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Short Stories

Twice A Month

May 10th

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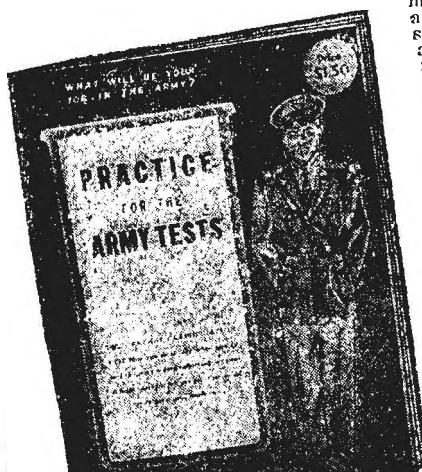
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How the Army Decides Upon
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Cube Counting. (Very Im-
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Short

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LAMONT BUCHANAN, *Associate Editor.*

BIGGEST AND BEST—TWICE A MONTH

Stories

latest stories—no reprints



May 10th, 1943 —

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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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The Story Tellers' Circle

High Speed Mystery

WHEN James Norman wrote (in collaboration with Richard Worthington) his new mystery novel which starts as a serial in this issue, he may or may not have had in mind certain corrupt and dictatorial city governments of the East Coast and the Middle West—anyway, it's a whale of a story. The motto for the town of Preston struck us as especially neat—Here anything is possible—do it—or words to that effect. Sounds a bit like what one says to the newest editorial recruit—and sometimes you get results. Frequently queer.

Norman himself belongs now to the California writers brigade—a sizeable one—but was born in Chicago as recently as 1912. Quite a few things have happened to him since then, what with one thing and another. In 1932 he went abroad—Spain, France, Central Europe and North Africa—and studied sculpture, besides working at odd times for the Chicago *Tribune* and *Pari-Trib* (a weekly review) in Paris. In 1935 he returned to the U. S. for a year and put his studies to classical use, by supporting himself from the proceeds of ice sculptoring for any sort of festive occasion. Then he returned to Europe to report the Spanish war for a Chicago paper. While there he joined a French anti-aircraft group attached to the Spanish Republican Army. He spent nine months at the front, then was hospitalized. Discharged from the army, he took a job with the government press bureau and broadcast from Madrid (Station EAQ) until the Casado coup. He left Valencia two days before Franco walked in.

Back in Chicago in 1939, Norman be-

came military editor of Compton's Picture Encyclopedia, then drifted into fiction writing. He now lives in the Sierra Madre Mountains with his wife and dog. Principal relaxation, he says, is mountain climbing and hunting, or trying to collect bounties on puma or mountain lion. Sort of a reward complex there, whether incorporated or not.

Another slant on this guy is that during 1933, he was trainer for Zimmy (the legless swimmer) and they made three unsuccessful attempts to do the English Channel. The last try swept them into the North Sea via a storm. And during the winter of 1934 he was a side-show barker in Luna Parc, Paris. Squeezed also into these years were short period jobs as bartender, running a gambling concession and leg man for U. P.

Quite a background these fiction writers have!

Letter from Alaska

THIS one came through quite untouched by military censor:

Me and Bulldozer are going out for about three fingers of whiskey, but chances are it won't end there. The chances are I'll get stiff before the night's over, and it's all on account of your putting me on the cover of your book. Every time I meet an old sourdough friend they say, "Well, I see you're on the cover of *SHORT STORIES*. Kinda gettin' up in the world ain't you?" Then they show me a parched throat and I have to buy. S'long and good luck,

Yours truly,

No-Shirt McGee.

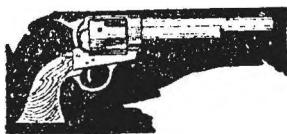
It was the cover of our February 25th issue *No-Shirt* is talking about. He is coming back in another story in the next number.

Short Stories' Gun-Man

PETE KUHLHOFF was in the other day, bringing as we remember, his latest *Shooter's Corner* column.

We jokingly asked Pete if he had been raised with a gun in his crib . . . as one reader suggested not so long ago in a letter to us.

Pete said not quite. But as a very "young squirt" he had hunted rabbits in the woods of Oklahoma with his grandfather's Civil War cap and ball pistol.



From what we could gather, his early shooting record was not spectacular. Pete told us that one time in native Oklahoma he got his hands (probably for the first time) on a ten-gauge shotgun. Conveniently, there happened to be a dove sitting out back in a small tree. Pete says he crept up somehow on the bird, finally getting the barrel of his gun within a couple of feet of the dove . . . and then blasted away magnificently with both barrels. When the smoke of battle cleared and Pete opened his eyes, there was no dove to be seen anywhere . . . and there wasn't much left of the tree.

But Pete went on to become an expert rifle and pistol shot, perhaps proving that crack shots are made, and not born.

Pete Kuhlhoff, who is as popular here at our editorial offices as he is with you readers, has been around *SHORT STORIES* for some time. His first illustrations for the magazine showed up in 1932. His first cover for us decorated the September 10, 1934, issue.

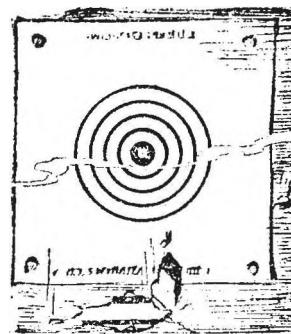
The *Shooter's Corner* appeared first in November 10, 1940. Interest in rifle shooting was growing all the time and it was believed that an authoritative department conducted by an expert would be in-

teresting to a majority of *SHORT STORIES* readers.

In the first "Corner" Pete listed certain fundamentals of safety in the handling of firearms and also gave instructions in proper shooting technique. That the department caught on with the "gun-bugs" among our readers was not surprising. But we hear that many others who originally had no particular interest in guns have become regular followers of the *Shooter's Corner*.

Incidentally, Pete Kuhlhoff, who spends his time equally between Connecticut and New York City, is a deputy sector air-raid warden and also instructs young chaps about to go into the army in shooting technique at a rifle club here in the city.

For sometime now, Pete, with a wicked gleam in his eye, has been inviting one of your *SHORT STORIES* editors to come down



to the shooting club and try some target shooting. Not wanting to put our questionable marksmanship to the test without a bit of secret practice we've kept putting off the day. However, .22 long rifle cartridges are mighty hard to get in these times, and there are no rifle ranges in Radio City, so we think we'll have to accept Pete Kuhlhoff's challenge without any warm-ups. If we acquit ourselves with credit we'll let you know. If not . . . well, one of these days Pete may come out in the *Shooter's Corner* with a little note about "an editor who missed the target completely."

REWARDS INCORPORATED

Tuesday: Preston, Pop. 300,714

I

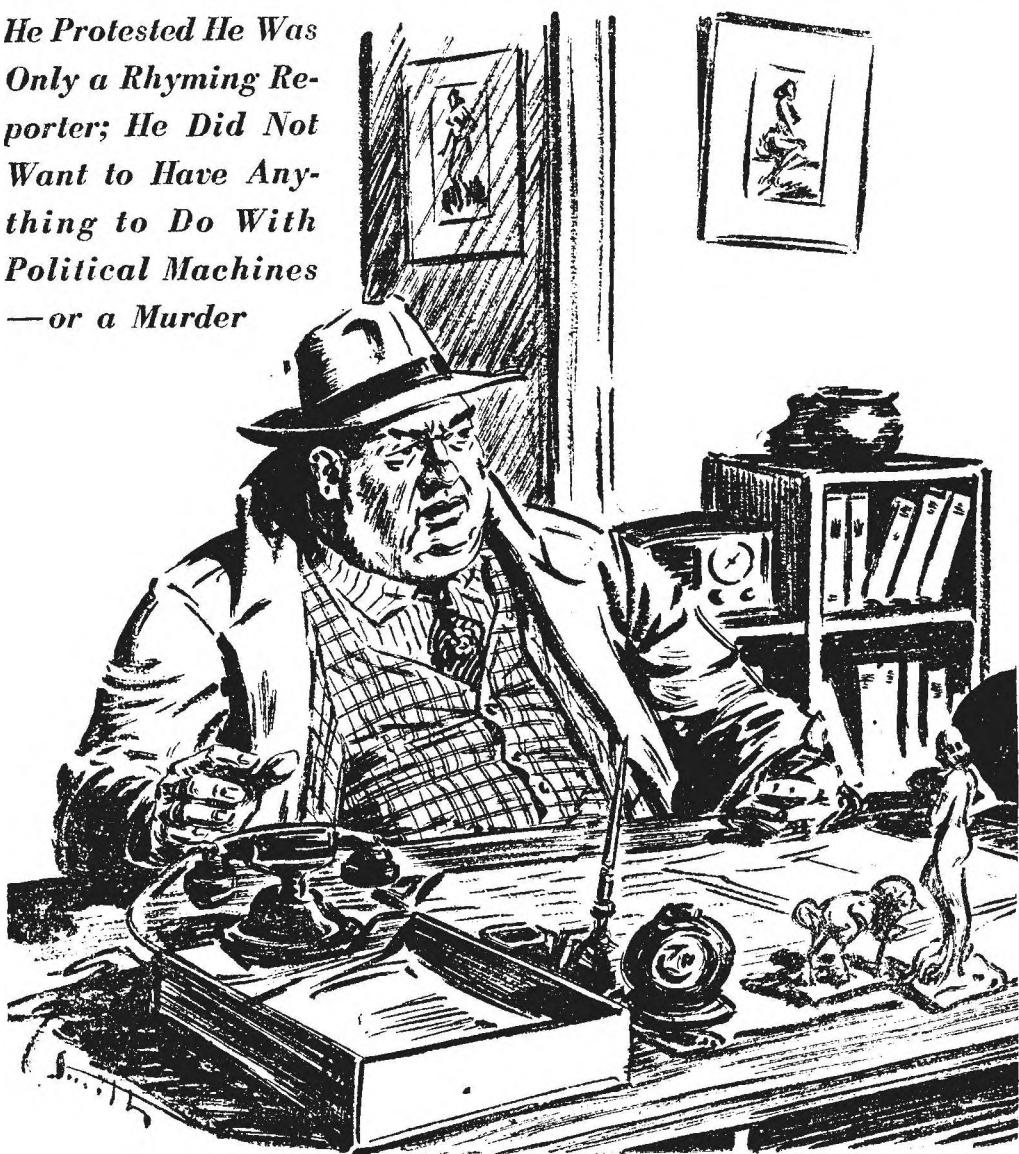
9 A.M.

NOT so long ago, when most everyone in the world was a little bit younger and only half so wise, U. S. Highway Number Twelve slashed its way out of Chicago and roared southward past

brooding, square-shouldered steel mills. Gaining momentum, it jumped a state line, then in an almost shy bulging curve headed seventy miles to Preston.

Preston was a brawling young city which sometimes wore short pants and sometimes long. In its suburbs, Highway Twelve came to an abrupt halt, faced by a sixty-foot statue of Mayor Timothy Bent. The

*He Protested He Was
Only a Rhyming Re-
porter; He Did Not
Want to Have Any-
thing to Do With
Political Machines
—or a Murder*



By JAMES NORMAN & RICHARD WORTHINGTON

monument was imposingly crowned by a quarter ton concrete derby, symbol of the mayor's hard-hat politics. At its base was riveted a bronze plaque engraved with the following words from Boss Bent's own lips:

IN PRESTON EVERYTHING IS
POSSIBLE . . . DO IT.

Strange things did happen in Preston. For twenty years its people had dazedly watched the incredible spectacle of their single-track, narrow-gauge town hitched to a high-speed political machine the size of a Baldwin locomotive, and with similar inclinations. Governed by a mayor whose psychic feeling for political situations was colored with a vigilante's imagination, liv-

Part I



ing in a city that was the nation's liveliest sideshow, it was no wonder some of Preston's most practical citizens occasionally forgot to keep their feet on the ground.

On this morning, four days before local elections which came regularly on the first Friday of the first week in May each second year, the city was outdoing itself according to legend.

Shortly before dawn three citizens, described as hooded men, robbed a currency exchange and made their getaway on a steam-roller. An hour later two children from the swanky Pizarro Drive district started for California on tricycles. All this was merely a beginning, for at breakfast time an armored truck scattered nickels along one street.

By nine o'clock Preston was well awake. Tentatively feeling out its new spring brightness, the morning sun crept across the city and curled pleasantly in the broad plaza before the City Hall. Here a city white-wing busily freshened up another, smaller statue of Boss Bent with a feather-duster. At the same time, countless other white-wings throughout the city were dusting other statues which might have all been taken from the same mold.

In his office overlooking the plaza, Boss Bent stared down at the city with ferocious satisfaction. *His city!* A thick-jawed bull of a man, with a big belly and bright eyes that looked like agate chips, his movements could be grotesquely swift and darting for all his vast and fatty bulk. Now, as if he were equipped with a built-in hurricane, he turned from the window and plunged knee deep into the matters before him concerned with the approaching election.

But if Boss Bent had known at this hour about the activities of another fat man on the fourth floor of the Lakeside Building, two blocks away, perhaps he wouldn't have looked so smug and satisfied with the way things were going.

This other fat man wore a derby too. He was huge and he didn't look very important. His body had the appearance of hav-

ing been carelessly slapped together from stray chunks of plasticine, except for the nose which was bright and bulbous and looked like Diogenes' lantern stuck out in front of his face.

He had cautiously and laboriously climbed the service stairway, avoiding the elevator. Wheezing tremulously, he waddled down the fourth floor corridor, around an L-shaped bend, and came to a puffing stop before a door labeled: *William Stevens, Attorney at Law*. You could see how tall he really was as he balked up there against the door frame, wiping his moist forehead and glancing nervously toward both ends of the hall. He was huge.

HE HAD hardly touched the door-knob when the sharp click of high heels came from beyond the turn in the corridor. With a quick, sucking intake of breath he looked quickly around. He spied the service closet across the hall and with elaborate frenzy, he squeezed into the narrow cubicle, burrowing his way into the mountain of pails and mops that were stored there.

The fat man fixed his eye to the door crack and watched the girl's brisk approach. She was pert and smaller than half a minute. She had on a cardinal-red polo coat that flared out vividly around her trim calves, and wasn't exactly an invitation not to look at them.

The fat man had a brief moment of connoisseur's appreciation. Then he gradually realized that his right foot was soaking in a pail of soapy water. By the time he'd pulled it out, the girl had disappeared.

Rhea Vern didn't see the fat man. She was too busy with her own thoughts, which were chiefly concerned with her boss. She was, she imagined, the sort of girl who is born to marry her boss and sit in his expensive house all day and worry about her successors. She could get Stevens to marry her all right. She knew that. She just wasn't sure that she wanted to.

Stevens was a fine man and she was fond

of him—more than fond, but in a worshipful, almost daughterly sort of way. That was the trouble. That *daughterly* business. She fitted her key into the lock of the office door, and knew that she was going to have to make her mind up pretty soon.

She stooped to pick up the morning mail from where it had fallen through the door slot. Flipping through it rapidly, she slipped one letter into the bottom drawer of her own desk. The rest of it she stacked on the desk-corner.

The reception room and Rhea's railed-off cubbyhole guarded the approach to Stevens' office. There were heavy carpets on the floor, a filing cabinet, three big chairs, a closet. A second door led into Stevens' slightly larger private office. The floor here was carpeted in rust color, the single desk and bookcase containing legal volumes were made of Bengal mahogany. It was the office of a man of careful taste who spent more money on his place of business than on his home.

Without taking her coat off, Rhea went into the private office. It struck her as odd that the shade was drawn and she crossed to the window, raising it. A square of sharp yellow light toppled into the office and spread its rectangle upon the floor and desk. She stared preoccupiedly at the Municipal Auditorium across the way and the edge of vivid blue lake beyond it.

Just then the phone on Stevens' desk buzzed. Rhea answered it. "Monroe 1775," she said briskly.

"Stevens there?" The hearty voice boomed over the wires and Rhea winced and held the receiver away from her ear.

"Mr. Stevens isn't in yet."

"Is that you, Miss Vern?"

Rhea tilted her sleek, dark head. "Yes."

"This is Colonel Abbott. I'm sending a man over to interview William."

"Now?" Rhea sounded disturbed. "But, Colonel, he has an appointment until after ten."

"My man's on his way already. Sorry."

"He can't." Rhea's glance rested on the

upturned derby lying in the desk. There was a "S" initialed in gold on the band. She frowned at it blankly, as if its presence offended her.

"All right," Colonel Abbott's voice shook the phone. "Stall him."

"I haven't had breakfast yet, I'll have to catch him downstairs. Who is he?"

"Hamlin. He'll be carrying a camera."

"Tall or small?"

Abbott chuckled. "Hamlin? He's neither tall nor small. He's around thirty I'd say—but he looks like a fugitive from a preparatory school football team.

9:10 A.M.

ON East Broadway, a few blocks from the Lakeside Building a lively little man with eyes that rolled and shone like a kid's marbles curbed his rattletrap car. Gurgling with relief, the car boiled over and wet the pavement.

Mr. Sienciewicz shrugged. He looked down-at-heel in a glossy way. His head was entirely bald and his threadbare serge suit glared, not in patches, but every place it showed beneath a nondescript fur-collared overcoat. He looked like an unemployed musician. The little Pole was a very familiar, highly mobile landmark around Preston. He was always in evidence but he never seemed to have any place to light. The few people who had ever heard his name forgot it right away and no one knew if he was rich or poor.

Leaving his car, he entered a drugstore to purchase one telephone slug and a fifty-cent cigar with a twenty-dollar bill. Tipping the clerk a quarter, he edged into a phone booth. He dialed a number—Monroe 1775—waited, fumed and finally retrieved his slug. Then he dialed the number again. He waited and fumed some more.

Presently the little Pole came out of the booth and returned his slug, unused. "Such a laziness," he muttered darkly.

Next, Mr. Sienciewicz visited the hat shop next door where he purchased a derby.

It was when he came out that he encountered the young man with the camera. The young man had an alert, worried face with a tilted nose and a small, mobile mouth. His eyes were bright blue, friendly, and reassuringly lazy. They seemed to look at Mr. Sienciewicz and accept him without really seeing him. Maybe it was the swatch of yellow hair that jagged down over his forehead or the way his features were all sort of crowded together in the center of his face—or both—that gave it its elfin, even babyish look. Anyhow it was a look that didn't exactly gibe with the things you noticed at second glance—the slight pouches under the eyes, the fine lines around the mouth, the patina of past dissipation that passed for a complexion. The total impression was that of a boy scout with a terrific hangover.

Piper Hamlin's camera clicked before Mr. Sienciewicz could do anything about it. And before Mr. Sienciewicz could say anything at all, Piper had gone into his spel.

"I'm the Rhyming Reporter, *Preston News*, Mister. Each day I snap five people and ask each one of them a question on various topics. Your answer is put into rhyme and printed, with your picture, in the next day's *News*. For instance—here are Colonel Abbott's views on the coming election:

"'The time has come,' the colonel says,
'To talk of many things:
'Of honesty in politics
'And mayors who'd be kings.'"

He recited it off with the illusive enthusiasm that came from long practice. Nobody hearing him would ever have guessed at the self-scorn that buzzed in his brain, the writhings of inner shame that went through him every time he heard his own voice making that pat little speech.

"You and your cute little camera," he told himself in the darker moments when he let himself have a good look at what he'd become. "You ought to be ashamed

of yourself. Hiding behind a cockeyed little chunk of ground glass so you won't get into a spot where you'll have to find out how rotten with fear you really are. The Rhyming Reporter—hell!"

But that didn't show on his face when he confronted Mr. Sienciewicz. In fact there was nothing about him to account for Mr. Sienciewicz's recoil of horror. Unless, Piper thought, his nose wrinkling a little, distastefully, it was the mention of that word politics.

"I don't want no question," Mr. Sienciewicz shrieked. "I don't want no politics!"

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said Piper soothingly. *Let him go, you fool*, a cautious voice shouted inside of him. *Whatever he knows is scaring the daylights out of him. You don't want any part of it. Steer clear.* But Piper could feel the reassuring smile take hold of the corners of his mouth. Dismayed, he heard the smooth tones of his voice as it betrayed him. "Surely you've heard of William Stevens, the independent candidate for city treasurer? Perhaps a word on his campaign—"

M R. SIENCIEWICZ eyed him with sudden guile. "Stevens?" he purred. "I should know a Stevens?"

"Sure," Piper said, getting a grip on the little Pole's shiny lapels. "Now if Stevens gets in, do you want him to clean out graft as he promises and risk a federal investigation of our town? Or would you rather see things ride along the way they are?"

Mr. Sienciewicz turned green. Then he got a grip on himself once more. "English I should talk?" he demanded. "Tak Ja rozumiam, musze ics."

With that, he broke from Piper's grip and scurried across the pavement to his car. He looked like a little bug scurrying for cover. Piper watched him speculatively.

He was—or had been—a good enough newspaperman to know without being told that his innocent question had stirred up something, something that might contain a

germ of a story for a crusading paper like the *News*. A good reporter would have hung on to the frightened little man or followed him and tried to find out what that something was. But he wasn't a good newsman, he reminded himself. He was the Rhyming Reporter. And all he had to worry about were his candid snapshots and his dear little jingles.

Piper pawed absently at his nose to stop the itch that plagued it. He knew that itch of old. It was no good. It had never led him into anything but trouble. From now on that itch was going to be ignored, in spades.

Preston's Broadway was warm and cheerful in the morning sunlight. The after-effects of that unseasonable blizzard that had swept the Midwest a week ago had disappeared. The streets were dry and clean. Spring clothes were everywhere. A rush of traffic hummed across town, trucks and buses spinning eastward into the driving factory area.

As Hamlin walked west toward the stretch of buildings known as Lawyer's Row, a budding breeze from the lake fluttered the brim of his shapeless brown felt hat. Automatically, his fingers reversed the plate in his camera. His undisciplined thoughts were still working on the frightened little Pole.

Preston was like that. It made people jittery. Especially around election time when the whole town was on its ear, ready to scream at the drop of a hint.

At first, Preston had seemed a possible refuge—a bright, thriving little city, prospering on a dozen metal-stamping industries, its auto-part plant and the shipbuilding yards that served the Great Lakes trade.

But it hadn't taken Piper three months to find out that disquieting, dangerous, threatening things lurked beneath its surface industrious bustle. It was remarkable how much you could pick up about a place in a short time—half without knowing you were doing it. It was like an atmosphere, an exhalation that you absorbed through

your pores. And you knew from it that this was a bad place you were in, so you kept your eyes and ears open, defensively, because it might turn into a trap and you had to discover everything you could about it, all the escapes, all the exits.

No, Preston wasn't going to be a refuge. Pretty soon, he'd have to get out of here. Find another place.

He entered the lobby of the Lakeside Building. A big clock, suspended over the sidewalk like a mechanical moon, said nine twenty-five. At the left of the lobby was a combination eat shop and bar. Piper looked through the big glass doors and his eye was caught and held by the flash of a cardinal-red sports coat.

THE girl who wore it was sitting with both elbows on the counter, looking out through the double doors. She had a coffee cup lifted halfway to her mouth. Her little finger wasn't stuck out. Piper nodded approvingly just as their eyes met.

The girl stared at him speculatively for a minute, then she made a swift gesture with her free hand and jumped off the stool.

It was pretty crude, Piper thought. He didn't know her. He didn't know any girls in this town.

Those were the things he had to stay away from—two of them. Politics and girls. Maybe other guys could take them, but for Piper they spelled trouble in large glowing letters. They always had.

He ducked for the elevator.

"William Stevens' office," he said to the elevator boy.

"Four twenty-one," the boy said. The boy was a courtesy title. All elevator attendants are called boys. This one was a sallow-faced man well over forty. His shoulders sagged, his mouth was thin, and there wasn't a trace of moisture in his eyes.

"You from the *News*?" he asked without curiosity.

Hamlin nodded.

"Stevens' secretary's waiting in the grill.

Girl in a red coat. She wants to see you before you go up."

So that was why the girl had waved to him. Probably she wanted to give him some kind of a stalleroo. "I'll see her later," Hamlin said.

"She said before you went up," the elevator attendant said patiently.

"Let it go. I'm in a hurry."

The starter's noisemaker crackled. With a shrug of his shoulders, the attendant set the car climbing. Piper got off at the fourth and went down the corridor. Nobody answered his knock on Stevens' door, but the door itself was partly open. Anxious to be done with this assignment that he hadn't liked in the first place, Hamlin elbowed the door open. The reception room was empty.

THE inner-office door was ajar, too; he knocked on it and gave the panel a gentle push.

The man at the mahogany desk wasn't just fat. He was the fat man to end all fat men. Rolls of loose flesh cascaded down inside his clothes and ended up in a sagging lump in his lap. His out-size suit was stretched to its limits to encase his plumpness. Pink flesh bulged out over his collar and the whole vast bulk of him seemed to be on the point of bursting out of the seams that sought to contain it. The man's eyes were flat discs; there were spots on his wrinkled vest.

He didn't look much like a reform-candidate, Piper thought. More like a Buddha. Or, with that bulbous nose sticking out of his face, like Diogenes with his lantern eternally in quest of an honest man. Preston wasn't much of a place to find one in, Piper reflected, amused with the Diogenes conceit.

The fat man looked startled, but he calmed down a little when Piper explained who he was. But he still didn't act as if he was expecting Piper. Piper didn't like the setup. That girl in the red coat, trying to head him off in the lobby; and now this.

Something was screwy. Piper's nose began to itch and he wanted, suddenly, to finish up his assignment and go some place else.

Fatso still had his hat and coat on. And that was funny too, because there was a derby on the desk by his elbow.

Piper patiently re-stated his errand.

"I can't see you now," the fat man said.

"I've got an edition to make," Piper insisted. "The colonel said you had something about Mayor Bent?"

The fat cheeks got as red as the bulbous nose. "I can't say anything at this time," he said thickly.

Piper methodically put his satchel on the desk, twisted a bulb into the flash-gun and walked around the fat man. "Okay," he said. "Just that way, thanks." The flash-gun flared brightly.

The fat man said, "Hey! You can't—"

Just then the phone rang and the fat man began fumbling in one of the desk drawers. "You answer it," he said.

Piper's blue eyes narrowed just a little. He picked up the phone. "Stevens office."

"This is Rhea, Mr. Stevens," said a pleasant, female voice.

"I'm not Stevens." Piper frowned. "He's here. Want to talk to him?" He glanced over at the fat man and saw him shake his head and dig into the drawer again, looking for something. "He's busy," Piper said.

"Ask him when I can come back, please."

"When can she come back?" Piper asked the fat man.

"Tell her, not yet."

"Not yet," Piper repeated into the phone. He hung up and stared at the fat man. "What goes on?" he asked.

The other shrugged irritably and kept darting glances at the door as though he were pressed for time or expected someone.

"Please," he said, "come back in an hour or so. I'll have something for you then. Something important."

Piper nodded. "How important?" He walked around the desk to the window, glanced across toward the lake, then turned expectantly.

The fat man eyed him cagily. "Very important."

"Enough to force a state investigation?" Piper asked. He took out a cigarette, lit it with a lighter from the desk and put both the package and lighter back in his pocket. "Is it?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Okay, I'll be back in an hour. I'd like it exclusive." There wouldn't be any trouble about that. Stevens and Colonel Abbott were close friends. They'd fought together in France in '17.

"You can leave your things. They'll be safe here." The fat man looked toward the camera and satchel.

"Thanks, but I've got work to do."

He gathered his things while the fat man stood up and went to the outer door with him. Standing side by side, they looked like Jack and the Giant.

The man's meaty hand fumbled along Piper's spine, and ended up with a luke-warm pat between his shoulder-blades. The door closed.

PIPER stood outside the door for a minute, his instinctive feel for people and his sixth sense for a situation that wasn't strictly kosher both working overtime. There was something inside Piper that worked like a barometer in a purely automatic response to stimuli that his mind had not actively grasped at all.

And whatever it was it registered its sensitive findings in the famous Hamlin itch. He'd been a prey to it for so long that he couldn't remember when it had started. It was a real, physical itch. It started on the right side of his nose and, in the course of years had given him an absent-minded, characteristic pawing gesture, as if by putting his hand to the place he could drive it away.

If he didn't pay any attention to it, it

grew to a nagging buzz inside his skull that felt like a lot of question marks humming around in his brain; and it settled finally in the pit of his stomach in fierce and angry protest, attacking his vitals like a physical sickness, and driving him into the action it demanded.

Piper would have been annoyed if you called him a crusader; but just the same that's what that nagging little itch tried to make of him.

Only things that were fundamentally wrong and howled aloud to be righted brought it to life.

But if Piper wanted to live a peaceful life, he knew he'd have to learn somehow to ignore it, to teach it to leave him alone and quit shoving him into places he had no business to be in—places where there was lurking danger and fear and the whisper of sudden death.

That itch had been bothering him ever since he'd come out of that four-week binge and known he was in Preston. That was how he knew it was a bad town to be in.

It was worse than ever now. The bees of interrogation were making a deafening hum in his head. Piper clamped his jaw. Let them buzz. He'd learned his lesson—the hard way; and until he could get out of this rotten town, he was going to walk the chalkline no matter how bad the itch got.

He walked briskly down the corridor, unable to shake off the feeling that the red-nosed man was watching him. When he reached the bend, he whirled suddenly. He couldn't see any one. But he heard the door of Stevens' office closing softly.

II

To 9:40 A.M.

PIPER HAMLIN glanced in at the eat-shop. The girl in the red coat was talking to the counter-man. He wondered if she was the one who'd made the telephone call just now. He fought down an impulse to stop in and ask her about that

and about the fat man, and went out the main doors.

He went south a block to Marquette, pausing long enough to snap a picture and ask a question for his column. He turned in at the door of the *Barber of Seville*, two numbers east of Preston's fine new marble post office.

He flipped his battered hat on a hook and plopped down in the chair nearest the window, shoving back the hank of yellow hair from his forehead. The skin felt moist. It wasn't a hot morning; he hadn't walked fast; but there were little beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Morning, Fio," he said to the florid, squint-eyed Italian who ran the place. "Haircut, shave—and no goo."

Fio Puccini beamed. There was more gold in his mouth than any place else in America, except maybe at Fort Knox. Fio thought Piper was wonderful. The compact, cherub-faced man brought a surge of paternal emotion to Fio's capacious chest. According to Fio, Piper was "fine guy, no trouble, always keep nose clean. Plenty smart."

Fio didn't like trouble-makers and reformers. Not only did Fio cut hair for all of City Hall on a patronage basis, but at every municipal election, he delivered twelve votes for Mayor Bent's machine. His own and Mama Puccini's made two; the other ten Fio cast for his children, who were of course too young to vote intelligently themselves.

"Next year I gonna have thirteen votes," he told Piper as he ran the clippers deftly over the back of Piper's neck. "If she's a boy, I call her Torino. Maybe Mayor Bent give her job right off."

In another minute, Fio would be telling him all about the Bent machine in which Fio, with his large bloc of votes, naturally took a proprietary and guileless interest. Piper didn't want to be told things. He didn't want Fio spilling a lot of inside stuff in his lap.

"Where's the manicurist?" Piper asked,

noticing the empty table. He didn't care where she was; he just wanted to turn the flow of Fio's talk into other directions. Usually the manicure table was held down by a red-headed, handsome woman with worried eyes. Today she was missing.

Fio shrugged. "Maybe drunk. Maybe dead. Is no good, that one," he said and went right back to Mayor Bent and the machine. "My brother gotta job with the city. Fine job. Street cleaner. Gotta charge of two blocks by Marquette and Sixth Street—get pay seventeen hundred dollar the year."

In spite of himself, Piper was interested. "I thought the city farmed out the work to a private company."

Fio sighed patiently. Piper was nice fellow but sometimes plenty stupid. "'at'sa tight," he said. "But my brother, she work for city. All he gotta do is keep eye on street. Box fall off truck, he call up street-cleaning company and get them to fix."

"But Torino, she be too young for job like that. Maybe we get better job. Maybe inspector of forty-five pistols. Nobody she gotta forty-five pistols in Preston."

Piper leaned back. He wished Fio would stop talking about Mayor Bent. And guns. He wished Fio would stop talking. Period.

Fio rubbed lavender shaving soap into Piper's checks and along his jaw. Fio's fingers noted with pleasure that Piper's skin was as soft and firm as a baby's.

Piper closed his eyes and thought about the book he was reading. "Sundown Jim." Piper had left off just as Sundown rode into the feuding town of Reservation. Sundown knew he couldn't go into the town without courting a showdown with a gambler named Maffitt. But Sundown rode in anyway. That was the kind of sucker Sundown was. All Sundown would get out of it would be shot. And serve him right. A guy his age should know better. Of course, Sundown wouldn't really get killed. He couldn't because he was the hero of the

book, and in books heroes don't get shot. Anyway, not fatally. That was what was so nice about books. In life it was different.

Sundown Jim's foolhardiness gave place in Piper's mind to speculation about the fat and frightened Mr. Stevens. A guy as soft and shaky as that had no business tangling with the machine.

Boss Bent had Preston tied up tighter than a fiddle. It had taken him a long time and a lot of trouble to do it, but that's the way he had it, signed, sealed, delivered, and payment on the dotted line.

Finding the old-fashioned city council too unwieldy to assure a fair margin of profit, Bent had thrown it out and installed a streamlined city commission. He'd muscled in on the county administration too and had placed a man of his own in the tax assessment office at the state capitol. He hadn't missed a trick. It was beautiful.

THERE wasn't any black magic about it, either; just years of party wheelhorsing, until the party had ended up in Boss Bent's pocket. Patronage and hard, grinding work. Good will to his friends, a grateful memory for past favors, and a cold, merciless vengeance for his enemies. Most American cities in this year of grace had worked themselves out from under the domination of machines like his; but in Preston Boss Bent held on tight and there wasn't the smallest sign of a break in his power.

"Suppose Stevens gets elected treasurer," Piper prodded. If he could cause the smallest tremor to the least important member of Bent's vast organization, it would give him a certain satisfaction. "What then?"

"Mayor Bent no let him. It is simple like that." And Fio drew a thick forefinger swiftly across Piper's throat. "Matti take care of him if he have to."

Piper thought of Kitten-face Matti, and his flesh crawled beneath the Italian's fingers. He was cold all over.

THE wail of a siren sliced across the grain of traffic in the street outside, the sound curving upward with bladelike sharpness. Piper straightened in his chair and looked out.

"Homicide squad," he said. A black sedan with official markings rocketed down the avenue, its tires clinging precariously to the asphalt. Behind it purred the mayor's sleek, black limousine.

Bent's habit of going out on homicide cases was well known in Preston. The town got a kick out of it. But it made Piper sick. Imagine living in a place where the mayor couldn't keep away from a corpse. There must be a ghoulish streak in the man some place.

"Somebody is dead all right," Fio said portentously. He whisked the cloth from Piper's slight shoulders.

Piper flipped him seventy-five cents and asked to use the phone. He dialed the paper's number and asked for Colonel Abbot. What he finally got was the icy, mocking voice of Arn Cleaver, who covered the city-hall beat.

"Hello, precious," he said in those sardonic tones that curled Piper's spine to shame and anger. Cleaver had sized Piper up the first minute he'd seen him, knowing by some probing instinct what Piper could be and despising what he'd become.

And he took sadistic pleasure in reminding Piper of this at every opportunity, taking the skin off the skeleton of Piper's pride with malicious, surgical skill. "Collected any pretty poems yet?"

Piper's face got red. Just the sound of Cleaver's voice made him wince—it affected him like sandpaper rubbed over his naked flesh. "Get me Abbott," he barked.

"Get a story first, Nellie Bly," Cleaver mocked.

Piper writhed. He cursed bitterly into the phone. Cleaver answered in a fading chuckle and then Abbott's gruff voice switched in on the wire. As Rhea Vern had done, Piper held the receiver away

from his car. He told Abbott about the interview and the photo.

"You're a fool," the colonel roared. "Can't even handle a simple little political interview."

The boss was sore all over. Piper wondered what he'd done wrong. "I told you I didn't want the assignment in the first place. You crammed it down my throat. Hell, I got the picture and I'll get whatever Stevens got—"

"Shut up," Abbott interrupted. "Have you ever seen Stevens—or even a picture of him?"

Piper admitted he hadn't. "But this was Stevens all right. Fat, forty, nose like Diogenes' lantern."

Abbott exploded with even greater violence. "That wasn't Stevens," he roared. "Stevens is thin. And what's more, he's dead!"

"Dead?" Piper felt numb. His itch hadn't been wrong.

"Bill Stevens was found, murdered, ten minutes ago by his secretary," Abbott said, spacing the words as if he'd been talking to a child. "Now you get over there and get a story. And remember, this is a political killing—even if he died of heart failure."

Piper's hands were slippery with sweat. "Listen, boss—I don't want any part of this. I'm not a crime reporter. I'm—"

"You're fired if you don't get over to Stevens' office in three minutes. You've started this—you finish it. And wait—Who did you say you took a picture of?"

"Fat guy," Piper mumbled. "I thought he was Stevens. He let me think it."

"When was this?"

Piper glanced at his watch. It was nine-forty now. "About fifteen—twenty minutes ago."

"Okay. We've got to find your fat man. Send your plate over right away. I want to see that picture."

Piper hung up the phone. Things were crowding in on him, pushing him around. He wasn't going to take it. He was going

to stay clear. Please, dear God, it wasn't going to start all over again. Not for the third time. But why not? Everything happens in threes.

He jammed on his hat, glared savagely at Fio as a representative, even though a very minor one, of the black forces that were crowding him into the wall. He'd go over to Stevens' office and get what he could. Then he'd bring it back and put it in Abbott's lap. After that, Abbott could hand it over to somebody else. That wise guy, Cleaver, for instance.

On the street, he stopped by the first cab in the rank in front of the post office. He thrust his satchel into the driver's hand. "Rush that to the *News*. The colonel will pay you." He didn't even wait to see the cab start off. The pressure was in his head now, pushing at the walls of his skull, making it throb.

10 A.M.

WILLIAM STEVENS had died very thoroughly. Rhea Vern had found him in the closet in the reception room, hanging by the neck from one of the hooks. A steel paper-knife was thrust hilt-deep into his chest. His fingers incongruously clutched a pink gardenia.

When Hamlin got there, they were cleaning up the routine. The mayor was in the inner office, barking at his subordinates. Piper showed his press card to Captain Kennedy of the Squad.

Kennedy grunted noncommittally. He glanced at Hamlin's camcra. "No pictures, poet," he rapped.

Piper's blue eyes widened innocently. He was going to behave himself. If he thought of any embarrassing questions he wasn't going to ask them.

He glanced at Stevens' body, which had been taken out of the closet and lay stretched out on the carpet. The knife had been removed and Piper's eyes lingered on the red-brown splotch that had stiffened over the shirt front.

Stevens had been lean and gray-haired.

His face was the sharp-prowed, gaunt-checked face of the crusader's breed. Sure. He'd tried to buck a crooked political set-up, and look what had caught up with him. Sundown Jim, walking into Reservation with his guns in their holsters. That wasn't for Mrs. Hamlin's blue-eyed boy. Not any more.

Somebody had weighted the dead man's lids with two red typewriter erasers. They made Piper's stomach twitch and he knelt to remove them. As if they'd been on springs, Stevens' cyclids snapped back. His eyes stared at Piper with baleful vacancy, like the windows in a gutted house.

He put the erasers back and stood up. Stevens had been dead a long time. His cheeks were cold as ice.

Boss Bent's bulky body filled the doorway. He recognized Hamlin as a newspaperman, and went into his act. "Reds, anarchists--that's what it was," he said bluntly. "They're a pack of lawless murderers, that's what they are." He glared at Piper as if he, too, might harbor subversive ideologies. Then he went on with his tirade.

NOBODY paid much attention. Everybody who didn't accept the law of Boss Bent became automatically a red or an anarchist. It was just a convenient lump-label for the opposition. Piper didn't think Boss Bent meant it himself, or that he was the clown he apparently wanted people to think him. Behind that moronic facade lurked a keen and ruthless brain. Even if Piper hadn't known that no mountebank could ever get to the places Boss Bent had, his itch would have warned him. There was something ugly and sinister in that masquerade.

It was like smearing a clown's white paint over the face of a hangman.

Piper glanced at the door behind the mayor. "Who else is in there?" he asked Kennedy.

"The D. A.--the Vern girl, Stevens' secretary--"

"Any theory about the killing?"

Kennedy's smile was sour. "You heard the mayor. Reds, anarchists. The lawless element."

At Rhea Vern's desk, a headquarters man was slipping the wilted gardenia into an envelope.

"What's that flower?" Piper asked.

"What flower?" Kennedy snapped.

Piper got it. He wanted to press the point--that is, his itch wanted him to. His sense told him to keep his mouth shut. He did.

The headquarters man was filing away a water-soaked snapshot. Piper could see it was a picture of a soldier in a 1917 uniform. The photo was old. Piper saw that by the grade of paper and the photo-grain.

"Was that on Stevens?"

Kennedy shook his head. "In a bucket of water in the janitor's closet across the hall. I don't think it means a thing." Piper accepted that.

A massive head, crowned by a lionine mass of silvery hair appeared in the doorway.

Snapping black eyes questioned Hamlin's presence in the room.

Piper identified himself quickly and meekly.

District-attorney Halliday grunted. He was tall and straight; his black and white ensemble was relieved by no touch of color. Looking at him didn't increase Piper's itch; and he had the reputation of being the smartest man in Bent's entourage. Some people even said he was honest.

He motioned Piper into the inner office. "I've been waiting for you," he said, making the summons sound like an invitation to the gallows. He grinned with an air of jauntiness at Captain Kennedy, and received no answering smile. His own grin vanished and he followed the district attorney into the other office. Things were tough and they were going to get tougher. A whole lot tougher.

III

10:15 A.M.

PIPER brushed past Halliday, his glance skimming around the private office. Boss Bent was pacing restlessly back and forth over a three-foot square. Someone else sat near the bookcases—a man completely hidden behind his open newspaper. All Piper could see was his hat and his large, yellow brogans.

Sitting in Stevens' chair, where it had been pushed back near the window, he saw the girl in the red polo coat—Rhea Vern.

The sunlight through the window fell across her face just right. Her face, framed by waves of piled-high jet black hair, was nearly a perfect oval. The planes coming down from her high, wide forehead to the firm narrow chin cried out for a camera to imprison their strong, sculptured clarity.

The girl had been crying. Well, why not? She'd discovered the body, hadn't she?

Boss Bent stopped pacing, stood sprawl-legged in front of Piper. "Where were you, Hamlin?" he barked.

"When?" Hamlin wished the mayor wouldn't stand so close. Piper could feel the strong, sure waves of evil emanating from this man. They made him unhappy.

"When it happened," Mayor Bent snapped.

"I don't know when it happened."

Bent glanced at Halliday. "Coroner just got here," the D. A. said. "We don't know yet, either."

"Well, get after it. I want action."

Piper shook his head sadly. What the mayor wanted wasn't action; he wanted a goat. Somebody to tie this killing onto before it could be traced to the machine. From where Piper sat, he looked like just about the best candidate around.

Bent chewed his cigar, glared briefly at Piper, and stalked out. Piper's busy brain toyed idly with the notion that maybe Bent was as upset as he seemed; that maybe for once some cog in his precious machine had

operated independently, so that Bent actually was in the dark about the killing. No; that just wouldn't go down. Nothing happened in Preston that Boss Bent didn't know about. And most of what happened, Boss Bent personally planned.

"I believe you were up here earlier this morning?" Halliday said smoothly.

Without thinking, Piper said, "No." It was a stupid lie, born out of that inner panic that had gripped him ever since he'd entered Stevens' office and found fat Diogenes sitting at his desk. And it was so damned useless. There were a hundred ways they could find out the truth.

The D. A. turned to Rhea Vern. "You opened the office as usual this morning?"

The girl nodded. She was going over this for the third time.

"Stevens usually didn't arrive until nine-thirty. But today he had an earlier appointment. With whom?"

The girl shook her head. "I don't know. It's the way I told you. Last evening, he asked me to open up as usual this morning, then leave the office until after his appointment. That's what I did." Desiance edged her tones.

"You did take a phone call from Colonel Abott this morning about a reporter he was sending over. Who was it?"

"I didn't see him," Rhea Vern said, and Piper breathed softly.

"You called here from downstairs around nine-thirty?"

"That's right. I told you why. Someone answered—a man. Not Mr. Stevens. He told me Mr. Stevens was busy."

"You don't know if Stevens was actually alive then or not?"

The girl shook her head. She could see where Halliday was going. So could Piper Hamlin. They couldn't railroad him for this, his brain thought wildly. He hadn't done anything. He'd been good—he'd behaved. He'd ignored that nagging itch, made every effort to stay out of it. He felt like a bewildered Peck's Bad Boy who'd reformed and found disaster waiting for

him anyhow. It was a gyp. It wasn't fair.

"Now, Miss Vern"—the D. A. was almost soothing—"I want you to identify that voice you heard on the phone." The girl started nervously. "Ah, I see. You've already recognized it. You've heard it, just now, in this room, haven't you?"

The girl glanced timidly at Piper. She nodded.

"Whose voice is it?"

Piper begged the girl with his eyes, but it didn't do any good. Without a tremor, she threw him to the wolves. "His," she said. "That man's."

"Hey—you can't—" His voice caught. Then he went on more evenly. He had to fight now. He had to think coldly and act as calmly as his jangling nerves would allow. "Just because my paper's been sniping at Bent's machine, you try to hang this on me. All right. I was here. I was crazy to lie about it. But I didn't see Stevens, and I didn't have any reason to kill him."

HALLIDAY'S eyes glinted. "You didn't see Stevens? Then how did you know he was too busy to talk to his secretary?"

Piper started to answer, then held his tongue. An instinct for preservation warned him to keep Diogenes on ice for a while. He wanted to find out what else Halliday had, or thought he had. He turned to the girl. "What about this guy with the appointment? He could have got here after I left. I was at Fio's. Who was it? You ought to know. You make Stevens' appointments."

The girl was as cool as icicles. "Not always. I didn't make this one. It was confidential."

The door opened again and Captain Kennedy appeared. "Shoemaker's report is ready." He came into the room, followed by a wizened little character who filled the office of medical examiner. Kennedy jerked his thumb toward Piper, and glanced at Halliday.

Halliday caught the cue. "You'd better

clear out now, Hamlin. But hang around. We'll be seeing you."

Piper halted in the doorway and glanced around the room. His eyes fell on the desk and he wondered why it looked emptier than when he had seen it earlier. Then he remembered the derby hat. It might be important. Because Diogenes had his hat on. The extra derby could have belonged to Stevens, which would mean that he'd been in the office then, either alive or dead. Or it could have been the third man's, who might have already arrived, stabbed Stevens and hung him gruesomely in the closet and left before Diogenes got there.

It might mean a lot of things. Maybe the police had it already. Maybe Diogenes had taken it away with him. Maybe it meant something to Rhea Vern and she'd gotten rid of it before calling the police.

Piper's brain swung dizzily. He filed the derby away for future reference, along with Diogenes; grinned weakly and left.

From the lobby downstairs, he phoned the office and left instructions about the pictures he'd sent over. "Treat 'em nice and gentle," he said. "They may include a portrait study of the guy who killed Stevens."

At the curb, he waited for the cab that nosed in to pick him up. The cab door opened, and Piper ducked inside. The door slammed shut. Big, chunky hands reached out to grab him. At least two pairs. One set reached up to grab his mouth and another fastened swiftly around his ankles. His own momentum pitched him forward on his face. His chin socked the metal base of the folding seat and constellations danced brilliantly before his eyes.

The cab spun forward.

Hands reached down to twist his arms behind him. His head was still wobbly from that clout on the jaw. Somebody put a knee in the small of his back and somebody else grabbed him by the hair and lifted his chin off the floor. A boot kicked him in the jaw.

His brain rocked sickly. He struggled feebly but his arms and legs wouldn't do the things his brain tried to tell them to do. He wasn't struggling so much against the two men, anyway. It was the damnable recurrence of his destiny that he was battling sickly on the floor of the cab.

The fierce anger had gripped his stomach again. "This," he thought insanely, "is where I came in."

They fastened his wrists with cords, and he could feel two pairs of feet coming to rest on his back, holding him down. He lay very still. He remembered that other time. The things he'd learned then. Sometimes they let up on you a little if you just lay still and took it and didn't move at all.

Then something connected solidly with the base of skull and lying still was no longer an occasion for pretense. His mind fogged in thick, soothing blackness.

IV

2:30 P.M. Chicago time.

DENNY McHUGHES' pale green eyes, deceptively naïve and childish, examined the bulletin board in the new Chicago post office. The rest of his olive-tinted face was quite expressionless. His hands rested easily in the side-pockets of his conservatively cut overcoat.

He resembled a well-fed stockbroker or petty bank official who was, possibly, not too bright.

But a clever cop might have spotted the slight bulge his betsy made under one arm-pit. And any member of the police forces of at least fifteen American cities would have groaned helplessly at the sight of him.

Underworld rumor gave him the reputation of being the nation's most resourceful looter of bank vaults. But no one was absolutely sure. The police had been watching him for a dozen years or more without successfully pinning anything on him. And now it was too late. Denny had reformed.

Denny stared soulfully at the reward posters and permitted a little sigh to leave

his lips. There was a faint nostalgia in his eyes as he recognized the visages of former good companions.

He took a small leather-bound notebook from his pocket and carefully copied down the chief items of four of the reward notices. The notebook's pages were edged with gold and a little gold pencil was attached to it by a chain. Denny loved nice things.

A policeman stationed on the post-office steps greeted Denny as he came out. "More pictures, Denny?"

Denny smiled pleasantly and contrived to look a little embarrassed. "Four," he admitted.

"Pretty soon you'll have your album filled."

Denny merely looked embarrassed, like a boy whose collecting hobby has become the family joke. A pretty big boy, at that. Denny stood just over six feet and there was plenty of poundage to go with his height. But he handled his bulk well, moving with the slithering, silken ease of a big black tom cat.

He headed northward, then east on Madison, crossing the slow, oily river. Here in front of Insull's Folly, the big opera house, he wistfully studied the five-year-old placards with the pictures of Jeritza and Martinelli and Pons.

Denny missed the opera. As you've heard, he liked nice things. Succulent food unspoiled by liquor. Good fabrics. The rich, throaty outpourings of buxom divas. The smooth, solid feel of an automatic cradled confidently in his palm.

A little way down the street he stopped at an open-front shooting gallery. The proprietor eyed him with pain and sullenly handed over the slightly bent .22 rifle. Denny neatly demolished ten clay pipes in a revolving row. Considering the woeful gun-eyes of men in Denny's former choice of occupation, this was not bad; the gallery owner stifled his delight.

"No, Denny"—he protested. "That's enough."

"Maybe you should bend the barrel more, Sam," Denny suggested amicably, tossing a half dollar to the counter.

He continued his leisurely way across the Loop. Turning north, he arrived at the Sherman Hotel where he took the lift to the second floor, given over largely to office suites. He fitted his key into a door lettered:

Rewards, Inc.

A corporation which proclaimed its avarice so bluntly as that title suggested might well have caused prospective clients to think twice before entering. But most of Rewards, Inc.'s customers were sufficiently desperate to give it no thought.

Rewards was a highly resourceful combination of three men and a girl who made their living tracking down individuals for whom a bounty had been offered. If they sometimes skirted closer to the law than the law quite liked, they were quick-witted enough to stay out of serious difficulty. Sometimes they even worked with officialdom, and left it gasping for breath and succor.

In the big main office, Gavin Muir ruled the organization with the coolness and aristocratic intelligence of an early Roman general. Muir had been a lot of things in his lifetime. A yachtsman, a soldier, a maker of South American dictators and an unmaker of same, an aide-de-camp to a punch-drunk Chinese Warlord, a newspaper correspondent and even a certified public accountant. He liked excitement in reasonable quantities, a chance to let his keen brains rove at will over dark perplexities, the leadership he felt his qualities entitled him to—and system.

System was his watchword. Everything could be boiled down to system. Every problem was susceptible of systematic solution. And an observant student of military history, he felt, could never be at a loss in finding the proper strategic system that would serve.

Rewards was his baby. He'd known

when the idea for it had come to him a little over a year ago that he'd found his perfect *métier*. He'd chosen his associates with consummate care, beginning with Denny McHughes whose skill with locks and tumblers, in conjunction with his underworld connections and artistry with firearms had made him an invaluable ally. To his staff he'd quickly added Lincoln Wegg, a dried-up little man who had no equal as an applied criminologist, and Angel Auden, a luscious blonde who had no equal.

Muir himself was tall and slender with a thin, austere face and chilly gray eyes. Hair that was half-blond and half-silver was plastered sleekly to his long skull. There was a jagged scar down one side of his jaw and the only way you could tell when he was angered was to watch that scar. His eyes were deeply set in his head and he had no nerves at all.

When Denny came in and stood beside him, it looked like the meeting of a cata-mount and a greyhound. Muir glanced up and said, "You didn't knock, Denny."

Muir's voice was a school-ma'am's ruler whacking across the knuckles. Denny mumbled an apology. If any other person talked to him like that Denny would promptly mow him down. When Muir did it, he sort of liked it.

Muir unbent and sorted out Denny's reward notes. He picked one up. "Call the Evanston police and remind them we collected on this one last week," he said.

"They get very mad when I call them," Denny said. "Maybe they do not like us to help them."

"That sizes it up nobly, Denny," Muir said. Denny's brains were all in his fingers anyway. Plus of course a certain instinctive criminal cunning that had kept him, miraculously, on the free air side of prison bars.

MUIR was filing the notices away when the door opened and Angel Auden came in. She didn't knock either. But Angel never knocked. She was tall and

lushly blonde with frank, bewildering eyes of higher than normal voltage. Her smile was a contemptuous little curve that clearly expressed her opinion of all men, with a few parenthetical comments on that popular indoor sport that softer mortals call love, and of which Angel wanted no part. Angel was about as softly sentimental as an anvil.

Muir looked at her thoughtfully. Some day that girl was going to melt. When she did, he was going to be around, waiting. Muir was an intensely patient man when there was something he wanted badly enough.

Even Angel didn't have the smallest idea how he felt about her.

"Hello," she said. "Ever hear of Piper Hamlin?" There was a dry sparkle in her eyes that meant that Angel smelled money. It was her favorite perfume.

Muir shrugged. "Wipe your mouth, dear. Chocolate bars don't become you." Except when she needed to use them, Angel was sublimely careless of her looks. There was usually, somewhere about her, some small untidy blemish to mar the creamy perfection of her appearance. This afternoon it was a smudge of chocolate smeared on the corner of her vivid red mouth. Lazily, she wiped it off with a filmy scrap of handkerchief.

"What about Hamlin?" Muir asked.

"I think you'll like him. I do. I'm crazy about him. He's divine. Somebody's going to give us a lot of money to find him," she cooed. "The Preston *News* is offering five thousand dollars for information leading to his return. I positively adore him."

3 P.M.

THE angry drone of a circular saw in a planing mill hummed nearer and nearer. Piper struggled weakly to get away from it, and pain shivered through his skull. He was drowning in a sea of mud that pressed down on him and he was fighting to surge up through it, choking.

There was beginning to be a little light.

