

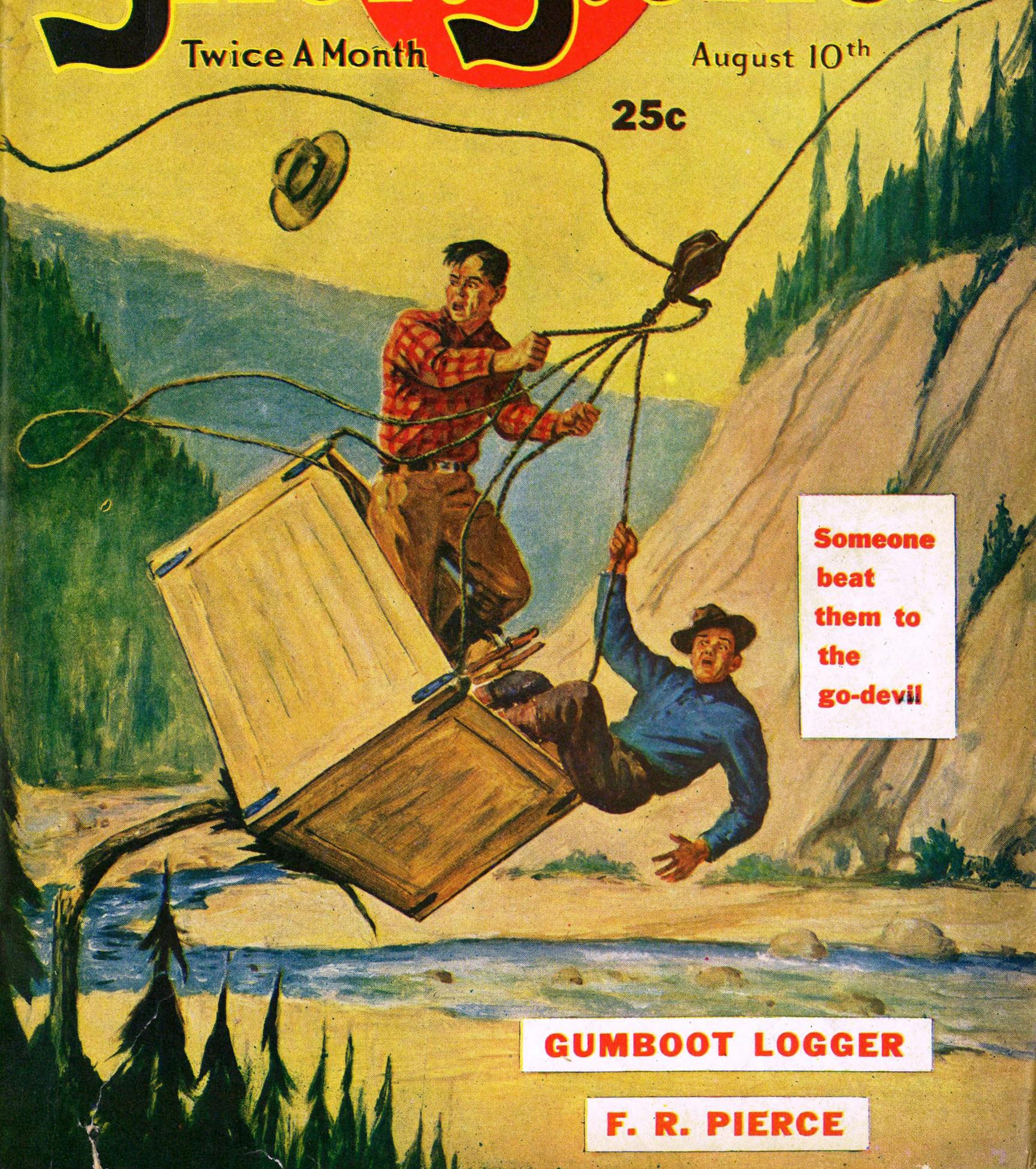
"The Housing Shortage Murders"—STEUART EMERY  
"Red Haid Snaps Up"—WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINÉ

# Short Stories

Twice A Month

August 10<sup>th</sup>

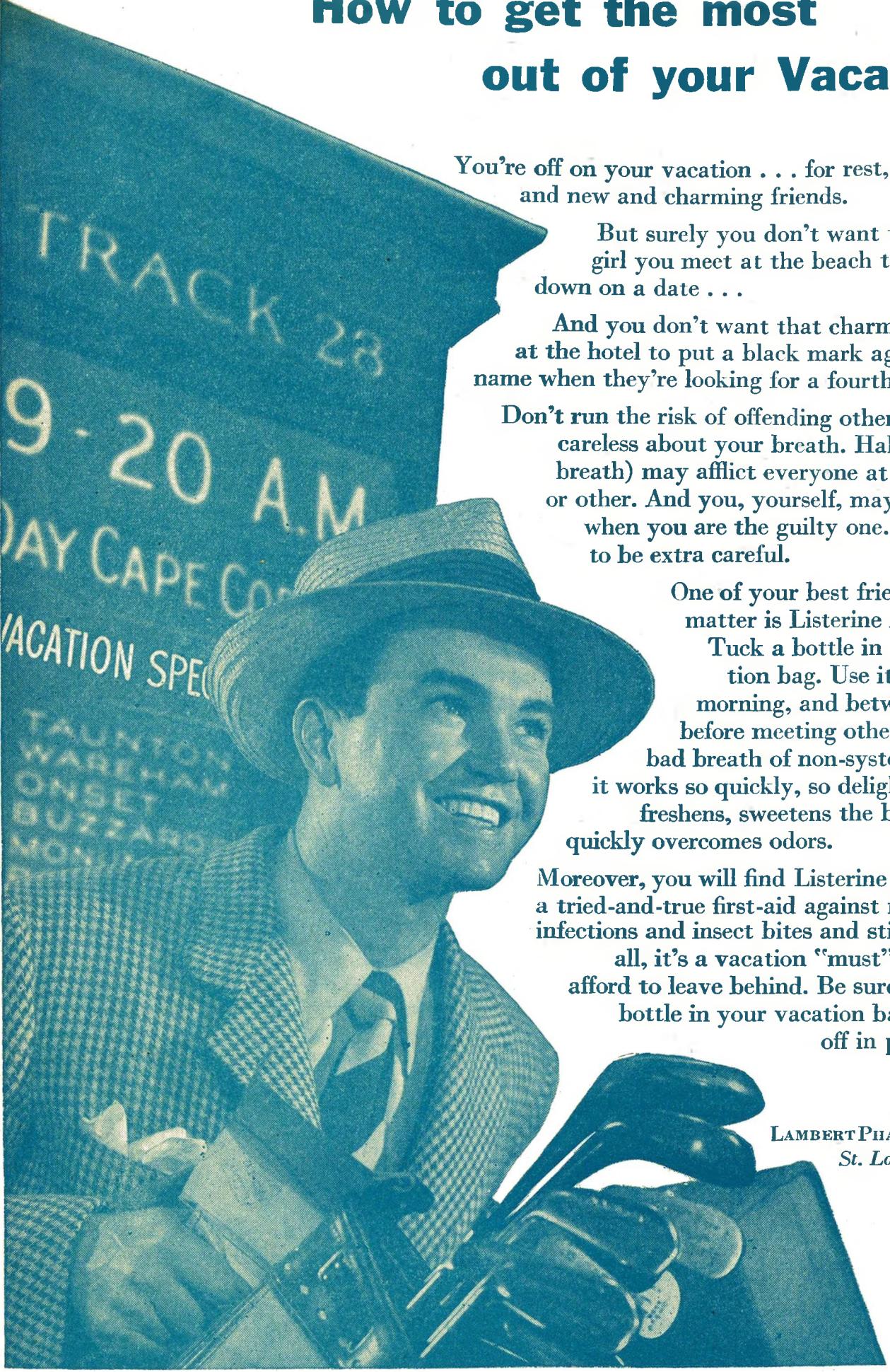
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**GUMBOOT LOGGER**

**F. R. PIERCE**

# How to get the most out of your Vacation



You're off on your vacation . . . for rest, relaxation and new and charming friends.

But surely you don't want that lovely girl you meet at the beach to turn you down on a date . . .

And you don't want that charming couple at the hotel to put a black mark against your name when they're looking for a fourth at bridge.

Don't run the risk of offending others by being careless about your breath. Halitosis (bad breath) may afflict everyone at some time or other. And you, yourself, may not know when you are the guilty one. So it pays to be extra careful.

One of your best friends in this matter is Listerine Antiseptic.

Tuck a bottle in your vacation bag. Use it night and morning, and between times, before meeting others. Against bad breath of non-systemic origin it works so quickly, so delightfully . . . freshens, sweetens the breath, and quickly overcomes odors.

Moreover, you will find Listerine Antiseptic a tried-and-true first-aid against minor skin infections and insect bites and stings. All in all, it's a vacation "must" you can't afford to leave behind. Be sure to tuck a bottle in your vacation bag. It pays off in popularity.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL Co.  
St. Louis, Mo.

**P. S.** Do you know that Listerine Antiseptic is a wonderful precaution against infectious dandruff with its ugly flakes and scales? Make Listerine Antiseptic and massage a part of regular hair-washing.

# The Story Tellers' Circle

## Policemen Have Ears, Too

AN AUTHOR will go to all sorts of pains to work up his stories, as you readers know. With "experience-is-the-best-teacher" a fixed axiom, the question arises: How experienced can you be? It's pretty necessary to know first hand about forests and logging if one contemplates a lumber camp yarn. Well now, how about crime? Logically the best whodunits should come from "thems who have." But, Whoa, isn't that carrying things a little too far? The law is notoriously touchy, and how much of a joke can they take? For instance, take this following incident from the life and files of Steuart M. Emery, whose current business is the solving of "The Housing Shortage Murders."

*"As a writer of crime stories such as 'The Housing Shortage Murders' besides the Jezebel Westerns, I have found out that it isn't a good idea to talk about said crime stories in public.*

*"To wit: My old friend, the late Frank Lord, formerly an Assistant District Attorney under Jerome and later Deputy Police Commissioner in charge of Homicide, and I were walking along a street in New York's Forties one afternoon, violently discussing a crime story we were writing together. It was a gangster yarn wherein the Big Shot intended to rub out the café singer who had once been his girl friend because she knew too much about him and he feared her revenge for casting her off into poverty.*

*"I was defending the lady, exclaiming: "Adeline is a fine girl, I really like that character. I don't want to rub her out."*

*"'Nice or not she gets rubbed out,' growled Lord. 'Now, how do we dispose of her body?'*

*"Two large figures in blue blocked us. There was a tentative but firm grip on the arm of each of us. 'And just who are you planning to rub out?' inquired the larger of the patrolmen. 'And what is this body?'*

*"We looked up from our author's voyage into a world of crime and saw we were passing the sidewall of the New York Hip-*

*podrome with forty uniformed patrolmen standing against it, all with their ears stretched toward us.*

*"'Officer,' said Frank Lord. 'My friend here and I were just discussing a crime story we're writing. I used to be a Deputy Commissioner, Homicide. Here in my pocket I have a letter from Commissioner Valentine, whom I know well from the old days, in answer to one of mine asking for the use of Headquarters files for our research, which he is glad to extend to me as a former Commissioner. The rubbing out of the girl is going on in our minds, it isn't real. She's a character in a story. If you want further identification I'll be glad to give it to you.'*

*"'Okay, Commissioner,' said the patrolman. 'Sorry to have stopped you. But what do you and your friend expect when you come walking along, waving your arms, and plotting a murder out loud? When you are going to kill somebody in a story, kindly do it indoors.'*

*"'Right,' said Lord, and we went on. 'Lucky thing I had that letter with me; we certainly didn't look too good. Now let's remove the blood-flecked foam of the killer from our lips with some real foam in the place I see ahead of us with the sign marked "Beer".'"*

Steuart M. Emery

## Woodsman, Don't Spare That Tree

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE'S "Gumboot Logger" illustrates once again the fact that the author has lived a goodly portion of his life in the logging country. About that country and the changes that have taken place recently, Pierce writes:

*"In the old days, they used to leave trees that had twisted grains or were 'school-marms,' or had too many knotty areas. The lumber was hardly worth the trouble. But not any more. However, such trees seeded immediate areas long before there was talk of regarding lumber as a crop. Many trees from such seed are now large enough to saw.*

*"With old houses getting older, the popu-*  
*(Continued on page 141)*

# Short Stories

TWICE A  
MONTH



## THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

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### GUMBOOT LOGGER

(A Complete Novel) **Frank Richardson Pierce**

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*Nature Says—"Here Are the Trees, Get 'em if You Can" . . . Experience Shows That When a Particularly Difficult Job Is to Be Done, the Right Fellow Comes Along and Does It*

### DEAD RECKONING

**Herbert L. McNary** 38

*To the Average Person the Ocean Appears to Be of Immutable Sameness, but to the Fisherman the Ocean Is a Thing of Tides and Currents, Colors and Soundings*

### RED HAIR SNAPS UP

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*On the Frontier, You Can Rustle and You Can Kill, but You Can't Force a Girl to Marry You—Usually, That Is*

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*A Little Knowledge Is a Dangerous Thing; a Little More Knowledge Is Very Dangerous; Too Much Is—Fatal!*

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*A Double-Cross in the Shape of a Boomerang Might Be Hard to Draw, but It Looked as if Black John Was Going to Have to Try It on Halfaday*

EDITOR  
**D. McILWRAITH**

ASSOCIATE EDITOR  
**LAMONT BUCHANAN**

August 10th, 1947

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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.

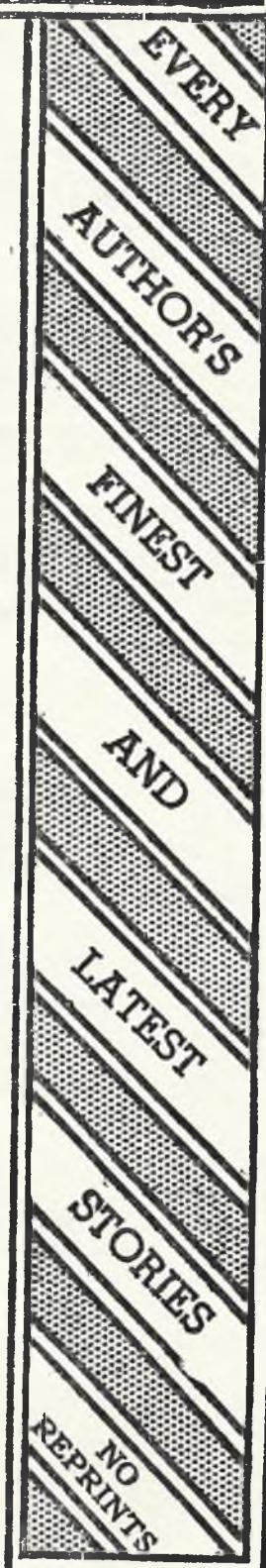
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# GUMBOOT LOGGER



By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

STEVE SHERIDAN'S impatience increased in proportion to the stage's decrease in speed. He supposed it was necessary to go into second and sometimes in low on the narrow turns and steep pitches, but if the driver built up a momentum on the downgrades, he would make better time.

"Still," he thought, "who am I to tell an experienced driver how to handle a loaded stage in mountain country? It was late afternoon, but already the dense timber made it darker than it was in the open country. Steve had heard about the Puget Sound forests, but this was the first one he had seen. He had an idea—after looking at the stumps—

that road building was expensive business. "You don't just throw a cable around those stumps and yank 'em out," he thought.

The driver looked over his shoulder. "Trout Creek just ahead, mister," he said.

"Thanks," Steve said. "Keep an eye out for me about this time tomorrow or the next day. I may want to go on to Saw Mill City." As the stage came to a stop he picked up his pack, fishing rod and slung a pair of gumboots over his shoulder. It was quite a load, but there were two hundred pounds and six feet of him, and none of it was soft. "I've been looking forward for years to fishing in a Puget Sound trout stream," he said, "and here I am."



*. . . and the Eyes of a Tough  
Sawmill Town Were on Him*

"It couldn't've been too many years," the driver observed. "I'll bet you're under thirty."

"Twenty-five," Steve answered, "but a kid can look at pictures when he's supposed to be studying and dream and plan, can't he. I had things lined up when I was eighteen, but my mother had an operation and she sort of wanted me to hang around. Three years ago I was all set to have a shot at it, then along came a war. You may have heard about it."

"I was in it," the driver said. "Good luck. You'll need it."

It wasn't until later, when Steve was well beaten up, that it struck him the driver's *good luck* carried a grim, warning note. He jumped down as the stage stopped, waved at the driver, and watched it grumble and growl its way up a switchback. He looked around and liked everything he saw.

First, the icy stream ran over fair-sized boulders. Each had enough water below it to form a hiding place for a trout or two. A man could wade upstream, casting into the foam-covered eddies below the boulders and fill a creel. There was room along the bank to walk, and the branches were high enough so that in casting the hook wouldn't snag.

He followed a game trail a short distance and noticed that it intersected a Forest Service trail that had seen considerable use. A nearby sign indicated it was permissible to camp and build a fire.

He shed his pack, built a fire and stepped over to the creek for water. He was thinking coffee would hit the spot and that he would soon have the world by the tail and a down-hill pull. A cracking twig warned him. He straightened up and looked around. "Probably a deer or bear," he thought. "I'd sure like to see one."

The brush parted a moment later and a man Steve's size stepped into the open. "Okay, guy," he growled, "pack up your stuff, and get the hell out of here."

Steve gave himself a couple of seconds to recover from his amazement. The man had a bashed-in nose, hairy fists and a jaw that looked as if it had come from a concrete mixer. He dripped self-confidence. "I'm a reasonable man," Steve said, "and if you'll give me a good reason why I should pack up and light out, I'll go."

"Because I say so," the other retorted.

"Not reason enough," Steve answered.

"Why you bum!" The other roared, then charged. His first punch knocked Steve over a log and into a fern thicket. It was a tremendous push rather than a punch, but it could cave in ribs or break jaws from the force behind it.

Steve moved groggily away as soon as he got to his feet, then he turned suddenly. "My head's clear now, and I'm ready to find out what this is about. Let's have it!"

"And you'll get it," the other promised. Again he came in, and Steve, with the aid of footwork, began going with the other's punches, and hitting the target with his own fists. He saw the man's knees buckle, and put everything he had behind a finishing punch. He nearly broke his hand, but he heard the crack as the other's jaw bone fractured. The man went down, tried to get up and went down again. Something in his eyes caused Steve to turn.

A second man was swinging on him. Before he could go with the punch or lift his hands in defense, a fist nearly tore his head off. He went down, and the second man followed, throwing punches into Steve's unprotected face and stomach. A distant voice warned, "Don't kill the cuss." Vaguely Steve recognized Bashed-in Nose's voice. "We don't want a murder on our hands, Hank."

"Damn it, Pete, they told me this cuss would scare off," Hank answered. "You talk funny, like you had a busted jaw. I'll take another crack at him and we'll get the hell out. He can drag hisself down to the highway."

The final crack Hank delivered plunged Steve into utter darkness. The stars were out when he regained consciousness. He felt terribly battered and sick. For a long

time he was content to relax in the hope that he might feel better. He tried in a confused sort of way to review what had happened, but it didn't add up. "According to Hank," he muttered, "I was supposed to scare off more or less easily. Why should a man wanting nothing more than to fish for trout, scare off? I bought a Washington state visitor's hunting and fishing license. The season is open and this creek is on public lands. I don't get it."

HE crawled to the creek, scooped up cold water, drank it, then bathed his face. His right arm throbbed with pain. He concluded that it had caught one of the kicks aimed at his ribs. Somewhere a twig snapped, then he heard footfalls. A flashlight probed the forest, sending the eerie shadows formed by the somber trunks leaping about. "I need help," Steve thought, "but how can I tell friend from enemy, if I yell someone may finish me. They may think I know too much."

A girl's voice came suddenly, "Johnny! Oh—Johnny!" Then faintly, "He must be here somewhere, badly hurt or—dead."

Steve decided to take a chance. He yelled, "Down here!" The flashlight began dancing, and he knew the girl was running. "Here!" he called again, when she almost passed the spot.

"Johnny!" she cried in relief, then, "Oh—you aren't Johnny."

"No, I'm not Johnny," Steve answered, "but I've taken one hell of a beating from a couple of guys who must have thought I was. And if they think I'm going to take this meekly, they've got another think coming."

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," the girl said.

"I didn't come here to inherit the earth," he retorted testily, "I came here for a mess of trout, and by strange eskimo gods, I'm going to catch a mess of trout."

"Let's have a look at your wounds," the girl suggested. "I brought along a first-aid kit—"

"So you knew something like this might happen, and yet you took no measures to stop it, such as calling the sheriff?" he bitterly accused. "I think the country is beautiful, the trout streams inviting and the air bracing, but the people are a bunch of

heels, and the country deserves a better break."

"Why don't you move into the Trout Creek country," she quietly suggested, "and improve the inhabitants' decency quota? There's certainly room." She went over his battered features quickly and expertly. "Your right arm isn't broken, but your muscles took a kick and it'll be some time before you can handle a fishing rod. Do you feel up to hiking back to the road? I've a car parked. We live in Saw Mill City—Mill City for short. I'll help you to your feet."

"You and who else?" he grumbled. "I weigh a tenth of a ton, and you can't weigh much over a hundred and ten pounds."

"You're the most exasperating creature I've ever met," she remarked. She caught his good arm, gave a heave and he found himself upright and standing on a pair of rubbery legs. For a pint-sized girl she possessed surprising strength. She picked up part of his camping outfit as if to carry it to the road, but he stopped her.

"Cache it somewhere," he said, "no sense in carrying it out. I came here to fish, and as soon as my right arm is limber enough to handle a rod, I'm going fishing, and no damned thug is going to stop me."

"Who are the thugs?" she asked.

"When they thought I was unconscious, they talked. I learned three things. 'One, they confused me with your friend Johnny. They figured he would scare easily.'

"And you didn't scare easily," she said.

"Hell, no," he exploded. "It wasn't a matter of courage, it was just—just—well, just that if a man has any self-respect he isn't going to let a couple of thugs deny him his rights, so I started swinging. And got licked, of course, as often happens when Right starts punching away at Wrong. The second and third things learned were their names Hank and Pete."

"You couldn't have taken on a couple of tougher customers," she said. "Hank Grogan and Pete McCoy." She cached his outfit in a burned-out cedar stump, then led the way back to the road. He followed, limping and muttering.

**S**HE helped him into the car, saw that he was as comfortable as possible, then drove rapidly toward town. "If you're up to

it," she said, "I'd like to take you to Judge Roy Darrow, so that he will know what is going on."

"A sort of Exhibit A?" he suggested. "Okay. I'm agreeable to anything that'll lead to Hank and Pete's downfall. What's back of all this?"

"Several years ago an uncle died and left me a thirty-five percent interest in the Trout Creek Logging Company," she said. "That makes me the largest stockholder. Brad Gallagher, my uncle's manager, owned a seven percent interest. Uncle was sick two years before he died and left the logging camp's management largely to Gallagher. The man ran it expensively. The year following Uncle's death the company skipped paying a dividend for the first time."

"Incompetent management?" Steve asked.

"No," she answered, "Gallagher, thirty-five, has been a logger since he was fifteen. He knows the game. I think he was forcing down the value of the stock with the hope of picking it up at his own price. The showdown came when he wanted to build a bridge across Blue Clay Gulch to tap the Cedar Bench timber. That would put the company on the skids. I put it up to the little stockholders and lined up enough stock to give me control. I fired Gallagher and put in my brother, Terry, as manager. Terry is an experienced, practical man, though under thirty. He called off the Blue Clay Gulch bridge project, fired some of Gallagher's pets and was in a fair way to show a profit, when Gallagher went before Judge Roy Darrow and asked for a receivership."

"I suppose he figured that the judge would appoint him receiver?" Steve suggested.

"Perhaps," she answered. "He plays a very smooth hand and looks a long way ahead."

"Where does Johnny come in?"

"I'm coming to that," she said. "Judge Darrow said that he wanted a receiver who was not identified with either faction. He ordered that Terry be fired. He also ruled that neither Gallagher nor any of his men could be employed."

"It sounds to me as if the judge wanted the receiver to have a clean shot at conditions," Steve said. "If there was dirty work involved an interested party, working on

the job, could cover up clues and drag red herrings across trails."

"I suppose so," she admitted, "though Terry and I were and are interested solely in operating the camp honestly. Anyway, the judge appointed Johnny Crahan, receiver."

"An experienced logger, of course," Steve said.

"No, a young business man who was developing a trick of making a sick business well," she replied. "We went to the university together, though he's several years older than I. He had to miss terms, go to work, and get himself a stake for the next term. Johnny is a queer duck in the eyes of many people. He calls himself a physical coward. He doesn't like trouble, and seeing men fight makes him ill. He won't hunt because he doesn't want to kill things."

"What about the late war? A 4-F I suppose?"

"No. He was accepted. He told them that he would be a liability in combat. They weren't impressed, but he stayed with his guns, and finally they asked, with sarcasm, I suppose, 'We really can't use a baby sitter in this man's war, what do you want to do?' He answered, 'I like to tinker. How about a job with some bomb disposal outfit? You know, dig down, remove the fuse so the damned thing won't let go and hurt a lot of people.'"

"What a guy!" Steve exclaimed.

"I'm very fond of Johnny," Margie said. "He is a marvelous judge of men. He seems to know which man of a group can fill a special job. Such a man doesn't have to know too much about logging. He selects men who do know the game, then manages them. Judge Darrow sent for Johnny and appointed him receiver. I protested. I told the judge that some mighty tough cookies would mix into the fight and that I didn't think Johnny was the man."

"What did Judge Darrow say to that?"

"He said, 'Young woman, Johnny Crahan will represent this court, and this court is a very tough cookie when the law is involved,'" she said. "And that ended that."

awakened someone because a light came on, then a window opened and a cheerful voice asked, "Who is it?"

"Margie Moran," the girl answered. "Can I see you for a minute. It's important."

"Can't it wait until the morning?" he asked. The cheerfulness drained from his voice. "Young woman, I don't like my sleep broken."

"It has to do with contempt of court," Margie explained, "and I've been told that you are very careful about such things."

"Be right down," he said.

**T**WO minutes later he was opening the front door. He was a thin dried-up man of medium build. His hair was white and he wore a white mustache which bristled. He wore a dressing gown over an old-fashioned nightgown. His feet were in carpet slippers.

"Hank Grogan and Pete McCoy, beat up this gentleman, thinking he was Johnny Crahan," Margie stated. "Is that contempt of court?"

"What was Johnny supposed to be doing at the time? Or to put it differently, what did Grogan and McCoy think Crahan was doing at the time of the attack?" the judge asked.

"Johnny was supposed to be on his way to Camp One to take charge, as per court order," Margie stated. "He was delayed, and missed the bus. This gentleman, on a trout fishing trip, left the bus at the point where Johnny would have left it. You see, there's a short-cut over a Forest Service trail up Trout Creek. When Johnny mentioned his intention of walking to Camp One instead of waiting until the logging truck was repaired and going in that way, he was warned of possible attack."

"And Johnny went ahead anyway?" the judge asked. "That's hard to believe because we must admit Johnny will duck physical violence."

"He said that inasmuch as he was acting for Your Honor, and that was known to everyone, no one would be foolish enough to attack him," Margie said.

"Young man," Judge Darrow said, "step into the bathroom, strip and let me examine your bruises. Margie, you are a very astute young woman. You came direct to me, while this young man's wounds were still bleeding, and the attack was fresh in his

**I**T WAS nearly midnight when she stopped in front of a seven-room house on Saw Mill City's outskirts. The crunching of tires on the gravel driveway must have

mind." He waved toward a door, and Steve went in and stripped.

Judge Darrow examined him carefully, then called a doctor. "Nothing to worry over, Sheridan," he said. "It's just that I want your bruises certified by a doctor. Tomorrow, we'll hold a court session." He picked up the telephone again and called the sheriff.

The sheriff's tone was heavy with annoyance, then he shook off his sleep and grew alert. When Judge Darrow was officially on the prowl, everyone jumped. "Sheriff, pick up Hank Grogan and Pete McCoy. I want them brought before me tomorrow morning at eleven o'clock." He hung up and turned to Steve Sheridan who had finished dressing and was limping from the bathroom. "I shall have to ask you to appear in court, young man. I'm sorry to interrupt your vacation, but so much is involved. You will find Margie Moran a gracious hostess, I'm sure."

"I can't do much fishing with my arm in its present shape," Steve replied. "My time is my own. I returned from the war to my old job, but didn't like it. It was an inside job, and I had spent several years in the open, hopping from island to island in the Pacific. I sold my interest in the business—it wasn't much—and decided to catch up on my fishing, and look around. You won't have to put me under bond to appear. The fact is, I may stick around awhile. Ignore this officially, please, but I'd like to take a poke at Grogan and McCoy."

Judge Darrow chuckled. "I'm hard of hearing at times, Sheridan. Goodnight. Thank you again, Margie, for letting no grass grow under your feet."

Margie drove on to her own home. Her uncle had built it in the piping days when most lumber was hauled in sailing ships. It was the Queen Anne type of architecture, with windowed towers overlooking the bay.

"Here's the guest room, Mr. Sheridan," she said. "If you like old things, the walnut furniture and the marble-top tables will catch your eye. If not, you'll probably want to stand in a corner and mutter. Personally, I love old things."

"Judge Darrow should be living here," Steve said. "He's part of Queen Anne period furniture. I like him, and I like your home. I hope there are court delays and

that you are stuck with me as a guest. I can hardly wait for the daylight view."

"You'll love that, too," she predicted. "Goodnight."

IN HER own room Margie reviewed the evening's events. When she had driven to Trout Creek she had followed sheer impulse.

She hadn't known that Johnny had missed the bus. But she had given thought to the methods Brad Gallagher used to gain his ends. Beating up Johnny, and frightening him off the job, was one way of getting rid of a man who would prove dangerous from the moment he seated himself in the office and began checking on records.

Perhaps, Margie had thought, the records would yield nothing on which criminal prosecution could be based. Again, if Johnny put two and two together, he might find the result was four. If he went on from there, he might build up a conspiracy case and prove that Gallagher had tried to smash the company.

She had gone roaring over the highway to Trout Creek to assure herself that Johnny was unharmed. It was logical that he camp at the campgrounds designated by the Forest Service, because the stand at this point was owned by the government. Johnny liked to camp by a hurrying creek.

There being no sign of Johnny, Margie had started calling, and Steve Sheridan had answered. She had concluded Johnny had been tied up by some eleventh-hour business, and had missed the bus.

"It is certainly tough on Steve Sheridan, an innocent bystander," she mused as she turned over on her side and tried to sleep, "but it proves what I tried to impress on Judge Darrow from the start, that Gallagher is ruthless and isn't going to be scared out by fear of contempt of court proceedings. Johnny is one of my favorite people, but he isn't the man to be receiver for the company. We need someone who will start swinging, physically swinging, in spite of the odds—someone like Sheridan. I wonder what his background is?" It was quite awhile before she was asleep.

Margie awakened him, and he cursed and groaned as his stiff muscles and bruised flesh were disturbed. He sat on the edge of the bed and moaned, "I can't get up. I

simply can't. I'm going to stay in bed all day."

"What did you say?" Margie asked. "I thought I heard you talking?"

"Skip it," Steve replied, his pride and indignation taking control, "I'm only talking to myself."

"Who won the argument?"

"My superior self won for a change," he said. He put his palms on his knees and tilted his shoulders forward, then slowly got to his feet. He heard her engaged in some occupation down the hall. A broom handle clattered.

When he went downstairs he found her in the kitchen. "The girl who helps with the cooking and cleaning is sick this morning," she explained. "Things always happen in bunches. Judge Darrow wants us in court at eleven o'clock."

"Have they caught my beat-uppers?" he asked.

"Not yet. How do you like your eggs and coffee?"

"Coffee black," he answered, "and eggs sunny side up."

A few minutes later she had everything arranged at one end of the long dining-room table. She joined him, flushed and very pretty from speeding up her work.

"How much of a vacation can you really afford?" she asked. "As I understand it you sold your interest in some company and quit your job and are looking for a place to light?"

"That's right," he agreed. "First, fishing, then I'll look around for the right spot." He looked up sharply. "Have you something in mind?"

"If you can handle men," she said thoughtfully, "that is, pick the right man for the right job, there might be a place with Trout Creek Logging. There's a shortage of the executive type of man. Logging and lumber are going to be good lines for quite awhile. We aren't going to catch up with the housing shortage this year or next. It's just a thought. You might not like it at all."

"I might, at that," he said thoughtfully. "In spite of my reception I like the country."

"Why not list your activities since you left school?" she suggested.

"Say!" he exclaimed. "Just *what* have you in mind?"

"Sometimes," she replied seriously, "it pays to play a hunch. Again, you can play a hunch in the logging game and lose your shirt." That was all that she would say.

She picked up the paper when he had finished itemizing his accomplishments, folded it neatly and put it in her handbag. On the way to the courthouse she drove along the waterfront where he could hear the whine of saws eating into good, clean wood, and see the trucks dumping logs into mill ponds. She watched him narrowly for his reaction and smiled quietly when she decided it was good.

The courtroom was empty when they arrived at ten minutes to eleven. The clerk and bailiff were talking in low tones at the former's desk, and she heard the clerk say, "The judge is fit to be tied this morning. Someone beat up a visitor, mistaking him for the receiver he appointed to straighten out the Trout Creek logging mess. You'd think the judge had taken the beating from the way he's seething—not saying a word, but when he puffs on the cigar it threatens to burst into flame. When he blows out the smoke, it's like a black powder explosion. The sheriff has the willies. He can't find the guilty parties."

MARGIE nudged Steve. "That's Brad Gallagher who just came in," she whispered.

"Two and two are four, sure as hell," Steve answered. "Why would Gallagher be on hand unless he knew of the beating, and expected fireworks this morning?"

"My hunch is working out nicely," she said. "You think fast. Excuse me." She walked over to the clerk, spoke briefly, then went into the judge's chambers. When she emerged it was fifteen minutes after eleven, Gallagher was shifting nervously in his seat, and the sheriff, who had arrived promptly at eleven o'clock was shooting apprehensive glances at the judge's door.

Margie said nothing as she seated herself beside Steve. They stood when the judge appeared, then sat down again. The sheriff wasted no time in reporting. "No trace of Hank Grogan and Pete McCoy, Your Honor. My office is continuing the search."

"Hmmmm!" his Honor said, and the sheriff's face grew red. The judge turned his gaze on Gallagher. "Mr. Gallagher, is

there something you wish to bring to the court's attention?"

"Nothing, Your Honor," Gallagher answered. "I'm just a spectator."

"Hmmmm!" Judge Darrow said in a slightly rising tone. It was another way of saying, "Gallagher, I can't go behind the evidence, but I know this, if you weren't aware of this beating, you wouldn't be here this morning. I know the sheriff, Margie Moran, Steve Sheridan and I haven't been talking."

GALLAGHER'S big form twisted on the bench until the wood creaked under the strain. Judge Darrow's eyes continued to bore into the logger.

"This Court," Judge Darrow said, "after due consideration, is making certain changes in the Trout Creek Logging Company matter. Mr. John Crahan is to be relieved of his duties as receiver."

"As a stockholder, I'd like to know who will take his place," Gallagher said.

"I shall appoint a man I deem adequate," the judge answered. "Court stands adjourned until two o'clock." He retired to his chambers.

"He's a lousy judge," Gallagher growled.

"Judge Darrow knows the score, Mr. Gallagher," Margie said with spirit, "and you know it. You also know what happened last night. You were afraid Johnny might show you up, so your personal goons went to work and beat up the wrong man. And that, Mr. Gallagher, was the biggest mistake you ever made. It's going to backfire. And how it's going to backfire."

"I wish you were a man," Gallagher grunted. "I'd like to wade into you."

"On rare occasions," Margie retorted, "I wish that I were a man. This is one of them. What a brawl it would be. Come, Mr. Sheridan, the judge is waiting for us."

"Us?" Steve gasped.

"Of course," she said sweetly. "You don't suppose we were talking politics before he opened court? We were discussing the new receiver."

When Steve entered Judge Darrow's chambers, he noticed the jurist was studying the life sketch that he had given Margie. "My boy," he said looking up, "I'm impressed by that you haven't said. Three years in the war are dismissed with seven

words. What was your rank on discharge from the service?"

"I was lucky—a major," Steve answered.

"Now, Mr. Sheridan," Judge Darrow said, "I'll give you a few details, in confidence, of course. I'm speaking man to man and not as a judge from the bench. I surmise some things, and have formed certain conclusions. Basically I am interested in young people who have been married a year or two, or who want to marry, and have no home except a room or two provided by in-laws. The marriage adjustment is difficult enough between two youngsters without it being complicated by third parties, even if they are well-meaning in-laws."

"That's right," Steve agreed.

"You can't build homes without lumber, and you can't manufacture lumber without logs," Judge Darrow continued. "Naturally the trees within easy reach of water or roads are taken first. During war pressure we made tremendous inroads on our timber. Throughout the country certain small stands have been by-passed because of physical problems involved."

"Cedar Bench, owned by the Trout Creek Logging Company, is an example. Brad Gallagher's record is none too good. I'm confident that he was black-marketing logs to certain shady millmen who in turn were black-marketing to builders who would pay the price," the judge said. "Proving it is something else. If Gallagher can gain control of Trout Creek Logging Company, he's in a position to make a financial killing."

"It sounds that way," Steve agreed.

"Naturally I'm not influenced by what I surmise or think," Judge Darrow continued, "I consider the evidence before me. Mr. Sheridan, I want to see that timber go to mills who'll sell lumber to builders of small homes. I think you're the man I'm looking for to act as receiver. You have this advantage—you're an outsider, under obligations to no one."

"But I've no woods' experience," Steve argued.

"Your war record suggests, despite a painful lack of detail, you solved many problems either by your own resourcefulness or your ability to pick the right man to do the job," the judge answered. "There's no reason in the world why you should do this, except that it's been my experience that when

there's a particularly difficult job, the right fellow comes along and does it." He grinned.

Steve grinned back. He knew that this shrewd judge was maneuvering him into a challenging deal. "You've been around, Judge Darrow," he observed.

"In my time I've been cowpuncher, miner, deputy sheriff, United States Commissioner in Alaska and several other things," he answered. "I never went to law school. Got it in a frontier law office and passed the bar examination. I think I know men. Well, how about it?"

"I'll take it," Steve said.

"Gallagher may bring in outsiders, unknown men, to help him out. They may get in some good licks before you know who they are," Judge Darrow said. "A man named Margo is sometimes in with him.

"If he strings along with him on this, you'll have your hands full. I've an idea, Margo will weigh all angles, and conclude this deal is too hot to handle." The little dried-up judge grinned again. "I think it will be. Be in court this afternoon, and we'll make this job of yours legal."

THE courtroom was crowded when Steve appeared that afternoon. "Most of the Gallagher faction is here," Margie whispered to Steve. "Hank and Pete excepted, of course."

"I have a brief decision to announce," the judge said. "Steven Sheridan has been appointed receiver of Trout Creek Logging Company as of this date."

"Your Honor," Steve said, rising, "my thought in accepting such an appointment is to put the business on a paying basis in the least possible time. We all know the dire need of lumber. The housing shortage is improving very slowly, and the lack of lumber is one of the reasons. Without logs, the mills can't cut lumber."

"That is correct," the judge said, "proceed."

"There appears to be a trouble-making faction among the stockholders," Steve continued. "As Exhibit A, I direct attention to my battered features. I was mistaken for the previous receiver. I hope that if any of the previous employes, or the stockholders, appear on the company's property, with-

out my express permission, they'll be adjudged in contempt of court."

"That's aimed at me," Gallagher belied, jumping to his feet.

"If the shoe fits, put it on," Steve retorted.

The judge banged his gavel. "The gentlemen will address their remarks to the court," he warned.

"Okay, then," Gallagher roared. "I think it is a hell of a note when a judge appoints an inexperienced man as receiver—"

The gavel came down with a crash. "Mr. Gallagher, you know better than to address this court in so contemptuous a manner. I fine you fifty dollars."

"I've got that in my vest pocket," Gallagher snapped.

"And thirty days in jail," the judge continued. "Have you got that in your vest pocket?"

"No, Your Honor," Gallagher said, "I apologize. I lost my temper and my head."

"And your liberty for thirty days," the judge added grimly, "but in view of your apology I'll restore that. The fine stands."

As Gallagher paid the fine, Steve noticed he carried the fifty dollars in a billfold and not his vest pocket. Judge Darrow turned to Steve who had remained standing throughout the incident. "Mr. Sheridan, you are charged with the responsibility of getting logs, by lawful methods, to the mills, and in a manner that is profitable to the company. If this is not possible, then the company's affairs will be liquidated. You will be a representative of this court. Any-one obstructing your efforts will be guilty of contempt and dealt with accordingly. I want this made clear to all parties."

"Yes, Your Honor," Steve answered. "You've made it clear enough."

WHEN court adjourned, Margie made her way to Judge Darrow. "I can't believe Steve would accept this responsibility so readily. I'm just tickled to death."

"Some bright day, Steve will ask himself, 'How did I get into this deal?' And here's the answer," the judge said, chuckling. "A man who naturally has plenty on the ball, goes to war. Strange problems must be solved, and inexperienced men have to solve them because trained military men are

spread too thin. So the boy solves the problem. The brass hats notice this and naturally cash in. Solving problems becomes a habit. Fellows like Steve take it as a matter of course. Successfully meeting challenge after challenge builds confidence. I doubt if it occurred to Steve that he didn't have to accept. He was footloose and accepted. It was the same after World War I. Fellows who generated momentum, went far."

"Oh, Lord!" Margie exclaimed. "He left the courtroom right behind Gallagher. They may clash."

"Steve realizes that the eyes of a tough sawmill town are on him. Had he lingered, waiting for you, it might have looked like he was ducking under the court's protective wing until the bad boys had gone their several ways," Judge Darrow explained. "He knows, as we know, the opposition will leave no stone unturned to make him look bad and to fail."

"Why did you suspend Gallagher's thirty-day sentence, or isn't that a fair question?"

"I didn't want it said that I was binding the hands of a minority stockholder," Judge Darrow explained. "Later, Gallagher won't be able to say, 'That old bum locked me up. So what could I do to protect my interests?'"

Margie was smiling as she left the courtroom, but her smile vanished when she reached the street. Steve and Gallagher were facing each other, and the latter was saying, "If I can find a sucker, I'll unload my stock, but quick. A damned punk in gum boots, taking over a logging camp. That's a joke, son."

"I'm the sucker you're looking for," Steve said. "What do you want for your stock? I'll pay you what an impartial committee of men say it is worth."

Steve had forgotten his battered features and his desire not to attract attention in the stress of the situation. And for the moment he had forgotten that his original purpose in coming into the country was trout fishing and a vacation. Gallagher's face was a study. He hadn't expected his bellyaching to be regarded as a challenge which was quickly accepted. Slowly his eyes shifted from face to face in the crowd. If they weren't saying it, those gathered were thinking, "The next move is yours, Brad Gallagher."

"Do you know what I think, Sheridan?" Gallagher said softly.

"No," Steve replied, "but I'm all ears. Shoot!"

"I think you're bluffing, and its time you were called. So far you've got by on jaw bone," Gallagher said.

"I've done little talking so far," Steve reminded him. "Mostly I've said *yes*, or *no* to questions or propositions. I'm saying *yes* to yours. Name a fair man and I'll buy your stock at the price he fixes."

"Ollie Walker, the banker is your man, Gallagher," someone in the crowd shouted. A wave of assent followed.

"Oliver Walker is a fair man, Steve," Margie said, stepping to his side. "The bank is across the street."

"Come on, Gallagher, if you're coming," Steve invited. He stalked across the street to the Saw Mill City State Bank, entered, and brought up in front of a brass sign which read, "Oliver Walker, Pres."

Walker was a brisk, pleasant man and one glance was sufficient to convince Steve of his high IQ. "I know the present worth of that stock to the penny," he said. "We are loaning money to some of the smaller stockholders on it. Your stock, Mr. Gallagher, is worth fifteen thousand, seven hundred and fifty dollars. It can drop to ten thousand dollars if continued operation at a loss forces it into liquidation. It can go up—well—forty-five thousand is a reasonable figure. It all depends on management."

"Then, Gallagher," Steve said, "if you'll put up your stock, I'll pay you Mr. Walker's figure. I can have the money here within forty-eight hours."

"It's a deal," Gallagher said. He went over to the safe deposit vault, got his box, opened it and brought the stock to Walker, accepting a receipt.

He left the bank with a brief nod, and a glance black with hate, at Steve.

Griff Margo, a drinking, fighting and occasionally a business partner of Gallagher's, shrugged his shoulders. "You've made several moves in this deal, Brad, and every one of them has been wrong."

"Yeah?" Gallagher retorted. "Okay, smart guy, let's hear 'em."

"The biggest mistake was trying to freeze out the Trout Creek Logging Company

stockholders. You could have pulled down a fat commission, plus dividends by a regular operation. There's one hell of a demand for logs these days. But you had to play whole hog instead of going before the stockholders and demanding, in a nice way, a bonus based on high returns."

"Go on," Gallagher said savagely. "Get it out of your system."

"Next was hiring a couple of mugs like Hank and Pete to beat up Johnny Graham," Griff Margo continued. "You might have known they'd start slugging without making sure."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah," Margo said. "You popped off in Judge Darrow's court. Then had to back down like a whipped dog. The final mistake was sounding off about your stock when Sheridan was around. If the man had any self-respect, he had to make you an offer. You've lost your stock, now."

"Yeah?"

"Get the anger out of your eyes, size up the fellow, and you'll know, or should know he'll pull this mess out of the fire," Margo argued logically. "He's the kind of guy who can do it."

"Nuts," Gallagher snapped. "When I get through with Sheridan Trout Creek stock will be worth the timber and the salvage value of the logging equipment. And who do you suppose is going to walk in and pick up the wreckage? You're looking at him, Mister, you're looking at him."

"I can predict your next move, Brad," Margo said quietly. "You'll want to get in a little dirty work and will be caught at the crossroads. Contempt of court. Jail."

"You're wrong there," Gallagher said. "It'll cost dough, but it'll be worth it. I'm putting Max Cramm on my payroll. He knows logging, he can think up plenty of angles to make Sheridan look foolish, and lastly, he isn't known around here."

"Mister," Griff Margo said, "if you show as much sense the rest of the way in, you may own Trout Creek Logging lock, stock and barrel."

STEVE SHERIDAN'S first act when he took over as receiver was to call in Terry Moran, Margie's brother. He liked him instantly, but he also realized Terry was somewhat on the wild side. He might

work steadily for weeks, then suddenly toss aside everything regardless of consequences to himself and others, and go off on a rip-roaring bust. This probably accounted for the fact that the lion's share of their uncle's stock had gone to Margie when he died.

"Your job, Terry," Steve said, getting down to business, "is woods' boss. Also screen those we have on the payroll and fire anyone who can't be relied on. We don't want any of the Gallagher faction throwing a monkey-wrench into the works."

"That's right." Terry was dark, rugged and good looking enough to get into trouble without half trying.

"Just to get me started on the right foot, Terry, suppose we make a tour of the camp?" Steve suggested.

TERRY was quick to respond, and they started at dawn the following morning. It was raining, and Steve pulled on his rubber boots because he lacked the tin pants and leather calked boots worn by Puget Sound loggers.

Gallagher saw them climbing aboard a logging truck, and he sneered, "Gumboot Logger. Isn't that a laugh?"

"Could be," Margo agreed.

"In a way," Terry said as they drove along, "Uncle Joe was ahead of his time. Originally he was a 'cut and move on' logger. He believed we never could cut all the trees in the woods until he looked at the Pacific one day, and said, 'This is as far as we go.' Then he began thinking of timber as a crop. Second growth was coming up, and he spent a lot of money building fire trails, and otherwise protecting it against fire. We used a lot of that timber in the last war for piling, telegraph poles, and so on. If we work it right, cutting the annual yield, we'll never exhaust our timber resources. That's the present-day school of thought."

"It makes sense to me." Steve could see where fifty and sixty-year-old trees had been cut down, and small fir trees planted in their place. Nature had done a good job of reseeding, and there were trees of various ages covering the bench.

"Uncle Joe didn't leave seed trees intentionally," Terry said. "He never thought of it, though now, of course, seed trees are left. But there were twisted-knotted trees

that wouldn't make good lumber so they were left standing. Their seed did the trick."

They rode several miles through freshly logged land, and finally stopped before a thin stand of trees. Beyond, it seemed to Steve was thin air for some distance, then a virgin forest.

"The thin air marks the Gulch," Terry said, "the forest is Cedar Bench. From the air the Gulch looks like a woman with an hour-glass figure. The Forest Service has a go-devil rig at the narrow point—you get in a box-like deal, supported by a single cable. There's some talk of the Forest Service replacing it with a two-cable foot bridge."

"Why not a suspension bridge heavy enough to drag logs over?" Steve asked.

"That would cost too much," Terry replied. "You'd have to build towers to support the cable and all that. Gallagher was starting that kind of a bridge when he was tossed off of the job. It was his scheme to break the company."

"The trees on Cedar Bench are large and expensive to handle," Margie said. "My guess is that some way must be found to build a road down this, the east bank, across the Gulch, and up the west bank. Crossing Gulch Creek, which runs through the bottomland will be a matter of building a log bridge. The road would probably start up here somewhere and reach bottom somewhere at the Gulch's widest point. All this is just my idea. You'll likely come through with a better one."

As they neared the east end of the cable it began swaying and Terry said, "Someone has beaten us to the go-devil. It means we'll have to haul the box back—an arm-aching job."

The box containing two men dressed in fishing togs, shot downward. As it hit center and began climbing toward the west end, the east end cable snapped at the tree, writhing like a snake as it fell. The box struck a tree-top, glanced, hit a limb, then crashed to the creek bed. A single outcry came from the men, then silence except for the hoofbeats of a startled deer, and the scrambling of a frightened bear. Steve Sheridan, heedless of life and limb, was descending the sheer gulch walls before the deer was out of sight.

Sometimes he grasped small trees to check

his descent. Again he slid short distances. Most of the bank was oozing water and in a few seconds he was smeared with clay.



One man, drenched to his skin, and dazed sat on a sandbar a few feet from the shattered box. The other's body lay over a boulder. Steve knew that he was dead. Somehow, perhaps when the box glanced off of the limb, the survivor had been tossed out to land in the deep pool.

"Better stretch out," Steve advised, "and take it easy. You may have picked up a harder jolt than you think."

"Look after Al," the man muttered. "He's hurt! Or—is he dead?" The man's face, ashen, was beginning to take on color. "Yeah," he added, "Al's dead."

"Sorry," Steve said. "Stretch out here on this grass under the tree and relax. You can do it. I know it's tough."

"The cable broke," the man said bitterly. "Why wasn't it inspected? It broke and killed Al. There's no justice. Al liked to have killed himself working during the war and afterwards. This is the first day of his vacation and he's killed because somebody didn't inspect a damn' cable."

He put his face into his hands and began to sob. Steve let his grief run its full course. It was better in the long run than to dam it up. Margie came a moment later, and Steve demanded impatiently, "Where's Terry? Why doesn't he hurry?"

"Terry started to follow," she answered, "changed his mind and headed for the nearest Forest Service telephone. He knew we'd need an ambulance." She looked at Al's body and shuddered.

"Quick thinking on Terry's part," Steve said. "Stay here with this fellow—"

"Name's Tench," the man said, "George Tench. Somebody didn't inspect the cable and Al died. He died on the first day of his vacation. Just because somebody didn't inspect a damn'—"

"Take it easy, fella," Margie said, dropping beside him. She saw signs of hysteria and wanted to head them off. She talked in a low, soothing tone.

Steve watched a full minute, concluded that she had the situation in hand and pushed through the brush to the cable's end. It had whipped about some, cutting off the tops of small trees and knifing through the brush.

He looked at the wire's end. The strands were ragged. Some of them had broken clean, but there was unmistakable evidence of cutting. "No need of telling George Tench about this—yet," he thought. "Someone reasoned that I would want to take a look at Cedar Bench the first thing. They reasoned, too, that Terry Moran and I would probably make the trip together. Rightly they assumed we'd cross on the cable. They cut the cable deeply enough so that when the strain came, the remaining wires would break."

flected, "but obviously the greatest strain would be on the cable when the low point was reached. When the upward climb started it would be something like a diver kicking down on a springboard. Brad Gallagher is either quite a smart buzzard, or else he knows where he can hire 'em."

Margie had opened one of the packs, found a blanket and spread it over Al's body to shut the scene out of his partner's eyes. "And that," Steve said with self-accusation, "is something I should have remembered to do."

Terry, badly winded, and smeared with muck from a too-swift descent down the bank joined them later. "I reported exactly what had happened to Ranger Dick McDonald," Terry said. "I told him I didn't see how either man could have survived, and he agreed. They're coming in with an ambulance, doctor and stretcher men. He can't understand why the cable parted. It was recently inspected and found okay."

"Let's have a look," Steve said.

"Tracks show you've been here ahead of me," Terry said, picking up the end. "Hmmmm! This was cut! And the reason Sheridan and Moran didn't crash into the gulch is because a couple of guys out on a fishing trip got there ahead of them."

"The enemy reasoned that fishermen wouldn't be out this time of the week," Steve said. "It's murder any way you look at it. Well, there'll be no inspecting Cedar Bench today. And I can't do it tomorrow because I've made appointments. Terry, what's the argument against bulldozing a road down one side of the gulch and up the other to Cedar Bench? The creek is lousy with gravel for roadbed ballast and to fill up the soft spots."

"The smearing we got coming down answers the question. Under the forest floor is clay formation sloping toward the gulch. It picks up the drainage water and spills it in the form of numerous springs," Terry explained. "Cut a road through the bank, and you start slides after the first good rain. Nor can you float logs down the creek. They'd be battered up in the rapids. It'd cost too much to build a road down the stream because there'd be too much rock work."

"So we get back to Gallagher's bridge or your slides?" Steve said.

**H**E WALKED slowly back to Margie. "Perhaps I'm giving the enemy too much credit for careful reasoning," he re-

"That," Terry agreed, "or forget the Cedar Bench stuff until such time as logs are so sky high we can build a bridge, or put in an extensive drainage system."

"We don't want logs to go any higher," Steve insisted. "Lumber is beyond the average service man's reach now in many cases. It's got to go lower."

"I'll go along with you on that," Terry said, "but how? Nature doesn't give a damn whether the ex-service fellows have houses or not. Nature says, 'Here are the trees. Get 'em if you can!'" He finished a cigarette in silence. "What do you think the answer is? I was gambling on the road, hoping to get enough logs over it before slides took it out—hoping, too, it might not cost too much to keep the road open after the slides started."

"Let's walk along the gulch awhile," Steve suggested. "No, I'll go alone. You'd better stay with Margie. George Tench might go to pieces and give her a bad moment. I think he's still suffering from shock."

Steve was gone a half-hour, and when he returned, he was muddier than ever. "Terry, who is the best bulldozer man in this part of the country?" he asked.

"His name is Bulldozer Craig," Terry answered. "He's a partner of an Alaskan miner named No-Shirt McGee. They're very much in the chips, and Craig doesn't have to bulldoze these days, except at some of their mining camp operations. Not much chance of your getting him."

"You can get most anyone if you put it up to them right," Steve answered.

"You're the damnedest optimist I've ever known," Terry exclaimed. His expression plainly indicated that he didn't know whether to regard Steve as a plain chump, or the answer to a prayer.

"Where does Bulldozer hang out when he's in Seattle?" Steve asked.

"The New Washington collects quite a bunch of Alaskans when they're down this way," Terry answered. "I wish you luck. Bulldozer Craig is the Joe Louis of bulldozers. Here come the rangers. We'd better give them a hand."

**T**HREE were several in the party that was cautiously descending the steep bank. Terry identified the sheriff, Tip Crandall;

Ranger Dick McDonald; the coroner; and assistants.

McDonald and Crandall examined the dead man, the shattered box, then Steve showed them the cable end. McDonald's brief glance was sufficient. "Dirty work, Sheriff!" he said wrathfully. "We've a good idea of what is behind all this. Proving it is something else again."

"We'll prove it," the sheriff promised in grim tones, then he called the coroner whose men were shifting Al's remains to a stretcher.

A half hour later, the men began the tough job of climbing out of the gulch. Except at the steepest points the men insisted that George Tench remain a stretcher case. Then they watched him carefully, and helped him.

"There'll be an inquest tomorrow afternoon," the coroner announced. "That'll give you a chance to change your appointments, Sheridan, and get in a few licks at the office. Sorry that I have to do this, just as you are getting started here, but you're lucky to be keeping appointments."

Steve, Margie and Terry turned in dog tired that night but it was long before the former could sleep. Gallagher, through his men, had thrown the first punch. It was intended as a knockout, and it had missed by a trick of fate. Steve hoped that he could classify potential enemies before they swung again.

Fortified by a big breakfast he arrived at the office ahead of the force. A wire basket on the company president's desk was piled high. He read the telegrams first. They were from sawmill operators asking for logs. "Probably don't expect to get them," he mused, "but deep down inside they believe in Santa Claus."

Someone came to the counter in the outer office and Steve went out and asked, "Something I can do for you?"

"I'm a logger. I know every angle of the game, even if I do admit it." The man grinned disarmingly. "My name is Max Cramm. Can you use me on one condition?"

"What's the condition?"

"I want to be sure any outfit I work for is sending logs to the right place," Max Cramm said.

"And the right place?"

"Mills that see that the ex-service men get a crack at the lumber," Cramm answered. "Fair enough?" Again a warm, disarming grin.

"Show up tomorrow morning," Steve answered, "and if you can deliver the goods you'll have a job as long as you want it."

"Thanks," Cramm said. He left the office and smiled—a cold, hard smile this time. "That was easy."

**H**E SAUNTERED over to the Loggers' Rest, an old-time saloon now operating under a tavern license. Its backbar mirror had been replaced many times—due to flying bottles in tough and tumble brawls. Its huge paintings of lovely ladies in the nude had looked down on epic fights. Stands of timber, sawmills and log rafts had changed hands at its backroom poker tables.

Its bartenders were tight-lipped men who might have their own ideas on who was behind the current dirty work abroad in big timber, but they never voiced their conclusions. It was a matter of policy, and it was safer.

When Max Cramm downed a drink and sauntered into the back room, the bartender on duty was inwardly interested. Brad Gallagher had preceded him by five minutes.

Cramm sat down to a table and began shuffling a soiled deck of cards. "There was nothing to it, Brad," he said, "I'm on the payroll. You got any others planted in Sheridan's outfit?"

"Not yet," Gallagher answered, "but they'll be along. I'll let you know."

"Let me know who they are," Cramm said in a clipped, business-like voice. "But don't mention me to them. That's the way I operate. There's one man you haven't mentioned—the one who worked on the wire cable; the one the coroner and sheriff are so interested in finding."

"I didn't mention him," Gallagher said evenly. "I don't know who he is. That's the way I want it."

"I think you're lying," Cramm said confidently. "But we'll skip it."

There was no resentment on Gallagher's part. "You're a cool proposition, Cramm," he said. "That's why I hired you. Here's a down payment. The rest will be ready when the job's done. Now there may be

other accidents. You'll be warned in plenty of time so you'll be in the clear."

"Going to the inquest?"

"Everybody who can get away will be there," Gallagher said. "To stay away would look queer. I'll be there."

"S'long," Cramm said. On the way out he stopped for another drink. "Not many around this early in the day," he observed.

"Yeah, it's kinda quiet," the bartender said, "kinda quiet."

**B**ACK at the office, Steve was facing new, but not surprising problems. Supply men were anxious to sell him the items needed in the logging operation, but they were wary of the company's future, and each deal was conditioned on cash on the barrelhead. They didn't propose to be paid ten or fifteen percent on the dollar at some future time when the assets were sold.

Steve was glad when it was time to report for the inquest. It was a break in the sustained pressure that had started when Cramm called.

He was asked if it were generally known that he was planning to use the cable to reach the Cedar Bench. "I mentioned it to no one," he answered, "but it was logical that a receiver would take the first opportunity to check on Cedar Bench. Anyone out to get a receiver would be a fool to believe otherwise. I doubt very much if we are dealing with fools."

The jury listened attentively to the other witnesses. George Tench attracted the most interest. He had recovered from his experience, and described the sensation of falling. "Of course," he concluded, "I haven't the slightest desire to go ahead with a vacation Al and I had planned together. If I were a detective, I'd go to work on this case independently, and I wouldn't stop until the guilty man or men were convicted." He was mild-mannered in appearance, but his voice in the effort he made at self-control, betrayed his cold anger. He was a peace-loving man thoroughly aroused.

The verdict was a foregone conclusion—death at the hands of a party or parties then unknown.

Steve returned to the office to find two sawmill operators glaring at each other. "I'm Kelso," one said, "and I'm a man of few words. You're going to need money to

operate. You're going to have a hard time to get it. I'm ready with spot cash for every log you can deliver in the bay."

"That's a generous offer," his rival sneered. "Who wouldn't be? Convince me, Sheridan, that you can dump Cedar Bench logs into the bay and I'll advance you money from time to time. I'm Adams."

