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FREDERICK C. PAINTON

Nov. 25th, 1940 SHORT STORIES 176 Pages

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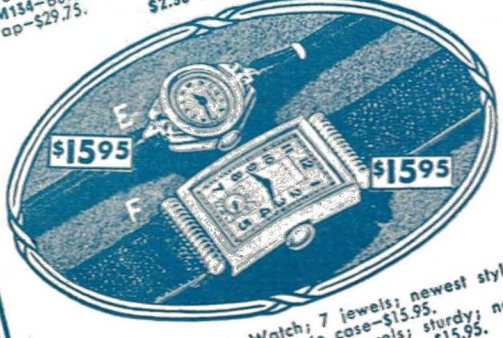

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COVER—Charles Wood

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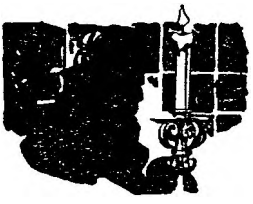

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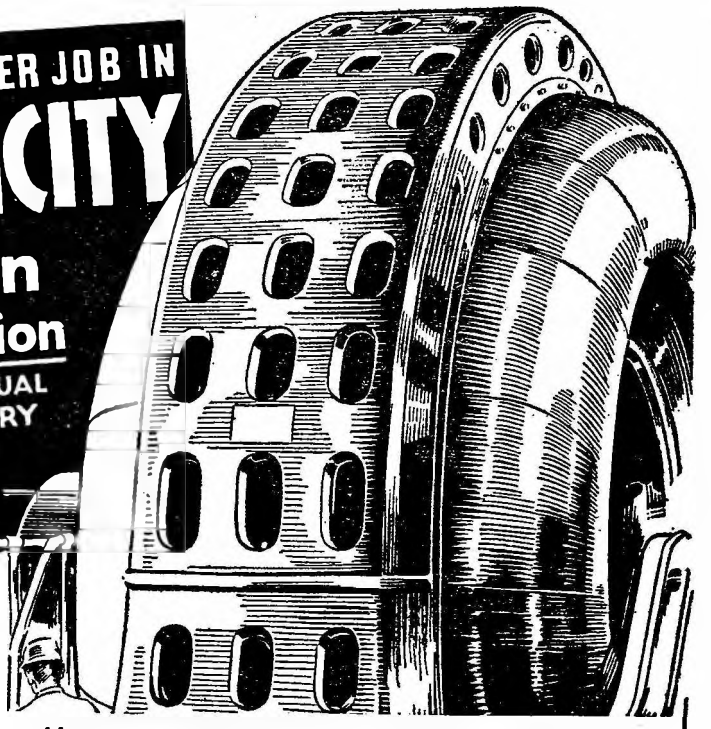

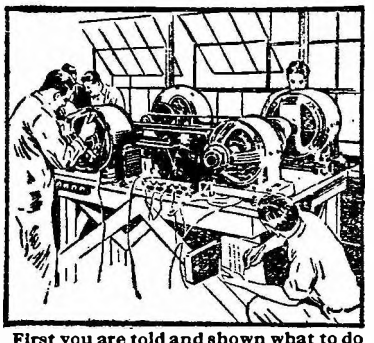

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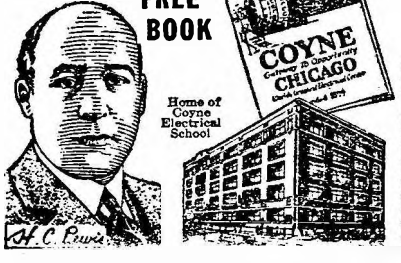

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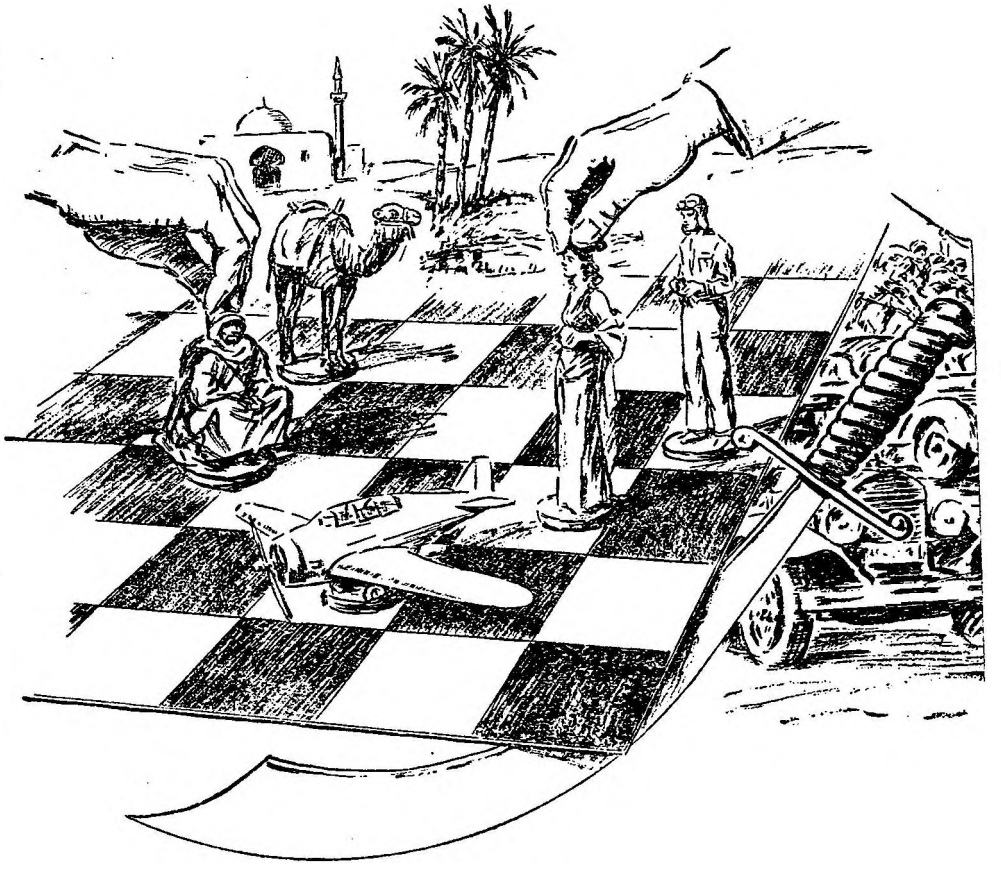
THE SWORD OF ISLAM

By FREDERICK C. PAINTON



AUTHOR'S FOREWORD: *Once again I must ask the reader's indulgence for a necessary introduction which I will make as brief as possible but which I cannot forego because it explains so much of the remarkable narrative that follows.*

A few days after the copy of SHORT STORIES *containing my novelette, "Back-door Invasion," appeared upon the news-stands, I received a telephone call from New York. The man said his name was Michael J. O'Hara; he said he had read my story and knew the background was accurate.*

"Why," he asked, "don't you do a piece about what the Italians are attempting in the Near East?"

I explained that I knew very little about the Italian secret service, and that while I had spent several months in Turkey, the Near East and Egypt in 1933, I was not up-to-date on present activities and knew only what I read in the newspapers.

"I've got the dope," he said. "I just came from Istanbul. Even if I had not read your yarn I would have looked you up. A Turk guide named Arzan Bey mentioned you. He said, 'Painton Effendi is biggest, most notorious writer in America, isn't it?' There was also a Russian girl named Noka who pleasantly mentioned

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By the Author of "Back Door Invasion"

you. Incidentally, Arzon Bey married Noka's sister—which is how I know about you."

"We'll leave all that for my memoirs—if any," I said hastily. "What have you got from the Near East?"

When I met him, I found he had plenty—all that appears hereafter and more. He was on his way through to Canada to teach embryo combat pilots how it is done, so we spent twenty hours or more together while I soaked up facts, dates, places and the incredible, melodramatic episodes that can only occur in the Orient.

I thought it was a cinch to write: I did sixteen thousand words before I found out I couldn't tell it from O'Hara's viewpoint. His was an adventure story, a romance, the thriller of a professional soldier-of-fortune. What I wanted was a laboratory case of how the Italian Secret Service worked in the Near East.

So once again, as in the stories about Lou Rourke, I have chosen to tell this yarn from the viewpoint of Captain Arnaldo Cavacci, about whom you will know more presently. O'Hara had copies of Cavacci's reports; he knew him long ago as appears hereinafter, and he knew Near East politics as well as Joe Levy, a New York paper's Cairo correspondent. So all of Cavacci's story is here.

There has been, of course, dramatizing, telescoping, improvization and cutting to make the narrative close-knit and give it smooth pace. I have changed names but I have not tinkered much with geography. Once again I make use of footnotes so as not to slow up the narrative with additional data.

I do not know *that this yarn is true. I* believe *it is, because the pattern is so identical with Mussolini's ambition to break the shackles that keep him prisoner in the Mediterranean. Furthermore, recent events have borne out much that was only rumored when O'Hara was living the following story. But you, the reader, as always will be the final judge of the story's inherent accuracy.*

FREDERICK C. PAINTON.

CHAPTER I

ISTANBUL

FROM: Capitano Arnaldo Cavacci, Hotel Tokatlian, Grande Rue de Pera, Istanbul, Turkey.

To: Count Giovanni Strazza, Seccione 2 (T), via Dodecanese Base to Bari.[1]

Subject: Progress of Plan A, and Interview with Prince Storfi.

July 14 (7:05 P.M.) Padrone: Your special King's Messenger[2], Prince Storfi, met me here today in my office where I am presumed to be a correspondent of the *Roma Telegrafo.*[3] He outlined to me the tremendous grand strategy[4] of our campaign in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and the part I am to play in it. I swear to you, *Signor,* that I shall be found worthy of the trust placed in me.

There is much to report but I shall, first of all, detail the interview with Prince Storfi for my *dossier,* and to make certain that my understanding of my orders coincides with yours.

I had served with Prince Storfi in the Spanish adventure, and we greeted each other with enthusiasm. After we had settled down over a bottle of *strega*[5] he questioned me closely about my work in Syria, Iraq and Saudi-Arabia. I soon satisfied him that I knew the Arabs well, and had won many adherents among them to the future of Greater Italy.

He then said, "Arnaldo, it is possible that the Germans can force England into a negotiated peace before cold weather puts an end to campaigning. But there is always the probability that this may not occur. In our larger strategy we must consider this fact."

I smiled at him. "What you are leading up to, *Signor,* is Il Duce's statement that the British Empire must be attacked simultaneously—not only in England itself, but along the empire line."

"Even more than that," said Prince Storfi. "The present situation is critical and for this reason: we did not expect England to fight over Poland, and we were not ready by two years. We actually have but eight months' material to carry on a first-rate campaign."

I NODDED, and waited without speaking.

"We are prisoners in the Mediterranean," he resumed, "with England holding Gibraltar at one end the Suez Canal at the other. In short, we can replenish

---

1 The Dodocanese are a group of small islands in the Mediterranean north of Rhodes which Italy has made into a strong naval and military base. Bari, on the eastern heel of the Italian boot, is a big broadcasting station for the Near-East and Asia. Cavacci would, naturally, using short wave and code, file through the base.

2 A King's Messenger is a diplomatic courier and, through courtesy, his pouches are not examined at a nation's frontier. He can, hence, act as go-between for secret agents, assured that no one will examine the papers he carries.

3 Every secret agent has a "cover," i.e., some job in a foreign country that covers the actual work he is there to accomplish. Newspaper work is usual in Europe.

4 Grand strategy, as apart from tactics or campaigns, embraces a huge comprehensive plan of action covering perhaps years in its accomplishment. For example, Hitler first conquered Denmark and Norway to protect his rear, made a deal with the Russians to safeguard the East, and then launched his campaign against Holland and Belgium and France—all for the ultimate end of smashing England.

5 *Strega* is a strong Italian brandy.

our losses of material only through the Brenner Pass and the Balkans. This may not prove enough."

I could see that. With crops bad, and men mobilized instead of in factories, the Balkans would have little to sell. Germany was, as I knew, breaking her back to supply us with coal.[1]

"Furthermore," went on Prince Storfi, "the British fleet in the Eastern Mediterranean has so far effectively blocked all our efforts to reinforce and supply the mass of troops we have in Abyssinia and Libya. If they are to carry on a campaign against the Sudan and Egypt and capture the Suez Canal, they must be aided."

"In brief, then, *Excellente,*" I said, "the one hope for Italy this winter is to capture the Suez Canal."

"Precisely," he nodded. "Already we are making feints in the Sudan. We have well-equipped divisions on the Libyan border. And within a few weeks we shall launch a campaign against British Somaliland and take over French Somaliland."[2]

Hastily I visualized my map. With the crack-up of France the well-trained Near-East army under General Weygand had been dissipated. But still the British had Australian and New Zealand divisions in Egypt and a campaign to capture Egypt would be costly in lives and material.

Prince Storfi saw from my eyes I had touched the weak spot of our position.

"You have it, Arnaldo," he said. "A frontal attack on Egypt would have no more than an even chance of success—and failure would be disastrous."

As he spoke the real truth struck me sharply.

"There is one way to insure success," I cried eagerly. "If the Arabs should rebel and fight the English—*from behind* while we attacked them *in front,* the pincers grip would smash them, make us masters of Suez and the Near-East."

"Exactly," he smiled. "Which is why, for three years, Il Duce has had the nightly broadcasts in Arabic from Bari to tell the Arabs that he is their natural protector. They must rise and drive the sword of Islam against England's back to make certain of victory."

"My long journey," I said, "told me that the balance of British power is small. Many influential Arabs believe the Axis will win. Others that England will win. If we could but—"

He broke in curtly. "I know that. And what you do not know, Arnaldo, is that one man, and one man alone, can swing the Arabs to Italy. If this one man can be persuaded to declare for us—then we launch our major campaign against Egypt, and we shall be masters of the Eastern Mediterranean before Christmas."

I looked at him doubtfully. "You are sure?"

"We know. That is why I am here. The *Mullah*[3] of Palestine holds the key. If he will but announce that he has thrown his destinies with Il Duce then all Islam will rise."

"Per bacco!" I cried, "of course! I know the *Mullah.* I saw him two months ago in Alexandretta. If—"

"He is here, now, in Istanbul," said Prince Storfi, "which is why you have received this mission. You will go to him and convince him that Italy will give the Arabs a national state. You will get him to declare a holy war, raise the green flag of Islam. The Moslems from India to Syria will rise."

"Si, si," I nodded eagerly.

"And now," he leaned forward, "with

1 Prior to the war Italy, which has no coal deposits of its own, imported coal from England. With the British blockade Italy had no place to turn but to Germany. Germany had the coal but no men. So nearly 200,000 Italians have been imported into Germany for use in the Ruhr and other coal fields, and despite the shortage of railroad cars Germany has shipped enough coal to keep Italy's wheels turning. This is mentioned to show how ill-prepared Italy is unless the British blockade is broken.

2 Since this interview Italy has captured British and French Somaliland and is attempting to control the Red Sea and break England's empire life line.

3 *Mullah,* a high priest of the Mohammedan faith; about comparable with a cardinal of the Catholic Church. They have tremendous influence among the Moslems. The *Mullah* of Jerusalem began and led the Arab revolt against the English in 1937-38, and finally fled to Syria, and there kept the revolt alive.

the Arabs risen, the oil pipe-line from Mosul to Beirut[1] will be smashed. The Eastern Mediterranean fleet of England will have no oil for their bunkers. We shall control the Red Sea—we shall bag the lot of them."

Ah, *Signor,* it was as if scales had fallen from my eyes and I saw the great, the astute, the masterful planning of Il Duce. With the British fleet helpless and unable to control with their guns the coast road from Libya into Egypt, the Suez campaign was assured. With the Arabs at their back the British expeditionary force could do nothing but evacuate to India.

THE genius of it to me, however, was in seeing that one man, the *Mullah* of Palestine, held the key to this solution.

"Ah, then, *Excellente,*" I said, "what is my mission?"

"It is two-fold," said Prince Storfi. "You will convince the *Mullah* that his destiny and that of the Arabs lie with us. That done, you will immediately arrange for a gathering of the Transjordania tribes —who look to the *Mullah* for guidance— and have them raid and cut the Mosul pipe-line where it drops down from the Transjordian heights. This must be done at once because we must control Suez by Christmas.

I nodded. "What am I to offer the *Mullah?*"

Prince Storfi shrugged. "Bribery is impossible because he has no personal ambitions. You must seek to convince him that his people are for us, and that England will do nothing for the Arabs, but that Mussolini will."

"And if he refuses that?" I asked.

"We will discuss the matter further," he said. "There is a priest of the Jebel Druses who might aspire to be *Mullah.*"

I smiled. I thought I saw the next move. "And I am in complete authority?"

"You are. You understand the Arabs, you know Near East politics. You have been chosen for this task because no one else has as much chance of success." He looked at me narrowly. "I have told you the situation in detail so that you will understand how your actions will determine our African campaign."

I stood up, gave him the salute. We shook hands. "I swear by God," I said, "that I will not fail to do this. I shall see the *Mullah* tonight. I have the friends and influence in the Turkish government to act as I choose."

He understood what I meant and smiled. "Two hundred thousand *lire*[2] have been placed to your account," he said. "Two trusted men, Pierto Garci and Luigi Geevenetto will report."

He went to the door. "Remember," he said, "the Turkish government also hangs on the fence between England and us. This *fait accompli* will throw them to us."

A thought struck me. "The Americans? They have much invested in Mosul."

Prince Storfi shrugged, snapped his fingers. "They talk and fume—and do nothing. We have nothing to fear there. They are pacifists at heart."

That is the detail, *Signor.* If my understanding is correct, radio via Bari. Now I go to see the *Mullah* of Palestine.

Hotel Tokatlian, Grande Rue de Pera,

[1] The Persian oil fields and those of Iraq yield their oil to a pipe-line that runs to refineries in Beirut on the Palestine coast. Newspapers have reported repeated Italian bombings of the refineries in Beirut, but this scheme, of course, is to cut off the oil in the desert. The pipe-line is over 500 miles in length with booster stations at intervals, and while guarded by British troops, a concentration of thousands of Arabs at any one point would hopelessly overwhelm the local defenders. With the Mosul pipeline cut and the Italians controlling the Red Sea, the British Eastern Mediterranean fleet could not refuel and would be helpless to resist.

[2] The Italian *lire* has a pre-war rate of five cents each. It is not quoted now.

Istanbul. July 14 (9:10 P.M.) via Bari Urgent Seccione Two (T). MESSAGE BEGINS MULLAH OF PALESTINE REFUSES DIRECT RESPONSE PERIOD BELIEVE BRITISH ARE BARGAINING WITH HIM PERIOD DO NOT KNOW THEIR OFFER BUT BELIEVE MULLAH DISTRUSTS IL DUCE AND WISH AUTHORIZATION TO TAKE DRASTIC MEASURES IN CASE HE REFUSES FINAL PROFFER MESSAGE ENDS CAVACCI.

From Seccione Two (T) via Bari to Cavacci Code (C). MESSAGE BEGINS AFRICAN CAMPAIGN BEING PLANNED ON COOPERATION OF ARABS PERIOD MAKE ANY OFFER TO MULLAH PERIOD IF ASSURED BRITISH HAVE WON HIM REMEMBER THE MULLAH OF JEBEL DRUSES IS OUR MAN AND ACT ACCORDINGLY MESSAGE ENDS STRAZZA.

Hotel Tokatlian, Grande Rue de Pera, Istanbul, July 15 (8:10 P.M.) Padrone: I have your radio of authorization. Much has happened since my first brief report. I have a plan which cannot fail to throw the Arabs to us, and I am proceeding with it.

Chapter II

ENTER O'HARA

BEFORE describing this, let me tell you of our stroke of luck. Today I learned from the Turkish Air Ministry that twelve Douglas bombers had been flown here from Vladivostok to the Uskudar airdrome.[1] The navigating pilot was Michael J. O'Hara, and it is of him that I now concern myself.

For my plan of causing the Arabs to revolt, I need a trustworthy pilot. And O'Hara is just the man. I flew with him under Franco, and urgently request your authority to employ him.

For your *dossier* I give you these facts: he is twenty-nine years old, six feet, one inch tall, weight one hundred and eighty pounds.[2] Blue eyes, reddish-brown hair, nose once broken, giving hawk-like effect.

He is absolutely unscrupulous, and will fight for the side which pays him the most money. He was in my squadron at Toledo under General Franco, and has a record of eight victories over the Russian P-planes. He flew against us in the Ethiopian campaign but only for a month. He was not paid and flew his plane to the Egyptian Sudan and sold it at Omdurman. He speaks several Arabic dialects, having been partly educated at the American University at Beirut.

He is not too clever aside from flying, and considers me his friend, and will do what I say and remain quiet so long as he is well paid. He is now at the Hotel des Londres on the Rue Galata. I ask your permission to employ him for the finale of our project to cut the British oil pipe-lines from Mosul to Jaffa. Please radio decision at once as his movements are unpredictable.

From Seccione Two (T) via Bari to Capitano Cavacci. MESSAGE BEGINS RE O'HARA PERMISSION GRANTED PERIOD SUEZ CANAL CAMPAIGN NOW BEGUN IN SOUTH PERIOD YOUR IMMEDIATE ACTION ORDERED AS ARABS MUST RISE WITHIN THIRTY DAYS MESSAGE ENDS STRAZZA.

Hotel Tokatlian, Grande Rue de Pera, Istanbul, July 16 (7:15 P.M.) Padrone: Your radio in Code C is acknowledged, and I hasten to say that you will have splendid news tonight.

Meanwhile, I shall report on my meeting with Captain Michael O'Hara because of its peculiar aftermath.

Immediately after receiving your permission I went to the *Ruf* night club on the Rue Mustapha Ataturk.[3] O'Hara has a

1 The British blockade and President Roosevelt's embargo, prohibiting all American shipping from waters in war areas, make impossible Mediterranean deliveries of American exports. Hence, in this case, the Douglas planes would be shipped to the Russian port of Vladivostok, assembled and flown under their own power. O'Hara was hired to lead the Turkish pilots, no great shakes as cross-country flyers, apparently.

2 Cavacci's report naturally described heights in centimeters and weights in kilograms which I have transcribed to American terms for simplicity.

3 In establishing his New Turkey, Mustapha Kemal Pasha demanded all men take last names, something hitherto unknown in the Sultanate. He himself took Ataturk, and the street is so named.

blond sweetheart there, a White Russian[1] named Marina. And with money in his pocket he would think only of her and Irish whiskey and a laugh.

The place was crowded, but above all the turmoil I could hear O'Hara's voice. *Per bacco!* How that man sings when he is drunk! And always the same song; I heard it all over Spain. Something he calls "Red River Valley."

He bellowed:

"Oh, they say in the valley you're leaving,
We shall miss your bright eyes and sweet smile—"

I had thrust through the crowd. He was seated at a table, a bottle in front of him, and this Marina on his lap. He saw me and as I shouted, "O'Hara!" he sat Marina on the table, gave a bellow and jumped up.

"Arnaldo! By God, if it isn't old Trigger-finger himself!"

He leaped at me and as I kissed him on both cheeks he began to pound my ribs with his fists. This is an American's queer way of showing you he is glad to see you. I weigh one hundred and sixty pounds and am tall, but he swung me up on his shoulder as if I had been a boy.

"Effendis and sitts!" he roared. "Meet Mussolini's triple-threat half-back; he can fly, he can fight, and he's the cleverest scoundrel that ever scuttled an enemy without a trace."

No one understood his English; so they stared. O'Hara switched to the Turkish dialect.

"Furthermore, this handsome Italian rapier is the great gift of Allah (upon whom be peace) to fair maidens desiring the soft caresses of love."

"Sangre de Christo!" I said, laughing, "I want neither notoriety nor brandy, O'Hara, but only to talk to you."

He grinned and we sat at the table. He poured himself a huge drink.

"By God!" he said, "it's my night to howl, Arnaldo. Vladivostok to Uskudar in five days on Russian gasoline that wouldn't light a lamp." He opened his shirt. "Russians! My faith, all the good ones left home when Lenin moved in." He grinned at Marina and patted her cheek. "Look!" he said. I saw that his skin was covered with tiny red marks.

"Fleas!" he roared. "Russian fleas. And lice! Big gray-backs that are fat enough to wear gold crowns on their teeth. I picked them up in Irkutsk on Lake Baikal, the first stop out of Vladivostok, and I kept adding to the menagerie all the way. I was so filled with *nits*[2] leaving Tomsk, and scratching so hard when I crossed the Urals[3] that I damned near ran into an uncharted mountain."

He leaned back and roared with laughter.

"There's one for the book. Flyer navigates eleven dumb Turks into mountain peak, crashing and killing all because he had the itch."

O'HARA can be very amusing, and I let him roar and joke and grin, meanwhile making certain in my mind that he was our man. And he is, *Padrone*. The English once jailed him for a fear for gunrunning and he has no love for them.

I ordered a *dozy-ko*.[4]

He yelled, "That belly-wash—what have you in mind that you stay sober?"

"You," I smiled. "Five minutes of conversation—if Marina can spare you."

"Breeng beeg American cossak back," she said, and waved a bracelet that must have cost two hundred Turkish *lire*.[5] O'Hara spends it rapidly, *Padrone*.

So we sat alone, O'Hara and I, and he

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1 White Russians, i.e., refugees from Red Russia, took refuge in Turkey, and the *Ruf* is their café where they are the entertainers and hostesses.

2 *Nits* are the lice larvae that line the seams of underclothing and are most annoying.

3 O'Hara was evidently following the Transsiberian Railroad across Asia. The Ural Mountains are the dividing line between European Russia and Siberia and Tomsk is the big city where O'Hara would head south along the Volge River valley.

4 *Dozy-ko* is a distilled anisette, clear until water is added; it then turns smoky. The same thing as a French *pernod*. Mildly intoxicating, used as an *aperitif*.

5 A Turkish *lire* is worth roughly $2.50.

said, "Arnaldo, I thought you would be in Africa, flying against the English."

"There are more places to fight a war than on the front," I said, and explained I was representing the *Roma Telegrafo.*

He gave me a sharp look, then grinned. "Secret agent, eh? Still trying to get made a count and be one of Mussolini's head men."

You, *Signor,* who know my ambitions, will not misconstrue this. In the New Italy a man with wit and daring may aspire to high places. I merely said to O'Hara that I was engaged in important work, and needed his services as a pilot. I offered him ten thousand Italian *lire* per week, with a bonus of forty thousand more at the expiration of the work, and gave him five thousand to bind the bargain.

He took the package of thousand-*lire* notes. "You're no Santa Claus," he said. "What do I do for this?"

"Flying," I said. "It may involve one or more trips into Transjordania. A Turkish pilot is not clever enough; and I have neither an Italian nor a German pilot capable of doing the desert flying."

"What else?" he asked. "This is too much for that small job—knowing you."

"You might have to fight off English pursuit planes. We are at war."

"That," he grinned, "might be fun. The damned limeys made me pick lint in a stinking Jerusalem prison for a year and a day because I ran a few rifles to a couple of Arab sheik friends of mine[1]."

I now remembered his friendship for the Arabs. I shall be careful not to let him know our ultimate objective.

"You will do this for me, then?" I asked.

He looked over at Marina. Suddenly he laughed, put the money in his pocket. "Why the hell not? But tomorrow, when I'm sober, tell me more. I don't like to work in the dark."

I gave him a smooth promise. He clapped me on the back and rejoined Marina. It was then I saw the girl in green. She was covertly watching O'Hara and me. She did not appear to belong in the *Ruf* and sat alone. I felt she had tried to over-

hear us. Who is she? You who have *dossiers* on all agents may be able to tell me. She is five feet, seven inches, copper-gold hair, long green eyes, white skin, about twenty-four or five. Very seductive figure which she reveals boldly. If the British are at work here, I should know their agents.

Now, *Padrone,* I break off to see the *Mullah* of Palestine.

Chapter III

DEATH IN STAMBUL

HOTEL TOKATLIAN, Grande Rue de Pera, Istanbul, July 17 (1:10 A.M.) Excellente: A terrible crisis has arisen. I have solved it and have begun my plan to arouse the Arabs. We are committed now, and you must pound with propaganda in radio and Arabic press. The situation for the next few hours will be critical. Here is what happened: With Luigi and Karl Handt, who represents the German Gestapo, we crossed Galata Bridge to old Stambul[2], again to see the *Mullah.*

Ah, *Signor,* what a night, and how excitement held me! There was a white moon

1 By the provisions of the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1920 England was bound to create a Jewish haven in Palestine, a free state. This was done and the Arabs protested bitterly at the taking of their land. These protests in 1937 and 1938 reached revolt proportions, and to stamp it out England prohibited guns and ammunition. O'Hara evidently ran in guns and was caught.

2 The old part of Constantinople, lying across the Golden Horn and reached from the heights of Pera by the Galata Bridge. Here is the old seraglio of the sultans, and the ruins of Byzantium. In contrast to modern Pera, its streets are scarcely wider than a man's shoulders and all movement is by foot or donkey.

in a cobalt sky. In Stambul's narrow streets were a few *hamels*[1], some water-sellers with their bells and a few sweetmeat sellers. When we reached the entrance to the Byzantine cisterns[2] the *Muezzin*[3] was summoning the faithful to special prayer.

I rapped on the door of the *Mullah.* His black Sudanese servant admitted us. The *Mullah* himself sat cross-legged on the floor. He wore his usual green vestments and the green turban of the hagi.[4] He was eating cous-cous.[5]

"Salaam aleykum, my son," he said.

"Aleykum salaam," I returned the salutation.

I went through the formalities of polite speech, tasted of the *cous-cous,* and drank mint tea with him. But as I did so I was studying him. He has small clever eyes, *Signor,* and a perfect mask of a face. Yet I sensed that I was fighting a losing battle. But I had come prepared, so as soon as possible I launched into my final argument.

I told him of the French collapse and what it entailed in Algeria and Morocco among Moslems. Of the drift of the Japanese to our Axis and the likelihood that India would throw off British shackles and become an independent nation under the guidance of Japan. I told him the British Empire was tottering and one *putsch* would send it toppling. To back this up I cited victory after victory. I even told him we were then moving to take British Somaliland and the French port of Djibouti.

"You can see, Holy One," I concluded, "that for the Arabs there is no hope outside of Il Duce. He has said many times he is your protector. Now is your moment to declare for him and throw off the British grip of the Near East."

He had wiped his fingers[6] of mutton grease, and smoothed down his beard. He did not speak.

"Il Duce," I said, "will throw the Jews out of Palestine, and all the land that was the Arabs will be theirs again. Don't you see, Holy One, that there is no hope for an independent Arab state with the British —and if you do not throw in with us now when you are valuable, you have no hope with us."

"There you are wrong, my son," he said at length. "I hold the British promise that not only will there be an Arab state—there will again be a *Khalif*[7] of Islam."

Ah, *Signor,* if he wished to shock me, to startle me, he had succeeded.

I SHALL not bore you with the involved present political situation regarding the *khalifate.* It is enough to say that since the first World War, the British have sedulously prevented the appointment of a *khalifate,* for such a vice-regent of Mohamet has the power to declare a *jehad,* or holy war, and is a unifying center around which the Moslem world can rally to establish an Arab state.

So, if Britain has a candidate for *khalif* who is acceptable to all factions, she can hold Islam tightly in line — and all our efforts will go for naught.

It was a staggering blow. At the instant all my plans were smashed. I could only say, "There are already several claimants to the title of *khalif.* And England has always tricked you."

"She will not trick us this time," said

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1 A *hamel* is a human beast of burden, carrying as high as two hundred pounds in the wooden frame on his back.

2 A subterranean lake of vast length where water was kept against siege by the Byzantines.

3 *Muezzin,* the priest who calls on the Minaret to summon Moslems to prayer.

4 Making a pilgrimage to Mahomet's grave in Mecca is called a *hagi,* and those who do so may wear a green turban to show they are holymen.

5 *Cous-cous* is a dish of mutton and rice eaten with the fingers.

6 Even the most educated of Arabs eat with their fingers. They have a saying, "We know how clean our hands are—but who can say what filth is on your knives and forks?"

7 *Khalif* or *Caliph:* Supreme head of the Mohammedan religion, and his rule is called the *khalifate.* Comparable to the Pope of the Catholic religion. This title was vested in the Turkish sultan until the World War when England decreed the abolition of the *khalifate.* But Islam has always been hungry for a new leader which is the importance of this point to Cavacci's plans. The *Khalif* is the representative on earth of Mohammed, founder of Islam.

the *Mullah* calmly. "And we have the direct descendant of Abu Bekr who will be acclaimed from the Philippines[1] to Morocco as the true leader of Islam."

He spoke on, but I did not listen I was adjusting my mind to this new problem.

Finally I said, "Who is this descendant of Abu Bekr?"

The *Mullah* shook his head. "That I cannot tell you. His life would not be worth a *piaster*—and you know it."

I did, and my fury was roused. I scowled at him. "Holy One, we of Italy shall advance our own claimant to the *khalifate.*"

He smiled and shook his head. "That you cannot do. It would only precipitate the war among the Arabs, for they know Abu Bekhr's descendant is the true *khalif* and the Qu'ran demands that all false claimants be killed."

Again he had skillfully blocked me. And on a sudden, *Signor,* I returned to my original plan. Indeed, as the *Mullah* droned on, I thought through it, and saw that I now possessed a weapon of tremendous power to stir the Arabs to a *jehad.*

I felt in my right hand pocket. There was the British Webley pistol with the Mark IV cartridges. My eyes sought Luigi's and I gestured toward the door through which the big Sudanese had gone.

The *Mullah* said, "Within forty-eight hours I shall announce to all Asia that the new *khalif* has been enrobed."

Luigi and the German, Handt, got up as if to go, went to the wall near the doorway and leaned against it. I gave them the signal.

I said, "Then you will not support Il Duce in any way?"

The *Mullah* shook his head. "We of the true faith see no freedom under either your Mussolini or again Hitler."

I nodded. "Then so be it," I said, and rose.

I pulled out the gun. His eyes darted to its sheen. His mouth opened. Then he settled back.

"What would my death achieve?" he asked quietly.

"Without your influence, Holy One," I said, "there will be no *khalif.* Go with God."

My finger tightened on the trigger.

Padrone, it was not easy. To be in hot blood and fighting an antagonist and then killing him, is something done without thought, and carries no regret. But to pull the trigger on an unarmed man who stared, without movement, into the muzzle —that requires every ounce of will a man possesses.

For what seemed a century I looked at his bearded face. I willed my finger to tighten, but it would not respond.

"That shot," he said, "seals the fate of Italy. It means the freedom of the true believer. So it is written. So will Allah (upon whom be—)"

THE trigger fell, and his body shot back under the impact of the bullet. Now that the spell upon me was broken. I rushed at him, emptied the gun into his body. Above all, now, he must not rise to comfront us.

But he was dead. The first bullet had blown off the top of his skull. I flung down the Webley beside him. As a British gun, loaded with British army cartridges, it was vital evidence in my plan for the Turkish police to find.

Luigi and Karl Handt rushed into the room. They stopped, staring down at the dead *Mullah.*

"Um Gottes willen!" muttered Handt, "you did it."

Luigi crossed himself. I felt the same queerness. The *Mullah's* white-bearded face did things to that room.

"The Sudanese!" I said, "what of him?"

That broke the spell. Handt nodded. "He is *kaput!"*

Luigi said, "Someone else has been here, *Signor.* We found a cot and clothing. Per-

[1] It may surprise some Americans to learn that in the Philippines we have more than a million Moslems.

haps a woman and her child. There was children's clothing."

"But not here now?" I demanded sharply.

He shook his head. Swiftly I told them about the British plot to create a *khalif*. "That child may be he. Take the clothing. We must find him—and settle *that* end."

This Luigi did. Presently we left there, I to write my dispatches and reports, so that this "incident"[1] will arouse Islam to white fury against the English.

(Later). *Signor,* I have written all my dispatches upon which you can base your broadcasts and special stories to El Ahram! I shall interview the police officials and they will charge that the evidence clearly proves England murdered the *Mullah* because he chose to throw in with Il Duce and our candidate for *khalif*. *Viva Il Duce!*

Chapter IV

THE MAN WHO HAS NO LEGS

HOTEL TOKATLIAN, Grande Rue de Pera, Istanbul, July 20 (11:05 A.M.) Padrone: Send me at once a *dossier* on a man, believed to be a Canadian, known variously as Matthew Luke and The Man Who Has No Legs. Something has gone badly wrong.

As you know, even the Prefecture of Police is factionally divided between our supporters and sympathizers with the British. And so, at the moment, I cannot send, as you order, eye-witness statements from the police on the brutal British murder of the *Mullah*. The Prefect has stopped it.

Why? *Per bacco!* Because this Matthew Luke, this Man Who Has No Legs, has gone to the Prefect. He has said he had found a witness who can testify that this is an Italian plot to stir up the Moslems and stop creation of a *khalifate*. He is being permitted to send out such statements. They are being radio broadcast from London and Cairo. Instead of white fury sweeping the Moslems, they are now of two minds. There is doubt. They do

not know whom to believe. I am certain there were no witnesses. But I must strike at this Matthew Luke.

From Seccione Two (T) via Bari to Capitano Cavacci (Code C). MESSAGE BEGINS AT ALL COSTS MULLAH INCIDENT MUST BE PROVED TO HILT AGAINST ENGLISH PERIOD WHOLE AFRICAN CAMPAIGN PIVOTS ON SUPPORT OF ARABS PERIOD RE MATTHEW LUKE THIS MAN IS MOST DANGEROUS BRITISH SECRET AGENT PERIOD HAS SUPPORT OF AMERICAN GIRL AGENT CYRILLA MARSHALL PERIOD HIS SILENCE NOW IMPERATIVE AS WE SHALL SHORTLY ANNOUNCE OUR SUPPORT OF PASHA OF LIBYA FOR KHALIF PERIOD CAMPAIGN AGAINST SUEZ CANAL HAS BEGUN AND WE ARE COMMITTED MESSAGE ENDS STRAZZA.

Hotel Tokatlian, Grande Rue de Pera, Istanbul, July 21 (10:25 A.M.) Before I answer your Code C radio, I must describe a most extraordinary situation—one that nearly cost me my life.

It seemed, at first, only a comic incident. O'Hara was sitting with Marina. I had told him to get ready to fly to Transjordania (our propaganda from there could reach the desert tribes quicker).

Suddenly, out of the crowd came this red-haired girl in green about whom I have reported to you. She ignored me, gave Marina a hard look, then bent over O'Hara and kissed him full on the lips—and hard.

[1] The creation of an "incident" is a well-used formula by German and Italian diplomats seeking to establish a cause for invasion or war. As an example, Italy charged Greece with the murder of an Albanian patriot and as this is written, prepares to demand Greek territory on threat of war. The recent murder of Leon Trotsky in Mexico City indicates to what lengths the dictatorial powers go in this abuse of a neutral country's hospitality.

"Remember me, darling?" she murmured in English.

"How," grinned O'Hara, "could I forget anything like that?" Then he saw Marina's furious face. "Listen, Beautiful, I chase my own street-cars. A street-car looks silly as hell chasing a man."

"But in London," she said, "and that night at Monte Carlo—"

Black-haired Marina sprang like a sleek panther, loosing a string of Russian oaths. I did not know it then, *Signor,* but it was a signal.

As they screamed and tore at each other, men rose and began to mill around. Suddenly the lights went out. Before I could gather my wits someone grappled with me from behind.

I tried to draw my gun. But my arms were captured. A stunning blow struck me on the head. I fell down, not half-conscious.

I heard O'Hara roaring, and then came another crushing blow and I heard nothing—

Ah, *Signor Padrone,* I opened my eyes later upon an amazing scene. I sat up, weak, shaken, my skull aching, and saw a room flooded with ivory light from a magnificent eight-branched candelabra. I was not tied, *Signor,* and I lay upon a couch.

Near a door towered an Arab at least seven feet tall. He held a submachine-gun, and he never took his eyes off O'Hara and me.

O'Hara was standing, feet apart, arms akimbo, facing the girl in the chartreuse evening dress. He was grinning but there was no mirth to it, and his eyes were blazing and hard.

"Well, my little chickadee," he said, "what's the broad idea? You never met me before in your life. You kissed me to start a fight so your men could snatch Cavacci and me."

"O'Hara," she said calmly, "at times you're positively brilliant."

I stood up. I was giddy but I could think clearly.

"It's a British scheme, Mike," I said. "They're up to something."

"So I gathered," said O'Hara. "But what?"

"My dear Cyrilla," said a new voice, "bring O'Hara here so I can see him."

I whirled. In the semi-gloom of the far end of the room a man sat in a baby's high-chair. On second look I saw the chair was a queer contrivance made of wicker, with straps to attach it. It looked like a miniature elephant's *howdah* without the canopy.

The man in it was only half a man. His body ended at his thighs.

A blanket lay smooth where his legs should have been.

I knew, then, that this was the mysterious Man Who Has No Legs. The girl was Cyrilla Marshall whom you, *Padrone,* had mentioned.

We were, I knew, prisoners of the English's most dangerous secret agent. My eyes flashed to the giant Arab. The man would shoot at the slightest false move.

I thought quickly. Istanbul, being what it is in war, Luigi had orders always to trail me in case of trouble. Had he? Or had he been knocked about in the brawl? If he knew what had happened, then help might come. Otherwise—I shrugged. For the moment, then, there was nothing to do but watch the queer performance that followed.

The girl, Cyrilla, had said, "Go to him, O'Hara, and bend over. But be careful. Ali has his orders."

O'Hara grinned. "Anything for amusement." And he went to the Man Who Has No Legs and bent over so that they were practically face to face.

A SILENCE came to the room. Suddenly the legless man's hands, white and slender, came from under the blanket. They flicked over O'Hara's face. Softly, they followed the shape of his head, probed the sockets of his eyes, felt of his nose, his lips, his chin line. They even passed

over his broad shoulders and his lean back and hips.

Signor, I knew, then, that this Man Who Has No Legs was also blind!

"I have seen enough," said this strange man, who called himself Matthew Luke.

"And this one—Cavacci?" said Cyrilla.

"I know what he is," said Matthew Luke dryly. "It was the other, this O'Hara, who was strange."

O'Hara backed away, a queer, puzzled expression on his face. "Well," he said through the silence, "what next?"

I waited, tense in the silence, prepared to seize any break in the luck.

Matthew Luke spoke slowly. "Those who have eyes see many things at a time, a kaleidoscope of action, color and impression.

"So they really *see* nothing. I, who am blind, see one thing and see it well on the screen of my mind."

He paused. I wondered if a quick leap would throw the monster Arab's aim off.

"I know," said Matthew Luke, "that Arnaldo Cavacci murdered the *Mullah* of Palestine in cold blood. I thought, perhaps, O'Hara had helped him. I do not think so now. His face is not that of a brutal killer."

O'Hara shifted his booted legs. Then he sat down, his hands near his boot-tops.

"Cavacci," said Matthew Luke suddenly, "I hate death, and I hate to kill. But unless you sign a confession that you murdered the *Mullah* of Palestine, you will not leave this room alive."

Chapter V

NIGHT OVER STAMBUL

PADRONE, I smiled. He was bluffing—and I do not bluff easily.

"*Signor* Luke," I said, "I did not kill the *Mullah* and you English cannot foist the blame of that crime upon us."

"Don't lie," said Matthew Luke. "One who has seen you here, swears you fired the gun. And the Gestapo agent, and your jackal, Luigi, murdered the Sudanese servant."

Per Bacco!

I knew, then, *Padrone,* that there *had been* a witness! This was not guesswork. But if there had been a witness, then why did Matthew Luke want a confession from me? Who was this witness?

I decided to bluff. "Your alleged witness lies in his throat," I said.

I glanced at O'Hara. His gaze jumped from me to Luke, to the girl. He was obviously puzzled.

"What's this about, Arnaldo?" he said.

As he spoke I saw his hand move very slightly near the boot-top. Instantly I realized he had in the boot-top a weapon of some kind. He was just waiting for an opportunity to act. And I knew that if he believed I had killed the *Mullah* I would lose a valuable tool.

I smiled calmly. "Mike, the *Mullah* of Palestine was going to declare for Il Duce. Had he been permitted to do so, all Islam would have revolted against the British raj. So the British—perhaps this legless meddler—killed him. By throwing the blame on us, they think to arouse hatred for the Italians and keep the Arabs loyal."

Cyrilla gasped. "Good Lord, that's exactly why *you* killed the *Mullah*—to arouse hatred for the British."

"The Perfect," I grinned, "said a British Webley and British army cartridges were used."

"You fight cleverly and ruthlessly, Cavacci," said Matthew Luke. "But it is useless. The witness who saw you is the next *khalif* of Islam."

I blinked, and then my mind raced. The *khalif!* Then the children's clothing I had found at the *Mullah's* were his. A mere child. And he had been sent to the *Mullah* to be tutored in the Moslem faith and ritual. Inwardly I cursed. Had I only found that boy, then with him liquidated all would have been clear sailing.

I knew now, *Signor,* that if I could escape this trap I must, somehow, shut the

boy's mouth before his testimony ruined all our plans.

Outwardlly I smiled. "That is impossible," I said.

And as I spoke I saw my next action. I must force O'Hara to act before he had time to think. Before Luke could speak I dove headlong at the huge Arab. With my left hand I knocked up the muzzle of the submachine-gun. With my right I struck him in the face. Then I sought to seize his throat.

That giant Arab was not to be held. He exploded furiously. I was flung down and the submachine-gun muzzle veered toward me. But he did not fire.

SUDDENLY O'Hara with a derringer in his hand had the two muzzles of the tiny gun at the Arab's skull.

"Now, sweetheart," said O'Hara, "are you going to put down that chatter gun—or do we shoot it out?"

I think the Arab would have swung and fought. The girl gasped. I jumped aside, ready to leap on the Arab's back. But the voices had told The Man Who Has No Legs what was up. So now he suddenly cried in Arabic, "Ali, stand fast. Put down the gun and obey in all things."

O'Hara took the submachine-gun, then jumped to put his back to the wall.

"I can shoot you, Luke," he said, "before the men behind yonder curtain can get me."

"Yes," said Luke calmly, "but it won't be necessary."

Here was my chance! Our most dangerous enemy—and we held the cards.

"Give me the gun, O'Hara," I said.

"No, no," cried the girl. "He would shoot Matthew Luke."

O'Hara gave me a sharp glance. "Find the door out of this fire trap, Arnaldo, and we'll scram."

For an instant I debated trying to take the gun from O'Hara. But I saw the hopelessness of it if there were men behind that curtain. I turned and sought a way out. Beyond the doorway on the right I found a corridor and an outside door. I called to O'Hara.

He came, the girl beside him.

"You're playing on the wrong team, O'Hara," she said. "Matthew Luke would pay you treble—and I might change my mind about you."

"What do you mean, change your mind?" said O'Hara. He kept the gun muzzle in her side.

"That you're a cheap, mercenary, run-down heel," she said calmly.

O'Hara reached the door. "Well," he said quietly, "I stick to the man that pays me, and I don't throw my body and my kisses at a strange man to trick him."

He slid through the door and we backed into the darkness.

We moved silently for perhaps a half-minute. Then I heard a soft whistle. Luigi! He had seen me emerge; he was waiting. Instantly a scheme of action jumped through my mind.

O'Hara said abruptly, "Arnaldo, you and I have got to have a talk."

I had to be rid of him for what I intended to do.

"Later, O'Hara," I said hurriedly. "We may be followed. They may try to attack us in the dark. We'll separate and I'll see you in the hotel in an hour."

It was sensible and he knew it. "We're in Stambul," he said, looking at the slender shadows of minarets. "I'll see you at the Hotel des Londres. And I want to know plenty."

He turned and strode rapidly toward Seraglio Point. He could turn to the Galata Bridge from there.

I pretended to go in the opposite direction, but not far. I whistled, and waited.

Presently Luigi came through the shadows.

"Signor!" he whispered, "thanks be to God! I had sent Pietro to bring help, but I was afraid I was too late."

Men! I swung on him. "How many?"

"Three of ours—and I told Handt to get all the Gestapo agents he could. I—I was afraid for your life, *Signor.*"

I pinched his ear affectionately. "You did well, Luigi. You have probably saved Italy tonight."

Padrone, I break off momentarily in this report to request you immediately to order the Saidel tribes to gather and move toward the Mosul oil pipe-line at the oasis of Abou Kembal. I promise they will be reinforced by other tribes within seventy-two hours.

The game is in our hands, *Signor.* The Sword of Islam is drawn, and the green flag of the *jehad* raised in holy war.

Chapter VI

PLANE FOR TRANSJORDANIA

HOTEL DES LONDRES, Rue Galata, July 24 (8:10 P.M.) Padrone: Success! Within an hour O'Hara will fly to Transjordania. And, unknowingly, he will take with him Achmed El Orfali, son of the Rualla sheik, Hussein ibn Ali El Orfali. And when he arrives the Arabs will rise to the last Bedouin in such a mad fury as has not been seen since the days of the *Mahdi*[1] at the turn of the century. For this boy is the one the English wish to make *khalif*—and when he arrives he will be dead, and the murder charged to the British. Let me explain.

Within twenty minutes Karl Handt of the Gestapo arrived at the house in Stambul where Matthew Luke had held me prisoner. I was crouched in the darkness and no one except me and O'Hara had left the house.

Handt brought his own men and also *Unterleutnant* Rudi Koch of the S.S. troops, Hitler's own Elite.[1] He exploded in a curse when I mentioned The Man Who Has No Legs. He seemed more anxious to capture him than the pseudo-*khalif.*

"Herr Gott!" he muttered, "Matthew Luke! There is a half-million mark price on his head—alive."

I asked why. He told me that the legless Luke had his own organization. It extended into Germany, had been responsible for the British bombing of the Zeiss factory where the gun-sights and bombing precision instruments were made.

"Once we have him," muttered Koch, "he'll tell us who are the traitors in the Reich."

With eight armed men I led the way into the house. Koch and I hit the door with our shoulders. It burst open at the impact and we spilled inside. The hall had been lit; it was in darkness now.

"The flashlight," I called. "Quick! Shoot at any movement."

There were some shots when we whirled into the big room. I saw the streaks of flame, the sparks. But I did not go that way. This room was empty but there was one in back. I arrived as a body swung through the window. The girl, Cyrilla.

I heard the voice of the legless Luke, calling to her. I grabbed her by the shoulders and jerked her into the room. She fought silently, savagely, like a tigress. Shots roared outside and I heard Luke's frantic voice, "Ali, back! Dear God, Ali, take me back."

I struck the girl with my pistol barrel

1 The last holy war of the Arabs against Europeans occurred in the Sudan in 1883 when Mahommed Ahmed declared himself a descendant of Mahomet, and made himself *"Mahdi"* or leader of Islam. He was crushed by Lord Kitchener at Omdurman where he was killed in 1909.

2 Due to the activities of ambitious Heinrich Himmler, head of the German Gestapo, all party military formations such as the *Schaffstaffel,* or S.S. troops became part of the police organization. They do secret work abroad (in the United States they kidnapped and took back to Germany important witnesses in the Griebel espionage case). They act as military police at the front in war and help Axis agents in their work abroad. It is well known to the F.B.I. in the United States that Russian, German and Italian secret agents are cooperating against democracies. So it is not surprising to find them working hand in hand in Turkey.

and she fell senseless. Then I fired out the window toward Luke's voice. I only saw him briefly, *Signor,* but I shall never forget that sight. He rode on the back of the seven-foot Arab in his wicker *howdah.* They loomed monstrous in the night, against the pencil minarets of Haifa Sophia, and the mosque of Suleiman the Magnificent. Luke was striking at his bearer but the Arab ran on.

I fired, *Signor.* I emptied my revolver. I cursed and I called for Luigi. But before we could fire again, the sight had gone.

Koch came into the room and uttered a string of German curses, all run together like their impossible language. Behind him his men brought a struggling child of seven or eight, dressed in the Arab kaftan and egale. He had a tiny curved sword, a scimitar. *"Allah abkhar!"* he cried. *"La ilallah,* I am Achmed El Orfali, son of the great sheik Hussein El Orfali, and I have killed a fox. I fight like a warrior."

Koch knocked him senseless with a blow.

"Herr Gott!" said Koch, "we catch minnows and the shark escapes."

I smiled in joy. "We have everything, *Signor* Koch, the war in the East is won."

He scowled at me. "What do you mean?"

I told him, *Signor,* because I needed his help.

There was, already, I told Koch, propaganda spread that the English had murdered the *Mullah.* The British denial, with offers of proof, had aroused some doubt.

Now, however, if I could deliver young Achmed's body to his father in the desert —with this girl's body, too—and reasonable proof of British guilt, the rage of the Arabs would sweep away all doubts. Hussein El Orfali had tremendous prestige and influence.

He alone could mass enough desert warriors to capture miles of the Mosul pipe-line and destroy it. If all Islam rose, as I knew it would, then we should crush the British in a pincers grip.

"Zum Gott!" muttered Koch, as I finished, "it is *kolossal.* It must work."

"It will," I said. "Now take the boy Achmed and the girl to Uskudar airdrome. Use your influence to get a plane and permission to fly it to Transjordania."

He looked inquiringly at me.

"The boy is to die," I said, "with Italian troops in air transports trying desperately to save him."

He grinned. *"Zu befehl!"* he clicked his heels and we went out.

YOU have my radio to dispatch some troops by air to Abou Kembal. O'Hara leaves within the hour from Uskudar. He thinks he is delivering propaganda. He believes that Luke's charges against me are part of the propaganda campaign. He will fly without knowing of the extra passengers and Luigi and Pietro will go along to attend to the boy and Cyrilla Marshall.

Uskudar Airport, Asiatic Turkey, July 24. Padrone: O'Hara just took off in a two-motored Junkers plane. He is without suspicion and if he attempts to interfere at Abou Kembal, he will be liquidated. His usefulness to me is past, anyway. *Viva Il Duce!*

Uskudar Airport, Asiatic Turkey, July 24 (Midnight). RADIO CODE C VIA DODECANESE STRAZZA MESSAGE BEGINS CEASE ALL PROPAGANDA ON MURDER OF MULLAH AND OF ACHMED EL ORFALI PERIOD COMPLETE REPORT FOLLOWS MESSAGE ENDS CAVACCI.

Hotel des Londres, Rue Galata, Istanbul, via Italian Embassy, July 25 (9:10) A.M.) Padrone: The absolutely unexpected has happened. The situation is critical but not hopeless. O'Hara has played the dog.

After his take-off I went to the Consulate to write my dispatches and arrange to have the Turkish censor release all news. This I had done by two A.M. I had also prepared a special radio to you for transmission to Bari, the contents to furnish material for Arabic broadcasts.

At 2:15 A.M. I heard gunfire, cannon. In these times the Turks shoot first at an unknown plane and inquire later. The

sub-prefect of police, Karzan Bey, who is our man, rushed in.

"Effendi," he cried, "something is wrong. The plane you sent has returned. Our scouts are forcing it down."

My plane back? What had happened? I rushed out to the car and drove to the airdrome a mile away. It was true. In the glare of the floodlights the Junkers was taxiing to the ramp. A squad of Turkish soldiers had surrounded it.