He was remembering, piece by piece. When he opened his eyes, he'd be in a hospital bed with bandages around his head, staring up at a nurse.

But he had to go back further than that and recollect how he'd come to this hospital.

Effortfully, feeling very proud of his powers of concentration, he pieced it together. It had started with the Albinc story. After six years on the *Gazette* they'd fired him because some of the big wigs up at the capitol didn't like the things he'd been finding out and printing about Luke Albinc, whose bloody gangster's fingers had left a trail right to the back door of the executive mansion. The word had come down from the big boys and Piper Hamlin was fired. Not only fired. But blacklisted. He'd never work on another paper in this state.

But Glory'd been swell about it. Never once complaining, always waiting for him with that million-dollar smile as if they hadn't stopped living at the top of the world but had only moved over a little, temporarily.

"You're too smart, darling," she'd said. "You won't be out of a job long. I just know it."

And she was right. Even if she was his wife. Because soon after that Sam Tracy, whom they'd both known at the State U, had been appointed special state prosecutor and he gave Piper a job on his staff of investigators.

"And it isn't just because we've always been friends either," Sam had said. Good old Sam. Didn't seem to mind a bit that Piper had cut him out, finally, with Glory. "You're a good, solid man. Way you handled that Albinc thing proves that. But even with a proposition like this, Piper, we've got to string along to a certain extent."

That was the trouble. When the time came, Piper hadn't strung along. Some of the stuff about the capitol boys that he'd turned up for Sam had thrown a definite

and unmistakable light on a roadhouse shooting in which two men had been unpleasantly and permanently punctured with lead.

Piper had kept his mouth shut, but his itch had hold of him. He went right on working, quietly. And what he found out convinced him that the half-crazy dishwasher they'd convicted for the shooting had had no more to do with it than Piper had. The guilty man was the nephew of the governor of the state.

The governor's nephew—wouldn't you know? And that put it squarely up to Piper. He knew what to do. Just keep his mouth shut, forget what he'd discovered. He couldn't tangle with a thing like this. It was so big it scared him. The Albinc affair had taught him his lesson. Sam kept pounding it into him. He wouldn't stick his neck out the second time.

But Piper did. That cursed itch of his just wouldn't let him see an innocent man go to the gallows for something Piper knew and could prove he hadn't done. So he spilled his story to the cops, and they had to act on it. Even the governor's nephew couldn't get away with murder.

He got away with a ten-year sentence for manslaughter though; and Piper got fired. And beaten up. Six men working on him for over a week, killing him by inches, vengefully. Tossing him out of a speeding car when they thought he was dead because nobody could live through the things they had done to Piper.

But he wasn't dead—he was alive—in this hospital.

The mud grew blacker, and Piper groaned.

No, that wasn't right. Because he knew what would happen next. He'd open his eyes and ask for Glory and the nurse would hand him that note in which Glory had coldly informed him that he was a fool and a failure and she'd been crazy to waste her time on him and try to make something out of him.

Later he'd find out it was Sam Tracy she'd left him for—that she was Sam's woman now just as she had been for sometime. And still later, his kind friends would delight in telling him what a tramp she'd always been, how she'd fooled him. How there'd been, not just Sam, but a lot of other men, a whole long line of them, giving dates and places, naming names.

And there he'd be with every single thing he'd built his life around shot out from under him, facing a black and howling void that engulfed him completely.

And so he'd go on that six-week bender that had ended up—where? Preston. That was it. Preston. Three months ago. Colonel Abbott and the *News*—the Rhyming Reporter—

It was coming faster and faster now. His brain whirled and accelerated—and then crashed to a stop against the blank, terrifying wall of murder. Political murder. Stevens with a knife in his chest strung up in the closet in his office.

PIPER didn't want to open his eyes. He was afraid to. Destiny had set the trap for him still a third time.

In spite of himself, his lids eased back and his eyes came slowly into focus. He gaped.

He was staring at what seemed to be a nude woman of mammoth proportions. She was not only mammoth, she was lavender.

Piper closed his eyes and tried again. The lavender nude was still there. They've beaten my brains out, he thought dully. I'm slap-happy for sure. Well, that's fine because a guy that's slap-happy doesn't have many problems. Nobody expects him to think. Or to find out about things.

He stared contentedly at the huge lady. Then something called perspective came back into his eyes and he saw that the lavender lady was painted on the ceiling. Beneath her was a large window that seemed to front on some street. Its lower part had been blocked out with a soap

lather. Piper slowly read the goldleaf letters across the glass.

REEB NO ITA VLAS

He repeated them to himself, tried to make words. Must be some kind of a Russian joint, he decided drowsily. He forced himself up on one elbow and the blood pounded in his aching brain.

His hands were free. He used them to explore the wreckage of his face, itemizing the damage and wincing as his fingers touched the sorcer places. One split, puffy lip. Three bad bruises on his cheek. A swollen place higher up that could only be a beaut of a shiner. The whole top of his scalp was raw and there was some blood clotted in his hair. His midriff felt as if they'd beaten it for hours with the side of the Roxy Theater.

Groggily he pulled himself to his feet and, swaying, had a look at where he was. It was some kind of deserted saloon. To the rear was a wall of stacked tables and chairs. Behind them burned a dull electric light. Somebody was back there, moving about.

There was an empty quart soda bottle at his feet. Cursing against the dizzy pain, he stooped down and picked it up. Then he moved cautiously toward the sounds he had heard.

Rounding the stack of tables, he saw the lumbering hulk of a man about one size smaller than Ringling's gorilla. His small head was attached to his shoulders by a short, thick neck that Piper didn't think he could get both hands around. His face looked as if Gene Autry's horse had stepped on it. The nose was mashed flat and flesh puffed around the eye-sockets so that the eyes themselves were visible only as tiny, baleful beads of blackness.

Piper hefted his bottle uncertainly. Muscles tensed, he raised his arm to swing.

The gorilla man whirled swiftly, grunted and reached out a long arm to slap the bottle out of Piper's hand. Then he lifted

him by the lapels and bounced him down into a chair.

"Louie," he called. "Junior's awake." He had a voice like a foghorn.

"Keep the little punk on ice," came a voice of exactly the same tone. "I'm busy."

"He's cookin'," said the gorilla man. "It's kinda hungry work slappin' guys around. You took it pretty good, too."

"Thanks," said Piper.

"Sure you wouldn't wanna tell me where the stuff is? I mean it'd look pretty good if I was to find out all by myself. Louie always hogs everything." He sounded plaintive.

Piper said truthfully, "I don't know what you're talking about," and braced himself.

The sweep of the gorilla man's paw nearly knocked him off the chair and left a buzzing ring in his head. When he could speak, Piper said, "How long have you lugs been working out on me?"

"Since this morning. You was out most of the time."

Piper wondered vaguely how Sundown Jim would have acted. He'd get himself out of this sure. It was nice to think how easy Sundown Jim would handle it. The only thing inside of Piper was a tense and blasting hatred.

Wondering if the gorilla man would slap him down if he tried it, Piper hoisted himself to his feet and took a few uncertain steps. The gorilla man glanced up at him idly. "Don't go too far away, Junior," he said.

HE NEEDN'T have worried. The jukebox standing against the wall by the door to the men's room was about as far as Piper could get. He smiled foolishly. "Like to hear a little music?" he asked sociably.

"You can't play that thing. We don't want no noise in here. This place ain't supposed to have no people around." He had another thought. "It was nice of you to ask, though. That's the kinda guys I like. Nice and friendly. No hard feelin's. Hell,

me and Louie gotta earn our living, ain't we?"

Piper debated the necessity. He glanced idly at the lettering on the window and knew his brain was clearing. All you had to do was reverse the letters and the sign read as it would from the street:

S A L V A T I O N B E E R

It was simple. It was nice, too, to be able to think again.

He tried to figure why they'd picked him up. What was the *stuff* they wanted? Piper shook his head. Then another idea, more dismal, lodged in his brain. Maybe his reputation as a trouble-maker had finally caught up with him. Maybe this was Boss Bent's idea of taking care of him before he could stir things up.

The kitchen door swung open and a man came in carrying a tray. Piper gaped. He was still groggy—seeing things. He glanced at the gorilla man and then at Louie. There couldn't be two of them. It was against nature. But they were—exactly alike, even to the mashed-down noses and the rumbling, foggy voices.

Louie cleared a table and took the things off his tray. A huge bowl of spaghetti, chipped white plates, two glasses and a bottle of cheap red wine. "I got the bread outside," he said. He looked up at Piper. "That's right, bud. We're twins. That's Albert. I'm Louie." He went to get the bread.

When he came back, the two men sat down to eat. "If you wasn't to close-mouthed, we could feed ya," Louie said, shoveling spaghetti between his teeth and sucking it noisily the rest of the way into his mouth.

"Who could look at you and eat at the same time?" Piper demanded scornfully. Both men glared at him. Sure, that's right, numbskull, Piper told himself. Needle it into them, so the next time they go to work on you they can really get some pleasure out of it.

He turned sourly to look at the jukebox's list of records. *Honeysuckle Rose*, *Dream Boat*, *Red Sails in the Sunset*, *Little Sir Echo*—nothing but corn. He wouldn't play that tripe if they'd let him. The last title on the list was *The Artillery March*. He'd bet that was a beauty. Nice and loud. Probably blast your cardrums loose.

With a mouthful of spaghetti, Albert said, "I talked to the mister on the phone while you was cookin'. He said if Junior wouldn't come clean soon not to play around no more. Said if Junior wasn't on the half-shell, his stuff wouldn't be no good."

"We gonna get paid extra?" Louie wanted to know. "He ain't said nothin' about no killin' before?"

"The mister's gonna do all right by us," Albert said, reassuringly. "He better, the big tramp, with what we got on him."

Drop by drop, ice-water trickled down Piper's spine. He heard the words but his mind balked at accepting their sense. He wanted to shout, hey, look, this is me you're talking about killing. Me—and I'm standing right here listening to it. It—it isn't *human* to do a thing like that.

What was he standing here like a lump for? Frozen to this jukebox. Get a move on, Hamlin. Get *out* of here.

He took a step toward the front of the empty saloon; and the big shiny forty-five that had been lying on the table between the two gorilla men leaped spasmodically into Louie's hand, covered him. "You ain't goin' no place, Junior," Albert said gently.

"That's right," Piper answered obediently, his palms sweating.

Albert put down his fork and pawed his mouth with the back of his hand. "You finished, Louie?"

"Sure. I'm ready, Albert," Louie said. Both the men stood up.

Piper's heart was hammering his chest. This was *it*, he thought wildly. It's going to be now. And there he was, against the two of them, with not the ghost of an idea

in his throbbing head. Well, maybe the ghost of a little one that he'd been playing with for the past five minutes. But it was corny, crazy. It wouldn't work in a thousand milleniums.

The gorilla men shambled forward. Albert carried the big gun, and Louie's mouth wore a placating smile. "Now, Junior," he said, "don't do nothing foolish."

Here goes, thought Piper, with a swift little prayer. His head jerked back over his shoulder. "Hey come on—hurry!" he shouted at the empty saloon.

At the same instant, he jammed his palm against the coin slide on the jukebox, and ducked down to avoid Louie's crashing, instinctive shot. Piper's fingers twisted the volume control as far as it would go.

The nickel rattled down inside the machine during an exasperating, agonized second.

Then the whole place was filled with the blare of the *Artillery March*. Cannons roared. Drums rolled. Trumpets blared. A whole artillery barrage blasted out over the music.

Albert's eyes glazed, his mouth popped open, and for one shard of a moment the gun sagged in his hand. Piper lunged forward, kicked the gun out of Albert's grasp, pivoted to uncork a swift jabbing right to Louie's beefy jaw, and then twisted and dodged into the men's room before the gorilla twins had really comprehended the sudden hullabaloo.

Piper's fingers shot home the bolt just as Albert and Louie crashed with twin bellows against the door. It shook and cracked, and next time it would give.

Albert had recovered his gun. He shoved his twin out of the way and pointed it at the door. He fired.

Piper flattened against the wall. The first shot came ripping through the door-panel, waist-high, flattened with a metallic thud against the washbasin.

The second shot was at an angle and a little higher. It plucked at Piper's coat sleeve.

V

4:15 P.M.

A NGUISH darted through his body, not missing a single nerve. He whipped around to face the wall and had a look at the small, grimy window just over his head. The jukebox was still bombarding the saloon. It might attract a cop, he thought swiftly; but it would also cover the noise of the shooting.

He got a grip on the window handles, heaved upward as hard as he could. The window stuck. He tried again, ripping his finger on the rusty grips. Suddenly the sash gave with a screech.

Piper hoisted himself frantically into the opening; his bright head, then his shoulders, poked into the daylight slanting across a deserted alleyway.

Piper slithered through and let himself drop the six feet to the brick pavement. His right shoulder broke most of the force of his fall. But his skull collected a secondary bang that it didn't really need. Bright circles sizzled through his brain, and he wasted precious seconds just sitting there on the bricks numbly watching their brilliant zigzags.

Just as Albert's head appeared in the window above, Piper struggled to his feet and raced blindly down the alleyway.

When he stopped for breath, he found himself on a busy street that led across a steel-girded bridge. He shook his head fogily.

Beneath him was the river and beyond it the mirage-like panorama of a great city. Dazedly, he recognized the Carbide Building's porphyry and gold tower, and the trim leanness of the 333 skyscraper. This wasn't Preston. This was, for Pete's sake, Chicago!

Chicago had been one of the more lucid intervals in that six-weeks' rake's progress that had carried him halfway across the continent. It had been in Chicago that his bankroll had started to give out and he couldn't remember very clearly the last

days of his stay. He wondered if maybe the cops did.

Just in case they did, he dropped down to the lower level of the double-deck drive that bordered the river by the Clark Street Bridge.

In a cigar store at the corner of La Salle and Lake he phoned Johnny Spiro. Johnny covered the municipal courts for the *Chicago Tabloid*, and Piper knew him from way back.

He got Johnny on the wire and listened to a long and loud lecture, couched mostly in four-letter monosyllables, on his behavior. Finally, Johnny suggested that Piper come right over. "The *Tabloid* 'll turn you in, Ham. We'll go to bat for you. It's your only chance to beat the rap, fella."

Piper was firm. "I'm not figuring on taking any rap, Johnny. I didn't kill Stevens, but I do need help."

"Come on over, and we'll talk about it." Johnny hung up.

As Piper left the cigar store, he figured that maybe Johnny was right. This wouldn't be the first time a reputable paper had made a deal like it. The accused's exclusive story in return for the best legal talent that money could buy. It made everybody happy. Maybe it was the smart way to play it, after all.

In a shop-window mirror, Piper saw a guy who looked as if he'd tangled with a meat grinder. He had a black eye; his face was swollen and cut; his blond hair stood every which way and he wore no hat. His clothes were rumpled and stained; the left leg of his trousers was slit to the knee.

Piper studied this shambles with contempt. Then he looked again and glanced down at his trouser leg. "Holy cat," he whispered. "That's me."

No wonder everybody he passed had been staring at him. For the rest of his way, he kept within the shadows of the El on Lake Street. He paused wistfully at the wares displayed in a joke-store window. Red wigs. Bushy black beards. Big false

noses. He shook his head. They'd only make him twice as conspicuous as he already was.

From the alley behind him, a soothing voice said, "Roll, babies. Fade 'em free and fancy."

Piper wheeled. This was the first good break he'd got in what seemed like an aeon of misfortune. He glanced into the alley where four men in mud-crusted dungarees were crouched in the ice of a cement-mixer, rolling the bones. Sandhogs working on the subway.

Piper came closer. "Free for all, boys?"

They looked up at him and grinned. "Show your money and pull up a chair, brother."

TEN minutes later Piper went on his way down Lake Street, his step jaunty and unhaunted. A sandhog's walnut-laquered helmet sat rakishly on his head; a lunch-bucket swung in his hand. With his rumpled clothes anybody would take him for just one more of the sandhogs the city was filled with. There was also a pleasing little sum of seven dollars and eighty cents cash money in his right-hand trouser pocket.

He bought a paper at the corner and found the Preston datelined story on the Stevens murder half-buried on page three. There was a picture of Piper, but the article itself didn't say much. The search for the reporter Hamlin had spread out over three states. His employer, Colonel Abbott, had offered a reward for information about him. The usual startling developments were expected hourly.

So Abbott was riding him, too. Why couldn't they just plain leave him alone? He wasn't anybody; he was unimportant. He wanted bitterly to stay that way.

He needed a drink. He turned into the Sherman Hotel bar and ordered whiskey. He held the paper carefully in front of his face, drinking behind it.

The bartender, who'd been eyeing him without much kindness, moved away to wait on a couple of regulars who had just

come in. Piper could tell they were old customers because the barman started fixing up their order as soon as they came in. Chartreuse for the blonde; buttermilk for the tall, green-eyed man who was with her.

THE minute Piper laid eyes on them, he lifted his hand instinctively to the right side of his nose. He was right. Pretty soon, it began to itch.

Piper eyed them with greater interest. Particularly the blonde girl, whose lightly greased eyelids had the dull luster of silk. And under those lids—Piper's spine twitched uncomfortably—her azure blue eyes were watching him intently in the mirror.

Her vivid lips were fixed in a faintly sardonic smile. If you wanted to read it that way, you could say that it had a definitely come-on-handsome-let's-ditch-the-guy-I'm-with expression.

Firmly, Piper wiped the nascent, answering grin off his mouth. Wasn't he ever going to learn? Glory's solid, below-the-belt wallop should have been more than plenty. No pretty face, no sweetly lying eyes were ever going to get the chance to rip the living heart out of him again.

The girl lit a cigarette, and blew smoke across Piper's face. "Been waiting long, lover?" she asked.

Piper jumped as if she'd stuck him with a knife. "I'm not waiting for anybody," he told her.

"You've been waiting for me, darling." The girl's voice was pleasantly husky—and plenty distinct. She didn't seem to care if her escort heard her or not.

She wore a summery yellow dress and fitted every inch of it. Dresses didn't hang passively on this number, he could see. They argued it out with her. Their purpose was obviously to clothe without concealing. Piper wondered if the dress she had on now hadn't overestimated its own strength.

"Spiro send you?" he asked cautiously.

"Who's Spiro?" She shrugged. "A toothpaste?"

The man on the other side of her was beaming at him with childlike green eyes. Piper wanted to tell him that he should keep his girl under lock and key and preferably in a strait-jacket.

"I'm Angel. You see, we found you, duckie. This is Denny."

"Hiya," Piper said. These two were nobody to get mixed up with. They were crazy. "I didn't know I was lost," he told them.

Piper's frown deepened as he spotted the vague bulge beneath this Denny's arm-pit. Vague, my foot, Piper thought. That wasn't any potted geranium he was toting under his coat.

Standing up suddenly, he slipped a dollar bill on the bar and headed for the street. So did the two characters who'd tried to pick him up.

The blonde hooked her arm through Piper's left elbow. Denny fell in at his right.

"Look, kids," he said earnestly, "aren't we too big for games?"

"Who's playing games?" the blonde demanded, wide-eyed.

Her purse prodded Piper in the ribs. Something hard inside of it pressed against him. He glanced hastily down. Her purse was open and from its disordered depths, Piper caught the unmistakable gleam of gun metal.

"In here, precious," the girl said, smiling. They turned into the door of the Sherman Hotel. And Piper felt as if he were going down for the third time.

4:50 P.M.

PIPER sat on the edge of the maple chair beside Gavin Muir's desk, his face tilted patiently upward while Angel with deft, impersonal fingers was swabbing his bruises with witch hazel. It felt very good. Her body, pressed against his

shoulder, was warm and softly fragrant.

He noticed that part of the zipper on her dress had come unfastened. He decided to worry about that for a while. It was much more soothing to worry about trifles. There were so many big things to fret him that he didn't feel he could handle them all.

Denny was leaning on Gavin Muir's desk, munching drippy dill pickles. Out loud.

Muir was saying as coldly as if Piper had been a slab of beef. "You understand you possess a certain financial value. Around five thousand dollars, I believe. You can't capitalize on it. We can." Muir's cigarette flicked at him in quick, darting thrusts.

From beyond the desk a third guy, lean and cadaverous, was watching him through rimless glasses. Every once in a while he would flick at imaginary dust particles on his sleeve with long, loose fingers. But most of the time he concentrated on Piper as if he couldn't wait to begin the autopsy. It was a gaze Piper didn't feel happy about meeting. And he wished to God the guy would stop flicking at things that were invisible to the naked eye.

Angel finished what she was doing to his face. She stood back. "Why he looks like a kid," she exclaimed delightedly. "Like some cockeyed, helpless kid."

Denny leaned forward a little. "I never saw a kid," he said judicially. "with bags under his eyes."

Piper flushed. He wouldn't pay any attention to any of them. They were all nuts.

"How did you know he'd be in the bar?" Muir asked Angel.

"So I didn't know he was going to be there," she said with a shrug. "But I'm the type of girl who doesn't ask questions when pretty apples drop into her pinafore. Nice golden apples. Pennies from heaven. His picture was in the paper. I recognized him sitting there when we walked in."

Piper turned imploringly to Muir. "Lis-

ten," he begged hoarsely. "I don't know what this is about, but I want out. I didn't kill Stevens. I don't know who did, and I don't care. But I'm not going to be turned in for it. I didn't do it!"

Muir's face was motionless.

"All right, you didn't do it," Angel said reasonably. "Who cares? Five thousand fish is five thousand fish."

"Holy cow," Piper moaned. "You'd think I was a hunk of wood."

"I wouldn't think so, precious," Angel said.

Once before today he'd felt like this. He still got cold around the back of his neck when he thought of Albert and Louie calmly discussing the need for killing him and the possibility of collecting an extra fee for it, right in front of his face. But somehow this was worse.

To Muir, he was a problem. To Angel, he was a certified check for five thousand dollars. To Denny, maybe a target, for all Piper knew. And to Lincoln Wegg, a possibly interesting cadaver.

"Look at it this way," Muir said chattily. "We're really doing you a favor. You'd be caught anyhow sooner or later."

"But I didn't do it," Piper said for the thousandth time.

"That," Muir told him, "is not our department."

"All you'll be doing is helping the Bent machine," Piper insisted.

"Who bent it?" Denny wanted to know. Muir gave him a look.

Piper was going crazy. He knew he was. But somehow he had to stay calm. "Look, it's election week in Preston. All they want is to keep the voters thinking I might have stabbed Stevens, until election is over. I'm so innocent it's a shame. I've told you about the gardenia—and about that fat guy—Diogenes. You've got to believe me."

"We do and we're out a wad of money," Angel said practically. "Be reasonable, honey."

"You've never seen this Diogenes be-

fore?" Muir's long fingers were toying idly with a bronze miniature cannon which he used for a paper-weight. He went on in exactly the same tone, "Did you realize that rifled artillery and explosive projectiles were introduced by Napoleon III around 1859?"

Piper sought wildly for some connection. "No, I didn't. I mean, no, I never saw Diogenes in my life."

"Interesting," Muir said dryly, and Piper wondered what was. Diogenes or Napoleon?

"How about the guy Stevens had that appointment with?" Piper demanded. "The one the secretary didn't know about?"

"Is she nice, darling?"

Piper stiffened. "She's an icicle. But I guess she's pretty."

Angel smiled happily. "That's nice, lover. You ought to get something out of this."

"Why did Colonel Abbott assign you to the Stevens story?"

"Because he couldn't get anybody else. It came up at the last minute and Cleaver and I were the only two men in the shop. I told the Colonel I didn't want to get mixed up in anything political. I hate politics. There are political machines. Sure, I know that. I don't like them, but I can learn to accept them. I just don't want to get mixed up with them. Every time I do, I land on my ear. But Abbott threatened to fire me, and Cleaver sort of needled me into it, damn him! And so I said I'd do it. And now look where it's put me."

Muir nodded sympathetically. "It might be interesting to try to get you out of this," he mused. "But it's so much simpler taking the reward."

Piper's hopes had lifted, for a minute. Their crash was sickening. "That's absolutely the damnedest cold-blooded thing I ever heard in my life!" he exploded.

"He's a kind of a nice-looking little character," Denny said sympathetically.

"Maybe he should oughta help him at that."

"We might vote on it," Wegg suggested. It was his first utterance.

"I vote no," said Angel decisively. "I'm sorry, darling, but a girl's only real friend is her bank account."

Piper could feel the sweat trickling icily down inside his shirt. Just then the phone rang. It sounded like the reprieve from the governor.

DENNY, whose automatic had popped uselessly into his hand, answered it. "Lady downstairs," he said. "Says she's from Preston. She wants to come up."

Muir nodded. Then he looked at Hamlin and jerked his head sidewise. The gesture meant nothing to Piper, but Denny got it. "This way, cousin," he said mildly, hoisting Piper to his feet.

Piper shook his head. "This is apt to concern me. I want to see what goes on."

Denny looked pained. He reached forward, grabbed Piper's wrist and twisted it around behind his back. He gave a little upward jerk. Piper winced and cursed but stopped struggling; and Denny stowed him expertly away in a tiny room fitted out like a darkroom.

"Please be quiet," Denny urged. "I do not want to have to slap your brains out." He closed the door. Piper opened it a crack so he could see what was going on

Rhea Vern came into the room. She had on the same scarlet coat, with a black veil-and-feather hat perched low on her dark hair. She was really something to look at. But so was Angel Auden, that walking cash-register.

Muir identified himself, and Denny pushed a chair out for her. She glanced at Angel Auden and the tiny pucker that creased her forehead told Piper right away that she didn't like her. Wegg brushed a bit of fluff from his lapel.

"My name is Rhea Vern. I drove up from Preston because I need your help.

I knew about you because you once did some work for one of Mr. Stevens' clients—a man named Throckmorton." Muir nodded, and Piper wondered if there could be some kind of hook-up. It didn't seem likely, but everybody suspected him—so he might just as well suspect everybody.

"You may be under a misapprehension, Miss Vern," Muir said. "We're not detectives. We're tracers. We locate missing people."

Rhea bit her lip. "Well, you could start by locating that Piper Hamlin. I'm sure he knows more than he's told."

"How much would you pay us?" Angel wanted to know.

"I—I haven't a great deal of money. That is—" She broke off helplessly and smiled trustingly up into Muir's face. This certainly was nothing like the cool, self-possessed Rhea Vern who had thrown him down so calculatingly to the police, Piper thought. All these helpless rolling eyes she was tossing at Muir, that air of mournful forlornness—it was an act. And it stank.

"Just what is your angle, Miss Vern?" Muir demanded, his eyes a little narrowed.

"I don't care about Hamlin really," Rhea said. "Unless he's guilty. I want to find out who murdered my—my employer."

"Only man I ever worked for," Angel said, buffing her nails on her dress, "could have been murdered twenty times over, and I wouldn't have minded. He was Scotch."

Rhea just looked at her. "I don't know if I can explain—"

Muir slipped in to help her. "I think I understand. Until the murderer is found you're bound to come in for a certain amount of publicity, perhaps even suspicion.

"Naturally that will make it difficult for you to locate another position. After all, you're a working girl. You have to consider that sort of thing. That it?"

Rhea clutched at it greedily. "Yes, of course."

But it wasn't at any rate the whole truth. Muir didn't think so either. But he said, "How much do you think it's worth to have this case cleared up?"

Rhea's gloved hand fussed with her veil. The gesture hid her face as she said, "I haven't the least idea about such things. But I could pay you—a thousand dollars. Wouldn't that be enough?"

VII

5:10 P.M.

IN THE darkroom, Piper registered surprise. Where would a girl like Rhea Vern get a thousand dollars to blow in on catching a murderer?

"I could pay you in about two weeks" Rhea went on quickly. "It would take me that long to raise the money."

Angel looked at her pityingly. A girl with a face like Rhea's needing two weeks to get her hands on a thousand dollars either wasn't wise to what she had on the ball, or didn't know how to put the English on it. She shrugged. It wasn't Angel's loss. "You could make a loan against future prospects," she suggested. "Five from Abbott and one from Vern makes six. goodv-goody." She made a little tune out of it.

"Draw up a contract, Angel," Muir told her. Angel was good about contracts. She knew how to plug every loophole so that not one stray penny would squeeze away from her.

"Do—do you know where Hamlin is?" Rhea asked. "I mean you seem so sure you're going to collect Colonel Abbot's reward." You couldn't tell from her voice whether she wanted him found or not, Piper thought. Well, maybe you'd be able to from her face.

He opened the closet door and stepped into the room.

Rhea looked up and saw him. It was very disappointing. The only expression

she permitted her face to show was one of perfectly understandable surprise. Plus, possibly, a shade of irritation at his eavesdropping.

"Hello," he said. "Remember me?" To Muir's stern face, he remarked, "I'm sorry. But I was getting tired of that same old air in there."

The girl's mouth was contemptuous. "So they finally caught up with you?"

"They and a couple of dozen other guys. I was snatched."

"Ha!" said Rhea briefly.

"And if it wasn't for you, they wouldn't have been after me at all," he told her. Rhea Vern gave him the long-lashed freeze. Piper pulled up his coat collar and did a mock shiver. Rhea wasn't even faintly amused. Neither was Denny.

"You're a very sad character, cousin," Denny said.

"Now that you're here, Hamlin," Muir said, "we may as well settle down. Let's chat about the late lamented."

So for the next twenty minutes, they discussed Stevens. Muir gleaned a few facts that were new to him, but the only information that Piper felt would be helpful to him that he didn't know before was that Rhea Vern was a lot closer to Stevens than any of them had realized. And even then, Piper wasn't sure whether she was giving that impression subtly and deliberately, or whether the little clues and hints that she dropped were inadvertent. He wondered if Muir caught on. He needn't have worried.

The rest was old stuff; Stevens' activities as a reformer which stemmed from his growing contempt for the lawlessness of Mayor Bent's courts and the injustices caused by his machine.

"He was always running up against it when he was trying to help people. It became a sort of fixation with him. I don't know if you can understand that. He—was a very good man," she added.

Muir dropped a pack of cigarettes in her lap. It was a fresh pack, and he

sliced away the top cellophane deftly with the smallest blade of his penknife.

"Thank you," Rhea said, and took off her gloves to cope with the unopened under-wrapper. She tore a corner away neatly, tapped the package with her thumbnail until a cigarette came up. She put it between her lips, and Denny was quick with his lighter. "Thanks," she said, smiling at him.

She placed the package on the corner of the desk and a minute later, Lincoln Wegg retrieved it unnoticeably while flicking imaginary dust off the desk. He walked quietly into the laboratory.

Neat, Piper thought. Very, very neat.

Muir had leaned forward to distract Rhea's attention from Wegg's activities with the swift question: "How about women in his life, Miss Vern?"

It caught the girl offguard. She fumbled with her gloves and then lifted beseeching eyes to Muir's face. "I really wouldn't know," she said in almost a whisper.

"He was fond of you, perhaps?"

"Me?" They wouldn't understand. They wouldn't ever understand. "I was efficient," she said. "He liked that. I did his work and I did it well. He was appreciative." Her words were coldly, almost furiously courteous.

"I see." Muir abandoned the point. Miss Vern's transparency depressed him. "How about enemies? Violent ones?"

"I wouldn't have called them violent. They were—political enemies. The Preston machine. He was bitterly angry at them, and he made trouble for them. He thought he could drive them out of office. That's why he consented to run independently for city treasurer. He thought if he was elected, he could stop their grafting, somehow."

"There really is an element in Preston which is opposed to Mayor Bent. Mr. Stevens was counting on the support of men like Colonel Abbott. Colonel Abbott, you know, is running for mayor on the

same ticket. He's—he's been running for years. It's sort of a joke by this time."

Denny chewed on a pickle. "Some joke," he said. "I don't get it."

Angel brought in the contract, and beamed when Rhea Vern signed it. "You know there's a clause in there that says we get paid even if you don't like our final choice for *It*. You're not hiring us just to pin this on Hamlin." Angel's frankness was somewhat impeached by the fact that she had waited until Rhea had signed the contract before telling her.

"I—I understand," Rhea said.

"Piper's sort of cute, don't you think?" Angel went on. "I wish I could figure out some sort of way to turn him into a steady money-making proposition."

"Maybe my book will be a best-seller," Piper said, without stopping to think.

Muir looked interested. "You're writing a book? Not about Preston politics by any chance?"

"Well, I'm sort of gathering notes. I'm not going to be a Rhyming Reporter all my life. I hope."

Muir looked pained. "Ye gods, and he still asks us why Mayor Bent should be interested in framing him."

"But how would he know?"

RHEA VERN opened her purse and brought out a clipping. "Rumor," she said. "The same way that even I know about this. You wrote it, didn't you, Mr. Hamlin?"

The clipping had been cut from the editorial page of a recent copy of the *Preston News*. It read:

I am Mr. Crow. Sometimes I'm a judge in our city's Criminal Courts. Sometimes I'm Boss Bent in extension. When the House is in session down-state, I'm in extension. I'm no governor, just call me parliamentary adviser. Watch closely. Here's how it's done. I sit for hours and listen to debates. State congressmen sure talk long. I

check rolls and see that the Machine's representative bloc does right by Preston. I take Boss Bent's orders by phone; pass them on to the Governor, the Commissioners and the Legislature. They say that when I stride down the aisles of the Chamber I'm overdressed and arrogant. Okay. And perhaps I don't hold an official state job, but I run the state for Bent. Nobody knows more about parliament than I do, and nobody talks less.

Why waste breath? Why should you see me telling the boys in our bloc how to vote on the next bill. We've got a Machine. The Machine elected Botelli to the House. Botelli is dumb but his name begins with B. It's at the beginning of the alphabet and rolls are called by alphabet. I tell him, "Vote No." His name is called and he votes NO. The bloc votes as he does, all the way down to Zymbanski. Not to vote like Botelli is to want oblivion.

"You wrote that, didn't you?" Rhea asked, her eyes amused.

"Yes, but—" Piper fumed. He cursed himself for ever having written it in the first place. He'd done it idly, for his own amusement, but that snoop Cleaver had found it in his desk and had shown it to Colonel Abbott who'd ordered it into type. Piper had known it would get him into trouble.

"Colonel Abbott told Mr. Stevens you wrote it. He was delighted with it. And he said something about its being part of a book you had in mind. Colonel Abbott talks a lot. Any one of Bent's men may have picked it up at one time or another."

Muir nodded. "Another interesting point would be where you got the information that article indicates that you possess."

Piper shrugged. "You hear things around." Through pores. Defensively. You hear things and they stick in your

mind. "The machine leaks a little maybe. Just an irritating dribble."

"Most of the actual data in that article was supplied to Colonel Abbott by Mr. Stevens," Rhea said. "I know that for a fact. And I'm afraid Mayor Bent knew who gave it to the *News*."

Piper remembered. Maybe he had picked up most of that stuff from Abbott. "You mean to say that I—that my article might have started this whole thing?" His eyes were very blue and very wide.

Rhea closed her eyes, and a little shiver ran through her. This time Piper didn't think it was an act. "I'd never seen Mr. Stevens as excited and secretive as he's been during the past few days. But I don't know who was bringing him that information. I wish I did." Her voice sounded hollow.

"A fat man," Piper said. "Diogenes."

Rhea's shoulders sagged. "I'm sorry, but I really can't help you any more."

"Diogenes," Muir murmured, letting a feather of smoke trail up his cheeks and fog his curving eyes. "We really must get that man identified."

"There's a little matter of finding him," Piper reminded him.

"Angel," Muir said suddenly, "put in a long-distance call to Colonel Abbott. Tell him we're collecting on that reward—and we also want Hamlin's pictures as part of the deal. The ones he took in Stevens' office."

"But you can't turn me in—" Piper yelped.

"Be quiet," Muir rapped. "They haven't got a case against you. Not really. And Abbott's five thousand will give us working capital." He rose from the desk and collected the lead soldiers that were strewn around the desk, packing them away carefully in a leather case lined with red-plush.

"Don't worry, Piper," Muir continued. "I'm turning you over to the Preston

News. Not the police. Maybe we'll be able to distract the attention of Mayor Bent's minions for a while."

"Fat chance," Piper mourned. Suddenly Lincoln Wegg came up behind him and caught his right hand in a swift and surprisingly able grip. Piper whirled and tried to twist away. Wegg held on, and forced Piper's fingers down on an oily inkpad, then pressed them on a sheet of paper, taking a nice clear set of prints.

Piper's brain exploded. This was the one too many. He'd stood enough. He whirled and clipped Wegg on the point of the jaw. Wegg staggered back, and Muir stepped between them.

"Behave, Piper," he said quietly.

Wegg got up and rubbed his jaw. "That's one for the book anyway," he said, gathering the prints.

Angel came in. "Abbott says he'll pay. But he wants Hamlin alive and as sane as possible. About those pictures. He hasn't got them." She looked at Piper sleepily. "He says you must be holding out on him. I think he's mad."

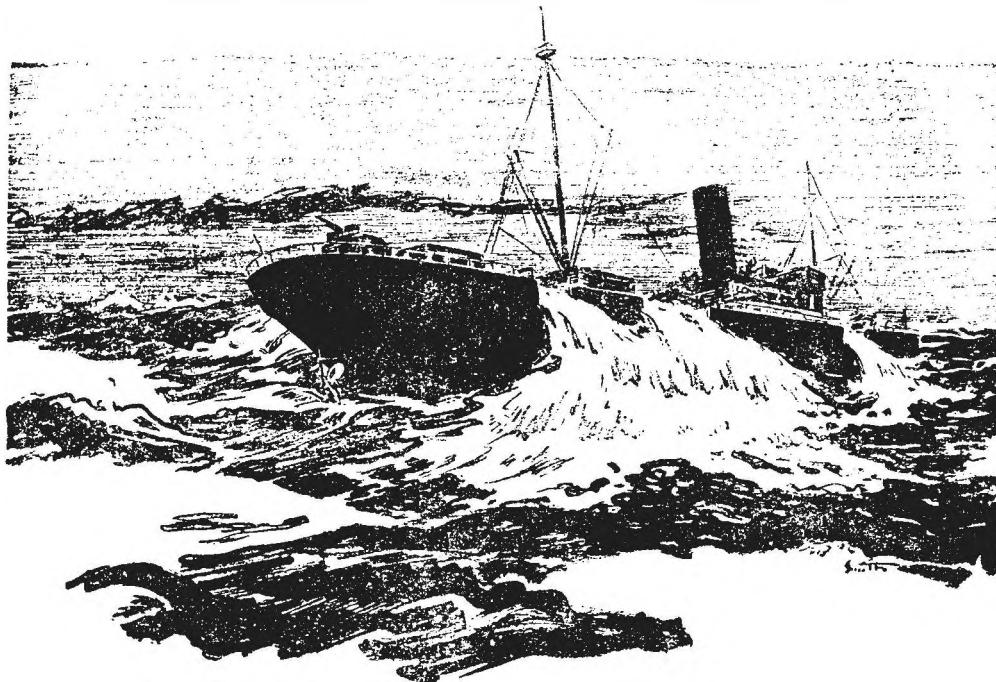
Muir put a hand on Piper's shoulder. "If Hamlin's got those pictures, he's going to give them to us when we get to Preston, aren't you, Piper." The voice was soft but the menace was there all right, hard and cold. They moved to the door.

Muir stood with his hand on the knob. Rhea left first. Then Wegg. Piper brought up the rear between Angel and Denny,

"One thing worries me," Muir said, frowning. He closed the door. "They haven't a case against you they can take even to one of Mayor Bent's courts. But they may be counting on something else. If Piper should resist arrest, for instance, they'd be perfectly justified in shooting him down. Or even if he didn't, they could always say he did and shoot him anyway."

"Thanks. You're a real pal," said Piper huskily.

Trust a Ship and She'll Do Her Best for You



MOTTO OF THE MERCHANT MARINE

By BILL ADAMS

Author of Many Tales of the Sea

HE WAS looking at a navy recruiting poster on the post office wall. I was addressing a letter to my brother, a newspaper man. While I was blotting the envelope, the fellow turned to me. "If only one were young!" he exclaimed.

"A man can be that but once," said I.

"It's here that counts," he replied, laying a hand on his breast. "The body ages, but the heart—no!"

"A man your age has had his day," I retorted, perhaps rather brutally.

He gazed into my face, his eyes shining. "Sailoring was a hard life," he began, and went right on. I was soon hop-

ing no one would come to disturb him. Only a women entered. She was of indeterminate age; the kind of woman that makes one forget there's such a thing as age. Perhaps forty, perhaps nearer fifty, she was in the prime of womanly beauty. Appearing just after he started to talk, she stood instantly still: as though unwilling to disturb him; her eyes on his face, lovingly, and, it seemed to me, patiently also.

"Think of the grub! Salt pork, pea soup, salt horse, bean soup,hardtack either flinty or mouldering and full of crawlers. Never a vegetable, or a bite of fresh meat. Bitter coffee made in a dirty old tin pot by a dirty old cook who never washed it. Bitter

skilly supposed to be tea, made in the same pot. How did we live on such stuff? We kept nations going on it. Me, a builder of nations, eh?" He paused, to laugh, and continued, "I went to sea at sixteen. Hadn't ever seen a ship except in pictures. I don't mean movies. No movies in those days. It was a clean decent world in those days. Look at it now!" His eyes on the recruiting poster again, he added, "I'm no navy man. Just a plain merchant sailor. But a fellow wants to do his bit."

"You've done yours, I rather think," said I.

"It wasn't much. We did have some funny times though," he replied. "Take my last voyage as an apprentice, when I'd been two years at sea. We sailed with a cargo of cement, cannery, tin, railroad steel, coal, and pig iron. Don't forget the pig iron. She was overloaded, though no more than down to her load line. They should have had a special load line for that sort of cargo. And look at the crew! Fourteen men in her forecastle, and not a sailor in the lot! A forget, wanted by the police. Three burglars. An ex-pugilist, and another ugly brute who looked like a murderer. The rest were young fellows who'd never been in a deepwater ship. We made 'em into sailors on the way to the Horn!"

"I've read that officers had to make some poor material into sailors at times," I interposed.

"I was an officer that voyage," he continued. "The second mate was no good. A few days after we sailed the skipper dismasted, and sent him to live with the crew. I acted second in his place. Being only an apprentice I had no license of course. There were four first voyage apprentices in the half-deck and, though acting second, I still lived with them. The owner was a bit close-fisted. It'd have cost more to feed me in the cabin." Again he paused, to laugh.

"To me it sounds grim rather than laughable," said I.

"Grim!" he exclaimed. "Why grim? Do

your job. That's the motto, or would be if merchant sailors had mottoes. But we did have a bit of a wild time down the Atlantic. The skipper, an old-style driver, didn't dare carry sail. There was no leaving canvas aloft till the last minute, as one does with a good crew. The mate wasn't a bully, but no one could bluff him. I followed his lead, of course. You can't treat that sort of crew in the lily-hand way. One of 'em drew a knife on the mate when we were three days out. A belaying pin soon cooled his hash. Next day one of 'em went for me. I was never one to scrap if it could be avoided. It couldn't be that time and things were soon settled. We had plenty more troubles, but by when she was well down in the South Atlantic the crew was beginning to shape up.

"Just when the mate and I were beginning to think we weren't going to have such a bad voyage, the skipper fell ill and had to lay up. It didn't much matter. With me to help, the mate could take care of the ship. But a few days later we ran into a blow. A blow? That ferocious wind, that savage gray-backed sea, were utterly incredible. Badly scared, the crew managed to get sail off her; with the mate and me to help them.

FOR two days she took a terrific pounding; then, when the weather looked a bit like clearing, shifted cargo and went over on her beam ends. We knew she was done for; but led the crew into the hold to try to trim cargo and get her upright. That's where the pig iron came in. Working for thirty-six hours without a minute's rest, we dug down to it through the coal, hoisted, and placed it elsewhere. Up she came! The mate reported to the skipper, who, scarce conscious, managed to give orders to take her to Monte Video and get a new crew before trying the Horn.

"When he came back to the deck, the mate asked me, 'Is it Monte or the Horn?' I told him the Horn was fine with me if it was with him: so we laid her course for

the Horn. We not only hated to waste a good wind. We wanted to see how that crew would stack up as Cape Horners. I found out. The mate never knew a thing about it." He paused, and smiled reminiscently.

"Dearest, I'm afraid you're talking too much. You mustn't bore people, you know," interposed the woman, and to me said, apologetically, "My husband seldom talks."

"Go on," said I. "What do you imply when you say the mate never knew a thing about it?"

"We'd no more than laid her on a course for the Horn when the wind came back almost as hard as ever, but it was from astern this time," he continued. "With a gale at her heels, a ship rolls heavily; specially with the sort of cargo we had. While she dipped her railings under, one after the other, the gray-backs unceasingly swept her decks. We'd been running only a short time when one knocked the mate down, and swept him into the scuppers. He couldn't rise. Had a leg broken, and some ribs cracked. I told two of the crew to carry him to his bunk. 'Take her to Monte!' he groaned, as they bore him away. She was making ten miles an hour with only her topsails set. If I turned her for Monte, the wind'd be dead in her teeth. Wasting a grand wind!"

"Forgetting the discipline he'd been taught, one of the crew yelled, 'Will we take her to Monte?'

"I yelled back, 'You'll say 'sir' when you speak to me.' You've got to have discipline at such a time as that. He scowled, and I landed him a crack on the jaw. He fell, and I grabbed him just in time to save him from going overboard. 'Is we going to Monte, sir?' he yelled. I ordered him to get a bag of seal oil and hang it over the bow. Nothing like seal oil to break the force of the sea. With only an eighteen-year-old in charge you couldn't blame the crew for being scared. They thought I was putting the oil over to make turning her

round for Monte less risky, and went to the ropes; ready to obey my orders when they came. When the oil was over I shouted, 'Go below and get some rest! We're off for the Horn!' They stared at me, sullen eyed; water swirling to their knees, their thighs, their middles. I reached for a belaying pin. They went below, and I ran to the bridge."

"Did you get round the Horn?" I asked.

"Of course," he coolly answered. "Two days after the mate was hurt I took her past the corner of Staten Land. That's ninety-eight miles northeast of the Horn. We were forty-four days making the ninety-eight miles. Six weeks of wind at hurricane force, dead in her teeth. Snow, or sleet, or hail, or icy rain. Sometimes we'd hear drift ice clinking against her sides in the inky night. Though you don't usually meet bergs down there in winter, we were several times amongst bergs. The sails and rigging were coated with ice, from a few days after we rounded the corner of Staten."

"What of the mate and skipper?" I asked.

"I turned them over to the steward, and, except to snatch a snooze in the chartroom now and then, never left the deck. I ate in the chartroom when I ate. In six weeks I never had my clothes off: not even my oilskins."

"What about the crew?" I inquired.

"They were all right. They had to be, or die. But give 'em their due. They weren't cowards, when the showdown came. Only one tried to malinger, and the others dragged him back to the deck. That was the disgrated second mate. He disappeared one black night. We never knew how he went. I'm afraid he hated me. It's the one unpleasant memory of that voyage. But, after all, it wasn't my fault he was disgrated."

"Look!" he continued. "A landsman can have no idea what the Horn was like, how a crew suffered. No warmth in their

quarters except what their shivering bodies could produce. Their bedding always sodden. Always the same wretched food. The palms of their hands continual torture, because of the splits that came in the thick skin at every finger-joint. Red flesh showing at the bottom of the splits. Salt water boils at neck and wrists, wherever their frozen oilskins rubbed their skin."

"What about yourself?" I asked.

"Oh, the same with me of course, but I'd been round the Horn six times before. One gets used to it. Usually an officer doesn't have as tough a time as the crew, because he doesn't have to go aloft and handle sails. Naturally, I had to do whatever my crew did. An eighteen-year-old with no license can't put on airs."

"You spoke of four first voyage apprentices? What of them?" I queried.

"They were training to be officers, just as I was, and knew that a fellow can't be an officer if he can't take his medicine. But the crew fought the sea for survival alone. They did at first, rather. After a week or two they began to fight just for the sake of fighting. Something had wakened pride in them."

"You had something to do with that," I suggested.

"Me?—Oh, no! Not at all. I remember that I did go to their quarters once, in a bit of a lull, and tell them that if ever we got her round the Horn the skipper'd be proud of them."

"Now that you weren't living in the apprentices' quarters you had better food, of course," I said.

"That'd not have been quite square," he replied. "The skipper was too sick to know anything, and I couldn't very well take advantage of him by having the steward serve me cabin grub. Besides, I wanted to see if I could get her round the Horn just as a plain every day apprentice. I thought it'd be a bit of a joke on the owner. I even thought that maybe the owner'd give me some monetary recompense. Apprentices drew no pay at all, you know."

THE skipper grew better when we entered warm weather, and was able to do the navigating and to supervise things generally. He fixed the mate's leg after a fashion, and I suppose the cracked ribs mended themselves after a fashion too. But the mate was disabled all the way to port, and went to the hospital when we came in. I never saw him again. I left the ship myself before she sailed for home, my apprenticeship done.

"Did the owner pay you well for what you'd done?" I asked.

"Devil a cent!" he laughed. "Money isn't everything, thank heaven! I'd have liked to stay with the ship, but fell ill myself soon after she came to port. I was run down, I suppose, from having done three men's work for so long on such poor grub. There was no doctor in a sailing ship, of course; and the skipper didn't dare send me to a hospital and run up a bill on the owner. He'd have lost his job. The doctors tell me I must have had pneumonia. I survived anyway, but it left me with some loose screws, so that I couldn't go in sail any more. Steam's no life for a sailor, but I couldn't stick that long either. I had to come ashore."

"I'd think you'd hate the sea," said I.

"The sea was all right. It was the human element that at times rather spoiled things," he replied. "Why hate the sea?"

"What do you think of the war?" I queried.

"It's hard to be doing nothing," he answered, and added, "Sorry to have talked so much."

"Come along, dear. Try to remember you're not a boy. You're fighting's done," interposed the woman.

"You'd keep an' man young," he replied, and to me said, "Meet my skipper. The best skipper ever any sailor sailed with. His wife smiled to me, put a hand on his arm, and led him away.

A month or so after my meeting with that sailor fellow, I had a letter from my brother. "I've had a stroke of

luck," he wrote. "My paper's sending me to sea with a convoy. We sail tomorrow. . . ." His letter was interrupted there, and continued some days later. "I didn't get away as soon as I'd expected to. Several of the ships of the convoy were short of officers. But I've joined my ship now. Her skipper's young, and tremendously keen. It's his first voyage as skipper. I think I'd feel better with one of wider experience; and yet—this is a young man's war. No old stager could be expected to stand the appalling strain at sea these days. . . ."

There was another break in the letter, which continued the following day. "We almost missed sailing with the convoy. The skipper passed my open door while I was writing to you, and stopped to introduce his second mate; a lad of round twenty or so, and keen as his superior. When I'd shaken hands with him the skipper said, 'I hope my first mate shows up soon. I can't think where he is, and I can't sail without him.'

"My skipper had but spoken when a naval officer appeared. 'Captain, I'm afraid you'll have to wait for the next convoy,' said he, 'we had to send your first mate to a larger ship.' While the skipper and second mate stared at him, both of them too disappointed to find words, he asked my business aboard. 'How about my getting a transfer to some other ship, sir?' I asked, when I'd explained my presence. He replied that there wasn't a chance. With everything arranged to the least detail, the convoy was leaving in a few hours. I picked up my grip and followed the navy man along the alleyway to the deck. Stepping to the deck we came face to face with a man in civilian clothes. 'What are you doing aboard this ship? Where's your pass?' demanded the officer.

"This is the only pass I have, sir. I heard this ship needed a first mate. I'd like the berth, sir," replied the fellow, and handed the officer some papers.

"One doesn't often run across a man

with a master's license for sail or steam nowadays. I'll take you to the skipper at once," said the officer, when he'd glanced at the papers.

"I suppose it's the best I can hope for. I notice you've been ashore a good many years," grumbled my skipper when he'd looked at the stranger's papers.

"'A good many years, sir,' answered the stranger. 'I'm afraid my navigation's a bit out of date and rusty; but seamanship's something a man never forgets—not when he's had the drilling in it that I had. Give me the chance, and I'll very soon get my sea legs again, sir.'

"'We'll hope so,' replied my skipper, plainly not at all favorably impressed w'th his new first mate. They went off and I saw nothing of either till next day. The second mate looked in on me that morning, where I lay seasick in my bunk. 'The barometer needle's jumping up and down and I don't like the looks of things,' he said, and added, 'I don't want to see much dirty weather with that old has been of a mate aboard; and I know good and well the skipper feels the same. He's totally out of date, and hasn't even got a pair of sea legs.'

"I felt better toward noon and went on deck. The ship was rolling hard in a high following sea. The sky was low and dark. A chill wind whined in the rigging. The convoy was strung out in three long lines: my ship the last vessel in the center line. As I made toward the bridge a stiff squall blew up from astern, and she began to roll more heavily yet. At one side of the bridge, holding fast to the rail, were the skipper and second mate. At the other, alone, stood the new mate, his feet braced to the rolling, his body swaying easily to the ship's motion, his hands deep in the pockets of his oilskin coat. A sudden hard rain beat down. A bell clanged. The skipper ordered the second mate to keep a sharp lookout, and called to the mate and myself to come down to the saloon for dinner.

" 'Captain, I'd like your permission to take the tarpaulins off those tanks on the deck,' said the mate, as soon as we were seated.

" 'What are you talking about, Mister?' snapped the skipper. 'The tarps are to protect them from the weather.'

" 'They'd be better without them than at the bottom of the sea, sir,' coolly replied the mate.

" 'Just what might you mean?' demanded the skipper.

" 'I've a feeling this old packet's going to break down, sir, if we meet much dirty weather. It looks as if we were in for plenty of it,' the mate answered.

" 'We don't go by *feelings* at sea nowadays, Mister,' satirically replied the skipper.

" 'In my day, sir, there was a thing we called "sea sense,"' replied the mate. 'The sea birds and fish have it. We used to take the old sailing ships through the stormiest seas by it, often seeing no sky for weeks at a time.'

" 'What's all this got to do with the tarps?' the skipper coldly queried.

" 'This ship's not much over fifteen hundred tons, sir. She's little, but I understand she's got a mighty valuable cargo. Any cargo's mighty valuable these days, for that matter. If you'll let me have the tarps, and allow me to have the cargo derricks unshipped and trimmed, we can get her under sail when she does break down.'

" 'And how do you imagine we'd ever make our port under sail?' asked the skipper, with a sneer in his tones.

" 'I said nothing about her getting to the convoy's port of destination, sir. We'd keep her away from the usual convoy courses to avoid the subs, and we'd take her to some other port,' replied the mate.

" 'We'll keep her as she is, and the tarps where they are, and we'll take her to port with the rest of the convoy,' retorted the skipper.

"Four days later a quartermaster looked into the saloon when the skip-

per, mate, and I were at lunch again, and told the skipper that the second mate wanted him on the bridge. The mate followed the skipper. I followed the mate. So far, though sky and sea had remained constantly threatening, and though the barometer had given continual warning, we had experienced no really bad weather. Now the whole sky astern was an unbroken canopy of flying jet black cloud; the sea beneath it almost as black. Already sharp squalls, coming fast one after another, were whipping great sheets of spray from the angry sea crests. Turning to me as we reached the bridge, the mate remarked calmly, 'Bit of a breeze coming, eh?' His eyes grim, his expression one of dread and defiance comingled, the skipper gazed now ahead at the other ships of the convoy, and now astern at the gathering storm.