"I'll advance you money on what you haven't cut this side of the Gulch," Kelso offered.

"We aren't going to cut much more of that," Steve said. "Badly as we need it, the Forest Service boys tell me it should be left for reseeding a cut-over area. We must think of coming generations."

"I'm sick of that tripe," Kelso roared. "By the time seedlings could grow to saw logs, some kind of plastic will be invented and people won't need wood for houses or anything else."

"If either of you gentlemen will agree to deliver lumber from Trout Creek Logging Company logs to contractors building homes for ex-service men *at a reasonable price*," Steve said, "I'll put you at the top of the list."

"Put the name, Adams, at the top," Adams said. "Now I won't bother you until you send for me. We've made a deal. Here's my hand."

Steve shook Adams' hand. Unless his judgment of character had failed him, Adams was one of the men he was looking for. When he had a breathing spell Steve sent for Max Cramm. "Do you know anything about cruising timber? I want to get a line on what we've got on Cedar Bench. I mean the stuff that can be handled under adverse conditions. Will you go out with Terry Moran and me?"

"I'm your man," Cramm answered.

"Tomorrow morning, then, at six o'clock," Steve said. "We'll drive out to the cable tree and descend there. It's as good a point as we can find."

Cramm was on hand at the appointed time. He had turned on his warmest personality for the occasion, and Terry liked him immediately. As they drew near the point of descent, they smelled campfire smoke coming up from the gulch. "Wonder who's down there?" Terry observed. "That stream's closed to fishing. We'll soon find out."

As they reached the camp George Tench came out to meet them. "I'm not fishing" he said. "Al's watch, a family heirloom, was lost in the crash. I can't change my vacation time, so I thought I might as well hunt for the watch. It'll keep me out in the open." He indicated a bucket, shovel and screen. "Bedrock is only a foot down and it shouldn't take me long to sift the sand around the boulder."

"Good luck," Steve said, and continued on. They climbed a steep slope and moved slowly over an almost level bench. The forest rot was springy under their feet, and there was a hush broken only by the distant song of the stream flowing through the gulch.

Steve kicked away the forest rot and found good soil mixed with gravel beneath. "No trouble to build a logging road over here," he said. "This stuff, with a little ballasting, will support a loaded truck."

"I suppose you want number one stuff, Mr. Sheridan?" Cramm said. "No sense in hauling second grade stuff until you have to."

"That's right," Steve said. He left Cramm to his cruising while Terry showed him the stand. It wasn't large. A large stand might have justified building a bridge. But this was fine timber. The older trees were overripe and should have been logged years ago, but the medium-age stuff was prime.

When they reached the boundary they worked toward the bluff and followed it back searching for the logical point for a road. Even to a die-hard like Steve the prospect was bleak. "This fellow, Bulldozer Craig, that you mentioned," Steve said, "interests me. My guess is, being an expert, he might have some ideas."

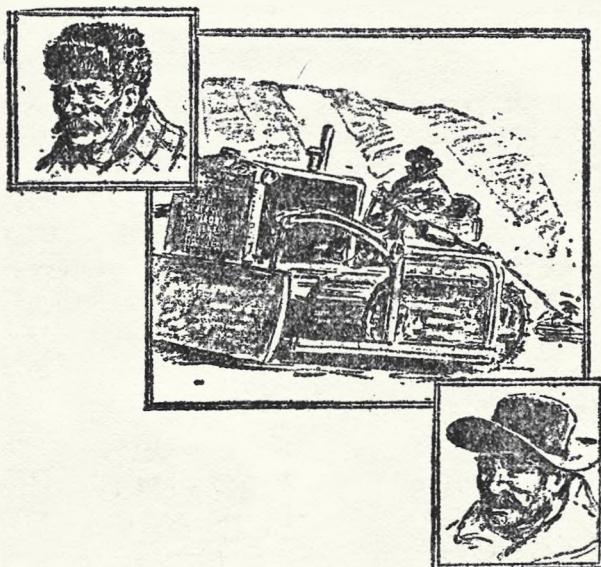
"You don't take no for an answer," Terry said, half annoyed but half in admiration. "You can try your luck, but I'll bet you ten to one that you don't get to first base."

"I'm knocking off tomorrow," Steve said, "to settle the point. Well, here's Max Cramm. He seems to know his business."

Cramm spilled enthusiasm all over the place. "Here are the figures for the same cruise I just made. Mr. Sheridan, there's enough lumber in this stand to build a small-sized town. I've never seen the like of it. How do you propose to operate?"

"There are several points along that line that aren't settled yet," Steve said grimly. He was getting tired of making that statement. "You get the men and equipment ready. We're going to start falling and bucking next week. We'd look damned silly with a road and no logs."

**M**ISTER BULLDOZER CRAIG of Alaska was enjoying his Seattle visit. His partner, No-Shirt McGee was up North and in no need of Bulldozer's peculiar talents. He had dropped around to several construction jobs, gossiped with old friends who were bulldozing earth, and watched their technique with a critical eye. He had gone down to Seattle's famed Skidroad and dug up several friends who were down on their luck. He had staked them, at the same time giving them solemn lectures on the evil of gambling and strong drink when you couldn't afford it.



He had been hopeful of getting into a rough-and-tumble fight. It would have to be for a just cause, of course, because Bulldozer wasn't a trouble-hunter by nature. Usually there were just causes kicking around, just waiting to be picked up by a champion, but he had found none.

When he returned to the hotel and the telephone girl informed him that a Mr. Steve Sheridan had called twice he growled, "Somebody with something to sell me I suppose. Well, I won't buy it. I'm on a vacation and I won't be bothered by fly-by-night schemes."

An hour later Mr. Sheridan was in the lobby, using the house phone. "I am informed that you can do anything with a

bulldozer any other man can do," the voice said. "That, Mr. Craig, I doubt."

"Hey, say that again!" Bulldozer belled, unable to believe his ears. He listened. No doubt of it, Mr. Sheridan was doubting his skill. "Say, if you want your ears knocked down come up to my room." Bulldozer awaited an answer and got it. Mr. Sheridan said that he would be right up.

Bulldozer took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, rubbed his fist, then thoughtfully opened the door so that Sheridan wouldn't be delayed by knocking.

A moment later, Steve was framed by the doorway and was saying, "Mr. Bulldozer Craig?"

"That's my maiden name," Bulldozer answered. He noticed immediately signs of fighting on Steve's face. He assumed that Steve went around sticking his neck out and his first impulse was to dislike him. Then he noticed that Steve looked very tired, as if he had carried a load for a long time and needed a rest.

Instead of swinging on Steve he said, "Sheridan, have a chair and a drink?"

"I'll take both," Steve said.

Bulldozer put a couple of jiggers in each glass. "Fizz water, ginger ale, muskeg water or straight?" he asked. "Muskeg being the Alaskan name for tap, well or creek water." Steve accepted water.

They drank slowly, sizing each other up and finding the result satisfactory. "How this all came about," Steve explained, "is unusual. It began when a couple of guys beat me up, interrupting a fishing trip."

Steve gave the complete picture. "I said," he concluded, "that no bulldozer jockey in the world could get into the canyon right side up, let alone get out again. Terry Moran said that you could, and the upshot of it was I'm here to tell you that you can't."

"Well, I can," Bulldozer said flatly. He was reckless when his pride was involved. "You have a regulation bulldozer on the brink of the gulch Saturday morning, and I'll be there. Now let's have another drink." They finished it, shook hands, and Steve returned to Saw Mill City.

Long after Steve had gone Bulldozer suddenly remarked to himself, "That cuss sold me a bill of goods. He must have known I ain't interested in a job, or taking on a road-

grading contract, so he suckered me." He got up, tramped up and down the room, swearing a blue streak, then suddenly his sense of humor got the upper hand and he roared with laughter. "That cuss is okay!" he exclaimed.

When Bulldozer arrived at Saw Mill City, Steve was waiting for him. "Margie and Terry Moran insist that you stop with them," Steve said. "And by the way, whatever is right, I'll pay you."

"We'll see what's done first," Bulldozer answered.

HE WAS cheerful and confident when he dressed the next morning. He had yet to see the hill that couldn't be licked some way or another. He didn't grow serious until he looked into the gulch. He saw George Tench's campfire on the stream bank, then he looked at Cedar Bench. "A lot of houses growing over there," he said. "Hmmm!" He spent an hour studying the descent. "Sheridan, you need a bulldozer to build a road, logging equipment and a truck on Cedar Bench, is that it?"

"That's right," Steve answered. "If we had them there, we could supply fuel, men and grub by the cable the Forest Service is going to put back up next week."

"Bring your truck and enough wire rope," Bulldozer said, "and we'll see what can be done."

Terry brought the truck and parked it near the bulldozer, Steve had supplied according to instructions. Bulldozer secured one end of the wire to the truck and the other to the bulldozer. Then he got aboard the latter machine and drove it slowly into the woods, taking up the slack. "Here's what I'm going to try to do," he explained, "ease the truck slowly down to the gulch floor. Who'll take the wheel?"

"I'll take it," Steve answered. Nearly a hundred rangers, loggers and people from town had gathered to witness whatever was in the cards. Until that moment Steve had been a doubtful quantity in the eyes of most, particularly the loggers. Now they were paying tribute to his nerve, not by words or applause, but by their attitude of respect and admiration.

Max Cramm saw it, and put it down as Steve's round in this fight. If something went wrong, it would be just too bad for

Steve, and Max Cramm regretted that he hadn't anticipated this particular action and taken measure to insure that something did go wrong.

Steve started the motor, and Terry took up a signal man's position on the gulch brink. In low gear he drove to the edge, felt the wire rope tighten—felt the front wheels sink downward. The rear wheels cleared the rim and now the truck was held from a plunge by the wire cable.

Slowly the bulldozer now moved toward the brink. The truck's front wheels flattened small trees and brush. By steering, Steve managed to avoid the few larger trees growing on the bank, and the boulders. But mostly it was a matter of letting the truck's weight slug through ooze, shale and brush.

He knew that the crowd was breathlessly watching every move, but he dare not look over his shoulder. He could see George Tench, hands on hips, gazing upward. Steve gave a triumphant blast of the horn as the truck leveled out. He heard the cable whipping about behind him as those above cut it loose from the bulldozer. He drove on over the grassy bottom to a point where the stream could be forded, then stopped.

Bulldozer was following, his treads slipping, dislodging muck and rocks, but in the end holding. Once he got into a jackpot as sliding muck revealed several boulders that would hang up the treads. He backed up, clawed along the ragged edge of nothing for several yards, then continued the descent. He drew up beside Steve, grinning. "The trouble is in a deal like this, you can't hear the applause."

"You're all they said you were," Steve said admiringly.

"Don't be too sure about that," Bulldozer answered, "we aren't on Cedar Bench yet." He picked up the wire rope end. "Now we reverse the deal. One end goes on the front of the truck, the other the bulldozer's tail end."

"You don't think you can tow the truck to the top?" Steve exclaimed.

"Either that," Bulldozer answered, "or something will bust."

The bulldozer crawled over the ford, and Steve followed with the truck. Twice it looked as if he'd bog down, but each time he nursed it safely through. It was obviously the bottom wouldn't support a loaded truck.

Bulldozer began the ascent by bellowing, "Look out below!"

He wasn't fooling. As the treads bit in and slipped, then caught, loose rocks were kicked clear to come tumbling down the slope. Steve watched the machine slash a path through an alder thicket. Some were broken, some torn out by the roots, and others were laid flat to slowly lift their tops in a bewildered manner as if wondering what had hit them.

Bulldozer edged along a shelf and Steve shouted a warning. He could see the muck ten feet below squirting out like mush under the pressure. Bulldozer must have sensed it, because he began backing. A split second before the dirt gave way completely he jumped and grabbed the nearest alder. The machine seemed to drop from under his feet. It turned over twice and brought up against a stump. Bulldozer scrambled down and shut off the spluttering motor.

THE watchers on the gulch's rim were too far away to be heard but Steve knew they had sighed dejectedly. "Steve," Bulldozer sharply demanded, "are you downhearted?"

"Hell, no!" Steve answered. "This crack-up is but a minor episode between those trees and folks living in new houses."

"The best thing that ever happened to Trout Creek Logging Company was when those mugs beat you up," Bulldozer said. "The company got a guy people like to team-up with. Now let's check the damage. It's going to take some doing to get that bulldozer unhung from that stump."

Steve went below the stump and began moving muck. He scraped away with a stick and in a few minutes the muck began sliding. The weight of the bulldozer pulled the remaining roots free and the big machine slid several yards to a stop, grinding the stump into the muck.

Bulldozer picked up a small fir that had been torn out. Using it as a lever, he pried the bashed-in cab into something like its former shape, then he started the motor. He made several tests, then started up the slope again.

This time he made it, leaving numerous small muck slides in his wake and loosening hundreds of small rocks. A moment after the bulldozer disappeared over the rim, he

bellowed down, "All set? If so, hang on, but be ready to jump. If the cable breaks the truck will go end over end."

"Okay!" Steve yelled. Bulldozer took up the slack and began dragging the truck up the slope. There must have been times when the treads almost slipped, because progress became a crawl that was hardly visible. Most of the time the truck was at a forty-five degree angle, and Steve's weight was on his back against the cushions. The front wheels touched lightly, and sometimes left the ground only to be yanked back again by the whipping cable. It was cutting a trench on the gulch rim. The front wheels rolled over the top and the truck wallowed to a stop twenty yards beyond.

Bulldozer released the cable, lowered the big blade and came back, bulldozing a road of sorts. "Now," he said, "drive to the end of the road and I'll follow."

He followed, pushing up an embankment against the rear wheels. "Nobody out to do you dirt, can start the motor and put her into the gulch."

"How about bulldozing a circle around this area," Steve suggested, "so we'll have footprints in case someone fools around?"

"Good idea," Bulldozer agreed. When the job was finished he said, "Here's the ignition key."

"How much do I owe you to date?"

"Your logs are going into lumber for new homes, aren't they?"

"Yeah."

"Then you don't owe me a dime," Bulldozer answered. "I never realized how many young couples couldn't get married and start housekeeping until a friend of mine had to buy an old railroad depot, lower down on this same Trout Creek—where they got the new dam. If you need any more help, just squawk."

"I'll squawk," Steve answered. "Here's my plan. Start logging immediately, and build up cold decks of logs at a point where the planned road will start down. Build the road this summer when the seepage is at a minimum. After that, charter every logging truck in the region and keep 'em moving."

"A pious idea," Bulldozer agreed. "If you build now, you'll be fighting slides all summer long. It'll cost like hell, and you'll get no benefit from it. And don't forget, in slide areas, a few sticks of powder touched

off in the tight place, could start one hell of an avalanche of mud."

It was a long, tough trip into the gulch and out again, but most of the spectators had remained to congratulate Bulldozer. "I've been around," Max Cramm said, "but I've never seen the equal of that. I'll bet that you could bulldoze a road that would stand up, slides or no slides."

"I've got a yen to try it when the time comes," Bulldozer answered. He saw several sawmill men in the crowd, and in the hope of cheering them up he said, "Tell your customers Cedar Bench logs will be going into houses before the fall rains come."

Margie's handclasp was warm and her smile came right from the heart. "Thank you so much, Mr. Craig," she said.

"Just a Boy Scout," Bulldozer said cheerfully. Inwardly he thought, "If she's going to be underfoot, damned if I don't think I'll hang around. No-Shirt has told me a dozen times that I should marry and settle down. The trouble is, when I come across a girl she's already taken." He twisted his head slightly for a look at her engagement ring finger. It was bare.

He rode back to town feeling like a million dollars, and only business engagements in Seattle kept him from staying over.

**T**WO unseen observers had watched Bulldozer's feat—Hank Grogan and Pete McCoy. "I hope that bulldozer driver don't hang around long," Pete growled. "Any man who'll do what he done, will stop at nothin'."

"And don't forget Steve Sheridan was at the truck wheel on the down and up trips," Hank reminded him. "Well, we know our next move—run the truck over a cliff and hear her hit the gulch floor."

Brad Gallagher, playing for big stakes, had laid his groundwork carefully. His first thought was to so arrange matters that he could not be incriminated if things went wrong. Secondly, like a good general, he had considered the possibility of retreat and had prepared positions.

One of them was near Granite Knob, a Forest Service lookout station. It was well away from the nearest trail, and hikers were not likely to stumble onto it. Anyone ambitious enough to climb that high would go

on to the station and talk to the lookout. An outcropping below the station effectively concealed the spot from the lookout. And unless a man stood in plain sight, and someone picked him up with binoculars from the lower country, he was not likely to be seen.

Here Gallagher had stocked a cave with grub, sleeping bags and cooking equipment. Under orders never to cook in the daytime there was little danger of smoke betraying his men. At night, rocks curtained the campfire. He provided the retreat with a battery radio and small wind charger.

And here Hank Grogan had holed up with Pete McCoy after beating up Steve Sheridan. They had left the place but once—to hack the Forest Service cable spanning the gulch. By radio they had learned that a man had been killed—the wrong man. Twice they had failed to get Steve. Getting him was now an obsession with them. In the meantime they weren't forgetting to deliver any blow, no matter how small, that would bring failure to Judge Darrow's receiver.

The truck, delivered at such risk and effort, was right down their alley. Shortly before darkness they made their way to a small stream. They waded it, leaving no tracks, until a Forest Service bridge spanned the stream, then they left it, taking to the trail which was constantly used by game and sundry humans.

**T**HEY moved slowly, in darkness, knowing the lawful men would light the way with flashlights and occasionally break the silence with snatches of conversation.

"Here's the truck," Grogan said. A moment later he added savagely, "They bulldozed a ridge behind it. Smart guys, huh? Okay, a hole in the gas tank, and a match will turn the trick. And once those big rubber tires start burning we'll have a fire that'll take care of the truck for good. Suppose we shove the bulldozer against the truck and get it, too."

"No chance," Pete McCoy said a few minutes later. "They took the key with 'em. Let's get the truck."

He knocked a hole in the fuel tank with a rock, stood back, lit a match and was in the act of tossing it into the liquid when flame stabbed from the nearest thicket, a shotgun roared, and Pete dropped. Hank

Grogan jumped like a startled deer, almost fell, but managed to keep his feet. He ran for the nearest tree, putting it between his husky body and the shotgun. He was expecting a second barrel to let go any moment.

He heard footsteps pounding behind him, and drew his automatic pistol. A pistol has little chance with a shotgun at close quarters but he shot over his shoulder, and Pete bellowed, "It's me, you damned fool!"

Three hundred yards beyond, they stopped. "You bad hit?" Hank asked. "I got a few scattered pellets in my legs."

"My legs are full of 'em from the hips down," Pete replied. "If the cuss had shot a little higher he'd've got me in the belly. Who do you suppose it is?"

"That damned Sheridan," Hank answered. "He's a snake in the grass. He didn't say, stick 'em up and give us a chance, he just blasted. He's a dirty fighter, he didn't warn and give us a chance to fight back. He just—blasted." He suddenly warned, "Shhhh. He might be sneakin' up on us again."

They listened, but heard nothing. Quietly, and trying desperately—oh so desperately—to make no sound they circled the area and began working back to their hideout. Finally Pete said, "I can't take no more of this. I'm losin' blood all the time. My legs are tremblin' more and more."

"You gotta keep goin'," Hank insisted, "you just gotta."

STEVE got up early to drive Bulldozer Craig to the bus. He found Margie preparing breakfast. Bulldozer beamed. He liked nothing better than home cooking, just so long as it wasn't the home cooking of No-Shirt McGee and himself. Just as they sat down to ham and eggs, with plenty of fried potatoes and flapjacks, the telephone rang.

"I'll get it," Steve said. He was back in a minute, badly worried. "That was George Tench. He's been screening gravel, trying to find some of his partner's belongings. He reported that he heard a shotgun blast last night on Cedar Bench. I think I'll take a quick run over that way. Margie will you drive Bulldozer to the bus?"

"Of course," she answered.

"I'd sure like to stick around today and

see what kind of hell's going on," Bulldozer said. "You know, Steve, it's been my experience that the quickest way to grab the monkey is to force him into pulling his own chestnuts out of the fire, by rounding up his stooges."

"Catch the little fellow and force the big guy to do his own dirty work," Steve said. He bolted his breakfast and was off. Max Cramm hailed him as he drove through town. It was Max Cramm's business to watch Steve closely. "What's up? Do you need me?"

"Yeah, come along," Steve answered.

The Forest Service gang was already at work on the cable when they arrived at the Gulch. Smoke came lazily from George Tench's campfire below them. There was a faint odor of bacon and coffee.

They dropped down the bluff, Steve's gumboots slicing through the muck that was nearly hip deep at times. "Why don't you get regular logging boots?" Max asked.

"Haven't had time to break 'em in," Steve answered. "Besides, muck goes over boot tops."

George Tench met them. The man could supply no details, he said, except that he distinctly heard a shot. Steve led the way to the top, following the trail left by the bulldozer. "I smell gasoline," he panted. "Light no matches."

They stopped near the truck and the evidence was clear—two sets of footprints leading to the truck. A rock; a broken fuel tank; the knee marks where someone had gone down; widely spaced prints proving the two men had left on the dead run; perforated leaves. "The leaves prove that all the shots didn't find their mark," Cram said. "Those guys sure took off. Now who do you suppose laid in wait for the pair and dusted them with shot?" He looked at Steve for the answer.

Steve didn't have the answer and he said so in a convincing manner. "I should have left a guard," he admitted, "but I didn't think anyone would be fool enough to take a chance on tampering with the truck. When I find our unknown friend, I'm going to put him on the payroll. In the meantime, let's follow these tracks a ways."

Cramm was worried. Stung, possibly badly wounded, the men had made no effort to cover their tracks. "The damned fools

were in a panic," he thought, "and Sheridan is turning into a regular bloodhound."

Later, he breathed with relief because the pair had made a belated attempt to cover their escape by taking to a creek. His relief was of short duration. In the darkness the men had stumbled and left faint blood smears on overhanging branches.

"Here's where they came out," Steve said. "One of 'em is weakening. Look! His steps are shorter, and his toes drag—he keeps stumbling. Whenever he falls, he leaves a blood smear."

"He sure does," Cramm said softly. "He sure does!" A moment later he picked up a rock that was round and fitted perfectly in his palm. He swung it sharply and struck Steve behind the ear. Steve dropped and rolled into the stream. "Out!" Cramm said. "Out like a light! Now let's think this over. I should drown him. And yet—a lot of men saw me come in here with Sheridan. He hasn't suspected me, so when he said he didn't know who fired the shot he was telling the truth. Okay, somebody that none of us figured on is setting in on the game. Who can it be? This is no time for riddles. Maybe he saw me hit Sheridan. If not, maybe he'll spot me finishing the cuss. Not so good." He dragged Steve to the nearest gravel bar, then removed one of his boots.

He filled the boot with water and sluiced off the blood stains on the wet brush. A hundred yards upstream he noticed that a single set of boot prints were visible in the sand. "One man carrying the other," Cramm said. "The tracks are deep. Here's where he left the stream for the last time."

He began sluicing again, sending the water in gentle waves, so that it would look as if the stream had risen recently and left clean, undisturbed sand. It was a good piece of work, and he returned to Steve with confidence. He removed Steve's other boot and set about reviving him. After a long time Steve opened his eyes, then closed them again. Perhaps ten minutes later he opened them once more. "What happened, Cramm?" he asked.

"You slipped on a mossy rock," Cramm answered, "and cracked your head in the fall. Those damned gumboots filled in the pool and you came close to drowning. They had you anchored and the current was swing-

ing your body toward deep water. I was close enough to haul you out."

"I've got a hell of a headache," Steve said, "but I can see clearly enough, so there's probably no skull fracture."

"What do you want me to do? Go get help?"

"I'll rest a while, and start back," Steve answered. "Stick around and see that I don't fall again."

Later he pulled on his boots and walked slowly to the Gulch. He sat down several times, and rested a good hour at Tench's camp, watching him screen sand. Tench said, "I've got to go into town for grub. I'll help you out of the Gulch. Cramm can take one arm, and I the other."

THEY helped him to the top and into Tench's car. He drove Steve and Max Cramm to town. "Stop at the sheriff's office," Steve said, "I want to make a report."

The three went into Sheriff Crandall's office and made the report, while a deputy took notes. "And you've no idea who fired the shotgun that drove off the two men?"

"I haven't the remotest idea," Steve said. "But this I do know—keeping the enemy at bay and trying to lick the Gulch is a three-man job, and I'm only a one-man guy. I wish the unknown who is helping me would make contact so that we could work together. Broadcast it around, Sheriff, and perhaps he'll reveal himself. It's a cinch that he knows how to work under cover."

"He isn't one of my men," the sheriff declared.

"If you don't need me any more, Mr. Sheridan," Cramm said, "I think I'll wash up. I hope you get rid of those damned gumboots. I don't want to lose my boss."

Steve grinned and Cramm went to his quarters, a small room in a cheap hotel near what answered for Saw Mill City's Skidroad. He changed clothes, went to a pay telephone and called Brad Gallagher. "You got time to talk?" It was Cramm's trick of asking Gallagher if it were safe to talk.

"I'm pretty busy right now," Gallagher answered. "Call me later, if it's important."

Gallagher's offhand reply would have lulled the most suspicious of men. He knew that things were critical or Cramm wouldn't have called him. He knew, too,

that Cramm would go directly to his room and wait.

Gallagher appeared in a half hour. "We can talk," Cramm said. "I've checked. The rooms on both sides are empty." He made a detailed report of what had happened.

"Grogan and McCoy tried to fire the truck," Gallagher said. "I wonder if either was hurt bad?"

"I don't think so. Light flesh wounds I'd say. Nobody knows who done it," Cramm said. "Sheridan don't know. He really don't. I'm sure of that."

"You should've finished him when you had the chance," Gallagher said. "You could've pulled out without being caught."

"The hell with that," Cramm said. "I've never yet killed a man. Maybe I'm yellow. I don't know. But when I do, I'll make sure they can't hang it on me. I think we've raised enough hell to date."

"You do, eh?" Gallagher sneered.

"Yeah, I do. Everybody's on his toes looking for clues," Cramm argued. "What you want is the Trout Creek Logging Company. Right?" Gallagher nodded. "Piling up cold decks of number one logs on Cedar Bench ain't going to pay dividends. Right?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"And it'll eat right into their reserve funds. It'll put the receiver in wrong. Judge Darrow will finally order assets sold to the highest bidder, so you get everything including the cold decks. Right?"

"Yeah," Gallagher said.

"Then let's ease up. I'll log like hell. When their guard is down and we know where they're weak, we'll hit 'em with all we've got," Cramm concluded. "Though how you're going to get those logs off'n the bench and into the bay is more than I know." He was thoughtful a moment. "Still, if you get the whole works cheap enough and peddle the logs in the black market, you could build a cable suspension bridge and snake across one log at a time."

"Leave that problem to me," Gallagher suggested. "Get up there on the bench and start logging. Start logging—like hell."

STEVE SHERIDAN was looking for the gimmick. There was a trick, or gimmick in this deal somewhere. Things were running too smoothly. The new cable bridge had been completed and supplies were going

over to the Bench in a steady stream. It meant back packing, with the men well spaced so too great a load would not be at one point. Some of the heavier machinery had to be dismantled and the parts moved by wheel barrow.

He watched Cramm climb a tree and top it to serve as part of the loading gear. He rigged it with guy lines, then cut it at the base so that the top could be tilted a point some distance beyond center. Logs could then be lifted and a truck backed under them without the tree interfering. It was forest work at its best.

Terry Moran was everywhere that he was needed, but Steve noticed that he never gave Cramm orders. There was no necessity of it. He not only taught Terry several tricks, but gave Steve himself a short course in that particular type of logging.

The bulldozer supplied the loading power, and as soon as the truck was loaded it would wallow its way over the moist roads to a point above the Gulch where the logs were piled up. Nightly the crew crossed the cable bridge to the portable bunkhouses bulldozers had dragged up. Here they ate and slept, while down below the patient Tench sifted sand.

Margie was waiting for Steve one night. "I'm kidnaping you," she said.

"Well, don't take me across a state line or you'll have the FBI on your trail," he warned. "What's the deal?"

"You're driving yourself too hard," she said. "You're taking a week-end off and we're going trout fishing with Mr. and Mrs. Staley, very old friends."

"I'd like to," he answered, "but a receiver should stay on the job. Who is going to receive when the receiver isn't receiving?"

"Very corny," she answered. "It is a poor receiver, if you ask me, who can't take a few days off. Or do you imagine yourself indispensable? I know that is cruel, and I don't want to treat you cruelly, Steve, because Terry and I are very fond of you, but surely you've picked the right man for every job by this time?"

"I suppose I have," he admitted. "I'd sure like to go fishing. That's what I came here for." He smiled and began shaking his head.

"What is the matter, don't you trust your crew? Isn't Cramm competent?"

"There's no quarrel with Cramm's work," Steve admitted. "Men who know say they've never seen his equal in the woods. As for the crew, I trust every man but one. I've an idea that I might sneak off for a few days." He gazed intently at her. She had grown on him with each passing day. He liked her common sense, her calmness and courage. And he had never known a more attractive girl. She turned heads, and it was nice to be seen with a girl who turned heads.

"Find arguments in favor of going, instead of staying on the job," she urged. "Just say, 'Margie is a very wise girl. Margie advises me to go. Margie knows best.'"

"Aw hell," he laughed, "you've talked me into it. It's a date. When do we leave?"

"Friday morning. It's a weekend affair. All you have to do is be ready. I'll take care of details," she promised.

Thursday evening the telephone rang and Terry said, "Margie some man wants Steve."

"Tell him to go jump into the bay," Margie answered. "It's just some darned thing that's come up to spoil this weekend. Every time that poor fellow wants to rest fate says, 'Oh no you don't.'"

Terry returned to the offending telephone. "Who is it, please? Oh! I'll tell him. He'll be right over."

"Now why did you promise anything like that?" Margie demanded.

"Because, darling sister, the guy you wanted to go jump into the bay is Judge Darrow," he replied.

"There goes the weekend," she moaned, then called up to Steve.

"May be I'm in contempt of court," Steve grumbled. "It's a cinch I will be unless I respond. Listen, call Bulldozer Craig. I think he's back from a quick trip to Alaska. He'll be tickled to death to weekend with the Staleys and you."

Steve hurried over to Judge Darrow's home and found His Honor spluttering. "A confounded fellow telephoned me and said if I wanted to jail Hank Grogan and Pete McCoy for contempt of court, I'd find them holed up below Granite Knob. The cuss refused to give his name, damn him. Of course I want to jail them. Now, Steve, I've watched you carefully. You're cool-headed. Take a trusted man from the sheriff's office, pick up two or three others, and

arrest those fellows. It is likely they'll watch your approach, so you'll have to use strategy, my boy. Good luck."

"Keep this strictly under your hat, Your Honor," Steve said. "Gallagher's quiet, and so are his men, but all hell might break loose if they knew what is up. I don't want hell to break loose. We are getting out logs."

STEVE left that night, with two deputies, and instead of crossing on the narrow cable bridge, visible to anyone who might be watching, descended the bank to Tench's camp. "Want to join a posse?" he asked. "We're going to pick up a couple of men. We can use a fourth?"

"No, thank you," Tench answered, "I'm afraid I wouldn't be of much use. I'm by nature a man of peace. Through violence, I lost my best friend. If you don't mind, I'll stay here with my sand sifting and keep out of trouble."

"Just thought I'd ask," Steve said pleasantly. "Good night."

"Yellow as an egg yolk," a deputy growled.

Steve led the way up to Cedar Bench, and the going was tougher than usual because they were in the gloom of night. A deputy who knew the country led them over the Granite Knob trail to a small creek. "Now if they're under the Knob," he said, "this is about where we turn off. As I remember, there's a game trail meandering over that way."

"They'll be listening," Steve said, "so let's take this easy."



"That's my idea," the deputy said. "It might be a good idea to wait until morning and get the drop on 'em when they come out for water."

Ten minutes later Steve stopped him. "Listen!" A radio voice was saying, "Names make news and so did these—"

"That's the tail end of a newscast," the deputy whispered.

"They're listening," Steve said. "Let's get 'em!"

A faint glow was visible behind a large slab of rock that had fallen in front of the cave mouth. Three men shoved guns over the slab and the deputy said, "Stick 'em up, boys, Judge Darrow wants to see you. Contempt of court for a beating."

The amazed men leaped to their feet and the deputy crawled over the slab, slapped handcuffs on their wrists, then searched them, while the radio blared, "Whata world."

"You've got a nice set-up here," Steve said. "In case you don't remember me, I'm the guy you beat up on Trout Creek that night."

"We figgered you was Johnny Crahan," McCoy said. "Johnny's got a business head on his shoulders but he scares easy. You slugged it out and we had to get tough."

"We might as well stay here for the night," the deputy said. "Hey, McCoy what's the matter with your pants? Moths get into them. They're full of holes."

"You should know," McCoy answered bitterly, "somebody cut loose on me with a shotgun loaded with rock salt."

"Shut up," Hank Grogan shouted. "Anything we say will be used against us."

"So what?" McCoy retorted. "At the jail we'll be stripped and run through a shower. Anybody can see all the places where the rock salt caught me. Damned dirty trick. Salt stung like hell."

"What do you expect?" Steve said. "You're in a damned dirty business. You're lucky. Shot would have gone deeper and might have opened an artery."

"It opened enough as it was," McCoy complained. "Bled like a stuck hog. How'd you find us?"

"Someone tipped us off," Steve said. "Like as not it was the same gent who tried to preserve your legs in salt."

THE three took turns at guard duty, ate breakfast from the prisoners' supplies, and hit the trail. As they neared the cable bridge, Steve noticed Hank and Pete ex-

changing quick glances. "I don't mind climbing down into the Gulch and up the other side," Hank said. "I don't like these cable deals. The one with the box on busted and a man was killed. This has two cables supportin' a narrow walk, but I don't like it."

"How'd you know the other broke?" Steve asked sharply.

"Heard it over the radio, how do you suppose?" Hank answered. "We figgered somethin' might go wrong when we went out to get Johnny Crahan. Judge Darrow is one tough customer. So we had the hide-out all fixed up in case."

"Get moving," the deputy ordered. "That bridge has supported a man pushing a wheel barrow carrying seven hundred pounds on it, so I guess it'll hold you."

Sweat poured from Hank Grogan's face. He knew that Gallagher wasn't above weakening the new bridge so that it would break under heavy strain. Pete McCoy followed, hands gripping the cable, as he walked.

George Tench stood near his camp on Gulch River, looking up. Steve shouted down. "You should have gone along with us. We had a lot of fun."

"My work's cut out for me right here," Tench said. "I've got to go to town in a few days. May be gone several weeks, but I'll be back. Is it okay if I leave my camp here?"

"Sure," Steve answered. He followed the others off the bridge thinking. "That man Tench is one queer duck. His partner's loss must have affected his mind. Otherwisc why would he keep sifting sand for relatively unimportant articles?"

On the way to town he rode in the back seat between the prisoners because he wanted to talk to them. It was a tight squeeze and his legs from the knee to thigh were tightly against theirs.

"You're small fry in this fight," he told them in a careless, offhand manner. "A couple of cats Gallagher is using to pull his chestnuts from the fire. Ordinarily you might make a deal and turn state's evidence, but that's out. You're going to be stuck with murder or manslaughter for cutting that cable."

Against his legs, he felt their muscles jerk violently from the impact of his words, words that had been delivered casually and

had caught them completely off guard. He turned and grinned at Grogan. "That was a shot in the dark. Sometimes a leg makes a good truth serum." It was the toughest grin Grogan had ever seen. "Of course," he continued, "proving it will be something else again. I know you fellows did it. A little work may produce the needed evidence." Now he was serious. "The sheriff's office will be interested."

When the prisoners were turned over to Sheriff Tip Crandall he was tremendously interested, but he agreed with Steve that producing evidence that would convince a jury was going to prove a tough assignment.

That afternoon the prosecuting attorney and Steve went into a huddle. "We can convict them of assaulting you," he said, "and that should put them away for ninety days.

"By that time we may be ready to press a more serious charge. We'll skip the contempt of court angle."

THE arrest of Grogan and McCoy stirred Brad Gallagher into action. He called in Griff Margo and Max Cramm. "Someone figured out Grogan and McCoy's hide-out," he stormed. "Who?"

"I was never good at riddles, Brad," Margo said.

"I can't figure it," Max Cramm said. "I haven't seen strange men wanderin' around the big timber country. There's the Forest Service gang that's been buildin' the cable bridge; a few fishermen and mountain climbers who passed through, and the nut who screens sand down on Gulch River."

"Listen, Brad, you bullheaded chump," Margo said, "I've advised you to lay off this deal right along. I've done things in my time that wouldn't stand too close an inspection by the authorities as well you know. But this fellow Sheridan packs too many guns."

"Name one. He isn't even a logger," Gallagher argued.

"He's got guts plus," Margo said. "I checked on his army record. He knows men, and how to get the most out of them."

"Cramm's fooled him," Gallagher said. "Are you sure?"

"Hell yes!" Cramm said.

Margo shrugged. "Okay. We have a

man starting on a long postponed fishing trip. Two thugs beat the hell out of him. He wants to get even, naturally. He's cutting timber for a lot of buddies who need homes. That's incentive enough. Along comes a guy named Gallagher who is playing for big stakes and has a lumber black market tie-up. If that isn't enough to put a man in fighting trim, I don't know what is. It might not be too late now to retreat and leave the little guys holding the bag. Why don't you do it?"

"I can see a barrel of dough in this deal, that's why I'm going through with it," Gallagher said.

"I'm keeping my hands clean in this deal," Margo said. "I want no part of it, so don't call me up, or contact me. When you get into a jam I'll be around and see what I can do for you."

"A rat deserts a sinking ship," Gallagher said coldly.

"I was never aboard this particular ship," Margo reminded him. "If I had been, I'd be manning the pumps and pumping like hell."

When Margo was gone Cramm asked, "Why did you bring him in? I don't like him. Maybe he's the guy who salted Grogan and McCoy and tipped off their hide-out."

"Naw," Gallagher answered.

"He could've done it, figgerin' to scare you out. Sometimes friends are queer that way," Cramm said.

"I could sure use his help," Gallagher said. "Oh well, Kelso will help when the showdown comes. He wants logs for his black market clients and he knows Sheridan will never sell them to him. Cramm, when do you think they'll start that road?"

"I don't know," Cramm answered. "The longer he waits, the longer the dry spell lasts, the better the chance of getting away with a road that will stand up. If the rainy season starts early he may be out of luck. I'd say that he was good for another month yet."

"Urge him to delay as long as possible," Gallagher ordered. "The more cold decks that can't get to immediate market, the more for us in the long run. If anything develops, let me know. I'll see that Hank and Pete have a good lawyer."

The lawyer was on the job the next

morning, and he got a continuance until the following week. Steve, not being called to testify, caught up on his paper work in the office. He was at it Sunday afternoon when he saw the Staley's cruiser coming in from the week-end trip. He went down to the pier and took the line that a beaming Bulldozer Craig tossed him. Margie, radiant and tanned, was handling the stern line.

"Sorry you couldn't go along," Bulldozer said, "the four of us had a swell time." To himself he added, "Like hell I'm sorry. I had Margie to myself."

"I'm glad you had yourself some fun," Steve said, adding to himself, "but I wish it were some other girl. She hits me hard, but what time do I have left for girls? If she'd been included in the receivership I'd devote a couple of hours a day to her."

Bulldozer stayed over until Monday then went out with Steve to look at the Gulch. Gulch Creek was low, and several of the springs that spilled water from the Gulch walls into the streams were reduced to trickles. But much of the bank was moist, and in spots dainty ferns grew.

WHEN they returned to town Adams, the sawmill man, was waiting for Steve. He was accompanied by a worried individual named Zednick. "Adams to Zednick," Steve thought, "from A to Z."

"I promised not to bother you, Mr. Sheridan," Adams said, "but Zednick is worried and I brought him out to talk with you."

"I'd like to show you something," Zednick said. "Will you drive to town with me some day this week?"

"It'd be nice if you could do that, Mr. Sheridan," Adams said.

Steve could see it was a matter of great importance and he agreed. Bulldozer went along with him the following Thursday, and Zednick met them. He skirted the city's busiest streets, drove beyond the city limits to a tract several blocks in area.

Steve could see that the land had been cleared of young firs and cedars, laid out with dirt streets and sidewalks. One house was completed, even to roses and lawn. "That's a sample of what the district will eventually look like," Zednick said. "In clearing the land I left small cedars, firs and dogwoods. The larger trees were traded

for lumber. I bought sewer and water pipe from a government surplus depot. You know, one of the mushroom war deals that was abandoned when it was no longer needed. Had to dig up the pipe, of course."

It looked to Steve as if all sewers and water mains were in. But there were rows of concrete foundations awaiting lumber and carpenters.

Zednick said no more. The concrete foundations were more eloquent than words. "And young couples are waiting to move in?" Steve asked.

"Every single unit has been sold months ago," Zednick answered. "Some of the kids are going to do their own construction."

"I didn't need this incentive," Steve said, "but it'll serve as a kick if I start weakening. And you might pass the word among the boys that we can use a few truck drivers and a few who are handy with their fists. Somewhere along the line I expect the enemy to get tougher. This beautiful stretch of progress isn't going to last."

A young fellow named Dvorak and his bride, who wasn't much more than a girl, walked over. "That's our place over there," he said. "We're living in a tent—which makes five years straight that I've lived under canvas of some kind. See that truck? When the first log starts through the mill, Mr. Sheridan, that truck is going to be waiting for the lumber."

Steve looked at the Dvorak place, and it was enough to make a man want to cry—young fruit trees actually bearing fruit; a lawn; rose garden; vegetable garden; a concrete driveway leading to a slab of concrete—the garage floor; a brick walk leading to where some day there would be a front door; and the basement. Everything but the house.

"Mister," Bulldozer said, "you're going to get your lumber if I have to pack the trees out on my back."

THREE weeks later Steve said, "It's time to build that road." Bulldozer agreed. The equipment was on call, and began arriving the next day. Bulldozer's plan was simple. There would be no reverse curves or horseshoe bends. They'd start at the top and work along the Gulch bank, gradually descending, until they reached the bottom land. They would cross Gulch Creek, then

gradually ascend the west bank until they reached Cedar Bench.

Bulldozer began the descent, the blade knifing into the bank and spilling dirt over the edge. Back and forth moved the machine in the hands of an expert who gloried in the danger and the problem. He left behind him a road that was little wider than a bulldozer. Other machines could widen the road and fill in the holes until it would support a logging truck.

There were stretches where he made more rapid progress; other stretches gave him trouble. Men back-packed fuel to his machine. Ten hours from the time he started he pulled up before a slide area. Ferns and shrubs grew out of muck that was oozing water in several spots. He cocked a critical eye up the slide. "Got by here," he muttered, "and we'll have clear sailing for quite a stretch. I don't like the looks of this mess at all. I wonder if there're any big boulders covered up in the muck above me?" He lit a cigar and sat on the machine while he smoked.

Other bulldozers were roaring away. The situation looked good—mighty good, except immediately ahead. There was a lot of muck and dirt above him—"one hell of a lot," he muttered.

The benches on each side of the Gulch were level and relatively at the same elevation. But at this point the bench rose abruptly and became a small mountain. Its slopes were timbered with trees the size of telephone poles, but in many places slides had carried away the timber and dropped it to rot on the Gulch floor. Some of the slides were so old that trees, twenty-five and thirty years old grew from them.

Bulldozer finished his cigar. "Well, faint heart never won the fair lady, as the poet says," he grumbled, "which is maybe the reason I've never married. Here goes."

He dug into the muck ahead, and started a small slide. When it quieted down he tried again. This time he got into clay which resisted the bulldozer for a time. Slowly, surely, he got past the bad stretch, then stopped two hundred feet beyond. His machine clung to the ragged edge of nothing.

Steve hurried up. "That slide may start again," he said. "Let's get a couple more machines across while we've got the chance.

Then they can be working beyond this slide area."

"Good idea," Bulldozer agreed.

He watched one machine make it safely. As the third was half way across he belled, "Come on!"

The driver gave it everything he had and the machine wallowed ahead without bothering to pick up loose dirt along the way. A mass struck the back end, half turned it, and for a moment the treads kicked rocks and muck below, then the treads came up against a buried root which held and the bulldozer rumbled on to safety. "You've lived a clean life—never pushed old folks off sidewalks, or kicked a dog," Steve said, "or you'd have gone down with the slide."

Muck was flowing slowly like lava, then muddy water gushed from a point a hundred feet above them, and rocks, roots and muck spilled down on old slides.

Margie and Terry Moran, watching from a nearby point, groaned in unison. "Poor Steve," she said, "Poor Steve!"

"Poor Steve?" Terry exclaimed. "Poor Trout Creek Logging Company."

"No," she insisted, "poor Steve! He was tired when he came out here and fate never should have dumped this problem into his lap. His breed thrives on lost causes. The very nature of the man is such that he couldn't turn his back on the challenge. He's given his best and a little more. He's entitled to success, and fate is hammering away at him again."

"Okay, it looks as if they'd never build a road across that mess," Terry said. "Want to bet that Bulldozer and Steve don't win out between them?"

"Of course not," she answered. "But victory is so long overdue."

They descended to the slide, started to cross and changed their minds. It was too soft, and any moment another mass might come down. Steve was asking, "Where the hell does all that water come from after a dry season? There must be an underground creek, but where does it get its water? There's no snow above us, and it hasn't rained in several weeks. There's no such seepage on the Cedar Bench side of the Gulch."

"This is the time for Gallagher to pounce on us, if he's going to pounce," Bulldozer

said. "Our fortunes are at the lowest ebb as the feller says."

Max Cramm climbed the bank and looked at the slide. "Tough," he said. "And it had to come just when it looked if you had the road problem licked. I'm knocking off for the evening, unless you need me here."

"I can use you here," Steve said. "I'm going into town, and you might as well go along with me. After a good night's rest, I'll be in better shape to tackle this problem." He blazed a trail through the muck, followed by Bulldozer and Cramm.

Steve drove, and when he arrived in town, he took his time in the traffic. "There's the very man I want to see," he said stopping. "Hey, Sheriff!"

The sheriff came over and got in, sharing the back seat with Max Cramm. Steve reported on slide troubles, and the state of the weather until he was opposite the jail, then he said, "Sheriff, I want you to arrest Max Cramm. I'll supply you with the necessary warrant. Judge Darrow issued it on my request several days ago. Cramm, I hate like hell to do this. You're a damned good man in the woods, but now that the showdown is at hand, it's well to put you where you can't knife me in the back."

"What in the hell you talking about?" Cramm demanded. "I've given you the best that's in me. I've backed you to the limit, and I've kept pitchin' ten and twelve hours a day."

"There's no doubt about your pitching, Cramm," Steve agreed, "but the trouble is, you weren't pitching in my league."

The sheriff looked at the warrant. "Assault with a deadly weapon, intent to murder," he read, then whistled softly. "When did this happen, Steve?"

"Cramm knows," Steve answered.

"I guess you'd better come along," the sheriff said. "And just to be safe, we'll slip the bracelets on."

When Cramm was locked up, the sheriff asked, "What happened?"

"We were wading a stream, searching for tracks left by Hank and Pete," Steve answered. "Until that moment, I had no reason to suspect Cramm. In war, you develop instincts and quick reactions. When I had a hunch I was in danger, I didn't shake it off as imagination. We were wading a pool at the time, and I saw Cramm's face

mirrored on the surface. At first I thought that the ripples had distorted it. It grew flat for a second, and I saw that he was set for rough stuff. I turned—a split-second too late. He let me have it. I had sense enough to know I lacked strength to fight back successfully."

"What did you do?"

"One boot was full of water, and that served as an anchor. I went under and the cold water partly cleared my foggy brain. I figured that he wouldn't finish me then," Steve said.

"Too many people had seen you go into the timber together," the sheriff suggested. "He's plenty wide between the eyes, and he knew folks would be asking why you didn't come out with him."

"That's right," Steve agreed. "The purpose in socking me was to check pursuit while he covered up the tracks we were following. He told quite a convincing story of me slipping on a rock, and cracking my head on another rock as I fell. I pretended to swallow it. After all, he's a good logger. I'll mail him his check to date, plus a bonus I promised him if he'd accomplish certain things."

"You're a damned fool."

"A deal's a deal," Steve said.

THE sheriff looked at Steve intently for several seconds. "On the level don't you know the fellow who tipped off Hank and Pete's hide-out?"

"On the level, I don't," Steve answered. "Well, I guess I'd better get back on the job."

As soon as he was gone, Max Cramm was allowed to put in a call for a Seattle lawyer. The attorney arrived Monday morning, and after a brief talk suggested release on bail.

Cramm shook his head. "I need a rest," he said, "and I'll stay here for awhile. Tell Brad Gallagher the answer to the seepage could be Teal Lake. It's high up, practically a lost lake. It has no known outlet, but it never overflows so the water must go somewhere. I think Brad might like to know."

"I'll bail you out and you tell him," the lawyer suggested.

"That isn't the way Brad would want it," Cramm insisted. Inwardly he was thinking, "A man never knows what Steve Sheridan

has found out until he lets him have it. If I'm in jail when the showdown comes I won't get into more trouble."

The lawyer went immediately to Brad Gallagher and reported. "So Cramm doesn't want bail?" he commented. "I wonder what Sheridan has on him?" I've been busy, protecting my rights and those of some of the smaller stockholders. Can you bring an action in court that will stop the waste of stockholders' money on a road that can't ever be built? I sold my stock to Sheridan in a moment when I blew my top. I've since bought a small block."

"That qualifies you," the lawyer said. "I'll bring the action immediately. We'll stop the entire operation."

The lawyer was not highly regarded by the bench and bar. He was careful to avoid anything that might bring disbarment proceedings. Gallagher knew this and naturally did not come clean on what had happened, or what he planned to do. The lawyer, in turn, was confident that Gallagher was holding something back. He guessed it was information that might tie his ethical hands and was glad it was not forthcoming.

When he was gone, Gallagher gave Teal Lake considerable thought. "Hell," he snorted, "Why didn't I think of it before. Sure Teal Lake supplies that seepage. It isn't on the map, or Sheridan would have figured that angle. There's no trout in the lake, so no one ever goes up there."

He poured himself a drink, drank it slowly and finally arrived at a conclusion. "If a man touched off seventy-five or a hundred pounds of dynamite on the lake bottom, it would increase the seepage and they never would finish that road," he mused. "Blast it, I wish Hank and Pete were handy. I need 'em. Max Cramm's had enough of Sheridan. Margo won't have any part of it, so it kinda puts things up to me. Okay, I'm the guy who can do it."

STEVE was studying the slide problem when Margie came out with a note from Judge Darrow. "Gallagher's lawyer is bringing action to stop further road work," she said. "On the face of it, Steve, he has a case — a slide area that blocks road construction; thousands of dollars worth of logs piled up on Cedar Bench."

"Tell him his receiver will make a report

in full," Steve answered. "And thanks for coming out."

She smiled gently, understandingly, to let him know that she was right behind him, and that the tired, worried lines in his face distressed her. She imagined that his men, during the war, had seen deeper lines, and she wondered if they had had her deep confidence in him. Probably they had. Steve, being full of his problem, missed the expression as he hurried back to Bulldozer.

"In Alaska," Bulldozer had been saying when Margie came, "they can tell where underground water runs by the willows. They either grow bigger, or else there'll be no other willows growing. That's tundra country, of course, which is treeless. But I've been thinking if you could tell by the tree growth where the seepage runs, you might find the source."

"Something like finding a gold ledge by following 'float' up the mountain?" Steve suggested. "You've given me something to think about. If we could divert the water at the source, we'd have the problem on this East bank licked. The Cedar Bench side isn't as tough."

"Shall we tackle it now?"

"No. We've got to go to town tonight. The hearing is tomorrow morning, and I may want you to testify," Steve answered. "You might give final orders to the bulldozer crews so things will keep rolling when you're away."

When they arrived in court, Bulldozer was full of fight. "I'd sure like to take on Brad Gallagher in a finish fight," he whispered to Steve.

"Too late," Steve answered, "I've already taken him on."

"He'd sure like to get his hands on you," Bulldozer said. "He figgers you're the man he can lick in a rough and tumble fight."

"Who knows?" Steve answered. "Well, here's the judge."

Judge Darrow listened attentively to Steve's report, which was backed up by Bulldozer, who identified himself as a practical man. "As far as the seepage is concerned," Bulldozer concluded, "we'll lick that problem if we have time."

"The Court is satisfied with the progress so far made," Judge Darrow said, "and plaintiff's plea is denied. However, the stockholders' interests are paramount. Mr.

Craig, may I ask you to meet with me tomorrow and outline the methods by which you expect to overcome the various road problems?"

"Sure," answered the startled Bulldozer.

Steve returned to the Gulch that night, and the following morning he began tracing the source of the seepage by following a series of mucky places, growing ferns and grass. It all led him to a blind alley in the form of a stand of young firs growing on a steep slope. "Hell!" he exploded in a disappointed tone. "I wonder what's higher up? It's getting late. I'll check higher up tomorrow."

His checking began by crossing over to Cedar Bench and studying the slide area through binoculars. It was some little time before he noticed that an occasional alder, growing among the firs, appeared to be following a definite upward course. Steve studied a small cliff that would mark the area, then crossed the Gulch to the slide. He made his way to the cliff, and found an alder growing in moist earth at its base.

Above, he heard the crackle of brush and thought, "Bear." He listened a moment, then exclaimed, "There it is again. But a bear doesn't swear."

He climbed cautiously some distance, wondering exactly where he was. Suddenly a flock of teal passed overhead. He knew by the set of their wings they were going to land, and a moment later the trickle of water as their bodies touched, came through the timber.

"There's the answer!" he exclaimed. "Lake! Some guy is on his way to fish, no doubt. But let's not get careless about this. And speaking of fishing — that's what I came to Puget Sound to do."

HE crossed boot tracks, turned and followed them. He had discarded his gumboots for heavy Army shoes. Now he removed these and approached. He saw the lake with a swamp area at the upper end. The teal's heads were jerking nervously, a sign of alarm. Suddenly they took off.

Steve heard brush crash, then he saw Brad Gallagher paying out wire from a coil over his arm. The man hung the coil to a limb stub protruding from a small tree, then carried a compact object to the protection of a larger tree. "Blasting machine!" Steve ex-

claimed. "Damn it, why didn't I pack a gun today?"

Obviously, Gallagher had lowered an explosive charge into the lake and was about to fire it. Obviously, too, he could have but one purpose—shatter the lake bottom at this point and increase the seepage.

Steve began working his way toward the machine. Its operation was simple—pull up a handle and shove down hard. This sent an electric spark over the waterproof wire and detonated the charge.

He was thirty feet from Gallagher when a rotting branch snapped. Gallagher, in the act of attaching the second wire to the machine, looked up. Steve made a headlong rush. Gallagher held the wire with one hand, sensing there was no time to attach it, and yanked up the handle with the other. He pushed down with most of his weight just as Steve hit him.

The earth shook, then a column of muck and water shot upward. They were fighting as the last hunk of rotting muck and vegetation fell. There could be but one outcome to this fight, Steve thought. He had to win it. There were too many places where Gallagher in his present desperate mood could bury the body.

ALLAGHER had all the advantage. He was heavier, stronger and fresher. Steve was physically tired when he accepted the receivership, and many weeks of driving himself, planning, worrying and carrying out his plans had taken their toll.

"You weren't in the Army, Gallagher," Steve panted, "or you would have used some of the tricks we were taught in hand to hand combat. I'm getting licked and we both know it. I've got to fight dirty if I want to live. I'll try not to kill you."

He saw fright fill the man's eyes, then Steve struck. Gallagher dropped. He removed Gallagher's belt, cut off the buttons that held his pants together, then waited for him to regain consciousness. Steve felt a sense of satisfaction. He hadn't had to resort to dirty fighting. The mere threat of it had caused the man to tense defensively, and he had left an opening. Steve's punch to the jaw had been the cleanest and hardest that he had ever put over.

After awhile Gallagher regained consciousness. "It's a tough trip down to camp,"

Steve said, "and we'd better get started. You'll have to hold up your pants with your hands. Let go of them to pull a fast one on me, and they'll trip you."

"You haven't a thing on me," Gallagher said.

"That remains to be seen," Steve answered.

"Okay, I was blasting trout," Gallagher said. "The game wardens will fine me—"

"That won't stand up in any court I know of," Steve said. "Get going."

The first man Steve saw when they reached camp was Bulldozer. "I was beginning to worry about you," Bulldozer said. "But it looks like you could take care of yourself. Were'd you get all that stinking mud. You smell like something the cat drug in—something old."

"We're going to call on the sheriff just as we are," Steve answered. "Anyone who doesn't like it can hold his nose."

"Your man doesn't look very meek," Bulldozer commented.

"He'll never truck those logs to a mill-pond," Gallagher said, "nor will anybody else this year. And he knows it."

"Put bulldozers to working on that slide," Steve directed. "Keep the stuff coming down and maybe we can get road enough to hold up twenty-four hours or so. Go up the bank a couple of hundred feet and dig in there. But make sure no one is going to get hurt."

"I'll do that job myself," Bulldozer answered.

With Terry Moran's help, Steve took Gallagher into town and turned him over to the sheriff. "He's in contempt of court," Steve said. "Judge Darrow will take care of that. Ask the prosecuting attorney to prepare conspiracy papers. If released, it should be only on a husky bond."

"Leave everything to us," the sheriff said. "Where can I get hold of you?"

"At Moran's," Steve answered. "I'm going to take a bath, get into some clean clothes, eat, listen to a radio program, then go to bed. If I don't relax pretty soon the men in the white coats will be coming for me."

Bulldozer called him at four o'clock in the morning. "Get your logging trucks out there," he urged. "We've got what passes for a road. I dug a basin out, like you ordered, run a pipe over the road and am

spilling water in a steady stream. But it won't last. The seepage is increasing, and by the time it comes down from that lake in force, no telling what'll happen."

Steve called every logging truck driver that he knew, and by nine o'clock that morning they were lined up at camp. Steve took them down the road to the slide area. "Now here's the deal," he said. "The road, except at this point, is in fair shape. We've got a log bridge over Gulch Creek. You've seen them before and you know that they'll stand up. You've trucked over tougher roads, with bad curves. Now the muck we've moved at this point has left a mess of blue clay on which we've dumped gravel. The whole damned slope may let go. I want you to crawl past it and not gun your motors or start vibrations. Now, do you want to tackle it?"

All of them inspected the road and the slide, then decided to try it. They went back up and got on their trucks and soon they came down, cautiously, and with plenty of space between them.

As they crossed the Gulch and climbed the East bank to Cedar Bench, Steve thought of the truck convoys that he had seen in the Army moving over dangerous country. The drivers wore the same devil-may-care attitude these men did. But he knew beneath it all was shrewd calculation based on experience.

He thumbed a ride and went over. The truck used to bring logs to the cold decks stood loaded and ready. "I'll take her," he said. "Terry you stay here and keep things moving."

Steve drove slowly down the Cedar Bench grade, crossed the bridge and began climbing. The logs moved ponderously as the wheels struck rough spots. Ahead loomed the pipe that was carrying the water from the basin Bulldozer had dug. It was muddy, running heavy to dirt and fine gravel. And it was increasing in volume. The sides of the basin, visible from the road, gleamed with moisture. Bulldozer had a gang of men with shovels strengthening it as movement of the water weakened it. Anyone could see that it wouldn't last.

As Steve eased past the danger point, George Tench climbed onto the truck. "Well, I've finished my work down on Gulch Creek," he said. "Sure did shift a

lot of gravel, but that was a stall. It covered up my real purpose."

"What was that?" Steve asked.

"To see that the men who cut that wire and killed Al were brought to justice," he answered.

"You sure surprised me," Steve said. "Under cover work, eh?"

"Yes," Tench said. "It was I who shot rock salt into Hank and Pete that night."

"Naw!" Steve exclaimed, grinning with approval.

"I figured they were up to some kind of hell so I watched. Then when you were knocked in the head that time and couldn't follow the trail they left, I took it up," Tench continued. "It was I who tipped off their hide-out. Do you know why? I'll tell you. I wanted to quietly examine their stuff. I didn't think anybody would bother to pack it down."

"What did you find?"

"A nicked axe. I turned it over to a chemist and criminal laboratory man," Tench said, "and he will prove it was the axe that cut the cable strands and weakened it. The way I see it, you can prove conspiracy all along the line. A man was killed as a result, and I think Gallagher will go over the road for a long stretch. My hunch is that Hank or Pete will crack and spill everything to save his own skin. I figured you'd have your hands full with your logging problems, and that I owed it to an old friend to get evidence that would convict those responsible for his death."

"I hope to kiss a pig," Steve said. "You fooled me completely."

"That was my idea—fool everybody so that I could work quietly," Tench said. "If you don't mind, I think I'll ride into town with you."

"You can have anything you want," Steve said.

IN town he let Tench off at the prosecuting attorney's office. "He'll greet you with kisses," Steve predicted. "He needed evidence to prove conspiracy, and I couldn't supply it."

