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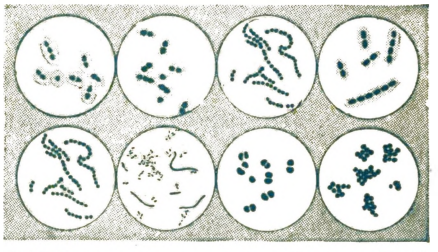

TOP ROW, left to right: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneucococcus Type IV, Streptococcus Viridans, Friedlander's Bacillus. BOTTOM ROW, left to right: Streptococcus Hemolyticus, Bacillus Influenzae, Micrococcus Catarrhalis, Staphylococcus Aureus.

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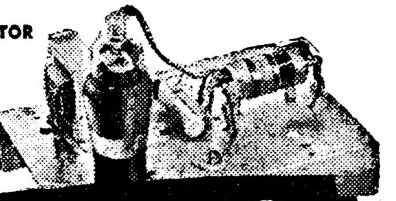

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

April 10th, 1916

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COVER—A. R. Tilburne

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

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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary*

The Story Tellers' Circle

The RCMP

WHEN H. S. M. Kemp, in his yarn "Murder at Pemmican Portage," tells us about Staff-Sergeant Nettleton who is just "getting used to automobile horns and neon lights," that's a joke, Son! Probably few people know the Mounted better than Mr. Kemp, whose own brother is one of the top men of the RCMP.

And Mr. Kemp would be one of the first to tell us that, actually, the Mounted today is an efficient and ultra-modern police force of 2,500, with a criminal investigation division very much like our own FBI. The traditional phrase "They Always Get Their Man" is entirely true, but the "getting" is as often accomplished by highly-skilled technicians and scientists working in well-equipped laboratories at Regina than by the movie-version mountie hero gun dueling in the frozen North.

Organized in 1873 into a small group of about 300 men whose primary function was to uphold the laws of the Dominion and control the large western territories, the objectives of the present force are much the same although no longer confined to the huge areas north and west of the established western provinces.

His work more routine than glamorous, today's member of the Mounted scorns the melodramatic conception of himself as a lone red-coated human bloodhound, always up against insurmountable odds, always outnumbered, always invincible.

Still and all, there are garrotings and espionage and shootings (as you will find at Pemmican Portage) and when there are, who turns up but your friend in the red coat and striped blue trousers.

And he is not so scientific, not so up-to-date and laboratory-bound that he can't, when required, do all the things attributed to him by the most hair-raising legends.

It's All Good Land

"SWEET LAND," George Shaftel's yarn in this number, made us do some homespun philosophizing. Thought us 'uns, every land is "sweet" to some, North, South, East and West and all points in between.

Ever heard a man a long way from home start to talk about it; notice the way his voice and his eyes light up? We have, and it's made us think the "sweetest" place of them all is where *you* yourself happen to come from!

"In 'Sweet Land,'" writes Mr. Shaftel, "I tell of a Southern family that went West after the Civil War, to settle in new country. This was not an isolated or unusual incident at all. After the War-Between-the-States was over, there were many fire-eating Southerners who actually left the United States. Some of them went to Mexico (and of their number, some found jobs as hired gunmen for Maximilian). Others went to Brazil (and Leslie T. White has written a fine book telling of the troubles and adventures of those people). Still other Southerners moved West, and communities of them settled in Nevada and California and Oregon, taking up new land and keeping pretty well to themselves. A number of such families settled in Owens Valley.

"In that day, Owens Valley was pretty raw and wild, and the mining camp of Cerro Gordo was raw, wild, and high-rolling in prosperity. Cerro Gordo means 'fat hill,' and the camp rested on a hill fat with silver. In 'Sweet Land' I speak of the freight road to Los Angeles — all goods coming in and freight going out had to come by wagon over 200 miles of sandy road from Los Angeles, and be sent back to L. A. And it cost $120 a ton for transportation! The Cerro Gordo Freighting Com-

(*Continued on page* 139)

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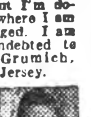

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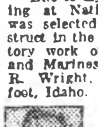

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THE CANTON TRUNK

By DAN CUSHMAN

BOOK I

A SCRAP OF SILK

W. C. WILLOUGHBY, vice-president of the California-Pacific Bank of Commerce, wished he had gone somewhere on the Boulevard for his lunch rather than stopping there at "Harrison's American Café," for in Manila, and especially on Rosario Street, an "American Café" can turn out to be almost anything.

Harrison's was long, and dim. There was no air conditioning, and like every other place along Rosario, it was frequented chiefly by Chinese.

Willoughby hesitated at the door, but he was tired, the linen looked clean enough, and cabs were hard to get since the visit of the Mikado's army. He sat down at a table just at the rear of a battered grand piano.

When the suave little Chinese waiter came around, Willoughby decided against lunch and ordered a stengah.

As he sat there, waiting, an extremely large man in wrinkled, white ducks hobbled in on what was obviously an artificial foot.

For some reason the man fascinated him. It was not merely his size, for he had seen larger without staring, nor his foot, which was by no means unusual. There was something else, something in the set of his rather thick lips, the furrows of his fiercely cut face, the intensity of his eyes.

Apparently he was well known at Harrison's, for even the Chinese looked up and were pleased. He hobbled to the piano and sat heavily on the stool. It was then he looked up and met Willoughby's gaze.

He bowed slightly, "You have a preference in music, sir?"

His voice was singular. It had a sonorous quality, a note of culture which did not match his unbrushed appearance.

Willoughby cleared his throat, "A preference? Really—I don't know."

"You are a man of discernment, sir. For-

Since Time Was, the Orient Has Held the Secret of Jewels of Fabulous Value and Evil Reputation

give me, but one learns to recognize individuals for what they are here in the East."

He turned abruptly and stared at the yellowed keys of the piano; his right hand fell solidly, and he commenced playing one of the less frequently heard Chopin etudes.

Willoughby was a fairly constant concert goer, hence the number was familiar to him, but it seemed startlingly out of place here, its notes mingling with the hum of electric fans, the tinkle of dishes, the ebb and flow of the cackling Chinese language.

The big man played with skill, with a sort of ponderous brilliance. His hands were thick and short, stretching scarcely an octave, and his unorthodox manner of negotiating some of the arpeggios held Willoughby fascinated. He ended the etude, incongruously, with a series of thunderous chords from a Beethoven concerto, then he stood and hobbled over to Willoughby's table.

"Your hospitality, sir!" he bowed. "I assure you." He bowed again.

Willoughby was helpless to do other than gesture him to be seated. The chair creaked beneath his weight.

"We Americans must stick together, you know," the big man said. "These Orientals —they all despise us. Like the Athenians despised the conquerors from Rome. They bow to our strength, they accept our endowment, but theirs is the ancient culture, and they despise us for the barbarians we are."

The Chinese waiter came up, suave and smiling. The big man ordered, speaking Chinese with a rapid inflection which showed the language had become habitual with him. He turned back to Willoughby:

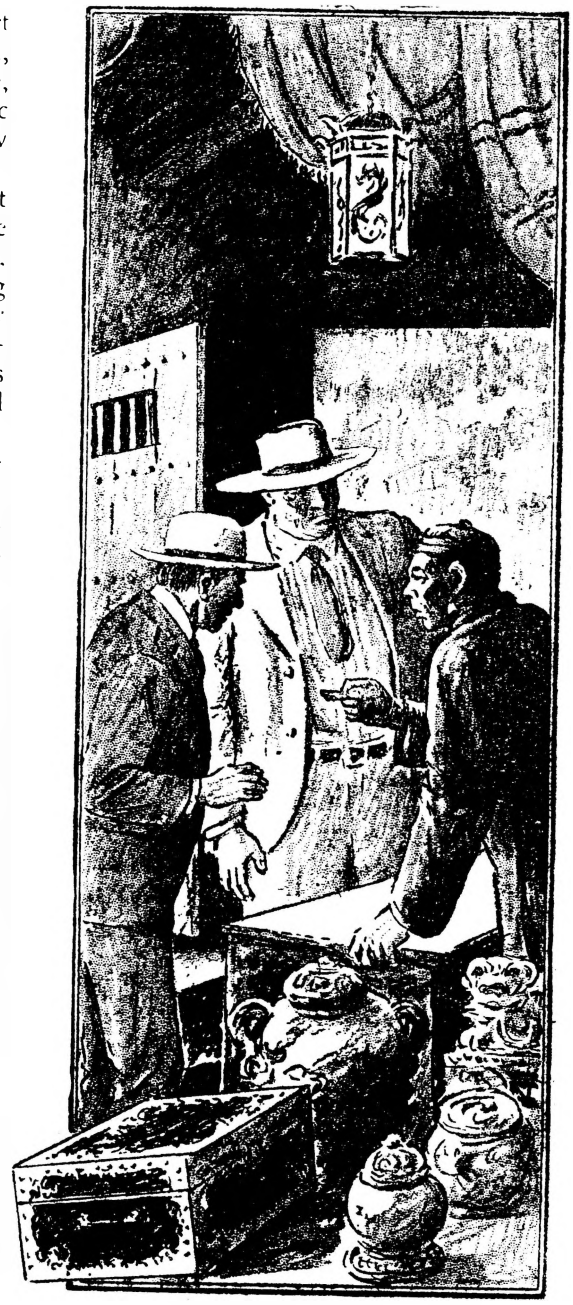
"Order in English and you're likely to get anything. But, forgive me." He stood, clomping his artificial foot on the floor. "My name—McQuarrie. Oakleg McQuarrie, they call me."

"Willoughby."

They shook hands. "Ah, yes. You are the banker. Forgive me, I overheard the Chinese at the next table. You are inspecting the assets of the Hong Gim Forwarding and Sight Draft Company. Little enough left of those assets, I'll wager."

Willoughby smiled ruefully. Hong Gim had been secured chiefly in the Osaka Specie Bank whose assets had sunk away like rain in sand.

McQuarrie nodded. "Ah, the fortunes



that have gone. Melted away. Vanished without a trace, leaving behind only those futile rows of figures in the ledger. But those paper fortunes are not the only ones. There have been others—fortunes in native metal, in gems, in jade. Buried as the conqueror swept down from the north. Placed in casks beneath the earth, sunk in wells, in the muck of rivers, beneath floors. And they who hid them—where have they gone? Scattered, sir, like oak leaves before the autumn winds in our native America. Dead of bullets, of dysentery, gone mad in prison. But should they return, what do they find? Houses, landmarks in rubble. So they search for years, for a lifetime—"

McQuarrie leaned across the table, his eyes intense.

"And I, sir, could tell you of such a fortune, or the *secret* of a fortune, concealed in the bottom of a little Canton trunk in the Siamese city of—but forgive me, I must not divulge the name."

He stopped abruptly and lifted the drink the Chinese had placed before him.

"Your health!" and he drained it.

"Forgive me," he went on, spreading his thick fingers on the table. "I am boring you. This talk of money, when you are sick of the thoughts of it."

"Not at all. On the contrary, what was that about—?"

"Ah, the trunk! Your hospitality. One more stengah. You are most kind."

"IT WAS morning," McQuarrie began, settling back in his chair. "Morning in Bangkok. You have been there, sir? No? A stinking city, sir. A city on stilts, seething with the miasma of the tropics. I remember the night well. I was staying in a room above English Sam's Coffee House, and had just gone down to the bar for a sustainer. It was there I met him. Higbe was his name. Martin J. Higbe."

I don't know how Higbe ever found his way there to English Sam's. The place is on one of those stagnant little klongs that branch away from the Menam Chao Phya, and certainly not listed on the tourist itineraries. I suppose he got to wandering, and that sign, in English, drew him in.

Anyhow, there he was, a little, lonesome man of fifty, dressed in a gray tweed suit that was out of place as a *chang-san* would be in Toronto. He was standing by the rear wall, not fifty *bahts* in his pocket, and ten thousand miles from home.

The East has taught me to be hard and ruthless on necessity, sir, but I did not have it in my nature to pass that little man by.

"Have a drink?" I asked, and the sound of English, good, honest-to-the-Constitution United States English, brought him around like a hypodermic.

He was from Seattle. Never been away before. He'd come as far as Manila on the *Prince Rupert*, and he'd taken the *Rathcliffe* from there. The *Rathcliffe* was the old *Penang Morn* of the N. Y. K. lines, but she was in Darwin with a sheared screw when war broke, and the British took her for a couple or ten of theirs that the Japs sank at Singapore. Anyhow, the *Rathcliffe*, being a twelve-thousand tonner, was too big to get over the bar, so she anchored at Kohsi-chang and Higbe took the ferry from there.

Some way or other he landed on the Right Bank, and when those Chinese money changers were through with him he couldn't have bought passage to Saigon. At that time the *baht* was twenty to one with the dollar, but those Chinese made the percentage work the other way around.

You're probably wondering what a man like Higbe was doing in Bangkok. So was I.

"What brought you to this ultimate sumphole of the Orient?" I asked after pouring two or three stengahs into him.

He sat there, looking at me with his little, pale eyes, wondering if I was the kind who would stab him in the back. He evidently decided in my favor, for he fumbled through his wallet and laid a bronze key on the table.

"This," he said, "and this."

The second article was a star sapphire to which a fragment of grayish limestone was still attached.

The sapphire was small, but it was a beauty.

Even there, in the poor light, its star was spectacular and perfect. Just like the cross on the moon when you see it through a winter's mist.

Allow me to tell his story in my own manner, sir. I am a writer of sorts, and his tale is worthy the novelist's style.

It was winter. Seattle winter with rain and fog which seems colder than the Arctic. Night. The steep, hill street up from the Sound was slick from a coating of sleet. The employees entrance of Curry and Lambertson, wholesale druggists, creaked on its frost-constricted hinges, and a little man stepped outside, buttoning his overcoat. The man was Mr. Higbe.

He walked swiftly to the Chelsea House where his bachelor's quarters were located. The Chelsea is one of those red brick, by-the-month hotels over near the Smith Building.

It felt good to get inside. It was warm there with the friendly smell of hamburgers and those other things that shopgirls like to cook for late supper snacks. He climbed the dim stairway, and walked down a long hall lit by a single peanut bulb, his steps dragging a little after a hard day.

He stopped at his room, fitted a key to

the lock. The key wouldn't turn. After a few tries he learned the reason—the door was not locked.

It sent a shock through him. He was positive he had locked the room.

He swung the door open cautiously. It was dark, but instinct told him something was wrong. There was no light switch at the door, so he groped inside, reaching for the hanging cord.

His foot came in contact with something, and he almost fell. He knew by the feel of it that it was a human body. He turned on the light. A man lay there—dead.

The man was about sixty, powerful of frame, bronzed very dark. He had been knifed, his pockets had been turned inside out, his clothes cut along their seams, even his shoes were split apart.

The room was in almost unbelievable disorder, too. Everything Mr. Higbe owned had been dragged out and torn apart.

IMAGINE, if you will, the little man's emotions at that moment. A bookkeeper who had never soiled his fingers with worse than ink to come home and find a dead stranger in the wreckage of his room.

He ran down the hall toward the pay phone on the landing. Suddenly he stopped. It was very quiet as he stood there in the hall, listening to the tick of his own watch. The face of the dead man—it came to him from the past. It was the face of his uncle, Matthias Higbe—"Uncle Matt," the family black sheep, who every year until the war started had remembered him with a letter on Christmas.

Mr. Higbe didn't call the police just then. He went back and searched around. He found a book of matches from the Canadian Pacific Lines, an automatic pencil, and a wallet containing a ticket stub from a Manila theater, and two traveler's checks for $100 each.

After completing the search, Mr. Higbe put these things back exactly where he had found them and called the police.

The police came and acted wiser than they were, and fellows from the *Star* and the P. I. burned some flash bulbs. That's all that ever came of it. An obvious case of robbery and murder, the police said—but Mr. Higbe was not so sure.

He spent the remainder of the night in the lobby of a nearby hotel. Along around nine in the morning he had a hunch. He started back to the Chelsea. The hunch became stronger, and he ran the last block of the distance. The mailman was just leaving. Mr. Higbe looked in the box. It contained a little, oblong package almost covered by foreign stamps—a package addressed to Uncle Matt in Uncle Matt's own handwriting.

Mr. Higbe was smart enough to know that his life was in danger as soon as that package came into his possession. He slipped the package in his overcoat pocket and started up the stairs as though to go to his room. Instead he went down the hall, out the back door and along the alley to a little Oyster House a couple blocks off the Sound.

There, inside a booth, he opened it.

God knows what he expected to find. A map to Treasure Island, maybe. He tore off the heavy wrapping of brown paper, opened a corrugated box, and there were the two objects he had shown me—the star sapphire with its fragment of limestone clinging to it, and the old-style bronze key.

No note. Just the pebble and the key. The key had the word L'Acoste stamped on it, and a number, 356. He held the pebble to the light—it gleamed blue with a crystal cross.

Mr. Higbe had never heard of a star sapphire, but he did before the morning was over. He took the rock to Herstabber and Company and was offered $800 for it.

He didn't sell. He put the key and the gem away in his wallet and did some thinking. Whoever murdered Uncle Matt had evidently followed him from Bangkok. It was there the package had been mailed. They were no doubt after more than a mere $800. Perhaps they were after the key. At any rate, there was some reason why Uncle Matt was afraid to carry them on his person.

He took the key to a locksmith who guessed it was made to fit an old-style lockbox. Perhaps a safety deposit box in some bank.

Mr. Higbe did some guessing, and came out with the conclusion that there was a bank called L'Acoste in Bangkok, that Uncle Matt had a safety deposit box there, and that the box was filled with star sapphires worth $800 each.

Can you blame him for discontinuing his

savings account, quitting his job, and taking the first available passage for the Orient?

"Let me see that key again," I said to Mr. Higbe, as we sat in that Bangkok coffee house.

HE handed it to me. As I said, it was a heavy, bronze affair with the word L'Acoste molded into the design, and the number 356 die-stamped. I'd been in Bangkok long enough to know there was no bank called "L'Acoste." It was a trade name, like "Yale," in America.

"Been to the banks?" I asked.

"All of them. Bank of Canton, the Commercial, California-Pacific, and a dozen more. None of them were familiar with the key. Somebody said it was awfully old." He sighed. "I guess I'll have to sell the sapphire. That should give me enough for passage home."

"Keep the sapphire!"

"But do you have an idea—"

"No, but I have a hunch. Finish your drink."

He downed it, and got up to go, but a big Dutchman named Van Sheldt had come in, and Mr. Higbe was watching him like a bird watching a snake.

"That man! Most peculiar. Yes indeed!" I heard Mr. Higbe muttering. "You don't happen to know him, do you?"

"That's a Dutchman named Van Sheldt."

Van Sheldt used to run a hotel down in Surabaya, or what passed under the name of a hotel, but they found a few too many paying guests floating around the mooring chains, and the Colonial Administration ran him out. The British have stronger stomachs than the Dutch, so he moved on to F.M.S. but one thing and another caused them to grow sick of him there, and he ended up in Bangkok. There were so many worse than he was in Bangkok that he fitted in quite neatly.

I thought Mr. Higbie was merely marveling at Van Sheldt's size, which was on the scale of a Percheron horse, but it turned out to be something more.

"He was on the boat coming over from Seattle!"

"Not Van. You've made a mistake. He hasn't been to sea in anything more respectable than a tramp lugger in the last nine years. He couldn't get a passport."

"I tell you I saw him. And not only that, he tried to get acquainted with me, but I didn't like the looks of him. He had another fellow with him—a tall fellow who wore one of those single-lens glasses."

"A monocle?"

"Yes, and he had a birthmark on his cheek. He talked with sort of a British accent, only not like Churchill or George Arliss, but—"

"That was Limey Jack Westlake."

"He seemed to stay drunk a good share of the time—"

"Then it *was* Limey Jack, and no mistake."

I'll tell you, sir, I did not like the looks of it. After finding out those fellows were on his trail, I would have been physically incapable of abandoning the little gentleman.

You look at me strangely, sir, believing it was the sapphire which interested me. No, it is not so. You see me in tatters, the flotsam of the East, cast up by an errant tide, playing for drinks in a second-rate Chinese restaurant, but I have my code, and I live by it. But forgive me. My story—

As I indicated, this Van Sheldt was somewhat lacking on the score of good citizenship. However, he was smart, and Mr. Higbe wasn't the sort who could hide what was on his mind. I started the little fellow toward the door, but Van saw us and came over with that rolling walk of his and blocked the way. He was easily once again as broad as I am, so there was no getting by. He addressed Mr. Higbe.

"Ach! mein friend! I see you once more, yah?" And he showed two rows of coffee-brown teeth in what he intended to be a friendly smile. He explained to me, "Me und Higbe, we ride together on but from Seattle, yah. You have business here, Higbe?"

"I—" started Higbe.

"It's none of your concern, Van Sheldt," I cut in. "And by the way, the Consul-General knows Higbe is in town."

"Ach! Why tell me this?"

"Just to let you know that if he should go floating across the bar with a knife in the ribs, you'll be asked to answer some questions."

"Ho! You think because you are thiefs all honest men are thiefs, too!"

YOU can see what he was getting at—trying to give Higbe the idea I was taking him on a one-way trip. He knew Higbe was cautious, and a suggestion like that might make him sneak away from me. Cobra smart, that Van Sheldt. He went on, edging close I could smell the *zwiebel-tiffen* he'd been eating.

"Like those English tourist you sell Rapajosak Consolidated in Sur'baya, yah? Ho! ho!"

I'd been in Surabaya, of course, but I'd had no dealings with an English tourist, and I'd never heard of Rapajosak Consolidated.

There was nothing for me to do except stand there and take it. Fat and gross he was, yes, but the strongest man I have ever seen. In Jostok they tell how he once lifted a pony bale of hemp and carried it from the N.P.C. wharf all the way to the fisk-koker, but that's just the story and I wouldn't vouch for it. Anyhow, I have good reason to remember his strength, as you shall presently hear.

He chuckled and blew his foul breath around for awhile, but everybody in Sam's got to looking at him so he returned to his drink at the bar. He stood there with his back to us, but I could see his little, swine eyes watching in the mirror as we opened the insect door and went outside.

As you see, sir, all the parts of the puzzle were there. It was simple enough to piece them together and jump to the conclusion. I'll state it thus, briefly: Uncle Matt had acquired a wealth of star sapphires, and Limey and Van Sheldt knew about it. Matt realized they were out to get him, so he deposited the stones in a vault and decided to get out of sight for a while. He naturally thought of his nephew in Seattle. He must have suspected he would be followed, so to play safe he put one star sapphire and the key to the vault in a package and mailed it to himself at his nephew's address. Van Sheldt and Limey followed him to the Chelsea and cut him down. They didn't find the secret. Maybe they didn't even know exactly what they were looking for. But they suspected Mr. Higbe, and they followed to keep an eye on him.

Mind you, I'm not saying that's how it really was—it was just my conclusion.

"Thank goodness, we're rid of him!" muttered the little fellow.

"We're not rid of him, if I know Van Sheldt."

"But if we keep on walking, along these sidewalks, this maze of canals—"

"Men like Van Sheldt have their ways."

MR. HIGBE turned pale, and I was sorry for having said anything, but you can see how it was—I couldn't let him fool himself. Van Sheldt played his dominoes for keeps, and slit throats are practically regarded as natural death in Bangkok, if you will forgive an unpleasant statement of fact.

I remembered a locksmith—a Chinese—whose shop stood in the shadow of a gingerbread temple half a mile down the klong. I'd passed his place a thousand times during the days those high-stepping Siam for the Siamese boys were riding high on a wave of Jap bayonets.

He was sitting there, a little dehydrated Cantonese, almost crowded onto the walk by his racks of keys. I showed him the bronze L'Acoste, and he answered without hesitation:

"Tupang."

I could have booted myself. I should have guessed. Tupang was a blind Lukchin with a combination hock-shop, lock vault and sing-song house over on the right bank.

I hustled Mr. Higbe out and hailed a dig-dingy fruit peddler and had him pole us across.

It's mostly Chinese over on the Right Bank. Money lenders—solid fronts of them. Big ones in plush-teak parlors who could lend you twenty million *bahts* to start a steamship line, down to sidewalk vendors who would spot a man ten *ticl* for prussic acid to poison his grandmother and take her gold teeth as interest. You know how those Siamese are—always in debt. Hate the Chinese, but they'd starve without them. Made the Chinks take down their banners while the Japs were here, but they were all aflutter when Mr. Higbe and I got there, and it looked like a street in Canton.

We had a bit of trouble locating Tupang's. It doesn't look like much. At least, not like a place famous from Frisco to the Reef. It stands on one of those little klongs where the footwalks reach so far out there's hardly room left for a pair of sampans to pass. It had a front of brick veneer that had

been pretty swank at one time, but the building stood on piles, and the piles had sunk unevenly causing the brick to crack up and fall out here and there and reveal the boxwood framing beneath. It was a long building, though you wouldn't have guessed that by the front, or rather, it was a whole series of buildings, and nobody knows quite where the back door is located—a fact which may be just as well for a customer's peace of mind.

There's electric power in the Chinese city, but Tupang didn't use it. The place was lit by a row of kerosene lamps. It was afternoon, bright sun, but the lamps were lit—and that may give you an idea of the last time Tupang washed the windows.

The front room was long and dim with counters and cases heaped with everything a person could imagine—diamonds and cheap brass candlesticks, Mandarin silk and worn-out *chang-sans*, all heaped together. A European, working to create the world's greatest hodge-podge could never develop the clutter which your Chinese creates as a matter of course.

We showed the key to a young Chinaboy who led us through a labyrinth of passages to the deep interior of the building. Tupang never kept the names of the men who rented his boxes. You just paid your rent and took the key—but if you got a day behind in the rent, you could trust Tupang to be in that box and take all.

They say the captain of a pearler came in fifty-two years ago and took out one of those boxes, leaving rent for one hundred years. Shortly afterward he was killed in a tussle with a Limey gunboat in restricted waters, and for six years his estate tried to negotiate access to that lockbox. But Tupang said "No." They didn't have the key, you understand, and that was all the real proof there was that the Captain had ever rented it. So there it sits, that locked box, and there it will sit for another forty-eight years until the rent comes due. That's the way Tupang does business.

I could see why the place had never been robbed, after wandering through that maze of hallways. Finally the Chinaboy led us to a large, windowless, low-ceilinged room with walls lined by lockboxes. About eight hundred of them, I would guess. Bronze fronted and turned green from age. He turned us loose, and we seemed to be alone—but you know how those Chinese walls are, they have eyes and ears.

The numbers were corroded so it took us considerable time to locate number 356.

"Here," said Mr. Higbe in a trembly voice. "You take the key and unlock it. I'm a little—ah—nervous."

His hands were so jumpy he could hardly hand the key to me.

"We'll split the sapphires fifty-fifty," he added.

I was not one to turn down a few rocks if he had plenty, but a fifty-fifty split was too generous. "I'll take a few—*if* they're in there."

"No! Fifty-fifty!" He seemed almost angry at my refusal. Just nervousness, of course. "I'd have gone home without anything if you hadn't come along. Maybe that Dutchman would have murdered me."

I'm only human, sir, and worse than most—so I agreed.

The lock was old, and it took a little time to loosen up the tumblers. Finally it opened, and I pulled out a long, metal drawer. It was heavy, so I carried it over to a table.

I won't say I expected the sapphires. I expected something—nothing. You know how those moments are. I'll admit my hand shook when I lifted the hinge top. We looked inside.

Empty! Yes, empty, save for one tiny article. All the box contained was a little scrap of native-weave silk.

"Well, gosh all Connecticut!" moaned Mr. Higbe. He sat down and held his head in his hands. His shoulders shook as though he were weeping, but no sobs came.

I felt pretty low myself. The thing seemed all wrong. Why would Uncle Matt mail a key to an empty box all the way to Seattle?

"Do you suppose this Tupang fellow robbed it?" Mr. Higbe asked.

"Not Tupang. He might fox you on a matter of interest, but he's no thief. He's an old man and too proud of his reputation. Believe me, this box is the way your Uncle Matt left it."

WE SAT there for several minutes staring at the box. It was stagnant in the room; no windows, no ventilation, the air thick with the odor of kerosene smoke and

chandu, but in spite of that I became conscious of a peculiar odor—a perfume. I knew no one had entered, but I glanced around anyhow, half expecting to see one of those short-haired sing-song girls. Then I noticed that the odor was coming from the box—and more exactly from that little scrap of hand-weave silk.

I examined it. It was grimy, and frayed at the edge as though it had been carried around for a long time. But it was the perfume more than the silk that interested me.

It was none of your dollar-a-pint synthetics. You have studied the perfumers art, sir? No? Most fascinating. An art of great antiquity, though few of our Occidentals realize it. And this perfume was an example of that art.

You observe the music I play—music with its glory of theme accentuated by dissonant chords? So, sir, with the perfumes of the East. Theirs is the glory of jasmine against the stinging odor of musk, lotus and civet—yes, in plain English, sir, rosebuds and skunk!

I held the scrap of silk in my palm, letting the warmth of my body call back its scent. It had a peculiar quality—a headiness like wine drunk too warm. It reminded me of those cellar dives over in Rangoon filled with the heat of men, and dancing girls, yes, and opium fumes, too, despite the righteousness of His Majesty's Government.

You think I wander? Ah no, that is not the case. All these, my thoughts, they have their bearing as you shall presently see. Perfume, no less than music, arouses visions. I had visions then, in that stifling room, with little Mr. Higbe across from me, head in hands. I stood up and replaced the lock-drawer.

"Higbe," I said, holding the silk out to him, "have you ever seen fabric of this quality before?"

"I don't know."

"Or smelled perfume like this?"

It was the first he noticed the perfume. "I never paid much attention to such things."

"Smell of it, Mr. Higbe. Don't you think this scent is a little exotic for your ordinary Occidental's olfactory membranes?"

"But what—"

"What of all this? I will tell you. Here, in this frayed and dirty scrap of hand-woven silk, in this essence of civet perfume, lies the secret of the star sapphires!"

He looked at me incredulously as though I had suddenly gone mad. But of course he was wrong. Who could tell what an expert might read from the weave of that silk or the blend of the perfume?

It is true, sir, that I can tell at a glance the source of any auriferous quartz ore from this archipelago. Not only the district, but sometimes the very mine, and even the level. I am a mining geologist, sir. Colorado School of Mines, 1911. Acatana Deep Mine, Burma, level number four—that is where my foot rests today. A piece of drying flesh and crushed bone pressed between two slabs of syenite-porphyry.

But, back to the silk, and the perfume. I expected it to tell me much—and it did.

WE WENT to Yong San Gong, one of the old silk companies, ancient when Raffles landed on the peninsula. There was a little, bent Chinese there named Sung who sat crosslegged on a table all day, examining samples of silk. I laid the fragment in his hand, and he rubbed his fingers across it, for he could see poorly despite the thick glasses he wore.

"Where was it made?" I asked him.

"In the town of Puer-fu, across the pass of Ipang. As you see, the tram is twisted but thrice in the length of the mid-finger. Had it been twisted five times, it would be from the looms of Wutasio; seven from Shang-sa for they do thus in honor of the seven-headed god of increase which watched over the larvae." He kept rubbing the silk between his fingers, eyes closed, smiling. "It is the ancient craft. What fingers do you find on your looms of steel which can twist the tram but thrice and stretch it flat as this cloth of silver? What machine do you find to weave those green and gold serpents, each one a little differently than the next?"

I hadn't paid much attention to the design—it was so soiled. I saw after he spoke that the flat-brushed surface had once, indeed, been a beautiful cloth of silver, and that serpents had been woven in, green and gold.

"Where would you buy silk like this, O wise one?"

"I do not know. We have received none for many years."

"Is it expensive?"

"It is for the wealthy."

"Would it come from across the road to Chieng-sen?"

"Perhaps."

"Or by ship from Haiphong?"

"By the road. Ancient silk comes by the ancient route."

And so we left. To you, as to Mr. Higbe, it perhaps seems that I learned little. But who can tell? May not a single, floating twig guide a Columbus to the discovery of a continent?

Our next journey was across the Menam to the office of the Cardigan Vanilla and Fruit Extract Company. Cardigan maintained this office to purchase floral essences which were shipped to France for perfume. Two dinky office rooms, and out behind a little warehouse with four or five hundred jugs boxed in straw—it didn't look much like a quarter-million-dollar business, but it was.

The place was foul with essence and musk. The only man there was a tall, leather-faced Englishman sitting in a rattan chair in front of an electric fan. He took the scrap of silk, sniffed it, and made a wry face.

"What these natives won't concoct on a dark night and call perfume!"

"Where is it from?"

He shrugged. "The scent is ylang-ylang with a touch of brush sandalwood. The fixer is civet—good old Siamese civet, the most vile in the world. We collect a few flasks of it each year. There's a French concern, Capoue, which uses it for its ultra special Nuit d'Amour. Supposed to inflame the male's darker instincts, but I'd say it would be more likely to inflame the sinuses." The Englishman chuckled and snapped his finger. "I say! You should have been here five years ago when a bloomin' flask of it broke out there in the storehouse. We all took our hot season vacation."

He got up and opened a noisy mechanical refrigerator. "Stengah?"

We had one, and then I got back to the perfume.

He tapped the silk with a finger and said, "Perfume like this is native. They've been making it up around the Me Hong Sorn for more years than England's had kings. They pluck ylang-ylang about a day beyond prime, distill it, and catch the odor on strips of pork fat, then they dissolve it out with alcohol. If they'd take that concentrate and add just a hint of civet they'd have a perfume so respectable you could sell it to an Edinburgh banker's wife. But these natives are never content with such as that. They have to add more civet, and some of that foul sandalwood smoke so they'll smell like a Buddhist temple."

And so it was that all things pointed toward the north—the silk from the pass of Ipang, the perfume from Me Hong Sorn. It occurs to you that silk and perfume indicated a woman, and in that you are right. Man's every action, if traced far enough, will be found to spring from two instincts—sex and fear. The urge to create life, and the terror of losing it. Believe me, sir, I have thought deeply of these things. I have drunk at the dark wells of Eastern philosophy. Death and the Woman—in these intertwined orbits swings the cycle of man's existence.

I seem to digress? Ah, no— philosophy of love has its place in our drama, for I shall presently tell you of two persons, a woman with a beauty to touch the brain like the stultifying smoke of green opium, and a man who was destined to destroy my dream of love forever.

The man, first.

He was young, handsome, with a dash of reckless adventure which even I found it impossible to resist. Hernandez Riley was his name, and we found him sitting at a little table near the automatic gramophone when we returned to English Sam's Coffee House.

Peculiar name, you're thinking. Hernandez Riley. He was Spanish-Irish, and he inherited the charms and the vices of both peoples. He would drink whiskey, and strum a guitar, and weep, and give you his last dollar, and throw knives. A freebooter, a blockade runner, a promoter of worthless mines and insurrections.

We walked in the door, and he sat there, smiling at me, his teeth as white as Molucca pearl shell against the coconut brown of his skin, his Ronald Colman mustache made to seem a trifle off-kelter by the shrapnel scar on his upper lip, his eyes that peculiar quality of blue one so often finds in the mingling of light and dark bloods.

"McQuarrie!" Hernandez shouted, stand-

ing up—all six-feet-two of him. "McQuarrie, I haven't seen you since the night we raided that moonstone concession in Palembang!"

I quieted him in a hurry. Not that there was anything to the so-called "raid"—a piece of high spirits only, I assure you, despite what that meddling Regisseur said in his report—but you can imagine the effect such a remark might have on our mild Mr. Higbe.

I introduced the two men—Mr. Higbe polite and reserved, Hernandez flamboyant, as though meeting the little man were his lifelong ambition.

"Mr. Higbe, I'm glad to meet *you!*" he said.

We ordered drinks, and Mr. Higbe said in that polite way of his, "What business are you in, Mr. Riley?"

"*Your* business, if it's profitable," Hernandez grinned, showing his white teeth and reaching in my pocket for a cigarette.

You'd naturally expect a remark like that to scare Mr. Higbe, but it didn't. You see, Hernandez had a way about him. He was the kind who could sell Grand Circus Park to an Ypsilanti apple grower and talk the chief of police into accepting a commission on the deal.

"I'm a business man, like yourself," he said, lighting up, "although at present I'm a trifle pressed for capital. You understand my situation. The war. Destruction, devaluation. If you and Mr. McQuarrie were discussing some particular venture, feel free to proceed in my presence. I will treat the matter with utmost discretion."

YOU can see what he was playing for. He thought I'd trapped myself a moneybags, and he wanted to be dealt in. Not that I was against it. It would not hurt our prospects to have the services of a man who could place seven Luger bullets through the crown of a grass hat during the short time it takes to sail it away. Hernandez guessed my sentiments in this, and he went ahead trying to win Mr. Higbe.

"Yes, I have had vast experience. Truly vast, and I might have been wealthy had the war not intervened. Property destroyed. The *baht* devalued." He snapped his fingers. "Gilt-edge securities, swept away. I had tin properties on the peninsula; I was a ship owner plying the archipelago, and before that I supplied munitions to the cause of freedom."

What Hernandez did not say was that his tin properties consisted of a worked-out placer in Khota Baru, that his ship was a third interest in a pearling lugger that was working some crown shell by the dark of the moon, and that his munitions for the cause of freedom were stolen from a government warehouse in Georgetown and sold to some anti-labor Dons in Barranquilla who wanted to set up a certain General Risias as dictator.

In half an hour Hernandez had sold himself so completely that Mr. Higbe went down in his pocket, showed the star sapphire, asked me for the scrap of silk, and told all his secrets.

As for Hernandez, he was enthralled. The silk captured his Irish imagination, and the sapphire had aroused his Spanish cupidity.

"Mr. Higbe," he breathed, laying his hand on the little man's shoulder, "you are indeed fortunate that I happened along. I have a knowledge of silk and perfume—a knowledge won at its source. No, not in their manufacture, but gained from those who use them. From women!"

"Ah!" said Mr. Higbe as though he were sinking his pick into gem gravel already.

"Now this silk—see? it is very fine. Exquisite. It is such silk as worn by the princesses of India and the dancing girls of Thai. And this perfume—I have smelled it somewhere before. I must have time to think." He went into his trance. Mr. Higbe held his breath. "Wait. The vision is returning. I never forget a scent or a taste."

He was right, of course. You have read Marcel Proust? There is no equal to a man's olfactory, or its child, the sense of taste, to recall scenes from the past.

"Somewhere I have smelled this perfume. It brings back a scene—the up-country . . . a deep, narrow room below stairs . . . tables . . . liquor . . . and the swaying body of a beautiful woman!"

"Her skin gleaming like burnish copper under the oil lamps?" I asked.

"You have been there, too?"

"Mental telepathy," I retorted grimly.

"You don't say!" gasped Mr. Higbe.

"Now, the thing for us to do is run down this perfume," said Hernandez, reaching in

my pocket for another cigarette. "I have an idea it leads to some woman."

"Any ideas," I asked, "aside from that swaying body?"

Hernandez shrugged, "She's good enough for me."

"Sure, but how do you propose finding her? By visiting all the sing-song houses in Thai?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"Oh, dear," said Mr. Higbe. "Not tonight!"

I didn't blame him. It was humid with the kind of heat that sticks to your skin, and there he was, sweating his life's moisture away in that hand-me-down tweed suit. I looked him over and expressed the opinion that the suit made him a trifle too easy for Van Sheldt to watch.

We took him upstairs to my room and got him a suit of whites. Then, to make sure we were rid of the tweeds, Hernandez presented them to the Siamese hall-runner. When we left that evening, the hall-runner was strutting around in the abomination as proud as in a silk hat.

WE MADE the rounds—one of those stinking sing-song houses after another. Air thick with civet, and sweat, and the smoke of opium, and home-grown cigarettes until we couldn't have detected the perfume if the woman had bathed in it. And to top it off, Hernandez got drunk and started a fight with a Danish sailor.

The sailor was a broad devil and strong enough to have tied Hernandez in knots. I expected him to do just that, but instead he went for his blade. Naturally, that sent Hernandez under his coat for his Luger, so there was nothing for me to do except prevent a killing. I let him have it over the head. The Dane, that is, and we got out the back way.

Pah! I can't explain how such things nauseate me, sir. Violence! Even the telling of it. But you shall have the whole story, as I promised.

It was nearing dawn when we returned to English Sam's. The Coffee House was closed, but a roofed stairway led up the side of the building to the rooms. In there it was dark as the tunnel of a mine, so we went slowly, myself in the lead.

I will not say I had a "premonition of danger." With some of us, whose misfortune it has been to live in close association with violent death, such premonitions are forever there, they become one's nature, as much a part of him as his reflexes in breathing. So it was with me that night, making my way slowly up that dark, roofed-over stairway.

I reached the head of the stairs. There was one tiny, overhead light burning. Just enough to light the carpet and accentuate the deep shadows at each doorway. We traveled the length of the hall to reach our room.

I inserted the key in the lock and turned. It refused. A similar scene flashed in my mind—they had forgotten to relock Mr. Higbe's door, too.

"We've had visitors," I said.

I turned the latch and allowed the door to swing open. We stood there in the hallway, waiting. The room was black, save for the faint, geometric patterns where the light from outside worked its way through the jalousies. No movement. No odor of *zwiebel-tiffen* which had befouled the breath of Van Sheldt that afternoon.

I knew Hernandez was covering with his Luger, but I drew the automatic I carried in my coat pocket anyway. With my free hand I scratched a match and tossed it inside. It bounded on the matting and flared for a while, lighting the nearby reed chairs, the mosquito curtain, and making grotesque shadows upon the walls.

"Well, let's go to bed," muttered Hernandez. "I'm sleepy."

He shoved in ahead of me, groping for the light cord. The light went on, he took off his coat, stopped, and cursed. I made it inside with a long stride and looked. There, sprawled face down halfway beneath the bed was a dead man.

For a fraction of a second I thought it was Mr. Higbe, forgetting that he was standing in the door behind me. It was understandable, a thought like that, for the dead man was clothed in Mr. Higbe's old tweed suit.

Hernandez turned him over. He was the Siamese hall-runner. He must have come back to the room, perhaps to lift a hat to complete his ensemble, and there was that ambusher, waiting for him.

Hernandez turned to Mr. Higbe and grinned, "Congratulations! Your white suit fits you well."

Mr. Higbe looked at his suit, and down at his blood-soaked tweeds. He got what Hernandez was driving at, although the levity seemed a trifle out of place. He ran his hands over the front of his coat and jittered around like a locust on a hot griddle.

"Yes. I see. Yes indeed. But why did they want to murder *me?*"

"Why did they want to murder Uncle Matt?" I popped back.

"The key?"

"If they know about it. They probably think you have your pants loaded down with star sapphires."

"Jumping Jerusalem! Sometimes I wish there'd never been any sapphires. Yes indeed!"

We stood there, looking down at the body and wondering what we should do next. Hernandez smoked a cigarette down to his fingers and stamped the coal out on the mat.

"Well, Oak-Leg, give me a hand."

"Do you want me to fetch the police?" asked Mr. Higbe.

"Police? Get those busybodies sniffing around and who knows who they'd have in jail. Maybe you, Mr. Higbe. And anyhow, McQuarrie and I have a little too much biography to welcome an investigation. Higbe, turn off the light and pull up the jalousie."

He hopped around to do as he was told, though I don't think he realized what was up until Hernandez and I slid the poor little hall-runner through the window and sent him rolling down the tile awning. There was a splash, and after that, a very noticeable silence.

"Gosh all Connecticut!" whispered Mr. Higbe, staring down at the dark water.

He was still muttering to himself when I rolled up on the bed and went to sleep.

AS YOU may have guessed, I am a conservative man, but Hernandez was of different stamp. It was the hot, Latin blood in him, mixing, not blending, with the thoughtless sentimentality of the Irish, an explosive mixture as many of our Latin American countries have found out.

Now, in his unreasonable way, Hernandez had formed an immediate liking for little Mr. Higbe. Paternal, you might call it, even though Higbe was twenty years his senior. In spite of his hell-and-be-damned manner, the attempt on Mr. Higbe's life had affected him strongly.

The first I guessed this was next morning when we went below for a breakfast of eggs and a powdered milk cocktail at the bar. Van Sheldt was there, as I expected he would be, and at his elbow was Limey Jack Westlake, monocle and all. As soon as we stepped through the insect-proof door, Hernandez's eyes turned hard as fresh-chipped quartz.

"Goot morning!" said Van Sheldt in that thick-lipped way of his, the inevitable *zwiebel-tiffen* befouling his breath.

He was hunched down as big fellows so often do in an attempt to minimize their size, and it made him look like a gorilla—some species of hairless gorilla, for his skin was very smooth, pink, shiny with oil from his pores.

I nodded in response to his "goot morning" and would have passed. After all, we had no proof. Higbe trembled a little, I could feel his shoulder against my arm, but he managed to meet Van Sheldt's eyes, and the two of us went on toward our favorite table by the gramophone.

Hernandez fell a step behind. I motioned to him, but his hot, Spanish blood was more than he could control. He stopped a couple of meters from Van and looked him up and down, contemptuously, like the buyer of blooded horses appraising a brewery hog.

"Riley, come along!" I said.

Perhaps he would have obeyed me, but Van Sheldt said, "You would maybe haff beer met me, yah?"

"With *you?*" and Hernandez laughed.

It was that laugh, more than the refusal implied in his words, that cut. Gross as Van Sheldt was, the insult had made him wince. He was known for the animal fury of his temper, and I could see it flaming up in his little eyes. The beer glass in his fingers shattered. There was a crack in it, I suppose, and he'd squeezed it too hard. Blood trickled, drop, drop, drop, to the bar, but he did not notice. English Sam, afraid for his furniture, started yipping in his Cockney voice, trying to stop the impending battle, but neither man heard him.

Then, as though he hadn't said enough already, Hernandez added, "You murdering swine!"

Van Sheldt flung the fragments of his

glass to the floor and rolled forward, arms outstretched, more like a wrestler than a fighter.

At first glance one would think him incapable of quick movement, but that was not so. He carried himself on the balls of his feet, delicately balanced as a bull-fighter despite his elephantine size.

Hernandez waited, and as Van Sheldt came in range, he swung a left and a right. The blows connected solidly, and an ordinary man would have gone down. Van Sheldt, however, did not wince. His expression did not change. He merely absorbed the force of them and plodded on.

Hernandez had nerve, make no mistake about that. He stood his ground although the futility of the contest must have been apparent. He swung another right and left as Van Sheldt roared in.

The big Dutchman sent Hernandez reeling backward with a sweep of his left arm. Hernandez tried to shift out of the way, but a table held him. He started to roll around it; Van Sheldt's right fist caught him like a sledge.

The blow connected high on Hernandez's cheek and the force of it drove him back across the table. He lay there, stunned for a second. Van Sheldt sprang, trying for a neck-breaker, but Hernandez had wits enough to roll on to the floor.

The table was between them. It was a heavy table—teak, cut slablike on the diameter of the trunk, but Van Sheldt snatched it up and lifted it high overhead as though it were bamboo and paper. He would have charged with the table as a weapon, but Hernandez flipped catlike to his back, and in his hand appeared that Luger pistol.

I have seen Indian fakirs draw multicolored silken scarfs from their fingers so rapidly the colors blended to neutral gray, but never have I seen human speed to match Hernandez when he called on his pistol.

They hung there for an instant, the Dutchman swaying on the balls of his feet, the heavy table overhead; Hernandez with the gun, its safety off, his finger on the trigger. Had Van Sheldt made any move forward, perhaps any sudden move whatever, I am certain that gun would have spoken.

Just as well, you are thinking? Yes, perhaps. But Bangkok had police, and a public shooting is a hard thing to overlook. So it was the instinct of self-preservation, rather than mercy for the Dutchman, that stayed Hernandez's finger.

Van Sheldt stepped backward. He lowered the table slowly, as though setting it simultaneously on all four legs was a ritual. And he returned to the bar.

He had seen death very near in the black muzzle of the Luger, but no sign of fear showed in his eyes. He was not a coward. One must not make the mistake of underestimating an enemy, or overestimating a friend. Let us state it positively—Van Sheldt brought to the cause of villainy both bravery and leadership.

We of America find it hard to reconcile ourselves with such facts. All of our teachings placidly assume that bravery forever marches under the banner of right, that cowardice is the heritage of wrong. But life is unfathomably complex. Greed, lust, and sin—they have their martyrs, too.

And thus, Van Sheldt. He had attacked with his fists, well knowing that death as swift as a cobra's strike lurked in Hernandez's shoulder holster.

He said, "Ach, see now who calls me murderer! Und of what? Who? I ask it of you." He spread his arms so his white jacket would fall open. "You see, mein friends. No weapon. No gun. No knife. Nothings. Yet, this man, he calls me murderer. This man mit gun. Ach! If any man here knows me as murderer, let him speak. Say so. Yah, now I buy beer. Mit honest coin, I buy!"

Half the people in Sam's knew Van Sheldt carried a flat, American pistol in the side pocket of that white jacket he opened, but no one mentioned it.

Hernandez put away his gun and came back to sit with Mr. Higbe and me. When the waiter came around, we ordered drinks rather than the eggs and powdered milk highballs we had intended.

Hernandez said, "Sometime there will come a showdown between the big fellow and me, and when it does, there'll be nothing barred. Nothing!"

I SPENT some time visiting the consular offices, but none of them had a record of a Matthias Higbe. The Thai government, however, found a record of a J. M. Higbe who had been held in the Maung-Thai com-

pound, having been moved there from the camp at Chieng Dao.

It wasn't a very good gamble, but anything seemed better than sitting around Bangkok, waiting for Van Sheldt to decide whether it was worthwhile to stick knives into us.

Chieng Dao should have been a twelve-hour train ride, but flat wheels and series of hotboxes made it stretch out to forty-eight. The city was more Chinese than Thai, and that gave it an air of enterprise. It lay on a terraced hillside, at about three hundred meters of altitude. An ancient city, its streets hammered hard by the feet and cart wheels of two hundred generations, for men have lived there ever since the traders of south China began traveling the pass of Houei-sai to exchange the silks of Canton for the rubies of Cathay.

The station at Chieng Dao is one of those bastardized pieces of architecture, built with public moneys and designed to maintain the Siamese artistic traditions over and above the Western steel and concrete engineering formula. Beyond the station was a big, white stucco building of what had been Nippon Dao Nakorn, a tree-oil concern, and beyond that, the extensive teak and rubber warehouses of England's Borneo Company.

No doubt it was through the influence of these influential concerns that this portion of the city was paved and laid out in rectangular blocks, but beyond that the work of the White hand was not discernible, and the city became planless and interminable.

A Thai-born Chinese operated a little cavern where he stored civet glands gathered by Katong Luang tribesmen, but his sense of smell had become so paralyzed by his business that he was unable to detect any odor whatever in our scrap of silk.

The second afternoon, however, I turned up a fragment of information—an English engineer who was on his way out after testing certain northern zinc-copper complexes for a selective-flotation process told me he once had a friend named Herman Glasser who was associated with a Matthias Higbe in some sort of a mine in the Hue Hong Sorn. Glasser, he thought, had died in an internment camp.

With that hint we hired an ancient Chevrolet and made a three-day journey over rutted bull trails to the Sorn. We stopped at a miserable mining town called Hi-kong where Bhao-nan tribesmen brought down gems, and placer gold, and gold-in-quartz high-grade which had been stolen from the stopes of Karenni Consolidated across the high peaks. Chinese owned shops along the crooked streets where they traded for such loot, and bought skins, and wood beryl, and crude opium from the Mon-khmer peoples who cultivated the little clearings.

Sapphires? Yes, they received a few, but no star sapphires had been seen there for twenty years. And none of them had heard of men named "Higbe," or "Glasser."

We filled the tank with petrol at ten *bahts* per liter and drove on across miserable trails to Pahok, and from there to Ta-kua, and thence to the village of Tien at the edge of the great teak country. Fruitless.

At Tien, Mr. Higbe lay for ten days turning his stomach lining out for our inspection with the fortnightly dysentery. A Chinese herbalist fixed him up with *hong gorn* root and egg white, and it was three weeks to the day when we rolled once more along the streets of Chieng Dao.

A hotel, a bathtub, and real sheets! It seemed like the luxury of Shanghai's own Broadway Mansions, or the Cathay. Even in our failure we gave thanks.

"Take a few days' rest, Mr. Higbe," Hernandez said. "Soothe your stomach with good brandy, and your eyes with beautiful women. Hear music. You'll look on things differently after that."

Yes, we all had need of relaxation. The filth, the disease, the seething poverty of the East—these are not things a man can endure without his dreams. This land's mysticism, and its opium are not accidents, sir. One must have visions in the midst of wretchedness. One must build his holy of holies, his Angkor Vat must be made to rise from the jungle rot.

That night we forgot the silk and had whiskey at the International Club. We went on. Another bar. A Siamese theater where men sat crosslegged on rugs and drank local rice beer while they watched native women execute their dumb-show dances.

"These hummingbird women with their too-many clothes!" spat Hernandez. "Symbolism, pah! I tell you, I wouldn't trade one bedraggled Pavlova from a Julio Street dive down in Tampico for a harem of them."

A Portuguese fiber buyer from one of the trading houses overheard Hernandez and sat down.

"Senhors! I overheard, and I agree. But do not theenk we have no dancing woman in Chieng Dao. Oh-ho! What a mistake to make! But come, you must see *her!*"

"Who?" asked Hernandez, showing interest.

"The woman. Y-lang, she is called, after the blossoms she wears in her hair."

"Where is this sultry goddess?"

"I weel take you."

THE Portuguese took us downhill from the new city of reinforced concrete along a street so narrow the pedestrians were crowded inside the shop doors whenever two bull carts passed. It was heavy with the odor of humankind, of molded burlap, of rancid animal grease from ten thousand generations of fat ducks succeeding each other above the doorway of the food stalls.

"Your princess, she is a long way from Covent Garden," I complained, for my foot gives me trouble on rough streets.

The Portuguese chuckled, "Covent Garden! Of that I have never heard. But wait until you have seen this place—the White Dragon."

A purple banner with a conventional white dragon marked a dingy stairway leading down. This was the place. It didn't look like much, but the Chinese are like that. I have seen temples fit for Venus beyond doorways which even the spiders had abandoned.

The stairs led to a large room, its size accentuated by the extreme lowness of the ceiling, and by the many fancy-carved boxwood pillars which supported it. There were small, round tables, each with four chairs, spaced so closely that a large man, like myself, had difficulty in picking his way. Decorative silken screens were tacked along the walls, woven rattan covered the floor and the place was cluttered with Chinese bric-a-brac.

Incongruously, in the midst of this atmosphere, hung a row of bare electric bulbs, and in the niches of the walls, half a dozen electric fans. The fans, incidentally, were futile, for all they did was blow back the air you had already breathed.

A Chinese place, yes, but its customers ranged through the racial hetrogenity of the Orient. There were Siamese, and Lukchin, and Malay, and Cochin, and Europeans from Dane to Croat, and even a few strong-faced Arabs ignored the sinful odor of alcohol and roasted pork.

The place was about two-thirds full. No particular excitement, no music, no dancing girls. At the far end of the room was a little, elevated stage. At one side of this stood a *chieng* organ with bamboo pipes, each attached to a calibash, and leaning against the wall was an assortment of Oriental instruments—tom-toms, big and little bells, a *serinda,* a *kin,* and several long-throated banjos. At the other side of the stage was an entrance covered by heavy, glass-beaded drapes.

We ordered French brandy, and, O miracle of Allah, they brought it! Cellier de M. Portnoif, Paris, vintage 1924. I did not believe the seal when I broke it—these Chinese are natural-born counterfeiters—but the taste, the tang without after-shudder, the glow of the cognac grape, these were not susceptible to counterfeit. And at only thirty-five *bahts* per liter!