"Thin rain turned suddenly to sheets of battering hailstones, and at the same instant the wind increased to a savage roar. For a few moments we saw, indistinctly, the vessels to either side of us. Then they vanished, and we were alone. Gesturing toward them 'ere they were lost to view, the skipper shouted to the mate, 'We're doing as well as they are.'

" 'They're new ships. They can stand this sort of thing, sir,' replied the mate, and had but spoken when a grayback lifted its angry crest and crashed over the deck below us.

" 'A fine chance you'd have to get the tarps,' shouted the skipper, and I guessed that the mate had again tried to persuade him on that matter.

" 'It could be managed, sir,' came the mate's calm answer.

" 'You'd best go below and get some sleep while you can,' shouted the skipper.

" 'I'd prefer to stay on deck, sir,' replied the mate.

" 'Obey orders!' commanded the skipper, and the mate went to his cabin. The bridge being no place for a landsman, I went to mine. Lying in my bunk, listen-

ing to the increasing roar of wind and sea, I wondered if ever we should reach our port of destination. Somewhere, the subs were waiting for us. Even if the mate were wrong about his feelings, his sea sense, what hope had we of survival; alone in that all-enveloping savagery. Yet something seemed to tell me he wasn't wrong. But the engines went steadily on, and after a while I dozed off.

"The sound of crash timbers and rending metal awakened me. Sure that the subs had found us, I sprang from my bunk. The mate ran past, and I ran after him. The bridge ladder was torn and twisted, but I managed to follow him up it. The far side of the bridge was gone. Before us, on what was left, knelt the second mate, one hand holding fast to the skipper's prostrate form, the other clinging to a twisted stanchion. For a moment the mate bent over the skipper, then ordered the second to get him to his cabin and to send the chief engineer to the bridge.

"How are things below?" asked the mate when the engineer appeared.

"We thought the subs had her. She's not much better off. She can't stand much of this, sir," replied the engineer.

"Suppose we put the engines to dead slow astern, d'ye think she can weather it?" asked the mate.

"I've heard of that trick, but never saw it tried, sir," answered the engineer.

"Dead slow astern, then. If you can keep the engines going for twenty-four hours we'll bring her through. Have one of your lads put a bag of oil over the port quarter and see he pricks plenty of holes in the canvas. He'll find sail needles on my desk. I'll bring the wind a point on the quarter, and we'll see what we see," said the mate.

"With the engines at dead slow astern, and the oil bag over, the ship rode comparatively easily. In less than an hour after the skipper was taken below the crew had all the tarps in the saloon, whence table and chairs were removed to make room for

them. The rest of the day the mate plied a sail needle with swift fingers, fashioning the tarps into sails while the second kept the bridge.

"At dusk the skipper appeared at the saloon door, 'Give me a needle, Mister. I can sew canvas,' said he, his face drawn with pain.

"THE mate jumped up and took his arm. 'Captain, the best thing you can do for her now is to stay below. If you try to keep the deck, with that broken ankle and broken ribs, we'll all be worrying about you,' argued the mate. He had but spoken when the skipper staggered, and nearly fell. We helped him back to his cabin.

"For the first part of the night I lay on a tarp in the saloon; now listening to the wind's fury, now dozing uneasily. At some time in the early hours I opened my eyes to see the skipper in the doorway again. Bidding me by a gesture to be silent, he beckoned me. 'Help me to my bridge,' he urged, with his lips at my ear. Wordlessly, I pointed toward the cabin; trying to dissuade him. 'Obey orders,' he hissed. The carpenter had repaired the twisted ladder and I helped him up it. As we stepped to the bridge he uttered a sharp cry of pain.

"Who's that?" shouted the second mate.

"The skipper's here sir," I replied. We bore him into the chartroom abaft the bridge, and laid him on the settee. 'That's good. Leave me here and don't say anything to the mate,' he grinned. The second returned to the bridge. Presently the skipper dozed, and I went back to the saloon.

"Where have you been?" inquired the mate, without looking up.

"On the bridge, sir," I replied.

"You have no business on deck. If I'd known you were going I'd have forbidden you," he said, his tones rather stern. Now and then during that night and the following morning he paused to swallow hot coffee and a few bites of food. Each time the steward brought them he asked how the

skipper was. 'He's doing very well, sir,' the steward replied. Then the mate inquired how the second mate was, and the steward answered, 'Fine, sir. I'm up an' down all the time, sir, lookin' after 'em both.'

"By noon that day the sails were ready to set upon the spars that carpenters and engineers had shaped from the cargo derricks. The mate rose, stretched his limbs, and said to me, 'Let's take a look at the skipper.' I followed him to the skipper's cabin.

"'Gone!' he cried, and hurried to the bridge, and shouted to the second that the skipper was lost overboard. And then he shouted angrily, 'What the devil do you find to grin about?' The second pointed to the glass front of the chartroom. Pressed against it was the skipper's face, pale but also grinning. The mate turned to me, 'You knew about this?' he demanded?

"'I had to obey orders, sir,' I replied, and then the mate grinned too.

"Throughout the afternoon the mate coolly ordered and directed, getting the spars aloft. Taking their cue from him, the crew, unused to ropes and sails, were equally cool. Dusk was setting in by when the sails were aloft and ready to set. 'Bully for you, lads! We can take her anywhere we want to now!' cried the mate, and then a grayback roared over the rail and flooded the deck waist deep, and the old ship, with all that added weight forward, stuck her bows deep down in a black sea trough; so that her stern rose high and her propeller raced in the air. As her bow slowly rose, the wind, that had been from astern, came from the beam and she rolled most horribly in the fierce beam sea. Thinking the helmsman had let her fall off, the second shouted, 'Watch your helm there!' Even as he gave the order, the engineer appeared, yelling to the mate that the propeller shaft had cracked. And, as both of them shouted, the mate, already aware that the engines had gone out, bellowed, 'Give her her canvas, sons! Show us a sailor!'

"Leading the way aloft, the mate showed the crew how to loose sails; his feet and theirs slipping in the ice-sheathed rigging; his head and theirs beaten by threshing hail, battered by hissing spray. Later, while they hauled on icy ropes, he hauled with them, everyone waist-deep in raging white water. By nightfall sail was set, and, laid on her course, the ship was riding comparatively easily once more.

"It's difficult to tell you how the days passed then. The whole thing seemed unreal; as though the struggling little ship and her sea-soaked weary crew belonged in some other world than this warring world.

Though constant watch was kept for enemy vessels, our war was in the main against the elements. No smoke came from the funnel. The engines were cold. There was no warmth anywhere, not even in the cook's galley, which was ravaged one chaotic morning by a murderous grayback. No hot food, nor drink. And yet the mate remained all the time utterly calm, entirely confident. 'Three miles an hour, lads! She's doing fine. We've a ship to be proud of!' he'd say. And at that the crew would cheer him, their voices rising high above the gale. He'd think they were cheering the ship, and shout, 'That's the stuff, lads! Trust a ship and she'll do her best for you!' The second mate followed his lead, the two of them serene as though the ship was tied at her dock. The skipper remained throughout in the chartroom, propped on the settee, whence he could watch the battling ship. Whenever I visited him he asked, 'Well, got any news for your paper today? How do you like the sea? Great life, isn't it?' And once, while the mate stood at the other side of the chartroom glass from us, he said, 'Listen, you newspaper man! If this old tub should happen to drag herself into port you damn well tell them about that old whale, see? He's got a wife ashore, and a couple of half-grown kids. Swell-looking woman, and swell-looking kids. I saw their pic-

tures one day. He didn't have to come to sea. Get me?"

"**A** STRANGE thing was that no one but I really noticed, really saw, the mate. I alone saw that, after the second day the ship was under sail, he was sick and suffering. I caught a glimpse of him seated in his cabin, his breath coming in gasps, his face drawn. He had a photograph in his hand and was gazing at it. I was passing on when he saw me. Instantly he jumped up. 'How are you making it? Think you can stick it out till we bring her in?' he cried. Not a thought for himself.

"I said, 'Sir, you're a sick man. You're worse off than the skipper. Couldn't you stay below and leave her to the second and the crew?'

"He replied at once, 'The skipper's young. We don't want him crippled for life. If I didn't keep the deck, he'd be sure to try to. Besides I'm quite all right. I can keep going as long as she needs me. That's all that matters. Stay quiet about it. The second couldn't handle her alone. It wouldn't be fair to let him try it.'

"He did keep going as long as she needed him. We came in yesterday. I can't tell you to what port. A destroyer

picked us up and took us in tow for the last few miles. The mate gave in as soon as the towline was fast. When we docked he and the skipper were taken to a hospital. I went with them in the ambulance, to the hospital door.

"'Well, we had some funny times together, eh?' the mate said to me, smiling, as we shook hands; saying good-bye.

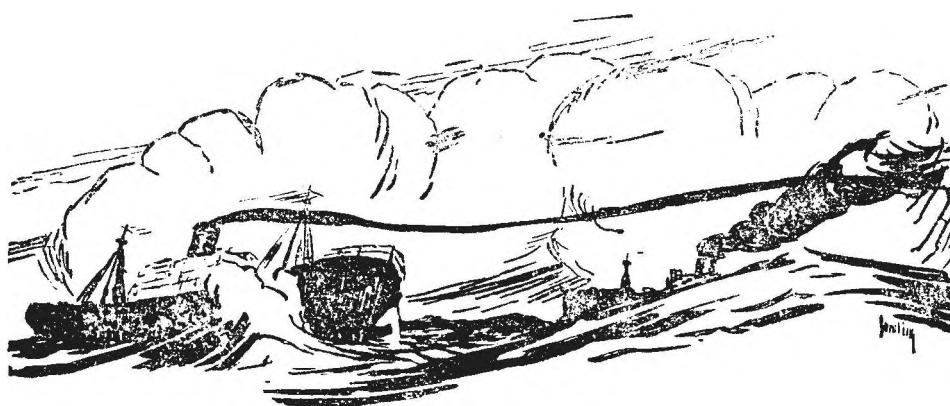
"'A bit grim, I'd call them, sir; and not at all funny,' I replied.

"'Grim?' he exclaimed, 'Why grim? We brought her in, didn't we.'

"The skipper, with his broken ankle, swollen and horribly discolored, with five broken ribs under his shirt, chimed in with. 'Grim hell! I wonder if they can fix me up so I can get back aboard in two or three days. By gad, they'd better realize I've got a job to do.'

"And then, as they lifted the mate from the ambulance, the skipper beckoned to me to come close. 'Don't forget what I told you. . . . I mean . . . about . . .' and then, before he could say any more, he fainted away.

"So there you are, brother. I've told you just how these chaps of the merchant service are. Nothing overdone at all. . . . You get it first. Don't forget. I hope the public won't forget."



Corporal Jimmie Moore of the Mounted Gets His Evidence from the Highest Quarters



TIME CHECK

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of Many Stories of Northern Outposts

THE scene was the snow-banked Mounted Police detachment at Franklin; and Franklin is end-of-steel of a spur line that sprouts off like a feeling tendril from the Hudson Bay Railway north of The Pas. The detachment, for three parts of its capacity, was jammed with a representative cross-section of Franklin's male population. The balance of the room held a gray-haired man with a tobacco-stained mustache sitting at a table, two

men sullen of face standing nearby, and the crisp, blond figure of a Mounted Policeman between these two men and the gray-haired man at the table.

The gray-haired man was Bill May, sometime trapper, now resident postmaster and justice of the peace of the northern settlement. The Mounted Policeman was known to his friends as Corporal "Jimmie" Moore. And of the two big bearded thirty-year-old men at his side, one was Hank Richards—another blond—and Sam

Blackman, whose name might have been tagged on him for his looks alone.

Thus was the setting and these were the characters in Bill May's frontier court of justice. Bill May, father of a much-decorated pilot officer in the air force, was speaking; and he addressed the bearded men.

"We don't want no hummin' or hawin' or hair-splittin'. You'll either plead guilty or not guilty. You've heard the charge; boiled down and in English it says you two birds failed to register when National Registration was on, and moreover you hung out in the scrub hopin' to beat the army rap. Now then, guilty or not?"

The blond man, Richards, fidgeted. Blackman spoke for both of them. "We never figured it applied to us fellers outside civilization—"

"That ain't the point!" blared old Bill May. "What you're doin' is to offer a defense. You'll get plenty chances for that later on. Right now I'm askin' if you're guilty or not; and if you can't talk the King's English, come right out and say so!"

Blackman gave a snort. "Okay, then!" he said blusteringly. "I guess I'm guilty."

Richards nodded. "Sure. That goes for me."

Bill May sighed. "Swell. Now we're really gettin' somewheres." He turned to the policeman. "All right. Corporal Moore, s'pose you step out and tell us all you can of your side of the picture."

The corporal nodded. "The facts are these: Monday last I returned from a trip to Winnipeg. Unlocking and entering the detachment, I discovered this note, ~~posted~~ under the door." He marked it "Exhibit 'A,'" passed it for the magistrate to sign and took it back again. "You will observe that the paper itself is a torn-off half-sheet of writing-paper of good quality with written words thereon. The words read as follows: 'Sam Blackman and Hank Richards are hiding out on their claim on Dog Lake. They should be in the army, or are you cops asleep?'" Corporal Jimmie

Moore gave a whimsical smile. He went on. "As I was not too familiar with this territory or the inhabitants, Your Honor, I showed the note to you. You informed me that the two defendants—the men mentioned in the note—were working a mineral claim on a creek off Dog Lake; and, confronted with the facts, you remembered that neither man had appeared before you to register under National Registration when registration was ordered, which probably was the reason neither had received orders to report for military service. Both are single and both fall in the eligible category.

"The Mounted Police don't spend too much time investigating anonymous notes such as this one, but with specific information that two men were evading registration, I considered it my duty to look into the matter at once. Consequently, I went north on the mail-plane to La Hache and got Buck Harris to fly me the thirty miles further on to Dog Lake. I interviewed the defendants, and despite their threatening attitude and the later offer of a bribe, I arrested them both and brought them here today for trial."

Old Bill May nodded his gray head with vigor. "Yeah. Plumb neatly put." He turned to the two defendants. "Okay, you birds; now what you got to say? We'll hear first from you—Blackman."

BLACKMAN, jet-eyed, heavy-shouldered, in mud-encrusted shirt and high boots, tried to look innocent. "Well, I told you. We thought that this registration business was only for fellers in town. Didn't we, Hank?"

Hank Richards nodded emphatic agreement.

"You did, eh?" Old Bill was not impressed. From under tufted brows he looked up at Sam Blackman. "Got a radio?" he suddenly asked.

Blackman nodded. "Sure. Why?"

"Works?"

"Sure."

"Then yer excuse is no danged good. They put it over the air time and ag'in, and there wasn't a word to make anyone think that this man or the other man was exempt from the provisions of the Registration Act. You got to gimme a better excuse than that'n."

BLACKMAN scowled, but Richards thought fast.

"We were expectin' papers to fill in. When they didn't come, well, we didn't do no more about it."

"Yeah?" Old Bill was plainly skeptical. "You know what I think? I think you never had any idea of registerin' at all. You were a pair of wise guys. You said to yourselves, 'We've got something kinda nice here in this claim; why register, be drafted into the army, end up, mebbe, by goin' overseas and gettin' killed? Nuts to that stuff! We'll hang tough till things quieten down; then they'll forget all about us'."

"That ain't right!" growled Sam Blackman.

"It ain't, eh?" sneered old Bill. He wiped his tobacco-stained mustache, gazed around the interested audience and back to Blackman. "Then tell me this, why is it that from registration day right down till last week you never come to town and you had your grub ordered in by plane? That's more'n a year, and you birds used to be in every month or so."

"There wasn't nothin' to come for," put in the blond man, Richards.

"Then why were you in last week?"

"That was different. It was Christmas time; and anyways, a celebration was due us."

"A celebration what for?"

"The claim," explained Richards. "All winter we bin thawin' gravel and haulin' it out; but come spring, and we'll be ready to start washin' and makin' us some real dough."

"Sure," broke in Blackman. He glared sooty-eyed in Jimmie Moore's direction.

"And we'd be workin' our claim this very minute if only them Yaller-legs'd leave a guy alone!"

"Never mind the Yaller-leg stuff," suggested Bill May, threateningly. "The point is yet all wet. This stuff about fillin' out papers, only guys in town needin' to register and the rest of it is hooey from 'way back when. S'far's I'm concerned, you're just a pair of draft-dodgers, and I'll treat you accordin'ly. I'll order you to pay a fine of a hundred dollars apiece and costs, or, failin' to do so, you can help yourselves to three months in common jail."

Richards gave a surprised "Eh?"

Blackman ripped an oath. "A hundred bucks—?" Blackman began.

"And costs," emphasized Bill. "Costs of the court, of the corporal's trip to Dog Lake, your expenses on the plane coming in from there. At that, I'm lettin' you off light. You know what I can crack you? Ten dollars a day for every day that you've failed to register since registration time."

CORPORAL JIMMIE MOORE was calculating with pencil and paper. He looked up at length. The costs in each case amounted to seventy dollars even.

"So there you are." Bill May uttered the words with evident relish. "That'll cost you a hundred and seventy dollars per head. And not only that," he said quickly. "I'll forward a recommendation to the authorities that if you've missed a military call you be given one right away. Make up for lost time, v'know."

The faces of the two defendants were studies of rage and surprise; but old Bill's feelings seemed to go down well with the crowd in the detachment. Among the crowd were two or three storekeepers and their clerks, Pete Knight who ran the poolroom, and "Big George" McGovern of the local hotel. Then there were loafers from around town, a few halfbreed trappers, and even Chung Lo, proprietor of the "Paris Cafe."

Blackman's voice broke in, harshly pro-

testing. "But we ain't got that much money! This time next year we'll be able to buy you all out, but right now we ain't got it!"

Old Bill shrugged. "Then the free trip to town holds good."

"Without a chance to raise the money?" asked Hank Richards.

Bill May looked across to Corporal Jimmie Moore. Then, "All right," he agreed. "Forty-eight hours. If you haven't raised it by that time, you're outa luck."

Sam Blackman tried one more angle. "But," he whined, "if we get drafted or go to jail, what happens to our claim?"

"Yer claim don't worry me." Old Bill was brutal with contempt. "There's a war on; and if we had to depend on a lot of brush-huntin' jackrabbits like you, Hitler'd move in and you wouldn't have no claim. Court's dismissed!" he suddenly ordered. "And you guys get forty-eight hours to dig up the money."

WITH the clearing of the detachment, Corporal Jimmie Moore lit a cigarette. There were reports to be typed, but these could wait. He picked up the anonymous note, studied it.

"You still think this note is what it looks to be?" he asked old Bill.

"Sure," answered Bill May. "These two guys was on a rip-roarin' drunk all the time you was in the city. Somebody got fed up with 'em and put up a squawk."

"I'll stick to my idea," said the corporal. "It's a plan to railroad them off their claim. And by recommending that the boys get a call for military service, you're only doing what this note-writer knew you would do."

Old Bill scowled. "Ain't there a law protectin' a guy on active service? Like holdin' his claim till he gets back?"

"I believe there is, but maybe the note-writer doesn't know it. Anyway, at an outlandish spot like Dog Lake, a man could gopher out a lot of gold between now and the finish of Hitler. And for another thing," pointed out Jimmie, "there's the

angle you mentioned—about these guys getting killed and never coming back at all."

"Yeah," admitted old Bill May.

Now the policeman held the paper against the light. "The paper's watermarked," he observed. "There's a trademark, a couple of crossed keys. And some words—'ity Bond.' 'City Bond,' mebbe. I'd like to know where it came from."

Old Bill stirred. "Aw, quit worryin'. If you've nothin' to do, type me out a letter. To the O.C. of the military district in Winnipeg, tellin' him we've got a couple good men for him right here."

Coming away from supper in the Paris Cafe that evening, the corporal dropped into Pete Knight's poolroom. Jimmie Moore was a wizard with almost any type of radio, and the poolroom-keeper asked him to take a look at his defective set. Knight's quarters were in the back of the place, and as the two men entered them, a man in overalls and with untidy red hair got out of a chair in which he had been sitting. Knight nodded to him. "Okay, Red; see you later." As the man left, Knight said, "Red works for me at my cordwood camp now and again. But about this radio—check it over, and if you can fix it, I'll pay you what you say."

The job took Jimmie considerably over an hour, but it looked as though the time so spent might pay for itself. For on the table-top and within handreach of where Jimmie was working was a box of Pete Knight's headed writing-paper. "Knight's Billiard Academy, Franklin, Man."—and on the end of the box was the trade-mark of the paper, that pair of crossed keys again and the words, "Security Bond."

"So it's Security Bond," mused Jimmie. He wiped his fingers, and extracted a sheet of the paper. He held it against the light, looked at the watermark, folded the paper and put it in his tunic pocket. To write the police a letter of complaint concerning a pair of roistering drunks was no crime in

itself, but it was always nice to know who one's correspondents were.

"But Pete Knight—?" Jimmie Moore shook his head. "Didn't know Pete was averse to men having a celebration. Or," he asked, "is he?"

There was no answer to the query, and just then Pete Knight himself returned. Knight was tall, spare, with a slash mouth and a perpetual poker face. Noting the radio giving out the soft tempo of a fox-trot, he asked, "Fixed?" Added, "How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing," replied Jimmie. "I like fooling with 'em."

"It's got to be something," persisted Knight. "As a start, how about a drink?"

But Jimmie mentioned the work awaiting him at the detachment, and telling Knight he'd see him later, he came away.

IT HAD been somewhat of a surprise for the corporal to discover that in some way Pete Knight had entered the picture, but two more surprises were due him before the evening was over. One was to find that during his absence from the detachment the anonymous note had been stolen, and the other was when George McGovern of the Franklin Hotel came up to pay the fines and costs of the two men, Blackman and Richards.

Regarding the note, the thing had definitely gone. Jimmie had left the detachment unlocked, and the note had been lying with other papers on the blanket-covered table beside the typewriter. He pawed through these papers, but the search netted him nothing.

"Now what?" he asked. He shoved the service cap onto the back of his head, hooked his thumbs in his belt and scowled around him. During the hour or so he had been away from the detachment, somebody had done a spot of burglarizing. His second question was, "And who?"

His mind immediately flitted to Pete Knight. Knight had kept him fixing the radio, and if Knight were the thief, he

had had ample time to do the job. Nor, except for the missing note, had he left any clues to his visit. There would be no tracks in the hard-packed snow outside, and so far as fingerprints on the doorknob were concerned, in January men wore gloves.

He was still standing there and puzzling the matter when McGovern walked in on him. McGovern was a crony of Pete Knight, reputed to be a hard business man and as crooked as the proverbial dog's hind leg. When he offered a check for three hundred and forty dollars in payment of fines and costs for Blackman and Richards, the corporal bluntly asked him what was the idea.

McGovern brushed his handlebar mustache with his knuckles and his face cracked into a wintry smile.

"Just as a speculation," he said. "The boys'll pay me back sometime; and meanwhile I have a lien on the claim."

Three days later, the corporal thought of this when the two men received their call for military service. There would be a time-limit on that lien, and a lien would wash out any protective regulations a kindly government might set up. But if this were McGovern's "speculation," he was due for a jolt; for one week from the day they went away, Blackman and Richards returned.

The corporal and old Bill May were up at the station when the twice-a-week train pulled in and the two men swung down. Hank Richards spotted them first. He nudged his partner, and the two came over to where the corporal and Bill May were standing.

Blackman grinned. "Well, wise guys! If you figured to railroad Hank and me into the army, it didn't work!"

The corporal said nothing. Old Bill rumbled deeply in his chest. "What d'you mean, railroad you? And how didn't it work?"

"You know what I mean," jeered Blackman. "Some pals of yours wanted our

claim. They couldn't jump us, so they got you two buzzards to shove us into the army. Well, the stunt backfired. They turned Hank down."

The corporal's lips tightened. A few interested listeners were crowding in. Old Bill said, "What'd they turn him down for?"

"His guts. He's got stomach ulcers."

The corporal looked from Blackman to Richards. Richards' grin widened. "So while you took care of Sam, I'm still around. Or do you figure to frame me some other way?"

The grin got Jimmie Moore. "A few more cracks like that and you won't be around at all."

"Which is another laugh!" retorted Hank.

But one of the audience wanted further details. "How come then, Sam, you're here?"

"Me?" grinned Blackman. "Why, them army guys are white men. All of 'em, from the two-bit corporals—" with a flicking glance at Jimmie Moore "—to the officers. 'Take a week, and wind up your business,' they told me. So here I am, all ready to wind it up!"

THAT night the corporal dropped into the poolroom. Nose to the ground, he was still on the trail of that anonymous letter. Complications had arisen for someone by the partners' return, but this might be a break for Jimmie Moore.

Sam Blackman was playing a game with a halfbreed, and except for a goading smile, Blackman seemed content to ignore the policeman entirely. Later, Buck Harris, the pilot, came in. He seemed to be looking for Blackman, for he walked over to the table where the man was playing. Jimmie heard him say that he was going north on a flight the next morning and perhaps Blackman and his partner would care to go along.

"Suits me okay," said Blackman.

"And Hank?"

"I guess. He'll be along after a bit. I'll ask him."

Harris mentioned that he had tried to find the pair at the hotel, but without success. Blackman explained this by saying they had met Abe Mullins in Winnipeg and that Abe had given them the key to his shack and told them to use the place till they went north.

The pilot wanted a game of billiards. Jimmie Moore took him on. After about half an hour Blackman was ready to leave. He said to Harris, "We'll figure on tomorrow morning, then. Hank ain't shown up, but I guess the gal musta kept him."

"Or old Mike," suggested Harris. "If he saw Hank first."

Blackman grinned, and was looping his parka-strings when the door was thrown open and a girl and Pete Knight burst into the room. They stood there for a moment, then Knight pointed to the corporal.

"There he is. Tell him."

Jimmie knew the girl for Annie Grabo. She was dressed in a parka of gaudy blanket-cloth but her face was dead white and her eyes were staring. She rushed over to Jimmie, grabbed him by his tunic-front and shook him hysterically.

"Hank!" she stammered. "Down the trail—his head all blood!"

Jimmie shot a glance at Knight. "What's this? Hank get beat up?"

Knight didn't know. "I was just coming in when she bumped into me."

The girl was still trembling. Jimmie asked her, "Where is Hank? On what trail?"

The girl swallowed with difficulty. "The trail between his shack and our place. Dad was working, so I waited for Hank to come down. When he didn't I went to look for him. I had a flashlight, and—and—" But she could say no more for her shivering returned.

Buck Harris said to the corporal, "I'll fetch the wife." Jimmie turned the girl over to the poolroom keeper, nodded to Sam Blackman. "Let's see about it."

"Yeah," agreed Blackman in a tight voice. "I don't like this—at all!"

Blackman had a flashlight of his own; and when they stepped out, half a dozen other men followed.

Blackman took the lead, and on the outskirts of town they came to a fork in the road. Straight on, a hundred yards away, was Abe Mullins' shack, the one the two men were using; branching off at right-angles was a trail through the spruce.

"This must be it," Blackman said. Again he took the lead, throwing the beam of his flashlight before him. And a few yards along this trail, they all pulled up short. Off to one side a man was lying face down in the snow. And by his clothing, the man was Hank Richards.

HIS cap, a muskrat cap, was lying nearby, and the back of his head was pulp. Blackman drove forward, but the corporal held him.

"Wait!" he ordered. "This looks like murder."

"But he may be alive!"

"And there may be tracks. Leave him to me." Jimmie took the flashlight from Blackman and knelt down.

He guessed that Richards was dead, and he was certain of it when he felt for the pulse. Looking up at Blackman, he said, "You can't help him." He added, "When did you see him last?"

Blackman broke into a fit of savage cursing, directed mainly at Jimmie Moore. But the corporal shut him up.

"I'm asking questions. When did you see him last?"

"Soon after nine," barked Blackman. "What's that to do with it?"

"Where?"

"In the shack. Listening to the news."

"Did he tell you he was going out? Say where he was going?"

"Sure. Said he had a date with Annie Grabo at ten."

By Jimmie's wrist-watch it was now ten-fifteen. "Tell you anything else?"

"Only that he wouldn't be there long. Said he'd see her again tomorrow when the old man went to bed."

The corporal knew that Mike Grabo, Annie's father, was a night-watchman for an airplane company at the river base. He also recalled that gossip had it that the old man had no use for Hank Richards, which would be the reason for Richards calling on the girl while old Mike was away. He gave a grunt, turned to the body again.

But there was little to see, save the body itself and a pool of blood that had seeped into the snow. Whoever had killed Hank Richards had apparently clubbed him down from ambush as he passed by. Either that, or the killer had watched Richards leave the shack, followed him, and got him from behind.

The corporal turned to one of the men. "Get Hackett down here with a stretcher. And tell him to make it fast." Hackett was the local undertaker, whose place of business was not far distant on the main trail.

When the man left, the corporal began a careful hunt around; but he found nothing. There were no tracks around the body, there was no sign of the weapon used, and the trail itself was packed to the hardness of cement by the cold and the passing of many feet. When the undertaker arrived, Hank Richards' body was loaded onto the stretcher.

"We'll take him up to your place," said the corporal. "Hold him there, too, for the inquest."

They all went back together, and as though by common consent made straight for the poolroom. Annie Grabo had gone, and only Pete Knight and the red-headed man who worked "now and again" for him were present.

"Find him?" asked Knight.

The corporal nodded, asked a question himself. "You say you bumped into the girl outside here?"

"Yes," said Knight. "I was just getting

back from the hotel. Take my meals there, y'know."

"Your meals? At ten at night?"

"At six," corrected Knight. "I spent the evening with George McGovern afterwards. But about Hank Richards—is he really hurt?"

"He's really dead."

Knight's poker-face gave no hint of the surprise he should have felt.

"And you've no idea who killed him." More a statement than a question, Knight's remark called for no answer. Jimmie indicated the red-headed man.

"What's Red's other name? Everyone seems to call him Red?"

Sam Blackman answered. "Hennesy. I oughta know. Red worked for me last fall on the claim."

Red and the corporal looked each other over. "When did you quit, Red?"

Hennesy's voice was saw-edged. "Last November. There's easier ways of makin' a livin' than bullin' around the bottom of a ten-foot shaft."

The corporal grunted. "Where were you tonight, between nine and ten?"

Red's face suddenly darkened. "What's it to you where I was?"

"Don't be a fool!" Pete Knight's voice cut in sharply. "Murder's been done, and the corporal has a right to ask."

"Then I was asleep," growled Hennesy. "Asleep in my place over the Chink's."

"And the Chink saw you there?"

"The Chink saw nothin'. There's a back stairway, and I use it."

GEORGE McGOVERN, when Jimmie called on him later at the hotel, went good for Pete Knight's alibi. "Sure Pete was here," he said. "Both of us together, up in my room."

"What did you do?"

"Oh, had a drink or two, listened to the radio. Roosevelt," he said off-handedly, "was pretty good tonight—"

"Never mind about Roosevelt," ordered Jimmie. "Somebody beefed Hank Richards

about ten o'clock tonight, and I'm checking up."

McGovern's hard face showed surprise, if Pete Knight's hadn't.

"Beefed him?" Then, "And you figure you've got to check up on Pete?"

"What time did Pete leave here?" countered the corporal.

"About ten, I guess. Maybe a bit before. But who says Hank was beefed around ten?"

Jimmie told him. "Sam Blackman left him about nine, and came down to the poolroom. Annie Grabo showed up around ten-five or ten-ten, and Hank was dead already. Hank was going to meet the girl at ten o'clock, and when he didn't keep the date, she went to find him."

"Too bad," grunted McGovern. "But I guess Pete'll go into the clear."

Frustrated at the first round in his investigation, Jimmie Moore headed back for the poolroom. McGovern and Pete Knight alibied each other, and Red Hennesy was asleep when the killing occurred.

"We're doing well. And they're all the suspects I have."

At the poolroom he picked up Sam Blackman and with him went down to the river-base and called on Mike Grabo. Grabo, a bull-necked Hungarian of fifty-five, knew all about the killing already. One of the boys had been down to tell him, and as soon as a relief arrived he was going home. Now he was waiting in the lighted airplane workshop.

"You didn't like Hank, eh?" asked the corporal.

"No," answered Grabo. "He vass no goot. I tell Annie keep away from heem. W'en she wouldn't, I pound her."

"You pounded her, eh?" observed the corporal. "Why not pound him?"

Grabo spread his grubby hands. "He vass too big."

The corporal gave a grunt. "You been here all night?"

"Yes, sure. Just me, alone here all night."

Another man with an alibi. Jimmie went at him for fifteen minutes without success. Like Red Hennesy, Grabo had no proof of his alibi, but on the other hand, Jimmie could not disprove it. They left, and the corporal said they would call on Annie Grabo.

On the way there, they detoured to Abe Mullins' shack. The place, deserted and isolated in a grove of spruce, was in darkness but Blackman unlocked the door and they went inside.

The place was clean, held a wide bunk, a cookstove, chairs, table and a radio. Two packsacks were on the floor near the bunk, and the corporal asked which was Richard's. Shown, he fastened it, picked it up and said he would take it along.

From there to Mike Grabo's place was about four hundred yards. Annie Grabo was there with a woman who was apparently her mother. Both women had been weeping and already learned the news. Annie said, in answer to Jimmie's question, that she had last seen Hank alive in the Paris Cafe, where she worked. Hank had arranged to meet her when he was there for supper.

"Anybody hear him make the arrangement?" asked Jimmie.

She didn't know. There had been several men at the counter at the time, and although Hank had lowered his voice, somebody might have overheard him.

"Red Hennesy there?" asked Jimmie.

The girl raised a tear-stained face. "Red Hennesey?" No, Red hadn't been there at the time, although he came in soon afterwards.

"But somebody may have known that Hank was coming down to see you," persisted Jimmie.

"Yes," admitted the girl. "Anybody."

JIMMIE MOORE admitted he was up against it. The crime was as simple as it was brutal, and it was the simplicity of it that made it more difficult to solve. A search the following morning revealed nothing more than was known the previous night, except that Doc Knowles, the local medico-coroner, said that death had been instantaneous and was the result of a series of blows on the head by a blunt instrument. An inquest was slated for two in the afternoon, and so that he should have a permanent record of even the slightest details, Jimmie sat down at the typewriter and set them out.

El Lobo makes it a Fiesta day. Viva the great American Saint—Jorge Washeenton!

"Clocking of Buzzard Pass"

WALT COBURN



A Novelette

in the

Next

SHORT

STORIES

It was all a matter of time, the exact time of the murder. Blackman had left Richards soon after nine; the girl had found him soon after ten. Who between nine and ten had had the opportunity? Then suddenly the corporal's eyes narrowed and he pushed back slowly from the machine.

A matter of time. If Sam Blackman could give him a statement of just what Hank Richards was doing when he last saw him, the case would begin to crack; and if that jibed with something else that the corporal remembered, the whole thing would fall apart.

First, he called on Bill May, picked him up and dropped in on Doc Knowles. After a few minutes with the medical man, they went in search of Sam Blackman. What Blackman had to say would be important, and they found him killing time in Pete Knight's poolroom.

Pete Knight, too, was there, fitting tips to a billiard cue with Red Hennesy looking on; but Blackman was out of earshot of them, watching two other men having a game. Jimmie and Bill May crossed over to where he was sitting.

"The inquest is for two o'clock this afternoon," the corporal began, "but there are one or two points that I want to get straight first. One of 'em is the precise time you left Hank in the cabin. You say it was soon after nine. But are you sure of that?"

"Certainly," said Blackman. "Hank was listening to the news when I left him. The C.B.C. news. That always comes on at nine o'clock."

"You were in the poolroom soon after nine-thirty," observed the corporal. "Because that's when I came in. And I saw you there. But I don't think you could have left Hank listening to the news, because it didn't come on last night till nine-thirty. From nine till nine-thirty the President of the United States was speaking; and as that was carried over the Canadian network, the news was postponed."

For a moment something blazed in Sam

Blackman's sooty eyes, but Jimmie went calmly on.

"Another thing I'd like to know. You say Abe Mullins gave you the key to his shack. How was it that if you left Hank in the shack last night when you came away, you had the key and unlocked the place when we went down later?"

Blackman blinked. "I—I always carry the key," he said.

"All right, then," countered Jimmie. "If you had the key and you left Hank there, how did he lock the door when he came away?"

Blackman glared at him, but his breath was coming quickly. "What's all this mean—all this about news and keys?"

"It means," Jimmie told him, "that I don't need to look any further for the guy who beefed Hank Richards. You did the job yourself."

"Nuts!" said Blackman derisively. "Me kill Hank! What for?"

"What for? I'll tell you what for. Because you found out that Hank was the guy who wrote that anonymous note—that it was Hank and not me who railroaded you into the army!"

There was silence in the poolrom. The two players nearby were motionless, cues in hand. Pete Knight and Red Hennesy had moved in.

"I'll tell you the rest of it," went on the corporal. "Hank had an idea he could never pass the army exam. On a plea of wanting to get some life insurance, he called on Doc Knowles when you two were last in town and had a check-up. What the doc told him, verified his belief; so he decided to capitalize on it. If he wrote me a note squawking about the two of you not registering, he himself would never be suspected; and he figured that once you were convicted, an army call would follow. And with you out of the way and he rejected, he'd have all that big gravel dump to himself. It was an added bit of luck for Hank that Doc Knowles was away from town when the case was tried, for he was

able to get his army call, with you, without Doc saying a word to anyone about him being unfit.

"Hank didn't expect to get a hundred-and-forty-dollar fine out of it, but it would be worth that in the end. That is, it would have been if you hadn't got wise to it."

Blackman, watching the corporal narrowly, said, "How could I get wise to it?"

"Because," Jimmie told him, "you're the guy who walked into the detachment that night and pinched the note. With the note in your possession you hoped to find the guy that wrote it. And you did —you recognized Hank's writing." After a pause, Jimmie went on. "Then you got your idea. If you weren't going to capitalize on the claim, Hank wouldn't either. So you decided to kill him. It wouldn't do to make a sloppy job of it or to bump him off in Winnipeg, where it would be hard to find a motive; but to get him back here, to build up a story about some mysterious third party 'railroading' you off the claim, well, you'd be the last guy in the world that one would suspect."

"So last night you went through with it. Instead of leaving Hank in the shack, you came out with him. Hank was early for his date with Annie Grabo, but, as I found out when I searched him, he didn't have a watch and you probably told him it was getting on for ten. You probably also said that you'd go along with him as he wouldn't be there long; and you locked the door behind you, pocketed the key, and went with him. And down where we found him last night, you let him have it."

Blackman's jaws were gritting and there was a cornered look in his eye. Jimmie knew all the signs, and was ready for what would happen.

"You're nuts!" said Blackman thickly. "If I killed him—"

"If you killed him?" jeered the corporal. "Suppose I told you I had the definite proof—the weapon you used, Hank's blood still in evidence on it, your fingerprints—"

It was a bluff, but it worked. Blackman

came out of his seat like a wild bull. And Jimmie hit him.

He went back, shook his head, charged again. And again Jimmie let him have it. He gave the man no chance to get set at all, drove him the third time on the point of the jaw and saw him collapse. Before the dazed Blackman could recover, there was one more thing that Jimmie wanted. It was the letter, stolen from the detachment. If Blackman were the man who had stolen it, it would probably still be in his possession. For Blackman was that sort—boastful, gloating, the sort of man who would treasure something like that as a tribute to his long-headedness and cunning. And Jimmie found it.

It was tucked away in Blackman's wallet, with his money, his newly-acquired registration certificate and his army pass. The corporal turned to Pete Knight.

"Did Sam, at any time, bum a sheet of writing-paper off you?"

The poolroom-keeper frowned. "Believe he did; about a month ago when they were down from the north. Said he wanted to drop a note to his girl. But how did you know it?"

The corporal didn't reply to the question just then. He was watching Sam Blackman as the man got up and slumped into his seat.

"You're under arrest for murder, Sam," he told him. "So anything you say may be used against you. But at that, all you can say won't hurt you more than you've hurt yourself already; although, if you get a good lawyer, the extenuating circumstances plea should be pretty good."

Old Bill May, who had said nothing nor taken part in the proceedings, now added his bit.

"You should never have picked that particular night. Not if you was figurin' on usin' the news broadcast as an alibi. As it is, we got a top-notch witness against you." In answer to Jimmie Moore's inquiring glance, he added, "Sure; the President of the U. S. A."

Curioddities BY WEILL

IN ANCIENT CARTHAGE WHEN A CHILD REACHED THE AGE OF TWO MONTHS IT WAS EXAMINED BY A SPECIAL COMMITTEE AND, IF IT DID NOT RESEMBLE THE FATHER-
IT WAS KILLED!



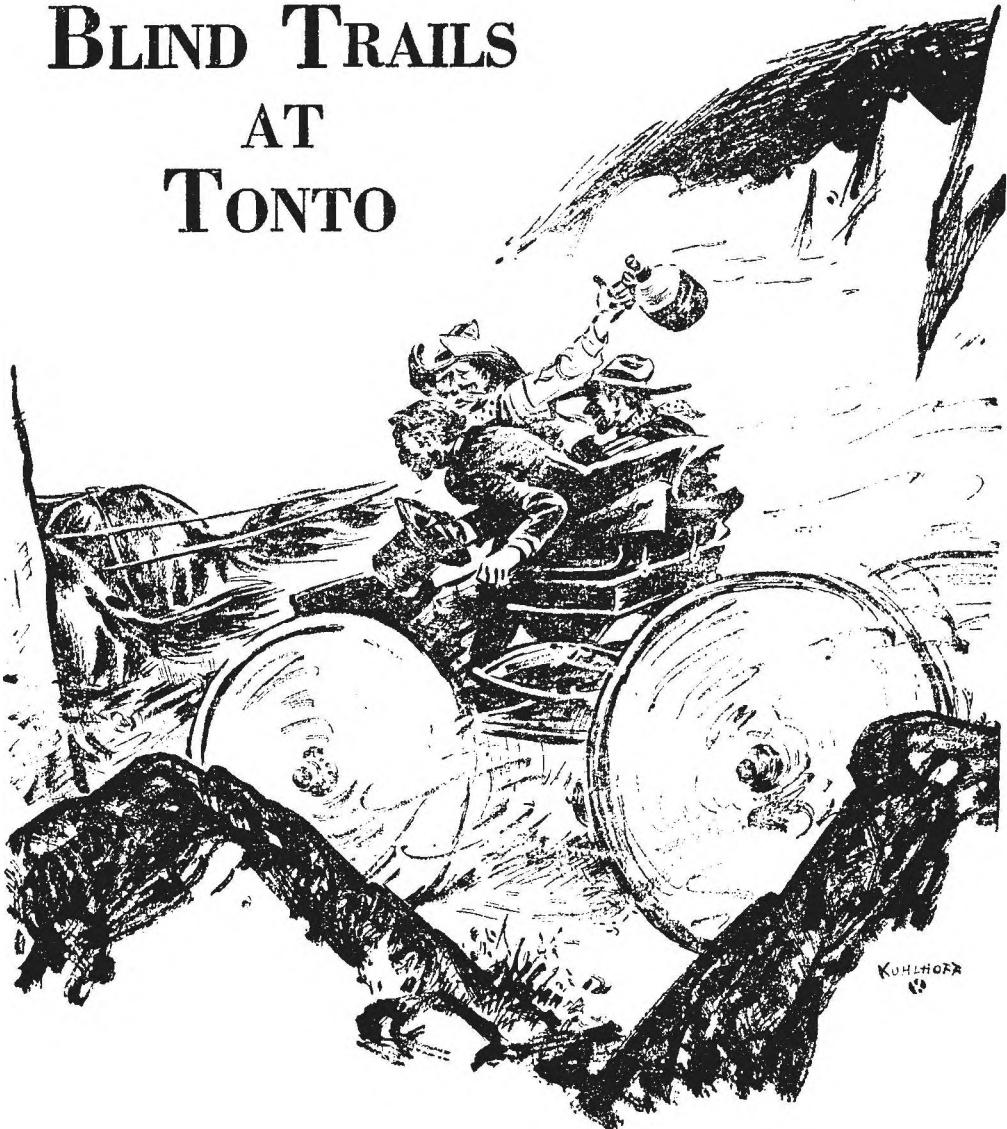
IN ENGLAND IN 1360, A BOOK COST AS MUCH AS A SHEEPFOLD, A KITCHEN OR A COUPLE OF COTTAGES!



THE WEAVER BIRD GETS ITS NAME FROM ITS HABIT OF WEAVING ELABORATE NESTS. IF SUPPLIED WITH SUITABLE MATERIAL, SUCH AS RAFFIA, IT WILL HOLD EACH STRAND IN PLACE WITH ITS FEET, WHILE THE FREE END IS LOOPED AND KNOTTED - REPEATING THIS PROCESS INDUSTRIOUSLY UNTIL THE STRAW IS COMPLETELY USED.

WHEN WERE HOMING PIGEONS FIRST USED IN WARFARE? See Curioddities next time.

BLIND TRAILS AT TONTO



By W. C. TUTTLE
Author of the Henry Stories

HENRY HARRISON CONROY, sheriff of Wild Horse Valley, held up a water-glass filled with an amber-colored liquor, and squinted thoughtfully through it at the light from an oil lamp.

"Nectar of the gods," he said quietly. "Ambrosia—fit for the palate of a king."

"Judge" Van Treese, the deputy sheriff, had swallowed his drink, and his Adam's

apple was doing a devil's dance. A few tears trickled down his seamed cheeks, and he opened his eyes. Then he said huskily: "The king is dead, Henry."

"Frijole Bill" Cullison, the cook, tilted back in a chair against the wall of the main room in the JHC ranchhouse, looked curiously at Judge, while "Slim" Pickins, a lean-faced cowpuncher, sprawled in a chair, an empty tin-cup dangling from a long forefinger.

*In Many Ways Henry Was Always Resourceful;
a Good Quality in Any Sheriff*



Henry Harrison Conroy drank slowly and thoughtfully, his eyes closed, and his nose, the biggest and reddest in Arizona, seemed to glow with an added power.

"Egad!" he breathed. "It doth take posseesion."

"What in the name of the Lord did you put in that last batch, Frijole?" asked Judge. "There is more than the juice of the prune."

"Yea-a-ah," admitted Frijole Bill, "there is. I blended her with potato alcohol, added some rice, a couple pounds of raisins, and topped her all off with a few shots of horse liniment. Yuh see, I wasn't just sure how she'd act on the human frame. I had t' shrink a couple new hoops on that danged keg, because she kept a-swellin'."

"And she purred like a cat," added Slim. "Times she kinda groaned, too. I got kinda spicious of that stuff, so I wrapped the keg in a tarp, tied a rope around her, and tied it off to the bunk-post."

"You'd lie, and Slim would swear to it," declared Judge.

"Personally," said Henry, "I believe it. I can still hear it crackle."

"I tried her out this mornin'," said Frijole soberly, and I found out one thing, Henry. If she blows back on yuh, don't be perlite. Jist open yore mouth wide. I didn't, and it blowed off a pivot-tooth I've had for twenty year. It atchally did, and I found that tooth buried half out of sight in a pine board."

"And then I seen old Bill Shakespeare,

the rooster. He'd got hisself full of the mesh. Well, sir, he—"

"Have done!" snorted Judge. "No lies please, Frijole. No one ever sees that Bill Shakespeare, except yourself—and you'd lie about—"

"I seen him, Judge," interrupted Slim.

"Tell us more, Slim," urged Henry. "I am in the mood for a good lie."

"I am not," declared Judge. "I believe that, instead of listening to lies about an inebriated rooster, we should be planning just what we intend to do in this campaign. According to the *Scorpion Bend Clarion*, and may James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly stew in his own grease, we haven't a chance on earth to remain in office. He says that Honest Ed Henderson will poll twenty votes to our one."

"And you, sir," said Henry patiently, "want me to waste my energies at such odds. Twenty to one—my godness!"

"And unless we bestir ourselves—he may be right in his odds," said Judge.

"Some day, when I'm in the right mood," said Slim Pickins, "I'm goin' up to Scorpion Bend and kill me an editor."

"And hang for it, I presume," said Judge.

"If yuh cut off his ears," said Frijole, "I'll bet yuh can't hang him; that rope would slip right over his head. How about another little snifter, gents?"

THEY were a queer pair of peace officers, Henry Harrison Conroy and Judge Van Treece. Henry, short and fat, with a big, red nose, was a well-known figure in vaudeville for many years. In fact, Henry grew up back-stage, with little knowledge of anything outside the theater. But when vaudeville waned, and Henry, confronted with the necessity of making a living, was willed a ranch in Wild Horse Valley by an uncle he had never known, Henry knew nothing about the West; and the West had never seen anything like Henry, with his tailored clothes, derby hats, gold-headed cane and spats.

Wild Horse Valley, and especially Tonto City, chuckled with glee. In Tonto City was Judge Van Treece, tall, angular lawyer, who drank himself out of the profession. With the figure and face of a tragedian, courtly manners and a frayed frock coat, he appealed to Henry's sense of humor.

And when Wild Horse Valley, during an election, wrote Henry's name on their ballots in sufficient numbers to assure his election as sheriff, Henry, in turn, appointed Judge Van Treece as his deputy. And then, to add flavor to the office, he appointed Oscar Johnson, a giant Swede horse wrangler, as jailer.

"If Wild Horse Valley's sense of humor elected me," said Henry, "I shall give them more to laugh at."

But in spite of outward appearances Henry and Judge had proved their ability to handle the affairs of their office. Perhaps they drank too much, perhaps their methods were not of the approved Western sheriff, but the results were the same. Frijole Bill and Slim Pickins handled the work at the JHC, together with Thunder and Lightning Mendoza, two brothers, who mishandled the King's English, and loved to lie in the shade.

But things were changing in Tonto City. Jim Nelson, reputed a big-town gambler, had purchased the King's Castle, the biggest saloon, gambling house and honkatonk in the country. It was Nelson who was backing Ed Henderson, owner of the Circle H spread, for sheriff. Nelson didn't like Henry and Judge. Henderson was a cattleman, hard-faced, cold-eyed, who wore a fierce mustache and rode bad horses. Henry had nothing against Henderson, who had been in the valley about nine years.

The editor of the *Clarion* had coined the name "Honest Ed" Henderson.

Just where the honesty came in, he had never divulged, but it gave him a chance to work the honesty angle for all it was worth in his editorials against the regime of Henry Harrison Conroy, although he

could not say that Henry had ever done anything dishonest.

Frijole Bill was the cook — when he wasn't distilling prunes into a very remarkable whiskey, which had become rather infamous for its potency. Frijole was past sixty, with a heavy mustache on a face entirely too small for such an ornament, and he would not weigh over a hundred pounds, filled with his own concoctions. Slim Pickins was about forty, lean as a half-starved hound, with a lean, serious face and a pair of inquiring eyebrows.

"Yuh know what I'd do?" asked Frijole. "If I was runnin' for sheriff, I'd hire me a band, and I'd hire the Slim Princess to sing to the voters. By golly, I'll betcha I'd get votes."

"Even if I wasn't runnin'," amended Slim, "I'd take her. Wouldn't even bother about a band."

"Keep your mind on taking care of the JHC cows," said Judge.

The "Slim Princess," as she was known, was Jim Nelson's wife, and the principle attraction at the King's Castle. She was also an accomplished faro dealer. But the cowboy and miner worshiped from afar, because she paid them no attention, and Jim Nelson had let it be known that she was taboo.

Frijole filled their glasses again.

"I cannot quite grasp that twenty-to-one prophecy, Judge," said Henry. "I look at you, and I consider me. The odds are not fair, my friend."

"Too large?" asked Judge, sniffing at his liquor.

"Too small," replied Henry soberly. "If Honest Ed is half as good as the *Clarion* paints him—we will be lucky to vote for ourselves. In fact, after reading that last editorial, I doubt that I shall vote for myself."

"I feel thataway m'self," said Frijole. "He's a dinger."

Judge drank half the glassful, shuddered visibly and put down the glass with a trembling hand.

"You might at least blend it, Frijole," he said. "My last swallow was pure horse liniment."

"It don't blend so good," said Frijole. "Yuh see, I stirred in that liniment, but soon's I quit, she comes right to the top again."

"The thing to do," said Slim, "is to take off the top, rub yourself good, and then drink the rest."

Henry got up and placed his glass on the table, his eyes closed tightly.

"O, Death where is thy sting?" he whispered.

"Listen!" exclaimed Slim.

Someone was coming up onto the porch. Suddenly the lamp chimney exploded into a million pieces of thin glass, and from outside came the blasting report of a rifle. A framed picture at the end of the room came down with a crash, as two more shots were fired.

ALL four men were on their feet, staring at the door, where protruding splinters showed where a bullet had smashed through. For a space of perhaps ten seconds no one moved nor spoke. Then they heard the sound of galloping hoofs, receding in the distance.

"They got Uncle Jason!" exclaimed Frijole, pointing at the picture frame on the floor, the glass shattered.

Henry walked to the door and flung it open. On the porch, sprawled on his face, was a man. A rivulet of crimson was spreading across the boards. Frijole brought the lamp and they examined him. He was a middle-aged man, not very tall nor very heavy, roughly dressed, and quite dead from two bullets.

None of them had ever seen the man before. About fifty feet from the porch stood a saddled horse, reins down. Slim went out and led the animal over to the light, where he examined it.

"This is Russ Haley's horse," he said. "Now what would a dead man be doin' with Russ' horse?"

"He wasn't dead when he got it," reminded Frijole.

"Yeah, that's right—he wasn't."

"Such inane conversation!" snorted Judge. "Of all the damnable—"

"Slim," said Henry calmly, "will you please get a horse and go to town after Doctor Bogart?"

"I shore will, Henry."

"You might find him at the King's Castle," called Judge, "tryin' to make a pair of deuces beat a full-house."

They went back into the house, but left the door open. Judge said:

"This makes fine grain for the *Clarion* mill, Henry. A stranger is killed on the steps of the sheriff's home. And only two weeks before election. Why couldn't this have waited until the issue was determined?"

"A very constructive idea, my dear Judge," said Henry. "But unfortunately human passions are not guided by political necessity. Unless, of course, you feel that our opponents have stooped to murdering on our front porch in an effort to embarrass us. What do you think, Frijole?"

"We don't know the man — and he's dead," replied Frijole soberly.

"That is a sensible answer," said Henry. "Poor Uncle Jason!"

THEY went to the back of the room and looked at the picture. It was a huge, crayon portrait of Jason H. Conroy, founder of the JHC Ranch. It was there, when Henry took possession, and out of respect for the man who had so kindly willed him the ranch, he left it on the wall. But now the ornate frame was cracked, the glass broken, and Uncle Jason was half-out of his frame. A bullet had cut the wire.

"It won't seem like home no more without Uncle Jason," said Frijole sadly. "I helped him hang that picture. A feller promised to enlarge the photograft for two dollars and sell him a frame for ten. The bill was fifteen dollars for the picture and twenty for the frame. Uncle Jason said he

hung the damn thing up there, so that every time a peddler came along he could look at it—and shoot the peddler."