As Steve neared the mill pond, a half dozen interested parties including Adams came up in a car. Dvorak, driving a battered truck, followed. He yelled, "I told you I'd be on hand for the first lumber."

They watched the big log truck stop and the logs tumble into the empty mill pond. A boom man with a long pike pole headed it toward the mill.

"Come along, Steve," Margie said hurrying up, "let's follow it through."

The log, rolling ponderously, left the pond and moved under a spray that knocked off rocks stuck to the bark, and sluiced away the dirt and sand that might damage saws. The head sawyer sized it up, jerked levers and heavy machinery rolled it about until it would yield a maximum of lumber.

The carriage moved and the saws ripped away the bark exposing the clean, sound wood beneath. Back and forth moved the carriage, and each time the saws cut off a slab of the required thickness. The slabs went on to other saws, to emerge rough lumber.

Steve and Margie watched the lumber loaded onto Dvorak's truck, "Come along with me?" he asked.

Steve started to decline, but Margie said, "Why not, Steve? Bulldozer, Terry and the others can keep things going."

He hardly realized how tired he had been, and suddenly he knew there was but one answer to her, "Why not, Steve?" And that was, "Why not?"

It was almost sundown when they arrived at the Dvorak lot. Mrs. Dvorak came out of her tent and exclaimed, "At last! At last!" Then she began to cry.

DVORAK unloaded with a noble clatter of boards, then watched carpenters carry a long, heavy timber to the waiting foundation.

It was midnight when Margie and Steve returned, and the trucks were still roaring through the night. "Did you ever hear sweeter music?" Margie asked.

"Music from harp strings plucked by an angel," Steve answered.

When Judge Darrow opened court several days later, Steve stood before him. "I wish to be discharged as receiver, Your Honor," he said. "Before seepage from Teal Lake's blasted bottom worked through most of the logs were brought out. Some of the men worked thirty-six hours straight. All bills have been paid and there is a nice working balance."

The judge looked at the sheet Steve

handed him. "Hmmm! Here's an item marked Bulldozer Craig, one thousand dollars for consultation and services."

"He was worth it, Your Honor," Steve said. "He endorsed the check over to a crippled children's hospital. He said he didn't need the money. Then he returned to Alaska."

"My opinion is, Craig had a lot of fun out of the affair," the judge dryly observed.

"I believe the lake will drain completely and insure a dry roadway next summer," Steve said. "In the meantime we are keeping the road open part time, and if there is a freezing spell next winter, then we can operate. We are leaving ample seed trees on Cedar Bench to insure reforestation, which is the practice. The Trout Creek Logging Company is planning to operate on a timber cropping basis, cutting the annual yield. And that, I think, is all."

Judge Darrow complimented Steve, discharged the receivership and turned the company back to the stockholders. "And

now, Mr. Sheridan, you may resume that interrupted fishing trip. I understand the higher streams are about right. And, of course, sea run cut-throat are coming in, if I can rely on the reports of my favorite spy."

"Thank you, Your Honor," Steve said. "Excuse me for a moment. What was that you said, Margie? What? Well, I'll be doggoned." He turned back to Judge Darrow.

"The fishing trip is postponed again. Miss Moran has just advised me of my election as president and general manager of the company. It looks as if I'd be here quite a while."

The judge smiled benignly. There had been little time for billing and cooing, but if he knew the signs correctly, and he was sure that he did, Margie and Steve would make up for lost time, and the fishing trip would be a twosome. "Yes," he said, "I think you'll be quite an addition to the community, Mr. Sheridan."



... a towheaded young horse jingler with muskrat blood in his veins was taken along by the horse raiders ... he might prove useful

## "THE HORSE THIEF TRAP"

A Walt Coburn *novelette*

*In the next big issue of SHORT STORIES*

... and Man Pays  
His Debt to the Sea--  
Young Life for Old

# DEAD RECKONING

By HERBERT L.  
McNARY

THE wet haze that had been hanging off shore thickened abruptly into a clammy fog—the kind that could chill the hearts as well as the bones of fishermen caught at sea in their small two-man hookers.

Pete Longo, wizened and mummified and the lone crew member of the *Dove*, out of Boston, looked accusingly at his skipper and owner, Mike Baranca. Already the fog formed little globules on Mike's swarthy and oleic features. Mike's had been a dangerous and foolish impulse that made him quit the customary fishing grounds and shift into the lane of ocean liners.

*Mama mia*, thought Mike Baranca as he scowled at the fog and wiped his beading forehead, *it is more of the Cataldo curse*. All this has happened because that Jimmy had hidden again aboard the *Dove*, causing Mike to put back with him when discovered well down the harbor.

It mattered not that Jimmy Cataldo was Mike's twelve-year-old godson, or that the repeated thrashings administered by Gino Cataldo had not cured the lad's penchant for following in the steps of his ancestors.

Mike Baranca and Gino Cataldo were of an age. Born in the same house in Naples,



they had come together to this country, and had fished and lived together until each had married. They had remained like brothers until their falling out.

It was well known around T-Wharf that Mike and Gino were top men in the putt-putt fleet when it came to fishing and navigation. Perhaps Gino had a little the better on the fishing, but Mike surely had the edge in navigation with his uncanny sense of dead reckoning.

Then one night at a christening when the red wine had passed around generously a dispute over these respected qualities had developed into an argument and thence into a persistent anger in which neither spoke the other's name.

"*Ab-wooooo.*" Ghostly, distant, but seemingly reverberating from each fog particle, sounded the mournful bleat of a fog horn.

The ancient Longo threw up his rooster-like head and made frightened effort to locate the source of the horn. It sounded again and Longo cried out in fear.

"Quiet," barked Mike. "It is known that no man out of Boston is my equal in a fog. Even Gino Cataldo must admit that."

"*Ab-wooooo! Ab-wooooo!*" The demoni-

“  
acal dissonance of the dense clammy fog caused the hoarse blast of the unseen vessel to envelope the little putt-putt; now forward, now to stern, to starboard and then to port. The terrified Longo grabbed whimpering for Baranca.

Mike flung him free because in that moment Mike needed desperate use of his great navigating skill, but in his tenseness Mike used greater strength than he realized. The ancient one fell athwart the gunwale. He did not try to recover from his precarious position as the fog-blanketed hooker rolled in the giant swell. Fright gave way to a subliminal prediction that chilled the superstitious Baranca. Piercing eyes glowed in a face pale and lined like a withered lemon.

“It is the end. We shall die. It is the punishment for your wicked pride. You should not have come into the lane of great vessels in the season of bad fogs. But you would prove yourself better than Gino—”

“Ah-wooooo! Ah-wooooo!”

“Silence, thou old fool.” And yet Mike knew his anger to be a confession. Pride. Pride. It was a sin one must confess.

“Ah-wooooo! Ah-wooooo!” Now the sound was above them. Mike heard the rush of water as when a great ship drives through the waves.

Mike swung hard. The little putt-putt swallowed in a giant swell. It sucked against the side of the speeding liner, bumped hard and rocked like a chip in the frothing wash of the great vessel, so close that it could almost be touched, and yet unseen in the dense moss of wet fog.

Baranca was thrown to his hands and knees. A well of white water rose spectrally above him and he called to his mother. But while these putt-putts might not be pretty to look at or smell, they were sturdy of build. The little hooker righted—and the great liner ploughed on with none aboard aware of what the fog had hidden.

Mike took a deep gulp of the wet air. “You see, ancient one—”

There was no ancient one. Pete Longo had vanished into that spectral fog. Water murmured and gurgled beyond the barnacled sides and seemed to be muffled voices berating Mike Baranca.

The historical significance of the Boston market district sprawling around Fan-

uil Hall of sainted memory was wasted upon Mike Baranca. Returning from the sea without Pete Longo he had taken an oath to forsake the calling of his people for generations, even though the learned Father Mallucci at Saint Stephens had told him there was no sin of the Fifth Commandment upon his soul.

But a man must work. Mike had sold his *Dove* to young Guido Marcella who had financed his purchase under the GI bill. Mike then found a job in the market where his brawny arms tossed crates of fruit and produce instead of hauling in struggling haddock and cod and great seinefuls of mackerel.

Save that his view was blocked by the congestion of trucks and vans Mike could look down South Market Street to the waterfront, or, with the prevailing east wind, smell the brine and the sea. But his sullen, silent thoughts refused to dwell upon his past except in thoughts of penance for his sin of pride.

Months passed and it was again a season of dangerous fogs that settled down for days with the scent of kelp and seaweed, and kept to port all but the reckless. Mike, looking up, saw a half dozen men winding through the traffic of Richmond Street and heading for him. He knew each one for a member of the fleet, and leading them he saw Gino Cataldo.

Mike set down the crate of oranges he held like a package of candy. Obviously these men came for him. But why? Had they worked out some punishment for the death of Pete Longo at this late date?

The men stopped. They looked expectantly at Gino. The latter seemed lost for words—for the first words that would be spoken in nearly a year to his old friend. His horny fingers fumbled with a grimy blue knitted skull cap.

“Mike,” he said in halting voice, “maybe we forget many things. You go look for Jimmy—please. You take my boat—yes?”

Mike wet his lips. “Jimmy—he hide on board again?”

“Yes. On the *Dove*. Only one so young and foolish as this Guido Marcella would go out in this weather.” Gino hesitated and his voice lowered respectfully. “Only one so skilled as Mike Baranca could find him.”

A muttered obligato provided confirmation. Here it was—admission that he excelled them all as a mariner. *Mama mia*, to find a small putt-putt in the broad fog-bound ocean—it was worse than the needle in the haystack.

As though understanding the cause of Mike's puckered brow Gino said, "The mackerel were running off Cape Ann. We were there when the fog closed in. This Marcella would be smart. He would be out there when the fogs lift and be first to drop a seine. This fog, she lift sometime for little while." Mike nodded understandingly.

"This Guido have good luck part way. He reach Gloucester. We learn that. Then he put out. This fog she settle down to stay."

Off Cape Ann. Not only near to the lanes of ocean ships, but close to the treacherous reefs and rocks. But had they forgotten? He had finished with the sea because of his sin.

"I am done with the sea," he said. "Because of me a man died."

No change of emotion came over the asking faces. Gino, the father of Jimmy, said simply, "This Longo was old. His time had come to die like his ancestors. Jimmy—he is but a child."

The voice cracked. Mike hesitated and then said simply, "I will go. Maybe it is God's wish that I make amends."

**T**HE black and barnacled *Star of the Sea* put out into the harbor and a hundred yards from T-Wharf the fog closed in like folds of heavy wet canvas.

To the average person the ocean appears to be an immutable sameness, but to the fisherman the ocean is a thing of tides and currents, colors and soundings. Mike asked pointed questions. Gino knew where the *Dove* had been, where young Marcella would take her, rifts in the fog permitting. Gino could give apt answers to Mike's questions, but only Mike Baranca could put the pieces together.

Hours followed of wet uncomfortable pushing through the pea-soup fog with no sound save the hoarse exhaust of the *Star of the Sea*. Mike Baranca had asked all the questions he could and there remained nothing more to talk about. Now Mike

must devote all his senses to the skill of navigating.

Mike ran along the North Shore, sometimes close enough to hear the menacing pounding of surf on the rock-strewn shore.

"That would be Magnolia," said Mike. Another time he said, "We have passed Gloucester."

Now Mike calculated that they were nearing the waters where young Marcella hoped to be when the fog lifted. If the young one had the sense to anchor. But youth is impatient and Mike knew it took years of patience to ride out the soul-chilling constriction of wet fog.

Four hours the *Star of the Sea* coursed the waters Mike Baranca had found, for all the obstacles of the fog. And as each run brought the hooker closer to the treacherous shore the wearying father's eyes never left Mike's face.

An alien sound drifted through the fog. Surf. Gino looked sharply at his life-long friend—save for this past year. They would have to put to sea again. Maybe give up the search as hopeless.

Suddenly Mike throttled down the engine. "Listen," he said softly.

For some time Gino heard nothing, and then his straining ears caught the sputter of an engine, as when one works over a balky motor.

"It is the *Dove*," said Mike as though talking to himself. "I would know it among a thousand, even though this young owner has all but ruined it."

Mike changed his course. To locate that occasional sputter, as deceptive in this fog as the horn of liner had been when he had lost Pete Longo, Mike must keep down wind—what wind there was. That meant keeping inside—and close to the dangerous rocks. Seemingly, the *Dove* had broken or lost its anchor, and the drift of tide and heavy swell was carrying the hooker closer and closer to the rocks.

Mike drove inside skirting the dangerous rocks with visibility almost zero. Father and godfather strained again for the sound of a sputtering motor. Only the sharpest ears could pick up the engine of the *Star of the Sea* against the wind—

"Uncle Mike!"

Jimmy's voice, high-pitched and excited.

His keen, youthful ears had picked up the sound of an engine and he had known instantly that only one man could have found him in this fog.

Gino, the father, tried to call, but his voice cracked with sobs. And then there could be no calling, because the pounding of surf rose to almost a roar.

"Mother of God," cried the agonized father. "We have found the boy when it is too late."

Mike said commandingly, "Stand by with the rope. I will make a run for it. It must be at full engine."

**F**ULL engine to battle the power of the surf, but full engine against the rocks meant smashing the hooker to bits. There could be but one pass in a fog so thick that rocks and the *Dove* could not be seen but only guessed at, in a roar of surf so loud that Mike now could hardly be heard by Gino.

But there were signs; even in the limited vision of a few feet over the side, Mike could read the back eddies and swirling white water.

Full engine and a rush. Powerful arms whose cords stood out like bands of steel held the wheel against the drive and suction of the surf. Each had his part to play. Each part must be timed perfectly, the run, the throw of the rope and the making fast of the rope aboard the *Dove*.

Mike had placed that cry of Jimmy's and he drove for it. Rocks loomed like a blurred silhouette to starboard, and at that instant Gino shouted. An instant later Mike felt the tug of a taut rope and he rode with it.

The *Star of the Sea* veered just in time. The bottom scraped, but a wave lifted the hooker. Now straining arms held the hooker against the in-rushing surf, held it with the drag of the *Dove*, back there in the fog.

Now began the run for open water, the cheating of the angry surf and the hungry rocks—a slow, difficult drag. But Mike

Baranca made it and the straining engines could throttle down.

The father, coming aft, could say no more than a simple, "Thanks."

Mike spoke gruffly to hide his emotion. "Take over," he directed. "I must go aboard the *Dove* to see what that young fool has done to the engine."

By joint hauling on the tow line the two hookers emerged out of the fog to drift gunwale to gunwale. Mike clambered aboard the *Dove*.

"Uncle Mike," exclaimed a button-eyed lad, "I knew it was you. I told Guido you could find us—"

He would have ran on, but Mike rubbed roughly the lad's wet mop of hair and spoke sharply to young Marcella.

"You should be playing with toy boats in a bath tub. What have you done to the engine?"

Mike expected no answer other than what he could find for himself. Muttering and mumbling, he went to work on the engine. Young Marcella might know all about automobile motors and even airplane motors from his war experience, but an engine such as this that had to be nourished with wire and spare parts through a shortage was something else again.

Eventually the engine sputtered, coughed and then throbbed deep-throated. Little Jimmy let out a cry of triumph.

"Look," said Marcella. "I got a chance to go in on a garage with another guy. If I can fix it with the bank, how about buying back this lug?"

Mike fingered lovingly the spokes of the wheel he had handled so many years.

"Sure," he said. "I'll take her back."

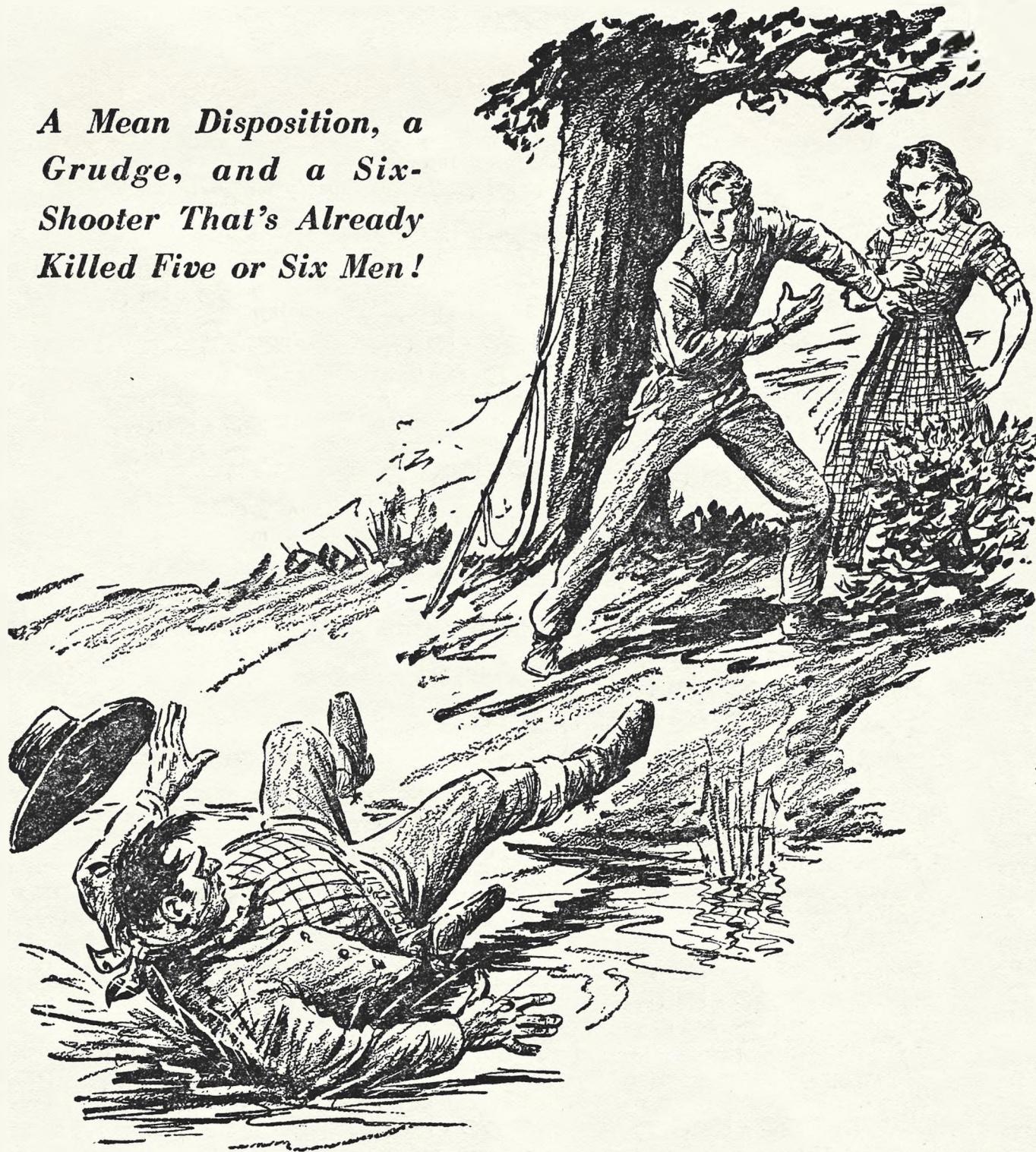
Once again Jimmy shouted for joy. "And, Uncle Mike, you'll let me go with you—when I get big. There is no one who can sail like you—you and Papa," he added respectfully.

Mike Baranca's chest swelled—and quickly deflated. Pride.

"Maybe," he said humbly. "If old Mike is good enough—and not just lucky."



*A Mean Disposition, a Grudge, and a Six-Shooter That's Already Killed Five or Six Men!*



## RED HAID SNAPS UP

By WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINÉ

### I

**A** BOY lay by the river bank, face up, looking into the blue unflecked sky. He was a red-headed stringy lad who would be nineteen on his next birthday. Against a cottonwood a fishing rod was

propped. The trout were feeding. Every now and then one leaped for a fly, but he gave no heed. He was thinking of a girl. Soon she would come down the path to meet him, a fine animal vigor in her light step, warm sunshine in her smile. He and Jean Mahoney were going to be married as soon as they had saved a hundred dollars. That

would not be long. He earned eight dollars a week at the grocery store where he worked and she got twelve a month at the hotel.

Dan Dixon was a dreamer and very much in love. To others Jean might be just a pretty girl. To him she was rare and precious, and in her lank loveliness centered all the mystery that was womanhood. He pitied all the prosaic people who went their drab way unaware of what they were missing.

Footsteps sounded on the path, from the wrong direction. Dan turned on his side, to see approaching a big dark man in a black low-crowned hat, a checked cotton shirt, a suit of jeans, and dusty scuffed cowboy boots. The stomach muscles of the boy tightened. One man he was afraid of was Cash Tolt. The fellow was a bad character, known to be a killer, suspected of being involved in the deviltry that radiated from Brown's Hole into three neighboring states. His life touched Dan at one vital point. He had taken a fancy to Jean.

Tolt grinned with impudent mockery. "Look who's here—one of Meeker's rising young merchants. Don't get up, Mr. Dixon. I'll sit down with you and have a nice little talk. Maybe you can do a stroke of business, even if it is Sunday. Now I'm fixin' to get married I'll need to stock up my cabin with groceries."

A cold wave went through the boy. He could guess what was coming. "I—I didn't know you were a marrying man, Mr. Tolt," he said.

"As a rule I ain't. I kinda play the field. But when a fellow meets the right girl he can't do better than put his brand on her. Don't you think so, Mr. Dixon?"

"That's a sort of personal question you and the lady would have to decide between you, I reckon." Dan got to his feet, anxious to get away before Jean arrived. "I didn't know it was so late. Have to run, if you'll excuse me. I got an appointment."

"With me," Tolt said, sharp finality in

his voice. "I'll tell you when to go. *Sit down.*"

Dan sat down reluctantly. He knew that Tolt could be as violently eruptive as a volcano. Better not anger him if there was any way of avoiding it.

The bad man had dropped his sarcasm. "Listen, young fellow," he said bluntly. "Me, I get what I want. No kid not yet dry behind the ears can stop me. If you have any notions about Jean Mahoney drop them. I've spoke for her. She's mine. Don't get in my way or I'll step on you."

The boy was frightened, but he was also angry. "You got no right to talk thataway to me, Mr. Tolt," he said. "Like I have to get off the earth on your say-so."

"Boy, you've done said it," the man boasted. "If I tell you to jump in that river you'll jump. I've sent grown men to hell on a shutter because they bucked me."

"I'm not buckin' you." Dan's stomach muscles tightened into icy balls. "But Jean's my girl and I'm not going to run out on her. I just can't do it and I won't."

The sinewy fingers of the bad man, matted with black hairs on the back of the upper joints, fastened on the flesh of the boy's biceps and bit in till the pain made him want to scream.

"Don't do that, Mr. Tolt," Dan cried. "Please."

The pressure increased. Tolt's brutal face shaped itself to a sadistic gargoyle grin. "That ain't nothing yet," he taunted. "I haven't hardly begun."

A FLASH of white showed between the trees. A girl was moving down the path toward them. The breeze modeled the skirt around her slender legs. She swung a straw hat in one hand and the sun caressed her corn-silk hair. Still a little gauche and immature, there was none the less a rhythmic charm in her light-poised grace. The desperado's hand dropped to his side, sultry



eyes fixed on the young woman. He had forgotten Dan. Her presence hit Tolt with an almost physical impact.

The girl stopped in her stride with a shocked astonishment. Both men had risen. She stared at the outlaw, fear in her hazel eyes.

"I promised you I would be back soon," the man said.

The blood ran stormily to her heart. "I told you—I said for you not to come," she protested. "Not ever."

"So you did. And here I am. I don't like my women too tame to start with." His possessive eyes gloated over her. "Me, I like vixens."

"I'm not your woman. I never will be. Why don't you let me alone?"

"You've got in my blood, kid. I've got to have you. Me and the boy here have been talkin' things over. He's about made up his mind he is too young for you. So he's steppin' out of the picture."

"I'm not either," Dan denied. "No matter what you do you can't run me off the reservation. Jean and I are going to be married."

"Get out of here, you damned little squirt," the bad man roared. "I want to talk with this girl."

"We'll both go, Dan," Jean said.

"No. You'll stay." Tolt strode toward the boy. "You're going into the river like I said. Right damn now."

Dan backed away, and as the big man lunged at him he sidestepped. Tolt's foot landed on a small round willow branch that rolled beneath his weight. It flung him forward. One push from the boy was enough. He took a header into the river with a great splash.

The startled eyes of Dan met those of Jean.

"We'd better get away from here," she murmured.

As they ran back up the path toward the town they could hear the man still threshing in the water.

They stopped in front of the hotel. The town basked in the sunshine of a peaceful Sunday morning. People were just coming out of the Methodist church across the square. A few ponies drowsed at a hitch-rack on the other side of the street, but all the saloons and stores were closed.

Jean's fear-filled eyes swept the street. There was no sign of Tolt yet.

"You'll have to leave town and hide," she said breathlessly.

"No," he flung back. "I won't go."

"He'll do you a meanness. He'd as lief shoot you as not."

"What right has he got to crowd me? I'm not scared."

"You are, too. He'll be crazy mad—and he's a killer."

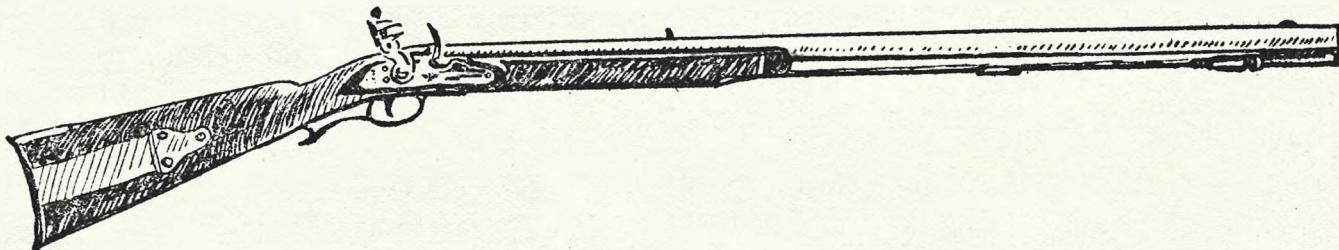
"All right, I am scared," he admitted doggedly. "But I won't run away and leave you to him. I don't pack a gun. He can't murder me. He dassent."

"You're trying to fool yoreself, Dan Dixon. What's to stop him? He's got a mean disposition, a six-shooter that's killed five or six men, and a grudge that will be eating him till he's fixed you. He can fork a horse and light out soon as he has done it."

"If I go he'll pester you until you marry him," he said wretchedly.

Though not yet seventeen, there was a store of good judgment in her. She knew the West in which she lived and how far a bullying bad man could ride over a frontier town. "No, that's one thing he can't do," she replied. "He can kill you, but he can't force me to marry him. If he went too far he would be hunted down like a wolf."

"He's a crazy bully-puss devil, and he might not think of that till afterward." A lump swelled in the boy's throat. The heat of an imperative urge ran through him. She was all he wanted in life. He loved the generosity of her spirit and its warmth. He loved the lithe body that encased it—the outlines of the small firm-pointed breasts, the eyes so quick to mirth or indignation,



10  
the delicate color that came and went in the planes of her cheeks. If he ran away now he might not lose her, but always there would be the feeling in him that he had deserted her in an hour of need. "I'm not going," he told her. "I'll keep under cover today where he can't find me, but that's all."

"He'll look for you at the store tomorrow. If you're there—"

She did not finish the sentence. There was no need to put her fear into words. He understood it.

"I'll be there," he said.

"You mean—you'll just let him find you there?"

"I'll borrow a pistol."

"A lot of good that would do you."

She argued with him but she could not move him.

MATT BRYAN, the town marshal, ate at the hotel and after dinner she drew him aside and told him her fears. He was a bowlegged heavy-set man of forty-five who had fought under Crook in the Civil War and later had campaigned with Miles against the Indians. He put a question to the girl.

"As I understand it, Tolt hasn't even made a threat against Dan. What can I do until he goes into action?"

"Then it would be too late," she answered, her eyes dark with worry.

"Yes. But I'm tied till then. I can't read his mind."

He was a good fearless citizen, one who did his duty even when it involved danger. But he was no match for Tolt with a revolver. She realized that. In the back of her mind was another plan. Meeker was in the heart of a big game country. Every man and every boy big enough to carry a rifle was a hunter. She broached her idea to Bryan and he went for it like a hungry trout for a fly.

While she was still talking with the marshal Tolt straddled into the room. He had dried his clothes in the sun, but his face

was dark with anger. Dragging back a chair at the table, he slammed down into it.

The owner of the hotel, Mrs. Malden, started to wait on him. He waved her aside. "Send the Mahoney girl for my order," he snarled.

Mrs. Malden was affronted, but she knew the man's reputation for violence and she turned him over to Jean.

"Where's yore smart-aleck boy friend?" he demanded harshly when the girl appeared at his elbow.

"I don't know," she replied, a pulse of fear beating in her throat. "He didn't mean to push you, Mr. Tolt. It was an accident."

"That's a lie. Tell him I'll get him if it's the last thing I ever do."

"He's sorry about it. He doesn't want any trouble with you."

"I'll bet he don't. Tell him to go heeled. It's him or me first time we meet. Hustle my grub along."

He bolted his food and left the room, his face black as a thunder cloud. The girl prayed he would not find Dan in his hide-out.

As soon as Jean was through with the dishes she made a round of visits on the most prominent men of the town. Some of them were not enthusiastic in support of her plan. It carried a possible risk of retaliation. But they were Westerners, men who believed that law enforcement rested with the people and not in a shelf of calfskin-covered books. Even those who were reluctant, with two or three exceptions, consented to be a party to it. Her last call was on the editor of the *Sentinel*. Though it was Sunday, he was in his shirtsleeves setting type for a poster. The marshal had already been in to see him. Bill Stevens was a plump pudgy little man with pink cheeks.

"Who is going to tack these up?" he asked.

"I am," she replied. "As soon as you have them finished."

"You don't have to do it, Miss Jean.



There are twenty men in this town with nerve enough."

"Yes, but I don't want any of them killed. Cash Tolt won't dare hurt me while I'm putting them up."

The editor said, after a moment's thought: "I'll put 'em up myself. This town doesn't have to hide behind a girl's skirts."

As it turned out neither of them nailed up the posters. Two young cowboys drifted in, borrowed a hammer and tacks from the editor, and in the gathering darkness fastened them to the doors of stores and saloons, to walls, and to cottonwood trees on the plaza.

Cash Tolt woke up late with a hangover from a night of heavy drinking. There was a thick brown taste on his tongue and he was in a vile mood, a fit frame of mind for a killing. Most of the breakfasters had gone before he reached the hotel dining room. Those still there watched him covertly. Everybody in town knew at whom the posters were pointed.

Jean was not in the dining room and when he asked Mrs. Malden for her the landlady gave him a curt answer. "If you want to see her, Mr. Tolt, you should get up earlier. She's washing dishes and can't leave the kitchen."

He took that sourly but without protest. This morning he had important business on hand and there was no sense in getting into any jangle that might distract him from it. Since he might be in a hurry when he got ready to leave town he probably would not see Jean again today. A meeting with her could wait.

A cigar in his mouth, he strode out to the porch. A poster tacked to a cottonwood tree in the yard caught his eye:

ANYBODY WHO KILLS AN UNARMED MAN IN THIS TOWN WILL BE TRIED BY A CITIZENS' COURT IMMEDIATELY AND IF FOUND GUILTY WILL BE HANGED AT ONCE.

To this notice was attached below the printed names of twelve leading citizens of the town.

Fury boiled up in the bad man. He slewed his head at a lounger seated in a porch chair. "Who put that there?" he demanded.

Andy Roach, a battered old cowpoke,

turned to the bully a wrinkled face weathered by seventy years of desert sun. "I dunno, Mr. Tolt," he drawled. "Must of been done last night. It was there when I come."

Tolt ripped the poster down and tramped it angrily beneath his feet.

The old-timer continued innocently, "Looks like something has kinda stirred up the folks by the way they was all toting rifles to work this mo'ning. Mebbe the Injuns are on a rampage again." His washed-out eyes took in with a faint gleam of malicious mirth the raging gunman.

"I'll show 'em," Tolt shouted. "I'll show 'em they can't hurrah me."

HE STRODE down the street, wrath and hate churning in him. At Charley Grey's boot repair shop a second poster stared at him. He tore it from the wall and warned the cobbler to mind his own business if he wanted to keep out of trouble. From Pat Abbott's saloon door he jerked down another of the notices. He could not shift his eyes without catching sight of the placard. Three trees on the plaza carried it. The windows of stores blazoned the threat.

Tolt stamped into the office of the *Sentinel*, one of the offending bills in his hand. He shook it in the face of the editor, Bill Stevens, who was seated at his desk writing an editorial on law and order.

"You printed this," he bellowed. "I'm gonna blast hell out of you."

The color faded from the face of the editor, but his eyes met those of the killer steadily. His open hands were on the desk, palms up.

"I'm not armed," he said quietly.

The words broke through Tolt's stormy passion with the effect of a shock. He could not kill Stevens, not with posters on every side announcing how swiftly retribution would reach out for him. He could not even destroy this boy Dixon who had outraged his pride and vanity. Not openly at least, in the face of public opinion. But his fury had to have some vent. He snatched up a chair and crashed it on the desk. The printer's font he overturned and pied the type. With one leg of the chair he beat furiously at the press. When he left, the office looked as if a cyclone had passed through it.

The rumor of his violence in the news-

paper office had preceded him along the street. Eyes watched him from store windows and from the doors of saloons. Rifles were within reach of some of these men, perhaps were in the hands of more than one. He wanted badly a drink, but a deep instinct warned him that he had better not stay to gratify his thirst. The fool town was on edge and some crazy hothead was likely to blast lead into him.

In front of Johnson's Grocery a ranchman's wagon stood, his wife in a faded calico dress and poke bonnet holding the reins pending the arrival of her husband from a hardware store. Dan Dixon came out of the grocery carrying to the wagon a box of supplies.

The boy stopped on the sidewalk, his frightened eyes fastened on the bad man. From his cheeks and lips the blood washed.

"I—I'm not armed," he cried.

If Tolt had thought for an instant of finishing the job now and leaving town at a gallop the magic formula brought him back to reason. He would not get fifty yards from where he stood. The rifles would cut him down.

His left arm swept Dan out of his way and flung him headlong into the window. The crash of glass sounded as groceries spilled over the sidewalk. Tolt caught a small boy by the shoulder and walked beside him to the livery stable. He saddled swiftly and left the village as fast as his horse could carry him.

But nobody who knew Cash Tolt believed that he would let this defeat stop him. He was the leader of a rough lawless band in Brown's Hole which would back him in any deviltry. The outlaws might raid the town any day. The love story of Dan Dixon and Jean Mahoney was no longer their own private concern. It had become as much public business as the building of the new brick bank.

The consensus of opinion was that these two youngsters had better get married at once. If Jean was Dan's wife she would be more safe from the pursuit of Tolt. Any attempt to coerce her would put the man outside the law.

Showers of linen and dishes helped to outfit the newlyweds. These gifts they stored away. For the present they lived at the hotel and Jean continued to work in the

kitchen and the dining room. The days ran into weeks and the weeks into months before Cash Tolt appeared again at Meeker.

## II

Jean was completely happy. Joy had vitalized her whole being, had made her beautiful as a wild rose. Mrs. Malden was touched at her lyrical ecstasy. She sang as she made the set-ups for supper and ran forward to meet life as she did to greet her husband when he came home from work. The older woman sighed. The pitiful thing about youth was that it danced on the treacherous quicksands of time with no premonition of the future.

Dan was under no illusion of security. Beneath his deep delight in this girl-wife was the dread of a day of reckoning. In the daytime he could forget it, but in the dark silence of the night after Jean was asleep his imagination pictured the hour when Cash Tolt would come back to shatter the idyllic life they led. He carried the fear with him, but he could not share it with Jean.

Since old Andy Roach had retired from the activities of the range he spent a good deal of time speculating about the affairs of others. He had struck up a friendship with Dan and knew that something was troubling the boy. From a remark young Dixon had dropped he guessed what it was.

"You're scared of Cash Tolt," he said one Sunday morning as they sat on the porch together.

Dan started to deny it and then thought what was the use.

"I reckon I am," he admitted. "I'm scared of what he'll do to me. But that ain't the worst of it."

The old man slanted his sun-faded eyes at the lad. "What worries you most is that you're afraid he'll beat you down so you won't stand up to him. Ain't that it?"

"Yes. I don't want to act like a quitter, but he's such a terrible man I wouldn't have a chance with him."

"Not if you feel that way." The old-timer stopped his whittling and glared at Dan. "What's turrible about him? He's a dirty killer, if that's what you mean. He struts around throwin' a big shadow. But don't let it fool you. Back of a Colt every man is the same size."

"Except that he can hit a dollar flung in the air and I would likely miss a washtub," Dan amended.

"Go out and practice half an hour every day. You'll improve fast. But that's not most important. You're not thinkin' right. He's just a two-legged wolf someone is gonna blast to hell one of these days. Mebbe it will be you if you've got the guts, but not if you insult the good Lord who made you by actin' like a worm." The old cow-puncher's next words came like the crack of a whiplash. "Snap up that red haid of yours."

Involuntarily Dan's head came up as if released by a spring.

"Keep it there," ordered Andy. "Remember you are jest a little lower than the angels. You been givin' dominion. God's watchin' you to see you cover that sorreltop with glory. Hell's bells! Whyfore did he make you in his image if it wasn't to play out the hand that's dealt you?"

The old man's words went to Dan's heart as water does to the roots of thirsty flowers. A man had to play his part without flinching, valor in his soul. If he went through there was nothing to fear even in the cold clean sting of death. A dozen times in the waiting days that followed he recalled the curt injunction to snap up his head. The leaden fear went out of his stomach and the weight from his mind.

Jean noticed gladly the change in him. "What's come over you, boy?" she asked. "You used to act worried and now you are gay."

He gave her an answer she did not understand. "I've been given dominion, honey."

Summer had waned and the frosty mornings of fall had reached the White River country when Andy Roach walked into Johnson's Grocery with news for Dan. Since the young man was waiting on a customer the old-timer dropped the information casually.

"Cash Tolt is payin' a little visit to Meeker," he said in his easy drawl. "Two gents with him, one of them Joe Bodey. The other one, too, has got scalawag writ all over him."

"Headed this way?" asked Dan in a quiet voice that gave no sign of the sudden pounding of the blood in his veins.

"Right now they are taking a little liquid

refreshment at Pat Abbott's saloon. I would not know about future intentions."

Dan finished waiting on the customer, then walked to the back of the store, found a revolver in a drawer, and pushed it down between the front of his trousers and his shirt. He stepped to the sidewalk and looked up and down the street. Carpenters were busy at work on the new bank building, the brick walls of which had been finished and the frame for windows inserted. On the opposite corner was the old bank building, still used for business pending the completion of the new one. Three dust-and-sweat-stained horses drooped at the hitch-rack of Pat Abbott's place. On the street was no unusual activity and no evidence of excitement. This was in the heart of a cow country, fifty miles from a railroad, and cowboys drifted in and out every day.

"What had we better do?" Dan asked Roach.

"I'll get word to Matt Bryan that Tolt is here. After that, we don't do a thing. It's a free country. The Brown's Hole riff-raff have a right to come here when they please long as they keep the peace. You stay right here back of the counter nursin' yore six-gun. Maybe he won't bother you. Me, I'll circulate around and drop word to the boys what guests are with us."

THE trouble with this advice was that it ignored Tolt's interest in Jean. The fellow might have come to take her back with him to the Hole, that roost of bandits where no sheriff's posse ever entered. Dan was so uneasy in mind that he decided to slip up to the hotel and stay with his wife.

Events moved too swiftly for him. Tolt and his companions came out of the saloon and stood on the sidewalk talking for a few moments. They untied their horses from the hitch-rack and without mounting moved them up the street to a tie-bar in the cottonwoods close to the bank. Dan noticed that beside each saddle was a rifle in a leather case. There was nothing unusual about this, since the men from Brown's Hole had come a long way and Ute depredators were still roaming the country.

A heavy-set squat man left the others at the cottonwoods and strolled across the dusty road, spurs dragging. He disappeared into the bank. That was Joe Bodey. He might

have been working for a cow outfit and wanted a check cashed. Presently Tolt flung away a cigarette and followed his companion as far as the sidewalk. Then he passed down the alley between the bank and Dad Parker's billiard hall. A wild suspicion flashed through Dan's mind. There was a side door to the bank. This was a hold-up.

Johnson was not in the store. He was down at the stock pens looking over some beef stuff a rancher had driven to town. Dan ran back to the office, picked up a Winchester from the corner where it lay, and dumped into his hand half a dozen cartridges from a box on the desk.

When he reached the sidewalk again he caught a glimpse of a woman's skirt vanishing into the bank. A long-eared hound lay on the edge of the road nosing itself for fleas. The third Brown's Hole man was in the grove with the horses. He was a tall lank bearded man. The quiet street sat in the sun, a picture of repose.

Dan knew exactly what he meant to do. He cut across the road to the unfinished brick building and climbed the temporary stairs to the second story. He crouched back of one of the empty window frames and rested the barrel of the rifle on the sill.

"What in the hell do you think you are doing?" an astonished carpenter demanded.

"I'm not sure," Dan answered, "but I think there's a bank stick-up."

The man's eyes swept the pleasant scene. He laughed. "You get the damndest ideas, Dan," he scoffed.

When Cash Tolt walked into the bank he found there three customers in addition to the cashier and the president. One of the customers was Jean Dixon. She had been sent by Mrs. Malden to get silver for a ten-dollar greenback, and she was at the teller's window when a harsh voice behind her grated an announcement.

"This is a stick-up."

The words sent a scunner through her. Before she turned her head she knew who had spoken. Tolt was standing back of her, a .45 in his hand. Another bandit was near the front of the building, to make sure that nobody ran out and shouted an alarm.

"Line up over there with yore faces to the wall," Tolt ordered. "All of you but the teller."

Bodey covered the president and the cus-

tomers while Tolt went back of the cage with a gunny sack to get the gold and the bills from the vault. A cattleman named Safford walked in to make a deposit. He joined the line up at the wall, but not until Bodey had collected from him his cash in hand.

"Haven't time to give you a deposit slip right now," the squat robber told him with a grin.

Lung Wing entered by the side door with a two-day take-in from his restaurant and simultaneously Matt Bryan appeared in the street doorway.

"Get 'em up!" Bodey barked at the marshal.

Instead, Matt's hand moved toward the butt of his revolver. The fingers did not get that far. A slug from Bodey's gun crashed into the marshal's side. Bryan grew rigid, then his body began to slump along the wall. Lung Wing went out of the side door as if he had been shot from a catapult.

"Bank lobbely! Bank lobbely!" he yelped as he raced for safety, the long pigtail flapping against his back.

THE sun-warmed languor of the street instantly erupted to swift action. Hoarse voices called, one to another. Feet pounded up and down wooden stairs. A woman tore across the street shrieking. In stores and saloons a dozen men scuttled for revolvers and rifles.

The sound of Bodey's first shot withered the heart of the outlaw guarding the mounts. They had planned a quick getaway with no alarm shouted until they were in the saddle. It would not be that way. The Brown's Hole men would have to fight their way out of town. The bearded bandit dragged a rifle from its boot and set himself to mount.

Inside the bank the excited voice of Bodey called to Tolt, "We gotta get out of here, fellow."

Tolt slammed the long barrel of his revolver against the head of the teller and the man sank to the floor. The robber hurried out of the cage, the loaded sack in his left hand. He waved his .45 at the prisoners.

"We're on our way," he snapped. "Two on one side of us, three on the other. The first one tries to make a break we gun." To Jean he said with a malicious grin, "Stay

right beside me, sweetheart, where you'll be safe."

**S**HE knew how safe she would be. The hold-up had broken badly for the outlaws. Big-game hunters would be gathering for the kill. She recalled now seeing the horses tied in the cottonwoods. There would be a battle in the street before the Brown's Hole men reached their mounts. As Jean passed out of the door she had to step over the body of the wounded marshal.

"Here they come," someone shouted.

At doors, windows, and street corners armed men crouched. None of them fired. The screen of hostages protected the bandits.

As yet nobody had connected the bearded man in the cottonwoods with the robbers. He made a mistake now and called attention to himself.

"For God's sake hurry," he cried.

Three rifles boomed. He went down, his body torn by three bullets.

The sound of the guns sent panic through the hostages. They broke and scurried for safety. Dan's heart turned over at sight of Jean. She ducked back into the bank, Tolt at her heels. Lines of fire concentrated on Bodey. He did not get three yards before he fell.

Dan had not fired a shot. Already he was tearing down the stairs. He raced across the street and into the bank. The marshal was sitting up, propped against the wall. A thin trickle of smoke oozed from the barrel of his revolver.

"He went out the side door with yore missus," Bryan said. "I think I hit him."

"Badly hurt?" Dan asked as he ran for the alley.

"I'll get by," the officer answered.

In the alley Dan met old Andy Roach carrying a Winchester.

"Fellow ran this way," Andy gasped. He was out of breath from running. "Had some woman by the arm. He has been wounded. Reckon he'll hide in the willows."

"He has Jean with him," Dan called back. He was already ten yards ahead of the old-timer.

If it had not been for Jean's danger Dan would have waited for help. Tolt was trapped. They had rifles and he carried only a revolver. But if they crowded him the fellow would use Jean as a screen. It was better not to wait.

There were drops of blood on the grass. Tolt had made straight for the river. He must still be very near. A few yards down the stream Dan saw the foliage of the young willows moving.

A bullet whistled past him. The willows were flung aside and Jean ran into the open. Tolt broke from cover a few yards back of her. The man pulled up, weaving on his feet. He flung another shot at Dan.

Young Dixon's bullet took him in the throat. The outlaw teetered on his heels, swayed forward, and sank down. Life was going out of him before his head struck the ground.

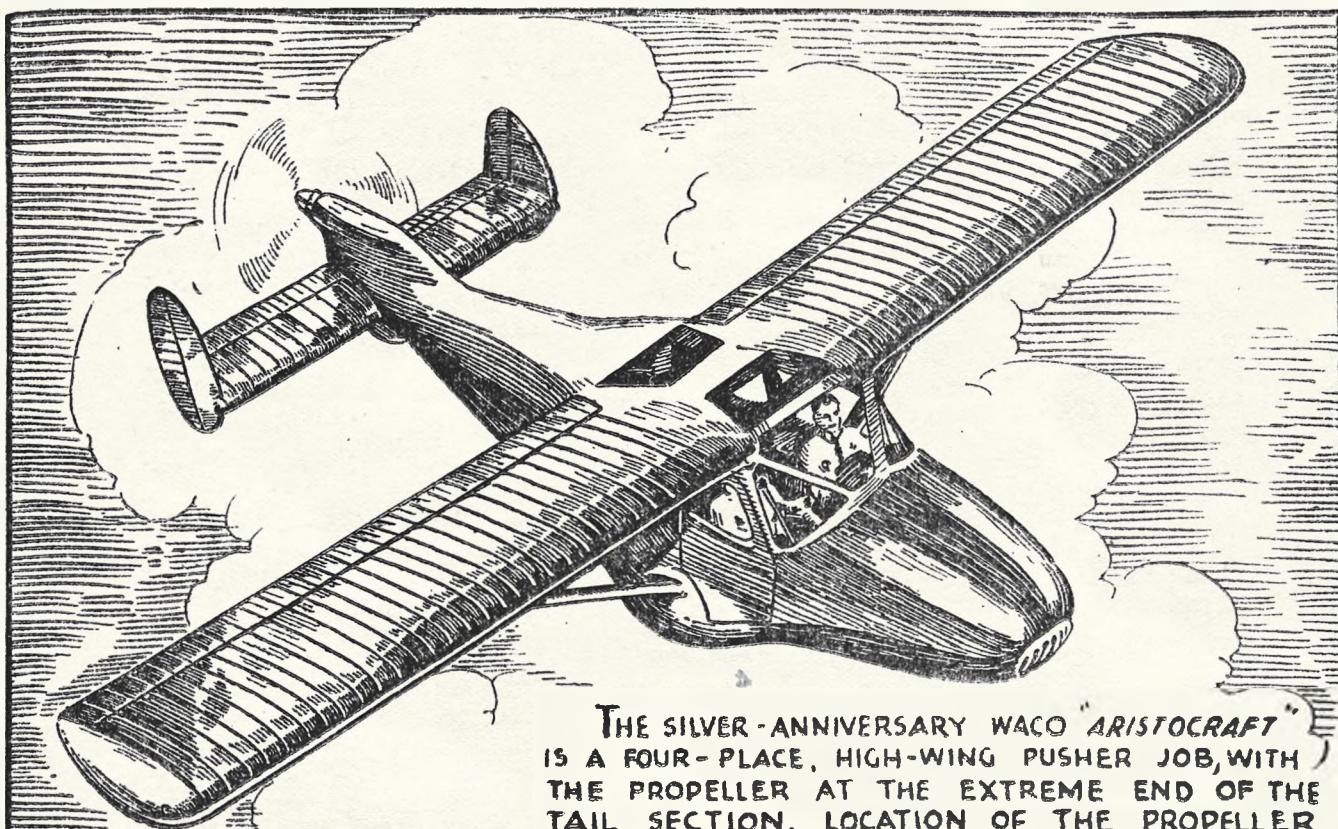
As Jean came into her husband's arms Dan heard Andy Roach's exultant yelp. "You got him, red haid, like I said you could."

Dan felt no exultation, but there was in him a great gladness that Jean was safe. There was nothing in the world to fear now.



# PLANE FACTS

BY  
Jim Tracy

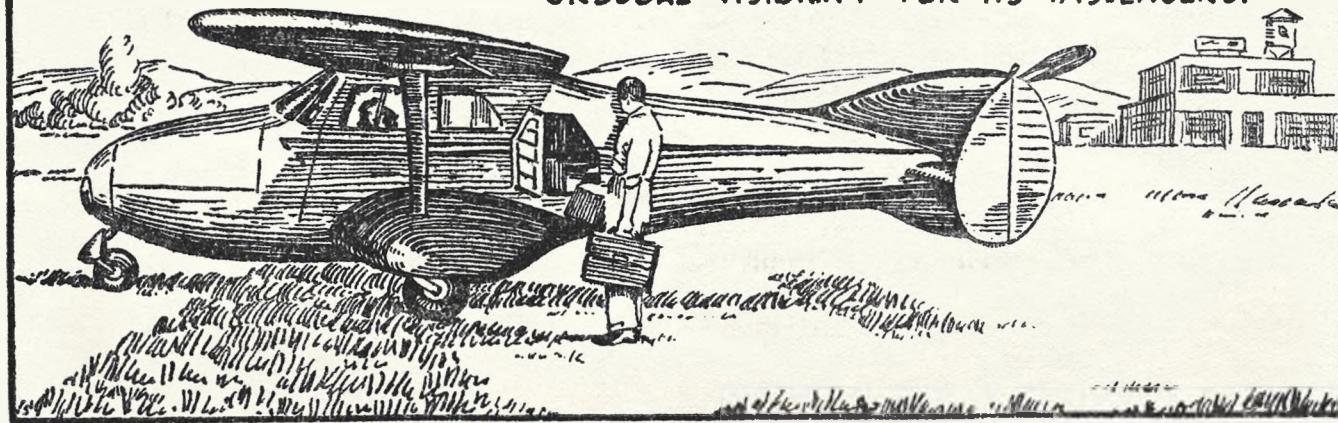


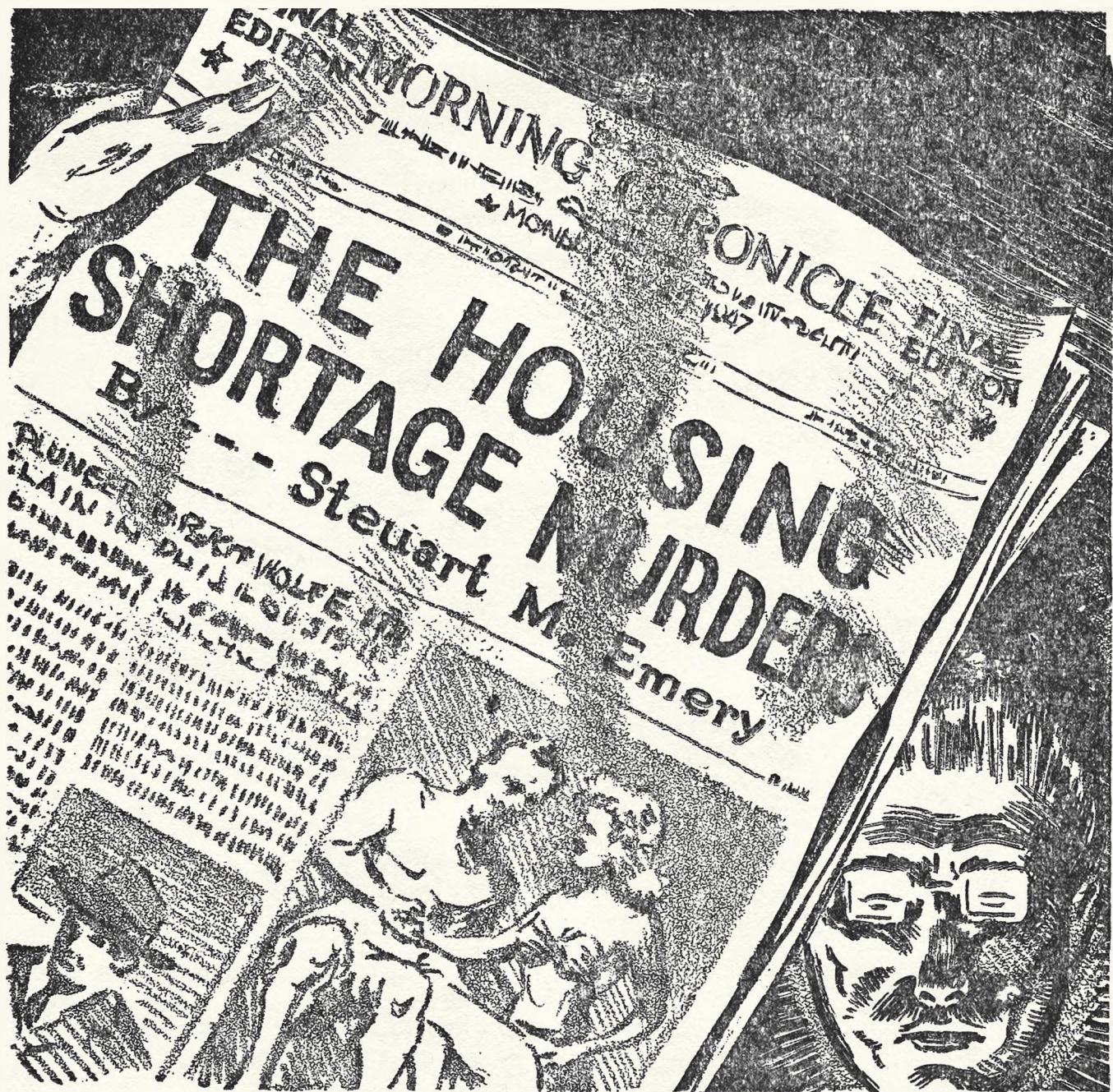
THE SILVER-ANNIVERSARY WACO "ARISTOCRAFT" IS A FOUR-PLACE, HIGH-WING PUSHER JOB, WITH THE PROPELLER AT THE EXTREME END OF THE TAIL SECTION. LOCATION OF THE PROPELLER REDUCES DRAG BECAUSE THE AIRPLANE IS NOT EXPOSED TO ITS TURBULENT SLIPSTREAM.

THE ENGINE IS HOUSED IN THE NOSE OF THE PLANE AND IS CONNECTED WITH THE PROPELLER BY AN EXTENDED DRIVE SHAFT.

THE "ARISTOCRAFT" HAS A RETRACTABLE LANDING GEAR THAT IS SIMPLE AND SAFE. THE CABIN PROVIDES AMPLE ROOM FOR FOUR PASSENGERS AND THEIR BAGGAGE. IT HAS WIDE AUTOMOBILE-TYPE DOORS. ITS DESIGN MAKES THE CABIN EASILY ACCESSIBLE FROM THE GROUND WITHOUT CLIMBING OVER A WING OR STEP.

THE "ARISTOCRAFT" HAS A SIMPLIFIED CONTROL SYSTEM, NON-SPINNING CHARACTERISTICS AND HIGH FACTOR OF SAFETY. A COMFORTABLE CABIN IS TASTEFULLY APPOINTED AND OFFERS UNUSUAL VISIBILITY FOR ITS PASSENGERS.





*Author of "Armored Pay Car," etc.*

IT WAS the swiftest, most merciless shooting that young ex-Captain Hugh Booth, very much civilian-at-large, had ever seen and he had seen plenty of shooting. He stood fixed in his tracks staring into the murk of the alley, hardly able to realize that death had jettisoned not ten yards away from him. The figure still crouched under the sill of the open window that gave onto the ground-floor room of the brownstone front. The gun with the silencer that had coughed dully, unheard by any other ears than Booth's in the myriad noises of after-dark New York, still showed in the shooter's hand. He was leaning forward into the patch of light the window threw into the alley, looking at the result of his work.

He had made his kill. Booth could tell that by the way the man's lips curled back over his teeth under the little waxed mustache. There was a pointed, foxlike nose, small hard features shadowed by the down-drawn, black felt hat. The rest of the man was clad in black, so that he merged into the shadows. One moment he had been nowhere in sight, the next, as Booth had paused in the alley's entrance to the street to light a chance cigarette, he had slid to the window and fired, unaware that anyone had stepped into view. Now he turned to go.

"Stop there, you!" Instinctively the order broke from Booth. Equally instinctively his hand slid under his left armpit and gripped the butt of the service revolver that nested in the leather scabbard. "Halt, damn you!" He was moving with instantaneous reaction



but the black-clad killer had his reactions also. He whirled and his first shot slapped past Booth's cheek as he caught the telltale armpit reach. The second shot whipped after it, an inch closer.

Booth breathed a curse as his Colt stuck in its scabbard. He was used to drawing off the thigh, not from under arm and this unknown killer had him. Then his gun was out and shooting but it was shooting at a shadow that fled along the wall and was swallowed up by the wall inside of twenty spouting paces. Charging forward, Booth caught the slam of a door and the final fade-out of light footsteps. He brought up in

front of a typical alley sidewall of wood, shielding the backyards of the houses facing on the next street. His hand, tearing at the door latch, brought only clicks; the door's inner bar had been shot and his target lost in the maze of washlines, other yard fences and general clutter of a sidestreet's rear premises.

He shrugged and put his gun away. "Action over," he told himself grimly. "Estimate the casualties and report."

No one, it seemed, had heard the shots or perhaps they were used to guns going off in this uptown East Side section, years ago select but long since deteriorated into the

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*With the Housing Shortage What it Is, Well, a Few Murders Mean a Few Vacancies!*

shabby and the insecure. He was walking back toward the alley's mouth to the spot where the open window glowed. Then he was looking through it into the room it aired.

"Right where he meant it to go. That sniper could shoot!"

**S**MALL and blue the hole showed in the center of the dead man's forehead. He was slumped in his high-backed, old-fashioned chair, Vandyke-bearded jaw dropped as though in astonishment, scrawny figure wrapped in a voluminous and aged dressing gown. His eyes bulged glassily behind square steel spectacles. That was enough to nail down the essential facts of the situation. Now decisive action was called for and in four hard years Booth had learned to decide and act quickly. His well-cast face with the lean jaw was older than his age, with the poised expression of a man who has found himself and his capabilities and his generous mouth had firmness. His tall, loose-limbed frame was still down to bone and muscle, unsoftened by civilian life.

He swung swiftly up the alley onto the street, passed the front of the rooming house and went for the area door that showed at the bottom of short steps. It was open, a plump and slatternly shape was revealed that seemed almost to block it, and the shape was speaking.

"No vacancies, I tell yer. That sign 'Rooms' don't mean nothin'. I just keep it there. No vacancies, no vacancies. I am sick and tired o' bein' hauled out to tell you people that. Get along, young lady."

Booth plunged down the steps, hardly aware of the slim figure that turned away from the door. He had a glimpse of a pert red hat, a small, finely chiseled face, a trim figure in a tailored suit and then he and the tailored suit and its contents collided with appalling suddenness. A little gasp came from the girl, she staggered and he reached out and caught her, setting her back on her feet.

"Sorry. Emergency. You're the landlady?" he cast at the slattern, now revealed as an elderly woman with hopelessly disordered hair, in a stained kimono, from whom the odor of aroma of gin exuded none too pleasantly.

"Missus Limpett, yes. No vacancies, I keep on tellin'. It is always an emergency.

First it is this young leddy almost cryin' her eyes out fer a room and now it is you. No vacancies."

"You have a vacancy, Mrs. Limpett," said Booth shortly. "And the police will want to know about it immediately. Your tenant on the alley ground floor has just been murdered. Phone?"

"Murdered!" The landlady's jaw dropped. "Holy saints! Murder on my premises!"

