

STREET & SMITH'S

Top-Notch★ Magazine

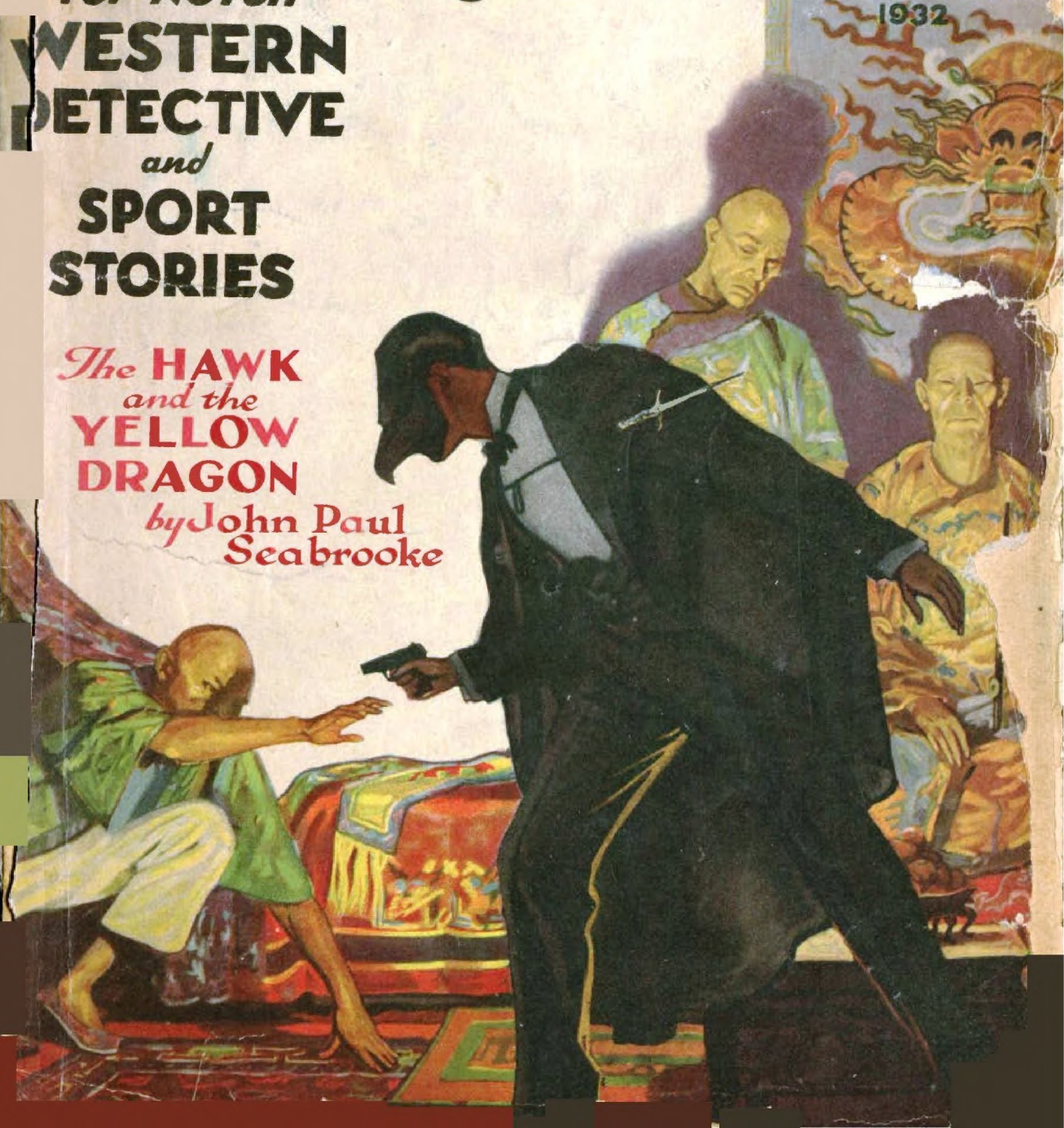
TOP-NOTCH

WESTERN
DETECTIVE
and
SPORT
STORIES

The HAWK
and the
YELLOW
DRAGON

by John Paul
Seabrooke

MAR. 1st NUMBER
1932



15¢

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The National News Revue

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Number 1

CONTENTS FOR MARCH 1st NUMBER, 1932

Cover Picture—Scene from "The Hawk and the Yellow Dragon"

Gayle Hoskins

TOP-NOTCH DETECTIVE NOVELETTE

The Hawk and the Yellow Dragon . . . *John Paul Seabrooke* . . . 1

TOP-NOTCH SPORT NOVELETTE

The Incurve Pitcher *Burt L. Standish* . . . 34

TOP-NOTCH WESTERN NOVELETTE

Tangled Trails *Orrin Hollmer* . . . 67

TOP-NOTCH SHORT STORIES

Trail of the Paint Hoss *Galen C. Colin* . . . 23

Champ Stuff *Phil Richards* . . . 56

Jungle Master *Paul Annixter* . . . 88

Gringo Steel *Charles Dana Bennett* . . . 107

Loggers Are Tough Meat *Paul Hosmer* . . . 119

TOP-NOTCH SERIAL

The Boss Of Boom River *Clay Perry* . . . 94

A Four-part Story—Part Two

TOP-NOTCH VERSE

Rumors *Cristel Hastings* . . . 22

Bellyaching *Edgar Daniel Kramer* . . . 87

Night's Troubadour *Anton Romatka* . . . 106

Stampedes *Ray Allen* . . . 118

TOP-NOTCH TALK

Your Views—and Ours 125

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Several hundred people were divided into three groups and kept under medical supervision for periods ranging from 4 weeks to 4½ months, during the winter of 1930-31. One-third of them gargled with full strength Listerine twice a day. One-third gargled with it five times a day. One-third did not gargle with it at all.

Those who gargled with Listerine twice a day contracted only one-half to one-third as many colds as those who did not gargle at all. When Listerine users did develop colds, they were approximately one-fourth as severe and lasted only one-third as long. In a number of tests, even greater resistance was registered.

Those who gargled with Listerine five times a day showed still greater resistance but not in the direct ratio to the number of times used.

These results, amazing as they are, do not mean that Listerine should be used as a substitute for the family physician, who is always your best friend in time of illness. They do mean that the average person can reduce the risk of ill-health considerably by the systematic twice-a-day use of full strength Listerine. Begin now. See how your health improves.

Ask for Listerine at your druggist's—and see that you get it. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo.





The Hawk and the Yellow Dragon

By John Paul Seabrooke

Author of "The Hawk Strikes," etc.

CHAPTER I.

ADVENTURE IN THE DARK.

DUKE PIERSON, alias the "Hawk," stepped out of the circle of light shed by an arc lamp, and stared at the black sedan that was just rounding the corner ahead of him.

The sound of a powerful motor reached his ears. Two bright headlights bored through the fog that was sweeping off the river and filling the streets with twisting, eerie streamers of yellow vapor.

TN-1A

What was the matter with that car, anyway? It was after midnight. The fog made driving dangerous, yet the sedan was racing up the narrow street at a speed that seemed to threaten life and limb.

Duke didn't slacken his jaunty stride, however. His piercing, steel-blue eyes were riveted upon the approaching auto, but he walked briskly along, his gold-headed cane tapping the pavement.

Since playing the dangerous rôle of the Hawk in an effort to get back some of the fortune stolen from him by three unprincipled lawyers, Duke's senses had

become abnormally alert. They had to be, for more than once private detectives had trailed him. More than once he had been shadowed by the city police. The Hawk had become a sinister and notorious figure.

Yet to-night Duke was only a peaceful citizen returning from a formal society dinner. The bulk of his fortune was gone, but he was still welcomed into the homes of the city's most exclusive set.

The car came on and Duke stared at it keenly. Beneath his snug-fitting, immaculately tailored dinner jacket, there was a perceptible tensing of muscles. Some inner sense seemed to warn him that all was not well with that sedan. Perhaps it was the ghostly wailing of the ferryboat foghorns out on the river and the wraithlike fingers of the mist working on his imagination. Perhaps, too, it was the recent accounts he had read of gangsters and their murderous doings. But more likely it was the appearance of the car itself lurching up the dark street at an unsafe speed.

Duke turned his head as the sedan came opposite and then roared by. He could feel the wind of it on his face. He got a glimpse of the indistinct form of the driver crouched over the wheel. Then he noticed a curious thing. The side curtains of the car were pulled down nearly to the bottom.

He followed it with his eyes; saw the red and green tail lights winking at him like the eyes of some fabulous monster; saw the car lurch from side to side as it continued its mad way.

Now, for an instant, it was directly under the arc light where he himself had been a half minute before. And suddenly he drew in his breath sharply. Another sound reached his ears above the steady roaring of its engine. It was the tinkling of breaking glass. He saw a shower of sparkling splinters fall from the small window in the sedan's rear. Then, for a second, he saw some-

thing else plainly revealed in the rays of the arc lamp.

It was the pale, fear-contorted face of a young man staring out of the broken window: staring back into the shadows where Duke stood.

Fog made the features indistinct, but Duke could not mistake that expression of fear. Then the face disappeared and something else came to view. It was a hand. It flashed out of the window, paused a moment and then flashed back.

Duke came to a dead stop and leaned forward tensely. The sedan was almost gone from sight now, swallowed by the curtain of mist beyond the arc light. In another second it was no more than a dimly-moving hulk blending into the shadow of the street.

But Duke quickly retraced his steps. Had he been mistaken, or had that hand appearing for an instant in the car's broken rear window dropped something? His eyes had seemed to detect a moth-like flutter of white in the miniature whirlwind following the car's wake.

He reached the arc lamp and looked about eagerly. Then he clicked his tongue sharply against the roof of his mouth. There it was—a tiny scrap of white paper lying in the angle formed by the curbstone and the street.

He picked it up and opened the single fold. There was a pencil scrawl on the torn sheet, hardly decipherable. Duke bent closer, his eyes narrowed. The words seemed to leap out of the page at him:

Help! In the Yellow Dragon's hands.
G. M.

That was the strange message that had been dropped almost at his feet in the dead of night.

Duke stood there thinking deeply, but for the moment completely puzzled. Was this a joke? Was some one trying to play a trick upon him? But that couldn't be. There was nothing

jocular about the face he had seen looking at him out of the car's rear window. There was nothing in the nature of a joke, either, about the car's reckless, space-devouring speed.

"In the Yellow Dragon's hands." Duke suddenly stiffened as he read the words again. It seemed fantastic to connect that luxurious speeding sedan with a Chinaman. One usually thought of Chinaman as slow-moving figures, shuffling in straw-sandaled feet, or riding in old-fashioned conveyances. They no longer wore pigtails, to be sure; but they still ate rice, used chopsticks, and lived in an atmosphere of silk draperies, flowered fans and paper lanterns. For the most part they were harmless, peaceful and industrious.

But once in a while a crafty, slant-eyed Oriental took to the dark byways of crime. And Duke had heard of such a one—Wong Sing, the man who called himself the Yellow Dragon. He had heard of him in connection with tong wars in Chinatown, mysterious robberies, and killings that had stirred the police. But, so far as Duke knew, nothing had ever been fastened on him. Few white people, outside of the police, had ever seen him. He was hardly more than a shadowy, half-mythical figure hovering in the gloom of Chinatown's underworld. Yet he was reputed to be wealthy. It would not be impossible for him to own such a car as Duke had seen flash by. That was the only answer he could give in his mind to the scrawled note in his hands.

He thrust the scrap of paper into an inside pocket; then, with head down and the fog still beating against his face, he resumed his way back toward his snug apartment. It would be good to get there, with "Limey" Lewin, his valet and general handy man still waiting up to make him coffee. Good old Limey! He never overlooked anything that might add to Duke's comfort or safety.

The doorman was off duty, and Duke

let himself in with his own night key. A sleepy elevator operator took him up to his apartment.

Sure enough, a light was burning. Limey was still up. He came forward as Duke entered. He was a small, meek-looking man, with a flattish face and mouse-colored hair. And as soon as he spoke, it was apparent why he had been nicknamed Limey.

"'Ow's the weather, Mr. Pierson?" he said. "You're not wet, I 'ope." His words were spoken in a heavy cockney accent.

"No," said Duke. "The fog's so thick you could cut it with a knife; but I'm not wet—just a little damp."

"You should 'ave let me call for you in the car, sir," said Limey reproachfully. "Come 'ave a bit of coffee. It will warm you up."

Duke drank his coffee and stared at the wall abstractedly. His eyes had a far-away look in them. Limey noticed this. He fidgeted nervously. After a time he spoke.

"Nothing wrong, sir, I 'ope?"

"No," said Duke. "Not with me. But I had a small adventure to-night, Limey. A closed car sped by me as I was coming home. I picked up a peculiar message in the street afterward. Did you ever hear of the Yellow Dragon?"

Limey's face screwed up in puzzlement.

"You mean that chink that gets 'is name in the papers every time there's a killing in Chinatown?"

"Yes," said Duke. "He's the one. But I can't imagine who G. M. is. Those were the initials signed to the message, asking for help."

"Maybe it's a trap," said Limey. "Maybe the chink is after you."

Duke pondered this a minute. Then he shook his head.

"It can't be," he said. "He doesn't even know who I am—and, besides, that message wasn't dropped for me partic-

ularly. The person in that car who threw it out of the window couldn't have known who I was. I was in the shadow. The fog was so thick I could barely make out his face when under the arc light. He just saw some one moving on the sidewalk and dropped that note on the desperate chance that it would be found. He must have had it all written and ready to throw to the first person he saw."

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Limey.

"I don't know yet," Duke replied. "I'd like to know who G. M. is."

"Whoever he is," said Limey, "'e ain't got much chance now. They say that chink's poison."

Duke grew silent. They talked no more about the matter that night. But next morning Duke read the newspapers eagerly. There was a grim purpose in his mind as he ran his eyes down the columns. He wanted to see if Wong Sing, the sinister Yellow Dragon, had figured in any new crime. But he found nothing.

The late afternoon editions yielded better results, however. Duke bought them all. Suddenly his blue eyes snapped with excitement.

"Listen to this, Limey," he said. And he read aloud:

BANK DIRECTOR'S SON DISAPPEARS

"Giles Maitland, Jr., mysteriously dropped out of sight last night after a gay party with a group of friends in the Apex Hotel.

"Young Maitland was last seen talking to some one in a large sedan beside the curb just as the party was breaking up. The doorman at the Apex claims that young Maitland was suddenly pulled into the sedan, after which the car drove off at a high speed.

"It is feared that Maitland may have fallen into the hands of kidnapers, and police are combing the city for a sedan that answers descriptions given by the Hotel Apex doorman."

Duke got up and paced the room excitedly. He drew a cigarette from his case and lighted it.

"Giles Maitland! That's the 'G. M.' who signed the note I picked up. There's no doubt about it in my mind. How the Yellow Dragon got him into his clutches I don't know; but the motive is probably simple enough—money."

"The lad's father will probably come across," said Limey.

Duke drew his brows together.

"He may pay over the money that the Yellow Dragon will undoubtedly demand, but whether he'll get his son back is another question. From what I've heard of Wong Sing, he's as treacherous as a snake. I don't believe he'd reveal his own connection with this thing. He might figure, too, that it would be dangerous to release young Maitland. Many kidnapers have the gentle habit of bumping off their victims after receiving the ransom money."

"Then you'd better tip the police off, sir," said Limey.

Duke shook his head. "I don't think so, Limey. Every time the police have tackled the Yellow Dragon they've bungled. His methods seem to be too tricky for them."

"Then it looks as if the poor bloke was a goner," said Limey dolefully.

"Maybe not," said Duke. There was a grim smile on his lean, hawklike face. "I'm going to take a hand in this myself, Limey," he said.

A horrified expression came over Limey's face.

"You mean you're going to try and get 'im away from the Yellow Dragon?"

"That's it, Limey. I picked up the message. I feel a certain responsibility in the matter. Chance threw this thing my way—and you know, Limey, that I have more respect for chance than a great many people have."

"But if the police can't save 'im, you can't either, sir. An' you'll get into terrible trouble. You've 'ad enough 'ard luck since those crooks stole your fortune without goin' after more."

"That's just it, Limey," said Duke with a smile. "I know what it is to have hard luck descend upon me—so I'm going to see what I can do to help our friend, young Giles Maitland."

Limey still tried to argue him out of the notion, but Duke was firm.

"I've made up my mind," he said. "I'm going to pay the Yellow Dragon a visit."

"When?" asked Limey.

"This evening," Duke replied. "The Yellow Dragon is said to be the proprietor of the Fan Sing Café. Get my roadster ready, Limey. Then we'll both dress and drive down. I may need your help."

CHAPTER II.

IN CHINATOWN.

WITH the coming of night, a curtain of fog was once again rolling in from the river, as it had on the evening previous.

Duke Pierson set the automatic wiper going on the windshield of his powerful roadster. He drove carefully, the collar of his topcoat turned up about his neck, his hands resting firmly on the wheel. Limey Lewin sat beside him scowling at the inclement weather.

"Wot a night!" he growled. "This bloomin' fog gives me the shivers, sir. I'd be 'appier if I wasn't goin' to Chinatown."

Duke did not answer. He knew that Limey's complaining was just a habit. His pessimism was only skin-deep. Duke had learned on occasions past that behind the mild-looking exterior of the little cockney was the spirit of an adventurer. The man was not as shy, as he appeared, and, though he seldom professed any enthusiasm, he had a way of being on the spot whenever anything exciting was going on.

The fog steadily thickened. When they reached the outskirts of Chinatown the mist was like a yellowish gray stage backdrop shutting off every-

thing that was not in the immediate foreground.

Duke put his roadster in a garage. There was no use driving into the heart of the Oriental district. The streets were too narrow for parking, anyway, and he expected to spend some time in the Fan Sing Café.

Limey and he walked along the narrow sidewalks past shops whose windows contained a jumble of merchandise—strings of herbs, packages of tea, jars of preserved ginger and balls of unsavory looking dried meat.

But most of the stores were dark, and the streets themselves were almost deserted. The chill weather had kept the sight-seers away and the Oriental residents were behind tightly-shut doors preparing their strange dinners in their badly-ventilated quarters.

Now and then, however, the stoop-shouldered, flat-chested figure of a Chinaman would emerge from an alley or basement stairway and shuffle past them in the gloom. Slant eyes would focus upon them for an instant in an inscrutable, expressionless stare.

Then they came to the entranceway of the Fan Sing Café. This was a notorious Chinese night club on the second floor of a large and old-fashioned building of brown stone. A dilapidated sign, composed of red-and-green lights, winked in and out to attract passers-by, and a Chinese doorman slouched against the threshold.

The place was notorious because it had been raided several times as an opium joint, and because it was at one time believed to be the headquarters of a powerful tong. A tong victim had once been found by the police lying directly in front of the place, his skull cleft in two by one of the sinister hatchet men.

Duke, in a jocular mood, had outlined the history of the café to Limey before they started. The little cock-

ney's eyes were round with curiosity and excitement as they climbed the creaking stairs to the second floor.

The singsong notes of a Chinese violin reached their ears, and the warm air was filled with the pungent smell of oriental food. They checked their coats and hats and walked through a doorway into the main dining room. The walls were decorated with gilt Chinese symbols and serpents twisted into grotesque designs. A thick oriental rug covered the entire floor, except for the small space in the center allotted to dancing; and the lights in the room were low.

A half dozen black-coated waiters moved silently about, their yellow faces as impassive as statues.

Duke glanced around, but could see no other members of his own race. All the diners to-night seemed to be Chinese. Yet he knew that the entry of himself and Limey would cause no excitement. They would merely be taken for "slummers," from uptown, down here to see the sights.

A bowing head waiter came forward and showed them to a side table. Duke, with his broad shoulders, narrow hips and athletic figure, looked gay and dashing in his Tuxedo. But Limey seemed more out of keeping in such clothes. Every now and then he jerked his head from side to side and ran his finger around the inside of his wing collar, which he claimed was slowly choking him.

But he seemed to forget about his uncomfortable collar when the Chinese bill of fare was placed before him.

"Hegg Foo Young," he muttered. "I've 'ad heggs boiled and fried and scrambled and poached and whipped with a beater, but 'ere's one way I've never 'eard before of mistreatin' a poor hegg."

Duke gave his order without even consulting the bill of fare. He appeared to take little interest in food to-

night. Behind a cloud of cigarette smoke, his keen blue eyes were sizing up the place, locating the doors that led to the kitchen and those that seemed to lead to inner rooms of the café.

He took note of the aisles between the tables. Then, when the waiter had gone, he leaned forward toward Limey.

"Look around, Limey," he said, "and get your bearings. But don't stare too openly. No one dining in this room has ever seen the Yellow Dragon. But it is known that he lives in this building. He must have a luxurious private suite on this floor or some other. We're going to visit him—and we may have to make our exit from this room in the dark."

"And 'ow is that?" asked Limey in perplexity.

"Wait," said Duke. "You'll see. Just as we came in, I noticed that a waiter with a covered tray went through that narrow door with the green panel in the farthest corner of the room. He hasn't emerged, and no other waiter has followed him. He must have taken that tray to some special diner—or to the big shot who owns this place."

Duke felt inside the pockets of his dinner jacket. He wanted to make sure that certain articles were in place where he could remove them in the shortest possible space of time. One of these was a thin black-silk cloak carefully folded up. Another was a black mask in the shape of a hawk's head. It had a projecting beak and two eye-holes.

Lastly, in his right-hand pocket, was a pistol that looked exactly like a regular automatic but which was loaded with shells containing a highly concentrated gas that, fired within a radius of twelve feet, would cause unconsciousness. For Duke, during his activities as the Hawk, never resorted to bloodshed. He depended almost entirely on his keen wits. Limey carried a small revolver loaded with nothing but blanks.

Their Chinese food was set before them, but Limey had not taken more than a few mouthfuls of his egg Foo Young, when Duke gave an exclamation.

"Ah!" he said. "There comes that other waiter through the green paneled door now. See? His tray is empty. I'm going to take a chance, Limey, and try that door first. I have a hunch it's the one we want."

"But they'll kick up a terrible fuss, sir, if you just walk through," said Limey, looking worried.

Duke smiled. "Not if they don't see me," he said.

As he spoke, Duke took a dime out of his pocket and laid it on the edge of the table. Then, making sure that the waiter was not looking, he reached up and with a few twists unscrewed one of the electric bulbs in the wall lamp near his shoulder. The bulb had been colored to dim the light, and, while the other one was still burning, its absence would hardly be noticed even if any one was watching across the smoke-filled room.

But Duke didn't leave it out long. With a quick movement he picked up the dime and slipped it into the electric socket. Then he screwed the bulb back in.

There was a flash of blue flame, a sputter and crackle from within the socket, and suddenly every light in the room went out.

Duke had deliberately caused a short circuit, blown the fuses out, and he knew now that he had a few minutes of darkness in which to work.

CHAPTER III.

THE DRAGON'S POWER.

AT the instant the lights went out, Duke rose from his chair and slipped the black silk cloak around his shoulders. Then he adjusted the hawk's-head mask over his face.

Startled exclamations and mutterings in Chinese were coming from all parts of the room. But Duke leaned across the table.

"Take hold of the edge of my cloak and follow me," he whispered. "We're going through the green door."

Duke had so carefully marked in his mind the pathway between the tables toward the green-paneled door that he started out confidently. He had a small flashlight in his trousers pocket, but he didn't want to turn that on now. His feet made no noise on the thick rug. Neither did Limey's. A waiter at the far end of the room struck a match and lit a candle. A few cigarette ends glowed in the darkness; but Duke and Limey passed like black specters between the tables, and no one noticed them.

They reached the corner. Duke felt along the wall with his fingers. In a moment he located an upraised panel and a small knob.

He turned the knob, and the door opened. He stepped through first, with Limey close at his heels. The door with the green panel shut softly behind them and they stood still in the pitch darkness.

Duke listened for the slightest sound, but there was none. He moved forward slowly, then felt out with both hands. His fingers encountered other panels. He was in some sort of a hallway.

Now Duke took a chance and turned on his flashlight for an instant. It shone down a long corridor which seemed to lead toward the rear of the building. So far as he could see, no other doors opened off it. He felt a slight tingling of excitement. His hunch had been right. This was undoubtedly the way to the private rooms of the Yellow Dragon.

"Keep close to me," he said to Limey. "We'll see what we can find."

Then he walked straight ahead down

the hallway. There was a faint smell here which he recognized—sandalwood incense. The odor grew stronger as they neared the end of the hall.

Once again Duke flashed on his light. He was glad he had done so. A stairway opened at the left side of the hallway close to the end, and behind heavy, half-open draperies of silk was what appeared to be a black cavern, leading downward.

Duke thrust the draperies aside and cautiously began the descent of the stairs. They, too, were carpeted. Everything inside this building had an air of luxury.

When they reached the floor below, this was even more apparent. The smell of incense in the air was now almost stifling. There was a silence like that of the tomb, and the life of the modern American city seemed far away. It was as though they had been mysteriously transported to the world of the Orient when they came through that green-paneled door and descended those carpeted stairs.

They walked along another corridor, and Duke suddenly paused. His keen eyes had detected radiance ahead, the soft glow of a dim light coming through a parting in draperies.

He reached out in the dark and laid a hand on Limey's arm. Then he put his lips close to Limey's ear, his voice sunk to the merest whisper.

"I see a light ahead," he said. "It may be Wong Sing's chamber. If so, I will enter it first. You remain outside until I call you."

Limey whispered assent. Then Duke continued slowly forward. The crack of light took recognizable shape. It was a space between curtains. Duke could make out a narrow band of light above them where they were hung on a pole.

He moved stealthily up to the draperies and brought his eye near the opening. He saw at once that the light

came from a candle burning on a small ebony table. The air was so still in the room that the flame did not even waver.

Then Duke saw something else; a low couch, and on it the figure of a man. But was it a man? The figure sitting there cross-legged was more like a statue. The eyes were closed, the face was immobile. There was no movement of the hands or arms.

Duke's eyes became adjusted to the light. His gaze dwelt on the face of the still figure with a sort of eerie fascination. A whitish scar ran from the corner of the thin-lipped, cruel mouth up nearly to the eyebrow. The nose was flattened, the forehead high. Duke had seen that face before, in the pages of the tabloid newspapers. It was the face of Wong Sing, the Yellow Dragon.

And then, as he looked, Wong Sing's hand moved slowly upward as though it had no connection whatsoever with the body, but was perhaps the fantastic sluggish head of a serpent. But the fingers grasped a long-stemmed pipe. Wong Sing was smoking opium.

When the pipe touched his lips, his eyes slowly opened. Duke felt an uncanny prickle along his spine when he saw that the Yellow Dragon's gaze seemed focused on that crack in the curtain, as though staring directly at him.

The Chinaman took two long puffs of the sweetish smoke and inhaled deeply. Then his eyes closed again and the yellow hand with its long, pointed nails sank slowly down.

Duke pushed the draperies aside then, and in three strides walked to the center of the room. His face behind his mask was grim, his muscles were tense.

"The Hawk and the Yellow Dragon meet," he said in a low-pitched, muffled voice.

But if Duke expected to startle the Chinaman by his unexpected entrance,

he was disappointed. Wong Sing's eyes opened as slowly as they had before. No muscle in his face or body moved. Duke had never seen such perfect control, such uncanny poise.

Any ordinary man would have jumped out of his skin at the sudden visitation of the Hawk in his black cloak and mask. Yet Wong Sing did not even seem aware of his presence.

For a moment Duke wondered if the Chinaman was so far under the influence of the drug that he could not see or hear. But the intent, snakelike stare of those slant eyes belied this.

Then a voice sounded in the room, dry, soft and nasal, reminding one somehow of the rustle of withered leaves. It was the voice of Wong Sing.

"Welcome," he said. "Many birds enter the dragon's lair, but few fly forth." His lips hardly moved, yet the English was perfect in its precision.

Duke jumped a little in spite of himself. An indescribable feeling of danger came over him. He had felt the same way once while wading through a swamp inhabited by deadly cottonmouth moccasin snakes. But no man had ever affected him so before. He centered his gas pistol on Wong Sing's broad flat chest. But even this didn't seem to disturb the Chinaman.

"What does the honorable gentleman who calls himself the Hawk require?" asked Wong Sing. "To what do I owe this pleasurable visit?" For a moment he smiled, and the whitish scar crinkled up hideously.

"Simply this," said Duke, not beating about the bush at all but coming straight to the point because he wanted to get the job over with as quickly as possible. "I happen to know that you are holding prisoner a certain young man named Giles Maitland. What you had intended to do with him is not my affair; but I demand that he be brought here so that I can take him home."

"So it was you, sir, who picked up

the message that our young friend so foolishly dropped?" said Wong Sing softly.

"Yes," said Duke.

"And now you choose to play the part of gallant rescuer and save this admirable young gentleman from the claws of the terrible dragon?" There was a sneering, ironic note in Wong Sing's voice.

"Exactly," replied Duke. "If he is not brought here at once, I shall be forced to pull the trigger of this gun."

Wong Sing stared fixedly at the muzzle of the gas gun in Duke's hand. Slowly he took another puff from his opium pipe.

"Very well," he said. "You shall see our young friend. But for reasons which I cannot explain, it would not be convenient to have him brought here. You shall be conducted to him."

Duke sensed a trap; but he had a counter scheme. Limey Lewin was still outside. The Yellow Dragon did not know this.

"All right," he agreed, "call one of your servants and have him take me to see young Maitland. But I'm going to station a friend of mine in here with a gun pointed at your head. And if I'm not back in five minutes—you can guess the consequences."

The Yellow Dragon bowed. "Your cleverness amazes me," he said softly. "Bring your friend in and I will call my servant."

Duke raised his voice and called Limey. The little cockney entered at once and focused his bright eyes on the Yellow Dragon.

"Stand behind that screen over there," said Duke. "Keep your revolver pointed at our honorable host's head. No use in letting the servant see you; but Mr. Wong Sing knows you're here, and if I am not back in five minutes, pull the trigger of that gun of yours; then make all the noise you can and call the police."

"Right-o," said Limey. "I'd like a little target practice to-night, and nothing would suit me better for a bull's-eye than that chink's mug."

He stepped behind the screen, through a crack of which he could still see Wong Sing. Then the Chinaman reached out and struck a single note on a gong.

In a moment there was a shuffling sound in the corridor and a slant-eyed servant came in with a candle. The man, rat-faced and almost as thin as a skeleton, bowed low. He said something in Chinese, and the Yellow Dragon nodded. He turned to Duke.

"My servant tells me that all the electric lights in the building are out. Very clever of you, O mighty Hawk. I perceive that you came to visit me on the wings of the darkness. But electric lights are an invention of the white devils. Candles, though they have a humble flame, cannot be short-circuited. By the light of the two now in this room, I shall show you that the Yellow Dragon is not without a magic of his own."

Then Wong Sing spoke to the servant in rapid Chinese. To Duke's surprise the man sprang forward and whipped away the screen behind which Limey had hidden a minute before.

Duke's body tensed, and a chill ran along his spine. He could hardly believe his eyes; for, though there was no doorway apparent in the wall or floor, Limey had disappeared as completely as though the earth had swallowed him.

CHAPTER IV.

JAWS OF DARKNESS.

FOR the first time, Duke realized that he might have been foolhardy in coming here. He had thought that the craft and the wickedness of the Yellow Dragon had been exaggerated in the sensational newspaper stories about him. But now, with a tremor of dread, he

saw that he had been mistaken. Wong Sing had the mind of a master criminal.

He was laughing soundlessly at Duke's surprise, the whitish scar on his face showing lividly.

"Now, most honorable Hawk," he said mockingly, "do you still wish to be conducted to the chamber of Mr. Maitland, or will you stay here and entertain the Yellow Dragon with your clever white devil's tricks. Just make your choice."

"I'll stay here," said Duke harshly, "and I'll keep my gun pointed at your head. If my friend isn't returned to this room by the time I've counted to fifteen, I shall be forced to pull the trigger."

"So," said Wong Sing in a voice as soft as the purr of a cat.

"Yes," said Duke, and he began to count: "One, two, three——"

For safety's sake, he edged slowly around so that he could see the doorway from the corner of his eye. But even then he didn't feel at ease. Limey had been whisked from a spot which seemed to have no exit. This room might have a dozen secret exits and entrances for all he knew.

"Four, five, six, seven——" his voice droned on monotonously. But it seemed to be having no effect on the Chinaman.

Calmly Wong Sing inserted another white pellet of opium in the end of his pipe. Calmly he held the bowl of the pipe over the still flame of the candle. The skeleton-thin servant hovered near his elbow, looking at Duke with expressionless eyes.

"Eight, nine, ten," counted Duke. "Eleven, twelve——"

He broke off with a hissing exhalation of breath and whirled. He had caught a vague movement of the draperies by the door. The skin along the back of his neck prickled.

He had not been a second too soon. Crouched near the wall was a China-

man with a thin-bladed knife in his hand. The man raised his arm at the same instant that Duke swung his gun in an arc. Then Duke ducked back. Something flashed through the air close to his shoulder.

There was a faint thud as the knife buried itself in the wall. The Chinaman had missed by inches only. But when Duke's gun centered upon him, he let out a squeal like a frightened rat and scuttled out of the room.

A cold sweat broke out on Duke's forehead under his mask. On many occasions in the past he had proved his coolness and courage; but now he was facing overwhelming odds in a situation of such uncertainty that he didn't know from which direction to expect the next blow. If Wong Sing was really bent on murder, the advantages seemed to be all on his side. A cold fury possessed Duke now.

He aimed the gun at Wong Sing's head again.

"Quick," he said. "I won't be put off an instant longer. Have your servants bring back the man who came in with me, or the vengeance of the Hawk will descend upon you. And I do not want to have to repeat this."

Duke had come close to the Chinaman now. He was standing on a small oriental rug with his gun pointed directly into Wong Sing's yellow face.

"As you will," said Wong Sing with an air of resignation.

His hand came out as though to strike the gong. But at the same moment he moved one of his sandled feet down from the couch and touched something on the floor.

It was all done in the space of a second. Duke didn't guess what the movement meant. He opened his mouth to speak. But his breath seemed cut off; for at that moment the rug he was standing on, dropped out from under him, and he had the terrible sensation of falling into a bottomless pit.

Not long after this happening, in another chamber of his suite, the Yellow Dragon sat on a comfortable pile of cushions while a pale-faced young man stood before him.

The Chinaman took a small pipe with a pewter bowl out of his pocket. He placed some pulverized tobacco in the pipe, lit it, took a few puffs, and then spoke. There was an evil smile on his scarred face.

"Honorable sir," he said, "your folly in throwing the message from the car window has had grievous consequences. A white devil, who calls himself the Hawk, picked it up. By a trick, he obtained entrance to my private chamber, and he brought another white man with him. But what is a Hawk to a Dragon? The power of Wong Sing prevailed, and I have them both where they will do no further harm. I had intended merely to hold you for money, which your good father would have been glad to pay to get his most beloved son back into the paternal nest. But, like a foolish wind in a rice field, you have complicated matters. It grieves me to tell you that your error in dropping the note will cost the lives of three men—your own, and the lives of the two fools who came to rescue you. For I have but one course to follow. I must send you all to the Chamber of Eternal Silence."

The Chinaman's snakelike eyes were fixed upon the face of Giles Maitland, watching with interest the effect his words might produce. He saw young Maitland's face grow even paler, saw his eyes widen and his hands tremble and contract.

"What do you mean?" asked Maitland hoarsely. "You're not going to kill me?"

"Ah," said Wong Sing softly, "the Yellow Dragon will not deprive you of your life with his own hands. He will leave that to the mysterious forces in the Chamber of Eternal Silence. Un-

like the white devils, his methods are never crude."

Maitland understood the drift of the words. He saw that Wong Sing was jesting grimly at his expense; that he had some terrible plan in mind.

What was this Chamber of Eternal Silence? The name had a sound that sent chills up Maitland's back. He had been through a living hell in the past twenty-four hours, ever since he'd been pulled inside Wong Sing's car at the curb before the Apex Hotel.

A mysterious message had been given to him at that time, saying that a friend outside wished to speak to him. He had been amazed to see a Chinaman; but there had been no time for wonder. For, the next thing he knew, he was being held down on the seat and the car was speeding away.

His nerves were just about shot to pieces now. The devilish expression on Wong Sing's face made him shudder, as did the portent of his words.

"Let me go, you—you yellow devil!" Maitland suddenly cried in a half-hysterical voice. He was trembling, and there was a clammy moisture on the palms of his hands. He whirled and made a dash for the door.

But instantly two tall Chinese servants appeared from behind the draperies and caught his arms. They twisted them cruelly, till Maitland cried out in pain. Then they flung him back into the room and stepped out of sight like well-trained mechanical men.

Maitland sank to his knees and began to plead for mercy. His life so far had been a pampered one. He had never shifted for himself, and his character lacked the strength of Duke Pierson's. He was almost sobbing in terror now as Wong Sing's dry, malignant voice purred on. The Chinaman's eyes were gleaming cruelly. He was playing with the young man as a cat would with a mouse.

"You are excited and noisy, like a

summer squall," Wong Sing said. "Consider, then, how fortunate you are. For presently you shall find peace and rest in the Chamber of Eternal Silence. When men come forth from there, they are no longer concerned with life's troubles. They are philosophers then with the peace of mind that only death can bring."

Maitland came closer, crawling along the floor, begging for his life, begging to be allowed to see his parents again. But slowly the hand of Wong Sing moved out toward the bronze gong beside him to summon the servants who would conduct Maitland to the Chamber of Eternal Silence.

He had the small striker with its padded head in his hand. He drew it back to strike the single booming note; and then he paused as if frozen. For suddenly a piercing, agonized scream sounded from somewhere in the house. Several thicknesses of boarding could not muffle its terrified note. It seemed to come from the floor below.

CHAPTER V.

UNDERGROUND TERRORS.

WHEN the rug gave way under him and he felt himself dropping, Duke thought it was the end. The murderous attack of the Chinaman with the knife showed that death lurked in this strange house.

Duke instinctively drew his knees up to break the terrible shock he expected. But he landed with a swish on something soft; something that prickled against his skin and sent up a choking cloud of dust. Straw! He sank into it, rolled on his back, then sat up and wiped his eyes. But he could see nothing. The place into which he had fallen was as black as the darkest midnight.

Duke felt about him cautiously, edging along the top of the straw pile. Soon he began to slide, and presently his feet touched a stone floor. He sat

there for a minute. Then he remembered that he had a flashlight in his pocket. The shock of the unexpected fall had temporarily erased the thought from his mind.

He took the flashlight out and switched it on. The bright beam showed him the interior of a cell-like chamber about fifteen feet square. The walls were made of gray stone set in cement. So was the floor. He saw the heap of straw in the center and high overhead he could dimly make out the lines of the trapdoor through which he had fallen. It was tightly closed now.

This room was evidently a carefully planned device for trapping the Yellow Dragon's enemies. No doubt it had been used many times before. How many amazed and fear-stricken victims had fallen through that trapdoor and landed on the straw pile? Undoubtedly the door was controlled by some sort of push-button mechanism.

It was certainly considerate of the Yellow Dragon to place a pile of straw where he had to break the fall of those who dropped through. Without it their bones would most certainly be broken. But Duke smiled grimly. He had seen enough of Wong Sing to feel sure that it was not kindness that made him put the straw there. More likely he wanted to preserve the victims who fell through for questioning at leisure.

With that thought, Duke began to examine the four walls of his prison. He immediately discovered that there was a door at one side. It was made of sheet metal and fitted snugly to the stone. It was evidently locked on the outside. For Duke could not so much as budge it after several minutes of pushing and prying with his fingers.

Then he looked up and saw that there was a steel beam set in the masonry above the door. It projected about six inches from the surface of the wall.

For some moments, Duke stared at it thoughtfully; then an idea began to

form in his brain. He jumped forward and raised his arms. By standing on tiptoe, he could just grasp the edge of the beam with his fingers. It would be a difficult feat; but he believed he could draw himself up on the beam and even manage to balance there if he put his plan into effect.

Now he turned back to the straw pile and flashed his light upon it. The small oriental rug which had so treacherously fallen out from under him, had come through the trapdoor with him. This rug had been a factor in betraying him into the Dragon's hands. It would be a nice ironic touch if he could make the same rug save him.

The rug was now half buried in the straw pile. Duke went over and pulled it out. It was about six feet long and four feet wide. Duke felt the thick fabric in his hands for a few moments, a deep frown of concentration creasing his forehead. Then he laid his flashlight on the floor, with the switch on, so that he would have a steady glow of light to work with.

After this he began rolling up the rug the narrow way, so that it formed a cylinder six feet long—just about the height of a man. He walked over and propped it against the wall opposite the door.

He began to gather armfuls of straw and stuff the rug out at the top and middle. He twisted some straw into a ball and placed it on top.

When this was done, he slipped out of his black cloak and hawk's-head mask. The mask he placed carefully over the ball of straw. He draped the cloak over the rug so that it covered nearly the whole length. With a minute or two of careful patting and rearranging, he achieved the effect he was after.

A fairly lifelike dummy of the Hawk now leaned against the wall facing the door.

A problem now presented itself. He couldn't leave the flashlight lit on the

floor; yet he needed light for his next task. He finally placed the flashlight on one end of the beam over the door.

Then he set about the difficult job of climbing up to the overhead beam. Before he could accomplish this, he had to take his shoes and socks off and use his bare toes to help his balance. The cords in his neck and shoulders stood out as he raised himself slowly with his arms, rested his elbows on the beam, threw one knee up, and finally squirmed and wriggled to an upright position. He could now reach a part of the ceiling, and, by placing the palm of one hand on it over his head, he could maintain his balance on the beam.

But no man, unless he was in the pink of physical condition, could have made such a climb. Duke thanked his stars that through systematic exercise he had kept himself down to the minimum weight and had developed his muscles till they were as responsive as elastic bands.

It was a terrible ordeal, though, to remain on the beam as the minutes passed. He had no idea how long he would have to wait. The whole thing was a gamble. The Yellow Dragon might leave him there till he starved to death. But Duke was playing a hunch. He believed that Wong Sing's curiosity would get the better of him, that the Chinaman would want to question him before too long a time had passed.

Sweat began to break out on his forehead as his muscles grew stiff. He could barely shift at all, but had to hold one position if he wanted to stay on the beam. His body began to ache. He lost all track of time. He had turned his flashlight out long ago. He felt blind from staring into the dark so long.

Then a faint sound came to him. It was the scratching of a key in a lock! He pressed his palm tighter against the ceiling and crouched a bit. The scratch-

ing sound continued. There was a click, and then a narrow band of light shone below him. The metal door had been opened.

Slowly it was pushed inward. Duke, staring down, could see the blunt nose of an automatic entering his prison chamber before anything else. It was clutched by a skinny, yellow hand. Then came the bright lens of a bull's-eye electric lantern, and after it the top of a black head.

"Come out," said a guttural, accented voice. "Put your hands up."

The Chinaman below had found the dummy of the Hawk with his lantern. He was covering it with his automatic. Again he spoke, ordering the Hawk to come out. Then slowly he entered the cell, seeming to feel that he had the upper hand so long as his gun was trained on that sinister black figure against the wall.

Duke balanced an instant and then dropped. Like a springing leopard, he fell straight down on the Chinaman's back. The man never knew what struck him, though he let out one fearful, agonized scream.

This was the scream that was heard in the Yellow Dragon's room above. It was not repeated, for Duke's fingers met around the Chinaman's throat and choked him into unconsciousness. He struck the man over the head twice with the butt of his own gas pistol, and then dumped him unceremoniously in the corner. The fellow would be out for a long time.

Duke quickly put his Hawk mask and cloak back on, and then, with the keys of the unconscious Chinaman in his hand, stepped out into the corridor. He flashed the bull's-eye lantern a minute and saw that the corridor was long and dark. But there seemed to be doors opening off it. It was very much like the dank corridor inside a prison.

A prison! Duke pursed up his lips. Limey Lewin was probably not far away

from here. Most likely he was behind one of those metal doors at the side of the corridor—and Duke had the keys.

There was no sound anywhere that he could detect. Had the jailor's scream been heard? Certainly it was loud enough to be; but Duke had to take a chance. He had to get Limey out. It was his fault that the little cockney was here.

Quickly but cautiously he walked along the corridor, keeping in the dark for the most part, but occasionally flashing his light. And halfway down that dank passage he heard a sound—the voice of Limey Lewin. The call was muffled but unmistakable. It came from behind that rusty metal door on the left.

Duke sprang forward. He flashed his light for an instant. His eyes were glowing with excitement; but his hand was steady as he tried the keys in the lock. There were eight of them.

Systematically he began with the first. It didn't fit; but the third did. He started to turn it in the lock, and then it seemed that a ton weight struck him.

The lantern clattered to the floor and smashed. The key ring was yanked out of his hand. He felt powerful arms meeting around his body and warm breath fanning his neck. The next instant his feet were knocked out from under him, and he struck the stone floor with a thud.

CHAPTER VI.

WONG SING PRONOUNCES SENTENCE.

WITH senses reeling from the blow he had received, Duke looked up. Another light flashed on, and he saw what had happened. Two huge Chinamen were there. They had jumped him as he was trying to free Limey.

Both of them were powerful fellows, stripped to the waist, with muscles that bulged under tawny skins. They seemed to know all the tricks of jujutsu, bor-

rowed from the Japanese, for one of them had Duke's arm twisted in such a way that he was almost paralyzed. He was lifted to his feet and forced to stand there, his teeth clenched in pain.