Before I could interfere I saw the lieutenant bring O'Hara and Cyrilla Marshall out under gun-point. It took a stretcher to take out Pietro. Luigi was immediately arrested. And then, *Signor,* young Achmed El Orfali was carried out. He was kicking and alive.

I knew then that my plan had failed in the first step and that I must manufacture another. As soon as the confusion had died out I hastened into the office of the commandant, *Bimbashi* Taled[1], a friend of the accursed English.

"What has happened, *Bimbashi Effendi?"* I cried.

He gestured to a door. "The American, O'Hara, is under arrest for night flying without permission over Turkish territory," he said coldly.

"But he had permission," I protested. "I arranged for that myself."

"He had permission to *go;* not to return," said the *Bimbashi.*

I saw I would get nothing here. I went through the door. O'Hara was standing by a barred window, smoking a cigarette.

"In the name of God, what happened?" I demanded.

He turned on me, the muscles in his jaw working. "Cavacci," he said softly, "all bets are off. Here's your dough—all that's left," and he flung me a package of *lire* notes.

"You mean you—you turned back deliberately?" I cried, enraged.

"I did just that, you yellow rat," he said. "You were going to murder that kid, Achmed, and Cyrilla Marshall—as you killed the *Mullah.*

He went on talking in a low, terrible voice. Cyrilla Marshall had unloosed her bonds, he said, and burst through the door of the baggage compartment. She had screamed at O'Hara who got to her just before Luigi shot. He had knocked out Luigi and Pietro, and released the girl and the young Arab, and turned back.

"And from now on, Cavacci, I'm on the other team," he said savagely. "I like the Arabs and I hate your guts."

I was scarcely hearing. My perfect plan was tumbling in ruins about my ears. And as he talked on I discovered he knew or guessed all my scheme. I let him curse, trying to see how complete ruin might be averted.

One problem stood out starkly.

At all costs the boy, Achmed El Orfali, must not tell what he saw in the *Mullah's* house. All else must wait on that.

I dashed to the outer office and sought the *Bimbashi.*

"The girl and the Arab boy," I cried, "where are they?"

Bimbashi Talad was no friend of ours, and he proved it now.

"There was no reason to arrest them," he smiled. "They are gone."

"But where?"

He shrugged. "What matters it to me? I do not know."

Lying or not, I knew he would not tell. I knew more. O'Hara had gone to their side. They would need him. He knew where the boy and Cyrilla Marshall were hidden. He must be made to tell.

You see my dilemma, *Padrone.* Official statements had left the Palazzo Chigi. We were committed to the premise that the British had murdered the *Mullah* and also young Achmed El Orfali. If Achmed appeared alive and told his story, it would be we, the Italians, that the Arabs would attack. They might, as under Lawrence of Arabia, undertake to guard the Mosul

[1] *Bimbashi* is the Turkish title for Major.

oil pipe-line, and relieve British troops for action against us in Egypt. We stood to lose the war in the East.

Ah, *Signor,* I worked like ten devils throughout the night. And none too soon. Matthew Luke and the English moved heaven and earth to gain O'Hara's freedom.

I worked for his imprisonment because, as you well know, *Padrone,* a Turkish prison can break the bravest man.

And I won. I talked with the Italian and German ambassadors at Ankhara and told as much as I was compelled to. They went to work. And today O'Hara is in prison in Stambul, charged with espionage. He has refused to talk, but a few days will change that.

Meanwhile, the Gestapo, the Russian OGPU, and two Japanese agents are helping my men reach every nook and cranny of Istanbul for Achmed El Orfali.

Simply keep reiterating the charge of murder, *Signor.* I swear that Arab boy shall never be *khalif,* or tell what he knows. *Viva Il Duce!*

Chapter VII

INNER WHEELS

From Seccione Two (T) via Bari to Cavacci (Code C). CONFIDENTIAL DESTROY MESSAGE BEGINS HUSSEIN EL ORFALI HAS RISEN AGAINST BRITISH AND IS MARCHING ASSEMBLING TRIBES AGAINST MOSUL PIPELINE PERIOD AFRICAN CAMPAIGN BEGUN WITH THREE POINT ATTACK ON BRITISH SOMALILAND TO CUT RED SEA EXIT[1] PERIOD IMPOSSIBLE TO WITHDRAW FROM PRESENT POSITION WITHOUT MAKING ARABS ENEMIES PERIOD IF YOU CANNOT CAPTURE BOY THEN USE SUBSTITUTE TO CONVINCE EL ORFALI PERIOD FOR THIRTY DAYS HE MUST NOT KNOW TRUTH PERIOD YOU WILL BE TRIED FOR YOUR FAILURE MESSAGE ENDS STRAZZA.

Hotel Des Londres, Rue Galata, Istanbul, July 26 (5:10 P.M.) Padrone: Your radio message acknowledged, and you have neither to threaten my life nor to outline the crisis. All possible is being done to restore the situation. We have found no trace of the boy, Achmed El Orfali, nor of the legless Matthew Luke.

Through our work in the Turkish Prefecture of Police we have closed the exits of Turkey.

They cannot get out without our knowledge. And I have a plan that will find the boy within the next twenty-four hours. It came as a result of our first stroke of luck. I shall explain.

This afternoon I went to Stambul prison to see O'Hara. In order to break him I had had him placed in the lower tier of cells that are forty feet below the ground level. These are partly filled with water, and have no light save as the prisoner buys candles from the warder at sixty *piasters* each. A man of O'Hara's wild and free nature cannot long endure this. I went to see if he was softening.

The conditions were horrible!

He exists in a cell eight feet by six, the brick walls clammy with sodden moisture There is no bed; only a mass of mouldy straw and three old blankets, all damp. He has only two meals a day; in the morning at seven, a cup of Turkish coffee, and a small chunk of bread; at two o'clock a pannikan of *soupe* made of lentils and potatoes. A single pail of water suffices for drinking and toilet.

That is not the worst. He is twenty-four hours a day alone with his thoughts. All civilized people require escape from themselves at times; they seek it in theaters, drinking, women, other people, books. Here there is nothing but yourself and darkness and silence.

[1] Recent newspaper dispatches report capture by Italians of British Somaliland.

I expected to find O'Hara a raging madman, pacing his cell like a caged hyena.

But as the steel door clanked and I entered, I saw him squatted on the floor. On a wooden bench three candles burned. He had a steel mirror burnished and was reflecting it across the cell where three or four inches of stagnant water reflected the light.

"Steady," he said, not looking up, "I've got the beastie hypnotized."

I looked. He had reflected the light of the candle on the reddish eyes of a rat. The rat was staring back, motionless. O'Hara's hand reached out stealthily and seized a leg of the bench he had evidently wrenched off. Now he suddenly hurled it.

The rat screeched and went down, smashed and dead.

O'Hara grinned happily and put away the mirror. Now he looked up. His jaw set and his eyes thinned as he saw me. Then he smiled.

"Just a little indoor amusement, Arnaldo," he said. "I counted all the straw, piece by piece—there are three thousand and ten, including the rotting little bits. So now I've taken up hunting. Got four of the stinking things."

He paused, then added, "They don't bother in the daytime, but they start gnawing on my boots and clothes at night and walk on my face."

"You don't have to stay here, O'Hara," I said in English.

He plucked the stub of a cigarette from behind his ear; bent his lean face to the candle and ignited it.

"You mean if I'll tell you what you want to know, you'll turn me loose?"

"Yes," I said.

He blew out a cone of smoke. "Don't lie, Arnaldo, I know too much. I could stop the Arabs—Hussein, in particular—and you don't want that."

"How do you know Hussein marches?" I cried.

"Transatlantic telephone," he grinned.

I looked at the turnkey. He returned my stare guilelessly. My suspicions were aroused. Why was O'Hara so cheerful? Why this bland confidence? I bided my time and begged, cajoled, threatened and tried money up to twenty thousand *lire*. But he merely smiled.

"You help pass the time, Arnaldo, but you waste your breath." He paused, then said, "Arnaldo, I had a dream last night. I dreamt I shot you—and I had no regrets."

"You'll rot in here until your bones are phosphorus," I yelled.

"Not that long, Arnaldo," he grinned.

Then I knew my suspicions were true, and went out.

As soon as we had reached the ground level I swung on the turnkey. He was a thin Turk with gray mustaches and wore a green silk cloth on his uniform cap to show he had made the *hagi*. His name was Abdul Khara.

"Abdul," I said curtly, "the *miralai*[1] in command of this prison is a friend of mine. He hates corruption. If I were to tell him you had been bribed to permit a prisoner to escape—"

HE GASPED as I struck him across the mouth.

"I swear by Allah (upon whom he praise) who has told you this, lies in his beard," he yelled.

But there was a flicker of surprised terror in his eyes.

I seized him by the shoulders and shook him.

"Now, *Onbashi*,"[2] I said, "you do not have to lie. Indeed, I wish to help you earn this money, and will double it if you tell me the truth, and say nothing to any one. But continue to lie and by Allah's beard, thou shalt feel the *bastinado* and be hung besides."

I handed him a thousand *lire* note. He stared stupidly. "You mean you wish O'Hara *Effendi* to escape?"

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1 *Miralai:* the Arabic term for Colonel.
2 *Onbashi:* Turkish name for Corporal.

"I do," I said, "but he must not know you have told."

He smiled then. "By Allah, upon whom be prayers, I say nothing. O'Hara would kill me." Swiftly he told me the plan. Late tonight—at eleven—a Turk will take O'Hara's place in the cell. O'Hara goes out the postern gate.

I shall be waiting, watching, *Signor,* and O'Hara will lead me to where the boy, Achmed, is hidden. For it is Matthew Luke who is arranging this escape.

Upon the outcome I will report at once.

From Cavacci to Strazza, Seccione Two (T) Code C, via Dodecanese and Bari. URGENT MESSAGE BEGINS DISPATCH IMMEDIATELY LONG RANGE SCOUT PLANES FROM DODECANESE OR CARRIER TO INTERCEPT AMERICAN LOCKHEED WHICH MAY BE FLYING EAST AND SOUTH OF ANTILEBANON MOUNTAINS TRANSJORDANIA SYRIA BORDER ABOUT DAWN TWENTY SEVENTH PERIOD SHOOT DOWN AND DESTROY PERIOD FULLER REPORT FOLLOWS MESSAGE ENDS.

Oasis El Khebir, Transjordania, July 27 (2:05 P.M.) Signor: I seize these few moments to amplify and explain my urgent radio. At the moment I am in Transjordania. But I go back to when I waited in the darkness by the postern gate of Stambul prison.

Luigi suddenly slid up beside me, excited and worried.

Signor, he whispered, "I have just come from the Air Ministry office. You have been tricked."

I turned on him. "What do you mean?"

"The British—this legless Matthew Luke—have obtained permission to fly a plane south. The plane, an American, is on the ramp now, waiting."

"How do you know this?" I snapped.

He told me that Fouada, a clerk in the Ministry who is our man, had come to him with the facts. There could be no doubt of the truth.

Instantly I perceived the purpose of Matthew Luke's aid to O'Hara's escape. O'Hara would fly Achmed El Orfali south. He would go to his father, and our whole campaign would be shown as a tissue of lies. I turned to the postern gate. O'Hara had not yet emerged. I knew I could stop him; perhaps capture Luke and the boy, too. But there was also the chance that another pilot might be found—or this a ruse to draw my attention.

So I sent Luigi with the message to the Consulate; you have it by now, and God pray that the planes have left Dodecanese.

At quarter to midnight Michael O'Hara emerged. He must have had help from high influence, for he came out boldly and walked without disguise down the slope that led to Galata Bridge. I followed him.

Going up Pera Hill to European Istanbul, Luigi rejoined me.

"It's gone?" I asked.

"Urgent," he nodded. "His Excellency, who is the cousin of Count Ciano, told me to assure you Italian planes will intercept."

"They'd better," I said and smiled mirthlessly. On what slender bases do we build empires.

By now O'Hara had swung around the equestrian statue of Mustapha Kemal Pasha (who could scarcely sit a horse) and gone up the Rue Suleiman Pasha. We would run him to ground shortly.

In this section of Istanbul are modern apartments and at the tallest O'Hara turned in. I swung on Luigi.

"Get Handt, Koch, all our men," I said swiftly. "They are to come armed. Hurry! Turkish police or no, we take Luke and his swine out of that apartment."

"And you, *Signor?*" he asked.

"I'll be locating the hideout. Whistle the signal when you come. I'll be waiting to point out the right apartment."

He slid off into the darkness. I entered the apartment house. There were many doors, but they did not concern me then. I first went to the rear to mark what means of escape there were, and to plan to block them. There was only a rear door that

led to garages. Two armed men could stop egress here.

I returned to the *rez-de-chaussee.* There was no elevator, and I reasoned that a legless man would locate himself on the ground level. I began looking for clues.

But as I came under the balustrade of the stairs I suddenly stopped.

A cold steel gun muzzle pressed against the base of my neck.

"All right, Arnaldo," said O'Hara's voice, "keep your hands in sight and walk to door number two."

Chapter VIII

WINGS IN THE NIGHT

I WAS stunned. "But—I—"

He chuckled. "I just won two hundred *lire.* Walk—and walk carefully."

I walked, the gun prodding my neck. The door to number two opened at his knock. He pushed me inside.

I saw Cyrilla Marshall and she was smiling joyfully. I saw Matthew Luke in his incredible wicker chair. He was smiling.

The Arab boy, Achmed El Orfali, saw me and cried, *"Wallah!* Is O'Hara *Effendi* a *djinn* that he foretells what will happen?"

O'Hara shut the door with the heel of his boot.

"Cyrilla," he grinned, "I said Cavacci would follow and we'd bag him. You owe me two hundred *lire."*

"I'm glad to pay off, my lad," she said.

"What—what does this mean?" I growled furiously.

The legless Luke spoke. "O'Hara thinks, Cavacci, that if we deliver you to Hussein El Orfali at the same time we return his son, your confession will buttress the boy's testimony for all tribes."

Signor, I turned cold. You know the Arabs. In their hands, they who have made torture an art, death would be long in coming and something to scream and thank God for. If this were permitted to happen, every Arab in Asia and Africa would swear blood-feud against Italy.

My mind flashed to Luigi. Could he get Handt and Koch and the others here in time? Somehow I must delay them.

"Hussein has already risen," I forced a laugh. "He attacks with all the desert tribes—and cannot be reached by radio."

"You will meet him at El Khebir at dawn," said O'Hara. "And he has not yet attacked."

I knew, then, that British Intelligence was in this to the hilt. Before I could speak again the telephone rang. Cyrilla Marshall answered, shifted to Turkish, and then brought the instrument to Matthew Luke. We waited silently, tensely. How I prayed for Luigi's return.

The legless Luke spoke only four words, *"Tayib! Shokr! Allah yehfazak!"* All of which means, "Very well! Thanks! God keep you"

He hung up and said in a queer strained voice, "O'Hara, silence the prisoner. A new development causes a shift in plan."

Cyrilla cried, "You mean we do not go south to intercept Hussein?"

"We do," said Matthew Luke, "but—take care of Cavacci, O'Hara."

O'Hara had stepped close to me. "Sorry, Arnaldo," he said, "but this seems the simplest way."

I tried to dodge, *Signor,* but his balled fist was like a white streak. I saw it for a divided second. Then the world crashed against my jaw and all was blackness. . . .

Oasis El Khebir, Transjordania, July 30 (10:05 A.M.) Padrone: I continue with the crisis in which I found myself.

I regained my senses aboard the Lockheed plane. I was tied hand and foot, and a turn of rope held me fast to the seat. O'Hara was at the controls, his face hard in the greenish light of the instrument board. In the co-pilot's seat sat Cyrilla Marshall. In her lap lay the boy, Achmed El Orfali. His face was bandaged and so was his neck and chest. I started.

The boy had been wounded. But how?

Had Koch and Handt struck and failed? I saw that Matthew Luke was not aboard. Something was amiss here.

As I sat with eyes closed, pretending insensibility, Cyrilla got out a chart and conversed in low tones with O'Hara. I gathered we were past the lower Anti-Lebanon range and flying into the dawn.

"El Khebir at daybreak," O'Hara said.

Ah, *Signor,* at that moment I remembered my radio message to you. Somewhere south of the mountains your planes would intercept. It might—it would—mean my own life. But that did not matter so long as O'Hara never reached El Khebir with Achmed El Orfali.

The plane droned on.

I lay quiet and listened to their talk.

Signor, I learned, then, that O'Hara loved this girl. His eyes, his speech, his gestures betrayed him. Whether she loved him I could not tell. But she was constantly urging him to work for Matthew Luke.

"I can only be his eyes," she said. "But you can be more than his legs—you can be the weapon in his hand."

She spoke of Luke who had been a young officer in 1917 and had had his eyes blown out and his legs blown off by a shell at Ypres in a fruitless attack. He had made a fortune in Canada and spent it, working for peace.

"He works for peace now," she said in a low voice, "because only in England's victory does the hope of world peace lie."

They talked and the eastern sky grew gray and below us were the barren black mountains and beyond the flat burnished brown of the desert. The moments grew fewer.

I prayed that our planes would come. Good God, how I willed for them!

AND they came, *Padrone*

I had sunk into uneasy dozing, dreaming that I had led the Arabs to the great pipe-line and had blasted it with dynamite, watching the rich black life blood of the British Mediterranean fleet leak into the yellow sand.

Suddenly I awakened sharply. O'Hara had cursed and thrown the plane into a maneuver that would have toppled me to the fuselage floor but for the ropes.

I looked out the window. A black shape banked against the sky and I saw—what joy, *Signor!*—the Fasces[1] of Italy. This plane had sighted us and radioed his mates, for two more came roaring out of the west.

"You had better land and surrender, O'Hara," I yelled. "They have one-pounders and fifty calibre machine-guns. They will blow you to pieces."

O'Hara did not reply. He glanced at the watch strapped to his wrist. And then he opened the throttle wide. But though the plane was fast—two-eighty, I should judge—it could not escape the medium Fiats which could do three hundred fifty. They closed in deliberately, boxing the Lockheed so that one ship could ride the tail and gain a steady target.

Cyrilla had on the headphones of the radio. She turned the dial so that a red light shone on the instrument board.

"The flight leader calls for your surrender, Mike," she said. "He gives thirty seconds."

I knew then, *Signor,* that Luigi had somehow got word to you that I must be aboard. That flight leader wanted to save me.

O'Hara laughed. "El Khebir is less than a hundred miles. How's your courage?"

"I'm scared to death," she said, "but I'm calm about it."

"Then grip on those Vickers machine-gun butts and let's surprise 'em. We'll gamble."

I have told you, *Padrone,* that O'Hara was a fine flyer. He knows all the tricks and he used them, and had there been a cloud in that desert sky he could have reached it, plunged in and escaped. But

[1] The Italian air emblem is two *fasces,* the rods and axe of the old Roman Empire.

he was fighting men who knew the future of the New Italy rested with them.

They gave him one more chance. One pilot lay almost wing-tip to wing-tip. He leaned out, the new sun's rays glinting redly on his goggles. He thumbed down, then pounded his gun breeches. He was thinking we had no radio or if so, it was out of order.

O'Hara grinned. "Less than eighty miles, gal," he chuckled, "we're gaining."

Then the attack began.

We rolled around the sky in loops, half-rolls, dives and ninety degree banks. We zoomed, dived. That heavy Lockheed responded to O'Hara like a stubby chaser. And always he gained a little south-east.

But, suddenly, pulling up to avoid the head-on fire of one Fiat, O'Hara lost speed and a streaking plane dropped on his tail. The guns roared.

Padrone, it is not death that is to be feared. It is the constant groping of its fingers that twist a man's soul.

I could hear the roar of the one-pounder. An explosive shell tore open the duralumin cabin over my head. I heard the *rat-tat-tat-tat* of the machine-guns and the tracer bullets tore into us like fireflies gone mad.

O'Hara swerved out of the fire lane but not until the cabin over our heads had been torn open as with a can-opener.

He threw the plane in position and Cyrilla pulled the triggers of the guns. The boy in her lap lay relaxed and sleeping. It seemed impossible but it was so.

Then a Fiat coming slantwise hit the left wing with an explosive shell. The internal bracing smashed; the wing began to weave. A Fiat sideslipped in the rear and a burst of a hundred bullets stitched seams across the right wing. It did not sag, but it was weakened.

Any more sharp maneuvering and the wings would sheer off. We had no parachutes, and we were in a dive.

"I daren't pull her out," said O'Hara. "We'll probably come in fast. Bank yourself with cushions."

The Fiats withheld their fire as we tore earthward. But that explosive shell on the left had shattered the reserve petrol tank. The gasoline sprayed out whitely. O'Hara cut the port motor to prevent a fire. But when we landed we should burn.

"O'Hara," I said, "we'll be in flames. Do I burn to death?"

He was easing the plane out of the dive.

"Take my gun, Cyrilla," he said. "Untie Cavacci, and if he tries to move shoot him dead."

In that last thousand-meter fall she untied me. But the gun muzzle covered me and I knew she would shoot. There was no use to try trickery. After the smash I would be master of the situation.

I heard the buzz of the retracted wheels going down. The desert was ahead and down and flowing past like a yellow river torrent.

"Hang on," said O'Hara, "this is liable to be slightly rough."

Rough? Good Mother of God! There was a bump and the plane sailed sideways and O'Hara fought the wheel-control. Another bad bump and the left wing sheered. It tore open the fuselage beside me and cut me with flying duralumin pieces.

A smash and the right wing cracked, but fell clear. Then the plane hopped like a kangaroo—we were in the lap of God, and He had the controls.

In that instant the plane made a wild gyration, half-tipped. I shot through the opened cabin. I caught at a trailing wire. I hung momentarily suspended, the wire burning my hands. Then I fell. The Sweet Mother Mary watched over me then, for I landed slack-kneed, double and rolled like a circus tumbler.

CHAPTER IX

DESERT BATTLE

WHEN I had my wits about me, *Padrone,* I saw the Lockheed a mile ahead on the edge of a small oasis. It was tilted and rested against the stub of the

broken left wing. There was no movement about it.

One of the Fiats had landed and now taxied up opposite me. The pilot leaped out and I greeted him with a joyous yell.

He is Senior Lieutenant Giovanni Strafaci and he should be cited in dispatches as a cool, resolute and quick-thinking officer.

After I had established my identity he said, "My orders were, if I came upon you, to place myself and my flight at your command. Something about an Arab boy."

I gestured toward O'Hara's plane. "He's in there."

Lieutenant Strafaci turned toward his ship. "We'll soon have him out."

"Wait," I said.

My mind had been working swiftly. The British are wily, the Arabs not stupid. If Achmed El Orfali had survived that landing—and he should—then to have the pro-British Arabs find him dead in a smashed British plane would not bear out our story. As I thought, Strafaci stirred uneasily.

"British reconnaissance planes come this way, *Capitano,*" he said. "And we have just sufficient petrol to return to the base. We cannot delay long because a combat would use up our petrol reserves."

I had calculated that.

"Where are our men?" I asked, meaning those brought by transport plane to work with the friendly Arabs.

He replied, "There are ten of them thirty miles to westward. They and the Ulalla tribe captured a British supply train last night."

I clapped my hands. "Excellent! We'll see how O'Hara has done. If he is alive I will stand guard. You or one of your flight will fly to the Ulalla tribe and have them come swiftly. The rest you can leave to me."

He nodded and at my request gave me his pistol. He swung his plane and while I clung to the wing we taxied toward the Lockheed.

At four hundred yards we were greeted with a burst of machine-gun fire that riddled the wing on which I lay.

I screamed at Strafaci, "He's going to shoot it out. And his radio may be in shape to summon help."

He nodded, swerving the plane to the right.

"Can you fly me to the Ulalla tribe on the wing?"

It was dangerous, *Signor,* but it was possible and I now knew I must go with him to speed up the *finale* before British aid arrived. So he took off, *Padrone,* with me hanging to the edge of the fuselage. Thank God, it was not a long trip. Indeed, it was even shorter than I had anticipated, for the Ulallas had been moving eastward.

I saw them down there, the Arabs in Buick touring cars, and four British military trucks with them. And behind a flock of some hundred camels.

Strafaci landed near them. He glanced anxiously up at his own flight.

"I must return to the base immediately, *Signor Capitano.* What message shall I take?"

I smiled, watching two cars crammed with Arabs careen over the desert toward us.

"Tell them," I said, "that Hussein El Orfali will continue to be the deadly enemy of the British, and that the Mosul pipe-line will be cut before tomorrow's dawn."

I turned to face the oncoming Arabs.

Oasis of Wadi Halfa, Transjordania, July 29 (6:00 P.M.) Padrone: Success! I hold all the cards and there is no way we

can fail. I take up at my junction with the friendly Ulallah tribe.

The sheik, Abdul ibn Ali Mo'zen, had been warned of my coming and had splendid news.

All the desert tribes have risen, *Padrone.*

Hussein El Orfali's messengers have penetrated everywhere. He has taken the title of *Mahdi,* leader, and has declared a holy war.

Everywhere you hear the war-cry of the *jehed, "Thibhakum bism er Rassoul!"* (Kill in the name of the Prophet).

SHEIK Abdul had four British prisoners but intended to execute them. I asked him to wait and without telling him what I had in mind, told him of O'Hara's present location.

"He and Matthew Luke," I said, "killed the boy Achmed El Orfali."

He pulled at his perfumed beard.

"So!" he said. "Hussein and I have made *ghrazzu*[1] but we have no feud. I shall go with you."

And so, *Signor,* stuffed into a Buick whose paint the desert sands have removed, we careened over the trackless waste to where O'Hara was down.

Lieutenant Strafaci dipped his wings in salute and headed west. I did not care. I needed nothing but what I now had, to arrange the end.

But the moment did not come quite then. In three-quarters of an hour our advance unit of four cars full of Arabs reached the spot of the crash.

But the smashed Lockheed was not there!

The broken wings, the tire marks—but the plane—what had become of it?

"Wallah!" yelled Sheik Abdul, "are we then bewitched by *djinns*—or do you lie?"

"Drive on—around the oasis," I cried, suddenly realizing. "Quick — and go fast."

HE OBEYED doubtfully, but shouted in joy when we had swung south of the oasis.

There was the Lockheed plane, taxiing over the desert, guided only by her rudder and driven by her propellers. Not fast, *Padrone,* for the plane was illy-balanced. But O'Hara was still trying to reach the Rualla tribe and Sheik Hussein El Orfali.

The Arabs needed no urging then. They fired their guns in joy and we tore across the desert in pursuit. I prepared myself for this last act.

And we caught them, just at the edge of the oasis Wadi Halfa, where I write this.

O'Hara drove that smashed plane into the trees and greenery. He tried to get out and swing his machine-guns on us. But I urged Sheik Abdul to the greatest speed. And those Buicks were fast—they had to be for the sheik to catch his prey on the desert.[2]

And before O'Hara could loosen his guns we careened alongside and the cars disgorged Arabs. We rushed, I leading the way. Guns were exploding. Cyrilla Marshall, carrying the boy, was running for the protection of the trees. I reached her, flung her to the ground so hard the boy, Achmed, fell from her arms. I fired three bullets into the boy's chest. He moved not at all as death took him. He would never be *khalif* now.

Cyrilla did not move, was senseless. I turned, my heart pounding. O'Hara was down, swarmed upon by Arabs.

"Take him alive," I screamed. "The death of Achmed El Orfali is on his face

[1] *Ghrazzu* is an Arab game of war played by certain rules that reduce fatalities.

[2] With the coming of the motor car to the desert the Arab has abandoned his camels in his robbing and raiding and uses automobiles to catch the busses and automobiles that cross the desert from Baghdad to Haifa and Damascus. The Nairn busline which runs eight-wheelers by the sun by day, by compass and stars by night, buys immunity from the sheiks on the route. But every so often, a greedy sheik will careen his cars alongside and rob the passengers. Nowadays the bus-drivers go unarmed and have orders to stop, because the casualties of resistance got too high. But the Arabs still keep camels for milk, cloth and other products—camel dung for fires.

and he must answer for that to Hussein, the father."

By the time I reached him a rifle butt had knocked him senseless. I took Abdul by the arm and led him to the dead body of the boy. The face and chest were still bandaged but it took only a glance to see he was dead.

"See what the British dogs have done," I said.

He stared down. *"Wallah!"* he muttered, "curse the British now. We shall exterminate them."

"And we ride tonight to join Hussein and attack at Abou Kembal."

"We go now," he shouted.

Padrone, the New Italy has struck—the British Middle Empire crumbles in ruins.

Chapter X

BATTLE AT DUSK

ON MARCH across Transjordania to Abou Kembal, July 31 (8:15 P.M.) Padrone: We move toward the Mosul pipeline at Abou Kembal. By the time you receive this it will be cut, the Mediterranean fleet made helpless. We shall organize the tribes then and march on Jerusalem, capture Jaffa.

I have trucks of ammunition, two one-pounders and six cases of dynamite. All the Arabs are armed with Mauser rifles and have plenty of ammunition.

O'Hara and the girl are prisoners. They are in the rear truck. I shall turn them over to Hussein El Orfali, probably about dawn. Their deaths will not be pleasant.

I plan to trick O'Hara. His chief concern, now that Achmed El Orfali lies dead in the lead truck, is to save Cyrilla Marshall. I shall use this desire to buttress our position. I shall explain that after my present talk with O'Hara.

On March across Transjordania to Abou Kembal, July 31 (11:05 P.M.) Padrone: With Lieutenant Taliferri of the parachute troops in charge of my men, I rode just now with O'Hara and made my proposal to him.

"O'Hara," I told him, "you can have an easy death or a hard one. The girl can be spared or die with you. The choice is up to you."

"In return for what?" he demanded.

"I want your sworn statement that the British killed the *Mullah,* and then Achmed El Orfali. Hussein will believe your word."

O'Hara looked at me. "And if I do not?"

"Sheik Abdul will stake you out in the sand and slit your belly and fill it with sand."

There is no worse death, the most lingering, most painful of all. He knew it. He knew also that I would not fail to carry out my word.

"And you say you'll spare Cyrilla?" he asked.

"I swear it," I said.

He laughed harshly. "You lying rat! You know you won't. She knows too much."

I kept my head. *"Si,* the *signorina* knows too much. But I can make death for her painless and quick."

"And you could also make it hard?" I heard his teeth grind.

"I can and will unless you agree."

"No, Mike, don't," she said.

"Hush, gal," said Mike. He glared at me. "Bring on your statement, Cavacci. I'll sign."

I called out to Taliferri to bring me paper and pen. He came, his face anxious.

"Capitano," he said, "that airplane just now was an English reconnaissance plane."

I smiled. "What difference, Lieutenant? They were bound to see such a group."

"But they will be prepared, ready."

I shrugged. "At Abou Kembal there are perhaps fifty troops, a few small guns. Against ten thousand Arabs—which we will have with Hussein—what can they do but run?"

He nodded and returned to his post. I climbed into the truck.

O'Hara looked up at me. "If Cyrilla would swear to keep silent, Cavacci, could you give her a break?"

"How can I violate military necessity?" I said. "An incident must be complete."

It was growing dark with the rapidity of dry desert country. But there was still light enough for him to write.

"She shall be strangled," I added.

The girl's white face never changed. O'Hara muttered something. "You'll have to unfasten my hands so I can write," he said.

I knew his legs were tied, which made him helpless. So I bent over to untie the knots. As I did so his hands snaked upward and closed around my throat.

He laughed joyously. "Now, Cavacci," he cried, "it's you and me and to hell with the rest."

I staggered back, clawing at his hands. And so we fell with a crash from the truck rear. He made the mistake of breaking his hold to stop the aim of my gun which I drew. So I tore loose.

And as I did so a machine-gun rattled to the right, a storm of bullets swept over me like hail. There were screams, yells, moans of agony. Men fell, their kaftans suddenly covered with blood. I caught a fleeting glimpse of men charging upon us.

Men on camels. Men on horses. Men in motor cars. Arabs! And leading them, his *howdah* perched on a horse, the horse led by the seven-foot Arab, was Matthew Luke, The Man Who Has No Legs. Someone rushed through and cut the bonds on O'Hara's legs. He rose and plunged at me.

Chapter XI

MISERICORDE

OASIS of El Khebir, Transjordania, August 2 (Midnight). Padrone: I pray this vital report reaches you, for it may be the last I shall ever write. To explain, I return to that fatal instant when O'Hara and I fought it out, and Luke, the legless man, charged us with his yelling Arabs. With him was a great, white-bearded sheik—Hussein El Orfali!

How Luke had ever persuaded the Arab to attack us and his own race I did not know. But I did know that if O'Hara and the girl died now, there was one slim chance that he would believe the British had murdered his son.

I had time to think no more. O'Hara was on me like a charging leopard.

His fingers locked around my throat. We lay chest to chest, and I could not break the stranglehold.

But as my eyes darkened and death came I saw, looming against the sky, The Man Who Has No Legs.

He was riding in his wicker *howdah* on the back of the huge Arab. And he called out, "O'Hara! Stop it, O'Hara!"

And then Cyrilla Marshall was racing toward us, slim silk legs flying. And she pulled at O'Hara and had him loose. I lay gasping.

O'Hara straightened up, dazed. "Why did you stop me?" he muttered. "I was just going good."

I lay there, rubbing my neck. The firing had ceased, the battle was over. And as Luke stood there Hussein El Orfali came up. I would have bluffed and lied it through, but I could not.

Beside the sheik walked a boy of seven or eight with drawn small scimitar, Achmed El Orfali. Yet I had killed him. I staggered upward and looked at the truck. A boy's body lay there. What did this mean? What trickery had taken place?

O'Hara nodded grimly at me. "Yes, that lad in the truck is dead, Cavacci. But you won't answer for his murder. He was dead before we left Istanbul."

I stared in amazement.

"The boy had died of pneumonia," said O'Hara. "We were warned that your plans might be to intercept us. So we dressed him in Achmed's clothes and Cyrilla—God

bless her!—carried that dead body in her arms. Matthew Luke and Achmed left by another plane while you trailed us as was expected."

Tricked! And the Arab support irrevocably lost. Italy's empire must be won without them.

As I sat silent, crushed, O'Hara and Luke talked.

"It was a near call," said Luke. "But Hussein and I could not start until the British scout plane had located you."

"It was all right," O'Hara said, "except for Cyrilla—a dead child in her lap for a thousand miles."

I heard no more. Two of Hussein El Orfali's men seized me, bound me cruelly. The sheik faced me sternly.

"The *Mullah* was blood-brother to me," he said, "and by Allah (upon whom be prayers) his vengeance is on my face. And you shall suffer the death for killing a holy man."

They dragged me away. I am under guard now while the tribal leaders meet on my fate. My hands have been freed. I have paper and pen, presumably to write a confession. So I pen this report to you which God grant you receive.

How the problem can be solved—I can write no more, *Padrone.* They have come for me. *Viva Il Duce!*

EXCERPT from the diary of Michael O'Hara, August 3: Cyrilla and I stood in the oasis under the moonlight tonight. I was trying to convince her that I had been a fool, a stooge, through most of this affair. She was telling me I should cease to fight for money, a smile, a whim, and fight for my heart. We were in each other's arms. We did not speak of love; we knew.

Matthew Luke came presently on the back of Ali.

We came apart. He said, "I'd like to have you, Michael. I'd like your legs, I'd like your fighting spirit. But you are needed elsewhere."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Bombs fall on London," he said. "Children and women are torn as if by wild beasts in their hellish explosions. Only one thing can save them; stop the German planes."

I knew what he meant. So did Cyrilla. Her hand came out unexpectedly and then seized mine.

"You're a fighting pilot and England needs them. England defends civilization, is the outpost for America."

I stood silent.

"I cannot take you when England totters," Luke said. "Not when there are wings to fly with, hot guns to shoot down the monsters who rend and tear human flesh with bombs."

"Yes," I said, "I know, Matthew Luke, and I agree."

"Then," he said, "God bless you—and all arrangements will be made."

He was gone then, and we stood there in the moonlight. Cyrilla and I. Her hand on mine, her lovely face lifted in exaltation to the silver glow of the moon. I wanted to kiss her and say things. But I didn't.

Because as we stood I heard a moan. It was the kind torn from a man through clenched lips by an agony beyond human endurance.

Cyrilla shivered. I let go her hand. I remembered Cavacci.

"I'll be back in a moment," I said, and she did not move or turn, but she knew what I intended to do. I went through the Oasis to the far side beyond the Arab tents.

I found Arnaldo Cavacci. Stakes had been driven into the ground and ropes tied to them. The ropes held Cavacci's arms and legs and he was spread-eagled with his face to the sky. His eyelids had been cut off, and all day he had stared into the blazing desert sun. The skin over his stomach had been neatly slit so as not to disturb the inner organs. And into the orifice a few grains of sand had been thrust.

Peritonitis had already set in. His eyes

had been baked blind. He was dying, and he was dying terribly. He had evidently heard the hiss of sand under my feet, for the utter agony of his face stiffened to a livid mask of a man fighting to smile.

"See, you swine," he said in Arabic, "how a man can die."

I felt only pity for him then. Cavacci had lived according to his lights and fought the same way. And if he must die for murder, then it should not be this kind of death. I bent over him.

"Hush, Arnaldo," I said, "it can be made easier."

"O'Hara?" he asked thickly.

I knelt down. All hatred I had felt for him vanished now. You can't hate a man who can bravely die this way for what he believes. "Yes, Arnaldo."

He gave way to his pain and I had to look away from his face. But his voice, though strained, was steady. "I tricked you. I did what I could—it was for Italy —the great Italy of the Romans. The new Roman Empire."

I said nothing.

"You have won," he said, "or rather Matthew Luke has won. And now, in the last moment, I ask of you a favor."

I knew what it was. I said, "Yes, Arnaldo, that's why I have come."

"Then in the name of the Lord God, O'Hara, be quick! The Arabs will come. I can't have them seeing a man—a white man—grovelling like a dog. Quick, in the name of sweet Jesu, O'Hara."

I TOOK out the gun. The star-glitter and moon hung along its steel edges.

"Through the brain, O'Hara, the blessed end," he gasped.

I moved until I was behind his head. His staring blind eyes looked up but could not see me. His encrusted lips were parted. As I leveled the gun I saw a shadow on the sand. Hussein El Orfali stood there.

He did not speak. His eyes were merciless and so was his face.

I pulled the trigger. On the desert night the gun report roared like a cannon. I leaned down, extinguished the fire that the flash had started in Cavacci's black hair. His face was oddly, suddenly, at peace.

I straightened up and walked around him. Hussein stood there, his arms folded.

"He was a dog," he said, "and he deserved to die harder. But always, *ferengi*, thy heart is too big. Some day it will be the white man's undoing."

I said nothing. He locked his arm with mine. "Come and drink some mint tea," he said, "and I'll tell you of my plans."

Beyond the oasis I could see Cyrilla. I walked with him, and knew she would be there when I came out of the striped tent.

Clipping from New York Press, August 24: Captain Michael J. O'Hara, former test pilot and barnstorming flyer, and Cyrilla Marshall of Menton, Connecticut, were married today in the Church of the Transfiguration on East 29th Street. They were accompanied only by Matthew Luke, a Word War veteran, who is the bride's godfather. Captain O'Hara left immediately with his bride for Montreal. Commissioned as a major in the R.A.F. he will train pilots in combat fighting.

Excerpt from New York Press, August 28: Cairo, August 27: The British High Command here declared today that the Italian pincers attack to capture the Suez Canal had bogged down with the occupation of British Somaliland which was declared to be an empty victory, devoid of strategic advantages. There is some expectation of an attack along the Libyan border, but the High Command said, "We would welcome this."

The rumor that the Arabs would rise and support the Italian aspirations in the Near-East was officially denied today by the All-Arabian Council which met at Baghdad.

"Our sympathies," said a spokesman, "are for England in this crisis, and we see no hope for Arab nationalistic aspirations in the victory of Hitler and Mussolini."

GOD'S POCKET

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

Author of "Jinx Ship," etc.

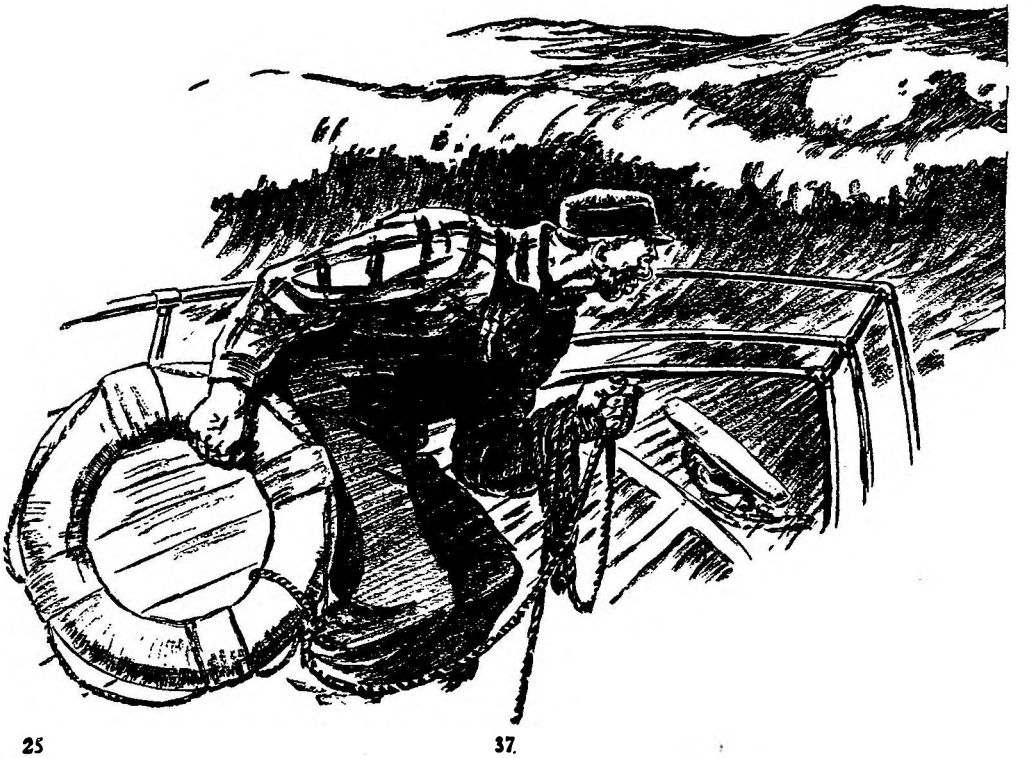
SOMETIMES a man doesn't sleep soundly in a strange bed. Jinx Murray dozed and yet was aware of faint harbor noises, of light from a float lamp thrusting a pale beam through a porthole. Night traffic of a seaport town lifted a distant, muted rumble. Midnight. The hour of the graveyard watch. For the first time Jinx felt a creepy atmosphere envelop the *Rocket*. He lay thinking about the man who sailed her last. The crabs were picking the bones of Black Mike Coogan. Some of Mike's clothes still hung in the forepeak. A strange apprehension of some presence, an intangible sense of nearness to something disturbing kept Jinx from sound sleep. Twice he had come out of a cat-nap with a nervous, expectant sensation.

"This is goofy," Jinx told himself fretfully. "Musta drunk too much coffee."

He shook his pillow, resolutely closed his eyes. Began to float off into space, asleep and yet not asleep. That impression of nearness to something, someone, fastened on Jinx again. He could almost feel someone in that tiny cabin. He could even hear that someone move, breathe. But he wouldn't open his eyes. He would *not* imagine things like a small boy in a dark cellar.

And then Jinx grew tense in his blankets, wide-awake, taut-nerved. He did open his eyes. He could see a faintly luminous sky through the open wheelhouse door—a door he had closed before turning in.

He could see a vague outline. He lay

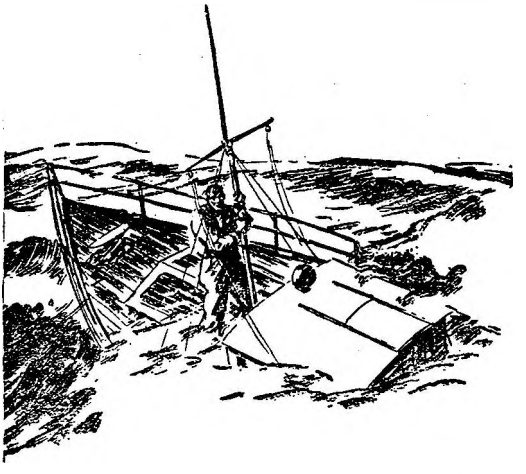


still a moment, listening. Fingers scuffed on woodwork.

Jinx softly pushed aside the blankets. To a salmon troller a sneak thief prowling his boat is one of the lowest forms of life. Jinx jumped and grabbed with an angry snarl. Jinx stood only five foot eight. But he was built like a bull and nearly as strong. Yet neither his weight or strength served in that encounter. His hook-scarred fingers closed on a body that swiftly became dynamic. Jinx's grip was broken with a violent wrench. A single blow on his chest hurled him back on his bunk. The companion steps creaked once, the pilothouse doorway darkened for a moment. Feet thudded on the float planking alongside. Then silence, in which the raspy sound of his own breathing was all

No more sleep now. Soon it would be midsummer dawn. He could put to sea. Jinx made a pot of coffee. Sipped that, brooding on his bunk. A wharf rat prowling for loot was the logical answer. Jinx couldn't dismiss it at that. The bit of light filtering into the *Rocket* had given him a glimpse of a face ugly as sin. He had a vague annoying sense of having seen that ape-like countenance before. His wheelhouse door had been fastened shut with a wooden peg in a hole. The peg could be reached by a long arm through an open window—but only by someone who knew how to reach that fastening in the dark.

Jinx had painted his dinghy on the back deck that afternoon. On the starboard wall of a low trunk cabin white finger-



Jinx Murray Was Running from a Barrel-Chested, Ape-Faced Shadow—a Shadow That Was Trying to Give Him Money!

Jinx heard. He sat up. His ribs felt as if they had been stove in. That marauder had exploded like a bomb at Jinx' touch.

"Big as a house, strong as a mule, quick as a cat," Jinx muttered. "I sure tackled somethin'."

He switched on a light. From the wheelhouse door Jinx stared into a night faintly luminous from the glow of ten thousand neon signs. The dark shapes of fishboats and moored pleasure craft lay all about him. Except for that distant city rumble the Cardero slips were hushed as a graveyard.

marks showed in a dozen places, as if the man had felt around on the wall for something that should have been there.

A thief would go for stuff in lockers, tools, a compass. It bothered Jinx.

"If I was superstitious I could sell myself some bright ideas over this," Jinx muttered.

They would have been depressing ideas. Jinx had fought a hoodoo for a long time —something that began with the building of this very boat. Jinx Murray had owned the *Rocket* less than forty-eight hours and he had practically mortgaged his soul to

get her. Yet he knew every bolt and plank in her stout hull. With his own hands he had hewed her heavy keel timbers.

THE *Rocket* was five miles at sea when the sun laid yellow fingers across the Gulf of Georgia. While she wallowed in the tide swirls out of Howe Sound a gray fishboat emerged from the smoke pall that an east wind brought off Vancouver city. Jinx didn't notice the craft astern. It wouldn't have meant anything to him if he had.

Well clear of the land Jinx dropped a bundle overside. That bundle contained a slicker, a pair of trousers, gum boots, other odds and ends. Black Mike Coogan's belongings.

Black Mike was a sore spot in Jinx Murray's brain. Dead or alive he always would be. Mike was dead and Jinx owned the *Rocket* which he had helped create, possession of which he had always craved. Jinx would always be on the wrong side of the ledger as far as Black Mike was concerned. But when he heaved those articles into the sea he said:

"That account is closed forever."

Jinx had no way of knowing that to the bulky fisherman in the gray boat two miles astern Black Mike's account was still open, still to be settled, and that the settling involved the *Rocket*.

UP TO the moment Mike Coogan vanished off the *Rocket's* stern in a seaway, he had been a lucky man. A big, hard-driving man with a roaring laugh. Mike feared nothing and nobody. There were whispers about some of the things Mike did along the coast. They always remained whispers. Black Mike was big and fast and tough—and lucky. As a troller he could always find salmon schools and take more than his share.

Only a few men on the West Coast knew that originally Jinx Murray and Black Mike Coogan built the *Rocket* in partnership. They split that partnership at the end of the first season. Only Jinx and Mike knew why. Jinx paid for half the material in that boat, did more than half the construction work. They took a gross of nearly three thousand dollars that summer. When fall came Black Mike had title to the *Rocket*. Jinx was on the beach without enough money to carry him through the winter. Black Mike was foxy as well as lucky.

So Jinx took a hand-line in a rowboat and worked the kelp beds for a year. He lived on clams and flapjacks. When his fingers were numb in a frosty sunrise Jinx sometimes burned with a murderous rage. But he had no comeback except killing, and he didn't want to hang for murdering a cheat. Eventually that turmoil within him died. He fished bluebacks and winter springs until he earned enough to get a small power boat and proper gear.

But Jinx never quite shook off something that fastened on him after he lost the *Rocket* in a gyp deal. He never ceased longing to feel her deck under his feet, to helm her over the big rollers that march in from offshore. He had drawn her lines, framed her, and she had proved herself a sweet packet, able in any going.

Now he had the *Rocket*—but with a string to her. He had to get the breaks or he would lose her again. And Jinx had the queer conviction that if he went on the beach again he was washed up for all time as a salmon troller. He just felt that way.

A Bull Harbor troller saw Black Mike go overboard in the rips outside Nawhitti Bar. He picked up the *Rocket* crawling slow with all her gear dragging. A Provincial Police patrol towed the *Rocket* to Vancouver. The Cardero Packers produced an authentic claim against Mike Coogan's estate and the Public Administrator finally sold her at public auction to satisfy that claim.

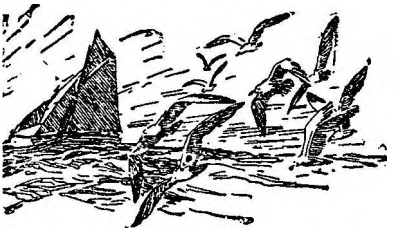
Jinx was on hand to bid. He came three hundred miles to make a pass at an old love. He hadn't enough money, but he

made a deal with a boat broker to take the boat he had off his hands and advance enough cash to swing the deal. One lone bidder stopped when Jinx went to thirteen hundred. Dirt cheap at that. Only—boat brokers are not in business for their health. Jinx had to pay through the nose for that accommodation. If he didn't repay on the nail—well, he lost the *Rocket* and all he had put into her.

But Jinx gladly took the chance. Trolling salmon is always a gamble. Partly because he loved that little ship, partly because he had a sort of notion that owning and fishing her he might shake the hoodoo that had given him his name. Maybe with the *Rocket* under him he could fish salmon as he used to fish them. Be a high-liner again with the glory and profit a high-line troller attains.

It was queer, Jinx thought, that Black Mike should be broke and owe a fish company money besides. Black Mike had been fishing away north, in the best salmon waters of the Pacific. Jinx had heard every season about the killings Black Mike made.

The man on the gray packet tailing along could have set Jinx wise about that. But Jinx still had to learn about this man.



IN a tough racket, among tough men, snatching a living from the cold, impersonal sea, dealing with buyers who will fudge on weight and grade, bums who borrow ten bucks and forget, in a world where economic necessity makes men struggle for any kind of advantage in any kind of deal, Matt Petersen remained simple and child-like in most of his ways and thinking.

He was probably the ugliest man on the North Pacific coast. They called him Monkeyface Petersen—but not where he could hear. He had the build of a gorilla rather than a monkey. His arms ended in great knotty hands that hung on a level with his knees. His features belonged in the purely animal kingdom. Low forehead, high cheekbones, thick lips, a nose that was a mere fleshy knob with round flaring nostrils. His eyes alone saved him from being pure ape. They were kind eyes, soft brown, like the eyes of an intelligent spaniel.

Jinx had never heard of it but Matt Petersen had been Black Mike's next partner after he ditched Jinx. Petersen had been almost the shadow of the *Rocket* for three seasons. Black Mike Coogan knew why—or thought he did—and he used to chuckle about that, being without conscience and without fear.

Matt was not far away when Coogan drowned. He followed the *Rocket* to Vancouver, bid against Jinx for her, stopping only when he reached the limit of his capital. Matt Petersen wanted the *Rocket,* too. For quite a different reason than moved Jinx Murray.

Matt had lived rubbing elbows two seasons with Mike Coogan. In the close quarters of a seven-ton troller a man's habits, customs, all his natural tendencies become thoroughly known to his companion.

Jinx and Matt could have lent each other a shoulder to weep on if they had known how closely their experiences tallied. Their contacts and clashes with Black Mike had been so similar. Only Coogan had bamboozled Matt a little more thoroughly than he had Jinx.

Black Mike and Matt Petersen hooked up in the spring. They ended a good season at Prince Rupert. Monkeyface Petersen went ashore the night they docked with twelve hundred dollars in his pocket. He walked by the dark end of a dock shed and there a greater darkness swiftly overtook him. When the world grew light

again he found himself with a split scalp and empty pockets.

Bleeding he staggered back aboard the *Rocket*. Black Mike consoled him. Damn thugs, said Mike! Anyway if they had cleaned him he still had a home, Coogan further said. So Matt put in the winter on the *Rocket*. Mike fed him, even gave him a few dollars now and then. And didn't remind Matt too often of his generosity.

Coogan didn't work the blackjack trick a second time. But that fall he persuaded Matt that a half-interest in the *Rocket* was worth most of Matt's share of the season's take. Black Mike didn't sign any papers but he got Matt's money.

And early in the spring he picked a row with Matt and eased him off the boat.

Matt Petersen had no recourse. He had no documents. He couldn't prove either agreement or payment. Reprisal didn't occur to Matt. For all he looked like an ogre he was as kind and gentle as a St. Bernard. He was not so much engaged as grieved and bewildered. Both emotions were heightened when he learned later—from Black Mike himself as a drunken boast—how he lost his money the first time. Most men would have gone berserk on the spot. Monkeyface Petersen merely said:

"Dirty cheat. One day I feex that."

Matt got himself a job longshoring in Rupert. With the first five hundred dollars he could save he got a boat and went trolling again. She wasn't much of a boat, but no salmon troller can stay ashore very long. The tug of a fighting salmon on the end of a twenty-fathom line drags him back to sea.

Every summer when the fleet put out Matt Petersen haunted the areas where Black Mike Coogan trolled. Matt never got in a blind fury about being cheated and robbed. But he didn't forget. He cherished a blind conviction that some day he would get back his own.

Jinx Murray had nursed the same idea. But Jinx in the end had to buy his own back. Matt Petersen had an entirely different plan. That was why he followed Mike Coogan from Hecate Strait to the rips off Cape Scott. That was why he haunted the *Rocket* now. He could still get some satisfaction out of Black Mike Coogan, even though Black Mike was dead.

Jinx buying the *Rocket* complicated, but did not alter the set-up. Not in Matt's simple reasoning. Mike had never given him an opening to get five minutes alone on the *Rocket*. Maybe a new owner wouldn't be as cagy as Black Mike. Trollers were always wandering away from their boats, leaving them open.