Booth drove past her as she broke into hysterical gabbling. He had spotted the pay phone on the wall of the murky hallway. He was at it dialing operator. He spoke quick and fast, the police answered with remarkable speed. He spoke even more quickly, the old curt note of authority creeping into his voice. There was no dispute from the other end, he caught the orders that put the machinery in motion. "Stay where you are, radio car and the rest coming," the phone barked at him. He stepped back.

"All right, Mrs. Limpett, the police are on the way. In the meantime. . . ." Some strange instinct was prompting him. He had seen the killing, he was the first to view the body, from an ordinary room hunter prowling the streets of New York at the bitter height of the housing shortage he had been projected into the core of murder and he meant to go on with the job. Room hunt to man hunt, he reflected.

"Pass key to the alley rooms, Mrs. Limpett? I'll do the talking to the police when they get here."

"Somewhere I got it. Oh, holy saints, holy saints!" The wail rose to the dingy ceiling.

Booth grabbed the key that was fumbled from a pocket ring and took the stairs in front of him. In the upper hall close by the heavy street door he stopped, found his bearings in an atmosphere laden with heavy cooking and the mingled aromas of a rundown brownstone, and got the door on the right open, stepping in. The body still sat stiffly in its armchair, waiting. Booth stopped abruptly in the center of the room, gone tense and fingers reaching for the reassurance of the gunbutt under his arm. He too was waiting, but for what?

"Nothing," he snapped.

The vague sounds of darkened New York reached in to him in this room of

death. It was a strange, studious and apparently harmless old gentleman he was looking at, from whom life had been foully stricken without warning. The book he had been reading had slipped to the floor. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in a worn scholar's edition, some kind of a green paper bookmark sticking from it. For this particular Duncan life's fitful fever was over.

Booth had seen others like this before, suddenly the scene of the furnished apartment seemed to drift away into a wider one and he was back in the throes of war where bodies in battle dress lay around on the beaches of France and in the snows of Belgium like rag dolls, usually with their bayonets and the muzzles of their rifles still pointed forward toward the victory they had helped win but would not see. Then the Armistice, then assignment to Intelligence in the Army of Occupation, then the long-awaited return home to a land gone short, it seemed of everything. For a week now he had been just another one of the hapless army of apartment and room hunters reaching the stage of prowling the side streets, and this had come.

More was coming. Booth jerked his head up, startled at the quickness with which New York's police turned in on a call. He had hardly had time to catch the wail of the siren before the front door was being opened.

"Oh, my saints!" Mrs. Limpett was bubbling. "To think of a thing like this in my house. Oh, it is you, Lieutenant Riordan."

Two men came into the room. The first to enter was tall and stooped, gone gray in the service, his lantern jaw unusually long under his mustache. His blue police uniform with the lieutenant's insignia had seen long and faithful duty like the man himself. Booth's eyebrows went up as he saw the second man, young and hard-tanned like himself, about a year or so under his own age. He had a stocky and muscular body with wide shoulders, and there was a competent look about him. But he wore khaki officer's trousers and a civilian coat with a white armband around one sleeve.

"Radio car," Lieutenant Riordan cast at Booth. "I was inspecting at the time. First to get the news. Who are you?" He saw the obvious question in Booth's eyes as he stared at the younger man and smiled drily.

"Rookie patrolman on his first week's duty. Name of Rennie. Clothing shortage, no blues yet."

"I turned in the phone tip," said Booth. "Passing by when I saw this man"—he gestured toward the chair—"shot from the alley. Here's my identification." He drew his wallet, picked out the papers and passed them over.

"Seem okay," grunted Riordan. He passed one of the papers to the rookie. "You case this one, Rennie, you know this stuff. Discharge."

Rennie's eyes went along the sheet. "Bulge, eh, Captain?" He grinned. "So was I a Bulger. Airborne Infantry lieutenant. Rugged going."

"Never mind the reminiscences," snorted Riordan. "Now, Mrs. Limpett." The landlady hovered in the door, pop-eyed. "Wait a minute, just who are you and how did you get into this picture?"

The red hat and tailored suit were in the room. The girl stood not four feet from Booth and he saw her clearly for the first time. She was even trimmer and more engaging than at the first casual, almost forgotten glance. From under the amusing hat the brown shoulder bob gleamed in the light with amber tints. Her nose was up-tilted deliciously, her mouth was soft but firm. She had a delectable chin but it was a chin of her own that had recklessness and confidence in it.

"*Morning Chronicle*, Lieutenant. Terry Travers."

"How'd you know this happened so fast? You got a crystal ball?"

"I use a dream book. As a matter of fact, I was room-hunting at the area door when this—ah—er—gentleman"—she directed an appallingly clear stare at Booth—"encountered me, looking for the phone. He encountered me like an Army fullback going through Notre Dame's secondary. Do you think that as a reporter I wouldn't follow up a murder that exploded under my nose? I've already phoned the flash to the City Desk from that pay-box down among the cockroaches and the cabbage soup."

"All right," said Riordan. "You can stay."

"Handsome of you, Lieutenant," said Terry Travers sweetly. Her hand went out and intercepted the papers that Rennie was

passing back to Hugh Booth. Her eyes scanned them. "You've been shot at plenty, I see, ex-Captain Hugh Booth; born Fargo, N. D., age 26, State College graduate, occupation—none as yet, except tank officer and Intelligence."

**A** LITTLE crimson flush began to dye Booth's tan. After all, this was murder, it wasn't a musical comedy. There was something about Terry Travers of the *Morning Chronicle* that was too flippant, almost desperately so, and he sensed some veiled gnawing emotion. The sudden thought stopped. Car brakes had squealed outside and a deluge of men hit the room. Photographers' equipment, laboratory satchels, briefcases swamped the place. Here was Homicide from Headquarters complete with plainclothes detectives and a fast-moving Assistant District Attorney in a double-breasted suit and nose glasses.

"All right, Lieutenant, give," said the double-breasted suit.

"Body's here," Riordan jerked his thumb. "Witness there. Ex-Captain Booth, record okay, Mister Pierce. He saw it happen, reported it."

"All right, ex-Captain Booth, you give," ordered District Attorney Pierce. He spoke in a quick, decisive voice and Booth recognized a man with an alert, keen mind when he saw one.

Booth spoke clearly and concisely while the stare from behind the nose-glasses never left his face. Orders crackled and men left the room, even before he was through. The camera was up and flashlights exploded, the routine of Homicide went into full motion. A pencil was taking down every word Booth uttered.

"Okay, Mister Booth," said Pierce. "You had a right to use your gun on your permit. Also to carry one at night. This is a mugger's town."

"So now we have what?" A full-bodied detective moved an unlit cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "How this guy was shot, yes. Mrs. Landlady, who was he?"

"Oh, my saints!" Mrs. Limpett, suddenly projected into the center of the scene, collapsed on the antiquated couch. Her wild and random air increased. "Sech a nice gennelman roomer. Always so on time with

his rent. Not a friend or an enemy in the world."

"What was his name?"

"Every first day of the month he paid his eighty dollars rent all in one dollar bills."

"What was his name?" demanded Pierce.

"Never a piece of mail did he receive. Never a soul did come to see him. Oh, my tonic. I have the flutters!" Mrs. Limpett put a hand to the bulging bosom of her kimono. "If some kind gentleman would only go down to my kitchen and bring me a glass of my tonic from off the back of the stove. I am that upset."

"Go get Mrs. Limpett her gin," said Lieutenant Riordan wryly. "She has gone into the dithers. But don't give her too much; she either cries or fights on it. Mrs. Limpett, we have known each other a long while. Who was this lodger?"

"He was Eremite Smith, a gennelman of mystery."

"Eremite Smith!" exploded Pierce. "No-body is named Eremite Smith!"

"He was. First day here he come down inter my kitchen fer to get some hot water fer his schnapps when I was a-doin' my daily crossword puzzle and asked him what was a seven-letter word for 'hermit'. 'Eremite,' he says, and cackles in his funny, foreign way. 'I know, because I am an eremite. You may call me, Eremith Smith, Missus Limpett'."

"No letters, no callers, no contact with the world," said Pierce. "Well, we have plenty of those solitaires in this town. What is it, Booth?"

Booth was pointing toward the end of the room, at the table-desk by the front wall where men were going through the drawers.

"Not such an eremite."

The phone showed clearly, standing on the desk.

"Maybe he didn't want anything in writing. Or any visible contacts. I've done Intelligence, Army of Occupation. That kept me over there much longer than my points called for. They were short-handed."

"So?" Pierce's forehead wrinkled. "No contact with any human being, Mrs. Limpett? Except by phone or whoever he met outside?"

"No contack with nobody alive what I knows of. He sat and he read and he read

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outer what he called his classicks. Soy bread he would go outer here with under his arm by the loaf fer his lunch when he took his walk at noon jest as reglar as the clock."

"The soy bread's here, all right." A detective stood in the doorway to the bedroom. "About ten loaves of it in a breadbox in the kitchenette."

"Soy bread and Shakespeare this apartment seems to be furnished with," remarked Pierce. Along the walls were shelves containing rank on rank of battered tomes. The rookie Rennie was over by them, bending down.

"Yes, Mr. District Attorney, and at least twenty of these volumes are furnished with one dollar bills for bookmarks, like the one that fell out of the old gentleman's hand."

Booth stared at the shelves, stacked with the produce of second-hand booksellers. He could see the green paper sticking up from the tops of the dusty pages.

"Oh, he had slathers of them one-dollar bills," gurgled Mrs. Limpett. A half glass of gin was placed in her hand and she inhaled it with skill and gusto. "Once I seen him count out five hundred of 'em."

"Five hundred one-dollar bills?" flashed Pierce. "Just how . . . ah!" A detective had handed him a slip of paper.

"Desk drawer. Only paper in the whole thing."

"Bill of sale for furniture of two-rooms to John Smith for \$500. I see, Mrs. Limpett; it's just as well for you that the OPA is out of business."

MRS. LIMPETT crumbled. "When you can get no dacint rentals and when you have got people knockin' your door down fer rooms and when you got maintenance costs goin' up and when you got . . ."

"Dry up!" ordered Pierce. "Answer these questions."

Booth listened while the stenographer's pencil sped. Nothing was coming out of Mrs. Limpett that would ever be of any help, nothing was being turned up under the intensive and expert search that had been going on. The body, photographed from all angles, was on the ambulance stretcher. Booth had a last look at the figure, waxlike already with a stiff Teutonic air about it. The medical examiner had done his job, everybody had done their job

and the results were exactly zero. Yet behind this murder, Booth knew, as behind every murder some motive must lie. In the face of the waxed-mustached sniper in the alley a ruthless purpose had lain.

"That seems to be about all for now," said Pierce. "Call my office, one of you, and tell them we've wound up the preliminaries."

The detective turned from the routine call, his mouth twitching. When he got it out his voice was hoarse.

"Good God, Mr. Pierce, it just came into your office! Plunger Emil DeWolff shot and killed in his Park Avenue penthouse apartment by a tall, heavily veiled woman in black. Elevator man took her up and back down in less than ten minutes in which she did the trick. Carried up a little blonde job with a private key and a date a quarter of an hour later, and did she yell when she found Emil on the floor?"

"Emil DeWolff shot by a woman! The biggest spender on Broadway. Call the doctor back! Get going! Get going, you entire crew! Never mind this side street stuff. Lieutenant Riordan, I'll turn the premises over to you."

IN SECONDS the place was almost empty. Homicide was off on the case of the year, perhaps of the decade, with all its staff and equipment.

"Big promotion for whomever cracks that one," said Lieutenant Riordan. "Nothing for anyone here. Rennie, I'll leave you on the spot." He turned and made for the door. "Mrs. Limpett, you better go to bed."

"Go to bed!" shrieked the landlady. "I'll never sleep a wink! Me, I am goin' to the nearest tavern."

Booth drew a cigarette and lighted it thoughtfully. He and the rookie smiled at each other. They had plenty in common. From the desk a voice was speaking in coolly practical accents. Terry Travers was at the telephone.

"*Chronicle?* City Editor Bascom, please. Mr. Bascom? This is Terry Travers. Beautiful, pistol-packing veiled lady has bumped off Plunger Emil DeWolff in his Park Avenue penthouse. The DA and his mob scene just left here for there. Do I get things done for you, or don't I?"

## II

"HERE'S how, Bulger."

"Mud in your eye, Bulger."

Booth and Rennie sat in the easy chairs lifting glasses that held a colorless liquid. Everyone else, including the girl Terry Trav-ers, had left long ago. The drink went down and Booth tingled all over.

"That was a squarehead went out on the stretcher," he said. "Not a Holland Dutchman even if this is the best of Holland schnapps we looted from the kitchenette. All Germans adore Shakespeare; they even claim he's German."

"Sure it was a squarehead, Eremite Schmidt, no doubt. What does that buy us? One more refugee with a wad, hiding away in New York, but hiding from what?"

"From somebody who wants something that's in this apartment, these rooms. That sniper was all readied to come in over the window sill after he'd fired."

"Marvelous, Holmes," grinned Rennie. The more Booth saw of this rookie cop the more he liked him. He looked a little easy going, but he would be a good man in a jam. "Down the hatch again and give us a clue."

Booth shrugged. Nothing made sense to him around this place so far. The squarehead, Eremite Smith, had seemed as inoffensive an old recluse as they came. A profusion of dollar bills could be plain eccentricity. The gunman had vanished and the police questioning had produced no one who had seen him flee through the back-yards. It was a clean killing and a clean getaway.

"Nice of you to stay on and keep me company, Booth," said Rennie. "From now till I get off duty at 8 a.m. is a long haul. And my wife at home is expecting."

"Well, well, Bulger. Here's to the little Bulger." Booth also grinned. "And it's not necessarily so damn' nice of me to stay and keep you company. I live here."

"You—huh?"

"Squatter's rights. I've moved in." Booth thought back over the procession of hopeless, nervous days. "This apartment has certainly come vacant and I've grabbed it. Possession is nine points of the law, isn't it, or it used to be regarding billets overseas. I've been put out of my hotel

room I had for seven days only, my kitbag is in the Grand Central checkroom, and I figured I might have to crawl onto the same shelf with it."

"Captain Booth," said Rennie. "I do not see why you did not emerge from the war at least a colonel. This two-room palace is yours as far as I'm concerned. Living room, such as it is . . ." He gestured at the bare and worn furnishings. "A bedroom like a barn, even a private side door entrance into the alley off the slumber chamber. Thank heaven, my wife nailed us down a flat while I was over yonder. Plenty of the boys from this neighborhood where I was born go on the force, police or fire, after which they generally marry the girl from the next block. We're New York East Side hicks. And, speaking of the girl from the next block I married, I think I'll buzz her now I've got the chance and say good-night. We use our building phone."

He worked the dial, the cheerful grin widening. "Hello, Superintendent. Rennie talking. . . . What's that, Superintendent? WHAT? Good God! St. Stephen's . . . half an hour ago. . . ."

Young Rennie's weathered face went tautly white. He looked as though he had had a shock and a bad one. "Yes, yes . . . I'll get there on the run. I'll. . . ." He dropped the receiver. "Cripes, I'm on duty, Booth! My wife's in St. Stephen's emergency maternity two weeks ahead of the date. She was just about able to yell up the super who called the ambulance. And I can't go! It'd cost me my shield, and that's not even safe yet to run out on this watch detail without a relief. I'm nailed down here till 8 a.m.!"

He began to sweat. Rennie looked like an ex-lieutenant who had been a tough man when lead was flying, but this was different. It had gotten him.

"Remove the nails, Rennie," said Booth brightly and poured a splashing drink into Rennie's glass. "Stiff shot for the expectant father. Here's your relief—me. I certainly am capable of sitting in this room and seeing that nobody removes the paint from the radiator until you have Rennie, Jr., presented howling, to your sight, blue bootees and all. Get going, Rennie. I'll cover you up."

"Booth, I'll do it! You've done Intelli-

gence. You'd be even better than I would if anything turned up here. So long! Call me at St. Stephen's if something breaks."

HE PLUNGED out of the room and Booth heard the slam of the front door and Rennie's fast-fading footsteps. New York's newest father-to-be was on his way and Booth sank back relaxed and drowsy. At last the long hunt was over, he had a roof over his head. A complete lassitude began to seep into him; he hadn't realized how tired he was.

He moved to the wall and clicked off the switch. A vague eerie light poured in through the front windows from the street and in it the chair in which Eremite Smith had died was a dark blur. Surroundings like this were not going to bother him, reflected Booth; he had slept in too many places before where death had struck. He stretched full length on the couch, coat and shoes removed in the semi-murk, eyes closing.

"If the phone rings for Eremite Smith, string the guy along and trace the call," his last thoughts ran. "If anybody drops in, hold them for the coppers." Then he was plunged into deep sleep, unconscious of time.

He sat up suddenly. The old training had clung, a noise of the wrong sort had wakened him and it had come from somewhere inside the rooms. Alert in a second, he listened. Footsteps sounded lightly behind the closed door of the bedroom. He caught another cautious sound. The side door had been closed behind the secret entrant. Again the footsteps paced and a band of light slid beneath the ill-fitting door sill. The intruder had turned the light on.

Booth swung up and onto his stocking feet.

He had his gun in his right hand and he moved fast and noiselessly for the bedroom door. Whoever it was in there, creeping into the late Eremite Smith's apartment would be dangerous. More than that, they would be murderous and if it was the waxed-mustached sniper with the uncanny aim, it would be the man who got the first shot in that won. He gripped the doorknob, turned it, flung the door open and leveled his automatic at the figure that

whirled around from the bureau, every fiber in him keyed for gunfire.

"You!"

"You wouldn't shoot a girl who has both her hands up and combing her hair, would you?"

Miss Terry Travers stood in front of the bureau, her hat and handbag tossed onto it and a comb poised over her brown-amber head. Her eyes had flicked with surprise, but she appeared to look quite calmly into the bore of the forty-five. A most remarkable young person.

"Always plunging wherever you go? First you knock me down, are you now going to knock me off?"

"I . . . ah-uh . . ."

"And just what are you doing here? Two hours ago I left . . ."

"I stayed on. I live here."

"So do I."

"You w-what!" Words failed Booth.

"Don't scratch your head with that gun barrel, it makes me nervous. I'm a room-hunter the way you are, on the prowl, and I guess we've both reached the point where we're without scruples or kindness to our fellow hunters. Dog eats dog and crawls into his doghouse. This is the first vacancy I've found and I need one. I'm out where I live."

"Hotel? Your time lapsed, like mine?"

"Rooming house." Terry smiled queerly. "Two hundred and fifty pounds of landlady sitting on my trunk. Eviction at eve for lack of two week's rent. My worldly goods."

She gestured toward the bed and on it Booth saw the already opened overnight bag. "Nighties, toothbrush, vanishing cream, other feminine mysteries. I know a side-door key when I see one. I saw the one to this alley on the stand in the front room, so I snatched. If I don't live here, I live in City Hall, Bryant or Central Park, third bench on the right as you come in, please leave one pint of milk, will pay you tomorrow, maybe."

"Broke? You're broke and evicted? But you've got a job on the *Morning Chronicle*!"

"I hope, I hope." Terry's eyes glistened. "This case exploded as I said, under my nose. I'm using it to get a job on the *Chronicle*. I just claimed I belonged. That rock-faced City Editor Bascom I phoned, who told me this afternoon he took on no

gals without metropolitan experience, told me to go ahead with the on-the-spot tip I phoned him. Captain Booth, as a WAC, I passed the Rock of Gibraltar. The north side of it bears a startling resemblance to the face of every city editor I've asked for a job in New York for the last two months. The Emil DeWolff business Bascom is sicking his star men on, naturally, not me."

"You're here. You stay," smiled Booth. "Your rights are as good as mine. After all, with that private door into the alley, this is really two separate one-room apartments. You can barricade the connecting door."

"I shall trust to the rugged frontier honesty which I discern in your North Dakota face," said Terry. "I'm a Western gal myself, who came on to the big town looking for a career. The old story, one more moth Manhattan gave the mothballs to."

BOOTH started and turned abruptly. It was the telephone jangling and he reached it fast. Here was some unknown link with the outside world reaching into the rooms where death had struck, looking for Eremite Smith.

"Yes," he said in a deliberately muffled, practically indistinguishable voice, lifting the receiver.

"Is that you, *Johann, mein bruder?* This is Otto," said a voice in German.

"Yes, it is *Johann, Bruder Otto*," said Booth in the same language.

A string of guttural, rapid and tense German followed. Booth could catch most of its meaning but not all.

"Speak English, Otto," he said with a stiff accent. "Where are you?"

"The pay booth, Joe's Tavern, it iss very near to you. Your special delivery letter, Johann, just to hand, it puzzles me. You say you fear we are followed, you have transferred it to a safe place. You say it is at the Sign of the Little Black Duck."

"Yes," repeated Booth, "The Sign of the Little Black Duck."

"What are you talking about? Shall I come to your rooms?"

Booth touched the dull blue of his automatic, under his arm. "Come in, Otto," he said stiltedly. "I shall explain my letter."

"I am coming to you immediately. I am . . . Johann, there are two men outside

this booth! They are . . . *Gott, Johann!*" The scream rose and it carried over the connection—the thud carried also. Then silence. Somewhere close at hand in the night at the other end of the telephone wire destruction had smashed for the second time that night. Booth was up, mind racing.

"Joe's Tavern, near here, somewhere. Dirty work on Eremite Smith's brother."

"Joe's Tavern?" Terry pointed at the wall. "Almost directly opposite the mouth of this alley, next street. I live in this neighborhood. I've passed it any number of times. Tough dump where anything could happen."

"It has. It's happened in a phone booth. I'm off to see who it was that got it. And fast!"

"You give me what you find and my job is sure."

"You get it!" Booth was in the bedroom before he realized he had grabbed out his automatic and had it in his hand. He pivoted, thinking. I'm leaving the gun for you," he called. "You'll be alone. Can you use one?"

"I'm from Texas," called back Terry. "We don't slap wolves' faces, we buffalo them with the barrel. Put it on the bureau."

"It's there. Dropped back of your handbag."

Booth went out of the sidedoor and down the shadowy alley as fast as he could travel. He spotted the neon sign across the street and went for it. The door opened and he walked in, pulling himself to an easy stroll. This was not the nicest sort of neighborhood tavern into which he had walked. Its walls were discolored, its pair of bartenders in soiled jackets, a majority of its patrons unshaved or with glaring make-up. Mrs. Limpett huddled at a table by the wall with three empty glasses in front of her and the air of an habitual customer. No telephone booth showed in the main room which was crowded and reeked of alcohol, but Booth saw the passage at the back and made his way between the drink-splotched tables and sodden patrons. There it was, crowded against the building's side wall, out of sight of the main room, a perfect trap for anyone who used it.

He went down the empty passage and shoved at the door, expecting the block of a body behind it. There was none, the booth

was bare. Yards only beyond was a back door and a trash can filled with debris stood beside it. Old newspapers from it littered the floor between the booth and the door. Booth bent down and lifted the nearest one, seeing what he expected to see. The darkish stains had been covered up with the nearest material at hand. He went on to the door, opened it and stepped into a murky back-yard, lit by a single dim bulb on the far wall. Unless the killers had carted the body all the way to the street and to a waiting car through the opening to the lane he could make out it would be around here somewhere.

He caught the blur of the big box and moved to it. It was the yard's refuse bin, handled and roomy. He lifted the lid and a smelly wave of dust and trash struck his nostrils. Then his match flared and he saw what was in the box, the huddled limp shape of the man, his head and face indistinguishable under the battering they had taken.

"Slugged once or twice in the booth, then all identity battered off him out here," thought Booth. "They sure cover their tracks, this gang. Another job for Homicide's busy little bees."

He went back fast to the pay booth and ruffled the tattered directory, dropped his coin and dialed. "St. Stephen's" came the answer.



"Get me Police Officer Rennie, waiting room, maternity ward. Emergency." In a minute Rennie answered. "That you, Rennie? Booth. Everything okay so far?"

"So far, Bulger," came the reply and Renny sounded cheerful. "Won't be long

now before New York has another new citizen."

"New York has lost another old citizen. I'm at Joe's Tavern, near the alley. There's a body in the yard trash bin those buzzards who got Eremite Smith knocked off. Listen." Briefly he spoke. "You'll have to beat it down here I'm afraid, Rennie. This is supposed to be your report, not mine. The story is you got that phone call and investigated, not me. You don't want to get slung off the force with an addition to the family on your hands. You better hike it here."

"I'll have to. Coming right away, Bulger. Will you wait?"

"Yes, here in the backyard. Come straight through the tavern down the passage into it and the bin with the body is against the wall." Suddenly a strange tingling ran through Booth. "No, Rennie, no. I'm not waiting here! I'll be waiting over at Smith's rooms. Terry Travers, the newspaper gal, came back and she's there alone now."

"Okay."

BOOTH shouldered down the passage and went fast through the ill-smelling main room. No one looked at him. Not a head had turned, it was clear, toward the passage when the dull crashing of the black-jacks had destroyed the man Otto, their sound muffled by the still-blaring radio. Not only the vocalist on the radio was blaring. Mrs. Limpett, crimson of face and blood-shot of eye at her solitary table, was shrieking at an unimpressed and dingy waiter. She had moved from the mournful to the appallingly belligerent in her travels from brownstone to nearest bar.

"Yer'll serve me no more—yer jughead? I am a leddy, I'll have yer know I have never been drunk in my life. If the likes of yer that works in this dirty place won't serve a leddy in her troubles, I'll . . ."

"Lay off," suggested the waiter. "Or your left ear will hit the pavement."

"Yer ain't no gennelman, yer ain't! Why, yer . . . Throw me out and I'll pick up a brick outside and sling it through yer front window."

Booth went on, struck the open air and headed for the alley's mouth. No longer was the alley clear, his pace quickened at the sight of the small black coupé drawn up in it against the side door, its rear to him.

No one was in it. He reached it and stopped. There were voices, so low he could hardly hear them in the two-room apartment of death. The car had brought visitors.

"California license," he told himself, staring at the plate. "Challis Townster. No police car." Old instinct from his Intelligence service sent his hand to pencil in his vest and for an envelope from inside his coat. He wrote and tore, throwing down the unused half of the envelope and folding the noted number into the upper breast pocket. "California, here I come!"

Cautiously he tried the side door. The knob revolved but it was locked from the inside. Again he caught the low, indistinct voices and they were the threatening voices of men. He crept past the empty car and looked through the inch-high gap between the drawn-down shade of the living room and its sill into a room that was not empty. It was filled with menace.

The fox-faced man was back but the wax mustache was gone. He had shaved it off and his black garb had gone also. He wore a dull gray felt hat and a subdued gray suit and no description of him Booth had given the police would fit him any more. Somewhere close by he must have effected the transformation that gave him safety in the streets. Another man was with him, in a checked sportsjacket through which his muscles seemed to bulge.

The fox-faced man stood in profile to Booth, the sportsjacket had his back to him. On the chair between them, white-faced but game, sat Terry Travers. The baseboard of the wall was ripped out for three feet and a mass of packaged and loose currency lay on the floor in front of it. Never before had Booth seen so many one-dollar bills. The loose ones looked like a snowstorm in green. But neither waxed mustache nor sportsjacket even glanced at them.

"All right, smart gal, you talk," ordered the fox-faced man.

"Don't rush me," said Terry. "Let a girl get her breath, will you?"

"Maybe I better poke her, Denver," suggested the sportsjacket.

"Lay off a while, Hollywood," said the fox-faced one. "Now, you . . ."

"I'm still trying to recover from the shock of having a gun shoved in my back while I was trying to rustle up a pot of coffee."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm a newspaper gal, Terry Travers, of the *Chronicle*, who was covering the murder story. I came back after Homicide left to do a little investigating on my own and found the place empty. Are you going to light me a cigarette or let me have one of my own?"

**S**HE was speaking slowly, coolly, her poise recovered and Booth sensed that there was a meaning in every one of her words and actions.

"You missed what you came for, didn't you?" The fox-faced man called Denver had lit and handed her a cigarette and she gestured with it toward the open baseboard. "Was it ever there?"

"It was there last night, I saw it myself. Smith took it out and showed it to someone. So I came back for it. Now it's gone."

"I know who has it."

"You what?" said Hollywood. "Lissen, you, come across and come across quick. We want the Big Bundle. Don't stall."

"I'm not stalling," answered Terry. "I'm trading. Do you let me go if I tell you what I know?"

"Spit it out, you little . . ."

"Lay off, Hollywood," snapped Denver waspishly. "Yes, Terry Travers, we'll let you off but not until the Big Bundle is in our hands."

"So I can buy my freedom by a squawk?"

"Freedom?" Denver's voice was murderous. "What you're buying is your life, you little fool. Make up your mind and make your choice."

"Oh!" gasped Terry. Her hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes traveled the room wildly. "Is the ante that big?"

"When something is worth one million dollars, nobody is big enough to get in the way. Spill your info quick or we take you along with us."

"OH!" gasped the girl. "Oh—I think . . . I think . . . I'm . . ."

"Going to faint, huh?" snarled Hollywood. He slapped Terry in the face and her head jerked back. "Oh, no, you're not!"

Booth was down, traveling fast for the bedroom window. Rage rode him, almost blanketing his vision and then it cleared and he was ice-hard. His own gun should still be lying, hidden by the handbag, on the

bureau, and if he could get it and take Denver and Hollywood from the rear. . . .

A NOTHER thought struck as he reached the bedroom window and gripped its low sill. Terry Travers had the secret of the mystery they had stumbled onto, in minutes only after he had left, she had solved it. But the men who were after it would kill her the way one killed a fly to get that secret from her.

"She's coming to," he heard Hollywood say. "Shall I . . ."

Booth swung up and onto the sill, doubling his body to pass through. There, within yards only of him, lay the gun. He would have it in his hands in seconds. And then his grip slipped, his body came around in a sudden wrench and he was falling headfirst onto the floor, helpless.

"What in hell!" burst the cry from the next room. Feet sounded. Booth was on his hands and knees staring into the muzzle of a gun with a silencer on it. Hollywood had him and for the first time he saw Hollywood's face above the loud silk scarf tucked into the neck of the glamorous sports shirt.

It was as round and lineless as an infant's, the eyes were round, the mouth was a small purse. It was the face of a baby—but a cruel baby.

"Up, damn you! In here!"

Hands in the air, Booth went into the front room.

"Here's a punk crawled in the window."

"So it's you!" snarled Denver of the late waxed mustache. "Broke things up from the start, didn't you? You've put your nose into something that isn't your business once too often."

His gun swerved to cover Booth's stomach. Booth's throat constricted. "I suppose I have," he said.

"We've had this spot cased for a fast return call. What brings you back to it?"

Watched, yes, the place had been watched. But they had missed seeing him leave by the alley, it came to Booth. They did not know that he had seen the body in the refuse can, that the police would be back and into these rooms any minute.

"I have no place to sleep in, neither has this girl. We've moved in here. Two homeless room hunters. Yes, it's none of our

business what you're after, but we've gotten ourselves in it."

"So you take it. Here and now." Cold, vicious purpose threaded the words. Here was a trigger man, by choice. "We'll dump you somewhere en route. This place is getting too many people in it. The girl goes along with us and when she gets to where she's going, she'll sing. Stand over and face that wall, you!"

He jerked his thumb. The pit of Booth's stomach went empty. This was another cold-blooded killing he had run into but it was his own. And the girl was going with the killers. Instinctively he measured the distance between Denver and himself. In his last living second he was going for him but he knew that Denver would get him first and that Hollywood would have a shot into him midway of his jump.

"Why knock him off?" Terry's voice cut into the pregnant pause. She had one hand to her cheek where the flush of Hollywood's blow showed. "He'll trade, too, if you take him along. I only know who has the Big Bundle, but he knows where it is."

Denver's gun muzzle wavered. "That's right?"

Out of a dry mouth Booth spoke. Time, this girl Terry Travers had bought them both time. Time in which they would be together.

"Yes, I know where your Big Bundle is."

He strained his ears, listening for possible sounds in the alley outside that would tell him Rennie was on the way. But there was none.

"You'll come along," ripped out Denver. "The girl goes in the front with us. You go in the luggage compartment and there isn't going to be a chance of a peep out of either of you until we get you in the right place. Hollywood, go to work on the girl first."

Hollywood's baby face smiled horribly and he stepped forward with something thin and shining that came from his pocket. He gripped and swung the girl's wrist up, he drove the needle in and pressed its plunger so quickly the girl had hardly time to know what was happening. Then he stood back.

"Bye-bye for a while. We've done this before. Even faster than the old sleeping pills. Now, you, into the bedroom with your hands behind you."

Booth walked into the other room and stood against the bed. He felt the coils of a handkerchief wound around his wrists, pinioning them tightly and then other coils went around his ankles.

"Lay down, you!" A violent push between the shoulders sprawled Booth face down across the bed, as helpless as a trussed fowl. These men, Denver and Hollywood, were experts in every branch of their work. He heard Hollywood moving back into the front room.

"Okay, Hollywood," rose Denver's voice. "She's about ready to go. Stow those ones back in the baseboard. We've got no time for that small lettuce."

"Hell, there's about five thousand. . . ."

"When we can maybe have something worth a million by dawn? Shut up!" There was a medley of small sounds and then Denver spoke again.

"Case outside. She's cold."

With an effort Booth got himself around on the bed. Hollywood came into the bedroom, flicked off the light, opened the side-door and stepped into the alley. He was back immediately.

"Clear. Hoist her aboard."

The light in the front room was cut and Booth made out the dim shapes of the two men, supporting the limp figure of Terry between them. They crossed the bedroom, stepped into the alley and in a moment returned bending over him.

"Needle him," snapped Denver.

"Needle's fresh out," said Hollywood. "But I can fix him. He don't ride in the front seat."

He tore the silk handkerchief out of Booth's breastpocket and crammed it violently into his mouth. But it was skilfully done, he could breath if he couldn't utter a sound. The two men swung him up, lugged him through the door and then he was being lowered into the open luggage compartment in the back of the car. Lolling against the cushions of the front seat he had made out Terry.

"Off and clear," said Denver. "This Smith business will be nothing but a pinprick in the coppers' necks by tomorrow when the big stuff busts loose."

The luggage lid slammed down but a prop had been put into it to keep it an inch open for air.

"Popped in the penthouse. Squarehead plunger playboy found by faithful valet entering to draw the master's bath at eight-thirty. Emil extinct. Police dragnet combs city, newspapers nuts."

"Close your trap, Hollywood. We want out of here. Drive and do it fast."

Booth wrenched into a position that was cramped but not unbearable. A chaos of thought began. Penthouse . . . playboy . . . Emil . . . this was reminiscent stuff and newly reminiscent. Somewhere in all this tangled mass of mystery that included Terry, the Big Bundle, Eremite Smith, Brother Otto and now penthouse and playboy there were threads that interwove, threads stained red for murder, but they must all come together in the center of the web. He stopped thinking, stopped figuring on this line. He had other things to think of. Terry's life and his own.

The car was moving now along the alley. In another moment it would be out of the alley's mouth, opposite Joe's Tavern and on its way to wherever it was going. And to try to figure out the route of a car, in the black darkness of a luggage compartment would be impossible. To judge by ear would be useless.

There was something suddenly that could be judged by ear. It was a wild yowl that rose close at hand and the brakes screeched on. Someone was in the alley, blocking it.

"Run down a leddy would yer, yer muggers! Tryin' to kill an honest woman!"

"Get out of the way!" rasped Denver's voice. "You're drunk. Get out of the way, I tell you!"

"Kill an honest leddy on her way home! Call her a drunk, insult her with no one to protect her! No, I will not git outer yer way until yer apologize. I shall call the police!"

It was the voice of Mrs. Limpett, the embattled landlady, ringing in the alley. It rose louder. "Poleece! Polee . . ."

"You blasted hag!" A savage oath burst from Denver. "Get her with the fender, Hollywood. Bump her against the wall and drive like hell. She'll have the coppers on us."

"Poleece! Arrgh, warrgh!" There came a gasp as the car jumped forward and took an obstacle, brushing it aside. "Yer . . . yer . . . Take this in yer dirty mugs!"

A shattering crash penetrated to Booth.

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It was glass. Mrs. Limpett had fulfilled her promise of finding a brick in the street but it had not gone into the front window of Joe's Tavern. It had gone through the windshield of the black coupé that was now running smoothly and fast.

"The old witch!" came Denver's snarl. "She's flat on her bottom, breathless for a minute. Lose this job in traffic as fast as you can."

"Losing it," said Hollywood. The car jerked abruptly, obviously out of the alley onto the side street, ran fast and Booth sank back into his pit of darkness and lost hope. He had been wrestling with his bonds but they held, unyieldingly. There seemed to be little chance that they would not continue to hold until his finish, which appeared to be closer than he cared to think about.

### III

"WUXTREE, wuxtree! All about the big penthouse moider! Wuxtree!"

The shrill call came in to Booth. The car had stopped and he could tell that it was in a crowd of traffic at a cross-street waiting for the light to go green. It had dodged and angled since it had left the alley, once putting on velocity in the straightway he had judged that it was a Third Avenue from the crashing rumble of an elevated train overhead. Now, it was stalled temporarily and in among the traffic some enterprising newsboy was penetrating.

"Wuxtree, wuxtree! All about the big Park Avenoo penthouse moider! *Mornin' Chronicle!*"

"Boy!" Denver's voice lifted tautly. "Over here! Two copies."

"Hey, mister," came another voice, one sharp and questioning with authority. "Where'd you get that windshield?"

A wild hope surged in Booth. This was the traffic officer speaking, an older man by his voice, experienced and quick to act. The black Townster must have pulled up in front rank at the red light. He wriggled, trying to get to his feet to kick at the roof of his cage. Muffled thuds coming from inside the luggage compartment would be promptly investigated. But he could not get himself around.

"Ran into a hunk of lumber sticking out the back of a truck in the jam coming onto

the Queensboro Bridge, Officer." It was Hollywood speaking casually. "I'm insured. It won't cost me a dime."

Quick silence fell. The officer must be still staring. "And the lady?"

"My wife, Officer," offered Denver. "It was a party to celebrate the housewarming of friends of ours. Just landed a small house out on the Island. You know what those things are like, particularly these days. Afraid she had one over the eight but I'll have her home in a couple of minutes. All right, honey?" The tone made Booth grit his teeth. "She's perfectly okay. Just sleeping on my shoulder."

Horns tooted in the mad clamor of nervous New Yorkers waiting in a jam for the light to turn. Whatever the officer said was drowned out. But the car moved suddenly forward, clear. Depression settled over Booth, his one break in the luck had gone wrong. He hardly realized that the car had stopped inside of a minute. It remained motionless a long while before he heard movement and the lid of the compartment swept up.

"Yank him!" ordered Denver.

Booth was hauled out and dragged to his feet. He stood in a rear courtyard, mysterious in the moonlight with the walls of tall apartment houses hemming it in. A service alley ran to the side street beyond. He swept his glance here and there, trying to fix on something that would give him a hint as to the locality.

"Bag him."

A rough sack went over Booth's head, blinding him. Hands picked his pockets. The bonds were ripped from his feet and he was being hustled forward. Just as the bag came down he had seen the front seat of the car. It was empty, the girl was gone. He heard a door open and then he judged by the sound of their group's footsteps that he was being shoved along a hall. There came a flight of stairs and subconsciously he counted them . . . twelve steps. Another door opened, his hands were freed. He was given a shove and the door closed and its lock caught. He got the bag off his head and the gag out of his mouth and stared around.

He was in a small boxlike, utterly bare room with a single stripped cot as the only furniture in it. Several trunks were piled

against the wall. On the cot lay Terry Travers, breathing deeply and easily. Her face was flushing a little and she was coming to. In the corner stood a running water basin and Booth dipped his handkerchief and began to bathe her face in the cold water. She murmured, her eyes opened and she looked uncomprehendingly around as her senses slowly cleared.

"Take it easy," he told her. "You've been needled but it was only a little shot. We're locked up somewhere in the Borough of Manhattan. That's all I can tell you. And I mean we're locked up."

A single window hardly more than two feet across and four feet high loomed in the wall and beyond the glass it was barred. This was a combination trunk room, and maid's room of some kind, barren and dreary. He went to the door and tried its handle. As it clicked Hollywood's voice sounded from its other side.

"No tricks in there. I'm outside. Try anything and you won't even have time to be sorry."

"How did we get here?" asked Terry, sitting up. Booth told her in as few words as possible. She seemed to be taking the situation with complete calm, only a tiny muscle twitched in her cheek. "Do you really know who has the Big Bundle?"

"No, I was playing for time. I expected you back any minute after they jumped me. Like a little fool I let the gun stay on the bureau when I got hungry. I'm sorry."

"You did a good job, Terry," said Booth. "We're still both in one piece and in this world. But . . ." He looked again at the window, fumbling through his pockets. "If we yell out of that Hollywood will be in with his gat. So yelling is out, even if anybody could hear. But if we can throw something out to identify us—Rennie will know we've been snatched and they'll have an alarm out." His hands appeared empty. "I have nothing, they've cleaned me of letters, everything. You?"

Terry shook her head. "Handbag still back in our cozy little two-room apartment."

"Then . . ." Booth stopped. He had seen the tin cup filled with green powder under the wash basin and he was thinking faster than he had ever thought before. "Thank God for cockroaches! Tie that tin cup onto

some kind of line, lower it along the wall of the service alley this window looks on and jerk it up and down until somebody hears. Then whisper down."

"Make a line?" echoed Terry. "With what?"

"Clothing. Something that won't show it's been taken off. Here goes my undershirt." He shed coat and vest, ripped away his undershirt and began to tear it into strips. "We'll need a lot of this stuff. We're on the second floor. Can you help?"

"You'd be amazed." Terry grinned. "We girls wear a lot of stuff you wolves never see, I hope, I hope. Turn your back like the perfect gentleman while I go into the strip-tease. I regret that I have but one slip to give to my country."

Booth began to knot the strips together.

"Okay, I'm back into the habiliments of a perfect lady. Here's several feet of line, composed of brassiere, garters, slip, handkerchief. Also a trunkstrap from under the bed. Under suit and blouse, I am as bare as a Texas bluejay."

"Good girl!" said Booth. "Throw the roach powder down the basin and give me the cup."

**H**E SLIPPED the end of the trunkstrap around the bar and tied the rest of the miscellany to it. The cup went onto the line's end, fastened by its handle and he shoved it through the window, paying fast. He felt the cup strike bottom, yanked it up and let it drop full force. A tinny clang answered him. Again and again he yanked and dropped and below him outside the wall the steady, if low, racket began. It would never be heard by Hollywood.

"Got it!" he exulted. "Sooner or later someone will pass the service alley on the street. When they see a tin cup jumping and banging around they'll want to know why, and investigate."

"Maybe any minute. . . ."

"Hey, you, in there!" Hollywood's call came from outside. A key clicked. "You're wanted."

Booth jumped back, standing away from the window. He felt as though the floor had collapsed under his feet. Only five, ten, fifteen minutes more and he knew that inevitably he would have attracted the attention of someone. The door opened as the

lock went back and Hollywood stood there, one hand casually in his sportsjacket pocket.

"Okay, folks, Mister Big is ready for you. This is it."

Booth and Terry went out of the door onto a gallery, dimly lit, on the second floor of a duplex maisonette. They moved to the right to the stairway at the jerk of Hollywood's free thumb and started down the steps.

Terry turned to Booth, the tiny betraying muscle still pumping, but outside of that she was the coolest young lady he had ever seen.

"In the midst of want we land in plenty. Houseless and roofless we walk into something like this. It's a dream house."

It was. Soft and subdued luxury was everywhere. The carpet was of the thickest pile, the lighting was exquisite. They moved between pieces of carved antique furniture glossy with the patina of age and value, tapestry clothed the walls, dull bronze and lacquer brooded in the farther shadows of the big ground floor room with the immense Renaissance table. Everything proclaimed the connoisseur's choice, backed by wealth.

"Done by *carte blanche* and Cartier," remarked Terry. "And here is Cartier, or Mister Big."

A man rose and bowed as they reached the head of the Renaissance table. Before him on its polished surface in the glow of a magnificent antique oil lamp lay newspapers and Booth's private documents which he had apparently been studying. He was of a tall and graceful, but muscular build; his complexion was an olive pallor. His hair was a raven black, the startlingly olive eyes under the trimmed brows were raven black. He might have been anywhere from thirty-five to fifty and there was an air of concentrated intelligence and power about him. Also of smooth and suave wrongdoing. He was a European of a race that Booth could not make out, perhaps a mixture of differing strains. But this Mister Big was a higher-up in whatever circles he moved in. Denver and Hollywood lounged in chairs and Denver's gun lay significantly before him.

"Sit down, please," said the tall man in a rich, controlled voice.

Booth seated himself. At close range he

could see the lighter patches on the upper jawbone where Valentino-like sideburns must have been recently shaved off. A subtle, clinging aura of perfume reached his nostrils. It was faint but definable.

"And now to come to business, please, without further delay. You are Miss Terry Travers of the *Morning Chronicle*, and you—" he tapped Booth's papers, lying in a neat pile on the table, "are former Captain Hugh Booth. Quite innocently you blundered into something, upset it completely and so you have been brought here to give me the information you say you possess about what Denver and Hollywood call the Big Bundle, but which I prefer to refer to as the El Dorado Portrait. You may call me Paul Morin, the name under which I go and do business."

"Would you mind?" It was Terry breaking in, stalling for time again as Booth recognized, her quick mind reacting to every possible chance. She was reaching for one of the two tabloid copies of the *Chronicle* that Denver had picked up at the car stop. "You are after all, a gentleman, Mr. Morin, and I am, after all, a newspaper gal. You know what we're like. Can I have a look at the story I phoned in to Rockface Bascom, my heartless city editor, first, and talk later?"

Morin nodded. "We can spare you, Miss Travers, a few minutes."

Mechanically Booth reached out and took the other paper. Across the top screamed the headlines:

#### PLUNGER DE WOLFF SLAIN IN PENTHOUSE MYSTERY GUN WOMAN IN BLACK SOUGHT

Below a spate of pictures filled Page One. Booth was staring at Emil De Wolff's face, squarish, hard and unscrupulous. He had never seen the spectacular plunger-playboy but there was something about him that was vaguely familiar, perhaps the set of the eyes or the nose. Emil De Wolff lounging with a Hollywood star on the striped cushions of the Zebra Club, Emil De Wolff with a cover girl model at the Ibis, Emil De Wolff with a pair of beauties at the Belmont races, the pictures crowded the newsprint. Emil De Wolff was a womanizer who spent thousands in the night clubs and gambled even more thousands on a single race.

Booth turned the page and ran his eye over the heavy lead type. The *Chronicle* had gone all out on its exclusive news beat.

Pitched forward lifeless on the carpet of the penthouse foyer, two bullets in heart . . . apparently shot the instant after he had opened the door. . . . Was revenge the motive? . . . Had Playboy De Wolff once too often discarded a woman? . . . Another woman, entering with the privilege of a private key, fifteen minutes later . . . never allowed servants to stay on premises when entertaining feminine friends . . . opened door to murderer obviously expected caller.

"Not an appealing character, Emil De Wolff," said Morin silkily. "A refugee German of wealth, loyal to nothing and no one, not even himself. New York for years has been filled with such."

TERRY looked up from her paper. She was not skimming its pages searching for her own story. She had stopped at the De Wolff murder. She was concentrating on it, a fine wrinkle between her eyebrows, almost as though she were memorizing it. She was after something, the thought struck Booth, and no doubt she would come up with it.

"It would seem that he gave away mink coats with his right hand and dealt out a fate worse than death with the other. Well, he got himself caught up with. Suspected of black market activities, suspected of having caused the last stock market crash, suspected of this, that and the other thing; there isn't much left of his reputation by the *Chronicle*. What you would call a revolving heel, any angle you look at him from he was a heel."

"Quite correct," said Morin.

Booth put down his copy of the *Chronicle*. He had read it all, it was fixed in his mind and it was no pretty picture.

"Well, Booth?" inquired Morin. "Shall you and I return to the discussion of the El Dorado Portrait while Miss Travers pursues her reading? I have studied your identification papers which were brought to me. In Germany, following the collapse of the Reich you were engaged in Intelligence for a full year, seeking to trace the hidden Nazi

loot of cash and objects of virtue and no doubt, you questioned many people concerning secreted art treasures. Now the boot is on the other foot, you are being questioned concerning hidden loot."

"So the El Dorado Portrait which Eremité Smith held was Nazi loot brought into this country?"

"Exactly; for the next twenty or thirty years the lost art treasures of the occupied countries will be trickling into this country for disposal through unofficial channels. I am such an unofficial channel."

"Black market," said Booth quietly. "International fence."

"Call it what you like. Observe this *maisonette*. I know *objets d'art*, from gems to paintings. I know where I can find collectors and collectors who have no scruples. The slight splashes of crimson which may have marked the course of an *objet d'art* in its passage from hand to hand do not show on that same object."

"So the El Dorado Portrait is worth killing for?"

"Very much so. Two men died in Lisbon, Europe's escape hatch, to get it here. It was in Lisbon that I met our friend, the recluse Smith, who had other *objets d'art* to dispose of in order to live. When he confided to me what he really had in a state of desperation—the El Dorado Portrait—I got him his passage to Argentina and I preceded him here. The world will never see again such a troubled pool for profitable fishing as Lisbon."

"Hell of a place," growled Hollywood. "No decent drinks, spiggoty women."

"The good Hollywood and the able Denver I met there and did business with," said Morin. "Deserters from the American army, former members of Yankee mobs who like to shoot but not to be shot at. Most valuable aides for me in America. So I got them out also, via an oil tanker to Venezuela. Why do I tell you this? For background. You saw Denver shoot Smith and that knowledge will be either highly valuable to us or completely fatal to you. You are either going to aid us or . . ." He shrugged.

Booth said nothing, there was nothing to be said.

"You would know the disposal of some of the hidden Nazi loot, no doubt, Booth?" said Morin easily but meaningfully. "You

would have knowledge we can use, not only in this case, but in the future?"

"I dug up a load of bullion and oil paintings in a salt mine if that is what you mean," said Booth. "I have seen Nazi records of stuff which never has been located. So what?"

"I shall trade with you. You and Miss Travers can give us the information you possess as to the whereabouts of the El Dorado Portrait and come in with us. The alternative is, as they call it in Europe—liquidation."

"I feel pretty much liquidated now," Terry spoke clearly, staring at her newspaper. "Here is my topflight story, butchered down to three small paragraphs practically back in the want ads. Emil De Wolff has done the dirty to another gal. He has shoved me back onto page 28, the so-and-so space-grabber."

"Put the paper down, Miss Travers, and consider my proposition, both of you. You told Denver and Hollywood, Miss Travers, that you know who has the El Dorado Portrait."

"Yes."

"And you know?"

"The answer is lying right out in front of you."

Booth started. There was the ring of confidence in Terry's words. "Emil De Wolff had it. He was shot for it. That's the motive behind the killing. And I also know who killed him."

"Miss Travers," said Morin suavely. "You are a most remarkable young woman. Just who killed Emil De Wolff?"

"You did."

#### IV

PAUL MORIN'S raven-black eyes blazed with a startling light. His smooth face went hard and stark.

"Why you. . . ."

"Up here." Terry's fingertips touched her own face, just before her ears. "The different complexion where the sideburns were until you shaved, Mr. Morin. No veiled lady goes around in sideburns, a wig can't hide. And the feminine odor of Fleur de Paris which is distinctly present at this table does not come from me. I use Night in Vienna. The mysterious heavily veiled gun-

woman in the black cloak, black gauntlets, high fur-trimmed carriage boots and thick black veil who is splashed all over the *Chronicle* was you, Mr. Morin."

"Well, I'll be damned!" gurgled Hollywood. "Jackpot!"

"Shut up!" snarled Morin and with the snarl his face went feral. But it was too late. In Hollywood's and Denver's surprised expressions the truth was out.

"The elevator man, aged sixty-two, remembered the heavy perfume particularly for the press. You overwhelmed him with it, which was smart of you. It dimmed his visual recollections of the tall Glamazon of which there are plenty in New York. You are very graceful, Mr. Morin, you could imitate a woman's walk. And with the gauntlets and the carriage boots hiding your oversized hands and feet, well,—there you are. 'Newspaper Gal Answers \$64 Question.' "

Morin had controlled himself. He bowed.

"You have a saying here in America: 'If you want anything properly done, do it yourself.' Yes, I shot Emil De Wolff."

"But you didn't get the El Dorado Portrait. Or you wouldn't want us."

"I did not shoot De Wolff for the El Dorado Portrait. I shot him to prevent him from getting it. Smith was shot to prevent him from giving it to De Wolff. Smith was to turn it over to me as soon as he reached New York. He delayed, he dallied, he made excuses, he claimed his brother Otto, following him many weeks later from Argentina had it, he went on endlessly and so I had him watched."

"Last night, around midnight, Emil De Wolff came to that alley door and Denver spotted him and recognized him. He got under the window and heard and saw everything. Our friend the late recluse Smith took the El Dorado Portrait out from the baseboard, undid its wrappings and exhibited it to De Wolff, offering it to him. But De Wolff wanted no part of its possession for a while to come. It seems the income tax people, also the FBI are on his trail for suspected evasions and black market affiliations and he doesn't know when he may be called on the carpet and his penthouse, bank deposit boxes, private safes, et cetera, scrutinized. If the El Dorado Portrait were found in his hands, he would do

a tremendous prison term. So he told Smith to keep it safely for him until the skies cleared and then they would reap a fortune on it."

He paused. "You see?"

"I see," said Booth shortly. "But why didn't Denver do his job the minute De Wolff left and grab El Dorado?"

"Because the worthy Mrs. Limpett came in to scrounge a nightcap of our recluse's imported gin and they sat and drank and chatted together until almost dawn. It seems they liked to hobnob over their toddies. So Denver came along here and we picked tonight. Nobody ever doublecrossed me yet and got away with it."

"I imagine not," nodded Booth and meant it. He could picture how much destruction lay in this man's past. Life was bitterly cheap in Europe in the backwash of wartime when men fought and robbed for their mere bread, to say nothing of loot, in a shattered civilization.

"So now, Miss Travers, having failed to give us the correct information, suppose you give it, Booth," said Morin softly. "Just where is the Sign of the Little Black Duck?"

"The—huh?" jolted from Booth.

"Two of my men whom you have never seen and never will attended to Brother Otto Smith, as he was phoning to our recluse. They overheard him ask Smith what he meant by saying the El Dorado Portrait was now at the Sign of the Little Black Duck. Otto, of course, had to be attended to. He would know who killed his brother and an anonymous letter to the District Attorney or police, would bring them down here immediately. My passport and papers would not stand one-hundred-percent expert investigation and Denver and Hollywood, of course, would never pass muster. So, Brother Otto had to go along with Emil, who could inform on us also. The Little Black Duck is not listed as a restaurant, bar or tearoom in the New York, Westchester or Long Island directories, which I have had plenty of time to search since my aides phoned in their reports to me. Our recluse had no time to go far between 4 a.m. this morning when Denver left and the time Denver returned."

"It's here in New York," said Booth. He was sparring mentally, groping from minute to minute. "I took that call from Brother

Otto. It's down in Greenwich Village. It's a new place, not listed in the phone book yet."

**M**ORIN stared at Booth and his stare was deadly. "It is not. Don't you think I dialed Information to find out if it were just that—some new place; perhaps an old one taken over recently and re-named. There is no Sign of the Little Black Duck on the New York Telephone Company's records. You have made a good try, Booth, but all it is is a try. Neither you nor Miss Travers has the slightest idea where the El Dorado portrait is. And so . . ."

"And so?" echoed Booth. His stomach drew together. He saw Terry give a tiny, defeated shrug.

"You are of no value to us. We don't want you in with us."

"We wouldn't have come anyhow," said Terry quietly. "No. Definitely no."

"So you both disappear. Miss Travers will be found as a hit-and-run case out near some disreputable Long Island roadhouse; you, Booth, will turn up eventually in hand-me-down clothes in the East River, our local Tagus. No one, I gather, is going to look for either of you for a long time as you are both homeless, and apparently, have no near friends in New York." He lifted a letter. "You will not appear to take this excellent job offered you one month from now as salesman-demonstrator for the Eastern Farm Machinery Company, Booth. You will resign by telegraph. A woman aide of ours will phone City Editor Bascom and as Miss Travers, quit in a wild rage for his butchery of her murder story about Recluse Smith. All angry women's voices sound alike on the phone, and an insulted editor is not likely to take any steps. No, you will disappear unostentatiously and effectively. A little knowledge is a dangerous thing. Too much knowledge is fatal."

"You mean to shoot us here and now?"

"No such thing. No bullet wounds. Hollywood will drug you unconscious and take you out in a light delivery truck. You, Booth, will go off one of the bridges; Miss Travers will go on to Long Island before dawn. I have no other choice."

"No," said Booth thickly. "You haven't."

"Hollywood," said Morin, "have you re-loaded?"

"Uh-hun," grunted Hollywood and held up the needle.

"Then get going. Denver, cover with your gun."

DENVER'S lips twisted and he took up the automatic with the silencer. Hollywood advanced on Terry, needle ready. Booth stiffened in every muscle, his head came up. Morin's head came up also. Screeching at top pitch and coming fast, the sound of the fire siren split the night outside the curtained front windows. It howled, it tore the long-after-midnight hush. It seemed to burst into the room itself and then stopped. A flurry of mixed sound rose.

"Outside," said Hollywood. "In front of this place."

He darted to the windows and parted the curtain, staring into the street where expert action boiled. The glow of a searchlight suffused the curtain, penetrating the thick glass.

"It's across the street," called Hollywood. "They're going into the apartment house. No, they aren't. They're scattering. Maybe some drunk pulled a box. They're hitching the hose and hunting."

Morin turned, Denver turned for an instant and in that instant Booth acted. His hand went out to the antique oil lamp on



the table, he rose and threw. The lamp swept over Hollywood's head, struck the heavy window glass and driven by its weight crashed through. He could see the blazing oil scatter on the street.

"Fire!" he shouted. "Fire! This way, firemen! Terry, yell!"

Terry's voice rose in an added clamor with feminine penetratingness.

"Fire. Fire in here! Fire, fire!"

The searchlight outside switched instantly. No longer it shot its beam down the street. It focused full on the broken window from which the flaming lamp had come. It filled the dusky room with its glow.

"In, men!" roared a hoarse voice. "Pressure! Pressure!"

"Damn you!" The voice of Paul Morin was terrible. His hand flashed in under his armpit and came out with an automatic, a silencer on its barrel. "Denver, gun the girl! I'll take the man. Throw them in the trunks in the boxroom. Act drunk and we'll pass that lamp off. Hollywood, here!"

Denver turned in murderous obedience and leveled on Terry. Booth stared into the bore of the silencer that Morin held. Hollywood also obeyed the order of Morin but he obeyed in an utterly unexpected manner. He came toward the table, reeling on his heels, his body hit by a stream of water that crashed into the windows and flung them apart and knocked him staggering.

"Pressure up! Full!" came the cry.

The frightful force of the hose drove down the room. Through the broken windows Booth glimpsed the slickers of firemen; handling the stream. With them was the blue of police.

"Terry, they're in!" he panted.

"And you're out!" Desperate madness rode Morin's voice. "Denver!"

Jaw agape, Denver readied from distraction at the call and Terry dropped for the floor.

"Get that girl!"

The hose hit and took Denver ten feet. But Morin was still up, he was done for and he knew it, but he was taking Booth with him. Booth saw his finger curl for the squeeze on the trigger, he read death in Morin's face, smooth no longer, but twitching with a killer's madness. He himself stood braced against the table overbalanced, there was no way he could dive to the floor. Somewhere in the rear of the maisonette a terrific crash sounded.

A hole burst in Morin's right cheek under the eye, a second blow took him in the

mouth and he went down, the gun dropping from his hand.

"Longest snapshot I ever took, Bulger," sounded the voice of Rennie.

THE reports had come almost like a single shot. Rennie stood at the rear of the room with two brawny firemen beside him and he was lowering a tommy gun. Then from front and back the police were in with Lieutenant Riordan at their head.

"Rennie! What the . . ."

"Bulger, you left a trail anybody but a blind man could follow. And the New York cops do not exactly go around with smoked spectacles peddling pencils."

"I left a trail?"

"Lieutenant Riordan has it. The torn envelope addressed to you that you wrote down the California license of the black Townster on. I found it on the bed with both of you gone at Eremité Smith's. The other part of the envelope in the alley. Put 'em together you jotted the licence of a car in the alley, and managed to leave it for a clue."

"It must have fallen out on the bed when Hollywood, there, gagged me with my own handkerchief and he never saw it in the dark." Booth's forehead wrinkled as he thought back. "I'd shoved it in between the folds of my handkerchief in my hurry after I'd taken it down. Break, what?"

"You're gone, you're snatched, that car took you off. Radio, teletype, in five minutes the alarm is out for it, every cop on duty is looking for the California Challis Townster, with a broken windshield."

Booth gulped. "How'd you know that?"