"One time, when Uncle Jason came home drunk and lit the lamp, he thought the frame was a winder, and some whiskered pelicano lookin' through at him. So he throwed three shots, before the lamp blew out, but he never came within two feet of the picture."

"Uncle Jason," said Henry soberly, "must have had a fine soul."

"Well, maybe he did," replied Frijole doubtfully, "but it never showed."

"I feel," said Judge, "that we should consider the dead man, and why he was shot on our porch. It must have been with malice aforethought."

"And a thirty-thirty," added Frijole. "Look at that hole in the door."

They took the lamp out there again, and searched the man's pockets. There was not even a cent in money, nothing, except, deep in a pocket they found a crumpled piece of paper on which was crudely penciled:

TONTO CITY—SOUTH OF SCORPION BEND. STAGE LINE.

There were no marks on the clothes, as far as they could see. Judge examined the wrinkled suit and the heavy shoes.

"Penitentiary clothes, Henry," he said. "I'd bet my soul on that."

"I have never worn them, sir; I wouldn't know," said Henry soberly.

JIMMY SEARS, the stage driver, admitted that he gave the man a free ride from Scorpion Bend. Said Jimmy, a good-hearted old rawhider:

"He said he didn't have a cent, and he wanted to go to Tonto City. Shucks, it didn't cost me a cent to let him ride. He sat on the seat with me, but he didn't talk any. That is, he didn't say much."

"Did he ask about anybody in particular?" asked Henry.

"No, he didn't, Henry. He said he ain't never been here before."

Russ Haley, the cowboy, whose horse the old man had stolen, laughed heartily over what happened.

"He stopped me in front of the King's Castle Saloon," said Haley, "and asked me where the sheriff's office was. I told him where it was, and I said there wasn't anybody there, 'cause I just came past. Then I told him how to get out to the JHC—and I'm a son-of-a-gun if he didn't steal my bronc to go out there."

Another man came to Henry and said he had seen the man in the King's Castle, listening to the Slim Princess singing. Later, he said, he saw the man standing against the wall, watching the crowd.

THE stage from Scorpion Bend came in about four o'clock; so the man was in Tonto City from that time until about nine o'clock that evening. But no one had seen him in conversation with anyone. Something had happened during those five hours to cause him to need a sheriff's assistance; a need so great that he stole a horse to go after that assistance.

In the sheriff's office Oscar Johnson, the giant Swede jailer, was telling Judge Van Treece, "Ay am yust as good defective as anybody, Yudge. Ay hord, "Oscar lowered his voice confidentially, "von of de girls at De King's Castle say to anudder girl, 'Das ha'ar faller come to me and he ask me who is sinking dat song, and Ay say it is de Slim Princess'."

"In the same dialect, I presume," said Judge soberly. "And just what does that prove, Oscar?"

"Va'al, Henry wanted to know who talked vit the dead man, Yudge."

"Very good, my dear Oscar. But every man who sees or hears her for the first time would probably ask the same questions. And for your information, the word is detective—not defective—although, in my opinion they work about the same."

"T'ank yu," smiled Oscar. "Ay vill listen some more."

"You better keep away from the girls at the King's Castle," advised Judge. "The next thing we know, you will be using perfume."

"Su-ure," grinned Oscar. "Ay bought bottle dis morning. Yockey Club."

"Better not let Josephine smell it on you."

Josephine, the maid-of-all-work at the Tonto Hotel, was Oscar's light o' love. She was a big, raw-boned person, with a hard jaw, and a punch in either hand."

"Ay am t'rough vit vimmin'," declared Oscar. "Dey are frickle."

Shortly after Oscar left the office Henry came back, sat down at his desk and tried three times to put his feet on the top. Failing in this, he sagged back in the chair and looked soberly at Judge.

"You seem a bit depressed," remarked Judge.

"I am not, sir," declared Henry. "Right now I am in the hands of a scientific detective; so there is no reason for depression."

"You jest, my friend?" inquired Judge, mildly interested.

"Far from it, sirrah. Came this morn to Tonto City, a stranger, whose card indicated that he is J. W. Ferguson, private detective. I found him at Doc Bogart's place, conferring with John Harper, our eminent prosecutor, as J. W. L. Pelly indicates him in the *Clarion*, and the good doctor. It seems that Mr. Ferguson is interested in our latest casualty. In fact, he is so much interested in that corpse that I have been asked to request that everyone in Tonto City come to see the corpse, and to try and identify same, while Mr. Ferguson, from concealment, mind you, observes their reactions.

"Doctor Bogart will place the deceased on a bier in the center of his mait. room, and while the curious throng moves in single-file from west to east, Mr. Ferguson will observe from between the portieres in

the small archway, leading south. Is that fairly clear in your mind, sir?"

"The arrangement seems simple," nodded Judge. "In fact, everything seems simple, including Mr. Ferguson. Has he told you what his interest may be, and just who the dead man was?"

"He," replied Henry quietly, "is rather reticent."

"Does he," asked Judge, "expect the killer to come and examine the handiwork?"

"He hath an idea," replied Henry soberly. "He told me he had. Well, I must pass the word to the folk of Tonto City. The remains will be on display at two of the clock."

Jim Nelson, owner of the King's Castle, listened to Henry.

"What do you want me to do—close my place for an hour?" he asked sourly. "And why the hell should I order all the girls to go down there and look at a dead man, Sheriff?"

"You see," explained Henry confidentially, "we suspect that this man jilted one of the girls in your honkatonk, and she shot him. Now, if that girl was obliged to look at him—"

"You're crazy!" snorted Nelson. "One of my girls? Would one of my girls steal a horse and—Conroy, I've been told that you have some of the craziest ideas on earth—but this is the worst."

"Thank you, sir. Now if you will ask that they all come there—"

"All right," growled Nelson. "We'll all come, if it will make you feel any better."

"I would greatly appreciate it, Mr. Nelson. If I can solve this case quickly enough, it might be of some assistance to me in the coming election."

"You'll need plenty," said Jim Nelson coldly. "Henderson will beat you so badly that you'll be ready to leave Wild Horse Valley."

"I am all a-twitter with apprehension," declared Henry soberly.

HOWEVER, Jim Nelson cooperated one hundred percent by closing the King's Castle and insisting that every employee go down to Doctor Bogart's place. The room was not very large, so the line formed out at the gate. It seemed that everybody in Tonto City was present. Henry stood inside the room, leaning against the wall, only a few feet from the casket, while through a slit in the portieres, Ferguson sat, where he could see the faces of everyone who halted to look at the dead man.

Then began the slow shuffle of feet, as cowboy, cattlemen, miners and townsfolk moved slowly past the open casket. The girls from the King's Castle were at the far end of the line. Henry, squint-eyed and thoughtful, watched the expression of their faces.

Suddenly a gunshot broke the quiet of the place. Glass tinkled, the portieres shuddered violently, and a heavy thud sounded. Henry whirled and yanked a portiere aside. The detective was flat on the floor, one hand still clutching the bottom of one portiere. One pane of glass in the window behind him was shattered.

Henry turned and looked at the shocked audience. Doctor Bogart came from another room, and Henry motioned him. Then he said:

"I shall have to excuse you, folks—at least for a while; we've got another one."

Judge tried to shoo them out, like a bunch of chickens, while Henry ran out, managed to get through the fence, and circle the place, but there was no one in sight. He shoved his way through the crowd outside, and joined Judge and the doctor.

"This man is dead, Henry," said the doctor. "My God, this is awful! In my house! Someone shot through the window. Did you see anyone?"

Henry shook his head. "They rarely wait for the law," he said. "Take care of things, Judge; I must look around a bit."

Some of the crowd were still in the yard,

but the folks from the King's Castle had all gone back to the saloon. John Harper, the prosecutor, met Henry. Neither of them had anything to say, until Harper remarked:

"I guess you've got a job ahead of you, Henry."

"You mean—finding the murderers, John?"

"Henry, if you don't—you're sunk; you will have to leave them for Ed Henderson to solve."

"And then," replied Henry quietly, "he will be sunk."

"No doubt—but he will be the sheriff, Henry. He has said that when he is elected he will guarantee that crime will cease in Wild Horse Valley."

"Which, in my estimation, John, is the talk of a half-wit."

"True enough," agreed the lawyer, "but the masses love it."

"Perhaps. But John, I should hate to see crime abolished in Wild Horse Valley—and so would you. It's part of the place. And who wants to live in a milk and honey Utopia? It doesn't fit, John. It would be like a cowboy wearing a silk topper."

The lawyer laughed. "Maybe you're right, Henry; but don't voice it to anyone else. They're all talking of a crimeless county, with Honest Ed Henderson for sheriff. They know better—but it sounds good."

Henry went back to the office, where this time he succeeded in getting his two feet up on the desk-top. Judge came in, tilted his accustomed chair against the wall and hooked his heels over the lower rung. Henry opened his eyes, looked at Judge, and closed them again.

"Of all the damn things to happen—now!" grunted Judge.

"What was that?" asked Henry.

"Why, that murder at Doc Bogart's—what else would I be speaking about?"

"Oh, I thought something new had happened, Judge."

"New? My God, Henry, that happened

less than an hour ago. They are already criticizing you, although they do not know what that stranger was doing behind the curtain. They think it was your idea."

"It seems," said Henry quietly, "that this Mr. Ferguson followed the stranger here, possibly seeking someone else, whom the man might contact. The stranger died, and the one he wanted to find—didn't want to be found. As Oscar would say, he's a tough yigger."

"Two murders," sighed Judge. "And election in the offing."

"And," added Henry, "at odds of twenty to one. Why struggle, Judge? Even allowing for J. W. L. Pelly's malice and imagination, at two votes to our one, we are vanquished."

"You mean that you are not going to—er—make an effort?"

"Judge," replied Henry soberly, "when I came into the office the gamblers of Tonto were offering juicy odds that I would never be able to put my two feet on my own desk-top. Did those odds deter me? They did not, sir. In spite of the odds, and in spite of my own-er-rotundity, I made it. Damme, Judge, I haven't even begun to fight!"

"When and how will you make this fight, as you term it, sir?"

"I have no tongue for oratory, Judge. My actions will speak for themselves. Is there any more of Frijole's distillation in the back room?"

"Enough," replied Judge, "to addle the brains and atrophy the muscles of an army."

"Good!" said Henry. "That will make a small drink for each of us."

JAMES WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW PELLY, editor and owner of the Scorpion Bend *Clarion*, came to Tonto City. Word of the first murder had reached him, and he came to Tonto immediately. He was not an impressive figure, being rather scrawny, near-sighted, and with a high-pitched voice, which usually broke

badly under strain of excitement. Pelly thoroughly believed in himself as a crusader, and never lost an opportunity to wield a vitriolic pen against the regime of Henry Harrison Conroy. It was Pelly who coined the expression, "The Shame of Arizona," when speaking of Henry, Judge and Oscar.

Pelly found Jim Nelson and Ed Henderson in the King's Castle, and from them he learned about the latest killing. Nelson told him about Henry's orders to have all the employees of the saloon try to identify the corpse, and that someone shot through a rear window and killed another stranger, who was seated behind the drapes. No one had told Nelson who the stranger was, nor why he was there.

"Very puzzling," agreed Pelly. "Great story, of course, put puzzling."

"I'll buy a drink," offered Henderson, who had already drunk too much.

"I never drink," said Pelly. "Thank you just the same. I must try and get more information."

PELLY didn't want to go down to the sheriff's office. He was just a bit afraid of Oscar Johnson, who always wanted to shake hands, and Pelly had never been able to use that hand for hours afterward. Pelly left the saloon and crossed the street, where he stood in front of the general store, trying to make up his mind, only to suddenly find himself surrounded with Oscar Johnson, Slim Pickins and Frijole Bill Cullison.

"Ay am delighted you are ha'ar," declared Oscar. "Shake."

James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly put his hands behind him and tried to back against the wall, only to find that Slim was directly behind him. These three had fine teamwork.

"No use a-bein' onfriendly," said Frijole.

"Keep your hands off me," gritted Pelly impotently.

Jim Nelson and Ed Henderson saw this

tableau from the King's Castle, and decided that one of their biggest political assets was in trouble. So they went over there. Oscar, Slim and Frijole saw them coming.

"Now ain't that a shame?" said Slim quietly. "A maiden in distress, and here comes a couple knights."

"Las' night and night before," said Frijole. Pelly didn't see them, until they stepped up on the sidewalk, and Nelson said:

"Need a little help, Pelly?"

"Yes, I—I do."

Oscar Johnson was not one to stand on the ceremony. Without any preliminary motions he hit Jim Nelson on the jaw. Nelson was a big man, solid built, and reputed a fighter, but the Swede had the kick of a work mule in either hand, and that blow knocked Nelson, not only off his feet, but off the two-foot-high sidewalk.

As quick as a cat Frijole dropped behind Ed Henderson, and a quick push by Slim Pickins sent Henderson upside down to join Nelson, who was still enjoying a constellation of some sort. Then Oscar took hold of Pelly's sleeve and said quietly:

"If you want to see Henry, we vill take you to him."

Pelly didn't say anything. His legs started functioning, and he went with them, while a crowd gathered around Nelson and Henderson.

Henry and Judge had just finished their second drink, and were in a very expansive mood. They looked in amazement at James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly and his companions. Pelly blurted:

"I resent this, I tell you! I am a citizen of this country, and I am entitled to protection. The actions of these men are reprehensible!"

"Have they injured you mentally or physically?" asked Judge.

"They forced me here, I tell you! They—"

"Who forced yuh?" interrupted Slim, assuming an injured air.

"Well, damn it, I was afraid that if I didn't come—"

"Purely a mental case," said Henry soberly.

"I demand my rights!" shrilled Pelly.

"Well, we haven't got them," declared Slim.

"This situation," declared Judge, "is getting inane. Invite Mr. Pelly to have a drink, will you, Slim? I'm not speaking to him myself."

"I don't want any drink!" snapped Pelly. "My friends come to assist me, and are beaten and slugged. A fine state of affairs, I must say."

"Your friends?" queried Henry.

"Mr. Nelson and Mr. Henderson," said Pelly hotly.

"Beaten and slugged?"

"Good heavens, what happened?" asked Judge quickly.

"Aw, it wasn't anythin'," said Frijole. "Jim Nelson had a run-in with Oscar, and got his jaw cracked. Then Ed Henderson fell over me and landed in the street. They prob'ly ain't hurt much—I'm sorry to say."

"Oscar, why did you hit Jim Nelson?" asked Henry severely. Oscar grinned slowly.

"Va'al, he asked for it, Hanry," he replied.

HENRY nodded, apparently satisfied with the reply.

"My God, Henry, do you condone such actions?" remarked Judge.

"I believe in service," replied Henry soberly. "Why, I believe it is mentioned in the Bible—ask and thou shalt receive. Possibly Mr. Nelson doesn't read his Bible."

Judge walked to the doorway and looked up the street. There were several men in front of the King's Castle, and the usual number on the street, but Nelson and Henderson were not in sight. Tommy Roper, a stuttering cowboy, who managed the livery stable, came up to the doorway, grinning.

"I sus-sus-sus—" he began.

"You saw it," finished Judge soberly. "Who was to blame, Tommy?"

"That bub-big Swede can huh-huh-huh—"

"Yes, he can hit," said Judge.

TOMMY walked away, still grinning and unperturbed. He was used to having folks finish his sentences for him. John Harper, prosecutor, came from the King's Castle. If John had any sense of humor, it rarely came to the surface. He came into the office and looked at the assemblage.

"I did not see it," he stated, "but the folks over at the saloon say that Oscar made an unprovoked attack on Jim Nelson. And that what happened to Ed Henderson was also unprovoked and very embarrassing to their candidate."

"John, just what am I supposed to do about it?" queried Henry.

"You might appoint another jailer, Henry."

"Listen, John," said Henry quickly, "I am not toadying to the King's Castle. Oscar Johnson is still my choice as a jailer. You may carry that statement back to Jim Nelson, and in a little personal message from me, you can tell him to go to hell."

The lawyer flushed quickly. "I am not a messenger boy, Henry," he said.

"You came here as one, John. You brought a message from Jim Nelson."

"Did I? Yes, perhaps I did. Sorry. But if you have anything to tell Jim Nelson, you can tell it to him personally."

"Thank you, John; I shall."

The lawyer walked out and James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly said:

"What about me?"

"We have wondered that same thing lots of times," said Judge.

"I've got a fresh jug out in the car, Henry," said Frijole. "It seems that this is the proper time to have a little drink."

"Mr. Pelly," said Henry, "you came here for information, I believe."

"I was forced to come here," declared Pelly warmly."

Oscar leaned over and looked into Pelly's face.

"You vars—what?" he asked.

Pelly blinked and drew back. "I—I could use some information," he said weakly.

"Pour some drinks, Judge," said Henry, "while I enlighten Mr. Pelly. You have cups for six, I believe."

"None for me," said Pelly quickly. "I—I rarely drink."

"Only six drinks, Judge," said Henry. "Now, Mr. Pelly, just what do you wish to know?"

"Everything," replied Pelly, "and I don't drink."

"You want to know *everything*—and you do not drink," mused Henry.

"I mean I want to know all about those two murders," corrected Pelly.

"That is very simple," smiled Henry, "but, my dear man, you surely will be willing to wait until I know something about them myself. One man was shot on the porch of my ranchhouse. One was shot behind the curtains in Doctor Bogart's home. Why and by whom, we do not know. The last death was a Mr. Ferguson, private detective. Where he came from and why he came here we do not know. The identity of the first murdered man is still a mystery."

"Do you expect me to believe all that?" asked Pelly.

"Here's yore drink, Pelly," said Slim, handing the tin cupful of Frijole's concoction to the newspaper editor.

"But I do not want it," insisted Pelly. "I told you—"

"Ay don't like to be snoo-tee," said Oscar, "but Ay t'ink you vill like it."

James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly drank it. He shut his eyes, tilted the cup, and did not draw a breath, until the cup was empty. Then he almost didn't. He leaned on Henry's desk, wheezing, his eyes pouring tears down his lean cheeks, while

Slim Pickins pounded him on the back. But he recovered, blinking through his tears, as he tried with unsteady hands to adjust his necktie. Finally he took a deep breath and turned to Henry.

"As you were saying," he remarked in a husky whisper, and then began to grin foolishly. The depth-bomb had busted.

DOCTOR BOGART was a very busy man, what with two corpses and his regular round of visits. With only one man identified, and no clue as to where either came from, it looks as though Wild Horse Valley would have to bury them both. There wasn't much money in that for Doctor Bogart.

He had just put on his coat, preparatory to going up to talk with Henry about the inquests, when there was a quiet knock on the back door. It was the entertainer from the King's Castle, known as the Slim Princess. She was slim, olive-skinned, dark-haired, and very pretty. Doctor Bogart had only seen her at a distance.

"This may seem like a queer request, Doctor," she said quietly, "but I should like to see the dead man."

"My dear lady, we have two," said the doctor.

"I—I mean the first one, Doctor," she said quickly.

"Why, yes, you may see him. Step this way, please."

He led her to the back room, where she looked fearfully at the two white-draped boxes, and did not come forward until he had uncovered one of them. Then she came timidly forward, her eyes wide. Suddenly she stopped, swaying forward, and it seemed to Doctor Bogart that there was an expression of horror in her eyes and on her face. She stepped back and stood there, lips tightly shut.

"Do you know him?" asked the doctor quietly.

"Know him?" she looked up quickly. "No, I—I—don't, Doctor. I thought—" she shook her head. "I thought I might,"

she finished, and turned back to the other room. Doctor Bogart followed her to the back door, where she stopped and opened her purse.

"Would the county have to bury him—them?" she asked.

"Unless some friend or relative could be located, Miss."

She handed him a roll of bills and turned away quickly.

"That might help a little," she said, and went across the yard.

Doctor Bogart was frankly puzzled. Why would this girl come down there alone, look at one of the dead men and then give him two hundred dollars to help pay funeral expenses? He put on his hat, pocketed the money and decided to talk it over with Henry Conroy.

Things had become very rosy at the sheriff's office. James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly wanted to sing.

"I c'n do it, too," he declared owlishly. "I used to b'long to a quart."

"A what?" asked Slim.

"A quart," explained Pelly. "Four shingers. I wash the ten'r."

"What did you wash him with—soap?" asked Henry.

"I needa drink."

"My lad," said Judge patronizingly, "do not forget that you are the owner and editor of the *Clarion*."

James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly cuffed his hat over one eye and leered at Judge.

"I am," he declared, "the mas'r of my own shoul, the cap'n of my own fate. I run 'er, or leave 'er alone. I wanna shing."

Henry took Slim aside and whispered that it would be a very bright idea to take Mr. Pelly out to the ranch and sober him up a little. Slim, nearly as cock-eyed as Pelly, agreed heartily.

So Slim explained that Pelly should be their honored guest at the JHC, where they had plenty more of that same brand of liquor. Pelly accepted the idea, cried over their hospitality, and was willing to ride

Slim's horse, while Slim rode behind him. The horse had never borne a double burden, but nobody cared about that. Ed Henderson saw what was going on down at the office; so he came down there, possibly thinking that Pelly was being misused.

Pelly was already in the saddle, and Slim was about to mount behind him when Henderson arrived. Henderson stepped in beside the horse and said to Pelly:

"What in the devil is the matter with you, Pelly?"

Slowly the editor of the *Clarion* turned his head and looked down at the man he had dubbed "Honest Ed." He chuckled foolishly and pointed a bony forefinger at Henderson, as he said quickly:

"Now wouldn't you like to know?"

And almost at that same moment Slim Pickins leaped off the sidewalk, grasped the cantle of the saddle with his right hand and tried to make a fancy mount behind the saddle. He hit the animal's rump with one knee, and did a sort of swan dive over the rump and into the street.

NO horse would stand for such actions behind its back, much less a half-broke animal such as Slim rode. With a snort of fright, it bogged down its head, reins flying, and headed down the street, pitching wickedly, while James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly clung with both hands to the horn. There could be only one finale, although Pelly made a famous ride. Nearly against the big watering trough in front of the livery stable, the horse sun-fished to the left, and James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly, describing a nearly perfect arc, went full length into the two feet of water.

Tommy Roper ran from the stable and pulled him over the edge, while the horse kept right on bucking, as it headed for the JHC. Doctor Bogart joined them in front of the office, wondering what it was all about. It was evident that Pelly was not badly injured, because he was on his

feet, apparently arguing with Tommy Roper.

"It's a wonder the damn fool wasn't killed," said Henderson.

"We can't have everything," said Henry soberly, although there were tears in his eyes. Henderson grunted and headed for the stable.

Doctor Bogart touched Henry on the arm, and indicated that they walk up the street.

"I don't know what this means, Henry," explained the doctor, "but perhaps you can figure some angle to it." And then he told Henry what had happened at his home.

"Do you think she knew the old man?" asked Henry.

"I do, Henry," declared the doctor. "Her actions indicated that she knew him. She didn't care to see the other body."

"And she gave you two hundred dollars. Hm-m-m-m. And she came and left by the back door, which would indicate that she didn't want anyone to see her."

"A very, very pretty woman, Henry," said the doctor.

"And rather hard around the edges, I might add," said Henry. "Still, she would be—the life she leads. And Jim Nelson watching her like a hawk. Doc, I feel that you have really dug up something for me. Did she ask you to keep this a secret?"

"No, she didn't, Henry."

"I see. Well, we will keep her secret—as long as possible, Doc. Thank you for telling me."

Ed Henderson had taken James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly over to the King's Castle, fearing that he might have gone over to the enemy. Jim Nelson was mad. His prestige had been marred by a big, ignorant Swede, and he was ready to curse anyone, just to relieve his own feelings. He looked at Pelly, still wet and only partly sobered by his ride and dive.

"Well, you let Conroy and his gang make a first-class fool out of you," he said angrily.

"That," declared Pelly, "is none of your

business. You didn't look so good, out there in the street a while ago yourself—nor did Henderson. Honest Ed—on the back of his neck in the dust. And you jump onto me! Take care of your own morals—I'll look after mine."

"Take it easy," said Al Horne, one of Nelson's gamblers, as he tried to make Pelly presentable, with the aid of a towel. "Jim didn't mean anything, Pelly. He has your interests at heart."

"That's right, Pelly," said Henderson. "We're all friends of yours."

"There's one thing I like about Conroy and his gang," said Pelly. "They don't like me, and they don't try to make me feel differently. At least they're honest. I've fought them ever since they were elected, and they've never tried to win me over to their side. Damned if I don't believe they like to fight me."

"Well, you won't have to fight them much longer," assured Henderson.

Al Horne gave Pelly a drink of liquor and he downed it at a gulp. The strong whiskey brought color back into his face. There were a lot of people standing around, watching them minister to the needs of Pelly, and listening to what was said. Someone said something about a new regime bringing peace and safety to Wild Horse Valley.

"That's a lot of bull, and you know it," said Pelly. "It sounds good in print. I've been thinking about it—lately. My fight against Conroy has made my paper popular. I realize that Conroy told me a little while ago that when he is defeated I won't have anything to write about; so I might as well come down and live with him at the JHC, and we'll both go to seed."

Jim Nelson shoved through the crowd to Pelly. "So that's the way you feel about it, eh?" he snarled. "Going to throw us down at the last moment, eh? How much is Conroy paying you to double-cross us?"

"Conroy," said Pelly firmly, "said that if I ever said anything good about him

he'd come down and break my damned neck. I don't believe I like either of you. At least, I'm free and can do as I please. I'm not for sale, Mr. Nelson, and I'm too big a coward to be scared into anything."

"Have another drink and forget all this foolishness," said Al Horne.

"I'll have the drink—and pay for it," said Pelly. "And I've always prided myself on a first-class memory."

JIM NELSON and Ed Henderson went to Scorpion Bend next day. Henry was of the opinion that they went to make peace with James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly, and to do a little promoting for Ed Henderson.

Henry wanted a chance to talk with the Slim Princess.

He knew that her dressing room and living quarters were upstairs over the honkatonk in the King's Castle. The rest of the girls lived up there, too, and all used a rear stairway from the stage to reach their dressing room. Henry wanted this interview to be private, but just how to accomplish this he did not know. There was a main stairway leading up from the gambling parlor, but this was in full view of the public. Henry had never been too popular with Nelson, who seemed to resent even having the law come there for innocent pastime.

But Henry was resourceful. He had a private talk with Oscar Johnson that evening, and the big Swede, known as the "Vitrified Viking," was more than willing.

"Maybe it will work into somet'ing, Hanry," he said, grinning widely.

"Don't go too far," advised Henry.

"Ay will just go far enough," assured Oscar.

That evening, when things were beginning to warm up in the King's Castle, Henry sauntered into the saloon and made his way slowly back to the gambling room. Not over six people were in there, including Al Horne, who usually operated the roulette wheel. Henry stopped near the

foot of the stairs, casually watching the play at the roulette.

Suddenly from the bar came the loud voice of Oscar Johnson:

"Ay can whip any damn man in de house, ay ta'al you that!"

"Oh-oh!" grunted one of the players. "The Swede's on the war-path again!"

"Ay whipped Yim Nelson, and Ay can whip him again!"

Al Horne stopped the wheel and headed for the archway, followed by the players. A few moments later Henry was up the stairs and safely in one of the halls, where the light was dim. There seemed to be an uproar from the barroom, but that was to be expected, where Oscar was concerned.

Not knowing the layout up there Henry was unable to determine just which rooms the Slim Princess occupied; so he took a chance and moved back to the stairway, leading to the stage. From there he could hear her singing one of her encores, and in a few moments she came up the stairway, with a swish of silken skirts.

He stepped out to meet her, and she stopped short, her face only a white blur in the dim light. For several moments they faced each other. Then she said, "What are you doing up here? Don't you know—"

"Yes, my dear, I know that Jim Nelson never allows men up here. But I am up here, and what I want is a private matter, which we may only discuss together. In a few moments there will be a chorus of girls up the stairs."

"Then you better get out of here," she said coldly. Henry laughed.

"After all, my dear," he said gently, "I am the law. Your beauty and grace do not appeal to me at all, and I am old enough to be your father. Please be sensible for the moment and take me into your room, where we may talk things over."

Only a dozen steps down the hallway she unlocked the door, and Henry followed her in. It was the living-room of their apartment. The Slim Princess sank

down in a chair. There was no light in the room, except from a curtained window. The girl said quietly:

"What did you want to know, Mr. Conroy?"

"Did Jim Nelson know that you gave two hundred dollars to Doctor Bogart?"

"No, no," she said quickly. "I—I don't know why—"

"What was your father's name?" asked Henry. It was a shot in the dark.

The girl jerked forward, staring at Henry.

"You knew?" she asked huskily.

Henry drew a deep breath and settled back in his chair.

"You see," he explained, trying to appear casual, "the other man was a detective named Ferguson. He told me part of the story. I'd like to have your part, my dear. But first your father's name."

"His name was Jack Winters," she said, "but I don't know any of the story. I don't know why he came here. I haven't heard from him for over ten years. Mr. Conroy, I thought he was dead."

"A strange story," said Henry quietly. "Did Jim Nelson know your father?"

"No. Oh, we must hurry. I have to be back there in a few minutes."

"One more question, if you do not mind," said Henry. "Were you among the girls who came down to Doctor Bogart's place to view the corpse?"

"No," she said quietly. "Jim said I didn't need to go."

"I see. You didn't happen to know Ferguson, the detective?"

"No, I did not, Mr. Conroy. I didn't even know what his name was, nor that he was a detective."

"I guess that is all and thank you very much, my dear. Perhaps you had better wait until I get downstairs. I shall hurry."

Henry closed the door quietly and went down the hallway to the railing near the stairway above the gambling room. None of the games were operating. It was a chance for him to gain the lower floor,

without being seen. But as he stepped over to the top of the stairs he saw Al Horne, the gamblers, standing in the shadow near the top of the stairway, leaning against the wall.

"Looking for somebody?" he asked coldly.

"Not now, sir," replied Henry, and walked down into the gambling room.

Al Horne followed him down, but had nothing further to say. Henry went into the barroom. There were quite a number of men in there, and one of the swimmers was sweeping up broken glass from behind the bar. John Harper, the prosecutor, was at the bar, and he followed Henry to the street.

"What happened, John?" asked Henry.

"That big Swede again, Henry. He came into the barroom and announced that he could whip any man in town, including Jim Nelson, I believe. Buck Faber and Dave North, the two bouncers, decided to throw him out."

"Did they?" asked Henry.

"I don't think so," replied Harper. "I didn't see it all. I saw Oscar throw Buck Faber halfway across the street, and then he went back. They say he threw North across the bar and smashed a hundred pieces of glassware. They had to take North down to have Doctor Bogart sew up some of his wounds. Henry, you'll have to get rid of that man; he is a menace to society."

"Buck Faber and Dave North are not society, John," said Henry.

"No, I—I guess that's right, too."

"Ergo, we keep Oscar, John. Really, he is a jewel. A bit rough, of course, but who would expect a jailer in Wild Horse Valley to be polished? I love every bone in his hard head."

"Well," sighed the lawyer, "I suppose it is up to you, Henry."

"Thank you, John."

He found Judge and Oscar in the office. As far as he could see Oscar had suffered no bodily harm.

"Of all the damnable things, Henry!" said Judge.

"Did Ay do oll right?" grinned Oscar.

"You did," stated Henry. "Possibly you overdid it a trifle, but that was to be expected."

"Just a moment!" exclaimed Judge. "Did you --- er---have a part in this, Henry?"

"Oscar," replied Henry, "was working under my directions, Judge."

"Have you both gone crazy?" asked Judge.

"It vars a gu'ud fight, Henry," declared Oscar. "Das North vill have seven year of hord luck. He broke de back-bar mirror vit the scat of his pants."

"Henry," groaned Judge, "will you explain what this is all about?"

"Oscar," said Henry calmly, "merely started trouble to cover my actions."

"Ay am damn gu'ud yailer, eh?" grinned Oscar.

"The best in Tonto City," agreed Henry. "It worked rather well, I thought. Judge, if there is any more of Frijole's pain-killer on hand--I believe I could use about the full of a mule's car."

"Am I to be kept in ignorance?" asked Judge peevishly.

"At present, you will remain normal, Judge. Suffice to say that Oscar's actions were at my suggestion, and meet with my approval. Of course, he wasn't instructed to wreck the saloon and hospitalize any of the inhabitants, but that, I suppose, was a normal conclusion. The jug, Judge."

JIM NELSON and Ed Henderson got back from Scorpion Bend in time for the double inquest, and none too happy over James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly's editorial in the *Clarion*. Judge read it, snorted a few times and called Henry.

"Listen to this," he said. "Mr. Pelly writes, 'No one can honestly say that Henry Harrison Conroy had not given us an efficient, although humorous and not too sober a regime. Crime and criminals do not dis-

may him. He laughs. In other words, Wild Horse Valley is the stage, on which a master comedian has held the spotlight for several years. What now?'"

Henry chuckled and shook his head. "J. W. L. Pelly is slipping," he said.

"And there is more," said Judge. "Listen to this: 'Honest Ed Henderson is an unknown quantity. This paper will not go on record as saying that Henderson will be a great sheriff. We will not even predict that he will be any better than the present incumbent. The worst we can say now about Henry Harrison Conroy is that he laughs at the world, drinks his whiskey raw, and has never done or said a word to influence the opinion of this paper. May the best man win'."

"Nothing about the Shame of Arizona?" asked Henry.

"Not a word. James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly has reformed."

"I hope not, Judge. Evidently he has fallen out with the other faction, and--How do you do, Mr. Nelson."

Henry turned his head and saw Jim Nelson standing in the office doorway. Nelson scowled. Evidently he had heard Henry's comment.

"I want to talk with you about that damned Swede, Conroy," said Nelson. "I've stood about all I'm going to from him."

"Have you mentioned the matter to Oscar?" queried Henry blandly.

"He is employed by you," snarled Nelson. "I'm not going to have my place wrecked by that ignorant bum."

"Bum?" queried Henry. "Oscar will not like that appellation, Mr. Nelson."

"I don't care what he likes! The next time he starts trouble for me, he'll get filled with lead. The boys have their instructions. I've warned you, Conroy, and I never warn twice. Good day, sir!"

"My gracious!" exclaimed Henry as Nelson went back across the street.

"If I were you, I'd fire Oscar," said Judge.

"Fire him? Why, Judge!"

"Do you want him filled with lead?"

"Hm-m-m-m, no, I wouldn't like that. I'll tell Oscar what sort of a reception to expect."

"I don't know," sighed Judge. "Sometimes I wonder which of you has the fewer brains."

"Had you average intelligence, Judge, you could look at us and determine that."

"Oscar, I presume, sir."

"Wrong again. Well, I presume we must prepare for the inquest. Doctor Bogart said it would be at two of the clock, and it is nearly that time."

THE inquest brought out no startling evidence, nor was any expected. Henry told them what he knew about the murder of the old man on the porch of the JHC ranchhouse. The stage driver testified that he brought the man to Tonto City from Scorpion Bend, while Russ Haley, the cowboy, testified that he had directed the man to the JHC, after which the man stole his horse.

Doctor Bogart and John Harper testified that the detective, named Ferguson, after swearing them to secrecy, asked them to help him view the folks of Tonto City, as they came to try and identify the corpse. They did not know where he was from, nor who he was looking for. Henry had asked Doctor Bogart to not mention the money given him by the Slim Princess.

Henry wanted another talk with the Slim Princess, but he knew that his chances were almost nil. He went to the King's Castle that night, but she was not on the program. The crowd was disappointed, but Jim Nelson made no explanation. During an intermission Henry drew "Doc," the piano player aside and questioned him. Doc was reputed a marijuana addict, but a good honkatonk piano player.

"Hell, I dunno what happened," said Doc. "One of the girls told me that her and Nelson had a hell of a fight about somethin', and he locked the door, when

he came out. He's been grouchin' around all evenin'. He's crazy, if yuh ask me; she's the only trouper he's got, even if she ain't no Nellie Melba on the pipes."

"Do you know what her right name is, Doc?" asked Henry.

"You, too, eh?" grinned Doc. "No, I dunno any other name for her, unless yuh want to call her Mrs. Nelson, which I doubt like hell."

Henry doubted it, too, but he didn't say so. After a while he went back to the office. The house was dark, but Judge met him outside the door.

"What is going on around here, Henry?" asked Judge severely.

"I just came, sir," replied Henry soberly. "Suppose you tell me."

"The Slim Princess is in the office," whispered Judge. "She came a moment ago and insisted on going in and waiting for you. She didn't want any lights. As a matter of fact, I was going to look for you."

"My goodness!" exclaimed Henry quietly.

"You might find a less prominent place to hold a tryst," suggested Judge.

"Possibly, Judge, I had nothing to do with it. Will you come in with me?"

"I sir," replied Judge, "am no damn cupid. Do not drag me into it."

"Very well, sir—stay out."

Henry walked into the dark room, closed the door and lighted the lamp on his desk. The Slim Princess was seated against the wall, one of her beautiful eyes well blacked. It was the first time Henry had ever seen her, except in her stage finery, and she looked like a very weary young lady. Even the rouge and mascara was missing.

"I suppose you are surprised to see me here," she said.

"Life is ever a surprise to me, my dear lady," he replied. "I suppose that Mr. Nelson would also be surprised. Your eye looks very bad."

"It should," she replied coldly. "He

hit me. Then he locked me in the room, and I climbed out on a blanket, dropped a few feet and almost broke a leg."

"My goodness! You have had troubles. What happened?"

"He found out about the two hundred dollars I gave the doctor. It was his money. I had to tell him. Then he accused me of entertaining you in my room, and I had to tell him what our conversation was about."

"I suppose Al Horne told him," said Henry. "After I left your room I met him at the head of the stairs. Is he your keeper?"

"Possibly," she said slowly.

"You are not married to Jim Nelson?" queried Henry.

She looked up quickly. "All right, we're not married," she said.

"Did Jim Nelson kill your father?"

"No!" she said quickly. "Jim wasn't away from the King's Castle that night. Why should he kill my father?"

"I'm sure, I do not know, my dear—I merely wondered. Tell me something about yourself."

"There isn't much that I'd care to tell," she said. "I believe I was born near New York. My mother died while I was still young. I never did know what my father did for a living. When I was twelve years of age, I was sent to a private school in New Orleans, I was eighteen, when I learned that there was no money for further schooling. I didn't know where to find my father."

"Then I met Jim Nelson. I suppose it was the same old story. It would fit most of the girls over in the honkatonk. Jim taught me to deal faro. I had studied music a little. We knocked around over the country, until Jim heard about this place being for sale. That's about all, Mr. Conroy."

"And after all those years you recognized your father?"

"Yes," she said quietly. "They say that death wipes away the years."

"Why did you even think that it might be your father?" asked Henry.

"I saw him that night at the show, Mr. Conroy. It was only a flash, but something told me that I knew that man. Then I heard he was killed, and I—I wanted to be sure. It was my father — older and more gray. His hands were gnarled and hard, as though he had worked hard."

"He wasn't that way the last time you knew him?" asked Henry.

"No, he wasn't. Dad dressed well, and he had wonderful hands."

"How on earth will you ever get back to your rooms?" asked Henry.

"I'm not going back," she said firmly. "I'm through. I told him over a year ago that if he ever struck me again, I'd leave him. I'm leaving."

"But, my dear, where are you going?"

"To Scorpion Bend. I've got money—my money. I won't go back to Jim Nelson. I'll hire a livery-rig and go alone. If I can ever get to a railroad, he'll never find me."

"Did you ever drive a horse?" he asked curiously.

"Never in my life—but I'd take that chance."

"Hm-m-m-m." Henry squinted thoughtfully. Finally he made up his mind. He took a sheet of paper and pencil, wrote a note and left it on the desk. He took a six-shooter from a desk drawer, put it in his coat pocket and got to his feet.

"What are you going to do?" she asked anxiously.

"We are going to Scorpion Bend, my dear lady," he said. "I shall get a horse and buggy, and drive you there myself."

"Do you really mean—you'll take me to Scorpion Bend?"

"Certainly. It is a small matter for a man like me. Come."

They went outside. No one was in sight. Henry told her to wait in the darkness, until he could secure the vehicle. Judge Van Treece, hunched in the darkness of an alley just above the office, watched

Henry drive from the stable, pick her up near the office, and then go on toward Scorpion Bend.

"And just when the *Clarion* was in our favor!" groaned Judge. "Only three weeks before election—and he runs away with another man's wife. And I thought that Oscar was the brainless one."

JUDGE went into the office and lighted the lamp. There was a faint odor of perfume in there, and Judge snorted disgustedly. Suddenly the door was banged open and in came Jim Nelson and Al Horne. Nelson glared at Judge, and looked around the office.

"Where's Conroy?" he asked harshly.

"My dear man," replied Judge, "I have no idea where he is. I presume he is around town."

Jim Nelson sniffed audibly. "Around town, eh? What's this?"

He leaned over and read the penciled note which Henry had left for Judge. It read:

HAVE GONE TO SCORPION BEND ON BUSINESS.

"He's gone to Scorpion Bend, Al," said Nelson. He whirled on Judge who came over to see the note.

"How long since you saw him, Van Treece?" he demanded.

"I do not like your attitude, sir," declared Judge stiffly. "After all, you haven't any right to talk—"

"Oh, go to hell!" snapped Nelson. "Come on, Al; we'll find out at the livery stable."

They slammed the door and headed across the street. Judge didn't know what to do. Evidently they had found out that the Slim Princess was gone, and in some way they knew she had gone with Henry. As he started out of the office, he almost ran into Slim Pickins and Frijole Bill. Frijole had a gallon demijohn in his hand.

"We kinda thought yuh might be runnin' low," said Frijole.

Jim Nelson came from the livery-stable doorway, calling back to Horne, "Pick me up at the saloon, Al—and make it fast."

Judge said, "Frijole, did you two come in the buckboard?"

"Shore did, Judge," answered Slim, before Frijole could reply.

"Come with me," ordered Judge. "Henry ran away with the Slim Princess tonight, and Jim Nelson is going to try and catch them. We've got to get out of here ahead of Nelson, or Henry might get hurt."

"My Gawd!" blurted Slim. "Henry Harrison Conroy!"

"Do your marveling on the road!" snapped Judge. "Hurry! Bring that jug along, Frijole—we may need it."

And as Al Horne drove a horse and buggy out of the wide doorway of the livery stable, the JHC buckboard team lurched away from the hitchrack in front of the general store, and went out of town at a swift gallop.

"You'll kill this team at that pace!" said Judge anxiously.

"Maybe," replied Slim, "but all we've got to do is beat 'em to the Lobo Grade, Judge; they can't pass us after that."

"Speaking of passing," said Judge, "where is that jug, Frijole?"

"Right here on m' lap, Judge. But we better wait for a smooth stretch."

"You're right!" yelled Slim. "I spilled some on my red necktie at the ranch, and turned the danged thing to a pea-green. But I can't git over Henry runnin' away with the Slim Princess, Judge."

"She's another man's wife!" exclaimed Judge. "You can't get away from that, Slim."

"I wouldn't want to," replied Slim. "How the hell did he ever git a chance to court her?"

"Must have been love at first sight," said Frijole. "And if you don't pay more attention to drivin' and less to love, we'll all be in the ditch. Don't forget that we've got four wheels on this here hack."

"I'm too sober, I reckon," said Slim. "When we hit the mesa we'll all have a snifter. Well, well! Ol' Henry fell in love! Viva la Hank!"

"And election only a short time away," said Judge. "We're sunk."

"What was it Henry used to say, 'Live, laugh and love, 'cause there'll come a time when yuh can't?' I reckon the old boy met his Waterloo."

"We might be able to save him, Slim," said Judge.

"Gawd, I'd shore resent that idea, if I was with her," said Slim.

"But he can't love her," said Judge. "It must be a passing fancy."

"Can't, huh?" queried Frijole. "Well, if he can't love her—what about her lovin' him? Is her eyesight all right, Judge?"

"I have never tested them, Frijole."

"I've looked into 'em—from a distance, and they shore looked all right to me," said Slim. "If I thought she'd fall in love with a feller like Henry—I'd shore got closer to her. Yuh never can tell what might have happened. But that's me—allus a shrinkin' vi'let."

At the top of the mesa, Slim drew the team to a stop, while they uncorked the jug and had a big drink.

"That team is pretty tired, Slim," remarked Judge, after he recovered his breath. "Better take it easy."

"Tie down the cork, Frijole," ordered Slim. "'Cause we're goin' to kick the tails off them two broncs, until we hit the grades. After that, we'll let Jim Nelson do the frettin'. Hang onto yore hat, Judge."

JIM NELSON and Al Horne tried once to pass them, but that buckboard team put on extra speed, and almost buried them in a cloud of dust. Nelson didn't know that this was the JHC buckboard, and that they had had their last chance to pass it until the end of the Lobo Grades.

Those narrow, dangerous grades far above Lobo Canyon had places where two vehicles might pass, but not unless the team

in front permitted—and this the JHC buckboard would not permit. In fact, the buckboard made a number of stops, while the three men lowered the liquid content of that jug, and the two men in the buggy had to wait.

"I ain't never been cussed so hard before in m' life," declared Slim. "Every time we stop it gits worse."

Their final stop was not over two hundred yards from the end of the grade, and it seemed that Jim Nelson could not contain himself any longer. The moonlight was bright, but the dust from the buckboard had never given Nelson and Horne a clear view of who was head of them. But now he got out of his buggy and came up to the buckboard.

"This is insufferable!" he snapped. "You've deliberately kept us back all the way. You wouldn't let us pass, and now you stop—oh!"

He got a full view of the barcheaded Judge in the moonlight.

"You!" he snorted. "Damn you, Van Treec, I'll—"

"You'll do what?" asked Slim Pickins coldly, and the click of his six-shooter caused Nelson to hesitate.

"So you're in with Conroy on this deal, eh?" he snarled.

"Henry," said Frijole, "is part of our outfit, Mr. Nelson. Have a drink?"

"I might have known it," said Nelson, and went back to his buggy.

"Aw, yuh scared him, Slim," said Frijole.

"I can shore make that upper plate of mine sound jist like cockin' a six-gun," chuckled Slim. "All set, gents? Let's go. If Henry ain't halfway on his honeymoon, it ain't our fault."

In less than a mile from there the buggy passed them, the horse on a gallop, but the buckboard team kept at a sedate pace—their work was over.

It was about two o'clock in the morning, when they arrived at Scorpion Bend. Slim tied the team in front of the Scorpion

Bend Hotel, where Henry and Judge always stayed when in that city. There was no sign of Jim Nelson and his horse and buggy along the street.

The sleepy-eyed hotel keeper recognized Judge.

"Did Henry Conroy and his bride register here, Mose?" asked Judge.

"Bride? F'r Gaw's sake, when did he git hitched, Judge? No, he didn't have no woman with him. He's in yore regular room—but he's alone—'s far as I know."

THE three men plodded up the stairs, none too steady on their feet, and opened the door of the room. Slim Pickens scratched a match and lighted the lamp. Henry sat up, blinking at the lamp and at the three men.

"A cheese sandwich late at night always does this to me," said Henry. "I don't know why I indulge."

"Where-at's yore woman, Henry?" asked Slim soberly.

"My—my what?" gasped Henry. "Is that really you, Slim?"

"I dunno," replied Slim. "Frijole's whiskey does things to me."

"Hm-m-m-m," muttered Henry. He brushed a hand across his eyes and looked questioningly at Judge.

"I—I found your note, Henry," said Judge. "Jim Nelson and Al Horne came and saw it, too. They were going to try and catch you; so we blocked them on the grades. We had to do something, you know."

"I see," nodded Henry. "Friends in need. Well, well! My gracious!"

"We didn't blame yuh," said Slim. "I'd have done the same thing."

Henry wiped his moist eyes and tried to think of something to say.

"You are going to marry her, Henry?" queried Judge. "But you must remember that she already has a husband."

"I thought of that, too," said Henry huskily. "Frijole, is that a jug you have in your hand—or is it still a dream?"

"The fix you are in—and you jest," sighed Judge.

"Am I in a fix, Judge?"

"Are you in a fix? You run away with another man's wife—and he is right here in Scorpion Bend, wild-eyed and ready to do murder."

"My goodness! Frijole, will you hand me that glass on the table? Thank you. Now—the jug."

They all drank from the same glass. Henry said:

"Slim, you and Frijole go downstairs and register for a room. There is no use wastin' all the night. Judge, you will sleep here. I am afraid we have things to talk over."

"I should think that some explanation is forthcoming, sir," replied Judge.

After Frijole and Slim had left the room, Henry locked the door and blocked it with a chair-back placed under the knob.

"Just in case," he smiled.

"Now, sir," said Judge severely, "suppose you explain this peculiar action on your part."

Henry sat down on the edge of the bed, motioned for Judge to move his chair closer, and lowered his voice.

"The lady," he said, "is not a very good actress. In fact, it is easy to see why she never went higher than a honkatonk, Judge. Her histrionic ability is very poor. She set the stage, but her props were bad. For instance, that black eye, suffered from the fist of Jim Nelson, was badly made. Close inspection revealed grease-paint, no swelling, no injury to a very pretty eye."

"But why on earth did you bring her here, Henry?"

"Oh, yes, of course—you were not present. For your information, when Oscar started that trouble in the King's Castle, I went upstairs, managed to get an interview with the Slim Princess, who admitted that the man who was killed on our ranchhouse porch was her father. She gave me the usual line about innocent childhood and all that."

"Then she has a fight with Jim Nelson, who gave her a grease-paint black eye. She is supposed to have crawled out a window and swung to the ground on a blanket-rope. She wanted to get away at once. She was through with Jim Nelson. She played on my heart-strings, Judge; so I hired a rig from the livery stable and brought her here. When we arrived she told me she couldn't go through with it. She was afraid he'd find her, no matter where she went. I knew she'd say that, before we left Tonto City."

"But, Henry, I don't believe Jim Nelson was acting," said Judge.

Henry laughed quietly, "Judge, why did they come straight to the office? And so soon after she left."

"Well, I am amazed," declared Judge. "But what good has it done?"

"I do not know—yet," confessed Henry. "It was a shot in the dark when I asked her how long her father lived in Chicago, and she replied that she wasn't sure how long, but it was several years. I left her here at the hotel, and went to the depot, where I wired the Chicago police, asking information on both Winters and Ferguson. I hope they can tell us something."

"But why should she do all this acting, Henry, and get you to drive her all the way up here? It doesn't make sense."

"Judge, she wanted to find out how much Ferguson told me."

"But Ferguson didn't tell you anything, Henry."

"Judge, when you deal with liars—do a little lying yourself. It might pay dividends."

"Sometimes you amaze me, Henry."

"Sometimes I amaze myself, Judge."

"Did--did the Slim Princess take a room at this hotel?"

"She did not. I asked the clerk when I came back from the depot. She is probably waiting for Jim Nelson to reach here, and they will go back to Tonto together. But she never got any information from me, I can assure you of that. And what

misinformation she got will not make them feel any better. Take off your clothes, Judge, and get into bed."

"But, Henry, do you suspect Jim Nelson of wrong-doing?"

"Somebody did wrong, Judge, and I cannot believe that the Slim Princess would do all that acting for anyone but Jim Nelson."

JAMES WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW PELLY was up fairly early next morning. He didn't wait to open the *Clarion* office, but headed directly to the Scorpion Bend Hotel. Henry, Judge, Frijole and Slim were in the dining-room eating breakfast when Pelly came in.

"The despoiler of appetites," groaned Judge, shoving his plate aside.

Pelly came straight to the table, ignored a proffered chair, and glared at Henry.

"What is your defense, sir?" he asked severely.

"My ability to laugh at the world, I suppose, Mr. Pelly. I am not fleet of foot, have little ability as a boxer, and my shooting is vile."

"What in the devil is wrong with you, Pelly?" queried Judge.

"I am not talking to you, sir," replied Pelly. "For the first time in my life I relented and gave Henry Harrison Conroy an even break in my editorial. I gave him the benefit of all doubt—put him on a par with Ed Henderson. Now what? Jim Nelson awoke me at an early hour and told of your perfidy, Conroy. Last night you deliberately ran away with his wife, brought her to Scorpion Bend, and while you arranged for transportation at the depot, Jim Nelson arrived from Tonto City and saved her from disgrace."

"He did?" asked Henry in amazement. "My goodness!"

"You cannot shrug that off, Conroy," said Pelly.

"I am not shrugging, sir," replied Henry soberly. "But doesn't it sound rather humorous that a performer at the

King's Castle should be saved from disgrace. It is really a miracle, Pelly."

"He is her husband," said Pelly doggedly.

"You have, I presume, looked at their marriage certificate."

"I am willing to take the lady's word for it."

"Oh! So she visited you with Jim Nelson, eh?"

"She admitted to me that you urged her to accompany you."

"Did she exhibit her black eye, Pelly?"

"I saw no black eye."

"I told her she might as well wipe it off," smiled Henry. "Did she tell you that she had a fight with Jim Nelson, who locked her in her room, and then slid from a window to the ground on a blanket?"

"She did not," replied Pelly.

"At least, she was honest in that respect, Pelly. But, in my opinion, she is one of the most prolific and least impressive liars I have ever met. As an actress, Pelly, she isn't worthy of carrying the make-up kit of one of the Cherry Sisters. Pelly, have you ever seen the Cherry Sisters?"

"I have not, Conroy. But isn't it rather ungentlemanly to say that a lady is a liar?"

"A lady—yes, indeed."

"Oh! I see. Well, do you deny that you eloped with her, Conroy?"

Henry chuckled. "Pelly, you amaze me. A man of my age and girth, not to mention my financial disability, eloping with a beautiful, young thing like the Slim Princess. I may be nearly everything you have called me in your newspaper, but down deep in my heart, Pelly, I am not that big a damn fool."

James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly was a bit puzzled. The story seemed plausible last night, or rather, early this morning, but just now it had new angles.

"Why on earth would Jim Nelson tell me what he did, if it was not true?" he asked.

"My dear, Pelly," said Henry, "haven't you noted the political angle? They felt that they were losing the support of the *Clarion*, due to your last editorial. Without you and the *Clarion*, they are lost. Ergo, they try to frame me, kill my reputation, sink me in my own iniquity."

"I see-e-c," muttered Pelly. "That is possible. Well," Pelly shrugged his shoulders, "I shall wait for developments. Perhaps you are right. But if you are wrong I'll never let up on you, be sure of that."

"Oh, I am, Pelly; I really am," said Henry soberly.

"How about a little ham 'n' aigs?" asked Slim. "They're good."

"Thank you, I have had my breakfast," replied Pelly, and walked out.

"Mr. Nelson," said Judge gravely, "almost scuttled our ship."

"It is still leaking," smiled Henry, "but we may make port."

THEY finished breakfast and went to the depot, but there was no answer to Henry's telegram. He decided to send Frijole and Slim back, and he and Judge would either take the morning stage or wait for the night stage.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon when the telegram came. It was from the detective bureau at Chicago, and read:

WINTERS RECENTLY PAROLED FROM JOLIOT AFTER TEN YEARS FOR BIG PAY ROLL ROBBERY. REST OF GANG NEVER KNOWN. ANY INFORMATION WILL BE APPRECIATED. FERGUSON OUSTED THIS CITY FOR BLACKMAIL. NO RECORD HIS PRESENT CONNECTIONS.