Then one of the Chinamen picked up the keys, unlocked the door that Duke had attempted to open, and brought Limey out of his cell. Limey blinked at the light. When he saw Duke, his eyes opened wide.

"They've got you, too, sir?" he croaked.

Duke didn't have time to answer. The big Chinaman, pinioning his arms, shoved him along the corridor. They began a silent march, climbed a flight of stone steps, and reached the corridor overhead. Then they made a sharp turn, and Duke saw a curtained door before him. He realized that he was going to be taken into the presence of the Yellow Dragon again.

Wong Sing was sitting placidly on his pile of cushions when Limey and Duke were pushed into his chamber. He looked at them in silence for a time, with a twisted evil smile on his face. Giles Maitland was cowering in a corner, sweat gleaming on his forehead, a haunting fear in his eyes. Duke looked at him curiously, for it was the first time he had been near enough to inspect his features closely. He had no doubt in his mind that this was young Maitland.

Before speaking, Wong Sing once more took out his pipe with the pewter bowl and filled it with powdered tobacco from a little silk bag. He pulled the draw string shut with a snap of his sharp teeth. Then his dry, nasal voice sounded.

"The estimable Hawk is clever," he said. "Compared to most white devils, he is as agile as is the fox to the water buffalo. But he cannot outwit the Yellow Dragon. Through a trick, most honorable sir, you got in here. Through a trick, I am told, you temporarily es-

caped from the prison room below; but no trick can prevail against the Chamber of Eternal Silence."

The Chinaman stopped speaking, puffed lazily on his pipe, and regarded Duke to see whether he would cringe as Giles Maitland had. But the mask still covered Duke's face, and his tall, black-cloaked figure was grimly erect.

Wong Sing arose now. There was something snakelike and sinuous about the way his thin body seemed to uncoil. It was the first time Duke had seen him upright. He stared in fascination as the sinister Chinaman came slowly forward. And Wong Sing was staring at him.

His long, yellow hands with their needle-pointed nails, reached out. He caught hold of the hawk's head mask on either side and lifted it. Duke's keen, sharply chiseled features were exposed. He faced the Chinaman without batting an eyelash.

For many seconds, Wong Sing stared at Duke. Then he smiled again and dropped the mask into place once more.

"The Hawk is young," he said softly. "He is in the full tide of his swift-blooded manhood. His muscles are as lithe as the young willows that grow by the stream. His eyes are as bright with the zest of life as the surface of polished jade. What a pity that his wings must be clipped forever!"

There was a look of malicious satisfaction on the face of Wong Sing as he spoke. His professed feeling of pity was only for dramatic effect, meant to unnerve his victims if possible. He was a man devoid of all human feeling; a criminal who was a law unto himself, taking delight in his devilish power over others. He not only hated the Hawk for his boldness in entering his private chambers, but he dared not let him live, now that Duke had discovered some of the secrets of the place.

If he let Giles Maitland live, he knew that the young man's father would con-

duct a police raid on the Fan Sing Café, and that this time he might not be able to get off.

So, settling himself once more upon the cushions, he lifted his hand with the imperious gesture of an emperor.

"Take them all to the Chamber of Eternal Silence," he said, "and when *Kou Fu*, the water god, has done his work, let incense sweetness with rose petals be burned in every room of the house of Wong Sing."

The two burly Chinese "strong-arm" men were joined by another. They had not spoken, but they instantly obeyed Wong Sing's order. His word seemed to be law around here, and Duke wondered what terrible tortures he inflicted on those of his own race who did not obey.

The stoical Oriental servants thrust them out into the corridor once more. Giles Maitland looked as though he might collapse at any moment. His face had a greenish pallor, and his legs were like those of a sick man.

Limey Lewin was watching Duke narrowly for some word or sign that would tell him how they were to get out of their terrible predicament. He had implicit faith in his master. Always before when they had been in tough situations, Duke had given the cue, and Limey had followed. But Duke was silent now, staring straight ahead of him.

Limey grew more and more anxious. He had seen enough of Wong Sing's methods to believe in the Chinaman's thoroughness. With the guards holding the prisoners' arms and with other guards ready to give aid, there seemed to be little chance of escaping by force. What was Duke thinking about? What was going on behind that expressionless black mask?

Then, to Limey's horror, he saw Duke's head begin to sag forward, saw his body grow more and more limp. He

seemed to be on the point of fainting with fright. He stumbled and lurched from side to side. The huge Chinaman holding his arms, jerked him once roughly.

What was the matter with the Hawk? This was not like him. Then Limey drew in his breath. Ah, he saw now—it was only a ruse! During that brief moment that the Chinaman had unconsciously relaxed his grip, Duke had taken a long chance. He had bent downward, twisted sidewise with all his might, and wrenched himself free.

They were at the bottom of the stairs now, back at the end of the passageway where Duke had been knocked down when he had tried to release Limey.

Limey thought that Duke would dash back up the stairs to the floor above, make a desperate attempt to break through the guards, and then run out of the building and summon help. But instead, Duke turned and headed toward the trapdoor room into which he had fallen from Wong Sing's chamber overhead.

As he watched, Limey cried out a warning. It seemed the height of folly for Duke to run that way. It was a blind alley, a place from which there would be no escape with the guards holding the passageway in front. But, nevertheless, Duke continued toward it.

Limey saw a sneering grin on the brutal face of the big Chinese guard. Evidently he knew, too, that there was no escape for the Hawk that way, and believed that the "white devil" had run forward blindly because he was crazed by fear.

In the next few seconds, Limey watched the swift movement of events with a growing fear in his heart. He saw Duke reach the trapdoor room and bang the metal door shut after him. He was safe momentarily. But could he hold the door shut? Limey doubted it.

The big Chinaman was bounding down the corridor behind him. He

reached the door a few seconds after Duke. There was a delay of perhaps half a minute while the Chinaman forced the door open, easily pushing away some obstacle with which Duke had tried to hold it shut.

Another Chinaman, with a lantern, was running behind the first one. There was a confused jumble of struggling forms and the sound of guttural cries. And then Limey saw what he had feared most.

They were dragging the black-masked figure of the Hawk out of the room. They were beating him, raining blows on his head and face, pulling him along viciously.

The punches seemed to have put the Hawk in a daze, for he was like a drunken man now, stumbling, all the energy gone out of him. And it was obvious that he would have fallen to the stone floor of the corridor if the Chinese guard hadn't seized him under the arms.

Limey witnessed all this, and his sense of despair deepened. This was apparently the end of everything. They were in the terrible clutches of the Yellow Dragon from which there seemed to be no escape. And once again they were led along through the gloom of the corridor, into another passage and on around a bend.

Then they came to a stop before a door with curious Chinese designs upon it. But there were businesslike valves and levers on the right side of the door which had nothing Oriental in their appearance.

The Chinaman with the lantern yanked one of the side levers toward him, and the metal door slid slowly ceilingward, revealing a dark opening. The dismal sound of dripping water came. The air was damp and musty.

The lantern lit up the interior, and Limey Lewin, who was the only one of the three prisoners able to take notice of his surroundings, saw a stone cham-

ber with a water outlet at the bottom and several inlets at the top. He was thrust in with the others, and he realized with horror that he was in the Chamber of Eternal Silence.

It was a death chamber where victims could be destroyed by the simple process of drowning them. Wong Sing preferred this to all other methods of killing because water left no marks on the body.

After a period in the Chamber of Eternal Silence, the water could be drawn off through the outlets and the remains of the victims thrown into the river. When they were found, there was nothing to prove who their murderer had been or whether it was murder at all.

Limey guessed this in the first swift glance. The guards thrust them all against the farthest wall, then backed out.

When young Maitland lurched forward toward the door, shouting for mercy, the metal panel had already descended in its oiled, water-tight grooves. His fists beat against unyielding iron. There was no escape from this chamber.

Outside the door, the Chinaman with the lantern performed his awful task. With experienced fingers he reached up and turned the lever with the yellow dragon's head on it. There came the gurgle and swish of water within the chamber, and the moaning, frantic cry of young Maitland. The slow but sure death had started. They were all about to be drowned like rats in an underground trap.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CHAMBER OF ETERNAL SILENCE.

IN the pitchy darkness of the terrible room, young Maitland continued to shout and pound the door. He was too hysterical to realize that it would do no good.

The sound of the water running in overhead and the feel of it against his

feet, made him frantic. It was creeping up, up, up. He knew that in time it would reach above his waist, above his head, and that even though he swam, it would eventually fill the whole chamber to the very ceiling, for the inlet pipe was exactly flush with the roof and the water would run in until that level was reached.

Limey Lewin was trembling with fright, too; but he saw the folly of crying out. So much had happened in the past hour that he was still in a daze. It seemed like a wild and horrible nightmare; but there was the chill water creeping up his ankles to remind him that it was a reality.

He had seen his master, Duke Pier-son, make a courageous attempt to escape from the yellow devil who held him, and he had seen him brought back again and thrust into the death chamber in a half-conscious state.

There had been no sound from the Hawk since he had been dragged into the room with the others.

Panic seized Limey Lewin now. He was shrewd and resourceful himself, but for months past, when any great emergency had arisen, he had depended on Duke for instruction and guidance. Duke had seemed to him invulnerable, a man who had an almost uncanny faculty of side-stepping the blows of fate. He had been in terrible scrapes before, but never in anything like this.

Limey had all he could do to keep from whimpering. He felt an uncontrollable desire to get near the Hawk, to ask him what he should best do, to find strength now that death was creeping upon them.

He sloshed through the rising water to the spot where he had seen the black-cloaked figure thrown. His feet stumbled against something. He was horrified when he realized that the Hawk was still just where he had fallen when the Chinamen had dropped him.

There was only a feeble movement

to that prone figure. He was shivering as the water crept up his body.

"Mr. Pierson, sir!" Limey called out. It was almost a wail. "Mr. Pierson, you hain't 'urt are you?"

But there was no answer. In his greatest hour of need when life itself was at the ebb, it seemed that he was even to be denied a few last words with his respected employer and worshiped friend.

Limey got down on his knees in the water. He reached out with trembling hands. He shook the shoulder beneath the black cloak. And he called again.

"Mr. Pierson, sir, what shall we do? Speak to me! The water's comin'!"

He bent down with his face close to that of the silent black-robed form. He pleaded, and a sobbing note began to creep into his cockney voice. But still the other was silent. He did not move, and, except for that slight shivering, he might have been dead.

And Limey, desperate with worry now, ran his groping fingers up to the Hawk's mask. The water would soon wipe them all out; but momentarily his own fears were forgotten in the all-absorbing fear that Duke Pierson was seriously hurt. He lifted the Hawk's mask, touched the face beneath with inquisitive fingers. And suddenly his body grew as rigid as a statue. Cautiously his exploring hands felt over the face he had uncovered, and then Limey let out a shrill scream that even broke in upon the moanings of Giles Maitland.

"It hain't the 'Awk!" he yelled. "It hain't Duke Pierson at all. It's a bloom-in' chink dressed up in the 'Awk's clothes."

At this precise moment, in the darkness of the trapdoor chamber, a peculiar thing was happening. The dusty pile of straw was slowly moving. Wisps of it were being pulled cautiously aside, and then a head came out—the head of Duke Pierson. He had not ducked

into the room because he was crazed with fear; but, because, fantastic as it had seemed, it offered the only plan which appeared to have the slightest chance of success.

This plan was to transfer the Hawk's cloak and mask to the still unconscious Chinaman in the chamber. Duke had gambled on two things—that the Chinaman *was* still there, and that in the darkness he would be mistaken for the fear-stricken Hawk.

For Duke had known that once all three of them were in the Chamber of Eternal Silence, there would be no hope. One of them had to remain on the outside to operate that lever that controlled the door. He had elected himself for the job.

He crept cautiously out into the corridor. The place was silent now. He inched his way forward. This time he could not afford to take any chances. The lives of two people depended on him, and he had no illusions—his own life would be forfeited, too, if he were caught again.

But, after putting the prisoners in the water room, the Chinamen had gone off. The door was securely shut by the outside lever. They knew by experience how long the drownings would take. It was purposely a slow death which gave the victims time to ponder on the futility of pitting themselves against the Yellow Dragon.

And so the door was now deserted. They would not return until an hour had elapsed, when it would be necessary to perform the gruesome task of opening the outlet valve and taking the bodies out.

Silent as a shadow, Duke passed along the damp stones of the corridor. He found the door leading to the next passageway, walked through it, and at last came near the door of the death chamber. The electric system was now in order again and one small bulb in the corridor cast a faint light. After

waiting nearly a minute and assuring himself that there was no one about, Duke supplemented the light of the bulb with his own flash.

He studied the valves and levers outside the door for a minute, then unhesitatingly gripped the valve with the dragon's head upon it. He turned it and heard the sound of running water in the chamber gradually cease until it was a faint trickle, and finally had stopped altogether.

Then he gripped the outlet valve, for the mechanism of this chamber was clear enough. Deadly though it was, it was also simple. He heard the sucking sound of water entering a drain. Then he pulled the lever and opened the door.

Limey had known what to expect as soon as he found the form of the Chinaman dressed in the Hawk's clothes. He was the first to spring through the door and grip Duke's hand. The next was Giles Maitland, still moaning. Duke silenced him with an angry whisper.

"This is no time for that sort of thing," he whispered. "Pull yourself together—and we may get out of here."

But after they had come back into the main corridor, Limey's face fell. He started uncertainly toward the stairway, leading to Wong Sing's quarters; but Duke detained him.

"Not yet," he said.

"Ow will we get out?" asked Limey dolefully.

"I've a plan," said Duke. "The only way to fight a dragon is with fire. Isn't that what the fairy books used to say?"

Limey nodded, though he didn't understand what Duke was talking about. But he soon found out. Duke walked swiftly along the corridor, once again in the direction of the trapdoor chamber. He went straight to the straw and stacked it into as high a pile as he could. Then he took up the rug that had served him so well before and placed it on top of the straw pile.

Next he reached into his pocket for his cigarette lighter. A spin of the wheel and there was a flickering flame. Duke bent down, and the tiny flame became a giant. The dusty straw burned like tinder and licked the edges of the rug. A dense smoke arose and the flames mounted higher and higher until they reached the trapdoor overhead.

The boards began to smolder. Then Duke added his hawk's mask and cloak to the conflagration and jumped away.

The fire burned still more furiously, till it grew into a twisting, roaring pillar of flame, and clouds of stifling vapor began to seep through the floor of the chamber above. A Chinese servant saw them and made the fatal mistake of opening the trapdoor in an effort to throw water down.

Instantly the flames roared up as though through a chimney, for there was a direct draft now. A silken drape caught, then others, until the whole room was a seething mass of flame. The Chinaman went shrieking out, as costly ebony and teakwood furniture snapped with the heat and ignited.

In another near-by chamber the Yellow Dragon sniffed at the air wonderingly. He was smoking opium again. His senses were dulled; but there was a pleasant glow in his brain which always came with the knowledge that he had outwitted his enemies.

Then the smoke thickened. It was not the fragrant smoke of opium or tobacco, but pungent, sickening smoke and stung his nostrils and made his slant eyes smart.

He frowned angrily. What careless servant was responsible for disturbing the comfort of the mighty Wong Sing? He would see that the man was punished with twenty lashes.

But now his ears were assailed also. There came a terrified shriek from next door—the shriek of the yellow man who had foolishly opened the trapdoor.

With a cry of anger, Wong Sing picked up the silk-headed mallet and struck a booming note on his bronze gong. He would teach his slaves that, no matter what the reason, it was perilous to disrupt the peace in the house of Wong Sing.

But the shivering note of the gong subsided and there was no answer. Twice more he struck it without effect. And only then did it come to him that something was radically wrong. If his servants did not answer that deep-toned summons, something even greater than their fear of him must be affecting them.

He brushed the fumes of opium from his brain and rose to his feet with the uncoiling motion of a snake. He glided toward the door. Then it was that a cloud of acrid smoke seemed to leap into the room and strike him in the face. He fell back gasping and choking.

All his calm left him now. There came distinctly to his ears the crackling of flames. His voice rose in a high singsong note, ordering his servants to come and tell him the meaning of all this. First it was a command; then, as another cloud of smoke entered the chamber, it became an alarmed call for help.

But the servants had other things to think about. Their fear of fire was even greater than their terror of the yellow hand of Wong Sing. Like rats leaving a sinking ship, they were dashing along corridors, leaping through windows, running toward the street exits as though a thousand devils were after them.

Wong Sing had cringing slaves, but no friends, and in his hour of greatest peril, his slaves had deserted him, not seeming to care whether he burned alive or not.

He realized this as the side of his room began to smolder and the air became unbearably hot. He knew now that he must get out of this room be-

fore the draperies in it caught, too, and before he was burned alive.

And once again he turned toward the door. With his yellow clawlike hands before him, he grouped through the smoke. His lungs, made sensitive by the fumes of opium, smarted excruciatingly as he breathed in the stinging vapor. He stumbled out into the corridor, blinded, whimpering. First he turned in the wrong direction, toward the fire. But the blast of heat made him realize his mistake. He cried out, and lurched in the other direction.

A great fear seized him. Sweat broke out on his yellow face and trickled down in gathering beads. He thought of his prisoners on the floor below in the Chamber of Eternal Silence, and at that moment he envied them. Better than this; better than being roasted alive was the cool death that water would bring.

The smoke was growing thicker now. The flame was at his heels. He plunged ahead, tearing his costly embroidered robe. Then he banged into the wall and fell, half stunned.

Whimpering, clawing at the carpet, he crawled forward, still crying for help in Chinese and English, and, coming steadily nearer, was that terrible roar of the flames.

He gave up hope as the soles of his feet began to smolder, and he could feel the smart of the heat upon his very flesh.

Then two arms came out of the whirling smoke clouds and seized him. Two arms lifted him to an upright position, and he was dragged forward. A voice rasped in his ear:

"Come on, you yellow devil. Run for it before you roast like a Chinese pig."

It was the voice of the Hawk, the man who at this moment was supposedly facing a slow death by water. What did it mean? How had this white devil escaped from the Chamber of Eternal Silence?

But Wong Sing wasted no time trying to figure it out. He followed the guiding hands along the corridor toward the blessed light of an open window that gave on the alley in back.

And Duke Pierson was grinning as he helped the Chinaman over the sill and out into the waiting arms of Limey Lewin.

"Here, Limey," he said, "hang onto him tight while I get out. I reached him just in the nick of time."

The Chinaman opened his smoke-filled eyes in the fresh air.

"You are clever, most honorable Hawk," he mumbled. "You have saved me from the wrath of the fire gods. The Yellow Dragon owes you a debt of gratitude."

"Save your flowery speeches for the judge when they try you," said Duke harshly.

Giles Maitland grabbed hold of Wong Sing, too, and Limey at this moment shoved his hand close to Duke's face and then opened it. In the palm of his hand was a grotesque light-colored Chinese figure made of amber. Limey was grinning gleefully.

"What is it?" asked Duke.

"Blarst me if I know any better than you do, sir," said Limey. "I snatched it when we ran through the bloomin' 'all on our way out. But I'm keepin' it as a souvenir, sir—to prove that the 'Awk got the best of 'is royal 'ighness, the Yellow Dragon, an' did 'im up proper."

RUMORS

By CRISTEL HASTINGS

I HEARD the West Wind breathe a tale
Of purple mountains looming high
Beyond the clouds, their snowy tops
Reaching for stars that dot the sky.
This same West Wind went on to sing
Of moonlit ranges flaring wide,
Of prairied miles and roaming herds
Where dusty cowboys sing and ride.

It told of rivers and dim trails,
Of marmots whistling in a wood,
Until it seemed these city streets
Began to fade right where I stood!
It seemed I felt the wind against
My lips and knew the sagebrush tang
Of prairies, while the rushing sound
Was the low song some river sang.

To-night I think of nothing else
But mountains and their starry heights.
I find more beauty in a star
Than a thousand city lights.
Since this low wind began to tell
Me things it seemed so well to know,
My feet must trail the western sun
And learn if all these things are so!



Trail of the Paint Hoss

By Galen C. Colin

A "Lazy Lucas" Story

THE slender youngster who had slipped through the door of the Pearly Gates Saloon eyed the hard-bitten group from between slitted lids. His legs were spread wide, and his feet set solidly on the floor. His shoulders were hunched forward, and his slender fingers hovered over the butts of a pair of well-worn six-guns.

"I'm lookin' for a waddy thet forks a paint hoss—a big, black-faced waddy. An' when I find him, I'm aimin' to swap lead with him. Any o' yuh rannies seen him?" he demanded.

There was something in his pose—something indefinable but plain—that

told of the uncertainty in his heart. The youngster was not a gun fighter. It must have been some mighty urge that forced him to face these half dozen ringy men, and fling defiance in their teeth.

"Yo're talkin' might cocky, younker." A lanky, lantern-jawed man stepped toward him. "A ranny right well acquainted with Arroyo Rojo would kind o' hesitate to make smoke talk in the Pearly Gates!"

The slim youngster did not drop his steady gaze, but his fingers slid a bit nearer his gun butts. It was evident from his pose that he knew the reputation of the dingy cluster of shacks

dubbed Arroyo Rojo—Red Gulch. And it was just as evident that this knowledge could not deter him from his purpose.

"The waddy I'm lookin' for will find out I ain't braggin'!" he snapped. "He plugged my dad, an' I'm aimin' to pay him in the same medicine."

The lantern-jawed man threw back his head, and a raucous laugh came from his twisted lips. Then his teeth clicked shut, and he scowled fiercely at the slim youth.

"Yo're stickin' yore nose inter plenty trouble, skinny. Us waddies in Arroyo Rojo are mighty hostile when gun-totin' strangers come prowlin' around. Yore bronc is out front. Fork him—an' get goin', pronto!"

The young stranger did not budge an inch. "If yuh didn't know the killer ranny I'm talkin' about, yuh wouldn't be so proddy. I'm thinkin' yo're all hooked up with——"

"Blast yore skinny hide! Yuh done brung it on yoreself." The lantern-jawed man's hand streaked for his holster.

Lightning fast as the man was, the youngster was evidently looking for just this. For his gun leaped from its holster before the other's weapon was clear.

But the odds were too great. Two of the other hard-bitten men had been watching every move, and their guns were half drawn, when the fighting words were passed.

Then, from behind the slim youth, two reports barked out almost as one. The wind from the bullets fanned the slender youth's face.

One of the men at the bar straightened suddenly. Slowly his fingers opened. His gun clattered to the floor. His knees buckled under him; then he pitched forward to his face.

The other spun half around in a wild effort to dodge lead, but a bullet caught him. His gun whirled to the corner. With his left hand he clutched his right

arm. Lurid oaths boiled from his lips. The merest fraction of a second later, two more shots roared their sinister message. One was just the least bit ahead of the other—and the second bullet buried itself in the ceiling.

The lantern-jawed man slumped in a heap to the floor, his wide Stetson covering the youngster's left foot. Apparently the rest of the men did not care to pursue the argument. Like puppets, they raised their hands high.

And now the slim youth looked around wonderingly. His eyes held on the tall, indolent figure that leaned back in a chair against the wall—looked into a pair of dreamy, wide-spaced gray eyes beneath lazy lids, caught the unruly tangle of crisp, blond hair beneath the pushed-back Stetson.

The face, serene and untroubled, was clean-cut—almost handsome. And each cheek, even in sober moments like this, was dimpled deeply.

The smoking gun in the stranger's bronzed hand told plainly who had horned into the fight. And at the youngster's wide-eyed survey, the man's face broke into an infectious smile. Casually he swung open the loading gate of his gun and blew the smoke from the barrel.

And only then did he speak: "Seems like every time I begin to get caught up on my rest, some blame fool gets into a tight fix. An' me, like a blasted idiot, has to horn in an' pull him out. Ding it all, kid! Why did yuh have to go an' hop a hull regiment?"

"I'm huntin' a ranny thet forks a paint hoss!"

"Seems like I heerd thet before," drawled the indolent-appearing stranger, as he got slowly to his feet and pushed his chair back against the wall. "But this ain't no place to do yore searchin'—not no more! You an' me better build ourselves a cloud o' dust. Reckon Arroyo Rojo ain't healthy for us now."

The slender youngster glanced about

the Pearly Gates hesitantly. Apparently his mind held but one idea—to find the man with the paint horse. But at last he backed to the door. The stranger followed him lazily, but his hands did not stray from his holsters.

Outside they snaked their horses from the line at the hitch rack. The blond waddy swung into his saddle with indolent ease, and turned his rangy black's head to the south trail. The slim youngster was not far behind.

With close-lidded eyes watching the door of the Pearly Gates, they touched their mounts with their rowels. For a mile they sped into the twisting foothills, wordless and intent on the business at hand.

II.

At the crest of a ridge, they pulled to a halt. A mile back, and two hundred feet lower, they could see the shacks of Arroyo Rojo on the brink of the ruddy slash that gave the little town its name.

Three horsemen were urging their mounts at top speed out from the cluster of shacks. But as the two on the hill watched, they turned off into another trail at right angles. Even at that distance they could distinguish the white splash that meant a bandaged arm on one of the riders.

The youngster turned to the man at his side. "I—I owe yuh my life, Mr.——"

"Lucas." The blond rider's face split with the dimpled, infectious smile. "'Lazy' Lucas, most folks call me. Not thet I'm lazy—jest tired. Reckon mebber I owe yuh as much as yuh owe me, son. Yuh done somethin' thet I been tryin' to do for a week. But we'll let thet pass for a spell. What's yore name, son?"

"Bob Ballard of the Box B spread." Then his eyes clouded and his jaw set. "Reckon I own the spread now. A human polecat dry-gulched dad yesterday.

Rammy forkin' a paint hoss. Come nigh gettin' me, too. But I holed up behind a rock. Then I follered him almost in sight of Arroyo Rojo. Lost him in the hills. Yuh know the rest."

Lazy Lucas shook his head slowly. "Nope, but I can guess as good as the next one. Mebbe further than you, Bob." Lazy Lucas paused a moment. Then he looked into the youngster's eyes. "A feller don't dry-gulch another jest for fun. Who did yuh figure done it, son?"

Bob Ballard looked at Lazy Lucas, wide-eyed. "Why—why, I figure it was a rustler thet's been runnin' off Box B stock."

"Rustlers pretty thick in these hills, huh?" Lazy Lucas's drawling voice seemed hardly interested.

Bob Ballard shook his head. "They was, up to two years ago. But dad figured he had the range mighty nigh clean of them. He an' the rest of the ranchers chased Lobo Carillo acrost the line an' sent most of his outfit to the pen."

"Year ago, huh? An' yuh ain't heerd no more of Lobo Carillo since? Yore dad was kind o' the leader of the ranchers, wasn't he?"

Ballard nodded. "He organized 'em."

"An' they wouldn't stay hitched without him proddin' 'em, huh? There's always some waddy thet's a natural leader."

"Yuh—yuh don't think it might have been Lobo Carillo, do yuh?" There was startled amazement in the slim young rider's tone.

Lazy Lucas bobbed his head lazily. "Yore dad was of kind o' the same idea, son. Leastways, thet's what he wrote to Barry Hildreth, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association. 'Lowed he was afeared Lobo Carillo was back. Kind o' hinted he might be needin' some help."

"Then yo're a range——"

Lazy Lucas nodded. "Yep. Barry Hildreth asked me to come down an' kind o' look around a little. Thet's why

I was squattin' up there in the Pearly Gates when yuh come in, as proddy as a three-year-old with a busted horn."

Bob Ballard eyed the blond stranger, a puzzled frown furrowing his brow. Lazy Lucas did not look like a C. A. detective—at least, not like his idea of what one should be.

And this same indolent, lazy-eyed look had fooled more than one man—some of them to their own sorrow. For his nickname was honestly earned, according to the standards of the cow country. He hated the routine of ranch life like poison. Only danger and excitement could lure him from his slothful pose.

But old Barry Hildreth knew men—knew that beneath this lazy exterior was hidden lightning speed of muscle as well as brain, nerves that were as steady as granite, and uncanny ability with gun and rope.

When the elder Lucas died, the old secretary of the Cattlemen's Association had offered Lazy Lucas a commission as a roving range detective. And the blond young puncher had accepted with a dimpled grin. The job just suited him. No regular hours—plenty of excitement.

And it was a letter from old Tom Ballard concerning "Lobo" Carillo that had brought Lazy Lucas down into the foothills—that had caused him to spend a week in Arroyo Rojo waiting for a clew that he knew would turn up sooner or later.

And now, as things began to straighten themselves in Bob Ballard's mind, his eyes narrowed.

"What can we do, Mr.——"

"Forget the mister, son. I'm jest Lazy Lucas to my friends. But it looks like I ain't goin' to get to live up to my name for a spell. Yuh an' me is takin' the trail of this Lobo Carillo ranny. They won't be no restin' until he's wiped out, an' I'm nigh tuckered out right——"

Crack! Zing-g-g! Whee-e-e! The bullet whistled out of nowhere, zipped past Lazy Lucas's ear, and flattened against the rock wall beside him.

With the speed of long practice, Lazy Lucas hurtled from his saddle and dropped behind a protecting rock. Bob Ballard was not a moment behind him. The blond man turned to his slender companion.

"Ketched us nappin', son! Settin' there gabbin' like a pair of school-ma'ams. Might have knowed them three rannies was figurin' on circlin' us!"

Now he thrust his head cautiously around the rock. His lazy-lidded scrutiny swept the hill across the deep arroyo. For a long three minutes, he stared. Not a sound broke the stillness. It seemed that the single bullet had carried its message alone.

At last Lazy Lucas withdrew his head. The dimpled smile spread across his face.

"I've got 'em spotted, son! An' I'm goin' to play their own game! Yuh stay here an' keep 'em interested, if they start anything."

Before Bob Ballard could say a word, Lazy Lucas pushed himself backward down the opposite slope. In a moment, he had disappeared in the tangle of rocks and scrub oak. For a full half hour, deathly stillness reigned.

Then from across the arroyo a six-gun roared. Twice more came its bark. Bob Ballard scrambled to his knees and watched from around the corner of his hiding place. And as he looked, a wild yell of pain and anger echoed in the hills.

A squat figure reared itself from behind a rock. Like a spinning top with its momentum almost gone, it turned. Slowly it toppled over. And then two other figures hurtled into the clear and raced down the slope, slinging lead back over their shoulders.

Bob Ballard watched their desperate

sprint, wide-eyed. Then another shot barked out. One of the men stumbled, staggered, and sat down heavily on the rocks. The bandage on his arm was plainly visible.

The other man disappeared in the tangled rocks. In a moment, the thunder of his horse's hoofs drummed through the air.

Indolently Lazy Lucas straightened his gangly form from behind a jagged rock. With slow steps he made his way to the wounded man. But his six-gun swung in his hand, and there was no mistaking his readiness to use it.

As he walked, he raised his left hand and beckoned to Bob Ballard. With flying feet, the slim youngster plunged down into the arroyo and up the other side. Almost together, Lazy Lucas and his slender companion reached the stricken man.

Lazy Lucas looked down at him. "Yuh wasn't satisfied, huh?" he drawled. "Yuh didn't get enough back in the Pearly Gates. Had to foller for the rest of the dose."

Then his voice hardened. "All right! Yo're goin' to get it—unless yo're willin' to talk."

Slowly he raised his six-gun. The wounded man watched with fear-stricken eyes. He did not know Lazy Lucas. Judging by his own companions, he thought the blond stranger would just as soon as not shoot him as he lay there helpless.

"What—what d'yuh want to know?" he stammered.

"Where is Lobo Carillo's hideout?" asked Lazy Lucas.

The man's face turned white. This was putting him between the devil and the deep sea. But it was better to dodge present danger than to worry about future peril.

"What—what d'yuh know about Lobo Carillo? They ain't nobody seen him for a year."

"Mebbe not; but I'm thinkin' differ-

ent. I'm thinkin' Bob Ballard here seen him not two days ago. I'm waitin' for yuh to talk."

The wounded man's teeth clicked shut. But his eyes were on Lazy Lucas's trigger finger. He could not help seeing the finger tighten for the fatal squeeze.

"I—I don't know where he is," he blurted at last. "Nobody knows—less'n it's Jap Jarnigan. They're partners."

"Who's Jap Jarnigan?" demanded the blond C. A. man.

Bob Ballard spoke up. "He owns the Lazy J spread across the Bucktooth range. An' he also owns the Spread-eagle Saloon in Saltillo. Thet's the nearest town to the Box B spread—but we never visit it. Tough as whang leather, Saltillo is!"

"Reckon this waddy is talkin' straight, Bob?"

"I'm tellin' the truth, so help me!" declared the wounded man.

Lazy Lucas turned his gaze to Bob. "We'll leave this skunk at yore place, son. Reckon yuh got some one thet can ride herd on him. Yuh an' me is head-in' for Saltillo."

"Hank Collins will tend to him. Hank's old, but he can still shoot straight an' quick!"

III.

On the hill that overlooked Saltillo, the two riders pulled to a stop. Bob Ballard turned in his saddle and faced Lazy Lucas.

"There she is—the wickedest little town in the whole Bucktooth country. Filled with mean, crooked killers—an' Jap Jarnigan owns 'em all. Killed a deputy sheriff, Jap did, an' appointed one of his own men in his place. Run out the justice of the peace an' put in a man of his own."

Lazy Lucas scrutinized his young companion with indolent, but observing, eyes. Then the dimpled smile spread over his face at what he saw.

"Yuh ain't honin' to back out, son?"

In answer, Ballard touched his clay-bank horse with his rowels. Together the two rode into Saltillo. At its very edge, the sound of a hymn, bellowed lustily, came to them. It appeared to have its beginning in the rickety blacksmith shop, a few yards farther on.

Lazy Lucas grinned widely. "Reckon there's at least one upright man in Saltillo, son. Let's drop in on him."

They pulled up at the door of the shop and swung from their saddles. A barrel-chested, sooty-faced man swung from his anvil and faced them truculently.

"Get out o' here, yuhimps of Satan! Don't yuh know I don't allow none of yore breed inside my shop?" The voice was like the bellow of a bull.

"We're strangers in Saltillo," began Lazy Lucas. "Aim to be reasonably honest waddies. What for yuh got it in for us?"

"Yuh may be strangers—but honest! Why, they ain't been an honest man in Saltillo for so long thet I've forgot there was such a breed. What's yore business?"

"Supposin' we was lookin' for Jap Jarnigan," drawled Lazy Lucas. "Where would yuh advise us to hunt?"

The blacksmith squinted at Lazy Lucas. "Friends of Jap Jarnigan?"

"Not any!" Lazy Lucas shook his head.

"Then I wouldn't advise yuh to look for him. It ain't healthy unless yo're comin' on a right friendly errand!"

"Too bad, if yuh won't give us a hint," answered Lazy Lucas sadly. "We'll jest have to root him out."

The burly blacksmith sighed gustily. "They keep a-comin'—an' they're all carried out feet first! But if yo're still a-honin' to see Jap Jarnigan, yuh'd better start lookin' in the Spreddeagle Saloon. I ain't seen him around to-day, but thet's his place!"

The smithy turned abruptly to his an-

vil. And as the indolent puncher and his slim companion rode down the dusty street, they heard again the strains of the hymn.

Straight for the Spreddeagle they made their way. They were aware of eyes watching them furtively, but they looked neither to the right nor left.

A grim, set expression marked Bob Ballard's face, but Lazy Lucas still wore his indolent, uninterested air. Lazily he swung to the slow gait of his rangy black.

The first thing that caught Lazy Lucas's eye, as they entered the saloon, was the glittering star on a dirty shirt. It was worn by a lanky, bow-legged man with a nondescript face.

He leaned against the bar, but he was not alone. In his company were three of the hardest-bitten ruffians that Lazy Lucas had ever seen.

The blond C. A. man slouched to the bar, and Bob Ballard followed at his heels. They ordered drinks. Then Lazy Lucas addressed his companion in a low tone.

"Reckon thet's the depity Jap Jarnigan app'inted. Looks like a scoundrel if there ever was one." He paused and turned his lazy-lidded eyes down the bar. "Here he comes now."

Bob Ballard did not look up, but remained intent upon his glass. But his nerves and muscles tensed, and his hand shook a trifle with suppressed excitement.

"Strangers in Saltillo?" asked an oily voice at Lazy Lucas's side.

The blond man looked up indolently. "Yep, jest rode in." Again he turned to his glass. But the deputy persisted.

"Nice town, ain't it? An' what business did yuh say yuh was in?"

Lazy Lucas set his glass down deliberately. He turned slowly to the lanky man. "I didn't say, hombre. But if yuh insist, my business is wipin' out rannies thet ask too many questions."

The lanky man stepped back, a snarl

on his lips. His hand streaked for his holster. But his eyes met the lazy blue ones that held a strange steel glint.

Then they dropped to the capable brown hands that rested lightly on twin gun butts. He forced a laugh and turned away.

Now Lazy Lucas looked over the saloon. There was no one inside who remotely resembled the description of Jap Jarnigan. And Lazy Lucas was glad, for he would rather face the boss of Saltillo alone.

Then he whirled as the door jerked open. A dark, snaky half-breed slipped through. The man cast a hurried look about the barroom. Then his eyes caught those of the lanky deputy.

He jerked his head. The deputy, apparently glad of an excuse to forget the gun-toting blond stranger, stepped toward the newcomer. A few swift words passed between them.

The lanky deputy's brows lowered. He cast a veiled glance toward the strangers at the bar. Then he strode to his companions at the other end. He whispered to them for a moment, then slowly edged toward Lazy Lucas and his slim companion.

"News travels fast, son," whispered the blond C. A. man from the corner of his mouth.

"I'm ready for what's comin'!" answered Bob Ballard softly.

Now the fake deputy and his three henchmen split into pairs. Two edged to either side of the strangers. The fat-paunched bartender dropped behind the shelter of the thick oak bar.

Lazy Lucas turned his back to the bar. His hands touched his gun butts. And now the dimpled, infectious smile broke across his face. But there was no smile in the low-lidded eyes—no humor in the hunched shoulders and wide-spread feet.

The lanky deputy stood at Lazy Lucas's side. A skinny, turkey-necked ruffian stood beside Bob. Then the dep-

uty's foot shot out toward Lazy Lucas's toes. But the blond stranger was not there.

He moved like chain lightning. The deputy's mouth dropped open in amazement. His talonlike fingers streaked for his holster.

Lazy Lucas waited until the gun was half drawn. Then a six-gun appeared as if by magic in his right hand. Its butt rested in that bronzed hand as if each were made for the other. Its muzzle covered the deputy's middle.

But the ruffian was experienced in gun fights. He hurled himself to the floor, twisting sidewise like a snake. A cunning look swept into his eyes. This was a move that had saved his skin more than once. Now his gun was out of the leather.

Crash! The report tossed from wall to wall.

A tiny wisp of smoke curled upward from Lazy Lucas's weapon. The lanky ruffian's gun whirled into the corner.

The moment of excitement which had drawn Bob Ballard's eyes for a second was ample for the turkey-necked man to get out his gun. Bob whirled not a split second too soon. His .45 roared. The slug went true.

The skinny man gasped, crimson bubbling from his lips. Slowly, slowly his knees buckled beneath him. Then he pitched forward to his face.

The other two drew back, and raised their hands. Lazy Lucas's voice drawled as he spoke to Bob:

"Looks like saloons was bad medicine for us, son. This here is the second time——"

"Hist 'em!" The order was harsh and peremptory.

Bob whirled toward the door, but Lazy Lucas turned slowly and indolently, his eyes still on the two men before him. His face did not change expression as he faced the muzzle of a menacing rifle.

Behind the weapon were the slant

eyes of a flat-faced, heavy-bodied man—eyes that glinted evilly. Then the man stepped into the saloon. Behind him were three others, each with ready guns.

IV.

The flat-faced man turned to the lanky fake deputy. "What's up, Bat?" he queried in a voice as flat as his face.

The deputy staggered to his feet. For a moment, he stammered incoherently. Then his words tumbled over each other in eagerness.

"These here waddies jumped us, Jap! Jumped us whilst we wasn't lookin'! One of 'em killed Lanky, an' t'other drilled my wrist."

"Who are they?" snapped the flat-faced man.

"Pair of strangers from up Arroyo Rojo way!" The deputy's left eyelid dropped a trifle, and Lazy Lucas caught its meaning.

"Better lock 'em up, Bat. Strangers ain't got no call to raise thunder in Saltillo. Call Tip Albright. Tell him to get his justice-of-the-peace book out. The sooner they stretch rope, the better."

Now, seeing the deputy's two remaining followers had the strangers covered, Jarnigan turned and strode from the saloon. It was plain that the flat-faced hombre wanted to show that he had no personal interest in the case.

Lazy Lucas's eyes moved slowly about the room. He noted the window back of the bar—just a small window, and high. But it could be reached from the top of the bar.

He turned lazily to the deputy, who approached to disarm him. Then he moved with that deceptive lightning speed. His hands streaked downward. Both guns came out roaring. "Bat" Burley, the deputy, slumped to the floor with a slug through his shoulder.

Another bullet clipped the lobe of an ear from one of the remaining gunmen.

"Jap" Jarnigan and his men had whirled at the first shot, and now they were pounding back across the street.

Lazy Lucas leaped to the bar. His fist crashed through the glass of the window, and his body followed the fist. In the barest fraction of a second, he was gone.

The two ruffians inside the saloon hurled themselves upon Bob Ballard. The slim youngster was so startled by the turn of events that he offered no resistance, and Jap Jarnigan's men were soon there to help.

But Lazy Lucas was gone. The dozen pairs of straining ears inside the Spreadeagle caught the thunder of hoofs that told the direction of his flight.

Jap Jarnigan pushed through the crowd. A few terse words told him what had happened. He whirled to one of his men.

"Yuh, Slash! Take this waddy to jail! Yuh'll find the keys in Bat's pocket. The rest of yuh fork yore brones an' round up thet other waddy. Me, I'm headin' for the Lazy J. Got business there. But I'm countin' on yore catchin' thet gangly hombre, pronto." He turned abruptly and strode from the Spreadeagle.

Roughly the hard-bitten ruffians marched Bob Ballard to the little jail and thrust him into a cell. The only window, small and heavily barred, looked out to the east. Bob watched the lengthening shadows. The sun was sinking behind the hills to the west, and he felt strangely alone.

Although he trusted Lazy Lucas absolutely, it was hard to keep a bit of lingering doubt from his mind. And since he had heard no hoofbeat or sound of voice for some time, he was thinking that the pursuit of his partner was a long one.

He turned from the window and slumped to the cot. For a full half hour he sat, chin in cupped hands. Then he leaped to his feet and sped to the

window. For a low whistle reached his ears.

His eyes, straining out into the gathering gloom, caught sight of a rangy black horse sliding to a stop outside the cell. And behind it he could see a short-barreled claybank. And the man who swung indolently from the saddle was Lazy Lucas.

A rope was looped swiftly about the bars in the window. A sharp word barked out. The black backed two steps. With a muffled crash the bars loosed from their bed of mortar.

Bob thrust his slender body through the opening, and dropped to the ground, just as the guard stamped to the cell door.

A shot crashed out, and the evil-faced guard dropped with a slug in his thigh. And now Bob Ballard was astride his own horse.

The two riders whirled out of the almost deserted little town and headed onto the trail leading southwest. Not until a mile had unwound beneath the pounding hoofs did Bob voice a question.

"I circled the Spreadeagle an' was right on the tail of Jap Jarnigan's men when they went inside," explained Lazy Lucas. "I snaked a hoss out o' the line an' headed it up the trail. Reckon the posse is still chasin' thet other hoss, 'cause I put a bur under the saddle. Then I slipped along behind the shacks, until I reached the blacksmith shop. Holed up there until the way was clear."

"An' now where?" asked Bob Ballard.

"To the Lazy J," drawled Lazy Lucas, as the dimpled smile broke across his face once more.

Only Jeff Hoagland, one of Jap Jarnigan's hired gunmen, remained with the boss of Saltillo at the Lazy J. The rest of the outfit were out on Lazy Lucas's trail.

"Thet blond, griinnin' hombre is shore

pizen," grunted the flat-faced rancher. "I'm scared he'll outsmart the posse. I may have to get him myself. But the young waddy is safe an' sound. The boys will string him up when they get back."

"Thet hombre ain't pizen," scoffed Hoagland. "Bat Burley jest bungled things—thet's all. If he shows up around here, I'll get him—plenty."

But Jap Jarnigan only grunted in reply. He had seen too many dangerous men to be mistaken. A slight shiver of fear chased itself up and down his spine.

Nor could he shake off the uneasy feeling all during the time he was eating supper. When he had finished, he arose and pushed back his chair.

He turned—and looked square into Lazy Lucas's eyes!

The indolent hands, resting lightly on twin holsters, seemed to menace him. And Jap Jarnigan's hands edged toward his gun butts, but halted midway.

Bob Ballard was but a step behind Lazy Lucas—just far enough to give the blond C. A. man room for action. But for five painful seconds the lazy-appearing puncher was dead silent.

Then he spoke: "Yuh kind o' fell down on yore plans, Jarnigan." The voice was drawlingly slow, but there was more than a hint of steel in it.

"What—what d'yuh mean, hombre?" gasped Jarnigan, feigning surprise.

"Yuh figured yuh'd see us swingin' on a cottonwood limb. But it didn't work out. An' now we've come for a settlement."

Jarnigan's flat face turned a shade paler. But he glared at the blond C. A. man.

"What d'yuh want?" he snarled.

"Lobo Carillo's hideout—where is it?"

"Lobo Carillo? Why, I don't even know——"

"Ain't no use to lie, Jarnigan. Liars don't stand a very good chance in the

hereafter, an' thet's where yo're head-in'."

