"A Man Could Make a Million"—RYERSON JOHNSON

"Run, Rogue, Run"—MERLE CONSTINER

25c

Short Stories

Twice A Month

October 10th

. . . . the satisfying freedom of being home again and feeling cinders beneath his feet!

MIRACLE MILE

by — Jackson V. Scholz

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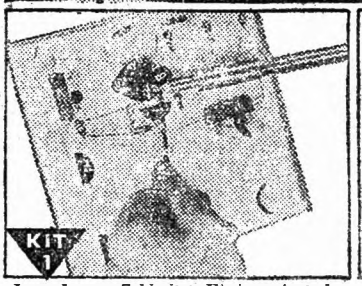
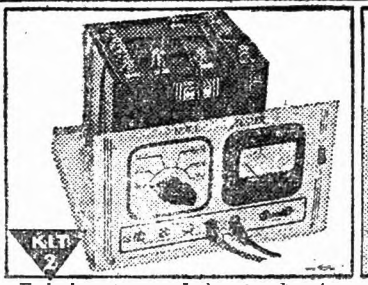
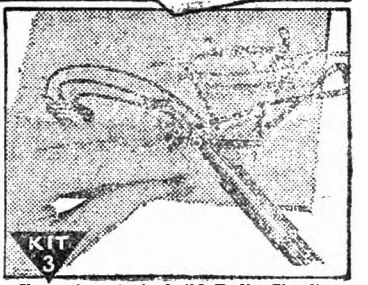


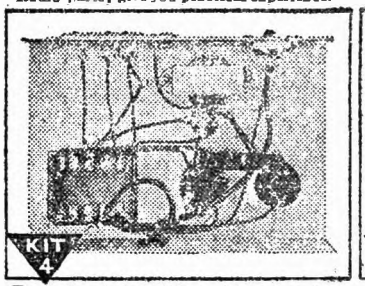
I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



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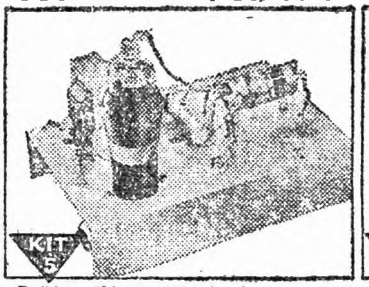

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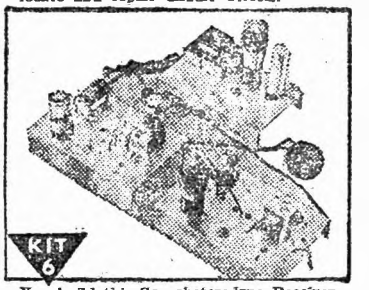

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Short Stories

TWICE A MONTH

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SHORT STORIES issued semi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City 20, N. Y., and entered as second-class matter, November 24, 1937, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE in the United States, American Possessions, Mexico and South America, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $6.50; and to all other countries $6.60. Price payable in advance. October 10, 1946. Vol. CXCVII, No. 1. Whole Number 979.

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LAMONT BUCHANAN

October 10th, 1946

CONTENTS

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

EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES NO REPRINTS

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The Story Tellers' Circle

American Gab

MERLE CONSTINER passes on to us (and you) some thoughts concerning the slang and secret language used by thieves.

Of course all fields of endeavor have their own private lexicons and, whether doctor, lawyer or Indian chief, they all sound like crazy to the rest of us uninitiates.

But of all these "trade" languages certainly the most colorful is the verbiage of thieves and gangsters.

The author of *Run, Rogue, Run* now takes over the subject. And if you can understand that last paragraph—well, better not admit it!

"For some years now I've been picking up source books here and there on the secret language of thieves and the so-called dangerous classes of yesteryear. It's a pretty engrossing subject.

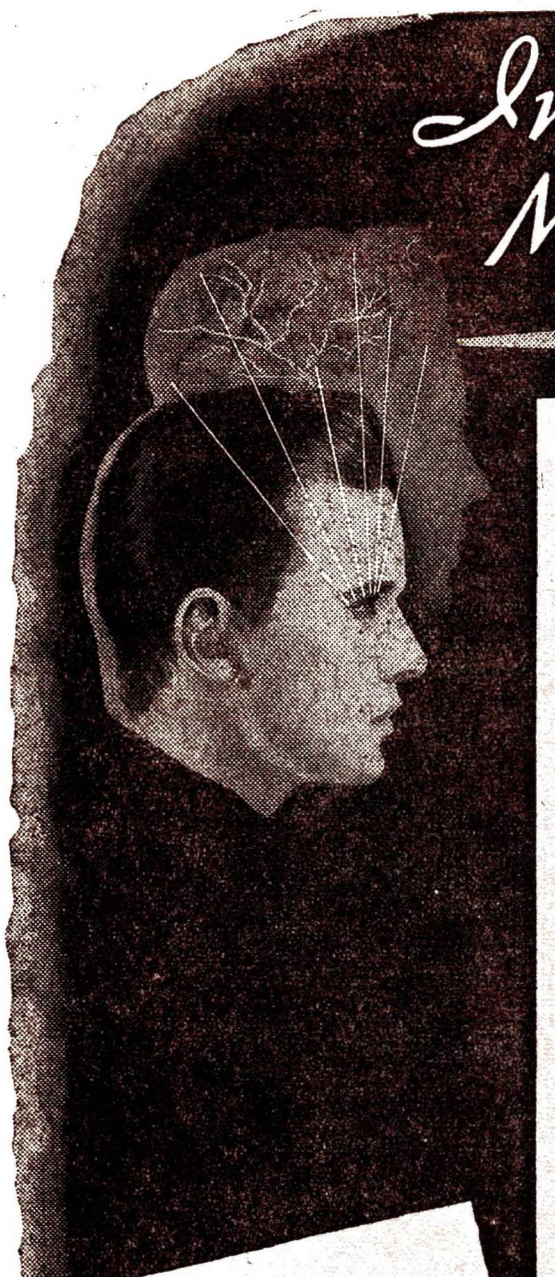
"The secret language in 'Run, Rogue, Run' is just that, a secret language, and was resorted to in public for purposes of confusion and in private for the heck of it. It's very ancient, of course, and has been known as 'cant' and 'flash' and 'stamfish'. Almost every tongue has its traditional robber-language, or vagabond language. At the time of 'Run, Rogue, Run,' American flash was a mixture of Gpysy, European, English, and good old American nonsense words. The history of American flash is extremely interesting, but too elaborate to go into here. For instance, twentieth-century gangster slang has a knive as a 'shiv' which of course should be 'chive'. At the time of the story a knife was a chive, a bone-handled knife was an ochive. The word chive comes from the gypsy, and means a tongue, or knife. Old gypsy for prison is 'distarabin,' last century English flash for prison was 'sturabin,' modern gangster slang is simply 'stir,' an abbreviation.

"One of the earliest books on beggars' cant was Martin Luther's 'Liber Vagatorum,' published in 1528. I have an 1866 edition. Another volume which I prize rather highly is an 1810 edition of 'The Life and Adventures of Bamfylde-Moore Carewe, the King of the Beggars, with a History of His Travels Twice through Great Part of America.' Containing a lexicon of beggars' cant. George W. Matsell, New York's first chief of police, has a keen book on this business. (He was nominated in 1845 to the position, a newly created office.) Some of the words Matsell gives are 'queer,' counterfeit money; 'finniff', five dollars; 'hot' 'mob', 'drum', 'kick'—for pocket; 'job' for robbery, and so forth. All words at least a hundred years old and unchanged in their usage.

He gives other words, too, which are no longer familiar. Here's one to work out for yourself. Leather then, as now, means wallet. It's a pickpocket incident given by Matsel, set in a railroad station: 'The knuck was working the goaways at Jersey City, and had just touched the bloke's leather, as the bull bellowed for the last time, so the cove mizzled through jigger. The flat roared beef but it was no go, as the bull was going very mad!'"

Merle Constiner

(*Continued on page* 102)



In Your Mind's Eye

The Secret of MENTAL CREATING

IF you just like to dream, read no further. There comes a time when your fancies *must be* brought into light—and stand the test of every-day, hard realities. Are you one of the thousands—perhaps millions—whose thoughts never get beyond the stage of *wistful wishing*? Do you often come to from a daydream with the sigh, "If only I could bring it about—*make it real*?"

All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

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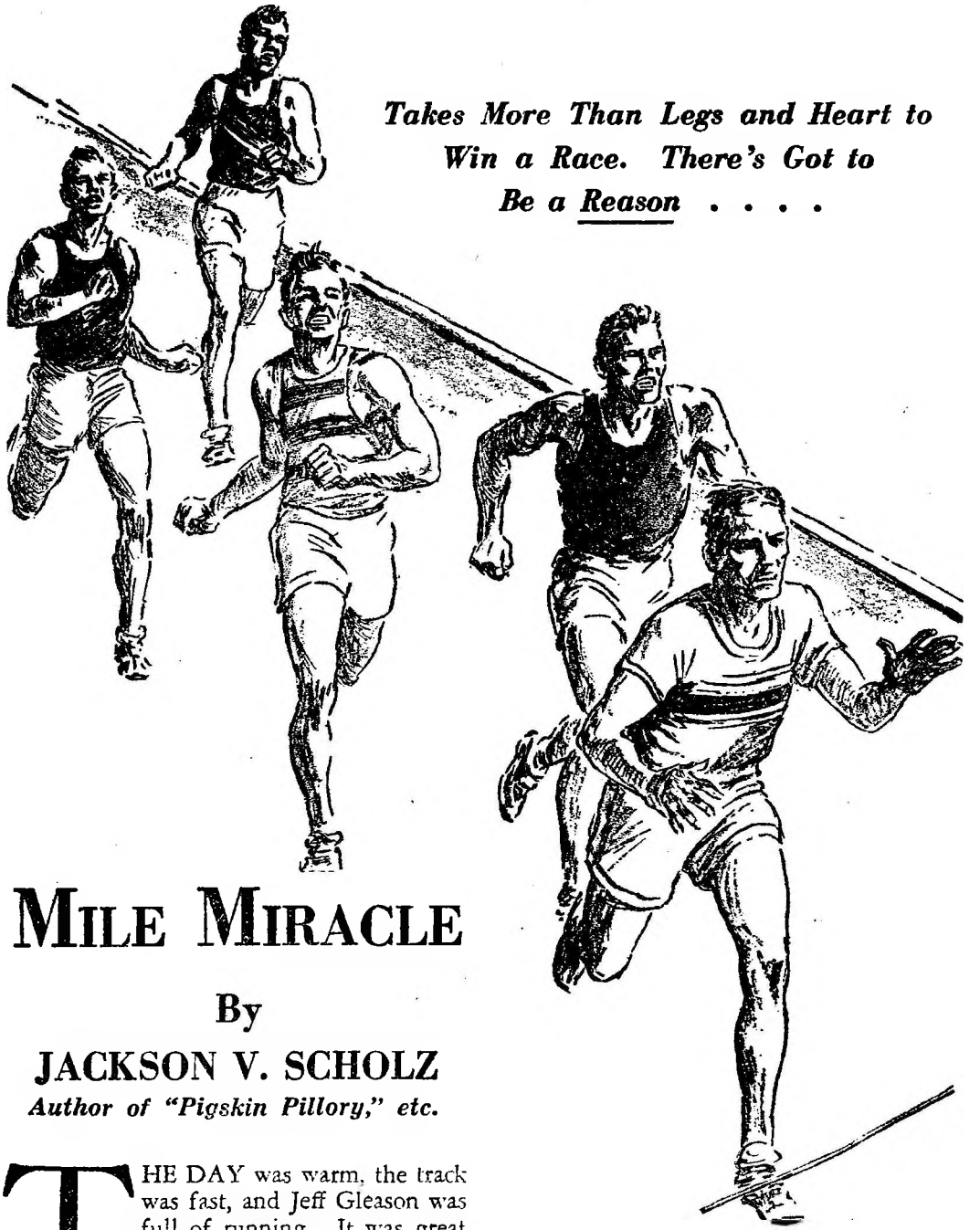


Takes More Than Legs and Heart to Win a Race. There's Got to Be a Reason . . . .

MILE MIRACLE

By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

Author of "Pigskin Pillory," etc.

THE DAY was warm, the track was fast, and Jeff Gleason was full of running. It was great to be back in action, he told himself, particularly this sort of action, great to feel the crispness of the cinders beneath his featherweight spiked shoes, great to recall the contrast between *these* cinders and the shifting volcanic ash of Iwo Jima.

It was his first time trial in three long years, a matter of no great importance to anyone but Jeff, but to him it was a moment of supreme achievement, marking a goal which he had believed at times he never would attain—to be home again with track shoes on his feet and to feel the satisfying freedom of a track suit.

He was running by himself against the clock. He was full of oats and bounce. Probably a little too full, because Coach

Tobin yelled at him as he passed the quarter mark:

"Sixty-two! Too fast! You've got three laps to go! Slow down!"

Too fast? Maybe so. The time had been when Jeff Gleason had scarcely needed a stop watch. He'd carried one in his head. Okay, he'd lost his sense of timing. So what? He'd get it back. Meanwhile he believed he could hand Coach Tobin a very pleasant surprise by proving what a stretch in the Marine Corps could do toward building stamina and endurance in a guy who had experienced it.

So he finished the second lap without reducing speed, his long legs moving with the smoothness of a lubricated crank shaft. The breath flowed in and out of his deep lungs easily. Tobin barked:

"Two-four!" Then followed him with, "Okay, go ahead and kill yourself!"

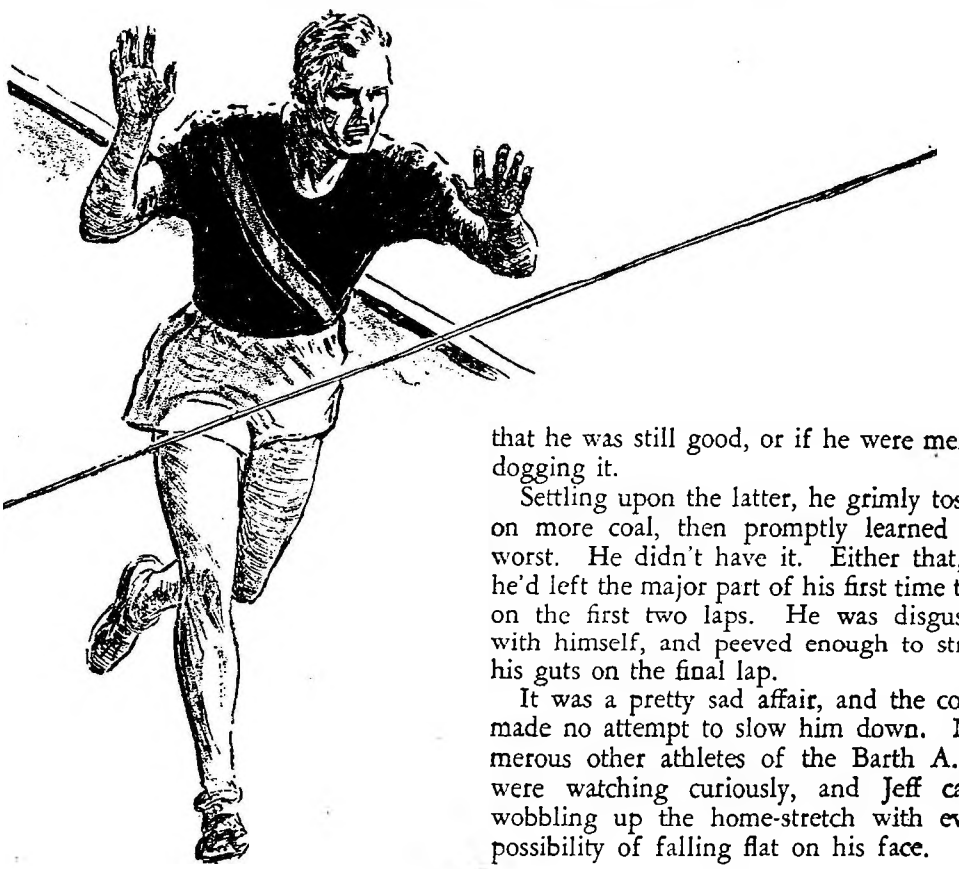
Jeff Gleason, however, was not considering suicide. He had profound faith in Coach Tobin's judgment, except that the present conditions were a little different. Tobin hadn't worked with him a great deal since Jeff's return, and the coach naturally assumed that it would take some time to build Jeff Gleason up to his former brilliance as a miler. It was a natural mistake.

Jeff still felt good. His breath was getting a little rough, of course, but that was normal at this stage. He was depending on his legs, and so far as he could tell they were still strong as a mule's.

So he held his pace. At least he thought he did, which made the shock he received at the three-quarter mark all the more unsettling. The coach called out his time with no side remarks.

"Three-twelve!"

Jeff almost faltered in his stride. Three-twelve. Six full seconds above his own estimated time. He had the quick, angry belief that the coach was kidding him, but his common sense assured him that Coach Tobin wasn't that sort of a kidder. Jeff therefore transferred the anger against himself, wondering if he had blundered in his belief



that he was still good, or if he were merely dogging it.

Settling upon the latter, he grimly tossed on more coal, then promptly learned the worst. He didn't have it. Either that, or he'd left the major part of his first time trial on the first two laps. He was disgusted with himself, and peeved enough to strain his guts on the final lap.

It was a pretty sad affair, and the coach made no attempt to slow him down. Numerous other athletes of the Barth A. C. were watching curiously, and Jeff came wobbling up the home-stretch with every possibility of falling flat on his face.

He didn't, though. He managed to keep his feet after he passed the finish line. He staggered to a halt, then bent down with his hands upon his knees while he regained his wind and a portion of his exhausted strength.

HE FELT like a fool, at first, but his sense of proportion came back quickly. There was a funny angle to the situation, and if there was anything funny about a situation, Jeff Gleason usually could spot it. He was geared that way. And now he saw himself as the great miler of three years ago, who had had himself and everybody else steamed up for his spectacular comeback. He was an atom bomb who had gone off like a Chinese firecracker. He straightened up, walked over to the coach, and asked anxiously:

"Did I do it?"

"Do what?"

"Crack four minutes?"

The coach studied his watch carefully. "Not quite," he said. "You missed by twenty seconds.

"Hum-m-m," mused Jeff. "I must have timed it wrong."

"A little," said the coach, and permitted his weathered face to crack into a grin. He was an old-timer, and he knew his job. He trained his men with all the meticulous attention to detail he had learned in his days of professional running. He had competed in Australia when the sport was at its peak. He had won the Christmas Handicap, the classic of professional sprint races, but had schooled himself in tolerance toward the modern amateur, admitting grudgingly that running made a better game than a profession.

"Did I stink pretty high?" asked Jeff, becoming practical.

"What do you think?"

Jeff scratched his chin. It was durable and blunt. The features of his face were also blunt, but far from stolid. They were mobile and expressive. His eyes, blue-green, had the disconcerting quality of adjusting themselves with swift but microscopic care to each new object which they touched. The blue predominated ordinarily. It indicated amiability. But when the green showed through it was a danger signal. It meant that heat was building up inside. Answering the coach's question, now, Jeff said:

"I think I'm better than I looked. I got pig-headed and tried to show off. I think if I'd run the way you told me to I could have shaved off plenty from my time."

"I think so too," said Tobin. "You're not quite ready yet, but I think you'll be as good as ever, if not better."

"I'm counting on it," Jeff said frankly.

The coach glanced at him sharply, then said dryly, "Yes, I know you are."

Jeff tried to fathom the implication behind the coach's tone, but Tobin's face and eyes were blank. Jeff, with his usual bluntness was about to make a try at getting to the bottom of the matter when Tobin's eyes moved past him and fastened upon something which brought a sour look to the coach's face. Jeff's curiosity made him turn, and when he saw the man who was approaching, his own face settled into wary lines.

RECOGNITION of the man was prompt, and not too pleasant. It was Archie Flynn, whom Jeff had no reason to remember with any degree of pleasure. Archie's two years in the service had filled him out with muscles which looked as if they might be useful, but had done nothing to subdue his chestiness, nor to reduce the self-importance of his bearing. Archie's hair was blond and thick and wavy. His eyes were china-blue, long-lashed and greedy. He was handsome if you liked the type. His mouth, as Jeff had seen it last, was petulant and immature.

Archie was a member of the other athletic club in Stanton, the Dillon A. C. Three years ago he had shown great promise as a miler, but had lacked the age and experience to take the number of a man like Jeff Gleason. Nevertheless, their meetings had been frequent. Archie had run a consistent, but not dangerous second to Jeff, and Archie invariably had behaved badly upon being licked. He hadn't been able to take it with any decency at all, hadn't been able to accept the fact that Jeff Gleason, a garage mechanic and an orphan, should be permitted to kick cinders into the face of Archie Flynn, whose dad Matt Flynn, owned a sizable chunk of Stanton, and went far toward bossing the small city. From Archie's standpoint it had

appeared to be a matter of gross social injustice, aside from the fact that he was naturally a stinking loser.

And now as Archie strode toward him with elegant nonchalance, Jeff couldn't see that Archie had changed much, unless for the worst. With the added muscle, which would probably bring him up near Jeff's weight of one hundred and sixty-five pounds, Archie had also added a phony worldliness which seemed to have its outlet in the belief that he could patronize the world at large, an excellent way, reflected Jeff, to invite a punch upon the nose.

Young Flynn stopped in front of Jeff, and with hands thrust deep into the pockets of expensive slacks, surveyed Jeff briefly with the air of a stock-buyer sizing up some inferior beef on the hoof. He finally said:

"Heard you were back, Gleason, and I thought I'd drop around and say hello."

"Okay," said Jeff. "Hello," and let it go at that.

Archie recognized the brush-off, drooped his eyelids for an instant, but stood there with the amused air of a man who had come upon an entertaining mission.

"Your first time trial, Gleason?" he inquired.

"Why, yes," said Jeff. "If you could call it that."

Archie turned toward Tobin, glanced at the watch in the coach's hand, and asked:

"How did he make out?"

"I'm satisfied," said Tobin flatly.

"So am I," smirked Archie, pulling a hand from his pocket and displaying the stopwatch in it. "I caught him, too. Terrific." He turned to Jeff again and said, "It looks like my year, Gleason."

"Well," said Jeff, looking Archie up and down. "You may be right. You're a big boy now, and you can't keep a good man down forever. We old-timers have got to let the kids take over some time."

Archie didn't quite know how to handle that one. It wasn't quite what he'd expected, and he didn't like to be patted on the head, since he obviously felt he was in the driver's seat. He said with some annoyance:

"Then you *admit* you're all washed up."

"Well, I didn't exactly admit it, Archie," said Jeff amiably. "But I've got to consider it a possibility. Of course, twenty-six isn't *too* old for a miler, but at that age you don't get back in shape so fast. And then, I've been away from it for three years, so maybe my prospects don't look very bright."

"You're damn right they don't look very bright," snapped Archie.

"Oh, I get it now," said Jeff, as if a great light had dawned upon him. "You came here to discourage me."

"You know why I'm here," rasped Archie, no longer a suave man of the world. "I'm here to say you're going to get paid back for all the lickings you handed me when I was learning to run. I've eaten plenty of your cinders, and now you're going to eat mine. I'm going to rub your nose in it, Gleason, and you're going to like it."

"I don't *have* to run against you," Jeff pointed out.

It was a new thought to Archie, and it shocked him to his heels. He almost turned pale. His expression made Jeff laugh, a belly laugh.

Archie Flynn said thinly, "Damn you, Gleason."

Coach Tobin spoke up sharply, "Okay, Archie, that's enough. Get off the field."

But Archie scarcely heard him. He had to get the matter straight. He glared at Jeff, demanding, "You mean you're not competing in our invitation games two weeks from Saturday?"

"Sure, Archie, I'll be there."

The other's breath exploded in a gusty, "Ah!" of satisfaction. And then he said, "I should have know you'd *have* to run. Well, I'll be seeing you." He turned and left the field.

When he had gone, Coach Tobin chewed the end from his cigar and spat it to the ground. He said:

"Nice boy."

"What's wrong with him?" asked Jeff.

"A spoiled brat, to start with. His dad's always given him everything he's yapped for. He's also the worst loser I've ever known, and I've known a lot. He's got a mean streak, too. Hasn't changed much, has he?"

Jeff scratched his chin and gave the matter careful thought. He finally said, "He has, a little. I almost got sore at him today, and, before, I always figured him as a nasty little punk who wasn't worth getting

sore at." As an afterthought he asked, "How good a miler is he now?"

Coach Tobin sobered. "They're keeping him pretty well under wraps until their invitation games," he said. "But from what leaks out he's really good."

"Can I lick him when I get in shape?"

"I honestly don't know."

Jeff shrugged, and said, "It probably doesn't matter much. Just so the folks in Stanton know I've run an honest race."

"That's important to you, isn't it?" asked the coach, the dry tone of criticism creeping in his voice again.

Jeff let defiance move into his eyes, and said, "It's damn important."

II

JEFF took his bath, got dressed, and started from the track field back to town. He caught a bus. The bus was fairly crowded, and as he moved toward the back he had the satisfaction of overhearing several subdued mutters, "That's Jeff Gleason," a thing to be readily expected in the city of Stanton, a characteristic of the place upon which Jeff had founded his own immediate hopes, and those of his two partners.

Stanton was unique, not that it should be filled with athletic fans, but that the fans were, for the most part, rabid track fans. It had been going on for some time, having received its early impetus back in 1924, when, incredibly enough, Stanton produced three members of the American Olympic which went to Paris. One of these men came through with a first place in the field events, one finished well up in the 110-meter high hurdles, and the other was on a winning relay team.

From then on, Stanton, agog with its own importance as a producer of track and field men, bent every effort to remain so, and succeeded. Their phenomenal success stemmed from the simple well-known theory that hundreds of people walk the streets of every city who are potential stars. Having no interest in running, jumping or weight tossing, these men have never tried their hands at it, and hence remain undiscovered. In Stanton, however, the interest was always alive and sizzling. Kids had it fed to them from birth, and usually acquired a pair of track shoes with their first street shoes. Talent was uncovered every day.

As a practical outlet for all this energy there were two athletic clubs in Stanton, plus an imposing public stadium with a lightning-fast four-forty track. The stadium had been donated by a former hammer-thrower by the name of Clark who had several hundred thousand dollars he didn't need.

The members of the Barth A. C. called themselves the Falcons, and the members of the Dillon A. C. called themselves the Lancers, and the rivalry between the two clubs, by comparison, would make Annapolis and West Point look like a pair of cuddling doves.

Unfortunately there was a line of demarcation between the Falcons and the Lancers which had nothing to do with the talents of their respective athletes. The Lancers, with few exceptions, came from families with abundant means. Their training quarters and equipment were of the best.

The Falcons, on the other hand were men who, through necessity, knew the value of a nickel. Their club facilities were less elaborate, a fact which didn't make them love the swanky Lancers any more. But the citizens of Stanton played no favorites. They were proud of all their athletes.

This was a fact which Jeff was pondering while he rode upon the bus. As he had previously admitted to Coach Tobin, it was vitally important that the Stanton fans should look upon Jeff Gleason with approval, because the Stanton fans had the power to make or break him in a business way.

It wouldn't have been so vital if Jeff were the only one concerned, but his two partners, Barney Todd and Tex Hackett were also in the business up to their necks, and they were in it solely through the instigation and the sales talk of Jeff Gleason. Jeff was the originator of the idea, and, as such he felt the entire burden of responsibility.

Barney and Tex had been his special pals on Iwo Jima. The business pact had been developed between lulls in fighting, contingent on the belief that they would all get out alive, a miracle which ultimately took place. Jeff had told them:

"There's a big opening for another taxi company in Stanton."

"Can we get a franchise?" Tex had asked.

"I think we can," said Jeff. He told them then about the athletic set-up in his own home town. "They're loyal to their athletes," he said. "And, if you will permit a modest appraisal of myself, I was quite some punkins before I left. I ought to be just as good or better when I get back. If I am, we'll have all the customers we need. It's quite a big gamble. Want to take it?"

Both Tex and Barney had agreed to shoot the works. They ran across another element of chance a little later when they learned that the best deal they could get was a temporary franchise—for a year.

"Looks fishy," Jeff had said. "Shall we turn it down?"

"Not too fishy," Tex had argued practically. "It looks at least as if they're giving us a chance to make good. And if we don't make good they *ought* to lift the franchise. No town wants a fleet of broken-down crates and sloppy taxi drivers on the streets. Let's take 'em up on it."

THEY had done just that, and matters had worked out with surprising smoothness. They had obtained their GI loans with a minimum of difficulty, and had bought ten battered cars from the army. All three men were topnotch mechanics, and they soon had the ten cars covered with new paint and running sweetly. They called themselves the Ajax Taxi Company. They hired some ex-GI's for drivers, and their investment was beginning to look sound. Their only rival was the Stanton Taxi Service, which accepted the invasion with apparent calm. There was business enough for everybody.

The three partners had dinner that evening in a lunchroom. Tex was big, rawboned, deliberate of manner. Barney was his counterpart, blocky, solid and quick moving. They had finished dinner at the tile-topped table. Barney and Tex lit cigarettes. Jeff wanted one, but had sworn off during training season. Tex leaned back, stretched out his legs and drawled:

"Okay, Jeff. Spill it. What's on your mind?"

"Huh?" grunted Jeff, surprised.

"Give out," said Barney. "You're worried about something."

Jeff looked a little sheepish. He'd forgotten how close these men were to him, close enough to interpret his moods accurately. He scratched his chin, and his grin was apologetic when he admitted:

"Well, maybe I am a little worried, but I guess I didn't realize it myself until right now."

"What about?" asked Tex.

"That's the hell of it," said Jeff. "I can't put my finger on any definite reason for being worried. It's more of a premonition than anything else, a sort of hunch that I may have dragged you guys into a mess."

"We're doin' fine so far," Barney pointed out.

"Sure," admitted Jeff. "But I'm beginning to wonder if I've figured all the angles."

"Such as?" encouraged Tex.

"Archie Flynn, Matt Flynn's son. I met him again today, and he's still a stinker. He's also one of the best milers in the country."

"I still don't get it," said Tex flatly. "It looks to me like the set-up is still like it was when we moved in. We knew that Matt Flynn just about runs this town, and that he owns controlling interest in the Stanton Taxi Service. But we also know he swings his weight through politics, that he's a smart operator and is too foxy to buck strong public opinion. Our job is to build enough good will in this place so Matt Flynn won't dare to make a move to push us out. Am I right?"

"To a certain point," conceded Jeff. "The catch is that it all hinges on me. Not that I've got brains or a winning personality, but because I was born with a good pair of legs. That's what this town will fall for quicker than anything else, and I've still got a jittery hunch that my legs can make or break us."

"Nuts," said Tex. "I'll admit it's not like you to look for ghosts in dark corners. You're a born optimist, but I think you're going off half-cocked this time. What if Archie Flynn does lick you? What difference does it make so long as you give him a good race and the fans get their money's worth?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to *lick*

him," Jeff insisted doggedly. "And don't ask me why."

"Quit crystal-gazing," said Tex bluntly. "You're not the type."

BARNEY cleared his throat and drew the attention of the other two. "Maybe Jeff's got a gift for crystal gazing," Barney declared soberly. "I was talking to one of the Stanton Taxi drivers this afternoon. He's a good guy. He was on Iwo Jima, too. He told me that Matt Flynn is turning over his interest in the Stanton Taxi outfit to his kid, Archie. It's straight dope."

There was a brief heavy silence around the table. Tex finally broke it gruffly with:

"So what? The set-up's still the same."

Jeff nodded reluctantly, admitting, "Yeah, I guess it is. We'll still do business if I can show the folks a little speed."

"Then stop hanging crepe," Tex ordered. "If the time ever comes when we have to do any *real* worrying, Barney and I will help you with it."

Jeff shook his shoulders, grinned, and said, "Damn good advice. I'll try to follow it."

"Good," said Tex. "Tackle one job at a time, and your job right now is to get those legs of yours in shape."

"Can do," said Jeff.

He felt a lot better after the talk with his two pals. Airing his worries had served to get them off his chest. Furthermore, he wasn't the type to fret too much about intangibles, and it was good to know that if any real cause for worry came, he wouldn't have to worry all alone.

He still felt the heavy burden of responsibility, but he didn't let it hound him to the point of interfering with his mental attitude toward training. He found it easy to bridge the three-year interval and to fall readily back into the old routine. He permitted himself no more interludes of cocky confidence, accepting the simple fact that Coach Tobin knew more about the running game than he did, so he followed instructions to the letter and began to get results—encouraging results—very encouraging. On his final time trial before the Dillon Invitation games, Coach Tobin clocked him in four-ten.

"And in a real race," Tobin told him, "you'll shave off several seconds from that time. I'll be surprised if Flynn's as good as that."

The trial had been held secretly. Coach Tobin had sent his squad to the showers. Spectators and reporters had left the field, then Jeff had come out again to run his mile, the time of which would remain a secret between Jeff and Tobin.

It was slightly on the dramatic side, perhaps, but Kirby the Dillon coach had asked for it by spreading the same veil of mystery over Archie Flynn's performances. There were rumors, lots of them, but no one knew for sure just how fast Archie was. And that's the way, decided Tobin, it would be with Jeff.

There was nothing further needed to stir up violent interest in the classic event of the Dillon Games, the mile event. It held the center of the stage, assuring a sell-out of Clark Stadium.

As an invitation meet no great club prestige was at stake. That would all come later when the high point of the season would be reached in a dual meet closed to the Falcons and the Lancers. The championship of Stanton would be decided then. It was a local legal holiday.

On the morning of the meet, Barney and Tex refused to let Jeff lift a hand, and they were even concerned about the lifting of his feet.

"Get off your legs," they ordered Jeff repeatedly as he prowled about the garage and taxi office.

Jeff would sit down obediently for a few moments, but he couldn't shake his muscles loose. He was jumpy as a cat, so he'd have to get up and move around some more. They'd tell him to sit down again, and finally Jeff snarled:

"How about mindin' your own damn business! *I'm* running this race!"

Barney winked at Tex and said, "I think the champ's in shape."

And Jeff hoped desperately that Barney Todd was right.

III

JEFF'S nerves got steadily worse as game-time approached. When he reached the locker room beneath the stadium his throat was dry as dust, and his chest felt cramped and tight. His condition worried him.

In the past he had never been phlegmatic before a race, but he had always been reasonably calm and reasonably assured. He tried to tell himself that his long lay-off made him feel this way, that he had forgotten how to bring himself to the proper mental attitude before a race. It may have been sound reasoning, but it didn't help him any at the moment. He found himself being forced reluctantly to the admission he had never run a race of this importance in the past. There had never been this much at stake.

He tried to use his head, demanding angrily of himself what *was* at stake. He didn't know, could not put it into actual words, and his failure only made things worse. It opened the door to the chill draft of premonition. It swirled about him, leaving his hands cold and clammy.

He also considered the alarming possibility he might be over-trained, that Tobin had carried him past the peak, that he was stale. He rejected the theory promptly, knowing that staleness did not take this form. Maybe he was just plain scared.

He felt a little better when Tobin came into the dressing room, studied him critically, and said:

"You'll do."

"I'd hate to race a turtle right this minute," Jeff said grimly.

"Get into your duds," said Tobin. "Go out and jab your spikes in the track. It'll cool you off."

Jeff nodded, and started to undress. His hands were none too steady, but by moving slowly he controlled them. When his suit was on he taped his feet, wrapping about a two-inch width of black friction tape about the insteps. He liked the black tape better than adhesive tape. There was more give to it. He pulled on a pair of light, tight-fitting cotton socks which had been cut off at shoe-top length. He then put on his sweat suit. It was a warm day, but the protection of the suit would keep his muscles nice and loose. Then with his spiked shoes in his hand, he left the locker room and headed for the field.

It was a nice layout, with concrete bleachers on each side of the track. The place would seat some twenty thousand fans, and the seats were filling rapidly. In a short time they'd be full.

Jeff sat on the infield turf and put his shoes on. He inspected the laces carefully, and found them to be sound. A broken shoe lace was an easy way to lose a race. When the shoes were snug he stood erect and stepped upon the track.

He started jogging easily, and soon felt the wisdom of Tobin's advice. The feel of the track did much to help his nerves. It was firm and springy, but his spikes came clean—no cupping. As he approached the grandstand he was recognized. A yell went up, and Jeff Gleason liked the sound of it. The fans were glad to see him back. No doubt about it, and they let him know it.

By the time he reached the dressing room again he believed he had things pretty well under control. He still felt feverish and dry, but not as if he wanted to chew nails. Coach Tobin told him to stretch out on a padded rubbing table until his race was called.

JEFF was all right at first, but the waiting began to get him. The mile run, as the feature event had been placed deliberately late upon the program. Jeff tried to relax, but the muscles of his legs kept twitching. He tried to keep his eyes closed, but red dots would jump about inside the lids, so he found it easier to keep them open, to stare stonily at the concrete ceiling of the dressing room.

He cursed himself as a weak-kneed, jelly-spined fool, but that didn't help much either. And when an official stuck his head inside the door and yelled, "First call for the mile!" Jeff Gleason came off the rubbing table as if someone had given him a hot-foot. He grabbed his shoes and started for the field.

As he sat on the grass again to don his spikes he noted the change in the atmosphere of the stadium. It seemed filled with static now, quivering with the electric impulses which came in waves from the crowd of track fans. They were keyed up for the main event, tense and waiting.

"What are *they* hopped up about?" Jeff grimly asked himself. "What if they were in *my* shoes?"

But they weren't. Jeff Gleason had to wear his own shoes, and as he laced them up he deliberately left slack. He stepped to the track and started his careful warm-up.

He heard his name called from all sides, but he scarcely noticed. He was watching a figure jogging toward him on the track, a streamlined figure with blond wavy hair.

It was the first time in three years Jeff Gleason had seen Archie Flynn in a track suit, and the change was almost startling. Archie had filled out in the right places. He had added weight and muscle without jeopardizing flexibility. His build, now, was magnificent—and he knew it. He pranced along the track like a cock race horse, giving the crowd it's money's worth. There were murmurs of appreciation from the bleachers.

Then Archie put on an ostentatious act. Coming up to Jeff he stopped, stuck out his hand with great goodfellowship, and said loudly:

"Hi-ya, Jeff. Glad to see you. Great day for a track meet, eh?"

Jeff played up. He shook hands with Archie, and said, "Sure, Archie, a fine day for a meet."

Still smiling brightly, Archie said just loud enough for Jeff to hear, "But a tough day for you, Gleason. A very sad day indeed."

Jeff beamed broadly, slapped Archie jovially on the shoulder, and said softly:

"It's perfectly amazing, my young friend, how a guy like you can smell up a whole stadium of this size."

Jeff went on with his jogging then, feeling better. His stimulating contact with Archie had taken some of the edge off his nervousness. He had studied Archie carefully while talking to him, and had come away with a very enlightening fact, which was, that Archie, despite his big display of confidence, was a badly worried man, and just a little scared. Jeff knew the twitchy symptoms.

Archie Flynn had rather obviously fallen victim to the war of nerves started by his own coach, Kirby. As matters stood, Archie knew no more about Jeff than Jeff knew about Archie, and Jeff was ashamed, now, that he hadn't realized this before and let it comfort him. Maybe his present comfort was too late. Maybe he'd worried away just enough energy to make the difference between defeat and victory.

"Cut it out!" he warned himself. "Flynn's in the same boat."

The loudspeaker boomed, "All milers report to the clerk of the course at the starting post!"

Jeff started from the track, and walked across the field, breathing deeply, trying to stretch the persistent tightness from his lungs. There would be six starters in the race, two more local men, Jim Kent and Andy Marcello, and two from out of town, Joe Metz and Wally Brady.

THE race, as Jeff had previously known, was a deliberate set-up for him and Archie Flynn. None of the other men should be able to run within ten seconds of them, a careful arrangement which assured the fact that Jeff and Archie could battle it out without fear of unexpected competition which might complicate the duel.

When the milers gathered at the starting post the clerk of the course checked their names perfunctorily, then put six numbered, flat-sided Kelly pool marbles in a hat and held the hat slightly above his head, making it necessary for each competitor to reach above his own eye-level in order to take a marble from the hat. When Jeff's turn came he pulled out a number and glanced at it without much interest. In this particular race he didn't care where his position might be, inside, outside, or in the middle. It was a small field of starters, and there was only one man he had to beat.

He was not disappointed, then, when he found he had drawn the fifth lane. Brady was outside him. Archie had drawn the pole, and the other three men were in between them. The starter said:

"All right, boys, let's get going."

IV

JEFF stepped off the track and peeled his sweat suit. His skin was moist with perspiration, and his joints felt well lubricated, almost too well in fact because his knees felt watery and weak. Kneeling on his sweat shirt he carefully tightened the laces of both shoes, a last-minute precaution which always imparted a temporary lightness to his feet. He saw with interest that Archie intended to go right out from the crack of the gun. Brady, on the outside, was also digging holes, but the others, including Jeff, preferred to take a

standing start. Jeff had the ridiculous feeling that, if he crouched for a start, his knees might be too weak to bring him upright.

The starter said, "All right, men, go to your marks."

Jeff wiggled small cups in the cinders for his feet, and shifted his weight forward on his legs. The silence of the fans was breathless and complete, as if the huge crowd had sucked all their air from the big stadium. The starter said:

"Get set!"

Jeff leaned a little farther forward, his chest still tight, his stomach quivering.

The starter's gun crashed loudly in the silence. Jeff let his forward weight carry him from the starting line. He nursed his legs for the first few strides, wondering grimly how they intended to behave. He heard the gusty thunder of released voices from the fans, and the clamor swept across the field like a wave which carried weight and substance. Jeff almost felt as if he had to push against it.

The first few seconds of the race were jumbled with confused impressions, but gradually the pattern of his thoughts took shape. His first concise awareness was purely physical, having to do entirely with the action of his legs and muscles. With a surge of intense gratitude he found the action of his running to be sound and smooth. The pre-race nervous sickness was no longer there. The mere fact of being in actual competition, of finding himself in an authentic race, bridged the three-year gap of his lay-off, and catapulted him directly back into the days when running was an exact and pleasurable science.

The feel of the track was imparted through his spikes. It was springy, sound and durable, something upon which a man could pin his faith and judgment. His legs were strong again, each fiber fitting snuggly into its accepted place, willing and eager to obey him. The constrictive band about his chest was gone, permitting the easy passage of his breath. The brassy taste was no longer in his throat, and the feverish burning of his eyes was eased.

He accepted the miracle gratefully, then thrust it sensibly from his mind as he let his thoughts converge and concentrate on the immediate problems of the race. He didn't believe there would be many, except those concerned directly with Archie Flynn, but Jeff had learned at an early stage of racing that no one but a fool would underestimate any of his competitors.

He noted, now, that Archie had made good his early determination to grab the lead at once. He had gone out from his marks with a speed which had assured his retention of the pole. He was swinging steadily in the lead, intent upon reaching the turn first.

Wally Brady must have had some idea along those lines, because he had driven hard from his holes on Jeff's right. He held his speed until he was several strides in front of Jeff, then cut across toward the pole.

Archie heard Brady coming, though, and stepped up his pace enough to suggest he would permit no monkey business. Brady took the hint and swung behind him into second place.

Jeff made no attempt to cut in until he surveyed the field. He knew the tendency toward crowding at the start of a race, and he also knew the danger of getting spiked or bumped off stride while the men were still in their early stages of blind excitement.

He saw that the field was too well bunched to permit him to edge his way into the pole. Marcello was holding a close third, with Kent and Metz behind him. Jeff had the choice of running wide on the turn, or of dropping into last place. He chose the latter, knowing he would have to travel too much extra distance by running wide.

Archie shot a quick glance across his shoulder, saw Jeff in the caboose position, and made the most of it. He lengthened his stride a bit and began to move away. Brady stuck to his heels, but Marcello refused, and the gap began to open up.

Jeff didn't like the looks of it. He knew that a miler would have to be exceptionally good to hit such a stiff early pace without taking too much out of himself, but the catch was, Archie Flynn just *might* be as good as that. It was what Jeff *didn't* know.

At any rate, Jeff grudgingly admitted, it was sound race psychology whether Archie intended it that way or not. It forced Jeff to take the sort of action he didn't want to take, because Kent and Metz were holding

a pace which was definitely too slow. Even Marcello was moving away from them.

So Jeff swung wide upon the turn. He came abreast of Metz, keeping as close as he dared without touching the man beside him. Jeff passed Metz and swung abreast of Kent. Kent glanced at him, and Jeff feared for a moment that Kent might balk at being passed, but he didn't. Jeff moved ahead of him and stepped into the pole behind Marcello halfway around the turn.

A quick warning jumped into Jeff's mind. Marcello was one of the Dillon A. C. milers. The Lancers had another pair of milers considerably better than Marcello, but who had been kept out of this particular race in order to make things easier for Jeff and Archie.

Or *was* that the real reason, Jeff asked himself? Wasn't it possible that Marcello was in there specifically to make trouble for Jeff Gleason?

And then Jeff grunted, mildly disgusted at himself because of his suspicions. Kirby, the Lancer coach, might be foxy, but he wasn't crooked. Besides, the Stanton fans held sportmanship upon a pedestal. They would stand for nothing shady.

To prove this to himself, Jeff eased more power into his stride and came beside Marcello. Marcello might have held him on the outside had he wished, but he glanced at Jeff and let him pass. Jeff used valuable breath in saying, "Thanks, Andy," as he moved ahead.

ARCHIE FLYNN, having made good his spurt around the turn, had settled down to a steady pace. Brady was moving along five yards behind him, and Jeff was ten yards behind Brady. Fifteen yards was a husky lead, even at this stage of the race, and Jeff felt the sudden urge of a novice to cut it down while he still felt fresh.

The fans weren't much help either. Some of Jeff's backers gave way to the excited impulse of telling him how to run his race.

"Get up there, Jeff!" he heard them bellow. "Get in the race, boy! Don't let him walk away with it!"

It was a temptation not to give them what they wanted, but Jeff was too old a hand at the game to let himself get panicked. All of his old racing instinct was back with him now, his calm acceptance of the factors involved, and his deliberate attitude toward meeting them. More valuable than this was the return of his instinctive sense of timing. He had tried it out in training, and he found it accurate. He didn't have to carry a stopwatch with him, as the great Nurmi had done, Jeff had the watch inside his head.

Despite the jockeying he had done, he knew, now, he was slightly behind schedule, and could afford to step things up a bit—not much. So he eased a little power into his stride as he reached the head of the backstretch, and slowly the distance lessened between him and the men ahead. It didn't lessen enough to suit his fans. But it suited Jeff.

Both Archie and Brady held their positions down the backstretch, but as they reached the end of the straightaway, Jeff had cut down Brady's lead to five yards. He noted Brady to be a strong, heavy-legged runner with a deep chest and a determined set to his neck.

When Archie swung into the turn he was far enough ahead for Jeff to get his first good look at him, and the look was nothing to arouse elation in Jeff Gleason. Archie Flynn had class written all over him. He moved with an effortless, automatic stride which didn't waste an inch of distance or an ounce of strength. His feet, remaining low at the end of each stride, came forward again in a brief economical arc, to reach the ground once more, straight-kneed. His body angle was exact, and the action of his arms was beautiful.

The quick picture of such perfection brought a cold spot between Jeff's shoulder blades, but he warmed the spot with the knowledge that there was no way of knowing what Archie's heart was like. And in the final yards of a mile race, Jeff knew it was the things inside a man which counted.

Jeff let his momentum carry him around the turn, content, for the moment, with his position. The three men held their five-yard intervals up the straightaway. Archie was setting a sound pace which suited Jeff at this early stage of the race. He shook his muscles loose and tried to keep his mind a blank, but when he approached the turn he noticed suddenly that Brady was running almost on Archie's heels. The only solution to that was that Archie had deliberately slowed up. Jeff wondered why. Was Ar-

chie trying to rest up a little from his open-spurt around the turn? Had he become confused, through inexperience, in his sense of pace? Or was it a deliberate grandstand play to let Jeff catch him, thereby arousing uncomfortable speculation in Jeff's mind. But Jeff refused to let it bother him.

He pulled slowly up to Brady, noting that Brady, too, was apparently confused by Archie's tactics, not knowing exactly what to do about it. He made up his mind, however, at a bad time for Jeff. Jeff overhauled him at the turn, swung wide and uncorked a quick sprint intended to carry him around Brady and Archie.

But Brady had the same idea at the same time. He swung out in front of Jeff so suddenly that Jeff had to break his stride in order to keep from raking Brady with his spikes. It was an upsetting thing to happen at any stage of a race, but Jeff held his temper, regained his balance, and stayed on Brady's heels.

Jeff was braced for almost anything just then, knowing that Archie might decide to join the sprint and make a brawl of it. Surprisingly, however, Archie permitted both Brady and Jeff to pass him. Jeff was ready to hold his sprint if Brady slowed up too much, but Brady settled down to a respectable pace, and Jeff fell in behind him. Archie accelerated his own pace then, and stuck with Jeff.

Jeff wondered what it was all about, but in order not to keep from worrying about it, he finally decided that Archie had merely delegated the job of pace-setting to Jeff Gleason, secure in his own mind, probably, that he could pass Jeff any time he wanted to, benefitting meanwhile from Jeff's long experience at close timing.

V

JEFF watched Brady closely, because he had him pegged by this time. Brady was not a deliberately mean runner, he was merely the pugnacious fighting type which never knew when it was licked. He would make an honest dogged effort to run his own race, holding blindly to the pig-headed belief he was as good as any miler in the world.

He started to slow down before reaching the second back stretch, and Jeff had no choice but to swing wide off the turn and try to pass him on the straightaway. It didn't work, because as soon as Brady heard Jeff coming up he turned on more speed and refused to let Jeff pass.

Jeff eased up, then tried it again in the middle of the straightaway—same result. Brady set out again like a horse with the bit in his teeth, and Jeff was forced to change pace again.

The crowd didn't like it, but Brady didn't care. He was running his own race, and to hell with public opinion.

Jeff rather admired the guy, but had no intention of letting him gum things up. Jeff set his own pace after that, running slightly wide of Brady so that Brady could turn the juice off and on as often as he wanted to. Archie continued to match his pace to Jeff's, and it was a trifle disconcerting for Jeff to know how smoothly Archie was coasting along upon his heels.

Jeff had to run slightly wide upon the turns. He didn't like the idea, but it had to be that way until the ambitious Brady ran himself into the ground. It was nerve-wracking, in a way, to have a guy like that ahead of him, but Jeff tried not to let it bother him any more than necessary. He set a stiff pace, clocking himself as accurately as he could, balancing his remaining strength against the remaining time.

Brady lasted longer than Jeff believed he would. He lasted until they reached the final turn on the third lap. He had finally run some common sense into himself, and he must have realized that, if he wanted to lick anyone, it would have to be one of the lesser lights—not Jeff or Archie Flynn. At any rate when Jeff came abreast of him again, Brady renounced his fantastic ideas of being a hero. He refused the challenge, and Jeff slid past him to take the lead.

As he moved in to the pole ahead of Brady, Jeff flashed a glance behind. He saw that Archie had kept the gap well closed, but that Marcello, Kent and Metz were running in a bunch some twenty-five yards behind.

Jeff swung into the straightaway, and as he came toward the start of the final lap, he decided his condition was as good as could be expected at that point. He was feeling the strain, but not seriously. His legs were still reasonably loose, and his

breathing sound. He still had plenty of running in him.

And it wasn't long before he knew he'd need it. He heard the light drum of Archie's footsteps closing in on him. He heard the shrieking of Archie's fans, and knew that Archie was about to make a bid to pass him, now that the troublesome Brady had been eliminated.

Jeff considered the matter carefully, and decided it was not the time to fight things out with Archie. Jeff had full confidence in his own speed when it was needed. He was fast for a miler, could shade fifty seconds in a 440-race, and he believed, now, it would be sensible to save his sprint until he needed it.

When they reached the starting post to start the final lap, the gun went off, and Archie uncorked his passing spurt in the best grandstand tradition, suggesting he had merely waited for the final lap to run Jeff Gleason in the ground.

He went by fast and held his speed to open a five-yard gap. Jeff refused to be thrown off stride. He eased a little more power into his legs, slightly startled at how much the effort cost him. He felt the warning fingers of fatigue reach for his muscles. Archie fell back into a steady stride and held the five-yard lead.

The guy ahead of him still looked good, Jeff decided ruefully, but he didn't put too much stock in the decision. He'd seen plenty of form-runners enter the last lap looking fresh enough, only to fold up in the final yards.

So Jeff stuck calmly in his spot, keeping his mind and eyes alert, determined not to be lured from the vitally important job of running his own race.

As they approached the middle of the final backstretch, Jeff noted the first signs of fatigue in Archie Flynn. Archie's stride still seemed smooth enough, but he was working harder with his arms, driving them in a jerky way which indicated he was trying to give his legs some badly needed help. It was a message of good news which lifted some of the growing dullness from Jeff's muscles. He was saving a sprint which he was gambling was a better sprint than Archie could uncork.

They labored down the backstretch and had almost reached the final turn when an unexpected factor came into the race with cyclone violence. A big dog of uncertain breed, but playful mood, appeared from nowhere. He came bounding on the track, yapping with delight to find someone who possibly might play with him. Archie seemed the most likely prospect, so the dog came at him in full tongue.

The effect on Archie Flynn was prompt and positive. Being obviously scared of dogs to start with, he easily misinterpreted the animal's intentions. Archie thought, undoubtedly, he was about to lose a leg.

He acted that way, at any rate. He jumped from the track to the infield turf, backed away from the playful brute, then stopped and poised his leg for a kick in self-defense. The dogs stopped short and stared at him reproachfully, while nearby officials came charging to the scene.

Several thoughts flashed through Jeff's mind during the brief interval, but he wasn't sure of the source from which any of the thoughts stemmed. Their combined effect, however, was to bring him to a halt, whereas he could have gone on to win the race with ease.

He scarcely believed he had been actuated by pure sportsmanship. When he analyzed it afterward he believed it might have been a combination of this and other things—sheer surprise, and the more selfish motive of wanting to win a clean-cut victory for the effect it would have on his taxi business.

At any rate, he stopped, and the crowd chose to believe he was being a super-sports-

man. Their impulsive ovation embarassed Jeff, and even had its effect upon the approaching milers who seemed to want to share Jeff's glory. They too slowed down until the dog was grabbed and the situation brought under control.

The entire incident was concluded in the space of several seconds. Archie, taking stock of the dizzy situation, waited until an official had collared the dog, then Archie stepped back upon the track and resumed the race where it had been left off. Jeff played the hand which had been dealt him. He fell in five yards behind. The other milers held back dutifully, and the race was under way again to the appreciative bellowing of the crowd.

Jeff felt like a fool, but he didn't let it affect his common sense. He still had a race to win, and he set about it grimly, uncomfortably aware that the brief stop hadn't done him any good. It had given his muscles a chance to tighten up, and he had trouble making them obey him.

It scared him for a moment, until he noticed Archie was having the same difficulty. The legs of the men ahead of him were also tight and unresponsive. He was having trouble forcing them in motion.

Both men were running easier, however, when they reached the home stretch. Jeff had pulled within three yards of Archie when they faced the final brutal yards which would lead them to the tape.

Jeff began to wonder desperately if he had saved a sprint, if he could force his dead legs into the final violent effort. The short stop had also broken the rhythm of his breathing, and the metal band was beginning to close around his lungs again.

But he knew he'd have to sprint or lose, so he gathered his remaining forces and tossed them recklessly into the final gamble. His legs protested, gritted with pain at the injustice of it, but Jeff forced them doggedly to greater speed.

They had it—some, at least. The three-yard gap closed up. Jeff moved slightly wide to pass, trying hard to keep from staggering.

BUT he didn't pass. Archie, too, had something left, something he had hoarded for the moment. He brought it out and staged his sprint, a lumbering, uneven gallop, but it served its purpose. It met and held Jeff's challenge—for a while, at least. The guy had guts. He could keep on racing past the point where he had lost his form.

The tape was twenty yards away, and they were side by side, battling with the final ounces of their strength. Jeff felt the agony of each step and breath, but he kept his head down with an effort, and he kept his thoughts clear.

They were clear enough, with fifteen yards to go, to tell him he could win the race. Experience, instinct told him he had more stuff left than Archie. He moved ahead by inches. He heard the harsh whistling of Archie's breath, his futile grunts at knowing he was through.

There was almost daylight now between the pair. The tape was glittering ten yards away. Jeff gathered himself for the final drive—then the track gave way beneath his left shoe spikes.

NOT much, just slightly, but enough to slow him down. He knew in a flash of choking bitterness that he had struck a soft spot in the track. It was inexcusable that such a spot should be there, but Jeff had found it and it forced his stride to shorten at a vulnerable time.

He made a violent effort to regain what he had lost, but the distance was too short. Archie passed him as he struggled. Archie lunged into the tape ahead of him.

A portion of the fans were stunned, those who had wanted Jeff to win, and who had seen him with sure victory in his hands. And Jeff himself was stunned beyond the point of thinking clearly at the moment. He could only wonder at the over-all effect of losing the race might have on him. He didn't know, and couldn't dope it out right now.

But he did the proper thing when he had regained his breath to some extent. He approached Archie who was walking slowly on the grass to get back his own wind. Jeff struck out his hand and said:

"Nice race, Archie. You had the stuff."

Archie shook hands and said, "Thanks, Gleason, but it wouldn't have been even close if it hadn't been for that damn dog. I hate dogs, and he scared a good ten yards out of me."

"Tough break," observed Jeff noncommitally.

"Maybe not so tough," said Archie.

Something in the other's tone flashed a quick warning to Jeff's brain. He waited, knowing Archie was leading up to something. Archie took his time, and finally said:

"You ran a good race yourself, Gleason. I mean a *smart* race."

"I'm listening," said Jeff.

Archie shrugged. "Are you waiting for me to thank you for letting me win the race? You had two chances and tossed 'em both."

"Maybe you'd better make that a little clearer," Jeff said quietly.

Archie made a gesture of impatience with his hand, then said irritably, "Don't play *me* for a dope, Gleason, because I don't play *you* for one. You know the answers. So do I."

He turned abruptly and walked away. Jeff watched him go, and as his thoughts fell into their proper slots, a cold chill traveled up his spine.

VI

HE STARTED toward the locker room a short time later. As he passed the stands the fans all gave him a big, approving hand. They were sincere about it now, at any rate. But, Jeff reflected glumly, what would they think about it later under the prod of subtle propaganda?

Coach Tobin stopped him, saying, "You had a tough break, Jeff, in the last ten yards."

"You saw it?" Jeff asked gratefully.

"Yeah, you stepped in a soft spot."

"But what is a soft spot doing in *that* track."

"Easy enough to explain," said Tobin, a wry look on his face. "We've got so many track-crazy kids in this town that a lot of them sneak in the stadium to practice starts. That would be all right, but some of 'em dig their holes any old place. They cover 'em up when they're through, but sometimes they don't tamp 'em down. You had the lousy luck to step in one."

Jeff nodded. Tobin studied him and said:

"It's a good alibi for losing, if you want one. I'll back you up on it."

"Thanks, Coach," said Jeff. "But I don't want an alibi. All I want to do is race that guy again."

"You will," said Tobin. "And I think you'll lick him next time."

"So do I."

THE next few days were uneventful, except that ugly premonition was building up in Jeff again. He didn't discuss it with his partners, but he couldn't throw it off. And when his premonitions began to bear fruit in a slow, inexorable way, Jeff wished he hadn't been so righteous and bull-headed about refusing Tobin's offer to explain to the Stanton fans why Jeff had lost the race to Archie. It was too late, now, to do anything about it.