"I told you that he wore prison clothes," said Judge.

"Blackmail, eh?" muttered Henry. "The plot grows thicker, Judge."

"Too thick, I am afraid, Henry."

"At least," smiled Henry, "we know more than we did."

"Yes," agreed Judge soberly, "and the same applies to our friend James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly—but he isn't sure."

The day passed without event. Few people mentioned the election to either of them. The night stage left at eight o'clock. Henry and Judge were the only passengers, and they rode inside. Judge, still tired from his ride to Scorpion Bend, was snoring shortly after they left town.

Jimmy Sears was a good driver, and Henry felt perfectly safe. There was a big moon across the Lobo Canyon, making conditions good for the driver, because it illuminated most of the hair-pin curves. He was dozing, listening to Judge's snores, when the stage jerked up sharply. Then it lurched ahead, and Henry heard the sharp pop of Jimmy's whip.

He heard a voice yell a command of some sort, followed by the crack of a gunshot.

But the four horses were running now, traveling down a dark stretch of the narrow grade. Henry yelled at Sears, but knew that the driver would not hear him. Judge was awake, trying to get somebody to tell him what had gone wrong, when the stage suddenly sideswiped the rocky wall on the inside of the grade. Sparks flew, as the iron tires bit into the solid rock of the roadbed. As it bounded back the door flew open and Henry fairly tumbled out.

He clawed his way to the front of the stage. In the moonlight he saw the driver, slumped in his seat, but still clinging to the lines. As Henry managed to climb over the wheel and reach the seat, a bullet went past his head and ricocheted off the rocks with a high-pitched whine, like the breaking of a guitar string.

But Henry didn't hesitate. He tore the lines from Jimmy's hands and swung the team into line. Luckily the harness was intact. Another bullet whined past him, causing him to duck low. He was on the wrong side of the seat, and could not control the brake, but he was in no position to bother with small details. With one arm around Jimmy Sears, hunched forward, doing all the driving with one hand, he

yelled at that frantic team, and they responded.

There was more shooting, but Henry didn't mind. He couldn't stop that team, anyway. That side of the grade was all downhill, and it was only a question of keeping the team ahead of the heavy stage, and keeping them all on the grade. He realized that if the lead team ever sagged back and allowed the wheelers to get their legs over the stretchers, there would be a grand wreck on Lobo Grade, in which none of them would be likely to live longer than it took to fall all the way to the bottom of the canyon. Praying that there would be no north travel on the road, Henry drove around narrow curves, until he became dizzy.

And this nightmare driving was not over until they came down the last stretch, wheels smoking, and headed for the upgrade to the top of the mesa above Wild Horse Valley. Henry stopped the exhausted team and got down, his legs so trembly that he could hardly walk. Both doors of the stage were closed, but Judge was missing. He had no idea what happened to Judge. Had Judge fallen out, or did he get out when Henry took charge, and failed to get aboard again, he wondered? There was nothing to do about it at present. He had to get Jimmy Sears to the doctor, regardless of anything and then come back for Judge.

Jimmy Sears had been shot through the right shoulder, and Doctor Bogart was optimistic over his chances. Henry found Oscar asleep on the office cot, and ordered him to saddle his own horse, along with Judge's animal, and go back to Lobo Grade to pick up Judge. Oscar was not the one to ask questions, especially when he was still half-asleep. Then Henry kicked off his shoes and went to sleep on the cot.

AND Henry slept right there until ten o'clock, when Oscar returned without Judge.

"Ay can't find Yudge," he declared.

Henry was puzzled. Had Judge fallen off the grade, he wondered? Or had the men who were shooting at him—Henry scowled thoughtfully. Had Judge left the stage, following him out, those men might have found him. They had followed the stage a little while. Henry was trying to visualize what might have happened, when a man came in. He was a small, thin, grizzled person, badly in need of front teeth.

"Hyah, Sheriff," he grinned widely.

"Len Buckley!" exclaimed Henry. "We haven't seen you since—"

"Since you sobered me up in yore jail three months ago," finished Buckley. "Well, sir, I'm out of a job, Henry. Got fired right after breakfast this mornin'. Ed jist said, 'I'm goin' to git a new cook, Len; so yuh can pack yore war-bag and I'll have Dell Cates take yuh to Tonto.'"

"I thought the Circle H assessed you as personal property, Len."

"Yeah? Well, I reckon not. Yuh don't know where I can git me a job, do yuh?"

"No, I don't, Len. But you should be able to find a job. Ed Henderson always swore you were the best cook in the valley."

"Oh, I'll get a job all right," said Len. "Ain't been to town for three months; so I reckon I've got to get drunk. And how I hate it."

Len walked to the doorway, but turned and said, "And I ain't votin' for Honest Ed Henderson."

Oscar came back from breakfast, picking his teeth with the pointed blade of his pocket-knife.

"Yudge ain't come yet?" he asked.

"Not yet, Oscar."

Oscar wandered back into the corridor of the jail, just as Jim Nelson came. The big gambler was either mad, or doing a good job of acting.

"Conroy," he said harshly, "I've stood all I'm going to stand from you. Last night was the last straw."

"That was queer, wasn't it?" smiled

Henry. "All that fuss, just to try and pry some information from me. Nelson, you rained on your own parade, and now you try to blame me because everything got wet."

"What do you mean, Conroy?" rasped Nelson, leaning across the desk.

"For instance, the lady with the black eye," said Henry calmly. "I realized that it was a fake, long before I agreed to take her to Scorpion Bend. I knew she wanted information, Nelson, but I was the one who got it. And the injured husband, trying to turn a *faux pas* into political profit, went to the newspaper editor. I thought you had more brains than that."

"Why, you damn red-nosed monkey!" roared Nelson. "I'll break every bone in your damned fat carcass, and throw—"

JIM NELSON stopped, because he was out of breath. Oscar Johnson had stepped in behind him, hooked his left elbow around Nelson's throat, and put his right knee into Nelson's back.

"Say de word, Henry," said Oscar tensely, "and Ay vill yerk just vonce."

That one jerk by the giant Swede would break Nelson's back; so Henry did not give the word. He got up, removed a revolver from Nelson's coat pocket, and motioned Oscar to release him. The big gambler wheezed breath back into his lungs, as he stood unsteadily against the desk.

"If you vant any more, Ay vill give it to you," said Oscar.

Nelson didn't. That grizzly-like strangle-hold had taken all the fight out of him.

"This won't end here," he whispered. "You still owe me a debt, Conroy, and when a man owes Jim Nelson a debt—he pays, sooner or later."

"I am usually available, Nelson," said Henry. "Call again."

Nelson went on. His legs were none too steady.

"You must have squeezed hard, Oscar," said Henry.

"Yah, su-ure," grinned Oscar. "Ay don't like him."

"I wish I knew where Judge is," said Henry. "Stay here, Oscar, while I get the mail."

Henry walked up to the post office and got the office mail, which consisted of two papers and one letter. The letter, strangely enough, had been posted in Tonto City, and consisted of one sheet of none-too-clean note paper, on which had been written in sprawling characters:

We hav yur deputy. Unles you resin and leave this valley inside of twenty for hours' we will kill him. Then yu wil be next. We meen biseess.

There was no signature. Henry read it twice and put it in his pocket, after which he opened one of the newspapers, reading it as he walked back to the office. If anyone was watching for his reactions to the receipt of that letter, they must have been disappointed. He sat down at his desk and stared thoughtfully at the opposite wall.

"Any mail, Hanny?" asked Oscar.

"Nothing of importance, Oscar," he replied. "And, Oscar, please do not mention the fact that Judge is missing."

"Ay vill not," declared Oscar. "Yudge vill be along. He is tough old yigger--but Ay like him, Hanny."

"I guess we all do, Oscar," said Henry sadly. "I don't know what I'd do without him---and I can't do anything *with* him."

Time seemed to stand still for Henry. James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly came to Tonto City driving the livery rig, which Henry had used to take the Slim Princess to Scorpion Bend. The same man owned both the Tonto City and Scorpion Bend stables.

But Pelly did not come near the office. John Harper dropped in for a short chat, and informed Henry that Jim Nelson was putting on a little election rally at the honkatonk that night.

"I suppose he will have Ed Henderson

make a speech," smiled the lawyer. "That last editorial in the *Clarion* has them worried. Folks are wondering if Pelly is going over to your side."

"I do not believe it," said Henry. "I saw Pelly arrive a while ago, and he is still at the King's Castle. Perhaps he was invited to make a speech on behalf of Ed Henderson."

"I must be there," laughed the lawyer. "That *would* be worth hearing."

Slim Pickins, Frijole Bill, Thunder and Lightning Mendoza came in from the ranch. The two Mexican brothers were short, squat, more Indian than Mexican, and with the ability to tear the King's English to shreds.

"*Buenas dias, patron,*" grinned Lightning. "And how am I, you hope? *Mucho gracias*, we are better than you could be expected."

"The same to you, and much of ect," added Thunder expansively. "Those corals post ees all dugs up, and those hole ees ready for sitting."

Henry gave each of them a silver dollar, and they waddled away to a cantina, where they could secure tequila at rock-bottom prices.

"Where's Judge?" asked Slim. Henry closed the office door, and told them what happened on the stage. He let them read the note, too, but cautioned them to not mention a word of it.

"But we've got to do somethin', Henry," said Slim anxiously. "My Gawd, he's one of our set! Don'tcha realize we can't let 'em hurt him?"

"If we only knowed who to kill," sighed Frijole. "What'll we do?"

"Nothing," said Henry. "You and Slim stay around town, where I can get you—if I need you. Stay sober, if possible, too."

"My Gawd, we ain't drinkin' now, Henry!" exclaimed Frijole. "Maybe we'll have a couple—after we find Judge. Henry, I came away without m' gun. If you've got a extra hawg-leg—"

Henry had. Frijole shoved it inside the waistband of his overalls.

"I feel plumb dressed now," he said. "See yuh later, Henry. Me and Slim will do a lot of listenin', but no talkin'."

SUPPERTIME came. In the restaurant Henry heard men talking about the political meeting at the King's Castle. It was to be held after the first show at the honkatonk. That would make it about ten o'clock. Henry went back to his office and lighted the lamp. From an old wardrobe he took his clothes and made a complete change to overalls, old flannel shirt, high-heel boots and a slightly battered sombrero. Then he belted a heavy gun around his expansive waist, locked the front, went out through the jail corridor and mounted his horse.

About four miles out of town he turned to the left on a side road, which led to the Circle C ranch. He rode more cautiously now, not wanting to meet anyone. An overcast sky was to his liking tonight. The Circle C ranchhouse had been built on a slight raise, partly screened in a sycamore grove. South of the house was the big stable and a series of corrals. Directly back of the house, and about fifty feet away, was a big storage shed.

There was a faint light through the curtains in the main room, as Henry dismounted in the heavy shade of a sycamore at the east end of the corrals. He walked quietly up to the old shed. The door was partly open, and the rear window was only a hole in the wall. He went inside, shielded a lighted match carefully and looked around. On the floor, near the doorway, were two ten-gallon cans of kerosene.

Henry carried them to the rear of the shed, and quickly slashed the sides of them with his pocket-knife. Kerosene gushed out over everything. Then he went quietly around to the rear of the shed and leaned against the wall at the open window. There was not a sound.

From his overalls pocket he took the letter he had received from the kidnapers, crumpled it in his fingers, and reached for a match. The air reeked of kerosene. Then he tossed the lighted piece of paper through the open window and went running for the corner of the house.

He was nearly there before the flame caught in the kerosene, and the explosion lighted the surroundings. Yellow flame gushed from the doorway, and in a few moments the whole shed was blazing. Someone inside the house yelled, and the kitchen door banged open.

"That damn shed's on fire, Ab! Get a bucket!" he heard Dell Cates yell.

Henry heard them banging buckets, as they raced for the watering-trough, swearing, stumbling. Then he twisted around the corner and quickly entered the kitchen. Henry did not hesitate, as he ran into the main room and up the stairs. The room at the corner was his objective. The door was locked, but he stepped back and crashed it loose.

Roped to a chair was Judge Van Treece, his features plainly visible, as he craned his long neck, trying to see what was causing the glow through the partly-covered window.

"It's me—Henry!" panted the sheriff, as he fumbled with his knife.

"Ungrammatical, but welcome," said Judge huskily, as Henry cut away the ropes that bound him to the chair.

"Can you walk?" asked Henry.

"I—I hope so," groaned Judge, as Henry helped him to his feet. "But where on earth did you come from?"

"A debate is out of order right now, Judge. Follow me!"

They reached the stairs. Judge was having difficulty, because of being tied in one position for so long. It had not helped his rheumatism. They were halfway down the short flight of stairs, when the two men, panting, came into the kitchen.

"Let the damn thing burn!" panted Cates. "It can't hurt anythin' else, now. I

told Ed that we hadn't ort to store that—"

They had entered the main room and saw the two men on the stairs.

"Well, my Gawd, where did you—" exploded Cates, and streaked for his gun.

BUT Henry had his .45 muzzle across the stair railing, and he squeezed the trigger. The heavy bullet drove Cates back into Ab Rader, who threw both hands into the air, and went sliding along the wall. Cates went down and his half-drawn gun clattered on the floor.

"I quit!" yelled Rader. "To hell with it! Never liked the deal, anyway."

Henry and Judge came slowly down the stairs. Rader wasn't wearing a gun.

"I'll be a liar!" he said. "Didn't recognize yuh in them clothes. And they said you was dumb—and couldn't shoot. Huh!"

"So this is the Circle H," marveled Judge. "Of all things!"

Henry managed to dig a pair of handcuffs from his hip-pocket. He snapped one end on Rader's right wrist, and the other around the door-knob.

"You will not go far, dragging the house," he said quietly. "Will you tell me which horse in the stable is gentle?"

"The gray one," said Rader wearily.

"You would not play a joke on two elderly men, would you?"

"Not in my present position, Conroy; he's gentle."

They looked at Cates as they went out.

"He is tied to something bigger than a door-knob," said Judge.

THE King's Castle was crowded that night. Word had gone out that Jim Nelson was holding a political rally, and the honkatonk was jammed. The Slim Princess had finished her last encore amid deafening applause, as Jim Nelson, Ed Henderson and James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly came out on the stage. Henderson, Pelly and the Slim Princess sat down on chairs quickly arranged near the footlights.

Oscar Johnson shoved his way down the center aisle, stopped at a front seat and tapped the man on the shoulder. When the man looked up, Oscar said something. The man scowled and replied, but Oscar took him by the shoulder, and the man got up quickly. Then the big Swede slid into the chair.

Jim Nelson saw the tableau, but did not hear what was said. However, he realized that Oscar had forced the man to relinquish the seat. He wondered why the Swede had done this. If it was to heckle any of the speakers, he would find a quick way to silence the Swede. This was one time that Oscar better stay where he was and behave himself.

Then Jim Nelson, smiling widely, walked close to the footlights and motioned for silence.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is just a little innovation from our regular show. You all realize that it is only a few days until election. You probably know that I am backing certain candidates, because you are all sick and tired of the present incumbents."

"Gentlemen, I feel that Wild Horse Valley is entitled to the best, and at this coming election, you may be sure we will have the best."

The applause was deafening. Nelson smiled with satisfaction. If they could only go and cast their votes right now. When the applause died down, he continued:

"For instance, you all realize the inefficiency of the sheriff's office. They have made Wild Horse Valley the laughing stock of Arizona long enough. Gentlemen, I want you to meet the man we feel is our best choice for sheriff; a friend to all of you, and a man you can be proud to vote into the office as the sheriff of Wild Horse Valley—Honest Ed Henderson!"

The audience, most of them at least partly drunk, got to their feet and gave Ed Henderson a great ovation. Jim Nelson waved them to silence, and they gradually sat down, the room roaring with conver-

sation. Nelson held up his hand, until the noise subsided. Then he said:

"Honest Ed Henderson, next sheriff of Wild Horse Valley, will say a few words to you. Ed is not an orator, but his words to you are honest."

Henderson stepped forward awkwardly and looked down at the crowd. He started to speak, but the words stuck in his throat. Coming down the center aisle, bareheaded, walking slowly, was Judge Van Treece, his eyes on Henderson.

JIM NELSON had started to sit down, but merely hunched there, holding to the back of the chair with his left hand, his eyes glued on the tall, old man, coming down toward them.

"Hyah, Henry! Comin' to yore own funeral?" yelled somebody in the crowd.

Nelson jerked around. Behind them on the stage was Henry Conroy. He had come in from the wings. The Slim Princess screamed, jerked to her feet, and suddenly put both hands over her face. No one in the audience, except Oscar Johnson, knew what was going on.

"Henderson," said Henry, and his quiet voice carried to everyone, "Cates is dead, and Rader is handcuffed to the front door. Your campaign is over."

But Honest Ed didn't have the nerve to face the music. He yanked a gun from under his coat and leaped for the center aisle, intending to try and force his escape through the saloon, but he reckoned without Oscar Johnson, who raised up to meet him.

The gun went flying, and the candidate for the sheriff's office went down in a crumpled heap, with the giant Swede on top of him.

Jim Nelson had a gun, and he whirled, shooting at Henry, but his aim was bad. Henry shot once, twice, as calmly as he usually did everything, and Jim Nelson almost did a top-spin on his left heel, before he went down, crashing into the vacant chairs.

It was too much for the nerves of James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly. He went out of his chair, slipped, when he tried to jump, and dived headfirst right over the top of the upright piano, taking Doc, the piano maestro right along with him. The crowd was starting to stampede, but Henry, with one hand holding the arm of the Slim Princess, yelled:

"It is all over, men! Take it easy! We have just smashed the worst gang that ever operated in Tonto City. No time to explain now. Will somebody call Doctor Bogart? Oh, there you are, Doc! You know what to do. Are you all right, Oscar?"

"Yah, su-ure!" called Oscar. "Das von is not going to run for anyting."

Someone yelled, "Henry!"

"Yes, Frijole."

"Al Horne tried to escape," said Frijole. "Slim had to shoot him."

"Good work, Frijole. Help Oscar put Henderson in jail."

"He don' need a jail, Hanry," said Oscar. "He is yust a remain now."

The Slim Princess was on the verge of collapse, as Henry led her backstage, where they met John Harper, the prosecutor. Without a word, they helped her up the stairs and down the hall to her room, where she almost fell into a chair.

"My dear lady," said Henry kindly, "as you probably know, the law is always lenient to those who assist the law. Your confession might make things a lot easier for you."

"What can I say?" she whispered. "You knew—"

"But we would rather have you tell it," interrupted Henry. "After all, what I know wouldn't help you in the least—before a judge."

"I—I don't care now," she said huskily. "Jim's gone—they got Al. I'll tell you what you want to know."

The door opened and the disheveled James Wadsworth Longfellow Pelly came in. He had a long scratch down his thin nose, one eye was swollen, and he had lost

his collar. The Slim Princess did not even look at him, as she said wearily:

"Ten years ago Jim Nelson and his gang robbed that payroll. We got enough to last us—always. They got Jack Winter, but he never talked. There was only Jim, Al Horne, Henderson and Winters. Winters took the rap. Henderson bought that cattle ranch, but the rest of us moved from place to place. What we did don't matter now. Jim kept in touch with Henderson, and it was through him that we came here.

"Jim wanted to boss the valley. I told him it was a mistake, but he was bull-headed. Then Winters came. Jim spotted him right away. Winters wanted money -- his share. Jim laughed at him. I guess Winters lost his nerve and was going to tell on us. Henderson beat him to your ranch and shot him. We were sure that none of us would be suspected, when Ferguson showed up. Jim knew him. Ferguson was a blackmailer. He wanted to know who Winters came to find. Henderson killed Ferguson. They said you didn't have any brains.

"You were right, when you said I lied about my trouble with Jim. I did it to find out what you knew. We came back from Scorpion Bend and saw Henderson's two men. The idea was to kill you. But I guess that fell through, but they got Van Treec. How you knew where to find him, I do not know. I guess that is the story."

"Not a bad story, John," said Henry. "But my dear, Winters wasn't your father."

She shook her head. "No, I lied to you. I liked Jack Winters, and I was fool enough to show it. Now you can take me to jail."

THEY did. Al Horne was dead, and Jim Nelson only had a small chance to live. Henderson had a broken shoulder and a fractured arm. Men came and congratulated Henry; the same men who roared applause at Ed Henderson. But Henry was too tired to enjoy it. He and

Judge went up to their room at the hotel, where they undressed in silence. Finally Judge said:

"Henry, I do not know how you discovered all this. I retract everything I ever said about your mental processes. You are a great officer; the greatest I have ever known. Tonight you saved my life. I appreciate that. It isn't much—but it is all I had."

Henry sat on the edge of the bed, which buckled under his weight. He was not impressive in his full-length, bulging underwear. His eyes blinked wearily. Finally he replied:

"I appreciate that, Judge. A great officer of the law. Almost single-handed I smashed a gang of cold-blooded killers. None got away. I wove a web that caught them all."

"You did, my friend, and I appreciate every action. But, Henry, now that we can be honest with each other, and leave all the bull behind—just what *did* you know?"

Henry's face twisted into the first hearty laugh he had had since Winters had been murdered.

"For your ears alone, Judge," he chuckled, "I didn't know a damn thing. If it hadn't been for the Slim Princess' confession, I could have been made the biggest fool in Arizona. All I knew, Judge, was that Ed Henderson fired his cook on short notice. That cook is an honest man, and they had to get rid of him, in order to keep you there at the Circle H."

"Is that all you had, Henry?"

"Except deep and dark suspicion, which never convicted anybody."

Judge reached under the bed and drew out a gallon jug. Henry blinked at it thoughtfully.

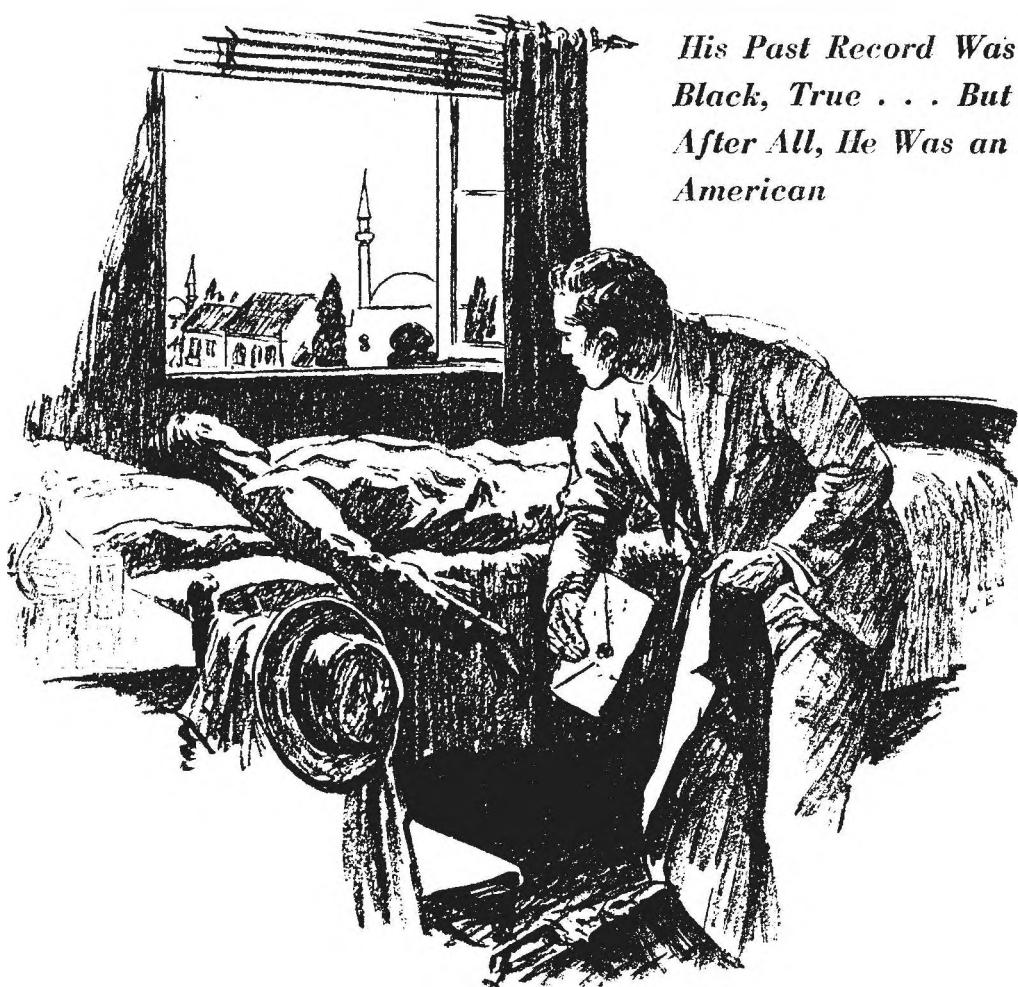
"Ambrosia," he whispered. "Nectar of the gods—fit for the palate of a king."

"Or the palate of a fool," amended Judge.

"Two fools," whispered Henry. "Get the glasses, Judge."

Our Far Flung Battle Line

His Past Record Was Black, True . . . But After All, He Was an American



A WOLF IN WOLF'S CLOTHING

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

BENEATH the blazing morning sun of Tunis, the Honorable David Morton flushed with annoyance as his companion began to sing softly. They had alighted from the tram at the Avenue Jules Ferry. Although he was, rumpled and unshaven and dirty from three days of prison, Dick Ravelan could sing. His words, however,

were impudent; he wanted to be rid of the Englishman at his side.

"Taffy was a Welshman, Taffy was a thief, Taffy came to my house and stole a piece of beef!"

Morton halted. "See here, Hobbs, I've had enough of this!" he barked.

"Well, David's the same name as Taffy, said Ravenal. "You certainly came to my prison house, and you got me set at liberty, and took your piece of beef!"

"And paid for it," snapped Morton. "Have you no gratitude?"

"None. I just don't like you. Because you're in the British consular service, should I worship you? Far from it. I've informed you on troop dispositions and the exact number of planes at the Bizerte base and the air fields here outside Tunis—"

"I helped you because you're a British subject, Hobbs!" began Morton. Ravenal grinned.

"I'm no such thing. The passport I showed you isn't mine; it was stolen. As though I'd have a name like Hobbs! That's what the Arabs call bread—*hobbs!* My friend, I'm an American citizen. You got me free; now run along with your information. You did a good job telling the police they had made a mistake, and you're paid for it—so what? I have business ahead. Here's your pocketbook; don't be so careless with it, or some thief will grab it. I've no use for it. Good-by."

He pressed into the hand of the astounded Britisher a fat leather pocketbook, then slipped away and was gone in the passing throng, leaving Morton all astarte; and this was the last he saw, or wanted to see, of the Honorable David Morton.

Doubling back the way they had come, Ravenal slipped around the corner and walked into the Transatlantique Hotel, by no means the largest or finest in Tunis. It was convenient because it stood on a corner and had two entrances. He went to the desk and demanded his key.

"M'sieu has been away?" said the clerk, handing it over.

"Yes," replied Ravenal. "For three days I have been sitting mourning among the ruins of Carthage, my friend. No letters? Good. Send me some luncheon, and a bottle of that Monfiorre Chianti."

"Ah, M'sieu! There is a trifling matter of accounts—"

"Apply this; I've had no time to get it changed." Ravenal laid down an English five-pound note, and departed to his room, anxious for a bath and a change. The Honorable David had paid in cash as well as in service for the information he got. Ravenal wondered why the devil he had been so keen to get it.

Dick Ravenal, at present soldier of fortune, was one of those not uncommon men whom most women think in need of mothering, and whom other men usually like on sight.

He was not so much a rascal as merely amoral; he had no reverence for money, his own or another's; he knew his way around in a dozen countries, and he had an air of pleasant, kindly intimacy and sympathy which was natural to him. This deceived enemies and bound friends more closely.

He was not a bird of prey; such birds prey on victims, and Ravenal had no victims. He could rook a blackguard with pleasure, he could live by his wits, he could even kill without a qualm if life were at stake; but he had a certain code which he never transgressed. For years he had been knocking about north Africa—after losing a fortune in Egypt, at cards and tables and women. He was no angel, understand; hear the worst and get it over.

THAT plunge into the fleshpots of Egypt had swept away his money and his past. His young wife, back in Baltimore, divorced him, his business associates chucked him out. He could not go home, so stayed where he was, in Africa, and wandered. He slipped into easy ways of living, collecting tribute where it offered, giving generously where there was need. Because he was speaking fluent Italian with a poor devil of a runaway Italian soldier, and giving him cigarettes and money, the police here clapped him in jail as an Axis spy, until Morton convinced them he was only a mad Englishman. And in return—why the devil, he asked himself again, had the

consular chap been so frantic after that information?

He reached his own corridor, started for his own room, and paused. Beside him, a room door swung open; a man appeared, clutching at the jamb, speaking to him.

"So here you are, species of canaille! I've been ringing for half an hour. Inside, inside! Abominable service in this rathole, abominable! Quick, damn you—help me!"

His first thought was that the man was drunk; then he dismissed it as the man caught his arm. Not drunk, but ill—frightfully, terribly ill, doubled up with agony. He had been mistaken for the garcon. This was not a tourist hotel with telephone luxurics; here one used the bell, French fashion, and sometimes it worked and sometimes not.

Ravenal helped the man to the bed, helped him stretch out, half-conscious. A hard, lean man, who muttered to himself in German. Ravenal pricked up his ears. A Nazi? No lack of Nazi spies hereabouts by all accounts. He looked around swiftly.

Evidently the man had arrived very recently, perhaps within the hour. A handbag was open, a grip strapped and locked, still fresh with the chalk-mark of the customs inspector. A coat and vest lying on a chair. Ravenal swooped on them, delved in the pockets, found a passport and two letters. The passport was French and told that this man was Eric Horn, a Frenchman. The letters gave it the lie. They said Eric Horn was a Nazi, outfitted in Paris with French identity; in reality, Ober-lieutenant Horn of Breslau.

Ravenal pocketed the lot. He came back to the bed. Horn's eyes wavered open in a lucid interval. Ravenal spoke to him in German.

"Shall I call a doctor? Tell me what I can do for you."

The man was clutching at his side, in a sweat of anguish, but joy darted into his face at hearing the German speech. He fell into a babble of fevered words.

"Yes, yes! The doctor, yes. But first—

the summer-house in the Belvedere—at five this afternoon! Meet Hesse there. The report on that damned American agent—important. He must be—must be removed—the Americans—fleet from England to Algiers—sh!" A groan wrenched at him and he twisted in convulsive pain. "Meet Hesse—meet Hesse—"

The man straightened out, unconscious.

Ravenal was deeply startled by those words. He swiftly examined the Nazi agent; there was no sign of injury. The truth hit him suddenly—the appendix, of course! He searched clothes and handbag again, replacing the passport on the dresser in full sight. A wallet, fat with paper money, rewarded his search. In it was a note, addressed to Eric Horn at the Transat-Hotel, written two days previously; a brief but illuminating note. It was brief and curt, but indicated that the writer did not know Herr Horn:

Five o'clock, the Belvedere summer-house, on the 4th. Bring this to serve as your identification.

Hesse.

Ravenal chuckled. Then he left the room and made his way back to the downstairs desk, and spoke to the clerk.

"There's a man in Room 39 who's very ill. He asked me to have a doctor sent. It looks like an emergency case, too."

This done, he sought his own room and lost no time in getting a bath and shave and a change of clothes. He left his door open and kept an eye on the hall. When he had dressed, he went to Horn's room and found a physician there, at work. He explained his interest and the doctor nodded.

"Good thing you called me; apparently a ruptured appendix; the fool had taken a physic. He's not recovered consciousness. I've given him a hypodermic and am rushing him to the military hospital. It's a toss-up whether he'll live."

Ravenal withdrew. In his own room,

he applied himself to a hearty lunch; and then, in the expressive native phrase, sat knuckling the drum of thought. He was faced with a decision which, no matter the choice, was unpleasant.

HE HAD no desire to mix in the North African game of politics, which in Tunis was particularly hot and vicious. The French feared and hated the Italians in nearby Tripoli, and in Tunis itself the Italians outnumbered them. Between Nazi agents, Italians, Allied agents, Vichy agents and occasional Fighting French sympathizers, Tunisia was a hotbed of undercover action. And life was cheap here.

But two things stuck in Ravenal's craw. First, that consular chap's overweening interest in the dispositions at the airports; second, the words of Horn. "The Americans—fleet from England to Algiers—" and then about the removal of some American agent. This struck Ravenal as not only ominous, but directly keyed by destiny to pluck at his own affairs. Cards had been dealt him. If he refused to play them, he was a rat.

The choice was, in a way, a bit hard because he had a deal on with a Tunisian grain broker that would net him a cool ten thousand francs provided he put it through at once. If he did not get down the coast to Sfax this afternoon and see his man, the deal was off. If he stayed here and played the cards given him, he must chuck the other completely.

"Be damned to it!" he thought. "These Nazis are out to get some American; my job is to step in. I've been given the chance, maybe, to make up for my sorry wasted opportunities. If I refuse it, good-bye to all self-respect. So I must lose a cool ten thousand francs for the sake of some chap from home I never set eyes on! Well, I'd be a hell of an American if I passed up the chance."

So he reached a decision, then found himself rewarded upon dipping into Horn's wallet. The money in it was French and

Algerian, and the total was close to seven thousand francs—sweet consolation for his lost brokerage deal! This cheered him up amazingly, and clinched his decision.

There is simply no use in affirming that Dick Ravenal was a heroic figure burning to match wits with the masters of espionage; he was not. He knew too much about that grim game, and was afraid of it. He had a bad record, and from some standpoints was an arrant rogue. And yet—well, even those wretches in prison had liked him. One of them had given him a couple of racing tips, too.

With his borrowed English papers in his pocket and a few other things besides, Ravenal walked down the Avenue de Paris, bought himself a spotless sun-helmet and a swagger new white jacket of the finest material, and in its buttonhole carefully adjusted the ribbon of the Legion of Honor, which he had no earthly right to sport. He then turned in at a *boutique* half French, half Arab, and made some heavy bets on the afternoon's races at the Kassar Said hippodrome.

By this time the afternoon was wearing along, so he hopped a northbound tram, taking a ticket to the Belvedere. He got off at the entrance avenue of palms. This enormous park, with its theatre and casino, was entirely French but was always thronged with the white-robed natives, particularly as the evening prayer-hour approached, for your Arab is a sensuous soul and loves beauty. And this was the most beautiful spot in Tunis, at the day's end. Ravenal felt himself thrill to it now, as always, as he climbed.

From the open loggia of the summer-house, he stood looking across the trees and the city beyond to the Kasbah and the ragged peaks of the Bou-Cornein. The soft richness of the view, the vast expanse of white houses and roofs, spotless with distance, was enchanting. Ravenal, however, kept his eye on the figures around. He had not come here for the view. No German was in sight. A few soldiers, a num-

ber of Arabs as usual, a little group of Italians with a guide—and a woman, close by, who stood looking dreamily out across the park.

A young woman, dark, gowned in the simplest and most notable Parisian style; svelte, slim, with incisive profile and the eyes of an artist. She drew a deep breath, turned, caught Ravenal's look, and colored slightly. Then she returned his gaze.

"It is very beautiful," she said in French.

He bowed slightly, as in apology for answering. "It is called the Burnouse of the Prophet," he said. "That is the native name for the city. See, how it flows from the Kasbah, where lies the hood of the burnouse, toward the port and La Goulette! A burnouse of purest white, pricked 'out with the green tiles on the domes of saints' tombs and mosques; streets so narrow as to be invisible, windows all on the inside of the houses—secrecy everywhere, sanctity everywhere, a city of holiness! That is, from a distance."

As he spoke, he was wondering what such a woman was doing here, alone.

"What an odd conceit!" she exclaimed, gazing out again at the city, neither rebuking him nor showing too much interest in him. "It is more beautiful than any other city in French Africa! Why is that?"

"Beauty gravitates to beauty," said Ravenal. "These people love beautiful things, as they love perfume! the perfume bazaars here are unique, you know. Have you seen them?"

She nodded. "I've been here several days. One goes first to the perfume bazaars."

Her tone bespoke dismissal; she was through with him. Perhaps, he thought, she had come here to meet someone. This recalled his own errand. He bowed slightly to her and turned away. Still no one in sight who looked at all like his man; or, he reflected, the Nazi agent might even be in Arab guise.

Ah, the letter which was to serve as identification—of course! He moved closer to the square opening in the exquisitely

tiled walls which gave view of the city. He took out the letter, unfolded it, held it as though perusing it, and then in leisurely fashion struck a match for his cigarette. Surely, he thought, if the man Hesse were anywhere here, he must catch sight of this significant poised figure!

Then he caught a startled breath from behind, and turned to find the woman staring at him. She spoke softly, but in German.

"Where did you get my letter?"

"Your letter?" For an instant, Ravenal was thunderstruck, as he realized the truth. A smile came to his lips. "But it is mine, since it is addressed to me! And don't speak German here. So you are Hesse!"

"Of course," she said. "Hesse Dubois. But you—well, I would never have taken you to be Eric Horn, after what I've heard of you!"

"Neither would less friendly persons, which is my object." Ravenal forced himself to accept the situation. He concealed his astonishment and nodded at her, offering his arm. "We can't talk here. Come along. Let's take a tram and find a *café* and be comfortable. Did you have any trouble getting here?"

Not for nothing was Ravenal a crafty fellow. As they left the buildings and headed for the tram entrance, he got what he most needed to know; information.

"Leaving Egypt was not easy," she said. "However, I got a boat from Alexandria. And I have frightful news. The British have amassed incredible forces. American planes and tanks and men are pouring in. Already the offensive is under way and Rommel is crumbling; he cannot hope to stand up against it. What word from Paris and Algiers?"

"Nothing of moment," said Ravenal. "The most important thing at present is the matter of that American who must be removed."

"Yes, yes, that is urgent!" she replied. "I have learned everything. I got it straight from an American consular agent in Alex-

andria—the fool! The information must be sent on at once from here; have you any means of sending it?"

"Of course," said Ravenal calmly. She relaxed, and sighed.

"Good. Then everything's all right. Here's the tram."

They got aboard and started down the long avenue, chatting of little things. Meantime Ravenal found himself sizing her up anew. He was good at this; every rascal, like every hotel clerk, learns to do it automatically. Yet she had fooled him at first sight.

NOW he saw her as a person not to be lightly regarded. Evidently she was a trained and supple spy, probably of French birth; her hands were slim and tapering, but they were strong, her features were vivacious and beautiful, but lacked any sympathy or compassion. She was obviously efficient, but also superficial.

At the Avenue de Londres they changed to a west-bound tram, and in time gained the crowded Place Halfaouine, with its trees and stone benches and French fountain and surrounding cafés, and the enormous Mosque Halfaouine at the far end. This was the very heart of the Medina or native city, thronged with Arabs of every hue, with grayish Berbers, with shiny black Soudanese, with magicians and story-tellers and snake-charmers, and the air a din of laughter and babbling voices.

"You speak English?" questioned Ravenal, as they settled down at a café table.

"Of course."

"Then stick to it, as the safest. Here's the soul of Tunis before your eyes," he said. "Squalor enough, but also beauty. They go in for fine clothes, these natives. Like the ancient Khmers who built the jungled ruins of Siam, they worship beauty—and the same vice. There, opium. Here, hashish. It spells decadence, effeminacy, weakness."

"How soon can you get off my information?" she demanded. She was practical,

not dreaming of beauty; probably anxious and worried, thought Ravenal.

"Within half an hour. By short-wave wireless."

"Oh! And you only arrived here today?"

Ravenal waved at his hand. "Everything was long ago arranged. The superior Aryan race is most efficient. I am surprised that you did not run into any of our people."

"I did," she confessed. "But I had orders to report to you alone."

"Excellent woman!" he said, as their drinks arrived. "Now, then, let's have it."

She poured out a torrent of low, rapid speech, to which Ravenal listened without evidence of emotion. His pleasant, kindly features held their half-smile. His dark eyes narrowed a trifle; a shadowy, predatory air became visible and lent his face an incisive quality. Inwardly he fell into tumultuous and ghastly alarm.

"These special trade control officers the Americans have sent to Africa," she said, "have been here a year and a half. They are picked Intelligence men, cooperating with the Free French sympathizers. Spies, all of them — spies! Agents working against us! No one has suspected this before. They're supposed to supervise the exchange of American products and food sent to North Africa for cork and other things. Something is in the air! Berlin must be warned at once. No one knows just what it is."

She paused. Into Ravenal's brain darted the words of the sick man. "The Americans — fleet from England to Algiers!" Could such a thing be? No, no, it was fantastic!

"That is the information you must send," she went on. "This man Wright, here at Tunis, is one of those agents. He has caused us terrific injuries."

"And therefore must be removed?" said Ravenal. She nodded.

"Exactly. That is my work; it is all arranged. I met him yesterday. He's not only in contact with the military authorities here, but with the British; also with Italians

in Tripoli—the swine! He has caused the loss of invaluable ships sent to supply the Afrika Korps. How far may I count upon your help."

"All the way," said Ravelan. "But the thing must be kept quiet."

"Just you and I and Kleine. He was our best man in Cairo but it got too hot for him and he had to clear out. He'll arrive here tonight or tomorrow. You'll like him."

Ravelan doubted this, but gathered that Kleine did not know Eric Horn, which was pleasant. She went on, a vicious edge creeping into her voice.

"We'll handle this American pig tomorrow night. Wright lives at the Hotel des Anglais and does his work there. He is circumspect, but a fool. I think he must be a naval officer. He is interested in helping me, and thereby gaining some vital information."

"You're a charming woman," said Ravelan, and almost meant it. "How did you trap him?"

She smiled. "Oh, my brother is an officer in the aviation; he is very ill. He wants to give the Americans full information on the latest dispositions at the Bizerte base, also at the Aouina military aviation base here. And you are to be the brother."

She broke into a laugh and stopped there, refusing to give him any hint about her plans. Glancing at her watch, she rose. "I must leave; I have my report to finish and get in the mail. I'll telephone you tomorrow. You'll send the information at once?"

"Immediately," said Ravelan. "But if you phone me at the hotel, do not ask for Eric Horn. Ask for Mr. Ravelan. I'll tell the desk clerk it's an affair of the heart and he'll be delighted to cooperate. I find it safer not to use the name of Horn."

The sun had set. They walked back to the tram line and parted. This Hesse DuBois was beautiful, but she was a very machine of a woman and not one for philandering; nor was she more than superficially clever. Ravelan's notions of voluptuous

female agents went glimmering. He began to feel the very cold, steely edge of this young woman's real personality, and it frightened him.

He returned to the Avenue de Paris, dropped in at the betting office, and to his surprised delight found several thousand francs awaiting him. That tip from the chap in prison had been accurate. Decidedly, he reflected, he was finding virtue well rewarded! So, being the man he was, he sent half his winnings by a sure hand to the poor devil in prison, and sought the Brasserie Tantonville where he dined like a lord.

But, at the back of his brain, things were jangling. An American agent and a British agent both risking much to get accurate information on the local aerodromes—Americans, a fleet from London to Algiers—hell's bells! Could his wild fantastic thought actually be true? Were his own people going to move in on North Africa?

He went to a dance after dinner, not to watch the dancers but to watch the crowd, as he loved to do. Arab women were not allowed to dance in Tunis; the performers were women from the Jewish suburban community of Ariane, but the dances were purely Bedouin. Only a native-trained eye could appreciate them, since they were neither naughty nor graceful from other viewpoints. The crowd, mostly native, would sit entranced for hours, sniffing flowers and munching burnt almonds. Ravelan munched and sniffed also, and watched the people around. He finally headed for home, determining to call on Wright in the morning.

Upon reaching the hotel, he inquired after the sick man. The desk clerk shook his head; M. Horn might or might not survive the operation. One could not say. Only Allah could foretell the event!

Dick Ravelan slept soundly.

AT NINE next morning he was walking briskly down the Rue de Portugal. Just outside a gate of the Medina, the old

native city, was his destination; an obscure French hotel of small size. Ravenal asked at the office for M. Wright. The clerk looked dubious; M. Wright was usually busy. One must be announced. So Ravenal gave his name and settled down to wait.

Presently came a query; his business with M. Wright? Somewhat nettled, Ravenal made answer that it was personal, concerning the Aouina airport. He waited again. At ten o'clock a cheerful garçon appeared and led him upstairs and down a corridor to a room door, and in. There, sitting behind a desk in a room that was obviously part of a suite, a room business-like and bare, was a man with bleak eyes and stony features. A man of thirty, who nodded at him and bade him be seated.

"You have business with me, Mr. Ravenal?" came the brisk American words.

"Yes, of a rather personal nature," replied Ravenal. "In fact, I think that I can interest you in—"

"Pardon me," broke in Wright, who was fingering a dossier that lay before him. "You can interest me in nothing, Mr. Ravenal. Let me refresh your memory. You have been knocking around the Near East for some time in a disreputable manner. Your passport was long ago cancelled. In Egypt, you were implicated in the El Arish scandal; you had a share in the Myers cotton swindle; after a most unsavory series of episodes, you were expelled from the country because of your participation in the affair of Nabhas Pasha."

Ravenal writhed inwardly: pallor stole into his cheeks as he listened to the chill, unemotional words. Wright continued with pitiless voice.

"In Algeria, you had a bad record; twice arrested, each time released with charges unproven. At Constantine you had a finger nipped in the swindle of a French promoter; you came to Tunisia and have been mixed in the same sort of slippery business. Very recently you tasted prison life, being mistaken for an Italian spy. You are

a second-rate con man. The world may be your oyster, Mr. Ravenal, but I am not. Is that sufficient?"

The cold eyes bored into Ravenal. He met them squarely.

"No," he said quietly. "If I were the type of man you think me, I'd be blabbing about how hard the world has used me, about everyone being down on me, and so forth. Well, I'm not. I admit frankly that I've been pretty much of a rascal. Maybe you remember a Jew named Saul?"

"Offhand, I do not," said Wright.

"You should. He made the same admission, and changed his name to Paul, and became quite a guy. I'm here because I can be of use in a big way, to you personally and to our own country. A man on the edge of the underworld often has abilities and knowledge which make him of great value—"

"I don't think we care to deal with underworld characters," broke in Wright.

"Very well." Ravenal gathered himself to rise. "I see that she was right about the Annapolis ring; navy man, eh? And her report on your work and that of other trade control agents in North Africa, including your connections in Egypt and Tripoli, was probably correct. But the matter of a fleet from London to Algiers, and the American forces concerned, probably is of no interest to you, so I'll say good morning. Pleased to have met you."

He nodded amiably, rose, and started for the door. As his hand touched the knob, a word stopped him—a hoarse, strangled word.

"Wait!"

HE TURNED. Wright sat as though shocked into a paralysis. Twice he opened his lips, twice closed them. He gestured to the chair and found words.

"Come back. Sit down."

Ravenal complied. He sat and looked at Wright, whose stony features were becoming human under the stress of inward emotion. He said nothing. He perceived in-

stantly that his words had struck to a vital spot. Not only was Wright frightfully startled, but his cold hauteur had smashed like an eggshell.

"What is it you're after?" Wright asked, with difficulty. "You want money, eh?"

"No," said Ravenal pleasantly. "Oh, no! I'd like to be given an emergency passport and get in good standing again with the lodge, so to speak, and to be given a job without pay. I'm not selling information, if that's what you mean. I could be useful. I have friends among the natives, you know, all through these parts. I even speak their language at times."

"Wait," said Wright, who seemed to be in panic mentally. "You said—you mentioned a woman—that she took me for a navy man—"

RAVENAL nodded cheerfully. "Yes; you should not wear an Annapolis ring on this sort of job, Mr. Wright. A full report on you and other members of the trade control, and their real activities here, was turned in last night for transmission to Paris and Berlin; I killed it. I could tell you a lot of things, but I've no interest in telling you how wise I am. That's water over the dam."

"You seem," said Wright, choosing his words carefully, "to have picked up a lot of amazing and probably erroneous information, Mr. Ravenal."

"That's the wrong attitude," Ravenal replied, with kindly concern. "Really, it is. You're in a good deal of personal danger; that's why I came to you. It seems that you've done some very fine work, and the Nazis don't like it by half. With your Egyptian connections, you must have heard of a certain Nazi agent in Cairo named Kleine?"

Wright's eyes flickered slightly. Ravenal smiled.

"I see you have. I'll probably be chatting with him today. If there's anything you'd like to have conveyed to these Nazis, I'll be glad to—"

"See here!" Wright almost exploded. "Come across and tell me everything you know and where you got it. I'll make a deal with you. This—damn it, this is uncanny!"

Ravenal relaxed, laughed, and produced the Royal Khedivial cigarettes he was now enjoying. He lit one, unhurried. This was a hard man to deal with, but his play was won.

"No. I don't intend to empty my bag and then be kicked out. Luck has put me into a position where I may regain all that I've lost, including my self-respect, and I mean to do it. Let me give you an example. I can write letters to a few natives I know; and in three days can have the most detailed and exact information on every aviation field between here and Constantine. Simply because I know a native or two who have connections."

"We don't need that information," murmured Wright, who was staring at him.

"Perhaps not. I might warn you about certain things; I shan't do it. You're one of those men who must be allowed to make mistakes—"

"Confound you!" said Wright. "Who's this woman you're talking about?"

Ravenal smiled, regretfully.

"You see? You've formed a certain notion of me; therefore you must browbeat and make demands. Too bad. A Nazi agent came to town the other day, via Algeria. He must have contacted some of your men there; at all events, he was bubbling over with information and surmises about American activity in North Africa. Well, he has stopped bubbling; in fact, he may be dead by now. That reminds me, I must inquire at the hospital."

Wright, by this time, had steadied and was under full control.

"Ravenal, you ask what I can't do off-hand," he said frankly. "I must get instructions. That will take time."

"As a navy man," said Ravenal, "you ought to know the value of individual action and responsibility."

"True." Wright bit his lips. "Still, I must have a bit of time on this thing."

"As you like. You say you don't need information on the aviation bases here; yet in reality, you and the British both need it badly. You can't make up your mind about me, so you refuse to trust me. That's natural; I don't blame you a particle. But just stick away in your mind what I said about Saul of Tarsus—he was a pretty bad egg, you know." Ravenal rose, smiling. "I'm at the Transat, as you probably know, so you can always reach me. But, if I were you," he added gently, "I'd not waste very much time. Good-by."

This time he walked out unhindered.

"Left him flat as a pancake," he reflected. "So, by heaven, it's true about our boys moving into French Africa—ships, planes and tanks! Probably the British, too. Well, maybe I should have warned Wright about the fair Dubois and what's on the carpet; still, I gave him plenty of hints. He's a stubborn ass! The only way I can convince him is by making deeds talk louder than words. But I've sure left him flattened out, poor devil!"

Ravenal was no hero and had no ambitions in that line. How long he could keep up the role of Eric Horn was an unpleasant conjecture; particularly as this fellow Kleine was sure to be far more clever and shrewd than the pretty Hesse Dubois. He must keep it up for this evening, anyway. Perhaps Wright would have brains enough to accept the warnings given, but he thought not. That man lacked the suppleness needed in the sort of game that was afoot.

SO, regrettably, Dick Ravenal made up his mind to the worst, and prepared for it in his characteristic fashion. Life had taught him the folly of dramatics, and the practical value of success without trumpets, and he knew that Nazi agents were brutally direct in their methods. So he made no attempt to get hold of a pistol or other weapon, although some very curious

things of that character were to be had in the Medina. Instead, he looked up a grain broker whom he knew in the Suk of the grain merchants, and talked with him for a long while.

"It can be arranged," said the Arab, pocketing a thousand-franc note. "Allah is great; blessed is Allah! It will be delivered before the sunset prayer. Loaded and ready."

Ravenal went to his hotel, since he was expecting word from Hesse Dubois at any moment. He inquired at the desk regarding Eric Horn; the man had died an hour previously, without regaining consciousness. The police were now taking away his effects.

In his own room, Ravenal pondered this turn. For the moment, all was well. But the police would wire Paris; by the morrow Berlin, and later all other Nazi agents, would know that Eric Horn was dead. So it would be just as well not to overplay his role—yes, just as well to end it this same evening!

"But," he vowed, "never again—never! No more of this damned secret service. Let Wright give me a job of some sort, no matter what, but count me out as a political agent. There are better things in life so far as Dick Ravenal is concerned."

A wise decision. He had scarcely made it when he was summoned to the office telephone to answer a call. He was greeted by the voice of Hesse Dubois.

"Our friend has arrived," she said, after satisfying herself of his identity. "Can you meet us about six at the Chianti Restaurant in the Avenue de France?"

"With pleasure," began Ravenal. She rang off before he could get in another word.

Ravenal was thirty-four, at the axis of life. If he was wise in chicanery, he was all the more apt at recognizing and borrowing the wisdom of others. Now he took a leaf from the Arab book and made his way to the Grand Mosque under the hill of the Kasbah. About the Tunisian mosques

were grouped cafés, often by nationalities. He seated himself in the café of the Moroccans, bought flowers from one of the countless flower-sellers, ordered mint tea and sat there for the next three hours. He sniffed perfume, sipped tea, and meditated in relaxation and repose of mind, like the burnouséd men around him.

When he came back to the hotel, he was renewed and invigorated. He found two telephone calls, and laughed; they were from Wright. He ignored them, went to his room, and changed clothes. While he was at it, a package arrived: the promised package.

He opened it and disclosed a malacca stick in two pieces. He screwed them together and had a light, rather thick, quite handsome walking stick, with a carved handle in place of the usual crook. The handle was of wood, carved into the shape of a goat's head with ruby eyes. He touched the horns with his thumb and they moved slightly.

He put his fingernail under one of the ruby eyes, and it came loose—a bit of glass on the end of a pin. He examined the tiny aperture and saw a drop of moisture; he quickly replaced the pin and eye, and nodded with satisfaction.

At five-fifty he left the hotel and walked briskly down the Avenue de France toward the Italian quarter. The Chianti was a notable dining place, not far from the Place de Rome. As he drew near, Ravenal saw Hesse sitting at one of the café tables, a man beside her. He went to them, bowed over her hand, and shook hands with Kleine at her introduction.

"I shall leave you gentlemen at once," she said, "having an engagement. There is no time to lose, M. Horn. You and Kleine will await us; I'll bring my friend to you. Kleine knows where. An apéritif, and then to work."

The drink was ordered. Ravenal found Kleine devouring him with curiously intent gaze. This Cairo agent looked anything but a Nazi; Ravenal could have

sworn, by looks and gestures that he was a Greek, and said so.

"You compliment me," said Kleine, with a flash of white teeth. "It is a matter of careful attention to detail, of course, from haircut to fingernails; I had the proper build to start with, luckily. But you, Monsieur—you astonish me! You do not answer to anything I have heard of the famous Eric Horn; it is marvelous!"

"Thank you," said Ravenal modestly. "What news have you?"

"All bad," returned Kleine. "Rommel is breaking. These damned English and Americans have assembled incredible strength! And that American army in England is about to strike, probably at Norway. I think we had better get our organization here together, eh?"

"We shall do so this evening, when our present task is done," said Ravenal. "I had a long talk today with your friend Wright, Mademoiselle. He is no fool. Do you think he'll risk his neck like a lovesick boy?"

