute, and I'll open the front door for you."

It was less than a minute before the front door opened—and the Tocsin was in Jimmie Dale's arms. It was much more than a minute, however, before she spoke again.

"But now listen, Jimmie!" she said, then.

"We might as well talk here in the hall for the next few minutes as anywhere else—afterwards I have something to show you. And thank Heaven you have come as early as this; but, even so, the time is short.

That's what I meant by telling you to come as soon after dark as possible. I was afraid Pascal might see you and report your visit if you came too early; while, on the other hand, Daddy Ratzler generally gets back around nine o'clock."

"Back?" repeated Jimmie Dale in surprise. "Isn't he here?"

"No," she said. "I don't think he was physically up to it, and even now he is none too well; but, anyhow, he got up the next morning after your visit to him and went to New York, and he has been going to the city every day since."

"H'M!" said Jimmie Dale. "And Pascal? Where's he?"

"Upstairs in his room at the other side of the house. He gets up with the dawn and goes to bed with the dark. You know, that besides being deaf, he's a very old man. So we've got the house to ourselves for the moment. And I am not going to ask a single question until I have told you my story, and, above all, *shown* you what I have found. Daddy Ratzler *might* come back earlier than I expect, you see—and when he does come back I must be upstairs in my room."

"Right!" conceded Jimmie Dale. "Go on, dear."

"Well," she said, "Daddy Ratzler got up the next morning after you were here, and went to town for the day. He said he wouldn't be back until about nine o'clock. And Pascal, taking advantage of Daddy Ratzler's absence, went off to spend the afternoon with some cronies in the neighborhood, so I risked a trip to New York that afternoon. I was terribly anxious to know about the blue envelope, and also what had happened at The Two Oaks; for, of course, we had had no chance to discuss anything that night when you staged that little one-act play. So, as I say, I went to town. I called up Jason on the 'phone—as Mother Margot, of course.

"He told me you were away. I went to the Sanctuary to see if you had left any message. There wasn't any, and I came back here, quite early in the afternoon. Daddy Ratzler returned about nine o'clock. He went to bed, and I heard him *lock* both his door and his window. I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. My door was open.

I suppose it must have been somewhere around eleven o'clock when, as I lay there, I suddenly heard voices in Daddy Ratzler's room. They were low and muffled, of course, and not a word was distinguishable, but Daddy Ratzler was unmistakably talking to someone. Now, no one could have got into that room without my knowing it—for even you, Jimmie, couldn't have opened the shutters and the locked window and have got in that way without my hearing you, for my window was wide open on the veranda just a few yards away. So this was the *second* time I had heard two voices in that room when it seemed impossible that any one could be in there with Daddy Ratzler."

The darkness hid the sudden thinning of Jimmie Dale's lips.

"I'd like your story better, Marie," he said grimly, "if you were out of this cursed place for good and all! But go on! What happened then?"

"A great deal, Jimmie—then and afterwards," she said quietly. "The voices only lasted for a very few minutes. Then I heard Daddy Ratzler get out of bed. A moment after that he unlocked his door cautiously, and came quietly out into the hall. He stood there for a little while, apparently listening; then he tiptoed into my room—you remember I told you my door was open—and bent over the bed. I pretended to be asleep. He stood there so long that I was afraid I would give myself away, but he was finally satisfied that I was not awake and went out of the room again. I watched him as he went out. He was wearing a dressing gown. I could see just enough to make that out, you understand, dark as it was; for, though the light was on in his room, so little of it could show along the hall that he had evidently not even thought of closing his door."

"I understand!" said Jimmie Dale tensely. "And then?"

"He went downstairs. I heard him go into the kitchen and open the door leading to the cellar, and then I heard him go down the cellar stairs. I did not, of course, know whether he would be back almost at once or not, so I waited a while to see. I suppose I waited nearly half an hour. Then, as he did not return, I got up. It was *my* turn then, Jimmie—that was what I was out

here for. Besides that mysterious conversation, Daddy Ratzler was up to something and I meant to find out what it was if I could. I went into his room; but it was of course empty, and there was no sign of anyone else having been there. Then I crept downstairs without making any noise.

"To all intents and purposes, as I have said, there was actually no light showing in the hall, but it would have served excellently as an excuse. If he had seen me, I had only to say that I had wakened up suddenly, and, noting a faint glow in the hall that I thought could only be coming from the open door of his room, I had jumped out of bed to see if anything was the matter; and then, finding his room empty, I had become alarmed and had started to look for him. Anyway, he did not see me, nor did I see him.

"I went to the door at the head of the cellar stairs and listened, but I couldn't hear a sound. Then I opened the door quietly. There was no light in the cellar and still no sound. I turned on the light at the head of the stairs, and went down a little way; but I did not have to go anywhere near the bottom to see that there was nobody in the cellar. I turned out the light, went back upstairs, got into bed again, and lay there for a long time trying to puzzle it all out.

"It was certain that Daddy Ratzler had gone down to the cellar; it was certain that he was not there; and it was certain that he had not come up the cellar stairs again. It was true, of course, that there was a door in the cellar through which he could have gone outside; but if he had intended to go



outdoors, why should he take so awkward and roundabout a way when he could have gone out so much more easily by the front door? And, then, another thing! If he

had intended to remain outdoors for so long a time—it was more than an hour, Jimmie, before he eventually came back *by the cellar stairs*, it seemed strange that he had not put on his clothes instead of going out in his dressing gown.

"I could not answer those questions, but I spent hours in the cellar yesterday and again today—every minute when Pascal was out of the way. And then I—but you'll see for yourself, Jimmie. It was about noontime when I made my discovery. I waited until Pascal had gone off on what had now become his habitual neighborhood visits, then I went to town, and again telephoned Jason. You still were not back, so I left that note for you in the Sanctuary, and hurried back here.

"And now, come and I will show you what I found. Give me your flashlight."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

THE hall, disclosed by the flashlight's ray, led through to the rear of the house and into the kitchen. Here the Tocsin opened the door at the head of the cellar stairs—and a moment later, following the Tocsin, Jimmie Dale found himself standing in the cellar itself.

And now the flashlight in the Tocsin's hand rested for a moment on a door with a few short steps leading up to it at the far end of the cellar, and then played slowly over the rear wall—which Jimmie Dale could see was sheathed with rough planking and still formed the backing for a series of large bins, now in disrepair.

"Pascal says these used to be vegetable bins. And now, Jimmie—*look!*"

She had stepped close to the wall, and was pressing with her finger on what appeared to be no more than the rusty head of an old nail. Without a sound, and as though operating on well-oiled hinges, three of the planks swung suddenly outward.

"My glory!" Jimmie Dale ejaculated. "Good work, Marie!" And then, eagerly: "Here, give me the flashlight, and let's have a look at what's in there!"

BUT the Tocsin shook her head. "No; not yet," she said. "It's a sort of half cave, half cellar. You can explore it as soon as you have told me *your* story, I am going to leave you here so as to take no chances of being anywhere else but in my room when Daddy Ratzler gets back. But first I must tell you what else I found.

You will see a speaking-tube sticking out of the wall at the far end when you go in there—and that, of course, accounted at once for the two voices I had heard—the other end of the tube was obviously in Daddy Ratzler's room. It wasn't nearly so hard then to unearth what was in Daddy Ratzler's room as it had been to find this secret door here, and I didn't have to spend the hours sounding the walls up there that I did down here in the cellar. On both occasions when I heard the two voices, Daddy Ratzler had been in bed, therefore the end of the tube in his room must be so close to the bed itself that he could speak into it without getting up. You will remember, from what you saw on the night you were there, that the room is finished in cheap, varnished wood—so cheap, Jimmie, that it is everywhere full of knots. Well, the upstairs end of the speaking-tube is behind one of those knots just beside the head of Daddy Ratzler's bed—the knot can be taken out and replaced quite readily."

Jimmie Dale was frowning now.

"It's queer!" he muttered suddenly, as though almost unconscious of the Tocsin's presence. "I wonder!"

"Everything about this house is queer," she said; "but you'll think it is queerer still when you've seen what is behind this secret door—which, by the way, opens and closes on the inside by means of a push-button that is not camouflaged by the head of a nail. And now the things that I want to know! Did the man with the 'black hair' turn up at The Two Oaks after all?"

"Yes—masked!" said Jimmie Dale with a short laugh. "But he went away *marked* with a wound on his left ear. Also, his revolver, which he left behind him, proved to be the one with which Ray was shot—which dispels any possible doubt that he is the man who murdered Ray."