The point was reached, however, when Jeff had to hold a gloomy business conference with his partners. They sat around the table in the lunchroom after dinner.

"Our business is beginning to drop off," Jeff opened bluntly. "You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah," said Tex. And Barney nodded.

"Do you know why?" demanded Jeff.

"Only vaguely," admitted Tex. "I've heard several rumors which I can't quite hitch together."

"Same with me," said Barney, then added frankly, "but, I know it's got something to do with the race you ran against that Flynn."

"That pegs it," Jeff said thinly. "And it proves my hunch wasn't as crazy as it sounded. I didn't know exactly why, but I knew I had to lick that guy."

"Okay," said Tex impatiently. "Your hunch was sound. But what's happening to our business?"

"Mass psychology," said Jeff.

"Nuts," said Barney.

"And here's the way it works," said Jeff, ignoring him. "Archie Flynn's out to get me—we all concede that, he had the first chance dropped right in his lap, and was clever enough to use it. All he had to do was to get the rumor started that I'd deliberately tossed the race to him—for business reasons."

There was a short silence while Tex and Barney thought it over. Tex got it first.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "The angle is that you let Flynn win because you

were scared of the influence he might get his dad to swing in taking up our franchise."

"That's crazy reasoning," snapped Barney. "The folks in this town wouldn't fall for it."

"This town's different," said Jeff flatly. "It's full of track fans, and they want their sport kept clean, they want their athletes to be square shooters."

"But they wouldn't think that about *you*," insisted Barney doggedly.

"They haven't seen me for three years," Jeff pointed out. "How do they know how much I've changed?"

"Hold on, now," said Tex, taking Barney's side. "Let's look at it from *this* angle. Why shouldn't they feel like *we* do, that by winning races, even by winning over Archie Flynn, you can build up enough good will to make Matt Flynn scared to tangle with you? Why don't they think *that* way?"

"They'll think the way they want to," Jeff said wearily. "Or, more exactly, they'll think the way they're led to think. That's politics. Matt Flynn runs a powerful political machine, and Archie being the apple of his old man's eye, has access to it."

IT WAS a clinching argument, added to the more tangible fact that their business was actually falling off. Barney finally admitted his acceptance of Jeff's logic with an angry grunt.

Then he said, "It all boils down to one thing. You've got to lick the stinker."

"Sure," said Jeff, then prophesied. "But watch what happens. He'll stall me off with good excuses."

"Then he'll cut his own throat," said Tex. "People will say he's scared to meet you."

"He may hurt himself to some extent," admitted Jeff. "But he'll hurt us more in the meantime. Besides, everybody knows he's *got* to race me in the Falcon-Lancer games, a month from now. If he licks me then, the town will believe he's proved his point. It'll mean we're through. But if I lick *him*, the whole rotten mess will explode in his face and make a liar of him. We'll be the fair-haired boys, and the fans'll break their necks to make it up to us."

Tex nodded slow agreement, then said: "Archie's gambling high."

"So are we," Jeff told him dryly.

"Can you lick him, Jeff?" asked Barney bluntly.

"I'll have to," Jeff said quietly.

JEFF'S guess concerning Archie's strategy was accurate. The Falcons held their own annual invitation games, and Archie Flynn was not on the starting line with the milers. A strained muscle in his leg prevented him from running. The strain, it was reported, was but a minor injury which would clear up in a few days if it were not subjected to an extra strain at this time. The Stanton fans swallowed their disappointment, and accepted the matter without question.

The mile itself was not exciting. Jeff Gleason won it in a breeze, following Coach Tobin's advice carefully. Tobin had told him not to hang up a faster time than was necessary, so Jeff coasted home in four sixteen.

On the following week Jeff accepted an invitation for a meet in Newark to compete in a special mile run against some first-class milers. He learned that Archie had been invited to the same meet, but, instead, had accepted an invitation to compete in Chicago against a Middle Westerner by the name of Greyson who was considered hot

Jeff tangled, in his race, with Bert Hopper, a rangey powerhouse from the Gotham A. C. of New York. Hopper was hot as a blowtorch, and the race was a bang-up duel, every inch of it. Jeff managed to squeeze out a narrow win in the last few yards, but it took everything he had to turn the trick. The time was 4 minutes, 6.2 seconds, the best official time of the year, and Jeff established himself solidly as a national sports figure.

He was frankly amazed at his own ability, but his satisfaction was clouded by the effect the spectacular time would have upon the Stanton fans. They would reason logically, "If Jeff Gleason can run *that* fast, why didn't he lick Flynn in their first meeting?"

The logic was strengthened by the results of Archie's race in Chicago. Archie licked Greyson, but not until the last ten yards. The time was 4 minutes, 9.4 seconds. But, Jeff reasoned carefully, if Archie hadn't passed Greyson until the last few seconds of the race, it might easily mean that Archie had planned it that way, had run no faster

than he'd had to, and was actually capable of much faster time.

However, facts were facts, and the Stanton fans seemed willing to base their judgment on the impartial evidence of a stopwatch. They were sold, now, upon the belief that Jeff was a better miler than Archie, yet Archie had handed him a licking.

So the Stanton fans gave evidence of their verdict in a way which hit disastrously at the pocketbooks of Jeff and Tex and Barney. The business of the Ajax Taxi Company fell off to a trickle. The three partners were grim and peeved about it all, but not discouraged. As Tex put it:

"Hell, a few lean weeks won't hurt us much. We'll have our day when Jeff licks the pants off Archie."

"And what a day," said Barney with hungry grin.

They were basing their hopes completely on Jeff's legs, and had talked themselves into a state of confidence that Jeff would win. Jeff found this flattering, but the added burden of their absolute trust was no unguent to his nerves. They weren't in good shape, and they got worse as the day of the Falcon-Lancer meet approached.

IT MAY have been the condition of his nerves which dragged him into a nasty mess a few days later. He was driving one of his own cabs that day. He picked up a fare at the railroad station, a big, unpleasant-looking guy with a mean look on his face. He wasn't carrying a bag, which seemed funny if he had just got off the train, but when he asked to be driven to the Rand Hotel, Jeff gave him a polite, "Yes, sir," and started off.

When they reached the hotel Jeff hopped out, opened the door, and the man stepped to the sidewalk. He snapped:

"How much?"

"Fifty cents."

"Are you kiddin'? A half a buck for that short distance? Let's see your meter."

"We're not required to have meters," Jeff told him patiently. "We have established rates between certain points in town."

"Just gyppin' the public, huh?"

"No," said Jeff. "Just trying to make a living."

He was getting a little fed up with the situation. He had enough other worries without arguing with a mug like this. The other, however, seemed in no hurry to terminate the business, or to pay his fare. He showed his yellow teeth in a nasty grin, and said:

"What sort of a livin? Hi-jacking guys like me?"

"Fifty cents, please."

The man reached into his pocket, took out half a dollar and tossed it back through the open door of the car. It was an insulting gesture, and the hair began to prickle on Jeff's neck. The man went on, still keeping his voice low:

"I ought to bat your ears down."

"Why don't you try it?"

The guy then avowed he wouldn't dirty his hands on a so-and-so like Jeff. However, he did not use the term so-and-so; instead he employed something considerably more lurid, the sort of connotation Jeff wouldn't take from anybody—not, at any rate, in his present frame of mind.

He didn't stop to think. He merely lashed out with a wicked short hook to the fellow's jaw. There wasn't enough steam behind it for a knockout, but it set the big hunk back upon his heels.

The argument had attracted no attention up to this point, but now it attracted plenty. People who were passing stopped and stared. Jeff set himself for a first-class brawl, then found, to his astonishment, the fight was over. His recent fare stayed safely out of range and bawled:

"I want a policeman!"

Not until then did Jeff realize how completely he'd been played for a first-class sucker. A cop came pounding up, an old friend of Jeff's, Dan Flemming. He demanded:

"What goes on?"

The guy whom Jeff had socked soon told him, loudly, "I want this taxi driver arrested. He hit me. I'll go along and prefer charges."

"Did you really clip him, Jeff?" asked Flemming, worriedly.

"Yeah," admitted Jeff, the palms of his hands cold and wet.

"Then I'll have to take you in," said Flemming sorrowfully.

"Sure, Dan. It's your job," said Jeff.

While they were booking Jeff at the police station, Barney Todd came in in

custody of another cop. Same charges, assault and battery. Tex Hackett joined the parade a short time later. Seeing Barney and Jeff, he forced a sheepish smile and said:

"Thank God I'm not the only half-wit in the outfit."

They talked it over later during their usual after-dinner conference time. They were three thoroughly subdued and ashamed partners. The evening paper, the Stanton *Herald,* another Flynn possession, was lying on the table with them. They had all read it—the part which concerned them.

Aside from the front-page story, giving the unpleasant facts, there was an inside editorial on the matter. The editorial, looking upon the affair with guarded horror, regretted that the fair city of Stanton should possess a taxi company whose three partners, war heroes though they were, could not adjust themselves to peace, nor to the behavior of irascible customers.

"Lovely," growled Tex. "Simply lovely We all let ourselves get framed like a bunch of morons. Archie hires three bums to pull us into brawls, and we all fall for it."

"But why did he do it?" demanded Barney practically. "He already had us on the ropes."

"A good question," conceded Jeff. "And I think I know the answer. Maybe he's not so *sure* he's got us on the ropes. Maybe he figured I can lick him a week from Saturday, so he pulled this deal today to give us an extra boot downhill."

"How bad are we hurt?" asked Tex. "And I'm not talking about the fines we'll have to pay when our cases come up."

Jeff scratched his chin, giving the matter careful thought. He finally said, "We're not much worse off than we were before. I *know* these track-maniacs in Stanton, and they'll never give our brawls today a second thought—if I win the race."

"*If* you win?" demanded Tex.

"I could pull a muscle, step in another hole, get spiked, break a shoelace—a dozen things could happen."

"Don't *talk* like that," said Barney fretfully.

VII

NEITHER Jeff nor Archie Flynn had a race scheduled on the week-end before the Falcon-Lancer games, so the steaming fans had no further chance to compare their respective times.

It seemed to be the general consensus that Jeff could lick Archie—if he wanted to—but a counter-belief was gaining strong support, the conviction that Archie had kept himself well under wraps in his race against Greyson at Chicago. The conviction was fostered by Archie's smug, mysterious attitude on the subject, and the most accurate information Jeff could gather indicated that Archie was still cocky, and was showing no more than normal strain over the approaching race.

Another element in the growing excitement of the fans struck Jeff forcibly, but didn't surprise him much. The mile race would be, unquestionably, the prize event of the meet. The fans were tremendously concerned with its outcome, but their concern was entirely overshadowed by their interest in the outcome of the meet as a whole. It was the most important local event of the season so far as the Stanton fans were concerned. The rivalry between the two clubs was intense, and the fans, about evenly split in their loyalty, became rabid partisans for this one day in the year. There was no dividing line—no neutrals.

Excitement sizzled and simmered during the preceding days, then burst into a roaring flame when the big day finally pulled around. It was a legal, local holiday. All places of business were closed up tight, and all roads led to the stadium. The lucky fans got seats. The others stood. The Falcon fans filled up one side, the Lancer fans the other.

Jeff Gleason's nerves were far from calm when he walked into the dressing room, but he was satisfied with their behavior. His emotions weren't tumbling around haphazardly as they had on the occasion of his last race with Archie Flynn. Jeff had them in control this time. He was calm and grim and reasonably steady. He knew what he had to do, and he was certain he could do it. He was in magnificent condition.

The Falcons were stretched taut above an underlying shell of worry. The most conservative pre-game figuring of statistics gave the Lancers a slight scoring edge. The Falcons were strong in the field events, but the Lancers possessed definite superiority on the track. It was generally conceded the Falcons would have to pull a miracle to win, a matter which Jeff regarded quite objectively. He had his own serious problems to usurp his thoughts.

He was in no way prepared, therefore, for the thing Coach Tobin sprung on him. Jeff was leaving the locker room for a light warm-up when Tobin fell in beside him. The coach said:

"We could use three extra points in the four-forty. It might mean the difference between winning and getting licked."

JEFF nodded, not getting the point right away. Then suddenly it hit him like a kick in the solar plexus. He stopped short, thunderstruck. He stared incredulously at Tobin, and demanded:

"Are you asking *me* to run the quarter?"

"Not asking, nor ordering you to," said Tobin. "I'm merely pointing out that we have one good quarter-miler, Rankin, and that the Lancers have three mediocre men. You could lick any of them, and finish behind Rankin. The four-forty is the second event on the program, the mile is next to last. You'd have an hour rest."

"But—but Coach," Jeff gasped. "You don't understand—"

"I think I do," Tobin interrupted him "I also understand that the primary object of the Falcons is to lick the Lancers in team score. The team feels that way about it, and thousands of fans also. And you," he ended simply, "are a member of the Falcon squad. It's my judgment you could run the four-forty without slowing you down much in the mile. You're in great condition."

"May I think it over?" Jeff asked dully.

"I wish you would."

The coach returned to the locker room, while Jeff, continuing to the track, went through the terrible ordeal of decision. He was forced, now, to consider elements he hadn't bothered to think about before. He hadn't expected a showdown of this sort, but was forced, now, to the chilled admission that the coach was right. Jeff was a member of the Falcons. They supplied him with equipment and facilities for training. He owed them plenty, and they needed him now as they had probably never needed him before.

On the other side of the ledger were some ugly facts. If he ran the quarter, he might lose the mile. It would give him an alibi, of course. But would it be accepted? Wouldn't the fans figure, when they'd cooled off, that he'd deliberately given himself this alibi in order to have an excuse for losing to Archie Flynn? Yes, that's what they'd think, or at least what they'd be led to think through the propaganda machinery of Archie Flynn.

Jeff stayed upon the track, and when Coach Tobin came out to be on hand for the sprints, Jeff told him dully:

"I'll run the quarter."

So Jeff ran the quarter with results which Tobin had predicted. Jeff was able to hand his team three points by finishing in second place. He ran no faster than he had to, but was forced to run faster than he'd hoped to. How much had it taken out of him? He was scared to think.

He went back to the locker room to stretch out until the mile was called. He felt sorry for himself, at first, as if the coach had double-crossed him, but the feeling gave way gradually to something else, a feeling imparted to him by the men around him.

He saw their feverish, intent faces. He saw them come in weary and staggering from their events. He saw the exhultation of the men, not always those who'd won, but those as well who had given everything they had to finish third and win a single point. And he saw the men who had failed to win a point. He saw them bury their faces in their hands and sob. They weren't sobbing for themselves, but for the Falcons. A slow and guilty shame began to creep into Jeff Gleason's veins.

When the mile was finally called he climbed off the rubbing table with a sober face. He heard the men about him say:

"We've got to have it, Jeff. You've got to give it to us."

Jeff told them quietly, "I'll try."

Once on the field, Coach Tobin gave him the set-up in more detail. He said:

"We're leading now, 64-62. That means we need a first in the mile to win the meet, because we don't stand a prayer in the relay, nor the chance for a third in the mile."

Jeff nodded, and let it go at that. His legs felt weak from the quarter-mile he'd run. Or was it just imagination? He took a careful warm-up, just enough to limber up. When the loud-speaker called him to the starting post, he jogged across.

HE NOTED with concern that a stiff wind had sprung up, and that it seemed to be increasing. It was blowing directly down the home-stretch, picking up small clouds of cinder dust. It would make things tough, destroy all possibility for fast time. Comparative times meant nothing now. It would all depend upon which man possessed the greatest stamina to plow into the wind.

Archie Flynn was drawn and taut. There was nothing cocky about him now. He hadn't counted upon wind either, and it worried him as much as it worried Jeff The crowd had worked itself into a state which bordered on hysteria. The fans were well aware the meet would be decided by the mile.

There were four other entries in the race, Chuck Streeter and Nick Loda for the Falcons, and Hap Mason and Kenn Wolf for the Lancers. Mason was a good man, certain of third place, probably a close third.

The runners drew for lanes. This time Jeff was hoping for a good position, but he didn't get it. He found himself all the way on the outside, and he didn't like it much.

He liked it less when he noted that, by a freak of chance, the three Lancer men had drawn the three inside lanes. He saw Archie digging holes for another crouching start, but Jeff decided to start upright as he had before. He peeled his sweat-suit, tightened his laces, then stepped to the starting line. His knees were quivering a little.

The starter gave them the preliminary commands, then fired the gun. Jeff took a deliberate start, feeling the early force of the wind as he got under way. Streeter and Loda, just inside him, took slow starts to give Jeff all possible advantage.

He forced his weary legs into motion, and once more had the satisfaction of feeling them regain their strength. Nothing but nerves, after all, he told himself. Just forget about that four-forty race. Just wipe it from your mind. It was just a warm-up for you, kid. You're okay. You've got the stuff.

Jeff saw that Wolf had gotten away to a fast start. He was a big man, an effective wind-break for Archie, who dropped in right behind him, a maneuver which had been obviously prearranged. Mason slid into third position on the pole, and Streeter and Loda permitted Jeff to move in behind Mason.

The runners held these positions around the first turn, with Wolf setting a stiff pace. When they reached the straightaway, with the wind behind them, Wolf moved aside and let Archie take the lead. Archie fell into a long, reaching stride, letting the wind carry him.

He began to move away.

Jeff watched him carefully, but refused to become alarmed at this early stage. There were two schools of thought about running on a windy track, and Archie was obviously a disciple of the school which believed the wind would serve him best if he opened up while it was at his back, then took things easy while he faced it.

Jeff didn't figure it that way, and he put his theory into practice now, the theory of a steady pace. So when the wind pushed hard against his back, he loosened up and coasted, keeping his stride even and relaxed. He rested and saved his strength until he'd need it when he faced the wind.

The other Lancer milers stuck with Archie. They had a fifteen-yard lead at the foot of the backstretch, but Jeff stuck grimly to his own accepted tactics.

He held his pace and began to close the gap around the turn. Then just before he reached the straightaway he heard Chuck Streeter pulling up to him. Streeter passed him at the end of the turn, moved ahead and took the brunt of the wind. Then

Loda moved up beside Streeter, making a double wind-break.

"Hold the pace," Jeff grunted.

Streeter had a good head for time, and he used it now. He moved steadily along. The Lancers ahead was behaving as Jeff had believed they would. Their speed was noticibly cut as they shouldered their way into the wind.

On the backstretch Archie took the lead again, and opened up. Streeter and Loda moved aside for Jeff. The second lap was a repetition of the first.

But the pace was stiff, and the wind was a relentless enemy. Archie Flynn was pouring it on, and Jeff knew the reason. Archie obviously had a profound respect for Jeff's closing sprint, and Archie's present strategy was to take all the sprint out of Jeff Gleason before the final deadly yards of the home stretch.

Archie was forcing the race into a showdown of power and guts, gambling wisely upon the fact that the quarter-mile Jeff Gleason had already run would take its toll when the chips were down. Jeff wondered if it would, then forced his mind back on the race.

It was a blistering pace which began to reap its harvest early. The third lap fell into the pattern of the previous two, but when the runners breasted the wind toward the finish of the lap, it was soon obvious that Jeff's teammates were in trouble.

They couldn't hold the pace, couldn't even carve a path through the elements for Jeff Gleason.

Loda was first to realize it. He gasped, "Sorry, Jeff! Damn' sorry!"

He fell aside, and Streeter with a hoarse apology soon followed suit. Jeff Gleason was on his own, and not until he faced the full blast of the wind alone did he realize how much protection his teammates had given him. The wind seemed to suck the breath maliciously from the very bottom of his lungs. It whirled dust in his face, dust which burned his eyes and gritted in his teeth.

MASON was still five yards ahead, on Archie's heels. Woolf still broke the wind ahead of them. Jeff lowered his head and grimly held his pace. He crept up slowly. He heard the flat bark of the gun, the signal for the final lap. So this was it. Damn the wind! He held his pace.

He was close on Mason's heels when they reached the turn. He saw Wolf give up the ghost, swing wing and fall back, breathing noisily. Archie took the lead and appeared to be still running strong. In proof he opened up a bit. Mason let him go, the thing Jeff had been fearing all along.

Archie opened up five yards. Jeff would have to pass Mason in order to close the gap. He would have to run wide around the Lancer, thereby sacrificing precious yardage. Jeff decided reluctantly against it, knowing that Mason would surely try to fight him off.

So Jeff waited for the backstretch, knowing he had something left, but not knowing how much. He wondered what would happen now, and he soon found out. Archie shot the works.

The instant the wind was at his stern he began to unfurl his sails. It probably was a wild gamble, maybe not. Jeff didn't know. He only knew that at this stage of the race he dared not let Archie gain a lead where he could crawl home ahead upon his hands and knees.

JEFF had no choice, the challenge was there, and he had to pick it up. He felt the violent protest of his muscles, but he drove them anyway. He expected trouble from Ken Mason, but Mason didn't have the stuff. After an abortive attempt to hold Jeff off, Hap Mason faded gradually and had to let Jeff move ahead.

Jeff matched Archie's speed but didn't gain back the five yards Archie had stolen on the last turn. Archie was still that much ahead. His hips were getting tight, and the reach of his legs was shortening.

It might have been good news to Jeff, except that his condition was no better—probably worse. The pace had been terrific, and the spectre of that quarter-mile still clung to him, edged panic in his thoughts

He fought the panic off, and sought for the help he knew he'd need, some outside help to help him fight the dreary blankness of exhaustion. He struggled around the turn. It was a nightmare of extended torture, mostly mental torture. He needed help, some vital faith on which to pin his thoughts, some overpowering urge to win

which would help him rise above the frailness of his flesh.

"You fool!" he told himself. "You've got that urge. You've *got* to win! It means your business, Tex and Barney's business!"

It was the greatest incentive he could bring to bear, but it wasn't great enough. It helped him gain two yards on Archie Flynn, but there it failed him, lacking strength to rip aside the curtain of his vast fatigue.

Archie Flynn gained back two yards. He was out ahead by five once more when he faced the wind which howled against him down the home stretch. Jeff saw him stagger, but dig in.

And then the wind hit Jeff, a solid thrusting wall against his body. He ground his teeth upon the dust it threw, then battled into it.

He called upon his last reserves, but couldn't close the gap—not all the way. He gained two yards again, then stuck there. He needed something else.

And then he found it. Not all at once, but gradually it came to him, another roaring—not the wind this time. It settled about him in a tremendous wave of sound, a wave which seemed to have the substance to support him.

Then suddenly he knew what a fool he'd really been. He had failed to take advantage of the lesson he might have learned back in the locker room while waiting for his race. But the lesson was being hammered at him now, hurled upon him from many thousand throats.

The Falcon's fans. Thousands of them They wanted desperately for him to win. They were pleading for *his* help. They were trying to tell him that he didn't count at all, trying to tell him to forget his own petty interests. He was running for *them*, not for himself.

THEY got him told—with thirty yards to go. He felt a strange new force begin to work against his weariness and agony He didn't try to understand it fully then, he just accepted it.

It almost seemed as if the thunder of the voices eased the pressure of the wind. A crazy fancy, sure. He was probably wacky from the punishment he'd taken.

And so what? He was still upon his feet, still running. His legs were wabbling like a pair of shaky stilts, but they kept on ramming at the track, and dragging him along.

He didn't quite know how it happened, but he found himself at Archie's shoulder. The tape was out ahead, not far, some fifteen yards perhaps.

Too far? Jeff knew it wasn't. He knew his legs would take him there, his legs and the sustaining thunder of the voices. And Archie must have known it, too, must have sensed that Jeff had found, somewhere, the strength to win the race, and that Jeff intended winning—this time.

Then Archie lost his head in crazy, furious frustration. He lunged at Jeff and tried to slug him. But Archie Flynn misjudged the distance, also his own remaining strength. His fist passed harmlessly behind Jeff's head. Jeff heard him crumple, cursing to the track.

Jeff kept his feet. The tape snapped when his chest surged into it, and Jeff had never known a breaking tape to feel that good before.

When he finally regained his breath, and the hysteria of the fans had stilled, Coach Tobin had a chance to speak to him.

"You saved your business, Jeff," he said.

Jeff studied him, then grinned.

"That's not what pulled me through *this* race," he said.

The coach grinned, too, and asked:

"You're telling *me?*"

A Man Could Make A Million

By RYERSON JOHNSON

THEY slept that night at the plane. At least they went through the motions, Janet in the cluttered cockpit and the two men in eiderdown bags on the frozen ground. She could hear the burr of their talk. It went on and on, an angry gnawing in her ears—and the fear that had nudged recurrently throughout the day needled her skin in the Arctic night, like tiny icicles pricking.

Was it only today that she had looked upon a knob-shaped hill laced with the most precious thing on earth? Beside it gold was nothing and diamonds were nothing; and there was more of it, perhaps, than had been turned up anywhere else in Canada, even at Great Bear. Was it only

They Were Holding a New World in Their Hands; But the Visions of Two Men Were Vastly Different

today? Now in the dead of night with the two men quarreling, it seemed weary, frightening years.

Fright was something so new to Janet

Harris that the very awareness of it paralyzed her, until she remembered that fear fed upon itself, and to conquer it sometimes you only had to name it. She made herself think back, trying to pin the fear at its source. Well, first there was Jimmy—

No, first there was Ed Cardigan, because he was the most important. Far north to teach in the Dominion school at Fort Norman—and she had met Ed Cardigan. Ed said it was destiny, and she guessed that surely he was right, because the odds would have buried her a hundred years down north without letting her meet anybody half as exciting.

Ed was a free-lance ore cruiser who flew his own plane and ran down rumors of pay-dirt wherever in the world they were thickest. It sounded like a perfectly fascinating way to make a living, and Ed Cardigan, square-jawed and breezy—big Ed, Million-dollar Ed—was a fascinating guy. Because even though he spent so much time at tag-end places like the Spanish rough country or the Belgian Congo, there was a—well, a big-town smoothness about him too. He gave a girl the impression that he would never keep her standing in the rain, that he would know how to get a taxi for her when no one else could; and that he would be as right on Madison Avenue in Brooks Brothers tailoring as he was here on the edge of nowhere in mackinaw and muck-lucks. Things like that.

AS ED himself put it: "Mining's not a pick and shovel proposition any more. These days you mine your ore in an office building. It takes money to make the rock pay off. Big money. That's where I come in. I've got contacts where the money is. I'm the despised middle man; I bring the discoverer and the operator together. I take my cuts from both. I'm expensive. No one likes me. But I'm necessary."

She had liked him—and "liked" was probably the world's largest understatement.

Little Jane Harris who had taught Sunday School in Edmonton, who cried her eyes red at movies like "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," and who once had her wrist bitten, trying to drag an under-dog out from under a very determined top-dog—little Janie with the wide, brimming eyes and compassionate mouth—had liked him so much that she had even conceded there was something appealing in his straightforward acceptance of the grab-first-and-hold-hardest school of business ethics.

She had liked him and he had liked her.

"Stick with me, Featherweight. I'm your destiny talking. Sooner or later I'll ram into a million dollars. When I do, I won't stand there blinking. I'll run it up to ten. I operate by instinct, Featherweight. I figure there's a blind force, a natural instinct that can shape our lives if we let it. I let it."

Maybe if you stopped to think, it sounded selfish. But with Ed you didn't think. You just curled up and purred, and let him do the thinking. He poured it on and you let

a blind instinct or a natural force or something shape your life.

It was at Ed's urging that she had written to Jimmy Marrs. She had known Jimmy in the States, at the University of Minnesota where he had majored in geology and she had taken one elective course in it. Jimmy was sweet and he was shy, and he had been popping in and out of her life for—well, for all her life it seemed. That was the comfortable way you felt about Jimmy; he had always been there and he always would be there. It was a pretty crazy way to feel, considering that the only times she saw him were when he was on his way somewhere else—Greenland, Labrador, Alaska, or wherever in the North a geologist would want to go.

She said in her letter:

> Remember Desperation Bay, Jimmy? Remember you wrote me that you knew where your calculations went wrong, that you were sure you could drop right down on the hill next time? And remember how frantic it was making you because the Government needed uranium so frantically, and was so stubbornly sure your Desperation Bay area was barren? You didn't tell me it was to make an atomic bomb; did you know, Jimmy? Sweet Jimmy, who wouldn't blow up so much as a fly if he didn't have to.
>
> Remember one thing more, Jimmy—you said you just *might* look in on me when you were out of the Army, 'Way up here—*down* here; I never can remember to say *down*—we'd have a snowball cocktail, you said, though you didn't say whether we'd throw them at each other or eat them or what. Anyway, I'm to have a vacation while they put a new roof on my schoolhouse—the old one got blown half off and is now patched with canvas—and if you came I think I could promise to make it worth your while because there is a man here, Ed Cardigan, who believes in Desperation Bay the way you do, and who flies his own plane, and who knows your work. . . .

She must have written a persuasive letter, because Jimmy Marrs came on. She saw him first in the stiff little parlor at Mr. and Mrs. McGlennon's where she boarded. Jimmy had always stirred a soft excitement in her. He did now.

He looked about as he always did, a little more serious maybe, but lean as a winter rabbit, brown as tanbark. His nice eyes, with maybe a few more sun-squint wrinkles at the corners, were alert and faintly questioning. Just the way she remembered. The same mouth, so warm and generous—

The first thing he did was kiss her with it. Just take her in his arms and kiss her, holding her with her heels lifted off the floor. It was a startling exhibition, really, of the kind of male forcefulness she had come to associate only with Ed Cardigan. All Jimmy's other kisses had been glad-to-see-you ones, or just friendly going-away ones. This was different.

She felt the slow hot rise of color to her face, and in embarrassment she said, "I just can't wait for you to meet Ed. He—he says everybody thinks you're—Ed's own words—a hellova nice guy. He knows you by reputation."

"I know Ed by reputation, too," Jimmy said.

Somehow it didn't seem like a compliment the way he said it, and she told him bluntly, "I'm going to marry him."

She was watching his face, his brown face with the nice brown eyes probing. The mouth seemed about to smile. That didn't prove anything. It always seemed about to smile.

"Where's Ed now?" was all he asked.

"With his plane on Yellowknife Lake. I'm to take you there as soon as the town's asleep."

"So secret?"

It provoked her that she felt called upon to defend Ed. Naturally it's secret. With the whole world on an atomic bomb jag—with German scientists working in hidden laboratories in other countries—"

"Is that how Ed put it to you?"

"Well, is there anything so wrong about that? Haven't you been reading the papers?"

He seemed on the point of saying something, but in the end he didn't. He only smiled reassuringly.

It was a nine-mile trek to the wilderness lake where Ed kept his plane. Ed gave Jimmy the heartiest kind of a greeting; and

Jimmy, she was relieved to observe, was at least civil. He turned out to be an old sourpuss, though, at the last minute.

"Too risky for you, Janie. Fog can come in off the ice pack so fast you wouldn't believe it."

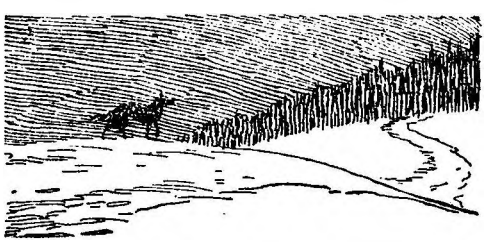
Inside the bulk of down-north clothing her woman's body gave an impatient wriggle. She stared unbelievingly at Jimmy.

"You mean I can't go with you?"

The wide, blue, staring dismay in her eyes brought Ed Cardigan quickly to bat for her. Big Ed who went in a straight line and got things done. He draped his grizzly bear of an arm around her, grinned out of his square-jawed face, and said in a breeze, "She's been counting on this all winter, Jimmy. She'll be in good company. If two bush-wise guys can't take care of one little featherweight girl, it's a hellova note." He grinned again. "Anyhow we need a mascot."

So they went in the air, all three. Ed and Jimmy took turns at the controls. Every free minute they spent studying maps and terrain, and they had very little time for their school-marm mascot. The mascot felt very much pushed in the corner, like excess baggage. It *was* exciting looking down, though. Lonely as the north Atlantic, the Great Canadian Barrens unrolled beneath them, mottled black and silver in the moonlight from the frozen lakes that lay everywhere, like mortar trowled on between the bare granite hill tops.

They based at Desperation Bay. They used Ed's gasoline cache, and they aircombed the cold dead world—and they located the particular one out of all those flat-topped hills, that showed yellowish-



green stains indicative of copper-uranium weathering.

They slapped the skiis of the plane down on the nearest lake with enough surface for a runway, and tramped a weary distance over greenstone rock and crusted snow. Close-up view of that knob-shaped hill showed it to be like any of the other low elevations stretching to skyline—except for one thing. It was veined with the most sought-after substance on earth: pitchblende.

She held some of the ore that the two men knocked loose. Jimmy had been the one to put it in her hands. Maybe there was something special about Jimmy being the one. She hadn't thought about it until now, but maybe there was. Ed Cardigan had been so excited he had forgotten she was there. Jimmy had been sky-soaring too, but he had shared his high moment with her.

Turning to her as instinctively as breathing, his thin, intent face glowing, he had put the ore in her mittened hands. Pitchblende: hard, black, heavy, it looked no more interesting than coal. Yet it was dream stuff. Refined, this dull-looking gob became a magic-something label U-235, which wasn't as submarine as it might sound, but a mess of very fat uranium atoms, each with 143 neutrons in unstable attendance. Processed in ways known only to God and the Government—and you had a big bang to end all bangs.

The appalling energy could be used for other purposes, though, besides making bombs to blow up the world we already had; it could be used for fashioning a bright new one. It was this use that had so intrigued Jimmy Marrs. Hunched over their discovery vein, his shoulders looking so woefully thin, even under the swaddle of outland clothes, that she wanted to put her arms around him to protect him from something, anything:

"A new world—we're holding it in our hands!"

His awed whisper hadn't reached Ed Cardigan. The discovery, it seemed, had meant only one thing to Ed. She had watched the restless weaving of his big body. She had seen the jut of his chin, the hard burning of his eyes, blue as polar ice.

"A man could make a million dollars out of this—maybe ten."

It had come as a small shock to her that Ed sounded greedy, where before when talking about money he had seemed merely forceful—well, at the worst, like a little

boy, strutting. And that was the beginning of her fear, she recognized now. But fear of what, precisely? Now that she had pinned it down to time and place, it was still nebulous; she couldn't name it. Fear of what?

She only knew that something had become not right among them. The men had started watching each other with sidelong, calculating glances. At night they had all dragged themselves tiredly back to the plane. They had tried to sleep. They were still trying to. At least she was. If only they would stop their beastly quarreling and let her.

SHE must have gone to sleep at last, because she opened her eyes, and here it was—the gloom of morning. She crawled stiffly out of the plane and sat for a drugged moment on the wing, with feet dangling. Jimmy had the alcohol stove going. The blue flame in this world's-end desolation was an eerie note. She pushed herself free of the plane. Even through two pairs of wool sox and the soft-soled fur boots, her feet stung when they hit the frozen ground. Whatever it was the men had spent the night quarreling about, they weren't saying, but the ugly tension was on them still, so that they didn't much more than nod to her, their faces sullen.

They ate in moody silence, but when it came time to leave for their pitchblende hill, Ed spoke up and said he guessed he wouldn't go, that the fuel line and other things on the bush-hopper needed tending to—he'd stay and work the plane over.

"The hell you will," Jimmy Marrs told him flatly.

Ed's whiskey-ad jaw was never more in evidence than now, as he smiled in a thoroughly unpleasant way and asked, "What's the matter, don't you trust me? Think I'd fly off and leave you in the empty top half of Canada?"

Jimmy didn't have to answer that one. Janet did it for him. "Everybody trusts everybody," she snapped. "Now quit acting like four-year-olds, both of you."

She could spank them both. Men! Little boys squabbling over marbles. But little boys who fought each other with more than snowballs; who, in addition to breaking your heart, could wreck a world—or save it.

Jimmy had his way this time. All three of them went to the hill. Making the most of the scant daylight hours, they worked in silence and without rest, charting and sampling the pitch-like veins. But the tension remained on them all, with the men like two wary animals.

A rising temperature didn't help matters. Janet wriggled her head clear of the fur parka hood and called attention to her wet black hair.

"With a couple of flippers I'd look just like a seal," she said.

Nobody laughed. Later, with the men sullen still, they all left to investigate another hump of rock which, from the plane, had revealed telltale pinkish streaks that could be cobalt bloom.

They were a mile, perhaps more, from their discovery hill when the fog caught them. It came rolling in from the Arctic coast with the appalling inexorability of the glaciers that in a past age had moved in and scalped the whole top of the continent—like the ghosts of those same glaciers the fog thrust down.

Briefly the nearest of the flat-topped hills loomed in gray evanescence. Then they were blanked out with the rest. Janet pressed closer to Jimmy. Poking from the thrown-back hood of her parka, her face looked pinched and small; but fear made her eyes big.

She couldn't even think how curious it was that she had instinctively drawn close to Jimmy, when it was Ed Cardigan who loved her, and whom she loved, of course, and whom she was going to marry.

JIMMY spoke quietly. "This might hold in for days. But with a compass to line our way back to the plane, we're in no immediate danger—"

He broke off. Janet was close enough to see the fog-blurred movement of his hand as it dropped away from his mackinaw pocket.

"What's the matter?" she bit at him.

"My compass," he said. "It's gone." He pushed through the fog to the big, shrouded figure of Ed Cardigan. "We'll have to use yours."

"No—" Ed's voice sounded curiously constructed. "I've just been feeling. Mine's gone, too."

After a long moment Jimmy said, "That's crazy. How could they both be missing?"

"Don't know," Ed's uncertain voice sounded. "Maybe back there on the pitchblende hill—when we started sweating and shucked our mackinaws."

"One compass might have got lost that way. Not two."

With quick belligerence then, Ed said, "Maybe you've got a better idea."

"Maybe I have—will you stand for a search?"

"I sure will if you will, brother."

Like clumsy bears in their heavy clothing, they padded at each other's pockets while Janet watched, confused and apprehensive at this spectacle of two grown men so childishly mistrusting one another. They didn't find any compass, and when Jimmy stepped back, a thin ledge of ice broke under his foot. He stumbled and would have fallen if Ed hadn't been quick to support him.

"You all right?" Ed questioned, with a nervous-quick concern that even Janet found surprising.

Jimmy was hobbling around, trying his sprained foot. "Could be worse," he muttered. "With visibility around zero, no trouble for any of us to step off a white ledge and break a leg—or a skull. We've got to be careful."

"You're a northern man," Ed said reasonably. "Suppose you lead off. Janet, you follow close and I'll hold right behind you. We'll save our squabbles till afterwards."

THEY groped along, locating remembered landmarks at first. But somewhere they took a wrong tangent; although they passed what seemed like a hundred fog-bound heights of land, they never did pass their pitchblende hill.

"We're lost, aren't we?" she said once to Jimmy. "Completely lost?"

"Yes," he told her, "but don't think about it. Just keep going—and watch every step you take."

So she floundered along. But each time they slumped down to rest, she thought she could never get started again. Fatigue had knifed into every muscle and joint until she felt all of one painful piece, as though nothing about her could ever bend again. Despair was numbing her mind, too. If they couldn't locate a hill as big as a circus tent, how were they going to find the plane?

It was on a humped ridge no different from all the other humped ridges that she heard the sound of soft mysterious patterings. Like leaves rustling—leaves in a land so barren that not one scrub willow poked above the leaden snow. In this dead world, that sound—as of abundant life—was weird, terrifying. It had to be in her mind, of course, all in her mind—and that was the most terrifying awareness of all—until she looked in the faces of the men and realized that they heard it, too.

"Keep moving," Jimmy threw out the terse order.

They went on, down the icy slope toward the sound, and they only stopped when she could see—or thought she could—a mass of movement on the ground. It made no sense at first—things that stirred, dark blobs against the snow and withered moss and lichens.

Then suddenly it did make sense—a horrible sense. The snow was alive, it crawled with—

"They're rats!" she gasped. "A million-billion rats!"

Ed ran forward. She could see him dimly, thrashing about and stamping. She heard a squeak. He loomed close then, holding something in his hand. She drew back from him. But what he said was faintly reassuring. "Not rats—lemmings."

"Lemmings?" She forced herself to bend and examine the furry creature. Like a field mouse, she could see now, only stouter, with stubby legs and tail, no ears at all, and claws like little sickles. And all at once she was looking on the tiny broken body with compassion, as her school-room lore came flooding back to her.

"Lemmings—why, of course. Arctic rodents. In Norway and in Canada. They ate moss and roots and things, and every few years they ganged up and moved north. Nobody knew why. Maybe in a past age they found food by going north, and their directional instinct survived. That was what the book said; it was what she had taught the children. Summer and winter they kept moving, swimming rivers and crossing ice packs, forced on by some blind instinct. North, always north. On and on until they tumbled into the sea."

There had been something tugging at her perceptions and now here it was, sharp and clear, and she sputtered it out so fast the men couldn't understand her.

"What's that?" Jimmy asked.

"North," she repeated. "Lemmings travel north."

"So-o?"

"Well, we're lost, aren't we?"

He just stared at her. Oh, but he was dense sometimes. Ed caught it like a flash. He picked her up in his arms like he was always doing, and did a bear dance with her.

"Our little ol' school-marm mascot! Who said it wasn't good luck to have a mascot? You always want to listen to teacher, Jimmy." Then as though Jimmy wasn't old enough yet to go to school, he explained. "Our compass. We use the lemmings for our compass."

By the time he put her down, though, Janet was having sober second thoughts. She said, hope dying hard, "In all the distance they travel, they can't go straight north all the time. Can they? There's bound to be some wiggles. Isn't there?" Her hand waved out. "The direction they're going now—how do we know it isn't one of the wiggles?"

Ed disposed of that in one second flat. "We'll backtrack and find out." He looked at Jimmy. "Don't be so glum, fella. What's the matter, you sorry our mascot turned out to be something better than a burden? Be big enough to admit that the little ol' school-marm has probably saved all our lives. I don't mind saying now, I was beginning to think we didn't have a chance—"

"These wiggles," Jimmy said, not kindling much to Ed's enthusiasm, "maybe we'd better start ironing them out. Take Janet and go one way; I'll go the other. We can meet back here and report."

Ed grabbed her arm. "Come on, Featherweight."

She was looking back at Jimmy, and it gave her a pang to see how the fog swallowed him before she had taken three stiff-legged steps away.

She trudged with Ed for what seemed an unconscionable distance. The lemmings' line of march was straight all the way. Ed stopped finally, spoke with harsh elation:

"They're going north." He quartered around and stood with arm extended. "That's our direction."

She stared doubtfully into opaque space. "The fog's still thick. And a plane's such an awfully little thing—"

"All we have to do is hit that long pan-handled lake we used for a runway," Ed reminded, "then follow along shore. We can't miss."

She let herself be convinced now, really for the first time. They were going to live. She felt her nerves smoothing out, her muscle soreness dissolving. She lifted her face to Ed and did the best she could with a smile.

He was moving away. "Come on," he urged impatiently.

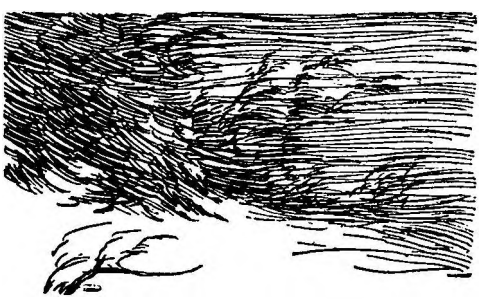
"Wait," she called. "You're forgetting."

"Forgetting?"

"Jimmy."

"No," he said, "I'm not forgetting Jimmy."

Something about the way he said it—There was a curious noise; it drummed at her skull, and it was a moment before she identified it. Her teeth—chattering. She



bit down hard to make them stop. Cold or fear—those were the only things that made your teeth chatter. She wasn't cold. She *had* been afraid of the fog. But not now, since they had their directions straight. Then what? Besides the fog there was only Ed and Jimmy. Sweet Jimmy. Good Jimmy. No one could ever be afraid of Jimmy. That left only Ed, which made no sense at all, because how could a girl be afraid of the man she was going to marry?

Ed was looking back at her. He came close. "The important thing's to get you to the plane, Featherweight. I'll stow you away there, snug and warm. Plenty of

time then to take a compass and come back after Jimmy."

When she didn't budge or say anything, but just stood rooted in the snow, "Don't you trust me either, Featheweight?" There was no heat in the words—no hurt, no indignation. If there was anything, dull realization came to her, it was mild amusement.

"Of course I trust you." It was her mouth saying the right words undirected by her brain. She was so tired she thought she would drop.

Ed was watching her so closely. His head started nodding. "Yes," he said, you're just like Jimmy. You think I'd fly the plane away and leave him here."

"Oh, Ed, for heaven's sake—"

"It's an idea, at that. Jimmy's a northern man; he could live off the country."

"Ed, he couldn't! No one could. As well leave him on the moon—" She took her lip between her teeth to make herself stop this inane babbling. Ed was only trying to frighten her, of course, playing with her. There had always been a streak of cruelty in him. Odd the things you could sense all along about a person and never admit. Not until—until—

She caught the look on his face. It was the same as yesterday at the pitchblende hill. It was an utterly humorless way to look—indecently, nakedly hungry. Yesterday she hadn't been able to evaluate the look. Now she could, and the old fear, the one before the fog, the one last night, came needling back. Ed was going to hurt Jimmy, wasn't he? That was what her fear had been about—that he would hurt Jimmy. She knew it now.

There was a bad moment when the ground seemed no more substantial than the gray murkiness around her. She felt Ed's hand under her elbow—his big hand—holding her up. She could hear his voice. It was coming to her, not very distinct; more like the burr it had made last night when he quarreled with Jimmy.

"You're all beat out, Featherweight. Tired right into the bone. That's why I'm putting you first above everything. Now come on—let's get going."

With Ed you didn't think. That blind instinct, that natural force he was always talking about—you just let it float you. But there was somebody named Jimmy Marrs who was always going away from her, and Jimmy was sweet. More than sweet. Oh, so much more. She had been in love with him, she guessed, for about all her life, and if she didn't know it before, she knew it now. She had never quit loving him. Not really. Even though she had been—well, overwhelmed by Ed for a while there.

And now she heard herself saying, while her feet dug in and her whole body sagged back from Ed's pull, resisting him with her body as, numbly, she resisted him with her mind and her heart; heard herself saying, "I won't go without Jimmy. I won't!" Her voice surprised her, how strong it sounded in her ears. "You quarreled with Jimmy—"

Ed quit pulling at her. "Quarreled? I was trying to show the dim brain how we could make a million dollars out of this prospect, that's all."

"A million," she heard herself protesting. "Pitchblende—uranium—it isn't a thing you can bargain about any more, to find the highest bidder. Atomic energy—it can't be hawked around like, like—"

"Why can't it?"

She felt the drive of his words like weights against her, and she faltered, "The Government would be fair—you'd get something, Ed. A great deal—"

"How much? Ten thousand? A hundred thousand before taxes? What's that when there's a million for the taking? How many men ever get a chance at a million dollars? What would they do if they did? I always told you what I'd do. I said I'd grab and grab hard. Well?"

Silence pressed in, broken only by the subdued scamperings of the lemmings below them in the glacial trough, and by the pounding of her own heart. Her cold lips moved. "I—I don't see—"

He came all the way out with it then. "Do you think the United Nations are the only ones interested in atomic energy? Do you think all the"—his voice became edged—"shall we say, unsocial ones, were taken care of at the Nuremberg trials? Do you think some of them didn't get out to—shall we say, South America? I always told you I had contacts where the money is. And you said it yourself; this top half of Canada is lonesome as the moon. Pitchblende's be-

ing flown out from Great Bear. Is there any reason why it can't be flown out, secretly, from here? Any reason that money can't solve."

"There is a reason," she said. "There is a reason. Jimmy—"

Ed's voice was as bleak as this wide, gray land. "Jimmy's on the moon. . . ." he said.

". . . We're all on the moon," Jimmy said.

She heard him say it. Heard it plain as day. She just didn't believe it. Ed heard, too. He was staring into the fog as though he didn't believe it either. But pretty soon he did. They both did. Because the voice in the fog became Jimmy. He wedged in close, as though pushing through a deep-walled fuzzy curtain.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Ed wanted to know.

"I've been tagging along," Jimmy said. "Never very far behind you." He didn't beat around about things. That's why I suggested we split in two parties," he said. "so I could follow you. Without me, I thought you might bring out your compass from wherever you hid it, and strike a course for the plane."

"You idiot. I haven't got a compass."

"Yes; I'm prepared to believe that now. I stepped on it, didn't I? Back there where I stumbled when we searched each other? You dropped yours on the ground, intending to pick it up afterwards. But thinking back now, the way you acted, I must have stepped on it and broken it. Careless of me, wasn't it? Particularly since it was our last compass. You lifted mine on the pitchblende hill, didn't you, and threw it away?"

"I don't know what you're talking about—"

"Oh, I admit it's all surmise. Like the time you went into the Belgian Congo with Harry Smeltzer. Nobody could *prove* that you ran out on Harry. You just came out alone, that was all—with a too, too careful story, and a stake in the pitchblende deposits at Katauga—"

"That's enough, Marrs." Ed's voice was hoarse, his face beefsteak-red in his anger.

"Not quite enough," Jimmy said. "You sat out the war in Spain. I could have been wrong in what I thought about it, so when Janet told me she was going to marry you, I didn't say anything. But now you've said plenty. It was more than draft-dodging, wasn't it, Ed? You were building up contacts there. Contacts with all the wrong people. But your people lost, didn't they, Ed? Like you're going to lose now—"

It happened so fast then, that it was over before Janet could open her mouth to scream, even if she had been of a mind to. Ed was towering over Jimmy, and he pulled off his moose-hide mitt and let go with his wool-gloved fist. It was coordinated action, with the big shoulders in on the punch, and smooth fast motion for a big man. But maybe it was what Jimmy had been goading him to do. At least he seemed to anticipate it, because he was moving fully as soon as Ed, his wiry body twisting to miss the hammer blow of Ed's fist. Only he didn't miss it, quite. Maybe it was his sprained foot that failed him. Anyhow it wasn't a clean dodge, and Ed's fist raked the face, not full-force, but with enough wallop to knock him hard off his feet. Jimmy must have slid ten feet on the ice and he lay there spread out like a pelt nailed to a stretching board. He must have struck his head on the ice, because he tried to get up, but couldn't. Ed was leaning at him, his shoulders weaving. He seemed to be trying to make up his mind whether to risk running in and stamping. In the end he turned, and without even a look at Janet, went bolting through the fog in the direction he had determined that the plane lay. The fog gulped him, but the frantic stumpings of his feet sounded back. They did for a long moment.

Jimmy tried again, and he made it halfway up this time, and ran, bent over, his long arms flopping. "Come back," he was shouting after Ed. "You damn' fool—"

But only a kind of choked-off cry came back. Muffled in the fog, the voice was totally unreconizable. But it had an elemental quality, Janet recognized; it was a fear cry. Jimmy waited for her to catch up with him. With their arms around each other, gripping hard, holding each other up, they pushed ahead. But Jimmy saw to it that they went cautiously now. . . . It took her breath how close they came to the icy cut-bank in the fog before they could see it.

Jimmy found a place to climb down. He seemed to be gone for a year. He came back to her and, "Ed's down there," he said. "Dead."

Her head was nodding all of its own self. "Like the lemmings," the bizarre thought crowded in, "the lemmings—that follow their instinct—"

"Chances are," she heard Jimmy dimly, "Ed wouldn't have made it to the plane anyway, the direction he was headed. That's what I was running to tell him."

She heard her own voice in muddled protest, "But why? Ed took his directions from the lemmings—"

"Ed never was a good bush man. A promoter. A city slicker. Never should have stepped off the pavements."

"But lemmings do go north. Their—their instinct makes them."

"Sure," Jimmy said wearily. "In a general sort of way. But you'd have to trace them back for days to iron out the wiggles." He put his arm around her. "Start relaxing, Janie."

She stiffened instead. "You mean—we're still lost?"

"That's the size of it, Janie."

She sagged against him weakly. She couldn't struggle any more and she was almost past caring. It was pleasant just to cling and not think anything or feel, except to know that here at the very last they were together, Jimmy and she, who should never have been apart, ever.

She must have been thinking her sad thoughts out loud because Jimmy said severely, "Snap out of it, Janie. What's worrying you, anyway?"

What a curious thing to ask her. But she answered dutifully, "This fog—"

He wouldn't let her finish. "All we have to do is sit it out," he said.

He was humoring her, of course. It aroused her almost to hysterical resentment. "It could last for days. You told me yourself. And in all that time we could possibly freeze or starve—"

"Not a chance," he said cheerfully. "If it turns really cold the fog will lift. And—have you forgotten our 'ace in the hole?"

"We—have one?"

"Sure. If we get hungry enough we can always scrim together enough dry reeds and moss for a fire. Did you ever eat roast squirrel?"

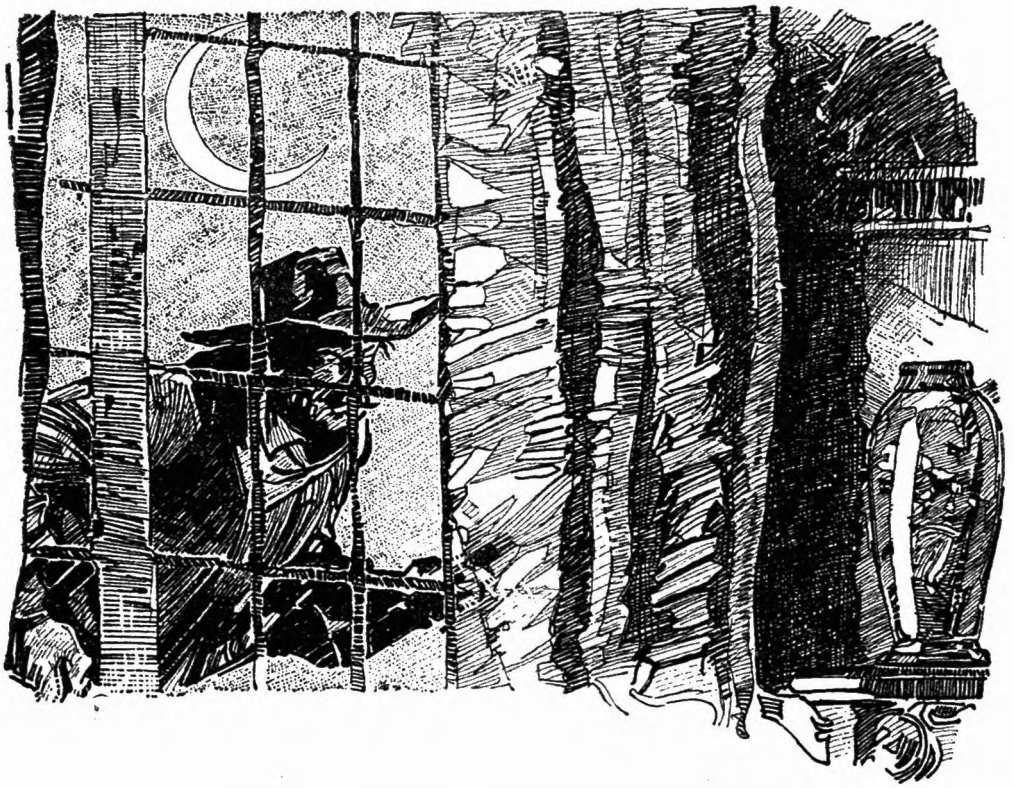
She stared at him doubtfully. "I think," she said weakly, "once." Then just to prove that she was realistic and didn't need to be indulged, she braced herself and said, "It does sound better than roast rat, doesn't it?"

She went ahead and blanked-out then, in his arms. She was still in them when she opened her eyes. Jimmy was sitting on the ground, holding her.

"You take it easy," he comforted. "I think there's a good chance that before dinner the fog will have lifted anyway. Doesn't it seem to you to be thinning?"

She couldn't tell if it was or not. She didn't even care.

In Jimmy's arms she just felt drowsy and good.



A Ring with a Boss—Giving the Kentucky River Town a Lot of Trouble; It Could Happen Even in the Back Country of 1845

RUN, ROGUE, RUN

By MERLE CONSTINER

Author of "Death on a Party Line," etc.

CHAPTER I

THE TERROR AT WIDOW MELAMPY'S

THE young man laid two cheap silver watches on the bedspread and the fat man lolled back in his rocker and shook his head. "I hain't never christened no cymbals in my life, I'm jest a pore retired grocer. Perish my flatter-trap if I ever cloyed a josken, dropped a nimenog, or fibbed a cull's quarron on the rumpad for the honey of it. I'd like to help you but the ways o' evil is a sweet mystery to me. You fly the lingo?"

"I fly the lingo, yes." Kyle Brokaw nodded woodenly. He was thin, in his early thirties, lantern-jawed and weathered. His serge suit was shiny at the cuffs, his black stock was frayed and carelessly knotted. His eyes were gray and steady. The fat man pursed his lips, "You learned the lingo the hard way, mayhap? In the stone pitcher, mayhap?"

"I've never been in jail," Kyle Brokaw answered. "I learned it on the road."

Widow Melampy's boarding house was like an oven that summer afternoon in 1845; despite the open windows, bow-windows looking out across the roofs and chimney pots of the Kentucky river town, the

room was stifling with arrested, motionless heat. The room was one of Widow Melampy's best, on the second floor, overlooking a livery stable and an alley, and the backsides of Galtsburg's Main Street. Sporadically, through the sweltering air, came the lethargic, muted confusion of the river landing. It was a large room, white plastered, with straw matting on the scrubbed floor.

Kyle Brokaw had never seen the fat man before, or his room, but he was quite familiar with two pieces of the fat man's furniture: the cherry bed and the small oak wardrobe against the wall. The bed and the wardrobe. This much he'd found after days of cautious, patient search.

This looked like the end—and it hadn't been easy.

The fat man's name was Spires; a broken-down jeweler from Pittsburgh, he appeared to be a newcomer to town. Brokaw studied him with stolid interest. A mound of blubber-like flesh wrapped tightly in his green silk dressing gown, he rocked ceaselessly back and forth in his hickory rocker, his grimy, spatulate fingers locked beneath the

bulge of his belly. His hard, little blue eyes never left Brokaw's. He asked affably, "Who told you I christened cymbals?"

A cymbal was a watch, and a christened watch was one on which a crooked jeweler had removed the maker's name and substituted another. Brokaw said innocently, "I didn't want you to christen them." He stowed the silver watches in his pocket. "I just wanted you to remove the works from the cases, and switch them. They're my watches, I bought them. I'm just as honest as you are. You could keep one for your labor."

"What a story! Nix." After a moment, Mr. Spires grinned. "You're a Dr. Green at this business, hain't you? You ain't been on the cross long, have you? What was your gait before you took up gamming watches?"

"I was a fighter. Until a couple of weeks ago. I'm not working at it just now." This was the truth. Brokaw decided that where he could, he had better stick to the truth.

"A fighter? What a gait! You mean a miller, a prizefighter?"

"No. I fight anything. Bears, wolves." He said it matter of factly; it was a business to him. "Once in a backwoods opera house in eastern Kentucky I fought a panther. It's a hard way to make a living, though. Too much travel."

A SUDDEN silence came into the sweltering room. Finally, the fat man spoke. "So you're a Captain Hackem! I've heard tell of you bhoys and I can't say I'm pleased to make your acquaintance. *Garrrh!* It's claw and cut and come again. I can't stand to think about it. You're lucky you hain't lost your vicissitudes! Where you stayin'?"