HESSE gave him one flashing look. "Not at all. Evidently you misconstrue my ability. Do your part as well as I do mine, and all goes excellently. Now I must be off. Au revoir!"

She rose. The two men bowed her away, and then resumed their seats.

"That woman," observed the dark, swarthy Kleine, pulling at his long mustache, "has her limitations; but within them she has the devil's own brain!"

"Apparently so. She's not too obvious," assented Ravenal. "What's our program?"

"Simple, bold, efficient. She and I have taken rooms in the St. Georges Hotel in the Rue Hoche—a huge tourist place, eminently reputable and distinguished. You and I go there now and wait. She brings him to visit her very ill brother. It is all open and aboveboard, nothing secret, you understand. He comes. We kill him; we depart."

"Hm! Bold enough, certainly, and a

trifle risky," said Ravenal. "How kill him?"

"Knives. They're ready and waiting. And she has a pistol, if needed. It won't be."

They paid for the drinks, departed, and caught a tram for the Rue Hoche in the upper French city.

Ravenal was not happy about this murder-trap, but nerved himself for the worst. Wright would be unsuspicious, of course; a big hotel, an atmosphere of absolute security, a plausible story. Well, it was going to be a nasty business at best; he clutched his walking-stick lovingly. No more of this damned secret service! If he got out of here alive, somebody else could take over the job; Eric Horn was dead, and would stay dead.

THEY swung into the hotel, empty now of tourists but crammed with officers and their families, with consular service people and visitors and, above all, refugees who had money to spend. It was a gay and cosmopolitan crowd.

Kleine got his key at the desk, explained that his sister and a dinner guest would arrive at any moment, and led Ravenal away. From the ornate and somewhat overstuffed lobby they passed through corridors and more corridors, until Kleine paused at a door and opened it, to show a very handsome two-room suite. Unopened luggage stood about.

"Bluff," said Kleine, kicking a suitcase. It was obviously new. "This is at the end of the building, excellent for our purpose; we can leave by the courtyard entrance. Not much time; here, into the bedroom. Throw some things about—"

He tumbled pillows and bedding and switched off the lights, leaving only a bed-lamp burning in this farther room. From under his coat he drew a weapon, passing it to Ravenal; an Italian stiletto, razor-edged, long and thin and deadly.

Ravenal dropped into a chair that stood at one side of the entrance. He put his

walking-stick between his knees. The feel of that knife made him a bit sickish; he had seen Arabs at knife-work and it revolted him. If he needed anything to steel him to his own job, this was it. Kleine thumbed a similar stiletto with satisfaction, his swarthy features and glittering eyes touched with diabolic glee. The two of them were at either side of the doorway.

"As you're no doubt aware," Kleine said, "the important thing is to do it swiftly and shut his mouth. Not that noise would matter here; the court's on one side, the gardens on the other. An admirable location. . . ."

Ravenal shivered and the words ceased to register. Assassination, foul murder—should he take care of this Nazi fiend here and now? No, wait; he wanted above all else to convince that stubborn man Wright. It could be done deftly, with luck, when Wright appeared. The trap must be sprung, must be evident, if Wright was to believe—

"Arrived!"

WITH the word, Kleine crouched *W* against the wall, opposite, stiletto ready. From the outer room came the slam of a door, the fresh, eager voice of Hesse in French.

"He is in the next room. Monsieur. Proceed, I beg you. Gilbert! Here is the visitor I promised! Is your light on?"

Wright came into the doorway between the rooms. Unexpectedly, he paused and turned.

"But, Mademoiselle—"

Just there, she struck him; what with, Ravenal could not see. Wright came staggering into the bedroom and groaned, and collapsed. Kleine leaped on him, knife ready—

Ravenal's thumb pressed on the horns of the carven goat, desperately. He had dropped the knife. A finger-nail had plucked out the two red eyes as he sat; he held the stick with steady aim. There was a slight hiss. Two invisible jets of liquid

shot forth, straight into the face of the Nazi.

A howl of agony burst from Kleine. He hurled the stiletto to the floor and clawed at his eyes. Into the doorway came the woman Hesse, just as Ravenal rose to his feet. He swung the stick, pressed again—a fractional second too late. She was already swinging up a small pistol, her features convulsed with surprise and fury and comprehension. It exploded; then the ammoniated fluid jetteted into her face and eyes. A stifled scream escaped her.

Ravenal felt that one bullet leave a scar across his cheek. He was already in motion, springing at the woman, wrenching the pistol from her and with one hearty shove sending her reeling and staggering away into the other room.

He whirled around. Kleine was spluttering oaths and grasping at the air. Ravenal aimed and fired; the bullet struck the Nazi just above the knee. Kleine howled anew, collapsed and sat clutching at his leg while his blinded eyes poured forth tears.

Ravenal swooped on Wright, who was feebly trying to rise. He helped Wright up, wrenched him about, and urged the dazed, bewildered man through into the other room, past Hesse who was gripping at a chair for support, and to the door. An instant later they were out in the corridor. Wright put a hand to the back of his head.

"Lord!" he groaned. "What is it? Who are you? See here—"

"Check it. I'm Dick Ravenal. Come along and get out of here, you blithering

idiot!" He urged Wright along. What was it Kleine had said—out through the courtyard? Here were the stairs—good! He swung Wright at them. "This way! I had to shoot Kleine to make sure of him—only in the leg, though. You walked into a perfect murder-trap, and now you're walking out of it. Pull yourself together and we'll make the street from here."

They came into the cool, starry courtyard and caught a breath of perfume from the orange and lime trees. Wright clung for a moment to a carven pillar; his shoulders squared, he had himself in hand now.

"So that was it," he said. "Ravenal, I owe you apologies—more than apologies, by heaven! Will you shake hands?"

"I guess we can afford the time," said Ravenal, chuckling. "Do I get that bit of work?"

"You get any damned thing it's in my power to get for you," said Wright fervently. "And since you know so much about it, I don't mind telling you that this is the big night, over in Algeria and Morocco—the zero hour comes at dawn. American armies are landing to occupy the whole country, and British as well. It's the biggest thing that ever happened! You bet you'll get that bit of work—for your country!"

Ravenal pressed his hand. "Thanks. Thanks! Just one thing—no more of this blasted secret service stuff in mine. Anything but that; anything!"

"Okay," said Wright. "Let's go find a drink and talk it over."

Wings for Victory

BY Jim Ray

"MUSTANG"

THE ONLY AMERICAN FIGHTER USED BY THE RAF, THE "MUSTANG" IS CALLED "THE AIRPLANE WITHOUT A MISTAKE" AND IS HERALDED HERE AND ABROAD AS ONE OF THE BEST FIGHTERS TO COME OUT OF THE WAR. THE "MUSTANG" PROVED ITSELF AT DIEPPE BY OUTFIGHTING THE VAUNTED FOCKE-WULF 190. A NEW NORTH AMERICAN "MUSTANG", THE P-51 FOR THE ARMY AIR FORCES, WILL PROBABLY BE ONE OF THE SURPRISES OF 1943-FOR THE AXIS.



JUST A SAMPLE

By PETER
PAIGE

*A Case of Mistaken
Identity Turns the Mouse Into
a Trouble-Shooting Spy Hunter*

IT IS still the talk of all who work for Glorious Silk Prints, Inc., how Henry Pringle changed from a mouse into a man overnight. Speculation has long since run its course but the talk continues—behind the back of Mr. Pringle, now the dynamic vice-president in charge of sales.

Henry remains silent on the subject. Lou Albrecht is no longer around to tell. And the only others in the know, a couple of Washington men with gold badges, merely chuckle at the memory and conceal the facts from outsiders—as Washington men with gold badges should.

On the afternoon before the night of

the transformation, Henry Pringle was not only mouse-like; he was actually known as Mouse Pringle. Seated at his desk, an eager junior salesman, he was a puny figure with washy blue eyes wearing a white shirt rolled at the cuffs and a black tie neatly knotted.

He was listening in at the phone and Lou Albrecht, sales manager, towered over the desk rattling a sheaf of invoices impatiently.

Lou Albrecht had all that Henry lacked. His chest swelled a sky blue shirt. Thick hairy forearms showed up to the rolled sleeves.

His head shot up like a bullet from

massive shoulders. His eyes were opaque and his mouth hard.

He listened to Henry's voice rising in a squeak: "What's that? Hah? What—what—*what!*!"

"Snap it up, Mouse!" urged Lou Albrecht.

Henry returned the receiver to its cradle with trembling fingers. His washy blue eyes glistened. "Boy, oh boy!" he murmured. "Boy!"

"Okay, okay, Mouse!" cut in Albrecht with a show of irritation. "About these emblem prints. The dye streaked and you'll have to stall these orders until—*hey!*"

Henry Pringle never heard him. Henry Pringle was across the floor grabbing a briefcase from a wall rack and a hat from a peg and a jacket from a hangar.

Miss Brice at the switchboard called out as he passed: "Mr. Albrecht is paging you, Mouse."

HENRY PRINGLE floated by as if in a trance. He sidestepped neatly through the crowded hall, made the elevator by an eyelash. The portly executive on whose toes he stood scowled down at him and Henry beamed in reply, "Boy!"

The lobby was even more crowded and a line of angry looks followed his wake from bumped hips and jerked elbows.

Once out the revolving door he paused. The Broadway sidewalk thronged with brow swabbing, heat cursing sufferers. The July sun was a molten furnace overhead beating its rays earthward. The gritty pavement beat the rays back up into streaming faces.

It might have been snowing for all Henry knew. Henry was excited. Behind him lay a life as drab as Monday morning's wash. Starting in P. S. 53, his phenomenal aversion to athletics had earned for him the sobriquet of Mouse. From then on it had been Mouse Pringle—through high school and then clerking stock for Glorious Silk Prints, Inc.

Even when he was promoted to the "floor" after three years in the stockroom. Even in the sanctuary of his two-room flat in the Bronx, his winsome little Felice called him "Mousey."

But now that all lay behind him. He was viewing the world with brand new eyes. Before him lay—"A taxi!" he murmured to himself rapturously. "This once. Hang the expense. Boy!"

That was when the man in the green hat strolled over from the curb and laid a hand on the briefcase under Henry's arm. The man was wiry and dark complected with nut brown eyes that fastened on Henry's face.

"*Die Hälfte von zehn ist fünf.*" said the man.

"What?" blurted Henry.

"*Die Hälfte von zehn ist fünf!*" repeated the man darting his eyes about swiftly, his hand still on the leather case.

"The what of what is what?" Henry gasped.

Green Hat gave him a startled look, jerked the briefcase from Henry's arm and examined it. "Es ist!" he snarled. He regarded Henry again in growing puzzlement, then muttered, "Ach!" and darted swiftly away.

"Hey, that's my sample case!" shouted Henry after him. Henry was about to say more. Henry was about to yell for a cop. But a hand gripped his elbow first.

"You can save the act, fella," said a quiet voice. Henry gaped at an elderly weather-beaten face with stern eyes and an unlit cigar dangling from yellowed teeth. Then he looked down at a glint of gold from a badge snuggled in the stranger's palm.

"No fuss does it, fella," warned the elderly stranger. "You don't wanna start a rumpus now, hey?" The hand on Henry's elbow moved and Henry moved with it—across the sidewalk to a gray sedan parked at the curb.

"But that guy in the green hat stole my sample case!" protested Henry as the other

shoved him into the rear of the sedan and crowded in after him.

PRACTISED hands flew over Henry's pockets, under his arms, down his hips.

Then the cigar chewer leaned back and allowed his jacket to slide open—revealing the ebony butt of an automatic.

"That is a gun!" came weakly from Henry.

The other appraised him shrewdly. "A good act, fella, but skip it. Just sit still and remember it goes boom."

Henry sat still. Outside, the parade of sun victims staggered endlessly by: salesmen, stenogs, clerks, models, buyers, needle workers—the conglomerate lifestream of Manhattan's garment center. None displayed the faintest interest in the sedan parked at the curb.

Henry sat still.

Then a hatless fellow panted up from the middle of Broadway and wrenched open the front door. He seemed, to Henry, as large as the side of a house. His face resembled that of a dyspeptic bulldog.

He slid under the wheel, tossed the leather sample case over his shoulder without glancing back.

"Got it!" he gasped. "The other lug saw me comin' and slung it way into the middle of traffic. I coulda gone for him or it. I went for it. By that time he'd faded. Did I do right, Morgan?"

Morgan was apparently the leathery faced man with the cigar. He fingered the sample case. "You did right, Turk. He was just a stooge. Peewee here is Number One. Get started."

The sedan made a graceful U turn under Turk's expert guidance and started downtown.

Henry came to life. "Hey, where you guys taking me? I've got to go uptown. I've got to, see?"

Turk flicked a glance through the rear-view mirror, then concentrated on driving. Morgan opened the sample case. He with-

drew a black wooden rod from which hung yard square samples of silk prints.

Ignoring Henry, he spat on the top print, a blue flower pattern, and rubbed the moist part with his thumb. The blue dye smudged easily. He said, "Ah!"

Henry's anguish mounted as the garment center slid behind. "It's Felice, don't you understand?" he pleaded desperately. "She's at the Mother of Mercy Hospital. All at once, after three years we've been married, see? You've got to go uptown!"

"What's your beef?" chuckled Turk from in front. "I been married ten years."

"But don't you see it? I'm going to have a baby!"

"Hat!" chortled Turk. "Me, I'm gonna lay an egg!"

Morgan shifted his attention from the dye smudge to Henry as they drew up to a red light.

"You gonna stick to that act?" he said.

Henry ground out his words. "It is no act! Just now up at the office I got a call from Doc Thorne. I wasn't expecting it until next month but now he called and said it's coming early and I should hurry over to the hospital where they took Felice in an ambulance."

Morgan shrugged. "If you wanna stick to that, okay by me, fella. But your stooge, Rudolph Schmidt, sold out to us when he heard what happened to his family in blitz-krieg land. That make a difference?"

"I tell you I don't know any Rudolph Schmidt!"

Morgan sighed. "And you wouldn't know how photographs of U. S. military plans are smuggled out of the country?"

"I swear I don't!"

"And you're not the fella who attends to that little detail for the Gestapo; the guy known as Number One?"

Henry's voice rose to a squeak. "Me?"

Morgan bit off the end of the cigar and lit it. Outside, the light changed from red to green but the sedan failed to move.

"Traffic jam up front," announced Turk.

"Look," pleaded Henry eagerly. "My name's Henry Pringle. I work in Glorious Silk Prints where you saw me come out. I swear I don't know what you're talking about and you can check on me all you want. That's your business. A mistake was made about me, okay. I'll forget about it. But can't you have a heart and see why I've *got* to go to the hospital and see my wife?"

"You should be in the movies!" shouted Turk over the cantata he was trying on the horn. All around, the horns of other stalled cars were building up into a deafening chorus.

WHICH was why neither Henry nor the others heard the two doors swing open until a dark face under a green hat leaned over Henry behind the butt of a revolver which landed over Morgan's eye.

Turk's eyes in the rear-view mirror almost popped. His left hand darted from the horn button to his hip—then he cried, "Ugh!" and slumped in his seat from the blow of a second revolver butt in the fist of a stout blond man standing on the running board.

Henry Pringle, heart in mouth, found himself on Broadway with Green Hat's fingers on his arm. In Green Hat's other hand was the black wooden rod with the silk print samples. In Henry's mind was vividly etched the picture of Morgan limp in the rear of the sedan with a trickle of blood running down his cheek and a trickle of smoke rising from the cigar in his lap.

Green Hat urged, "*Kommen Sie, Genosse!*" and Henry was entering a taxi on the uptown side of Broadway. Green Hat crawled past Henry. The fat blond man squeezed next to Henry. Without glancing back, the driver sent the cab flying north up Broadway.

The fat man grinned at Henry. The deep red of his cheeks made his eyes seem white. Sweat poured down a thick neck, soaked into a tan polo shirt. "I am Varmetz," said the fat man. "Otto shouldt haf

knowed der police vas dere ven you refuzed to gif answer to der passyordt."

Green Hat, evidently Otto, dabbed a handkerchief at his brow. "*Ja.* I am sorry, *Genosse.* We caught Rudolph Schmidt leaving the Federal Building this morning but didn't know to what extent he had betrayed us.

"You, of course, didn't know this and, never having seen me before, your suspicion of me was natural. I was too impulsive."

"But all iss goot now, *nein?*" grinned Varmetz.

Henry nodded. He couldn't trust himself to speak. With men who flashed badges he'd been able to talk. These men flashed guns. The guns were out of sight now but they were there.

That they mistook him for someone else was obvious. And, he thought to himself as the cab swung into Central Park at Columbus Circle, if these men mistook him for a fellow conspirator, it was no wonder Morgan and Turk had made the same mistake.

But how could such a mistake have been made?

Henry ransacked his brain. Something about the print samples, possibly—the way the dye smudged. Henry frowned to himself. That was all wrong. Glorious Silk Prints, Inc., used waterproof dyes!

But he didn't think of it long. The cab swept over long curves of parkway, veering always east—toward Fifth Avenue. Henry wanted to cry out. This was as bad as going downtown. Mother of Mercy Hospital was on the west side. But Henry didn't cry out. The guns were still there and Henry was still Mouse Pringle.

The Mall slipped by to his left. . . .

EMERGING from the park, Varmetz said, "Ve talk mit Rudolph now, *nein?*" His little eyes glittered.

Henry still couldn't trust himself to speak. The cab turned north again up Madison Avenue.

Otto fondled the print samples. "This time our friend, Rudolph, will tell *all* he knows," he said significantly. "Perhaps we may have to change our entire method of communication with the Fatherland. That interfering ---- of a G-man has been experimenting with this. I can tell. I should have split open his fat skull!"

Otto smiled at Henry. "It was such a clever method you devised, *Nummer Eins*. It would be a shame to discard it."

Henry allowed himself another nod. He noticed that Otto, unlike Varmetz, spoke English without a trace of accent. Varmetz chuckled:

"Dey vill surprized be ven dey avaken, dose policers, *nein?*"

Henry cleared his throat. "How did you catch up with us so fast?"

"When I saw you arrested by one officer and another running after me I hurled the briefcase into the road and slipped into the crowd," explained Otto. "The man chasing me went for the briefcase. His back was turned and I took advantage of the opportunity to return to the cab. You see," he added apologetically, "Varmetz and the driver came along because this was the first time your contact man was not Rudolph Schmidt and we were uneasy."

"It was goot I came!" nodded Varmetz sagely.

"We trailed the gray sedan," went on Otto, "until the red light. Looking ahead, I saw traffic was halted where two trucks had collided in the middle of Broadway. We turned the cab around, back to where the police sedan was parked. It was very simple."

It was simple but Henry was thinking fearfully about the conclusions Morgan and Turk must draw when they came out of their stupor. Now they would be convinced he was part of the gang; the man who smuggled military secrets out of America!

The idea was incredible. He'd read a few stories about spies, seen a few newspaper headlines and some spy movies. Un-

real, it had all seemed—imaginative *yarns* out of another world. Fantastic. But Varmetz and the dark complexioned Otto were not fantastic. Their guns were not fantastic. And then—Henry shuddered inwardly at the thought—what were his prospects when they discovered he was *not* their mysterious Number One!

Another thought struck Henry. How about Felice alone in that hospital anxiously awaiting him? The picture almost wrung a cry from his lips.

But the cab had swung to the curb just then and Otto was holding the door open and Varmetz was leaning his bulk against him from behind.

"It iss not goot making zlow, *Genosse!*" warned Varmetz.

The cab darted back into traffic as soon as the door slammed without Henry having seen the driver's face once. He marched rapidly across the sidewalk between the two agents.

A few stragglers passed, their shadows black circles on the pavement from the shimmering white ball overhead. Henry wanted to call out, thought better of it, found himself entering the chromium and glass lobby of a swank apartment hotel.

Up a self-service elevator and at the end of a long carpet stood the door of apartment 12D. Otto's key opened it on a curtained foyer.

Past the curtain Henry stepped on a rug that seemed to come up to his ankles and stared at the kind of furnishings he had only seen before in Fifth Avenue windows. Everything was curves and mahogany and indirect lighting. After the first glance, Henry saw none of it.

On a three-pillow lounge lay a small man. Except for his eyes he lay motionless. He couldn't help that. From his bare feet to his neck stout ropes bound him to the lounge. Thick patches of hospital tape covered his mouth, held his forehead down.

His eyes screamed.

"Make yourself comfortable, *Nummer Eins*," invited Otto as he scaled the green hat onto a table lamp. He indicated the bound figure. "Rudolph Schmidt, of course, you already know."

Henry couldn't even nod. He stood frozen as Rudolph's eyes flickered over him in astonishment.

Varmetz waddled to the lounge and ripped the tape from Rudolph's mouth leaving tiny blood flecks on the lips.

"It zeems ve haf been too cozy mitt you, *mein klein Freundin*," he said. "Not only haf you betrayed *Nummer Eins*, here, but alzo you haf tell of der zyztem, *nein?* Now you vill tell *uns* vat elze you haf toldt der policers, *nein?*"

Henry gave a start as shrill, frenzied laughter emerged from the bleeding lips. Words cut through the cackles: "*Nummer Eins, sagen Sie!* . . . You are trapped, Varmetz. . . . Trapped! Him. . . . *Nummer Eins?* *Nein!*"

THE heel of Varmetz's fist crashed into the bleeding mouth and Rudolph's convulsions stopped long enough for him to cough up a fragment of tooth, then he began cackling again.

Henry started edging toward the door, stopped as Otto's hand touched his shoulder from behind. Otto's face wore the same puzzled expression as in the street when he had first approached Henry. In a low tone he said:

Die Hälfte von zehn ist fünf, Nummer Eins."

Henry could only stare.

Die Hälfte von zehn ist fünf!" grated Varmetz from behind.

"Well?" prodded Otto softly. "You know the answer?"

Even Rudolph's hysterics ceased as Henry whispered, "No. It's all a horrible mistake. Somewhere you got mixed up. I don't know how but you think I'm someone else. Like Morgan and Turk. They figured like you that I was—whatever you think I am."

Otto's eyes narrowed to brown slits. "So? Who are Morgan and Turk?"

"The men with the badges who arrested me on Broadway." Henry's voice was drying into a rasp. "You see, my wife's having a baby. I had a call to the hospital and when I came downstairs you walked up to me and the whole business started. I don't know what it's all about—I swear I don't! If you'll just let me go—"

They were good at that sort of thing, Otto and Varmetz. Henry heard nothing, saw nothing but the speculative expression in Otto's nut brown eyes—then a buzz tickled his eardrums and he saw nothing. . . .

FIRST it was the memory of Rudolph's shrill cackles, then it became a steady drip . . . drip . . . drip . . . drip. Then the ache in his head really came to life and Henry Pringle opened his eyes.

A metal tube gleamed high over him. Above that was white plaster. Turning his head, his nose brushed against white marble. It hurt like blazes to move but he managed to sit up leaning heavily on one hand. The tile floor under his hand was slimy.

He grew faint again when he saw it was blood and that more blood was caked over the shoulder of his jacket. His head was topping the rim of a bathtub that was wet on the bottom as water trickled from a faucet. That was the dripping sound he'd heard. He got to his feet unsteadily and looked around.

It was a small white tiled bathroom with a glazed window at one end and a door at the other. When his eyes came to the cabinet mirror his jaw dropped open. Dried blood caked the right side of his face. His left cheek was a ghastly hollow. He looked dead.

Everything was painfully clear now—except why was he left alone in that room untied? Perhaps they had gone and left him!

Cautiously, he listened at the door. No

sound. Later, he was to learn that each room in this apartment was soundproof. Now, hearing nothing, he tried the door gently.

It didn't budge. There was no keyhole.

A second glance in the mirror told him why he had not been bound. They must have left him there confident that he wouldn't come to for a long time—or that he wouldn't come to.

But apart from his aching head he felt all right. Over his right ear was a swelling that throbbed painfully when he touched it.

He wondered how long he'd lain there. Then he decided it had been quite a while because the light filtering through the glazed window was dim and it must have taken time for his blood to dry.

He tried the window. It slid open noiselessly to his touch. One look, then he closed it again.

Twelve flights of brick wall made a sheer drop to the street below. Across Madison Avenue stood a deserted school and, beyond it, the green of Central Park and, beyond that, a crimson sunset.

Henry tried the door again. It was still locked. The medicine cabinet was empty. The window still opened on suicide.

Panic was fast gaining possession of him. Somewhere Felice lay on a hospital cot and he should be at her side. He had to get free of this white prison. Had there been iodine in the cabinet he could have painted out a message on the lone towel and thrown it out the window.

But there was no iodine. And his pen and pencil were gone—in fact all of his pockets were stripped bare.

He looked out the window again. This time he looked *up* and the first thrill of hope came to him. In front of the window directly overhead were thick iron bars—the sort you guard your window with when there are children loose in the apartment. It was getting dark now but he could see the bottom bar came out about six inches from the wall.

A four inch granite ledge ran under the bathroom window for the entire width of the house.

The plan forming in Henry's mind brought a spasm of fear but the thought of Felice alone in the hospital made his desperation stronger than fear.

To make sure, he stooped low inside the bathroom and tried to whip the towel over the shower curtain rod. No good. The end of the towel that went over refused to slide down into his free hand. A weight was necessary to pull the slack.

That was when fortune smiled at Henry. His foot struck something under the sink that moved. It was a heavy closet key. Henry forced it through one end of the towel, then removed his shoes and jacket and climbed to the four inch ledge outside the window.

It was dark now and a faint breeze tugged at his trousers. His left hand gripped the top window frame. With his right, he whipped the towel up—the key banged the wall wide of the bar and then dropped back.

Henry inched along the ledge on his toes until the window was to his right and warm bricks pressed into his chest. He tried again. The key cleared the bar easily but failed to haul down the slack. Henry wriggled his end of the towel and the key dropped a few inches—not enough to reach his groping left hand.

Sweat poured down his face now and he grew aware of nauseous waves throbbing down from his head. There was little slack left. He pinched the towel with his fingertip and wriggled it hard.

The key dropped. The towel slid up from Henry's moist fingers.

Henry grabbed for it as the key dragged its burden over the bar and down and, for one dizzy moment, Henry swayed on the four inch ledge and the towel was a white blur floating down to Madison Avenue twelve flights below.

A harsh voice called: "*Mouse Pringle!*" as Henry once again hugged the warm wall, his arms spread wide, his fingers clinging to half inch brick corners.

"Mouse!" repeated the voice from the bathroom window to Henry's right. "What the hell you tryin' to do?"

He peered under his right arm, saw the bullet head jutting from the window, whispered, "Lou Albrecht!"

The sales manager for Glorious Silk Prints, Inc., stared back at him incredulously. "Come back inside, Mouse," he instructed quietly.

It was a painful process of inching on his toes, then Albrecht had Henry's knees in a powerful clamp and Henry sprawled into the bathroom.

The scowling sales manager helped him to his feet. Behind Albrecht stood Otto and the plump blond, Varmetz. Otto's revolver lay poised in his fist. Henry would have passed out had Albrecht not slapped his face hard.

"Come inside," said Albrecht, leading Henry past the two agents into the living room. The overhead lights were out now; only a few table lamps illuminated the room. Rudolph still lay on the lounge with tape around his mouth again.

Henry's mind was in a turmoil at this unexpected turn of events. He said, "Lou, I don't understand this. How did you follow—" A knotted fist smashed him to the rug before the sentence was completed.

"You're a dumb bunny, Pringle," said Lou Albrecht, rubbing his knuckles. "I yelled after you to stop when I saw you grab my sample case this afternoon. But you were in the elevator before I could get to you." Albrecht didn't say this heatedly. His voice was low.

BUT it snapped through Henry's mind like a whip as he struggled to his knees. "You mean I took *your* sample case and that was why all this—" Henry's arm swept the apartment. His lips were numb from the blow but the full impact

of Albrecht's words made him insensible to pain.

The sales manager nodded. "You took my case."

"Then you -- *you're* the guy who's smuggling plans out of the country!" Henry scrambled to his feet and waved an indignant finger at the bigger man. "You're this Number One!" he yelled.

"Yes, Mouse," said Albrecht softly. "I'm the guy. I was supposed to meet a contact agent and hand him my sample case. It was a new man and, seeing my initials on the leather case, he mistook you for me.

"When I finally reached the street and he wasn't there, I understood what must have happened. It took me a couple of hours to learn his address. Then I came here to straighten it all out. It's tough on you, Mouse, but it was a soft cushion for me and now that my contact man turned out to be a rat it's no longer soft."

Lou Albrecht spoke patiently, as if lecturing to a class of children. "It's tough on you, Mouse, because the Feds think you're me and we want 'em to go on thinking you're me and we want 'em to think I'm a dead duck. So you see how it is?"

Lou Albrecht spoke patiently because that was how he always addressed Mouse Pringle. He was taking the trouble because you didn't work with a guy for three years in a nice peaceful place like Glorious Silk Prints, Inc., and then convert him into a dead duck without giving him a good reason.

At least, if you were Lou Albrecht you didn't. Maybe he was trying to justify it in his own mind. Maybe he expected Mouse Pringle to understand and stick his neck out gracefully.

Definitely, he did *not* expect Mouse Pringle's fist to rip into his solar plexus almost up to Mouse Pringle's wrist and, for a moment, Lou Albrecht was a very sick man. His muscles were paralyzed. He saw things through a blood haze.

Varmetz stood behind Otto and saw

nothing. Otto didn't realize what had happened until Lou Albrecht dropped to the rug like a felled tree. Then Otto jerked up the revolver in his hand.

Henry Pringle (née Mouse) was also seeing things through a blood haze. For the first time in his life, Henry was seeing red. But he wasn't paralyzed.

He was halfway to the curtained foyer when his stocking foot ripped the wires loose from a table lamp and he sprawled to his face.

An angry hornet zipped through the part in his hair and a giant firecracker seemed to explode behind him and all the lights in the room spluttered out.

All three happened at once.

The proper thing for Henry then would have been to take advantage of the darkness and try for the door. But Henry was seeing red. Henry was changing from a mouse to the man who was to become vice-president of Glorious Silk Prints, Inc.

It wasn't for patriotism. It was for Henry. It was for a blow on the head and a punch in the mouth and, most important of all, for Felice alone on a hospital cot somewhere in the night.

Henry heard Lou Albrecht's voice gasp: "Otto, cover the door! You—fatty—take the window side of the room! Mouse! Save us the trouble of hunting you down or, by God, I'll tear you to pieces with my bare hands, you little ——!"

Henry heard cautious footsteps approaching, then he arched his back and moved forward—noislessly—like a jungle beast on the prowl. . . .

MORGAN and Turk followed the room clerk down the long carpet to the door of 12D. The clerk was almost as big a man as Turk but his hands swam in perspiration. Morgan waved him aside, carefully killed his cigar against the parquet wall, dropped it in a vest pocket, palmed his automatic and put an ear to the door.

"Dead quiet inside," he whispered to

the others. "It's either a bum hunch or they've lammed."

Turk's hand clamped over the clerk's mouth as the latter was about to speak. "The key," whispered Turk. The other gave it to him. Turk passed it on to Morgan, then drew his own automatic.

The clerk backed down the corridor. Turk and Morgan stood on each side of the door. With his left hand, Morgan inserted the key, turned it, then pushed the door open with his foot.

Darkness. . . .

Morgan motioned Turk to follow and entered the foyer. Past the curtain was more darkness. Morgan felt along the wall, found a switch, turned it.

From his side came Turk's voice as the room flooded with light: "Well, I'll be dipped in—!"

"You and me both," said Morgan.

Flat against the far wall stood a stout blond man with fragments of a table lamp all over his face and hair and the wall behind him. The wall held him up—but he didn't know it.

Near the foyer where Turk and Morgan stood, crouched a dark complected man with a glassless mirror framed around his neck and a revolver on the rug just out of his reach. He didn't move—just crouched.

In the center of the room sat a barrel-chested man with head shaped like a bullet and bedecked with the splintered remains of a chair.

He just sat.

On a three-pillow lounge a little unshaven fellow was pushing the last bits of rope off his legs. Near him stood Henry Pringle with the knife that had cut the ropes still in his hand.

Henry looked like something out of Dracula but his one good eye narrowed as he recognized the intruders.

"Ha!" he snarled in a voice that startled his hearers. "You guys!" Moving toward them unsteadily, he roared, "Get this straight once and for all if you're not looking for trouble! *I'm not the guy, see?*"

"We've known that a couple of hours now," grinned Morgan quietly.

Turk lifted Otto's revolver from the rug, said, "Sure. These ginzoos took the silk but left the briefcase behind and that had initials on it; L. A. As soon as we could call the firm, we found there was a Lou Albrecht working there who was built big while Henry Pringle was a peewee."

"The fat guy over there's got another gun," offered Henry as Turk passed his hands over Albrecht.

"We realized our mistake then," went on Morgan, "and got back uptown just in time to catch Albrecht skipping out. We tailed him in circles until he wound up here. But we lost him in the self-service elevator. No indicator in the lobby and, finding him called for more than two men.

"So I got the cop off the beat, phoned Headquarters for the riot squad. While we waited, a guy came in off the street with your message."

"My message!" said Henry blankly.

"This." Morgan handed Henry a closet key that Henry had last seen on a floating towel. "It was just a hunch you dropped it. We figured these rats were bound to discover the same mistake about you we'd made. So I stationed the cop in the lobby and came up." Morgan was gnawing his cigar again. "We were some help!" he grinned, surveying the carnage.

HENRY didn't hear him. His good eye was fixed on the key. Stamped along the thin metal side was, "12D," the apartment number!

Rudolph came over bearing the silk samples. "Here they iss!" he said proudly. "It vill proof my story, no?"

Morgan nodded.

"I don't get that part," said Henry. "It's a lousy print job. The dye runs."

"That's the point," explained Morgan. He held up the corner of the blue flower print he had smudged earlier in the day. "It's a new process—photographic prints on silk. Any picture can be transferred

from a regular negative to the cloth and waterproofed on. Covering that with a dye that washes out in water is just a slick disguise.

"The samples could be mailed or sent by package to silk firms across the water. It happens every day. Only these particular samples would wind up in Gestapo headquarters."

"With photographs of plans under the dye?" asked Henry.

"Right."

Henry shook his head. "I don't see how Albrecht could get hold of such photographs."

"He didn't," said Morgan. "He's just one link in the chain; he gets the negatives, has them transferred to the cloth and passes the samples along."

Turk was extracting parts of chair from Albrecht's person and Morgan was shaking Varmetz loose from splinters of glass when Henry suddenly yelled, "Wow! I forgot!"

Otto had the misfortune to be between Henry and the phone in the foyer. Otto was just getting to his feet.

He was flat on the rug again as Henry's finger tore at the phone dial. Then Henry was filling the mouthpiece with question marks.

When Henry stood up again, he was murmuring, "Boy, oh boy! Boy, oh boy!" He took a step forward, then joined Otto on the rug.

Morgan grabbed the receiver which was still off the hook. "What's that you just said?" he asked.

A female voice replied, "I said that Mrs. Henry Pringle gave birth to twin boys half an hour ago. Mother and children are doing fine."

Turk was trying to revive Henry when Morgan turned away from the phone. "Boy!" ejaculated Turk. "Didja see after all he's been through how the guy folded?"

"Boy is only the half of it!" grinned Morgan, adding, "Boy, oh boy! Who wouldn't?"

*Well, Maybe Bat and His Pals Did Reform the Wrong Man.
So What?*



CHANCE
DEALS
A
HAND

By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

*Author of Many Stories of That Unique Character—
Bat Jennison*

BAT JENNISON was sore. That throbbing boil perched exasperatingly on the inside of his thigh was reason physical. Resigning his beloved pony to the care of a passing freighter was anguish mental. Yet Sunflower would fare well enough. The distance he would travel at the endgate of a freight wagon was after all only twenty miles. And Jennison must surrender the pony's rocking chair gait for the discomfort of a lurching stagecoach. Truly the master's plight was sadder far than his pony's. But then, Jennison loved that yellow pony, tried companion of many a stirring adventure. His attachment was very like that of a fussy hen riding herd on a single chick.

To blunt the edge of his sorrow for this twenty-four hour separation, Bat Jennison limped into the barroom and drank two

whiskey straights. Then he clumped moodily out onto the porch and lowered himself gingerly into a chair. Now from beneath his hat brim he glowered at the world. A fair world, too, under the mid-morning sun, for Despaine stage stand sat a high ridge from which a deal of fine things were displayed to delight the unjaundiced eye. But Jennison's eye was not unjaundiced. So he shifted warily in his unsteady chair and lighted his pipe as aid to fidget away the time till his stage should arrive.

A half hour later it lumbered up and halted in a swirl of dust. Jennison waited on the porch while they unspanned the four horses and hooked in two fresh teams. It was not until the driver mounted his seat that Jennison moved. He cast a wistful eye at the top of the stage, but he did not feel equal to the climb. This trip he

must ride ignominiously inside. So with a sigh, he swung open the door and sprawled into the stage.

The initial lunge of the frisky team twirled Jennison half round and catapulted him into the rear seat with a teeth-rattling jar. The assailed boil shrieked shrill protest, which Jennison translated into lurid speech. Then he pried his hat up from his battered ears and abruptly halted his fiery oration. In the corner of the opposite seat was a passenger. A little boy, well scuffed shoes dangling just clear of the floor, wrinkled stockings, clothes ragged to the patching state, a dusty, disheveled boy, eyes sharp as a bird's, ten years old at a close guess. Was he laughing—or no? Jennison in his confusion could not quite decide. Then the boy broke the silence.

"Mister," he stated it as his solid conviction, "you do say things grand. I thought at fust you was a preacher, but I guess not."

Jennison swallowed hard. In his highly varied career, men had mistaken him for a number of things, but never for a minister. He grinned feebly.

"Bub, your last figgerin' is on top. I mcbby had some of the words, but not in the correct order. Had I knowed you was aboard I'd a corked them words up inside. But I've gotta boil on my laig and when the team jumped—"

"Had a boil myself," youthful wisdom nodded. "You bet they hurt. Still there's worse things."

"Fur instance?" Jennison chuckled.

"Being scalped by an Injin. Did you ever scalp an Injin?"

"Never have, old-timer."

"I'd sure like to," the boy asserted. "A band of Injuns chased us into a fort in the Black Hills. Kept us there a whole day."

LATER Jennison was to affirm that that day delaying band of Indians was the sure outcropping of an all wise Providence. Now he asked a personal question.

"Where'd you come frum?"

"I took the stage at St. Joe," the answer backtracked. "But I'd come by boat to there from Keokuk, Ioway. Uncle Ezra put me on the boat. He's a mean old stinker, Uncle Ezra is. I've lived with him ever since I can remember. Awful stingy and licks hard."

At the twin names "Keokuk" and "Ezra," the turbid pools of memory began stirring, but the boy was rattling on.

"You see Uncle Ezra got a letter from my pappy. Uncle Ezra lost it coming home, but anyway he remembered the town. Pappy's been out here for years minin', fightin' Injuns and bears, too, I reckon. Anyway, he sent for me in this letter Uncle Ezra lost. Well, Uncle Ezra got me started so quick he forgot to get me any new clothes. That's what he said."

"And you're goin' where?"

"To Bedrock. Where do you live, Mister?"

"I live at Bedrock, too." Then Jennison remembered. "You ain't yit told me your name."

"It's same as my pappy's," the boy informed him proudly. "Frank Shumile. You know my pappy?"

So that was it! "Ezra," "Keokuk," both mysteries were irradiated now! Did he know Frank Shumile? What could he answer to this bright-eyed boy, sitting knee to knee with him in this lumbering stagecoach? But Bat Jennison in times of emergency was genius at its ultimate peak. In great moments of stark necessity his fabrications were deckle edged, flawless and labeled with the exact imprimatur of truth. No faltering amateur's, but the sure hand of a master was sketching now. Not drawing a completed portrait, but merely pencilizing in firm outlines.

"Know your pappy," he chuckled. "Well, I'd tell a man! Listen, old-timer."

And now to the enthralled son, Jennison related tall tales of this unknown father, gorgeous exploits in which Jennison, as minor partner, participated. At

the end of a mythical story in which Shumile had succored an emigrant family down on their luck, the boy sighed happily.

"Mister," he declared, "I'm glad he done them kind of things, for now I know the kind of a man he is."

"Too bad he's out of town right now," Jennison lied on sunnily, "I seen him yesterday and he was leakin' out to look at his mines on Squaw Crick. Be gone three or four days, he said. But me and my two pardners'll take you in whilst he's gone. You see, he couldn't know you was comin' so quick and he's gotta tend to his business."

"Sure he has," the boy nodded wisely. "Anyway, we're going to be together all the time from now on."

Now the boy yawned with the delightful unconcern of the unsophisticated child. To Jennison it was a direct gift from friendly gods. For he needed time desperately to think and plan. So now he moved to cash in on this heaven sent gape.

"You likely didn't sleep much last night," he smiled, "and a little nap 'ud set you up. You want to roll into Bedrock fresh as a daisy. Here. Roll up your jacket fur a piller and I'll cover you snug as a bug in a rug with my mackinaw. Thar. Seat's jest right fur length. Git your snorer workin'. I'll wake you up in plenty of time."

Jennison, no laggard himself when oblivious, through sleep, was concerned, nevertheless marveled at the lad's swift translation from the world of reality to the realm of dreams. And as he looked at the sleeping boy, he murmured pityingly.

"Pore little shaver! Everything he's said looks disfavorable to Uncle Ezra, but at that she's a hundred to one bet he'd a better stayed in Keokuk."

THEY were a mile from town when Bat Jennison awoke the boy. The road here angled down the side of a ravine so steep that in rainy weather the powerful

brakes did not avail to hold the stage. It was necessary then to clamp heavy wooden shoes on the hind wheels and litterly sled down the sharp slope. But not now. Disdaining the brake, the driver took the grade at a gallop and so without slackening till they stopped with a grand flourish before the stage stand.

Curiosity was not a major sin in those frontier camps, for many there had much to conceal. Besides, Bat Jennison, in a grave mood was not to be trifled with and well they knew it. So when to a group of loiterers he had said quietly, "No *wawa* now, boys, it'll come later," they had taken him squarely at his word. Digging the boy's grip from the rear boot of the stage, he led the way to his cabin. The grip was in fact a ratty old carpet bag so thin that it was plain Ezra had dowered the boy very lightly with worldly goods and chattels.

The cabin that housed Jennison and his two partners was near the lower end of the town, a dozen yards or so from the river's bank. Log walled with shake roof, it had as a matter of custom a squat stick and mud chimney, one door, one four-paned window and tamped clay floor. Three pole bunks lined a side of the single room.

Through the open door both partners were viewable. In a homemade willow rocker sat Doc Levitt. Tall, kindly, urbane was Levitt, never sober, yet never submerged, a gentleman be the occasion fair or foul. Sweating over the sheet-iron stove, his massive back to the door, was Whispering Thompson. A Hercules with the voice of Homer's Stentor and the heart of an unspoiled child. Certain it was that Frank Shumile's boy had found anchorage in a haven where no storm would wimple the calm of its serene waters.

"Boys," Jennison announced from the doorway, "this is Frank Shumile's boy all the way from Keokuk, Ioway."

Thompson's capacious mouth sagged open, but no words emerged. With an eloquent finger Jennison had forestalled indiscreet speech. Doc Levitt needed no

monitory digit to restrain him. Like a courtier born he arose and held out a slim white hand.

"Welcome my young friend," he smiled. "Welcome to Bedrock."

Thompson had now gained a decision over his slackened jaw muscles and wiping his floury palm vigorously on his jeans, advanced a hand that balled, could scarce find sanctuary in a ten-pound lard pail.

"Put 'er there, old-timer," and he engulfed the boy's thin hand. "What Doc just said goes double. And Bat, if you and the youngen will wash up, I'll dish the grub. Everything's piping hot."

Let the scientific dietitian snarl with rage. That mountainous midday meal consisted of beans, fried pork, sour dough biscuits, stewed prunes and much black coffee, sweetened with sorghum. Yet from it not one stomach took offense. Very wise was Doc Levitt and now he made a suggestion that freed Jennison and Thompson for a task he knew must somehow be done that afternoon.

"The world's progress," he declared sagely, "was, and is, accomplished through an orderly division of labor. Bat, you and Whispering have many things to do up-town. Well and good. For our share, Frank and I will wash the dishes and utensils, tidy up the house, mayhap cut a bit of wood and then take a stroll *down* to the Indian camp."

The nub in the suggestion was the fact that the Indian camp was *below* town, while Shumile's cabin was above. Jennison nodded gratefully while Thompson added a rumbling acquiescence.

"The very ticket. Old Wrinkle Britches thinks you're a genuine *tewat* (medicine man) since you dug that arrow head out of his back."

"Arrow heads and Injuns," the boy whooped delightedly. "Where's the dish pan?"

When the two men were out of all possible hearing distance, Thompson halted.

"Gentlemen hush!" he appraised their

problem. "Ain't that youngen in a hell of a mess, Bat? I'd as leave live with a scabby sheep as Frank Shumile. The only way to reform him would be with a sawed-off shotgun."

"We've gotta reform him, notwithstanding," Jennison insisted. "That said miracle has got to be accomplished. I done some figgerin' comin' in on the stage which mebby'll bear fruit. Also, I reckon he's up to his cabin now, drunk as per usual. Whilst we're toddlin' thither, I'll unspool my notions of what to do."

Exteriorally, Frank Shumile's cabin differed little from the other cabins in Bedrock. All were of hasty construction, for life was hectic and patterned on a twenty-four hour day without intermissions. Life there had its ebbs and flows, no stoppages. But when the creaking door of his hut was pushed inward, notable differences were made immediately manifest. Yes. Interiorally, Frank Shumile's cabin had individuality and an air all of its own. And while Jennison and Thompson were seasoned campaigners, they were not that seasoned.

"Twould gag a man in hell," Jennison sputtered as the fetid air dived out as if striving to escape. "A senile skunk, with his smellier damaged considerable wouldn't kennel up in that."

"The umbilical truth," Thompson okayed fervently. "In that small defussing of itself, there's a lot too much unwashed socks, old bacon grease and a general swill barrel effect. I doubt if even a buzzard could breast it, maybe."

"Speakin' of buzzards," Jennison began, then stopped. A sound from within had intruded to block the hoary tale. Shumile was awakening, a labored effort, if groans and gruntings were taken as just evidence. Presently he struggled up to a sitting position while he bunged at his bleary eyes with knuckles long innocent of soap. Now with a mighty effort, he pivoted around till his sock-encased feet rested limply on the dirt floor. Palpably,

his was not a sight to enrich the eye. It was then he first perceived his visitors.

"Set down, gents," he hiccupped hospitably. "All three of you. Nice morning, I betcha."

"She's past noon," Jennison informed him, "and that's only two of us, also."

"Sure enough," Shumile admitted when he had obtained a better focus with his rheumy eyes. "Just Bat and Whispering, my two best friends. Set down."

Jennison was there on business, not for the exchange of empty platitudes.

"Shumile, you're from Keokuk, Ioway?" he posed a half query.

"Sure am," Shumile nodded. "Good old Ioway, the buckeye state."

"Ohio's the buckeye state," Thompson as loyal son protested heatedly. "Ioway's the hawkeye state."

"Same thing," Shumile maintained stubbornly. "Both of 'em eyes. Both of 'em animals."

Jennison waved the growling Thompson to silence.

"You left a boy that didn't you, with your brother, Ezra?"



To this the answer must be yes, if a hundred circumstantial recitals were worthy of belief. And Shumile obliged with a very wealth of detail and a lachrymose obligato that troubled Jennison mightily.

"He was only six months old," he wailed, "when his mother died. Her with hair just the color of corn silk. I'd made

him a cradle, gents, sawed a barrel in two and put runners under it. No, I mean rockers. Made 'em myself with a drawer knife." He shifted to ask tearfully, "Bat, you ever been a father?"

"Scarcely," Jennison disclaimed. "I ain't ever even been engaged."

"Me neither," Thompson denied hastily, as he saw the bleary eyes turning his way.

"Then you men can't understand," Shumile sniffled. "I've wrote for him to come. I've prayed for him." Still more dramatically, "I'd give my left arm, I'd give my right arm. I'd—"

"Stop your amputations right thar," Jennison cut him off. "You're enough of a cripple as is. Your boy's personally present so to speak. Right now he's down at our cabin."

A long incredulous stare followed Bat Jennison's announcement.

"Who's boy?" Shumile blinked.

"Your boy," Jennison answered seriously. "From Keokuk, Ioway, sent by your brother, Ezra, per a letter you wrote recent."

"My boy---from Keokuk, Ioway---sent by my brother---Ezra, per a letter---I wrote," Shumile conned it over dutifully in well spaced whispers. Then he nodded, as a knowing look deployed slowly over his bloated features.

"Somebody's been funning you," he declared owlishly, "I ain't got no boy at Keokuk, nor any place else, so far as I know."

"This boy's named Frank Shumile," Jennison marshalled the evidence, "and you're Frank Shumile. He's got yaller hair and you jest said his mammy had yaller hair. You've told us about him a million times, more or less. You can't lie yourself out of your plain duty now."

"I was only joking," Shumile giggled. "I was always great on jokes."

"Joke, hell!" Jennison snapped angrily. "Shumile—"

The man held up his hand impressively.

"And my name ain't Frank Shumile,"

he stated categorically. "It's Herman Humpedlinker. How'd you like to be called that, hey? As for the name, Shumile, I run into a man some place, don't remember where and took a fancy to his name. I took along his story about his boy and so forth because I liked it too. Maybe I done wrong, but that's my business, I reckon. And now I'll lay down awhile, because your fairy tales kinda upset me."

Exhausted or not, his head was not destined just then for a downy pillow. For Bat Jennison had leaned nearer to fix him with an eye cold as ice and implacable as fate. Yet his voice was low and uninflected, far more compelling than blustering speech could be.

"Shumile," said he, "you're tryin' to bridge hell with a wormy splinter. She won't function."

WHISPERING THOMPSON, two hundred-fifty pounds of heart, muscle and indignation, roared into the discussion.

"Of all the low-down, onery, contemptible coyotes," he proclaimed at the topmost capacity of his spacious lungs, "you sure take the leather johnny cake! For months you've been whining and sobbing about this boy of your'n and *now* when the blessed little feller shows up, you deny his parentage. You're so damned lazy and worthless that you say *now* you ain't got a boy. Hanging's too good for a polecat like you, though I figger it's the best we can do for you in Bedrock."

Two passing miners had halted at the open door as Thompson's tirade rumbled its finale out into the distant mountain scenery. Now they made inquiry as to its cause and Jennison in succinct way informed them of Shumile's delinquency.

"Bat," one of them spoke up hopefully, "I've got a brand new rope at my cabin which it won't be *no* trouble at all to fetch. And right here before the door is a tree special made for hanging."

"Agreeing in principal, Dill," his companion interposed, "still I've got a notion that hanging a drunk man's illegal. By sun-down though, that 'ud be out of our way. Shumile will be sober by then."

Jennison waved the volunteer assistance aside.

"Should reason not work," he distinguished, "of course that's the physic we'll use. Also I'm obliged to you boys fur statin' your views. They're sound, sound as a dollar. And if it comes to that, I'll let you boys in on the party. But I'm nursin' a notion that Shumile has already seed the clear path of duty and will toddle therein with joy."

Shumile had indeed seen the "clear path of duty." He knew these big-hearted miners and how pitiless could be their judgments when their stern sense of justice was affronted. Father or no, he would be a father.

"Sure, I'll do my duty," he nodded. "Though this place ain't fitten to bring my boy. And I ain't got no money to fix it up proper nor buy grub or blankets. Besides I ain't fitten to have him. Look at me and you know it's so."

"That's where the camp comes in," Jennison told him simply. "We've already done told the boy a fancy tale about you. He thinks you're out of town right now lookin' after your mines and such. I told him you likely won't be back fur some and sevrul days. Every man in this camp 'ill help you out. This damned cabin needs renovatin' considerable and it 'ill be did. You've got a damned good mine. You can take out a hundred dollars most any day you work. Pete Jones, the storekeeper 'ill give you credit fur blankets and grub. None of them things 'ill be a thistle weight of trouble."

"I could make myself fitten," and Shumile shook his head dolorously, "if it wasn't for whiskey. I've got to have my quart a day. I can't git along on less."

"That's what *you* think," Jennison said crisply.

The purposeful stressing of that "you" yanked Shumile from the lofty heights of self pity and set him on the solid earth.

"What do you mean?" he quavered.

"That you're goin' to do without that said quart," Jennison told him flatly. "You are to be rationed. After today, you'll have two drinks per day, them to come solely from Ob Onslow at The Pick and Shovel Saloon."

"Two drinks a day!" The terror threaded words hobbled forth in a toneless whisper. "I can't do it."

"I figger you can," Bat Jennison said grimly. "In fact I know you can, because you're goin' to so do." Now he proceeded on remorselessly. "That's the word to every man in this camp. All your liquor comes from Onslow. It's goin' to be hangin' to any skunk who does otherwise. More'n that, every man in this camp will be on the lookout to see it's done. You toll your little boy out here with windy promises and you're goin' to fulfill 'em. I've run the risk of losin' my immortal soul paintin' you up as a man he can be proud of and by God, you'd better make good on my chromo to your boy!"

"Amen!" Whispering Thompson added to the high demand fervently. Then he added practically, "For if you don't, we'll string you up higher than that Haymow told about in the Scriptures."

"I'm leavin' you this pint of whiskey," and Jennison fished it forth from a side pocket, "to sober up on. What you need is a haircut, a whisker trim, some decent grub, a bath and a good sleep not come at through bein' dead drunk. We'll see you in the mornin'. Come on, Whispering."

"Well," Bat Jennison announced with mixed satisfaction as they left the house, "we've done our work here. Let's go and prime Ob Onslow."

OBADIAH ONSLOW was squat, round and bald, with a benevolent face and eyes set oddly out on guard like

those of a fat toad. An ex-judge by his own admission, he did not drink, smoke nor gamble, three probable graces that constituted the bulk of his moral baggage. At least they were the floor on which his lesser virtues trod ever so lightly. He owned The Pick and Shovel Saloon, the chief port of wharfage for the elite of Bedrock.

Briefly, Jennison made known the problem resulting from the appearance of the boy in the camp and laid out his plan for Onslow's judicial appraisal.

"I've heard Shumile's story many times," Onslow reminisced, "and gave it little credit. He's so full of hyperboles—"

Jennison stopped him with a forthright, earnest remark.

"Hell, Ob, I knowed he swilled whiskey, but didn't know he'd sunk to that other said which you jest named."

Without the flicker of a smile, Onslow continued.

"You don't know him, Bat, like I do. Now as to your plan, of course, I agree fully and completely. This must be a camp enterprise, a Bedrock project. I'll pass the word to the men as they gather here tonight. And if I know them at all, co-operation will be one hundred per cent. You'll see Hopson and Peoples I presume?"

"You bet," Bat Jennison nodded. "I knowed we could count on you, Ob."