"Oh, Jimmie, tell me about it!" she exclaimed tensely—and listened as tensely while he rapidly sketched in the details of the night at The Two Oaks. "Yes," she said at the end, "he is the man, of course. And now about the envelope—did the ruse work with Daddy Ratzler?"

"Perfectly!" said Jimmie Dale with a tight smile. "There was a message written in sympathetic ink under the flap of the envelope—brought out by heat. It simply

gave details for a midnight rendezvous on the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence and specified a date that was then several days past. I went there, of course, just the same. My idea was that the rendezvous would eventually be kept at the same place, and if the man with the clipped ear was still getting inside information, as Daddy Ratzler seemed to be afraid he was, he would be there on the heels of Daddy Ratzler's gang in an attempt to pick what Daddy Ratzler intimated was the choicest plum of all."

"What was the reason for this rendezvous?"

"I don't know, except, of course, that it is probably an international smuggling ring of some sort."

"Was the rendezvous kept?"

"Yes," he answered, a sudden bitterness in his voice; "but not at all in the way I expected. It was kept last night. The plan was that a boat showing a single green light was to make contact with the shore. I saw the boat coming through the storm, and expected, of course, that since Daddy Ratzler was sick, Silky Hines would be in the boat, either alone or with some of the rest of the gang. As the boat touched the shore a lantern light appeared at the water's edge, then came a sudden little flash, which I know now was a revolver shot, and the lantern went out; and then, in a flare of lightning, I saw the boat for an instant as plainly as though it were daylight. It was racing away from the shore again. There was just one man in it—the man with the clipped ear! And when I reached the spot I found a man lying dead beside the broken lantern. He had been shot through the heart—just as Ray was—and by the same hand."

"THIS is terrible," the Tocsin said, her voice shaking a little. "Do you know who the dead man was?"

"No. I searched him, of course. He was well supplied with money; but there was nothing in his pockets in the shape of letters, or papers, or anything else from which I could obtain even a clue to his identity. I left him there. He would certainly be found by daylight. That's all, Marie."

"And now?" she queried anxiously.

"I don't know," Jimmie Dale admitted frankly. "If the fellow, having picked Daddy Ratzler's richest plum, is now satisfied there would be no chance of getting track of him again by watching Daddy Ratzler any further; for, in that case, there wouldn't be any 'next'



coup at which the man would be present, even if we could discover what it was to be. That, however, is purely problematical; he may *not* be satisfied, and so, for the time being, we shall have to carry on as we have been doing. But that is not all. Last night worries me. Last night he outplayed them all. The boat was a little late in reaching the rendezvous, but I put that down at first to the storm. I've thought a lot about that since. Why was there no sign of Silky Hines? Had Silky Hines originally been in the boat? Was Silky Hines still in it—dead—when the boat raced away again from the shore? Or what? I haven't even seen the evening papers—I do not know whether they have reported the finding of a body, or bodies, up there on the Canadian border. I was going to try to find out tonight if Silky Hines was still around his usual haunts, and whether or not he had ever left New York at all. Has he been out here, do you know?"

"Not since the time I told you about when he was here with the rest of the gang," the Tocsin answered. "I am positive of that, unless, of course—" the flashlight in her hand bored suddenly in through the opening beyond the secret door—"it was Silky Hines who was in there the other night with Daddy Ratzler."

Jimmie Dale shook his head.

"I don't think so," he demurred. "It's possible, of course, and it would explain the two voices; but the only trouble is, Marie, that the pieces do not fit. Why wouldn't Silky Hines have gone to Daddy Ratzler's room as he did on that other occasion?"

"On that other occasion, Jimmie," she reminded him, "I was out of the house,

and, so Daddy Ratzler thought, on my way to New York."

Jimmie Dale shrugged his shoulders non-committally.

"That's one explanation, of course," he admitted. "Do you think that the second time you heard two voices was when Daddy Ratzler and Silky Hines were discussing arrangements for keeping the blue envelope rendezvous?"

"What else is there to think?" she asked a little helplessly.

"Heaven knows!" ejaculated Jimmie. "But if that is so, I'd say unhesitatingly that Silky Hines has now passed on into the beyond. And in that case, how did Ray's murderer get next to what was going on?" He nodded toward the opening. "I've a growing hunch that the explanation is in there, if we can only find it. But first there's just one question before I poke around here for a bit while you go upstairs to forestall Daddy Ratzler's arrival. I'm rather curious to know what Daddy Ratzler's reaction was when he found he couldn't make anything out of that blue envelope. Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No," she answered; "he never mentioned it, and I never saw it again. He simply got up the next morning, and said he was well enough to go to town. But he was frightened, and he has been frightened ever since."

"Right!" grinned Jimmie Dale with sudden cheerfulness. "Well, you go on up now, Marie, so as to be sure to be on hand as a reception committee for him! I'll let you know before I go away whether I've stumbled on anything worth while down here or not."

"But suppose he gets back in the meanwhile, as he is almost sure to do?" she asked dubiously. "He would hear me if I left my room and went downstairs."

"That's all right," smiled Jimmie Dale reassuringly as he took the flashlight from her hand. "The veranda is still there, and you say he keeps his window closed now. Just you keep yours open—and stand by, no matter how long you have to wait. I'll be there. All set?"

"Yes," she said; and, as Jimmie Dale pointed the way for her with the flashlight's ray, she ran up the cellar stairs and closed the door behind her.

AND then Jimmie Dale was in action. Several times he tested the mechanism that controlled the secret door both from within and without, and then the three planks, noiseless in their movement, swung finally back into place against the wall behind him. A flight of rough, unenclosed steps comprised of some six or seven treads led downward. He descended these, and at the bottom stood motionless for a long time while the white beam of his flashlight again and again, slowly, inquisitively, swept in all directions around him.

It was a long and narrow tunnel-like chamber running at right angles from the steps that he had just descended, and paralleling the wall of the house. The floor was cemented, but was badly cracked in places and in need of repair; and the roof, boarded, was supported by wooden beams and uprights that had every appearance of having been in existence there for years. But the place itself bore eloquent testimony to present day occupation; for, from where he stood beside the steps, which were at one extreme end, his flashlight picked out at the other end, perhaps some forty feet away, a bed, a table with a lamp upon it, a washstand equipped with bowl and pitcher, several chairs, and a high bureau.

A queer and sudden smile touched Jimmie Dale's lips.

"Yes," he muttered. "I certainly would like to know who Daddy Ratzler was talking to down here! I think it would bring us very close to—the end!"

He moved slowly forward now. Strewn in more or less confusion against the sides of the walls were a number of dust-laden boxes of various sizes, their covers for the most part awry, and—he stopped suddenly again, and bent down for a closer inspection—yes, unmistakably, the remains of an old printing press. The next instant he was delving into some of the boxes. Some engraver's tools, gone to rust, and several steel plates upon which work had been started, rewarded his search.

Jimmie Dale straightened up. All this didn't matter very much except that it justified the original existence of the place and satisfied one's curiosity in that respect. Years ago, for there was no sign of any modern photographic appliances of the up-to-date counterfeiter, this had obviously

been a safe and doubtless busy little retreat where Uncle Sam's banknotes were reproduced, without the sanction of Uncle Sam! Perhaps it was Blotz, the former owner, whose ingenuity was responsible for that three-planked door! "Who killed Blotz?" Had Daddy Ratzler been a partner in that enterprise too—only to abandon it later on for something perhaps more lucrative and less risky, though he had been assiduously careful not to abandon the house itself? And no wonder! This hidden chamber could serve many an ugly purpose dear to Daddy Ratzler's heart!

The bedroom, if it could be so called, now occupied Jimmie Dale's attention. There had been no attempt at seclusion, no effort made to divide it off from the rest of the chamber, even to the extent of a hanging of any sort. And here his flashlight, circling around, disclosed the mouth-piece of the speaking-tube protruding from the side wall that was the nearer to the house; it played over the unmade bed, whose blankets of an excellent quality had been flung back over the footboard; it picked out a rug of rather good quality that covered this section of the cement floor, and, near the table, a most inviting easy-chair.