A HALF-HOUR passed. An hour—who knows? We drank the French liquor. Suddenly I became conscious of the place. I looked around. It had become crowded with men. Every chair was occupied, and men stood closely along the walls. There was no ventilation. The air was stifling.

"Let's get out," said Mr. Higbe.

"Wait!" I pulled him back to his chair.

Hernandez felt it, too—the tension, the repressed excitement, the anticipation. I looked at their faces. I saw their eyes all staring at the little, draped doorway beyond the stage.

The curtains finally swung aside and a group of musicians came in. They straggled across the stage and took up places on stools and cushions, fingering their assorted instruments. After a few preliminary twangs from one of the long-throated banjos, the music began.

A tinkle of bells, the weird, oscillating screech of the silk-stringed *serinda,* the broken, pulsating throb of the tom-toms, the apparently unrelated sounds of *kin,* and cymbal, and *cheng.*

I know the abomination of the Oriental

orchestra to the Western ear. And to me, a musician, pure blasphemy. But there is a depth to Chinese music. Beneath its surface of noise and discord pulsates notes of purest rhythmic beauty.

The crowd, however, had not come to hear music. They still stared at the curtains. And at last a woman glided out.

Lithe and tall she was. Her skin the hue of copper, oiled, and shining like satin from the bazaars of Bagdad under the yellow glare of the electric bulbs.

Beautiful. Ah, what a poor word! Still it must be used. Not the Chinese beauty of the broad face, the wide, placid eyes, the short limbs. And not the tea-cup beauty of your bandy-legged Siamese. Her beauty was not of one race. She was the universal beauty —this woman, Y-lang.

She came slowly, almost carelessly, with a sway of her thinly draped hips, looking across the press of men as though she had contempt for them and their hungry eyes. She paused in the center of the dancing floor, lifted her arms above her head, bent her hands horizontally to symbolize the cobra.

Then slowly, with almost lazy movements, she commenced to dance.

Believe me, sir, when I say that the dance is as much a part of music as percussion or reed. How infinitely more meaning Swan Lake has when danced than when merely played as an orchestral suite! And so with this peculiar, wailing jargon of the deep Orient, Y-lang gave it meaning. She seemed to be its soul, her flesh the culmination of its oscillating tones.

She followed the *serinda,* but always a sixty-fourth behind, as though she danced, as its slave, unwillingly. Heel and toe, with hips, torso, shoulders, and with little, sinuous movements of her arms. She danced with eyes staring, her lips drawn back, teeth set.

I could feel the excitement of her audience mounting. I tell you, sir, that woman exercised a power. She pulled one forward. She made one forget time, and place, and fetid air. She was universal woman.

Do you understand me? Have you ever, in your youth, felt the red, blazing synthesis of love and hatred? Felt the urge to rend the thing you desired? Felt that elemental human passion which keeps the strongest of us teetering on the brink of madness? If you have, then you understand the emotion kindled by Y-lang. That dance she performed —it was not the cobra dance as symbolized. It was more. It was the dance of hatred, of ecstasy.

Slowly, by imperceptible degrees, its pace quickened. But still the small, unwilling movements. Still the lagging behind the *serinda.*

Unexpectedly, the cymbals beat with a vibrant clang.

It was a signal. The repression was shattered. The *serinda* player's bow moved so rapidly it became a blur across the silken strings. The girl's feet no longer lagged. She was away, spinning, her steps intricate and amazing. Faster! Faster, still. Her lips were parted, her eyes bright. And then, suddenly, the music stopped, leaving her dancing there. She paused, stood tiptoe, stretching her lovely body so high her fingertips almost brushed the ceiling—and then the tension of her ecstasy left her, and she crumpled, crosslegged, head tossed forward, her short ringlets scattered over her knees.

"Y-lang! Y-lang!" the men shouted. They laughed like beings released from emotional bondage. They called her name and tossed coins that twinkled in the electric light, and jingled to the floor beside her.

Y-lang did not acknowledge the applause, nor glance at the money. She stood and glided back through the curtained passage.

"That perfume!" Mr. Higbe was saying. "That perfume!"

"What?" I asked.

"Did you notice her perfume?"

His words jolted me back to reality. A breeze from somewhere, a faint stir in the air, brought the odor of it to me. Faint, but distinguishable amid the sultriness of *chandu,* and tobacco, and liquor, and human sweat—the unmistakable perfume of the scrap of silk!

BOOK II

Y-LANG

OAKLEG McQUARRIE sat back and fingered his empty glass.

"Forgive me. Perhaps I am keeping you too long with my Mariner's eye. You have an appointment with the Hong Gim Company."

Willoughby moved suddenly in his chair. "Nonsense. I'm afraid it would take more than one lifetime to find anything resembling assets in Hong Gim's books, anyway."

"My glass. It's empty. Your hospitality—"

Willoughby called the waiter who appeared with his usual, smiling unobtrusiveness carrying two drinks on a tray.

"Your health!" said McQuarrie.

They drank. McQuarrie set his glass down, half emptied, and stared thoughtfully through one of the high, side windows. Willoughby looked, too. Nothing was visible out there except a brick wall which had been partly knocked down by a small artillery shell, and then patched with white concrete.

"KIAO AO COMPANY"

read a sign which had long ago been painted on the bricks,

Importers and Exporters Dried Fruits, Ivory, Medicinal Roots, gums, Cowbezoar.

and there it ended in the area of new cement.

"You were saying . . ." said Willoughby.

Ah, forgive me, said McQuarrie. The woman—Y-lang. I was sitting here, trying to call her beauty once more to mind. A moment ago it seemed that she was with me, in this room, filling the air with her strange perfume.

The crowd in the White Dragon was tumultuous. They called for her and threw their money, but she did not return. At last their applause subsided, and they drifted toward the door. Once again it got so a person could breathe.

"Will she came back tonight?" I asked the Portuguese.

"After midnight."

"If you'll excuse me, I'm going back to see her."

The Portuguese laughed, "You? See Y-lang?"

"She will see me, sir!"

Hernandez rose with me, but I said, "No. You stay with Mr. Higbe. This is a task I must accomplish alone."

Do not misunderstand. It was not doubt of my own prowess with women that made me leave the handsome fellow behind. It was merely that I could see he had already forgotten the primary object of our search. What is a fortune in sapphires compared with the smile of such a woman as Y-lang?

I pushed among the tables, crossed the dancing floor, and lifted the beaded drapes at the doorway. A tall Arab confronted me.

"I am to see Y-lang," I said.

He did not move. He remained sombre, tall and hook-nosed.

"She knows me," I said.

"No. Y-lang will see no one. Return to your table."

Your Arabian is the most adamant person on earth, but he has a certain universal human weakness. I drew a ten-baht note and held it before him.

"Ah, Master!" he breathed.

I pressed it in his hand. "Now take me to her."

"I cannot, Master."

I tried to retrieve the money, but his hand was closed on it.

"Give me that note, or I'll nail you to the wall," I commanded, my hand on my automatic.

"Ah, Master, I dare not take you to her. But I will carry a message."

"Very well, tell her my name."

"And it is?"

"Matthias Higbe."

My name would have meant nothing. She would merely have sent the Arab away. But Higbe! Surely that name would win me access.

He passed down the hall, turned, and I could hear his soft shoes padding up a stairway. In a minute he returned, shaking his head.

"She will not see thee, Master."

"Did you say my name?"

"Matthias Higbe!"

"And she didn't know me?"

"She said, 'Go away.'"

I only half believed him. These Arabs will lie like the very rug-peddlers of Damascus, angling for more money. I rammed this fellow from my way and started down the hall, but with a leap as quick as a jungle cat he placed himself in front of me again.

I could have smashed him down and trod-

den over him. These Arabs, they are the devil's own liquor with gun and sabre, but no match for a white man at close encounter. But instead, I drew up, for I am no lover of violence.

I handed him another ten-baht note. He held it for a moment, exhaled, and stood rigidly against the wall to let me pass. I glanced in his eyes and saw he was afraid. Not of me—of something else. Of what, I could only guess.

There was a steep, narrow stairway beyond the turn of the hall. I ascended slowly, for my foot troubles me at such times. At the top was a short hall with six doors opening onto it.

The doors were numbered with Chinese characters, or worded, rather, "Door of Sunshine," "Door of Feast and Plenty," "Door of Heaven," et cetera.

I walked to each of them and paused. They fitted so tightly that no light showed. I rapped at the Door of Sunshine—no answer. Next, the Door of Heaven—

"Feisal?" It was a woman's voice. She said something in a Siamese dialect which I could not catch, and then in English, "Damn you!"

I tried the knob. The door was not locked. I went in.

THE room I entered was ornate, luxurious after the Oriental conception. In other words, it was hung with too many drapes, littered with too many silken pillows, with too much of the futile bric-a-brac of the East.

I stood there for a second before I saw the woman. Wrapped in an Indian shawl, she was half concealed by a silk and wire screen over which her dancing costume had been thrown.

Something about me must have stamped my nationality, for she cried sharply in English, "Get out!"

I closed the door and remained where I was. And so we stood, looking at each other for a while. Then, something about my manner seemed to dull the point of her wrath, for she shrugged with a graceful motion.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Your perfume," I answered, "I am familiar with many rare essences, but I thought yours the most exquisite I had ever experienced. Was it blended especially for you?"

These words—an inspiration. They were unplanned, but I immediately saw they had struck the proper chord.

You understand—the world is full of lovers for such a woman, all of them harping on her beauty. But praise of her perfume!—The perfume she had used so long and must therefore treasure.

"You like!" That voice—how changed. How different from the sharp "What do you want?" of a moment before. It had become dulcet. A[illegible]sical as water singing through fungu[illegible]overed stones. Smooth as the whisper of her brown flesh against the sheer silk of her shawl.

SHE walked to the divan in the middle of the room and half reclined amid its heaped cushions. She reached for a tin of Royal Bengal cigarettes, lit one. "You will smoke with me?" she asked.

"Certainly."

"You will sit down?"

I sat on the divan beside her. She puffed the cigarette, blowing the smoke through her slim nostrils, gazing at me curiously.

"You have used the perfume a long time," I said.

"How do you know?"

I shrugged.

"You have seen me before? Perhaps in Bangkok?"

"No."

"Then how did you know about the perfume?"

"One who understands perfumes can tell many things."

"You are clever."

She kept looking at me, her long lashes dropping against the rising cigarette smoke. I could not be certain whether she was laughing at me or not. I was struck by her intelligence—yes, and by her education, for she was educated as Eastern women go.

"You are part Dutch," I said.

"I am part English—and I am of other races, too."

"And you were raised by your father's people."

She laughed, flattered and pleased that I was right. "I have seen soothsayers who could take lessons from you, *senor.*"

"And you were taught by the Spanish sisters of the Philippines."

"It is true!" There was no laughter in her tone now. "I have told that to no one. How did you know?"

I did not answer, but my guessing was easy enough. European blood was apparent in her facial conformation. It came from the father, for few white women choose to bear children to the dark races. That her education was Spanish had been revealed by her use of the title, "senor," and where is one educated by Spaniards save by the good Sisters of Charity in Luzon?

She was pleased—so much so that she brought a bottle of Tosao brandy and poured a little in each of two rather syrupy glasses.

"You are a clever man, *senor*—what was the name?"

"McQuarrie. Patrick McQuarrie."

"That was not the name Feisal called to me."

"Matt Higbe. Did that name mean nothing to you?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Have you never known a man named Matt Higbe?"

"No."

She was lying, I decided, and doing a rather good job of it. Still, the secret of the star sapphires was not troubling me a great deal at the moment.

BEHOLD me, sir. A man in his early fifties. My face, unhandsome, but manly. A physique of proportion and strength, yes, but a cripple. Many, whose advantages are greater would believe themselves no longer attractive to women. But what an error! Women are always unpredictable, and I tell you truthfully, without vanity, that Y-lang was attracted to me.

She sat watching me, swirling the liquor in her glass, her eyes dark as some night-prowling animal's, her glossy hair contrasting with the long raceme of ylang-ylang which was pinned there. I glanced down. Her hand rested on the silk of the divan a few inches away. It was at the hand I looked rather than at the impelling beauty of her body.

There is a saying of Tsengtse, "It is well enough for a young man to be clever—an old man must be wise." So I ignored her beauty, thus to challenge her.

Looking at her carmine lacquered finger nails, I said, "Sometime I will tell you of a lacquer made of liquified jade—a secret of the court of Angkor Vat."

She laughed. "You are saying that only so you may visit me again."

"I have not even left."

"You must leave soon."

"Why?"

"Perhaps I have a lover."

"You have a thousand lovers—but you have no man such as me."

"This man—he will kill you."

I was certain she was only trying to make me jealous. I held out my glass, and she filled it.

"Of course," she went on teasingly, "if you have no fear of a bullet through the heart—"

"Perhaps you are afraid for *him*."

"Ho! I know you Americans! I have heard the great maxim of your nation. How you say it—shoot first and speak afterward."

"Did I say I was an American?"

She shrugged. Not a flicker of her eyelash—but you can see what I thought. That hint, she knowing I was American. Perhaps she knew because I had asked about Matt Higbe!

I finished the drink, and we talked of other things—small things, as a man and woman do when they are attracted to each other. At last I got around to the subject again.

"The silk of your shawl—it is exquisite!"

She shrugged again with that most characteristic gesture. I went on, "But somehow I can see you in quite different silk—a heavy silk with flat, shining tram, silk with a surface gleaming like silver, wrought, perhaps, with green and gold serpents."

She was staring at me. I was quick to notice the amazement in her eyes.

"Why are you surprised?" I asked.

"Because I once—" She stopped, rose, and turned on me, furious that she had said so much.

"Go ahead with what you started to say."

"Get out!" she cried.

She tried to thrust me away, but I seized her wrist. I am powerful, sir, but taking

hold of her was like holding a tigress. She twisted out of my grasp and laughed at me. "I was teasing you. Wherever has anyone seen such ridiculous silk as you talk about? Cloth of silver with green and gold serpents!"

She was lying, but I pretended to believe her.

"Oh, that silk," I said. "It was just something Matt Higbe used to talk about. You did know him, didn't you? He said you did."

"That man again. That Matt whoever it is. I have never heard of him until tonight."

"He is dead."

"Good. I am glad of it."

"And I am his best friend. I will be your friend, too."

She laughed and came close to me, "You are hiding something from me, Patrick. And I am hiding something from you. Good. Let it be so for now. You are a strange man—and many call me a strange woman."

You can understand my not pursuing the subject further. I am a man, sir, and she seemed drawn to me.

I left her, went to the head of the stairs, started down. Three steps from the bottom, I paused. Someone was waiting down there, just beyond the door to the hall. A scarcely visible shadow gave him away.

THERE was a movement. Nothing audible. It was like a heavy man shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Then my nostrils caught a faint odor—*zwiebel-tiffin*.

Van Sheldt! There was something fatal about the man. Something inevitable. He was waiting down there, I knew, to murder me.

His mind—it was slow, but it had a cobra quality, too. He had followed us here. He had watched from somewhere and knew I was in Y-lang's room. He thought I had gone there for something, perhaps for the secret to the gems. Now, when I was most likely to have it, would be the moment to strike.

I drew my automatic and backed up the stairs, never taking my eyes from the door. In the hall I turned and almost walked into Y-lang who was standing in front of her door. I wondered if she had known Van Sheldt was waiting. Thoughts like that occur to a man.

"Why do you hold the gun?" she asked.

"The man who murdered Matt Higbe—he is waiting at the foot of the stairs to ambush me."

"To kill?"

"I suppose. Will this hall lead me outside?"

"Yes."

The hall led to a balcony overlooking a dirty little alley. A steep stairway, little better than a ladder, dropped to the ground. I let myself down and picked my way through refuse to the street, and thence once again to the White Dragon.

I crowded between many tables to my chair.

"What the hell?" asked Hernandez sourly. "Isn't this a bit early in the afternoon to be getting around? We're not through with siesta."

You can see how it was—he had been taken by the woman himself. He sniffed of my coat and made some unwarranted remark concerning the perfume, but he changed his tone when I asked, "Did you see Van Sheldt?"

Hernandez poured himself another drink, and Mr. Higbe went pale beneath his new-won sun tan. The Portuguese had gone to sleep with his head among the glasses.

"He's here," I went on. "He was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs when I started back three or four minutes ago."

"What happened?"

"I took another route."

"You ran from him?"

"I walked."

Hernandez looked grim after his Spanish manner. "I shall not run from him! No, sometime I will meet that Van Sheldt again, and when I do—"

"When you do, you'd better do it with your Luger."

"You mean I'm no match for him with my fists?"

"I do."

He spat. "That affair back in English Sam's! That! He merely caught me off balance with a lucky blow. Believe me, you wooden-legged old fool when I say—"

"You'd better do it with your Luger!"

Hernandez spread his long, dark hands out on the table and admired them.

"No! Not the Luger. I will beat him *first*—with these!"

WE SAT on, watching for the Dutchman. He did not come. The Portuguese moaned and snored with his head on the table. Mr. Higbe kept jittering in his chair every time someone came through the door.

When it was time for Y-lang to dance again, I arose.

"Where now?" asked Hernandez.

"Outside—for fresh air."

"I'll come too!" cried Mr. Higbe.

"You'll stay here."

I returned to the refuse-filled alley, climbed the steep stairway, and walked quietly down the hall. I stopped just short of the turn which would take me to the rooms.

It was quite a long wait.

The building was not well constructed, and through the floor I could hear the mutter of the crowd down in the house of pleasure. At last there came the familiar, introductory twangs of a long-throated banjo, and then the oscillating wail of the *serinda.*

With sound of the *serinda,* a door opened, and Y-lang's sandals went slap-slap along the hall and down the stairs. Later, like a long-delayed echo of her passage, came the strong scent of her perfume.

I went on to her door, slowly, for my foot makes a noise which is difficult to conceal, even on thick carpet.

She had locked her door. I could have opened it with any straight-bar key, but I had none. I tried the door of Feast and Plenty. It was open, and I went inside. It was very dark, but I found my way across to the window which was marked by a faint lattice of light through the half-closed jalousies.

I pulled them open and leaned outside. Her window was twelve or fourteen feet distant. There was no other way, so I reached up, found the wooden eave gutter, and swung out.

For a man like Hernandez—tall, young, and with youth's quickness, it would have been easy, but my weight and age made it difficult. However, I made it across, doggedly, hand over hand. I managed to open her window screen with my feet. I swung inside and stood for a moment, getting my breath.

Distantly I could hear the sound of the *serinda.* The dance was just beginning. Thus I had perhaps ten minutes.

I turned on the light and started my search by going through the compartments of a tall, gilded wardrobe. Costumes, slippers, robes; silk, even rare silks, but none to match the frayed sample. Next I opened a chest filled with trinkets, then one containing a tumbled assortment of head scarfs.

I listened. The music told me that the dance was about half over. The cymbal's crash would be my signal to leave. I searched rapidly, keeping my ear tuned for it.

I glanced behind the screen. There, in the corner, was a little, black lacquered trunk. It was one of those old-style boxes so long favored by seamen, for they are large enough to be useful, small enough to be carried aboard ship on a man's back. They are called "Canton trunks" by sailors, because they were made by one of those little *hongs* near the House of Five Hundred in Canton.

I opened its lid. It was filled with old clothing. Like everything else in the room, the things it contained were redolent with her peculiar perfume, but these also had the peculiar fungus smell which came from being shut up too long. There was a scrap of prayer rug with woven designs in fibre gold, a long headdress with turquoise ornaments, some red cloth like Hindu peddlers sell—Lord knows why she kept that. I rummaged to the bottom.

The crash of the cymbals brought me up like a knife thrust. I was on the point of slamming the lid when a flash of something familiar crossed my eyeballs.

There, its corner sticking from the heap, a fold of silvery gray silk with woven serpents of green and gold.

I pulled it out. A robe. One of those flowing Chinese kind which are worn with a scarf around the waist. I held it up, wrinkled but exquisite in beauty. And there, in one corner, the rent.

I do not deny my fingers trembled when they fumbled for the scrap in my pocket. She would be coming by then, and I had only a moment. I matched it. The identical fabric, and though the scrap was frayed from much handling, it fitted.

I threw the robe back in the trunk and slammed the lid. The lid would not close.

I tried to force it. I opened it and tried to straighten things out. They were shouting below, calling her name. I could even hear the jingle of *baht* and *satang* pieces on the floor.

I finally closed the lid, stepped over, turned off the light. As I did so, there was a rattle of a key in the lock.

She was there, only a second or two from entering, but I dared not run. She would have heard the clomp of my foot. I stopped on the window ledge, wondering why she had not opened the door. I heard voices then, hers, sharply questioning, and next the gutteral tones of Van Sheldt.

I could not understand what they were saying, and I dared not go back to listen. If I did she would surely open the door and find me there. I reached up, found the eave gutter, and swung out, closing the screen with my foot. Then hand over hand to the room of Feast and Plenty.

All this took about thirty seconds. I reached the door and listened. The voices had stopped. I turned the knob stealthily and opened the door until there was a crack the size of my finger. No one. They must have gone inside her room.

Jealousy, sir! Yes, I will admit it. The thought of them there, together, behind that closed door. And with him—that percheron horse! That brute who walked like a man.

I strode into the hall and stood close to her door, listening. Someone was moving around inside. No voices, just the squeak of boards in the floor, and the stealthy sound that silk makes under a person's hands.

Some instinct I cannot explain made me turn around.

Van Sheldt had advanced on his rubber-soled tennis shoes, and, as I turned, he drove for me. One of his hands was upraised to brush away my defense, and in the other was a blue glimmer of knife steel.

Had I turned a fraction of a second later, I would have died there in that hall. Or perhaps, had I glimpsed him a moment before my fate would have been the same. As it was I had time for but one bending movement, and that movement surprised him and made him miss. The knife brushed the fabric of my coat, and its keen point tore splinters from the door. We collided, and he rolled half over me.

He was helpless for that moment as he was balanced there—but I, with feet solidly on the floor, was not. I twisted around, grasped his knife wrist in both my hands, ducked low and under it as I had seen Hindu wrestlers do. Van Sheldt rolled with me, otherwise the bones of his arm would have been splintered along their length like twisted, dry bamboo.

The knife flew from his hand, thudded against the floor matting, and skittered away. I could hear it go clack, clack, clack down the stairs.

I rolled him out to the floor, but his weight carried me along. We sprawled there. I dropped his wrist and tried to regain my feet, but he was ahead of me. My foot, you understand. And that man, quick as a jungle cat despite his size.

He drove forward from a crouching position while I was still on one knee. His hands reached for my head. Not my throat, sir—my head, for his hands had power to snap a man's neck like a hangman's rope.

There was no escape. I felt his merciless, sweaty palms as they closed on the two sides of my skull.

I did not try to pull free. Believe me, sir, had I tried that I would have fallen, writhing like a decapitated chicken. But I am powerful too, you see, and I realized my only chance was to withstand, not fight, the hold.

I knotted my neck muscles and threw both arms above my head. I twisted and rolled with him. He cursed, dragging me upright. We plunged into the wall, and the lath and plaster shattered like paper. He forsook his headhold then and went for my throat.

Those hands! Merciless as steel clamps. They seemed to mangle cartilage, and bone, and muscle of my throat. I beat against him, but his strength was not human. It was of the order of the great apes.

I have looked at death, sir. Cholera, and blackwater, and the hundred fevers of the East. That fearful moment when fever leaves and man lies there, his soul merging with eternity but his mortal self still knowing the world—the body-damp sheets, the thatch ceiling overhead, the hot fly-drone of afternoon. And what of man's thoughts

then? Ah, sir, believe me, it is easy to die thus. For death is cool, and it takes away the scorched tongue, the quinine and fever hammer of the brain. But to die in health, with love and riches just beyond the thin panels of the Door of Heaven!

I had no doubt I was dying. The strength which lay in his hands not only strangled—it cut off the blood from the brain.

I tried to fling myself backward, but he laughed and held me there. I tried for a leg scissors to trip him, but he was anchored like the percheron horse I have said he resembled. I fumbled for my gun, but his elbows pinned my arms.

I became blind. My struggles were desperate and futile. Have you ever been strapped down, battling an anesthetic? Thus with me. The world was red and spinning. Then, suddenly, I collided with the far wall—free!

I saw him, standing there, his broad back to me. I pulled the automatic, but I had enough presence of mind not to fire. Confronting him was Y-lang.

It was a few seconds before I understood. They stood so close—so still. Then the light glimmered from the blade of the dagger she held in her hand.

It was a tiny weapon, seven or eight inches long, its triangular blade no larger than a pencil, but its point needle-sharp. That point was beneath his ribs where a quick, upward thrust would have punctured the heart. I could see a spot of blood spreading through the fabric of his shirt, but he had not been stabbed—pricked only.

He looked down on her, scarcely breathing, his little, swine eyes slits of yellow between lashless lids. He was like a man who has stumbled into a cobra's nest and sits still as though hypnotized, not daring the slightest move for fear of drawing their strike of death.

The fact was, neither one dared move for fear of the other. I leveled my automatic at the base of Van Sheldt's brain and said, "You're covered."

He took a deep breath, and Y-lang glided back, the dagger still held in front of her. He turned then and looked at me.

"Ach! Ach. You are brave man. You hide behind woman. You hide behind gun—"

"Get going."

"Behind woman's skirts. But me. Ach! I fight mit hands. Alone. Against you. Against Spanish murderer. Against Matt's nephew from Seattle." His eyes roved over to Y-lang and he chortled, "Ach, you, woman. You should come mit me. Vat kids we would raise!"

I released the safety, and the snap of it brought him up sharp. I hated him, sir. Yes, I will admit it—like all hatred, mine was the best part fear. But I am not one to take life except in the last extreme of self-preservation, and so I did not pull the trigger. I watched as he shrugged in his ponderous manner and shuffled away—a bear walking upright. The stairs creaked one after another as he descended.

"What were you doing here?" Y-lang asked.

"I came to see you."

"You lie."

"Do you think me too old to be interested in a beautiful woman?"

She laughed and put her dagger back beneath her robe. "You did not before say I was beautiful."

"I say it now!"

Half jeering, "Ha! Princes have called me beautiful. A thousand men have called me so. I dance, and money falls like rain during the monsoon. What is your flattery to me?"

I seized her by the wrist and drew her towards me.

"My flattery is enough to make you kill the man who wanted to murder me."

"Ah—that!" she purred.

"And your princes be damned—you are a woman!"

Her eyes taunted me. She was defiant, yet I noticed that the tension began to leave her body—but only for a second. Heaven cannot be grasped so easily.

Perhaps that would have been the moment to have learned the secret of the scrap of silk—but I forgot. I am but human, sir, and worse than most. And when love comes late in life, man is three times the swain, according to the proverb of Hsun Ch'ing.

I could not sleep that night for thinking about Y-lang. Her face, her body, her perfume burned like embers in my brain. I walked to the hotel veranda and looked

across the dark woods and rice terraces where the moonlit country dropped away to the mist-hung lowlands of the Menam—Siam's slow-moving river of life. Dawn came up with a red flare over the dog-tooth mountains of Burma, and with the dawn, a horde of mosquitoes which drove me inside. At last, I slept.

Hernandez remarked at tiffin, "Fellows like Van Sheldt always work with gangs at their backs. Limey Jack Westlake is around, and he had a hatchet man in tow that I wouldn't care to meet without a loaded pistol."

I said, "Better shadow them and find out what they're up to."

I didn't care much what they were up to—all I wanted was to see Y-lang again, and Hernandez was getting a little too curious.

I watched her dance again that night, and later I rapped at the Door of Heaven. She was half reclined on the divan, waiting for me. I sat on a stool beside her and took her hand.

We talked of many things, and part of the time we merely sat there with our own thoughts. We were very close spiritually. Perhaps that, more even than her beauty, had attracted me to her. As we sat silent, I planned of the places I would take her. I imagined her in American clothes, taking her to Shanghai's great hotels—the Cathay, an evening at the Canidrome. I was proud, you see. I wanted to show her, my possession.

Unexpectedly she reached across and drew me towards her. I came like iron attracted by an electromagnet. I sat on the narrow edge of the divan, and she placed her hands upon my shoulders.

"You must be seeking great riches," she said.

"Why?"

"Because Americans, your race, they are always fortune hunters, here, in Thai."

It was true, I suppose. A race cannot escape its gods, and the American Kismet is the dollar.

"What difference why I came?"

She smiled in her detached way, as though her thoughts ran deeper than her words.

"There are many things I have wanted, and those things *my man* must buy me."

I waited.

"Once, in the bazaar of Moulmein, I saw a headdress. Purple cloth of silk worked with golden wire and strung with pearls, bluish white, such as the divers bring in from the banks of Janpeya. How I wept for one of those headdresses! Then a rich man, an English tobacco grower from Sumatra, came and offered me one as a gift. But he was ugly, with legs bent like an ape's. And he wanted in return too much. So I dance tonight without that headdress. But if you should find great wealth—"

"I will buy you the headdress—and much more."

"Soon?"

"We will go to Moulmein."

"Tomorrow?"

I was desperate to say "yes," but I had only a miserable two thousand *bahts!* I must first learn the secret of the star sapphires.

"Not tomorrow. Perhaps two weeks."

"Then it is true you came here seeking a fortune."

She had me. "Yes. I came seeking a fortune."

"What was it?"

In love I may have been, but blinded by love I was not. I shrugged the question quickly off.

She said, "That other man—the tall man with the mustache—he looks for the fortune, too?"

It was like a knife thrust, her knowing him. "No," I lied. "He is—my valet."

"And the little man with eyes like a sheep at the altar?"

"My bookkeeper."

I watched her dance a second time that night, and walked back up the stairs with her, but she stopped me at the Door of Heaven.

"You will see me too much. You will tire of me," she whispered.

I left by the rear stairs, my automatic drawn. No ambush. Just the steep stairs, and the dark, rubbish-filled alley.

IN THE morning I bought a chain and locket of Indian craftsmanship and sent it to her. Then I returned to the hotel and found Mr. Higbe. He told me that Hernandez had not been in since the night before.

"I don't like it," Mr. Higbe muttered. "I don't like it at all."

"Hernandez will take care of himself."

"But that Van Sheldt—he's a killer."

"What do you think Hernandez is—a Baptist missionary?"

"But gosh all Jerusalem, he hasn't been in all night!"

We sat out siesta on the screened veranda, drinking stengahs and passing *satang* pieces to the native boys so they'd keep the punkahs going. The street below was hot and indolent. Now and then a native woman would walk by, barefooted on the hot, Western pavement, carrying baskets of cane or fruits on a long pole across her shoulder. At suppertime we stayed where we were and ordered Singapore Sustainers—concoctions of tinned tomato, powdered milk, raw egg, and a shot of *Aji no Moto* for flavor. Not appetizing, but at least free of Siam's ubiquitous infusoria. Higbe had practically lived on them since his bout with dysentery.

I wanted to leave him there that night, but the expression in his spaniel's eyes wouldn't let me.

"Come along," I said.

"Where?"

"The White Dragon."

"Not there!"

I was surprised. Mention of the place seemed to terrify him.

"Why?"

"That woman. I don't know how to say it, but there's a devil in her. She's evil. That look in her eyes when she dances! And the—well, the beasts she makes of the men who watch her. Oh, don't smile. I've seen it, I tell you. I've seen it, and I'm afraid of her. Not for myself, but for you. And for Hernandez."

I patted him on the shoulder. "What you need is another stengah."

"No I don't! I warn you, Mr. McQuarrie, don't go to her room again. I had a dream, and——"

"And what?"

"Well, don't laugh, but I saw them carrying a man from there—dead."

"Me?"

"No. Hernandez."

"That's a relief."

"Don't joke, now—"

"All right. You believe in this dream. We'll see how accurate it is. What did the room look like?"

"I don't know. All I saw was the door."

"Well, what did the door look like?"

"It—well, it was a brown door, and it had a number twenty-two on it."

I wet my finger in the dregs of the Singapore Sustainer and worked out the Chinese characters for "Door of Heaven" on the table.

"That's what her door has on it," I said.

He stood up, shaking a trifle. The tropics had him, you see. His liver was going bad, and now, with the red drained from his skin, he was atrabine yellow.

He dreaded being left alone even worse than going to the White Dragon, so he came along, a pitiful figure, his feet dragging, and that hunted look in his eyes.

It was early, and there were only a couple dozen customers in the place. The Arab came over, tipped his *tarbouche*, and said, "Y-lang not here."

I wondered if she had left instructions for him to keep me away. I went upstairs and listened at her door. There was no sound. I knocked. No answer.

IT WAS understandable enough, of course. She still had a couple of hours before time for her dance. I went down, ordered brandy, and waited. The place filled up. In an hour I went up again. Still she had not come. I was nervous. I returned and ordered more brandy.

"Gracious," said Mr. Higbe, "but I'm worried about Hernandez!"

At last the orchestra straggled on. There was the usual tense anticipation, then the wail of *serinda* followed by the abomination of tom-tom, *kin*, bells and banjos. They played on and on.

"Y-lang! Y-lang!" the crowd started shouting.

But Y-lang did not come. Finally the *serinda* player laid aside his instrument and went through the door, leaving the rest of the orchestra whanging on. I stood, mopping perspiration. There was no air in that overheated vacuum.

"I'm worried about Hernandez," muttered Mr. Higbe.

"Hernandez be damned!"

"Why, Mr. McQuarrie, that's wicked!"

I felt like strangling him. But I looked

down at his simple, sincere face, and was ashamed of myself.

"Sorry," I said.

I started for the door, flinging men from my way. In the hall beyond the dancing floor I met the *serinda* player returning.

"Y-lang there?" I asked.

HE NODDED. In a second I heard the patter of her slippers on the stairs. She faced me for a moment, paused to rub her shoulder across my arm, and ran on through the door. When the dance was over I walked upstairs with her, but she would not let me go in her room.

"Why not?" I asked, tortured by jealous thoughts.

She lifted her shoulders and did not answer. I seized her and flung her around.

"Why not?"

She stood there, defying me. I wanted to strangle her. You can see what it was—the jealousy of middle age. I was certain there was another man. Something in her feline manner told me. The jilted lover can always tell.

"Go away," she yawned. "Tonight I have walked far, and the dance—it tired me."

I remained where I was.

In sudden fury, she screamed, "Go away!"

The creak of someone moving told me there was a man listening to us from behind those panels. I reached beyond her, turned the knob, and flung the door open. It bumped someone. I walked past her, and there, facing me, was Hernandez Riley.

"Sit down, McQuarrie," he grinned, scratching that shrapnel scar in his mustache. "Have a drink. The little lady pours a most excellent variety of brandy."

There was something admirable about his effrontery. Hating him as I did at that moment, I had to return his smile and walk with him to the little, lacquered stowaway where she kept bottle and glasses.

"You seem to know your way around," I said.

"I progress," Hernandez answered.

I suppose she had expected murder. Anyway, she was budding with smiles and reconciliation, and she was careful not to favor either of us.

Back at the hotel, I tried to sleep, but sleep would not come. I got up and sat on the veranda. Hernandez's room was next to mine, and through the open shutters I could hear him breathing deeply. I walked on to Mr. Higbe's window. His bed squeaked as he tossed about.

"Mr. Higbe!" I called, rapping at the shutter.

The bed gave a louder squeak as he sat up. His feet slap-slapped across the floor. He opened the shutter.

"What do you want?"

"I believe I have a line on the stones. Will you let me have your sapphire for comparison?"

He went back and got it.

"Don't tell Hernandez," I said, "but it may be necessary for me to be gone a couple or three days."

I WENT to the gate and awoke a rick-peddler. The narrow streets of the native city were vacant at that hour, so we made it to the White Dragon in ten minutes. I told the peddler to wait for me and ascended the outside stairway.

I rapped at Y-lang's door. She was asleep, and it took me several minutes to talk my way inside.

"What do you want?"

"I came for you."

"For *me?*"

"To take you away."

"Where?"

"Over the pass to Burma, or if you wish to Bangkok."

"I'll talk with you in the morning."

"No, tonight."

"Why?"

I couldn't answer, even though she must have known. It is hard for a man to say he fears the competition of another. She let me in the door and I sat beside her on the divan.

"You will go?" I asked.

"Perhaps."

Ah, sir, how shall I explain myself? I was taking the sapphire—all the little man's wealth. Absconding. But love is a potent force. I would have done anything, I repeat, anything to have had that woman for my own.

"Get your things," I said. "I have a rick waiting outside, and a train leaves shortly after daylight."

She sat, holding my hand in both of hers, looking into my eyes.

"Sit closer!" she whispered.

It was not a difficult command to obey. She reached up and caressed my cheeks with her hands. Her fingers entwined in my hair. Her breath was against my ear. The warmth of it made me forget my haste.

"You love me?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Just me, and not Hernandez?"

"I am your woman."

We were thus for how long I know not. Like heaven, her embrace was timeless. At last her dulcet voice.

"Patrick, you will buy me the pearl-and-purple headdress?"

"Yes."

Money? I had a little. I had my two thousand *bahts*, and the English gem buyers will pay diamond prices, karat for karat, for a good star.

She said, "He lied about you, that Hernandez."

"What did he say?"

"He said *you* were *his* servant. He said you were poor while he was rich."

You see now, sir, how he tried to win her from me? Do you blame me now for taking the sapphire? To prove I was not poor, I drew out my wallet, removed the sheaf of hundred *baht* notes and riffled their edges.

I noticed that her eyes were not on the money. She was staring at the floor, just over the edge of the divan. I looked down, and there, fallen from my wallet, was the scrap of perfumed silk!

"So, It was you who tore my robe that night!" she cried.

"That scrap of silk was given to me."

"Liar! You were the one who climbed through my window that night in the city of Raheng. You tore my beautiful robe—"

"What night was that?"

She shrugged. "You remember well enough the night the Japanese came and took your white brothers away. You remember opening my trunk—"

The trunk! The secret was in that trunk. I ran over and lifted its lid.

"Wait! You will leave my things alone!"

I fended her off and rummaged toward the bottom. She was like a wild creature. Her nails dug my cheek. She squeezed in front of me and flung me back. She was strong and I staggered backward to keep from falling. The next instant I felt a point of steel sting the flesh of my abdomen, just beneath the heart.

I stood still, as Van Sheldt had stood two nights before. Then a more intense burning, and the dagger point forced me back. She drove me across the room, through the door, down the hall. At the head of the stairs, she said, "Go!"

"You are a fool, Y-lang. You drive me away, and you drive away a secret worth one thousand headdresses from the bazaar of Moulmein."

For half-a-hundred ticks of my watch we stood there.

"There is a *secret* in my trunk?"

"Yes."

"I thought you were going to cut little pieces out of all my beautiful silks."

Like a child she was in some ways! But she was crafty, too.

"Tell me about the secret."

"It is there, in the trunk, hidden there that night the Japs came to take the white men away. Let me look in the trunk. When I find that secret, I promise it will be for you and me to share."

SHE put the dagger away. "I have been through that trunk many times and I have seen no secret hidden there."

I said, "Tell me what happened that night in the city of Raheng."

"I was dancing at a place called 'The Glass Slipper' which was owned by a Cochin Frenchman. There my dressing room was on the ground floor. That night the Japs arrived, someone came through the window of my room, took my robe from the trunk, and tore from it that piece of silk. Tell me, what did that man want of the silk?"

"He didn't want the silk—he wanted the perfume. Perfume fixed by civet permeates wood and even the pores of metal so that the odor is there forever. With this sample of silk he could identify that trunk by its odor anywhere."

She was thinking. "This secret—perhaps is it written on the bottom of the trunk?"

"Perhaps."

"Months ago I saw some words written there in a strange tongue."

"Let me see them!"

We turned to go back inside. The same instant there was a thump as of something heavy being bumped inside the room. We both started for the door, but of course she was ahead of me. She shouted something and whipped her dagger from beneath her robe. I drew my automatic. I glimpsed Van Sheldt at the open window, the trunk in his arms. I would have shot him, but she was in my way. I hurled her to one side, and at the same moment he tossed the trunk outside and leaped after it.

I made it to the window. It was dark down below. Ducks were quacking and flapping their wings at the end of their tie-strings. His heavy footsteps were audible, even the snort of breath through his nostrils as he ran along. At last I spotted his movement between two huts. I aimed and fired. He ran on across a patch of moonlight, full tilt despite the hundred pounds of trunk on his back. I fired again, but those automatics—! They are useless beyond ten paces.

You understand how it was. He had been listening in the room of Feast and Plenty. The walls were thin, and he could hear us quarreling over the trunk. He knew it contained a secret, so, when Y-lang drove me to the hall, he swung out and worked his way along the eave gutter as I had once done myself.

"Follow him!" I commanded her. "It means a fortune if we can get that trunk back. I'll take the rick and bring Hernandez. See where he goes and meet us at the Tiger Gate."

We ran together down the stairs, then we separated, she moving swiftly as a gazelle along the littered alley, I limping my best to the rick where the peddler was sleeping.

I handed him a five-*baht* piece, and he made those cycle peddles go as perhaps they had never gone before. I leaped out near the entrance of the hotel and ran up the veranda stairs, shouting. In five minutes Mr. Higbe and Hernandez were descending those same stairs with me. At my instructions, the rick boy had awakened a peddler and a runner, and we all lit out for the Tiger Gate. We reached it at almost the same moment as Y-lang, who said, "He went up the alley of the incense makers. Two other men were waiting for him there. They backed an auto from a shed and drove it through this gate. They cannot be far."

It took us half an hour to roust out the owner of a garage and cycle shop, and another five minutes to convince him that he should lend us his car-for-hire, a 1926 model Buick. The argument which finally won was Hernandez's Luger.

FROM the Tiger Gate in Chieng Dao, the ancient road to China passes through teak and boxwood forests, contouring hillsides and crossing saucers and half-moons of land where Siamese farmers have salvaged plots for rice paddies and poppy fields. Aside from insignificant spurs, there is no way of getting off the road short of Pong Pu.

Hernandez jolted up the rocky streets of that city shortly before midday. We inquired and learned that they had stopped for petrol at the Borneo dispensary, and then had turned up a little-used road which led to the pass city of Chieng Se. Van Sheldt certainly was intent on getting that trunk where he could keep it for his own.

Actually, the road here was not good enough for bull carts. It was steep, rocky and rutted. We were in low gear for hours. At twilight the Buick, hammering a loose connecting rod, nosed along one of Chieng Se's uphill streets.

As there were only six automobiles in the city, four of which belonged to the local potentate, Prince Pitraya, we had little trouble in following Van Sheldt. Presently we came on the car itself, a Chevrolet, with one wheel off, overhanging a sewer ditch in front of a dingy Buddhist temple.

A neophite sat inside, staring at the cuffs of his *talapoin,* not apparently having progressed in his mystic faith sufficiently to contemplate his navel. I asked him where the owners of the Chevrolet had gone. He did not answer. I repeated the question in Kamuk dialect, but he made no sign. I tossed him a *baht* piece, and the jingle of its metal broke his reverie. Did I once condemn Americans for worship of money? Forgive me. The god is universal.

"Those men. They go!" he said, scooping up the coin.

"When?"

"At the last interval of the sun."

"Where?"

But he was back again, staring at the orange sleeves of his *talapoin* and nothing but the jingle of another *baht* piece could rouse him.

"Perhaps they go to the Inn of the Half Moon," he said.

For a thousand years, I suppose, merchants had paused there at the Inn of the Half Moon to drink rice wine and millet beer before continuing with their caravans to the peerless bazaars of Cathay. It stood in a circle of feathery mountain pines, a third of a kilometer from the road which switch-backed up the bare, porphyry slopes toward China.

The building had reached that degree of age when its origin seemed not to have been in man, but rather of the land itself. Its massive girders of resistant teak were set in walls of porphyry. Vines grew up the sides until their weight had caused a general sagging of the veranda. It was not originally a large building, but additions staggered one after another, marking the expansionary ideas of many generations of owners, and it looked as if it would take quite a bit of wandering to cover it all.

Oil lamps shone yellow through the netted windows, and a dismal, regular creak-creak told us that, despite the altitude, it was hot inside, and the punkahs were working.

I cached Hernandez in the shadow of the vines so he could watch the great hall, while Mr. Higbe, Y-lang and myself went inside. I had returned the sapphire to Mr. Higbe; he never knew how nearly I had betrayed him for it.

CHINESE merchants from across the pass, shop and warehouse keepers of the village, and well-to-do farmers sat around tables in long, silk *chang sans,* white slippers, and little caps drinking from cups of transparent porcelain. They glanced up at us and went on, placidly, as though it were common for disheveled Europeans to burst in on their backwater of the past.

Van Sheldt was not in the room. I crossed to a little cavern in the wall where a patriarch sat smoking a blue-paper Shanghai cigarette behind a barred window.

I asked whether two white men and a Siamese had entered. He answered in the affirmative, saying I could find them by going to the head of the great stairs, then down a hall to the left, and then along another hall to the right, thence six steps down and another turn to the left where I would find a veranda with four doors, with the white men in the last of them.

We were friends, I assured him. He need not call a boy to guide us. It is better to surprise one's friends than shock one's enemies, were those not the words of Teslu, the disciple of the Master?

I motioned to the window where Hernandez was posted, and he came inside. My automatic I gave to Mr. Higbe with instructions to wait with Y-lang. Hernandez and I climbed the stairs. We passed down a long hall with a planked ceiling turned almost black by centuries of candleflame. Next the turning to right, six steps down, and another hall. We stopped at a door looking out on the veranda.

Slowly the little sounds of the night emerged—a whirr of crickets, a rustle of birds nesting in the vines. When we were certain no one was sitting on the veranda, we went on outside.

Four doors, and a strip of light around the farthest of them. From a concealing spot among the vines we waited.

Van Sheldt was in the room. We could hear the guttural sound of his voice, and from time to time the nasal tones of Limey Jack.

Unexpectedly the door swung open, and a rather ugly brownfellow appeared, his deep color accentuated by the white *topi* he wore on his head.

Van Sheldt said something, the brownfellow answered, coming on outside and closing the door behind him. Hernandez and I stood very still in the vines. We had not spoken, but still we had the identical idea.

I let the brownfellow go by. Hernandez, timing himself, made a slight movement. The fellow leaped back, and I had him, my forearm strangling the cry that had risen in his throat. As he struggled, Hernandez struck him with his fist.

He came around in four or five seconds, but by that time we had his *topi* rammed down his throat, and in a minute more he

was trussed, hands to feet. We lifted the vines where they trailed across the floor and thrust him out of sight. It had all been quiet and orderly. Experience, you see—I won't deny it.

You can see our idea—they had sent the brownfellow for something, and if he did not come back on schedule they would go out looking for him. If they left for as little as two minutes we would have time enough to grab the trunk and drop it over the veranda rail.

I don't know how long we waited in the deep shadow of the vines, listening to an occasional mumble from the room, to the rustle of some chattersnipes in the leaves overhead, to the heavy breathing of the brownfellow at our feet.

"What the hell's in that trunk, anyhow?" Hernandez asked.

"Those Canton trunks have a double bottom. Metal covering both sides of a wooden frame with a quarter or third-inch of air space between."

"And where does that take us?"

"You're dull, Hernandez."

"You think Matt Higbe hid those rocks in that space? Then he was dull!"

"A man wouldn't have time to hunt out a Monte Cristo cave with a gang of Jap manhunters on his tail."

"McQuarrie, I'll lay you silver dollars to paper *bahts* there's not a damned thing in that trunk."

"Don't lay your dollars so loudly."

He grunted. "Let him hear. I'd like to have a chance to even things with him anyway."

"With your hands?"

"With my hands!"

Still the boy, you see. That affair back in English Sam's—it had injured his pride.

The door was booted open and Van Sheldt appeared, head lowered, an ugly expression on his face. He seemed to be looking directly at me, but his eyes were still used to the candlelight inside the room. He moved on out, walking a trifle sidewise to keep his shoulders from brushing the narrow doorway.

His feet were catlike in his tennis shoes, although the weight of him made the entire veranda vibrate. He looked down the hall for a while, then he turned and said, "You. Limey. Come mit!"

Limey obeyed. He used to be a dandy who carried a walking stick, but tonight I noticed he was rumpled and seedy looking. Not knowing, a man might have taken him to be just another tropical tramp, but he wasn't. Not Limey. He was a bird of prey, like his partner.

LIMEY locked the door and the two of them started down the hall. They weren't gone twenty seconds when Hernandez started in on the lock. He picked it with a bent wire, and we went inside.

The candle still burned in the brass wall bracket. We looked around. Furnishings included a couple of rattan chairs, a slim-legged stand, a wash bowl and pitcher, a lamp for burning opium but no wire or pipe, an iron bedstead from Pittsburgh.

Hernandez located the trunk beneath the bed. He snaked it out, and the two of us were lifting it when the door squeaked open.

Yes—Van Sheldt was standing there.

He was crouched forward, a long-bladed clasp-knife open in his hand.

I reached for my pocket before remembering that Higbe had the automatic. Hernandez, however, was not at such a loss. He dropped the trunk and flipped out his Luger with a single movement.

And so they stood—Van Sheldt with the knife, Hernandez with the gun. Van Sheldt laughed in his throaty way and flung his knife to the floor.

"Ach! You see? So. I call you coward. As before. You mit gun. Me? Nothings. Only mine fists. Mine own body. Mit gun, you can kill me. Yah. But no man to man. Ach! You are afraid. Ho! Ho!"

I glimpsed Limey just behind Van Sheldt in the door. I could see he was holding a bulldog revolver in his hand. I shouted a warning, but it was too late. Hernandez had flung the Luger to the floor. It skittered beneath the bed.

Van Sheldt moved to one side so Limey could bring his bulldog revolver into action, but I was there ahead of him. I leaped behind Van Sheldt, seized Limey by the wrist. The gun cracked, but its muzzle was tilted up so the bullet only tore plaster from the ceiling. With a whip motion I flung Limey to the floor.

Van Sheldt roared and charged Hernandez, but I had no time to see how they fared.

Limey came up fighting, and he was rangy and fast.

He tried to get out of the corner where I had flung him, knowing the disadvantage of my foot in an open battle, but I threw him back. He went for my throat, and that was a mistake. I am big, you see. Never less than 190 pounds since my eighteenth year. I shook off his stranglehold and smashed an uppercut to the nerve center at the pit of his stomach. He turned the color of rice paper and slid forward. When he went down his head struck the edge of a stool, and if there was any consciousness left in him, that blow took it away.

I spun around and saw Hernandez, beaten, hanging over the back of a rattan chair, his face toward the ceiling. Van Sheldt was getting ready to put his neck breaker on him.

Van Sheldt did not see me, so intent he was. I picked up the trunk, heaved it high, and flung it.

Mighty as he was, he could not stand against such a blow. It swept him halfway across the room where he went to hands and knees.

He squatted, staring at me with his little, lashless eyes. He rose slowly, never taking his eyes off me. I cast about for Hernandez's Luger, but it was not in sight. Limey's gun had been kicked aside, too. And so, it was the two of us, fang and claw, there, in the tiny room, by the flickering candleflame.

He came for me. Not blindly. Charging, yes, but with a catlike wariness, a poise which would let him turn at the last moment. The power of him carried me against the wall. We struck, rebounded, and as always he went for that head hold.

I rode it out, arms tossed high, as I had that night above the White Dragon. We staggered across the room, grappling. Then he gave up trying to snap my neck. He bent double and pitched me to the floor.

I struck, half sitting up. I lifted myself on my hands and swung my legs in an arc, scissoring his knees.

HE HAD expected me to crawl away from him, not attack, so the movement caught him off balance. He crashed down like an elephant bull through the fragile cover of a pitfall. I flipped on over, going for a toe hold. He tried to roll with me, but he was too late. I bent that toe down and twisted. I heard bones crack. I twisted again, and again, each time rolling the foot farther. The pain must have been excruciating, but he made no sound.

He gathered his muscles and flung me away. He grappled, clasping his hands behind the small of my back. His neck hold had failed, and now he was trying for a back-breaker.

HIS strength—inhuman. The strength of a Siberian bear. I fought, but inexorably the advantage went to him.

In such a predicament man's instinct is to fight on until at last exhaustion brings an end to it. Believe me, to wage such a struggle would have meant my death. Instead, I allowed my chest to collapse and muscles go suddenly limp. The next instant I twisted, doubled my legs. He felt me slipping and went for a better hold. He was too late. I sprang up, free.

It was then, sir, that he made his mistake. He tried the identical trick I had downed him with a moment before. From a sitting position he swung his legs for a scissors. He toppled me like a tenpin. He rolled, taking my toe with him. You see—it was revenge. An eye for an eye. He wanted to splinter the bones of my foot as I had splintered his.

He roared in guttural glee, and bent and twisted with all his strength.

Ah, sir, had that been my own foot rather than the excellent product of that limb maker's on Hong Kong's Peddler Street, my leg would have been wrung off like a cockerel's neck. As it was, the straps merely rolled free, and the unexpected ease of it spilled him sidewise.

He was helpless for a second, trying to regain balance. In that same second I rolled to my back, catlike, drew my good leg to my chin, and let it go with the stunning impact of an uncoiling spring.

My heel caught him well. On the jaw while his mouth was open. His head snapped so drops of perspiration flew from his short-roached hair. He rose and backpeddled, slammed the wall, staggered forward, and went to his knees.

Still not unconscious. He was trying to shake the fog from his eyes. I dragged him up by his collar, balanced on my good foot, and flung him across the room so his head

left its impression in the gypsum plaster of the wall.

He came back, groping. I took time to fasten on my foot. Limey's gun had somehow got kicked out in the open, but I ignored it. He tried to put up his hands when I came for him, but his arms moved slowly, as though the muscles had congealed. I swung a left to his jaw, a right, another left. He reeled, hands before his face. For the first time, those little swine eyes showed fear.

"No—no—no—" he kept repeating.

I kept swinging. I landed blow after blow until my arms felt heavy, like liquid lead. And still he stood there. Even then I believe he could have overpowered me, had we grappled, so great was his strength.

But he was beaten. He hobbled back through the door on his shattered foot.

Heavy boots clomped down the hall. Van Sheldt staggered across the veranda and almost collided with one of those high-stepping, foreign-trained policemen. Limey's shot had attracted him, no doubt.

I was quick to give this lad the right impression.

"Stop him!" I shouted, pointing to Van Sheldt. "Stop that thief!"

The policeman grabbed, but Van Sheldt brushed him aside with a swing of his arm. The policeman sprawled among the vines. When he untangled himself, chattering in Siamese, Van Sheldt was lowering himself over the edge of the veranda.

IF HE had merely laid low, down there in the deep shadows, the chances are the policeman would not have found him. But he was still befuddled—terrified. He hobbled away at a ponderous, wavering lope. I could see him in his white suit, appearing and reappearing here and there where moonlight found openings among the shrubs of the overgrown garden.

He started to cross a rough, open place where melons had once been planted. For ten steps he was perfectly outlined, white suit against dark ground. The policeman stood there, his S. & W. service pistol steadied over his left forearm.

He was a good shot. Even Hernandez, who had now staggered from the room, later admitted that. That foreign police training, you see. The gun cracked. Van Sheldt went on for two or three steps, his toes dragging.

Ah, sir, how I dislike such details. Let us merely say it thus, with the Tentmaker: Van Sheldt—"turn down an empty glass!"

A crowd of chattering Chinese had gathered in a minute or two. I motioned Hernandez back to the room. Limey was gone—escaped. That pleased me just as well. It left us alone with the trunk. He carried it to the veranda, but there was no chance of escaping with it. We sneaked it quickly into the adjoining room, latched the door, lit the candle.

"Better go through it in a hurry," I said.

We dumped out Y-lang's things and examined the bottom. The note she talked about was nothing—merely an address some Swedish sailor had written there. The bottom was not made as I had supposed. There were two thickness of metal, but no air space—they were pressed one against the other.