But now a peculiar smile played across Jap Jarnigan's face. For an instant Lazy Lucas could not fathom it. Then it came to him like a flash. He whirled, crouching.

"Yuh take Jarnigan, Bob!" he snapped.

Jeff Hoagland, the gunman, stood in the doorway behind. His .45s were snaking from their holsters. But Lazy Lucas was a split second ahead. The guns spoke almost in unison.

A bullet split Lazy Lucas's sleeve from wrist to elbow. But Hoagland went down, a look of surprise on his hard-bitten face. He straightened, twitched, then lay still. Hoagland had failed to fulfill his boast.

Jarnigan, seeing he was cornered, went for his gun in a desperate move. Bob waited until it was free from the leather. Then his six-gun spat lead. The slug caught Jap Jarnigan in the shoulder, knocking him flat. Bob stood over him.

"Yuh'll lead us to Lobo Carillo's hide-out, or we'll spreadeagle yuh on an ant-hill. Which is it?" he demanded.

Jap Jarnigan hoisted himself to a sitting position, then staggered to his feet. His head nodded as he shuffled for the door. Lazy Lucas and Bob Ballard followed close behind.

V.

Straight into the hills Jap Jarnigan led his two stern captors. Deeper and deeper into the fastness the dim trail penetrated. And when the first pink of dawn painted the eastern sky, they were there.

Jap Jarnigan halted on the crest of a hill. Weakly he lifted his hand and pointed. Lazy Lucas and Bob Ballard strained their eyes through the dim light.

Below lay a little valley, thickly wooded and well hidden. And huddled

beneath the trees like a dingy hump of slag was a squat little lob cabin.

Before the cabin, a half dozen saddled horses stood. And among them was a paint horse. The white-and-black splotches showed brightly in the dawn light. Bob Ballard let go a rumbling oath, for here was the end of his search.

They nodded Jarnigan ahead once more. The man swayed from side to side in his saddle, as if nearing the end of his strength.

Closer and closer they approached the cabin. Now they were within a hundred yards, and the smell of pine smoke from the chimney crinkled their nostrils.

Suddenly Jap Jarnigan galvanized into life. He lifted his head and yelled shrilly. Then he swung sidewise from his saddle. But Lazy Lucas whirled toward him like a shot. He brought his gun high and crashed it down. Jarnigan tumbled to the rocky trail.

Lazy Lucas turned swiftly to Bob. "We're in for it now, son! Head for cover!"

They thrust rowels into their horses' flanks. In a burst of pebbles and a thunder of hoofs, they hurtled forward. A rifle muzzle thrust through the door of the cabin. It barked its sullen report. Another shot came from another angle, and still another.

Lazy Lucas counted six shots from six different guns as they raced forward. Then the firing became almost a volley.

Twenty yards from the little building, Bob pitched from the saddle. Lazy Lucas cast a swift glance over his shoulder. Then he heaved a sigh of relief, for Bob scrambled to his feet and scuttled to the shelter of a boulder.

At the very corner of the house Lazy Lucas threw himself from his saddle, alighting on the run. With angry bullets whistling about his ears, he made for the lean-to behind the cabin. Its shelter was his best bet now.

He crashed through the door. A

form arose to meet him, but the blond puncher's gun roared. The form crumpled.

Risking a swift glance through the window, Lazy Lucas saw three men converging upon the rock that sheltered Bob.

But the slim youngster's gun chattered its song of hate. One man went down. The two others turned and fled into the tangle of juniper and scrub pine.

Now Lazy Lucas examined the lean-to more closely. There was no place that a man could hide. And Lobo Carillo was yet to be accounted for.

The blond C. A. man slipped to the other door that led into the main room of the cabin. He opened it a crack, and his eyes swept the gloomy interior.

Then he dropped to the floor, as a vicious stab of orange flame spat toward him. The bullet plunked into the log wall behind him.

And now Lazy Lucas's gun roared, but in the darkness of the room the bullet only brushed its mark. A great, dark-faced, hook-nose half-breed jerked erect.

Oaths flowed like searing acid from his lips. A twinge of fear swept over his face. With lightning speed, in spite of his bulk, he whirled. Straight through the window he dived.

And as Lazy Lucas sped to the opening, the big man leaped to his feet and raced for the paint horse at the hitch rack.

Lazy Lucas leveled his six-gun, but held his fire. For a slender figure

straightened behind a boulder. And then Bob Ballard hurtled forward.

Twice in swift succession his six-gun spoke. Lobo Carillo, an oath still on his lips, pitched to the pine-carpeted ground. He looked up with glazing eyes at the son of the man he had murdered.

A half hour later, Lazy Lucas and Bob Ballard again rubbed leather. And now Bob spoke hesitantly:

"I'll be needin' somebody to help me run the Box B spread, an' I'm hopin' yuh'll take the job. I'll pay yuh twice what yo're gettin' from the Cattlemen's Association."

The dimpled smile spread across Lazy Lucas's face. "Nope, son, I'm sorry. I'm done ketched up on work. This here job I got is a lazy man's job, an' it suits me fine. Tar-heels here, an' me'll be leavin' yuh at the turn." He leaned down and stroked the neck of his rangy black. "Tar-heels ain't hankerin' to be no cow hoss, neither."

Then he looked up at Bob Ballard with a grin. "But some day, son, when yore work is all caught up, an' the last crook is gone from the range, I'll come an' rest a good long spell with yuh."

Being a range detective may be a lazy man's job to Lazy Lucas's way of thinking, but there's quite a few hombres—most of 'em in jail—that believe quite differently. The young range dick will prove again that he can act plumb fast when he has to, in his next story, which will be in Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine soon. Watch for it.

AFRICAN CAMELS IN AMERICAN DESERTS

ONE of the most unique experiments ever tried by the United States was the bringing of camels from Africa for use in the Great American Desert in the northwestern section of Texas, the Panhandle country. This was prior to the Civil War, and as a result of the concentration on this matter of the war the camels were forgotten and left with nothing to do. After the war they were sold by the government, though some of them are reputed to have escaped and wandered way into the wilds and were killed by hunters or died in the uninhabited regions.



The Incurve Pitcher

By Burt L. Standish

Author of "Southpaw Strategy," etc.

A "Brick and Boots" Novelette

CHAPTER I.

THE HERO.

THE man at the bat took a fresh grip on the old war club. Leaning toward the plate, he eyed the stocky twirler in the gray uniform. The latter wound up slowly, then pitched the ball. Straight to the crouching catcher it sped, a fast one with no stuff on it. For the Greenwood moundsman had just walked the runner who was now on first, and his principal concern now was to get them over the plate.

Grinning, the wielder of the willow

swung mightily. *Swat!* He landed on it—that undisguised good ball that looked like money from home. Over the shortstop's head it sailed in a high drive. It landed in short left and went bounding to the outfield. The left fielder ran in, hands held up to grab it.

The Greenwood fans who had followed their team to Coral Beach, cheered as the left fielder jumped up and snatched the old apple on the bound. With almost the same motion, he flashed it to the shortstop.

The runner who had been advanced to second, judiciously held his base; the man who had rapped out that single,

clung to first. Only the swift work of left fielder and shortstop had saved Greenwood from a two-bagger and a possible run scored against the team.

Excitement reigned on the bench where the Coral Beach players waited for their turns at the bat. It was the last of the ninth inning, none out, the score 5—4 in favor of Greenwood.

"Hot bunts!" whooped a fat youth in the midst of the waiting green-uniformed Coral Beachers. "We've got that pitcher on the run! Wait till I git to bat. I'll whang that ol' pill over the fence!" He turned to the lanky, copper-haired player who sat beside him. "You just watch *me*, Brick," he added, with a self-satisfied grin.

But "Brick" Day kept his blue eyes on the wabbling pitcher, and did not answer. His long arm reached around to his hip pocket, and he tossed a few salted peanuts into his mouth. In the bright California sunlight, his gaunt face, with its high cheek bones, was as bronzed as an Indian's. His face was long, his nose thin and straight, his chin lengthy but firm. As he leaned forward to watch the play, his shoulders looked unusually broad for a fellow with such rangy legs and arms and slim hips. It was those broad shoulders of his that saved him from having a gangling appearance.

"Oh, heck!" groaned his fat companion on the bench. "Wasn't that a shame!" For the batter had whanged out a long fly that sailed high, then settled easily into the center fielder's hands. "If I couldn't do better than that——"

"Cut out the chin music and get on deck, Boots," snapped Brick. "Here's your chance to show what *you* can do."

With a howl of delight, "Boots" Tobin hopped up from the bench and waddled over to the stacked bats. He lifted his cap and brushed back his bristly dark-brown hair, his little brown eyes blinking eagerly. With his short, turned-up nose, receding chin, and

cherubic cheeks, there was something about the fat youth's face that reminded one of a contented little pig. After hefting the bats and selecting one, he tightened his belt buckle a notch, so that his squat body, with its stumpy legs and arms, resembled a stuffed sack bound up tightly in the middle.

"Here's where I show 'em," he muttered, planting his huge feet wide apart, gripping the bat in abnormally developed hands and swinging it spitefully. "Here's where Boots Tobin makes Babe Ruth look like a piker!"

Brick smoothed back his copper-colored hair, crossed his long legs, and grinned. This was going to be good! For never, to his knowledge, had his pal, Boots, succeeded in batting anything that was sent over by the dumbest pitcher. From their kid days back in Galesville, Ohio, when they started chumming together on the diamond, Boots had never been able to size up a ball that was pitched to him. He swung at everything blindly, and the result was a record for strike-outs that would have made him a liability for any team, had not his consistent value as a backstop saved him.

Then Brick's long face sobered, and he thoughtfully munched his salted peanuts. This was no joke. It was all right for him to get a laugh out of Boots's performances when Coral Beach was having smooth sailing. Heretofore, Boots had struck out when better batters were coming up after him, when everything didn't depend on him. Now if Faunce, the man at the bat, should strike out, with two men on bases——

Munching his salted peanuts vigorously, the copper-haired Coral Beach pitcher watched Faunce's every motion. One strike—then a ball—then another ball. If he could only wing that old apple far into the pasture——

He swung, but it was another strike. Again the ball zipped toward the plate. Faunce let it ride. And Brick's heart

sank. It was strike three. Two out—and Boots at the bat! Boots, who had never made a fair hit in his life!

Brick glanced at Arlis, the bland-faced Coral Beach manager, in his white Palm Beach suit, his kindly gray eyes sheltered behind horn-rimmed spectacles. But Arlis was letting Boots go through with it. Indeed, there was nothing else he could do, for he had no pinch hitter to send in. The substitutes who had not already got into the game, were scarcely more reliable in a batting crisis than the fat young catcher.

The copper-haired twirler groaned in dismay. The fans were howling, calling on Boots to rise to unexpected heights and rap out the hit that would bring in the winning run. And now, if Boots failed them, his name would be mud in Coral Beach. He would never live down the disgrace of it. Already Brick was sharing his fat pal's agony after that inevitable fiasco at the bat.

"Gee whillikens!" he muttered. "This is terrible! If Arlis would only send in a pinch hitter, even if he *can't* hit. He couldn't do worse than Boots. Why can't Arlis see it that way?"

But it was too late now. For with a swing that would have ripped the stuffing out of the ball if it had ever connected, Boots flailed his bat through empty air. The ball was so far away from the plate that the catcher muffed it. But he picked it up and slung it back to his gray-uniformed twirler.

Again the ball flew—and again Boots swung. It was a strike, the swinging bat coming nowhere near its target. The Greenwood pitcher grinned hopefully. This dumb fat batter looked to him like a gift from the gods to get him out of the hole he had feared he was in.

The howls of the Coral Beach fans mingled in an uproar that drowned out bits of advice they yelled at Boots. Arlis and the green-uniformed men on

the bench were shouting, too, but their words were lost in the general din.

But Boots only colored a little around the ears. Savagely gripping his bat, he waited for the pitcher to send over his next one. If the fat youth was in the least ruffled, he showed no sign of it. Brick glanced at the exit from the Coral Beach dugout, wondering how he could ever get Boots off the field without being mobbed.

The stocky pitcher wound up. Straight for the plate the old apple zipped—the ball that would ring down the curtain. Bracing his big feet firmly, Boots put all the muscle of his stubby arms into a swipe that would have done credit to the Village Blacksmith.

Whang!

Brick nearly fell off the bench when that unmistakable crack of willow on horsehide smote his ears. For an instant, he believed that he had been transported into an imaginary, unreal world. Boots really hit that ball? It couldn't be! Was he dreaming? Was he—

But that stumpy pair of legs scurrying down the lane to first was no dream. Those big feet kicking up the dust were real enough. And the fielders running to get the ball that was coming down beyond the center and left fielders, over their heads, out of range of both of them—nothing could be more real than that!

A runner sped across the plate, while the catcher, hands on hips, looked on helplessly. Then another came across. Boots was lighting out for third, racing to beat the ball which was now sailing into the infield.

And Boots might have made it, had it not been for those huge feet of his. But halfway to the third sack, the fat youth, panting like a porpoise out of water, suddenly got tangled up with himself. Down he went in a swirl of dust, flat on his face. And there he lay, puffing and blowing, while the short-stop tagged him out.

But the woes of the prostrate youth were forgotten in the outburst of Coral Beach cheering that greeted that happy ending of the game. Those two runs had brought victory to the home nine. Boots had done just what the fans had implored him to do—whaled out that two-bagger that had saved the day.

Brick? He hadn't yet got his breath.

"Gee whillikens!" he finally succeeded in muttering. "He did it! He did it! What do you know about that. And I'd have bet a million against him!"

Boots, now on his feet and waddling in, still panted and puffed, while Arlis and his teammates delightedly grasped his hands and slapped him heartily between the shoulders.

"Have you been holding something back on us all this time, Tobin?" laughed the overjoyed Coral Beach manager, giving him another handshake for good measure. "Here you've had a batting average of minus zero all season—and now you go in in a pinch, and bring home the bacon!"

Boots grinned broadly, brushed the dust off the front of his green shirt, and swelled out his chest.

"Say!" he gloated, "that wasn't nothin'. Why, one time back in Bainston, Ohio, I——"

"Out of the way, please, gents, while I get a picture!" called a man who was elbowing his way through the crowd that already had Boots hemmed in.

"Sizzlin' homers!" exclaimed Boots. "Am I goin' to git my picture in the papers?"

"You sure are," laughed Arlis. "So look pleasant, please."

Boots did his best to assume a heroic pose. He threw back his head, inflated his broad chest, and clicked his heels together.

Again and again the camera clicked, while Boots changed position, now holding a bat, now crouching with his big catcher's mitt on his hand.

"Thanks," said the newspaper pho-

tographer, walking off with his camera. "I'll send you a copy of the paper."

"Send me two dozen!" yelled Boots. "I got 'em comin' to me for what I done!"

During this performance, Brick's long face was sober, and his reddish eyebrows were leveled in a worried frown.

"This'll put the kibosh on Boots if nothin' ever did before," he muttered to himself. "Now he'll be so swelled-headed, no one can touch him with a ten-foot pole. As if I didn't have trouble enough keepin' him in check already!"

For Brick knew Boots better than anybody else did, and he was fully aware that the fat youth's sudden burst into fame was about the worst thing that could have happened to him. Not that Brick was jealous of Boots; far from it. Nobody had labored harder than he to make a successful batter of the Coral Beach catcher. Nobody would have received a greater thrill than he to see Boots lionized as a baseball idol—if he had conscientiously believed that Boots deserved it.

But now, although he shared Boots's happiness over the victory he had brought to Coral Beach, he knew that Boots's long hit had been bull luck and nothing else. His flailing bat had landed on the ball purely by accident. He could not do it again in a hundred tries.

"But try an' tell Boots that," grumbled Brick. "Yeah, try an' tell *him* that! My next job will be to keep him from buyin' a railroad ticket to New York an' tryin' to sign up with the Yankees!"

CHAPTER II.

HUTTON'S GRAFT.

THE office of Ike Hutton, manager of the Greenwood baseball nine, was in a small second-story room of a two-story white stucco building on

the main street of that southern California winter-resort town.

There was a roll-top desk against the wall and a small square table, littered with sporting magazines, in the center, with straight-backed wooden chairs ranged around it.

Hutton himself sat at the open roll-top desk that sunny afternoon, chewing a half-smoked cigar, lighting it frequently, then letting it go out again. He had a habit of reaching up a restless long arm and rumpling his dark hair that was turning gray around the temples. As his long, tusklike teeth bit into the cigar, he showed a gold tooth prominently in front, and one of his pale-blue eyes was screwed up in a suspicious sort of squint, the other wide and direct-looking. His cheeks were inclined toward gauntness, his nose lean and quite humped.

"We've got to win that game with Coral Beach Saturday, Bob," he declared, tugging up his sharp-creased, dark-blue trousers at the knees, and crossing his long legs. "We lost our last game with 'em, you know. That's why I sent for you."

Bob Taylor leaned back in his stiff wooden chair, and thrust his calloused brown hands deep into his trousers pockets. He was of medium height with a square jaw, sharp black eyes, a snub nose, and hard, sun-tanned features. His broad shoulders hid the back of his chair, but his waistline was waspishly thin, almost as if he wore corsets.

"You know me, Ike," he replied in a voice that was almost a snarl. "When I pull down fifty dollars for each game I pitch, believe me, I aim to win!" His bushy dark eyebrows leveled in a wicked-looking scowl. "How come you can pay so much for a pitcher, Ike? I wouldn't believe a dump like this could afford it."

Hutton's narrowed pale-blue eye and its wider mate turned toward the closed

door. He hitched up his trousers again at the knees, wobbled his extinguished cigar around in his coarse lips, and leaned toward his hard-faced visitor.

"I've had a pretty soft graft here since I last saw you back in Frisco, Bob," he said confidentially. "This bird I'm working for not only has me managing the Greenwood ball team, which he owns, but I'm superintendent of his big estate." He pointed to some of the pictures of race horses on the walls. "Those are some of Corbin's plugs," he explained. "I've got charge of them, too."

Taylor whistled. "Ike," he declared, "you always did have a knack for fallin' into soft jobs. Soft? I should say you *have* got it soft!"

But Hutton shook his head.

"Not so soft since that Coral Beach game, last Saturday," he stated. "Corbin had me on the carpet after that game. He blamed me for the rotten showing the team has made this season. Told me that if the team doesn't win that return game with Coral Beach Saturday, I get the gate, and he gets a new manager and super of his estate. So you can see why I——"

"Sure, Ike, I get yuh—I get yuh," broke in Taylor, with a voice as sympathetic as he could make it. "I don't blame yuh for wantin' to hang onto this job. But fifty bucks for a pitcher——"

"Don't worry about that," interrupted Hutton, rolling his cigar and grinning shrewdly. "It isn't the job alone and what it pays me that I'm so anxious to hang onto. It's the sweet little graft I've got that goes along with it—the graft that makes it possible for me to pay a guy like you fifty smackers a game when I'm in a hole like the one I'm in now."

Taylor chuckled evilly. "Trust you for findin' a chance to graft wherever you land, Ike," he observed sneeringly. "That little race-track gamblin' graft

you had back in Frisco, f'r instance, that sent you to the pen where I was pitcher on the prison baseball nine."

"Keep your lip buttoned on that, do you hear?" warned Hutton, nervously rumpling his dark hair. "This guy Corbin has let me have free run of things; never has questioned me, even, up till now. What got him sore was having the Greenwood team stuck this season at the bottom of the league. And losing to Coral Beach last Saturday was the straw that broke the camel's back."

Taylor nodded his square head and blinked his sharp black eyes.

"I'll pitch a game next Saturday that will make that Corbin guy sit up an' open his eyes," he promised. "But you know, Ike, I can't win the game all alone. I got to have support."

"You'll get it," Hutton assured him. "Greenwood's got a strong infield and outfield. They did some dizzy work in that Coral Beach game last Saturday. Our weakness was in the pitching department. But now with you on the mound, that's cured."

"Yeah, that's cured, all right," agreed the hard-faced ex-convict twirler. "But you ain't told me nothin' about the guy who'll do my catchin' for me, Ike. What's he like? You know I got stuff on my deliveries that only a few guys can hold. If you don't give me a backstop to bolster me up——"

"Don't worry; I'll have one for you, all right." Hutton rolled his cigar confidently and displayed his gold tooth. "I've got a line on one that's just made for you, Bob. A guy that can hold anything you or any other twirler can shoot across to him. And a guy that can go to the bat in a pinch and be relied on to deliver the goods every time."

Taylor grinned and nodded, revealing a cavernous and almost toothless mouth.

"That guy sounds like the answer to a pitcher's prayer," he chuckled. "If that guy can do all that, he's the first

catcher I ever seen who could fill the bill at the bat and behind the plate both—with me on the mound."

"I'm making no false claims about this guy," insisted Hutton. "I've seen him in action, and I know what I'm talkin' about."

"When will you have him here?" asked Taylor. "I'm anxious to see him and work out with him, and see just what he *has* got."

"He'll be here in time for you to get warmed up with him before Saturday," the thin-faced manager assured him. "With you and he as our battery, Greenwood ought to come through in that Coral Beach game. And if you do—— Well, you know me, Bob. I'll make it right with you—with twenty-five bucks thrown in to keep that fifty company."

Taylor rose and squared his broad shoulders. "O. K., Ike," he said, grinning and nodding. "We'll make that Corbin guy think it's the Chicago White Sox he's ownin' instid of a Californy winter-league nine. An' your little graft, Ike—say, you'll have it cinched for life!"

Hutton rose and shook Taylor's gnarled brown hand in his whiter, thinner one.

"Thanks, Bob," he remarked to his imported pitcher. "I knew I could count on you to be with me."

After Taylor had gone, the Greenwood manager again seated himself at his desk and rubbed his hands together.

"I knew old Bob Taylor was the very guy I needed to calm old Corbin down," he muttered. "He'll have those Coral Beach batters looking like school kids when he sends those fancy curves of his over to 'em next Saturday. And now for that catcher I promised him. I haven't any doubt that the same bait will fetch him that fetched Bob Taylor here."

Picking up a pen, he busied himself writing a letter. It was an offer to a catcher in the Southern California Win-

ter League to quit the team with which he was now associated and join the Greenwood nine. And the pay for his services, Hutton wrote, would be fifty dollars for each game he played, with the guarantee that he would be used in every game as first-string catcher. He was to join the Greenwood team at once.

Hutton folded the letter and put it in an envelope, then inserted with it a black-covered mileage book, with which the new catcher was to pay his railroad passage to Greenwood.

Sealing the envelope, he stuck a special-delivery stamp on it. Then he wrote on the outside the name and address of the lucky individual who was to receive his generous offer.

It was addressed to:

Mr. Boots Tobin,
Coral Beach, California.

CHAPTER III.

BOOTS GETS A LETTER.

AS Brick had foreseen, Boots Tobin had been a tough proposition to live with since the Greenwood game. In the bungalow which they shared together, he had swaggered about as if he owned the whole establishment, and when he talked, it was solely about himself and his hit that had scored victory for Coral Beach. His copper-haired pal was heartily sick of his fat companion's boasting, but he let him rant on, without answering him. He felt assured that next Saturday's game would take Boots down a peg when he went to the bat. The best way to handle Boots was to let nature take its course.

They had just finished breakfast that Tuesday morning, when the knocker on the front door clanged. Boots scurried to the door and opened it.

"Special delivery for Mr. Boots Tobin," announced the letter carrier, handing Boots an envelope and a receipt book for him to sign.

With fumbling, overanxious fingers,

the fat youth scrawled his name and tore open the envelope. First he took out a black-covered mileage book for use on the railroad, then snatched out the letter and read it, mumbling the words to himself as he did so. Brick looked on from across the living room, wondering what it was.

With a whoop of delight, Boots jumped up and down and danced awkwardly like a trained bear.

"Read that, Brick!" he roared gleefully, handing the letter and the mileage book to his lanky pal. "I knew it was comin'! I knew the offers would begin to pour in to me after that great game I played last Saturday!"

Brick whistled with surprise when he read the size of Hutton's offer.

"Fifty dollars a game!" he remarked. "That is real jack." He passed the letter back to Boots. "Well, what you goin' to do about it?" he asked.

"Do?" shouted Boots. "You don't think I'm goin' to turn it down, do you? Fifty smackers a game! Say, I'll be rollin' in money by the time spring gets here. I'll——"

"But aren't you goin' to talk it over with Mr. Arlis first?" inquired Brick.

"Sure, I'll go see him and give him a chance to meet Hutton's figger," the fat youth consented rather condescendingly. "Sweet baby! Fifty smackers a game!"

His cherubic face flushed with excitement, Boots pocketed the letter and the mileage book and bolted out of the front door. Down the street he ran clumsily to Arlis's large bungalow, set far back on a spacious green lawn that was sprinkled with small beds of gay-colored flowers. Dashing up the front walk, he rang the doorbell.

Arlis was at home, and he came to the door in his white Palm Beach suit. Like Brick, the bland-faced Coral Beach manager whistled with surprise when he read Hutton's offer. He handed the letter back to Boots and shook his head.

"I wish I could offer you the same money to stay at Coral Beach," he said sadly, "but I can't. That's a lot of money to pay a ball player in the winter league; I don't see how Hutton can do it. I suppose it's needless for me to ask you if you're going to accept his offer, Tobin."

"Do you think I'd turn an offer like that down?" Boots asked. "You couldn't expect me to."

Arlis shook his head. "There'll be no hard feeling if you do," he said, and extended his hand. "Best of luck to you, Tobin! When do you expect to leave us?"

"Right off—to-day," Boots replied.

"Rather short notice," commented the Coral Beach manager, "but we'll just have to make the best of it, that's all." And again he congratulated Boots, and offered his best wishes for his success on the rival Greenwood team.

The departing catcher returned to the bungalow in which Arlis and the Coral Beach improvement committee had installed Brick and Boots after they had demonstrated their value to the local baseball nine. So elated was the hero of the previous Saturday's game, the thought that he was putting Arlis in a hole, never occurred to him. All he could see was that fifty dollars for each game he played with the Greenwood team. Even Brick and what would now become of him, never entered his consideration.

When he arrived at the bungalow, Boots started at once to pack his principal personal belongings in his traveling bag. Brick looked on. For a while he was silent, listening to Boots's account of his visit to Arlis and the latter's good-fellowship in bidding him farewell. Then his copper-haired pal opened up on him.

"Boots," he declared, "you're makin' a big mistake. You know as well as I do that the reason Hutton wants you is that he saw you rap out that hit that

beat Greenwood, and he thinks you're hot stuff at the bat. He——"

"Well," broke in Boots, "ain't I hot stuff at the bat? Didn't that hit prove I am?"

"That hit was pure accident, and you know it as well as I do," Brick retorted. "You couldn't rap out a hit like that again in a hundred years. You couldn't even *hit* the ball in that time. You ain't goin' into a camp like Coral Beach where they can forgive your rotten battin' because of your work behind the plate, Boots. They'll expect you to do *both* there. And when you fall down——"

"Oh, yeah?" said Boots, throwing out his fat paunch. "You wait an' see if I fall down. I'll rap you an' every other pitcher I run up against all over the lot! That bozo, Hutton, is payin' me fifty smackers a game—an' I'm worth every cent of it!"

Brick sighed. What was the use? He might just as well waste his breath arguing with an army mule. Boots closed his traveling bag with a bang and started for the door. Brick stepped aside and let him pass.

"You're jealous of me—that's the trouble with you," Boots fired a parting shot. "If 'twas *you* that got that offer, I wouldn't act so nasty to *you*. You wait till I step into the majors. You'll be sorry then." And slamming the door behind him, Boots was on his way.

Brick smiled as he watched his fat pal depart. It wasn't the first time Boots had left him to make a bigger mark for himself in the baseball world. And if Boots should come whimpering back like a dog with his tail between his legs, it wouldn't be the first time he had done that, too.

Alone now in the bungalow, Brick lazed around until it was time for the baseball practice which Arlis had called for that afternoon. Then Brick went

to the country club, got into his green uniform, and joined his teammates on the diamond.

After working the players out on batting and fielding, Arlis selected two teams and let them go to it in a practice game. He put Brick on the first team, with the second catcher, Bicknell, behind the plate. Bicknell was a new man, a fair batter and a backstop who showed considerable promise. It was the first time he had ever caught for Brick, so before the game started, the copper-haired twirler sent over a few to get them accustomed to each other. Arlis was watching them closely to see how they promised to team up.

But after a few easy ones, which Bicknell held handily, the lanky pitcher opened up with his curves. And then his heart sank. For Brick had worked out with so many catchers, he knew the signs when he was teamed with one who couldn't hold him. Like the others who had failed, Bicknell was muffing them—muffing them even before Brick was sending them over with the full speed of which his strong right arm was capable.

Nor did Bicknell improve as the game progressed. Whenever Brick put any "stuff" on the ball, the sturdy young catcher muffed it. Batsmen were going to first on third strikes which the catcher dropped. The bases were filling up. And when Brick fell back on his simplest deliveries, batters landed on them for hits. Three runs came in.

Arlis put in his third catcher, Hoyt, relegating Bicknell to the second team. But Hoyt was even worse than Bicknell. When finally the first team went to the bat and the second took the field, Arlis came over to Brick and asked him:

"What are we going to do, Day? Had we better send for a catcher from out of town for the Greenwood game? It doesn't look as if Bicknell and Hoyt were going to be able to hold you."

Brick sadly shook his head.

"It won't do any good to send for an out-of-town catcher," he declared. "He wouldn't have much better luck, I'm afraid."

Arlis scowled behind his steel-rimmed spectacles. "Do you mean to say that Tobin is the only catcher in California who can hold you?" he demanded.

Brick shook his head. "It isn't that," he said. "But Boots is the only catcher I've ever been able to team up with. There's something about my pitchin'—I don't know what it is—that catchers just ain't seem to get wise to—only Boots. I guess it's because Boots and me have always teamed up since we were kids. And when Boots ain't behind the plate—well, I'm just as apt to blow up, too."

Arlis nodded. "I've noticed that," he admitted. "You're a battery that depends on each other, and you never should be broken up. But that isn't goin' to help us in the Greenwood game. The only thing I can see is for you and Bicknell to work out together until you *do* team up better. We're depending on you in that game, Day. Whoever catches, you've got to come through!"

"I'll certainly do my best to," promised Brick. "But to be honest with you, Mr. Arlis—it—it don't look so good."

The bland-faced manager nodded his iron-gray head glumly. "And we need that game," he declared. "We're now in second place in the league. Surfside is leading us first place by only two games. We need every game we can win from now on in the race for the pennant."

CHAPTER IV.

TAYLOR GETS HIS BACKSTOP.

BOOTS was a little disappointed, when he arrived in Greenwood, to find no brass band waiting for him at the station.

With a porter carrying his traveling

bag, he alighted from the train at Greenwood after his overnight trip. His heart sank when he discovered that only a few loafers were hanging around the station platform.

"That's queer," he muttered, grasping his traveling bag and leaving the untipped colored porter staring balefully after him. "I sent Hutton a telegram sayin' I was on my way."

But neither Hutton nor one of his emissaries was in sight. So the crest-fallen new Greenwood catcher was obliged to inquire of a seedy-looking bum as to where he could find the Greenwood baseball manager.

"Up in his office on Main Street," drawled the red-nosed station loafer. "Git a taxi—he'll take you thar."

So Boots climbed into a taxi and was whisked to Hutton's office. He found the Greenwood manager at his roll-top desk, where he was looking over papers.

"I'm Tobin, the catcher you sent for—from Coral Beach," the fat youth introduced himself.

Hutton's pale-blue eyes widened, and he displayed his gold tooth in a twisted smile.

"Glad you're here," he commented, giving Boots's pudgy hand a feeble shake. "Give me that mileage book, and we'll go to the ball park. The guy who's going to pitch to you will be there."

Boots grinned happily and handed Hutton the mileage book, which the Greenwood manager laid on his desk. They went down to the sidewalk together and took a taxi to the ball park. On the way, Hutton told him about Taylor and the latter's unbeatable brand of pitching.

"You two ought to make a great team," declared Hutton, "if you play as you did in our last game with Coral Beach. That hit of yours in the ninth was the best bit of hitting when 'twas needed that I ever saw in my life."

"That was nothin'," boasted Boots. "You wait till you see me pound that ol' apple in the game next Saturday! I bet I'll whale out a homer every time I come up."

Hutton grinned gloatingly. He was complimenting himself on the ease with which he had lured the Coral Beach star backstop into the Greenwood camp. He was thinking of how delighted Corbin, the team owner, would be after next Saturday's game, and how thenceforth his own position as superintendent of the Corbin estate and baseball manager would be doubly secure.

After he got Boots into a gray uniform, he escorted the fat youth out onto the diamond and introduced him to Taylor. The hard-faced ex-convict fastened his black eyes on the new catcher and sized him up. And the expression on Taylor's snub-nosed countenance was far from happy. At first he looked disappointed, then sniffed impolitely and scornfully.

"So you're the great Tobin, eh?" he half sneered. "Well, come on into the bull pen, and we'll see what yuh've got."

Leaving the other members of the team to field flies which a batter was rapping out to them, Boots waddled off toward left field to the bull pen. Hutton and Taylor followed him, the pitcher talking sneeringly to the manager, the latter trying to convince him that the new catcher was not such a slob as he appeared to be.

Boots, however, was just as disappointed. His triumphal march into Greenwood was anything but glamorous.

"Gee!" he grunted to himself. "I don't like that bozo Taylor's looks. He may not be so bad when him an' me git better acquainted, though."

Drawing on his big mitt, Boots signaled Taylor that he was ready. The pitcher blinked his black eyes, wound up, let go with his sinewy arm, and sent over a scorcher. Boots winced as it

landed with a thump into his mitt. For the force of it almost jerked his arm from its socket.

But he held it. And Taylor then began to throw curves. Boots's troubles commenced. He muffed the first one, then the second. He encouraged Taylor, however:

"Keep on with them curves! I'll hold 'em, all right, after I git used to 'em."

But Taylor changed his pace, mixing in drops and slow balls. He warned Boots which each delivery would be, using the time-honored finger signals. And Boots did manage to hold some, but most of them persisted in tumbling out of his hands.

Boots could not imagine what was wrong with him. The stuff Taylor put on the horsehide was no more deceptive than Brick's deliveries, and yet the fat catcher was making a mess of it. Taylor was now sneering openly, and Hutton's squint eye was screwed up narrower than ever, his half-burned-out cigar rolling anxiously from one corner of his mouth to the other.

Boots realized, with a feeling of panic, that he was making anything but a favorable showing. Then Taylor sent over another curve. As it broke, the fat catcher grabbed at it, but missed it altogether. He chased the rolling ball and finally recovered it. But instead of throwing it back to Taylor, he walked with it toward the pitcher. The ex-convict twirler stared at him wonderingly, then advanced to meet him halfway.

"Say!" exclaimed Boots, with genuine admiration. "Did you know that curve you jest sent over was an inshoot?"

"Yeah?" growled Taylor. "Well, what of it?"

"I never see a right-handed pitcher who could send over a real inshoot—till I jest see you do it," replied Boots. "Take the bozo who's been pitchin' to

me—Brick Day. He can *bend* the ball over the plate to a right-handed batter, but he can't *curve* it in."

Taylor's square face bloomed into a wide grin at his seeming conversion of Boots to a hero worshiper. The fat catcher believed he was winning the good graces of the surly pitcher, so he went on:

"Brick got the notion, one time, that he'd like to control his curves better. So he sent for somethin' that he put off his fingers to hold the ball with—a little metal dingus that he saw advertised in a sportin' magazine. The ad said he could control any curve with it—even that right-handed inshoot like yours. But with Brick, it never worked right. So he chucked it away, and never bothered with it again, and——"

While Boots was talking, Taylor's hard face darkened like a thundercloud. Then he savagely broke in:

"Say, what is this—a gab fest? Ain't I got nothin' better to do than hear you chew the fat? Let's git playin' ball!"

Deeply humiliated, his plump cheeks reddening, Boots slouched back and prepared to receive Taylor's further deliveries. This Taylor was the grouchiest bozo he'd ever run across. Fine thing to get sore about, that was—telling him about Brick's failure to derive any good from that curve-controlling device!

Crouching and pounding his mitt, poor Boots did his best to stop those scorching deliveries which the tireless Taylor sent over. But if he had made a mess of them before, he was pitiful now. His hands shook, and cold perspiration stood out on his broad brow. Taylor looked to him like a lion about to spring upon him and devour him. The very sight of him filled Boots with panic, and he went completely to pieces, muffing everything.

Then Hutton stepped in and ordered Boots onto the diamond, where he was handed a bat and given a batting try-out. While a slow pitcher sent the sim-

plest sort of deliveries over the plate, Boots, as usual, swung mightily at them all.

But by that time the fat youth's nerves were so unstrung, it is doubtful if he could have hit anything, even if he had an eye for judging the ball as it sped toward him.

"Good night!" he grumbled, his forehead beaded with cold perspiration after a swipe at a slow one that missed the plate by a yard. "How can Hutton expect me to hit anything that boob pitcher bozo sends over? Who ever told him he could pitch? Gee! If Brick was only here!"

While Boots slugged and missed and growled to himself, Hutton and Taylor went into conference. Then the Greenwood manager rolled his unlighted cigar butt from one corner of his mouth to the other, stepped forward and called Boots in.

"Come to my office with me," he said shortly.

"I'm havin' an off day, Mr. Hutton," the fat youth apologized for his miserable showing, as he and Hutton walked off the field together. The manager did not answer, but followed Boots aboard the taxi he had hailed.

Back in Hutton's office again, the manager seated himself at his roll-top desk, and waved Boots to one of the stiff-backed chairs. The fat youth's heart thumped. Had he made a better showing than he thought he had, after all? Was the manager going to offer him a contract? Or——

His thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of a tall, erect and well-dressed man, somewhat past middle age, with silvery hair, blue eyes, and a broad, white mustache and little goatee. He had all the bearing of a Southern gentleman of considerable means. Hutton jumped up the instant he saw who his visitor was.

"Sit down, Mr. Corbin," he invited,

and pulled up one of the straight-backed chairs.

But Corbin shook his head and remained standing. "Just dropped in to settle this week's account," he said, drawing a small memorandum book from the inside pocket of his black coat.

Hutton nodded and got out a similar black-covered memorandum book from his desk. He opened it, and he and his employer talked together in lowered voices.

While they went over the figures, Boots sat and twiddled his chubby thumbs. He saw Corbin nod and set down figures in his notebook. Then the white-haired owner of the Greenwood baseball nine drew out a wallet and peeled out a number of bank notes.

"Make 'em small, Mr. Corbin," suggested Hutton, showing his gold tooth. "Those laborers I'm using on your estate won't have much change on them."

Pocketing the money, Hutton bowed his dignified-looking employer out. And the smile left his face as he screwed up his squinted pale-blue eye and fixed the wider one on Boots.

"We don't want a rattlehead like you on the Greenwood team," he snarled. "Maybe you can catch and bat when you're in your best form, but I don't want a temperamental guy like that. I want a steady one I can rely on, and Taylor wouldn't stand for waiting to develop you."

Boots caught his breath, and his little brown eyes bulged.

"Do you mean—I'm fired! That I won't git them fifty smackers for the game against Coral Beach?" he whined.

"Fifty smackers? You aren't worth fifty cents," retorted Hutton nastily.

"Don't I even git my fare back to Coral Beach?" wailed the saddened Boots.

Hutton shook his head. "Not from me," he replied coldly. "You'd better beat it. I——"

Three men in brown overalls and old

working clothes walked in at that moment. Disregarding Boots, Hutton hauled out his wallet and consulted his black-covered memorandum book. Then he paid them off one by one. Boots looked on, thinking up a last desperate plea for another chance to make good with the Greenwood nine.

The men made no comment as they received their money, and then walked out together. Hutton whirled on poor Boots.

"Well, what you waiting for?" he snarled, his gold tooth flashing in a hostile grimace. "Get out of here before I have you thrown out!"

Choking back a sob of rage, Boots got up and waddled toward the door. Hutton jumped up to open it for him and hasten his departure.

The fat youth's little brown eyes fastened on a black-covered book lying on Hutton's desk. And while the manager's back was turned, Boots grabbed it and thrust it into his trousers pocket. Hutton wouldn't give him his fare back to Coral Beach, eh? Then, Boots decided, he'd take it out of that mileage book which the Greenwood manager had forgotten to put away. And on his arrival in Coral Beach, he'd send it back to him.

"That ain't stealin'," Boots told himself. "I'm entitled to that much. That gold-toothed bozo can't play such a trick on Boots Tobin an' git away with it!"

Hutton slammed the door behind him. For a moment, Boots stood outside and roared:

"You wait, you squint-eyed crook! You wait till I git up against your rotten old team in the game next Saturday! You'll wish you hadn't worked this dirty trick on me. You——"

But receiving no reply from within the manager's office, Boots patted the purloined book, and clumped down the stairs to the sidewalk.

There he found the three laborers whom Hutton had just paid off. They

were close together, talking excitedly, their voices gruff. Boots listened.

"If times wasn't so hard, I'd strike," growled one. "Hutton pays us the lowest wages he can git away with, and makes the three of us do the work of twice as many men."

"*Twice* as many," corrected another. "*Three times* as many. He hires me out to tend to the hosses, then makes me work in the gardens and mowin' lawns."

"An' don't pay us for overtime; don't forget that," grumbled the third. "He's the meanest guy and the worst slave-driver I ever done business with."

Boots chuckled to himself. At least, he had company in his misery, and there was consolation in that. He decided that he wasn't so badly off, after all.

"He'd probably slipped somethin' worse over on me if I'd stayed," he muttered resignedly.

And he patted his mileage book again and waddled off toward the railroad station.

CHAPTER V.

BOOTS RETURNS.

IT was Friday afternoon. In the bungalow which he and Boots had occupied together at Coral Beach, Brick Day was getting his outfit together for the trip to Greenwood for the game the following day.

The lanky pitcher smoothed back his copper-colored hair and paused now and then to tidy up the bedroom. For since Boot's departure, the household duties which the two had shared, had been somewhat neglected.

Brick didn't care much, anyhow. Without Boots, the place didn't seem the same. He knew he could never stand it there alone. Boots was a boob in many ways, but Brick had chummed with him so long that he had grown to be almost like a brother.

"I'm goin' to move out and get myself a single room in some lodgin'

house," Brick declared to himself. "I expected Boots would be back long before this."

Could it be that Boots had really made good at Greenwood? Or was Hutton holding him to keep him out of the Coral Beach game, knowing that by this trick he would break up the Coral Beach battery combination? Other unscrupulous managers had tried that stunt before. Brick was sure that Boots was not being retained on merit alone. He knew how helpless that fat youth was when he had any other pitcher than Brick twirling to him.

He had just finished packing his traveling bag, when the front door opened, and a heavy foot clumped down in the hallway. Brick gasped as he rushed to the door and saw who it was.

"Boots!" he exclaimed. "What's happened to you?"

With heavy feet, the fat youth dragged himself to a living-room chair and flopped down into it. His cherubic face was dirty and crestfallen. He was covered with dust from his bristly dark-brown hair to his enormous feet. Even his belt line seemed to have shrunk. He looked as if he had lost at least twenty pounds.

"I've hoofed it all the way from Greenwood," he panted hoarsely. "Bummed a few rides in cars that picked me up, but *darned* few. Brick, we still got that hunk o' roast beef left? Git out everything you've got in the ice box. An' go out an' git me a dozen pork sausages, and——"

"What happened to you, anyway?" asked Brick, trying to hide a smile. "I thought you were goin' to——"

"Don't be cruel to me, Brick," the returned prodigal groaned. "Ain't I suffered enough?"

While Brick got the roast beef, what was left of it, and other eats on the table, Boots told how Hutton had

worked him out with Taylor and then fired him. After he had related how he grabbed up the mileage book, he paused and produced it from his dusty and baggy brown trousers.

"Look at it!" he wailed, handing it to Brick. "Look at the darned thing!"

The copper-haired pitcher opened the black-covered book and glanced through it.

"Why, this isn't a mileage book," he said. "It's only a memorandum book, with a whole lot of figures and names written down in it."

"Don't I know it?" wailed Boots. "But I didn't find it out till I got on the train. And wa'n't the conductor sore! I'd spent all my money gittin' to Greenwood, an' didn't have enough for my fare left. That conductor was a hard-hearted bozo. He kicked me off the train. I hope I never see them concrete roads I hoofed it over again. It makes me sick to think of 'em."

Thereupon Boots pitched into the food on the table, and ate like a wolf. And after he had regaled himself on the cold roast beef and devastated three quarters of the other dishes, he continued his account of what a hard-hearted, merciless bozo Hutton was.

"He even gyps the guys he has workin' for him on Corbin's estate, Brick," he declared, and told of the three laborers and their grumbling after Hutton had paid them off.

Brick glanced through the memorandum book again, then closed it and handed it back to his fat pal.

"It serves you right; you deserved to get stung on the train," he said. "No matter how rotten Hutton used you, you took something that didn't belong to you. Now when we get to Greenwood to-morrow mornin', it's up to you to go to Hutton and give this book back to him. And apologize to him for takin' it."

Boots's little brown eyes stuck out. "I will like heck!" he exploded. "I

ain't goin' near that bozo again. I'd draw off an' paste him if I did."

Brick put the book in his pocket. "Then I'll give it back to him," he declared, "and I'll tell him how I came to get it."

Boots glared at his lanky pal for a moment, then grinned.