Jimmie Dale's dark eyes were somber now, reflective. If there was not luxury, whoever frequented the place had at least an eye to his own comfort! Who was it? Perhaps Daddy Ratzler, sometimes—which would account for the fact that he might make many visits here unknown to the deaf Pascal who claimed that Daddy Ratzler rarely came to the house, and then only in his capacity of the real estate agent in charge of the property. But was Pascal honest?

WHO else came here—and apparently was quite at home here? Those clothes hanging on the wall pegs were not Daddy Ratzler's clothes! They ought to prove well worth a close examination—and those bureau drawers as well!

Jimmie Dale stepped over to the array of pegs, reached up to take down a coat—and stood motionless, hand poised in air.

Someone was out there in the cellar!

And then, while a second passed, Jimmie Dale's brains raced. There must be an opening somewhere, craftily arranged, whereby the sound of any one moving about in the cellar could be heard in here. . . . It was fortunate that Marie had not gone all the way down into the cellar that night. . . . Who was it out there now? . . . Marie? . . . Not likely. . . . Then it was either Daddy Ratzler, or the unknown to whom these clothes belonged. . . . And discovery here now would be disastrously premature! . . . What was he to do? . . . There was no place to hide. . . . Yes—just one!

He was running now, silently, swiftly back along the way he had come. Those steps! They were open at the sides! There would be just room enough to crouch under them! He gained the steps, and, switching off his flashlight, wormed his way quickly in beneath them.

The door above made no sound as it opened, but an instant later footsteps creaked upon the treads over his head. Came then the crackle of a match—and someone stepped down onto the cement flooring.

And now, peering out from beneath his hiding-place, Jimmie Dale could see the shadowy figure of a man, the match-flame lighting his way, walking briskly toward the far end of the tunnel-like sub-cellar, and carrying what was obviously, if only dimly seen, a large valise in his free hand. The match went out. The man struck another, reached the table, and, bending over, lighted the lamp.

And then it seemed to Jimmie Dale as though his veins were suddenly afire. The man's back was toward him, but over the man's left ear a bandage was plainly in evidence. And then the man, stooping to pick up the valise which he had set down beside the table when lighting the lamp, turned his head—and this time there was no mask upon his face.

It was Beaton, Ray Thorne's valet!

This will be concluded in the next issue.

THE HAND OF GOD

By MURRAY LEINSTER

Author of "The Skipper Knows Best," "The Red Stone," etc.



When a Western Mob Is Set to Lynch

IT WAS very hot when the sheriff sucked meditatively at his pipe in the county jail and listened abstractedly to the buzzing of the mob outside. It was dark, of course. Mobs do not often form in daylight—not mobs who propose to lynch one not especially reputable citizen for the murder of another still less reputable one. The jail was dark and more than a little malodorous. A darky in one of the rear cells whimpered a little in entirely unreasoning terror. A moth blundered heavily about the yellow-flamed lamp.

The only other sound was the sucking, bubbling sound of the sheriff's pipe. He rapped it out and rammed out the stem with a broom straw. There was a knock on the thick outer door.

"Huh?" said the sheriff heavily.

"Has he come to, yet?"

"Not yet," said the sheriff.

He refilled the pipe with care, and struck a match. He had to shift a heavy, blued steel revolver on his desk to get at the matches. He rearranged the matches and the revolver and the box of shells—already opened, so that all three articles would be equally convenient. He leaned back in his chair and smoked and sweated. He left the window of the office down, though. His forehead was creased in an irritated frown.

The buzzing of the mob outside the jail kept up. The pounding and thumping of a second-hand car came down the road, growing louder as it came nearer until it stopped with a squealing of brakes. There were voices, new voices and loud ones.

". . . What in hell diff'rence does that make?" . . . 'Might's well go on an' get through with it. . . . Ain't no diff'rence

whether he's come to or not. . . ."

The buzzing rose louder. The sheriff mopped his face and looked speculatively at the blued steel gun. He wished it weren't undignified to fan himself. Any jury on earth 'ud convict Sam Blake an' send him to the electric chair. Just cost the county a lot o' money convicting him an' the State a lot more electrocuting him. An' with election comin' on, an' a lot o' folks thinkin' about votin' Republican again, an' all—— It was mighty foolish to try to keep 'em from gettin' Sam.

A banging on the door again. The sheriff hitched himself upright.

"He ain't come to, yet," he said irritably. "I ain't lyin'. I ain't goin' to let you-all have him, but I'm tellin' the truth when I say he ain't come to, yet."

There was no direct reply, but voices growling to one another in the heat outside. Then someone was repeating savagely, over and over: "Want him to know what's happenin' to him—want him to know what's happenin' to him——"

The buzzing of the mob absorbed the sound. The sheriff continued to smoke and frown.

A little murmur, different from the buzzing of the mob. A voice protesting. The sheriff grunted. Preacher Bayles outside, arguing with the mob, trying to persuade them not to lynch Sam Blake. His voice was cool and persuasive. But another voice answered him.

"Hit was the hand o' Gawd gave Sam Blake away! Hit was the hand o' Gawd!"

The sheriff lifted his eyebrows. One may be a good church member, but the business of enforcing the law among ten thousand people, white and colored, leads to certain skepticisms.

"First time," grunted the sheriff drily to himself, "I ever knew the Lord to knock a man cold so much longer'n was necessary."

A car cranked up and went sputtering away. To get more people, maybe. If you had half a county mixed up in a lynching, you couldn't do much about it. Somebody said you couldn't indict a nation. Well, you couldn't hang a county, either. Or half of it. Especially for lynching a cold blooded murderer.

THE killing had happened down in Bethel. And the sheriff, just by luck, had happened to be there, or Sam Blake would have been dead before now, unconscious or not. It was a clear case. Open and shut. Absolute, positive, hanging evidence.

The sheriff went over it in his mind. Something of stubbornness made him want to justify himself for what he was going to do. Get killed, pretty certainly. Kill some other people, quite likely. And over a murderer that a jury would send to the electric chair as soon as they left the jury box.

Nothing special about the killing itself, of course. Kittinger went into Bethel store to get his mail. He got it, growled at the storekeeper and went out. He stopped on the store porch to fill his pipe, leaning against a pile of newly arrived packing-cases that filled up three-fourths of the porch. And as he tamped down the tobacco with a horny thumb, from somewhere an incisive, spiteful *crack* resounded. Kittinger shuddered suddenly and moved his head to look astonishedly down at his breast. And then, quite abruptly, he pitched clumsily forward down the rough plank steps into the road. Then he was still.

The sheriff had been down in Bethel serving a summons and complaint. He'd heard the shot as a thin, muted, distant *pop!* They'd sent a man racing after him, and he got to the spot within five minutes of the killing. Kittinger's body was still warm, still flaccid. His face still wore that expression of blank astonishment that would never be wiped off it. Never. The sheriff had been peculiarly shocked by the fact that a dead man's hand should slip from his own and drop with a sickening, loose-jointed thud in the soft dust.

And they'd found Sam Blake in the dis-used blacksmith shop just across the road from Bethel store. With a gun lying beside him, and his toe caught on a discarded metal wagon tire half buried in the earthen floor. He'd fired his shot and turned to run away, and he'd stumbled over that unimportant obstacle. His head had hit a mass of brickwork as he fell. There was a great welt on his forehead where he'd struck.

"Open an' shut," growled the sheriff, sucking at his pipe.

Two more cars rolled up to the jail out-

side. The sheriff pricked up his ears. Sam Blake was still unconscious in the cell to which the sheriff had rushed him. He was the murderer, all right. Even his motives were clear. He'd wanted to marry Lucy



Sears, and her father was making her marry Kittinger because Kittinger had more money. He'd have been lynched before now if he'd come to. But it is one thing to drag a scared and bab-

bling man out of a smashed-open jail and hang him to a telegraph pole, riddling his body with bullets to make sure. It is an entirely different thing to haul a limp and unconscious figure, totally unresisting, out to the same fate. No mob is especially honorable, but that last is beneath even a mob.

WORDS rose above the murmur of the crowd on the courthouse green. Preacher Bayless was still arguing, trying to convince men that the law should take its course. The sheriff would take a hand in the discussion presently, but his argument would be the blued steel revolver lying handily on his desk, with the open box of cartridges beside it. It was horribly hot to think of fighting.

"The hand o' Gawd——"

That was Pete Brown, the nephew of the dead man. He had been the only one to see Kittinger die. He'd seen the killing from his barber shop, fifty yards away, and he'd been the first man to reach the body. When the sheriff got to the spot where the dead man lay in the dust, Pete Brown was still babbling.