Failure, sir! It is not easy to take when one believes victory lies inside the clutch of his hand.

We left the trunk there, found Mr. Higbe and Y-lang, and the four of us went to a rest house which the English had constructed at one time or another.

I was tired. I flopped down with my clothes on and slept without dreaming. Then, of a sudden, I was awake. The trunk! We had conditioned ourselves to thinking *the sapphires* were hidden in it. But, had that been the case, would not Matt have hidden them *all?* Would he have saved one out? I, a mining engineer, should have understood. A sample is always guarded by the man who wishes to relocate a deposit—and our sapphire had been saved, not for its value, not even for itself—but because clinging to it, was that fragment of silicified gray limestone.

He had not hidden sapphires. He had hidden a paper. Folded flat, a map could easily be slipped between the two layers of metal at the trunk's bottom.

I started outside, but Hernandez stopped me. Suspicious, you see, because of the woman.

"The trunk!" I said. "I just thought. The secret—it's a paper, slipped between the layers of metal."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind!"

He went along. The Inn of the Half

Moon was barred for the night. We climbed the vines to the veranda, went inside the room, struck a match.

The trunk was gone. We went back to the car and bounded over the cobble roads to the temple of justice. Our friend, the marksman, was there. Trunk? He smiled and brushed his very European mustache. Ah, yes. It was there. Evidence. He was sorry, but it could not be examined. He looked at us craftily.

"Why," he asked, "Do the Americans come so far, and struggle so hard, for an old trunk? It contains some secret, perhaps?"

Secret? Hernandez and I nudged each other and had a great laugh. It was a lady's trunk, and we had promised to return it. Merely that.

"Here," I said, "is ten *bahts* for your trouble."

He was insulted. An offer of one hundred *bahts* mitigated the insult, but he still said no. Five hundred *bahts*—he was adamant.

You understand how it was. For centuries the princes of Chieng Ra province had levied tribute from caravans which traveled the road from China to Cathay. But the present prince, Pitraya, had been born late. The caravans were few and poor now that the China traffic passed down the Si-kiang to Hong Kong and thence by steel bottom southward to be traded, not for the riches of Cathay, but for slum mass-produced in Calcutta. Thus, Prince Pitraya must be sharp and live by his wits, levying against such bits of riches as straggled inside his domain.

Next morning I received a communication, the Prince expressed regrets. He wished to return the trunk, but there would be a slight duty. Twenty thousand *bahts*. Or, if we chose, 2,150 American dollars.

We tried to dicker. Days passed. His Highness sat tight, not lowering his price a single *satang*.

On the fourth or fifth afternoon I sat on the veranda of the rest house drinking a concoction of rice wine when Y-lang came to me.

As Hernandez was gone, she sat at my feet, wrapped her arms around my legs, and laid her lovely head in my lap.

"For many days you have spoken no word of the pearl and purple headdress," she murmured. "When you learn the secret of the trunk, then will you take me to Moulmein and buy it for me?"

"Yes."

"You love me, Patrick?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Will you take me to Moulmein if I tell you how to get the trunk?"

I nodded.

"Then listen. There is a man. He was a magician at a hall in Pnom-penh. This magician is a Hindu from Bessem and they are all thieves. He knows how to get the trunk for 9,000 *bahts* and still have money left for himself."

I approached Mr. Higbe and Hernandez on the subject. We counted our money. Hernandez had exactly two hundred *bahts*, all of which he had borrowed from me. Mr. Higbee had 376. Added to mine, we had 2,158.

Hernandez said, "I met an English engineer who's moved enough Kimberley blue ground to know a gem when he sees one. Give the star sapphire to me. I'll get 7,000 *bahts* for it."

I told him he was dreaming. One might get such a price in London, but I knew of nowhere else.

"A bottle of brandy on that," grinned Hernandez. "The best in Singapore."

"It's up to Mr. Higbe," I said, virtuously perhaps.

"What is?" the little fellow asked.

"Whether he wants to sell the stone."

"And what's more," grinned Hernandez in that cocksure way of his, "I'll be back here with the trunk in three hours."

Well, Higbe gave the stone to him, and I the money. The two of us sat there on the veranda, waiting. Three hours. Four. Twilight. Still he was not back. We went looking for him. The car was gone. He had not been to the Prince's. The policeman at the palace of justice assured me the trunk was still in their care.

I wondered about Y-lang. I had not seen her recently. We hustled back to the rest house, up the stairs. I hammered at her door. What is there about an empty room that sounds differently to a knock? I knew without opening it that she was gone.

Ah, sir, I should never have trusted that Hernandez! What good can ever come of an Irish-Spanish halfbreed? But, no tears! No recriminations. To you, sir. Your health!

Oh, forgive me. I had not noticed. My glass—empty.

W. C. WILLOUGHBY rapped on the table, and the sleek Chinese brought stengahs.

"Your health!" said Oakleg McQuarrie, lifting the glass and staring at Willoughby with intense eyes.

Willoughby nodded. "Then you never saw them again?"

"Y-lang and Hernandez? Gone, sir."

"And Higbe?"

"Gone as well. I had a few shares of Sydney Transportation, Consolidated, and I used it to buy him passage to Seattle. Sold it to him, since he wished it that way, for his share in the trunk."

"And that trunk?"

"Still held by Pitraya for 20,000 *bahts.*"

"Then you never learned its secret."

"A month later, in Bangkok, I hunted down the former secretary of the Office of Concessions for the district of Me Hong Sorn. From him I gained enough information to let me piece together this story:

"Matthias Higbe and his partner, a German named Glasser, had turned up a strata of sapphire-bearing lime in the mountains toward Burma. They came down and filed papers with its location at the Concession Archives in Raheng, started back, and they heard about the Japs.

"Higbe knew well enough what would happen to all mineral locations that were in the records—those Japs would exploit them. So he went back to the Concession Office, broke in, and took his papers.

"There was no chance of escaping town. Spies and soldiers were everywhere. No place to hide the papers, yet he must not be caught with them in his possession. If he destroyed them, perhaps he'd never be able to locate the deposit again.

"He spied an open window in the rear of a sing-song house and climbed in. He was in a dancer's dressing room. The Japs were down below. He cast about for a place to conceal the papers. The room? They might search that. He saw the trunk. Not an ideal place, but better than no place at all. He knew the attachment all showpeople have for their baggage. He pawed up its contents and slid the paper between the two layers of metal at its bottom.

"Now, how would he ever be able to identify the woman who owned the trunk? And if it left her possession, how would he know which trunk it was? He noticed the perfume. Exotic—different. To identify the perfume, and the trunk, he tore a fragment of silk from a robe and hid it on his person together with the one sapphire to which a sample of limestone still clung.

"He was captured, interned. Glasser, in the meantime, was also taken prisoner. He died in an internment camp; those Japs—they treated the Germans no better than the rest. And in that camp to learn Glasser's secret were Van Sheldt and Limey Jack."

The Chinese waiter approached deferentially.

"Mr. McQuarrie. One man, he's say see you, please."

"Short man? Redfaced?"

The Chinese nodded.

"Forgive me. He's an American who wishes to buy a half-interest in the trunk." McQuarrie rose to go.

"How much is he paying you?" asked Willoughby.

"The bare amount of the ransom."

"You're making a poor deal."

"Beggars—you know the saying."

"Fiddlesticks! Anyone with a corpuscle of gambling blood would stake you to more."

"Perhaps—" McQuarrie leaned over the table tensely.

Willoughboy thought for a moment. Then he nodded. "Yes, perhaps me. Though of course there must be papers of agreement."

McQuarrie sat back down. "They shall be drawn!"

"Excuse, please," murmured the Chinese. "The man—"

Willoughby said, "Tell him to wait!" He took a billfold from his pocket, opened its zipper, and counted out its contents, a trifle more than nine hundred dollars.

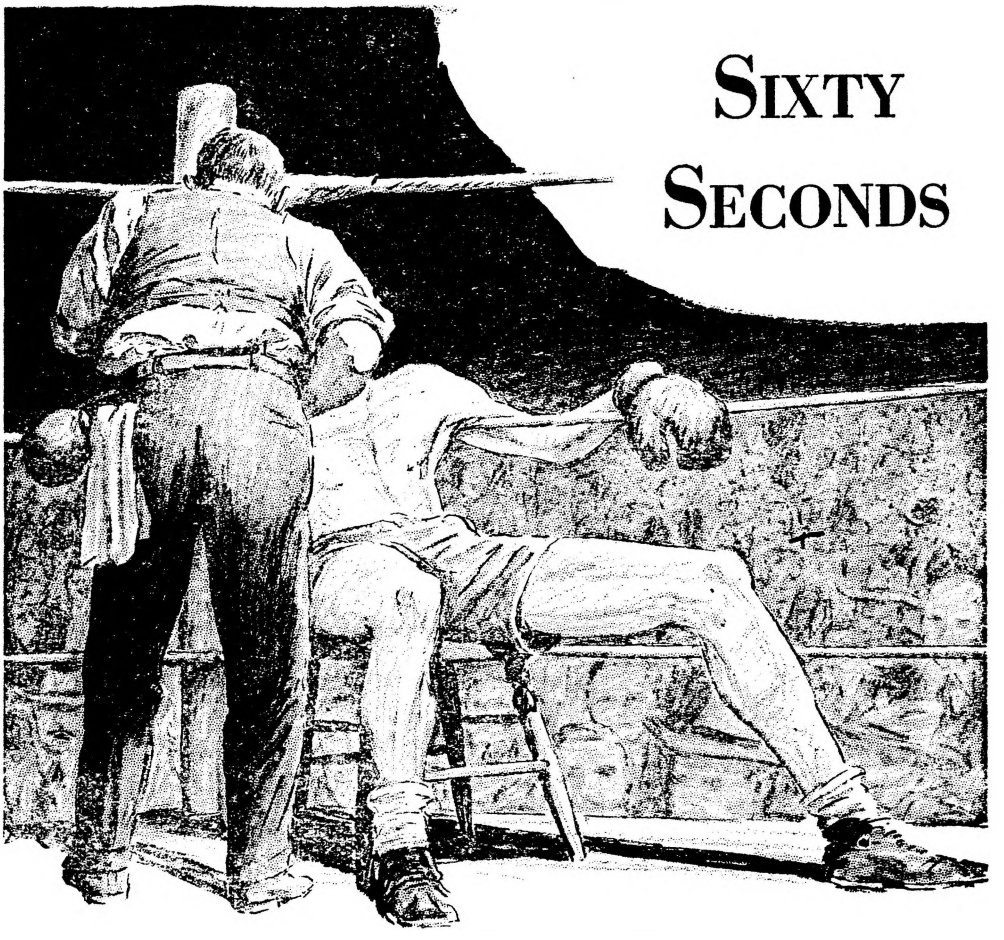
"You understand, when you accept this on account, the deal is closed."

McQuarrie nodded without taking his eyes from the money. He caressed it with his heavy fingers like a connoisseur examining an unrivaled silk of Shiu-chow.

"Ah, sir," he breathed, "at last! The trunk! The trunk!"

Suddenly, As the Challenger Caught a Certain Expression on His Trainer's Face, Things Began to Add Up

SIXTY SECONDS



By JACK KARNEY

WHEN the ovation for the Champ had dulled sufficiently for the announcer to be heard, he introduced the blond-haired Challenger, Johnny Cooper. The derisive cries rode the wind like summer thunder.

They laughed, taunted.

"Cry-baby, give out with the tears, cry-baby."

Johnny's lips hardened into a thin white line. He leaned back on his stool, closed his eyes against the jeering crowd.

He said to Bill Slade, his manager, "The hell with them."

But it hurt inside. He loved the fight game, the smell of resin and sweat, the crazy fans. For ten years he had given them everything he had, to the best of his ability. And now, in his final fight, they were riding him.

What hurt most was that it wasn't his fault, not really. It started with the fight he'd dropped to the tough Mexican, a close ten-rounder that could have been called a draw. Bill Slade had unburdened himself somewhat explosively. He howled to the reporters, appealed to the Commissioner, took a corner post on Jacobs Beach and told everyone within earshot that his boy had been robbed.

Johnny had begged him to cut it out. What good was kicking about a decision?

Like arguing with the baseball umpire, it got you nothing but a sore throat.

The next fight was an eight-rounder with a Polack from Chicago. Johnny beat the Polack decisively, five rounds to two and one even. Again Bill Slade cried, this time against the referee for permitting the Polack to use rough tactics. The reporters listened, smiled furtively and left.

The next day, Kelly of the *Tribune* said, "Win or lose Johnny Cooper is sure to beef. Lately he's become a cry-baby—"

THE bell rang and the crowd moved forward in their seats, expectantly, eager-eyed. Johnny came out slowly, remembering Bill Slade's orders to box the Champ for a few rounds. The order had surprised Johnny. It was his idea to come out punching. After all, he was no chippy. Ten years in the pro ranks had taken something out of him, whereas the Champ was in his prime. What was more, the Champ was a master at boxing. But Johnny was used to taking orders. Long ago he'd learned that the manager was his eyes, his brain.

Johnny came back to his corner. They'd spent the first round playing around, feeling each other out. Once the Champ had beat Johnny to the punch, sent him reeling from a short left to the head.

Johnny said, "I got no business boxing that baby, Bill. He's greased lightning."

Bill Slade stood over him, restless eyes in a long yellow face. "I'll call the shots, Johnny, you play 'em, huh?"

Johnny shook his head. It didn't make sense, an old-timer boxing a youngster who had sweet music in his legs, lightning juice in his long arms. At the end of the third round, Johnny's eyes were troubled. Something obscure and indefinable. Maybe it was the way Bill Slade worked over him, carelessly, somewhat sloppily, not like the sure-fingered handler of previous fights. Maybe it was the odd light in Bill's eyes. It was a smugly satisfied look, complacent.

"Bill," Johnny said, "what the devil goes on?"

Bill Slade fumbled with the sponge, dropped it, picked it up. Johnny shot him a curious look. "Bill, I'm going out slugging the next round, ain't I?"

"Two more rounds. The Champ'll slow down, then you can chop him up."

Johnny met the Champ in the center of the ring. The Champ moved around Johnny, stabbed him with a razor left, brought the right down in a choppy motion. Johnny went back. He blocked a left, never saw the right. There was a roar in his head and the red lights shimmied, broke into a thousand dirty pieces. Down on one knee, he shook his head, clearing his blurred vision. He pushed himself up. The Champ came rushing but Johnny grabbed and held, tied him up neatly. Over the Champ's shoulder, Johnny glanced toward his corner. Always when in trouble, he looked to Bill Slade for advice, for moral support.

Bill Slade stood there, stiff and unmoving, a look of triumph on his hawk-nosed face. Even as Johnny stared, the look disappeared as if wiped off with a hand. But Johnny had seen it and suddenly everything began to add up.

Bill had worked him hard during training, harder than he'd ever worked before. Johnny had protested at the extra miles of roadwork, the long rounds with his sparring partners, secret sessions away from the prying eyes of the reporters.

Bill had said, "You gotta be in the best shape of your life to beat the Champ. Before I get through, you will be."

In the dressing room an hour before the fight, Bill said, "Do ten rounds of shadow-boxing."

Johnny gaped. "Ten rounds! Gee, Bill, I feel kind of tight now—"

"Do you good. I want those muscles warmed up, ready to go. I know you never did more than four rounds before—"

The bell rang ending the round. Johnny sat down on his stool, watched Bill Slade through suspicious eyes. Now things were beginning to make sense. That tiredness in his arms and legs. He had been over-trained, deliberately. Anger closed his throat tight. Bill Slade had picked that argument with Willie, the regular trainer so that he alone would be in his corner tonight.

"Bill," Johnny said, trying desperately to keep the harshness out of his voice, "you got any money on this fight?"

Bill glowered. "Somebody been bendin' your ear wtih crazy stuff?"

"I was just asking. You've bet on fights before."

"On my own boy, yes, but not on the

other—" He stopped short, a sickly pallor spreading over his face.

Bitterness cluttered Johnny's thick voice. "I said nothing about betting on the other guy, Bill."

When Johnny came back after the next round, there was a dull ache in his shoulders. He was tired, desperately tired. He flopped onto his stool.

"Bill," he said, "how much you bet on the Champ?"

"You gone nuts?"

"It's my last fight. You knew it, so you bet your roll and your share of the fight."

Bill Slade blinked, his jaw muscles working, and Johnny knew he had hit the mark. He growled deep in his throat. All he could think of now was Bill Slade's ugly face. He wanted to smash it. He'd get another second. He'd holler loud and the Boxing Commissioners would come running from their ringside seats.

Bill Slade's eyes were clear, probing. "Don't do nothing crazy, Johnny. I'm with you all the way and you know it. Don't be a cry-baby all your life."

Johnny cursed under his breath. He went out for the next round and when he returned he knew Bill Slade had him over a barrel. Who'd believe Johnny Cooper if he squawked? Who'd believe the cry-baby? He couldn't prove anything. Later, after the fight, he could start an investigation. Maybe it could be shown that Bill Slade had bet on the Champ. And maybe not.

Johnny's breath came out unevenly. He watched Bill Slade work with the sponge and water. The man worked fast, accomplished nothing. He killed precious seconds with the sponge, leaving no time to rub new life into Johnny's throbbing muscles. Johnny cursed loud and fluently but Bill Slade didn't answer.

A cold tightness swelled up in Johnny's throat. What the devil was the matter with the Commissioners, the referee, the crowd? Couldn't they see how Bill Slade was stalling?

Rage sent Johnny running from his corner at the bell. He'd teach Bill Slade to bet on the other guy. He'd rip the Champ's head off, cost Bill every cent he owned.

Suddenly he was down on hands and knees, shaking the thunder out of his head. He ran his tongue over his lips, tasted blood. He took a full count, got up, feet braced, waiting. The Champ jumped a left into his face, crossed a right. Johnny caught it on his shoulder, let it slide off harmlessly. They exchanged light taps in the Champ's corner.

Johnny returned to his corner on wobbly legs.

"Give me a shot of air," he said to Bill, looking around for the miniature oxygen tank.

Bill said, "Told you the tank was on the blink."

Johnny's voice dripped sarcasm. "You told me what?"

"Maybe I forgot. Johnny, don't do nothing foolish."

The veins on Johnny's neck stuck out like blue wires. "You'll never collect that dough, Bill."

"I don't know what you're yappin' about."

In the tenth round Johnny came out of a clinch, a deep gash over his left eye. The heel of the Champ's glove had ripped open an old scar.

Exhaustion distorted Johnny's face when he returned to his corner at the end of the round. Bill Slade washed the wound, doused it with collodion, covered it with adhesive. Nice and easy, no time for anything else. In previous fights, Bill could fix a cut in half a minute. Now it took him the full rest period leaving no time for even a sip of water for his fighter.

THE Champ poked with his left, missed the adhesive, tried again and again to dislodge it. Johnny felt it slipping, a dribble of blood running down to his eye. Weariness and despair brought an involuntary sob from his lips. What kind of tape? Damn that Bill. The tape had probably been given a heat treatment, drying the gum.

Johnny went back to his stool, hot words on his bruised lips. But he never uttered them. Suddenly, working over him, was the old Bill Slade with his eighteen years of experience.. He squeezed water over Johnny's head, on his chest, ran his finger along the rubber top of the trunks, letting the cool liquid run down. He slapped Johnny's arm muscles, whispered advice into his ear.

Johnny's forehead puckered. Now what? Had he been wrong about Bill? No. He was positive—yet, this made no sense.

Bill said, "You can take that big mattress.

He's a sucker for a feint and a right cross. Make him come to you."

Johnny said, "I don't get it. I mean, this sudden change."

"You dreaming or something? Maybe I wasn't feeling good, maybe I was nervous, but, hell, you think I don't want you to win the crown?"

Round after round Johnny came back to find Bill ready to work. And he did, quickly, expertly, giving Johnny new wind, fresh muscles, confidence. Only there was something wrong, something intangible.

The warning whistle blew for the fourteenth round. Bill slapped Johnny's shoulder. "C'mon, kid, you can take him."

Johnny eyed him shrewdly. "You really want me to win."

Bill laughed hoarsely. "You talking from heat? Do I want you to win!"

The Champ came rushing, caught Johnny with a left and right to the head, sent him staggering with a two-fisted barrage of soggy red leather. Johnny grabbed and held with desperate strength. They broke and the Champ followed him relentlessly. Johnny bounced off the ropes. The Champ came under fast, hooked his right and the tape over Johnny's eye came away. The blood came down, blinding him.

He tried to blink away the blood. A glove burst in his eyes. Suddenly his legs were weak, the juice gone. The Champ's eyes were cold, lustreless. He exploded a right and a left and Johnny went to one knee. At nine he was up, feet solid on the dirty canvas, hands hanging at his side, defenseless. Through blurred eyes he saw the distorted face of the Champ coming closer, closer—The bell was sweet music to his ears.

Bill Slade helped him back to his corner, dumped the pail of water over Johnny's head. Bill pulled a bottle out of his pocket.

"Your shot-in-the-arm," he said, pulling out the cork.

Johnny knew it was the honey and water. Always when he needed a little extra energy he would be given the mixture. When he'd first started in the boxing game he had experimented with energy-producing mixtures. Ammonia and water made him terribly sick; sugar and water had no effect; honey and water was the answer to a weary fighter's prayer.

He lifted his head back. Bill raised the bottle to Johnny's dry, cracked lips. Their eyes met. Abruptly Johnny twisted his head to one side; slapped the bottle out of Bill's hand. He'd seen something in Bill's eyes.

Johnny cried, "You put ammonia in there?"

"Crazy fool!"

Johnny said, "I figured you had something up your sleeve, playing like you'd had a change of heart."

AS MATTERS had stood at the tenth round Bill couldn't know which fighter was leading on points. It was close, too close for a man who had bet every dime. So Bill had tried to win his fighter's confidence, enough for Johnny to take one good swallow. Smart Bill. He didn't need knockout drops. That would be too obvious. But ammonia and water, hell, who'd question a mixture used by hundreds of fighters. If he, Johnny, opened his mouth, they'd sing, "Cry-baby, cry-baby."

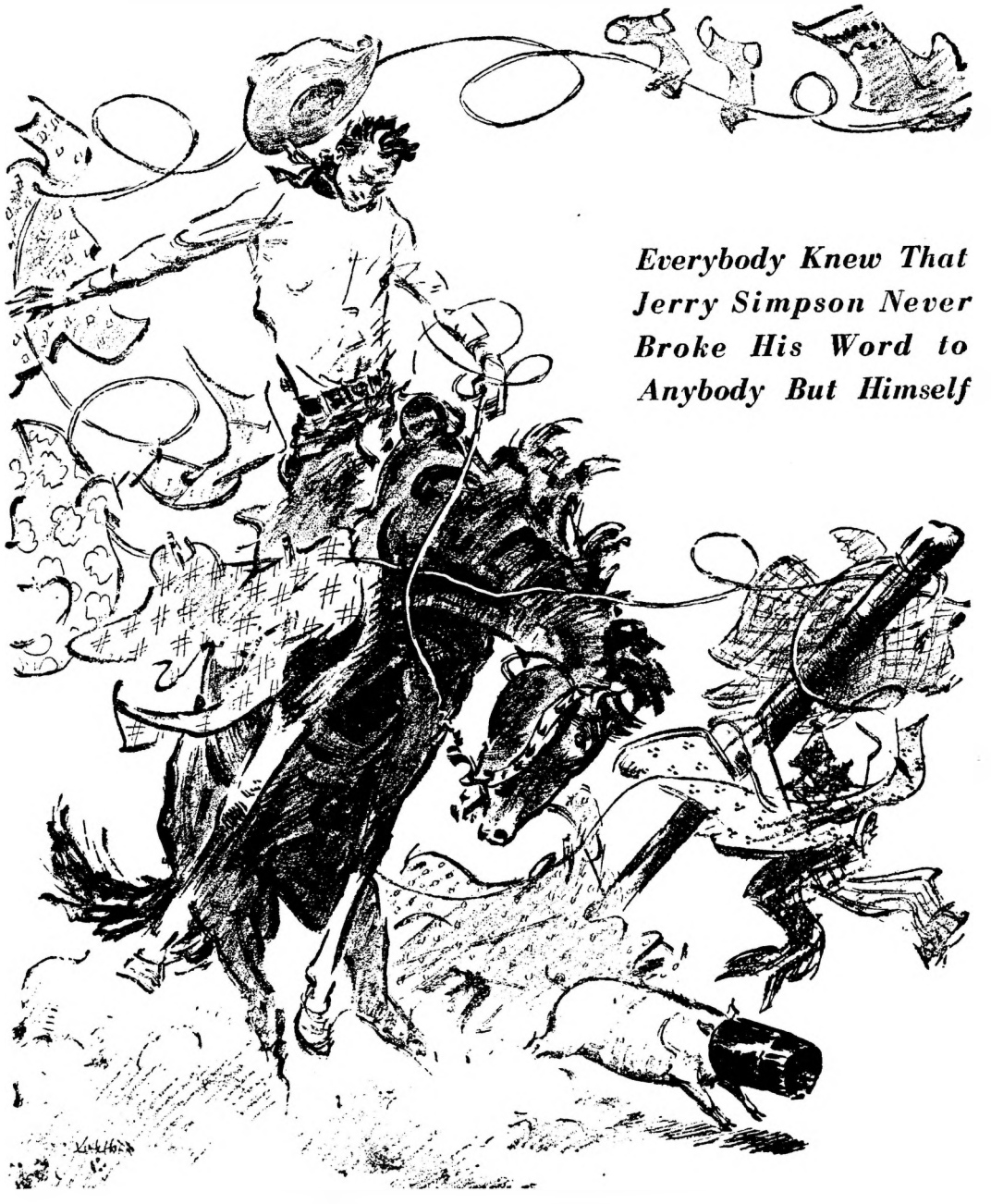
They touched gloves and the Champ flicked his left into Johnny's face. Johnny shuffled in slowly, not swinging, saving his strength. His feet scraped dryly on the wet canvas. The Champ landed four quick lefts, but Johnny bided his time. In his heart he knew that he couldn't stand even one fast minute. He was too tired, dried out.

For one second, he thought, it's my last fight. Win or lose, I'm through. What difference would it make if I dropped the decision? Then he thought of Bill Slade and a cold fury possessed him.

The Champ missed a left. Like a flash, Johnny bobbed under, hooked his left, every ounce of weight behind it. The Champ's mouth opened, the mouthpiece flying out. Johnny crossed his right. The Champ's knees buckled and he went down on his face, rolled over on his back. At six he turned around, at eight he was on one knee. Up at nine he stood helpless. Johnny walked close, feinted with his body, exploded his left and walked to a neutral corner. As the referee counted he looked for Bill Slade, but the manager was gone.

The crowd sang its praise as Johnny went back to his corner, thinking; Poor Bill, every nickel lost. Maybe he's gone out to look for a long rope—

A Pig and a Promise



Everybody Knew That Jerry Simpson Never Broke His Word to Anybody But Himself

By CADDO CAMERON

FOLKS said that Jerry Simpson would give you his shirt. Afterwards he might get you into a poker game and win it back along with your pants, all in a spirit of aggravating fun of course, since he rarely needed money. What he mostly needed was excitement, any kind of excitement.

But everybody liked Jerry, or nearly everybody, and it wasn't because he happened to be the only child of Cattleking Simpson, owner of the SX outfit which claimed oodles

of horses and cows and controlled a large slice of Northwest Texas. Men liked the rollicking redhead because they knew that underneath his foolishness he was all man and he never broke a promise—never. In fact, when necessary he'd raise plenty hell in order to keep a promise. Women liked him because. Most of them couldn't or wouldn't tell you why. Of course, mothers primly said that he was "wild" or "fast" and girls who had experienced him agreed with mamma on both counts, but they liked him in spite of, or because of, depending on the girl.

The only girl he knew who didn't like him, or said she didn't, was the one girl Jerry Simpson wanted to marry. Most everybody said that little Betty Jones could tame the wild six-footer and make him settle down if she was a mind to, but Betty didn't seem to want the job.

Today, Saturday, was going to be the big day. That's what Jerry thought while riding into Plains City on a tall red horse—Firefly, his best horse—dressed fit to kill in black broadcloth pants, fine white linen shirt, a twenty-dollar Stetson and forty-dollar boots. His cartridge-belt and holster were of hand-carved leather, too. Today, Saturday, Betty Jones would say "yes," Jerry promised himself. If not today, tomorrow, or next day, or—. He swore he'd stay in town and haunt her father's store until she did say "yes."

What's more, he'd behave himself every minute of the day and night. No drinking or gambling, none. No riding into places, onto sidewalks, or pitching his horse up and down Main Street. No yelling like a drunk Indian. No roping chimneys, outhouses, or fat men. No catching anybody's ducks and dropping them down anybody's well. No fighting—Jerry hesitated over that, gave it serious thought. Some of the ONT boys might be in town. Simpson's SX and Baker's ONT had a bloodless feud of long standing. But Jerry called to mind a few of Betty's many caustic comments about his escapades and resolved to behave, regardless. He'd even behave if Charley Watson was there, Charley being the ONT cow foreman. A good, steady man, Charley was working hard to get the inside track with Betty and not doing so bad, either. And above all, Jerry faithfully promised himself to stay out of jail this time, definitely outside.

Everybody knew that Jerry Simpson never broke his word to anybody but himself.

OLD Buckshot Jones, who had the double distinction of being Betty's uncle and the town marshal, was sitting on the porch of the Jones Mercantile Company. So was Betty. So was Charley Watson. Jerry saw them when still a hundred yards away. He glanced down at his shadow as it jogged along beside the road. He pushed his hat a shade more to the left and looked at the shadow again. Not bad. He rode sedately up to the rack and stepped down with a smooth dignity, a radical variation of his customary gusty and dusty entry into town.

Everybody spoke.

Charley Watson's broad and honest face was serious, too serious. "What's the matter, Jerry?" he inquired. "Sick?"

Jerry grinned at his husky tormentor, and drawled, "Yes, Charley, I'm feelin' porely. Gettin' stove up from ridin' the rough ones. Reckon I'll have to get me a job as cow foreman and keep a gentle horse under me like cow foremen always do."

Buckshot Jones chuckled.

Betty started a smile, stopped it short. But she couldn't keep it out of her snappy dark eyes.

Charley Watson flushed to a fighting red.

Damned poor start I'm making, thought Jerry. He figured he'd better get away from Charley and take Betty along.

So he said to her, "I need somethin' special. Will you help me pick it out?"

"Of course," she answered, getting up.

"Her father is in there," suggested Charley grumpily.

"He won't do," said Jerry pleasantly.

Old Buckshot Jones piped up, looking straight at Jerry, "You know the rules on Saturday. Shuck yo' hardware, boy."

The tall redhead stopped with one leg inside the door. He looked down at the craggy old marshal and thought of several things he'd like to say. On past occasions he had said them, too, and done time in jail for it; but not until old Buckshot had deputized every man in sight and disarmed him. Never any shooting, of course. He simply regarded this business as an infringement upon the rights of a citizen of Texas, whose citizens claimed more rights than most citi-

zens. Charley Watson's hip was naked so he was grinning, which didn't help much.

Jerry ran an eye along the hitchracks up and down the street. Plenty ONT horses in sight. He told Buckshot, "There's a lot of scalawags in town. I may need my gun to protect myself."

"Gimme," said the marshal.

"Last night I heard that old Santanta has jumped the reservation with forty bucks and four squaws and he's a-headin' this way. You'll need help and I won't fight Indians with my fists."

"Gimme," said the marshal.

"Another thing," persisted Jerry, "stove up the way I am, I may fall and break a leg, then I'll need a gun to put me out of my misery."

"Gimme," said Buckshot. "If you bust a leg, just squawl and I'll fetch you a sawed-off double-bar'l loaded to the eyes with rusty horseshoe nails. Gimme!"

Jerry looked at Betty. What he saw there influenced him to unbuckle his belt and hand it over.

Damned few women are worth it, he reflected.

Young Simpson glanced around the store. Betty's father was hammering in the back room—a good place for him. She went behind the counter and he sat on its edge so as to get as close to her as he could. She leaned back against a bolt of calico to get as far away as she could.

"I want to buy a diamond ring, a big diamond," declared Jerry.

Betty laughed. "You know we don't carry such things."

"And I want a weddin' ring—broad, heavy band, solid gold."

Betty only smiled at that. "No wedding rings."

"Too bad," said Jerry. "Now I'll have to send to Kansas City or Saint Louie and I'm in a hurry to get 'em."

He held out his hand. "Gimme."

"Give you what?"

"Your left hand. Gimme."

Betty put her hand behind her. "There's a scalawag in the store. I may need both hands to protect myself. Why d'you want my hand?"

"Gotta measure it for rings. Gimme."

Betty shook her head. "As I've told you thirteen—"

"*Six*teen."

"—sixteen times, no wild man can put a ring on *my* finger."

Jerry Simpson took off his hat, brushed a dismayed hand over his curly red head. When so minded he could look like a hurt boy. He did now.

Humbly, he asked, "D'you reckon you'll be feelin' thataway this evenin' when I come to take you to the dance?"

"Yes."

"And tomorrow mornin' when I walk you to Sunday school?"

Betty's eyes kind of opened. "Yes."

"And Sunday evenin' when I lead you to preachin'?"

Betty's eyes *opened.* "Yes."

Jerry laughed. "You *can* say yes, can't you?"

Betty eyed him thoughtfully. "D'you really mean that about Sunday school and church?"

"Shore do."

"Is it a promise?"

"Shore is."

"I'll be waiting."

He returned his hat to its customary place and cocky angle. "This is my lucky day. Well, I gotta go and put up my horse. So long, honey."

Betty's lips twitched. "So long, wild man."

JERRY looked for Charley Watson on the porch, but Charley wasn't there. He was sitting in the shade of Widow O'Leary's house directly across the street playing with the widow's pet pig, a little white shote. Four lines of Mrs. O'Leary's washing were strung across an adjoining vacant lot, flapping in the breeze. Jerry started to sing out something about the resemblance of cow foremen and pigs, but remembered in time that he was behaving today. So he simply untied Firefly and stepped aboard—or rather he had one foot in the ladder and the other in the air when it happened.

He didn't see what Charley Watson had done. He didn't know that Charley had shoved the little pig's head into a short length of stovepipe so that it stuck good and tight. He wasn't aware that Charley had aimed the stovepipe at Firefly's trim and impatient legs and turned the pig loose. The pig's field of vision was, of course, lim-

ited. Accordingly, it ran toward and in pursuit of the only visible spot of daylight —straight ahead. Charley's aim was good.

The trumpet effect of the stovepipe made of the pig's innocent squeal an unearthly and horrific sound. Firefly—a horse of spirit—had never heard anything like that, nor had he ever seen an ambulant stovepipe open at one end and plugged tightly at the other by a pig. Squeal, pig and pipe landed among Firefly's legs. All four legs went straight up and due north simultaneously. Jerry Simpson was present when this occurred, but the thought flashed through his befuddled mind that he wouldn't tarry long if he didn't hurry up and find his right stirrup. It was waving in the wind of Firefly's acrobatics. In the nick of time, fortunately, he caught the stirrup and set himself to do some serious riding.

It momentarily grew more serious, for a crowd was gathering. With keen instincts for fun or trouble, men came running from all points of the compass. And to make it doubly serious, Betty Jones had a grandstand seat.

The pig caroomed off a hitching post, spun around squealing louder than ever and returned over its original course. Pig, pipe and squeal again landed among Firefly's legs when they briefly touched the ground. All four legs went up and only one came down. That jolting twist sent a high ripple up Jerry's backbone. Having spent most of his adult life gentling broncs for his father, with a lot of contest riding thrown in, he thought he knew every bucking routine of which a horse was capable. Now he was fixing to change his mind. Firefly was a big stout horse in the pink of condition, a saddler with the blood of aristocrats in his veins. He wasn't supposed to know how to do any real pitching. After a few jumps Jerry wished he *did* know how. The red horse did everything wrong, but he did it in a big way. When he went up he went higher, and when he came down he came down harder than ordinary horses. Leather popped and windows rattled. So did Jerry's teeth. In the past folks had watched Jerry Simpson top the bad ones and declared that the boy had glue in the seat of his pants. He now swore that he had rocks in the seat of his saddle.

But he was making the ride of his life and he knew it. He had an audience, too. He was showing ONT tenderfeet how a SX man rode a horse. And Betty Jones was there. It was more than a red-blooded man could bear in silence. Life was good and he simply had to give voice to his feelings. Away went a resolution. He sounded the long yell and it was a honey.

Firefly was mad and that made him madder than ever. He tried to get out from under the yell. He executed a crab-like movement of high velocity that swept him across the street, scattered a bunch of spectators and plunged him into Widow O'Leary's washing. Jerry went along. Firefly penetrated three lines, taking them with him, then reared and whirled and catapulted through the fourth line taking it with him, too. Jerry was there. He was cussing now, for his head had tangled in a double-barreled white garment with ruffles on its muzzles. His eyes were hazy, but his ears were working. That roar he heard was the crowd.

Widow O'Leary suddenly filled the door, her face like a full moon in flames. She had a shotgun. When the widow saw who it was the fire changed to a mirthful glow. Jerry Simpson always paid generously for damage he wrought. She sat down the shotgun and herself and contributed her widow's mite to the roar.

IT WAS then that Charley Watson made a mistake. He led a shift of the audience the better to see the fun and Jerry saw *him*. Down came the redhead's rope. With the speed and skill of an expert he shook out a calf-size loop while in effect sitting a-straddle of of an active volcano. It was an open-country rope, sixty feet of hard-twist manila. Jerry's long arm whirled once and the rope whined through the air, straight and stiff with a hungry loop at its end. Charley Watson turned to run, tried desperately to dodge. The loop snapped shut below his knees, he landed on his face in the dust and it splashed like water. Jerry cast loose his line, for he wouldn't drag a man.

That little diversion sort of eased Jerry's feelings. Life was good again. Apparently it affected Firefly that way, too. The big horse shook and kicked himself free of

the clothes lines. He went up and came down in a final stiff-legged and colossal effort that seemed to drive Jerry's bones through the saddle's leather and clinch them in its wood.

Then Firefly rolled an eye back at Jerry and snorted, as much as to say, "You still there? Well, boss, you win. I'm hungry and I need a drink. Let's go."

So they went to the livery corral, straight down the middle of Main Street, heads up. They took an awful ribbing on the way, but Betty Jones smiled and waved and looked generally well pleased and that was all that mattered.

Jerry saw Charley Watson drag his feet into the ONT bar, spitting mud and profanity.

ON HIS way back up Main Street afoot, Jerry Simpson walked stiffly. He knew that the ends of all his bones were in splinters and he suspected that something had torn loose inside of him. As saloons came nearer, that suspicion became a certainty. Folks said that *any* Plains City liquor would heat and weld a man's busted innards, but Jerry's choice in potency rested between the SX Bar—his home bar—and the ONT Bar which was definitely off the range for a SX man. So he turned into the ONT.

A goodly crowd was there. Jerry knew that most of these citizens were packing the ONT iron, which provided a situation with possibilities. Of course, having promised himself to behave, he wasn't *looking* for trouble; but he figured that a promise like that hadn't ought to keep a man from going where trouble was, then protecting himself if he had to. Heads twisted on necks and there were mutterings. At the rear-end bar stood Charley Watson. Jerry stopped at the front-end bar so that they had an unobstructed view of each other.

The long redhead was very polite to the bartender, a bad sign. "I'd like a dram of Old Crow," he said, "a big dram, please."

The barman took a bottle from the back bar. "You're a lucky man, mister, he said. "Today we ain't got nothin' but Old Crow."

One of Jerry's near neighbors ordered a helping of Pine Top. The bartender set out the same bottle. "You win, mister. Today we ain't got nothin' *but* Pine Top."

Jerry wasn't sure that one drink had fixed him up inside. So he told the barman, "Reckon I'd better try a blend of Old Crow and Pine Top, if you don't mind."

The saloon man took down the same bottle. He shook it vigorously, and said, "A blend it is, mister. Shore glad you dropped in on us on a day when we ain't got nothin' but blended drinkin' whiskey."

Down the line some place, somebody said something about pigs in stovepipe hats. Jerry cocked his ears. Charley Watson repeated his remark and enlarged upon it. Their eyes met. There followed a telepathic exchange of ideas that resulted in a meeting of minds. The two men moved away from the bar and walked purposefully toward an inevitable collision.

Meanwhile, Buckshot Jones had seen Jerry go into the ONT. The old marshal accordingly went about the familiar task of gathering a posse of strong men.

Jerry Simpson hadn't forgotten his resolution to behave. Hastily he made a tally of the unfriendly faces around him and took the measure of the burly cow foreman now coming at him. Again he resolved to behave. That is, he'd behave in the way any SX man *should* behave in a den of ONT's.

The two men collided and neither gave an inch. Space was cleared for them, or they forcibly cleared it themselves. The fight was on and it promised to be a dilly. Fists landed and blood flowed in the first split-second of hostilities. The spectators

howled for more. The bartender reached for his private stock, got the wrong bottle and downed a slug of bar whiskey without detecting the difference — it was that exciting. Charley went down and bounced up. He brought one from the floor with him. Jerry stopped it and went down. He bounced up, too. That's when Buckshot Jones barged in with his posse and the *real* fighting began.

The marshal bellowed demands for law and order. The combatants ignored him and the spectators howled him down. He found no sympathy in the ONT, not a particle of it. Having lived and fought under six flags, Texas citizens resented and resisted what they considered encroachment upon their traditionally asserted right to fight whom, how, why, where and when.

Buckshot Jones hurled himself and his six deputies into the ruckus. Jerry and Charley took them on. By unspoken agreement, they fought side by side and back to back like blood brothers. The crowd didn't interfere, notwithstanding its vociferous sympathy for the minority. This fight belonged to Jerry and Charley. Had the crowd horned in, even in their behalf, they'd have taken *it* on, too.

This was war of movement. The battlefield shifted from the saloon to the sidewalk, to the street, down the street in a pall of dust past the Jones Mercantile Company where Betty again had a grandstand seat, and on to the city jail one hundred feet beyond. There it ended. Neither Jerry nor Charley surrendered or asked for an armistice. They simply quit because they had to. No man, not even an SX or an ONT could fight with his legs hobbled, his arms tied and two men sitting on him. But he could cuss and they did.

"Be still, damn it!" panted Buckshot Jones.

He scowled at the jail, scratching his head with a hand that was puffing up. "I dassn't pen you two wildcats in the same jail 'cause you'll go to fightin' and bust it all to hell and this is the onliest jail we got."

It wasn't much of a jail. As if ashamed of itself it hid in a clump of brush that screened it on all sides, while over it towered an ancient cottonwood with a projecting limb that had seen service as a gallows before the coming of law and order. Plains City citizens didn't believe in jails. They wouldn't pay taxes to build or maintain one of the things, so Buckshot Jones had built this one himself with the assistance of a few roistering cowhands arrested primarily for the purpose. The jail was of dry-rock construction. Built for the discomfort of tall men, it had one door and no windows, and a board roof that sat on top of the walls —anchored there by large rocks suspended by wires from its outside corners. Its ultimate capacity was eighteen standing drunks. If one went down, the others stood on him.

"Tell you what we'll do," said the old marshal after a moment's thought. "Tom and Slim, you-all throw the redhead in here and unloose the cuss. Bob, you go to the store and fetch me a trace chain and two padlocks. We'll picket Charley to one of Widder O'Leary's clothesline posts. They's good grazin' for him on that vacant ground and I'll get the widder to water him regular."

JERRY SIMPSON rested on the hard clay floor and gave himself a physical examination. Both eyes were swelled to slits and no doubt black, his lips were puffed and bleeding. He found other cuts, bruises and abrasions too numerous to inventory. However, he was gratified to unearth no broken bones unless there were some in his hands. Of course, there might be a skull fracture, but he couldn't tell much about that through a lump already an inch high and going higher.

Jerry felt to see if he had a hat— No hat—no shirt—boots stomped to ribbons—practically no pants. Reviewing what had happened and the certain effect on Betty Jones, he added to himself: *And no girl.*

He sure had made a mess of things. Of course, Charley Watson really started it. But he didn't blame Charley. That pig-in-a-stovepipe thing was a larrupin' fine idea. Wished he had thought of it himself and worked it on old Charley. He didn't feel hard toward anybody, Buckshot or anybody. He didn't even feel hard toward himself. *What the hell!* Life was good and he aimed to get all he could out of it. Of course, he hated to lose Betty. That hurt a-plenty. Reckoned he could take it, though. Always had been able to take it from a man or a bronc, so he ought to be able to take it from a slip of a girl.

Sitting on the floor with his bruised and naked back against the rock wall, Jerry looked the jail over. Nothing there that he hadn't seen before. Knew every rock in the damned place. One thing was different, though. He had never sat in this jail and felt a spirit of independence building up inside of him as it was now. Of course, he was sober now. Maybe that had something to do with it. Anyhow, this spirit of independence cried out for expression—not in thoughts or words—in action, in deeds of violence. Then he thought of Betty Jones and felt neither independent nor violent. Hell of a mess he'd made!

ALL of a sudden Jerry Simpson thought of something else—his promise! Sunday school—preaching. Old Buckshot would keep him in jail until Monday morning—always did. Damned if he would this time!

Jerry stood up. That is, the lower five and one-half feet of him did. The upper six inches couldn't. He bumped his sore head and cussed. Angrily, he put his palms against the roof and pushed. It didn't budge.

Then it dawned upon him that he was trying to lift the whole roof and the four big rocks hanging from its outside corners. He remembered another little thing, too. While in town a few nights ago, just for devilment he had sneaked out to the jail and substituted a light cobblestone for the heavy rock at the northwest corner, figuring that it might come in handy some time. He lost no time in testing that corner. It lifted fully eight inches and Jerry found that by putting all he had left into the effort he could hold it up with one hand and a comparatively undamaged spot on his head. With his other hand he took flat stones from the top of the dry-rock wall and cribbed the roof so as to support it there.

Jerry Simpson moved back to get his breath and look the situation over. The road to freedom and the keeping of his promise invited him to depart and drift, but the road passed through a ten-inch crack and *he* couldn't do that. Right now, time was his worse enemy. From experience he knew that at any moment citizens in groups of three or more would gather at the jail, there to sit and smoke and lie about what all he had done and the men he had killed, talking loud enough for him to hear every word.

One such kangaroo court had recently sentenced him to swing, while he lay inside nursing a hangover and hoping he would. Had to get out of here, and quick. By standing tiptoe and straining his already tortured muscles he managed to enlarge the opening to a point where he figured he might be able to squirm through. Tight squeeze, though. To play safe he ought to work a few more rocks out of the wall, but old Buckshot had interlocked those flat stones so skillfully as to make it hard to take out a small section and time was mighty precious. He'd chance it. That damned roof balanced up there like a rat trap. Sure hoped the thing didn't come down on him.

Jerry saw that he'd have to go through on his back, since the opening was more than five feet up and his body would have to hang from the knees so as to get his hands on the ground. Carefully he reached up and pulled himself into the opening, a tough job and those rocks were sharp. Wished he had a shirt or something. He got along pretty well until the top of the wall reached the upper part of his calves and it looked for a moment as if he'd be able to pull his legs through the crack and drop to the ground feet first. A big mistake. While hanging onto the roof and struggling to jackknife his legs and feet through the opening, he kicked the cribbing out. The roof snapped down onto his legs just below the knees!

Fortunately, at that point he had taken enough rocks off the wall so that the weight didn't rest on his shins. He could move his legs a little, but couldn't get his feet

through. He did manage to reach the cobblestone and get it out of the wire, but the big rocks were too far away. While they were in place he couldn't lift the roof an inch from that position. He couldn't loosen the stones under his calves. He tried all these things in desperation, sweat dripping from his half-naked body. He couldn't do a thing but dangle from the knees with his hands on the ground to ease the strain, and cuss.

THERE came footsteps on the path through the brush to the jail. Jerry Simpson closed his eyes and groaned. He'd *never* live this one down. He'd have to leave Texas, leave North America, go to Argentina, or go to hell. *That's* where he belonged.

He heard a gasp, opened his eyes—Betty Jones!

He closed his eyes again.

"Why—*Jerry!*" cried the girl. "Are you hurt?"

He opened one eye. He peered at her through two mounds of puffed and blackened flesh. "Nope, nary a scratch. You can up-end a Simpson, but you can't hurt him."

"What—on earth—*are* you doing?"

Jerry opened his second eye. It wasn't any better off than his first. "Before a man makes up his mind to marry a girl he'd ought to look her over from every angle. You look good to me from *any* angle. Marry me, won't you, honey?"

Betty Jones laughed. Tears overflowed her eyes and ran down her cheeks. Her knees sagged. She dropped to the ground and laughed in greater comfort.

Jerry couldn't flush any redder. Most of his blood was already sloshing around in his head.

Presently, she gasped, "I'll declare to goodness, I never in all my life saw anything like it! Why did you try to get out of jail? You've never tried it before."

"Huh! You've already forgot about Sunday school and preachin'."

Betty sobered instantly. "Why, Jerry Simpson! You were just trying to keep your promise, weren't you?"

"Maybe so and maybe not."

The girl lowered her voice. "Look, Jerry. How can I help you to get out, or get back in?"

"I ain't gettin' back in," growled Jerry. "Now, let's see. You can't lift this dadblamed roof. You can't tear this infernal wall down. You can't untwist the wires that hold those blasted rocks to the roof. Mmmph! Why didn't I fall in love with a two-fisted, six-foot woman. But you *can* fetch a pair of wire cutters from the store and cut those rocks down. Burn the breeze, honey. Any minute now we're due to have a congregation of the cussedest citizens in all Texas. Git!"

But Betty didn't. Elbow on her knee, she cradled her chin in a palm and looked dreamily at the upside-down redhead.

"Hurry, sweetheart!" he pleaded.

Betty sat still.

Jerry Simpson's fingers clawed handsful from the earth. If that girl didn't get a move on, he'd dust her like he'd dust a red-eyed cow!

"Looky, honey," he implored her. "You don't want a bunch of scoundrels to catch your mighty-near husband thisaway, do you? Shake a l—er—skeedaddle, damn it!"

Betty Jones smiled, at once bewitching and devilish. "Before I do anything, Jerry, will you make me a promise?"

"NO!"

"Just a teeny promise, Jerry?"

"No—er—that is— No-o-o."

"Just a teeny-weeny promise, Jerry?"

He cogitated. Notwithstanding the passage of time and the frightful strain it imposed, he cogitated. Promises were mighty serious business. He didn't make them rashly to anyone other than himself.

"No," he said, "but what sort of a promise is it?"

With one little brown forefinger, Betty Jones traced a design on her pink lawn skirt. She seemed intent upon that alone, but she asked, "Will you promise to behave like you think a married man should behave?"

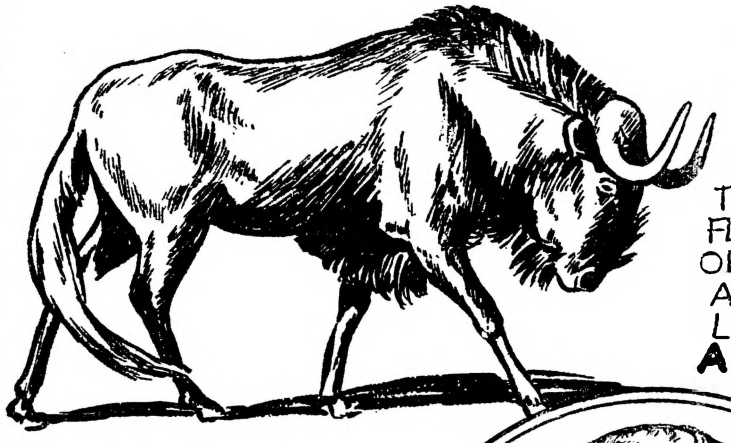
"Huh?"

Her eyes met what was left of his.

"Promise you *that?*" he burst out. "Hell, yes! Oh, excuse me, honey. What I mean—yes, I promise. Now come and kiss me. Hurry, you ornery little devil!"

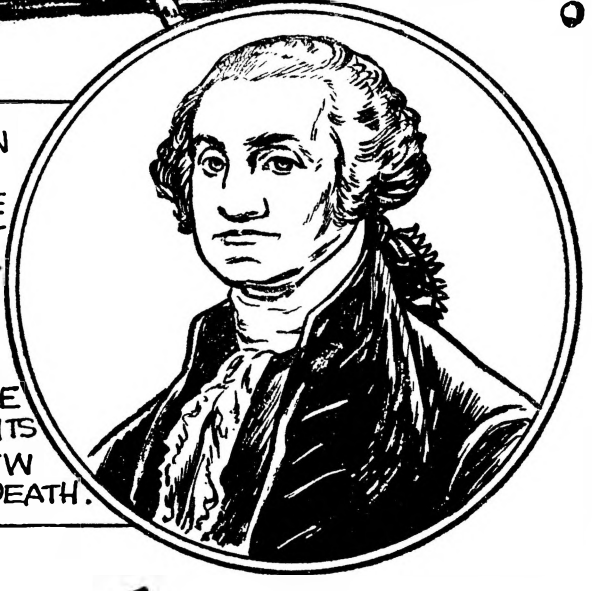
Betty did.

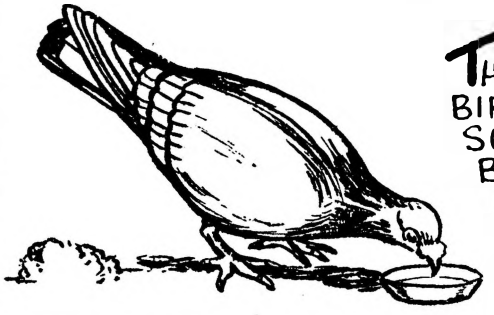
Curioddities By Weill



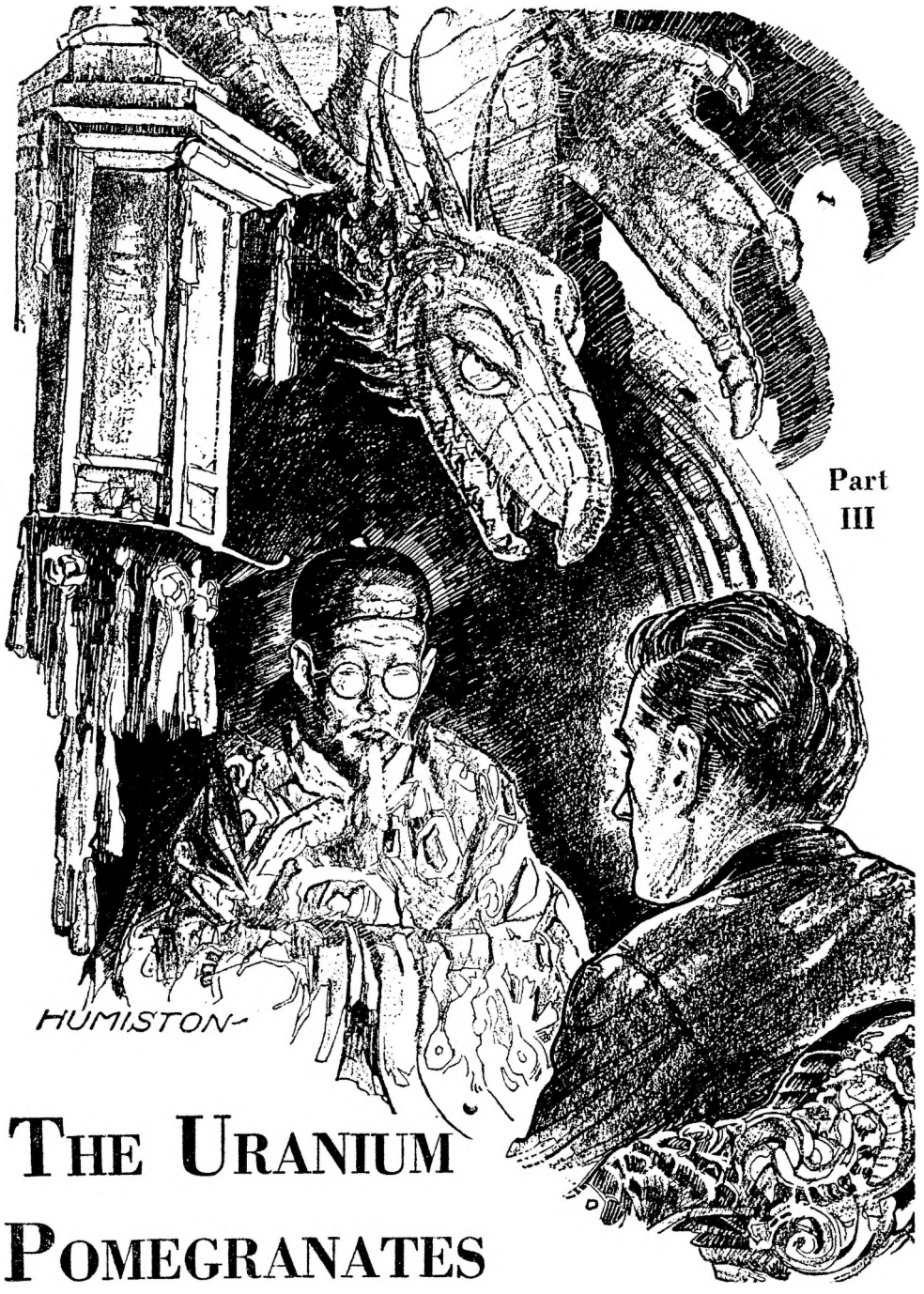
THE GNU OF AFRICA HAS A HEAD LIKE AN **OX**, THE BODY AND FLOWING TAIL OF A **HORSE**, AND THE LIMBS OF AN **ANTELOPE**!