Matt thought he had a wide open chance in town. He had watched Jinx stride away that evening in his town clothes. When Matt stepped aboard the *Rocket* an hour or two later it didn't surprise him to find a wheelhouse door open and the door pinned shut from the inside. He had reached that pin many a time in the dark. What did surprise him was Jinx' hands grabbing. He didn't know that Jinx had turned back and gone to bed when a shower hit him at the first street corner.

Matt was sorry for punching Jinx. But he had to get away and he had had a touch of panic. Matt could easily have taken Jinx Murray apart. But he never wanted to hurt anyone. From having clashed with a man or two in his time Matt knew he had such strength in those gorilla arms and massive shoulders that he was afraid to use it. He never had to. One good look at him was enough for most of the tough guys. Yes, Matt felt bad about smacking Jinx down, that night. He hoped Jinx didn't see him well enough to identify him.

So Petersen tailed the *Rocket* north, and he meant to sit on the *Rocket's* tail until he did his stuff. He could watch and wait like a tomcat at a mousehole.

JINX had strained himself to get the *Rocket*. Now, as he wheeled up to the mouth of Queen Charlotte Sound, he be-

gan to wonder if he had just stuck out his neck again. He had gas and grub but he was worse than broke. He was in debt. A man who had taken it on the chin as many times as he had shouldn't have too blind a faith in the future.

Jinx reflected that he had not suffered any of these vague and groundless forebodings until that bulky prowler stole into his cabin pawing around for something that wasn't there.

"The way he landed on me," Jinx thought, "it mighta been Black Mike himself come back to look for somethin' he left behind."

Which was absurd and Jinx knew it. Yet that strange uneasiness floated around in the back of his mind as he plowed into the last shelter before he nosed into the open sea.

In a small harbor against the outer horn of which the North Pacific beat with a sullen roar of surf Jinx moored to a float and shut off his power. He stood to look about for trollers he knew. A gray packet came wallowing in the entrance, tall trolling-poles waving in a crazy arc. Jinx' eyes narrowed as he watched that fisherman tie up.

He had marked that gray boat tied at the Cardero slips in Vancouver. He had seen her at the Yuculta passage as he steamed north, and again at Alert Bay.

This was the first time he had seen the man close. The same fellow who bid the *Rocket* up to twelve hundred dollars. You didn't forget a face like that. Jinx stared. That powerful body, those great ham-handed arms could deliver exactly the sort of blow that knocked Jinx gasping on his bunk. Jinx had a strange surety about that. He walked past the gray fishboat Matt Petersen's ape-like face seemed to leer at him through a wheelhouse window.

"Who's the bozo on that gray packet that just blew in?" Jinx asked the storekeeper.

"That? Oh, Monkeyface Petersen. Fishes outa Rupert mostly. Ain't seen him this far south in years," the man answered. "Big, ugly brute, ain't he? Like a damn gorilla."

Jinx agreed. He bought a tin of tobacco. The store man said:

"So you're fishin' the *Rocket* now. Say, I wouldn't fish a drowned troller's outfit for love nor money."

"A dead man's boat couldn't make my luck any worse than it has been," Jinx replied tartly.

"Just the same—" the man shrugged his shoulders.

He wasn't the first to voice that notion. Jinx wished they would skip it. He wasn't superstitious. He didn't believe in the jinx power of black cats, thirteen at dinner, walking under ladders—and yet—there is a power of suggestion in harping on one theme.

He passed by the gray boat, wondering if that gorilla really had prowled the *Rocket* that night in town. If it just happened that all the way from Vancouver that gray packet had been tagging astern? He told himself that he was a fool for letting such things ride him. But Jinx couldn't forget that from now on he had to get all the breaks or be on the spot. He had to get fish. If he lost the *Rocket* he was through. He felt that in his bones. For no definite reason Jinx shrank from the idea of that ape-faced fisherman trailing him around.

"Damn!" he thought irritably. "I'm gettin' all nerved up like some old woman."

GRAY dawn. Gray swirls of fog. A green rounded swell marching under that gray. Jinx could hear the hoarse grunt of the horn on Pine Island to the south. Unseen, half a dozen trolling boats harried a school of salmon at the western end of the Storm group. Jinx, steering a compass course, could occasionally hear the slow beat of an exhaust. But the only one that passed him like a ghost in the fog was Matt Petersen. Twice, three times, before ten o'clock they crossed each other.

The fog lifted late. When it cleared only Jinx and the gray boat dragged gear by Storm Islands. Jinx had a few fish. He hauled gear, hoisted poles and slanted away for camp. In that quiet bight the fleet was already moored. Jinx was sloshing off his deck when Petersen came alongside the fish-float. He forked off coho salmon until he had a silver mound on the wet planking.

"Forty-dollar day for him," Jinx reflected with a touch of envy. "An' I just about make expenses."

Petersen's brown eyes kept turning to the *Rocket.* Jinx knew. He could not keep himself from watching that barrel-chested man and his gray boat. A low-hulled, dumpy-looking packet.

Jinx fished Storm Islands from Cascade for a week.

"It's *not* my imagination," he told himself finally. "That guy *is* interested in me. He does tail me around. Or am I gettin' the jitters? Anyway, I'm goin' to move. I don't seem to fish very good around here. Yet that bozo gets his regular. I'm sick of the sight of him."

IN THE fog that pushes in from offshore at night and blankets the North Pacific coast until dispelled by noon-day sun Jinx drove straight past Storm Islands across the Sound toward the mainland shore. He was off Slingsby fishing the edge of a heavy tide-rip when a distant speck gradually became a gray hull with poles spread. Matt Petersen drew up abreast of Jinx. Every three hundred yards or so he pulled a salmon. Jinx was getting about one an hour.

"Day in day out the same old hoodoo follows me about," Jinx didn't sing it—he snarled. "I gotta shake that ape-faced bozo. He's gettin' in my hair. He's gettin' me down."

Petersen's nameless gray boat had no business in the Slingsby rip. The *Rocket,* twice the tonnage, with the freeboard and lines to live in anything, pitched and dived. Those short, sharp seas broke inboard on Petersen, shot barrels of water across his low deck. A big guy with guts, fishing an unseaworthy packet. And getting fish. He had no business in the rip off Slingsby, but he was there.

And hour after Jinx tied up in Goon Harbor, Petersen came in, unloaded forty coho. In a bright sunset he sat on his back deck, long arms wrapped around his knees, staring at the *Rocket.* His dog-like brown eyes remained unblinking when Jinx returned that stare.

Jinx studied the tide-tables. There was nothing much around Goon Harbor. Petersen had brought in more salmon than six boats, including the *Rocket.* There was one more spot in that area where a man might make a killing. A place where Matt Petersen wouldn't follow—unless he were definitely hanging on the *Rocket's* tail for some definite purpose.

If there was nothing up inside, Jinx planned a long jump to Cape Scott. There were always salmon off that stormy headland, if a boat could live in those seas. The *Rocket* could. Petersen's low-hulled gray packet couldn't possibly face the Cape Scott rips.

At dawn Jinx eased out of Goon Harbor. He would have denied that he was running away from a barrel-chested shadow with the face of an ape. And he wasn't really. He was hunting for salmon. But if that bird did follow him to the lonely reaches of Up Inside he would find out why if he had to go to the mat with the big ape. Jinx' blue eyes snapped and his teeth clicked when he reached that conclusion.

When the Roaring Hole was going good the deep, resonant drone carried

two miles. Nothing that swam, nothing powered by man, could buck the ebb tide that poured through that granite slot. That outflow point from a great inlet became a maelstrom, a fury of surges and whirlpools. Once inside, the green sea floor spread calm between high mountain ranges.

"If you hit coho Up Inside it's big business. You can dip into God's Pocket an' come out with a fistful of ten-dollar bills."

Jinx had heard trollers say that with a laugh. He understood the parable. He had watched the Roaring Hole foam and swirl. He had made a winter's grubstake once in two weeks' fishing Up Inside. He had known many trollers to make fruitless trips. Either the coho bit savagely or they didn't strike at all. Up Inside was a trolling gamble.

The B. C. Pilot gave the Roaring Hole a current speed of twenty knots. Jinx had heard it called the fastest tiderace in the world. Nobody ran that short narrow pass except at the turn of the tide, which brought only four minutes slack water.

Yet as he stood off up the inlet, with a streak of white water beginning to show in the mouth of the Hole astern, he kept looking back. A speck appeared, as if spat out of that gap in a granite and forest-green shore. Jinx kicked out his clutch, lay-to a few minutes to make sure. He scowled.

"Anybody that runs the Hole when she's gettin' up steam," he muttered, "has more on his mind than just his hair."

Four hours from the Roaring Hole Jinx trolled along a sea-floored chasm, walled in by peaks snow-tipped in August. His lines hissed softly where they cut the water. Two hundred yards abreast of him Matt Petersen pulled one coho after another out of that smooth jade-green. With slow unhurried movements. And Jinx couldn't strike a single fish. He sat idle in his cockpit, fuming. He had fished shallow and he had fished deep. He had tried every spoon he had. No soap.

Early in the afternoon he eased into God's Pocket. A hidden pocket. Driving straight at the green shore a crevice showed. Two fathoms in that crack. A tiny, circular lagoon within. Room for ten boats. No more. God's Pocket. Made for shelter. The only anchorage along ten miles of precipitous cliffs. Not many boats in a season found their way into God's Pocket. No troller knows who named the place. It has no mark or name on any chart.

Petersen slid in after him and dropped anchor. They couldn't get far apart in that circular bight, ringed about with hemlock and cedar forest. A slow eddy drifted the boats near each other. Petersen sat on a box. He didn't speak. Nor did Jinx. Not for a long time. Not until the slow swirl of the tide brought them almost together a second time. Then Jinx hooked a pike-pole over the gray boat's gunwale and hauled the *Rocket* alongside.

"What the hell are you follerin' me all over the ocean for?" he demanded fiercely.

Petersen stared at him out of soft brown eyes.

"Me," he said very gently, "I follow feesh."

It took the starch out of Jinx Murray, made him feel foolish. It could so easily be true. He shoved the boats apart, went below and cooked his supper. When he came up again Petersen was still sitting on deck, still staring at the *Rocket*. Once more Jinx had the profound conviction of something amiss, of something abnormal, disturbing. It maddened him. There was nothing, yet his nerves were getting raw, jumpy.

Stretched in his bunk Jinx didn't sleep so well that night.

Nor did he fish well when he went out at daybreak. Petersen was pulling salmon again. The sight of those streaks of silver flopping into that gray boat every few minutes weighed Jinx down. He had the boat, the gear, experience. Yet he went empty-handed where another man with a haywire

outfit took salmon at every turn. Queer, depressing speculations abut the nature of luck began to simmer in Jinx' mind. If he could just get rid of this hoodoo. He could take salmon other places, even if not by God's Pocket. If he could see the last of Matt Petersen and that gray boat at least he would breathe easier.

Jinx anchored up in God's Pocket early that morning. Why waste fuel? He sat, staring dispiritedly at the green wall of forest surrounding God's Pocket, down into the clear still water that reflected sharp images of tall trees.

Matt Petersen chugged in, dropped his hook.

"He's gotta catch the afternoon slack," Jinx thought. "Them salmon won't keep till tomorrow. I'll be rid of him for twenty-four hours anyway. I'd catch the same slack an' beat it to Cape Scott but what's the use? What's the use of anything? This water is lousy with salmon an' I can't catch enough to wad a hollow tooth. What's the matter with me?"

As on the evening before some slow shift of current through God's Pocket brought the two boats sidling together. Imperceptibly they would edge near and then shift apart. Jinx didn't pay much attention to that. An oppressive sense of defeat rode him too hard.

A queer notion began to form in his mind. Suppose he gave this bird a chance to do his stuff, whatever it was? Leave the *Rocket* alone, wide open. Then if this human gorilla made any sort of pass at her, go for him. Here in this lonely place maybe it would come to a head. Get it over. Break up this game of tag. Maybe that would change the luck.

JINX slid his skiff overboard. Took a water-can and rowed away to a spring that trickled over a shelving rock. As the water pattered into his can Jinx watched. The *Rocket* and the gray boat began edging together again. Presently, as Jinx had done the day before, Petersen reached with a boathook and drew them gunnel to gunnel.

"Now, by jiminy," Jinx muttered, "you just ease into my cabin, big bozo, an' I'll be there to take you apart, if I have to use a fish-knife to do it."

But Petersen merely took a turn with a line around the stays and stood up. He put his skiff over and got into it with a can, as Jinx had done. Came rowing to the spring.

Jinx moved back into the brush. He didn't want to be near Petersen, nor talk to him. He clambered up the slope a little way. God's Pocket spread green and hushed below, with two fishboats lying side by side. Jinx rolled a cigarette. Through the smoke whorls he saw Matt Petersen row back.

The big ungainly man hauled up his skiff, went out on the bow and pulled his anchor. Jinx could hear the clank as he stowed it on deck. Petersen went below. His engine came to life, *chug-achug-achug.*

He came up from below. Stood a moment looking all about. Then he stepped across the joined guard-rails and went down into the *Rocket's* cabin. Jinx sprang to his feet with an oath.

OPENMOUTHED, shaking with rage, Jinx stood on the shore. His skiff was gone. He was marooned by the spring. For a moment Jinx lost his head completely. He waved his arms, mouthing obscene curses. Then he snapped out of that. A wooden skiff doesn't sink. It was not afloat in the lagoon. Jinx scanned the shore. He spotted the skiff, nose up on a ledge, fifty yards away.

But he couldn't reach it alongshore. Between him and the skiff a straight-faced cliff rose sheer from the waters of God's Pocket. He could swim or climb. It would take him ten minutes to scramble through the brush. The skiff was as far alongshore as the *Rocket* lay offshore. Jinx elected to swim. And not for the skiff.

He cleft the cold water like a seal, almost as silently. His fingers hooked over the *Rocket's* bulwark. He heaved once and landed dripping on the planks, shook his wet hair like a spaniel and dived for the wheelhouse door and the steps that led below.

Matt Petersen was bent forward, his hands on the starboard wall of the cabin, his back to the door. His head turned as Jinx came down those steps. He swung and his lips drew back as well as his knotty right hand. But Jinx was in the red-eyed rage that had been gathering in his breast. He smashed at Matt Petersen's face. It was like hitting a rock. For a second or two Jinx swung right and left, and Matt Petersen blanketed some of those blows with his great forearms. But some of them got home and blood spurted from Petersen's nose, oozed from a split lip.

He took a quick step back, a step that backed him into the V of the forepeak between two bunks. And then he lurched forward. Jabbed off with his left hand, the rush Jinx made, and smashed his right fist home to Jinx' chin.

Something seemed to explode in Jinx Murray's skull. Matt Petersen caught him as his knees buckled and his eyes went glassy and laid him on his bunk.

IN THAT goofy period which follows recovery from a knockout Jinx tried to re-orient himself. He recalled everything, but things didn't tally well. He remembered Petersen pulling his anchor and starting his engine and he understood now that Petersen thus prepared for a quick getaway. On the cabin wall above the bunk where Jinx lay his rifle rested on two pins. Jinx sat up. Grabbed for the rifle. He would blast Matt Petersen before he made the narrow exit from God's Pocket. Jinx burned with an incandescent fury. Nobody could make a monkey of him, prowl his boat twice, knock him cold, and get away with it.

In the very act of reaching for the gun Jinx eyes noted the hands of his clock. He knew what the time was when he stood on the beach. Forty minutes had elapsed. Matt Petersen would be miles away. Jinx groaned. Gritted his teeth. Swung his feet sidewise to the cabin floor.

Then he sat transfixed on the edge of his bunk. The flame of anger died to cold, incredulous amazement.

On his small hinged table lay a flat pile of currency, held down by two polished salmon spoons of a size and pattern Jinx had never seen.

He picked up the spoons and the money. Laid down the spoons and began to count —one hundred—two hundred—on up into double figures. All in bills of large denomination.

"Seventeen hundred dollars!" Jinx whispered. "Holy hell!"

Reaction made his knees weak as well as his voice. He sat down. Counted the money again. He turned the sheaf over and over, staring stupidly, dumbfounded.

"It's real," he muttered. "It ain't no dream. But—but—what for would that guy put on an act just to leave me seventeen hundred dollars? It just don't add up."

He looked at the spoons. Spoons of brass, silver, bronze, are the sharp tools of a troller's trade. He buys them. He hammers new ones out with care, experiments with new patterns, trying to evolve a killer spoon.

Jinx marked the pitch and strange angles. A radically different design. Double the size of any coho spoon Jinx had ever seen. Beautifully polished golden bronze.

"Seventeen hundred bucks an' a new kind of spoon. What the hell does it mean?"

He answered one part of that question after a confused minute of thinking.

"That's just about five hundred dollars over and above what Black Mike Coogan stuck me for when he did me outa my share in the *Rocket* an' that season's fish," Jinx said aloud. "But why—how—"

"An' I was all primed to kill that Petersen guy," he said with a shake of his head.

Jinx looked at his watch and checked on the tide. Petersen could easily make the next slack in the Roaring Hole, and the *Rocket* could not. But he would make the night slack. He had to catch up with Matt Petersen and find out about this, if he had to chase him the full length of the North Pacific coast.

Jinx stared at those bronze spoons. Maybe they would work. Maybe that was how Petersen got so many coho. Maybe—

He couldn't sit still wondering. He counted that money once more, fingering the bills, some new, some worn and old. Tucked the sheaf finally inside his shirt with a puzzled shake of his blond head.

Then he steamed out into the silent, sunbright inlet and let down his poles, streamed those two new spoons from the leaders of an inside line.

Jinx took ten salmon as fast as he could pull them without a single strike on any spoon of his own.

Then he shut off his power, drifted idly on the smooth green water while he hammered out half a dozen more to that exact pattern from a sheet of bronze spoon metal.

JINX didn't make that night slack. A heavy fog closed in on the Roaring Hole. He didn't dare that passage when he couldn't see. But he got through a little after daylight, with the fog floating high in ghostly wisps—and he unloaded a hundred and twenty coho salmon on the Goon Harbor float.

"You'n that Petersen guy seem to be the only trollers around here that can get fish the last two three days," the fish buyer said. "You're sure clickin'. You musta got lucky, Jinx."

"You wouldn't know just how lucky," Jinx replied lightly. "Did Matt Petersen pull out yesterday?"

"Naw, he laid here last night. Dragged it about an hour before you come in. Said he was goin' to try the Slingsby rip."

Matt Petersen and his gray boat had no business in the Slingsby rip that morning, Matt knew as soon as he cleared the islands masking the entrance to Goon Harbor and met the groundswell from the open sea.

That swell was sharp and high, peaking up under the pressure of a brisk west wind.

Ordinarily Jinx would have turned back. West wind and a falling glass. In a little while it would be too rough to fish. But the *Rocket,* built and ballasted for heavy going, could take it. Jinx stood on. He wanted to get within hailing distance of Matt Petersen. He had to. There had to be an answer to this riddle, or he would always burn with curiosity. Jinx felt that he had a right to know what lay behind Petersen's curious actions.

And if there had been none of this Jinx would still have forged on to that line of tumbled water that marked the outflow of Slingsby Channel, once he cleared the last island. Because he could see a boat rolling, rising, vanishing in the furious commotion of the rip.

No small boat had any business there with the tide on the ebb. A nine knot current pouring out of Slingsby met the westerly swell. Short steep waves rose straight up and broke both ways at the crest. Even the coasting steamers gave that area a wide berth while the ebb ran. Along the edge of the rip sometimes the trollers got good fishing. But they skirted the rip. This packet was in it. Helpless. Tossing and tumbling.

When Jinx drove the *Rocket* into the first white water he wasn't worrying about living through it. But he did doubt if the

gray boat would last till he reached her. Once a boat went out from under a man he couldn't stay afloat in that yeasty turmoil. A hoarse muttering rose from those tumbling seas. Green pyramids and white foam. And Petersen's gray hull was now awash. Matt himself—when Jinx could see him—held to the mast. Combers lashed foaming across the decks.

The *Rocket* plunged, rolled, lay on her side and skidded. But she forged on. Spray came over her in sheets. Solid water smashed against her heavy hull. Jinx bent a line to a ring buoy. He fought his way up astern of the gray boat, abeam. Only her fore part and the pilothouse was afloat.

Matt Petersen stood in water to his hips. She fell off a comber into a hole and the next sea broke clean over her. And when she emerged, sluggish, wallowing, all but ready for her last dive, Jinx was close enough to throw. He put that ring buoy of cork right across the sinking hulk, and Matt Petersen's great hands clamped on the line.

Jinx turned the *Rocket* and gave her the gun. He dragged Matt through two combers. He had to get away from that half-submerged hull lest a sea crash them together and sink the *Rocket* too. Then he kicked out his clutch. With the *Rocket* rolling scuppers under he hauled, and Matt Petersen swam, and presently the big man came in over the rail, panting, dripping. Jinx didn't ask questions. He shoved home his clutch, stood by his helm, eased, nursed the *Rocket* along. Sometimes his heart came up in his mouth as a straight-faced sea rose above the stemhead. For ten minutes the *Rocket* took a savage pounding. Then she rolled out of the rip into the smooth run of the groundswell.

"Is grand seaboat, this," Matt Petersen said through the pilothouse door.

"Yeah," Jinx agreed. He looked over his shoulder. "Well, you sure kissed your packet good-by. What happened?"

"Crankshaft break. I drift into rip."

"No business bein' there," Jinx growled. "Still it's too bad to lose a boat."

"Very old boat. Pretty haywire. Time I get new boat, anyway."

"Want to go back to Goon Harbor?" Jinx asked.

Petersen shrugged his great shoulders.

"Well, if you don't care," Jinx replied, "We'll ease into Skull Cove. Handier."

He drove around an island, through a notch in the mainland shore, and so reached the landlocked waters of Skull Cove.

There he dropped the *Rocket's* hook, and shut off his engine. He and Matt Petersen stood in the warm sunshine of August staring at each other. Jinx put his hands on his hips.

"I ain't got no clothes that'll fit you," he observed. "But it won't hurt anybody as tough as you to be wet for a while. Now, big feller, why have you chased me so hard? Why do you knock me cold an' then leave seventeen hundred dollars on my table? I want to know."

Matt Petersen began to peel off his soaked clothes. As he wrung the water out of them with his great hands he told Jinx Murray of his dealings with Black Mike Coogan.

"I know that when Mike he's fish he always cache that money-belt on *Rocket*," Matt said. "When he go ashore he put on belt. When he fall overboard fishin' off Nawhitti, I think his money will be where he always keep it. I move your skiff from spring so you can't get off shore quick. But you get aboard sooner than I expect. So I have to hit you. Very sorry for that."

"Yeah. But why leave *me* a bundle of Mike's kale?" Jinx wanted to know.

"I only want what is mine," Petersen told him. "I count. I take twenty-five hundred dollars. The rest I leave for you. Not my money. I get mine."

Jinx digested this. "Did you know," he asked, "that Mike Coogan an' me built the *Rocket* together, an' he gypped me outa my interest in her end of the first season?"

"No. I never know that," Petersen looked surprised.

"Well, he did. Kinda odd we both been partners on this boat one time and another. Say, how in hell couldn't I find that money? I had the same notion you did, seein' I knew Mike had no use for banks. I searched this packet from stem to gudgeon."

"I show you," Matt Petersen grinned. He went down the steps, stripped to a bare gleaming torso. He leaned over the drip-board by the galley sink. He put one hand on the lower part of a panel, pressing down hard.

With the heel of his other hand he struck the upper section of the board smartly. A six-inch piece of wood popped out.

"Jiminy cripes," Jinx said. "Nice little secret cupboard in the cabin wall."

Petersen put the panel back. The edges showed barely a crack.

"Is held by small flat spring in slot," he said. "I make that place for Mike, myself."

"Ain't life wonderful?" Jinx murmured.

SIPPING coffee hot off the galley stove Jinx said, after a long thoughtful silence: "Why didn't you come to me an' say Black Mike had money hid aboard an' some of it was yours?"

"When a man buy boat he buy everything on her," Matt replied. "If I tell you, you say to hell with you, any money here is mine."

"Probably I would," Jinx rubbed his nose reflectively. "An' if I'd been in your place probably I wouldn't a left any at all. An' why them spoons? Why did you leave me them?"

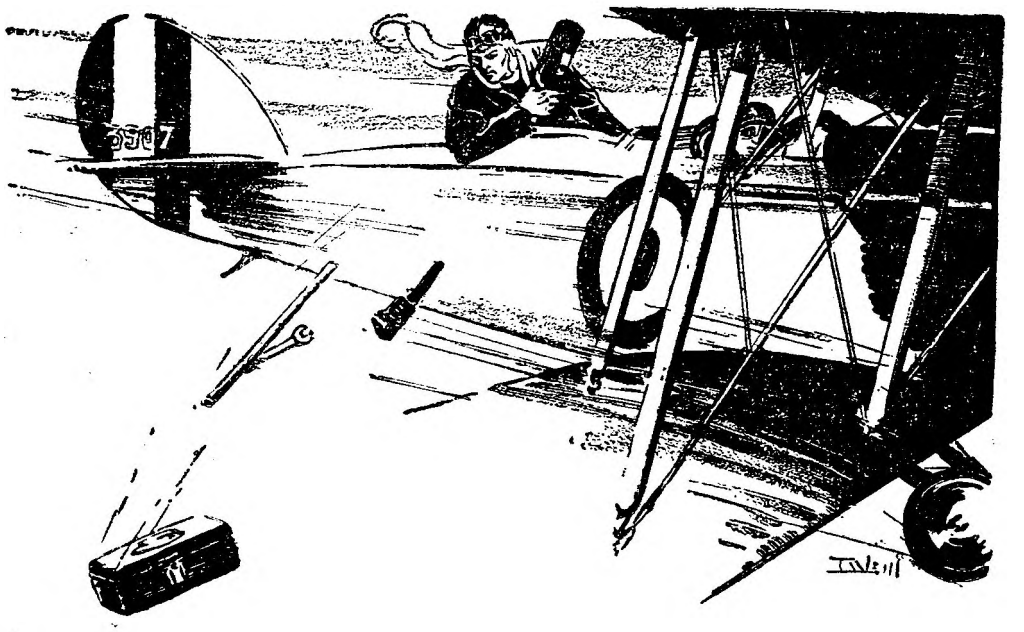
"We-ell," Petersen muttered, looking a little sheepish. "You don't have very good luck fishin'. I know them coho take my spoon—is killer, that spoon. So I leave you couple."

Jinx brooded over his cup for awhile. Finally he said:

"Lissen, big boy. You're a goin' concern—an' I'm not so dusty myself. You got enough money in that belt around your middle to build a new boat. But the *Rocket's* a two-man boat. We both been partners on her. Suppose we go partners again? On a share lay. What about it?"

"Me? Oh, I say yes," Matt answered promptly. "I think very good idea."

"Right," Jinx grinned. "There's a big wind outside, but there's a slack in the Roarin' Hole two hours from now. There's *hiyu* salmon Up Inside. Let's go."



Quite a Few Celebrated Characters On Federal Proving Were—

THERE WHEN IT HAPPENED

By A. A. CAFFREY

I

LOOSE LIP TELLS ONE THAT SOUNDS LIKE A WHOPPER

CAPTAIN CALL, officer in charge of test hangar at Federal Proving Ground, sat behind his desk in the loft flying office, and gabbed about this and that with Test Pilot Mowat.

Slow feet were heard on the long, steep flight leading up to the loft office; then old "Glue-Joint" Rance, chief mac in Assembly hangar, came in and tossed a transfer-of-ship paper on Captain Call's desk.

"She's all yours, Cap," Glue-Joint Rance made known.

Captain Call uncocked his swivel chair from its most-comfortable leaning position, reached out to capture the paper and asked, "Meaning which 'she,' Rance me fine feller? A ol'time killerdiller like me has shes in—or near—every airport, y'know."

"She's the Orr Company's airport-demoralizer ship," said Glue-Joint.

"Oh," said Call. "Airport-demoralizer class, eh? Well, it had to come. Guess we've just about got 'em all now—pursuit, intercepter, airport-defense, long-range fighters, short-range fighters and what not—

"Let's see: Bill Orr didn't show up in person on this assembly job, did he? How the devil did you men get an Orr job

together without Bill's cussing and fussing?"

"We managed," Glue-Joint Rance said. "Had the usual trouble trying to find which side the landing wheels belonged on. And as for the props, well you wouldn't believe it—she's a pusher. Yes, sir, so help me gents, she's a two-motored pusher. Motors in backaxward, and the props hell'n'gone back behind the trailing edge of the wing.

"Yup, we managed," Glue-Joint again stated. "But the egg-layin' seed drills sure had us stopped for a while."

"What d'y'mean—seed drills?" Test Pilot Mowat asked.

Glue-Joint looked from Call to Mowat, then back to the latter and asked, "Don't you know any of the fine points of this Orr mock-up, Mowat? She drops hand-grenades, through seed-drill flex tubes. What's more, she yanks the grenade's pull-pin as it leaves the ship. And them there eggs is laid by the count, Mr. Mowat. The rate of layin' is according to the speed of the plane, or, if the pilot chooses, by his choice. The seed-drill thing is geared to the motors."

"Wow," said Mowat. "Well, Cap, this is something else that had to come. Remember way back during that other big war how the Yank artillery gang taught French 75's how to toss shell all day, then throw rocks all night? And now we've got a plane that chucks hand-grenades."

"That's demoralizing 'em, and no dam'-fooling," Captain Call agreed. "Yes, sir, you might discourage a stooka by not being there when it finishes its dive and dumps its quick load, but what can you do against a ship that cruises back and forth along the company streets seed-drilling hand grenades all over you. Seed-drilling 'em! Guess that's the country boy in old Bill Orr, eh? *Sure,* it's Bill's own idea."

"It'll sure sow unrest among the victims," Mowat said. "Sort of get 'em off their dead ends. as 'twere, in the event they intended doing this enlistment sitting down."

"Sow unrest is correct," Glue-Joint Rance agreed; "but the other Orr feature —Bill's aerial spot-welder—'ll surer'n'hell give them unrestful victims the hot-foot."

"Don't tell us there's more," Mowat said. "Or, better, go ahead and tell us, 'cause with you assembly guys guessing these ships together behind canvas walls of utter secrecy, even we test-hangar gentlemen don't get to see 'em till after the unveiling."

"I'M for this sabotage-fear, spy-scare secrecy all the way," Glue-Joint said. "It keeps you non-Assembly guys outa our hair. Hell. Back in the old slack days, believe it or not, we never opened an incoming new-ship crate but that we found Loose-Lip Lock already in there. Nowadays she's different. Loose-Lip don't get to see 'em till they're rolled in on your floor.

"But about this other Orr feature," Glue-Joint then said, getting away from test hangar's star mechanic—Mr. Loose-Lip Lock. "This danged airport-demoralizer bus carries two flame throwers. So help me! A nozzle in the tip of each wing. As I get it, the pilot demoralizes the ground troops first with the grenade sowing, and the six machine guns that shoot straight down, then he picks spots that look important—fuel tanks, warehouses, magazines and such—then goes back, whirls wing-down in a low, tight *verage,* and pours the old liquid fire out the tip of his wing. Ain't that just too-too nasty, Mowat?"

"If it isn't," Test Pilot Mowat agreed "it'll sure do till the real nasty stuff comes along."

"Where's the ship now, Rance ol' top?" Captain Call asked.

Glue-Joint Rance turned, strolled to the windows that looked down on the great hangar below, then said, "There's the tow

car draggin' her in now. She's yours, Cap."

Glue-Joint started for the door, and the lead-down stairs. Getting out of his comfortable chair, Captain Call said, "Wait a shake. Let's look 'er over together. How do I know that you're not delivering a bad-order job on me?"

Mowat went along with them. When the three reached the foot of the long, steep stairs, the tow car had just lifted its padded hooks from the new Orr ship's landing-gear fittings; and a few of the test-hangar roustabouts were putting the man to the big job's turning—turning it tail-in to the rear of the hangar. There was one member of the post guard standing by, as is the custom now on Federal Proving Ground when a new model first comes in for test. This one guard was sort of putting the prod on a few stray shop men who happened to be gold-bricking out there where much air work was in view. One look told you that the guard appreciated his own weight of man; for all Federal guards must swing that full weight during days such as these. Yes, sir, that guard was missing no bets.

The guard sort of saluted Captain Call; and allowed the three to pass. And just as the captain was reaching a stand under the Orr ship's rapier-like left wingtip a new arrival spoke up.

It was old Streeter, civilian in charge of the parachute shop. Old Streeter snapped, "Just a jiffy, Cap. What the hell you got here?"

"Oh, hello, Street'," Captain Call greeted. "Didn't you get a peek at this baby when she was in Assembly? This is the new airport-demoralizer bus that Bill Orr thought up."

"Airport demoralizer?" old Streeter repeated. "Airport demoralizer! Oh, hell, yes. I heard guys talkin' about this airport-demoralizer thing but I supposed they were just speakin' about your bad right hand—Loose-Lip Lock."

"I heard that, Streeter! Dam' your flea-bit, moth-et, pre-shrunk, ancient hide!" said another new voice. The new voice, which was really a very old voice on Federal Proving Ground, seemed to be coming from somewhere within the new ship.

There was a machine-gunner's turret way back on the top of the long fuselage. That turret top was provided with an armor-plate crown that folded back on itself in segments. And now the segments were folding and Loose-Lip Lock's nose was popping out into view.

Streeter, he barked, "in my country that kind of a low remark means 'fight.' Dam' lucky for you that I'm not in my country, feller!"

"All right, tough guy," old Streeter said. "What is you country?"

"Damned if I can remember," said Loose-Lip.

Well, it was fun for Loose-Lip and Streeter. Maybe for Captain Call and Mowat, too. But Glue-Joint Rance and the guard on duty, having their own responsibilities, "went right up into the air," and without any flight orders from headquarters, either. To say that they were surprised is to put it foolishly mild.

"Hey you, Lock," Glue-Joint yelled, "how the hell did you get in this ship?"

Loose-Lip leaned far out over the slick metal side of the ship. He pointed down and forward. "See that U iron?" he said. "Well, first I put me right foot in that. See that grab-iron? Well, Glue-Joint, I then puts me good right mitt on that. Then I lift myself up an' onto the left wing's catwalk. For a few seconds, then, I just stand there and get used to the altitude; and the rest is easy when I stop bein' dizzy."

"Ya dizzy lug, you'll never stop being dizzy!" Glue-Joint growled. "But cut the kiddin', Lock. Now how the hell did you get into this ship?"

"Let's have it, feller," the guard added.

Captain Call, trying not to laugh, sort of turned away and started pointing out things to Mowat and Streeter. Old

Streeter mumbled, under his breath, "Dam' this Loose-Lip for a butt-in."

And Loose-Lip was saying—almost yelling—"How did I get into a ship, ya want to know? How've I been gettin' into ships on this an' a dozen other fields durin' the past twenty-odd years? Just climbin' aboard; an' Uncle Sam's dam' glad to have me do it."

"That don't answer the question," said the guard.

"Listen," Loose-Lip then said. "I just walked into Assembly. This ship was there. It's my business to know everything about every ship that's headed for test. *Hey, Cap. Am I right?* And, anyway, nobody told me not to climb aboard."

"So ya gotta be told, eh? Glue-Joint Rance crescendoed. "An' *you've* gotta know all about these ships! I suppose you know this one from stem to stern by now, eh, wise guy?"

"More than you know, hired help. More than you know," Loose-Lip Lock crescendoed in turn.

And it was the soft-spoken Captain Call who sort of eased Glue-Joint and the guard off to one side and explained that there were enough outside influences to be fought without this thing of working up inter-department frictions on Federal. Somehow or other a soft-spoken gent can dampen down the hotheads just about every time.

DURING the next two or three days preliminary test runs were made with the new Orr airport-demoralizer job. Captain Call, having a weak spot for Orr products, found time to handle the controls on each of these opening hops. Test Pilot Mowat was along as second officer. One or more of the test-flight observers went, too, and Loose-Lip Lock, usually assigned as flying mac on all such important craft, rode in glory.

Noon of the fourth day found the usual after-lunch gathering of field attaches loafing and smoking on the concrete apron between hangars. Loose-Lip Lock on his back and half asleep, was among them. The general talk, as during such gatherings of the past few days, centered on the Orr airport demoralizer—and, most especially, whether or not it could demoralize 'em.

"Nuts on their airport demoralizers and dive-bombers!" Test-Flight "Hardy-Guy" Kinney said. "Stookas be damned! That stuff might scare out Checks and slow down the Poles, but I've always argued the brave people can take it. Look at the Finns—an' the Spigs in Madrid. Then the French—till the dam' politicians in the rear squatted down behind them and pushed 'em over. How about the troops on the beach at Dunkirk—did they take it? Say nothing of the way the Limies have been laughin' it off for months.

"Hell's bells," Kinney concluded, "this dive thing, this airport demoralizin' ain't nothin' new."

Loose-Lip Lock sat up, shook his head sleepily, yawned and said, "Kinney's right—for once. Airport demoralizin's old stuff. Did I ever tell you guys about a hop I made over the lines during the big war, over in France? Well, one day—"

"This," old "Silk-Worm Streeter, he of the parachute shop, said, getting to his feet and starting away, "is where I came in."

"What-a-hell do you mean—this is where you came in?" Loose-Lip took time out to demand.

"It's where I came in—in on Federal Proving Ground," old Streeter repeated. "Yes, sir, gentlemen, when I reported in at this field, just fifteen years come next week, old Loose-Lip was doing just exactly what he's starting to do now—tellin'

how him and the Marines won that other war.

"So I'll be movin' on," Streeter added. "A man can stand just so much, you know, an' duck quackin' ain't new to me."

"All right, Silk Worm, all right!" Loose-Lip said. "But I was just going to tell these guys about a flyin' gent who could really demoralize a place. Him an' me. An' what I mean, this gent an' yours truly did it, too. Over in France.

"Any of you guys ever know a Lieutenant Hank Drinkwater, the guy they used to call 'Don't' Drinkwater? You musta knowed him, Kinney. You an' him was at Issoudun when I was, 'bout the middle of summer in '18."

"Don't Drinkwater? Sure, I knew that egg," Kinney said. "A big ape, 'bout two axe handles wide in the shoulders and butt, an' a voice like the bull of Boston. A nasty guy."

"Meaner'n hell," agreed Loose-Lip.

"A uniformed louse if ever there was one," Kinney added.

"A lug that not even a mother could love," Loose-Lip tacked on, "but how the guy could fly 'em!"

"Yeah," Kinney agreed. "Drunk or sober."

"Don't know about sober," Loose-Lip said. "Never saw him that way. But he could sure kick 'em around when he couldn't even see the instrument board. That's what I want to tell you guys about.

"Don't Drinkwater went up to the front 'bout the end of August. Few weeks later, just when things was gettin' plenty hot in the Yank sector, headquarters sent me up on detached, special service. You guys know me—when the engineering office had a big job of work, they always sent me. Well, anyway, I reports in at this light-bombing outfit's drome. They're flyin' French Breguets; and the big stationary motors has three rotary-motor macs stopped. It's up to me to dig in an' show the dumb johns what makes 'em perk."

"Well," said Kinney himself, getting off his sitter, "Streeter had the right idea, except—here's where I *go* out."

LOOSE-LIP reached up and pulled Kinney back to the hard concrete. "Sit down, you mug," he said. "You're going to like this story. It ain't all about me, ya know.

"Where was I? Oh, yeah. Well, I goes to work on a motor that's been givin' 'em plenty grief. In no time at all I've located the trouble an' worked out the bugs. We push the bus out on the line, start the power plant an' she knocks 'em off like a million. For a fact, man, that old hot pot turns up a good hundred revs more per minute than it's ever turned before. And the outfit's engineering office starts callin' me *Mr.* Lock."

"Oh, enough of this is too dam' much!" Kinney wailed, again trying to get up and go. Loose-Lip pulled him down again.

"If I have to sit on ya, you'll listen, Kinney.

"Well, as I say, the motor sings sweet music. I feel swell—gettin' my well-known stuff across like that, an' with this new outfit. So I sort of bulge me buttons an' say—this to the engineering lieut that calls me Mr.—I say, 'I usually like to give my motors an air test, Lieutenant. Could I have a pilot?'

"'Why, certainly, Mr. Lock,' the lieut tells me. 'Wait just a minute. I'll see that this ship is flight tested right away.' An' the lieut hurries off and soon comes back with a pilot.

"Hell, Kinney, ya coulda knocked me flat with a ten-pound mawl. Know who walks—or staggers—out on that field? None other than Don't Drinkwater. An' he's tight as a drum. This is his ship, the macs tell me, an' he hasn't been off the ground in two days. He's been ridin' their tails, too. Nasty as hell, they said. An' did they love that heel!

"Well," Loose-Lip Lock went on, "just before we quit the ground the outfit armorer climbs up on the left lower wing

an' yells into Drinkwater's ear. I heard what the guy said. He said that there was no bombs in the racks an' that the machine gun was empty. An' Don't Drinkwater nods his head, dopey-like, an' pushes the armorer away.

"So we take off. An' man, oh, man, what a take-off! That half-shot dam' fool shoves full throttle to it, gets about three-four feet off the ground, holds 'er there, begins lowerin' the left wings—then zooms, whango!—an' before we gets two hundred feet in the air he's got that big ark square on its back, in a *chandelle*, an' we're sinkin'. Whew!"

"An' what did you do?" Kinney asked. "I'll bet you—"

"I should've, but I didn't," Loose-Lip made known, "and I couldn't've been called a sissy if I did."

"Not you," Kinney agreed. "Well—"

"Sit down!" Loose-Lip again ordered, serving the order with a yank. "Now where was I? Eh, yeah, I was—"

"Holdin' to the floor boards while Drinkwater wished it out of that *chandelle* turn," Kinney suggested.

"Yeah, just about," Loose-Lip admitted. "I never got such a scare in my life; an' you guys know that they don't throw a scare into old Mr. Lock every time off the ground. No, sir!

"Dam' that Drinkwater! But he kicked 'er out of that flat, upside-down turn; an' the big bus was swishin' through the tree tops when she came level again.

"From there he went out for quick altitude. Just eased full gun to the crock an' let 'er climb. An' she clum, what I mean. I sure had that motor just about right. She was turnin' up nearly two hundred revs more than any other Breguet motor had ever turned in the air before."

"Oh, now, now, Mr. Lock!" said one of the motor-shop macs. "You don't mean to tell us that you inspired that motor toward bigger and greater effort, that its great mechanical heart was in accord with you, that it was bursting its very pistons just—"

"Will you lay off me, Fats?" Loose-Lip begged. "Hell, I'm just a poor guy without no eddication tryin' to get along, ain't I? Give a guy a break.

"Drinkwater kited 'er up to 10,000 in no time at all. That motor, the way I'd tuned it up, just simply sucked that big Breguet into the sky. At 10,000 this rummy Drinkwater went to stuntin'. That drome's location was about thirty kilometers behind the front. Safe enough to play around way back there, for, like I told ya, the Yanks were plenty hot just about then. Fact, is, the Dutchmen were gettin' hard to find. That is, the flyin' part of the Hun army.

"But pretty soon Drinkwater grows tired of that stunt stuff. All of a sudden he begins to stare off into the east—off toward the German lines. We can see the smoke of a few burnin' towns off there; but there ain't a sign of any planes, Allied or German, in any part of the sky.

"Drinkwater has the bus headed east, an' he's still all-eyes in that direction. Then he pulls way back on the throttle, an' the motor purrs low, just tickin' 'em off. Boy, have I got that power plant just about right!

"When the ship is just staggerin', an' that motor's idled to a hum, Drinkwater turns an' gives me the nod. I climbed ahead over the windshield an' got as near him as I could.

" 'Want to see the front?' he yells.

"I yelled back, 'Let's go! But don't forget we've got no bombs or machine-gun rounds.'

"Drinkwater gave me a bleary-eyed stare, nodded that he knew that, then went back to his air work. An' we were on our way to the lines.

"Yes, sir, gents," Loose-Lip went on to tell, "I was one of the very few Yank enlisted stiffs that ever went over the front lines. An' how!

"So help me! That gin-jag Johnnie of a Drinkwater began droppin' altitude. When we got in over No Man's Land, we

were so low that you could see the Heinies's eyeballs as they stared up."

"THAT was the time to shoot," said Kinney.

"Either shoot, shave or—but, like I told you, we didn't have no rounds in the machine gun. But Drinkwater went right ahead. Soon—an' not any too soon, brother—we had the front lines behind us. We was in enemy territory. An' we was goin' deeper an' deeper all the time. You guys know me—I can take it; but that thing of bein' in there without guns or bombs, well—"

"What the hell," said Fats, the motor-shop mac, "you still had your tongue, Loose-Lip."

"Do you want to hear this story, or don't you?" Loose-Lip demanded.

"I don't," said Fats.

"We don't," said Kinney.

"All right then. All right," said Loose-Lip. "Now let's see. Oh, yeah, we was gettin' deeper an' deeper into enemy territory. An' this Drinkwater mug seemed to be lookin' for somethin'. Hangin' his head over the side an' lookin'; an' the bus was so low that I thought he'd start lookin' under the low bushes, or high grass, any time now.

"Then he suddenly pulls the Breguet up into his lap, sort of zooms a few hundred feet, an' points ahead an' off to the south. There's a big enemy troop concentration off there. Just beyond this big camp there's an air field. A dozen canvas hangars and some big permanent wooded shops.

"Man, oh, man! what a dish for a bomber—if said bomber had bombs in his racks, or even slugs in his belts."

"Never mind tryin' to make it hard," Kinney said. "Let's have it. We know that you two handled the situation all right, for the war was called off right after that."

Loose-Lip Lock ignored that remark. He said, "Too bad that war hadn't been called off days before. Gentlemen, I lost years off my life durin' the next few minutes.

"Yes, sir, that Drinkwater nut zoomed a bit, then held to the climb till we had six or seven hundred feet. Then, with the bus still climbin', an' the motor pourin' it on full power, he sort of stood on his seat—off the rudder and away from his stick—and turned to talk with me.

"Let me have the fire extinguisher outa that pit," he yelled.

"I yelled 'There's one in your pit.'

"Drinkwater bellowed, 'Give me that dam' extinguisher!'

"I pulled the extinguisher out of its bracket," Loose-Lip said, "an' passed it ahead over the cowl. I thought the guy musta gone nuts.

"'Let me have that spare joy-stick too,' Drinkwater then yelled. There was a spare joy-stick—like in most observation and bomber jobs—racked in spring clips at one side of that back pit. I handed it ahead to Drinkwater. It was one of them all-metal sticks.

"'Anything else handy in that pit?' he yelled.

"'Only this,' I yelled back; an' I handed him a canvas tool-roll that some mac had left there by mistake. That kit was, maybe, ten or twelve pounds. Pretty heavy an' rolled tight, see?"

"Yeah. We see," said Kinney. "So, what? See!"

"Wait till I tell ya what the ape does with all the junk he's collectin' in that front pit. Two Jyrene fire extinguishers. The extra joy-stick. The tool-kit roll. Then I see him reach down an' unstrap his own personal altimeter from where all them wartime pilots kept 'em strapped just above the right knee. Them there round altimeters was heavy, too. Then he reaches into the ship's tool-box, just behind his head in the cowling, an' pulls out a few empty booze bottles an' some machine-gun tools. An' all them he's tuckin' into his lap when he tops the climb at

about two thousand feet an' starts studyin' the German camp just ahead.

"Well, I knew it wasn't goin' to be long now! An' all of a sudden a train of cars goes by us—an' it musta been plenty close! —an' there's a wham right overhead. Archie! Yes, sir, the anti-aircraft is grooving 'em up our way."

"But you weren't scared," Fats kidded.

"Naw, not much," Loose-Lip agreed. "But I did wish my brother was there an' I was at home with ma.

"Anyway, rum-dum Drinkwater goes into his dive. A power dive from that two-thousand elevation. An' don't you guys think that a two grand power dive ain't no dive at all. Hell, a guy could hang a Breguet's wings on a cloud in less distance than that. Remember that even the pursuit jobs weren't divin' much more than four or five thousand in them days.

"SO HE shoves the nose right down, stands on his rudder-bar, an' lets the ground come up. An' did it come! Boy, oh, boy! That big, wide-winged crate shook an' shimmied like tin roofin' in a hurricane; an' them wing panels bend back an' up like an eagle's tips.

"Well, men," Loose-Lip then said,

"that's when I first see some of this airport demoralization first hand. I'm lookin' straight down over the ship's nose and into that camp—into the air-field section of the big layout. An' they's guys pickin' 'em up an' settin' 'em down wherever I look. An' they're tumblin' an' scramblin'. There's panic down there. They're gettin' from under; an' Drinkwater has her aimed straight at a sort of drill-ground where he'd spotted a couple of thousand guys gathered."

"Well, come on—reach the ground!" Kinney urged.

"And pile yourself up, Lock," Fats added. "Crash right in."

"Damned if I didn't think we was going to," Loose-Lip went on. "I'm not tryin' to wow you guys, not me, but that nasty heller, Drinkwater, holds 'er in that dive till I can see the expressions on them German mugs. Then he yanks 'er out of the dive—crazy as hell an' full power!—zooms, hangs 'er on the prop, 'bout four hundred feet up, an' begins tossin' all that junk down on the scared guys.

"Yes, sir, men. Drinkwater's all screwed around in his seat, yellin' at the top of his voice an' whammin' all that junk down past my head, over the tail service, an' into camp.

"Well," Loose-Lip admitted, "I don't know that the guy actually hit anybody down there, 'cause there was scramblin' guys all over the place. But Drinkwater sure had lotsa fun, what I mean."

"Is that all?" Kenney asked.

"Just about all," Loose-Lip answered. "The archie drove the nut away shortly after that. Almost got us, too. Anyway, we hedgehopped all the way back to our drome. Then Drinkwater got out of the ship, stood there for a minute sort of lappin' his dry lips an' strolled away. Never said a word about the fun. Guess he just remembered that he was thirsty again."

"That was Don't Drinkwater all right," Kinney agreed, getting to his feet just as the one o'clock whistle was sounding off. "I saw him in New York, 'bout the end of spring in '19. He had just come back from France. He was down in front of the Hotel McAlpin, drunk as a lord and dragging a swell trench coat along the sidewalk. Looking for trouble. Yeah, still in uniform."

"He wasn't in uniform for long, though," Loose-Lip said. "He got himself cashiered for some flyin' trouble him an' another Mitchel Field monkey had up on Long Island. I think they was rollin' their wheels on a country club roof or something. You know how it was: that stuff went over big when a guy was in France, but back here it's no bets. No soap."

"He was one guy Air Corps could do without," Kinney made known as he and Loose-Lip strolled into test hangar. "A nasty, no-good guy."

"An' meaner'n hell," said Loose-Lip.

"A uniformed louse," added Kinney.

"A lug that not even a father could expect a mother to love," Loose-Lip tacked on, "but man, oh, man, how the guy could fly!"

"Yeah, drunk or sober," said Kinney.

"Ah, hell, will you shut up an' punch that clock!" Loose-Lip barked. "You're like an old woman—always want the last word. Air Corps got rid of Drinkwater but it's still got you. What a hunk of logic, or justice, that is!

II

THE great nation was on its toes. Long troop trains rolled through forty-eight states. Fall was in the air and red and blue armies campaigned the bloodless battlefields of every corps area from coast to coast. Preparedness was the watchword, the national shibboleth; and "cooperation" the order of the day.

Federal Proving Ground, of course, was cooperating. It was doing more than that. It was proffering itself and all its mighty facilities. Its acquired knowledge was open for any and all authorized units. Its equipment, held to cautious limits, was within request reach of all. The great nation had spent many, many millions on Federal Proving Ground; and now Federal was proving up.

The Orr airport demoralizer had passed all required tests. It was everything Air Corps had demanded, and all that Bill Orr had promised. And in so far as the type had now reached mass production in half a dozen of the nation's largest factories, the Orr airport demoralizer was no longer a guarded secret. Perhaps it's a national weakness, but the ship, like other important items of late equipment, could be seen by just about everybody and anybody interested in such military developments.

So there came a day when, late in the afternoon, Captain Call strolled down onto test hangar's great floor. There he sought out and located Loose-Lip Lock.

"In the morning, Lockie me boy," the captain said, "we rise and fly. You, the good Lieutenant Mowat and I are scheduled to hop the Orr ship up-state to Camp Gunn. We're to show off for a few days. Does that sound good to you?"

"Camp Gunn?" Loose-Lip asked. "Oh, yeah. That's where the National Guard gents are fightin' each other, eh? Sounds swell to me, Cap. Man, oh, man, will I open the eyes of them there tin soldiers—an' their plane macs—when I start doin' my stuff?

"You know, Cap; there's very few air macs that know their stuff like I do. Now you take these two pusher plants in this Orr job—they're just about right. Man, I've got them hot pots boilin' out more revs per minute than the makers ever guaranteed."

"And you know that ship from armpit to appetite, too," the captain kidded. "Wasn't that what you told Glue-Joint?"

"An' how!" Loose-Lip bragged. "Bill Orr put all that stuff in, but I know 'how' an' 'why,' if ya see what I mean. Yes, sir, Cap, you don't go far wrong when you count on old Mr. Lock to know all there is to know about these ships. I really should be in line for a raise in pay, eh?"

"Raise in pay!" said Captain Call. "What the devil, man. You'd think Uncle Sam's a bloody millionaire. Well," he added, moving out toward the apron and

the skyful of test ships in work, "pack the tooth-brush and that other pair of socks, tonight, and be all set to shove off bright and early in the a.m."

"Tooth-brush!" Loose-Lip said. "Tryin' to be fancy again, eh? Only you hi-mucky-muck people with pink teeth can afford tooth-brushes. Do you think I don't read the magazines?"

Camp Gunn, a two-hundred-odd mile hop from Federal, was a hive of training activity when the Orr job set down there next morning.

Along with Captain Call and Loose-Lip, Test Pilot Mowatt had made the hop. Because the corps area staff would expect a show, the new Orr airport demoralizer had been fully equipped before departing Federal Proving Ground. That is, it's machine guns carried loads, not blanks. It's grenade belts were in place, "live" grenades on the reels, and all set to do their horrible stuff as though in actual warfare. The flame-throwers' tanks were in place, under pressure, and ready to pour their hot breath of death at a moment's notice. Seldom had Federal dispatched so lethal a ship.

The show to be but on—as Captain Call understood present plans—was to consist of the destruction of a mock village that was to be subjected to punishment by both tanks and planes sometime during the next day. Also, as he understood it, the Orr ship was not to participate in any of the usual flight maneuvers attending the war games.

There were a few hundred assorted Guard ships—from all over five states—on Camp Gunn's air field when the Orr job set down and rolled to a stop afront headquarters hangar. Naturally, it was the center of attention—by all those Guard airmen—as soon as it arrived. And before quitting his controls and stepping down to meet the boys, Captain Call took great pains to impress Loose-Lip Lock with the fact that this bus represented something akin to dynamite. Not that Loose-Lip didn't already appreciate that fact.

The captain said, "Lieutenant Mowat and I can't sit around here and hold your hand all the time, Lockie my man. You know that, eh? So it'll be up to you to stand by the ship. Now, you're going to be lonesome. I know you. But don't get so lonesome that you'll forget what we have aboard this bus. Keep your eye on it, boy. Keep your *good* left eye on it. And don't let anybody play with those demoralizing instruments on the "attack" board. They're bad!