"Here at Widow Melampy's. I moved in today. I've got her attic room.

"What you doin' in Galtsburg? You come here to read and write?"

Read and write was rhyming cant for *flight*. Brokaw said, "The law isn't after me. I'm not running away from anything, no. Galtsburg used to be my home. I left it for the road when I was a youngster. My family are now all gone. I just came back, that's all."

Mr. Spires' eyelids drooped. He coughed into the palm of his hand. "Maybe you're free to change your work?"

Kyle Brokaw raised an index finger, pointed at the cherry bed. He hadn't seen it for almost twenty years but he'd know it blindfold. It was his mother's bed, without doubt the bed she'd died on, out at the old homestead, when typhoid had taken her away. He said mildly, "That's a nice bed, and that's a nice oak chest yonder. Mrs Melampy didn't give me anything as swell as that in my attic."

"Them hain't Widow Melampy's," the fat man said. "Them's mine, bestowed on me by a very inflooenshial gentleman. I hear tell he got 'em from Johnny the Kidsman. When Johnny ain't working with his kinchins he's on the ken-crack, a bit of a housebreaker, they tell me. Now, should this certain party like you, he'd fix you up a room as swell as this 'un, mayhap. And that was what I was gettin' around to. I got a friend that can use you. The work's easy, and the pay's what you make it. How does it sound?"

"What kind of work?"

"It ain't up to me to say. I don't reely know."

Brokaw frowned. Mr. Spires said silkily, "There's money floating around in a town like this, plenty of it. And Galtsburg's got a olli compolli that can show you how to git your share." The fat man paused, rubbed the ball of his thumb up and down the lobe of his meaty ear. "Go to your room. Don't sing to nobody about this. At seven-thirty sharp, come early candle-light, you git your carcass back here and I'll have a gentleman waiting that'll talk business with you. You hear me?"

Brokaw nodded absently. "I hear you." He got to his feet and left the room.

BROKAW did not retire to his garret cubby-hole, however. Widow Melampy's boarding house was taking on a new and added interest. The upstairs hall was dim and narrow, and uncarpeted, flanked on either side by a battery of tightly closed doors. He'd quartered himself in many a lodging house in his day and this place had the feel about it of a cross-drum, a thieves' hangout. In the murk, he felt for the landing with his feet, and the banister with his hands, and descended the creaking stairs to the lower floor.

There was a little more light in the lower

hall, which came not from the front door, oaken and tightly closed, but from a candle-end on the tallow-smeared newel post. Widow Melampy was not in sight. He'd only seen her once, when he'd rented his bed and paid his fee, and then, strangely enough, he'd liked her, a small, energetic woman, keen and friendly, with a jeremiad of domestic woes at the tip of her garrulous tongue. He strolled down the hall, through the empty kitchen, and out into the sunlit yard. He found a bench beneath a redbud tree and sat down.

The tiny backyard, rank with jimson weed and tangled, uncut grass, was enclosed by a tall board fence; there was a gate at the far rear, but no gate at the sides or front. He inspected the house casually and yet carefully.

The house was old. The town had grown up about it and now it was buried in oblivion, between two alleys. It was a faded, brown frame building, of three and a half stories, drab, melancholy, its windows shuttered in the bright evening sunlight, its siding rotting here and there from the joists, its shingles curled and askew. At one time a room had been added to the back, the annex which was now the kitchen, and in the ell thus formed was a small porch and blistered green door. This, the brief period before sundown, was the hottest interval of the day; the heat shimmered before Brokaw's eyes, making it seem as though he were looking at the courtyard through cheap bottle-glass. A meadow lark drank greedily from a pan at the kitchen door and a mangy mother cat paraded ceaselessly back and forth, from stable to woodshed, moving her family of kittens.

It was with his eyes cast downward, watching the cat, that he happened to notice the grille. A small iron grating, possibly five inches square, rusted and corroded, was set into the fieldstone foundation of the house by the little back porch. The grille was old but its standstone frame was new and solid, with white, new mortar.

The green door opened and a man stepped out into the dazzling sunlight.

He was an elegant man, middle-aged, resplendent in loose buff pantaloons, a jacket of cream nankeen and a waistcoat of changeable crimson sparkling with gilt buttons. From his neck down he looked like a dancing-master, but the head on his padded shoulders was a different story. His puffy face was bleary-eyed and dissolute, his jowls and lax mouth were downy with unshaved stubble. He left the porch, circled the corner of the building, and—to Brokaw's astonishment—hunkered down on his heels, made a funnel of his hands, and peered into the iron grating.

Brokaw called out good-naturedly. "What's up? What do you see?"

The man stood up. He looked worried. "I see nothing. That's what troubles me. I've looked in that hole a hundred times. I think there's a black veil, or cloth, hung just inside so—" He suddenly leered. "Who are you? Can you shave a man?"

"I'm Brokaw, a lodger here. I don't believe I care to shave anyone just now, thank you."

"Well, come in and have a drink. Name's Gilmore. Got a bad case of barrel fever; have every evening as a matter of fact. It's terrible to wake up with a hand shaking like a bowstring and have to play with a razor. It's times like this, when my nerves are shot, that I get worrying about that little iron grating. Will you come in?"

Brokaw nodded politely. He followed Mr. Gilmore into an untidy bedroom-sitting-room. There was a cot against the wall, a dressing-table loaded with bottles, bread crusts, cheese rinds, and loose change. There were pictures of prizefighters on the wall, and of race horses, and of fighting cocks. Clothes were strewn about the floor, there were cigar burns on the red rug. Mr. Gilmore said roughly, "What'll you have? I've got everything." He added, "Excuse me if I don't join you. I only drink from seven o'clock in the morning to eight. I'm a gambler, and a very good one, I might add, and I only indulge after I've finished my night's session."

Brokaw said blandly, "I'll have a bit of maraschino, thank you."

"Maraschino!" Mr. Gilmore looked horrified, poured out the drink into a crystal goblet. "That's a cordial for females! This is free, do you understand; I'm not charging you one penny. You're my guest!"

Brokaw took it, sipped it in silence. Mr. Gilmore removed his jacket, lathered his face and stood before a mirror. He looped a towel about the back of his neck, over his

shoulder, so that it braced his razor-hand, and thus shaved, amid much muttering. While he worked, he asked, "You wouldn't feel inclined to brush off my jacket and lay out some clean handkerchiefs for me?"

"No," Brokaw said curtly, "I wouldn't."

There was a moment of silence. Brokaw asked genially, "Why were you peering into that iron grille?"

MR. GILMORE became so agitated that he was forced to lay down his razor. "A man named Spires who lives here keeps something pretty ghoulish down in that cellar, of that I'm convinced. I haven't any idea what it is. I listen and listen, with my ear to the carpet and I can't hear anything. I look through the grating, and I can't see anything."

"Spires? What do you mean?"

"I'd been here about two weeks when this Mr. Spires moved in upstairs. He's a big, sloppy, fat man, you'll see him around. Right off, he rented the cellar from Widow Melampy. He told her he wanted it as a storeroom. She wasn't using it, so she let him have it. He paid her twenty dollars. One night, when we were all asleep, or out, he went down and put two new padlocks on the door. You should see them: they're as big as turnips!"

"Maybe he distrusts his fellow lodgers."

"The point is, none of us ever saw him move anything into it. It must be empty. That is, I hope it is."

Kyle Brokaw asked carelessly, "Who is paying the rent for your room here, Mr. Gilmore?"

"Why, let's see now, hold on! What do you mean?"

It was a test question, a long shot, and it got an interesting answer. Brokaw declared, "Someone must be paying your rent, or making this place financially attractive to you in some way, or after the story you just told me, you'd surely get out. Mrs. Melampy's boarding house gives you the shivers —and yet you stay. Why?"

"Spires pays my rent. He's a simple-minded sort of a fellow, of course I wouldn't care to be quoted, and he's doing it in exchange for a bit of a favor I do him now and then."

"Maybe I could do him a favor and he'd pay my rent too?"

"I hardly think so. The whole thing was an unusual stroke of luck on my part. We were chatting together one day in his room and I happened to mention that when I was a youngster, I was an apprentice locksmith. I was out of a job then, that was several months ago, before I took up the profitable profession of a gambler. He said he had a wealthy and influential friend and if I'd do a bit of work now and then for this gentleman, why then Spires would be deeply indebted to me. One thing led to another and I said yes and he just up and offered to carry my room rent for me."

Brokaw showed a courteous interest. "What was this work you were supposed to do for this wealthy gentleman?"

"Now this friend, whoever he is, is a gambler, too. Not a professional like myself, but a merchant who likes a game now and then. It seems he owns shops and warehouses, and such, and is cranky on the subject of burglars. To guard against thievery, he keeps changing the locks on his shop doors. Well, this means that any time, in a hurry, he might need new keys. Mr. Spires gives me impressions in wax and I file them."

"And you give these new keys to Mr. Spires?"

"Oh, no. I take them to the Arcanum gambling saloon and leave them with a gawky, red-haired fellow that's always there at a table by the bar. This red-haired fellow gives them to the wealthy merchant. I've never met this merchant yet. I understand he's a visitor, too, at the Arcanum."

"Is that where you gamble, at the Arcanum?"

"Yes. One night after I'd delivered some keys, the red-haired man suggested I get in a two-handed game; not with him, with the house. I won forty-five dollars. I played every night and always win. Sometimes it's only a few dollars, sometimes it's more. The houseman calls me his ninety-two-dollar customer. I clear pretty close to that figure every week!" Mr. Gilmore smiled smugly. "I didn't know I had the talent until I tried!"

Brokaw arose. "It's been pleasant talking with you." He picked up his shabby beaver. He was very tired. "Last night I walked the streets, I've had no real sleep for two days. I think I'll go to my room and catch a nap."

Mr. Gilmore, combing pomatum through his hair, nodded, said amiably, "Would you mind reaching me that whisk broom yonder? Thank you. Now that it's in your hand would you just give the back of my collar a few swipes?"

Brokaw said solemnly, "I've got lumbago." He laid the whisk on a chair seat, closed the door softly behind him, and stepped out into the hall.

BROKAW'S garret-hole was about ten feet long by six feet tall. The roof sloped from the wall on the right to the floorboards on the left. A small dormer window, about knee high, was cut into the eaves. The sole pieces of furniture were a crude trestle bed and a three-legged milking stool. The air was thick, heavy with suspended dust, almost unbearable. It's only redeeming quality was privacy. A cribbage score had been kept on the pine wall and a cracked whiskey jug lay on its side in a corner. Unbelievable souvenirs of gaiety and revelry, the mementoes of a former tenant. Brokaw stripped to his waist, kicked open the shuttered window, and stretched on the rough planks of the bed. He placed a watch on the floor where he could keep tab on the time, and thought of Mr. Spires.

Brokaw had been in New Orleans when he'd got the letter from the family parson saying that his mother was in a bad way with typhoid. It had been a long, hard trip upriver and by the time he'd arrived she'd died, and had been buried. Brokaw knew he'd never been a very good son, his people had never understood his urge to wander. Now he was alone, without kith or kin. For a moment he felt utterly lonely and completely miserable. And then he thought of the cherry bed, and the oak wardrobe, and Mr. Spires, and his heart roiled with a dull, pulsing anger. He closed his eyes.

It had been a harsh homecoming. There'd been a dinner at the parsonage, a silent, solitary dinner with the parson and his wife; briefly and coldly, the parson told him of his mother's illness, and death, told him too that he was the sole heir to the pitiful estate, a few mounds in the graveyard, and the tiny homestead. He'd given his family little, and he wanted nothing from them. But he listened stiff-faced, and kept a silent tongue.

The Brokaw homestead was a modest cottage set in a grove of oaks at the edge of town. That evening, after he'd visited the cemetery, he paid it his respects. His first shock came as he put his hand on the doorknob. The lock had been jimmied with such force that the door was sprung from its hinges. He read the sign as accurately as though he'd seen it happen. He knew the work of a ken-cracksman when he saw it. He knew what was awaiting him inside. There were marks of a heavy hauling dray by the front porch, and horse droppings on the lawn. He entered.

Housebreakers.

Room after room, it was the same story. Not a piece of silver, or a stick of furniture, or a scrap of clothes or linen left. He'd never seen such savagely efficient robbery. Sometime while he was en route home, probably the very night of his mother's burial, ken-cracksmen had cleaned the place. The total swag couldn't have amounted to a hundred dollars. Ken-cracksmen, with a cart and horse, had cleaned the place. Most of all Kyle Brokaw missed his father's organ that used to stand in the parlor with a lace runner over it, the organ and his mother's bed. So great was his fury that he leaned against the doorsill for support. And the slender panther scar, inconspicuous along his cheek, glowed whitely, like a filament of silver wire.

Despite his better judgment, he'd reported it to the chief constable. And the constable had informed him that Galtsburg was a town of almost eight thousand souls, and that such things happen where great numbers of persons congregate. He further said that he'd keep an eye cocked—but he showed no particular optimism. He wasn't over-cordial.

So Brokaw had set about to do the job himself.

The tracing of the dray of household goods had been long and devious, full of false starts and false leads. A neighbor had seen a cart beneath a hedge the night Brokaw's mother was buried. The cartman, with a lantern, was pulling a sailcloth over a load of used furniture. The neighbor recalled that the horse's harness had a housing of bearskin. That was Brokaw's start. Bearskin housings were rare, old-fashioned. A canvass of Galtsburg's harness menders revealed but three. The upshot here was that all three

owners were innocent. One cartman, however had hauled such a load of goods as Brokaw described, on the night mentioned. He was approached by a lanky red-haired man with these instructions: he was to leave his dray beneath a certain hedge, return a few hours later, and deliver the contents in a certain manner. A cherry bed and an oak wardrobe and an organ he was to take to Widow Melampy's lodging house where a fat man named Spires would receive them. The remainder of the load, linens, kitchen utensils, and so forth, he was to leave at the public market place where they would be received by an old woman covered with hideous sores.

The old woman covered with sores appeared to be non-existent. If this portion of his family goods had been peddled, as he suspected, from a stall in the public market —then they were gone for good, swallowed completely up.

That left Mr. Spires—and Widow Melampy's.

Brokaw knew one thing without a doubt. He'd stumbled into something a lot bigger than he'd expected. It wasn't a simple job of housebreaking. Johnny the Kidsman, the red-haired man, the woman with the sores—there were too many people involved. And olli compolli. Mr. Spires had mentioned olli compolli. In the lingo, olli compolli meant the head man, the master thief. That was the lad Kyle Brokaw wanted to talk to, olli compolli.

A sunset breeze stirred over the housetops, into the window, cool and fresh from the river. Brokaw fell asleep.

HIS next impression was that he was back in that tinkers' camp in the Tombigbee country, taking a drink from a roadside spring. He was a little astonished at the wavering reflection of his face in the water, knobbed-cheeked and florid, with a smear of tobacco on its underlip, and then he realized that the picture was all wrong and that a man was smiling at him and shaking him gently. A man in a blue work shirt and cheap tweed trousers, a man with a gunbelt made from a cut-down cavalry belt with a government holster and a horse pistol at his hip.

He said, "Get up, friend, and come downstairs. Mrs. Melampy wants to ask you a question or two. She's lost somethin'. I'm Deppity Tupper."

Brokaw slipped into his shirt. His watch said eleven minutes after seven; the purple shadows of twilight were reaching across the attic floor. Brokaw said calmly, "Why bother me! I didn't take it."

"No one said you did, friend. This won't take a minute, you can go right back to sleep."

"What did she lose?"

"A roomer. A big one. Someone went and kilt Mr. Spires."

CHAPTER II

MR. DURKEE ASSISTS

EARLY candlelight, Mr. Spires had said, and early candlelight it was. Widow Melampy had placed tapers, five of them, on the mantelshelf and their white pallor carved an eerie cave of light above the body on the floor, touched the cherry bedposts to liquid red, and licked the panes on the bow window in glossy ebony against the dusk beyond. Sheriff Tupper said thoughtfully, "There he lays. Just like Widow Melampy found him." Mrs. Melampy, her calico apron loose on her shriveled frame, her wrinkled, toothless face puckered in concern, agreed. "Yessur! I come in with his pot o' Bohea tea—and thur he was. Flat on his thingamabub! Down, jest like the walls o' Jericho. Deader'n a pan o' cat liver. He was a nice, good man. An' he was all paid up."

Brokaw gazed at the corpse. Mr. Spires wasn't a pleasant sight; his green dressing robe was twisted about his obese body, his arms were crumpled over his enormous belly; his puffy face was discolored and his lips were bruised. Brokaw asked harshly, "What has this to do with me?"

Sheriff Tupper spoke apologetically. "The Widow says you was in here talkin' with him a coupla hours ago. I was just wonderin'—?"

"What we were talking about? Nothing, really. Just gabbing. He was complaining about his lodgings here, about his ill-cooked food and rats and cockroaches. I was disagreeing, claiming this place was number one, just like a palace."

Mrs. Melampy stared at Mr. Spires in

sudden distaste. Sheriff Tupper, a twinkle in his eye, said, "Talk about anything else? About Mr. Lake Durkee, for instance?" Brokaw shook his head. Sheriff Tupper produced a scrap of folded paper, straightened it out, held it to the light. Brokaw scanned the tiny, shaded copperplate

Frishby Spires, Esq.
Melampy's Boarding House
Dear Sir:

In answer to your interesting and tragic letter permit me first to offer my sympathy for the position in which you find yourself. Though I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, I am convinced by the genteel tone of your communication that you are the gentleman you indicate and your genealogy as you outline it seems most impressive—though I must admit I'm entirely unfamiliar with the bloodlines of Lousiana aristocracy. I wish you'd do me the honor of having supper at my home with me, however, as you say, you feel it incumbent to withdraw from the public eye because as a scion of a distinguished family you have been the victim of temporary financial disaster.

I don't know who brought me to your attention but let me repeat, sir, it is a pleasure hearing from you.

To get down to the substance of your epistle. I'm sorry to hear that you are forced to break up your family jewelry collection and if I find myself in the need of precious gems, I shall certainly let you know. It was very gracious of you indeed to send me such a delightful gift as that quaint little organ. Its carved oak goes very nicely with the wainscotting of my library. A beautiful gift from an unknown admirer. What a noble compliment!

Your servant, sir,
Lake Durkee
Deer Park

"I found it in the pocket of his dressing robe," Deputy Tupper remarked. "Lake Durkee is the swell banker that lives out at the end of Plum Street. Were you and Mr. Spires discussin' him?"

"No." Brokaw looked annoyed. "Do you suspect me of—?"

"I don't suspect you of nothing. I wish I could but I cain't. Mrs. Melampy swears you was in your attic and the feller hain't scarcely cold. Besides, lookee here." Sheriff Tupper bent over, laid back Mr. Spires dressing gown. Across the front of the fat man's leg, above the knee, was a faint bruise. There was a bruise, too, on each of Mr. Spires' wrists.

Huggers!" Brokaw exclaimed.

"That's right," Sheriff Tupper said dryly. "I seen too many of these to ever forgit 'em. And they're always the same, the same marks are always there. He was garroted, done in by huggers. One man couldn't have did it alone, this feller's too fat. Huggers works in threes. One from behind to hook the victim's leg with his'n, to choke him with his arm about his windpipe. Another from the front to grab the victim's wrists. And the third to stand by and take care of whatever might come up. I don't much like the idee of huggers working in my bailiwick!"

Mrs. Melampy seemed in an angry trance. Finally she spoke. "I thought he was such a nice man, so fat and suety, and all the time he was blackguardin' me to my other guests, sayin' my food was ill-cooked. That I had rats and cockroaches! I shoulda knowed he wouldn't fadge when he offered me twenty dollars for that useless old cellar!"

Sheriff Tupper raised his eyebrows. Mrs. Melampy explained. "It's locked," she finished. "And he never used it." Sheriff Tupper said softly, "Doggone! Now you got me curious to see inside that place. Let's find his keys."

They searched but Mr. Spires were bereft of keys, or money, or other personal belongings. Sheriff Tupper sighed. "I hate to do it but we'll have to break the door in. It's in the name o' the law, Mrs. Melampy. You run out and get the undertaker. Me and Mr. Brokaw will sojourn to the basement an'—"

"Help yourself," Widow Melampy said bitterly. "You'll find a sledge hammer behind the stove in the kitchen. It serves him right. Rats and vermin, he says!"

The cellar door was at the foot of a steep flight of steps beneath the ground-floor staircase, halfway back in the musty hall. It had evidently been a fruit and vegetable cellar at one time but now the sturdy low door bore three great hand-forged hasps and three large padlocks. Kyle Brokaw held the candle

while Sheriff Tupper swung the twelve-pound sledge. Beneath crashing blows the panel splintered and the door sagged inward on its frame. They entered.

The small, dank cell was floored and walled with fieldstone. But for a scrap of black cloth hung just inside the rusty iron grille, the room was completely empty. In fact, it was immaculate.

Brokaw passed the candlelight painstakingly about the wall and floor. There was no scratch or scar on the masonry. The stonework was old, and in no way had it been disturbed.

Sheriff Tupper said wryly, "So that's that. He locks up an empty room and we smash down the door! I've got nothing against you, Mr. Brokaw. You can go any time you like. Thanks for your help."

THE estate at the end of Plum Street known as Deer Park was new to Brokaw, and the name Durkee, too, was unfamiliar to him. Many things had changed since he left home. The town had more than tripled in size—and six thousand newcomers was a lot of strangers. Brokaw passed through tall marble gates with armorial bearings, and reflected that this was wild country when he was a boy, that he used to set partridge traps here.

He sauntered up a gravelstone drive, across a velvety lawn formally landscaped with sphere-shaped trees and columnar box hedges, passed a sequence of geometrical flower plots and a mechanical fountain of a porcine cupid spewing a sluice of water into a lily pool, and shuddered. He wondered what Boone would say to this, and Wetzel. It hurt him to see Kentucky degenerate. There was a bird on the grass but Audubon couldn't have classified it; it was a cast-iron swan made in England.

The house was as magnificent as many state capitols he'd seen. It sat on a shelf at the peak of a series of slate terraces and must have contained ten or more rooms. In the diaphanous, violet dusk he could make out the classic front with the pillared portico, the ornate chimneys of spiral brick. Inside, one by one, the windows turned from black patches to oblongs of soft orange and he knew that it was arbitrarily night, and that the house lamps were being distributed from their cupboard in the kitchen. He mounted stone steps, crossed the tiled veranda, and dropped the iron knocker—as big as a hawser ring—on its metal shield. A man-servant opened the door, announced automatically, "Mr. Durkee is not at home."

Brokaw smiled icily. "I'm afraid you're presuming a bit there, my man. This is no visit. Please inform Mr. Durkee that Mr. Kyle Brokaw says everything is all wrong."

The servant looked confused. "Wrong, sir?"

Brokaw gave a short sinister laugh. "Unless, of course, it's a joke. Frankly, we've been wondering about that. It's not quite serious enough to ask Mr. Durkee to meet his engagement on the field of honor but it is extremely irritating to persons of our sensibilities. Out of the mode, you know. Tell Mr. Durkee, for he evidently doesn't know it, that iron swans are being gilded in Europe this season, that cupid fountains are considered ludicrous—satyrs are the vogue, and that no one who is anyone trims elm trees in spheres. It's cones this year. All the best people have cones. And Indians."

"Indians?"

"I don't care to discuss it any further. Good day."

"Just a minute, sir," the servant disappeared, reappeared a moment later. "Mr. Durkee," he said in a loud clear voice, "asks Mr. Brokaw to join him in a glass of sherry."

The library was wainscotted in black-stained oak, and the raftered ceiling was black-stained, too. The heavy oak table, and a few of the chairs, bore trefoil and grape-leaf carvings and this motif was carried out again in deep relief in the massive door-frame and window arches. The expensive Rumford Illuminator table-lamp brought out the black and yellow and rose of the Persian rug, coloring the floor like the underwing of a giant moth. It was a pleasant room, but new-smelling. The diamond-paned casements were swung outward to a sultry summer night sky. Mr. Lake Durkee sat by the lamp in his carpet slippers, reading a journal on fashionable attire; occasionally, he curled the magazine into a tube and slapped at a mosquito. Brokaw, unannounced and standing just inside the door, took it in good grace; he knew it was an act, that he was being treated to an intimate version of the squire of the manse at home.

After a moment, he said warningly, "Mr. Durkee isn't going to like it if he catches you sitting in his favorite chair. You'd better get back to the—"

Mr. Durkee pivoted his head with a jerk, said petulantly, "I, sir, am Mr. Durkee!" He sprang to his feet. "Gracious, I have a guest. You're that Mr. Brokaw. Forgive me, forgive me!" He was a small man, and vigorous, frocked in Spanish blue; he wore a ruffled shirt and his absurdly high collar was muffled at the throat with a taffeta stock of dusty rose, a trying color for his square face, for it brought out the mesh of minuscule blood veins on the ball of his nose and on his ruddy cheek-caps. He thrust out his hand, presented himself, and pulled out a chair. "Sit down, sir. This is a pleasure!"

Brokaw sat down. Mr. Durkee said enthusiastically, "How about a touch of sherry?" Brokaw said, "No." Mr. Durkee opened a cigar box, a midget replica of the Parthenon fashioned in satinwood, "Stoga, sir?"

Brokaw shook his head. He was gazing past Mr. Durkee's shoulder, into a small-groined alcove. At a carved oak organ. He'd played on that organ when he was a boy. Mr. Durkee asked humbly, "What's this about gilded swans and—I've been so busy lately that I don't—"

"Oh, that?" Brokaw frowned vaguely. "I like everything just the way it is. I've changed my mind." He gestured toward the alcove. "That's a nice little organ you've got there. Where'd you get it? Is that an old inkstain on the keyboard?" It was stove polish, as a matter of fact; he'd gotten it on when he was ten years old.

"It's just a smudge, you've got good eyes if you can see it from where you sit, sir." Mr. Durkee beamed comfortably. "That was a small gift from one of my many admirers."

"Yes? From whom? Maybe I know him."

"I doubt it." Mr. Durkee got his black Havana going properly, relaxed in his chair. "It was a delightful surprise. I'm a banker, sir, and the saying is that bankers have no friends. Evidently I'm the exception to the rule. I'm sociable-natured, I keep up with the vogue, dress—ahem—fairly decently, and set a good table. Word gets around that Lake Durkee is human after all, a pretty good sort of fellow. He'll trip a few dance steps with the younger set, take a hand of whist if the stakes are reasonable, or otherwise exhibit his sporting blood, if circumstances are decent and respectable. I like to be popular, and I am popular. I submit that organ, sir, as proof positive."

Brokaw looked politely skeptical.

Mr. Durkee rolled up his magazine and slapped a mosquito. "Blast them, they breed in the canebrakes. Not friends, you understand, I mean mosquitoes. Where was I? Oh, yes. A scion of a very old Louisiana family, a gentleman named Spires, made me a present of that organ. A present! For no reason at all. He's living in town now, destitute, and he just wanted to do something, he said in his letter, for—ahem—one of Galtsburg's leading citizens."

"So he brought it around and presented it to you as a token of his esteem."

"Substantially so, but not precisely in the manner you describe. First, I got his charming note, and then, bless my heart, the organ was delivered. Mr. Spires is too delicately modest, he didn't appear. As a matter of fact, his landlady brought it in. My footman helped her, of course."

"Mrs. Melampy?"

"I don't recall her name. She just said she was Mr. Spires' landlady." Durkee gasped at the memory. "I've never seen such a strong girl! I'd hate to throw the maul with her! Biceps like a river roustabout. Pretty though, in a flat-faced sullen way—"

"Did you say *girl?*"

"About twenty-two, I should guess. There's a light in your eye! I can see you like the ladies!" He gave Brokaw a lickerish wink. "Afterward, Higgens, the footman, told me about her. She gets so strong, he thinks, from eating oatmeal cookies. She steals them and eats them, Higgens says. One rainy night he was down in Buffalo Court and happened to drop into a dingy bakery to get out of the downpour. There was a girl behind the counter eating oatmeal cookies, he swears it's the same wench. She tried to wait on him but he wanted nothing, and wouldn't have bought anything if he had because of her sly manner. The real proprietress was out, Higgens thinks, and the girl was pilfering."

Brokaw nodded casually. He arose courteously, said, "I'm afraid, sir, I'm keeping you from your supper. You have been most gracious and entertaining. I wonder now if

you would be helpful. I am a stranger here —and know little about this city's Sunday amusements. During the week I find myself occupied; Sundays are extremely uneventful. What would you suggest?"

"I suggest you go to church," Mr. Durkee declared promptly. "On Sunday Galtsburg goes to church. There are several, all good. I myself am a member of St. Lukes, in fact, I am senior warden. The rector is a personal friend of mine, a very pious man."

"But I'm a stranger," Brokaw repeated. "Will he let me in?"

"Of course, he'll let you in, how absurd!" Mr. Durkee considered. "However—" He picked up a steel pen, dipped it into an inkpot, and scrawled a brief note on a sheet of lavender notepaper. "Here you are!"

Brokaw took the paper, glanced at it:

The Reverend Littlejohn Buckles
St. Lukes Rectory
Dear Sir:

This is to introduce Mr. Kyle Brokaw. Permit me to entrust him to the mercy of your tender care.

Yrs Respectfully,
Lake Durkee
Deer Park

Mr. Durkee accompanied his guest to the door. "And that," he smiled, "makes you feel better, eh?"

"Much better," Brokaw answered earnestly. "Thank you."

On the street again, Brokaw tore the address from the note, tossed it on the cobblestones, folded the note carefully and placed it in his wallet.

BUFFALO COURT was not far from the river. Brokaw passed through a narrow archway of mouldering brick and found himself in a small, bottle-shaped enclosure bordered by frugal but respectable-looking shops. High overhead a hazy moon sponged the little hollow with shadows. Cicadas skirled from distant tree-tops and a bat curvetted in and out of the radiance of the single, lighted shop-window.

It was a dirty window, low-set, flinging an ankle-high gleam out over the court flags. As Brokaw approached he saw it glowed in an areaway below street level. A neat sign said simply: *Bakery.* He descended the steps into the areaway and opened the door. A bell tinkled.

The room was small, the floor bleached from lye scrubbings, the walls immaculate with white wagon paint. Behind a short, bare counter were rough lumber shelves displaying a few loaves of bread, some ginger cookies, a jug of milk, and a round of cheese. A tin barn-lantern hung from an iron hook in the ceiling joist. The place was empty but as Brokaw entered a girl appeared from a door at the rear and walked behind the counter. In a listless voice, she asked, "Yes?"

She was a tall girl, sullen and flat-faced, black-haired. Her lips were full and coarse, her nostrils were flared and coarse, her wrists were thick and strong, yet somehow there was a faint attraction about her. She was Mr. Durkee's organ-mover, without a doubt. Her hazel eyes studied Brokaw slyly, and while her moist lips remained immobile yet they seemed to smile. She said, "I'm just about to close for the night. What did you want?"

Brokaw pointed to the bread on the shelf. "I'd jock gilyore peck. Some of that pannam damber." He gestured to the cheese, "And a bit of your cass."

"You'd like what!"

"This is a burster-butterker, a bakery, isn't it?"

"Of course, but—" Her eyes seemed suddenly inviting, her face remained stolid, lifeless. "What's your business, sir? Who sent you here?"

Brokaw laughed. "She says what's your business, sir? I've no feker, my sweet optime prim. I'm a jagger. Johnny the Kidsman sent me."

She smiled. Just a touch of motion to the corners of her lips. "Don't call me your optime prim, I'm nobody's lovely sweetheart. Doesn't feker mean trade, and jagger gentleman? If you're a gentleman, where did you learn the lingo? Are you a friend of the Kidsman's?"

"I'm a friend to nobody. Just to myself, my dear. And that's ryebuck!"

She looked him over carefully. "You're a brawny boy," she said slowly. "I'm Betsy Hanrahan. I could pal with you."

"Not with Kyle Brokaw," Brokaw said coldly. "I've had a wife."

She laughed. A wife, in the lingo, was

an iron prison-shackle. She cut a slice of bread, said, "Here's your pannam," and a wedge of cheese, "—and your cass. What really brings you to this shop?"

"Higgens, the Durkee footman. I want to talk about him."

"Oh." She looked at him in new appraisal. "Then you're ryebuck yourself. You're from the elephant!"

It was an innocent-sounding word, and she dropped it carelessly, yet when he heard it, Brokaw's mouth tightened. An elephant was not only a big thief, an olli compolli, but one who had the cream of his loot hidden in an "outside plant," a secret hiding-place. Things were shaping up at last. And fast.

He was about to answer when a look of annoyance crossed her face, annoyance with a trace of fright. She was looking past his shoulder, out the window. He turned his head. Outside, in the night, where the light fell outward from the window, three pairs of legs stood on the raised pavement. Men's legs. Only the boots and ankles were visible. Three pairs of trousers legs in ordinary brown tweed, three pairs of ordinary boots, not shabby, not polished either. Just run-of-the-mill boots like you'd see on the street anywhere; just three bodiless pairs of commonplace trousers. And yet, somehow, maybe it was because they were grouped so intently, yet, somehow, Brokaw felt fear. And the feeling of fear was almost a stranger to him.

The boots moved on. Carelessly on, into the night.

The girl asked pettishly, "Now what did *they* want?" She spoke with a faint inflection to *they*. As though the boots and trousers were not unfamiliar to her.

She took down the lantern, said abruptly, "Let's go into the back room." Brokaw followed her through a door behind the counter, down a short, vaulted passage, into a cramped windowless compartment. Here was a small bed, two chairs, and a tiny mirrored dressing-table. Betsy Hanrahan hung the light on a wall bracket. She stripped to her chemise, took off her broad-heeled shoes and fine cotton stockings, and seated herself before the looking-glass. Brokaw took the remaining chair, placed his beaver on his knee, and waited.

Miss Hanrahan pinched flour from a teacup and dusted it through her black hair with a horn comb. She talked as she worked and gradually her hair became gray-streaked and unkempt. "This footman, Higgens, came into my shop one night, on the prowl for lassies, and tried to paw me. I didn't know then how olli compolli had Mr. Durkee on his list to sell swag to, didn't know that they were giving him an organ. They always give the flat a present to warm him up into a good customer. When the footman came in that night I thought maybe he was a spy from olli compolli. Just had the feeling somehow. I didn't know then that he was Mr. Durkee's footman. I didn't find out until I delivered the organ at Deer Park. Well, Higgens didn't place me, you can tell olli compolli that!"

"Why don't you tell him yourself?"

She laughed. "I'd like to. But I wouldn't know him if I saw him. Nobody knows him but Johnny the Kidsman. And maybe you."

Brokaw winked. "Not me, I'm new in town. Who is this Kidsman?"

"A no-good cracksman from Louisville. He lives in the loft above the old carriage shop on Water Street. He teaches kinchins to be faggers and such. It's against the laws of nature to learn young ones to steal. I loathe and despise the man! I don't for the life of me see why olli compolli favors him!" With the tip of her finger she touched a bit of soot beneath her eyes and to the hollow of her throat; before Brokaw's gaze she aged forty years. She said casually, "There's a dose on tonight at eleven and I have to play shady to pipe."

It was then that she began to make the cleymans. Cleymans were artificial sores, Brokaw had seen them on manderers, or beggars, at fairs. This was the first time he'd ever seen them under construction. In a saucer, in careful proportions, she mixed white tallow and yellow mustard powder, binding it with a little lard. She then donned a ragged frock, kilted almost to her knees. Expertly, she laid on three horrible cleymans; one on her cheek, one on her throat, and a long, ugly one on her forearm. She made these quickly and deftly, swabbing a patch of skin with the purple juice of poke-berries and fashioning the tallow-and-mustard over it in simulation of a festering scab. The effect was stark and shocking. For an instant she inspected herself in the glass; satisfied, she pointed to a crutch in the cor-

ner, said, "I'll fadge, I guess. Hand me my plyer, pal. I have to be getting out on the street."

An old lady with sores.

Brokaw said quietly, "Not long ago a cottage was robbed. A little cottage at the edge of town, in a grove of oaks—"

"Yes. I diary it. It was the Kidsman who heaved that libben. What about it?"

"What became of the loot? You took the drayload at the marketplace. What did you do with it?"

"What's wrong? Isn't everything ryebuck? I watched it till daybreak, like I always do, and then I turned it over to Red Parrett and his boys. They peddled it. All except the lig, the cherry bedstead, and an oak wardrobe, and the little organ. They went to Spires. Spires sent the organ to that banker, Durkee, to butter him into buying swag later."

"What became of the silver? The plate, such as it was, and the tableware? The chatty-feeders and gobsticks, the knives, forks, and spoons?"

"Don't you know? Why olli compolli always weeds out the silver gobsticks and chatty-feeders, and such. All gems, too, and money. That's what he salts away in his outside-plant. That's why he's called the elephant." She smiled, and the hideous cleyman crept like a scab up the side of her face. "He says some day we're going to divide it."

She opened a door—and they stepped out into an alley. Brokaw remarked, "I'm headed for a gambling-house known as the Arcanum. How do I find it?"

She came to a dead stop in the filtering moonlight. "It's a brick-faced drum with a blue lantern over it, on South Street. You going there for business or pleasure?"

"Pleasure."

"Then you'd better stay away. That place is going to be on fire tonight. The boys are going to heave it. Didn't no one tell you? At eleven sharp. I'll be on the street deeking for the law, playing shady to pipe. Keeping an eye peeled while the boys work." She touched him on the arm, hesitated, "Good night."

The river mist swirled her from view. Two alley cats were having it out, tooth and nail, over a mound of rubbish; through the open door of a grogshop came the tinny plinking of a banjo. The courthouse clock struck seven-eight-nine. Brokaw wished suddenly that he was armed. He'd never owned a pistol and his bearknife, along with his two extra shirts and signet ring, reposed in the strong-box of a pawnbroker in New Orleans—that was how he'd raised money to get home.

HE LEFT the alley and headed for Water Street, and the loft of Johnny the Kidsman.

He was crossing a vacant lot back of Main Street when he saw the man with the dark lantern. There was a faint blob of pale green light, scarcely larger than a luminous green delft plate, and it seemed to be moving along the ground, through the scythe-cut weeds, this way and that, patiently, ceaselessly. It was very dark here, and silent, and the outlines of the nearby buildings stood out against distant street lights like black cardboard. Brokaw's first thought was that the man was a fisherman searching for night crawlers. As he was about to pass, the man called out to him. In a tense, husky voice he said, Gawd, I'm glad to see you! Pass the word along! They come through here last night an' are making for Orchard Village and the post at Silver Creek!"

Brokaw slowed up. "Who?"

"The Miamis! Who do you think." There was the trace of a sob in the husky voice now. "A war party of at least a hunnert devils come down on us out'n the Ohio country. They kilt my mammy and poppa. An' took my pet calf. And farred the cabin. I hit out in the bresh. I'm lookin' fer my pocket-knife. I had it right here under the hearthstone. But I cain't seem to find the hearthstone. I cain't find nothin' but durn ole weeds!" He came forward, held the lantern in Brokaw's face, and Brokaw got a sensation of gnarled, old hands and a grizzled, seamed neck. In disgust, the man said, "No tomahawk nor huntin' shirt! That hain't no way to travel this kinda country, you'll starve to death!"

Brokaw asked gently, "How old were you when this happened, this massacre?"

"I'm six, goin' on seven. Is it any business o' your'n?"

"No," Brokaw said. "But—"

The man put out the lantern, said curtly, "He's your meat, boys."

They were on him out of the darkness,

instantly and without sound, the killers—the stranglers. An arm from behind circled his throat, and another, like steel, his chest; a leg was through his, and around it, and his windpipe was crushed. And as the web of pain and blackness and fire tore through his brain he knew it was the huggers, and that this was the manner in which Spires had died. And he knew that huggers worked in threes: one for the throat, and one for the wrists—and one for trickery. He remembered, as from another world, the three pairs of boots outside the bakery window.

As the second man clawed at his wrists, and fingernails tore at his skin, Brokaw tore himself loose and throwing his arms over his head counterlocked the head of the strangler, dropping to a quarter-turn crouch to ease the leverage which was throttling him. The pain was almost unbearable. He was fighting for his life. It was the bearpit again. The tall man behind him fumbled in his balance and the hold relaxed. Brokaw, flatfooted, wrenched himself violently free, and wheeled.

They came at him in an avalanche, the three of them now, but the death-hold was broken. The attack was bestial and frenzied, but disorganized and clumsy. This was a craft to Brokaw, this cutthroat brawling, and he knew its skills and secrets like a master. Again and again, with the tigerish muscle of his body behind his blows, his smashing fists hammered like poleaxes. The flurry was short and vicious, one of them called, "Take to your beaters, pals!"—and he was alone.

It was all over.

He lighted a lucifer, located his hat in the grass, and picked it up. His shoulder was numb and his throat felt as though it had been seared with a hot iron. When he got to the corner of Main and Water Streets, he straightened his stock and brushed off his coat sleeves.

CHAPTER III

THE ARCANUM

THE carriage shop was old, it had been old and abandoned even when he was a boy. Brokaw stood in the shadowed shelter of a hackberry tree and scrutinized it. It didn't look too attractive. In the faint nimbus of a distant street light, it stood in a small brushy lot, a vague and weird, a gray hulk half materialized in the black night. Through the years it had been undergoing slow collapse, sagging forward on its foundations, and now its ghostly bulk was propped with stilt-like beams of scrap timber giving it the loathsome appearance of a great gray spider. High up under the eaves a slender pencil of saffron light shone through a crack in the planking. Into the larger old carriage door had been set a small, newer door of box lumber. Brokaw left the shelter of the tree, crossed a patch of grassless earth, and opened this smaller door.

Smells came to him out of the darkness, smells of vacancy, of sour wood and rotting floors, and pungent, ancient dust. And the blackness was without texture or body, a sensation of nothingness. After a moment of listening, Brokaw struck a friction match. In the tiny tongue of flame he saw a long empty room, with a rickety, canted floor; to his right was a disused forge, hung with streamers of cobwebs, to his left, at the far rear, out of a jumble of old dust-coated packing-boxes, a staircase rose to the upper floor.

Brokaw extinguished his match, groped his way along the wall, and ascended the stairs. At the landing the door was missing from its frame but a piece of carpet hung across the opening as a curtain. He pushed aside the carpet and entered.

The loft was tent-shaped, and foul, and river haze pressed moistly into the room through a spangle of missing shingles. There was no bed here, just a heap of grass clippings, mouldy and odorous. Johnny the Kidsman sat on an up-ended nail keg, by a crude desk constructed from a saw-horse and a cupboard door. A candle guttered in a gin bottle at his elbow. He was a young fellow, younger than Brokaw had anticipated—about Brokaw's age. And indescribably dirty, even the interstices of his fingers were crusted with accumulated grime. His tattered coat was too large for him, his trousers too small, his shoes patched and repatched. His sallow face was thin and wedge-shaped, with a bony bulbous forehead, and his eyes, behind thick-lensed spectacles, were as pale and blue as skimmed milk. He held a small cardboard-bound book in his hand; Brokaw read the title: *Professor Applegate's Second Reader.*

The Kidsman nodded amiably. "Come in." He seated his spectacles firmly on the bridge of his nose, said, "How does this sound? Rover and I go nutting. I find butternuts. Rover finds a squirrel. Heigho, what a lark! How does that sound?"

Brokaw said nothing. The Kidsman closed the book, "I'm teaching myself my letters. I sometimes wonder if it's worth the effort. Who are you and what do you want?" His voice was cold and lifeless, like flexible steel.

Brokaw asked solemnly, "Are you enjoying yourself? Of course, we have nothing to do tonight, so we just sit around and read primers." He raised his eyebrows.

The Kidsman's eyes glazed with frosty anger. "I get ambitions. I want to read and write and be a passable gentleman. How I spend my spare time is no concern of yours, or anyone else's. State your business, and quick, my friend, before I toss you out of here."

"The boys are heaving the drum at the Arcanum tonight and you are sitting around with Rover chasing squirrels and butternuts."

"When I'm needed, if I'm needed, I'll be on hand. I always am."

"Put away your little book," Brokaw said insolently, "and get out your kit, cracksman. The job comes off at eleven sharp."

"I know when it comes off, I helped set the time, didn't I? Furthermore, this is no job for tools. I thought I'd settled that. At eleven sharp the chief houseman brings the evening shift receipts into the strong-room. Parrett and his boys come in through the back, over the fence and across the court. They come up by the kitchen roof and into the room by the window. They wait by the door with their lead pipes. Downstairs, the manager leaves the gaming rooms, passes through the hall, and goes upstairs with his bag of blunt. There should be plenty of blunt, a couple of blunt—a couple of thousand dollars, I'd say. The Arcanum's carriage trade and the patrons play wide and handsome. When the houseman comes into the strong-room, heigho, the boys give him the snitchel. And that's that."

"It might not work."

"Of course, it'll work. It's all set. I've had faggers washing windows and scrubbing floors there for a week. It's clockwork." Faggers were young thieves, boy apprentices in the gait. Brokaw looked dissatisfied, "The girl will be outside, to pipe, but where will you be? Chasing butternuts and squirrels up here out of pistol-shot?"

The Kidsman's pale face went taut around the mouth. His vicious little eyes blinked behind their strong lenses. "Lay off," he said softly. "Don't kimbaw me too far. I didn't like your stinkin' face from the moment I saw it."

Brokaw smiled in heavy arrogance. He thought, *Now I am near the end of the trail. This here before me is the very blackguard who desecrated my home.* He thought, *Near the end but not quite. I must go slowly. I must watch myself. I must fight these people as the bobcat fights, remembering that the backlash is more lethal than the lash! Things are not yet ready.*

He said in biting scorn, "The plans have been changed. You are to jimmy a window on the ground floor ten minutes before the appointed time. You are to enter the gaming rooms with a pistol in each hand and rob the tables. The boys will be in the back, and the girl on the street, to cover your escape."

The Kidsman was speechless. Panic crept into his milky eyes. "But I'm not on the bangstick cross, and olli compolli knows it. I'm a ken-cracksman. I've never held a pistol in my life!" He pondered an instant, shook his head. "Walk into that room, under those chandeliers, alone, with an iron in each paw, hey? Where everyone gets a deek at my phiz and any sportsman with a tube full of gunpowder can take a potshot at me? Oh, no, my friend. I'm a cracksman. I work in the dark, and safe, and live to be a hundred-and-ten!"

"Shall I tell that to olli compolli?"

"Why not? He's no better than I am."

"I'll tell him that, too."

"You'll tell him, you'll tell him! Who the hell do you think you are? I'll tell you who you are. You're some corn-thrashing joskin he brought in to edge me out and take my place."

"That, I deny."

"Of course you do, and you'd better if you don't want your throat cut where you stand!" The Kidsman's lips flattened against stained teeth. "I've made him plenty blunt in this town, the swag's been good, cove, I'm getting out of this back-country. I'm

going to learn my letters, and swell it around, and get somewhere! This does it! It's the next bull for me, and mizzle to stait. That's where I belong, stait!"

Stait was New York. Brokaw said, "So you're going to catch the next train and hit for New York? Galtsburg will hate to see you leave."

"Olli compolli will hate to see me leave. Him and his outside plant! Tell him I'm collecting my share, that the time has come. I want my divvy."

Brokaw said, "You'll have to tell him that yourself."

Johnny the Kidsman grinned. "I will, cove, I will."

Brokaw left him wrapped in moody reverie, staring at the guttering candle.

THE brick house on South Street was set flush to the street, with an eight-foot brick wall flanking it along the pavement on either side, evidently enclosing what had once been gardens. It had been built as a dwelling and had undoubtedly once been used as a dwelling, but had now about it an indefinable mercantile air. From its tile chimneypots to the worn sandstone doorstep, it had the feel of whispered commerce. A square lantern of blue glass hung on a bracket above the door. On the cobblestones by the curb was a carriage or two and several gigs.

Brokaw yanked the polished brass doorpull and instantly an elegant man with silken mustachios admitted him to a boxlike, enclosed ante-room. The doorman waited a moment, asked politely, "The card? Do you have a card?"

"I have no card," Brokaw declared. He produced Mr. Durkee's note of introduction to the rector. "But possibly this will do?"

The doorman read it. He read it twice. He looked elegantly surprised. *"This is to introduce Mr. Kyle Brokaw. Permit me to entrust him to the mercy of your tender care. Lake Durkee.* If Mr. Durkee, sir, recommends you it's enough for us. But that tender care business. Perhaps Mr. Durkee is making a joke. Ha-ha. Mr. Durkee can be very funny whenever he wishes to expend the effort, he's a very witty man. His sense of humor, I understand, runs into many thousands of dollars. Come in, and welcome. Mr. Durkee himself should be along a little later. He usually whiles away an hour or so with us every evening about this time."

The doorman bowed Brokaw out of the ante-room, into the main foyer. Here was a wide hall, carpeted in blue. In the white light of crystal chandeliers, Brokaw saw a delicate staircase, ascending from a rosewood ramshorn in a graceful curve to the upper floor where it was swallowed in a balcony of potted plants. Halfway along the broad main-hall double doors were thrown open and from here came the clink of chips and the muffled murmur of restrained voices. He sauntered into the gaming room.

This had once been the house's dining-room but partitions had been removed, greatly enlarging it. The ceiling of ornamental moulded plaster, flowers and medal-

lions tinted in silver and blue, and the deep rug reached from baseboard to baseboard. Gentlemen were gathered about a scattering of tables, engaged in whist and poker and faro. Along the rear wall was a diminutive bar, tended by an immaculate barman, and sparkling with crystal goblets and glassware.

Brokaw's clothes, threadbare and a bit rumpled, were out of place, but the glances he drew were completely friendly, and politely restained. A tall, red-haired man was drinking whiskey at the bar, arguing with the barman. Brokaw wove his way through the tables and approached.

The red-haired man gave him a long, hard look, averted his eyes. As he turned his head Brokaw noticed with pleasure a fresh welt, livid on his cheek. The red-haired man said raspingly to the barman, "Your whiskey, I like. Your card games, I like. Your wine is something different. It's colored with logwood dye and sweetened with sugar of lead. Gah! Now once when I was in Dublin—that's in Ireland as you know, and Ireland, as everyone knows is—"

BROKAW said softly, "Your name is Parrett, isn't it? I want a word with you."

Red Parrett spoke harshly over his shoulder. "I'm intelleckshully occupied in a discussion of verbiage with this barman-gintleman here. Be off!"

Brokaw said, "An hour or two ago you and a couple of your friends tried to hugger me in a vacant lot behind Main Street. That welt on your cheek is where I marked you. I'm ordering you out of town. If I run into you tomorrow, I'll beat you to the ground and shoot you where you lay. That's all. Barman, I'll take a maraschino, please."

The red-haired man's shoulders went rigid. He set his half finished drink on the mahogany. The barman frowned, set out Brokaw's maraschino. He attempted a paternal smile, said earnestly, "We try to avoid trouble in the game room, sir."

Red Parrett straightened his jacket. He spoke intimately, to no one at all. "The Arcanum has been a friend to me, and I'll be a friend to it! It's not a low ginhouse and I'll not disgrace it by ruffianism. Barman, I'm a man who can swallow a insult for the sake of honor and loyalty. I'll be getting me a breath of fresh air, now. I can't abide a drunken rowdy. No offense to anyone in partickler, I make haste to add—it's jist a general statement. Goodbye, gentlemen."

No one answered him. He strolled across the floor and left the room.

Brokaw said, "I wish to see the chief houseman, and promptly. Tell him it's to his best interest."

The barman, beaded with sweat, disappeared through a heavily panelled door. He reappeared, nodded warily. "Just step into the office, sir." The Eli Whitney clock on the backbar said fourteen minutes after ten.

The clock on the wall of the manager's office was a new Seth Thomas, with a landscape painted on its base depicting a white house, that looked like a white-washed prison, on a green knob, that looked like half of a green billiard ball. The brass pendulum swung interminably back and forth, pushing the minute hand around, and up, till the dial read nine minutes of eleven. The office of the Arcanum was rich and comfortable, a thing of soporific luxury. The appointments were genteel, and masculine, and varied from a massive ebony table off a China Clipper and a battery of exquisite decanters, to a mounted fox brush under a pair of crossed riding crops. Here, a glass in his hand, a gentleman could relax and enjoy the good things of life. At one side, partially out of sight behind a silk screen, was a desk, with paper, and ink, and a pen stuck in a holder of buckshot; here, a gentleman, pressed by debts and an unlucky evening, could mortgage his house, or dash off a promisory note, or an heir bond away expectations. The office at the Arcanum was prepared to meet any situation that might arise.

Three men sat about the big ebony table: Manager Neff, a small placid man with thinning hair and a powered chin, Brokaw, and Sheriff Tupper. Manager Neff said, "It's nine minutes till ten. Maybe we'd better—"

Sheriff Tupper was telling the story of his life. "—My first wife's first husband left her with the custody o' five pigs but no children. Now when my second wife's husband deceased he bequeathed her six children but no pigs. I didn't have no children of my own, to speak of, but I'd saved me up seven more pigs. Then comes the hard winter o' 1829 and I get out my slate pencil and add 'em up, pigs and children, and deevide the total into the corn in my crib, and count the days till spring, and figger I'll have to do some butchering, somewhurs along the line. Well, I git to thinking an' apuzzling. Shall it be pigs or children? Well—"

Mr. Lake Durkee opened the door from the gaming room and entered. He was dressed in a neat suit of English woollen, buff with a faint red check, and was eating a lozenge. He said mechanically, "Mr. Neff, I'm having a bit of difficulty getting the right cards tonight. I wonder if you'd cash me a draft for, say, five hundred?"

Mr. Neff shook his head. "I will not, sir. You need no paper in the Arcanum. Your word is your bond here, sir. Tell the dealer I stand behind you."

Mr. Durkee beamed. " 'Jove, that's good of you!" He recognized Brokaw, and the Sheriff. "Bless my heart. Some sort of a conclave. I'm sorry, I hope I haven't interrupted any important—?"

Brokaw said affably, "There's about to be a robbery attempt on the Arcanum. Mr. Neff has just sent a runner out for Sheriff Tupper. We're just getting ready to ambush—"

Sheriff Tupper glared balefully. "I swear and declare! Some folks talk too much."

Mr. Durkee smiled happily, "Great Jupiter! Not really? How sporting! I believe I'll join you."

The men got to their feet. Sheriff Tupper accepted a big brass key, the key to the strongroom, from Mr. Neff. He said sourly, "We'll take him with us, Kyle, so's he won't flutter around through the guests and put the place on its ear. You come with us, Mr. Durkee, we're going upstairs. Mr. Neff, like I said, you hang around the front door lest they pull a surprise from the street. All right, let's go." He swung his cavalry holster into comfortable position and started for the door.

THEY ascended the sweeping staircase in the foyer, passed the battery of potted plants, and made their way down the long, dimly lighted upper hall. On this floor was the manager's quarters, and the quarters of some of the help, and a few special parlors for private parties, but tonight, at this hour, all were deserted and quiet. At the rear end of the corridor was an oak door, banded with iron strips; Sheriff Tupper fitted his key in the lock and threw the bolt. They entered, and closed the door behind them.

Outside, the river mists had dissipated and a small moon hung over the rooftops, in the curve of the blue night-sky. In its faint radiance Brokaw could make out outlines and objects in the strongroom. Mr. Durkee had found a chair and was taking his ease, waiting for the show to begin. To Brokaw's left was a counting-desk, with a ledger open on it, and a stool before it, beyond stood the hulking squarish form of a great chest, the Arcanum's strongbox. Sheriff Tupper, dwarfed and withered and indistinct in the shadows, stood by the strongbox. He had his horsepistol in his hand; he said sociably, "Let 'em get clear inside, remember. When I say the word, Kyle, you strike a light. Mr. Durkee, you just sit there an' eat lozenges. I'll take care o' this."

Brokaw asked, "What happened to the pigs and children?"

"Neighbors all swore it was the best sausage they ever et, but I got a dash too much sage and black pepper in it. Quiet now! Watch sharp!"

The minutes ticked by, slowly, tensely. Through the window Brokaw could see the low sloping roof of the kitchen and below it a moonlit triangle of the backyard, grassy and neat, enclosed on the alley-side by a white, waist-high board fence. Anyone walking down that alley would be revealed from the waist up.

And suddenly, almost before he realized it, a black streak appeared in the white fence. The gate was opening. In the distance, the courthouse clock struck eleven. The alley-gate opened and the black figure of a man emerged, a man crawling on his hands and knees like a great dog. He was followed by a second, and then a third; single file, they scuttled across the triangle of grass towards the house, and passed from vision. There was an instant, then, when all was the same as before, peaceful and without motion, the white fence and the grass and the dusty silver moonlight—but now the gate was wide on its hinges. Sheriff Tupper stirred.

White fingers, glowing like ivory, clenched the edge of the kitchen roof. A man pulled himself over, and up, and squatted on the shingles. It was Red Parrett. He made a sign below him and two others joined him, a squat, apish figure and a hunched, grizzled figure. The huggers. Parrett approached the window.

He felt the glass with his fingertips, tested the frame to locate the inside lock. He

gestured and one of his companions handed him a short jimmy. He inserted the tooth of the iron bar beneath the window sash and applied a slow, increasing pressure. In that instant, magnified and distorted by the moonlight, he seemed a vicious, crouching monster, knees and elbows, and enormous grimacing head.

Mr. Lake Durkee, from his chair, raised a short barrelled pistol from his lap and shot.

The flame of the heavy bore and the crash of glass overlapped, and Red Parrett half rose, spread eagled in pain across the window glass. And Mr. Durkee fired with the other barrel.

Parrett went to his knees, his companions dropped from sight into the yard. The red-haired man rolled down the slope, and bucketed over the roof ledge. Sheriff Tupper hopped forward, swung a chair, and knocked out the window pane; Brokaw joined him. Down below, Parrett's friends appeared, carrying the wounded man between them, across the grass, out through the alley-gate—into the maw of the night.

Sheriff Tupper said calmly, "I thought I told you to stick to your peppermint candy. Well, live an' learn!"

Mr. Durkee stowed the short-gun into his waistcoat pocket. "I should be a sheriff, eh?" His voice quavered slightly. "I didn't miss, did I! A criminal caught in the commission of crime. Frankly, gentlemen, I've carried this weapon for two years without either firing it, or drawing the charge to replace it with a fresh one, and I was afraid it might fail me. But it didn't, did it?"

"No," Brokaw asserted. "It didn't. Well, what now, Sheriff?"

"I don't know," Sheriff Tupper answered stoically. "Dammit, I hain't got no idee."

"I suggest," Brokaw declared, "that we arrest the wounded man. Through him we can locate his companions. How does that sound?"

"I ain't gonna bother to even answer," Sheriff Tupper walked out into the hall.

Brokaw said, "I think I know where we can find your man. His name is Parrett, and I think I know where he'll go."

Sheriff Tupper froze to a halt. "Says which? Goddomighty!"

Mr. Durkee said, "Splendid, Mr. Brokaw." Sheriff Tupper spoke hastily, "Not you, you go home! You've had a turrible experience, Mr. Durkee, you ought to be at home in bed. Yessirreebob!"

Brokaw said, "We'll take him along. He may come in handy. I may need his advice. How about it? All right, let's go!"

AS THEY walked down Main to Plum, and turned from Plum to Water, Brokaw told them about his connection with the affair. This was as good a time as any, he decided, to explain his connection with the business. He told them about the death of his mother, about Johnny the Kidsman, and Red Parrett's stranglers. He told them about the organization of thieves, and how they conducted their depredations, and explained to Mr. Lake Durkee, in an indirect and delicate manner, how it appeared he was being cultivated as a respectable market for stolen goods. He recounted everything, and in detail. Everything except the existence and function of Miss Betsy Hanrahan, the lookout. Miss Hanrahan, Brokaw felt, was just a poor kinchin who deserved a chance. Things were going to pieces, and fast, and it was Brokaw's guess that Miss Hanrahan would pack her portmanteau and leave for parts unknown.