GEORGE WASHINGTON LAID THE CORNER-STONE OF THE WHITE HOUSE IN 1792, BUT *HE NEVER ACTUALLY OCCUPIED IT!* UPON ITS COMPLETION IN 1799, HOWEVER, HE IS SAID TO HAVE WALKED THROUGH ITS ROOMS ONLY A FEW DAYS BEFORE HIS DEATH.





THE PIGEON IS THE **ONLY** BIRD THAT DRINKS BY SUCTION! ALL OTHER BIRDS TAKE THE WATER INTO THEIR MOUTHS AND THROW THEIR HEADS BACK *IN ORDER TO* **SWALLOW**!



Part III

THE URANIUM POMEGRANATES

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

THE STORY SO FAR

BACK home after three years of war, Bud Harper was inclined to think selling bonds was a pretty dreary life; an envelope meant for someone else and containing five one-thousand-dollar bills pitched him right back into a life of action.

The envelope had been meant for Donna Bryan, whose father had long been in China

In the Safety of One Man Seemed to Be the Safety of All Mankind

and was the discoverer of a vast deposit of radioactive ores in the Gobi Desert, and when Bud met her to deliver it, he was caught up in the menace that encircled her. Her father had disappeared—together with his world-shaking secret—and Donna was determined to find him. James Crunkleton, a San Francisco broker, was willing to help her and the five thousand dollars was an earnest of this. But Crunkleton died the very day he sent her the money, after having appointed one Mike Dolan as her bodyguard, and after warning Harper that a certain Murdock was not to be trusted.

Murdock knew that the secret of her father's discovery lay in the four pewter pomegranates which Donna had in her possession. His men tracked down Mike and were trying to force him to tell Donna's whereabouts, when he caught them off guard and escaped. .

Meanwhile, an aged Chinese man made contact with Bud and told him to tell Donna that her father was in Seattle and to lose no time in getting into communication with Dr. John Lee at Halfway Hill. Bud and Donna located Halfway Hill but learned that Dr. Lee was in Seattle. Then Bud called Crunkleton's office and got in touch with Ivan Muratov who was evidentally working with the Russian government and with Ivan Muratov who was evidently Bryan. While Bud was interviewing Muratov, Donna was picked up on the way back to her apartment by two of Murdock's men. Bud returned to the apartment and, after Donna's driver arrived without her, he and Mike commenced to search for her. They found her in a sanitarium and while Mike went to phone the police, Bud helped Donna out of one of the back windows. When Mike did not return, Bud went to investigate. He found him slumped in a chair with a pool of blood on the floor below him and at the same time something hit him with terrific force and knocked him unconscious.

IX

HARPER wakened from dreams to physical pain.

The dreams had been delightful, though he could recall them only vaguely. Mike Dolan had figured in them, and Donna Bryan, and the old Chinaman with wispy mustaches who had talked with him. They carried a singular sense of reality. He even

woke with a vivid memory of something the old oriental had just said to him:

"Solitude is not in the hills, nor tumult in the market-place, but in man's heart."

A man might carry peace or tumult in his heart, but Bud Harper could not contain the pain that greeted his wakening, nor quell it. He lay groaning over and over until it dimmed and died out; a queer, intolerable pain that seemed to fill his whole body. After it went away, his head still hurt, and his left side, under his arm, hurt; but this he could stand. He still had an abiding horror of the other and greater agony, like fire.

Now came a curious scene; it could not have been real, of course, yet there were some very singular points of reality about it. Bald-headed Martin stood looking down at him, thought Harper, his haggard features venomous with hatred. With him was another man, a bearded stranger, whom he addressed as Doc.

"Do it again," he was saying viciously. "Give him another dose of it, Doc. I'd like to see the guy suffer till he sweats, for what he did to me."

"It is dangerous," said the other man. "Once will do no harm, but—"

"Never mind, damn him! Go ahead."

The bearded man held a hypodermic syringe. He moved, as though to lean over the bed, when he was checked by a voice.

"No, no! You must not! I forbid it!"

Harper recognized the somewhat sibilant accents of the old Chinaman; here came the black-clad old man himself padding forward. One arm was in a sling. With the other slender ivory hand he touched the arm of the bearded man, and spoke again.

"You must not, Kastner! Remember, I forbid it."

Kastner was impressed, and drew back with a nod of assent. Martin cried out hotly.

"You damned interfering old polecat! Get out of here or I'll have you thrown out! Doc, you're taking orders from me. Go on, and hurry up."

The old Chinaman regarded him, ivory features placid. "You are determined? Very well. But you mistake. Dr. Kastner does not take his orders from you. I shall have to take action."

His figure seemed to dissipate and melt away. Another grew in its place; the suave, perfectly attired figure of Murdock, whose eyes were very blue and crinkled in their half-smile as he spoke.

"No, Kastner, no. It is ended; let him recover. Martin, you wouldn't venture to oppose my wishes, I hope?"

The quiet voice tightened; the intensely blue eyes assumed a tense concentration. Martin shivered and drew away, mumbling, and departed with his heavy tread, terror in his haggard features. Murdock nodded at the doctor.

"Very good, Kastner. We must take care of him—for the present. I have a reason. She has escaped us, but that was not your fault."

HARPER was aware of an interim. Again he wakened, this time to darkness, at the sound of voices. Murdock was conferring with bald Martin in low tones; he found their words very distinct, and listened drowsily, comprehending yet not caring.

"Usually, Martin, you carry out my instructions. I do not understand this failure."

"Couldn't help it, Jim," the bald head replied uncomfortably. "We can't get in the apartment. Two men there; Russians. We know she's not there, and Dolan's dead—"

"And you let yourself fail, because Muratov has put a couple of his men there? I'm surprised—"

"Don't be," came the bitter response, "I've got only a couple of chuckle-headed fools to work with. This isn't Shanghai, Jim."

"Granted. But I want you to go over that apartment with a fine-tooth comb and do it at once. You'll have plenty of help tomorrow, when the others reach here from Seattle with Bryan." The quiet, urbane voice became edged and severe. "That fool John Lee got a lesson up there, and a sharp one; these Chinks have learned not to interfere with white men. Well, give Muratov a lesson and one he'll remember, understand? At all costs."

"This is Frisco, not Shanghai," said Martin warningly.

"Don't be a bloody ass; act! We have one pomegranate here; the other, possibly all three others, are in that apartment. Your job is to get them. If you've lost your nerve,

say so and I'll get someone else to fill your shoes."

"Oh, my nerve's all right," snarled Martin. "If you want to take off the limit, that suits me; I can do it. But we're taking on an awful load. First this John Lee, then Muratov, and now you want to thumb your nose at the police! All right, if you say so. Got any report on the girl?"

"Yes; a few minutes ago. I know where she is and how to reach her. I'll attend to that myself. Jim Murdock is able to handle a few Chinese and a handful of these blasted Russians; you give Muratov the lesson he needs, and if he makes any further trouble I'll take him in hand personally and finish him. Things are really in very good shape, Martin."

"They might be if you weren't so set on the girl personally, Jim. We could sell out for big money."

"Precisely my intent; but first we must have something to sell. You go through that apartment and secure it. Do it tomorrow night without fail, and make a clean job. . . ."

The voices died away. Another hallucination, thought Harper, and fell asleep.

AGAIN Harper wakened, this time to less pain, and feeling remarkably like himself. However, he heard Murdock's voice, and did not open his eyes.

"How does he seem, Kastner?"

"All right. That knife-cut in his side isn't bad; his head is good enough. The man is tough as nails."

"I can waken him? He'll be normal?"

"Quite. The effect of the drug has disappeared entirely."

"Good. Now, Bryan will be here tonight sometime; you understand the case?"

"I think so. Very easily taken care of."

"Yes. But there's something else. I had a look just now at the Chinese fellow who was taken in yesterday by your sanitarium people."

"I admitted him personally, Murdock," said Kastner. "He's a well-to-do business man, has a big store in Grant Street, and is a good paying client. Liver trouble."

"That's all right, quite all right," purred Murdock amiably. "The point is, I think he's a plant, possibly to get in touch with Harper here."

"You don't say! I investigated him thoroughly—"

"Oh, he would look okay; we're dealing with clever rascals. Tell your people not to interfere with the old fellow. Let him do as he likes—let him reach Harper if he so desires. Understood?"

"As you say, of course."

"Then I'll wake the fellow up. I'm anxious to speak with him."

Harper opened his eyes for an instant, to get a sight of Kastner. The same bearded man who had appeared in his first hallucination! He closed his eyes at once. After a moment Murdock was gently shaking him, and he allowed himself to be wakened by degrees.

It was broad daylight. He lay in a rough, unfinished room, beams and shingles overhead. He met the eyes of Murdock, who sat on a chair beside him.

"Oh, you!" he exclaimed. "Where am I?"

"In a room over this garage," Murdock answered pleasantly, half-smiling, "where you left one of my blockhead assistants badly injured."

"Glad of it," Harper said. He was clear-headed, quite. "They bungled the job; I found Miss Bryan's hat in the car."

"Yes. I've had to work with very poor assistance," said Murdock. "However, things promise smoother going. May I help you to sit up? Here's a glass of orange juice."

Presently Harper was sitting up, pillows behind him. The drink was delicious. Murdock put cigarettes and matches on the little bedside table, then leaned back and nodded.

"Everything comfortable?"

Harper smiled. "Amazingly so. Why?"

"My method of approach," Murdock said blandly, and lighted a cigar. "You are a far more clever person than I gave you credit for being, at our first meeting. Could it be you, by any chance, who abstracted those two pomegranates from my hotel room?"

"Which two?" asked Harper.

"That's the question. Where's the other one?" As he spoke, Murdock nodded at the table. Harper turned and saw a pewter pomegranate sitting on it. He reached around, took it, examined it, and recognized it as the one he had purchased at San Rafael. For a moment his head felt dizzy, then cleared anew. It had been in his pocket still when things went to smash here.

Garage! He must be in a room over the sanitarium garage. He let his hand fall, and Murdock, reaching forward, took the trinket from him. He perceived dimly that the man thought it to be one of the two taken from the room at the Hatfield.

"Yes, the other," Murdock went on. "Where is it?"

"I gave it to Miss Bryan."

ACCEPTING this, Murdock nodded again and puffed at his cigar.

"I'm afraid Martin is slipping," he observed. "Under no circumstances would I have permitted force to be used against the young lady. I hope you believe me."

"Well," said Harper, "you're a good liar, anyhow. What are you after?"

"The other pomegranate. And two more like them."

"Turn Donald Bryan loose, and I'll get them for you myself. No one else can."

The blue eyes narrowed, bored into him hard.

"Four of those pomegranates exist, Harper—all, like this one, bearing inlaid studs of silver and copper. You know that they contain a secret."

"Vaguely. Where and how, I have no idea."

"You can be made to talk," Murdock said calmly. "Perhaps you remember suffering from Martin's rancor; he is anxious to make you suffer further. It is not a pleasant method; these injections cause the entire body to burn and writhe. Suppose I turn you over to him? I think you would soon talk and tell what you know."

Harper grimaced. "What would that get me? Nothing. Now, I'm not lying, Murdock; I know nothing about the secret those pomegranates contain. I know you want them. To save myself, to save Bryan, I'm willing to turn over the other three to you—after Bryan is freed."

Murdock eyed him for a long moment, thoughtfully. Under that look, Harper began to sweat. He relaxed on the pillows and kept his gaze on the cigar-smoke. It was difficult to resist the intensity of those blue eyes with pin-point pupils, but it could be done. He reached out to the table and took a cigarette and matches.

"Hm! It is worth a thought," observed Murdock. "Bryan will not get here until sometime tonight. He may not desire to leave me. What then?"

Harper lit the cigarette. Murdock had taken the lure, at least.

"That's not my affair," he rejoined coolly. "Look here, now. I'm on the level. You're not—at least, I'll not take you for granted. Instead of butting into a wall, why not be sensible?" He thought fast, as he spoke. Donna had somehow got away, he knew from what he had overheard; why not, then, reassure her as to his own safety? Suppose you get in touch with Muratov," he went on, "and tell him exactly what I've proposed. Arrange to hand Donald Bryan over to him. You can no doubt manage to do it, somehow, somewhere. The moment he's safe in Muratov's hands, I'll lead you to the other three pomegranates."

"You don't honestly expect me to trust you to perform?"

"Yes. You're too smart to do anything else; smart enough to know when a man is in earnest," said Harper. "You're after the location of those ore deposits. Muratov is not; his aim is to secure Bryan's safety. That's mine also, acting for Miss Bryan."

"Oh! Your interest in this matter?"

"One of friendship for her, and nothing else. Muratov offered me a hundred thousand for the secret, as an advance only—and was refused. Now figure it out for yourself."

THE cigarette was distasteful. Harper snubbed it out, and closed his eyes. Murdock pushed back his chair and rose.

"My friend, I may take you at your word—so far as talking to Muratov about it is concerned. I'll see you again later. Meantime, a guard remains on the stairs, there is no window on which to practice your agility, and if you leave that bed you'll be in trouble."

Murdock walked to the door, left it ajar as he passed out, and descended the stairs beyond, exchanging a few words with a man there as he departed.

Harper sighed and relaxed. Murdock believed that bit of pewter to be one of the four genuine pomegranates, and upon this supposition Harper rested his entire scheme, such as it was.

How far to trust those hallucinations, those fragments of conversation, that had

come to him, he could not tell. From them he gathered that Donna had gained safety, though Murdock knew where she was and seemed quite complacent about it. She was not at the apartment, however. Exploring himself, Bud Harper discovered that his bandaged head was sore but not particularly painful, and he had a bandaged wound in his left side. Knife, Kastner had said. He had been knifed and knocked out at the same time, just as—

Mike Dillon! The hideous memory of Dillon's ghastly face and the blood on the floor struck him. Dillon dead, killed in the very act of reaching for the telephone—

It was a bad moment. Harper groaned; he squirmed until his side hurt, and relaxed again. After all, this was war; he had seen other men, better friends than Dillon, laid out dead from Jap shells or bullets. Yet it hurt. It would always hurt.

The orange juice had done him good; he felt remarkably clear in the head. He must have been here for a day or two. The unknown Dr. John Lee had obviously gone to Seattle in order to rescue Donald Bryan, and had failed; Murdock had gone there himself, and Lee had been hurt.

Of Muratov, nothing—except that he had occupied the apartment and put a couple of his men there. Before he could get to work, the harm had been done and Donna gone. Harper groaned to himself at thought of how he and Dillon had bungled that evening's work; hindsight, as always, was clearer than foresight. If only, on finding that white beanie in the car, they had cleared out, called Muratov! But, he recalled, he had tried to reach Muratov from the apartment, and had failed.

What about Murdock's suspicion that some Chinaman, here in the sanitarium, had been planted by John Lee in order to communicate with Harper? Might be something to that; hard to say. Nobody, it seemed, was being very efficient in this affair except Murdock himself.

Harper lay wondering about those hallucinations that had come to him. In the first, Kastner had appeared—and he had seen Kastner in the flesh, later, exactly as he had appeared. Had it been a hallucination, then? Assuredly his old Chinese friend had not been here in person. It was all a wild, chaotic fancy, except for that frightful memory of the dead face of Dolan, which haunted him.

His wonder deepened. She had known, all the time; standing there clinging to the window-sill, she had told him to hurry, that there was danger, that Dolan was here with them in the darkness—

Harper groaned, shut it out of his mind, and dropped off into uneasy slumber.

LATER in the day, he came awake and found a tray on the table beside him; he ate and drank ravenously, and examined his prison. A chair, a lavatory in one corner, a pane of glass like a miniature skylight in the roof—nothing else. His clothes were tossed carelessly in a heap on the floor.

Feet scraped the uncarpeted stair-boards. Murdock stepped into the room, came toward the bed, and nodded to Harper.

"Well, I had a talk with Muratov," he said briskly. "By phone. He wants to speak with you. We'll call him back—eh?"

"Good idea," said Harper.

Murdock sat down, urbane, amiable. "How did you discover this place?"

"Your bald-headed stooge, when he had picked up Miss Bryan, told his driver where to go. He was overheard. In return—how was Dolan killed?"

"By a thrown knife. Same way you were nicked in the side."

"You think you can get away with that sort of thing here in San Francisco?"

Murdock bit at a cigar and surveyed him blandly.

"I don't understand. The police were called in; they investigated. That Dillon had been killed in the act of robbery was self-evident; he had a record. All is quite open and aboveboard."

Harper was wordless before this absolute assurance; the man's suavity, his air of smooth command, was maddening. From whatever angle he was approached, he seemed invulnerable, his wily cunning seemed proof against any attack. It was incredible.

"You'd do well for yourself, very well indeed," suggested Murdock, "if you were working for me, instead of for a shadowy ideal. Eh?"

"I'm too young," Harper retorted mockingly. "Just a young man. You said so."

"Touché! I've been known to make mis-

takes," Murdock chuckled slightly. "Who is this person John Lee?"

"I don't know. We never saw him or contacted him," said Harper truthfully.

"There is so much you don't know! I might enlighten you a bit," came the amiable offer. "I took Donald Bryan out of Japanese hands, for example. I've been good to him. They tried in every way to win his secret, and failed. He has promised to give it up, provided I bring him and Donna together. That's one reason I wanted her here, when he arrived from Seattle."

Harper said nothing. Murdock interpreted his silence aright.

"You disbelieve me? I had, still have, a personal interest in Miss Bryan, a far greater one than you imagine," he went on musingly. He seemed deftly circling around some unuttered point, some unknown fact; it caused Harper anger and alarm. "She is the most remarkable woman in the world. I have every reason, in fact every right, to protect her, even from herself and her sad hallucinations, as I explained to you at our first meeting. That is why I wish to find her at once."

Harper was afraid of this fencing; he decided to puncture the whole thing.

"Why lie, Murdock? You know where she is now; you are even confident that you can reach her easily."

Murdock flushed. "Why damn your soul!" he said, his voice thin, sharply edged with surprise and menace. "Are you a mind-reader?"

"At times, yes."

"Like hell! You get dressed and come along. When you're talking to Muratov, don't say where you are, where this place is —or you'll be stopped suddenly and unpleasantly."

"Okay." Harper threw back the covers. "It's a straight deal, no tricks; the other three pomegranates in exchange for Bryan."

He stood up and dressed. He was weak and shaky, he found; unpleasantly so. He passed a hand over his rough face.

"I could do with a shave," he observed. Somewhat to his surprise, he saw that nothing except the pomegranate had been taken from his clothes; his money was untouched; even Donna Bryan's crushed, pathetic little "beanie" was still in his coat pocket.

"I've a new suit waiting for me and I sure need it," he said. "Why don't you send and pick it up for me?"

"Can do," Murdock said agreeably. "Where?"

Harper told him, and Murdock nodded. "Have it here this evening. All ready? Then be careful of those stairs. The damned things are steep—just boards nailed across risers."

HE USHERED Harper out at the door. A man sat outside, pistol in lap—a guard. The stairs were narrow, steep indeed, and ran down the garage front to the door there. With Murdock and the guard at his heels, Harper descended and came into the open air. Martin stood there awaiting him with a snarling look.

It was mid-afternoon. Harper drank in the fresh air gratefully. Obeying a gesture from Martin, he walked toward the back door of the house, and looked up at the porch roof; the ladder was still in place against it. By that ladder, Donna had doubtless escaped.

They all crowded into the kitchen, and up the back stairs to the rear hall, Martin in the lead. Then down the hall and around the angle to the doctor's office, where Kastner sat writing. At their appearance he rose and left. Martin motioned Harper to the desk. He sat down; he was in the same chair Dolan had used. That bitter scene rushed back upon his mind; he closed his eyes and leaned back. The effort had tired him already.

Murdock picked up the phone and dialed. "Murdock speaking," he said crisply. "I want Muratov." He waited, and made a gesture. Martin came around and stood behind Harper's chair. "Hello, Muratov? This is Murdock. Harper's here. Okay." He handed the phone to Harper, then stepped to the corner of the room, picked up an extension, and remained listening.

"Hello," said Harper.

"I am glad to hear your voice," came that of Muratov, unemotional, impassive. "You are well?"

"Well enough," said Harper. "Are you in touch with Miss Bryan?"

"Oh, yes. She is well and safe."

"You needn't be cautious. Murdock knows where she is. I don't." Harper gave the watching Murdock a smile. "Now, about this deal. I had one pomegranate in

my pocket, and Murdock has that. I offered to turn over the other three to him, provided Donald Bryan were released to you. If you'll query Miss Bryan, I believe you'll find that she agrees. As you know, she even offered to do this herself."

"Yes," leaped out the Russian's voice, "and I said it was silly. I opposed it then and I oppose it now, but if she agrees, I am helpless."

"Naturally, I'm thinking of myself also," Harper rejoined. "I'd like to be at liberty, and see no other chance. Contact her and let us know, will you? Then you and Murdock can arrange it. If you like, I can turn over the pomegranates to you, to be given him at the time of exchange."

"I cannot let you know. I do not know where you are," said Muratov. "But I'll call Halfway Hill inside the next half-hour; Murdock can ring me back. And my friend! There is something else. The present situation is agreeable to nobody. It is silly. Dr. Lee has proposed that he and I meet with Murdock at some place so public that none of us need fear trickery, and put an end to it. Perhaps at the St. Francis."

"Good idea," said Harper. "Murdock's on an extension. He can answer for himself."

Murdock did so promptly.

"I'm agreeable, yes," he said. "We're fools to be fighting each other. Where does this Dr. Lee come in?"

"He will represent Donald Bryan," said Muratov. "I will represent myself. You will, of course, represent yourself—"

"Then we'd better have the meeting before I let go of Bryan," cut in Murdock. "He was to be here tonight; I will have his arrival postponed. Naturally, I cannot take any chances."

"That is understood, Muratov rejoined. "There will be a fourth at the meeting—Ellifer Stevens, representing certain American steel interests, whom I have contacted. He is now in the city. I think you will recognize the name."

"Oh, absolutely!" Murdock's voice was eager. "Yes, I agree. Say when and where."

"I'll get in touch with Stevens. Can you call me back in ten minutes?"

"Certainly."

"Very well. In ten minutes."

The phone clicked. Harper hung up. Murdock nodded at him.

"Sit tight till this is concluded. Okay, Martin; looks like we'll put over a deal, so take it easy." So saying, he produced a cigar, bit at it, and dropped into a chair.

"When does Skaggs call in from Petaluma?" Martin asked.

"Four-thirty. Another hour yet," Murdock replied.

To Harper, the words meant nothing; yet, a moment later, they tied in. On the big desk stood an open box of cigarettes. He reached forward to it and took one, and picked up a lighter standing near. It was only for the fraction of a minute that he remained thus, leaning over the desk—but as he held the flame to the cigarette, his eyes touched on a pile of papers at one side, and rested upon the top one, bearing a penciled scrawl—the word "Skaggs" and below it the word "Ukiah," then "Petaluma, 4:30." That was all.

He leaned back and closed his eyes, relaxing. Petaluma was forty miles north of the city; Ukiah was another eighty miles beyond. Harper was on edge, his brain was alert; he ticketed these words, not understanding at the moment their import. He was thinking of how neatly Muratov had let him know that Donna Bryan was at Halfway Hill and quite safe. She must be safe—she must be—even if Murdock was confident of reaching her—

"Sorry, Harper," said Murdock abruptly, "that our little deal seems to be off for the moment. However, you'll be free if the other and bigger one goes through. It'll save you the trouble of a trip out to John Lee's place after the pomegranates."

"They're not at—" Harper checked himself abruptly, at Murdock's half-smile, and cursed himself for falling into so simple a trap.

"Not at Halfway Hill? No, I suppose not. No matter," said Murdock suavely, and glanced at his watch. "We'll give him a full ten minutes."

Another pause. Harper smoked out his cigarette, and pressed it into an ash-tray. Murdock rose, picked up the phone, and dialed.

"Murdock speaking—oh, hello, Muratov!" He paused, and his blue eyes sparkled as he listened. "Yes, St. Francis—

downstairs restaurant—one o'clock—day after tomorrow, Saturday. Yes. Agreed. Whatever happens in the interim—it's a date. Harper? Oh, he'll stay here and rest up until tomorrow; he's feeling a bit under the weather. Yes, he'll not be harmed, I promise you. Goodbye."

He hung up, and swung around at Martin.

"You heard? We're putting over the big deal on Saturday! Skaggs will be stopped. You'll have to act now, tonight! Those pomegranates are there, in that apartment—"

Martin gaped. "But you just said—a deal—"

"And I'll hold all the cards! No bungling this time, curse you!" Murdock was in a flame; he had become another man, all lightning energy, his voice ringing like a steely bell. He caught sight of Harper and started. "Get that fool back to his place," he added savagely. "I'll have Kastner give him a shot to keep him quiet. Careful, Harper! Be good, and tomorrow you go free. Out with him!"

Nudged by Martin, Harper rose and departed without a word. Murdock had suddenly revealed himself for what he really was.

X

BACK in his own room under the garage roof, Harper stretched out on his bed, still fully dressed, and forced himelf to relax.

Within him was gathering and burning a glowing excitement. That last mention of the name Skaggs had been as spark to powder, giving him complete comprehension.

And he saw, with a swift inward vission, how the whole game lay in his own hands for the winning.

He had fully intended to keep his bargain with Murdock. Donna Bryan, perhaps even Muratov, must have comprehended it instantly. Murdock had the antique pomegranate, taking it to be one of the four. If three of those four, now in the apartment, were handed over to him in exchange for Donald Bryan's freedom, it would be a cheap deal—for three would do him no good without the fourth, according to Donna. But now this deal was off, at least for the present.

Harper pictured in his mind's eye that paper with the three words—Skaggs, Ukiah, Petaluma! The scraps of talk in Kastner's office had given him the clue. Skaggs was, of course, Murdock's man in charge of Donald Bryan, no doubt with three or four companions. Harper had been wondering at the back of his mind how Bryan could be brought down here, even if drugged, in secret, with Muratov and Dr. John Lee both presumably on the watch. Not by plane or train, certainly; stations and airports would be watched. By auto was even more risky, for all cars underwent official checking and search at the state line.

Now it was explained. Skaggs would bring his charge by train to Eureka or Ukiah, well inside the state, and there transfer to cars for the remainder of the trip to San Francisco. He had arranged to call Murdock from Ukiah, again from Petaluma, en route. And Murdock now planned to halt him at Petaluma, keeping Donald Bryan safely in his grip until after the meeting with Lee and Muratov. A cagey man, Murdock! He had guessed shrewdly that the pomegranates—the other three, as he supposed—were still in the apartment. If Martin secured them tonight, he would have them in his hands too—all the cards, as he put it.

"And the odds will be against Muratov's guards," Harper told himself, suddenly recollecting the little bag that Donna had carried. "Her keys were in that bag; Murdock now has them. Boy, what a chance for me! If I can get there and warn Muratov or his men—then get help and go to Petaluma with Muratov—boy! We'll catch this Skaggs with his pants down, sure enough, and rescue Bryan and end the funny business for keeps! What a chance!"

Even were Murdock to release him on the morrow, as promised, it would then be too late to act. But tonight held everything!

If he could do it.

HE CALMED down, recalling the final words from Murdock—"have Kastner give him a shot to keep him quiet." He lay staring up at the rafters and shingle-backs. He must not, he must not at any cost, let Kastner give him that hypodermic! But

how could he prevent it? There was no way. No earthly way. There was a guard just outside the door here, even did Kastner come alone—

A dark streak between the rows of sheathing overhead took shape and form. He focused on it and perceived what it was. A slim, old-fashioned tire-iron, stuck in there back of a rafter and forgotten, slightly curved at the ends, so rusted that it was the color of the shingles behind.

Harper swung his feet to the floor, carefully, lest the guard outside the partly open door hear the bed squeak. He stood up and reached, caught hold of the iron, drew it out, and carefully stretched himself again on the bed. Heart beating fast, he lay quiet. Now! If it came to a struggle, if he had to fight to keep from being doped, at least he had a weapon to make up for his lost strength! He slid it under the blanket.

For a long time he lay there, thinking of all that tonight promised and held waiting in the hand of darkness. A fine clear day outside; the sun slid gradually across the little skylight. A night of murky fog would have meant much, now, but there was none.

The scrape of steps sounded from below; Harper tensed himself, then relaxed again. The big doors of the garage below were being swung open. A voice floated up to him—the voice of Murdock—the same savage voice he had last heard, a-thrill with menace.

"Your last chance to make good, Martin! Got the keys—everything? This must be a perfect job; no excuses accepted, remember! And do it silently. Stick to knives; no guns, no alarm. Fail in this, and you're useless to me. Carry it off, and all's well. Don't be too late about it—no alarm, remember."

"Okay, boss. Trust me," said Martin.

Steps receded. A car door slammed, the engine was started and then roared and the car left the garage. It paused, while Martin, evidently, came back and closed the doors. Then the car departed. There had been a second car below, perhaps Kastner's car.

Harper lay unmoving. All was quiet again. A match scratched and the odor of tobacco reached him; the guard outside his door was smoking. Thought of Kastner stirred in his brain—the bearded Kastner, in his white surgeon's apron. A useful person for Murdock to have, of course. With the help of such a man, Murdock must have kept Donald Bryan in his power, all this time.

The sun had left the skylight. How long he had lain there, Harper did not know; his watch had stopped. He was strained and anxious, listening—listening—and then his listening senses caught brisk steps approaching, coming to the door below, opening it, scraping on the board steps.

He tensed.

"Hello, Doc," growled the guard's voice. "Want any help?"

"No, better not," Kastner replied. "Might cause trouble. I'll call you if I need you, thanks."

"Okay."

Kastner came into the room and swung the door closed, and stepped toward the bed. He wore light overcoat and hat, evidently going out somewhere. A hypodermic syringe was in his hand.

"What's this, still dressed?" he exclaimed cheerfully. "You'll have to get under the covers, my friend! Well, well, do it when I leave. Let's have your arm, now—I'm going to give you a nice little dose that'll bring back your strength and let you sleep."

He came to the bed, on the left side. Harper made no response, except to raise his left arm obediently. His brain was rioting. Alone! The man was alone—oh, boy!

Kastner took his arm and rolled back the sleeve.

"This will do you good. You'll wake up a new man. Steady, now—"

He leaned forward, the syringe poised for the thrust. Harper's right arm moved and swung; the tire-iron clipped the bearded man across the back of the head, with its edge. Kastner leaned forward a little farther and collapsed face down across the bed.

Harper jerked his legs free of that dead weight, and came to his feet. He went to the door, set himself, put hand to throw the sound back, and spoke.

"Hey, you guard! Come here a minute."

"Coming, Doc," was the response. The door was shoved open and the guard stepped inside. As he did so, Harper caught a glimpse of him—saw him wearing the old cap that Mike Dillon had worn. Sigh

of that cap put a vicious strength into his arm as he swung. The iron slapped the guard squarely across the forehead.

A hoarse cry broke from the man. His hands flew out, dropping his pistol. He staggered backward, lost balance, cried out something and pitched away. Harper stepped after him, then drew back at the terrific crash. The man had gone headlong down the narrow stairs. He lay in a huddled mass at the bottom, motionless.

Harper scooped up the pistol, laid the iron aside, and darted back to the bed. He lifted Kastner's legs to the bed, then picked up the syringe that had fallen on the blanket. Chuckling to himself, he bared Kastner's arm, found a vein, plunged in the needle and emptied the syringe, which he cast aside.

"Now you're safe!" he murmured. "But I think I'll profit by your carelessness—make you pay as heavily as possible!"

He stripped the light overcoat from the senscless figure, found Kastner's wallet and some loose bills, saw that the man's watch pointed to five-twenty, and set his own timepiece. He slipped into the overcoat, took Kastner's hat and jammed it on his head, bandage and all, and pocketed the guard's pistol, a very good automatic. Then he paused.

"Can't wait for dark," he reflected. "Don't wear out your luck—keep moving!"

HE LEFT the room and passed down the stairs. The guard reposed there, twisted, as though his neck had been broken. Harper neither knew nor cared, but opened the door, saw no one in sight, and stepped out. He closed the door after him and hurried around the garage and down the alley to the street beyond. He turned into the street, slackened pace, and considered, as he moved slowly along.

This much exertion had tired him horribly and left him shaking. The apartment, he knew, was a dozen or more blocks away, toward the park; no streetcar lines went that way, and to walk it was impossible for him. Even now, he had to find rest somewhere and take things easy. He could not well sit down on the curb. No business district was within sight.

Yet imperative urgings hammered at him. He could call the apartment—he could and must! Muratov's men had to be warned; it was a must indeed! He could do it by phone, and have them call Muratov as well.

At the next corner, with sunset darkening into evening, he saw the lights of a small neighborhood movie palace ahead, and turned thankfully toward it. He could hardly drag himself along, and acute alarm seized him. Reaching the place, he found it open, and went to the ticket window. A girl was seated inside. He bought a ticket, and saw the phone at her elbow. He pushed back the hat, to show his head and bandage.

"Look, miss, I've been hurt and am pretty shaky. Will you let me use your phone?"

"Against the rules," she said. "For all I know, you might be a stick-up." Then her eyes warmed, as she comprehended the pleading necessity in his face. "What's the number? I'll call, and pass the phone out. Come around to the little door at the side."

Harper complied, giving her the number. A moment later she passed out the receiver, and he took it. A voice reached him, answering the call.

" 'Allo! 'Allo?"

"Hello there," said Harper. "Muratov around?"

"Muratov? *Niet. Niet.*"

"Well, listen here. Murdock's on his way there, or his men are; you fellows keep your eye peeled. This is Harper speaking. Harper, understand? Call Muratov and have him come to the apartment at once. I'm on my way, but can't get there for a while. Get me?"

"Da, da!" came the response. "Muratov, you bet!"

Foggy, dazed, conscious of unutterable relief that the warning was given, Harper returned the phone and spoke to the girl.

"Thanks, miss. Will you be good enough to call a taxi for me? I'm done up and will wait inside."

"You certainly do look all in, mister," came her voice in kindly sympathy. "Sure, I'll call a cab, but won't do you much good if you're rushed. There's awful poor service in this part of town."

"Oh, there's no hurry now. It'll help me get home."

"Okay. Tell the boy at the door where to find you."

He went in, gave up his ticket to the boy at the door, told him about the expected cab, and passed into the show, collapsing into a seat at the back of the house. He was more than exhausted; for a moment he was in deathly fear lest he black out then and there, but time passed, he gradually came around, and the fear waned. He was still shaky, though.

THIS warned him of his scant strength. What matter? He was free, free to go through with his vision! He had pulled through the hardest pinch with amazing luck; that Kastner had come unaccompanied was the biggest thing he could have hoped for. What remained would now be easy—contacting Muratov, and the dash up north to Petaluma. Even when Murdock discovered his absence, there could be no suspicion that he knew of Donald Bryan's whereabouts. Nothing could go wrong now!

It was a pleasing prospect, so pleasing that Harper sat hugging himself joyfully, careless of time's passage, seeing the screen without knowing what the pictures said. He realized that he was becoming rested in body and nerves; the energy that came back to him might be a false strength, but it made light of what lay ahead. Only when the ticket-boy came in and touched him on the shoulder, and in the lobby lights his watch told him it was after seven, did he realize how the time had gone. A taxi was waiting at the curb.

He gave the address of the apartment. "First," he added, "stop by somewhere I can get a sandwich and a cup of coffee while you wait."

"Sure. There's a drugstore over on Geary."

He got in and they were off. Harper found himself hungry, and at the drugstore got two sandwiches instead of one, gulped down the coffee, and ate ravenously. It came to him that if the apartment were under observation, stopping there might be unwise, so he changed the address to the next block.

They rolled over the hill toward the far-reaching park. By this time it had long been dark. When they reached and passed the apartment building, Harper noted a street light directly in front, and also that the apartment windows were dark. A good thing he had not stopped in front.

He alighted, feeling very cheerful, paid off the driver, and walked back toward the apartment. Better go in the service entrance at the side and around to the back; safer that way, to escape the street light. He did so. The passage along the side of the building was deserted, and he went up the stairs to the second floor, all the apartments there opening on a rear porch.

At the door of Donna's apartment he rapped sharply. There was no response. He struck a match, found the bell, and pressed it. Lighting a cigarette from the match, he noted that the curtain of the kitchen window was blowing out—the window stood wide open. He tried the door; locked. No response whatever came from within.

He went to the open window, put in his head, and struck a match. The kitchen was empty. He recognized it; he had the right apartment. Beyond, at the hall doorway, which was clear, there was something white on the floor. He held up the match—then, startled, dropped it and pulled himself inside the window.

The white object on the floor was a human hand.

Tumbling in across the sink, Harper got to his feet and switched on the lights. He went into the hall doorway and recoiled. A man's body lay there, arms flung out, hand across the doorway—a stranger, lying in a pool of blood. And with this, Harper knew that he had come too late. Martin had come—and gone. But he had warned them! He had warned them!

HE WENT into the front living room. There, sprawled across the little blue-and-gold Ming rug—now, after three hundred years, no longer blue-and-gold—was another man; like the first, he was dead, stabbed, in his hand an unused pistol. The body was still warm; Martin must have been here very recently.

Harper was incredulous, stupefied; he could not understand it in the least, could not cope with it. Except for that stay in the movie house, he himself would have reached here in time. Yet he had warned them! The pomegranates—

Turning, he hurried down the hall to Donna's room, and snapped on the light.

The room was littered with objects flung about everywhere. In one corner the trunk stood open, its lock twisted and smashed. The top drawer was emptied. The three pomegranates had gone. Recollection struck Harper; what of the fourth?

He went back to the little dining room. This seemed untouched. On the buffet were stacked the pewter dishes in an aimless pile. He fingered them, separated them; the pewter pomegranates all lay huddled in one of the larger dishes. With bated breath, he examined them—and sighed in quick relief.

It was here; the one of the four Donna had put here. Martin, getting the other three which he was after, had probably ignored this room entirely. Harper picked up the trinket and slipped it into his pocket. The three which had gone to Murdock, would be useless to him—without the fourth.

Breath short, head swimming again, Harper sank into a chair, trying to think. Now what? He glanced around, saw Dolan's whiskey, and poured a drink. The glow of it did him good and cleared his brain. With that one pomegranate saved, he had not failed entirely. He rose and went back to the front room, picked up the phone, intending to call Muratov. But there was no response; the phone was dead. It had answered to his own call, certainly. Therefore, Martin must have cut it before entering.

He came back to the dining room, had another drink, lighted a cigarette. He could call Muratov from outside, somewhere—but could he reach him at the Soviet consulate? They had refused, previously. Leaving a message would do small good. Finding that the hat made his head hurt, Harper removed it, got rid of the bandage, and poured another drink. Things were coming clear to him. Why his warning had failed, he could not see, but there was nothing to do here now.

He dismissed the idea of going out and reaching another telephone—why the devil drag Muratov into it at all? So far, the Russian certainly had not been much of a wonder-worker, for all his big talk.

Dolan's old coupe was probably still in the garage below. Take it. Drive north to Halfway Hill and Donna, pick up help from John Lee, and go on to the rescue of Donald Bryan. Petaluma was not a big place; easy enough to pick up the trail of a sick man brought in by car. John Lee would jump at the chance.

"Hell! I could do it myself!" grunted Harper excitedly. "Only I'm not such a fool as to try. We may have to get the cops into it—this fellow Skaggs may be a doctor, and he'll certainly be covered up somehow. Lee can attend to the details. I can be there in half an hour or so. Might pack up some of Donna's things and take 'em along—poor gal, she didn't even have a change of stockings."

Practical as always.

In her bedroom again, he found an emptied suitcase and threw into it everything he could find—dresses, silk underthings, stockings, toilet appurtenances—that seemed essential. He closed the bulging bag and carried it to the front door of the apartment. The feel of the pistol in his pocket was reassuring. He had money in plenty, and the coupe, old as it was, permitted him freedom of action.

Here he paused and took thought. With two men killed, the police might enter into the affair right here, and precautions were in order. He secured a dishcloth from the kitchen, and painstakingly went over everything in the place that he had touched—glass, whiskey bottle, pewter pieces, window ledge—wiping away possibilities of trouble in the shape of fingerprints. He even dallied to get a quick shave, with Donna in mind.

Then he let himself out into the hall, wiped the doorknobs, and carried the suitcase down the stairs. The door leading into the street-level garage was locked only toward the outside. He switched on the garage lights and found the little old coupe, sure enough, with the keys still in it. He put in the suitcase, went to the street doors, opened them up, and then got the car started. Driving it out, he came back and closed the doors, wiped the handles, and was through.

A moment later he was chugging away toward Geary Street, and very thankful for Dr. Kastner's nice light overcoat, for the night was clear but cold.

At a Geary Street filling station, he had the car serviced with gas and oil, then procured a highway map, just in case he might

need it to reach Halfway Hill. While he waited, he weighed a sudden temptation—to call police headquarters, tell of the apartment murders and put the police on to Murdock and the Bay View Sanitarium. Martin and his gang would be there, and the possibilities looked tempting.

Almost regretfully, he decided against it. He remembered something she had said, as they drove to Halfway Hill that day; he had not comprehended just what it meant, but he did now.

"Be slow, always, to set outside forces in motion, my father used to say. And the chief lama, or abbot, at the monastery harped on the same thought; it is never well to call in others to do one's work, because he who rides a tiger cannot dismount."

A lot of truth in that, Harper told himself, and gave up his bright idea.

As he paid the toll and headed out along the great bridge toward the Sausalito shore, he thought of Kastner and the fallen guard, and wanted to sing aloud joyously. He had struck a blow for poor Mike Dillon, and Kastner had a dose of his own medicine, quite literally. He himself was free as a bird, and intended to stay that way. Further, if he could now accomplish his purpose, the game was won for Donna Bryan and her father. All in all, Bud Harper was very happy and cheerful, as he thought ahead.

He did spare a sigh for that new pinstripe blue suit, however, and wished he had not told Murdock about it. Probably the suit was now at the sanitarium. His old garments were certainly taking a terrible beating.

The old coupe could attain a surprising amount of speed, and the eighteen miles to San Rafael quickly fell behind. The evening was early. Beyond the town, Harper kept a sharp eye out for the cut-off road, found it without trouble, and turned off.

Chugging at last into Ransome, he remembered the directions his driver had obtained there, and struck out on the dirt road for Halfway Hill. Things had fallen out very neatly, he reflected. From here to Petaluma was only some fifteen miles, by his road-map, and the evening was still young.

On that narrow, climbing road he had to turn out once to avoid an on-coming car, a big white Packard that purred softly past. Then on, the old coupe coughing at the long grade but chugging steadily on. And at last, with excited eagerness, he saw the headlights pick up the entrance and massive gates of John Lee's place, and he turned into it.

He started to climb out, rather stiffly, then paused and gaped. No one appeared, he had not touched the bell-pull, and yet—yes! They were opening, sure enough! Silently, of themselves, the big timbered gates were swinging open to give him passage!

With a laugh at his own amazement, he settled back in his seat. Electric eye, of course; even before the war, it had been common enough. Yet there was an eerie feeling about those gates swinging wide in the night with no hand upon them.

He revved the engine and started up the curving drive, expectantly.

XI

AHEAD glowed lights, and he discerned the masses of a house. He was close to it when, from either side, a dazzling and blinding beam of intense light broke forth upon him. Sighting an obstruction squarely athwart the drive, he jammed on the brakes hard and halted, with a startled oath. When he looked again for the obstruction, he was not so sure. But a man was walking out in the glare of light. A rather heavy-set Chinaman, hat shoved back from broad features, chewing at a cigar. He looked vaguely familiar.

"Hello," he said. "Harper, ain't it? Miss Bryan thought it might be you."

"Is she here? And Dr. Lee?"

"Do your talking to her, mister," said the other, opening the door of the coupe. "Let me in and I'll take care of the car."

"Oh!" Harper knew him suddenly. "You're the man who drove that taxicab—"

"Yeah. Move over. I'll drop you at the door."

Harper complied. The other got under the wheel and sent the car ahead.

"Look out," Harper warned sharply. "That obstruction across the road—"

"Optical illusion," said the other, and drove through the shadowy something that was not there. The blinding glare ceased.

The car drew on beneath a porte-cochere and stopped. A door opened, and in the lighted doorway appeared Donna Bryan.

"Bud! Is it really you?" came her voice eagerly.

Harper lifted out the suitcase and with it came to the doorway. The car moved away. Donna caught his free hand—for an instant he thought she was going to fling her arms around him, but did not—and drew him inside. She was excited, laughing, radiant.

"I knew it, I knew it! When I saw that old coupe of Dolan's, I knew it must be you!" she cried. "Oh, it's wonderful! They've been looking everywhere for you—and here, just as they thought they knew where you were, you come calmly along!"

Harper was aware of soft lights and luxury, but could not take his eyes from her.

"It's good to see you, it sure is," he said. "But what do you mean—you saw the car? You couldn't. It's all dark out there."

She laughed again. "Anything that stops before the gate shows on a screen back in the main room—some sort of invisible light. I don't pretend to understand much here." She looked at him critically. "Where did you get that funny hat and coat?"

"Oh, I took it." Harper suddenly recollected himself, and his errand. He put down the suitcase.

"But are you all right?" she exclaimed quickly. "You weren't hurt? Did Mike come with you?"

He looked at her for a moment, realizing that she could know nothing of what had happened. How long ago it seemed! Yet it could have been only a day or two.

"Mike didn't come," he said. "Look, Donna—there's an awful lot to go over and no time to chew the breeze—things have happened. I've got to see Doctor Lee at once. I know where your father is and how we can reach him. We'll have to act fast."

He stripped off the overcoat and tossed it on a chair. Under pressure of the hat, his head was throbbing. He removed the hat, felt his head tenderly, and winced.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed.

"Well, it's still tender anyhow. I fetched this suitcase with a lot of your things in it. Dresses and everything."

She had become motionless, looking down; he followed her gaze. From one end of the stuffed suitcase was protruding part of a silken garment, but it was a sodden mass, wet and—red, Harper recollected that dead man in the hall and the pool of blood there.

"What's happened?" She was looking at him suddenly, directly. "Where's Mike?"

"Oh, that's not his blood. He's gone, though." Harper passed a hand across his eyes; he felt dizzy. Then she was beside him, clinging to him; she wore Chinese garments, shirt and trousers, of a delicate brocaded silk trimmed with fur, Chinese fashion.

"Forget the hurry, Bud," she said. "You're hurt—"

"Just a bit weak," he cut in.

"All right. Come along, now; don't talk. You give me just five minutes, and you'll be in better shape to handle things. Most important is to put you in shape, Bud."

She broke off to clap her hands sharply, then took his arm and urged him on. He obeyed. A Chinese woman appeared, and Donna spoke to her, and she went away. Harper found himself in an oriental atmosphere—spacious rooms, Pekin rugs, soft and beautiful lamps of cloisonné shaped like dragons standing on their tails. Then Donna paused, turned a switch, and led him into the most beautifully restful room he had ever seen.

"This belongs to Doctor Lee, but we'll use it," she said.

There was nothing in the room except a couch, floor mats, and one vase in a niche of the matting-covered wall—a magnificent ox-blood porcelain worth a king's ransom.

"Stretch out here," she ordered, and Harper lay on the couch. She came around behind his head and put her fingertips on his temples, then her palms. "Don't speak. Don't even think. Just absorb."

He relaxed and closed his eyes. The dizzy feeling vanished. Gradually there stole upon him a blissful sensation of utter peace, grateful beyond words; all tension was gone, and as though her two hands were the positive and negative electrodes of some current, he could feel a pulsing flow of healing strength that seemed to pass into his body.

"It's a queer thing, yes, but it's old as the hills, quite literally," she was saying

softly. "When Doctor Lee does it you think he must be some terrific battery—yet he's such a little man! Quiet, now."

He looked up at the ox-blood vase and lent himself to that gently-stealing current of vitality and magnetic energy. He remembered how, back in Maine, in the old days, his Irish grandmother used to do this very thing to the children. Once after he had fallen out of a tree and received a bad shaking up, she had calmed him and revivified him in this identical fashion.

"All right," said Donna briskly. "Now be comfortable and talk."

She got herself a chair. The Chinese woman brought in a little table and a tray, with a bottle and tiny lacquer cup; Donna poured out a thimbleful of yellowish liquid and gave it to him as he sat up. He downed it at a gulp and grimaced. She smiled.

"You should have taken twenty minutes to drink that—but never mind. Now go ahead and tell me everything. Wait! First, I'll show you something that may explain a lot to you."

SHE went out and came back with a framed photograph. He took it from her. It was the photograph of a man, whom he recognized instantly—that placid old yellow man with the wispy mustaches. Under was written a signature in Chinese, and the name "John Lee."

"The same one—you see?" She took the photograph, laid it down, and became attentive. "I'll not interrupt. Dolan is dead, isn't he? I knew it long ago. One knows, yet hopes against hope—"

Harper fumbled out the pewter pomegranate from his pocket, put it into her slender fingers, and talked. It was remarkable, how clear-headed he felt—like a new man indeed. She listened gravely. The dark hair was whipped back from her face; in the glow of light he could see the perfect contour of her head, the delicate facial bones, the incredibly fine texture of skin and hair—the whole expression of intent springing anger and purpose and awakened decision. Her nostrils flared and thinned, a flame gathered in her eyes, yet she never moved, until he had finished. Then she spoke abruptly.

"You passed a white car as you came?"

"A white Packard, yes."

"That was Doctor Lee. He and Muratov went away together. I don't know where."

Harper stared. "He and Muratov? Then we'll have to reach them! This thing won't wait, Donna—"

"I know. Wait till I get Fong."

She clapped her hands. The woman appeared and nodded when Donna spoke. Fong! The name wakened Harper's memory.

"That market where they grabbed you, on Geary Street—the Chinese boy working out in back! His name was Fong. He told us about it."

"It is a common name," she said.

"And I never dreamed that John Lee was a Chink!"

"I should have guessed, but did not," she said gravely. "He's a very influential man, Bud. A very wonderful man; I think he likes you, from that first meeting. Well, so Murdock has the other three pomegranates, and one false one! At a price. It is terrible to think about—oh, here's Fong now."

The broad-faced Chinese who had taken the coupe approached them, removing the cigar from his mouth.

"Fong, we must get hold of Doctor Lee at once," said Donna. "Mr. Harper knows where my father is; we must go to him."

"Can't be done, miss," said Fong. It was odd to hear from his mouth the colloquial speech of Grant Street. "He's off with that Russian and won't be back till late."

"But we must!" Donna frowned. "Can you and a couple of other men go with us?"

"The others here went with the Doctor, Miss," Fong rejoined. "We? No can do. I was ordered to stay here and guard the place. I think that Russian guy had a job for the other boys."

"There's nothing to stop me from going with Mr. Harper, then?"

Fong looked disturbed.

"I guess not, if you got to; but I don't advise it. I'd go, but believe me I know better than to disobey orders. Maybe I can reach Doctor Lee later—in an hour or so. Or if you want to wait till I put through a phone call to the city, I can have some friends here—an hour or two, maybe. Too bad everybody went off like they done."

"Too damned bad," Harper said savagely, angered by this unexpected checkmate. The gaze of Donna rested on him, calmly.

"It's not far to Petaluma from here. There's a hotel and a number of motor courts. We could leave word for the Doctor to follow, or Fong's friends, and go ahead to take a look and learn what we can. It should be quite safe. This man Skaggs won't know you."

"Do you know him?" demanded Harper. She nodded.

"Yes. He's from upriver, as they say in Shanghai—from Soochow or near there. A doctor, and a thorough rascal, quite notorious."

"I don't know as I'd ought to let you go, Miss," said Fong, looking more disturbed. Donna looked at him.

"You'd better not try to stop me."

"No, I suppose not," he grunted doubtfully. "But I don't like it."

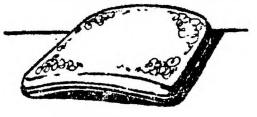
"Get out Mr. Harper's car and have it waiting," she said with dismissal. Fong scowled at her, then ducked his head submissively and departed.

"We'd better go, but there's no great rush about it," she said quietly. "I just can't sit here doing nothing, with my father so close."

Harper noted that her temples were throbbing; restraint was an effort.

"I lost out once tonight because of delays," he said. "No reason for you to go, though. I can run on up there by myself. You come with Doctor Lee—"

"Don't be absurd; my place is there."



She made a little gesture of finality. "Let me think, now. We can locate Skaggs and his party and wait till help comes along. Let my father just hear my voice, and he'll know everything's right—are you ready?"

"Sure. You're not."

She glanced down at herself and laughed. "Right; I'll be back in two minutes. Thanks for the suitcase—I certainly need it! And where shall I tell Fong we'll meet them?"

"Better say the hotel. Skaggs won't be there, and we can wait in the lobby."

She nodded and departed.

Harper strolled out into the big room, staring at its magnificence. He picked up Kastner's overcoat and hat, but left the latter off for the present; he noted that her suitcase was gone. He lighted a cigarette and waited. He was feeling like a million.

Funny, he thought, about Doctor Lee. He remembered, now, that the name of Li was a common Chinese one, but they had never thought of the unknown John Lee as an oriental. What began to puzzle him most in all this involved affair, was the situation of Donald Bryan. It seemed most unlikely that such a man, unless a confirmed invalid, could be held captive over a protracted period of time—not in Japanese hands, but in the midst of civilization. This had struck Muratov at the outset as strange. Clever as he was, Murdock could scarcely have held Bryan by trickery alone.

"Well, there's a reason; we'll soon have it," he reflected, and turned at a step to see Donna. She was wearing one of the dresses he had bundled into the suitcase, and over it a heavy dark robe.