Eph Hopson ran a small disreputable saloon at the upper end of town where foregathered the riffraff and floaters that did not find entertainment in Sul Peoples' doggery at the lower end of the camp. More than once the two had run asoul of the solid citizenry led by Jennison on crusade bent. When he had given each brief instructions as to Shumile, each concurred in individual fashion. Hopson had simply grunted:

"The damned blowhard don't ever come here, anyway, but if he does now I'll boot him back into the street."

"Should he apply," Peoples had de-

clared suavely, "he'd find that the liquor supply is *non est*."

Now followed a brief call on the store-keeper, Pete Jones, to assure themselves on the question of credit to Shumile, then they turned toward their own cabin.

"Dat," Thompson announced, "the way you lay plans shows you ought to have been in the army. You'd make a hell of a smart general."

"I'm too ignorant to a been a general," Jennison said a bit wistfully. "And as to layin' plans, all I try to do is git people to pull together."

"That's the proof," Thompson deducted triumphantly. "Getting people to work together is the very extract of generaling."

A horse pranced and curvetted to a stop before their cabin door just as they rounded its corner. A sick horse, bestraddled by a very dirty little boy. His feet were cased in moccasins, his cheeks were dabbed with vermillion, his tousled head was glorified by a bandanna of feathers set awry, over his shoulder peered a bow and quiver of arrows. Culture had skidded into the background, stark nature had emerged triumphant. Trudging in the dust of the ramping young warriort came Doc Levitt, bearing in his hands the discarded shoes.

"I ain't scalpin' any more Injuns," the boy announced with finality as he looped the leather hitching strap over a splintered branch and dismounted with a prodigious expenditure of muscle. "I like 'em. See my moccasins. Ain't they dandy?"

"We have met the enemy and we are theirs," Levitt smiled a revised quotation. "I fear we have in two short hours seen the transmutation of a civilized lad into a primitive. But what odds it? He is happy."

"He sure looks it," Thompson approved the opinion, "and that's something to shoot at."

"How do you like my moccasins?" the boy again demanded of Jennison. "And did you see my pappy?" This apparently as an afterthought.

Jennison answered the easiest question first.

"I think your moccasins are bully," he chuckled. "Also your pony and your feathers. And as fur your pappy, I told you comin' in on the stage that he was over lookin' after his mines on Buck Crick."

"You said Squaw Crick," the youngster corrected.

"Well, he's got mines on both cricks," Jennison explained blandly. "Anyway, he'll be outen town three or four days. You'll stay with us, so we've gotta git busy and set you up a bunk before tonight. Come on. You can help drag in the poles and the fir boughs fur your bed."

THAT next morning Shumile awoke sober, wretched and in the cold sweat of fear. Item by item he reviewed his abortive attempts of the night before to obtain liquor and how his raging thirst had gone unslaked. For as Ob Onslow had told him plainly:

"It's Jennison's orders and they'll be obeyed. Buck up and play the man for a change. You might find it interesting, even exhilarating."

So now as he lay there in his cabin, he muttered to himself:

"I know now how a wolf feels when it sets his foot in a trap. I'll never set another one so long as I live."

While he tossed and writhed in the agony of utter frustration, there came a knock at the door, followed immediately by entry without leave. From under swollen eyelids he noted that here in the flesh were the two miners who but yesterday had discussed with casual detachment the immediateness of his well earned hanging. But instead of a rope, they now bore a pot of coffee, a skillet of fried potatoes, bacon and a half dozen flapjacks.

"Frank," one explained their expedition with the shyness of a man detected in the commission of an unselfish act, "we had a lot of trash left over from breakfast and hated to throw it away." And before Shu-

mile could fumble out a reply, they had set down the smoking food and beat a hasty retreat.

It was the first decent meal he had eaten for days and his assault upon it was both earnest and sustained. With the last cup of coffee drained to the dregs, he drew back from the table, lighted his pipe and took stock of his world. It was a queer world, he reflected ruefully, where men who would hang him without benefit of clergy one day would be his beneficent ravens the next. A queer world, spiced with sternness and liberality, broad mindedness and narrowness, freedom and restraint.

And he must walk a very circumspect path in this queer world. One misstep might be fatal and he shivered at the thought. And now to emphasize his posited dilemma came Bat Jennison and Whispering Thompson armed with a miscellany of carpenter tools. They were there to build a couple of bunks, rehang the sagging door, nail down some flapping roof shakes, repair the shutterless window.

"You've gotta burn that muss of rags and corruption you've been callin' a bed," Jennison declared briskly. "Better drag it out now so as we ran rip down that that bunk."

"And we'll also toss out that rust pile that goes by the name of a stove," Thompson added. "I see Jones yonder tunnelling up a new one, pipe and all on his wheelbarrow."

"But," Shumile protested, "I can't afford it."

"Who said you was affordin' of it?" Bat Jennison demanded. "I done told your boy you was rich and we're goin' to prove it. Be movin' out of that that bed."

THREE days later Jennison was giving a painstaking final instructions to a man refurbished in person and in home. Morally considered, there still might well be a wide open question.

"The time has arriv," Bat Jennison ex-

plained seriously, "when we've gotta play out this game, so attend careful to what I say. You've been outen town lookin' after your mines on Squaw or Beck Crick, as the case may be and jest got back into Bedrock about supper time. *Of course*, since you've wrote fur your boy, you're expectin' him, but you won't know he's here till we bring him up, say about sundown." He looked at the paling man keenly, then proceeded in categorical fashion. "You're goin' to be surprised, Shumile, but over and above that, you're goin' to be gratified. Fur," he added as a clincher, "it ain't everybody who gits a son back that way."

"Hell and I know it," Shumile blurted through flabby lips. "I simply talked myself into—"

The ice in Jennison's gray eyes congealed Shumile's words there.

"Which is one break you'd best not make to your boy," Jennison made the superfluous remark. Then he continued placidly, "We'll bring your boy up therefore. *Treat him right*. That's what the camp's expectin' and this camp is some set in its ways."

Why Jennison turned round just as he stepped from the cabin, he never knew. Frank Shumile sat in his chair, face buried in his hands, shoulders twitching.

"Upset frum shortage of whiskey," Jennison freely obliged with an easy guess, "and wonderin' how his boy 'll take to him."

To Jennison it was as simple as that, yet he was some fathoms short of the truth.

As the zero hour approached, when the curtain was to rise on the great drama of reunion, Jennison displayed lack of faith in his histrionic powers. Drawing Levitt outside, he said earnestly:

"Doc, I'm ignorunt and ain't got the proper words in a crisis like this. But you know, you're educated. Neither Whisperin' nor me can do this job up right, but you can."

"Bat," Levitt assessed the task justly, "nothing is needed here but heart and, my

friend, you have it. However, if you wish it, I will."

"Then that's settled," Jennison hastily closed all dealings. "Reckon we'd best be on our way. You've told the boy already his dad's back in town. How'd he take it?"

"He's honest, Bat," Levitt declared, "like all unspoiled children. He said he'd rather stay with us. Naturally, too. He doesn't know this father, you know. Some way I feel we're doing a damnable wrong, because we do *know* Shumile."

"Agrecin' with you, Doc in whole and in totum," Jennison parlied, "still and but we cain't stand between father and child. Providin'," he added, "Shumile toes the mark— Damned if we hadn't told the boy, the camp, everybody, we'd back out."

"We'll give Shumile a chance, Bat."

"Yep," Jennison nodded, "one solely."

IT WAS dusk when they left the cabin, Levitt and the boy ahead, Jennison and Thompson a powerful rear guard. A discrete rear guard, too, that did not tread by yards on the heels of the advance detachment. Levitt clasp the boy's fingers and talked as they walked along.

Shumile's door was closed, but light filtering out from around the edges indicated that the man was at home. And as they halted, the odor of cooking food made his presence all but a certainty. The fateful moment was at hand. Jennison and Thompson had lagged a dozen yards when Levitt voiced the common frontier summons:

"Hello, the house!"

A delay ensued, long enough to make Jennison fidget, then the door opened slowly and Frank Shumile stood paraffined in the lamplight. Levitt stepped nearer, bringing into view the boy. And because of the boy, he saluted the man in words and tones more respectful than the derelict had heard in many a day.

"Mr. Shumile," Levitt addressed him, "I have the great pleasure to present to you

your son, arrived from Keokuk in response to your urgent letters. Frank, my boy, your father."

Shumile hesitated, then he pushed out half hesitatingly a limp hand toward the youngster, as he fumbled out:

"Pleased to meet you." A pause, then words tumbled forth for he had noted Bat Jennison and Thompson in the shadows.

"Hell, that ain't it. Come to your old pappy!"

And dropping to his knees, he hugged the puzzled lad to his chest while he mumbled incoherent phrases of affection and greeting. It was the exact time for outsiders to depart the picture and with a scattering volley of good wishes, the three withdrew.

"And all of said which," Jennison asserted fervently, "sure calls for a drink."

"The spifficated truth," Thompson amended the motion, "only my idee is it calls for two."

"Why linger on the exact number?" Levitt further amended. "I suggest a moratorium be declared as to the limit involved. Let capacity erect the boundary markers."



Yet despite Jennison's fear, the firm of Shumile and Son seemed to enjoy a mild prosperity. The boy, ably trained by his Uncle Ezra, was a worker par excellence. He did the chores, washed the dishes and took great interest in Shumile's placer mine. Afternoons, however, as a rule were spent with Levitt at the Indian camp, or dashing about the camp astride a pinto cayuse, gift of Jennison and Thompson.

This for three days, then Elysium was shattered.

Jennison saw the boy first. He was running desperately down the dusty road toward their cabin and his face was white under the moonlight.

"He told me to stay in," he gasped, "but I didn't. His eyes scared me. They looked awful. And the other man he went away with had one eye. And—"

It was time for action, not speech. They knew enough already. Nevertheless, Jennison gave no indication of haste in his words.

"That's Pud Hicks," he catalogued One-eye, "a pardner of your pappy over on Squaw Crick. Somethin' big has happened fur them. Trot on down and tell Doc you're stayin' there all night. Tell him also not to wait up fur me and Whisperin'. So long."

As the boy's heels twinkled away, Jennison turned to Thompson to prophecy.

"That damned halfbreed's got Shumile a bottle of whiskey. Let's ramble."

"Bat," Thompson rumbled a request, "if we get our hands on that one-eyed squirt, let me handle him."

"He's your meat," Jennison nodded, "if you'll promise to be rough enough."

The door to the halfbreed's cabin was shut, the draw string inside. Plainly, he did not propose to admit callers. But the men who stood without were not hampered by slavish devotion to customs. Thompson simply put his two hundred-fifty pounds to a just service. The retaining prongs that held the bar across the door were ripped away and the twin Nemesis were inside.

In that next split second Bat Jennison's eyes took in a series of interlocking scenes which his mind would later sort out for grim contemplation. On the greasy table sputtered a candle, glued there by its own drippings. On the bunk sprawled Frank Shumile, one leg hanging over the edge, one arm likewise, nerveless fingers just clearing an empty bottle. On a box in a

corner was the culprit, Hicks. A tough, hard man was the halfbreed, intrepid and dangerous. Now as the two followed the crashing door inward, he leaped up, his two hundred pounds plus, poised lithely on his moccasined feet. No novice in battles, he swept a knife from its scabbard as he set himself to repel the attack. Jennison, for his part, simply picked up the candle.

Thompson moved in slowly, an implacable avalanche that gave no heed to obstacles. The knife flashed upward, a terrific gut ripping slash—if it had collected its mark. Instead it swished through empty air, for Thompson had prudently tucked in his stomach. Then as the knife swept harmlessly by shoulder high, Thompson struck. It was harder than a common sledge blow, lighter than a pile driver. The breed's face seemed to crumple up like a deflated concertina, his feet left the dirt floor and light as a bird he floated to the wall where he settled, plastered solidly into the corner.

"I reckon he won't run off," a voice remarked from the doorway, and the miner, Dill, stepped in. "If he don't, I figger morning will be as good a time as any to string him up. What are you aiming to do to Shumile, Bat?"

"I'm goin' to git that whiskey out of his carcass," Jennison said shortly. Now he turned to Thompson.

"Git that hunk of soap that, Whisperin'," he indicated a withered bar of yellow laundry soap, rancid and grimy, "and whittle me off some shavin's. I figger to make a suds and drench him like a hoss with the colic. Barin' epicac, that ain't nothin' more fetching."

At the end of some minutes, Shumile's stomach was as innocent of whiskey as that of a new born babe's, though gagging cructations still wracked his frame.

"She sure did work handsome," Dill observed approvingly. "Never seen better. He lathers like a engine filled with alkali water, don't he?"

"Yep," Jennison conceded with satisfaction, "he sure does. Also I'll bet he won't want a drink fur some and sevral hours, nor nothin' else, fur that matter."

"We'd better move him over to my cabin," Dill suggested presently. "We can't leave him in this pig pen. Hicks fits it all right, being used to it."

"I'll tote him," Thompson volunteered generously, as he slid his giant hands beneath Shumile's limp body. "Go ahead, Dill, and light a candle."

When the two had gone, Bat Jennison stepped over to the partly revived half-breed.

"If I was you, Hicks," he stated dispassionately, "I'd *not* be in Bedrock, comes morning."

SHUMILE was out of town on mining business for the next two days, so the boy was told and with the capitalist had gone his sterling partner, Pud Hicks. Which was at least a half truth, for Hicks had shaken the dust of Bedrock from his moccasins in no uncertain fashion. Meanwhile, Shumile recuperated at the cabin of the charitable miner.

Then the camp came into possession of a genuine sensation.

A stage had just rolled in, which Jennison by sheerest accident chanced to greet. Leaning comfortably against the stage stand he had watched the passengers disembark, then viewed with amused interest the baggage being tossed helter skelter from the two boots. Among the dozen passengers, Jennison found only one of more than passing interest. He was a near replica of General Custer, long yellow hair, dashing mustache and soldierly set of trim shoulders, all included. Jennison's first glance was cursory, his second keener, for the duplicate of the distinguished general was approaching him.

"Stranger," he remarked, "I just came in from Rimrock."

"I seen you," Jennison said in a friendly way. "You've traveled from one rock to

another and still you're in Idaho territory."

"That's true enough," the other agreed.

"Seems like," Jennison pursued the thought, "that they could a picked names a mite more differenter. Chances are it's a puzzler now and then to people in the east, say."

"I've thought the same thing," the stranger admitted, "in fact that's the thing that induced me to take a stage ride of one hundred miles."

"That's intrustin'," Jennison said encouragingly. "How come?"

"It's like this," the other explained. "For days now I've been expecting a letter from the east and finally I got to wondering. Rimrock and Bedrock might look a lot alike, written down."

"They sure would," Jennison grinned, "if I wrote 'em. Why—"

No further strictures on his own handwriting now, for one of his mysterious hunches had fanned him with its knowing wings. Without hesitation, he held out his hand.

"Mr. Shumile," he laughed engagingly, "you won't give one continental darn about no letter when I tell you that your boy right now is personally present in Bedrock."

Half an hour later, the explanations were all in. Shumile sat in the cabin, the boy on his knee, the three partners happy, if somewhat chagrined auditors. The crux of the matter lay in the letter lost by the boy's uncle in which Shumile had sent for his son. Written from Rimrock, it had been transformed into Bedrock by the miserly Ezra. As to the man, Humpedinkler, who had stolen his name, Shumile had no knowledge.

"Still and but," Jennison contended, "we've gotta unhook him frum the check rein we bitted his drinkin' to. Also, we've gotta spread the good news to the camp. I moves, therefore, that after supper we three toddle uptown to do that said righteous act. You understand, Mr. Shumile,

that you and Frank are our guests tonight. The cabin 'ill be yourn."

The Pick and Shovel Saloon, hub of all important civic matters had just received the authentic news from Jennison's lips, though rumors had traveled far and wide ere his official version.

"Well," Obadiah Onslow opined, "after all this pseudo Shumile has little of which to complain. His house is virtually new, he has furnishings for which, of course, he'll never pay and he's been laundered thoroughly, inside and out. He's well ahead of the game."

"Nevertheless, it just goes to show," Thompson proclaimed virtuously, "how dangerous lying is."

"Within limits, Whispering, my stentorium friend," Levitt provisoed. "For there are moments when the recording angel smiles benignantly at a lily pure fabrication."

"I don't know about no fabric," Jennison intruded his blissful ignorance, "but I do know about holy lies. But now as to his drinkin' habits, of course, we've gotta take the brakes off and let his liquor chariot roll onwards down the—"

HE halted his vivid simile at this point, **H** for the man in question had appeared. Glancing neither left nor right, he pushed with dignity up to the bar. Fixing Onslow with his bleary eyes, he spoke instead to the ghosts of memoirs that had been and to things that were to be.

"Your orders is two drinks per day and two drinks it's going to be from now on and forever, amen. Anyway," he stipulated, "when I gits the taste of this damned soap suds out of my mouth. But I'm setting them said two drinks up as meaning *two quarts*. I'm ordering, therefore, my first day's rations right now!"

"BLOCKING OF BUZZARD PASS"

A novelette in our next issue by

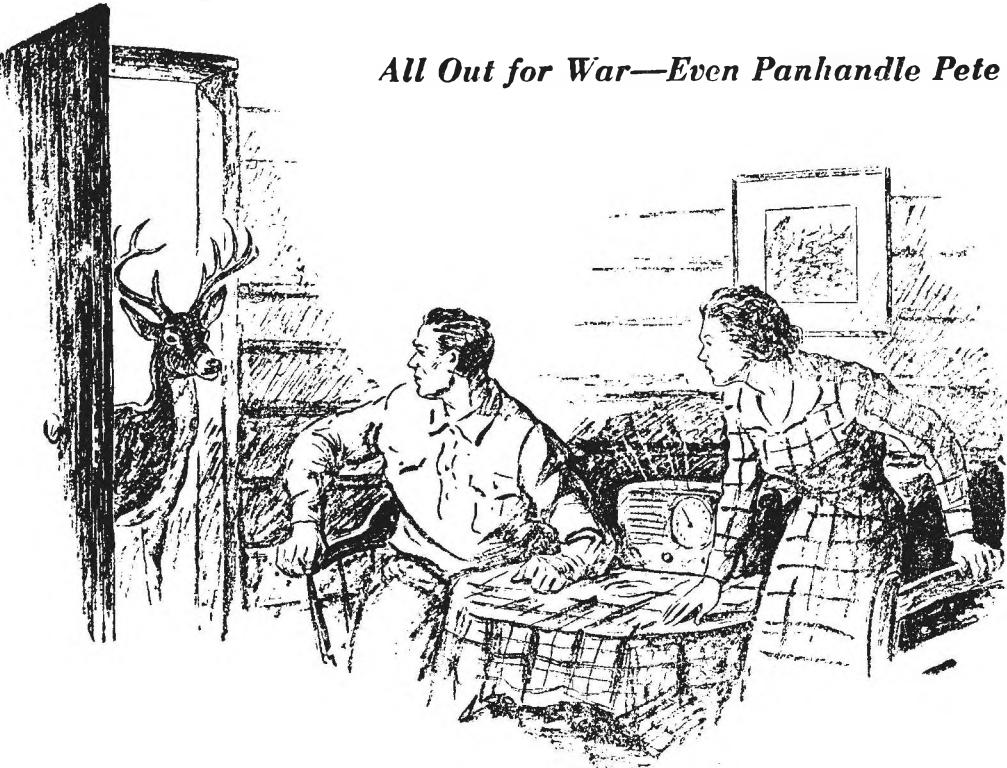
WALT COBURN



Buzzard Pass—where the Border Patrol always rode double.

And the very spot where Sergeant Mike, the great Irish, got caught like the newest rookie — his leg under his fallen horse.

All Out for War—Even Panhandle Pete



PANHANDLE PETE AND THE TOURIST TRADE

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of Many Stories About the Buck Deer of Rainier National Park

BUCK SEATON, ranger at Rainier National Park, turned on the radio. It was ten o'clock in the evening and the News Flashes program was due. He wanted to know how the boys on the various fronts were doing. "All stations down," he told his wife. "There must be unidentified planes approaching the Puget Sound country."

"Yellow tourists," she commented.

"They won't be bringing their skis and fishing tackle with them," Buck replied. "If the weather is as thick down on the sound as it is up here, the enemy will have

a sweet time finding a target. It is probably a false alarm."

"Better lean too far on the safe side than to make a bad guess," Mrs. Seaton suggested. She listened and heard a scraping on the door. "That isn't a Jap, Buck," she said. "Shall I let him in?"

"He's an internal nuisance," the ranger answered, "but—open the door." He hastily concealed his cigarettes and pipe tobacco. She opened the door and Panhandle Pete, one of the park's most magnificent pets came in.

When Pete was a spike buck he had formed the tobacco habit. Tourists quickly

discovered he liked to chew up cigarettes, cigars or tobacco. They satisfied his taste. For a time he had been like a boy with his first job in a candy store—he gorged himself. He even went to the dogs for several months, snooping around picking up snipes and discarded butts around Longmires and the public camp grounds. Possibly he felt this undignified, or disliked the ashes that went with the average snipe, in any event Pete became choosy and fell into the habit of panhandling.

During the slack seasons he pestered Buck Seaton. He wasn't above pushing down a door and making himself at home while he searched for tobacco. On these occasions he usually paused to eat the flowers and plants that Mrs. Seaton grew in window boxes, and this brought the lady's wrath and broom down across his snoot.

Buck gave the deer a package of cigarettes that had got wet when he fell into the river, and Pete ate them, paper and all. Fifteen minutes later the ranger said, "Your manners are lousy. You never seem to know when you've overstayed your welcome. Why don't you pull your freight?"

"Why don't you join the army?" Mrs. Seaton asked the deer. "A great big, healthy fellow like you and not in uniform. It'd be different if you were raising food or doing war work. I'll bet you haven't bought as much as a war savings stamp?"

Buck Seaton himself had tried to join up and been rejected. It was something about over-taxing his heart while packing out an injured skier at high altitude. And Buck had wanted to become a member of the ski troops, too. Later, perhaps, after a winter's rest, the doctor might let him into the fight.

"Never jump all over a guy because he isn't in uniform," Buck said, "There may be a good reason. Panhandle Pete tried to join a ski company the same time I did. A very sad thing happened."

"What was it?"

"Well, as far as the enlisted personnel was concerned, Pete was in," Buck ex-

plained. "The major, captains and lieutenants were friendly, too. A corporal had painted the regimental insignia on both of Pete's shoulders, plus a top sergeant's chevrons. Then the colonel came up for inspection."

"On skis?" Mrs. Seaton saw horrible possibilities in such a situation.

"On skis," Buck answered. "Now, the colonel didn't expect Pete to salute him. Neither did he know that Pete's nostrils can pick up the tobacco odor a long way off. Inside his uniform, the colonel had his day's reserve of fat cigars. Pete sniffed them and pushed his nose against them.

"Well, the colonel didn't know that when you push on a buck deer's head or horns, he thinks you're another buck that wants to do a little head butting. You've seen them."

Mrs. Seaton nodded. It wasn't child's play. In fact it is downright dangerous for a strong man to start pushing against a buck deer's head, particularly in the fall, when he's in a combative mood.

"Before anyone could tell the colonel he shouldn't push Pete's head, he'd given a lusty shove and said, 'Get the hell out of here!' The boys didn't know whether to break ranks and try to overpower Pete, or hope for the best, and while they were making up their minds, and those immediately around the colonel were getting set to do something, Pete smacked him in the back.

"The snow wasn't very deep, but it was fine for skiing. The colonel almost went down, and to keep from falling, he leaned forward. He was solidly built amidships and I've never seen a finer rear elevation. Pete smacked him a beaut, and he ended up with his head between his knees and the skis moving briskly down the slope. I helped dig him out of the snowbank and the first order he gave was to chase the deer out of the region. 'And furthermore,' he concluded, 'if I find anyone, officer or man, petting, feeding, or even admiring that infernal buck, I'll have him busted.'"

"And that's why Pete has no standing with the ski troops," Mrs. Seaton said.

"He doesn't feel the disgrace of the thing," the ranger said, "but he's a sucker for public admiration and tobacco. And he's getting neither these days from the men in uniform."

MRS. SEATON opened the door and her husband gave Pete the bum's rush. It was snowing outside, and after snorting and pawing the snow a couple of times the buck moved away, taking a fence in an easy leap. Buck could hear the deer fussing about in a nearby thicket. Then he heard something else—the drone of motors.

The plane was flying at a high altitude—better than fifteen thousand feet. "Some one flying high enough to clear Mount Rainier," Buck Seaton reflected. "Hold on! I've never heard motors like that before." He called his wife and she listened a moment. "What kind of a plane is that?"

"It must be a Jap," she said. "The radio is off, the Puget Sound country is blacked out."

"I just wanted you to confirm my own opinion," he told her. Mount Rainier was a natural attraction for any pilot on a practice flight on a clear day. Over fourteen thousand feet above sea level—a few miles distant—a pilot got the full benefit of its bulk.

The dense forests on the lower slopes, the brawling glacial streams which looked like silver threads on green cloth; the snowfields, and the glaciers in the sunlight all combined to create a breath-taking spectacle.

As a result every type of plane from the great Boeing Fortresscs to the smaller ones flew in the vicinity of the mountain again and again. In time, Buck Seaton and his wife caught the different sounds that distinguished the various types, and they knew what was flying overhead on the darkest nights.

They had never heard a Jap plane, and unless Boeing had created something entirely new in the way of a two-motored job, the plane faintly audible high above the quietly falling snow, must be definitely an enemy.

They listened quite awhile. "It sounds as if he's trying to get a bearing on the peak," Mrs. Seaton said. "He's going around in a five or six mile circle."

Buck nodded. Anyone familiar with the mountain could get a bearing on most any target in the region. "The damned Japs came up here in droves, skiing," he said, "and chances are there were spies among them."

"Our planes are coming—fast combat jobs," she said. "The motors sound as if someone was tearing canvas to shreds." They passed over with a "whom-whom-whom-whom."

"I hope they find out *ubom*," Buck said. "The Jap's gone." It was probably blowing at fifteen thousand feet, the ranger reflected and even if the peak was obscured by snow clouds, they might roll back occasionally and give a pilot a brief glimpse. Again, the air might be clear and sharp.

THEY stayed outside until after eleven o'clock, hoping to hear the sound of motors, but the planes didn't return. Buck was up early the following morning, tuning in on news broadcasts. The newscaster was quite excited when he came on the air. "Good morning ladies and gentlemen," he said, "an unknown plane, believed to be of enemy origin, caused a general blackout last night. Flying in the thick weather, the plane came from some point on the Pacific, passed over the lumber town of Aberdeen and spent nearly an hour in the vicinity of Mount Rainier. Army officials will make no comment, but residents between Tacoma and Ashford report hearing our planes."

A few minutes after the news broadcast ended, a major knocked at Buck's door. "Come in, Major," the ranger said.

"You're in time for a stack of hots, bacon and coffee."

"This isn't a social call, Buck," the major answered, "but we can eat and talk to."

"Far be it from me to take words out of the mouth of an officer and gentleman," Buck said, "but my guess is that a Jap plane was either shot down or wrecked last night and you want the wreckage located, or the plane dropped parachutists and you want to build a fence about them in the shortest possible time—one with bayonets."

"Parachutists," the major said. "We've no proof. The weather was so thick up there our planes never caught a glimpse of the enemy. But the peak was visible at times, and he probably got his bearings and dropped his men."

"Smart, treacherous and obstinate—that's a Jap all over," Buck said. "If they dropped parachutists, they deliberately picked the kind of weather best suited for their purpose. It's snowing all over the mountain. A few minutes after they landed snow would cover their tracks. Undoubtedly they had a specific point where they could gather and hole in and by now there isn't a break in the snow's surface anywhere."

THE major grinned. "I come to you for hope and comfort and I have my own fears confirmed. If you were a Jap and wanted to land men in these parts, where would you drop them?"

"First, I must turn myself into a Jap," Buck said, "then view things from his slant. What's the purpose of landing in the first instance?"

"Probably to set up a short wave transmitter and keep the Imperial Japanese Navy posted on weather conditions in these parts," the major answered. "That would be preliminary to a large-scale raid. I would assume that as soon as I transmitted reports to any great extent that my position would be located by triangulation. I'd expect to be either killed or captured, but I'd want to do as much damage as possible before that

happened. I'd pick a spot where it'd be difficult for the Americans to get a fix."

"You have it all worked out," the major said.

"I went to sleep pondering on the various angles last night," Buck admitted. He spread out a map of the park, and pointed to a particularly rugged region. "I don't want to send you on a wild goose chase, but my guess is they're somewhere around there. They would probably be just above or below timberline so that they would have fuel and concealment, yet could, on short notice, operate with the least interference."

"You won't be sending us on a wild goose chase," the major said, "because we're starting from scratch."

"If I can help out, just let me know," Buck offered.

"We'll appreciate it if you will remain on call," the major answered. "And by the way, the colonel is coming to take personal charge. I hope you can arrange to keep Panhandle Pete penned up. It may save friction. I didn't mention it at the time, but the buck not only made the colonel a laughing stock in front of his men, but he also broke all of his cigars. They cost six bits apiece."

After the major's departure, Buck Seaton lit a cigarette and sauntered in the nearby timber. It wasn't long until the scent of tobacco smoke reached Pete's nostrils. He bounced lightly from a thicket in which he had taken shelter, approached the ranger with confidence, then suddenly stopped, attitude one of suspicion. "Hyah, boy," the ranger said, "have a cigarette?"

With a snort the deer vanished. "Huh!" Buck was disgusted. "Wise guy, huh?"

He returned to the cabin and related what had happened to his wife. "Pete must have known you were up to something," she said, "but how?"

"Ask a Chinese pheasant or a mallard duck what makes them know hunting season is on hand, or why they're confident certain areas are protected, and then you'll know why Pete smelled a rat," Buck re-

plied. "Again and again I've seen game gather in protected areas the day before the hunting season opened."

Pete had watched Buck return to the cabin. His tobacco hunger urged him to follow, but a deeper instinct warned him that all was not well. After a brief struggle between desire and instinct, he bounded away as if fearing he might weaken.

THREE was plenty of activity among the ski troops, but they would have none of him. "Beat it," they said whenever he approached, "want to get us in wrong? The Old Man is here. Will you go, or do you want a bust on the snoot?"

Pete, lowered his head and offered to do a little friendly butting with a sergeant, but the latter said, "Oh, no, you don't!" Pete wandered off, but when the ski troops began moving, he trailed along. Sometimes the snow was almost too deep, and he had to wallow through the drifts in a series of jumps and heaves. But mostly he managed to trail them by sticking to wind-swept ridges and hogbacks.

The ski troops broke up in small parties. Each moved with considerable confidence, believing the Japs wouldn't betray their position by firing upon them. They were there to kill Americans, but not in small groups. What they wanted was to kill them by thousands by aiding a fleet of bombing planes to come in. The ski troop's line of reasoning was sound.

The men holed in shortly before dark, and Pete, after browsing on green leaves within reach, found a bed of leaves and needles under a big tree, and went to sleep. It was a light sleep, broken often by warnings that came through the forest, but at daybreak nothing had happened. A light fall of snow had covered his tracks, as well as the ski trail left by a nearby party.

THE ski troops ate cold food and moved on, following a definite pattern they hoped might lead to something. Pete, finding good grazing where the wind had

cleared away the snow, stopped to eat. Later he might overtake the men, but he was pretty much disgusted with them. He had long since learned that a group of humans either came through with tobacco, or they didn't. If they were stingy, there was no percentage in sticking around.

A shifting wind brought various scents to Pete which he identified, then classified as of no interest, as indicating danger, or that were worth while. The bobcat scent didn't bother him, but the cougar scent filled him with fear. It was remote, and in a few minutes he lost it. Too smart to betray himself, the buck waited, nostrils in the wind. The cougar scent might return, stronger than ever, then he would have to clear out.

Presently he caught an odor that, though faint, nevertheless left no doubt of its origin. Tobacco. The deer moved silently into the wind. When he lost it, he remained where he was until it returned again. It was quite a distance away, and in very difficult country, but it grew stronger.



The deer heard no movement, no sound of talking, and the snow was unbroken, but suddenly a puff of tobacco smoke drifted from a thicket. He stepped close and looked over a clump of brush. There were three men, very warmly dressed, sitting in

the protection of an overhanging ledge. Their sleeping bags were spread against the wall, beyond reach of snow or sleet.

Panhandle Pete hadn't seen that type of human in a year's time. They were short, yellow men, with slanting eyes and cruel, insolent faces. They lacked the carefree manner of the yellow men he had seen at Longmires on their way to ski in Paradise Valley. Those men talked in a language the buck could partially understand. Pete had never heard the language spoken by this trio. It was harsh, and seemed to come from their lips with difficulty.

One of them stared intently at the thicket, then saw the deer. He reached for a light machine-gun and there was a murderous gleam in his eyes. His superior, a Lieutenant Matsui, snapped, "You fool, do you want to bring the Americans here? Weren't you told this is a game preserve and that there is no hunting?"

KAMOURI nodded, but he drooled at the thought of fresh meat. He remembered the time in the Philippines when they had cut steaks from a living critter and eaten the raw meat. If he couldn't shoot the buck, he might get himself a steak, or better still, a knife thrust at the throat might supply them with fresh meat for a protracted stay.

Matsui watched him unsheathe the keen-edged weapon and slowly advance. The buck watched him curiously, the Jap officer thought. Smoke from Kamouri's cigarette got into his eyes, and he removed it from his lips. When Panhandle Pete stretched his neck toward the cigarette Kamouri mistook the act for curiosity. He dropped the cigarette onto the snow and waited. If the buck put his head down, he decided, he would grasp his horns and give them a quick twist. If the neck snapped, well and good. If not, he would drive the knife into the throat while the buck was struggling in the snow.

He put the knife between his teeth and as the buck lowered his head he grabbed

the horns. Pete's head went down, but he recognized the gesture from experience with the ski troopers. He charged, smashing Kamouri's body against a rock, and driving his horns deep into the man's stomach.

Panhandle Pete's horns caught in Kamouri's clothing and for a moment the deer thought himself trapped. Panic, then cold fury gripped him. He tossed his head so violently that Kamouri's body was lifted from the ground and hurled clear. There was a rending of leather clothing at the seams, then the buck was free, except for something which hung over his eyes like a partial blindfold.

He tossed his head in fury and the blindfold flapped back over his antlers. He bounded from the scene a little wildly, shaking his head from side to side to rid himself of the flapping thing on his horns.

His flanks were heaving, and breath was coming from his nostrils in violent white plumes when he sighted a party far down in the timber.

He turned toward it when he saw Buck Seaton. The ranger, called into help with the search, swore when the buck came up. Well, what in hell have you been up to now?"

The colonel scowled. "Get that damned critter out of my sight. If you want my opinion, Seaton," he said, "he's probably gored someone to death. Isn't that blood on that leather on his horns?"

"Yes," Buck admitted gloomily, "I'm afraid it is. You see, Colonel, people don't realize they shouldn't push against a deer's head or horns. It gives him ideas. Naturally he charges."

"He's a killer, and we should dispose of him," the colonel declared. "No man's life is safe with a dangerous animal like that running at large."

"Come here, Pete," Buck ordered. He opened his cigarette case and took out a couple. "How's that, Boy?"

"Wasting good tobacco on a damned

deer," the colonel fumed. "I never heard of such a thing."

He lighted one of his six bit cigars and watched the ranger's technique. A *point* on the antlers had punctured a piece of leather clothing and held it. Buck got around behind Pete and enlarged the hole with his knife. Then with a deft movement he pulled the leather free without pushing on the horns.

"Flying clothes," the colonel said. "He's gored some poor pilot forced down and probably in bad shape. Why—hold on! None of our pilots, army, navy or marines, wear this type of material."

"That's Jap stuff, sir," a lieutenant said. "Their flying personnel wear it."

"By God it is!" the colonel exclaimed. He whirled on Panhandle Pete. "Where'd you get that?" he demanded.

Buck Seaton repressed a grin. "Let's find out, Colonel," he suggested. "Here's what probably happened. Pete was prowling around and caught the odor of tobacco smoke. He'd smell it where a human would never dream it existed. Pete went over, all steamed up, feeling he'd panhandle a cigarette or two. I don't know what happened, but Pete charged, wounded a Jap and came away with part of his clothes. Let's back track, if we can. It's snowing lightly and we may be able to get up there before the tracks drift over."

"Then what're we waiting for?" the colonel demanded.

BUCK led the way because his eyes were better trained to pick up hoof marks on the sod and places where the ground was stony or very hard.

"Why not take it a bit easy, Buck Seaton," the colonel warned. "I've just been informed on the state of your health."

"We can't take it easy with snow drifting over the tracks higher up," Buck answered. "We'll never get a hotter tip than this one. I don't matter."

"Two of you men help him along," the

colonel ordered. "Carry him up the steep places. Work in relays."

"Come now," Buck protested, "I'm not that badly off."

A burly pair hurried him along and when they tired, another stepped up. They reached the snowline and after some searching back and forth, plus Buck's knowledge of Pete's habits, picked up the tracks again. They were faint—little more than depressions in the snow.

"He was certainly traveling," the colonel said, noting the space between the tracks. "The bat out of hell had nothing on him."

"Pete was beginning to slow down here," Buck replied. "He can do better than that when he's really scared. Which isn't often," he added loyally.

The party moved silently now. Skis were racked up below them, because the thickets into which the deer had naturally run for cover made skiing next to impossible. Buck Seaton stopped at last. There wasn't a sign of a track.

"We're up against it," the colonel whispered. "Blast the luck."

"We're close," Buck answered.

"How do you know?"

"Panic was on the buck when he covered the stretch below us. The space between the strides was tremendous. There were signs of blind flight—anything to get away. Later, he remembered caution, and kept thickets between him and possible danger. By the time he reached the snowline he was cocky once more," the ranger explained. "I'll bet we're within a quarter mile of them, possibly less, and yet there are so many places to hide out we might pass within twenty yards and never see them."

"Then let's comb every square foot," the colonel said.

"We'd never finish before dark," Buck answered.

"If we had a bloodhound," the colonel began, then snorted at his wishful thinking.

"That gives me an idea," Buck Seaton

said. "We've got the next best thing." He went back down the trail a short distance and held up a cigarette. Pete, trailing Buck rather than the ski troops, answered instantly.

Lured by the cigarette Buck walked to the head of the line.

He chewed up the cigarette and looked for more. The colonel scowled at the deer. "Panhandle—well named." He lighted one of his cigars and Pete stepped up hopefully. "Get the hell out, you bum."

"Suppose," the ranger suggested, "you order the troops to leave, pretending they've given up the search in this region? They can fall out and take things easy a quarter mile below. Then we'll wait quietly and see what happens."

The men marched off, the colonel finished his cigar and tossed the butt at Pete who sniffed disdainfully at its smallness. The sound of retreating men, faded and died. "Odd isn't it," the ranger whispered fifteen minutes later, "why men feel the need of a smoke after a long strain."

"I find that true," the colonel answered.

"White, Black or Yellow, it is all the same," Buck said. "I've seen them make long runs down the mountain on skis, end up tense and unable to relax after the hard fight with tricky winds and steep pitches of glare ice. Then they'd light up and—"

He held up a warning hand. "Watch Pete, Colonel," Buck whispered.

Pete's attitude in the colonel's opinion wasn't anything unusual, but the ranger recognized the signs—someone was smoking. Buck sniffed and smelled nothing. The colonel sniffed also, and with the same result.

The deer took several steps forward, turned a little to the right, then to the left. He advanced several yards with confidence, sniffed again and bounded lightly over a snow mound. He stood stiff-legged and stretched his neck straight ahead, and sniffed several times. Plumes of steam swirled from his nostrils as he exhaled. Suddenly shaking his antlers, half in fear,

half in disgust, he trotted back to the ranger.

Buck Seaton hadn't taken his eyes off the tree tops while the deer sniffed. "Something straight ahead," he whispered.

"How do you know?" the colonel asked.

"The tree tops stayed in the same direction, they didn't point this way and that, proving the wind was steady," Buck replied. "I'll be back." He moved in a straight line three hundred yards and came to a snow-covered boulder. He sniffed and caught the faint, elusive odor of tobacco smoke. "There's only one place that could come from," he mused. "In that gulch."

He rejoined the colonel. "Let's join your men," he suggested. "I've an idea we may bag something."

STANDING in the center of the ski troops a few minutes later, Buck Seaton sketched the gulch in the snow. "It can easily be defended," he concluded.

"Can't we get above it?" a lieutenant asked.

"No. There's a steep slope of ice, covered with snow," the ranger explained. "A man attempting to cross would either slip and fall two hundred feet or start a slide that would drop him into the gulch."

The lieutenant grinned. "If I could be permitted a little time to study the ground, sir," he volunteered, "I might induce anyone in that gulch to come out." After a moment's thought, he added, "And save many of our men from machine fire."

"I'll show you the ground," the ranger said quickly, adding, "with the colonel's permission."

"Go ahead," the colonel ordered. "We'll follow in fifteen minutes, splitting our forces to cover the gulch's outlet."

As Buck Seaton and the lieutenant left the others, the ranger swung well to the right. "I've a healthy respect for Jap sniping," he explained.

"And there's a chance this is a wild goose chase," the lieutenant said. "But caution is proper. Besides, you're a civilian."

"They wouldn't let me in," Buck replied, "and I've done a lot of belly-aching about it. Then, suddenly, a little side show was tossed into my lap."

Presently he began to crawl in the snow, wallowing through the drifts until he was almost lost from view. The ground began to rise almost abruptly. "No sound," Buck whispered. "Not even a loud breath."

A few minutes later he stopped, held up a warning hand, then motioned for the lieutenant to join him. The ranger pointed and the lieutenant grinned. "Three Japs," he whispered, his lips close to Buck's ears. "And look at the machine-guns and radio equipment. They could put up a whale of a fight. And were ready to."

"And still are," Buck answered.

The lieutenant got out a grenade. His eyes plainly said, "This will do it, but it'll smash up their equipment. We'd like to study the sort of stuff they're parachuting into our country."

Buck pointed to the *toe* of the snowfield immediately above the gulch. The lieutenant nodded and Buck led the way again. The lieutenant hurled the grenade and it struck solid ice and exploded before it could fall back.

Buck, crouching behind a rock, risked an eye to see what the Japs were doing. They had leaped to three machine-guns and were waiting for the first sound, or the first head. Suddenly the snow broke clear a hundred yards up the slope. With a mounting roar it spilled like a waterfall into the gulch and like a waterfall it rushed and bounced along the gulch's bottom in a series of angry waves. The Japs, machine-guns in their hands, raced toward safety.

A hundred pound mass of solidly packed

snow caught one of them between the shoulders and knocked him twenty-five feet through the air. The other two struggled briefly in the heaving mass, then went under.

Buck stood up and cupped his hands to his mouth. When there was a lull in the roar he bellowed. "Come up either side of the gulch. Don't get in front. Snow's still falling."

The colonel was the first man on the scene. "I tossed a grenade, sir," the lieutenant reported, "and the snow slide did the rest. I think we can dig out bodies and equipment—undamaged. Buck Seaton did an excellent piece of guiding. They were suspicious, but didn't know where we were."

"Well done, Lieutenant," the colonel said. "And you, too, Mr. Seaton."

"The lieutenant and I are minor actors in this drama," Buck said. "After all, it was Panhandle Pete who put the finger on the Japs, as you might say."

"Yes, I guess that's right," the colonel admitted. "I've hunted behind pointer dogs, and they never failed to point at the game, but this is the first time in my life that I ever saw a buck deer point a covey of enemies." He turned as the deer came up.

Panhandle Pete possessed a sixth sense at times. He seemed to know to a split second the psychological time to approach. He looked at the colonel and his eyes were filled with optimism. "Yes," the colonel said, "I'm talking about you." He took out an expensive cigar, bit off the end and started to light it. "Oh, by the way, Pete," he said briskly, "have a cigar. Hell—have all of them."



*Certainly the Comical Little Dachshund Was No Match for
a Clever Saboteur. At Least That's What the
Saboteur Thought*



BEWARE OF THE DOG

By FREDERIC F. VAN DE WATER

THE man who had said his name was Jones sat stiffly on the forward half of his chair in the lobby of the Eagle House and turned his derby hat about on his lap with nervous hands. His questions were so hesitant, his manner so mild, that Albert Miller was shamed by the memory of his recent alarm.

Miller had stood beside the lobby's revolving door, waiting the northbound bus, when the man had spoken apologetically at his elbow.

"I'm Jones," he had said, "F. B. I." and a badge had shone momentarily beneath the backward drawn coat. "Mind if we sit and talk for a while?"

They had been sitting, side by side in leather chairs against the wall for ten minutes now, so inconspicuous a pair that none of those who had passed had looked at them twice. Mr. Jones now cleared his throat and hesitated. Miller leaned back and looked about him.

In thickening twilight, folk of the arms factory's 8 to 4 shift went along Main

Street with shoulders hunched against November's wind. The clerk at his desk looked carefully at each fingernail. A woman in rumpled white hooked back the swinging doors to the dining room. A smell of food came out into the lobby and added hunger to Miller's grievances. Memory of his fright when the stranger first had spoken galled him. He said, for Mr. Jones' current pause seemed unending:

"Listen; let's speed this up. I've missed one bus already. I've told you where I work. You can check on me at the plant. Want to see my social security card, my registration card, my sugar card?"

He offered his wallet with a sour grin. His free hand patted his pockets.

"I got eleven dollars and some small change, a pocket knife, a bottle of chloroform for a no-account old dog that belongs to my uncle. I live with my uncle, Egon Kurtz, two miles out on the Black Brook Road. Cross the covered bridge; take the first turn to the left."

His acidity roused Mr. Jones who looked at his hat and asked:

"Egon Kurtz? German?"

"A refugee. Is it a crime my father married his sister?"

"German," Mr. Jones said again. "Was he home last night?"

"Absolutely. We went to bed early."

"If you went to bed early," the other mused aloud, "how can you be sure he was home?"

"Look," Miller asked, suddenly sitting as straight as his companion. "What gives?"

"A little trouble." Mr. Jones spoke like one who confides a family scandal. "Sabotage. "So we're—checking."

HE TURNED his hat completely around and looked down dismally at its crown.

"Kurtz works in the arms plant, too?"

Miller shook his head.

"He's old; he's feeble. Used to be an

engineer in the old country. Now he paints pictures for fun and sits around alla while with that damned dashhound of his."

"Someone," Mr. Jones said and his eyes dwelt apologetically on Miller's face, "planted a contact bomb on the railway bridge last night. Sentry found it by luck."

"Oh-oh!" Miller said at last. His face hardened as he found implication in the other's speech.

"It was—an excellent bomb," Mr. Jones went on. "It could have blown the plant's whole mid-week shipment into the river."

"Look," Miller blurted, his face dark. "Uncle Egon's no Nazi. Besides, he couldn't walk that far."

"A car?" the other asked.

"A jalopy, but darned little gas. If you think—"

His surmise choked him. Mr. Jones plucked at a bit of fluff on his derby's crown.

"Talk much," he asked, "with your uncle about what goes on at the plant?"

"Not any," said Miller firmly. "They got rules. I keep 'em."

He scowled at his own grimed hands. The lobby's revolving door wheezed and flapped. Mr. Jones blinked at the tall, dark man who strode past. Miller drew a deep breath.

"Look," he said, "I sleep sound, but it wouldn't make any difference if I didn't. That damned pooch of Uncle Egon's can hear me a quarter-mile off and they're always together. He's bit me twice already. That's why I got the chloroform today, but God knows when I'll get to use it. Uncle Egon and Loki—that's the dog—they're like that."

He held up two fingers. Mr. Jones looked mournful.

"If I'd smelled anything," Miller told him, "I'd of been looking for you guys, instead of you tailing me. I got another Uncle, name of Sam. It's him I work for."

Mr. Jones nodded and got up.

"That's what I hoped you'd say," he said

in mild satisfaction. "You can reach me here any time. Or leave a message."

"Absolutely," Miller promised, "but I'm telling you you're wrong."

SPARSE, cropped hair glittered like white sand on Egon Kurtz's brown skull as he pushed back his chair from the easel, laid palette aside and twisted stiffness out of his gnarled hands. The dachshund who had slumbered before him rose, with like deliberate movement. His crooked, inconsiderable legs supported a tube of body, so sleek, so black, that it might have been fashioned from tar. Loki lifted a narrow head toward his master. The black and tan muzzle was misted by age; the topaz eyes were sad. The dog reared, planted splayed forefeet on Kurtz's knee then dropped to face the door with a rumbling in his throat.

"Quiet," the old man bade. "It is only Albrecht, returning. No more scenes tonight. Sometimes I think you plague him purposely, old friend."

The dachshund was silent, yet lifted hackles still marred the column of his neck and teeth shone within the snarling curve of his lips.

"Hi," said Miller, entcning, and as Loki growled, added sourly. "Welcome like always, eh?"

"You are late," Kurtz said in blunted English.

"And hungry. How's for supper?"

"Long in the oven," his uncle told him.

He nodded toward the kitchen, yet he did not rise. Awkwardly the three tarried in this room, filled with the litter of a womanless household, and watched each other.

Only the dog's eyes were candidly hostile. Kurtz cleared his throat at last.

"A man," he said, as though the words hurt him, "came today and asked me questions."

"Yeah?" Miller was watching the dachshund. His hand slipped into his pocket and closed about the lethal bottle.

"Questions," Kurtz said more loudly, "about you?"

His nephew stared. He asked at last:

"Sort of Caspar Milquetoast? Fidgetty like?"

"Caspar Milquetoast I do not know," Kurtz returned. "This was a tall, dark man. He asked where you were last night."

In the brief silence his bleached blue eyes pried at the younger man's still face.

"I told him that you were here—in bed."

"So what?"

"You were not here, Albrecht," Kurtz said.

"No?"

"No."

THE word's impact seemed to throw Miller off balance. He took an unwilling step forward. Loki growled again and lifted his head like a vigilant snake. Kurtz's pale eyes watched his nephew. He said slowly:

"I did not tell him the truth. You were not here last night."

Loki's growl endured, grew shrill. His master hooked paint-stained fingers within his collar. The palm of the other hand scrubbed his own cropped skull, as though friction might clarify thought. His speech was more heavily accented.

"I have had misunderstandings with secret police. I wish no more. You are my nephew, yet if you—"

He paused, unwilling to utter threat. Miller looked at his uncle carefully and some secret amusement softened his own mouth.

"Look," he bade. "Don't think you're getting special attention. This afternoon, at the Eagle House—"

THE old man sat straighter. He accused:

"You went upstairs early, last night. When you thought I slept you climbed from the window to the shed and then to the ground. We heard you, Loki and I."

I found your footprints beneath the eaves, today."

He marked for the first time his nephew's abashed grin and paused, bewildered. Miller asked with wry amusement:

"And that's what you didn't tell the G-man?"

"Because you are Lotte's son," Kurtz replied wearily. "Because I could not be sure, Albrecht; yet someone last night placed a bomb—"

"I know, I know," Miller broke in. "The partner of the guy that came here combed me out. I said you were here, but I didn't really know."

"Because you were not here yourself."

"True," the other answered reflectively. "Absolutely true."

He scowled at the uneven floor and scuffed with one shoe at a protruding knot. At length he raised his head decidedly.

"Look," he said. "We better drive down to the Eagle House. We better find those birds and come clean, the both of us. You can tell them I wasn't here; I'll tell them where I was. It isn't healthy to lie to G-men, not any."

He chuckled at the amazement on Kurtz's face and went on in rueful amusement:

"I wasn't planting bombs last night. You see, there's a mouse and her husband works the 12 to 8 shift and she gets lonely. You know; that old *euige Weiblichkeit* you alla while talk about. That's what I gotta tell those lads and don't you say I'd been smarter to stay home. Already, I know it."

FOR a long instant he enjoyed watching relief clear the other man's gaunt face. The dog looked up inquiringly as Kurtz uttered a brief, abashed laugh. Miller echoed it.

"Let's go," he urged. "I don't like cops after me any better than you do."

The old man rose slowly. Loki stood beside him.

"I'll get the jalopy," said Miller. "And !"

leave the pooch behind for once, will ya? We got trouble enough."

"He has not yet had his supper. First, I will feed him," Kurtz said happily. The dachshund trotted behind him toward the kitchen. Miller went out through star-embedded darkness, toward the metal garage where his uncle's ancient car was housed.

As usual, the iron door stuck. It gave its customary screech on yielding. The inner air was thick with scents of oil and rubber. Miller felt his way to the car door and settled himself behind the wheel.

The starter churned, but the engine did not rouse. He trod upon the pedal again as he heard footsteps, accented by a cane, that signaled the old man's approach.

KURTZ stood beside the car, bent and dim in the reflected glow of the weak headlamps. These faded as Miller pressed the starter again.

"Here," he surrendered and slid along the seat. "Maybe you can start her."

Kurtz hoisted himself gradually in behind the wheel.

"So!" he said in a pleased voice as the engine coughed, roared and subsided into steady rhythm. "It knows its owner."

He glanced backward and thrust the gear lever into reverse.

"Loki has dined on our supper. It was baked quite dry. We can eat in Apple-dore."

"Yes," said Miller through clenched teeth and slapped his sodden handkerchief against his uncle's face.

It was easier; it was briefer than he had feared. The old man's instinctive gasp was his undoing. For an instant they strove in vicious silence. The car bucked violently; the engine died. Hands that had clasped Miller's wrist relaxed and fell away; the head, locked in the crook of the other elbow, twisted no longer. Miller cast the handkerchief from the car, flexed fingers that the chloroform's chill had numbed and, thrusting his head through

the further window, drew in cleaner air.

He had no compunction, no regret. These were weaknesses against which he had been schooled. His tutors would have approved the speed, the audacity, the *immerangreifen* with which he had met and subdued unexpected peril.

Miller paused to straighten Kurtz's coat that the struggle had rumpled. Then, leaning across the still body, he pressed the starter and adjusted the throttle until the engine ran briskly.

When he had slid from the car, he retrieved the almost dry handkerchief and paused to survey his handiwork critically. His uncle's arms dangled. The nephew lifted each and clasped its fingers about the wheel. He gave a small satisfied sound. The garage door complained as he closed it tightly behind him.

He lingered and listened with satisfaction to the industrious sound of the engine, filling the garage with monoxide that insured the death of Egon Kurtz, even if he still lived. Few who opposed the Third Reich's purposes could hope for so merciful an end. Men would find the body at the wheel and say that Kurtz had been driven to suicide by fear of the F. B. I. Miller grinned at the thought. Such clumsy, childish men were fit police for a democracy.

He must still accomplish the final touches that would wholly absolve him. There was no time for premature gloating. Miller went quickly toward the house. Already he had chosen the items of the saboteur's craft he would take from the cache beneath his bedroom floor. Among his uncle's paints and dashed canvases he would place some bits of bomb metal, an obsolete code, an emptied TNT can. They would be enough. The G-men would bay exultantly over their trove.

WHEN the transfer had been made he picked up the satchel he had packed for himself and stood within the door he had left open on entering, to review care-

fully once more all he had done. The drama, so quickly and deftly assembled, was almost finished and hoodwinked men would play its concluding scenes at his implicit bidding.

The whole structure, Miller thought, with narrowed, calculating eyes, was sound and good. He would go now, bearing his bag, down the road and across the covered bridge to Morton's farm and ask for a night's lodging. To Morton, he would appear an angry and suspicious man who had charged his uncle with being a German agent and who had been evicted by the furious Kurtz.

