Vol. CXXIII. No. 4
Whole No. 538

SHORT STORIES

May 25th
1928

L. Patrick Greene—Ernest Haycox—C. W. Sanders

Short Stories

Twice A Month

30c in Canada

MAY 25th

25cts

Rustlers Ride
the Southern Ranges

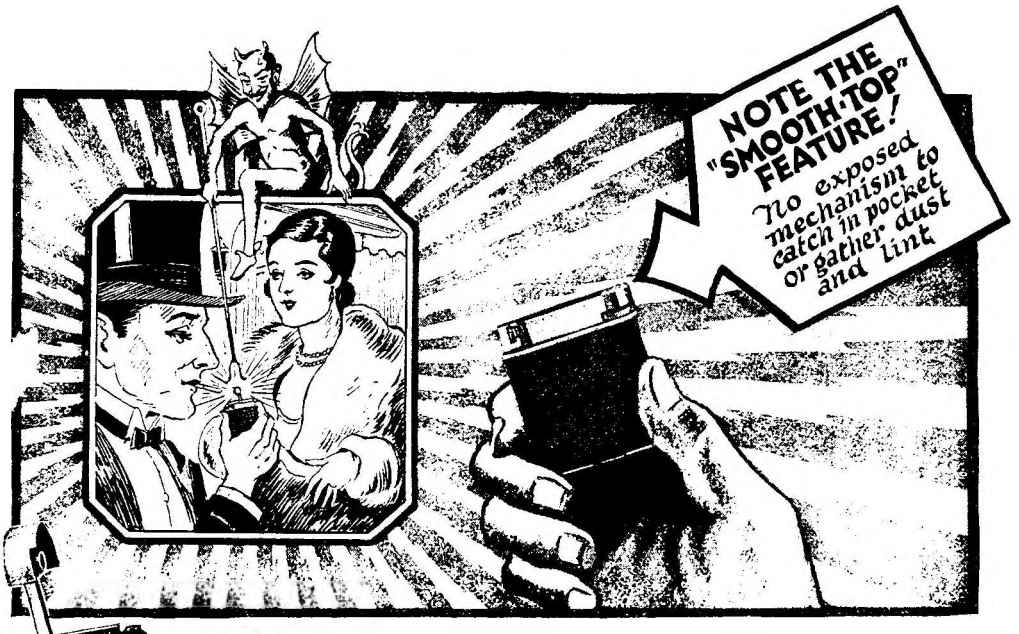
Part I

MESQUITE JENKINS

by

Clarence
E. Mulford

SHORT STORIES. Published semi-monthly on the 10th and 25th. May 25, 1928, issue. Vol. CXXIII, No. 4. Published at Garden City, N. Y. Subscription price $5.00 a year. Entered at the Post Office at Garden City, N. Y., as second class mail matter. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office Department, Canada. Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., Garden City, N.Y.



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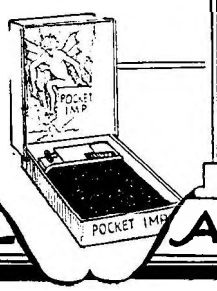

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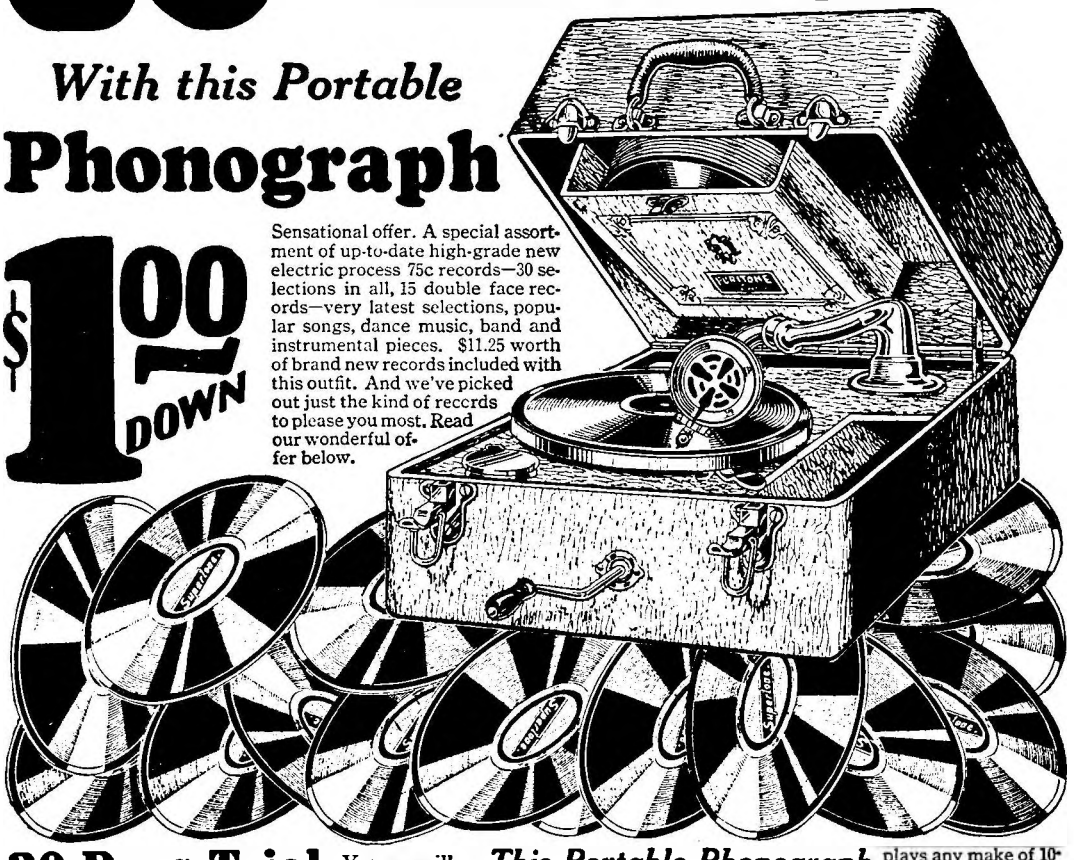

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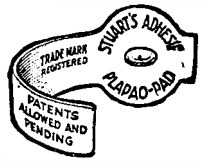

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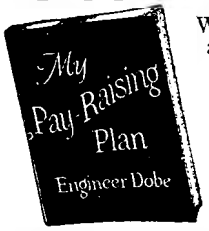

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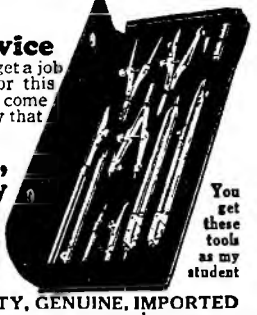

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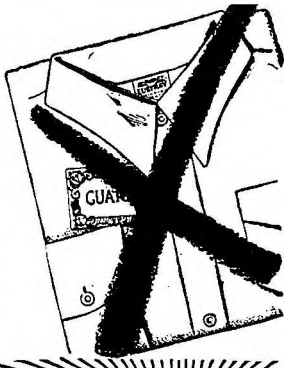
Some Shirt for $2.00



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New Model Pocket Ben

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You'll find it as good looking as it is dependable. Millions of men carry it with pride and confidence.

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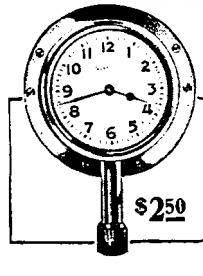

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New Westclox Auto Clock

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Title registered in U. S. Patent Office

Short Stories

Vol. CXXIII, No. 4 — Whole No. 538

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITOR

D. McILWRAITH
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

TOP HAND

"TIMES has changed all right even since I I come to this country," said Hank Hardrock the other day, "but I dunno, I just been reading a book about one of the greatest old-timers of 'em all and I guess the requirements for a real all around tophand nowadays, barrin' the Injun fighting, is just about what they was in the old times when they was plenty buffaler on these plains and before there was any cattle business to speak of. I mean, a feller had to know some different things then than what he does now, but out in this man's country he's got to be pretty much the same *kind* of a hombre the old-timers was, to be real *skookum*. Old Kit Carson trapped every stream from the Flathead to the Gila and fit Injuns his whole life. O' course Kit was a famous scout, got to be a colonel or a general or some such in the Civil War and had a big part in civilizing the country, but through it all he never got swell headed nor forgot what it was he knew as a tophand.

"What makes a top hand out West here? Well, a feller who's good on his job. Now lemme tell you a few of the things old Kit was good at. He could make a saddle, mend a gun, build a fort, make snowshoes or canoes or bull-boats, run bullets, handle an ax or a knife, dress skins, kill and butcher his game. He was an expert packer, cook, wrangler, trailer, teamster, and breaker of horses. He knew the habits of big game and other animals, and he could make a map of any country he had ever been in. As a scout old Kit had it all.

"Now of course a tophand today don't know just exactly them particular things, but he knows a lot of others. He must know his stuff and know how to live off the country. Ideas and book learnin' is all right for some, but in a new country whar a feller's up agin cussed men and raw nature *facts* an' action is what counts."

THE EDITOR.

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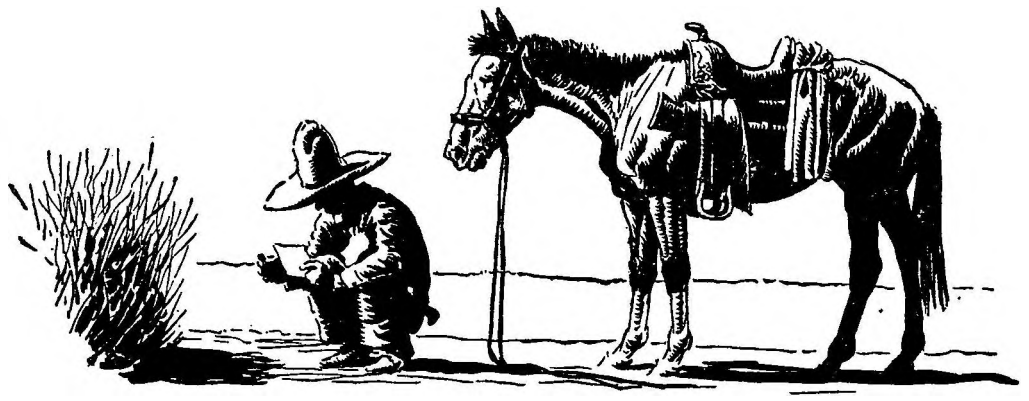
TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

MAY 25th 1928



MESQUITE JENKINS

A Tale of Rustler Trails and a Ranch Retrieved

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of "Corson of the JC," "Bar 20 Rides Again," etc.

Part I

RIDING THE DESERT TRAIL, FOOTLOOSE AND AT EASE, MESQUITE JENKINS PLUMB STOPPED BEING CAREFREE FOR MANY A DAY FROM THE MOMENT HE CAME ACROSS MURDERED OLD TOBE RICKETTS. FOR MESQUITE JENKINS, IT WASN'T SO HARD TO LEARN WHO THE KILLER WAS, BUT TO SAVE MA RICKETTS' LAZY S RANCH FROM THE THIEVES WHO WERE DESTROYING IT CALLED FOR ALL THE TRAIL LORE HE HAD AND FOR CONSIDERABLE HOT LEAD TO BOOT

Chapter I

A TRAGEDY

THE rider slowed and stopped as he topped the little rise and looked through close lidded eyes along the desert track, following it as it meandered over the straighter, more direct openings through sage, cactus and greasewood, at times wavering and thinning in the quivering iridescence of heat waves, streaming up from the hot desert floor.

There was no movement, no life save his and that of his horse, for this was the midday hour, and the desert dwellers sought sanctuary of warrens and the shade of sage and chaparral. The desert was hushed, deserted, concealing a teaming and tumultuous life as vicious as it was swift and short lived. A distant range of burned, brown mountains was indistinct in the heat hazes, seemingly close at hand; but he knew better.

This was the trail he had been looking for, the main track between Franklin and Desert Wells. His short cut, taken with the calm assurance of the desert bred, had saved him a full day of riding, nearly forty miles.

There was nothing unusual about this scene, one way or another. It was an accustomed environment, revisited after a year or more of absence. The heat, hover-

ing between one hundred twenty and one hundred thirty at this hour of the day, was nothing to become uneasy about; he sensed it without any particular thought, accepted it tacitly. The glare of the sun was stopped by the brim of his big sombrero, but the reflected light, pouring up almost like a material thing from the desert floor, caused his lids partly to close. He rode on, letting his horse pick its way, set its own pace. A man on a holiday, with a year's wages in his pockets, had no need to hasten when haste was foolish.

He had a destination, but also he had all the time he wanted in which to reach it, and the destination was not so important that it could not be changed if he felt like it. For weeks he had been riding south from a far northern range, angling and pausing, riding slow and riding rapidly, as his humor and the circumstances directed. He still had many miles to cover, in as many hours, days or weeks as he chose.

The past year had made a tremendous difference in his life; in fact, the change had begun a year or two earlier, but this had been more of a probationary period, so tactfully imposed and directed that he had hardly been conscious of it. A mere youth, his careless steps had wandered down the easy slope which leads to crime and outlawry; but, through the influence of others, he had climbed the slope again before his digression had become really serious.

HE SMILED as he let his memory bring that second year on the Montana range, as he thought, man by man, of that close-woven outfit, where daily precept had taken the place of preaching, and recalled the courage, loyalty and clean thinking which had taken on a dignity, in his slowly opening eyes, which was very much worth while. He had learned by close personal contact, through days and nights, that honesty, truthfulness, justice, clean thoughts, consideration for others are not signs and measures of weakness, not sickish, not things for which apologies should be made. He had learned that such attributes are colored by the individuals who practice them; that the great factor is the nature of the man himself. He had known the opposite attributes, had associated with those who practiced them almost as a profession; they had been a hard crowd; but he chuckled as he thought of that hardness; hard as they were, they would have broken, crumpled, had they come in contact with that northern outfit; hard as glass they were, but soft to a diamond. Why, there was one man in that northern outfit who would have cut them down as a scythe cuts grass.

A whirling dust-devil caught his attention and he idly watched its mad, erratic course across the desert sands, glad when he saw it break and sift down to earth. He glanced about him carelessly, and then his horse snorted and stopped. It was trembling, its delicate nostrils playing nervously.

A movement caught the rider's searching gaze. Something dirty colored had moved past an opening in the sage.

Instinctively his knees pressed against the saddle skirts and sent the nervous horse moving from the trail at a tangent. His hand rose and fell, the spurting smoke spreading along the ground, the crashing roar lost in the immensities of flat space. Heavy bodies rose from the sand, winging ponderously aloft, reluctant to leave. He rode past the dead vulture, and then stopped quickly as he caught sight of the vultures' magnet.

Face down on the sands was the body of a man, its neck showing a single slash, where a vulture's beak had ripped. This meant that the man had only just died, for otherwise he would have been torn to ribbons by now; but how long he had lain there helpless was conjecture, how long he had watched those restless scavengers waiting for him to breathe his last could not be known.

The rider, tossing the reins over the horse's head, went ahead on foot the few remaining steps, his questioning eyes on the inert shape, searching, appraising, studying.

THE earth has its messages for such as he, and he moved along a twisting track, which easily might have been overlooked by you or me. To the uniniti-

ated too often the word "desert" brings up great reaches of sand, soft, deep, ridged and patterned by winds, where footprints lose identity in the unstable, sliding grains. Such prints would be larger than the feet which made them, their rims squashed outward from under the falling tread, and from those outer rims the inner surface sloped downward to the center. Here the desert was hot, hard soil, covered with an armor of pebbles, slivered rock, and occasionally dusted lightly with rounded grains of sand, except where it was piled in windrows. The heels of a puncher's boots might have scratched it, but it seemed impervious to signs of progress on hands and knees. To the stranger's eyes the marks were plain: small crescents cut here and there by curved and digging fingers; an almost imperceptible line where the toe of a boot had dragged; the unvarnished side of a larger pebble facing upward, and the hole from whence it had been scratched.

The stranger noticed that the tracks described a curve, and he pushed on wonderingly. The curve was constant, and seemed to have been purposefully made, since there was not an aimless twist or bend in it. Reaching the trail he found a wealth of signs: hoof prints made by iron shoes; marks of a fall, shown by the ground and broken sage brush; red brown spots which had been hurriedly sucked of moisture by the parched earth; and now the hoof prints which he had idly noticed as he had ridden along the main trail told him an interesting fact. The unfortunate man had been riding in the same direction as his own; he had noticed that the bullet which had brought death had gone in the back, under the left shoulder; therefore, the man who had fired the shot had been behind both the stranger, as he now stood, and the victim. This was something which could wait. The dead man came first.

The stranger went back along the tragic tracks and stopped again beside the body. Yes, the bullet had been fired from behind; but to make certain of this he gently turned the body over. Opening the blue shirt, one glance told him that his conjecture had been correct. This, then, was murder; cold, cowardly.

He studied the elderly, bronzed face; the grizzled beard with its stain of brown around the lips; the pale blue eyes; the sombrero, coat and everything else to be seen. The gun lying on the ground had not been fired. It was a revolver not very common in that place and time: a Smith and Wesson re-issue of 1877, shooting the .44 Russian cartridge, and a gun of exceptional accuracy so far as regular issue weapons were concerned; but this weapon had been used and abused so much that the rifling in the end of the barrel had been worn almost smooth.

WHY had this unknown man steadily curved to the right as he crawled and dragged himself away from the trail? Why had he left the trail, where help might be more reasonably expected than out here, a hundred yards into desolation? The stranger nodded in a satisfied way, went to his horse and rode forward on a continuation of that pitiful trail, seeking visual proof of what he already knew to be the true explanation. It was not long before he found it; another gathering of greedy vultures, this time around a startlingly mottled piebald range horse, dead on its side. Its tracks curved back to the main trail parallel with those made by the man, but with a much greater radius. It had been killed by a shot through the head.

It was plain now, the reason for the dead man's curving trail: he had crawled doggedly toward his loose horse, which had kept ahead of him on a greater circle. The stranger could see this terrible scene: the moving piebald, the crawling man slowly bleeding to death; the blazing sun, the desert silence, a murderer grimly waiting; a murderer who did not have the decency to finish his victim out of hand, but who took an indirect though no less certain method. The death of the horse spelled death for its owner.

The stranger followed his own track back to the body and thence to the main trail, which he crossed before he began

his circle. After a few minutes of riding he found and followed another set of horse tracks. This set had followed the trail, but distant from it two hundred yards. Then, behind a clump of greasewood, where the alkali was thick and scabby, he stopped and read a book which was plain to his eyes.

The killer had dismounted here, picketed his horse in a little gully, walked to this clump of greasewood and sat down, cross-legged, like a Turk or a cowboy. Half a dozen cigarette stubs told that no small interval had been passed here. Hand and leg prints, on the right side, showed how he had arisen, presumably with the rifle in his left hand. The left foot, plain in the yielding surface, was ahead and to the left of a deep knee print. So he, a righthanded man, had knelt and fired. The empty shell lay a little more to the right.

The stranger pocketed it before he followed the boot prints around the clump, and back again. Going out, they were those of a running man, the sharp heels driven deep on the turn; coming back they were walking steps, leading straight toward the picketed horse. These walking steps were carefully measured, in terms of his own stride, by the stranger.

Mounting again, he followed the tracks of the murderer's horse to the main trail and across it, at a point three hundred yards from the place where the victim had been dropped. They stopped, and swung sharply back to the main trail, and along it out of sight.

THE stranger stopped, too, and looked studiously from this point to the place where the dead piebald lay. The shot had been an amazing one for such a distance with such a gun. No man but an expert rifle shot could have made it; and with a .45-70 repeating rifle it was almost beyond belief. No, not quite beyond belief: "Red" Connors, up there in Montana, could have done as well, and then repeated it to prove it not an accident; but when one unconsciously linked the marksmanship of an unknown man with that of Red Connors, it was a compliment, indeed. This killer was a wonderful shot, with rifle at least.

He looked down hopefully. Yes, there lay the empty cartridge shell, its brassy surface glinting in the sun. He swung

down gracefully, picked it up, and then struck straight for the dead man. The vultures had drawn close again, and one was so desperate and vicious as to show a sign of fight. One shot cured it, and drove the others off.

In a few minutes the stranger rode on again, carrying a burden as heavy as himself, face down across the saddle blanket, tied snugly against the cantle. No more did he ride carelessly, apathetically; for the killer might be holed up somewhere, ready to object to such close interest in his affairs. The stranger smiled grimly and hoped that the first shot would miss; after that, if it did, he would endeavor to give an exhibition of Ute trailing and Red Connor's rifle work. It was a combination bordering upon perfection.

It was mid-afternoon when the stranger rounded a rocky hummock at the far end of a narrow trail through the ridge, and saw the town of Desert Wells sprawled before him on the low bench; and he also saw that this farther side of the ridge was nowhere near as desert-like as the other. A turn in the trail had brought him face to face with a good cattle country, and here he felt even more at home than he had back on the desert wastes. The trail joined a narrow road which skirted the ridge, and it was not long before he entered the town, itself. Stopping at the first building, its faded sign proclaiming it to be Parsons' Saloon, he dismounted and went inside.

Parsons himself was behind the bar.

"Where's the sheriff, or the coroner?" asked the stranger, now hearing excited voices in the street outside.

Parsons looked at the speaker, his face grimly curious.

"Pe-culiar combination," he observed, and he had used his eyes so well by this

time that nothing about the stranger, on the surface, was undiscovered.

"There come both of 'em," he said, bobbing his head toward the door.

THE stranger turned slowly and saw two men push through the crowd now milling about the front door. They were commonplacee, these officials, of medium stature, with bronzed and wrinkled faces, and the hair of both had been well bleached by the sun. The eyes of the first were a pale blue; of the other, a slate gray. Both wore scrawny mustaches, and the age of neither could be easily approximated.

"That yourn?" asked the first, whose five-pointed badge bore his title in capital letters.

"Where'd you find him?" asked the second curiously.

The stranger removed his hat and wiped his forehead with a dusty sleeve.

"It ain't mine," he said to the sheriff. "Three hours back on the Franklin trail," he said to the coroner.

"Why didn't you let him lay, an' bring the news to me, instead?" asked the sheriff coldly, and his companion emphatically nodded.

"I had to kill two vultures out of a score to keep him from bein' eaten while I looked around. Nothin' else has been touched, an' there's plenty of evidence left."

"What kind of evidence?" asked the sheriff.

"Signs—lots of 'em. Here's one bit," and the stranger handed over an empty shell.

"H'm! .45-70," muttered the sheriff, rolling it in his fingers, his gaze on the dented fulminating cap.

"Just scratch some kind of a mark on the side of this, stranger, so it can be identified," requested the sheriff, returning the shell. He watched the stranger's knife point scratch a double X, and then he took the shell and put it in his pocket. He turned to the coroner.

"Reckon we better take him over to Murphy's," he said. "We oughta be able to hold the inquest tonight. He won't keep well in this heat, an' Murphy can't embalm worth a cuss."

He spoke to the stranger again.

"Reckon you better come along an' git yore hoss. You've got to take us back there, anyhow."

The stranger nodded and obeyed the sheriff's gesture, lining up at the bar with the two officials. He was last on the line, and gave his order after his two companions had made known their wishes.

"Sarsapariller," he said.

The two officials looked their frank disbelief, and the man behind the bar leaned forward quickly.

"Sarsapar——" said the latter, not completing the word. His lips curved unpleasantly. "Wall, now, damned if I got any. Nor milk, neither."

"I know better than to ask for milk on a cow range," said the stranger. "What you got, aside from likker?"

HELL, I got a lemon," answered Parsons, not as free with his facial contortions, and keeping the inflection of his voice within safe limits. He was now beginning to discover things which his first gleanings had failed to find. The stranger had been regarding him with a cold, level gaze, and something came to the bartender with great clarity and suddenness.

"You squeeze it, then, in water," said the stranger, and thereupon aided in keeping the silence intact.

The drinks disposed of, three rounds of them, the stranger shoved his two cigars into a pocket and followed the officers out to the horse.

In silence they went to Murphy's the local undertaker, who would have reached for his gun had anyone called him a mortician, and who could not embalm worth a cuss. Evidently he was a

much better hardware merchant, as suggested by the stock on his shelves and his evident prosperity. A trip, slowly and in step, to Murphy's back room marked one duty done, and the three emerged in customary and becoming silence and gravity.

Some one following the crowd had brought up two horses and turned them over to the officers. In a moment the three men were riding along the bench road leading toward the desert trail to Franklin.

"Seein' as how you got there first," said the sheriff as they drew away from the town and whatever itching ears it might contain. "You might tell us about it." His glance had rested on the rifle in the stranger's saddle scabbard.

"Mine's a .45-70," said the stranger coldly. "Take it out, an' look at it, if you want."

"Shucks," grunted the sheriff. "Be lots of time for that later. Did you find him on the trail?"

The stranger told his story briefly, but not quite all of it. He was nettled and perfectly willing to let his companions do some of their own work themselves. At the conclusion of the recital the coroner turned his head.

"He couldn't 'a' been dead very long, the way them vultures acted. You must 'a' been right clost to there when he died."

"Mebby; he was plumb limp, if that means anythin' to you."

"It means somethin', that an' them vultures," said the coroner.

The sheriff pulled at his mustache.

"See anybody?"

"No."

"H'm. If the hombre that did this killin' was ahead of you on the trail, he could a' been seen, out there, for quite a ways. Must 'a beat you to town, huh?"

"He started back the way he come," replied the stranger, "toward Franklin. An' if he didn't want to be seen, he couldn't 'a' been seen for quite a ways, out there."

"Seems you took a lot of interest in this here murder, if it was one," suggested the coroner professionally.

"Seems as though I did; but what of it? Shouldn't I oughta?" asked the stranger in mild surprise. "Citizen's duty, I take it."

"Kinda pert, ain't you?" demanded the coroner, slightly huffed.

"Don't reckon so; but I never did have the tail-waggin' habit."

There was no reply to this, and another silent interval ensued.

BOTH officers stole occasional glances at their companion, supplementing and checking up on the franker scrutiny they had enjoyed back in Parsons' saloon. What they saw might have disturbed less worthy souls. A calm, unemotional and very cold face, with thin lips and a pair of eyes which had a trick of becoming frosty.

The pair of Colts on the stranger's thighs were tied down for an unhampered draw. Most men found it sufficient to carry but one; but there were some who had attained professional dexterity who made it a point to carry two. This was unwise if the dexterity was insufficient, for two guns bespoke the professional, and there were certain ambitious souls upon whom this conceit acted as an irritant. Some of them regarded the two-gun affectation much as small boys regard a chip on the shoulder.

"Did you notice anythin' special?" asked the sheriff, his hounding instincts arousing themselves to a fresh effort. "Any perticular signs?"

The stranger was canny when dealing with strangers, and he still smarted under that look at his scabbarded rifle; still, it had been perfectly natural in a peace officer.

"Quite some cayuse tracks," he answered. "I kept off of 'em the best I could. All I wanted to know was two things: First, if there was any life in that feller to be saved; second, if the shooter was hangin' 'round within gunshot of me." He let his eyes rest calmly on the coroner's face. "If I'd had any sense I'd 'a' come on my way an' let him lay there, an' forgot all about it."

"H'm," said the coroner unpleasantly.

"H'm," echoed the sheriff not at all unpleasantly. "Glad you didn't. His wife will want to know. Kinda uncertain when a

man don't come back, an' nobody knows why."

"You know him?" asked the stranger.

"Yep. Name's Tobe Ricketts, owner of the Lazy S, over east of town. Tobe warn't none too well liked. He was havin' some kinda trouble with his men. Don't know what his widder will do now, with one thing an' another like it is."

"One of the first settlers, Tobe was; an' sorta had the idear that the hull range belonged to him," supplemented the coroner, thawing a little, perhaps because of the desert's heat. He spoke without bias or warmth, but he caught the sheriff's warning glance, and felt hastily for tobacco and papers.

Mile after mile rolled behind them and then the stranger drew rein, and pointed ahead on the trail.

"There's where I started," he said. "You want me to come along?"

THE answering grunts were affirmative, and they rode first to where the body had lain, the stranger explaining its position, and pointing out his own tracks. Then he fell in behind and let his companions lead the way. They did not backtrack, either through poor eyesight, or because they did not believe it necessary, but rode on to where they were told they would find the horse. Vultures arose from it as they drew near, but were soon allowed to return and continue their feast.

"Lazy S piebald that he mostly rode," said the sheriff. "Where's the tracks of the feller that did the shootin'?"

They stopped again at the alkali depression and looked around for a few minutes. The track of the off caulk of the near front shoe of the killer's horse did not show, although the other caulks were plain enough in the crust. The stranger said nothing, showed only casual interest; but his eyes missed nothing that his keen and thorough training told him was worth studying. He idly pulled a stem of salt grass, withered and sere, and gently chewed one end of it; and when the officers turned their backs to bend down over a boot print, he swiftly measured a print near his hand, broke off the stem and put it in his pocket.

"Where'd you find the ca'tridge?" suddenly asked the sheriff, without turning his head.

"Right back there, where he knelt."

"H'm. Shot Tobe in the back. Let's foller his sign, an' see where he got back on the main trail, where he shot the hoss."

It did not take them long to reach the spot, and one glance was all the sheriff wanted. He took the shell out of his pocket and idly turned it over and over, and end for end.

"Re-loaded ca'tridge," he grunted. "Well there's a-plenty of them in this country, 'though the primer may tell us somethin' when we get a chance to force it out. Don't know as there's any difference in the various makes, but that can wait. The calibre ain't very talkative, neither; I know a dozen men that use the same ca'tridge. H'm."

The stranger smiled coldly, drew his Winchester from the scabbard, and offered it for inspection.

"What you doin' now?" asked the sheriff in mild surprise.

"You seemed to be curious about this gun," explained its owner, "back there on the trail. You better look it over before I get rid of it."

"Shucks," grunted the sheriff with a show of amiability. "I don't have to look at that. I looked at the tracks of yore hoss in town, an' at yore boot tracks, out here. I ain't as dumb, mebby, as some folks reckon; but, notwithstandin' the fact that I find yore tracks out here just like I oughta find 'em if you didn't do the shootin', an' just to please you, I'll take the gun. Hand her over."

THE sheriff handed his friend the empty shell, took the rifle, pushed down the lever to see that the gun was loaded, and then fired into the ground. He caught the shell as it came out of the barrel, examined it swiftly, held it out

against the one in the coroner's hand, and smiled.

"Look at the prints of the firin' pins," he said. "Yourn is deeper, sharper, smaller an' plumb center; the killer's is shallow, blunt, a mite bigger an' a mite to one side. His rifle's purty well wore, while yourn is like new." He tossed it from him before the stranger could check the movement, and then chuckled at the instant retrieving of it.

The stranger did not try to justify his action, but he did not intend to have that shell lying about on the scene of the murder.

"Well, let's go back an' hold the inquest," suggested the coroner.

"Reckon we might as well," acquiesced the sheriff. "I know the verdict, right now."

"Murder, by some person unknown," said the coroner, and wheeled about to return to Desert Wells. Four hours later he was proved to be a prophet, for that was the verdict of his jury. There was one thing about this inquest which was striking and illuminating to the stranger. This jury was very easily satisfied with three sworn statements; the finding of the body, the course of the bullet, and the position of the supposed murderer. Not a single bit of detail as to other proof was demanded. The sheriff's professional secrets were not revealed, which must have been very gratifying to that officer.

Chapter II

INFORMATION

THE death of Tobe Ricketts and the manner of it made a stir in the little town of Desert Wells. The first seemed to be taken with a degree of complacency which strongly suggested satisfaction; the second had a disturbing effect, for the verdict of the coroner's jury automatically put every ill-wisher of Tobe Ricketts under suspicion; and the number of ill-wishers was greatly in the majority.

This was soon apparent to the stranger, who had broken off his journey and tarried in town. He mixed with the crowd in Parsons' saloon, which was the chief gathering point, and bit by bit his store of knowledge grew.

He learned that Tobe, who had reached his three-score years and ten, had been autocratic, domineering, and that he had claimed full grazing privilges over the entire range by right of priority. The fact that three other ranches had acquired title to their own particular range made little difference to Tobe, and he drove his herds where it pleased him to graze them, and furiously denounced the men who turned them back again. It was this which became responsible for the disintegration of his outfit, for his best men, knowing that they were trespassing, resented the job, resented the trouble which ensued, and at last one by one refused to obey the ranchman. One by one they quit or were discharged, and their places taken, perforce, by men of lesser moral strength. In time Tobe's outfit became a collection of the worst type of men riding range; and they, according to their natures, had small loyalty for their boss, and worked for reasons known only to themselves.

Five years before Tobe's death a new cattle outfit had moved into the country and turned its forty head loose on range which, because of its wildness, no man claimed. This lay on the far side of the basin's slope, against the distant ridges to the northeast. It was very rough country and it was now dominated by rough men. Their brand was the Clover Leaf, better known locally as the Ace of Clubs because of its almost exact similarity to the single club pip on a playing card. All was in order with this outfit and its brand, for the latter was recorded and was a legitimate mark of ownership.

The stranger took no part in the discussions which went on about him, unless directly questioned. He had told his story a dozen times, in the bare essentials, and another dozen times he had nodded confirmation to it when it was told by some one else; but while his vocal cords were mostly idle, his auditory apparatus was otherwise.

I DON'T feel sorry for Tobe a damn bit," said one red-faced cowman, whose liquor had loosened his tongue; "but I shore do feel right sorry for Jane Ricketts. The Lazy S has had a lot of trouble the last few years, an' shore has been goin' to the dogs. Now it won't keep out of the sheriff's hands for a great while. Why," he exclaimed, looking slowly around the circle, "do you fellers know the figgers of the last Lazy S sales?" Encouraged by the silence, he answered his own question. "Not one-third what they was the year before; an' the year before they wasn't but half of the year before that. The Lazy S shore is totterin'." He reached for his half-emptied glass, finished it and wiped his lips. "Jane's headed for the poorhouse, an' I'm right sorry for her; but Tobe got what he has been huntin' for for near twenty years."

"How's the Box O a-comin' along these days?" asked a man in a corner.

The first speaker, owner of the Box O, wiped his lips again as he peered at his questioner.

"Little mite better than last year," he said with satisfaction. "We are growin', slow but steady."

"Ace of Clubs ship out many head this spring?" persisted the questioner, looking directly at another cowman, an unpleasant appearing person, whose eyes were set too close together.

"We fell off quite some," came the instant answer, but the close set eyes shifted to the stranger, and away again.

"Wonder when the sheriff will get back?" mused a fourth in the circle. "I reckon he must 'a' struck straight for Franklin."

"You fellers all aimin' for to join in the funeral, tomorrow?" asked a fifth.

"*I* am!" came a snorted answer. "That's somethin' I been waitin' twenty years to do. I want to see Tobe under ground an' covered up. He liked to ruin me, ten years back. I ain't no hypercrite; when a skunk dies that don't unmake my recollections of him. I hated Tobe when he was alive, an' I hate him now. I don't hold with murder, but now that he's dead, I'm right glad of it. Just the same," he said, his voice losing its hard edge, "I feel like Zeke, here. The Box O had their troubles with the Lazy S, didn't you, Zeke? Yes, you shore did; but it warn't Jane's fault. Reckon if it hadn't been for Jane old Tobe would 'a' been even worse. I feel right sorry for her, an' I'm announcin' myself as number one on the list, if the time comes, that is made up to keep her out of the poorhouse."

RIGHT, Tom!" cried the owner of the Box O. "An' my name'll be right under yourn!" He looked around the circle and then caught the bartender's eye. "Set out another round, Parsons! This here round will be drunk to Jane Ricketts, widder of the meanest man this country ever seen!"

"Which we drinks standin'," hiccoughed a tearful voice, whose owner's villainous face was smirking with hypocrisy.