"We found the good Mrs. Limpett shrieking in the alley—a Rolls Royce sedan two stories high tried to run her down so she slung a brick into its windshield. She remembered alcoholically two girls with red hats between four men in the front; coming off traffic duty half an hour after the teletype went out, Officer Halloran on the avenue reported the damaged Townster went by him, girl with red hat in it, which Miss Travers wore, passed out with two men, license number had three One's. And by the break of the luck, on the next block was a cut-off for repairs with two featherbed workers eating their midnight snacks and playing automobile poker for ten cents a

side who swore no three aces license came out of the block and passed them. I didn't think all this up, Lieutenant Riordan engineered the combing after that second deceased showed up in the ashbin. So we're down to this one long block for the California car and you two and did the lieutenant cover it! Know where you are?"

"Not the faintest notion."

"Not five blocks from Eremité Smith's. If you had a long ride, you were taken in circles." He stopped. "Excuse me, Lieutenant Riordan, I talk too much. You ought to be doing the explaining."

The lieutenant was kneeling beside Morin's body. "Go ahead, Rennie. You got the gift of gab. You've earned your chance to shoot off your mouth as well as your gun. I'm too busy, anyhow."

On a sofa by the wall, wilted and handcuffed, sat Denver and Hollywood. Terry Travers stood by the table. The smile she sent at Booth made him tingle all over.

"Go on, Officer Rennie, please. I'll make you famous in the *Chronicle*."

"So the lieutenant combed the block with every reserve he could scrape up and I was the one came down this place's service alley. When I see Monday's washline hung out after midnight Friday, I know something is up. When I find the initials 'TT' on a lady's silk slip and a gentleman's 'HB' monogram on his handkerchief, I don't consider John and Jane Doe are held upstairs back of that barred window, throwing out an SOS. You're a Grade A Intelligencer, Booth. In the rear court I find the three aces California car with the busted windshield and our snatchers are run into their hole."

"But this two-story separate maisonette is a fort, the back service door is four inches thick and so's the front door. We can't get through them in time if they mean to give you the works. Lieutenant Riordan fixes that with a fast phone to his old friend Battalion Fire Chief Tompkins, who turns out the apparatus with eight dicks in fireman's slickers and hats riding on the first piece, a hose wagon and some hydraulic jacks. We know these are bad babies who've got you and we've got to get in quick. When you threw that lamp out and yelled the balloon went up pronto. A hydraulic jack took the back door up through the roof, and let me

in with the tommy gun. By cripes, Booth, I damn near parted your hair with those two cracks."

"You did," said Booth. "Bulger, you can shoot."

"That's all for our side. How about yours?"

"I can tell you why this mob killed and what it was they killed for. I can also tell you that this man on the floor, here, who called himself Paul Morin, is the woman killer of Emil De Wolff."

"Booth, are you nuts?" broke in Riordan.

"No, I'm not nuts. Terry Travers smoked it out. This is how it was." Long before he had finished speaking the lieutenant was at the phone, dialing and talking. He hung up.

"That was Pierce at De Wolff's apartment. He's the happiest man in New York tonight, cracking a case like that, to say nothing of this one. Young lady, you certainly are to be congratulated. You have probably made the next District Attorney." A grin split the lieutenant's face. It was matched by Terry's answering grin.

"Assistant District Attorney Pierce leaps into the public eye overnight, and I—well, the *Chronicle's* last edition went to press long ago. Their presses can't roll again by union rules until 8 a.m., but they'll have their extra out in half an hour after that. So a lady's bra and slip hung out on a washline may be responsible for making the next District Attorney. Which reminds me, are they still there, Rennie?"

Rennie nodded.

"Then I am going for them and become once more the well-groomed New York newspaper gal, inside and out."

She tripped up the stairs, waved and disappeared in the direction of the trunkroom.

At a sign from Riordan, Denver and Hollywood had been led out, all but two of the firemen had gone, only a few plain-clothes men and officers remained in the water-wrecked room.

"We're clear on about everything, aren't we?" asked Booth. "That is all except who or what the El Dorado is a portrait of and where it is."

"We are," grunted Riordan. "We may find out where and what the El Dorado portrait is and then again we may not."

"Oh, I think it'll turn up." Terry was back, looking brighter than any girl had a

right to look, thought Booth to himself.

"Frilly feminine mysteries aren't the only things I was putting on up in the trunkroom," she remarked. "I put on a thinking cap also. I know where the El Dorado portrait is, the clues to it have been lying around all over the place."

"You know where it is!" exploded Booth.

"If I don't, never trust a woman's intuition again. It's drawing on for dawn, just about the right time for us. Rennie, can you get off for a special purpose now?"

"Easy. I'm off anyhow at 8 a.m. for the day."

"Then get off now and come along. All we need is a loaf of soy bread, of which there's plenty left at Eremite Smith's, a taxicab and a Venetian gondola."

"Soy bread!" burst out Booth. "Taxicab—Venetian gondola! What's the Venetian gondola for?"

"I just put that in to make it harder," said Terry.

## V

"**H**ERE's the entrance to the park," said Terry. "Tell him to stop."

The taxi-driver, paid off and overtipped, rolled on his way with a grin. Terry led the way through the low-walled entrance and stuck out smartly, the loaf of soy bread, picked up at Eremite Smith's, under her arm with a small breadknife stuck in it. Already the first pale light was streaming out of the East and the sun would be coming along any minute.

"It was the soy bread gave me the hunch," she said. "There was too much of it in Eremite Smith's bread-box. No man eats an entire loaf of soy bread for his luncheon as our estimable Mrs. Limpett claimed he did. Five blocks from Eremite Smith's chambers to Central Park. Of course, he was feeding it to the birds on his noon walks. When our homicidal friend Morin spilled the information that the El Dorado portrait was at the Sign of the Little Black Duck, then it was ducks he was feeding it to, and we're looking for the little black one. Bridge ahead, lake ahead, there are ducks on that lake."

"Terry," said Booth and meant it. "You may have something there."

"Female intuition, I told you before, Mr.

Hugh Booth. No woman is without it. Ask Rennie there, he's married and knows all about it. What's the matter, Rennie?"

The ex-lieutenant of Airborne Infantry was sweating profusely.

"Here we approach a crisis in our solution of the mystery and you go all to pieces. From under that table I saw you knock off Morin with a couple of shots Annie Oakley couldn't have bettered and you were cool as a cucumber."

"This is different," gagged Rennie. "When Riordan let me use the phone at that duplex the hospital said not yet, any minute now. I clean-breasted my run-out from Eremite Smith's to Riordan and he's been a father himself four times, so he passed it over. I told Maternity I'd call from the Arsenal Police Station in the Park as soon as I could. It's right up there."

"Duty first," said Terry. "Fatherhood later. Here's the lake and here's . . ."

They stood at the shore close to a rustic bridge. The last of the night's mists had gone and out on the water, not thirty feet away, bobbed the feathered shape that was of ebony hue.

"The Little Black Duck," said Booth awedly. "All alone. He stayed here when the others went wherever ducks go for the night. And I'm beginning to think I know why. A clever, clever devil, Eremite Smith. Use that bread, Terry."

Full sunlight was up and Central Park basked in its green and tranquil beauty. Terry cut off a piece of the bread and tossed it within easy reach of the duck. It paddled swiftly and gobbled it. She threw another closer in to shore and the duck gobbled that one also.

"All ducks love soy bread," she remarked. "Train 'em to expect it as Eremite Smith did, and they'll ignore everything else."

She threw a third piece of bread ten feet from the duck. It dove for it, brought up short and began to paddle desperately, angrily, getting nowhere. It was stopped cold in mid-career.

"All right, Rennie," suggested Booth. "You go get whatever that duck is tied to. It'll be on the bottom. The El Dorado portrait with the Little Black Duck used as a mooring buoy to mark its resting place."

"Well, I'll be . . ." burst out Rennie. He

tore at coat, shirt and trousers, standing up in a pair of boxer shorts. "You'll have it in thirty seconds."

"Hey, Rennie!" rose a yell, coming closer. "Hey, Rookie Rennie, you down there?"

A young patrolman was strolling from the direction of the Arsenal and was yelling at their group from two hundred yards away. Rennie straightened, fumbling at shoelaces.

"Rennie here!" he shouted back.

"Phone for you from St. Stephen's. Hurry up, popper. POPPER, I said!"

"Good God!" exploded Rennie. His whole face burst into one huge grin.

"Get going, Bulger!" urged Booth. "I'll do the wading."

Wild-eyed Rennie tore for the young patrolman and the Arsenal Station telephone. Booth stripped and waded into the lake. It shelved suddenly and he was shoulder high before he caught the duck that fled from him to the length of its inevitable mooring. He stroked its feathers to the accompaniment of an enraged quacking and felt around.

"Wire on one leg, leading down."

He began to haul in on it, after freeing the duck which indignantly departed with both paddle wheels revolving. Then he was coming ashore holding the heavy, small rectangular package that was wrapped in oil-skin.

"For a portrait, it's the smallest I've ever seen and the heaviest. I pretty well can tell you what it is now."

HE GOT ashore, and Terry proffered the breadknife. The strings came apart, the oilskin wrappings opened and they stared at the pair of plates, fastened on the steel bases. Booth put one aside and held up the other.

"The El Dorado portrait is of President Grover Cleveland. His is the portrait on the U. S. \$1,000 bill. Here we have probably the most perfect set of counterfeit \$1,000 plates ever made." He turned the plate over and stared at the etched lines on its base. "Signed in German. Johann Wulf, Chief Engraver, Berlin Mint, and Otto Wulf, Assistant Chief Engraver. They made it, and, believe me, any plate turned out by the Chief Engraver of the Berlin Mint

would be as good as the original. It would have exactly the same number of hairs in Grover Cleveland's mustache as the real McCoy. Good cripes, worth a million? With Emil De Wolff distributing . . .

"It's right name is El Dorado all right. The Black Hills of Dakota never turned up such a gold mine. Night clubs, racetrack windows, big crap games, black market payments, payments for stolen art loot that, as Morin said, will be trickling over here for the next thirty years—the brain revolves. Yes, we came across Nazi records that counterfeit United States Treasury Notes were ordered. They could finance whatever Nazis escaped in other countries. And De Wolff could get himself a counterfeit printer with his connections just as Morin could get himself all he wanted or import them from Europe. Those dollar bills Eremite Smith . . . Johann Wulf, was lousy with were the U. S. Government banknote paper he got out that could be bleached and used for genuine paper on the \$1,000 reproductions."

"So he double-crossed Morin and got his," put in Terry. "Emil De Wulf, Otto Wulf. Brothers or cousins, or what?"

"That will all come out in the wash. Out of the wreck of the Nazi empire they were going to make a nice, little private empire of their own. I figure Johann Wulf only used Morin as a means to get himself smuggled into America, figuring he could ditch him once he got here."

"Morin was nobody to fool with on a job worth millions of bucks," said Terry. "When Johann the Eremite suspected that and Emil wouldn't take the plates, he parked Grover Cleveland over here. I'd say, having trained the Little Black Duck to come to him. Somewhere around dawn he must have made his trip between apartment and like. That's the . . ."

"Ah!" burst the exclamation behind them. Rennie stood there, panting from another wild run, speechless but happy.

"Boy or girl?"

"Eight pounds. Red hair, blue eyes. Boy," gurgled Rennie. "Both doing fine. I—I—I'm off for the hospital. First taxicab."

"Put your pants on at least," said Terry practically. "Never mind what we found

here. You're off duty until nightfall. We'll phone you later at the hospital. Or you phone us at Eremite Smith's apartment."

"Suits," said Rennie. He crammed himself into his clothes and was off.

"Tell them to wrap you in hot blankets and give you a slug of whiskey," called Terry after him. "Mother and son may be all right but you are in a critical condition."

Rennie's racing figure grew smaller, headed for the entrance.

"He'll be a detective second grade by nightfall after the credit I'll throw to him. He rates it. I'll have a swell job on the *Chronic* and Hugh Booth"—Terry smiled delightfully—"it would appear, gets nothing out of the evening except some extra combat experience."

"Huh?" Booth stared at the most remarkable young lady he had ever met. This decision was coming quickly and he knew it would stick for the rest of his life. "I . . . ah . . . there are four apartments unexpectedly vacant in New York—Emil De Wolff's penthouse, Eremite Smith's, his brother Otto's—and we can assume, Denver and Hollywood had a flat together. Out of those four . . ."

"That's the news behind the news. The *Chronic* ought to headline it: 'SUDDEN SLAYING WAVE EASES HOUSING SHORTAGE—Public Hopes It Will Continue'."

"Terry," said Booth. "There's more news. You've got a job. I've got a job, we've got Eremite Smith's apartment, which is no palace, but it's adequate. So—er . . ."

"It could be made very presentable by a competent female. Yes—go on—for a man with five battle stars, you're the most nervous person I've ever seen."

"Well, that's all that's necessary for us to start . . . ah—er . . ."

He moved closer to her and she did not move away. Her eyes were shining. A hopeful quacking rose. The little black duck was back not a yard from shore, almost at their feet. Terry threw the entire remaining loaf of soy bread far out in a glorious gesture and the duck turned and went after it instantly.

"Get away, duck. We don't want any witnesses to what's coming next."

## *Black John Appears to Be Arguing Both Ways From the Middle*

# THE PARTNERSHIP BUSINESS



1

**I**N THE Tivoli Saloon, in Dawson, Swiftwater Bill yawned and stretched as he watched Black John Smith rake in the pot and stack the chips in orderly columns in front of him. "That'll be all fer me," he said, shoving

back from the table. "I got to be hittin' fer Squaw Crick. A man's a damn fool to play cards all night when he's got to hit the trail in the mornin'."

"I'd ort to went to bed, myself," Burr MacShane admitted. "I'm pullin' out after breakfast, too."

Old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs,

snickered. "You fellas give me a pain in the neck. Hell, there's plenty of nights when there ain't no stud game fer a man to sleep. Ain't that so, John?"

"That's be'n my thesis. Sleepin's all right, when there ain't nothin' else to do." As the others rose from the table, the big man picked up his chips and led the way to the bar where he cashed them in. "I'm buyin' a drink," he grinned, as he gathered the bills into a roll. "I figure you boys can lick yer wounds better if your tongues are wet."

"Yer luck was runnin' tonight," Swiftwater grinned. "But this ain't the last game you'll be settin' in. Luck like that can't hold."

Three men entered and stepped to the bar. Bettles slanted them a glance as a bartender set a bottle and glasses before them. "There's that damn Tom Brower," he said. "Prob'ly found him a couple more suckers to trim."

Swiftwater Bill nodded. "Yeah, he's a slick one, all right. Beat old Mort Dolan out of every damn cent he had—an' his location, to boot."

"Yer damn right he did," Moosehide Charlie concurred, "An' he beat Clem Johnson out of his steamboat. Clem, he had a good thing in that there *Aurora* till Brower bought in pardners with him."

"Clem was a damn fool to have any dealin's with him," MacShane opined.

"Well," defended Moosehide, "come spring, the boat needed overhaulin'. An' you know Clem—he hangs around all winter an' blows in the money he makes in the summer. Brower finds out how Clem's up agin it fer money to pay fer the overhaulin', so he offers to pay the bill on a pardnership proposition which looks like a good thing, so Clem takes him up. I don't know how he worked it, but it worn't no time at all till he owned the boat, an' Clem didn't have nothin'. Then Brower sold the boat fer seventy thousan'."

"Pardnerships is his game," Camillo Bill said. "He's got plenty of ready money, an' he lays around an' finds someone with a goin' proposition which needs cash fer development, an' he offers to put up the money fer a half interest in the proposition. He's a lawyer, an' he draws up the papers, an' clutters 'em up with 'whereas', an' 'be it

known', an' 'party of the first part'—now you see it, an' now you don't see it—till the first thing you know he's got the hull proposition—an' the other guy's out."

"Hu-u-m," said Black John, eyeing the three at the far end of the bar, "doin' pretty well for himself, eh?"

"I'll say he is! An' it's a damn shame," Bettles said. "I'd shore like to see someone take him fer every damn dollar he's got. It would damn well serve him right. He's turned half a dozen crooked tricks that I know of, an' God knows how many more. Always works the same game—pardnership. An' he's smart enough to always keep inside the law."

"How come these suckers go to him for their development money instead of the bank?" Black John asked.

Swiftwater Bill shrugged. "Prob'ly some of these propositions ain't far enough along so the bank will take a chanct," he hazarded. "An' then again—mebbe they do put out a feeler at the bank—an' the bank tips Brower off."

"But hell, Swiftwater," Moosehide Charlie cut in, "why would the bank do that? Cripes, if they done that they'd lose the interest on the loan!"

"The bank wouldn't tip him off—as a bank. But some teller or clerk might. It wouldn't be no money in their pocket if the bank made a loan—but if they was to slip the word to Brower, an' he made it, he might make it worth their while."

**B**LACK JOHN shook his head slowly. "Tch, tch, tch, the ways of these damn scoundrels is devious in the extreme. Human nature, in some of its aspects is shore sad to contemplate."

Bettles grinned. "Yeah. I'll bet that's the way Clyde Barto looks at it, too. He faded plumb out of the picture after you took him fer two hundred thousan' on that Dewar location. But at that, John, I'mbettin' this here Brower is smarter even than Barto."

"Anyone," Black John opined, "that would lay around preyin' on the needs of his fellow man is nothin' but a damn vulture. Personally, I ain't never be'n averse to turnin' an honest dollar at the expense of sech damn scoundrels."

"You mean," inquired Swiftwater Bill

expectantly, "that you figger on takin' this here Brower?"

"W-e-e-l-l, the idea sort of intrigues me—as a sportin' proposition. Of course, if the transaction netted me some slight profit, it wouldn't irk me none. But it's an undertakin' that would require a certain amount of thought an' meditation—not one to be entered into on the spur of the moment, as the sayin' goes. Evcrything would have to be open an' above board. I wouldn't want no hint of onderhandedness about it. Drink up, an' I'll buy another. Then I'm goin' to breakfast, an' after that I'll be hittin' out for Halfaday. I'll most likely be back in about a month er so an' give you boys a chanct to even up this stud score. Meanwhile, if you can find a woodshed somewhere, my advice is that you go out behind it an' practice dealin'."

## II

OLD Cush, proptietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, hard against the Yukon-Alaska border, set out the inevitable bottle, glasses and leather dice box as Black John stepped into the room and crossed to the bar. "How's things down along the river?" he asked, after the big man had beaten him for the drinks.

"Nothin' startlin'. I took the boys down to the Tivoli fer three thousan' in a stud game.

"There's be'n three, four chechako stampedes to different cricks, but they didn't turn up nothin'. By the way, Cush, speakin' of cricks, reach in the safe an' get me the transfer paper to that location I bought off'n young Ellis. You rec'lect he's the lad that located last fall on the gulch we named Spruce Crick. You know I bought it off'n him after he'd got discouraged workin' it, an' had the transfer recorded the next time I went to Dawson."

Cush fumbled among various papers in the safe and tossed the transfer onto the bar. "That location ain't no good—an' never was," he granted. "No one but a chechako would of recorded it."

"Gold's where you find it."

"Yeah—but it ain't where you don't find it."

"Your postulate is ontenable. There might be plenty of gold—"

"Oh, shore," Cush interrupted, "an' if big words could git it out of the gravel, you'd be the richest man in the world! But jest the same, that there young Ellis never took no gold outa there, an' you was a damn fool to buy the location—like I told you when you done it."

"Oh, I don't know. I felt kind of sorry for the kid. All he wanted was enough to pay you for what he owed for supplies, an' buy his passage back to the States. That's the best place for him. He'd never have made good up here. He wasn't the type. An' then again—a man can't never tell when some odd piece of property might come in handy."

"Like fer what?" Cush grunted. "You goin' to start a moose farm, er somethin'?"

"No. Fact is, I'm goin' to work that location. I swung around by Sebastian's Village an' fetched up half a dozen Siwashes. They can knock out one end of Ellis's cabin an' make it a little bigger, an' then go ahead an' sink a couple of shafts. Better shove out enough supplies to last 'em a month er so, an' they can start packin' 'em up there."

"You gone crazy, er somethin'? You know damn well Ellis never even took wages outa that location. Spruce Crick—hell! There ain't no water in it only in the break-up. You couldn't never sluice out yer dump."

"There's a little spring-fed lake back off the rim. A man could pipe water from it."

"Huh," Cush snorted disgustedly, "so on top of payin' them Siwashes wages, yer figgerin' on blowin' in eight, ten thousan' dollars fer pipe, eh? You'd ort to stayed down to Dawson an' got yer head examined. I'll bet Doc Sutherland would laugh like hell when he found out what you're tryin' to use fer brains."

IGNORING the comment, Black John continued. "An' not only that, but I'm goin' to get some of the boys to locate on the rest of Spruce Crick. There must be room fer half a dozen locations besides Ellis's Discovery claim."

Cush shrugged. "Who you goin' to git? There ain't that many more damn fools on Halfaday."

"Some of the boys ain't doin' much better'n wages—Pot-Gutted John, an' Long

10  
Nosed John, an' a few others. I'll guarantee 'em double what they're takin' out on their own locations to file on Spruce Crick an' work their claims there."

"Looks like the older some folks grows the less sense they git," Cush grunted. "But it's your money."

The big man grinned. "You wouldn't, perchance, care to go into this proposition on a fifty-fifty basis?"

"Not by a damn sight! When I want to throw money away, by God, I'll go down to Dawson where I'll have some fun doin' it! Not sink it in some damn dry gulch."

"Okay. I'll slip down along the crick an' speak to some of the boys. I want 'em to get their stakes in on them locations so I can take the papers down to Dawson an' record 'em."

A MONTH after his departure for Halfaday, Black John stepped into the Tivoli and joined the group of sourdoughs at the far end of the bar. "Figured I'd come down an' give you gravel hounds a sportin' chanct to get yer money back," he grinned. "Fill up. I'm buyin' one."

"Speakin' of sportin' propositions, I recollect the last time you was down you claimed you might try to put one over on this here Tom Brower that's be'n gyppin' folks along the river on them pardnership propositions. But I notice he's still flyin' high. Don't look like his wings has be'n clipped none."

"Oh—yeah—Brower. Hell, I'd fergot all about him. Fact is, I've be'n busy ever sence I left here on a location I bought on Spruce Creek."

"Spruce Crick?" Bettles asked. "Where the hell is Spruce Crick?"

"It's a little crick that runs into Halfaday a little ways above Cush's. Young fella name of Ellis located on it last fall, an' this spring I bought the location off'n him so he could go back to the States."

"You mean, yer workin' the location?" Burr MacShane asked.

"Shore. Got half a dozen Siwashes sinkin' a couple of shafts. An' when some of the boys seen that, they filed the rest of the crick. I fetched the papers down with me an' recorded 'em. They're all busy up there sinkin' shafts of their own."

"You takin' out any dust?" Moosehide Charlie asked.

"W-e-e-l-l, we ain't only be'n at it ten days—an' I fetched down the dust we panned out." Swinging his pack to the floor, he reached into it and tossed half a dozen little moosehide sacks onto the bar, and called to the bartender. "Hey, Curley—weigh up these pokes, will you?"

One by one the man placed the sacks on the scale as the sourdoughs looked on, wide-eyed. "Five hundred ounces, she figgers altogether," he announced as he totalled the figures he had jotted on a paper.

"Fifty ounces a day!" Swiftwater Bill exclaimed. "Good God, John, you've shore hit it lucky!"

"Yeah," Black John admitted, "kinda looks like I might of, at that. Trouble is, this here Spruce Crick is dry most of the time, an' I ain't got no water. But I located a little lake back off the rim. I can pipe water from there. But it'll take quite a bit of pipe, an' I ain't in no shape to swing the deal."

Moosehide Charlie gasped. "What! Cripes, John—if you can't swing it—who the hell could?"

"I don't figure I can finance the venture alone. I need some outside capital. I can't very well go to the bank for it, on account of it's bein' a new location of unproven worth. But I was thinkin' that if you boys know'd where I could get holt of a pardner, someone with plenty of loose money to invest, I might——"

A GREAT light broke upon Bettles, who roared with laughter and smote the bar with his fist. "By God, John, yer all right! I figger we might find you jest the man! Fella name of Tom Brower——"

At mention of the name the others saw the light, and several rounds of drinks were had amid much laughter and back thumping.

"Of course," Black John continued, "this Brower, he ort to hear about the Spruce Crick proposition in a roundabout sort of way, an' somehow get wind of the fact that a chechako name of John Smith, an Iowa farmer, is sort of lookin' around for a pardner." Reaching down he raised his packsack from the floor, stowed the sacks in it, and swung it to his shoulder. "I'll be seein' you boys after supper," he said. "I'm goin' over to the bank now, an' deposit this here dust."

**S**HORTLY thereafter Bettles left the Tivoli and, sauntering down the street, spotted Brower seated at the window in the lobby of the Northern Hotel, idly awaiting the supper call. Almost at the same instant, Black John, packsack dangling from his shoulder hove in sight from the direction of the bank. Bettles accosted the big man. "Yonder's Brower sittin' there in the hotel," he said, and falling in beside him, spoke hurriedly for a few moments.

Entering the hotel, with Bettles following, Black John strode to the desk, registered, and picking up the key the clerk tossed onto the counter, turned and headed for the stairway with Bettles still arguing. At the foot of the stairs he turned. "No!" he growled. "By God, you don't buy in on that Spruce Crick proposition fer no lousy fifty thousan'! You'll have to double it—er I'll find someone that will!"

"I'll have to see the boys first," Bettles replied. "I don't know if we can scare up that much right off hand—but you come over to the Tivoli after you've et, an' we'll see what we kin do."

Black John grunted an assent, and went on upstairs.

As Bettles turned toward the door, Brower accosted him with a grin. "Your friend don't seem in a very amiable mood," he said.

Bettles scowled and dropped into an empty chair besides the other. "Name's John Smith—claims he's a farmer from down in Ioway, er somewhere—er was, till he come to the Yukon. Says he's prospected around on a lot of cricks without doin' much good till he hit this Spruce Crick proposition."

"Seems to me I've seen him in town from time to time," Brower said. "So he struck it lucky, eh?"

"I'll say he did! Last fall some damn chechako name of Ellis located on this here Spruce Crick an' didn't do no good there, an' this spring Smith bought the location off'n him fer jest enough to git Ellis back to the States. Then he puts half a dozen Siwashes to work on the location an' damned if they didn't take out five hundred ounces in ten days! He fetched the dust down with him an' Curley weighed it up right there on the Tivoli scales. He sluiced out them ounces with snow water, but now the cricks went dry on him, an' he's got to

git water. He found a little lake back off the rim, an' figgers he kin pipe all the water he needs out of this lake—but he ain't got enough cash to swing the deal fer the pipe. He claims he tried to git the money at the bank but they turned him down on account of Spruce Crick not havin' no claims of proven worth on it. So he come over to the Tivoli an' offered us boys a half interest in the proposition. We seen the dust he fetched down—an' we know he couldn't of be'n workin' the claim much longer than the ten days he says—because he was down here not so damn long ago. First off, we figgered on stampedin' up there an' locatin' on the crick. But Smith says, it ain't only a short crick an' when news of his strike got around prospectors from nearby cricks come in an' staked the whole crick. Smith, he fetched down the papers an' recorded 'em for these boys. So we talked it over, an' I jest offered him fifty thousan' fer a pardnership—but he turned it down. Like you heard him."

Brower nodded with apparent unconcern. "Yeah—said he wants double that. Do you figure the proposition's worth it?"

"Worth it! Hell—figger it out fer yerself—fifty ounces a day—that's eight hundred dollars—twenty-four thousan' a month, an' his pardner gits half of it—an' they ain't hardly into the grass-roots! So long! I got to go tell the boys."

**A**S BETTLES disappeared down the street, Brower made a beeline for the recorder's office and verified the transfer of the Ellis Discovery location on Spruce Creek to one, John Smith. Verified also, the fact that numerous other locations had been recorded that very day. Then he returned to the hotel, and finding the dining room door open, peered in to see the big man seated alone. Pausing beside the table, he smiled down. "Mind if I sit here?" he asked. "Brower's my name. Sort of boring eating alone."

"Help yerself. Smith's the name—John Smith."

Seating himself, Brower glanced at the bill of fare and laid it aside. "Prospector?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Lots of hard work—prospecting."

"Well, it is, an' it ain't" Black John replied. "Take farmin' now, an' it's all hard

work. A man's got to git up 'fore daylight, an' clean out the barn, an' milk the cows, an' feed the horses, an' slop the hogs, an' when he gets that done, his day ain't started yet. Prospectin', a man can get up when he wants to, an' knock off when he wants to, an' when he strikes it lucky he can hire someone else to do the work."

"I guess most of 'em don't strike it that lucky."

"No—most of 'em don't—but some of us does."

"You mean you're one of the lucky ones?"

"Oh, shore. I am now. But I ain't always be'n lucky. I've had my ups an' downs, same as the rest."

"But now you're fixed so you can just sit back and let someone else do the work, eh?"

Black John eyed the other frowningly. "Listen, mister—there's a damn sight more to runnin' a proposition than jest settin' around an' lettin' someone else do the work. It's like farmin'. Take it like when a man gets his farm in shape so he can hire hands to do the work, he's got to stay right on the job himself. He can't jest move to town, an' buy a house, an' a fast-steppin' team of horses, an' a fancy rig an' ra'r back an' take it easy. Not by a damn sight, he can't! A lot of 'em does—an' the first thing they know their farm's gone to hell. Either the hired hands don't rotate the crops, or they don't spread no fertilizer, er they leave the hay sp'ile an' when that happens them fancy town farmers has got to get back into overalls, er by God, the bank gits their farm."

"I guess that's right," Brower agreed.

"Shore it is—take me, now. I've had a bunch of Siwashes up there on Spruce Crick shovelin' gravel fer ten days 'fore I left there. We sluiced out the dump with snow-water, an' I fetched down five hundred ounces of dust an' stuck it in the bank. But—can I jest set around an' take it easy whilst them Siwashes shovels out the dust? Not by a damn sight I can't. This here Spruce Crick ain't no reg'lar crick. It goes dry after the snow-water runs off. Dust ain't no good layin' in the gravel on a dump, no matter how rich it runs. It's got to be sluiced out. So it's up to me to get water onto the crick. I can do it. There's a spring lake back off the rim, an' I can pipe all the water I need from that lake.

But it'll take some workin' capital to do it. It ain't no use goin' to the bank, on account of 'em not knowin' nothin' about Spruce Crick. So I went to a bunch of sourdoughs, like they call the old-timers up here—men that knows dust when they see it. I showed 'em them five hundred ounces, an' their eyes shore bunged out, 'cause they knew I hadn't be'n workin' that proposition only a few days. I offered 'em a half interest in the location on a pardnership basis, an' they offered me fifty thousan'—but hell, I ain't goin' to let go a half-interest in a proposition like that fer no fifty thousan'—not by a damn sight, I ain't! I want a hundred thousan'—an' not a damn cent less."

"Hum. Where is this Spruce Crick?"

"It's up the White River a piece. The White runs into the Yukon about eighty miles above here. Spruce Crick's a gulch that runs into a crick that empties into the White."

"I'd like to look the proposition over."

"You!"

"Yes. That's my business—looking around for investments. I suppose you'd call me a speculator. I've got capital to invest in gilt-edge propositions, preferably on a partnership basis."

"You got a hundred thousan'?"

For answer the man nodded, and drew from his pocket a balance sheet and a packet of canceled checks. "Just pick this up at the bank this afternoon," he said, and selecting the sheet, handed it to Black John, who scrutinized it, and handed it back.

"Accordin' to that," he said, "you've got a hundred an' thirty-seven thousan' four hundred an' sixty-two dollars an' fourteen cents in the bank."

"That's right. But of course you understand that I would have to look this proposition over before I put any money into it."

"Oh shore. But—I don't know. There's them sourdoughs—Bettles, an' Swiftwater Bill, an' the rest of 'em. I offered them the chanct to get in on this proposition. They claimed they could scrape up fifty-thousan' between 'em—but I turned em down. I was talkin' to Bettles in the hotel jest before supper, an' he claimed he'd go back to the boys an' see if they could scrape up another fifty thousan'. Them boys knows a half interest in the proposition's worth a damn sight more'n a hundred thousan'. It's jest

that they mightn't be able to raise that much on short notice. It kind of looks like I'd ort to go over to the Tivoli where they hang out an' see if they got the money, bein' as I was dickerin' with 'em."

Brower leaned forward and eyed the big man shrewdly. "Listen, Smith," he said. "Don't be a damn sap. Those men know you're a farmer—a greenhorn in this country—a chechako, they call 'em. And they're tryin' to take advantage of you. Don't think for a minute that those men couldn't raise a hundred thousand—or twice that much on a moment's notice—if they wanted to. They're stalling. They figure that if they can make you believe that fifty thousand is all they can raise, you'll take it. They know you can't get a loan from the bank on a proposition on an unknown crick, so they figure you'll have to deal with them—on their own terms. In other words, they're trying to beat you out of fifty thousand. It's nothing but a damned swindle!"

Black John's eyes widened and his brow drew into a frown as he smote the table with a fist that made the dishes rattle. "Why—the damn scoundrels! I'd ort to go over to the Tivoli an' knock hell out of the whole bunch of 'em!"

Brower smiled. "That wouldn't get you anything. There's too many of 'em. They'd gang up on you—and if they didn't beat hell out of you, the police would probably pick you up for disorderly conduct, or something. I've got a stampeding pack all ready, and I happen to know that the *Sarah* is pulling out for upriver at eight o'clock tonight. Why not take a canoe along and get the captain to set us ashore at the mouth of the White, then go on up to Spruce Creek?"

"By cripes, we'll do it! An' it'll serve them damn sourdoughs right fer tryin' to beat me out of fifty thousan'. I'll learn 'em that they can't play John Smith fer no sucker!"

### III

SOME ten days later they beached the canoe at Cushing's Fort, and Black John led the way up the steep bank. At the summit Brower paused and glanced about him. "Well—quite an establishment here!"

The big man nodded. "Yeah. Tradin'

post an' saloon. Some fella name of Lyme runs it. Does pretty well fer himself. There's quite a few prospectors located along the crick, an' they trade here." Stepping into the saloon, with Brower following, Black John crossed to the bar. "Lyme," he said heartily, "I want you should meet Tom Brower. Tom, he's come up to look my Spruce Crick proposition over. Kind of figgers on buyin' a half interest in it, if it looks good to him."

Cush set out a bottle and three glasses. "Fill up," he said. "This un's on the house."

They drank and Brower bought another round. "Quite a place you've got here," he said, glancing about the room.

"Tain't bad."

As the man's glance lingered on the array of card tables, Cush caught Black John's eye, winked, and shook his head emphatically.

The big man looked puzzled for a moment, but as Brower again faced the bar, he tossed off his drink and ordered another.

Brower shook his head. "No more for me, thanks. Two's plenty."

Black John grinned. "Okay. I ain't much of a hand fer likker, neither. Well—shall we shove on up to Spruce Crick? My cabin's there on the crick bank about a hundred yards from here. But if we hustle we can get up to Spruce Crick an' back before dark."

Brower shook his head. "Not me. Not today. I don't mind telling you that I'm plumb tired out. Tomorrow, maybe—but not today. It was a man-killing pace you set coming up from the Yukon. I don't see how you stand it. But I suppose your work on the farm has hardened your muscles. Gosh, my shoulders feel about ready to drop off. I'd like to crawl into a bunk and sleep for hours."

"Well, there ain't nothin' to hinder you," Black John replied. "I've got an extra bunk in the cabin. I'll take you over an' you can roll in an' sleep as long as you like. I s'pose when it comes right down to hard work, us farmers has got it over you city fellas."

In the cabin, Brower pulled off his shoes and threw himself on the bunk. "This sure feels good," he sighed.

"Go to it. I don't feel sleepy, myself. I'll loaf over to Lyme's, I guess. I'll be back later an' cook supper."

Brower nested his head on the pillow. "Listen," he said, "if I don't wake up when you get supper ready, for God's sake let me sleep. I don't care if I don't eat till breakfast."

Back in the saloon Old Cush eyed Black John somberly as he set out the bottle and glasses. "So that's why you was so damn anxious all to onct to work that there Ellis location, eh?"

The big man grinned. "You guessed it. This here Brower is an ornery skunk that makes his livin' swindlin' honest folks out of their money—"

"Howcome he'd tackle you, then?"

Ignoring the jibe, Black John continued. "His specialty is buyin' a pardnership in some good proposition, then beatin' his pardner out of his share. The boys was tellin' me about him last time I was down to Dawson, so, as a sportin' proposition, I figured it was my duty to teach him a lesson. He beat old Mort Dolan out of his location an' Clem Johnson out of his steamboat—an' he's swindled plenty of others besides, accordin' to the boys."

"So you figger on sellin' him a half interest in the Ellis location, eh?"

"That's right—for a hundred thousan', spot cash."

"Howcome he figgers yer a farmer?"

"Oh, I don't know. My looks, mebbe. Mebbe somethin' I might of let drop over the campfire in the evenin'. You know how it is, Cush, them early reminiscences crowd into a man's mind—settin' there in the firelight—an' he jest naturally talks."

"Huh," Cush grunted, "them early remisses you'd be thinkin' about wouldn't incloud no farm—by a damn sight. But speakin' of this Ellis location, how about lettin' me in on it?"

"Not by a damn sight! You called me a damn fool when I bought the location off'n Ellis. An' you called me a damn fool when I put them Siwashes to work on it. I offered to let you in on it fifty-fifty, an' you turned me down cold—said when you wanted to throw money away you'd go down to Dawson where you could have some fun doing' it, an' not sink it in some damn dry gulch. But now when you can see a good profit in sight; you want to horn in on it! No, sir—that hundred thousan' goes into my pocket—an' no other. An' that reminds

me—jest shove me out three, four sacks of dust. I'll slip up to Spruce Crick tonight whilst Brower's asleep."

"Figger on saltin' the dump, eh?"

"W-e-e-l-l, a judicious sprinklin' of dust on the right place might sort of influence Brower in drawin' a conclusion. Mind you, Cush—I wouldn't stoop to saltin' a claim under ordinary circumstances. But Brower's a damn swindler. His sole idea in buyin' into this location is to beat me out of it. So I deem it my duty to teach the damn crook that crime don't pay."

"An' you won't sell me a half interest in it, eh?" Cush asked again, filling his glass.

"Nope. That's final. You had your chanct, an' you passed it up. The only half interest I'll sell in that location goes to Brower."

Cush nodded somberly. "And I'd ort to let you go ahead an' sell it, but I can't do it, John—much as it would serve you right."

The big man frowned. "What do you mean—serve me right?"

"Serve you right if I let you go ahead an' git beat out of that location fer a hundred thousan' dollars. Hell, man—it's worth a million! I guess that sayin' 'a fool fer luck' is about right. I told you you was a fool fer buyin' that location—an' you was. An' now it turns out to be a million-dollar proposition."

"What ails you?" Black John asked. "You drunk? Or jest crazy?"

"I ain't neither one. Didn't you see me shake my head nix when you said you was sellin' this here Brower a pardnership in the location?"

"Shore I did. An' I wondered what the hell you meant. But what's this about that million-dollar proposition?"

"Couple of days after you'd hit out fer Dawson, Pot-Gutted John an' Long-Nosed John come bustin' in here like the devil was after 'em, an' they told how them Siwashes of yours had busted into the damndest richest pocket they ever seen. You rec'lect you got them two an' some of the other boys to locate on the crick below yer Discovery claim? Well, they happened to pass yer dump an' looked down an' seen yellow dust showin' up, so they grabbed a pan an' started pannin'. I'm tellin' you, John—they

panned, twenty, thirty, an' even fifty dollars to the pan right off'n the top of yer dump! It's jest like Bonanza that first year! The boys is up there now workin' their own claims—an' they're all doin' better'n wages. But they ain't struck nothin' like yourn. An' here you was figgerin' on saltin' that dump with three, four sacks of dust! Say, rich as that gravel is, if you throw'd *forty* sacks onto that dump it would weaken it!

"H-u-um—that shore is important news, if true," Black John said. "Guess I'll slip up to Spruce Crick an' look her over before Brower wakes up."

On Spruce Creek, before he reached the Discovery claim, Cush's estimate of its worth was verified by Pot-Gutted John and the others he had induced to stake locations on the creek. Procuring water from a spring he made a dozen test pannings and stared wide-eyed at the butter-yellow residue in the bottom of the pan. Then, as he squatted there beside his pan, a slow grin widened the lips behind the black beard. "Well—I'll be damned!" he muttered. "Ain't that jest my luck? Right when I've got it all rigged up to take Brower on this proposition —this had to happen!" For several minutes he squatted there staring down at the gold in the pan, then the grin became a low chuckle. "I told Cush I deem it my duty to teach that damn Brower that crime don't pay—an' I ain't the one to shirk my duty when I see it. Besides, onct I engage in a sportin' event I like to see it through—if I don't them damn sourdoughs never would quit ribbin' me."

POT-GUTTED JOHN and Red John, who had knocked off work for the day, strolled up and the big man eyed them. "How's your dumps pannin' out?" he asked.

"Not bad," Pot-Gutted replied. "We're takin' out anywheres from three to six ounces a day, an' the stuff is gittin' better as she goes down. When we hit bedrock she might be a real strike."

Red John grinned at Black John. "Yeah—an' when you hit bedrock, here on Discovery, I'll bet there won't be but damn little gravel mixed in with yer dust!"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Black John replied gravely. "I done a little pannin' here off'n the dump, an' she's entirely too rich to suit me."

Pot-Gutted John regarded the speaker with a puzzled stare. "What!"

The big man nodded. "Yeah," he continued, seriously, "the fact is, I'm figurin' to sell a half interest in this location—speculator from Dawson—Brower, his name is—I'll fetch him up here tomorrow to look the proposition over. In the meantime we've got to get busy an' thin this here dump out." He turned to Red John. "You slip down and get all the boys that's located on Spruce Crick to come up here pronto. Tell 'em to fetch buckets an' sacks an' whatever they've got that they can pack gravel in."

Red John eyed the speaker with a puzzled frown. "But—"

"No buts about it!" the big man interrupted. "Get goin' an' fetch the boys back with you!" He turned to the Indians. "Get busy now an' shovel lean top gravel into the shaft—a good two foot of it." As they complied, he picked up a shovel, and tossed in rich gravel from the dump, shovel for shovel with the lean.

WHEN Red John returned with half a dozen men at his heels Black John ordered them to get busy and throw lean gravel onto the dump, covering it to a depth of at least a foot, while he and Pot-Gutted John, who worked under his orders with a bewildered look on his face, mixed rich gravel into the lean.

At the end of two hours the job was done and Black John issued his final instructions. He ordered the Indians not to disturb the present shaft, but to start a new one in the morning over near the rimwall, and turned to the others. "I'll come back tomorrow with a guy that's figurin' on buyin' in on this Discovery location. I want to make this sale, an' I don't want any of you boys to say nothin' that might queer it—like blurtin' out how rich it is. If Brower asks you any questions, tell him it's a damn good proposition—but don't go no further than that. He'll prob'ly do some test pannin' out of the dump, an' the bottom of the shaft, an' find out for himself that it's good enough to invest in."

Pot-Gutted John removed his hat and scratched his head, a puzzled frown on his face. "But—hell, John—if you want to sell a location, the richer it is, the more the guy would want it!"

"Yeah," the big man replied. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"Oh—you mean you don't want him to buy in on it! Well, then why in hell didn't you cover the dump with lean gravel without mixin' no rich stuff into it?"

"Why in that case, he wouldn't invest in it. No one's damn fool enough to buy into a proposition that don't even show a color! Well, so long boys, I've got to hit back to Cush's. Mind what I told you—tell Brower the claim's good—but not too good. So long!" And before any of the bewildered men could find voice Black John had disappeared around the first bend of the gulch. They stood there eyeing each other. Pot-Gutted John was the first to speak. He eyed the others solemnly. "He worn't drunk," he said. "I edged up an' got a whiff of his breath, an' there worn't no more likker on it than nach'el."

"Mebbe he's went kinda cuckoo," hazarded Short John. "By heck, I've know'd fellas to salt a claim—but this here's the first time I ever seen one onsalted!"

"He's shore as hell got his wires crossed somewhere," Long-Nosed John opined. "When Pot-Gut p'ints out that the richer a claim is the more a guy would want it, Black John says that's what he's afraid of. An' when Pot-Gut asks him if he didn't want the guy to buy it, why he mixed in any rich stuff at all, Black John says in that case this here Brower wouldn't want to buy in on it! Cripes—he's augerin' both ways from the middle!"

"Halfaday Crick'll go to hell in a hand-baskit if Black John's gone nuts," Left-Handed John said ruefully. "Me—I'm goin' to hit out fer somewhere else."

Red John eyed the others calmly. "Listen, you guys—Black John worn't drunk, an' he ain't gone cuckoo—you kin bet on that. I've heard him talk like a damn fool—an' I've saw him act like one before this. But I never seen him *be* one. I can't figger out what he's up to, no more'n what you boys kin. But believe me—he knows. An' don't you fergit it!" Only half convinced, the men returned glumly to their shacks.

Back in the saloon Old Cush eyed Black John across the bar as they filled their glasses. "Well—how'd she look?" he asked.

"She's a better proposition than I ever hoped to own."

"She's that, all right," Cush agreed. "When you wouldn't let me in on a half interest, I'd ort to let you go ahead an' sell that pardnership to Brower. But hell, John—I couldn't do it. Sort of a pride I've got in the crick, I guess. I don't like to see none of the local boys git took—not even you. I guess this here Brower might's well head back fer Dawson in the mornin', eh?"

Black John shook his head and regarded the other gravely. "No, Cush, we'll be headin' up to Spruce Crick. Fact is, I've be'n thinkin' the matter over, an' I've come to a decision. Brower's gone to considerable trouble an' expense comin' up here—an' he came on my promise to sell him a half interest in that location. Ethically, I feel bound to carry out my part of the contract—cost what it may."

Cush stared aghast. "But—I thought you claimed this here Brower wasn't nothin' but a damn crook—a swindler—an' you was aimin' to learn him a lesson, shovin' off a half interest in that worthless claim on him!"

"That was my intention. There's no gettin' around it. But a promise is a promise, Cush. I give him my word that if he liked the location, I'd sell him a half interest in it. An' I feel in duty bound to hold to that agreement. That promise was made in good faith, without no qualifications regardin' Brower's moral status. An' you know as well as I do, Cush—I ain't a man to go back on his word."

"I know this," Cush growled, in disgust. "Yer the damndest fool I ever seen—an' there ain't no moral statuses mixed up in that, neither!"

#### IV

BROWER slept on through until breakfast. The meal over, Black John reached for his hat. "Come on," he said, "we'll slip up to Spruce Crick an' you can look that proposition over."

Brower yawned. "What's the hurry? Why not wait till tomorrow. Cripes, I was never so tired in my life. I could sleep all day today, and all night, too."

"It ain't only a little ways," Black John said. "I'd like to get the deal closed as quickly as possible so I can go down to Dawson an' order that pipe. We want to be

shore of havin' water on the crick when we need it."

Reluctantly Brower put on his hat and followed the big man up the creek. On Spruce Creek Brower stopped to question several of the men who were working their claims. Their replies seemed to satisfy him—to a man they stated that their locations were good—but not as good as Black John's Discovery claim. All were careful not to mention its extreme richness, merely admitting that it was a mighty good proposition. Brower made several test pannings, both from the dump and from the bottom of the shaft. "She's good," he admitted, "providing we can get water."

"Oh, we can get the water, all right!" Black John assured him. "We'll go up, now an' I'll show you the lake we'll tap. It lays a little piece back from the rim, right opposite here."

Brower eyed the almost perpendicular rimwall. "How do we get there?" he asked.

"Climb up, an' then walk back a piece."

"You mean—climb that damned wall—and then walk back in those hills!"

"Oh, shore. It ain't but a little ways, onct you get to the top of the rim."

"To hell with climbing that wall!" Brower said. "I'm tired out already just walking up here practically on the level. I'd never make it. I'll take your word that the lake's there. After all, you're as much interested in getting the water as I am."

"Okay—if yer satisfied. I'd rather you'd take a look at it, though. Jest to make shore there ain't nothin' onderhanded about this deal."

"I'm satisfied. Let's go back to your cabin and I'll draw up the contract, and we'll close the deal."

"Did you fetch the hundred thousan' with you, in cash?" Black John asked.

"Certainly not," Brower replied. "I'm not damn fool enough to hit out into the wilderness with a perfect stranger, and a hundred thousand in cash in my pack-sack."

"You can draw up the contract in my cabin," the big man said, "but the deal won't be closed till I get the hundred thousan'."

"You'll get that in Dawson just as soon as I can draw the money out of the bank."

"Okay. Let's go."

Back in the cabin, Brower drew several sheets of legal cap from his pack and arranged them on the table. "This will be a partnership agreement, equally binding on both parties," he said. "Now regarding the firm name—how do you want it—Brower & Smith, or Smith & Brower?"

"Suit yerself," the big man replied.

Brower wrote steadily for half an hour. Then he paused and looked up. "Regarding this hundred thousand I'm turning over to you—as I understand it, part of this money will be available to the firm for such expenses as arise in connection with the business of mining, such as the purchase of the necessary pipe and so forth?"

"You don't understand it very good," Black John replied, eyeing the man shrewdly. "That hundred thousan' goes into my pocket, an' the pardnership ain't got no strings on it whatever. It's what you, personally, pay me, personally, fer a half interest in the location. All operatin' expenses will be stood by the firm."

Brower smiled. "Okay. You can't blame a man for trying." Shortly afterward he wrote out a duplicate, and handed both copies to the big man for inspection. Black John glanced at the script, and after a few moments handed them back. "Got so damn many 'whereases' an' be it knowns' an' parties of the different parts that I can't make head nor tail to it—but I did take particular notice that you set it down in both copies about that hundred thousan' bein' paid to me, personally, an' the operatin' expenses to be assumed by us jointly, as pardners. That's the main p'int, as I see it. To hell with the rest of it. I ain't no lawyer. I'll take your word that it's draw'd up proper—same as you took mine about the lake. That's fair enough."

"That's right," Brower agreed, and handed over the pen. "So now, when we set our John Hancocks down here we'll be full partners—and each will have a copy of the agreement."

Both signed, folded and pocketed their copies, and Black John glanced at the clock. "I'll fry us up a moose steak, an' then we'll be hittin' out fer Dawson," he said. "I want to git back here an' git to work on the claim."

"Good God, man—you mean pull out for Dawson, today!"

"Oh, shore—it's only noon. We can git a hell of a ways by dark with the days as long as they be."

"But I'm tired, I tell you! I feel like I could sleep for a week."

"Goin' back down won't tire you none. You'll be in the bow, an' it's all downstream. You won't even need to pick up yer paddle, if you don't want to. You can lean back on the packs an' snooze all day. I don't want to lose no time. The quicker I git back an' git to work, the quicker we'll begin' makin' money."

"Okay," Brower grinned. "One thing I won't have to worry about is a lazy partner. I sure wish I had your stamina."

"Yeah, stamina's a good thing to have," the big man agreed. "We'd ort to do all right—I've got the stamina, an' you've got the brains."

**I**N DAWSON Black John waited outside while Brower stepped into the bank. When he came out the two proceeded to the hotel where Brower paid over the hundred thousand in big bills. Black John pocketed the money, and stepped to the door.

"Okay, pardner," he said. "Good luck to us. I'll slip over to Al Scougale's store an' order that pipe." After a few minutes closeted with Scougale in the little office, he proceeded to the Tivoli, where the sour-doughs eyed him expectantly.

"We figgered you'd be showin' up pretty quick," Moosehide Charlie said. "Swiftwater, he seen you an' Brower pull in at the landin' an' hit fer the bank."

"Did you take him?" Bettles asked. "By God, if you did yer the first one to do it, that I ever heard tell of."

Black John grinned broadly, and producing his packet of bills, rifled them as the men stared at the denominations. "If these are good genuine bills I took him—I hope."

"What do you mean—'you hope'?" Burr MacShane asked. "Hell, you've got the bills, an' they shore look good to me."

"Well, it's jest possible there might be some kick-back to the deal. Brower draw'd up them papers, an' he's tied up with me, hard an' fast, as a pardner. But as we stepped into the hotel I seen Cuter Malone eyein' us from the door of the Klondike Palace. Brower, he frequents the Palace,

an' it might be that Cuter will tip Brower off that his pardner is an outlaw."

"What the hell do you care? You've got the cash." Camillo Bill asked. "S'pose he does tear up the contract!"

Black John's grin widened. "That's jest what I want him to do. If he don't, I'm in a hell of a fix."

Depositing his packsack in his room, Brower stepped across the street, entered the Klondike Palace, and stepped to the bar behind which Cuter Malone stood, the inevitable big black cigar cocked at an angle from the corner of his mouth.

"Where the hell you be'n fer the last three, four weeks?" he asked.

Brower grinned and winked. "Been way up the White River. Got hold of a sucker, and bought in on a location that ought to net a good profit—after I ease the sucker out. Shove out the bottle and I'll buy a little drink."

"Who was this here sucker?" Cuter asked, slanting Brower a glance as he set out a bottle and two glasses.

"Oh a boob by the name of John Smith—some farmer from down in Iowa, or somewhere."

"You mean the fella I seen you go into the hotel with a few minutes ago?"

"Yeah, that's him. Big, black-whiskered cuss."

**M**ALONE mouthed his cigar to the opposite corner of his lips and eyed the man before him. "You didn't, I hope, let go of any real mazuma to this here sucker, did you?" he asked softly.

"Sure. I paid him a hundred thousand in cash for a half interest in a proposition on Spruce Creek, that I'll double my money on easy. He's got nothing from me that I won't cash in on. You can bet on that."

"Uh-huh," Cuter replied dryly, "nothin' but a hundred thousan' of your cash. An' when you come to work that claim, you'll find out it ain't worth the powder to blow it to hell."

"Why—what do you mean?" Brower asked sharply.

"Ever hear of a guy named Black John Smith?"

"Why—yes. Some kind of an outlaw, or something, isn't he?"

"He is. An' he's yer sucker, Brower.

It was him I seen you go into the hotel with."

THE color drained from Brower's face, and the hand that raised the glass trembled so that much of the liquor slopped down his front. "You mean—you mean—that—"

"I mean that Black John has trimmed another sucker," Cuter said in a low, hard voice. "An' you ain't the only one—he's took me fer plenty. He's prob'ly over to the Tivoli, right now, countin' them bills."

"By God, he must have salted that claim then! I made the test pannings myself—and I know the dust was there in the gravel!"

"So what?"

"So I'm hitting for the Tivoli right now, and demand my money back."

"An' all you'll git back outa Black John will be a good horse-laugh."

"I'll take it to court!"

"How you goin' to prove he salted the claim? That's one thing you never kin prove—leastwise I never heard it proved, an' I've saw lots of 'em try it."

Brower's eyes were fixed on the glass before him in a widening stare. "But—but—but—" His lips formed the word stiffly and got no further.

Malone shoved the bottle toward him. "Snap out of it!" he said. "Take another drink. You've kissed that hundred thousan' good-bye—but there's more where that come from. As the feller says, there's a sucker born every minute. Cheer up."

"But—there's a clause in that partnership contract that might let him clean me out! He could incur any amount of expense for operation—and I'd be liable for half of it! By God, I've got to get hold of that contract and tear it up!" Abruptly he turned and dashed from the room.

A few minutes later he stepped into the Tivoli where Black John was drinking at the bar with the sourdoughs. The big man greeted him heartily. "Here's my pardner now! Come on over here Brower, an' meet the boys. Boys, this here is Tom Brower. Him an' I are pardners on a sweet proposition up on Spruce Crick" As he spoke he drew a paper from his pocket and held it so Brower could read. "You see, Brower,

I didn't let no grass grow under my feet, as the sayin' goes. Here's the order for that pipe—ninety-six thousan' dollars worth of it, all signed up by Brower & Smith. I jest stopped in an fixed it up with Scougale. So I'll have to trouble you fer forty-three thousan' dollars."

"Ninety-six thousand dollars—worth of pipe!" the man said in a dull voice, as though trying to grasp the idea.

"Yeah, you see, that little lake I spoke of—"

"You said it lays only a little piece back from the rim. My God, man—ninety-six thousand dollars!"

"It ain't only a little piece back from the rim, in comparison to the distance it might be. This here's a big country, Brower. It could lay ten times as far. But it's only a matter of ten mile—an' this order ain't all fer pipe, neither—you'll notice there's several syphons, an' valves, an' pumps, an' what-not. You see there's a couple of ridges lays between the lake an' the rim that we've got to h'ist in the water over. It'll cost a lot more before we git it workin'—but we'll sure have the water when we need it!"

Brower's face flamed a brick red. "By God, I won't pay it! I won't pay a damn cent!" he cried in a voice that rose to a scream.

"Oh, yes you will," the big man said, and drawing the partnership contract from his pocket, he shook it in the other's face. "That stuff is ordered, an' you're legally liable fer your half."

Quick as a flash the man's hand shot out and snatched the contract from Black John. An instant later he had torn it to shreds and dashed them onto the floor. Drawing his own copy from his pocket he tore that up, too. Scraping the bits of paper into a pile with his toe, he reached down and touched a match to it. Then he eyed the big man with a sneer. "There's your damned contract," he said. "You took me for a hundred thousand—but that's every damned cent you'll ever get out of me! I'm no damned fool!"

White teeth flashed behind the black beard. "That's what you think, Brower. Later, when you hear about that there Discovery claim on Spruce Crick runnin' into a million, you'll know different."

# CURIODDITIES BY Neill



THE LONGEST PERIOD OF BIRTH FOR MAMMALS IS REQUIRED BY THE ELEPHANT—NEARLY **TWO YEARS**! ANIMALS REQUIRING A LONGER PERIOD BEFORE BIRTH ARE OFTEN THE **LARGER SPECIES** AND GENERALLY **LIVE THE LONGEST**!

WHEN AN ANCIENT ISRAELITE SOLD SOMETHING INVOLVING A CONSIDERABLE SUM, HE ALSO HANDED OVER HIS **SHOES** TO SEAL THE BARGAIN!



IF THE STARFISH IS TORN IN HALF IT PROMPTLY GROWS NEW RAYS ON EACH HALF—**BECOMING TWO WHOLE FISH**!

# FREEDOM HAS A PRICE

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

## Part II



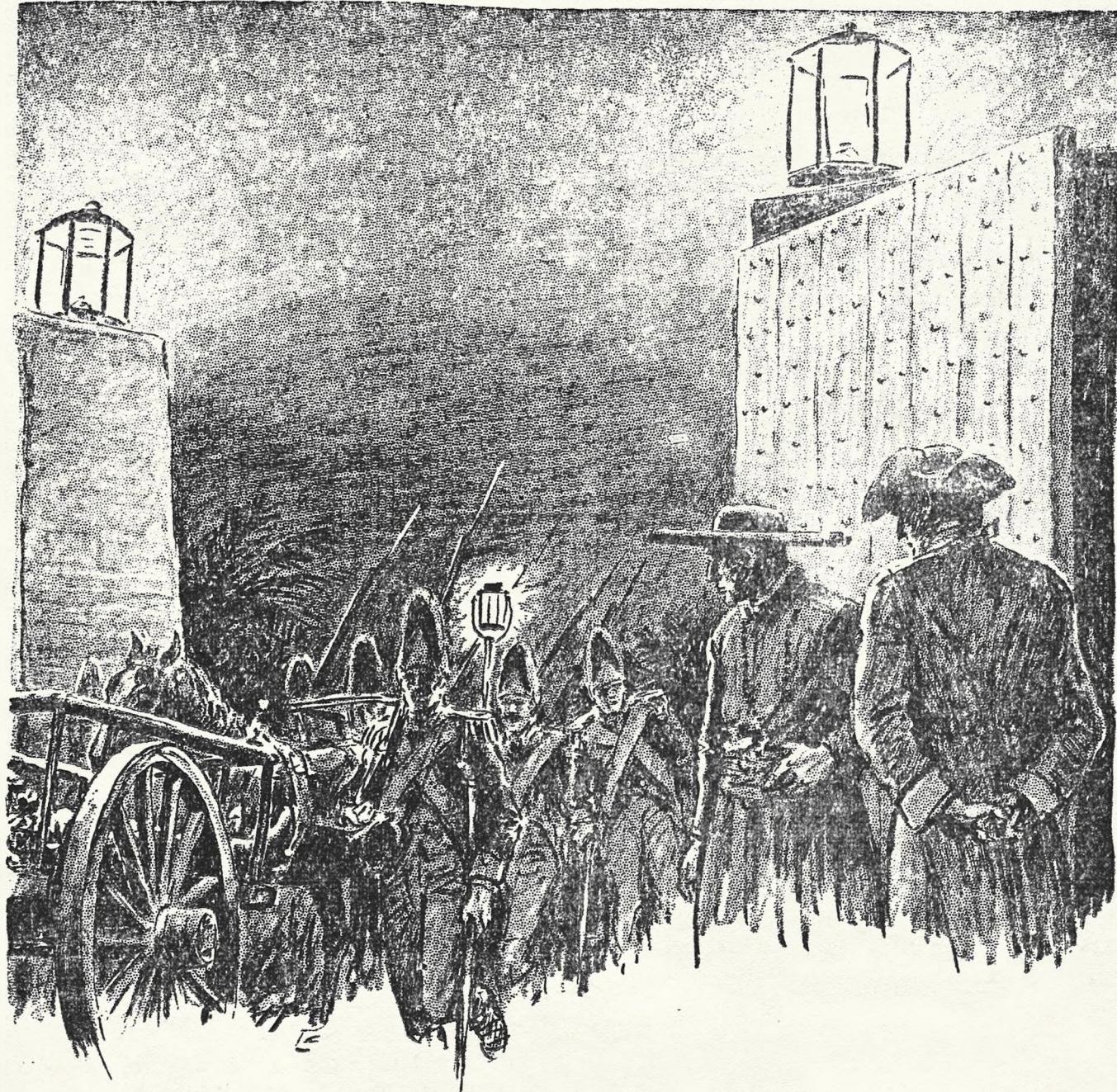
***“Conspiracy to Renew Slavery in the Colonies Would Betray Us, Our Dead and the Republic!”***

### THE STORY SO FAR

THE sweltering city of Cap Francis on the Island of San Domingo in the year 1802 was the nerve center of the gigantic shadowy grip whose claws had stretched from the Old World to sink into the New—the grip of Napoleon.