"I was lookin' at him on the porch of the store, an' he was fillin' his pipe, an' I heard the shot, an' he looked down at his chest an' looked surprised, an' then he just slumped over an' went tumblin' down the steps——"

The whole scene came back with the vividness of tragedy. The sheriff felt the hot breeze on his sweating face; felt the curiously liquid feel of soft dust beneath his feet; saw the small, scared crowd part-

ing for him and then seemed to see the still limp figure with the dark spot on its shirt-front, grayed with the dust of the road. There was no dignity in a death like that. One was merely a huddled heap in the dust before a mountainous pile of packing-cases.

"He was fillin' his pipe, an' I heard the shot, an' he looked down at his chest——"

Something of the sick disgust he had felt returned to the sheriff as he sat smoking his foul old pipe in the sooty jail office.

He'd bent down over Kittinger in the roadway, and it had been shocking to find his wrist still warm, still flexible, still limp. He'd stood up.

"Who shot him?"

Nobody knew, but Pete Brown shivered and pointed to the gray and scabrous walls of the abandoned blacksmith shop across the road. The packing-cases on the store porch made it inevitable. Kittinger could only have been shot from directly across the road.

THE sheriff waddled over to the place. Five minutes, at least, since the shooting. No man would be fool enough to stay where he had hidden to kill another, and the sheriff knew too much about the practical part of man-hunting to think seriously of tracks, of clues, of betraying signs left by a hastily fleeing murderer.

It had been almost with incredulity that he saw a man lying on the sun speckled dirt floor of the abandoned shed. Sam Blake, sprawled out, tripped up by a forgotten piece of scrap iron in the act of flight. His head had hit the corner of a brickwork forge. He was unconscious then, as he had been ever since, but his rifle lay where it had fallen from his hands, with a freshly discharged shell on the floor just a little way off. Hanging evidence. Open and shut. Absolutely positive proof of his guilt. With just enough of the supernatural about his discovery to justify that talk of the hand of God that was being circulated among the members of the mob outside. And enough of the supernatural, too, to weigh powerfully with a jury.

"Durned fool," grunted the sheriff to himself in the dismal lamplit gloom of the jail. "What d' I want to p'tect him for?"

Waitin' theah till ol' Kittinger come out, an' drillin' him, an' then turnin' to run before anybody came lookin'. He'd ha' got away if he hadn't tripped on that wagon tire an' cracked his head on the forge."

He stood up uneasily. He saw heads moving outside of the barred window. His pose, the revolver, the lamp, had not been arranged at random. Even the martyrdom of a closed window on a hot night had its purpose. The members of the mob could see him there with the gun and cartridges ready. But they could not talk to him. Moral effect. It is always daunting to see a man with a gun ready, when you cannot reason with him.

The sheriff waddled back into the jail proper. He unlocked a cell and went over to the cot against the wall. The fumes of strictly local moonshine arose to his nostrils. Sam Blake had nerved himself up to his bush whacking by copious doses of corn whisky, it seemed. Still out. No—he was stirring.

"Pete, y' g'dam fool, gimme 'nother—"

He relaxed. Snores, vast and stertorous, sounded monstrously loud in the tiny cell. The sheriff grunted.

"So drunk he don't know what he's done."

HE WENT out of the cell again. That fool darky was still whimpering in the stifling darkness. The mob was still waiting grimly. Cousins and neighbors and friends of Kittinger, waiting for Sam Blake to recover consciousness so he'd know he was being lynched. Getting impatient, too, and getting more numerous all the time. All his kinsfolk gathered. All of them suspicious of the law and the Democratic Party. Election coming on, and a proved murderer in the jail, and the sheriff needing re-election.

He growled stubbornly to himself.

"There ain't a pris'ner got away from me yet, an' they ain't goin' to take one now."

He sat down at his desk again, scowling. A cloud of smoke came irritably from his lips. Perspiration streamed down his face. It was hot. The mob was buzzing more angrily, now. The sheriff knew what was needed, of course. Something to puzzle the

men outside. Something to focus their attention somewhere else. A storm. A house on fire. Anything would do. He heard them puffing and grunting at something heavy. It wouldn't do to look out of the window. His job was sitting here where all men could see him, with a revolver on the desk before him, making of himself a threat.

But it would be hard to kill men in defense of a murderer as low-down as Sam Blake. Lying there in ambush, waiting until a man stood still as a fair target—

The squeak of a wheel, outside. The sheriff grunted to himself, tucking his handkerchief inside his collar. Half of a log cart. They'd swing a ten-foot section of log to it and grab the shaft. Rush it against the jail door. It would break in. Then they'd come in and it would be time for the sheriff to start shooting.



"Gawd!" growled the sheriff disgustedly, "shootin' them damn

fools so's a blasted murderer can be 'lecrocuted instead o' hung! That's all it mounts to."

It hurt. He didn't like lynchings. Never had believed in them. Never would. But Sam Blake was the coldest blooded murderer in the history of the county. And Kittinger's kinfolk had a right to see that he died. If they'd shot Sam dead there in the blacksmith shop, with his empty gun beside him, nothing would have been done about it. Talk, maybe, but everybody'd have said it served him right. And there wasn't much difference between that and coming and getting him out of jail.

"Huh!" snapped the sheriff to himself. "Am I gettin' scared?"

Pounding on the door again. Something definite, final, something resolved in this pounding.

"Sheriff! Open up! We ain't goin' to wait all night!"

THE sheriff reached over to his desk and picked up the blued steel revolver. He squinted at the shells in the cylinder. He was hot and angry and stubborn and irritated.

"Listen heah t'me!" he snapped. "I ain't aimin' to kill you folks, but I'm goin' to do it if yuh try breakin' in that door! If Sam Blake comes to an' confesses, maybe it'll be another matter. But I ain't goin' to let anybody take a unconscious man outer my jail an' hang him. If he confesses, a'right. But if he don't——"

A momentary silence, while the sheriff raged in sudden shame. He deliberately cocker his revolver. Moral effect. The click would carry through the door. Murmurs.

"... Want him t' know what happens, anyways. . . . The bloody louse'll confess all right. The hand o' Gawd's on him. . . . Doc'll bring him to. . . . Pete, you take yore car an' get the doc. . . ."

Men went back. More murmurings. Grim satisfaction outside. Somebody cranked up a car. The sheriff swore bitterly.

"Losin' my nerve, maybe," he growled. Then with a harsh disgust. "They forgot I got a telephone."

He sat down at his desk again. He replaced the revolver within easy reach. He knew Sam Blake was guilty. Empty shell on the floor of the blacksmith shop. Empty gun almost in Sam Blake's hands. The sheriff looked over at the killer's rifle on a table by the wall in his office.

And then, quite suddenly, the sheriff swore a tremendous oath. He'd seen—— He thrust himself out of his chair and to the rifle with one movement. He picked it up. He snapped open the bolt.

An empty, discharged shell flicked out of it and went spinning to the floor.

The sheriff stared at it for seconds. His pudgy figure was stiff. The stem of his pipe snapped between his teeth.

"Hand o' Gawd," said the sheriff grimly to himself.

He picked up the empty shell. He went back to his desk and rummaged in the drawer. A little cardboard box. Another empty shell. A brass shell—the one that had killed Kittinger.

The sheriff sat them up, side by side. He'd looked at Sam Blake's gun. He'd looked in the barrel for fouling, for proof—which he hadn't needed—that it had been recently fired. His handkerchief had fouled in the bore. Sam Blake's gun had been fired. The sheriff hadn't looked in the breech,

however. Hadn't there been the empty shell on the dirt floor? What need to look in the breech?

But—a rifle shoots one shell at a time! The killing of Kittinger had been done with one shot. And now he knew there had been two empty shells at the scene of the murder! One snapped out of a rifle after being fired, one left in. Two empty shells in the deserted blacksmith shop—and only one shot had been heard and only one bullet had been found.

THE sheriff mopped off his face. Stubbornness suddenly intensified in his rather pudgy figure. This was funny stuff. Nobody was goin' to take Sam Blake out o' the jail tonight! Funny stuff. Wheah'd that extra shell come from? Weah'd the bullet from it go? Why wasn't the other shot heard? Sam Blake must ha' killed Kittinger, but—why the other extra shell? The hand of Gawd?

"Ef Gawd's han' is in it," grunted the sheriff stubbornly, "an' Him havin' thunderbolts handy, theah wasn't any need to waste a thutty-thutty shell."