Together they passed out to the portecochere. The little coupe was waiting, and Fong opened the door for them. Donna conferred with him for a moment, while Harper got under the wheel, then stepped in. The door slammed and they started down the drive. No blinding glare greeted them this time. At the gates, they paused briefly while the massive portals swung open of themselves; and were on their way.

"We'll get back to the highway and then point north," observed Harper. "You know, Donna, what I can't figure is how Muratov's men, in your apartment, got caught by Martin, so soon after I gave them warning!"

"Are you sure you did?" she queried. "Muratov was here yesterday, and called up the apartment and spoke with them in Russian. Yet he usually speaks English. Perhaps those men didn't speak English at all."

"Good lord!" Harper remembered the confused answer he had received. "I believe you've hit it! I just took it for granted. *'Da, da,'* the guy said. Come to think of it, he didn't speak any English at all. I was pretty foggy myself, about that time. Well, there's nothing to be done about it now; I did my best."

"One receives credit for the intent, whether success or failure comes," she said gravely. "Are you feeling better now?"

"Like a fighting cock!" he responded cheerfully.

"There must be no more fighting, my dear friend; already there has been too much. It frightens me." Her soft, rich voice which had so thrilled him over the telephone that first day, reached into him with almost startling earnestness. "It is always a mistake to use violence; it lets loose more forces than we can comprehend."

"I don't savvy pacifist talk," said Harper, surprised and a little hurt. "Anyhow, Murdock started it; let his chickens come home to roost!"

SHE laughed a little. "There is some truth in that, yes. Well, let us hope it will soon be ended! How can I tell you what we owe you, Bud? It passes all words. And I'm so happy! Happier than I've ever been, I think. We'll be together again, my father and I! It is hard to sit still, when he is so close."

In her voice, in her presence, he could sense the joyous eagerness that fairly vibrated from her. She put out a hand to him, and it came against the weight in his overcoat pocket.

"What is that, a pistol? Give it to me, please."

He complied. Next moment she was opening the car window at her side, and made a swift movement. The pistol flew out.

"Here! Stop it!" he exclaimed in dismay —too late.

She laughed. "It's gone. For your own sake, don't you see?"

"No," he grunted angrily. "That's a hell of a thing to do! We may need that gun."

Her hand touched his, on the wheel, resting lightly upon it.

"My dear," she said with gentle insistence, "weapons are two-edged things. You are strong, fine, competent; you must not ride the tiger from which one cannot dismount! Already things have gone too far. So, for your own sake, I must guard you. Too great strength will harm itself; as the Chinese say, an exceeding strong Dragon causes regret to exist. There is nothing better than careful action, nothing worse than excessive strength."

All smoke over my head, thought Harper, but evaded.

"You can't get ahead in this world without fighting."

"Without struggle, you mean. Killing is different."

"I was a soldier for quite a spell, and helped to kill plenty Japs."

"That's different. Serving your country is another thing. You were resisting evil."

"What else are we doing right now? And the best way of resisting it is to have a gun handy."

She sighed. "It is so hard to make you see the workings of the Law!"

"What law? Don't you get religious on me, Donna. It's over my head."

"It is not," she retorted. "You know as well as I do there's a higher Law. Just as there's a lower man, an earthly materialistic person, and a superior man, conscious of spiritual things. That's not religion; it's common sense, philosophy if you like. The spiritual life is here and now, all around us, if only we can discern it."

"I can only get a faint glimmer of what you're driving at," he grumbled.

"That's enough." Her fingers pressed his hand for an instant, as in caress. "One grows, my dear. Few, very few of us, can be sages like Doctor Lee, so be content. I like you as you are. Sometimes all of us are momentarily adjusted to the physical sphere; at other times we're in harmony with higher things. There's a balance within us."

"Says which? Translate it," he grunted. She laughed lightly.

"Perhaps you think of Murdock, for instance, as a bad man, an evil rascal. Actually he's not all bad. He has flashes of good; much of him, indeed, is very gifted. All of us are mixed good and evil, two natures. Nobody is either all good or all bad."

"Are you excusing him, now?" demanded Harper. "I remember, you've said what a charming guy he can be."

"Don't evade, please. This whole affair in which we're involved began long ago and far away. It's only just now coming to a head. There is so much that you don't know, that I hope you'll not know!" She

sighed again. "Come back to the argument. You do understand what I'm driving at, I feel sure."

"In a way, yes," he admitted. "We all have our good and bad points, sure."

"You see? I'm only saying what you know in your heart to be true. If you don't have that pistol, you'll not be tempted to use it and to kill with it. So simple!"

"And you're liable to be sorry that I haven't got it, too, before we're done."

"Not so sorry as I would be if your own strength made you a man like Murdock. No, resistance can be passively strong, Bud. I think I'd have been perfectly safe in Murdock's hands, perfectly able to resist him."

"Yeah, maybe; I've thought the same thing, but I'm not so sure. He seems to be in love with you, by his own admission."

"Oh, yes, or what he means by love."

"Well, dammit, can't you see—"

Her hand came over his mouth. He promptly kissed her fingers, and she laughed and removed the hand.

"Now, stop your arguments; this is no time for them. I'm sure of myself, I'm sure of you, Bud Harper, and everything's going to be all right."

"It will be if I can make it so, even without a pistol."

She merely laughed again, softly, and remained silent. What a wonder-creature she was! All women were past comprehension, anyhow, thought Harper. He could dimly perceive what she was driving at, but only dimly, and let it pass without trying to catch at it. The main thing was the harmony existing between them, and this gave him a glow of happiness.

Meantime, they were chugging north on the main highway in starry solitude; this side of Petaluma there was not so much as a filling station. The lights of the chicken-and-egg metropolis grew upon the sky as they came over the hills; the city was close.

Harper shook off the lingering effect of her words, and came back to realities; this was no time for dreaming, he told himself.

"Reminds me of something our chaplain used to say, at Okinawa," he said. "If these things are necessities, then let us meet them like necessities! That's good sense. The road map says there are trailer parks and motor courts here, as well as a hotel. Well, Skaggs will have come in from the north, so he'd probably stop on the north side of town. We'd better drive on through, and try a motor court on the north side."

"Agreed," she said, and laughed again. "You and your chaplain and St. Paul are dead right. He was a practical man like you, and knew about spiritual values as well."

"He was a darned good guy, that chaplain."

"I didn't mean him. Never mind. Now remember, Skaggs will probably be using some other name. Are you going to ask about him?"

"No. About a sick man with a party—that's all they'd remember."

THEY came into the town which, with provincial custom, was already closing for the night; a flaring neon sign pointed up a motor court, with vacancies. They went on through, the highway following the main street, passed the hotel, and came to the north side of town. Harper went on. Skaggs, he figured, would have turned into the first motor court encountered, so he held on and aimed for a neon flare at the northern edge of town. Here he slowed and turned in.

"Sit tight," said Harper, and climbing out, went into the office.

"Sorry, pardner," said a man there. "We're full up."

"Sounds like war times," Harper rejoined. "Anyhow, I don't want a room. I'm expecting to meet a party coming from the north, with a sick man."

"Oh, them! Yeah, they come in late this afternoon. We couldn't take 'em in—filled up. I sent 'em on to Pop Warner's—next court you come to, this side the road. They got room there."

"Thanks," said Harper, and returned to the car. He headed it around. "Our party's at the next place back," he said.

He drove back. Pop Warner's "Shady Rest" proved to be a double line of courts, with a parkway between, all overhung by heavy trees. The usual glaring lights were absent, except from the front office itself. The little buildings stretched far back among the trees and had a peaceful, inviting air. Harper halted before the office and went in.

A woman at the desk laid aside her newspaper and stood up.

"Good evening." Harper, who had left his hat in the car, unused as yet, nodded to her. "No room, thanks. I'm expecting to meet a party coming from the north, with a sick friend, and I'm told they were sent here this afternoon."

"Oh! I guess you mean Doctor Brown's party, got in about four," said the woman. She pulled over the register and began to examine it. "Let's see—Pop was on the desk then and I don't know where he put 'em. Yes, here they are—they got the three doubles down at the back end, H, J and M. Four men and the sick man and his nurse, in two cars."

"At the back of the court, you say?"

"Yes. They ain't there now, though," she responded. "They went out to see the picture show. That is, all but the sick man and the nurse. I know, because I got the nurse some milk a while ago for his patient. And I must say he wasn't up to my notions of a nurse."

"Thanks. We'll go back and see 'em," Harper said. "Which one are the nurse and patient in?"

"M, clear at the back," she replied.

Harper went out to the car.

"Skaggs is now a Doctor Brown," he told Donna. "Your father and his nurse, or guard, are alone, the others having gone out to a movie—or so reported."

"Oh! Alone?" She opened the car door. "Then—"

"Easy, now," Harper checked her. "No telling what we'll find, except that we'll sure find trouble if you go barging in. The wise and sensible thing is to go sit in the hotel lobby and wait until our friends come along."

"Not much." She got out and faced him. "If Skaggs is somewhere downtown, that would be the most dangerous thing to do; you forget that he knows me by sight. Here's the opportunity to find my father, with only one man guarding him; we must do it at once."

"All right; you're the boss. But we'd have a lot better chance of finding him, if you hadn't thrown away my pistol. Wait a minute, now; I'll take a rattle out of this old bus." Harper leaned in, and from the floor behind the seat picked up one of the loose tools flopping there—a wrench. He slid it into his pocket, and with a nod piloted Donna down the flowered walk between the rows of cottages. He had taken his hat, along with the wrench.

"The back one, numbered M," he observed. He still felt bitter about the needless loss of that pistol, which might have meant so much to him now. However, it was done; no help for it.

Abruptly, he halted, checking the girl beside him.

XII

"WAIT. I've just thought of something," he murmured. "After all, what's the most practical thing for us to do? Go to the police, of course. Your father's a kidnapped man. They'd act at once, and—"

"I've been thinking about that very possibility," she murmured. "It won't do. This is a country town. The police don't know us. Even if they did come here promptly to find my father, they'd be very slow to act, afraid of making mistakes. And Skaggs won't be slow in anything he does. You can be sure he's well prepared with papers regarding his patient, especially since he brought him into this country."

"So far, plausible," commented Harper.

"What's more, we don't know what condition we'll find my father in," she went on swiftly, with a relentless logic. "He may be really ill. He may be out of his head. He may be drugged and helpless. We don't dare risk it, Bud! We must find him first, and act as seems best. We aren't even sure this man is my father!"

"Worse and worse—you're still right."

"Then there's Murdock. He's clever, able to squirm out of any emergency. I've been afraid he might come here to meet Skaggs; it's the most likely thing for him to do. He showed up in Seattle and there was a fight in which Doctor Lee was badly hurt—he was shot in the arm—and Murdock came out clear."

"My apologies; you're three jumps ahead of me all the way."

"Believe me, I've been thinking of all this," she concluded, "and the only thing is to seize the opportunity, act fast, and obtain sure knowledge of what we're doing."

"Come along," he said.

Even at the moment, her mention of Doctor Lee struck him with wonder. In his hallucinations at the sanitarium, when Lee, or the old Chinaman, had seemed to be present, he had carried one arm in a sling. It was beyond explanation.

"Which arm was hurt?" murmured Harper.

"The right one."

He grunted. Sure enough, the same. He gave up trying to explain anything, and bent his attention to the work in hand.

The numbers, or letters, of the cottages were illuminated by small lights. The last three on this side were dark; the rearmost was M, and light showed from around the edges of drawn blinds. Harper pressed her arm, and pulled Kastner's hat over his eyes.

"Me first. Once I'm in, you come along."

They stepped to the door of the cottage; he could feel her arm trembling, knew what a big moment this must be to her, and knocked sharply, pulling open the screen door as he knocked. There was a movement inside, a step, then a bolt was shot back and the door was opened a trifle. A man peered out—a man in his shirt-sleeves, features lowered and pointed, fox-like.

"What is it?" he growled suspiciously.

"Message from Murdock for Skaggs," said Harper. "Where's the doc?"

"Oh! He ain't here. Come in, come in." The man opened the door widely. Harper stepped into the one room of the place.

No halfway measures! He jerked up the wrench in his pocket and pointed with it; his face thinned into snarling lines, his eyes bit into those of the man.

"Up with 'em, you!" he snarled under his breath. "Up, damn you—quick!"

The man obeyed, startled, caught wholly unawares. Fury leaped in his eyes, but he stepped back and raised his arms. His mouth fell open in astonishment as Donna appeared.

"Take his gun, Donna," said Harper. "And don't go crazy with it."

He was surprised by the speed and efficiency of her action. She moved around to the man's back, frisked him, and produced an Army pistol. Harper reached out and she gave it to him. Harper threw it up and slid off the safety catch.

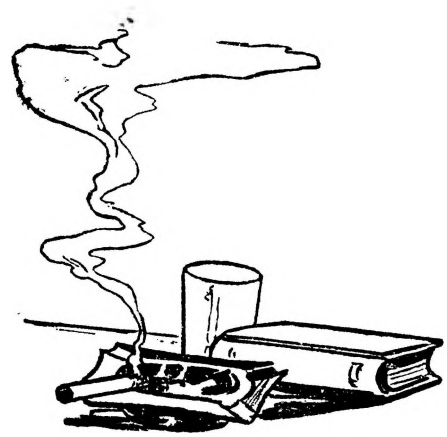
"Now," he said to the man, "get back into the kitchen."

The one room of the place opened into a tiny rear kitchen. As he urged his captive into it, Harper was aware of a sharp cry, of blended voices, of Donna Bryan flinging herself at the bed; but he did not take his gaze from that of his prisoner. The latter backed out into the little kitchen. A chair stood there.

"Sit down," barked Harper. The man obeyed. Harper moved around behind him. On the sink were dishes, cups, fragments of food; a dishcloth hung at one side—a generous one. Harper seized it, caught up a knife, started two strips, and tore them off. "Reach back your paws, and keep 'em close to the chair."

"You'll soak up hell for this," growled the man, but obeyed. Harper laughed, and leaned down. With one strip, he lashed the wrists securely; with the other, he tied them to a rung of the chair-back.

"You're a lucky guy," he said. "Skaggs and the boys are pinched. I figured on filling you with lead, but stay quiet and you'll go free. Hitch your chair around so your back is to the room—I'll help you."



He did so, and placed the captive so he was unable to see what passed in the main room. Laying the wrench on the sink, Harper snapped on the safety catch of the pistol, slipped it into his pocket, and stepped through the doorway.

Donna lay half across the bed, arms around the neck of her father. Harper recognized Donald Bryan instantly, from the snapshot he had seen. Yet Bryan was far

from the same. He was older, shrunken and gray, emaciated. His eyes were closed, but tears glinted on his unshaven cheeks. The girl was sobbing convulsively, murmuring endearments.

Harper stood for a moment watching them, and at last spoke.

"Sorry, but delays are dangerous."

They moved, separated; Donna looked up at him, smiling through her tears.

"Right. Father, this is Bud Harper. We have so much to thank him for!"

One arm around her, Bryan reached up the other hand, and Harper took it. He felt a shock at its weakness; almost at once, it slid away and fell.

"Here, what's up?" he demanded briskly. "Everything's okay. We're here to get you away. You want to come along, don't you?"

"More than anything in the world," murmured Bryan faintly.

"Are you sick?"

"Yes. Weak—too weak," came the uncertain words. Bryan's eyes were open; they were clear and strong, but there was no strength behind them. "They—they don't feed me much. The old Jap trick. I'm—a bit dopey—drugs, too. Have to be carried. Can't walk—no clothes."

"Well, buck up," said Harper, and jerked a thumb toward his prisoner. "Plenty of clothes for you right here. You don't look very hefty; expect I can carry you out to the car all right. Or we can just bundle you up in this blanket, huh?"

Bryan's eyes went back to Donna, hungrily, devouringly.

"Anything you say," he murmured. "Afraid—I'm no good."

Donna leaned forward and kissed him. Harper never forgot the look of rapt happiness that filled her face in this moment; he had never seen her so radiant.

"Oh, dad, it's wonderful!"

"You won't leave me, Donna?"

"Never! Not for a minute!" she exclaimed. "You and I are together again, dad, and nothing else matters. Where are you sick? What's wrong?"

"Fever of some kind, malaria, I think," said Bryan. "They caused it—gave it to me—didn't want me to get well—"

"Everything's jake now," said Harper reassuringly. "Donna, the three of us are going to crowd the old coupe quite a bit—and the sooner we crowd it, the better. Or we might bring it around here; there's an outside drive around these shacks. Think you could manage it without wrecking the car?"

She stood up, laughing.

"Oh, I think I could, Bud!"

"Then I'll be getting your dad in shape to move."

Harper caught a sound and lifted his head. The door stood wide open—they had forgotten it—and through the screen came a suave, quiet voice.

"About that new suit of yours, Mr. Harper. It just happens that I have it here, very luckily. I think Dr. Kastner would be glad of his hat and coat back, too."

The man on the bed uttered a gasp. For an instant Harper was paralyzed by those words, that voice. His hand moved—

"Hands in sight, quick!" came the voice, now with an edge to it that impelled compliance. "Any sudden shock would be fatal, Harper. Don't try it. Keep him covered, Martin. I'll edge in carefully, not to spoil your line of fire."

The screen door opened. In the room, gingerly, quickly moving from the doorway, came Murdock. He stood looking at them, his eyes half-smiling.

"I understand Skaggs is seeking diversion," he observed calmly. "Strange, isn't it, how no one but one's self can be trusted to do anything aright? Well, Harper, you'd better lose no time. Martin is waiting for you and is looking forward to having you with us again; so is Dr. Kastner. We'll have to give you another tap on the head, perhaps, but you're solidly built—"

"Stop!" Donna turned on him, checking his words. "Nothing of the kind, Murdock; you are to let Harper alone—let him go free. He's nothing to you in any case. I'll remain with my father."

An expression of crafty amusement slid into Murdock's face.

"You think, perhaps, that the good Doctor Lee is coming to kill the bad wolf? Far from it. That worthy gentleman's car now reposes at the roadside some five miles south of town, the tires riddled with bullets. I took measures against just such emergencies, being well acquainted with the honest but frail Dr. Skaggs."

The man on the bed groaned again. "Oh, you devil! You unholy devil!"

"Entirely at your service." Murdock bowed with smiling mockery. Harper, listening, felt his heart sink. Donna had whitened a trifle, but met Murdock's gaze firmly. Now her voice rang with vibrant strength and surety.

"All the same, you're going to let Harper go free. I'll stay voluntarily; you need not force me."

"Indeed?" Murdock's brows lifted. "He is quite powerless to injure me."

"That's not it." Donna was entirely calm. She was making herself felt, her presence seemed to fill the whole room. "Let him take his car and go—"

"Here, be sensible!" Harper suddenly came to life and turned on her. "You can't do this! We can still fight this damned little rat—I'm not beaten yet! I've got a gun and—"

"Unfortunately, you have." She was looking at him now, with such sadness in her eyes, yet with such grave strength behind it, that he was struck dumb. "My dear, you heard what my father asked, what I promised him. I'm not leaving him; I'm remaining with him. Murdock has no power over me. Do nothing desperate, but go back and be assured that no harm will come to us. My place is here with my father; he needs me."

Murdock was regarding her with something very like crafty astonishment. Harper, incredulous, could not take his eyes from her.

"You can't! You can't mean it!" he cried hoarsely. "You know what it would mean to you, to your father! I won't do it, I won't let you do it—"

She made a pitiful little gesture of futility. It broke something in him. But Murdock interposed, in his suavely impregnable manner.

"Let me advise you, Mr. Harper, to assent. Saturday is day after tomorrow; then this affair will come to a head—satisfactorily, I trust. Miss Donna is eminently wise; her place is indeed here, doubly so. Let me have your weapon, to prevent any unfortunate incident, and depart in peace."

Harper, still unable to believe what he had heard, glared at the man.

"Go in peace? Be damned if I do! I'll see you jailed—"

"Please!" broke in Donna. "Please, my dear!"

Harper ignored her. "You think you can squirm out of anything; you can't, damn you! I'll have you behind the bars, if it's the last thing I do!"

Murdock nodded at him serenely.

"Do you imagine I'd let you go, if you could? No, young man. My position is secure. The police will support me; Donald Bryan is in my care quite legally. I am fully equipped with the necessary papers. And, to insure against further silly interference on your part, you'll have to know what is none of your business—Miss Bryan is my wife."

Harper began a scornful laugh. It died on his lips as he looked at Donna.

"No!" he ejaculated. "Don't—don't look like that—it's a lie—"

"It's true," she said quietly.

For an instant, everything went blank; it was like a blow in the face. Then, his shoulders sagging, Harper turned sidewise to Murdock.

"You win. All right—take the gun," he said brokenly.

And yet, as Murdock's hand sought the pistol, furious impulse rose within him. Licked? Far from it! Grapple this devil, hold him as a shield against bullets, make a desperate play that would bring help, citizens, police—

"Forgive me for not having told you," came her voice. "And now—please!"

That shattered him; the impulse died. Then the chance was gone, as Murdock stepped quickly away and spoke.

"Martin! Have one of the men take Mr. Harper to his car. Give him the package I brought for him, take his hat and overcoat, and let him go freely. Good night, young man. I hope the new suit pleases you."

One helpless, incredulous look at Donna —and Harper turned to the door, beaten at last. As he went out, the faint groan of the man on the bed followed him into the night.

(To Be Concluded in the Next SHORT STORIES*)*

As Spiteful a Speck of Seagoing Horseflesh As You'll Ever Hear About!

By Courage Through Danger

By D. COTTRELL

AS OF the ancient legend, he was truly "a steed to race the morning and the light; ridden by courage, through danger, upon the field of honor: Arabia as the footcloth of his sires; Rome's legions as the servants of their pride." Power and passion had molded him—if by error molded him small. Consigned as "one toy pony, name Button," in a packing crate, his nostrils whistled for lost warriors—and he was a horse of warriors—and the hands of warriors only should have mastered him.

The results of this confusion—all temperamentally unpleasant, since almost everything offended him—had robbed him of longed-for lollipops and apples in ten-cents-a-ride rings, and removed him from pleasant estates whereover he might have drawn old ladies' wheel-chairs, and had placed him now, as last insult from the hands of men, within the crate bound for an unsuspecting gentleman of South America. Escaping from the crate on the sixth day out, rounder than a drum but shrieking with a stallion's temper, he expressed those things which he had felt while in the crate's confinement. He was small—but so is a stick of dynamite. He banged a colored sailor to the schooner-deck—and bucked! He stood upon his forehoofs—and he kicked! He stood upon his hindhoofs—and he screamed! His halter broke—and he bit the Negro cook where the cook felt springy and surprised. His rolling eye was ruddy and unrepentant. He twitched throughout his small, redundant form. With

ears flat, he galloped, kicking, round the deck: the crew of a potential *Marie Celeste* showing increasing unwillingness to leave the rigging. Inexpert efforts at re-crating, entertained him. Amidst simple Latin seamen, he tasted great sweetness of fulfillment. Turtle-crews are timid before the unfamiliar. At the end of an hour, he was preserving status quo. . . .

"It is too much!" Tomaso, the captain, shouted—having narrowly escaped a further kick: "This is a devil and no horse! . . . Also, my legs are tired. . . ." Cautiously, he opened a section of rail left hinged for the gangplank; treacherously extending a potato-sack, he advanced upon the pony as upon a bull in the ring. "Pig!" he said over the top of the sack. "Pig and son of many pigs!"

With ears back, Button charged the sack; teeth grasping for its yielding surface! Almost, he had it—as his feet slipped into space! With a wild neigh, he sprang outward. Thin air gave under him—he saw the gleam of blue water below him—squealed as his fat stomach stung to the impact of salt water. The squeal was the saga of a misspent life. . . . He went under and saw mysterious blues—saw the queerness of the sun on the top of the sea. He strangled—and buoyancy and his own milling legs brought him to the surface: where he tried to lift himself from the sea by rearing—and went down again. . . .

"We will say," Tomaso said, "that he died lingeringly upon his bed of hay. That we nursed him—"

"—as we would have our own mothers," Angel, the mate, contributed.

"—or grandmothers. But that as the dawn came, he died. Hence, we buried him in the sea. . . ."

"With much regret. . . ."

"H'm. I think we will omit the regret," Tomaso said. "Myself, I cannot feign regret for that scion of Hell!"

THE schooner bore to sea on a returning breeze, as Button, thrashing and splashing, went down for the third time. He was terrified—but he was a stallion and he was also furious! And indignation in part supported him, as, again achieving the surface, he stopped trying to climb bodily out of the water; and, after some snorting circling, began to swim for Central America. Groggy with salt water and with sides heaving like bellows, he some time later staggered out upon the shining sands of Cereil—as spiteful a speck of horseflesh as ever seas cast up; to be further affronted by the sight of a small and perhaps eight-year-old Negro boy—the shining joy of whose face filled him only with suspicion.

"Here me, Willy!" the small boy said. "Oh, hoss, is yo' real?" he breathed in an ecstasy that showed the whites of his rolling eyes. "Is yo' honest-to-goodness?" He advanced, extending a small hand towards Button's neck. Squealing, Button charged him: uninterested in the sizable problem of how a small American Negro boy with a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to the rags above his skinny ribs, had materialized from the virgin jungle of Cereil.

Expecting little of life, Willy was admiring as he leapt. "Hoss, yo' sho' is nimble on yo' feet!" Button's teeth clashed behind Willy's pants. "Hoss," Willy gasped with humility as he doubled, "yo' is *sho'*ly nimble on yo' feet!" Button chased him into the green luminosity of the jungle—having done which, and lost him, he suddenly stopped. His backward lying ears came forward, and, for the first time, he listened to silence. The light wind made a faint noise from the million fainter noises of moving leaves. The lazy surf fell with measured interval of foam-muffled feet. His ears reached farther in the jungle—seeking other sound. He heard the leaves near him. He heard the leaves farther away. Beyond those—to infinity—he heard only wind on leaves. He heard to seaward, and there was the fall of tepid surf. He heard for long miles up and down the coast—and there was only the measured break of shallow sea upon sand and shells. . . . Not a train whistle. Not a trolley clang. No horns. No laughter. No steps of men. Only green leaves stirring—green alleys opening—clear seas breaking. For the first time he was alone from men. His coat prickled all over.

TOSSING his small head defiantly, he extended his rubbery lips to sample a very green leaf; known locally as The Most Holy Fire of the Little Jesus of the Burning Martyrs. Some minutes passed before his agonized squeals, bucks, prancings, pirouettings, rears and kickings abated their tempo

sufficiently to be discernible one from another—and become a straight, low run for the beach. Holding open his outraged mouth, his eyes almost shut, he charged for water! Skidding fetlock deep, he plunged his nose to drink—and the water was salt! He squealed again. He galloped frantically upon the sands; small tail astream, small hoofs making little platters in the lonely sand. He became momentarily thirstier and more excited. . . .

"Hoss, does yo' wish a drink of water?" Willy asked; reappearing from beneath a wild banana and carrying an enamel container never wasted in Cereil by the use for which its makers had intended it, but variously applied as table centerpiece, piggy bank or flower pot. He also carried a bridle and a light rawhide rope. Button looked at the frantically desired water—then at the rope. His ears went back. The boy placed the container of water on the sand. . . . Boy and small horse circled it warily, approaching it—and each other—by inches; and always Button broke in a swirling gallop before the boy was quite within roping distance. At intervals the little Negro readjusted the looped rope over his arm. Always he talked soothingly. ". . . Hoss, yo' is the raringest hoss ever come out o' points West. . . . Yes, sir! Yo' is the sort o' hoss my pa done rode when he were Black Lightnin' the Buck-jump Rider! Yes, sir, Mister Hoss, my pa was *somebody!* . . ." Button measured his chance of getting to the water and avoiding the rope. The cautious game of tag went on. The boy's voice played a lazy accompaniment.

Suddenly, Willy, Button, the article of enamel ware and the rope were in proximity both to each other and the wild banana! Willy's small black hand swept back, his body braced itself—and straight at Button, the coiled rope uncoiled! Neat, over Button's dodging head the looped rope fell! Quick, 'round Button's fleeing neck the slip-noose closed. A tug and tightening jerked him from his feet. Regaining his feet, he shot backward—but too late! The rope was fast about the old banana trunk. Six minutes, and the boy had the bridle on Button's head—was on his back! . . . The restraining rope fell free—and on the beaches of Cereil began a battle of man and horse the rodeo had never bettered. Willy's heels hit hard into Button's fat sides. Button bolted—bucking. The boy rose with him; was there when he descended. Button turned in air—and the boy turned as one. "Oh, hoss!" Willy said, "My pappy done teach *me* to *ride!*" Button went in a dead, straight run—and stopped so that the squeaking sand ploughed up beneath his braking hoofs. Willy's small body leaned along his neck, but Willy's inky stern remained upon his hot back. "Hoss, yo' sho' knows all the tricks—*but so do Willy!*" Button ran 'round and 'round—but *he* was giddy first! He danced with forelegs to the crimsoning clouds; wild sunset shining upon his whirling! Again he bolted. But no pampered brat was now upon his back! . . . Only hard breathing of boy and horse, thudding of hoofs and squeaking of sand broke the silence. Crimson sunset touched the banana leaves. The clear green sea was lit with wine. Blue shadow crept across the beach—and only sand hurled upward by the struggle now shone copper. Two miles along the beach, the pony's flying hoofs drummed to disturb the pigeons! His sides pumped in and out! His sides ran foam and sweat! Foam was between his jet black thighs! He bucked again. He threw himself sideward—and rolled! The boy was off—the reins within his grasp—and on again as Button gained his feet! Button rose up, leaned backward—and threw himself backward against the sand! The boy was clear—and held the bridle reins. The boy was on his back as he struggled up.

"HOSS, yo' done asked fo' it!" Willy said. "We hossmen stands fo' buckin' an' fo' boltin'. We don't stand no rollin' an' backward fallin'! Hoss, I goin' to lick th' livin' daylights out o' yo'!" The stick was small, but lignum vitae—and heavy. Willy's small black arms were muscular. Fire and anguish fell on Button as he plunged. "Hoss, my pappy say don't never hit a woman or a hoss unjust—but don't never let one get away wit' nothin' prevocacious neither—" *Whack!* "An' you has tried fo' sixty minutes straight to kill me!" *Whack!* "Now, is yo' ready for reasonableness?" Button was sore and struggling. He was afire with thirst. But deep within him something stirred and bloomed. Born in contest, fed with strife, respect had come to his irreverent soul. He had fought—and been

beaten in fair fight. He knew the great thrill of submission to mastery. He was a good horse—this was a better man! He tensed to the hard embrace of Willy's little, fierce legs about him. For practically the first time in his life, he was unoffended! Suddenly, he stood still, and tossed his small crest in puzzlement.

Instantly, Willy slipped off, his arms went about Button's neck. "Hoss, yo' is had 'nuff? Yo' *is?*" He put his little black cheek lovingly against the pony's. "Then we is pals! In fac', I been yo' pal throughout de whole of de unpleasantness—but yo' was unaware of it. . . . *See now! I* ain't got no pappy—an' *you* ain't got no one, 'cause you came out of de sea all by yo'se'f." Willy patted Button's face; and his finger was tender on the velvet of Button's nose. Just slightly, Button tickled his crest against him: then, delicately as lightest finger-touch, his exquisite velvet nose ran over the numerous bits of Willy which came darkly through the gray gossamer of Willy's trousers. The assay gratified him. Last animosity died. Willy stroked Button's mane. Button made prewphing noises. "See now!" Willy said. "I won't ever make yo' ride me back. I walk—fo' yo' is tuckered out with trying to destroy me! . . . See there, don't heave yo' sides so! . . ." And presently: "See *now!* Here we is back by old banana! *Now* yo' has yo' drink! . . . Yo' see, hoss," Willy whispered, "my pappy get killed by a furry-lambs snake. An' dey buck-jump boys, dey clean fo'get to collec' *me!* . . . An' fo' all two years I been live here with Uncle Thomas figurin' how to get back to the United States of America—*an' now yo' has come fo' to carry me home! . . . Hoss, yo' don't know it yet, but yo' is come to take me home to de United States of America!*"

BUTTON was munching a faded bit of sugared melon-rind as this project was discussed with Uncle Thomas, eighty, black and ex-Jamaican. "Boy," Uncle Thomas said, "no country isn't going to get notably excited over the reclaiming of the Colored man, not if he blossom like the Rose of Sharon! . . . Suppose, now, you *has* a horse, an' you rides down the length of this benighted land, and—which the Bard of Avon only could describe the improbableness of—you is not robbed of your horse, bitten by serpents, killed in a revolution, or lost on the way—and you reaches the American Consul, what is he a-going to do? If he not too busy, he says, 'Where your proofs?' . . . You ain't got none! (As I been telling you every schooner you gone bolting down to since your pappy died.) You *says* you is a American-born? You ain't no birth certislicate! You *says* you come here with your pappy as worked for a buck-jump outfit? *What* buck-jump outfit? You don't rightly know! You only know they was Big Sam's. Consul ain't going spend his life looking for Big Sam—he working for a Bigger Sam! Or, suppose he *do!* They buck-jump people isn't going to say, 'Sure! When the war come, we was going so fast, we clear forgot a little Colored boy.' They going to say, 'We never hear of the boy!' Passport recordings isn't going to help you any, for likeliest reason those boys were hurrying, is that they was here without benefit of passport paper. . . . I did hear of a carnival troupe as was wanted for smuggling. . . . An' further an' more, you don't know your pappy's proper name. You only knows he was called Black Lightning. . . . Oh, boy, stay peaceable where you is—for here is where you is going to stay into you lean and slippered pantaloon!"

Button ate melon. Willy's face was shining, black and stubborn. "De Consul will find out fo' me" he said confidently.

Uncle Thomas placed one veined hand upon Willy's Astrakhan head. "Boy, if you was a white boy, surely! But you is *black*—and to be black, boy, is to be most profoundly unimportant to all and sundry concerned!"

"Uncle Thomas, I will regret leaving of yo'," Willy said. "You has been like my own gran'pappy to me—but I is goin' home to de United States of America, Uncle Thomas, where my pappy done say all men is created equal."

"I don't say you pappy pull the long-bow, boy. I just say 'Don't waste you time looking for no such country as one where the black man is created equal!"

"Uncle Thomas," Willy said, "you hasn't never been there!"

"No. . . ." Uncle Thomas said. "But I has been eighty years a black man!"

"I *nus'* go home, Uncle Thomas!" Willy said with stubborn anguish.

"Boy," Uncle Thomas said, "if you is alive when you finds out contrary-wise, come

back to you old uncle! An' meantime, may God Almighty watch over you in you folly —for you Uncle Thomas love you! . . . An' here is two *dol*lars!"

Willy's tears fell like small, hot raindrops on Button's neck, as, next day, they went. "Hoss," Willy said, sniveling, "de go-home in a man is a perculious thing. . . ."

While Button, plodding docilely, could not know this, Willy's discourse through the next days clearly proved him the ideal radio sports-commentator gone to waste. Riding empty beach or jungle-trail, his thin, black legs embracing the pony's jet satin sides, Black Lightning's old pistol flopping against the pony's glistening shoulder, he gave piping cries of: "Whooee! He *up!* He *down*— dat ole lion is! Whooee! I hit him wif my elphump gun!" For change, they rescued imagined and dusky maidens; led the charging hosts of freedom. ". . . For when we sees de enemy, we *at* dem! Just like my gran'-pappy done in Cuby. . . ." At evening, after the pony had been fed and bedded for the night, Willy would nestle in the reeds or palm-fronds beside him: and the little stallion, changing position in the night, was careful as a cat not to harm the sleeping Negro boy. At times he rubbed the little woolly head with a gentle nose.

With dawn, they were on their way again: through vast heat, vast showers that drummed the jungle and along white beaches where the sea grew hot, approaching that place where for seven weeks Colonel H. H. Hughes and Major B. P. Adams of the U. S. Army had scrambled through the Coastal Jungles of Cereil in charge of mechanized maneuvers designed to teach the technique of modern warfare to the armed forces of that Republic.

AT HIGH-NOON of the day that merely seemed hotter than all other days, the defending army of the coast, Major Adams commanding, had deployed across the Grand Coastal Highway—here clearly discernible as a cart-track through the brush—and was getting the theoretical worst of it from the army of the mountains in a theoretical attack accompanied by the trundling of many genuine tanks and the firing of many genuine blank cartridges. The "enemy" had that moment crashed in force from the faded moonflowers; led by a tank from which gestured the formidable figure of Colonel H. H. Hughes; trying to indicate to unaccustomed drivers that even tanks had to be steered 'round trees above a certain girth—his continued lack of success in this giving an instant's at least partial aid and comfort, to the hard-pressed Major Adams. "At 'em boys!" the Major roared; signalling an unpromising counter-attack—when from the moon-flowers behind him shot a snorting pony, over whose shoulders hunched an inaudibly yelling small boy, brandishing an outsize pistol of ancient make.

"Great guns! He's *firing* it!" yelled the Major. *"Stop him!"*

But with little legs hitting like pistons, and Willy's pistol popping before them, Button, pursued by the army of the coast, charged the army of the mountains. Tanks, unwilling for infanticide, swerved and broke into the jungle. With its commander saying things that were better unheard, the army of the mountains came to an astonishing stop—unintentionally but effectively encircled by the equally astonished army of the coast. . . .

"Please, sir!" Willy was presently explaining. *"I thought you was de Axil come to fight de United States of America. . . ."*

"Be the cause what it may—i.e. route before superior forces of pickaninny—you must still admit, Colonel, that we seem to have scored a little victory," Major Adams declared exultantly. "It's obvious we're in a position to blow you to pieces. . . . Shall we say, 'Beaten back by stiff counter-attack'? . . . Or," he grinned, "would you prefer the facts published?"

"GO AHEAD and crow!" the Colonel said bitterly. "I'd like to be sure you hadn't a hand in it!" He turned to where Willy clung wide-eyed to Button's mane. "Now then, boy, explain how the devil you got here and where you stole that million-dollar pony?" Still later he was saying in perplexity to the Major: "It may be the sun —but damned if I don't believe him!" Still later—by two weeks—in the offices of the United States Consul to the Republic, the Colonel would have surprised his subordinates by the fact that he could plead. "Let the boy go home, Ned!" the Colonel said. "I'll write old Brady in Texas. . . . Pip of a pony, the kid has! Pair of them make a swell

mascot for a Negro regiment. . . . Boy has the making of a soldier—" He coughed. ". . . Anyway, the Army's the only place he won't find out too much about his native country!"

"That's not the point, Hal," the Consul said, "I've got certain rules to stand by—"

"If you'd seen him coming down the road trying to pot me. . . ." the Colonel said dreamily.

"I might have enjoyed it," the Consul said. "But I do not admit so-called United States citizens unless they can prove it. . . . It may interest you to know that over a hundred fantastic stories of American citizenship are told in this office every month—with more 'proof' to back 'em than this boy's story. . . ."

"You're a cold-blooded devil, Ned!" The Colonel walked to the window. "Come here a minute!"

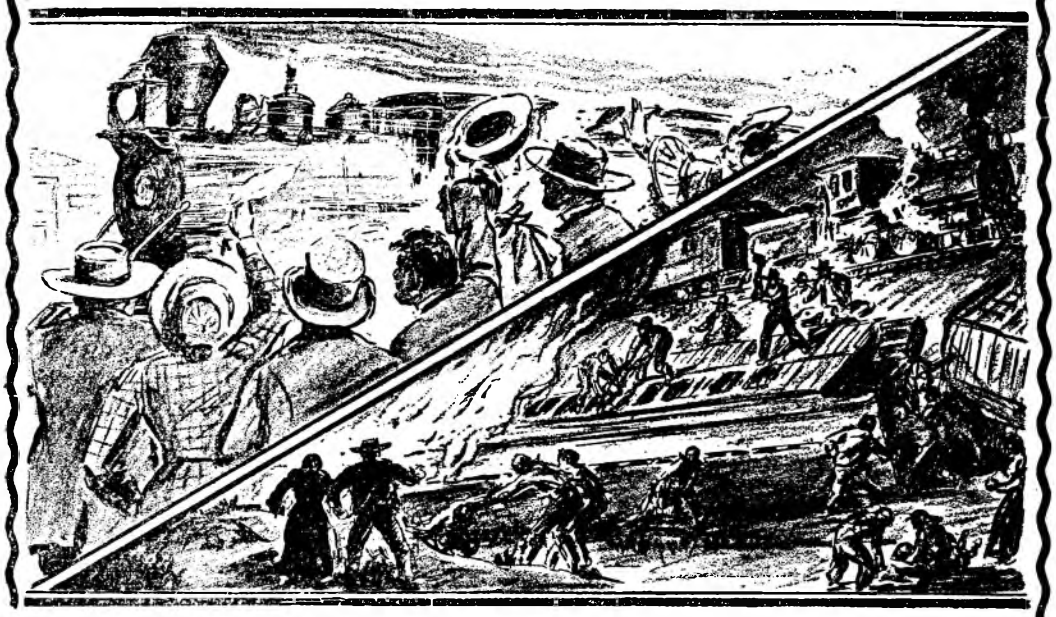
They looked down into the Public Square, where a troop was drilling—with Willy, in a uniform made by the Colonel's tailor, riding at its head. Button had been polished until his coat seemed liquid. His mane was braided. . . .

His neck arched stiff with pride. He danced a little sideward—as dance the marble chargers on the friezes of the Parthenon. His hoofs kept time to music born of battle. "Regular little war-horse, isn't he?" the Colonel said. "And little soldier, the boy! . . . The U. S. Army owes a lot to the black man, Ned! Simple, faithful, valiant, humbly proud—the Colored soldier's all that! Asking—and getting—so little of his country—and so ready to die for it!" He whirled on the Consul. "Don't rob your country of a fighter, when—worse luck—it may need them for a long time!"

"Keep your recruiting oratory for recruits, Hal! You can't recruit me! . . . If it wasn't for one thing, I'd turn you down cold. The one thing that tells me a part of the story is true, is that pony. . . . It *must* have been brought here by the buck-jump outfit! Boy's afraid to admit it—thinks he would lose the pony if he said it was the buck-jump boys'. But it's preposterous that the pony swam to the child from the sea—'thrown overboard from a schooner'! A valuable, gentle little creature of that sort! No! The boy is lying there. But you can thank the pony for proving the rest of the story to me! . . . After lunch I'll make out the papers for you." He grinned at his friend. ". . . Or maybe you did 'recruit' me!"

THERE were plenty of railroad men who believed that rolling stock was too light to stay on the rails in a hazardous 4-day trancontinental run, that attempting such a schedule was just plain flaunting of man's vainglory in the eyes of fate.

But after all, the railroad was the mechanical marvel of the age, so why shouldn't the new-fangled and fire-breathing iron horse race against the most inexorable of opponents—time? . . . . . .



"Golden Gate Express"

A Complete Novel by

GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

Short Stories
April 25th

HAWKE KEY—well, maybe some would call it just a little chunk of land on the edge of the Bahama Bank. Scouting there for a fishing camp, who would have thought of finding a dead man on its deserted foreshore?

"Double Cross Key"

RICHARD HOWELLS WATKINS

After Twenty Years at Hogging a Man Might Become as Implacable as the Earth He Fought

SANDHOG

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

HE CAME into the company restaurant, and he was so big the doorway was dwarfed behind him. His hair was blond and blue eyes were alive in tanned features, and when he spoke, his teeth were as even and white as a girl's.

"I'm Johnny Dundee," he said. "I can lick any man in the place."

Steam hissed in the radiators, and mist was on the windows; for hoggers needed to sweat out the high air in their blood between shifts.

Danski, the bartender looked up, his hand automatically going for the sawed-off ball bat below the bar, and his eyes swivelled to where Big Mike sat at a rear booth, drinking beer.

"Hooey!" Big Mike said scornfully, and buried his nose in foam.

The restaurant was crowded, for a shift had just come from the tunnel, and there wasn't a little man in the room. Their eyes swung back to Big Mike, and the slow belligerency went from their faces and turned into expectancy. Johnny Dundee had been looking for this fight for a long time; now maybe Big Mike would do what he had done to half a hundred other hogs who had thought to marry his daughter Kathleen.

"Any takers?" Johnny Dundee said, and looked straight at Big Mike.

"Look, Dundee," Danski said fearfully, "take your fighting outside."

Johnny Dundee spat thoughtfully, and kept coming forward. There was a difference between him and these men; and they seemed to sense it, for there were no greetings, no good-natured cracks at his statement. If anybody else had thrown his challenge into the room, and there were no belligerent takers, he would have lost his pants in a hurry, plus getting a beer massage. But because he was Johnny Dundee, and because his old man was J. B. Dundee, the Company President, the men just watched and made mental bets.

"I'm talking to you, Mike," Johnny Dundee said, and halted beside the rear bench.

Big Mike wiped a mustache of foam and permitted his gaze to wander leisurely the length of the kid. There was respect in his eyes for the other's size, and calculation, and a dislike which had moved from J. B. to his son.

"Get out of here, sonny," he said gently, "before I shanty your other eye."

THEY could see it now, the other men, the purple and yellow bruise on Johnny Dundee's left eye, and some laughed grimly, reminiscently. Big Mike was a handy guy with his fists. He'd worked over plenty of sandhogs who'd talked a better fight than they had fought.

Johnny Dundee reached down and lifted the half-glass of beer. "I'm looking, this time," he said grimly. "Let's see you do it my way."

The booth trembled when Big Mike came to his feet. He pushed the table aside and faced the younger man; and if he was half a head shorter, he made up for it with the breadth of his shoulders and the bulging strength of his chest.

"Dundees ain't welcome at my house," he said. "Do I make myself clear?"

He was black Irish, this Big Mike Kerrigan, and his eyes were as belligerent as his outthrust jaw. He faced young Dundee, just spoiling for a showdown fight; and Johnny Dundee wasn't the man to disappoint him.

"Have a beer," Johnny Dundee said, and flipped the suds into Big Mike's face.

BIG MIKE roared and pawed at his eyes. Glass shattered on the floor and Dundee moved back, balancing on booted feet, the red and black squares of his mackinaw making his back wider than it actually was. He was smiling now, waiting, and his voice cut like a whip.

"Come and get it, Mike," he said. "Come and take the licking you been needing for twenty years. My dad licked you once, and I'm doing it again." His big hands knotted into fists. "After you've got your comeuppance, maybe you can come to my wedding."

Big Mike came in. He moved solidly, planting one foot before the other as he always did in a fight. His chin was tucked into his chest, and his eyes were shining, and he licked beer from his mouth as he went for the blond.

Johnny Dundee hit him, threw each hand and rode with each blow. Big Mike rocked backward, and red skin was on his cheek. Then his own hands came lashing out, and he caught the younger man in the ribs, and Johnny Dundee's gasp sounded like air in the tunnel.

Dundee whirled, catching Big Mike's right arm, and twisting in a spinning half-crouch, locked the arm over his shoulder, and surged with the weight of his heavy thighs. Big Mike left the floor, whirling through the air, and crushed a table beneath his weight.

He grunted when he hit, and clutched for support. His eyes were a bit dazed; but at last he found the floor and came to his feet. A streak of blood was in the gray hair at the edge of his forehead, and he breathed heavily through his mouth. He was grinning a bit, though, and he moved as purposefully as ever.

He hit Dundee, threw the weight of his

shoulder into the blow, driving the other's defense aside, and his bunched knuckles caught Dundee's chin and smashed him back against the wall. He followed the blow, and a lifted knee slugged at his chest and threw him aside.

Kathleen came in then. Not much bigger than a minute, with Irish dimples in the corners of her soft mouth, she pushed through the crowd and stopped between her father and Johnny Dundee.

"Shame!" she cried. "Fighting like dirty little boys."

"Get out of my way, Kathie," Big Mike said. "I'm teaching this boy a lesson."

"Let him come," Johnny Dundee said. "It's time for a showdown."

Kathleen stamped her foot, and she was like her mother then, like Rosie had been when she married Mike. Her eyes blazed, and her hair was almost red in the light, and anger tightened slender fingers into fists.

"Stop it—this minute!" she said. "My own father, and you, Johnny, fighting like drunks." Her eyes went about the shift gang. "Why didn't some of you stop this?"

Men edged away, looking guilty as hell. There wasn't a one who'd have stopped the fight.

"Why were you fighting?" Kathleen asked Big Mike, and he scuffed his worn boot at the floor. She looked at Johnny Dundee, and read the answer in his eyes, for she flushed and drew to her full height.

"I'm through," she said, "through with both of you. Fighting over me! I'll have you know I do not like it."

She whirled and stalked across the floor, high heels tap-tapping her anger back in little jets of sound. She was little and Irish, and as stubborn as Big Mike. Either man could have broken her with one hand; but she was the strongest of the three.

The door slammed after her, and Big Mike swung on Johnny Dundee. He had the look of a man besotted with poteen, but the drunkenness came from his heart and not out of a bottle.

"See what you did!" he accused.

"Me!" Johnny Dundee went toward the bar. "To hell with you, shantyman!"

Big Mike should have whipped him for that; but he sat down in the booth, watching the door through which Kathleen had gone. For a second, fear was in his eyes. Like Rosie she was, with the temper of Old Nick himself.

Rosie had walked out once, just the same way; and if Mike hadn't once kissed the Blarney Stone, he'd never have had the tongue to bring her back.

"Hell!" he said dispiritedly.

Johnny Dundee at the bar said, "Hell!" and tilted a glass of beer.

THEN the whistle blew, and men began to spill out of the restaurant, going across the street toward the gantry and the lifts. They pulled heavy coats about them, and the steps rocked beneath their feet. At the man-lift, they crowded together, Johnny Dundee and Big Mike ignoring each other, and the crew boss yelled, "Cut the rope."

The cage dropped fast, and moist cold air pushed at the men, and they tightened their coats, instinctively pushing together for warmth. Yellow electric light replaced the brightness of day, and a cable spanked the wall above. Seconds later, the cage grounded, stopping at working level, and the men edged from the lift, going toward the concrete and steel bulkhead ahead.

Three cylinders thrust orange painted noses from the bulkhead, bolt-studded doors in each. One was the muck lock through which the sand and muck was carried from the tunnel, and the second was the man-lock through which the hogs entered and left the tunnel. The third was the most important, and the least used, for it was the escape lock, the only exit if a blow came and the river poured into the tunnel. Built as close to the roof as possible, it was the difference between life and death.

They entered the man-lock, crowding onto the benches, and Big Mike swung the rubber-gasketted door to. The men watched the lock-tender, and the crew-boss said, "Hit it."

The lock-tender grinned and opened the air valve. Heat burgeoned and screamed and drew instant perspiration. The pressure was a giant squeezing with intolerable pressure on the hogs.

Johnny Dundee hawked and blew his nose to equalize the pressure. The gauge needle began to cruise its arc, and the pressure rose pound by pound with incredible speed. Sweat glistened on faces and backs and arms until they appeared to be oiled.

Compression built, and only the lock-tender seemed to be enjoying the experience.

The gauge stopped at forty, and the inner door swung open, moaning in a sigh of wind. For a second there was quiet. Men began to pile out, going toward the head. They walked single file down the incline, the glistening strips of track bright in the dim light of the bulbs overhead.

Fog-haze was in the tunnel, for the high air sent it swirling in a shifting cloud. It spread and shifted, and men were like ghosts limned in eerie light. Muck cars rumbled past, loaded with mucky sand. The heat was sticky and intense, and the dull roar of work was building with every yard they covered. Forty pounds of high pressure clamped them in, made their movements strangely logy.

Men replaced men, caught up tools warm from sweaty hands, and the old shift began to string toward the man-lock. The new iron gang moved onto the wooden platform over the center of the tunnel, swinging heavy wrenches at the bolts on the curved plates of iron. Below, muckers scooped with shovels, bending and straightening, filling the cars with the muck sliced from the tunnel's face.

Johnny Dundee grinned and loosened the muscle of his back. He liked this work, liked fighting the earth with the power of his body. His Dad had breathed high air, and the thrill of hogging had been his heritage to his son. Not that Johnny Dundee had to do it. There was an oak-paneled office waiting for him, ready any time he wanted to use it. And the company would be his some day. But he had an idea that hogging was something a man couldn't learn at a desk; and now he worked with his hands, getting the feel of the business, learning first hand some of the problems a sheet of figures couldn't make real.

"I'll take over, Sven," he told the big Swede, yelling above the scream of air piling into the tunnel, and caught at the other's shovel.

SVEN nodded and climbed down the webbing toward the floor. Dundee watched him go, before beginning his job, seeing the water splashing from the other's boots, the water which gurgled unheard through the floor despite the pressure. He shivered unconsciously, thinking of the billions of tons of dirty water which swirled overhead. The tunnel was almost a hundred feet down, and death waited patiently for any man to make a mistake.

He swung the shovel, throwing his weight into the stroke, slashing a layer of sand from the face. The muck slid down between his feet and spilled toward the mucker's shovels. He worked fast, stopping to face the cut with hay and boards, clamping them into place with a screw-jack.

High air pressed against him, sapping his strength. He knew now why men worked one hour and rested five. No man could take more than that. Yet he relished the work, fighting it, perspiration sliding down his skin. He drove at the work, and behind him the gang worked in a close precision of movement which never relaxed.

THE noise was a blanket smothering everything, almost as solid as the air; but he was accustomed to it now, and could hear and identify small sounds unheard in the first few weeks. He wiped the sweat from his face, and glanced at Big Mike in Number Four pocket. The man worked with a dogged strength and persistence and the skill of twenty years of hogging. He was as implacable as the earth he fought.

Johnny Dundee sighed. It was too bad the guy was so touchy about the Dundees; he'd make a fair father-in-law. There could be only one answer to the problem; he had to whip Big Mike in a fair fight. Kerrigan understood fists, at least, and he'd respect the man who whipped him.

The minutes flashed by, and the working hour was almost up. Johnny Dundee could see that progress had been made. He had worked the anger out of him, and now tiredness was creeping into his big frame. He blew his breath and finished boarding his cut.

A new gang was coming in, and he relinquished his shovel to a Negro, making an okay sign with circled thumb and finger, and swung down the flanges to the floor. His crew was streaming back toward the locks, and he paced slowly, consciously that Big Mike was ten feet ahead.

The roar of the tunnel faded behind; and he seated himself on the man-lock's bench, wiping perspiration from his face and neck with a dirty handkerchief. The gang slumped tiredly, a couple making cracks;

and the lock-tender began to bleed the high air.

Minutes went by before decompression was finished. The outer door sighed open, and men scrambled out. Johnny Dundee was first, and waited until Big Mike was pulling on his shirt and coat.

"Look, Mike," he said, "fighting won't get us anywhere. I guess I love Kathleen as much as you. Why don't you give up?"

Big Mike turned slowly, and his voice was so low Dundee could barely hear it.

"Stay away from my daughter," Big Mike said grimly. "Stay away."

He swung about and went toward the lift. His wide shoulders were squared and his hands knotted into fists. Johnny Dundee watched him go, then slowly followed. He had Big Mike's final answer, and short of killing the man, there was nothing he could do.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Johnny Dundee whispered bleakly.

* * * * *

SIX days went by before Johnny Dundee found the rooming house to which Kathleen had moved. Big Mike had refused to talk to him, and only Johnny's sidestepping the issue had prevented a fight. By canvassing Kathleen's friends, he had finally discovered her new address.

Now she came to the porch where he waited, after sending the landlady for her, and her eyes didn't dance as once they had when they met. They were cool and interested, but somehow the sparkle just wasn't there any longer.

"Hello, Johnny," she said.

"Hello, Kathleen," he answered, and fumbled for more words.

He felt like a schoolboy then, big and inarticulate and very much in love, and he didn't know what to do. At last, he looked around, and made a short circling gesture.

"Why?" he asked.

Kathleen sat on the swing, and the chains creaked. Johnny Dundee sat beside her, watching the pert lines of her face.