Bonaparte's deputy was General Leclerc whose secret terror of revolt in the island every day made him more ruthless. His rule

was upheld by black troops and the disease-ridden remnants of the old Army of the Rhine, and his secret orders would reimpose slavery on the country once Napoleon felt strong enough there. There was word of a secret cache of arms on the island, and the French knew that these would be used against them by the native armies if they enforced their idea of the return of slavery. So one of Leclerc's greatest missions was to discover the hiding place of the arms.



They were supposed to have been supplied by a firm in Philadelphia, and a member of this firm, young Langlade, whose family were former planters on the island, comes to the general's headquarters. Leclerc is very suspicious of him, but Langlade insists his visit is purely a personal one and that he wants to visit a Colonel Friquet who is in the hills with the army of General Valette. Leclerc finally agrees if Langlade will carry some papers to General Valette, so the American finally makes his way to Morne Rouge where Valette's forces are surrounded. It was like an ark in which a few people found refuge from the deathly flood overwhelming all others. Not that these men, white or black, sat idle in garrison. There was no insurrection here. Sylla and his mulatto bandits had cut them off, and Langlade was startled by the suggestion

that Friquet would never be rescued at all.

"Impossible!" he thought anxiously, desperately. "They cannot mean what they say! Friquet must be rescued at all costs!"

## VI

ON THIS same afternoon, Pere Simon was chatting with old Corporal Hugonin, not for the first time. He was awaiting the surgeon's report on Valette, and was free until the returning column brought in the wounded.

His chats with Hugonin had provoked utter and stupefied amazement. The little corporal was one of those men who are invariably called "old," irrespective of age. Little over fifty in point of fact, Hugonin had suddenly gone all to smash. What years

of campaigning had failed to accomplish, was brought to pass by six months of jungle, sun and fever. Now he wandered in his mind, except at drill, where he obeyed commands like an automaton.

Why this lean priest, with his dark face seamed and puckered by scars and blue-dotted by gunpowder spots, with his indefinable savour of the aristocrat, should favor old Hugonin with his company, was as mysterious as it was amazing. It was generally supposed that Pere Simon hoped for a convert. This, among those so short-sighted as to credit it, caused huge merriment.

Hugonin was one of those fantastically fierce Parisians who, half-naked, half-armed, had stopped all Europe at the Rhine. It was he who had hoisted aloft the head of Lamballe, and who dipped his hand in the blood of Louis Capet. He had a fund of curious, often terrible, anecdotes.

There exist certain persons who seem pre-destined always to witness and to share in great events, Hugonin was such a person. It was he, for example, who had helped carry the assassinated Kleber to his death-bed. It was Hugonin who had lifted the body of Marat from the fatal bath. It was his voice, though he was not a delegate, which denounced Carrier and the Jacobins to the guillotine. One of the first men across the bridge of Lodi, had been Hugonin. Desaix, the true victor of Austerlitz, had died in his arms.

Now the priest sat in silence while Corporal Hugonin gabbled away, painting the word-pictures of war that he loved. Once Herculean, the corporal was now shrunken and slack-jawed, his eyes watered, his voice rambled in a dead monotone. His words were colored by the most horrible blasphemies of gutter birth and army breeding.

Hugonin had shared the island history from the moment the fleets came westward, to the forty days of marching which had subdued the territory. The priest, however, beheld the canvas in a far different light. Pere Simon knew all that Hugonin did not, of the years preceding this martial deluge. He knew how a nation of freed slaves had been welded into unity by Toussaint L'Ouverture. He knew the hideous power lying dormant in this land, and the more hideous possibilities were the freedom of these slaves menaced.

With deft questioning, Pere Simon turned the rotting brain back across the years. Hugonin babbled of fighting on the Rhine, the siege of Spire, the taking of Holland. And suddenly Pere Simon lost his gloomy abstraction and tensed; for Hugonin, at last, was talking about happenings in Brittany, when the Vendean insurrection was crushed.

Given other attire than his shabby old soutane, this lean priest might have been anything. The scarred features, the puckered right cheek, the deep eyes, hinted at the soldier. In proper garb, he might have posed as an aristocrat.

At their first meeting, he and General Valette became friends, and he attached himself to the column. He was both respected and suspected; many of these veterans bore a fiery animosity to all religion. Valette himself, in '92, had helped to stamp out God and substitute Reason. Yet Pere Simon had earned tolerance and even affection.

Leaning forward, he spoke slowly and impressively, voiced the same question he had repeatedly asked the old corporal.

"When La Rochejacquelain was broken, you helped drive his defeated Whites out of Dol? Perhaps you heard of one known as the Comte du Courtois?"

Hugonin sucked his empty pipe, drooling over his wobbly chin.

"Courtois—the ci-divant Courtois, yes!" he mumbled. "The fool gave me gold. It was a very curious thing. He dared to call himself a friend—a friend of—of the great man, the supreme patriot—"

There he paused. An unseen force appeared to check the name; or as though, at this name, his wandering mind trembled and failed. But he gathered himself together, frowned in effort, and Pere Simon leaned forward tensely. At last, at last!

An officer strode in at the door. Old Hugonin looked up, struggled to rise, and managed a half salute.

"At ease, my friend," said the adjutant, and gestured to the priest.

A sigh, a suppressed ejaculation of bitter disappointment, and Pere Simon rose. His scarred features again impassive, inscrutable, he followed the adjutant outside. The sun had just sunk to rest. The guard was being changed.

"Well? What news?" asked the priest calmly. He was inured to disappointments.

Cripet shrugged. He was dried up, with pinched features behind huge mustache, a dour air, a sharp tongue, a bitter heart; the Egyptian sun had turned his blood to acid, they said of him. Yet, apt as he was at sardonic blasphemy, Cripet displayed a certain affection toward this priest.

"I've just seen Monnier," he said gravely. "The ball is lodged in the spine, causing temporary paralysis. Monnier is worn out and does not dare risk the removal until morning. Once the bullet is out, the paralysis may or may not be relieved."

"Then there is hope?"

"There is none. Valette may linger for a few days, a week, even more."

Cripet lifted his bright, glittering eyes to the crimson afterglow in the western skies, and a harsh sigh escaped him.

"Valette! Symbol of the perfect soldier, figure of restraint and wisdom, you whom Bonaparte called 'Valette the sublime'!—to think of you dying like this!" He turned on the priest with a snarl. "What's your boasted God about? Why did he not die gloriously in Syria, or in Egypt to the scimitar of some lordly Bey? To see him pass in this ignoble end! Assuredly there is no God; there is only a species of destiny."

Pere Simon's arm fell about the little man's shoulders.

"My friend, sometimes it is harder to live than to die. Did the column accomplish anything?"

"Did Valette ever fail? He smashed the bandits and captured Sylla's camp; at that instant he fell. Another two minutes and the road was open. No one could replace him; Jourdal was overcome by the son. Sylla rallied his men, we fell back. That accursed Friquet, that son of hell! For him, Valette has perished."

"Then the road is still closed."

"Yes, at the third defile. The column will be back tonight."

"Who'll have command here?"

"That imbecile Laporte is the senior. He's gloomier than ever. His brother was in the 7th of the Line, and it's been wiped out. An American arrived here this afternoon from Le Cap, bringing the news."

"Arrived?" the priest exclaimed sharply. "Then communication is open?"

"No. This is some American with a French name, on private affairs; he circled by St. Marc and around, by some miracle had no trouble. Perhaps he's a friend of the blacks, but he brought despatches from the Captain General. Monnier let him come in." Cripet turned and pressed the hand of the priest. "*Au revoir!* Laporte has called a council of officers. By the way, if you wish to depart, this arrival had an escort who are waiting."

"Thank you, I have business here."

Cripet strode away.

PERE SIMON headed toward the officers' quarters. Near the entrance he met Captain Gouget. A devout man, noted for his adherence to religion. Gouget saluted and the priest asked him a question. The morose veteran shrugged.

"I don't recall—wait! Yes, I do. His name was Langlade. Charles Langlade."

Pere Simon stiffened. "That's impossible! I tell you, it's impossible!"

"I don't know about that. I know the name on his pass," said Gouget, with a curious glance. "Young, but not a bad sort."

Gouget saluted again and went his way. Pere Simon, with a stupefied, blank air, walked out toward the parade ground; presently he slowed to an uncertain halt.

There was no sound but the slow pulsation of a drum from somewhere in the hills, and the shrill, merry voices of the black troops from their cantonments outside the fort. A dim, confused stir came from the barracks, where preparations were being made to receive the column upon its arrival.

"Charles Langlade, from America!" muttered Pere Simon. "To come to this place of all others—at this, of all times! If true, it must be some singular ordering of Providence. However, the name is not uncommon. It is probably some other man."

He lifted his head. In the eastern sky stars were pricking out silver points against the blue-dark night, clouds were massing heavily in the south for more rain. The priest was lost in reflection. His surroundings had vanished. Memories and experiences came pulsing across his mind. Other nights when the stars were hidden, not by cloud but by lurid smoke, when flames rose throughout the island from north to south, whole towns and plantations and canefields

burning for days together. In the struggle of three races, whites, mulattos and blacks, to exterminate one another, he had witnessed many strange and terrible things.

His own presence here was singular enough. He had met the advancing column and had dined with the general; at that dinner, the name Friquet was mentioned, a colonel with the advance, a soldier, a master of artillery. Even now, Pere Simon felt again his startled astonishment. He remembered how Valette had looked, that evening, tall and thin, deep eyes luminous and enchanting, the very image of gallant chivalry.

"Come with me," Valette had said, while his long, beautiful fingers toyed with the silver snuffbox a Mameluke Bey had given him. His voice was musical, with vibrant timbre. "Here you have nothing left, your church is burned, your flock scattered. My men have need of you. Come."

Would he have obeyed, if Friquet had not been somewhere ahead? At the mental query, the priest's thin lips drew into an ironic smile. He had come not to serve, but to find.

The curious thing was that he had missed his aim. When he reached Morne Rouge, Friquet was gone to L'Etang des Platons, the Spring of the Gorges, and Sylla's mulatto insurgents had cut the roads. Friquet, only twenty miles away, was unattainable.

"Hugonin remains; he may still talk," muttered Pere Simon. "Now that Valette has failed, will the others move to save Friquet? I doubt it. He inspires detestation and hatred. Well, they must be forced; cost what it may, Friquet must be rescued!"

He recalled the American, and frowned. He must look up the man. One word, one glance, would tell him the truth. Then, a prey to conflicting emotions, the lean scarred priest shrugged and turned toward the buildings.

"Laporte will do nothing," he said aloud. "He must be made to do it."

## VII

IT WAS the evening of Langlade's arrival, I early evening. Dinner would not come until much later, until the column had returned.

Above, the stars were now hidden by rolling clouds. Lanterns gave a dim light

above the gate, where Langlade and Pere Simon stood together, awaiting the column.

"Singular that Valette was hit in the very instant of triumph!" observed the priest. "Yet it frequently happens; upon a single bullet, depends destiny."

"You intimate," Langlade said drily, "that a higher hand jealously strikes us at the moment of victory, which is a pagan notion."

"It is not a pagan notion to believe in God," the priest retorted.

"You believe in God, and therefore in the devil," said Langlade. "But I believe in the devil, and therefore in God."

"Word-trickery! Why take such a position?"

"Because, the devil has for some years been busily efficient in protecting his own. Now his efforts appear to be weakening."

Pere Simon was silent for a moment. "I fail to comprehend you, *monsieur*. To what, or whom, do you refer?"

Langlade laughed harshly. "If I said that my words referred—well, to Colonel Friquet—it would mean nothing to you."

The lantern-light fell on the priest's hands, clasped at the girdle of his soutane, tightly clasped and gripped.

"You are acquainted with this Colonel Friquet?"

"No," Langlade said curtly. "Who's this bandit Sylla? One of the blacks?"

"Not at all; a mixed blood, a mulatto, an intelligent man who has lived in France." Pere Simon accepted the change of topic without comment. "He and our black General Noyer hate each other bitterly. Sylla's men are outcast whites and maroons from the south. Noyer's men are Negroes from Dahomey, the last batches of slaves brought hither under the old regime. Savage as the hatred is between them, at least—"

The other paused. Langlade caught the drift of thought, and smiled.

"At least, it guarantees that our blacks won't join Sylla. Is that it?"

Pere Simon responded with a nod. Impressed by the man, Langlade eyed him curiously.

"Were you born here in the island?"

"Yes," answered the priest. "I went to France before the troubles, then to Italy. Eventually I entered the church, and was sent back here. Religion here has suffered

no persecution, and the blacks respect me—ah!" He broke off. "The column is coming! The wounded men first—excellent. This Jourdal knows his business."

"You speak like a soldier," commented Langlade.

"I was a soldier, once." With this revelation, Pere Simon passed through the opening gates as men came trooping from the guardhouse, and went to meet the column.

Lanterns bobbed against the background of jungle. Four carts creaked drearily along, bearing the more severely wounded. Those able to walk hobbled beside the carts. After, came the column itself.

LEADING was a file of the 19th Light, a German battalion; save for this detachment at Morne Rouge, it no longer existed. These men marched in solid formation, with admirable precision. Then came a company of the 90th of the Line, veterans of the Rhine; these moved haphazard, but fell into ranks like a machine upon reaching the gates. Behind came the companies of black troops. Valette had given Friquet a hundred of his whites, exactly half; thus, the relieving column was not large.

The priest went with the wounded to the hospital. The guard officer embraced Captain von Hartman of the Germans, extending a canteen of wine.

"Thanks," said Hartman. "The general reached here safely?"

"Yes. The ball's in the spine. There's no hope, but death may be slow. Remember Laplume, who caught precisely the same thing at Marengo? He lived a full six weeks. Too bad it wasn't Friquet who got it."

"Yes, worse luck!"

"Any loot?"

"None of consequence. We grabbed Sylla's tent; in it was an iron casket, fast locked. May have something worthwhile. It's with the baggage. The general ordered everything brought in for examination, especially letters and papers. Well, I'm off."

The last of the column filed in. The gates were closed. The sentries resumed their pacing along the walls.

From the forest, from the far peaks, drifted the multitudinous night sounds of hill and jungle, with the distant pulsation of drums. These were louder than usual,

Langlade thought; the air was oppressive, rain threatened, sounds carried far. The fragrance of flowers reached him, the sudden odors of decaying vegetation. The rains brought everything to life, but this new life brought death to everything it choked out, like the vines of the accursed fig about a tree.

Crossing toward the officers' quarters, Langlade encountered Cripet. The little adjutant was sucking a clay pipe, and greeted him with animation.

"No hurry, Citizen American! Pardon my curiosity and tell me something." Cripet took his arm, with confidential air. "I'm something of an ass; but our honest Major Lervaut is actually a fool. He has a passion for the most depraved and useless of all studies, that of genealogy. Can you imagine such a thing, these days?"

Cripet, with his sardonic chuckle, went on quickly.

"He was asleep when you arrived, but has heard about you, and was just now talking to me. He says there are Langlades in Canada, and Langlades used to be here in Haiti. It seems they all came from his part of France, near Avranches, in Normandy. True?"

The American smiled.

"True, and quite unimportant. I lived here as a boy. Just before the Revolution, my father and his brother went to France on business. The troubles came, the estate was sold, the family fled to America. My uncle was killed somewhere, in a duel as I heard. The Revolution engulfed my father; he vanished. His fate remains unknown."

"Many such cases. This idle rascal of a Lervaut declared that you should be a duke or marquis or some such useless animal."

Langlade pressed the adjutant's arm.

"My dear Cripet, will you do me a favor? Stop the mouth of this man. I'm an American; we use no titles there."

"I understand," Cripet agreed quickly. "He'll shut up. Lervaut's a timid sort, except when bullets whistle; then he has more guts than any of us. Ah, there'll never be another Valette! Blood does tell, after all."

Langlade was genuinely astonished at this. "What? You fellows who curse all aristocrats can admit that blood does tell?"

Cripet chuckled. "The aristocrat, my friend, becomes the patriot. Valette had a

title; he abjured it, took the oath, and served the cause of freedom."

"Betraying his king, his class, like Tallyrand and others?"

"Careful, Citizen!" Cripot uttered a sudden growl. "I like you. We welcome you as an American, a patriot, one of the family. But keep your tongue off our general!"

A fierce passionate eagerness, a furious gusty vibrance, deepened his voice.

"What did Valette do? He fought for France. He sought nothing for himself, he gave everything. He gave himself to the republic, staying with the army. He beat back the Allies on the Rhine, with Moreau and Humbert and Kleber. He is as pure and beautiful as a Damascus rapier; as upright, as terrible, as honorable! We love that man, Citizen, and he is at this moment dying."

Langlade pressed the adjutant's hot, quivering fingers.

"Forgive my words; I should not have uttered them. There's much I don't understand; all around me are astonishing things, emotions, actions. I meant no offense."

"Ah, you're a generous rascal! Say no more." Cripot embraced him warmly.

"You shall share our mess, our councils, our destiny. You brought despatches, eh?"

"A packet for Valette, another for Friquet."

"Ah! That rogue. He should have died long ago."

"Eh? Your comrade, a servant of the Republic?"

"Servant of hell—of what he thinks his duty! Oh, I know; he has his points, but he's not one of us. Years ago I set out with a fine pack of fools to win glory; and name of a little black dog, we won it! In Holland, in Germany, in Egypt and Italy; and what became of us? One died here, another there. But not Friquet. He began as a spy, ferreting out aristocrats and enemies of the Republic. But we fought those enemies, in Austria, in Syria, in the Vendée! Always some new foe to meet! That's the difference. And now the accursed Corsican ships us here to die. What a pity our conspiracy fell through at Rennes! Because that blasted Colonel Pinoteau delayed to shave, Bonaparte escaped the guillotine."

"You forgot that his brother-in-law is

your leader," said Langlade, who knew or cared nothing about Rennes.

"Aye, and Bonaparte hates Leclerc because he's a real man."

"Opinions seem to vary," Langlade said drily. "I've heard him called a fool."

"You can hear anything. The army's full of rank gossip. You'll hear that Bonaparte practised incest with Pauline. Lies, lies, lies! If Leclerc wins glory, it's all in the family. If not, he's out of the way, and so are we. You know what some English poet wrote? 'The paths of glory lead but to the grave.' Wait and see. Look at this army of heroes who whipped all Europe; whither have the paths of glory led them?"

Langlade suddenly recalled the words of Marie Soulaster.

"Didn't Valette have a son as well as a daughter?"

"Heard that talk, have you?" Cripot whistled eerily. "That was back in '91, I know little about it. Valette never mentions it. The boy was guillotined. Well, we've talked enough! We're to dine in half an hour or so. First, Laporte wants you to come to the council of officers and tell us what's happened at Le Cap. Now, immediately. He sent me to find you."

"And you've been gabbing all this while?"

"Bells of the devil! What's the hurry?" Cripot emitted a cackle of mirth. "There's no haste. Laporte won't decide on anything; a splendid soldier, a worthless leader. He fears to act, lest headquarters kick him in the pants. Let's hope he catches a bullet."

"Eh? You seem to mean it."

"I do. Cripot rapped out an oath. "If he gets his way, he may try to relieve Friquet! That's madness. Come along! Talk first, then eat."

WONDERING at this sardonic rascal, Langlade accompanied him to headquarters and entered a room filled with officers, hazy with tobacco smoke and curses. The worried Laporte, stolid and impassive, sat at a table reading the captain general's orders to Valette. The packet addressed to Colonel Friquet remained unopened, being marked personal.

The room buzzed with voices. At one side sat Major Lervaut, a stoutish, earnest

man, nearly bald, with enormous curled sidewhiskers and huge mustaches that nearly touched his epaulets, giving him a deceptively ferocious air. Langlade was beckoned forward by Laporte, who shoved out a chair for him.

"Sit down, citizen; we want to hear the news, if you'll oblige us. These dispatches merely order us to remain here and to disarm our black troops. We want details. You're among friends, so be at ease; there's no formality. This tobacco might be to your taste."

In his awkward way, Laporte was trying to put the visitor at ease. Langlade thanked him, accepted a clay pipe, and filled it from the jar of tobacco.

"Suppose you ask me what you want to know. I fear I've no good news."

"We expect none," said Laporte. The silence, the intent faces, the eyes focused on Langlade, all confirmed his words. "The army is dying, we know. But how?"

"As it lived."

The curt phrase gripped them. A lifting hum whirled into a sudden burst of applause. "Vive l'Armée! Vive la République!" Then silence again, and a volley of questions.

Langlade gave an unvarnished account of what he had heard and seen at Le Cap. In the midst of question and reply, Pere Simon entered. He was followed by Monnier, whose rubicund features were white and drawn, and who called for brandy. They had just finished with the wounded men.

Bluntly asked what he thought of the situation among the blacks, Langlade hesitated. The choleric surgeon spat out acid words.

"Out with it! We'll all die soon enough. When does the pot boil over?"

Langlade shrugged. "When the blacks find that slavery is to be re-established. They suspect that Leclerc holds secret instructions from Paris."

"Suspect? Everyone knows it!" rose a jeering voice. "It came out when he quarreled with the admiral. The Corsican outlined every step of the occupation. But slavery? No, no! That's impossible, even for Bonaparte. What about the executions? You told Gouget something about Belair's brigade."

Langlade met the eye of Jourdal, a hand-

some fellow who wore his uniform with an air and held his head very high. He told what he knew of the repressive measures. Looks were exchanged, an eager hum arose, pierced by the bitter tones of Cripet.

"If slavery were renewed in the colonies, then Leclerc is betrayed, we're betrayed, our dead are betrayed, the republic is betrayed!"

"Bah!" said the morose Gouget. "It wouldn't be the first time the Corsican has betrayed us. Citizen American! Will the colonial troops at Le Cap be disarmed?"

"That seems the intention. But Leclerc is afraid to disarm them at once—"

"So he orders us to disarm ours, eh?" cried Jourdal, amid a burst of ironic mirth. Laporte stirred uneasily, shuffling the papers before him.

"Is this the respect of an army for its commander?" he growled.

"Yes!" yelled somebody. "Citizens, I denounce the traitor Corsican!"

**L**APORTE stood up. His voice blared out in explosive anger:

"You damned bleating sheep, listen to me! I have orders and I obey them. So do you. I'm in command here. That's all there is to it."

"Right you are!" shouted Hartman. "Vive Laporte! To hell with Bonaparte!"

Another burst of applause and oaths. Laporte did not know whether to be gratified or furious. Then Pere Simon stood up and spoke, gravely.

"My friends, General Valette is not dead. He may not die for weeks; indeed, with God's grace he may not die at all—"

"When it comes to bullet wounds, I know more about God's grace than you do," broke in Monnier. "He may remain paralyzed, he may come to himself, but he will certainly die."

"In that case," said the priest, "why not postpone any decisions? Let Valette die as the general commanding. It will gratify him."

There was instant acclaim. Laporte seized on the proposal with relief.

"Suppose we await his recovery, then. There's another matter; his family. That daughter of his is at Le Cap. He loves her dearly. If she could be here, with him—"

Voices leaped up, protesting, affirming, arguing. The theory that her presence would

comfort Valette, that she would be safe enough here, gained ground. Langlade perceived that these men had but one thought, one impulse; complete devotion to the dying man. He became steadily more curious to see the person who could inspire such affection.

"Well, fetch her here!" rapped out Cripot. "She might as well die here as there; that's sensible enough. But she should have some other woman here. Perhaps the Corsican's sister will come, eh?"

Someone uttered a phrase whose coarse obscenity brought a howl of laughter. Then Gouget spoke up.

"All right, she's a child of the army; she comes. That's settled. What about Friquet, now?"

Looks were exchanged, oaths boiled up—bitter curses, so instinct with hatred that the room fairly vibrated to the savage hum. Laporte smashed his fist on the table and his bellow rose above the noise.

"Colonel Friquet is an officer of the Republic! With him are our comrades, soldiers of the Republic! There'll be no more nonsense. You'll get orders from me or from the general, and by God you'll obey them! This council is adjourned."

He marched stiffly out of the room amid a storm of laughing applause.

**A**N HOUR later, dinner finished, Langlade lingered with others over pipes and cognac. Major Lervaut moved to a chair beside him, fenced about the topic in his mind, touched with hesitation upon the name of Langlade. The American gave him a look.

"Perhaps you have something particular in your thoughts?"

"Yes, *monsieur*—I mean, citizen." Lervaut caressed his bald head. "Something that vexes me. You see, I myself come from Avranches. That is why—"

Langlade caught sight of Cripot in the doorway, beckoning him. He rose, laid down his pipe, and put a hand on Lervaut's shoulder.

"The subject, my friend, is at the moment distasteful," he said with a familiar air. "I think I know what's in your mind. Later, we'll discuss it."

"You are most kind," replied Lervaut. "Do you know, I've learned some highly in-

teresting details from one of our veterans, old Corporal Hugonin!"

Upon those words trembled destiny, but Langlade was unaware.

"Pardon, Cripot is beckoning to me," he said. "We'll talk later. Meantime, you'll confer an inestimable favor on me by mentioning this matter to no one. *Au revoir!*"

At the doorway, Cripot seized him by the arm.

"Come along! The commandant wants you. Private business."

"What? Again?"

"You'll see. He's a queer duck," and Cripot chuckled. "The big ox! Thanks to Pere Simon, he'll leave things in the air for the present. Go on in to him. I must rout Monnier out of bed, confound it!"

Langlade entered a small, earth-floored room where Laporte sat at a table by candle-light. A cot, candles, masses of papers, objects piled everywhere in confusion.

"Ah, citizen! Draw up a stool," said Laporte cordially. An anxious frown creased his brow. From the roof, from everywhere outside, came the drum and the ceaseless running murmur of descending rain. "About your business here; is it with the general?"

"No. Of a private nature, and lies with Colonel Friquet."

"I see. Most unfortunate," Laporte murmured vaguely. "It may be days, a week, a fortnight, before Colonel Friquet returns. Now, there's something I wish to ask." He regarded Langlade uncertainly, and thumbed his mustache. "It's impossible for you to see Friquet at once. Monnier tells me that you're not a fool—pardon; those are his own words—that you're shrewd and take precautions. In this personal affair, I can't order my own men to act. I can't order anyone—"

Langlade perceived what the man was driving at in his vacillating manner.

"I understand, Citizen Colonel. You wish me to return to Le Cap and bring General Valette's daughter here. Eh?"

Langlade's jaw fell. "How the devil did you guess? Yes, that's it exactly, but the matter is complicated. She ought not to come alone. At the same time, this place is not designed for women."

Langlade smiled. "I know her, and think she'll come gladly. Also, I know the proper

companion for her, perhaps. Leave everything to me. I can arrange it."

With unutterable relief, Laporte clasped his hand warmly.

"Citizen, you're superb! You're one of those men who know exactly what to do in any emergency! You will go, then? In the morning?"

"Of course. Have my escort ready, and replace my horse; Monnier had him shot."

"Magnificent! It's settled, then, provided Monnier agrees. I've sent for him. And remember, I'm eternally your debtor! Ah, there's Monnier now."

Steps at the door. Not Monnier entered, but Jourdal, followed by Cripel.

"Citizen Colonel, you sent for me?" asked the lieutenant-colonel.

"Yes, yes; will you be seated?" Laporte looked at Cripel. "Where's Monnier?"

"Dressing. He'll be here."

Dismissed by a gesture, Cripel saluted and withdrew. Laporte turned to the American with a word of apology.

"Pardon us, Citizen, while we speak of another matter. Jourdal, about that box taken in Sylla's camp! Citizen Langlade leaves in the morning for Le Cap. I'm sending some of the captured documents by him to headquarters. But this box, eh?"

"Should be inspected, certainly," agreed Jourdal.

"Then we'll do it. There may be papers to go to headquarters. I've had the hinges broken, but the cover is intact."

Laporte rose, and from the pile of objects in the corner brought a despatch-box a foot square, apparently of iron. He wrenched off the lid of the coffer. Upon the table he dumped out some rings and other jewelry, then two packets of letters tied about with ribands. Upon the hot and oppressive air rose a faint scent of perfume.

"So the rebel preserves his *billets doux*!" said Jourdal, laughing.

"Devil take me if you're not right!" Laporte was glancing at the letters. He opened one, then another. A change came into his features.

Eyes widening as though with incredulity, he sank back and snatched at other letters. An oath, and he dropped them, shoved them away from him.

"Damnation! These accursed letters—they mean terrible things!" His words were

almost incoherent. Then he pulled himself together; that he had received some frightful shock, was obvious. "Kindly forget this matter. It is for the general alone. Ah! Enter!"

Monnier came into the doorway. "Who's dying? Why did you get me out of bed?"

"Citizen Langlade goes to Le Cap in the morning. He'll return with the general's daughter and another lady. I want to ask you about it—the sickness—"

Monnier shrugged. "I'd say be damned to you, for any other reason! For the general, it's different. Her presence will ease him, will help him."

"Is it dangerous to admit women?"

"Ten thousand devils! It's dangerous to admit anyone from below!" exploded the surgeon. "Don't waken me again, imbecile; I'm dead for sleep. You have my permission."

He strode out of the room. Langlade chuckled and rose.

"Then I'm off in the morning. Don't forget about the horse."

"It's good of you, very good of you," murmured Laporte.

JOURDAL left with Langlade and, outside, halted the latter.

"I must thank you for bringing me a certain letter. You think you can get her here safely? They say you came through without trouble, when all our patrols got shot."

Langlade shrugged. "I'll do my best, be sure. What's the mystery about the iron box and the letters?"

"No mystery," and Jourdal laughed. "This Sylla, you comprehend, is a handsome fellow, with very little Negro blood. He has many mistresses; love affairs with many ladies here and there. White women."

"Oh! Isn't that—well, rather incredible?"

"Nonsense! The conduct of the island women has been a public scandal. Bonaparte ordered all such deported; we've sent off two batches of them. Not that the poor things are to blame. God knows they've had to buy safety, security for those they love! And what did our honest Laporte see? Tender missives from some of the ladies whom he knew quite well, I imagine."

"It seems impossible," Langlade muttered.

"So Laporte thought, evidently, until he came face to face with the impossible!"

## VIII

ON HIS way, Langlade stopped briefly at the *habitation* Soulastre. He found that Marie and her aunt were gone; not to St. Marc as they had expected, but to Le Cap, where the English schooner was to pick them up.

He pressed on, riding hard, pushing his escort, for haste was imperative. He met with no hint of danger anywhere, and it seemed absurd that communications with Morne Rouge should be broken. But he had a black escort; perhaps there were other reasons. The drums were pounding away all the time, and he was known to be no enemy.

Of Hernan Dupuche he saw nothing, heard nothing, did not even think.

On the last stage of the journey he rode nearly all night and reached Le Cap with morning, hungry, weary, mud-splattered, unshaven.

He went direct to the Residency, learned that Leclerc was out at the palace on the promontory, and mounted his horse again. As he gathered up the reins, he saw Marie Soulastre riding across the square before the cathedral. He hastened to meet her, and drew rein at her side.

"Well," he exclaimed abruptly, "do you still want to visit Morne Rouge?"

A flash leaped in her eyes.

"Yes! What a queer greeting, my American! When did you arrive? Just now?"

"Yes. I'm on my way to see Leclerc. General Valette is dying; I've been sent to bring his daughter to Morne Rouge. Will you accompany her?"

"I'll go in any case." Instantly accepting the situation, she turned her horse. Her swift, fiery spirit, her gay laugh, the dancing radiance of her, lifted Langlade out of himself. "When do you leave?"

"After I get a bath, a shave, an hour's sleep. Valette, remember, is dying."

"I see. My aunt's aboard the schooner yonder, my business is done. I'm free. I'll ride to the palace with you and see if Pauline's still putting up preserves. Did you find Colonel Friquet?"

In a few words, Langlade briefly sketched

the situation at Morne Rouge. A gleam of joy flashed across her face.

"Good! Now nothing could keep me from going with you—nothing!"

Langlade drew rein abruptly, met her eyes with cold and level gaze.

Listen to me, Marie. You've not fooled me. I know your feeling toward that man, I suspect your intentions. I wanted it clearly understood there's to be no folly. My business with him comes first. I must talk with him privately—"

"You think I accept orders?" Anger lifted in her cheeks and dilated her eyes. "Just because I'm a woman?"

"I speak with a friend and comrade, not with a woman."

"An implied compliment, no doubt; but I agree to nothing. You, who treat Hernan Dupuche as you did—do you expect to get back to Morne Rouge alive?"

"Of course, I do," Langlade rasped irritably. "Damn Dupuche!"

"We'll see. The equinox has come, the sickness will soon be gone. Have you heard the news?"

"What news? I've heard nothing."

"General Belair's troops have either been disarmed or have deserted. He's left Le Cap and gone to his plantation, probably to raise a revolt. They've sent Dessalines after him."

Langlade stared out at the harbor as his horse plodded wearily on. Belair fled, his troops dispersed—well, Leclerc had at least averted revolt. General Noyer, the friend of Belair, would hear of this sooner or later, unless he died with Colonel Friquet.

"There's the schooner from Jamaica." Marie pointed to a craft in mid-harbor. "I'll get another ship in two or three weeks. Can we be back from Morne Rouge by then?"

Langlade's lips curved ironically. "Two weeks hence we may all be dead."

"That sounds like Pere Simon. The future belongs to God!" she said demurely.

"He's at Morne Rouge. You know him?"

"Naturally. We've been friends for years. But look there—!" She pointed suddenly. "A ship coming in past the headland! Commerce is picking up. A year or two ago, we'd have a dozen ships each day. Now even one is an event."

A brig had forged into sight, heading into the harbor under a light breeze, the flag of France trailing. A boat was going out to

meet her. Even in the white-hot morning sunlight she looked dark, dark of spars and canvas and hull.

**L**ANGLADE found himself fascinated by her appearance. Perhaps it was merely her somber air, her slow and steady progress; but he felt an insane wild apprehension, an utterly reasonless, leaping, rushing conviction that with this brig was sweeping forward some ominous and terrible force of destiny. He made an effort to clear his weary brain, to throw off the flittering fancies that had seized him.

"I know her!" exclaimed the girl. "She's an island trader, the *Cocarde*. She must have come from Guadeloupe. She's owned there."

Langlade scarcely noted the words at the moment; later, they were destined to reverberate in his mind, in Le Cap, in the whole island, in history itself. He took his gaze from the ship and looked at Marie questioningly.

"Queer!" he muttered. "Look again. Do you see anything sinister, deadly, terrible, in the appearance of that brig?"

"No, but I do in yours, my American. You're flushed and feverish, your eyes are wild. Let's get out of the sun; you've had too much of it. I hear Leclerc is bringing in all the outlying troops. The whole town is uneasy. Everyone feels as though something frightful were about to happen—hurricane weather, perhaps."

Langlade quickened the slow pace of his horse. The brig tacked and stood out again. The shifting breeze, the currents, had carried her too near the headland.

An hour later, Langlade removed his clothes in a tavern room, flung himself on the bed, and was fast asleep on the instant. All was arranged. At two o'clock he was to meet the two women with an escort of the Battalion Etranger, and get started back.

One o'clock. Langlade was dreaming of Marie Soulastre, riding at his side. He saw her face suddenly convulsed with terror, with horror; she was dragging frantically at his arm, her fingers sinking into his flesh. She actually pulled him from his saddle. He felt himself falling. There was a thunderous crash ringing in his ears, and he awoke.

He was lying on the floor beside the bed; he must have rolled off. The air was choking with powder smoke—no dream, this! As

Langlade came to his feet, people rushed into the room with cries, exclamations, questions. By the open window, a long horse-pistol lay on the floor, still warm. In the wall was a splintering gap where slugs had riven the wood. From window to wall a straight line would have run across the bed.

The commotion quieted; Langlade quelled it with a smile and a shrug. Men, white and black, stared at him queerly. Those slugs, said one, had knocked him out of bed but had done him no harm! The pistol simply could not have missed. The story began to spread, with variations and additions.

Langlade shut everyone out, bathed, shaved, dressed. Someone there at the window had, most certainly, emptied the pistol at him. The dream—what had the dream to do with it? Despite his sangfroid, his disdain of the supernatural, he felt a cold chill; the happening pulled at him strangely.

When he mounted and rode away, he saw that the tale had gone far. In the black faces, in the rolling eyes, he read wonder and fear. He smiled at it all; but when he met Marie, who was waiting with Julie Valette and the escort, he spoke to her quietly.

"Somehow, you saved my life a little while ago. Do you know it?"

"I?" Her frowning gaze questioned him. "Are you joking?"

**H**E TOLD her what had happened. A little color rose in her cheeks, but before she could speak, the others joined them and the start was made.

Thus, at two o'clock, Langlade was again riding through the streets of Le Cap, bound for Morne Rouge. In the van clattered three troopers and a corporal; six more brought up the rear. Behind Langlade rode the two women. In the harbor, now at anchor well out from shore, lay the dark brig, the *Cocarde*. She had brought troops and prisoners from Guadeloupe.

Langlade bore curt orders from the captain general—Morne Rouge was to be evacuated. Noyer's colonials were to be disarmed and dispersed, the artillery spiked, the munitions and fort blown up. Leclerc was abandoning his conquest. Now he could hope only to hold the chief towns of the island, until more troops arrived. He himself had changed, and was fighting off sick-

ness; Langlade had been startled by his words and looks.

Suddenly the escort drew rein and parted, giving passage to a column of black mounted troops. At their head rode a party of officers, their hats nodding with colored plumes, their uniforms heavy with gold lace. The gigantic figure that commanded them drew to one side, waved his companions on, and beckoned Langlade.

"Ride on," Langlade told his companions. "I'll catch up."

The others went on. He came stirrup to stirrup with Christophe and saw that the man's eyes were rolling wildly, like those of a maddened horse.

"Well?" he asked.

Christophe lifted a hand, with a tense air. "Wait a moment. It's exactly the hour, the time—listen."

In the hot silence, Langlade studied the other, who was dripping with perspiration. This brawny, heavy-jowled black who so curiously resembled King George of England in every feature, was scowling with suspense, on the alert, listening intently.

"There!" he said sharply, as distant trumpets blared and drums rolled.

Quick and vibrant came a rattle of musketry, a volley. Christophe relaxed.

"It is over," he said, and mopped his sweating face.

"Suppose you explain," said Langlade. "An execution?"

"A man and a woman. Dessalines caught them. Charles Belair and his wife."

Langlade started. "Belair? Executed? But he was not in revolt!"

"They were afraid of him." Christophe evidenced a sudden emotion, then checked it and straightened in his saddle. "It's not important. Nothing is important now. I have bigger news. Do you know that the *Cocarde* arrived today, just now, from Guadeloupe?"

"Ah!" Langlade started slightly. "The brig! The dark ship!"

Christophe bared his white teeth in a mirthless grimace.

"Ha, you feel something, do you? Two men escaped from that brig and swam ashore, despite guards, despite sharks, despite everything. Two prisoners, black men. Let me tell you, it were better for Leclerc had this ship and all aboard her been blown

up with powder! Better for him, for his army, for all of you whites—"

Again he checked himself. The veins in his black neck, in his forehead, were swollen with emotion. A pulse was pounding at his temples. He went on, more quietly.

"I warned you, Citizen Langlade! The truth has come today from Guadeloupe, brought ashore by those two escaped prisoners. There are no more secrets. General Richepanse has subjugated Guadeloupe. He has published a proclamation of the First Consul. And what does it say? That the blacks are slaves; that slavery is renewed in all the colonies, *all!* Do you understand? We who won freedom, are slaves again. You are not an enemy, but a friend; I warn you, leave this island by the first ship! *Au revoir.*"

Driving in his spurs, Christophe sent his horse leaping away like a mad thing.

Langlade rode on; he was stunned. This news seemed unreal, incredible. He thought of Leclerc, thin, anxious, worn. There were no more secrets! The blacks knew they were betrayed. Leclerc and his army, too, were betrayed. No wonder the troops were being concentrated. Once this news spread, the land would be in flame. Slavery! Belair and his wife shot!

General Noyer, up there in the hills with Friquet, would hear. He had troops to fling upon Valette's force in a whirlwind of massacre. Disarm Noyer's men? A harsh laugh escaped Langlade at the thought. But what would happen if they were not disarmed? The dilemma was horrible.

When Langlade caught up with his own party, Julie Valette regarded him with a slight, supercilious lift of her brows.

"You have strange friends, it appears."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, mademoiselle. Something tells me you are right."

Irritated by these words, Julie rode on ahead. He found Marie Soulastre at his stirrup, touching his arm, regarding him with grave intentness.

"Don't heed that little fool. Something more about Dupuche?"

"Eh? Dupuche?" said Langlade dully. He had forgotten, for the moment.

"Oh, the devil!" she broke out angrily. "Hernan Dupuche, you imbecile! You know he was sent to kill you, that he was behind that pistol! What did Christophe tell you?"

"Oh! That Charles Belair has just been shot. The brig from Guadeloupe brought word that Bonaparte has openly proclaimed slavery in all the colonies. The news is out."

She caught her breath, dismay darkening her features.

"Oh! Then—then—if we go to Morne Rouge now—why, in a day or two the whole island will be in flames!"

Langlade nodded grimly. "You need not go. Nothing compels you."

"You're going?"

"Of course. I have an errand."

"So have I," she said curtly, and urged her horse forward to join Julie Valette.

**D**URING the journey, Langlade rode much by himself, kept largely to himself. Julie Valette, beneath her crystal-hard exterior, was shattered and broken by the news of her father. Marie, while not particularly fond of her companion, gave of herself liberally and completely in the effort to help; for all three, it was a trying ride.

Langlade was seeing the country with new eyes, now, and it saddened him. The rich plantations, the once lovely villages and chateaux adorned with every refinement of wealth and luxury, were mournful ruins. The unkept fields, with each succeeding year, were more completely swallowed by the jungle.

The fields in the great plains of the north and the cul-de-sac, once of almost incalculable wealth, were still tended, managed by black generals or mulatto aristocrats, or by remnants of once-proud white families. The cultivation was half-hearted. The system of forced labor devised by Toussaint L'Ouverture, acceptably replacing slavery, was abandoned. The enormous aqueducts and irrigation works, a hundred years in the making, were ruined and gone. An entire civilization had been swept out of existence.

"They are gone, we remain," recurred the prophetic words of the corpse-gatherer.

On the final evening, halt was made at Marie's plantation, not yet occupied by Hernan Dupuche. Langlade planned to spend the night here, and with an early start reach Morne Rouge the following noon.

After the evening meal, the party dispersed to rest. Langlade lingered in the downstairs room where the caricature of Friquet still adorned the wall. He was

smoking, idly watching that shadowy likeness, when Marie came into the room.

"Stay as you are." Throwing a cushion on the floor beside him, she dropped on it. "Talking with Citizen Friquet, are you? What a strange man you are, Charles Langlade! Too much of a man for Dupuche to murder. You fool, to sit here like this in the light! Next time, his assassins won't miss."

She leaned forward, pressed her finger on the candle-wick, and extinguished it. In the darkness, Langlade reached for her hand; it yielded to his, clutched his fingers.

"I want to know," she said simply. "I know so little of you!"

Her lips came to his in the darkness, cool, fresh, seeking.

"I've nothing to keep back," he said, his voice shaking a little. "From the first moment we met. I want to know, too. Your hopes, your ambitions, your faith."

"Begin with Friquet, then," she said.

In the stillness, he could feel her body trembling, as though responding to his own emotion. A thread of moonlight filtered across the floor from the window. The muffled, distant pulsation of drums made itself felt rather than heard, with monotonous insistence.

"A ship came to Philadelphia with news of the army, with lists of the regiments," he said slowly. "I heard the name of Friquet mentioned. I secured passage and came. That's all."

"A beginning, at least," she said, and laughed softly. "You hear those drums? News that Belair is dead, that slavery is decreed. The mulattos don't use drums; Sylla will hear the news from the blacks, however. But go on."

"A long time ago my father and his younger brother went to France," he resumed. "Troubles came. The plantation here was sold to Dupuche, my mother fled hastily with me. My uncle was a wild blade; he went to Italy, got into some scandal, was killed in a duel, or so I heard. My father fell heir to a title and estates in Normandy; the revolution in France rendered them of no value. He joined Rochejacquelin's revolt in the Vendée. I have a letter he wrote home; it has given me some hopes that he may still be alive. I found it only after my mother's death."

"The letter?" she murmured.

"Yes. He wrote it while a prisoner, going to Paris. A man in Paris, who for years had acted as business agent there for the family, had great influence. My father was his warm friend. By appealing to him, my father was confident of escaping the guillotine."

"And this man?"

"Citizen Friquet."

"Ah! He saved your father?"

"I don't know. I only saw this letter after my mother's death, last year. Friquet can tell me everything. That is all my errand, you see."

The room was wrapped in silence. Langlade could hear her breath coming rapidly, unevenly; she pushed his hand away, yet her fingers clung to him.

"Surely," she broke out, "you don't expect that Friquet showed mercy?"

"Why not? He was under heavy obligations to my father. He must know the truth; I must learn it. My father may be alive in some prison. Such things have happened."

"Yes," she said, and paused. "Yes. Friquet was business agent for many planters, a scrupulous, honest man. My father was his friend; but he sent my father to the guillotine, nonetheless. Suppose, in your case—"

"Then my uncertainty will be ended."

"You would spare him?"

"Spare him? I don't understand."

"Don't evade. Be frank. Answer my question!"

"You're too imperative." Langlade laughed. "You're the one to cease evasion. You don't think, surely, I expect to kill him?"

"Of course."

"Because he killed your father, you consider vengeance a duty? Nonsense." Langlade relaxed, his voice strong with restraint. "That's not my conception of duty. I seek Friquet only with the idea of hope."

"And when you find him a fiend who destroys hope, you'd turn your back and leave?"

"Certainly," Langlade replied. "What good to shoot him? Would it save a man dead these ten years? Still, until I learn the truth from his own lips, I can't predict my reactions."

"But I can predict mine," came her voice, fired with passionate emotion.

"Then see that you don't interfere with me."

"Is that a threat?"

"It is." Langlade's arm tightened about her shoulder. "Rather, my dear, it's a warning. Those whom we love, we warn."

"Indeed? I agree to nothing—" She broke off abruptly, listening. Then her hands came to him, seizing him, holding him closer. "The drums! Something has happened, there in Le Cap. Listen to the quicker, louder pulsation! The sound seems to leap and bound in the air—hear it?"

"Yes. Like your heart, and my own," Langlade said, as he listened.

It was true about those drums; Marie Soulaster was right. Something had happened in Le Cap, this same evening.

Leclerc, in his headquarters, was dictating



a letter to the First Consul. He was half dressed, his shirt open, his eyes bright. He had risen from bed to get this letter off by a ship leaving in the morning. In the adjoining room, a waiting surgeon was conferring with the anxious Pauline, listening to a mutter of gunfire that came from outside the city.

"Never was a general in more dreadful circumstances," fluttered Leclerc's voice. "The island is lost to France unless I receive ten thousand men in one contingent by January. Clairvaux and his mulatto troops have revolted and seized the outer forts. Dessalines and Christophe joined the rebels today with their forces. The firing can be heard here, as I write. An assault is predicted for tomorrow. I cannot attack. I have only a few hundred men, with the National Guard formed from the civilians—"

Leclerc's voice failed. He staggered and collapsed. The alarmed secretaries called for the surgeon; there was a rush into the room. Leclerc was carried to bed, and presently the surgeon left him and sought Pauline.

"Cholera," he said, without evasion. His look expressed what he did not need to utter. The captain general was about to follow his officers and men.

## IX

**H**ELPLESS apathy had descended like a blanket upon Morne Rouge.

The bullet extracted, General Valette had sunk into a peaceful slumber which lasted an entire day and a half. When he wakened, Monnier ordered him fed with strong meat broths. It became evident that the slowly dying man would remain paralyzed from the waist down; fortunately, he had no pain whatever.

Monnier, after two days and a night without sleep, left the sick-bay wearily and sought the adjutant's office. Cripel was gone; the surgeon found Major Lervaut here, with Pere Simon, sipping water and limejuice as they talked.

"He's come around," Monnier said.

"Then he will live?" asked Lervaut hopefully.

"No, species of cabbage! But he'll not die for some days. He must see no one till morning; his head will be clear then. He can't move below the waist, but that will of his is an invisible steel thread holding him to life. When should his daughter come?"

"God knows." Lervaut nervously caressed his side-whiskers. "Tomorrow, next day, the day after. Perhaps never."

Monnier spat an oath. "Tell Cripel no one is to see the general until morning, and make it emphatic. I'm off to get some sleep."

The other two sat in silence. Pere Simon was thinking of Valette, now like a log, awaiting death. The inertia that held him now extended to all those around.

Laporte had done nothing. Against Laporte rested the terrible indictment of never having committed either a mistake or a brilliant action. The subject of disarming the colonials was like a red-hot iron that no one dared to touch.

Here were a hundred white troops, and three times as many blacks, whose temper was fearfully uncertain. Their officers were alert, suspicious; a spark might set off an explosion. Jourdal advised shooting all the officers; Laporte dared not risk this. Cripel advised parading them within the fort, turning the cannon on them, and dispersing them after taking their arms. At the same time, added Cripel, if he were a black

officer he would assuredly fling all his men on the guns and the white troops. This terrified Laporte. Safer to let Valette decide.

As to the rescue of Friquet, Laporte actually feared that his officers might refuse orders, and indecision gnawed him. He should have known better, but waves of doubt, of uncertainty, of horrible possibility, beat upon him from every side. So he waited.

"I hope that girl gets here," muttered Lervaut uneasily. "Not that I think she's up to much, but he's devoted to her. Ten years ago she'd have gone to kiss the guillotine, but times have changed."

"They have," said Pere Simon. "Now she merely goes into the wilderness to be with a dying father." The irony was quite lost upon Lervaut, who nodded solemnly.

"Not here yet. Just that damned Bonaparte woman to hold her back. Still, the American will bring her. There's a man for you! Do you know—"

He hesitated, picked up his pipe, began to clean it, frowning.

"A queer fellow, that Langlade," he went on awkwardly. "I'm from their part of the country. The younger branch emigrated, the old branch perished. The last Comte de Courtois died in '91."

"Was it not in '93?" queried the priest. Lervaut, jerking up his head, regarded the other with a certain astonishment.

"It was not, I am positive; I keep track of such matters. I was a notary's clerk in Avranches. The Comte de Courtois died in '91, a very old man. In '92 a man came to talk with my master. I listened at the door," he added naively, "because their talk fascinated me. This man was Charles Langlade, father of our American friend. He was, legally, heir to the Comte de Courtois but the revolutionary decrees had ended all that and he did not assume the title."

The lean, scarred, puckered face of the priest shoved forward.

"What was the talk about?" he asked idly, veiling his keenly probing gaze.

"About a brother of Langlade who had just died in Italy, killed in a duel there after some terrific scandal. Well, the next year, in '93, this Langlade was guillotined. I saw the name in the lists of the proscribed."

"Are you certain he was guillotined?" the priest asked.

Lervaut shrugged. "So reported; there was something odd about it. When the Vendéan army was broken at Dol, he was captured. Instead of being shot with the others, he was sent to Paris a prisoner. Why? I could never learn. There was some reason. It was very singular."

Pere Simon nodded thoughtfully, as though the singularity might have impressed him also.

"So there we are." Lervaut sucked noisily at his empty pipe. "Our American friend must know of the title; he refused to let me discuss it. At any rate, he can't deny his birth."

"True." Pere Simon lingered a little on the word. "One may conceal it, but can never deny it. True."

"Oh, he's concealing nothing! A fine chap, given to a flat no or yes without any explanation. You see character in that American."

"Have you known Colonel Friquet long?" asked the priest.

"Oh—that one!" Lervaut changed expression. "Spy, informer, police agent, of Robespierre, commissioner to the army, became an officer, developed a genius for artillery work. They say the Corsican took a fancy to him. Has betrayed his best friends, by all accounts; a thing of steel with no bowels. I don't know him well, but I agree with everyone else about him. Devil take him! Here's Cripel now."

The sardonic little adjutant bustled in.

"Hello! Talking theology or genealogy? The one's as useless as the other. What word from Valette?"

Lervaut told of Monnier's report and orders. Cripel settled himself on a stool, unbuttoned his tunic, and reached for pipe and tobacco.

"Tomorrow we begin to live again, then—while Valette lives." He flung the priest a sudden glance. "By the way, Corporal Hugonin was just taken to hospital. He's had a stroke of some kind. Better catch him while he's knocked out; you might score a convert at the last gasp!"

The priest started up. "It's a good thing I know you and your tongue to be two different things!" he shot back, and strode out.

Cripel swung his feet to the desk, puffed at his pipe, and grinned at Lervaut.

"Well, it's beginning! Now it'll gain momentum, come faster and sharper all about us. You'll see, my old one!"

"Eh?" Lervaut drew down shaggy brows. "What are you talking about?"

"Death. Once it begins to come, it comes fast. Valette, Hugonin, then a deluge. You and I will soon be gabbing with the angels."

"You have damned disagreeable thoughts," Lervaut said uneasily. "I've been talking with Gouget about this business of disarming the colonials. Do you think it dangerous?"

Cripel rolled his eyes, as though calling heaven to witness that he dealt with a fool.

"Dangerous? A cataclysm, annihilation, crack o' doom—that's all! You should have stayed with your notary in Avranches. You imbecile, don't you realize that every man of us faces destruction?"

"That's curious," Lervaut said, breathing heavily. "Gouget thinks the same. He says the colonial officers were making vague impudent threats during drill today."

Cripel shrugged. "They'll do nothing till they learn whether their general is dead or alive. They're all devoted to Noyer."

"Suppose Friquet does return, and General Noyer? We'd have two hundred men against six hundred—"

"Bah! That detachment won't return full strength, my son; not a half of it! Bah! We should parade those blacks under the guns and disarm them, before Noyer returns. But will Laporte do it? Not he. That a few score of France's veterans should hesitate before three times their number of black rascals—why, it's incredible! Preposterous!"

"Citizen Adjutant! Citizen Adjutant!"

Shrill voices, pounding feet; a soldier appeared, breathless, sweating, his eyes wide. He saluted hurriedly.

"A messenger—just arrived from—from Colonel Friquet!"

Cripel leaped up and rushed from the room. Outside he paused, blinking in the afternoon sunlight, then hurried toward a group approaching from the gate.

A number of men were supporting a frightful object—a huge black, entirely naked, plastered with reddish mud, bleeding in a dozen places from thorns. He was at the point of exhaustion. Head and body showed festering wounds, his eyes rolled wildly, his tongue lolled out like that of a

dog. However, he grinned faintly in triumph of arrival.

A canteen of brandy and water was produced. The black gulped at it, and revived instantly under the influence of the fiery liquor. He saluted Cripet.

"Three days, m'soo!" he said in the island patois. "But I got here. Citizen Ermine, sergeant, of the Noyer Demi-brigade. I have a message."

"Good!" cried Cripet eagerly. "How goes everything, Citizen Ermine?"

The Negro's eyes flashed exultantly, proudly.

"We've held off those damned mulattos under Sylla! Fighting, comrades! Attacks night and morning; rain, sun, surprises. Ah, but the citizen colonel is magnificent! Twice he saved the life of our general. His courage, his coolness, saved us all. A great man, that Citizen Friquet! Thirty-five of your men remain with the colors; of ours, eighty."

He seized the canteen again and lifted it to his lips, amid a frightful silence.

Thirty-five whites left out of a hundred; eighty colonials out of three hundred! The brief words were eloquent, an epitome of epic heroism.

LAPORTE approached, hurriedly fastening his belt. Ermine drew himself up and saluted again. Half drunk with the cognac, he rolled out his message grandly.

"Citizen Commandant! A verbal message. Citizen Colonel Friquet says that his ammunition is low, his powder nearly gone; enough remains to last until Friday. On Friday morning he will attack and attempt to break through. That is all. Now I'll go to tell my comrades of such fighting as will rejoice their hearts!"

He went reeling and staggering away, laughing at any mention of hospital. The vaudou healers among the colonials would look after his hurts in their own way.

Cripet and the others clustered about Laporte. It was curious that the one vitally important thing, the one supreme fact, quite slipped their minds; not one of them heeded the messenger's burning eulogy of Colonel Friquet. And yet this unregarded mention was the key to the whole destiny of Morne Rouge and those in it.

"Friday! And today is Tuesday!" Laporte glanced from face to face, and received no

help. One thought gripped them all; thirty-five left of a hundred, eighty left of three hundred. He went on hastily. "But there must be some mistake! He can't break through! He'll have wounded men to transport, also!"

"Imbecile!" spat Cripet. "He expects us to attack at the same moment, of course."

One of those who had brought the messenger from the gate, saluted and spoke.

"Citizen Colonel, he spoke of the wounded. There are none."

"No wounded?" Laporte stared wildly. "Who let that fellow go without a full report? But never mind now. No wounded? Why not? There must be wounded!"

"He told us," said the sailor. "After the general's column retired, the enemy attacked and captured part of the position. This fellow said that Citizen Colonel Friquet had the wounded shot, in order to prevent their capture by Sylla."

Low shocked voices welled up into a storm of oaths. At tension from the heat, the suspense, these men suddenly loosed a whirlwind of passion. The name of Friquet was coupled with the foulest imprecations, the most horrible of profanity.

Cripet took the arm of the stunned Major Lervaut and walked away. He took a certain pleasure in tormenting this bald-headed notary's clerk, whose ferocious mustache concealed an eternal bewilderment.

"You see, my old one! As I said. Death strikes ever faster."

"But nothing has happened here," Lervaut protested. "Ah, those wounded! A frightful action, an incredible action!"

"Not at all," said Cripet coolly. "Bonaparte did the same thing in Syria. Any good commander would do it. Better kill them, than have them crucified, impaled, flayed alive in sight of the garrison! Much as I detest that unspeakable louse of a Friquet, here he acted well. Decidedly, that Englishman was right; the paths of glory lead but to the grave. Our turn is coming."

"I don't get your meaning, Cripet. We're not besieged. I don't see—"

"If we could see death's approach, we might avoid it. You're merely human; I, on the contrary, am something more than human. An angelic being, let us say. Therefore, I can see clearly things that are hidden from your sight."

Dragging along the unhappy Lervaut, horrified yet fascinated by his torrent of dry blasphemy and terrible predictions. Cripel went his way.

Meanwhile, in the cool quiet of the hospital, Pere Simon sat beside the bed of the dying corporal, calmly studying the face of the stricken man, and from time to time freshening the cold compresses on his brow.

The windows were open to allow any breath of air to reach the double row of cots. Folding screens across the windows kept out the blinding sunlight. At the far end were the wounded from Valette's column; the general himself lay in adjoining room, apart from the main ward.

Pere Simon, fingering his crucifix though he was, assuredly was not praying; his gaze was intent on the stricken man, his scarred features betrayed impatience, almost anger.

"To drink, to drink!" Corporal Hugonin had wakened; the voice was feeble. Pere Simon took a cup from the floor and held it to the man's lips.

"You!" Indescribable contempt and defiance blazed in the old eyes. "What are you hanging around me for, you faked papist? Tell them to give me some cognac, and get out. I shot four of your devil's brood in the Vendée. Wish I'd caught you there!"

"You are, obviously, yourself again, Corporal Hugonin." Pere Simon smiled. "Now tell me something. You were in the Vendée, you saw the fighting around Dol."

"I did. And next day clapped plenty blackbirds like you into Mont Libre—the cidevant Mont St. Michel. Twenty or more. What do you want to know?"

The bleary old eyes were hard and bright, bitter as acid, now. Corporal Hugonin would die as he had lived, defiant of aristocrats, of royalists, of God, to the end. He was indeed himself again.

"You've been a good soldier, Hugonin, these many years. I want to learn something about those days in '93 when the regiments from Paris shattered the Whites at Dol. You were in one of those regiments."

"True," said Hugonin.

"Once you mentioned the Comte de Courtois to me." Now, for the final time, Pere Simon asked the same question he had so often put before to this same man. "Will you have the kindness to tell me what be-

came of this Citizen Courtois, as you called him."

"I slipped a bayonet into a lot of those rascals, and into their cursed women as well, in the good old days! But not into that fellow. I remember him. It was after the victory—"

He paused. The color ebbed out of his face, and his eyes closed.