Miller reviewed the details of the quarrel that he would confide to Morton and nodded. All was safe and certain and firmly established. It was time to go. He stepped out into the colder air of night and closed the door behind him. Stars hung close and bright in the silence. He strode away, remembered the half-empty chloroform bottle still in his pocket and paused.

Thin sound came out of the blackness to stab him. He flinched and stood wholly still while fear's small, tingling feet scampered along his spine and dampness spread on forehead and palms. He heard the noise again and knew it now. In the dark a dog lifted a low, unhappy whine and, as it ceased, Miller recognized the frantic scraping of claws upon metal. He gasped and then swore.

Loki, the devoted dachshund; Loki, his constant enemy, begged for entrance at the garage door behind which his owner's body lay. Another thought smote Miller and numbed him. The dog whined again, more wretchedly. There was no other sound. Within the closed garage the car's engine no longer ran.

Terror, for an instant, overwhelmed Miller. Egon had been shamming. Egon was not dead. Egon had revived, turned off the motor and, armed with full knowledge, had fled to proclaim his nephew's damnation. Panic, stooping out of the

darkness, gripped Miller and shook him, mocking his recent pride, twittering of disaster. He withstood the attack, beat it back and held it at bay with resolute thought.

He had been terror smitten by a dog's fidelity—nothing more. Egon was still within the metal shed. Otherwise, Loki would not keep vigil at the door. If Egon were still alive and within, he must be faced and silenced.

Miller stole forward, clasping the bottle in his pocket with clammy fingers. So silent was his approach that he was almost upon the dog before Loki heard him. The dachshund whirled about, snarled and backed away.

"Good dog," Miller wheedled. "Here Loki, good dog." He bent toward the small, blacker smudge in the darkness. It snarled again and fled. The night immersed it. Miller heard the patter of fugitive paws. He made no attempt to pursue but tugged at the latch with slippery, bungling hands.

The door gave way with a banshee screech that pierced him. Warm vapor, rank with scents of burned oil and roasting metal, gushed forth. Miller stepped back and drew a long breath. He heard the throaty boiling of the radiator. He saw, in the thinning haze, that headlights still burned dimly and marked through the car's rear windows the blurred outline of Kurtz's bent head and shoulder.

MILLER released a breath and drew another. He would not wait for outer air wholly to cleanse the reeking atmosphere but stumbled forward. He pulled open the car's door and knew relief's immensity and shakily scorned himself for recent terror.

Egon's body had not stirred. It still sat, in meek composure, as Miller had left it. No faintest pulse dwelt in the bony wrist. The man was dead. On the dialboard the gasoline indicator pointed a mutely eloquent finger to "Empty."

Soft sound rose behind Miller and some-

thing touched his leg. Breath burst from him with a harsh sound. He wheeled and stared down in the weak light at a narrow, woebegone head; a long reptilian body that cringed at his sudden movement. Devotion, trampling upon hatred and dread, had brought the dachshund into his master's presence. Loki gave way as Miller lunged toward him, but he did not seek safety again in outer darkness. He scuttled into the garage's far corner and there, with head drawn back like a gun's cocked hammer; with bared teeth glittering, faced his enemy.

"Out," cried Miller. "Get out," but the dog's only response was a bleaker grimace.

Time passed. Each second cried more urgently for haste. Shame at his own nervous blundering smarted within Miller. He went toward the dog, swiftly yet warily, lest the defiant beast evade him.

"Good dog! Good Loki," he muttered, stopped suddenly and caught the dachshund's neck. For an instant one hand held a fold of loose soft hide, but the body it enclosed was muscular and elastic as a snake's. Loki twisted about with a shrill sound that Miller's outcry amplified. Sharp teeth tore at the delaying hand. The dog jerked free and fled.

Anguish ran up Miller's arm and unsettled his mind. Instinctively, he wrapped his handkerchief about the warm and dripping fingers. Thereafter, he looked frantically about the garage. There was no sign of the dachshund, though Miller even got clumsily to his knees and peered beneath the car. The craven beast had struck his enemy once more and then had fled.

Miller stole out and closed the noisy door behind him. Night's chill abolished the fright that had harried him within that reeking chamber. Cold air cleared his mind. He retrieved the satchel he had left beside the porch and went hastily down the driveway.

It was hard to think clearly when each step drove new pain through his torn hand,

yet he must. Panic, fathered by the cursed dog, had almost overset him. It must not happen again. Resolutely, he rehearsed, as he plodded on the revised tale he would relate at Morton's farm.

He paused, in mid-recitation, forgetting for an instant his purpose and his injury. Darkness was melting. The lately black mass of foliage above him was changing into assemblages of individual leaves. Beyond a ridge in the road a brilliance grew. A car was coming. He could hear its motor now and quickly turned about, retracing his steps.

Miller was trudging back uphill when the headlights' beam smote him. He saw his elongated shadow grow sharper. In the glare of new peril, his brain did not fail again. Swiftly, it edited the story he would tell whomever journey uphill to Egon Kurtz's home.

HE HEARD the motor slacken, the brakes take hold. He stepped out for the car to pass but it halted beside him and he knew the voice of Mr. Jones.

Miller stood with a foot on the running board and his injured hand behind him and spoke with a canny mixture of anger and regret. Mr. Jones uttered small sympathetic sounds. His tall companion, dimly seen in the glow from the dial board, did not speak. Smoothly, Miller added the last, necessary episode to his tale.

"So I pack, after he tells me to get out, and I head for Morton's. Maybe I can sleep there. Then I get to thinking. You can't tell what that old devil will do. I start back to watch him. Maybe he's following me—I don't know. Anyway, that dog of his jumps me. Bites me"—he held up the hand in its scarlet wrapping—"and runs before I can kill him."

Mr. Jones moaned. His seatmate leaned forward.

"Better have that tended to. He might be mad."

"Anything," Miller agreed with a grim laugh, "could happen tonight."

He climbed into the rear seat at Mr. Jones's bidding. The car moved on. Its driver said over his shoulder:

"Kurtz told Evans, my partner, that he wanted to see him again. That's why we drove out."

"You can take him and his dog, too," Miller replied and liked his own surly tone. So Egon, his own uncle, had been planning to denounce him! He had struck none too soon.

The car halted before the house, small and dingily meek with a single lighted window. Evans got out and knocked. Miller held his breath waiting for the familiar fury of Loki's barking. The silence endured. Evans said at last, "Nobody home," and pushed open the door.

"That's funny," Miller exclaimed. He and Mr. Jones entered the dwelling together.

"I'll look around," Evans said and departed. Miller called after him, "Beware of the dog." It was hard to keep zest from his voice and face. The glee of imminent triumph was mounting.

They entered Egon's room. Mr. Jones turned the lamp higher and clucked as he looked at Miller's hand.

"You're sure it was Kurtz's dog?" he asked shyly.

"Who'd know better?" the other returned. "He's bit me before."

"And where's Kurtz?" Mr. Jones went on. "He can't hope to gain anything by running away."

He seemed to deplore the idea. Miller scoffed.

"He's around. Him and that dachshund are twins-like. Never apart."

His heart jumped, yet he was certain neither his face nor body stirred. Steps sounded on the porch and Evans called:

"Jonesy. Outside a minute, will you?"

Miller sat and held his wounded hand. He scarcely felt the pain. The thing was moving according to plan—his own plan. Evans had found Egon's body. Jones had gone to inspect it. They were launched on

the trail he had decreed they should follow. By training, by intelligence, he was their amused superior.

He had quenched his pride and had assumed a look of suffering when Evans and his partner returned. There was a funeral air about Mr. Jones. He faltered:

"We've found Kurtz, Mr. Miller; dead, in the garage."

"The hell!" said Miller and stared.

"Dead," Mr. Jones went on sadly. "Asphyxiated by fumes from his own car. Sad—very sad indeed. And now, if you please, I'll have a look at that hand."

Miller held it out.

"The other, too," Mr. Jones added. "Thank you very much."

Steel dropped upon the extended wrists, and closed with a dry double sound. Miller, lifting a stupefied face, met his captor's melancholy regard.

"For killing Egon Kurtz," Mr. Jones said, as though he supplied a footnote.

This could be only pretense. It must be. This could be only a ghastly joke; a clumsy attempt to frighten him. Miller looked at his linked, extended hands and asked hoarsely:

"You gone nuts?"

Evans stepped behind him. "Stand up," he bade and swept skilled hands over the prisoner's body while Mr. Jones pursued mildly:

"We found him in his car. It had run itself dry. You tried to make it look like suicide."

EVANS'S hand fumbled in a jacket pocket and brought out the small brown bottle.

"Half-empty," he said, holding it to the light. Mr. Jones nodded.

"You drugged him," he went on as

though reporting his thoughts, "with chloroform you said you'd bought for the dog—the dog you claim bit you a few minutes ago."

He paused, blinked, cleared his throat and went on:

"A few minutes ago, you said, but we found the dog in the car, close beside the body. And the dog is alive and well. Followed you when you went into be sure you'd killed the old man, I imagine."

Miller could not speak. An unheeded voice within cried out against his own carelessness. Why had he not thought, after Loki had bitten him, to look within the car for his enemy? It was there, beside his beloved owner, that the dog would choose to hide, scuttling to fancied safety through the car door Miller had left ajar.

He turned his head slowly and the inner, accusing tumult died. The dachshund stood in the doorway, a comically formed creature who wore a baleful dignity. His sharp black and tan muzzle was misted by age. His topaz eyes were intent. The man read in their regard hatred appeased and dire satisfaction.

Further pretense was vain. Hope and pride alike had been swept away, not by overwhelming forces but by a detested and grotesque dog, who gloated over him now with bitter eyes.

Despair numbed Miller. He tried again to speak, but all his stricken mind could lay hold upon was a shibboleth he once had shouted arrogantly.

The handcuffs clicked as his wrists jerked at each other. In a shrill voice he cried to his captors, to the attentive dog: "Heil Hitler!"

"Yes," said Mr. Jones and took his prisoner's arm, "that's what we've suspected right along."

BRITISHER JOE'S SECRET

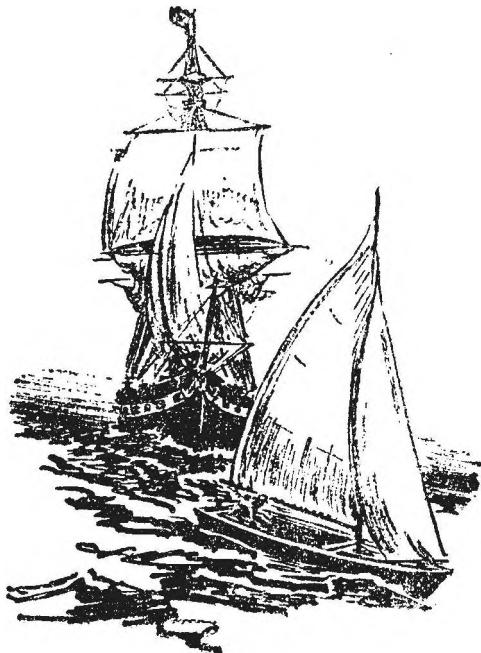
By B. E. COOK

*Author of "A Coat of Faded Blue,"
"Take It From the Mate," etc.*

BRITISHER JOE was not British. He was a Yankee from the granite islands down the Maine coast and he despised the British ensign.

Plenty of history lurked behind his misleading name. It reached far back into Revolutionary times when those down-east islanders could not always be sure who was patriot, who was loyalist. For six families lived on Tuppence Island then as the gravestones up on the bluff headland still testify. But today, only one man inhabits the island—Britisher Joe.

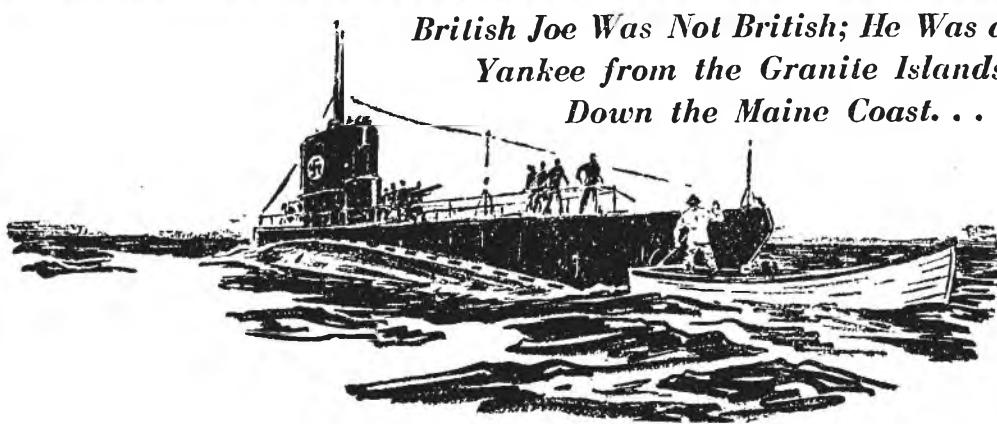
No doubt ever existed regarding the Clemmys and Dunstons. They were ship builders and masters of sail; they were for the British strong. And the Greeleys? Mere clam diggers whose loyalties mattered not in those less democratic times. But Britisher Joe's forbears were the Robinsons who burned with a zeal for liberty and freedom. Also they kept their mouths shut. Of the two other families on Tupp-



pence, no political record survives; presumably they fished, gardened and reared families, unmoved by affairs of empire.

The Clemmys and Dunstons demonstrated their caste. They assumed airs, they schooled their children in Portland off on the mainland, they gave hoity dinners for the wealthy from that town. Not so the Robinsons who disparaged such a show. They were the equals of both Clemmys and Dunstons and needed no social display to convince themselves of the fact. They owed no man. They wanted no red-coats to come off the main onto Tuppence

*British Joe Was Not British; He Was a
Yankee from the Granite Islands
Down the Maine Coast. . . .*



to prescribe their lives. They did not believe in paying British tax nor would they pay much longer if young Jed was right—if what Jed was saying should come to pass.

For young Jed attended secret meetings on the mainland. He came home so crampful of defiance and rebellion that the older, more cautious members of the family isolated him from the Clemmys and Dunstons lest some provocative word sting him into flatly declaring himself patriot. The time was not yet ripe. Certain undercover movements up Boston way still were not ready to come into the open. Even now their lengthening tentacles reached along the shores of Casco Bay, and one hint of it to any loyalist might work irreparable damage to the patriot cause.

Presumably Jed let nothing slip, but somehow Amos Clemmy discovered what was on. He dispatched his oldest boy by boat to the mouth of the Kennebuc River, there to report it to a British frigate stationed there, blockade fashion. It would be a great stroke for that frigate should she land men and pounce upon a meeting convoked by notorious Sam Adams. And for the Clemmy clan's prestige as loyalists. It might even get Clemmy ships lucrative cargoes—rich reward indeed.

How natural, therefore, that little Tommie Clemmy should boast of his older brother's assignment—to the Robinson boy Nate. Really, brother was gonna pilot one of the king's frigates close inshore and not fur fr'm hereabouts and capture a hornet's nest on the main. Thus, in effect, the child put it. He could not understand the need of a British frigate against a hornet's nest, nor could tiny Nate, but that word "frigate" did things inside the latter's brain. For frigate meant British and in the Robinson household men spat in the woodbox when they spoke of Britishers. Oh, they held their tongues in leash out of doors, to be sure; it was diffi-

cult on Tuppence Island to really distinguish between rebel and loyalist.

So the Robinson lad hurried home to create an excitement that delighted his youngster heart. The big kitchen became the scene of big argument. It centered, as usual, around Jed, just in from fishing offshore. Forthright Jed took a stand and he could not be budged.

"Action?" he demanded. "Me go warn that meeting? Never. It is too important to be canceled. It's a long way from Boston, those big men including Mr. Adams might not come so far again. And many a lukewarm man 'long that Cumberland Road needs just the talk from Boston town to swing him to the cause. No, that meeting's got to meet."

MR. ROBINSON exercised the patience of age. "But what can they do when the redcoats arrive, Jed?" He shook his head and added, "A few squirrel-shooters against a landing party of trained redcoats; 'twill be murder—or capture. Then what good could come o' the meeting?"

Jed stood there, feet spread, chafing his stubbly chin, pondering. His father's words made sense and yet, "They must not raid that gathering," he insisted slowly. "Somchow I have to prevent it."

"Somehow you? How?" incredulously.

"Oh, match the Clemmy trick with a better one . . . maybe . . . maybe."

The entire family now watched the pair—until, at length, quick light flooded Jed's whiskered visage. "I've got it!" he cried and spun on his heel. "Got 'em in a trap! Looky, I know every inch of this coast from Saco to the Kennebuc. Me! And who's their pilot? A Clemmy," scornfully. "What do the Clemmys know about sailing close along shore on this coast? They are deepwater sailors, they don't fish in-and-out o' bays like me. I'll fix those Britishers. Damme if they don't strike and stick there the rest o' their lives—and shoot their cannon at the gulls if they shoot at all. I'll fix 'em!" He threw

back his head and laughed; it was like a full gale off the open sea.

And fix 'em he did. He sailed his boat to the mouth of the Kennebec. He ran afoul of light fog which—for the moment, at least—only enhanced his chance of success. For he aimed to give the frigate the impression he was watching her, then melt away as though to go unseen to warn the patriots. Of course this was bound to stamp him a rebel, but that fact must come to light eventually. Men up Boston way already had fought and died in this cause.

The fog forced him close to the frigate before he could be certain her lookouts observed him. Then he came about. They were singing up-anchor before he could sail the *Betty B* beyond earshot. He hoisted his jib, hauled closer for speed and crowded her. But he tacked and turned so that the frigate would not quite lose sight of the sailboat. Those Britishers must be drawn in pursuit, at the risk of cannon fire he must draw them on into the fog.

THEY came with canvas unfurling. The loftier sails caught real wind and they gained on the *Betty B*. Jed Robinson chuckled; he had at least baited the big frigate. Now to keep her attention on him.

His chuckling died when a squall struck and it grew darker in the fog, for big wind favored the larger ship. Very soon she was closing in on his little boat. She became a looming menace when the fog started scudding alee. Gunports opened abaft her bowsprit shrouds. Ordinarily those guns would shoot over Jed's head, but one lucky shot could hole the *Betty B*'s mainsail, a luckier one dismast her. Jed caught his breath at this prospect. He quit breathing when came the hail to heave to, followed closely by an air-shattering boom!

The ball overshot the boat. Jed took slight comfort in it because he saw the frigate's bows already rising and dipping on the quick seas kicked up by the squall. If her gunners shot at him on a downward

dip, they could sink the *Betty B* abruptly. He tacked.

The frigate broke out more canvas. T'gans'ls loomed white against blackness and whitecaps on the sea matched them in increasing size and numbers. It looked as though Robinson had launched his trick at the wrong time of weather and now was too late to escape the bad break.

But he did not want escape. It was not often a small boat could rouse a frigate of the British navy from anchorage. He tacked back and forth in a zigzagging course. This, however, allowed the ship to gain on him faster. He ran so far to port, then, that her crew scrambled aloft to handle sail to watch his maneuver—then back he came again on the other leg. Another shot sang overhead. That one showed him she was too close aboard to pot him, almost close enough to run him down!

In desperation he studied the fog. It varied in density. Now the frigate stood huge and bare and big enough to chill his blood; now she was erased in the wet whiteness. He headed into the next thick scud, sailed straight ahead, all the time drawing the frigate toward a certain objective. In and out of scud he led her on and escaped her random shots, in and out and on—

Until the great moment came when he braced to the tiller with one knee and took bearings between whisps of mist off a low rim of land under the blurr—too low for those on the frigate to observe at their higher positions on lookout. Then it came out into plain view; the high bluff on Tuppence Island rose black against the lowering sky on his starboard hand and there to larboard lay Patten's Rock, a smear in the near distance. It was the trap.

Another boom of cannon, another ball so close that its waterspout showered the racing *Betty B*'s mainsail. She was flying, spume was flying over her, the frigate storming along in her wake and unable to do anything else in the face of disaster. This could not continue for long.

Nor did it. Jed worked his tiller with the lightning precision of a fisherman. Yelled orders aboard the frigate told him that they had discovered his trick—much too late. Straight toward the bluff Jed drove the *Betty B.* Within scant fathoms of sheer rock, he wheeled her off and away. She heeled over, her cheeserind came awash, she sped on and away into deep water. No mere cannon-dodging, this; it was the fine and hair-splitting difference between disaster and survival.

Now the *Betty B.*'s sails fluttered upwind and her sheet block clapped along the race. Jed Robinson stood, feet spread, knee against the tiller, and peered into the mists astern. Abruptly he threw back his head and laughed, for the frigate had fetched up on the sand bar he had passed over. Her standing gear twanged and parted noisily on the wind. Spars lost their parallel smartness, sails hung slack and dead. Britishers bellowed futile commands and the confusion filled her from bulwarks to t'gallant yards.

True to his word, Jed Robinson had wedged the frigate fast, almost against the bluff in the fog. There she would stay, be beachcombed and rot. Tuppence islanders even now stole to the bluff against the wind to gape at her and recognize young Clemmy, the seaman who knew the seven seas better than his own bar and sand bars. That disaster branded the Clemmys.

JED'S remarkable feat placed his family in the vanguard of the new order. It was boasted, "That's the sandbar where Jed Robinson trapped a British frigate for keeps. Smart, that Jed."

Through the passing years, however, the tale lost interest. Came other wars, other young men who, too, were bold and clever. One by one, the families left Tuppence Island until only the Robinson house showed a night light, until blood thinned and the family deteriorated. Yet they hugged the old independence and the time-worn story of their man who had out-

witted the Britishers. From father to son the proud boast came down and the Britishers remained "the enemy," even as the same sandbar persisted below the bluff. And the Robinsons on Tuppence got to be known throughout the bay as "queer."

The World War found but three persons on that island, old Tim Robinson, his wife and grandson Joe. The latter proved sullen and defiant in registering for force for the draft. These isolated Robinsons never had knuckled down to any one—hadn't a Jed Robinson demonstrated to the British that nobody could boss him around? That story got a laugh now; old chestnuts do.

It got more. Joe glowered sullenly throughout the registration process; these hoity toities had belittled his family's ancient pride. This numbering business was to him but an attempt to boss him around. Only by degrees did he comprehend that either he'd respond to the draft call or else . . .

Joe did else. He shipped out of Portland on a freighter. Fourteen months in her fo'castle branded him "queer guy." He recited the time-worn tale to indifferent ears, retold it until he became "Britisher Joe" and the wise look passed around.

He observed the look, recognized it and hated all hands, hated them worse than the Germans whom he never saw throughout those bitter months. But the British bluejackets on guard in certain ports, the limies who took to baiting him, the cockney dialect—Joe hated profoundly and saw red.

This, then, the Joe who returned to Tuppence after that war, bitter and unfriendly, stung by ridicule. Adding to his discomfort came government boats that dredged a channel between the bluff and Patten's Rock. They removed the sand bar. His last tangible link with past glory was gone.

Then death placed the grandparents on the headland just below the remains of the valiant Jed, as was fitting. Britisher

Joe was left alone. He kept off the main, concived of no future for himself and dwelt more than ever in the past. His evil hours with those cockneys repeatedly came to mind and his hatred of them burned within him constantly. Thought he, Jed would have blasted them had he been there, but I didn't—until, by degrees, Joe Robinson became ashamed. He felt guilty because of his own inadequacy. Too late he wondered why he, too, hadn't gotten back at the Britishers—fired warehouses in Liverpool those evil nights, snatched explosives out of that cargo to Cardiff—"Cawdiff, y' biroke"—and blown up one of their ships he'd rowed around after the mate. Jed would have done it, would have got back at 'em.

Joe brooded, became more queer. People shunned Tuppence save for the few rusticators after fish at his tumbledown wharf. Being a Robinson, he knew the bay like a book and fished it. But he fished only enough for bare existence, then drifted and dreamed on the tide. He dreamed of forfeited opportunities to punish the Britishers in the war. He reconstructed incidents, considered what he might have done, and would do if ever the chance came again. Thus by stages his thinking became objective—only there never was the chance to do anything on Tuppence.

One day he roamed the island and discovered a secret that exalted him above the deadpan of his routine. He got to believing that perhaps a way would open to him to vindicate himself, that this discovery was a sign. Instead of drifting on the tide, he now watched and waited with mounting faith and intensity, hugging his secret to himself.

War came again to Europe, to all the world—except Tuppence Island. Pearl Harbor scarcely broke in upon Joe Robinson's watching, his waiting. The draft found him too old, the war far away. But if only Britishers should come sailing by Tuppence again, it would be near indeed, and welcome. For he might accomplish

some feat that would match what the great Jed had done.

Ah, but the gov'ment in Washington! It had gone crazy again, chumming 'long-side Britishers instead of fightin' 'em as should be. Fools thinkin' Britishers their friends, hoodwinked. Not Joe Robinson. His chance at the old foe would come, people would mention the name Robinson with the old-time respect. Britisher Joe would show 'em if his chance came.

Strangely, it did come. So he stowed a second secret alongside his great secret deep in his heart, and both were strictly his own.

JOE ROBINSON'S knife lost narry a stroke when the head appeared at the ladderhead beyond the stringpiece. Nor when he grunted response to the greeting. The intruder from the motorboat had "rusticator" written all over him. Covertly, Joe was glad he had come. For some of these outsiders were impressed by his tale of Jed, could even be led to the bluff and shown the scene. More, however, exchanged knowing winks and sly nods which had rendered Joe cautious.

This latest comer took the wind out of his reserve; he introduced the subject with startling abruptness. "You're Joe Robinson!" he exclaimed. "Britisher Joe?"

That cursed nickname fired Joe's temper. Savagely he stuck the knife into the plank, slewed the split fish to a barrel and snarled, "I ain't British and don't you call me one. I hate 'em."

His guest laughed softly. "So do I."

Their eyes met and held. The stranger was older than had appeared. "Well!" Joe grunted to the first man who had ever agreed with him in this matter.

"Come on, tell me about it."

And it never occurred to Joe to question how the stranger knew there was a story. For he listened eagerly, followed Joe to the bluff, absorbed his enthusiasm and pride in Jed's feat. Aye, out there—pointing—Jed had trapped—and beyond, in the distance, could be seen the smoke

pennants of the present war, ships coming and departing in Portland Harbor.

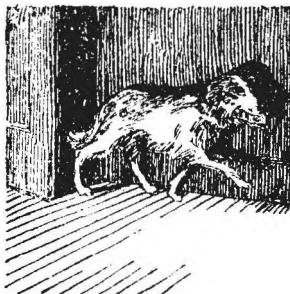
Finally, "Brave man, that ancestor of yours. Smart boatman, too. They don't breed them like him today." He watched Joe slyly, saw him flinch. The last remark had salted Joe's old wound.

"Take yourself"—softly—"you couldn't match what Jed did."

Joe's response was more animal than human.

It drew a smile; aye, the yarns he had heard about this character were true. Cracked. Fanatical hate of the English and withal a secretive craftiness plus skill with a boat. It was worth a try. Must be handled with finesse, though; haste could prove fatal. The idea must be allowed to grow in Joe's mind and gain substance.

"Don't agree with me, huh?" he prodded. "Could you pull off anything as smart? If, of course, you were getting back at the British?"



Joe's face convulsed momentarily but his lips remained set tight.

"Mister," the stranger persisted, wagging a finger, "those British are no more friends today than then. They're sucking us into this war—again. You know how it was in the last one, we fought their war. Did we get any thanks? Huh, they laughed up their sleeves—or didn't you know that?"

Didn't Joe? Those hated limics and their jibes at him still haunted his nights.

"And when we get through this war we'll find they've taken us over, this time for keeps."

Joe's breathing quickened. Indeed the

last war had ended that way—he hadn't wanted to leave Tuppence Island for months in a grimey freighter, or get mixed in their war and their Liverpool and their Cardiff. Nor take their dirty jibes. That once they had trapped him; never again. He wou'd not knuckle to any Britisher!

He put a question. The stranger ignored it to continue: "I could tell you plenty...." He preferred to let Joe simmer while he worked on him. Later, he would come again. Shrewd man, this. The yeast he was leaving in Joe's half-crazed, muddled brain would ferment the very rage and suspicion which should render him receptive to what he had in prospect. He went down the ladder.

To return the following day and find Joe eagerly watching for him. He read the madness in Joe's eyes and smiled. Receptive? Decidedly so; perhaps the plan was not so fantastic after all. What a stroke if it went through! And what recognition from the Fatherland!

Today he worked along a different slant. Instead of playing on Joe's hatred, he talked of the city across the bay. "Go to Portland often?"

"Not unless I have to."

Well indeed could he understand the sullenness in which Joe said it; he was a waterfront joke over there, the butt of baitings. Hadn't it been a chance remark there which had suggested how to do this job? Now he was following it up after careful inquiries and assembled details regarding this half mad hermit.

"Been over there lately?"

"Yes," reluctantly.

"Saw what's going on then," crediting Joe with sharp eyes.

JOE blinked, however. Portland Harbor was aswarm these days. What portion of its fierce activity had the man in mind? Joe held his tongue.

"You did not see them? All those ships going the clock around? Who do you think they're building so many ships for?"

"British!" Joe spat out. Indeed he knew; he had resented it a long time. His one consolation had been that he was not a part of the big project.

"Our men, our yards, our cash, their ships—while our own are being sunk. And that is not all. British ships bunker over there, they come in for repairs. Every good port on the coast they are using. And they're here for what? Nothing for our good, I promise you that."

Joe stirred uneasily; he, too, hated the sight of too many British ships. For they had come in Jed's time, loaded with red-coats when the critical moment came. They had brought trouble and interfered with folks' independence. But Jed had accounted for one of them and pretty soon there weren't any more hereabouts and folks had retained their priceless independence. Joe stopped for breath, not realizing he had been ranting on and on.

"And they're the people you're building ships for," the stranger cut in.

"Me?"

"Not yet you, but who knows?"

"Stranger, talk plain to me."

"I will. The British are up to their old game. Suppose this war ended tomorrow, who'd get all the world trade—with those British ships we're building for it?"

Joe took the barb. "Dirty, scheming devils!"

"Worse than that, they could take over this country—just like that. Their ships in all our ports—look at them over there now! Their blucjackets everywhere, watching everything. How'd you like to be doffing your hat to their flag? Sure could be. Could take you off this island to serve in their boats. Didn't they grab our men for their navy once upon a time?"

Joe's chest was heaving, his thick hands fisting tightly, his lips fumbling with jumbled words.

The stranger gauged his reactions. Was this the moment to broach the scheme? Would Joe's present frenzy endure? If left alone again to ponder, would he, by

any chance, come to question these incredible insinuations planted in his brain?

"Could happen. Look at Russia; thick with the Germans, then attacked overnight. Same could happen to us. Listen: I know—I say know—they plan to take us unawares. Huh, you yourself can see their warships up this bay; placed in behind forts they could powder by a surprise bombardment. And their planes! They're swarming on our airfields. I—know—these things!"

He paused to watch the effect of these even more extreme statements. It was encouraging. He continued: "If Jed was here today, what would he do about this? Ali, that man had guts. Brave men in those times. Don't come that way nowadays. Why, there's not a man who would dare—"

"What do you want me to do?"

It struck the stranger dumb. Here stood his tool, asking for the big scheme. A veritable miracle had come of this carefully developed meeting. Well, it had been both clever and bold. It would win honors and distinction in the Fatherland!

However, too much must not be revealed to this Joe today. Many details must be perfected, it would have to go smoothly. So the stranger turned to the fisherman and said, "I seem to have made a mistake; you are as fit and bold as Jed was! Very well, you can strike the first telling blow at the British. They're our real foe as usual; clean 'em out and there'll come peace and independence quickly. It is not Germans who keep these wars going, you know; it is the British. Now, Mister, I have work to do," turning away abruptly. "Tomorrow afternoon I shall tell you what you're to do. Meantime, tell nobody about my comings and goings here. Nor what I have said. You—ah—can keep a secret?"

Joe laughed in his face. Could he keep secrets! He kept on laughing through a sleepless night whenever he thought of the stranger. Joe Robinson keep a secret? Neither this stranger nor anybody else

knew his own secret; it was hidden away, deep inside him. But the day would come, some day—

THE stranger's third call came later in the day, the third day of emotional surge for Joe Robinson. The prolonged suspense, however, blended into an excitement which carried him along without fret or suspicion. For he, Joe Robinson of Tuppence Island, was to deal the hated English the first blow. Portland's population, all the bay folks, would rate him beside Jed, respect him, proclaim his nerve. In the exhilaration of it all, Germans sank entirely out of consciousness. Indeed, he had not even seen a German in that other war, but the British—how he abhorred them!

This time the stranger, too, was keyed up. It made considerable of a contrast, for heretofore he had been very self-possessed. Today he promptly launched into his plan. "I'm telling you all of it, Joe," he declared, "there are no secrets between you and me."

But weren't there?

"Listen. More British ships are entering Portland Harbor every day, I've been up there checking it. Full of them. Which is their plan—harbor full of their ships when they take over the port. Now there's just one way to balk them, Joe, and you're the man to help do it. That is, if you still want to match Jed."

"I am ready. Talk."

The stranger dashed sweat from his brow and dried his hat band. Joe thought this unusual, the day was cool, the wind east of north.

"Joe, those ships must be surprised and destroyed. It will be easy to do. Two are at the grain elevators, one destroyer is patching up for convoy duty, six are building on the ways." Only in his mind did the stranger include the score of American ships also there, yet all shipping would suffer and the damage would be inestimable!

Joe stared toward the harbor up the bay.

He murmured, "Damned Britishers. What in the name o' Gawd A'mighty can I do to get rid o' so many of 'em?" He faced the stranger directly. "I can't hack holes in their hulls nor set 'em all afire. Now can I? What could I—"

"You can pilot a ship in there that'll ruin them all." At long last, it was out. The stranger mopped his drawn face. "You know this boy as well as Jed did?"

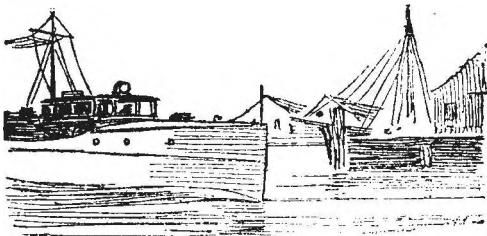
"Sure do. But no man could pilot any ship in there; they'd stop us outside the boom. Sharp watches kept, Mister."

"Right." The stranger's gaze moved away from the harbor to the islands near Tuppence and the waterways between them. "If a man really knows this lower bay, he can con a ship up behind these islands, in between two of them. I don't believe there are nets down this way, not in these little, crooked places between islands. Ships never come through hereabouts, do they?"

"Never do," Joe agreed. "Mighty few ways in and they are crooked and lined and puckered with granite ledges. What water is yourn goin' to draw?"

The stranger named a figure, a guess.

"I could pilot her in, plenty of water above half tide—if you know where. But they'd spot us."



"Supposing she is invisible? I mean under water," drawing a roll of stiff paper from inside his clothing. "Chart of this bay, Joe. Recognize it? Now there is water enough here to approach and later leave the bluff, submerged."

"Oh!" Joe exclaimed, "submarine."

"Right. And this way in is pretty much lined with timber or high shores."

"Yes, but she'd have to surface past the bluff. End o' Patten's Rock reaches in toward the bluff, look at the soundings there."

"Very well, it is the dark of the moon now. The U-boat comes this far, surfaces, crosses over that end of Patten's Rock, submerges again and she's inside the bay. She runs up the bay submerged—"

"Wait," Joe broke in, "they've got gadgets that'd hear her propeller when she moved up the bay."

THE stranger had to remind himself that Joe had sailed the U-boat infested Atlantic in the other war, but he came up with a ready answer again. "Ah, but she has the rest of the flood tide to carry her. The screw will turn up barely enough—with the help of the fair tide—to maintain steerageway. Strong tide up this bay, it'll take her there quietly."

Joe grinned. Every objection he had raised revealed a smart way to overcome it.

The stranger read his grin and plunged on. "When she does open throttle, it'll be too late to interrupt her mission. She is launching torpedoes into every British ship at anchor. She might even surface and open up with gunfire if lucky."

Lucky? What a presumption! It was a suicide job not unlike the reckless one inside Scapa Flow early in the war. But Joe? He cried, "I'll do it! She needn't surface more'n ten minutes. She's gonna riddle 'em at anchor, at the docks and shoot up the ones on the ways. Dirty Britishers! When do we do it? Quicker the better, flood tide after dark, no moon."

"Again you are right, Joe," the stranger agreed. His thoughts were: when dealing with a crank like this fellow, act before he has time to think about the American ships in that harbor. What a bag of cargo bottoms, a destroyer, tankers—"Tonight!" he declared.

Tonight indeed, while frenzy held, while Joe's sick brain stood at fever pitch. "I'll stay here with you, I have to signal. Got

men watching this island for it. They will relay it to the submarine outside."

So? Joe's farsighted eyes roamed the bay, squinting against the glare, then turned to search seaward.

The stranger's smile had a grimness. "You can't spot the U-boat, nor my men," he chuckled, "nor recognize my signal when I give it. Huh, no. Go into the house and get us a supper, I'll be in soon. We have to be ready by starlight."

THE aroma of pork chops trying out for chowder greeted the man's nostrils on entering later. Joe worked silently, thinking, for his over-sensitive independence had asserted itself. This stranger had ordered him—ordered him into his own house to get a meal. Uninvited, he had presumed on hospitality. Joe was a hermit. Hermits are not always hospitable, are likely to be independent, are as likely to resent commands.

So Joe's resentment was stirring within him; he had been bossed around. By the time the chowder was ready for the pork scraps, Joe had half a mind to set this presumptuous stranger to rights—yes, and call the whole thing off. Sullenly he diced potatoes without an upward glance.

"Work fast there, Joe. Soon be dark."

With eyes still on his cutting. "Mebbe I won't do your piloting."

"Maybe you—oh, yes, you will!"

Joe scraped the cuttings into the kettle. Not a word or glance aside.

"Joe, turn around here," came in authoritative tone.

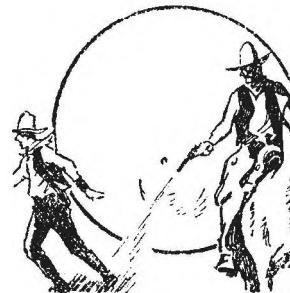
Joe obeyed stubbornly. He looked into the ugly end of a revolver.

"No more of that talk, you pig-headed crank," snarled the stranger. "You're in this to stay. You're going through with it."

Joe returned to chowder-making. The sun sank, shadows extended across Tuppence. Until Joe, still silent, sat to the kitchen table with his offensive guest. They ate and the eating was a chore, Joe in low-

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by **Walt Coburn**

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PHILIP KETCHUM

ering silence, the other watching him, gun ready. Meantime, the stranger observed a change in Britisher Joe; nothing clearly definable except that Joe's tension melted. But the eyes remained hooded and crafty as though brooding over something secret. His guest dared not ease his vigilance and his steel gray eyes were merciless warnings.

Now the guest got to his feet in the dusk. "Ready?"

"Sure." Joe was thinking about the details of that dredged channel.

"None o' your Yankee trickery," came the warning.

"Not while that thing points to me. I don't see what it's for, I said I'd pilot. I am, ain't I?"

"I take no chances. Walk on ahead." He crowded close on Joe's heels, urging him toward the wharf. Both down the ladder and aboard Joe's boat, the latter never got beyond reach. When he reached for the starter switch, a heavy boot kicked his hand into the air.

"Fool! Want to draw a patrol boat? Bad enough to have to run your engine after we pick up the U-boat." He swore in a jargon of throaty sounds and added, "But you lead her over the end of Patten's Rock in ten minutes as you said and we'll dive before they can spot us."

"Yeah, and what about this here boat o' mine?" Joe demanded. It was his living.

The stranger scowled in the dark. Such stupidity! "Get away in it afterwards, you dummkopf. I explained all that; you're not going up the bay in that U-boat."

"Mebbe a patrol—"

"Go on, you are known around here," scornfully.

Joe recognized this contempt; he had endured it from shipmates and Britishers in the other war. He ground his teeth, set the long sculling oar over the stern and held his tongue. Huh, there were things he knew tonight. . . .

Joe could think and scull automatically. He thought, stupid stranger, this one, thinking to pull wool over a Yankee's eyes,

making out he hated the British. Joe knew a Britisher when he saw one. A Britisher acted 's though he was God Almighty, bossed people 'round, lied to 'em, then pointed an ugly gun and told 'em to hustle. Well, maybe this Britisher wa'n't so smart after all. There was going to be one thing below the bluff that he didn't know.

"Keep her off."

Joe hove harder on the left twist in his sculling, then straightened on the prescribed course.

"Ease up, she's dead ahead!"

Joe quit sculling and peered into the gloom. The blackness of her took form, ominous, deadly and low on the water. He tried to gauge her size and draft.

Came a cautious hail. The stranger answered it and Joe could not fathom their throaty jargon. The stranger, gun still handy, snapped, "Ease alongside, I'm going aboard. Here, set this red lantern on your stern—no, you're not going aboard her, you'll lead her over that sunken end of Patten's Rock in your own boat."

"You're gonna follow this here red light," Joe said rather stupidly.

The response was only an exasperated grunt.

JOE'S boat nudged along the sleek U-boat's hull. The stranger stepped over there to reaching hands, then turned back to growl, "All your speed on that motor and remember, this gun is on you every minute of the ten!"

Joe sculled clear and led the way. He started his engine, but did not open it wide until he made sure of his markers on the bluff and the low blurr of rock on the water at the narrows.

Now he gave her the gun. Louder the engine whined, whiter his wake churned and reddened in the lantern's glow. His motor's noise badgered him, the sight of the sub in his wake made him mad, the threatening gun over there rendered him furious. Yet he managed to discern the silhouette of that lone scrub spruce atop the

bluff and the low black at the other side of the narrows, Patten's Rock.

The great moment came swiftly. He looked astern, the sub was coming faster, was speeding up his wake. Fine! He entered the black narrows, spun his wheel fiercely to starboard—now he conned her back a few spokes, back two compass points came the bow. He steadied her on that course quickly—

"Now!" he exploded and hove himself flat under his helm. For Joe Robinson's great secret was out; it was the sand bar. The Almighty had long ago put sand across this narrows. The gov'm't had dredged it away and charted it as a channel. But soon the same Almighty's tides had rebuilt the sand bar where it was meant to be and only Joe Robinson had seen and known it was back again. Aye, part of it was back.

Came a wild yell astern, ripping and grinding noises too. Promptly that cursed gun barked. Bullets sang over Joc's head, into his boat's stern. He remained on his back under the helm until his boat sped on, well inside the bay, well beyond the eyes of everybody on the firmly grounded submarine. Then he reached overhead and gave the wheel a few turns, took his next course by Polaris and headed for his wharf on the other end of Tuppence. Not until the land stood between him and the wreck did he get to his feet.

And the drone of planes came from over the harbor. Presently they were near. Gunfire!

THUS the mantle of the valiant Jed came to rest on Britisher Joe. The fact that he had trapped a German U-boat and thereby saved a score of both American and British ships was never quite clear in his mind. Some day, however, this war would go into history and people would remember and say, "That's him, the Joe Robinson who pulled the fast one on the sand bar under the Tuppence Island bluff. Smart trick, as smart as Jed's was, long years before him."

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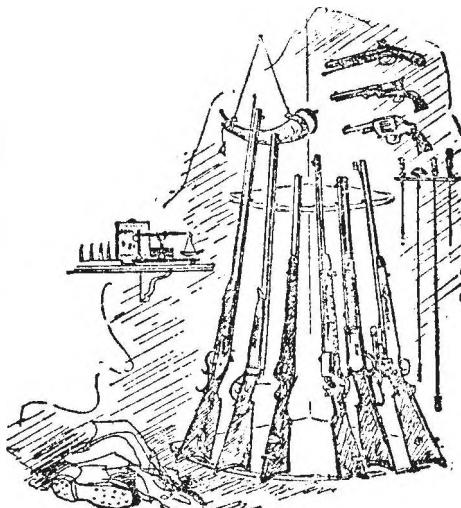
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This and That

HERE'S a rambling letter from a brother gun-bug who is no doubt hunting inhuman vermin by now:

Thanks for the info in your recent letter. You write of Lyman sights and my remark of same. Afraid you did not understand my scratching very well. I wrote the Original Sight Exchange at Paoli, Penn., and exchanged several sights and I asked them for a Lyman micrometer peep. They replied that at the time, Lyman sights could not be bought for any amount of money, due, no doubt, to defense work. That was what I wrote you. Could not, not would not. I know this penmanship is pretty bad, but I still like my guns.

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Purchased a Colt Detective Special about two years ago, and with a few home-made changes, find that the two-inch barrel gives me a score that is quite a surprise. (I am not an excellent handgun person.) At ten and fifteen yards, the mid-range wadcutters stayed in bull nicely. Have never gone into handloading as it is fairly expensive, if you wish to buy good tools.

One of my pet theories is this—a full load wadcutter, at ten feet, is much more effective in stopping power than ordinary .38 Special (266 feet pounds). The flat nose is very destructive on a side of beef or large ham. Hope I never need to use such on man, but if so, I don't want him to get me. Self preservation!

Have been afraid to use that Super X .38-44 Special in so small and light a rod, yet know it would be perfectly safe, from various reports from Colt and the American Rifleman magazine. Believe that load runs around 436 feet pounds. Too much load for a 21 ounce arm. Have filed off hammer spur of Detective Special and cut front of trigger guard. Shortened grips by $\frac{1}{2}$ " and built in adapter in a pair of very old, hard walnut grips. Used a three-edge file for checkering and it answers the purpose.

In the Stoeger Arms catalogue of 1940, they advertised a Walther hi-power new-type automatic. New sidearm of German army. About the slickest of autos. Yet somehow I cling to the old six-shooter.

Recently repaired two old percussion single shot handguns for my employer. Inclosed find rough sketch of them. You will notice that one has nipple under the barrel. One of them had three notches cut in trigger many years ago so some rust and old finish showed they had been there a long, long time. Also fixed up a tip up .32 rimfire with heavy octagon barrel and high trigger spur. The arm's manufacturer's name was not plain but the date was 1869. The model is not in my "History of Colt Firearms." Nor was it a Smith & Wesson. The arm was still in excellent condition. In and out. All three guns

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belonged to boss' grandfather. My damned relatives never left anything but debts.

Speaking of gunsmiths, in Phil Sharpe's book, "History of Rifle in America," there are several stocks (beauties too) in fine photos by Robert Milhoan of Elizabeth, West Virginia. But saw where army drafted him.

Of course we always have Griffin & Howe, and Stoegers, but these boys are in it as strictly as a business. To my mind a first-class gunsmith is higher than dollars or cents. He is an artist. And no man can be good at his trade, art, vocation, etc., unless his heart is in it. A gunsmith should be highly interested in his work, or he gets no work from me. I like to fiddle with small repair jobs, but tools in my place are limited. A good gun shop has hundreds of dollars invested in fine tools. I like to harden and temper steel and find spring steel is fine for some purposes, but tempermental as hell! Do not know much about it, however, but read your article on

NO HIT, NO EAT — AT LEAST FOR THE HUNTER!

screw-drivers and now have several good home-made ones, thanks to your cherry red method. I had been tempering too hard.

Believe Uncle Sam is shortly going to give me the opportunity to use his. Would like to get my hands on a Garand, but will settle for a Springfield.

Believe the old frontiersman, with crude peep and open sights, *could not shoot with the modern expert*. Our modern sights (fully as important as the gun) and guns, of course, have the advantage. Yet in *The American Rifleman*, I read an account of flintlock-rifle hunting which showed good results. Do believe the Indian fighters

were excellent shots, however, and he had an advantage over moderns. If he didn't shoot straight every time, his hair went into some brave's lodge, or he did not eat venison that day. Also the fact that he shot only one rifle, not a dozen. He took it to bed and carried it all day. He could really judge distance. How many modern riflemen can judge the distance of a hundred yard shot right off? If he comes within 25 yards, he is lucky. Why? The frontiersman did not have an auto to ride, or street cars to carry him around. He walked. A mile was just a jaunt to nearest neighbor for a pipe-load of tobacco. (I love Granger Rough Cut in a corn cob.) He shot food, he could not duck into the grocery on the corner for 25 cents worth of spiced ham. One hundred yards was a hundred steps. He lived hard and slept on hard beds. No constant reading to ruin his eyes. If he had our fine micropeep sights and our modern .30-06 or .270, he would be the finest marksman on earth.

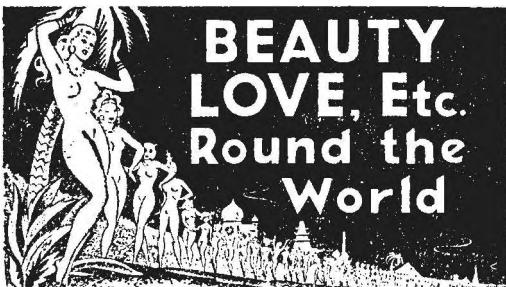
Every man has his own ideas of what constitutes pleasure. Give me a day in woods and field, away from all houses, roads, with a rifle under my arm, and that's my idea. How about you? Good luck and stay with **SHORT STORIES**, but give more pages of information. Thanks again
M. W. P. Maryland.

— O —

Next we have part of the last letter I received from Charley Askins, Jr., well-known Firearms Editor, Champion Pistol shot, excellent hunter and outdoorsman.

Why don't you come on down? The quail season opens Sunday in New Mexico, the season is now open in Mexico, and the season opens in Texas, December 1. The deer season is now open in New Mexico, also in Chihuahua and opens in Texas tomorrow. I am sure we'd find plenty to do.

I have just returned from a three-weeks' jaunt after elk. Killed two bulls, the second, a real prize. We hunted in 14 inches of snow in a country above 10,000 feet and



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I brought out a rifle which looked ten years old whereas when I went in it was brand new. The aspen and spruce really took the bark off the gun.

Askins, Jr., is now an officer with Uncle Sam's boys in North Africa.

— O —

Now for a couple of requests:

Question: I have in my possession (temporary) what appears to be some sort of an old Colt type revolver.

Length 8 3/4 inches overall.

Length 4 3/8 inches barrel.

Length 1 1/2 inches revolving cylinder—6 chambers.

Chambers are round, approximately .25 and have nipples 1/4" long for some sort of caps. The barrel is hexagon bore. Under the barrel is what seems to be a swivel ramrod which works in the holes in chamber, and is used, I suppose, for loading each chamber with powder, wad and ball, etc. On top of barrel is stamped The Union Arms Co. On side of swivel No. 46. Front of trigger there is a ratchet on barrel. Guard 10,340 and 1/2 cock on hammer. And by pulling the trigger forward the hammer will stop at 1/2 cock or all the way back. This gun is quite heavy, well built with brass trigger guard and walnut stock. The sight arrangement is a groove along top of chamber and a pointed knob at end of barrel.

Answer: I am afraid I'm not going to be able to give you much information. As near as I have ever been able to determine the Union Arms Co. was located in Hartford, Connecticut.

I don't know whether they made Colt type cap and ball revolvers with or without permission of the Colt people.

I have no record of a pistol with specifications similar to the gun you have, which is no doubt either .265 (often referred to as .28) or .31 caliber.

Sorry I am unable to pass on some information about your gun, but as near as I know there "ain't none." Do any of you

SHORT STORIES readers know about this gun?

— o —

Question: I'm seeking information regarding a Krag .30-40 Mod. 1894 rifle. This gun has been remodeled from its original form by Stoegers of N. Y. C. into a sporting arm. The barrel is 24 inches long, weight about 8 pounds, rear sight a Redfield peep, front, a high ribbed one.

I have never fired this gun and would like to know what to expect in the way of recoil, etc. The one thing I do not like is that there seems to be an undue amount of side play in the bolt. Is this dangerous? I have been told this is common in Krags. Otherwise the breech seems to be quite solid and substantial. I will respect and abide by your decisions. H. K. L., N. J.

Answer: The Krag has always been a favorite gun of mine. I have often said that if I could have only one rifle (for all-around use) it would be this good gun.

I don't know what to say about recoil—if you have not fired a high-powered rifle very much you will no doubt be conscious of the recoil. If, on the other hand, you have used the .30-06 or .375 you won't particularly notice the recoil of the .30-40. Many times I have fired a Krag rifle well over a hundred times in one day and have never been bothered with a sore shoulder or jaw.

Your Krag should be a good one. By side play I imagine you mean the looseness of the bolt when there is no cartridge in the chamber. This is apparent in most of these guns. BUT, the bolt should be absolutely immovable when a cartridge is in the chamber. You might try it with a fired case. If you have any doubts on this point take the gun to a good gunsmith and have it checked for head space.

That's all for now. See you next issue!

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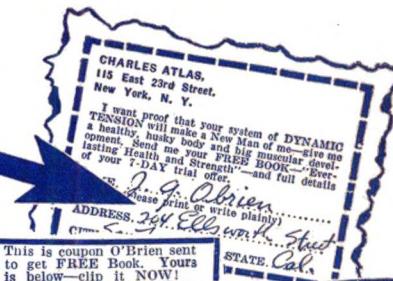
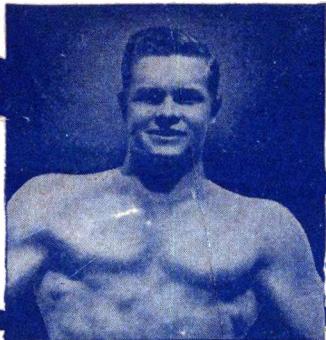
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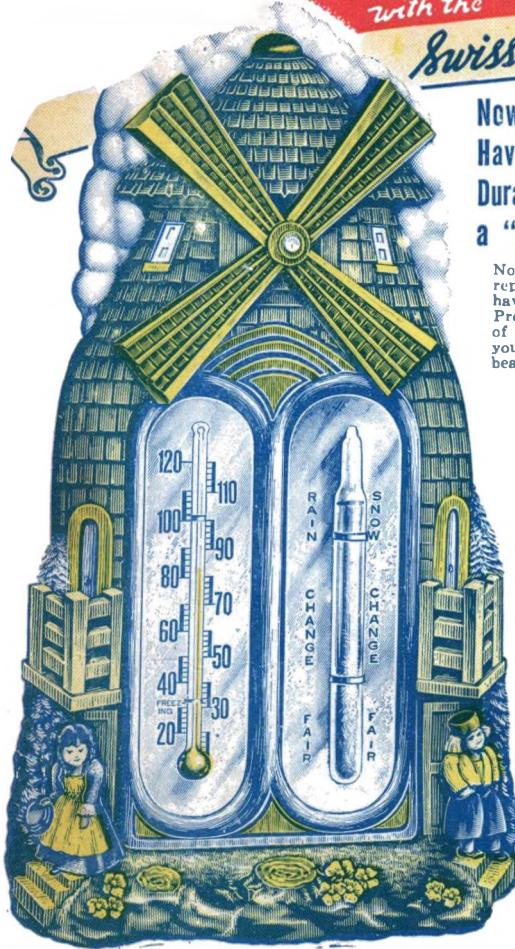
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