"After we put on the show tomorrow, and get rid of this 'live' cargo, you'll have plenty time to run round in circles and awe this army of mechanics."

"I catch," Loose-Lip said. "But if they want to stand around—down there under the ship—an' ask me questions about me, well you can't blame me for answering, eh?"

"But keep 'em on the ground," was all Captain Call added; and he and Mowat stepped down and out into the welcoming group.

SHORTLY after their arrival the groups of Guard planes began to take off, go places and do things. The sky near and far, high and low, buzzed and hummed, roared and howled with air work. A few crashed. A few men died. And, during all those doings, Loose-Lip Lock sat up front in the pilot's seat, dozed at times, and contemplated the softness of a job that paid you for that while absent from the more pressing labors of the home post.

Being busy with their own ships, neither the Guard's pilots nor macs bothered Loose-Lip very much. Now and then either Captain Call or Lieutenant Mowat escorted certain high rankers out to take a close view of the Orr airport demoralizer. And, as a rule, Loose-Lip Lock heard snatches of warlike conversation. Most of these snatches had to do with the

high rankers' collective desire to see the ship in action. To be on hand tomorrow and see the ship sow its grenades, pour its fire and demoralize 'em with those machine guns that fired straight down. Oh, it was all great stuff; and the big boys with the brass hats were in a position to appreciate the destructive potentialities of such craft.

WHEN the morning's problems had all been fought out and worked out, the groups of Guard ships again came home to crowd that field. Then, during noon hour, Test Pilot Mowat hurried out to relieve Loose-Lip. Mowat was in a kidding mood, and when he told the star mac where he could find grub, he added:

"An' hurry back, feller. I want to get me over to staff headquarters again, pronto. Man, are the captain and yours truly hot stuff here? We're being conferred with on every hand. Hell, yes, we're working with the operations staff on all this air work you see near and far. Great big shots is what we are. You're not going to see much of the captain and Mr. Mowat, Loose-Lip, unless you sneak up and peek in where the brains are kept."

"That suits me fine," Loose-Tip answered. "I'll hurry back. Got lots of sleep I want to sneak up on. Hell, I don't even think I'll answer any more questions about me. But, say, you don't think the staff could use another brain, do you?"

Along toward two of the afternoon the games went into a major problem. The air work involved called for every ship on the post. Still sitting in the pilot's seat, Loose-Lip watched all those groups line up, drill out along the runways, then take off. And by two forty-five all but one ship had taken to the air.

That lone ship was a two-motored light bomber; and as Loose-Lip gazed down field to where the frantic macs were running themselves ragged around that ship, his practiced eye advised him that there was starting trouble there. The off motor wouldn't take it.

"I should go down there and hunt out the bugs for those tin-horn macs," Loose-Lip told himself. *"But to hell with 'em,* the lazier part of Loose-Lip added. *"What the hell, Bill. What the hell. No wars lost if that cull never gets off the ground."*

While Loose-Lip gazed in the general direction of that in-trouble bomber his lazy eye caught something that held his attention and aroused his utmost sudden curiosity. So Loose-Lip took a long look at what he thought had come into his vision, then quit his comfortable seat and hurried down to the ground.

There was a group of Guard macs sitting on the grass just to the rear of the Orr ship. Loose-Lip gave one of that group the high sign and asked him to step up front.

"Look, Chief," Loose-Lip said, and he hooked a thumb down toward the bomber, which, of course, was the direction of the object which had caught Loose-Lip's attention, "who's this large-size gent comin' this way?"

The Guard mac took a guarded look, cussed nastily in a low voice, then said, "It's Major Drinkwater. That's his bus they're workin' on down there. The crew tie him up every time they get a chance. That dam' heel's bad joss, soldier."

"Don't I know that?" asked Loose-Lip. "Hell, feller, I fought a war with Drinkwater. How come he's flyin' here in the Guard?"

"Political drag," said the mac. "Drinkwater's brother-in-law is Lieutenant-Governor in this state, you know; or, maybe, you don't know. That heel's been set on the ground a hundred times, but he manages to hold his Guard commission just the same. Drag, just drag, that's all. Sh-h-h, the heller'll overhear us."

Don't Drinkwater, Major Drinkwater, barged ahead toward the Orr ship. Coming alongside he pulled up, stood there with field boots wide apart and studied the aircraft demoralizer.

"Hello, Drinkwater," said Loose-Lip

Lock. "Remember me — Ex-Sergeant Lock, A.E.F.?"

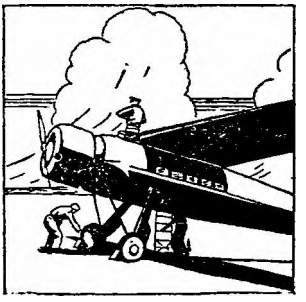
Big Major Drinkwater gazed down his nose, and he said neither yea, nay nor "Go to hell." He said nothing. The utter silence should have spoken for itself, but Mr. Loose-Lip Lock is never the man to take utter silence as an answer.

"You remember me, Drinkwater," he insisted. "Remember the motor mac that hopped along with you when you power-dived that old Breguet into the German concentration—the time you didn't have no bombs or rounds, but just loose junk an' a tight snootful. Eh?"

Major Don't Drinkwater actually bared his fangs when he said, "It must've been two other guys, soldier. And it's 'Major' Drinkwater, and 'Sir' to you."

"Not to me," said Loose-Lip. "I'm a civvie. A Federal Proving Ground civvie."

"I see," Drinkwater said. He stared at Loose-Lip for a full fifteen or twenty seconds, then added, "An Air Corps civilian, eh? Yes, sir. A civilian." And there was no question about Major Drinkwater's regard—or lack of regard—for Air Corps or Air Corps' civilian help.



DRINKWATER swung on his heel and gazed down field toward where that bomber of his was still in trouble. Then he cussed so's all the world might hear and stiff-legged it around front of the Orr job.

The Guard mechanic with whom Loose-Lip had been talking dropped his voice very low and warned, "Go easy, Federal. This guy is cockeyed. He don't look it, but he is. An' he's nasty. Don't invite him to poke you. The guy can hit to kill. They say it's been done, you know. Sh-h-h, he's comin' around this side."

"Sergeant Stafford!" Drinkwater barked; and he was talking to Loose-Lip's new acquaintance. "Oh, Stafford. Is this ship ready to go?"

"This isn't a Guard ship, sir," Sergeant Stafford said.

"I didn't ask you that!" Drinkwater snapped.

"I don't know, sir," Sergeant Stafford amended. "This proving ground mechanic is in charge, sir."

"Oh, that's it, eh?" Major Drinkwater then said. "Hell, for a few minutes I wondered what an Air Corps civilian was doing on a post where there's work in progress. Well, how about it, is this ship ready to go, Mr. eh—Lake?"

"She isn't," Loose-Lip answered.

"What's wrong with it?" the major demanded.

"Not a thing," said Loose-Lip.

Major Drinkwater, rolling his two-axe-handles-wide bulk of man, stepped a few strides closer to Loose-Lip. And old Loose-Lip, being a few axe handles wide, just stood where he was. She sure looked like a blow-off.

"You wouldn't be playing hoss with me, would you?" Major Drinkwater demanded.

"Not me," Loose-Lip answered. "Hell, I'm too old for giddy-up games. I play with the big, rough boys. Ma says I'm even beginnin' to smell like 'em. Why do you ask, Drinkwater?"

When Major Drinkwater sucked in air then, he really sucked in air. The man was so hot under the collar that he hisses. Still and all, fisticuffs in the open—especially between officer and civilian—are definitely out. So it was Drinkwater—not Loose-Lip—who released the tension.

"All right, wise guy, all right," Major Drinkwater then growled. "You tell me why this ship isn't ready to go?"

"It's a special job. It's an experimental

job. It's one of the most important jobs in the possession of Air Corps," Loose-Lip Lock stated; "and it was sent up here for extra-special purpose. And not for routine air work. It isn't part of the war games."

"That's all I want to know," said Major Drinkwater.

"Sergeant Stafford," he then said, again turning to that Guard non-com, "call your crew and start these motors."

Stafford looked nonplussed. But, for an enlisted man, an order is an order. And an officer can be drunk as a lord, all the way out of line, and still his order is an order. That's the hell of being an enlisted man in any man's army; and poor Sergeant Stafford showed it at that moment. So he called his crew members from among the sitting group.

"I'd go slow about this, Drinkwater," Loose-Lip warned.

Major Drinkwater was calling another man from among those sitters. "Corporal King," he barked, "run down to my ship and tell Observer Shaw to get the hell up here. Tell him to bring his equipment, we're going to fly."

Sergeant Stafford had climbed aloft into the pilots' bay. Loose-Lip, realizing that the non-com had no choice, had stood aside and allowed that passage. When the two power plants snapped into action Major Drinkwater pulled goggles and helmet from his pocket and began to make ready for flight.

Loose-Lip ranged alongside the major. Again he said, "You're takin' in lotsa territory, Drinkwater. You can get yourself burnt by monkeyin' with this ship. I had orders from Captain Call that nobody was even to climb aboard her."

"Captain Call?" repeated Drinkwater, bellowing to make himself heard above the bark of motors. "A captain? I rank a captain, Lake. So you won't need to worry while you're on this post. And that's your order: don't worry."

Drinkwater's observer, Lieutenant Shaw, came a-running at that point. He saluted his superior.

"Climb aboard, Shaw," the major ordered.

"This ship is loaded, Drinkwater," Loose-Lip made known.

"Meaning what?" the major demanded.

"Meanin' this ain't no mock-war job. Her machine-gun rounds ain't blanks; an' her eggs ain't flour puffs. I tell you she's dynamite."

"That's what the gang in Brest said about the gal from Armentieres," Drinkwater shot back at Loose-Lip, "but I did all right with her. Out of my way, Lake. You get in my hair."

Drinkwater moved toward the left side of the ship. And Loose-Lip was right behind him. Drinkwater stepped up on the wing and stepped into the passage that led up to the pilots' bay. And Loose-Lip stepped in right after him.

"You riding along?" the major turned to ask.

"If it goes, I go," Loose-Lip said. "But for the last time, Drinkwater—use your head! Somebody's goin' to get one hell of a ridin' for this."

"Stick right along and you'll get the ride of your life," Don't Drinkwater promised. "No guy ever said I gave him a dull trip in the air. Now shut up; and get t'hell back in that gunner's turret if you're staying."

LOOSE-TIP didn't start aft immediately. Instead, he stood there in the narrow passage and watched big Drinkwater lurch forward to the left-side pilot seat. Shaw was filling Mowat's former place—the right-side seat.

Sergeant Stafford, satisfied with the two motors that Loose-Lip knew were just about right, slid out from behind the wheel. The sergeant had a few words for Drinkwater, pointing to this and that dial on the big instrument board. Then Stafford shouldered his way aft to where Loose-Lip still stood and waited.

Passing close to Loose-Lip—as he went through the small ship-side door—Sergeant Stafford said, "This is one hell of a boomerang you're stoppin', Federal. There's nothing wrong with that bomber of Drinkwater's. His crew has a standin' order to ball the works, and hold his ship on the ground, whenever he comes out stinko. The lug's had plenty trouble in the air, you know."

The Orr ship's snub nose, out there ahead of the wing and free of the zone usually given to whirling props, had been designed for greater visibility, and not for crew comfort. It was strictly a two-man pit—that pilots' bay—and there wasn't even a jump seat to accommodate a flying mac. And because it was strictly a type ship, a single-purpose design, none of the "attack" controls were beyond reach of the pilots. That is, there was no aft bomber's controls. And because the wide, deep monoplane wing carried so much inside installation—all the control cables and wires for the six guns that shot straight down, and the tie-down fittings for those guns—the fuel tanks, usually housed in the wings, had been relegated to the fuselage proper, just behind the pilots. Hence the narrow, between-tanks passage that led from where Loose-Lip still stood.

Added to the cables, wires and fittings of the machine-gun installations in those wings, there were the pressure tanks and lead-out pipes having to do with the flame-throwers. Then, just below each motor nacelle, there was the rather complicated set-up that handled the grenade sowing—the mechanism that was geared to each engine and sowed 'em, as Glue-Joint Rance said, "accordin' to the count."

To accommodate all that internal junk, Bill Orr had resorted to the deep-wing type of monoplane panel. And to make each installation easily accessible—either for hangar service on in-the-air emergency—Bill Orr had provided a man-tunnel which had its opening in the fuselage floor and terminated among the stays and braces at either motor bed. A mac couldn't walk through that tunnel wearing a high silk hat, and Loose-Lip had long since told Captain Call that it was a swell opening for midget help in Air Corps; however, if put to it, a good-size man might make the grade, with some crawl, a lot of squeeze and plenty cussing.

No, Loose-Lip Lock didn't crawl down in that man-tunnel and start eating worms—just because Drinkwater had clouded his day. Loose-Lip Lock just closed and safetied the side door after Sergeant Stafford's passing. Then he mumbled "To hell with it!" and went aft to that armor-plated machine gunner's turret from which his nose had first protruded when Glue-Joint Rance and the Federal guard made Assembly delivery on the Orr job.

When Major Don't Drinkwater booted that ship off the ground, Loose-Lip Lock went back some twenty-odd years to that other take-off in France. The take-off was strictly circus—an awful example of what flying man can do with a ship when said flying man just doesn't give a damn for personal safety of flying orders. Chances are, Drinkwater hadn't flown a pusher job in years—maybe he'd never before handled one—but a ship was a ship, to him, and he had what it takes.

But Loose-Lip's ancient recollections were very brief. Back in that rear armor-plated turret, he had pulled the sliding sectors open. At the same time, he swiveled the whole works around so's he could get front vision—a view that would give him a peek into the pilots' cabin, through the rear window of that domed compartment. He wanted to keep an eye on Drinkwater.

And just as Loose-Lip yanked open the armor-plated slide sectors and swiveled, Drinkwater zoomed his take-off. Well, a gunner's stool doesn't provide a safety-belt that holds its man tightly to the seat. Instead, it's a wide belt, with long straps, that gives the wearer freedom of motion. So Loose-Lip was half standing when the zoom unfooted him. He went back hard

against the armor-plated crown; and his head hit that plating a sickening rap. That dizzy, star-filled, pinkish haze swelled through his brain, and the hit-on-the-nose feeling spread across his face.

THEN, suddenly topping his zoom, Drinkwater whirled his bus over on its back—the grand maneuver of the *chandelle* turn, and shoved the ship's nose hard down. At that exact moment, Loose-Lip was thrown forward—halfway through the turret opening—and the sliding sectors of heavy plate clanked shut. Clanking shut, they clipped Loose-Lip on the side of the head. The big guy, more than half kayoed, felt down for his gunner's stool, put hands on that rest, and sat. The turret-top sectors clanked and slid, opened and closed; then the safety caught, and the turrent was locked shut.

When they shut, they sealed that gunner's bay tight as a drum. And there were heavy fuel fumes in that fuselage, fumes thrown down and blown in by the crazy zoom and *chandelle* turn. Add fuel fumes and ship's heat to a near-kayoed condition and you're likely to have a sick man. Loose-Lip was limp. Sick. Dry of mouth and bug-eyed. He didn't care whether school kept or not. And something—past experience, no doubt, when he'd been up against such accidents before—told him that he was just about set to go out all the way. Out cold!

The big mac knew a moment of panic. It was no time and place to do a sleep, even a short sleep; not with that Drinkwater nut up there doing his well-known stuff.

Loose-Lip ran a slow, exploratory right hand over his head and down that side of his face. It came away wet, and the pink haze before his bleary eyes told him it was blood. Plenty blood.

Blood? That's nothing to a hard guy. But that damned sick-at-the-gut feeling, and that floaty, light headed stuff—that was the thing he had to fight. Had to get some fresh air. Well, give him just a few seconds, there on the stool, and he'd pull himself together, open that tin can's top and get out into the wind.

Loose-Lip didn't know how long he'd been sitting there. But he guessed it hadn't been long. No, he hadn't been all the way out. He'd have fallen from the stool—at least he'd have slumped against the pit's side—if he'd been out cold and lost any real time. And anyway, Drinkwater was flying her level. He'd been flying her that way for quite a while. Loose-Lip guessed that the great dizzy jag had the bus in a steady climb.

But all of a sudden the ship was kicked out of that easy, level line of flight, or out of that climb, if it was in a climb.

This time, Loose-Lip put both hands on the tourelle ring and held himself away from that armor-plated dome. From the crazy motion of the craft—and judging from the fact that she was roaring full power—he guessed that Drinkwater was going round and round with some other ship—or ships. Then, when Loose-Lip knew that the Orr job was square on its back, the motors were suddenly cut back; and while the big bus came down in a recovering swoop, a skyful of noise came to ear. Loose-Lip was certain that they were in the thick of air battle.

Oh, it was no time at all for a man to be sealed up in a can. Anything could happen there. And—

Like another blow on the head, a thought hit Loose-Lip. That thought was that he wasn't wearing his parachute. That chute was forward in the pilots' bay. Say, if he didn't do anything else, he must clear the cobwebs from his noggin long enough to go forward and get that chute. Good Lord! chutes were invented for just such spots as this.

So it was that prod, more, perhaps, than anything else, that finally put Loose-Lip to work. He felt around and once more located the turret's safety latch, released that, then put his right mitt on the handle, and pushed. It began sliding back, sector

on sector; and, gazing out through his pink haze, the man in the can saw the closest of many ships that seemed to be doing a hundred crazy stunts out there in the blue.

Loose-Lip tried to stand, and he couldn't. He'd have to take it easy. And Drinkwater was in another crazy turn, so Loose-Lip had to be careful. Damned if he didn't feel helpless! It was a devil of a spot.

"What's this guy doin' with the 'live' equipment, with the built-in Orr features?" Loose-Lip suddenly thought. *"Wonder if the drunken heel is using his bow guns? Wonder if he's firin' on these other ships?"*

Loose-Lip got his ear close to the pit's metal—and then held his heart in his mouth while he strove to pick up the rap and tap of ship that would have told him that Drinkwater was actually using his bow guns.

Loose-Lip found no such rap and tap. So far, so good. Perhaps Drinkwater wasn't too far gone to remember what Loose-Lip had told him—about that ship being loaded with "live" stuff.

A glance at the ground told the groggy star mac that this dogfight was being staged somewhere between eight and ten thousand elevation. Dizzy as he was, he could appreciate that; it would give a man time to use a chute, in the event.

Ah, that was it: he was going to work his way forward and get his own chute.

Slowly he swung the turret opening forward, for front visibility and a swish of air. Man, that was the stuff for sick soldiers! That slipstream blast. That would blow the cobwebs away.

But oh-oh! Just as Loose-Lip was getting that front-visibility view, just as he was getting to his feet, Drinkwater once more whaled full power to his motors, dropped the nose, and Loose-Lip glanced ahead—right down the spine of the Orr job—and spotted the Guard pursuit bus that Drinkwater was diving on.

And the quick dropping of the diving bow once more threw the star mac back on his sitter, back on the small stool and grabbing for any part of the pit's fittings he might reach in a hurry. He wasn't going to let that armor-plated turret clank close on his sore noggin again. Not Loose-Lip Lock!

THEN it came! That rat-a-tat-tat! Rat-tat-a-tat!

Loose-Lip thought he was imagining that. He hoped to hell he was dizzy enough to be imagining that. He almost prayed that the actual thing wasn't happening.

Again he braced himself, held open that turret and looked out forward. Drinkwater had the bus in a full forty-five degree dive by then. And the pursuit ship being shagged was not more than a hundred yards ahead.

It came again. Rat-a-tat-tat! Just one quick burst, a gun-warming burst. Loose-Lip cut his glance back till it was in the front pit—on Drinkwater—and he could see that that hog-wild heller was really in battle. Drinkwater was balled ahead over his controls; and, even in that dive, he turned his fierce grin on Observer Shaw, mouthed something in the line of a yell, slapped his throttles with the free left hand —as though to force more speed to the dive—then squeezed down on those bow guns again.

Rat-a-tat-tat-a-a-tat-tat! It was a long burst. Loose-Lip watched the tracers reach out for the pursuit ship ahead. Then he saw the face of that lone pursuit flyer when that surprised man turned and stared up and back.

Then Loose-Lip saw something else. He saw flame, and smoke, on the pursuit job's bow—and flame in the pit. He saw the pursuit man turn back to his air work, saw him pull up the nose, then step overside and open his chute.

The chute snapped to full bloom! Drinkwater pulled up and zoomed, in order to miss hitting the parachute, and the wide-winged, deep-paneled Orr job almost tore itself apart in the change of direction.

Loose-Lip knew that Death passed him closely at that minute. Him, back there without a chute, and a wild man yanking a wide-winged job out of a dive like that!

Loose-Lip, swiveling the turret to watch the chute float downwind, knew just how bad that pull-out might have been when he fully realized how deep the dive had been. Dazed and dizzy as he was, he knew that they were within a few thousand feet of the ground then—and that they had been dog-fighting way up around ten thousand when Drinkwater got on that unfortunate pursuit guy's tail.

Don't Drinkwater, still acting like a man who had shot down a genuine enemy, came back to circle the floating chute; and he quit that only when the pilot and his silk spread tangled with a clump of brush—and the Orr job was almost clipping the tops from that brush thicket too. Then, with that off his hands, Drinkwater located the spot where the pursuit ship had crashed and was burning itself out in a thick stand of spruce. The spruce was doing a big burn, too, and units of Camp Gunn were going to spend the next few hot days bringing that forest fire under control.

For a few minutes Loose-Lip watched Drinkwater while the great berserk jockeyed the ship through the tree-tops and circled the fire. Again and again, Drinkwater threw back his head and sent out a yell that Loose-Lip could hear, even way back where he was. Then he'd watch Drinkwater slap that throttle, hoss the controls, point to all the gadgets on the instrument board, reach over and slap Shaw's back, then yell like hell again. The guy was geared for battle. Wild with the stuff. As lost to actual surroundings as a man could be.

And Observer Shaw—Loose-Lip could tell—was as close to being scared stiff, as any sane man could be. Shaw didn't even attempt elation. He just sat there, stared ahead, looked dead.

Drinkwater leveled the ship's flight for a few seconds. Loose-Lip watched the big guy stare skyward—up and far back to the north where the big air battle had been under way. That great piece of air work was breaking up. Some of the groups were moving east, some west, while stray ships were coming down in the dive; these latter to get a closer view of the pursuit job's fate.

That air action, at any rate, had terminated. Loose-Lip and Observer Shaw, no doubt, were dam' glad of that. Had it still been going on, Don't Drinkwater would have gone back; and that would have meant more hell for somebody. Meantime, the ship climbed a bit.

So Drinkwater just circled—there at about five hundred elevation—and studied his sky. The Guard ships that came down kept well away from him. Of course, these other pilots had no way of knowing that it was Drinkwater in the Orr ship, but they each must have had a sneaking idea that the downed pursuit job had fallen victim to "live" machine-gun fire. For a while—and just for the hell of it—Drinkwater amused himself by trying to get closer to those other ships. Most of them were faster than the Orr ship, though, and the Guard pilots made the most of that added speed.

Loose-Lip watched Drinkwater closely. Suddenly, as he expected, Drinkwater showed signs of getting sore. These other guys wouldn't play with him! These other guys wouldn't stay to go round and round, as combating pilots should! Well, to hell with 'em!

Loose-Lip could almost hear Drinkwater yell that as the big guy dropped a hard chase, began to abuse his controls, yell and circle. And now he didn't reach across and slap Shaw on the shoulder any more. The game, perhaps, was going sour on him.

Maybe he'd give it up as a bad job, lose his keen edge entirely, and start back for the landing field. Loose-Lip, still pretty woozy, hoped so. Somehow or other, Federal's star mac couldn't clear the old

head, couldn't get the man back on his feet. But as for getting that chute of his —well, a man didn't need a chute at the low altitude Drinkwater was now carrying. And, chances were, he wouldn't go higher.

No, he might not go higher; but he suddenly showed signs of going lower. Drinkwater had sighted other worlds to conquer.

LOOSE-LIP felt sicker than ever when he saw what Major Don't Drinkwater had spotted. And when Drinkwater quit his loafing and put the airport demoralizer on the line for those new worlds to be conquered, the sick mac just dropped his head on the gunner's tourelle, stared down at the floorboards and uttered a fervent, though resigned, "Aw, what the hell."

Way off to the southeast, off toward the old, permanent section of Camp Gunn, the war of movement had caught Drinkwater's eye. About four miles south of where they'd been circling—and shagging those other won't-play Guard ships—the new model military road crosses the ten-mile-wide military reservation. And on that great wide model road now were unit after unit of mechanized equipment. Gun trucks, armored cars, ammunition trains, staff cars, motor-bike squads and everything else that rolls, clanks or cats. The great military artery was carrying war of movement to full capacity, rolling stock by the thousand, troops by the tens of thousands. And in the fields and on the rolling hills to either side of the wide, many-laned strip of cement, countless other army units whirled and surged in their respective spheres of battle effort. The set-up was a natural for a man like Drinkwater; and if there wasn't fun to be found there, then there was no fun left in this world—or in Drinkwater's sky.

The country between the clump of spruce in which the pursuit ship burned and the model highway, a good four mile stretch, was almost entirely fields. The hay fields of the old Camp Gunn remount station, now, for the greater part, weed-grown and tinder-dry. It was all open country, the sort of country across which a Drinkwater would love to hedgehop at absolutely no altitude. So he went right down to about one hundred elevation. And Loose-Lip Lock, still with his arm and dizzy head on the tourelle, swiveled till he faced aft. Loose-Lip glanced overside—just to watch the dry, yellow fields swish past. And suddenly Loose-Lip came to life!

Loose-Lip had seen what he didn't want to see—stretching off behind their path was a long double row of grass fires starting up. Straight down, Loose-Lip gazed, forcing himself to a standing position, hanging half out the turret.

And there they were breaking! Breaking, exploding, tossing fire into the dry grass. Grenades! Hand-grenades! Grenades being sowed "by the count" and by the hundred! Hell on the wing!

Getting under way, Loose-Lip swung that turret for forward visibility, shot one glance ahead to Drinkwater and saw the big laughing guy pointing out the levers of the "attack" board to Shaw.

Shaw, still sort of listless, was just nodding.

Loose-Lip's glance ahead also brought in all those troop movements and concentrations; and the air-wise mac knew, as sure as he was a foot high, that Drinkwater was angling in on the great highway. Maybe the madman would not actually jazz the crowded artery, but he'd at least fly over and along it by way of being in that busy military swim. Loose-Lip knew Drinkwaters well enough to know that this Drinkwater couldn't pass up such a dish.

Loose-Lip knew that time was running out on him. And that time was, perhaps, sneaking up on too many of those troop units ahead. Any ship, even a relatively slow piece of modern aircraft, kicks three or four miles behind its rudder in no time at all; and, when Loose-Lip went into action, it was no longer a matter of three or

four miles, but maybe less than two. That is, the Orr demoralizer was about halfway across the old remount fields.

Lurching and lunging, yelling with everything he could muster, Loose-Lip plunged forward through that narrow lead-up passage.

"Drinkwater! Drinkwater, you crazy, son—!"

Drinkwater glanced back just as Loose-Lip came into the small pilots' bay.

Drinkwater's face lost its smile, or grin, or leer, or show of wild joy. His hand, at that exact moment, was up on the master throw of the "attack" board. That master throw was Bill Orr's version of the English "Works" button. When that master throw was brought down, it threw the levers that fired—and kept firing—all machine guns, both fire-throwers and the grenade layers.

Loose-Lip Lock made his try for the hand that was on that master throw. Drinkwater pulled that throw, then threw that free hand into Loose-Lip's face. Loose-Lip fell back, dazed, half blind. He went hands down to the floorboards. Good common sense told him that reason had no place in that bay with Drinkwater. Also, the star mac knew flying time so well that he realized this was just a matter of split seconds. There was only one way out, and he knew that way—if he had the drive and strength to go through with it.

Just as he fought his way back to his feet, and shot a glance through the bay's side window, he saw the wild-eyed Shaw point wingward and yell, "What the—Ship afire! Ship afire!"

An arc of flame curved back from the tip of either wing. Drinkwater took a look, too, and bellowed something. The flame-throwers were working.

Drinkwater, though, must have known something about the flame-throwers. He wasn't panicky. What's more he was continuing the flight—right straight ahead—and still angling in on the big highway, not very far away now.

LOOSE-LIP LOCK spun and tumbled back into the narrow passage. Down on his knees he went—there between the big fuel tanks—and jerked open the hatch that gave on the wing tunnel. Into that cramped runway he scrambled head first. Just inside, and first to come within reach, were the pressure tanks for the left wing's flame-thrower. The pressure on those tanks was built up and maintained by the usual pressure pump on the motor, and the thin copper tube that carried that air to the tanks was the first thing that snapped under Loose-Lip's mighty right hand. He heard the slight hiss of air that escaped from the broken lead; and, at the same time, knew a bit of relief when that other mighty hiss—the flame throwing from that left nozzle—died down.

Next, along the main spar truss, and metal looped to that deep wing member, was the collection of three steel flex tubes that carried the firing cables of the three left-wing machine guns, the three guns that were chattering like hell, the three of six guns that were pouring "live" slugs into the ground—or, maybe, into the troop units over which Drinkwater might be then passing. Loose-Lip was able only to put his right hand on that group of steel-covered controls. Again he yanked; and when the leads ripped off their loop fittings, the fingernails of his right—three of those nails—came off, too. The machine-gun chatter went out of that left wing.

Next, and harder to reach, was the long piston rod that regulated the dropping of grenades. That rod—a three-eighths piece of steel—came down from the motor's cam-shaft housing. The steel rod, working at top speed, was plunging through a stroke of only two inches. But Loose-Lip had to make his grab between struts, and in cramped hand room. Miss that first grab and yank—and he might lose a hand against the angle irons of the truss.

But he had no time for anything like personal safety, so he grabbed. He yanked. He held. The rod broke free. And the

grenade-dropping mechanism went out of business. That entire left wing had quit its job of demoralizing.

So the job was half done. And when Loose-Lip turned toward the second half of his undertaking, he also turned a second-saving stunt that was to cause argument—back on Federal Proving Ground—during weeks to come. Yes, sir, the big mac was in such a frantic hurry that he actually turned his mighty bulk—and six-foot-plus length—in that tunnel that Bill Orr had designed for midget help. Later—back at Federal—the smallest men in the hangars were to try that turnabout, and fail. But the bloody hand marks on the narrow crawlway showed that Loose-Lip came back toward the fuselage the same way he went in—head first. And there was plenty of blood to attest to that passage of hurt man.

Getting back to the fuselage end of that left wing's tunnel, Loose-Lip reached up to the frame of the hatchway opening, just by way of getting a quick handhold for a forward pull. And as his hand came away, it rapped the open upturned hatch. The hatch fell shut. Loose-Lip didn't mind that—it meant nothing for the time being—and he plunged ahead into the right wing's tunnel.

What he had done in the left wing, he now undertook to repeat in the right. First he broke the air-pressure lead. Then, with his left hand this time, he yanked out all the machine-gun flex tubes—and left the fingernails of his left hand with them. Then he went ahead for the last big effort, and something warned the star mac that this *was* going to be his big effort. Perhaps too big, too big even for a guy who could make them "just about right" no matter how big mechanical problems came.

GROUP after group of excited Guard airmen had shot their landings on the big field. Especially excited were the men of that pursuit squadron which had lost a ship in flames. And only when most of the planes had returned did Don't Drinkwater call a halt to his wild jazzin' and come in for a landing.

The big boy in person, Major-General Hallett, and most of his tactical staff were on hand, out there on the field, by then. So were Captain Call and Lieutenant Mowat. And when Drinkwater stepped down, it was Major-General Hallett in person who called the Officer of the Day and snapped, "This officer"—meaning Major Drinkwater—"is to be escorted directly to his quarters. See to it that he remains there. The gentleman is under technical arrest in quarters. That's all!"

Captain Call and Mowat climbed aboard the ship. Then, shortly after, the captain again stepped to the ground—where Observer Shaw was still on the grill before Major-General Hallett and group.

"There's something very strange here, sir," Captain Call reported. "These Guard mechanics claim that my flying mechanic, Mr. Lock, was aboard when Major Drinkwater took off. Mr. Lock's parachute is still in the pilots' bay, but there's no sign of him."

"What do you know about that, Mr. Shaw?" Major-General Hallett demanded.

"Why, nothing, sir," said Shaw. "That is, er, yes, the mechanic rode along. He was still with us when Major Drinkwater came down to jazz the highway. Good Lord, sir, I don't know what happened after that."

"And another thing, sir," Captain Call went on to explain. "The master throw of the 'attack' board was still pulled down for 'the Works' operation when, just now, I went into the pilots' bay. Still, sir, we know that the machine-gun fire, the flame-throwers and all grenade dropping stopped just before the highway was reached by this ship. I hate to suggest this, sir. Eh, I hesitate to become dramatic, but—

"Eh, pardon me, sir. What have you located, Lieutenant Mowat?"

Mowat had stepped down. He said, "There's dry blood back in the gunner's

turret. Blood on the armor-plated sectors. Blood on the gunner's tourelle. And blood on the stool. Blood just about everywhere."

"That, sir," Captain Call then said to Major-General Hallett, "is what I mean. Could Major Drinkwater have—"

"But Major Drinkwater didn't leave his controls for a moment, sir," Observer Shaw interrupted.

Captain Call and Mowat had turned to the ship. They were inspecting the tail service. If a man had gone overboard, without a chute, that wide tail service should have clipped him in passing. There might be blood there. There were no signs of blood anywhere on the left-side stabilizer or elevator. So Call and Mowat went around the rudder to examine the right-side tail members.

Sergeant Stafford and a group of his Guard macs were off to one side, under the ship's wide, deep right wing. And suddenly Stafford spoke up.

"Just a second, Captain," he called. "This isn't all old oil that's runnin' down this strut. It's blood."

Stafford was running his hand through the gooey mess that coated the main strut of the right landing wheel. That strut came down from a fitting directly under the right motor's egg nacelle.

Even as he spoke, Sergeant Stafford was unscrewing butterfly nuts, removing the lower cowling from the motor nacelle. Captain Call and Mowat went to work with Stafford. And the lower cowling fell free.

In there, messed up with the mechanism of the seed-drilling grenade sower, was a bloody hand. Clutched in the bloody mitt was a twist of the grenade-carrying belt—and in the pin-pulling reel of the mechanism was all twisted hell'n'gone out of commission.

"I've found my man, sir," Captain Call said to Major-General Hallett. "Yes, sir, he's still running blood. So he'll be all right.

"Come on, Lockie, me boy," the captain then yelled, "let's go! Time to eat!

"Not a rise out of him," Call then mumbled to Mowat. "Never saw a guy who could sleep on hard metal like Lockie can."

LOOSE-LIP-LOCK didn't stop sleeping on hard metal till long after they'd pulled him—feet first—out of that wing tunnel.

Then the medical men went to work on him, and he finally started arguing and showed all the old signs of fighting life.

"Where am I?" he demanded. "Oh, hello, cap. Hello, Mowat.

"Say, I made a mess of this Orr job, eh? Had to do it. That big Drinkwater monkey was too much for me—after that turret top had cold-copped me like that. Yup, I had to do it.

"But that last steel rod—on the grenade sower—was one too many for me. Couldn't snap it. Had to hand-twist the grenade belt off its sprocket. Almost pulled a grenade pin while I was doin' it, too. Almost made one hell of a mess of me, Cap.

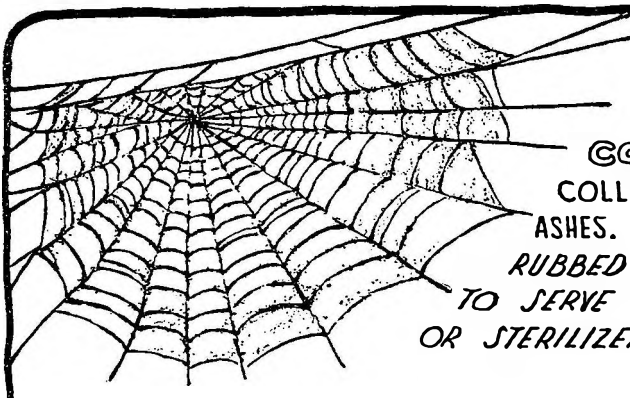
"Say, how much damage was done, Cap?"

"Not much," Captain Call answered. "Nothing that a court-martial can't fix. I'll give you odds that Drinkwater stays on the ground for a long, long time."

"There's a man!" Loose-Lip said. "A heel. A nasty heller. A son that even a son wouldn't expect a father to ask a mother to love. But how the guy can fly 'em. How the guy can fly!

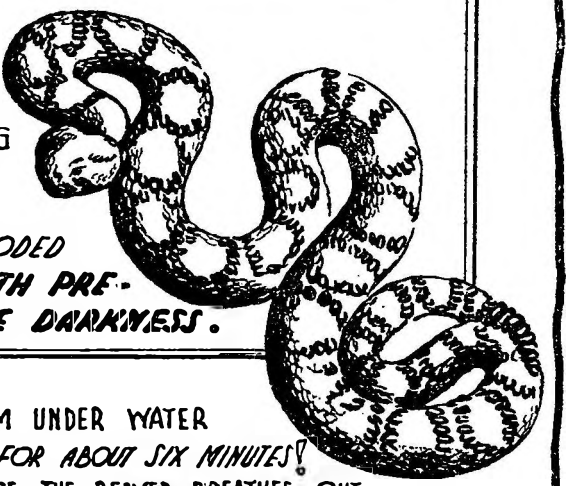
"If he ever comes back to flyin', though, I'll go into submarine service. Twice is enough. Slip me a cig, Cap."

Curioddities By Weill

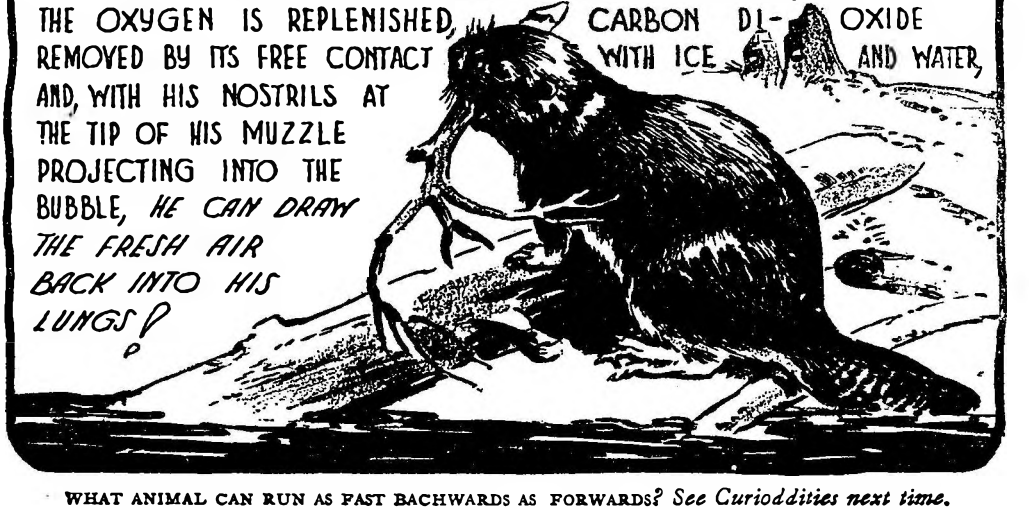


IN MONGOLIA, COBWEBS ARE COLLECTED AND BURNED TO ASHES. THE ASHES ARE THEN *RUBBED INTO WOUNDS TO SERVE AS AN ANTISEPTIC OR STERILIZER...*

RATTLESNAKES ARE EQUIPPED WITH PIT-LIKE RECEPTORS SO SENSITIVE TO THE TEMPERATURE OF MOVING OBJECTS THAT THEY CAN *NOT ONLY DETECT THE PRESENCE OF WARM-BLOODED ANIMALS, BUT* ***STRIKE WITH PRECISION IN COMPLETE DARKNESS.***



BEAVERS CAN SWIM UNDER WATER ***WITHOUT BREATHING*** *FOR ABOUT SIX MINUTES!* WHEN ICE HAS SEALED THE SURFACE, THE BEAVER BREATHES OUT TO FORM A LARGE BUBBLE BETWEEN ICE AND WATER. QUICKLY THE OXYGEN IS REPLENISHED, CARBON DIOXIDE REMOVED BY ITS FREE CONTACT WITH ICE AND WATER, AND, WITH HIS NOSTRILS AT THE TIP OF HIS MUZZLE PROJECTING INTO THE BUBBLE, *HE CAN DRAW THE FRESH AIR BACK INTO HIS LUNGS!*



WHAT ANIMAL CAN RUN AS FAST BACKWARDS AS FORWARDS? *See Curioddities next time.*

TREASURE RANCH

By CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

Author of Many Outstanding Novels of the West

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

THE scene of this story is Arizona and the vast Parlette Ranch—two hundred and forty square miles of it. Its owner is Joan Parlette, youngest daughter of old John Parlette and mother of a son—young Gregg. The boy's father, Frank Dade, faded out of the picture years ago, the other Parlette brothers and sisters hastened East after their father's death, and Joan's vast holdings have been cared for and increased by two loyal men — old Tom Hackett and Bob Webster, foreman of the mighty spread. Joan is now worth a cool million, but is restless, wanting she doesn't know what, in spite of her devotion to her home and lands.

Then two strange pilgrims come to the Parlette Ranch—Mona Wilsden, a show girl, and her sidekick and champion, Bat-

PART II

Even Tin-horn Gamblers Come Back

tling Kelso, a prize-fighter. They are very strange to Joan, but she welcomes them, and they are very interested in Joan, in Webster, in Gregg and in ranch life. Soon comes to join the group Joan's brother, Paul, who has been away a very long time, and he brings word that her sisters, Kathie and Gail, are on the way home also. News of Joan's great wealth is what is bringing them, Webster says cynically to Hackett. Joan herself is pleased at the thought of seeing them again, her assistants not at all so.

VI

"FOLKS are like that," said Tom Hackett. "Only more so." A horse hair rope, braided, was lying near him on the scorched ground near the campfire, its coils glistening from frequent rubbings with wet rawhide. He stopped shoving a harness maker's needle back and forth through the honda he was shaping at the end of the rope, He went on, "If a thing you see don't interest you right away you don't pay enough attention to it to find out what it is." He pulled a plug of tobacco, a conical stone pipe and a jackknife from a pocket. He cut a slab of tobacco from the plug, rolled it between

the palms of his hands, licked the knife blade with his tongue and put tobacco and knife back into the pocket. He said, between puffs at the pipe, looking at Gregg Parlette over the match flame, "There's that cooney, now, under the chuck wagon. You've seen it a lot of times on all your Maw's wagons, but you never asked what it's name was. You wasn't interested." He puffed, making grunting noises. Through the smoke that drifted upward into the windless dusk he watched a moonlit ridge where late that afternoon he had seen a silhouetted Indian, rigid and motionless, blanketed, his braid hanging straight down as he stared at the cattle in the valley bottom—and no doubt counted the riders guarding them. Hackett had been so close, behind a thicket of alder and scrub cedar, that he had clearly seen the roach of the brave's hair and the parted hanks that came down to meet the braid. A Maricopa Apache. Again now, he spoke to Gregg. He said, Folks take too much for granted." Once more he thought of the Indian. After watching until the Maricopa disappeared he had swung around and slipped up a dry wash to a far, brush-screened hilltop, to see Indian lodges with their hide-covered walls and their crossed center poles, dotting a sheltered level of the Antelope, where the stream doubled before it flowed down to the flat. He was surprised to see them there, for the last time he had heard of them they were on the North Branch. It was not a war party, for they had brought their women and children. Some of the ponies were still rigged to travois poles. He went back to his subject, saying, "Some cook with an idea of saving his legs invented the cooney. The cook who first built a cooney had picked up dry wood as he drove along with his chuck wagon. He put the wood into the cooney, where it stayed dry. A cooney is nothing but a dry hide tied under the bed of a wagon. But some cook had noticed things."

He worked again with the honda. At dusk he had doubled the night herd crew, against any chance that the Maricopas might take some steers without permission. One success would make them bolder. If trouble was to come it was just as well to have it arrive before they got too arrogant. But he'd have to get Gregg away from here, back to the ranchhouse where he would be safe.

"This rope is finished," he said, tossing it into the boy's eager hands and seeing how delighted he was. "There's a lot of life in a horse's tail," he said. "But when they get too dry they turn brittle. Then they are not so strong. If I was you I'd ride for the home ranch tomorrow and spend a great deal of my time polishing the rope with damp rawhide. Maybe I'd keep throwing it at a snubbing post in a corral, to limber it up and get the honda to running smooth. It takes quite a while to limber a rope to where the noose won't kink."

Gregg said, "Thank you, Tom," and smiled at the rope-maker. He added, "Gee! You started it last fall, didn't you? Making a horse hair rope takes a long time. But it's a beauty!"

"You like it, eh?" Tom said. He liked the kid. As well as he liked the kid's mother. "How many horses's tails went into that rope?" he asked, and got a shake of the head for an answer. "I don't know, either." He liked to see pride of ownership in Gregg's eyes. The kid reminded him of John Parlette. His young manliness was a counterpart of the dead owner's character.

"I'll ride in tomorrow morning," said Gregg.

"I'll ride along with you," Hackett said. "I've got to go in anyway." Thinking the inducement of rope-limbering might not be quite enough, after a night's reflection, he added, "There's another reason why you ought to go in. Your Maw's got company."

"Who?"

"Nobody you know. Your Uncle Paul from the East. And a show girl. And"—

he kept the ace-in-the-hole for the last—"a prizefighter."

"Gosh!"

"A heavyweight prizefighter. His name is Battling Kelso. Ever hear of him?"

"Sure. He fought the champion. He got licked, but he made a good fight. Gosh!"

Hackett now made it strong. "Maybe you could get him to give you boxing lessons. He's a nice feller."

"Did he bring boxing gloves?"

"He brought two valises with him," said Hackett. "And he don't wear many clothes. Just some light shoes, a pair of pants and a funny kind of shirt without any sleeves to amount to anything. It's likely he's got boxing gloves. There's another thing. Two of your aunts are coming tomorrow—your Aunt Kathleen and your Aunt Gail. Webster and some of the boys are going to Maricopa tonight to meet tomorrow morning's train. They're taking the station wagon to bring them to the ranch."

Gregg carried the new rope to a spruce near the bank of the creek, where his saddle was hanging from a low limb. He lashed the free end of the rope to the saddle horn, threw its coils over, got his blanket from the bedroll and went back to the fire, where Hackett was knocking the ashes from his pipe.

MID-AFTERNOON came before they got started toward the ranchhouse. Hackett had circled the herd and had given orders to slowly edge it down to where the valley broadened and flattened, later to meet the level country beyond. To various lounging riders he spoke of the presence of the Maricopas, and at last rode back to the chuck wagon where, with Gregg watching from a distance while saddling his pony, he told the cook to hitch up and begin to drift downstream with the herd. The cook was warned to move leisurely. Gregg had watched the wranglers hazing the horse herd down the creek, and as he and Hackett racked through the valley toward a sandy arroyo that looked like the bed of an ancient watercourse, he several times glanced inquiringly at his friend. Later in the afternoon, following a shallow ravine that led to some timber, above, he spoke, "Won't they think we are afraid of them, Tom?"

Hackett's start was inward, but he stopped chewing his tobacco. He said, "Who will think we are afraid?" and looked at Gregg.

"The Maricopas," said the boy.

"What Maricopas?"

"The ones that are camped above the head of the flat. Yesterday afternoon I saw you ride up that dry wash to look at them. While you were telling off the men for night herd duty I rode up the wash and had a look at them, too. There's not so many of them. I counted twenty-two braves. Spotted Elk is there, too. And I saw that brave on the ridge, watching the herd."

Hackett grinned. The way the kid had acted no one would have known he knew anything about the presence of the Maricopas. He said, "I thought I was being slick last night when I was shooting off about the cooney. You do notice things."

The ravine angled away from the flat. It ran through a cedar brake as it gradually ascended to higher country, and the brush along its edges grew thicker and taller. It doubled sinuously, widening always until it merged with a wooded slope that led to the road over which the Parlette wagon train had traveled on the day it had brought Mona and Kelso to the ranch.

"The Maricopas were near the North Branch when I left there Tuesday with Jardine," said Gregg. "Webster sent some of the men of the Gila outfit up there. Was he expecting trouble?"

HACKETT looked at the sun. He was reluctant to continue this subject. "Webster and the station wagon ought to

be along pretty soon, now," he said. "No —no trouble. He aims to avoid it. At the same time he won't take any orders from Spotted Elk."

"Orders?"

"I expect you've heard about it—or you've guessed it. Spotted Elk has been kicking about the beef ante. The agreement your Maw made with him last year was a steer a week. Now he wants two. Claims the hunting is bad. Fact is, his braves are too lazy to hunt. Spotted Elk wants your Maw to come to him for a pow-wow. Webster won't let her do it. It's Spotted Elk's place to go to see her. Think of her running to make a deal with a damned Indian!" He looked hard at Gregg, his eyes narrowing, and suddenly pulled his horse down, motioned Gregg to do likewise, threw his head up and sniffed the slight breeze that wandered up the ravine. An eagle feather showing above a manzanita clump at the road's edge, above, caught his attention before he had time to look down the ravine. He whispered, "Scoot!" to Gregg as he wheeled his horse to go back the way they had come, but with the movement he saw two Maricopas coming up, riding bareback, as they always did. A roan and a paint horse, wearing rawhide hackamores. Funny how a man would notice such things at a time like this. He backed his horse into the trees at the edge of the ravine, whipped his big gun from its holster on his leg, feeling Gregg near him, seeing a sunflash from the polished blue of the gun in the boy's hand. Gregg was always rubbing and oiling the weapon, and at times, while riding, drawing and pointing it. Now he suspected Gregg knew what was up.

The timber along the edge of the ravine was too thick for running. It would have to be fought out right here. But he wanted Gregg to get out of it clean, so he yelled for him to stay where he was and jumped his own horse down the ravine, straight at the two Maricopas who were coming up. His Colt poised for a shot, he saw the right hands of the two Indians raised in the peace sign, so he reined in, warily watching them. He heard Gregg calling to him, saying, "They're friendly, Tom!" and glanced swiftly up the slope to see two other Maricopas standing near the manzanita clump, just where the slope merged with the road. They, too, were making the peace sign. He saw how it was and was mad clear through. Knowing he was in charge of the outfit, they had watched him, wanting to talk about their beef rations. Likely the brave he had seen on the ridge yesterday afternoon had seen Gregg, who was known to them.

The two who had ridden up the ravine had stopped at a little distance, far enough away to keep their ponies from wrangling with his, but near enough for him to smell them and to see the thong-wrapped handles of tomahawks stuck in the girdles of their breech clouts, the heads at their backs. They bore rifles, a long Sharps and a Wesson, under their left arms, the muzzles pointing downward. The two who stood near the manzanita clump had no rifles. All their faces were inscrutable except Gregg's, who watched Hackett, to interpret his movements and to catch any signs he might give.

The Indian on the paint horse wore two feathers in his hair, and a frontlet band of elk teeth on his forehead where the hair began. Dirty buckskin leggings ran upward to his knees, and his beaded moccasins were scuffed almost through at the toes.

"How!" he said.

"How!" said Hackett. Gregg was silent, watching.

"Me Two Feathers. Me want talk with white brother," said the rider of the paint horse, in understandable English.

"Sure," Hackett agreed. But he wouldn't talk here, where they had him and Gregg between two fires. He jerked a thumb toward the road, above. "Up there, on the level," he said. He motioned the Maricopas forward. They rode past him while

he stayed Gregg, and as Gregg ascended he sent his own horse up with a rush that quickly took him to the boy's side. "Let her go!" he said to Two Feathers.

THE Indians were solemn. Two Feathers held up two fingers of his right hand, separated, and said, "Maricopas want two beef. One no good."

After all, this was just palaver—a dicker for additional food. A bluff, perhaps. They might be fearful that the one steer a week would be denied them. They did not intend to force things. Or did they? He watched Two Feathers' eyes. Their beady depths could not be read. He would find out what their temper was—their intention.

He said, grinning, "Why don't Maricopas hunt for game?"

"Hunt no good," said Two Feathers. "Want two beef!" An angry flash crossed his eyes. So their hearts were not entirely peaceful! Their demands refused, they would turn warlike. Hackett tickled the belly of his horse with the touch of a rowel, making him jump. Gregg's pony backed away and Hackett edged in front of him.

Hackett had no authority to settle it. He said, "You'll have to talk to Joan Parlette," and sought to swing his horse to one side, to pass them. He had a slight hope that the gesture would end the parley. Two Feathers' companion jumped his roan over, and the two others, afoot, stepped in front of Hackett's horse, and Hackett saw it would not be as simple as he had thought.

"She no come to talk with Maricopas?" said Two Feathers.

"Sure not. You go talk to her. Have Spotted Elk go—he's your chief."

Two Feathers shook his head decisively from side to side. "Spotted Elk no go to squaw. Squaw come to Spotted Elk. Spotted Elk big chief. Want two beef. Want white squaw come!"

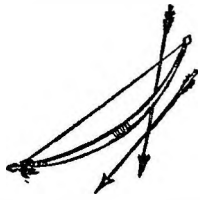
"No!" said Hackett, shaking his head. The Maricopa on the roan horse kept trying to edge around to his right. He stopped that by seeming to accidentally keep his own horse in the way. Both animals, their ears laid back, their teeth bared, made the maneuver difficult; and when Hackett saw it was their intention to surround himself and Gregg, and that already he had to turn his horse sideways to Two Feathers and the dismounted Indians, he began to understand they were trying to separate him from the boy.

"White squaw no come, we take white boy," said Two Feathers, and drove his paint horse toward Gregg's pony. Now the roan squealed in fury as its rider forced it against Hackett's horse; and in the resulting melee the dismounted Indians were lunging forward, snatching at Gregg's bridle reins. The rider of the roan horse was trying to swing the muzzle of his rifle up to bear on Hackett, and Hackett, who had shoved his Colt down his leg when he thought the Maricopas might prove to be friendly, now jerked the weapon loose. Its explosion made the roan rear backward in fright, and as the big gun kicked upward the Maricopa jerked sideways and tumbled into the heavy dust of the road. The roan galloped off, bucking and squealing, and Hackett, aiming from the hip at Two Feathers, saw the Indian, close, reaching for Gregg. The boy, who had been waiting for his friend to take the initiative, had drawn his gun with Hackett's movement. As Two Feathers reached for him, swinging near, he smashed the long barrel of the forty-ounce weapon down upon the Indian's forehead, near the Elk's tooth band. As Two Feathers reeled, to pitch off the paint horse after the animal had taken not more than two or three jumps, Hackett saw a crimson streak appear on the red man's forehead. The dismounted Indians began to run toward the timber in which they had left their horses. Hackett spurred after them, Gregg riding close behind, not so bloodthirsty as Hackett, who was raging. The foremost

Maricopa reached the timber, disappeared into it. The second spun around and dived crazily into the road as Hackett's vengeful bullet struck him, and as man and boy pulled up, to hear the escaping brave's pony crashing through the natural forest barriers, they saw blood welling up from the bronzed back of the Indian lying face down in the road.