"Because I want to," Kathleen said evenly, "You and Mike had the idea I'm the prize in a fight, and I won't have it. Mike's swell, and I love you; but I won't have this Kerrigan-Dundee feud spoiling the rest of my life."

"It's not my fault," Johnny argued. "Lord, Kathleen, I don't want to fight with your old man."

The girl nodded, and the moonlight turned her bright hair black. Lashes shadowed her eyes, and the perfume she wore touched Johnny Dundee's senses.

"I know," she admitted, "but Mike thinks your father licked him crookedly. For twenty years he's had that idea, and he's transferred his hate to you. I would rather give up both of you than be torn between loves, as has been happening." She spread slender hands. "That's the size of it," she finished. "Until you stop quarreling and fighting, I'll not see either of you again."

"Look," Johnny Dundee argued, "that's our fathers' fight, not ours. Let's get married and move away. Sooner or later, things will straighten out."

His arm went about her shoulders, and for the moment she lay willingly in his arms. He kissed her gently, thrilling to the sweet warmth of her mouth; and then she pulled free.

"No, Johnny," she said. "I mean it."

White lines of anger came to Johnny Dundee's mouth. "Do you love me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then let's stop this horsing around, and get married."

"No."

"But why?"

"I told you."

"You told me a lot of stuff that doesn't concern us. If that lousy Irishman wants to nurse a grudge—well, that's his funeral."

Anger came to Kathleen, too. "Big Mike is my father," she said, "and you'll not talk like that about him."

"I'll talk any way I please about—"

"Good night, Johnny," Kathleen Kerrigan said, and walked into the house.

The door slammed, and he was alone. He swore futilely at the night, then went down the steps and onto the walk. He began to walk, aimlessly, and stopped in for a beer.

The glass was cold in his hand, and the beer was cool in his stomach. But his anger was hot, and he left the glass half full on the bar.

He took a taxi to Big Mike's place, and stood for a long moment on the sidewalk, wondering what to do. He didn't want to face Mike, but he could see no other solu-

tion. Anyway, Kathleen was worth whatever had to be done.

HE WENT up the steps and knocked on the door. The house was small and set back from the walk. Frilly curtains were on the window, sewn by Kathleen; and he wondered how Big Mike liked living by himself. With Rosie dead these ten years, and his life wrapped about his daughter, the house was probably not a home any longer.

Big Mike opened the door, squinting a bit, his face freezing into truculence when he saw who the visitor was.

"What's on your mind, Dundee?" he asked, and the fingers of his hands began to curl.

Johnny Dundee forced a smile. "I just talked to Kathleen."

"Where—" Big Mike's eyes lighted. Then they went cold again. "So what if you did?"

"Look, Mike," Johnny Dundee said earnestly, "she's taking a beating. She wants to marry me, but she also wants to be true to you. Let's stop this fighting, and straighten things out."

Big Mike was rigid for the moment, and then he began to laugh. It wasn't nice laughter, but scaling high in triumph.

"So she brushed you off?"

"Well, yes, in a way."

Big Mike stepped back. "To hell with you, Dundee," he said. "I fought your father, and he licked me by slugging me with a wrench. You're his blood, Dundee blood, and it'll never mix with a Kerrigan's." He laughed shortly. "You'll never get Kathleen, not if I have anything to say about it."

"Why, you lousy—" Johnny Dundee began, but he was talking to a closed door.

He heard Big Mike moving about inside; and then he went from the porch, the hate in him for the bull-headed Irishman almost as great as his love for Kathleen.

"What the hell do I do now?" he asked the uncaring moon, and headed for the nearest bar.

* * * * *

TWENTY-EIGHT DAYS, Johnny thought, and *nothing settled. At this rate, I'll be old enough for grandchildren before I have children.*

He was in the shield, bracing himself on the webbing of Number Two pocket, and the sound of work hammered against him like a physical force. The air surged into the tunnel in a sullen bass roar, like the bellow of the earth enraged at their tearing into its vitals with tools of hardened steel. Vapor swirled and clung tenaciously to everything, shifting and closing; the hoggers like phantoms in a mist.

Muck cars snaked in and out of the tunnel, never stopping, and the muckers fed them with insatiable shovels. Wrenches clanged on metal, as the iron gang fitted iron plates like scales into the tunnel's skin. Below, water seeped onto the floor.

Dundee wiped at his face with the back of his hand, estimating the cut he had made, then packed hay and boards into place, and began to work again.

He was tired, strangely tired, of the work then. There was no particular thrill to it any longer. In fact, now that Kathleen refused to see him, even his zest for living seemed dulled. He knew the attitude was stupid, and had tried to reason away his lack of appetite; but always before him was the memory of Kathleen's pert face. And then, when he had tried to talk again to Big Mike, he had gained exactly nothing.

He cursed thoughtfully, glancing aside at Big Mike in Pocket Five. The antagonism of the man was a tangible thing, and he went out of his way each day to make the younger man realize it.

There was no end to the situation that Johnny Dundee could see. He could whip Big Mike; but the passing days had made that solution impossible. Even Kerrigan realized that, for he no longer offered to fight Dundee at every opportunity. It was stalemate of the worst kind, but a kind which pleased Big Mike.

Johnny Dundee slashed with the shovel, the big muscles of his back sliding like snakes beneath his sweaty skin. He worked indifferently, but skillfully, trying to find an answer to his problem.

The shift changed, and he climbed down from his pocket. A mucker's shovel slashed dangerously near his foot, and he stepped nimbly aside from the blade, but slipped in the river muck. His hand went out instinctively at the nearest man, and the hard palm crashed into Big Mike's face.

Big Mike bellowed above the roar of air,

and he booted Johnny Dundee in the belly. Dundee whirled aside, nausea sickening him, shaking his head to clear the fuzziness away.

Then he was coming up, savage exultation exploding in his mind. This would solve nothing, but there would be one hell of a lot of satisfaction in whipping Kerrigan.

He slammed Big Mike against the muck car, battering with both fists. His breath was hot and strangling, and he cursed softly as he fought. A fist jarred his boot-struck belly, and he winced and came away. Big Mike followed, blood streaking his face.

The gang had whirled to watch, and three were coming in to stop the fight, when the man in Number One pocket felt the suction on his leg. He jerked free, and yelled, and the cry was swallowed in the eerie whistling keening through the tunnel.

"Blow!" he screamed. "It's a blow!"

He tried to stuff hay into the whirlpool sucked into the ruptured face of gravelly sand, and it vanished like smoke drawn through a fan. The hole widened, crying with a banshee wail, and suction caught at him, tried to draw him in. He caught up bags of hay and scraps of boards and fed them to the hungry sandy mouth. They held for a second, then whisked from sight.

"Blow!" somebody screamed, and the cry spread like dust in a breeze, touching everybody, sucking color from their faces, sending them in a stumbling run for safety.

Johnny Dundee heard the cry, but he could not move. Big Mike straddled him, battering with bloody hands at his face. He heaved, and bucked the hogger to one side, then climbed erect by pressing against the side of a muck car.

Sand was piling now, the dirty stinking sand of a river bottom sliding into the tunnel, slipping from the face and running like thick mush onto the floor. It spread with fantastic speed, pouring in ever-increasing volume, and Dundee knew that nothing could stop it now.

Air began screaming in the piercing shriek only tunnels know. It rushed into the break, thickening like smoke from the sudden decompression, until the tunnel was filled with a swirling cloud of nothingness.

Big Mike was coming in blindly, his eyes squinted with rage, ignoring what was happening. Johnny Dundee ducked to one side, and his heavy hand clamped on Big Mike's arm.

"Blow, Mike," he screamed. "For God's sake, it's a blow!"

Big Mike Kerrigan understood then what was happening. He was a hogger, a tunnel man, and had seen blows before. He went toward the face, the fight aside for the moment, and began handing bags of hay and stacks of boards to the man in Number One.

A mucker caught at the wall phone, and screamed the news to the operator on the surface, then darted for the man-lock. Already, and only seconds had passed, the tunnel was clearing, the gang racing for safety.

Johnny Dundee searched for hay and boards, or big tools, with which to stuff the hole, going blindly through the mist, catching up what he could and staggering back to the face. He dumped the stuff at Big Mike's feet, and the Irishman fed it to the man above. It was herculean work, born of desperation, for on their efforts lay the lives of all the men about them.

Rushing air pushed at their backs, tugging with insidious strength, and the shrill whine of its passing blotted out all other sounds. Muck was icy about their legs, flowing like lava over the floor, dangerous, utterly terribly dangerous.

Johnny Dundee laughed then, laughed deep in his chest. He had heard of blows, but had never expected to fight one. And now that he stood with Big Mike and the Negro, he knew he faced death; and it was good to know he was not afraid.

He caught up boards and fed them to the Negro, and saw them slip into the rupture and shrivel out of sight. The whirlpool was growing, slowly but surely, and only a few minutes were left before escape was impossible.

"Run for it, Mike," he bellowed. "Sam and I'll hold it a minute."

"To hell with you, Dundee," Big Mike screamed.

Sam must have heard, for he grinned with a flash of white teeth, as he reached for more boards. Then he cried out, and the smile was gone, and his hands were clawing for life.

The suction caught him, bending his body at the waist, pulling him back in a steady rush of irresistible power. He cried again,

and for a second his hand touched Johnny Dundee's.

Johnny Dundee tried to help. He clawed with his free hand to get forward, slipping in the spreading muck, feeling the grip of the Negro's fingers. Blood spurted where the skin tore from pressure; and then Sam was gone, sucked into the breached face, vanishing so fast he seemed to dissolve into the air.

"Oh, my God!" Johnny Dundee whispered.

And the blow caught him.

It lifted and twisted him upward, and it was as though some giant were tearing his body in halves. He wrenched about, fighting for purchase on the webbing; but there was no escape. He cried out, blindly, in a dull panic, and knew that he was doomed.

His mouth made gasping sounds he could not hear, and the muck was on his chest, his body sliding higher into the hole. His arms flailed, and he tried to kick himself aside, and knew that he had failed.

Then hands caught his legs, big hands, a sandhog's hands and two giants fought for his life. One was insensate, a hungry stupid giant in the earth, the other a blocky black-haired devil who hated the man he fought to save.

Big Mike braced his heavy legs, and his back arched with the power of locked muscles. He went backward like a machine, strain cording his face and lifting the muscles of his neck. He grinned without mirth, and surged backward.

Johnny Dundee came free, falling, pushing his arms down so that he would not smother in the flowing muck. He came to his feet, a muddy colossus at Big Mike's side.

The air's scream was less now, for the pressure was lower, even the pumps failing to keep up with that which gushed through the face. Muck poured ever faster from the sucking maw, climbing about their legs, and only seconds were left for escape.

Big Mike wasn't running. He was a sandhog, and this was his life. He fed the insatiable mouth of the face with everything he could reach, trying to stop the flow for the infinitesimal bit of time which would make possible the placing of a solid plug in the face. The bags of hay were gone, and the last of the boards vanished. Shovels and picks and wrenches were pulled from his hands and vanished into the whirlpool of air-twisted sand.

He hadn't a chance, and he knew it; yet he would not quit. His head turned, and his eyes lanced at Johnny Dundee.

"Run, kid," he bellowed. "I'll hold it till you're safe."

Johnny Dundee saw then that Big Mike could never leave. He was braced against the webbing; and in pulling the other free, his leg had slid into the webbing and broken just below the knee.

But there was no fear in Big Mike's face. This was his job, and he knew what the price might be. He rode his hips against the rusty steel, and his hands groped for more boards or hay or tools with which to stuff the hungry hole in the face.

"Dammit!" he screamed. "Get out while you can!"

Johnny Dundee turned away. Rage was in him then, rage at the stupid strength of an earth which could kill and suck into its belly a man like Sam, and then fight to swallow another. He cursed, terribly, bitterly, and took two long steps to the first muck car.

Three hundred pounds it weighed, and few men could have budged it from the tracks. Johnny Dundee bent and braced his legs, and caught at the rusty metal. It was dead weight, and muck clawed at his legs, and he was deathly tired from what had gone before.

He heaved with a steady remorseless strength, muscles ridging his back, tendons thumb thick in his neck. He gasped with the effort, mouth strained and white. His eyes closed from the effort and he was half-blind when he opened them.

The car came up, and he staggered toward the face, taking one slow step and stumbling into a second. Big Mike watched with bulging eyes, forgetting danger for the moment, shocked at the incredible feat of young Dundee.

For Johnny Dundee was a dirty sweaty giant then, the kind hoggers talk about over mugs of beer. He wasn't Johnny Dundee or anybody else; he was a sandhog doing an incredible job in an incredible way.

He lifted, muscles cracking with strain, and threw every atom of his strength into the heave. Air caught the car, caught and

lifted; and with Johnny Dundee's initial impetus, it went solidly into the break. It slipped, then held. Without waiting, Johnny Dundee whirled to search for other things with which to make the plug more solid.

But there was no more need of him now. Men were pouring back to the face, the emergency squad mobilized within the fleeting minutes since the blow had started. They worked incredibly fast, packing the face, and slowly the pressure was building again, its abnormal screaming stopping.

Johnny Dundee leaned against the wall, shaking with reaction; and finally came free, slogging toward Big Mike. Men were freeing the broken leg, and the sudden wrenching of the shattered bone had sapped all consciousness from the man.

"Gimme," Johnny Dundee said, and bent to lift his enemy.

Staggering, afraid that he would fall, but wanting no help, he carried Big Mike Kerrigan toward the man-lock. For the first time then, he saw Big Mike's face in repose; and strangely, he felt sorry for the man. Big Mike was getting old; gray was in his hair and his face was lined.

"You poor bitter old devil," Johnny Dundee whispered gently, and laid his burden on the bench in the lock.

Big Mike Kerrigan was propped in a wheel-chair, swearing at the company doctor, when Johnny Dundee and Kathleen came into the room. "Get out, you incompetent butcher!" he said to the doctor, "and don't come back."

"See you tomorrow, Mike," the doctor said, and winked at Johnny Dundee.

He went from the room, and Big Mike glared at his retreating back.

"What the hell do you want?" he said to Dundee. "Hello, Kathleen," he finished to his daughter.

"We're getting married," Johnny Dundee said, and his arm tightened about Kathleen.

"The hell you are!" Big Mike Kerrigan said, but there was no conviction in his tone.

"The hell we aren't," Kathleen said, and bent to kiss Big Mike. She smiled at Johnny Dundee; and for a moment they were alone. He was big and blond, and adhesive tape was on his right hand.

"I won't have it," Big Mike said.

"Hooey!" Johnny Dundee said.

"You can give me away, crutches and all, in two weeks," Kathleen offered.

"No!" Big Mike said.

He was licked then, and he knew it; but he was black Irish, and he had his pride, and there were principles at stake.

"He's Dundee," he pleaded to his daughter.

"He's a sandhog," Kathleen defended warmly. "You said so yourself, yesterday. You said he was the best damn' hog you'd ever seen."

KATHLEEN dimpled, seeing the red come to her father's face. And Johnny Dundee laughed aloud.

"We'll name the first boy after you, Mike," he said. "So how about your blessing?"

"Bah!" Big Mike said, and was suddenly lonely for Rosie whom Kathleen resembled so much. His tone changed slightly. "You got it all planned," he finished. "Why come to me?"

"Take your choice," Johnny Dundee said. "Give us your okay, or fight me every time we meet."

"All right," Big Mike said, "get married." He grinned, and rubbed his mouth so that they might not see. "Not, you understand," he finished, "any Dundee could whip a Kerrigan the best day a Dundee lived."

They were laughing then, the three of them, and the room was suddenly friendly and a nice place to be.

"Little Mike," Big Mike said softly. "*Me* a grandfather!"

It would be tough, not having Johnny to fight with any more. But old J. B. was left. Now there was a good hogger, even if he did fight with a wrench he jerked from his opponent's hand. He looked up, thinking maybe it was time to admit maybe he had been wrong.

But Johnny Dundee and Kathleen weren't listening. He was bending, and she was on tiptoe, and he was kissing as only an Irishman can.

Big Mike blew his nose and looked away. He was smiling.

It's Hard to Make Your Point When Your Opponent Is Quite Sure You Won't Shoot

SWEET LAND

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

JOHN PRINGLE'S lean young face was wary and expectant as he set the cigarette stub on the desk. But Casey Moran made no guilty start of surprise.

"What's that, John?"

Instead of answering directly, John said, "Last week I bought a placer claim from you."

"A damn good claim, too."

"A damn gyp claim for which I paid you $4,300."

"You suggestin' I rooked you?"

"You rooked me. You gypped me good."

"Nobody can talk to me that way!" Moran blustered.

A clerk at the front of the office turned to look. John drew a .45 from his holster but held it so that the man up front could not see.

"Sit quiet and listen, Moran."

The stocky promoter slumped back in his chair; but his fleshy, good-humored face became taut and ugly.

"About this cigarette stub," John went on. "Remember the first time you showed me the claim? You panned some pay dirt for me. You took samples at random along the creek. Every time you washed a pan of dirt, you showed me good color."

"It's a rich mine!"

"It isn't any mine at all. Every time you washed a pan of dirt, you just *happened* to spill ashes off your cigarette into the pan. I thought it was sloppy, but not important. But after I bought the placer claim from you and started working it, I got suspicious. Because there's no gold at all in that creek, Moran."

"There is! I got colors in every pan!"

"You *put* it into every pan. When I got suspicious, Moran, I looked for your cigarette butt. I suppose you would've hid

that stub if I hadn't been watching you and you were afraid to do anything that would look too careful. So you just flicked it 'way off into the brush. I found it, Moran. And I examined it close."

John Pringle pressed on the stub with a long finger. The stub had been cut and it spread open, spilling grains.

"Look, Moran. Specks of tobacco. And specks of gold mixed in it. You 'salted' that claim you sold me."

"John, boy, I'm surprised and hurt. To think that you'd accuse a man who marched at your side in battle—"

"You've got a money-belt under your shirt," John cut in. "Slip that belt off and hand it over to me. I've got a bill of sale all written out. You're buying back that placer claim."

Casey Moran grinned and shook his head.

"There's only one sucker at this table. Look, boy, if you really think I gypped you, why don't you go tell the sheriff?"

"I did."

"And the sheriff," Moran said comfortably, "told you that you'd made a business deal and he couldn't butt in. In fact, I bet

he glared at you and said by grab, he had no time to wetnurse suckers and back up tinhorns welching on a fool play they'd made."

John Pringle flushed. He had the light skin that goes with red hair and the warm blood shone through his sunburn.

"Moran, you're buying back that claim!"

"I am like hell."

"You hand me your money-belt or I'll—"

"What?"

"Put a slug through it!"

"Huh-uh. You won't, Johnny Pringle. I know you."

"I'm counting to three!"

"Shoot a man in cold blood for a measly four-five thousand dollars? No, Johnny. Not you. Not even for fifty thousand dollars. Now me, I might. Hell, there are dozens of men in Cerro Gordo who'd follow you down a back alley and cut your throat for a measly hundred bucks. But not you, Johnny. Oh, no!"

Casey Moran leaned back in his chair and laughed mirthlessly.

"You rat! You lying, back-stabbing—" Low-voiced, John Pringle cursed him.

Moran's grin merely broadened.

"No, lad, you can't even work yourself up to it. Of course, if I went for my gun, you'd fight, all right. I know that. So," he chuckled, "I ain't drawing my gun."

John holstered his .45 and pushed back his chair.

"Listen, John." Casey Moran was no longer smiling. "Like I said, there are dozens of barflies in Cerro Gordo who'd knife a man for a hundred bucks. I intend to spend two-three hundred bucks. That's fair enough warning, isn't it? Get out of camp and stay out."

"I was leaving anyhow," John said slowly. "But just to make sure you understand that it's not on account of you—"

John Pringle's rangy, muscular figure bent forward. His open hand lashed out so swiftly that Moran could not dodge. The blow knocked Moran crashing over onto the floor, chair and all. John stood there, waiting, taut. But Moran made no effort to draw a gun. He sat up, his shrewd face black with anger; but he shook his head, and managed a twisted grin.

"You ain't ribbin' me into a fight, Johnny."

John Pringle turned his back contemptuously and stalked out of the office, no inkling of his bitter frustration showing upon his face.

He rode out of Cerro Gordo, astride a big buckskin, leading a pack horse, and headed down the freight road to Owens Valley. He rode leisurely, his gray eyes quizzical with regret. He hadn't panned out as a miner.

It was ten years since he had left Illinois. At eighteen he had been a sergeant in an Illinois regiment, until he was wounded at Antietam. After long months in hospitals, he had been mustered out; and he had joined the restless tide of soldiers turning to the West. He had come to Arizona. And finally, at Yuma got a job as a mule driver. He worked for three years freighting goods from steamboats on the Colorado River to the mining camps and Indian forts along the Gila.

He had worked at other jobs. He hauled mine timbers to Virginia City. He harvested wheat on huge California ranches. He handled a giant monitor in a hydraulic diggings on the American River. He hunted wild horses in Oregon. Somehow, seasons slid into one another and the years fled past. He saw a lot of country, and made a lot of friends; but he earned little and saved less, and the fact became serious. So he took a steady job, driving stage between Sacramento and Yuba City. And he stuck with it until he slowly saved $5,000. His plan had been carefully thought out; he would buy a proven gold claim, and dig a comfortable living out of it. He grinned wryly as he thought back.

"Well, I still intend to settle down," he told himself. "Without money, there's just one thing left for me to do. Homestead."

On the far side of Owens Valley, in the long chain of the Sierra, there were fertile mountain parks where already ranches had been established. In one of them he'd take up land. Not too far from neighbors. A man had to live near his own kind.

He was too sunny of temperament to brood and stew in regret. He started whistling as he rode along.

Reaching the valley floor, he turned southward along the freight road. Wells-Fargo stages swept past him with a skirl of dust. At sunset, he reached Cartago on the brine-encrusted rim of the dead sea that was Owens Lake, and here he camped for the night. Next day he continued on south, passing Remi Nadeau's great twenty-mule wagons bound for Los Angeles with 100-pound bars of silver from the Cerro Gordo mines. Off to his right rose the lofty rampart of the Sierra, peaklines aglitter with snow.

The little boy stood beside the road, holding up an empty canteen and shaking it. John reined in his horse.

"Gimme some water, Mister?"

"Why, sure, sonny." The youngster was a scrawny five-year-old and looked shy and scared. "Where's your Ma?"

"She's dead."

"Oh." John dismounted and took his big canteen from the packhorse's back. "Where's your Pop?"

"He's workin' a gold mine down south. That's what Granpa tells people. But re'lly Pop's in jail."

It was said matter-of-factly, but John couldn't help the sudden lump in his throat. He studied the youngster. The boy wore faded jeans and a patched shirt. His arms and legs were pitifully thin, though he had a small child's touchingly rounded tummy. His curly dark hair was uncombed, and his big blue eyes deeply shadowed. There was something so aching, so starved and resigned, in the boy's face that it caught at John, and made him heartsick and furious both at once.

"Granpa sent you to get water?"

The boy nodded. "I come every day."

"You do! Well, what's your name?"

"Tom Akers."

"Take me to Granpa, Tommy."

John was grim. Water was precious in the desert. A man who'd send a kid to beg water from travelers was a pretty poor sort.

THAT'S how the camp looked. Pretty poor. A ricketty old wagon with a faded tarpaulin over it stood by a thicket of sumac. Two boney horses, hangdog in their gauntness, had long-since eaten away all grass within range of their picket ropes and were trying hopelessly to reach some brush beyond. Beside a fireplace made of a ring of stones stood a box with a few dishes and a skillet and kettle. From within the wagon a man called out in a voice reedy with pain, "How'd'y."

John looked under the tarp, at a man lying on a bedroll. He was small and wrinkled of face and white-haired.

"What's wrong, Oldtimer?"

"Well, sir, one of my fool horses kicked me, and busted my leg. Guess I'm gettin' kind of brittle."

"Hard luck. Where were you headed?"

"Into the mountains. I aim to do a lot of trappin'."

But you can't run a trap line with a broken leg.

John didn't say it, but the old man guessed his thought, and said, "I got an old partner up in the Minarettes country. He'd take us in, once we got up there."

"You'll get there," John said heartily. "Look, it's time for supper. Mind if I throw in with you tonight?"

"Glad to have you, you bet! My name's Chad Akers."

John moved the horses to pasture. John cooked a meal. Chad Akers hastened to tell him to use their grub. Their grub consisted of a bag of beans and some prunes, and not much of either. John said delightedly he'd been starved for some prunes. He added bacon to the beans, and made fried bread and coffee. He had some apples and raisins in his pack, and he added these. Tommy's eyes grew big and round at sight of them.

Tommy squatted on his heels and watched every move John made. When John set a heaping plateful of food before him, Tommy did not start eating until John did; and Tommy did not wolf his food, though he left not a crumb upon his plate. And matter-of-factly he started to help in cleaning up when they finished.

Chores done, John said, "Sit over here by me, Tommy."

John named stars for Tommy. Pointed out the North Star, the dippers, Sirius and Orion. Told him Indian stories about them. Told him how soldiers told time and direction from the sky.

"Well, I guess you'd better climb into your blankets, Tommy."

John stood up and started off. All he intended to do was to see that the horses' picket ropes were staked down tight.

Tommy clutched wildly at him. Tommy's arm wrapped around John's leg, and Tommy clung to him, sobbing.

"Don't go! Don't go 'way!" Tommy cried heartbrokenly.

John sat down again and cuddled Tommy onto his lap and held him close, whispering, "Hush, boy, I'm not going away," until his storm of fear and grief had subsided. Tommy quit weeping, but his thin shoulders still shook. He felt pitifully light and fragile in John's arms. John pressed his lips to the boy's hair.

He lifted Tommy into the wagon, then; and as he drew blankets over Tommy, John spoke to old Chad Akers.

"It's a funny thing, Mr. Akers, but I've been figuring to go up into that Minarettes country myself, and I'd sure like to have company. Mind if I tag along?"

The old man uttered a long sigh. He reached out and pressed John's arm in gratitude too deep for words.

JOHN'S pack horse was broke to harness, and John teamed him alternately with Aker's jaded nags. They made slow, but steady, progress up Chinquapin Canyon into the Sierra. It was late the third day that they topped the ridge guarding Honey Valley.

John reined up, with a sudden harsh catch of breath. A wide basin lay below, a green and lovely basin so like John's dreams that he blinked and stared. Timbered mountains ringed it, and a clear stream crossed it, flowing between the lush fields of a half-dozen fine farms.

"Tommy, here's where I find me a homestead!"

They drove on down. John reined up at the first house.

A young woman came hurrying out. She carried a rifle as if she knew how to use it, and she looked scared and suspicious.

"My menfolk are away fighting fire in the hills," she said. "You can water your horses, but then you ride on."

She was very pretty, and John grinned down at her. She was just a girl, a slim shapely girl with light-brown hair she wore plaited in a crown about her head. Her eyes were a vivid blue, and her skin creamy-smooth. Her speech had a lazy inflection which neglected the r's.

"You must be Southern," John said.

"You must be a damn Yankee," she retorted.

"John," asked Tommy, "why're you a damn Yankee?"

"Because," John said, "we're nigh starved and wore out and got nowhere to lay our heads."

His tone was sad, his eye quizzical and calculating. The girl flushed, as if under reproof.

"I didn't see the boy. You can camp here. I got supper nigh ready."

Her manner was reserved, but her victuals were generous. John carried a huge platter of food out to old Chad, in the wagon; then John sat down with Tommy, in the kitchen, to fried chicken and cold beef and corn bread and sage honey and sweet milk. The girl had no words for John, but she kept staring at Tommy.

"This boy needs his mother!" she accused John.

Indignantly he said, "I take good care of him."

"How long since he had a bath? Don't tell me, I'm horrified enough! Why don't you cut his hair?" She was turning Tommy's head to look, but her fingers were so gentle, so caressing, that Tommy wasn't yelling blue murder as he would have been if someone else held him. "And his ears—I bet a ground hog and six prairie dogs are making nests in them." But she was looking into Tommy's eyes and laughing, as she said it, and Tommy laughed with her. "Come on, sugar, I'll clean you up."

Tommy actually went with her.

John grinned. The girl's words were edgy and scared, but her heart was all right. John helped himself to more fried chicken. He realized that he had been hearing a noise outside for some time now. Like somebody shouting. Like somebody in trouble, somebody hopping mad. The yelling wasn't loud, but sort of muffled.

He strode to the back door of the kitchen. The shouts seemed louder, and seemed to be coming from a stout tool shed near the barn. He walked out toward the shed, curious. The door, he noticed, was locked by a heavy crossbar on the outside.

"Let us out of here!"

"We got friends. They'll burn your whole place down."

Well! Couple of men locked inside the shed.

John heard running footsteps, and turned. The girl was coming from the house, that rifle in her hands.

"Don't you let them out!" she warned.

"Fattening them up, for butchering?" he asked.

"Maybe we are, at that. Come back to the house."

The men inside, hearing voices, yelled louder.

"What did they do?" John asked. "If you don't mind telling."

"I mind. You want to join them?" the girl challenged.

And the rifle looked him squarely in the eye. He turned and studied the log shed. A smart prisoner could find a way to push out the mud chinking between the logs, then ease the locking bar from its braces. These were not smart prisoners.

"I wouldn't stay in there very long."

"You sure admire yourself!"

He grinned. Men usually smiled back at him, and women sidled closer. This girl did neither.

"Come on back to the house," she ordered.

She made him walk into a bedroom where Tommy sat amiably in a wooden tub of water, making small-boy noises.

"Soap him," the girl ordered John.

He scooped soft soap from the dish beside the tub and lathered Tommy, who laughed as he was tickled.

"Don't! You tickle him beyond bearing!"

IT WAS easy, as she leaned forward indignantly, to scoop a handful of soapy water into her face and wrench the rifle from her grasp as she recoiled, gasping and momentarily blinded; it was *not* easy to see her sweet lips begin to tremble and tears brim in her eyes. He set the gun back of the door and knelt down beside Tommy again.

"I'm sorry. You were making me nervous with that gun."

"You—you—Oh, let me do that!"

She started washing Tommy, rubbing him with a washrag so hard that he howled; then she soothed him with a hug and a kiss.

John rolled himself a smoke.

"My name's John Pringle. What's yours?"

She didn't answer for a bit; but being rude came hard.

"Sally. Sally Merritt."

"How long have your folks been in this country?"

"All the folks here in Honey Valley are my folks. They were the first ones, and the only ones in here!" she said vehemently.

"A whole clan of you, huh? How'd it happen?"

His tone was friendly, and she explained, "Uncle Bill brought his family in first, a year after the war. When General Lee surrendered, we were living in Texas, near Austin. Dad came home and tried to farm again. But he couldn't stand the carpetbaggers, and he couldn't stomach night-riding and wearing sheets to scare people, either. So, six years ago, he brought us here to join Uncle Bill."

"And your uncles and your cousins followed after?"

"Yes. Uncle Luther and Uncle Jack had never surrendered. After the war, they went to Mexico. Porfirio Diaz and Juarez were fighting that old Emperor Maximilian down there, and Luther and Jack joined Diaz's army. My cousins, Mike and Anthony, went on to Vera Cruz and took a boat to Brazil—"

"They weren't a part of the Rebel bunch who looted the Federal treasury at Austin, were they?"

"If they were, I wouldn't blame them one bit!" she said hotly.

He grinned. "Go on," he urged.

"WE WROTE Luther and Jack to come here, and finally they did. Then Mike and Tony wrote how nice it was in Brazil. Blue rivers and monkeys and bananas and the best-tasting coffee! Only, it was too hot down there, and they were homesick, and they had left girls behind. So we wrote them to come here, and they did. They married, and brought their wives. We've had the whole valley to ourselves."

"I bet I'll like your folks," John said. "I'm going to homestead here. Chad and Tommy will stay, too, I bet."

Her face went white with fear. She turned sharply away.

JOHN stirred in his bedroll, under the Akers wagon. A sound had wakened him from sleep. A sound like a barn door squeaking on hinges as it was cautiously opened. Quickly he pulled on his boots and grabbed his rifle. On Sally's suggestion, he had locked the horses in the Merritt barn, with generous baits of grain in the feedboxes.

He saw nothing suspicious as he stalked toward the door. The moonlight was tricky, though. That barn door *did* look ajar.

It was ajar. He pulled, and it creaked as it opened wide. The two men inside saw him first, and acted first. He had a dim, swift glimpse of a man swinging onto a saddled horse, and of a second man heaving a saddle onto another horse.

Sally's two prisoners. *Escaping.* John realized.

Then the mounted man spurred his horse, lunging right at John, to ride him down.

John hurled himself back, so that the horse brushed past, an iron stirrup raking across John's chest. John swung up his rifle and pulled trigger. Instinctively, then, John twisted sidewise, and the tines of a hay fork missed his throat and jabbed deep into the barn door and luckily stuck, so that for an instant the man wielding the fork tugged to pull it free. John swung his rifle, struck the man across the temple, and he crumpled heavily to the ground.

The saddled horse was standing a hundred feet away, riderless. John ran toward him. The rider had fallen from saddle, but caught a foot in the stirrup. A wilder horse would have kicked him to death, but this mount stood taut, his hide crawling with nervousness. John quickly loosened the man, who was groaning and swearing too much to be badly hurt. His shoulder was wet with blood.

Sally came hurrying from the house, a lamp in her hand.

"What happened? Did they get away?"

"No, I stopped them. Get some cloth and hot water, Sally."

He dragged the two men back into the

tool shed. Sally brought bandages, and he bandaged the wounded prisoner. They *had* pushed the chinking from between logs to pry up the bar across the door. John nailed that locking bar in place now.

"John, you're hurt!" Sally said, noticing the blood seeping through his shirt. That iron stirrup, raking across his chest, had gashed the flesh.

"Just a scratch. Looks worse than it is," he assured her.

"I'm ever so g-grateful to you," she stammered. "If those men had got away—"

"Supposing they had?" John asked.

"Don't pry!" she said angrily; but, contritely, she touched his arm, then hurried back to the house.

He stared after her. She looked so worried, so scared.

HE LAY down in his bedroll again, but sleep did not come. So he was still awake, less than an hour later, when horsemen rode up to the house. He saw Sally run out to meet them. They all entered the house. Sally's menfolk had finally come home.

John rose to his feet, then, as the back door opened and Sally came out, carrying a lamp, and three men followed her. They were gaunted and dirty, but their manners were bright.

"Dad, this is John Pringle," Sally said. "My father, John. My Uncle Luther, and my brother Jeffrey. John, I've told them how you helped me with—the two men locked in the shed."

"We are indebted to you, suh," Loren Merritt said. "You are welcome to my home." And the way he said it made John reflect that these Merritts garnished a debt with honor.

They asked John to join them in the kitchen for coffee. They washed up while Sally set out food. Her father was burly and gray-haired. Her Uncle Luther was tall, lean, quiet-spoken. Her brother Jeff resembled her, for he too had light-brown hair and clear blue eyes and fine features.

Bluntly, as they ate, John asked, "What've those two men done? I mean, those men you've got locked up in the shed?"

Loren Merritt's face turned bleak.

"You noticed our farms, riding into the Valley?"

"Sure did. So prosperous-looking they made me decide to homestead here."

Young Jeff started pushing back from the table, his blue eyes hard and belligerent.

"Sit down, Jeff!" his father commanded sharply. "Mr. Pringle deserves well of us." And Loren Merritt went on to John: "This valley was raw and wild when we first came in. We developed it. We built homes and barns, and set out orchards, and built a dam to keep the river flowing all summer. We've invested years of work and damn near every dollar we own here. But now," and Merritt's deep voice shook, "we're in danger of losing these farms. Every acre of them."

"How's that?" John demanded, startled.

"We don't own this land."

"Well, *buy* it, for Lord's sake!"

"Can't. It's not for sale. It's public domain."

"Better yet! File homestead claims!"

"We can't homestead," Sally's Uncle Luther said harshly.

"Why not?"

"We're Southerners. We fought in the Confederate Army. We bore arms against the United States. We can't homestead."

"That's right!" John realized, in consternation. "Congress was in a hating mood when it passed the homestead law of '62. Just the same, there must be some way—"

"Our two prisoners," Sally's father went on, "came here looking for homesteads. To protect ourselves, we locked 'em up."

"Now I see it," John said. "Those two men had likely discovered from land office maps that this valley had never been filed on. So they came here, and they saw the fine farms, and they had likely realized that they could grab the houses and barns and orchards and all, just by filing homestead claims on the land."

"We'll fight to keep our ranches!" young Jeff burst out.

"You can't fight a United States Marshal," John said.

Loren Merritt spread his hands helplessly.

"We don't know what to do."

"We can kill homesteaders sneakin' in here!" Luther said.

"That's suicide," John retorted. "But, men, by golly here's what you *can* do!"

"What?" Sally's father asked.

"Listen! Though you can't buy public domain, and you can't homestead, here's one thing you can do. Congress has issued land scrip to veterans of the Civil War. Every veteran who hasn't taken up a full 160 acres already, has been issued scrip. That paper is good for any part of the public domain, and that scrip is *negotiable!* Any veteran can sell it, and anybody can buy it."

"Dad!" blurted Jeff. "That's the answer!"

"By the Almighty!"

"All you've got to do," John said, "is to buy up enough scrip to cover your acreage here. With it you'll buy legal possession of your farms for keeps!"

"But where'll we get this scrip?"

"Buy it from ex-soldiers. Lots of them in Cerro Gordo and Panamint and Darwin. Most of them will sell. Cheap!"

"You said *buy*. How much cash would we need?"

"For a thousand acres, I'd say about five thousand dollars."

They had been hanging on his words, hardly daring to hope, wild excitement rising in them. Abruptly that hope died. They turned away from John, their faces bleak with dismay.

"So it's just a pipe dream," young Jeff said.

"Well, that's that," Loren Merritt said, tight-lipped. "We haven't the cash, John. All together, we can raise about nine hundred dollars. Not a cent more. So—we're out of luck."

John looked at them. At first, in his own enthusiasm, he couldn't absorb the fact. Then it got through. He rubbed his lean jaw abstractedly, and took a restless turn about the room. *Well, what you going to do?* he asked himself. *Sure, it's a jackpot. But you can bust it! You've got to!*

Aloud, in his honest, agonized thinking, he murmured, "About the youngster. Tommy. I'd like for him to grow up here. To have your kids as friends." He looked at Sally, at the lamp-light glinting in her bright hair. "There's nothing I'd like better for myself. I mean, to have a ranch here, with you all as neighbors." He turned violently toward Loren Merritt. "Look, I'll lend you the money! I haven't got it, but —I can raise it! In Cerro Gordo! And while I'm there I'll buy land scrip. Give me your nine hundred dollars, and I'll raise the rest myself!"

He started back to Cerro Gordo in the morning. Before he left, he told Loren Merritt to help his two prisoners find good land, and build cabins for them. That would pacify them.

He hugged Tommy; and he told Sally, "I'll be back soon!"

"We'll be waiting. Take care of yourself!"

But John's confidence died as he rode, and his thoughts grew grim with troubled doubt. Just how had Casey Moran warned him to stay out of Cerro Gordo? *There are barflies in camp who'd knife you in the back for a hundred bucks. I aim to spend two-three hundred bucks!* John did some hard thinking.

When he rode into Cerro Gordo, late

the third afternoon, his left arm was in a sling, his left hand swathed in a bulky bandage. He rode down the main street to Kiley's Stable to leave his mount, deliberately allowing himself to be seen. He drank a whiskey in the Keno Saloon. He ate supper at Ma's Place. He didn't see Casey Moran; but he was positive that Moran knew that he was back in camp.

There was a light in the mining promoter's office when John approached it at nine o'clock. He smiled mirthlessly to himself. The spider was waiting in the parlor for the guileless fly.

At the door, John paused, caught a sharp breath, and entered. Moran sat talking to a burly man in rough clothes. The one side window was open, and the back door was wide open to the darkness. The trap, John realized, was set.

"Well!" Casey Moran boomed. "You're back. I'm surprised, John. I thought I'd warned you plain enough."

John stalked straight back to Moran's desk. John's breath was tight in his throat and his heart pounded. The man beside Moran had a red-veined face and bloodshot eyes that watched John unblinkingly. That bulge under the man's coat was a .45.

John said, "So you've got a witness handy."

"I warned you, John."

With his right hand, John laid on the desk that bill of sale to the placer claim which he had showed Moran before.

"Moran," John said, "my left hand isn't really crippled. I've got a double-barreled .44 derringer inside this bandage. It's covering you two men."

Moran's jaw dropped. The man beside him made an instinctive move toward his belt. John's bandaged hand swung toward him, and he checked the move.

"That money-belt under your shirt, Moran—strip it off!" John commanded. "Pay me back for that claim!"

"Are you crazy? I ain't paying you a damn cent."

"I've got to have that money," John said stonily. "Moran, maybe you've got a gunman planted at the back door and at that side window. I'm going to grab for my holstered gun. That will flush 'em out. That will make them shoot. And if they do shoot, you'll get a slug from the derringer in my other hand. Unless you pay me *now*."

"I said I won't pay you a damned cent!"

Deliberately John raised his voice as if in fury, "You crook! You thieving high-grader!" And his right hand streaked to the butt of his holstered gun—and he sprang back.

Even as he moved, a pistol lashed fire from the darkness outside that window, and John's body twisted sideways from the smash of a heavy slug into his shoulder. But his own gun flashed answer, its report mingling with the concussion of the first shot; and outside that window a man gasped in strangled agony.

John was reeling sideways against the desk. Moran and his burly partner sprang from their chairs, and Moran's partner whipped the pistol from his belt. ' John fired, and John jerked his .45 toward Moran as the gunman plunged face down to the floor, his pistol falling from lifeless fingers.

"Don't shoot!" Moran screamed. "I'll pay—don't shoot!"

John was giddy, his shoulder numb, and the floor seemed to heave under his feet.

"Pay off," he said thickly. "Quick!"

Hands shaking, Moran opened his money-belt.

"There'll be men swarming in here in a minute," John said. "They'll find this rat lying here, and another outside that window. And me wounded. Three against one—and one of the three in ambush outside. It'll be obvious self-defense, Moran."

"Yeah? And you with a derringer inside that bandage!"

'There's nothing inside this bandage but an empty hand," John said.

Moran's jaw dropped and his face turned livid. John gestured with the gun, and Moran resumed counting.

"Forty-three hundred dollars," he said, then; and he added bitterly, "And once I said you'd never shoot a man for a wad of money."

"I didn't." Not for money, John wanted to say. But for a five-year-old named Tommy, for a girl with light-brown hair, for friends in desperate trouble. They made a difference. They made all the difference in the world!

The Sergeant of the Mounted Thought It Was Funny the Way Cockeye McDonald Managed to Be Around Whenever Lightning Struck

MURDER AT PEMMICAN PORTAGE

By H. S. M. KEMP

COCKEYE McDONALD, dean of the Caribou Lake prospectors, sat at ease on an empty nail-keg in the Hudson's Bay store at Pemmican Portage and brought himself up-to-date on local affairs. It was considerable moons since Cockeye had been in that particular locality, but for an old-timer, Cockeye got around the country pretty well. Of course, there was little reason why he shouldn't. His time was his own, and the sixty thousand dollars the Consolidated had paid him for the original discovery on Caribou Lake had, by judi-

cious manipulation, been almost doubled. Thus with unlimited leisure and no financial cares, small wonder that Cockeye had not demurred when Pilot Jimmy Graham swung around by Pemmican Portage on his way to town.

Now, in the Company's big store, Cockeye had just been introduced to Baldy Jacobs, to Pete Lucas, and, more particularly, to Swede Johnson. Johnson was the assistant game guardian, and the introduction had been effected by Sam Preston, the Hudson's Bay man himself. Old Sam had known Cockeye for a long, long time; from 'way back when, twenty years before. Cockeye's digestion had already been ruined by half-baked bannock and well-charred beans. Old Sam was moved to comment on that friendship now.

"Yeah; a lot of water has run under the bridge since first I run into Cockeye up on Bittern Lake. He didn't look like no Rockefeller then—all g'anted up and raggeder than a Dogrib Indian. But he was a stubborn old pelican; and seems like his stubbornness paid off."

Cockeye's leathery cheeks cracked in a grin. "Dunno about stubbornness; but when everybody was claimin' the North to be a Land o' Golden Opportunities, I sorta had to stick around till one of them there opportunities showed up."

Old Sam nodded. "Yeah. And you used to tell me to quit tradin' and get into the prospectin' racket. Mebbe I should of listened to you."

"You should of," agreed Cockeye. "Prospectin' ain't no picnic, but if a feller's got guts, he'll hit the jackpot in the end."

Baldy Jacobs, swinging his booted feet from the top of the counter opposite, squirted tobacco-juice into the sandbox and quirked an eyebrow.

"Them's comfortin' words, Old Timer. Me, I've only bin at the game ten years, so I wouldn't know."

Cockeye gave Baldy the once-over. "But in the meantime," he suggested, "you ain't just starvin' at it."

Baldy chuckled; so did the other men in the place.

"No, I ain't starvin'," agreed Baldy. "And occasionally I make a dollar or two on the side."

"Yeah; just a dollar or two," grunted Swede Johnson. "Just five thousand for a couple of claims he peddled last fall. And fresh back from a month or so in town'll mean he's probably got rid of those other three claims he staked this spring."

Cockeye gave a grunt. "Thasso? Quite the goin' concern, our fat friend here. Too bad, Baldy," he suggested, "that the Gov'ment won't let a feller stake more'n three claims in a year. Ten more years, and you'd hafta hire an auditor to figure out your income tax."

"Too bad, nothin'!" jeered Pete Lucas. "If there wasn't no limit, guys like Baldy'd stake the whole country and there wouldn't be left no place to trap."

"Oh, you'd make out," countered Baldy. "There's always the Reserve."

There was a laugh from the others, but it was an odd laugh, restrained. Assistant Game Guardian Swede Johnson seemed embarrassed. A bit nettled, too. But before anyone spoke, a shadow fell across the doorway and a newcomer stepped into the store.

HE WAS a man around thirty-five, with untidy clothing, a battered hat, and a limp pack-sack over one shoulder. He dropped the sack to the floor, favored the gathering with a hostile, furtive glance, and hoisted himself to a seat on the counter. Baldy Jacobs stared at him for a moment, then his face broke into a grin.

"Well, if it ain't old Jackpine! H'are you, boy?" He added, "And how's things down on the farm?"

A wave of color swept Jackpine Sanderson's ratty features. He glared back at Baldy Jacobs.

"Aw, shut yer mouth!" he snarled. "I don't need no cracks like that from you!"

Baldy Jacobs was all contrition. "Ferget it, Jackpine," he told the man. "I was only foolin'. You know me better'n that."

"I don't know nothin'!" averred Jackpine. He glared angrily around the store. "And that goes for you other guys, too. You all done worse'n I did, only you wasn't caught. Or mebbe," he amended, "there wasn't no one around to squeal on you."

A sudden silence fell. Then, as though defiantly, Jackpine glanced across and up at the flushed face of Pete Lucas. Pete Lucas

had Indian blood in him, and his face showed it now. Thinly, in a short-clipped voice, he said to Jackpine, "Put it into words—and I'll tell you you're a dirty liar!"

He added, "That is, if you've got the guts!"

Jackpine stiffened. The color was now flooding his own face. Then watching the halfbreed narrowly, he began to lower himself from the counter to the floor.

But so did Swede Johnson. The assistant game guardian was a tall man, tall and rawboned and hard. He edged in front of Jackpine Sanderson, looked from him to Pete Lucas and back again.

"Break it up!" he ordered. "You, Jackpine, you let your mouth run away with you. And you, Pete—well, neither one of you could fight your way out of a paper bag. So forget it, or I'll trim you both."

Of all this Cockeye was an interested observer. He said nothing, but he decided that if hostilities opened up, his nail-keg was in a direct line of attack. But before he could move, Jackpine Sanderson brushed Swede Johnson away, muttered something about another chance and another time, and headed for the door.

COCKEYE waited. "Well, well, well!" he said at last. "Another little matter amicably settled." And when there was no comment coming from the others, he turned to the Hudson's Bay man. "What's the matter with everyone? Don't nobody tell me nothin'?"

Cockeye thrived on gossip; and when drama was being enacted under his very nose, it was right and proper that he should know all about it.

"Ain't so much to tell," answered Sam Preston. "Jackpine trapped a bunch of beaver up in the Muskeg Game Reserve last spring and got pinched for it."

"Uh-huh," noted Cockeye; and cast an eye in the direction of Swede Johnson.

"I never pinched him," put in Swede. "It was the boss—Jack O'Neil."

"Cost him much?"

"Two hundred bucks or thirty days. He took," said Swede, "the thirty days. And it looks like he's just getting back."

Cockeye scrubbed his straggly beard. "Thirty days, eh? Wouldn't none of the citizens," he suggested, "dig up the money for him?"

"Not two hundred simoleons," put in Baldy Jacobs. "Jackpine, yunno, is a mite unreliable."

"And if the fine wasn't enough," supplied old Sam Preston, "O'Neil confiscated his gun, traps and canoe. That left Jackpine high and dry, and he's been kinda sore about it, I guess, ever since."

Cockeye chuckled. "In Jackpine's position, I'd be a bit disgruntled myself." He glanced across at Pete Lucas. "And when the lad mentioned about someone squealin' on him, you didn't seem too joyous, neither."

Pete Lucas gave a short grunt. "Jackpine's bugs, anyway. I saw him headin' into the Reserve—paddlin' up the Balsam River. So when O'Neil caught him in there that afternoon, he figured I'd done the squealin' on him."

"Which, naturally, you hadn't."

"Sure I hadn't," flared Pete Lucas. "I got plenty to do without playin' stool-pigeon for Jack O'Neil!"

"Meanin'," grinned Baldy Jacobs, "plenty to do dodgin' him yourself!"

The halfbreed suddenly softened. With a swift glance at O'Neil's assistant, Swede Johnson, he told Baldy, "Mebbe. And that goes for you and the rest of us."

A moment later, as though by common assent, the store emptied and Cockeye found himself alone with old Sam Preston. The Company man came around to where Cockeye was sitting, took a seat on the counter-top and began to load his pipe.

"This Jackpine feller—" began Cockeye.

"Jackpine Sanderson."

"Well, Jackpine Sanderson—what does he do when he ain't poachin' beaver on the Game Reserve?"

"Nothin' much. Traps some in the winter and makes a bit of bootleg hooch in the summer."

"Moonshiner, eh?"

"Kind of. And it'll cost him more'n thirty days if the Mounties ever catch him at it. Outside of that, he ain't a bad guy. Only he's sure got it in for Jack O'Neil."

In his quest for gossip, Cockeye asked after the other men. "And this fat pilgrim—Baldy?"

"Baldy Jacobs? He's a prospector, and

a good one. Last winter, though, he tried trappin' with a guy named Snuffy Parker. They had a pretty fair district, but they never made their beans. That is," amended Sam Preston, "Baldy Jacobs didn't, anyhow."

Pete Lucas, Cockeye learned, had always been on the out with Jackpine Sanderson, but the trader doubted that Lucas had ever squealed on Jackpine at all. Jackpine was the suspicious type; probably had an inferiority complex and was prepared to think the world was against him. In the trader's opinion, it had been merely chance that had brought Game Guardian Jack O'Neil into the Reserve that day.

"But he needn't have been so blamed tough," Sam Preston agreed. "The fine or the thirty days might have been all right, but there wasn't no call to seize the canoe, gun and traps. That was sort of rubbin' it in."

Cockeye was inclined to agree. "I never met this guy O'Neil. In fact," he grinned, "in my younger days I was pretty much like Pete Lucas and Jackpine himself—spent more time dodgin' game guardians than tryin' to meet 'em. And by what you've told me of this O'Neil feller, I ain't so fussy about meetin' him now."

But he met him, and within half an hour; for the man himself came into the store to buy a can of smoking tobacco. Out of courtesy Sam Preston introduced Cockeye McDonald; and O'Neil seemed interested at once.

"McDonald?" he said. "Of Caribou Lake? I've heard of you. From Fat Morris."

"Heard of you, too," reciprocated Cockeye. "From Jackpine Sanderson."

O'Neil gave a grunt. "And Jackpine didn't flatter me."

"And Fat Morris wouldn't flatter me, neither."

O'Neil grinned. He was a big, hard-faced man with heavy shoulders and a powerful jaw. "Oh, I dunno. Fat seemed to think a lot of you. Says you taught him all he knows about the mineral game. It must have been plenty; for he's doing all right with that mine of his up on the Snare River. But about Jackpine—don't fret over him. He knew the score; and if he got caught, well, that was his tough luck."

O'Neil dismissed the matter then, bought his tobacco and began to discuss with Sam Preston the matter of royalties on fur. Cockeye, out of it, lounged over towards the door. The drumming of airplane engines caught his ear, and he knew that this would be Jimmy Graham—back from a side-jaunt to the Foster River and about ready to resume his flight to town.

THEY landed in the city at sundown; and although civilization and all its works were an abomination to Cockeye McDonald, business affairs took him there once in a while. This present trip concerned merely a three-hour chat with his lawyer and the signing of several seal-studded documents; but lawyers' appointment-books being what they are, Cockeye couldn't contact his man until three of the following afternoon.

It was nearly six o'clock when his business was finally concluded, and seven by the time he had finished supper. But it was not yet bedtime; so as he had done on many a previous occasion, Cockeye walked out to the residential section of the city and called on his friend, Bill Nettleton.

Nettleton was the staff-sergeant in charge of the local five-man Mounted Police detachment; and although he was getting used to automobile horns and neon lights, Bill Nettleton was still a Northerner at heart. For years he had been stationed at Jackfish Lake, and Cockeye knew that it was only the matter of the children's education that kept the sergeant in town at all. So for an hour the two old cronies smoked strong tobacco, drank Mrs. Nettleton's excellent tea and brought each other abreast of general happenings.

Cockeye told of his stop-over at Pemmican Portage and touched on the run-in between Jackpine Sanderson and Game Guardian O'Neil.

"That O'Neil looked to me like a tough baby," he remarked. "But prob'ly the Gover'ment knew what they were doin' when they hired him."

Bill Nettleton agreed. "And they think so much of him they won't let him go."

"Let him go for what?" asked Cockeye. "Mean, he wants to quit?"

The sergeant shrugged. "Guess he never wanted to but thought he had to. He's

taking a crack at fur-farming. He and a feller named Parker have leased a two-hundred-acre island up on Crooked Lake and figure on stocking it with mink and foxes."

"But he ain't goin' to quit?" persisted Cockeye.

"No. The way I heard it, the Department are sort of closing their eyes to the deal. He can run his fox-farm provided it doesn't interfere with his own work. And it needn't. He'll put up the money, and this guy Parker'll do the rest."

Cockeye squinted. "Parker? You mean, a Snuffy Parker? Feller that trapped last winter with Baldy Jacobs?"

Nettleton didn't know. "But he claims to have worked on fur-farms down in New Brunswick. Anyway, he seems to satisfy O'Neil."

Cockeye debated the matter for a moment. He gave a grunt.

"O'Neil must rate pretty high with his Department. Or what's wrong? Couldn't they find no one to take his place?"

Nettleton shrugged again. "I wouldn't say that. There's his assistant, Swede Johnson. Swede's a good man, and for a while we figured he'd get the job. But they finally decided to keep O'Neil; so the Swede's out of luck."

"Well," sighed Cockeye, "I wish Mr. O'Neil success in his new venture. At the same time, there'd have been few tears shed around the Portage if he had jumped the job. Jackpine Sanderson, f'rinstance. He'd have bin plumb tickled about it."

"Not if they put in a tougher man than O'Neil."

"They don't come no tougher. Not anyways," said Cockeye, "by the way I sized him up."