He stared at the two bits of brass in the yellow lamplight. Sweat poured down his face, but he forgot it. The mob outside the jail was merely murmuring now. It was waiting. Doc Paulson had been sent for. He would come. He would be passed into the jail. He would bring Sam Blake back to consciousness. Maybe Sam would confess. Maybe he wouldn't, when the mob would take him. The mob was waiting in a patient deadliness for what it was going to do.

"Time," said the sheriff, sweating in an agony of impatience. "I got to have time to think hit out. Ef Gawd would send a thunderstorm, or set a house on fire, or somethin' to get these folks thinkin' about somethin' else——"

Two brass shells where there should be only one! Small, insignificant things for a man's life to rest upon. The sheriff had been wavering. Hard to think of killing men so that a proved murderer could be electrocuted instead of hung. Mighty hard. But something was wrong. Kittinger had been killed with one shot. The sheriff had heard it. And here were two empty shells

—one from Sam Blake's gun, and the other— Where did the other come from?

The sheriff had to guess, and guess quickly. Doc Paulson would be back soon. When he was passed in, some members of the mob would force themselves in too, unless the sheriff started shooting. And when the mob once got in the jail, Sam Blake would go out with it. Confessing or not confessing, praying to Gawd or screaming he hadn't done it. When Doc Paulson came something was going to happen. Sam Blake was going to get lynched. And there was something wrong— Two shells, instead of one—

"I got to think. A thunderbolt, or a house on fire—even a haystack, Lord!" said the sheriff helplessly. "Somethin' t' gain me time! Somethin's wrong!" He beat his forehead with a pudgy fist. "Wheah's the hand o' Gawd?" he demanded despairingly. "Ef Sam Blake ain't guilty, why don't the hand o' Gawd show up?"

Rumblings. A car coming. The sheriff's hand closed convulsively.

"I'm goin' to get killed," growled the sheriff defiantly, "an' I'm goin' to kill some other folks too, an' Sam Blake's goin' to get lynched. This heah looks wrong t' me. Ef he's guilty an' innocent folks get killed, it ain't my fault!"

HE GRIPPED the blued steel revolver, full of defiance of some supreme power on which he had thrown all responsibility.

The car came nearer. Then the sheriff realized that it couldn't be Doc Paulson. Too soon for him to get here.

"More folks for the party," said the sheriff, setting his teeth. "What happens from now on ain't my fault. It's up to the hand o' Gawd."

The telephone rang.

The sheriff took down the receiver. It was his deputy talking, half a dozen miles away—asking fearfully if the sheriff wanted him to come in to the jail.

"No," replied the sheriff savagely. "It ain't up to me, what happens." He was in

a mood to clutch at straws. "But looka heah! You git to Doc Paulson's. Quick! Theah's a carload of Bethel folks hustlin' theah to wake up the doc an' bring him heah. They want him to bring Sam Blake to, so's they can make him confess to the killin' an' lynch him. You git Doc Paulson outer his house if yuh have to drag him out in his nightgown. He's to leave word he'll be back 'most any minute. An' then you keep him off somewheres. I'm playin' for time. Keep him outer his house until the Bethel crowd leaves. When they come back, I'm goin' to have to start shootin'. Understan'?"

The deputy, relieved at so tame an assignment, agreed volubly. The sheriff hung up the receiver and wiped the sweat off his face. He'd been asking God to bring on a thunderstorm or a fire, something to unsettle the lynching mob outside. God hadn't done it. And the sheriff was still playing for time, hoping rather desperately for a miracle.

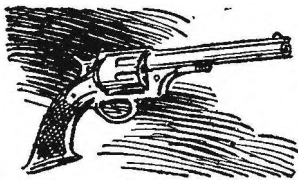
It mightn't need a miracle, at that. Two small crowds are only one-fourth as deadly as one large one. While the mob was divided its menace was lessened. And mobs have no patience. Never. Part of the mob would not attack, because it would be waiting for the rest to return. And the rest of it might wait a long time for Doc Paulson to come back to his house. It might. But of course

"I'm holdin' on," said the sheriff grimly. "It's up to the Lord to build me a back-fire."

IF HE could hold off the lynching until morning, he could get help from the city and rush Sam to a safe jail. But the sheriff felt weak and shaky. He was dealing in mob psychology, which was not exactly one of his strong points, and he knew it.

"But there's somethin' wrong," he said stubbornly. "They ain't goin' to hang Sam Blake t'night."

He sat and stared at the two small cart-ridge shells without seeing them. He was listening—to the low voiced, savage murmuring of the mob—to the infinitely faint rustling of wind in the topmost branches of the trees on the courthouse green—to the whimperings of the darky back in the



jail and the stertorous snorings of Sam Blake, too drunk to know what he'd done.

Time passed very slowly. Twice the mob grew restless, as its increasing murmuring testified. Each time it quieted down. But it was in a deadly mood when, all of half an hour later, a car came roaring down the road from Doc Paulson's. The sheriff was drenched in sweat, but at the sound he rose and dried his hands grimly and picked up the big revolver. He was going to bluff, or he was going to shoot. He was going to keep Sam Blake from being lynched, or he was going to be killed. And he renounced all blame from the beginning.

He unlocked and flung open the jail door and stood in the opening, staring stubbornly out at the soft, velvety blackness. Headlights drew nearer and played upon the surging figures of the mob, moving toward the car. It stopped.

Voices rose; snarling, babbling voices.

"Doc was theah. . . . Dep'ty sheriff got theah while he was dressin' Talked to the doc. . . . He wouldn't come. Him an' the deputy said we'd have t' drag him. The deputy pulled a gun. . . . Hell! It ain't that important. . . ."

The sheriff felt sick all over. The deputy had gotten there too late. Hadn't understood, maybe. He'd just understood the sheriff didn't want the doc to come. It was a bonehead play. If he'd come on with the doctor, the two of 'em might have kept the mob out of the jail while the doc lied and said Sam was dying.

THE sheriff licked his lips and lifted the muzzle of his gun as the mob surged toward the jail.

"You-all lookin' for the Pearly Gates?" he snapped. He was raging; wrathful with a supreme power which gave no help to a sorely tried peace officer in time of need. One last straw presented itself. "I'll let two of you men come in heah," he snapped again, "just so's yuh can see I ain't lyin' about him bein' in no shape to know whether he done it or not. Just two, so's yuh can see. An' if more'n that try to come I start killin' somebody!"

His gun sent a sudden long streak of yellow flame out into the darkness. A man had run on ahead and was moving toward

the jail door from the side. The sheriff's voice cut through the echoes of the explosion as other guns came out in answer to his.

"I wasn't aimin' to hit, then," he snarled, "but I'm tellin' yuh! Two men, no more, can come in this heah jail!"

He was crouched down, deadly and desperate and despairing of help from above. He was going to be killed. He was quite sure of it. But his tired brain was clinging desperately to one last shred of hope. If they picked two men who would listen to him, he could show them the two shells. He could reason with two men, when he couldn't with a mob.

The mob was milling aimlessly and angrily. The sheriff's shout, alone, would have been useless. The shot, alone, would have been worse than useless. Together, they halted a mob not quite up to the pitch of facing hot lead for the sake of a killing it lusted for.

And then two men came forward. One was Pete Brown. The other was Lucy Sears' father, raging because he had wanted his daughter to marry Kittinger.

"We're heah," said Sears harshly.

Pete Brown's eyes were bright when the sheriff let them in the jail, and brighter when he barred the door behind them. He was fingering a gun in his belt.

"You try shootin' him, Pete," said the sheriff, "an' I blow yuh to bits! A lynchin' is a lynchin', but one man killin' another is murder, an' yuh know it."

Pete snarled at him. The sheriff was very weary, and very sick at heart. He took hold of Sears' arm.

"Listen heah, Mistuh Sears——" began the sheriff desperately.

But Sears wasn't listening. He was looking savagely after Pete Brown. And Pete Brown had gone on, and was staring into a cell—then he turned, with the smoky lamplight disclosing his teeth. Pete Brown looked remarkably unhandsome, just then.

"Y' damned liar!" he snarled at the sheriff. "I seen him! He was sittin' up! He flopped down an' he's pretendin' to be passed out now. Shammin'!"