Awed, Gregg exclaimed, "Gee, Tom, in the heart!"

Hackett said, "An Indian ain't got any heart," and wheeled his horse to go back where Two Feathers was lying, face up, close to a clump of greasewood. Gregg rode close behind Hackett. "You sure busted him, kid!" said Hackett. "Saved me killing him. He'll wake up with a headache, and then he'll go back to camp and tell Spotted Elk that you and me don't think much of this hostage business." He looked at the paint horse, standing near, and at a bay pony running hard over a distant level, his rider showing only a leg and an arm over the animal's back. "We'll have to get out of here," he said. "They'll be buzzing around pretty quick." He turned to take a final glance at Gregg's victim lying near the greasewood clump,



with his elk's tooth frontlet band and his foolish feathers. Man and boy now heard the clip clop of hoofs nearby. They watched a dust cloud traveling toward them from east to west along the road to the ranch, and then they saw the Parlette station wagon, convoyed by several Parlette riders, coming toward them.

VII

KATHLEEN would not step down into the dust of the road to look at Two Feathers lying near the greasewood. But Gail got out and stood close to him as he got up, dazed bewilderment in his eyes, to stare at her and at the driver of the wagon, who vindictively watched him, and at the several cowboys who were clustered around Webster and Hackett a little distance away.

"What a beastly face!" said Gail. "He's had smallpox."

"Don't look at him, then," Kathleen said, shuddering. She turned her back.

Ranch born, Indians were no novelties to the returning sisters of Joan Parlette, for they could remember days when Apaches were more numerous than now, and soldiers fewer. With the detachment of casual interest they had read of cavalry posts in Arizona being augmented or newly created, and of Apaches being herded to reservations. Yet dead Indians had been vastly more appreciated by John Parlette than live ones, and this pleasant philosophy had descended to his daughters. Without a pulse of pity they watched Two Feathers rise and stagger to his paint horse, to climb upon its back and ride away, neglecting to search for his rifle which, when he had tumbled from his horse, had hurtled from his hand into some juniper bushes. The sisters were more interested in Bob Webster, who was now questioning Tom Hackett.

"Twenty-two braves, you say?" said Webster. "That's about all there were at their North Branch village. "They've been drifting away from Spotted Elk. Some are roaming Tonto Basin, and some are up the Hassayampa, just this side of old Fort Whipple. The braves that are left are too lazy to hunt or fight. I don't think we will have any more trouble with them. Yet, just to be sure they don't get the jump on us, you men can join the Bear Flat outfit, temporarily. You can go back with them, Tom. Tomorrow you can send a man to the North Branch to bring back the Gila men who went up there last week. Don't go out of your way to look for trouble, but if trouble comes, let them

know about the brand you keep on hand. Got plenty of ammunition?"

"Plenty. In the chuck wagon. So-long." He rode down into the ravine with the men of the wagon convoy. He turned in the saddle and shook hands with himself, with Gregg watching him. He called back, to Gregg, "You're the seeingest kid, and the bustingest. Just like John Parlette and your Maw. If you put on the gloves with Battling Kelso, sock him in the kisser for me. And you—you old haw-knocker"—he was now grinning at Webster—"you ain't the kissable kind. But you might be. What you need is a burr under your saddle!"

"He made me a horse hair rope," said Gregg, proudly showing it. "He's so quiet and kind and deep. He keeps you guessing about what he's thinking. Why did he say you need a burr under your saddle?"

"Thinks I need bucking up," said the foreman. "And maybe I do. Yes—he keeps you guessing."

THEY rode back to where Kathleen and Gail were waiting in the station wagon. The sisters had seen the two Indians lying in the road, and had tried to hear what Webster and the other men had been saying. Only Hackett's voice, from the ravine, had reached them, very faintly.

"Wasn't that Tom Hackett?" said Kathleen.

Webster said, "Yes," and motioned the driver to proceed. There would be no other wagons coming along the road, and the Maricopas would return for their dead. He rode beside the wagon, now, with Gregg beside him.

"Why didn't Hackett speak to us?" said Kathleen.

"Tom's bashful," said Webster. "Besides, he wasn't around much when you were at home."

"That's absurd! He was married at the Parlette ranch. They had two children, but both of them died. Then his wife." She knew Hackett had never liked her, and she had always been annoyed by his speculative glances at her. She had always suspected Hackett knew her better than she knew herself, and the thought had irked her.

Until now, Webster had ridden far ahead of the wagon. He hadn't wanted to answer questions—wouldn't answer them. Now, because he felt more responsible than ever, he had to ride near the wagon. And the questions came. He fended off some, the important ones which would have provided the girls with information about Joan and the ranch. He answered others. Yes, Padre O'Meara was still at his hacienda on the Antelope. The Apaches were always troublesome. He had been the Parlette foreman for about eleven years. Yes, Joan had appointed him. Was it true that Joan had grown wealthy? A Chicago livestock man, visiting Newport, had told her so, said Kathleen. He said, "Was he a dealer in Bulls and Bears?" and succeeded in keeping his face straight.

"You *are* naïve, aren't you?" said Kathleen, but there was doubt in the probing glance she gave him. He hadn't answered her question. He was good looking enough to arouse her interest, and she saw Gail critically watching him as he rode along, tall and loose in the saddle and very graceful. He had a striking profile, and the raw bronze of his skin gave him a wild look—like an Indian. She thought things would be rather dull here, and that it would be fun to tame him. Remembering him as a reckless dare-devil in the old days, when her father recounted his exploits as a bronc buster, a fearless fighter of Indians, a top roper, a tireless rider who had been respected far and wide for his wizardry with a six-shooter and a rifle, and his cold nerve in a crisis, she saw that age had taken the edge off of his ebullience, to fashion him into an easy-going, quietly confident and dependable foreman who was liked and respected by his wild riders and who was responsible for Joan's success with the ranch. She had quietly questioned the driver of

the station wagon, to find him taciturn, but very respectful when she mentioned Joan.

It wasn't until Gail exclaimed, "Oh, look at that beautiful kid!" that she noticed Gregg. Then she said, "He *is* beautiful, isn't he? All cowboys are alike until you look closely at them. He's dressed just like the others were. And he carried a six-shooter and a rifle. Imagine that! And he's just a boy, isn't he? He can't be more than twelve-thirteen or fourteen at most." They watched him as he jogged along, an easy, graceful rider, talking with the foreman, who had spurred ahead to escape further questioning.

Gail said, watching Gregg. "He reminds me of someone. Dan! When Dan was his age. Why, he looks like Dan, doesn't he? And like father! Isn't that remarkable?"

"Very," said Kathleen. "Yes. But of course he doesn't. We've simply forgotten."

Gail said, "I'm going to find out who he looks like," and called to the driver, who looked back at her. "Stop!" she ordered. "We want to rest."

THE horses were pulled down, and the driver slid out of the seat, stretched himself and leaned against the right fore wheel. Gail got out first, and, seeing no dust on the shale surface of the road, Kathleen followed. Webster and Gregg rode back to see what was wrong, and Webster suspected the truth when he saw the sisters staring at Gregg.

"My, what a young cowboy!" said Gail. She thought he had the Parlette eyes, with their clarity and serenity, and their quiet, meditative calmness. Webster had turned his head, but was listening.

"You can't be over twelve or thirteen," said Kathleen. "Are you?"

"I'm going on eleven, Ma'am," answered Gregg. "Are you Aunt Kathleen or Aunt Gail?"

Gail gasped and Kathleen said, "Well, of all things! Who are you?"

"I'm Gregg Parlette, Ma'am," he said, and was curious when they showed astonishment.

They looked significantly at each other, while Webster hid a satirical smile with a hand. It was awkward for the boy, so he said dryly, "He is Joan's boy," and let them see his smile.

Kathleen was trying to read his expression. She said, the acid of doubt dripping from her voice, "We hadn't heard about Joan being married!"

Webster said, "That's strange. She sent that report out, along with the one about her wealth," and kicked his horse in the ribs, Gregg following him, while the driver herded the passengers aboard and spoke to the horses.

"I think he was trying to be sarcastic," Kathleen said, staring after the riders. "And—if Joan *is* married, why does she let her son use the Parlette name?"

VIII

THE curiosity of the two sisters was restrained only until, in Kathleen's room, with their baggage still unpacked, they were alone with Joan. Then Kathleen seated herself on the edge of the bed and began to remove her dust stained clothing—first her shoes and stockings, then her white shirt waist with its high lace collar and its starched cuffs; then her skirts and underthings. Kathleen, always plump, had grown thin. She got up, looked at herself in a tall mirror, said, "Damn!" to some wrinkles that had definitely traced a sagging pattern over her face and neck; stared resentfully at the dolorous flabbiness of her shoulders, and returned to the edge of the bed, where she sat envying Gail, who was still attractive, even if somewhat blasé, and Joan, especially Joan, who, still retaining her youthful and lissom figure, and who revealed vital beauty of face and spirit, was joyously attentive and solicitous.

Kathleen said, "Well, here we are," in a jaded voice, touched with a suggestion of

rancor. "Home again, to find ourselves with"—her pause was flat with futile remonstrance—"well, with a curious collection of oddities. A battered up prize fighter, a show girl, and a boy who calls himself Gregg Parlette. He might be a long-lost brother. But he isn't. Who is he, Joan?"

Joan was looking into a closet, and for an instant braced herself there, to resist the shock of the sudden question. Not quite formed in her mind had been a certain impulse of sentiment, a decision to take the girls into her confidence should she feel she could depend upon their love and charity. When she felt a coldness stealing over her she knew she had hoped in vain. She faced them calmly, and felt calm. She was thinking of Webster—of the advice he had given her. Webster, who had told her to lie. She said, "Gregg is my son," proudly, with a smile.

Kathleen was ready to smile cynically, but held it back, so that Joan could see only the intention on her lips. Gail merely watched her. Kathleen said, "Well, that's news, indeed. We didn't know you had married. Who was the lucky man?"

"Gregg's father is Frank Dade." The name was strange to her, and she did not like the sound of it.

"Your husband—of course?" said Gail, still quietly intent.

"Naturally," Joan said.

"Then why not call the boy Gregg Dade instead of Gregg Parlette?" said Kathleen.

"Preference, I suppose," Joan said. "At first I thought of him as a Dade, but later, when I saw how greatly he resembled father and Dan, I changed my mind."

"Permanently?" This was Gail.

"I hope so."

Kathleen said, "Sounds like a separation. Was it?"

"It might be called that." She was able to smile at them. "He—Frank—was called away before Gregg was born. He hasn't come back." She felt she had to tell them the facts they might find out from others.

"That was terribly thoughtless of him," said Kathleen.

"Sounds more like desertion than separation," said Gail. "He probably ran off with another woman. Why on earth didn't you get a divorce. I wouldn't have stood for anything like that."

"Gregg is going on eleven," said Kathleen, and watched Joan's face with guarded alertness. "That's what he told us. And you say his father has never seen him. Almost eleven years of waiting for a husband to come home can mean only one thing. Two, I should say. You don't believe in divorce or another man hasn't appeared. Which is it, Joan?"

Joan said, "Why should it be either?" and walked to the door.

"Oh, come, Joan," Kathleen said. "We haven't seen you in an age, and we are dying of curiosity to know about your runaway husband. I hope he was handsome. But of course he must have been, to win you when you were so young. You couldn't have been quite seventeen—nearer sixteen, weren't you?"

"It was after father died," Joan said, and wondered if they had always been as they now were, or whether their experiences in the East had changed them. Were they strange, or had her own experience and her constant longing for happiness given her a new conception of life and people? Or had she forgotten what her sisters had been like? Well, whatever had happened to them or to her, they were her people, and she loved them, though at this minute they aroused in her a feeling of defensive anger. What would happen if they discovered there had been no marriage? She shrank inwardly at what she saw in their faces, though she was outwardly so calm and quiet that she puzzled Kathleen, who pursed her lips and looked at Gail.

"You say it happened after father died? That was after we left, of course," said Kathleen. "Yes, you were about sixteen, past. That's so very young for a girl to

marry. It would make you almost eighteen when Gregg was born. It was too bad your husband had to leave without seeing his boy. What on earth made him do it?"

"Business—he said." Now Joan was certain about the purpose of this inquisition, and she wondered why they had not put it off after they had changed their clothes.

"It it perfectly natural for elder sisters to discuss the marriage of a younger sister," said Gail. "Do believe in the charity of our motives, Joan."

"Of course," said Kathleen. "Don't think we are merely prying. To be sure, we were astonished when your boy told his name—Gregg Parlette. That aroused our curiosity, of course. It must have been very difficult for you to bring the boy up without a father. But I suppose the cowboys were helpful. Tom Hackett, perhaps. Or Bob Webster. Webster, very likely. As kids, you and Webster were obviously in love. I can see both of you now, as you used to run around the ranch. Bathing and riding and sitting in dark corners. How does it come you didn't marry Webster, Joan?"

"Kathie, you are being absurd," said Gail. "Everybody knows that a girl never —well, almost never—marries a boy who grows up with her. The grass is always greener in the next pasture, you know. So are girls when they marry the handsome stranger."

"He couldn't have been handsomer than Webster," Kathleen said. "Was he, Joan?"

"It is strange that I have never noticed Bob in that way," said Joan. "I liked him for something different. I think it was for his honesty and loyalty, and because he always minded his own affairs." She hid her annoyance behind a steady, sisterly smile, though Kathleen saw that the corners of her lips were white and that deep in her eyes was hot resentment. "You'll forgive our sudden interest in you, Joan," said Gail, and began to strip for a bath and a change of clothing.

"Of course," said Joan quietly. "It isn't so sudden, after all. I've had eleven years to prepare for it." She smiled at their startled glances and left them.

Kathleen listened to Joan's steps in the hall. Then she looked at Gail, enjoying her consternation. "I think it was Webster," she laughed.

SOME of the whiteness of Joan's lips had gone when she came upon Mona in the living room, and she met the show girl's inquiring gaze with a composed smile.

Those questions had been questions of curiosity, of course. And no doubt Kathleen and Gail *were* interested in discovering what had happened to her during the eleven years of their absence. They were justifiable questions. Yet Joan knew that the spirit of curiosity may be cynical or suspicious. The loyalty and love of the remaining members of her family—now like strangers to her—was going like a glorious sunset being swallowed by the purple shadows of night, and she must steady herself to meet this new disappointment. Charitably, she thought of their weariness after the long ride from Maricopa. Perhaps they had only been irritable, and would be different after a wash and a change of clothing. She said, walking to the big door opening upon the veranda, "Where are my other guests?"

Mona answered, "Bat's hanging around the horse corral, as usual. He's got a yen to ride a horse, and Gregg has already promised to teach him. Gregg's with him now. Say, Gregg's a great kid, isn't he? Looks something like you, but more like that painting of your father, hanging in Webster's office. It made my ticker go pit-a-pat when I saw how he hugged you when he rode in. It must be swell to have a boy like that. He's so big and strong that you have to look at him twice before you know he isn't a man."

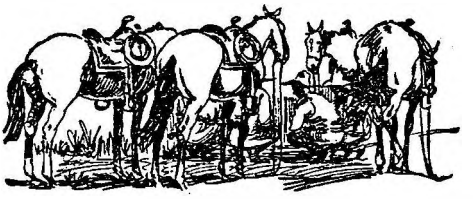
"Yes," said Joan; "it is—swell, as you say," and leaned a little farther out of the doorway so she could see the boy more closely, where he sat on the top of the

adobe corral fence laughing and talking with the prize fighter. She saw Paul standing near a corner of the harness shop watching the two, but all were so far away that she could not see the expressions of their faces. Still farther away she could see Webster in front of the foreman's shack. He was washing his face and the dying sunlight caught the bronze in his hair as the water splashed over his head. Gratitude for his loyalty and dismayed regret for her sisters' hard cynicism stabbed her with quick contradictory pangs as she stood there and heard Mona saying, "Don't you think it is time for me and Bat to clear out?"

Joan looked at her reprovingly. "What made you think of such a thing?"

"Your sisters. Maybe they'll think it will be crowded here from now on."

"There's plenty of room, Mona. You know that." She was apprehensive that the girl was really thinking of going. Already she had grown to like Mona, and had enjoyed her personality and the slang



expressions that crept into her speech. She was breezy and entertaining, even if some of her observations were somewhat pointedly shaped with the double-edged worded barbs of her profession and her sophistication. She was frank, too, and could be depended upon to discriminate between the real and the counterfeit.

"Then you *really* don't want me to go?" she said, catching the concern in Joan's voice.

Joan said, "Of course not!" impulsively, and added, "You are not offended because I changed your room, Mona? For of course Kathleen wanted her old one."

"I'm flattered," said Mona. "Why, you poor lonesome kid, I've had the time of my life, here. And now I've got the room next to yours, and can duck in there once in awhile and weep on your shoulder—when I'm thinking of your handsome foreman. Say, he's a pippin, isn't he?"

Joan said, "Do you think so, Mona?" and understood that the show girl was only tantalizing her.

"Surest thing you know," Mona said. "I'm stuck on him to a fare-thee-well. And I think Kathleen and Gail are a little dizzy, too." She saw there was no sign of jealousy in Joan's eyes, and a certain thought she had vagrantly entertained went out of her mind forever. *It wasn't Webster.* "They've hurt you, some way," she said. "You looked white around the gills when you came in here a few minutes ago. Well," she said when Joan silently turned her head away, "so far as I can see, the Parlette kids who went East with the Parlette kale didn't turn out so well."

"They were just tired and cross," Joan said. "You'll like them better when you get acquainted with them."

"You certainly are an optimist," said Mona.

YET when after awhile Kathleen and Gail came down the hall and merely paused in the living room, where Mona sat reading a week-old newspaper, and inspected the decorations, which were the same as when they had left the ranch to go East; ignoring Mona entirely and looking past her with arrogant disinterest, and went out to the great veranda where they dusted off the seats of two of the heaviest rockers with dainty flicks of their handkerchiefs, and sat in the chairs and gazed critically about them, at some new adobe buildings, erected during their absence, and decided between themselves that the chairs on the veranda were the same chairs they had known, Mona, listening and smiling, was certain their presence would add nothing to Joan's mental comfort, and that she, herself, would not bother to extend herself to become better acquainted with them.

At the supper table she watched them and saw how they patronized Joan and

studied Gregg's face. They completely ignored Mona and exchanged comprehending glances with Paul, and not too guardedly made verbal references to Battling Kelso's disfigured face. Kelso countered by not even looking at them. He gave all his attention to Gregg who, seated at his right, was admiringly watching him, and listening to him.

" . . . so he cops me on the beezer when I wasn't looking," said Kelso, continuing his recital of the final round of his fight with the champion.

"The beezer?" said Gregg, wide eyed. "What is a beezer?"

"My beak," explained the fighter. "My nose. He broke it with that wallop, a right. I hadn't learned how to duck or block them. The champ knew it. So he plants another right on my ear, and made a cauliflower out of it. Then he hangs a shiner on each of my lamps, and busts my kisser with a lallapalooza; and while I'm coming in, not seeing him any more, he finds the button with a haymaker, and stops me cold. After that I learned to be scientific. But then it was too late. I'd slipped."

"What's that?" said Gregg.

"I'd lost my strength. My condition. My punch."

"Tom Hackett said you hit the Pilgrim awfully hard," said Gregg.

"Ten years ago, hitting him like that on the back of the neck, I'd have killed him."

"You landed on the champion and didn't kill him," said Paul. "You were outclassed. The champion murdered you."

"Sure," said Kelso, smiling through his puffed lips. "I found that out."

"He was a sucker for a right," said Mona, looking at Paul. "The same as *you* were a sucker for the gamblers." She laughed, but the sting of truth in her words annoyed Kathleen, who knew of her brother's faults.

Kathleen looked past Joan and at Mona. She said, "Paul wasn't a gambler. He was a gentleman sportsman. There is a difference, if these people were able to distinguish it."

"I'll bite," said Mona. "Where is it?"

Joan said, "Don't be so touchy, Kathie. Paul always gambled. All of us know it. He was always gambling with the cowboys. And father dragged him out of a Tucson gambling room."

"I'm not ashamed of it," said Paul. "All right. I'm a gambler. But Kelso never was a fighter."

Kelso smiled, holding no resentment. Joan had reproved her relatives for attempting to adopt a superior attitude toward her guests. And Gregg disliked his Uncle Paul for depreciating the ability of his new-found hero.

IX

MOST disturbing to Joan was her sisters' obvious lack of affection for herself and Gregg. When they noticed the boy at all it was with speculative glances which bore maliciously harbored suspicion and doubt. They had not accepted her statement of Gregg's parentage. They had not, like Mona, shown interest in him, or affection for him; and Mona's "He's a great kid, isn't he?" had thrilled her, and had touched chords of happiness which were muted in the presence of her sisters. Of course they must never know how their coldness was hurting her.

After supper when Mona, smiling at her, went out into the darkness of the veranda, and Paul followed Mona; and Gregg and Kelso went to the fighter's room where the boy was to inspect the boxing gloves and perhaps take his first lesson with them, she lingered in the living room with Kathleen and Gail, dutifully to entertain them. It was like entertaining strangers to whom you are trying to be nice, but who put you on the defensive by asking impertinent questions. They did not look at her at all until after they had completed a leisurely inspection of the living room. Then Kathleen said, "Joan, don't you ever

get tired of looking at the same things year after year?"

"Why should I? I like everything here."

"These old decorations—the deer heads, the guns, the bear skins, the powder horns; that Indian head-dress with the dirty feathers on it; the arrows; the adzed beams; those cracked panels; that beastly fireplace; the Buffalo robes, and—and all the rest of the junk?"

"They were father's. I shall always keep them." Joan wondered if Kathleen had forgotten how John Parlette prized these relics of the pioneer days.

"Bosh!" said Kathleen. "The place looks positively medieval. Like an old fort. With loopholes everywhere. And what on earth do you do with your spare time? Just sit around and mope over your lost husband, I suppose? Well, if he was mine I'd show him a thing or two."

"I always have plenty to do," said Joan, and thought of days, all too short, when the work with the cattle, the garden and the accounts, kept her busy.

Kathleen was looking at some books on several open shelves. She walked to a table where still other books were piled, looked them over, and then glanced around the room. She seemed to be searching for one book in particular. She said, "I suppose Padre O'Meara is still living in the mission hacienda?"

"Yes."

"Is he as old fashioned as ever?" she asked. And when Joan told her she had never thought of the Padre as being old fashioned, she laughed and said, "The danger is in becoming old fashioned without knowing it. That is what is wrong with you, Joan. You are stuck in this old dump—buried here, if you only knew it—while the rest of the world whirls on its way, perhaps somewhat dizzily, but going somewhere, anyway. People are having a good time, and living. Do you go to parties or dances, or take trips to the various watering places to associate with the best people—important people who did big things? You don't, of course, and because you don't, you miss the broadening influences of life."

Joan said, "It is probably exciting and interesting to people who like things of that kind. But though I like to read about big cities and their people and their activities and pleasures, I also like this country—the land and the things it grows; the cattle and the horses, and the young calves and colts toddling around on their funny long legs. I have always loved this ranch, from the first day I saw it, I think. Perhaps I inherited my love for it. Father loved it, you know. It has one virtue that endears it to me—it never changes, as people change."

"Well," said Kathleen, "I never change, if that's what you mean. I hate this land you profess to love. I have always hated it. And I don't see how you, or anyone else, can say you love it. You don't, really. The lovely things it grows are sand and rocks, and Indians trying to scalp you, and smelly horses and men, and a sun that bakes you, and snakes and other crawly things, and horny cactus that makes you think of a forgotten cemetery with headstones so hoary with age that they've grown prickers, and—" She caught herself overdoing it and added, "I certainly do hate it, don't I?"

NOW Joan remembered Kathleen's shuddering at the sounds of calves bawling in the branding pens, and Gail's fits of sullen fury over nothing at all, or over trivial crosses, and Kathleen's continuing criticism of everything—the food, the dust, the sun, the distances one had to travel to towns in search of a good time; her contempt of the people she met in such towns; the way both girls had quarreled with her, and dominated her, and had ignored or repulsed her every attempt to win their affections. Padre O'Meara had termed them "Unfortunate accidents of birth" when greedily they had taken their father's money and had gone East with it,

to squander it, leaving Joan alone, giving her no choice. And this land, which they hated, had brought Joan nearly a million dollars which was safely invested. It hadn't brought her the happiness she wanted, but it had brought Gregg. And now it had brought her sisters and Paul, all of them improvident and foolish, from a world in which all of them had failed to make their way. Yet she was not dismayed by this new obligation, for she had learned to calmly discipline herself against the sardonic ironies of existence. So she was able to smile at Kathleen's vehemence, knowing that her sisters, having had the advantages provided by the social existence of their choice, had made no greater success of their lives than she had.

"You've scads of money, they tell us," said Kathleen, seeing how little her criticism had affected Joan. "And you don't have to live like a hermit. Why don't you chuck all this and go East with us? Just think of what a sensation you would create! The papers would be full of it. *Millionaire ranch girl flees the desert! Special train bearing Western beauty arrives in New York!* Wouldn't that be exciting? Stunning gowns, theaters, swell bathing beaches, the races, receptions, balls—a life of pleasure. And men who would make you forget your handsome runaway husband."

"And a yacht," said Gail. "And the best hotels. Gregg in a good university, where he would become a gentleman. What will he be here, Joan?"

Joan said, "Gregg will be what he wants to be—a ranch owner. He shall have the ranch and most of the money I have when he is twenty-one. I shouldn't like the kind of life you describe, and I am sure Gregg wouldn't."

"I see," said Kathleen. "You are going to stay here and wait for Dade. You are going to martyr yourself over a foolish love affair. It's incredible!" Disappointment drew her lips into a drooping crescent. "Don't be a fool, Joan. Why should you waste your life on *one* man?"

"You are wasting *your* breath, Kathleen," said Joan. She was wondering if they had always been as shallow as they now were, and if they thought they had succeeded in hiding their selfish interest in the proposed Eastern conquest. She added, "I won't ever permit myself to think of leaving here—for any reason."

Kathleen dropped into one of the big horse hair chairs without taking the precaution of flecking dust, real or imaginary, from it.

She sat, staring at Joan, making an effort to conceal her disappointment and chagrin behind a smile of patient resignation. Gail was frankly furious. She said, "Damn!" and walked to the open doorway, to see two figures she thought to be Paul and Mona, sitting in the moonlight on a far edge of the veranda. Mona was laughing mockingly, and the sound seemed to carry a derisive implication of Kathleen's failure to interest Joan. Gail contemptuously shrugged her shoulders and came back into the room in time to hear Kathleen say, "That was one of the reasons we came here, Joan—to take you back with us."

JOAN was now wishing they hadn't come. They were so transparently insincere. She said, "I'm sorry you have wasted your time," and went out into the kitchen and dining room, where she talked briefly with the two Mexican women housekeepers—wives of Mexican gardeners—and the cook. She came back into the living room to see her sisters thumbing the pages of the family Bible, and instantly she surmised that this was what Kathleen had been looking for in her search among the books. She said, forcing calmness, "Oh, the Bible. Are you going to read a chapter, Kathleen? Father used to do that." But she knew they would not read. They were searching for the family birth record, which her father had kept. Their suspicious minds would explore every possibility to discredit her, to provide them with means to again dominate her. Knowing

they would find no record of Gregg's birth, she nevertheless was held there in dread fascination, looking over their shoulders as the pages were turned, wondering why she had not anticipated this search, and why, during Gregg's lifetime, she had not herself made the record. It would be embarrassing to explain the absence of such a record, and humiliating to endure the questioning their warped minds would devise. They said nothing to explain their purpose in looking through the Book, but there were the beginnings of malicious smiles at the corners of their mouths, and both leaned closer as the sought for page was disclosed. The inward stiffening which had aided Joan through the suspense became limp relief as she read, at the bottom of the record—where it should be, if it was there at all:

"Joan Parlette. Born April 16th, 1860."

This was in her father's crabbed handwriting. She thought it would be all. But it was not all. Following closely was:

"Married June 20th, 1876, to Frank Dade. Born of this union, Gregg Dade, July 10th, 1877."

This last was not her father's writing, but she recognized it. She quietly slipped away. And while the sisters were chattering over the Book she fled like a drifting shadow, though a radiant one, over the dusty yard, past the harness and blacksmith shops and the storehouse and the bunk and mess houses to where, while the sun had been setting, she had seen Bob Webster splashing water over his face in front of his adobe quarters.

He was sitting in a tilted chair near the door of the building, smoking. He got up when she stopped in front of him and removed the cigarette from between his lips. He said, with a note of laughter in his voice, "So they found it, first pop, just as I thought they would, after getting acquainted with them on the trip in. I had some trouble remembering the dates, and maybe they're not so accurate. But they are convincing."

Breathlessly she said, "When did you write it?" She stepped close to him, so that he saw her eyes were bright with gratitude.

"The night brother Paul drifted in. I thought he'd be a snooper, too."

"Thank you," she said, and kissed him. She had to stand on the tips of her toes to do it, her lips brushing his as lightly as thistledown, and his clasping arms just missing her as she ran toward the house.

X

THE half dozen riders who had entered the planked portals of Delefan's gambling house in the Dela Plaza—changed to Ott Street by the yearning of respectable citizens of Tucson for the elimination of the old Mexican flavor and many vices—were greeted by a swirling cloud of tobacco smoke strong with the odors of whiskey, garlic, red peppers from steaming con carne dispensed over a counter in a corner, and the man-smell of horsemen and freighters, Mexican and American, who wooed the siren-voiced dame of fortune at the gambling tables. The Parlette riders, in town for a spree, with the consent of Bob Webster, who permitted digressions of this sort for the sake of contentment in the outfit, were variously named Antrim, Brill, Elwell, Fanning, Gumbo and Jansen. They had visited many Mexican cantinas as well as numerous American saloons, and they grinned and blinked at the lamp lights gleaming through the heavy atmosphere of this room. They wanted to play faro, and when they finally got their bearings they gravitated to the layout like moths to the flame.

There were no bets on the layout. Someone had swept the counters into a little heap on the green cloth, and the dealer's hands were idle on the dealing box. The

case-keeper, lacking interest with no customers facing him, was leaning back in his chair. A swinging lamp, suspended over the faro table, shed its yellow white beams upon the dealer, whose masculine attractions were enhanced by a shirt of spotless white linen and a stock of the same material, neckband and drooping frontispiece caught together with a diamond stick pin. He exuded opulence and professional suavity as he smiled at the Parlette riders, who stood in front of the layout, ready to place their bets. He said, his voice soft amid the din of rattling poker chips, the whir of roulette wheels and the shouting of betters, "Place your bets, gentlemen. The bank is ready," and pulled up the sleeves of his immaculate shirt.

"What's the limit?" said Gumbo, and drew a handful of silver dollars from a pocket.

"Fifty and one hundred," said the dealer. To Gumbo, who had played faro, this meant that any amount up to the larger sum could be wagered upon one card except on the last turn, when the amount must not be larger than the lower figure.

Gumbo played, and the case-keeper deftly slid the buttons along upon their rods. The others—Jansen and Elwell duplicating Gumbo's bets — also played. Dealer and case-keeper were quiet and attentive, but unconcerned while the riders won some bets, for the gamblers were running a brace game, with a set of undetectable signals, and they knew that in the end the riders would lose.

Gumbo said, after losing half a dozen bets, "Luck ain't running my way," and jingled the silver that still remained in his pocket. He drew out a handful, counted it, replaced it. He added, "If I was Joan Parlette, now, I'd bust your damned bank."

His belligerence seemed to amuse the dealer, who sat still, his hands idle, looking at him. "Joan Parlette," he said, musingly. "Seems I've heard of her. Sure. She owns that big ranch on Antelope Creek. Your boss? She's got money, you say? That's interesting." He dealt a card. The case-keeper moved a button opposite a corresponding card on his little machine, so that the players, at a glance, could tell what spots had been played or were still in the dealer's box. The stakes were small, for pay day for ranch hands brought them no great riches, yet such as they were they represented months of toil and danger. The dealer raked in several pieces of silver that Jansen had placed on the king of clubs. The king would have won for Jansen if the dealer had not pulled two by the sand tell method. He was using a straight box, with certain of the cards roughened or sand-papered slightly, so that by pressing heavily upon the top of the exposed card the one beneath would stick to its neighbor above, and he could deal the two with one motion.

Gumbo, keen-eyed, had noticed the extra thickness of the card that had slid out of the box. He watched the case-keeper swiftly slide the buttons along their rods to record the extra card. It was confusingly fast work.

"You ain't been around here long," said Gumbo to the dealer. There was a hint of frost in his eyes.

"Only a few weeks. I've hardly got acquainted."

Other men were now playing. The dealer paid some bets and raked in others. He looked at Gumbo. "Her father died about eleven years ago, I hear," he said.

"Eleven or thereabouts," said Gumbo.

"There were some brothers and sisters, I understand. Where are they?"

Jansen lost another bet. Again the dealer had withdrawn two cards from the box. "You know more about them than you let on," said Gumbo. "More than a stranger should know."

"What if I do?" said the dealer. He laughed. "Don't turn your wolf loose. I used to know the Parlettes."

"Do they know you," said Gumbo. "I've heard they are particular about who they get thick with." He watched the dealer's face grow pale, then red. He saw how the dealer accepted the insult by pretending not to hear it, and by asking a question, "Any Indian trouble around?"

"Some. And getting worse. Stay close to your dealers' box. It's safer. And surer." He drew out a handful of silver dollars, counted out twenty-five and placed them on the duece of Spades, to lose. Jansen had lost again, and was standing back, scowling at the layout. The other Parlette riders, their pockets nearly empty, were listening to the strange conversation. They were watching Gumbo, having caught the antagonism in his voice. He was their leader and they would support him in any action of his, whatever it should happen to be.

The dealer fingered the box. The case-keeper fiddled with the buttons, but watched for the dealer's signal. It came—pull two. With deliberation the dealer shoved out two cards, their sanded surfaces clinging together so that there seemed to be only one. The duece of Spades was now the top card in the dealer's box. Gumbo had lost, having placed the duece to lose, and the duece had won. The dealer said, "Place your bets, gentlemen," and grinned at Gumbo. The case-keeper reached for the marker buttons as Gumbo, with one sweeping motion that began at his hip and ended on the green cloth, swung the muzzle of his six-shooter down upon the case-keeper's hand, smashing it before it could reach the buttons.

"Brace game," said Gumbo, and jerked the muzzle of his gun upward, so that dealer and case-keeper were looking into its dark ring. They were motionless, having also looked into Gumbo's eyes, which were now flecked with hate. The case-keeper had not moved his crushed hand, but was grimacing with pain and looking at a spreading rivulet of crimson spouting between the knuckles and wrist, staining the green cloth under it. The hand was his right, and it was broken. All the Parlette riders were now close to the faro table, and were enraged by Gumbo's accusation of trickery. Four had not drawn their guns, seeing Gumbo and Jansen would prevent retaliation. They ignored the case-keeper and watched the dealer, whose face was as white as the stock around his neck, and his mouth open, as if paralyzing fear had stilled in his throat a meditated cry for help.

"Tinhorn!" said Gumbo, his voice cold with contempt. "Dip into that cash box and fork over the two hundred you snatched from us. Fast! Or I'll perforate that dickey you're wearing about your neck. Exactly two hundred," he added as the dealer began to toss silver dollars to the table top. "No more, no less." He watched the other riders transfer the money to their pockets, and again spoke to the dealer, watching his eyes, seeing the lids narrow to slits. "You've got a rattler's ideas and a polecat's liver," he said. "But you're keeping both of them where they won't poison anybody. Adios."

THEY were laughing as they went out of the doorway, with the crowd in the room between them and the two gamblers at the faro table, whom they watched as they departed. The case-keeper was still staring at his broken hand, and the dealer's mouth was still open.

They roistered around town, doing the things they wanted to do, and drinking more than they needed, as if they sought like camels to store against the desert's thirst. And when in the morning they compared notes and realized that by re-

maining longer in town they would break their word to their foreman, they mounted their ponies and rode across the dry bed of the Santa Cruz into the polychromatic veil of distance, behind which lurked the dangers of their trade.

Two camps in the open brought them to a certain crossing of the Gila, where life and fertility reigned in the swales, and nondescript brush lifted leafy barriers under drooping fronds of cottonwood. The river levels were carpeted with bright green grass and the atmosphere was aromatic with the sweet smells of sage and mesquite, and paloverde with its smooth glittering bark and its clusters of yellow blossoms. Then again they abruptly met the desert, corroded with the vitriolic yellow and russet brown of its repulsive verdure, and rode into it, virtuously conscious of having earned the foreman's trust.

They were dots of life in a dead land upon whose broad expanse were salient features which through constant observation and necessity they remembered; and with their ponies racking along in a Spanish chop-trot they threaded the wilderness of space, mentally noting various landmarks by which they set their course—Three Mile Mesquite, Choya Ridge, Face Rock, Sacaton, Skull Canyon; finally sighting the peaks of the Big Horn Mountains and the towering spire of Cathedral Rock. And there, presently, wandering northward through the hills and creases of the land, they saw the ribbon road that stretched from Maricopa to the head of Bear Flat. They rode along this road for several miles, and then angled westward toward a narrow valley set between low hills. And there was the ribbon road again, meeting them near the head of the valley. They halted to scan the vacant country, and then became interested in some puffs of dust in the valley bottom, at a distance.

"Cattle," said Antrim.

"Strays," said Brill, speculatively.

"The Bear Flat outfit is rounding them up, to haze them back," said Fanning. "Now why did they let them break out?" He had seen horsemen dropping down a hill behind the cattle.

Ground-hugging dust clouds trailed away in the wind behind the distant horses, with their riders, who were so far away that they were hardly distinguishable to the watchers above, who had pulled up in a dry wash which formed the only outlet from the valley at their end. A stand of timber halfway up the wash screened them from the country below, yet an instinct of caution sent them scurrying into the further concealment of boulders and brush beside the trail, from where, with professional interest, they waited and watched.

"They ought to turn them now, while they've got room," said Gumbo. "Pretty soon they'll have to ride the slopes, and they've got no horses with short legs on one side.

"Seems they ain't aiming to head them off," said Brill, scratching his head in perplexity. "They ain't showing no speed. They're trailing them."

Elwell growled, "They're just dumb, that's all. Just the other day Hackett was telling me he'd got rid of all the thick-headed hands—now the slopes are crowding in and they've lost their chance."

"They'll turn them up here, where there's plenty of room," Antrim said, his voice dripping sarcasm. "They're afraid of cramping their style."

Gumbo said, "They're needing their cuts," and enjoyed the bewilderment suddenly showing on the faces of his friends, who stared at him. "Your eyes ain't so good," he said gently. He pulled his rifle from its saddle scabbard, worked the drop lever action enough to see that there was a cartridge in the firing chamber, and spoke again, "They are wearing their hair in braids, decorated with feathers and wampun. One of them is showing turquoise beads."

"You mighty near had me dizzy," said Antrim. He stared at the running cattle

and now saw that Indians were driving them. They were quite a distance away and heading straight for the wash where Gumbo and his friends waited. Antrim added, "Likely they're Spotted Elk's braves. There's a dozen steers. I tally six Injuns, unless some have laid back to jump any of the Bear Flat boys who might hop on their trail."

Gumbo looked at the ribbon road that circled the base of a low hill at the head of the wash, to angle away again, out of sight.

"We'll jump them here," he said. "They'll be traveling slow, horses and steers being winded by the climb. If any get by, we'll pick them off as they go over the hump of the wash." His voice was low, yet it crackled with decision. No thought of mercy annoyed Gumbo. As natural enemies the Apaches were to be massacred. So Antrim, Brill and Elwell were detailed to cross the wash, there to fade out of sight, while Fanning, Jansen and Gumbo were to stay where they were. No Apaches, missed by the first blast of rifle fire, would escape by riding under the shoulder and chest of his pony.

WAITING, the men discussed their visit to Tucson, and their talk finally got around to the faro dealer. "He's bothering me," said Gumbo. "I've seen him, or a jasper like him, somewhere, sometime. Wherever it was, or whenever it was, I hated him as much as I hate him now." Not less did he hate the Apaches, now heading up the wash, driving their stolen cattle ahead of them. The pleasant country, basking in the afternoon sunlight, was disurbed only by the voices of the Parlette riders, talking and laughing, and by the Parlette steers, laboring up the wash ahead of the Maricopa Apaches, riding single file in negligent fashion, exulting in their successful foray, with the folded ridges of the land rising between them and the hard-riding men of the Bear Flat outfit.

At the hump of the wash, just where the ribbon road circled the hill, the steers slowed to a scrambling, grunting walk, their foam stained muzzles and flanks steaming from their long run. The Maricopas were crowding them when one after another the rifles of Gumbo and his friends cracked dryly from the flanking brush. Four of the Maricopas pitched off their ponies at the first fire, but two, untouched, slid under the shoulders of their animals, showing only a leg and an arm, each, to Antrim, Bill and Elwell, but making fair targets for Gumbo, Fanning and Jansen, who calmly riddled them, while from the brush opposite bullets thudded into the copper-hued bodies of the fallen rustlers, whose twitching muscles showed them to be still alive.

The startled steers cleared the hump of the wash and went lumbering off into the highway country, where Gumbo and his friends emerged from the brush to follow them, to round them up and head them back.

The red men were lying at the edge of the ribbon road near the head of the wash. Their bodies were scattered, for in their death agonies some of them had clung to their frightened ponies, from which they had dropped as the animals bucked them off. On the ground of the wash were flint-tipped lances and arrows; a long bow decorated with eagle feathers, a rusted carbine which looked like a Spencer; an octagonal barreled Sharps rifle; a powder horn, and a rawhide quiver with some feathered arrow shafts sticking out of it. The scene was not so pitiful to Gumbo as it might have been if there had not always been in his mind certain memories of what Apaches had done to white men and women he had known. As it was, he was stirred to vindictive satisfaction as he dismounted, while the other riders watched from their saddles, to walk among the bodies to make certain all were dead and not able to reach their tribe with the story of the ambush.

"Hackett got two of them a couple of

weeks ago," he said to the other men. "Webster was telling me just before we started for town. Four of them were after Gregg—figuring to hold him at their camp until Joan came to raise the beef ante. The kid busted Two Feathers with the barrel of his gun and—"

He looked intently at the partially visible face of an Indian who was lying stomach down with his legs drawn up as if about to spring upright. But Gumbo was certain the legs no longer had any life in them, for there was a bullet hole in the Indian's back, and though his lambent eyes were open, they seemed to be set as they stared into the dust of the wash. Gumbo said, a little surprised, "Here's Two Feathers, now, with his elk's teeth biting the dust," and leaped back to slap swiftly at the holster on his leg as Two Feathers rolled over on his back and shot him in the left side with a six-shooter which had been concealed under him. Gumbo's gun kicked upward and Two Feathers' head jerked back with a hole between his malignant eyes as Gumbo steadied himself and smiled foolishly at his friends, who began to run toward him, and were at his side in an instant carrying him to a flat rock, upon which they placed him and tore his shirt away from the wound. Apologetically Gumbo said, "I wasn't looking for a dead Indian to move that fast." And again, a little later, "You boys round up them steers and head them back. I'll climb aboard my horse and light out for the hoodlum wagon in the flat."

"You'll do no riding for a while," said Brill. "That's a bad place to be hit in—just at the edge of the last rib. Lucky it went through." He swabbed the wound with water from a canteen, packed it with his neckerchief to stop the bleeding, and ripped off his shirt to use as a bandage. Then the five literally ripped two small saplings from the roots and rigged up two travois poles to which they lashed a blanket and placed Gumbo upon it. Gumbo heard shooting and raised his head to see Jansen and Elwell administering the coup de grace to the other Apaches. They did it vindictively, while the other riders lashed the root ends of the sappling to the saddle on Gumbo's pony.

REACHING the Parlette ranch, their holiday ending in near tragedy, they were relieved when at the mission house Padre O'Meara told them that while there was danger of complications there was little doubt that Gumbo would survive. He said, sitting beside his patient, while studying the sober anxiety on the somber faces of the others, "You had no such concern over the Apaches you killed."

They grinned. Said Antrim, "Most of them never knew what hit them. And we left their hair on."

They had brought Gumbo to the mission house because there was no doctor available, and they knew the Padre would take care of him, as he had taken care of many of them in similar circumstances. They had tried to avoid being seen from the ranchhouse, but such things are always seen, and now here were Joan and Bob Webster, listening as Jansen briefly told them of the killing of the red maurauders, not neglecting to accentuate the punctuality of the return from Tucson. And a little distance away were Kathleen and Gail. They had talked to Gumbo, and had seen the wound—which made Kathleen's face blanch—and now they were standing under the dangling fronds of a cottonwood, near enough to see the Padre's ascetic profile, and to suddenly remember that he had always been handsome.

Kathleen said, "I don't see why a good-looking man should bury himself in this place. I mean he would be good-looking if he didn't seem half starved."

"I think he puts a little of that on," said Gail. "For effect."

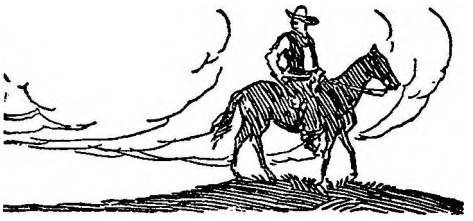
"I remember that you never liked him," said Kathleen. "Do you remember why?"

"His absurd philosophy. According to him it is sinful to enjoy the good things

of life. If that is so, then we are all wicked."

"I think he is more than half right," said Kathleen. "That's why sinning is so easy, and why it's so hard to be good. That man Gumbo is nice looking, isn't he?"

"I like the blond one—Brill, they call him. But I heard one of them say they are part of the Gila outfit, and I suppose they'll go away as soon as they are certain about Gumbo."



Padre O'Meara went into the hacienda, leaving Gumbo on a canvas cot in a little patio, where Webster and Joan leaned over him. Gumbo's friends, reassured, sauntered to the cottonwood where they stood, hats in hand, talking with Kathleen and Gail. Gumbo had some news to communicate to Joan and Webster, but was uncertain as to how best to tell it. He said, tentatively, "Glad we wasn't unpunctual coming back, Boss. That brush with Spotted Elk's rustlers was the only fun we had."

"That hardly sounds natural," said Webster. "Then it was quiet in Tucson?" Joan was looking at Gumbo's cheeks, into which spots of crimson had come, staining the bronze.

"Yes—quiet," he said. "The only fun we had was with a gambler." Joan noticed that Gumbo avoided her gaze and her cheeks went a little white as she remembered that Gumbo had been with the Parlette riders before Frank Dade had come —and gone.

"A gambler," said Webster, and stared hard at Gumbo.

"Dealing faro," Gumbo explained.

"Dealing faro," repeated Webster. He knew Joan was watching him, that she was watching Gumbo. And he suspected she was thinking exactly what he was thinking—that Dade's letter had come from Tucson.

Webster looked at the group under the cottonwood. He was wondering if they could hear Gumbo's voice, and was certain they could not.

"He was running a brace game," said Gumbo. "He was not so slick. But the case-keeper! That was a scream. He tried to look sorry when we lost."

"Of course," said Webster. "The case-keeper being sorry makes it easier for the loser. But you won once in awhile?"

Gumbo nodded and smiled. "Just often enough to keep us betting. He wore a linen dickey with a diamond stick pin in it."

"The case-keeper wore a dickey?" said Webster. "If it wasn't starched it was a stock."

"It was a stock," said Gumbo. He looked at Joan and wondered why her lips had grown so white. "The dealer wore it," he said. "Slickest looking gambler I ever saw. The kind of a man you remember—once you've seen him. I kept thinking I'd seen him before. I kept wondering *where* I'd seen him. Bothered me. Do you know why you hate a man?" he said, looking from Webster to Joan, and thinking that Joan seemed to be holding her breath. "Something about him disgusts you," he said. "I hated him from the minute I clapped eyes on him. Claimed to know you, Miss Joan, and I told him you was mighty particular about choosing folks as acquaintances. Seems he'd heard you'd got rich. Wanted to know about your brothers and sisters."

"You hated him, you say," said Webster. "Usually, when Gumbo hates a man—" He hesitated and looked down at the gun on his leg.

"Not this time," said Gumbo. "I don't know *why* I didn't kill him. I had the notion. But after I smashed the case-keeper's hand, and had bent my gun on the

dealer, making him fork over the two hundred he'd fleeced us out of, I got soft hearted, though I'd already picked out a spot on the dickey for my bullet to go into. Later I fired that bullet into Two Feathers' forehead."

"You had seen the dealer before," said Webster. "Can you remember where?" Joan was watching Gumbo's face. Padre O'Meara approached. He paused nearby, not wanting to listen, yet interested.

Gumbo's brows were screwed up in an effort at concentration. "Yes," he said, "I've seen him before. In this country. I can't place him. But in another gambling joint in Tucson I inquired about him. His name is Frank Dade."

XI

IT WAS no shock to any of them, and Gumbo's gaze, roving from one to another, could read nothing which would lead him to think that his news had any value. He thought Joan's steady, pale smile seemed a little bleak, but the changing light brought on by the flaming colors of the sunset probably was responsible for that; and her hand gently stroking his head made him wonder if the fever surging through him had not loosened his tongue and colored his thoughts.

Joan said, "I am so sorry you were hurt, Gumbo," and though he had heard of her warm sympathy for distressed man or beast, he was astonished to see that her eyes were clouded with emotion. He was uncomfortable with guilt, for until now he had only half believed the legend of her concern for the unfortunate. When he saw Webster's eyes flickering with a frosty light and caught Padre O'Meara making the sign of the cross, he smiled ironically, thinking they believed he had received a death wound.

O'Meara followed Webster to the far side of the house, where they stood in the shadows of the mountains as the color flood of the sunset poured its beauty into the skies behind them. They listened, and could hear Joan talking with Gumbo.

"A beautiful and wonderful girl," said the Padre. "She has great courage. Not a sign or a sound out of her." Webster's quietness amazed him, too, yet looking back over the years he could not remember when the foreman's emotions could easily be read.

"She's seen many wounded men," said Webster, and strode away. He came back instantly and stared hard at the Padre. "Damn it," he said, "say what you mean! Don't talk double to me!"

"I never have," said the Padre. "Straight talk is in my mind. It's you. You don't want to believe it—that Frank Dade is coming back."

Webster was breathing hard. The Padre considered this phenomenon. The man still loved her — had continued to love her throughout the years. That was why no other woman had ever been able to hold him—it was why he had been quietly taciturn and coldly civil in respecting Joan's decision about the gambler.

"So you know," said Webster. "You have known all along!"

"Of course. Do you think I have no eyes? Listen, son. You loved her when you were both children. Before Frank Dade came. She always hung around you. You taught her to ride, to shoot, to swim, to rope and to brand. Maybe you were too young to know that you might have married her in those days. That was not your fault. Youth thinks there is plenty of time. You couldn't forsee that Dade would come, to carry her off her feet. I remember that while Dade was here, courting her, after his fashion, you were away on the range, earning your spurs. And when you came back, Dade was gone. And after Gregg came, you avoided her."

He was startled to learn that the Padre knew how it had been between Joan and him—that his neglect of her had been noticeable. Yet it hadn't been altogether neglect. He had thought she had wanted time

to adjust herself to Dade's desertion. He hadn't wanted to appear to force himself upon her. And now all at once he saw that the fault had been with him and not with her. That as the male he should have been the pursuer, the aggressor, as the males of all species are aggressors, following nature's scheme in that respect. By his timidity or reserve—or because of a stubbornness which made him feel that he should have been invited—eleven years of his life has been wasted. Had he thought of her merely as a woman he would have taken advantage of Dade's absence. Then she might have forgotten Dade. Then, perhaps, there might have been a son of his own. But she was not merely a woman, to him. More than a woman. It was curious about his feelings for her. Sex in her, of course, yet something more than sex. Nothing that he could put a finger on, to hold it down for examination. The way she had of holding herself erect—fearlessly; a way she had of looking at you, doubting. A breathless worship of her beautiful hair, wavy and brown, with bronze ringlets in it and unruly wisps that added a reckless and abandoned glint to the meditative calmness of her brave, steady eyes. He had always thought he would have liked her as well if she had only been his sister.

HE WALKED to a corner of the house and looked at her leaning over Gumbo, talking to him, stroking his head, and thought of her doing that to Dade—thought of more intimate things the two of them had done. The bitter jealousy in him made him tingle with rage, so that when he strode around the corner of the house and stood beside Gumbo, and drew Joan away, his face was white, even though he spoke with husky steadiness, knowing Joan was curiously watching him, "I'm pleased with you, Gumbo."

Gumbo stared at him, wondering why he should be pleased. Pleased that he hadn't killed Dade? He said, "Thank you, Boss," and looked at Joan, whose face was as pale as Webster's. Gumbo studied the fading light as he listened to Joan and the foreman walking away—heard them call "so-long" to himself and the Padre. "I've seen him more pleased," he said. And then to the Padre, who had approached, "Was it the light that made him look like that?" and watched the Padre's face, which was pallid and solemnly wistful, as he traced the riders growing dimmer in his sight. The Padre thought of the big gun on the foreman's thigh, and crossed himself. His lips moved. He walked slowly away without answering Gumbo.

"I COULDN'T face them now," said Joan, thinking of the family, and turned her horse from the dry arroyo that led to the creek road. Wondering what her feelings really were, Webster rode beside her through the wooded country north of the ranchhouse, and followed her when the trail narrowed in the thick-growing brush of the shallow valleys. The poison of jealousy turning his blood to water, fanning his stomach to physical sickness; an ineffable yearning swelling his lungs as he stole glances at her when she rode beside him or watched the graceful outlines of her figure swaying ahead of him, he did not speak when at the crest of a low hill she drew her horse down and slid from the saddle.

She leaned lightly against the shoulder of her horse, a faint wind stirring the recreant, tantalizing wisps of hair at the nape of her neck. Her head was erect, her face and throat outlined in the faint paleness of the twilight, softly defining the nobility of the profile he loved—suggesting her character. Waiting for her to speak, he sat astride his horse, watching her. To make it less awkward for her he got down and pretended to tighten a cinch buckle. Then he rested his arms on the saddle and wondered why he did not step over and put his arms around her. He wanted to, in spite of his jealousy of Dade. But first she had to show him that she wanted him.

Some sign must come from her—some invitation. He would not throw himself at her. He would not stand up like a dog and beg for her love. The kind of love he wanted from her was not the kind of love Frank Dade had taken.

He was astonished when she said, calmly, "So he is coming back. Back—at last."

"Did Gumbo say that?" he said, and saw her smile wryly.

"He told Gumbo he had heard that I had grown wealthy. Hearing about my money was what brought the family back, It will bring him back, too."

"If that's what he wants," he said.

"What else could he want?" she said, and faced him, her eyes bright with rage.

"You," he said, and saw her wince.

A grimace was stiff on her lips as she said, "You don't believe that! It isn't sense, is it? He's had eleven years to think it over.

"The same as my sisters and Paul. What brought them back? Money. They came back as soon as they heard I had money. He came back, too."