THEY talked on other matters and the hour grew late. Cockeye got up to leave. But at the doorway Bill Nettleton asked him to drop into the detachment the following morning.

"I've got some rock-samples I'd like you to look at. An Indian fetched them in from Clearwater Lake."

Cockeye said he would; but when morning came and he called at the police office, Bill Nettleton seemed to have other matters on his mind. Cockeye found the place in a turmoil and the sergeant himself packing a club-bag with a raincoat, some papers and a pair of handcuffs.

The sergeant recognized his visitor, gave a grunt, and stood up.

"Funny," he remarked. "I was just thinking about you."

"That's nice," allowed Cockeye.

"Is it?" countered Nettleton. He went on, "Remember last night, and talking about Jack O'Neil? Well, we've just got a radio message from Pemmican Portage. The guy's been shot. This morning."

"Shot?" echoed Cockeye. "You mean—hurt? An accident?"

"Bumped off," answered Bill Nettleton grimly. "Rubbed out. Murdered."

Cockeye blinked. "Good gosh!"

The sergeant returned to his packing, but spared time to give out a few more details.

"Yeah. The message came through a few minutes ago—from the Pemmican Portage Government Station. O'Neil's up there, dead. I radioed 'em back to leave the body as is. Then I chartered an Airways plane and we're hitting out right away."

A couple of constables were standing nearby, ready to give Bill Nettleton a hand. Cockeye asked, "Takin' someone along with you? I mean, one of your boys?"

"Short-handed as we are!" Bill Nettleton gave a grunt. "This ain't the army!"

"Oh," said Cockeye. "Yeah; I see."

A moment later he tried again. "I was wantin' to head north myself, only Jimmy Graham ain't around. They say he took off for the portage with a load of stuff for O'Neil's new fur-ranch and may work outa the portage for a week."

Bill Nettleton grunted but refused to bite. He shut the club-bag and glanced around to see if anything had been overlooked. But Cockeye was persistent.

"I was wonderin', Bill, if—well—I mean, if you wasn't goin' to be crowded—"

Then Bill Nettleton grinned. "You weren't wondering anything of the sort! What you were doing was scheming some way of sticking your nose into another murder case."

Cockeye looked embarrassed. "Well, I dunno. You'n me, Bill, we *have* worked together on one or two cases. It's sorta funny, but—"

"It *is* funny," agreed the sergeant. "Funny how you're always around when the lightning strikes. You said Fat Morris once told you that. But still, if it's just a lift to the portage you want, I guess it can be arranged."

THUS it was that a couple of hours later Bill Nettleton and Cockeye McDonald stepped from an Airways Junkers in front of Sam Preston's store. The trader met them, raised an eyebrow at Cockeye and remarked that the two men had got there quick.

Bill Nettleton was all business. "Yeah. And where's the body?"

"Just up on the portage into Reedy Lake. Half a mile from here. That's where he was shot."

Bill Nettleton gave a grunt. "With two or three hundred people milling all around him."

"No," said Sam Preston. "We knew you wouldn't want that. So Baldy Jacobs offered to do guard-duty, sort of, till you got here."

Now, so far as Cockeye was concerned, the sergeant dropped all pretense. He nodded to the oldtimer, said, "Guess that's where we make the start."

Sam Preston said his canoe was on shore, but though there was a trail that ran from the village to the portage, the canoe and engine would get them there quicker.

"Okay," agreed Bill Nettleton. "Let's go."

The canoe was a big freighter, and the three men piled into it. Sam Preston tended the engine, and in a few minutes a turn in the river showed a dozen or so Indians sitting smoking and talking together at what was evidently the beginning of the Reedy Lake Portage. Preston suddenly shut off his motor, and they swung in.

They got out under the lowered scrutiny of Indian eyes, and Sam Preston led the way up the steep river bank. Baldy Jacobs stood waiting for them.

He nodded to the sergeant, to Cockeye, and said, "Nothin's bin touched and nobody's bin around. He's lyin' just the way they found him."

Now the two men saw the body, a dozen yards or so away. It was face down and feet toward them. And they saw a sixteen-foot canoe, lying where it had fallen beside the narrow portage trail.

Bill Nettleton moved ahead. Beside the body he stopped. A glance at the side-turned face, and—"O'Neil, all right," he remarked.

The dead man was wearing high-laced boots, breeches, and a white shirt; but between the shoulder-blades the shirt was red with blood and torn with a ragged hole.

"Lend a hand," ordered Nettleton. "We'll turn him over." And when they had done so, they saw another hole, smaller but more bloody, right above the heart.

They stood up again, glanced around, took in the details. By the appearance of things, O'Neil had been in the act of packing his canoe across the portage when the bullet had struck him.

"With the canoe upside-down on his shoulders," observed Cockeye, "he couldn't see no distance ahead of him at all." He added, "Sort of a cinch for the killer."

Bill Nettleton was frowning. He shoved back his Stetson and stroked his blue-shaved jaw. "Who found him?" he asked Baldy Jacobs.

"An Injun," answered Baldy. "Old Toby Bear. Though several people in the village claimed to have heard the shots. Seems to me," admitted Baldy, "that I heard 'em myself."

"And what time was that?"

"Around five-thirty, or soon after. And that's what I mean about me hearin' 'em, too. Something woke me up, and at the time I thought it was shootin'. When I got outa bed, my watch said five-thirty-five."

Bill Nettleton gave one of his accustomed grunts. "Yeah; even at half a mile, shots sound pretty loud that early in the morning."

"Especially calm," put in Sam Preston, "like she was."

The sergeant, with Cockeye, crossed over to the canoe. It was lying against the underbrush, keel-down. A glance toward the stern showed a splintered hole through boards and canvas, with flecks of blood around the hole itself.

"Right through his body and right through the canoe," observed Nettleton. He added, "Too bad."

Cockeye understood. "Yeah. Sure is."

The sergeant turned to Sam Preston. "You

can't leave him here. And you've got an old canvas tarp in the freighter. How about getting two-three of the Nitchies to load him, then you two guys take him back to his house?"

Preston said he guessed it'd be all right; but where should the body be put? "Not in the front room?"

"No. Nor in bed. But if there's a warehouse of some sort—? Sure; stow him in there. Cockeye and I'll walk back in a few minutes; just as soon as we get done."

Preston started for the beach, and the sergeant went along till he came to where the Indians were still waiting. In his fluent Cree, he asked them, collectively, "How many of you heard the shots?"

Three men had, and were emphatic about it.

"All right," he said. "How far apart were they?"

How far apart? There were frowns, wrinkles of thought. Two of the men said they were in their houses, one in his tent, at the time. But between them they agreed that the shots were fired at an interval of from five to ten seconds.

"Five to ten seconds, eh?" The sergeant nodded, turned, and found Cockeye behind him. He said, "I want another look at O'Neil before they take him off."

TEN minutes later, they were alone. The sergeant filled his pipe, squinted at the dead man's canoe, turned to Cockeye.

"O'Neil was only hit once. That means one bullet missed him."

Cockeye sniffed. "A ponderous deduction." Then he asked: "Yeah; but which?"

"Which what? Which bullet missed?" The sergeant gave a faint grin. "Does it make any difference?"

"Mebbe not to O'Neil. But it's sort of queer." Then at the frown that gathered on Nettleton's face, Cockeye went on, "Well, put it another way: which of the two bullets killed him?"

Nettleton gave a faint snort. "Okay. I'll bite. Which of 'em?"

"I dunno," Cockeye admitted. "And that's what seems queer. If it was the first one—and I believe it was—where did the second one go?" He turned, pointed up the portage ten or fifteen yards away to where the trail took a sharp turn to the left. "The guy that downed him hit him plumb center and head on. That means he musta bin standin' right there beside that spruce tree. It ain't no distance, and, dang it; it's what I say. If he drilled him through the heart with his first shot, why did he shoot ag'in? Or, shootin' ag'in to finish him off, why didn't he hit him? The target was big enough. What I mean, his whole body's about ten times as big as the circle for his heart."

Nettleton shrugged. "Okay. So he did

not get him with his first shot. He got him with the second."

Cockeye looked at him pityingly. "Have you ever bin shot at? You musta bin—or them First War ribbons you're wearin' don't mean a thing! Well, if somebody took a crack at you from fifteen yards with a canoe upside-down on your shoulders, would you stand there gawpin' and waitin' for him to shoot ag'in? Remember O'Neil was a Game Guardian. I dunno, but if I was a Game Guardian and a bullet whistled by my ear, I'd ditch the canoe and hit for the brush like a scared wolf."

Bill Nettleton grinned. "All right; pick

up the marbles. So O'Neil was killed with the first bullet, the second one missed him and we don't know where it went. Suppose we try to find out."

They did, but without success. As Cockeye had pointed out, O'Neil had been shot from head-on, and behind him were no trees, no obstacle of any sort. The backdrop for the murder was the Churchill River itself, at that point three-quarters of a mile in width.

"You see?" explained Bill Nettleton. "That second bullet—or your first, and it's all the same to me—went high, wide and handsome. What concerns us more than where the bullet went is where the murderer stood. And that's what we're going to have a look at right now."

As Cockeye had pointed out, due to the twist in the trail there was only one place the killer could have stood. That was in the screen of half a dozen spruce trees, right where the trail took its turn.

They began there, and a few minutes' search in the moss and the tangled undergrowth showed impressions that might have been made by a man.

"And don't they help!" jeered Nettleton. "What are they—moccasin tracks, boot-tracks, or a feller crawling around on his hands and knees?"

"But there were a couple of shots," pointed out Cockeye.

"I know it," said the sergeant, almost brusquely. "And I know what I'm looking for."

He found it almost immediately—an empty shell-case, a short four feet from where Cockeye himself was standing.

He picked it up, twisted it around in his fingers till he could read the markings on the butt.

"Remington .32." He turned to Cockeye with a grunt of satisfaction. "Well, does that help? Or don't it?"

"Dunno," Cockeye admitted. "Could have helped more if you hadn't smeared all the fingerprints off."

Nettleton scowled. "A feller don't need fingers to eject a shell."

"No. But he needs fingers to shove 'em in."

The sergeant reddened. "Fingerprints wouldn't show on a shell-case after it had been fired. The fumes, the acid—"

"U-huh," allowed Cockeye. "Mebbe. I wouldn't know. I ain't a cop."

BUT the policeman was strangely quiet as with Cockeye he struck off along a trail that led back in the direction of the the village. He made straight for the Hudson's Bay post, and his first words were to old Sam Preston.

"How many Remington .32's you got in this neck of the woods?"

"Remington .32's?" Sam Preston frowned. "Just two, s'far's I know. I own one, and Jackpine owns the other."

"You own one, eh?" Nettleton nodded. "And Jackpine the other?"

Preston agreed, then looked anxious. "Why?" he asked. "You figure a .32 was mixed up in this affair?"

Bill Nettleton didn't answer him. Instead, he persisted in his inquiry. "You sure Jackpine owns a .32?"

"Sure I'm sure!" averred Sam Preston. "He bought it off Snuffy Parker a couple months ago. Then Snuffy bought a new .303 Savage off me."

For a moment or two the Hudson's Bay man watched Nettleton's face. Finally, he asked the question he had put before.

"Is a .32 mixed up in this?"

"Yeah," the policeman told him. "There is. But, of course, you'll have an alibi for yours?"

Preston looked dubious. "I got an alibi for myself, but not for the gun."

"And your alibi?"

"I was in bed, asleep."

Bill Nettleton almost smiled. "Quite an alibi. Try and do better than that." He asked, "Anyone in bed with you?"

Sam Preston reddened. "Of course not! I'm a bachelor."

The policeman grinned. "Okay. So's Cockeye. But he'll probably be bunking with me tonight. But I get the general idea." After a moment he asked, "Where does Jackpine live?"

"Jackpine? Down by the church. He's got a cabin just this side of it. But I don't know if you'll find him home. He was up in the village just now."

With Cockeye, Nettleton walked out; and while they were debating whether or not to go to Jackpine's shack, they caught sight of the man himself coming toward them.

With him was an overall-clad individual whom Cockeye had seen around the village on his earlier visit.

Nettleton waited, and when Jackpine would have passed by, the policeman stopped him. "C'mere! I'd like a word with you."

Jackpine hesitated. "Yeah? Well, what about?"

"I'll tell you what about," Bill Nettleton informed him bluntly. "Jack O'Neil was shot with a Remington .32. Where was your .32 about that time?"

Jackpine blinked. "Who says it was a .32?"

"Never mind the questions," rapped Nettleton. "You give with the answers."

"Well, I don't know nothin' about it," stated Jackpine. "Anyways, my gun, she's home."

The sergeant seemed to suddenly remember. "Home? Didn't O'Neil confiscate it?"

Jackpine spat as though at a distasteful thought. "Nah. That was my shotgun. A blamed good 12-gauge, she was. Full choke on th' one barr'l—"

"Never mind the one barrel," ordered the sergeant. "We're talking about .32's. And who says your gun is home?"

"I do. I lent it to Snuffy here and he brought it back last night."

"Snuffy?"

"Yeah me." The overalled man put in with an explanation. "They call me that 'count I useta have hay-fever. Don't bother me no more. Y'see, run to a feller down in Winnipeg—"

Cockeye chuckled. Bill Nettleton scowled. "What *is* all this? I'm trying to find out something about a Remington .32 and all I get is choke-bore shotguns and hay-fever. Look," he told Snuffy, "if you've got this guy's .32—"

"But I ain't got it!" averred Snuffy. "I took it back last night." Then, as Jackpine Sanderson seemed anxious to get in a word, he hurried on. "Yeah; I borrered it 'count ol' Sam run outa shells for my .303, and there was a bear draggin' my fishnet outa the water all the time. Then when I heard ol' Nicocheese had killed him, I took it back."

Bill Nettleton showed his rising ill humor. "We're getting nowhere, fast. Snuffy had the gun, fetched it back again. You say it's home. Okay! So the gun was in your possession about the time that Jack O'Neil was murdered this morning?"

Jackpine agreed. "But what of it? That don't prove me no murderer. And ol' Sam Preston owns a .32. Why not talk things over with him?"

"I have. And now I'm talking them over with you. The idea being," explained Bill Nettleton, "that someone is going to be jugged on a murder rap. Some gent who owns a .32 and who was on the prowl this a. m. around five-thirty."

Jackpine fought the fear that flashed into his eyes. "Well, it wasn't me. I never knew nothin' about no murder till Snuffy come into the shack this mornin', woke me up and told me about it."

The sergeant glowered at him. "You another bachelor? Don't take in lodgers? Sleep alone?"

"Yeah. But Snuffy's tent ain't far away. That's why, when he heard about the murder, he run in and told me."

Bill Nettleton swung on Snuffy. "That right—you found him there—in bed—asleep?"

For a bare instant Snuffy wavered. Something swept over his face. Then he said, stubbornly, "Yeah; he was there. I woke him up."

BILL NETTLETON drilled him for a moment. "Your name Parker?" he asked. "The guy who was going fur-farming with Jack O'Neil?"

Snuffy's eyes had cleared. "That's right," he admitted. "On a sorta partnership basis—seventy percent for him, and thirty percent for me. And grub, of course. Jack was t' get the biggest slice, 'count he put up the dough."

"And now what happens?" asked the sergeant.

Snuffy spread his hands in doleful resignation. "Dunno. Hard t' say?"

Nettleton frowned. "Hard to say? Why what's hard about it? The way I see it, you've got the complete set-up—fencing, grub, stock and equipment—and it didn't cost you a plugged nickel."

"Yeah," agreed Snuffy, doubtfully. "But Jack, was a pretty good guy."

Bill Nettleton turned to Jackpine Sanderson. "Was he?"

"He was a—a son of a—well," gulped

Jackpine, "call him anything yuh like. It's okay by me!"

The sergeant glanced at Cockeye. "See the way it goes? One man's meat and another man's poison."

Cockeye nodded. "Sure. One man's benefactor, and the other guy's pain in the neck."

Snuffy Parker broke in. "Jack had his failin's, I guess. He was tough on Jackpine here, but he always used me good."

Jackpine let a strangled squawk. "Used yuh good? What about the time he caught you kissin'—or tryin' to kiss—Pete Lucas's sister last New Year's?"

"Huh?" For a moment Snuffy Parker seemed embarrassed; but he passed the matter over with a deprecatory wave of his hand. "Oh, that? Cripes, that was nothin'. Jack was new to the North then; he didn't savvy Injun customs. Anyways, how was I to know she was his gal?"

"What happened?" pressed the sergeant. "Did he beat you up?"

"Beat me up? Him!" Snuffy's face hardened. "Jack never saw the day he could beat me up, big an' tough though he was. No! We had words—fightin' words for a while; but once he understood, nothin' ever came of it. We were the best of friends ever since. Partners, even, at the last. And if he hadn't bin bumped off, I'd have played the fiddle at his weddin'."

"His wedding?" put in the policeman.

"Yeah. Him and Lottie Lucas. They was gettin' married next week, then he was goin' to help me north with the outfit."

The policeman gave a shake of the head. "Tough on Lottie, eh?"

"But she'll get over it," Snuffy assured him. "That's the way these people are, yunno. I run into a feller up on Island Lake one time—"

"Skip Island Lake," suggested Bill Nettleton. "Tell me instead where you were around five-thirty this morning."

"At five-thirty? Lemme see." Snuffy's brow wrinkled. "I was prob'ly gettin' up about then. But five-thirty? That was the time of the murder. No, I was up; rustlin' some kindlin' in the bush. That's how I come to hear the shots. And when I heard 'em, I said to myself, 'Somebody's got some-p n; mebbe a moose or a deer swimmin' the river.' So I hightailed her back to t' tent. But," deprecatingly, "I never seen nothin'. And it wasn't till a kid come runnin' by about an hour afterwards that I heard Jack had bin killed."

The policeman decided that for the moment he would get nowhere with either Jackpine Sanderson or Snuffy Parker, and he was at a loss as to what his next move should be when he saw Baldy Jacobs turn out of the wooded trail that led to the village and come toward them. Baldy had a ring of keys on a stick, which he handed to the sergeant.

"Thought you'd show up," he told him, "but I got tired of waitin'," He repossessed the ring of keys for a moment and indicated one key in particular. "The warehouse is marked 'No. 1.' You'll find him inside."

Jackpine smirked. Baldy stared at him. "What's funny?" he asked.

"Nothin'," said Jackpine. "Only now, if we move around we'll know where he is."

Baldy gave a bit of a grunt. "Mebbe you've got somp'n there. Jack didn't rate killin', but now he's gone a lot of hard-workin' trappers'll sleep a whole lot easier nights."

"You, for one," shot back Jackpine.

"Not me at all," retorted Baldy Jacobs. "I ain't no trapper. I darn near starved at it last winter. But on the other hand, a feller should be able to get a moose when he wants one, or a duck or two, without feelin' like a criminal." He turned to Bill Nettleton. "You're a northern man, they tell me. There ain't no butcher shops or delicatessens up here. What did you do when you got tired of eatin' fish three times a day? But don't bother tellin' me, I know."

Bill Nettleton grinned. "And I know something, too. That is, that somebody beefed the guy. Somebody that got up around five in the morning to do it. And five in the morning is pretty early to be around. For a murderer or a Game Guardian, either."

"O'Neil never made a habit of gettin' up that early. Only he claimed someone was trappin' young foxes in the Reserve and he figured he might catch 'em comin' out."

"That was him!" sneered Jackpine. "Always scared somebody was gettin' a break."

"Well, there's a law, ain't there?" suggested Cockeye.

Baldy Jacobs gave a short laugh. "What's the difference? One man traps foxes after the season opens; another guy traps the young 'uns and keeps 'em in a pen. They all end up on a stretchin' board."

"A soothing philosophy," grinned Cockeye. "And you figure he was killed for that?"

"Could be," hedged Baldy. "But you ain't gettin' me to make no suggestions. First thing I know, I'll be gettin' what O'Neil got."

"Only," pointed out Cockeye, "you *wouldn't* know it."

AT THE invitation of Sam Preston, the policeman and Cockeye had dinner at the Hudson's Bay post. Preston's Scotch clerk was at the table, but the meal wasn't exactly a festive one. But Cockeye understood. With a .32 Remington in the murder-picture and old Sam owning one himself, the Company man felt that a certain amount of suspicion was directed his way.

But Bill Nettleton drew him out. He plied him with questions concerning the other residents of Pemmican Portage, and found that with the exception of the missionary and O'Neil's assistant, Swede Johnson, all the accountable white men were on hand at the moment.

"The missionary, Mr. Short," explained Sam Preston, "is out in town with his family for a holiday. And they tell me that Swede Johnson went up the river yesterday mornin' with a load of stuff for a new ranger cabin they're buildin' at Twin Falls."

"Oh?" remarked the policeman. "And did Swede go alone?"

"I guess so. It's a short trip and no portages. He should have bin back before this."

After a while the sergeant asked, "What d'you know about this Snuffy Parker? How long has the guy been around here?"

"Snuffy?" repeated Sam Preston. "He pulled in here last summer. Then when freeze-up come, he threw in with Baldy Jacobs and went trapping up at Pickerel Rapid. About half a day from here."

"And they didn't make out very good, Cockeye tells me."

"Because neither of 'em can trap worth a hoot. And the location wasn't to blame. Seems to be good enough for Pete Lucas. Baldy went up there couple days ago for what stuff he'd left in the camp, and Pete's movin' in next month."

The sergeant mentioned the marriage that was to have taken place between the dead O'Neil and Pete's sister, Lottie.

"Sort of rough on her," he pointed out. "What'll she do now?"

"Marry someone else, I guess," predicted Sam Preston. "She's a good-lookin' gal, and educated. Half the guys in town are squabblin' over her."

Cockeye opened his mouth to say something; then suddenly shut it again. His glance caught that of the young Scots clerk across the table. Sandy Ferguson was tense, frowning; and when he caught Cockeye's gaze on him, he blushed to the roots of his carroty hair.

"Hmm!" said Cockeye to himself. And again, "Hmm!" But there came a sudden distraction; and with a short knock, Swede Johnson stepped into the room.

The Assistant Game Guardian was in his shirt-sleeves and there was a dew of sweat on his brow. He caught sight of Bill Nettleton immediately, and said, "What's all this about Jack getting killed?"

The policeman had about finished his dinner, so he pushed back from the table and glanced up at him.

"Well, what about it?" he countered. "It's happened; and there we are." He added, "The body's stowed in a warehouse. No. 1."

Swede glanced around, and back again. "I just got in," he explained. "Jackpine told me. Said it happened early this morning."

"U-huh," agreed the sergeant. "Somewhere around five-thirty."

"And you don't know who did it?" Then, at the oddness of the question, Swede amended it a bit. "I mean, you got any ideas?"

"Not many. Have you?"

Swede shook his head. "No idea at all. Matter of fact, I haven't seen Jack for a few days. Well, for a couple, anyhow. We have been in and out, but always managed to miss each other."

Bill Nettleton gave a grim smile. "Well, the guy that went gunning for him didn't

miss. Got him dead center; through the heart."

"Shotgun?"

"Rifle. With a Remington. A .32."

Swede's eyes narrowed a bit. "A .32," he repeated. "You sure of that? Because there ain't so many .32's around. Jackpine owns one; and Sam here—" He caught himself. "Well, Sam sells him shells for a .32 anyway."

Sam Preston looked awkward. Bill Nettleton said, "Any other .32's you know of?"

"Not off-hand." Then, hurriedly, said Swede, "But don't get me wrong about this. I wasn't tryin' to get Jackpine in Dutch. The fact that he owned a .32 just popped into my head."

Bill Nettleton soothed him. "Sure." Then he asked, "How's things up at Twin Falls?"

Swede Johnson's raw-boned face showed bafflement at the switch in topics. "All right, I guess. Why?"

"Nothing. Only the boys said you should have been back earlier. I wondered if anything had gone wrong."

"Nothing wrong," Swede assured him. "Only my engine was actin' haywire all the way up, and I fooled away a couple hours workin' on her this mornin'."

"U-huh. And, of course, you wouldn't use the Reedy Lake Portage on the way to Twin Falls."

"No. I went right by."

Bill Nettleton stood up then. He handed the ring of keys to Swede Johnson, said he'd see him later, then gave Cockeye the nod to follow, and walked out.

SAM PRESTON had a pile of logs set out nearby. Evidently a new building would be going up. The sergeant crossed to it, pulled out his tobacco and said to Cockeye, "Sit down for a smoke, and we'll talk things over."

"And there seems," observed Cockeye, "plenty to talk about."

But for a few moments, neither of the two men said anything. They sucked on their pipes and brooded out across the river. Finally, Bill Nettleton observed, "Think we're taking the wrong angle? I mean, centering on the white men. Think it might be an Indian crime?"

Cockeye spat, parted his white mustache "Ain't many Indian murders in this country, Bill. I figure we're doin' all right the way we are."

The sergeant shot him a glance. "Yeah?"

"Sure. We got plenty eligible suspects, plenty motives. We'll think about the Nitchie angle when these play out."

"You know what I think?" asked Nettleton after a while. "I think we're going to find ourselves plumb up against it. Any murder cases I've been on before, I had something to start with. Something real, something tangible. This case, we've got nothing. No bullet, no tracks, no fingerprints. The way I see it, some guy has a grudge against O'Neil. He downs him from fifteen yards, leaves no tracks, and vanishes into thin air."

"There *were* tracks," pointed out Cockeye.

"Tracks!"

"And a shell-case—right at the scene of the killin'."

NETTLETON gave a grunt. "Yeah, there was a shell-case; but what's that goin' to prove? Right now I'd be prepared to swear that the shell came from Jackpine's gun. He was lying, when he said he was in bed and asleep when Snuffy Parker called to tell him the news. Snuffy gave the game away—hesitating like he did when I sprung that question on him. But the fact that the shell or the bullet came from Jackpine's gun won't help us. All Jackpine has to do is to say that as far as he knows the gun was in his house at the time or that any one of a dozen men could have pinched it. I guess they could have done—and put it back again when all hands went up-river when the murder was discovered. But what we haven't done yet, and what we've got to do, is to prove the identity of the gent who stood in that spruce-grove and downed O'Neil. And what I think, the spruce-grove is the place to begin."

So once more they headed through the bush to the Reedy Lake portage. There, they combed thoroughly the spot the killer had stood. From the position that the .32 shell-case had occupied, it seemed evident that the killer had taken up his own position near to the biggest of the half-dozen trees. The sergeant stared at this tree for a mo-

ment, then crossed over to scrutinize its seamed, gummy trunk.

Cockeye grinned. "What are you lookin' for? Honey?"

But Nettleton ignored him. The sergeant was picking at the rough bark, taking something from it, placing it in the palm of his hand.

Cockeye's grin turned to a frown. Intrigued, he came over himself.

He squinted, breathed down Nettleton's neck. "What you after, Bill?"

Nettleton turned, a grim dogged line to the blue-shaved jaw.

"Maybe this is the break. I figured—suppose a guy wanted to take careful aim—had to make sure of hitting a mark with the first shot—what'd he do? What would *you* do? Well, I know what I'd do—something I've done time and again before. I'd get up against something solid, a tree or a fence-post; anything to steady my aim." He turned back to his tree. "And I'm wondering if these bits of flick are natural fuzz, or hairs from somebody's sweater."

Cockeye gave a grunt. Clearly he was impressed. He rooted in the hip pocket of his breeches and came up with a spectacle-case that yielded a pair of steel-rimmed glasses. He squinted once more over Bill Nettleton's shoulder, while the sergeant picked, and picked, and picked.

A note of satisfaction came into the old-timer's voice.

"Dang it, Bill! Mebbe you got somp'n there."

Now, when he turned, the policeman had a dozen or so fibres cupped in the palm of his hand. With equal care he pulled a wallet from the pocket of his tunic and passed it over his shoulder to Cockeye.

"There's a little folder in there," he explained. "For postage stamps. Take the stamps out and gimme it here."

When Cockeye did so, he placed the fibres in the folder, returned folder, stamps and wallet to his pocket again.

"Now," he said, grimly, "we'll see what the Laboratory has to tell." At Cockeye's frown, he went on: "The C. I. B. boys down in Regina'll go to town on this. If I can grab a plane before Ted Baldwin picks us up, I'll rush my samples in to them, they'll shove 'em under a microscope and tell me if they're spiderwebs or fluff from a sweater. I can tell the color for myself—blue, or a slate-gray—and if they *are* bits of a sweater, we'll know if the sweater was made of cotton or wool. And even," he exaggerated, "the name of the mill that produced it."

Cockeye goggled. "Good gosh! You mean that?"

"Sure!"

The oldtimer shook his head. "I've seen everything now—Bill Nettleton as a scientific flatfoot!" But then he brightened. "Still, where d'you go from there? You'll mebbe find that they come from a sweater that old Sam Preston has sold a dozen of; and you'll be right back where you started."

The sergeant deflated a bit. "Anyhow," he grunted, doggedly, "we'll try it, and take a chance."

AT THE far end of the village and perched atop a hill was the government-owned radio station. Bill Nettleton suggested they walk up to it and see if Fred Stillman, the operator, could contact a plane coming south.

"I shouldn't have let Ted Baldwin get away," the sergeant mourned. "But charter-jobs cost money; and if this side-trip of his to the Vermilion halves expense, it's up to me to save public funds."

Cockeye grunted, squinted at the spidery antenna on the top of the hill. "And me to save my legs. So you go ahead, feller. I'll be here when you come back."

The sergeant was gone about twenty minutes in all, and when he returned, he was smiling.

"Hit it lucky, for once. Ducky Teal's on his way south from Cree Lake. Says he'll touch in here in about an hour."

"So all you've got to do—" began Cockeye.

"I've done it: written a note to the boys in town and told 'em to rush the samples through to Regina by air-mail tonight. But there's one thing I haven't done—had a talk with Pete Lucas. I think," said Bill Nettleton, "we'll do that now."

Cockeye stood up. "Might be a good idea."

Pete Lucas, according to Sam Preston, lived on an island a quarter of a mile up the river. Cockeye remembered passing the island and seeing a house on it earlier in the day. So they borrowed Preston's canoe

and went across there. And they found Pete Lucas at home.

The halfbreed was sitting on the steps of the house and cleaning a rifle. He stood the rifle against the wall and came down to meet them. Cockeye introduced him to the sergeant.

"Just want to ask you a few questions," Nettleton began. "And the first is, how well did you know O'Neil?"

"Oh, as well as anyone," replied Pete Lucas.

"Did you like him?"

The halfbreed shrugged. "Got along with him anyhow."

"He was marrying your sister, wasn't he?"

"Yeah."

"That okay with you?"

"Why not?" the halfbreed countered. "She'd have done better than marrying anyone else around here."

Nettleton guessed that was right, then asked, "When did you see O'Neil last?"

"Well—couple days ago. In the store." Pete Lucas turned to Cockeye. "You were there, too; going south."

Cockeye nodded.

The policeman looked at the halfbreed for a moment, then he asked him, "What's your theory about O'Neil's murder? Know anyone who hated him bad enough to bump him off?"

Pete Lucas gave a thin grin. "Sure. So do you—if you've been around. Check up on the guys who own a .32."

A swift frown swept the policeman's face. "So? And what do you know about .32's?"

"Only what Sam Preston and Snuffy Parker told me. Why? Was it a secret?"

"It should have been," growled the sergeant. "Anyway, when did you see those two guys?"

"About the time you went into Sam Preston's house for dinner. I was over there."

"And Jackpine—Jackpine Sanderson? Did you see him, too?"

"Not for quite a while. Not, anyway, since bright and early this morning."

"Bright and early? What do *you* call bright and early?"

"Oh, I dunno." Pete Lucas seemed very casual about it all. "Somewhere around half-past five or a quarter to six."

Cockeye glanced from Pete Lucas to Bill Nettleton. The policeman was frowning, just as though he hadn't heard aright.

"Half-past five or a quarter to six?" he repeated. "Are you quite sure of that?"

"Sure as I can be," Pete Lucas told him. "I generally get up at five, and at five-fifteen I turn on the early-morning news. I did today; and about the time the feller got done tellin' it, I came outside to split some more wood for the fire?"

"Yes? And you say you saw Jackpine then?"

"Sure. It ain't so far over to the mainland—mebbe couple hundred yards—and I caught a glimpse or two of him headin' home on the run along that trail. You know, the trail from Reedy Lake portage."

BILL NETTLETON was drilling the man with hard, cold eyes.

"You know what you're saying, don't you?"

The halfbreed shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you asked me."

Again a pause, then the policeman put another question. "If you were up at five and you live only a quarter of a mile from the portage, how come you didn't hear the shots?"

The halfbreed's answer was a shock to both Bill Nettleton and Cockeye. "Who says I didn't hear the shots? Sure I heard 'em!"

Bill Nettleton began to smile, but it was a wicked smile, known to Cockeye of old.

"You're good, boy; you're good," he told the halfbreed. "Now that murder has been committed and I'm out to nail someone for it, you suddenly remember you see Jackpine at the right time and you hear shots. Okay, then, we'll say you did. And now tell us, when you saw and heard all this, what happened first—the shots, or Jackpine running?"

"The shots."

"I see. And you thought—?"

"I thought Jackpine had downed something. Moose, mebbe; and he was hittin' out of there before Jack O'Neil nailed him."

Color began to creep up Bill Nettleton's neck. Cockeye knew all the signs, and he began to feel a mite sorry for Pete Lucas.

"Now listen!" growled Nettleton, omi-

nously. "And don't try kiddin' me! So far, your story don't sound very sweet. You say you thought Jackpine had downed an animal, then he's running and leaving it in case O'Neil nabs him. Does he generally do that—get up bright and early and kill a moose just for the fun of seeing it go over?"

Pete Lucas's face suddenly hardened. "Listen!" he said sharply. "And I ain't kiddin' you. When I saw Jackpine first this morning, it was like I told you. I figured he'd been over to Reedy Lake to catch an animal comin' down to drink. I figured he'd come up with one, only instead of downin' him there, the animal took him off towards home again. Back here in the bush apiece—or on the portage—Jackpine gets a couple of shots at him and knocks him over. Then he does what anyone else woulda done—bleeds him and scatters. The idea?

"Well, to see if O'Neil is home—or home, is he up? He can watch O'Neil's place, and if there ain't no sign of life within a few minutes, he can go back to his animal, gut him, and drag him away. If, on the other hand, O'Neil *does* come bustin' out, well, Jackpine'll just fade into the bush and Mister Game Guardian's left holdin' the bag."

Bill Nettleton hooked thumbs in his Sam Browne and seemed to waver.

"So that's the way it's done, eh?"

"That's the way. The only way you can do with a guy like O'Neil around."

For what seemed like minutes to Cockeye, nothing further was said. And, finally, it was Bill Nettleton who broke the silence.

"So, moose-hunting jigger that he is, you think Jackpine goes into the clear?"

"Do I?" Pete Lucas spat. "Well, for your private information I don't!" He seemed to be studying Bill Nettleton for a moment, then harsh, bitter words spilled from his lips. "What I think is that Jackpine Sanderson is a sneakin' dirty killer! Oh, I know! I thought different this morning before I knew about the murder, but right now that's all out! He had it in for O'Neil and didn't have guts enough to meet him man to man. So he lays up and bushwhacks him!" The halfbreed was breathing hard and his nostrils flared. "Me, personally, I don't care what happens to O'Neil or Jackpine either, but I got a sister to think about. She was crazy over O'Neil, thought there was nobody like him. Right now, the kid ain't sayin' nothin'. She's just sittin' there in the house and starin' at the wall. But I know what'll happen. She'll go all to pieces soon—and Jackpine is the dirty rat responsible!"

Bill Nettleton waited, then in a quieter tone he asked, "When you saw Jackpine, was he carrying a gun?"

The halfbreed shrugged. He seemed to have lost all interest in that phase of the matter. "I dunno. Mebbe he was. It was quite a ways off, and through the trees—"

Bill Nettleton turned to Cockeye. "Well? Shall we go?"

THEY landed in front of the Hudson's Bay Post. Bill Nettleton said he would walk up to the radio station and see if there were any more word regarding the incoming plane. He asked Cockeye what he intended to do.

"Take a rest," said Cockeye flatly. "Since nine o'clock this mornin' I've flown a couple hundred miles, walked dang near as many, and listened to most of the outstandin' liars they got around here. Sam's couch in the front room looks like the one bright spot, and I'm stakin' a claim to it before some other sidewinder noses me out."

So they parted; and after dropping into the store to tell Sam Preston his intentions, Cockeye wandered up to the Company bungalow. Save for the Indian housekeeper cleaning up in the kitchen, the place was deserted; and when a few minutes later the woman went off down to the village, Cockeye stretched on the couch with a sigh of relief.

But resting of the body was not resting of the mind, for Cockeye had no intention of allowing the murder of Jack O'Neil to wither underfoot. He could now give it his undivided attention. And in his own way.

This stuff of scratchin' hairs off a gummy spruce tree might be all right for Bill Nettleton; in fact, the hairs might prove very useful in the end. But Cockeye's way was to begin at the beginning, snuff around among the motives and sort over the in-

consequentials that others might have missed.

Well, there were plenty of motives, as well as there were plenty of suspects. There was, to begin with, Swede Johnson. Swede had had the opportunity. His yarn of cleaning his engine up at Twin Falls was plausible enough, but it might as well only be a yarn. He could have dumped his load at Twin Falls, doubled back, and waited on the portage for dawn and Jack O'Neil to come along. As for a motive, well, Swede might be the type who didn't take kindly to disappointment and frustration. The game guardian's job, he thought, was in the bag; then the Department and O'Neil himself grabbed it from him.

Then there was Jackpine Sanderson. A man with a grudge and an inferiority complex. Let this ferment within him, give him the opportunity, and Jackpine, too, might well do murder. Vide Pete Lucas.

Next came Snuffy Parker. Cockeye gave a grunt when he thought of him. Snuffy was, at best, one of the liars. His confirmation of Jackpine's story of being a-bed when he, Snuffy, had brought him the murder news, was proof enough of that. Snuffy probably wouldn't beef O'Neil out of vengeance, but when the opportunity came along to acquire a complete fur-farm, Snuffy looked well like the sort not to pass it up.

COCKEYE next spared a thought for Pete Lucas. For all his casualness, the halfbreed had deliberately thrown Jackpine Sanderson to the wolves—the wolves being represented by Staff-Sergeant Bill Nettleton. By that run-in earlier in the store, Cockeye could estimate very accurately the halfbreed's mental attitude towards Jackpine. Jackpine was a rat, and as a rat, Pete Lucas would have little compunction in squashing him, and squashing him hard. So that if the halfbreed had some particular grievance against O'Neil, could kill him and let Jackpine stand the gaff, that too might be all to the good.

And that, thought Cockeye, was just the point. If Jackpine wasn't the killer, he'd been neatly framed. This .32 stuff might mean a lot or it might mean nothin' at all. If the murder had been planned for a long time, getting hold of an old .32 shell-case was no great chore. Of course, in time Bill Nettleton would get around to testing the firing-pin on another .32 shell fired from Jackpine's gun, and if this proved that both shells were fired from it, things wouldn't look so hot for Jackpine Sanderson. In the meantime, though, Cockeye would wait and go ahead with his figuring.

Well, with Swede Johnson, Snuffy Parker, Pete Lucas and Jackpine checked off, who'd he got left? Cockeye was convinced that this was a white-man murder; and the three remaining whites were Baldy Jacobs, Sam Preston and Fred Stillman, the radio operator. He went to work on Baldy Jacobs.

Baldy was big, fat and jovial, but Cockeye opined that there had been fat and jovial killers before and that doubtless there would be again. But Baldy had been helpful; it was he who had done guard-duty at the scene of the murder so that nothing should be disturbed. Cockeye realized, though, that this in itself might prove damning to Baldy. If Baldy had framed Jackpine, he would want to be very particular that details were found by the police as he wished them to be found. The only flaw in this reasoning was that Baldy seemed genuinely friendly towards Jackpine. Though he had joshed him roughly in the store on the day of Jackpine's return from jail, had asked him how things were down on the farm, it was evident, later, by his manner that he had not really wished to hurt either Jackpine or his feelings. Mostly, though, in trying to build a case against Baldy Jacobs, Cockeye ran head-on into one difficulty: he lacked the motive.

So he did with the other two, with old Sam Preston and Fred Stillman; and he had just arrived at this disappointing juncture when from somewhere near at hand came the shattering roar of a single rifle-shot.

He sprang up from the couch, ran to the door and looked out. Old Sam Preston appeared around the corner of the store with Sandy Ferguson and a couple of Indians and shot swift glances towards Cockeye and the bungalow. Even under the spur of the moment, Cockeye remembered that here was another man he had overlooked—the clerk, Ferguson. He de-

cided he'd concentrate on him as well; but there was the mystery of the shot to be cleared up first.

He ambled down towards the store. Old Sam Preston turned.

"Sudden shootin' makes me jittery today."

"Shouldn't do," grinned Cockeye, "if your conscience is clear."

"It ain't my conscience that's worryin' me," explained old Sam. "It's my hide. You never know who's goin' to be next."

A fat squaw with a jammy-faced kid in tow came scuttling down the wooded trail from the village. She cast frightened glances behind her.

"Take it easy!" counselled Cockeye. "He missed you, whoever he was!"

Then a moment or so later Bill Nettleton appeared. With Bill was Jackpine Sanderson, hang-doggish, furtive, with handcuffs around his wrists. And Bill Nettleton was carrying a rifle. Cockeye recognized it as a Remington. He figured it was prob'ly a .32.

THE sergeant didn't stop; but as he went by he spoke to Cockeye.

"Going down to O'Neil's. Coming?"

Cockeye nodded, and fell into step.

But he didn't speak until the three of them were in Jack O'Neil's front room. He looked about him for Swede Johnson, then caught sight of the man through the window.

Swede was painting a canoe, down on the shore. Cockeye cast a glance from Jackpine Sanderson to the sergeant.

"You snared somep'n, eh?"

Bill Nettleton nodded grimly. He stood the rifle in a corner of the room and waved Jackpine to a seat. After that he produced a couple of empty shell-cases.

"They match," he said, succinctly. "The one from the portage, and this other. I tried one in his gun."

Jackpine began to whine. "I bin framed! I don' know nothin' about it!" His ratty face twisted in a grimace as he tried to keep from bawling.

Nettleton gave a grunt. "We'll see about that, too." To Cockeye, he said, "Keep an eye on him while I go talk to Johnson."

Alone with Cockeye, Jackpine started to whine again.

"I bin framed, Cockeye! Y'unnerstand? Some slob 'ats got it in for me. Pete Lucas, I'll betcha! You saw him in the store that day! Tell th' cop about it. He'll listen to you!"

Cockeye eyed the man sourly. "He won't listen to nothin' right now. Your best bet is to button yer lip and think up somep'n good. Or else tell him what you was doin' down the Reedy Lake portage this mornin'."

Jackpine stiffened, and he swallowed his Adam's apple twice. "Wh—who—" he

stammered, "—who says I was down the portage?"

"Oh, just a friend of yourn."

"Friend o' mine?" Jackpine stared, and a sudden, harsh look swept his features. "Y'mean—mean Snuffy Parker?"

Cockeye merely grinned.

The grin did something to Jackpine. He broke into a stream of cursing, paused, wiped the slaver from his chin with his manacled hands.

"Th' dirty, double-crossin' son! Claims t' be a friend o' mine and says he'll see me through—then runs off and spills his guts like that! *I* was down th' portage, eh? *Me?* Well, how does he know it? Where was he that he seen me? Yeah, sure; he says he was back in the bush rustlin' kindlin'!

Kindlin', would yuh! And you suckers fell for it!"

Cockeye didn't like to be called a sucker. His tufted brows beetled, and he glared at the slavering Jackpine.

"Well, where was he?" he demanded. "Tell us—and we'll take care of Snuffy Parker!"

Jackpine almost choked. "How do I know where he was? But if he saw me along the portage, he musta bin there himself!"

Cockeye grunted, turned, and lounged against the open doorway. Bill Nettleton had reached Swede Johnson and the canoe and was speaking to the man. A moment later he swung and retraced his steps to the house.

He was wearing a prodigious scowl, and once inside, he reached a ring of keys from a hook on the wall. He turned to Jackpine.

"Okay. Come on!"

PLAINLY, Jackpine didn't understand, but obediently he followed the policeman outside and towards a small, windowless warehouse. Cockeye saw Bill Nettleton wave Jackpine inside the building and snap a heavy padlock on the door; and when he retraced his steps to the house, Cockeye was waiting for him with a grin.

"Why didn't you pen him up with O'Neil? Yunno—'In death they were not divided.'"

Nettleton gave a sour grunt. He slung his Stetson on the table, dug the two shell-cases from a tunic pocket and scowled down at them.

"They were both fired from the same rifle—Jackpine's. That should be good enough for anybody. But cripes! I dunno."

"You dunno what?" asked Cockeye.

"Dunno whether I should have pinched him." At Cockeye's lift of the eyebrows, the sergeant went on, "Yeah, mebbe I'm crazy, but I don't feel just right about all this. All the way down here, Jackpine's been bleating about being 'framed.' Well, that don't mean nothing; every guy you pinch claims some sidewinder framed him. But in Jackpine's case, well, there's a chance he has been framed. My memory's not so hot, but I can remember back a few hours. And a few hours ago, Snuffy Parker was saying he had borrowed Jackpine's .32 to hunt a bear with."

Cockeye had taken a chair, an arm-chair; and now he locked his fingers across his stomach and seemed to be concentrating on the toes of his well-scuffed boots.

"You still with me?" demanded Bill Nettleton.

"With you?" Cockeye glanced up. "I'm 'way ahead of you. You're wonderin' if Snuffy Parker managed to work in a shot with Jackpine's rifle and saved the empty shell-case for the murder today. He was up with the crows—'round five-thirty, he says; back in the bush 'rustlin' kindlin'.' But was he rustlin' kindlin'? Or was he out gunnin' for O'Neil?"

"That's just it!" agreed Nettleton, emphatically. "And the more I think of it, the more logical it seems that Snuffy Parker's the boy who should be in the brig. For I'll tell you something. If Snuffy is the killer, that explains the mystery of that second shot."

Cockeye looked startled. "No!"

"It sure does! Look at it this way: Jackpine's probably a dimwit, but d'you think he's crazy enough to take two shots, then leave a shell-case at the scene of the killing?

"No! And I'll tell you what did happen. Snuffy Parker—and I figure it was him—killed O'Neil, with one shot; a shot from his own .303, irrespective of whatever he says about old Sam being out of .303 shells. He ejects this shell-case from the gun and pockets it; and to frame Jackpine, he drops Jackpine's own .32 shell-case right there. But that's not enough. He fires again—anywhere; up in the air, mebbe. And you know why? Well, because he's smart. He wants that .32 shell-case found by the cop that'll come in to investigate; and he knows that with two shots fired, the cop'll hunt around for a shell-case from one of the shots, at least."

Bill Nettleton paused. There was a grim, triumphant look in his eyes. But Cockeye looked merely bored, till he pulled a turnip-like watch from his breeches pocket and studied it with a bit of intentness.

"Did I say I was 'way ahead of you, Bill? Well, I am. 'Bout five hours an' a half."

The triumphant look of Nettleton's faded. The frown came back.

"You mean—?" he demanded. "Mean you doped that out already?"

Cockeye gave a snort. "Doped out, nothin'! It was there for a feller to see—one shot, dead center; the other a miss by a mile." He added, "It didn't look right; not at fifteen yards."

BILL NETTLETON seemed crestfallen. But only for a moment. He suddenly found himself a bedevilled man.

"Well, what do I do now?" he blared. "I got the goods—some goods, anyway—on Jackpine; and I got an airtight case against Snuffy Parker."

"Corral 'em both, then," counselled Cockeye. "If you don't win on Jackpine, you've always got Snuffy."

Bill Nettleton gave a snort of disgust. "Sometimes, Cockeye," he told the old-timer, "I could kill you."

"And you'd still be left with Jackpine and Snuffy on your hands." Then Cockeye smiled. "Still, don't give up hope yet. When you and I start from scratch and arrive at the same conclusion, like we have done, it looks like we're follerin' the right trail. But the sound of airplane engines falls on these old ears of mine. If that's Ducky Teal, it might be a good idea to make sure them samples of yours get out."

Bill Nettleton agreed; so retrieving his Stetson, he quit the place and struck off up the trail towards the village.

And this was what Cockeye most desired. Whilst listening to the sergeant's reconstructed happening of the crime, something stirred in the recesses of memory. Or, rather, several things stirred. At the moment they were disjointed, but they concerned the ownership of a .32 Remington, Snuffy Parker, and the envisaged fur-farm up on Crooked Lake.

So the departure of Bill Nettleton gave Cockeye a chance to woo these dim recollections; and he did so by slumping deeper into his chair and pulling his battered felt hat well down over the bridge of his nose.

Time went; Swede Johnson came up from his canoe, glanced in, and, deciding that Cockeye was asleep, went off without disturbing him. And Bill Nettleton, when he returned, had to kick Cockeye on the soles of his booted feet to make him aware of the fact that it was supper-time.

But after supper, at the Hudson's Bay post, Cockeye allowed the sergeant to return to the Ranger cabin alone. He and Sam Preston, he claimed, had old times and old memories to resurrect. Bill Nettleton wouldn't be interested; and he'd see him bye 'n' bye.

So Bill Nettleton departed, carrying with him a supper for Jackpine Sanderson; and it was ten o'clock, and dark, when Cockeye saw him again.

Bill Nettleton, shirt-sleeved, seemed to be in trouble, and the trouble consisted in putting up the stovepipes in the cabin's front room. Cockeye stared at the sweating and cursing sergeant for a moment, then took in the general disorder of the place. Three chairs were upset, the writing-desk was yards out of its ordinary position, and soot from the stovepipes covered everything.

Cockeye gave a grunt. "House-cleanin'?" he suggested.

The stovepipes suddenly clicked. Nettleton stood back and wiped the sweat from his brow on the sleeve of his shirt. He said, brusquely, "I had a visitor."

"Oh?" Cockeye glanced around him again. "Baby elephant?"

"Snuffy Parker."

Cockeye blinked. "Snuffy Parker, you say?"

"Well, I figure it was. Couldn't have been anyone else."

AT COCKEYE'S mystification, Bill Nettleton went on, "With nothing much to do and O'Neil's typewriter handy, I'm making out a report on my investigation. I'm right into it, see, and the next thing I know the blamed lamp's going out. No oil. So I grab the keys, blow the thing right out, and hit across for the warehouse where we left O'Neil. Then, halfways there, something makes me look back. Somebody's in the house here, striking matches. It could have been Swede Johnson, but all I remember is those two shell-cases on the desk beside the machine. I'd had 'em out, lookin' at 'em while I was making out the report. So I legged it back again; and just as I got to the door, the guy strikes another match and I see it's Snuffy Parker."

"So you tie right into him."

"Well, sort of. My idea was to sneak up on him, but I tripped over the blasted door-mat, went sprawling, and the fun began. Y'know," said the sergeant, "that guy's strong as a bull. No wonder he found it funny when I suggested that Jack O'Neil might have beat him up sometime— But now, all he wanted to do was to get out of the shack, and my little chore was to stop him. I figured he'd pinched those shells —and by golly, he had! He must have grabbed 'em just as I crashed in. Anyway, he heaved me around for a while like a rag doll, then all of a sudden I hear a couple of tinkles. It's dark, see, but I knew they were the shells hitting the floor. So what did I do? I let go of his neck, made a dive for where I'd heard the shells— and he outa the place like the Devil was after him."

Cockeye gave another grunt. "You sure it was Snuffy Parker? It couldn't have been Swede Johnson?"

"Swede Johnson!" Bill Nettleton scorned the idea. "Swede ain't built like a bull and three yards around. Anyway, why should it be Swede?"

"Dunno," shrugged Cockeye. "Only I wondered."

He said nothing more, but started to clean up the place. But when this was done, he asked Bill Nettleton, "We campin' here?"

The sergeant said, "Sure," and figured that it was time he was fetching Jackpine in for the night. It would get chilly in the warehouse before morning.

"There's a double bunk for you and me, and I'll hitch Jackpine to that couch over by the window. Swede's got his own place, so we won't worry about him."

But before he went for Jackpine, Bill Nettleton had a few more words to say about his marauding visitor.

"The nerve of the guy! He must have been standing right outside here and watching me. Then when I went out, he sneaked in. But feature it! If I'd lost those shell-cases, I wouldn't have had a scrap of evidence against Jackpine at all!"

"Yeah," agreed Cockeye. "Seems like Jackpine's got one good friend in town. And that's what makes me think that you're right—that the guy might've bin Snuffy. Snuffy tried to cover up for Jackpine this mornin', never mind what Jackpine says about Snuffy 'framin' ' him."

"He never said just that," put in Bill Nettleton. "He said somebody framed him, but he didn't say it was Snuffy."

"The heck he didn't!" retorted Cockeye. "You shoulda heard what he was spillin' to me while you was down the shore this afternoon with Swede Johnson. But that was all blah-blah, yunno. I sorta kidded him into thinkin' that Snuffy had talked, and it didn't take him long to come back at me."

Bill Nettleton scowled. "Just what did he say?"

Cockeye told him; and afterwards the sergeant was silent for a few minutes. Then he looked up.

"D'you know what I think? Well, I think Jackpine and Snuffy are in this murder together. And I don't lap up this stuff about Snuffy pinching the shells to help Jackpine. The way I figure it, I've got Jackpine under lock and key, and he's not very stout stuff. Put the pressure on him, and he'll start to sing. And that's what Snuffy's afraid of—that Jackpine'll sing and Snuffy'll find himself in the soup. So he figures that if he can pinch these shells and let Jackpine know that I haven't got another thing on him, the boy'll play dumb and everything'll be hunky-dory."

COCKEYE gave a whimsical smile. "You know, Bill, what I like most about you is your open mind. You ain't stubborn; ain't a bit pig-headed. Not long ago you sold yerself the idea that Jackpine was your man. Oh, it was Jackpine, all right; so you pinched him. Then about ten minutes later, you cock an eye on Snuffy Parker and figure that Snuffy's the guy you oughta nail. Now, all of a sudden, you face-about and decide the two of 'em worked this thing together. It won't be long before you'll be pinchin' me. Or me and old Sammy Preston."

The sergeant's jaw stiffened. "I haven't sold myself any idea. But in a case like this, you've got to consider everybody."

"I guess that's right," Cockeye agreed. "And right now you'd best consider Jackpine. Fetch him in, before he freezes up on you."

Cockeye was the first one awake the following morning; and after lighting the fire

and setting the kettle to boil, he wandered off in the direction of the Hudson's Bay post. But he was back in half an hour, to find Jackpine sitting miserably on the edge of his cot and Bill Nettleton cooking breakfast.

The sergeant turned, said, "Up early, eh?" He added, "Care for ham-and-eggs? O'Neil's got 'em."

Cockeye said that ham-and-eggs would be fine and for the sergeant to cook enough. "Because," he explained, "old Sam and I are takin' a trip, and we should get a bellyful of good grub before we start."

"A trip?" scowled Nettleton. "Where to?"

Cockeye chose to become tantalizingly vague. "Places. We're gonna chase a badger up a tree."

"And I don't go along?"

"To chase badgers? Cripes, man, you got all you can chase right here."

Nettleton's jaw hardened, and except for an order to pass this or that, he said nothing till breakfast was finished. Then, curtly, he asked Cockeye, "When'll you be back?"

Cockeye wasn't sure, but he figured two-three days should take care of things. Then he suddenly smiled.

"No, Bill, this ain't no badger-chase. It's a goose-chase. Wild goose-chase, mebbe. That's why I ain't askin' you to waste your time and go along. But if we catch our goose—*if* we catch him—you can pull most of the feathers."