The stranger's cold eyes settled on this last speaker and after a moment's close scrutiny turned to the coroner, who sat at hand.

"Who's the standin' drinker?" he quietly asked.

"Pecos Sam," answered the coroner.

"Who's he?" persisted the stranger, who evidently was particular about the answers to his questions.

"One of the owners of the Ace of Clubs."

"An' where's their headquarters?"

"On the first bench under Flat Top Mountain, near where the river cuts through the ridge. They been doin' purty well, them fellers has. Only had forty head when they came in here, among the four of 'em. Now they must have over two hundred."

"How long have they been here?" persisted the stranger, flashing another glance at Pecos Sam, who did not notice it.

" 'Bout five years."

"Forty head of cattle keep four men busy, an' pervide grub an' clothes for 'em, while they growed into two hundred head?" persisted the stranger.

"Oh, no; oh, no," answered the coroner. "They hire out. Hard workin' outfit, they are. But they're slowly gettin' their toe holds."

"Slowly?" inquired the stranger, his voice hard. "You reckon it's slow when forty head of cattle become two hundred in five years, not countin' them that was sold an' sent over the trail?"

"They put all their spare money in cattle, an' take cattle as wages, sometimes," explained the coroner. He grinned. "We don't have no one hundred per cent nat'ral increase down here in this country."

"I come blamed near believin' that you did," retorted the stranger, and allowed a thin grin to slip across his face.

"——never come from Franklin," said a voice, breaking through the noise of the general conversation.

"Then you figger he circled?" questioned a companion.

"Shore I do; what else should I believe?" asked the first voice in deep scorn. "Tobe warn't killed by no hombre from Franklin, an' you can lay to that."

THE stranger did not appear to have heard this bit of talk, but he had heard it, and it served to put some sort of endorsement on his own theory, a theory which as yet was very nebulous, very discrete, hardly more than a shadow of a theory; but what few things had tended toward concreteness pointed toward that hypothesis: the murderer was not a man who lived in Franklin. The cold eyes skimmed the circle; the murderer might even be among those present in the room. Again the cold gaze rested on the Ace of Clubs man, the man who wanted to drink standing up.

As yet the stranger had no particular interest in this crime, being intrigued only by the mystery presented, the part he had taken after the commission of it, and because of his own peculiar attributes and training. His father, once held captive for years by the Mountain Utes, had been taught by those savages the finer points of trailing; practice not only had trained his father's senses but also had schooled his mind. He had been his father's closest companion, the relationship between the two was far stronger than the ordinary one of father and son; and he, in his turn, had been as avid for instruction, as keen in that Ute art as his father had been.

He knew many things, even now, connected with the murder that the sheriff and the coroner and all the men roundabout would never have found out. For one thing, the sheriff and the coroner both had passed by that little tuft of horsehair hanging to a cactus leaf, and had been so eager to find signs that they had overlooked many of them.

The stranger's theory, which persisted in dominating his thought, was being added to, here and there, bit by bit; and it was an intriguing thing, this puzzle; but on the morrow it was to become even more so, to be bulwarked and supported by a keener interest, and one which eventually would hold him until the solving of itself and of other things. So it is that accidental things, outside one's own orbit, at last swing around, make a contact, and shape a man's destiny.

As the night grew older the crowd increased, and then slowly fell away until at last only Parsons and the coroner and the stranger were the only men in the room. Gradually their desultory conversation lapsed and the proprietor arose to turn out the lights. The stranger and the coroner said their good nights to him and passed out into the street, the door closing behind them.

The two men walked slowly toward the hotel, where the stranger had engaged accommodations.

"Ridin' on yore way again tomorrow?" asked the coroner to make conversation.

"That wouldn't hardly be the right thing to do, with the sheriff absent," answered the stranger. "I aim to stay here till he says for me to move along again."

STRIKES me that is the right thing to do, an' the most sensible," replied the coroner thoughtfully. "Flight sometimes makes folk think wrong thoughts;

an' there may be folks who would call it flight; especially the man who did it. Personally, I didn't have no likin' for Tobe; but shore as hell I want that murderer caught an' hung. I hate to meet his widder tomorrow. She's a frail, bent mite of a thing, ten years older than the record might say, an' the record might say she is about sixty. Tough job she's got on her hands. Reckon she better sell out for what she can get." He coughed and spat. "She'll lose everythin', if she don't."

"Is that just a guess, or do you know what yo're talkin' about?"

"I know what I'm talkin' about, but I can't prove nothin', not a damned thing," replied the coroner. "Goin' to be a nice day, tomorrow, for the funeral, if the wind don't blow, 'though it gen'raly does for funerals. You better ride on out with me."

"Yes; I will," responded the stranger. "You think the sheriff went to Franklin?"

"Why, yes; where else would he go?"

"I don't know. I just asked because I was wonderin' when he'd get back to town."

"Oh, he'll get back in time for the buryin'. Haskins likes Jane Ricketts right well."

"Well, coroner, I'll say good night."

"Good night, stranger. I'll be around for you in plenty of time tomorrow."

"I'll be waitin'."

The stranger watched the official move off in the moonlight, and then slowly, reluctantly, turned and entered the hotel. He would attend the funeral on the morrow, although he disliked the task; but that was not all he would do. If the sheriff really went to Franklin to find the murderer, then that officer was a bigger fool than he gave any signs of being. Oh, well, a mind trained to trailing leaps farther than one which is not. Tomorrow would be another day, and, he hoped, an important one.

Chapter III

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

IT WAS a three hours' ride to the headquarters of the Lazy S, over a road which ran straight for the most part. Half of the way the grade sloped gently downward, reached a rough but massive bridge of logs over the creek, and then went on over the long, easy slope which ran upward to the foot of the distant, low mountains, which were known locally as The Ridge.

The coroner pointed out to the stranger certain features of the terrain and gave rambling explanations of this and of that as they rode along. Flat Top Mountain had been well named, except for the generic term: in some parts of the country it would have been called a hill, although that would have been dignifying the term. The trail to the Ace of Clubs' headquarters left the main road at the bridge and forked to the left.

Three hours after leaving town the two riders, now part of a string of horsemen, neared the ranch-houses. The main dwelling was built of sawed lumber, hauled in years back by ox-teams, and stood about a hundred yards from the low, log bunkhouse, the virginal home of Tobe Ricketts and his wife.

A fenced-in well, driven down through a hummock to keep surface water out of it, stood near the dwelling; a fenced-in spring broke through the ground at the side of the bunkhouse; two corrals, a wagon shed, a blacksmith shop, a hay barn and a store house made up the rest of the headquarters ranch.

A buckboard, a high-bodied carriage, and a score of riding horses were in front of the house. Murphy, the undertaker, was very busy and very hushed, giving the impression to those who knew him well that he was as much afraid of old Tobe dead as he had been of old Tobe living. Each new comer was grabbed, whispered to, and ushered through the open door, to stay where he had been put. Murphy was pleased by the number of people who came and believed that it was going to be quite a pleasant occasion.

The stranger followed the coroner in-

side, in wake of Murphy, who had saved the best seats for his official friends. These were located within two feet of the oak casket and were so placed that nothing could be seen, except by effort, but the newly shaved face of the dead. Had it been a prize fight, Murphy's judgment would have been excellent; but under the conditions, neither the coroner nor his companion were at all enthusiastic.

"Damned fool!" breathed the coroner, squirming, and glancing around. He had to twist his neck painfully to see the slowly filling chairs where the common people whispered and creaked and rustled and coughed, and generally had a fair time. The grins which caught the coroner's apologetic eyes were not soothing, and he had arisen to his feet, one hand on his chair and the other pressing the stranger's shoulder in an unspoken signal, when the undertaker, bustling into sight, looked, gasped, and swiftly raised an admonitory hand.

"Stay where you are!" whistled the sibilant whisper, accompanied by a strangled snickering from the common people. "Set down!"

THE stranger calmly arose, took his chair and led the way to a more distant and democratic position, his cold eyes fastened on the sparkling blue ones of Murphy. The coroner seated himself comfortably, gently brushed some dust from a knee, and turned to whisper to his companion, but quickly hushed and stiffened with respect and deference.

Mrs. Tobe Ricketts, now and henceforth Mrs. Jane Ricketts, was coming slowly into the room on the arm of a friend. She was bent, and tiny, her seamed and kindly face a little blank from the shock of the sudden news, from mental groping and uncertainty, from the instant press of suddenly changed conditions. She seemed to be almost dazed, a pitiable figure in shiny black cotton, strongly scented with that odor common to cottons.

Her step wavered and she slightly lost her balance, and her thin arm moved out to let her thin and heavily veined hand rest for a moment on the nearest shoulder. She tried to smile an apology, which really was an appeal; and passed on toward the chair which was strongly gripped by Mr. Murphy.

The shoulder she had touched and leaned upon belonged to the stranger; and back of the set coldness of his face there occurred a metamorphosis; in his mind's eye flashed the picture, not yet dimmed by time, of another such scene, where he had been the only honest mourner. The odor of the new cotton dress brought a tightness to his throat; as long as he could remember his mother had moved about in such a scent.

He still felt the appeal in Mrs. Ricketts' forced smile of apology; he could sense the helplessness, the panic, the uncertainty in the heart of that bent old woman; and the young man, to whom "Hopalong" Cassidy had constantly preached the doctrine of coldness, felt himself warm and thrill. He arose without a word, turned, passed swiftly along the front row of chairs and out into the open. He was almost running when he reached his horse, and had not settled firmly in the saddle before he was riding back toward town. The sheriff had gone to Franklin! Damn the sheriff!

He passed through Desert Wells, almost deserted by the exit of the curious in the other direction, without stopping and loped along the bench road toward the trail of Franklin. Reaching this, he followed it to the scene of the murder, and there took another good look at the telltale horseshoe track, the track with the missing caulk. By now it was photographed on his memory. Then he knelt to study, one by one, the tracks of the murderer's boots. Finding the best impression, he gave it his whole mind. It was not much later when he arose, mounted, and struck straight north, in a course at right angles to the main trail.

HE KNEW that the killer had headed toward Franklin. He might even have gone there in an effort to lose his horse's tracks among the many on the street of that town. Had he become aware of that broken caulk he would be even more wary: he would go to Franklin and have a new shoe put on. If he was really

wise he would have a new set of shoes put on. But no matter for what reason he went to Franklin, if he did go there, the murderer came from the great basin in which lay the Lazy S, and he would return whence he came.

The stranger had been riding about two hours, it seemed. when he espied the tracks of a shod horse leading eastward in the general direction of Desert Wells. There was no sign of a broken caulk in the imprint of the near front foot; but it fairly screamed that the shoe was new. The other three imprints were of old, worn shoes, and they matched, so far as he could remember, those back behind the greasewood clump.

The tracks were not very old, and were easy to follow; and follow them he did. Soon he came to an interesting phase of this trail; the horse had turned, stopped, and gone on again after a moment. The time of the stop was suggested by the prancing the animal had done. On again, mile followed mile across the desert floor, the tracks at times fading out, and then reappearing.

Again there occurred that side turn and stop, and this time it was on the crest of a gentle ridge, where the backward view would take in more country and be less obstructed. He had seen signs that led him to believe that the tracks had been made after dark: in the bottoms of cut-bank storm gullies, where the light from the first-quarter moon had been absent, there were weavings and uncertainties in the course of the trail. This fitted in well enough with the rest of the murder facts. Unmistakable signs of this were found when the low mountain range was crossed, and the uncertainty and lack of directness occurred only where the moonlight could not have penetrated.

The trailer now did something which was not due to lack of courage, but to the keen interest which he was taking in his work, to the pride and artistry in it, which an expert would naturally show. He abruptly left the trail and swung off to the right, heading as directly as possible for the wagon road leading into town, over which he had set out.

Those stoppings of the tracks bespoke a man who took the trouble to look back over his trail, of a man who expected or feared that some one might be following him. Perhaps, if his conscience was guilty, he would not only do it again, but he might even hole up and wait for several hours to stop such a following horseman.

One of the requisites of successful tracking is to overtake the hunted, and the best method of accomplishing this, whenever practical, is to anticipate the general course of the trackmaker, cut across chords of his arcs, and to make better time that he makes. On such ground as the stranger had been covering, following the trail track by track would take far more time than was used by the maker.

WHEN the stranger emerged from the low mountain ridge, the first thing which struck his eye was Flat Top Mountain; and on the bench at the foot of that was the headquarters of the Ace of Clubs. He had seen an Ace of Clubs horse at the tie-rack outside of Parsons' saloon, and the brand, in a mind as suspicious as his, spoke volumes. Therefore, following the road and having good going all the way, he would make as good time to his objective and arouse less suspicion than if he stuck to the trail he had been following. He knew that he could not overtake the maker of the tracks, but he could cheat the maker of the sight of him following along the tracks.

When he neared Desert Wells again he turned off and rode around the town, got back on the trail again and pushed along at a more rapid pace. The morbidly curious had had more than time enough to return from the Lazy S, and he met no one. Crossing the log bridge, he came to the trail pointed out by the coroner and followed it over gently rising ground at a more sedate pace. A tired out horse is no asset to its rider, and a man looking for a job seldom rode at speed.

It was almost dusk when he stopped before the shack which served as the Ace of Clubs' headquarters, and standing in the door was Pecos Sam, the low-hung sun shining into eyes which would have felt far better in the dark. Sam had imbibed too freely the night before, and had taken sundry doses of the hair of the dog in hopes of curing the bite. His face wore a scowl.

"Hello, Pecos; didn't see you at the funeral," said the stranger as he swung down from the saddle.

"Hello; didn't go," growled Pecos. "What you want?"

"Nothin' very much; only a job, punchin' yore cattle," answered the stranger, loafing up to the door.

"Job? Punchin' for us?" questioned Pecos, blinking a little. He fairly blocked

the open door. "Damn that sun! Come 'round in the shade," he said, urging his visitor before him to and around the corner of the house.

"Yeah, thought mebby I could get a job," replied the stranger, noticing that the back door was closed. "I'm kinda lookin' this country over, seein' as how I'm figgerin' on stayin' here. If I stay I got to find somethin' to do. This wild kind of country is *my* kind. You need a hand?"

"Hell, no; we ain't got cows enough," answered Pecos. "Why, we hire out whenever we can. Who all was at the funeral?"

WELL, now yo're shore askin' me somethin'," said the stranger, grinning. "There was quite a bunch, but I only knowed a few. Parsons and the coroner, and that Box O feller—all them that were in the saloon last night, nearly. Well, all right. If you ain't got a job, there ain't no use of me wastin' time. I'll water my cayuse, take a drink for myself, an' head back to town."

"There's the trough," said Pecos, pointing to the corner of the flimsy little corral. "Sheriff at the funeral?"

"No; reckon he didn't get back from Franklin in time."

"Huh! You figger he should a' gone to Franklin?"

"I figger he should 'a gone any damn place where them tracks went," answered the stranger. "That's what tracks are for, ain't it?"

"Seems so."

"But the sheriff's wastin' time, Pecos. He'll never get that feller. Purty near everybody in this whole country hated Tobe Ricketts, an' Haskin's ain't got a chance. It ain't like just one or two hated him."

"Haskins is a good man," said Pecos, stating something which he did not believe.

"Well, he ain't good enough for that; nobody is." The stranger turned. "Wait till I get my cayuse," he said, and departed and in a moment he saw that the front door was now closed. Coming into sight again with the animal, he led it to the trough and looked idly about while it drank.

"What you diggin' for, gold?" he inquired with a grin as he looked at an excavation in the side of the hill just behind the corral.

"Naw; aimin' to build a kinda dug-out stable for our winter ridin' stock."

The stranger dropped the reins and started toward the scene of the digging.

"That ain't the way to do it, Pecos," he said, shaking his head. "You want to——" but the words were broken off as he tripped and fell, landing with his face almost in a fresh horse track, and for a moment he appeared to be stunned; but, after a few seconds, he slowly got to his knees and arose, wiping dirt from his scratched cheek.

"Damn fool thing to do!" he growled, kicking petulantly at the stone he had tripped against.

"Hurt yoreself?" asked Pecos with a frankly casual interest.

"No," grunted the stranger, dusting himself off; but some of it was moist earth, and would not come off. He rubbed the heel of his hand, little pellets of dirt rolling out from under his thumb.

"Yo're not diggin' that right, Pecos, as I was sayin'. You want to prop up the roof as you go, or she'll cave."

RECKON so?" inquired Pecos sarcastically. "Huh! The only thing that would make that roof cave in is dynamite. If you swung the pick under it, you'd know better."

"Well, all right; I was only suggestin'," said the stranger, turning to go back to his horse. He glanced at the place where he had tripped, and was a little deliberate when he crossed it. Reaching the trough, he leaned over, put his mouth to the end of the pipe which supplied it, drank moderately, and blew out his breath. "Well, so long; see you in town tonight mebby?"

"Nope; not tonight," replied Pecos, leading the way to the trail.

"All alone?" asked the stranger, swinging into the saddle.

"Yep," answered Pecos, his back against the door, his elbows touching the frames.

The stranger waved carelessly and rode along the trail toward town; but when he had ridden a mile from the Ace of Clubs headquarters, and out of sight of it, he turned from the trail, hid his horse in a bushy draw, and went toward the house on foot, figuring to strike it from the hill behind. This he did, and in the fading light could make out the building; but the voices were indistinct. Picking his way carefully down the slope, he chose the harder ground and managed to get within easy hearing distance.

"Aw, hell; yo're too suspicions," said Pecos' voice, rising in irritation. "He was just learnin' the lay of the land hereabouts. Figgers to stay awhile, an' he's only a fool kid, at that."

"Yeah? So *he* said," growled a second voice, one unknown to the listener. "You don't have to tell me what he said, neither; I heard it all. How do we know who he is, or what he's doin'?"

"Hell!" snorted Pecos in vast disgust. "You don't reckon he knowed that killin' was goin' to happen, an' hustled right down into this part of the country, straight to the body, before it was cold, do you? *Do you?*"

"Yo're damn smart, ain't you?" came the query, pitching high in vexation. "No, he didn't know any killin' was goin' to take place; but"—the voice broke from its intensity—"you never reckoned he might be a Cattle Association man, did you? Never thought of that, *did you?*"

"Damn if you ain't funny!" retorted Pecos. "Here we have been five years, an' not bothered; covered our tracks, jumpin' all over the whole damn cattle country, an' been here for five years; an *now* yo're figgerin' some Cattlemen's Association 'tective has jumped us! *Hey!* You aimin' to burn that bacon all to hell?"

THE stranger slipped away, returned to his horse, and rode on again; and the faint moonlight was showing him the trail before he reached Desert Wells. Eating a belated supper, he drifted into Parsons' saloon and joined the coroner, and his friend, the sheriff.

"Where'd' you go to this mornin'?" asked the first official, with a deal of interest.

"I get fed up on funerals awful easy," answered the stranger; "an' after bein' put face to face with that corpse, I had all I wanted. Soon as the widow got past me, the way was open, an' I sloped. Been ridin' around, learnin' the country. Well, sheriff," he said, smiling at that person, "anythin' new?"

"No," answered the sheriff. He pulled at his mustache, considered something for a moment, and then looked the stranger in the eye. "Frank, here, says you aim to stay around here till I tell you that you can leave. You can go when yo're a-mind to."

"Kind of changed my mind about that," said the stranger, digging at his teeth with a third toothpick. "I like this range. Goin' to find me a job, an' stick it out till next spring. You figger the Box O can use another tophand?"

"Huh!" snorted the sheriff, grinning. "Seems like there ain't nothin' but tophands no more. I happen to know that

the Box O are layin' off, instead of hirin'. They had two tophand tumbleweeds punchin' for 'em durin' the spring round-up, an' now they're on the trail again."

"Then that makes two outfits that don't want me," mourned the stranger. "I just come back from the Ace of Clubs. They ain't hirin', neither."

"Ace of Clubs?" said the sheriff in a rising voice. He flashed a quick glance at his brother official, and then laughed. "You didn't go out there for a job, did you?"

"Shore; why not?" indignantly retorted the stranger. "When I want a job, I *look* for it. It ain't very often they hunt me up. Pecos Sam is still feelin' the likker he drank in here last night. I didn't see nobody else. How many are in that outfit?"

"Four," said the coroner, determined to get into the conversation.

"There was another one of 'em in here last night, wasn't there?"

"Yes; Bully Tompkins was here with Pecos," said the sheriff.

"Who are the other two?"

"Charley Lennox an' his brother, Al."

"Were they in here, too?"

"No, but I saw Al in town just before you rode in with Tobe's carcass," offered the coroner.

HUH!" muttered the stranger, his eyes suddenly becoming frosty. "Three from four leaves one." He looked closely at the sheriff, leaned forward, and spoke in a voice so low that it barely carried across the gap between the two men.

"Charley Lennox is a tall man," he said, "with big feet, which toe in considerable. He's purty straight in the legs, a plumb, extra fine rifle shot; he rides a black cayuse that sometimes breaks into single-footin'; an' he's lost the rowel out of his left spur. Day before yesterday he wore corduroy pants. Is that Charley Lennox as you know him?"

"That's Charley," said the sheriff. "You don't happen to know what religious faith his great, great gran'father belonged to, do you?" he chuckled.

"If Charley takes after him, he didn't belong to any," laughed the stranger, and then he sobered. "When did the Lazy S start to go down hill?" he asked. "Don't guess; think close."

The sheriff cogitated as the coroner leaned forward to get his ears an even break.

"Let's see," mused the sheriff, interested in spite of himself. "Summer before last; the summer before that; the summer before that, an' this year. That makes one, two, three, four. Four years ago when it was noticed. It might 'a' started the year before, for all I know. Why?"

"Ah, that's it, why?" asked the stranger. "Four years ago the drives of the Lazy S began to fall off. A year before that a forty-cow outfit, with four men to work it, an' with the Clover Leaf brand, moved into this part of the country. Give 'em a year to get the lay of the land an' start workin'. I've seen both the Lazy S an' the Ace of Clubs brands. If that Clover Leaf, or the Ace of Clubs, can't blossom out of the Lazy S mark, then I'm a tumblebug. You ever think of that?"

"Some, an' considerable, as well," answered the sheriff. "If we're goin' to do much of this kind of talkin' we better move over to my office. Too many ears, an' eyes, in here. What you got on yore mind, anyhow?"

"Not in yore office," objected the stranger earnestly. "I don't aim to be hitched up with any sheriff as long as I can hold it off. I got a lot to tell; let's take a little ride." He glanced swiftly at the coroner, and back to the sheriff. "You stay here, sheriff, to kill off suspicion. Me an' Frank will meet on the bench road, an' he can tell you all about what's on my mind when he comes back. It's somethin' you'll want to know, an' know right quick."

THE sheriff nodded and leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and took out his pipe for a quiet, enjoyable smoke. The stranger did likewise, except that his pipe was a sack of tobacco and a packet of cigarette papers. He laughed, and at a facial sign the coroner and sheriff laughed also.

"That story allus struck me as right funny, seein' that I knowed both men," chuckled the stranger. "I can tell you

lots of funny tales about that pair of hombres when I've got time."

The coroner yawned, looked at his watch, arose and stretched.

"Save 'em for some time when I can hear 'em, too," he suggested. "I got some work to do before I turn in for the night, so I reckon I'll go do it. See you tomorrow. Good night."

They lazily watched him toward the door, and when he was about to step through it, the sheriff's voice arrested him, and he turned inquiringly.

"Frank, you figgerin' on bein' in yore office very long?"

"Well, I'll be busy for about an hour; why?"

"Reckon I'll drop in about then, to check up with you on this Tobe crime. That be all right?"

"Shore, that'll be all right," answered the coroner. "In about an hour," and he stepped through the doorway.

The sheriff and his remaining companion talked idly, and at the end of perhaps ten minutes the stranger stood up.

"I'm right sleepy," he confessed. "Reckon I oughta go to bed. You reckon there's any chance of the Lazy S needin' a tophand?"

"Not none in the whole, wide world," chuckled the sheriff; "but you might as well ride out there, an' learn the said truth for yoreself."

"I'll do that, right after breakfast. Well, good night."

"Good night, stranger," grunted the sheriff, and puffed contentedly on his pipe.

The stranger went to the hotel, around it to the stable, and led out his horse. Saddling hurriedly, he led it away, mounted and rode carelessly toward the ridge road. He had not gone far along the latter when a horseman pushed up out of a gully below the thoroughfare and joined him.

"Well, what's on yore mind?" asked the coroner.

"Did the sheriff find out anythin' in Franklin?" asked the stranger.

"Nothin' that he said anythin' about," answered the coroner. "He follered the tracks of a broken hoss-shoe almost into town, an' lost 'em in the heavier travel."

THEY went into Franklin', but they didn't come out again," said the stranger. "I reckon that hoss-shoe can be found in the blacksmith shop. The killer had a brand new shoe put on in Franklin—*one* new shoe. It was like swappin' a rattlesnake for a copperhead, but the fool didn't realize it. He rode back home north of the reg'lar trail. I know where he is, an' I know his name; an' if the sheriff will do what I did, he can collect enough proof for a first-class hangin'. I don't want to be connected up with it. I'm goin' to have troubles enough of my own without bein' blamed for trackin' down Tobe's murderer. There's only one thing I haven't found out, or tried to find out; the reason why Tobe was killed. There must have been one. The sheriff, knowin' everybody in these parts, should be able to learn that without much trouble, once he gets his man behind bars."

"Stranger, just *how* are you interested in this mess, an' *who* are you?" asked the coroner with deep curiosity, thinking in terms of the great Cattlemen's Association.

"You can call me Mesquite," replied the stranger. "If you or the sheriff want to know anythin' about me, an' have reasons for it, I can give you the name of a sheriff up in Montana who can tell you. You wouldn't believe me if I told you, but you might believe him. Now, then you say the Lazy S has been slippin', an' you reckon that old woman is headed for the poorhouse, to live on charity. I'm tellin' you that she ain't headed for there a-tall. Not if I can get me a job of punchin' on her ranch, she ain't. There's a lot of pole-cats under this particular pile of brush, but if I'm let, I'll smoke 'em out, an' mebby it'll be with powder smoke. There's a lot of things I want to know, an' I reckon I'll have to prove myself

to you an' the sheriff if I get any help from you fellers. You or the sheriff write to Hopalong Cassidy, Twin River, Montana. He's sheriff now, Buck Peters havin' quit the job in favor of a better man. You ask him what you want to know about Mesquite Jenkins. I'll write a note to go with yore letter, tellin' him that it's all right for him to answer. Will you do it?"

"Right quick," answered the coroner. "Anythin' else you want me to tell the sheriff?"

"Yes," answered Mesquite, and he told the coroner everything he had observed and heard, and the conclusions he had drawn. He reached into his pocket and took out the second empty shell, the one he had scooped up from the desert, the one which had killed Tobe's horse.

"Give this to the sheriff, if he wants it," he said. "It's marked with three X's. Which way are you ridin' now?"

"Seein' that I know this section much better than you do, I'll circle around an' come into town another way. You strike right back, the way you come. Jenkins, you——"

"Don't call me that!" snapped Mesquite. "Family names can be traced too easy. Anybody might be called Mesquite. You call me that."

"Mesquite," said the coroner, simply. "I like yore ways. After I hear from that Montana sheriff I'll mebby like 'em a whole lot better. If you can clear up that mess out at the Lazy S, every decent man in this country will be yore friend. Shake!"

"Thanks; good night," said Mesquite, shaking hands. Then he whirled his horse and rode back the way he had come.

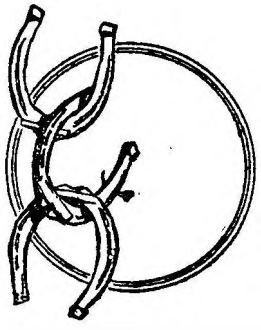
Chapter IV

THE SHERIFF MOVES

WHEN Mesquite went down to his breakfast the following morning he found the coroner waiting for him.

"Mornin'," said the visitor with a smile. "Thought I'd eat with you."

Mesquite nodded and waved toward a chair and as they seated themselves, two traveling men entered the room and headed straight for the table. They monopolized the conversation and their presence checked the coroner's purpose; but after the meal was finished the official led his companion out into the street and toward his own little shack, which was both office and home. He cleared a chair of old magazines, papers, reports and other junk, and waved Mesquite to it.



"Well," he said, smiling grimly. "Things are movin'. I told John everythin' you told me. He had a man riding to Franklin half an hour after he left me, last night. Wanted him to get there early, find out about that hoss-shoe, an' then head straight for a place a little this side of the Ace of Clubs headquarters. John, himself, if now ridin' over that track. He won't turn off, like you did, but will follow it every step of the way to wherever it stops."

"It stops at the Ace of Clubs, at their corral gate," said Mesquite positively.

"Yes, of course," acquiesced the coroner; "but John wants to be able to testify to an unbroken chain of evidence. An', by the way; we just wired to that Montana sheriff about you. The deputy is to send it from Franklin. Havin' your permission to make inquiries, we went right ahead. You see," he explained, with a friendly smile and no embarrassment, "we think right kindly of Jane Ricketts. Yo're a stranger. You act sudden. Mebby you can pull the Lazy S around an' make a real ranch of it; but we want to know somethin' about you. That's fair, ain't it?"

"Yes," said Mesquite.

"Good. Now you spoke about the reason for that murder," continued the coroner. "Tobe Ricketts was dead set against the Ace of Clubs. He claimed that they was stealin' his cattle an' changin' his brand; but he was no friend of the sheriff's, but quite the other way, an' he was too proud an' bull-headed to ask for help, or admit that he needed it. He said that he could handle his own troubles, himself; an' so he could have, if he had an

outfit that was worth a damn. I don't know, of course, what happened on the Lazy S; but if he was dependin' on his punchers to get proof of stealin' against the Ace of Clubs, then he didn't have a chance. Tobe had made threats against the Ace of Clubs. There was plumb bad feelin' between 'em. Nobody knows what he might 'a' said, or done. Anyhow, out in this country no jury will need definite proof of any motive when they learn the rest of the evidence. If them two ca'tridge shells are proved to have been fired out of the rifle of Charley Lennox, that will be enough, when coupled to the rest of the proof."

Mesquite nodded.

"The motive is the only thing unproved, so far," he said.

"Young man," said the coroner, with budding enthusiasm, "however did you get to be so expert at readin' sign. Damned if you ain't an Injun!"

MESQUITE explained briefly, and then turned to the matter uppermost in his thoughts.

"About me goin' out to the Lazy S," he said slowly, looking steadily into the eyes of his companion. "You reckon I better wait till you get the answer to that telegram?"

"What do you think about it?" asked the coroner.

"What does the sheriff think about it?"

"He's kinda puttin' that up to you, I reckon."

"Then I'll wait. A day or two won't make much difference; but you mebby oughta ride out there an' tell Mrs. Ricketts to sit tight for a few days; to say on the ranch, an' wait."

The coroner nodded.

"I'll do it. Jane has a lot of confidence in me, I reckon; an' now that Tobe's dead, she'll be able to show some of it." He cleared his throat and studied the unemotional face before him. "Why are you takin' so much interest in somebody that you don't know?"

"I don't know that I can tell you so you'll understand it," slowly replied Mesquite, his expression unchanged. "I like excitement. I lost my mother last year. She looked quite some like Mrs. Ricketts. Sooner or later I've got to find a job. It sorta looked to me like the job was right here, under my nose. If it is, it won't be no common puncher job; an' mebby I'll be foreman of that ranch before I get through, if I deserve it. I aim to deserve it. For a feller of my age to be foreman of a good ranch, an' it's *goin'* to be a good ranch, ain't very common. Besides, I've been livin' with fellers that hate a thief like they hate a snake, an' I got kinda turned against cattle thieves an' murderers."

"I can believe what you said about the fellers you lived with," said the coroner, a grin slipping over his face. "I never met any of that crowd, but I've shore heard lots about it. If Hopalong Cassidy says you are all right, me an' John will back you to the limit. But," he said, the grin fading, "mebby you ain't got any idea of the trouble that'll head yore way if you start workin' on the Lazy S."

The cold eyes frosted, the facial muscles hardened, and the coroner felt a little shiver play along his spine.

"Mebby you ain't got no idea," said Mesquite very slowly, "just how *much* trouble there's goin' to be. I have, because I'm figgerin' on makin' most of it, myself."

"Well," said the coroner, a little uncomfortably, trying to read the icy eyes, "this is a law-abidin' community—reasonable law-abidin'. The law of self-defense an' an even break ain't been covered up with a lot of legal trimmin's. We have been known, out here, to impanel a jury on hossback, an' try a man while all hands were ridin' along a trail. If yo're fair an' square, you won't have to worry about *that* end of it."

THE main thing, I reckon," said Mesquite, "is to clean up the range of rustlin' skunks an' ambushers." He cogitated, and a weak smile for an instant broke through the set expression on his

face. "I was a deputy, once," he admitted, a little apologetically. "Cleanin' up a range ain't very new to me."

"*That's* it!" exclaimed the coroner, a light breaking upon him. "That's it! Let John swear you in, an' do things accordin' to law!"

Mesquite's mind raced back to the scene of another swearing-in, of the objections he had made about taking prisoners, and of the reassuring replies. The answers to his former objections should hold good down in this country. He nodded, his eyes frosting again.

"Providin' that nobody knows it, for a while, but me an' you an' the sheriff," he said. "I once heard a feller say that he didn't want no flags flyin' an' drums beatin' when he went to war. I think a lot of that man's good sense; you'd be surprised if you knew how much."

There was a silence, and it lasted for quite some time, each man busy with his thoughts. Hoofbeats drew near and passed. The riders were three, and they were closely grouped. The coroner, glancing up as they rode past, leaned suddenly forward in his chair.

"Three deputies," he explained, his voice tense. "From the looks of 'em I'd say things are movin'. The sheriff is sendin' 'em ahead of him, to be near the Ace of Clubs when he gets there himself."

"That's what a man gets for bein' too stingy, or careless, to buy four new shoes instead of one," replied Mesquite. Then he looked at his companion. "Don't you an' the sheriff forget to leave me out of this whole thing! The sheriff can take the credit."

"Well, you'll have to swear to findin' the body, an' the lay of the land," replied the coroner.

"I'll tell anythin' that everybody knows that I know; an' nothin' else," said Mesquite. "Remember what I said about flags flyin' an' drums beatin'?"

"We'll fly the flags an' beat the drums," said the coroner.

"What's yore name?" asked Mesquite. "I ain't heard it all, yet."

"That so? Corbin—Frank Corbin. Call me Frank."

"All right, Frank. How soon you figger the answer will come from Montana?"

"All depends on how quick that sheriff acts."

Mesquite chuckled, and his eyes warmed a little.

"It all depends on how soon it gets to him from the railroad office. The operator is a good friend of his. It won't be long, then."

"Couple of days, mebby," guessed the coroner. "How you goin' to kill time? There's mostly a poker game goin' on in Parsons'."

"Poker ain't lurin' me none right now. I'll find ways to pass the time. I've got to know somethin' about this range before I can do anythin'."

Corbin laughed and leaned back in his chair.

"Strikes me you've done considerable already," he said.

"I was talkin' about my own job. Suppose you tell me the lay of the country, the trails an' roads out; the ranges, cricks, an' the people. The hist'ry of the Lazy S an' its present outfit would be right interestin'."

"All right; we've got plenty of time, an' we'll need it," said Corbin. "Shuck yore coat an' get ready for a lot of talk. If it comes too fast, or you get confused, say so."

THE sheriff was as keen on his present work as a hound on a scent. He had sent a deputy to Franklin, a man who had the knack of worming things out of people. The deputy dropped into the blacksmith shop about one minute after the smith had unlocked the door.

"Hello, Jim!" said the smith. "When did you get in town?"

"This mornin', Jake. I reckon mebby I got a cracked caulk. Take a look at 'em, will you?"

"Well, I'll be damned," said the smith. "What kind of blacksmith you got over there in Desert Wells? You tell Hogan he better learn his trade."