Pere Simon leaned over. In his face was frightful despair, a concentrated tensity; his eyes fairly burned into the waxen features on the pillow. As though compelled by this powerful, profound scrutiny, this exertion of will and energy, Hugonin opened his eyes and sighed faintly.

"I remember. I knocked him over. He was not killed; he gave me a shock, I tell you! Fancy his claiming to be a friend of Citizen Friquet! They called him Friquet the Patriot, back in those days; Friquet, the feeder of Mother Guillotine! Not what we call him now. We know him too well, the inhuman devil!"

"But Courtois?" said the priest with quiet insistence.

"I took him to Paris, a prisoner. He had money; not assignats, but gold. I handed him over to Citizen Friquet. The fool!" A faint laugh shook the dying man. "He paid me for putting—for putting him into the very hand of—of death—"

The words died and were gone. Pere Simon brushed away the flies, and gently touched Hugonin's brow.

"And there at Paris," came his deep, calm voice, "what happened to him?"

Corporal Hugonin was smiling. All bitterness had deserted his relaxed features, the lines were smoothed out. The eyes did not move—even when the startled priest touched the lids. Corporal Hugonin had departed, smiling, upon the very name of death.

Sharp, acute despair leaped in the face of Pere Simon; then he bowed his head and his lips moved slightly in prayer. His brow smoothed. When he heard a step, he glanced up to see Cripel. The adjutant glanced at the face on the pillow, and made a gesture as of dismissal.

"The paths of glory," he murmured ironically.

"Singular," said the priest reflectively, "that this man, of all others, should be smiling as he lies in death!"

"Not at all. He belonged to the generation of the Revolution, which in three years lived through a century. That generation, thanks to the Corsican, is rapidly passing. Have you heard the news? A messenger has come from Friquet."

"Friquet!" Pere Simon rose quickly.

"Thirty-five of his men left, eighty of Noyer's colonials. On Friday, he tries to break through. We must send a column, but that ass Laporte hesitates. Such a man! Such an imbecile!"

"Friquet must be relieved!" said the priest, with such swift energy that Cripel gave him a curious scrutiny. "Does Laporte really hesitate?"

"Does he ever do anything else? But they're all furious. Friquet shot his wounded so Sylla wouldn't get them. These others curse him for it."

"The wounded must have blessed him," said Pere Simon slowly. "Any news from that American?"

"No. He'll bring the girl; he's that kind."

"Yes, he's that kind," repeated Pere Simon.

Drums were rattling, the heat of the day was past, men were falling in for drill. From the cantonments outside the walls another roll of drums told that the colonial infantry there was also at drill. At the door of the officers' quarters, Pere Simon encountered the man he wanted to see.

Jourdal saluted smilingly. His vigor and energy, his brisk alertness and decision, made refreshing contrast to the weary cynicism of the older officers.

"I've just heard the news," said the priest. "Friquet will be met, of course. I desire to accompany the column."

Jourdal laughed. "Never say 'of course' when a Laporte commands!"

"What will be done?" demanded Pere Simon brusquely.

"Nothing, unless Valette gives the order." Jourdal took his arm, walked along beside him, spoke with rapid analysis. "Why risk everything to help Friquet? That's the general sentiment. This Sylla is nobody's fool. Laporte fears to lose everything."

"He's afraid Sylla would attack any column sent out?"

"Sylla would let it attack him, then destroy it, if he could."

"If you were in Laporte's place?"

"Ah! You'd see fireworks!" Jourdal laughed gayly. "I don't fancy Friquet, but look how he's fought! Besides, we're all useless here. With Friquet relieved, we could return to Le Cap. Here we're enfolded by the wings of futility."

"Perhaps General Valette will give orders."

"I hope so."

"In such case, you'll command the column."

"And Friquet will be rescued."

"I desire to accompany you."

Jourdal pressed the hand of Pere Simon.

"Delighted! To keep the rendezvous with Friquet, we must leave here on Thursday, day after tomorrow. Hm! Let's hope for the best." Jourdal looked out at the assembling ranks on the parade ground, a frown settling on his fine, clear eyes. "Curious, this general hatred of Friquet! Rather, detestation. The one man who should be most bitter against him, alone can assure his rescue."

"Valette?"

"Yes. Friquet caused his son to be guillotined, under the Terror. And here's a paradox! Valette isn't a Christian; he threw all religion overboard with his titles. Yet I happen to know that years ago he forgave Friquet the death of his son, from some sublime chivalry which I admit I don't comprehend. How do you explain the paradox?"

"Is it any more singular than that you should discuss philosophy when your men are awaiting you yonder?"

With a gay burst of laughter, Jourdal clapped him on the shoulder and strode away. Laporte, worried and nervous, came past. Soldiers hurried on. One of them, hastily arranging his crossed straps, halted beside the priest.

"Pere Simon! There is talk about an expedition, a column. Some of us—well, you comprehend? If you would say a mass, perhaps?"

"Be at ease, my son," said the priest quietly. "All will be arranged."

# FOUR APPRENTICING LEMONS

PANNIKAN CITY, cursed, writhed, and refused to be comforted. The Hell and Blazes Saloon was no more. In its stead twittered inanely The Turtle Dove. Gone too Mrs. Parmenter, she of the grenadier tread and glacial eye. Untested replacement, four Lemons. Bat Jennison gave bitter tongue to their communal mourning.

"Hell and Blazes," he recited fondly, "was a name you sure could take pride into. Per that said which you could jest about unbuckle the bellyband of the universe. But with *Turtle Dove*, you couldn't even trip up the year flap of a sennile sand toad."

Whispering Thompson inclined his

shaggy head in ponderous agreement.

"The umbilical truth," he rumbled echo to Jennison's gloomy thought. "Even so, Bat, that ain't the main thing. For we also lose Mrs. Parmenter. And I don't give one putrid damn if she *was* two ax handles and a plug of tobacco across, and wore a pair of pistols which she could and would use when occasion called. Gentlemen hush! It was a salve for sore eyes to see her moving round that saloon like a big deep river and *bossing* it, mind you. And every blessed minute, she was a lady."

"Above repute," Jennison murmured.

"Yes," Doc Levitt nodded dreamily, "she was indeed a lady, with a heart proportioned

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*"With a Name Like Turtle Dove You Couldn't Even  
Trip Up the Year Flap of a Sennile Sand  
Toad," Sez Bat Jennison*



# By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

*Author of "The Second Hornet," etc.*

to her ample body. This camp will be poorer infinitely in good deeds since she is gone."

"Amen," Thompson sighed soulfully. Then he hastened to amplify the expletive. "I don't mean Doc that I'm approving of our sure losses. I'm just seconding you saying they're due here on account she's departed. Hell! That word 'departed' smells too damned much like a funeral. I mean—"

"You'd best stop shellin' of that nubbin right that Whisperin'," Jennison chuckled. "You're undoubted arrivin' back outen the same badger hole you jest romped into."

Doc Levitt drummed softly on the table

"Hell and Blazes you were in name, but to the elect you were a mirth laded cornucopia from whose fluted mouth gushed an unfailing tide of comradery and hardy joys, all spiced and garnished with more than casual dangers. I salute you!"

He paused and Jennison pushed the bottle of liquor nearer.

"Mebby Doc," he said with ironclad earnestness, "you'd best take another gargle afore you set your feet to the praise trail. You cain't nowise do Mrs. Parmenter justice on only five drinks."

The Hell and Blazes Saloon under the skilled pilotage of Mrs. Parmenter had been a haven for the elite of the camp, the



with long articulate fingers as he apostrophized the glories vanished.

mecca of the solid citizenry. This for five years now. A vacation for the lady seemed

in order. Accordingly a week before she had left town on a long heralded visit south by east, with an inter-itinerary layover at The Soda Mud Springs, in deference to troubling rheumatic twinges. All this was okayed heartily by Pannikan City, for she would return.

And then, three days ago they received a withering blast. Baldy Wood, bartender par excellence who had subbed ably in her absence was its first recipient. The morning stage had disgorged the bad news, in the persons of four genial strangers, self-announced brothers of the doubtful cognomen, Lemon. They exhibited a bill of sale for the famous saloon, signed three days before at the rheumatic catering springs. Very graciously they retained the dazed Baldy, but they closed the saloon temporarily for what they pleased to call "refurbishing." Tonight at nine o'clock it would be reopened. Certain it was that the solid citizens would be present. Equally predictable, the riff-raff would be absent according to long established custom. But a seer could be wrong even in Pannikan City.

At nine o'clock Baldy Wood wedged back the doors to admit the crowd of a hundred or more who had gathered in critical mood before the saloon. Evidences of "refurbishing" were before the eye. For instance, the puncheon floor had been scrubbed, an infrequent humiliation in its lurid past. Likewise the bar and the mirror behind. Crippled and ailing benches had cringed at the assault of hammer and saw. The bottles and glassware sparkled. Nail kegs blossomed with flowers. Fir branches festooned the walls. The benches and chairs were arranged to suggest entertainment. And so it proved.

"Set down gents," Baldy Wood had beamed. "The show 'ill start any minute now."

"The sword scene doubtless from *Richard III*," Levitt murmured, "or Hamlet's immortal soliloquy."

"I don't like pig guttin' knife work, Jennison asserted flatly. "And as fur Hamlin's immoral solo or whatever you call it, Doc, I'll bet you could do it handsomer."

"Before my memory played me truant," Levitt sighed deeply, "perhaps I could."

They settled on the frontmost bench left to right—Thompson, Levitt, Jennison. On

Thompson's left the town derelict, one Dad Dozier, a gnome-like figure, five feet in height, a shy eighty pounds in weight. One Scriptural simile fitted Dozier more snugly than the donated mackinaw. Like the lilies of the field most emphatically he did not toil nor spin. Now comfortably awash with charity liquor he slid down till his bump of something or other clamped over the top of the bench and was asleep, his pallid lips pushing gently in and out with his conscience-untroubled breathing. Thompson felt like patting him on his hairless dome but restrained himself. The "show" was in the very process of becoming.

Four men had emerged from the office which snuggled the inner end of the bar. Big men were the Lemons, age span from eldest to youngest, at an easy guess, ten years, top limit a scant forty. Poundage yes, but beyond there, the resemblance grew thin. One for instance was a near albino, with silvery hair and eyes of faint pinkish tinge. His elbow companion was swarthy with hair that did no violence to the leathery skin. The third a neutral brown, the fourth patterned his color scheme from the red. The swarthy man held a fiddle by the neck. He it was who spoke for the four.

"Gentlemen," the smile was good. "We four brothers are amateurs and like amateurs will make many mistakes. With your advice and counsel we'll correct them. We want to please you. But we know we can never take the place of Mrs. Parmenter. For that reason we changed the name of this saloon. The new name is also subject to change.

"I'd like now to introduce ourselves. This is Ham Lemon, the oldest of the four." His hand had rested for the moment on the shoulder of the near albino. "I am Japeth Lemon, the next in age. This is Shem." He was the neutral brown. "And this redhead is the baby of the group and his name is Noah. You'll probably think our father was quite a joker when he came to naming his four boys. I suspect he was myself. And now we want to try an experiment on this opening night. If it pleases you we'll repeat it on succeeding nights. Following it, first drinks will be on the house." He turned to pick up his fiddle. "As soon as I get this tuned, Noah will sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner'."

AS HE named the song Levitt arose and removed his hat with an almost reverent gesture. All followed his example though there was wonderment in the eyes of some. All followed Levitt's example save the sleeping midget Dozier. Observing this affront to patriotism, Whispering Thompson feathered downward a hand that could scarce have found sanctuary in a ten-pound lard pail, gathered in slack of the voluminous mackinaw and in effortless way derricked Dozier upright. Half wakened the wraith-like man objected in fretful treble.

"I ain't goin' to jine," he maintained. "I'm goin' my own comfortable way to hell, and I ain't goin' to be turned aside by no hell and brimstone preachers."

"This ain't no camp meeting, Dad," Thompson's thundering whisper rumbled far and wide.

"No," Dozier demanded suspiciously, "Then what's everybody standin' up fer, I ask you?"

"Because that man up there is going to sing 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' "

"The Star-Spangled Banner!" There was awe in Dozier's voice now. "A man's got to stand *then*." His puny shoulders twitched and straightened, his flat chest arched its minute best. But his tiny legs of sand could not quite obey the urging of his will.

"Lemme lug onto your pocket, Whisperin'," he pleaded. "A man's jest gotta stand durin' the singin' of that blessid song." And so they stood, giant and pigmy, while Noah Lemon sang.

And he *did* sing. An untrained voice indeed, a rich authentic bass of surprising depth and compass, a perfect organ in a perfect setting for the immortal song. What mattered it that on the higher gradients he sometimes flatted? Nothing at all. Doc Levitt alone knew it, and the kindly medico would never reveal the singer's tonal shuntings. And they did not cheer, these men. Emotions were too deep for that. And when they spoke they found that voices had suddenly grown husk.

Levitt stamped it with the imprimatur of one who knew.

"With training what a voice," he sighed. What would it not be then to hear him sing 'Piff Paff' from *The Hugenots*, or 'Nella

bionda' from *Don Giovanni*? Beautiful, yes beautiful."

"I reckon it was," Jennison nodded absently, at grips with a troubling thought. "Yep, it musta been. But Doc, he ain't cellared as deep as Whisperin' is he?"

Levitt looked at the little man to whom friendship was the exact synonym for completed, unhanging faith.

"No, Bat, paragon of immutable loyalty," he smiled, "he is as you so graphically phrase it, not cellared so deep as Whispering. His lowest note was B-flat below low C. He must thus descend five additional musical steps to plant his tonal feet on the bottom tread of Whisperin's mighty diapason."

"Hell," Jennison said with relief, "I oughta knowed he wasn't minin' as fur underground as Whisperin' could." A long pause, then he added a bit wistfully, "It's sure hell Doc not to be able to tote even two right notes of a tune—along like me."

Self declared novices though the Lemons were in handling a frontier saloon, there was nothing amateurish in their managing of the rechristened Hell and Blazes. At least at the initial blush of beginning. Apparently well rehearsed, each of the four dropped into his slot. Noah of the subcellar bass was calling the changes of an old-fashioned "square" dance, with admirable ad-libbing and with power to be heard. Shem, the neutral brown had taken over the gaming tables, with an alert ease that proved whatever else, he was not unaccustomed to directive powers. Japeth the swarthy spokesman occupied a stool at the inner end of the bar, from which he commanded an overlooking perspective of the entire floor space other than a small inner segment of the dance hall. Ham, the near albino, nonchalantly wandered hither and yon.

HE WAS a man to awaken interest. A big man, largest of the four, wide-shouldered, deep-chested, he gave the sure impression of great strength. A powerful jaw, and a cool glint in an almost colorless eye were rather certain indicia of courage and resolution. Levitt observing him tabbed him dryly, "An ambassador of peace and good will."

Jennison has his doubts and so asserted them. "Looks like a damned sight more,"

he assessed critically, "like a rough and tumble fighter. A gougin', kneein' battler and a helluva able pelican at that. Also he don't wear a gun, figgerin' probable he don't need trappin's of that sort. Two hundred and twenty at a guess, yet and but he foots it like a cat. He's hard people, you betcha."

"The herbiverous truth," Thompson agreed, "Still I'd like to play 'wring' with him."

"Whispering, my dulcet-voiced friend," Levitt said fondly, "he would not countenance that digit crushing game. If I mistake not a bout with the cestus would be more to his liking."

"About says you what, Doc?" Jennison puzzled.

Verbal instruction *anent* ancient fistic arts, Levitt to Jennison was recessed for a highly practical modern demonstration, Lemon to an unwise interloper.

As already observed, The Hell and Blazes Saloon was reserved to the elite of the camp, but occasionally a rule finds its clearest emphasis in its fracture. So it was now. Three men had elbowed their obstreperous way to the bar and in uninhibited voices called for free drinks. The allotted quota of the free dispensation downed, they demanded refills, these too on the free list. Baldy Wood, the bartender of the moment refused on, to them, the flimsy excuse that their free ticket had already been punched. This didactic closing of the case brought a yell of protest from the three that reached the ears of Bat Jennison just then engaged as supervisory onlooker of a stiff poker game. Leaving the players to their own devices he and his two comrades strolled over toward the bar.

Yelling the loudest was a coatless, red-shirted giant, sail-like ears projecting out through long, greasy hair.

"I reckon," said Jennison, "that I'll hafta—"

"Wait, Bat," Levitt counselled. "Let us see how Ham Lemon reacts to this babbler. Methinks it may gladden the eye."

"Yep," Jennison conceded, "it more'n likely 'll be meaty."

The two satellites fell back as Ham Lemon approached. Halting three paces or so away he spoke to the truculent red-shirt.

"What's wrong?" he asked politely.

"Wrong?" the other bellowed, "Why that damned bald-headed coot," the jerk of an unlaundered thumb identified Baldy Wood, "was refused me and my pards free drinks."

"They done had their free drinks," explained the imperturbable Baldy.

"In that case," Ham Lemon observed, "there's nothing more to say."

"Says you!" Redshirt mimicked derisively, "You damned clabber-faced skunk! Mebby *you* ain't got nothing to say but *I've* got some words."

To him the "words" may have seemed important, yet they were slated for oblivion. Ham Lemon seemed to glide forward, his right fist traversed a short arc, yet very swiftly, his elbow swung up, his shoulder dropped behind the blow. Not on the burr of the chin but on the side of the jaw. There was a dull crack as the jaw smashed, and the man dropped like a pole-axed beef. His companions were tugging out their pistols but Jennison interposed.

"No," he advised them coldly. "He begged fur it and got it. Your kind belong down at Wolf's Den. Don't come prowlin' up here agin. Pick up your pard and tote him away, and soon."

"And when Bat Jennison talks," Thompson put in ominously, "you'd better be heeding."

"Yes, sir," one stammered. "We didn't know he was Mr. Jennison. Take Pike's shoulders, Sam. I'll pack him by the legs. Let's go."

As the threesome wabbled out through the door, Thompson turned to Ham Lemon to say,

"Damned lucky for you that Bat happened to be on hand. Otherwise your nose would likely be pointed up at the stars right now. Them boys is tough citizens and not to be handled with bare hands."

In his limitless admiration for Bat Jennison, Thompson had come within touching distance of condescension, the most loathed of all approaches to a high-spirited man. Ham Lemon sensed it, his face flushed and his voice showed bitter resentment as he asserted flatly,

"He horned in. Lemons take care of themselves. They don't like busybodies."

Perhaps Thompson had erred in the origi-

nal premises, but there was irrefutable certainty of Lemon's error in his retort. To accuse the knightly Jennison of so heinous an offense, to Whispering Thompson, was akin to dancing a Highland Fling on the lip of a seething volcano. Thrusting out some pounds of lower jaw he roared,

"All right, you buzzard! *I'm* horning in! *I'm* a busybody! See if the whole Lemon tribe can take care of *me*!"

That trial was not to be made, at least at this moment, and it was the courtly Levitt that forestalled it. For the second time in all their years of comradeship, Jennison saw Levitt draw his pearl-handled thirty-eight Colt, observed with the expert's attention to life and death detail, that it was cocked and pointed squarely at Ham Lemon's navel, while an almost unknown was saying coldly,

"I'll kill you, Mr. Lemon if you strike my friend with those brass knuckles."

Very gently Bat Jennison pressed Levitt aside as he asked,

"What do you mean, Doc, by that?"

"Have Mr. Lemon remove that handkerchief he has wrapped around his right hand," Levitt suggested. "You'll know then."

Jennison looked at the scowling Lemon, "Take that thar rug off," he ordered.

Lemon was brave, but not that brave. Yet his resentment flared forth as he unveiled his fist with a savage jerk. And bravado, too, as he demanded, "Why not knuckles? You use a gun."

JENNISON considered the maiming lethal weapon displayed while the spectators crowded up with craning necks to have a peek at an article of warfare virgin to most. A rumble of protest, a growl of anger, revealed the temper of the crowd. So now as mouthpiece for community mores Jennison answered Lemon's question, quietly incisively, reciting rules established.

"Some things is barred in this saloon," he explained. "Knives fur instance. In the way of makin' that plain we've done lynched three men who couldn't remember it."

"Four, Bat," an enthusiast chipped in, "You forgot Greasy Bill maybe."

"Well he don't proper count," Jennison distinguished, "on account he done his gut rippin' outside the front door. Still and

but, that's the rule. Now as to these damned brass knuckles, my notion is they sure oughta come in with knives. What say boys?"

A bellow of concurrence interlarded with castigating oaths and Jennison turned to Ham Lemon to say whimsically:

"The yeps have it. My advice is, unknuckle."

Ham Lemon hesitated then he caught Japeth Lemon's impervious eye. Tossing the knuckles onto the bar he turned about to say without seeming rancor,

"Well, we want to learn the rules of the camp. Thanks for telling me."

It was all but indecently early for Pan-nikan City when Jennison and his companions mopped their way out of the saloon and returned in gloomy silence to their cabin. Their immediate world was out of joint.

Levitt sighed as he reached for the bottle.

"Like the Shekimah of old, the aura of Mrs. Parmenter has departed."

"She more'n probable took it with her," Jennison contributed out of his Scythian ignorance. "With all her noble pints the widder was frugal."

"She could a mislaid that said aura," Thompson pursued the Stygian path already pioneered by Jennison. "She was careless, 'specially about trifles."

Levitt poured himself another drink, possibly to mask his mirth, but probably not. After a long moment's silence Jennison said with deep conviction.

"Somethin's wrong up thar, somethin' smelly. Now I ain't knowin'. The Scriptures good nor nothin', but I do know that Noah was some older than any of his boys. And *here* we find *him* the youngen."

"And also," Thompson added complacently, "in The Scriptures *Sam* was the youngest. *Here* he's the oldest."

"Ham not Sam," Levitt corrected gently, "but no matter."

"Wasn't *Ham* accordin' to repute," Jennison queried, "the first daddy of all blacks, Injuns, and sich? *Here* he's a albiner."

"A tradition as to Negroes, yes, that lacks verification," Levitt nodded. Now he continued speculatively. "There's method possibly in the game they play with the camp. What you have noted is true. They have reversed their names, they announce them-

selves as brothers. It's fifty-to-one odds that they are not *even* cousins. No common progenitor for these four Lemons. I mean father, of course. In other words they are not brothers."

"Great balls of coyote hair!" Thompson exploded, "What's the idee, Doc?"

"Agreein' in whole and in totum to what Doc's jest said," Jennison waded in ahead of any Levitt sponsored answer to Thompson's question, "that ain't the fly in the goose grease as I see it. I'd likta know more about that said bill of sale. You looked at it Doc, same as we done. What's your notion about it?"

"It's legal in form," Levitt assessed the half page of foolscap paper that recorded the sale. "Certainly the consideration, five thousand dollars, is a good price. It's dated properly and has two witnesses. Even the fact that Mrs. Parmenter signed with a cross is perfectly legal, *if she made that mark.*"

"Yep," Jennison added out of a wide experience, "I've seed men sign that way moren seldom."

"We must remember," Levitt said with large charity, "that Mrs. Parmenter lost her father at The Alamo when she was only three years old. She grew up on the very fringe of civilization, making her own way from her tenth year. It could well be that she could not write."

"I backed Baldy Wood into a corner tonight," Jennison told them. "Dammit! He's worked fur her three whole years and still don't know if she can."

"Well," Thompson said in exasperation, "if *Baldy* don't know, looks like our vein of ore is pinched out. Why the hell didn't somebody think to ask her sometime?"

"Thar's jest a chance," Jennison hazarded, "that Jude Corn knows. Actin' as postmaster mighta give him the know about it. I'm toddlin' down to his cabin right now so as to find out. And I'm takin' this bottle. Jude's cripplin' round home on account of a ingrowed toenail he rooted out with his jackknife. Whiskey won't make him disfriendly."

HALF an hour later Jennison was back. "By God!" he announced from the doorway, "she *can* write." Now he came in closed the door and sat down. Levitt re-

marked the absence of the whiskey and made quiet inquiry.

"Jude drunk it all," Jennison reported. "Couldn't remember nothin' sure till he'd so done. Remembered a lotta details thereafter."

"Maybe he made it up," Thompson voiced able-bodied skepticism, "Pretty tall liar at times."

"Nope," Jennison defended Corn's veracity with vigor. "Not this time he didn't. He was waverin' even before he pulled cork. Not," he conceded, "but it mebby helped him put some and several fringes onto his tale. Yet and but, and in the main it rung true. But what fetched it fur me was him rememberin' clear about her borrowin' a double-bitted pencil one time to write a letter with. I remember that pencil, carpenter 'twas. Then he cussed on account she set down on it accidental and busted it. It's a dead open and shut if she ever set down onto it she busted it. Yep. Mrs. Parmenter can write."

"In that case," Levitt analysed the probabilities, "that bill of sale would seem to be fraudulent, those two witnesses swore to a falsehood and the Lemons are in possession feloniously."

"If you mean they same as stole the saloon," Jennison provisoed, "I'm agreein' to that soundy word. Also them two witnesses lied like hell. I disremember their names."

"Jim Mesack and Bill Shandel," Levitt filled in the missing memory blanks.

"Jim Mesack and Bill Shandel," Jennison repeated thoughtfully. Now he turned to Levitt to grin, "Up at the saloon tonight, Doc, you groaned something about losing your memory. Well I reckon that sad happenstance ain't yit functionin'. Jim Mesack and Bill Shandel down at Soda Mud Springs, I figger is due fur a soon visit with yours truly. I've gotta whisper of a hunch," he added gravely, "that mebby the widder didn't take that trip East like she planned."

Soon after daylight the following morning Jennison and Whispering Thompson rode out of Pannikan City. They had left the not too robust Levitt behind under the kindly subterfuge that he could best serve the cause by keeping the Lemons under his watchful observation. It did not deceive Levitt for a moment. Their clumsy fabrications to bolster up their unselfish thought-

fulness stood unmasked before his keen mind. Yet wild horses could not have dragged from him one syllable to betray it.

It was a long two days' trip from Pannikin City to The Soda Mud Springs. Breaking the trip about midway was the placer camp of Soames Bar a familiar spot to them both. It was the west division end of a stage run, which passed through The Soda Mud Springs and on to the larger mining camp of Purgatory. A single stage driver covered this entire route, laying over a day alternately at Soames Bar or Purgatory. This was something that Jennison was to wish later he had remembered.

They followed the freight road from Pannikan City to Soames Bar, which they reached late in the afternoon. There on the advice of a friend they left the stage road for a trail favored by pack trains. It was shorter and afforded better grass and camping facilities their animated signboard assured them than did the river road. Dusk found them at an ideal spot for man and beast and accordingly they called it a day.

They had never heard of the economic shibboleth "division of labor", yet they practiced it. To Jennison fell the task of caring for their horses. To Thompson that of restaurateur. Both were simple understandable jobs. Jennison's unloading their dunnage, stripping off saddles and bridles, watering the horses and staking them out in belly tickling grass. Thompson's, building a fire, slicing bacon, this prodigally, mixing flap jacks in the bottom of their flour sack, setting to boil a gallon or so of coffee. As exquisite garnishment of prodigious appetites.

A smoke followed the meal as naturally as daylight follows dawn, then Jennison reinspected picket pins and ropes while Thompson unreefed their blankets. Devotees of simplicity, they pulled off their boots, laid their cartridge belts and guns within easy reaching distance and were abed.

Before Thompson could more than tune up his massive snore Jennison was asleep. It must have taken Thompson at least three minutes to join him.

**A**BOUT four the following afternoon they met a pack train and, halting, queried its leader. Yes, they were on the right trail he assured them, but The Springs

was a good thirty miles away. He added that the loudly proclaimed "short cut" was a long cut. So it was that near sundown they set about making camp.

They were now on a neat little mountain stream, clear, cold and swift, yet with an occasional deep rock hedged pool, preordained home of giant bull trout. As he straightened up from driving home his second picket pin, Jennison called to Thompson, "Hold up a minute on your bacon slicin'. I gotta nudge I can git us some trout."

"The bottoms of them deep pools harbor some mighty fine whitefish," Thompson said suggestively. "And there's nothin' better in the fish line, 'less it's smoked salmon."

Jennison's piscatorial equipment would certainly have raised more than a smile on the face of a modern disciple of Walton. In lieu of a reeled bamboo pole with tapering articulated joints, he cut a willow, more derrick than pole. From around his flat-topped black Stetson came his seven-foot line, *sans* leader, a black hook tied to the line with a conspicuous untidy knot. For bait he simply uprooted a rock, picked off a pennywinkle, shucked the fat, yellow worm from his comfortable shell, impaled him without art and was ready. Whispering's desired whitefish lurking in the bottom of the pool never had a chance at the delectable worm. Four husky bull trout saw it first. Nor did Jennison measure, nor brag without measuring. It was just an everyday way of acquiring a meal. Yet Thompson was compelled to make eight sections of the four trout before he could fry them in his by no means tiny skillet.

It was near four o'clock the following afternoon when they caught their first view of The Soda Mud Springs. No modern spa was The Springs. Set there in the primeval wilderness, it was almost as it had fallen from the hands of some careless if well intentioned Manitou. From the base of a cliff seeped a mineral impregnated stream, to form a mud ribbon as it slid downward and out upon more level gravel. Here the narrow slough had been cribbed into a half-dozen stall-like cubicles, made of split fir shakes. Sundry gaping knot holes would have made it a peeper's paradise, but peepers were few. Thus the mud baths.

Shoulder high to a man above the mud

seep, there gushed from the cliff a six-inch stream of clear hot water, also heavily mineralized. Troughs of split hollow logs, supported on pole stilts led down to the slatternly bath houses. Here frontier ingenuity had shunted the water to each bath house through sections of elderberry, from which the pith had been prodded. The bemuddled bather simply stood on a flat rock under an elderberry spigot for his shower.

Near the kennel-like bath houses slouched a rambling spiritless log building with a few rooms for the infrequent guests. It fronted on the stage road from Soames Bar to Purgatory. Besides, there were two cabins, a couple of tepees and a span of brush sheds. Jennison and Thompson rode up before the door fronting the stage road and dismounted. A man lounged in the doorway, his face hauntingly reminiscent of someone, Jennison could not recall for a long moment. Tall he was, wide shoultered, with tow-colored hair and pallid face. His eyes were about the shade of well-watered milk.

"Howdy," Jennison gave the conventional greeting.

"Howdy," the other returned without shifting his leisurely stance. "Looking for mud baths maybe."

"Could be," Jennison nodded. "Me and my pard here suffer now and agin frum rheumatics."

"Sure can fix that," the lounger grinned, a mouthful of ragged teeth furnishing tarnished accompaniment for the comforting assertion.

"We need a drink," Jennison told him. "Baths can wait, the tother seldom."

"I can fix that too," the other assured him. "Come on in."

THE room was small, cheerless and furnished meagerly. A few home-made chairs, a table, a corner whatnot with a few bottles of liquor, four dust bedewed glasses, a box spitoon, better imagined than described about complete the inventory. With the air of a grandee displaying a crystal chalice, he hefted down glasses and a bottle and poured three drinks. Jennison waved his glass toward their host saying:

"Here's luck, Mr. Shandel." He drank. "You don't need to look surprised," he chuckled. "You see Ham told us about you

up at Pannikan City when he knowed me and my pard was trunnelin' this way. You and him look enough alike to a been budded on the same bush."

"We're cousins," the grin lacked suitable confirmation. "My Mammy and his dad was sister and brother."

"No matter," Jennison said disarmingly, "Ham sent his regards. Said to tell you everything was goin' fine. Pour another snorter." With this in hand he pushed a seeming artless question toward the fidgeting Shandel.

"Ever have any women come here for the baths?"

"Seldom," Shandel fumbled. "I ain't got no help fur females 'cepting my woman. She's a squaw. Some 'ud think she wasn't over clean. Why?"

"Well," Jennison moved a step nearer, we're kinda lookin' up about a friend of oun, a Mrs. Parmenter, who left Pannikan City fur a trip East. She planned to stop here awhile first. Hearin' nothing frum her stirred up interest that."

"She was here," Shandel told him eagerly, "but she didn't think it done her rheumatics no good, and moved on. Two days I reckon it was she stayed."

"Anybody else here when she was?" Jennison asked in an idle way.

"Let's see," Shandel seemed to be coming over a mental roster. "Yep, a feller named Jim Mesack and my cousin Ham Lemon and three other men strangers to me. Fact is I hadn't seen Ham for a dozen years. As for the three, I don't know now what their names was but I know what they was when they *left*. You see they made up a company here for a reason. They liked that name Lemon and all took it, with different front handles of course. You see," he beamed, "they bought that lady's saloon at Pannikan City from her here in this very room. The papers was wrote out and signed on that table right there. She signed with a mark," he added, "on account her hands was swolled so bad she couldn't hold the pencil."

Thompson made a rumpus in this throat that carried no hint of scented bouquets. And as for Jennison, the breezes that frolic o'er Greenland's icy mountains, are chaffering and balmy when opposed to the frigid threat in his tones.

"You're lyin' Shandel. We figger she was murdered! That's why we're here!"

A savage jab with a red hot spear, the whiplash of a careening bullet, the sudden roar of an avalanche might have moved Shandel more swiftly, though open to doubt. Almost instantly he was on his feet, white faced, trembling, stammering out denial. Then he glanced down at the two, noted the revolver held unobtrusively in Jennison's hand, straightened his shoulders and had become his own master.

"You're wrong," he said with a certain something that approached dignity. "We couldn't have murdered her, because she left here on the stage for Purgatory."

"We could be wrong," Jennison conceded. "But you're sure harbordin' something that makes you damned uneasy. You act like a coyote who smells his own breath."

"Uneasy!" Shandel blurted through pale flabby lips. "Why wouldn't I be? Your guns and your threats. How do I know you ain't going to murder *me*?"

"It's your conscience," Thompson said placidly. "If you're innocent, and can prove it you ain't got nothing to be afraid of from us. Of course, if you cain't—"

"Looks like," Jennison said to Thompson, "we mebby 'll be here a spell. S'pose you go and loose up our cinches. Our hosses anyway 'll be comfortable."

As Thompson rose Shandel said suddenly, "I've got to tell my woman something. Won't take a minute."

"I'll toddle 'long so as you won't git lonesome," Jennison said in a comfortless way.

"You won't learn nothin'," Shandel seemed to elate, "She don't talk nothin' but Injun."

"In that case," Jennison said dryly, "you can count out eavesdroppin'. Still I'll go 'long."

Thompson all but swallowed his quid of tobacco at Jennison's statement. For that wily man also talked "Injun" better than English if that be a virtue.

Mrs. Shandel or no as the case might be listened as imperturbably as did Jennison, and her guttural monosyllables proved little as to the ripeness of her "Injun" scholarship. Even the appearance of the giant Thompson did not disturb her admirable phlegm. Palpably annoyed now, Shandel began back tracking with an occasional mon-

grel English word wedged in where his Indian failed him. And then while Shandel whitened, Thompson grinned and the squaw listened as Pygmalion's statue must have listened before her renaissance, Jennison in fluent Nez Perce countermanded, *seriatim*, Shandel's orders. No, she need not saddle his pony. There would be no need for bread and meat in his *cantinas*. No, she need not light the brush pile to simulate sudden conflagration. Forget was the word.

FOR a half dozen long moments she stood there, sloe black eyes empty pools of nothing, the in and out thrust of her thick lips sole evidence that she had not turned to stone. And when she spoke, not Nez Perce with its rich cadences graced her tongue but English. And it may be that she bankrupt her alien vocabulary in those two words hissed Shandelway.

"Dam' fool!"

The cold sweat of panicking fear beaded Shandel's forehead as the three returned to the miniature bar room. How deadly serious, how determined, were these men. Tales of like iron Westerners, raced through his fretting brain. Even handed justice, yes, but would it be tempered with mercy? Vague possibility that, but with no dross of maudlin sentimentality. As they sat down Jennison summed up the situation.

"That's a thin chance she wasn't murdered, none you didn't help steal her saloon. She mebby took the stage fur Purgatory, but she wasn't totin' no extry \$5,000.00 with her. Who drove her away frum here if you know."

"Lemme see?" Shandel puzzled. "Guess it was Shinky Hall."

"Shinky Hall," Jennison nodded. "We know him. Accordin' to schedule that's a fifty-fifty chance he'll be drivin' the stage comin' in frum Soames Bar. If so we'll learn something. What time does it roll in?"

"About six, if it's on time."

"In about a hour then," Jennison predicted following a glance at his watch. "Guess I'll buy us another round of drinks."

To Jennison and to Thompson that hour's wait seemed about sixty minutes long, to Shandel timeless. These patient inexorable men were wearing him down. Had they chided him about the duplicity he had at-

tempted through his wife? Not at all. They had made not the slightest comment following her contemptuous blast at her bungling husband. But Jennison's quirking smile, Thompson's chest bubbling was the very essence of withering evaluation. So dis-ease shuffled his feet, prodded thirst, sent his hand fumbling for his watch.

The stage rattled in over a series of spine cracking ruts and halted before the door where Jennison and Thompson holding Shandel firmly in tow were waiting. The driver peered down through the thinning dust web to query Shandel.

"Any passengers, Bill?"

Then the driver spied Jennison and Thompson.

"Why hello Bat, hello Whisperin'," he greeted them in jovial way. "What's gone wrong up at Pannikan? Everybody leggin' it? Here's you two and only last week I picked up that lady who owns that saloon there. Picked her up right here too—"

"Shanky, that's what we're here fur," Jennison said in a tone that erased the cheerful grin from the other's face as if by magic. "Come down a minute and talk to us."

Timothy Hall, dubbed Shanky, thanks to his unconscionably long legs climbed down. Sitting, he seemed but of average height, but erect on that mighty bifurcation he was tall. Some wag had asserted that "Shanky was split clean up to his Adam's apple." Long legged or no he was the ace driver on that stretch of stage road and a sterling character besides.

"WHAT's eatin' on you, Bat?" he asked seriously. "You look like you'd swallered a pickle."

"This," Jennison said briefly. "You hauled Mrs. Parmenter *away* frum here?"

"Sure did," Hall assured him. "Hauled her clean to Purgatory settin' right on the driver's seat by me. You bet I'm sure," he grinned reminiscently. "'Bout a mile this side of Purgatory I let the team sashay down a little grade and hit a chuck hole at the bottom mejum hard. What she told me about my drivin' and her rheumatics, and the way she told me. Yes, Bat, I shore hauled Mrs. Parmenter *away* from here."

"See," Shandel said gleefully, "I told you—"

"Jest a minute," Jennison interrupted him coldly. Then to the driver:

"She set by you Shanky and she talked more'n likely. Tell me some of it."

"'Bout her rheumatics and her trip mostly." Hall reported thoughtfully. Then he brightened. "And now I recall to mind somethin' special. She said one reason she left here when she did was on account of a bunch of fellers pesterin' her to buy her saloon up at Pannikan City. Said they offered \$5,000.00 for it and she wouldn't sell it at no price. Said she was comin' back in six weeks or so. Then she got kinda soft, I figgered, when she begun talkin' personal about Doc Levitt and—"

Here Jennison damned further narration by seizing the driver's hand while saying heartily,

"Well thanks, Shanky. We won't hold you no longer. So long."

**S**HANKY HALL, who knew his Bat Jennison winked wickedly at Thompson then clambered aboard and shook out his lines. A minute later Jennison and Thompson and Shandel were alone in a silence as heavy as a water logged scow. Now without a word Jennison turned to the door and entered, followed by Thompson and their some time host.

"Well," Jennison queried Shandel, "ready to talk now unhelped?"

"There ain't nothing to talk about," Shandel said virtuously. "Guess even you two will say no murder was done here and as for that other," he waved it grandly aside, "I could believe it if I hadn't seen her make that cross herself and take the money."

Jennison looked at Thompson, shook his head and sighed. The sigh was fraudulent, but beautifully executed. They would put on a mimic of persuasion by force. Shandel's imagination was to stretch him on the rack. Vicariously he would lacerate himself with thumbscrew and ironboot. So while Shandel watched with heightening anxiety, Thompson stood up and with maddening deliberation removed his mackinaw, and unbuttoned the cuffs of his number 20 blue flannel shirt. Now he turned the sleeves up slowly, pleat by pleat, displaying casually in the shuckling, muscles that a Titan would have envied. He looked at Jennison.

"I reckon Bat," he remarked as if com-

menting on the weather, "you want me to play with him."

"Pears to be the sole and only physic fur a jughead like him," and again Jennison sighed. "Mebby though should you start mejum easy, say a finger or so he'll cave in. Liars as a usual thing don't stand up good under hurts."

Thompson stretched out a hand like the grapple of destiny but his giant fingers never closed. Shandel was talking.

Pronouncing suitable objuration on that phantom "short cut," they took the orthodox stage road and were only two days on the return. Shandel, drained dry of words in that first fear motored spate, was a silent trail companion indeed. Soon after dusk they reached Pannikan City and their cabin. That is Thompson and Shandel did. But Jennison paused here and there to drop a fruitful word on ears tingling to hear. Presently a half dozen men had drifted in, silent sober men, the inner Sanhedrin of the Vigilantes, conservators of the camp's moral health.

Just men they were, too, sternly conscious of their self assumed responsibility, yet a responsibility they would not shirk.

Ahab Spratling, a gray-bearded patriarch spoke the mind of the group.

"For stealing a hoss we hang a man. It ain't no lesser to steal a saloon."

"Me and Jeb brung four ropes," thus Lefty Steffins.

"And I can borry another," Jeb Brent said helpfully with a glance Shandelway.

"The latterly mebby we ain't needin'," Jennison distinguished crimes, "on account Shandel apparently don't lug no profits outen the stealin'."

"Shandel," Levitt nodded judicially, "simply added his imprimatur to a falsehood."

"Hell, Doc," Thompson blinked dazedly, "*that* sure ought to be a hanging matter. Anyway," he back pedaled, "if it's half as bad as it sounds."

Now Bat Jennison stood up and slowly searched the faces of the other men, one by one. As Chief of the Vigilantes, these moments of decision always troubled him. So when he spoke his voice was somberly earnest.

"Boys," said he, "you know and I know what a terrible thing it is fur us to send a

man into life eternal on our judgment. Still we've made it. Let's go."

IT WAS shading ten o'clock when they stood before the saloon. A scant score of men had preceeded them for in Pannikan City the night life had scarcely more than burgeoned by midnight. To Jennison the absence of a crowd was welcome. Not that the Vigilantes of Pannikan operated by stealth, for their roster and actions were open as the light of day. But he had a lively dis-taste for parading the misdeeds even of thugs and this was a case presenting unique and troubling phases of wrongdoing.

Baldy Wood, polishing the bar with languid industry viewed their group entrance with slackened jaw tackle, for he was highly advised as to their personnel. So he asked no questions but as Jennison's brief order closed and barred the double front door.

It chanced that the four Lemons were clustered in conversation near the inner end of the bar and toward them the Vigilantes now moved.

Not hurriedly with far flung accusations, not that, but steadily, remorselessly as moves a sullen river, adrift with ice, and as cold. The four Lemons turned and still grouped tightly waited, while the Vigilantes approached.

An unsmiling group, spearheaded by Jennison it was, that halted before the four. Unsmiling too were the Lemons, and they stirred until shoulder touched shoulder in comradely caress.

"You've been caught up with," Jennison prefaced the indictment gravely. "Mrs. Parmenter didn't sign no bill of sale, we know from Shandel here. You've took over her saloon notwithstandingin', and that's stealin' and stealin' a hanging matter in Pannikan City. 'Less," he stipulated, "you've gotta right defense. We'll hear you if you so have."

It was Japeth Lemon who spoke for the four.

"Gentlemen," he said with disarming frankness. "We admit that Mrs. Parmenter did not sign the bill of sale, so there was no need for Mr. Shandel."

"He didn't give out of his own free will and accord," Jennison said justly. "We pried it out, and him damned stubborn about it."

"The supernal truth," Thompson corro-

borated. "He was as easy to lead to the truth as a jugheaded jackass."

"Go on Mr. Lemon," Jennison nodded. "You'd jest said the bill of sale was a fraud onto Mrs. Parmenter. Thar don't seem much more for you to say after that. Still we'll hear it."

"I hope," Lemon said almost wistfully, "you reserve judgment until I set out our defense. To make it, I want to preface with a short history of us four."

"Hell," one of the Vigilantes said impatiently. "You've done admitted the stealing! For one I don't favor listening to no long winded tale."

"No," It was Levitt, the urbane and courtly medico speaking. "These men are entitled to make their defense as they see fit. *We* are not savages. *We* are not raving wolves. By God! They shall be permitted to make it as they choose!"

"You damned well said it Doc," Jennison closed the argument. "Go ahead Mr. Lemon."

"Thank you," Lemon said simply. "And I'll be brief. We four men were with a circus for some years. I was the ticket seller and bookkeeper. Noah was 'barker' for the sideshow. Shem was the ringmaster, and Ham was the boss of the tent men, a very tough group of men to handle. There's where he learned to carry those brass knuckles. And believe me, gentlemen, he had to. It was crowbar or tent pin against the knuckles. We disliked it. We saved our money and following a letter from Mr. Shandel to his cousin Ham, we quit the circus and took stage for The Soda Mud Springs. From our first breath we loved the West, and when we met Mrs. Parmenter there at The Springs and listened to her praise the country, the people, her business, we decided to buy this saloon, if she'd sell. We made the offer, practically all our capital \$5,000.00. At first she talked favorably, so favorably indeed that I drew up that bill of sale.

"But next morning she'd changed her mind. She refused. Argument made her—well she—refused. And she left The Springs that very morning."

"And then?" Jennison nodded him on.

"Well, gentlemen, we did what you already know. I wrote her name, made the cross, Mr. Shandel and a man named Me-

sack signed as witnesses, and we took the stage for Pannikan City."

"And that ends it for them, I reckon," Ahab Spratling said slowly. "Kinda too bad after that damned circusin' and them fallin' in love naturally with the West. Yep so 'tis."

"Just a moment," Levitt put in shrewdly. "Me thinks it is not yet ended. Mr. Lemon you were about to say?"

"Before we left Soda Springs we drew up and signed this paper."

AND while Levitt smiled and others stared Lemon drew from an inner pocket a paper unfolded it and read as follows:

"Statement of agreement entered into this 10th day of August, 1863, between Japhet Lemon—*nee* Adam Sharp, Shem Lemon—*nee* George Friedley, Noah Lemon—*nee* Kirk Brownell and Ham Lemon—*nee* Ham Lemon. Witnesseth:

"That whereas the four above named men are desirous of acquiring The Hell and Blazes Saloon of Pannikan City and have this day offered \$5,000,000 to Mrs. Parmenter—the owner which said offer has been refused, Therefore:

"The four men named above have mutually agreed to take over the above named saloon as if owners, and to appropriate the same for such time as they may be able to so do. But *not* for their own profit, save in the experience they may gain by such occupancy. It is further stipulated that Japhet Lemon—*nee* Adam Sharp shall keep scrupulous account of all monies received by the above named four during said occupancy and shall keep it separate and intact less necessary expenses, to the intent that said monies shall be paid over to Mrs. Parmenter at the termination of occupancy by the above named four men.

Signed

Adam Sharp

George Friedley

Kirk Brownell

Ham Lemon."

He placed the paper in Levitt's hands, then turned to Jennison.

"There's something in the safe. Will you—"

"Go git it," Jennison cut off the sugges-

tion that he act as traveling guard. "We'll wait."

Followed a brief delay, then Japeth Lemon returned carrying a note book and a buckskin poke, the conventional bill fold of those days. He laid the poke on the bar and held up the book.

"Gentlemen," said he, "you heard me read the agreement. In it I pledged myself to keep an accurate account of all the money we received *after* we took over this saloon. Doctor Levitt will you please verify my statement that I have done so."

Levitt opened the book, scanned rapidly then looked up to announce.

"I find here a day by day analysis of the gross income, from the bar, the dance hall and the percentages from the games totaled up to six o'clock this evening. The gross aggregate is \$1,100.00 Against that is debited, salary for Baldy Wood \$45.00, soap \$1.15, Total \$46.15." Again he scrutinized the page.

"The last line reads," he chuckled. "In Mrs. Parmenter's poke \$1,053.95. You beat yourself \$.10 Mr. Lemon, if my mathematics has not gone to seed."

"Gentlemen," Japeth Lemon said with simple earnestness, "that's our defense. Technically we committed a wrong, but we meant no wrong."

It was a very silent group, as each according to his own code wrestled the unique problem. A theft that was not a theft, a stealing where the *corpus* was not removed, a wrong done without harm, a crime without a welt or bruise to mark its commitment. In his perplexity Jennison turned to Levitt for counsel.

"Doc," he said earnestly, "how do you read the rebus?"

"Before Doc lubricates that said riddle," thus the troubled Spratling. "I'd like for him to clear up something in that 'greement they signed. Several times they talk about somebody 'kneelin'' somebody. Who in hell got 'kneed' and what for?"

Levitt, gentleman extraordinary, made unsmiling explanation to the unlettered Spratling.

"It means this, Ahab. These four men formed the Lemon Partnership at Soda Springs, each taking the name Lemon. The word *nee* means they were born with other names."

"I get it." Spratling said triumphantly. "When Bat here takes the name Jim Hood, his 'knee' is Bat Jennison. Thanks Doc. Now go ahead on Bat's question."

"Gentlemen," said Levitt, "a court would doubtless declare that a crime had been committed, but we are not a court. We are simply a self established group of men, striving to guard this camp against injustice. These four men, in their endeavor to escape a life that had become hateful, and to gain experience and training in another way of life erred, but they did no injustice, wrought no harm, committed no crime against a fellowman. I for one pronounce them blameless."

"Agreein' in whole and in totum with what Doc's jest said," so Jennison gave ancillary decision, "I figger also they ought a should have wages same as Baldy Wood got."

"And charging up only a dollar for soap," Thompson thundered down the mercy course "is damned foolishness. They've swamped out this shebang from stern to babbitt. And whilst Mrs. Parmenter was a noble woman over cleanliness wasn't one of her starker virtues."

Tornadic as was his vocal ministrations, the barred front door was being assaulted by other than Thompson's diapason blasts.

"Open up, dammit!" a raucous voice made strident accompaniment to bludgeonings both fist and foot. "Open up or I'll kick it down."

"Jude Corn," Jennison chuckled recognition, "and him only one foot to kick with. Let him in Baldy."

"A hell of a note," the charity postmaster glared. "I limp up here to bring a letter to Doc and I've gotta hammer the door down to give it to him. Here take it and be damned to you all. If I hadn't knowed it was from Mrs. Parmenter I'd a never fetched it. How do I know who it's from? I opened it. Nope I didn't read nothing but her name at the end. I don't snoop another man's business."

THE pyramiding events of the evening found towering climax in this letter from Mrs. Parmenter. Levitt, without a word took it from the unabashed courier, and while eager interest stood on expectant tip-toe removed the single page from the

breached envelope, opened it with what seemed tantalizing deliberation and glanced it through. And Bat Jennison, who knew Levitt better than any other man, caught the swift glint of regret then happier phases as the page unfolded its simple message. Now Levitt raised his hand in an unneeded gesture for silence then without comment read as follows:

"Deer doc mebby youall be supprized mebby not but I ain't komming back becuz I'm maryd to a nice man I met here when the stage stope to eat. my new husban thinks I own a store an I don't want him to no difrunt you betcha. so doc I'me giving you power to sel my *store*—laff if you wanta I don't care how mutch you sel it fur ile leve that to you doc only send the munny to Mrs. John Smith hedrock idaho ter—you spel it doc I'me ignorunt but i send my luv to all them nobel men that you tell em doc

Mrs. John Smith  
if baldy wood tuk in enny munny say him  
to kepe it good by all and god bless you

Mrs. John Smith."

The aura that had been Mrs. Parmenter had indeed departed from the Hell and Blazes Saloon, and men who had loved her for her rough mothering were very near to tears. And then the heavy silence was blasted wide by Whispering Thompson's thunder.

"Boys I'm damned! I'm eternally kerbiberated!"

Japeth Lemon was plucking at Levitt's sleeve with trembling fingers.

"She wants to sell," he said eagerly, "and we want to buy. We offer you \$5,000.00."

"It ain't worth it," Baldy Wood said. "It ain't worth a damn over \$3,000.00."

"Our offer is \$5,000.00," Japeth Lemon repeated. "It's worth something to clear ourselves with our consciences."

"Sold to the highest bidder for \$5,000.00," Levitt chanted in orthodox auctioneering style. "We'll draw up the bill of sale in the morning. And now may I say to you, that we welcome you for apprenticing Lemons to Pannikan City. May you become master artisans in our communal life."

"And also," said Bat Jennison, "to wind up the bobbin' proper I suggest that Noah Lemon sings us one of them hell risin' songs of hisn which—"

"Wait Bat," Lefty Steffins implored in a whisper calculated to start a general resurrection, "I want to hear him sing but I also want to pitch these damned ropes outside first. Kinda clear the atmosphere for the music so to speak."

"And I've been thinkin'," Baldy Wood spoke up, "I ain't takin' that money Mrs. Parmenter willed me in that letter. Hell, them four men here did ten times the work I've did. I won't have it."

"In that case," Jennison announced judicially, "let's fire that said money. And since that's settled and Lefty's sweetened up the air by tossin' out them rope neckties we're ready fur you Mr. Lemon."

"Just one moment, Noah," it was Japeth Lemon with the third prelude to the delayed song. "After the singing all drinks for the night will be on the house. Now Noah."

The storied history of music is long and great. In it is enshrined all those moments of grandeur and triumph, all those moments of failure and defeat. Yet among the realities of life, what great artist ever sang while standing within the somber shadows of a gallows, or even emerging from its shadows? Noah Lemon a great artist in potential, alone was to accomplish that unique feat.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "I want to sing a new song. Written by an American and probably not yet known out here in the West. The author is Stephen Foster, the song, 'Old Black Joe.' I will sing two verses and the chorus. Then for reasons that I think will be clear, I shall repeat the chorus."

And how he sang it! Perhaps the perils he had just breasted, accentuated the haunting pathos of the song. Perhaps his auditors played a part. Men were there whose hearts were no longer joyous. Men who, too, heard loved voices calling. Men at sudden grips with poignant nostalgia. Two verses, the chorus, a pause and then the promised choral repetition.

"I'm coming, I'm coming,  
And my head is bending low."

Then monologing, "About an hour ago I thought I was going to hear," Now singing,

"those gentle voices calling  
Four Lem—ons."

Yes, but traps catch other  
folks, too!

# THE HORSE THIEF TRAP

## Walt Coburn



CADDO  
CAMERON  
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JONES  
DAN CUSHMAN

*All in the  
next issue of  
SHORT STORIES*

Bush-flying . . .  
eggs and dynamite; trappers and  
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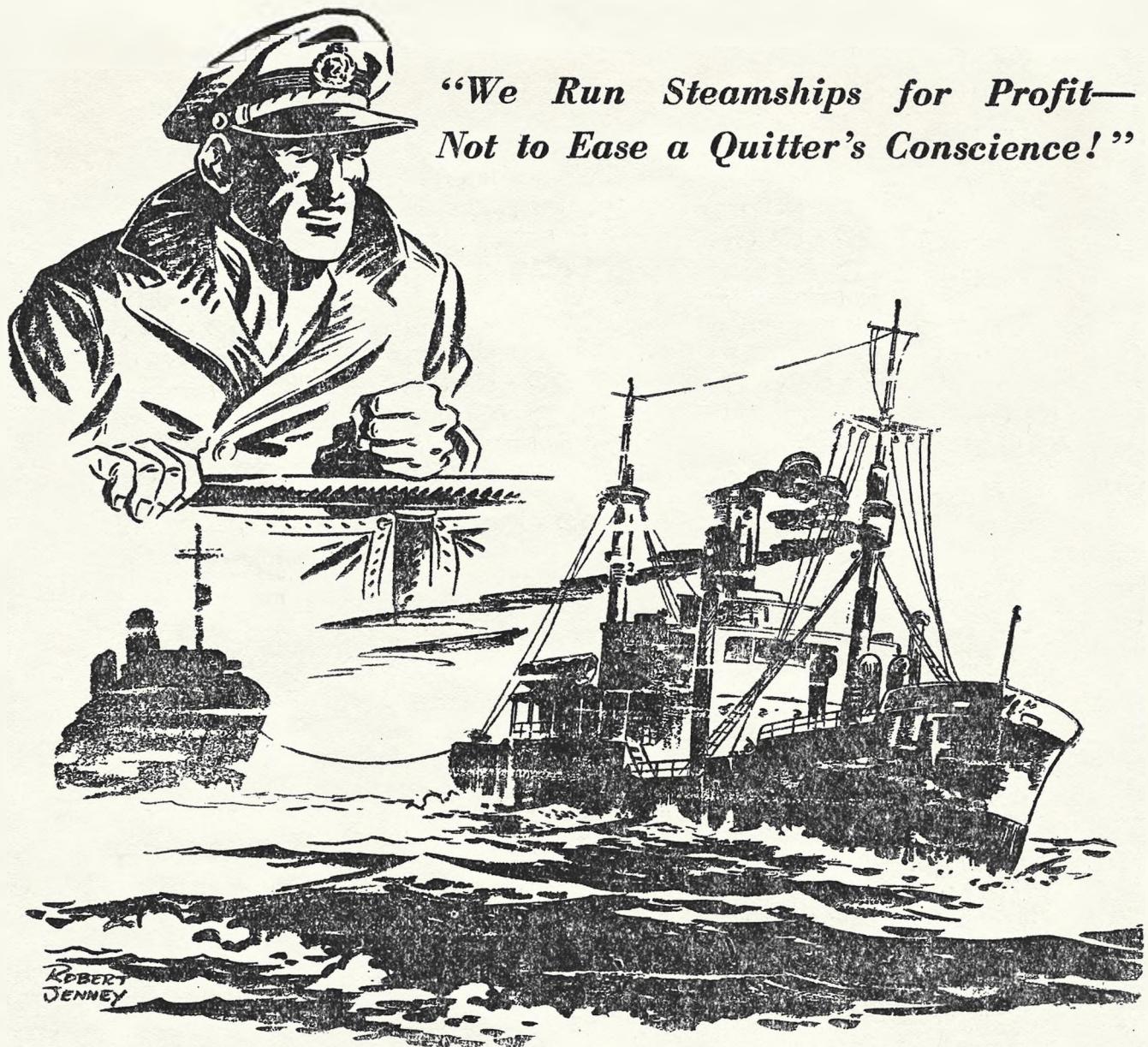
H. S. M. KEMP



EDWARD  
PARRISH  
WARE

## “Unknown Partner”

Somehow the Twentieth Century Seemed  
to have been mislaid along Black River in the  
North Arkansas Pearling Region



*"We Run Steamships for Profit—  
Not to Ease a Quitter's Conscience!"*

## SECOND CHANCE

By STEVE HAIL

*Author of "Deadline Advanced," etc.*

AS THE shore launch rounded the stern of a screening tanker, Captain Judson Cullen arose to his feet, stretched his big-boned body another inch or two above the spray dodger and peered curiously ahead at his old command. Unconsciously his knees pressed harder to the comforting solidness of a thwartship bench as the *Jacques Kilrain* broke into view. The action was not so much a steadyng motion against the short, jolting chop of the lower bay, as it was a reflexed bracing of will against the memories that the sight of the old freighter brought back.

The weather wrinkles at the corners of his brooding eyes deepened almost imperceptibly as the small boat cut through the anchorage, bringing the vessel into closer perspective. She lay there, unliving, silhouetted against the lowering sun, the cause of both his retirement and his return to the sea.

Gazing up at her, Cullen's feet spraddled wider on the bottom boards, and the thumbs of his fisted hands hooked and reached instinctively for the belt that hadn't been a part of his attire for months past.

It was this last gesture that brought a sheepish grin to the captain's lips, a gradual

lessening of the austerity of his mouth. Then he turned and his eyes ran appraisingly along the scarred strakes of the *Kilrain*. It must have been an imagined trick of sun and shadow, but as his gaze focused finally on the blunted bows, a rust streak slanting downward below the hawsepipes like the mouth of a grim-lipped giant, seemed to grin back at him in contemptuous pity.

Judson Cullen's teeth met with an audible snap, and for a passing moment he found himself regretting again the decision that had brought him down to the pier office of Oceanic Lines this same morning.

There had been raised eyebrows of discreet curiosity on the clerk's face as he had ushered Cullen into the port captain's office.

Captain Peter Weldon's reaction had been more direct. He had pulled himself upright in his swiveled chair, his hands pushing his heavy body to his feet.

"Cullen!" he boomed, but neither his heartiness nor his proffered hand concealed the frank surprise behind his eyes. "Let's see now, it's been half a year at least since you left us. How does it feel to have swallowed the anchor, to be a landsman?"

Cullen stretched himself out in an indicated chair and tried an answering smile. It lost itself in the deepened lines of resolution bracketing his mouth, the resolution that had brought him here almost against his will. He came to the point of his visit abruptly.

"I want a command, Captain Weldon," he said bluntly.

THE port captain leaned back, his fat fingers locked behind his head, regarding his former shipmaster with complacent understanding. They all came back! Then, remembering, the blandness of his expression sharpened to close-lidded suspicion, recalling the manner of Cullen's retirement. This captain of his had quit flatly, unequivocally, asking nothing but to be rid of the *Jacques Kilrain*.