"I should worry about what you do with it," he said, a sly twinkle in his little brown eyes. "I'd jest as soon Hutton *would* know how I got it. An' you can tell him that if him an' me ever meet again, he'll have to have a whole mouthful o' gold teeth when I git through with him."

Brick glanced at his watch. "Say!" he exclaimed, "finish eatin' and come along! We've got to meet Arlis and the Coral Beach team at the railroad station at five o'clock. Where's your travelin' bag?"

"Outside on the veranda," replied Boots, setting down the beef bone he had been gnawing. "I not only had to hoof it all the way from Greenwood, but lug that darned heavy travelin' bag, too."

They flew around—at least Brick did—getting the bungalow kitchen and the dirty dishes in a semblance of order before their departure. Then Brick's reddish eyebrows drew down in a doubtful frown.

"I don't know as Arlis will want to take you, Boots," he commented, "after the way you used him. He may——"

"Hot bunts!" roared Boots wrathfully. "You bet I'm goin'! I'm goin' to knock that bozo Taylor's fancy curves all over the lot in that game, if it's the last thing I ever do on this earth! Brick, I'm sore at that whole Greenwood outfit—an' I don't mean maybe!"

Brick grinned. He knew that the happiest man on the Coral Beach team, outside of himself, to see Boots back would be Arlis, the manager. But he hoped Arlis wouldn't be *too* enthusiastic. Brick had a reason for that.

CHAPTER VI

SWIFT INSHOOTS.

ALTHOUGH Greenwood had made a miserable showing and was at the bottom of the winter league, the nine's failure could in no way be attributed to lack of local support. The crowd that turned out for the Coral Beach game that Saturday, filled the ball-park bleachers. They watched their team work out, then retire and Coral Beach take the field for warming-up practice.

But although Brick Day was on the mound for the visitors, Boots Tobin sat dejectedly on the bench in the dugout. Bicknell was behind the bat, and was holding the fast ones which Brick sent across with greatly improved accuracy. For during Boots's absence from Coral Beach, Brick and Bicknell had worked out strenuously together, and a better understanding of each other had developed between them. Bicknell was to start the game.

Boots looked as if he had lost his best friend. His plump jowls drooped.

"Aw, gee, Mr. Arlis," he pleaded with the manager. "Let me go in, won't yuh? I'll never skip out on Coral Beach again. I want to slug that bozo, Taylor, out o' the box. Let me go in, an' I'll do what I done in last Saturday's game. Please, Mr. Arlis."

But the bland-faced manager shook his iron-gray head. "You stay on the bench till you're called on to go in," he replied sternly. "The loyal men on the team must be given first call."

Boots glanced across at the Greenwood dugout. And the sight of Hutton sitting there, rolling his half-burned cigar and displaying his gold tooth, infuriated the fat catcher to the bursting point. The back of his neck reddened, and he clenched his chubby fists vengefully.

And when the Coral Beach nine came in from its work-out, he pleaded with Brick:

"Can't you fix it up with Arlis for me to go in? It's goin' to be awful, to jest set here on the bench an' watch that bozo, Taylor, sling 'em over. Brick, please do that much for your old pal!"

But Brick, too, shook his head. "I'm not managin' the team, Boots," he said. "If Arlis wants you out, it means you'll have to stay out."

Boots sighed and stared hopelessly at the ground. Brick caught Arlis's eye, and he and the manager exchanged a wink. For it was Brick's own suggestion to the manager that was keeping Boots on the bench. The copper-haired pitcher felt that it was time for Boots to receive an impressive lesson that would make him think twice before he skipped the team again. And Brick could think of no better way of teaching that lesson than to hold Boots out of the game when he was fairly dying to get in and vent his spleen on Hutton and all of the latter's followers.

The Greenwood team was now on the field. Brick's blue eyes were on the hard-faced Taylor, who stood on the mound, thickset and rugged, his scowling black eyes sizing up the first Coral Beach batter as the lead-off man advanced to the plate. Hutton had imported a burly catcher as Taylor's battery mate, a scar-checked tough who looked even harder than the ex-convict twirler.

Taylor had speed, and a peach of a curve; Brick could see that at the outset. He sent the batter down on strikes, then allowed the next batter to fly out on a well-covered-up slow ball. The next batter nicked a fast straight ball for a foul tip. And then the ex-convict sent over that freak ball that Boots had told Brick about—a genuine inshoot.

Brick gasped with surprise as the ball curved in over the plate. The batter dodged back, thinking he was going to be hit. But the ball clipped the corner of the plate, and went down as a strike.

"Gee whillikens!" gasped Brick. "I

never saw anything like that. Why, that guy, Taylor, can make the ball do almost anything he wants it to on those curves of his. Say, Boots, he is good!"

The batter struck out, and Coral Beach took the field. With the improved Bicknell behind the plate, Brick realized that he would be called upon to use his best stuff to make it anything like a pitchers' battle.

Opening up with a fast straight ball, then changing his pace, he struck out the first batter. The second went down on an easy grounder to shortstop. But the third rapped out a hot single, and Brick frowned, aware that this simple brand of twirling would not do, after the Greenwood batters got wise to it.

So he, too, fell back on his curve, sending over an outshoot to the next batter. But Bicknell muffed it. By the time he recovered it, the man on first had stolen to second. Brick then sent over a ball, and another. That muff of Bicknell's had slowed him down. For he realized that his catcher was not to be depended upon to hold his fast deliveries. With a runner on second, those muffs were bound to be costly.

Cold sweat beaded Brick's bronzed forehead. He gritted his teeth, and sent over a straight ball to get the range again. It was a strike, and Bicknell held it. Brick sighed with relief. With Bicknell holding his fast deliveries, Brick banished the fear that he was on the point of blowing up.

Taking a brace, the copper-haired twirler struck out the batter with another outshoot and a slow ball. The batter angrily protested the latter to the umpire, claiming it was a ball. But the umpire called him out, and that settled it. Relieved that the strenuous first inning was over, Brick retired to the dugout with his teammates. And again Boots begged Arlis for a chance to go in, but to no avail.

As the game went on, the more Brick marveled at those curves of Taylor's.

He watched for the stocky ex-convict to try that inshoot again, but Taylor was evidently holding it in reserve. For few were the batters who would stand up to such a deceptive throw, which seemed sure to hit the batter. And if it clipped the corner of the plate—as, with Taylor's control, it was sure to do—it was always good for a strike, even if the batter did dodge back.

At the end of the third inning, the score was 0—0. Taylor had struck out most of the Coral Beach batters, sending down the others on easily fielded flies and grounders. Brick had been hit more frequently, but was supported by excellent fielding. But there was a feeling of restraint that he could not shake off when he pitched to Bicknell. His deliveries lacked their usual speed and deceptiveness. Yet even that unspectacular pitching had held Greenwood scoreless.

But it was the last of the fourth that the break came. The first Greenwood batter whanged out a two-bagger; it was the tough-looking gent who had been imported to catch for Taylor.

Then Taylor himself came to the bat. Brick gave him a slow drop, which he let go by, then an outshoot. For Taylor was holding a short length of bat. It looked as if he could never reach that outcurving ball. But——

Sock! Brick's heart sank as the old apple sailed off into the far pasture. By the time the ball came in, Taylor was on third, and the base runner had crossed the plate for the first score. The Greenwood fans yelled themselves hoarse.

Brick steeled himself to do better on the next batter. He sent over his fastest straight ball—and his heart dropped to his boots. Bicknell had let it slip past him! Taylor was streaking for home!

Brick ran to the plate, and Bicknell threw to him. But the ball went far over his head. The ex-convict was safe.

With two runs scored against Coral Beach, Brick realized that the time for fooling was past. The Greenwood batters were wise to his simple deliveries to Bicknell. If this kept up, they would knock him promptly out of the box.

He glanced at Arlis, and was about to raise his hand and ask the umpire for time out. But Arlis caught his eye, and nodded. And a gladsome sight brought a smile of joy to Brick's long face. For, jumping up from the bench with a whoop of delight, Boots Tobin was running out onto the diamond! Arlis had read Brick's thoughts perfectly. He knew that the time for keeping Boots out of action was past.

Crouching behind the plate, Boots thumped his big mitt and shouted encouragement to his lanky battery mate as Bicknell slouched to the dugout. He signaled excitedly for Brick's choicest delivery—what Brick called his "dead drop." This was much like Christy Mathewson's famous old "fade-away." Like Taylor's amazing inshoot, no batter had yet succeeded in connecting with it.

Brick nodded. He wound up and sent the ball toward the plate. It was not a scorching fast ball, but fast enough. The wielder of the willow grinned happily as he saw it coming up. For it looked like the easiest kind of straight delivery, with no stuff on it whatever.

As the ball crossed the plate, the striker swung at it with might and main. But he fanned empty air, and the old apple thudded into the grinning Boots's mitt. The ball had just dropped out of sight; it was almost on the ground when Boots caught it. A foolish expression came over the batter's face when he heard the strike called on him.

The rest was easy for that inspired battery. Secure in the knowledge that nothing would get by the doughty Boots, the copper-haired twirler sent over curves, slow balls, and now and

then that baffling dead drop. The Greenwood batters retired in one-two-three order, and Greenwood again took the field.

Boots was the first Coral Beach batter up. Taylor's black eyes narrowed savagely as he faced the catcher whom he and Hutton had turned down. But Boots was in his element as he brandished the bat and leered at the ex-convict.

"Come on and pitch, you homely, pug-nosed boob!" Boots yelled at him. "I'll make you wish you'd never laid eyes on me! I know your stuff; you can't fool me! Bah! Spit that cud o' tobacco out o' your mouth an' chew nails!"

Judging from the savage expression on Taylor's face, that was what he was furious enough to do. He slammed a fast straight ball at his tormenter, but it was a yard off the plate. Boots, however, swung at it and missed. But undaunted, he loudly resumed his reviling of the Greenwood twirler.

Taylor held in, and gave Boots a slow ball, which the fat youth again flailed at and missed. And again Boots shouted at him:

"If I had a mug like yours, I'd wear a false face in public! Whoever told you you could pitch baseball? What do——"

Taylor wound up quickly and pitched. It was a scorching delivery, coming up to the plate like a straight ball, but a little high. Boots braced his stumpy legs and set himself to wallop at it. Then——

Suddenly breaking, the whizzing horsehide curved in. There was a loud smack and an agonized yell. And Boots's knees buckled under him. Down he went flat on his face across the plate.

Brick yelled and leaped up from the bench. "Right on the forehead! He's killed!"

Full realization of what had happened swept over the copper-haired youth as

his rangy legs carried him swiftly toward the plate. Around the prostrate Boots a ring of players and the umpire had formed. Arlis also ran out onto the diamond. People were swarming down from the bleachers, the police trying in vain to hold them back.

Boots dead! Boots, Brick's pal since their kid days back in Galesville, Ohio! All the fat youth's good points flashed through Brick's mind in that terrible moment. He never before had realized just how close Boots was to him. And now——

With a groan, his pudgy hand rubbing a swollen spot on his forehead, Boots lumbered up to his feet.

"What hit me?" he roared, his little brown eyes blinking. "Who fired that cannon ball at me?"

"All off the field!" shouted the umpire. And turning to Boots, he asked: "Do you feel like taking your base, or do you want some one to run for you?"

"Sizzlin' homers! Sure I'll take my base!" howled Boots. And before any questions could follow, he waddled down the lane to first, a trifle groggy, but otherwise unhurt.

The umpire was reading the riot act to Taylor. But the latter protested:

"Aw, the fat slob walked right into it. It wasn't my fault." And he got away with it, and the game went on.

Seated on the bench again, Brick grinned. That wasn't the first time Boots had been hit by a pitched ball and staged an amazing recovery. That head of Boots must have been made of cast iron. It had been lambasted by baseballs, bats, and pop bottles, and had never even raised a scar.

But that inshoot which Taylor had pitched to him—had that bean ball been an accident, as the hard-faced Greenwood pitcher claimed? Or had Taylor, with Hutton backing him——

From his pocket, Brick brought out that black-covered memorandum book which Boots had given him to return to

Hutton after the game. He opened it and glanced through its pages. It was filled with names and figures set down after them, evidently Hutton's record of the men who had worked for him on the Corbin estate and the money he had paid them. But there were other names in that book, and other figures.

Through Brick's keen mind flashed Boots's account of Corbin's visit to Hutton's office, followed by the three laborers who had come to get their pay. He glanced through the book again, then jumped up and stepped over to Arlis. The manager's gray eyes widened as Brick pointed to page after page in the book and talked in a lowered voice.

Then Arlis nodded, smiled, and walked over to the nearest policeman. Brick returned to his seat on the bench. Arlis had kept the notebook.

As Coral Beach again took the field, Brick, striding into the pitcher's box, saw the policeman nod and walk off into the crowd. Brick grinned contentedly, and scorched a fast ball to Boots while he waited for the first batter to come up.

The game then developed into a pitchers' battle indeed. It was Taylor's curves against Brick's never-failing dead drop, with each twirler changing pace and saving his arm as much as possible. And it was on those changes of pace that Coral Beach landed on Taylor for several costly hits in the seventh. Three runs dribbled in, and Taylor had to go back to his curves to retire the visiting nine.

But Coral Beach did not hold its lead long. The last of the seventh, a Greenwood batter whanged Brick's straight fast ball for a long drive into center field. The fielder threw in wild, and the runner sped home, tying the tally.

The Greenwood fans went wild, whooping for victory. And the last of the eighth, another long drive off Brick

brought in a home run. The fans roared with delight as the next batter stepped up to the plate. It was Taylor.

With the score now 4—3 in Greenwood's favor, Brick eyed the grinning ex-convict twirler. Then, before he pitched the ball, he held it up and studied it. It was the same ball that Taylor had used when he pitched. Those curves of Taylor's—could it be—

Brick gasped, then his lips compressed into a thin straight line. Taylor saw that change of expression on the copper-haired twirler's face, and the ex-convict's smile vanished. His shaggy dark brows drew down in a wicked scowl.

There were two out. Brick decided that it was best to make short work of Taylor, who was a heavy hitter. So he started with the dead drop, and it was strike one. Then he sent over a slow ball with the precise finger hold and arm motion he used for a fast straight one. It fooled the ex-convict completely. Swinging at it with all his might, he rapped out a little pop fly which Brick himself ran back and caught. Taylor snarled wrathfully as his side retired.

It was now the first of the ninth. Coral Beach's last chance to turn defeat into victory. Tate, the first man up, surprised his teammates by rapping out a two-bagger. But the next two batters went down on Taylor's curves. For the Greenwood pitcher stiffened up and got down to his trickiest twirling.

With two out and a man on second, Brick stepped up to the plate. Arlis gripped him by the arm as he went.

"For Heaven's sake," begged the manager, "hit that ball, Day! We *can't* lose this game. Man alive, everything depends now on *you*!"

Brick didn't have to be reminded of that. Never had he felt so burdened by the weight of responsibility. But Taylor didn't look so happy, either, when he saw who the batter was. Brick

had been getting onto those curves of his the last few innings. That copper-haired kid was dangerous.

The Greenwood twirler opened up with a drop, which Brick let go by. It was a ball. Then Taylor sent over an outshoot, and the lanky batter whanged a foul into the bleachers. Taylor then eyed Brick savagely, wound up—and sent what looked like a rather high straight ball zinging with terrific speed toward the plate.

But that fast ball did not deceive Brick. The instant it left Taylor's hand, he recognized it as the same inshoot that had beaned Boots. Not stopping to step back, Brick hurled himself flat on the ground across the plate. And not an instant too soon, for even as he fell, the speeding ball grazed the top of his cap.

Again the umpire read the riot act to Taylor, and the latter gave his usual alibi. But the umpire ruled it a ball, and warned Taylor that if it happened again, he would go out of the game.

As the ex-convict again faced Brick, he was visibly nervous. He wound up and sent a fast ball shooting toward the plate. And that one didn't deceive Brick, either.

Smack! He landed on it with all the power of his sinewy arms. And as he sped down the lane to first, he glimpsed the horsehide sailing far out into the pasture.

Rounding second, Brick put for third, tagged that stick, and lit out for home. The runner ahead of him had already crossed the plate. The catcher stood in the lane, his hands up to receive the incoming ball. But taking no chances, Brick slid. His shoulder smashed against the catcher's shins, knocking him heels over head. And when the smoke of battle cleared away, Brick was standing on the plate, safe!

In the Greenwood dugout, Hutton was on his feet, sending in another pitcher, furiously beckoning for Tay-

lor to come out. But Brick grabbed the umpire's arm.

"Don't let Taylor go off the field!" he pleaded. "Look at his hand! I want you to examine it!"

The umpire looked surprised, but quickly decided that he'd better take the home-run hitter's advice. So he waved Taylor over to him and met him halfway. Without further words, he seized Taylor's right hand and looked at it. As he did so, a gasp of surprise escaped his parted lips.

"So that was the trick of your curves, eh?" the umpire snapped. "I've seen those things before, but I never knew a semipro ball player would have nerve enough to use one."

For attached to Taylor's forefinger and middle finger was a small metal device for curving the ball. It was an open violation of pitching rules.

"Now you can go off the field—and stay off," warned the umpire, while the fans booed the tricky twirler. "And don't ever play in this part of the country again, if you know what's good for you."

The rest of the game proved a walk-away for Coral Beach, with Brick shutting out the Greenwood batters in one-two-three order the last of the inning. The final score was Coral Beach, 8; Greenwood, 4. Taylor's successor on the mound was easy meat. The score might have been even larger, had not Boots struck out.

As the Coral Beach players retired to their dugout, Hutton came over, followed by Corbin.

"I hope you don't think I knew the trick Taylor was using, Mr. Arlis," meekly said the Greenwood manager, rolling his half-burned cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "I didn't——"

"Say!" roared Boots. "Sure you knew it! You're a bigger crook than he is! Kiss that gold tooth o' yours good-by! Here's where I shine!"

Swinging his fat fist, Boots smashed a terrific blow to Hutton's mouth, flattening his cigar against his nose. The Greenwood manager let out one agonized yelp, and went down flat on his back, his heels in the air.

Brick grabbed his triumphant fat pal and shoved him aside. A policeman also grabbed him. Wiping his crimsoned lips, Hutton staggered to his feet.

"Arrest that slugger!" he squealed. "Arrest him for assault and battery!"

"Yes, arrest him!" ordered the indignant Corbin. "He called my manager a crook. I won't stand anything like——"

"I think, Mr. Corbin," Arlis interrupted mildly, "I have evidence here that will establish that Hutton is a crook."

The white-haired Greenwood owner looked at him in amazement. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

Arlis opened the little black memorandum book and pointed to its pages. "According to Hutton's expense account," he said, "you've been paying him for the work of eight and sometimes ten men every week on your estate."

"Yes," agreed Corbin. "What's wrong with that?"

Arlis waved to a policeman, who stepped forward with three men in laborers' attire.

"Those three men are the only ones who have worked on your estate for two years," declared the Coral Beach manager. "They'll tell you so themselves."

"You bet we have!" heatedly spoke up one of the laborers. "We done the work of eight men, but we only got paid for three."

"And that isn't all," Arlis went on. "In Hutton's little book there are items telling of where that money you paid him for men he never hired went to—gambling bills, and the fifty dollars a

game he was paying Taylor, for instance. You'd better keep that book, Mr. Corbin. It tells the whole story of how you've been fleeced."

Corbin's dignified face went livid, and he tugged at his little white goatee.

"You may arrest Hutton instead of that fat boy," he ordered the policeman, holding Boots. "I don't need any more proof than that. It is quite enough—too much, in fact."

As the whimpering Hutton was led away, Corbin seized Arlis's hand and shook it warmly.

"But how did you ever find out how Hutton has been working me these two years?" he demanded. "Why, he must have done me out of thousands of dollars! I'll never find out thoroughly till I go over the books."

Arlis turned to Brick. "You tell him, Day," he invited.

Brick nervously stood on one foot, then on the other.

"It was that book Boots swiped from Hutton," he explained. "That, and Boots's story of how them three laborers kicked 'cause they were underpaid. I put the two and two together. And—well, Mr. Arlis did the rest."

Arlis laughed, and Corbin nodded, stroking his bushy white mustache.

"But what I don't understand, Day," the Coral Beach manager said, "is how you got wise that Taylor was using that device to control his curves. How did you ever ferret *that* out?"

Brick picked up the baseball which he had dropped when he separated Boots from Hutton. He pointed to three little holes in the horsehide—holes not much larger than pin pricks.

"When I saw those holes in the ball," he explained, "I remembered that thing I sent for to improve my own curves, when Boots and me were back in Galesville, Ohio. And I remembered *that* used to leave three holes like that in the ball when I used it. So I figured Taylor was usin' one o' them little metal

gadgets, too—but he certainly had a darned sight better luck with it than I did."

Arlis glanced at Corbin, and the latter nodded and smiled approvingly. Just then, a newspaper cameraman stepped forward. Boots threw out his chest and struck a heroic pose.

Then he growled, and slouched off into the background. For the lens of the camera was pointed at Brick. It was not Boots's day. He had had his.

Watch for a new "Brick and Boots" novelette, by Burt L. Standish, in an early issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine.



WASHINGTON STATE POLICE

OVER the gleaming highways of the State of Washington flash figures on motor cycles, clad in natty olive drab uniforms.

These men are State policemen. Unlike the constabularies of other States, their mission is not to save the public from marauders and preyers on society, but to save the public from itself. Their speed is necessary to overtake speeders. They do not track down wrongdoers, but aid the motorist, although sometimes they quell the lawless who regard the highways as private property.

The lives of these guardsmen move at a quick pace. While not policemen in the usual sense, their job is as varied. They are mechanics of high skill, able to give aid to the traveler who has broken down on the road. They are educators in methods of safety. Their rescues of stranded autoists are no less thrilling than the tales of man-hunts.

Another service these men render to their State is the prevention of forest fires. They travel thousands of miles in a year, and often are able to quench at the start a woods blaze that might destroy thousands of dollars' worth of timber if allowed to gain headway. In one year more than five hundred small fires were thus discovered and reported to the fire warden or put out by the patrolmen.

The Highway Patrol was organized in 1921. Four years later the superintendency was given to William Cole. He has created a morale among his men that compares favorably with that of older organizations of State troopers.

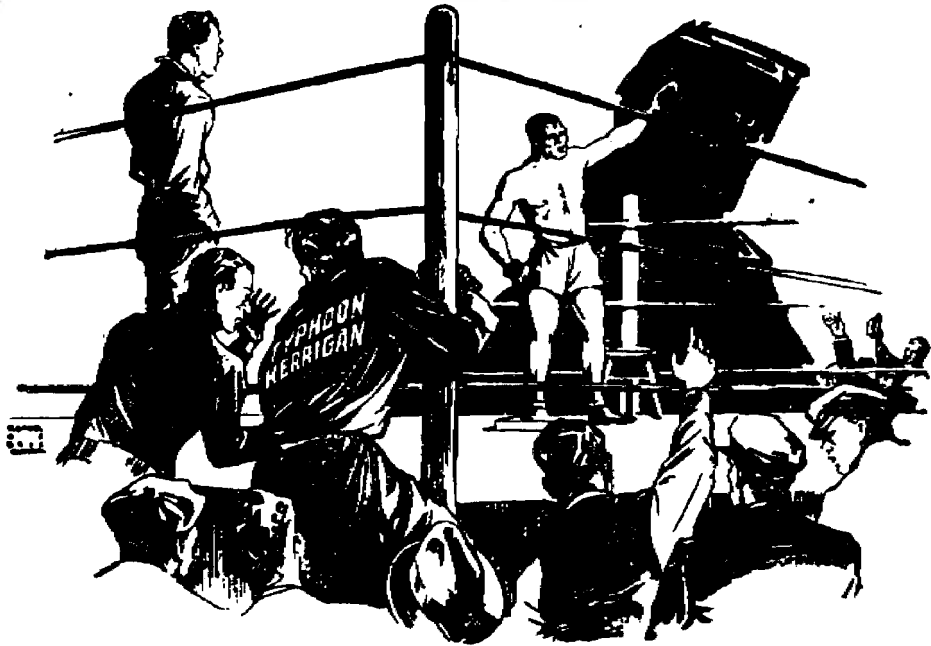
As head of the highway patrol, he has worked vigorously to reduce fatalities in automobile accidents and has trained his men not only to rescue persons in highway mishaps but to be crusaders against the carelessness which brings a high mortality toll.

Every man is handpicked for the difficult job before him. Once selected, he is given a sixty-day probationary period at Olympia in which he proves his fitness for the job.

He is placed under an instructor who teaches him the elements of his work and once a day comes under the eye of the chief, who continues his appraisal of the man's worth as an officer. If at the end of sixty days he is found not quite ready to take the road, he is given an additional thirty days for further instruction, after which he either becomes an officer with full rating or is dropped from the rolls.

Even then the chief takes the man into consideration, and none is released until other employment is found for him.

Two rigid rules are taught the recruits in handling the public. One is courtesy and the other is firmness.



Champ Stuff

By Phil Richards

A "Typhoon Kerrigan" Story

LIKE an imprisoned beast of the jungle, Leith "Typhoon" Kerrigan stormed back and forth in front of his homely little manager, "Hawkbill" Skelly. A philosophic old sea rover, usually calm and good-natured, Hawkbill was fiery-eyed as he snarled at his young middleweight protégé.

The other battlers in the dressing room looked on in gawking amazement, undecided whether to burst out laughing or to take it on the lam. For, surely, the two were crazy. A few moments before, the blond, handsome fighter had been dozing on a rubbing table, while Hawkbill had sat in a corner, stroking his long beak of a nose.

Then an arena attendant had poked

his head in, and announced that Leith Typhoon Kerrigan was on next with "Rough-house" Morgan.

Instantly Hawkbill had leaped to his feet and jabbed the sleeping fighter in the ribs. And Leith had slid off the rubbing table looking as though he would fight his weight in wild cats.

"Rough-house Morgan!" Hawkbill was exclaiming. "Rough-house! You get that? Tough, see? Why, you big hyena, that guy would take the bread out o' your mouth, the shirt off your back, the shoes from your feet! Know what he thinks of you? He thinks you're a big tramp! Yeah! A tramp, see? A push-over!"

"A push-over, huh?" roared Leith. "I'll show him!"

"Aw, you're a big laugh to Rough-house Morgan," Hawkbill went on. "He says you an' him don't belong in the same ring. He says he'll cut you to ribbons an' feed you to the hounds!"

"Yeah!" rumbled Leith.

Despite the fact that for Hawkbill the sun rose and set atop Leith's curly blond head, the manager reached up and slapped him across the chops, first with one hand and then the other. The fighter trembled with rage. He began shadow boxing furiously, and in a few moments was dripping with sweat. But his breath came smoothly, and he showed no sign of strain.

It was all a procedure that never failed with a fighter of Leith's fearless type. Hawkbill Skelly, canny old rover, never tackled a game without learning all the angles used by the sourdoughs. He soon found out that it was reckless to send a quiet, sensitive, considerate lad like Leith Kerrigan into the ring cold and mentally quiet.

Point him up! Work him into a turmoil! Whip him to a fighting edge where he'd tackle an African gorilla! Jam him full of hatred so he'd be like an Alaskan Husky straining at the traces!

Hawkbill Skelly and Leith Kerrigan, able seamen, had met one dark night on the Frisco Embarcadero, when the youngster had rushed to rescue the old rover from the attack of hoodlums. Finding much in common, the two had joined forces, and now they were making a bid for recognition in the realm of fistiana.

"Come on, Kerrigan," called an attendant. "The operatin' table's clear!"

"Operating table, huh?" growled Leith, drawing on his black robe. "Then I'm the doctor. I'll cut this palooka up to see what gave him the idea he could fight!"

Tough, eh? Well, folks don't drop around to a prize fight after a hard day at the office or factory to see a

ballet dance. The ring is no spot for a lily. A fighter may be a swell kid on the street, but happy he'll be if he goes in feeling like a mug who wished the world was one person so he could sock it through the ropes.

The arena was crowded, not only because Leith's victory over Bombo La Hiff had installed him a favorite, but also due to the importance of this three-round special. The winner was to meet "Buck" McCann, the title holder, for the amateur middleweight championship of the Pacific coast. Hawkbill expected Leith to win, and with the prestige thus gained, he intended taking the fighter to New York for a campaign among the amateur clubs.

Rough-house Morgan was already in the ring, working his shoes around in the resin. A product of the southern California oil fields, he'd handled a pick and shovel too long to go far in the boxing game. But he was a formidable foeman who would give any small-club main-eventer a large evening, and no amateur had yet stayed the distance with him.

He was the sort who didn't need to be made mad. Even in his most jovial moments, he carried a chip on his shoulder. He swung his long, hairy arms and tried to stare Leith down.

"Don't go Jack Sharkey on me," growled the seaman. "If you're tough, I'll know about it!"

"Nice 'n' easy, kid," advised Hawkbill just before the gong.

Bong! Leith stepped to ring center with the thought that there was nothing at the moment he'd rather do than fight Rough-house Morgan. Under the flood lights the two fighters paused to appraise each other with cold, eager eyes. Simultaneously, each dropped into a fighting crouch. There was a flash of tense silence, and then a roar burst from the crowd.

Slash! Rip! Bam! Like two wounded grizzlies the gladiators slung into each

other and stood chest to chest, clubbing and clawing with a ferocity that knew nothing of science. They matched each other blow for blow, and their left-rights carried all the savagery of an African fighting to save himself from the roasting pit of an opposing tribe.

For thirty hectic seconds they slugged, neither attempting to duck, roll, or side-step. They seemed like machines built to absorb and fling out punches. They kept out of clinches and gave fandum an eyeful of assault and battery that had even the most critical fight bug in the gallery screaming and stamping.

The youngster came out of the mix-up with his left snapping Rough-house's head back as though the bruiser was trying to jerk a kink out of his neck.

"Bet you're a tough guy punching a bag," gasped Leith.

"An' you're the punchin' bag who'll find it out!" snarled Morgan.

Again the two slashed. The seaman got in a dynamiting chop to the jaw a fraction ahead of his opponent's, and Rough-house flopped. But with the first down swing of the referee's arm, the middleweight from the oil fields was on his feet, coming at Leith with a swooping overhand right.

That made the job duck soup. Leith stepped inside, and planted a left-right on Rough-house's chin. The mauler's knees hit together, and he clutched Leith desperately until the referee yanked him away. Then he took a one-two between the eyes, and clinched again. He tugged his weight on the seaman, but Leith freed one hand and straightened Morgan with a three-inch uppercut.

Out of the clinch, Rough-house stumbled at Leith, who stung him with jabs, and dazed him with a trio of short-arm rights. Bobbing and weaving, the youngster popped leather at his staggering opponent without even being grazed.

"Stay away from him, Rough-house!" shouted Morgan's second in a shrill, piercing voice. "Stay away, I tell you!"

Clumsily Morgan obeyed orders. But that pointing-up Hawkbill had given his fighter in the dressing room hadn't been the preliminary for a quiet evening's social, and Leith charged with pantherish speed.

Slam! Slam! Slam! The seaman shot his punches straight and with the accuracy of a sniper. Rough-house was a mark, and in a moment the clouting dropped him over the top rope. The youngster stepped away and appealed to the referee, who started across the ring to raise his glove. The bell rang.

While one of Morgan's seconds dragged him toward his corner, the other sloshed a half bucket of water over the unconscious fighter.

"He's had enough," Leith mumbled.

"Now don't get good-natured," cautioned Hawkbill. "Remember, he figured to lay you like a carpet. Bust him till he quits."

But Leith went out at the bell to circle Rough-house and wait for a chance to slug in one merciful finishing blow. Morgan still seemed stunned, but he had his guard high and his chin buried.

Suddenly the seaman stepped in to let go a paralyzing right. Instantly Rough-house sprang to the side, gave Leith a quick shove disguised as a punch, and sent the youngster's feet skidding upward. Leith had been standing on the spot made slippery with the water spilled by Morgan's second. It was a well-planned trick that brought a yowl from Hawkbill, for as Leith fell, Rough-house Morgan drove a right to the jaw.

Hurt and dazed, Leith struggled to his feet, his arms dangling. A wild haymaker whirled him around and sent him stumbling across the canvas like a drunken sailor. Rough-house smashed him again, and Leith wavered on

buckling knees, while the mob shouted for a knock-out.

Suddenly the seaman's fighting heart asserted itself, and he hurled a right that caught his opponent on the temple. Rough-house went back on his heels, but somehow he managed to catch the point of Leith's jaw with a hefty upper-cut, and the young seaman went down again.

Hawkbill realized that his fighter needed more than ten seconds to recuperate. The old sea dog thought fast. Just as Leith pulled his legs under him, Hawkbill looked across at Rough-house's chief second and snapped his fingers. Morgan was dazed, too, but he started after Leith as soon as the seaman stood erect. Then the old-timer entered the deal.

"Stay away from him, Rough-house," he shouted in a shrill, piercing imitation of Morgan's chief handler. "Look out! He's stallin'!"

Trained to fight from his corner, Rough-house paused.

"Walk into him!" shrilled his own second. "Walk into him!"

"Stay away! Stay away!" piped Hawkbill.

Puzzled, Rough-house circled Leith warily, and when he again shot in a punch, the seaman was clear-headed enough to duck it. He held on in a clinch until the referee pried him away, and then he back-pedaled around the ring. Not one blow was struck the rest of the round, which set the crowd to booing and catcalling.

"Champ stuff!" exclaimed Hawkbill, during the rest period. "Never mind the crowd! They'll be whoopin' it up for you next round. Now forget you're Leith Kerrigan, nice guy. Right now you're a tough mug, an' you don't like the way Morgan parts his hair, see?"

At the bell, Leith went out pumping his fists like the pistons on the 20th Century Limited. *Zip! Biff! Wham!* Once more Typhoon Kerrigan was the

storm king of the Simon-pures, and the fury of his blast carried a stark, majestic beauty. Rough-house had no chance to weather that onslaught.

Again and again Leith staggered his foe. His left was as deadly as his right, for he stood flatfooted, swinging his body with every blow, one punch throwing him into position to deliver the next. Feebly Rough-house pawed back, but he was wilting under the incessant pounding.

A left toppled him forward, a right straightened him, and a hook to the body doubled him in a heap on the canvas. The referee raised Leith's hand, and the crowd roared its satisfaction.

II.

Typhoon Kerrigan was shadow boxing at the Acme, two weeks before his bout with Buck McCann, when Rough-house Morgan walked over.

"You're right in the pink, kid," he commented during the minute rest, while Hawkbill mopped the perspiration from the fighter.

Kerrigan smiled, but said nothing. His business with Rough-house was over, and he felt no animosity toward the mauler he had whipped fairly in a savage mill. Hawkbill called time, and the middleweight again made passes at the air.

"Say," asked Rough-house at the end of the three minutes, "will you show me how to drop that left for a hook? You hit with the knuckles vertical an' facin' inside, don't you?"

Leith nodded. "Like this, see? No, a half turn of your arm, and your elbow up. You don't need more than six inches for a K. O."

"It's a pip," agreed Rough-house.

"Dempsey's hook," said Hawkbill. "He did pretty well with it."

Kerrigan did a round on the pulleys, two hopping the hemp, and finished off with a few stomach exercises. Rough-

house followed them to the locker room. While Kerrigan was getting his rub-down, the oil-fields' bruiser broached his question.

"What's chances for me workin' out with you, Kerrigan? You beat me for a crack at McCann, an' I like to help you shape up for the fight. Always glad to learn from the guy who licks me."

Kerrigan shrugged and nodded at Hawkbill. "He's the doctor."

Skelly looked closely at Rough-house. "You're the kind of a sparrin' partner we need," he said, "but what's the rub? You're not figurin' to pull a phony?"

"Not me," returned Morgan quickly. "I took my lickin' gracefully, didn't I? My way of lookin' at it, a guy who can't take the breaks as they come ought to quit. I'm in the game to make coin, an' I'm willin' to be shown."

"Yeah?" mumbled Hawkbill. "Listens good. Well, if you want, be down at one o'clock to-morrow."

In his street clothes Leith Kerrigan went into the gym on his way out. Tony Moretti, the gymnasium goat, was whanging away at a heavy bag. Of the several hundred members of the Acme, only Leith and Hawkbill showed young Tony Moretti any sympathy or friendliness.

"How many times must I tell you not to swing wild punches at the bag?" growled Leith. "Keep your fists close to your body, and shoot your blows straight."

"An' lay off them right hands," put in Hawkbill. "Learn to snap a good left an' you'll make a baboon out o' plenty o' these monkeys."

Delight, gratitude, and worship shone in Tony Moretti's dark, cherubic eyes. "You mean—*bam, bam, bam*—like that, Mr. Skelly? Look at my footwork, Mr. Kerrigan. See how I side-step!"

"Yes, I see," said Leith. "Come here. Now side-step."

As Tony did so, Leith shot a light

left to the stomach and a gentle cross to the chin.

"Wide open as the Sahara," sighed Hawkbill. "Watch Typhoon. See that right protectin' his belly an' jaw? See that half turn an' hook? Now, you got to learn them things, Tony."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Skelly," said Tony fervently. "I'm practicin' hard, and I'm tryin' to do everything just like you say."

Everybody thought Tony Moretti had been born with two strikes on him, but it wasn't just bone that kept his ears apart. No one outwitted him on a business deal, and he could sell more papers at a given spot than any other newsie. Tony was an absurd figure because he'd put his whole heart and soul into a game for which he was unfitted.

Spindly, pigeon-chested, knock-kneed, flat-footed, Tony yearned to be a fighter. The obsession threw everything out of focus. He pestered every one at the Acme. Should he go on the road every morning? Were his biceps getting bigger? How could he develop his neck? Did a fighter ever reach the top who couldn't take it in the stomach? And so on, until Tony was the butt of every practical joke.

Unable to impress the crowd at the Acme, Tony used drastic measures to obtain recognition. Often while shouting his papers on a street corner, he would bandage his hands with elaborate gestures. Whenever he had a shiner, he would wear dark glasses, removing them on the slightest provocation to explain why he wore them. The unsightly bruise would repulse his patrons. See the mouse under the eye? And the split eyebrow?

Leith and Hawkbill realized that Tony was hopeless, yet his unyielding determination and deep sincerity caught their fancy. Their little displays of interest were the high lights of his life.

Rough-house Morgan proved to be just the sort of a sparring partner Leith

needed, for the oil-fields' mauler knew only one way to fight, and that was to tear in and let his punches go from all angles. He had the same style as Buck McCann.

Hawkbill, however, never allowed his middleweight to box him more than two rounds daily, for he feared the terrific pace would cause Leith to leave his fight in the gym. The pugilist finished off each day's sparring with a round or two chasing a fast bantamweight about the ring.

The old sea dog planned Leith's training schedule as though he were a champion. Up at six, the youngster and the rover took a car to the beach for seven miles of roadwork along the sand. From twelve to two, ten rounds of bag punching and sparring at the Acme, with a half hour wrapped in a blanket to dry out, a shower and rub-down.

Then Leith went for a long, brisk walk in Golden Gate Park, carrying in each hand a small rubber ball which he squeezed to strengthen his wrist and fingers. While he walked he built magnificent air castles of the day when he would wear the heavyweight crown. After supper he took in a show, and at nine o'clock he was in bed.

As a manager of a prize fighter, old Hawkbill had begun from scratch, but he picked up more angles in a week than the Frisco wise guys around the Acme gathered in a month. Hawkbill looked as though he'd been left in the sun too long, and one's first impression might be that he was a perambulating nose. But Hawkbill Skelly didn't miss many tricks.

Hawkbill's wits had served him well from Bremen to the River Plate, from Glasgow to Cape Town, and they weren't failing him now on the biggest deal of his life—managing Leith Typhoon Kerrigan.

Leith shaped up beautifully in his daily work-outs. Experts conceded him more than an even chance with the

amateur king-pin, and much of the credit was due Rough-house for the way he pressed Kerrigan to the utmost. Hawkbill was grateful to the sparring partner, who'd shown true sportsmanship in offering his services.

Then the unexpected happened. It was four days before the fight, and Leith was sparring with Rough-house. Suddenly Morgan tore in madly, in one of his blind bull rushes. Leith clipped him a left-right, and then tied him in a clinch. Coming out of it, Rough-house jerked his head up quickly, and gave Leith a terrific butting on the nose. The hard impact brought blood, and sent the youngster stumbling to the ropes.

"Lay off the headwork!" shouted Hawkbill.

"Sorry," grunted Rough-house.

A few moments later, the mauler pulled away from another clinch and butted Leith again. This time he opened a gash over an inch long above the seaman's right eye. A gush of crimson flowed from the deep wound.

"Time!" yelled Hawkbill. "What's got into you, Morgan? You know better than to butt a guy! This cut might cost Typhoon his fight with Buck McCann!"

"Sorry," grunted Rough-house.

Five stitches were taken to close the flesh rip, and Hawkbill wanted to call off the fight, but Leith wouldn't hear of it, for the set-to with Buck meant a chance to win his first title.

Coming out of the dressing room for a final light work-out the afternoon before the fight, Leith saw Rough-house boxing with Tony Moretti. Rather, Morgan was pounding and slashing the newsie about the ring unmercifully. It was shameful. Rough-house Morgan outweighed the other twenty pounds, and he had all the advantage in skill and strength. However, despite his frail physique, Tony took the beating without complaint.

"Don't whack the kid so hard," demanded Leith. "Take it easy."

"Come ahead an' make me, you dope!" retorted Rough-house.

After injuring Leith, Morgan had ceased his pose of friendliness. It was evident to Hawkbill that the fighter had butted Leith deliberately, to handicap him for the McCann fight. Possibly he'd been hired to do it, or, again, he might have merely satisfied a grudge. And now he was inviting more trouble, for he slammed a right that knocked Tony across the ring.

"I told you to lay off!" exclaimed Leith, jumping upon the platform and slipping through the ropes.

Rough-house slugged the seaman before he'd straightened up, the smash catching him above the damaged eye and breaking open the wound. Instantly Leith hooked with his left—the punch he'd explained to Rough-house. In their regular boxing contest, it had taken three terrific rounds to flatten Rough-house, but now Typhoon's anger lent such tremendous power to his blow, that the mauler sprawled out on the canvas, unconscious.

Sheepishly, Tony followed Leith out of the ring.

"Mr. Kerrigan," he said, "you're one swell guy. You an' Mr. Skelly are the best friends I've got. I—I guess I'm a bum fighter. But some day—some day maybe—can I be your trainer?"

III.

It was six thirty the evening of the McCann-Kerrigan go. Leith and Hawkbill were preparing to leave their Embarcadero quarters for the Golden Gate Arena, when Tony Moretti, perspiring and wild-eyed, burst into the room.

"They're coming!" he cried excitedly. "You got to beat it!"

Gently Hawkbill pushed the newsie into a chair. "Now take three deep breaths. Who's comin'?"

"Rough-house Morgan!" exclaimed Tony. "He's drunk, and he's got a couple o' bums with him. They're goin' to beat you up so you can't fight. I followed him an' Tip Larrabee down to McMahon's booze joint an' heard the frame-up."

"Yeah?" muttered Hawkbill. "Tip Larrabee—Buck McCann's manager! Goin' to work us over, huh?"

"Yes," went on Tony breathlessly. "Tip bought Rough-house a lot o' drinks, an' then riled him up over Mr. Kerrigan. Rough-house got paid for buttin' you," he said to Leith. "Larrabee's afraid you might win even with your cut eye, and he wants you bunged up, so he'll have to put a substitute in against Buck."

Leith smiled grimly. "Let them come. We'll be here. We've got an hour or two to spare."

Hawkbill went over by the window, stared out at the piers, and began caressing his long nose. Just as the sound of footsteps was heard on the stairs, the old-timer slapped his thigh and swung around.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed. "Typhoon, my bucko, what we need is color! You've got a lot of it, but we want more. An' anything out of the ordinary makes for color, see? An' color is what makes million-dollar gates, see?"

He beckoned to Tony. "Come here, lad, an' skin down this fire escape. You run to the cigar store on the corner an' telephone the sports department of the *Express-Dispatch*. Tell Johnny Kerwin to come to my place quick, an' to bring Ike along. You got it? Tell him it's a matter of life an' death, not to mention a scoop. An' hunt up Paddy O'Reilly around the Ferry Building. Ask him to drop in. Now, get goin', lad!"

No sooner had Tony disappeared, than loud knocks came at the door, and in walked Rough-house Morgan, bleary-eyed and staggering, flanked by a couple

of hulking tramps—alky stiff, who'd do almost anything for a few drinks.

"Hello, gentlemen, hello!" greeted Hawkbill jovially, holding Leith back. "I'm glad to see you. Sure am! How about a little drink?"

"We don't want your booze," mumbled Rough-house thickly. "We come here to let you have it. I don't like you guys—don't like you a-tall!"

"I see, Rough-house, I see," said Hawkbill. "But you should stand on a little ceremony. A nice drink, an' mebbe you can beat us up neater."

"Sure," spoke one of the tramps. "The mug's right. Let's have the drink first, an' then go to work."

"All right," mumbled Rough-house sullenly, bracing himself against the wall. "One drink."

"Steady," whispered Hawkbill out of the corner of his mouth to Leith. "I'm just stallin' for time."

The old sea dog went behind the screen that partitioned off their kitchenette, and poured cold tea into three glasses.

"Scotch or rye?" he called. "With ginger ale or soda?"

"Well," said one tramp, "I ain't much on them women's drinks, so you kin give me mine straight."

The other two called for ginger ale and soda.

"Right-o," sang out Hawkbill. "One straight, one rye high, an' one whisky an' soda. Comin' up!"