"That so?" inquired the deputy, bridling a little. "Hogan's the best blacksmith for five hundred miles around."

"Yeah? Like hell he is! Two Desert Wells fellers in two days drop in here

with busted caulks. Yes he is!"

"Two days, huh?" said the deputy suspiciously. "What you think I am?"

"Well, three days, then; what's the difference?"

I don't care nothin' about how many days it is, except to bust up yore conceit," retorted the deputy. "But I shore am questionin' yore statement that we both came from Desert Wells. Hogan never made that other feller's shoes."

"Didn't, huh? Then where does that Lennox feller go to have his hoss shoes made? Washington, D. C.?"

"I don't know where Al goes if he don't go to Hogan," confessed the deputy.

"Neither do I; but Charley goes to Hogan, don't he?"

"Reckon so. Was it Charley?" asked the deputy. "He's the Lennox brother that's allus in a hurry, ain't he?"

"Well, it was Charley; an' he was travelin' true to form."

The smith had his apron on by now and was clawing coals into the maw of a roaring blaze with one hand while he pumped the bellows with the other. The fire going to suit him, he went over to the deputy's horse and lifted one foot after another. Then he lifted them all again, and stood up, looking inquiringly at his companion.

"What foot did you say that cracked caulk was on?"

"Ne'er mind," answered the deputy, moving forward. "Can't you find it?"

"No, I can't find it! An' the reason I can't find it is because there ain't no such thing. You loco?"

"Well, Jake," said the deputy grinning, "you've told me so much that you shore can't plead ignorance. What did you do with that busted shoe off Charley Lennox's hoss?"

"What you mean?" asked the smith, arms akimbo.

"I mean that my boss, Sheriff Haskins wants that busted shoe."

"Damn it, I oughta knowed that you was up to somethin'," snorted the smith, but a grin was stealing over his face. "What's Charley gone an' done now? Stole a cow or two?"

CHARLEY is plumb suspected of shootin' old Tobe Rickets in the back. Tobe died. Somebody shot him through the back an' let him crawl, bleedin' to death, after his hoss. Then the feller shot the hoss, an' left the old man to die out on the desert. I wouldn't tell you, only I know you."

"The filthy rat!" snapped the smith, almost jumping toward the pile of iron miscellany on the far side of his anvil. "By Gawd! I come awful near workin' that shoe into somethin' else, but I didn't. Here it is. Put it around his neck when you stretch it!"

"I knowed you'd help kill vermin," said the deputy, taking the shoe. "Now, mebby you'll step around the corner a minute. I've seen the justice, an' he's waitin' to swear to yore signature. Got the thing all written out, except a couple of places you've got to tell us about."

"I ain't signin' no paper!" cried the smith, his face growing red. "I signed a paper once, an' it took me three years to git back out of debt!"

"I reckon you'll be safe if you sign somethin' for the Justice of the Peace of yore own town. Anyhow, you can read it over, first."

"I'd rather have it read to me; my ears are smarter than my eyes," replied the smith, untiying his apron. "I busted my glasses an' can't hardly see nothin'."

"But you could see there wasn't no crack in them caulks," said the deputy, enjoying himself. He knew that the smith could not read.

"Hell, that was part of my *business,* warn't it? A feller allus oughta be good at his own business, hadn't he? Come on. I'll sign anythin' the justice tells me to."

"This is just for our own information, Jake," said the deputy, leading the way out of the shop. "We'll tell you when you'll have to come over to court."

And thus was another link added to the chain of evidence.

THE sheriff was as busy as a two-legged, two-armed man can be, following doggedly along two sets of tracks, which made his work a little easier. He had taken Mesquite's tip and was now going over the same ground. The second and newer set was the easier to trail, for it seemed that its maker had deliberately sought to make his mount's footprints plain. This was Mesquite's trail, made plain purposely to aid the sheriff. The sheriff moved much more swiftly, therefore, than had his last predecessor on that trail; and he sighed with regret when he had crossed the mountain ridge, and came to the place where that second set of prints turned off and headed for town. From here on his progress was jerky. There were stretches of hard ground, and then stretches of soft; but on most of the hard ground were pebbles half buried, and many of these had been torn loose by the shoes of the killer's horse. The sheriff's only concern was to establish a connection between these tracks and the man who had made them—to forge a strong link to be used as evidence.

Time passed. The sun had moved over its meridian point when the sheriff at last, sighing with relief over one task finished, drew a deep breath preparatory to beginning a new task, and one more dangerous and exciting. He dismounted, led his horse into a thicket, tied it to a small tree, and slipped on foot toward the headquarters of the Ace of Clubs. This was their ranch-house, their only dwelling. The deputies he had sent out from town should all have taken up their positions. Halfway there he was hailed in a whisper, and joined by the deputy he had sent to Franklin.

"Just got here," said the deputy. "Not ten minutes ago."

"Find out anythin'?"

"All we wanted to find out. Here's the busted shoe, and an affidavit from Jake."

"Fine! Good work!" whispered the sheriff. "Keep to cover, 'round back. You come up behind the corral an' if you can get down the hill without bein' seen, do so. If you can't, then lay low up there with yore rifle ready. Things may happen mighty swift after they start."

"I'll be there," promised the deputy, disappearing.

The sheriff went on, crouched, gun in hand. As he stepped into the open, not far from the shack, his appearance seemed to be a signal, for his deputies, with drawn guns, burst from cover on the far side and sprinted for the house. They made pairs, with the sheriff, two at the front door and two at the rear; and they simultaneously entered the building.

Thus they burst in on Pecos Sam, Mesquite's "standing drinker" of Parsons' saloon, who was very much surprised for a man who had seen the start of the sprints; but like many actors, he overacted. The potatoes spilled and went one way; the knife went another, and Sam's hand was pressed over his heart. He forgot that he had earned the reputation for being a very hard, cold customer.

The bunks were empty. There was no place of concealment in the house, yet the sheriff's men went through the ritual of search. They developed no hiding place.

THE sheriff himself moved to the gun pegs and took down a Winchester repeating rifle. It was a .45-70. He went to the door, pumped a cartridge into the barrel, and fired into the ground. The shell disappointed him and he tossed it away.

"Where are the rest of yore outfit?" he asked, peering closely at the still flustered cook.

"Out on the range, I reckon. Why?"

"Where's Billy Tompkins? When did he leave here?" persisted the sheriff.

"I dunno where he is," answered Pecos. "He left right after breakfast, an' he's been gone ever since."

"Does he generally do that?"

"Shore. He takes a snack with him."

"Where's Al?"

"Out on the range, some'rs. He done just like Bull," explained Pecos.

"Well, where's Charley?" persisted the

sheriff, his eyes not once having left Peco's face.

"Dunno. He's like the other two. What's the trouble? What's up, sheriff?"

The sheriff ignored the question and waved to his men.

"Two of you take him outside, away from the house," he ordered. "If he makes a break for it, drop him."

In a moment the sheriff and the other two deputies had the room to themselves.

"Look for the re-loadin' outfit, an' the empty shells," said the peace officer, and he led the search. It was not a difficult matter, for the single room had no hiding places. One of the deputies, clearing a pile of papers and other things from a shelf, pulled down a box, and with his other hand pulled down another.

"Here it is," he said, and gave it to his superior.

The sheriff dumped the box of empty shells on the table, first being certain that Pecos could not see him through the window. He spread them about and examined them one by one. In a few moments he pushed several to one side and put the rest back in the box.

"Put these boxes back jest like you found 'em, an' put that junk back on top of 'em," he ordered. "Hank, you come here an' scratch yore initials on these shells on the side, so you'll be able to swear that you marked them, that you found them in this house, and on this date."

Hank complied, and as he stepped back, the sheriff compared each shell with one he took from his pocket, nodded grimly, and pocketed them all.

"When we catch him, he'll be tried an' hung," he said, and strode for the door.

HIS men complied with his energetic gesture and soon Pecos Sam was in the house again, his back in a corner.

"Pecos!" snapped the officer. "I'm goin' to ask you some questions. If you know what's good for you, you'll tell me the truth. Shut up! I ain't asked you nothin' yet! Now you lissen: are all three of yore friends comin' back to this shack as usual, tonight?"

"Why, I reckon so," answered Pecos, mildly surprised. "They allus do."

"Keep yore eyes right on mine! An' you tell the truth. When is Billy Tompkins comin' back here?" The sheriff took a step forward, his arm upraised. "Look at me! Look me right in the eyes! When is Bully Tompkins comin' back here?"

"I dunno, sheriff; I dunno. I reckon he'll be back for supper."

"When is Al comin' back?"

"I dunno; but he ought be back before dark."

"When is Charley comin' back? Look at me, I tell you! When is Charley comin' back?"

Pecos looked calmly into the pale blue eyes.

"I don't know any more about him than I do about the others. I reckon they all will drop in around supper time. If they don't, they can cook their own. What's the matter, anyhow?"

"Put the irons on him, boys," ordered the sheriff, "an' two of you take him to town. The other two stay here with me, but somethin' tells me that we're too late."

He shifted his head a little, away from Pecos; but not so far that he missed the flitting expression of satisfaction and exultation on the man's face. Pecos was now certain that his friends had escaped. So far as he, himself, was concerned, he knew that they had nothing on him; let them try to frighten him from now on! He chuckled. If everything was all right, he was to build a fire on the top of the hill, out back. He did not have to make an effort to do his signalling, for no signal was a signal.

The two deputies stepped up to Pecos, handcuffed him, and started toward the door; but one of them, obeying the sheriff's gesture, went back to the peace officer's side.

"Turn him loose when you get him near to town," whispered the sheriff. "We'll look for tracks, though I don't reckon it'll do much good."

When the sheriff and the two other deputies were alone he led them from the house, and signalled the man on the top of the hill to come down. They searched for tracks and found none that meant anything; the fugitive had been wise enough to take another horse, whose unknown prints were lost among the number of tracks on the hard-packed trail. When the black horse was rounded up, it was found to be unshod, no hard matter where tools were at hand for the work.

On the way to town they met Pecos Sam returning. He grinned sarcastically and rode past with his sombrero cocked at an angle which he considered to be insulting.

CHAPTER V

THE BADGE OF THE LAW

MESQUITE spent the next two days in the saddle, and the intervening night in a camp of his own. He chose for the scene of his activity the eastern end of the great basin, beyond the range of the Lazy S and even beyond that of the Ace of Clubs. The two low mountain ridges which roughly bounded the basin on the north and south, although they slanted well off the true course, here drew a little closer together and then flattened out into a high, connecting tableland.

The slope up to the top of this tableland was wild and rocky, cut with arroyos and small canyons, gouged by rainwater gullies, dotted with little hills and pitted with small valleys, some of which were blessed by springs, which made several of them exceedingly rich in grass. The general aspect was one of scraggly brush, its nature varying with the soil, the aridity and the altitude. Vision was limited except from the tops of the larger hills.

There were cattle in this broken country, but most of them were old and worthless; tough cows barren because of age; old steers, whose stringy meat would daunt even the best of teeth; mean old bulls, range scrubs, that should have been killed off as found, and not left to keep an inferior cattle strain alive in the herds below. Their self-banishment, was a good thing for the whole range, although at times they went down into the valley.

These outlaws of all kinds were mostly branded; and of really marketable animals Mesquite saw but few, so few that their numbers did not count. These were the facts, and he was gleaning facts, hoping from them to build up a chain of logic from which to draw knowledge, a knowledge which would aid him in the problems he would have to solve. Some of the facts he learned were so significant to his mind that already a working hypothesis was shaping itself.

Why were there practically no valuable cattle in so wild a country, especially when it was generally known that the outfit of the Lazy S, over a period of four years, had been careless and without real interest in its work? Why were there not numbers of Lazy S cattle up in this wild country, cattle of all ages, cattle of three classes. It seemed as though carelessness on one hand might be offset by carefulness on the other. If the Lazy S was careless, then who was careful? Who gleaned the strays?

What horse tracks he found were so old or obliterated or faint that they told him nothing, except that horses had been in this wild country, shod horses; and here and there the tracks passed around low-hung branches of the higher trees, suggesting a reason for it. Nowhere at such a place could be found tracks that went under limbs low enough to strike a rider. Few things seen by the eyes have as little significance as the majority of men attribute to them. Cause and effect, the oldest and most persistent relationship in the world, is perhaps the generally least recognized or understood.

IT WAS late in the afternoon of his first day of riding that he came to a focusing of the faint horse tracks he had been noticing so much. There was a faint semblance of a path, leading roughly in a northerly direction. His interest quickened and he followed the little trail, one so faint that often it was only by looking well ahead, when he could, that he could keep it in sight. It led him into one of the small valleys, a mere dip in the ground; but spring water oozed down the slope and kept alive a sturdy patch of grass. As he

glanced around the rim his attention was caught by something entirely foreign to nature, a long, horizontal line in the brush. There was no need to investigate it it was wire.

He rode far enough down the slope to get a better look at the softer ground in the little slough; and the pockmarks were those such as might have been made by cattle the year before. The suspicion of gleaning, awakened by negative evidence, was not acquiring that dignity which positive evidence endows. His suspicious mind flashed back over the trail of reasoning, over the facts and into the problematical; did these gleaners pick up only stray cattle, or were the cattle allowed to wander? Were they, perhaps, deliberately drifted into these wilds? The correct answer to this would be worth almost any effort made to obtain it. That would likely come later, and from another place.

Heretofore his riding had been without any especial alertness so far as his own safety was concerned, but now he recognized the need for a change, and his progress was a little more circumspect.

He followed along the trail, now a little heavier, a little wider and, therefore, plainer to the eye. Another small valley, with a swampy bottom, was reached some time later; and he learned of the wire because his horse almost ran into it. It was junk wire, joined and tied, both barbed and plain, and of several sizes. It also was in better continuity than the first he had seen, entirely circling the hollow except where the trail entered. A loose length, coiled roughly, told of a one-strand gate; and also told that a single horseman could pen his stock and be free to search for more.

Neither camping nor branding appeared to have occurred at either of these small valleys; the entire lack of burned spots or charred wood plainly indicating this.

He pushed on again, along an even plainer trail, and found that it was joined, here and there in low places, by that same kind of trail he had found so difficult to follow earlier in the day. And he became conscious of another fact; this larger trail ran generally upward, through a series of various kinds of depressions. This was curious, for the range of the Ace of Clubs, whose territory he was beginning to approach, lay on much lower ground. He smiled grimly, and then began to look around for a camp spot, for good grazing for his horse. It was nearly dusk before he found one which suited him, and after taking care of his mount and eating a portion of the cold rations he carried, he rolled up in a blanket and went to sleep like a child.

THE second day found him again calling upon his own peculiar training; he abandoned this trail and struck from it at right angles. It was as though he regarded it as one spoke, perhaps, to a wheel. It naturally would lead toward the hub; but to follow it might result in being seen, and in arousing suspicions in canny minds entirely two ripe for suspicion. It was a crooked spoke, and its axial line uncertain; but a second spoke would, if followed reasonably far, provide a line of intersection which might indicate the general location of the hub. With the short time at his disposal, approximation would have to suffice.

On his course up the slope of the tableland's benches, he crossed several of those already mentioned faint trails, and they all led downward, and, therefore, toward the trunk line he had quitted; but at last he found one which angled off in the other direction, and he followed it as rapidly as possible. It led him to others, and by noon he reached the main stem, and let it be his guide. Finally he came upon fresh horseshoe prints, going in the same direction, and he stopped, dismounted, led his horse from the trail, and climbed to the top of the right hand hill. For minutes his searching gaze slowly swept the country, gradually acquiring a greater radius; and then it stopped and fixed upon a moving dot, a dot so small that it told him nothing beyond the fact that it was a horseman. A rider, out here, could be no one

but one of the gang and he was heading in the right direction to prove Mesquite's points. Mesquite had obtained his approximation, and by it eliminated nine-tenths of the tableland and its sloping benches.

Back in the saddle again, he turned and headed for town. He crossed the log bridge west of the Lazy S at twilight, and reached town to find the hotel dining room closed. After a mediocre meal at a lunch room, he drifted into Parsons' saloon, and found the sheriff and his friend, the coroner, in their accustomed places.

"You found that job yet, Mesquite?" inquired the former, grinning provocatively.

Mesquite shook his head and dropped into a chair.

"Better ask the sheriff if he's found what he lost!" cried a humorous voice from the rear of the room, where the nightly game of poker was in progress, and a gust of good natured laughter proved that the jest was enjoyed.

"He ain't lost; he's just mislaid, an' I'll get him," retorted the sheriff. "He ain't the first feller that ain't been where my hand landed, an' he won't be the last. It's somethin' to know who he is."

"If you *do* know," retorted another voice, with just the suggestion of a barb in it. "Seems to me you ain't got much evidence."

"Had enough for the coroner's jury, as you oughta know, seein' you was on it," replied the peace officer imperturbably.

"Why, any fool would know it was murder," retorted the scoffer; "but as to fixin' it onto somebody, that's different!"

YES," said the sheriff reflectively, "that's different." He seemed to become a little doubtful, and change the subject. "You ain't quittin' yore job, are you, Tommy?" he asked the scoffer, in pretended anxiety.

"Who, me?" quickly asked Tommy. He was very much surprised. "Why?"

"I don't know why. I just asked a plain question."

"Naw, I ain't quittin'. Zeke say anythin'?" asked Tommy, vaguely disturbed because it was a good job and good jobs were scarce just then. The Box O had just laid off two men, and he hoped Zeke had no farther economies in mind.

"No-o, he didn't say anythin', you might say," drawled the sheriff, and seemed willing to let the subject lay.

"What made you ask me that, then?" demanded Tommy with more than casual interest.

"I was just thinkin' of somethin', that's all," answered the sheriff.

"There ain't nothin' wrong, is there?" asked Tommy, beginning to squirm.

"I ain't tellin' no professional secrets," placidly replied the officer.

"What you mean?" asked Tommy with throbbing curiosity.

"Nothin', I reckon; go on with the game," said the sheriff, turning his face away to hide its smile, and for the rest of the evening Tommy's lack of interest in poker was noticeable, and his losing streak continued. Thus are the wicked punished by the wise, and retaliation obtained by the subtle. Tommy's scoffing cost him nearly half a month's wages, and sent him home to worry for half the remainder of the night.

Mesquite caught the gleam of mirth in the sheriff's eyes, and read the satisfaction wreathing the coroner's face. Tommy's unrest supplied what else might be needed to explain the matter, and Mesquite chuckled low in his throat.

The sheriff looked at him, and his lips twitched. This would be a good time to try out the stranger's wits. The answer to the telegram had come from Montana, and the sheriff cleared his throat.

"These Western states think highly of their good citizens," he remarked reflectively. "From California to Missouri, from Texas to Montana, this is so."

"Yeah!" cried a boisterous, bantering voice from the card table. "Utah swears by Brigham Young, an' Missouri brags about Jesse James. Who've *we* got to cheer for?"

"Charley Lennox, you jackass!" ejaculated a companion. "He oughta have a medal."

"Come on, come on!" growled a player. "Deal 'em; deal 'em. Don't pay so much attention to Haskins. Put in a chip, an' deal!"

MESQUITE'S cold face softened a little, and he nodded. He was glad that Hopalong Cassidy's answer had been received. And he was glad to make the acquaintance of a man like the sheriff, and hoped that he might, some day, claim him for a steadfast friend.

"That remark about Utah swearin' reminds me of somethin'," said the sheriff, absently toying with the badge on his vest, "somethin' I figger on doin' tonight."

Mesquite looked at him intently, studying the seamed face, and his own eyes brightened as the sheriff opened his coat wide and revealed a deputy sheriff's badge pinned to its lining.

"But you drew four cards!" came Tommy's indignant wail from the poker table "Judas priest! Look here: three crowned heads, all male, an' they lose to a four card draw!"

"Santy Claus just clumb down the chimbly," placidly remarked the lucky winner, pulling in his gains.

"When I got the best hand, nobody stays," growled Tommy; "but when I got real, good hand, somebody's got a better!"

"Never mind, Tommy; you come in second, anyhow," consoled a companion. "Bust yore little pairs from now on, and wait for Santy Claus, yoreself."

"Well," growled a man, arising and pushing his solitary chip to the banker, "mebby yo're goin' to wait for Santy Claus, but I'm goin' out lookin' for him—with a gun. I'm through. Good night."

"Hey, you fellers," called the dealer. "Hey, Haskins; hey, Corbin! Hey, you Mesquite feller! There's room for another pilgrim."

The coroner looked inquiringly at his official friend, smiled at the shake of the head, and slowly arose.

"Goin' to invest," he apologized to Mesquite, and sauntered to the table. "What's the game?" he asked as he dug down into a pocket.

"Two bits an' a dollar," answered the dealer. "Look out for Tommy; he holds good hands."

"You go to hell," growled Tommy, grinning ruefully. He turned and glanced curiously at the sheriff, and slowly picked up his hand.

The sheriff waited until the game held the attention of the players, and of Parsons as well, and leaned a little forward.

"Which ever of us two leaves here first," he whispered, "waits at my office." His hand moved inside his coat and then fell to the arm of his chair.

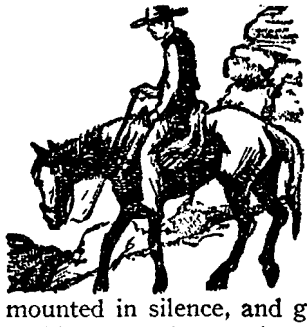
MESQUITE nodded quietly, but his face hardened. He could wear that that badge with far more complacency than he had worn the one which Sheriff Peters had pinned on his vest about two years before.

It was not long before Tommy, of the Box O, pushed back his chair and stood up. His remarks to his friends were not complimentary, but they gave as good as they received. He had no chips to cash, and therefore tarried not; but he stopped at the sheriff's side, and looked down inquiringly.

"What'd you mean 'bout me quittin' my job?" he carelessly asked.

"Ride along home, sonny," replied the sheriff. "You'll mebby find out, some day. Things like that usually get known. Ride along home." He stretched and arose. "I'll ride with you, far's the jail."

Tommy became a little apprehensive, but said nothing. He was swiftly running back in his mind for a clue to the sheriff's words, to find out if this short ride with the sheriff was going to be disastrous. He led the way to the tie-rack, mounted in silence, and grudged each step of his horse; but at the combination office and jail the sheriff waved his hand and said good night. Tommy's sigh of relief reached the officer's ears, and sent a grin to the leathery face.



Half an hour later Mesquite walked

slowly up the street toward the hotel, and saw the sheriff sitting on the single, low step before his lighted door. The curtains were tightly drawn. Mesquite angled over and paused.

"Gettin' a mite chilly," said the officer. "If you ain't in no hurry, we might as well go inside an' palaver a bit."

"Oh, well; for a few minutes," acquiesced Mesquite. "I'll smoke a couple of cigarettes while yo're finishin' yore pipe."

The door closed behind them, and when it opened again it let out a new deputy sheriff, whose badge lay inside his vest; and who had been told to ride to the Lazy S after breakfast, for the job which there awaited him.

CHAPTER VI

GETTING ACQUAINTED

MESQUITE dismounted at the Lazy S ranch-house and knocked. As the door opened to reveal Mrs. Ricketts, he removed his hat and smiled.

"I'm Mesquite," he said.

"Come in. I've been expectin' you."

Her old face beamed and momentarily lost a little of its look of worry and sorrow. She did not have much faith in the salvation of the Lazy S; if her husband's best efforts had availed nothing, then of what avail were those of any other man? But it was pleasant to think that she did not stand alone, that a fresh attempt would be made to save the ranch. The Lazy S was the sum of Tobe's achievements; it was the sum of the lifelong efforts of them both. It was a monument to his work, his pride, and sentiment directed that it should stand.

"I suppose you want me to tell you what I can about the ranch?" she suggested as they seated themselves.

Mesquite dropped his Stetson on the floor between his feet, and slowly shook his head as he looked at her.

"No, ma'am," he answered. "I've been thinkin' it over, ridin' out here this mornin'. All I want to know is the figgers in the tally book for the last six or seven years; the number of cattle branded, the number on the range, an' the drive figgers. I reckon yore tally books will tell me that."

"But Frank Corbin told me to tell you everythin' I could," protested the widow in some surprise.

"Yes, ma'am; I know he did," replied Mesquite quietly. "I thought that would be a good thing; but I've changed my mind. You see, when you live on a ranch for so many years, you see it too close up; you let things ruin yore judgment, sometimes. I don't want to have my mind made up for me ahead of time; I want to see things for myself. I can't explain it very well, but I shore know what I mean."

"I understand you," replied the widow. She sighed. "Mebby you are right. Mebby you'll see things that we didn't, mebby you'll look at 'em from another direction."

"I reckon I will, ma'am," grimly said Mesquite, his face growing hard again. "I reckon it's goin' to be quite a fight, puttin' this ranch back where it belongs. Now, it strikes me that if you trust me enough to let me work on the Lazy S, you might trust me enough not to question what I do. I want to feel that I'm workin' just like I'd work on a ranch of my own. I can't do anythin' if I'm hobbled, or pulled back. I've been told this ranch is right sick, an' I reckon I can cure it if I do it in my own way. Mebby my way will be right rough, sometimes; but if it is, that's because it has got to be. Now, if you'll just hire me, an' take me down to the bunkhouse to the foreman, I'll start. I don't figger to earn my wages for a while; I'll have to find things out before I can do much except ride range like the rest of the men."

"I'm payin' the foreman eighty dollars a month," suggested the owner of the Lazy S.

"THAT's too much for a poor man, an' not enough for a good one," said Mesquite; "but, considerin' the size of the ranch an' the way it's been handled, it's too much. What you payin' the men?"

"Forty, but I don't know where it's comin' from after while."

"We'll mebby find the answer to that, along with the answers to a lot of other things," said Mesquite. "Keep right on with the payroll as it is. Cuttin' a man's

pay is a good way to get rid of him, an' that'll mebby come in handy when the time comes. I don't need any money for awhile; let mine ride. How do you pay the men, personally, or through the foreman?"

"Through Rankin—he's foreman," answered the widow. She shook her head emphatically. "Yo're goin' to be paid, as long as the money holds out." Something had been puzzling her, and now she put it in words. "Frank Corbin said you'd take Rankin's place. You been talkin', sort of, like you wanted to be one of the men."

"Well, that's right nice of Frank, an' you, too," Mesquite his expression warming a little; "but I reckon I ought to be one of the men; until we see how things go. An' as long as Rankin handles the payroll, he'll have to pay me, or do a lot of thinkin'—an' I don't want him to do no more thinkin' about me than he has to. As it is, he'll be wonderin' why yo're hirin' another man, when you got more than you need, right now."

"No, I don't believe he will," said the widow, smiling suddenly. "One of the men is goin' to get married, an' set up for himself. You can take his place."

"Settin' up for himself, huh?" mused Mesquite. "I'll be glad to take that man's place. I'm glad he's quittin'. Saved quite some money in five years, at forty dollars a month, ain't he?"

"Oh, he hasn't been here that long," said the owner. "Two years, I think. He's the foreman's brother."

"That's interestin'," commented Mesquite grimly. "Where's he figgerin' on settin' up?"

"Why, he's buyin' into the Clover Leaf, an' goin' over there."

"Ace of Clubs, huh?" growled Mesquite, an unpleasant smile creeping over his face. "That's interestin', too. When's he goin'?"

"Why, he wasn't to go till the end of the month, but he's changed his mind, an' leavin' tomorrow."

"One from four leaves three, plus one makes four," muttered Mesquite, his eyes growing frosty. "He's goin' to take the place of the man that killed yore husband, ma'am."

"What did you say?"

MEBBY I made a mistake, ma'am; but I reckon no harm's been done. I don't figger you'll do much talkin'. Charley Lennox murdered Tobe Ricketts an' Charley has left for parts unknown. The foreman's brother is takin' his place on the Ace of Clubs, to keep that outfit up to four men. An' that's a thing that kinda puzzles me; you'd think any outfit that has four men in it, hirin' out when they can, an' with only two hundred cows, would shore be glad to shrink to three men, an' stay shrunk. Ma'am, this is goin' to be next to the best job I ever had; but, like the other one, I'm afraid it'll peter out." He shook his head regretfully. "Ain't it a shame that doin' a job ends it?" He vividly remembered that other job; the tracking down of a round dozen would-be murderers. "Well, they're right interestin', while they last."

"Young man!" snapped the owner of the Lazy S, "I think it's about time that somebody came to this country that can see things from a different point of view. Charley Lennox! Now I know who it was I heard Tobe quarrelin' with! An' Rankin's brother takin' his job with that gang!"

"Yes, ma'am; you might tell the sheriff all about that," said Mesquite. "He'll be glad to know it, if he don't know it now."

"I'll tell you, first!"

"No, ma'am; please don't," requested Mesquite. "That's part of a different story. I know it ties in with other things, but I don't want nobody else's eyes seein' things for me. Suppose you take me down, an' tell Rankin that I'm the new man." He chuckled grimly. "I'm honin' to see his face when his new man is hired for him; mostly a foreman hires his own men. He won't like that, an' he won't like me; but he won't be the first man that didn't like me, an' I reckon he won't be the last."

He picked up his hat and stood up.

"Young man," said the owner with some asperity, "I shouldn't like yore face, for it's too cold to be human; but, somehow, I do like it. An' I like the way you talk an' act, even if it is kinda—kinda bloodthirsty. Once, when I was a little girl, up north, I saw a wolverine. You bring it back to my mind. If there's goin' to be any shootin' around this ranch, I want you to keep it where it belongs; not on this side of the bunkhouse!"

"Ma'am," said Mesquite, grinning widely, "I said that I was goin' to like the job. Now I'm sayin' that I'm goin' to like my boss. There won't be no shootin' this side of the bunkhouse."

She laughed, for the first time in days.

"Come on, then; we'll surprise the foreman!"

LEADING the way, Jane's progress had the purposefulness and determination which might have been shown by the old Crusaders. Her short steps were rapid enough to keep Mesquite just behind her right elbow, and she sailed up to the bunkhouse just as Rankin moved curiously through the door, his level gaze on the stranger, a stranger to his eyes but not to his ears. The foreman's humor was not one which would warmly welcome this newcomer, for he looked upon Mesquite as a pestiferous meddler, who already had made necessary a change of plan; and he was not entirely certain, from what he had heard, that the stranger was only a meddler. The Cattlemen's Association acted in mysterious ways its miracles to perform, and its arm was long and powerful.

"Rankin," said Jane, her words bitten off and her face grim, "here's a man I just hired to take yore brother's place, since he's leavin' us tomorrow. Find him somethin' to do, an' make him earn his salt. His name is Mesquite. Pay him the same wages yore brother got. Mesquite," she said, turning to her tow, "this is Mr. Rankin, yore new foreman."

"Howdy, Mr. Rankin," said Mesquite coldly.

"Howdy!" snapped the foreman, and wheeled to face his employer, his eyes glinting. "Mrs. Ricketts, I don't know that we need another man. I was aimin' to try to get along without one."

"Very well, then," replied Jane decisively, in her mind formulating something strange to her. She hoped she could lie convincingly. "You can discharge somebody, then, an' put Mesquite in his place. He is a friend of my brother, an' I promised that I would hire him."

"That so?" drawled the foreman with thinly veiled contempt, as he turned with insulting slowness to look at the friend of his employer's brother, to look at the man who got his job through family pull. His lips curled and he nodded. "Reckon I can make room for him without firin' nobody, till I see how good he is. I never like to fire a man an' then have to hire him over ag'in."

"All right; do what you think best," said the owner, and whisked about to return to the ranch-house.

Both men watched her go and saw her enter the house, and each turned at the same instant and exchanged level looks.

"So, yo're a friend of her brother's, huh?" inquired Rankin, drawling his words. "An' a two-gun man, too! Well, well, well!" He rubbed the stubble on his chin, and his expression hardened. He draw out a big silver watch, glanced at it, and then verified it by the sun. "It won't be long before the boys ride in for dinner. I'll show you yore bunk, an' you can loaf around till then."

MESQUITE followed the foreman into the house, carrying his blanket roll with its meagre supply of extra clothing. In a few moments he turned from the bunk and started toward the door, to find the foreman blocking the way.

"We don't need no extra man," sad Rankin, his eyes glinting. "If we did, *I'd* hire him myself. If you don't find things pleasant 'round here, you can allus move on. Far's I'm concerned I don't care; but the boys are right sudden in their likes an' dislikes; an' they might not like the boss's relations pickin' out their bunkmates."

"No more than I like a foreman who lets his men pick his fights for him."

Rankin flushed.

"What you mean by that?" he demanded ominously.

"No man with brains would have to ask that question," retorted Mesquite. "Now, if yo're lookin' for somebody to pick on, you'll be safer if you hunt for a cripple."

The foreman's right hand dropped swiftly, but a straight left is a mighty swift movement, and a disconcerting one to a man who expects a gun play. Rankin's balance was disturbed, his head snapped back and his hand missed the walnut; and as his head came forward again, his chin was met by a timed right hand blow that drove him against the wall before he dropped. A fair referee could have counted fifty before the foreman stirred. Then one leg drew up, an arm moved; and then the fallen man squirmed as he slowly recovered consciousness.

He pushed himself up to a sitting position and slowly looked around the room. He saw Mesquite squarely before him, focussed on him and became aware in a flash of what had happened. His hand again streaked to the holster, but stopped suddenly as an eye-baffling movement of the standing man ended in a leveled gun.

"You reach for that gun again, an' I'll take it away from you," warned Mesquite in grim humor.

"Yo're fired!" snapped the foreman. "Git yore belongin's, climb yore hoss, an' make dust!"

"Mebby I'm fired, but I'm not quittin' the job," said Mesquite. "Me an' you will get along tolerable well, if you mind yore own business an' keep yore mouth shut about me. Mebby the time will come when you'll admit that Mrs. Rickett's brother is a right good judge of men. We've had our trouble, an' we've had it out. Nobody saw it but us, an' you won't have to get killed tryin' to save yore face. You lost yore head an' acted like a damn fool. We're goin' to get along all right, after this. Get up an' brush yoreself off." The gun in the speaker's hand slipped back into its sheath.

RANKIN was thinking swiftly. Under ordinary circumstances it would be only a question of which of the two men quit the ranch; but Mesquite was staying, and the foreman was not yet ready to quit; he could not quit. He had to stay on as foreman, not only for his own betterment, but for the betterment of others. And while Mesquite was working on the Lazy S, they could keep him in sight and know something of what he was doing. A crafty light crept into the foreman's eyes, and he slowly arose, brushed himself, and then stepped forward, his hand going out.

"Damn fool I was," he admitted, trying to make his words ring true. "I'm admittin', now, that her brother knows men. I had no call to ride you; but a foreman is supposed to do the hirin', an' it riled me. Are we all square?"

Mesquite ignored the hand for a moment, and then, having seen the crafty gleam in the other's eyes, swallowed his likes and dislikes and determined to be as crafty. He shook hands, and smiled, trying to keep the frost out of it.

"Don't know as I blame you much; I know how you felt," he said. "But you'll find I can do my share on the range. Let's forget the boss's relations an' start right. I'll stand or fall by my work."