It wasn't like her to be cynical. Yet it was a good sign, and it made his blood surge with vindictive joy. He said, "You seem to be sure of that."

"Wouldn't it bring you back?" she said. "Or any man?"

"I'd want the woman," he said. "If it was you and me. The money wouldn't be interesting."

"Oh, it wouldn't!" she said. "Aren't all men interested in money?"

"What will money buy?" he said. "Not you. What good would it be to me, then?" He was eager, seeing her eyes widen. "Suppose money is bringing him back?" he said. "That's what *he* is thinking about. It's what you are thinking about. That's important. You don't have to take him back if you don't want to." He was trying not to make the mistake of condemning Dade, but he added, "You've got to figure out why he left you."

"Wouldn't you have left me?" she said, watching him. Her chin was high, defiant.

"A baby coming wouldn't scare me out of the country," he said. "A man ought to be able to face his responsibilities."

"Aren't all men—just men?" she said, derisively calm.

So that was what her experience had done to her—destroyed her faith in men. Even with Dade staying away it would be difficult to win her. She had made his words about responsibility sound foolish to him. Before he could think more about it she said, "I shouldn't have said that. You always were a man. You and Tom Hackett. If it hadn't been for you and Tom—" Her voice choked, and he knew she was remembering the coming of Gregg. Now he was remembering, and pitying her. Remembering her bravery, her uncomplaining silence through the years. It made him hate Dade more intensely.

"I don't blame you," he said. "It wasn't exactly fun. Or any fun, remembering."

She tossed her head as if she were throwing something bitter out of her mouth, and he interpreted the gesture as indicating that she would never again taste that certain thing. Yes, it was going to be difficult. And now he knew why there had never been any invitation.

But how was it to be with Dade? Dade would come back. What would his reception be? He remembered her agitation upon receiving the letter from Tucson, which he had delivered to her. How she had been ready to go to Dade, the station wagon ready, with her bags piled into it, and old Miguel waiting. She had not gone to Dade, but she had been thinking of going. How near had she been to taking the second bitter taste? That was the question which had been bothering him, which he was now considering as he watched her.

HE SAID, "You've changed since a month ago, when I brought you his letter. You were ready to go to him."

"I knew that was what you thought," she said, and laughed nervously at his blank look. "That was why you slapped your boot that day, with your hat. That was funny. It was why you called Dade *tinhorn*. I could read your thoughts that day." She looked at him, her head held sideways, apprehensively, for she could see the black jealousy in him.

"Could you read *his* thoughts?" he said, and felt a savage joy to see the pain in her eyes. "His thoughts were not always clear to you. You didn't fool him, but you fooled me. Only, I didn't know it. Yes, I showed you what I was thinking about that day. I brought you his letter. I brought in the Gila outfit to escort you in case Spotted Elk should have notions. Your bags were in the station wagon. Old Miguel was ready. Yes, you could read my thoughts. They showed you I wanted you to do what you wanted to do."

"Maybe that was the trouble with you—with us," she said. She was thinking of their boy and girl relationship before the coming of Dade—of how she had ruled him. "You always let me have my way," she said. "That made me headstrong and wild." In the deepening darkness he saw her chin go up again. She sighed, and said, "Oh, Bob, don't ever change! Always show a woman what you are thinking—any woman you love. Never keep her guessing."

Now that darkness was between them, her voice seemed steadier. He looked around and saw the twilight shutting the world out from them, from her and himself, and there came to him the sudden thought that perhaps she had led him to this place to settle things between them. Her words, *Don't ever change. Always show a woman what you are thinking,* seemed to prove that the invitation he had longed for had finally come. Her voice had been meltingly soft, even in its steadiness.

He said, with a dry huskiness that came from years of repressed emotion unleashed in this wild moment of possible fulfillment, "I think you have always known what my thoughts are, honey." He had feared this moment would never come, though he had dreamed of it many nights when his hopes had been high. He moved toward her, thrilled by his own eagerness, considering the phenomenon of his shaking muscles and the ecstasy in his swelling lungs. She had turned from him and was facing her horse, and she said, "Oh!" in astonishment when she felt him close behind her; and she put her hands against his chest and tried to hold him off when he seized her and turned her around to face him, crushing her against him so tightly that their bodies might have been one. He could not be gentle with her with this madness surging through him; and though she cried out that he was hurting her, he drew her closer than ever and kissed her again and again, smothering her cries, which he thought were only protests against his eagerness; holding her lips with his own in spite of her efforts to escape him; and at last when she succeeded and buried her face in his shoulder, still helplessly struggling, and frightened at the now tender fury of his emotions, he kissed the tantalizing wisps at her temples and the nape of her neck. Then, holding her still, she fighting to free herself, he laughed. "There," he said, "that's what I think." His voice was still husky, and there was a ring of triumph in it, a great sigh of ecstasy. Now he became conscious of her struggles, and he took hold of her shoulders and pushed her back a little, trying to see her face; heard her saying in a voice which was bitter cold with rage and shame, "You—you—oh!" over and over, until he began to remember that she had not responded to his passion, and released her, standing there trying to see her, now understanding that he had made a mistake in thinking she had invited him.

She retreated, and from the darkness spoke to him. Her voice was quivering with angry scorn. "So *you* think I am like that, too?" she said.

"Like what?" he said. "What's wrong? Is it a sin to tell a woman you love her? If that is so, I have sinned since I began knowing you."

There was a queer mixture of dismay and misery in her derisive laugh.

"You're thinking of him," he said.

"Yes," she said, her voice muffled between gasping breaths. "Of course. *You* didn't think of him. He's my husband, isn't he? You told me such marriages as the one we made are common in this country. You made a record of it in the Bible. Now you think — *what* do you think?" she said.

She had misunderstood his passion, and he was now farther away from her than ever. "That you've got your morals mixed," he said. "That you don't know your own mind. You still love him."

"No, no, no!" she almost shouted, "I don't!"

"Keep a man guessing," he said. "Keep him blundering along. He feels more natural that way."

"Oh, you don't understand!" she said.

"What?"

"That I don't love him. I thought you would know, without talking about it, that I had no intention of going to him that day, just to be with him. That was all over —long ago. Over and done with!" She stomped furiously upon the hard earth of the hill top. "I—I hate him! But I feel I am married to him. For years I've hated him. I've hated myself. But I was going to him for Gregg's sake—so Gregg would have a father. So that he could hold his head up. I thought you would know—that you did know. At least after you told me ours was a marriage—and I didn't go to him. Men don't understand. They never understand. And I hate all of them. I hate you—too!"

She must have been climbing into the saddle while she had been talking, for she jumped the horse past him and was gone into the darkness before he could reach his own mount, to try to intercept her. He could trace the increasing distance between her and himself by the diminishing sounds of hoofbeats that carried to him.

(*Part III in the Next* SHORT STORIES)

Miracles and Newspaper Men Just Don't Seem to Mix

POP GOES THE MIRACLE

By LAWRENCE TREAT

Author of "Murder Too Many," etc.

THEY called him Pucker because when he was a kid he'd read Kipling and called everything he liked *pukkah* — good, genuine, okay. Nobody remembered the reason any more, least of all himself, but the nickname stuck and there he was. Pucker Luman, a pleasant dynamic guy with a sense of humor and a bump of curiosity. And a love of truth.

He breezed into the little southern town well ahead of the crowds and strolled around until his grinning freckled face was as familiar as the souvenir dolls. Then he entered the candy shop with the fancy red and gold front and spoke to the squat baboon of a man perched on a stool behind the cash register.

"I'm Luman, of the *Chronicle*. I'm here a little ahead of time to do some advance articles. You're Emmons, aren't you?"

The candy man nodded. His torso was broad-shouldered, powerful. "That's right," he said. "What do you want?"

"Nothing to put in print. But I was told you could give me the real facts. Who's behind this, how it's done, and so on."

Emmons hesitated. "How it's done, huh? Might be worth my life to know that." He stared intently at Pucker. "Come on in back," he said abruptly, and climbed off the stool.

Pucker had been told that Emmons was short, but his shortness was almost a deformity. From the waist up he was normal, but his thick bandy-legs were like the supports of a couch and barely lifted him above the five foot mark.

Pucker watched him climb another high stool in the rear room that was fitted up as an office. Emmons said, "I reckon I know what you're after. I can't give any proof, but I can tell you what I hear. Folks come in and they sort of loosen up over a soda. You know how it is."

Pucker nodded sagely. Harry had said that little Emmons—if you can call a man little when he has a forty-inch chest—was a clearing-house of information and gossip. And gossip was what Pucker wanted right now. He'd sift it later on and look for the

truth, but he had no illusions about his self-appointed task. Start with gossip, and look for a thread of fact strong enough to weave into a hangman's rope.

So Pucker nodded and Emmons leaned forward and said, "Money's behind it. The whole show's put on so the business man and the property owners can make their profits. Belnap the banker, Rennier the lawyer, Ogden the doctor—they own this town and they make the money. And I hear Sheriff Updyke's their man. If you want to find out what's really going on, they're the ones to watch. And don't go wasting your time on a dang fool of a candy store man."

Pucker went back to his hotel. He curled his legs around a table, stared at the worn portable and knocked out a warming up article.

"Here in Phenaville," he wrote, "the miracle season is opening. It comes as regularly as the solstice, economy propaganda and the drought, and is just as well understood. To jog the memory, a little history is in order.

"It seems that a couple of years ago a tornado curved erratically through the southeast and after a few random pokes made up its mind to flatten Phenaville. It shimmied down Main Street, cut a figure eight through a crowded group of cabins and then blew off with the cotton crop. It removed the boles as neatly as the new mechanical cotton-picker, but instead of piling them for ginning, it wafted them upward and powdered the countryside.

"The crop and the population — the twister hit them both hard. Fielding average, .800. Batting average, .200. Out of a population of six hundred, twenty dead and almost a hundred injured. Phenaville was wiped out."

Pucker took his hands off the keys and lit a cigarette. He puffed and then put it down on the edge of the bureau. It began burning a thin brown groove on the wooden edge. There were a couple of other burns and Pucker wanted to be in style.

He grimaced at his own flipness. Tragedy, those twenty corpses. Stark, gruesome tragedy. But newspaper readers want to be amused and not shocked. The Old Man had said, "A light touch, Luman. Don't go morbid on us."

Morbid? Hell no! His fingers danced along the keys.

"Down at the Thacker place, the tornado played tricks. Mr. and Mrs. Thacker, otherwise known as Pappy and Mammy, were hoisted out of their only room and sucked up by the seat of their pants. Sure. Both of them were. Mammy wore the pants anyhow, according to neighbors. And little Sarah Mae, sitting on the other side of the room, started to go up along with them, then changed her mind and dropped back with a thud. The thud was attested to by medical evidence. All black and blue where she landed, said Doc Ogden. And she landed as she had started. Sitting.

"Moreover, the neighbors saw the family ascend and saw Sarah Mae change her mind.

"But a week later she got lonesome and tried to follow Pappy and Mammy. In the middle of the night she rose like a balloon and bumped her nose on the ceiling. Thereupon she went down again and has been doing it ever since, on the anniversary of the twister.

"It's a national phenomenon now, a seasonal miracle. They've pulled down the side walls of the house and thousands watch. Two bits a throw. Sometime during the night, upsy-daisy she'll go, and downsy-daisy she'll drop. Three times a night, regular as a change of guard. Thousands will gasp, buy hot dogs and souvenirs and go home to spread the news of the miracle.

"Whoopee, Phenaville!"

Pucker put the story through the local telegraph office and went out. After Truth.

IN a bar, he phrased Truth rather tactlessly. To the big-boned man who was drinking beer next to him, Pucker ob-

served, "Nice little racket you got down here."

The big man got so big that he loomed. "What racket, fella?"

"This miracle thing." Pucker still spoke casually. A hoax was a hoax, he figured, and a miracle merely a word for something that never happened. These days, anyhow. But as between him and the big man, the opinion was not unanimous.

"There's folk here that seed it with their own eyes," declared the big man. "You don't want to come here with none of them smart ideas about be-so being ain't-so." He slid the wad of tobacco along his cheek as if it were a moving carbuncle, a slow-motion carbuncle. He was all slow-motion, in fact, with long dangling arms and great pads of hands and slow dull eyes. Beside him, Pucker buzzed like a nervous mosquito.

Pucker shrugged. "I'm just looking around," he remarked, "and I'll see whatever's here. Any objection?"

The big gawky man rubbed the stubble on his chin. His fingers made a faint scratching sound, like a fingernail drawn across sandpaper. "Air's free," he decided. "Welcome sign's out. We-all don't bother no one, if'n no one don't bother us." He took a deep breath. A lot of thinking

had gone into those words and his brain was temporarily exhausted. He stoked it with the rest of his beer and called for a fresh one.

Pucker said, "You got a nice town. I saw the pictures of it after the tornado and there wasn't much left. Somebody went and got money to do all this rebuilding, and now the tourists pay it back. With the sort of show you put on, you'd have what I'd call a national obligation. The average visitor to Phenaville spends twenty-five dollars, in the miracle season. Friend of mine was down here a year ago and had a lot more than that, but he never got around to spending it. Maybe you knew him. Harry Madden."

The gawky man's great arm grabbed Pucker by the shoulder and spun him like a top. "What are you tryin' to hint at, stranger? Them words bubbles out'n your mouth like the gas frothin' out'n soda water. I don't take it all in."

"I mentioned a friend of mine—that's all. And since you blow up so easily, you may as well know he was a particular friend of mine. So take your hand off."

The gawky man lowered it slowly. "No offense. Only folk don't go askin' after the dead like that. He's gone this long year into the spirit world and it ain't natural to talk on him." He wiped his mouth which wasn't wet. "I never knowed him. He was just a name I heared tell of when he got killed."

"You weren't riding with him, were you?" persisted Pucker. The gawky man spoke as if through a cloud, and his description fitted one of the occupants of the car in which Harry Madden had been riding when he died. When he died of a compound fracture of the skull after being thrown from the wreck of a car.

The gawky man looked worried. "Listen," he said. "You come in this here town and you're a guest of the township, but you got to behave like a guest or you get throwed out. By me." He showed his badge. "Sig Hallet, dep'ty."

"You were with him," said Pucker.

Sig grabbed him by the shoulders. Pucker felt himself lifted off his feet and shaken like a mop. He stiffened and shot a pounding jab at Sig. It slammed into his chest and boomed like a drum. Sig released him and wound up for a blow that could have cracked shale rock into

layers, or a man into a hospital case. Pucker ducked neatly and a delicate little bearded man in a spotless white suit scampered between Pucker and Sig.

"Stop it," he snapped. Sig, balanced forward and about to wade in, rocked himself back and lowered his arms like a mechanical man who had been turned on and then turned off before the movement could be completed.

"What's the meaning of this?" demanded the bearded man.

Sig swallowed and formed his words slowly. "He be hintin' at things. He be askin' questions. Be mixin' me all up."

THE bearded man turned to Pucker. "I'm Dr. Ogden. Sig here—" the doctor tapped his head and winked—"is prone to lose his temper. I must apologize, sir, for the action of one of my townsmen." Ogden put his hand on the bar and pulled it away quickly. "Sticky stuff," he said irritably, looking at his hand. "Nothing's ever kept clean. Will you do me the honor of having a drink with me?"

"Thanks," said Pucker. He sat down opposite the little doctor. Ogden dipped his hand in a water glass and wiped his fingers with a napkin. He seemed relieved by the action.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I told your friend that I was a skeptic in the matter of Harry Madden. We worked for the same paper and he was a friend of mine, and this year I have his assignment. To cover Phenaville."

"A tragic event. Madden was a young man, cut down in the prime of life. If anyone but Sheriff Updyke had been driving that car, I'd have demanded a thorough investigation. But you can scarcely ask a man to investigate himself."

Pucker admitted it. "The sheriff and two deputies, and Harry Madden. The car goes off the road and climbs an embankment. No reason for the accident. Updyke lost control. Harry's killed and nobody else is scratched."

"You exaggerate, sir. I treated the other three for bruises and shock."

"And Harry for a broken skull. There's a question been in my mind for a whole year, Doctor. Can you swear absolutely that Madden's injuries were the result of the accident?"

Ogden rubbed his hands together. They were small delicate hands, like a woman's, and the nails were carefully manicured. "How else?" he asked.

"I'm wondering. This miracle racket's worth money, lots of money, to the community, and Harry's a hard-boiled matter-of-fact newshound who smells a story a mile off. Then he goes riding with the sheriff and two deputies, and Harry gets killed. Why was he in a car with county officers, anyhow?"

"They were taking him to an outlying farm that had been in the path of the tornado."

"Did it need the three of them?"

Dr. Ogden gulped his drink, dipped his fingers in the water glass and wiped them off. "This is a curious town, sir. A small and backward town, filled with prejudice and provincialism. I'd advise you not to ask too many questions, nor to persist in asking them. Perhaps you'd be interested in seeing my medical records on the subject of Madden?"

"I would."

Ogden's bearded little head dipped in a bow. "An honor, sir, to serve you."

"The honor is mine," replied Pucker solemnly. "Sir."

Dr. Ogden's residence was a low sprawling white house, with the office and consultation room spread out in a separate wing.

The doctor trotted up the side path, pushed open a door and said, "Enter, sir. The room beyond is my study. If you'll wait there a moment while I wash my hands, I'll rejoin you immediately."

Pucker stood in the study and looked around. A small room piled with books. A broad carved desk. An ink well was

tilted precariously. Bump the desk and you'd knock it over.

Pucker turned slowly. A couple of extra chairs in front of the window. A brick fireplace. On the mantel above it, a row of ledger books. Pucker stared at the dates, stamped in gilt and level with his eyes.

Then the little doctor hurried in. "Germs," he said. "People can never be too careful. I prefer to face the world with clean hands. Will you be seated?"

Pucker sat down. "Clean hands," he repeated. "Did you know Harry at all?"

"He consulted me professionally while he was here. He suffered from headaches. Poor digestion, I told him. The root of all ill-health."

"About Harry," said Pucker, and the little doctor flinched. And as Pucker went on with his questions, he found in Ogden a curious mixture of frankness and hesitancy, of eagerness and unwillingness. One moment the words came tumbling out of his mouth, the next they stuck in his throat and he refused to answer. It took no master mind to realize that the bearded little doctor was afraid of something, but was quite willing to let anyone else face the danger for him.

In one of the ledger books that Ogden took from the mantelpiece, Pucker read the highly technical terms of the autopsy. They were a little hard to make out.

"The way I get it," he said, "Madden's skull was injured in both the front and back."

"Yes."

"And you found rock particles imbedded in the wound at the back, and yet the blow on the front was sufficient to kill him."

"Yes."

"And the rock particles matched a boulder at the scene of the accident. So when he was thrown from the car, he must have landed on the back of his head. He couldn't have landed on the back and the front at the same time, and so it follows he was hit on the temple before the car ever smashed up."

"I wouldn't say that."

"But you'd testify it was possible and probable."

"No—I couldn't, sir. I couldn't!"

"Harry was murdered!" barked Pucker. "And the evidence is right there in your book! You know it and I know it, and whether the story blasts the Phenaville legend into a fraud and a swindle or whether it just gets the killer and leaves the rest of the town its honest profits is entirely up to you. And I know what I'm saying and whom I'm telling it to!"

WHICH was so far from the truth that Pucker made it his exit line. In a way, he realized, he'd been a fool to voice suspicions that would merely warn whoever was guilty. But when blood's been drying a whole long year, you can't dig up much murder evidence from which to draw conclusions. All you can do is scare people until their fear drives them to do something about it. And the doing may be with bullets.

Pucker walked down the street and wondered whether he'd been dumb or clever. He had no real basis for thinking Harry Madden had been murdered. It was just a hunch, based on the fact that Harry had a nose for the sort of news that brought trouble. And that there was something phony about Harry riding with two deputies and a sheriff, and about one man being killed and three barely scratched.

Little enough, to be sure. But Pucker had met one of the deputies and had seen Dr. Ogden, and more than ever he had to get to the truth of Harry's death.

Pucker saw the two men lounging near the end of the street. Sig Hallet, big and awkward and gangling, and with him a great towering boulder of a man, convex in the belly and gigantic in the chest. Ham Clotter, the second of Sheriff Updyke's deputies.

Pucker hesitated. But there was no point

in avoiding them, even tonight on a dark street. If they wanted to get him, they'd find another time and another place. And if they didn't, he might as well talk to them.

Ham, who was fat on the outside but had great layers of muscle underneath, said, "You Mr. Luman? We-all been hearin' tales about you. You're one o' them trouble-makers."

"I'm just a reporter, covering the miracle for the *Chronicle.*"

"Mebbe so and mebbe ain't," went on Clotter, "but you been makin' trouble, and us-all, we stand responsible for the peace o' Phenaville. So we thought as how you might want to go back where you come from."

"And if I don't?"

Ham's protuberant belly shook with silent laughter. "If'n you don't, you're goin' anyhow. All you got to work your brain on, it's whether you go peaceable or in pieces." The laughter roared out now and the big man shook from heel to head.

Pucker said, "I'll go. I'll write a column saying I was thrown out for asking how Harry Madden died. Every paper in the state will reprint it, too. Still want me to go?"

Sig said, "He be brimmin' over with them dirty i-deas. He be goin' around from bar to bar and sayin' we-all killt his friend. He be a sort of he-devil from the big city. He be a menace to this here community."

Ham Clotter was less verbose. He stared down at Pucker and asked a one-word question. "Comin'?"

Pucker went.

They took him to his hotel and watched him pack his bag and fit the battered portable in its case. Ham kept looking at his watch.

"Got to make the midnight," he stated. "Ain't no trains out after that-a one till mornin'. Sure got to make it."

They made it with two minutes to spare. Ham and Sig escorted Pucker to the steps of the train, watched him climb in and kept staring at him until the engine began chugging off. Then they turned slowly and tramped back to town.

When the train reached the end of its run and the conductor checked through the cars, he found that someone had left a suitcase and a shabby old portable typewriter on the baggage rack. He pulled them down and a sheet of paper fluttered to the floor. He picked it up. It was addressed to the railroad company.

"Gentlemen," it read. "Kindly hold one bag and one portable typewriter until called for by me, the said pieces of baggage having been erroneously placed on the midnight out of Phenaville through circumstances beyond my control. (Signed) T. S. Luman."

The conductor scratched his head. It was a little irregular. He tried to remember who had sat in this seat. No one, so far as he could recall. And certainly no one from Phenaville on.

He lifted the two pieces and trudged slowly to the check room.

AS FOR Pucker, he bruised his leg and tore a rent in the shoulder of his coat when he threw himself off the train, before it gathered full speed on the downgrade from the Phenaville station. But the bruise was slight and the stiffness had worked out of his leg by the time that he reached Dr. Ogden's residence for the second time that evening.

It took Pucker quite awhile to get there. First of all he was hungry and he stopped at an all-night diner for something to eat. And in the second place he got mixed up and went in the wrong direction. It was around two a.m. when he got to the house.

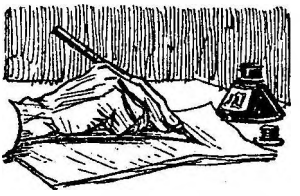
A light was burning in the doctor's office. Pucker kept to the shadows as he crossed the patch of lawn. He had no thought of eavesdropping when he put his face to the window. He merely wanted to see whether Ogden was still up, and if so

whether he was alone. The action of the two deputies this evening had forced Pucker's hand, and he intended to force Ogden's in the same way. By violence.

But what Pucker saw through the window transfixed him as if someone had leveled a gun. For a long time he stood there motionless. Then, in a trance, he pulled himself away and marched stolidly to the side door.

Pucker was careful to touch nothing, but he walked slowly round and round that room, stopping for a few minutes at a time to note something and engrave it in his memory. The body of the little doctor, stretched flat on the floor with the skull smashed in and that curious ink mark on the forehead. A figure "3," blurred and indistinct and meaningless at first, but the longer Pucker stared at it the more certain he was. Three. Why three?"

Pucker moved away and his eyes riveted on the desk. The ink-well knocked over



and the ink still puddled on the desk. The unused envelope. The broken pen on the floor.

Gradually the story came clear. Doc Ogden had been writing at his desk when the killer had come in. They could not have talked long, for the doctor had apparently still had his pen in hand when he had been struck.

But what had he been writing and where had the paper gone? And the figure three —what was the meaning of that?

Pucker bent down. The numeral was too blurred to have been put on intentionally. Its outlines were stamped into the forehead itself, and in places the skin was broken as if the number had been punched in with the full power of a blow. Signet ring?

Signet ring.

Pucker circled the room again. A chair had been moved from the window and placed in front of the mantelpiece. He gazed at it, then returned to the body. Why should the killer have left his trademark on little Dr. Ogden? Pucker bent down, still wondering what Ogden had been writing.

The fingers of the right hand were clenched. Pucker pried them apart, felt the scrap of paper still clutched in a death grip. It was just a thin strip that had caught on a fingernail and stayed in the hand when the rest of the paper had been ripped loose.

Pucker read the words on it. Jennie Seefer. The name meant nothing to him. He tried to slip the bit of paper back in the hand, but he couldn't make it look natural. After awhile he stuffed it in his pocket and circled the room again. Three, Jennie Seefer. What was the meaning of that, and did it hook up with the death of Harry Madden?

Pucker glanced at the mantelpiece and the long row of ledgers and record books. One of them was missing. He scanned the others and checked dates. The missing volume was the one containing the report of Harry Madden's autopsy. The killer himself had established a link between the two crimes.

When Pucker slipped through the side door and slunk across the lawn, dawn was breaking. He had an uncomfortable feeling that if it was known he was still in town, somebody might try to frame him for Ogden's death. He decided to go into hiding.

He walked to the outskirts of town and saw a field with little mounds of hay piled up and ready for loading. He realized then that he hadn't slept all night and that he was tired. He selected a pile near the far edge of the field and was about to burrow into it when he saw a bare foot protruding.

Pucker stiffened abruptly. Harry Mad-

den, number One; Doc Ogden, number Three. There had to be somebody in between. Who and where? He stared at the bare motionless foot and wondered. He stooped slowly and touched it.

THE foot kicked at him like a reflex and a boyish, freckled face shot up out of the hay. "I weren't doing nothing, Mister. Honest I weren't. I just fell asleep and—"

The boy stopped speaking. Pucker rocked with laughter and the realization of what a fool he was, mistaking the foot of a sleeping boy for a corpse. Murder on his mind—that was the trouble. It set him laughing.

The boy said, "Who're you? You don't live here, Mister."

Pucker stopped laughing. "Sorry, kid. I was just going in your hotel here and I touched your foot by mistake." Pucker sat down thoughtfully. "Who are you?"

"Calhoun Richard Fortescue, but they call me Cally. Pappy went looking for to beat me and so I come here to sleep. I ain't et supper and I reckon I won't get much for breakfast neither. Pappy, he's drunk, and when he's drunk he's that way three, four days. So I stay away from him, but I don't figure to eat so good."

Pucker studied the boy. Freckles and a grin, and something honest and straight about him. And who knows more about a small town and can pick up gossip better than a boy of fourteen?

Pucker said, "You're hired. A quarter a day and all you can eat. You follow me wherever I go, and if anything happens you report it. And you run errands and go to town to buy food. I'm Pucker Luman, a newspaper man. How about it?"

Cally rubbed his eyes and grinned. "Gee, Mister!" he said. "Gee!" Then he stuck out his hand and sealed the bargain.

When Pucker woke up it was the middle of the morning. He was lying in the hay, and about ten feet away a couple of boys were playing mumbly-peg.

At Pucker's grunt, they got up and approached him. Cally and a fat solemn lad with dark brown eyes. Cally said, "He's my friend. He wants a quarter a day, too."

Pucker looked at the fat boy. "What's your name?"

"He's called Fatty Welles," answered Cally.

Pucker spoke to the fat boy again. "Don't you talk?"

Cally replied for him. "Sure he talks, but he gets excited with strangers and he stutters." Fatty Welles nodded vigorously and blurted out, "Y-y-yes." Pucker chuckled and passed out the quarters. Light infantry and heavy tank corps. His army was mobilized for the battle of Phenaville.

Pucker's original problems, to learn the truth about Harry Madden and to expose the hoax of Phenaville, still remained, but now he had something to work on. Who wore a signet ring with the numeral "3," and who was Jennie Seefer.

He started with Jennie and despatched the army to send telegrams and buy food. One message was to his paper requesting information, the other was addressed to Jennie herself, in Phenaville, on the theory that the telegraph company was the best means of locating her. If she lived here they'd know her, and if she was visiting they'd canvas the hotels.

When the army returned, they woke up Pucker. Fatty Welles, loaded with hot dogs and milk bottles, stared and grinned and couldn't talk. But the infantry issued a report.

"That there telegram to Jennie Seefer —they tried to send it but they said they weren't no such person here, so we used up the money for to buy more hot dogs and some ice cream. Only we ate up the ice cream afore it melted."

Pucker rubbed his eyes and grinned. "An army marches on its stomach, so let's get food and then there's another job for you. The sheriff and his two deputies, and

Banker Belnap and Lawyer Rennier—find out if any of them wears a seal ring. And if so, what the initials on it are. Think you can manage?"

Cally said, "That's easy. And then I'll stop and get some more ice cream. I'll get enough so I can bring some back for you."

Callie's intentions were above reproach, but when he returned from the second trip he announced failure in the matter of the ice cream. Like this morning, it had threatened to melt, and rather than jettison it he had consumed it himself. As for the rings, he exonerated Belnap and Rennier and the two deputies.

"I couldn't say sure about Sheriff Updyke, though," confessed Cally. "Pappy, he told the sheriff I run off and he wanted me back, so I got to go the other way when I see him."

Pucker laughed. "How about Fatty? Can't he find out?"

"He ain't fast enough," said Cally promptly, "and if he got catched the sheriff'd wallop the daylights outa him."

"What for?"

Fatty rolled his eyes and said, "Watermelon." It seemed that he had made a number of raids during the season, and the law had promised to retaliate.

Under cover of darkness, that evening Pucker went to town. The answer to his wire to the *Chronicle* was at the telegraph office, but it was unsatisfactory. Nobody had ever heard of Jennie Seefer.

PUCKER wandered around the village. It was the day before the miracles were scheduled and the streets were filled with strangers. The bars and candy stores and souvenir shops were doing a thriving business. The Thacker house was lit up and hundreds of people were standing around it. It lay in a hollow and the surrounding slopes formed a natural amphitheatre. The entire area was fenced off so that no one could approach without going through one of the gates, at a quarter a throw. But this evening, with no miracle due, the gates were open and anybody could enter.

The walls of the house had been torn down and canvas curtains substituted. In case of bad weather they could be lowered, but the evening was mild and they were rolled up on three sides. Guards were placed strategically to prevent anyone from actually entering the house.

The scene was peaceful and friendly. The crowd was casually interested and content to wander around the slopes. In the center of it all Sarah Mae, a blond child of seven, played placidly with her dolls. Occasionally she glanced up to answer a question and her audience burst into laughter. No small part of the Phenaville show was Sarah Mae's personality. People were comparing her to Shirley Temple and it was rumored that a movie contract waited for her at the end of the season.

Pucker lit a cigarette and examined the house. A heavy spread covered the bed and reached to the ground. There might be some lifting mechanism underneath. Sarah Mae didn't weight much and he supposed any competent magician could rig up a simple trick. Maybe a device for bouncing her up; maybe just a wire lowered from the ceiling. He wondered how he could find out. If he or anyone else tried to reach that room, the guards would make quick work of him. And the place was lighted and protected twenty-four hours a day. No chance that way.

Pucker was about to stroll off when he noticed a gigantic figure loom above the fence and straddle it with a single stride. The man must have been at least seven feet tall.

Pucker threw away his cigarette. The giant was studying Sarah Mae, shielding his eyes and swaying uncertainly on his feet. Suddenly he lifted a paddle-like hand and waved. "Hey, Jennie!" he called. "Little Jennie—it's me!" He hesitated, took a few steps toward the house and called out again. "Hey, Jennie!"

Pucker marched over and grabbed the

giant's sleeve. "Jennie who?" he demanded excitedly.

The giant grinned. "Seefer. Little Jennie Seefer. She's—"

Pucker snapped. "Shut up! One man got killed for knowing about her. So shut up and get out of here." Down by the shed, Pucker noticed Sig Hallet turn and look at the giant. Then the deputy nodded to someone and pointed.

Pucker barked, "Quick! Let's get out of here!"

The giant followed. People were staring at him, but he seemed used to it. Because of his size, it was impossible to go anywhere without the whole town knowing. Pucker decided the safest place was in the largest and best-lighted bar in town. He steered the giant inside, sat him down at a table and ordered a couple of beers.

"About Jennie Seefer," he began. "Who is she?"

The giant shook his head. "I don't get this. Who are you and what's this all about?"

"I'm Luman, of the *Chronicle*. A man was killed last night, and he was killed for writing a letter to Jennie Seefer. So who is she?"

"Little Jennie," answered the giant. "One of the cutest little tricks that ever worked in a circus. Not a man on the lot that wasn't in love with her. I used to walk around with her in the palm of my hand." He held it out flat, a broad spreading mass the size of a dinner plate.

"Sure, but who is she?"

"She's got a job here, and it looks like a good one, too. Sarah Mae Thacker!"

Pucker looked up and said, "Hello." Ham and Sig loomed above him and didn't speak. The occupants of the next table got up and moved away. Pucker got up too. Then Ham reached out and pushed him down. At the same time Sig swung a small truncheon at the giant's skull.

Pucker tripped over a chair, lowered his head and came charging back. He hit Ham in the belly. It felt like an auto tire. Pucker ducked a blow and it whisked along the top of his head. The giant was swinging a chair. He whirled and crashed it down. Ham ran forward with little steps. His convex belly seemed to move ahead of him like a battering ram. It hit Pucker and smashed him against the wall for the second time.

He struck out, a trifle dizzy now and exchanging blow for blow. He aimed for the jaw, but the jaw weaved and jerked away. His fists seemed to be hitting hard rubber and his knuckles were bleeding. A fist smashed at his cheek and spun him sideways. He went down with his legs pumping. As he tried to get up, something exploded on his skull.

He lay quietly, listening to the noise of battle. His legs were heavy and they buckled under his weight. Somebody was helping him up and he trudged away, grave and completely engrossed in the job of placing one foot in front of the other. When the air hit him, it was too much. He let himself pitch forward and was sick.

HE HAD the smell of grass in his nostrils and the air felt chilly. He turned over slowly. Cally looked down at him and said, "Gee, Mister. You all right?"

Pucker blinked and rubbed his head. He felt the handkerchief around his head, and his fingers were moist from the blood that had oozed through. He said, "What happened?"

"Ham, he give you a mean one, and then somebody throwed a beer glass and got you in the head."

"Threw," said Pucker. "A bright kid like you. Ought to learn English. Then what?"

"Then you just lay there and one leg sort of jerked. Me and Fatty, we helped you out'n the place and took the loan of a car. I made Fatty take it back or we'd really get in trouble. There's a barn back here where we can sleep. You want some ice cream?"

"Yes."

"I ain't got none now, but I'll go soon as Fatty gets back. It won't melt so fast at night."

"It won't melt at all, or you'll get fined a quarter. What happened to the giant?"

"They took him away. He said he didn't like our town and was goin' to leave."

Pucker's wound wasn't serious. A gash in the head that mended by morning. And the absence of a headache or further nausea told him that his skull was intact. He was a trifle shaky on his legs, but the morning air steadied him and he marched resolutely into the town. He went into the first telephone booth he could find and spent ten minutes on a long distance conversation. Then he returned to the street. He made no attempt to hide himself this morning. He headed straight for the sheriff's office.

Sheriff Updyke was a dry cubed-faced and cube-shouldered, bloodless and cold, yet fluent as a water spiggot. He smelt of stale whiskey.

He didn't get up when Pucker came in. He merely said, "I didn't figure on no slant-gutted idiot like you walkin' in. You are scheduled to get locked up for disturbin' the peace and assaulting one o' my deputies with a busted beer glass. You ain't fit to let run around loose."

Pucker looked at the sheriff's hands instead of his eyes. He was wearing a ring but Pucker couldn't get a good look at it.

"I don't think you'll do that," he said. "I've been in touch with my paper and if they don't hear from me regularly twice a day they're going to print what I've dug up so far. Which isn't the complete story but which is pretty close to it."

"I got a right to lock you up without no ham-eyed whistle-tootin' rag of a newspaper gettin' het up over what don't concern it. They's hundreds of miles away and they can't know what they print, which they don't never do in any case, or this here would be a decent country instead of run by a bunch of cranberry-eyed hypocrites from the East where they got all the money."

Pucker found the argument a little hard to follow. He thought that if Updyke were ever opened up, the whiskey would pour out and it would be all bootleg stuff besides.

Pucker said, "You have the power but not the right to lock me up, but as soon as you do it the Federal men will come in. The Federal Bureau has jurisdiction in cases of fraud, kidnap or violation of civil rights and they'll clean out this town in one day. Maybe you think I'm bluffing. If so, read this."

Pucker produced a sheet of folded paper and made the sheriff reach out for it. It gave him a chance to study the sheriff's fingers. The ring was a seal ring all right and it had one initial. E.

Updyke said, "What in hell are you trying to do, handing me a blank sheet of paper?"

Pucker looked surprised. "Must have given you the wrong one," he muttered. He began searching his pockets "Well, it doesn't matter. It was just a copy of a letter from the Federal Bureau saying they were ready to step in, and that meantime they were checking up on Jennie Seefer, former circus midget. I wanted to show I wasn't talking through my hat. By the way, how come you wear a ring with the initial 'E'?"

"Middle name on my mother's side. Esme. The Esmes built up this country from the time they got it from the Indians. They built it up drinkin' hard liquor, and

when them paper-stomached polecats'd come in from the East, the Esmes'd give 'em a shot of hard stuff and it'd burn 'em up from the inside out. Used to throw them folk on the fireplace and let 'em burn. Heat up a room for a whole day, they would, and the Esmes wouldn't have to go out and chop no logs. Now all the chicken-heeled dudes roll in on four wheels and think they own the place. You want to go out to Esmeville—that's the county seat—and find out about this here country. I'll take you over and learn you."

"Is that where you were taking Harry Madden?" asked Pucker.

Updyke scowled. "You can walk out of this town or you can ride out in a automobile or you can go out on a railroad train. And if you don't do none of that, you'll go out at the bottom of a load of gravel and there won't be no one'll ever hear where you got to."

"You have nice instincts," observed Pucker. "But I happen to be down here on a job that demands a column a day, and what I came here to say was this. That I'll lay off this business for the week and send in my regular stuff and nothing else, provided you promise to call off your half-wits. And at the end of the week the war'll be on again. I'd rather wait with my feature story, anyhow. How about it?"

Updyke took a quart out of his desk and yelled, "Allie, bring in a couple of glasses."

A bundle of bones dressed up in skirt and blouse brought in two tumblers. The sheriff filled them about three-quarters of the way and pushed one toward Pucker. He looked at it and smelt the fumes.

"No thanks," he said. "I use my brains."

"And I don't make no promises to no weak-headed water-veined slice of a city brick-heels." He drank half the first tumbler. Pucker rose. The sheriff glared and Pucker walked out.

APPARENTLY he'd won the round. He returned to the hotel and hired his old room. It had a mirror over the bureau. Pucker wrote a capital E, in script, that resembled the letter on the sheriff's ring. Then Pucker held it up to the mirror. The reflection looked like the figure three he'd seen on the forehead of the late Dr. Ogden.

Pucker went downstairs and borrowed a typewriter. "The miracle is due to begin this evening," he wrote. Then his mind wandered back to the ring. A seal ring is cut in reverse so that its imprint is legible; an initialed ring is made to be read and it leaves its imprint in reverse. The reverse of a script E resembles a 3. So Sheriff Updyke had killed Ogden, and what could Pucker do about it?

He sighed and reread his first sentence. A few minutes later he was pounding away at the keys and composing a special article for the *Chronicle*. When it was finished, he filed it at the telegraph office and went out in search of his fellow reporters. And behind him, at a respectable distance, marched the army, Cally the light infantry and Fatty the tank corps.

That evening the miracle happened. A couple of thousand people crowded inside the fence, bought popcorn and beer and soft drinks and stared down at the brilliantly lighted shed in which a little girl lay sleeping. Promptly at ten-thirty she began to rise.

The crowd gasped and then laughed a little and watched her drop back. A few hallelujahs rose up from the throng. But the second time Sarah Mae rose, one of the guards ran a stick around her suspended form, between her and the bed and between her and the ceiling. The skeptics were convinced there were no wires and no trick that they could think of. The hallelujahs spread and the beer venders' business began to pick up.

Pucker, standing with a group of his trade, muttered, "Magnets. Got to be. A repelling force and a force to keep the object from slipping off. Put a metal plate under her nightgown and you can do it easy. Not a bad trick, though."

The *Daily Leader* man said, "What are the chances of finding out? I don't know whether the old man would rather know or not know."

"Stick around," answered Pucker. "Whether your city desk likes it or not, I'm springing this thing tomorrow."

"Nuts," said the *Daily Leader* man.

Pucker smiled. "You wouldn't want to make a ten dollar bet, would you?"

"You and who else is going to do this?"

"Me and the army," replied Pucker. "I have two army corps to help me out."

The *Daily Leader* man laughed heartily. "I'll take that bet, Luman." But he was a little worried when Pucker agreed so readily.

The following afternoon he was lounging near the shed, exhaling smoke and watching where the wind took it. With his eye he selected a flagpole and the porch of a house. The line between them cut the Thacker house. It also marked the direction in which the wind blew.

About forty or fifty people were strolling in the enclosure marked off by the fence. A half dozen of the big gates were open so that in reality the fence closed off nothing. Pucker kept gazing with longing eyes at Sarah Mae. She was playing with a doll and talking merrily with everybody that wanted to speak to her.

Back in town, a big black sedan rolled in from the main highway. There were four men in the car. They sat tensely and silently. They had talked themselves out and joked themselves out, and now they sat alert and waiting, a couple of them puffing at cigarettes and tossing them through the window before they were half smoked, and then immediately lighting up again.

The car was splotched with mud and the windows were dirty with streaks of rain, and the driver stared through the arc swept by the windshield wiper. The storm was many miles back.

It was a big car and it clung heavily to the road. The wheels were protected with steel fender-curtains, the glass was thick and the fenders were massive. It threaded its way to the center of town and slowly skirted the amphitheater. The driver's glance kept needling through the clean semi-circle of the windshield. After awhile he said, "That's him, Gil."

The man next to him nodded. "Yeah." He rubbed his long lean face with his fingers, then turned and said, "Open it up, boys."

The pair in back stooped at once and ripped the top from a box. They handed Gil a small metal container; each of them removed a similar cylinder. They cranked down the window on the right hand side of the car. Gil's was already open.

Pucker, strolling near the fence, saw the car. He noted the out of state license plates. Then he took a handkerchief from his pocket and rubbed his lips. He kept the handkerchief in his hand.

The car crept forward even more slowly. Pucker turned and sighted the flagpole and the corner house. When the car was crossing the line between them, he dropped his handkerchief.

IN a way, it was old stuff to them. They all remembered the times they'd rolled past a store front, slowed and tossed out their bombs. The old pineapple act, they called it. They'd done it to restaurants and fur shops and cleaning shops and beer halls. It all depended. One year it was one thing and another year another. And so it was the same old act. Except that this time it was in a sleepy old southern town and they weren't banging up anything.

The three bombs landed within a few yards of each other and exploded. The nearest was about ten feet from the shed. A thick column of smoke shot up, fanned out and dropped over the shed. A woman yelled. One of the guards fired a shot in the air. People began yelling. The car leapt forward, horn blowing and tires shrilling. A whistle blasted out, a siren

blared. The crowd running toward the shed saw only a thick pall of smoke settling in the bottom of the amphitheater and heard the voices of many people raised in wild and angry fear.

With the explosion of the first bomb, Pucker plunged downwards and vanished into the smoke. At the same instant the infantry and the tank corps charged, converging from opposite sides.

Pucker coughed as he hit the smoke. He clapped his other handkerchief to his mouth. It was well moistened and the knot was already tied. He lowered his head and stamped up on the platform.

It was the shortest and most amazing newspaper interview on record. Pucker came out of it coughing, with his eyes red and irritated with smoke. He wandered blindly as he scrambled up the slope. He saw Cally streak past him, running like a hound. The tank corps lumbered behind with Sig Hallet in pursuit, a big lanky form gaining with great strides and then getting fooled as the tank corps, scourge of the watermelon patch, dodged suddenly.

But the contest was unequal and a fat boy can't get away from a grown man. Pucker sprinted, caught up and blocked the big deputy with a dive. Pucker took him out as neatly as he'd taken out a certain Yale quarterback on an icy gridiron some five years back, and Fatty went free for his touchdown. Only this time there was no referee to blow a whistle and call off the war. Instead, there was a two-hundred pound deputy pulling a gun, and there was a curtain of swirling smoke to cut off the rest of the world and prevent any witnesses from seeing what Sig and Sheriff Updyke chose to do.

Pucker had the satisfaction of seeing the army vanish across the field. But except for that single salvage, the battle of the smoke bombs was a defeat. Pucker, with a pair of handcuffs on his wrists, was marched sullenly to the east of town.

Inside an old barn they unlocked the handcuffs and Sig shoved him against the wall. Pucker banged his hip against it and stayed there. The big sliding door was open a crack. Tire marks showed that this part of the barn was used as a garage, but the rest of the structure had been blocked off with a wooden partition. Pucker noted the small door in the center of the partition. Apparently it had no lock, but whether it was barred from the other side was impossible to tell.

Sheriff Updyke rasped, "I said you ain't fit to run around loose. Now I ain't sure whether you're fit to run around nohow. What in hell was the idea, huh?"

Pucker put his hands in his pockets and bit his lips. He kicked dirt with the toe of his shoe and moved a couple of steps nearer the little door. Updyke and his deputies had killed Harry Madden, and they'd killed him for much less than Pucker had done.

"Every newspaper man in town knows how the miracle is done," observed Pucker pleasantly, "but none of us had any proof. We chipped in to buy a couple of smoke bombs and then we drew lots to see who'd rush the shed when they exploded. I won —or lost, depending on how you look at it. At any rate I got in there, saw the big magnets under the bed and traced out where the wires come in. I spoke to Jennie Seefer and she showed me the harness to which the steel plates are strapped every night. Then somebody hit me and grabbed her. Maybe you did. That's about all. The smoke got in my lungs and choked me out of the place and I had to beat it."

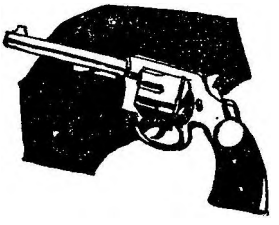
UPDYKE spat. If what Pucker said was true, the sheriff was powerless. The story would be printed in every paper and the whole world would know what had happened to Pucker Luman. But the question was whether Pucker was telling the truth.

A heavy step sounded outside. Updyke and Sig Hallet drew their guns. Hallet covered Pucker and Updyke covered the door.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Me." Ham Clotter's face showed in the crack and the sheriff relaxed. "Come on in," he ordered.

Ham had to widen the gap of the barn door to get his belly in. He closed it be-



hind him, but there was still a crack of light.

Updyke asked angrily, "Well? What'd you find out?"

"She ben't nowhere, John," replied Ham. "She be gone up in the smoke. They's folk that seed her mount the chariot of gold and ride up to heaven, like she always wanted to. There be no smoke left there any more, but there be no Sarah Mae neither."

Updyke made a face. He wasn't quite sure whether Ham believed all that stuff or not. "Is the shed still guarded?" he asked.

"Be guarded like the last trickle o' water come drought time," he answered. "Be a lot o' folk crowdin' round, but be none of them as got in the shed."

"How about the reporters?"

"They be askin' a pile o' questions, but they don't know any more'n other folk."

Updyke let out a snarl and faced Pucker. "You damn smooth-bellied citified slop-eared oily-lipped liar!" he intoned. The words slithered off his tongue in a cold disgust rather than in any real anger.

Pucker didn't know how he could get out of this situation. There was a chance that Cally or Fat had seen where he'd gone and would tell one of the reporters. The reporters had seen him dash into the smoke and would figure he'd gotten the story, and they'd risk a dozen Updykes to get in on what they figured was a scoop. Given time, given the gift of stalling, Pucker might get help. There was nothing certain about it. And even if it came, there was no reason to suppose it would save him. But it was something better than a blank wall.

Pucker got a few inches nearer the door. If it was open, if he could get through, he had a chance. But again, just a chance. And his problem was to prevent Updyke from killing him before time had an opportunity to deal a new hand. And the only way to stall off Updyke was to talk. Pucker could talk and think at the same time, but neither Updyke nor his deputies would be able to make any plans while they were engrossed in listening.

"I'm not lying," said Pucker coldly. "I'm stating facts. And I know plenty of them. Want to hear?" He strung out his words, playing for time and moving always toward the door he hoped would be open.

"I know more about this town than you do," he went on. He gazed at the two guns and felt scared, but his voice didn't show it and his brain still worked with all its cunning. "After the tornado, your chief citizens got together on this hoax and made their plans. Maybe you were in on it and maybe you weren't, but the chief conspirators were Rennier and Belnap and Ogden. And they were big enough to make you do whatever they said. They hired Jennie Seefer and they had the magnets installed and they hired publicity men and within a year they had the whole country coming to Phenaville. But that would have been innocent enough if Harry Madden had never come to town."

Pucker eyed them. He had their attention, but he had no idea what impression he was making and what their reactions were.

"Harry found out what I found out," he continued. "You killed him and I can prove it, because Ogden gave me the proof before he died. Harry was killed by a blow on his forehead. You took him out in a car, faked a wreck and threw him out.

But when you threw him, he landed on the back of his head and spoiled your trick!"

Updyke shook his head. "No, that weren't it," he said.

But Pucker went right on. "That murder lay heavy on Ogden's conscience. That is why he handed over the evidence to me. But after I'd left, his conscience still bothered him. He sat down and was writing out a complete confession, and that's when you came in and killed him. I saw the body before you got there, Updyke, and I saw the mark of your ring. Your ring got in a splotch of ink and stamped its imprint on Ogden's forehead. You wiped it off in the morning and thought nobody knew."

Updyke was still shaking his head. "No, that weren't it," he repeated. "I rubbed the mark off because it looked like my ring, but it weren't. Somebody else done it. Somebody else had a ring like mine."

"Sure," said Pucker. He had Updyke worried now, and Pucker was very close to the door. "Sure. You got wonderful reasons. Better think up some other ones before the trial, because you can't really expect anyone to believe those."

"No," said Updyke for the third time. "You're readin' the signs wrong. Madden were dead when we loaded him in the car, but me and my boys never done it. We found him there on the street and we figured it wouldn't do Phenaville no good to have a murder. And there weren't no clues and so we figured it wouldn't do us no good neither if we didn't solve it. So we took him out in the car and done like you said."

Pucker laughed. "That's even worse. And all I know is you can't get away with a trick like that again, and so—"

PUCKER dived suddenly and his shoulder punched at the door. It gave abruptly and he went tumbling into the darkness beyond. A single shot followed him, but it was high and he was sprawled on the ground, looking up and seeing the big wooden bar with which he could close off the door.

He was up and grabbing it with the speed of a bouncing ball. The heavy bar was in place before Ham Clotter's weight hit it and made the whole wall shiver.

Pucker looked around. This part of the barn was dim. Along one side of it were the old cattle stalls. A ladder led up to the hay loft, and at one end, underneath the eaves, he saw the gray light filtering through the dust of a small window. There was no door in sight.

He clambered up the ladder, but when he got to the top he found that half the loft had fallen away. Between him and the window was twelve feet of space and no means of getting across. He crouched there, looking for some way out of the trap and seeing none.

He heard the heavy blow of an axe. The wooden partition shivered again. When the blow was repeated, he saw a plank bulge and splinter. He wiped his forehead and gazed around. There was no hiding place except the row of stalls. He scrambled down the ladder and ducked into the nearest one. He crouched there in the corner. If they walked by him without looking, maybe he could double back and dash past them into the garage.

The axe struck again and the bulging plank shattered. He could see Sig Hallet's face. Sig raised the axe for another stroke and sent it crashing into the wall. Pucker slunk back into his stall. Something moved along the ground and quick claws tapped on wood. He shielded his face with his arm, afraid the rat might spring at his face.

There was nothing more that Pucker could do. Nothing but wait there, hoping and trembling and feeling the slow pounding of his heart. He tried to take his mind off it.

Updyke's story was naïve, to say the least. A sheriff who fakes an accident so that he won't have to solve a murder. And yet, its very naïveness was its chief claim

to truth. People don't invent such obvious lies, and Updyke was a back-country sheriff whom the accident of a tornado had brought in contact with the rest of the world. Until the tornado, he probably hadn't seen a stranger in years.

Suddenly Pucker found that he believed Updyke's story. Everything had pointed so directly to the sheriff that Pucker had never evolved any other theories. But now, thinking back to the theft of Ogden's medical records and to the chair in front of the mantelpiece—

The last plank shattered and Sig Hallet stepped through. "Come on out o' there, afore I come shootin'!"

Pucker heard the tread of feet, the mutter of voices and a gasp of surprise. He come out slowly and stepped through the hole in the wall. Gil and his three gunmen were covering the sheriff's party, who stood stupidly, their hands above their heads. Near the door, Cally and Fat were dancing with excitement.

PUCKER smiled and said, "Hello, Gil. You're the U. S. Marines today, on a rescue mission. How'd you get here?"

"Them kids," answered Gil, the long-faced man. "After we chucked them smoke bombs, like you told us on the phone, the traffic got thick so's we couldn't plough through, so we ducked out and got lost in the crowds. Thought nobody'd know us, until them kids come along and said the sheriff had you and was gonna bump you. So they took us over here. Us gunning for the law and knowing they couldn't touch us—say, we couldn't pass up a chance like that."

Pucker was slightly crestfallen, but he grinned nevertheless. "And here I thought you were pulling a rescue act to save my life!"

Gil laughed. "You!" he said. "What would I want to get you out of a hole for? Fact is, we got paid half in advance and we was to collect the other half from you if we done the job right. We done it perfect, but how the hell was we gonna get our jack if you was bumped, huh?"

Pucker hadn't thought of it in quite that way, but he saw it now. "Yes," he said. "I guess so. You can let 'em go now. Meet me at the hotel in a half hour and I'll pay up, but let 'em go now."

It was Gil's turn to be surprised. "They'll bump you, kid. I don't want to take no chances like that."

"Then follow along in case anything happens." He took a piece of paper and scrawled, "I, Jennie Seefer, testify that I was hired to impersonate Sarah Mae Thacker by—"

Pucker glanced up. The sheriff was watching with a tense interest. Pucker filled in the name and then left a blank place for Jennie's signature.

The sheriff stared at the name and then stared at the ring. "I never thought of him," he remarked. "Come on."

It was quite a procession, Pucker and the four gangsters, Updyke and a pair of deputies, and the tank corps and light infantry to bring up the rear. They marched straight into Emmons' candy store and into the rear office. The door resisted a few seconds, but no more. It snapped from its hinges and showed squat little Emmons and a midget dressed in a child's clothes. Jennie Seefer, alias Sarah Mae Thacker. They were both smoking cigars.