Mr. Durkee was a little embarrassed as he was revealed as a gullible victim, and blustered a bit, but all in all he took it with dignified grace and lavished praise on Brokaw's success. Sheriff Tupper spoke but once. He said, "So them's the fellers that has been giving me so much grief lately, a ring with a boss, eh?" And lapsed into stoney silence.

The old carriage shop on Water Street stood beneath its solitary hackberry tree, desolate, and mottled with moonlight and shadows. With its sagging roof and stiltlike props, it seemed somehow to be crouching, waiting. "Johnny the Kidsman lives here," Brokaw said. "He's first on our list."

They crossed the brushy lot and entered the ancient building. Sheriff Tupper produced a candle-end and struck flame to the wick. The empty, barnlike room sprung into view as the watery light played on the cobwebbed rafters, the dusty packing boxes. Mr. Durkee whispered sibilantly, "Gracious. You say someone lives here? I don't think I'd care for it. It's well, so insufficiently

furnished. At least that's the way it strikes me."

"Upstairs, Sheriff," Brokaw said.

They wove their way through the clutter of rotting crates at the foot of the stairs and mounted the steps. Brokaw held back the carpet curtain and they pushed into the loft. There was the pallet of mouldy grass in the corner, the nail keg and trestle desk, but Johnny the Kidsman was gone.

"Anyone can make a mistake, Kyle," the Sheriff said gently. "That's right," Mr. Durkee chimed in. "I've always considered errors in judgment as an unfortunate but perfectly natural human failing. Even I, myself—"

"I've made no mistake," Brokaw said. "Downstairs. We're not yet finished."

They found him, after a few minutes search, hunched in the little recess under the slant of the staircase. Packing boxes had been arranged to hide him, and as the Sheriff's candle shone into his little cave he showed his teeth and raised his lips, like a cornered ferret. "Come out, Parrett," Brokaw said. "—if you can walk." There was blood on his shirt-front. "I can walk, but slow," the red-haired man said. "I've a pistol ball in my shoulder and another which burned my hip. I'll not die, pals, but I'm not happy and the pain is most unenduring. Is any of you fine gentlemen a doctor? I was crossing the street in front of a grog-shop an' this uncouth stranger comes runnin' out, waving a brace o' guns at me. He sees me, yells, 'I've chased ye twicet aroun' the world and now I catched ye!'—and cuts loose with the gunpowder. I wish to file a warrant agin—"

Brokaw moved into the candlelight. His face was lined and weary. "Where's Johnny the Kidsman, Parrett?"

"Johnny the who? An' who might you be, sir? I don't believe I've had the pleasure of your—"

"This is the lad, Sheriff," Brokaw declared, "who strangled the fat man, Spires, at Widow Melampy's boardinghouse. He and his two pals. He's a journeyman leader of a band of huggers—and he'll be glad to tell you all about it before the night's over. He doesn't know much, but what he has to say will be interesting indeed. Take him down to your jail—and meet Mr. Durkee and myself at the Melampy place in, say, half an hour. I want another look at Widow Melampy's cellar."

Red Parrett showed interest. Mr. Durkee demurred, "But we've got the robber, it's all over! What are we after now?"

"The swag, Mr. Durkee," Brokaw said. "The outside plant. As far as I'm concerned this business isn't over until we've reclaimed the loot."

Mr. Durkee was amazed. "And it's in a cellar some place?"

"Of course," Brokaw said steadily. "It has to be. I've known it all along. You see, they worked a shuttle on us."

CHAPTER IV

THE ELEPHANT

BROKAW and Mr. Durkee were sitting on the little bench in Widow Melampy's backyard when Sheriff Tupper materialized from the shadows and joined them. They'd been there for twenty minutes, waiting, silent, staring at the melancholy brown frame house, each with his own thoughts, gazing each in his own way—Brokaw patiently, Mr. Durkee with growing irritation—at the blank clapboards of the shabby dwelling. The shutters were tightly drawn and nowhere was there the faintest show of light. Sheriff Tupper loomed up before them, "Parrett won't talk." Brokaw said, "He will," and got to his feet. They crossed the yard, entered the kitchen, and passed into the hall.

The candle on the newel post had been extinguished. They progressed cautiously, touching the grimy wall with their fingertips. Tupper's soft voice said, "Darker'n the inside of a parson's carpetbag! Here's the cellar stairs. Shall we go down?"

"You and Durkee go down. I'll wait here and play shady to pipe. That is a quotation from the Latin, Mr. Durkee, which means stand lookout."

"But we been through that place once, Kyle." Sheriff Tupper was annoyed. "Where shall I look—and what do you expect to find?"

Brokaw didn't answer. They pushed past him into the stairwell. A moment later he heard creaking steps and they were by his side. Sheriff Tupper's low voice was excited, "Guess what we found, Kyle?"

"A new door, a strong one this time, and new locks."

" 'y doggies, you snatched the words right out'n my gullet!"

Across the hall, a spot of yellow light no larger than a small golden button appeared. A light from a keyhole. "That's Mr. Gilmore's room," Sheriff Tupper declared. "Looks like we've got him out of bed."

Brokaw said pleasantly, "I do believe you're right." He knocked on the panel and the door opened. Mr. Gilmore, in nightcap and gown, with a quilt about his shoulders, asked, "What's all the fuss about?" Brokaw stepped past him and the others followed.

Inside, Brokaw said coldly, "Gilmore, if you're holding a gun under that quilt you better toss it on the bed. We've got you treed. Sheriff Tupper, here's your man. Watch him!"

THE room was just about as Brokaw had last seen it, the dressing table loaded with bottles, the rumpled cot, the sporting prints on the walls. Clothes were tossed about in confusion. Now, however, a shabby cowhide portmanteau lay on its side by the head of the cot. Mr. Gilmore stood in the center of the floor, his bare feet splayed into the nap of the red carpet. His bleary eyes watched his guests warily, his puffy lips and jowls were sodden with alarm. Brokaw pointed to the portmanteau, "Leaving town?"

"Yes." Mr. Gilmore nodded. "What, gentlemen, is the meaning of this outlandish—?"

Mr. Durkee dusted a chair with his handkerchief, sat down. Brokaw said, "Sheriff Tupper, this Gilmore is the olli compolli of as brutal a crowd of knaves as I've ever run into, and I've been around a bit. He's the man who gives Red Parrett his orders, through a housebreaker, his lieutenant, known as Johnny the Kidsman. That's the lay, that's the way he kept himself clean." Brokaw opened the suitcase; inside was a wad of dirty linen, a few cracksman's tools, and a small blue book. "He's been housebreaking, and thieving, and looting the citizens of this town until they don't know what's what! Tonight his robbery was to be the Arcanum. Probably his last robbery in this territory. He told me earlier, in a long story calculated to throw suspicion on Spires, a helper of his, that every night, all night long, he gambled. At the Arcanum. Yet we find him in bed. This, and he knew it, was a good night to stay away."

"I had a headache," Gilmore said carefully.

"Maybe he did at that, Kyle," Sheriff Tupper objected. "That's no proof. Galtsburg's full o' folks that stayed away from the Arcanum tonight. Sometimes I wish I had!" The sheriff paused. "If he's guilty, and I ain't sayin' he is—what makes you think this was due to be the last one?"

"I was the spanner in the works, Sheriff," Brokaw declared. "I upset his applecart. My trail led here to Widow Melampy's, and to the fat man, Spires. From Spires I tricked the admission that a fellow named the Kidsman as the vandal who had broken into my house. I mentioned the Kidsman to Gilmore, and that set off the fireworks. He got the wind up. Spires and his careless tongue were attended to. I was told a fancy story about keys, Gilmore passing himself off as a stupid locksmith, which was gauged to lure me to the Arcanum where I would foolishly accost Red Parrett and mark myself for death. Things went awry here, though, I delayed my visit to the gambling-house. Red Parrett and his hugger pals were forced to trace me down."

Gilmore laughed nervously. "These names you mention are all strange to me. Will you leave, gentlemen, so I may go back to bed?"

"Don't do it," Mr. Durkee said staunchly. "I believe this fellow is a rascal. Look at the villainous tailoring to his nightcap! It's almost depraved! If any of my servants wore a cap like that, I'd—"

"Who," Sheriff Tupper asked, "put that new door on the cellar?"

"Widow Melampy," Gilmore declared promptly.

"At your suggestion?" Brokaw asked.

"Certainly at my suggestion. In fact, I paid for it, and the locks. However, she has the keys. I simply want to keep it sealed, there's something creepy about that place."

Brokaw said pleasantly, "I see you have in your portmanteau a few burglar tools and a copy of *Professor Applegate's Second Reader*. All about Rover, and a lark in the woods butternutting, I believe. The last time I saw that volume Johnny the Kidsman

was using it to teach himself his letters. Now I was wondering just how it came to be—"

Gilmore took the gun from beneath his quilt. It was an old-time flintlock with a bore the size of a corncob. "Get out, all of you! Now! I'll listen to no more of this slander!"

Sheriff Tupper became suddenly interested. "Well, what do you know! I ain't seen a pistol like that sinst granpappy died. Better hand it over, Mr. Gilmore. You ain't fixin' to kill us all with that one charge, are you?"

Gilmore blustered. "This thing is loaded to the muzzle with brass filings. Brass makes a grievous and persistent wound, gentlemen!"

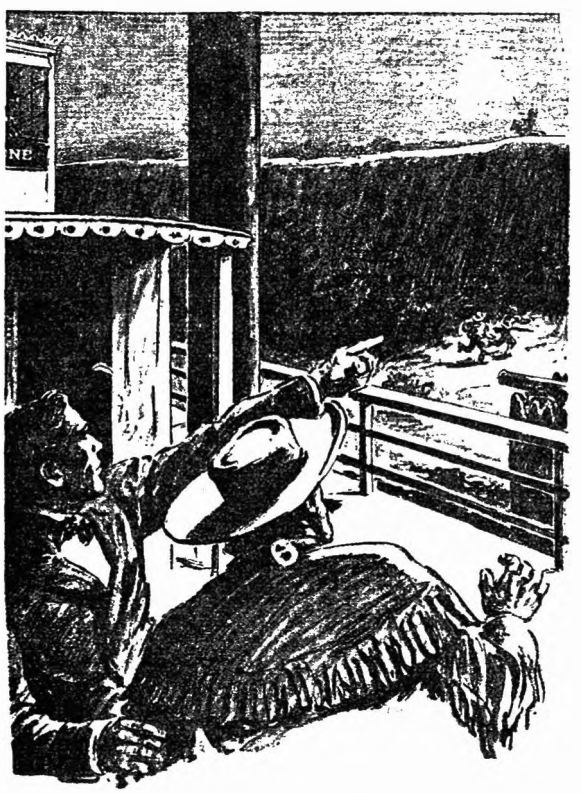
Sheriff Tupper said blandly, "Let's find out about that." And reached for his cavalry holster. Gilmore dropped his weapon as though it scorched his fingers.

Brokaw rolled back the red carpet. In the random-planked floor was the outline of a trapdoor. He raised the trap and held the lamp over the opening.

"This is all you need, Sheriff," he said grimly. "The swag's there—and the corpse of Johnny the Kidsman's there, too. This is the elephant's plant and here's the way he worked it. He locked the cellar from the other side and climbed in and out of his private scuttle-hole as he pleased. He could switch the loot into his room if he needed to, as he did this evening when we broke in. When Johnny the Kidsman came around tonight for a showdown, demanding his divvy—he was slain. Later, the body could be moved—"

Mr. Durkee seemed entranced. He said emphatically, "I'll never forget this evening, Mr. Brokaw. It's an experience that comes once in a lifetime. I can hardly believe it—a nightcap with a little pink rosette dangling from its peak!" He shuddered.

IT WAS A LONG TRIP to the Indian country; for some it would mean years of separation, danger, perhaps death. For, there on the upper Missouri, pistols spoke a little louder than the human voice. . . . . .

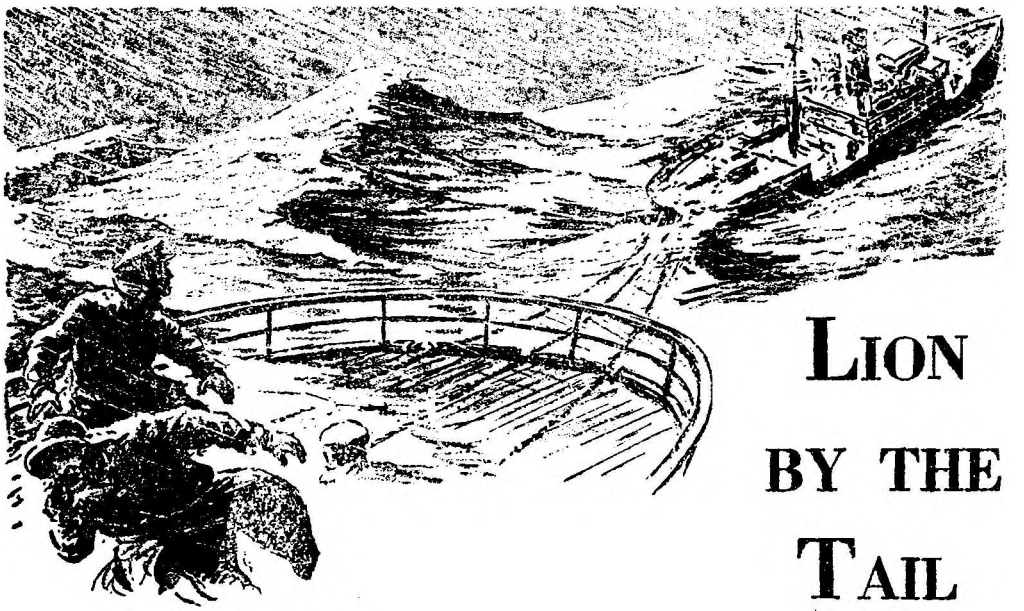


"FORT BENTON—1846"

A novelette in our next issue . . . by

DAN CUSHMAN

To What Tragic Extremes Can Armchair Policies Subject Both Men and Ships?



LION BY THE TAIL

By B. E. COOK

WHATEVER a Ringold deep-water commander looked like, he was not. The cant of the towboat master was in his torso. Intensity in both feelings and convictions made him more self-contained than talkative and his towboat informality was saved only by his silence. His first officer rather envied him his poker mien and manner; he never indulged in the game. His Second, already prone to stare at him, marveled that Mr. Daggett had found any excuse—much less reason—for appointing this man master of the freighter *Dragonette.*

Captain Fred Knight himself knew it was excuse, not reason. Every waking hour since clearing Boston he had been conscious of it, resentful and disappointed. Tonight he watched Diamond Shoal go by in a rare calm off Hatteras.

"I don't fancy this," Mr. Osgood remarked, "it's too peaceful. It is a weather breeder."

"Aw, we'll be out of the way," Brownell threw in, spoofing the forecaster.

They waited without results for the new skipper to speak, then Osgood warned, "We'll be back this way, young feller. Could be."

Which prompted the captain to reflect upon the way in which he had been thrown among these men. Mr. Daggett had sighed his relief when Knight had left for the Service; the thorn in his flesh was no more. With some Navy tug he'd doubtless remain. Wars were not without their compensations, were they now?

But victory had ended the services of most Navy tugs and Captain Knight was processed out with a commendable record on the great and grim D-Day off beaches now famous. The law declared that he could reclaim his old position with Ringold.

He had not taken his ninety days to get reoriented back into civilian ways of living. Not he. Never once had he given up his urge to command an ocean-going Ringold towboat.

In the war he had demonstrated his skill with tows at sea, and in point of service aboard harbor and bay tugs under the Ringold flag it was his right, as he saw it and Daggett refused to admit it, to be assigned to an outside boat hauling coal

barges. Now again it was time to hammer home another claim to this, his right.

Daggett's bacon and eggs turned over in his glottis when he beheld Fred Knight, doggedly waiting as of old to apply—Daggett could have told him exactly what he'd say. Inside ten minutes he struck the argumentative tone; but argue with Knight Daggett could not and brush him off he dared not. A good and—thank the Lord—satisfied skipper now had Knight's oldtime harbor tug and Mr. Daggett be blue damned if he'd make the change. Nor had he a berth for any returnee in outside boats. What to do?

Diamond Shoal Lightship stood well astern when Knight repeated once again: "'Cap'n, you never towed coastwise anyway." That challenge haunted him. It bit into his pride. It ignored his war record. It —an old moon rose orange red and huge— "Buried alive aboard this old freighter with a pair of wise guys and an ancient for mates," he growled. But he knew the answer; he was expected to resign in a huff, quit Ringold, take his weight off Daggett's chest, so long, good bye, don't come back!

Just before getting the lines, Daggett had struck this very note by dispatching Knight a message which read: "Make time. You are not in a towboat. Get coffee and sugar here while prices are up. Bunker to capacity, Santos." Bunkers meant confer with Chief Briggs; he showed Chief the message.

"This," Briggs opined, "can be taken two ways. Right? Like some of his attempts to drive ships and crews, it can be ignored as coming from a fool that nags in a swivel chair and—and never gripped a butterfly valve. On the other hand, one of his directors might be holding some sugar stock and we've got more bunker capacity than the other vessels he might have sent. What's your idea?"

Briggs observed the stamp on the towboat skipper's well known independence in this new captain; then he'd ignore the message. But no. Said Knight, "We can get plenty of coal in Santos?"

"Oh yes. Our agent there—"

"Good quality for your pulverizers to feed?"

"He sees to that for us."

"Then," Knight concluded, "we'll cram this one so hog-full of bunkers that the agent won't know whether we came just to race her home or to load cargo."

Briggs eyed him speculatively to respond, "O-k-a-y, Cap'n, that's a tough prospect racing her forty-seven hundred miles."

"Forty-eight."

"Y' know he just sold one of these older vessels to Mexicans, and that's a hot one. They dickered for weeks and when he closed in to clinch the deal at last, damned if they didn't specify that he must deliver her. Mad? They say he's stripped her clean of everything but barely enough bunkers and stores to get her to Mexico with a skeleton crew!"

Which reminded Knight that he was lucky there; supposing he had been picked to take —it was the *Puerto Ponce,* wasn't it?—from Boston into the Gulf! He pitied Captain Blair. On the other hand Blair would return for another command; ah yes, and Daggett had buried Knight in this one until he'd get sick of it. Not so lucky.

So the old *Ponce* was worn out; had Daggett replaced her from the growing pool of "retired" ships? He recalled that the *Ponce* rode especially high out of water when light, and rolled like smokin' hell. Well, the *Dragonette* would not with a cargo of coffee and sugar; just about enough weight in her to gets her best speed and hold it. He got a malicious glee out of the prospect.

SANTOS sweltered in the hot wind. Its waterfront teemed with astronomical numbers of bags piled high with fragrant coffee, with ships loading, ships waiting, and stevedores composed of various races because this was Brazil's doorway for its immigration.

The *Dragonette* lay alongside in part cargo and something was wrong. At intervals her mates conferred on deck as slings came over open hatches at a slow pace and the waits grew longer. Presently they ceased altogether. Loud voices on the wharf drew all stevedores ashore. Some boss there shouted a sharp command. It drew invectives, no return to work, some violence and a couple of the sailors made belittling remarks for the benefit of nearby natives.

Osgood, the mate, came along to quiet them, saying quietly, "Now what?"

Brownell hollered, "Is this a strike or a revolution?"

Captain Knight looked below at what he rated as half the sugar and maybe two thirds of the coffee, then looked up the agent. That one threw up his hands and cried, "What do they care you are in a hurry? On our hands we have a strike. The war is over, Captain; strikes come next. Is it not the way?"

Knight overrode all his oratory to keep at him: should the *Dragonette* lie here indefinitely for the last two fifths of her consignment or should she obey orders to hurry north? The agent would not make that decision. He stalled and made speeches and waved his arms, but that got nowhere with stubborn Knight. In the end, he saw the agent make tracks for an office uptown. In due course the harassed man returned with a cable which ordered the ship to wait twelve hours and if work didn't resume in that period, sail with what was in her.

Knight chuckled over it. Daggett must have torn his whiskers before he got off that expensive epistle—and he couldn't blame captain or agent.

Work did not resume. The *Dragonette* sailed and her skipper soon came to the conclusion that she had just enough cargo aboard to set her right for speed. But Chief Briggs came forward, east of Recife. Said he, "Cap'n, they didn't think we'd sail so they loaded us with the damnedest big lot of coal I ever took aboard. You fooled 'em just when they thought they had us."

I kept at him till he had to cable Daggett. Being a matter of dollars and cents, he had to choose between speed and quantity, and he chose speed. Which was precisely what I wanted. Now we're hiking her. What's she doing, sixteen?"

Briggs grew serious. "Sixteen and a half," he admitted, "but listen. We can't roar through that lot of coal at this early stage or we might have to slow down at the other end of the run. Forty-eight hundred miles—"

"Oh hell, Chief!"

Briggs assumed that air of labored toleration which aft occasionally takes with forward when the subject is machinery. Said he, "Now you're not an engineer; in fact you're a towboat man, used to the long hawser over the stern and three to five knot speed. This is something else, Cap'n. In these freighters we've learned the hard way that crowding our engines means repairs in port for us and anyway only fools spend their bunkers without holding back a good reserve."

They canvassed all the angles of the situation and in the end Briggs agreed to hold the *Dragonette* at her usual fifteen knots until she'd cross Cancer. Then, he agreed, he would drive her up the North Atlantic; the heat wouldn't be so terrific below.

Knight left him with the impression that his mates and engineers were quite determined to break him into their routine ways rather than follow his lead. He sensed that Briggs was making things easy for his after gang and to hell with so commonplace a matter as a message from Daggett to hurry. There was no overtime in it. It re-emphasized once again the old issue; was he to become one of these people who spent their lives on the South American runs? If so, he'd have to disabuse them of the notion that they could run their skipper their way.

And, sure enough, the mates welcomed the slower pace. It meant an easier, customary way of doing things; they were back in the old groove. Knight, of course, knew he had accepted defeat in a small matter which could multiply and create an issue for him. But he proposed to get into a towboat and now he rather believed it would be soon. Therefore, for the moment, he took defeat as a prod; would it have to be a Ringold tug?

That night his door was open and from Osgood's room he heard the mate say, "The way it ought to be, you say?"

"Sure," came Brownell's voice. "Them days are gone."

"What days?"

"Aw, when the skipper had his way regardless. We all can't be wrong."

That drew a pause. Finally Osgood said, "I'm older than you are, Second. I've seen plenty men come and go and you're a radical. What's happened is, the Chief doesn't want to work his men where there's no overtime to dangle 'fore their greedy eyes like bait. Don't fool y'rselves, this skipper ain't the kind to either jump at the first issue nor let you fellers run him."

In late afternoon the skipper went above. "Mister, I've had me a look-see below. She rides nice with this part cargo in."

"Just about perfect, I'd say, Cap'n—long as the weather holds smooth."

"Those rubber gaskets round number three, four and five are badly worn. In a real rough passage they might leak some," Knight suggested.

Osgood turned to face him. "Might!" he cried. "They will. I've put in my order twice for new ones and Mr. Daggett's desk, they say, is where they come to final rest. His secretary told me last time he was too busy at the moment."

"At the moment," thought Knight. Stalling the dollar as usual. Cap'n Blair probably could tell a pretty story along that line by the time he gets well across the Gulf; he'd probably arrive with just enough coal to dock her.

He went outside to feel the wind and forget Daggett awhile. Brownell came out with a yellow slip of paper. "Weather report, sir. Nothing cooking."

Knight read it, noted the time and spoke the Chief about a few more r.p.m.'s. But Brownell was waiting outside for him when he returned. Said he, "Listen, Cap'n; I got an idea about that slowing down off Recife."

"Spill it before you choke, Second; you're too young to die that way."

"Choke? Die? Not me. I mean the Chief probably had the leaky hatches in mind. You see, we've not been heading this one into really tough weather. We go around a disturbance."

"Second, our orders are to make time, this trip. Now what's on your mind?"

Brownell flushed, he looked the new skipper up and down doubtfully, he felt suddenly that he might have gone too far and maybe old Osgood had been right. But there was no retreating now. He blurted, "Don't quote me, Cap'n, but you see, one of the things Mr. Daggett won't take lying down is for his ships to get into a jam in the North Atlantic where they'd have to call on the Coast Guard for a tow." He raised a protesting hand against the sharp look in Knight's eyes. "Now I know you're just out of the Coast Guard—or the Navy—so you don't cozy to the idea but he objects—"

"What is his reason? You're talking pretty freely, young fellow."

By then, Brownell was indeed afraid, but he was angry too. "Aw why didn't the Chief tell you? The story is, a C. G. boat stood by a Ringold vessel for hours once, then the weather turned worse so the C. G., towing her, couldn't keep a line on her. I guess nobody could have and in the night they lost her. It was snowing great guns to boot."

"So he blames the C. G.," the skipper murmured non-committally.

"Damn it, his own orders had come by wireless to ride it out till he sent one of our own tugs. Y' see, Cap'n, he's fussy about picking skippers for those towboats and he likes to brag that Ringold tugs take care of Ringold ships on soundings—or so, they say, but don't quote me, sir. You asked me."

The skipper suppressed a smile as he reread the weather report and remarked, "Certainly there'll come no snow according to this weather report. Second, do you know it is still July!"

Brownell should have said nothing to that baiting, but he was devoid of—shall we call it humor? He responded, "I know, I brought up that report for Sparks and it reminded me maybe the Chief didn't come clean. He's the same with cards; y' never can get all he's got or knows."

IT WAS two nights later that the steward came forward wearing a long face. "That cussed Conneau is down sick, Cap'n. Got infection. Red streaks running up his arms and panting for breath and babbling like a fool. Want to see him?"

Knight knew the steward was scared as they went aft. Conneau did lie in a fever, there were red streaks up the arms, and the skipper found swollen glands in both armpits and groin. Lymphangitis was the word but Knight couldn't think up the word.

"It's tough, sir, and all Steward told him was put iodine in his cuts," a watchmate complained.

Knight examined the cut hands. "How did he get these?"

The watchmate did not reply. The captain turned back to Conneau and addressed five men. "Come, out with it! This man is seriously sick."

One said reluctantly, "Okay, I was one of 'em. We went ashore the last night in Santos and some guys mobbed us. One of 'em got to us with a knife." He glanced around and added defiantly, "We kicked the guts out of 'im; that's how we got back aboard."

Conneau had to be moved to the sick bay

above on the port side. Next day the steward reported Azeredo, the one who had confessed, in similar condition and big Michaud an oiler was unable to stand his watch. "Sterilize dishes, Steward, or we'll have an epidemic—or worse. Treat them as I told you and move the oiler above with the others," the skipper ordered.

"Fools!" exclaimed the steward. "This is what comes of shooting their mouths off to those striking stevedores."

Knight decided to have a look at all three men. But Sparks intercepted him with a weather report. "It will be a honey, sir; the air is full of calls to and from shipping and I can't make out what they're saying, the static is awful."

Late afternoon, skipper and Second worked over the chart until the captain stood away to say, "Best bet is into the nor'west. At the least it's a chance to work in behind and around the disturbance."

"Yes, sir," Brownell responded, "or we could slow down to give it time."

"You forget. Orders are to make time and Chief's stepped up to sixteen plus so lay a course from our position nor'west."

They soon learned there was no skirting the weather this time. Sparks came above at dusk with information that the affair north of them was a full gale extending all over the area.

"We could run east," Brownell remarked. "That's how the other cap'n—"

Knight was nothing if not stubborn. All the way north he had managed to keep it down; the Chief had little suspected the price of yielding to his no-speeding tactics after Recife, now this Second's repeated horning in with ideas. The time had come to disillusion folks—and he chuckled at what their moves would have gotten them in the Services!

In the doing, however, he became the original, informal towboat man whose torso seemed to conform to an open window and whose easy tone of voice startled nobody—until the smart ones caught on. Said he, while Brownell waited, Crassey stood with one ear cocked and Osgood emerged from the chartroom: "Avoid what? That's a hell of a way to meet it. Second, hold to your course."

As though that speech challenged the weather itself, rain began in a series of downpours that left the ship glistening in the dusk. Out of a black cloud came a terrific wind. Inside the hour the *Dragonette* hove it green over her bows and reeled and rolled so impressively that young Cressey exclaimed, when he took over at eight, "So this is the way to meet it, First?"

Osgood smiled at him in the binnacle's wan glow. "You haven't seen anything yet, m'boy. But you will!"

THE RINGOLD freighter *Puerto Ponce* ran into foul weather below Nantucket. A forty-five-mile northeaster went to work on her in a way that soon showed her skeleton crew she was nothing but a plaything for the elements. So far down and so incessantly did she roll that one man off the Great Lakes swore she had it on the touchiest whaleback he'd ever sign on. But it became serious when master, mates and engineers came to face the fact that they'd come to sea short handed. For, not only was she still a sizeable freighter, she rode high into the wind, she gave trouble in steering and her ballast tanks proved inadequate at keeping the screw under.

Her master almost doubted his title when he hove her to after nine hours of her sickening, dizzy gyrations. All night the wind's diapason and the thunder of mountainous seas kept him on his toes, warding off disaster. It became a battle of wits and consummate skill and some luck as she grew progressively less manageable. The storm was mounting apace.

Time and again she veered for the trough until, long before daylight, it became patent that nobody could keep her nose into it very long. Mr. Daggett had made Captain Blair grab a tiger by his tail; nevertheless he hung on until he had enough daylight to see at least three seas distant. Then he turned tail to the wind on a south southwesterly course, running before it toward her ultimate destination—he hoped—at a faster clip than she could have made in calm seas.

Whether it was sound judgment or not, the change well nigh proved fatal. Terrific following seas eventually caught her stern high and broke her rudderpost. The only fortunate aspect of this was, it did not happen to jam the rudder to port or starboard. It seemed to have gone.

After dark she dropped her tailshaft and

abruptly changed from a ship to a lofty old hull which promptly fell beam to the weather into the trough to stay. How long? Such rolling never had been experienced by anybody aboard her; forty-eight degrees on the inclinometer, some four degrees in excess of her safety factor.

Pandemonium reigned throughout her booming hull. Steward's stores met early ruin. The galley range shed all save its skeleton iron. Holds reverberated like cannonfire, the chartroom became a clutter of paper, instruments and breakage. Her crew were tossed from bulkhead to stanchion, most of them too sick to work when a small Navy craft discovered the reeling mass in the driving mists. Here indeed came a ray of hope.

It lasted just ninety-five minutes in the unabating fury. Towering seas took to climbing forty feet up her sides and she started to take in water in the first stage of foundering. Which prompted the Navy craft to risk everything to get a line aboard. After a long period of failures, a line was landed and made fast and the towing started; but the swift, jerking, upward heaves of the *Ponce's* high bow when she'd whoop high into the gale snapped the line inside fifteen minutes. Then seas poured down the Navy craft's funnel and she had to haul off.

Those two vessels never contacted again. More water entered the *Ponce* until even the most hopeful, courageous men, viewing the high spindrift, low visibility and hearing always that rush below of rising water in her, knew that the end at best could be only a matter of hours. She was doomed with all hands.

THE *Dragonette's* radio operator perched tight over his receiver with legs hooked to the chair, body hunched and phones crowded against his ears. Captain Knight bent over him equally tense, swaying to the ship's violence and repeatedly shouting, "Well? . . . What do you get? Who's calling us?"

Finally Sparks cried impatiently above the noises, "Two to one it's Boston but I can't sort it from the damned static . . . I don't know, I—it might be some ship—no, not the wavelength. . . ."

The skipper left him trying in vain as he swayed out and above, his own ears tuned to the crash of seas on the long main deck and those hatches with the worn gaskets. Why in hell didn't Ringold sell these older ships, all of them, and bid in for some of the many being tied up?

He considered manpower and phoned aft to ask the steward about the three who had been sick. All were still sick or too weak to work. Then came Brownell with the roundabout suggestion that they heave to, and Knight cursed his presumptuous tongue. Then he went outside to think in a lee.

Hour after hour of this wind roaring through the stays and screaming round the wheelhouse had worn on nerves, muscles and stomachs long without hot food. Seas appeared to mount ever higher, come longer and faster before the gale and Fred Knight, watching them come, watching the bow fight the helm, began to sense failure. He was not making time, he did not have full cargo, he knew what he had would be spoiled.

Yet he must drive the *Dragonette* on just as long as she could take it; then heave her to and regret that he had been so patient with Briggs. He might have been leaving the northern edge of this disturbance by now, he might have. So he reached the stage where he'd gladly go aboard any towboat; if Daggett had none for him, he'd leave the best company on the coast, as he rated owners, and one of the very few operating outside tows. The more he weighed matters, the more certain he became that Daggett would never give him a tug. He himself and the weather and a strike in Santos—everything had combined to lick him. It was not a pleasant prospect for a skipper who had negotiated the English Channel in the fury of D-Day with success.

Was it this or the weight of his weather clothes that made him perspire? He bent to the wind and moved up to the dodger, there

to stand in the wind, a pile of glistening wet blackness, eyes half closed against driving rain and long unshaven chin jutting out. Yes, D-Day had been terrific; so was this.

Presently something drew his eyes away into the mist. He dashed rain and salt spray from his face and peered to starboard. Up rose a dark mass, a blot in the prevailing grayness. He made out a ship's funnel, two masts. They swayed off there beyond the third, fourth, several seas. Now white spray seemed to spout—she careened crazily off a high sea and dropped out of sight. Again she rose and lay over—over——

"God!" he exclaimed, but masts and funnel reappeared.

And Osgood inside the wheelhouse behind him dropped a window with a bang like gunfire to shout, "That's the *Ponce* bound f'r Mexico, Cap'n. Awful shape, what?"

"Bound for bottom," Knight flung over his shoulder, the bang ringing in his ears. He took binoculars into the wing, murmuring "Gunfire!" Soon Osgood was at his elbow ejaculating. "No helm—no steam up?"

"Cut our speed."

While Osgood was inside, Fred Knight faced a situation worse than his memories of war; for there, maybe less than a mile distant, lay a tragic example of the extremes to which Daggett's armchair policy could subject men and ships. Whatever his skill, Captain Blair of the *Ponce* was one of the most dependable, loyal skippers under the Ringold flag. And his skeleton crew—"It's not right," Knight growled, yet he knew that Blair wouldn't abandon that hulk even if given the chance to risk a try.

Which further complicated an already severe problem. He returned the binoculars to their box and began to formulate plans. Two of his best seamen were invalids just at a time when most urgently needed. If he simply stood by the *Ponce,* the chances were five to two he'd lose her in the dark tonight. He watched that hulk's rearing bow and knew that he nor anybody else could hope to keep a line to it all night or all one hour in this going.

There were other considerations more personal. For instance: did money-grubbing Daggett rate that vessel he was selling as worth more in insurance? Was it possible to keep her in tow to safety if he did manage to keep lines on her somehow? Out of the welter of hurried thinking came that caustic remark Daggett had flung at him, "You've never towed coastwise anyway."

That and the plight of Blair and his crew combined in Knight's stubborn mind and out of them came a plan, a clear-cut purpose, a big decision: he would not merely tow the *Ponce* to safety, he'd get her all the way north to Boston—to the drydock where all Ringold ships were conditioned, to the place where Daggett would have to look upon the results of his niggardliness and disregard for human factors.

And himself? Knight knew he was finished with Ringold. This would give Daggett the very excuse he wanted. Was he mad? He almost laughed outright in spite of the critical situation. Why not? Here was the fiercest wild drink of pure excitement, the greatest challenge to his ability to tow since D-Day!

HIS yell to Osgood startled the old mate. "Prepare that gun on the after house to shoot three lines. Lively, Mister."

To the Third, "Have bosun and two volunteers lead the wire and hawsers aft; enough for you to feed the First what he wants."

He took on Brownell next. "So you wanted to heave her to. Very well, you're going to maneuver us to where we can shoot lines aboard that wreck. Come up off her stern end—"

"Stern!" Brownell's tongue would out with it.

Knight loomed over him and pointed away toward the *Ponce* and shouted, "So you're a towboat man now! How long do you suppose lines would hold on that bucking bow, once we got it upwind?"

"Yes, sir," respectfully.

"Watch my signalling on the after house and if you botch this job, Mister, I'll haunt you to hell and back." Knight turned away to phone the Chief, then made his precarious way down into the forward well deck, hustled two men to start the wire snaking past the bridge, saw them over the sea-swept main deck to the break of the poop and half carried one of them up with the eye of the line around him.

While the *Dragonette* passed the stricken

hulk, more lines were led aft and joined. Part of the crew over there waved awkwardly in response to the plan as Captain Knight himself wagged it, hand semaphore style, over the mist.

Twice the gun uncoiled a stringy streak in the wind toward the *Ponce;* but Osgood was no novice with it, he laid it forward of the poop; it finally came down onto the stern and two men fell on it. Captain Knight signalled to his Second up forward, the *Dragonette* maneuvered for that dangerous but advantageous position again. It was touch and go—maneuver, shoot, fail and repeat. Toward night the gaunt crew on the *Puerto Ponce* had three lines fast aft, two of which had a shot of cable; it had cost precious time and daylight, but Osgood had his way about it. Meanwhile men rigged the bridle as agreed upon between the two captains by semaphoring at the outset.

Little daylight offered when at length Knight swung the *Dragonette* some four points off to take up slack cautiously. Then he disappointed the younger mates; he seemed to do no more than hold both vessels upwind. Brownell had presumed—as usual—that the tow would make directly for, say, McCries Buoy; at least for the Virginia capes on the way to a haven, any haven. Instead he saw the night creep on and on without headway in either direction. This harbor tug guy! Damn it, he had a lion by the tail; he dared not proceed and he hadn't the gall to let go. "All set to tow and only riding," he complained to Osgood.

When the First had his fill of it, he said, adding fuel to the teapot rage, "Wait long enough and the weather might change."

The change did not come. The wind held just as strong, seas came even stronger and the rain strafed like bullets. Weary sailors sprawled in the lee of the bunker hatch, inside the ends of passages, anywhere to be near their assigned stations, avoid the storm's worst and steal a modicum of rest. During the tedium, hawsers whipped out between crests, then the world seemed to stop short. The tension eased in time. All nights, the three mates stood by for the parting of lines which did not occur because Captain Knight was a towboat man and he had made up his one-track mind to tow that hulk all the long way to Boston and plunk her down before Daggett's eyes, come hell or high water. Cargo and Daggett's inevitable ire mattered not at all to him now; he would be deliberate, persistent —and successful.

SUCCESSFUL he was when dawn broke, successful so far. He had held the *Ponce's* nose to the weather, put an end to those dangerous rollings, and no lines had parted. Now to the second stage and this one should leave nobody in doubt of his goal. He phoned the Chief that he was ready for ten or twelve more r.p.m.'s and the towing began in earnest.

The lumbersome, high stern of the *Ponce* plunged into a sea and the lines twanged tighter. They withstood their first big test, but the *Dragonette* was not pointing toward a haven, a shelter where the *Ponce* could be safely anchored and left behind.

"Where to, Cap'n?" Osgood inquired, one eye on the younger mates.

"Boston," Knight replied, "Boston eventually."

The mates were all stationed for the job anew when Osgood phoned from aft at 10:17. A line had parted. Over an hour they worked feverishly until that one was replaced and Knight ordered it spliced. "We'll probably have to use it again," he warned them, "so make it strong enough this time."

Old Osgood was appalled at the prospect of so long a struggle. The cargo was spoiling, boats might suffer damage, his lines would wear. At noon, he caught the skipper alone and poured out his heart; it was the tactful caution of a veteran mate stacking up against the fierce purpose of a younger skipper.

And be it to Fred Knight's credit, he did not slap the man down with a burst of impatience in the midst of the strain. He heard him out. Patiently he said, "There's sense, of course, in your argument, Mister; admittedly this does look like an unnecessarily long venture with no letup in the storm yet. But the commissioners certainly would approve of saving both ship and men. As for Mr. Daggett, he has long needed something like the sight of the *Ponce;* it was a crime to send her to sea in her condition, all the way to the Gulf where she was due to arrive in the early hurricane sea-

son. Perhaps you haven't thought of that angle.

"True, Mister, I could leave her behind the breakwater or in the Roads, but that would only give him an excuse to condemn either me or Cap'n Blair at a distance and you know him as well as I do, he would not take the trip there to see her for himself. It is too cussed easy for men ashore like Daggett to send us on foolish assignments and shift the blame if they fail. He puts dollars away ahead of lives and I've seen lives spent more numerously but more considerately. The only thing the war did to Daggett, Mister, was show him money to be made recklessly, I guess."

Osgood chafed at his week-old beard to murmur, "I thought young Brownell was a radical, Cap'n, but you make him look—like a banker."

As though Osgood had been right, the tow had to slow down when another line buzzed asunder between seas. But it was replaced and repaired and the way was resumed.

Another night descended upon the prolonged monotony. The wind took on a more strident pitch, the seas swept over the *Dragonette* and pounded on the forward side of her bridge. Nothing living could have negotiated her long deck that night. Then one of them—it must have reached a good fifty-six feet into the rain, Osgood opined—struck the bridge resoundingly in the blackness. The whole ship shivered under its impact and Knight, weary and beset and thwarted in his determination to hold into the north, knew that this could not go on.

The mate clinched it when he phoned from aft that the *Ponce* looked to be swinging beam to the weather in the trough and rolling her decks under. "I reckon we almost lost her this last time," he shouted.

"And no letup in this damned wind," Knight muttered. Towing aslant the wind had not been enough; heading for a lee now could offer little better chance, the *Ponce* would swing and the worst seas would batter the bridge. Into the east must be equally bad. He turned to the Second and said, "Our only alternative is to watch for a chance, whatever we can get, and turn around."

Pale, anxious Cressey standing near, put in, "That's talking! Eating our bunkers and getting nowhere and the sailors pooched and the sick pair lolling on steward's hands and griping—"

Brownell turned on him and demanded surprisingly for him, "What's their gripe, for cripesake?"

"Oh the sea lawyers there aft want to cut the *Ponce* adrift."

Knight's first impulse was to let these men have a piece of his mind that either they or the listening helmsman would take to the gripers; months under the brass in the Service had schooled him to look upon all adverse opinion that way. But he didn't. He still remained the self-contained towboat skipper in the pinches despite lost sleep, worry and an abused stomach.

He went outside in the dark fury to ponder more vital matters—turning around, for instance. Braced against the house, he accustomed his eyes to the wind, rain and darkness, hoping to eventually see a bit better. But a huge, high blackness loomed directly ahead of him. He made out the whiteness of foam marking its crest. He ducked inside barely in time to avoid being washed off his feet.

That one took away part of the starboard wing, broke one window and washed Brownell's face. Knight saw Cressey brace to the binnacle, tee away from it and pitch headlong to the settee. The *Dragonette* left no doubt about its effect on her; she squeaked and shuddered and wallowed under the tons of sea, not only forward but more like it on her main deck. A change must be made promptly.

Knight remarked, "Bad business in the dark," and phone aft to Osgood to have particular care about his lines lest in the maneuver the farther one show signs of laying the tow on its beam ends on the way around.

IT PROVED to be a terrible experience. The *Dragonette* went all under save for her bridge and after house. There were two occasions when she lay so far over that even her skipper considered survival as doubtful as the flip of a coin. Flooded, heaving solid seas high into the rain and wind, wavering her dogged way up steep climbs and diving headlong into she scarcely could have known what, that indomitable

freighter under the instinctive skill of her as unbeatable master, did eventually negotiate one of the hardest undertakings at sea in foul weather. But at a price. Everything not lashed tight was thrown helter skelter and one boat was battered to uselessness.

Nor did that end the crisis. The *Ponce* took to running up on her lines. Before the wind she actually moved faster, at times, than the *Dragonette*. Osgood saw her stern come rearing at him one time so threateningly that he phoned the warning in a great shout which outroared the storm's noises in the wheelhouse end of the line.

The skipper sent him to the Chief to arrange quick communications whereby those two could meet the threats with increased speed—at risk of dropping a propeller blade, as Chief argued; it was not a real solution. But they didn't have to tell that to Knight; this new threat, added to the prolonged strain and disappointment at having to head away from Boston, had him tied into a masthead knot. He sent for Sparks and no Sparks came—too sick to whimper, much less operate or even listen in. He looked aft without seeing the leaky hatches or after house. His sole consolation was the stubborn fact that the *Ponce* still came along, still in tow, and he'd get her around again into the north sometime. Nothing could sheer him off that purpose.

At 3:42, the wind died abruptly. Cressey cried, "God, what's coming this time?" But Captain Knight smiled—almost. He knew what it presaged and a fearful weight seemed to slide from his shoulders. He phoned aft for steward to bestir himself; the weather was about to change for the better.

MR. DAGGETT allowed himself, for reasons best known to himself, to be led from stem to stern throughout the battered *Puerto Ponce,* not by Captain Blair—for already he was off to another, better ship—but by the new master of the *Dragonette*. If, however, Knight had thought this was going to evoke remarks from that wary individual, he was mistaken. Daggett viewed the inside of the after house and saw the shambles without batting an eye. He went with Knight inside the bridge and met further destruction with equal aplomb—and not a word of regret that it had spoiled the quick unloading of the hulk onto the Mexicans. Nor a word of recognition of the really expert job Knight had done, or condemnation of him for towing her all this way to Boston.

FRED KNIGHT began to sweat this out. Daggett was poising a blow at him. When would the blow fall? When would that sharp tongue let go with the edict Knight by now knew was coming? At least he had his bag packed.

"Well, Cap'n," it finally came, "you've cost us some money to prove that you can tow at sea. Haven't you now?"

"And saved nineteen lives," Knight reminded him coldly.

Entering the master's cabin, Daggett turned on him abruptly to ask, "And what new plans have you made after this—this demonstration?"

Temper came scarlet in Knight's face. "My bag's packed. It's up to me."

"Yes, yes. Of course. Wouldn't consider, then, taking the *Highlander?* Not a bad bid to handle the barge charters out of Philadelphia. We bought her only last week, you know."

Knight could only glare at him, his emotions became so confused—until Daggett absolutely did bowl him over with, "You see, those fickle, haggling Mexicans changed their minds about buying this vessel. After you got caught in the gale yourself. We tried to wireless you and the *Ponce,* too, but the static, so they told me, made contact impossible."

THE DEVIL'S ROPE

By CADDO CAMERON

Author of "A Pig and a Promise," etc.

EXCITEMENT broke out early that morning in the Tumbling K bunkhouse. While the eight cowhands then at headquarters were smoking their eye-openers and making a stab at getting dressed, burly old Clark Benton—owner and boss of the outfit —barged in to tell them that a dozen cowponies had been stolen from a small horse pasture the night before. Since the pasture practically tied onto the bunkhouse, Benton rode the boys a-plenty.

He jarred sleep from the groggiest of them so that they grabbed hats, pants, boots and other clothing, meanwhile making threats and talking fight.

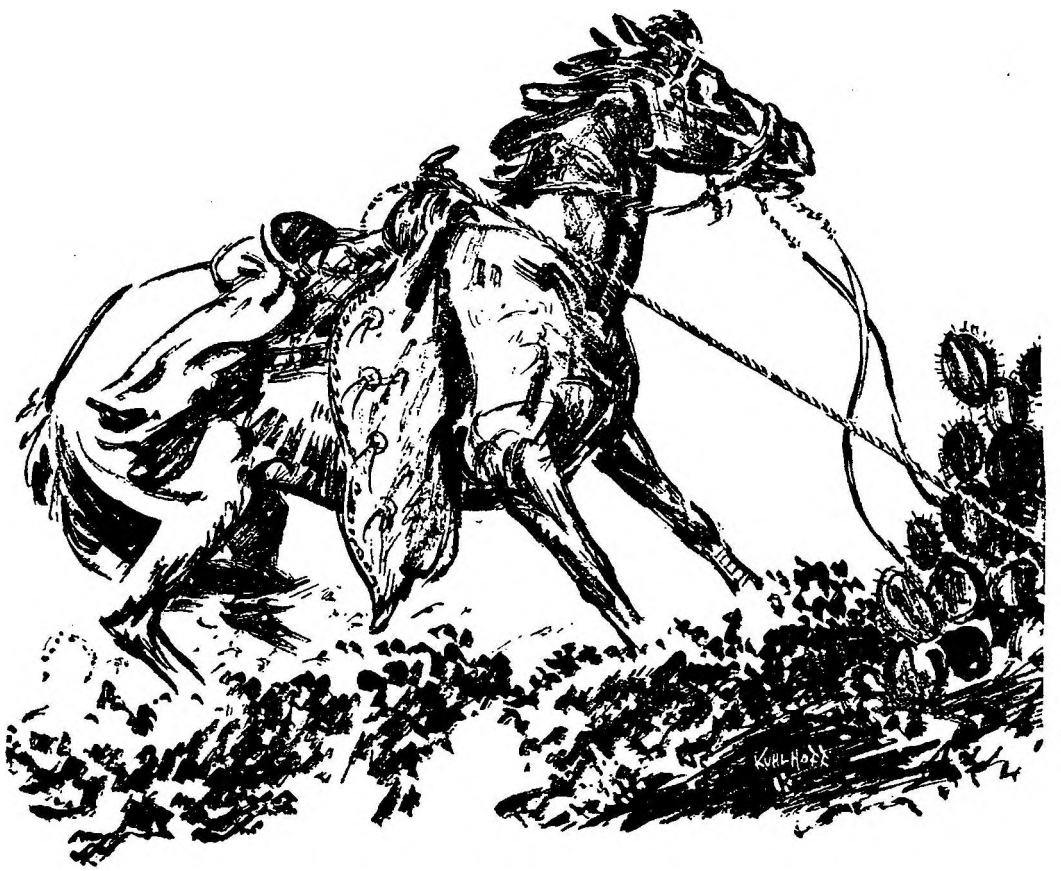
"Boss, we'll get the polecats this time, I betcha!"

"And you ain't talkin', boy!"

"I'll tell a man we'll get 'em!"

"No, we won't!" growled Benton. "Last time we chased thieves into Mexico it cost me two good men. *Rurales* shot 'em. Ain't like it used to be. The law over there now is a damned sight worse than the bandits. I'll notify the sheriff and the nearest Rangers and let them handle it legal, if they can. Like always, boys, we'll take good care of the thieves we catch on the Texas side of the river, but we ain't goin' across."

Some of the hands wanted to argue the matter.



"Be still" barked Benton. "I'll fire the man that crosses the Border after them thieves!"

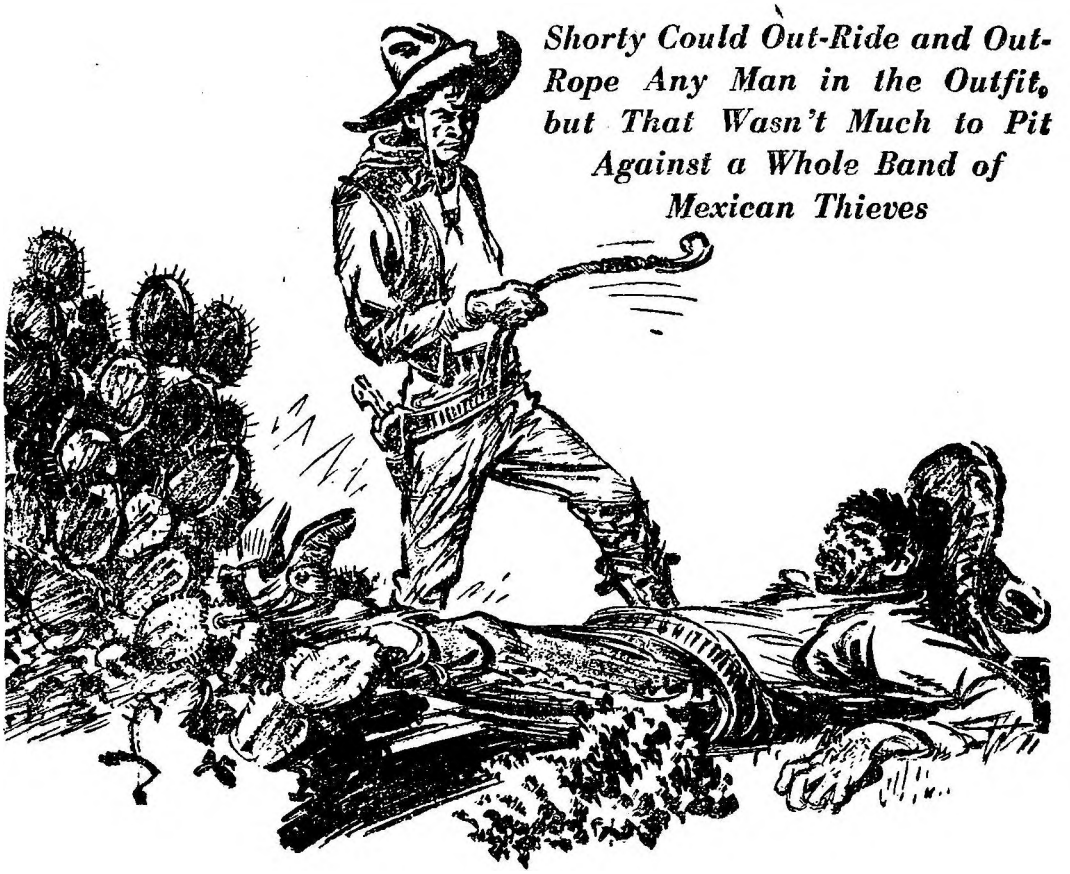
One man in the room hadn't opened his mouth. He was the smallest there and the youngest: short, stocky—about one hundred thirty pounds — colorless hair, mild blue eyes, round face innocent of lines; altogether a drab person in that colorful outfit. Shorty Walker was his name. While the others talked and argued he climbed rapidly into his clothes, buckled on his gun-belt and took his rifle down from its pegs on the wall.

Shorty then turned to the old cattleman. "Boss," he said quietly, "I'm plumb sorry to hear you say that, 'cause I'm shore goin' across."

Clark Benton managed to say, "Huh?"

Everyone else stopped whatever he was doing and listened, for this was something worth listening to. Shorty Walker going a-hunting trouble? That *couldn't* be. Shorty never looked for trouble and trouble always seemed to pass him by. The little bronc rider had been with the Tumbling K two years now and never a fight in town or on the works: not even a quarrel. That was a record for this outfit. Tumbling K riders were hard cases, plumb tough. Aside from Shorty, there wasn't a man among them who hadn't earned the right to carry one or more notches on his gun whether he did or not. Clark Benton wanted men like that and he hand-picked them. The immense range that he claimed lay on or near the Mexican border, a happy hunting ground for thieves from both sides, and therefore the rugged old cowman had always kept a crew of hair-trigger hands.

No one knew why he ever hired Shorty Walker. He, himself didn't know. When jumped about it he'd point up the fact that Shorty could outride and outrope any man in the outfit and do as much work as the biggest and toughest of them. He was, in fact, a wizard with a rope and the Tumbling K had won plenty money on him in match and other contest roping. Moreover, Old Clark would swear that the little fellow had as much horse-savvy as a horse itself. Benton



Shorty Could Out-Ride and Out-Rope Any Man in the Outfit, but That Wasn't Much to Pit Against a Whole Band of Mexican Thieves

would tell you that Shorty rarely failed to take a spoiled horse and make a good horse out of it and when he started a colt it was started right. But Shorty Walker never had been a fighting man: didn't even fight a bronc when working on it.

Old Man Benton was mighty good at hiding his real feelings. He now scowled ferociously down at the little twister, and demanded harshly, "What little cotton-pickin' thing is a-gnawin' on you, Shorty Walker? How come you're a-dabbin' on paint and a hittin' the war trail?"

SOMETHING came into Shorty's voice then: something that took all the humor out of the situation; something that touched a tender spot in every man there, for they were all horse lovers. "My Chunky horse was in that pasture, Boss, so they taken him too. Old Chunky ain't never throwed off on me when *I* needed help. *He* needs it now. Them Mexican thieves are rough on horses."

Benton kind of snorted. "Huh! That there clawed-up bay of your'n ain't worth riskin' yo' hide for, Shorty. I'll give you a better horse than him."

Shorty Walker's soft blue eyes spoke his thanks. His voice, however, was firm though gently apologetic. "Shore thank you, Boss, but any other horse won't do. Maybe Chunky ain't much of a horse. *I* ain't much of a man either, but that don't never stop Old Chunky from helpin' me when I need it. So I'll be goin' across."

Old Clark cleared his throat gruffly. "I'm a man of my word, Shorty. You're fired if you go."

Walker's small but muscular shoulders lifted and dropped disconsolately. "Mighty sorry, Boss. I like it here. Well, I'll be driftin' along then. Betcha Old Chunky is lookin' everywhere for me now and a-wonderin' what in hell has become of me. D'you reckon you could sell me a horse, Boss? I figger I got enough on the books to pay for it."

"No, damn it! I won't sell you a horse!"

That jerked the other men to their feet. Old Man Benton caught the devil from them. Before he could make himself heard they had all quit and told Shorty they'd go with him.

"Shut up, you crazy wildcats!" bellowed Benton. "Shut up!"

They finally did.

Then he grinned down at Shorty. Dropping a big hand to the little man's shoulder, he declared, "I still say I'm a man of my word. You're fired if you go and I won't sell you a horse. But dadblame yo' salty hide—I'll *give* you one! Go down to the south pasture and ketch up whatever you want. Now, git! You're fired!"

Shorty Walker wouldn't wait for breakfast, wouldn't even take time to down a slug of hot coffee. He soon rode away on a tough little coyote horse. Gathered at the wash bench outside the kitchen door, Clark Benton and the crew watched him go.

The tough old cowman coughed, cussed, and said gruffly, "Fellas, yander goes a man —what I mean, *a man*. All this time we done figgered him wrong. Take a good look at the little old fool. We won't never see him no more. Damn that Chunky horse!"

It was less than two miles from Tumbling K headquarters to Dead Chinaman Ford on the Rio Grande. The thieves headed straight to the crossing and made no effort to foul their tracks. Shorty Walker trailed at a lope. From time to time he paused briefly to work out the sign—always the same thing: one of the stolen horses making a fight to go back or quit the bunch in any direction. That horse was Chunky. Shorty had tacked those shoes on Old Chunky himself and knew every nail in them. Chunky tried again and again and always lost, for the thieves were riding fast horses and he wasn't very fast.

Pretty soon Shorty went to talking aloud as if the little horse could hear him. "Stop that, Chunk! Don't be a damned fool! You'd oughta know that thieves ain't got no use for bunch quitters and if you don't behave yo'self one of 'em is shore to—*he'll shoot you, Chunky horse!*"

It was natural for Shorty to talk that way. Chunky was his partner, the only one he'd ever had. All his working life had been spent with Border outfits—tough country, tough men with whom the amiable bronc rider had little in common when off the job. Most of the boys liked him, all treated him well, but they didn't take to him much. He'd never had a man pardner, nary a one. There were times, maybe, when Shorty and Chunky kind of missed having a pardner. They had gotten along all right, though; done a heap

of drifting, just the two of them, seen a sight of country and run into a smattering of trouble off and on when they couldn't dodge it. They'd always split trouble fifty-fifty, this little man and his little horse.