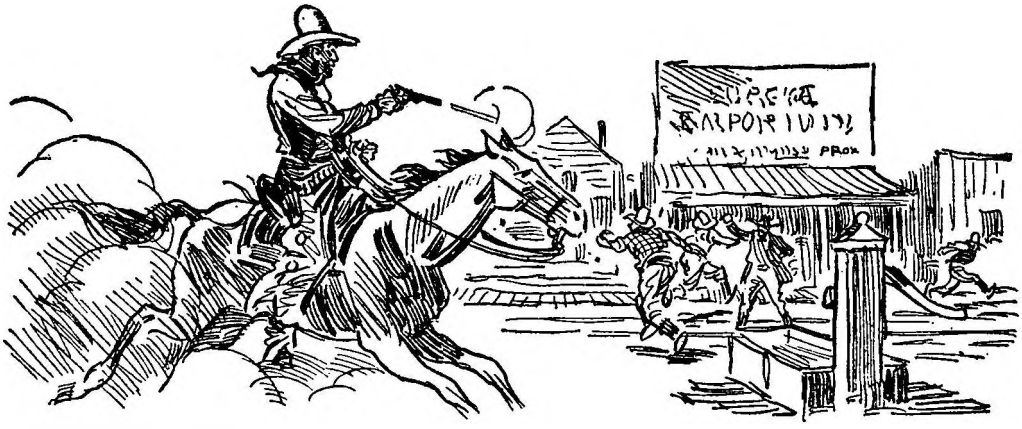
The foreman nodded and glanced out of the window, seeing the cook come out of the store house and close and lock the door. He sighed thankfully; no one would know of his humiliation except himself and the new man; and if he, Bruce Rankin, knew himself, the new man would not know it very long. His life was swiftly drawing to a close.

"Turn yore hoss into the corral, an' take yore pick," he ordered. "They wrangled in some good animals this mornin'. That white-faced roan is the best of what's left."

Mesquite nodded impersonally.

"All right, boss. When do we eat?"

Part II will appear in the next issue.



THE SHERIFF OF CROOKED RIB

By ERNEST HAYCOX

Author of "Starlight and Gunflame," "A Municipal Feud," etc.

BILL PATENT WAS, IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING, THE PRODIGAL SON OF CROOKED RIB COUNTY. BILL IT WAS WHO RECOGNIZED THAT IT WAS A DANGEROUS PROCEEDING ON THE PART OF THE LILY-FINGERED REFORMERS, TO TRY TO PUT A WHITE COLLAR AROUND CROOKED RIB. THEN THEY PUT IT UP TO HIM TO SETTLE SOME OF THE DIFFICULTIES THAT AROSE, AND BILL WADED IN—AS HE SAID, EITHER TO SETTLE TROUBLE OR TO MAKE IT

DIRECTLY after the funeral of Tamus Dolliver—old King Tamus, the law enforcer of Crooked Rib, town and county, for more than twenty long years—certain incidents transpired to show quite plainly how powerful a factor the departed official had been.

The first of these incidents relates to young Bill Patent. To dull the genuine sorrow for one who had been as a father and a counsellor to him, young Bill got extraordinarily drunk and whipped a man twice his size in the Gopher Hole saloon because that man had barely suggested that perhaps Tamus had outlived his usefulness. Not content with this, reckless, headstrong Bill Patent mounted his horse, flung a brace of shots into the wooden box of the town pump to advertise his disgust for the place, and raced into the desert. Whereupon, the reform element in Crooked Rib marked down another score against Bill Patent, on a sheet already full of such scores, and resolved that Bill's days of hell-raising were just about over.

The second of these incidents was less colorful and a great deal more secretive. In the same Gopher Hole saloon, a gentleman who sometimes passed by the name of Sorrel, raised his glass to a gentleman who sometimes admitted the cognomen of Little Dandy. Over the amber liquor they exchanged glances of full and significant satisfaction; these two had come to Crooked Rib only for one reason, and that was to satisfy themselves old King Tamus was actually dead—that his heavy hand was removed from above them. And having seen him laid in his last earthly tenement, both Sorrel and Little Dandy were in a distinctly holiday mood. Sorrel raised his glass, his pale blue eyes contracted, and he muttered, "Happy days." Little Dandy, being a secretive man, merely nodded. They drank and rode quietly from Crooked Rib with the air of being bound on particular business.

But the third incident, with its consequences, was by far the most important. Tamus had not been twenty-four hours at rest when ten men of Crooked Rib met

unobtrusively in a room of the hotel and formally instituted a commercial club, adopted by-laws and elected the most prominent of them, Mayor Darby Chamberlain, as president. Each of those ten had money invested in Crooked Rib; each of them likewise was firmly of the opinion that the time had arrived for Crooked Rib to pick up its dignity, cease to be an old-fashioned cattle town with the lurid and flamboyant concomitants of such a town, and in general to assume some of the more modern and sophisticated airs of larger metropolitan centers. The reason these ten had not previously organized their club was because public opinion in Crooked Rib County had hitherto been greatly influenced by King Tamus—and he would have laughed such a thing out of existence overnight. King Tamus was of the old school.

MANY kind words were said in eulogy of him by the assembled ten, yet every statement was tinged with an air of qualification. And when they presently came to discuss who might be the next sheriff, Darby Chamberlain aptly mirrored the progressive point of view. Tamus Dolliver, said he, was a great man, but times had changed in twenty years and Tamus, it was feared, hadn't changed with them. The old sheriff had done his business in the ancient manner, he had clung to his guns and the idea that a sheriff must be a fighting man before all else, he had put more importance in trailing a law breaker than in staying at the office and tending to his paper work. Moreover—and the mayor touched this string deftly—there had seemed to be a prevailing opinion throughout the state that Tamus Dolliver had been the prop and arch and keystone which for two decades had kept Crooked Rib from anarchy. Obviously, this had been an injustice to Crooked Rib and the other officials who had also waged the battle for public morality.

"I will admit," went on the mayor, sweeping down his mustache with a gesture he considered most effective, "that Crooked Rib was the wildest of counties, and I will also admit Tamus Dolliver was the one who swept it clean of its bad elements. Yet folks seem to have overlooked the fact that there hasn't been a major misdemeanor in this section for two years. Times have changed; we have grown orderly. Tamus was a landmark, and now that he's gone a new epoch has arrived. It's time for some necessary reforms. In the first place, gun-totin' has got to go. It may be hard to convince some of our wild cowhands that a gun butt is a poor instrument to drive staples with. It may be equally hard to convince 'em that our town ain't a place to wreck every pay-off time. But it's got to be done. What we need now is a sheriff who'll represent the dignified progress of the county. We don't want a fellow which the upstate papers will all the time be callin' 'picturesque.' Now, since it is a long ways to election time, I think we can swing it to have appointed a man pro tem who will exactly be what we need. That's all I've got to say, except that my remarks had better not be spread about. You understand."

THE other members perfectly understood. The memory of old King Tamus was as silver and gold to the four irregular corners of Crooked Rib, and it would have gone badly with Mayor Darby Chamberlain had his statements gone aboard to the vast majority who were not so much imbued with the idea of reform. But since a determined minority usually has its way, and since the members of the new commercial club saw eye to eye in the matter, it came about within the week through legal and extra-legal means that an affable and kindly character was summoned from his accounting books at the court house and given the star of authority hitherto worn by the great Tamus Dolliver.

His name was Andrew J. Anders; at forty he was a widower, who wrote a fine Spencerian hand and dressed in black broadcloth with a white shirt and string tie. He was polite to all people, he could talk to anybody, and so far as knowledge went, he had never made an enemy. Coming out of a sedate and orderly occupation, where his most exciting occurrence had been the discovery of an error in a column of figures, he must at first have felt

lost in the battered, disheveled office, where old Tamus had been wont to dwell as a caged lion. And when young Bill Patent entered the place somewhat later, he thought Anders looked a little oppressed. In truth, it was a grim place with its relics of violence. The walls were papered with reward notices and the pictures of escaped men; with drawings and photographs of the more notorious criminals—Tracy's body lying stark and lifeless in the wheatfield, Jake Lilly hanging at the end of a hemp rope, a black cape over his head, the grave of Sam Bass; with the guns that had killed men and the ropes that had caught them, and even a bullet scarred Bible, lying about as evidence of the mortality that surely overtook the breaker of justice.

"You sent word you wanted to see me," said Bill Patent gravely.

Anders looked up from a piece of writing. He smiled pleasantly and motioned to the vacant chair. Bill, who had a sharp eye for details, noticed that Anders' eyes were brown—a bad color for a man hunter. He saw, as well, that Anders' muscles were soft, his shoulders rounding, and his hands were small. The star that old Tamus Dolliver loved to display was tucked discreetly out of sight, nor did Anders wear a gun.

"I wanted to have a little talk with you, Bill," said Anders, lighting a pipe. "You see, one of my first orders was to lock you up when you hit town. Thought I'd better tell you that."

YOUNG BILL PATENT'S homely, sun-scorched face expanded in a grin. Observing that grin, it was not difficult for Anders to understand why old King Tamus had been so tolerant with the wayward Bill; nor why most of the county—with the exception of the reform element in Crooked Rib town—had a sneaking admiration for young Bill's forthright manner of perpetually doing some startling stunt. He was, so to speak, the county's prodigal son; for Crooked Rib was still unregenerate enough to like men with a little bark on them. And if he occasionally broke a few windows in the town, that only made the outlying settlers smile the broader. They themselves often cherished a similar hankering.

"Locked up, huh?" murmured Bill. "Well, maybe a little solitary reflection won't hurt any. I'm usually goin' off half-cocked. Lead the way, Sher'ff."

"The complaint," went on Anders, smoking thoughtfully, "seems to be a lack of proper reverence for Crooked Rib's dignity, coupled with a desire to damage the property of our merchants." Anders paused, tamping down the pipe ashes. Young Bill Patent wasn't sure, but he thought the sheriff was inwardly laughing. "Tamus Dolliver never did arrest you, did he?"

At mention of the name, young Bill grew somber. "No, sir. Tamus Dolliver was a blamed sight more patient with me than I ever deserved."

"Tamus liked you," reflected Anders. "If he hadn't, he'd took you in his big fists and shook you till you fell apart." Anders shook his head, wistfully. "I don't mind saying I'd like to be the man Tamus was. Which is neither here nor there. But I don't guess I'll lock you up, either."

"Don't get in trouble on my account, Sher'ff," said young Bill.

"You ain't bad at heart," pursued Anders. "You ain't mean minded. Point is, you don't seem to fit in. There ain't a suitable place to take care o' your energy. That's the only trouble. Tamus knew it. I know it. But, my boy, there's about a dozen gentlemen in town that don't see it. They've got you marked down for branding. I'm just lettin' you know which shoulder to look over. Take it easy till they sort of forget. Don't shoot any more holes in the town pump for a little while."

"It's mighty white of you," muttered young Bill. "It ain't my place to give anybody any advice. But I do a lot of ridin' around the country and I hear lots of things and see lots of things. That's all I'm good for. I can beat a jackrabbit at his own game. I know every blessed

wrinkle and pine tree in the county. Sher'ff, right now I'm lookin' forty miles off and seein' hell bein' brewed. Folks in town think this country is civilized. They think the old days are gone for good. Shucks! You know why we have peace the past two three years? Because Tamus Dolliver could smell trouble farther'n a bird could fly. There's plenty of crooks in this section, but Tamus had 'em afraid to breathe out loud. And right now there's a lot of peanut sagebrush politicians sayin' Tamus was only an old man that never did nothin' but roar. That's what makes me want to smash furniture.

ANDERS nodded. At that moment he seemed rather old and careworn. "Bill, I'd like to have a man that knew the trailin' end of this job. I'd like to make you my deputy." Young Bill Patent leaned forward. There was plain eagerness on his homely features, but he said nothing at all. Anders kindled his tobacco again, making a wry face. "But that wouldn't get by with the gentlemen who managed to put me here. I've got to stumble along best I can. However, I think you're painting the picture a little black."

Bill Patent pointed a finger at the revolver lying idle on the sheriff's desk. "Listen—don't you ever go beyond the limits of this town without that weapon strapped around your waist. That's how black I'm paintin' said picture."

"What do you know?"

Young Bill was half out of the door. He shook his head. "I'm no tale bearer, Sher'ff. That's as far as I'll go. But if ever you change your mind about deputizin' me, I'll make certain folks in a hurry to cross the boundary line."

He got to his horse and swung out of town; as he passed certain establishments wherein resided Crooked Rib's most ardent reformers, he wrinkled his nose, and the temptation was great within him to inflict a little property damage, to show them what he thought of their lily-fingered tactics. On he traveled, going toward the hills where his cabin snugly lay, and there was never a moment when his sharp eyes failed to record the signs written across the face of the broad earth, or the portents up in the sky. Behind his blunt features was a mind that ceaselessly trapped and sucked dry the varied facts of life about him; he had a wild animal's intuition. Yet it was almost a wholly unconscious process, for he could gather the day's story along the trail while thinking of other things. It was the sheriff who bothered him most, that kindly, soft-voiced man who was bound to fail. It took one with a little of the predatory instinct to catch desperadoes. It took a Tamus Dolliver.

"An' he'd liked me to have been his deputy," muttered young Bill. But the lily-fingered reformers wouldn't stand for that. The lily-fingers were going to put a white collar around Crooked Rib. And everybody must be as spotless as the driven snow. "They'll wake up from that sleep soon enough," was his bitter conclusion.

HE FOUND himself squaring himself a little, for a quarter mile ahead stood Ballinger's ranch-house. And when he came to the gate Sue Ballinger was by it, waiting for him, her cheeks a little rosy and her gray eyes quite welcoming; a slender, supple girl with an inherited courage and a way of sometimes making young Bill Patent ready to sweep the world off its feet.

"I guess I won't be gettin' down," drawled young Bill. "Your dad said something about a barrel of buckshot last time——"

"How long," asked Sue, "are you aiming to let my father buffalo you?"

"Just so long as I got myself buffaloed," was young Bill's answer. "I'm not scared of him, but I know every word he says about me is gospel. I'm born to hang or I'm born to succeed and right now it looks like the hemp has got the best of the start."

"Bill," said the girl, "what you need is so much trouble on your hands you won't have a minute to think. Right now, they've got you licked. They've made you think you're worse than you are."

"It's near the truth," said young Bill, seeing nothing but her loveliness.

"Ask me to marry you, Bill," was the girl's surprising request.

"What would you do, if I did?" de-

manded young Bill, entirely shocked.

"I'd accept. We'd get married tonight and I'd make enough trouble to keep you busy the next fifty years."

"I reckon you could reform me, all right," muttered young Bill.

"You don't need reforming," was her tart answer. "You need a little confidence."

"Lord, Sue! Don't go temptin' me. I'd walk barefooted across the county to have you. But what kind of a yella dog would I be to hitch you up with my name?" He looked down at her, his fist clamped around the saddle horn and the blood a-riot in his head. How was it that in all the twenty years they had lived side by side, he had not seen her so desirable, so sweetly alluring? Young Bill Patent had courage and inwardly he swore at himself until his sanity came back. But he had come near to slipping. The girl saw that as well; she was smiling serenely.

"Go along, Bill. I suppose I've got to die an old maid on your account. I hope I haunt you tonight."

"As if you didn't every blamed day I live," said young Bill Patent and spurred away in haste. Up into the bench he traveled, with the sun westering behind him and the long shadows thrusting through the sparse pines. At sunset he was on his own piece of land, in his own cabin. Along the last stage of his journey he had marked hoofs cutting toward the south, where the Crooked Rib-Tonty road was. And he laid that piece of information beside other odds and ends in his head. The story was plain enough, though, without an end. Well, that end should be coming soon now. Did the lily-fingered reformers think the county was paradise?

HE WAS still in his cabin two days later when he saw Sheriff Andrew J. Anders riding up through the vista of pines. The sheriff was alone and at that Bill Patent shook his head. The man was foredoomed to failure. However, he greeted Anders casually, invited him to light and eat. The sheriff refused, seeming to be in a somber frame of mind.

"God knows, I'm no hand at trailin' and I ought to have some old-timers along with me. But I'll see it through. They've been callin' me a pencil pusher around the county. I didn't ask for this job. But I'll show 'em I can make a try! Bill, how thick is the timber south of here?"

"It'll run a little solid," was Bill's answer. "But those boys didn't take to timber."

Anders set bolt upright in his saddle "What do you know about this, anyhow?"

"Didn't I tell you I could smell trouble forty miles off?" was young Bill's answer. "No, I'm not bluffin'. Yesterday afternoon five men stopped the Crooked Rib stage eight miles from Tonty, took an express box containin' close to six thousand dollars in paper and gold, killed the guard, tied the driver, and made a clean break, headin' toward the hills. You think they're in the hills. Well, they ain't, Sher'ff."

HE SAW nothing but astonishment on Anders' mild face; mixed, perhaps, with a small blend of reluctant suspicion. So young Bill squatted on the ground and began drawing lines in the earth. "How do I know all this? Listen. Little bitty things stick to me like burrs. First, I knew it was a stage holdup because that stage carried the monthly run of money. I knew it was yesterday because I saw tracks cuttin' across my trail the afternoon before. Two o'clock would be the time the stage reached the eight-mile point from Tonty. Why, the eight-mile point? Because the land sort of washes up there and makes a good place to do it. I'm guessin' a little as to the five men, and I'm guessin' a little as to the guard bein' killed. But I know of exactly five gents who travel together and who've been waitin' for Tamus Dolliver to die. Likewise that guard would make a play with his gun to protect the chest. They'd get him for that. The driver is an old hand and would act sensible. They'd likewise put a plain trail behind 'em for anybody to see—but they ain't in this ridge, Sher'ff."

Anders' head dropped to his chest. He

thought for a long, long while. "I can see why Tamus liked you, Bill. You're his kind of man."

"I'll be thankin' you for that," said young Bill.

"Where would *you* look?" asked Anders.

"It would be a matter of some huntin'," was young Bill's indefinite answer. He thought the sheriff was disappointed and he broke out rather strongly, "I carry no tales, don't you see? Put a deputy star on me, give me two days and I'll bring that bunch in dead or alive."

Anders turned half around. "I'd like to. I would. But I'll show this county I've got nerve enough to make the try. They called me a pencil-pusher."

"Don't do it alone, Sher'ff," warned young Bill.

Anders cut his words off sharply. "Would Tamus want help?"

"There's a difference," said young Bill.

"I'm no bloodhound—but what other difference?" was Anders' bitter question.

Young Bill chose his words carefully. "Tamus knew what a bad man would do, he understood how a bad man would act an' think. You see, Sher'ff, Tamus was part bad man himself, only he kept it hid. He had the killer's instinct in him. You got to have claws an' fangs to catch other animals with claws an' fangs."

"I never thought you was shrewd enough to tell that," muttered Anders.

"I'm judgin' by myself," replied young Bill. "There's some o' the jungle in me, too. But you, Sher'ff—you're straight civilized."

Anders turned, saying nothing more. He passed down the trail without a backward glance; young Bill was strongly tempted to follow after, but that would have been a distinct violation of etiquette and so he watched the official disappear, feeling greatly depressed. By what right was that kind and gentle character going out to track down a pack of wolves that would rip the flesh from him at first chance?

AS FOR the sheriff, he left the trail, skirted along the lower reaches of the bench and crawled upward into timber again, arriving at some old hoofprints. They led him from one ridge to another, they lured him far out into the desert and at last to a small area of lava rock. Here he stopped. Those hoofprints looked old, blurred. There could be no danger over there beyond view. What he failed to consider was that a fair wind would abrade the sharp outlines of such prints and make them appear colder than they really were: had he been a Tamus Dolliver he would instinctively have kept to the open, gone around. He would have stalked the fugitives from a different direction, lurked on their rear, cut ahead of them, and at last pounced unexpectedly upon them like a mountain cat, putting the very fear of death in them with his wrath.

Andrew J. Anders was not of that breed. Moreover, he was not thick-skinned and the criticism of the county stung him like salt in a raw wound. And he had a false code in the matter; he believed he had to go straight forward, prove that he had no fear. So he marched directly upon the shoulders of lava rock and passed between them. In the very heart of the volcanic upheaval a bullet cracked across the distance and struck him between neck and heart. He fell soundlessly; he was dead when he struck the ground—a first sacrifice to the reform element who had appointed him to the job.

It may have been entirely by accident, or it may have been by design—for Bill Patent had more good sound shrewdness in him than the county suspected—that he arrived in Crooked Rib town in the midforenoon following the discovery of Anders' murder. There was a meeting in progress at the hotel, attended by a good many outlying ranchers as well as townsmen. When Bill unobtrusively entered, he found that the reformers—and Mayor Darby Chamberlain in particular—were being verbally chastised. Young Bill held his tongue as long as he could, which was until Chamberlain had calmed his critics

a little with a few sounding words and effective gestures. At that point all the old dislike got hold of him and he rose from his back seat.

"Listen, Darby," said young Bill grimly, "you ain't foolin' a soul with that hog wash. You and your lily-fingered friends thought you could whitewash this county and charm the birds with a lot of honky-tonk tunes. It was you that backbit at Tamus Dolliver until he squashed you plenty. It was likewise you that put Anders in the sher'ff's chair. And by Godfrey, it's you that's got his blood to answer for!"

Darby Chamberlain turned savagely on young Bill, his finger stabbing across the space. "What right have you got to horn in here? You're place is in the lock-up!"

"I vote and I pay taxes," shot back young Bill. "I suppose you an' your two-by-four friends think you run Crooked Rib county. You got one good man killed an' I don't misdoubt you'll get more killed if folks let you tinker with somethin' you ain't at all familiar with. What're you proposin' to do about it?"

THAT was a question some others were wanting to know, and the groundswell of comment reached Chamberlain's ears. So he faced about from his antagonistic attitude. "We'll organize a posse——"

"Yeah," broke in Bill, "and telegraph every move to the fellows you're after. Fine! The more you say the less you know. Who's goin' to lead this posse?"

"Well," said Chamberlain, ironically, "maybe you think I'm afraid to do my duty. I'll lead it."

If he expected thunderous applause, he was sorely to be disappointed. None came. Instead, young Bill's answer fell flat and distinct through the room. "Which makes you out a bigger dam' fool than ever. Better stick to your politics an' your dry-goods."

"Then what would you do!" shouted Chamberlain, thoroughly enraged. "Give us some more of that free advice!"

"Personally, I'd get one or two old hands and turn 'em loose," said young Bill mildly. He disliked to speak out in a meeting where so many grayer and wiser heads were to be seen. Some of those fellows had fought sagebrush when he was weaning. Still, he observed that the cattlemen present looked favorably upon him. Chamberlain, however, had a slashing rejoinder.

"I suppose you think you could do it?"

Young Bill thought a moment, about to abandon the controversy. Then he saw Chamberlain wink at one of the reformers up front and that immeasurably provoked him. "Give me three days and a free ticket," he replied very gravely, "and I'll lead 'em back to Crooked Rib—dead or alive."

Chamberlain closed on that like a trap. He had maneuvered for just such a reply. "Done!" And he spread his arms to the crowd. "I guess this meeting's representative of the will o' the county. Here is a gentleman who guarantees to bring in the murderers—absolutely guarantees it. All in favor o' making him a special deputy for that purpose say so."

YOUNG Bill sat down, feeling a little foolish. He'd opened himself to a lot of ridicule. Chamberlain wanted to make a billy-goat of him. But neither he nor the mayor quite foresaw the reaction of the ranch owners and punchers who dominated the meeting by sheer numbers. They rose up solidly. By that token young Bill Patent bought himself a job. Chamberlain stood with his feet planted wide apart and the expectant humor faded from his face. And even for such a nimble-witted politician, it took more than one moment to get in stride with the public sentiment again. At last he nodded his head toward young Bill. "Well, you're it. Fly at it."

Young Bill made for the door. On the threshold, a grizzled puncher put up a barring hand. "He thinks he's got yuh in a hole, Bill. But yuh can do it if it's to be done at all. Now show some o' these high flyin' calico salesmen where to head in."

Nor was that all; a little later at the saloon another and more influential man of the range stepped over to him. "Listen, Bill—yuh do this job right. The county is backin' yuh. Do it up right an' we'll see

yore the nex' sher'ff o' Crooked Rib."

Young Bill permitted himself one drink. He went over to the harness shop and bought two extra lariats, then to the deserted sheriff's office for a couple pair of handcuffs. He tarried there a moment. Somebody had brought in an old picture of Tamus Dolliver and tacked it to the wall—Tamus as he had been in the full flesh of life. He was a burly man, looking a little like John L. Sullivan, and even the neutral tints of the picture couldn't conceal the suggestion of florid vitality in the bold, rugged face. Young Bill studied that picture at length.

"Tamus—when you was young it was a toss-up whether you'd be hung or be elected. Well, you gambled and won. I'm not the man you was, not by a long jump and run. But it's the same with me, Tamus. Either they'll be huntin' me, or I'll be huntin' them. Whole hog or none." And a long while later he added, "Some folks is just cut out for one thing. Either I'll be settlin' trouble or I'll be makin' it. Here goes."

AFTER that he moved with caution, went to the hotel by a back lane and climbed upstairs to a room overlooking the street. Here he sat the rest of the day with his eyes glued on the store across the way. Men and women moved around the place, in and out. One by one he rejected them. It wasn't until near sunset he picked upon an individual coming from the place with a gunnysack filled with grub. Later that man rode east from town at a casual gait. Out of a compartment in Bill Patent's mind where so many stray fragments of fact were stored, came one small item that fitted to this fellow like a glove. Young Bill walked back the rear alley, got his horse and likewise rode east.

"Litty bitty things," he murmured through the coming twilight. He gave the fellow with the grub sack plenty of distance; and thrice left the road entirely, traveling parallel. After an hour, he arrived at a point where a trail thrust southward directly into Crooked Rib's most arid stretch. Here, young Bill got from the horse and in the darkness scraped around on his knees, lighting and shielding a match between his cupped palms. Thereafter he

took the southern trail and traveled at a walk. Starlight came out brightly, the moon was at three-quarters and shedding a luster over the earth's shadows. And again, near midnight, he found himself at a piece of country striped with gullies. The trail ended here, the hoofprints milled about, met those of another horse coming from the opposite direction, and then swung eastward. There had been a meeting, that grubsack had been transferred—it was light enough to see the tracks in the disheveled sand.

"His name," murmured young Bill, thinking of the gentleman who had purchased that food, "is Henrick Tilt and this certainly proves he's the link between that gang and town. All right, Mister Tilt, I've got the dope on you and I'll continue to have it the rest of your natural born life. You're a key that's going to unlock a lot of things in the future."

Henrick Tilt had returned to Crooked Rib by another route; but the particular outlaw receiving the food left a broad trail leading still farther south. Young Bill summoned before him the map of the county as he had learned it through his years of roaming. "The Scored Buttes? Mebbe. But that's country somewhat traveled. He's ridden hard and I don't think he'll go too far before sleepin'. All right—us for the stand of cottonwoods at the bench mark."

HAVING decided this much, young Bill forsook the trace of hoofprints and put his horse to a steady gallop. Quite a wide circle he made during the course of the next hour. In the end it brought him within some hundred yards of a blurred outline standing toward the diamond-dusted sky. He left his horse in a hollow and went forward afoot; with due caution, but yet with the air of one not expecting to find company. Fifty yards off he was on his stomach and the rest of the

distance he covered sinuously. The cottonwoods were without brush, he saw each trunk silhouetted in the moonlight. At the base of one thicker than the rest he took station.

He had no wait at all. Putting his ear to the ground he discovered the earth's invisible telegraph thrumming with sound; and within a few moments he saw a rider silhouetted against back drop of night. The man came straight on, stopped within ten yards of young Bill and dismounted. Something jingled in the half-shadows; young Bill saw the gunnysack of grub drop. Meanwhile, he was discussing an academic proposition with himself. Was it better to let this fellow lead the way to the rest of the outlaws, or should he take the gentleman on the spot? It depended on the validity of the trail this member of the gang had already created in coming away from the others. And if there were four or five or them, decided young Bill, he had better not pass up the present opportunity.

The outlaw was apparently only taking a short rest, leaving the horse saddled. A match flickered in cupped palms and a cigarette gleamed. Young Bill rose behind the tree, crossed a dangerous five yards with his gun raised, and spoke conversationally. "Just remain in status quo, Joe Brimmer. Stop that! You want to go down the long chute? Way up—yeh."

"Quien es?" muttered the outlaw.

"No parley!" snapped young Bill. "Way up, now. Turn around. Face that tree. Lock your arms around it. Steady as so." His free hand whipped forward, seized the man's holstered gun; he leaped back with equal swiftness. "Don't wiggle none." Crossing to the man's horse, he untied the suspended lariat, circled back to the tree. "Put your arms out—nope—keep huggin' that cottonwood. So. Snubbed." And he took a half hitch around the extended wrists; he had Joe Brimmer locked fast against the cottonwood. Then he dropped his revolver into its scabbard and gripped the outlaw's legs. "Slide down a little, sitting on your left shank—shove the right one way around the trunk."

"Bill Patent? Now, son, lend an ear——"

Bill whipped the outlaw's legs into the old Iroquois tie, pushed the man farther down and stepped back, letting the breath pour out of his lungs. There had been a few bad moments in the transaction. Right at present Brimmer was married to that cottonwood. Without another man's help he would never work himself free. Young Bill found a cigarette and smoked it with deep relish; one by one his muscles relaxed.

"How many of you boys, Joe?"

"You go to hell!"

"I'll let a better judge decide that point," was young Bill's grave answer. "I'd figgered five on the deal, but I wasn't quite lookin' for you. So it'll be Sorrel, Little Dandy, Lew Ord and mebbe Rex Yancey. Yu'd be carryin' the grub to 'em. Which way, Joe?"

"It'll be hard luck for you to find which way, Bill."

"Well, somebody's got to die, Joe. You boys split up yet or still herdin' together?"

THE outlaw refused to answer. Young Bill's hands went exploring; he drew a nice packet from an inner pocket of Brimmer's coat. The thin light gave him an impression of what that packet contained—banker's tape was still around the money. "Well, you've divided the proceeds, so you must be split. Sorrel an' Little Dandy would be together, though. Guess I'll go huntin'. Which was first, Joe?"

"You'll die," was Brimmer's short answer. "Ain't I tellin' you?"

Young Bill leaned forward, a match flaring in his fingers. He looked studiously at the dust on Brimmer's boots. Going to the outlaw's horse he likewise inspected all four hoofs. "That red clay sort of sticks to a man, doesn't it? Listen, Joe. I'm not very bright, but I know Crooked Rib County. Well, I'll leave your canteen where you can manage to get a drink. It won't be hot in this clump of trees. See you tomorrow night, or next day."

As he rode through the trees, still going southward, he heard Joe Brimmer call to him. "So-long, son. My regards to all the angels at the gate."

Save for that trace of red clay dust he

would have waited until morning and looked for further tracks. The color of the dust answered his question. Once more he galloped through the frosty night. Right now it was very bright and he saw a good distance ahead. Even the peaks of the Ranger stood clear to sight; yet all this would change and in another hour, when he closed upon the particular location he aimed for, it would be quite black—just before false dawn.

THE wind swept against his cheeks, he heard the sad, weird lamentation of the coyotes along the eastern bench. And his path described a great circle in the desert, reached the rougher land and climbed into the first gradual roll of the up-thrusting hills. Stray pines marched through the darkness, like pickets flung out from the advance guard of an army. Once again young Bill summoned the map of the county before his eyes; it took no daylight for him to know that within another hundred yards he would cross a distinct cleavage of earth and that thereafter the red clay would powder the fetlocks of his own horse. Then he came to a deep bowl, circled it and passed through a grove of trees; and, as if he had been challenged, he stopped. A stray thread of smell wove through the breeze—the odor of burnt wood, the taint of that strong oil clinging to the hide of all horses. He had over-reached a little—he had come too close. Every nerve in his body woke to a twanging protest; he had the sudden chill of a man who looked up to see a cougar crouched above him.

"Yuh made it in a hurry, Joe."

Someone directly in his path. A boot struck a rock and he saw a figure, blurred and formless almost at his stirrup. Before he had time to answer, the man spoke again. "Yuh lost yore directions? Told yuh, didn't we, to come straight up past the rocks?"

His right leg touched the horse, the animal swung closer to the unknown. Young Bill's gun whirled down on the apex of the shadow, struck solidly. The man said nothing more; young Bill heard the sound of him crumpling into the loose soil. Well, he was born to hang or he was born to be elected; and it seemed to Bill then that an unknown power had manifested its will in the matter. The stark thought of infinity flamed through him, left him staring at the stars, gripped by the ancient puzzle of the universe. Presently it was gone and the taint of horseflesh grew more distinct. Young Bill dropped from his mount and took the precaution of appropriating the unknown's gun. He had only to follow the thread of smell; in the succeeding hollow was the camp, marked by a single ember of the fire, gleaming like an evil eye. How many were lying beside he didn't know, but he believed no more than three. Asleep, secured by the guard he had a moment back dropped. A man could only play out his hand as the dealer had dealt it.

He had brought with him a lariat. Halted within the sound of their breathing, he grimly canvassed the list of possibilities. If he heard aright there were only two by the ashes. Where was the third man—if there was a third? This was another touch and go matter, and the passage of time helped him not at all. Therefore, do the wildest thing. A fellow couldn't lean too much on Providence. Not unless Providence had reached down to poke him in the ribs as a moment ago——

He rose, walked quietly into the depression, whispering, "Sorrel——"

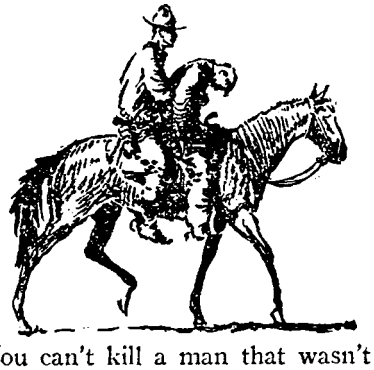
Somebody, he discovered then, sat bolt upright, seeming to be waiting or listening. He caught the bare outline of shoulders in the graying light.

"I thought so," said a voice coldly. The silence was shattered; blue flame spat in young Bill's face. A voice behind him wailed thickly. Young Bill dropped to his knees, very much like in prayer, and a second shot whipsawed him from the flank. The echoes beat about the depression. That had been Little Dandy's voice—he recognized it. Which meant Sorrel was the second man; they were never apart. Must have heard him drop the sentry and waited

for him to walk into the trap. Very queer, but he was firing back with no particular wildness. Seemed like they'd hit him somewhere. The shadow to the front wavered and collapsed sidewise. But Sorrel's metallic words reached him as through a long, long corridor. "Go down, damn yuh, go down! Tryin' to put the cross on us, huh? Yuh mongrel, I should've killed yuh along with the sher'ff!"

"Wrong number," answered Bill. "It's litty-bitty things that stick in my mind. You never ought to've stopped here——"

HE FELL backward; Sorrel sprang up from the blankets and stood directly over him. Young Bill had just enough energy to raise his gun and deliver his last shot. Sorrel dropped like a stunned ox, one arm striking young Bill fair in the face. A dead man had struck. As for Bill, he felt himself borne out on a tide and like a desperate swimmer he fought back; out again with something actually crushing him down, and still he beat back until the mists cleared and he felt a throb along his temple and the blood warm and thick on his cheeks. It was quite cold; dawn cracked above the eastern rim.



"You can't kill a man that wasn't born to be killed," declared young Bill.

AS FAR as Crooked Rib, town and county, was concerned, it was high, low, jack and the game. There had been only four concerned in the holdup and murders after all, for when they came to search Sorrel and Little Dandy—both gentlemen being dead—as well as the bruised Lew Ord and the entirely uninjured Joe Brimmer, they discovered the stage money equally divided between the quartet. What Crooked Rib yearned to know was the particulars and on this point young Bill Patent was obscure. For instance, how had he raised the trail between the town and the cottonwoods where he snared Joe Brimmer? Young Bill never told, for to have done so would have revealed Henrick Tilt's part; and Bill was reserving Henrick Tilt as a decoy duck.

Already, young Bill Patent was looking into the future and building his fences. Standing in the sheriff's office, one side of his face covered with a welt of cloth, he looked about him with an air plainly indicating he was at home and in no hurry to move. He was deputy de facto and he would stay so until the following election. And, being shrewd enough, he knew that he stood alone as the candidate for that office. Tamus Dolliver's star would be his. At which he swung to the photograph of the old man.