"The gag's up," announced Pucker. "I got on to it, Emmons, when I realized that with your height you were the logical one to have circus connections and thus hire Jennie. An old friend of yours, apparently."

Emmons scowled. "You're out'n your head. The poor little mite, she was all choked and cryin' from the smoke, so I took her here for some ice cream. The little uns, they sure go for it."

"Drop the act, Emmons. You've been behind the hoax the entire time. You're the one that's collecting on admissions and getting the big money. You figured nobody'd expose you because the entire town

was benefitting and hence had an interest in maintaining the fraud. But when you tried murder, you went too far. Let's see your hands."

Emmons held them up questioningly. Pucker pointed to the ring marks, although Emmons was no longer wearing the ring.

"You found Ogden about to give the whole thing away. He'd always suspected it was murder, but when I came along and made him admit it, he wouldn't be a party to the conspiracy of secrecy any longer. You found him writing out the story, and so you killed him."

Emmons shook his head slowly. He knew it looked bad, and he knew that he couldn't escape.

"And the way I knew, in the end," said Pucker, "was the chair. Only an abnormally short man would have to climb up on a chair to take the record books from the mantlepiece. Take him away, Sheriff."

As Pucker marched through the ice cream parlor on his way to the street, someone pulled his sleeve. He glanced down at the army and read the question in his eyes. Under international law, is it or is it not legitimate for the captor to loot the stores of a defeated army?

Pucker shook his head and took a dollar bill out of his pocket. "A bonus," he said. "And pay for whatever you take."

He still hesitated. Then he took a second bill and gave it to the tank corps. "Same for you," he said.

Then he went out. An army, he knew, marches on its stomach. And it was on the record books that the army of Phenaville marches on ice cream. And only ice cream.

"Campaignin' Is Like Fairgrounding a Steer. You Got to Think Faster'n the Voters—or You Get Piled."

FAIRGROUND CAMPAIGN

By

DEE LINFORD

"IT'S a funny thing," said Peace John Humboldt, sheriff and judge extraordinary of Carson County. "Drawin' up a warrant for your own arrest this-a-way. Funny, sort of, to accuse yourself of stealin' horses, when you ain't done much but corral horse rustlers for twenty years."

The mild-eyed old lawman was in the little whitewashed cube he called his office, and his words were addressed to his long-time friend and colleague, Arizona Jay, Deputy United States Marshal, late of Tucson. The marshal sat with chair canted back against the wall, and his fingers drummed a slow tattoo on the softwood seat between his angled legs. His hat was low in front, and his eyes were fixed in morose gaze upon the sheriff's wind-weathered face.

"It's got me spooked, John," the marshal admitted dourly. "Fact is, it looked bottomside up from the start, horses comin' out of Tobe Dell, with the swamp fever takin' the colt crop up here the last two years. But them drovers showed bills o' sale at the rail head, with your John Henry on 'em. Big as life an' just as purty. Anything with your name on is square as a die with me. So I let 'em ship. Then folks up here start yellin' 'hoss thief,' an' your office has got no record of them bills o' sale. So what's a officer o' the law goin' to do?"

John Humboldt raised his dusty-gray eyes from the warrant before him to give the marshal a long look. "Now don't you fret, Jay," he soothed. "We all do what we got to do. An' I'm obliged, you lettin' me handle the case myself. It will help plenty in my campaign."

"Campaign!" the marshal complained. "Them horses was trailed acrost two states. Fed'ral offense, John. You handle it, locally, but I got to take somebody to Tuscon to stand trial. I'll wait till after election, but damn if I see how you can clear it up. Election is tomorrow, an' if

you don't get it done by then you won't never get it done. 'Cause you won't be sheriff any more."

The marshal spoke cold fact, and a silence came between them as Peace John considered his situation again. He was charged by his own hand with horse theft and with using government papers to defraud. Both were federal charges, preferred on an information filed by Jay. There would also be a charge of betraying the trust of his office. But that would be brought by the county and would be along later. And Peace John, being also county judge, would be called upon to arrest himself again.

Funny thing, he reflected, the way a man gets used to being sheriff and sort of forgets about being careful not to step on the toes of the voters. Funny thing that an old gun-toter who had smashed the horse-thieving syndicates of Butch Cassidy and Teton Jackson twenty years before should be called upon to arrest himself for the crime he had spent a life-time in stamping out. Funny thing how his name got on those bills of sale Jay had seen at the rail head.

There was a scuffing of boots on the plank sidewalk outside, and black as the sheriff's thoughts were the shadows that fell across the sill of the open door. Three men came inside. In lead was Sam Crosby, tall, sunburned chairman of the Carson County Board of Commissioners. Behind him ranged Orly Bossman and Demps Rudd, Tobe Dell ranchers whose membership completed the board.

Such a delegation hinted of official business, and Peace John felt a foreboding when his eyes met Bossman's. That squat, heavy-jowled rancher held Peace John a grudge of long standing. A grudge growing out of Humboldt's effort to convict him of stealing horses ten years before. Bossman had been after Peace John's scalp ever since, and the sheriff suspected that he wouldn't pass up so good a chance as this to try for it again.

"Good day, gentlemen," the sheriff greeted. "Have a chair."

But the commissioners obviously didn't plan a long stay. For they didn't answer and they didn't sit. They grouped themselves around the officer's desk, and an arkward silence came into the room as they stared at the warrant thereon, sworn by John Humboldt, against John Humboldt. Peace John sensed their embarrassment. But he sat silent, offering no help.

"A hell of a note," Sam Crosby commented finally, his eyes fixed upon the legal paper.

"A *hell* of a note," Demps Rudd echoed with emphasis, also staring at the warrant.

Still John Humboldt offered no cooperation in these ice-breaking maneuvers, and Arizona Jay turned his head to conceal an ill-timed smile.

Crosby cleared his throat at length and forced a casual manner. "We was just sayin', John," he ventured, feeling his way with care, "that in view of—in view of things, you might want to do the party a service and withdraw your candidacy tomorrow."

That said, the air in the little room seemed not quite so thick. That opening made, the other commissioners were quick into the breach. "That is, unless you feel you ought to resign today, in face o' the talk in Tobe Dell," Demps Rudd added, rather carelessly.

"In which case a pension might be arranged," Orly Bossman supplied.

"Pension?" Peace John's eyes were pained. "Why gentlemen. I'm surprised. I'd figgered you'd sort of needed me 'round here. Fact is, I had considered retirin' these last ten years. But I've never felt plumb certain shore I would be leavin' you-all in good hands."

"There's Rap Gwen," Crosby offered. "He's been your deputy nigh onto three years now, an' has gave a good account of hisself."

"That," said Peace John in a voice deceivingly soft, "is a mare of a different

color. Rap Gwen, is it? Gentle-men, I am a candidate to succeed myself tomorrow. Good day, gentle-men."

Crosby's face became very red, and his throat rumbled ominously. "There's others of us up for election, John. The party can't afford to have your name on its ballot. Not with that charge agin' you."

"The party," reminded Peace John, has never elected me."

Orly Bossman suggested, "Statute says a man standin' convicted of a felony can't hold public office."

"I stand convicted of nothin'," Peace John mentioned, lights kindling deep in his agate eyes. "Charged, mebbe. But this here court regards a man innocent till he's showed to be otherwise, an' this court has accepted my plea of not guilty. Hearing is set for day after tomorrow. Meantime, I am free on bail to conduct my own campaign."

"Almighty high-handed with the law, ain't you, John Humboldt," Crosby accused.

"Well, John, we aim to fix that. We only figgered to make it easy on you. The party is backin' Rap Gwen for sheriff an' Roy Duncan for judge. We don't want no dictatorship around here. An' we'll see to it, John, that word of this here warrant gets around."

WITH that their word of parting, the commissioners turned and filed out into the summer sunlight. Peace John glowered after them. "I do declare," he muttered, approximately, "A man sweats his life away, to help 'em keep their noses in the public trough. An' this is how they thank him."

Arizona Jay glanced sidelong at his friend, and maintained a discreet silence.

"Just like my brother's boy," the sheriff blustered. "He says—"

That parable remained untold. For a hullabaloo in minor key had arisen in the street outside. There was a clattering outburst of gun fire, followed by a high-pitched "Yi-pee-ki-yi!" And a lone horse man thundered down the street. His reins were clamped between his teeth, a smoking gun was in either hand, and his voice trumpeted a challenge to the men of Tobe Dell, calling upon them to appear and be annihilated.

Dropping his reins in front of the Red Dog Saloon, the one-man mob charged inside—evidently to the discomfort of those at the bar, for they promptly left, by the back way.

Peace John had come erect with the first chatter of pistol fire, and now he jammed on his hat and reached for his old long-barreled Frontier model Colt that hung in its leather on the wall.

"That hombre 'ppears plumb ornery an' hostile, Jay," he remarked. "I better mosey down. If he's just a hell-bent cowhand lookin' for fun, you'll have to give up that bunk in the jail for a day or so. If he ain't drunk, then he's created a disturbance, an' is liable to the law."

"In which case—" the marshal prompted.

"In which case we'll knock his horns off an' check his back trail 'fore givin' him a floater," Peace John vowed.

The "we" of Peace John's utterance was purely editorial in intent, as both men knew; it by no means placed the marshal under obligation to side him at the saloon. At the same time, as visiting lawman, Jay was within his rights to go along and observe his colleague's techniques. He might even, if asked, lend a hand. But never unless requested.

The lawmen walked leisurely down the sidewalk toward the Red Dog, Humboldt waddling a little in his effort to match Jay's long stride. The street, filling now with ladies and gentlemen of inquisitive mien, was noticeably forsaken in the immediate vicinity of the captured bar, and from behind those ramshackle clapboard walls came the sound of breaking glass and the unmistakable gurgle of a man drowning.

The lawmen were near when the doors of the bar swung violently open, and the

bad man appeared. He was big, Peace John noted, and broad of beam. Behind him, and on his knees, was Suds Buxton, Red Dog barkeeper. It was Suds who gurgled, because one of the stranger's hands held an up-ended bottle between his teeth, the other held the barkeep's ear. And when Suds didn't drink, the stranger twisted the ear until it cauliflowered in his hand.

"Learn you to set Dago Red in fronta me when I order a drink," the stranger announced. "When you've swallowed that slop, I'm a-goin' to ram the bottle down your guzzlin' throat."

"Touchy hombre," Arizona Jay observed. "An' plumb ornery, likely. Bet he kicks dawgs."

"Seems right fussy about his drinkin' likker," Peace John acceded. "Like my brother's boy. Buys it by the gallon. Says, 'What's a barrel o' whiskey 'mongst one'."

The officers were now in the center of the deserted street, and the eyes of Tobe Dell were upon thm. Being firmly of the opinion that discretion was at least a good part of valor, Peace John shortened his steps, the better to get a look at the fire-breathing stranger who was so unmindful of the peace of Tobe Dell.

"There's a law in this town, stranger," he called, "agin' drinkin' on the streets in daylight. You're makin' yourself party to a crime, durin' the fact."

The stranger whirled at the sheriff's word. He released the hapless barkeep planted his back against the saloon wall, and either hand palmed a gun. "You look like the law to me," he said, his voice booming for all to hear. "An' I don't like law. Stand where you are, or I'll put windows in you."

The stranger's hat was back now, revealing a mop of sorrel hair above his deep-set eyes. Peace John got his first look at those eyes, and he was stopped, puzzled. For they were neither the eyes of a drunken man, nor the cold lights of a killer. Just an everyday hombre, this tough. But the guns in his hands didn't waver.

"Now look, stranger," Peace John cautioned, not breaking his stride. "Guns are dangerous implements. They go off, an' hurt folks. So—"

"So that's close enough," the hombre warned, shooting once at the ground in front of Peace John. "One step closer, an' I'll raise my sights."

THE bullet kicked dirt on Peace John's boots. It was warning enough for any man. And Peace John was only human. He paused, and studied the man's eyes to see if his first impression had been wrong. He decided it hadn't. But he still was puzzled.

Arizona Jay's arms were crossed on his chest, and his right hand was hidden beneath his left coat flap. His tongue moistened his lips, and he watched Peace John for a sign.

But the matter was destined to be taken from both their hands. For at that moment, Rap Gwen, Humboldt's thick-hipped deputy, broke from the crowd and walked down the sidewalk, across that wide circle around the front of the Red Dog. His hat was pulled low, and his jaw was outthrust. His big hands dangled just above his guns, and his swinging holsters were tied.

Humboldt and Jay stood where they were in the dust of the street. There was nothing else to do. It was Rap's show now, and it wouldn't be good manners to butt in. They had muffed their chance, and both the crowd and the tough had forgotten them.

A hush had come down over the town. The only sound was the unhurried *clack clack* of Rap Gwen's boot heels on the plank walk. On he came, relentless as death, and just as silent. The tarnished star on his shirt front winked as it caught then lost the reflection of the afternoon sun.

At length the sorrel-top came to life. He fired once at the deputy's feet, as he

had fired at Peace John's, and repeated his warning. "Stay there, badgeman, or I'll feed you lead."

But the deputy was of sterner stuff. He didn't stop. He gave no sign that he had heard the shot. On he came, without changing his pace, and the stranger stood irresolute. When three paces from the declared bad man, Gwen halted and fixed him with his eye. Deliberately, he drew his guns. He spoke then, for the first time, and his voice was low and steady as became him, but loud enough for all to hear.

"I don't like them pop-guns pointin' at me, hombre. Throw 'em out in the road. *Now!*"

The tough dropped his guns.

"That your hoss?" the deputy demanded, motioning toward a broomtail bay.

The sorrel-top nodded, without speaking, and without taking his eyes off Gwen's.

"Then Mister, you fork that hoss, an' go a long ways from Tobe Dell. 'Cause we don't like you here. Shake a laig now."

The tough turned to obey, and Gwen helped him on with a carefully placed boot. This by no means dampened the crowd's enthusiasm, and the crest-fallen hombre's dust was still in the air when the men of Tobe Dell closed in to congratulate the fire-eating deputy their town had spawned.

"Yay, Gwen!" a throaty voice chanted. "He's from our town."

"Ad" Libb, under-sized proprietor of the Kuster House Hotel and acknowledged sage of Tobe Dell, hurled his new plug hat on the hotel porch and jumped on it with unction and both feet. Libb was a man of refined tastes. He took his corn rye straight, and was given, on occasion, to inspired poetic utterance. Clearly, here was a hero, and Libb raised his voice in tribute.

"He's the long-toothed hellion o' Tobe Dell."

"An' the best damn badgeman this side o' hell."

Exhausted by the effort of his creation, the acknowledged sage of Tobe Dell retrieved his broken hat and retired to the Red Dog to recoup himself. The crowd shouted its endorsement of the poetic tribute, and a score of hands seized the deputy and swept him inside the saloon, where drinks were called on the house.

Outside, Peace John stared at the line of dust the fleeing man's horse had raised across the prairie, and his brow was knit in a puzzled frown.

"A good man, your deputy," Arizona Jay commented. "Active, alert, enterprisin'. An' he conducts a good campaign. Folks like a show."

Peace John's eyes were still on the red-top's dust, and he spat judiciously. And at that moment, Orly Bossman's voice was raised in the big saloon. "A toast, gentlemen. Rap Gwen, next sheriff of Carson County. Now, Ad, give us a pome."

Libb's voice, slightly unsteady now, arose without further bidding.

"Ole Rap Gwen packs a gun to fan.
An' he don't back water for no damn man."

ADMIRING hands had lifted the Sage of Tobe Dell to the top of the mahogany bar, and placed a brimming cup in his hand. But that rich red cup was destined to go untasted—the first time, local tradition has it, that Ad Libb failed to treat a drink in hand with the respect due it. For the swinging doors had been kicked open, and outlined in the small patch of white stood Peace John Humboldt. Humboldt, the forgotten man. A gaunt, listening ghost of a man whose name once was legend along the gun-smoked trail of empire, a trail that twisted like a tired river from the pampas of the Missouri to the fertile Sierra valleys.

There was a look to this faded, mild man that made the Sage of Tobe Dell feel conspicuous, there above his fellows. Conspicuous, and very much alone. His verse was said, and like the French general of legend, having fired, he fell back. Fell squarely into the arms of the surprised Mr. Buxton, who had reassumed his customary position behind the bar.

Peace John was speaking then, and his voice had a metallic ring the men of Tobe Dell hadn't heard in recent years.

"Turn around, Rap Gwen!"

The deputy turned, and surprise was in his eyes. The crowd moved back to form a narrow lane that extended from sheriff to deputy. Men were ill at ease.

"Rap Gwen," Peace John Humboldt accused, "you're low-down as a cross 'tween a polecat an' a bobwire fence. You got the principles of an Or-ee-gon work bull an' the guts of a snipe. You wouldn't make a scab on a tough hombre's hind laig. That's my say, Rap. An' you got a gun. If you don't like it, reach quick-like, an' I will kill you twice before you get it up."

Peace John Humboldt paused then, his cold-smoky eyes nailed to the pit of the deputy's stomach. Gwen stood motionless, white of face, and before him trooped the ghosts of quick-triggered men who had stood up to Humboldt's gun in an earlier day. They mocked him now, those phantom men, and taunted him with their sunken eyes. His lips went dry, and he moistened them with his tongue.

The Tobe Dell men recovered slowly from their surprise, and anger kindled in their faces. They didn't see the fear that turned Gwen's jade eyes yellow. They saw only the spectacle of a bitter old man, assailed with jealousy for the man who had done what he had shrunk from doing. Their anger rumbled in their throats, and they moved to close that narrow lane.

Sam Crosby pushed forward to face Humboldt, and his eyes told of his contempt. "It's a good job I saw it, John. Or I wouldn't of believed it."

Outside a few minutes later, Arizona Jay displayed the same sentiment, although he didn't speak it immediately. Rather, he avoided the sheriff's eyes as they walked back together to the little law office. Inside, seated once more, the marshal sniffed audibly. "What in hell got into you, John?"

Peace John's hand was steady as he lighted his pipe. "The expediency of the situation, Jay," he said vaguely. "The voters like a fairgrounder. So I give 'em a show. I got my campaign to think of."

Jay laughed softly and without humor. "You shore have, now, John. You've gone an' lost yourself what few votes you ever had corraled."

Peace John nodded. "Mebbeso, Jay. But it kinda gives me somethin' to work from."

Jay waited for the old sheriff to say more. Then, remembering past experiences, he shrugged and put the matter from his mind. Peace John would talk in his own good time.

They were at supper in the Big Chief Cafe that night, Humboldt and Jay, when Jode Boyle, dish-faced Bent Creek rancher and a deserving friend, threw down at the tie post outside and clanked into the eating house. Peace John bade him sit and eat a bite. But Jode held back. He wasn't hungry, excuse him please. But he might take a drink. Small one. He had been shot at two hours before. No, he wasn't hit, but it took his appetite, seemed like.

Who did it? He didn't rightly know. But whoever it was, they was gathering the Boyle brood mares from his south forty. He had offered them pursuit, and received a shot across his bow for his pains. But he had seen a big horse band before that shot had spoiled his vision, and it was headed straight toward Busted Stirrup Pass.

No, since Peace John mentioned it, he wouldn't say anything to anyone else. And —yes, he would stay away from the bar until morning.

Peace John knew of a short-cut trail to the Busted Stirrup, and he rode it, fast, Jay, of course, was along, and their horses beat a quick tattoo in the night. They followed Ninety Percent Creek to where it dropped into the Narrows, then rode a steep and little-advertised trail through a deep chalk break and dropped into the Busted Stirrup.

Stars were popping in the broad strip of sky that was visible from the bottom of

the steep-walled canyon, and a quick examination showed that no horses had passed that way since the last rain. Peace John had laid his plan, and, taking up a position in the shadows that winged out from the high rock walls, he imparted it to Jay. The canyon forked just below them. The horses from Tobe Dell would be coming up the Dry Fork, and if they could eliminate the lead rider without fuss, they could divert the horses up the Ninety Percent Creek trail before the tail riders came into sight out of the fork.

They hadn't long to wait. Soon the muffled, rhythmic pounding of hoofs down the canyon reached their ears, and it wasn't long until the ghostly shapes of the horses themselves hove into view around the turn in the canyon. They were traveling easily, and the man who rode point seemed to be asleep.

At any rate, he offered no resistance when Peace John emerged suddenly from the shadows to club him down.

Dismounting, Peace John turned the still face up to the thin starlight, and both men swore in gratified surprise. For the prone man was the sorrel-top who had tried to capture Tobe Dell that day. The sheriff dragged him into the shadows, unbuckled his heavy gunbelts and threw them into a bush, then returned to help Jay turn the rest of the horses up the Ninety Percent Creek trail.

The horses were all broken ranch animals, and easy to handle. So this maneuver was accomplished without sound and without breaking the rhythm of their walking. And when the last horse had disappeared in the direction of Tobe Dell, the lawmen withdrew into the shadows again to await the arrival of the tail riders.

They waited long, but no riders came out of the canyon gloom. This was strange, and when at last they crossed the gorge to check on the sorrel-top, he was gone.

"Must of come to an' slipped down the cut to warn the others," Peace John surmised.

"Come to?" the marshal demanded. "Didn't you tie him?"

"Never had a rope," Peace John said blandly.

JAY spat. He bit back the words that came to his tongue. But his look was dark and accusing. Never before had he known Peace John to be guilty of such criminal negligence in line of duty. It looked like—yes, the marshal had to admit, Peace John was getting old. Funny how you didn't think of men like John Humboldt in connection with passing years.

The marshal was trying the action of his guns, and, satisfied, he suggested that they move down country and overtake the thieves. But Peace John demurred, pointing out the dangers of stalking desperate men in rough country at night. Every chance for ambush, he explained, with the thieves in the bush.

Jay was silent for a second time. Never yet had he known this sheriff to consider odds, where the capture of a horse thief was concerned. Coming as it did upon his carelessness in not tying their prisoner, it seemed to confirm the marshal's first thought, and left him with misgiving.

"This is your show, John," he growled. "Till after election." And, still wagging his head in puzzlement and doubt, he followed John Humboldt up the Ninety Percent Creek trail.

The Tobe Dell horses, sensing with the fine instinct of their kind that they were going home, strung out and were walking fast when the officers overtook them in the dark. No hazing was needed; the riders had merely to follow the homing beasts.

Gradually, the sky widened around them, and they were back in the valley. The sky was gray and crimson, and the dawn was coming.

The day was a reality when the big horse band thundered down Tobe Dell's single street. Already, the streets were jammed with prospective voters who came early to

whittle and exchange political views over free election beer. Men swore as the horses turned down the board-front street, and women called sharply to children playing in the road. And when the swinging horse band had passed, these people crowded the street again to stare after the strange cavvy and the red-eyed men who trailed them. The dust ground up by four hundred hoofs settled on their town clothes, dulling their bright colors.

Menfolks who had suffered recent losses followed the dust to the stray pasture at the far edge of town, where the lawmen impounded the horses temporarily, and Peace John noted the covert interest and curiosity in their faces.

But he noted something else in their manner, something vague and hard to define. The slowness of their glances and the shortness of their greetings said that they still remembered and resented the Red Dog affair of the day before, that they still regarded him with faint suspicion.

Nothing daunted, the sheriff set a hard pace back down the street to swing down in front of a long row of canvas tents on a vacant lot near the Red Dog. For these were the voting booths, and here was the nucleus of the crowd that awaited the opening of the polls within the hour.

"I better tend to my campaign now," Humboldt told Jay as he anchored his horse to a tie rack.

But the sheriff learned that mankind is quicker to condemn than to forget. The crowd received him with a coolness that bordered on hostility. Sam Crosby and Demps Rudd were about, making great show of supervising erection of a speaker's platform. They also made great show of not seeing Peace John Humboldt.

A heckler raised his voice somewhere at hand. "The sheriff brings in his hosses—at 'lection time."

Someone had the bad taste to laugh, and others joined in. Humboldt flushed and was fashioning a fitting rebuke when horses sounded again down the street. A moment later, Rap Gwen and Orly Bossman came up on lathering horses and swung down in front of the booths.

"Where've you gents been?" Peace John was quick to say.

"To Beckton," Gwen was equally quick to reply. "Attendin' to my campaign there. Good thing to have votes in a campaign, John."

Humboldt nodded in agreement, and permitted himself a smile. "That's so, Rap. Me, now, I'm just windin' up my campaign. Puttin' on a show on my own. An' while I think of it, you're under arrest. Both of you. The charge is stealin' horses. Reach, now."

Calmly then, as if feeling for his tobacco, the sheriff reached for his own gun. Surprise, then protest flitted across Gwen's dark features. Peace John was still smiling, and the fact seemed to enrage the deputy. He twisted his thick body suddenly and went for his gun. Bossman followed suit. The crowd surged backward.

The sheriff's first shot was quicker than Gwen's by a breath. It caught the deputy high in the shoulder, crumpled him like a pole-axed beef. But Bossman's gun was stuttering, and Peace John was hit. He flipped his gun to his other hand, and his shot and Bossman's next made one double flash. John's old hat was pierced neatly through, and Bossman was threshing on the ground.

ARIZONA JAY stood quietly to one side, watching. One hand was inside his coat, and his eyes were narrow and bright. But he made no move to interfere. It would have been ill-mannered, as long as Peace John was on his two feet.

The marshal watched with the same frozen expression while the sheriff walked to the writhing deputy and pulled a handful of papers from his shirt pocket. They were small papers, just the size of bills of sale. And there was writing upon them.

Page 125
Pages 125 through 142
were cut from the magazine
sometime before scanning
Are Missing

Page 142
Pages 125 through 142
were cut from the magazine
sometime before scanning
Are Missing

But these boysh makes it different. See? Dead sports. See? Got a big deal on. See?"

With one swift glance Johnny's range-sharpened blue eyes evaluated the brace of florid gentlemen at Cliff's elbow. From flowered vests to slim, nervous hands, with almost transparent skin on the fingertips, they had cardsharper written across them in big letters. Gambling was the big deal about which Cliff felt so definitely. But left to the tender mercies of this pair, he would be skinned blind.

"Come on down to the hotel and talk things over with me first," urged Johnny. "We've got to be gettin' our plans laid for drifting back to Texas right away."

But the Cliff who would remain in the saddle twenty-four hours at a stretch and do three men's work on the trail, without ever a complaint, was a different man here in town. "No ushe goin' to a hotel," he said sullenly. "Might ash well give me my money now. It's my money, ain't it?"

The taller of the two gamblers stepped forward—a thin, supercilious smile slicing the pallid hardness of his face. "Excuse me. But aren't you a stranger here in Miles City?"

"That's a fact," said Johnny.

"Then permit me to make a suggestion connected with your continued good health. My name is Donovan. Duke Donovan. And you'll find I'm well known. Now here's that tip, Mr. Harper. Up here in Montana a man that's been drawing top-hand pay on a trail drive is considered old enough to handle his own affairs without a nurse tagging along. Have you got Strong's money?"

"You guessed it."

"Then perhaps you'd better fork it over pronto. Remember—I said my name was Duke Donovan."

Johnny got the full threat implied by the words. Donovan was notorious from the Pecos to the Powder River. His fame was of the same sinister sort attached to sidewinders and Gila monsters. When anyone questioned his methods he was ready to resort to a pair of pearl-handled revolvers that nestled inside the waistband of his trousers. Probably his companion was of much the same ilk.

"Well?" he inquired softly.

"I've always heard that the gamblers in these parts were up and coming," Johnny said politely. "But I didn't know you'd got it down to such a fine point that you went out in pairs and made men raise money so you could cheat them out of it. You must be looking for a hard winter."

THIS jibe broke the stiff poker set to Donovan's features. He did not speak but the quick, unbridled fury that twisted his face said louder than words—For that I'll kill you! His right arm blurred to the draw, but the forward thrust of Johnny's body was even swifter. His right hand lashed out and the impact, as it met the gambler's chin, was audible clear across the street. Donovan struck the rutted road full length and did not stir.

His partner froze with his gun half drawn and Johnny's cocked weapon trained unerringly upon his middle.

"Did you change your mind about something just now?" Johnny inquired gently.

The fellow licked dry lips and nodded. He was shaking all over. Death had been very close but an instant earlier.

Johnny jerked his thumb toward Donovan, who had struggled to a sitting position, with big splashes of manure and dust across his resplendent vest and broadcloth suit. "Better set him on his feet again," he suggested to the onlookers. "I may want to knock him down again."

Donovan's partner and a man from the growing crowd obeyed the suggestion. Cattlemen, freighters, Indians, dance-hall girls and soldiers were gathering to watch the scene.

"Mr. Donovan," said Johnny, "you offered me some advice that you said was good for a man when in Miles City. It didn't seem reliable to me, even for use here. Now I'll give you some that will stand good anywhere. At best, being a card sharper is a business you can't be too infernally aggressive about. It's one thing to skin a man when he asks for it. But it's another thing to go out in pairs hunting for easy marks. Do you agree with that, Mr. Donovan?"

"No, by—"

Johnny took a swift step toward him and the gambler backed away. "Stop!" he choked. "Don't hit me like that again! I'll agree to anything you say."

Johnny took advantage of the hooting laughter which followed to edge his friend away from the crowd. "Come on, Cliff. Let's drift back to the hotel."

"All right, Johnny. But it ain't goin' to make no differench about my stayin' here. There lotsh of money in Miles City and I'm goin' to get my share."

Johnny started to answer, then stopped as a gaunt, cadaverous-looking man with straw-colored mustache laid a hand upon his arm. "Mister, I watched yuh polish off that gambler. It was right fancy work. Yuh ain't, by any chance, the feller that delivered the horse herd to Adams and Smith?"

"That's me."

The stranger dropped his voice and inquired knowingly, "Yuh wouldn't be interested in a job punchin' cows with a trail herd, would yuh? If yuhr sidekick there is half as fast with a gun as yuh are, there'd be a berth for him, too."

Johnny shook his head. "I'm through work for this year."

"Better think it over. This man I'm hirin' for pays guys of your calibre one

hundred bucks a month and chuck. That's real money."

"And means that I'd be expected to do most of my work with shootin' irons," objected Johnny. "Sorry, but that's not my line."

Reluctantly the stranger let him go, calling after him, "Think it over. Maybe I'll be seein' yuh tomorrow."

By the time they reached the hotel Cliff seemed almost himself. "You're a blamed fool, Johnny," he protested. "Maybe I was drunk, but I knew enough to recognize that hombre who offered you a job. While you was settlin' up with the horse buyers I had him pointed out to me. His name's Calder and he's hirin' for the Triangle Dot. If I didn't have other plans, I'd sure go to work for him. I'd like to see the Triangle Dot beat the George Anthony herds to the Spanish Peaks country. This is goin' to prove whether them blasted Oregonians is as good cowmen as us Texans."

"You were born in Iowa and you talk as much like a Texan as though you'd never seen the Lone Star State," said Johnny, grinning.

"Never mind. I want the Texas herd to win just the same."

Queer thing, this. Everyone was taking sides—sympathizing with cattle spreads they had never seen and knew very little about. Two Government agents, stationed at separate points, had made the mistake of granting sole grazing privileges in that choice area north of the Missouri River to different cattle outfits. The result was that each brand was claiming the range for its own and each one was hurrying a trail herd toward the place in hope of holding it by right of prior occupancy.

Until Pat Malhuer had purchased an interest in the Triangle Dot brand it had been thought that the thing might be decided peaceably. But Malhuer was a man who acknowledged no rights except those won by force. He looked down upon the Oregonians who represented a type of cattlemen differing in many ways from those of Texas. If George Anthony did succeed in getting to the Spanish Peaks country, it could only be after a real struggle, and there would be fresh graves in the Montana sod.

Then Cliff's voice broke in upon Johnny's reverie. "Say, Johnny, when you goin' to give me that money?"

There was something about this demand that cut through Johnny's determination. He could not remember how many times he had dragged Cliff out of difficulties and had seen his first defiance turn to pleading. Cliff's will was not as hard as his own. He had known this fact for years and had fallen into the habit of looking after his pal, almost as though Cliff were a younger brother. Johnny meant to be just. Sometimes Cliff accused him of being calloused. Well, compared with Cliff's warm-hearted responsiveness, perhaps he was. He had tried to meet Cliff halfway but, of late, the going had been harder. Cliff still liked him, still took his advice while on the trail. But at other times he was growing increasingly moody. Today it seemed that they had reached the parting of the ways.

Cliff was thinking the same, for he said, "Johnny, you and me have had a lot of fun together and I reckon I'll never forget it. But your ways ain't mine any more. You want to go grubbin' along for every dollar you'll get. Me—I see chances to make a fortune in every town. Gamblin's in my blood. Mebbe I got it from my Daddy. Anyhow, I'm goin' to stick around the cow towns and clean up some easy money. There's a girl I met in Pendleton when I stayed there while you went to the

coast. By spring I'm goin' to have cash enough to marry her and buy a spread of my own."

"You won't make it gambling," Johnny insisted. "Better come on back to Texas with me. If you had had your roll with you today, those two would have cleaned you."

"No, they wouldn't. If I'd had all my pay, I wouldn't have taken the chance. Cough up, old hoss. And, when you see me again, I'll have a pretty little wife and some cattle of my own. Bet you'll wish you'd done the same."

FROM his vantage point upon a hill Johnny caught his first glimpse of the Box A herd. It was still some distance west and traveling on a course that would take it through a notch half a mile or better to the north.

His detour of a hundred miles to the west, instead of riding due south, was the result of old business—business with George Anthony that should have been settled long ago. Time had not seemed to matter much, now that he had broken off with his old friend, Cliff Strong. Handing over his wages and seeing him start immediately for a gambling hall in company with Duke Donovan had written finis on an association of long standing. He told himself that perhaps he expected too much of Cliff. Drink and poker seemed to call him with as definite an urge as migration had for wild geese,

Then his thoughts snapped back to George Anthony and the Box A herds. Anthony had the reputation of being an honest man, thorough, and a good manager—but hard to talk with. Johnny particularly disliked the ordeal ahead of him. It was something that should have been attended to long ago, but he had not always had the money and, when he had written, his letter had not been answered. At this late date it was going to be exceedingly difficult to explain to a man like Anthony that he had stolen a Box A saddle animal. A good animal. To be sure, the theft had been necessary in order to save his own life and he had always intended to pay for the animal as soon as he had the cash. Today he had it with him. If Anthony would give him time to explain, all would be well. Unpleasant things happened in every life, he told himself. Besides, if the owner of the Box A chose to be tough, Johnny was quite capable of taking care of himself.

Just then a bunch of steers from the Box A herd broke from the column and started racing across the sagebrush toward him. Three cowboys, who should have been strung out along the flank of the herd, instead of loitering together at the rear, took out after them. Johnny could hear their cursing a quarter of a mile away. The trio overtook the steers not far from where Johnny watched and, instead of turning them back in an orthodox manner, started shooting at the animals' horns.

With disgust Johnny saw two fine animals crippled for the remainder of the drive as forty-five slugs knocked a horn from each and sent them staggering in circles, blood spurting from the stubs. Even if the wounded animals did keep up for the rest of the journey, pain and loss of blood would bring them to the end of the trail gaunt and weakened.

Suddenly aware that they had an audience, the three men swung their horses toward Johnny. One of the trio, a bearded giant with a long nose that hooked down over loose red lips, called, "Hi, Stranger, what d'ye think of our way o' chasin' cattle?"

"You really want to know?" queried Johnny.

Something in his tone warned the Anthony men that a broadside was coming, for the whiskers on the chin of the big man bristled, and he said defiantly, "We shore do."

"Then here's where you get it. In the first place, you're drunk on a trail drive,

which no decent puncher ever is. Next—any normal man would have too much sympathy for the cattle he was handling to mistreat them, even if he was low enough to take money from an employer while he did him dirt. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"Yes, by hell, it is!" blazed the bearded man. "It is—and then some. Boys, yank the smart-tongued hellion off his hoss. I aims to kick the livin' stuffins out o' him!"

Two congestion-darkened faces moved nearer to Johnny. Perhaps it was because his gun was holstered while the bearded man's was drawn that they seemed to have every confidence in themselves. Then Johnny made a gesture too swift to follow. His right hand flipped up and a revolver sprouted from its palm. Caught off guard the whiskered citizen made the mistake of acting when it was too late. Smoke whipped from the muzzle of Johnny's weapon. Two shots hammered the silence in one long-drawn roar.

With a cry of pain the bearded man dropped his gun and shoved lead-smashed fingers into his mouth, while blood dripped from a punctured ear. His companions rocked back as though from the force of a blast, then Johnny's voice crackled out at them.

"Take him back to the wagon and fix up his scratches. I ought to ear-notch the rest of you. Now get!"

AS THEY turned to ride away Johnny heard a sound behind him and turned to find a girl watching him. She was mounted on a calico pony that had legs as trim and tapering as wine glass stems. Any horse lover would have looked at the calico a long time if it had not been for its rider. Johnny took his eyes from the calico's flanks and found them held fast by the dark brown ones under the worn sombrero. Afterward he knew that the things he first noticed about the girl were her smiling lips and steadfast eyes. She did not seem embarrassed or even bashful, though she put her hands up to pull her wind-blown auburn ringlets under the protection of her hat.

Almost instinctively he had stiffened, expecting an indignant tirade. Instead her voice was like the music of a cataract and her smile had the warmth of a campfire at the close of day.

"I don't know what I should say, but I really thank you for what you said. I almost thank you for what you did, though it may make me some trouble. It is hard for a girl to handle so many men on such a trip. Especially when I know so little about it myself."

"You're not bringing these cattle in without your father? At least I presume Mr. Anthony is your father?"

"He's my adopted father. My mother was his sister. Last winter she died and he wanted me to take his name."

"I am Johnny Harper," said Johnny. He wanted to be very sure about these introductions. "But I still can't see how a girl came to be left—"

"It couldn't be helped. Father had to go back with the second herd. There was no one else. At first our trail boss was good. Father trusted him and I felt sure that, working together, we could handle this herd while he'd go back to the other one where he was so badly needed. But, since he left, Guy Barrett has never been the same. I imagine he hates to take orders from a girl and, really, I don't know too much about it. So many new situations come up all the time." She stopped suddenly, then added apologetically, "I wouldn't have told all this to a stranger, only you couldn't help seeing a glaring piece of mismanagement and I wouldn't want anyone to think the Box A was run like that."

"I have always heard good things of the Box A," he assured her. "Can't you have a good talk with the trail boss and get some sort of understanding with him?"

"He's too drunk for that. Just after Father left, a stranger came and hung

around him for several days. I think that is where he got the liquor. Now, instead of trying to make the men do the right thing, he encourages them to be shiftless."

Johnny whistled softly. "Maybe I better round up these brutes and get 'em back with the rest of the herd. But I'd like to see you again. Will you wait here, or—"

"I'll help you."

And help she did—skillfully. It was not too difficult a job, though the animals that had been shot were frightened and hard to control.

Miss Anthony watched Johnny with frank admiration. "Thank you so much," she said when they were together again. "If I had someone who understood cattle and would try, this trip would not be so terrible."

"Look here," he said impulsively, "I'm not bad with cattle. Trailin' them and horses up from Texas has been a sort of profession with me. If you wanted me, I reckon I could handle the herd for you till your dad catches up. I'd kind of like to get a chance to talk with him anyhow."

"Would you really? I know there's always danger in hiring a new man, but somehow I trust you."

"I'm certainly grateful to you, ma'am," said Johnny, with sudden humility.

"The men may think this strange," she added, "but I'll explain. And, if Guy Barrett gives you any trouble—"

"I'll tend to him," promised Johnny. "Just leave such details as fights to me, ma'am. I'm used to 'em."

Riding back toward the chuck wagon he learned that her name was Sylpha. She told him, also, that she was very fond of her uncle, who was her adopted father, but that his temper was unpredictable. She could not promise Johnny that this new arrangement would meet with his approval. She could only hope that all would work out well.

A glum, hostile-looking group of riders gathered about to hear Sylpha Anthony's statement that she had hired a new trail boss. It was an innovation naturally unwelcome. Yet some respect must be felt for a man who could take such good care of himself against three others. Only Guy Barrett, who was on the bedding wagon, raised a protest. He steadied himself on his elbow, too drunk to stand on his feet.

"Come on over here!" he roared.

More to size the man up than for any other reason, Johnny rode closer. Barrett's face looked like a chunk of red granite, badly weathered. He was square-shouldered, short and powerful, and he radiated strength, even when soused.

"Where yuh from?" he growled.

"I was born in Texas," said Johnny, "but my folks was from Kansas. And I've been all over."

Barrett sneered. "Yuh're a damn, shiftless, potato-eatin' rawhider an' yuh won't know a blasted thing about handlin' Oregon cattle. George Anthony wouldn't have one o' yuhr stripe flunkeyin' fer the cook. That's what."

"That's Miss Anthony's responsibility. She hired me."

"Goin' to be sport watchin' yuh," sneered Barrett.

"There may be some things that won't look so funny to you, once you grasp 'em," suggested Johnny.

"Like what?"

"Like this drinkin' business, for instance. It all stops pronto. The booze has got to be got out of these wagons and kept out. If you keep your whiskey a hundred feet from the camp, I won't destroy it. But if anyone gets lickered up, I'll lick his socks off and then fire him!"

After this things began to move as a cow outfit should. Johnny saw that all the weak stuff was cut out of the herd and put in the drag. He made the men really ride the herd. When they approached water, if it was a small spring, he held the main bunch well back and had the others driven up in small bands, thus preventing the spring from being tram-

pled into a mixture of mud and water that no animal could drink.

To Sylpha, who rode with him, much of this was new. Barrett, who undoubtedly understood the technique, had shelved all his knowledge and let all discipline slide. Even Barrett and the three with whom Johnny had trouble the first day, though they still continued to hate him, admired the way he could swing a herd on the evening bed ground so that the footsore animals in the drag were saved every possible foot of travl. And, when he took the herd up to a stream for water, there was not a man who did not envy the smooth deftness with which he could scatter them along a quarter mile front in such a way that the downstream animals reached it first and had access to clear, fresh water. Johnny could handle this like a long-rehearsed drill.

Johnny found himself falling ever deeper in love with Sylpha Anthony and becoming correspondingly reluctant to tell her about the stolen horse. Girls were queer things and he must think of exactly the right way to approach her about the matter, or she might not understand.

And while Johnny thought only of cattle and Sylpha, Guy Barrett plotted day and night to overthrow him.

THE herd was nearing the Missouri when Johnny met disaster. They had camped early that afternoon in order to rest the drag where the feed was fair. Johnny had inspected the remuda, then had come back to the chuck wagon and was bantering with Sylpha in front of the covered rig in which she traveled with the squaw who looked after her things.

He dropped a hand-beaten silver rosette which he had carried in his pocket as a good-luck piece. Barrett, who happened to be standing nearby, made a dive for the ornament and picked it up. Johnny held out his hand for it but Barrett shook his head. His eyes glowed with ugly excitement and his lips curled in a smile of triumph.

"Before yuh git this back, Hombre, there's a lot of interestin' explainin' yuh've got to do." The savage exultation in his voice caught the attention of every man in the crowd. Dramatically he let his eyes sweep over the group, then, holding out a beefy palm with the rosette lying in its center, he punched at it with a stubby forefinger and began declaiming. "Boys, I reckon there ain't none of you that ain't heard me say more'n a thousand times that I wished I could lay my hands on the thief that stole my buckskin hoss last summer. It was when we was over on the other side of the Snake River in Oregon. Well, boys, it looks like I have him spotted now. Any of yuh ever seen this here rosette with the hoss head on it before?"

"Looks like it might be one that was on the bridle that was stole the same day yuhr pony was," observed the man whose fingers Johnny had clipped that first day.

"Yuh're right. Damn right," said Barrett gleefully. "Reason I know is because I watched a Mexican silversmith make 'em for me. Told him how I wanted 'em done and it's a cinch nobody else ever ordered a pair just like 'em. Now, Mr. Harper, I'd like yuh to do some convincin' explainin', and be damn quick about it!"

The sentiment of a crowd can change fast. Already the men who had been admiring the way Johnny could handle a herd were looking suspicious. Some even showed hostility. From the tongue of her wagon Sylphat Anthony watched with startled wonder. Johnny could have lied and said he got it from someone else. Some people would have considered the tight spot that he was in as ample justification for such a denial. But Johnny was

accustomed to play his cards straight and he would make no deviation from the rule when Sylpha Anthony was listening.

"You're right, Barrett. I did take your horse. The Snake Indians were after me and I had to have a mount. I couldn't find any of you about. I wrote George Anthony twice, asking what pay he wanted, but I never got a answer. That is why I came out to the Box A herd. I wanted to settle the matter up."

"Like hell yuh did! If yuh'd a-mentioned this to Anthony, he'd have said something about it to me. More'n that—if there was one word of truth in what yuh're sayin', yuh'd have mentioned it when yuh joined the outfit. What yuh really come fer was to snoop around and see what else yuh could get away with."

"I have the money to pay for the horse," said Johnny. "If I had known it was yours—"

Barrett turned to Sylpha and interrupted, "Did Harper say anything to yuh about takin' a hoss?"

The girl colored. "No-o. That is—"

"He didn't say a damn thing. I knew he hadn't."

"I told you I was waiting for Mr. Anthony to return."

"Yuh're a lyin' puke!"

SOMETHING snapped in Johnny. He reached Barrett in one swift bound. A blow that started in his boots and traveled upward through saddle-toughened sinews ended in five knuckles that exploded against Barrett's mouth like sticks of dynamite. He staggered back against a wagon wheel with Johnny after him. Hard-driven blows shook the head of the ex-trail boss until it blurred like a punching bag.

After the first startled instant the trio, with whom Johnny first had trouble, joined in the fray. At first Johnny kept his feet, scrapping with a savage fury that knocked men right and left. But weight of numbers pushed him backward. A leg hit against the wagon tongue and he tripped over backward with half a dozen riders on top of him. One drove a knee into his stomach, another reached his head with a clubbed revolver and all but brained him.

Half dazed, he was jerked to his feet and dragged toward a cottonwood. The bearded fellow, with blood seeping through his whiskers, fitted a rope about his neck. Someone else flipped the end over a convenient limb. Before they could string him up Barrett shouldered forward, glaring at Johnny from knuckle-chopped features.

"What yuh got to say now, yuh yaller, hoss-stealin' puke?" he snarled.

"Nothing except that if you hadn't called in help, I would have killed you. You're not man enough to fight your own battles."

"That's the last remark o' that kind yuh'll ever make, Harper. We're a goin' to string yuh up and I calc'late that, when George Anthony gits back, he'll give me a bonus fer good work well done. Put some air under his feet, boys."

"Wait!" That was Sylpha's voice.

She stood on the hounds of the chuck wagon, holding a cocked rifle. Her face was bloodless but her words had authority. "There's something you men must hear before you do anything you'll regret. To begin with, even if Johnny Harper is a horse thief, he has done the Box A a great service. If he hadn't come along and straightened things out, we'd never have got anywhere with this herd. He offered to pay for the animal he took and explained why he took it. Common decency demands that this should be investigated fairly. And no matter what he had done, it wouldn't be possible for him to act more despicably than Guy Barrett has done. If you do anything more to harm Johnny Harper, I'll see that every man of you is fired and I promise you that George Anthony will do everything in his power to see that you each pay for your crime. As

for you, Guy Barrett, if you let these men go ahead with the hanging, I'll shoot you down like a dog! You know I can do it."

It was quite evident that the men felt her statements carried no idle threat. Some of them appeared relieved as they backed away. In a cool moment they perhaps remembered that Johnny really had helped the herd.

One of the men slipped the rope from his neck. Never had air and sunshine seemed so delightful as now.

But Barrett was still blustering. "Just what yuh aimin' to do with this bird? Yuh goin' to keep him on?"

"I wouldn't dare to," said Sylpha, her voice ringing coldly. "Not with a snake like you in camp. One of you men get Mr. Harper's horse and saddle it. I'm afraid he won't want to help us any longer."

The men dispersed sullenly and Johnny found himself alone with Sylpha. "You don't figure that I intended to steal that horse last summer, do you, Sylpha?"

"I can't believe you did. You've been so—so fine about helping me. But why didn't you tell me about it when you first arrived?"

This was as much a mystery to Johnny as to Sylpha and he said so. Of course it was because he had been afraid of what she would think, but the way things had turned out, it didn't make sense.

"The men all talked about that horse being stolen last summer," Sylpha continued. "Guy Barrett made a terrible roar over it and Father was almost as angry as he was. They have both hoped to catch the thief, as they called him. It's a matter of pride with Father to protect the property of the men who work for him. If you had mentioned this when you first came, I'm sure I could have helped you straighten it out, but now I doubt it I could convince him in any way that you are not a thief. There isn't anything for you to do but go, Johnny."

She was near to crying and the knowledge did not make it easier for Johnny as he rode away. Queer how, by a little mismanagement, a man could let happiness slip out of his grasp just as he was trying hardest to cinch it.

A JARRING thud of lead against flesh, coupled with a crash of gunfire from the timber on his right, was Johnny's first warning of danger. As the gelding collapsed in the middle of its stride, Guy Barrett and his trio of admirers burst from the trees.

Now he understood why none of the four had been in evidence the last minutes he was at the Box A camp. Reaching over, he jerked the short saddle carbine from its holster. If the four succeeded in surrounding him he was lost, for they had brought his horse down in a grassy clearing, devoid of even a sage brush. Now he must beat them back until he could reach a jumble of boulders on the hillside a hundred yards to the right.

Throwing the weapon to his shoulder, he emptied the magazine. One horse, nicked by a bullet, went crazy and carried his rider out of the fight. A second of Barrett's companions gave an ear-piercing yell, then stood up in the stirrups, his hands pressed to his middle. An instant later he fell headlong.

Barrett and the other man held back, blazing away with their rifles. Throwing the empty carbine aside Johnny dashed for the boulders, conscious that his pursuers were coming up on him, one from either side.

He must reach the rocks! Doubling like

a scared cottontail, he emptied his revolver as he ran. He was almost to the boulders when the universe blew up with a roar.

When he regained consciousness he was lying on a bunk at one end of a log cabin. Across the room three men sat around a blaze in the fireplace. The cadaverous-looking man with the strawcolored mustache was Calder, who had asked him to work for Malhuer, back in Miles City. Beside him was Duke Donovan, looking strangely out of place as he flipped flapjacks in a skillet, instead of slipping cards from the bottom of a pack. The third man, his back turned, was Cliff Strong.

SOMEONE tossed fresh fuel on the fire and the flames spurted higher. A lancing pain ran through Johnny's temples. He must have groaned or moved, for Calder unfolded from the block of wood upon which he was seated.

Moving jerkily toward the bunk, he asked, "How yuh feelin', Harper?"

"Not too good."

Calder chuckled. "Nope. Reckon not, with a furrow like that across yuhr scalp. Strong came along just in time to save yuhr bacon. He said yuh'd be wantin' to join up with us. How about it?"

"Nothing stirring."

"Leave him alone, Calder. He's more interested in a harp and a crown than in a job just now. So'd you be, if you was in his condition. He'll come round. Give him time."

Calder chuckled mirthlessly. "Sure. When he gits the savvy of the whole business, he'll be damn glad to join up. I been findin' out a few things since we met in Miles City. For one thing, he's wanted in Oregon for horse stealin' and George Anthony's the interested party. Takin' that together with the fact that he probably killed Guy Barrett, and you've got grounds fer bein' pretty reasonable. Eh, Harper?"

Cliff Strong shoved forward. "You go on about your business, Calder, and leave Johnny alone."

"Say," demanded Calder, "who's runnin' this? You, or me?"

"You are. Except that I'm not goin' to have my old pard strong-armed."

Johnny wondered if there would be a fight. Calder's six feet of bone and gristle stiffened, then relaxed. "Good enough, Strong. 'Tain't each other we're supposed to be scrappin', but the Box A. Your friend can make his decision when he feels better. Right now we got to decide who's goin' to watch the ferry and who'll go after the horses."

"I'll look after Harper," said Donovan. "I don't feel like ridin' tonight."

"Like hell you'll stay with Johnny! You'd stick a knife in his ribs before I'd been gone ten minutes. I'll do the watching myself!"

Johnny was dimly aware that the others soon left. He wanted to talk with Cliff but his tongue was stiff and his head rang. He knew Cliff put cloths, wrung out of cold water, on his head. Finally he sank into a stupor.

IN THE morning he felt some better. There was no pounding in his skull now and he was stronger. Through the little window over his bunk came a rushing sound. When he pulled himself up on an elbow and looked out he blinked at the sheen of sunlight on a broad and hurrying river. The Missouri! He had not realized the previous afternoon that he was so close to it. On the far side, beyond the belt of yellowing cottonwood, tawny bluffs, dotted with cedars, rose in a rugged palisade, cleft by innumerable draws. Over there was the last frontier of grass. Beyond those stark, autumnal ridges lay the Spanish Peaks, the prize for which Pat Malhuer of the Triangle Dot was resorting to treachery and bloodshed to obtain.

A wooden tower, built on a gravelly shore, marked the far end of the ferry cable that, from across the river, looked like a strand of spiderweb. The rickety

ferryboat swung to the current not over a hundred and fifty feet from where Johnny lay. Scattered up and down the shore for some distance were piles of cordwood that had bleached bone-gray in the years since the boats had quit making their regular runs. This was one of the old refueling stations and Malhuer's men must have stumbled upon it and now were twisting the set-up to fit with their own problems.

Cliff came in with a pail of water to use in preparing breakfast. He grinned at Johnny.

"Lookin' more like yourself this morning, old hoss. Say, for a man that can hand out such good advice as you can about other folks keepin' out of trouble, how did you get in such a helluva jam?"

Johnny grinned back, then told Cliff his experiences.

"I see. A right fine reward for a bit of help. Still got your money?"

"No."

"Fine. That puts us back on the same basis. I gambled and lost mine, but I had fun while it was goin'."

"You working for the Triangle Dot?"

"You bet. Got a real job. One hundred iron men a month and a cash bonus of two hundred if the Triangle Dot gets the Spanish Peaks. And they will."

"What was that about horses?"

"What do you think?" countered Cliff.

"That they're planning to steal or run off Box A saddle stock."

"Correct. This is a war, Johnny. The George Anthony herds are closer to the peaks than the Triangle Dot. But Malhuer plans to hamstring their advance. That's why Guy Barrett and two or three others were bought off. If you hadn't have showed up, that herd would still be back seventy-five miles. Well, they won't make time when the Box A punchers have to travel on foot."

"You're not doin' right by helpin' with this lawlessness, Cliff. How about the girl you want to marry?"

Cliff winced at this question. "That's a touchy spot but, just the same, I'm goin' through like I started. It's a cinch that, if I don't get some cash pretty soon. I'll lose her. If I do, there's a chance she'll never know how I got it, or maybe she'll overlook it if she does." As Cliff spoke an excited flush reddened the tanned planes of his cheeks. "See here, Johnny. You've argued me out of a lot a things, but this is once you can't. I'm goin' to do a good job of helpin' lick the Box A so that I'll get more out of it than just what I mentioned. Sure, I'm gamblin', but what would be the use of livin', if I didn't. Think this over serious. There's a bigger opportunity for you than there is for me. Malhuer knows about you and he's told Calder to go the limit to get you. Why, hell, Johnny, you've got to join. These birds won't let you leave 'em."