He made a great ado about mixing the cold tea, but he didn't bring out the drinks until he heard footsteps on the stairs. Then he came forth, carrying the glasses and beaming with delight. The tramps opened their eyes at sight of the generous portions, and reached out eagerly, but Rough-house glowered at Hawkbill as he took his drink.

The sea rover nudged Leith as the alky stiff threw back their heads and gulped down the weak liquid. *Swosh!* Instantly both of them blew like spout-

ing whales, showering the room with spray.

"Yow!" cried one. "I've been poisoned!"

"At 'em, men!" yelled Rough-house.

Wham! Leith's left banged one tramp on the jaw, and his right doubled the other with a hard punch to the stomach. Hawkbill tripped up Rough-house as he lunged, and the three assailants were on the floor when a policeman rushed in—Officer Paddy O'Reilly of the water-front beat.

Five minutes later, Johnny Kerwin, sports writer for the *Express-Dispatch*, appeared with Tony Moretti and Ike, the newspaper's photographer. Quickly Hawkbill explained the situation—the frame-up of "Tip" Larrabee and Rough-house Morgan's thwarted attack, while Ike set up his tripod and camera. A half dozen group pictures were taken, but the last one was Ike's special pride—Hawkbill Skelly with an unbuttoned vest and a dish-towel apron, holding a tray of glasses above his shoulder.

"Color, gentlemen—that's what we're after," said Hawkbill, as O'Reilly led his three prisoners away. "Anything legitimate to get a load of publicity. Thanks, everybody, for comin' around."

"Nice story," commented Johnny Kerwin. "Human-interest angle, too. It'll make the front page for the nine o'clock edition. Come along, Ike, we've got to hit that deadline."

IV.

It was late when Leith and Hawkbill arrived at the Golden Gate Arena. The examinations and weighing-in had been completed, and the contestants had gone to their dressing rooms, for which the old sea rover was glad. After the doctor O. K.'d the fighter, and an A. A. U. official tabulated his weight, Leith stretched out on the table for a rub-down.

That finished, Hawkbill put a new

application of collodion over Leith's damaged right eye, which, because of the cut, was not swollen. Above the left he plastered a strip of adhesive, and then he taped the fighter's ribs.

"Just to fool Buck McCann," he explained. "He'll think you've been in a mix-up with Rough-house, an' he'll start to work on 'em. Then if he gets wise to that, he'll play for this white patch, which'll keep him away from your bum glim a while, an' give you a chance to sock him."

Leith nodded and went into a doze, a characteristic which delighted Hawkbill. As sensitive as he was, the middleweight didn't know the meaning of fear. Always before a fight he took a nap, falling to sleep with the ease of a tired child.

The arena was packed to the rafters when Leith quick-stepped down the aisle. This hadn't been an ordinary night of four-man eliminations, for the program had been composed entirely of special bouts, with the three-round title tiff between Leith and Buck as the main event.

The seaman was a great attraction, and the fans gave him a big ovation. As befitted a champion, McCann took his time in getting to the ring. He, too, received a prolonged cheer, for he was a willing mixer who'd never failed the fans.

A freckled, red-headed wood-chopper from Puget Sound, Buck McCann was a hard-hitting savage in the ring, who went berserk at the sight of blood. There was a chance in the game for him, and it was a misfortune that he was managed by Tip Larrabee, race-track tout and old-time shell-game manipulator. It was generally known that Tip wouldn't take a dollar honestly if he could get it by unfair means.

When the referee called the contestants beneath the lights, the crowd gasped at sight of their perfect physiques glistening under the glaring arcs. Broad-

shouldered, slim-waisted, tapering, their muscles rippled and bunched at every movement, but never a knot showed, never a kink that bespoke age or faulty training. Smooth—smooth as satin were they, and deadly—like young leopards lusting for a kill.

"Challenger, eh?" sneered Buck.

"Champ, huh?" gritted Leith.

Clang! Leith streaked across the canvas and pounded home a one-two before Buck had taken a step. The wood-chopper fell back on the ropes, rolled with a whizzing right, and springing sidewise, leaped to the center of the ring. With the speed of a flyweight, Leith whirled and charged.

Buck had gone into a Jeffries crouch. Realizing his foe's target was his own taped ribs, Leith stopped abruptly, raised his guard to expose his stomach, and as McCann hurled his right, bounded back and shot a left which knocked the champion off balance. Instantly Leith shuffled in like Fitzsimmons, and showered him with leather. There was a tigerish, Dempsey ferocity in the young seaman's attack that set the crowd wild.

Buck hadn't won his amateur title because he had a wart on his nose, and he came through that welter of gloves like an armored car through a hail of machine-gun fire. His mouth was twisted in a wicked little grin as he whipped a right to the ribs. But years of hauling and hoisting aboard ship had given Leith a stomach protection of corrugated muscle.

Continually the seaman uppercutted to the face. The crowd, always eager to see a title change hands, roared advice and encouragement. Buck's body blows were incessant, and the youngster was covered with purple blotches about the midriff. He felt as though he carried a rock in his stomach. Yet he was strong, and he knew that his opponent was hurt.

He jabbed and hooked and crossed

until it looked as if the fight wouldn't last the round. Left ear puffed, lip cut, face swelling, Buck weaved in angrily and threw his arms around Leith.

"Is this a game?" he demanded. "Your ribs ain't no more bunged up than mine. Tryin' to frame your old pal?"

He jerked an arm free, and scraped Leith with the heel of his glove, knocking off the plaster over the left eye. His bloodied face was close to Leith's, and he saw the red line on the right frontal bone, shining with collodion.

"I thought so!" he growled. "Figured I was dumb! Well, one biff on that blinker, an' people'll think you was dipped in a wine vat!"

All the while Leith had been pounding Buck with short punches to the heart, jaw, and solar plexus. Hawkbill's ruse had failed, and now it was fight, fight, fight. A half step back, and Leith lunged forward, slugging like a maniac. Buck met him, and the two stood toe to toe, ripping and slashing. Leith slung all his weight into every blow. It was now or never! Already a glove had caught him over the right eye, and he was blinded from the stream of scarlet. Any moment the referee might stop the fight.

The dreadful thought sent a tremendous surge of strength through his body. He slammed a right with such vicious intensity that Buck shot from his feet, and came up short on the ropes. But the champ was a glutton for punishment.

He charged as Leith charged, and the pair clashed head-on, hurling punches as though it were a fight to the death. Then the challenger got in a right, while the champ was cocking for another haymaker.

Sock! Buck's knees hit together. *Slam! Slam! Slam!* The champion was sinking! Five thousand screaming spectators came to their feet. The champion was sinking! But he was the champ yet!

TN-5A

Bang! As he fell, he threw a hook which caught Leith on the nose. A machine gun couldn't have chopped the challenger's legs from under him with greater dispatch. He was down—down from a punch on the nose, sprawled out and still. And a foot away lay Buck McCann, spread-eagled!

The noise in the great arena ceased abruptly. The astounded referee stared into the darkness, mouth open. Then he took a step and brought his arm down.

"One—two—three——"

Both fighters stirred, both dragged their knees beneath them, and as the count went on, they struggled to gain control of their faculties. At nine they were on their feet, arms hanging, staring bewilderedly at each other. They were both out on their feet, but the referee was looking thoughtfully at Leith. The bell rang.

Hawkbill had his fighter in the corner, working over him furiously. Leith was still in a fog when the referee walked over and examined the cut over his right eye.

"I'll stop the fight if that opens up next round!"

Hawkbill nodded. "Lawdy," he murmured, "if only they'd come! It might do the trick! It's ten an' they should be here."

He stanchd the wound, and freshened the fighter, but he feared the outcome. And Leith had so set his heart on winning the title!

The bell rang, and the challenger stumbled out, impelled by a shove from Hawkbill. Still dazed, Buck McCann stepped forward cautiously and knocked the patch off Leith's eye with a looping left. Just then a foghorn voice boomed above the din.

"Read about the frame-up of Typhoon Kerrigan! Learn the odds the great Typhoon is fighting against! Get the *Express-Dispatch*. Read about Tip Larrabee, archcrook of the Simon-

pures! The frame-up! All about the big frame-up!"

Hawkbill let out a sigh of relief. Tony Moretti had come through. There he was, a huge stack of papers under his arm, shouting his wares, while a half dozen of his newsies threaded down the aisles, selling extras.

An attendant tried to stop Tony, but the newsie gave him a punch on the ear, and continued on about his business. And almost everybody was buying a paper!

Across the front page was blazoned the scare head:

CORRUPTION IN THE FRISCO AMATEURS.

Ike's pictures were there, and Johnny Kerwin's human-interest story. It had come off as Hawkbill had hoped. He'd planned it for a publicity stunt, but now he would use it to help his fighter. He grabbed a paper, and leaping onto the platform outside the ropes, held it up and shouted to the referee, who'd stepped in to stop the fight on a technical knock-out.

"See?" Hawkbill cried. "A frame-up! Give my boy a chance! Let him fight. We don't want no gifts, but let him fight. That blood don't mean nothing. He ain't hurt."

The referee paused, and then stepped back, waving the fighters to continue hostilities. Buck McCann, terrified, looked at his corner to get reassurance from Tip Larrabee. But Tip had disappeared!

"Come on and fight!" muttered Leith.

"I didn't have anything to do with it!" exclaimed Buck. "I——"

Bam! The challenger caught the champ on the jaw. The instructions had been to protect oneself at all times, and Leith was playing fair. Again he

smashed Buck. The champ pawed him half-heartedly, but there was no sting in his blows. Leith sailed in, slugging lefts and rights to end the fight in a hurry.

Suddenly he stepped back, measured Buck with his left, and drove over the hardest right cross he'd ever delivered. The champion stood with his arms dangling, and then slowly, slowly he sank to the canvas, in a sort of a tragic bow to the new title holder!

"Well, champ," said Hawkbill jubilantly in the dressing room, "it's Noo Yawk for us! I'll get the tickets, an' we'll sail in a couple of days."

Leith shook his head. "We don't go just yet."

"Huh!" grunted Hawkbill. "Why?"

"Because I want to wait until my broken nose heals."

"Your—what?"

"My broken nose," repeated Leith. "You see, I went in to-night with a broken nose, as well as with a cut eye. Rough-house Morgan butted me in the gym that time and broke it. I didn't tell you, because I knew you'd call off the fight. It was a punch on the nose that put me out to-night!"

"Slap me down!" exclaimed Hawkbill. "You—you mean—you went in there with a busted beak! Wow! Talk about your champ stuff. Say, boy! You're just O. K."

New York—fountainhead of Fisticana, city of the double-cross, home of the build-up, frame-up, and set-up—where fortunes are won and lost on a punch, where thousands bid for fistic fame and get only shattered illusions and mangled mugs! Leith and Hawkbill are on their way. What will the big town do to this son of the rolling ocean? Can Hawkbill pay the Broadway weisenheimers back and through the nose for their smart-Aleck tricks? Ask him! Or better—find out for yourself in later issues of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine.



Tangled Trails

By Orrin Hollmer

CHAPTER I.

THE KILLIN' KID.

THE man in the black mask hobbled his horse in the dark hollow beneath a clump of cottonwood trees, for in a few minutes he might need that horse badly.

True, it was many chances to one that his horse would stand unhobbled, with the reins thrown over its head, Western fashion, but the man in the mask didn't believe in taking even *one* chance. For he was the "Killin' Kid."

He had been operating in the Rocky Pass country of Arizona for three months running. And there had been plenty of running. The Killin' Kid did some of it, but posses did most of it—

in general directions assumed to be taken by the Kid, but which never came near proving the right one.

It was ideal territory for the campaign of killing for profit which the Kid had mapped out for himself. There were big ranch pay rolls to tempt the Kid in the fertile grama-grass region to the north of the desert.

To the east was a most convenient network of crisscross trails leading to a country of low mountains, buttes, and mesas, canyons and streams—the streams dried up a part of the year.

The trail to the south was a good one to avoid, for the land was barren except for bunch grass which finally petered out to a bleak region of sand, greasewood, cactus, and mesquite.

But the posses never seemed to realize this, since the trail to the south led to the border, and that would be a natural direction for a bandit to take after one of his raids.

Working on the theory, "When they don't see you, they don't know you," the Killin' Kid had been most efficient. His crimes were conducted on a cold-blooded, business basis. His business was to rob and run—and to kill when seen doing it. It worked fine for the Kid. It worked very poorly for many of the men whom the Kid robbed.

By looking at him when he was at work, a man signed his own death warrant. As a result, the Killin' Kid was known by his reputation, but not by his face, or even by his clothes. No man who saw him lived to give any description of him.

There were signs posted about the Rocky Pass country:

WANTED!
THE KILLING KID.

The posted signs carried offers of reward and description of the crimes committed. But they carried no description of the culprit. When a man has not been seen by any living person, he cannot be described. And dead men tell no tales. There had been several dead men who had never told on the Killin' Kid.

This murderous scourge of the Rocky Pass country was just at present on the trail of old "Hardrock" Lantry. Whether old Lantry had ever been given any other front name or not, no one around the Rocky Pass country knew or cared.

Lantry was an outfitter to desert rats. He kept an odd little store in his lonesome cabin. He sold blankets, utensils, tobacco, and various articles, to men who went out on the desert to prospect.

Old Lantry was not a popular man. Possibly that was why he was reputed to have quite a little money. The good

fellows of the section—the "bellies-agin'-the-bar" boys—were largely broke. Old Lantry was far from broke. He always drove a hard bargain and hoarded his money.

Lantry's cabin store was only a short distance off the trail between the town of Mineral Butte, where the smelter and stamp mill were located, and the town of Rocky Pass, where saloons, gambling halls, and other amusement resorts were located.

The smelter paid off only once a month. If the men who worked there wanted any supplies during the month, they could draw scrip, but not cash. The scrip was good at the company store.

The workmen wanted cash, however, when they rode into Rocky Pass for their periodical sprees. That's where Hardrock Lantry came in. He accepted the company scrip and exchanged it for cash—always taking a generous profit for himself.

And that's where the Killin' Kid came in, too. For he knew that at nine o'clock on this particular night, many of the smelter hands would be riding in to the booming town of Rocky Pass, and would stop at Hardrock Lantry's to change their scrip on the way.

The Killin' Kid smiled. Well, they wouldn't change their scrip for cash tonight. For before they arrived, the Killin' Kid would have the money, and be galloping back to his hideout toward the east. The Killin' Kid had long planned to relieve old Hardrock Lantry of his cash when he got around to it. He had now got around to it.

For a purely business reason—and not at all through any fleeting mood of pity—the Kid decided not to kill Lantry unless the latter made it necessary. If he let old Lantry live, the skinflint could go ahead piling up more money. Then, some dark night when this first robbery was cold, the Kid would relieve him of his cash again.

The Kid smiled again. Lantry wouldn't see his face, which was masked. Lantry had never heard his voice. Also, the ex-miner couldn't pick out any unusual article of clothing to describe later; for although it was dry weather, the Kid wore a slicker. It covered him down to his cowman's breeches and boots. No, old Lantry wouldn't get very far trying to describe him.

And the law at Rocky Pass wouldn't kick up so much hullabaloo over a mere robbery as it would over a killing. There wouldn't be much of a chase after the robber, maybe none at all. The miserly old Lantry was hated pretty generally.

But if old Hardrock Lantry showed by the slightest sign that he even suspected the identity of the Killin' Kid—then Lantry had just a few minutes to live.

With this grim thought, the Killin' Kid walked up from the hollow under the cottonwood trees toward old Lantry's cabin.

He picked his steps carefully, making little or no noise, and stopped in the deep shadow to the right of the sagging veranda, or "gallery," of mesquite posts.

He could not be seen, but he could make out old Lantry through the window of the cabin. Lantry was sitting hunched over a crude table. His hawkish old profile was outlined by the light shed from the coal-oil lamp. He was fingering something. The Killin' Kid's eyes gleamed like a cat's in the darkness. Probably money!

Well, the time for sneaking up was past. The time for strategy was here. The Kid tramped noisily up on the little gallery, and pounded on the cabin door with the loaded end of his quirt.

"Who's thar?" came the challenge.

"Lemme 'in, Hardrock! The Killin' Kid's aroun', they say, an' was seen 'tween here an' Min'ral Butte. We gotta guard this trail. Step pronto!"

He knew that this message would get the door opened. It did.

There was the sound of shuffling old feet across the cabin floor; then the sound of a hasp being thrown back. The door eased open an inch or two, and Lantry's whiskered face appeared.

The Kid put his shoulder against the door, shoved quickly and hard, and stepped in. His six-gun was in his right hand. With his left he pushed the door shut, felt for the hasp, and threw it back into place.

"Gosh A'mighty!" gasped old Lantry. His faded old eyes stared at the masked man, then unconsciously swept toward the corner, where an old-fashioned muzzle-loader rested. "What—what yuh want?" he managed to ask.

"Keep yore paws up. Yuh know all-fired well what I want. Yuh got plenty dinero in this shack. Hand it over—an' hand it over pronto!" The bandit laughed. "I didn't tell no lies, did I? I told yuh the Killin' Kid was aroun', didn't I? Yuh're dealin' with him right now. Yuh know what thet means, I reckon!"

Evidently old Lantry knew what it meant, all right.

"I'll—I'll come through," he stammered. "Gi' me a minute sort o' ter git my wits back, will yuh?" His hands were reaching toward the roof, and he inclined his head toward the table. "Mebbe I ain't got as much money as y' appear to think, but thar's some on top o' thet table——"

"Yeah, I seen thet, all right. I'm taikin' o' real money."

"It's in thet table drawer. Take it all, an' gi' me a chance."

The bandit went first to the corner, picked up the muzzle-loader, shoved it under the dead stove. Then he crossed back to the table and yanked out the drawer.

There were six orderly stacks of small bills and a jumbled heap of silver coins. He tucked them into his pocket.

ets with his left hand, and did the same with the money on the table. Then he pointed his six-gun at Lantry's head.

"I'm givin' yuh jest one chance 'fore I singe yore whiskers. This ain't all yuh got—not near all. Yuh got money hid here. Yuh know it. Come on! Git out thet poke o' pay dirt!"

The Kid made a spirited motion with his gun. "No more chin music! Next thing yuh're doin'—ef yuh're livin'—is to tell me whar the rest o' the money's hid. Half a minute yuh got!"

Into the old man's eyes came a look of helplessness, followed by an expression of what might have been craftiness. He nodded his white head.

"I'll do it!" he said. "I got it hid under the floor. Jest gi' me two-three minutes. I gotta git the claw hammer to rip up the board."

"Git it, then! Git goin'!"

Falteringly, the old man, his hands still raised, shuffled to the wood box behind the stove.

"I'll be as quick as I kin," he promised and reached down for the hammer.

"Yuh better!"

The eyes glittered through the holes in the mask. The Kid was watching for possible trickery.

If Lantry reached for that rifle under the stove, he was a goner. But Lantry seemed completely cowed. He went to the dim corner of the room, knelt down with his back to the bandit, and edged the claw of the hammer under the head of a protruding nail.

"I'll hev it for yuh direckly," he said in a pleading tone.

Outside, on the trail which ran a hundred yards or so west of the cabin, sounded the *clip-clop* of hoofs and the rumble of a buckboard.

The Kid flashed a glance at Lantry's dusty clock on the table. Eight thirty! Maybe some party of early birds traveling from Mineral Butte into Rocky Pass; might want to exchange scrip for cash; might turn into old Lantry's. If so——

The bandit fingered the trigger of his six-gun suggestively. He could smoke them into Kingdom Come before they knew what it was all about. But the situation was annoying. It was clear that old Lantry had heard the sounds outside, too. He looked back over his shoulder.

"I'm doin' the best I kin," he whimpered. "Thar's three nails in this board an'——"

"Shet yore trap an' keep workin'!" The killer frowned. This was taking more time than he had figured on.

The frown became deeper as he heard the buckboard rumble nearer the cabin. This old buzzard might try to pull some funny business now. A shot would be heard by the folks in the buckboard. The old man knew he wouldn't dare shoot now.

A harsh, squeaky noise in the dim corner—the noise of another nail being pulled out of the board. Then:

"Jest one more nail to git," came the voice of the old man, "an' I'll hev the money f'r yuh. These tenpenny nails don't——"

With surprising agility for one so old, Lantry had turned. His arm was back over his shoulder. The claw-hammer hurtled across the room and struck the Killin' Kid in the stomach.

The Kid staggered, gasped, and slipped to the floor. His Stetson slid off, and with it, the mask. Old Lantry was crawling to the muzzle-loader under the stove. His hands were almost touching it.

"Hell take yuh!" he yelled. "I seen yore face. I *know* yuh now an'——"

But the Killin' Kid recovered quickly. His mouth was twisted in pain as well as rage, but he scurried across the floor on all fours like an animal. He wrenched the rifle away from the old man before the latter could get it into position to fire.

The Kid did not dare to shoot with that buckboard so near. But there were

other ways. He knew that old Lantry, unarmed, was as helpless as a yearling calf.

His hands went around the old man's hairy neck, and a yell for help died in Hardrock's throat. The yellow old face became purplish. Lantry's mouth was open, and his tongue was out. His eyes bulged in horror.

The Killin' Kid let the limp old body sag to the floor, and backed into the dim corner of the cabin. He waited breathlessly, with his hand on the butt of his six-gun, but gradually a gleam of triumph came into his eye.

The hoofbeats and the rattle of the buckboard were receding. Whoever was riding into Rocky Pass was not stopping at old Lantry's. The sound of the rig grew more and more faint.

The killer stooped and examined the board which had been loosened by old Lantry. He got his fingers around the edge of it and ripped it up.

There was a little recess about a yard long, and nearly a foot wide. A tin box, resting on its edge, was wedged into this space. The Kid drew it out. He broke the lock with one sharp rap of his six-gun and raised the cover.

"Not bad," he said.

The box contained a mixed hoard of scrip, jewelry, and money. There was a package of yellow-backed bills, and there was a mixture of "hard money" ranging from gold double eagles down to small coins of silver and even copper. There were also a couple of small gold nuggets.

The Kid's eyes made a quick estimate. Well over a thousand dollars. He picked it over quickly. He left the scrip, but took a diamond stud and a silver key-winding watch. He did not even overlook a tarnished wedding ring, a few Mexican pesos, and many two and three-cent pieces of the period.

His job was finished—or almost finished. His original plan of letting old Hardrock live was off now. Old Hard-

rock had to die. He had seen the face of the Killin' Kid.

The Kid felt no qualms over the matter at all. It was one of his forms of efficiency. Life was cheap in the Rocky Pass country. Other men, down at the Rocky Pass saloons, killed. They got folks into drunken arguments and beat them to the draw.

That sort of gun play did not appeal to the Killin' Kid. There was a chance of getting shot, and there was no money in it. And the Killin' Kid was crazy for money. Lots of it. When he had enough, he'd leave this part of the country. There were softer places to live. Just a few more jobs—maybe one big one—in particular, that made his eyes shine every time he thought of it.

He heard old Lantry wheezing and choking on the floor. Old Lantry seemed still helpless; nevertheless, the Kid took the muzzle-loader with him when he went out on the mesquite-post gallery to see if the trail was clear.

He listened. Not a sound. Everything all right. He went back into the cabin.

Old Hardrock Lantry was looking up with dim eyes. He was making a gurgling sound—trying to say something. He never said it.

A bullet from the Kid's six-gun struck him squarely between the eyes. The old body collapsed. There was no convulsive shudder when a second bullet tore through the chest.

The Killin' Kid blew out the lamp, shut the door after him, and walked calmly down to the hollow beneath the cottonwood trees. He unhobbled his horse and sprang into the saddle.

As the animal swung into its smooth, elastic stride, the Kid removed his mask and stowed it away in one of his pockets.

He avoided the main trail and loped cross-country. He reached the entrance of a narrow trail shaped like a big inverted "U." At the bend in the in-

verted "U," there was a bad road which seemed little more than a dry run, but the Kid knew that it wound up into a twisted maze of trails and rocky passes where a man simply could not be traced.

The stars in the soft Arizona sky looked big and white, but the Kid was not interested in stars. He was thinking that some one from Mineral Butte would probably discover the killing about ten o'clock.

The news would reach Rocky Pass. Probably a posse would take the trail. If so, the Killin' Kid would be with it. He would have a fresh horse. No one would ever think of suspecting him.

His horse, unknowing accomplice in a dark deed, galloped madly under the bite of the cruel rowel. The Kid rolled a wheatstraw cigarette as he rode, lit it and blew out satisfying puffs of smoke.

A good night's work, done in the usual efficient fashion. No evidence. No one to tell. Old Hardrock Lantry had seen the face of the Killin' Kid. He had paid for that sight with his life.

Once more the Killin' Kid had lived up to his name.

CHAPTER II.

RODEO WEBB LOPES IN.

TWO weeks after the burial of old Hardrock Lantry, a tall young man rode toward the town of Rocky Pass. He wore blue-jean overalls and batwing chaps of black leather, thinned down in spots like a much-used razor strop, a blue-flannel shirt, and scuffed boots.

The ten-gallon hat covering the blond head was tipped well over the eyes, for at this early-afternoon hour, the rider was facing the sun. His trail into Rocky Pass led uphill.

As he cantered into the rutted main street of the town, the rider's gaunt, prominent-featured face was turning from one side to the other. It appeared that he might be a complete stranger in

these parts. He evidently knew where he was going, for his lean face showed interest at one of the signs among the false-fronted buildings.

"Here we are, Rawhide," he remarked to his wiry little roan, which had a Flying W brand on it.

He neckreined his mount to the right of the street, in front of the Rocky Pass Bank. Then he dismounted and, not bothering to look for a hitch rail, walked into the neat-looking building.

A tawny-haired young man sat at a desk inside the doorway. He wore a dark suit of store clothes and a white collar.

"Reckon I could see Mr. Corey?"

The young man at the desk looked up. "Which one?" he asked good-naturedly.

"More'n one, is they?"

"Yes. I'm Rex Corey. Prob'ly the man you want is my uncle—Rufus Corey. He's president of the bank."

"Thet's the one. Whar's he?"

"Won't be here for a few minutes yet. He's over to a meeting o' the Cattle-men's Association right now." Then the keen blue eyes of the young man at the desk rested on the travel-stained waddy, and his rather good-looking face showed new interest. He stood up and extended his hand.

"I'm wagerin' I know who you are," he said. "Uncle Rufe was saying you might happen in any day. I reckon you're Rodeo Webb."

"Right the fust time. Thet's what I answer to when they're callin' folks f'r chuck." The newcomer grinned. "Funny things 'bouth nicknames," he went on. "I had a piece o' luck when I was 'bout sixteen—won a ropin'-an'-bulldoggin' prize up Wyomin' way. They started callin' me 'Rodeo Webb' then. Reckon they'd oughter called me 'Work Webb.' I been workin' 'round nursin' cows sence I was fourteen."

The young man at the desk seemed inclined to friendliness. "Let that be a lesson to you on how much work gets

a man," he said smilingly. "How're tricks up Wyoming way?"

"Right dull at the present writin'. I reckoned I needed a train ride. I shipped my hoss, Rawhide, to Lava Junction, an' forked him over here the rest o' the way."

"Quite a ride. You must be tired." The well-dressed young man looked up at the clock. "That meeting ought to break up any minute now, over at the Railroad Hotel."

Once more the generous mouth of the cowboy widened in a grin. "Thet's a hot one, thet is," he remarked. "Shore is a right funny name f'r a hotel thet's a good many mile from a steam road. But mebbe thet's jest a title. I noticed yuh got a place called the Atlantic Pool Hall, too, an' I don't reckon yuh got any Atlantic Ocean in this man's town, have yuh?"

Young Corey laughed. "You think we go ridin' wild on names hereabouts. Is that it?"

"'Pears so. Mebbe I'll find this Killin' Kid is jest some dude thet shets both eyes when he pulls the trigger of his six-gun."

Young Corey's face sobered. "That's where you're wrong, friend," he said. "The Killin' Kid must have both eyes wide open when he throws down on some one, judging from results. But you're right, too, in a way. His name mightn't be any description of him."

"How's thet?"

"Well, we call him the Killin' Kid, but no one's ever seen him. We don't rightly know whether he's a kid or not. He might be a man o' fifty, for all we know. I suppose some one fond of alliteration gave him that title."

"Alliteration. What-all's thet?"

"Well, it's two words or more beginning with the same letter. Like 'Killin' Kid,' for instance, or 'Peter Piper picks a peck o' pickled peppers'—sayings like that."

"Yuh shore know how to throw an'

hawg-tie langwidge, young feller. You from the East?"

"Nope. Raised right around here. I've had a couple o' trips East, though. Worked in the First National in Chicago, and up in the Stockmen's Bank in Denver. Finishing off down here under my uncle, sort o' learning the business, and——"

A step at the doorway caused the speaker to turn. "Here's Uncle Rufe now," he announced.

He got up and faced the elderly man who had entered. "Uncle Rufe, this gentleman's Mr. Rodeo Webb. He wanted to see you. I'll go out and have my dinner while you talk things over. Be back well before two."

"Right glad to see yuh, Mr. Webb," Rufus Corey acknowledged, shaking Rodeo's hand heartily.

Rodeo's hands were big and calloused, but he admitted to himself that Rufus Corey, president of the bank, had a stronger grip than he had himself.

"S'pose we go into my office an' talk it all over fust to last," was the banker's suggestion."

He led the way to a railed-off space near the window which looked out onto the street. Then he hung his Stetson and his coat on a wall peg. Over his deerskin vest was a shoulder holster, from which protruded a double-notched six-gun with a cedar handle.

Rodeo Webb was studying him. He had seen many men of this type—former cowmen who had made their fortunes in beef on the hoof, and spent their later years as head of a cattleman's bank.

Rufus Corey pulled up a deep chair for his visitor, sat down at his desk, and rustled in a drawer. He was a man of perhaps sixty, but his dark hair was only slightly sprinkled with gray. He had a big, gaunt face, and a powerful jaw that clicked shut like a steel bear-trap when he stopped speaking. His

figure was that of an athletic youth—broad-shouldered, but thin-waisted despite his years.

Rufus Corey found what he was looking for in the drawer. It was a letter, and he straightened it out on the desk. He had big, muscular hands—hands like a bronc buster, thought Rodeo, who seemed fascinated by the big diamond in the ring which the banker wore on the fourth finger of his left hand.

"Now, about this letter o' yores," Corey said.

He fastened his keen glance on the sheet and reread the letter:

Flying W Ranch,
Lost Stallion, Wyoming.

HON. RUFUS COREY,
Pres't Rocky Pass Bank,
Rocky Pass, Ariz.

HONORABLE SIR: Word has reached this place of the death of Hardrock Lantry at the hands of the Killing Kid. Word also comes here that a town committee headed by you may decide to hire an expert trail scout to track down the killer.

I have a spread of my own in this country and I don't need the job for money, but I'd like you to consider me. My father was scout for General Nelson A. Miles in his campaign against the Apaches. His name was Bruce Webb, better known as "Trail" Webb. My father taught me all he knew of reading sign. I trailed "Cheyenne" Hart two years ago through the Hole-in-the-Wall country, and brought him in.

If you can use me, telegraph me, care this place. My name is Bruce Webb, but better telegraph me in the name of Rodeo Webb, which is the brand I'm known by.

With respect,
RODEO WEBB.

"That's a right good letter," Rufus Corey said, raising his steel-blue eyes and studying his visitor. "A heap better'n I could do. Now, jest plain man to man, Webb, thet letter's wrote a lot better than yore talk indicates yuh could write."

The cowboy flushed. "Shore is," he admitted. "I ain't much on parlor tricks. My sister got consid'able schoolin' in Cheyenne. I got her to write it f'r

me. Reckoned I might make a better impression, like."

Old Corey's rugged face had hardened into suspicion.

"Seems odd yore leavin' yore own spread to come down here, too," he said.

"Mebbe. But here I am."

"Well, I sort o' got an idee on how yuh might feel—wantin' to git out on the trail again. Ef I wasn't so old, I'd admire to be doin' somethin' more than jest sittin' here at a desk most o' the day. How old are yuh?"

"Twenty-four."

"Huh! Yuh look older. My nephew's twenty-seven, an' he looks younger'n you. Well, them things don't matter. I reckoned yuh'd oughter be the kind of a man we'd want. I bulled this thing through the committee—the idee o' gittin' yuh to come here."

"Right squar' o' yuh, Mr. Corey."

"Jest common hoss sense, thet's all. The Killin' Kid ain't got to my bank yet. But he's aimin' to, I reckon—ef only jest to show thet thar ain't nothin' he won't tackle." He looked sharply at the young man again. "Y'ain't said nothin' 'bout wages."

"I'd jest as soon wait till we see ef I'm wuth anything."

"Well, thet's up to you. Yuh might never see Wyomin' ag'in."

"Mebbe not. But I'll be seein' a new neck o' the woods."

The banker started to say something, then suddenly he leaped up like a youth and was pounding on the window. "Hey, Fred!" he called. "Come in here a minute."

A moment later, a man of about Rufus Corey's own height and build, but with a much weaker face, slouched into the office.

"Fred, this is Rodeo Webb," old Corey said. "Yuh know 'bout him. Now I'd like yuh to meet him. He's the man's goin' to help yuh run down the Killin' Kid." He turned to Rodeo.

"Mr. Webb, this is Fred Brace, sheriff o' this here county."

Rodeo extended his hand, but the sheriff appeared not to see it.

"Howdy do," he said, with curt civility. And then to Rufus Corey: "Reckon thar ain't 'nuff men in Arizony f'r the job, eh?" His dark mustache curled down in a sneer.

"Don't 'pear so," was Corey's crisp retort.

The three talked for several minutes. Sheriff Brace's manner was strained and hostile. Rodeo mentally remarked that he was a very young man for a sheriff, and that he was dissipated-looking.

"Well, what yuh think o' him?" old Corey asked, after the sheriff had left the bank.

Rodeo shook his head. "Ef it's all the same to you, I reckon I'll keep my opinion ter myself," he said.

"Suit yoreself. But me, I ain't so close-mouthed. I want ter say somethin' about Fred Brace. It don't seem to me like he's the right man fer sheriff. He's led several posses after the Killin' Kid, an' lost the trail every time."

Corey peered through the window. "See whar he's goin'?" Right into the Quartz Saloon. He don't lack nothin' on mixin' with folks. Good hand-shaker an' vote-gitter. Thet's 'bout all."

Old Corey's face fell into hard lines. "Let me tell yuh somethin', Webb. Don't overlook *no* one when yuh're lookin' f'r the Killin' Kid. No one knows who the Kid is. Yuh might be wettin' yore whistle with him acrost the Quartz Bar an' still not know it. Thet's jest a word to the wise."

Once more his keen steel-blue eyes sought and held Rodeo.

"Another thing, Webb. We got plenty good men in this town thet can almost drive nails with a six-gun, an' otherwise lick thar weight in sidewinders. Hopi Joe, a breed Injun, is one. My nephew's another. Lon Sim-

ril's another. Thar's a dozen more. But what we want is a man like you."

"I'm hopin' yuh ain't givin' me too much credit," said Rodeo Webb modestly.

"I ain't. Yore record shows yuh can read trail right smart. Thet's yore ace in the hole. An' this gift o' yores o' readin' sign—thet's goin' to be a secret. No one 'cept you an' me in all Rocky Pass country's goin' to know 'bout it. *No* one—an' thet includes Sher'f Fred Brace," he added, and once more his mouth shut like a steel trap.

"Suits me," said Rodeo Webb. "Only one other livin' thing knows 'bout it 'round here. Thet's my hoss, Rawhide. He's a right intelligent animal, but he cain't talk. Well, reckon I'll be mosey-in' over to thet Railroad Hotel f'r a wash-up."

CHAPTER III.

SIX-GUNS IN THE DARK.

RODEO WEBB put up his horse at Rocky Pass Livery and Boarding Stable, and saw that it was curried and rubbed down, watered, and fed a measure of oats. Then he went up to the Railroad Hotel and got himself a room. There he washed up and shaved.

Supper at the hotel would not be until six, but a sign on the Quartz Saloon across the street promised chili and frijoles. And the cheap food tasted good to a man just off the trail. As he ate, Rodeo listened to what seemed to be a mild argument at the bar.

One of the men in the argument was a heavy-shouldered man who waddled when he walked. Rodeo recognized the other as young Rex Corey, from the bank across the street. Young Corey, it seemed, was defending his practice of drinking sarsaparilla.

"A man can fight as well on this stuff as on what you're drinking, Simril," Rodeo heard him say. "Seems like you can *talk* more on that redeye you drink, that's all."

Rodeo recalled that old Rufus Corey had mentioned a man named Simril. This waddling, heavy-shouldered hombre must be the one. He heard Simril sneeringly refer to "gilded dudes that's been East."

"Well, of course we can't compete with heroes like you and our loud-talking sherill," he heard Corey retort.

"Mebbe we'd oughter elect you sheriff," was Simril's comeback. "You've been out after the Killin' Kid, too, ain't yuh? I didn't notice as you came home with his carcass acrost yore hoss."

"Break it up, boys," the bartender said.

But although the argument toned down some, it continued for several minutes more. It was clear that young Corey, like his uncle, thought but little of Sheriff Fred Brace, who, nevertheless, had a loyal defender in Lon Simril.

The pair were still arguing when Rodeo finished eating, paid for his meal, and went out. He walked down to the Rocky Pass boarding stable, saddied his roan, and rode slowly out into the hills. There was still much daylight ahead, and he wanted to get familiar with the surrounding country.

Sundown was less than an hour away when he started to lope back toward Rocky Pass. As he rounded a bend in the trail, he noticed a man on a powerful cinnamon-tail just ahead of him. The rider proved to be Sheriff Fred Brace.

"Howdy," Brace greeted him. He was somewhat more affable than when Rodeo had met him at the bank.

"Howdy."

"Been out f'r a little explorin' trip, I reckon?"

"Yep."

The pair of horsemen rode slowly in toward town. The sun was sinking below the horizon, and darkness fell swiftly in the clefts and ravines of the hills. Sheriff Brace did most of the talking. The topic was mainly the Killin' Kid.

"I been thinkin' things over," Brace said, as the trail wound into the little main street of Rocky Pass. "I felt a little techy when I l'arned yuh come here. Seemed like an insult to me. Thar's folks as don't think too much o' me as a peace officer in this town. All I can say, I done my best at all times."

He looked over at Rodeo. "Between friends," he said, "mebbe yuh wouldn't mind tellin' me ef yuh had a special reason fer leavin' yore own spread an' comin' down this a way to git the Kid."

"Between friends?" Rodeo repeated. "Sheriff, I ain't been long enough in this man's country to have friends here yet."

Sheriff Brace had just rolled a wheat-straw cigarette. His face seemed flushed in the flare of the match that lighted it.

"I reckon I made a mistake," he said. "I'm beggin' yore pardon."

"It's granted," said Rodeo calmly, as the two reached the foot of the hill and headed their horses up the main street.

There was a sharp rap on the door of Rodeo Webb's room. Rodeo had been sleeping soundly, but the first rap on his door found him sitting upright. Long hours on night-guard and trail-herd duty had done that.

"Webb, this is Sheriff Brace. Big doin's! Pull yore pants on ef yuh want excitement. The Killin' Kid's on the rampage ag'in!"

Webb was out of his bed and across the room in his red flannel underwear. His heart was pounding. It had been six days since he had reached Rocky Pass. There had been six days of nothing more exciting than combing the surrounding country in a vain effort to locate a possible hideout of the Killin' Kid.

He unbolted the door and opened it. Brace stepped in. Webb hurriedly struck a match and lit the lamp.

"He killed some un?" he asked, as he began pulling on his clothes.

"Don't know yet. But he broke into Jake Pfeister's ranch house an' grabbed the pay roll. Jake thinks his boys got the Kid bottled up in the hills. Jake hisself loped over here to git the posse agoin'."

Rodeo, already dressed, was following Brace down the rickety wooden stairs of the hotel. He looked at his silver watch. Twenty minutes past one.

The posse was already forming in front of the Quartz Saloon. Jake Pfeister, who had a small spread over Mineral Butte way, was talking excitedly.

"I know he streaked inter the hills," he was saying. "Two o' my boys is guardin' the trail over near my place. The Kid can't backtrack. We'll have him bottled up!"

Rodeo listened in silence to Pfeister's account of the pay-roll robbery. Rodeo was also looking over the other members of the posse and making mental notes of certain men who were missing.

The feeling in the group was tense. Personal enmities seemed entirely forgotten in the bigger business of running down a killer.

Shabby Hopi Joe, the breed Indian, was talking with the owner of the Bar M Bar, the biggest ranch in the county except Rufus Corey's.

A broken-down dealer from the gambling rooms back of the Quartz Saloon was talking with old Rufus Corey, who sat his cream-colored gelding with the grace and ease of a cowboy.

Even Lon Simril and young Rex Corey had apparently forgotten their dislike for each other, and were holding a civil conversation.

The posse, led by Jake Pfeister and Sheriff Brace, proceeded at a gallop into the hills east of town to the region just below Circle Pass. From this point they would spread out in fan-shaped formation over various trails.

Rodeo Webb was not too hopeful, though. He was inclined to think that the Killin' Kid might now be safe in some impenetrable hideout far back in the hills. Rodeo had combed almost every foot of the region for six days, and admitted that it offered ideal possibilities for hideouts. Hours could be lost running down wrong trails. The night was dark, too, and it would be very difficult to read sign.

"Spread out," Pfeister suggested. "Two an' two. Here, Simril—are yuh game to lope through Snake Canyon along o' me? But I'm warnin' yuh thet ef the Kid's layin' low in thar, yuh'll never be like to waddle acrost a corral ag'in."

"Git goin'," grunted Simril. "I'll ride with yuh." It was obvious that he was sensitive about his awkward, waddling gait.

Pfeister turned to young Rex Corey. "You an' him," he said, nodding in Webb's direction, "might fine-comb Circle Pass. We'd better overlook no little cubby-holes in the scenery to-night. We kin all meet here in twenty minutes, an' git goin' over toward the Mineral Butte road."

Young Rex Corey nodded. "Want to pair with me through there?" he asked Rodeo. "I reckon it'll be the same old stuff, though. I'm betting the Killin' Kid's miles from here by now."

"Might's well," Rodeo agreed.

He guided Rawhide after young Corey's sorrel, already galloping toward Circle Pass, which, despite its name, was not a complete circle. Viewed from the rim rock to the east, it looked like a big bent horseshoe carved out of living rock.

Rodeo had ridden over this U-shaped trail on two previous occasions. He recalled the dark recesses along the sides of the trail, where it seemed as if nature had bitten out great mouthfuls of rock. Those dark recesses might prove tem-

porary shelter for a bandit hard pressed by a posse.

The pair of horsemen reached the southern tip of the "U." Its northern tip was about two hundred yards farther on.

"You ride in on this side, Webb," Corey suggested. "I'll lope ahead and go in the other side. If one of us comes across the Kid, at least the other'll be ridin' toward the scene all the time. If you have any luck, don't try to take this fellow alive. Shoot to kill. That's what *he* does."

"Don't worry, son," Rodeo said good-naturedly. "And don't take any unnecessary chances yoreself."

He neck-reined his animal in toward the trail, and urged it into a slow lope. The walls were almost of solid rock. The pass was narrow, too, but Rodeo was examining it thoroughly, slowing his mount to peer into all those recesses which nature had put there. He rode with his six-gun in his hand. The click of his horse's shoes echoed and re-echoed against the rocky walls.

He was approaching the bend in the U-shaped trail now, and through the clatter of Rawhide's hoofs could hear the pounding of young Corey's horse on the other side. The pounding grew louder and louder.

It seemed that the trailers would meet in a moment—and with no result. But suddenly the measured beat of young Corey's galloping horse became slower. And then—

Bang! A shot! Then a shout in young Corey's high, excited voice—and then four more quick shots; then a single shot again. *Bang!*

"Come on, Rawhide!" Webb urged.

He rode at breakneck speed around the bend and reined to a quick halt as a figure stood in the middle of the trail, his hands signaling Rodeo to stop.

Then young Corey's excited voice came: "By golly! We got him at last! We'll share the credit, you and I!"

Webb was off his horse in a jiffy. He peered through the darkness. Corey's horse was down. Another horse was galloping madly down toward the mouth of the trail—a riderless horse, for its rider lay on the ground.

"I came on him all of a sudden," young Corey said excitedly. "I slowed down to a walk, looked in that big hollow in the wall there. Thought it was just a shadow first. Then he blazed away at me. He hit my horse. But I got him as I was falling."

Young Corey was walking toward the corpse. "I wasn't taking any chances. Filled him full o' lead."

Rodeo followed his young trail companion over toward the body. There was a groan from young Corey's injured horse, and the cow-puncher lit a match.

The animal's right foreleg had been broken by a shot. Rodeo put a merciful bullet through the sorrel's brain.

"Some hoss'll have to carry double back," he said. "But that's a smaller matter. Corey, I'm shore congratulatin' yuh on gittin' the Killin' Kid."

"We'll share the reward," young Corey volunteered. "After all, we got him together, you and I."

"You ain't sharin' no reward nor no credit," Rodeo insisted. "He's yore dead bandit, not mine. My reward is seein' this Killin' Kid layin' here as dead as a beef steer at a barbecue. Well, let's see the coyote. If I ain't mistaken awful bad, we're goin' to see the face of some ranny that we've seen in Rocky Pass before now."

CHAPTER IV.

THE HIDEOUT.

YOUNG Rex Corey had struck a match on the rocky wall of the pass, and was looking into the dead man's face. It was a dark-skinned face, topped by a shock of jet-black hair.