"I'm not the fellow you was, Tamus. Not by a jump and a run. But I reckon I know how you felt when you discovered you had got safely over to the right side o' the ledger. It's like gettin' a pardon from the governor. Oh, I'll keep this county sweet an' clean, don't worry none, Tamus. It's the one thing I can do."

He turned out of the office and got into the saddle. His intention was to ride east in the direction of Sue Ballinger's. A little beyond the general store he happened to observe Henrick Tilt leaning against a wall, narrow-eyed, watchful.

"Hello there, Henrick," said young Bill jovially. "How's tricks?"

Henrick nodded briefly; it seemed to young Bill that the man's whole face lightened. Whereat Bill serenely pursued his way. Mayor Darby Chamberlain crossed down by the stables and Bill took pains to draw alongside of the official and to speak quite casually.

"Say, Darby, there's a new rule in effect from now on. Any man enterin' town has got the right to take three shots at the town pump. Objections? No? Well, that's co-operation. I sure thought for a while, Darby, you'd fallen for a lot of this reform guff. Guess I was mistaken—or is it election time you got an eye on?"

A DEBT OF DEATH

By T. VON ZIEKURSCH

Author of "Law of the North," "Quicksand," etc.

THE LONG, HARD TRAILS OF THE NORTH BREED STRANGE BONDS, SEE ODD FRIENDSHIPS MADE, BRING POWERFUL FORCES INTO PLAY. AS WITNESS THIS TALE OF A BITTER PATROL OF CORPORAL MILTON OF THE MOUNTED

THE North's gods laughed in supreme derision. Icy fanged their wind-wolf howled over the forest. The wilderness was a place of blue-white mysticism. Through the night a power moved, it seemed, with familiar tread. That power was death. It touched the earth and the earth was cold beneath its frosted coating. The trees crackled in their agony and burst with muffled detonations. There were shatterings as of glass and the hollow thumps of the icicles that dropped upon the crusted snow. Swishings as of silk garbed spirits stalking down the aisles were given off by the wind that slid through ice sheathed branchings. Strangest of all, amid those sounds, filling the lulls, recurring again and again, dominating all, was silence, vast, omnipresent silence. It was a great power that settled, an active quality, stifling, penetrating.

A week before the Chinook had blown with its gentleness that devastated the legions of the North. The snow crust had softened. On the ledges creeping juniper became visible, eager for the new life. There were vague stirrings beneath the ice as of monsters in turmoil seeking to break the bonds of enchantment that kept them asleep. The white caps on the forest shrunk and were drab beneath the touch of this magic wind that blew from the south and east. Rivulets of snow water cut channels through to the lower levels and mush ice appeared on the lakes. There were softened whisperings that man not attuned to the wild could not hear. It was as though some wondrous message of a resurrection swept through the reaches.

THEN the North's gods struck and released their pack of inanimate furies. Down from the boreal wastes they came in their white armor, hurling the invisible javelins of cold.

The wilderness shrank from this onslaught that came as it was preparing to emerge after the long siege of winter. The rivulets of snow water became lanes of ice. The monsters stilled their turmoil. The dripping white caps of the trees sheathed their trunks in glassy armor and transparent daggers hung from every branching to be wrenched loose as the forest writhed under the wind in fierce play.

The great raven that had rested in the crotch of a giant spruce was fixed there by the ice that formed in the night where his claws gripped and he died in his struggles a day later.

Caught in the vise of ice that came as

a new crust the big grouse lingered and starved, or a smear of ghastly red told where the killers had found them, easy prey in this time when even the slaughterers stirred only to sustain life.

Through the night they moved abroad, ravenous now as the ordeal of cold continued in all its savage animosity. They were silent, too, and moved stealthily through the coverts. Their killings were quick, without long chases, for in this bitter air they knew the torture that would follow exertion with its panting breaths.

The icy days drew out and the depths were ghastly regions of horrors and cruelty to all living things. The awful moaning of the wind died away and that pressing silence filled everything. The hollows were dead places; each forest-clad slope stood a silent watcher above a forbidding world.

THROUGH a dip in the hills where the timber gave way to thinned brush growths a man came. On his wide shoulders hung a pack. He was tall and his limbs were slender. The rifle in its case across his pack swayed and swung with his stride. His wide set blue eyes belonged to the face in which was strength so evident despite the soft beard and the roughness that came of the wind.

Night was coming on, the gloomy, mystic night of the northern winter. Beyond the dip the man stopped and surveyed the region. Where the hills sloped away to a little valley he saw the open ice that told of a small lake, protected by a white sheathed rise that forced the fierce breath of the north up. There was an open space, a space where a man might camp and build his wind-break of brush and his fire, assured that even in the dim glow from the winter sky he could see whatever approached.

He went toward it, downward, his stride easy despite the long hours on the trail. In his thoughts was a slight rebellion. This winter patrol was lonely at times. A hundred miles to the west of the post on the lake, then a hundred miles to the south on the second leg of the big trangle. Then back to the post on the lake. Sometimes there were troubles to be straightened out among the Indians, grievances on which he had to sit in judgment. Occasionally there was a murder, for, though the law rested heavily and struck swiftly in punishment, still half-savage minds were apt to forget.

Far over toward the west were miners, too, white men who were harder to handle than the red. In the spring they gave most trouble, when they came in and fought over the little claims with all the vast reaches of the mountains to choose from. Sometimes, too, those who remained in the fastnesses through the winter came to hate each other, perhaps from seeing too much of each other.

THERE was sickness frequently among both red and white, the plagues that came to those who knew little about and cared less for sanitation. In the pack he carried, besides the cartridges and food, were the simplest of medicines.

Judge and jury, doctor and lawyer, confidant and friend, kindly advisor and guardian, stern instrument of justice, relentless as the fates and lonely as the north itself—that was the lot of the Mounted men, Corporal Milton accepted it as it was, though sometimes in the loneliness came rebellion and longing for companionship.

His thoughts were in that state as he swung meditatively downward toward the lake. Here was an overhanging bank just ahead. The Mounted man stopped short and the rifle came from his shoulder without evident hurry.

He stood looking beyond the bank. Then

he went deliberately down and around it. The tiny, scrawny beast that had been crouching there at the lake's edge turned its head slowly to look at him, and attempted to make off, but its puppy legs were unsteady and it pitched forward. As it lay there cringing it looked up at the man again and its eyes had a bluish glaze.

The Mounted man saw that it was too weak to move. One of its hind legs dragged and was misshapen from a fresh break. Its little body was gaunt with starvation. But it was a wolf, a baby of the killers, a potential menace, one of the outcasts.

CORPORAL MILTON of the Mounted started to draw back the case from his rifle. But the weapon seemed so big and this broken mite of the forest so tiny and helpless as it cowered there. Perhaps it was a month old, perhaps less. The man found himself conjecturing. He looked about at the wilderness, but there were no other signs of life. It was a waif of the storm, born ahead of the ordained time, perhaps of a mother that was old. He knew the ways of the wilderness, and as he stood there studying the little brute its story pieced together. Spring was long overdue. Perhaps starvation had overtaken the mother. Probably the other whelps had died in the cave or under the down timber. This one had made its way to the lake's edge, driven by some instinct that sought to quench the starvation thirst. It had fallen somewhere. Its leg was broken. He should hit it with the butt of the rifle, ending its misery and sparing the wilderness one more murderer.

Instead, Corporal Milton threw his pack off beneath the hanging bank that would break the wind and began gathering the night's supply of firewood. Occasionally he looked at the pathetic little beast which had turned and lay panting as its glazed eyes tried to follow his movements.

Corporal Milton was uncomfortable as he brought armful after armful of branches and some larger logs that would burn long, and also form a firmer shelter in case the wind blew too fiercely. Each time he returned to the lee of the hanging bank the hope was stronger that the pup would have gone. But it hadn't.

He built his fire, melted snow in a pan and threw in a strip of dried meat. The odor of the hot broth was rich. He turned his back to the pup deliberately and started to drink the broth. Suddenly he put the pan down and looked around. The pup was moving, coming toward him, creeping. A few yards away it stopped and lay there with its little head on the snow.

CORPORAL MILTON muttered something that sounded like an oath, got up and grasped the mite of fur gently enough. It shuddered and whimpered, but he carried it back to the fire and sat with it in his lap as he held the pan, still half full of broth, up to its muzzle. A dry little tongue came out and the wolf whelp lapped hungrily and made sucking noises. Once the man would have taken the pan away but the pup's head reached for it and it began to whimper.

"All right, if your little belly bursts I can't help it," the man said.

As the pup finished the broth the man was chewing on some strips of the dried meat that were his trail ration.

Afterwards he moved the fire, pushing the burning sticks to another spot and piling a heavy log on. Then he unrolled the sleeping bag where the fire had been and the ground was warm. The icy thrusts of the wind god's spear glanced off that overhanging bank. The man took some strong little branches, crawled part way in his sleeping bag and began whittling at them with a knife while the pup lay a few feet away, its stomach enlarged against the remainder of its gaunt body. At last the man reached out for it and bound the sticks on that broken leg with thongs that he tied up over its back.

"Now get out of here," he said, "and if you can find your mom maybe some day I'll shoot you when you're big enough to be shot."

Corporal Milton drew the sleeping bag up and a comforting warmth came from the ground beneath, where the fire had been.

Perhaps half an hour went by and he was asleep when something pressed against him very lightly. Almost instantly the flap of the sleeping bag went back. There was a moment of silence, then the man's laugh as he reached out and made certain the rifle in its case was at hand.

"All right," he said, "sleep there if you won't go away, and maybe your mom will be around looking for you."

THE pup nestled close enough, between the man and his fire, its leg in the crude splint sticking straight out. Once it whimpered. The man's hand came from the bag and felt of the injured leg. It was cold. He dropped a shirt over the little brute. The hours passed in silence, cold hours, the long hours of the bitter night. Afar off a timber wolf's ghost howl floated down the reaches, creepy, the spirit of the wildnerness loneliness, with all the unreality of this lost world of the north. The man stirred and the pup pressed a little closer.

Gradually the flame tongues ebbed and the log glowed blue and orange. The spears of the wind's wild lancers shivered off the iced shield of the bank that guarded the sleepers.

Corporal Milton arose and placed another log on the fire while the tiny mite of fur watched him with eyes that glowed greenish. It pushed a little further away in fear as the bright tongues licked up afresh at the new log. Then it settled in contentment again by the sleeping bag with only its head sticking from beneath the man's shirt.

Morning came and Corporal Milton scoured out the pan with hard snow, then melted more and made broth while the pup's eyes followed each move as it lay there. Again the man drank half and the whelp lapped eagerly until its belly puffed roundly.

Corporal Milton laughed and suddenly the laugh faded. As he sat there looking at the baby killer of the forest realization came that it was all not so lonely now, that probably he had not laughed in a month before finding this imp of the wilderness. His life, its very mode, left little opportunity for friendships. In that realization was something that drew him toward the wolf pup. Corporal Milton was perplexed. He watched it. The bones that had stuck up through the fuzzy fur along its spine the night before were not so much in evidence. The gaunt touch of death seemed to have faded around its ribs. It made an effort to stand as in newfound strength, but the splint was cumbersome and it fell and cried. There were markings on it, too, that made him study it more closely. Somewhere there had been a cross of the dog. He was almost certain of it. But that happened sometimes where the redmen bred up their huskies from the wild and where they occasionally reverted when the wild cross became dominant. Its muzzle was a little heavier, slightly thicker, and its tail had a slight upward curl at the end.

THROUGHOUT the day as Corporal Milton swayed in his snowshoe gait the wolf whelp rocked clumsily in the hood of his capote that hung down on the pack. Late that afternoon he shot a caribou and there was fresh, bloody meat for the pup, fed to it in little bits by the man as they sat near the fire while strips of the flesh hung in the branches of nearby willows to freeze. Next morning the pup actually tried to run about at the man's feet and play fiercely with a chunk of the meat, but the splint was too cumbersome and it fell and snarled eagerly, holding the meat by its forepaws.

Corporal Milton pretended to walk off without further heed. The pup ceased its play and watched him. Before he had gone a hundred feet it whined, then yelped a plaintive, squealing cry and, as he went on, it hopped after him, whining, the bit of meat it had been playing with forgotten, until he picked it up.

THREE weeks later as Corporal Milton came into the Dog Rib encampment where the Stikine widened into a lake the wolf pup was hobbling after him on three legs, a sturdy little thing. The dogs from the village, half famished, fierce brutes, made a rush but Corporal Milton lifted the wolf whelp and carried it, a broken branch serving to keep the huskies at a distance.

For two days Corporal Milton remained at the Dog Rib village, counselling the redmen, telling them that the law was their friend. Then one of the old men looked on the wolf whelp with appraising eyes and

asked for it. Seeing that the Mounted Man hesitated he said: "It will run away from you, back to the forest soon, anyhow, and I will keep it so that when the long snows come again it will pull my sled."

Corporal Milton hesitated. The gift of a dog among them was a gesture of friendship of deep significance. He opened his pack and laid its contents before the old redman.

"I took the wolf from the forest when it was hurt and could not run," he said. "It has followed me and eaten at my fire. Its tongue has touched my hand as I fed it and it has reached my heart in the loneliness. If it goes back to the forest I give it back where I took it. I am sorry."

The old Indian turned from the proferred gifts of tobacco, meat and cartridges.

Next morning the Mounted Man swung away toward the north and east, back toward the post on the lake. The whelp was heavy now and a strong little brute. At last the crude splint was taken from its leg and it followed in the tracks of the man, to be carried only when it tired as an aftermath of its long inactivity.

From the east came a warm wind that softened the snow crust and little rivulets cut gullies in the white surface. The soft fatness of the welp gave way to a strong body and it became more independent of the man as it wandered in widening circles from his track. Then it caught a rabbit that sat beside a hummock where the sun of spring had melted away the snow. It caught and killed and the hot blood of its kill lit wild fires in the wolf whelp's brain. It was strong, built up by the steady fare furnished by the man. There was a lump on one rear leg, the leg that had been broken and poorly set, but that was no hindrance to its speed. Having gorged on the rabbit it yelped once, a weird, rolling cry that was deeper than its puppy yelps. A long time it lay there beside what remained of the rabbit. A porcupine came lumbering along. The wolf pup snarled and the quill pig edged away, bristling. Late that day it finished the rest of the rabbit and in the twilight loped toward where it had left the man.

Darkness settled. Things were moving in the night, strange things to the wolf pup, great forms that rustled and made the brush crackle. A vague timidity was upon it and it skulked from covert to covert, while miles beyond the Mounted man sat by a lonely camp fire and called occasionally into the blackness that gave no answer.

THE next day the pup caught a grouse by creeping upon it after two others had flown up to the safety of low branches when the pup rushed upon them. Thus it learned to stalk and kill, to take life in order that it might live. Only at night it longed for the warmth the man had given it; perhaps, too, for the touch and odor of the strong hand that had caressed it when the fears of starvation and hurt were upon it. Occasionally it whined its loneliness for the man. But that food the man had given it so regularly in its babyhood was showing effects now. The wolf pup was a big, strong-limbed creature, limping ever so lightly in its shuffling gait. It had a courage that might have come from those long weeks with the man who taught it no fear, weeks during which it should have been learning the skulking ways of its own kind from its mother. But if the man's association had been kindly it also had its drawbacks, and the wolf pup had many things to learn. It had to find out through hard experience that there were things in the forest to be avoided. A wolverine gave it a terrible thrashing when it came to take a rabbit that the pup had stalked and the pup fought to retain its kill. The pup's flanks were torn terribly and it lay in a swamp where it could lave its wound in the cold water for nearly three days, days during which memories made it whine often for the man who had befriended it. Then a moose cow made a lunge for it and narrowly missed crushing it with those mighty hoofs when the pup failed to give

her calf a sufficiently wide berth. Gradually, out of these incidents, grew deep hatreds for almost everything with which it knew contact.

HUNGER came to the pup, too, and new wariness with the things it learned. Its flanks were thinning out but those long haunches were sinewy, and the thick new hair that came was of deepest gray. The summer months brought increasing power and swiftness to long, lean muscles and all the cunning of a wild hunter to the brain that had never been taught by the mother who disappeared into the night to die and leave her brood to their fate.

Sometimes during the warm months the pup in his ramblings came across others of his kind, but they were unsociable and he wanted none of them. In him, somewhere, was a barrier that was not easy to pass, a barrier of blood other than the wolf. He was a lone wanderer of the reaches. Once, too, he found the trail of men, and the man scent. Wild eagerness came up in him, but this scent was different. It was not the scent of the man in whose capote he had been carried, whose warm body had protected him, who had fed him from a pan on which the man's lips had left their own scent. It was not the odor of the man whose hand had stroked the hip that ached so terribly as the sticks were tied upon it and who had picked him up and protected him when the fierce Indian dogs rushed upon him.

He crept along, following the scent and came upon a camp of the Dog Ribs, the same one he had been taken to by the Mounted man. A stream was nearby. Fires glowed in the darkness and figures moved. The scent of fish came to him from the drying racks. A motley gathering of dogs sat beneath, yapping and howling except when a stick hurled in their direction sent them yelping.

AS THE pup lay beyond the edge of the brush in the clearing, watching the wonderous scene of the encampment, the low sound of a moccasined foot nearby made him look up. Twenty feet away were two Indians. His interest in the scene had been so great he failed to notice their approach. Before he could leap back to the sanctuary of the coverts one of them made a swift motion and the rifle bellowed fiercely right at him. He saw the burst of fire that came from its muzzle as something struck him a terrible blow on the haunch and bowled him over. The bullet had raked and torn him along that flank. It had shocked and the roar of the trade gun terrorized him, but he gathered his shattered powers and fled as the fierce dogs of the village came to hunt him through the depths where he fled, dragging his terrible hurt. He lived, but fresh hatreds were born, hatreds of these men and their dogs, deep, awful hatreds that came of agony and the fires of fever.

Life was harsh to the pup. Nature taught him her lesson, that beneath her beauty and her quietness was a hostility that must be constantly met to live. He became a master killer who existed by the cunning of his brain, the ferocity of his onslaughts and infinite patience learned of the early days of his immaturity when his rushes had been unavailing and only through stalking and understanding had he been able to take the little wild things on which he fed.

PERHAPS the early start under the care of man, perhaps the necessity for living that first summer on his own resources or a combination of the two was responsible for the superb brute he had become when the first snow fell and the effects of the bullet wore off at last. Swift, silent, with his great young fangs perfectly capable of hamstringing a moose he hung along the edges of the lakes before they froze, long since aware that here the caribou came most frequently and were less wary in the knowledge of their closeness to the sanctuary of water in event of danger. There he lay in the coverts, waiting, his slanted, amber-hued eyes half closed, his sloping haunches stretched out in rest until hunger drove him to his kills. He learned to make the charge of the attack, the whirl and leap with loose hanging jaws that sent him hurtling like a gray wraith in front of, past, and back of the caribou calves. He had brought down two

moose cows alone and stalked off surfeited when others of his kind came in response to the message of blood that rode down the wind from his banquet board.

There was a strangeness about him toward them. He had seen them in the nights and heard their voices rolling through the aisles of the wilderness, but was content with his heritage of loneliness, a wanderer of the depths without friendship.

OFTENER now he heard the chorus of the pack cry as they swept through the forest and there were impulses to answer, to lift his head high and let out in a wild burst of pulsing sound the things that were seeking expression. At last came another cry, high pitched and drawn. Something in him beckoned immediately. The roar that came from him was of utter loneliness. In a swampy bottom he met her, the young she-wolf, and even as she lured another male came in answer to that first cry.

There were swishings in the dark, the cracklings of brush and quick, soft rushes of padded feet as they fought, in silence. Occasionally they came together as horsemen in a charge and reared on hind paws, slashing at each other's throats, but mostly their attacks were furious thrusts and parries of fang on fang until the interloper fled, horribly torn. But victory brought no fruits to the young conqueror, only gaping slashes about which the blood froze on his gray hair where he lay alone in the densest coverts. The foe had been a worthy one and the mate he had sought was gone. His strength, too, had departed through the wounds the wolf gave him in that fierce battle. His body fevered and he whimpered. It may be he longed again for the man who had brought him relief that time he was hurt and starving as a pup. It may be, also, in the fever of his hurt, he felt again in imaginings the stroking of the man's hand. He nearly died, but the body hardened in the crucible of the wild served to bring him through, gaunt and starving, at last.

The strangeness that had been in him toward his own kind was increased through this experience. He lived and hunted alone. Once, that spring, a lambent ground breeze curling up from the bottom brought him an old scent, faintly discernible as his nostrils moistened eagerly. A low sound came in his throat. He quartered that breeze like a hunting dog. His low hanging tail came up as he swung back and forth and his wrinkling muzzle almost touched the ground. He found the camp site with its ashes of fire and the spot where the man had slept. That was the spot where the wandering breeze had picked up the man scent. But the ashes were cold and the vague scent lost itself as he loped in a widening circle, for the man had been gone two days before. That night two spots of opalescent flame paled and brightened from the brush near where the camp had been, but the man did not return, and in the morning the wolf dog was gone in the mystic depths.

A WEEK later he came out in the little valley by the lake where the man had found him. Perhaps memories welled up. He pawed and sniffed among the logs and branches that had been the man's wind-break. The elements had long since removed the last vestige of scent but it may be also that memory found for him what his keen nose could not. And here also was the overhanging bank. At its base he pawed and dug among the rocks until he had scooped a den in which he could lie and look out upon the spot where his only friendship had started. He returned often to that den and lay there, great muzzle on forepaws, looking out.

That spring Corporal Milton was transferred from the post on the lake to a station far to the south and east and another man came into the northland to take his place. The seasons passed and others came in the cycle of duty to the great loneliness of the North, to the round as judge, jury, friend and avenger, to advise and administer and protect.

The wolf dog became a monster, a massive gray monarch of the reaches, cling-

ing to the peculiarity which made him shun his kind except when mating instincts lured commandingly. At other times he hunted alone and took as he chose, by wile and strength. His sinews were mighty, his muscles tireless. He limped still in his shuffling gait from that injury of his babyhood, but it was no handicap.

Then came a winter that brought trouble, when the caribou sought new feeding grounds amid the muskegs far toward the east, when the rabbits developed the little yellow spots and died and there was hunger among the tribes and pestilence broke out and the headmen in the villages were forced to accept the decrees of the shamans that their troubles were due to failure to adhere to the old gods.

AUTHORITY was brushed aside in the North. The wilderness became a place where death was very close to the surface, where the laws of man and nature were cast off. Murder and death rode the cold wind that came down from the waste places in the night. Into the midst of this the cycle of duty of the Mounted, changing its forces, sent a man, a tall man whose limbs were slender, whose hair was graying above his wide set blue eyes that belonged to the strong face.

He came through the storm, far to the westward of the post on the lake. A hundred miles to the west of the post, then a hundred miles south on the second leg of the big triangle, and back. He'd known it years before. It had seemed easier then. Perhaps he'd been more eager in the long ago. The beard that grew in days on the trail was thicker now and there were gray streaks. But the years had brought him the reputation for solving troubles. Would this story never cease? Even his tireless

muscles were wearying of the endless battle against the wind. It was cold. The wind-wolf roared over the white frosted world like a mad thing. Somewhere toward the west the Stikine came down out of the hills and widened into a lake. There'd been trouble at a village there. Years before he'd visited it. He must be right in direction! Two days back he'd lost the compass, but that didn't matter. He carried it only perfunctorily.

The North's wild gods laughed in supreme derision and spun him under the fierce shock of their wind lances. Driven ice lashed beneath the hood and seared across his eyes, blinding him. He swayed, rubbing at his face. The blue-white glare had inflamed his eyes despite the smears of black he'd daubed about the lids with ashes from the previous night's fire.

TWILIGHT was settling and the cold was more intense. Groping, the man made his camp and the brittle twigs of the brush tore at his face as he searched for firewood. In the warmth he sought the ease of sleep, but the pain in his eyes was too great. He refused to let himself think.

Morning brought no relief. His eyelids were swollen almost closed. The cold was bitter, but the blue-white glare was gone as a wind driven ice mist spun across the face of the world. Hoary maned, the titans of the boreal reaches rode their mad white steeds in swishing charges, shivering their icy spears in merciless thrusts that bent the forest. There were screechings that lowered away at intervals to a subdued, eerie wail as though ghosts in the hidden glens called one who was soon to join them. Feeling blindly in the ashes of his fire the man smeared his face with black to lessen the agony that came with the light. At last he tried to go on. Dim, pinkish glows came to him through the horror of his swollen eyelids. He went slowly, groping, stumbling, falling. Ice was forming on his lashes. Where his breath touched his beard became like glass. He crashed face downward in the brush, arose slowly and went on. Like an evil spirit the wind raged at him, tugging and smashing. The day was waning. His head throbbed with hot fires.

Graying purple the twilight came, bearing the cold mysticism of night in its robes. He was in a dip amid the hills where the timber gave way to thinned brush. Here the hills sloped to a little valley and

there was a small lake, protected by a white sheathed rise that forced the fierce breath of the North up. There was an open space beneath an overhanging bank, a space where a man could camp. In the center of it was a pile of old logs and branchings, decayed and fallen, that might have been placed there years before as the shelter of man.

THROUGH the twilight came the distant howl of a wolf. It quavered and moaned across the dead world, fading on the wind to be answered by another.

On the crest of the white sheathed rise above the lake the man slipped and plunged headlong. The rifle slid from his shoulder as he rolled to the very edge of the overhanging bank and fell amid the snow and rocks below.

As he lay crumpled there safe from the fierce touch of the wind, through the gathering night came that howl of the wolf again, a moaning, pulsing voice of death and terror. It was haunting, full throated, eager, and others merged with it, the pack cry of the wild hunters on the blood trail. The man's body stirred very slightly, perhaps a sub-conscious urge.

Except for that eerie swishing of the wind as though spirit garments rustled over the iced world there was silence, the omnipresent silence of the winter wilderness. Closer, bursting the bonds of the silence, wailed that quavering, awful throb of the hunting pack that added a chill more ghastly than the touch of the North's metallic breath.

THEN another sound roared over the wilderness. Skirting the edge of the lake to that spot beneath the overhanging bank where he had come so often in the years since the man had camped with him

there and placed the crude splint on his leg the big wolf dog came in his shuffling lope. That afternoon he had dragged down a caribou and feasted alone, secure against disturbance in the power of mighty fangs that the wilderness knew all too well. He was old and slower, ordained to his lonely wanderings by the heritage of his crossed bloods, hating the wild gray runners of the forest, hating the dogs that had chased him as a pup from the vicinity of the Dog Rib village, hating the redmen who had wounded him, hating the things he killed to live and hating the things that would have taken his kills from him. He was an outlaw of nature and an outcast of man. His hair was grayer, his fangs a bit worn but deadly still and his thews heavier with the heaviness of age, but mighty.

The blood of his last kill was still on his long muzzle, frozen there. He was grim, repulsive, and he shuffled through the brush in contemptuous security, the pale flame of his eyes brightening to a greenish glow as the hunting cry of the wolf pack came closer. They were sweeping through the dip toward that white sheathed rise which ended at the overhanging bank beneath which he had scooped out the den where he could lie and look out as though on a spot where old memories came to ease his loneliness. He heard their cry afar, heard it coming nearer as he approached that spot, and once he had stopped in his shuffling lope to throw his head back. His throat expanded and out of the great, red maw of his mouth came that awful roar. It was more fearsome than the cry of the wolf, deeper, filled with an awesome challenge. In it was utter defiance as it rolled and echoed.

THEN he went on, a little faster in his lope and the flame in his eyes burned more brightly. Across the lake's edge and past the old pile of decayed wood that once had been a man's wind-break he loped. It seemed to him a scent he had never forgotten came to him again. But that was an old trick of this spot. He was almost to the entrance of his den when he stopped short. The heavy mane came up a little more and his head lowered. He sank to his belly and his nostrils were wrinkling as they sought the currents along the snow surface. He crept forward and the opalescent flares played in the depths of his eyes. Slowly he was creeping closer

to the dark form that lay huddled so near the mouth of his den. A low sound came from it, an almost inaudible moaning. Ten feet away he halted, crouching as though to close in his deadly lunge. His great muzzle was extended toward it; the flames were brighter in his eyes, the eyes of the fierce killer who had wrested life from the wilderness.

He was moving, a little nearer, on his belly, creeping with little perceptible motion. Closer, his head swaying, searching for the vague scent; closer he came. Only a few inches separated his muzzle from the face of the man, the face that was swollen and battered.

The great wolf dog's head swung around as he lay there, flattened. He was looking out onto the dark world of the frost, across the lake. His head lifted and he peered up at that overhanging bank. Great white fangs bared. Then his head sank. The inches that separated his muzzle from the unprotected face and throat of the man diminished. Something warm and moist touched the man's face, something that was rough. The odor of blood from his last kill was fresh on the wolf dog's muzzle. Again his tongue licked the man's face, and from the dip where the hills lowered to that little valley came the full burst of the hunger cry as the pack swept in, ten of them, huge, fierce brutes, perhaps sensing the helplessness of their quarry.

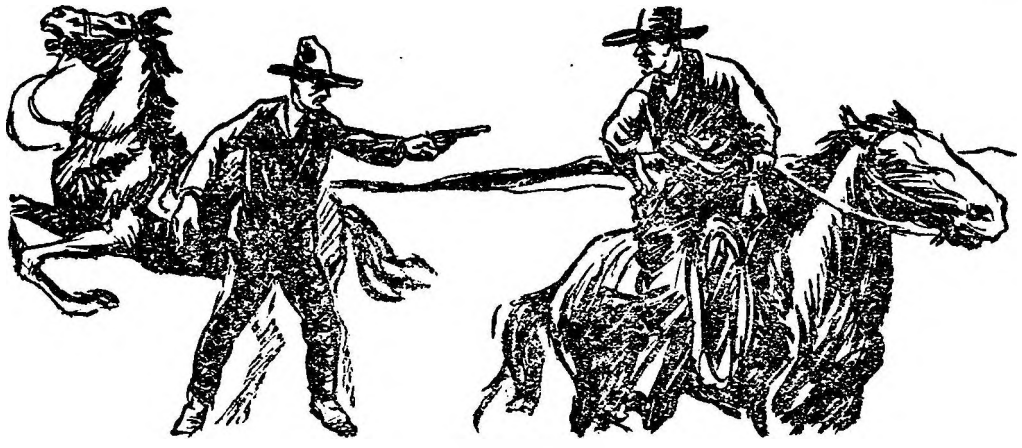
DOWN toward that ice sheathed rise they sped, close together, and the wolf dog reared suddenly above the man. Like a burst of deep rolling thunder his roar split the night.

As they came around the edge of the overhanging bank, ravening in their great hunger, he met them. Five feet from the man he stood, braced, his rear paws spread wide. In the darkness and the storm there were sounds, fierce, horrible sounds. He did not fight as his instincts and experience had taught him to fight, leaping, scarce touching the snow. Perhaps he knew that then some might pass him. There were whirling bodies, soft, clashing sounds and raspings as though metal met metal or fang scraped bone, and ghastly sickening crunchings, with short yelps of agony. But the wolf dog made no sound.

A dark figure slunk away into the night, and another. At last the silence of the North settled, broken only by the moaning wail of the wind. A great, shaggy body came beside the man. It seemed to droop, pressing close against him. Once a warm tongue licked his face and there was fresh blood on that tongue. Gradually the wolf dog's body stiffened where it lay, and it kept the curling eddies of the ice spirit's breath off the man.

IN THE morning two wandering Dog Ribs saw the pencil of smoke from a distance and came toward the lake. Wondering, they watched the man whose face was swollen and whose eyes were inflamed and almost closed. He sat beside the body of a huge, shaggy brute with gaping slashes in its neck and flanks, slashes out of which the life blood had flowed and frozen. The mitten was off one of the man's hands and they saw that his fingers ran slowly down one of the wolf dog's legs. They stopped and were gentle. There was an enlargement, a swelling as of an old break that had never been set just right. Something that wet the man's face came out of his swollen eyes and he gathered the stiffened body of the wolf dog close in his arms. Near the overhanging bank were two other bodies, and a third had dragged itself to the edge of the brush near the lake to die.

One of the Dog Ribs was old. His face lighted with recognition of the white man. His people had known and respected him long ago, but he did not understand as Corporal Milton insisted that they help him fill the little cavern with loose rock, covering the body of the great beast they had seen him take in his arms while tears came from his half-blind eyes.



A TEN THOUSAND DOLLAR ROMEO

By E. S. PLADWELL

Author of "The Freight Boss," "The High Trail," etc.

IN SPITE OF HIS DETERMINATION TO KEEP IT QUIET, THE WHOLE COUNTRY SEEMED TO KNOW ABOUT THE $10,000 THAT JOE HOLLIDAY WAS BRINGING BACK FROM A CATTLE DEAL. AND IN THE END EVEN JOE COULDN'T TELL HOW MUCH OF THE POPULATION HAD BEEN AFTER IT

JOE HOLLIDAY, in a new blue-serge suit made in Chicago, ambled with his locked bag across the patch of uneven blackness known as Main Street, making for the well-lighted porches which ran along the northern border of the dirt thoroughfare. At the depot behind him, the engine of the Limited gave clanging announcement that it was about to resume its journey toward Yuma and the Coast.

He came into the brilliant light thrown out upon the Saturday night crowd of porch-loafers by the wide open doors of the Pinal Grande Saloon and Dance Hall. Many pairs of eyes went instantly in his direction. He smelt danger. One or two voices called, " 'Lo, Joe!" but the rest only nodded while their glances went swiftly to the small black bag in his left hand, and then with more leisure toward his broad-brimmed hat, sandy hair, cheerful blond face, blue eyes, blue shirt, purple necktie, serge suit, and the high-heeled boots inside the ends of his trousers.

A hand grasped his left arm. Big Bill Woods of the Cold Spring ranch confronted him.

" 'Lo, Joe. On your way home?"

"Yep. Have a drink?"

"We-el, all right."

BUT when they stood at the long bar where throngs of citizens moved all around them, Bill leaned toward his friend.

"Watch yourself," he whispered. "The whole town knows you've got ten thousand dollars!"

"No!"

"Yep. You'd better get your pony out of the stable and then fan the wind. Some of these ruffians would cut your throat for half the money."

Holliday looked around. Nobody seemed to be watching him, yet there were shifty eyes and furtive faces here, and some of these well-armed persons were extremely tough.

"Funny they know about it," he remarked.

"Somebody blabbed. Old Man Winters sent you east with a herd, didn't he? He

wanted you to bring ten thousand cash so he can buy out those two sections north of his place, didn't he?"

"Who talked?"

"Maybe he did. The old man's that way when he celebrates. You've got the ten thousand, haven't you?"

Holliday nodded.

"Then, skip! And you'd better watch that satchel like a hawk!"

HOLLIDAY looked down at the shining black bag in his hand.

"Yeh," he admitted, "I'd sure be out o' luck if I lost that! Phew!"

"Need any help?"

"No. No, thanks. I'll get through, all right. They know I'm a pretty good shot. Besides, it's a personal matter." Holliday looked uncomfortable and his face flushed slightly. He blurted, "Nellie got the old man to send me East. He didn't want to. Said I was just a darned fool cowpuncher. Nellie said I wasn't a darned fool cowpuncher. She said I had brains. So—well—I've got to make good."

"Uh-huh," agreed Bill. "Nellie's a mighty fine gal. You're lucky. Have another drink?"

"No. I'll take your advice. Thanks."

Holliday got out of there. He strolled down the board sidewalk, halting once to buy some tobacco, and again to arrange with a teamster briefly about a future load of hay. Then he resumed his journey toward the stable, feeling the comfortable bulge of a short-barreled forty-five in his rear pocket.