"So," Weldon asked quietly, "you want to ship again?" He left the question open, waiting for Cullen to go on, but the man across from him only nodded and said nothing.

Weldon leaned forward, his eyes searching the other's face. "You were always a

competent shipmaster, Cullen. One of our best—till you took over the *Kilrain*." He smiled thinly. "You may still be, for all I know. You are the one to know that." He hesitated, his fingers drumming the desk top, then went on. "Well, Oceanic can always use good masters . . . and I needn't tell you that we don't hold the bad luck on your last voyage as anything reflecting on your ability. Accidents can't always be avoided. Young Daly now . . ."

Looking across at Judson Cullen, his words dropped off to silence as spreading pallor jaundiced the other's leathered tan.

"I'm sorry, Captain," he went on quickly. "I don't mean to be brutal. Daly's misfortune was unavoidable. The investigation cleared that up. Daly will be all right, too, I understand. Another month or two and he'll be as good as ever. Oceanic is taking care of him."

THE color returned slowly to Cullen's cheeks, but his fingers still worked on the arms of his chair.

"Ben Daly was my friend, Captain," he said slowly. "We started together as deck boys ten years ago. Shipmates ever since. You don't forget an accident like mine, and you can't blame it on the ship. It's the men who man the vessels that make the luck. That's the way skippers earn their pay, with the courage and judgment to prevent accidents like that. I failed. That's why I'm back. I want another chance."

He passed a hand across his eyes as if to wipe away the memory of that gale-swept day six long months ago when a turnbuckle had carried away in the wild, erratic lunges of the *Jacques Kilrain* as she stumbled before a wind-driven sea. She should, Cullen had felt sure, have taken that vengeful gray-beard in stride. But she hadn't. The *Kilrain* had roiled like a champion to a punch, but instead of recovering had gone on over to bury her bulwarks in the smothering foam to lee'ard. That was when the deackload of heavy machinery had shifted, turnbuckles and chains snapping like chafed manila as the cargo cascaded across the well deck, bludgeoning chief mate Ben Daly, all but lifeless, into the scuppers.

Cullen was to remember that day for endless time, especially in the closing darkness of the night watches, when con-

science pressed down on him like coastal fog. Unavoidable, the board of inquiry had called it, but in those interminable, wide-eyed watches, Cullen wondered. Maybe it hadn't been luck. Maybe if he had paid more attention to the details of tenderness and stowage, she wouldn't have taken that unpredictable dive. Maybe, too, if he, Judson Cullen, had had the courage to ride out the gale instead of driving hell-bent for shelter like a frightened first-tripper, Ben Daly would be walking instead of railing at a cast that kept him shackled to a shore-side bed. Maybe . . . but, however, it was, Cullen had learned that there was no escape from conscience ashore. The answer had to be found where he had failed to find it —at sea.

Weldon was talking then, quietly, understandingly.

"There's the *Sea Raven*," the port captain said, "due in this week from Australia with war brides. She'll make a quick turn around. Greenup, her master, has been hounding me for leave. Suppose you take her, Cullen?"

Judson Cullen looked up, his eyes hard on Weldon's. "I want the *Jacques Kilrain*," he said.

THE chair groaned as Weldon snapped erect. "You're joking, Captain? The *Kilrain*! You must have had your fill of her, man! The *Raven*, now, she's a fine new ship. A vessel to rebuild a man's lost confidence." His eyes narrowed shrewdly as he settled back. "Young Daly's wife is aboard the bride ship. I think he'd like you to have the *Raven*. It would be a fine gesture."

Judson Cullen got up, dogged stubbornness bulging his jaw. "I want the *Jacques Kilrain*," he said again. "That would be a finer gesture."

Weldon's eyes held, then fell before the spark under Cullen's lids. "All right, Captain," he sighed at last, "but a vessel that's once had you down is a poor bet. Oceanic doesn't give many men a second chance—and there's never a third." His eyes flashed sudden fire. "We run steamships for profit, Captain, not for trouble, or to ease a quitter's conscience. Remember that!"

He pulled a blank crew list from a desk drawer and lettered in: *Jacques Kilrain*. He

handed the pen to Cullen and indicated the line marked, "Master."

"She's anchored in the stream," Weldon went on, and his voice was gentler now. "Be ready to get under way in forty-eight hours. You'll proceed south to Pedro to finish discharging before loading for the Islands. Bunker her there. Take only enough fuel here for your coastwise run. Good luck, Captain. I hope you won't need it."

THE *Jacques Kilrain* squared herself away on the buoyed lane to the lightship late in the afternoon of the second day. She rolled the headlands abeam and shouldered her bulky bows through the whale-backed swells charging in from the offshore soundings.

Ahead and to seaward, but closing fast on the harbor entrance, lay the seasonal pall of cloud that Cullen recognized as fog. Out of its wool-packed banks would come the wind, as it always did in these months, roaring down the coast and funneling straight onshore through the portals of the bay.

Captain Cullen shrugged the collar of his greatcoat higher on his neck against the chill of the moist wind sifting through the canvas dodger of the bridge wing. Against the chill, too, that pimpled his spine at the sight of Disappointment Shoal to starboard, north of the line of buoys. It curved away from the channel in a mile-long arc of intermittent shallows, lashed now by the fog-spawned wind into roiled acres of angry water.

Cullen's eyes swept across the reef, recalling the score or more of vessels that had missed the channel and struck there. Struck and stayed, to break up later at the leisure of the patient sea. Most had foundered on blind nights like this one promised to be, with the buoys blacked out by mists and the sonic warnings of the aids drowned by the fury of the wind.

A buzzer on the wheelhouse bulkhead sounded above the moan of the making gale. Cullen turned and nodded the mate toward the engine room telephone.

"The chief wants to know is it okay to pump bilges," the mate relayed. "Says we're bloated like a poisoned porpoise after the week at anchor."

"Tell him all right," Cullen said absent-

ly, "and have him put his engines on Stand By. It's shutting in fast up here."

He turned back to the forward windows. Already the first raveled yarns of fog were curling around the bridge, and within minutes the *Kilrain* was in the thick of it. Visibility narrowed to a shiplength. Premature night closed over them like a flung cape.

Around them from all sides, singly at first, then taking up the warning in chorus, came the ghostly sounds of the night. Cullen catalogued them mentally, the bells, the whistles, the diaphones, checking each against his remembered image of the charts. One by one they fell into their appointed places in his mind, each where it should be, with the *Kilrain* picking her way amongst them.

All except one, a querulous steam whistle to seaward and to the north—the wrong side of the channel for an inbound vessel. Cullen rang down the engine, listening to the other ship groping for the buoys in the blanketing murk. He blew a single, tentative blast, straining his upper body out the window for the answer. It came back loud, startlingly close—and still farther north. Too far, Cullen realized suddenly, and his hand closed again on the whistle lanyard for a warning.

Steam, ripped from the other's stack, drowned out their own, but now it was a continuous roar as someone on the unseen vessel's bridge hung desperately to the cord in the universal signal of distress. Then the siren died, but left in its stead a grimmer sound, the grating crunch of steel on rock.

"She—she's struck, sir!" the mate cried needlessly.

Cullen stood unmoving in the lee of the wheelhouse door listening to the panicked sounds of action echoing across the blankness of the night. He waited for the thrash of screws to tell him they were attempting to back clear. Instead, the rattle of chain racing through a hawsepoke bore down the wind. There was silence then except for the mute, controlled commands of the shipmaster on the other bridge.

Captain Cullen nudged the telegraphs ahead to Slow, edging closer to the channel's border. Why was it the *Kilrain* that had to happen by when this inbounder

blundered into trouble, he wondered savagely. His mouth hardened as he picked up a megaphone and aimed it in the direction of the grounded vessel.

"What ship is that?" he shouted testily.

The answer came back quickly, close, in voluble explanation. "*Sea Raven*. Captain Greenup. Out of Sydney. The lightship fogged out, Captain, and my direction finder is evidently out of calibration. I never even heard her diaphone. I'm afraid I'm on Disappointment Shoal. What ship are you? Can you lend a hand?"

Cullen's irritation faded.

HE COULD see her then, a huge bulk of blackness, darker by a shade than the surrounding night. Blurred pin-points of light showed feebly for an instant as the fog thinned before a stronger puff of wind. He could imagine, too, the women crowding the rails with their high hopes of the voyage's end turning to despair. Ben Daly's wife would be there, Cullen remembered, frightened, panic-stricken like the others.

But this was a job for tugs. Greenup's suggestion, if attempted, could only result in disaster to them both. The *Kilrain*, underpowered as she was and . . .

"Are you there?" Greenup's voice cut into his thoughts, impatient, demanding. "What ship is that? What ship I say!"

Cullen ignored the question. "I'm standing by," he shouted. "Can you back down? Reverse your course. You're only fifty yards or so outside the channel."

"I'm deep by the stern." Greenup's reply magnified by fog came booming across the water. "My after section's hung up. Propeller and rudder damaged. I dropped anchor to keep from drifting farther in. I'm helpless, Captain, unless you can pass me a line. Damn it, man, what ship are you?"

Cullen notched the telegraphs on Dead Slow, keeping only enough way to breast the tide. "How badly are you holed?" he asked, still evading the demand.

"We ought to float for a few hours," Greenup said, but doubt was in his voice now. "We're taking water fast. The pumps'll hold her for awhile, but . . ."

Cullen was silent, the sweat of indecision dampening his body. What chance had they to pull a vessel of twice their tonnage

clear of those clutching rocks? And if they did, there was the problem of keeping steerageway enough on both of them to make the safety of the harbor. The greater chance was that the *Raven* would drag them both back on the shoal. This was a job for salvage craft.

He turned away toward the other wing, biting at his lips, admitting to himself his reason for withholding their identity from Greenup. If they were to continue on their way, no one could ever prove that it was the *Kilrain* that had refused to render aid. There would be accusations of course, but it would be his word, the captain's, against anybody's in the crew that might try to refute them. In this shrouding fog the *Sea Raven* could never identify them. Any ship would look the same, just a dark blur in a deeper darkness. They could be any one of half a dozen vessels clearing port this day as far as Greenup would ever know.

Weldon's warning, clear, remembered, stabbed through the mists of his indecision: "Steamships run for profit, not for trouble, Captain!"

Greenup cried, "My anchors won't hold much longer, Captain. And I can't slack away any more without fetching up for'ard!"

Weldon's words reminded him: "Oceanic's second chance is always the last. Remember that!"

Cullen's head lifted and swung around to where the pier office jutted out into the bay, five miles behind them, invisible. "So what!" he snarled at Weldon, out of the silence. "There are men that will die tonight, over there. And women."

"Sir?" the mate asked, startled.

Captain Cullen grinned. "Right rudder," he ordered. He aimed the megaphone at the *Raven*. "This is the *Jacques Kilrain*!" he yelled. "Have a line ready. I'll take your towing wire."

THEY were the better part of an hour hooking on to the stranded vessel, and it was another thirty minutes before the *Raven* had her chain spooled aboard and Cullen was ready for their try. He listened for the sound of the bell buoy guarding the channel. He picked it up finally, ahead and to port. That meant they were already in shoaling water. He rang Full Ahead, then added an extra jingle.

The *Kilrain* staggered as the engineers below decks poured steam to her complaining pistons, but her wheel churned frenziedly as the revolution counter on the forward bulkhead reached for the limit of the dial.

It was still another half hour before Cullen knew that their best wasn't going to be good enough. The buoy they had to round to gain the channel was nearly abeam now, but still to port and close aboard. They had gained nothing. They'd never make the honest water to the south.

Cullen watched, his knuckles tightened to gray on the bridge railing, at the realization that his judgment had been wrong again. He should have waited for the tugs, he admitted now. Or better still he should have continued on to sea. They'd be well clear of this mess by now, headed down the coast alone, "making a profit—not salvaging a quitter's conscience."

He thought again of that other night six months ago when he'd acted on what he'd thought to be a logical solution to a similar problem—and been proven wrong. As he'd told Weldon. . . . But that was it. Then, he hadn't had the courage of his own judgment. Now . . . Hell, this was the way he earned his wages. Right or wrong, he'd made his decision and he'd see it through. His hands came away from the rail and reached in instinctive action for his belt, hooking there. In the same moment the weight of defeat seemed to lift miraculously from his shoulders.

"Right!" he ordered the helmsman. "Hard right. We'll take this cripple home!"

The quartermaster stared, unhearing, motionless.

"Right!" Cullen barked again, and started for the wheel.

The helmsman moved at what he saw in the captain's eyes. The wheel spun hard down, fast.

Cullen became aware of the mate's eyes, white rimming their edges, on his own. "Good Lord, sir! You're taking her over Disappointment Shoal!"

The captain's shoulders lifted. "Why not, mister? We'll never reach deep water this way. The shoal's got three fathoms over it except on the channel's edge where the *Raven* struck. We've drifted past that now. She's low on bunkers, probably draw-

ing fifteen feet or less. She'll clear everything that's left."

"But us, sir! The *Kilrain's* drawing eighteen aft. We can't—we'll never make it! We . . ."

"Well?" Cullen asked coldly. "Do you want to sail forever? At least the *Raven* will pile up on an honest shore if we strike."

He turned and watched the other vessel swinging in a broad circle in their wake. "With the start we're giving her, she can drift the rest of the way on the flood even if we hang up."

"But we—we . . ." the mate began wildly, but the roar of a diaphone cut off his stammering objections.

"South Entrance beacon," Cullen interpreted the sound. "Another quarter hour will see us through. Post a man with a fire axe at the towing bitts in case we fetch up."

EVERY fractional part of the next quarter hour was a remembered second to Captain Judson Cullen. He kept the *Kilrain* on Full, ploughing ahead against the time when the *Raven* would fill, or they themselves would strike. He stood at the bridge railing, tense, unmoving, feeling the pulse of the *Kilrain's* efforts as she moved ahead, but waiting always for the shuddering lurch that would mean she had found the ground.

The entrance beacon drew closer, rapidly now under the impetus of the favoring wind and tide boosting the *Kilrain* ahead. It was abeam at last and Cullen, not trusting his voice, beckoned the helmsman to ease the wheel to starboard. He swung hard right a moment later, signaling the man on the fantail to cut the towing wire adrift. The *Raven* slid by their counter to beach herself with a sucking sigh of thankfulness on the cushioning mud of the sloping shoreline.

Even as the *Kilrain* turned toward deeper water, Cullen saw the summoned salvage craft swarming out of the fog like moths in a smoky room, making for the *Sea Raven*.

Captain Judson Cullen wiped a heavy arm across the satisfied but bitter smile on his mouth. "Full Ahead," he told the mate curtly. "Ships are run for profit. We've got a voyage to make."

The engine room indicator on the telegraph followed the mate's signal to Full. It stopped there a hesitant second, then jin-

gled back to Stop. From below decks the *Kilrain's* engine coughed and died.

Cullen, striding toward the telephone, was met by the chief engineer as the latter burst into the wheelhouse from the inside alleyway. The chief's mouth hung open in stunned disbelief. "We—we're out of fuel, Cap!" he cried. "Somehow we got the wrong hook-up down below. We thought we were pumping bilges all this while. We—we've pumped the bunker oil over the side!"

In the sudden quietness of the wheelhouse the mate was the first to find his voice. His mouth was rounded with wonder. "That's why we didn't strike on Disappointment Shoal," he whispered. "We've lightened ourselves a fathom or so."

Captain Cullen was silent, the fine lines of strain about his eyes showing white in the dim glow of the binnacle light, not hearing the mate's words, but thinking beyond them to an imagined position a score of miles down the coast. A lee coast in this weather, where the *Kilrain* would even now be sucking the dregs of fuel oil from her empty tanks and drifting down to helpless destruction on the waiting rocks.

Cullen shivered and shrugged his collar closer around the clutching tightness in his throat. "You'd better get for'ard, mister," he said softly to the mate, "and put an anchor down. The *Kilrain* won't be going to sea tonight."

He turned to the engineer. "I'll send word in, Chief, to barge out some oil." He smiled wryly when he pictured the port captain getting the message. "I don't think Weldon will be pleased at this delay."

The chief gazed thoughtfully into the gray bank of fog tumbling in through the bay entrance, masking the hidden terror of Disappointment Shoal. "Maybe not," he said fervently, "but I know I am. And Captain Greenup over there."

"And Ben Daly, when he finds out," Cullen added half-aloud. Then he thought about the unprofitableness of a new transport breaking upon Disappointment Shoal, and the little money to be made from the rusting scrap of a freighter's hull pounding to pieces on a rocky coast. His mouth relaxed in a wide grin. "Well, maybe even Peter Weldon," he admitted aloud.

# JUMPING BEAVER'S BOMB

By JOHN E. KELLY



*... Tenderfeet Always Have  
More Money Than Guts."*

THE three men hated one another, with the dull, passive hatred of lifelong neighbors from whom no secret was hid, of familiarity transcending contempt. Their rough tongues raked their fellows, in curdled distemper bred of frustration and personal failure. Violence lay just beneath their words, as the white-hot lava lies below the volcano's cone, but the release of action was denied them by realization of its futility. The guns at their hips hung quiescent; there was no point in

a shooting that got them nothing but trouble with the law.

With no lessening of rancor they were gathered this July day about the single unpainted table in Messaday's general store at Tyler's Ford. Enmity toward one another was fruitless, for they were equal in shiftless poverty, none envied his neighbor a slatternly faded overworked wife, his tumble-down cabin, an untended garden patch, for these, and little else, each possessed. But there was something new in the valley, something old yet new, that had eluded them and was enriching "furriners," that would enrich them could they muscle in on a share. Now their hatred, their corrosive envy had an outlet, and the three, welded in one, were as blindly dangerous as a rattle shedding its skin.

**S**INCE the virgin timber has been felled and the Chinese tongs stripped the River Lampa of its placer gold, there was little enough in the Valley, unless one put his back into it from dawn to dusk, or made his brains or money work for him. Desultory "sniping" of twice-worked gravel, furtive seasonal moonshining in remote pockets high on the Sourdough Range, letting the poor soil run to weeds while the owner hunted or fished, yielding only a threadbare existence and fanatic self-pity, patent in the thin faces and hot eyes of the three gathered about the table. The target of their fury lay on a flank of a subsidiary defile, where the West Fork made its tortured way into the Lampa. Tenderfeet, Eastern dudes, had bought a worked-out mine, an object of derision for forty years, probed its recesses with technical skill and located a vast orebody. Now the hills echoed with the pounding of carpenters building a mining camp, scrapers laid the bedrock bare, the countryside flocked to the good pay the company offered. All but the three. Insult swelled injury; they had owned the mine and with scarce-concealed snickers palmed it off on a visiting engineer for a thousand dollars, an incredible sum when they had seen it counted out in golden eagles.

The big man had bummed a metropolitan newspaper from the stage driver. He stabbed at a paragraph in the financial columns with a soiled spatulate forefinger.

"Them tenderfoots cheated us!" he howl-

ed, his voice taut with outrage. "Here's whut I called you fellers ter see. It's writ plain, 'West Fork Mining Company Raises Two Millions Working Capital.' Two millions, and we got a mizzerble thousand dollars!"

"What of it?" snarled the lantern-jawed one. "We signed the paper when we took the money. It's their right enough, legal."

The third man was smaller than his companions, compactly built, with a lethal grace of movement like that of the cougars he hunted in the shadowy forests of the Sourdoughs. He pushed his surly face forward.

"An' it were you, Hen," he said accusingly to the big man, "who 'lowed thet engineer with th' choke-bored pants 'd drop the claims fer taxes and we could stake 'em again!"

Kilgar defended himself. "I can't look inter the ground no further'n the next feller! Any fool could tell there was nuthin' in sight. But how did I know the dude 'd bring a doodle bug and get 'way down in the guts of the mine?"

The hunter scowled. "It's ourn by rights; thet damn tenderfoot knowed too much. We gotta get it back."

Lantern-jawed Dan Tork smiled bitterly. "I s'pose you'll hand back the thousand dollars! Where yuh gettin' it, Buff?"

"Give back nuthin'," sneered Buff Hay. "We'll bluff the company inter quittin'. It'll be a lead-pipe cinch; tenderfoots has more money than guts."

"Here's yore chonct ter prove it," Kilgar broke in. He pointed through the small-paned window that commanded the stage road. A man in his early thirties was alighting from a buckboard before the store. His short tight "store-bought" jacket pulled upward as he put a foot to earth and disclosed a thin leather belt, innocent of gun or cartridges. Throwing a word to the bearded driver, the stranger turned and climbed the steep plank steps leading to the breast-high platform where the freight wagons and the stage unloaded Messaday's shipments.

"Thet's Marshall, the Company's new manager."

Kilgar's explanation was barely made when Marshall stepped through the door. The newcomer lacked an inch of six feet, his hundred and eighty pounds were well distributed on a large-boned frame. In a county of beards, his cleanshaven face

marked him a tenderfoot. Hay's hackles rose at what he considered a personal affront, but while he meditated a challenge, Marshall's brown eyes flicked disinterestedly over the three, strangers to him, and he strode down the cool dim length of the store to discuss hardware with Messaday.

"Yuh shore done a fine job scarin' the tenderfoot, Buff," applauded Tork. "Likely he's passin' Trampas Ceety now, headin' East!"

"Shet up!" snarled the baited one. "I was fixin' whut ter jump him on, an' I jest got it. Here he comes. Watch my smoke!" Hay rose and half blocked Marshall's egress, sticking his chin out belligerently.

"Hey, you!" he barked. "They's things you gotta learn, right now! You got a Chink up at camp; we don't 'low the yellowbellies in the Valley."

Marshall had stopped, his arm full of parcels, and regarded the furious Hay evenly. He thought Buff drunk.

"Why?" he asked quietly.

"Cause them rat-eaters takes white folks' jobs, thass why!" howled Hay. In the Valley the blow followed the word in short order; Buff misread the engineer's quietness and thought him cowed.

"Wong Fong is a cook," Marshall continued in the same voice. "Are you one?"

"Me? A—cook?" Buff's hand fled for his gun. He drew but did not level his Colt, suddenly puzzled by the stranger's manner. This wasn't going according to Hoodlum. He compromised on oral violence. "Yore damned right I ain't no cook!" His roar set a row of coal-oil lamps on Messaday's shelves tinkling.

"Then Wong Fong is not taking your job," stated Marshall flatly and while Hay struggled with the implications hidden in the civil words, the Easterner pushed past him and moved calmly through the door and down the steps.

Hay's arm snapped up and he glared over his sights at the engineer's receding back. A slug right in there, below the shoulder, would find the heart. His finger tightened on the trigger. A hand snaked past his hip and struck his elbow sharply, so that the muzzle threw upward and the ball buried itself in the ceiling. Dan Tork wrestled Buff to the floor.

"You ain't got th' sense God give little

apples, Buff!" he told the squirming hunter. "Naw, I ain't lettin' you up ontell Marshall's outa sight. An' you was gointa bluff him!" Tork's tone was eloquent.

Hay gritted his teeth. "You're in cahoots with th' tenderfoot! But yuh can't save him, I'll get him next time sure."

Hen Kilgar bent over the prostrate man. "Hev we gotta knock sense inter yuh, Buff? They's no good in shootin' the manager, the company kin git plenty more. What we gotta do is make minin' unpossible. All yuh done is put him on notice we're hostile. I oughta cut down yer share fer bein' so dumb!"

MARSHALL had moved calmly through the door and across the loading platform, but beneath his khaki shirt the muscles of his back crawled with nervous anticipation. He was on the topmost step when the bark of Hay's gun echoed hollowly from the deep cavern of the store. Instantaneous reflex action bowed his knees and he sprang to earth, taking cover under the planking. But when no one appeared from the store and the single shot was succeeded by a confused murmur of angry voices, the engineer somewhat shamefacedly gathered his scattered parcels and stowed them on the buckboard.

"Probably an accident," he said wishfully to the driver, who had remained seated, an alert but passive spectator.

"Mebbe," grunted the latter skeptically, gathering the reins as Marshall swung up beside him. He was a native of the Valley and knew its people.

His laconic doubt chilled Marshall. The engineer had willed himself to believe the shot unconnected with Hay's inexplicable truculence. He had just come out and needed the job, after a six months layoff with a shattered leg finances were low and his sick wife longed for Western sunshine. Only yesterday he had written her, rhapsodizing over the Valley, their future home rising from its foundations above the mining camp, the trails they would explore when the mountain air had healed her. He would have recalled the letter; the warmth leached out of the afternoon. At a turn in the road where stout columns of silver pines arose from a laurel thicket and framed the first distant view of the mine, he had planned

to halt while Betty drank in the scene, the immensity of the pale windswept sky, the long fold of the ridge and thereon the tiny square of clearing with the white pinpoints of the new houses. Now he saw only ambushes lurking in the underbrush, hatred gun in hand stalking the road. Apprehension twinged his stomach, determination tightened his jaw. Marshall knew himself no hero, just an ordinary fellow with something to fight for who wasn't running from trouble not of his making.

THE driver slid a glance sidewise at his silent boss. Hard to figure the tenderfoot out; he might be scared silly or maybe he'd forgotten the ruckus and was deep in plans for the camp. Marshall caught the other's movement.

"You heard that—in the store?" he asked.

"Buff Hay sounded a mite riled," admitted the driver.

"What's he got against Chinese?"

The native expertly flicked the lagging team, cracking his whiplash like a pistol shot. "The Chinks come up here 'bout twenty year ago," he began slowly, feeling for words. "Hundreds of 'em, working the river with wing dams fer gold. They took out fortunes where white panners couldn't make beans an' bacon. So th' boys cracked down on the yellowbellies with rifles an' got mosta th' gold. But some o' the whites got knifed and a couple drowned. Natural, the folks was red-eyed then an' run all the Chinks out. It's not Buff only, most everybody is agin havin' 'em in the Valley."

"What happens if Wong Fong stays on the mine property and doesn't come down to Tyler's Ford?" asked Marshall, conscious of the divided loyalty of the man beside him, inherited prejudices in the balance against the best paying job Mart Noble had ever held.

Noble pointed his whip at a natural terrace across the river. "Pretty fair gravel up thar," he remarked, apparently at random. "Two-three y'ars back, a German doctor—scientific feller—come out and 'lows he's goin' to work it with a gold machine he's invented. He hed a coupla Chinks 'round his tents. The boys asked him perlite—I mind Buff Hay was thar—ter ship his yellowbellies out, but he says no, they're

stayin' as long as he does. He was right at that.

"One night the boys come to camp unexpected-like. The doctor was like you, didn't pack no gun—wouldn't hev done him no good nohow. The boys tied them two Chinks' pigtails together and hangs 'em over a limb o' one of them big pines yonder, musta been fifteen feet off the ground. I reckon it hurt right smart, fer them Chinks carried on. You ever hear a yellowbelly screech? Mister, a cougar can't do no better. The boys could still hear 'em, plain, when they crossed the Lampa down ter Tyler's Ford."

"Why didn't the doctor free the Chinese when the gang left?" demanded Marshall hotly.

"I was a-comin' to that," replied Noble. "The boys didn't hurt the doctor none. They jest tied him face up on a log and put it, careful, right under where them two Chinks were hangin'. Then Buff, er it might o' been Hen Kilgar, went up the pine agin and without showin' no light, hung a knife from the limb nigh the Chinks, whar they could see it in the mawnin'."

"What's the point of that?"

"It's an all-fired deesgrace fer a Chink ter lose his pigtail," explained the driver. "The yellowbelly that fust seen the knife hadda lose face hisself or make a lifetime enemy by slicin' off the other's queue. Whichever he done, the two of 'em'd 'bout half kill th' doctor, fallin' on him. The Chinks hightailed it, soon as they lit, an' a couple of the doc's tenderfoot friends found him plenty stove up an' carried him out."

"Nice people," commented Marshall, reflectively. "Would they shoot up the camp to get Wong Fong?"

"Likely," Noble told him, "ef'n they was sufficient likkered up."

"How about the men working for us? What would they do if the gang raids the mine?" the engineer pressed his companion.

"Them fellers you brought in, you can best speak fer," responded the driver, chivvying his team up the last steep grade to the camp. "Th' Injuns off'n the Reservation, like Mike Cusak an' Jumpin' Beaver, they'll stick with the Company ef they figure you're bound ter win. They got it in fer Tyler's Ford folks anyhow. Them from the Valley, it's hard ter say. Yer pay is good and jobs

is scarce, likely they'd stand aside an' take no part."

"And you, Mart, can we count on you?"

The native shifted uncomfortably. "You got me whar the hair is short, on thet," he admitted. "My old woman is Buff Hay's sister." He pulled up at the makeshift office, a plank shanty, serving until permanent quarters were completed. Noble studied Marshall's set face as the manager alighted. "But I wouldn't do you no harm, Mr. Marshall," he added hastily, seeing his job in peril.

"I hope not," the engineer replied non-committally and vanished into the shanty.

WHEN four nights had passed uneventfully, Marshall set down Buff Hay's bark as worse than his bite and lost himself in a thousand pressing details of construction. He drove down to see Messaday, finding the storekeeper alone.

"We're running short of lumber," the engineer began, "and I thought you could give me the name of a good mill nearby."

Messaday protruded his long pendulous lower lip doubtfully. "Most o' the operators in the Valley done cut out an' got out," he replied slowly. "Thar's some boarding left up whar the old East Slope mill was, but how good, I couldn't say. The watchman, Dan Tork, 's been sellin' it off."

Tork's name meant nothing to Marshall. He took Messaday's directions and turned his team westward, following the stage road over the Sourdoughs. The storekeeper came to his door to watch the buckboard climb the steep grade, fanning the dust wraithlike behind its narrow tires. Messaday drummed soundless on the jamb. The company was already his best customer, when they got really going he'd put in a full stock and hire a helper. But he wasn't taking sides in the trouble he saw coming up; he had to live in the Valley. Too many men had taken a slug through their windows at night. Besides, Tork wouldn't start anything while he had a prospect of cash money for the lumber. A woman's figure in calico crossed the road toward the store and Messaday went behind the counter to wait on her.

Where a sagging signboard, "EAST SLOPE LUMBER COMPANY," peeped from a tangle of briars, Marshall turned

into a narrow rutted track, climbing a steep quarter mile across the flank of the ridge to drop finally into a pocket hanging precariously on the slope. The scene was one of utter desolation, dragging at the engineer's spirits. Wasteful "cut out and get out" lumbering had leveled the forest; the mountain-side was littered with the trunks of innumerable rejects, bleached a leprous white. The loosened soil had gullied under the lash of winter rains until the pocket was half filled with deltas of red mud baked brick hard in the scorching heat of the dry season. The abandoned camp was in keeping. The mill had been stripped to its huge foundation beams, the masonry engine-bed gaped bare. A bunkhouse had collapsed in flames, smaller shacks sagged crazily, devoid of doors and panes. Marshall halted where a tangle of rusted cable disputed the right of way and stepping out, seized the near horse's headstall to back the team, convinced he had come on a wild goose chase.

In what had been the toolhouse a door opened and an angular figure in worn jeans stepped into the open, with a rifle cradled in the crook of his elbow. His stance of belligerent wariness proclaimed that all strangers and most familiars were hostile. He approached slowly, at a shambling walk, halting when a dozen feet from Marshall. His lantern-jawed face was vaguely familiar to the engineer, but half the county had come job-hunting and all beards looked alike to him. Marshall recollects the name.

"Are you Dan Tork?" he asked.

"Whut was you wantin' ter see him fer?" demanded the other uncompromisingly.

"To buy lumber."

The watchman led the way behind the mill site to where weathered boards were stacked in squared piles. They were mill-ends, rejects, with bark edges, in odd lengths. Only one stack of better quality claimed Marshall's interest and he came to terms on price. The native put out a weathered hand.

"Gimme th' money," he said avidly.

"I'm told Mr. Tork sells this," objected Marshall.

The other tapped his chest. "I be."

"All right," replied Marshall, "but I don't pay here. You deliver at the mine and our men will scale the boards. We'll buy what's usable, so don't send up any junk

like that." His thumb cocked toward the trash piles.

Tork scowled and remained silent so long that Marshall turned to leave. "All right," he growled finally. "It'll be up tommoror."

He was as good as his word. Marshall was leaving the cookhouse at noon when two ramshackle lumber wagons pulled up before the office shanty. Tork drove the first with Hen Kilgar besides him, Buff Hay glowered from the other. As the engineer walked over to inspect their loads, Tork hailed him.

"Here's yer boards," he said doggedly, "gimme the money now."

"Wait till we scale—" began Marshall when he saw the lumber more closely. "Hold on, this isn't what I ordered, this is the junk I told you not to send!"

"It's whut yer getting!" responded Tork insolently. "Come on, boys, get them boards on the ground." Aided by his companions he yanked the stakes from their sockets in the flat wagonbeds and threw the boards overside in disorderly piles. "Now we done delivered," he yelled, "an' we wants our money."

**I**N THE middle distance a group of laborers grubbed out stumps with powder and mattock, clearing the site of the gold recovery plant. Stripped to the waist, their sweating torsos glistened copper-bronze in the sunlight, impervious to tanning. They had regarded Tork's arrival with interest, facing about to keep him within view. As the loud voices came to their ears they drifted unostentatiously across the open to stand behind the wagons, a half dozen Picaro Indians, with square Mongolian faces above powerful squat bodies.

"That junk will lie there at your risk; if it's not off the property in a week, the cook gets it for kindling," Marshall told Tork, feeling that he was standing on the cliff's edge with the ground crumbling beneath him.

"Do we get the money?" shouted Tork.

"Not a cent," snapped Marshall with a composure that was entirely external.

"Then we'll take it outa yer hide," howled Tork. Snatching a wagon stake he advanced on the engineer, imitated by his fellows.

As the unarmed Marshall turned for refuge in the shanty, he saw a sight

that froze him in his tracks. Rounding the lumber wagons at express train speed flowed a copper tide, advancing with primitive stealth upon the three bearded men. With tackles that would have done credit to Jim Thorpe, the Picaros swarmed over their victims, pinned their backs to earth, snatching their guns, stifling their outcries with mouthfuls of sand. Jumping Beaver brought the captured weapons to Marshall.

"Those fellow no good," he said, breathing hard from his wrestling match with the powerful Kilgar. "You tell Picaros throw 'em in river?" he added with manifest anticipation of a pleasant chote.

"Not this time," replied Marshall, half regretfully. "But if they try it again, I don't care what you do." He broke the pistols, pocketing the cartridges, and threw the empty guns on the wagons.

"Let them up," he told the Picaros, "but watch 'em closely."

The Indians needed no coaching. They hauled the three roughly to their feet and at Marshall's nod, booted them onto the wagons. The captives spat sand and curses. Tork shook a febrile fist at the engineer.

"Injun-lover!" he roared. "We'll get you, the whole kit and caboodle of you!"

"Talk's cheap," returned Marshall. "Get going."

The wagons rattled down the trail into the thick forest that ringed the mine. Marshall watched them out of sight, conscious of the inglorious role he had played. The Picaros had saved him. Tenderfoot though he was, the engineer knew that to Tork, to the Valley, that was unforgivable. He had compounded his sin of bringing Wong Fong into the country. From now on it would be war, until the losers were carried out, feet foremost. For the first time in years, Marshall buckled on a gun.

When Mart Noble brought the mail up on the following day, Marshall was alone in the office. The driver put the pouch on his desk and turned away, patently lingering. The engineer grinned at the transparent maneuver.

"What's on your mind?" he inquired.

"They's talk at the Ford," responded Noble.

"Talk?"

"Buff an' Dan Tork is talkin' of firin' the woods an' burnin' the Company out."

Marshall's nerves cringed. The close encircling forest was tinder dry. Driven by the breeze that sprang up each afternoon, the flames would leap the clearing, licking up the piles of slashings dotting the open, spread to the camp buildings. With one match Tork would have his revenge, while remaining safely out of gunshot.

The engineer searched the driver's face.

"I suppose you'll be wanting to quit before it happens," he inquired.

Noble's forehead corrugated, he fidgeted with his fingers. "I been thinkin'" he began.

Marshall remained mute, unhelpful.

"Thinkin'," repeated Noble. "The woman an' the kids never et regular 'fore I got this Company job. Looks like it's up ter me ter he'p the Company keep me workin'. They can't pay me ef the place is burnt out. I was fixin' ter ask you ter let me hev the next house that's ready, so's I'd be handy ef—" His voice ran out.

"And Buff Ray wouldn't want his sister burned," surmised Marshall.

"There's that," admitted Noble, "but I'd go fu'ther. Buff never done nuthin' fer me. Whut he's fixin' ter do loses me my job. Mister, ef'n I catch Buff in the woods with a match I'd throw him off 'n the cliff my own self—an' the woman an' the kids 'd want me to!" He wiped his brow with a sleeve of his jeans.

"Good man!" said Marshall. "You get the next house." The engineer's spirits rose mercurially; the solid hostile front of Valley opinion broken, there would be more Nobles. He was the more encouraged, although Tork's threat spread instantly, when no Valley man quit his job.

ON THE day that the new house was ready, Marshall lent Noble a gravel wagon to transport his goods and chattels. Mart was back at dusk with his family seated on the small pile of cloth, wood and metal that represented their total possessions. The engineer's throat constricted at the graphic presentation of a poverty new in his experience but that was normal in the Valley. Almost he found reason therein to forgive Tork and Hay their murderous envy.

Seeing Noble moved in, Marshall walked across the clearing toward his office, for a

mine manager's work is never done and he knows no hours. Wong Fong slipped out of the rear door of the cook house, pattering over to the incinerator near the edge of the forest. His white duck coat made a blob of white in the fast gathering darkness. Sparks glowed briefly under the trees; before the reports reached Marshall's ears he saw the Chinese stumble and pitch forward.

MARSHALL threw himself into a dead run, tugging his Colt from its holster. As Wong Fong struggled to his knees, there was another shot from the forest and he fell on his face. The engineer slid to earth, shielding the victim with his body and emptied his gun toward the latest flash. Reloading with frantic haste he heard the door of the Indian bunkhouse bang open and Picaro gutturals filled the air. Jumping Beaver and Mart Noble reached Marshall in a dead heat.

"Have two of your boys carry Wong Fong to Dr. Blanchard," Marshall told the Indian crisply. He jumped to his feet and confronted Noble.

"You were right," he told the driver, "they did come for the cook."

Mart nodded somberly. "I thought I seen Dan Tork's pinto at Buff's when I come by this after," he replied.

"And you didn't tell me!" Accusation underlined the engineer's words.

Noble shrugged. "No use o' borrying trouble," he said. "I didn't tell you neither, that Buff done sent me word—when he heerd we was movin' here—he'll shoot me like a kyote, er a Chink, the fust time he ketches me." His voice took on a grimmer note. "Two kin play at that game and I aims ter git my licks in fust. Time's a-wastin'; them varmints is gittin' away."

Followed closely by Marshall and every miner who packed a gun, Noble plunged into the forest where the ambushers had hidden to shoot down Wong Fong. The pursuers spread out in a long line and made their way cautiously forward, falling on the rough terrain, beating through thickets. But save for a distant crashing which might have been deer startled by the invasion of their coverts, no trace of the assailants was found. Marshall was about to call the hunt off when a cry far down the slope where the Picaros searched the forest along the cliff over the

river, was relayed by nearer and anxious voices.

"Fire!"

Far ahead and quartering on the left, where the mine's wagon trail joined the stage road, a glow widened, pale gray tan above, angry crimson below. The profiles of forest giants, soon to be torches, were silhouetted against the growing glare.

Marshall sent his voice bellowing ahead. "Noble, Mart Noble!"

When the driver appeared at his elbow, materializing from the night with a woodsman's silent tread, the engineer gave him swift orders.

"Get all the men out of the forest and line them up along this edge of our clearing, spaced to cover the whole front."

The deep woods resounded with cries as the miners passed the word. Marshall turned back, finding his way with less difficulty, for the forest was no longer pitch black under the trees. The reflection of the great fire spread a faint cold light.

The nerves in the engineer's arms burned like hot wires, tumult whirled in his brain. The trouble he had sought to avoid was here, sweeping upon the mine in the sirocco gusts of the forest fire. If the flames overran the clearing his number and that of all his people was up. Tork and Hay had called the turn, their bets were down. Rage possessed him; must Wong Fong be shot like a wolf, Mart Noble's family be burned because the Tyler's Ford gang resented the Company's presence? Marshall stepped into the open outwardly calm, but this was it, with no holds barred and winner take all.

Jumping Beaver stood in his path. The Picaro was perturbed, obviously the tenderfoot did not understand the ways of flame in the forest.

"Man tell," he began, "You say to line up here. Is right?"

Marshall nodded, then realized they stood in semi-darkness. "That's right," he agreed.

Jumping Beaver was blunt. "No good, no can stop fire when get here."

"But we can start it," replied Marshall.

"Ugh?" grunted the Picaro, uncomprehending.

The engineer wet a finger and held it aloft. "The wind has died."

"Pretty soon night breeze start," Jumping Beaver added. "Blow down river, to fire."

"So I figured," responded Marshall. "We'll fight fire with fire. Pass the word that when I shoot twice, each man is to start a burn in front of him."

THE backfire caught at the parched grass and shrubs, then sprang into the nearest trees and roared aloft. The miners retreated from the searing wall of heat and the engineer anxiously calculated the risk to the mine settlement. But the blaze moved deeper into the forest, slowly at first, gathering momentum from its own draft and the first gusts on the night breeze. It swept down upon its outlaw twin with express train speed, whirling blazing limbs and treetops far ahead in gage of battle. The fire lines met with a crashing fury that rattled window sashes in the mining camp.

Marshall exhaled with a heartfelt sigh; barring a change of wind that would sweep the backfire about the base of the clearing, the Company had come safely through the ordeal. Mart Noble swiftly routed the engineer's incipient complacency.

"Don't go turnin' in yet," he warned. "You done right well, but Dan an' Buff wasn't behind the door when the brains was passed out, and you've give 'em an idee."

"Now what?" asked Marshall, with cold shivers of premonition.

"We ain't got the varmints yet," argued Mart doggedly, "an' ef'n we don't, they'll git us, sure as shootin'. All they gotta do now is do what you done, get upwind from the camp and come right down river through the woods from the other side. You can't set no backfire thar against this wind."

The engineer's stomach went queasy. The trees were even higher across the clearing and huge piles of stumps and slashings from the clearing led like a powder train directly to the camp. The gang had merely to reverse their field to have the mine.

A flurry of shots, muted by distance, broke out below the clearing, where the gang must pass to fire the upper forest. Matching Noble stride for stride, Marshall raced down the slope, gun in hand. On his right the smouldering wrecks of trees made a pattern in red and black against the paling glare of the receding conflagration. Tripping over a root he dove with a bone-shaking crash into a stump hole and lost the race. When, half stunned, the engineer

reached the lower edge of the clearing the shooting had ceased and the Picaros were combing the silent woods like hounds on the hot scent of a fox.

Not until dawn did an Indian yell, answered instantly by a rifle shot, signify that the quarry had gone to ground and were holed up, at bay. Following the summons, Marshall made his way carefully down the heavily wooded slope toward the cliff, driving his heels deeply at each step lest a slip send him tobogganing on the pine needles and over the brink. Jumping Beaver halted him where a thick growth of holly clustered on the very edge. The Indian pointed through the mass of deeply green, spiked leaves.

"Careful," he warned. "They close, watch sharp."

The engineer peered through a break in the foliage. East and west the cliff edge ran, and vertically a dizzy two hundred feet down to where the West Fork frothed in its narrow, boulder-laden channel. Thirty yards from where he crouched, a tiny tongue of rock protruded into the canyon. It rose level with the cliff edge and some thirty feet in diameter, connected to the mountainside by a neck of bare limestone, not over two yards wide. The peninsula was covered with a dense tangle of vines and small trees, in whose midst Marshall thought to detect the outlines of a log hut.

"That's Hermit's Hangout, shore 'nuff," whispered Mart Noble at his side. "I done heerd of it, but never believed it real. Thet's why the Injuns couldn't find them varmints in the dark. They combed the hull slope but thet narrer neck 'scaped 'em."

"Now what?" demanded Marshall.

"Buff an' Dan figure ter tote up thar on tel we git tired. Can't nobody cross thet bare neck ter git 'em and the ol'timers 'low they's a cave an' a spring under them trees."

A dozen feet ahead a Picaro peeped about the bole of a giant yellow pine, drawing a bead on a target in the gang's refuge. Before he could pull his trigger a rifle cracked on the peninsula and the Indian sagged slowly to earth, blood pouring from his head. Forgetting Jumping Beaver's warning, Marshall slipped from cover, seized the prostrate brave and dragged him toward the shelter of the holly. The unseen rifle barked twice, Marshall's hat flew from his

head and hot lead seared his arm. He looked down to find his shirtsleeves soaking from a shoulder wound.

Firing broke out all along the line of the cliff, forcing the Tork gang to take cover while Jumping Beaver and Noble got the victims under cover. They propped Marshall against a live oak while preliminary twinges in his wound forecast the pain to come. But the engineer brusquely refused Mart's suggestion that he be evacuated to the rear.

"Not until this is over," he replied. At Marshall's direction, Noble bared the shoulder from which a warm geyser of arterial blood flowed with the pulse of the heart. The engineer pressed his wadded handkerchief against the wound, while Jumping Beaver strapped it in place with a belt. Then Marshall ordered a Picaro to summon Dr. Blanchard. Noble demurred.

"I'll go myself," he explained, "ef'n you'll gimme the key to the powder house."

He was back in record time with a dozen sticks of sixty percent dynamite, a few lengths of short rope and his squirrel rifle. Ignoring Marshall's look of inquiry, Mart held whispered converse with Jumping Beaver. When the Picaro nodded emphatic agreement, they moved carefully forward, taking advantage of all cover, while the miners' continuous fire kept the gang's heads down. When they had settled behind twin pines standing at the landward end of the peninsula, Marshall painfully shifted his place to keep them in view.

Jumping Beaver knelt, wrapping the end of a rope about a bundle of six sticks of explosive, while Noble tried a snap shot at Tork's hiding place. The Indian arose, "hefting" his burden, and nodded to Mart. While the latter crouched with his rifle ready, the Picaro stepped into full view, whirling his missile to gain momentum, and threw it directly at the peninsula. Marshall frowned, puzzled, for the amateur grenade bore no fuse.

Freed of his grasp and with the rope trailing, the bundle of dynamite rose in a lazy parabola, then as its speed failed, dove toward the gang's refuge. Jumping Beaver had planned to toss his bomb directly amid the thicket. Blowing down, as dynamite does, it would clean out the cave. But the throw was short, and Noble, leading it care-

fully with his rifle, waited an instant too long.

Jumping Beaver's bomb struck the inner edge of the peninsula where the wall and surface joined, just as Mart's tardy slug churned into the lethal sticks. The hot lead set the dynamite off in a thunderous roar thrusting against the rock obstacle with demoniac fury. Through the smoke and dust Marshall's incredulous eyes saw a crack widen in the limestone, running steeply down and outward toward the void. The top of the pillar trembled, moved tentatively, then slid with ever increasing speed, riding rock fragments in the fissure as if they were rollers. With its thicket waving wildly, the great block of stone launched itself into space, turning lazy somersaults as it fell. The West Fork received it with a monstrous splash that echoed and reechoed

from the canyon walls like distant thunder.

On a litter of saplings and Picaros' shirts, Marshall was borne up the slope to the infirmary, where Dr. Blanchard waited to mine for lead in his shoulder. The throbbing was building up to a maximum and fever burned his forehead. But the engineer lay supine, content. The slate was wiped clean, the mine would work in peace. The world loves a winner and the Valley would side with the man who had done it, Mart Noble, one of their own boys and no tenderfoot.

Marshall mumbled. Jumping Beaver bent over him but made nothing of the white man's words. The engineer was planning a letter to his wife.

"Dear Betty," he whispered. "Hurry out here! The trails are free again and our home is nearly ready—"

## *The Story Tellers' Circle*

(Continued from page 1)

lation increasing, we'll have a housing shortage for some time to come. Besides, new uses for wood products are coming along. Milk cartons, which you throw away, for example. This is tough on newspapers and magazines, but if farmers can be sold on raising trees for market, and the vast forests in Alaska opened to pulp mills, the situation will ease up.

"And incidentally in the story, when a bulldozing job developed, there was but one guy qualified to go all out. Yes, of course, Bulldozer Craig."

Frank Richardson Pierce

### *Here You Are, Mr. Marquis*

GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS wrote us a note about his story in this issue of *SHORT STORIES* and in the course of it mentioned that he was left-handed. Now we have been struggling to decipher his letters for years, and we are glad to have that explanation of his—well, individual handwriting. However, he ventures to suppose that one of our staff is also left-handed—judging from his handwriting. Well, we dunno what *that* infers. However, Mr.

Marquis has this to say about "Four Apprenticing Lemons":

"The story, 'Four Apprenticing Lemons,' is fanciful as to plot, but the setting and characters are not fanciful. In name, yes; in substance, no. Mrs. Parmenter never existed, so far as I know, but her type was a reality. Women of easy virtue, as they would seem to the prudish present, were very much a part of the social maze in those harsh pioneering days. Generous, kindly, full of unselfish deeds, they did much to blunt the hard austerities of those camps where they and their burdy-gurdy girls constituted often the total female population. In times of sickness as in disaster, they were nurses. To stake a homesick, penniless miners seemed to them the perfectly natural and just thing to do. So I lay a modest wreath of tribute on the tomb of Mrs. Parmenter, true type of women who flaunted the so-called moral codes, yet were very often angels of mercy. Bet you won't publish a word of this, and I'll not blame you. Maybe you'd better not."

George Bruce Marquis


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## THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

### Conducted by PETE KUHLHOFF

#### *Obsolete One-Shooters*

FOR quite a number of years certain shooters, scattered throughout the United States have collected single-shot rifles.

Generally speaking, these guns are not particularly valuable nor are they extremely rare. Yet, to the single-shot rifle fan there is no thrill like that of finding one of these old guns in good shooting condition, especially if it is a finely engraved specimen or one chambered for a rare, obsolete cartridge.

This may seem strange to the run of the mill collector or shooter, but half of the fun is in the search for proper ammunition and discovering what the gun will do by actual shooting on the target.

Single-shot rifles were manufactured by many concerns, the better known ones being Winchester, Remington, Stevens, Ballard and Sharps. Others are Peabody and Peabody Martini, Maynard, Bullard, Wesson, Whitney, Farrow, Wurfflein, etc.

Regardless of the fact that these firearms were made in higher and finer grades than any others offered by American factories, the hobby of collecting them was for years an inexpensive one. By this I mean that good specimens in shooting condition would be picked up for a few dollars. I have a fine little Ballard that I bought for \$1.75 not so many years ago. And for one of the finest side hammer Sharps rifles that I have ever seen I paid only five dollars. And I have picked up beautifully engraved Stevens rifles with Number 44 and 44½ action for under twenty dollars.

But now it's a different story. At least I can't find 'em for anything like the bargain

counter price of the good old days not too long before World War Two.

The reasons for the higher prices these old guns bring are fairly obvious. First of all, everything is higher today and as there are more gun collectors than ever before there are fewer old guns in circulation. Also a large number of these guns of suitable design have been converted to take modern cartridges developed for varmint shooting. And of course neglect takes its annual toll.

Recently a dealer offered a .25-21 caliber Stevens No. 44 in just fair condition for \$18. Production of this model Stevens was discontinued shortly after the turn of the century, and at that time sold over the counter for \$12. The basic No. 44 Stevens sold for \$10. But the rifle chambered for the .25-21-87 cartridge cost a couple bucks more. Why, I don't know. Anyway, in the past, I have picked up such rifles for as little as two dollars.

This seems like quite a big increase in selling price, especially when we consider the fact that this particular action is not suitable for conversion to even the lower pressure modern varmint cartridges such as the .22 Hornet, 218 Bee and 2R Lovel.

**S**PEAKING of rebuilding these old guns for modern cartridges brings up a pet peeve of most single-shot enthusiasts. The thought of butchering a finely factory-engraved single-shot rifle such as the Winchester, or one chambered for an unusual cartridge brings cold chills to the devotee of the one-shooter. There are plenty of these rifles in plain form of common calibers or with ruined barrels that may be used for conversion, and I'm glad to say that I have never had a hand in the nefarious business of altering a fine single-shot rifle.

The rifles of this type that have actions that are suitable and desirable for use in building a fine varmint rifle are the Winchester with high side walls, the Stevens with the 44½ type action, the Remington Hepburn, the Sharps Borchardt and the English Fraser as well as the Farquharson.

The Ballard is at its best as a .22 rim-fire match rifle as the action is not strong enough for the high-pressure cartridges.

Besides installing a new barrel or relining the old one, the work necessary to con-

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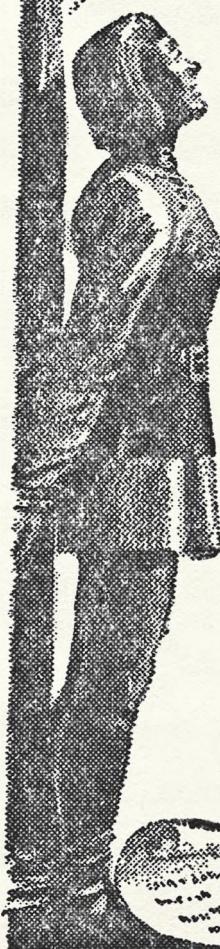
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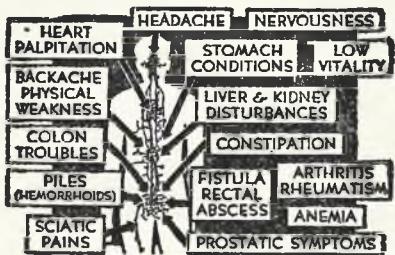
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vert one of these rifles generally consists of bushing the breech block for a small firing pin, shortening the hammer throw and boring a gas escape vent (in case of a pierced primer or burst cartridge case) lengthening the lip of the extractor and restocking.

The Winchester single-shot is perhaps the easiest to work on, and as this action is one of the strongest it is in great demand among varmint shooters.

I prefer the Winchester or the Sharps Borchardt for conversion but many shooters swear by the Stevens—and a real Stevens fan will insist, until he is blue in the face that the Stevens 44½ is the finest single-shot rifle ever produced.

Although I have several rebuilt single-shot rifles and use them quite a bit, I get a bigger kick out of shooting them in the original calibers as they came from the factories.

For instance, a couple of years ago I bought a very good Remington Hepburn in original condition, for \$10. It is chambered for the obsolete .38-50-265, and as I was lucky enough to have several boxes of this old ammunition with paper-patched bullets, I headed for the range. I was having a wonderful time burning these black-powder loads when a stranger who turned out to be a cartridge collector asked if he might examine one of my cartridges. He almost had a fit. "Don't you know that these cartridges are worth seventy-five cents apiece?" he gasped. "And you're shooting them up like .22 shots?"

"Yes," I replied, "but I gotta have some hulls for reloading."

"It's a dirty shame," he growled and stalked away, forgetting to return my cartridge. Mebby I'm crazy, I don't know, but I'd rather shoot 'em than have 'em in a display case!

I especially enjoy shooting the big charcoal burners and have several of these single-shot rifles in the heavy .44 and .45 calibers. I have a very good Remington Rolling Block rifle chambered for the .43 Spanish caliber. This rifle set me back only \$5, and I have had as much fun shooting it as with my most expensive rifle.

Many of the younger shooters are unfamiliar with the old one-shooters and they don't know what they are missing!

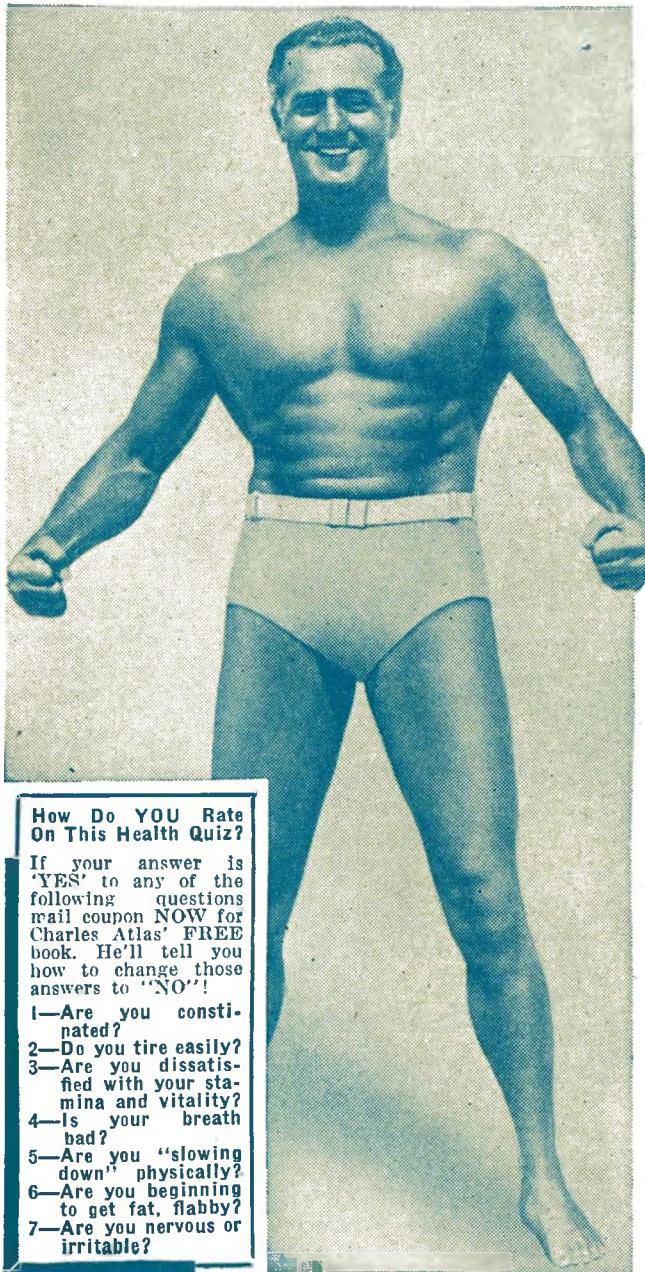
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Enjoy the tingling delight of really robust health; the grand refreshment of restful sleep; welcome relief from constipation, "nerves," indigestion. Gain new self-confidence, a genuine feeling of joy-in-living.

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"Dynamic Tension" is the amazing system used by Charles Atlas to change himself from a flat-chested 97-lb. weakling into the "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man." Although he is now past 50, Atlas himself displays each day the kind of vigor and vitality that most men of twenty can't even approach!

"Dynamic Tension" is actually FUN! Using it for just 15 minutes a day—in the privacy of your home—you wake up the hidden power in your own God-given body. No tiring apparatus; no muscle-training gadgets of *any kind*! Soon you begin to bristle with new stamina. You feel a rough-and-ready ambition surging out of you that the whole world can't lick. You know, once again, how it really feels to *live*!

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I want the proof that your system of "Dynamic Tension" will help make a New Man of Me—give me a healthy, husky body and increased vigor, vitality, and physical stamina. Mail to me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

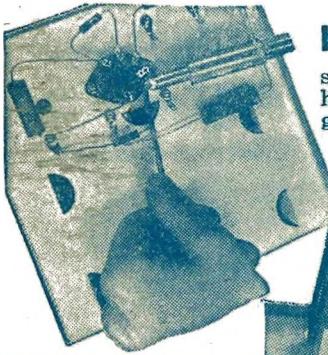
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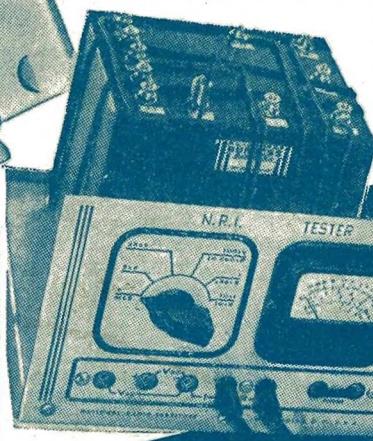
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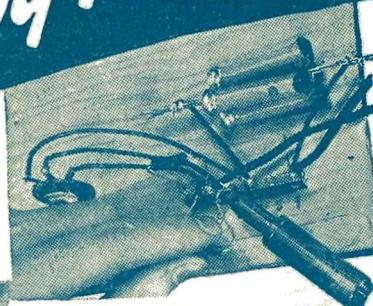
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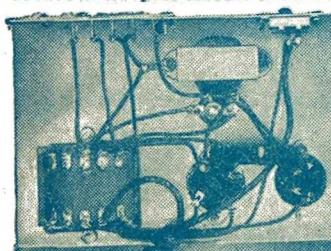
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### KIT 3

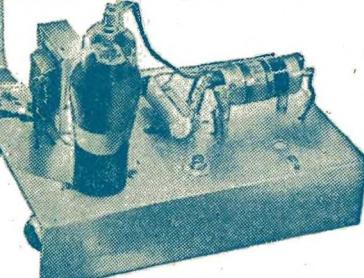
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



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**KIT 5** Building this A. M. Signal Generator gives you more valuable experience. It provides amplitude-modulated signals for many tests and experiments.



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