FROM somewhere in the woodyard a pistol was fired. Cliff rushed to the door while Johnny stared out of the window. Into his field of vision ran scores of steaming horses, crowding down toward the water. As he watched, a pair of punchers rode between them and the river, turning the ponies back. There was no danger of stampeding them after a long run and it would do them no good to drink while hot. They were Box A mounts, right enough, Johnny could pick out the familiar brand on a dozen flanks.

Outside Cliff was talking to Calder. "Looks like you had good luck."

"Got about half their mounts. Would have cleaned them out slick as a whistle if George Anthony hadn't showed up. There's one sage brusher that's a damned hard scrapper. If he'd cut off half his fingers dally weltin', he could still pull a gun faster than anybody I ever saw and throw its lead straighter. How's your friend?"

"Better, but a long ways from well."

"Uh-huh. Say, Stag got a slug through his paunch. Rest of us need to swim the

ponies across. Could you and Harper work the ferry over?"

"Sure."

"That's the talk. Better get goin' right away. Anthony's liable to come boilin' over the ridge any minute with a string of gun slingers behind him. I'd like to let them ponies cool a whole lot longer but it's too big a chance."

Before Cliff got the wounded Stag on the ferry, Calder and the other men had the horses halfway across the river. Working the boat was not a pleasant operation with Stag writhing in death agony, his blood staining the splintered planks on which he flopped. When they were within fifty yards of the far shore, over a dozen riders spurred across the woodyard and opened fire. Lead ripped splinters from the planking and hummed about Cliff and Johnny as they stood at the windlass. A slug buried itself in the drum. Another cut strands in the rope.

"Johnny," said Cliff, "I can keep this windlass turning by myself. You start triggerin' lead at 'em. If you don't they'll get us."

Johnny shook his head. "I'm not going to war with George Anthony."

"The hell you won't. If you don't scrap, I've got to!" Locking the windlass by slipping a leather loop over the handle, Cliff picked up his rifle and opened fire.

Calder and his riders got their stolen horses into shallow enough water so they could wade ashore. Quickly the Triangle Dot punchers hazed the stock into the brush, then took up positions behind stumps and logs of driftwood. When they joined the fighting the Box A men began hunting shelter among the piles of cordwood.

Suddenly Johnny was aware that a man had climbed up the cable tower on the opposite side. From the man's powerful build and agile movements he decided that it was George Anthony himself. Hardly had Johnny seen the climber when Cliff also saw him. An oath ripped from his lips and, crouching behind the windlass, he steadied the barrel over the drum. As the red bloomed from the weapon's muzzle, wood flew from the timber just over Anthony's head. Before Cliff could fire a second time Johnny knocked his weapon to one side.

"You damned fool!" panted Cliff. "He's going to hack that cable in two!" As he spoke Cliff gave Johnny a shove that sent him stumbling half the length of the ferry. Still trembling from weakness, Johnny tried to get up just as Anthony began hacking at the cable. Fascinated he watched the oil-soaked strands spring out. Abruptly Anthony jerked. It looked as though he would fall. The knife slipped from his fingers and his arm fell to his side. "There, by hell," exulted Cliff, "I stopped—"

The ferry gave a sudden lurch and started drifting back into the current. Looking over his shoulder Johnny saw that it was not the big cable but the frayed rope attached to the windlass that had snapped. So far as their safety was concerned the result was about the same. They were drifting back toward the middle of the river. Once there they would have their choice of jumping overboard or being picked off by Box A riders.

AS Johnny sized up the situation his hands were busy. On the deck was a coil of inch rope. Grabbing it up he hastily made a loop. On the downstream side was a snag sticking above the water. Bracing himself on wobbly legs, Johnny whirled the improvised lasso over his head. The gap was widening and one try was all he would get. With a final, terrific heave he let it fly. The heavy coils glided out with a snaky deliberation. It looked for a moment as though the throw would fall short. Cliff uttered a groan of disappointment that turned into a grunt of satisfaction as the loop settled squarely over the stub. As it ran right Johnny snubbed the free end of the windlass and shouted

for Cliff to cut them loose from the cable trolley.

Free of the cable the boat swung downstream. When they reached the end of the rope there was a jerk, but hemp and snag both held. The current shoved the ferry into shallow water.

Protected from the Box A fire by its hull, Calder waded out and helped carry Stag ashore. On legs that wobbled, Johnny followed. Before he reached dry land the river, trees and bluffs were pinwheeling in a blurred rush before his eyes. There was a new throbbing in his head and, when he placed his hand on the bullet wound, it came back wet. The shove that Cliff had given him had started it to bleeding again.

In a sort of daze he floundered back from the stream and lay down in the grass. Almost instantly he fell asleep. When he woke up he was rolled in a blanket near a campfire. Squatting on their heels beside the blaze were Cliff and Calder.

"What we've done is good enough far as it goes," Calder was saying, "but it still won't stop Anthony. But if we get up the river and blow hell out of their wagon when they try to ferry across, we've got 'em licked. Before they can rustle more supplies Malhuer will be into the Spanish Peaks country from the south end. Wish we didn't have to split our force on account of them damn horses."

"I'll take care of the Box A wagon if you'll look after Johnny Harper," offered Cliff. "I don't trust Donovan. Given half a chance, he'd knife Johnny."

"Maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea at that. Harper kept you from gettin' Anthony. I seen him knock your gun up and I seen you give him that shove."

"Yes, and you saw him lasso that stump and pull us out of a bad jam. I'll start for that wagon tonight if Donovan goes along and you'll look after Johnny."

"Ain't he able to take care of himself?"

"No, damn your eyes, he ain't. Not when half dead. Do you look after him, or don't you?"

"I'll see that the boys lay off him," promised Calder. "When yuh startin'?"

"Right now. Tonight."

"Good. Anthony's liable to cross day after tomorrow and yuh need a little time to spy out the lay o' things."

Johnny heard Cliff ride away with Donovan and another man. Carter, and the three remaining with him, rolled up in their blankets. Johnny looked at the stars and pondered. If Cliff succeeded in wrecking their wagons, things would be black indeed for the Box A. It was hard to lose their horses and have a traitor in camp without this added trouble. He wondered if he had strength to saddle a horse. Could he ride it if he had? And, if he reached the Box A, would they listen to his story? There was a life-and-death risk in approaching Anthony under the circumstances, yet Johnny felt that he must make the attempt.

He lay awake a long time, listening until reasonable certain that all the others were asleep. Then he crawled carefully from his blanket and crept away from the fire. Fifteen minutes later he was in the saddle and pointed north, the night wind cold against his cheeks, the Northern Lights pulsating over the Montana horizon.

SOME memories remain forever incomplete. Johnny's journey up the Missouri was one of these. There were lucid intervals when he was aware of the river's windings, the cottonwood-studded bottoms and of breathing the dank air from the sloughs. Again there were periods when he rode blindly with but a spark of consciousness remaining.

During one of these spells his horse took him under a low limb and knocked him from the saddle. He could not catch the horse that night and marveled how he found it the next day. Shortly after recovering it he decided to ford the Missouri

while his mind was clear enough for straight thinking. When they were near the south bank the animal, tired of swimming, lowered its hind quarters in an attempt to strike bottom. The water rose to Johnny's shoulders and he reached shore quaking with cold. To keep from freezing he found a protected spot, built a fire and dried himself. It was hours before he was rested enough to resume the journey.

Just before daylight the following morning he caught the scent of a wood fire. A few minutes later he was riding through a herd of sleeping cattle. A few stood up as he passed and the earth gave off a faint, ammonia-scented mist from the heat of their bodies. He ran his fingers along the ribs of one cow and felt the ridges made by the Box A brand. He had reached the herd.

From the massed gloom he heard hinges squeak and a board bang. That would be the cook letting down the table on the back of the chuck wagon. A clatter of pans followed. Within half an hour the cook's "Come and get it" would have the whole camp stirring.

Dismounting, Johnny moved through the shadows on foot. If he could but reach Sylpha and deliver his message, he might quite easily escape afterward. He found her wagon some distance from the others and, creeping close, held an ear to the frosted canvas. Within he could hear two people breathing. One was light and regular, the other heavy and mixed with snores.

This latter one must be the squaw. Edging around to one side, as close as possible to Sylpha's head, he scratched gently on the canvas. The steady flow of her breathing broke into irregular catches. She was listening.

"Sylpha," he whispered softly.

A startled gasp came from inside the canvas. When he repeated her name, a hand stole from beneath its edge and lifted it higher.

"Johnny," she whispered, "are you mad?"

"No. But I have to talk with you. Will the squaw keep quiet?"

"Yes. I'm the only one whom she obeys. Wait. I'll come outside."

Almost instantly she appeared at the front opening, wrapped in a blanket. Johnny helped her to the ground, gripping her hands. There were a thousand tender things he wanted to tell her but there was no time. "Listen, Sylpha," he said. "I just left a bunch of Triangle Dot men down the river. It was the same gang that stole the Box A horses. Now they're planning to blow up the ferryboat with the Box A wagon on board. When were you planning to cross?"

"The first thing this morning. Johnny, are you sure?"

"Sure enough so that I took the risk of coming to see you. You must have that boat examined, Sylpha."

"But why are you telling me this? You are a Triangle Dot man. I couldn't believe it but Father says he saw you with them yesterday."

"I'm not a Triangle Dot man, Sylpha, and I never was."

"You're an infernal liar," said George Anthony's rage-choked voice behind him. "And, by the livin' lightning, I'll have you hung!"

Johnny's blood chilled. The cook's fire was blazing high so that a faint wash of red beat upon the blocky man who glared at him, his hand resting upon his holstered gun. With a sickening certainty Johnny realized that he could never convince this man of anything. Instead of trying, he acted with blinding speed. Before Anthony had time to pull his revolver from its holster, the muzzle of a cocked Colt was shoved against his body.

"Make a sound!" snapped Johnny, "and I'll pull the trigger! Now get what I'm saying. I want Sylpha to take two or three men that you can trust with her and go down to the ferryboat and search it.

When she gets back, I'll surrender. If I am wrong it gives you a wonderful chance to get rid of me. If you are sane, you can't object to this."

It was evident that Anthony did not like the proposition but, largely because of Sylpha's pleading, he finally agreed. For what seemed like ages the two stood facing each other, Then an excited shout reached them, followed by gun-shots.

"By hell," growled Anthony, "if you've led my girl into a trap, I'll have my men roast you over a slow fire."

"Wait," said Johnny. "We'll soon know."

MOMENTS as slow as centuries passed, then Sylpha came running toward them, calling, "Father, there was a keg of blasting powder in the bottom of the boat and it had a fuse attached. There was a man hiding, too, but he jumped overboard."

By now half the Box A men were crowded about. Anthony shoved nervous fingers through his tangled hair. "I don't get it," he growled. "Your actions don't make sense. How were you so damned certain of what we would find?"

"I knew the man who did it," Johnny answered. "He used to be the best friend I ever had. I still think more of him than any man alive, even if I don't like what he's doing. Maybe I always will. Now, if you want my story, I'll be glad to tell it."

He told the facts well. At its close George Anthony held out his hand. "Shake. I'm glad to admit I made a big mistake. And I do thank you for the way you handled my cattle."

"Then do I get a job with you?"

Anthony's dark brows pulled together. "You want to keep on fighting this hombre that used to be your friend? You want to risk havin' Guy Barrett or one of those other buzzards I fired take a pot shot at you? Barrett's getting well from that wound you gave him and he's sworn he'll pick you off."

"If I can have a day or two to rest up, I'll be able to look after myself. I know the country you're going to. Spent one summer there with a buffalo hunter named Jim Corey."

"That right? You been through the Spanish Peaks?"

"Lengthwise and crosswise, several times."

"And you know cattle. All the men say that. With Barrett gone I need a trail boss. Maybe—"

"But I don't want Johnny to take it," interrupted Sylpha. "Johnny, I hate to tell you, but it was your friend, Cliff Strong, who was in the ferry. It was the strangest thing. I met him in Pendleton a year ago—before I took Father's name for mine. We had some good times together but I didn't think much about it. Now he believes you came here and deliberately tried to cut him out. He was terribly angry and said to tell you he would kill you on sight."

Johnny's face grew set. It seemed impossible that Fate should play so dirty a trick on any man.

"Still want to work for the Box A?" Anthony asked with rough gentleness?

Johnny squared his shoulders. "Why not? Think I'd want to leave the country before I had a chance to show Cliff that he's wrong? Sylpha knows how I feel about her, but I never guessed until now that she was the girl he was always talking about."

"No, I reckon you didn't," said Anthony. "Well, the job's yours. Mebbe I'll give you the work of spreadin' all the herds out after we reach the Spanish Peaks. I can't be there. I've got to keep punchin' the other trail bosses along. Fact is, I've got to go back right now."

THE wizened little man, who hunched over a sagebrush fire on the edge of the creek, looked like a bundle of jerked meat stuffed into a wolf-hide coat and buckskin breeches. A half-skinned antelope

lay close by and from it Corey had taken the steaks which he was roasting. Across the blaze the buffalo-hunter's eyes shone as brightly hostile as a mink's. As a rule he was averse to human company.

"Hello, Jim," Johnny greeted. "Guess you don't remember me."

A ripple of excitement ran over the wispy figure and a smile cracked the leathery folds of his face. "By damn, I didn't at first. What in tarnation yuh doin' in the God-forsaken country? Hidin' from the law?"

When they had shaken hands Johnny explained. Corey wagged his head in wonder. "Hell, boy! Yuh're crazier than a buffalo hunter. Yuh bring cattle across the Missouri this time o' year. Yuh do it without enough supplies to last yuhr crew a week. Yuh're short on horses and without any shelter but tents."

"I left the men building a cabin back off the river a few miles. Thought we could use it for a supply depot while moving the herds farther into the Spanish Peaks."

"Yuh're apt to be damn glad to camp in it all winter and let the cattle freeze. Why, man alive, winter can crack down tomorrow. What if twenty foot drifts pile up between yuhr herds and supplies? Yuh ain't got runners for the wagons, have yuh? And what are the cows goin' to eat when the snow gets belly deep and is crusted harder than a banker's heart? Go get yuhr stock back on the south side of the river again before it's everlastingly too late!"

"Can't. George Anthony's staking everything he has on this drive. It's win the jackpot or lose everything. I'm with him to the finish. We're going to beat the Triangle Dot and we'll lick the weather, too. What I want you to help me do is to get horses."

Corey flipped his meat and scowled. "Talkin' Indians out of ponies right now ain't goin' to be a bit easy. The soldiers have discouraged stealing and the army posts make a right good market for their own."

"I've got to have them, anyhow."

"Mebbe. Well, set down and chaw while I think it over. I always did admire plenty of salt and vinegar in a man more than good sense and caution. Hell—the West's been made by young roosters who didn't have brains enough to stop fightin' when they was licked."

"Coffee ready to pour?" asked Johnny.

"She's bilin'. Here's a tin cup. Mebbe I will throw in with yuh, jest fer the excitement. There ain't no buffalo left and anyhow I don't like the idea o' gun-slingin' Southwest rawhiders crowdin' Oregon dallywelters off the range."

"The Texans are all right," said Johnny loyally. "I'm one myself. The Triangle Dot was a good spread till Pat Malhuer bought in."

"I've heered as much. Say—some Blackfoot Indians told me a herd would be fording the Missouri twenty miles below here tomorrow."

"That must be a Triangle Dot herd."

"Sure. And them ponies that was stole from George Anthony is bound to be right close. We'll ketch us some sleep and then git down there early."

Shortly after dawn the next morning the two men rode out on a promontory that gave them a good view of the river. A mist followed the windings of the stream, but clumps of trees projected from the blanket. So, also, did the deep gashes that were made by the side ravines.

"It's too cussed soupy down there to be right sartin of anything," Corey fumed, "but I'd bet two plugs o' tobacco aginst a broken saddle string that Malhuer's herd is over across where the bottoms are widest. What we need now is to git a line on them stolen horses, if they're holdin' the bunch on this side."

"LISTEN!"

From their left came a demoniacal chorus of yip-yip yahees. As they sat

motionless, the eerie yelpings rose in volume till bluffs, trees and gulleys rang with the sound.

"I don't like it," Corey grumbled. "When coyotes scrap thet hard over their eatin', there's bound to be a hard winter ahead."

"Suppose they could be workin' on a dead horse?" asked Johnny.

"Could be. Anyhow, it's a hunch worth followin' up," answered Corey. "And they just might lead us to where we want to be."

A few minutes later they found a half-eaten carcass of a pony, with scraps of hide and entrails scattered over the ground around it. Johnny dismounted and, bending over the remains, made out part of a Box A brand on a piece of skin.

"That settles it," said Corey. "The rest of the nags are close by. Let's do a bit of circlin'. I kin sniff camp smoke blamed near as fur as a beef critter kin smell water."

"We don't need that to tell us, either," observed Johnny. "There right down in that ravine. Hear that?"

The crackle of brush, as animals moved through it, came plainly to them. A little later they picked out horses. Then came the blue, twisting smoke of a campfire.

Tying their mounts, they crept closer on foot. Presently, from behind a screen of squawbrush, they made out three men, squatted about a fire. Corey looked inquiringly at Johnny and patted the breech of his rifle.

"I don't know how used yuh are to this sort of thing," he whispered. "Now me—I favor fillin' the damn thieves full o' lead and askin' 'em to surrender afterwards."

"I can't do that," objected Johnny, "I've got a friend in that group. He saved my life. We've got to work a little closer and give 'em a chance to stick up their hands."

What it was that warned the men Johnny never knew. Perhaps it was the same instinct of self-preservation which watches over predatory animals. At any rate two of the trio leaped, cursing, to their feet and ran for cover, their revolvers blazing. At Johnny's elbow Corey's rifle spurted lead and thunder. One of

the horse thieves yelled in a way that told Johnny he had been hit, but he did not look at the man. All he could see was the white, defiant oval of the third man's face. Cliff Strong was pulling a gun to shoot the man who had shared his bed and had ridden with him from the Rio Grande to the Big Horns. Johnny's own revolver was out and cocked. There was no question of his being able to kill before he was killed. But he did not shoot. He stood in a horrified trance. He would have let Cliff fire without doing anything to protect himself. An oath ripped from Corey's lips and his heavy gun boomed again. Cliff staggered, then whirled and disappeared into the haze.

Corey seized Johnny by an arm and dragged him back. Once under cover he turned his full wrath upon the younger man. "What in all damnation got into yuh? By heavens, I believe yuh'd a stood in yuhr tracks an' let that buzzard plug daylight into yuh without movin'. It's all right to git buck fever when yuh're huntin' deer, but not with horse thieves. Say, yuh're sweatin' like a hide-skinner in August."

From up on the hill came a voice, reckless and challenging. "Hey, Harper! Can you hear me?"

"Yes, Cliff, I can," answered Johnny.

"All I want to say is that you're a fool, like your partner said. And don't make the mistake of not shootin' if you ever get the drop on me again. I'll kill you just as I would a snake—any time, any place.

And I won't bother to tell you I'm goin' to do it, either, you dirty, doublecrosser!"

The statement ended in a burst of blood-chilling laughter.

Corey listened open-mouthed. "Who was that?" he asked. "Was he the kid yuh used to trail round with and was always talkin' about the summer yuh and me was together."

"You're right," said Johnny heavily.

WITHOUT seeing anything more of the Triangle Dot men, Johnny and Corey rounded up the stolen horses and started them in the direction of the Box A. After they had traveled several miles, Johnny reined up and said, "Jim, I don't believe we're bein' followed."

"Nope. Neither do I. Reckon that Strong feller's been busy patchin' up the holes in the other two."

"That's how I figure it. Now if you'll keep the ponies headed toward home, I'll swing back and have a look at the Triangle Dot herd."

"Decided to git even with Strong after all?"

"I was just thinking. There's some pretty swift water and rough country right below where they're goin' to ford. If that herd got to millin' about while it was crossin', they'd have one sweet time gatherin' it together again."

"Would fer a fact. But yuh're crazy to go back."

Against strong objections from his partner Johnny returned to the river, but he took a circuitous route. When he reached it the Triangle Dot punchers were just beginning to shove the herd into the stream. To make the cattle handle better, Malhuer's men were driving a bunch of horses ahead of the cows, so the latter would follow them. One horseman pointed the water for the rest. Shading his eyes against the sheen from the water, Johnny stared at the leader. From the first there was something familiar about the man. By the time they got where it was deep enough to swim the horses he knew. It was Donovan. Funny how a professional gambler had joined up with a hard-riding gang like Malhuer's. It seemed that either Donovan must have lost heavily at cards, or was being offered a big inducement by the Triangle Dot. Well, if Malhuer did succeed in gobbling the Spanish Peaks, there would be openings for a lot of hard, unscrupulous men. Meanwhile Johnny had called the gambler's hand once before and he was ready to do it again.

He waited until the herd was past midstream, with most of the stock swimming, before he stepped into the open. With a sweep of his arm he motioned Donovan to turn downstream. The gambler saw, but he kept on coming. Johnny whipped the carbine to his shoulder and triggered a shot that geysered water in the gambler's face. Jerking a saddle gun from its scabbard, Donovan returned the fire. The next time Johnny's carbine flashed, the gambler's horse threw up its head and went under.

Donovan kicked free of the stirrups and seized the mane of another horse. By now the riders on the flanks of the herd were shooting at Johnny, who sprawled behind a log of driftwood. A few more bullets sprayed among the horses had them turned and drifting downstream. The riders on the lower side of the herd tried to head them back, but Johnny drove them from their saddles with more well-placed lead.

From then on the fording herd lost all semblance of order. The forward end curved downstream, carrying part of Malhuer's punchers with it. The current was churned to a foam by struggling animals. The men shouted and discharged their guns, but the sound was lost in the greater medley of bawling steers and squealing horses.

Sure that he had given Malhuer's men work for days before they could have the herd gathered up again, Johnny turned to leave. As he did so a soaked figure rose

from the water a hundred yards below him and started wading toward shore. It was Donovan, looking more like a rat than a man. Johnny ran down the bank and headed him off. "Where you goin', Shyster?"

Donovan winced as though struck, and threw up his hands. "Don't shoot," he whined. "I know when I'm licked."

Johnny had just started to answer when a bullet from behind sung past his ear. Donovan staggered. His mouth jerked open. He turned slowly on his heels and pitched to the ground. Johnny, who had leaped sidewise, whirled and glanced behind him. Fifty yards away Cliff Strong was on his hands and knees with a smoking rifle lying on the ground beside him. A few feet to the left stood Corey, calmly reloading his gun.

"Shore is a tough cuss. Thought shore I'd bust my gun when I clubbed him. Now I'll blast his damned gizzard out."

"No, you won't, Jim. Leave him alone."

Hurrying forward Johnny helped Cliff to his feet. Blood was running down the side of Cliff's head and dripping from his jaw, but the dazed look was slowly dying from his eyes. While Johnny wiped the blood away. Corey bit a thumb-sized quid of tobacco and began chewing savagely. Without comment he watched Johnny help his one-time friend to the river's edge and start bathing his head. When the bleeding stopped, he said, "I've got to be goin' now, Cliff. The rest of your bunch will be gettin' across."

"I tried to shoot you in the back," Cliff said wearily. "Missed you and nailed Donovan."

"Smashed his shoulder blade, I guess. Maybe he'll get well."

"I don't worry about that. None of the crew would care if the cheating cur was killed. Johnny, you'd better let your pard finish me. He'd be glad to do it. After I get to broodin' again and drinkin' I may have another impulse to get you. Right now I—I—"

"Listen, Cliff. You and I have been together a lot. You've saved my life more than once. And I'll step between you and trouble as often as I have a chance, no matter how you feel about me. One thing I want to tell you and I'm not lying. You never said your girl you liked was Sylpha Anthony. Miss Jackson, or something else you called her. I didn't dream it was the same one, until she saw you on the ferryboat and told me herself. Think this over—"

"Hell-amighty, Johnny!" bawled Corey, "Can't yuh see the whole Triangle Dot crew is gittin' ready to jump us? Let's fog!"

Johnny did.

"SO THIS Anthony gal blamed yuh fer not savin' them few hundred weak critters thet wandered back on to the Missoury and went through the air holes?"

"That's right, Jim."

Corey scratched his jaw. "The ways of all females is plumb inscrutible, but this perticilar gal has 'em all shaded. Look at the crusted snow on these flats! If yuh'd had men waste their time on them poor critters instead of spendin' every minute o' the last month shovin' herds into sheltered places, where would the Box A be now?"

"I didn't bother to ask her that."

"Nope. Yuh was too frazzled out, an' too much in love. Does she think buildin' all them line camps was child's play?"

"There are still plenty of Guy Barrett's friends on the payroll. They lie to her."

"Then why not quit? Yuh're gant-bellied and holler-cheeked as a starved coyote."

"I told George Anthony I'd stick until he got here to take over himself. It can't be long now."

"Yuh just think that," grumbled Corey. "Why I said I'd help yuh is one o' life's mysteries. It's only the last o' November an' the mercury is twenty-six feet below

ground level. What's winter goin' to be like when it really starts?"

Around Christmas they found out, for, from the north, there came a black, howling blizzard that turned the midday into a deep twilight. The fine, hard-driven particles of snow fell thick as flour from a sifter. When the storm ended coulees twenty, or even thirty, feet deep had been drifted full, while white hills now stood on what had been level plains. For days the wind whipped dry snow into the air again to form raging ground blizzards, through which Johnny and Corey caught occasional glimpses of a frost-splangled sky that glared with the light of a dozen sun dogs.

The temperature dropped until the cottonwoods along the creek were bursting with gun-sharp reports to the pressure of frozen sap. Except for a few antelope and some hungry wolves all wild life had left the country. To ward off the bitter cold Johnny and Corey donned so many clothes that they found it difficult to travel. Corey wore several pairs of socks inside his moccasins, and three pairs of trousers. To supplement the warmth of his coat and vest, he draped a blanket, Indian fashion, about his shoulders. Then he drew his sealskin cap down over his ears. Johnny's costume was much the same. He discarded his boots and replaced them with three pairs of wool socks, on top of which he wore heavy Dutch socks that reached to his knees. In place of boots or moccasins he wore overshoes. He wore woolly chaps over two pairs of pants and, to augment the warmth of coat, he had a heavy, blanket-lined overcoat, with a cape buckled high around his ears. His sombrero was gone, replaced by a badger-hide cap, given him by Corey.

Dressed like this the two men drove stock back to the protection of the hills, then proceeded to the next camp. When they arrived it was ten o'clock at night and their coat collars were filled with ice. Instead of a welcoming fire, they found the cabin deserted and the buffalo robe at the door blown loose so that the place was half filled with snow. Corey cursed with bitter fluency.

"Hell without heat is what we've got!" he crackled. "I knew them damn devils wouldn't stay through this. I'm not blamin' 'em much at that—damn it all. There ain't enough grub in the place to keep a pair o' packrats goin' more'n six minutes."

"They could have killed a beef."

"And ett the damned stuff frozen. Oh, I reckon they could have got some wood. But I've an idee they just said to hell with the hull business."

Within a week every Box A man except themselves had deserted the line camps. Existence became a savage, unrelenting battle with the two men driving themselves to the limit of human endurance in an effort to accomplish the work of a dozen. From before daylight until the stars were out in the evening they bucked the crusted snow, rescuing weakened animals from drifts and turning the stronger stragglers back toward the safety of the main droves.

Then one sundown they approached a camp to find it a smoldering pile of embers. The few supplies the cabin had held had been either burned or taken away. The snow about the demolished building showed the tramping of many hoofs. Close by a steer had been shot and a chunk cut from its haunch. Lying on the carcass was the end of a dried fruit box. On the board was scrawled in charcoal, "Hope you like the bonfire, Harper. We'll have another just like it fixed for you up the line."

"The Triangle Dot agin," said Corey grimly. "Man, how them boys must hate yuh to be on the prod this weather. Now are yuh ready to quit?"

"No," said Johnny shortly. "But, if you want to turn back, I won't blame you."

"Johnny, if yuh're game to still keep on, by the lights o' Lucifer, so am I!"

That night they slept between two fires, with a third already laid and protected

from snow by a saddle blanket, ready to touch off before getting out of their bedding rolls. When they moved on they found that the threat of the Triangle Dot was not an idle one. Each camp had been burned to the ground.

For food they depended chiefly on beef, varied by an occasional rabbit. Their coffee ran out. Their clothing, also, was under a difficult strain. When buttons came off they tied their garments together with leather thongs. Johnny's overshoes wore through and he wrapped them with canvas and burlap until he could scarcely get his feet through his ox-bow stirrups.

Added to the physical hardships was the conviction that they had been deserted. No messengers came. No supplies were sent. And, despite all their efforts, the number of Box A cattle dwindled. Never did they return to a herd without finding that more animals had frozen.

"HELL-AMIGHTY, Johnny! We're agoin' to have a visitor. Know who it is?"

"Can't tell at this distance, Jim. I sure never expected to see you act glad to see another human."

"Mostly I ain't. Coyotes is so damned

preferable to most of 'em. But this feller looks like he might have some grub along. I kin use some change on my bill-o'-fare fer a fact."

Through the February fog Johnny stared at the approaching rider. The man looked haggard and worn and it was not until he spoke that Johnny recognized him.

"Hi, Johnny. You may be a little surprised to see me, but I kinda got a hankerin' to see you—" he stopped to cough, then began again. "Thought maybe I'd enjoy the society of honest folks once more. If you—"

"Johnny, ain't this one o' them skunks thet tried to take a pot shot at yuh?"

"This is Cliff Strong, Jim. He and I were friends for a long time and—"

"And thet's why he so lovingly drew a bead on yuh?" bristled Corey.

Cliff ignored the older man and went on talking to Johnny. "I'm damn sorry for what I done to you, Johnny. If you'll let me stay with you a while, mebbe I can explain some things. Anyhow, I've got a bunch of supplies that may help out a bit."

"Got some coffee?" Corey demanded, his tone less belligerent.

Cliff nodded. "Coffee, sugar, tobacco, flour. Oh, a little of everything, includin' a few pints o' brandy."

"Hell-amighty!" Corey ejaculated pulling at the pack ropes.

Cliff went on talking to Johnny. "I'm through with Malhuer for good, Johnny. If I can help you—"

"You're always welcome, Cliff. You know that. But how did Calder or Malhuer ever let you get away with this stuff?"

"I got it from the Box A, Johnny. I've been watchin' you fight for these cattle for over a week now. Finally I went to Anthony's headquarters and told 'em what a gutless gang it would be that would let two men stand what you have. Didn't have much effect, though. They say they won't get out this sort of weather for anybody. Kind of surprised 'em to find out that you were alive. They've been figuring that everything up north of here was either dead or holed up." He paused with a new embarrassment, then continued, a faint smile on his drawn face. "I guess you're thinkin' about Sylpha. I tried to see her, too, but she's been sick. Now she's starting to get better. She heard what I wanted and sent word by the squaw that was taking care of her that I was to be given supplies to take to you. If Anthony

was back, he'd see that you had help, but he's still on the trail with a herd that'll likely all die on him. I never expected to mention Sylpha to you again, Johnny, and I won't after right now. I've been busy the last while cutting her out of my calculations. It's been hard but then, she's got a life to live and me—well, I won't be much good from now on, I reckon." Johnny started to protest, but Cliff continued, "When a man gets with a bunch like I've been with—well, you know how it is. I hope you get her, Johnny. I honestly do. Now I'm goin' to help your sidekick with the pack animals."

There was a lump in Johnny's throat as he watched his friend limp away. For all Cliff's wildness, he had shown streaks of greatness. It bothered Johnny to see him limping and to note that his right arm did not swing straight and that he used it awkwardly and not with the old deftness.

Corey's hostility departed as he unpacked the food and tasted the brandy. He could even endure another human being for such blessings as these.

From then on Cliff rode with them every day. When they traveled any distance he kept close to Johnny, talking always of the days that were gone, not those to come. At times he seemed almost happy and would joke as he had done in the past, but often he was silent for a long time. One of his first acts was to win Johnny's cap and overcoat on a bet. When he insisted upon wearing them and giving Johnny his own in exchange, Johnny was only mildly surprised. Cliff had always been like that.

Three or four days after the trade they were riding along the foot of a timbered ridge. Without warning a gun spanged from the trees. Cliff clapped both hands to his side, swayed a moment, then toppled from the saddle. While Johnny tried to help him, Corey went to locate the sniper. When he returned a few minutes later, Cliff was dead.

"Find anything?" asked Johnny.

"Nope. But I know who killed him."

"How did you find out?"

"Have yuh noticed how Cliff was always tryin' to ride on the side of the brush or timber?"

"I didn't think of it before but, now you mention it, I remember. Good Lord! Did he trade clothes with me because he figured someone was after me?"

"Yuh're right. He told me when he fust got here that he was tired of livin' and hadn't nothin' to live fer. He said Barrett had joined up with the Triangle Dot and had swore to git yuh. Said if he could save yuhr life and lose his own at the same time, there wasn't nothin' he'd like better. I thought mebbe he was drawin' a long bow, but this proves he wasn't."

WHEN Cliff Strong was buried something of Johnny Harper's life went into the shallow hole that was chipped in the frozen earth. Then he and Corey rode through the darkness in pursuit of the killers. A thaw that day had softened the snow enough so that the freezing since sundown had made a heavy crust which gave off brittle squeakings beneath the ponies' sliding shoes. Frost, filtering out of the frigid night, powdered their bodies with ghostly crystals. Occasionally the clouds parted and they glimpsed the stars. Not a coyote barked nor did a wolf howl. Only these two were abroad in the cold-numbed land.

On a ridge of stark white Corey reined in and tilted his lean nose into the stirrings of air. "I smell smoke, Johnny. Reckon we're closin' in. We'll find 'em down in that belt o' timber. Better leave the horses back aways, so they won't hear the shoes squeakin'."

Eight men sleeping in a tent built on the ground warmed by a fire. It was easy to tell the number by the upturned saddles around another fire outside the front.

"Not a single cuss on guard," exulted Corey. "We kin kill the hull damn pack."

"Wait!" cautioned Johnny. "We don't

want to slip up on this. First we get their horses."

This was easily accomplished. They crept toward the tent again. The cocking of Corey's carbine was a clear, metallic note in the darkness. "Ready, Johnny?" he asked. "We'll jest blow hell out of the tent and talk turkey to what few come out —if any."

"Nothing like that, Jim! We're not Indians. Hey, you inside!"

His words rang like a bugle. The sides of the tent heaved to the movements of men suddenly awakened.

"Listen!" Johnny continued. "We've already got your horses. Come out of there pronto, with your hands up, or we'll cut loose!"

Startled voices broke into argument. Johnny fired a shot through the top of the tent.

"Stop!" yelled a man. "We're comin'."

One after another they staggered from the tent, their arms above their heads. Johnny lined them up by the dying fire. One, two, three, four, five six, seven—There was still another.

The roar of Corey's carbine shattered the stillness. Someone was firing back with a pistol. The eighth man had got out and was running, the buffalo hunter's bullets speeding his dash. There was nothing that Johnny could do but hold the seven that were left—and hope.

Corey returned alone and disgusted. "Must be gittin' old," he growled. "The polecat slit the tent and was fifty yards away before I seen him."

"Seven out of eight isn't bad, Jim."

"Mebbe not. But the eighth man was Barrett. What yuh goin' to do with these jaspers now that yuh've got 'em?"

"I'm going to make 'em work, Jim. They're owing me a lot right now and we'll let them work a little of it out. We've been needing men bad and they'll come in mighty handy."

And for a week he drove the captured seven without mercy. They cut willows and cottonwoods on which the cattle could feed, working from the first hint of dawn until darkness. It was a killing pace for the two captors as well for day and night, one of them had to be alert against a possible revolt.

As time passed Johnny had to do more and more of this. Corey did not seem well, though he made no complaint and was noncommittal when Johnny asked questions. But it was easy to see that each day it was more difficult than it had been the last for him to sit in the saddle. His face held a pained look and he kept reaching for his right side.

"What's the matter, Jim?" Johnny demanded for the tenth time.

Corey twisted in his saddle and winced. His mouth opened as though gasping for breath.

"I didn't never intend to tell yuh, Johnny," he muttered, "but I reckon I got to now. Thet cuss of a Barrett plowed my side with a bullet the night he got away. I—I didn't figger it amounted to much. Knew if I said anything thet yuh'd want to take me in. And I always hated doctorin' and molly-coddlin'. It—"

The statement ended in a groan. Johnny reached him barely in time to keep him from pitching headlong to the ground. When he stripped back the clothing, he understood. Corey's under garments were stiff with blood. The wound had never stopped bleeding. Though Johnny did everything he could think of, the buffalo hunter was dead within an hour.

TWO friends Johnny had seen die on this empty, savage range. Hard-eyed, he stood by and watched men, working at the point of his revolver, dig the second grave. When Corey was covered he spoke to the seven in brittle tones.

They were free. They had the same chance to get out of the country that he had—which wasn't very good. But they must start out in a different direction from the one he intended to take. He was start-

ing out to report to George Anthony. He would give them but one rifle and only ammunition enough to procure food. Then they would not be tempted to use firearms to kill human beings. Of course they might freeze, but that was their problem. He had the same thing to contend with and there would be a number of them to help, if all would cooperate. He watched grimly until they were out of sight before starting on his own lonely journey.

He rode what seemed like a thousand miles through the white stillness, though he knew from the sun that he had not gone far. A whistle, piercing as that of a rockchuck, sounded on his right. He turned his head and from a big boulder came a demoniacal burst of laughter. Standing behind the rock, resting his gun upon its top, was Guy Barrett. The ex-trail boss was hatless, his face was seared almost black by the sun and snow and the gloating upon the features of one who had suffered so much from exposure was revoltingly grotesque.

"By hell," he cried, "I knew yuh'd be along. Winter couldn't kill yuh. All Malhuer's gunhawks didn't do it. Yuh're tough as the Devil's toenails. But I'm goin' to git yuh yet."

Johnny's brain was racing. The man was out of good pistol shot. Before he could possibly draw his own gun from its scabbard, Barrett would have plenty of time to carry out his threat. Johnny raked the flanks of his pony with the spurs and the tired beast lunged through knee-deep snow. The crack of Barrett's rifle was followed by a thud. The convulsive shudder which ran through his mount, communicated itself to Johnny. As the animal's legs folded, a jet of crimson spurted from its neck and struck smoking in the snow.

Fury shook Johnny. Here was the man who had been traitor to the Box A. This was the cur who had killed both Cliff and Corey. Without conscious volition he was on the snow, running toward the rock. Barrett crawled farther up on the boulder and fired again. As his rifle cracked, the crust broke beneath Johnny, dropping his body a good two feet into the snow. The ball, meant for his heart, sung harmlessly over his shoulder.

Screaming curses, Barrett pumped the snow full of lead. There was a stinging in Johnny's right leg, just above the knee. That was all he could feel through his emotional tempest. Getting to his knees, he wiped the powdered snow from his eyes. Barrett was lunging toward him, brandishing his clubbed gun.

Johnny's pistol arm straightened and steadied. When Barrett was only yards away, he squeezed the trigger. The ex-trail boss staggered and half whirled to the impact, then came on again, animal snarls coming from his bared teeth. The twitching, brick-red features belonged to a drink-crazed maniac. Johnny's weapon flashed twice before Barrett fell, grunting, to the snow. By the time Johnny could pull himself to the man's side, he was dead.

Making a crude tourniquet to stop the bleeding of his leg, Johnny pulled himself to the boulder and bracing himself against it, looked about. Over behind a screen of brush was a glint of red. Barrett's horse! It took an age of dragging through the snow to reach it. He almost fainted with the effort of pulling himself into the saddle.

He rode toward headquarters in a half coma. Overhead the sundogs glared from a frost-spangled sky. Beneath his horse's hoofs the crusted snow crunched with the cold grating that had grown to be a part of existence. Through his half consciousness ran and endless repitition of gloomy facts. Cliff dead. Corey dead. A thousand Box A cattle stretched dead among the

willows and in the drifts. On the river perhaps another thousand had died. For these George Anthony would hold him responsible. With this for a record, he could never get another job.

When he approached headquarters a mongrel dog, belonging to a bunch of Indians, barked. From a cabin two of the older riders stepped into the yard. Not until he had a chance to see himself in a mirror did Johnny understand their awed expression. His beard was long and irregular. His clothing was dirty, half-frozen tatters. His eyes bloodshot, his cheeks and nose scarred by frost bites.

"IS Sylpha Anthony here?" he managed to ask.

They answered, but he could not seem to hear. There was a roaring exhaustion in his brain. When he half tumbled from his horse the two on the ground realized his condition. By the time his thoughts began to clear he was inside the cabin and seated in front of the fireplace, across from George Anthony. The accumulated smoke of sagebrush fires had filled his clothing until now it scented the room. Had he not been so exhausted he might have recognized the understanding respect in Anthony's face. As it was, he launched directly into his report.

Tersely the tale of the Box A came from his mouth. He described the bloody trails of starving cattle, the snap and crunch of willow sticks, sagebrush stubs and cedar limbs as the famished brutes ate wood that killed them. He told of the hundreds of frozen carcasses that dotted the creek windings and speckled flanks of mountain drifts. He gave the ugly facts of the Triangle Dot's destructive raids and reported the deaths of his two friends. His words had the ragged intensity of a man who has suffered to the limit of his endurance.

"And now I'm ready for my time," he concluded.

George Anthony walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're not getting it, Harper. At least not until you're well and have had a chance to think this over. I got in just this morning. Since then, what few men were left have started out to look for you. Listen, Harper. I've got reports on stock all through the Northwest. It has been the worst winter on record. Losses have gone as high as ninety percent. All over Montana they average sixty percent. The Triangle Dot has so few left they won't even try to stay in the game. They're licked. If the crew had remained under the old management, which was a decent one, they might have pulled through. But hiring gunmen instead of cowboys wasn't the way to do it. As for you, boy, instead of bein' a flop, you've saved eighty percent of the cattle. It's the best showing in the whole country."

Success where he had steeled himself for defeat! It made his exposure-thickened blood course faster. His eyes began hungrily searching the room. The grip of Anthony's fingers upon his shoulder grew tighter.

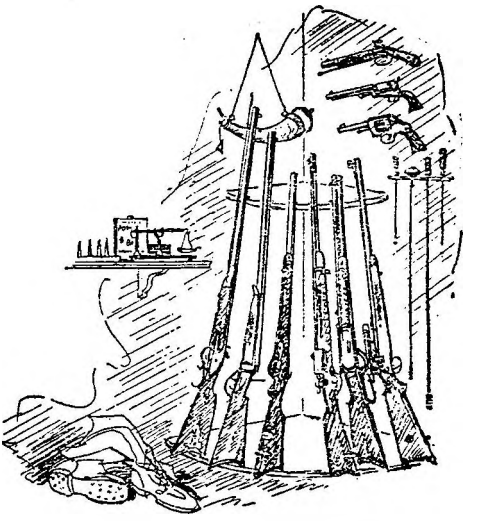
"Son, if it's Sylpha you're lookin' for, she's over at the other cabin, fixin' things comfortable for a sick man. She's going to be your nurse and I'm thinkin' you'll be pretty well tamed before she turns you loose."

Spring in the Montana range country can be wonderfully pleasant when the February drifts have melted into banks of flowers, and the hungry cows of winter are nursing wobbly-legged calves along creeks where meadowlarks are singing from every clump of sagebrush and wild rose. It was on such a day that Sylpha and Johnny rode out to Cliff Strong's grave and Johnny did not mind when Sylpha gathered an armful of wild flowers and, with tears in her eyes, placed them on the mound. Here in the sweet prairie sod was a link that would hold these two who mourned together, while the old West gave way before the new.

THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF



THE stumbling block that has put the bee on more than one army has been the slowness of the so-called military mind to lay aside anything it has been taught and adopt new practices.

In the first World War, certain Belgian and French armies went into battle using arms forty years old or over. And in the present war practically the same thing has happened.

But let's go back to the early days of the thirteen colonies. About this time, Frederick the Great of Prussia was cleaning up most of Europe by the use of command volley or mass-fire type of fighting. It seems that the intelligence of the men who made up the armies at that time was not considered high enough for anything approaching individual skill in the use of the rifle. So the officer would command, "Load!", "Take aim!" and "Fire!", and then plow into the enemy with cold steel.

Our own General Washington's favorite load for this kind of fighting consisted of a ball and three buckshot, dropped into a smooth-bore musket on top of the powder charge and with most any kind of wadding crammed in on top of the whole mess. This was so easy that anyone, with the possible exception of an outright idiot, could be a soldier.

During the war for Independence, it was definitely shown that the few American troops, such as the forest rangers, armed with rifled shoulder guns were far superior to the British troops using the smooth-bore musket. Yet, believe it or not, it wasn't until 1799 that Congress passed an act authorizing the addition to the regular army of a "Rifle Regiment." England followed suit the next year.

By 1800 the Harpers Ferry government arsenal was equipped for manufacturing our first regulation army rifle.

It was known as the Baker model 1800 and was manufactured until 1819 when the model 1817 was first issued.

About the only thing that was absolutely standard about these rifles was the size of the ball used. It weighed half an ounce, which would be over .50 caliber. The barrel lengths varied from 32 to 36 inches long, and it seems that each riflesmith had his own ideas about various small details.

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.....

Taken all in all, it wasn't a bad-looking rifle. (See cut.)

There being no mass production in those days, it was quite some time before these rifles were generally distributed. They were used on the western frontier, in the navy, in the War of 1812. And some were still in use in the Mexican War.

The Lewis and Clark expedition—up the Missouri, across to the Pacific and return to St. Louis—was equipped with these sturdy rifles. At times the many hardships were so overwhelming that the men were forced to eat horses traded from the Indians.

Here is a quote from the standard edition of the Lewis and Clark journals.

Lewis, January 20, 1806 (still at Fort Clatsop): "We have latterly so frequently had our stock of provisions reduced to a minimum and sometimes taken a small touch of fasting that three days full allowance excites no concern. In those cases our skill as hunters afford us some consolation, for if there is any game of any description in our neighborhood we can track it up and kill it. Most of the party have become very expert with the rifle."

This old 1800 job presently wasn't much compared to Uncle Sam's fancy new Garand semi-automatic rifle—but, kids, in its day it was a wow!

This and That

Sporting rifle powder No. 80, which has for years been the hand-loader's standby for reduced loads in high power rifles, has been discontinued. In its place the E. I. DuPont de Nemours & Co., Inc., are manufacturing sporting rifle powder No. 4759. Haven't had a chance to try it out, but understand it gives higher speed with less breech pressure—also is supposed to burn cleaner.

The old Hoffman Arms Co. has been revived. The new plant is located in Amarillo, Texas. Understand they are tooled to do a complete job on most anything in the rifle line. The new company is owned by J. A. Hedgecoke, who owns and operates the famous "Goodnight Ranch" in Texas.

Those Swedes are still at it! If you are interested in one-man, low-cost trapshooting, take a look at the new Mossberg Targo gun. It's a nifty!

Captain Charles Askins, Jr., of the border patrol, has written "Hitting the Bull's-Eye." a booklet on pistol target shooting. For a copy, apply to Iver Johnson's Arms & Cycle Works, 43 River Street, Fitchburg, Mass. It's free!

Complete instructions in the principles on which good marksmanship is based is contained in the "Handbook on Small Bore Rifle Shooting," by Colonel Townsend Whelen, published by the Sporting Arms & Ammunition Manufacturers, Inst. We have made arrangements to send this handbook to all SHORT STORIES readers interested in shooting. Just enclose ten cents, in coin or stamps, to cover cost of handling and postage, and send to The Shooter's Corner, Short Stories, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, New York.

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Fiction and the Near East

"IT HAS been said in the past that life and truth can never keep pace with fiction; that the creative writer's mind can outstrip all the struggles of practical man in pursuit of his objective," says Frederick C. Painton in a letter about *The Sword of Islam*. "Perhaps that was true once; but not so lately," Mr. Painton goes on.

"Shortly after I sent to SHORT STORIES the manuscript of *The Sword of Islam*, I read the following headline in the New York *Times*. It is from the October 2, 1940, issue: 'ITALIAN PRESS SAYS AXIS PLANS TO AROUSE ARABS AGAINST BRITAIN.'

"And my story dealing with precisely that theme has not seen print as I write this. So for once the fact beats fiction to the printed word. I dwell on this point

because I think most of us are not fully conscious of the terrific acceleration of events around us. History is being made every hour, and it's just too damned fast for us. Perhaps by the time you read the story itself, Italy will have staged just such an incident as I have endeavored to describe.

"Will Italy succeed? It is five years since I spent a lot of profitable months in Turkey, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Algiers and Morocco. But I have several ardent correspondents—besides Mike—in these sundry North African and Near East places, and from what they say and what I saw, my answer is no.

"One of my pals in Istanbul—a guide for the Tutta Agency—fought against the British at the Dardanelles. Now, contrary to what you may have believed, the Turk is a damned fine soldier; there is none better. And he respects a fighting man, and he learned to think highly of Tommy Atkins. He learned something about the Germans; that they are good soldiers, but arrogant in victory and whining in defeat.

" 'We'll never fight on their side again,' he said. 'The British stood with us in the Greek affair, and we'll never be caught fighting them again. More important, Mustapha Kemal Ataturk thinks so—and he rules Turkey.'

"At that instant Mustapha Kemal Ataturk, the Turkish dictator, was sitting not twenty paces from me in the Ruf Cafe, drunker than fifty dollars with a Russian beauty on each knee, and bellowing with laughter. Ataturk was a dictator who loved to live high, wide and handsome, and it killed him, but he had a good time doing it, and when he died he said, 'Stay with the British. They've got *character.*'

"In Palestine where the Arabs were sore and killing British Tommies over the Jewish state, Achmed el Orfali—not the one in the story but the real one—said, 'The British are slow. But we'll convince them. And if anybody's going to kill them it will be us, and we need no help.'

"So went the story in Cairo which was to be expected in as much as a British High Commissioner gently informs King Faruk what to do. But Joseph Levy, Near East correspondent for the New York *Times* thinks that Islam will remain faithful to the British. And he ought to know.

"In Algeria and Morocco the story is not so good, because the French are bad colonizers, and there may be changes there —*after the war.*

"All of this only proves the opinion *I* hold, and you may disagree—which, thank God, in these United States, you've got a perfect right to do, loudly and vociferously. *Salaam Aleykum.*

"Frederick C. Painton."

Headhunters Are Religious

HERE is a letter from Eaton Goldthwaite about his story in this SHORT STORIES:

"It may sound like a paradox to say that headhunters are highly religious. Yet such is the case. The strange *Jivaros* who roam the upper Amazon territory seem to consider their work of self-decimation an appointed task. Head-hunting parties are led by the tribal chief who, by virtue of his authority, is also the medicine man and priest.

"Before embarking on their bloody mission, the *Jivaros* gather about a sacred fire to pray for rain. That it usually comes may not be such a manifestation of their religious powers as a testament to the weather-forcasting abilities of the chief, for he is the one who starts them off.

"The *Jivaros* move in their canoes to within striking distance of their unsuspecting victims. The canoes are sunk in the water and weighted down with heavy stones. Then, about the fire, the dance begins. It usually lasts all night, with the 'braves' covering themselves with a dye made from the bark of the *huito,* or walnut tree. When they have worked themselves to a sufficient frenzy, they strike.

"There is nothing brave about it. The victims are slain in the fields as they work, in the village streets, or in bed. They seldom see their attackers; the heads, called 'Mukas' are lopped off with a single blow from machetes. The most attractive women are carried off to become vassals of the 'conquerors.'

"Following the party, the 'braves' return to the sacred fire and the process of preparing the heads begins. It is a long process and filled to the gunwales with religious boogy-woogy; the hair is parted and the scalp slit so the skull can be removed. Then the nostrils are plugged and the lips sewn to prevent the spirit of the departed from coming out. The next step is burning the flesh from the scalp and skin with the use of hot stones and hot sand. Heat also shrinks the head, and clever manipulation retains the original features.

A friend of mine tells me of discovering in Manaos the head of an old Dutchman he had known; he says that the memory of the old fellow's curling yellow mustaches has pursued him ever since.

"I should think it would!

"Some of the tribes have the idea that butterflies are the spirits of departed warriors.

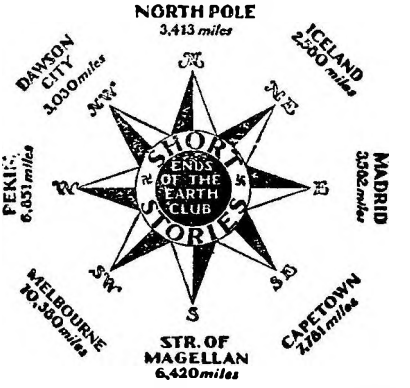
"Now it is no secret that South America, and the Amazon basin particularly, abound in countless specie of the colorful insects. They range in size to as large as dinner plates; on short walks from Manaos it is possible to see as many as five hundred *different* specimens.

"So the poor dumb *Jivaros,* intent on killing each other off, have reserved a special niche for the Black Butterfly. And well they might, for it is difficult to picture a more beautiful or eerie sight than a cloud of lazy, floating butterflies covering the air with tremulous wings.

"From hunting heads to butterflies! Quite a jump, isn't it? And yet, why not? The Amazon is quite a country.

"Eaton K. Goldthwaite."

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, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership - identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Paging New Zealand and Australia

Dear Secretary:

Would you enroll me in your Ends of the Earth Club? I live in the northern part of Alberta and would be pleased to correspond with anyone interested in this land.

I would especially like to hear from New Zealand and Australia and of course any part of the U.S.; stamps being the objective. Other hobbies include curios, badges and medals.

Incidentally, I've been a steady reader for some years.

Your sincerely,
Laurence Tippie

Box 396,
Stettler, Alberta,
Canada.

From one of our air-minded members

Dear Secretary:

I would like to join your Ends of the Earth Club. Life in the Air Corps sometimes gets rather dull between flights. In order to combat this dullness I read SHORT STORIES. I travel quite a bit all over the States, but never miss an issue. I would like to correspond with members, both sex, who are interested in aviation and collects picture postcards and stamps. I will faithfully answer all letters, so here's hoping I hear from all you far-away members.

Yours,

Pvt. Malcolm T. Purisch

97th Observation Sq.,
Mitchel Field, Long Island, N. Y.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of SHORT STORIES, published twice a month, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1940, State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared T. Raymond Foley, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the President of the SHORT STORIES, INC., owners of SHORT STORIES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publisher:* SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.; *Editor:* D. McIlwraith, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.; *Managing Editor:* None; *Business Managers:* T. Raymond Foley and W. J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owners are: SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock are: T. Raymond Foley, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.; W. J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

SHORT STORIES, INC.
(*Signed*) T. RAYMOND FOLEY, *President.*

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 26th day of September, 1940.

[SEAL] H. J. HAGGER.

(*Signed*) H. J. Hagger, Notary Public, Westchester Co. New York Clerk's No. 731; New York Register's No. 1H459.

My commission expires March 30, 1941.

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