OLD OTTO SCHMULZ, whose whiskers were like a saint's, came bowing out of his doorway, rubbing his hands as Holliday approached. The lights inside the Schmulz store gleamed on a helter-skelter array of jewelry, trunks, lamps, cutlery, saddlery, old boots, second-hand remnants, and anything else which Schmulz could get together by honest means or otherwise. Nobody ever knew how he conducted his business. Even the sheriff was baffled. Still, Schmulz was a real jeweler, and that was why he had business with Holliday.

"Please," came his soft voice, "I want you should pay for your tiamond ring."

Holliday came to a standstill.

"But I can't pay you now! I've just got back from Chicago!"

Schmulz made a gesture of infinite regret.

"Two mont's you ain't paid me. How can I live? You are a honest man. You will pay me efferything now. Sure. Else you will give me my tiamont back, no?" The jeweler leered shrewdly through his spectacles.

"I can't give *that* diamond back!" yelped Holliday, and then he spoke more coolly, "Besides, I paid you two hundred. You said you'd wait three months for the rest."

SCHMULZ admitted it with a doleful wave of his hands.

"Sure. I am sorry. But cash I need now. Comes rent; comes a wife sick; comes bad news. I must have money or get your tiamont back. I do not like to. No. But give me a little money. Please. Or I must get my tiamont back."

"My gosh!" groaned Holliday. He did not wish to let Nellie know of this time-payment plan.

"Fifty dollars?" insinuated Schmulz.

"Haven't got it."

"Tventy-five?"

Holliday frowned.

"I can give you fifteen," he hesitated, "but that pretty near cleans me."

Schmulz bestowed a grateful smile and a welcoming gesture.

"Sure I take it. Anything. Come inside. Come in. Yes. A receipt I give you, to keep the account straight. Sure. Ve are business men. Yes. Fine night! Nice veather!"

SCHMULZ still rubbed his hands as he went into the store and around behind the end of the tall counter in front of the left wall. Here he halted to fumble in an old cigar-box for pen and ink.

Holliday laid his black bag alongside his left foot. Looking vigilantly toward

the door where intruders might be watching him, he drew a purse from his left hip pocket, took out three five-dollar gold pieces, and laid them on the counter.

Schmulz clutched them and then grasped Holliday's hand warmly.

"Shake! Some peoples run avay from paying money, but you—you pay vether you like it or not. I like to meet such people! Shake!"

At Holliday's left foot, a long arm in dirty blue denim reached along the floor and around the outer corner of the counter, curling its silent fingers upon the handle of the black bag. With miraculous swiftness the bag was whisked out of sight. With equal promptness an exactly similar bag made its appearance, resting alongside Holliday's foot. The whole transaction was done in two seconds.

OLD Schmulz wrote his receipt with much clucking and tongue-twisting. Holliday corrected his spelling twice and then looked down. The black bag stood innocently alongside him. His left hand lifted it while his right took the receipt.

"There!" said Schmulz, coming from behind the counter and making for the door. "The money comes in goot time. I needed it!" He bowed, rubbing his hands. "Come again. Soon. Often. Thank you. I like to meet people like you!"

But when Holliday's footfalls ceased sounding on the board-walk just outside, Schmulz went rearward with a little throaty chuckle.

"Ha-ha! Some people use six-shooters to get rich in this country, but me—I use brains!"

He leaned over his counter. He peered down to where one Snifty Gibbons was making himself small. Schmulz clucked. His rat-faced helper scrambled erectly to his full five-feet-six, holding the black bag concealed in a grain-sack while his wobbly blue eyes almost popped from excitement.

"Open it!" he whispered. "Less see it!"

Schmulz smacked him across the mouth with one hand while grabbing the grain-sack with the other.

"In this place? Fool! You vant I should get a bad reputation? Shut up! You stay by the store. I go to the barn on Villow Creek to see Tom Cully and the gang. Yes. I vould not hold out on Tom Cully. No, I am honest. Besides, it is not goot business!" Schmulz wagged a solemn finger in the youth's flabby face. "Remember! Do not forget! Nothing crooked goes on in this store; everything is honest in plain sight here! Now, keep your mout' shut and vatch the store. If anybody comes for me, I am nobody knows vhere!"

BY THIS time Holliday, with his black bag, had mounted his buckskin pony and was letting it race along the northern road to take out some of its excess vim after two weeks of enforced idleness in a livery stable stall. The first two miles fairly flew past. The town went far behind and its cultivated acres were succeeded by vast stretches of bare rolling country with a few occasional clusters of trees to denote the presence of a ranch-house.

Holliday's mount, slowing down, was nearing one of these extra-dark places under a row of trees when a sudden object leaped out from the left, so swiftly that he could hardly yank up his reins before it arrived. It had been lurking here silently to make a standing jump at him.

There was a clatter of hoofs, a thud, and the feel of a warm and heavy body shoving into him. Then came the colder feel of the muzzle of a six-shooter at the back of his neck.

His horse seemed to stop itself.

"The bag!" commanded a heavy bass voice.

There was no argument. The highwayman's unoccupied hand already had found it and yanked it out of Holliday's grasp.

Apparently the man then tucked the bag in his arm, for his hand again touched Holliday, running over his thigh, vest and chest in a search for the usual six-shooter and cartridge-belt. There was none, and luckily the fellow failed to touch the right

hip pocket, which was resting almost on the saddle.

The highwayman drew his hand away at last with a grunt of satisfaction, though his revolver was still held at his victim's head.

"That'll do," he growled, with a new tone of arrogance. "Git off that hoss!"

"But——"

"Git off, I said! I'll not speak again!"

HOLLIDAY, under the gun-muzzle of a robber whose bravado was now superb, eased himself down from his pony while the darkness hid the quiet movement of his right hand as it went to his hip pocket and tugged out the short-barreled forty-five. The other's gun-muzzle was still at his head, but suddenly the highwayman took it away, wheeled his horse, drew it ahead, and kicked Holliday's outraged buckskin in the stomach.

The pony jumped straight up as Holliday fired at its assailant. His pistol sent a lurid yellow flash across the road.

He fired again, but the sudden frantic movements of the two horses and the rider created so much noise and commotion that he stepped backward and raised his revolver muzzle toward the skies while waiting for a better target.

His own pony launched itself toward home. He knew it was gone for good.

The amazed highwayman whirled completely around before his own gun could spew a thunderous blast of fire and lead into the road. Another shot blazed forth, but above the loud explosions came his scandalized voice:

"My God, he's got a gun!"

Holliday fired at the voice. The robber's dark shadow loomed high in the air as his horse arose on his hind legs. Holliday pulled the trigger again.

"Damn you, you've shot my horse!" howled the highwayman, who was sending tremendous blasts of lurid flame even as he floundered near the ground.

"Yes, and I'm aimin' to shoot you," promised Holliday. "You crook, drop that bag before I blow your head off!"

In reply came an explosion of flame which belched almost into his face, but he wasted no time in replying to such futile marksmanship. Running forward, he stumbled over a hind leg of the dying pony, and almost butted his head accidentally into the robber's stomach.

The highwayman remembered with sudden horror that he had fired all his cartridges while the vengeful Holliday still had a few more in his six-shooter. With a bellow of despair, the robber hurled his revolver in the general direction of Holliday and then turned around and began running away. For a moment there was only the sound of his clumsy boots thumping on the hard ground. Then he dropped something with a muffled thud.

HOLLIDAY leaped at it. His left hand fumbled on the smooth sides of his black bag, closing delightedly upon the handle, though his right hand clung to the gun whose barrel was still pointed toward the slowly galloping highwayman. Beyond that vague black figure, square lights began to appear. A dog's barking became persistent. A swinging lantern under the further trees threw its dim radiance upon the white outer walls of the old Gordon ranch-house, indicating that the Gordon family was starting to look into this racket.

Holliday fired a shot into the air.

"Halt!" he yelled.

The fleeing highwayman decided to obey, tossing up his hands just as old Paul Gordon and his two sons, armed with shotguns, came into the roadway up ahead and held up their lantern so that its wan rays illumined the wheel-tracks and the two figures. In a short time, while Holliday stood in vigilant silence, the Gordons came up carefully to the surly ex-highwayman, whose eyes were blinking in the light thrown straight into his bearded face.

Holliday came around from his rear and recognized him instantly.

"Why, that's Jake Plummer, one of Tom Cully's gang of robbers!"

The white-whiskered father of the Gordon clan inspected the prisoner and then nodded while pointing a thumb toward the black bag.

"Yep. He wanted that ten thousand, I guess!"

Holliday took a sharp breath.

"My gosh, does the whole country know about that?"

"We-el," observed Gordon, "it looks like it, don't it?"

"It sure does!" Holliday turned resentfully toward the bandit again. "So Tom Cully sent you after me, eh? Is that it?"

"No," growled the robber.

Holliday gave a dry laugh.

"The whole country knows about my ten thousand, doesn't it? What's become of Cully, then?"

The bandit kept staring at the ground, but after a long silence he felt compelled to speak:

"Cully had his own scheme. Him and some friends."

"What was the scheme?"

"I dunno."

"Why not?"

The robber tightened his lips, but the silent stares of four pairs of eyes caused him to squirm and then to mumble.

"He said he didn't need me. He said he was goin' to use brains this time. He said you'd never know what happened to yuh. Brains! Hell! That's no way to treat me after all I've done for him!"

"So you used your own brains," concluded Holliday.

"Still," broke in old Gordon, "this here business is beginnin' to look serious. There's somethin' mighty suspicious goin' on, Holliday. You'd better let us lock this here scallywag in the woodshed alongside our Great Dane while we ride to your ranch with you. I don't like the looks of this thing!"

SO IT was done. Holliday and his friends arrived without further incident at the Winters ranch-house three hours later. Lamps were lit in the front parlor to await his expected coming. Nellie Winters leaped joyously into his arms. Her father gave him a formal hand-shake, greeted his neighbors courteously as they came across the threshold, and then marched up to the onyx center-table where Holliday had set the black bag.

He found it hard to open. He labored for more than a minute.

"It works sort o' stiff," he observed, wiggling the key in the lock.

"Well, you got through all right, anyhow," complimented his future father-in-law.

"Uh-huh." The key clicked. Holliday's hands pulled the bag open. "There. There's the most important thing—— My God!"

He took two steps straight backward. His face grew white, his hands clutched at empty air, and his eyes bulged with sheer disbelief as they stared at six newspapers and an old bed-sheet rolled up inside the treacherous black bag.

His voice yelled of its own accord:

"And I got into a gun-fight—and killed a good horse—for that!"

The guests stiffened and stood on tiptoe to gaze at this family catastrophe. Nellie Winters' alarmed hands went to her throat. Old man Winters' mouth came open.

"The money!" he croaked. Then he waved his anguished hands at Holliday. "The money! The money! The money!"

"Oh, that!" Holliday walked backward into a great armchair. "I knew some idiot would blab about this money, so I took precautions. It's a tough country. A fellow has to be careful." His body doubled up as his hands tugged the left boot off his foot and out from under the long blue trousers. He turned the boot upside-down, shaking it. Five crisp yellow thousand-dollar bills fluttered to the red carpet. The other boot yielded a similar flurry. "But that's not what worries me," mourned Holliday, looking up pleadingly at the girl who was smiling at him. "The most important thing is lost. At least, it's the most important thing to me. It was something for you!"

Old Man Winters had given a little joyous cry and was starting with arms outstretched toward the yellow bills lying on the carpet; but the piteous consternation of the young lover in the chair caused him to halt and to make sounds in his throat which resembled a person choking on a fish-bone.

"Hell!" he exploded. "If I knew I was sendin' that sort o' Romeo back east——"

"Well, he brought back the money," placated old Gordon. "Didn't he?"

Winters checked himself and produced a bandanna handkerchief to mop his face. He began to get a new viewpoint on this thing.

"That's right," he conceded, slowly. "If it hadn't been for that black bag, somebody might have looked into his boots. Yeh. I guess he had the right idea, at that."

"Joe used his head, didn't he?" triumphed Nellie.

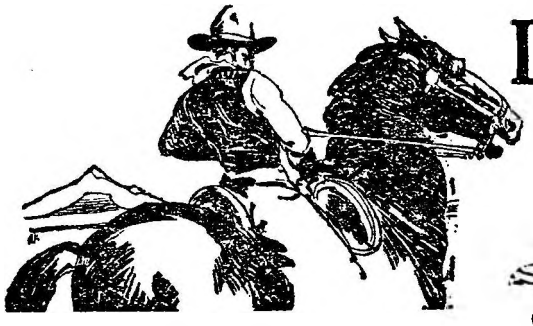
"I sure admire the way he used his feet," admitted old Winters. "He's got a lot o' brains there."

"Thanks," said Holliday, drily. "My feet compensate for your mouth, then. It looks like we'll be a happy family, after all!"

"Eh?" gasped Winters; but slowly he began to comprehend what Holliday meant, and thereafter the young man had no further trouble with his blushing father-in-law.

At this very moment, some twenty miles southward, in an old barn lighted by a dirty lantern, a rascally old storekeeper and seven fierce-looking bandits with six-shooters at their hips were glaring at a black bag containing a box of elegant chocolates and a lovely sky-blue Japanese silk kimona.

But something in their manner indicated that they were not entirely satisfied.



I'll Say I'm Living

by

Clem Yore

I AM not a-cravin' riches,
Nor them dude-like, whip-cord breeches;
And I ain't a-countin' stitches
Though a stitch in time saves nine.
But I'm sure plumb full of yearnin',
And my daggone heart's a-burnin',
For a trail that's just a-turnin',
To that home-like "spread" of mine.

My old roof is poles and thatch,
And my door ain't got no latch,
But I sure knows how to batch,
Sizzle bacon, and all that.
There's no walls of alabaster,
But there is a mortgage-plaster
Which I'm sure a-goin' to master,
When my dogies gets their fat.

Oh, I loves the smell of cattle,
And the clash of horns a-rattle,
And the hoofs like shots in battle,
When my herd is on the prod.
Just beyond my shack, off yonder,
Where the pine trees point and ponder,
There is where I loves to wander,
When I'm getting close to God.

So, I rides and ropes and sings,
Builds me castles, blows me rings,
Gets a wife and other things,
As I dreams before my fire.
While the coyotes yip and call,
And my big bulls paw and bawl,
Why, I've got no grief a-tall
At my ranch of heart's desire.

DEVIL'S KLOOF

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "The Trout in the Milk," "Witchcraft," etc.

HERE IS A BOOK LENGTH COMPLETE NOVEL OF THE MAJOR, AND IT DEALS WITH HIS EARLY ADVENTURES. INDEED IN TIME IT ANTEDATES ALL THE MAJOR STORIES PUBLISHED LATELY. IT TELLS OF THE TIME WHEN EVEN THE MAJOR WAS NEW TO SOUTH AFRICA. HE WAS FRAMED AND PAID THE HEAVY PRICE. AFTERWARD, WITH THE FAITHFUL JIM HE DARED TO TREK THE TRAIL THAT LED FAR OUT TO THAT DARK PIT IN THE VELD WHERE LAY HIDDEN FABULOUS WEALTH SAID TO BE GUARDED BY RAGING SPIRITS THAT PROVED NO LESS DEADLY BY TURNING OUT TO BE MURDEROUSLY ALIVE

Chapter I

STREETS OF CAPE TOWN

A FIERCE southeast wind was blowing, warning the seasoned residents of Cape Town to seek the warmth and shelter of their homes. The white cloud, which all that day had been hovering like a white, damask cloth above Table Mountain, darkened and spilled itself down the steep slopes, fogging the valleys and making the town a place of howling desolation.

For a little while the winding streets were alive with a cosmopolitan horde of hurrying people, but soon they were deserted, left to the white police and their native helpers, to an occasional belated merrymaker and to those who preferred to work when the fogs swirl down and the street lights flicker.

Addison Street was even more deserted than the others. In its whole length there seemed to be but the two men who had met under a lamp light. One was a policeman; the other, a man in evening dress, wearing an opera hat rakishly tilted to one side.

"Evenin' officer," he drawled affectedly —and a monocle gleamed in his right eye. "Regular London particular, eh, what? And cold! My word! Thought this was supposed to be the bally tropics?"

He shivered and made a great show of swinging his arms in order to induce circulation.

The officer looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you doing out alone this time of night, Percy?" he asked.

"I am on my way to my hotel. And my name is not Percy; it's Aubrey St. John Major. But you may call me Major, dear old pal of my youth, if it pleases you."

"What's the name of your hotel, Willie?" the other asked stolidly, ignoring the opportunity offered him.

"The Mason—and my name is *not*——"

"Better get to it then," the policeman interrupted curtly. "Know the way?"

"Oh rather: Yes, quite! I proceed in the way I was going for a little way, then I take a side street——"

"Better keep off the side streets, tonight, Reggie, and go the long way home. It'll be shorter."

"My word!" exclaimed the man who called himself Major. "You're a very exasperating fellow. Of course I shall take the short cut to my hotel, and my name is *not* Reggie. It is——"

"I heard you the first time, Algy. And you be warned by one who knows—you keep to the main streets an' keep in the middle of 'em."

"But why, old thing?"

"New to the town ain't you? Just come out?"

"Well—er—yes. I think it would be correct to say I've just—er—come out."

THE policeman nodded. "Thought so. You look that way. Look as if only the other day you was hanging around stage doors, doing the lardy-dah! I wish you'd tell me something I've always wanted to know; why do chaps like you wear a window in one eye. If your eyesight's bad, why don't you wear specs?"

"That's a poser, dear old representative of the law. But you wouldn't expect a one legged man to wear two cork ones, would you? No! Of course not. So, having only one eye weak——"

"Thought it was your brain," the other growled.

He of the monocle appeared to consider this.

"Maybe you're right. On the other hand a monocle does improve the appearance, don't you think? Paints the lily, as it were; provides that final touch of—er—elegance, what? Oh, well—I must toddle along. But why must I keep to the middle of the street?"

"Because there's men in this town that 'ud cut your throat for a quid. You're just the kind they get fat on—damned fool dudes who ought to be tied to their mamma's apron strings. Good night."

He turned on his heel and clumped off down the street muttering something about, "Another damn fool remittance man who thinks he's still in London."

The monocled man beamed after him, an expression of boyish good humor on his smooth, clean-shaven face; then, whistling cheerfully he continued on his way.

Presently he turned down a narrow alley leading off Addison Street, and here, by reason of the murky gloom, was forced to proceed at a slower pace.

He was conscious of some one ahead of him, could vaguely discern two shadowy shapes. Voices, muffled by the fog, sounded as if raised in argument. The voices sounded louder: a man's in threatening anger, a woman's tearful and entreating. The shapes presently materialized out of the yellow murk and "the Major," as he had already begun to be called—for this was early in his South African career—saw ahead of him a woman and a man. The woman was crouching back against the wall, cringing, looking up in fear at the stick the man raised threateningly above her head.

"Help!" she screamed as the stick was brought down with brutal force.

The stick was raised again, but before it could fall the Major rushed up and wrested it from the man's hand. Instantly, two other men rushed out from a doorway where they had been hiding and closed in on the Major, hitting out blindly, kicking, cursing. Their very eagerness to finish him quickly proved their undoing for they got in each other's way and made it possible for the Major to shift his ground so that his back was against the wall.

"This is most extraordinary," he gasped, and caught one of the men flush on the point of the jaw with a powerful uppercut, sending him over backward, striking his head with a thud on the hard pavement.

THE other two attacked half-heartedly; cursing and blaspheming, gasping in pain whenever one of the monocled man's blows got home, and that was frequently, for despite his soft, helpless appearance, he delivered his blows with the strength and precision of a well trained boxer.

Presently his attackers wavered, calling upon the fallen man to get up and help them. When he failed to reply and their intended victim left his position, carrying the fight to them, they lost their courage entirely and, taking to their heels, vanished into the gloom which had spewed them forth.

The Major, scarcely breathed, turned to the woman, intending to offer to escort her to her home.

She was bending over the fallen man whose limbs were now stirring feebly with returning consciousness.

"If you'll allow me, madam," the Major began with a courtly bow.

She jumped to her feet at that and rushed at him, threatening to tear his eyes out, accusing him of attacking her innocent, harmless man, making the night echo with her strident cries.

He retreated before her savage onslaught, protesting feebly, shielding his face with his arms, sighing with relief when she finally left him and returned to minister to the man he had knocked out.

"My good woman," he protested timidly, "I assure you I meant no harm. Had I

known that you and your—er—worthy partner were simply indulging in one of the little luxuries of—er—connubial bliss, I wouldn't have interfered for the world. Positively. I thought—I give you my word!—that he was going to knock *you* out. Of course, I couldn't see very well—hence my mistake. I—er——"

His voice trailed off into silence at her wordless snarl of contempt.

He bowed again and said, "Then, in that case, I'll bid you a very good night."

He turned on his heel, but, as if that was the cue for which she was waiting, she rushed after him, wildly brandishing the stick with which only a little while ago her man had appeared to threaten her.

"You ain't goin' to get away as easy as all that, mister!" she cried. "Not if I know it. You killed my man and you're goin' to pay for it."

As she spoke she struck at him again and again, blows meant to kill, blows which missed their objective by reason of the Major's uncanny intuition and agility.

He found breath, beside, to expostulate with the woman and, finally, when fearing that his cries would call out other denizens of Cape Town's cosmopolitan underworld he sought to take refuge in flight, he found his way blocked by a tall man whose bearded face was spasmodically lighted by the red, glowing end of a cigar.

BETTER stay and have it out with her," the newcomer said sardonically. "Why don't you knock the cat out?"

"Oh, really!" the Major protested, glancing over his shoulder, relieved to find that the woman had gone back to her mate and was sitting on the pavement beside him, holding his head in her lap.

"Oh—I see," the other said. "I thought for a moment you were one of the gang. What was it all about?"

The Major briefly recounted what had happened.

The other laughed.

"God! You must be soft. Don't you realize yet that it was all a put up job?"

"You mean?"

"Why, the man pretended to thrash his woman, pretty sure you'd butt in. Then, they planned to do you in with help of the other two, take all your valuables, strip you—and you'd be another brutal murder."

"'Pon my soul! And they nearly succeeded. The officer was right. I ought to be tied to my—er—mother's apron strings still."

The other struck a match, shielded it with his cupped hands so that its yellow, flickering light shone in the Major's face.

"A monocled dude, eh!" he exclaimed. "It's a wonder they didn't kill you."

He let the match fall to the ground, where it flickered for a moment then went out.

The woman came running to them again, sobbing, cursing.

"The blighter! He's killed Piet! He's killed Piet!"

The newcomer interposed himself between the woman and the Major, placed a restraining hand on her arm. Curiously, she submitted willingly to his authority.

"Let me deal with her," he said over his shoulder. Then to the woman, roughly, "Shut your fool squawking, there's nothing the matter with your Piet. He's only shamming so that this gentleman here

won't hit him again. Here—let's go and have a look at him."

The two moved away and bent over the man called Piet. A match flared, then another and another. The Major watched them uneasily, half inclined to join them, half inclined to hurry away, wondering at their low, murmuring conversation, impatient at the lengthy time that the inspection of Piet's injuries took.

"I say——" he began nervously, and moved an impatient step toward them.

THE tall man rose swiftly and came to intercept him. The woman remained on her knees, sobbing softly.

"He's in a bad way," he whispered. "I am no doctor, but I should say he's split his skull. You'd better get away from here before those others come back with more of their kidney to help them. Where are you staying?"

"At the Mason. But——"

"Good," the other interrupted. "You go on there, and I'll stay here and help the woman get her chap to a doctor. I'll bring you the doc's verdict to the hotel. Who shall I ask for?"

"Major—Aubrey St. John Major. But I say, this is awfully good of you. I——"

"Not a word, old man. You'd do the same for me, I know. Off you go now. I'll bring you word as soon as I can."

The Major hesitated; he wanted to see for himself the extent of the fallen man's injuries. Then Piet groaned dismally; the woman cursed the author of her man's ills. The Major took to his heels and ran. The others waited in silence until his footsteps had died away in the distance. Then, as the injured man and woman rose to their feet, the bearded man laughed softly.

"You ought to give up highway robbery and go in for acting, Piet," he said sarcastically. "You fool, you ought to be more careful who you select as easy marks."

Piet groaned, a hand to his aching head.

"Hell!" he swore. "He looked as simple as a cooing dove; looked like a bloomin' know nothin' dude, he did."

"He's a dude, all right, and brainless. But he's got muscle, Piet. He's got muscle." He laughed, as if the idea amused him.

"I'd 'a' muscled him," Piet growled, "if them other two 'ad 'ad any guts! The swine! I'll get even with them for that—leavin' me in the lurch like they did. And look here—what did you let him go for, Soapy?"

"You call me Richards, *Mister* Richards, and I'll like you better, Piet," the other replied suavely. But there was a heavy threat underlying his softness. "I let him go for reasons of my own, because I think I can use a fool dude who can use his fists the way he can. Glad I happened along this way when I did."

"As if you wouldn't have been 'angin' around, anyway," Piet countered, "to make sure you'd get your share of the pickings."

"Yes of course," the other agreed easily. "You see, Piet, I'm not sure that I can trust you to divvy up fairly."

Piet growled inarticulately.

"Beside," put in the woman, "we don't want the dude, Piet. I've got all he had worth having. Look! It ain't much. I imagine his remittance is overdue."

PIET struck a match and by its feeble light examined the watch and chain and the small handful of gold and silver coins which the woman held out on the palms of her hand.

Richards laughed.

"You'd be rich, Piet," he said, "if you'd let Bess boss things. She's artistic, you're too fond of the rough work. Now I'm going to the dude's hotel, and I'll take his watch and chain with me. Maybe, as I've said, I can use him. If I find I can't, why I'll make him pay through the nose for killing you, Piet. So long." And he strolled slowly down the alley on his way to the Mason Hotel.

CHAPTER II

THE MAJOR LOOKS AT HIMSELF

ARRIVING at his hotel, Aubrey St. John Major went directly to his room on the ground floor at the rear of the

building, lighted the gas, partially undressed and donned an elaborate, gold brocaded dressing gown. That done, he sat down pensively in a Madeira wicker-chair, lighted a cigarette and gazed thoughtfully about the room.

It was in a state of utter confusion. The floor was covered with trunks of all shapes and sizes; some were packed, locked and strapped; others, their lids open, empty, waiting to receive whatever their owner decided to put into them. Hanging from hooks in the wall was a small armory of weapons—two Lee-Metford service rifles; hunting guns of divers calibers, revolvers and hunting knives, and boxes of ammunition. Arranged in a neat row along one side of the room was an array of boots; brown riding boots with spurs attached; stout walking-boots; rope-soled deck-shoes, a pair of mosquito-boots and several pairs of patent-leather pumps. The huge, four-poster bed was piled high with clothing—white drill riding breeches, white silk shirts, underwear and sleeping suits; white sun-helmets. On the floor a pile of thick, woolly blankets and, nearby, another pile of linen sheets, pillow cases, table napkins and towels.

The Major sighed, and looked thoughtfully at the thumb of his right hand and rubbed it tenderly; it was slightly swollen and very painful.

"Piet's jaw must have been frightfully tough," he muttered. Then he frowned, remembering his late adventure, wondering how it was going to turn out. "Hope the bounder won't peg out. If he's as soft as all that he had no bally business in the footpad trade. It'll be frightfully awkward if I have killed him. No one would be prepared to believe my evidence if it came to a murder trial. No!" He smiled bitterly. "No one would be willing to believe the word of an—er—ex-convict, while the woman would undoubtedly find a lot of witnesses to swear that I attacked Piet with no provocation whatever. My word, yes!"

HE ROSE to his feet and, with the sureness of a much traveled man, busied himself in packing his equipment, clearing the things off his bed.

As he worked his thoughts ran on.

"Yes, it 'ud be deucedly awkward if I were arrested for murder. That would just about finish the governor back home. The dear old boy, for some reason or other, is always too willing to believe the worst of his youngest son. Of course I've been a bit of a lad—but nothing vicious. Harmless scrapes at the worst! Oh, well! Maybe it's because the governor's so darned upright himself that he can't understand my little—er—failings. Just the same—" and once again the bitter smile hardened the lines of his face—"he was not playin' the game about that last affair. I wrote and told him all about it; I gave him my word of honor that I was innocent, that I'd been 'framed'! But does he believe me? He does not. He sends his—er—final blessing and five hundred pounds with the instructions that I'm never to darken his doors again. That means I'm an exile from home. Oh, rather! I must learn to forget all that England ever meant.

"And there you are. At least the worst is over except for the sentimental side of it. I've served my two years on the breakwater, less time off for good behavior—punished for buying a diamond illicitly—only I didn't buy it; it was given to me. And I didn't know it was a diamond. That's that! But let's see, now: How do I stand? By Jove! I think I'll draw up one of these—er—balance sheets or whatever the clerk laddies call them. Yes, I'll do that."

Chuckling softly at the humor of the idea he sat down in his chair and on a large sheet of writing paper wrote, awkwardly by reason of his injured thumb, the following items on the "assets" side, making running verbal comment as he set them down:

Four Hundred pounds (*cash*). "And I'm glad I know how to play poker. Judging by the way I've succeeded these last few days I might make a good livin' as a professional. But the company I would have to keep is not very—er—entertaining. So that's out."

Plenty of clothes, guns and ammunition; horse; buckboard with eight mules. "And poker won me all that. I didn't like taking the buckboard and mules from that bally

Boer. But then, the blighter shouldn't have tried to play with an extra ace or two up his sleeve."

Good health—quite strong. "Thanks to the governor who always insisted that games were worth more than brain."

Good rider and shot. "Thanks again to the governor."

Some knowledge of native languages. "Thanks to hours of most fatiguing study while a pupil at—er—Breakwater Prison College."

Speak the taal fluently. "Thanks to a Boer warden bribed—" he sighed heavily —"with the ring returned to me by the girl I thought I was going to marry.

"And that would seem to be the sum total of my assets. Except—'pon my soul I almost forgot him—except Jim, the Hottentot. Now how about my liabilities. First of all:

Wear a monocle. "Of course I might cease wearing one. And yet, I rather fancy it has its uses. And I'd be blind as a bat without it. At least I'd feel deucedly bare. No: I'll continue to wear it and accept it as a liability, if it is one."

Look and talk like a silly ass. "Well, I can't help that. Maybe I am one. I think it quite likely when I consider how easily I was trapped two years ago, and how simply I walked into that bally business tonight. 'Pon my soul! I don't believe I'm safe alone."

No knowledge of the country. "That, of course, only time can rectify. But I'll start about it at once. Yes. Tomorrow I'll go on trek up country. I'll pick up Jim, if he's still waiting for me, at Umbalose's kraal and get off the beaten track for a while."

An exacting conscience. "Which is a bally nuisance. But maybe I can kill it in time if I try hard enough.

"An' now how does this balance up?"

He read what he had written and smiled ruefully.

"I don't seem to be anything for a fond parent to be fond of. Perhaps the governor was right."

HE TOSSED the paper down on the table, rose to his feet, lighted another cigarette and continued his packing.

There was a covert knock on the door.

"Come in," he shouted, not bothering to look up from his task.

The door opened to admit Richards.

He looked around the room, stroking his yellow pointed beard with one hand, nervously fingering his high collar with the other. His prominent Adam's apple moved up and down like an agitated thermometer.

"Here, Major," he said in a hoarse whisper, "it's a good job you're nearly packed. You'd better get out of town first thing in the mornin'. I'm afraid it's all up with Piet."

The Major straightened himself slowly and turned to face his visitor, let his monocle drop into the palm of his hand, polished it absently and stared, slack-jawed, at Richards.

"Are you trying to tell me," he said, "that our mutual friend Piet has—er—been gathered to his fathers? Why it's incredible, I broke my thumb on his bally jaw, thus proving his jaw was harder than my blow."

Richards smiled mournfully.

"Yes—and when he fell he cracked open his head which proves anything—or nothing."

"Is the blighter dead?"

"Not yet, but I don't think he'll last long. The girl thinks he'll be around in a day or two and I bribed her to keep her mouth shut. But she's in love with him, and if he dies she'll be out for revenge. So you'd better make tracks up country without delay."

"I'll start in the morning. I was going to anyway." The Major's wave of the hands indicated the packing he had been doing. "But sit down, have a cigarette, and a drink? There's the whisky, help yourself. I'll join you as soon as I've got this trunk strapped up."

He turned to his packing while Richards sat down, helped himself to a large drink, lighted a cigar and gazed sharply about the room.

He grinned contemptuously at the piles of clothing and the very new guns.

Then he stared at the Major's broad back and at the man's face which was reflected in the mirror opposite.

The monocle was gleaming again in the Major's eye and it seemed to deprive that man's face of any glimmer of intelligence.

RICHARDS looked his man over, with the eye of one accustomed to appraising the worth of others, from the corners of his well groomed, jet-black hair to his small, well shod feet. He looked again at the Major's kit, at his ornate dressing-gown, at the white hands on which, undoubtedly, much care had been lavished; he thought of the Major's folly in allowing himself to be trapped by Piet's crowd and gave full consideration to the way in which the Major had fought off the men who had attacked him.

Richards carefully considered all this, then came to his decision.

The Major was undoubtedly a brainless fop with little thought beyond clothes, possibly a remittance man undoubtedly well supplied with money. A man who looked soft, physically; who looked less than his five foot eleven, but who was, nevertheless, stronger than the average, and knew how to use that strength.

Coincident with Richards' arrival at that decision, the Major sat down facing him, on the trunk he had been packing. "That's all I do tonight. An' look here, Richards, I'm no end grateful to you."

Richards tugged again at his collar. A large diamond ring sparkled on his middle finger.

"Nothing to thank me for, dear boy, nothing at all."

"Oh, but there is. And look here—just occurred to me—even should this fellow Piet die, why should I—er—depart in haste? You would be witness, surely——"

"You forget, Major," the other put in, "that I only witnessed the girl trying to stop you from leaving the scene of the assault."

The Major lapsed into silence, toying with the frogs of his dressing gown, yet his lazy eyes never left Richards' face.

"And," Richards continued, "as you'd already planned to leave tomorrow, anyway, why take any risk in stopping over?"

"That's true. Never thought of that."

"I suppose you're going on a hunting trip. How I envy you lucky young devils who came out from home, well supplied with money, free from care."

The Major sighed.

"Yes: I envy them myself."

"But aren't you one?" Richards exclaimed.

"Far from it, dear old friend of my bosom. Far from it. You behold in me a limb, as it were, chopped off the family tree. A black sheep, cast out of the fold, and there's no one to hear my bleating. I have spent the last penny which will be given me from the family coffers; with it I bought all this and an equipment to take me way back of the beyond, where, dear man, I intend to find my fortune. The gold mines of Solomon, or buried treasure of the old Portuguese explorers."

"Or diamonds?" Richards suggested softly.

"No! Positively not diamonds—not yet."

RICHARDS raised his eyebrows skeptically but made no remark. His cigar had gone out and he reached over for a piece of paper which was lying on the table, intending to make a taper of it to light at the gas jet above his head.

It was the Major's balance sheet.

He looked at it covertly, stared slightly when the Major said laughingly:

"Yes, go ahead and read it."

Richards read, cleverly masking his feelings, finally expressing great astonishment.

"You must have been out here a long time to be able to speak the *taal*."

The Major nodded.

"Over two years—but I spent most of the bally time in prison. You see, when I first came out I went up to the diamond fields and some one made me a present of

a diamond. I thought it was deuced kind of him until, a little later I was arrested, tried and found guilty of I.D.B. I learned the *taal* in prison, and a lot of other things." A smirk of satisfaction passed over Richards' face.

"So that's why you're not interested in diamonds, eh? But I should have thought you'd want to get your own back on the chap who framed you."

"And so I do, and so I shall." The Major's voice was now hard.

Then almost immediately the old, vacuous expression returned to his face.

"And so I do," he repeated smoothly. "And I want to get even with the bally syndicate responsible for the law which made my arrest possible. Yes. And I know exactly how I am going to do it—I worked it all out while I was working out my—er—sentence. I shall write to all my friends and tell them not to buy any more diamonds; and I'm going to form a society for 'The Abolition of Diamonds in Engagement Rings.' That will bring the prices down and ruin the syndicate. Quite a clever plan, eh, what? And so simple."