AND suddenly the sheriff saw everything. Everything. Pete Brown was lying! He said he saw Sam Blake, but he didn't, because the cell into which he was looking was empty. Sam Blake was in another cell entirely. And that little lie, of Pete Brown's contriving, made two little brass shells mean—?

Pete Brown was shouting:

"Come in, folks! He's up an' about, only shammin'!"

And the sheriff's voice cut like steel.

"The hand o' Gawd's come down at las'! Pete, yuh remembered t' shoot off Sam Blake's gun, but yuh forgot to eject the shell!"

Pete whirled. The sheriff's big revolver was bearing unwaveringly upon his body, and the sheriff's eyes were glowing.

"That cell's empty," said the sheriff, very calmly. "Yuh didn't see anybody in theah, because it's empty. But I'm willin' to believe yuh did see yore uncle when he was killed. Only—whah were you when yuh saw him?"

He went hurtling forward as Pete Brown gasped and jerked something out of his belt. There was a terrific explosion in the iron and concrete interior of the jail. Then there were thrashing bodies, fighting madly between the rows of rusty bars. The bearded Sears stared, stupefied.

And suddenly the sheriff heaved upward, with blood flowing from a cut on his forehead. Keys jangled. A cell door clanked open and clanged shut again. There were thunderous, pounding blows upon the jail door. The sheriff shot through it, deliberately high. The blows stopped. He shot through it again, lower down.

"I just arrested Pete Brown," said the sheriff, in a voice that cut through the thick wooden door. "I 'rested him for the murder of his uncle. Pete got Sam Blake drunk las' night an' shot off his gun somewheres, but the damn fool forgot to fling out the shell a'terward! An' this mornin', sometime before the killing, Peter banged Sam over the head—Sam bein' still dead drunk—an' dragged him into the blacksmith shop. Then Pete shot his uncle himself an' run, leavin' Sam to take the blame. But there

was *two* empty shells in the blacksmith shop, one where Pete'd flung out the shell he killed his uncle with, an' the one he'd left in Sam Blake's gun. Pete run along the back of the houses to his barber shop an' run out, sayin' he saw his uncle die. But, listen t' me, you folks out theah! The porch of the store wheah Kittinger was killed is full o' packin'-boxes. Pete couldn't ha' seen a damn thing from his barber shop! *The only place he could ha' seen Kittinger die is from the place the murderer killed him!*"

A pause. One second. Two. Three— Then Sears, beside him in the jail, gasped, "By Gawd! Hit's so!"

He turned, his face working with rage. The sheriff's gun came up.

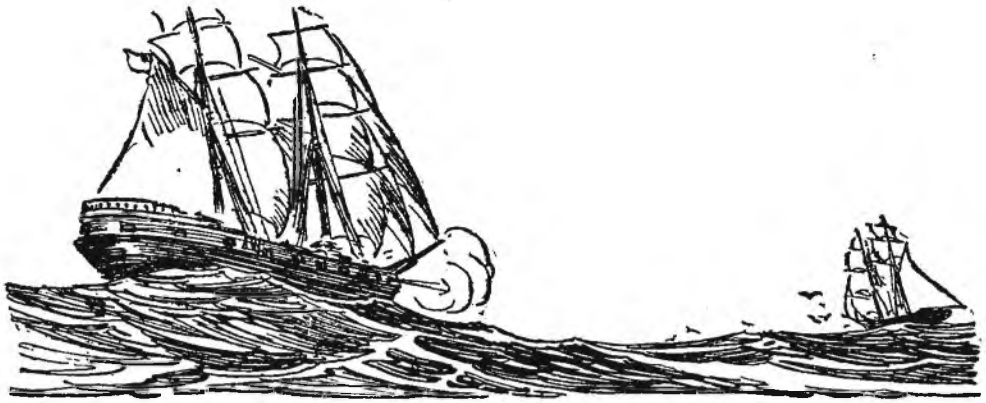
"Git out o' my jail!" said the sheriff grimly. "No matter who's the murderer, theah ain't goin' to be no lynchin' tonight! An' me thinkin'—me thinkin'—" The sheriff swallowed suddenly and went to the jail door, unbarred it, and stepped out. "Git to hell outer theah!" he snarled at the still dazed mob. "Git goin'! The lynchin's off, if I have t' kill every rannihan in the county!"

HE WAS ready to kill, then. Quite ready to kill in defense of his new prisoner, who would have no option but to confess his crime and the lust for Kittinger's money that had prompted it. Entirely ready to kill, now, for the sake of the law alone.

Men are queer things. And so are mobs. Anything that distracts the attention of a mob—a storm, a house on fire, the discovery that it was about to lynch an innocent man— Did not such things show the hand of God?

A quarter of an hour later the sheriff went back into the jail from the now deserted courthouse green. He was trembling. He raised the window and a cool breeze came in and fanned his forehead.

"The hand o' Gawd—" The sheriff felt suddenly guilty, as if he should apologize to someone or something for his previous skepticism and for his hesitation. But an innate stubbornness came to his rescue. "Dawggone it, hit wasn't my fault! Anybody'd ha' got mad!"



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Gold Lust

GOLD LUST is a strange and dangerous kind of madness. Its symptoms crop up, sometimes unexpectedly, in every sort of setting where men take less account of lives than they do of prizes. It may occur in the very camps where the stuff is mined; it may cause hold-ups and robberies; it sometimes breeds insane frenzy over the gaming table; and often it is responsible for the death of a whole crew and the sinking of a ship. And strangely enough, wherever it appears, it seems to seize upon the lower natures of the men who come in contact with it and to transform them into unrecognizable and savage beasts.

The more remarkable, then, is the one man on board the ship in H. Bedford-Jones' magnificent sea story, "Black Mutiny," whose soul is not preyed upon by gold lust. You'll find it the first story in this issue of **SHORT STORIES**.

Old-Timer Talk

JACK BERTIN writes us as follows about his great Western story, "Straightened Trail":

"You ask me to send you something, either about myself or the yarn 'Straightened Trail.' Instinct urges the former, but common sense frowns upon instinct. 'Straightened Trail' is a story, while I am only a medium (the brotherhood of scribes call it that)—a medium for something told by someone else. That's the stock excuse, folks, by which authors evade responsibility for some things. However, the age of

miracles is past. Parts of 'Straightened Trail' were related to me, and you'd never guess where. He was an old timer—Perry—his beard and walk advertised that; he knew the desert and the range and he had known it before macadam cut across it. But while we stood on the corner of Bayard and Elizabeth streets, right in the thick of New York's Chinatown, he told me about a killing in the Panamints. I was there on the usual business of authors; but why he was there, and just who he was, he kept well under his hat. Externally he was as prosaic as most of the seedy mob waiting on the corner bread line; but he knew things, did Perry. He knew things about the stock country when cowpunching was a somewhat tougher game than it is today, and when he talked desert he made me smell sage and dust. I had approached him for information about crime conditions in the big town, and for possible help on a lead for gangster fiction material. When he learned that I wrote stories of the West, he opened up—and boy, he made me see things! Well, I put 'em down on paper, adding to them the figure of Warbling Lou, which somehow seemed to fit in, and the result was 'Straightened Trail.' Perry himself was material for a story, and perhaps a good many stories, but I lost him. However, he sold the Mohave to me, the Panamints, and the rolling dunes. I've got to check up on him; and so I'm taking a car, a tent, and some curiosity, to see just how the desert country slows up the march of time and change. Drop in on me sometime!"

With the Marsh Arabs

WE'RE publishing a most unusual story of Arabia in this issue, "He Knew The Country." Sinclair Gluck, its author, hasn't appeared in *SHORT STORIES* for a long while. Always popular with readers of the magazine, there was a terrible clamor when he disappeared from its pages—for reasons best known to himself—and so it is with particular pleasure that we give you this new story from his pen.

It's such a curiously exciting and real little tale that we asked him to tell us more about how he got the dope for it.

"The yarn," he replied, "is a reminiscence. The visitors from London and the details of the night scrap are invented. The rest of it is true. Captain Brett is a real man in both senses, though that is not his name. The marsh Arabs harried our flanks out there, some fourteen years ago, by constant sniping. They stabbed our fellows sleeping. If they caught a straggler, he died unspeakably. Those we caught hung and dried on the gallows in the old Turkish parade ground.