The dead man was about thirty years

of age, Rodeo judged. He noticed the brown chaps and the checkered shirt of green and yellow.

Young Corey seemed flustered. "This is odd," he said. "Maybe some o' the other boys might know him. But I never remember seeing this bird before."

A group of posse men, attracted by the shots, thundered up the rocky pass and dismounted. Rodeo Webb noticed Sheriff Brace, Jake Pfeister, Rufus Corey, and Lon Simril among them.

"Who got him?" asked Brace, looking down at the body.

"Corey did," Rodeo answered.

"Sure did," spoke up young Corey, who was kneeling on the ground going through the dead man's pockets. "He had first shot at me—an' missed. Nicked my horse. I don't remember ever seeing him before, but maybe some o' you fellows— Ah!" His voice rose exultantly. "Yeah, I reckon this is the Kid, all right! Look at that, men!"

He held up a thin black mask which he had pulled from the dead man's pocket.

"Great work, Rex! I'm proud o' yuh," old Rufus Corey said.

The banker and several others were grouped about the dead man. Sheriff Brace was lighting a lantern which he had carried on his saddle.

Lon Simril, looking sullen and disappointed, waddled to the other side of the trail and rolled a cigarette.

"Some folks has luck," he remarked dryly. It was evident that young Corey's glory had rekindled Simril's dislike for him.

Rodeo Webb looked keenly at Jake Pfeister. "Thet the feller robbed yore pay roll?" he asked, pointing with his boot toe at the dead man.

"Shore is," Pfeister replied. "I remember thet checkered shirt. I was sleepin' sound, I reckon. Had a little redeye in my gullet. He must 'a' knowed I paid off on the fust o' the month. He

was climbin' out the windo' when I woke up. I got one bad shot at him when he was leggin' it fer his hoss."

"Yuh shot at him," Rodeo said slowly, "an' he streaked for his hoss an' high-tailed it. Don't sound much like the Killin' Kid, does it now?"

"What yuh mean?" asked Pfeister.

"I mean thet the Killin' Kid allus killed the feller thet seen him in action. This may be the hombre thet robbed yuh all right, but I ain't sayin' it's the Killin' Kid."

"Shore it's the Kid. Thar was a mask in his pocket, wa'n't there?"

"Other bandits wears masks." Rodeo turned to young Corey. "Kind o' tough on you, Corey. It don't take none o' yore credit away. But I'm thinkin' this ain't the Killin' Kid."

Young Corey's face fell. Lon Simril let out a dry laugh and waddled back across the trail. He seemed to be enjoying young Corey's discomfiture.

"Tell yuh what I think," Rodeo Webb said. "We been callin' this bandit the Killin' Kid, but we never seen him. He may not be a young man at all. He may be a man o' fifty or more, fer all we know, jest as you said yoreself, Corey. But it's my opinion thet this dead hombre was one o' the Kid's helpers."

The matter was discussed. Most of the group agreed with Rodeo Webb, even young Corey finally.

"A fact is a fact," he said slowly. "I reckon you're right, Webb."

Lon Simril gave a loud guffaw, and old Bruce Corey bristled. It was clear that he was proud of his nephew's achievement, but he said: "Well, we got Rodeo Webb down into this country to git the Kid. He don't 'pear to me like an hombre as makes mistakes."

Somewhat to Rodeo's surprise, Sheriff Fred Brace nodded in agreement. "Waal, ef we even got one o' the Kid's helpers," he said, "it's a good night's work. Mebbe the next man we git'll

be the Killin' Kid hisself. We'll kill 'em off one at a time, like a nest o' rattlers."

The dead man was thrown over one of the saddles. Young Corey rode double with his uncle, as the little cavalcade started back toward town. Simril and Pfeister rode on ahead. It seemed to Rodeo Webb that both Simril and Pfeister were jealous of young Corey, and were not any too skillful in hiding their feelings.

Rodeo Webb got his roan from the boarding stable at two that afternoon, and loped off in the direction of Circle Pass.

Why had that bandit killed by Rex Corey made for Circle Pass? Could he have been bound for some hideout which led through the pass? There were several winding trails which shot out from the bend in that U-shaped road.

Rodeo recalled that one of these trails, which looked hardly more than a dry run as it wound up the steep slope, had never been thoroughly explored by him. And Rodeo had never given up the theory that the Killin' Kid had some hidden retreat never stumbled across by the various posers.

Rawhide's roan coat was wet with sweat when the climb to Circle Pass had been made. Rodeo rubbed him down and breathed him before guiding him up the still steeper trail which he had never explored.

The trail wound and writhed like a snake under the brow of the mountain. The pathway was no more than four feet wide in some parts. It was no place for a man with a skittish horse. Rodeo decided, a grim smile curving his wide mouth. But the smile died when an abrupt turn brought him smack up against a rocky wall which towered straight up for twenty feet or more.

"Yuh cain't go up *that* trail, onless yuh grow wings, Rawhide," he said to his plucky little roan. "Well, it looks

like a bum steer, after all, don't it, ol' hoss?"

His keen gray eyes were directed down over the sloping rock below him. Suddenly they hardened. Ten feet or more below him was a pile of dirt and clay and powdered lava. It seemed to rest solidly on the sharp slope of the mountain. It had been the result of some minor landslide.

But sliding earth required some sort of turn in the mountain wall to keep it from sliding completely down the slope.

Rodeo uncoiled his lariat from his saddle and placed the loop of it over a boulder near the edge of the narrow trail. He lowered himself slowly over the ledge.

His feet finally touched the pile of earth below, and found footing there.

Rodeo Webb had done some hard work in his time. But he never had worked harder than during the next twenty minutes. A shovel would have made the work easy, but pawing away the dirt with his big hands for several minutes at a time proved far from easy.

Rodeo's face was eager, though, as he finally uncovered the hole which he now felt certain led to the cavelike hideout of the Killin' Kid. He lay flat on his stomach and began to snake himself through the narrow opening.

When he crawled out to the slope and looked back into the hole a few minutes later, his face was working queerly. He had found the Killin' Kid's hideout; he had also found the Killin' Kid's treasure hoard. But he was still a very long way from finding the Killin' Kid.

Ten more minutes were spent in the hard work of shoving the dirt back into place. If the Killin' Kid came here to-night, he would not suspect that any one knew his secret. And Rodeo Webb meant to lie low to-night at the mouth of the trail which wound up to the mountainside retreat.

He climbed up to the ledge by means of his lariat, coiled up the rope, mounted Rawhide, and guided the animal slowly down into Circle Pass.

He was hardly a mile out of the pass before he heard the sound of hoofs around a bend in the road. The next minute, he had come face to face with the sheriff of Rocky Pass County.

"Howdy, Webb," Brace greeted him heartily. "Doin' a little more explorin'?"

"A little," Rodeo replied. "Seem to be doin' some yoreself."

"Yep. Goin' into town?" Brace asked affably.

"Reckon I'll do a little more explorin' over Snake Canyon way fust."

"Good stuff! Reckon we'll git the Kid some day ef we keep on tryin'."

"Reckon so," said Rodeo.

"Well, me, I'm on my way to Mineral Butte," Brace said. "Good luck to yuh!" He spurred his horse.

"Thank yuh," said Rodeo Webb.

The shadows lengthened. Darkness fell swiftly in the canyon where Rodeo Webb had built his small sheltered fire. The mountain air had a chill in it, and he crouched close to the blaze. In another half hour, he would start back for the mouth of Circle Pass.

It was more than likely that the Killin' Kid, if he came to his retreat at all to-night, would not come early. He would come in the small hours of the night, when he would be apt to meet no one on the trail.

Rodeo Webb's square jaw snapped shut. Well, it would be a long night watch, but Rodeo meant to stand guard over the mouth of the trail until long after midnight. He would make it his business to know the identity of any rider who passed. It might furnish some clew.

Up on the rocky ledge above him, he saw a moving shadow. More by instinct than anything else, he dived away

from the circle of light cast by the fire. He had not been a split second too soon.

Bang! Bang!

A bullet whistled over Rodeo's head. Another kicked the live embers of the fire into his face.

Bang! There was a twinge in his left arm which felt as if some one had pinched him. That third bullet had cut through the sleeve of his flannel shirt and just grazed the skin.

Treachery!

Rodeo Webb fell flat on the rocky floor of the canyon. But he managed to fall behind the flat-topped boulder, and beyond the glow cast by the fire.

Treachery! His mind flashed back to Sheriff Brace, cantering along the trail near Circle Pass. Was Brace in with the Killin' Kid? Was Brace, in fact, the Killin' Kid himself?

As he lay there, sheltered by the boulder, he thought of what old Rufus Corey had told him during that first talk in the office of the bank. He thought of the times he had seen Sheriff Brace loping through the hills around Circle Pass. Well, Brace must have awaited this opportunity to get him.

He continued to lie there. His keen eyes were peering through the gloom, up toward the edge of the canyon, where he had seen that moving shadow before the bullet had whistled over his head.

If Brace thought he was dead, Brace would be down here soon. If Brace thought he was even wounded, he might take a chance to peer over the edge of the canyon—

Rodeo's reflections stopped abruptly. The vague form of a man was outlined there at the top of the canyon. The man was moving toward the canyon rim furtively. His gun was in his hand. He was ready to take another shot at Rodeo. Rodeo grinned. Right within good six-gun range. Well, Brace had it coming to him!

Bang! Rodeo had leaped out from

behind the boulder, and fired. The man on the edge of the canyon wavered, threw up his hands, fell forward, and pitched down into the floor of the canyon.

At once there was the rattle of clattering hoofs up the canyon trail. Rodeo Webb sat crouched in the shadows behind the boulder. Was this approaching horseman still another accomplice of the Killin' Kid? Or was the man he had just killed the accomplice, and was the horseman the Killin' Kid himself?

The hoofbeats sounded louder and louder. The rider was within fifty yards now. Rodeo Webb aimed his six-gun. He could make out the smudge of horse and rider through the gloom.

"Thet's fur 'nuff!" Rodeo yelled. "Pull up thar! Let's see who y'are!"

The horse came to a stop. A voice called out: "I was lopin' back to town. I heard the shots. 'Fraid some un might 'a' got yuh, Webb. What happened?"

Rodeo Webb's body stiffened in surprise.

It was Sheriff Fred Brace's voice.

Then who was the man he had killed?

Sheriff Fred Brace walked toward the fire with an easy, natural stride. If there was anything wrong with Sheriff Brace, Rodeo decided, at least the man was an excellent actor.

"Some one shot at yuh, Webb?" he asked.

Rodeo Webb, his hand an inch from his six-gun, nodded. "He's over there on the floor o' the canyon," he said. "He's dead."

Sheriff Brace ran across the canyon, knelt down beside the body, and struck a match.

"Great Scott!" he gasped. "It's Lon Simril! An' to think thet Lon Simril was the Killin' Kid! This seems more like it, eh?"

"Mebbe it does, an' then ag'in, mebbe it don't, Brace. Simril wasn't a smooth-

'nuff hombre, f'r one thing. We know now thet Simril was in with the Kid, jest like the coyote young Corey killed in Circle Pass last night. But my big guess is thet the Killin' Kid himself is still livin' an' foolin' most folks."

The sheriff's big, loose jaw had dropped. He looked the picture of innocence.

"Waal, anyhow, things shore look bad fer me," he said. "Young Corey gits one o' the Kid's men las' night. You plug another to-night. I'm thinkin' I'll be as pop'lar as a polecat 'bout next election time."

"Bigger things than election time, Brace. I got a plan to smoke out the Killin' Kid."

"Yuh hev? Mind lettin' me in?"

"Not a bit," Rodeo replied. "I got an idee thet the Killin' Kid was in thet posse las' night. Lon Simril was in it. Then why not the Killin' Kid himself?"

"Yeah. Possible. But what 'bout the plan?"

"I'm comin' to thet." Rodeo Webb rolled a cigarette and lit it, but both the rolling and the lighting were done with his left hand. His gun hand was still less than an inch from his holster.

"Ol' Rufe Corey was goin' to send a shipment o' gold to the El Centro Bank the day after to-morrer," Webb went on. "'Bout ten thousan' dollars' wuth."

"Dawg-gone!" Brace exclaimed.

"A nice haul, eh?" Webb said. "Well, Rufus Corey says he'll coöpyrate with me to the full extent. He wants thet Killin' Kid brought in. I'm goin' to tell him to send the shipment to-morrer night, instead. We'll git thet gold down to El Centro out o' the Kid's way."

"But how 'bout the trap, Webb?"

"I'm comin' to thet. Fust, we'll take in the carcass o' Lon Simril. We'll tell what happened. We got the mask to show, an' everything. We'll let Rocky Pass think thet Lon Simril was the Killin' Kid."

Brace frowned. "Don't quite git yuh."

"Yuh will, when I'm through. When the real Killin' Kid thinks the town's fooled—when he thinks they b'lieve thet Simril, brought in dead, was the Killin' Kid, he'll feel purty safe.

"But understand, Brace, we'll spread the word about thet gold goin' down to the El Centro Bank the day after to-morrer. The Kid'll be sartin' to hear of it. He'll try to stick up thet stage—an' then we'll git him. An' only you an' me an' the bank'll know 'bout gettin' the money down out o' his way to-morrer night. Git me?"

Sheriff Brace's eyes were glowing. "Shore is a jim-dandy of a plan," he said. "Now, let me git this right. The real shipment goes down to-morrer night. No one knows thet except the bank, and you an' me. Thet shipment'll be secret an' it'll slip by safe. The stage won't even have no guards to tip the Kid off, eh?"

"Thet's the ticket. An' the second shipment—the one thet the Kid'll *think* has the gold on—won't carry nothin' but bullets. Y'see, the first shipment 'u'd be a cinch fer the Kid, but he won't know it. The second one is the one the Kid'll try."

The sheriff seemed elated.

"Dawg-gone!" he said. "Now we're gittin' some place. Ef we don't dangle the Kid an' any hombre left in his outfit at the end of a stretch o' hemp, then I ain't never fired a six-gun."

Once more, back in the shadows beyond the fire, Rodeo Webb was studying the face of the other man.

Was Sheriff Brace really a good fellow, if incompetent for the office that he held? Was he honest and willing, even though a good deal of a fool? Or was he a man who could act the fool and be, instead, a killer and a scoundrel?

Well, if things went according to plans, to-morrow night would give the answer.

CHAPTER V.

FACE TO FACE.

THE Rocky Pass stage lumbered down the narrow road that led through Indian Canyon and through Mineral Butte to the town of El Centro.

Through the Rocky Pass region, word had been deliberately allowed to leak out that the following night the bank shipment of gold would start for El Centro. But only four men were in the know that the gold was really going down *this* night.

The four were Sheriff Brace, Rufus and Rex Corey, and the man on the box of the stage—who was Rodeo Webb.

The El Centro stage had left Rocky Ledge with old Lafe Halpin, the regular driver, on the box. But two miles out of Rocky Pass—in such a dark stretch of road that old Lafe had reached for his shotgun and almost used it—Rodeo Webb had appeared in the middle of the road, and had called out Lafe's name.

Quick explanations had been made by Rodeo. Clothes had been changed. Now, as he sat hunched on the seat, Rodeo Webb wore the old checkered jacket and creased sombrero which had made old Lafe a familiar figure along the stage route for years.

Rodeo smiled grimly as he clucked to the horses, and the stage rumbled along on the route to El Centro. No one except old Lafe and himself would know that Rodeo Webb was driving. Sheriff Brace wouldn't know. Even Rufus and Rex Corey wouldn't know.

There was bright moonlight, and it dappled spots along the road. But to any one concealed along the right of way, it wouldn't pick out the features of this checker-coated stage driver.

Rodeo sent the horses along at their regular smart elip. He knew that he might be a target for a sniper's bullet this night. But that was the chance he would have to take.

It was probable, though, that any concealed bandit would bring down one of the horses with his first shot.

That would be more like the Killin' Kid's way, to keep the horses from bolting and running away at the first sound of gunfire.

Rodeo was wondering just what Sheriff Fred Brace was thinking this minute.

Was Brace concealed somewhere in Indian Canyon, the dangerous trail through which the stage would have to pass? One thing was certain—he was, if he was the Killin' Kid. Yes, if Brace was the Killin' Kid, then he would stumble into the trap set by Rodeo Webb—unless he got Rodeo Webb first.

At times, as the cumbersome old wagon rolled along, Rodeo had doubts. Maybe poor Fred Brace was a good fellow at heart, trying to do his best in a job to which he had been elected, but a job for which he was obviously unfitted. There was another man in Rocky Pass—

But Rodeo Webb tried to drive that thought from his mind as the stage reached the down grade toward Indian Canyon. He peered from his seat at the row of giant boulders lining both sides of the road.

Indian Canyon, or some spot very near it, would be the spot chosen by the Killin' Kid to stick up the stage.

"Ef the devil ever made a heaven on earth f'r bandits, this canyon shore is it!" Rodeo said to himself. "The Kid jest couldn't overlook a spot like this. He'll either try to hold us up when it's passin' through the canyon trail, or——"

Crack!

The gray horse on the right went down with a rifle bullet through its head. Its teammate reared and squealed in fright; but it was stopped in its tracks. It could not pull the stage and its dead teammate, too. It reared and whinnied.

The crack of a second rifle shot

sounded from behind the line of boulders to the right, and a masked figure leaped into the road. The figure ran toward the stage, pulling his six-gun from its holster as he ran.

But Rodeo Webb's six-gun flamed, and the masked figure pitched forward at the side of the road. There was the pounding of horses' hoofs just ahead around the bend in the trail.

A second masked rider galloped into sight, and the window in the stage was smashed.

Then another bullet whistled uncomfortably close to Rodeo Webb's ear. But Rodeo had toppled off the seat in the shelter of the stagecoach. His six-gun was raised and aimed.

The masked bandit was pounding toward the stage. It was too bad, thought Rodeo. He'd have to bring down the bandit's horse. He loved horses, and it was with a pang of regret that he did so.

Bang! The bandit's horse stumbled, started to fall. Its rider was out of the saddle in an instant. His six-gun was belching. A bullet spat against the rim of the wheel behind which Rodeo crouched. The bandit was still coming—probably didn't fear feeble old Lufe Halpin very much.

Bang! Rodeo Webb's six-gun again. He had taken careful aim. The six-gun dropped from the hand of the masked bandit, and with one leap, Rodeo Webb was out of shelter and in the center of the road. His six-gun was aimed in line with the bandit's heart. Rodeo felt a stab of anguish in his own heart over what old Rufus Corey would think. For there in the bright moonlight, he could see that slender, stripling figure plainly.

It was not the raw-boned figure of Sheriff Fred Brace. It could be only one other!

"Strip off that mask, Corey!" Rodeo ordered.

Coolly young Rex Corey removed the mask, and let it drop to the road. "You

got me all right, Webb," he said. "Smooth trick you pulled with the stage. Bad day for me when you came down from Wyoming."

"Listen, Corey," Webb said. "I got yuh covered. One move—jest *one*—an' yuh git a bullet in the lungs."

"I'm not moving," said Corey, still with that unbelievable coolness. "You got me."

"Yeah. I got yuh. The saddest night's work I ever put in. I been watchin' yuh from time to time, Corey. Yuh thought yuh was above suspicion. At times I suspected yuh, an' when I did, I felt like a mean, sneakin' coyote—got mad at myself fer even darin' to think o' such a thing."

Corey made no answer. He stood there like a statue in the moonlight, his hands reaching toward the starry sky.

"Who's the coyote I jest dropped side o' the trail thar? It's Jake Pfeister, ain't it?" Rodeo asked.

"Yes, it's Jake Pfeister. You knew that, too, did you, Webb?"

"Well, I know it now. It was a smart trick yuh played thet night in Circle Pass. Yuh had Pfeister rig up the story 'bout his pay roll bein' robbed. Yuh got the posse out thet way. But before thet, yuh imported some strange gunman into the country, an' told him to meet yuh thet night in Circle Pass. Yuh fooled him. Yuh shot him in cold blood. Yuh claimed yuh found thet mask on him—thet mask thet yuh took from yore own pocket. Yuh thought then thet the mystery o' the Killin' Kid was dead. Yuh thought yuh fooled us all, didn't yuh?"

"I did." Rex Corey's answer was as calm as if he had been in a courtroom.

"Mebbe I'd even b'lieved it," Rodeo said, "only f'r one thing. Yuh showed yore nat'ral croolty when yuh didn't kill the hoss thet yuh wounded yoreself. Thet's the fust time I began to l'arn what a skunk yuh was."

He took a step nearer Corey. The gun was still aimed at Corey's heart. "Smart business, too, thet pertendin' thet you an' Lon Simril was enemies. Thet was real smart. It had me fooled a long time—right up ter to-night."

"Yes, I had something on Simril and on Pfeister, too. Webb, no one alive knows my identity as the Killin' Kid except you. An' I got a fortune, Webb. A fortune!"

There was a look of contempt on Rodeo Webb's strong face. Young Corey's remark had been an obvious attempt at bribery.

"It won't do, Corey," he said. "Yuh thought money'd do anything, didn't yuh?"

"Yes, I did. That was my downfall, I guess. I wanted money—plenty of it. I wanted cities—wine—theaters—bright lights! I got a taste of it in Chicago. And my uncle was old-fashioned. He thought a small salary would——"

"Yore uncle," Rodeo Webb cut in, "is the whitest man in all Arizony. It's goin' to be hard work to tell him thet his nephew is the Killin' Kid. I'd ruther never 'a' come to Arizony. I'd almost ruther I'd never been born, than have to tell him. An' yuh was aimin' to rob yore uncle's own bank, too. I know yuh was. Yuh figured no one'd suspect the nephew o' the pres'dent."

"I admit it," said Rex Corey, still with that icy calm. "I guess anything I admit now can't make things any worse, and——"

With a lightning motion he had reached back to his hip pocket and had drawn another gun. The moonlight gleamed on its bright barrel as its muzzle belched flame.

Bang!

Bang!

The two shots had sounded almost as one. But Rodeo Webb was still standing there in the moonlight. Rex Corey had pitched forward on his face.

Rodeo walked over to the body, and raised the head. "Right through the forehead," he said. "Yeah, I reckoned he was goin' to reach for another gun. I s'pose it's a heap better this way."

He let the head drop back again to the road; then walked back opposite the stage and looked at the body of Jake Pfeister. There was a hole in Pfeister's shirt on the left side, just over the heart.

"Jake Pfeister," Rodeo said, "yuh was a dirty, pi'sonous rattler when yuh lived, but yuh're goin' to be a lion now thet yuh're dead. The other feller has folks. You ain't got none. So yuh're goin' down in hist'ry as the Killin' Kid."

Rodeo Webb sat in an armchair in the great lounging room of the Corey ranch house.

Opposite him sat old Rufus Corey, looking a little older than he looked the day before, but with a strange expression of pride mixed with the sadness in his rugged face. Over by the window sat Sheriff Fred Brace, who now got up.

"Waal, I reckon I'll be goin'," he said. "I'm owin' yuh an apology, Webb. I'm admittin' thet when yuh fust turned up in this man's town, I was suspectin' as mebbe you was the Killin' Kid. Thet's why yuh met me a good deal when yuh was lopin' out in the hills. I wasn't trustin' no stranger."

He repeated his apologies, shook hands with Rodeo, and departed.

"An honest-enough feller, Fred Brace is," old Rufus Corey remarked. "Dumb—lots dumber than a burro. But I reckon I'll support Fred when he runs fer sheriff ag'in."

The old man looked over at Rodeo. "Tell me about thet—thet business o' last night once more, Webb," he said. "Tell me the dee-tails, now thet we're alone. Tell me about my boy." His voice trembled with emotion.

"Well, it's jest as I told yuh, Mr.

Corey," Rodeo Webb said. "I was drivin' the stage myself. Made ol' Lafe Halpin let me git on the seat. I jest didn't know but what the Killin' Kid *might* git wind o' the gold shipment somehow. He was mighty smart."

He paused a moment. "Not smarter'n my boy, though," old Corey said proudly.

"No, not smarter'n yore boy," Rodeo admitted. "Yuh see, Mr. Corey, as I was drivin' down into Indian Canyon, thar's a shot from behind a boulder, an' the gray hoss goes down. It was a shot from the Killin' Kid. I reckon the varmint had me 'fore I could pull my shootin' iron. But——"

"But thet's whar my nephew come along."

"Thet's it. Thet's it, exackly. Yore nephew was smart 'nuff to suspect thet the Kid might be layin' low down in thet vicinity. He gallops down the road. The Killin' Kid had jest got me in the arm, and next shot'd prob'ly got me f'r good——"

"But my nephew Rex gits him fust an' then——"

"Yeah, Rex comes a-shootin'. Pfeister, the Killin' Kid, throws down on Rex. But it don't stop Rex none—no, sirree!

"He goes f'r his gun, an' him an' Pfeister shoots the same instant. Rex gits the Killin' Kid through the heart—as perfect a center shot as I ever seen. The Killin' Kid gits Rex through the head. They both drops. But yore nephew died a hero, Mr. Corey.

"He did," Corey said softly. "He shore did."

He came over nearer Rodeo Webb.

"Webb," he said. "I want ter tell yuh somethin' private, like. Thar was times when I was afeard fer Rex—plumb worried about him. His father was the squarest man in Arizona, but he didn't make the marriage that I wanted. He married a woman with bad blood in her fam'ly. It worried me.

It worried me after Rex's father an' mother died, even.

"But I took Rex over then. I got him back from Chicago. I had him live with me on my ranch, an' I larned him to rope an' ride an' handle a six-gun, an' how to be a man, an' it wa'n't long 'fore I seen he was turnin' out to be a Corey. A Corey, sir," he repeated proudly. "He's dead. But he died a Corey. I'm right proud o' my nephew, Webb. Yuh—yuh ain't goin'? I could do things fer you ef yuh admired to stay in Arizony——"

"No, Mr. Corey," Rodeo said. "I reckon I seen enough of Arizony. I'll be hittin' the trail. I'll have to lope

right smart to git to Lava Junction to see 'bout shippin' my hoss, Rawhide, back to Wyomin'."

The early afternoon sun was back of Rodeo Webb as he loped down the trail that led from Rocky Pass to Lava Junction.

He patted his horse on the neck.

"Rawhide, ol' boy, it's a right good thing yuh cain't talk," he said. "Yuh might show me up, 'though I reckon yuh ain't the kind of a critter to tell on a pard. An' don't forget, Rawhide, thet once in a while—jest once in a great while, Rawhide—a darned good lie is a heap better'n the truth."



BELLYACHING

By EDGAR DANIEL KRAMER

THOUGH I ain't a fellow
Who thinks grouchin' sweet,
I let out a bellow
When it's time to eat,
For th' grub we're gettin'
Is a lot of truck,
That is some upsettin'
To a puncher's luck.

Night or noon or mornin',
When th' cookie cries,
Sleep or labor scornin':
"Come an' feed, you guys!"
For th' vittle-seeker
All th' bacon's burned
An' th' coffee's weaker
Than a lover spurned.

Beans as hard as pebbles,
Mulligan like glue
Have th' punchers rebels
With their brains askew,
An' th' rage I'm fightin'
In a crazy dance
Soon will have lead bitin'
Cookie through his pants.



Jungle Master

By Paul Annixter

NAGARA, the Python, lay dozing by the brink of his favorite pool. The circle made by his enormous coils was a good seven feet in diameter, and he was bigger round in the middle than a man's thigh. Across a loop in the thickest portion of the body rested the flat fierce head, armed with backward-curving teeth that were tipped like needles. The magnetic center of this entire mass—a gemlike setting for the dully polished coils—was a pair of pale, cruel eyes with slit vertical pupils.

For eight days and eight nights Nagara had lain thus, digesting his last meal, eaten a month before, and waiting also for another to appear. There was no hurry about either process, for all

Python affairs move deadly slow. Perhaps at times he slept; none could say. Sleeping or waking he looked the same; the lidless stony eyes never closed; but continued to hold their hateful stare.

Lying there in the greeny-yellow sifting of jungle light, he was a study in mottled shadow. The huge leaf-brown body was marked off with yellowish blotches that were identical with the patches of sunlight coming through the green canopy overhead—a marvel of deviltry in camouflage. So perfectly did he blend and melt into the lacy light and gloom of the midday bush that you might have stepped straight into the deadly ring of his coils without seeing him, unless your nose had warned you.

That was the one warning Nagara ever gave. Round about him for a radius of thirty feet a musty odor hung, badge of all those who have the unpleasant habit of bolting what they eat without chewing it. To human nostrils it would have been only a strange, hot reek, heavy and indescribable, but to all wild things it was the taint of death itself. Even that master hunter the leopard, would have to be quite mad or well pursued indeed, to disregard that warning, and even his fierce strength would not avail, should he be rash enough to come within the eleven-foot limit of Nagara's lunge.

Neither man nor any beast may ever escape the regal Python's coils, once his jaws have secured their grip, for the lap of his steellike coils, about the victim's body is simultaneous with his strike—one swift follow-through motion—then the gradual tightening of the deadly loops of solid muscle, which pound for pound, possess more force than any other living flesh.

And so the bush in the vicinity of Nagara's pool remained scrupulously deserted. Nothing stirred in the stifling gloom. But Nagara continued to wait. Impatience was unknown to him as to the hanging creepers roundabout. As for nerves, a Python hasn't any. Sooner or later some misguided creature would blunder into range.

There is no telling how long Nagara might have lain there, had not something overtaken him. Nothing less than a season—the subtly miraculous spring of the West African bush. In that steamy clime where the days and the months seem all the same, there is little—only a rising of the river water after the rains, and perhaps a trifle headier scent of stic-lac and frangipanni. But the wild things knew by a thousand tingling senses. The ground breathed up a new life, the air became filled with an invisible elixer associated with rising sap and swelling buds.

The wail of the gibbons in the trees took on a different note; the languorous scent of a score of flowering vines lured clouds of great white moths each night, and the feathery fronds of new bamboo began to spring up a foot each day, rustling in the soft breezes.

Nagara was slow to answer the call of spring, perhaps because there was so much of him to stir. All told, he was an evil dream of some twenty-five feet, all of it moving and horribly well-conditioned.

On the tenth day strange activities began to be manifest among the gliding folk. Strange sounds were heard up and down the mud flats and through the environing thickets. Distant, evil rustlings, sudden threshings in the fern brake, and ever and anon through the still, heat-charged air the penetrant dry note of the constrictors' call came to Nagara where he lay—a prolonged venomous hissing, followed by three sharp clacks, like a locust's whir increased a thousandfold. How these sounds differed from the great snakes' hunting call none but the wild things knew, but differ they did. They advertised to the lesser dwellers of the bush that the Python kind were engaged in love for the present, not hunting, and that the going was safe. And all the hunted took heed, for except during these few brief weeks of the mating time, there was not one hour out of the twenty-four nor one minute out of that hour, in which the smaller things of the jungle felt free from deadly peril.

II.

DUSK of the eleventh night saw Nagara getting under way. That was a night of intoxicating sweetness. The smell of the young new growths was like a wine in the air, and the whole of the Lower Kingdom which lives close to the ground, and of which Nagara was king, was flooded with a soft madness, a

symphony too grave for any human ear to catch—attuned to growing things, a blending of sound, sense, color and smell in one, in which all things became lost in a wild abandon for a day or a week, and finally came out of it again as if it had been a dream.

Nagara was slow to move, as if loath to break his trance. First his head and neck looped gently to the ground and disappeared in the fern brake. His tremendous middle portions followed, and finally after five or six minutes the whole of him was sucked into the green smother and disappeared.

Emerging onto a well-traveled game trail, Nagara flowed regally toward the river. He feared nothing that might come along that trail, for he was acknowledged master of all the river bush. In all the jungle he had but one real enemy—the most negligible of all from other animal standpoints. This monster lived in morbid fear of ants. If he had a single conviction, it was that the carnivorous driver ants of the jungle, whose name is legion, would one day come upon him in the midst of a deep feeding dream.

All life in the vicinity of the jungle pool became suspended as word of the master's coming ran along the jungle runways. After a few hundred yards, Nagara began really to unlimber, and it was decidedly no sight for a drinking man. His legless gait was never fast, but it gave the impression of amazing speed. He didn't weave from side to side, as might be supposed. He flowed—merciful nightmare—like a living river, without effort and in the straightest of straight lines. The horror lay in the fact that while one portion of him advanced, another stood still, so that there seemed to be several of him coming at once.

An unwary reed buck coming up from the water, failed to sense him, and leaped away with a snort of terror only two feet ahead of the blunt-nosed head.

But Nagara gave no sign beyond a hiss. Hunger was forgotten now.

A pair of wild pigs broke from the thicket, spied a portion of his disappearing tail and fell upon the illusion that it was the whole snake. No live wire could have exhibited more abrupt variety than did Nagara. The green gloom was filled with a fearful hissing, and quick devastation was visited upon that portion of the bush under the lashing of twenty-five feet of coiled might. The brush was broken down and the ground gave back the echo of thudding blows. Where the two pigs had stood nothing remained; they had been whipped from sight into the oblivion of the fern thickets and were seen no more.

Nagara flowed on. He came to the river bank at last, and thence moved unerringly down to the shimmering mud flats of the lower bend. Arriving there, his favorite spring basking place for untold seasons, he found himself a good two days late. No less than a dozen of his kind had foregathered there, of all sizes and degrees of development. On a sandy bar that ran out into the shallow water, in a still heat of some 120 degrees Fahrenheit, a strange ceremony was taking place among the gliding folk.

Nagara quickly made up for his tardiness by his great size. Two young males, mere nineteen-footers, hastened to make room for him. Then all settled once more into deathlike immovability, stretched full length on the superheated sand. The moon swung along its upward arc, the whole night passed and then another day, and still no movement was manifest. Apparently all slept or were stupefied, but such was not the case. Untold stores of solar energy were being soaked up by the great bodies, in the new spring currents released from the earth.

The unknowable process of pairing was going on—the great females were making their choice of the season's

mate, by what means of elimination none could say. For here as in dim antediluvian times, when the female of the species ruled, it was the females who dictated, who gave sanction.

Came now a few days of sudden intense heat, such as often follow a tropic spring. They marked a cessation of activity among all other jungle things, but in the serpent colony it was the tide of highest life. The jungle became a vast, still hothouse.

One midday, at some unguessed signal, the gathering on the river flats suddenly broke up. All thirteen of the monsters took sudden life, and flowed together in a great pyramidal mass, the gleaming folds of which rose several feet in air. Out of this labyrinth they began departing, two by two, as the day wore on, striking away into the jungle, a female followed by the male of her choice.

Nagara departed early on the trail of a lithe, green-tinted female, and the pair slid soundlessly away from the colony. Nagara's mate had been coveted by no less than five other suitors of dignified age and experience, but Nagara won over all. During the first few hours of that nuptial flight the pair could not quite contain themselves. Their mighty stores of contractile energy, ever most amazing, were at their greatest height, every inch of their great bodies spoiling with energy. Without seeming effort they would glide up the trunks of leaning trees, and down again, the female always leading. It was a chase, a dance, an abandon of the body to the strange earth forces in an ecstasy of motion unequalled elsewhere in nature.

A game was evolved between the two as the day wore on. They would hang from the tree limbs, mouths agape as if in laughter, stiffening their glistening bodies outward in defiance of gravitation, swing to-and-fro, caressing one another with the flamelike play of

forked tongues. Then the female would loop to the ground again and the chase would go on. Untold miles were covered, through dim lanes where nesting birds and drowsing monkeys would fly screaming or chattering in terror before them. But never did they stop to kill.

Finally a call came to the young female, an instinct that told her good hunting and safe lairing lay just beyond. And the moonlight of that night found the pair in the mazes of the mating dance. In an open glade, two gleaming lengths upon which the moon shown in jewellike glints, heads upreared, man-high, red tongues licking, they swayed together and circled one another, and the moon made their gemmed eyes glow like rubies of pigeon blood, then like opals, then like glowworms in the dark.

Then they sank to a lower range of color, and finally, after an hour or more, to rest. A horrid nightmare one would say, unless through some queer process fear and revulsion were lessened, and one saw the weird beauty of motion and coloring.

It was not until the following day that the mated pair went forth to hunt. Sudden hunger had assailed them, grown to an inordinate gnawing that would not let them rest. Through the wet, green depths of the jungle two great forms raced with silent speed. A game trail wound through the tangled ferns. They followed it, and about noon made their kills at a drinking pool.

A green monkey fell to Nagara's agile mate. An hour later the king himself struck down the first of a band of gibbons coming down to drink. A screech, a crunching sound in the stillness, then the heat and the silence held sway once more in the noonday bush.

They slept. Each in a separate covert, they sank into the deep stupor of the Python kind. But the rest of Nagara this day was far from pleasant. Evil visionings filled his restless dreams.

III.

A MILE down the river from the scene of Nagara's mating was the camp of Brinkmann, the Dutch naturalist. On a grassy knoll overlooking the tea-green stream, his weather-beaten tent had stood for ten days, while the big Hollander and his eight native carriers had made short exploring trips into the surrounding bush.

Brinkmann was "animal man" for the Hamburg and London Zoölogical Gardens. Just now he was out on a strange mission, such as only a few men in the history of animal catching have ever successfully attempted. After a fortunate year afield in which he had collected everything from howler monkeys, to veldt lions and two-ton hippos from the Zambezi, he had set for himself the final task of bringing in alive and unharmed one of the huge Pythons of the river bush, the largest to be found—work which had already entailed weeks of crafty study amid excessive dangers.

Brinkmann, it happened, had come upon the trail of Nagara shortly after he left the jungle pool, and had followed it, amazed at its uncommon size. Later, through a telescope, he had spied upon the serpent colony on the mud flats, and finally with the aid of his skilled bush trackers, followed Nagara to his tryst. Immediately he had set for himself the task of capturing Nagara. None other would do. There remained the wearisome task of waiting till the king had fed and finally slept.

Came finally the word from his scouts that Nagara had made his kill at last. That day camp was struck, and the party of nine, armed with great nets, ropes and poles, set out on the tortuous trail into the jungle depths. In the flat primitive faces of the carriers was a lurking fear and awe, remnant of a time not so far past when their ancestors had made human sac-

rifice to these great serpents of the river banks.

Nagara stirred in his sleep. A slow tremor ran along his length. Perhaps in his dreams he was seeing again that terrible red column of the driver ants, the scourge of the jungle, advancing upon him as he lay. But this that crept silently up to his covert was no column of ants, but of men. They came with utmost stealth, inching their way through the smother of green, pausing for their very lives' sake to peer.

To Nagara's dim, half-waking senses it seemed that the green and tenuous network of the forest tendrils hanging round about, had fallen suddenly upon him, as a net of cunningly woven silk dropped over him, enmeshing his mighty coils. A low hiss, like leaking steam, escaped him as he strove to rear to fighting poise. But a slip-knot tightened about his middle, imprisoning the first four yards of his might before he roused himself to sluggish life.

Cold fury swept him, and a deathly fear, as he strained drunkenly against the unyielding strand. Open-eyed and fully aware of all that was taking place, he fought against stupor to bring his muscles into play—his deadly tail that could sweep these puny creatures into space. But other men with ropes and poles had already slipped nooses about him from the rear. In half an hour, a great writhing bundle of leashed might, nine feet long, looped round and round with hempen strands, and lashed to a pole, he was being carried down to the river.

Thereafter he slept again, the deathly sleep of gravity, stronger even than fear.

Night found him in the camp of the naturalist, ten miles down the river. The nets had been removed from him, and he lay in a long crate of strong green jungle wood. On the morrow he was to be taken down river to the

coast port, en route to far-off Europe. The terrible monarch of the river bush had become as a worm through the wiles of these pygmies from another world.

But the brooding gods of jungle affairs had other things in store for the mottled king of the Pythons. For it was that night, just before the green and mystic dawn appeared, that Nagara's dream came true. Alive and flowing, slow-winding and inexorable, a fiery ribbon came writhing through the bush—the cannibal driver ants, a regiment four hundred yards long, moving at a changeless rate of a mile an hour flat. Nothing stopped them, nothing could, except a wall of fire. Passing the camp on the river bank, the column turned. One supposes they must have smelled. At any rate they streamed unerringly to Nagara's carted prison and flowed like water through the bars.

Nagara awoke to the fiery torment of some twenty thousand huge-jawed insects nipping him simultaneously. Nothing but a jolt of electricity could have stirred him more effectually. He reared and hissed in horror, and the musky reek from his gaping jaws filled the night air. Like lapping flames the horde flowed over him, more and evermore, in overwhelming waves. Had they found him a day or even a half day sooner, a trifle deeper in his trance, they would have consumed him alive. But a gibbon is not hearty fare for a Python, and Nagara's stupor was already on the wane.

Nagara's prison house was seen to stir. It moved as if of its own accord, and then it bulged. Between the slats the dying moon picked out a prolonged,

flowing movement as of something thickly stirred, and then a thud. A dozen wooden bars gave way at once, like decayed teeth, with scarcely a sound, yielding to the malign resistless force within. Then through the gape flowed fold on fold of mottled strength.

For a space there was a great lashing and writhing as of a chemical warfare between two flowing liquids. Thousands upon thousands of the ants were killed before Nagara won free. Then across the dim-lit clearing was the sense of something racing with an effortless ease, and the waiting jungle swallowed it and the sound of its going.

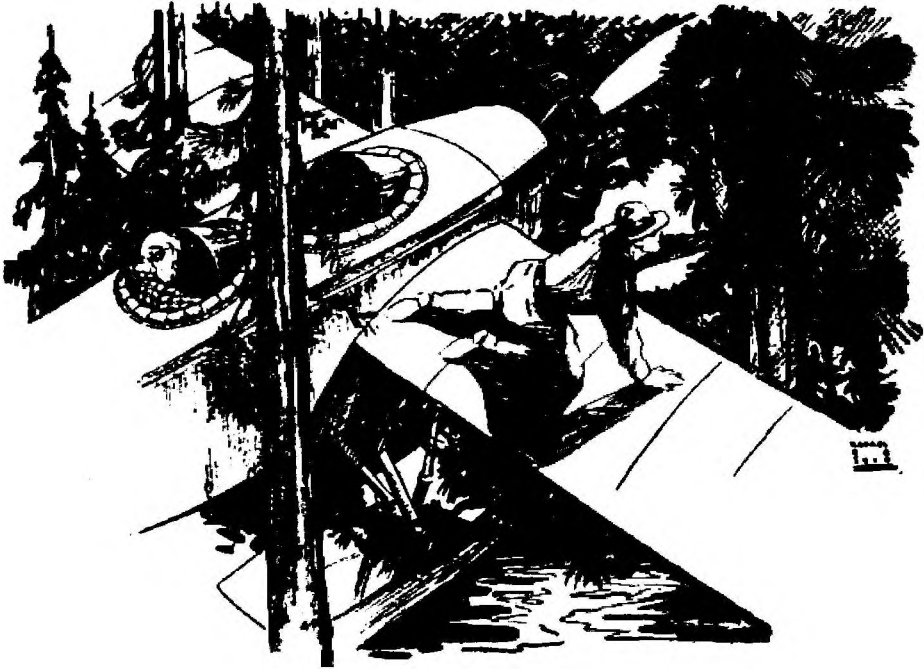
In the light of early dawn the naturalist read the whole story in the army of dead ants that lay about the broken crate, and the clean-picked pathway that marked the myriads' passing. In natural course his captive would have slept another week at least. But the bush, had played its subtlest most resistless force against him, for which no man could be forearmed.

Swiftly he followed with his men along Nagara's trail, but within a mile he knew the quest was hopeless. The king would never again be caught by man. Some lesser subject must suffice the curious crowds across the water.

Straight as a surveyor's line, that trail led back to the trysting place. There it became a double trail, two parallel pathways marked by bent and broken stems of fern and creepers, as if some strange tank out of no man's land had passed that way.

Nagara had found his mate a second time.





The Boss Of Boom River

By Clay Perry

Author of "Tall Timber," etc.

A Four-part Novel—Part II.

Read this condensed version of the first installment of this serial of the big-timber country. Then go right ahead and enjoy it to the finish.

TIMOTHY LAWLER was surprised to find that the dead town of Boomville had quite an up-to-date drug store. But the pretty red-headed girl behind the soda fountain was what caused the reddish, peculiarly-shaped scar on his left forearm to tingle. It always tingled when there was good fortune ahead, and itched when there was danger.

So he soon made the acquaintance of this red-headed girl—Sophy Blair, daughter of the drug-store proprietor.

He told her that it was her father's overenthusiastic chamber-of-commerce circular that had lured him into that forsaken land. For Timothy was looking for a site for erecting summer camps. In this venture he would have the backing of his employer, John Kreger, head of a string of chain stores. And Timothy had found nothing in that region but stumps of trees long since cut down, and general desolation.

Sophy introduced him to a sturdy old-time lumberman called "Singing Shepard." And the old-timer's eyes widened with amazement when he heard that Timothy was the son of old Tim Lawler—a famous lumberman in that locality in his day.

The veteran declared that old Tim's choicest tract of uncut timber—called the "Famous Forty"—had been lost and never found since his death. He talked Timothy into looking for it, and Sophy brought the lease on the Boomville saw-mill for him to sign. He did so, and appointed Shepard "talking boss" of the crew of lumbermen that the old-timer promised to supply for him.

When Timothy met that crew, however, they looked to him like a gang of old cripples. They lived in a "wan-igan"—a sort of house on a raft which, with a contrivance called a "gator" and a hydroplane, were included in the lease.

"Well, here we be!" roared Shepard. "All set an' r'arin' to go!"