"Yes, but very slow," said Richards, masking his look of contempt. "But I can set you on to an easier way than that. A friend of mine has a lot of dealings with the I.D.B. gentry in Kimberley and he'd have a lot more if he could only find some one he could trust to run the diamonds down here for him. It'd be easy for you to do it, hardly any risk. No one's going to suspect you of carrying for I.D.B.'s. You'd pose as a silly ass dude, on an hunting trip. You look the part——"

"You are not suggesting, are you?" the Major interposed with a show of dignity, "that I'm a silly ass? Because if you are, let me tell you that I'm not."

"I only said you looked the part," Richards assured him hastily. "And you have to admit that's true."

"Yes, I'm afraid so. This bally monocle——"

"Well, what do you say? Will you do it?"

The Major considered it and then slowly, regretfully shook his head.

"I'm afraid not. It's—er—hardly honest, is it?"

Richards held out his hand.

"Shake!" he said heartily. "And, let me tell you, Major, that it's a pleasure to shake the hand of an honest man. I'm glad to see that your past unpleasant experience has not made you bitter. I was trying you out just now. Had you agreed to run diamonds for my mythical friend, our acquaintance would have ended here and now. As it is—shake!"

THE Major, evidently greatly embarrassed, took Richards' hand in his left. "My right hurts like the deuce," he said by way of apology, and having shaken the other's hand he fidgetted with his eyeglass.

Richards nodded complacently and, leaning forward, tapped the Major on the knee.

"Look here," said he, "you say you've made plans to leave here tomorrow and that you're practically broke, save for all this equipment. Are you heading anywhere in particular?"

The Major shook his head.

"No, save that I have to go first to Umbalose's kraal and pick up a Hottentot servant of mine. Then I—er—head for the wilds, as it were."

"If you'll go on an errand for me, I'll give you five hundred pounds and a fifth share in the profits, if any."

"Sounds interesting," Major drawled. "What do you want me to do?"

Richards rose and tiptoed to the door, his finger on his lips warning the Major to keep silent. He opened the door suddenly and looked up and down the corridor. Satisfied no eavesdropper lurked outside, he closed the door and locked it, then he drew the curtains across the French windows which opened out onto the grass plot at the rear of the hotel.

"Can't be too careful," he said in answer to the Major's puzzled look, and returned at length to his chair.

CHAPTER III

TREASURE OF THE VELD

NOW, listen," he began in a low voice. "Ever hear of a place called Devil's Kloof? No, I see you haven't. Well, that's

where I want you to go for me. I'll tell you why. You must have heard the story the niggers tell about the blasted place? No? That's surprising. Thought everybody had heard of it in one form or another. The

niggers say it's the place where all the wicked spirits live. They say they have been appointed by the Big Spirit to keep guard over a hole in the Kloof which is full of diamonds. They say as any man who goes near the place'll die a nasty death before the day's out."

"Oh, I say," the Major protested, moving uneasily, "and you want me to go there? Really!"

As if seeking to cover up his nervousness he took down his monocle and polished it vigorously.

Richards looked at him contemptuously, ran his finger around the inside of his collar, and continued, his Adam's apple moving uncannily as he spoke.

"Wait a minute. I haven't told you all yet. Now seeing how this niggers' tale is pretty generally known, and seeing how there's always a smattering of truth back of stories of this sort, you won't be surprised when I tell you that a lot of expeditions have been fitted out in the past years and've gone searching for Devil's Kloof. And the queer part about it is this: Although most every nigger knows the legend you can't hardly find one who'll admit to knowing where Devil's Kloof is; and them who says they do know where it is won't tell, no matter how you treat 'em." He laughed harshly. "And I ought to know, I've treated them all sorts of ways myself —from nearly killing them with kindness, giving them all the rotgut their bellies would hold, to stripping the skin off their backs with a *sjambok*. But not a peep could I get out of them. And here's another thing, not so funny. Some of them expeditions was never heard of again, and I knows of two or three men who had gone looking for the pit whose bones were afterwards found out on the veld."

"My!" the Major exclaimed in awed tones. "That would seem to indicate that there's something in this bally story, eh, what?"

IT MIGHT mean most anything," Richards said sourly. "But the only thing I'm interested in is that nobody has found the Devil's Kloof. Nobody, that is—" he dropped his voice to an impressive whisper —"except me."

"You!" the Major exclaimed incredulously. "But you're not dead."

Richards laughed.

"Not so as you'd notice it. And that means, I take it, that there's nothing in this story of the niggers."

The Major looked crestfallen.

"What a shame," he murmured. "I hoped you had found the pit full of diamonds."

"The pit's there, all right—it's a deep black hole in the ground and don't seem to have any bottom to it. It's hidden in the middle of a thick clump of thorn-bush and ain't hardly wide enough for a full-sized man to get into. If there are any diamonds in there, then they're at the bottom, an' the bottom's too far down to be reached anyway I've ever heard of."

"Then," the Major said slowly, "I don't see what you want me to do."

"Wait a minute," Richards replied. "I ain't finished yet. I got to tell you first how I happened to find the place. I was gold-prospecting up country with an old California miner as partner, Tom Wallace was his name. And one day when Tom had gone to some nearby kopjies to see if he could get a buck for supper, I goes in the opposite direction, following up a dried up river bed, thinking I might happen on a pocket or something.

"Well, this dried up river course led me after an hour or so between two steep banks and finally through a 'gate' between kopjies—regular mountains they was with steep sides as shiny as glass; sheer up and down they was, and black like polished ebony. Then I found myself in a sort of blind alley—there was hills all round me and the only way I could get out of the place was back the way I came. I ain't what you'd call an imaginative man but, somehow, that place frightened me. For

one thing, except for a few thorn bushes, there wasn't a living thing to be seen, nothing but this black, shining rock; not an animal, or a bird—not even a vulture. Nothing but a lot of snakes tied up in knots and me.

"Well, I determines to look around a bit before I start back and it was then, quite by accident, like, I stumbled across the pit. And then it comes to me where I am: I realize that I'm in Devil's Kloof and that this pit is the place where the diamonds are supposed to be. Excited? What do you think? Well, I throws myself down on my belly and tries to look down the hole—but it's as black as hell and I can't see nothing. I throw a stone down—but don't hear it touch bottom. I made a sort of fire-ball and chucked that down and watched it drop out of sight. And then I rolled up a big black boulder and rolled it over the edge, an' listened. Man, I believe that boulder's dropping yet!

"And then I got really frightened and left the place at a run, sure in my own mind that, supposing there was diamonds in the pit—an' I don't believe there are or ever were—there was no way of getting them out.

I DIDN'T look back until I was well away an' then, believe me or not, I couldn't see any opening in the hills where I'd gone in and out. It looked as if the bloomin' hills had moved and closed up the entrance."

"Now you're spoofin' me," the Major said reproachfully. "The hills couldn't move."

"Of course they couldn't—don't be a damned fool. I only said it looked as if they had. I only told you that to show how hard it 'u'd be for anybody to find the place unless they followed up the river bed. An' who 'u'd think of doin' that?"

"You did," the Major pointed out.

"Yes, I know, stupid, but I wasn't looking for the Devil's Kloof. If I had been, I'd have looked at them hills through my field glasses at a distance and I'd have found no opening an' gone on. As a matter of fact you couldn't see that opening a hundred yards away. Look here, give me a pencil and I'll draw you a picture map of the place."

And on the back of the Major's "balance sheet" he made a little sketch.

"You see," he explained, "the rock being black like it was, and them two ends of the range of hills lapping over like they do, made it seem as if the hills was all in one unbroken line.

"Well—all that's interesting, but ain't much to the point.

"But, as I was saying. I got back to the camp and told old Tom Wallace of my find. He got all excited; would have it that I was keeping something back an' that I'd found enough diamonds to fill a sack. The old fool wouldn't be pacified. An' that night he went down bad with fever."

"Then there is something in that part of the story," the Major murmured in awed tones. "The curse works."

"Don't be a damned fool. He didn't go near the place, did he? Besides, he'd been ailing for a long time. Anyway, I had the devil's own job getting him to a place where he could be looked after. He never really recovered. Sort of lingered for a few months. He wouldn't have lived so long if it hadn't been for his daughter's careful nursing. And he was sort of crazy all the time. Got it into his head that *he'd* found the Devil's Kloof—not me—and that there was diamonds there an' that I'd tried to kill him. What d'you think of that?"

The Major muttered a few inarticulate words of sympathy. Adding, "But I'm still mystified as to what you want me to do?"

"I'm coming to it. But first I want your word of honor that you'll not go blabbing what I tell you."

"I give you my word—on my solemn affy—er—davey. Is that enough?"

"Good enough for me," Richards said in bluff, hearty tones. "Now listen: Old Wallace's daughter believes all that her father told her and she's gone up country to try and locate the Kloof. An' because she's my old partner's daughter I want to protect her, see? I can forget an' forgive all old Tom said about me—he was not re-

sponsible at the time, anyway—an' for his sake I'm ready to protect the girl."

"But why bother, old thing?" the Major questioned. "You say yourself there's nothing in the legend. Why not let her go and find out the truth for herself?"

YES, I might do that, only—look here, I wouldn't want a daughter of mine to go up country with no one to protect her save a damned fool of a Boer who drives her ox-team. Just think, man, of all the things what can happen to a white girl, a damned pretty girl, at that, alone up country on a trip like that: Lions, an' fever, an' niggers on the warpath as like as not—not to mention certain white men who might get on to what she's after and get on her trail for their own dirty ends."

The Major nodded comprehendingly.

"Yes. By Jove! Come to think of it, it's not safe for a young female to wander alone unprotected in this bally country. It's not safe for a man, for the matter of that. Just look at what happened to me!"

Richards smiled covertly.

"And besides," he continued, "there's another reason why I want to send some one I can trust up to Devil's Kloof. There might be diamonds in that pit after all. I didn't have a chance to really examine it at the time; had no rope with me, and then I had old Tom sick on my hands. And I haven't had a chance to go back since. But, as I say, if there are diamonds in the pit, they're mine by right of discovery. Mine to share with my old partner's daughter and the man who's willing to help me, and that's you."

"Deucedly kind of you, I'm sure. But I still don't see just what you expect me to do."

"It's easy. You travel as fast as you can for Devil's Kloof. The girl's got two weeks' start on you, but she's trekking in an ox-wagon an' you'll get there before her, easy. Maybe you'll pass her on the way. If you do, don't let her find out what you're after, an' don't try to get her to turn back. She wouldn't believe anything you was to say to her anyway; she's suspicious of everybody, specially anybody she thinks is connected with me. What you've got to do is go on for the Kloof, camp inside it, there's plenty of water, an' wait. When the girl comes along to the Kloof, you hold her prisoner an' keep her there until I join you."

"It all sounds frightfully complicated," Major protested wearily. "There's a thousand an' one questions I want to ask you."

"Dont ask any of them," Richards interrupted impatiently. "What do you want to ask questions for? All you've got to do," he continued meaningly, "is remember that I'm keeping my own mouth shut about things I know an' offering you a way of escaping from being arrested an' sentenced for murder. Why don't you remember that, be satisfied and obey orders?"

"I do," the Major replied quickly. "I am, and will."

"Now you're talking," Richards approved and rubbed his hands briskly together.

"And, I take it," the Major continued, "orders are to go to Devil's Kloof and keep everybody out of it except the lady and you?"

"Right first time," agreed Richards.

"And right it is," echoed the Major. "But where the deuce is Devil's Kloof? How am I to find it?"

RICHARDS hesitated a moment, then taking the paper on which he had already sketched a crude plan of the Devil's Kloof, itself, now made another sketch.

"It's easy to find when you know where to look," he explained. "You make for Steinberg—that'll be easy—and from there head due north four or five days' trek until you see a kopje what looks like a camel's hump. Then you make for the kopje, trekking east and you'll strike that dried-up river I told you about. Trek along the bed of that, and there you are. Easy, eh?"

"Very."

"An' you'll do it? You'll start tomorrow?"

The Major nodded.

"But first, I'd like to ask you one of the thousand an' one questions: Why not go after the lady yourself? Why take a third person into the—er—business?"

"That's easy: First because I'd find it difficult to deal with Miss Wallace. I told you she didn't trust me. An' then I daren't

go openly to the Kloof. I'm being watched by some of the most desperate criminals in the country. They think I've got valuable information about a new diamond field and if I went to the Kloof and did everything openly, like I'd rather, why I'd have this gang following me. Damn 'em! So I've got them on a false scent. I've spread the news around that I am now on my way to a place north of Kimberley. What's more, it

is my intention to go there and then, when I've thrown them off my trail I'll double on my tracks and come down to meet you at Devil's Kloof. An' what 'ud happen to Miss Wallace while I'm gadding about up country with no one to look after her welfare? You can see for yourself that she wouldn't be safe at all."

Richards yawned and rose to his feet.

"Now I'll say goodby and leave you to your packing. The earlier you start tomorrow the safer you'll be. I think I silenced Bessie, but Piet may die during the night and then Bessie 'ud split to the Force an' you'd be in a hell of a mess. And don't forget to keep your mouth shut about this job you are doing for me. There's sure to be some of the gang that will try to get information from you. But you play the dude part an' you'll be left alone." He took a gold repeater from his pocket and made a pretense of listening to its tinkling chimes; actually his eyes were riveted upon the Major's face and he smiled covertly when that man's face remained a vacuous mask. Evidently the monocled dude could not recognize his own watch when he saw it; as likely as not he did not know yet that he had lost it.

"Well," Richards continued, returning the watch to his pocket, "I must go now. S'long!"

"S'long," echoed the Major with an airy wave of his hand.

He escorted Richards to the door, bowed him out, shut and locked the door and then threw himself down full length on the bed, holding his sides, his face red with suppressed laughter.

Chapter IV

TURNED TABLES

PRESENTLY he sobered and rising from the bed went over to the chair and, sitting there, closely examined the maps which Richards had sketched on the back of his "balance sheet." Then, having committed the maps and the instructions to memory, he tossed the paper onto the table, closed his eyes and endeavored to sift the false from Richards' long story.

"I have a feeling," he muttered, "that the bally fellow did not tell me the whole truth—far, far from it. It was, on the face of it, such a fishy sounding story; absolutely full of flaws. On the other hand, there is undoubtedly a lot of truth in it. I think Mr. Richards—he reminded me, rather, of a—er—Sunday School teacher gone to the devil—prides himself on being able to estimate a man's qualities at one glance. And he's probably quite clever that way. He no doubt thinks that I am an awful bally ass who happens to be able to use his fists an' can ride an' shoot. He took my word for that. And he thinks I've swallowed that yarn he told me and that I'll therefore obey orders. He thinks, too, that he has a hold over me from my little encounter with the man Piet. He should know better than that. Oh, well! And why did he exhibit my watch? I think that was a little bravado on his part; a little, shall we say—conceit. Wonder what he would have done had I claimed it? Not that that is important. But, let me see: it would seem that I'm committed to this undertaking. It may be most amusin', an' perhaps I can find a way of being useful to a lady in distress. Yes: I think that quite possible. And now for some more packing."

KNOCKING his thumb on the edge of a trunk, he winced, and paused from his task long enough to saturate a small towel in water and wrap it around his

thumb, tying the ends around his wrist.

"That's better," he murmured, "much better. It's funny, bally funny, how a little thing like a sprained thumb can be such a bally nuisance. But I have a feeling that Piet's ugly jaw hurts him a great deal more than my thumb! That's a little consolation. I wonder if Piet is really at—er—death's door. I fancy not. In fact I am quite positive he is not. And I'm inclined to think that Mr. Richards, my guide, philosopher and friend, is hand in glove with Piet and Co. Yes. Well, we shall see."

He tensed and was very still as he caught the sound as of stealthy footsteps crossing the grass plot at the rear of the hotel. He smiled and taking from its holster one of his revolvers, dropped it in the large pocket of his dressing gown. Then he resumed his packing, busy now with the things on the bed, his back to the French windows, that opened onto the grass plot at the rear.

Apparently he did not hear the creak caused by the stealthy turning of the handle of the French windows, did not hear them open and close, or the turn of the key in the lock, or the rapid breathing of the two men who had entered.

Not until one of them cleared his throat with a harsh cough did the Major turn to face them.

"Greetings, old dears!" he then exclaimed cheerfully, after a first, well feigned startled cry of surprise. And coming up to the table he picked up the paper lying upon it, folded it lengthwise with exaggerated care and then, using it as a spill, held it in the gas flame and lighted his cigarette with it. He offered the two men cigarettes and when they cursingly refused dropped the paper to the floor and put his foot on the flame.

"I hope you are not deaf and dumb," he said lightly, his face beaming with innocent good nature, while he inwardly reproached his carelessness in having left the paper on the table, thus making it necessary for him to resort to stratagem to get it out of sight. "I said, you know, 'How do you do?' In reply you simply snarl at me. Most extraordinary, really. And, come to think of it, just what do you mean by coming into my room quite uninvited, as it were?"

"You stow yer gab an' listen to hus." It was the smaller of the two men who spoke —an undersized, rat faced little man who was redolent of the vice and petty meanness of the London slums. "We wants ter 'ave a tork with you. Wot's yer name?"

"Aubrey St. John Major, dear lad. And what is your? Fagin or Bill Sykes, or the —er—Artful Dodger or some other of the Dickensonian appellations?"

"Never mind wot my nime is," the other replied sourly. "I wants ter ask you a few questions. An the first is this: Wot was Soapy Sam adoin' of 'ere?'

"Soapy Sam!" the Major exclaimed. "What a most extraordinary name. But I know no one of that name. Really!"

"Oh! Come off yer perch, Percy," the little man growled. "I means Richards— Soapy Sam them as knows calls him. He was 'ere to see yer, ain't been long left, I should say. Didn't the chap who was 'ere try to wash 'is hands with nothin'? Course he did. Well, that was Soapy Sam. Smooth all over, Sam is; so smooth in his way of torkin' that yer'd think butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. But he's the biggest crook in all Africa, for hall of that.

"Well, we wants to know, me an' Demper 'ere"—he jerked a thumb toward his companion, a tall, skinny Boer—"we wants ter know wot Soapy Sam was torkin' to you about."

"Well, really," the Major began hesitatingly, "I do not like the tone of your voice and I do not like your attitude. Upon my soul, I don't. Whatever business I transacted was quite confidential and not meant to be—er—shouted from the housetops. He——"

"Cut it short," the little man interrupted. Then, to his companion, "Show 'im a gun, Demper."

STOLIDLY, his face totally devoid of expression, the Boer drew a revolver which he leveled at the Major's head.

"Hands up!" he growled in a harsh, guttural voice. "I say, 'Hands up,' you *verdoemte roinek!*"

The Major backed a few paces and as his hands shot with rapidity above his head a vacuous smile spread over his face.

"Most astonishin'," he drawled. "You must be wicked bandits. And so bold. All I have to do, though, is to tug this"—his hands closed on a bell-rope which hung down beside the bed—"an' all sort of chappies would rush to my assistance."

"You take yer 'ands off that," the little man snarled vindictively, "less yer want a bullet in yer brains. Dutch 'u'd be only too glad of a hexcuse. So I'm warnin' yer."

With a gesture of alarm the Major moved away from the bell-rope.

"That's better; an' now, per'aps, seeing as yer life ain't worth much, you'll tell us wot you an' Soapy Sam was torkin' about?"

The Major moved uneasily.

"I don't think I ought to tell you," he stammered. "It was—er—most secret. A secret business deal, as a matter of fact."

The little man took this up quickly.

"I'll lay it was somethin' to do with Devil's Kloof an' diamonds, wasn't it now? Sure as my name's 'Arry 'Ewins it was. Ain't that right?"

"I'm glad to know your name is Harry—you meant that, didn't you?" the Major replied. "But you're quite wrong. And as I can't see that it really matters, I'll tell you what we were talking about. Although, mind you, I don't at all see what it has to do with you; neither do I approve of the way in which you have come about trying to get this information from me. However, let me tell you that Mr. Richards has sold me a most marvelous idea. You know, of course, that when an elephant feels that he wants to—er—shuffle off this mortal coil, he leaves all his bosom companions and toddles off to some place of solitude to die. An' they all go to the same place—a sort of bush cemetery, as it were. An' that place, you know, has never been found, although hundreds of hunters have searched for it. But Mr. Richards' plan will enable me to discover the place with ease. He was most generous. He told me his plan first, saying I could give him what I thought it was worth to me. And I gave him one hundred pounds and half share in the profits, if any. What I have to do is this: I *trek* for elephant country—I start first thing in the morning—and, once there, I wound an old tusker and follow the old fellow wherever he goes. Of course, realizing that death is close upon him, he'll make at once for his private burying ground. And there you are, dear lads. I shall be simply rolling in wealth. Just think of all the ivory tusks which will be mine for the taking!"

Hewins chortled and nudged Demper in the ribs.

"Ain't Soapy Sam a oner," he said. "There ain't nobody like 'im, blast 'im! Ain't that just the sort of game 'e would put over a damn fool dude like this chap?"

Demper stolidly scratched his head with his left hand, but his right did not waver.

"I don't know, ma-an," he said slowly. "It may be that this dude is not the fool he looks. Maybe, yet, he is playing a game of us. *Ach sis!* No man could be such a fool as to believe a story like that."

"That's because you ain't never met a dude like 'e is, afore. But I 'ave. I knows 'is sort. Plenty of 'em in Lumnon. Soapy Sam—'e could make a bloke like this fink the moon was made of green cheese."

"Am I to—to understand that you think Richards was spoofin' me?" stammered the Major.

"I don't fink," Hewins answered with a laugh. "I know.'

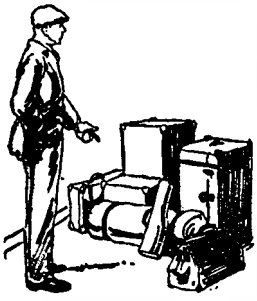
"You mean that there's no elephant's graveyard? My word! If that's true, I'll have the bally blighter arrested for obtaining money under false pretenses. 'Pon my soul I will. An', I say. Can't I take my hands down now—I'm sure I must look like a bally fool holdin' them up like this."

"You keep them where they are, I tell you, ma-an," the Boer said and exchanged a few whispered words with Hewins.

LOOK here, Aubrey," Hewins then said easily. "My mate finks you ain't as soft as you look. So, to put 'im in good humor, I'm goin' ter 'ave a look through this stuff an' see if I can find anything worth 'aving."

As he spoke, Hewins turned to one of the

trunks, turning its contents onto the floor.



The Major yawned and took a few steps nearer Demper.

"You're both beastly rude," he said, "and were it not for my love of peace I should be tempted to raise my voice in a wild cry for help."

"If you did," Demper replied slowly, "it would be, ma-an, the last time you would ever use your voice. So be wise, and silent."

"Wot a 'ell of a mess!" Hewins sneered as he turned his attention to another trunk. "Wot's the idea of taking so many pretty clothes on a 'untin' trip, Aubrey? Lumme! Men who go 'unting in this bloody country fink 'emselves well off if they've got one shirt an' a pair o' patched trousers to 'ide their nakedness. But you! Blimey! You've got a regular wedding trussoo! An' ere's a bloomin' dress suit! Wot the 'ell do yer think you're goin ter do with that?"

"A man must observe the—er—conventions, dear Hewins, even in Africa," Major drawled. "An' I say, I do wish you'd be more careful. Look at your bally dirty finger marks on my dress shirts. Really! It is too much!"

In his eagerness to prevent his linen from being soiled any further, the Major took a step or two forward. He was very close to Demper now. His hands were clasped on the top of his head and his attitude was reminiscent of a schoolboy who was being punished for some breach of discipline.

Hewins had now turned to a third trunk.

"Look at this!" he cried presently. "Gawd love a duck! I be damned if 'e ain't got a whole box-full of winders for 'is bleedin' eye." And from the velvet lined case he had discovered he took a monocle, fixed it awkwardly in his eye, and postured theatrically, burlesquing the mannerisms and drawling voice of the Major.

"My word, Demper," he simpered. "I'm a bleedin' toff. Take yer 'at off an' call me 'Dook.'"

For an incautious moment Demper turned his head to look at his partner; for just that one fraction of time his hand wavered.

And in that fraction of time the Major had taken the wet towel from his injured thumb and flicked it forward.

It snaked around Demper's revolver, jerking it from that astonished man's hand.

Then before either Hewins or Demper could make a move the Major was lounging in the wicker chair, covering them both with his revolver.

"And that's that," he said pleasantly, toying with his monocle and smiling at the men who were dumbfounded at this sudden turning of the tables.

Then he was silent for a little while, amused by the angry recriminations which passed between the two men.

"I think you were both to blame," the Major put in placatingly. "But we won't endeavor to apportion the blame now. There are so many other things to do. I am torn, for the moment, by quite different desires: one, to be relieved of your—er—contaminating presence without delay; the other, to make you clear up this bally mess you have made."

"Look 'ere," Hewins whined. "I know as we did wrong coming in 'ere and 'olding you up the way we did. But we thought as 'ow you and Soapy were doin' us out of our rights. He stole the plan of 'ow to get to Devil's Kloof from us afore we 'ad 'ad time ter look at it ourselves, an' we thought we'd try to get it back. That's all! An' now we knows you ain't the fool dude we took you for at first, we knows you must be in with Richards on the Kloof job. Well, we knows things about it Richards don't, an' we're ready to come in with you. You an' us 'll go an' get the diamants an' old Soapy can go to the devil. Wot do yer say?"

MY DEAR chap," the Major drawled, "let me assure you that you're barking up the wrong tree. Oh, quite! How could I be partners with you—I ask you?" Then he turned sharply on Demper and, for a moment, the inane grin left his face. "And I advise you," he continued, "to stand quite still and not try to pick up the revolver you dropped—kick it over here, thanks—or try to draw any other you may

have secreted about your bally person."

"Did I not say he was no fool, Hewins?" Demper growled.

"But I am, very," the Major said laughingly. "Quite a bally ass in fact. And I'm so soft hearted. Of course I ought to call the police and give you in charge. Instead—and I must insist on obedience—I am simply going to ask you to refrain from speech and pack up my kit. I think that that is only fair. So, get to work. Quick, now! And be very careful that you fold everything neatly."

The two men hesitated a moment and then, because they did not care to face the alternative, silently set about the task appointed them.

Their task at last ended; every trunk packed, the lids closed, strapped and locked, Hewins made one last appeal to the Major to accept them as partners.

But he laughingly refused to listen.

"No," he said. "The best I can offer you is a nice downy bed for the night. You, Hewins, take a length of that rope and truss up your partner very securely.

"That's good," he said presently with a nod of approval. "Now gag him. I don't like his curses."

Again the way in which Hewins obeyed earned the Major's approval.

"I suppose," that man drawled, "you wouldn't care to come with me and let Demper, as well as Richards, go to the devil?"

"Wouldn't I?" Hewins said fervently. "Just you try me. Demper's nothin' to me. An' every man for imself, I says." He laughed triumphantly at the scowling Dutchman. "Wot do yer say, Major? Are me an' you goin' to be pals?"

The Major sighed.

"I don't see how we can. You seem to find it so easy to be off with the old and on with the new. I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to trust you."

"Ah, but yer can," Hewins said eagerly. "I wouldn't go back on a real pal like you'd be. But a bloomin' Dutchman—— Dutchies don't count."

"Well, you and Demper must settle that between you. I rather fancy your late friend will have quite a lot to say to you. Now turn round and I will see if I can truss and gag you as well as you have Demper. I rather fancy that I can. Perhaps better."

In a very little while he had fulfilled his promise. Then, with effortless ease, he picked up Demper and carrying him into an adjoining room, placed him on the bed. There, too, he carried Hewins. He examined their bonds once again, made them even more secure, then pulled the covers up over them, tucked the mosquito netting carefully around them, wished them "pleasant dreams," and tiptoed out of the room, locking the door behind him.

Ten minutes later he was in his own bed, chuckling softly.

Presently he got up again, lighted the gas, and picked up from the floor the paper on which he had made out his "Balance sheet," and on the back of which Richards had drawn the maps.

"I have been very careless about this," he murmured. "I think I had better destroy it before it gets into bad company. I think that I have everything clearly impressed upon the little brain I have. So I'll burn the incriminating papers. But first, I want to change this."

He read through the statement he had drawn up then, chuckling as he did it, crossed out under "Liabilities," the items, "Wear a monocle," "Look and talk like a silly ass," and wrote them down under the heading "Assets."

Then he lighted a match and set fire to the paper which he held until the flame reached his fingers, then dropped it and ground its black ash into the carpet.

A few minutes later he was fast asleep.

Chapter V

THE KRAAL OF UMBALOSE

IT WAS nearly noon. Overhead a fiery sun floated in a sky of brass, not a breath of wind was stirring and the fine red dust of the veld when disturbed by some wayfarer or grazing beast, hovered like a

pall a few feet above the ground before finally settling.

At the kraal of Umbalose all was peaceful. All around the tiny collection of huts perched precariously on the slopes of the kopje, cattle and goats browsed contentedly or huddled together in the shade of the trees, placidly chewing the cud and gazing incuriously at the antics of their naked little native herd-boys.

The kraal itself was a hive of activities —the men making ready for the morrow's hunt, the women preserving skins, grinding corn or preparing a meal, singing in very shrill, but not unmusical voices as they worked. Occasionally a man's heavy deep bass bellowing would join in the song until he was loudly scolded by the women to silence.

Flies swarmed everywhere and their loud drone formed a monotonous accompaniment to the other noises of the kraal.

A heavy, pungent scent pervaded the place. It was, in its intensity, as cloying as the thick red dust which needed but a little rain to turn it into thick, clinging mud; it was, in a way, redolent of Africa and Africa's people.

Outside the largest of the bee-hive shaped huts, the hut of the headman, Umbalose, sat two men.

THEY smoked filthy, battered old pipes, long since discarded by some white men, and drank occasionally from a large calabash of thick, native beer which stood on the ground near by.

One of the men was Umbalose, a man who boasted, with no little ground for his boast, that he was a full-blooded Zulu. He was very fat; so fat that his chin seemed to descend to his waist in a succession of billows.

His eyes were almost lost in rolls of fat, but they were bright and intelligent; and, if they hinted at cruelty, they promised hearty goodfellowship toward all who did not actively oppose their owner. Umbalose had been a mighty warrior in his youth, but the onward rush of civilization had entangled him in the soft vices of peace.

His companion was an altogether different type of man.

His skin was of a dull, dirty yellow color, his face flat and in some ways suggestive of the Orient. His wiry hair stuck out in queer corkscrew twists all over his head. His nose was very broad, his ears outstanding. His teeth flashed white and his homely face indicated loyalty, keenness and a highly developed sense of humor. He was not very tall, but, evidently, abnormally strong; every time he moved, no matter how slightly, splendid muscles rolled under his skin. There was not an ounce of superfluous flesh on him and as he now sat, or rather squatted on his haunches, his hands gripping his ankles, he aptly represented the spirit of Africa; looked like a study in ivory, yellowed by age, carved by a master hand.

"Why remain thirsty, Hottentot?" said the headman, "if there is still beer in the pot?"

The Hottentot laughed.

"I have drunk my fill, Umbalose," he replied. "To take more would be folly."

The headman spat contemptuously and, picking up the gourd, held it to his lips, tilted back his head and emptied the gourd with a long, appreciative gurgle.

"It is always folly," he remarked, wiping his thick lips on the back of his hand, "not to drink what it is possible to drink. The time will come, Hottentot, when you will greatly desire this beer which you now refuse."

The Hottentot laughed again.

"Maybe, Umbalose," he said. "And when that time comes I will think of this I now refuse and my thirst will be satisfied."

Then he sighed and looked with longing eyes at the empty gourd.

The headman chuckled and clapped his hands, ordering the woman who appeared at the opening of his hut to bring more beer.

She scowled, asking, "Why should good beer be poured down the throat of a pig of a Hottentot?"

Then, cowering slightly at the headman's angry frown, she brought out another pot and set it humbly at their feet.

"Now drink, Hottentot," the headman invited.

But the other shook his head.

"No. That I cannot do. Maybe today my

baas will come. He must find me with my eyes open and my legs ready to take the trail."

Again the headman spat contemptuously.

"All Hottentots are liars and fools; there is nothing of worth in them. And of all Hottentot you are the biggest fool and liar of them all. For two years now I have suffered you to dwell at my kraal and have had scorn heaped upon my head because I called a Hottentot my friend. But that scorn I can put on one side; it is no more to me than the bite of a mosquito. Though you are a Hottentot and thus less than the dogs, I know you to be a man and therefore on an equality with great chiefs.

There is not one among my young men as strong as you or who can read the spoor as well. Not even old Gante, the witch doctor, has greater wisdom. And your courage—that has been tested and proved many times during the time you have been with us. So I say that you are a man and I can forget that you are a Hottentot. But I also say that you are a liar, and, maybe," he laughed, "it is because of that I have allowed you to stay with us. Never was a man born who could tell lies with so serious a face as you, Hottentot." He smote his thick thighs, chuckling as he thought of one of the experiences narrated by the Hottentot.

"It is," he continued, "that I am now thinking of the story you told of the killing of a lion with only a broken assegai for your weapon. Wo-we! To think of that!"

"And yet, Umbalose, that was true," the Hottentot replied gruffly. "See! Here are the marks of his claws." And he pointed to a long scar which ran from his right shoulder down across his chest, ending at the waist.

The headman laughed.

"You may say it was a lion, Hottentot, that marked you so, but I think it was done by the finger nails of an angry woman. Wo-we! I tell you that a woman is more dangerous than any lion."

THERE was silence for a little while, broken only by the headman's wheezy breathing and his gurgles of satisfaction as he sipped contentedly of the new gourd of beer.

"But wherein am I playing the part of a fool, Umbalose?" the Hottentot asked presently.

"Do you ask?" countered the headman. "Is it not plain? You came to me, seeking my hospitality, saying you wished to wait here until a white man, your Baas, joined you. For two years you have been here, hunting with my young men, helping to train my cattle, doing at times the work of women in order to pay for the hospitality I was willing to give you. And for nearly two years you were a good companion. You drank until there was no beer left and my women could not make beer strong enough to weaken your limbs, blind your eyes or weaken your stomach. But this past month you have been more like an old woman awaiting death. You have kept close to the kraal like a child who is frightened of evil spirits. And you have set your mind against the kindness of beer. No longer are you a companion fit for a fighting man. As well might one drink with a new born babe.

"And all this you do, say you, for the sake of your Baas, for the sake of a white man you have seen but on two days—and that so long ago. Au-a! The folly of it. Maybe this man you call your Baas is dead; or, if not dead, maybe he has forgotten you. Or, if he is not dead and has not forgotten you, then undoubtedly he is without wealth—for what man just released from *trunk* is possessed of wealth—and so in no way able to reward you for the services you intend to give him.

"So I say, Hottentot, drink and forget all white men."

The other shook his head.

"No," he replied. "That I cannot do. You do not know my white man. He is a man amongst men. He is in all things different from others. It is true that only on two days have I seen him. But on the first of those day he saved me from an evil white man who was thrashing me with a *sjambok*. And because of what he did on that first day, the second day he was caught in the snares of that evil man and sent to

trunk. For my sake, he was punished. For two years he was sentenced to heavy punishment. Would you, then, have me false to the debt I owe him?"

The headman sighed heavily.

"Maybe you are right, Hottentot," he said. "But I shall be sorry to see you go from me, and I am eager to see this white man of yours."

"You shall, Umbalose. Maybe today he will come. And I will be sorry to leave this place. But my white man will need me. Although he is a *man,* he is as helpless as a babe unborn. He knows not this country or us black ones. He cannot speak our tongue. Should he stray but a few yards from an outspan, he would be lost. But he will learn; he will learn quickly. And I shall teach him."