"They weren't so hot in a stand-up fight, but they were beggars for night work. Everybody knows the Gurkhas, little taciturn brown devils, first class in hand-to-hand fighting—wonderful scouts. We had a number of them in Mesopotamia. They manned some of our marching posts along the Tigris between Basra and the front lines. The marching post was a sandbag fort surrounded by a ditch, with a ten-foot-thick wire entanglement outside that. Gurkha sentries have ears like cats, and see almost as well in the dark. But the marsh Arabs got into one of their posts one black night, located a machine gun, lifted it over the wall and were half-way through the wire again before a sentry heard them. Then a searchlight spotted them, and the little garrison blotted them out. But their absolute silence of movement under such difficulties was simply uncanny.

"I was an American volunteer regular in the British Army out there. No doubt there were other 'Yanks' in that campaign, but I never met one, nor any of the British who had. If there are any such among your readers, I'd like to get in touch with them

and swap notes. We had half-a-million men on that front, about twenty per cent of them whites. Afterwards I ran across a lot of Americans in the British Army on the French front. That was around Bapaume and Arras, in 1917-1918. Some were airmen, others field ambulance drivers like myself.

"War means unity in a common purpose, real comradeship, and stark reality. Courage is better than hiring a good lawyer. Is there any human height in peacetime greater than the wartime words of a certain general? He was going into battle and addressed his shaking knees: 'Shake, damn you! In a minute I'll give you something to shake about!'"

Stag and Big Sticks

NOBODY—we think—can beat that old lumberjack, James Stevens, when it comes to writing any sort of story that has *wood* in it. We mean, of course, wood in tall, straight sticks standing up in the background, or wood in long, straight sticks lying underfoot; for if there were ever a gang of tough, hardboiled, less *wooden* characters in a string of stories, it is those two-fisted, fighting men who people Stevens' stories.—And just about the hardest of the lot is that guy he calls Stag Sharkey. Stag's struggles for sticks with his mortal enemy, the timber wolf, Kalam, are just about as exciting as anything in the way of fiction that we know. And they've become a tradition in *SHORT STORIES*.—Don't miss the one in this issue, then. It's called "The Only Two Left," and it's one of the strongest of the series.—And here's a tip, it's the last of these Stag Sharkey stories.

But although it may be the last story about Stag Sharkey, it'll not be the last story by James Stevens. Us? Well, we hope Stevens goes on writing stories about logging and lumber until the whole damn country's completely deforested!

"Perhaps a little stuff about present day log towing on Puget Sound will be of interest to your readers," says James Stevens.

"Most of the Puget Sound log tows are from the Olympic Peninsula, on which stands America's greatest virgin forest.

Roughly, this forest is two hundred and fifty miles long and from fifty to seventy miles in width. The timber is cedar and spruce, hemlock and Douglas fir. Trees of the last-named species grow to such a height that sometimes they reach three hundred and fifty feet, such giants having trunks from twelve to fourteen feet in diameter. The logs are hauled down, dumped, and worked into rafts by boom men. The towboats then haul the rafts to mills located where deep-water ships can dock and load.

"The most colorful life of the log tows, however, is that between the Canadian and Northern Washington mainland camps and the Seattle mills. On this run the skippers have to dodge from island shelter to island shelter with their rafts, the winds and swells from the Pacific driving at them while they run. And here they fight tide-rips when they turn between islands to make the course for Seattle. Many a prize raft has smashed on the rocks because of a small mistake in the judgment of the time and the tide currents by the skipper in charge of it.

"The idea for 'The Only Two Left' was captured during a recent trip made on the towboat *Pioneer*, one of the largest and oldest in the Puget Sound fleet. I talked it over with Captain 'Terrible Teddy' Charlesworth, whose chief amusement—so his mate says—is to take off his shoes and socks and kick the knots off logs with his

bare toes. Anyhow, Cap'n Teddy the Terrible has made many a charge through Deception Pass—you can find it on the map between Fidalgo and the Whidby Islands—and he showed me on the chart how Stag Sharkey and Rufus Kallam might have fought it out. So the story holds water—even tidewater.

"Log piracy, like cattle rustling, is rapidly being brought to an end. But once it flourished mightily. Any old-time tidewater man will point out certain large Seattle mills and tell you how they were started on pirated logs.

"To end, I'll say that a man has never seen the best in the West until he has ridden with a log tow on the sound, when the moon is hanging low on a warm night. The drive of the engine underfoot. The raft a vast black shadow swinging from the tow-line. Timber on the shore, and the white peaks beyond shining under the moon. Timber smells, salt water smells—and then, best of all, coffee and bacon smelling from the galley. Yay-hoo! Bullies, let's go!"

Buried Treasure

TREASURE and loot next time, me hearties!—Western nuggets; prize money from rodeos; prize money from the fight ring; black gold from the oilfields; precious gems from the Orient; hush money from racketeers; the loot from burning buildings; and the plain silver

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1 _____

3 _____

2 _____

4 _____

5 _____

I do not like:

Why? _____

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

dollars honestly earned by hard work and hard fighting on the railroads or on the seven seas.—Just glance at this chart of all the treasure that's buried in the next issue of *SHORT STORIES*.

It's the title that "tells all" in the case of "A Cow Town Frame-Up," by Ralph Cummins. And a harder riding, straighter shooting, more exciting serial you've never read. Why not make sure of getting the issue in which this great story begins?

"The Red Globe" of Sidney Herschel Small's complete novel of that name is really a precious jewel fashioned to represent the earth. In the story it becomes the symbol of a treacherous, crafty man's desire for world power—of a struggle for the possession of natural resources in the Orient—of murder and intrigue, of revolt and sudden death. A story that'll get you!

Ladd Haystead contributes "Brahma," a story of Brahma cattle and Western rodeos. Karl W. Detzer has written "Smoke Eater," in our opinion one of the

very finest fire stories he's ever done—a thrilling story of fire-boat adventures. Thomson Burtis gives us another of those fine novelettes of danger in the great South-western oilfields (there's one of the same series in this issue, too); and in it one moves again with Slim and Sleepy and Tex, through adventures that Burtis has called "Capital Punishment." For those who prefer adventures on the high seas, we can't recommend Ralph R. Perry's story "Squared" too highly. And for those who like railroad tales, there's T. T. Flynn's "Honor Roll."

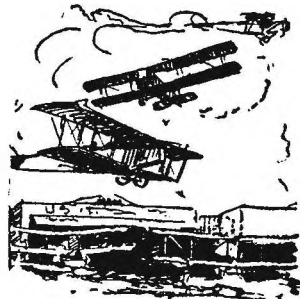
Nor must we fail to mention that Frank L. Packard's latest gangster story, "Jimmie Dale and the Blue Envelope Murder," is concluded next time. You can still begin it, for there's a synopsis of preceding chapters, and you'll not find this last part lacking in excitement.

Unlimited treasure, me buckos! And it only costs a quarter to dig it up out of the news-stands.



OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in Yours.



Diamonds Found in America

WHILE most of the world's diamonds come from far away countries, writes John H. Spicer, South Africa and Brazil are not the only regions in which they occur. Diamonds are sometimes found right in the Eastern United States, in the area north of the Ohio River. They are extremely rare of course but several have been found in Wisconsin and in other states in the Great Lakes region. The writer once had the pleasure of examining one of these gems that had been discovered among the sand and gravel in the bed of a small stream in central Indiana.

Most of this northern area was covered by moving glaciers during the ancient Ice

Age and the surface in many places is still covered with gravel or clay deposits left there when the glaciers retreated to the north again. The diamonds found so far have been among this glacial gravel or in the beds of streams which have washed them out of the gravel deposits. Like the gravel in which they are hidden, the diamonds are supposed to have been transported by the glaciers from some unknown point in the north. There is no evidence to show just where the original deposit may have been located, but, unless it was entirely destroyed by the glaciers, it is possible that a diamond mine lies hidden in northern Canada awaiting discovery by some lucky explorer.

When Shark Meets Octopus

IMAGINE, if you can, a battle between the two most feared creatures of the deep.

In some remote South Sea Island, a shark and an octopus have been captured, the shark by a noose about his tail, and the octopus in a bamboo cage baited with live fish and placed on the sea bottom.

His majesty, the octopus, is a desperate adventurer and quickly dashes his life out against the rocks of a shallow pool, but placed in a deep one, its channel blocked up to prevent escape, he finds shelter in some underwater cave and proceeds to make the most of his captivity.

When the octopus is fully acquainted with his new surroundings, the shark is loosed into the pool. He, too, is a desperate adventurer, and when the two meet there is a battle royal.