"So I see," replied Timothy. "But what are we going to do with that outfit?"

"Why, fall timber, raise cabins, drive logs, an' sechlike," answered Shepard.

Timothy got a start on that. He wondered if he was biting off more than he could chew. He then went to the hydroplane with Shepard. Timothy was at the controls. The two flew over the valley through which Boom River flowed. Just before a fog thickened, both thought they sighted standing timber. But in trying to make a landing, Timothy brushed the treetops.

There was a frightful sound of splitting wood and ripping fabric, an impact, and then Timothy was hurled forward into space. His last conscious act was the shutting off of the ignition to try to save the ship from catching fire.

CHAPTER V.

TIMOTHY CRUSOE.

TIMOTHY LAWLER regained consciousness, and found himself sitting on the floor of the cockpit, his legs astride the stick, which he held firmly in his hands.

His eyes were glued shut with blood which he finally managed to swab away.

He saw Singing Shepard, crimson dripping from his nose, staring at him.

"You hurt bad?" Shepard asked.

Timothy shook himself a little, grew dizzy for a moment, but the dizziness vanished quickly. He felt his head.

"I guess I'm hardly hurt at all," he said. "How about yourself?"

"Nothin' but a bumped nose. Where be we? It looks like we was up a tree."

Timothy glanced cautiously over the side of the cockpit.

"You're wrong," he said, with a weak chuckle. "We're up *three* trees, growing close together. I didn't think there was that much forest anywhere around here. What farmer's wood lot do you suppose we've landed in? I'm lost, and I'll admit it. But we're lucky, I guess, after all. The branches of the trees saved us."

"I suppose," observed Shepard, peering over his side, "that this is what you might call an enforced landing, eh?"

"It's what you might call a tree-stall, Mr. Shepard. We haven't landed yet. If the wind blows, we may. Hold steady! Do you recognize the country, Mr. Shepard?"

"Well, I'll tell you. I can't seem to see the forest for the trees. There's a whole lot of 'em. But seems to me I remember gettin' a look at some water an' a hill. Then I seen stars. Say, this reminds me——"

Timothy, swabbing away at his crimson-soaked features with a handkerchief, listened absently to one of Shepard's outbursts of singsong, wondering if the crash had knocked him silly.

"Ancestors of the airplane!" muttered Timothy, leaning forward a little and hastily sitting back, because the ship tilted as if it were about to slip down through the thick pine branches. "We've only about a day's iron rations in my pack sack—and I'm beginning to feel very, very thirsty. Where do you suppose we are?"

"If I could git to the lake an' taste of it, I might tell you," said Shepard, "I know the taste of almost every swamp an' slough in the Northern Peninsula. An' I'm thusty, too."

"Do you know, I think if we had a way of getting the plane down, it would fly!" observed Timothy. "Near as I can make out, it's only damaged on the pontoons and braces. The prop is not even scratched."

"Eighty miles from Boomville!" exclaimed Shepard dubiously. "That 'gator, towin' the wanigan, can make about six miles an hour, barrin' portages. Might be up here inside of two or three days."

"Up where? I don't know whether that water down there is Lake Michigan or Lake-of-the-Woods."

"If I only could taste it, I'd tell you," muttered Shepard, stirring uneasily and muffling a groan as he bent his right leg. "I guess I banged my knee a little," he added.

"Sit right where you are!" commanded his superior. "I'll climb down and see if these trees are rooted in the ground or floating around in a fog. I feel as if it was the latter."

Gingerly he crawled out of the cockpit, onto a wing, got a firm hold on a branch that was bowed down by the weight of the plane, shakily slipped to another, and made his way down the rough trunk of one pine tree, bracing his shoulders against another that grew close beside it. From below, he called to Shepard:

"It isn't really ground; it's rocks! I never thought I'd see timber like this growing out of solid stone such as this seems to be. Sit tight now! I'm going to find that lake or slough or whatever it is."

"Holler if you git lost," advised Shepard. "I'll prop one ear open."

A little later, as Timothy stumbled over rocks and fallen timber, he heard Shepard sing out:

"Look for a peavey handle!"

"Yeah! Or a needle in a haystack," Timothy retorted, wondering if the old fellow's mind was wandering.

He pushed down the steep, moss-covered slope of ragged rocks, with only the silt and mold of fallen foliage in the crevices showing as soil. He came to a final thicket which let him suddenly onto a sandy beach.

A line of reeds waved from a shallow bar, a flock of wild ducks honked up from wild-rice beds and hurtled off in a low-flying wedge just above the dark surface of what seemed a considerable body of water, its extent only to be guessed at because of the fog.

Timothy dipped his hand in the water. It was surprisingly warm and brackish to the taste.

"Which only proves it can't be Lake Michigan," he told himself. "The question is, which direction have I been flying since I got lost? This certainly isn't a river. Must be a shallow muskeg lake."

But the shore, as far as he could see in any direction, was rocky and steep. Evergreens arched out over the narrow beach—pines, spruces, tamaracks, balsams, mingled with a little cedar and the ghostly trunks of white birches.

"What a site for a camp!" he muttered, and then: "Look for a peavey handle, eh? I suppose he meant, to see if some one has been logging here."

One thought led to another. And then, from the locality, the lay of the land, the evident fact that the timber had not been touched by steel for many years, he began to feel a tingle of excitement—a tingle that began in his scar.

He started down the shore. The air was as white as milk from the fog. He sought for some opening in the forest, some evidence of an ancient log landing—or a new one which he hoped would not be there, with its plain claim of prior discovery and occupation.

The trees bent over farther and far-

ther, and he was forced to wade out a little way from shore in the shallow water. He dropped suddenly into a deep place and into water so cold that he yelped as he floundered back.

He found a brook dripping in through the rocks, drank from it and filled his flask, then decided to turn back and explore in the opposite direction.

Exploration, with the dusk coming on and the fog seeming to grow thicker, was a matter of feeling his way along and seeing only a few feet ahead. He came upon a spot that decided him to end his adventure for the night—an ideal camping place in a nook of the rocks beside a trickle of spring water and beneath a great spruce that leaned over and drooped like a tent above dry sand.

"Here's our home," he exclaimed and forced his way back into the forest and up the steep slope to where Shepard hung aloft in the plane.

"Ahoy the bumblebee!" he called up cheerfully. "Break out the anchor. You'll find it in a frame in the tail. Let down my pack sack with it. Can you slide down the rope?"

"Like a greased Injun," declared Shepard, "but I ain't agoin' to climb up it, by jing!"

Groaning miserably but without accident, Shepard lowered himself to where Timothy held the anchor rope taut, and refusing Timothy's offer of a hand, scrambled down the rocks to the spot Timothy had found.

Once there, he seemed to be more at ease, and after he had soaked a cloth in hot water and applied it to his knee, declared he felt no pain at all. They devoured emergency rations, then rolled in blankets beside a driftwood fire, comfortable under their living roof tree.

Very soon Timothy awoke—to find it daybreak.

"Ever seen this before, Mr. Shepard?" he asked the old-timer.

"No, nor behind, neither, that I rec-

ollect," answered Shepard sharply. "Nor tasted nor smelled it, neither. Can't see nothin' in this soft-soap weather that's hangin' on so. I wonder jest what sort of a hill it is we made a hangar of."

"I'm going to try to find out alone. I'll travel along shore, this way. Do you feel equal to using an ax to break a trail up to our hangar?" Timothy asked.

"I feel equal to Paul Bunyan hisself, this mornin', son," declared Shepard testily. "You take care you don't walk off into the west," he muttered as he strode off with Timothy's hand ax.

Timothy took his pocket compass and headed northwest, in the direction he had been going when he found camp. The shore line was irregular, deeply indented, curving this way and that, clothed with a splendid stand of timber, totally unlike the scrub second and third-growth stuff around Boomville.

But the fog was too thick for Timothy to get any idea of the shape or size of the lake or the extent of the forested land. There was no doubt that this timber was fit to cut, suitable for building cabins, for driving down to be sawed for lumber.

Yet it seemed incredible to Timothy that somebody had not located and begun cutting long ago—unless it was a protected park or reserve. However, he saw no signs, printed or trodden in the sand, until, after half an hour of progress in and out of the bays, he halted short, with an explosive exclamation:

"Crusoe!"

What he saw, sent his heart down into his boots, which already were half full of water, as he was wet to the waist. He saw footprints in the sand.

He had crossed the mouth of a brook which seemed very much like the one he had stumbled upon the night before. It was just beyond this that he found the footprints. There were two pairs of them, or else the feet that had left

them had halted here and turned about and retreated.

All the Christopher Columbus feeling he had had was dissolved as he inspected those hollows in the sand, water standing in them and distorting their shape so that he could not be sure that each pair of prints had been made by the same pair of feet.

A few steps farther on, he came to where some one had hacked an opening in the thicket, more footprints, distinctly a third set—or, at least, a second set. He halted again and stood with bowed head, bent shoulders, dejected and disappointed. Then a prickle of nerves in his left arm brought his head up.

He gave a defiant laugh and followed the trail on—and walked into his own camp!

CHAPTER VI.

PYRAMID ISLAND.

YO-HAY! Shepard! It's an island—if it is only a *pyramid* now!" shouted Timothy.

There was a crackling in the woods, and Shepard's deep bass rolled out:

"Yes, an' then it was we found
The river we was on was round."

"Did you hear me?" demanded Timothy wildly. "I say, it's an island! I walked all around it."

"Did you find ary a peavey handle?" inquired Shepard, emerging from the woods.

"No. Why?"

"Why, I kind o' hoped you'd find one marked with Circle L," mumbled Shepard.

"Do you mean—"

"She looks like a pyramid to me, close up," said Shepard drawlingly.

"The Famous Forty!" breathed Timothy. "Don't fool with me. Do you—really mean—to tell me—you think this—is where—my father left off—logging?"

"I tell you I'm lost," was Shepard's mournful and evasive reply, "I wisht you'd found a peavey handle. I tell you, I ain't used to droppin' down onto a location out of the air. I wisht that fog would break away. Well, if it's an island, Mr. Crusoe, we better build ourselves a cat-a-mary-ann."

"Look here, Shepard—" began Timothy, almost beside himself with anxious excitement. But he was cut short by a distant booming sound.

"Thar she blows!" ejaculated Shepard. "Stumpy Lobec is bawlin' 'em in to breakfast. By jing! We can't be fur from Boom River."

"The 'gator?" yelped Timothy. "Then I must have got turned right around before we crashed, eh?"

"Long as you didn't git turned upside down, it's O. K. with me," murmured Shepard, and he set to work dragging a dry driftwood log toward the water.

Timothy took his cue and set to work feverishly to help fashion a crude raft or "catamaryann," as Shepard called it.

There was plenty of dry driftwood and they used the anchor rope off the plane to lash logs together, then cut tough tamarack poles and shoved off, with their duffel aboard. They headed toward the last-heard sound of the 'gator whistle, southwest, skirting the shore until it receded from the direction they wished to go, when they pushed boldly out into the fog.

Timothy looked back. The island had vanished as if it had been indeed a mirage and his experience a dream.

The lake proved shallow, the bottom covered with oozy silt but thinly, solid, sandy soil beneath, against which they were able to shove with their poles and make good progress. Timothy held the raft on a course south by southwest, with his compass.

For an hour, they poled steadily on, seeing nothing save a little area of black water about them. The whistle con-

tinued to blow at odd intervals, and finally a dull, throbbing sound reached them off to the left. Shepard swung the raft sharply toward it.

"They're usin' the winch," he said. "They've got out a cable and tryin' to pull off the bar with the donkey. I hope they stick until we ketch 'em. What in Sam Hill are we comin' to?"

He thrust his pole ahead suddenly to fend away from a tangle of timber which loomed before them. Beyond it, the lake seemed to drop away.

"This looks like the jumping-off place," exclaimed Timothy, "or the end of the world!"

"It's a dam!" roared Shepard. "A beaver dam, by jing! By gravy! They go an' perfect them beavers by law—an' look what they went and done! Look at them colony houses! I can see half a dozen from here."

"There must be an outlet," suggested Timothy.

"Sure. There's a old channel through the muskeg marsh below, but this ain't the outlet here. It's too shaller. So that's what makes a lake out of a river, eh?" he finished, muttering into his beard.

"What river?" Timothy caught him up.

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Lawler, I dunno. That 'gator might be in Boom River or then it might be in another lake."

"How would it get there?"

"Over a portage, haulin' itself up like a spider on its own web," answered Shepard, "if it's on Boom River, this here couldn't be nothin' else but the Dry Branch."

"The Dry Branch?"

"I can remember when we used to float logs down the Dry Branch. It used to go dry every summer; but in spring it had plenty of water. But it's been tetotally dry now for years, spring, summer, fall, an' winter."

They pushed the raft into reed-grown

shallows until it stuck on the sand, then got off and waded to dry land, climbed a succession of low dunes and dropped into a fog-filled valley.

Out of the fog came a sudden confusion of shouting. Then the two were lifted off their feet by a blast that shook the ground, showering them with sand as they lay flat, hugging soil for safety.

"Ahoy, there!" roared Shepard, spitting sand. "What war is this?"

"Ahoy, yourself!" came an angry reply, accompanied by a thump of wood on wood and then on sand. Peg-leg Peters came limping out of the fog and stared at Shepard with wide, wild eyes.

"By jing!" he croaked. "You almost walked onto a plant of dynamite in this here sand bar. I was jest blowin' the other end of her to make a channel for the 'gator."

"A channel in what river?" sputtered Timothy, rubbing sand from his eyes.

Sawed-off Simpson loomed up beside Peters and answered:

"All there is left of Boom River," he said. "'The farther up you go, the less there is of it. We had good goin' yesterday an' all last night; but this mornin', we had to haul her over one big bar. This one was too much for her. I was havin' Peg-leg blow her. I been tootin' danger fer an hour."

"My gosh! I thought it was grub call!" snorted Shepard. "Been so long since I heard it. Where's the wanigan?"

"Anchored in a cove below that first bar. Did you find any timber?"

"Plenty," Timothy answered for Shepard. "But you're headed wrong for our location."

"I'm headed upriver. Mr. Lawler."

"Yes, but we want the 'gator and the wanigan over in the lake about a mile northwest of here."

"A lake!" gasped Simpson.

"Beaver Lake," explained Shepard, describing in a few words what they had found.

"Why, Mr. Shepard," gasped Simp-

son, "be you losin' your mind? That ain't no lake. It's a river. Didn't my gran'pap work in the woods up here the winter of the blue snow, an' didn't he help drive the Round River Drive around the Famous Forty?"

"It didn't have no end to it," snapped Shepard. "It's a lake with an island that runs up to a peak, an' trees on all four sides."

"Timber!" cried Simpson. "Timber! You say there's timber onto it? Whoopie! Come a-runnin', you snoligosters! Timothy Lawler's found the old Round River Camp an' the Famous Forty! Stumpy Lebec, you git that 'gator back over the lower bar an' hitch onto the wanigan again! We're agoin' to wind her up, overland, onto Round River. Did you land your airship into the river, Mr. Lawler?"

"I hung it up in some trees on the top of the island."

"Smashed to pieces, eh?" exclaimed Simpson, as his crew gathered about.

"No, sir. Not damaged much at all. I guess it would take Paul Bunyan and all his crew to get it down onto the ground or the water."

"Say, we got the 'gator, ain't we?" Simpson said.

Timothy stared at the wallowing craft as it came steaming back down the river and hitched onto the wanigan. He and Shepard and Simpson went down the shore and got aboard the wanigan, where Simpson held a conference with "Stumpy" Lebec, and finally went aboard the 'gator with the engineer.

The ancient crew was as excited as a crowd of schoolboys over Shepard's statement that he and Timothy had dropped down out of the air on top of the Famous Forty. There was, however, not one who pretended not to believe it.

Singing Shepard climbed onto the wanigan roof to try to obtain a view of the surrounding country and the bends and curves of the river. Timothy

after some deep thought, climbed up and sat down beside Shepard, as the big house boat was towed slowly behind the noisy 'gator.

"Now where are we goin'?" he inquired of Shepard.

"Lookin' for a gully to run up into, I guess," Shepard replied vaguely.

"Now look here!" snapped Timothy.

"I want you to tell me just how much you knew, in the first place, about that island up there. It doesn't seem possible to me that such a stand of timber could pass unnoticed and go uncut within fifty miles of Boomville all these years."

"Well, I'll tell you, I won't lie to you," drawled Shepard. "I knowed about it, but I forgot it. I mean, I forgot what section it was on. And all the time it was on Section 37."

"Section 37?" ejaculated Timothy. "I'm a greenhorn, but I happen to know there are only thirty-six sections in a township."

"Well, I'll tell you. I won't lie to before Paul Bunyan begun loggin' off the country," Shepard declared. "You see, he used to take an' hitch Babe, the big blue ox, to the corners of the sections an' haul 'em to the river, an'——"

"Stop right there; I've heard that one," commanded Timothy. "You knew all the time that this tract of timber had been left standing from my father's operations. And you knew it hadn't been cut over in thirty years or so."

"It seems to me it was in '94 or '95——" began Shepard weakly.

"It was in 1901 that my father died," said Timothy.

"I wouldn't lie to you," mumbled Shepard.

"No, of course not, you old pirate!" chuckled Timothy. "But you would let me drop out of the fog on top of my father's old concession and pretend you didn't recognize it."

"Well, you see, it's purty hard for a man that ain't been up in this country

for thirty years to locate hisself right off or to tell whether a river is a lake or——"

A distant, rumbling sound broke in on their conversation, and Singing Shepard snapped his fingers.

"Guess it's goin' to clear up," he said.

"Was that thunder?" exclaimed Timothy, in surprise.

But before Shepard could reply, the 'gator was swerved sharply toward the right bank and into a bay which led to a deep dry gully, its rocky bottom filled with a tangle of ancient timber, logs, whole trees, stumps, snags, and brush—the débris of an ancient freshet.

As the 'gator was maneuvered for a landing, a steadily growing rumble and roar and a rising wind came down the ravine. Then suddenly there came a burst of muddy water which caught the 'gator and the wanigan and swept them out into the river before the paddle wheels were able to fight back hard enough to check them.

"What is that?" demanded Timothy.

"Well, I'll tell you," Shepard answered confidentially, "I thought I heard thunder, a while back. Must be somethin' busted loose on the headwaters of the Dry Branch."

"This is the mouth of the Dry Branch? And the headwaters are——"

"*Sacré!*" exploded a complaining voice below, and Timothy looked down into the troubled face of Stumpy Lebec, who had come over from the 'gator. "Dat Sawed-off Simpson, he's up to hees ol' trick again. He jomp ashore back dere, jus' w'en we start, an' he's got a beeg pack onto hees haid. He take de trail you make comin' over from dat Beaver Lake. An' w'at for? Waal, I fin' hout he's toted wan hun'ed poun's of dynamite onto hees haid!"

"Thunder!" exploded Timothy, jumping up and grabbing Shepard by the arm. "You old fraud! That was dynamite, and Simpson's blown an opening in the beaver dam!"

"Waal," said Stumpy, with a satisfied air, "it's good t'ing we got watair on de Dry Branch, anyhow. Dat 'gator, she'll wear de bottom off her, draggin' herse'f over dat rock-gully bed."

Right at this moment, the 'gator was making hard work of it to keep from being carried downstream.

"How do you expect to get up against that current?" Timothy asked.

"Ho! We hitch de cable onto a tree an' haul ourse'f up," replied the engineer. "Den we buil' us a sluice gate onto dat dam to hol' back de watair until we want to use heem some tam."

"Stumpy, you wouldn't lie to me, would you?" demanded Timothy, fixing the black-bearded little Canuck with a keen gaze.

"But no!" denied Stumpy, round-eyed.

"You used to work for my father, Tim Lawler?"

"But, yes."

"And so did Mr. Shepard and Sawed-off Simpson—and every other man in this crew?"

"But, yes, sure!"

Timothy had his answer to the puzzle in full. He began to see red again. And he was far from being angry.

The red head of Sophy Blair had been responsible for all this that had "happened" so curiously. Except, of course, his blind luck in crashing into timber, unhurt.

"Stumpy," he said, "I want a boat and two good men to pull the oars. I'm going down to Boomville. I wish I had the plane in shape, and I'd fly to Chicago," he added, half to himself. "I'm worried about this. It's too good to be true!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE WATER GATE.

TIMOTHY did not go to Boomville by a small boat. The muddy freshet that roared down Dry Branch, seemed to be growing in volume as the 'gator

was headed into it, and Timothy began to realize that his job was to get to the opened dam and plug the hole which was emptying the lake out at a rapid rate.

He was going to need that water very much later on, and must conserve it. He urged Stumpy Lebec to force the 'gator and its tow up the freshet stream as fast as possible.

Two days passed in the laborious keel-hauling process of pulling upstream. The third morning, Timothy became impatient. He selected two men, went ashore and started up an ancient river trail, heading for the dam.

He got but a mile upstream when he came to impassable muskeg, the marshes flooded. He returned to the outfit then and got aboard, as the 'gator entered the marshes. The flat-bottomed power scow and its equally flat-bottomed wanigan were now able to avoid the swift current in the channel and detour across the marshes, and paddle-wheel power was sufficient to move them.

Toward dusk, the long, bristling line of the beaver dam came in sight, with an opening in the middle where the water poured through. A lone stub of a dead tree thrust up from the lake like a crooked flagpole. And from a distance, Timothy glimpsed something that looked like a flag waving from near the top. He borrowed Stumpy's ancient brass telescope.

"That's a man in that tree!" he cried out, as he got the telescope focused. "He's waving a red flag."

"By gar! Dat's Sawed-off Simpson!" declared Stumpy.

Timothy felt guilty. He had forgotten about Simpson, in his absence, except that he had been annoyed at Simpson's unauthorized act in blowing a hole in the dam, although it was this act that connected Beaver Lake with Boom River.

As they drew nearer, every one crowded the decks and strained his eyes

to see the tattered object that hung in the crotch of the dead tree. It was, indeed, Sawed-off Simpson, evidently marooned.

Peg-leg Peters snorted at the sight. Peg-leg was the dynamite man. Simpson had stolen his stuff, and this was what the thief got for being so forward.

It took some clever maneuvering to warp the 'gator and wanigan alongside the dam and to get a small boat over it and into the lake. Timothy took charge of the rescue operations—and well that he did. For Simpson was hung up in his perch.

He had driven the point of his hook hand so deeply into the tree that he could not pull it out. It was this that had saved him from dropping into the water during his three days and two nights of lonely vigil. When he fell asleep, it held him, a steel finger that never relaxed.

Timothy marveled at the blistering language Simpson used in describing how he had been marooned. It seemed that he had planted his dynamite and then had got caught in a tangle in the beaver dam, and was actually blown out by the blast.

Half conscious, he had crawled and floundered over a great raft of driftwood cast loose by the blast and got to the tree. The driftwood was carried away by the suction of the current which swept through the opening in the dam. He could not swim, and there he had remained, waiting for rescue.

The next problem was to get the 'gator into Beaver Lake. Timothy inspected the situation early the next morning. With the aid of Stumpy Lebec, he solved the problem by having the 'gator run around to the shallow end of the damaged hitching cables to stumps on shore, by which it dragged itself over through the reedy shallows where the raft still lay grounded. Then it worked itself into deeper water and floated.

The lake was alarmingly low already, and was emptying itself at a furious rate through the break in the dam. Beaver Lake proved to be a long, crooked, sprawling muskeg pond in a desolate region lacking any vestige of timber, save for dead stubs, standing in the water.

Far up the lake loomed the outlines of the wooded island. A long haul from island to dam, and Timothy needed timbers to construct a sluice gate or water gate in the dam.

He was sitting on the dam, frowning over the prospect of rafting down timber from the island, when something in the outlines of the huge wanigan gave him an idea. The wanigan still lay at anchor below the dam and must remain there and be abandoned when the crew went up to the woods, where a log camp would be constructed.

Timothy jumped up and sought out Singing Shepard. He put his plan to the singer, who consulted Sawed-off Simpson, Stumpy Lebec, and Roaring Rob.

Within half an hour, the crew was busy laying a rude corduroy walk atop the uneven surface of the dam. They robbed the beaver houses of their thatch of sticks to build it. The beavers had fled.

Over this corduroy were carried all the supplies, furniture, and equipment of the wanigan, until it was empty. Then the roof was ripped off, the side walls firmly spiked and braced to the heavy logs of the raft that bore it. Then the two ends came out and left the side walls standing.

By tearing the wanigan apart, and with the help of the 'gator, they constructed the sluice gate in the dam, and made a good job of it, too.

Before the gate was lowered, tons of rock from the lake shore were brought in small boats and dropped and rammed down on the edges of the wanigan raft, outside the walls, to anchor it fast.

Meantime, the crew camped under canvas ashore.

"Where's the boss of this outfit?"

A gruff voice put a period to Singing Shepard's song at the camp fire that night.

There was the sound of paddles dropping in a canoe bottom, the canoe being dragged on sand, footsteps, a grunt, and a growl, all out of the darkness beyond the camp fire's flicker, on the lake shore.

Timothy Lawler felt a stab of something like fear in the region of his abdomen. As he strained his eyes toward the source of the sounds, a gigantic figure loomed up out of the darkness.

Timothy rose and went grimly toward him. He noted that there were two other figures approaching. He caught a flash of ruddy hair, and his pulses skipped a beat, then hammered harder.

He steadied himself and faced the big man, who had bristling eyebrows, bristling beard, lantern jaw, fierce eyes, and a foghorn voice. This, he thought, would be the man who had the rights on Beaver Lake and the Famous Forty. He had been expecting this all along. But he put on a bold face as he demanded:

"What do you want? I'm the boss here."

"You the man that claims to be Timothy Lawler?" came the crisp demand. The stranger was looking Timothy up and down deliberately.

"I am Timothy Lawler," answered the latter emphatically. "Who are you? Oh, I guess you're the man I've been looking for—Mr. Blair, of Boomville! Come in and rest yourself," he finished invitingly, because that ruddy head in the background loomed nearer and more real.

He paid small attention to the other figure in the background, save to gather that it was a man of some inconsequential sort, wearing a languid air, a ciga-

repte, and an expensive "wilderness outfit" fresh from the store.

He extended his hand to the glowering giant, who seized it and gave it a shake as if he wished it were Timothy's neck.

"Well, you've raised merry heck with the Boom River," the big man charged angrily, "and with the sawmill and jack works and the whole town of Boomville. And I hear you've wrecked the plane. Say, what makes you think, Mr. Lawler, because you rented a logging outfit, that you had the right to tear everything up by the roots in this man's country?"

Timothy took a fresh grip on himself and held hard, for the sake of that ruddy head behind Mr. Blair. But he was angry as he answered:

"Boomville has been off the map so long that a little fresh water won't hurt it. My lease gives me the right of way to get out my timber, and my timber stands at the head of this lake. I've got to have sluicing facilities to get what I want out of here and down to Boomville."

"Hey!" burst out a hoarse voice behind Timothy. "Hey, Blair, you wailin' walrus, what you kickin' about? Boomville's got to git used to havin' high water again, ain't it? I blowed the hole in the beaver dam an' what do you know about that?"

Sawed-off Simpson, tousled and bleary-eyed, plunged out of the tent where he had been snoring steadily for hours, wriggling into a mackinaw jacket as he came, his steel hook flashing up and down with his struggles.

"By gosh!" ejaculated Mr. Blair, staring at Simpson. "You drunk again, Sawed-off?" The bigger man seemed a trifle fearful of the smaller one, Timothy noticed.

"Not by a jugful!" replied Mr. Simpson angrily. "I was hung up where I couldn't even git a drink of lake water for three days. I blowed the hole, an' it blowed me offn the dam into a tree.

Tim Lawler, here, he come up an' picked me off, an' then he plugged that hole as clever as anythin' I ever see done—an' I've seen some. What the heck! Oh, Sophy!"

"Hello, Mr. Simpson," chuckled the girl with the ruddy head,

She came forward, and her companion dawdled after her. And while Timothy's eyes were fixed on Sophy's smiling, dimpling face, twenty other pairs of eyes were fastened upon the dawdler. For he wore moleskin breeches, flaming-red coat, elkskin shoes, laced almost to the knees, and a plaid cap that looked like a run-over pie.

"I am sure that you did what you thought was right in the service of Mr. Lawler," said Sophy to Sawed-off. "And you did a fine thing in immediately admitting it, too. Father is so hasty.

"Mr. Lawler, I want you to meet a friend of father's from Chicago," Sophy went on, and for the first time, Timothy got a full-face look at her companion. He gulped and almost groaned aloud as Sophy presented him: "Mr. Charles Kreger, Mr. Lawler."

"I believe—we've had the privilege," muttered Timothy sourly. "How d'ye do, Mr. Kreger. What brought you up into this country?"

Charley Kreger flipped a cigarette away and tapped another on his thumb nail.

"Business, my dear fellow," he drawled insolently. "The governor thought I ought to have a look at the country you promise to make blössom like the rose. You don't seriously mean that you expect to try to lure innocent and unsuspecting persons into this desolate wilderness for their summer vacations!"

Just as Timothy was struggling against an impulse to pick Charley up bodily and hurl him into the lake, James Hastings Blair butted in.

"What's the matter with this coun-

try, eh? What's the matter with Boomville, eh? You don't like it, Mr. Kreger?"

"I mean—er—well, you know, in some ways it's all right, but it needs—er—"

"All this country needs——" began Mr. Blair, and then he stopped short. For Joe Bouchet, master cook and master diplomat, came from the cook tent, carrying in his hands a huge platter heaped high with steaming food. "Joe, are those beans?" he demanded.

"But sure. Bake' beans from hunder a pine stump in a 'ole full of 'ot rocks," replied Joe Bouchet, grinning broadly, as he put the platter down on the end of the table set up amid the tents.

"All this country needs," muttered Mr. Blair, slumping heavily onto a bench before the platter and holding one hand with the other, "is plenty of old-fashioned beans cooked under a pine stump in a hole full of hot rocks. Sit down, Sophy. Sit down, Mr. Kreger, we're going to eat beans."

Mr. Blair plunged a fork deep into the platter of beans. Sophy remained at the far end of the table. She caught the plate that Joe Bouchet skittered neatly down the table to her, without spilling a single bean. She gave it, with a bow, to Charley Kreger.

Timothy was puzzled by Sophy's aloof attitude, as if she wished to avoid him. Was it possible that Charley Kreger had won her good will? Timothy intercepted the next plate that came sliding down the table and carried it to Sophy, whispering in her ear as he set down before her:

"What does Charley Kreger want? And how did you happen to come up with him and your father, and where have you been for the last few days?"

"I—er—I've been in and out," she replied, "I've been terribly busy trying to find father. I missed him in Chicago. You see—— Oh, I'm so sorry about it, but it really wasn't my fault,

Mr. Lawler. I tried to get word to you sooner. You see, Mr. Kreger——"

"Why is your father fiddling around with Charley Kreger?" growled Timothy. "Say, do you know, Sophy. I think we'd better find a minister right away before anything happens. My arm is itching."

"Your arm, Mr. Lawler?"

"Nothing personal, Sophy. It means bad news for me, that's all, when my scar itches. I can't recall that it's ever been wrong."

Sophy gave a little gasp and evaded his look.

"What is it?" he demanded. "Let me know the worst."

"Father has come up—to break your lease," she choked out.

"Tell me about it, Sophy!" begged Timothy. "How did it happen?"

Sophy toyed with her fork. She seemed to have lost interest in beans entirely.

"I can't tell you all about it," she confessed. "All that I know is that Charles Kreger helped father to sell the surplus poplar pickets to John Kreger. He was the broker in the deal. He is also president of a folding fence corporation, of Illinois. John Kreger is the treasurer."

"Ah!" groaned Timothy. "The plot thickens. I'm beginning to know all about it now. It's happened before. John Kreger is backing Charley in another of his blasted rackets. Well, that is John Kreger's own funeral—and maybe mine, too," he added, dropping his voice. "No wonder my arm itched! Folding fences, eh?"

He chuckled, a little bitterly, then checked himself as he saw Sophy's face. She was flushed one moment, then white. "Folding snow fences," she explained. "You see, they can be made out of poplar because they aren't used, except, in winter. In summer, they take them up and fold them up and—— I think it's

clever of Charles Kreger to have thought of them. Don't you?"

Timothy did not have the heart to say what he thought about Charley Kreger. He would have liked to hit Charley over the head with a folding fence until his skull was full of splinters. This was the fourth or fifth scheme Charley Kreger had floated, with his father always treasurer of the corporation, holding the bag when the scheme went up the flue.

"But why," he demanded, "should your father want to break my lease because of this foolish fancy of another fond father? In a few days, I'd be floating timber downriver to the mill—big timber from the Famous Forty, or Bunyan's Island. I'd be building a camp on the island.

"It's an ideal site for a camp. I'd planned to make it the headquarters camp of the chain. And, Sophy, I have found just the spot for the little cabin for two we were talking about."

"*We?*" she challenged him. "You are tallying your logs again before they're timber. I told you that father intends to break your lease."

"Let him try it. It can't be broken without a forfeit, can it?"

"You didn't even read it," Sophy reminded him wearily. "And you haven't seen Boomville after the flood. Why, you've set the whole town against you by allowing the head of water to go tearing down out of Beaver Lake, without warning. In the language of the lease——"

"Oh, pshaw!" chuckled Timothy suddenly. "They'll all love me when I marry you, Sophy—your father included. Stumpy Lebec is a tugboat captain. No doubt he could perform the ceremony right here and now."

Sophy looked at him, shaking her head hopelessly.

"Can't you be serious?" she demanded. "I came up here on serious business, not to listen to funny stories. Here! Maybe this will make you serious."

She handed him a yellow envelope.

"They trusted me to deliver it," she said. "I think it's bad news."

What's the news that young Timothy Lawler receives? And how does it shape his career? The third installment of this unusual serial of the timber country will be published in the March 15th number of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine, on the news stands February 15th. Watch for it!



NIGHT'S TROUBADOUR

By ANTON ROMATKA

I love the night
When rapture-nourished dream birds soar.

I love the night,
Her peace, her dim and mystic light:
A shiftless, roving troubadour,
Beneath the palm, or sycamore.

I love the night.



Gringo Steel

By Charles Dana Bennett

ONE minute the train was gliding smoothly through the Mexican countryside. The next minute it lurched wildly and, with screeching brakes, ground to an abrupt stop.

Mike Rider, jolted to the floor of the day coach, managed to struggle to his knees and then to his feet. He heard a fusillade of shots from the direction of the locomotive; then more shots, nearer this time. And the splintering of glass in the day coach windows just a few feet in front of him added to the general hubbub.

Mike's blue eyes hardened. Rifle

fire! Splintered windows! The sudden stop of the train! These three things, added up in his cool mind, equaled one larger thing—a stickup of some sort. Well, Mike Rider didn't have bright-red hair and a strong jaw for nothing. Americans—those like Mike Rider, anyhow—didn't take such things sitting down.

He straightened to his full six feet and made for the nearer of the pair of splintered windows. It was good business to see what you were up against before you went into action.

"Down for your life! Down, señor!"

Mike recognized the voice—that of the Mexican captain in charge of the train guard—but he paid no attention to it. Some folks said that there were really two Mike Riders—both of them in the muscular body topped by that thatch of flaming hair. One was Mike Rider, college graduate, son of "Old Man" Rider, president of Hi-Steel Construction, a young man who was courteous and avoided disputes; the other was Mike Rider, steel worker, who never avoided a fight once it was started. It was the second Mike Rider who was functioning now.

He reached the window; found it jammed shut. Another bullet crashed through the glass, whined past his ear, and made a snicking sound as it lodged in the woodwork on the opposite side of the car.

Mike showed his square, white teeth in a grim smile. Yes, the captain had been right when he had yelled: "Down, señor!" Mike dropped to the floor as another leaden stream washed away what had been left of the window glass.

The Mexican captain was shouting commands at his men. Rifles were being brought into play from the inside of the car. Rifle butts were crashing through glass. Now Mike could see the Mexican soldiers crouching beside the windows of the car. Guns roared and blazed.

Bang! Boo-oom! The soldiers inside the car were showing that they could shoot quite as well as they could be shot at. Not a bad idea, Mike thought; in fact, a very good idea. He crawled quickly back to his bag, which had been jarred from the luggage rack, and dived into it for his army automatic. This first trip of his into Mexico was going to be quite exciting.

The car was filling up with acrid powder smoke. The soldiers' carbines flashed red through the haze. Bullets from outside the train tore splinters in the woodwork—and, more serious, in

flesh. Mike saw a pair of soldiers drop to the floor. One writhed about. The other lay absolutely still.

Mike had gained one of the windows now. Peering out, he could see that the attackers were hidden behind a low, sagebrush-covered ridge possibly sixty yards from the stalled train. The points of flame which marked their belching guns told him that his automatic would be useless at that range. All right! That poor fellow now lying motionless on the floor of the car would never have use for a carbine any more. Mike scuttled back, got the carbine, nosed it through the nearest window, and swung it into action.

He continued to blaze away. He kept firing, in fact, after a loud command from the Mexican captain silenced the other carbines inside the car. Mike had absorbed enough college Spanish to interpret that captain's command: "Cease firing!"

Mike's eager fighting face turned into a scowling one. What was the idea? Why "cease firing" when those bandits outside were still pouring a leaden hail into the car? Might not this be treachery on the Mexican captain's part? Mightn't it be some deal to deliver the train to the bandits? Well, he'd see about that! He'd find a use for that army automatic, after all. He plucked the smaller weapon from his belt and rushed toward the captain, barricaded behind an upturned seat at the end of the car.

"What's the idea?" he demanded of the captain. "If you and your outfit let that gang o' killers in on us, you'll be the first to go!" His voice was stern. The muzzle of his automatic, on a line with the captain's heart, was also stern.

The captain did not flinch, however. The light of battle sparkled in his dark eyes.

"Drop it, señor!" he ordered. "I am trying a trick—trying to set a trap.

"When the bandits charge, my men will finish them. You will see, señor."

Only half convinced, Mike hesitated. From behind the sagebrush-covered ridge came wild yells of triumph above the crackle of the rifles. Figures leaped into view, charged down the short grade, firing as they came. Silver glistened on their chaps, and in the bands of their high-peaked sombreros. Across every man's shoulder swung a bandoleer of ammunition. The attackers wore high-heeled Spanish boots, and their progress was rather slow; but it was not straggling; it was determined, deliberate, well organized and well commanded.

Mike clutched his automatic more firmly. He watched the oncoming bandits. He also watched the captain. This captain in charge of the train might be bluffing. The captain looked, Mike admitted, like a regular guy, but if—

A shouted command from the captain and an answering burst of rifle fire from the train broke into his doubts. Flame belched from the windows of the car. Mike could see several of the attackers fall in their tracks. Yes, that captain was O. K., at that.

Mike joined in the fight again, saw more attackers fall, saw the rest waver, finally turn and stumble up the ridge under a second withering fire from the day coach.

"After them, men!" came the captain's command.

His men wasted no time in carrying it out. They poured from both ends of the car. Mike, his suspicions banished, joined them. But by the time the defenders of the train had reached the crest of the ridge, the band of marauders had taken to horse. Joined by the detachment which had attacked the engine, they were swiftly disappearing up an arroyo and making in the direction of the mountains.

The guards fired a parting volley. To

continue pursuit without horses would be out of the question.

Mike Rider turned back toward the day coach. He owed an apology to that Mexican captain in charge of the train guards.

He found the officer—Captain Martinez—inspecting the wreckage. The car was pock-marked with bullets. There was not a whole pane of glass left on either side. The seats, which had been yanked out for barricading purposes, had been chewed to pieces by the leaden slugs.

Four of the guards lay groaning on the floor of the car. Three others were stretched out dead, martyrs to duty.

"So this is Mexico!" Mike grunted.

Captain Martinez turned from his work for a moment.

"No, Señor Rider," he said, "this is only a part of Mexico. There are bad Mexicans, just as there are bad Americans."

"Who were those fellows who tried to shoot us up?" Mike asked. "Revolutionists?"

Captain Martinez shrugged his shoulders and made a gesture with his hands. "Probably they are of the band of Pedro Mandrinos—yes. And Mandrinos calls himself a revolutionist. But in reality he is the equivalent of your Chicago—what do you call them?—gangsters?"

"Just what we call 'em," Mike told him. "Gangsters—racketeers. I've battled them in New York. And now it looks as though they're not wholly an American institution. I suppose it was money those fellows were after?"

"Robbers are the same the world over," Martinez remarked dryly.

Mike decided he liked this young Mexican captain. He met the officer's eyes squarely.

"I'm sorry about that fool break I made during the fight," he said. "But I couldn't help thinking something was queer—thought maybe you'd sold us out. I'm sorry. I hope you'll accept

my apology." He held out his hand to the captain.

Captain Martinez gripped it. "In your circumstances I should also have been suspicious, señor," Martinez conceded. "You are an Americano, fifty miles from even a tiny village in a land that has been badly disorganized in spots. It is unnecessary that you say more."

"Thanks," Mike acknowledged. "Guess I'll see how Tim Grogan made out, up in the cab. Tim and I are old friends."

He got out of the day coach, walked forward past a string of flat cars loaded with equipment for the Hi-Steel camp. His blue eyes showed his relief when he discovered Tim Grogan, the engine driver, inspecting the torn-up roadbed a scant twenty feet beyond the locomotive's pilot. Around Tim's shoulder was wound a piece of undershirt on which appeared a large red blotch.

"Hurt badly, Tim?" Mike asked.

Tim Grogan looked up at the booted and Stetson-hatted young redhead. He grinned. "Sure, I think I'll live through it."

Adventures in strange lands, mainly on Hi-Steel construction jobs, had failed to erase all of Tim's brogue. "Twinty feet more, an' we'd 'a' been into the ditch for a week."

"You're lucky, then," Mike said, smiling, "that you're not in a hotter place than that old engine cab. What happened to your shoulder, Tim?"

"Oh, just a bit of a nick from a greaser's spitball. He got me at short range, but I near broke the head av him with a pinch bar."

"And what happened to your fireman and the two guards up on the head-end here?"

"That peon, or whatever ye call him, ain't a fireman. He's just a coal heaver. The sojers have him on the other side o' the engine, washin' his face for him. His nose sort o' got in the way av a

bullet. Sure, here comes the gallant captain."

Mike saw Martinez approaching from the direction of the day coach. "Have any trouble keeping the bandits clear of the cab?" the captain inquired.

"Naw!" Tim grunted. He did not mention the incident of the pinch bar. "If ye can git some o' them sojers av yours to help tie these rails down, we can be startin' for camp in an hour or so."

II.

"Pop" Andersen, hard-nerved superintendent of the Hi-Steel Construction Co., met Mike Rider at the door of the day coach as the train finally pulled into camp.

"We had a slight delay," Mike explained, pumping the old super's hand in hearty greeting.

Pop viewed the bullet-riddled car. "Yeah, so I notice," he said grimly. "I'll get Tim to sidetrack the flats quick, an' then he can run the casualties back to civilization."

"Tim's plugged himself. Just a nick in the shoulder, though."

"O'Day can run 'em down then." Andersen called a workman, gave quick instructions, and then turned back to Mike. "We've been having trouble on this bridge job. Plenty!"

"Well, bandits come with the country, like fleas and hot tamales, don't they?"

"Yeah, in a way. But this case is a little different. Come on up to the tent, an' I'll tell you about it."

Mike shouldered his bag and followed Pop through the camp. The scene that met his eyes was nothing new to him, seasoned steel worker that he was. The hastily-made sidings were filled with loaded and half unloaded cars stowed with varied equipment—fifty-ton I-beam stringers, connecting bars, derrick masts, cable, donkey engines, concrete mixers, commissary supplies.

All were necessary to a self-contained camp something over two hundred miles from the nearest city and more than fifty miles from even a small village.

Mike's keen eyes took in the layout of the living quarters. On one side of the yards were pitched the tents of the peons, the Mexican day laborers; on the other, grouped in what was evidently a "fighting square," stood those of the American steel men. Pop led the way to the largest of these, which served as drafting room and office.

"Sit down," he invited. "So those rats stalled the train an' nearly got you guys, eh?" he said, as he dropped onto a camp stool opposite young Rider.

Mike nodded, and told briefly of the attack.

Pop Andersen's face looked serious when the younger man had finished. "First time they've gone that far," he said. "Up to now it's just been a game of derailing trains, getting the peons to quit, and such things."

"Shooting up your camp, too?" Mike asked, with apparent eagerness.

Andersen shook his head. "No, they haven't pulled that, at least. But it looks now as if they might. I didn't figure anything so hot, or I wouldn't 'a' wired your dad to send you down. Some nice welcome to Mexico for you, eh?"

Mike Rider's square jaw became still squarer. "Hey, what's the idea, Pop?" he demanded, half indignantly. "Tryin' to kid me? Don't you know me yet? Haven't I worked enough summers under you? Are you forgetting the last year in New York, Pop, with racketeers plugging at us on the top o' seven hundred feet o' steel?"

Pop Andersen laughed. "Thought I'd just get a rise out o' you. No, what I meant, Mike, was that I figured you could keep things moving on the line, while I pushed across with the bridge."

"Well?" Mike demanded. "What's so tough about that? Just keep on figuring that way, Pop. It's a cinch we're not 'layin' down,' ain't it?"

"Well, we're in a strange country, Mike, and up against a bad outfit. Something queer—*mighty* queer—about this whole business."

"I don't see so much mystery in it. If we can't stall off these bandits, or racketeers, or crooks, or whatever you might call these fellows, then——"

"That's the point, Mike. They're really not that. When nothing's been stolen, you can't call a man a crook, can you?"