CHUNKY had put up another fight at Dead Chinaman Ford. There in wet sand at the edge of the muddy Rio Grande, Shorty saw that his horse had tried desperately to cut back, fought against big odds for there were six of the raiders; and Shorty could almost hear the cruel snap of quirts and cow-whips and see them cutting Old Chunky across the face and ears and driving him into the river. Shorty looked for blood in the sand, looked up and down the stream for the body of a horse.

"Don't be a fool, Chunky! Don't—!"

His eye caught movement in the chaparral on the far bank of the Rio. He couldn't swear that it was a man, but figured that the thieves would drop one to watch the crossing and signal or bring word if pursuers were on their trail. Shorty Walker didn't let on that he had seen anything. He was careful to show no sign of curiosity or excitement, just put his horse into the shallow stream and rode slowly toward the Mexican side. Had Chunky been there, he might well have thought, "Don't be a damned fool, Boss!"

From beneath the wide brim of his hat Shorty watched the brush ahead and he kept an eye on his horse's ears, too. He wasn't exactly comfortable, smack in the big middle of the Rio Grande like this with somebody spying on him from over yonder and he sure wanted to kick the coyote across the river in a hurry. Suddenly the pony cocked its ears at a clump of willows ahead and off to the right a short piece. Like a prairie dog diving into its hole the little bronc rider dropped to the nigh side, leaving only a hand and one boot on top. At precisely that instant came the crack of a rifle. A bullet tugged at his sleeve as he ducked!

The coyote floundered ahead through the water, planted its hoofs on Mexican soil and plunged into the brush. Shorty Walker probably took the would-be assassin by surprise, for he lay along his pony's neck and pointed it straight at the willows from which powder smoke blossomed up. The bushwhacker fired again. A bullet blew its breath in Shorty's ear. An instant later a man lumbered from the willows into a small opening and ran for dear life toward a motte of trees not far away. Evidently he had left his horse in there. Shorty lifted the coyote with his spurs, jerked down his rope. The Mexican glanced back. The coyote horse was thundering down upon him, apparently much closer than he had thought it to be. Confused and excited he stumbled, stopped, fumbled with his rifle while bringing it to his shoulder. Shorty hadn't had time to shake out a loop. He simply flipped the end of his rope as he often did when driving stock. The rawhide hondoo—dry and hard—caught the bushwhacker in the paunch like a blow from a fist with power behind it. He dropped his rifle, gasping for breath. At that moment Shorty set the coyote down and landed on the big Mexican as if he were roping and tying a calf against time. They fell in a heap. Moving like a cat, the little bronc rider tossed the bushwhacker's weapons aside and looped his catch-rope around the fellow's ankles before the larger man got his breath. Afterwards, Shorty Walker climbed back into his saddle as calmly as if this were an every-day job for him. Presently the Mexican sat up, still more or less groggy.

SAID Shorty quietly in Spanish, "Do you speak English?"

"Better than you!" snarled the Mexican in English. "I learned it in school."

Walker's smooth face showed no sign of anger and he didn't raise his voice. "Where will them thieves take the horses they lifted from the Tumblin' K?"

The bushwhacker ran his eyes from his ankles, up the rope to the little man on the coyote horse. Apparently he quickly abandoned any hope of slipping the loop and getting away.

"Baby-face," he said scornfully, "are you fool enough to think that the likes of *you* can get anything out of a man like *me?*"

Shorty didn't turn a hair. His mild blue eyes regarded the Mexican without any show of feeling whatever. "Did any of you fellas hurt that little bay with four stockin's and panther claw marks on his rump? Put out a eye or somethin' like that?"

Perhaps the thief thought he could bluff this harmless-looking person. At any rate, he got more arrogant and cussed. "That

scrubby bunch-quitter? I was going to shoot him but decided to keep him and sell him to somebody for a plow horse. So I finally beat some sense into the jughead with the stock of my cow-whip."

With the stock of a cow-whip! . . . Shorty Walker went cold inside, but it didn't show on the surface of him or in the timbre of his low, soft voice. "Who is yo' boss?"

"Go to hell, Baby-face!"

"Where is he takin' that little bay?"

"Is Mama's pretty boy going to cry for his horsie?"

"Won't you tell me where they're takin' Old Chunky, please?"

"No, you baby-faced son—!"

Shorty Walker sank home his spurs!

The coyote leaped from a stand into a lope. The bulky Mexican yelled, grabbed for the rope, was jerked flat on his back and went sliding and bouncing and twisting over the ground. He bellowed profanity, then cried out for help. Shorty dragged him over sparse grass and sand, no rocks, and he made it a point to dodge by a hair's breadth the large clumps of prickly pear that were scattered through the opening. Every time he headed for one of these the Mexican screamed in mortal terror. After a few moments of this Shorty spun the coyote around a pile of cactus four feet high and twice as wide, its big flat leaves armed with spines like darning needles. Writhing at the end of the forty-foot rope, the Mexican screamed his loudest. Shorty reined in, the horse on one side of the cactus and the bushwhacker on the other, and stepped down quickly with a quirt dangling from his wrist.

Standing over the big Mexican, the little bronc rider still showed no sign of anger or excitement and his soft voice was as quietly impersonal as ever. "I ain't got no cow-whip like you used on my Chunky horse, but this here quirt is loaded and I can make it do."

Quickly he reversed the quirt, balanced it threateningly. "Are you a mind to do a little talkin' now?"

After what he had just gone through, the bushwhacker had no voice. He stammered, spluttered and choked, but no words came out.

Shorty Walker calmly went on to say, "That there coyote is a ropin' horse. If I lift my hand he'll snake you clean through this here cactus. D'you reckon you can talk now?"

"*Si! Si!* Senor!" In his excitement the Mexican cried out in his native tongue. "I will talk! What do you want to know, *mi capitan?*"

"What is yo' name?"

"P-Pedro Gil, senor," he answered after a moment's hesitation.

"Who is yo' boss?"

Again he hesitated. "Felix Costa, senor."

"Uh-huh," said Shorty. "I've heard of him. But he's just a two-bit thief. Who's the head man?"

The bushwhacker squirmed, looked this way and that, and finally said in English, "Don't make me tell you *that.* They'll kill me if I do."

Shorty nodded carelessly, said quietly, "Maybeso, but I'll kill you if you *don't* and my killin' might hurt worse than theirs. Who's Costa's boss? And recollect, Gil, I'm a-holdin' onto you and before I let you go I'll know whether you lied or told the truth."

SHORTY WALKER'S round, unlined face didn't look dangerous and his pleasant voice wasn't threatening, which made what he said all the more terrifying. Lying there on the ground at his feet the Mexican actually tried to squirm away from him.

"No! No! Senor! I will—I will tell. The chief is Ramon Delgado. But, please, senor! Never say that I told you!"

"Never heard of him," said Shorty.

The Mexican's heavy face showed genuine surprise.

"Where will they be takin' them horses?" asked Walker.

The big Mexican seemed more than willing to talk now. "To Tornillo first. They may hold 'em there for a while. They know that any American would be crazy to go into Tornillo after stolen horses."

Shorty nodded thoughtfully. Sounded as if the man might be telling the truth. Tornillo was directly across the Rio Grande from the American town of Javalina, about five miles up-river from Tumbling K headquarters.

Walker reached down and slipped the rope from the bushwhacker's ankles. Stepping back quickly, he said, "Get up and go

get yo' horse. We're takin' a little ride, me and you."

The burly Mexican got painfully to his feet. Almost twice the size of Shorty, he glared down at the little man as if he still couldn't believe that what had happened to him was anything other than a nightmare. His big hands knotted into fists and he took half a step forward.

Shorty shook his head. "Don't try it, fella. I mostly use a rope, but I *can* shoot if I have to."

The big man ran a hand over his badly scratched face and neck as though to clear his thoughts. "Where are you taking me?"

"Back across the river."

"You can't do that! This is Mexico and I'm a Mexican citizen. You'll need papers to get me into Texas again."

"You didn't need any papers to get my Chunky horse into Mexico." Walker slapped the loaded butt of his quirt against his chaps. It sounded heavy. "Move out. Git!"

The Mexican started away. Over his shoulder, he growled, "You baby-faced devil!"

GRUFF old Sheriff Sid Barnes took his feet down from the window-sill and cussed. Seated in his office at the Javalina County courthouse, he had seen Shorty Walker ride up to the hitch-rack herding a Mexican who looked as though he had been run through a cotton gin. The sheriff knew and liked Shorty. He was one Tumbling K man who never caused trouble in town; and, moreover, Old Sid had won plenty money betting on the little twister in roping and riding contests.

Shorty turned his prisoner over to the sheriff, said that the man was a horse-thief whom he'd be glad to testify against when the time came and let it go at that. He brushed the old officer's questions aside with the excuse that he'd have to be getting along.

"Where in hell are you goin' in such a lather?" demanded Barnes.

"I'm goin' to feed my pony at the corral and feed myself at the Chinaman's," replied Shorty. "Then I'm a-headin' for Tornillo."

"What you figgerin' to do across the Border?"

Walker answered in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice, "This here fella and his bunch of thieves lifted my Chunky horse along with a band of Tumblin' K ponies. I'm goin' to get Old Chunky."

SID'S bushy white brows went up in amazement. "Why, you infernal simpleton! A runt like you goin' alone into that there den of thieves and murderers? Why—!"

"Yes, sah, I'm on my way. So 'long, Sheriff."

"Wait! . . . Er—well, good-bye . . . Shorty."

Half an hour later the sheriff came striding into the Chinaman's and sat down across the table from Shorty, breathing hard.

He glanced cautiously around, then leaned over the table, and growled, "Looky here, Shorty. You dassn't cross the Border now—you dassn't!"

The little bronc rider downed the last of his third cup of coffee. "How come, Mistah Barnes?" he inquired casually. "I'm all set to ramble."

Barnes dropped his voice even lower, "On the way to the lockup that fool deppity of mine let yo' horse-thief bust him over the head and get away. By now that there Mex is in Tornillo. They'll be layin' for you down there. You simply cain't go!"

Shorty went to rolling a smoke. "Mighty good of you, Sheriff, to go to all this trouble to let me know. Shore do thank you, sah."

"Then you'll stay here or hit the trail for home?"

"No, Mistah Barnes, I reckon not."

"The hell you won't! Damned if I don't arrest you for disturbin' the peace and lock you up to keep you on this side of the Border. So help me, I will!"

Shorty Walker leaned back in his chair. His mild blue eyes met the old officer's fierce gaze through a cloud of smoke. He said quietly, "Shore hope you don't try that, Sheriff. I ain't doin' nothin' and there's witnesses here to prove it."

Sid Barnes sat up straight. He frowned as if mystified and, perhaps, a bit fearful of what he read in the impassive face across the table. After a moment, he said, "You don't —Shorty, d'you mean that you'd *fight me?*"

"Not if they's any way around it, sah, but I shore gotta go and get my Chunky horse away from them thieves."

The old officer shook his head, got slowly

to his feet. "Well—good-bye, Shorty, good . . . bye."

"So 'long, Mistah Barnes."

SHORTY WALKER crossed the Border three miles up-river. Having in mind Pedro Gil's escape and the certainty that the Tornillo thieves would be on the lookout for him—the law also, perhaps—he thus avoided the international crossing and now moved with great caution. Couldn't do Old Chunky any good by leaving his bones out in the brush somewhere or getting himself locked up in a Mexican calaboose. In fact, he would have stayed under cover until dark had he not wanted to take a look at several corrals in the vicinity of Tornillo which he knew where to find in daylight. Shorty had made a number of horse-buying trips over there with Clark Benton. The Rio Grande bottom along here was covered by chaparral —at some points impenetrable, at others cleared for small *rancheritas* or growing in scattered clumps—through which roads and trails wound their leisurely way. Though generally level, the valley had occasional hummocks or mounds piled up by old floods and now overgrown by brush. Having crossed to the Mexican side Shorty hid his horse, took his rifle and climbed to the top of a mound from which he could see a stretch of the main road to town from this direction.

South on the road Shorty saw wisps of dust rising above the chaparral and coming toward him. He waited impatiently. Pretty soon he sighted two riders under the dust. . . . *Rurales!* Mounted rural police. He'd know those slouchy uniforms anywhere. If they were not looking for someone you'd never see those fellows on the road in the heat of the day like this. So they were already patrolling the trails for him. That Pedro Gil had gotten fast action. Must have a pull with the Tornillo *alcalde* or someone. Shorty checked to make certain that there was a cartridge in the chamber of his rifle and glanced down to where the coyote was hidden. The pony couldn't be seen from the road and he sure hoped the little cuss kept his mouth shut when the Mexican law rode by. He soon found out about that. The coyote caught the scent of the *rurales'* horses, nickered loud enough to be heard in Tornillo if the wind were right!

Shorty Walker cussed. The Mexican officers savagely jerked their mounts to a halt. He overheard them chattering in Spanish about the probability that the brush was hiding an Apache ambush, a company of Texas Rangers, or more likely a band of desperadoes led by that *Gringo* Devil for whom they were searching. Shorty kind of wondered whether he was the devil. The coyote nickered again. The *rurales* buried their spurs. Fifty yards down the road they looked back, slid to a stop, then turned and walked their horses cautiously to where they started from. Shorty cussed again. This time he heard the Mexicans decide to investigate the hidden horse. He carefully cocked his rifle. It wouldn't do to be set afoot out here. He'd never find Old Chunky without a horse to ride.

No help for it. Only thing to do. He took aim and drilled a hole through the high-peaked crown of one of those sombreros down there. Working his lever fast he ventilated the other one, too, before the paralyzed Mexicans could move. When they did come to, each of the officers emptied a six-shooter at Shorty's smoke. Bullets cut brush all around him, some mighty close. Crouching there with nothing solid for cover, the little bronc rider figured that he'd have to hurt somebody if this kept up. Having emptied their guns, however, the Mexicans lit out for town in a mile-high cloud of dust. Shorty watched them go, cussing the coyote for starting the ruckus. Now those *rurales* would hit Tornillo with a story about having been ambushed by the *Gringo* Devil and twenty men, supported by the evidence of the bullet-holes in their hats, and they'd stand the town on its head. Make it a heap tougher for him and Old Chunky.

Walker went quickly down to his horse and followed the fleeing *rurales* southward at a lively clip. He figured that riding in their dust this way was the safest place for him so long as he kept out of their sight, an easy thing to do where the road was crooked. About a mile from town, however, it straightened out. Shorty turned into a cow-trail that quartered off to the southwest through high chaparral and should, he calculated, intersect another main road into town with which he was acquainted—a road that passed near three of the corrals he wanted to see. And eventually it did.

BEFORE venturing onto this road Shorty scouted it afoot, climbing a large huisache so as to see over the chaparral. All right toward town, apparently. But, to the west—*rurales!* Just around a sharp turn two of them had dismounted in the shade of a tree, close enough to be dangerous if he made much noise. Somebody was out to get the *Gringo* Devil, sure enough. He got on his horse, took the main road to town and left the officers sitting back there. The little bronc rider scarcely gave a thought to the fact that he now had the Mexican law behind and in front of him and, perhaps, all around him; not to mention the horse-thieves that would be laying for him. His mind was on his Chunky horse.

Shorty fought down a natural inclination to behave like a man on the dodge, simply rode along leisurely and openly so as not to arouse the suspicions of those who saw him. The first of the three corrals was empty. The second held only a few cows, but the third and closest to town was filled with horses. Shorty's spirits rose a little. Though the corral was a good two hundred yards south of the road and he couldn't identify any of the horses at that distance, bunched as they were, it was possible that he might find the Tumbling K's in there. Just as he was about to turn toward the corral, he saw a *rurale* ride up to its gate. The officer beckoned and a man came running from a shed in the rear.

They talked for a while, then the officer rode back the way he came. Shorty sat there and pondered for a moment. He knew it was plain foolish to go near that corral now. The *rurale* probably had been inquiring about him. He looked hard at the horses. Maybe Old Chunky was in there. He headed for the corral.

A man came to meet him at the front gate—just an average Mexican *vaquero* or cowhand, neither dumb nor particularly bright. The fellow rubbed his eyes as if his *siesta* had been disturbed by the visitors, then suddenly every trace of drowsiness left his broad face. He stared hard and suspiciously at the American.

Shorty spoke politely in fairly good Spanish. Afterwards he hooked one leg around his saddle-horn, brought out tobacco and papers and went to rolling a smoke as though totally unaware of the suspicion he had aroused. The *vaquero* continued to eye him warily.

Presently, the little bronc rider said, "My friend, I am looking for a man—a man on a horse."

The Mexican nodded, answered courteously, "If I can be of any help, senor, command me."

"The man is a thief."

"There are many thieves, senor."

"And he is a desperado, a terrible one."

The Mexican nodded politely.

"And this desperado looks very much like me."

The *vaquero* rolled his eyes. "That could not be, senor."

Shorty grinned his innocent grin. "Thank you, my friend. But it is true that he does, except for some small differences. *His* eyes are dark. Mine, as you can see, are light. His face is—how do you say it?—more . . . ah . . . fierce than mine. Perhaps that is because he is older than I. The horse he is riding resembles my horse unless one looks most closely. It is a trifle darker than this coyote and larger. Am I allowed to ask you confidentially whether you have seen such a man, my friend?"

WALKER had a good reason for making this comparison. He knew that the Mexican would talk after he had gone and he wanted it to be noised around that an American who resembled the *Gringo* Devil was looking for that mysterious person.

While Shorty was speaking the suspicion in the *vaquero's* face gradually gave way to doubt, followed by conviction, then his native friendliness. He answered with gestures and enthusiasm, "I have not seen the man, senor, but I know about him. The *rurales* and city police are looking everywhere for him and all roads are guarded. He was described to me as being a small but very terrible devil not at all like you, senor, armed with many weapons and riding a vicious horse that runs like the wind—very different from the one you are riding."

Shorty nodded soberly, having a hard time keeping his face straight. He thanked his lucky stars that the big bushwhacker had exaggerated this way because of reluctance to admit that a man half his size had got the best of him. Meanwhile, the little twister had looked over the horses in the corral. Not

a single Tumbling K there. He thanked the *vaquero* and rode on.

With some variations, this story was repeated at three of the remaining corrals. The fourth was empty. Of course, the "small but very terrible devil" got larger and more terrible as time passed, so that Shorty had even less difficulty in deceiving those with whom he talked. He stuck to his simple plan. Although he did not venture into the town proper and made it a point to avoid meeting policemen or *rurales,* he rode along slowly and openly, showed no sign of haste or anxiety when visiting corrals and carefully did nothing to attract attention to himself. With the law racing hither and thither all around him he went his way unmolested. But he failed to find a trace of the Tumbling K horses.

SHORTY WALKER was a thoroughly discouraged, but stubbornly determined young man when he rode into Tornillo proper soon after dark. He continued to make his way leisurely and more or less openly. At the upper end of the main street he tied his horse with several others at a rack in front of a store that was closed and dark. Standing there between two horses he sort of looked the town over. Sure was wide awake tonight. Horsemen going and coming in the street, plenty noise, men swarming up and down the sidewalks like a *fiesta* crowd though this wasn't a Mexican holiday, few women in sight, law officers thicker than he had ever seen them in Tornillo. What was coming off? Was the *Gringo* Devil the cause of all this? Anyhow, Shorty figured that it hadn't ought to be hard for a quiet little runt like him to orientate around without being noticed much. He kind of eased himself onto the dirt sidewalk and went drifting along, keeping a sharp eye open for the law and always managing to turn his back when he run onto it.

Shorty Walker kept his ears open, too, and it wasn't long before he learned something interesting. Dropping in behind three young *vaqueros* who were talking in loud and excited voices, he heard—

"Are you positive that this *Gringo* Devil is now in Tornillo?"

"Yes, my friend. Positive."

"And I also, Tomas. A policeman told me."

"I learned it from a captain of *rurales.* They were guarding all roads and now know that the *Gringo* Devil somehow slipped through."

"Yes, Tomas, and two *rurales* were ambushed by the *Gringo* and his men. They fought desperately and barely escaped with their lives."

"But why does he come here?" asked the first speaker.

"He seeks revenge upon Felix Costa."

"That is true, Tomas. I, myself, heard Costa say as much. He was drinking *aguardiente* in the Azteca while waiting for this *Gringo* desperado to appear."

"Costa may still be at the Azteca."

"Let us go and see if he is," suggested the one called Tomas.

His companions thought that was a fine idea. So did Shorty Walker. He followed at their heels until they neared the front entrance of the large *cantina.* The lights were too bright out there for him. He went around to the rear. A few ragged *peons* were gathered at the back door and windows, looking in at men with money to spend and listening to what they had to say. Shorty looked and listened, too.

The place was packed. A big man, larger than any other in the room, was leaning against the bar and holding forth in a pompous voice . . . Pedro Gil, the bushwhacker! Shorty moved a little closer to the window.

The big man emptied a glass of liquor at a gulp, coughed, and declaimed, "And so again I have told you the true story of my terrible battle with the ten American desperadoes, my friends. One of them still lives, only one. Their leader, he is. And I tell you that he is now in Tornillo seeking vengeance upon me for the death of his followers. He will not meet me openly. He will assassinate me if he can, for he is a devil—a very devil. I now wait for him—wait impatiently, most impatiently!"

One of the *peons* said to another, "He is a grand *caballero,* that Felix Costa."

"Yes, my friend, and Don Costa is also a terrible man in battle."

SHORTY picked up his ears . . . Felix Costa? That man was Pedro Gil, the bushwhacker who said that Costa was his boss. Or was he? Maybe Felix Costa, the

horse-thief, had tried to hide his real name that way. Not so dumb, either.

Walker spoke softly to one of the *peons,* "Hombre, I am a stranger in this country. What is the name of the large man?"

"You are surely a stranger, senor," answered the Mexican, "or you would know Don Felix Costa, cousin of General Ramon Delgado and *major domo* of the general's great *hacienda,* El Rancho Ramon."

Shorty didn't let on that this was *some* surprise. Instead, he asked casually, "And who is General Ramon Delgado, hombre?"

The *peon's* stolid Indian features showed symptoms of amazement. "You are indeed a stranger from some very distant place, senor. General Delgado is the *alcalde* of Tornillo and many people say that he will be the next governor of this state."

"Or the President of Mexico," added another *peon.* "Who knows?"

"Speak softly, my friend," cautioned his companion.

SHORTY WALKER wasn't interested in Mexican politics. His mind was fixed upon a little bay horse with four white stockings and panther claw marks on its rump.

He said, "This Rancho Ramon is north of town. No?"

"No, senor. It is west—three miles on this street to the house of the general."

Felix Costa's big voice again boomed out, "I go to my home now. If you see this *Gringo* Devil, my friends, tell him where to find me—if he dares. And tell him also that I ride a horse of his, a miserable beast that I shall flog to death!"

Shorty Walker's heart missed a beat. Costa riding Old Chunky? Of course, out of pure cussedness. Revenge for what had happened to him this morning: taking it out on the horse. Why in hell hadn't he gone to the front of the saloon? Might have seen Chunky at the rack. Too late to go there now. Costa was leaving, strutting like an over-grown game chicken, with a bunch of admirers at his heels. Going home, he had said. So he'd ride west on the main street, past where the coyote was hitched. Shorty thanked the *peons* politely and set off down the alley, walking as fast as he dared. He wanted to run, but that wouldn't do. If he started to run a dozen Mexicans would take out after him on general principles. Had to fight his feet to make them walk, though.

Shortly before reaching a point opposite where his horse was tied the little bronc rider heard a rumpus in the street, hoofs pounding, leather popping, a horse squealing, and men yelling, laughing and swearing in Spanish. He broke into a run! Couldn't help it. Turning into a dark passage between two buildings he reached the sidewalk and got under the rack to his horse without being seen, thanks to the fact that everyone was now running toward the Azteca. From between the horses Shorty stole a look down the street. Silvery moonlight from above and yellow light from windows pierced the dust and focused upon a scene that at first froze the blood in his veins, then set it to boiling with a rage such as this mild little man had never before experienced. At that instant he became in fact, a baby-faced devil with murder in his heart.

Felix Costa was giving an exhibition of savagery. Astride Old Chunky the huge Mexican—half drunk, no doubt—was putting the little horse to torture with a talent for cruelty fit to delight a bullfight audience. His three-inch rowels raked the bay's sides to ribbons. Wielded by his long and powerful arm Costa's quirt raised welts and brought blood from Chunky's nose to his flanks. When the horse fought for its head the most vicious of bits gouged the roof of its mouth and threatened to crush its underjaw. Again and again the audience roared its approval and Costa bellowed in triumph.

SHORTY WALKER sucked breath through his teeth. He didn't watch his little horse suffer for long: couldn't. Whirling back to his saddle he reached for his rifle, hesitated a split second, took down his rope instead. His mind was in a turmoil of rage, but his hands moved with certainty. He built a small loop, very small, a loop that only a master of the rope would risk for a difficult cast. Costa had now given Chunky his head. Lashing savagely with quirt and jabbing viciously with spurs, the big Mexican sent the little horse galloping up the street. Chunky stumbled staggered, but kept on going with all the strength he had left.

Shorty Walker flipped his loop over and back on the ground to make sure that it was opening right. He glanced from side to side

to be certain of ample room between the coyote on his right and another horse on his left. He saw that the sidewalk behind him was deserted now. Everyone had gone down the street to see the fun. Costa drew near, yelling, spurring and quirting. Shorty didn't whirl his rope. He took a quick step forward, flung the loop with an effortless motion of his arm as he had done thousands of times in horse corrals. The rope darted out straight and stiff. The loop snapped shut around the Mexican's throat. Walker flung his hip into the rope, dug his heels into the ground. Felix Costa left the saddle as if an invisible hand had snatched him away. He fell hard, almost at Shorty's feet. His head twisted grotesquely at the end of a broken neck!

An instant of stunned silence, then a roar from down the street. The thin, hard-twist rope could not have been seen at that distance, so they probably thought that Costa had fallen from the horse. A moment later, however, some of the spectators might have seen a small figure bend over the dead man. It was gone in a split second, for Shorty moved like a cat while retrieving his rope. The next instant there could have been seen briefly on the street an apparent riderless horse flying around a corner, a horse that looked ghostly white in the moonlight. Shorty Walker was draped along its off side.

THE little bronc rider was faced by a problem now. While galloping through the side streets to the brush that pressed in close to town he sort of cooled off and went to wondering whether he had been smart to lose his head that way. Maybe he'd have been wise to follow Costa out of Tornillo and catch him on the road somewhere. Maybe—but *no*. He simply couldn't stand to see Old Chunky take such punishment a second longer than he had to. Now, the question was—where had Chunky gone? The last Shorty saw of him he was running wildly up the street, indicating that Costa rode with closed reins which would enable the horse to travel. Chunky was frantic, crazed by fear and pain. Therefore, he might not have lit out for the Tumbling K and home as a horse would do when in its right mind. Maybe he simply stampeded back to Rancho Ramon. The balance of the Tumbling K horses were presumed to be there and he had been running with them off and on for two years. Shorty reckoned that he might as well go there and see.

It took some time to get to the ranch, for the little bronc rider was definitely on the dodge now with all roads guarded and everybody in Tornillo on the lookout for the *Gringo* Devil. A full moon and a clear sky didn't make it any easier on him. He followed cow and animal trails through the chaparral and went slowly until at length satisfied that he had gone at least two-thirds of the way to the Delgado *hacienda,* then quartered off on a cross trail toward the main road. Nearing it, he heard something coming from town. Shorty tied his horse, took off spurs and chaps and worked his way through brush to a point where he could see the road. An open carriage was coming at a slow walk, followed by several horsemen. Two men sat in the front seat of the victoria and on the rear cushions, with a man upon either side to support it, lolled the huge body of Felix Costa. They were taking the horse-thief home.

Walker went quickly back to his horse. He mounted and hurried out to the main road in time to lose himself in the dust of the procession ahead. Pretty soon he overheard an exchange of salutations up there. He promptly moved much closer to the riders in the rear, dangerously close. If any of them noticed him he was evidently mistaken for one of their number who had fallen behind and to strengthen this illusion, he went to work on his latigos as if tightening cinches. A few moments later he saw two *rurales* sitting their horses beside the road. Shorty kept his head down, working on the saddle.

One of the officers called out politely, "This is a terrible thing, senor."

"Yes." One word was all that Shorty ventured to say then.

"We will punish that *Gringo* Devil for it, senor, most certainly we will."

"Thank you, my friend," with his head down, sort of mumbled while working on a cinch.

RANCHO RAMON headquarters comprised extensive corrals, sheds, *jacals* or stockade huts for the help, and General

Delgado's house—a low adobe of many rooms enclosing a large patio rectangular in shape. Horsemen and vehicles could enter this enclosure through a wide gate, or stop at a hitching rack outside. Pedestrians used the gate, a door at the rear and another in the front of the house.

The carriage now rolled through the gate, but the riders dismounted at the rack and walked into the patio. Soon a hubbub arose in there, women and children crying, everybody talking at once. While this was going on Shorty Walker rode up, stepped down and tied his horse with the others. His eye fell upon a large oleander bush growing against the wall beside the gate and he quickly slipped in behind it: completely hidden there, thanks to his small size.

Shorty picked up snatches of conversation here and there and soon heard some interesting things. Chunky had caused excitement at the ranch by returning to the "Hidden Corral" with an empty saddle a short while back. The *vaquero* doing the talking had thrown the horse in with the others and hurried to the house. Where in hell would he go to find this Hidden Corral? thought Walker.

By piecing together things that he heard it wasn't long before he learned that the mysterious corral was heavily guarded by armed men. His heart sank. The little bronc rider was aware of his limitations, had no ambition to make a hero of himself and was too smart to tackle a job that was more than he could handle. But, he was out to get his Chunky horse and fully intended to do it, one way or another.

SHORTY also heard men from town telling a ghost story: how they saw Felix Costa fall from his horse for no apparent reason, since the animal was galloping straight away; how they had seen a thing dart out and crouch at his head for a moment, then slither away; and how they saw a great white horse appear suddenly near Costa, take two tremendous leaps such as no earthly horse could make, then vanish into thin air. Moreover, they had found a rope burn on the dead man's throat, though no one had seen a rope. Surely, this *Gringo* Devil was an evil spirit!

Hiding there behind the bush, Shorty Walker did some powerful hard thinking. Things looked bad. So far he had been mighty lucky, but he couldn't expect that luck to hold. It didn't stand to reason that he could go on making fools of these Mexicans the way he had. They weren't all like that—not by a long shot. Certainly this General Ramon Delgado was neither a fool nor a coward, otherwise he would never have gotten to where he was now. It would be dangerous to try to bamboozle him. . . . Or would it? . . . Maybe he was so much of a somebody he wouldn't be expecting anyone to try a shenanigan on *him*. . . . Maybe. . . . At any rate something had to be done to get Old Chunky out of this jackpot, reflected Shorty, and it was up to him to do that something, or try to do it. He made certain that his knife was still in its scabbard and he loosened his six-shooter in its holster. Then he settled down to wait for someone to come out.

PRETTY soon Shorty heard a man in there say that he had to leave and get back to the corral. The little bronc rider moved out from behind the oleander. A Mexican came through the gate and turned to pass near him.

"Good evening, senor," said Walker softly. "May I speak confidentially to you?"

The *vaquero* halted in his tracks. He stared pop-eyed at the American and during one tight moment it looked as if he'd surely call out.

Quickly, Shorty went on to say, "Please, senor, make no noise. It is important. I mean no harm. Look!"

The little American pushed his hat back from his face so that the Mexican could see it clearly in the moonlight, then folded his arms.

He added hastily, "Draw your knife or pistol, my friend, then you will have nothing to fear from me."

The *vaquero* hesitated doubtfully, meanwhile taking the measure of the harmless-looking little bronc rider. Apparently reassured by what he saw, he drew his gun and stepped closer.

"Who are you," he asked softly, "and what do you want?"

"A fair question, senor," answered Walker. "I am an American officer, a member of the United States Secret Service. I know who killed Don Costa, senor. I have

been trailing him for many days. My government wants the man."

"You—you know *that?*"

"Yes, my friend."

"What is the name of this *Gringo* Devil, senor?"

"Walker. He is called Shorty Walker."

The Mexican repeated "Walker" as best he could, adding, "That name has a devilish sound."

"It has," agreed Shorty soberly. "Confidentially, senor, this man and Costa had been partners in an illegal business. They quarreled recently. I have looked all over Tornillo for this American devil, and devil he is. Several persons in your town will remember me asking about him today. After the murder I traced him almost to this *hacienda.* He may even be here now."

"Here? You mean here, senor?"

"Yes, my friend. He moves like a ghost. The man knows me. He will escape if he sees me. I must talk to General Delgado about this affair. The Mexican government is concerned. Do you think, my friend, that if you explained what I have told you to the general he would be afraid to meet me alone in some room which I can reach through the front door without going through the patio where there are so many people?"

The Mexican was shocked. "The general afraid? No, no, senor! He is afraid of nothing."

"I suspected as much," said Shorty dryly, and he meant it. "Will you go and ask Don Delgado to meet me and to open the front door for me himself so that no one else will see me? Will you do that most secretly, my friend?"

The *vaquero* was convinced. He said it would be a pleasure and hurried away.

Shorty moved fast now, had to. Trusting to luck that no one came out and caught him at it, he untied the coyote and a big stout horse that was hitched nearby, led them around to the front of the house and tied the animals on the far side of a large fig tree where they couldn't be seen from the door or a window. He was racing against time and hoped the general stalled a minute or so. Walker took down his catch and tie ropes, then ran to one of two massive pottery urns that stood one upon either side of the front entrance—tall enough for him to hide behind standing up. He got there in the nick of time. A moment later the heavy door swung open.

A low, but crisp voice said in Spanish, "Enter, American officer!"

Shorty didn't breathe. Holding his loop cocked for a cast, he watched through a hole in the handle of the urn.

Again came the invitation—sharp, commanding.

After a pause, a small wiry man stepped impatiently through the door. He glanced irritably around. While his head was momentarily turned the other way, Walker made his cast. He couldn't waste a loop at that distance. The rope clamped tightly around the general's thin neck, choking off any sound he might have made. Shorty jerked, but not *too* hard. He had to have this man alive. The Mexican's slight body left the two-foot step as if he had dived off. His bare head slapped the hard ground. Walker bent over him to tie his hands. The man was out, so he didn't take the time to do it. He picked up his prisoner and ran to the horses.

SHORTY was in a desperate hurry now. He feared that Delgado had either set a trap in which to catch the mysterious stranger, or arranged to have someone take a look to see if everything was all right after a little time had elapsed. The general was still insensible, or nearly so. Walker hung him across the saddle of the tall roan he had borrowed, mounted behind, led the coyote and set off toward a cart road that buried itself in the chaparral two hundred yards away. He moved at a walk over the hard-packed yard, but struck an easy jiggle upon reaching softer ground. The ten-foot brush had no more than closed around him when all hell broke loose at the house—men and women shouting back and forth, a bell ringing and some excited man emptied his six-shooter. The shots echoed through the night and set little things in the brush to rustling and chattering nervously.

Shorty was nervous, too. He knew that by now riders were streaking out in all directions, that the whole country would be aroused by the news that General Delgado had been kidnaped, and there'd be trackers on his trail although they couldn't do much good in the chaparral before daylight. As if he didn't already have troubles enough,

his prisoner showed signs of coming to. Hanging face-downward across the saddle, Delgado went to struggling weakly and mumbling and he was likely to go to yelling for help as soon as he got his bearings. Walker searched him quickly: two small hide-out pistols and a short dagger. Afterwards, he lifted the slight little general to a sitting position in the saddle and held him there. Pretty soon Delgado asked where he was and what was coming off. Shorty let him know that he was a prisoner and told him to keep his mouth shut. While the general was getting that through his befuddled senses, Walker took a rawhide *riata* from the saddle and looped it around the Mexican's neck.

Delgado was wide awake but faking now. Shorty watched him slyly explore his clothing for weapons, then told him, "You're clean as a hound's tooth, General. I done combed you good."

Evidently Delgado understood English, but he wouldn't speak it. He stopped what he was doing, and demanded in Spanish, "Who are you and what do you want from me?"

"Walker is my name. Folks call me Shorty. All I want from you now is *no noise.*"

The general twisted around quickly. His face was within inches of Shorty's. "Walker! My Tomas told me that was the name of this terrible *Gringo* Devil that everyone is talking about. You?"

"Reckon so."

"You—not much larger than I, and with *that* face! I do not believe it! You are an impostor, a—a—!"

"Suits me."

Shorty reined to a halt. "Now, looky here, General. We're goin' for a long ride and a powerful quiet one. Understand? No noise!"

He gave the *riata* a slight twitch. "Feel that? It's around yo' neck and it stays there. One peep outa you and I choke you down. Understand?"

Delgado spat out a vile Mexican oath. "Yes, *pelado,* I understand! You *are* this *Gringo* Devil. My men will catch you. I will—*I,* with my own hands, will stake you out naked in the sun for ants to carry off in very small pieces. Understand?"

"Uh-huh."

Shorty got down. He went on to say quietly, "I'm hobblin' yo' feet under this roan's belly, but I'm leavin' yo' hands free. You ride in the lead and do what I tell you. I ride in the drag and I hang onto this here *riata,* sorta like drivin' with a jerk line. Will you behave, or had I might as well hang you now and get it over with?"

Moonlight glinted in Delgado's wicked eyes. The man wasn't afraid—not a particle, but he was smart enough to know how things stood with him. He snarled, "I have no choice but to obey you, for the moment. But, remember, *Gringo*—the ants!"

SHORTY couldn't go very fast, herding the general that way. Therefore, he fully expected to find himself trapped inside a circle of men thrown out by whoever was directing the pursuit and it wasn't a comforting thought. He was mighty near scared, wondered whether he'd bitten off more than he could chew. He kept one ear on his back trail, the other ahead and carefully examined every open space before venturing into it, and he kept a mighty sharp eye on this tricky general. Delgado behaved all right, but he talked about ants whenever Walker came near. After a while, just when it was kind of commencing to look as if they hadn't circled him yet, Shorty heard voices ahead—one man shouting to another, ordering him to stay there and watch the cart road!

Walker pulled lightly on the rope, half-whispered, "Stop! Turn around. We're goin' back."

Delago obeyed. When passing, he seemed faintly surprised. "Back to the *hacienda?*"

"Maybe so. Git along."

"You *are* a devil, a clever one." He added viciously, "But remember the ants. You are closer to the ants, much closer!"

Ants! Shorty hated the things. He was afraid now, scared plumb through and through. Needn't be, though. All he had to do was to turn this damned Mexican a-loose and light out alone. Wouldn't have any trouble breaking through the circle that way. Then he thought of Chunky. That little old horse must be scared, too, away off up yonder some place in a Mexican corral, sore and stiff and cut and scratched all to hell the way he was. Old Chunky was a sight worse off

than his boss. Had to get Old Chunky out of there, regardless.

Constantly on the alert for trackers who might be working out his trail by moonlight, Shorty went back to where the cart road crossed a stretch of open ground that looked as though it might extend all the way up to the main road from Tornillo to the *hacienda.* He pulled the general to a halt. Sitting there for a moment, Shorty got an idea—a fool idea, maybe, but better than no idea at all. . . . The main road. . . . They wouldn't think of looking for him on the main road this close to the ranch, so that's where he'd go. He'd go there and keep an eye on the road for a while. Maybe somebody would come along, somebody that he could use in getting out of this jackpot. Never could tell.

Most of the way he was able to ride in the fringe of the chaparral, more or less in its shadow with open ground on the left. Evidently Delgado guessed where they were going. He sat straighter, even more alert.

Noticing this, Shorty halted him a safe distance from the road. "Be mighty careful what you do, General," he said softly. "I'm a-takin' long chances now and I don't aim to get caught. If chokin' you or draggin' you at the end of my rope will keep 'em from ketchin' me, I'll do it. Understand?"

The general shrugged disdainfully. "Naturally. I am no fool. I understand that you are a desperate man without the soul of a man. But, remember, *Gringo*—the ants!"

"Uh-huh."

BUT Shorty wouldn't forget the ants, not for a second. He went on until they came to a sort of cove in the brush where they could not be seen from the road. He turned in there, tied Delgado's hands behind him, stuffed the general's large silk handkerchief into his mouth and finished the gagging job with the general's red satin sash. Afterwards, he took his rope and went and hid behind a bush at the roadside.

Pretty soon two riders came along from the west. They proved to be the *rurales* who had been guarding the road and Shorty overheard enough to learn that they had scouted west to the ranch and now were returning to town to join the general search being conducted by their colonel. Which meant that this part of the road would no longer be guarded. After a while, Shorty caught the sound of a vehicle coming from the direction of the *hacienda.* He glued his eyes to the road, gathered his muscles. This might be something. Before long it came into sight—the victoria that had taken Costa's body home, evidently a public conveyance engaged for that purpose and now returning to town. It was empty. The driver sat slumped under a huge sombrero with his serape gathered around him as if he were asleep or dozing, and the horses were taking their own sweet time. Shorty made up his mind in a hurry. When the team came abreast he roped the nearest horse. The team shied and lunged and woke the driver up. Shorty had already sprung like a squirrel into the seat behind him.

"Silence, *cochero!*" snapped Walker in Spanish, not *too* loud. "Sound no alarm and I will not harm you. Do what I tell you and I will pay you well."

The Mexican spluttered and stammered, but didn't make much of a fuss. With a few jerks on the lines he quickly brought his usually placid horses under control.

Then he said, "I am only a poor man working for a rich man, senor. This coach is for hire. I will do what you say, for such are my instructions from my employer. Where do you want to go, senor?"

Shorty took him at his word. Obviously he was a stolid man of the *peon* class with a single-track mind, accustomed to obeying orders to the letter and without question. He made no objection to driving his rig to the cove in the brush.

Walker raced through what he had to do now. With so many men looking for him, it would be a miracle if he got away from there before someone stumbled onto his hiding place. He had the driver put up the carriage top. He removed the general's gag for fear of suffocating the man, but left the *riata* around his neck and assured him that he'd be strangled if he tried to give orders to the *cochero.* Leaving Delgado's hands tied, Shorty made him lie on the floor between the seats. Afterwards he unsaddled the roan and covered the general with its blanket and rigging. He tied the coyote where he could reach the lead rope, turned the roan loose, got into the back seat and told the driver to return to the main road.

"Drive toward town at an easy trot," ordered Shorty, "but turn off before you

reach the business part. Follow side streets that will take you to the River Road. We go south on it."

The driver said he understood.

Before they got started, Walker added, "I shall pretend to sleep. If you are questioned, say that I am drunk; that I fell from my horse; that you picked me up and I hired you to drive me to a cow camp down the river because I am too sick to ride; and do not stop unless you are compelled to. Can you remember and will you obey?"

The *cochero* answered without a sign of excitement or curiosity, "Yes, senor, I remember and I obey. My employer has instructed me to lie skillfully to protect a patron from the law or his wife."

"Good! But do not forget, hombre—I sit behind you with a gun and an evil temper."

"I will not forget, for I am afraid of the *Gringo* Devil . . . Senor *Diablo.*"

UPON reaching the road Shorty leaned back with his head lolling against the cushions and his hat pulled down over his face, set so that he could look out beneath it. No one would notice the *riata* in the darkness of the coach. He held onto it and took up slack to a point where Delgado would feel a slight pull on his throat as a constant reminder.

The general was raging mad. He had cursed Shorty in the foulest terms of which the Spanish language was capable when the gag was removed and he began again when the carriage started off. The little bronc rider paid him no mind until he raised his voice to where it might be heard. That outburst ended in a wheezing cough. Shorty had given the rope a pull that wasn't any too gentle.

Then he told Delgado softly, speaking to him in Spanish for the first time, "You are a horse-thief. In Texas we would hang you and think nothing of it. Your life means very little to me. If you do anything to endanger my life, I will kill you. Be still!"

The coach rolled steadily toward town. The coyote trotted near a rear wheel, occasionally snorting in the dust. The driver sat slumped under his sombrero and serape as if he were asleep or dozing. Under the saddle-blanket at Shorty's feet, Delgado brooded in silence. From time to time they met or passed a rider on or near the road and frequently he heard men calling out while working the brush, looking for the *Gringo* Devil in some secluded place while he traveled the highway on comfortable cushions. They were almost to Tornillo before anything happened.

On the outskirts of the town a policeman stepped into the middle of the road with his lantern. In his anxiety not to stop, the driver almost ran the officer down, halting with the carriage tongue inches from the policeman's belt-buckle. Words ensued. The *cochero* apologized skillfully, giving as an excuse the fact or lie he was asleep. Apparently the policeman could understand and sympathize with a man on that score. Peace was restored. Shorty went to breathing again. The officer asked where the coach was going, glanced carelessly inside, wanted to know why the led horse, and inquired whether the *Gringo* Devil had been sighted, following with the now popular though wholly inaccurate description of that creature. Shorty gave the *riata* a slight twitch, moved his foot so that it touched the general's head. Delgado kept perfectly still. The *cochero* told his lie nobly, even embroidering it with excellent Mexican craftsmanship.

"Go with God, my friend," said the policeman. "Look sharply for this *Gringo* Devil. There are great rewards offered. Find him and you will be a rich man with carriages and fine horses of your own."

The coach rolled on. Sweat rolled down Shorty Walker's forehead, into his eyes and his sides were wet. He still didn't know why Delgado hadn't yelled for help and taken chances on a rescue before he was strangled, unless his experience with the rope had already taught him to fear it. That reward business was a dangerous thing. Shorty knew that he had to do something about it.

"Hombre!" he snapped sharply. "Remember that a poor man in good health is better off than a rich man with a bullet in his spine."

"I have been thinking of that, Senor *Diablo,*" responded the imperturbable *cochero.* "I choose poverty and good health."

LESS than two hours later the coach stopped on the Texas side of Dead Chinaman's Crossing. Shorty untied Del-

gado's hands, removed the *riata* and helped him out. While this was going on the *cochero* looked straight ahead, slumped under sombrero and serape as if he had already fallen asleep. When told where he was, the general flew into a rage and became more abusive than ever.

"Be still!" snapped Walker. "You're in a hell of a fix to be makin' all them threats. Limber up yo' hands 'cause you got some writin' to do."

THE fiery little Mexican said he wouldn't write a word, swore by all his saints that he'd never in the world pay one peso ransom to an American bandit.

"Mexican *bandido*—yes, if necessary," he concluded, "but to a *Gringo*—never!"

"Would you rather hang?"

"Yes! Ten thousand times—yes! *I* am an aristocrat. You are a *peon*, a *pelado*, and you cannot force me."

Shorty felt for his tally book, couldn't find it, decided it must be in his saddle-bags and went to get it. While his back was turned Delgado made a break to get away. A middle-aged man in good health, quick and light on his feet, the general ran like a cottontail toward a line of willows that fringed the river a short distance away. Walker heard him before he had gone more than a few steps. Snatching up the *riata* Shorty ran a little ways while building a loop, then made a long cast and caught the fleeing Mexican below the knees. Delgado hit the sand so hard he bounced. The little bronc rider took the rope over his shoulder and dragged the self-styled aristocrat all the way back to where he started from.

Looking down at his spluttering prisoner, Shorty said quietly: "Try that again and I'll snare you around the neck, so help me."

"You *are* a *Gringo* devil!" snarled Delgado. "And that *riata!* The Devil's Rope!"

Shorty hunkered down beside the general, handed him the little daybook and a stub pencil. "Now, horse-thief," he said quietly, "you will write what I tell you and the *cochero* will take it back to your *hacienda.*" He spoke in Spanish, and added, "You are not a fool, so you will write."

Delgado hissed and snarled like a cat and swore a variety of oaths. "No ransom! Not one peso. Not one *real!*"

"I don't want yo' infernal money. I want horses."

"Horses?"

"Yes. I want the horses that your Felix Costa stole from the Tumbling K last night."

"I know nothing about that."

"You're a liar, General."

Shorty slowly flemished down the *riata* in neat coils on the ground, then shaped a nice loop about the size of a man's head.

Delgado eyed the rope, cleared his throat. "It is possible that I *did* hear one of the servants mention American horses at Hidden Corral. Are those the ones you want?"

"Yes, 'specially a little bay with four white stockings and panther claw marks on his rump," answered Walker. "You'll write your ranch to fetch them horses and make delivery on the Texas side at Dead Chinaman Crossing. Make shore that the little bay is amongst 'em. When the horses come and I start home with 'em, I'll turn you a-loose. Here, write! And recollect that I can read Spanish."

THE general wrote for some time.

Shorty couldn't read Spanish very well. Delgado's instructions to a *capitan* of *vaqueros* at Rancho Ramon were clear and in order as far as the horses were concerned, but it struck Walker that he had used a lot of unnecessary words, some of which were hard to translate. Shorty did some thinking, decided to let it go as written. He wanted Chunky. He'd take chances to get him.

Walker went and handed the note to the driver, and told him, "Deliver this to Agustin Varga at Rancho Ramon. Go swiftly. Tell no one about this night's business. How much will I owe you when you have finished this errand and returned to Tornillo?"

The *cochero* made some mental calculations, mumbling to himself. Presently, he said, "Without taking into account the great dangers I have faced and the fine lies I have told, the cost is five pesos, Senor *Diablo.* Is that too much, or perhaps not enough?"

Shorty gave him a U. S. twenty-dollar gold piece—forty pesos. "Pay your employer his five pesos, my *cochero*, and keep thirty-five for yourself. And should anyone cause you trouble because of what you have done tonight, come to me at Rancho Tum-

bling K. I will get you work there. You are a good man."

The driver kept his poker face unruffled. "A thousand thanks, Senor *Diablo!* You are a very good devil."

While hiding the gold piece in a safe place, he muttered to himself loud enough for Shorty to hear, "The devil says that I am a *good* man, which makes me a *bad* man in the eyes of the saints. Or does it? Who knows?"

Fifty feet up-river from the ford there was a twenty-foot cutbank that erosion had carved into miniature canyons and lateral draws in which a man might find cover for himself and his horse. Moreover, a lonely cottonwood grew in there and Shorty had a feeling that he might need a tree before long. He took the coyote and Delgado to the cottonwood and told him to make himself comfortable, since they were going to wait there until the horses arrived.

"And if they do not come," asked Delgado sarcastically, "what?"

Shorty answered in Spanish, and in his quiet way he made it sound mighty convincing. "I shall hang you as a thief, then I will go and get those horses myself."

"*Gringo,* I believe you *would* do that."

"I would."

ABOUT thirty minutes before sun-up Shorty thought he heard faintly the yells of men driving stock down-river on the Mexican side. He wasn't taking chances now, for this was the showdown. Heedless of Delgado's profane protests, he tied the man hand and foot, once threatening to knock him out when the Mexican made a show of resistance. Afterwards he took his rifle and climbed hastily to the top of the cutbank. Dust was boiling up from chaparral on the river road in Mexico, less than a mile away. He couldn't see the little cuss; but yonder came Old Chunky, all right. Shorty felt like sounding the long yell. Chunky would know that yell and come a-runnin' if he heard it. Walker stood up so as to look over sagebrush and other dwarfed stuff on the Texas side. . . . Dust? He'd swear it was. . . . Not much of it, but that was dust up yonder. Moving thisaway, too!

Shorty climbed down quickly. Just as he had half suspected, that tricky Delgado had managed to slip something into his note which some smart person at Rancho Ramon had interpreted as a call for help. Why in hell had he let that note go, knowing that he shouldn't? This would be the real thing and no foolishness. These Mexican *vaqueros*—ranch hands who worked cattle and horses—usually were born and raised on the *hacienda* to which they were attached and were intensely loyal to it. They weren't in a class with the poorly paid *rurales*. These *vaqueros* averaged to be good men who could and would fight as well as an American cowhand. Plumb foolish for one man to try shooting it out with this bunch. Of course, he could turn Delgado loose and run for home. No trouble in getting away from here. But that would never do. Couldn't let Old Chunky down thataway. Something else had to be done about it. Naturally, Shorty Walker thought first of his rope.

When the little bronc rider again stood over him Delgado looked crafty, malicious and somewhat triumphant lying there on the ground. Shorty looked as he always did: utterly composed and plumb harmless; but he didn't feel that way. He was boiling mad inside and scared, too, for the simple reason that he doubted whether he was man enough to get out of this tight spot with a whole skin and his Chunky horse. He had already combed his brain for ideas and gathered just one. Maybe it wouldn't be worth a damn, but he'd give it a try.

Shorty untied the general's ankles, left his wrists bound, told him to shut up and helped him to his feet; then he looped the rawhide rope around the Mexican's neck and led him to a point directly under a cottonwood limb. He tossed the *riata* over the limb. Delgado's outburst was the worst yet. He did everything but froth at the mouth and finally tried to run away. Walker hauled him back and up until only his toes touched ground, then let him down again.

"Now, be-have yo'self," he told the general.

The general stood still, his breath coming in gasps.

Shorty ground-hitched his pony out ten feet from the limb and carried the *riata* to his saddle, fixing the rope so that it didn't have *too* much slack. Afterwards, he went back and faced Delgado.

Speaking in his usual soft voice, Walker said in Spanish, "You have tried to trick me.

Your men are now coming down both sides of the river. . . . Be silent! . . . My horse will stand that way until something frightens him. Talk or yelling and noise like that will not do it. But he is gun-shy. A shot will hang you."

Delgado's swarthy skin lost color.

Shorty went on to say, "I am leaving you here and going to hide with my rifle. When your men with the horses reach the crossing they can easily both see and hear you. Tell them to put the horses into the river and turn back. Those horses need no driving from there."

Delgado choked out a few words, "I—I will do that, senor. Gladly! So this—this hanging business is not necessary."

"It is," said Walker quietly, "because of your treachery. Your men on the Texas side will try to surprise me. You will surely see one of them before they see me. Explain your situation. Tell them that a shot will hang you, and send them away. Look! I have left little slack in the *riata*. If they shoot my horse its death plunges will break your neck. Order them to go away at once. After a while, when I am sure that it is safe for me, I will come and release you. Will you do these things?"

General Ramon Delgado—*alcalde* or mayor of Tornillo, aristocrat, rich man, politician and probable governor of a state—got green around the gills. He seemed unable to drag his eyes from the rope and the horse. He cautiously nodded his head as if fearful that he'd frighten the pony, and he promised faithfully.

"Good," said Shorty. "Don't be afraid to holler loud enough for yo' men to hear. That won't spook my horse."

TEN yards down-river the earthen cutbank was fifteen feet high with a very slight overhang, and six feet out from its base stood a column of silt and clay that had weathered years of erosion. Shorty went and crouched in this narrow passage with his six-shooter, rifle and rope. He watched the dust move down the river on the Mexican side—getting close to open ground now, but all he could see of Texas soil was the cutbank above and upon either side of him and the short grass and brush that fringed it. He strained his eyes at that, though. One of those *vaqueros* could Injun up to the lip of the cutbank and pick him off with a rifle without half trying, for the average Mexican hand had no equal at tracking and scouting of that nature. He sure wished one of 'em would show himself so that Delgado could tell 'em to get to hell away. . . . Or maybe he wouldn't tell 'em. . . . Shorty kept drying his palms on his shirt sleeves. Couldn't handle a gun or a rope good with wet hands. . . . Damn this having to wait like this!

The horses trotted from the brush into the open, almost directly across the river. Leading the band . . . yep . . . leading them ponies and a-headin' for home was a little bay with four white stockings!

Shorty Walker forgot the cutbank and its dangers, even forgot the general over there with a loop around his neck until the coyote's nicker went whistling across the Rio. Hot Damn! He hadn't figured on *that*. Maybe the crazy pony would stand hitched, though. If it didn't there'd be hell to pay. Sweat rolled down Shorty's face and ribs. That nicker scared Delgado so that he had to make several attempts to find his voice: then he yelled to the five men driving the Tumbling K's, and he followed Walker's orders to the letter—no unnecessary words, no tricky business. Meanwhile, the coyote twisted its neck so as to watch the ponies ford the river, nickered from time to time, stamped, swished its tail, but stood still!

Old Chunky led the band into Texas and Shorty heard them strike a gallop upon reaching level ground up there. Chunky was a-headin' for home. So were the five *vaqueros* who brought the Tumbling K's. The general had done a good job with them. But where were those on the Texas side? Were they close enough to have heard what Delgado told the others? Had they, too, turned back? These were questions that Shorty asked himself while his eyes crawled along the brink of the cutbank as far as he could see it.

Suddenly he saw a face up there. It was almost abreast of where the general stood, not far away from him, and perfectly screened by the dull-brown branches of a dead bush. The scout hissed softly. Delgado jerked his head around, evidently saw the man.

"Go away, Valez!" screamed the general. "Look! This *riata!* The horse! Do not shoot! You will hang me! Go—!"

SHORTY didn't hear the balance of it. A little earth trickled down the bank somewhere behind him. He dropped his head, turned it slightly so as to look from the side of his eye under the brim of his hat. . . . A broad face and a pair of keen dark eyes with a brown cloth above them to hide a mop of black hair. Shorty sat perfectly still —a mighty hard thing to do with that face up there behind him. But he didn't have long to wait. The man disappeared for a moment.

Shorty laid his rifle down, gathered his feet under him, turned a litte more. Suddenly the man stood up. His arm whipped around and over. A rawhide *riata* darted down and out with a small loop at its end. Mexican *vaqueros* taught Texas cowmen to rope. It was a beautiful cast, difficult, but perfect.

Although he saw it start and saw it coming, the loop moved so truly and swiftly, Walker was barely able to dodge it by a hair's breadth. He caught the rope above the hondoo, gave a sudden and violent jerk. The *vaquero* unconsciously hung onto his *riata*, the lip of the cutbank crumbled and he fell fifteen feet at least. He had no more than hit the ground when Shorty landed on top of him. Before the Mexican could gather his wits and get his breath, he had been tied hand and foot with his own rope.

Meanwhile, Delgado had been calling to the Tumbling K bronc rider and getting no answer. "Senor! Oh, Senor! My men have gone away, every one of them. Keep your promise. Release me!"

Breathing hard, Shorty answered now, "I know one of 'em that ain't gone."

He asked the *vaquero* in Spanish, "How many men came with you, my friend?"

"We were five men and one fool, Senor. I am the fool."

Walker took his rifle and climbed the bank. Sure enough, he saw five men riding northward and two hundred yards away stood a horse under saddle. Shorty felt like jumping down the bank instead of taking it slow and easy. He stopped at the *vaquero* long enough to clean the man of weapons, then went to the general. Behaving as though he couldn't hear or understand what all Delgado was saying in excited Spanish, he carefully adjusted the loop so that the hondoo was behind the left ear. The Mexican's face went greenish gray, his knees sagged and his tongue seemed to stick to the roof of his mouth. Shorty walked to the pony and laid hold of its reins.

Turning, he said in his gentle voice, speaking Spanish, "You broke your word —why should I keep mine? You are a horse-thief. In Texas we hang horse-thieves . . . so—"

He led the coyote away. The rope fell. It had not been tied!

Shorty grinned over his shoulder. "So 'long, General."

In our next issue October 25th

Tibet—a remote land, and one not to be hurried!

"Clown Face"

by

PAUL ANNIXTER

Queer thing that folks should think speed is a new idea!

"The One on the Left"

by

DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

. . . . *Ants Can Be as Good Guards as Radar and Machine-Guns*

ANT ISLAND

By CHARLES BEADLE

Author of "The Baboon's Paw," etc.

THROUGH the drumming of the rain on the tent roof faintly sounded a strangled scream. The man sitting on a camp cot oiling a gun, looked up.

"Bird or human?"

Came a muffled, distant report.

"That's the answer."

They both stepped to the V-opening of the tent which was pitched on a hillock above a lake. Only a gray wall of falling

water was visible. Intently they listened. An almost imperceptible throb reached their ears.