From his vicious appearance one would suppose that the shark would win an easy victory, but when he detects the presence of the octopus he fairly goes mad with nervous frenzy and cruises desperately about in an attempt to escape, or, perhaps, to buoy up his courage.

Suddenly the duel begins. So swiftly that the eye can scarcely follow, the octopus strikes, catapulting himself backwards, propelled by his powerful siphon, steering with his eight outstretched "arms" trailing behind him. If he misses the shark, as is likely on the first attempt, the octopus retreats swiftly and tries again. His prey may elude him a score of times, but eventually he strikes true, and the lithe, muscular arms whip around the shark in a grip that only death can relax.

Back and forth dashes the shark, sometimes on the surface, sometimes beneath, but always carrying his deadly burden. If he is miraculously lucky, the shark may crush the octopus against a jagged outcrop of rock, or perhaps kill himself as well as the tentacled sea monster in his blind rushes.

But it is a hopeless fight; gradually the shark weakens. His struggles become more futile. He is fighting beneath water, only occasionally winning back to the top. The end is in sight; it is only a matter of time

now, until he will roll over on his back and sink to the bottom, dead, suffocated, his gills clasped shut by a score of the clinging sucker discs which the octopus knows how to use with such deadly effect.

In these contests, seemingly so even-sided, the shark invariably loses. The cards are stacked against him, or, rather, the octopus has "arms," and he has none.

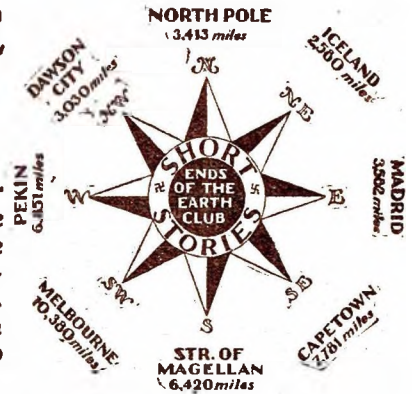
It is a battle of rapier against broadsword, of cunning against dynamic force; and the rapier wins.

Leviathan of the Air

THEY build 'em bigger an' bigger every day; pretty soon they'll have to open up the clouds a little more to give 'em enough space to pass through comfortably. We're talking about the airplanes that are being turned out of American shops. The latest development along lines of aeronautical bigness has been engineered by the Ford factories in Michigan. It is a four motor, forty passenger, all metal monoplane—and they expect it to be ready to take its maiden sail through the ether sometime this balmy summer. Several of the big national airlines are planning to use the new monster plane for their night and day services. And why not, seeing that at night the plane's forty seats can be converted into twenty berths? What to do about the twenty unlucky people who booked passage during the sunlight hours—along with the twenty others to make up the complement of forty people, the passenger capacity of the big plane—when night comes on suddenly and the twenty lucky passengers decide to convert the seats into beds, is a problem that is worrying air line officials throughout the length and breadth of the land. Our prediction is that these twenty bedless souls will be outfitted with parachutes—angels' wings being scarce and uncertain—and then pushed over the side of the fuselage by the irate cabin steward of the plane. Better that half should rest in peace than all should get blear-eyed sitting out a night ride, will be the watchword of the after-dark service. Our advice is to make certain that every seat has the potentialities of at least one bed before booking passage on these new leviathans of the air.

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 have been a reader of your magazine for quite a long time, but have never yet written to you in regard to the real stories you give us. I read it from "kiver to kiver" and some of the best ones I have torn out, and put in a binder I have, to keep for a library I am making up. My favorite stories are the Western, air and sea stories. I am 36 years old and a World War veteran, with a lot of battle scars for my souvenirs, which I received in France, Belgium, and on the Italian front. I am an oilfield worker here, but have also seen duty in South America and Mexican oilfields. I'd like to hear from some of the oilfield boys, and anyone else who'd care to write. I promise to answer all letters and may be able to send a few oilfield pictures once in a while.

Sincerely yours,

W. T. Smith

Lock Box 1513,
El Dorado, Ark.

Dear Secretary:

I wish to make an application for membership in the Ends of the Earth Club.

I have served one enlistment in the U. S. Naval Air Service, served two enlistments as a member of the Pennsylvania State Constabulary; during which service I have been in every county of good old Pennsylvania, pounded a saddle thirty and forty miles a day for a year in the last soft coal strike, and have had experience in investigating all types of crimes from murder to disorderly conduct. In my travels I have been halfway around the world and covered better than 250,000 miles.

My buddy, a former trooper, and I figure on another trip that will cover the southwestern part of the United States and we certainly would like to hear from anyone down there.

I am 25 years old, 6 feet, 200 lbs.; can operate an automobile, motorcycle, motorboat; can ride, and have had experience handling all types of pistols, rifles, and machine guns.

Yours very truly,

Robert P. Thompson

549 South 53rd Street,
Philadelphia, Pa.

Dear Secretary:

My membership card is one of my most highly prized possessions. I am mighty proud to be numbered among the adventurers of the world.

I am looking for a pal. I want to go either to Arizona or New Mexico to take up a homestead sometime this year. Am 35 years of age, an ex-veteran of the U. S. Navy. Made 13 trips across the Atlantic during the World War.

Also rode bicycle from Atlantic City, N. J., to Los Angeles, Calif., and return in 1914 and 1915. Have traveled all over the U. S. but am not satisfied yet.

I want someone to go fifty-fifty with me and to hit out for some place where one can have a good time and where the prospects are good.

Am a naturopathic physician. Was president of the State society as well as president of my local society. Member of the V. F. W., American Legion, Cooties, Naval Veterans, and a score of more lodges.

Will answer all letters addressed to me and hope I can find a real pal. One who is willing to put up with a few hardships in homesteading. May start a rabbit ranch.

Just one of the adventurers,

Dr. Vernon P. Cox

8334 N. E. 1st Ave.
Miami, Florida.

Dear Secretary:

I would like to apply for a membership in your club.

I've knocked around the world a bit. Been on the beach in Genoa, Italy, ambled around in North Africa, and hoboed over a good part of the United States. Have been on my own for quite a while and know what adventures and experience the world offers to a fellow with no place to hang his hat.

I read your magazine consistently and want to state that every time I do I get the urge to hit the open road and seek adventure in its lair.

Am preparing to take a cruise to the Far East, but will wait till I hear from you, as I would like, if possible, to carry your club card with me.

Hoping that you will favor my application and with best wishes for the success of your club and magazine, I am

Yours sincerely,

Elisha (Slim) Crowell

c/o Mrs. M. Andrick
Hohokus, New Jersey

Dear Secretary:

Am writing to ask if I may join the Ends of the Earth Club, which is one of the attractions of SHORT STORIES. Read SHORT STORIES where and whenever I can get one or more copies. With the exception of the "wild Western" stories, I like it fine. Certainly a great time-killer, especially on a lighthouse station. Am at the present employed by the Chinese Maritime Customs, but expect to hit the trail

south after April 15, for Java.

Haven't much to say about myself but really you'll want a little dope, anyway. So here it is:

Am a machinist by trade and naturally follow that line whenever possible, but can adapt myself to 'most anything. Have worked as electrician on the African West Coast; machinist, finka overseer, on bridge construction and maintenance of a fleet of 10 launches in Central America. Worked as R. R. fireman, salesman, soda-jerker (honest), and at one time, boss on a building construction, merely by linguistic ability.

However, after a job is done, I am too, as the incentive is then gone, and the trail gets sort of warm.

Was interned at Hamburg, Germany 1914-1919. On July 22, 1919 I stowed away on U. S. Destroyer *Bernadon*. Took train to London from Harwich, and then to Liverpool same day. After 3 weeks, stowed on U. S. N. T. *Plattsburgh*, the present *New York* of the I. M. M. Line.

Have been on the "go" ever since and expect to be for a while yet. My idea of having been some place is to have worked there long enough to learn the language fairly well, and the customs and geography.

At present speak, read and write German, Spanish A-1. Then a smattering of Japanese and Malay. Not so hot, though the latter are easy.

Well, hoping you'll accept my request, and that I may hear from you soon, I am

Yours faithfully,

Charles O'Neil

c/o Gen. De', Manila, P. I.

My U. S. A. address is:

c/o Mrs. L. Schenider

520 W. 168th St.,
New York City

P. S. SHORT STORIES runs rather high in Shanghai, 70c Mex, but it's worth every copper (168 of them).