"And you mean to say nothing's been stolen?"

"Not so much as a safety pin, as far as I know."

"That's queer," Mike admitted, running a hand through his red hair. "I suppose you've been called for cash and haven't come across. That it?"

"Nope. Never a demand for dough. I don't know exactly *what* those birds are up to. They never mentioned *money*. We've just received notes from time to time telling us to stop the job. Here's one of 'em."

Andersen drew a cheap envelope from one of his pockets. "Read the note in there."

Mike took out the note. It contained a single line of clearly written script:

Gringo steel must stop.

P. M.

"What do you think it means, Pop?"

"Plain enough. It means a certain gent whose initials are 'P. M.,' doesn't want our bridge to be finished. 'Gringo' is Mex for American, you know."

"Yes, and I imagined from what Captain Martinez said, that P. M. stands for Pedro Mandrinos."

"And Mandrinos considers himself to be the leader of a revolution," Pop supplemented, "though by all accounts he's just a big bum at the head of a gang o' cutthroats. You can see, though,

that there's nothing mentioned about handing over any racket money. The thing's deeper than that. What's your dope?"

Mike Rider stood up. "My dope," he said, "is that we go ahead and build that bridge."

"Attaboy, Mike!" said Pop.

III.

The concrete bases had been set before Mike Rider's arrival at camp, and with the young redhead at Pop Andersen's side, steel rose rapidly.

The construction itself presented no difficulties: two approach spans, and a central arch three hundred and ninety feet long. The arroyo bed was dry at this time of the year, thus making the labor considerably easier.

About the camp, though—or about the American side of it, at any rate—hovered a tense feeling. Work was going ahead under forced draft. The idea prevailed that the sooner the completed work could be turned over to the Mexican Federal government, the healthier it would be for a certain group of American engineers and steel erectors. And yet things progressed practically without incident for ten days.

On the eleventh day after Mike's arrival, the first twenty-ton stringer on the near approach was lowered into place. The pneumatic riveters sounded out their machine-gun clatter. White-hot rivets whipped through the afternoon shadows flung across the bad lands by the peaks of the Sierras.

It had been a good day. There was a glint of relief in the eyes of Pop Andersen as he and his American lieutenants rested around a roaring camp fire that evening.

"Well, we're gettin' along, Mike," he remarked to young Rider. "I guess Mandrinos decided we were pretty rough hombres to handle, after that train massacre he was banded."

Mike bit on the end of his pipe "Maybe," he said. "All we can do is wait and—— Jiminy! What's that?"

A mad turmoil seemed to have broken forth in the peons' quarters across the sidings. Andersen, his young assistant, and several others sprang to their feet.

"Seemed like a cry for help," Mike said. "Sounds like Tim Grogan's voice."

Pop Andersen's voice was tense. "Grogan an' O'Day were workin' overtime to straighten a rod on one o' the choo-choos," he said. "Maybe——"

"C'mon! Let's go!" Mike barked.

He grabbed up a knotted cudgel from the pile of firewood. Others of the group were not slow to follow suit. They gathered such weapons as they could find quickly.

A clerk and two draftsmen darted from the office tent, armed with three-foot steel rules. A transit man appeared with one of the brass-shod legs of his transit brandished above his head. Various steel workers were picking up stillson wrenches, pinch bars, straight end tackle bars of high-speed tool steel, and other gentle persuaders of peace.

Led by Mike Rider and Pop Andersen, the entire American delegation poured across the tracks. The scene that greeted them was startling.

A dozen camp fires lit the peons' quarters, and sent black shadows dancing over the walls of the tents. But the camp itself was deserted. Every last laborer was gathered in a seething, shrieking circle about two tattered, bloodstained men who, standing back to back, tried to fight off the mob with eight-foot clinker bars.

Pop Andersen recognized the two besieged men—Tim Grogan and Pat O'Day.

"Hold out a minute!" he yelled to them.

And Grogan and O'Day were doing that for the moment. They were laying about them with their strange

weapons. Knives flashed and glinted in the light of kerosene-soaked waste dropped at the side of one of the locomotives. O'Day and Grogan were managing to keep those knives at a distance.

But just as the American steel men swept into the fray, a gleaming blade whizzed through the air. It caught Pat O'Day full in the right side. Even then, O'Day made another sweep with his clinker bar. But he was slowly slipping to the ground, a look of pain and bewilderment on his battle-scarred face. And then the steel men were in the pack, wielding their bludgeons unmercifully.

Knives whipped and flashed; heads cracked under the driving impact of crushing steel. English and Spanish profanity mixed in a wild babble.

Mike Rider's stout cudgel crashed on the knuckles of a hand raised to strike down Pop Andersen. A knife flew aimlessly through space to land with a clatter on a cross-tie. The scar-faced peon who had thrown it, sank to the ground. His aim had been bad; his arm had been paralyzed with the smash of a club, just as he was hurling the weapon. The club had been in the hands of Mike Rider.

Almost at the same instant, though, something slashed across Mike's side, and burned like a white-hot rivet. Mike turned to face his assailant—a little Mexican, now drawing back for another lunge with his knife.

There was no time for Mike to raise his club again. He lashed out with his left fist. It caught the fellow on the point of the chin. The knifer went down and out. His weapon jangled on one of the rails.

Mike Rider whirled to continue the battle. But there was no battle to be continued now. The other steel workers had not been idle. The peons had wilted under their fierce onslaught. Black shadows were slipping into tents

or behind them. The railroad yard was cleared of all except the bridge builders and the more seriously wounded.

Pop Andersen took quick command.

"Mike," he said, "get the engineers and the transit men and go through every peon's clothes—and every tent, too. Clean out all the knives, and anything else that looks dangerous."

He turned to the rivet men. "You fellows get blankets," he instructed. "With four to a side, they'll do as stretchers. We'll quarter the wounded in the square. Step on it, men!"

Mike Rider had started to round up his detachment, but caught a motion from Tim Grogan. Tim was still on his feet, but swaying drunkenly from the terrific beating he had taken.

"Dynamite!"

Tim, badly bruised, had evidently been trying to get the word out before. That word was enough to halt every man in his tracks. Terror showed in every pair of eyes.

Mike whirled and reached Tim's side in great, leaping bounds. Pop Andersen already had the big fellow by the other arm.

"Wha'd'y'mean?" both bellowed in a single breath.

Speech was hard for Tim. His swollen lips were bleeding, and that big body of his had been weakened. His enunciation was poor. He mumbled: "I was goin' over—goin' over t' the tool house f'r an extra jack. 'Twas starlight. I wasn't sure, first——"

"But the dynamite!" Mike screeched. "What about it, Tim?"

"I saw some greaser lurkin' near the magazine up Midge Gully. I ran over. The magazine was bust wide open. Greaser started to run. Caught him by the engine. Pat an' me started t' work on him to find out what divilmint he was up to. Thim greasers jumped us then an'——"

Boo-oom!

There was a terrific report. A great

sheet of flame ripped through the night. Men were thrown from their feet. Wreckage of every description rained about them. To Mike Rider, it seemed as if the earth had torn loose from its axis and hurtled into a comet.

Mike picked himself up. Some of the others, too, were getting up. Mike heard Pop Andersen's voice:

"They got the bridgehead with that. But they must've used every damned stick we had to do it with. No more danger in *that* direction, anyhow."

"But it prob'ly means Mandrinos'll pounce on us!" Mike put in. "I'll bet Mandrinos had that staged—had the peons worked up——"

"'Fraid so," Andersen agreed. "Well, we gotta try an' get ready. No time to waste. Yep! Hear those hoofbeats? Comin' from Midge Gully direction. The Mandrinos bunch, all right!"

Inside the hollow square of tents, Mike Rider and Pop Andersen spread out their men. The fire was kicked out. The camp lay in silence.

Only a scant dozen revolvers and rifles were available for the steel men's forces. The rest had to content themselves with any kind of emergency weapons. They'd do their best with these when Mandrinos and his cut-throats attacked.

But Mandrinos did not attack—at least, not at once. It was evident that the bandit leader had an intimate knowledge of the camp, for he had halted his men in the protection of Midge Gully. Instead of leading a mad charge of cavalry, which would have brought up against the double strands of barbed wire on every side of the square, he was up to some other maneuver.

It came quickly—from the direction of the peon camp. The tents were being set on fire. Next, the tool house began to smoke; then, in another moment, a string of box cars burst into flame. Their offside had been dashed

with coal oil, to judge from the speed that the fire got under way. And, still, except for one or two vaguely-flitting shadows which appeared and disappeared too quickly to make marks for the defenders' guns, nothing happened.

Mike Rider was doing some rapid thinking. Those fires were not set out of terrorism alone. There must be other reasons. Did Mandrinos have the fires lighted to try to draw the steel workers from the defense of the square? That didn't seem plausible. It seemed odd, too, for Mandrinos to have fires lighted that would show up *his* men in their attack, and not the Americans.

Then, in a flash, Mike understood the strategy of Mandrinos! The bandit chieftain was attracting the attention of the Americans to the Midge Gully side. But Mandrinos would have a detachment circle about and attack from the *other* side!

The bandits could cut the wire barriers on the dark side, and then have the Americans between the glowing flames and themselves. In this way they could do merciless, murderous execution.

As Mike lay there behind the barricade and thought, there was a rattle of rifle fire from the direction of Midge Gully. Mandrinos was trying to draw the Americans' fire to this direction as a bluff; get their attention; have them waste their bullets. Well, Mandrinos must not know that any one in the American camp was wise to him.

Mike yelled a command: "Let 'em have it, fellows!"

He blazed away with his own gun in the direction of Midge Gully. Most of the Americans who had guns, did the same.

Mike grinned. That would make Mandrinos believe that his strategy hadn't been discovered.

And then Mike Rider started to edge more and more back. He turned his

face away from the fire, lay prone, and started to snake cautiously over the ground toward the barbed-wire barriers on the dark side of the square.

For once in his life—or so it seemed—Mike Rider was retreating from a fight.

IV.

He wanted to stand up—stand up and run. It would have been much less strain on his nerves than this slow, snakelike crawling. But standing up would be fatal. This way, he might make it, by careful, crisscross squirming through the shadowy spots. Once he stood up, he would be outlined against the brilliant background of the flames.

He inched along, paused; inched along, paused again and lay still; finally drew himself into the deep shadow. It was quite dark back here. He could not see through the darkness as far as the wire barriers, yet he knew there were men back there, for he could *hear*. It was as he had thought—the bandit chieftain's men were pliering the barbed wire.

He heard a voice in the darkness beyond the barbed wire now; heard the low-voiced Spanish command: "Cut it all down. We must have a wide front to charge through with the horses."

Mike pricked up his ears. Yes, that was the plan of the merciless Mandrinos! To clear the way for a cavalry charge. Extermination of the entire group of Americans seemed more and more to be his object. The man must be mad.

But he was efficient in his madness. He would have Pop Andersen's force in a hopeless position. They would be between the peons on the Midge Gully side and the skilled horsemen on the shadowy side. Pop's men couldn't charge either way. They'd have to lie there and take it.

Now came that same voice in sibilant Spanish from behind the barbed wire:

"Put your men up on the south section of the wire, Manuel. Then gather them, and we'll go back for the horses."

Mike edged closer. "Back for the horses!" That probably meant that the horses were being guarded farther back in the darkness; probably guarded by two or three men while the rest of the cavalrymen worked up here pliering the wire. Well, it was worth looking into.

He watched his chance, snaked along the ground away from the voices, found a section of wire down and, with the grounded barbs tearing his clothes and sticking into his body, gradually wormed himself beyond it. And now to try to get to the horses before their riders got there!

He had not spent two summers in the West for nothing, and believed that the cavvy would be guarded in the little depression marked by two cottonwood trees smudgily outlined in the darkness about a hundred yards to the rear.

As he warily approached nearer, he heard the stamping of steel-shod feet and the champing of bits. He also heard two voices. Only two men were guarding the cavvy. Well, two-to-one odds seemed fair enough, after the odds he had already taken to-night.

Once more Mike lay prone on the ground, and inched this way along. Perhaps the horses sensed his nearness, for two of them whinnied, but their human guards were still unsuspicious.

Mike looked up warily, saw the glow of a cigarette, edged nearer. He reached for the knife in his belt. No! He could not go in for that sort of thing. He could not bring himself to stab a man in cold blood. And yet there would be obvious disadvantages to shooting.

Mike compromised. He drew out his army automatic and sprang forward.

Smack! He brought the weapon down just back of the man's ear. The man dropped like a felled tree.

"Ow—"

But the startled exclamation of the second guard, several feet away in the darkness, came to an abrupt stop. Mike had sprung like a panther, and with one single, follow-through motion had clubbed the Mexican over the skull.

He knew that he had to work quickly. The two bandits had been guarding the horses in an improvised but efficient rope corral. The animals were saddled and bridled. Carbines were lashed to the saddles, stocks forward and locks down.

The main job was to unleash those rifles. But patience and persistence did it. Mike carried four of them at a time to a spot some yards away and hid them in a clump of mesquite.

With the rifles hidden, he started to remove the bridles from the horses, but had not finished this job when he heard the bandits returning from their work on the barbed wire.

Three quick strokes of Mike's knife were sufficient to rip out one side of the corral. It was the work of less than a minute to stampede the already nervous horses. There was a thunder of hoofs as they galloped away—all but one of them. Mike thought he could use that one for himself.

From the direction of the pliered barbed wire, Mike heard a piercing cry in Spanish:

"*Los caballos!*" the bandits were yelling.

But Mike knew that nothing on two legs—or four, either—could round up that herd of horses for hours.

The bandits were going to make an effort to do so, however. They came charging down toward the little hollow under the cottonwood trees. Some were yelling in dismay; some were cursing; some shrieked at the galloping horses, in futile efforts to stop the stampede.

"No place for me!" said Mike, grinning. He vaulted into the saddle of the little mustang that he had saved for

himself, and started to gallop out of the path of the horseless Mexicans.

He believed that the darkness was covering his movements. The hoofs of his mount made a pounding sound on the firm turf, but evidently the bandits thought that this was only an odd horse that had strayed from the cavvy.

The bandits raced on—on past the cottonwood trees, and, their side arms clanking and jangling, made for an arroyo from which came the receding thunder of fast-flying hoofs.

One of the Mexicans was sharper-eyed, though—or perhaps just more suspicious than the rest. He ran from beneath the cottonwood trees and tried to head off Mike's horse.

He had nerve, Mike decided—no doubt about that. He swerved not an inch from the course of the running mustang. It looked as if he had grabbed for the bridle before noticing that the animal carried a man riding low on its back.

Then his hand flashed to his holster. A split second too late, however. Mike's automatic came down on the crown of the bandit's sombrero. That automatic was doing valuable service to-night. The bandit staggered, crumpled to his knees. In a jiffy, Mike was off his horse and had smashed a terrific right to the man's jaw.

The battle between the steel workers and the peons was just about over when Mike Rider rode back into camp on a wiry little mustang. Across his saddle he held an unconscious figure dressed in a khaki uniform, studded with much ornamental silver. The man was face down; only his lank black hair and his costume indicated that he might be one of the Mexican bandits.

Andersen gasped. "I wondered where you went, Mike," he said. "I couldn't quite see *you* beatin' it away from a fight. But I kept wonderin' till I heard them horses stampedin' hell bent f'r

election. Then I realized your strategy. Well, it saved the fort, all right."

"Didn't have much trouble with the peons, eh?"

"No, they proved small-timers when they weren't reinforced by the bandit cavalry. They broke through the barbed wire at the Midge Gully end, but lost courage when their allies turned up missing. Got one of 'em there, eh? Say, he's an ornamental sort of a duck, and——"

As he talked, Pop Andersen raised the head of the unconscious man.

"Good night!" he yelled. "You know who this is, Mike?"

Mike grinned. "Well, I had a suspicion. That's why I brought him in. When I saw all that silver on his uniform——"

"Well, silver or not, it's Mandrinos himself!" Pop cut in. "How did you do it, Mike?"

Mike unloaded the unconscious bandit by the simple process of letting his unconscious body drop to the ground.

"I'm not saying I didn't have a lot o' luck—horseshoes all over me. First, I had a hunch a while ago, when things looked so tough for us back here. Thought about the possibility of a cavalry charge, and—well, you heard 'em stampeding a while ago, didn't you? An' Mandrinos, being a nervy guy, tried to stop one o' the horses. It happened that I was on the horse. And Mandrinos got stopped himself, and——"

Suddenly Mike Rider slid from his horse and sank to the ground. Up to now he had almost forgotten that he had received a knife thrust earlier that evening.

He raised his head once, to tell Pop Andersen where the rifles were hidden. Then he collapsed.

V.

The bridge was completed. The last stringer had been lowered into place, the last truss riveted, the last rail laid.

Gringo steel had triumphed over many difficulties. The hardships were forgotten now. The occasion was a festive one. A Pullman, filled with representatives of the Mexican government, stood waiting to make the first official crossing. With them was Captain Martinez, in charge of a guard of soldiers.

The captain's uniform was spick-and-span. His white teeth gleamed as he talked with Pop Andersen and Mike Rider as with old friends.

"A magnificent piece of work, gentlemen," he said.

Pop Andersen, his left arm still in a sling, grunted. "It was easy after you and your men came up and took Mandrinos off our hands."

The dark face of Martinez became serious. "I think Mr. Rider deserves that credit," he said. He turned to Mike. "He was a poisonous rattlesnake, that Mandrinos. I was wrong, señor, when I told you that Mandrinos was nothing but a robber. Surely he was a brigand, but with you people, it was different. It was not a matter of money."

"I thought not," Mike said, "after reading those notes of his."

"No. I talked to Señor Mandrinos before he was stood in front of a stone wall," Martinez continued. "He was quite mad, but mad like a fox. He hated Americans, but still more, he hated gringo steel."

The captain's dark eyes were raised to the newly completed bridge.

"Mandrinos," he went on, "understood that with the coming of the railroad to this wild part of the country, his rule would be finished. He lived by war, and he understood that gringo steel carries peace, not war."

"But it carries war, too, if necessary," Mike Rider said grimly. "Well, there's the whistle, captain. Here we go."

With Tim Grogan at the throttle, the train started to move slowly out across the bridge.

STAMPEDES

By RAY ALLEN

IT'S awful when cattle go loco.
I know; in my punchin' around
I've watched them tear loose with a bellow
An' crazily hammer the ground.
I've seen them head out hell-for-leather
With nobody knowin' just why,
Their tongues showin' red, their eyes rollin',
Their tails flirtin' up at the sky,
An' blind in the dust of their raisin',
The thunder of hoofs in my ears,
I've ridden my brone through the smother,
An' struggled to straighten them steers,
An' yet here an' now I'm admittin',
In spite of the dangers I've run,
When the herd got the lopsided notion
That they had to be havin' some fun,
It was nothin' compared to the Red Dog,
When, givin' his earnin's a jar,
Somebody shouts: "Hombres, I'm payin'!"
An' the waddies stampede to the bar.

I'm rememberin' down on the Pecos;
I couldn't forget, if I tried,
For that's where I got to be wry-necked
An' picked up these kinks in my side;
Through the dusk an' the lowin' of longhorns
There sounded a coyote's fierce yell,
An' then, like a shot, them dumb cattle
Hot-footed it back to beat hell,
An' while I endeavored to turn them,
A hole flung my dun on his head,
An', though I was pretty well trampled,
I somehow escaped bein' dead.
But still I'm compelled to be sayin',
In spite of my havin' fared rough,
When I lay in the lee of my pony
An' let them fool steers do their stuff,
It was nothin' compared to what happens,
When the cook of the Bar Circle bleats:
"Come put on the nosebags, you rannies!"
An' the outfit stampedes to the eats.



Loggers Are Tough Meat

By Paul Hosmer

IT was some time after the first of the year when the directors of the company which made money out of every log that Mr. Wicks and the "Highlead Kid" cut for them, and lost money on every meal they ate in the dining room, held a meeting in the head office and arrived at an important conclusion.

The directors decided that inasmuch as the bank balance was down to the last forty million, the market was off, and they were losing money on every car shipped, the thing to do was to ship ten cars a day instead of twenty and they would lose only half as much.

After some discussion, they also came to the conclusion that the annual divi-

dend wouldn't run a nickel over ten per cent and that it was getting harder and harder to get reliable stuff from across the Canadian line. Therefore, the only thing to do was to put the mills on a four-day-a-week basis until things picked up.

After collecting their twenty-dollar gold pieces for attending the meeting, the directors went into a huddle while they compared the telephone numbers of several more or less prominent personages who were expecting shipments within the week, and the meeting broke up in deep gloom.

In the course of the next week, this feeling of despair had reached as far west as Camp Four of the O'Brien Lum-

ber Company, where Mr. Wicks and the Highlead Kid were working in snow up to their suspender buttons, while they sawed and bucked a number of logs each day for the company.

Word was broadcast by a disgruntled logging boss that, beginning the first of the month, the crew would go on a four-day-a-week basis in order not to get too far ahead of the mill, which announcement very neatly and automatically cut down the earning power of Mr. Wicks and his partner.

The snow was heavy and wet, the logs were frozen, and falling timber was a tough job, especially when the powers that be insisted on holding a fellow back and keeping him from making any money.

It was, therefore, with a certain degree of satisfaction that the Highlead Kid, while attempting to jump gracefully from one sloppy log to another, slipped on a piece of ice and executed a snappy double back somersault over a large butt log, two axes, a scale rule and a No. 541 falling saw, collecting in the course of his flight, two cut fingers, a sprained ankle, and a dislocated shoulder.

As he lay groaning in the snow, however, the thought dawned on him that this accident meant a trip to the company hospital, and that if he had done it purposely he couldn't have picked a better time.

Mr. Wicks tried to stand his fallen partner upright, but finding he was unable to walk, he went back to camp and procured a toboggan.

A half hour later Mr. Wicks had his partner stretched out on a bunk and the timekeeper, who was called on from time to time to do a little light doctoring on the side, worked on him with a bottle of horse liniment and a roll of tape, the only two medical properties he knew anything about.

Under the direct questioning of the Highlead Kid, the timekeeper finally

admitted that the accident ought to be good for about three weeks in the hospital on company compensation, and that the Highlead Kid was a lucky stiff.

For the next four days Mr. Wicks worked alone. He rigged himself up an iron bar from the blacksmith shop, borrowed an old inner tube from the hind wheel of a pneumonia-model flivver which was snowed in for the winter, attached one end of his crosscut saw to the rubber, and pulled the other end himself.

He didn't have any one to talk to, and was heard to grumble to himself considerably. The evening of the fourth day he came in and changed his clothes, caught a ride into town and paid a social call on his friend and side kick in the hospital.

He was ushered into a good-sized ward filled with nice, clean beds, all neatly made up and mostly unoccupied. Mr. Wicks was somewhat awed at all this cleanliness and order, and he was, also, more than usually impressed with the young vision in a nurse's uniform, who piloted him to the bed where lay the Highlead Kid.

It seemed to Mr. Wicks that if there was any ailment known to medical science which this girl could not cure merely by looking at it, the patient must be already dead, and for just a moment he rather wished he could get sick himself.

When the vision had taken her departure and left Mr. Wicks at the bedside of his friend, he stooped over and gazed self-consciously at the Kid.

"Hello, Kid," he inquired in a hushed whisper, as if in the presence of death, "how you gettin' along?"

The Highlead Kid stretched himself luxuriously, reached for a cigarette and lit it calmly, replacing the burned match on a clean porcelain saucer which rested on a spotless table at the head of his bed.

"Feelin' great," answered the Kid.

"Certainly is a fine hospital. How's everything at camp?"

"Not so good," responded Mr. Wicks in a natural voice, now that he realized there was still a spark of life left in the Kid's bruised body. "Gosh, but this certainly is a fine place! How long do you figure you're goin' to have to put up with this sort o' treatment?"

"Two more weeks. My fingers an' my back are all right, but the doc says my ankle is still weak."

"Two weeks, huh? Certainly is soft for you, Kid." Mr. Wicks rummaged around in his clothes. "I brought you some cigarettes and a bag of apples."

"Thanks," murmured the Kid. "I've got lots o' cigarettes." He stretched disinterestedly and knocked his ash off on the saucer. "The nurse brought me a supply yesterday."

"She did, huh?" Mr. Wicks appeared surprised.

"Yup," said the Kid shortly. "She's a swell girl. She brought me some oranges, too."

"Gosh. This sure is a fine place."

"We had chocolate pie for supper to-night," continued the Kid languidly. It was apparent to any one that he was living the life of the well-known Riley and was becoming more or less effeminate and blasé under the unaccustomed treatment he was receiving.

A faint feeling of something akin to jealousy awoke in Mr. Wicks's chest as he gazed at the comforts of life his partner was enjoying. The Highlead Kid glanced at the clock on the wall, straightened the pillow under his head and rolled himself into a more comfortable position.

"I guess you'll have to go now, Charley," he said. "The nurse comes in every night at this time and rubs my shoulder."

"What, the pretty one?" exclaimed Mr. Wicks unbelievably. "She rubs your shoulder, huh? Gosh, this sure is a swell place." He picked up his hat

and prepared to take his leave. "Well, so long, Kid. I'll see you before long. Sure is a swell place."

"The nurse's name is Helen," murmured the Highland Kid, apropos of nothing at all, as Mr. Wicks disappeared through the door.

As Mr. Wicks made his way to town, a gradual light of understanding began to appear on his homely pan, such a light as might have been seen on the face of a worried inventor who has suddenly stumbled across the solution to a perplexing problem.

It was almost as if a great thought had dawned on him, and as he plowed his way through the snow to the Lumbermen's Rest his brain worked rapidly toward the conclusion of a very cagy scheme for getting himself in out of the weather.

II.

It was about seven o'clock of the evening following Mr. Wicks's visit to his friend that the hospital manager, George Hopkins, answered a ring of his bell.

Hopkins was not a doctor, but he knew more about doctoring than half the practitioners in town. He was a middle-aged man, kindly and cheerful, but with a hard-boiled surface gained by contact with too many different kinds of hospital patients.

Opening the door of his first-aid room, he found waiting him a mournful specimen of humanity in the shape of Mr. Wicks. The latter was to all outside appearances either dying of spinal meningitis or suffering from an attack of chronic rheumatism.

Mr. Wicks was sitting on a stool near the dressing table, carefully nursing a shoulder and back which seemed to be causing him untold agony. The look of intense suffering on his face told of the pain he was trying so bravely to suppress.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Manager Hopkins, who had learned from ex-

perience that all is not gold that glitters. "What have we here? Been in a train wreck?"

"No," answered Mr. Wicks gloomily. "I got a sore back."

The hospital manager looked at Mr. Wicks as coolly as if he were the snow scene in "The Two Orphans."

"Too bad," he remarked, without much sympathy. "What's your name?"

"Wicks; Charley Wicks. Been fallin' up at Camp Four." The patient wiggled a foot in an embarrassed manner. "I fell over a big log an' hurt my back."

"That's tough. Take off your shirt and let's see what it looks like."

Mr. Wicks complied, with many painful grimaces and much apparent torturing of the flesh. "Probably a little rubbin'——" he began.

"You don't look so bad," broke in the manager, letting a practiced hand run over the wiry torso of the faller, while he punched tentatively here and there into the firm flesh. "We may be able to bring you through yet. What did you say happened?"

"I fell over a log an' hurt my back," repeated Mr. Wicks, as he moved a finger experimentally to show how bad his shoulder hurt. "It's my opinion that a week or two in bed will fix her all right. A little rubbing maybe——"

"Yeah," agreed Manager Hopkins. "We'll have to look into this. Might have to operate——never can tell about these kind of cases. We had a feller in here the other day——"

"Aw," wailed Mr. Wicks huskily, "I don't need an operation. I just need a little rubbin'."

Now, Manager Hopkins had been handling hospital cases for some twenty-five years and he was not to be easily misled on a diagnosis.

In his long association with the company hospital, he had got to know most of the men by name and the rest by reputation and, like every one else who had worked for "Old Man" O'Brien for

as much as three days, he had heard indirectly of some of the exploits of Mr. Wicks and the Highlead Kid.

The latter, he knew, was in bed from an injury sustained in the line of duty. He also knew that Wicks and the Highlead Kid were inseparable companions, and that the weather had been pretty terrible for the past two weeks.

He was unable to find any of the symptoms he commonly associated with severe strains, such as swelled muscles and tightened tendons, and the thought occurred to him that possibly Mr. Wicks was running a whizzer on him. He recalled a little scheme by which one of his earlier hospitals in the South had been kept free of loiterers during the rainy season and it seemed that it might be a good time to try it on Mr. Wicks and see what happened.

He was pretty sure the logger was faking, but no sign of his thoughts appeared on his face as he ordered Charley to put on a white nightshirt and climb into one of the beds near the door of the ward.

"How's the weather at camp these days?" he inquired conversationally.

"Rotten," answered Mr. Wicks promptly. "She snowed last night again."

"Hm-m-m. Pretty cold, too, I expect?"

"Yeah, it hung around zero all day yesterday." Mr. Wicks was willing to talk about anything that would get the manager's mind off operations.

"Makin' any money these days?"

"Nope. Logs are froze in four inches."

"I thought so," murmured Hopkins half to himself, and left for his office.

Mr. Wicks proceeded to disrobe with alacrity and jumped between the whitest sheets he had seen in years. His sore back appeared to have cured itself somewhat as he threw back the covers with no sign of physical anguish.

Presently, Manager Hopkins came

back with a bottle of iodine, which Mr. Wicks eyed with distrust, and rubbed a quantity of it into his shoulder. Then, leaving orders for Mr. Wicks to lie still and rest, he returned to his office.

Mr. Wicks stretched himself like a cat in a parlor, folded his hands under his head, and prepared to put in two weeks of solid comfort.

"Hey, Kid," he called to his astonished friend at the other end of the room. "What time does Helen go to work? What I crave is a little intensive rubbin'."

III.

It was possibly a half hour later when the front door opened and a brisk step was heard in the outer hallway. Mr. Wicks was hovering in that gentle twilight between drowsiness and complete coma, but he awakened at the sound of voices just outside his door.

From the conversation, it appeared that the doctor had arrived, and there was some good-natured chaffing between him and the hospital manager. Suddenly, however, the voices dropped to a barely audible undertone and Mr. Wicks was obliged to lift himself up in bed in order to catch what they were saying.

"Whatcha doin' to-morrow, doc?" he heard the manager ask.

"Got an operation at ten. After that I'm free."

"What's the nature of the operation?"

"It's a lumberjack," said the doctor.

"Oh. Well, in that case it hadn't ought to take you long and we can get away by half past. What say we try a whirl at this indoor golf and see what it's like?"

"Suits me fine. Got any gin?"

"I can make enough for nine holes," replied Manager Hopkins confidently. "What's the matter with this lumberjack?"

"I don't know yet, but I aim to find out. I thought I'd tunnel into him a

ways so I can get my arm inside and feel around until I get hold of something. He's got three hundred dollars that I know of, and there isn't a bit of sense in letting him get away with it. By the way, can I borrow that little cross-cut saw of yours? I ruined mine on one of your tough lumber pilers last week."

"Sure," said the manager cordially. "Be careful of it, though."

"I will. I don't expect to use it, anyway. I'll be using a knife most of the time, but I want to have it around so I can saw my way in if I run across any bones."

"How about a spare scalpel?" inquired the manager. "Those loggers are tough meat, and a knife edge don't last long on them."

"No, I won't need it. I've got a good set of sharp knives."

"Well, I hope it comes out all right," said Hopkins.

"Yes, I hope so, too," replied the doctor, "but you never can tell about these operations. However, it doesn't make much difference; he's a Swede, anyway, and we can get the body if we want it. We ought to have a good skeleton between us so we can keep up on anatomy this winter. This bird is a fine specimen."

"Well, say," exclaimed Hopkins, apparently much pleased at the thought. "That's fine. We can have a lot of fun with a skeleton this winter, stringing it together on wire. And say, by the way, I've got a fine specimen of a logger that came in this evening. You know, we ought to have two skeletons, one for you and one for me. This fellow has a sore back, and I rather look for it to turn into sclerosis of the epiglottis. If that's the case, there isn't much we can do for him anyway except to hack off the shoulder and sew him up with piano wire again and wait till he dies. Maybe you'd better come back in half an hour and take a look at him."

"I'll do that. We mustn't let any of these specimens get away from us."

The voices grew fainter as they moved off down the hall.

Mr. Wicks lay flat on his back in bed between the clean white sheets, but the sheets were no whiter than his face. He lay in a pool of cold sweat that had oozed out of him during the conversation between the two men outside the door, and for the space of a minute he was too scared to move a muscle.

His hands were clenched in a death-like grip on the side of the cot, and his toes twitched spasmodically as if he might be suffering from a slight touch of the junior D. T.'s.

Gradually he regained control of his muscles enough so that he could raise himself up cautiously and get a look around the room. There appeared to be no one moving and the nurse—a very pretty girl at one time, mused Mr. Wicks, but not now—had not come in yet.

Shivering slightly like a malaria fever patient, Mr. Wicks silently crawled out of bed and retrieved a suit of bright-red underwear from a small closet in the corner. In the twinkling of an eye he wriggled himself out of his nightgown and donned the underclothing hurriedly.

If his shoulder pained him during this process, he showed no sign of it, and his jerky movements were not slowed up to any noticeable extent.

Feeling around in the closet, he dug up a suit of clothes and a pair of shoes, but he wasted no more time in dressing. The beautiful Helen was liable to come along any moment.

With his shoes in one hand and his clothes in the other, Mr. Wicks tiptoed in his stocking feet to the door, opened it carefully, and peered down the hall. No one was in sight. As quietly as a garter snake slipping through a pool of red engine oil, he filtered through the doorway out into the hall, opened the back door and disappeared into the cold

night air. He forgot to close the door after him.

Five minutes later, any one coming by that way might have been startled by the sight of a strange half-clad figure, partially concealed from the public eye by a corner of the garage, holding itself upright by a hot-water pipe as it shook itself hastily into a pair of pants.

Shirt and coat followed hurriedly, and the figure braced itself against the wall as it struggled manfully to pull on a pair of shoes. Without stopping longer than to fasten an occasional button at the most strategic point, the figure melted away into the darkness toward town.

"Jeremiah wept!" came in a shaky voice from the phantom as it faded from view. "I sure got out o' that place just in time. There's just two men who don't get my skeleton strung on a wire; one of 'em's me, and the other is the guy they send after me."

Back in the hospital, Manager Hopkins, aroused by a draft of cold air, made his way leisurely down the hall and closed the door. As he turned to retrace his steps, he opened the door to the general ward and glanced at the place where Mr. Wicks had recently been. Quietly backing out, he continued his way to the office.

"Hm-m-m," he murmured to himself, as he ran his fingers through a shock of slightly grayish hair and grinned at nothing in particular. "As I live and breathe, I'd have sworn I had a patient in that bed. Seems like every time I run across a good specimen he gets away from me. He must've got better suddenly. Loggers sure *are* tough meat!"

He closed the door of the office, reached under the desk and pulled out a jug of some colorless liquid.

"Well, I guess I'll make up the gin," he said. "I really owe Doc a snort for playing up to me. Between us we saved the hospital a board bill."

Top-Notch Talk

BY
THE EDITOR

All letters intended for Top-Notch Talk should be addressed to the Editor,
Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

WHEN you buy your copy of the next issue of Top-Notch—and it will be well worth buying, I promise you that—you will find that a new "Pinto Martin" story is featured on the cover. It's an outstandingly good one of this Western series; the plot was unusually good, I thought.

But in looking over the stories scheduled for this particular issue, it seemed to me that I could have featured either of two other novelettes on the cover, if I didn't happen to have one of those popular "Pinto Martin" stories to offer.

These were "Palookas Rush In," by Ben Conlon, and "The Twelfth Ikon," by F. N. Litten. I think you're going to like these two novelettes.

"Palookas Rush In" is an exceptional story of the prize ring, if for no other reason than that you won't be able to tell, until the very finish, just which one of two important characters is going to win the big fight. It is true that in many fight stories, you *do* know before the end is reached. You won't be able to guess this one. At least, I wasn't able to guess it, and I have been reading fight stories for some time.

From time to time I have received letters from Top-Notchers who read Mr. Conlon's previous fight story, "Cream-puff Alex," asking for another story of the ring by the same author. Well, here it is. Let me know what you think of it, will you?

Mr. Litten's novelette, "The Twelfth

Ikon," deals with the thrilling adventures of "Ace" Dallas, the American aviator-detective. It tells about a group of men, originally from Russia, who came away over to the U. S. A. to tell Americans how their government should be run.

They brought along an electrical invention which made them very dangerous. The invention meant death for Americans who refused to take orders from Moscow. It was a most amazing invention—and yet no more amazing than the radio, the telephone, television, or the moving picture.

Ace Dallas, of the Air Intelligence Corps, had faced danger before. He had faced it over the lines on the shell-torn western front, and in the dens of counterfeiters in his own country, and elsewhere; and somehow, he found that he always had a better time facing danger than not facing it. There are many thousands of such men.

He started out on a job that seemed impossible to complete successfully. Just how he did it makes a most interesting story of "The Twelfth Ikon."

As I looked over the Top-Notch records for several months, it seemed to me that it had been a long time since a good race-track story had been run.

Top-Notch features sport stories, but hundreds and hundreds of letters from Top-Notch readers have convinced me that the overwhelmingly large number of readers were interested in baseball

—and interested in it all the year round, too.

Football, in season, came next. In fact, the interest in football stories was as great as in baseball stories, at times even greater. The gridiron sport ran second only because the football fans did not seem to retain their interest out of season, as the baseball fans did.

Boxing came next—a good third—and as I read over those sheafs of letters I could understand why exciting ring contests drew “million-dollar gates” and attracted tens of thousands of enthusiastic fans into baseball parks and stadiums.

Therefore, it was up to me to run these sport stories—having to do with baseball, football, and boxing—in Top-Notch. But just once in a while I think that a story dealing with some other American sport would not go amiss—if it's a good story. So I am glad to be able to announce “The Jockey Rustler,” by John Franklin Fellows, for the next issue.

The more you know about running races or trotting races, or both, the more you'll enjoy this story. And even if you don't know much about either, you'll still enjoy it for its action, its drama and its human touches.

There'll be some other good short stories, including the third of the increasingly popular series about “Lazy” Lucas, the cowboy detective.

This next number of Top-Notch will be on the news stands February 15th, and I think you will agree with me that it is one of the best numbers of the new year.

Let me know what you think about it. I mean to find space in Top-Notch Talk for all sincere letters from Top-Notch fans.

Mr. D. Metzgar, of Lanark, Illinois, takes me to task for printing the novelette, “A Trap for the Hawk.”

This series has been very popular

with readers, and from a large batch of mail received shortly before and shortly after Mr. Metzgar's letter, I did not find any other complaints on this story.

However, this department is an open forum for Top-Notch readers, and I believe that if Mr. Metzgar took enough interest to write me, his views deserve to be aired. Here's his letter:

I have just finished reading John P. Seabrooke's “A Trap for the Hawk,” and I must say that in all of the ten years I've been reading Top-Notch, this is absolutely the most absurd, impossible story I have ever read.

What's the matter, Top-Notch? What's the matter, Mr. Seabrooke? You certainly can do very much better than publishing and writing stories of this kind.

There isn't one thing in the whole story that would be possible to carry out, and there aren't any supermen of the Hawk type, at least not in old U. S. A. Please show lots of improvement, Mr. Seabrooke, or I must turn author myself.

In the same week I received a letter from a reader in New York City, inclosing a check to cover magazines containing all issues in which “The Hawk” stories had been printed.

During the same general period I received letters praising the “Hawk” stories from Sylvester Myers of New Martinsville, West Virginia; Lucille Meek of Detroit; John R. Clark, Jr., of Hudson, Massachusetts; and Harold Crane of Buffalo, New York. These letters have already been printed in Top-Notch Talk. And here are some other letters recently received on the same subject:

A. SUMNER WEST.—About a month ago, I discovered your Top-Notch Magazine. I liked the “Brick and Boots” series and the “Hawk” series the best. “Pinto Martin's Outlaw Pal” in the November 15th issue was very good. “The Bully of Camp Three” was good, too. Keep stories like them in it, and I will read Top-Notch Magazine each month.—*Logan, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.*

HARRY ROOT.—I notice that a short story from Top-Notch won the cash prize of the

O. Henry Committee for being the best story published in an American magazine last year. Congratulations! But I think that if there were prizes for novelettes, you'd win several. Your novelettes are very good, indeed—much better than your short stories, to my way of thinking, although your "Zip Sawyer" short stories are good. I am particularly fond of detective stories, and those about "The Hawk" and "O. K. Polter" are my favorites.—*Toledo, Ohio.*

CHARLES SHAFER.—Just continue to print stories by Burt L. Standish, John Paul Seabrooke, and Ralph Boston, and I can't see where any reader will have any kick coming. The first and the fifteenth of the month are always red-letter days with me. These are the days I buy Top-Notch. Not too crazy about a return of the Merriwell stories. Don't care for checkers. Just good stories will do.—*Richmond Hill, New York.*

Well, there were some more letters about "The Hawk," but I guess I can't use them all in this issue. I'll print them some time again—and I'll print the kicks, too, if any more come in.

The many opinions received from Top-Notchers make life very interesting these days—all the more so because these opinions are varied.

Now, it is obviously impossible to please all readers with the same stories, but I am making a big effort to please the majority. Whenever readers get "fed up" on a series, I mean to discontinue that series, at least for a time. What you want is what I want to give you.

Some readers want Kroom back. Some claim that he was too much of a superman; in fact this word "superman" has occurred in several letters, and was applied to The Hawk and Frank Merriwell and Kroom.

A reader from that good, salty old town of New London, Connecticut, wrote in that "Kroom is as much a fish as he is a man. For the love o' Mike, give us stories about regular guys. I've seen a lot of seagoing men, but never one like Kroom."

A great many readers who are hot baseball fans are clamoring for a "Brick and Boots" novelette in every issue. Some are enthusiastic for the return of Merriwell, and others say that they would be very much disappointed in the magazine if we put Merriwell back. And so it goes. Just take a glance at the various opinions expressed on this page and the next.

There are knocks as well as boosts. But, quite naturally, I'm glad to note that the boosts far outnumber the knocks. You can't blame me for that, can you? Well, here they are:

PAUL LUBON.—Why not have more sport stories? Your "Polter" stories are O. K. Please leave out the serials, especially in the sport novels. I would not mind the Merriwell stories if they didn't come too often.—*Flushing, New York.*

I should not feel inclined to eliminate serials, even sport serials, unless I believed that an overwhelming majority of readers favored such a move.

Every so often, I received a letter from some Top-Notch fan who wants more serials. And as for the sport serials, here's what Arthur Rapp, of Guelph, Ontario, Canada, thinks of one recently included:

Have just finished reading your serial, "The Last Down," by Lieutenant John Hopper. I think it was one of the best serials published in Top-Notch. The descriptions of the football games were great, and I was always waiting for the next issue, to continue the story. The best short story of your December 1st issue was "Toy Bulldog," by Robert Nichols. I like your idea of including poems in your material, and I enjoy them.

BOB MCCOY.—Count the circulation of Top-Notch up at least four copies whenever an "O. K. Polter" detective story is published, for not only do I like these stories myself, but I have three or four friends who also like them and look for them. Also, continue to give us "The Hawk" and other thrilling detective stories, whether they are series stories or not. Isn't it about time we had a detective serial?—*Boston, Massachusetts.*

Yes, it is, Bob, and you will find the first installment of one within a couple of issues. It's called "The Great Stendahl Mystery."

MARCE S. FEINBERG.—As an old reader of the T.-N. Magazine, would say that I did not read the magazine for the last two years as the stories were very poor, but I bought a copy recently and find it much improved, with a better class of stories—that is, assorted.

Forget the Merriwell stories, baseball stories, and football stories, as they are usually the same old stuff; they are good for youngsters, but it is the adults that make the magazine a success. I don't care for the "Kroom" numbers, and stop giving so many boxing numbers. It is all right once in a while. I like Western, Mounted Police, detective and mystery stories and lumber stories. The "Pinto Martin" and "Hawk" stories are fair. —Roxbury, Massachusetts.

I am going to ask Mr. Feinberg to read a boxing novelette, "Palookas Rush

In," published in the next issue of Top-Notch; also, I'd be glad to receive his opinion of it.

Mr. Feinberg mentions stories that appeal only to youngsters. It may interest Mr. Feinberg and other Top-Notch fans to know what a wide range of readers Top-Notch has. Not long ago I received a letter from a thirteen-year-old reader of Montreal, Canada, who said that his school work and his reading in two languages, French and English, had kept him off magazine reading up to now, but that recently his father had permitted him to read two magazines a month. He had selected Top-Notch as one of these magazines.

Also, from Plano, Illinois, comes a letter from a Top-Notcher who is 77 years old. Pretty wide range, don't you think?

In the Next Issue of

TOP-NOTCH MAGAZINE

On the news stands February 15th

A Hair-trigger Western Novelette

PINTO MARTIN'S REWARD

By HOUSTON IRVINE

PALOOKAS RUSH IN

By Ben Conlon

A Fight Novelette That's a K. O.

THE TWELTH IKON

By F. N. Litten

*A Different Novelette Featuring "Ace" Dallas, the
Aviator-Detective*

RUSTY SPURS

By Galen C. Colin

A New "Lazy Lucas" Story

THE JOCKEY RUSTLER

By John Franklin Fellows

A Tale of the Southern Race-tracks

And Other Interesting Western, Detective and Sport Stories

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