"Paddles or motor?"

"Queer," said Luke Merrill, a tawny bearded man. "There're no natives around here, so that must have been a rifle shot and a motor."

"That's no motor," dissented Donald McGrae. "Vibration on water, I'm thinkin'," and added glancing up, "she'll be breakin' soon? Better go look see. Babijaan!"

Babijaan, a slender Bahima, who resembled rather a Greek god in ebony than a baboon, came running in the downpour from a lean-to and was told to go and bail out the boat.

About half an hour later the humid gloom lessened as if someone had lighted up beyond the veil. By the time they had squelched down the hillock to the tiny creek they had made in the swamp, the tropical sun was blazing again. For a few moments they could not distinguish anything on the vast expanse of lake to the horizon. Then Donald with his binoculars picked up a dot which they decided was either a floating log or a capsized canoe.

The "boat" was a couple of largish native dug-outs coupled by lashed beams with a space between and an outboard motor fixed to the after-pole as auxiliary, a kind of catamaran with a mast and a bit of lug-sail, which was serviceable enough to potter around the shore in search of flies, fish and botanical specimens.

As they chugged slowly toward the object a mile out, it was seen to be a capsized canoe with a protuberance which they took at first to be a fisherman's calabash. Nearer in they made out the bald head of a white man who appeared to be clinging with one hand to the wreck. Cautiously they ran the two prows of the catamaran on each side of the canoe, the better to get purchase to hoist the man aboard.

"The devil," muttered Donald as he bent over the fellow, remarking that the bald pate, face and body visible were a mass of wet caked blood from thousands of scratches apparently.

The hand was not clinging, but had been caught in some cordage of the broken mast of the canoe on its beam ends, just holding the head above water. The man was stark naked. They heaved him inboard.

He was just alive. He had been shot in the back, a slanting wound. Donald forced a few drops of brandy from his flask into the mouth. The man stirred and opened his eyelids, which were swollen and inflamed. The lips moved. Luke stooped to catch what he said, but only sibilant sounds emerged. The eyes were imploring. More faint hissing. He went limp. He was dead. On the right temple was a wound partially covered with dirty gauze.

"My Lordy," said Luke, "he must have been shot in the head, too, but it can't be a bullet or he'd have had his brains blown out!"

"Maybe, but where's the man come from? And who was the rapscallion who shot him in the back? And for why? He must have had a motor to get out of sight in half an hour!"

THEY examined the capsized canoe, a small dug-out such as fishermen use. Attached to a bamboo as a sail was a length of bark cloth with a slit in the center. There were no paddles floating around, so that must have been his only method of progress, steering with his hands. In the canoe naturally there was nothing that could tell a story.

"Wonder what nationality he was?" queried Luke. "Round skull might be Alpine type: French, German, Austrian. But his face is in such a mess that you can't make a good guess. Looks as if he'd been dragged through a cactus corral. If only we'd caught a single word it might have given a clue—who he was or where he came from."

"I can figure that out, I'm thinkin'," said Donald slowly. "Possibly he knew he was going, ye ken. Just naturally he'd think o' his killer, maybe try to give his name or where he came from."

"Reckon that's sound," agreed Luke. "But that doesn't get us any forrader."

"Aye, but it does. Those sibilants—what would they suggest as a word? Tsetse—the name of the island, mon, in the middle of the loch!"

"But that's been abandoned for years. Natives and planters were chased out by the tsetse fly, they said."

"Oh, aye, they said!"

"Well, then, suppose this fellow did sail from Tsetse Island—that's about fifty miles north. But why shouldn't he have come from the mainland?"

"For why would the man take to water where he could be seen miles away. For why—onless he was a feckless goof!"

"But this other guy who shot him—how'd he get gas?"

"Don't know."

Luke glanced at his partner. Grinned.

"You reckon we'd go see?"

"Oh aye, go look," assented the South African Scot.

II

"THERE she spouts—whatever it is!" exclaimed Luke, pointing to the north where filmy tree tops smudged the horizon under the sinking sun. "Why," he added, raising his glasses, "there's an eagle away beyond the island! Look, high up!"

"No, no," replied Donald, after taking a look through his binoculars. "That's no eagle around these parts. It must be the Transport plane from the Coast to the Kilo Mines in the Belgian Congo. They used to bring stuff to the railhead, ye ken, and away over the Uganda plateau and the Balegga hills by porters, a month's trek and more, but these have been running, I've heard tell, these years back."

The unfortunate had had to be buried, the catamaran loaded with provisions and gear, the little motor overhauled and petrol checked. Of the latter they had barely enough for fifty miles, and as the prevailing breeze was from the northeast and the catamaran could only sail with the wind astern, or at best on the quarter, they would have to use gas all the way, and at that could not make more than about four miles an hour. They would have to sail home.

As space was limited they could only ship two reliable boys, Babijaan and a Shangani, with a face like a gargoyle whom the Scot's pawky sense of humor had dubbed "Beauty." They had started at dawn.

As they chugged in toward the shore they searched with their binoculars for any signs of human habitation but found none; nor over the trees of what appeared to be dense jungle, was there any smoke visible. They selected a tiny bay sheltered from the day breeze which was already dying. There was no beach, for the roots grew out of the lake water like impatient fingers.

"My Lordy," commented Luke with a slight laugh, "we'll be a pretty fine pair of suckers if we've come this far to find a pre-Robinson Crusoe island!"

"But then where did that guy come from?" demanded Donald.

"And where did t'other guy go to?" mocked Luke.

"He'd gang away home," declared the Scot, a bit testily as he moved his cramped body, "if he had any sense at all, the gowk! Where'll we be landing, Luke? There's nobbut a wee bit of sun."

"Maybe we'd better lie offshore till daylight. We can't make camp in the dark in this jungle."

"No, no, I'm for a wee bit rest after this crazy Noah's coffin. I can scarcely move me hinderparts at all!"

As they argued, Luke cut off the motor and the prows of the catamaran struck an outlying root just as the sun took a dive, as it appears to do on the equator, and darkness came like the switching off of an electric lamp.

The torch showed a tangle of weeds and roots. Began the familiar hum of mosquitoes. At the first step Donald's boot sank in mud and slime.

"Bide here, Luke," he called. "I'll fossick around till I find earth."

Within ten yards he found it; seemingly solid ground with not much undergrowth.

The boys tied the catamaran to a root and brought ashore some canned food and blankets. They decided to stop just where they were until dawn.

With a sigh of relief Donald had sprawled on a blanket with his head against a tree trunk, gingerly stretching his stiff body as he lighted a pipe. With a muttered curse he flung down the mosquito net he was handling. At the same moment Luke growled:

"Ants, darn it!"

Then came squawks simultaneously from the two boys.

In the beam of the torch their black legs were covered with ants—not just a few marauders, but regiments of them. A flash

around the ground revealed that the earth was swarming on every side.

"My Lordy," exclaimed Luke irritably, brushing off hundreds from his trousers, "I've never seen anything like it! We seem to have set right in an ants' nest."

"Aie! Aie!" yelped the boys, "they have mouths of fire, *bwana!*"

The insects were biting voraciously, some kind of "warrior" ants of giant size.

"Emshi! Upesi! (Out of it! Quickly!)" ordered Luke and telling the boys to bring the goods, strode inland a few yards, examining the ground. On what seemed a clear spot he paused. The boys, hurriedly dragging the gear, followed cursing and slapping their legs as they scurried. As Donald joined them, Beauty exclaimed:

"But, *bwana,* look, look, they're more and more!"

Here too the ground as if by magic began to swarm with ants.

GETTING under the white men's pants and sleeves they began to bite ankles and wrists. In a few seconds the whole party was dancing, slapping their limbs and trying to brush off the climbing insects as if they had all gone mad.

"No use," gasped Luke angrily, "we'll have to go back to the darned boat for the night until we can see what we're doing!"

As he turned, switching the torch, he stopped; stared.

Clear in the beam was what seemed an ape, but it had a shining hairless face mouthing at him. A glimpse of an arm and the chest proved that it was human. Then it vanished.

The boys just dropped everything and fled; hopped and jumped madly for the canoe. As they passed the first spot the whole ground was seething with ants. Almost in a panic, they reached the catamaran, whites as well as blacks. The latter, moaning with the pain of the countless bites, oblivious of possible crocodiles, plunged into the lake to free themselves from the crawling horrors.

Presently as the two men sat in the canoe rubbing their bites with vaseline, Luke said cautiously, "Did you see that—thing, whatever it was, Donald?"

"Aye, I saw it—if ye saw the same as I did—and the boys saw it too."

"Well," replied Luke, as if still uncertain whether he had seen what evidently the others had seen, "I thought it was a native, but it seemed to have no top to the head. Is that what you saw? And it wasn't an ape because the face had no hair—was perfectly smooth."

"Hairless ape."

"Don't exist."

"But they may. For why not?"

"Improbable—" Luke interrupted himself. "Did you notice that—I mean the leg—was human, but the foot was right in the middle of the seething ants and I'm sure there wasn't a single one on the leg. They were milling all around it."

"Oh, aye," said Donald meditatively. "You's a mighty queer Robinson Crusoe, I'm thinkin'!"

The boys were clambering on board, having got rid of the pests. But scarcely were they in the canoe than they began shouting that the ants were attacking again.

"But they can't be," Luke was saying as he flashed the torch around. "My Lordy, they're boarding us!" and drawing his hunting knife he cut the painter on which the ants were swarming from the tree roots.

"Och," growled Donald, "will the beasties no give a man an hour's sleep? And what the devil's that? Look, man, it can't be the moon. She's no due for a while yet."

Over the center of the island had appeared a slight luminosity rather than a glow.

"Och, it must be the devil lighting his old pipe, ye ken!" and stretching his limbs as comfortably as possible he settled to sleep.

"I'll take watch till midnight, Donald," said Luke. "It's no use worrying about bugs or banshees till we get light. Good night."

III

THEY were floating a hundred yards off the island when the sun leaped like a salmon above the horizon, followed by the daily breeze more sedately. They had a better view of the island as a whole. The land rose slightly in the interior. Then they drew inshore and followed the coast north.

Given that the tragic refugee had procured a canoe on this island, there must surely be others; also if the mysterious mur-

derer had had a motor boat there should be some kind of inhabited bay or creek.

When the shadows were yet long the land began to fall away to the east, indicating the top of the island. As they veered, Beauty pointed to a point where he said was a river.

"River!" scoffed Donald. "And what would a river be doing in a wee island not eight miles long?"

There was a break in the forest near the spot indicated. As they approached, Donald swatted something on his sleeve.

"The wee beasties 're still here, I'm thinkin'," and he added as he examined a gray-winged insect about the size of a horse fly: "The *glossine palpalis,* sure enough. I wish we'd had a look at the old man to see whether he'd been infected or no. We'd have known whether there were folk here or no."

No river was there, but an abandoned clearing half grown over by the vegetation of years; rotted remnants of piles that once had been a jetty; a few mouldered canoes—but the runaway might have found a sound one.

They landed on a weedy beach. Several of the tsetse flies were swirling about. Flying sleeping sickness by day and flying malaria by night made a pleasant land.

At about twenty paces on hard terrain Luke stopped to point out the sagged roof tree of a large hut in an undergrowth of saplings, or maybe it had been a bungalow. As he turned, he glanced down.

"My Lordy, this can't be another darned ants' nest!"

But about their feet they were swarming, big fellows with nippers like tiny lobsters. The boys had spotted them and hung back on the shore. As the white men stamped to shake off the insects they crunched hundreds, so thick were they.

"Wait! No, no, get back!" said Luke. "I've got an idea!"

He ran inland. The undergrowth grew thicker as he advanced. Forty yards farther on, he stopped to scuff the earth.

"Still going strong!" he called and plowed ahead for another forty yards. Meanwhile Donald had skipped back among the boys. Presently they heard a bellow; saw Luke emerge from dense bush and come racing for the beach as if trying to break the hundred yards record. Panting and clothes black with sweat, he paused to recover breath.

"This just can't be another nest. It's a belt about a hundred yards wide—simply lousy with them. Must run right along the shore—all round the island apparently. Never seen nor heard of anything like it. Darn the flies, too! How anybody could live on this blasted island beats me."

"Aye, down south I've seen the like," said Donald. "But not the same species—termites which eat up everything, and man, there're too many of the bodies to stop even with boiling water, pitch or fire!"

"We could get through by running," reflected Luke, "but we must have food and cover and ammunition. We don't yet know what we're up against. But I'm damned sure the boys won't stand for walking through with loads. If only we had ammonia and something to make a paste—"

"Oh aye, but there's no drug store around."

"But emmets or no emmets, if there's folk in the darned place there must be a port somewhere. We'll go around the point and look see."

"But the gas is runnin' short, man."

"Doesn't matter. Once we get around we can sail down the east side with the nor'easterly breeze."

They re-embarked, Donald growling:

"I mind me a dopper Boer who took in more than a drap of dop, an' traipsed out over the veldt, and he must have fallen down on one of those nesties. All they found of the lad was a skeleton picked clean! If I hadn't seen yon poor lad and the way he was chawed I wouldn't believe there was a body living on the island."

"What gets me is the hairless monkey or whatever it was, with no brow, that the ants left alone. Darned queer," commented Luke, who was scanning the island with binoculars. "You take a look, Donald. Right on the topmost line of the trees there seems to be a branch sticking out, but the thing's moving; seems to be going up and down all the time."

"Oh aye, it's there and it's no there. Have you ever been in Holland?"

"Me? No. Why?"

"Aweel, if you'd ever seen a Dutch windmill over the horizon, that's what it

would look like as the arms go around."

"Windmills in Africa? Blah!" scoffed Luke. "Donald, you're going crackers!"

"I didn't say it was. I said 'twas what it would look like."

THEY swung around off to the east side. Donald was shaking the last petrol can anxiously when Babijaan gave a shout and pointed. Not far offshore, less than half a mile, were two canoes, seemingly stationary as if they were fishing. But as Luke swept them into the vista of the glasses, paddles flashed in the sun and both began scurrying for shore.

The whites could do nothing to jazz the asthmatic motor. The men and canoes vanished. Luke had half expected to find another abandoned clearing, but the jungle came right down to the water's edge. They hunted for traces of where the canoes had been dragged ashore. Then where the forest appeared even thicker they spotted a half-felled tree, so cut that the top drooped towards the earth, a perfect camouflage at a distance to cover a passage of water.

They grounded the prows of the catamaran on the edge and peered up a leafy tunnel between the big trees which, about twenty yards farther on, turned to the south. This canal was about two yards broad and they found by sounding with the oar, at least three feet deep, large and deep enough to float a fair-sized canoe.

"Yon's where the guy with the motor launch passed if I'm no a cockaleekie!" declared Donald. "And Luke, man, there's wide, open spaces beyont, I'm thinkin'. Look how the colors fade!"

"Guess you're right. If it hadn't been for those fishermen we'd never have spotted this hideout. Bit of luck!"

"Oh aye," agreed Donald. "No wimmen nor wars were won without a bit o' luck about the house!"

"Maybe, but luck won't get the catamaran up this canal. We'll have to cut her in half and paddle. And that's that for the ants!"

In less than an hour they had dismantled the catamaran; stowed the motor and other unwanted gear in the starboard canoe. In the other there was not enough room for the four, but in any case one would have to stay behind as a guard. Beauty did not like the job, and showed it.

"If you see or hear anything to frighten you, clear out and lie offshore," Luke told him in Kiswahili.

With Babijaan as bow and Luke as stroke, being the heaviest, they shoved off into the canal. Twenty feet up they paused while Luke probed the earth with his paddle a little beyond the water edge. Sure enough, ants began to swarm.

The canal wound among the trees in a steamy stench of rotting vegetation and the dim flashes of bright wings. The greeny blue twilight of the jungle lessened; glare glimmered ahead. Beyond the curtain of forest the sun blazed on open water.

The two whites got out to reconnoiter. Peering through from the jungle edge they saw that the canal debouched into what was a small lake, or artificial reservoir, about fifty yards across and fifty in width. On the far side were huts, well built long ones with streets between in which were planted avenues of banana plants.

"Man," exclaimed Donald, "the devils have gotten a wee dorp, an' look, man, over the houses—there's your moving tree from Dunsinana!"

Away beyond the roofs were the sails of a windmill turning with the trade breeze.

"Sure is," assented Luke, who was peering about with the glasses. "Seems set on a hillock. But what would those things be, I wonder, scattered about the far end of the pond, those funnel-like contraptions? And judging by the roofs there must be some far bigger houses beyond. Doesn't seem anybody about. Looks more like a deserted gold town way back. Yes, there's someone moving across the far end of the street. The whole outfit looks like a Government set-up if it warn't for the monkey business and murdered bald pate. Wonder what's become of the fisher lads?"

"Mebbe just reported a passing canoe, ye ken, or maybe said nix."

"That's so. Anyway I guess we'd better hide out till later and carry on by moonlight. Whole shebang smells phony to me."

They hauled the canoe into thick bush, ruffling the undergrowth to try to cover the tracks. They ate, drank and dozed during the heat. The settlement remained lethargic.

"Queer," remarked Luke once, during the sweltering afternoon, "the darned flies don't seem so thick here."

IV

LUKE laid a hand on Donald's ankle; held a warning finger as he looked up. Keen ears caught the swish of grass. They had flattened out a space where they had made temporary camp. Leaves of light undergrowth beneath the trees swayed.

A face peeked around a trunk, hairless but like an ape's, the replica of the mystery man of the previous night. There were many, for the bush quivered in a half-circle. Luke, conscious of the adjacent settlement, whispered to Babijaan:

"*Hapana bunduki* (no gun)!"

He seized his own rifle by the barrel, and Donald followed suit. The faces multiplied. They rushed, knives in hand. The whites and the boy rose to meet them.

Luke swung his rifle butt. Knocked out three like cracking coconuts. Donald smashed the skulls of two others. Babijaan got one and another slashed his ribs as he twisted and struck sideways. The last turned to run. Donald flung his rifle and tripped him; jumped, captured him. Panting, he brought him back alive.

"The devil's no monkey, I'm thinkin'," said he, wiping sweat from his eyes.

The others lay where they had fallen. They were evidently natives of a local tribe. The frontal bone of the brow had been removed giving the horrible apelike appearance.

Donald spoke in Kiswahili to his prisoner. The fellow, who seemed dazed or indifferent, did not comprehend. Babijaan translated in Wahima. The man understood.

The reply was a weird hooting noise as he opened his mouth.

"Man!" exclaimed Donald, "but the poor devil's got no tongue!"

Babijaan, holding his blood-streaming ribs, stared in horror.

"No native could have done this," said Luke. "This is a skilled surgeon's job. Ask him where he's come from," he told Babajaan. "He can point anyway."

The man understood; he pointed to the settlement, to the coast, mimed stabbing, and then to earth.

"Clear enough. They were sent to look for us, probably on the fishermen's report, apparently murdered Beauty, and trailed us back here. And d'you notice his eyes?" he added, peering down into the man's face.

"Oh, aye, he's no very intelligent, I'm thinkin', an' he looks as if he had no soul at all, the poor creature."

"Sure, if he kept his soul in the front of his head he hasn't!"

He told Babijaan to order the creature to sit down; he sat. To stand; he stood. There were no normal signs of fear, anxiety, curiosity in the eyes. Two of the others moaned and squatted. They had only been stunned. They also had no tongues; obeyed in the same mechanical way. Luke and Donald watched them.

"Extraordinary," commented Luke at last. "I don't know about souls, but they seem to have no minds; just like Zombies—I guess they must look and act like that."

"But the poor wee creatures—for they're no human—tracked us here from the coast and attacked."

"Sure, but so would a trained dog!"

"But a dog, man, would know fear—affection and hate. But did you notice when they attacked they were no more ferocious than a lamb. There was no lust to kill in his eyes when he waved his dirk, man, I mind well!"

"Sure I did. And darned if I think that they'll need hog-tying. I don't believe they'll move unless someone tells them to!"

As they were talking, the long shadows on the lake leaped into night; a galaxy of lights flashed as the sun plumb dived.

"My Lordy," exclaimed Luke, "electricity!"

"And for why else would they be wanting yon Dutch mill? We must bide for the moon, I'm thinkin'. She's nigh due."

IN THE lighted streets across the water was sudden activity; people scurrying as if a movie crowd had just come out. Then the watchers saw well beyond the village a sudden subdued glare and simultaneously heard a low hum which grew louder and louder in a strangely familiar way.

"My Lordy, a plane!" ejaculated Luke as a roar came over the forest. "And that's a lighted field waiting for him, or I'm a Dutch frau!"

The plane came over low, and after circling, cut out, and disappeared toward the glare.

"Oh aye, I know the game well," said Donald. "Running stuff under cover of the Kilo Mines transport! Easy for a machine to swerve south in the night, drop her goods—labeled 'machinery,' most likely; a trick as old as any smuggler!—and continue on to her chartered destination! Och, man, but yon whoosh stirs my blood to the cockles of my heart! Man, but I'd give a lot for a hand on the joy stick once more."

"Didn't know you were an airman, Donald," said Luke surprisedly.

"Oh aye, years ago it was," admitted Donald casually "but who the devil are these folk and for why?"

"Search me! But it's time we were hiking. Best cross the water before the moon rises. But what will we do with these fellows? I'll bet my last pair of pants they'll do whatever we tell 'em just as they would their bosses—whoever they are! Tell them" Luke instructed Babijaan, "to push our canoe into the canal and wait for us with theirs."

"Indio, bwana," said Babijaan, and jabbered at the uninjured man. Even as Luke had guessed they obeyed instantly; neither willingly nor unwillingly, just obeyed as if they were machines reacting to electrical impulses.

"Man," whispered Donald, "but they're no human."

They skirted the edge of the forest and then struck across for a spot out of the glare of the street lights. Their strange recruits followed docilely. They landed near a tiny jetty alongside which was moored a small speedboat. Cautious use of a hand-cupped torch revealed that she was three-quarters built-in and electrically driven.

"Charge batteries instead of oil to store," commented Luke. "That wasn't a motor we heard but the throbbing of the propellers."

"Aye," said Donald, "he must have caught the poor man, for he could only sail before the wind."

Suddenly the lights in the streets went out. Had they been discovered, or had the current failed? The glow of lights in the direction of the windmill continued. Then on the sultry air they caught the sound of a passage from the opera, "Aida." The music ceased and a voice began talking.

"Thought it was a recording," remarked Luke, "but of course with electricity they'd have a receiving set and probably a transmitter too."

As soon as they had landed, the queer natives made horrible hoots, pointing to their mouths. But it was not the absence of tongues they meant, for they champed their jaws, indicating hunger.

As they made off, a huge moon was rising over the eastern trees. In the dim light the whites could follow the scurrying forms up one of the streets. At the top was a kind of square seemingly, and a long, low roof like an open market. One of them switched on a light revealing long tables and benches. On a near one were set out nine bowls of food, presumably left for the men on duty.

The three survivors squatted and began eating, making weird noises as if of pleasure. The emotion of satisfaction of hunger seemed to have remained intact. Voraciously they snatched at the spare bowls of food.

The buildings the party had passed on each side of the street were not huts or bungalows, as they had thought; each was a long barrack-dormitory. Evidently the traffic just after sunset had been the workmen coming in to dinner; apparently as soon as they had eaten—and quickly—they were herded to bed and the lights put out. Donald sniffed slightly.

"D'ye note that queer odor from the creatures, Luke? I mind when I was wrastlin' it almost stung my nostrils. I can't think what it is."

"Sure, but it's not a human smell either," agreed Luke. "Queer, too, they don't seem to need slave drivers or police. Just act mechanically. Let's leave 'em to it and go see."

They moved cautiously in moon shadow. What they had deemed a square was an avenue as broad as a boulevard with double lines of trees and banana plants. There was no sidewalk, but the roadway was built up and had gutters, deep ones to take tropical rain floods.

On each side were larger buildings with thatched roofs neatly trimmed and higher and flatter, lying back behind banks of European flowering plants, roses, jasmine, nasturtiums grown giant size; each had a broad veranda before glassless windows, lightless.

Farther was a glare of lights. As they approached, the sound of chatter became

distinct. It came from the wide veranda of a lighted house where people were seated at a long table as if on the terrace of a French hotel. The intruders halted in the shade as near as they dared; used the binoculars.

There were some forty men present. Most of them wore beards; some full and others goatee. The man at the head of the table had a round white face, was clean shaven and bald, with peculiar ears pointed like a bat; had no spectacles, and was standing making gestures as if toasting someone. Presently he raised a glass; the whole company stood emitting what seemed at that distance a grunt.

"Quite a party!" whispered Luke. "Or is it a Board Meeting? What gets me is that there's no sign of a net and I haven't heard the buzz of a single mosquito. And d'you notice that strange odor—no, not that acrid smell, another, seems herby and not at all disagreeable. It isn't the flowers either."

"Aye," assented Donald. "But I'm asking what would yon lard-headed galoot be yammering about? I've a mind to hear. Bide a wee, Luke."

Stooping, Donald began to edge closer in shadow. Just as he was near the beginning of the veranda on the opposite side of the road and within earshot apparently, Luke, watching the party through the binoculars, noticed a red light suddenly appear above their heads. Instantly every man dived from sight under the table. Simultaneously he heard a scuffling of feet and Donald's voice exclaiming:

"Och, ye loons!"

His dim form had been swallowed by a mass of figures struggling in shadow. Luke drew his gun. He dared not fire, as he could not distinguish clearly. A black body hurtled into the moonlit roadway. Then they all disappeared, apparently into the house which cast the shadow.

Luke shrank down; waited.

The red light had gone. The crowd on the veranda had risen; seemed to be continuing their festivities. The red light must have been a signal warning which had put the police, or whatever they were, into action.

"Not so dumb, but not so bright," reflected Luke, "for they've overlooked me!" He had touched Babijaan's arm and told him to follow when a new movement caught his eye.

To Luke's astonishment, Donald walked right into the road. Luke snapped up the glasses. Evidently the Scot was not hurt although his shirt was torn to ribbons and his hair rumpled. Halfway across, he shot up his hand, turned the palm back and front again. That was no "come on" sign," Luke interpreted, but rather, hold everything.

Then to Luke's further amazement the chairman, whoever he was, rose and bowed to Donald as he reached the veranda.

Evidently he was formally introducing him to the company, who rose and bowed, too. Then Donald took a seat.

Luke sat back on his hunkers to figure this out. The red light stunt had suggested traffic lights; possibly these people, having electricity at their disposal, had fixed a cordon around this house—City Hall maybe!—which when trodden on made contact and gave the warning. Guess he's all right for the moment, Luke conceded with a grin as he saw Donald lifting a glass, but I'd best do some—what would Donald call it?—fossicking!

Followed by Babijaan Luke backed away from the electric cordon line and sought to find a means of getting around to the other side of the big house. Farther down, as they were evidently occupied with the stranger, he risked a dash across the moon-flooded boulevard, pretty well sheltered by the trees and bananas.

The house proved to be far bigger than he had supposed, for it had two wings, evidently enclosing a courtyard or quad. He wondered what it contained, but feared to approach too near lest he contact the cordon.

As no one appeared to be around he boldly continued on in the moonlight. Behind the building, built apparently on the model of a university or a hospital, was open land, an artificial glade into the forest about a mile long. The surface had been meticulously levelled and was of stamped cow dung, the native method of flooring, which made a splendid tarmac.

On either side at intervals were floodlights; and scarcely a hundred yards away was the glint of the plane. Again he was struck by the conjunction of the absence of mosquitoes, and the presence of that curious herby odor.

Slowly he began to walk towards the rear of the building planning to put the electric cordon out of function. He supposed that the line would be concealed, or protected, in some kind of a sheath just below the surface of the ground; probably not more than a couple of feet broad calculated to trap the ordinary pace length.

At length he detected a spot where the earth had recently been disturbed; scratching gently he discovered some kind of material casing. Explaining to Babijaan that he must not step on the magic line they both jumped high and wide; then ran for the shadow of the nearest building. Nothing happened.

LUKE began to explore the courtyard. The wing had numerous windows, open and glassless. Within was a glow from a night light, a wick placed in a small calabash of oil—maybe they were short of small bulbs—revealing a line of beds, bare affairs of four legs of sawn palm trunks and mattresses of interlaced reims on which lay silent forms with the heads bandaged. The place seemed to be a hospital.

He counted twenty beds. Beyond a partition was another room, small, with one bed and one light. As he peered trying to make out the contents, the form on the bed stirred. He saw that he had a beard; must therefore be a white man. The fellow sighed heavily.

"What's wrong, brother?" Luke asked.

"Ah!" The body made a convulsive movement as if trying to rise. After a pause the voice said, enunciating carefully:

"You spik Engleesh?"

"Sure. What's wrong?"

"I am Professeur Bouin and dey wanna —how you say?—op'rate? I cannot ex-plain, but weel you help, please?"

"Sure. What can I do?"

"I am stringed up. Dey do not want me to go, you unnerstan', because anoder man he run away. Weel you please to cut me loose?"

Luke straddled the low window-sill, drawing his hunting knife. With the torch he saw a pallid, bearded face with bright, black eyes under the bandages about his forehead which somehow reminded him of the hole in the head of the man in the canoe. He lifted the bark-cloth cover. The body was naked and bound with reims to the bedstead. He cut them and the fellow sat up stiffly.

"In one moment I weel be good, yes?" He swung his legs to the floor; stood up; made a pace. "Yes, yes," he murmured joyfully, "et ees all right. Now save me, please!"

"Sure," agreed Luke with a half laugh. "But I guess I've got to save myself and a buddy of mine who's having a party with a bunch of toughs in the front. Who are they?"

"Ah, yes, eet ees the night of the meeting. They are *Messieurs*—" He strung out a freight train of a German word.

"'Fraid I don't get that."

"Eet ees—how you say? *La Société pour l'Amélioration de la Race Humaine.*" . . . .

"The Betterment of Mankind! Crazy, eh?"

"How you know? Dey are devil, I did not know when I come to help, me, *professeur de la Sorbonne* and now—dey—" He waved his hands under emotion.

"Listen. Hadn't we better get a move on? Anybody likely to come look what you're doing?"

"No, *les crapules*, dey not come. Dey sleep, *les infirmières*, because dey know I am stringed up, yes, so eet ees all right. But I need someting vair bad? Dere in what you say hole in wall, yes? Ees a bottle."

Luke took a bottle of brandy from the cupboard and two glasses, for he was quite willing to drink the little man's health.

"So what now?"

"I weel tell you—all. But I want to make my leg walk."

SLOWLY at first he began to pace the room as he talked rapidly and not very clearly, as he tended to choke with angry excitement, but Luke understood that he was a professor of physiology who had joined the Society in Paris, a Society which he had been led to believe was devoted to—what it said it was—but that he had discovered out here that it was political and was imbued with the crazy notions of superman stuff intent on dividing mankind into slaves and the master race by physiological means.

A Polish scientist had discovered a way of removing undesirable emotions by a surgical operation; could deprive a man of all initia-

tive, the will to choose, without impairing other faculties, so that he became a submissive servant to the masters' will.

They had experimented on natives and made them just industrious ants, toiling but having no desires save hunger; knowing neither fear nor affection. Thus could they arrange the world when the millennium came—and that was near, they said.

For him he refused to work for such ideas of hell, so they were about to operate on him to remove these "subversive ideas." "To take 'me' away—do you understand?—cut out my soul!" The man almost screamed, "And leave my brains, yes, to work for them! 'Ere, 'ere!" he cried, touching the side of his temple, "dey make a 'ole, yes, and dey cut nerves jus' enough not to take away the frontal lobe to make slaves!"

Reminded of the hole in the other victim's head, Luke inquired about him.

"Ah! Ah! Eet ees sad," lamented the little professor, outstretching his hands. "De signor Italian we tink 'e get free. Dey make de first op'ration and when 'e ees in bed 'e run way an' steal canoe. I dunno. Wonnerful man, 'e make stuff chase mosquito. Dey pump dat all over de place and den no more mosquito, ony nice smell!"

AS THE Frenchman gabbled, Luke imagined the flight of the Italian scientist; how he had managed to slit the bark-cloth cover to make a primitive shirt, the floundering through the jungle, the torture he must have suffered battling with the ants to get the old canoe, make a mast and then sacrifice his only protection against the sun to have a sail, and the horror of the voyage, naked, bitten, and bleeding and roasted, to be foully shot in the back just before he reached possible safety.

"But how did they fix that ant barrier?"

"Ah! Dey devil! When I come I tink dey wunnerful! Dey exp'riment wit ants and dey sow pupae all round island to keep *indigene*—black man—not come look and dey tell white man. White tink island no good, ony tsetse and ants. Same Italian man 'e entomologist 'e make stuff chase tsetse. Grand savant yet dey cut 'is 'ead jus' same cos 'e 'ave what dey call bad thoughts to take 'em away."

Luke described the first native they had met in the jungle.

"Same man. 'E inoculated, yes? Wit same ting 'e make from ant cos slave 'ave to work outside, you unnerstan'? But some time some ting go wrong, yes? And 'e go wha you call crazy—amok, yes? and steal gun and try to shoot everybodies."

"That got 'em scared, I guess, and they fixed that electric warning system? But who were the big blacks who got my partner?"

"Dey Nubian *askaris.*"

"Fishermen must have reported natives offshore, so they sent slaves instead of police, eh?"

"Yes, please," continued the professor, not understanding. "Ony men 'lowed gun, but tell 'em not shoot—better catch live for —for what you call *cobaye?*"

"Guinea pigs to experiment on—the pleasant beasts!"

"Dey wanna make fact'ries all over world, make slaves by cutting 'eads of your bruvver, my bruvver. Dey say mus' 'ave slave in world so bes' 'ave slave 'oo dunno 'e ees slave, more better dan slave 'oo know 'e ees slave. No! No! No!" The small man's voice shrilled, then dropped to a startling calm as he added as if casually, "Now, *m'sieu,* you come 'elp me an' we do justice, yes?"

"You bet your sweet life we will. They're raving madmen if ever there were in all history."

"And how you save me please?"

"Darned if I know—yet," admitted Luke. "I've got to get my partner out of hock first."

"What ees 'is profession, please?"

"Well, he's a botanist, ornithologist, entomologist and piscat—"

"Entomologist! Oh, *mon Dieu,* dat is exactly what dey want to take place signor Italian! And *m'sieu?*"

"Oh, I guess I'm just a colleague."

"Oie! Dey weel be delighted to 'ave *m'sieu!*"

"You're telling me!" Luke laughed. "Now just when does that plane usually leave—for Kilo, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes, Congo Belge 'e mus' be dere before morning so nobody see 'im leave island."

"Good. Then we must get a move on. I want to see what Donald, that's my partner's name is doing."

"Yes, yes, *m'sieu*, I show you. We go troo Lecture 'all."

"Okay. But," added Luke with a grin, "don't you think you'd better put your pants on?"

"Oh, pardon, *m'sieu*, a tousand time. I am forgot." But just as he had one leg in the pants he ejaculated, "Oh, *mon Dieu, le médicin de nuit* (the night doctor)!"

LOOMING in the rush light in the doorway was a youngish, round face wearing spectacles. The partially bald head was turned, revealing the tell-tale scars on the left temple of one who had had his "subversive ideas" removed.

Instantly the fellow had taken in the situation; stepped inside, calling a guttural order.

As Luke's revolver came up a huge black Nubian rushed, seemingly indifferent to his weapon. Luke recalled that they had had orders to capture alive to secure fresh specimens and, knowing that a shot would alarm the gang, deftly grabbed his gun by the barrel and hit with the butt.

Now a Negro's skull is nigh twice as thick as a white man's. The blow struck slantingly as the man lowered his shoulders in the tackle.

The black hands darted around his waist, leaving the striking arm free. Luke brought up his knees on to the solar plexus dropping his gun; seized his assailant by the throat, pushing the thumb deep below the Adam's apple.

The black lifted him off his one foot, hugging him like a bear. Desperately Luke thrust with all his strength in the thumb on the windpipe; heard him choke; then kicking backwards with the free leg against the wall, felt the body sway.

The Nubian crashed on his back. The knee in his stomach knocked the rest of the breath out of him.

As Luke snatched his gun from the floor he caught a glimpse of Babijaan framed in the window. A gun flamed. Another Nubian behind him pitched forward. A third Negro grimaced in the doorway, gun in hand. Luke had no option; he blew the man's brains out.

The small professor and the doctor stood against the wall as if they were dumbfounded spectators. As the last slumped to the floor spewing blood and gray matter, Luke jumped to the window as Babijaan clicked the magazine of his rifle; pointed down the runway where the plane resembling a monstrous tsetse fly glinted in the neon-like light of the moon.

"Run and hold the magic bird!" he told him in rapid Kiswahili. "Let no man come near until we come! Slay silently any there!"

As Babijaan fled like a black antelope, Luke wheeled; ignoring the will-less doctor. He seized the professor by the arm; dragged him into the corridor.

"Quick! The way through!"

The Frenchman, jerked into action, ran nimbly along the passage and into a largish room, full of tables and bookshelves, half-lighted from the veranda. Amid an excited jabbering, Luke heard Donald's voice.

A glance showed that half the members of the queer society were bunched at one end of the long table; some were dumbfounded spectators, others in a drunken stupor. At the other end the bat-eared president was yelling something, and Donald, in the remnants of his shirt, was shouting some advice about the best way of entering hell, apparently, in broad South African Scotch. A fair youngster slipped down the steps and raced away along the avenue just as Luke fired in the air to attract attention.

Donald turned; saw Luke.

"Och, man," he shouted, "but I'm glad to see you. These misbegotten cockleleekies would be having us for guinea pigs, ye know—"

As he, at the same time, made a step toward his partner, the chairman and another man seized him calling in guttural German.

Donald caught up the first by the shoulders and hurled him at the other. They both fell amid a clatter of bottles and glasses.

In the sudden silence Luke roared a threat to kill anyone who moved. No one budged; the president and the other man lay inert among the debris.

"Quick, Donald," warned Luke. "There's a bunch of blacks coming up the road. Follow me!"

As he turned he spotted Bat-ears make a dive for his pocket; Luke fired, smashing the arm.

They disappeared into the house. Clamor broke again on the veranda. As they ran

through the quad, Luke saw a white-clad young man racing up the runway toward the plane. A crowd of blacks were swarming around one wing of the house. They began firing wildly.

As the two loped across the tarmac the airman disappeared behind the plane. Luke could not see Babijaan; sprinted. Several more shots zipped closer.

Luke neared the plane. Babijaan appeared, dragging the fair young pilot whom he had clubbed as he sought to enter his machine.

Donald hopped into the cockpit; switched on the lights, turned on the petrol. As he ran over the instruments, Luke and Babijaan turned to shoot at the approaching Nubians.

A small, panting figure arrived, gasping, "*M'ssieurs—les Professeurs*—you me 'ave forgot!"

And the engines roared into action.

Later on, Luke reached a vital decision—scientific expeditions for insects, birds and the like were fine, but the deeper and more devious reaches of science, they would never be for him.

The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Continued from page* 4)

The Mile

"MILE MIRACLE" in this issue reminds us of the last time we saw Jack Scholz, its author. It was too many months ago, but we remember it well because we had a grand time fanning over sports with him.

This department recalls, among other things, sitting with Jack in Paul Pilgrim's picture-lined office up at the New York Athletic Club. Pilgrim directs the athletic programs for the A. C. now and, like Scholz, is a former Olympic champion. Paul Pilgrim knocked off his middle distance laurels in 1906 (in the 400 and 800 meter runs) and Jack Scholz took the 200 in 1924. Nineteen twenty-four and '06 aren't exactly last year, but you'd never know it to look at these men. This department would hate to race either of them for a pound of butter over the hundred even with a 30-yard advantage!

Later on, as you might guess, discussions of sports focused down to track. Foot racing, in all probability man's earliest form of sport, is quite naturally Jack Scholz' favorite. We steered the talk around to the mile, that 5,280 feet of drive and endurance, of sprints and thrills, the main event at most meets, the big show that draws the big crowds.

A track man's approach to the four-minute-mile objective is different than the track fan's. The fan thinks in terms of "Who's going to do it?" and "When?" The runner is thinking of the molten lead that runs into his legs and the pressure that crushes his chest until he can't breathe down those last yards. He thinks in terms of time, that inexorable enemy of anyone so bold as to assault the four-minute mile.

The track man looks at the quarters; so much for this quarter, so much for the next. And if the runner takes the time of those 440 yards down to really interesting figures, will he still have enough kick left to finish on two feet!

It's personalities and fate to the fan. But it's mathematics to the runner.

Over 70 years ago Walter Slade of England ran the mile in the unheard-of speed of 4:24.5. London papers at that time commented wryly that perhaps the officials' timepieces were off—for obviously no human could travel that fast.

Then on a warm July day in 1944, sawed-off little Arne Anderson, the 29-year-old Swedish school teacher, ran the same distance in 4:01.6. That's 22.9 seconds lopped off in nearly three-quarters of a century! We're getting there.

So there's just the little matter of 1.6 seconds—less time than it takes you to strike a match—between us and that miracle, wonderful, impossible four-minute mile!

Of course there's nothing impossible about it. And with military trained and hardened athletes of many nations returning to the track, it's in the cards.

The pity is we can't know who's going to run it or when it'll happen. But happen it will. Mathematics says so!

Curioddities By Weill

IN THE AUGUSTAN AGE OF ROME ONE WAY OF PERFUMING A ROOM WAS TO DRENCH DOVES IN **PERFUME** *AND LET THEM FLY ABOUT*.

ALEXANDER HAMILTON WAS KILLED IN A DUEL WITH AARON BURR, VICE-PRESIDENT OF THE U.S. *AT THE SAME SPOT WHERE HIS ELDEST SON HAD FALLEN IN A DUEL* **3 YEARS BEFORE**.

ALTHOUGH THE YAK, BEAST OF BURDEN IN TIBET, IS ABOUT THE SAME SIZE AS A COW, IT GETS DOWN ICY MOUNTAIN SLOPES BY DRAWING ITS HOOFS TOGETHER AND SLIDING, *ALWAYS LANDING* **RIGHT SIDE UP!**

Even the Heat Couldn't Smother Red's Curiosity

TRACKS IN THE DUST

By GENE VAN

NO ONE ever denied it that there was a hotter place in the world than Arizona about mid-afternoon in the month of July. This particular day was an exception —it was hotter! Heat waves danced across the hot sands, and even the cactus seemed to wilt.

Down a narrow winding trail through sagebrush and mesquite rode two boys on a tall black horse. Red Harris and Little Pardner were used to the heat, but today they wished that they had taken Sheriff Spike Haslam's advice and stayed home. But no, they left early in the morning, seeking adventure in Mummy Canyon, and before mid-afternoon, they had emptied their canteen.

Hot and thirsty, they sought the nearest ranchhouse, which was a small spread owned and operated by Jud Gray. As they swung down the side of the hill, they could see the small ranchhouse situated back against the foot of the hill.

"It won't be long," said Red over his shoulder to Little Pardner, who was seated on the horse's rump, and holding onto Red's rope belt.

"I'm awful dry," sighed the youngster as he tried to wet his parched lips with a dry tongue.

"I'm dry, too," said Red, "but pretty soon we can get a good drink and fill our canteen, then we'll head for Ocotillo City."

"Good," grunted Little Pardner, "I'm awful tired, Red."

Red Harris sat erect in the saddle, his flat-crown Stetson pulled down over his red hair, and shading his blue eyes from the sun. His nose was straight, mouth wide, and his face was covered with freckles. Red was sixteen, but his slight build made him appear several years younger. He was dressed in overalls, a gray shirt, and his feet were bare.

Little Pardner was four years old, rolly-polly, with a moonlike face, small pug nose, large blue eyes, and a small mouth. He wore a battered old straw hat on his blond head, which was held in place with a whang-leather strap that fastened under his chin. He wore bib-overalls with a blue shirt, and on his small feet were worn tennis shoes.

These two boys were always together, in and out of trouble. They lived in Ocotillo City with Sheriff Spike Haslam, Little Pardner's father.

The officer had adopted Red, an orphan who had drifted into the country with an old prospector who later was murdered. Red acted as a guardian over Little Pardner.

Red swung his tall black horse, Diamond, through the brush at the foot of the hills until they reached the front of the Gray ranchhouse where they stopped. Everything seemed quiet about the place as Red slid to the ground. He dropped the reins, then

turned and assisted Little Pardner. Together they climbed up on the porch and went to the door where Red knocked loudly.

After several moments, with no reply, Red shrugged his narrow shoulders and looked down at Little Pardner.

"Reckon Gray's gone to town," he said. "Let's go out in back to the windmill and get a drink, and fill our canteen."

Red led Diamond around to the rear of the house and left him at a small watering trough, then he and Little Pardner walked over to the windmill where they found a spigot. They quenched their thirst, and filled the canteen. Red sat down in the cool shade of the water tank and sighed while Little Pardner moved about seeking his friends—any type of bug that moved.

"Hey!" called Red as the youngster scooted across the yard and around the house in pursuit of a lizard, then got to his feet and took out after Little Pardner. He grabbed Diamond's reins and led the refreshed horse to the front of the house. Red's eyes noted that a front door of the place was now open.

"Little Pardner!" he called. "Where are yuh?"

"I'm in here, Red," replied the youngster as he appeared in the doorway of the house.

"Don'tcha know yuh shouldn't go into anyone's house when they're not home!" snapped Red as he stepped up on the porch.

"Somebody's home," said Little Pardner.

"Who?" queried Red as he moved into the doorway. Little Pardner stepped back and pointed across the room. Red's eyes snapped wide!

Seated in a chair, and slumped forward across a crude table was a man. His head was twisted grotesquely to one side, and both arms were outstretched. As Red moved slowly forward, he noticed a pool of blood under the man's head.

"Jud Gray!" gasped Red as he stopped. Little Pardner grabbed Red's overalls and held on, his eyes filled with fright.

"Hurt, Red?" queried the youngster.

"Dead!" replied Red softly, as he took the youngster by the hand and led him outside, then he gently closed the door. "Whe-e-e-w-w-w!" he sighed, "this is bad, we gotta get the sheriff quick, Little Pardner."

"Uh-huh!" nodded the youngster.

As they stepped off the porch, Red's eyes studied the dust about the place. He saw boot-marks leading to and from the porch. They went to the hitchrack where he found more horses' tracks. Red boosted Little Pardner upon Diamond's rump, then he climbed into the saddle.

"Hold on tight," said Red "we're goin' to really travel."

He swung the black horse around and started down the narrow road toward Ocotillo City throwing a cloud of dust behind them.

"THE darn old fool, he's gettin' so irresponsible!" snorted Buck Ryan as he paced back and forth in the sheriff's office. "He's been late before bringin' in the stage, but never two hours. There isn't any reason for it!"

"Easy, Buck," cautioned Sheriff Spike Haslam, who was seated at his desk. Haslam was a big, red-faced man, with large eyes, a large nose, and wide mouth. "Somethin' might have happened."

"That's what I've been tryin' to tell myself," grunted Buck, "but I can't believe it. Jeep Carter's gettin' too old."

"That statement is wrong," said Geography Jones as he raised himself to one elbow on the cot and squinted at Ryan. "Any man who can accuse someone of stealin' cards ain't too old."

"Oh, that trouble!" snorted Buck. He shrugged his broad shoulders. Buck was a big, husky young man who owned the stage line between Ocotillo City and Copperville. "That wasn't much."

"Not much, eh?" snorted Geography as he sat up on the edge of the cot. "If Spike hadn't a-stepped in an' stopped it, either Jeep or Jud would have been dead by now. They was fightin' mad. Jeep claimed that Jud stole a king. No siree, Jeep ain't too old. He left the Fill 'Em Up Saloon swearin' that he'd get even with Jud if it was the last thing he'd ever do."

"Old fool talk!" snapped Buck.

"Here comes yore stage," grinned Haslam as he pointed out through the doorway. Ryan moved over in time to see the stage draw to a stop in front of the stage office which was next door to the sheriff's office.

Jeep Carter, small, wiry, climbed down

over the front wheel and looked around. He spotted Ryan, so he bow-legged his way over to him.

"Jeepers, but it's hot!" he exclaimed as he shoved his way into the sheriff's office.

"Where have yuh been?" demanded Buck.

"Been? I been driving that damn stage, that's where I've been," snorted Jeep. "What's eatin' yuh, Buck?"

"Yo're two hours late"

Jeep grinned and tugged at his shaggy mustache. "No use hurryin', is there? No passengers, an' this damn heat's bad for the horses. I seen a coyote at Twin Rocks an' took a shot at him."

Ryan sighed and started out of the office when he saw Red and Little Pardner dismounting in front of the office. He paused as the two boys hurried across the high boardwalk and shoved past him.

"Sheriff!" blurted Red breathlessly. "We —we just found Jud Gray—dead!"

"Huh?" gasped the sheriff as he leaned forward in his chair. "Yuh say yuh found Jud Gray dead—where?"

"We stopped by his ranch an'—" Red told the sheriff, Geography, Buck and Jeep what they had discovered. As he came to a close, all eyes were focused on Jeep Carter.

"Could yuh tell if he'd been dead long, Red?" asked Geography.

Red shook his head. "We didn't stay there long enough to tell much of anything except that he's dead," he replied.

Haslam got to his feet. "Red, fetch Doc Bishop. Geography, get the horses ready!" He looked at Jeep. "Better stick close to town, Jeep, I might want to talk with yuh when we get back."

"Now listen, Sheriff, I—I didn't do anythin'," pleaded Jeep. "I'll admit that I wanted to, but—I—jeepers, don't all of yuh look at me that way."

"Yuh said yuh killed a coyote," reminded Haslam, "an' yuh called Gray a coyote—remember. Lemme see yore six-shooter, Jeep."

Jeep Carter loosened his gun and handed it to the sheriff who examined it.

"One shot fired," remarked Haslam, "I'll hold onto this until we get back," he added as he placed it in the top drawer of his desk.

They filed out onto the boardwalk where Geography was waiting. Down the street came Red and Doc Bishop, the doctor's short legs carrying his chubby body as fast as they could. In his right hand he carried his medicine bag. As he stopped before the sheriff, he adjusted his thick horn-rimmed glasses and peered about.

"I—I thought the body was here," he panted.

"Out at Gray's ranch," said Haslam. "Better get yore wagon an' follow. Geography and I are on our way."

"Can I go, Sheriff?" asked Red.

"You'd better stay here with Little Pardner."

"I can go, too," grinned the youngster.

"Not this time," replied the sheriff as he mounted. "We'll be back in a little while."

"He's crazy!" snorted Jeep as the two officers rode down the street. "I never did it."

"Did what?" queried Red, who had missed the scene in the office.

"They think I killed Gray," replied Jeep, as he whirled and went back to the stage.

"Was it because of the trouble between Gray an' Jeep?" Red asked Buck Ryan.

"Yeah," nodded Ryan, "an' it does look bad for Jeep—with him bein' two hours late comin' into town. The main road is only half a mile east of Gray's ranchhouse."

Just then, a tall, thin man dressed in fancy range clothes came up on the walk. He spoke to the boys and Buck.

"Well, I'm goin' to settle down here now," he announced. "I just bought me a spread of my own."

"Yeah?" queried Buck. "What one?"

"I bought out Jud Gray."

"You—you what?" queried Red.

"Why, what's wrong?" he said looking from Red to Buck Ryan. "Is there any crime in buyin' a ranch?"

"When did yuh buy it, Mr. King?" asked Red.

"Why, this mornin'," replied Al King, who was new in Ocotillo City. He had drifted into the country only a short while back, trying to locate a ranch. He seemed to be well fixed financially, and had been accepted by the people of Ocotillo City. "I've been tryin' to buy it for some time, but this morning Jud Gray came to me and said that he was ready to sell. Henry McColl drew up the papers at the bank, and I paid Gray ten thousand cash for the place."

"Jud Gray's dead," said Buck Ryan.

"Gray—dead? Why—why that's impossible," stammered King. "I—I saw him ride away from here about noon. How—what happened?"

"Little Pardner an' I found him dead at the ranchhouse," explained Red. He told what he knew.

AL KING tilted his sombrero back on his head and scratched his neck. "Gawd, what a queer world," he muttered. "Gray was happy to sell that place. Said that he wanted to get back to his daughter in Phoenix."

"A daughter in Phoenix, eh?" grunted Ryan. "So that's why he used to make a trip there every couple o' months, eh? I often wondered about Gray. He always seemed well fixed, yet he never ran much cattle."

"He had two hundred head—an' I bought them," said King. "Well, I'll be seein' yuh." He walked up the walk past them.

"C'mon, Little Pardner, let's go up to the house," suggested Red, "it's too hot down here."

He took the youngster by the hand and they sauntered up the street to the Haslam house which was on the outskirts of the town. As they came up the front walk, Glub and Fitt came prancing out to meet them, Glub was a mongrel dog and Fitt a tall, rangy cat. Both pets went straight to Little Pardner. He petted the dog, then picked Fitt up and carried her back on the front porch where he sat and played.

RED HARRIS sank down in the old battered rocker on the porch, his mind busy trying to piece together the troubles that had occurred in the past few hours. Any mystery was an open challenge to Red Harris, and he was always happy when something exciting occurred. Red closed his eyes and tried to picture the room at the Gray ranch. He could see the still body, the outstretched arms, and the pool of blood. Who had killed Jud Gray, and why? He had to agree with Buck Ryan, things did look bad for Jeep Carter. Jeep had a motive, and a good chance to do it. There was no reason for the stage to be two hours late.

Red carefully weighed everything that he could think of; things he had seen at the Gray ranch and things that he had heard here in town. Slowly he shook his head and sighed. He had always liked Jeep Carter, but this was one time when he was forced to admit that there was very little hope left for his friend.

"Red," said Little Pardner, tugging at Red's pants leg, "I'm hungry."

"Hungry—heck, so am I," grinned Red as he opened his eyes. "I've been so busy thinkin' I plumb forgot about eatin'."

"I never forget inside," announced the youngster.

Red got to his feet and walked to the doorway. "Better get washed up, 'cause I'll have it ready in a few minutes."

It was dark when Sheriff Haslam, Geography Jones and Doc Bishop returned to Ocotillo City with the body of Jud Gray. Word had spread around town, and a small crowd was gathered about the Bishop house as they carried the body inside. Questions were popping from the lips of interested persons, but most of the answers were missing. Haslam and Geography managed to get away from the people and return to their office.

Haslam emptied a handkerchief that he had filled with Jud Gray's belongings. Among them was a small picture of his daughter, Nancy Gray, along with her address.

Quickly, Haslam wrote out a wire and handed it to Geography.

"Send this right away," he ordered.

As the deputy opened the door, Red Harris and Little Pardner shoved their way inside the office, and Red closed the door behind Geography. The sheriff eyed the two

boys, then began going through the things in the handkerchief. Red and Little Pardner stood beside the desk and watched.

"Find out anythin' new, Sheriff?" asked Red.

Haslam shook his head. "Gray was shot with a forty-five at close range," he replied, as he slowly closed and tied the corners of the handkerchief. "I'll keep this for his daughter."

"Is that all yuh found?" asked Red eagerly.

"Yeah, why?"

"There's no money there—an' we found out that Gray sold his spread to Al King this mornin' for ten thousand dollars."

Haslam sat down heavily. "Ten thousand, eh?" he muttered, rubbing his chin. "Who told you?"

"King did," replied Red.

"Mebbe he put that much money in the bank," suggested Haslam, "we didn't find any around the place."

"Whoever killed him could have taken it," offered Red, "say, mebbe that's why he was killed."

HASLAM thought it over. "I still think Carter had something to do with it. I'm going to have another talk with him." He got to his feet and walked out of the office, leaving Red and Little Pardner alone. They sat down on the edge of the cot.

"Daddy busy?" queried the youngster.

"Uh-huh," nodded Red. "He's got troubles."

"I got troubles, too, Red."

"You got troubles?" queried Red. "What are they?"

"No bugs," replied Little Pardner. "All bugs gone."

"I reckon it's too hot for 'em," grinned Red.

The office door opened and Geography entered. He glanced about, then sat down in a chair facing the boys.

"Where's Spike gone to?" he asked.

"Out to talk with Jeep," replied Red. "Geography what do you think about it? Do yuh think Jeep killed Gray an' took the money?"

"Money—what money, Red?"

Red told the deputy about the sale of the ranch. Geography whistled softly. "That throws a different light on the entire affair, doesn't it? 'Course, Jeep might of killed Gray, an' then discovered the money. He'd be a fool to leave it."

Red got to his feet and walked to the door. "I just can't figure Jeep as a killer," he said as he drew his right big toe through some dust on the floor. His eyes narrowed for a moment. "No sir, I don't think Jeep did it."

"Everyone's entitled to their own opinion," retorted the deputy.

"I got mine," announced Little Pardner.

"Opinion?" queried Geography.

"Mine's bugs," replied the youngster. "I like 'em—lots of 'em."

"I reckon that's yore opinion, all right," chuckled Geography.

IT WAS some time later when Spike Haslam returned to the office. He was in a bad frame of mind because he had been unable to locate Jeep Carter anywhere in Ocotillo City.

"He hasn't been to his room at the Ryan's house, either," added the sheriff. "Now, where do yuh suppose that little fool has gone?"

"It looks bad for Jeep," sighed Geography. "He promised to be around here for questionin'."

"That don't sound like Jeep," grunted Red.

"Like the old sayin', yuh never can tell which way a dill pickle is goin' to squirt," said Geography. "Jeep mebbe thought it over an' decided to pull out with the ten thousand."

Just then Buck Ryan entered the office. He leaned against the wall and squinted about the room.

"No sign of him, eh, Sheriff?" he grunted. "I didn't think he'd pull outa here."

"With ten thousand probably burnin' a hole in his pocket," snorted Haslam. "Buck, will yuh send a wire out to all the surroundin' counties, tellin' 'em to keep their eyes open. We've got to pick him up."

"I'll send it right away," said Buck as he opened the door. "If yuh find him, throw him in jail pronto. I heard the people in the saloon talkin' about a lynchin' party. Jud Gray was pretty well liked around here."

"Mebbe Jeep heard about it, an' is hidin' out," suggested Red.

Buck shrugged his shoulders as he left the office.

"Killed a coyote," grunted Haslam as he banged a huge fist on the desk top. "I should have locked him up before we went out there."

"Who killed a coyote?" queried Red.

"Jeep said that he did kill a coyote at Twin Rocks," replied the sheriff. "Aw-w-w, hell, let's go to bed an' see what tomorrow will bring."

TOMORROW turned out to be another hot day, and the appearance of Nancy Gray on the noon stage from Copperville is what it brought. Buck Ryan was forced to handle the reins of the stage due to the lack of manpower. He helped Nancy from the stage to the high boardwalk.

"I'll take yore bags to the hotel," he said.

"Thank you," Nancy tried to smile, but there was a tightness about the corners of her tiny mouth. Her blue eyes were now red from crying, and her face was streaked with tear stains and dust. She was dressed in a gray suit and wearing a large-brimmed hat on top of her red curly hair. "Is the sheriff's office near?"

"Right there, Ma'am," replied Buck, pointing to the building next to the stage office.

Nancy walked down to the office and entered. Sheriff Spike Haslam and Red Harris were alone in the office. They both got to their feet when she came in.

"Are you the sheriff?" she asked Haslam, and when he nodded, she introduced herself. Red pulled up a chair, and she sat down before the officer's desk.

"Miss Gray, may I say that I am sorry to have to meet you under such circumstances," said Haslam. "Yore father was a good friend of mine."

"He spoke of you, too, Mr. Haslam," she said. "I received your wire when I was eating supper last night, so I managed to get a seat on the midnight train and arrived in Copperville at six-thirty this morning."