HE LEFT soon afterwards; and half an hour after that, Sam Preston's big freighter canoe went roaring by the Ranger Station with the Company man in the stern and Cockeye himself riding the bow.

But it was almost four days later that the same canoe roared home again and Cockeye and Sam Preston got out at the Company post. As well as the conventional little cluster of interested natives, Bill Nettleton and a lanky Mounted Police corporal were on hand to greet them. Cockeye and old Sam were introduced to Jimmy Barnes of the police laboratory in Regina, and Bill Nettleton enquired as to how the goose-hunting had gone.

"Not bad," admitted Cockeye. "Not too danged bad at all. Matter o' fact, Bill, you'll have to go up there and do a bit of huntin' yourself."

Bill Nettleton studied him intently, then said, "When?"

Down at the wharf, a plane was anchored. Cockeye recognized it as Ducky Teal's Norseman.

"If Ducky ain't busy for an hour," said Cockeye, "you'd better start right now."

Ducky was at work in the plane, and they contacted him. The pilot said he'd go anywhere, provided he could make town by night.

"You can do that," promised Cockeye; then suggested that Bill Nettleton inform the lanky Jimmy Barnes of his plans.

Ten minutes later they were ready, and the pilot enquired of their ultimate destination.

"Crooked Lake," said Cockeye. "And the island that O'Neil figured to lease. You know it, eh? But don't go there direct. Head off south as though you were goin' to town, then when you get out of carshot, swing, and get onto your course ag'in."

Ducky Teal pursed his lips. "Hush-hush, eh?"

"You said it."

So far Cockeye seemed to be in control of things, but once they were air-borne, he sought information from Bill Nettleton.

"Jackpine still with you?"

The sergeant said, "Yeah."

"How 'bout Snuffy Parker? Or Swede Johnson?"

"Can't get a thing on them."

"Nor on Pete Lucas or Baldy Jacobs?" Cockeye shook his head. "What were you doin' all the time I bin gone?"

"Running in circles," answered Nettleton, savagely. "And trying to dig up a sweater."

Cockeye chuckled. "Same old sweater!"

"Then Jimmy Barnes lands in here today and tells me I'm on the right track. He's one of the Lab. boys, and says those hairs are natural wool and probably come from a hand-knitted sweater. And he tells me something else. The sweater will be dove-colored or slate-gray and may be dabbed with spruce gum."

Cockeye's brows went up. "Yeah?"

"Remember the spruce gum on the tree—and the hairs in it, like they had come from a sleeve or an elbow? Well, with spruce gum on the hairs that went out to

Regina, the boys figure there'll be more gum on the sweater. But try," growled the sergeant, "just *try* to locate that blasted sweater!"

Cockeye gave a tolerant smile and pulled a well-worn wallet from his pocket. He opened it, and extracted a little tuft of wool. He handed it to Bill Nettleton, smiled, and said, "Sort of matches up, don't she?"

Nettleton took the thing, examined it closely. He suddenly asked, "Where'd you find it?"

There was excitement in his tone; so much so that Ducky Teal up ahead, turned for a moment in his chair. Cockeye said, "Up on Crooked Lake. Some guy built himself a wickiup outa spruce-poles, prob'ly durin' a rainy-spell. Crawlin' in and out of it, he musta hung up the odd time. But you'll see, Bill, when you get there."

COCKEYE'S prediction was fulfilled. Bill Nettleton saw, with his own eyes; for when they landed again in front of the Hudson's Bay post there was heavy purpose in the way the sergeant swung down from the plane. It was getting along towards supper-time, and nearing fall as it was, a certain nippiness hung in the air. Cockeye noticed this as he stepped from the warmth of the plane and almost wished he could slip on a sweater. One man had already done so. Baldy Jacobs was following old Sam Preston out of a warehouse with a case of canned goods in his arms; and not only was Baldy's sweater warm-looking, but it was a dull slate-gray in color.

Cockeye stopped dead. He shot a glance at Bill Nettleton. The sergeant gave a grim nod, then went up from the wharf with Cockeye and followed Baldy Jacobs into the store.

Then his manner changed. He seemed very casual as he dragged himself up to a seat on the counter and looked around him. He noticed other men present—Pete Lucas, making some sort of a deal with Sandy Ferguson, the clerk; and a couple of Indians, killing time for want of something better to do. Old Sam Preston, behind the counter, seemed to be giving Baldy his attention, but Cockeye saw him shoot a look almost of waiting expectancy towards where Bill Nettleton sat.

But Cockeye himself seemed quite unconcerned. He happened to lounge over towards Baldy Jacobs, mentioned something about fine weather for flyin', and happened again to glance down at Baldy's sweater-covered left shoulder. And what he saw made him turn to face Bill Nettleton and give the slightest of nods.

Then he spoke to Baldy Jacobs. "Outfittin' already?"

Baldy, pushing three packages of tea towards a pile of other goods on the counter-top, said, "Yeah. Headin' north for a spell." Then, as though suddenly interested, he turned to Cockeye. "Where you guys bin?"

"Us?" Cockeye jerked his head. "We bin north, too."

"Claim-staking," put in Bill Nettleton. "At least, Cockeye has. On Jack O'Neil's island in Crooked Lake."

Baldy Jacobs turned slowly. He waited a moment, then asked, "Anything worth stakin' up there?"

"Only a deposit of platinum and gold."

Another long pause, and Baldy nodded. "I'd like to get in on that m'self."

"Guess so," agreed the sergeant. "Too bad you can't—till next year. You've staked this year's limit of three claims already."

Baldy seemed to catch his breath. Cockeye saw the fingers of one big hand tighten. "Yeah, that's so," agreed Baldy.

"But it isn't news to you," suggested Bill Nettleton. "That angle of the matter must have occurred to you when you heard that Jack O'Neil had made application for a lease on the island." He added, "You can't stake on land that's under lease. But you know that very well for yourself."

Cockeye almost admired Baldy then. Except for that one spasmodic tightening of the fingers, the man seemed almost calm. He wasn't grinning now, didn't seem so placid and jovial, but if he had been jarred badly, he didn't show it a lot. He merely said, "So you figure I knew everything?"

"Everything I've told you," agreed Nettleton; "and a whole lot more. For instance, you knew that having staked your limit already, you couldn't stake this property on the island till the first of May next year. You knew that if you wanted to prevent O'Neil from getting a lease on the island, you had to take some pretty drastic

measures. And if those drastic measures meant murdering him, you were the only man I can find who *knew* O'Neil would be crossing the Reedy Lake portage so early yesterday morning." Nettleton paused, looked at Baldy intently. "Remember telling me that O'Neil was trying to catch some guys who were going after the young foxes in the Reserve, and that's why he had got up so early? You sort of gave the game away when you made that little crack."

Baldy now wetted his lips, but his bearing was superb.

"So I was the only one to know it, eh? What about Swede Johnson?"

"Swede, if I chose to believe him, hadn't seen O'Neil for two or three days. Nor had Pete Lucas or Jackpine Sanderson. If Jackpine had, he wasn't what we'd call in Jack O'Neil's confidence. He hated O'Neil's guts; he wouldn't talk to him at all."

Cockeye suddenly realized the silence that had fallen over those present. Old Sam, arms folded across his chest, leaned against the well-stocked shelves. Pete Lucas had turned, and was motionless as a statue. The clerk, Sandy Ferguson, looked pale. The two Indians, Cockeye ignored.

Then Baldy was speaking, a harsher note in his voice.

"So you figure I killed O'Neil," he told Nettleton. "So what?"

"So you're under arrest," the sergeant answered bluntly. "And I'm warning you—"

Baldy laughed outright. It was a sneering laugh. "Never mind that old stuff. Go on; tell me more! Howza 'bout your idea that O'Neil was killed with a .32? My gun's an old-timer, a .38-55!"

"He probably was killed with a .38-55," agreed Nettleton. "The .32 was all a bluff."

"To frame Sam Preston!" jeered Baldy. "He owns a Remington .32. Or to frame Jackpine Sanderson—a pal of mine."

"No," said Nettleton. "To frame Snuffy Parker."

THE words were a slap in the face to Baldy Jacobs. The last of the posse left him. He looked like he was, a cornered, dangerous killer.

"Snuffy Parker!" he snarled. "How could I frame him? And why?"

"I'll tell you how," rapped the sergeant. "And I'll tell you why. You and he trapped together last winter, and at that time Snuffy owned a .32. So far as you knew up to a day or so ago, he still owned it. So when you hit off for your old camp last week, it wasn't to shift the balance of your stuff but to hunt around for one of Snuffy's old .32 shell-cases. But what you didn't know was that while you were out in town for a couple of months this summer, Snuffy peddled the gun to Jackpine. Upshot was you got the wrong sow by the ear—you framed your pal, Jackpine, instead of a guy you never had much use for, your one-time partner, Snuffy." Bill Nettleton paused. "Anything wrong with that?"

He went on. "And *why* did you frame Snuffy? That's simple. If you killed O'Neil and Snuffy was alive you'd be little further ahead. Snuffy was O'Neil's partner; and when the lease came through, Snuffy would carry on and you'd still be out of luck. But with one partner dead and the other implicated in his murder, the lease would never be granted and you could stake the claim next spring."

Baldy Jacobs, more dangerous-looking than ever, gave a metallic, sneering laugh.

"Swell bit of figurin', that—like two-and-two makes four. Only it's all figurin' and nothin' else!"

"Then we'll keep on figuring," Bill Nettleton told him. "We'll figure that it was you who raided the cabin last night and tried to get away with those .32 cases. I thought, then, you were Snuffy Parker, your back toward me and being the same build. But it was you, trying to square the horrible blunder you made in framing a friend. And we'll figure it was you who discovered that claim on Crooked Lake, and that it was you who steadied yourself against a spruce tree on Reedy Lake Portage when you pumped that shell into O'Neil. And why will we figure that? Because there were a few woolly hairs on a lean-to on Jack O'Neil's island—a sort of wickiup you used while you were working on the claim; and because there were a few more hairs of the identical sort embedded in the gum of that spruce tree on the portage. And we'll prove all this, definitely, scientifically, so that there'll be no doubt of any description; we'll have Corporal Jimmy Barnes of the Criminal Investigation Laboratory compare these wool

samples with the wool of that gummy-looking sweater you're wearing right now."

It was as though someone had paged Jimmy Barnes; for just at that moment the lanky corporal stepped into the store. It was as though, too, something in Baldy Jacobs' makeup suddenly exploded. For, head down, Baldy made one mad, desperate rush for freedom.

But things were against him; he was hopelessly outnumbered. After a smashing, cyclone-like battle that jarred loose the counters of Sam Preston's store, he was roped, hog-tied and handcuffed and carted down to the plane.

BILL NETTLETON got back his breath. "Now to turn Jackpine loose."

"Yeah," agreed Cockeye. "And I'll go along with you."

Then, when all this was done and Jackpine blinked, sniffed and stepped out into God's clean air, Bill Netteton said he'd go look in the cabin to see if anything had been forgotten. Cockeye nodded, and when the sergeant was out of earshot, spoke to Jackpine.

"You know, boy, I ain't the police," he said. "So anything you tell me now won't go no further. And what I would like you to tell me is what you were doin' up towards Reedy Lake Portage about the time that Jack O'Neil was getting killed."

Jackpine looked at the oldtimer suspiciously. He wouldn't commit himself. "Just pokin' around, y'know. I do that sometimes."

"U-huh. Pokin' around your mash-tub."

A flash of alarm showed on Jackpine's face, but Cockeye soothed his fears. "Me, myself," said Cockeye, "I ain't no bootlegger. On the other hand, I ain't no preacher. So it ain't up to me to condemn you. But if my guess is correct, well, it'd clear up the last bafflin' point."

Jackpine hesitated, gave Cockeye a soul-searching glance. And what he saw must have reassured him.

"Yeah, well," he capitulated; "that's what it was. I'd just run off a good batch into a galvanized pail and was gettin' ready to bottle her—then come the shots. I didn't know who was shootin' or if the guy was shootin' at me. So I lit outa there on the run." Jackpine shook his head sadly. "And I never went back ag'in. So the licker won't be much good and the pail'll be ruined." Then he became suddenly confidential. "But seein' as our business won't go no further, I got some better stuff up at the house. D'you want, mebbe, a coupla crocks t' take along with you?"

Cockeye shook his head. "No, Jackpine; that'd be sort of against the doctor's orders. He said he didn't favor his patients swampin' their guts with somep'n that'd eat th' bottom out of a galvanized pail."

But he was smiling as Bill Nettleton came along and they headed for the Company post. Everything was now hunky-dory.

Bill Nettleton seemed satisfied, too. He grinned at Cockeye, said, "You only wanted a lift north, old-timer. Well, you've had it. What now?"

Cockeye sobered. "I ain't sure. Right now I'm more'n halfway home. But then ag'in, I'd like to be on hand when Baldy comes up for trial. Just t' see, y'know, how things turn out."

"Yeah, sure," nodded Nettleton. "Then again, Ill probably need you for a witness. Baldy's a smooth customer; he might wriggle out of this thing yet."

But Cockeye merely chuckled. "I don't think so. I can't help comparin' Baldy with those Reserve foxes of Jack O'Neil's. Remember what Baldy said about 'em?"

"I dunno. What did he say?"

"Baldy said that some of 'em were trapped in the regular season and that others were caught young and kept in pens. Then he said, 'But it don't make no difference how you get 'em, they all end up the same way—on a stretchin'-board.'"

"Well?" persisted Bill Nettleton. "What's that got to do with Baldy?"

"Seems to me," chuckled Cockeye, "that Baldy'll end up that way himself. Only he'll be *standin'* on this stretchin'-board of his—and the dang thing'll be fitted with hinges!"

There Ought to Be a Law about Letting City Folks Loose in the Big Woods . . . .

RAIN ON THE ROOF

By DON CAMERON SHAFER

I

COLD fall rain drove relentlessly down.

Rain that was almost sleet beat off the ripe hardwood leaves to fall in a sodden carpet of red and gold on the water-soaked earth. From the valley depths, cut by noisy streams, a writhing gray mist drifted slowly upward through dripping trees to meet low-hanging, heavily burdened clouds that blotted out the mountains and higher ridges.

Wet, shaking with cold, hunting clothes torn and bedraggled, carrying an empty rifle, reddening with rust, an exhausted young

woman came slowly out of the dank forest into a small clearing to stop, swaying a bit, before a birch log showing fresh axe marks.

"I made it," hardly more than a hoarse whisper.

In this moment of victory the weight of sodden hunting garments seemed suddenly lifted from sagging shoulders. Cold, exhausted, famished body ceased to shiver and shake.

"I'm not lost now!"

Proud that she had kept her head through it all, never yielding to fear or panic that was death. Remembering always to walk down-hill, to follow the first stream, however difficult, now roaring out of the rocky gorge behind her. Before her weary eyes evidence that she had won back to shelter, food, warmth and rest. Cheered and strengthened, she followed along the stream bank at a quicker pace until, through rain and mist, she saw the dim outline of a small cabin.

II

THE cabin was of small logs neatly pointed with cement.

It stood cozily in a little clearing, half-encircled by the flooded stream, a swamp maple flaming scarlet in the mist before it. But, to her dismay, no comforting smoke drifted from the wide stone chimney, nor from the galvanized iron pipe marking the kitchen ell. Nevertheless, there was evidence of recent occupation and continued residence. Freshly cut wood was neatly stacked in an open shed attached to the kitchen. Three dish towels hung limp on a small line. Two tin buckets were turned up on a bench beside the kitchen door.

"Hello, the house," she called.

There was no answer, no sign of life about the place. In that moment of disappointment she realized how cold, how exhausted she was. Her feet were like heavy blocks of ice. Obviously, whether or not the cabin was occupied, she could go no farther. She stood an indecisive moment in the shelter of the open shed, listening to the drumming of rain on the roof, shivering again; then, in desperation, she tried the kitchen latch. The door swung open into a clean and orderly room. The little iron cook stove was cold. Bright cooking pots and pans hung behind it in orderly array. The yellow floor was clean. Everything was in its appointed place.

"Hello," she called. "Hello."

All was still, except for the drive of rain on the metal roof and the ticking of a small shelf clock. She saw that the hour was four of a cold, rainy fall afternoon. Worn hunting boots squished as she took the few slow steps necessary to look into the living room, a glance serving to convince her that no woman lived there. A fire was laid in the wide fireplace, ready for a match. A worn bearskin was before the stone hearth. The few chairs were large and comfy. The table held books, magazines, fish reels, rifle cartridges, spoon hooks, pipes, tobacco.

Convinced that there was no one at home, and that the absent owner would understand her dire need, she stripped off wet clothing and wrung it out in the kitchen sink. She found a towel for a rubdown. In one of the two small bedrooms she saw a man's plaid woolen shirt and slipped into its snuggling warmth. A pair of whipcord breeches were much too long but she made them do.

The matter of food was equally simple. The first kitchen cupboard she opened revealed a number of familiar bottles. She poured a long warming drink of old brandy that seemed to build a fire within her emptiness. She found cold venison and home-made biscuits. With a plate piled high with food she lighted the kindling wood beneath the logs in the fireplace, hung up her wet garments to dry, and sat down to the first rest and comfort she had known in two wet days and one cold night. The rain which, outside, had been a constant threat and menace, now became a soft musical pitter-pat on the roof.

Thus warmed to life again, reclining drowsily before the fire, she reached out and tuned in a small battery radio on the nearby table. Following the end of an exciting domestic drama that evidently had been going on for weeks and weeks came brief news flashes. She was amused to hear a broadcast of herself. "Lost from Long Lake Lodge, on the Ransom preserve, Joan La-Pointe, New York, five-feet-three, brown hair, blue eyes . . ." a description of other lost hunters . . . report of a serious hunting accident—mistaken for a deer . . . maniac slayer hunted— Resident of mountain vil-

lage, Emil Berg, brooding over fate of Germany . . . kills wife and father-in-law . . . knife slaying of overseas veteran . . . strangling of garage attendant . . . fiendish maniac on the loose . . . armed and dangerous. Black market ring caught with illegal venison. Local gas station robbed.

Anyway, she thought, rather sleepily, there was no danger of robbers, or maniac killers, finding their way to this small cabin hidden away in the woods. Her only worry now was how the absent owner would take this personal invasion of his private property.

Too drowsy to listen attentively she snapped off the radio and slept.

To be awakened half an hour later by a shrill whistle outside.

III

FOR a fleeting moment she knew fear, remembering the radio warning, then was reassured by the comforting thought that it probably was the owner of the cabin. Nevertheless, it took a bit of bravado to open the door.

"The hunter is home from the hill."

A tall, hatless young man stood dripping on the little porch. Obviously, with such a greeting, he thought she was the owner. He looked innocent and harmless enough despite the fact that he carried, rather awkwardly, an expensive rifle. Pale wavy hair was plastered wet over a well-shaped head. Water streaked a lean face. Large merry eyes were a deep gray. Plaid wool hunting shirt was silvered with tiny drops of moisture. Wet duck pants clung to shapely legs.

"I am lost, or rather I was lost," he explained.

"So far as I am concerned," said she, "you are still lost. I am a stranger here myself."

"Lost?"

"Uh-huh. Two days and a bad night."

"Then the owner will have to entertain more unexpected company—and like it."

"The owner isn't at home."

He did not seem to take being lost in the woods very seriously and evidently had not been lost long enough to suffer or to become really alarmed.

"Finding this cabin has saved a human life," said he.

"Two of them."

"And how!"

He handed her the wet rifle and she snapped open the action, to make sure that it was not loaded.

He sat down on the porch edge and took off his boots, draining out the water, wringing out heavy woolen socks.

"A good drink is what you need," she suggested.

"You can say that again, sister."

When he had ceased to drip she hurried him into the kitchen and poured him a stiff drink.

"On the house," said she.

"To the pneumonia ward," draining the glass.

"I will see if I can find you some dry clothes—"

"You better, or else—"

She brought a tan work shirt and blue denim overalls.

"These clothes will fit you better than they do me."

"Not so becomingly," gallantly.

She fixed a chair for him before the fire, glad to have company, with a soft wool blanket to draw over his cold shoulders.

"Where is our host?" he asked.

"I am sure I don't know. There was no one here when I came."

"Who owns this little gray log house in the dell?"

"According to the name in these books, and the mailing tabs on the magazines, it is one John Edgar Dunbar. He lives here alone, fishes and hunts a lot, a man not quite as tall as you—"

"I didn't know that Sherlock Holmes had a granddaughter."

"Elementary, my dear Watson—"

"Freddie is the name."

"We are both wearing his clothes."

She brought him a plate of cold venison and a couple of biscuits.

"Now for the Story Hour," said she. "We must know each other better."

"This Big Outdoor Man," said he between bites, "is none other than Freddie the Foolish."

"I am Joan LaPointe, supposed to be staying at Long Lake Lodge, wherever that is."

"This Great Adventure is convincing evidence that the Wide Open Spaces are not for our Freddie. I walked and walked through this awful fog and cold rain trying to keep

from freezing to death. It was more good luck than any woodcraft that brought me here."

"We were both lucky."

She sat down on the other side of the fire and told her story.

"I was brought up with bird dogs and guns, but never hunted in the North before. This was my first deer hunt. Of course, one can get lost in the South, but without danger of freezing to death or confronted with impassable spruce swamps and deep rocky gorges."

"I know," he nodded sleepily. "I waded around in one of those swamps for hours and when I finally got out, there was the Grand Canyon."

"I sat for hours and hours, where the guides left me, watching a lonely deer crossing, warned to keep quiet and motionless. After centuries of time I saw a buck coming stealthily through the woods, but too far away for a successful shot. I thought I could head him off and get closer. I never saw that buck again. When I started back to my watch the drizzle became a sleety rain and the clouds dropped down and blotted out everything. I kept my head—"

Her audience was breathing heavily in the deep sleep of exhaustion.

Night descended from the mountains in a wet gray robe. Rain beat steadily on the roof. Jo walked to the window, staring out into the mist, thinking of the searching parties that must be out in that weather looking for her, and nothing she could do about it.

Then, in the mist thickening with approaching dark, she saw a shadow move, sinister and foreboding, and again she remembered the radio warning. The approaching shadow resolved itself into a short, heavy-set man in a long raincoat and felt hat with the brim turned down to keep the rain out of his eyes, slogging toward the cabin, a gun under his left arm.

FOR a moment the man stood there in the rain, apparently surprised to find the cabin inhabited, smoke coming out of the chimney, the light of the fire in the windows, as anyone might who came home at dusk and found evidence of unexpected company in a backwoods cabin. Then he came on, sloshing through mud and water.

IV

HEAVY feet stamped slowly up the few steps and across the little porch as Jo opened the door to explain their presence there.

"You have guests, Mr. Dunbar," in her most friendly voice and manner. "Some very nice people have dropped in."

Stepping hastily back when she saw the muzzle of a mean-looking rifle pointed at her middle.

"Guests, ho ho ho! So I have guests, eh? Nice people have dropped in. How many guests, and who?"

"It was a crash landing," said Freddie, now thoroughly awake.

"A plane!"

"No," explained Joan. "That's only Freddie's manner of speaking. Both of us got lost, but from different camps. I got here first—"

"King-size babes in the wood," added Freddie.

"Oh, so you two got lost, eh?" He came in, kicking the door shut behind him. "City hunters always gettin' lost up here."

"Then the rains came," said Freddie.

"Most fortunate for us," explained Jo, "we stumbled on your little cabin, and I am afraid we will have to stay a while."

"You will, oh, you will! What a rain—what a night."

The wet rubber coat glistened in the firelight as he peeled it off. He tossed aside the sodden hat, revealing a big head, practically bald, on a short thick neck, with graying hair and two days of the same along heavy jaws. He was so big and round and heavy he looked far shorter than he was actually.

"Well, well, well—a girl hunter. In boy's clothes. Don't know as ever I saw that before. What a surprise—nice-lookin' girl, too. And a city feller. I see you lost folks have made yourselves quite at home. Right—right as rain—rain! Ha ha ha ha. Got to stay with me. Couldn't possibly go out now, not tonight, not in this storm. No, no. It will be black in two jerks of a lamb's tail. But don't worry about that, I like company—glad to have you—got to stay—mighty lonesome, mighty lonesome these days, and nights, too."

As he set his wet rifle down he saw the other guns in a corner.

"So you brought your guns in, eh? You didn't throw them away."

"I would have thrown mine away gladly," said Freddie, "only I borrowed it from a friend."

"You didn't happen, just happen, to leave one of them loaded, now did you?"

"Loaded," laughed Freddie. "I shot up all my ammunition the first hour signaling for help."

"Mine went the same way," said Jo.

"So that's what all the shootin' was about. Can't take your word for it—certainly not the word of strangers—not when guns are concerned—city hunters mighty careless with guns sometimes."

ONE after the other he picked up the rifles and, with some difficulty, opened the actions to make sure that they were not loaded.

"I am afraid, Mr. Dunbar," said Jo, "that, of necessity, Freddie and I have made rather free with your home and your things."

"Oh, you have, eh? That's right, quite all right. Custom of the woods. My goodness, yes. Lost people just drop in, any time, help themselves—"

"We had a drink—"

"Ah, you had a drink—you would. Now that you mention it, could do with a drink myself."

"Any inconvenience, any liberties we have taken," said Freddie, "and for raids on your supplies, we will be glad to pay."

"Never mind pay."

As Jo brought in the brandy bottle and a water glass, he poured out half a tumbler and gulped it down.

"Ahhhh," gasping. "That sure hit the spot. *Wooosh*. That warms the heart, my yes. Nothing like a good drink on a night like this, after a hard wet day."

"Unless it is another drink," grinned Freddie.

"Well, well, another round, on the house. What say, folks? That's what it is made for—that's what it is here for."

Freddie poured himself a small one, mindful of the limited supply.

"And you, my girl?"

"I am content," she said. "We have abused your hospitality quite enough as it is. How far is it to the nearest phone?"

"Phone, ah, yes, to be sure. A thousand miles, hahaha, on a night like this. What's the matter, aren't you folks comfortable here?"

"Quite. But our friends must be worried to death."

"Let them worry, good for them."

"If you would loan us a lantern we could go."

"Ridiculous. Couldn't think of such a thing. What's your hurry? I like company. We're just gettin' acquainted. Besides, there isn't any lantern. Flashlight, yes," he drew one out of a rear pocket. "But, you see, the new-fangled thing isn't much good, batteries weak. Not much better than a good firefly. Hahaha. Besides, light or no light, you couldn't go out on a night like this. Get yourself lost again. You'd never make it, not in this world. No. No. Stay right here where it is nice and warm and cozy."

His little eyes twinkled and blinked under bushy brows, never resting long on any one object, shifting from face to face. And all the while he was chattering away he busied himself about the room, straightening the skin rug, rearranging things on the table, handling books and papers, picking up the magazines and stacking them aside.

"Sit down," urged Jo, "and let me fix you something to eat."

"Eat, my goodness yes—quite forgot about it. Not used to so much company. Couldn't think of letting you wait on me."

He shambled out into the kitchen. They could hear cupboard doors open, banging shut under a heavy hand. He came back chewing on a piece of cold venison.

"Sit down by the fire," coaxed Joan, "your feet are wet, Mr. Dunbar."

"Don't mister me, please. Just call me Johnnie."

"All right, sit down, Johnnie."

She all but forced the man into a chair before the hot fire.

"Let me take off your shoes."

"No, no, no—"

Wet trousers legs began to steam as she filled a pipe and handed it to him, lighting a paper pip.

"Don't know as I feel like smokin', not right now," he protested. "Rather visit—"

He took a couple of puffs and laid it down.

"We appreciate your hospitality," yawned

Freddie, "but I fear that I won't be with you long."

"You can't go!"

"Go catch me a little shut-eye."

"He is sleepy," explained Jo.

"Why didn't he say so. Why don't he talk so folks can understand," petulantly.

He reached out a big hand to turn on the radio.

"Maybe something about lost hunters," he grinned.

"No danger of any more dropping in now," said Jo.

With the words the outer door swung noiselessly open. In the doorway, silhouetted against the misty darkness, was the figure of a tall and sinister man. Yellow firelight touched the highlights of his stern face, glinted on the ready rifle in his hands.

V

THE dark and ominous figure in the doorway, night mists drifting in and about, reached one hand behind him and carefully closed and locked the door by snapping the release on the catch.

Jo was the first to recover sufficiently from surprise and alarm to attempt a greeting, even though there was no doubt in her mind who this stranger was, thankful that the others did not know.

"Oh, hello."

She came to her feet bravely, suddenly very tired and weak, which she hoped he did not notice, her forced voice a bit too loud.

"We got lost, Freddie and I—hunting—just happened to come out here, and preempted Mr. Dunbar's cozy little cabin. Fortunately, he came home and was not too much annoyed."

"Not a bit—oh, not a bit," smiling and nodding, getting heavily to his feet. "Quite the proper thing to do, when one is lost. So come right in, stranger—get acquainted—make yourself at home."

Hard eyes silenced him and he sank wearily down again, muttering, visibly flustered.

"Won't you join us?"

Jo tried, not entirely successfully, to act natural and friendly, even while telling herself that this was the killer, the madman, Emil Berg, and that they were all in desperate danger. She realized that nothing must be done to betray the fact that she even suspected that a maniac was at large, thankful that Freddie and Dunbar had not heard the radio announcement. She must not let anything arouse his suspicion and fury lest they all perish. Braving it out, confident that the only safe way was to assume a welcome she certainly did not feel.

"Comrades of the storm," she smiled.

He took a few slow and careful steps forward, the gun now in the crook of his left arm, as though puzzled to know how much they knew of the killings and the pursuit, taking in every detail of the room, his eyes coming to rest on the rifles stacked in a corner.

He walked over and opened the guns one by one. Jo's and Freddie's guns were empty but from Dunbar's old rifle he ejected three shells and dropped them into a pocket of his canvas coat.

"Law of the woods," said he. "Loaded guns must never be carried indoors—accidents might happen."

At this fateful moment, hoping to liven things up a bit, Freddie reached out to turn on the radio. Before she could signal a warning the stranger spoke sharply.

"Don't turn that on."

"For why?" puzzled.

"Never mind why."

Jo knew why. Her eyes on Freddie and the radio, she saw that one of the wires was disconnected, probably by Dunbar's clumsy hands, and was grateful. She hastened to cover up a bad moment.

"By way of introduction—this is Mr. Dunbar, our gracious and uncomplaining host."

Dunbar lurched upright, smiling and nodding.

"Don't mention it, don't mention it at all. No more than anyone would do, under the circumstances, storm and all, for lost folks on a night—"

And sank heavily down again when the hard eyes fixed upon him.

"And this is Freddie," continued Jo.

"The reformed outdoor addict," grinned Freddie.

"And I am Joan LaPointe, out of Long Lake Lodge. Freddie and I got lost, hunting, Mr.—"

"Jock to you. We don't use mister much up here in the big woods."

"Well, Jock, if we hadn't stumbled on

this cabin the birds would be covering us with wet leaves at daybreak."

"Gruesome thought," added Freddie.

"There ought to be a law against allowing city greenies loose in the deep woods at this time of the year."

With these words, none too friendly, the stranger took off his waterproof canvas coat and wide-brimmed felt hat.

"So far as I am concerned," said Freddie, "legal restrictions will not be necessary."

"This was my first deer hunt," explained Jo. "I must admit that I prefer bird dogs and scatter guns."

Something in the way the man was looking at her, a whimsical twinkle of amusement in his eyes, made Jo suddenly conscious of her temporary clothing.

"I must look like a refugee."

She placed a chair for him before the fire. It was necessary to remove her own garments to make room and she was comforted to discover that they were quite dry. Excusing herself she went into one of the bedrooms, drew the curtain that took the place of a door and prepared to change.

For a long time she sat there on the edge of the bed, staring down at the shirt and breeches in her lap, conscious for the first that they were not, could not be the garments of the short, thick-set Dunbar. Someone else must live here, must occupy that very room. Wondering who he was, where he was, and when he would return—hoping that it might be soon enough.

VI

THE man calling himself Jock stood a long moment, studying them individually, carefully and thoroughly, as though weighing the odds, determining just how dangerous they might be to his safety. Then, apparently reassured that he had little to fear from a girl, or from an exhausted city hunter, and even less from an over-stout mountain hermit, he turned into the kitchen.

Jo heard him light the fire in the kitchen range, the dull roar of flame in the iron pipe, the tea kettle scrape forward over the lids. She realized that for appearances' sake, to avoid arousing any suspicion that she knew who he was, she must continue with her act.

"Could I help?"

The man wheeled about, facing her as though challenged, his eyes upon the living room.

"I don't know as I need any help."

He began kicking off rubber-soled shoepacs. She brought a pair of moccasins she remembered seeing behind the stove.

"Thanks," without enthusiasm.

"I thought we might get something for all of us to eat," she suggested.

"It looks as though you folks had helped yourselves plenty."

"Of necessity," she explained. "I hadn't eaten in three days, and the others—"

"Fasting is quite fashionable," unsympathetic.

"It isn't so funny when one is lost in the woods."

"If you had stayed where the guides put you and obeyed orders you wouldn't have got lost in the woods."

"Oh, so you worked that all out by yourself," resenting his dominating attitude.

"Dude hunters should be kept out of the big woods."

In the light of the kitchen lamp, and with his boots off, Jo saw that he was not as tall as he at first appeared. Slender, yet strongly put together and evidently in hard training. Black hair, a bit too long, was nicely waved. He needed a shave but the dark shadow of growing beard did not disfigure lean jaws nor mar a good profile. She noted that his eyes were large and dark, his teeth strong and very white. Certainly there was nothing in this man's personal appearance to indicate that he was a dangerous killer. But the way he acted and spoke, his strained manner of watching the others in the living room, established his identity beyond any question. Her role was to be friendly and to use what skill and womanly charm she possessed to keep the man at ease and content until daylight and the possibility of escape.

She noted that he evidently was one of those men who are at home in any kitchen. He found the tea canister and the teapot without any difficulty. He got out a mixing bowl and a package of biscuit mix. Despite his remarks she noted that he was making enough for all to eat.

"Do you suppose," she asked, "that Mr. Dunbar would mind if we opened this can of spaghetti and meat balls?"

"I wouldn't worry about him."

"After all, we are uninvited guests."

"They are the ones who take the most liberties."

"We had to make the best of an awkward situation. Whatever havoc we make with Mr. Dunbar's things he shall be well repaid before I leave."

"A guest at Long Lake Lodge should be able to pay."

"It's an inherited family trait," said she. "My grandmother was frightened by a bill collector."

"Anyway, it won't be much of a bill."

"We will all go as soon as possible. My friends must be worried to death."

"You will stay until daylight." Hastily adding, "The out-trail is particularly dangerous when the stream is in flood."

Carrying the dishes into the living room Jo noted that Freddie was drowsing in his chair, a lighted cigarette dangling from his long, yellow-stained fingers. Deftly she removed it and tossed the butt into the fireplace.

Mr. Dunbar was slouching low in his chair, still nervous and jittery, watching her every move.

"How does it seem to have a woman in your house?" she asked, more to put him at ease than for any other reason.

"Fine, fine—I like it, yes, I do. I like young and pretty girls."

"Who doesn't?" muttered Freddie sleepily.

Cleaning a place on the littered table for the dishes Jo noticed that the rifle cartridges now were missing.

VII

THE snack-supper proved a depressing half-hour.

Freddie's little pleasantries were ignored and soon dried up. Jo's forced attempts to make conversation failed after a bit. Dunbar chattered away for a minute or two but was soon silenced by the aloofness and cold hard eyes of the watchful Jock. The very air in the room, now a bit smoky, became electric and potential. Jo improvised several trips to the kitchen until she was finally able to catch Freddie's eye, motioning him out.

"Guess what?" whispering excitedly.

"The old hermit has a heart of gold and is going to make you his heir."

"No, no, Freddie. Be serious, just for the novelty of it. It's that man Jock—"

"Jovial Jock the Big Game Hunter. Go ahead with your daily strip and let's see what happens to Jock."

"It's what is going to happen to us—"

"Don't scare me like that."

"He, he is Emil Berg!"

"Emil the Evil, Dracula's son by Bluebeard. His very name makes me shudder and I break out with goose-pimples large as mushrooms. Now, for the secret—who is Emil Berg?"

"He is a killer—"

"How dare he kill without consulting my private list?"

"Freddie, this is serious. I got it over the radio, before you came in. Emil Berg went mad and killed his wife and father-in-law."

"I know of others who have entertained the idea even if they lacked the courage."

"A maniac killer the radio said. He will kill us all if he even suspects that we know who he is."

"Let's not tell him."

"We've got to watch him—the first suspicious move and we will all jump him at once."

"It won't be easy. Jocko certainly looks a hard man who has been where it was tough."

"Probably learned to kill and kill in the service."

"Could be!"

"Let's try to keep him amused and entertained until daylight, then we can all get out of here."

"Pronto!"

For all his whimsicalities Jo felt that she could depend upon Freddie. He was young and strong and evidently quite fearless.

Soon after this an unexpected opportunity came to confide in Dunbar. Jock followed Freddie out into the kitchen where she could hear them exchanging guarded words, as though sizing each other up for possible later emergencies. Taking advantage of the moment she confided her secret in Dunbar.

"It's him," jerking a thumb toward the kitchen.

"Who—what—where?" Puzzled.

"Emil Berg, the killer."

"My goodness—you don't say!"

"Went crazy—killed his wife, father-in-law, policeman, escaped. It was all on the radio—before you came home."

"On radio—why didn't you say so! I've got to get out of here—"

"He doesn't know that we know."

"Oh! Oh, my goodness."

"Maybe we can keep him amused and quiet until daylight."

"Who, me?"

Bouncing up, only to drop weakly back again, as Jock came back into the room.

He filled a pipe slowly and carefully, watching them with studied amusement, as though he more than suspected what she had been doing, lighted it with a paper pip from the fire, then spoke to Jo, almost a command.

"You better go to bed."

"I'm not sleepy," she protested, too frightened to sleep.

"You need rest—after two days and a night lost in the cold rain."

"I am quite rested now."

He pointed authoritatively to the nearest bedroom.

"I couldn't think of taking Mr. Dunbar's room."

"He won't be using it."

Dunbar, visibly shaken, was unable to protest even if so minded.

"I must clean up the kitchen first," she argued.

"I will take care of that."

There seemed to be no escape. She did not dare antagonize the man by refusing and to argue might arouse him to madness.

"All right, so I'm sleepy."

"I don't need a sleeping powder," said Freddie, stretching out on the studio couch.

Reluctantly Jo retired to the bedroom, drawing the curtain behind her. But she did not undress, stretching out on the bed, drawing a soft woolen blanket over her, alert and fearful.

Despite anxiety and no little fear, her exhausted body responded promptly to the soft mattress and warm blanket. She had to fight to keep awake. Rain on the roof became an irresistible lullaby. Soon Dunbar's chatter faded away to an indistinct murmur and she no longer heard the soft swish-swish of Jock's moccasins as he paced back and forth.

How long she slept she never knew. Startled awake by the slamming of the front door—as though another person were hurrying indoors, followed almost instantly by the familiar mechanical noise of a rifle breech closing—then a crashing shot that seemed to burst the walls of the little cabin.

VIII

FOR a few seconds that seemed a perpetuity of time Jo was unable to move, scarce to breathe. Strength flowed out of her body in a cold sweat as surprise and fright overwhelmed her. In that moment she felt the nearness of death, expecting every moment that Jock would rush into the little room and shoot her before she could get out of bed. Almost she could feel the bullet tearing through her young body. But the instinct to fight for life prevailed. She rolled from the bed to the floor, forcing herself upright from hands and knees and walked boldly out into the living room, to the thud of heavy blows, the throaty noises of fighting men. In the dim dancing light of the fire she saw the three struggling. One of them reeled back and crashed to the floor at her feet. He lay there, his body contorting while the others struggled back and forth over his inert body.

It was Freddie.

She saw that Dunbar had Jock by the throat with both hands in a killing grip, though powerful arms were pumping heavy blows into the man's thick middle, without any apparent effect. In desperation Jock tore at the man's rope-like fingers and sent a swinging blow at Dunbar's head. Seeing that the older man evidently had his hands full Jo did not hesitate. She hurried to the fireplace and seized an iron poker, swinging it at Jock's head. He saw it coming and tried to duck, but it struck a glancing blow. He slipped slowly down through Dunbar's arms, to his hands and knees, shaking his head. In that moment Dunbar sprang back and snatched up his rifle. At close range he fired twice into Jock's body.

This would seem to end it but, to Jo's amazement, the stricken man reared upright and swung a back-handed blow, his heavy fist crashing against the side of her head, knocking her against the table, which overturned spilling its load, and sent her sprawling on the floor. Before Dunbar could recover from his surprise that Jock did not fall dead after the two rifle shots, Jock swung right and left to the jaw, knocking the heavier man reeling back against the wall,

but he did not go down. Jo scrambled to her feet, a bit dazed, the poker still in her right hand. Freddie struggled up. Before either could do anything Jock grabbed the poker out of Jo's hands and struck Dunbar a heavy blow. He dropped like a bull hit with a stunning hammer. Jock was on him in an instant, twisting his heavy arms behind his back, lashing the wrists firmly with swift turns of braided copper trolling wire from a reel that rolled his way when the table crashed. He had not made the wire fast when the stricken man began to writhe and struggle, calling unintelligently in a hoarse voice.

"Quick you two," commanded Jock, "help me fasten him!"

Neither could move or speak.

"This man is a crazy killer."

"No!" exclaimed Jo.

"He is Emil Berg—a madman. I am Jock Dunbar—this is my camp—quick before he finds his strength again—give me a hand to tie him."

"Hot damn!" exclaimed Freddie.

Both were a bit dazed but they helped to wind Berg's legs to the knees with many turns of the strong copper wire. They fastened his arms securely above the elbows. Before this was accomplished the crazed man went into a fury of strength that required all three to hold him down.

"Kill, kill, kill," eyes rolling, in a spatter of saliva. "Kill them all before they kill you. We got to die fighting."

He seemed possessed of superhuman strength but the strong wire held though it cut into his wrists until the blood came. In a few more minutes of this the madman passed into a convulsive coma.

"It's daylight," said Jock. "Freddie get into your boots and hurry down the trail. It is four miles to Scot's Lake and the nearest telephone. Notify the State Troopers that we have captured Emil Berg. Explain that they will have to bring in a stretcher and carry him out."

"I am practically there," said Freddie, and if he had pulled on seven-league boots he couldn't have dashed out and away much faster.

IX

JO FELT suddenly weak and sick to her stomach, as the door slammed. She dropped into the nearest chair, mind in a whirl, thoughts jumbled and confused. And her face ached, red and swollen, where Jock had hit her. She reclined there, holding her aching head, without speaking, staring at Jock who was watching the prisoner. Through her bewildered mind ran an endless patter of words:

"The man is dead—the man is dead, dead, dead—"

Expecting every moment to see Jock collapse. She had been brought up with guns and knew that no man, however lucky, could escape a mortal wound from a heavy rifle fired that close to his body.

"He—he shot you," unable to stand it any longer. "Why don't you fall down dead?"

"I will be in no hurry about that," smiling.

"Don't tell me that you are wearing bullet-proof underwear!"

"This crazy Berg doesn't know much about rifles. He was an intelligence officer, with a gift for languages, in the German army in the first World War. He had only three shells left. I took them out of his gun. Those on the table were from my rifle. They would fit the action of his old .45 calibre gun but the high power bullets were only .22 calibre."

"Oh!" beginning to understand. "Oh!"

"Being so much smaller than the bore of his old type rifle the gas from the exploding powder passed around the bullet, instead of driving it, without force enough to penetrate my heavy clothing."

A long sigh of relief.

"Really," he grinned, "I was hurt more by the crack you gave me with the poker." Dabbing at a trickle of blood with a handkerchief.

She jumped up with an exclamation and ran out into the kitchen, returning with a towel and a basin of water.

"Just like a woman," he grinned. "Aim at Berg and hit me."

"I really meant to hit you," she confessed. "I thought you were Berg."

"You thought I was Berg!"

"I was here first, alone. I turned on the radio. I heard the broadcast about the killing. Then you spooked us all up when you came in."

"It is my camp and naturally I was sur-

prised to find company—and a maniac killer among the unexpected guests."

"It is a nasty cut and a real goose-egg—I am sorry—the doctor may have to take a few stitches."

"Search would disclose other scars and not all of them on my scalp. By the way, how is your head?"

"It aches."

"I am sorry, but in self-defense—"

"The score is even."

THERE was no longer need to worry about Berg. His twitching body and heavy breathing indicated that madness had passed into a stroke. Jock eased the wire bonds about his arms and made the stricken man more comfortable.

"He went crazy, as so many of his kind did, when Germany was defeated again," Jock explained, as he filled a pipe and sat down before the fire. "It will take Freddie an hour, at least, to get to Scot's Lake. It will be more than three hours before the police arrive. You better get some rest."

"I am too excited to sleep now."

"I will tell you a bedtime story."

"Tell me about yourself."

"A brief scenario: When I was a boy I grew too fast and Dad built this cabin in the woods so I could have plenty of outdoors. I come back here every fall that I can for a few days shooting. Invalidated home from the Pacific. I got mine at Okinawa. It was hard going. One learns to be tough and to take no chances with killers. I was out all day with a posse searching for this Berg. Imagine my surprise and consternation to find him here."

"Why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you make yourself known?"

"I was afraid that if you knew a killer was in the house that you would do something, say something, to arouse Berg's suspicions. I wanted to avoid a fight until the State Troopers could take over."

He got up and put more dry wood on the dying fire. "Next Monday I must get back to the job in New York—"

"Oh, then we are neighbors," she exclaimed.

"Near enough, I hope, so that we can see each other often."

"That will be nice," in a whisper as she fell asleep.

The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Continued from page 4*)

pany, bossed by Remi Nadeau, had a monopoly on this service, and got rich on it. They ran 56 huge wagons, each drawn by 16 to 20 mules.

"To shorten the long haul (the big wagons made only 10 miles a day) the outfit launched a steamer on Owens Lake, the 85-foot *Bessie Brady*. Plying between Keeler and Cartago, the steamboat made a shortcut in this hauling of silver bullion that saved 8 days of travel. Even so, the silver bars came from Cerro Gordo faster than it could be handled. The stuff would be stacked on the lake shore, waiting to be transported, as if it were railroad ties. Miners even built up shelters out of the bars of bullion!

"Panamint was supposed to be the toughest camp in Inyo County, but Cerro Gordo had a record of knifing and gunplay to satisfy the most bloodthirsty connoisseur. It produced an amazing total of $17,600,000 in silver, from its start right after the Civil War. But as late as 1911, the camp had a flurry of excitement, because zinc ores were found; for a while Cerro Gordo became the largest producer of lead, silver and zinc in California. And there are old-timers still waiting on the Pat Hill for wealth again to ooze from its generous bulk."

George Armin Shaftel.

The Tunnel Builders

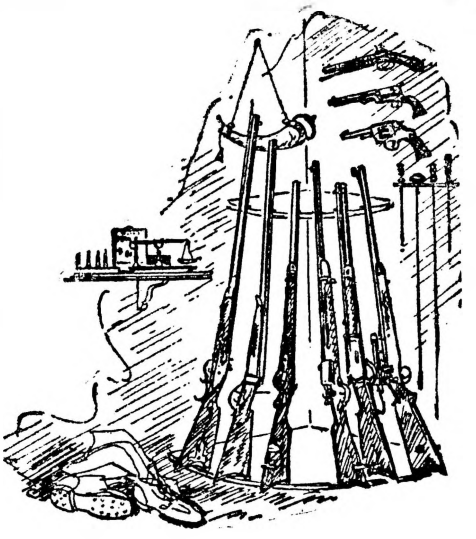
WILBUR S. PEACOCK gives us a look, in "Sandhog," at men who fight an implacable earth, the tunnel builders. There is one in particular, says Peacock, real as the river he fought—until he was snatched away by the Seabees for an even bigger battle.

But the story begins earlier and Peacock tells us about it herewith.

"'It takes a strong back and a weak mind to be a hog,' a big Swede told me once. We lived at a YMCA hotel, and somehow struck up an acquaintance. I accepted his statement, until I learned he held two college degrees. And that put another light on the subject.

"I was intrigued. Judicious questioning and quite a bit of reading brought the point home rather forcefully that tunneling was a fast and dangerous game; that only smart men stayed alive at it very long. The pressure, the incredible tension, the continual fight for life, all contributed to a short, hazardous career.

"I think that's why I wrote 'Sandhog'. I tried to give you a look at men fighting an implacable earth, a glimpse into the thinking of those giants who toil at back-breaking labor so that others may ride in ease through gleaming tunnels." *W. S. Peacock*



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by PETE KUHLHOFF

Old Stuff to a Few, Not So Old to Many

DO YOU shooters know the name of the man whose fertile brain was responsible for so great a number of gun inventions that millions on millions of guns embodying his ideas have been manufactured during the past seventy-five years? As a matter of fact, a very high percentage of guns manufactured today contain parts that were invented by this man.

His name was James Paris Lee. He was born in Scotland, August 9, 1831. At the age of four he emigrated with his father to Canada, settling in Ontario, where his father engaged in business at his trade of watchmaker and jeweler. During his school years

at Galt, Ontario, young Lee learned his father's trade and became well known for the excellence of his mechanical work. During this period he became keenly interested in hunting and hunting arms.

James Paris Lee evidently moved to the United States shortly before the Civil War because records show that he received patent papers dated July 27, 1862, covering a breech-loading action while he was residing at Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Incidentally this single-shot breech-loading rimfire carbine was manufactured in quantity in Wisconsin where the barrels were made in Milwaukee by the old Allis Iron Works, the original of the Allis-Chalmers concern. These were the only guns that were supposed to have been used in the Civil War that were manufactured in the Middle West.

At the end of the war a great number of barrels for these rifles which were on hand, unused, were used to fence in the Allis foundry by being set in the ground close together like a picket fence.

A couple of sentences ago I said that these guns were supposed to have been used in the Civil War. I can find no absolute proof that they were used and have a strong suspicion that they were not. For when the War Department filed an order for 1,000 of these guns on April 18, 1865, the specification called for .44 caliber. Lee figured that this meant the .44 long rimfire cartridge, which was actually .42 caliber and had his barrels so bored. Ordnance inspectors refused to accept them. Soon the Lee Arms Co. went out of business.

Undaunted by this tough luck Mr. Lee went ahead and submitted rifles of various forms of breech-loading mechanisms to the United States War Department Boards of 1869, 1872, 1878, 1882, and to contemporary ordnance boards of the British Government.

The Lee Single-Shot Breech-Loading Military Rifle patented on March 16, 1875, was chambered for the .45-70 Government center-fire cartridge.

I have one of these rifles in new condition with which I have experimented quite a bit —so inasmuch as I want to do a piece about it at a later date let's skip it for the time being.

In the '70's Lee worked out the idea for a bolt-action rifle using a box magazine under-

neath the bolt. This was the pappy of practically all modern military rifles and all sporting rifles having this type magazine.

This rifle (Remington-Lee) was adopted by several nations.

Its ideas were copied by the Mannlicher outfit in Austria, and was swiped by the Mausers of Germany.

In England it became part of the Lee-Metford and Lee-Enfield guns—every British military rifle since the adoption of the bolt-action system.

LEE had intended to manufacture this rifle (patented July 15, 1879) in the Sharps plant in Bridgeport, Conn., but when Sharps suspended business in 1880 the Remington people acquired the Lee patents and transferred the manufacture to the Remington plant at Ilion.

After this, Lee formed a new Lee Arms Co. out in Wilkes-Barre, Pa., and manufactured a variety of rimfire cartridge revolvers.

The Lee-Burton, Spencer-Lee, Lee-Hotchkiss, once known as the Winchester-Lee, all embodied his inventions.

The U. S. Navy Model 1895, caliber 6-mm. or .236—generally known as the Lee Straight Pull Military Rifle, was used by the Navy during the Spanish-American War.

This rifle was far ahead of its time and was the smallest bore military rifle ever manufactured in any quantity.

It was a box-magazine, high-velocity small caliber rifle and we are just beginning to appreciate the possibilities of such a rifle.

It is interesting to note that this arm had the fastest rifling twist (one turn in 7½ inches in Winchester guns) of any commercially-made rifle. I understand that Remington produced some experimental numbers having one turn in 6½ inches. For comparison, the .30-'06 Army rifle twist is one turn in 10 inches and some of the old black powder rifles had a twist of one turn in 32 inches or even longer.

The Lee Straight Pull rifle was discontinued in 1903, the year before James Paris Lee died at Short Beach, Conn. February 24, 1904.

Reloader Number One

THE other day Major Anthony Fiala, the well-known Arctic explorer and presi-

dent of Fiala Outfits, Inc., told me an interesting story.

In the early '70's when the U. S. Army used the .50 and .45 caliber cartridges with inside center-fire primers the Indians were raising cane with the Union Pacific Railroad.

The invisible primer center-fire cartridge looks very similar to a rimfire cartridge. The primer was held inside in the center of the head of the case or shell by a metal bridge which was held in place by crimping the side of the case near its base.

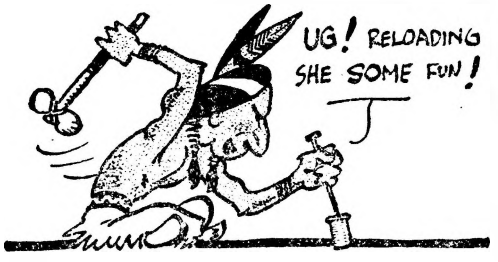
In several engagements with troops and settlers about 1871 the Sioux, who were armed with muzzle-loading rifles, captured a number of breech-loading rifles, mostly Springfields of .50-caliber.

Strict orders were issued not to sell them any ammo. for breech-loading rifles.

However, the Indians being smart cusses picked up empty cartridge cases whenever they got a chance.

In the latter part of '71 troops had a brush with several parties of Sioux and were greatly surprised to find quite a number of them using Springfield breech-loading rifles.

Where did they get the ammunition?



Investigation cleared up the mystery. The wily Indians had reprimed picked-up fired cases by the simple procedure of punching a small hole in the center of the case and inserting an ordinary percussion cap (in which a small piece of gravel had been inserted to act as an anvil) in the said hole. It was then a simple matter to reload with powder and ball.

Thus the Indian gets the credit for being the first practical reloader. So ends this day!

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But later I discovered the secret that turned me into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." And now I'd like to prove to you that the same system can make a NEW MAN of YOU!

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I don't care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it, I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps — yes, on each arm — in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day — right in your own home — is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice new, beautiful suit of muscle!

Only 15 Minutes A Day

No "ifs," "ands" or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc.? Then write for details about *"Dynamic Tension"* and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun. *"Dynamic Tension"* does the work.

"Dynamic Tension!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have learned to develop your strength through *"Dynamic Tension,"* you can laugh at *artificial* muscle-makers. You simply utilize the DORMANT muscle-power in your own body—watch it increase and multiply into real, solid LIVE MUSCLE.

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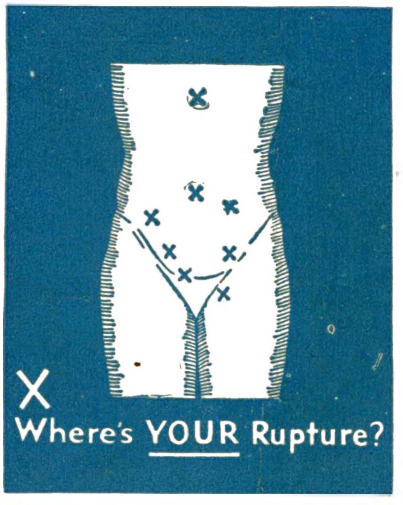

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C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

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