"I'm afraid there isn't much that I can tell you," sighed the sheriff. "Your father sold his ranch yesterday morning."

"He wrote me telling me that he thought he'd sell," she said. "He said there wasn't any money in cattle now."

"It took him a long time to find it out, Ma'am," said Haslam. "I hope we recover that ten thousand dollars. It'll kinda smooth things out for you. I don't suppose he sent you much money."

"On the contrary," replied Nancy, "he sent out quite a lot of money. In fact, he was ready to retire; so I was not surprised to hear that he was expecting to sell out."

"Hm-m-m-m," mused Haslam thoughtfully, "I—I didn't know—that. Would you like to see the body?"

"Yes, I would," nodded Nancy. "I'll make arrangements to take him back to Phoenix and bury him beside Mother."

Haslam got to his feet and led Nancy outside and down the street to Doc Bishop's house. Meanwhile, Red went outside and sat down on a crude wooden bench in front of the sheriff's office in the shade. He watched the people as they moved up and down the main street. Although his eyes followed them his mind was busy working on the crime that had been committed. He wondered where Jeep Carter could have disappeared to. Did Jeep kill Jud Gray? If he didn't, who did? All these questions popped into Red's mind. For a while Red had thought Jeep innocent, but now he was inclined to change his mind. The turn of events had caused Red much worry, and he wondered where Jud Gray had got all of that money.

"What's goin' on, Red?" asked a voice, and Red turned to see Geography and a short, heavy-set cowboy standing by the doorway to the office.

"I was just thinkin'," replied Red with a grin. "Howdy, Doug."

"Hyah, Red," greeted Doug Lane in a deep voice. "Hear yo're the one that found Jud Gray; too bad."

"What, me findin' him or his gettin' killed?"

"His gettin' killed," replied Lane. "I wish I was the one who fired the shot. I hated that old man."

"Now, Doug, that ain't no way to talk about the dead," said Geography.

"Aw-w-w-w, all right," snorted Doug. "But I did hate him. He tried to gyp me outta some money when I helped him out there a couple weeks ago. I sure told him off, too."

"Mebbe he was mistaken," said Red.

"Not Jud Gray!" snapped Doug. "He

spent all his time countin' his change. He'd steal a penny off a dead man's eye. I know that type—an' I'll never work for anyone like that again. Yes, I'm glad he got what was comin' to him—he probably tried to cheat someone else."

DOUG turned and sauntered up the street. Geography scratched his head and sat down beside Red.

"Doug's a queer critter," he sighed. "Always pickin' trouble with someone, but I doubt if he ever goes any further than doin' a heck of a lot of talkin'."

"Barkin' dog type, eh?" suggested Red.

Geography nodded. "Where's Spike?"

"He's down at Doc Bishop's with Nancy Gray," replied Red. "She came in on the stage. Looks like she's been cryin', too."

"Yuh can't blame her for that," said the deputy as he tugged at his mustache. "I wonder where in hell Jeep disappeared to?"

"If I could answer that, we'd have a big worry off our hands," sighed Red. He turned and looked closely at the deputy. "Geography, if Jeep did kill Jud Gray, how do yuh think he got over to Gray's from the main road?"

The deputy scratched his neck back of his right ear. "Well, he might have driven the stage over there. It's a little too far for him to walk, especially in this damn heat."

"That's what I've been thinkin'," said Red. "That road to the Gray place is awful narrow for the stage, an—an——" Red shut his lips tight, his eyes narrowing to mere slits.

"What's that?"

"Oh, nothin'," replied Red. "I just got a crazy idea, that's all."

A dog came around the corner of the office, hurried past Red and Geography, and cut across the dusty street. Red watched the dog, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Twin Rocks," he muttered.

"Huh, what's that, Red?" queried Geography.

"Oh, nothin'," said Red as he got to his feet. "I'm goin' back to the house if the sheriff should want me."

Geography sighed as he watched Red going up the street. He got to his feet and entered the office where he flopped down on the cot.

Little Pardner was busy playing on the front porch when Red came up the walk. He looked up at Red as the boy climbed the stairs.

"Hot again today, Red," he said.

"It sure is," replied Red, "whatcha doin'?"

"Playin' with Glub and Fitt. They like to play with me."

"I'll bet they do," said Red as he stepped to the doorway. "Are yuh hungry?"

"Uh-huh," said Little Pardner.

"C'mon in, then, because I'm goin' to get lunch now. I think I'll take a ride this afternoon."

"I'm stayin' here," said the youngster as he followed Red into the house. "It's too hot to ride."

"Suit yourself," replied Red.

THE hot afternoon sun beat down on the Twin Rocks, sending heat waves dancing off into space. The two rocks, identical in cut, were on either side of the road as it wound its way down the side of the hill toward Ocotillo City. To the right was the high hill; to the left was a deep cut of possibly seventy-five or a hundred feet. It was a couple of hundred feet across the cut to the other side of the hill, which was dressed in heavy brush.

Red Harris dismounted in the shade of the left-hand rock and dropped the reins to the ground. He sat down with his back against the rock, removed his flat-crowned sombrero, and wiped his perspiring forehead. There was very little air stirring. Red yawned, stretched, and wished that he could put in a few hours sleep, but he knew that he could only remain there a short while before he had to return to town in order to get home by dark.

He studied the surrounding countryside. Finally he got to his feet and walked to the edge of the cut and looked down. There wasn't a thing down there that interested him. He returned to the rock and leaned against it.

"I wonder where that coyote is?" he muttered aloud. He studied all the angles that Jeep Carter could have used in shooting a coyote from atop the stage. "Mebbe it was across the cut." He turned his attentions in that direction just in time to see a lone rider. Red backed against the rock anad watched. The brush was too heavy to afford him a

very clear view of the man, so Red was unable to see who it was. The stranger halted near the edge of the cut, dismounted. Red watched, but the brush hid the man from view. Red wondered who it was, and what he was doing over there.

Presently the man appeared again. He seemed busy at his horse for several minutes, then he mounted and rode on. Red prayed that the man would ride into view, but his prayers went unanswered as the unknown rode out of sight.

Red grabbed his reins and climbed into the saddle. He turned Diamond about and raced down the road possibly a mile to where there was a trail cutting across the cut and up the other side of the hill. Red swung Diamond up through the brush to the ridge, then sharply to his left. The boy raised himself in the saddle and peered about, but he was unable to locate the lone rider.

They swung in and out of the brush until they came opposite the Twin Rocks, here Red halted and slipped from the saddle. He found boot marks in the dirt and a large dark spot on the ground. He looked at it for several minutes, then with a smile of satisfaction on his face, he mounted and rode on in the direction that the lone rider had taken.

Thoughts were popping into Red's mind. Things were becoming more clear in one way, and more confused in another. He rubbed his nose thoughtfully and wondered where the lone rider had disappeared to. Who was that man?

Red was sure that if he found him, he would have the solution to all the trouble. It sounded easy—just find that rider—but who was he?

RED leaned forward and watched the ground ahead of him. It was dusty, and hoofmarks showed up plainly. He found a set leading across the trail that he was following. He stopped and studied them. Red wasn't an expert on tracks, but he was sure that they had been made by the lone rider. Taking a chance, he swung Diamond to his right and started following the tracks as they wound in and out of the brush.

Presently they swung to the right and down into a wash. Here it was hard for Red to follow him because cattle had been driven up and down the wash. He rode along, his eyes searching the surrounding country for any sign of life.

The sun had gone down over the western hills, sending weird purple shadows across the brush Red realized that in a short while it would be dark, so he decided that it would be best to forget the lone rider and head back for town. He knew that he was some distance away from the road, but he thought that if he followed the wash, he would come out near the Gray ranch.

Before he reached the Gray spread, it was fairly dark. As he swung to his right along the low hill, something attracted his attention. Red drew up on the reins and waited. Again he saw it. It seemed to be a flickering light! Red scratched his neck. No one lived over there—he was sure. The only place about was the Gray ranchhouse, and that was off to his left.

Again he saw the light—this time for possibly a minute before it disappeared. Red slipped from his saddle. The light was only a short distance ahead of him. He tied Diamond to a mesquite clump, then moved forward on foot, trying not to make any noise.

Twice he nearly fell over small clumps of brush, and one time he stubbed his toe which almost caused him to yell. He caught himself just in time, as the brush was heavy along the foot of the hill and the light failed to appear. Red halted, wondering just where he was. He waited some time, but no light. Had he been seeing things? Red was about to turn back when he saw the flickering light again, only a few feet off to his left. He held his breath, because this time he was about to see the shadow of a man through the heavy brush. As the light moved away, a thought dawned on Red. The light was coming from sort of a cave!

He moved forward, holding his breath for fear he might betray his presence. He found heavy brush about the entrance of the cavern, and the only way in, was through a small opening back against the hill. Red wondered who all were inside the cave. He couldn't hear voices.

Cautiously he moved forward along the opening to the mouth of the cave, where he paused. The ground was heavy with rubble, he craned his neck and peered around the corner of the entrance, but there was no light. Far back, he could see a dim radiance.

As his eyes became accustomed to it, he realized that there was a turn in the cave, and that whoever had the light, was around that bend. He eased himself into the cave and stopped. It wasn't exactly a cave either —more like a small stope in a mine.

Thoughts flashed through Red's mind. He wondered if he was foolish to enter this cave alone—and who was at the other end. Red was sure that if he found out who was there, he would know who killed Jud Gray. Was it Jeep Carter? Slowly Red edged his way forward toward the bend in the opening. He couldn't hear a sound, and this puzzled him a great deal.

He stopped at the bend and listened. He could hear someone moving about, but that was all. Suddenly the light became brighter, and Red realized that whoever it was, was approaching the bend in the cave. He shrank back against the wall of the cave, his eyes searching for a hiding place, but there was none. There was a queer feeling in the pit of Red's stomach as the light became brighter. He clenched his fists until the nails dug into the flesh.

Whoever was coming toward him, was unaware of Red's presence, so Red decided that a surprise move was his best bet. He braced himself against the wall of the cave, one leg drawn up and his foot braced against the rock, ready to spring as the man rounded the corner. The light was bright now, and Red was ready. He sucked in a deep breath and waited.

Around the corner came a man, and before he knew what was taking place, Red leaped at him, both arms encircling him. The force of Red's lunge threw them backward against the opposite wall, and the lantern went clattering on the floor, pitching the cave into darkness.

Red could feel the heavy breathing of his adversary as he held onto him, but the man, once he gained his senses, was cursing and clawing. Red fought back with all he had, realizing what he was up against. They rolled over and over on the floor, first Red, then the other on top. The man's heavy blows were telling on the boy, as he lost all his punch.

Then he went on the defensive, trying to tie the man's arms up, but the man staggered to his feet and threw Red to one side. Red's back struck the wall, nearly knocking the breath from him. He sucked in air.

Whack! The man's foot found its mark against Red's ribs. Red nearly doubled over, a weak groan escaping his bloody lips. Again the man kicked, but Red heard the movement, and grabbed the foot, and with what strength he had left, he jerked it, upsetting the other, who crashed to the floor with a thud.

"Damn yuh!" snarled the man as his hands clawed out at Red. One hand got too close to Red's mouth, and Red clamped his teeth deep into the flesh.

"Ouch!" roared the man as he slapped out with his other hand, knocking Red's head backward against the wall, and causing him to release the hand. Another hard blow struck Red high on the chest, driving the wind from him. A third blow caught the boy flush in the face, driving his head backward against the hard wall, and knocking all the fight out of him. He toppled over to his right and fell face down on the floor of the cave. The man reached out, felt Red, then laughed wildly. The boy could hear the laugh, but it seemed miles away from him, as stars and rockets seemed to flare up before his very eyes. Red's mind was reeling.

The man struck a match on the cave floor, cupped it in his hands, and looked down at Red. He drew back his right foot and let fly a hard, well-placed kick into the boy's ribs. Red groaned, but didn't move.

"Red-headed devil!" snarled the man. "I'll teach yuh to stick yore nose into other people's business!"

The match burnt low, burning the man's hands, and causing him to drop the flare. He cussed again and gave Red another kick in the ribs. Then he turned and stumbled out of the cave, leaving Red alone.

The first thing that seemed to register on

Red's sense was a-ringing in his ears. At first it seemed miles away, then it drew closer. Pains shot through his body as he tried to move. His right side felt as though it was caved in. It was hard for him to get a good breath, no matter how hard he tried. Red wondered for several minutes where he was, then his mind began to function, and he recalled the fight.

He opened his eyes, but everything was dark. Where was his opponent? Red listened, but the ringing sound remained in his ears. He tried to shake his head, but it almost weighed a ton. Every muscle in his body cried from pain, Red had never felt this way before.

Carefully, he managed to roll over, then with easy, slow motion, and lots of time, he was able to get to a sitting position. With his back against the wall, he relaxed. His head seemed to spin, and he tried his best to clear it. He glanced about, the cave seemed to be empty—no light anywhere. Who was the man he had fought with. Red wished he had had a chance to see the stranger's face. Slowly he pumped air into his aching lungs.

After some time, Red staggered to his feet, bracing himself against the wall with one hand. His right side hurt, and he explored it with his fingers. From what he felt, Red was sure he had some broken ribs. He looked toward the opening. How was he going to get to Ocotillo City? Red felt in his pocket and found a match. He struck it on the wall of the cave and glanced around in the flickering light. He saw a candle stub resting in a niche in the wall, so he lighted it and dropped the match to the floor.

With the candle in his right hand, he slowly made his way around the bend in the cave, determined to see what the man had been doing back there. As he stumbled along, he saw the end of the opening. There were several barrels, and a box of tools. As his eyes swept about, they rested on a gunny-sack that was stretched out beside the tool-box. He staggered over and dropped to his knees beside it.

With trembling fingers, he opened the top of the sack and drew it back. Inside was Jeep Carter, tied, hand and foot. There was a deep cut on the side of his head, and he was unconscious. Red pulled back the sack the best he could, then securing a pocket knife, he worked at the ropes. It was hard work for him to cut them because he had so little strength left. It seemed hours before he finished. He looked at Jeep. There was nothing he could do for him here, and Red was in no condition to try to get him to town.

Red staggered to his feet and leaned against one of the barrels, then happened to look down into it. Red swallowed hard, inside the barrel was the dead body of a coyote, its glaring eyes looking right at Red.

Red shoved away from the barrel and staggered down the tunnel around the bend, and out to the entrance, where he stopped and rested. The cool night air seemed to give him added strength. After a good rest, Red slipped out through the brush, using the candle to light his way. He found Diamond tied to the mesquite, he blew out the candle and dropped it to the ground as he gathered all his strength to climb into the saddle.

He grasped the saddle-horn, and with pain tearing through his body, he managed to pull himself into the saddle. He slumped forward over the saddle-horn and grasped Diamond's mane.

"Home, Diamond," he muttered as he kicked weakly at the horse's ribs.

SHERIFF SPIKE HASLAM, Geography Jones, and Little Pardner sat in the sheriff's office, looking glum, saying nothing. There was a worried look on the sheriff's face.

"That darn kid," he snorted. "I wish he'd told us where he was goin'."

"Red said he goin' for a ride," said Little Pardner.

"Yeah, but where?" growled Haslam as he banged his huge fist on the desk-top. "It's ten o'clock, an' he should be in bed—an' you should be in bed, too, Little Pardner!"

"I'm not sleepy, Daddy."

"Mebbe not, but yo're goin' to bed," said Haslam as he got to his feet. "I'll take yuh over to Mrs. Ryan's, she'll put yuh to bed for the night."

"Mrs. Ryan's got cookies, too," said the youngster happily.

"Mrs. Ryan's it is," smiled Geography. "Want me to take him over there, Spike?"

"Yeah," nodded the sheriff, "I'm goin' to do a little scoutin' around here."

Geography got to his feet and picked Little Pardner up in his long arms. The youngster threw a kiss to Haslam as he disappeared out the doorway with the deputy. Haslam got to his feet and walked outside, stopping on the high boardwalk. It wasn't like Red Harris to be out this late, and it worried the sheriff.

Being Saturday night, there were many people in town. The three saloons were all busy, but the Fill 'Em Up was the main attraction since they added music and a little dancing. Noise, song, and music, split the evening air as Haslam sauntered down the high boardwalk.

A rider swung into the hitchrack by the Fill 'Em Up. It was Doug Lane. He called to the sheriff, then entered the building. Haslam stopped and looked at the horses, then moved on. As he came to the north end of town, he was joined by Geography.

"Little Pardner's in his glory," he reported. "Ma Ryan had a box full of cookies, and he went up to bed with both hands full."

"I wish Red was here," sighed Haslam. "Geography, he didn't mention any place where he was goin', did he?"

"No, sir, but I wish he had," replied the deputy. "When he left me, I thought he had somethin' on his mind."

"He usually does," grunted Haslam. "Between Red an' findin' Jeep Carter—I've got plenty on my mind, too. I could kick myself for not arrestin' Jeep yesterday before we went out to Gray's place. Look what it would have saved us!"

"We can see it now, but we couldn't then," said Geography. "It will all work out for the best, Spike. We'll find Jeep in time."

"Mebbe," grunted Haslam as they stopped in front of the Fill 'Em Up Saloon.

"Red'll be driftin' in pretty soon," assured Geography. "C'mon, let's see what's goin' on inside. No use paradin' up and down the street like a couple old hens lookin' for a lost chick."

"Yeah, mebbe yo're right," replied Haslam as they crossed the porch and entered the saloon. The place was fairly filled. At the rear was a stage, and upon it were six girls doing a song and dance. Men were lined up at the bar, and across the room there were several poker games in progress.

HASLAM slid into a chair near the door and watched while Geography moved forward to the games of chance, watching the men win and lose. Doug Lane shoved away from the bar and came over to Haslam.

"How's about a little drink, Sheriff?" he asked.

"Thanks, but I never touch it," smiled Haslam. "Doug, you haven't seen Red in your travels this evenin', have yuh?"

"Red? No, I don't think I have." Doug shook his head. "What's wrong, is he lost?"

"Oh, no, I was just wonderin' where he was, that's all," lied the sheriff.

Doug nodded as he turned and went back to the bar where he joined Al King, who was leaning against the bar. Haslam watched the men.

The swinging doors flew open and a man came inside. He glanced about, then he saw the sheriff.

"Sheriff," panted the excited man as he approached the officer, "I—I just found Red Harris."

"Where—what's wrong?" asked Haslam as he got to his feet.

Everyone in the room had heard the man's words, and they all turned their attention toward the sheriff.

"Out—out on the road. He—he's all bloody," replied the man.

Just then the swinging doors opened and into the room staggered Red, his face caked with blood and dirt. He weaved back and forth on his feet as he stared about. Haslam stepped forward, and caught Red just as his knees buckled. He eased him to the floor while men began to crowd about. Geography stepped in and moved them back.

"Red, what happened?" asked Haslam as he knelt beside the boy.

"I—I found Jeep—cave," his voice was so weak that Haslam had to almost place his ear against Red's mouth to hear. "Dead coyote there—fight—I—I——" his lips stopped moving.

Haslam glanced at Red, but the boy was unconscious. He lowered Red's head and someone placed a rolled coat under it. Haslam raised his head and glanced at the men standing about. His eyes rested on Al King and Doug Lane.

"Like hell yuh do!" snarled Al King as he stepped back, his right hand darting for his six-shooter. "Yuh won't take me!"

Haslam, slightly bewildered, started for his gun, too. Just as King reached his six-shooter, Doug Lane crashed into him, driving him back against the bar. King managed to twist away from Lane, and he raised his gun, but Haslam fired first. The sheriff's bullet thudded into King's shoulder. He dropped his gun and grabbed at his shoulder as Geography grabbed him and threw him to the floor, and before he realized it, the deputy had placed handcuffs on King's wrists.

Haslam, with smoking gun in his right hand, studied the situation, still unable to figure it out. Why had King acted that way? The sheriff glanced down at Red, who was struggling to sit up. He turned back to King.

"Damn red-headed devil!" snarled King. "I—I thought I finished him off!"

"Oh, so that's it," said Haslam.

King raised his eyes slightly. "He—he told yuh it was me—didn't he?"

Haslam smiled as he shook his head. "No, he didn't, but thanks just the same, King."

"Was—was it King?" queried Red as he raised himself to one elbow and stared about. He squinted at King's hands. "There—his left hand—see where I bit him?"

"What's this all about?" demanded Haslam.

"King killed Gray," explained Red painfully. "I—I knew it couldn't be Jeep. I—I saw tracks in the dust at Gray's." Red paused and took another deep breath. He winced with pain. "Jeep rode a stage, but whoever killed Gray rode a horse."

"You're too damn smart!" snarled King. "All right, I killed Gray—I got my ten thousand back, too."

"Why didja want the Gray ranch?" asked Geography.

King drew his lips tight and a look of defiance crept into his eyes. The deputy repeated the question, but King refused to answer.

"I think I know," said Red. "I—I think there's gold in the cave where I found Jeep."

"Gold!" gasped somebody, "Gold on Jud Gray's spread?"

"There was," corrected a woman's voice, and they turned to see Nancy Gray, with Doc Bishop. Suddenly her eyes snapped wide, as she saw Al King.

"Albert Wells!" she exclaimed. "Where on earth did you come from?"

THE man they knew as Al King shifted his eyes, and did not reply.

"Do you know this hombre, Ma'am?" asked Haslam quietly.

"Why, yes—very well. He—he worked in a bank, and well, he handled our account. He knew about the gold. You mean that he—"

"He killed yore father, Ma'am," said Haslam. "He wanted that gold."

"But the gold is all gone," she explained huskily. "It was only a pocket, and Dad said it was worked out. That is why he was willing to sell."

"Fool's gold," whispered King. "I—I—was—the—fool."

"He's fainted," said somebody. "How you comin', Red?"

"I'm pretty good," whispered Red painfully. "I'm a fool, too. I've got what Doc calls astigmatism."

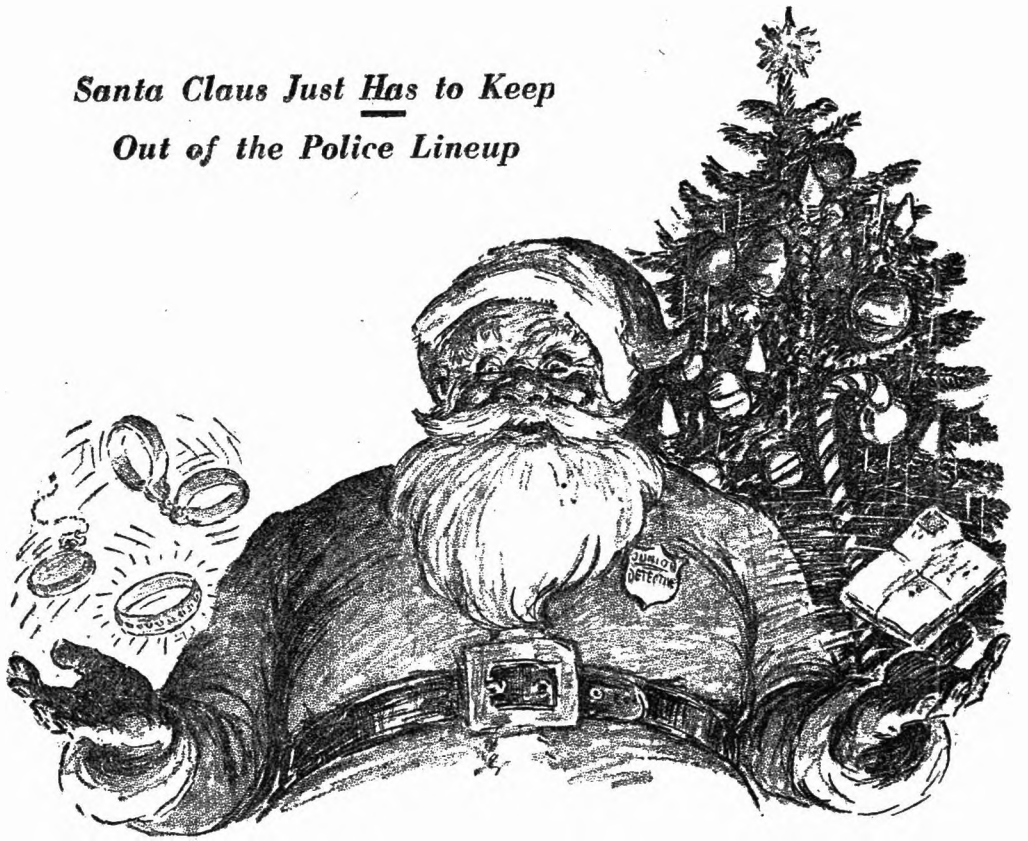
"Did he hurt yore eyes, Red?" asked the sheriff anxiously.

"No—it ain't that, Sheriff," grinned Red weakly. "I'm always pickin' onto somebody that's to big for me to handle. But I'm sure glad I ain't awful big. If I was, there'd be so much more of me to ache."

"You are just the right size," whispered Nancy.

"That," grinned Red, "makes me quit complainin'."

Santa Claus Just Has to Keep Out of the Police Lineup



THE LIGHT FINGERED SANTA

By ROBERT E. GLENDINNING

I AM not slim. In fact, if someone was to run around me with a tape measure, it would be found that I could not step through an over-sized barrel. That is why my jowly pink-cheeked face shook like a Samba dance when my turn came in the lineup and I waddled out on the platform. The glare from the bright lights which the coppers had aimed at me made me blink, but only for a second. Police lineups are old stuff to me—or they used to be before I went straight.

"Now hold it just a minute, boys," I said in my merry, mellow voice. "You got me all wrong. I've been behavin' myself."

"Who said any different? This is routine. Too many pokes are being lifted around the theatre district and who is the best pickpocket in the business? None other than you, Charlie Malone," a voice from the dark said.

"Thanks, boys." I lowered my eyes modestly and scuffed the floor with my toe. "But, like I said before, I'm out of the business."

"Sure you are, so maybe you won't mind telling us where you got that rock you're wearing."

The rock referred to was a diamond solitaire as large as the infield at the Polo Grounds. It was set in platinum on a wide platinum band. When the lights bounced off it, it glared like a thermite bomb and the reflections danced around on the walls. It had more carats than a grocery store sells by the bunch.

"Aw, now listen, fellas, I got this fair an' square. It was give to me an' I got a lot of sentimental feelin' about it." I

breathed on the rock and polished it on the seat of my pants.

"Who gave it to you?"

"None other than Mrs. J. Anthony Abernathy Dinkler."

This remark was greeted by a loud guffaw and the merry-hah-hah from all the cops. One of them says: "Phooey. What would the big financier's wife be handing you a present like that for?"

I looked around to make sure none of the other dips could hear me. There are some things that should be kept sacred, especially from friends who enjoy inserting the needle and twisting it. "She give it to me for playin' Sandy Claus," I whispered, "but do not pass that along, otherwise I wouldn't be able to hold up me head in public."

"*You,* Santa Claus? That is rich. This story better be good, Charlie, on account of it doesn't smell so good already."

I saw I was going to have to tell the story to keep in right with the law and also to hold on to the rock. The hefty cops out front wriggled around in their chairs to get comfortable. When the chairs stopped squeaking, I told them the story of how I played Saint Nick in much the same manner as I am about to relate it here.

This thing happened while I was disguised with a white beard which I grew myself and which I later shaved off because it was too conspicuous. Accompanied by a very slippery individual named Pat Rosen, I was strolling along the boulevard early one evening on a day which turned out to be none other than Christmas Eve. Pat and I were in a very playful mood and were practising a little game called Jostle and Snatch. In this game, I bump around a bit and jostle with my elbows while Pat, built along the lines of a squirrel, comes up from behind and pats around looking for wallets. Of course, since this was only a game we play, we didn't snatch anything.

It was a particularly good evening for such a game since everyone was smiling and carrying bundles. Women's pocketbooks looked heftier and wallet-lumps on men's posteriors were lumpier than I was accustomed to seeing on the average day. I was just about to comment on this to Pat when I noticed a very funny thing. People smiled at me for no special reason that I could see, and little kids pointed at me and let out loud whoops.

"Pat," I said, "do you see some dirt on my nose or some such thing? I'm attractin' a lot of attention."

"Nuttin dat I can see, Charlie, 'cept maybe that beaver yer wearin' looks queer."

I pulled at the white beard—which is the color of my hair—and told him it was a disguise.

"It ain't doin' nuttin' for ya but attractin' attention."

The light-fingered boys do not think it is smart business to stand out in any crowd, so if my beard was getting the stares I wanted to know about it. The very next time that a kid put the eye on me, I stopped him and his mama.

"What's the drift, kid?" I said. He didn't get me so I put it another way. "What ya starin' at?"

The kid giggled and buried his head into his mama's waist like an ostrich. The mama looked at me and smiled. "He thinks you look like Santa Claus with that beard and you—well, your size and all."

I LOOKED down at the kid and sure enough he's peeping up at me through his fingers. I put my hand on his head and made like a store Santa Claus. "Okay, shortie. Don't take no wooden nickels or swipe no apples or nothin' and I'll fix you up with a air-rifle." The kid smiled, but his mama didn't. She threw me a dirty look and yanked the kid down the street in a hurry.

I clapped Pat on the back. "How about that? I look like the old guy hisself, but in civvies." From then on, I talked good and jolly as we walked down the boulevard so all the kids could hear me.

"All I got to say is you picked a fine time of da year to put on a beaver for a disguise," Pat said.

I nudged him in the ribs. "Get a look at what's givin' me the glad eye." I pointed at a classy tomato who had a black pocketbook as big as a trunk under her arm. She stood about so high and had a figure like a streamlined hour glass. Her eyes were big and blue like a China plate. She upped to me and caught hold of my arm. Right away, I figgered she didn't like the way I

looked at her pocketbook and that she was going to yell for the law. I tried to wriggle away but she held on tight.

Pat said, "Charlie, you're too hot. I'm givin' you plenty of elbow room until after Christmas." He ducked into an uptown subway entrance, which was the last I ever saw of him, and I hope I never see him again. I don't like fair-weather pals who leave me alone to face embarrassing situations.

The chief embarrassing situation was in the form of a plainclothesman named Lou McQuire who always shows up when I need him the least. Lou shoved through the crowd and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Okay, lady," he said. "This time I got you dead to rights, Charlie. Shame on you for snatching purses on Christmas Eve. Haven't you got any Christmas spirit?"

Before I could open my kisser, this cute blond tomato spoke up. "I don't know what you're talking about," she told McQuire, "but I am Mrs. J. Abernathy Dinkler and I want this man to be Santa Claus at my house tonight."

McQuire scratched his chin. "Well, lady, it's your funeral. If you wake up tomorrow morning and find everything but the plumbing gone, don't be surprised."

She smiled at me like somebody advertising toothpaste. "Nobody who looks so much like jolly Santa could be dishonest."

"That's right," I said, giving McQuire the evil eye. "My name is Charlie Malone, Ma'am, at your soivice."

"I'll pay you fifty dollars," she said.

"Let us not speak of money at this gay holiday season," I told her. "Will that be in cash?"

McQuire shook his head. "The law will keep its eye open, Mrs. Dinkler," he said.

"Don't you worry. Santa won't get in trouble. I'll take care of him."

Before a judge could say thirty days, the blond whisked me into a big black car and off we headed toward Park Avenue. I was busy figuring how many apartments I could build in the back seat of the car to solve the housing shortage with, when the blond said, "Charlie, I want you to dress up in a Santa Claus outfit I have gotten especially for the occasion and then I want you to come out with a big bag over your shoulder. You will hand out presents to one and all."

"Who is the all?" I asked.

"There is me, of course, then there is my husband and little five-year-old J. Abenathy Dinkler, Jr. There will also be another party by the name of Thomas Neil." The way she shot out the last name, she made it rhyme with cheap heel.

"Does Sandy bring him somethin' too?" I said.

"Oh, yes indeed. You bring him a very beautiful diamond solitaire from Mr. Dinkler and me—well, really only from me but the card says it is from both of us. Mr. Dinkler wouldn't give Mr. Neil a ten-year-old necktie, but I *have* to gi—Whoops! Forget I started to say anything, Charlie."

Which I forgot, for the time being.

WHEN we got to the apartment house, I went around the back way and was let in through the kitchen by a flunky in a striped vest. With an eye out for business, but strictly on the up and up, I gave the apartment the once over. It was a classy layout. The walls were plastered with pictures and the rugs were so thick that a guy on the lam could have hidden out in them for years and never be found. The living room —the flunky said it was "the drahwink room"—looked like a hotel lobby without a cigar counter. At the far end, almost beyond the range of the naked eye, was a Christmas tree that was the twin to the one over at Rockefeller Center.

"A man who didn't have no Christmas spirit could make a very good thing out of this joint," I thought, as I hefted a solid gold vase. I put it down in a hurry when I heard footsteps.

Mrs. Dinkler came in with a man on each arm. "Darling," she said to one, "meet Santa. Charlie, this is my husband, Mr. Dinkler."

Mr. Dinkler was a nice friendly little man. He had a few gray hairs on his upper lip and he was a little paunchy around the middle, but he looked like the average guy that you might find behind the counter in a haberdashery.

"Well, Santa," he said with twinkling eyes, "I've been hearing about you for years. It's good to meet you after all this time."

"Likewise," I tell him as we shook hands.

"And this, Charlie, is Mr. Neil." The tomato pointed to the other man. He was a thin beady-eyed bird with skin the color of a lemon and he looked just as sour. He didn't put out his hand to get it shook, so I sized him up quick as a very unsocial fellow.

"I don't believe in Santa Claus," he said. His voice sounded like paper tearing.

"You had best watch out," I told him. "Sandy won't bring you no presents."

"I'm not worried. I've got me a private Santa Claus." He said it with a sneer and I saw Mrs. Dinkler turn white.

Mr. Dinkler nudged me. "Santa, you come with me so I can show you the presents."

I waddled out after the financier and followed him into a room which was lined with fancy books all the way to the ceiling. "This is my library," he said. "There are the presents and this is your Santa Claus suit. You can slip it on over your street clothes."

"This being my first job as jolly old Sandy Claus, what do I do with the presents?" I ask him.

He laughed. "Here is a box marked for Mr. Neil. I don't know what is in it, but when the time comes you give it to him. In this one, without the tag, is a very beautiful diamond bracelet which I am giving to my wife." He picked up another little box. "This one is marked for me from my wife, so I am sure it is a very extravagant gift indeed. Everything else is for my son and this party is mainly for him. All you have to do is to trot in acting very jolly and distribute the presents such as Santa might do. Also, you remain until the presents are opened and everyone has had a chance to *ooh* and *aah*."

"Sounds like a cinch," I remarked.

"I will leave you then," he said.

After he had went, I looked at all the boxes wrapped in fancy paper, at which point I got a very funny idea. Naturally, Santa should not be expected to hand out bangles which he has not examined himself. I opened the little box which had Mr. Dinkler's name on it and what did I see blinking up at me but a very thin solid gold watch with a very long gold chain. I studied the watch carefully and then quickly closed the box and put the paper and ribbon around it again.

In my haste, I did a very careless thing. I forgot to put the watch back in the box. In fact, I absent-mindedly wound it and put it in my pocket.

Again without thinking, Mr. Neil's diamond ring went into my pocket too. I opened the box which Mr. Dinkler said was for his wife. It had a bracelet in it all right, but not the kind of bracelet I enjoy seeing.

"Hmm," I thought, "Mr. Dinkler picks out very strange presents for his wife. Unless I miss my guess, this is no diamond bracelet but is the kind of thing a copper might flash on occasion." In the bottom of the box was a pair of handcuffs and also a badge.

I put the badge and handcuffs in my pocket, thinking to point out the serious error to Mr. Dinkler at some later date. I wandered out of the library and went into the living room. Like I said before, the living room was very big and had as many nooks and crannies as Grand Central Station. At first I thought I was alone in there but then I heard a voice mumbling in a little alcove.

I would know the sound of lemon-puss's voice anywhere. He was saying: "Well, I want more."

IT WAS quiet for a second and then the blond tomato spoke. "Tom, I can't ask James for any more. He will know there is something in the wind."

"That I do not care about. Either you get more dough for me or I will show certain things to your husband."

"You are a horrible creature," she said, in which opinion I agreed. "That all happened years ago—before I was married."

"Who is to know that? They are undated. I want more dough and I want it tonight as a sort of Christmas present from my favorite Santa Claus. Think it over," he said, "and a very merry Christmas to you."

Mr. Neil was a very low type engaged in a business for which I have no liking. I heard him walking toward me so I rolled my fat out of the living room and went back to the library. I pulled the outfit on over my regular clothes and felt as if I was

dressing backwards with my red flannel union suit on the outside instead of in.

No sooner was I ready in the Santa Claus uniform when Mr. Dinkler poked his head into the library. "In about five minutes you can make your entrance, Santa. I am getting James Abernathy Dinkler, Jr., from his bed right now."

At the end of the time mentioned, I shouldered the pillow slip filled with presents. I trotted into the living room, whooping, yiyying and laughing in a jolly way. I whizzed around the room a few times while I made merry remarks and slapped the adults on the back.

THE kid got a big kick out of it. He was blond like his mama and he had freckles running across his nose. His eyes were shiny and happy. He was wearing white pyjamas with built-in feet and if he had a candle he would have looked just like an ad for a tire. I picked him up and swung him around in the air until I got dizzy and had to set him down in front of the Christmas tree. He watched me like a hawk as I dug into the bag of presents.

I yelled: "Ho-ho! Ho-ho!" and for various personal reasons doled out the kid's presents first. He opened each one as I gave it to him, played with it a bit, and then put it under the tree until pretty soon he had a great big pile.

"Well, that is all I find in this here bag for you, bud," I said.

He looked up at me in surprise. "You *sure* that is all, Santa?"

"Ain't that enough? I am winded from luggin' all that stuff down from the equator as it is."

"You shouldn't be ungrateful to Santa, James," the tomato said.

"Yes, mother." The kid turned his eyes away from me and stared down at the things he had arranged under the tree.

"Now for the adults, Santa," Mr. Dinkler suggested.

"Ho-ho!" I roared. "Things for the big folks. I'm gonna hand you the boxes an' then old Sandy has to run. I got lots of places to get to once't I get out of here." Quick like a flash, I passed out the empty boxes and eased toward the door. I was so ashamed of my carelessness with the gold watch, the rock and the handcuffs, I didn't want to stick around where I might blush with embarrassment.

The blond whispered, "Don't leave before I slip you the fifty."

"Don't mention money to me," I tell her. "I'm filled with the Christmas spirit."

Mr. Dinkler moved around between the door and me. "Just wait until we open the boxes, Santa. It's all part of it."

"What's this?" Mr. Neil suddenly barked. "It must be a joke. The box you gave me is empty!"

"So is mine," the blond gasped.

"And mine," Mr. Dinkler added, as he dropped a ball of red paper to the floor.

"How can it be!" I said with an expression of surprise.

Mr. Dinkler grabbed hold of my shoulder. "What happened to my wife's diamond bracelet?"

"Diamond bracelet?" I asked. "Did you *really* have a diamond bracelet?"

"I did, and it cost me no less than ten thousand dollars."

I would have noted such a remarkable piece of jewelry as a ten thousand dollar bracelet. It had not been amongst the things I had carelessly put in my pocket. While I was figuring where it could have gone, the kid tugged at my leg. "What's with you, kid?" I asked.

"Santa, are you sure there wasn't a Junior Detective set in your bag for me? Your helper at Hansen's Department Store told me you would surely bring one."

The kid's eyes were sad and sort of accusing. I remembered the handcuffs and the tin badge and they began to burn a hole through my red uniform. I felt a funny lump inside of me which I thought might have been ulcers at first, but then I figured it was something else. Maybe this Christmas spirit I hear a lot of talk about. Then I see that I must do something about this situation. There is no name in my trade for what I did unless it could be called the reverse-dip.

"Ho-ho!" I shouted, as I felt around under the uniform for the baubles I had inadvertently stowed away. "Someone has played a trick on jolly Sandy. A dirty lousy stunt." I hustled around the room, spinning like a top. I tossed the kid into the air, hugged the blond tomato in a friendly way, and jabbed Mr. Dinkler in the ribs. I

started to give lemon-puss the same treatment. I changed my mind because, while I was jostling, my fingers accidentally brushed something hard and jangly in his side pocket, and pressed against something that was flat and crisp in his inside pocket.

Back I went to the blond, hugged her up a bit more, and kissed her hand.

"Say, what is wrong with you?" Mr. Dinkler demanded.

"Some sharpster made light of the Christmas spirit, but old Sandy has fixed everything up," I explained. "Why, what is that hanging from your pocket, Mr. Dinkler? It looks like none other than a gold chain!"

Mr. Dinkler pulled on the chain and up came the watch. "Wh—What—how did—"

"Daddy, mother!" the kid yelled from the other side of the room. "Look what happened to me!" Everyone looked. There was the kid handcuffed to the leg of a chair and as happy as a daily-double winner.

"And what is that which glitters on Mrs. Dinkler's wrist?" I shouted. "Surely it can't be a very expensive diamond bracelet!"

Mrs. Dinkler *oohed* and *aahed* in true tomato fashion and threw her arms around her husband's neck. Everyone looked very happy about the way things turned out, except Mr. Neil. He slapped his side pocket and then felt inside his coat, his face turning very white.

I stepped over and flashed the Junior Detective badge at him. "Scram, before I run ya in!" He scrammed without saying goodbye to anyone or wishing us a very merry Christmas. I flicked through the flat package I had taken from his inside pocket and blushed. While Mr. and Mrs. Dinkler were untangling, I unlocked the kid from the leg of the chair and pinned the badge on his white pyjamas.

"Charlie," the tomato whispered to me, "I don't understand what has happened."

"Blame it on the Christmas spirit," I said. I handed her the package. "A high class tomato like you ain't got no business writin' such things to a punk like him."

The next thing I know she had her arms around me and kissed me. I felt it right through my beard. "I'd like to give you something, Santa. Since there is no longer any need to give such a present to that man, I wish I knew where I could find the diamond ring. I would like to have something written inside it, if" she sighed, "I only knew where it was. Maybe Neil took it with him."

I looked around the room and clapped my hands over my eyes. "What is that brilliant thing which dazzles my eyes from the Christmas tree? Lo and behold! It is none other than a beautiful rock set in platinum."

"Now how do you suppose it ever got there?" she said.

Of course, I could not tell her the answer. There are many things associated with the Christmas spirit that a man such as me cannot understand.

But that is how come I have this ring which I am now wearing as can be proven by the inscription inside which reads as follows: *To Santa Claus—From a certain blond tomato.* Naturally, I would not wish to have this verified further, because no tomato, especially a high classed one like Mrs. J. Abernathy Dinkler, likes to be known by that name.

BLACK JOHN refused to accept the theory that murder on Rat Creek was none of Halfaday's business . . . . . .

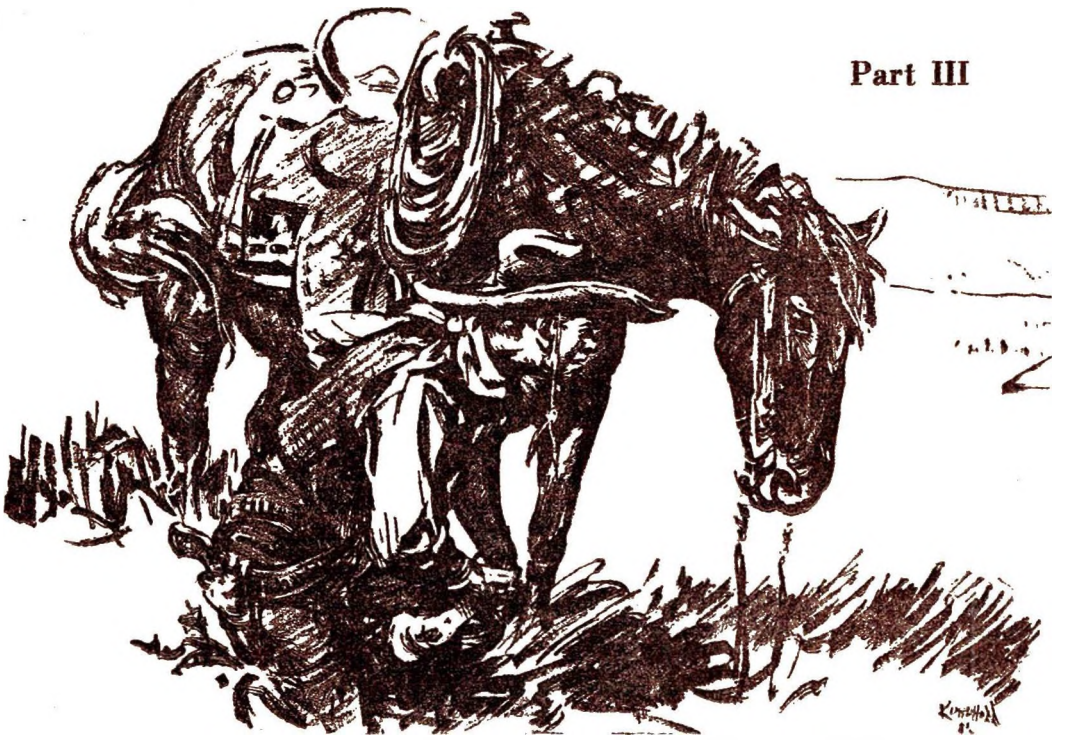
"New Talent on Halfaday"

A novelette in our next issue by

JAMES B. HENDRYX

RED CLARK'S SHORT CUT

Part III



Male Liars, Female Liars, Red Was Straight Himself and He'd Never Seen the Like

THE STORY SO FAR

AS RED rode down the mountain the wind stirred the pines and he sang to himself, though he was about the same as lost and had been warned that the Mollogons were a hideout for Jack Kellem's outlaws; but he had stubbornly headed into the mountains as a short cut to Verde Valley where a man he knew had asked for his help against rustlers.

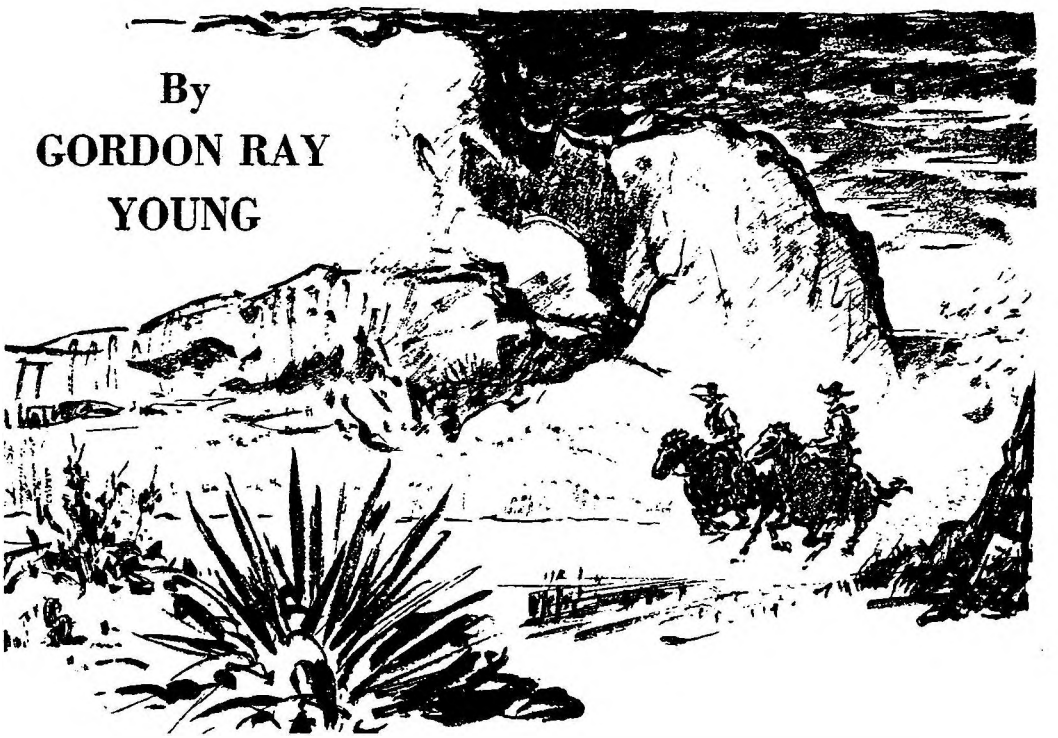
That was the beginning of it. Red was shot at—by a girl of all things—and it turned out she was Peg Renard whose father said he'd discovered gold—"more gold than any place in the world"—and would have no strangers on his land. Most of all Renard dreaded the Kellem bad men and Red finally had to show him a letter from old Tom Watson asking his help. Renard somewhat grudgingly believed him and Red suddenly found himself helping the Renards defend their cabin against a band of Kellem men. In the melee Renard was killed and to his horror Red believed Peg shot her own father.

Realizing this, the girl disappeared into the timberlands and though Red tried, he couldn't find her, only came on the ore he had helped her roll up to carry away. Later on he finds Peg in the company of Lucille Brandon, and Peg—who can tell more lies faster than anyone could ever follow—says she and Red are married. She says she said it to save his life.

Red proceeds to the Watson ranch and on the way gathers in an ally—a man who says he is representing the Cattle Association, but who, of course, wants to stay under cover. His name is Dave Martin.

At the Watson ranch Red finds a mess—Tom Watson's new wife is evidently making a drunkard out of him, while she's in ca-

By
GORDON RAY
YOUNG



hoots with the Kellems. Red can't figure it out why she just doesn't kill off Watson and inherit the ranch, instead of bleeding it. He forces a showdown and Nell Watson rides off. "Gone to make trouble for us," Red surmises.

X

MR. WATSON was all busted up. Red told him that, of course, Nell Watson had been robbing the ranch and couldn't do it without the help of the foreman, Frank Masters, and other hands.

"Next thing, you'll be killed so they can have ever'thing. Why you ain't been long ago, I can't guess. So whether you want or not, you're going to town!"

Red went to the stable. The horses that were used to harness were out in the pasture and he thought of sending the kid Ramon after them, but wouldn't trust him. It was a big pasture. Red didn't like to leave the place to go after them. Anyhow, he wouldn't know which were harness-broke, not unless they had collar marks, which wouldn't be likely because they weren't driven much. So he was making Ramon ride out with him.

Peg came into the stable while he was saddling up. She said in a bossy way, "Give me your rifle. If I'm going to stay here with that stupid old man—"

Red took off his hat and scratched his head. "He is stupid only because a woman made him that way!"

"If a man ain't stupid to begin with, how can she do anything to make him like that?" Peg demanded, just like she was serious.

"He was a good man to come into this country and build up and hold a ranch. Then married the wrong woman. He did get bunged up and couldn't ride good, so she took charge and kept him full of likker. I can't figure why she'd throw in with Jack Kellem when—"

Peg put her hands on her hips and raised herself on her moccasined toes, like she wanted to look taller as she asked, "Did you ever hear of something called 'love'?"

Red said he'd heard tell of it, but hadn't seen any. It wasn't much good, he thought since that must have been what was the matter with Mr. Watson when he married the woman; moreover, Red went on, even if the woman did love Jack Kellem, that was no reason why she'd want to give away cows. She must know that Lucille Brandon was, or was about the same as Kellem's wife and got his money. Besides, all Nell Watson needed

to do was to shoot Mr. Watson, then she could have the whole ranch as her very own.

Peg said, "I think Jack Kellem is handsome! It is easy to love handsome men that wear high boots!"

"All right, you go love him if you want!"

Peg didn't get the least bit angry though her eyes sparkled. "You wouldn't care?"

Red looked at her somberly. "I don't understand you. You get mad and won't speak, then turn around and act like you thought I was nice and make me feel all muddle-funny—"

"Oh, do I? Honest, Red?"

"You lie as easy as you breath, but—"

"But what?"

"You are sure a good one to tie to in a scrap! You're smarter'n any man and fight like a man ought!"

Peg's arms went around his neck before he knew they were coming, and it startled him a little. For a moment it was so much like she was fighting because she hugged as if trying to choke, and did take his breath. She was a fierce girl and strong. He was muddle-funny, as he called it, but not unhappy.

A shadow streaked into the dim stable and Ramon's girlish voice called excitedly, "Senor! They come!"

Peg let go and whirled about and Ramon gestured as he said that three men were riding in from the direction of the bunkhouse over the hill, which was where Nell Watson had gone.

Red asked, "Why are you warnin' me?"

The kid's face was earnest with, "You are not a bad man and have been good to me!"

Red went on a run out of the stable and from the front saw three men riding hard down the slope, and even at a distance he could tell that one of them was Frank Masters, ranch boss. They weren't trying to sneak up, so must be sure of themselves. He thought it a wonder that Nell Watson herself wasn't along, but guessed she had a bad headache from the way Peg had bumped her head on the floor, a bigger headache from what had been told Mr. Watson.

He looked aside and Peg was by him and had the rifle. She said, "Come back in the stable!" and pulled at his arm.

He said, "You go back!" and pushed at her, but she angled to one side, not stepping back though Red told her, "You can be lots more help to me by stayin' out of sight!"

Peg said, "Pah!"

"I want to hear 'em talk!"

"Talk! When she sent them to kill us!"

"Men won't shoot a woman!"

Peg snapped back, "You hurt me lots of times worse than if you shot!"

THE riders were heading for the house but as they came in line with the front of the stable they saw Red and Peg out front and swerved, then slowed down in coming up to the stable.

After Red pushed back his hat he hooked his thumbs over the edge of the wide belt and kept his eyes on Frank Masters, who was in the lead. Red had sized Masters up as a man who could be tough, and when he pulled down to stop, the other two fellows went on to the right of him before they reined up. They were about ten to twelve feet apart, which made it harder to watch all them at once. But they weren't comfortable because Peg, with the rifle butt to her hip, kept the muzzle lifted, and if they looked close they could see that she had the hammer cocked, her finger on the trigger.

Frank Masters gave his hatbrim a pull, squinted under it at Red and said, slow and biting, "So Mr. Badman Clarke hides behind a woman's skirt, hm?"

The two other men laughed. Maybe they didn't think it really funny, but they tried mockingly to sound like they did. None of the three were young and all had the weathered toughness of old hands, the tight peering suspicious eyes of men who weren't trustful. Frank Masters set his mouth in a mean twist that turned to an ugly grin after he jeered at Red about Peg's skirt.

But the grin went away like it had been wiped off with a wet sponge when Red said back, "You three hide *under* Nell Watson's skirt so you can steal Tom Watson's cows!"

Red knew they had come looking for a fight but wanted to be tricky, so he spoke up in a way that let them know they could have their fight any time they wanted.

Masters stared sourly without batting an eye to ask, "Just what do you mean by that, Clark?"

"Just what you think I do, Masters!"

Then Peg put in, her voice up and rapid, as she pointed the gun at Masters, "Didn't

that old witch tell you we caught her in the cabin with Jack Kellem?"

That hit hard. Masters looked like it was a sock on the jaw, but he got hold of himself, stayed quiet and was cool with, "That gun is liable to go off, young lady?"

Peg came back with, "Why else you think I've got my finger on the trigger?"

Masters was being taken care of, so Red eyed the other two men, one fresh-shaved and hungry-thin with deep eye sockets; he looked meaner and slicker than the other and heavier man who had black bristles on his face. Both of them leaned forward on saddle horns, as if at ease and not worried, which was a good way to put somebody they wanted to shoot off guard.

Red said, "If you fellows came for a talk, *talk!*"

The clean-shaven man straightened and flapped a hand toward Masters.

"Frank's boss. Talk to him!"

Masters said, "Yes. And I mean to stay boss—" in a calm steady voice, but he struck his horse hard in the flanks with spurs, then checked him back with jerk of reins. That made the horse rear right up with forefeet out almost over Peg's head and Masters had shouted as he sank in the spurs, "Open up, boys!" and went for his gun.

That trick of the rearing horse fooled Peg and scared her, for she was more afraid of the horse that looked like it was going to stomp down on her than of the man. The horse, up on its hind legs that way in front of her, protected Masters from her rifle, so she jumped back and bumped into the front of the stable and the rifle went off, missing both horse and man.

At the same time other guns were going off like a bunch of firecrackers, and it was all over before a man could take a long breath and let it out slowly.

Red had pulled both guns at the same time with a backward jerk and opened up on the smooth-shaved slick man that had shot once, then reached out, full arm's length, like he wanted to put the gun closer.

Red's way of hip-shooting was to press the forearm tight against his side. That held down the bounce of the gun and he could thumb the hammer faster, keeping a steadier hold; and he was good at it because he had practiced a lot.

He killed the smooth-shaved man in his saddle before Masters' horse hit the ground —falling the harder for having been on its hind legs. Red's glance flashed sidewise for a look at Masters who was the most dangerous; but he had dropped with his horse, his leg under the saddle, and it wasn't like a good horseman to be caught that way.

The man with the black stubble beard was on a horse that shied from bullets past his ears, and the man fired fast and cussed like he thought Red was a shadow and couldn't be hurt—and he wasn't hurt. Red's first shot back at him must have taken some of the whiskers off his cheek, it was that close; so the man ducked low over to the side, firing across the horse's neck.

Then the man, half out of the saddle anyhow, dropped. Red hadn't killed him, nor had Peg; but she pointed off toward the house. "He killed this man too!" She indicated Frank Masters.

Tom Watson had shot from just outside the kitchen doorway, and now he came at a joggling run, the rifle in his hand and what gray hair he had flying. He was so out of breath that he gasped, but the blurry eyes now had such a shine that Red thought he was drunk again. But he wasn't. He breathed like a windbroken horse, heaving his big bony frame. "I used — to be good — with a rifle!"

WHEN things quieted down the kid Ramon stuck his frightened face out of the stable door and Red told him, "Son, you light out and bring in horses for the buckboard."

The boy ducked back, but Mr. Watson drew himself up. "No buckboard! By God, I'm still good enough to fork a saddle!"

"Sure, maybe you are. But we got to haul these fellows into town and let folks see! They all on your payroll?"

Mr. Watson said they were and gave their names, but only Masters had been on the payroll as long as three years or a little more, and he didn't know where any of them came from.

"That woman—" meaning his wife, Nell, —"hired 'em!"

Women and kids of the two Mexican families that lived here came with timid flutters, their eyes as big as saucers. Mr. Watson looked at his rifle, ran a hand over

the butt as if stroking the gun, proud and with strengthening assurance that he was still good.

Masters couldn't be pulled out from under the horse, so Red uncinched the saddle on the dead horse and rigged two ropes, one on a forefoot and one on a hind foot; then with first one rope, then the other, on a saddle horn he dragged the dead horse from under the loosened saddle and off Masters.

One of the Mexican girls said that he wasn't dead. Red bent over Masters and found the girl was right. Mr. Watson's bullet had struck in the back, on the right side behind the shoulder; and the jarring fall had been enough to knock the senses out of a man. He had been shot before he could get a foot out of the stirrup to leave the falling horse. Red felt about and found Masters' leg was broken at the knee.

The hurt man groaned and stirred and his eyes weren't open when he muttered. Red said to bring water. One of the little Mexican kids ran clear to the house and came back with the big dipper from which he sloshed out half of the water in his excitement.

Red wet a handkerchief and sopped it on Masters' face and the eyes opened unseeingly, stared, closed again. Red soused the handkerchief and put it to Master's mouth. He sucked on it and opened his eyes again. This time he recognized Red and stared about like a hurt snake stares at somebody with a club that has broken its back.

Mr. Watson looked down at him and asked reproachfully, "Frank, have you gone plumb bad?"

Masters acted like he didn't hear and groped feebly toward his broken knee, then he tried to sit up and couldn't. Again he looked hard at Red, but didn't try to say anything. He began to cough some.

Red told him, "Fella, I don't know how long you've got to live and I don't care. You come rampin' in here with two other men—which wasn't enough. Both are dead!"

Masters' eyes were sullen with pain and mavbe hate too.

Red rolled and lit a cigarette then put it in Masters' mouth. He didn't say, "Thanks."

Red was rolling another for himself when Mr. Watson asked, "Why'd you do that for him?"

"I don't hate people good after they're bad hurt!"

Peg stood there, still holding Red's rifle which had jammed on her because when she bumped back into the stable she hadn't thrown the lever far enough to eject the empty shell; and all of a sudden Peg pointed down at Masters. "You helped steal Mr. Watson's cows because you loved Nell Watson. But she loves Jack Kellem and just made a fool out of you! She told me so last night!"

Masters' mouth opened so quick that the cigarette fell out and he scrouged on an elbow, glaring at her. Peg nodded, affirmingly. He hadn't any idea how she could lie and make it sound like the truth, but he asked, "She told you that?"

"And laughed!" said Peg.

Masters stared some more, then he said, "Damn her soul!" and lay back again. Red picked up Masters' hat and folded it under the hurt man's head for a kind of pillow. Red could tell that Peg's lie had hurt Masters as bad as if she had shot him again, or maybe worse.

It was a hot windless morning and they all stood in a ragged circle gazing down at him. Masters said, "Water." Red held the dipper to his mouth, giving him what little was left, and Masters didn't say "Thanks." After a time he heaved himself up on an elbow and looked toward Mr. Watson and said hoarsely, "We've stole you blind, Tom."

"Stole—me—blind?" The big old man's fingers ran through his hair. He was dazedly puzzled. "God A'mighty, Frank. My wife may've been no good but the books show—"

"She ain't your wife and never was!"

"B-but I married her!" said Mr. Watson.

"She's my wife!" Masters told him savagely. "I'm a goner, so—so the hell with her, carryin' on with that dirty yeller coward of a Kellem!"

"B-but I m-married her!" Mr. Watson repeated, befuddled.

Masters said, "When she come up into this country you made up to her, thinkin' she was a widow. So when I come, I said, 'All right, marry him and we'll take charge.' I'd rode off an' on with Kellem before, and I tell you, he's tricky but he's yaller!"

Mr. Watson stuttered out, "B-b-but the b-books show—"

Masters grimaced. "She kept the books. You're tally record don't mean a thing! After you got hurt, she kept you drunk. You was smart enough to know some cows got away and sent for Association men. We knocked them off, easy!" His eyes moved hatefully to Red. "You're the hombre that spoiled things!"

"Yeah," said Red sarcastically, "it was me made her fall in love with Jack Kellem!"

That made Masters go back to cussing his wife.

Peg looked at Mr. Watson and said in that rapid way of hers, "Lucille Brandon told me what an old fool you were over that woman!"

That maybe was true for all Red knew. The Brandon woman had said much the same thing to him. But Mr. Watson got up off his knee, brushed at the dirt on it, had a hangdog look when he stared at Peg. He changed his rifle to the other hand, drew a handkerchief, blew his nose, then bobbed his head.

"That's right. That's right, little lady. That's sure right. Old fool! Drunk old fool." He put the handkerchief away, looked down at his rifle, stroked the butt as if fondling it.

After that Red said they ought to carry Masters into the shade. Mr. Watson wouldn't help, but Peg and the Mexican women did. Masters winced and clamped his jaw but didn't moan as they lifted and carried him. When he was down he coughed and blood came up.

Again he asked for water. Red gave the dipper to the kid and told him to bring it full, not to hurry so. The little chap went on the run, but he returned at a walk, his eyes on the dipper so as to be careful.

Red held it for Masters to drink. Then he coughed some more and breathed hard, but stared at Red and asked how he came to get mixed up in this.

"Mr. Watson was my uncle—once. Married my mother's sister before I was born."

"We been afraid of his old friends. What are you goin' to do now?"

Red shook his head. When Masters asked for another cigarette, Red rolled it for him. This time Masters said, "Thanks, kid." It racked him to inhale, but he inhaled. After all, Red thought, what a dying man wants is no harm to let him have.

Red said, So that's why you-all didn't kill Mr. Watson? Some folks hereabouts knew she wasn't his wife. You'd have had to pay too much to keep them shut up. It was safer to steal what you could a little at a time!"

Masters looked sullenly at the cigarette, then admitted, "Yeah." A moment later he peered at Red. "Lucille Brandon knows Nell is my wife. They hate each other like two tomcats in a sack. All the brains Jack Kellem's got, Lucille carries in her own head for him! But she loves the man!"

After he quit coughing again, Masters said, "How she can grab a man and hold him like she does, I don't know. She's probably got the meanest heart of any woman that ever lived, but men like her. The damn fools!"

"The Brandon woman?"

"No, Nell." He eyed Red steadily. "She wants to see you dead worse'n anybody I've ever seen her mad at! But she was scared of me. I — I loved her!"

The cigarette went out and dropped from his fingers. He shut his eyes and his head rolled to one side and he breathed quick and hard, and coughed too. Soon his breath rattled, a little like he was gargling, then it got slower and fainter. That was how he died.

Red went into the house to see about some things and poured himself a stiff drink from the bottle still on the table. Then he asked Mr. Watson if he wanted some. Tom Watson shook his head and said casual-like, "I'm not drinkin' anymore son. Ever!"

Red thought that was a tall order for a man as used to it as Mr. Watson, but he didn't say anything, though he wondered how much of the old-time strength was left in the once fine man, and thought of what a woman could do to a fellow. That made him think of Peg, and how she had jumped at his neck in the stable—and he liked it, too. But oughtn't have, he felt. No trusting her; not the way she could lie. And even if she did lie to help him, he thought she could lie just as easy and quick to do him harm if she wanted. It was still in the back of his head that she had shot her father; so maybe at heart she was a good deal like Nell Watson—only younger, prettier, and that meant worse.

The kid Ramon hazed in the harness-

broke horses. He and Red and Mr. Watson ran the buckboard out from under its shed and took off the back seat, then spread some hay and loaded the three dead men, covering them over with old mildewed canvas.

"I want the sheriff to see!" said Red. "And get told some things!"

Mr. Watson said he was going horseback, like a man ought, and had Red get out his saddle from where it was stored in the house. He hadn't been in it for over a year, but it had been rubbed with neat's foot oil ever so often. Red heaved up the forty-pound saddle on one of the dead men's horses—or rather on Mr. Watson's, it being branded T. W.

When he told Peg it would be for her to drive the buckboard, she said she wouldn't; said she couldn't drive horses, said she'd walk first because she knew the horses would run away with her. He thought it a funny way for her to act but wouldn't argue. Being sure that Mr. Watson would soon tire in the saddle, not having ridden in so long a time, and be glad to take the reins, Red said, all right, he'd drive himself, Peg said, all right, she'd sit by him; so then he understood, or thought he did, what she was up to, but he hadn't guessed how far that girl could go in fixing things like she thought she wanted them.

She was in the house a long time and when she came out he didn't know her, not at first. One of the Mexican girls of about Peg's size was with her, and Red thought they were both Mexican girls, and one was dressed up as if for a *fiesta*.

Somehow Peg, probably with lies, had talked the girl out of her best clothes and, as nearly as he could tell, wore them as if she had grown into them—all except the red slippers. She had a high comb in her hair and a yellow scarf on her dark head, and wore petticoats that swelled out under the pleat-like folds. Lots of rice powder, too, was on her face. The high-heeled slippers were too tight for Peg's feet. She seemed to hobble and teeter in walking.

He asked, "What the devil do you think you're up to?"

"Don't you like me fixed up?"

The Mexican girl with her giggled shyly.

Red said, "We ain't headed for no fandango!"

Peg, sure of herself, smiled sweetly.

Red told her, "You walk like you had corns!"

That made her mad.

Mr. Watson helped her up to the buckboard seat and, though she got up clumsily, being unused to so many skirts about her legs, he said, "My, you are purty!" Peg thanked him nicely.

Red climbed up on the other side, reins in hand, having laid his rifle on the floorboards under the seat. He didn't look at her. His horse was tied on behind.

THE sun said it was past noon by an hour or two, and Mr. Watson thought they ought to be in town a little after dark. Mr. Watson, for the first time in his life, got into the saddle from a riding block. It had been put up for Nell Watson. As soon as he was in the saddle he settled down like the old-time cattleman he was. He had buckled on a gun and carried the rifle, not having a scabbard and refused Red's.

It was hot when they pulled out and would be hotter. Red grinned to think how Peg was going to wriggle and sweat in all those clothes that she wasn't used to.

When they came near the river, Red whoaed up, put on the brake, gave Peg the reins, then climbed his own horse and led Mr. Watson through the chaparral to look at the stocking-legged roan that Ramon had shot behind the ear.

"Just to try to find a broken leg on that horse," Red told him. "The kid brought her down here on the run. I seen him!"

Mr. Watson studied, nodded, turned his horse around and led the way back to the road.

Red got on the seat again, took the reins. Peg didn't say a word, but she had taken her feet out of the too tight slippers.

They crossed the river and pulled on, the horses plodding with heads a-bob up the long winding grade to the bench; and when they reached the top, Red looked all about and thought that anybody anywhere around for miles could see them and maybe not be seen. He brooded some on what would happen when they reached town. He expected trouble. Trouble was what guns were made for.

Peg was sweating all right. Perspiration ran down from under her hair and streaked

the powdered cheeks and she took off the scarf and laid it in her lap. She wriggled too because all those petticoats about her made it feel about the same as if her legs were wrapped in blankets. Red almost told her that Mexican girls had too much sense to dress up like that except at night. His thoughts popped into words. "You can't be pretty when you sweat!"

"Shut your mouth!" Peg said savagely, and the sweat on her face made it look a little like she cried.

Mr. Watson stuck to the saddle for a couple of hours before he came alongside and asked would Red mind if they changed places for a while.

Red tied Mr. Watson's horse to the buckboard, got into his own saddle, and jogged on ahead. After a time he turned aside to climb a knoll and was rounding it near the top when he saw a figure off west and going cross country hell-for-leather, so he backed his horse and stepped from the saddle the better to remain unseen though the rider was a long ways off. He whistled softly as he made out that the rider was in a side saddle. It could be somebody else than Nell Watson, but that's who he thought of; and thought too that the kid Ramon, or somebody, might have taken word over to the bunkhouse where she'd been waiting for Frank Masters and his two men to come back.

WHERE the woman was heading for, no telling; but, if she were Nell Watson, she would sure be making for where she thought there were people who would make more trouble. Anyhow, she was going fast, as if she didn't care about killing a horse.

By the time Red had returned to the road the buckboard had gone on a mile or more. He touched spurs to the horse that jumped willingly, then stumbled, coming down to his knees and Red yanked on the reins. But the horse was lame.

A hell of a note! Red thought, piling off and examining the injured leg. He couldn't find anything wrong except that the pastern joint was sensitive, so probably a tendon had been pulled; and he was the next thing to set down afoot. It would be hell to try to walk and about as bad to ride a three-legged horse, so he cussed some and sat down to smoke. He thought about shooting in the air, but Mr. Watson was probably too far off to hear.

Red figured that pretty soon Mr. Watson would get worried and come riding back. So Red stayed put, now and then having a look at the horse's ankle and found it swelling. He'd had a horse break a leg at full gallop in a dog hole and fling him fifty feet, heels over head; and he'd had horses go lame, but he had never been set down like this, forty miles from nowhere. So he took off the saddle and let the horse stand. It was getting late in the afternoon and Red squatted down in a yucca's shade a little way off the road, and thought things over and stayed patient.

The shadow kept stretching out and he kept standing up and stretching his neck, but there was no sign of Mr. Watson. He shook the last of his tobacco into a paper, tossed the sack away, and was making the most of his final smoke when he heard the far off drum-like beat of hoofs. More than one horse.

Maybe Mr. Watson had met somebody he knew and told them to hurry on and find Red; or it could be, Red thought, that somebody had found out from looking in the bed of the buckboard, what had happened at the ranch that morning—and didn't like the happening.

So when Red saw the two men round the turn ahead—and neither was Mr. Watson—he moseyed over, casual-like, and stood with his unsaddled horse between him and the road; and right off was glad he had because he didn't like the looks of the two men that pulled down with high jerk of rein in a way that made their horses almost squat and slide.

At first he thought he'd seen one of them before: the high shoulders, the long neck and narrow face, together with a kind of glare in the half-tight eyes, made him think of somebody; and he remembered that the somebody was Joe Hemlock. *So this is his brother George!* Red said to himself.

The other fellow was fatish, and had a red face, pig-shaped and squinty eyes. Both were on good high-spirited horses; and both had rifles under their legs but didn't make any motion toward them, nor toward their hand guns, probably because they didn't figure to meet up with anybody who'd make trouble here on the road.

That was where they made a mistake. Red came around the hind end of his horse with both guns out and he said, "Up with 'em!"

Hemlock looked like he'd been hit over the top of the head. The red-faced man tried to pull a gun as he rolled from the off side of his horse; and the horse being high-spirited and properly trained, didn't like it and jumped and sidled. That wasn't the right side to get off from. The fat fellow dropped his gun and was spilled face-down in the road.

Red said, "I didn't mean to scare you so bad!"

The fat man rolled over and sat up with his hands up and he cussed as hard as he could at Red for making fun of him.

Then Red told the man in the saddle, "Me, I'm Red Clark. I killed your brother and was told you'd be comin' around to even up. After what I've seen of how men fight in this country, I never expected to meet you head-on. Most men in this country sneak up from behind! Jack Kellem sent word you could find me at Watson's, didn't he?"

George Hemlock had dropped the reins and had his hands up, but wouldn't say anything.

Red told him, "I asked you polite!"

Hemlock said, "Yes. He sent word."

Red said, "You fellows met Mr. Watson on the road. What happened?"

Hemlock said sullenly, "We've got no quarrel with him!"

But the fat fellow in the road cussed and said that the damned greaser girl had lied to them! Which Red understood to mean that they, too, had somehow been fooled by Peg; and he said, "Two smart fellows like you ought to know better than to trust a woman!"

The fat fellow wanted to get up out of the road but Red told him to stay put, with his legs stretched out and his hands up; then Red asked, "Did you look at what was under the canvas in that buckboard?"

Hemlock shook his head, but the fat fellow asked, "Look at what?"

"Some more of your friends!"

The fat fellow asked who, but Red wouldn't say. He put one gun away, pulled the knife from his belt, walked up to Hemlock's horse and, keeping an eye on the fellow in the road, quick as a flash cut the reins off close to the bit.

Hemlock asked, "What the hell?"

Red told him, "You'll learn!"

After that, he jerked Hemlock's revolver from its holster, giving it a backward fling that sent it far away; then he said, "Use your left hand, pull your rifle and drop it!"

Hemlock surlily didn't move until Red explained, "Fella, I ain't foolin'!"

Hemlock put down his left arm and drew the rifle, all the time acting like he was trying to think of some way to use it; but Red was off to the side and a little behind him where he could keep watch on the man in the road too. When the rifle cleared the holster, Hemlock let it fall, muzzle down. Then there he sat with the reins cut and disarmed. He couldn't snatch for a gun or reins, drive spurs into the horse and bolt.

Red then went over and picked up the fat man's gun, gave it a backward fling too, far off the road. He took the rope from the saddle and tossed it to the fat man, "Get up and hobble his feet over there!"

The man said, "What?"

"Do it good. If you try tricks, the devil 'll have you in his bake oven quicker'n you can say 'Scat!'"

Red was too watchful to get up close enough for the fellow to jump up and grab at him; but he watched the man tie the rope around one of Hemlock's ankles, throw the rope under the horse and go to the other side, with Red following.

When the other ankle had been tied, Red told him, "Now you, Fatty, climb up behind Hemlock!"

So now they knew what Red had in mind, and the other fellow whined, "I can't!" and he got told, "Too bad! Then I'll hogtie and leave you here!"

"A hell of a note!" Hemlock muttered.

"Ain't it?" Red agreed. "Two of Jack Kellem's killers bein' tied up, without firing a shot—and all by a little boy from over the mountains who never stole a cow in his life!"

"Kellem!" said Hemlock, as if the name were an ugly cuss word. "Maybe he brought you in because he's afraid of me and my brother!"

RED perked his head to one side, sparrow-like and studied. He thought that was the way with bad men and law-breakers; as soon as something wrong happened,

they began to suspect one another, distrustfully.

Then Red told him, "Listen, you so-and-so," going on to say, "Just 'cause I talked to Kellem without knowing who he was, don't get it into your head that I'm one of his kind!"

It was beginning to grow faintly dark with dusk settling over the earth; and Red, who was nearly lynx-eared, heard another horse coming; so he went over to where his saddle lay and pulled the rifle, getting ready for whoever else was likely to make trouble.

It was Mr. Watson. He pulled down a ways off because he couldn't tell right off what was going on. Red called for him to come on up. He did and Red explained, "I'm taking these fellows along into town so folks can see it's not much of a trick to corral badmen!"

"W'y, son, soon as they're loose they'll kill you! They'd killed me only that little lady—they thought she was a Mexican girl—lied 'em into thinking I'd left the ranch to get away from *you!*"

Hemlock heard and swore at Peg about like a snake hisses. The fat fellow's red face—red even with the bristles on it—swelled up with surprised anger and he cussed hard.

Mr. Watson said again, "They'll kill you, sure!"

RED told him, "I ain't been killed yet by fellows that could knock these *hombre's* heads together and stick 'em in a pocket!"

Red put his own rope on Hemlock's horse, led the horse into a little gully at the side of the road, made the fat man climb from the gully's bank up behind Hemlock; then Mr. Watson tied the fat man's wrists together, fastening his arms around Hemlock's belly.

Red said, "That way he won't fall off—like he did a while ago!"

Then Red switched his own saddle to the fat fellow's horse and, pulling the bridle from his own lame horse so it could graze, promised the horse: "Take it easy. You're one of my best friends, and I'll have somebody take care of you!"

He put the lead rope on Hemlock's horse and started off with Mr. Watson riding alongside and looking back every half minute, still filled with wonder.

"That Dick Haynes on behind Hemlock there has killed a half dozen men, son!"

"Must've been cripples that were asleep!"

To Red's way of thinking, "killers" wouldn't stand up and fight straight back; they always tried for some trick that would give them an advantage, like even that tough fellow Masters, who had made his horse rear.

They didn't like it if you met them head-on with guns blazing.

Mr. Watson told them when these men stopped the buckboard on the road, this Dick Haynes put a hand to his gun and asked Mr. Watson where the hell he thought he was going; and he said to town.

Then Hemlock said, "So you've called in another range detective, named Clark! Want him to frame up lies about people!"

THAT was a guess, of course, based on knowledge about the other Association men who had been dry-gulched.

But Peg spoke up, sounding a little like she didn't speak English good, and said, "You look for that Clark man? How I hope you find him! Him and that ugly wife of his that think she is so pretty!" She rattled on, saying that Mr. Watson had left the ranch to get away from Red Clark because Clark was some relation to Mrs. Watson, who was making a big fuss over him and let him act like he owned the ranch!

Such a tangle of lies confused Hemlock and Haynes, particularly when she went on to say that this Red Clark was an old friend of Jack Kellem's. All of which didn't sooth Hemlock's need for revenge; but, completely fooled, and not knowing just what to think, they had ridden on.

When Mr. Watson expressed fear that they would meet and kill Red on the road, Peg hooted at him; it would, she said, take more than two men to be a match for Red. Then she rapidly talked of her gold mine, saying she would be rich, and would make Red rich too—but wouldn't live on a ranch. They would go to big cities, spend money, have fun.

As soon as Hemlock and Haynes were far enough out of sight—so they couldn't know they were being followed—Mr. Watson climbed from the buckboard and got into his saddle, riding back to learn what had happened.

XI

SOMEWHERE after nine o'clock they pulled into town, being that late because they had lost some hours on the road, they hadn't been able to travel fast since Hemlock and Haynes were riding double.

Mr. Watson drove, with Peg beside him; and when they hauled up in front of the Horseshoe saloon, he climbed down slowly and went in.

Peg lifted her eyes to the lighted windows across the street where Lucille Brandon lived; and Red, from the saddle, faced his two prisoners.

The first man out of the saloon after Mr. Watson went in was the old Negro. He came through the front door, the white of his eyes showing in the starlight, and he teetered with a drunken look on the edge of the sidewalk as he paused to stare at the two men on one horse; then he crossed the street on the run and vanished into the hotel before Mr. Watson came out again with the three or four men who had been loitering there. The bartender followed.

Peg sat motioness on the wagon seat with her hands in her lap.

The men out of the saloon looked at two of the country's badmen, now tied together on one horse, then crowded about the buckboard as Mr. Watson stood on a wheel hub and drew back the mildewed canvas. Amazed oaths were hushed; and finally one man said, "I'll go get the sheriff outa bed!"

A woman's head appeared at a second-story window across the street, and the strong husky voice called, "Now what the hell?"

Nobody answered until Old Tom Watson stepped farther into the street and lifted his voice.

"We had a ruckus at the ranch and I brought in some evidence!" He pointed to the two men on one horse. "They been fetched as evidence, too!"

"I'll be right down!" the Brandon woman yelled.

And soon she came hurrying across the dusty street, holding her long dress almost to her knees. The old Negro jogged at her heels. She stopped in surprise, recognizing Hemlock and Haynes. "Well, now, if you two don't look pretty!" Then, "Tom, did you do that to 'em?"

"No, 'am," said Mr. Watson, indicating Red. "He done it!"

Lucille Brandon turned peeringly. Her voice was soft. "Oh, you, eh? Kid, just who the hell are you?"

"Me, I'm Red Clark of Tulluco. Mr. Watson here is a kind of uncle. He wrote me he was having trouble. I come down to help how I could." He didn't know what he was in for, but he wasn't going to talk soft. "In the mountains I met her—" He pointed at Peg. "Her and her father. They learned who I am and why I was on my way down here. Some of Kellem's men rode in. Not so many rode out!

"Her and me there started for town and got separated. She was here when I rode in. She wouldn't let on she knew me. You know about that! That night after I left town, I run across her out on the flat. She was scared over how you acted about her not sayin' she knew me. So she grabbed a horse and rode, purt' near blind—just to get away."

Red didn't mention the helpfulness of old black Ben, or that Peg had tried to head for the Wallace brothers' ranch.

Peg sat motionless, hands in her lap; and the Brandon woman, taking notice of her now, said with a throaty laugh, "You little dunce! I been worried sick! Honey, my bark's worse'n my bite!"

The old Negro nodded vigorously.

"Next," Red went on, wanting this Brandon woman to know the full truth, "her and me stumbled on an out of the way place where Nell Watson, as she called herself, and a fellow with jackboots and a black beard and nice clothes was."

Her "What!" rang out like an angered jealous oath.

"He was nice as pie to us. Peg told him we were lost, trying to get to Watson's. We hadn't actually seen the woman with him, but—"

Lucille Brandon said, "Oh?" with relief, and instantly demanded, "Then why the hell did you say—"

"Let me talk and you'll learn! Two horses were there. One was a roan with three white stockings. The directions the man give weren't acc'rate. Took a long time to get to Watson's. When I did, I saw a Mexican kid leadin' the roan at a trot into the chaparral —where the kid shot the horse. I jumped

him and he told me Nell Watson had told him to take the horse off and shoot it. Now you can figure it out your ownself!"

The Brandon woman put her hands on her hips. "Go on!"

"You see, Nell Watson knew we were headin' for the ranch and had seen her horse, and would again if he wasn't shot!"

"Go on!"

"This Nell Watson, as she calls herself, didn't like us bein' there on account of Mr. Watson saying I was an old friend, but more 'specially because the Mexican kid told her I had seen the horse—dead. So that night she put this same kid up to takin' a shot at me. With my own rifle. He don't shoot good—not in the dark!"

"How'd you know he done it?"

" 'Cause I had suspicions enough to put a hand to his throat and he told me!"

"What'd you do to him?"

"Him? Nothin'."

"What do you mean, nothin'?"

"Nothin'. I don't hurt kids women have made a fool of!"

The big Brandon woman made a strange confused sound, like a puzzled oath. "Go on!"

"After breakfast this woman that calls herself Nell Watson—and ain't and never was!—took me and Peg upstairs for a talk. She pulled a shotgun out of a closet and leveled down. Peg here fooled her and got up close enough to grab the gun, so all it done was make a noise when it went off. Peg nearly tore her hair and clothes off in the fight they had!"

"Good!" said the Brandon woman, standing there in the ankle-deep dust with arms akimbo.

"Mr. Watson come up. The woman got out and rode off. She sent the foreman and a couple more over to settle things. And the three of 'em," Red concluded, pointing toward the buckboard, "are a-layin' there. We brought 'em to show the sheriff and other folks that Mr. Watson is still runnin' his ranch!"

Lucille Brandon's hand dropped weakly from her hips. She called Red the ugliest name she knew, but the word didn't have any anger in it; then she turned and Mr. Watson gave a hand to help her step up on a wheel-hub and she gazed down in the clear starlight at the dead men. Old Ben, who was about like her slave and proud to be, went around to the other side and peered, then stepped away and kept shaking his head like he thought this was bad, terribly bad. Some other of the men had another look, too, as if maybe they had missed whatever it was that held the Brandon woman's eyes so tensely.

When she stepped down she looked at Mr. Watson and nodded. "You been made a fool of a long time, Tom."

"I reckon, yes 'am!" he admitted in a draggy undertone.

After that she went a little closer to Hemlock and Haynes, who had been like two mutes. Mr. Watson explained wearily, "Red was way behind the buckboard and his horse went too lame to ride. These fellows come along to jump him, but he got their guns off 'em and I don't know why he didn't shoot!"

She faced about again, demanding of Red, "Why didn't you?"

"If I had, folks—some folks—would have said I drygulched 'em. So I pulled their tail feathers, stuck 'em on one horse, and brought 'em to show how badmen quiet down! It's for the sheriff to lock 'em up."

She asked, "How long will they stay locked up, do you think?"

"Long as the sheriff keeps 'em that way! I reckon he'd better — there's more honest men in this country than outlaws!"

"Maybe you're right," Lucille Brandon half muttered, again looking toward the buckboard where three of the bad bunch lay.

THE sheriff had been roused out of bed and came with waggle-haste that was almost a run. He said, "Howdy, Tom," in eager friendliness to Mr. Watson, looked uneasily toward Hemlock and Haynes, asked Red, "What you been up to now?" and didn't wait for an answer, but took off his hat to Lucille Brandon and asked, "What's the country comin' to?"

Her answer jarred him and her voice was furious. "It's coming to where things are changed! I'm damn' sick and tired of not knowing who are my friends! Of having them I help and trust turn against me! The deal's all over and a new shuffle has started! Tom Watson here has found out Nell's not his wife and never was, so—"

"Nell—not his wife?" The sheriff wasn't putting on. His mouth hung open as with a broken jaw.

"That old scarecrow just horn-swoggled him! What any man ever saw in her, don't ask me!" The malice of jealousy sizzled in Lucille Brandon's words. "I've thought for a long time she was making up to Jack, but he lied about it—like all men do! I'm through!" she said, and swept her arm violently. "Through with the whole kit and caboodle of you! That kid there—" the moving arm settled straight out at Red—"is worth ten tons of mangy coyotes that wear pants! Because he's honest! Understand? Is honest and can't be scared!"

That shut everybody up like they had plasters over their mouths until Haynes got his breath and cussed her out with, "You're a fine one to talk about bein' honest! W'y, you old battle axe, all you've got to your name is what Jack Kellem give you from his share of what we've done!"

She swung about, calling Haynes a liar. "I've bought and sold and made more out of business than you crooked-back horse and cow thieves ever got by shootin' people to steal! I'm goin' to keep it, too, as mine! Ever' smidge of it! I'm goin' in the cattle business with Tom Watson—"

Mr. Watson's face took on an expression of complete dismay, like that of a man who, just having had his fingers burned by one red-hot poker held out to him by a woman, is expected to grab another.

She went on, "Tom's got the range and I've got the money, and cows are plentiful to be had—honest. So rustlers are all through in this country!"

Again her swinging arm settled, this time on Hemlock and Haynes. "You lock 'em up, Sheriff! And you'd better see that they stay locked up or I'll cut your gizzard out and fry it! Times has changed from right this minute to Kingdom Come! Haul these dead rustlers off and take the two live ones to jail!"

Red sat as awkwardly as a stuffed monkey, not knowing what to think. Maybe the woman was putting on, just to fool them. He'd heard tell that women kicked over the traces and turned clear around when they got jealous. Maybe she felt that jealous of Nell Watson.

The old Negro leaned forward in a pop-eyed lurch. He was used to her tantrums but this was a new kind. Tom Watson fiddled with a plug of tobacco, like he was solemnly debating on whether or not to take a chew and, deciding against it, put the plug into his pocket. The sheriff stood with tired gawkiness, blinked with head cocked like he was listening for something more. To him, it sounded like she was just making talk to fool people.

XII

UPSTAIRS at the hotel Lucille Brandon paced about restlessly, walking heavily. She took a drink of whiskey every few minutes and offered the bottle to Mr. Watson who tiredly said no; proudly said he wasn't drinking any more, ever again, though all the while he was aching for some of the fire that would warm his tired cold bones. Learning who Nell was had been mighty hard on the old man. He sat wearily with his hat on his knee and wished for bed.

Red had a drink or two and wanted something to eat, but sat quietly watching the big woman get drunk and talkative. She dragged her dusty skirts about the floor, now and then stomping down as if crushing cockroaches. "Cockroach" was the mildest name she called Jack Kellem. She didn't seem now to care how Peg had lied and run away; and the dark Peg, who never appeared frightened by such dangers as would ordinarily terrify a girl, sat in her disarrayed Mexican finery, hands in her lap, and looked sullenly uneasy. Also she was very tired.

With whiskey, Lucille's crazed jealousy increased. Now when she stamped down it was on Nell Watson—calling her bitter names. Kellem got a lot of cussin', too. He was, Lucille said, always running after women! She wished to God she'd never run away with him, leaving a good home and a chance to be a famous actress. She'd saved his neck time and again, but never would again. The hell with him!

Red didn't know much about women but guessed that Lucille was so mad at Kellem because she loved him. A handsome fellow as Red had seen in the brief meeting, and Peg had affirmed. Good looks made women silly, Red thought; made the man that had them silly, too.

Red told himself, *Damn it, I'm hungry!* but sat still.

Lucille recklessly said things that she ought to have kept to herself. The rings

flashed on her fingers, sparkled when she rubbed at the tears in her eyes. Repeatedly she turned on Mr. Watson with woozy bleating. "You forgive me, Tom?"

"Forgiveness" meant he wouldn't blame her now for having known the trick Nell Watson played on him. Mr. Watson, looking about as helplessly fuddled as if drunk, mumbled, "Sure, sure. All over now. Sure. I allus liked you anyhow."

Red didn't like her, didn't trust her. Anger and liquor reddened her face and the nearly colorless eyes glittered. Now and then she flung a handkerchief to her face and bawled. Peg stared in a way that seemed disgusted.

Red said out loud, "I want to eat!"

No one paid any attention. The Brandon woman kept talking. Mr. Watson tiredly dozed off, slept with head forward and mouth adroop. She bent to Red, shaking a finger in his face, "Never trust a woman! Not the best of them! We're no good—none of us! Look how we lie and cheat and steal!".

He said, "Yes, ma'm."

Then, a little staggery, she crossed to Peg and in the same manner warned her never to trust a man, any man. She took Peg by both shoulders, shook her hard, demanded, "Promise me you won't ever trust a man!"

Red eased out of the door, closed it gently, moved down the hall and down the backstairs. He was going to eat. He had never seen a woman with a walking jag before, but this big woman had one; and the last he heard of her voice she was telling Peg what all she had done for men in her life and how they had been ungrateful and abusive.

She had another drink, this time from the tipped-up bottle, took a pose and announced to Peg that as a girl she had been on the stage, could have had a great career—then began to bawl about leaving her home and baby for the no-good so-and-so and such-and-such of a man! Peg stared uneasily. Mr. Watson snored.

The door opened soundlessly. Peg's eyes went past the drunken woman to the dark-bearded man in the long black coat and high black boots who was standing there with both revolvers out. His gaze whipped about the room as if he had been told what to expect, but he wasn't finding whom he expected. Peg gasped out loud when Jack Kellem spoke to her from across the room. "Where is he?

His voice was soft, smooth, at ease. Lucille stumbled in turning, cried, "Jack!" and staggered toward him, her anger forgotten, her arms out embracingly.

Kellem stepped into the room, easily moved aside from her, but she came on. She was taller than he was, and clutched at him lovingly. With the swiftness of a striking snake, his gun swung up and came down on her head and she dropped as though her legs were broken.

Mr. Watson had awakened and seen. He said, "Damn you!" under the menace of the hip-leveled gun. "Hit a woman!"

Peg stared with frozen eyes.

Jack Kellem said easily, "For all I knew she meant to grapple and give you the chance to shoot!" He lifted an eyebrow, smiled a little. "I understand you two are going into the cattle business together—when I'm out of the way!" He hadn't been in town long but he had heard the Brandon woman's crazy talk.

Mr. Watson repeated, "Hit a woman!"

"Ah, yes!" said Kellem, pleasantly. "You let 'em make a fool out of you and never lift a hand! But take notice, please—" now more to Peg than to Mr. Watson—"I was careful to strike where her hair is piled high. A little severity is often the greatest kindness you can show a woman." He smiled at Peg. "Where is your ah—husband, I believed you called him?" Evidently he knew now that she had lied.

Peg staringly said nothing and Jack Kellem, with smooth easiness, thrust his right-hand gun under his coat in the holster set for a cross-draw on the left of his belly, then coolly stooped and pulled Mr. Watson's gun and tossed it across the room. He remarked casually that he didn't have much time to spend in town as he put the other gun on his hip under the coat.

After that he pushed his black hat back and gazed with amused friendliness at Peg. "You are quite a girl!" he said, his voice soft and warm. "Pretty, too!" Then, "Where's your friend, Red Clark?"

Peg shook her head.

Kellem smiled. "I don't mind a woman lying. It's natural as a kitten's purr! But is he hiding in the next room?"

Again Peg shook her head. Mr. Watson said with slow dull anger, "Red don't hide!"

"But ought to," said Kellem, "after the trick he's played on this girl! Horse thieves are decent honest folks alongside of him!"

"What trick?" asked Mr. Watson.

"Of sending men up to steal her gold mine!"

"My gold mine!" said Peg, her face frozen with questioning.

"I can't see how he'd play such a trick on a girl like you!" Kellem was matter-of-factly sympathetic, and shook his head wonderingly.

"Trick?" Peg asked, her hands on both arms of the chair as if hanging on.

"W'y, yes," said Kellem. "But he's just a young fellow and wants to get ahead, and doesn't yet know there are things in the world worth more than gold!" He sighed, "Lots more than all the gold on earth! He'll find out!"

"How do you know so damn' much about it?" asked Mr. Watson.

Kellem explained as easily as counting to ten, "The first day he got to town he found a couple of men he thought were miners. Told them to hurry into the mountains and grab the mine. Said where to go. Said to hurry because he was pretty sure this girl would send somebody up to hold it for—" he turned to Peg—"you. Said he had to beat you to it!"

"You're a liar!" Tom Watson told him.

Kellem shook his head, smiling. "No, no, I'm not! He'd picked a couple of friends of mine." To Peg, still smiling, "I'm a hard case and all that—" his tone let her know that he really wasn't a hard case at all—"and I steal a horse now and then, or maybe a cow or two. But—" earnestly—"I never yet took a dollar off a woman! Never! And do you want to know what I told those fellows? I said, 'If there really is a mine up there, you hold it for that girl!' I said, 'It's little enough I can do for her after some of my men went tearing up there and tried to take it away from her father'—when I didn't know a thing about it!"

Peg's breath came as though she had been running up-hill. "Red done that?"

"Yes, Red Clark. So I hear he calls himself!"

Then Peg said broodingly, "So that's why he shut me up when I tried to talk about my mine! Said I didn't even have a mine! Oh!"

Kellem replied gently. "I feel sorry for you. I really do. And you have loved him?"

"Onct maybe, but now—no!" As she said it she stood up and her voice was up.

"By God!" said Jack Kellem, "I'll do everything I can to see that you get everything that's yours." Tenderly, "You poor child!" He put a fatherly arm about her and she didn't move. "We—you and me—haven't had much luck in the people we trust!" He looked toward the unconscious Lucille, huddled on the floor. The blow on her head had knocked her into drunken unconsciousness. "She has tried to steal everything from me she could get her hands on!"

Mr. Watson spoke up. "You didn't do any stealin'—you and that Nell!"

"Nell?" Kellem seemed mildly shocked. "An ugly mean old woman—but she had cattle to sell. I bought them."

"Stole 'em!" said Mr. Watson. "You knew she wasn't my wife and had no right to—"

"Not your wife?" Jack Kellem asked with all the minor aspects of surprise. "I knew nothing of the kind. Not your wife? That's news to me!"

Mr. Watson pointed at the crumpled Brandon woman. "She knew it—said so!"

Kellem raised an eyebrow, shrugged. "She never told me. There are lots of things, I find, that she never told!" He turned to Peg. "It's easy to fool a man when he trusts you. As that Red has done with you. I'll do what I can to help you. I feel I owe it to you. Poor child!"

Peg put her hands to her eyes, leaned against him and tried not to cry.

Mr. Watson looked at Kellem, told him, "You're a dirty liar!"

Kellem's eyes flashed murderously, but he turned Peg about, urged her into the adjoining room; and, when she had gone with blind stumbling, he went to where Mr. Watson was sitting and didn't speak, but swiftly cross-drew his gun and with continuous motion slammed its long barrel down on the old man's gray head. Tom Watson fell forward with blood gushing from his nose and mouth.

Kellem smiled as he stepped softly into the next room, following Peg. A shot would have made a noise and he would have had

to explain. So he had struck. She was a damn' pretty girl—and easily fooled with lies. Most women were.

WHEN Red had gone down the hotel's back stairs into the alley, he followed the alley until he came to the rear of the restaurant. He didn't know how many people were on the street, and he objected to being talked to, stared at. And he was hungry.

He looked through an open back door and saw the cook sitting on the edge of a kitchen table and the raw-boned freckled-faced girl leaned close with an arm about his neck.

She jumped when she noticed Red's face peering out of the darkness, and he grinned a little, coming in.

"Folks are supposed to go to the front door!" she snapped.

Red said, "Yes, ma'm, but—"

The cook was a hefty fellow and had been among those who peered over the side of Mr. Watson's buckboard when the mildewed canvas was pulled back. Right off he told Red, "God A'mighty, fella! Hemlock and Haynes was in here a while ago and et!"

"Was they?"

"They went on across to the Horseshoe!" said the girl. "I watched 'em!"

Red wanted to know who let 'em out of jail?

"They prob'ly wasn't ever put in!" the cook guessed.

Red said, "Well, folks, I didn't come expectin' to eat in the kitchen. I just didn't want to be stopped and talked to on the street. But if you don't mind—I'm all-fired hungry. I'd like to eat quiet and plenty. Can I here?"

"But if them outlaws—I mean fellas," the girl corrected, "finds out?"

"Let 'em!" said the cook. "He's wearin' guns, ain't he? He made us feed him in the kitchen. Sure!"

"Thanks," Red told him, taking off his hat and moving to the chair that the cook placed.

The girl said, "We don't stay open late as this, usual. But tonight—"

The cook scooted the skillet over a pothole, shook down the ashes, reached for the wood. "How come you didn't plug them fellows, 'stead of packin' 'em in on horseback?"

"Now, Charley, please don't!" The girl protested. Then to Red, "He's liable to get himself into trouble, talkin' free that away."

"Not to me, ma'm!" Then Red explained, "If I'd shot 'em, folks would've said I done it when they wasn't looking. Soon as I eat, I'm going over to the Horseshoe—and folks can look on!"

The cook nearly dropped the coffee pot. "Y-you're what?"

The girl clattered down the knife, fork, and spoon as if spilling them and stared at Red. "Y-you mean—y-you—alone?"

"W'y, that Haynes has killed—" the cook began.

"Hemlock's worse!" said the girl—"And on account of his brother—"

"Haynes has killed purt'near seven or eight men, so—"

"Shish!" said the girl. "It ain't good to even say his name!"

"How about Jack Kellem?" Red asked. "He come to town often?"

"No!" said the girl.

"At times, I reckon," said Charley. "The sheriff don't care! Only Kellem does sort sneak in and out—would look too bad for the sheriff if he didn't."

"Will you shish!" the girl begged.

RED had steak and fried potatoes and stewed tomatoes out of a can, and he had prunes and pie and three cups of coffee with lots of sugar. Then he rolled a cigarette and reached in his pocket for money. "How much I owe?"

"Four-bits," said the girl, promptly.

But the cook held up his palm, waggled it. "I don't take money for watchin' *you* eat!"

"Shh-ish!" said the girl. "Two fellows just comin' in. Strangers."

She went out to get their order and shook her head when she returned, saying quietly that she didn't know who they were. The cook peered through his lookout hole in the partition, then in an undertone he told Red, "They're the Wallace brothers from down South Forks way."

Red had heard their name, never unfavorably, but asked, "Cowmen?"

The cook nodded.

"Honest?"

He shrugged. "Mebbe. I don't know. Rich, I hear—so mebbe not too honest."

While the girl was taking their supper out to the Wallace brothers, Red moved to the back door. The cook stopped him and held out his hand. "I think you are an awful fool—that is, if you—are you?"

"What I say, I do!" Red told him a little stiffly, not liking the imputation that maybe he had been talking big just to hear his tongue rattle, and without shaking hands went into the alley.

The cook hesitated thoughtfully, then ran through the restaurant and peered from the front door. The two men who were beginning to eat looked up inquiringly and the girl called, "Charley?"

Charley turned about and said in excitement, "By God, he is going there!"

"Who, going where?" asked one of the Wallace brothers.

"That's Red Clark! He heard Hemlock and Haynes was in the Horseshoe. Said he'd go in after 'em—and he is! Headin' right straight 'cross the street for—"

The Wallace brothers weren't young. They looked weather-worn and saddle-trained. Both jumped from the table and crowded the cook out on the sidewalk so they could see through the door.

A block down the street they saw a lanking figure going cater-cornered across the street toward the Horseshoe's lighted swinging doors.

One of the Wallaces asked, "That Clark boy—for a showdown?"

"So he said!" the cook answered.

"Come on, Harve! Let's go see! Maybe he was just talkin' big!"

"Not that fellow!" the cook announced with a kind of personal pride in Red. "What he says, he does!"

Harve Wallace, the older, the bigger, said, "All we've heard about him is to the good!"

GEORGE Hemlock, tall and sour, stood with whiskey between his fingers while the fatish Dick Haynes, with his back to the bar, made up some lies to explain how Red had tricked them—leveling down, according to Haynes, with a rifle from across his saddle before they knew who he was; and even then, said Haynes, they'd have had the best of it, but Old Tom Watson came riding back to help Red.

There were over a half dozen men in the Horseshoe, mostly townsmen, hanging about to see and hear; but the sheriff knew that two were Kellem scouts, young fellows that went here and there seeking out the lay of the land. One was short and pock-marked, and the other had a broken nose. They didn't talk much. They hadn't said that Kellem came with them into town. They hadn't said that Nell Watson came ramping out the ranch where Kellem was, and wildly told that Red Clark had killed Masters and two other men at the Watson ranch—which was how she heard it from an excited Mexican kid (not Ramon) who took the news to her. That was what they believed, believing too that Red was a cattleman detective; and they knew that Kellem now thought the game was about up in this country and they would have to pull out.

The sheriff had told with a kind of explanatory pleading that though Lucille Brandon had ordered Hemlock and Haynes to jail—"I didn't lock 'em up." He knew they would retell all that to Kellem.

The sheriff was an old, tired unhappy man who had got himself involved with the bunch because he needed money, and he felt the devil rode his shoulders. No shaking the devil off once he got his hairy legs wrapped around a fellow's neck.

The pock-marked Harry and the broken-nosed Berry had come riding in with Jack Kellem because they'd known from Nell Watson's report that Red was heading into town. What Nell Watson had told she'd do them if they didn't kill that Red was enough to make a tough man shiver; and they knew

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she meant it, for that woman didn't stop at anything.

In town, as soon as they learned that Lucille had taken Mr. Watson, the girl and Red Clark up to her room, Jack Kellem said, "Leave that to me! I'll go up and settle with him—and them!"

So now they listened to Haynes bragging about what he'd do, and they saw Hemlock's sullen glower at the whiskey; and all the while Harry and Berry had their ears cocked in expectant listening for shots from upstairs across the street that would let them know Kellem had done as he said he would. But time went by, and there were no shots, so they wondered uneasily and took a few more drinks to ease the tension of waiting.

Haynes lifted his loud voice. "There ain't no man alive can take me alive 'less he plays tricks. And I'm goin' to lace that Clark with lead from his Adam's-apple to his belly button—"

The double swing doors opened as if hit by a stormy wind, and when the doors closed Red was standing inside the saloon, empty-handed, with hands down, palms backwards, shoulders forward, head up and eyes on fire. Townsmen squeaked and yipped with hasty backward shuffle. The bartender's shoulders went down level with the bar, and the old Negro got off his chair in a peering crouch—the floor being the safest place for onlookers.

Hemlock nervously overturned his whiskey. The old sheriff said, "Good God!" The pock-marked Harry scrouged backwards, his eyes searching beyond Red for who else was with him because he knew men—and none of the men Harry and Berry knew walked in on other men alone, not if outnumbered. Berry twisted about, thinking it must be planned to have somebody else enter from the back way as Red came through the front.

Red said to Hemlock and Haynes, "All right, you fellas! Put up your hands! You're goin' to jail or you're goin' to be buried!" And his hands were still empty as he said it.

The fat Haynes gulped, tried to swallow and couldn't. He twitched like a man nearly motionless on a tight rope, uncertain of his balance. The sheriff's breath was hoarse as the croup. He almost spoke up, reminding Red that jail was the sheriff's say-so, but he

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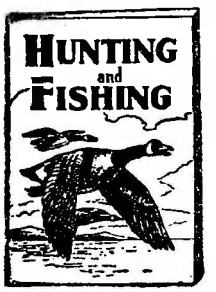

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didn't, not when he saw how Red looked, so he moved, sidling along the bar.

In the long, or seemingly long, silence men just gawked just like they were watching somebody fall from high up, and would die when he hit the ground.

Hemlock yelled, "Be damned 'f I will!" and jerked.

He was fast. Red was swift. Hemlock fired twice. His first bullet struck the door behind Red and his next went into the floor before his own feet as he doubled over, dead with a slug in his heart—killed by a shot that blazed from hip-high over Red's holster.

The broken-nosed Harry, never imagining that one man had a chance against so many, yanked and fired and went down with a bullet in his belly, even as his own hammer fell. The pock-marked Harry had started to draw, but threw up his hands, then turned and ran with thumping clatter—hands still up—as he disappeared in the darkness at the back of the saloon.

And Dick Haynes stood there while smoke swirled about him. Both hands were away up and they trembled, his eyes were wide, bloodshot, bulging.

The sheriff mumbled to himself, "God A'mighty! God A'mighty!"

The old Negro got off the floor, looking very tired and excited and a little pleased, then he went with tiptoe scurrying out the back way. Red still blocked the swing doors.

Townsmen edged forward with scared peering. Berry, writhing about on the dirty floor and soon to die, screamed curses at the cowardly Haynes. At least Hemlock had gone down with a gun in his hand.

Red's anger was as if his tongue had turned to flame; he told Haynes he was the biggest lyin' braggart that ever put a bullet into a sick man's back. Then, thrusting both guns into their holsters, Red walked up to Haynes, took his gun from him, turned on the sheriff.

"I've never seen the like of you! You've got a star on and you won't fight! You pretend to lock men up and don't! Stand and drink with 'em and listen to 'em brag—knowin' they're horse thieves, rustlers, killers!"

The sheriff flushed, hot and heavy; his tired eyes hung open with a hurt look that seemed trying for anger and couldn't make

it. He moved his eyes and the Wallace brothers were shouldering open the swing doors.

Red swung about, suspecting the strangers.

Harve Wallace, the elder and a weather-hardened man, with a cool look about the saloon, eyed the sheriff and said, "We are backin' his hand!" and gestured toward Red.

The other Wallace—John—came forward, letting the door swing back; and he said sternly, "Sheriff, he—" meaning Red—"has called the turn on you. We've got men camped outside of town ready to come in and take charge of things!"

"Charge? Take charge?" The old sheriff was shaky as he protested, but tried to look firm. "I'm still sheriff!"

"Oh, no you are not!" said Harve Wallace, the bigger and older of the brothers, moving close and speaking clear. "An Inspector for the Cattlemen's Association has been prowlin' around and learnt things and sent in his report to the governor. The governor has ordered you removed. We come over to be on hand!"

"Lots of us," John Wallace went on, "didn't want to believe you was actually in with the outlaws. But now we do! This young fellow's forced a showdown—"

He looked at Hemlock, down on the floor, then across to Berry, quiet now and dying, and after that at Dick Haynes, whose red face, covered with a thick patch of bristles, suddenly seemed shrunken and flabby; he had the kind of fear that eats away a man's bones, makes the skin and flesh sag.

John Wallace then offered his hand to Red. "Dave Martin has told us about you, but—"

"Who?"

"Martin. Cattlemen's inspector—" John Wallace smiled a bit. "You met him as Pecos Peters! He's with our bunch, camped a couple of miles outside town."

Again the swing doors opened and the old Negro rushed in. His wrinkled face was broken up in a look of agony, and the voice rose in a wail. "Jack Kellem's done come an' killed Miss Lucille, and Mr. Watson's dyin'—and that girl—your girl!" he said to Red, "has run off with 'im! He was over to the hotel, tryin' to catch *you!*"

(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES)

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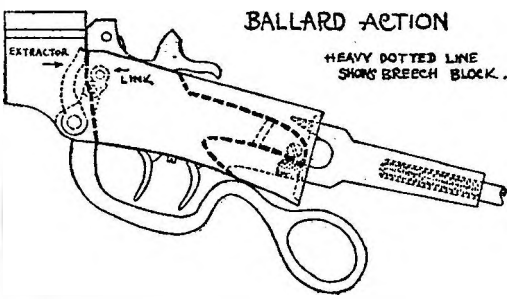
THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF



The Ballard Rifle and an Excellent Book

THE patent granted to C. H. Ballard covering his invention of a rifle action was dated November 5, 1861. Ballard rifles were manufactured for in the neighborhood of thirty years. Yet, today many shooters prefer this old rifle action for use, with a modern barrel, in high-class, small-bore competition. Seems weird, doesn't it? Especially when you consider that guns with this action were being manufactured during the Civil War.

The Ballard is, of course, a single-shot, and the breech block is actuated by a lever that forms the trigger guard.

Outstanding among Ballard advantages is its tight and positive breeching. This is one of the main reasons for its popularity among .22-caliber target shooters.

The Ballard is easy to take down: just open lever, remove lever pin and the block, which completely encloses the hammer and trigger parts, slides out. This housing against dirt and moisture was a feature contained only in the Sharp-Borchardt of all the rifles of the single-shot period. I used one of these rifles out in the Panhandle sections of Oklahoma and Texas, where sand and dirt gets around quite a bit (an understatement if I ever saw one) and had comparatively little trouble in this department.

The durability of the Ballard action is remarkable if taken care of, and used with

medium and low pressure loads, for which it was intended. The link connecting the breech block and finger lever generally gets the most wear, but fortunately it is easily made and replaced.

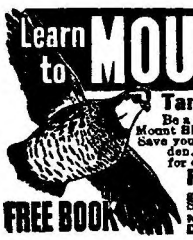
Once I had one of these rifles that was barreled and chambered for the .40-85 Ballard cartridge, and of all the Ballards I have used, it gave the most trouble. The finger lever was loose most of the time and the link for some reason or other gave a lot of trouble. I finally took a day off and made a link and finger-lever pin of tool steel, tempering these parts to a straw color, and my trouble was over.

All Ballards that I have used had good trigger pulls. This includes double-set jobs as well as the regular single trigger, which incidentally has practically no back lash. I have had, for many years, a little single-trigger Ballard rifle which is barreled and chambered (as it came from the factory) for the .22 Short cartridge. This little gun gets a lot of use on chipmunks, and for general plinking, and it has never required one bit of repair work.

The Ballard has unusually short lock time, and target shooters generally make it even faster by installing a heavier main spring, lightening the hammer weight and notching it to position closer to the firing pin in the cocked position.

Several years ago I sold a fine Ballard Schuetzen target rifle (barrel by Arthur Hubalek, and action tune-up by George Hyde) to a friend for forty dollars (I wish I had it back). He brought it to the range to try it out, and of course everyone present, including a target-shooting hot shot of national fame, wanted to handle said rifle. When it came the "hot shot's" turn to look the gun over, he proceeded to snap the finger lever open while the hammer was cocked. I thought my friend was going to shoot him. Fortunately only a small portion of the edge of the hammer notch was broken, and it was repaired without too much trouble. Anyway, never open the finger lever of a Ballard rifle when the hammer is cocked.

Arthur Hubalek, the above-mentioned barrel maker and oldtime shooter, has shown me several Ballard actions on which he has eliminated this trouble by fitting a housing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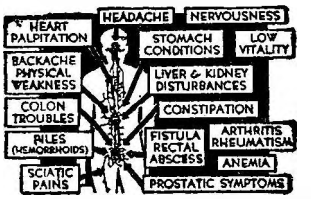

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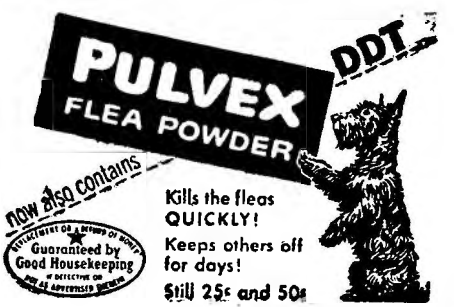

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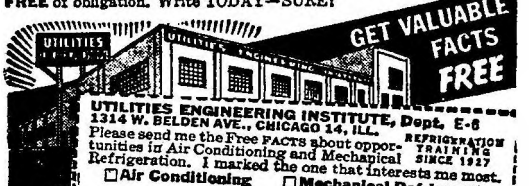

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over the hammer, which was cut down until it acts only as a sear to hold back a light, fast, coil-spring-operated firing pin, vaguely similar to the Sharps-Borchardt.

Buttstocks on the very first Ballards were secured by the conventional tange (upper and lower) and bolt through the stock-grip method. Few of these old guns are seen today.

The later and best method of fastening the buttstock to the Ballard action was by means of a heavy, long stock-bolt, which gives the necessary tightness for accurate shooting.

When the .22 Hornet cartridge was first produced a number of Ballard rifles were fixed up, by various gunsmiths, to fire it. But it was discovered that this excellent little cartridge produced a little too much pressure for this oldtime action to take regularly.

The Ballard is at its best handling low-pressure target cartridges such as the .22 Long Rifle, the .32 and .33-40, and the .38-55. In this class, it's hard to beat.

This brings us up to the main point in today's spasm. "Ballard Rifles in the Henry J. Nunnemacher Collection," a book by Eldon G. Wolff, published as a bulletin of the Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at $2.00.

This little book, printed on excellent paper, contains only 77 pages, not counting the full-page plates of which there are twenty-seven, or the two charts contained in a pocket in the back of the book.

This is a terrific piece of work. Invaluable to the student or gun-bug. There is no guess work in this book and the author has really "gone to town," making certain that only facts are presented. I especially appreciated his handling of the controversial question of Ballard rifles supposedly manufactured by the "Ballard Arms Company" of Fall River, Mass.

Although this book contains practically everything known about the Ballard rifle, it deals mostly with the specimens in the Nunnemacher collection, of which there are forty-six.

This is not what might be called a "popular book," yet I unhesitatingly recommend it to anyone seriously interested in arms or their history.

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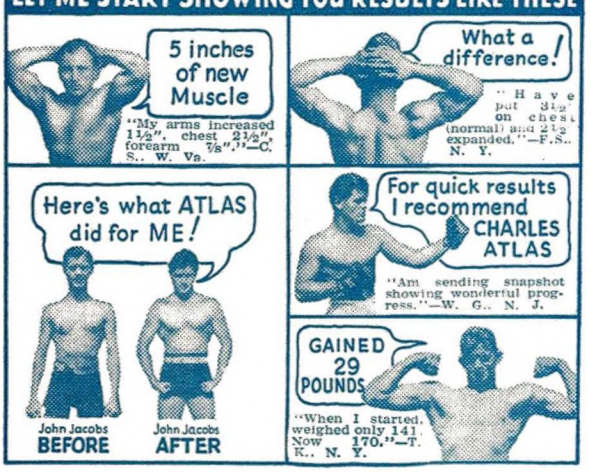

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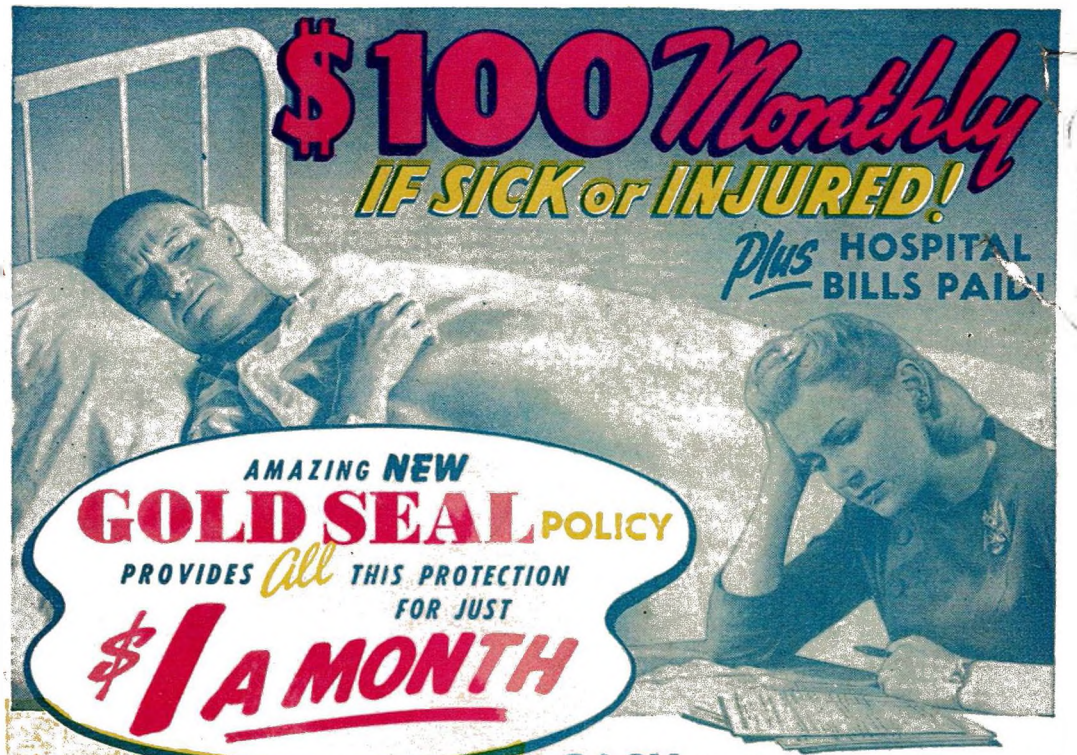

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