The noises of the kraal gradually died away. The women, with calabashes balanced on their heads, passed out in stately file on their ways to the river for water. The men also departed upon their separate errands and presently the kraal was deserted save for Umbalose and the Hottentot.

The day's heat increased, the glare was blinding. But the two men did not seek the shade of the huts, neither did their naked bodies seem conscious of the sun's scorching rays.

A white man, mounted on a raw-boned mule, rode up to the kraal and came to a halt before the headman's hut.

AT THE first sound of hoofs the Hottentot jumped to his feet, his eyes agleam with expectancy. Then, seeing the rider, he dropped back again on his haunches, grunted a sullen reply to the white man's greeting, and stared owlishly before him.

The white man dismounted awkwardly and took from his saddle wallets two square shaped bottles which he set on the ground close to the headman's feet.

"You are thirsty, headman," he said ingratiatingly. "I have brought you white man's *puza.*" He spoke the vernacular very haltingly.

He was a heavily built man. His face, shaded by the large sunhelmet he wore, was that of a man who revelled in moral slime. He was dirty and unshaven; his clothing torn. In his hand he held a large *sjambok* which he tapped nervously against his thigh.

"I have brought you these, headman," he continued, indicating the two bottles. "They contain a drink worthy of men like you."

Umbalose nodded and closed his eyes as if to shut out the vision of happiness the bottles had conjured up.

"I know white men," he said slowly, "and I know that you do not bring me this *puza* expecting nothing in return. What do you want of me?"

The white man laughed harshly.

"Very little I want, headman. Almost less than nothing."

"Still, I would know what that little is?"

"Only a guide to take me to that place of the spirits, that place, so the story goes, to which all the spirits go in order to watch over the treasure left there by Chaka."

"Wo-we!" the headman exclaimed angrily. "And again you come to me full of that folly? When you first came to me I said I knew not of the place; that if I knew where it was I could not take you to it because it is a thing forbidden. And as I said to you then, I have said to other white men who have come to me seeking information of the place which is forbidden. And I say the same to you again. I have spoken."

"But there is such a place," the white man insisted craftily. "You have heard of it?"

"Au-a!" the headman replied. "I have heard of it and undoubtedly there is such a place. But I have also heard of a land where the souls of white men go after the great sleep has fallen upon them, and, undoubtedly there is such a place. But I cannot take you to the one, or the other."

The white man's face fell and it was with difficulty that he restrained his temper.

He whistled, tunelessly, a few bars of a song then popu-

lar in the London music halls and endeavored to formulate a plan which would secure from the headman the information he so greatly desired and which, he was sure, the headman could give.

He started with surprise when Umbalose, apparently reading his thoughts, said: "It is useless, white man! I do not know where the place is, and if I did I could not tell you. It has been forbidden. Know you not that all the spirits of Chaka's dead warriors guard at that place?"

The white man nodded absently. Having arrived at a plan of sorts he did not now press the headman further. Instead, he drew the cork from one of the bottles and then held the bottle under the headman's nose.

ALL this time the Hottentot had been looking straight before him, apparently uninterested in the conversation of the headman and the white man. But now the cork had been withdrawn from one of the bottles, his nostrils dilated and he turned toward Umbalose, an expression of great longing in his eyes.

He stretched out his hand as if desiring to take the bottle from the white man.

The headman grunted and speaking swiftly, so that the white man could not catch the portent of what he was saying, exclaimed. "So a white man's *puza* makes you forget your folly, eh, Hottentot?"

"Maybe," the other replied, "it makes me remember. But let us not waste time talking, let us drink."

He snatched the bottle from the white man's hands and drank greedily, not even gagging as the raw stuff, doctored with acid, passed down his throat.

The headman laughed uproariously.

"Almost, Hottentot," he said, "I would be willing to tell this white man the secret, did I know it, in exchange for this *puza* which has made you a man again."

The white man who had been on the point of snatching the bottle back from the Hottentot, hearing this, opened the other bottle and gave it to Umbalose.

"You drink, too," he said, "and we will all be men together."

The headman accepted the bottle and for a time there was no sound save the greedy smacking of lips and the *tot-tot* of the liquor pouring out of the narrow-necked bottles.

Presently, the bottles emptied, the Hottentot and the headman began to sing one of the wild chants of Zulu warriors, accentuating the rhythm by softly clapping their hands, swaying drunkenly from side to side.

The white man, thinking his opportunity had arrived, questioned the headman again regarding the whereabouts of the Devil's Kloof. But he had over-reached himself. The foul drink he had given the two natives—one small drink of it would have been sufficient to knock out a white man—had made them both impervious to time or place. The headman apparently was unconscious of the white man's presence, deaf to his voice and, as the latter repeated his questions in a louder, bullying tone, only sang more shrilly and clapped his hands with greater vigor.

A long hour passed; the singing of the men died away and they now sat as if in a stupor, staring blankly before them, their eyes inflamed.

Thinking the propitious time had arrived, the white man again questioned the headman.

He was answered by a peal of derisive laughter, and the two natives exchanged a number of ribald and very pointed jokes anent the folly of white men and of this white man in particular.

Thereat the white man suddenly remembered his dignity and the respect due to a white man from a black, the respect which he had forfeited long since.

Jumping to his feet, he stood over the Hottentot, his *sjambok* raised threateningly.

"You damned rascal!" he swore savagely. "Do you dare to snigger at me?"

"I always laugh at fools, white man," the Hottentot answered with drunken solemnity. "And is it my fault that you are a fool?"

For answer the white man brought down his whip on the native's naked back, drawing blood and laughing callously at the half-suppressed moan of pain which came from the Hottentot's lips.

He struck again and again, laughing

continuously, vowing to kill the native who had dared to laugh at him.

SEVERAL times the Hottentot attempted to rise to his feet and run from the biting torture of the lash. But each time his legs failed him and he dropped to the ground in a huddled heap, his strength stolen from him by the rotgut he had drunk. Umbalose, too, was helpless; the liquor had made him drunker, even, than the Hottentot. He could only look on with wondering eyes, muttering words of sympathy, hoping that some of the young men of the kraal would return.

Breathing heavily, the white man paused for a moment from using the *sjambok* and lashed the Hottentot with a vicious tongue.

And so intent was he on his outpourings of wrath, that he was not aware of the approach of a light, tent-topped wagon drawn by sixteen mules.

The wagon came to a halt in a cloud of choking dust a few hundred feet away and the Major, dressed in spotless duck semi-uniform, highly polished riding boots, a white helmet and his monocle gleaming in his eye, jumped down from the wagon calling, gaily:

"O-he, Jim! Jim!"

The other white man turned at the voice and, seeing who the newcomer was, noticing particularly the monocle and the dude-like attire, turned away from the natives and made as if he desired nothing so much as to get away from the place with great speed.

And now the Major, noting with eyes of steel gray the recumbent natives, the blood-stained whip in the other's hands, the empty bottles and Jim's bleeding back, came hastily forward.

"My word!" he exclaimed. "This is beastly—positively beastly. It is absolutely criminal. First you make these two drunk on some rotten concoction and then you thrash them. Why?"

The other sneered. Having mounted his steed he now felt quite safe and looked down contemptuously at the Major.

"That's my business," he said.

"Really! Then it's a damned rotten business!"

"Well—supposin' it is; what are you goin' to do about it, Percy?"

The Major raised his eyebrows, allowing his monocle to fall into the palm of his hand. He put it carefully into his breast pocket.

"I'll tell you," he said. "I am goin' to make your business mine. So—dismount."

The other laughed.

"If I dismount," he blustered, "it'll be to finish what I started doing to you last night. If it hadn't a' been for my woman I'd have knocked your bleedin' head off."

The dude stared at him incredulously.

"It can't be Jake, surely," he cried. "It is, though!" He fished his monocle from his pocket and fixed it in his eye. "Yes, by Jove, it's Jake. Or is Piet the name? Really, I've met so many laddies within the last twenty-four hours that I find it almost impossible to keep you straight. But, now I come to think of it, I see that you're Piet, the chappy I knocked out; that is, I mean the chappy who hit my bally thumb with his jaw. Well! I am glad to see you. Our mutual friend, Mr.—er—Soapy Richards, told me that you were waiting for cherubs to carry you up to the Pearly Gates. I am afraid it will be a long time before they are opened to you. We must celebrate this little reunion and I think the best way will be to continue our little argument, so unfortunately stopped by your heavy fall, of last night. So—dismount."

"Don't talk like a fool," Piet replied. "Don't you know nothing? Don't you know it ain't the thing for white men to fight where niggers can see them? It gives the niggers wrong ideas. But you come on back to town and——"

"There may be something in what you say," the Major murmured. "But I can't think that witnessing two white men fight would be half as bad for—er—niggers as drinking the stuff you've been ladling out to them. Besides, I don't think these two laddies can see much. So, for the third time, dismount!"

To add emphasis to his order a revolver suddenly appeared in his right hand.

"Blast you," Piet whined as he slowly obeyed, "What right have you got to interfere between a white man and a little argument he is having with a couple of niggers?"

"SIMPLY," replied the Major, "that I do not like the way you conduct your argument."

Piet whined some incoherent reply and the Major continued:

"And now shall we continue last night's pleasant little argument?"

He smiled and tensed himself slightly, expecting a mad, bull-like rush.

Instead, Piet only answered sullenly, "I tell you I ain't goin' to fight. It's bad for the niggers."

Major sighed.

"So much consideration does you credit but—I have none. Give me your *sjambok.*"

Cursing, Piet handed it to him. He ran it through his hand, testing its suppleness, glancing in disgust at the blood which stained it.

"Won't you put up your fists?" Major asked hopefully.

"No, I tell you. An' look here, don't let on to Soapy Richards that you saw me out here. He'll have me murdered, mister, if you tell him that."

"My word!" Major exclaimed wearily. "He'd deserve a vote of thanks if he did. And now—get out. Quick!" He struck Piet across the legs with the *sjambok,* making that man howl and curse. "I haven't begun to treat you as you deserve," the Major continued. "If I did, I'm afraid I'd be arrested for murder and, really, I have no desire to hang for vermin like you. And now—" with one final cut of the lash —"if you will take my advice you will go hence and never return."

He threw the whip at Piet and watched that man clamber up into the saddle and gallop away, whimpering loudly.

Then he turned to the two natives and stooping over the Hottentot, gravely scrutinized his bleeding back.

"Jim!" he said.

But the Hottentot made no reply. Despite the cruel beating he had received, the fumes of the liquor had mounted to his brain and he slept, snoring hoggishly.

The Major turned to Umbalose.

"You are his Baas?" that man asked, grinning fatuously.

The Major nodded.

"Wo-we! You are all that he said you were. But your heart is too soft. You should have killed that evil white man."

"Why did he beat the Hottentot?"

"He asked me where was the place the spirits of Zulu warriors go. And when I said that I could not tell him he was very angry and cursed us. Then the Hottentot laughed at him; then his anger increased and he beat the Hottentot. That is all. But had you not come——" He shook his head doubtfully.

"And the Hottentot?" the Major asked, looking at the sleeping man anxiously. "You think he has not come to any great harm?"

Umbalose chuckled.

"His head will pain him when he wakes, and his back will be stiff. That is all. He only sleeps now. Au-a! And that is a strange thing: I have seen men fall asleep whilst they were being beaten, as if the beating had sapped all their strength, and they had not partaken of the white man's *puza* as the Hottentot had." The headman scratched his head and looked dubiously at the white man. "But if you are the Hottentot's Baas," he continued, "how comes it that you speak our tongue? He told me that you did not know it."

"Two years have passed since he last saw me. In two years a lot can be done."

Umbalose nodded sagely.

"True: Two years have taught me to like a Hottentot. He is a man, this one. But a fool. Truly a great fool. For these two months past he has had but little beer to drink because, said he, 'tomorrow my Baas may come and he must find me ready for him; he will need my help; my legs must be strong and my eyes clear!' Wo-we! And today that evil white man and the smell of the *puza* he brought was too much for the Hottentot and he drank. So-a! Then you come and he is not ready for you. He will be very shamed when he wakes. Be kind to him, white man. He has waited a long time for you."

"I WILL always remember that," the Major said gravely. "And now I must trek on. Come you to the wagon with me that I may in some part repay you for the hospitality you have given to the Hottentot."

"Hospitality is given, white man," the headman replied with dignity. "It is not a thing to be bartered."

The Major threw up his hand with the gesture of a man who has been hit.

"The fault is mine," he acknowledged. "But it is permitted, surely, to offer a present?"

Umbalose grinned.

"Truly! And if the present is desirable, it will be accepted."

"Then come down to the wagon," the Major said again as, picking up the Hottentot, he led the way.

With difficulty the headman struggled to his feet and staggered after him and was rewarded, as soon as Major had made the Hottentot comfortable on a pile of blankets, by a rich assortment of gifts: pocket knives, axes, mouth-organs and rolls of gaily colored cloths.

"It is a chief's wealth you have given me, white man," he stammered in delight.

"I have only given you my thanks," the Major replied. "And now we trek on." He climbed up into the wagon.

"But where do you go?"

"To that place of the spirits."

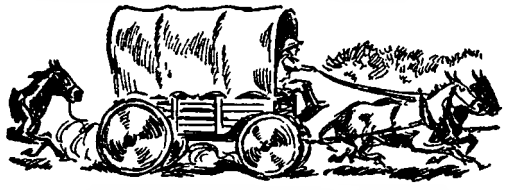
The headman scowled.

"And you know where it is?"

"Truly."

"Be warned by me, white man," Umbalose said earnestly. "Do not go. It is a place forbidden and there are warriors whose duty it is to see that none enter."

The white man hesitated, then, with a farewell wave of his hand, drove off at a



gallop, much to the disgusted surprise of the chestnut horse tethered to the tailboard of the wagon.

Chapter VI

THE LADY OF THE WAGON

IT WAS early morning. The sun had not yet risen far enough above the horizon to make its presence felt. The grasses were still laden with the night's dew; the bushes bespangled with globules which sparkled like gems. North, south, east and west stretched the vast, undulating veld. In all its vast expanse there seemed to be no moving thing except the white tent-topped wagon, no living creatures except the mules which drew it, the squat Hottentot who drove them and the Major, mounted on his horse, who rode beside the wagon.

And yet the bush was teeming with life, invisible to the untrained eye, but as obvious to the Hottentot as the printed page of a book to a student. And even the Major's eyes were beginning to see things which, but a little while ago, would have been hidden from him.

These past days of trekking with Jim, the Hottentot, had been for him a marvelous education in the ways of the bush and the creatures inhabiting it. And he had been an apt pupil. So that now when Jim pointed ahead, exclaiming softly, "See! There are springbuck, Baas!" the Major did not strain his eyes looking for the form of this most graceful of buck. Instead, with no effort of concentration, he would gaze casually in the direction indicated by the Hottentot, looking for something which *moved*. And then "something"—perhaps it would be only the switch of a tail, or the pricking up of an ear, or the stamp of a foot—would move in the vast stillness and focus his attention. And immediately the thing he sought would leap into his vision with the suddenness and clearness of a picture thrown upon a screen.

IT WAS proof somewhat of his newly acquired veld-craft that he presently pointed to a clump of trees ahead and turning to Jim, said, "There we will camp. There we will find water."

The Hottentot chuckled softly.

"The Baas learns," he said. "In a little while there will be nothing that I can tell him. But" he chuckled again— "not for a little while."

The Major looked at him wonderingly.

"But there is water there, Jim," he insisted. "I can smell it."

"Yah, Baas," Jim agreed. "Undoubtedly there is water at that place, but not yet is it sure that we will camp there."

"Why, Jim? What cause for doubt?"

"I have known caves," Jim said sententiously, "which offered a dry place in which to sleep in times of rain. But there were leopards in those caves, and when the rains came I slept in the open."

"You mean," the Major questioned swiftly, "that there may be leopards at the water-hole? And that because of them we will not be able to camp there? What folly. Of what use is this—" he picked up the rifle which he carried before him on his saddle—"if we are to be afraid of leopards?"

Jim looked admiringly at his Baas.

"I think," he said, "that you fear nothing. And yet, sometimes, it is wise to be afraid. I think it would have been best had you been afraid of the man on whose errand you now go. I do not like this place you call Devil's Kloof. It is an evil name and all things connected with it are evil. The man Richards is evil—I have heard of him. He will not play a true game with you. You, my Baas, risk much in order that he, who risks nothing, may grow rich. Therefore, I say that it would have been wiser to be afraid of that man and his doings. But most of all, Baas, you should be afraid of this trail we are following."

"And are you afraid of all these things, Jim?"

"Undoubtedly, Baas, but chiefly of the last."

The Major scoffed.

"It is only a woman's trail, Jim," he said lightly.

"And therein, Baas, is all the danger, all the evil, the world contains. A woman's trail is always dangerous, it always leads to folly."

"Wo-we!" the Major exclaimed. "And this from a man who boasts of four wives."

"It is because of that, Baas," Jim said mournfully, "that I know the truth of what I speak."

"But this trail, Jim," the Major protested. "We are not following it. It happens to go the way we are going, that is all. And it is an open trail. And I think that by tomorrow, or the next day, we will have caught up and passed the woman's wagon and be making a trail of our own."

"The Baas' eyes are not yet fully open," the Hottentot said. "If he will look closely at the droppings of the cattle which pull that other wagon, he will see that by sundown, at the clump of trees where he says there is water, we will have caught up with them."

"I see," the Major said gaily, speaking now in English. "That is what Jim, the old fraud, meant when he said that perhaps we would not camp at the water-hole. But I do not believe he knows they are so close ahead just by looking at the spoor. I believe the old blighter can see the wagon and oxen ahead of us. But, come to think of it, that's just as marvelous!" He shaded his eyes with his hand and stared directly ahead of him, endeavoring to pick out against the dark, olive-green of the veld a slowly moving wagon. Then he shook his head. "I can't see the wood for the bally trees," he confessed. Then, to Jim, in the vernacular, "I am going to ride on ahead, Jim."

"The Baas will take care?" the Hottentot said anxiously.

The Major laughed and spurring his horse, galloped swiftly away, sitting gracefully in the saddle, looking as if he and the horse were one perfect whole.

"What a man!" the Hottentot exclaimed. "There is nothing he cannot do, and do well. And he is my Baas!"

Even in the little while they had been together, a wonderful understanding had sprung up between these two, white master and black servant, both *men,* both embued with the spirit of eternal boyhood. Between them there was no question of race or color. But there was no mawkish, falsely sentimental "love for a black brother" about the Major's treatment of Jim; neither did the Hottentot ever presume or in any way seek to proclaim himself to the world as the equal in all things of a white man. It was rather that each recognized the other's essential manliness and was content to let it go at that.

AN HOUR later the Major drew rein, shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed over the veld. The clump of trees which marked his destination seemed no nearer than they had done when he first left Jim. Through the heat waves the trees were distorted and danced grotesquely.

Far beyond them a low range of hills, blued by the distance, loomed high on the horizon.

"By Jove!" the Major exclaimed, licking his dry lips. "This is a bally frightful country. I expected to be at the water-hole by now."

He turned in his saddle and looked back, half-inclined to wait for Jim. To his surprise he could see nothing of his white-tented wagon and for a moment felt alone and a little awed. The veld was so vast and he, by contrast, no more than a puny insect. Then presently, the wagon crawled into sight, topping a rise. He could hear Jim's strident voice and the rifle-like reports of the long driving whip. He grinned happily, feeling that no matter what happened there would always be Jim to back up any play he made—good natured, grumbling Jim, who feigned to be greatly afraid at the times when he showed his greatest bravery.

"He has taught me a lot already," the Major muttered. "But there is yet more, lots more to learn from him still. As old Pim would say: I am innocent as a new born babe. And so, until greater knowledge comes to me, I must be very cautious. Oh very!"

With that he turned his face once more in the direction of the water-hole, and rode on at an easy tripple, a rocking-chair gait which well trained and good conditioned animals can keep on tirelessly through a long African day.

Many times during the next hour the clump of trees ahead of the Major vanished altogether from his sight as he crossed one of the wide wave-like depressions of the veld. At other times it appeared so near that it seemed as if by stretching out his hand, he could touch the nearest tree. At times the heat waves obliterated all form and shape, and the earth about him seemed to dissolve into the electric blue haze of the sky; between sky and veld there seemed to be no dividing line.

At long last he came within shouting distance of the clump of trees, and with difficulty restrained his horse from breaking into a gallop.

He drew rein for a moment and scrutinized the place, making sure that all was safe, before he went on; he saw a number of oxen grazing contentedly nearby, and a large ox wagon, with a much patched canvas top, drawn up in the shade of the trees.

Riding on again he heard a woman's voice, a full rich contralto, raised, he thought, in angry expostulation.

Coming still nearer he heard a man's voice, sullen, interlarded with expressions peculiar to the South-African Dutch.

A few minutes later he arrived at the water-hole outspan and, reining in his horse, sat looking down at the girl who was seated on the dissleboom of the wagon, and the gaunt, shaggily-bearded Boer, who stood stolidly before her. Both of them were so intent on their argument that they ignored the Major's presence; seemed, indeed, to be unconscious of it.

The Major looked keenly at the girl, noting with approval her workmanlike dress and appearance. Her hair close cropped—not an affectation of fashion, but a necessity if one was to consider cleanliness and comfort on the veld—clinging in tight brown curls about her well shaped head. She wore heavy, cord riding breeches, a gray flannel shirt, open at the neck, its sleeves rolled up above her elbows, brown leggings and boots. A rifle rested across her knees, and one sun-browned, capable hand rested lightly on the stock whilst the other pointed accusingly at the Boer.

"She is pretty." mused the Major. "No! That is wrong. She is beautiful!

THIS last thought was induced by the girl's suddenly jumping to her feet and threatening the Dutchman with her hand, stamping her feet, crying, "You are

a fool, you big senseless lump of clay. You will mend the wagon, and tomorrow, maybe tonight, we shall inspan and trek on. You hear me?"

"Ja!" The Boer replied stolidly. "I hear you, little spitfire! Tomorrow we will trek; but not on. We go back! Unless—" He leered at her provocatively and stretched out his arms as if intending to clasp her, but backed away with a startled oath of dismay, as she suddenly leveled the rifle at him.

It was then that the Major decided to make his presence known.

"Can I," he drawled, taking off his helmet, and bowing low in his saddle, "can I be of any assistance, dear Miss?"

The Boer turned with a startled exclamation, and the girl looked up with signs of relief showing in her clear brown eyes. But almost instantly the look of relief gave way to one of suspicion.

"And who the devil are you?" she snapped.

The Major seemed taken aback and covered his embarrassment with an exhibition of inanity.

"Just a wanderer on the face of the globe, dear Miss," he said lightly. "I come and go as the wind blows."

"I should say you are mostly wind," the girl interposed.

"What is your name?"

"Aubrey St. John Major. I——"

Again her cutting voice interrupted him. "And your business?"

"Dear Miss," he protested in mock injured tones. "I am no bally tradesman. Actually I am on a hunting trip, for my health's sake, in company with a bally Hottentot, and I cannot begin to tell you how delightful it is to me in this outpost, as it were, of civilization to see a member of the—er—so-called weaker sex."

"Yes, I imagine you would be more at home at one of Lady What-Not's 'At homes.'"

He stared at her in blank amazement.

"But I do not know the lady I assure you."

She laughed again, then, suspicion again clouded her eyes.

"It is funny," she said slowly, "that you come up into this country on a hunting expedition, where there is so little game."

"I was assured," he began hastily, "that it was absolutely teeming with game; lions,

elephants, rhinos and what not, all dwelling together like the lion and the lamb of the fable, you know. You do not mean to tell me, surely, that I have been spoofed?"

"No," she replied, "I do not think that you have been spoofed and I do not think that you are as big a fool as you look."

"Really!" he exclaimed. "That is a bit too thick! I may look a fool—for that you must blame my parents—but I have plenty of brains I assure you."

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"I suppose," she said, caustically, "That you do not happen to know a man named Richards? Soapy Richards?"

OH RATHER, yes!" the Major replied gaily. "He is a most astonishing blighter and been no end good to me. At least," he amended, "I thought he was good to me at first. You see I was being beaten up by a gang of beastly thugs one night, in Cape Town, and I believe I should have been killed had not Soapy Richards interfered. I was no end grateful to him, I assure you, and I had no hesitation in buying from him stock in a mine he was trying to sell and which he assured me would in time make me rich beyond the well known dreams of avarice. And I was so pleased with my acumen in getting hold of so valuable a property that I did not think of questioning him, when, on bidding me good-by, he pulled out a watch to consult the time, and that watch, dear Miss, was my watch. It had been stolen from me by the afore-mentioned gang of desperadoes. I say I did not suspect Mr. Richards of anything at the time—I was, understand, so bally grateful to him—but later—" he sighed—"when I discov-

ered that the mine existed only in Richards' imagination, then I began to think things, and, do you know? I have come to the conclusion that the mine and Richards' good Samaritan act were all so much froth and bubble. The sort of thing one would expect to be produced from soft soap."

The girl laughed again; a clear musical laugh, and her eyes danced with merriment.

"You are an even greater fool than you look," she gasped. "But somehow, I am inclined to like you, Mr. Aubrey St. John Major."

The Major beamed with pleasure.

"Then I may dismount?" he asked, "and outspan, as the bally Boers put it?"

She nodded assent.

"There is room for us all," she said, and frowned when the Boer, who had been a silent listener to the conversation between herself and the Major, uttered a loud protest.

"There is not enough water for us all, *roinek,*" he said. "It is best that you trek on to another water-hole that is only five miles away; and that is nothing. You have a horse and a wagon that is drawn by mules, is it not? You go on and I will tell your Hottentot when he comes where you have gone."

There was a threat underlying the Dutchman's voice and the girl looked at the Major keenly as if wondering how he would take it.

"I think," that man said slowly, "I will stay here at least until my Hottentot arrives. Then, if he says that there is not enough water, we will go on." He turned to the girl continuing, "He should be here by noon, and I hope that your will do me the honor of lunching with me."

"I will be charmed," she said. "And now, if you will pardon me, I must dress in honor of the occasion."

With a wave of the hand she climbed up into the wagon and disappeared under its tented-top.

Chapter VII

VANDERSPEY SHAKES HANDS

THE Major turned to the Boer, glancing speculatively at his gigantic frame, the thick red lips, tangled tobacco-stained beard and the small, piggish, red-rimmed eyes.

"Your name?" he asked sharply, speaking the taal.

"Ach sis!" the Dutchman replied. "Must I tell my name to any damn fool Englisher who asks it?"

"Of course, old dear, if it is a name you are ashamed of I will not press the matter."

"Almighty!" the Dutchman roared. "I have no shame in my name. It is a good name, man! There is no better name than Vanderspey in all this land."

"That is all right then, Van, old dear. Now suppose you take me to the water-hole; there is enough I take it, for my horse?"

"Turn your horse loose, he will find the water."

The Major nodded, and, turning loose his horse, followed it to a jumble of rocks, where was a large pool of crystal-clear spring water. He drank himself then returned to where Vanderspey stood scratching his head in puzzled indecision.

"There is difficulty?" asked the Major.

"Ja!" the Dutchman replied wrathfully. "She wants to go on, this fool girl, and I say we should go back. This journey she takes is a folly. She goes seeking much treasure where there is no treasure, where only danger is, and puts to scorn the other treasure which is close to her hand."

"And what is this treasure which she scorns?" the Major asked.

Vanderspey laughed.

"Is it not clear to you, Englisher?" he asked. "I am a man! I have a big farm—three thousand *orgen*—with many niggers and sheep. Man! I tell you! By men who know, I, Vanderspey, am counted rich, and I offer all to this fool girl who goes searching for treasure that is not."

The Major laughed softly.

"But perhaps there is a string attached to the gift."

Vanderspey stared at him with dull, uncomprehending eyes.

"A string you say?" he muttered.

"Yes," the Major agreed. "Not that you, old chap, can be exactly called a string. But I suppose that with all this you offer the young lady, you also offer your hand?"

The Dutchman nodded.

"Ja! That is it, and, look you, it is a good hand." He stretched his big right hand out toward Major. "Shake it," he said, "and judge for yourself."

As he spoke he grinned maliciously.

"Yes," the Major drawled, fixing his monocle more securely, and gazing at Vanderspey's hand as if it were some freakish curiosity. "It would seem to be quite a good hand; very large and muscular. Judging by the heart line I should imagine you are going to be disappointed in love."

HE TOOK Vanderspey's wrist fastidiously between his thumb and forefinger and turned Vanderspey's hand over. "Very hairy," he continued, "and the condition of the finger nails leaves much to be desired. However, as a hand it is a good hand."

And then he held out his own right hand, slightly tanned, long-fingered, the nails neatly trimmed and polished; a plump, almost effeminate looking hand.

He grasped Vanderspey's, and instantly the Boer stiffened; his hand tightened about the Major's. The Major tensed slightly, standing with his feet apart. His biceps swelled under his white silk shirt as he summoned up his strength to meet the vise-like pressure Vanderspey was exerting.

The Dutchman stared incredulously. He had expected the Major to drop to his knees, to cry out in pain and beg to be released from the torturing grip; instead the dude only smiled. Worse yet, his fingers contracted about Vanderspey's hand in a grip of steel; each finger feeling like a wire, slowly but surely tightening.

Vanderspey's eyes dilated, beads of sweat formed on his brow, rolled down his nose and dropped into his tangled beard. He endeavored to put more force into his grip and, failing, bit his lips in order to suppress a groan of pain. His fingers grew numb, he felt that drops of blood must be dripping from his finger tips; suddenly he relaxed his efforts and at that moment Major twisted his hand upward, and to the right, pulling him off his balance, sending him with a crash to the ground.

"Yes," the Major drawled, wiping his hand on a handkerchief. "Yours is a very good hand but I fancy it has been rejected in a manner of speaking. Eh! What!"

"Almighty!" the Dutchman roared, rubbing his benumbed fingers, rose to his feet and glared angrily at the Major. "It was a trick, Englisher."

"Of course. And now perhaps you will tell me what you have decided to do. Do you go forward in the morning or back?"

"Almighty! That is easy. We go back. I will see to that."

"And if the young lady insists on going forward, what then?"

"I know how to deal with women. She will go back. In the beginning I agreed to do all she said, knowing that if I did not come with her she would get someone else to bring her on this fool trip. But I came. And, now she has spent all her money, she will be glad after a time of all the things I offer her."

"You mean to marry her, of course?" the Major said.

Vanderspey leered.

"Maybe. But at least I have promised to send away my nigger women so that she will have no rivals. That is most dangerous of me, is it not?"

The Major sighed.

"I am afraid, Vanderspey, that you are born to trouble as the sparks fly upward, and I think that tomorrow you will go forward. Yes, I will make it my business to see that you do that. But here comes Jim, he shall help you mend the wagon. But first he will prepare a meal."

AS HE spoke, Jim, the Hottentot, drew his mules to a halt with a flourish, and jumped to the ground shouting a greeting to his Baas and the scowling Dutchman.

"Outspan, Jim," the Major ordered. "There is plenty of water for the mules. Then prepare skoff."

With great efficiency Jim turned the

mules loose, then busied himself for a while in the interior of the wagon. Half an hour later he had set up a canvas table in the shade of some trees, had covered it with a white damask cloth, on which silver gleamed, and highly polished crystal ware; on either side of the table were set two canvas chairs.

And then the girl appeared at the opening of her wagon and the Major leaped forward, offering her his hand.

She took it gracefully and stepped down daintily.

"My name," she said demurely, "is Marjorie Wallace."

"Charmed!" the Major murmured conventionally and led her gravely to the table.

As the meal progressed all feeling of restraint between them ceased and they talked merrily of this and that, finding they had many tastes in common, not once did either of them by word or act indicate that there was anything unusual about so well served a meal in the wilds of a rawly new country.

To all intents and purposes they might have been any good looking, well dressed couple lunching at a fashionable resort in London or New York. When Jim brought them their coffee the Major took from his pocket a silver cigarette case, opened it, offered it to the girl and held the match to her cigarette.

For a little while they were both silent, happily content with each other's company.

Jim and the Dutchman were now engaged in cutting a new dissleboom and the ring of their axes against the hard wood was the only sound which broke the silence.

"I think," the Major said presently, "that by late afternoon you will be able to trek."

"I am quite sure I shall."

"But are you sure which way you are going to trek?"

"Naturally," she replied. "We are heading north."

"But Vanderspey has different ideas," the Major objected.

"Oh, Vanderspey!" She made a little grimace of contempt. "He will go the way I order. It is rather embarrassing at times, but he is devoted to me."

"I should think," the Major suggested, "that would be dangerous rather than embarrassing."

"Dangerous? How?"

The Major fidgetted uneasily. "My dear Miss Marjorie," he said, "consider your situation! You are here alone on the veld, your only protector a coarse Boer."

"You mean I am in danger of being abducted by Vanderspey! Poor old Van! He is as harmless as a sheep dog."

"Sheep dogs have been known to get rabies and then they are not altogether harmless."

"Oh well then," she said, with a seriousness befitting the subject, "if Vanderspey goes mad, I shall make sure of shooting before he—" she dropped her voice to a whisper—"bites."

THE Major sighed. He believed this girl needed his protection, yet he could not see any way in which he could force that protection upon her. She seemed so competent.

The girl, as if in answer to his thoughts, suddenly produced a revolver. "This," she said, "is always with me, and I find that it is a very competent protector."

"But can you use it?" he asked.

"Better than most men," she replied. "I lived through rough times with Daddy in the Californian gold fields, and often this was my only companion. Daddy saw to it that it was not just meant for show.

"Look," she said, and pointed to a small battered tin plate. "I will turn my back to you, put my revolver on the chair here, and you shall throw that plate up in the air. Then you call 'right'—and we shall see."

The girl turned her back to him, and he threw a plate high up into the air.

"Right!" he called.

Quick as a flash the girl whirled, picked up the revolver and fired twice.

The plate leaped in the air at the impact of the bullets, and then dropped to the ground. The Major picked it up, ex-

amined the two jagged holes and returned it to the girl.

"Are you satisfied now?" she asked triumphantly.

He shook his head.

"It is not always as easy as that, and I wish you would let me join your expedition."

Instantly the atmosphere of friendly good comradeship disappeared.

"I go my own way," she said curtly, "And I go alone. I warn you that should I have reasons to suspect that you are following me, I shall shoot at sight."

The Major sighed.

"Then will you accept my Hottentot, Jim, for your driver, and let Vanderspey come with me? I think I can handle him."

"No!" she said.

"At least," the Major said despairingly, "you will accept my horse, won't you? Then, if anything goes wrong you might be able to ride away."

She hesitated a moment. then:

"I think I will accept that," she said softly. "And thank you!"

And with that the Major had to be content. The only thing he could do now, was to make clear to Vanderspey that the girl was not alone in the world but had a protector, namely, himself. With this end in view, he rose carelessly from his chair, explaining in response to the girl's questioning look that he must be toddling along.

THEN he gave a few orders to Jim, instructing that man to pack up the luncheon things and inspan. And Jim having set about his task with a will—the Hottentot was strangely eager to get his Baas away from feminine influence—the Major excused himself to the girl and went over to where Vanderspey was slowly working on the new dissleboom, and watched him.

The Dutchman evidently resented this scrutiny, for presently he threw down his ax with a curse, and asked: "Why do you stare so at me?"

"I was attempting," the Major said lightly, "a little mental telepathy. I wanted to convey to your brain that you must obey Miss Wallace in all things. I want you to bear very closely in your mind that from now on I shall be only a half-day's trek ahead of you, sometimes less; and at night, when you may think you are safe from prying eyes, I shall take it upon myself to pay secret visits to your outspan. You will not see me; Miss Wallace will not see me; but I shall be there. And so, dear man"—he rose to his feet and stretched himself—"You will be very grateful, will you not?"

Vanderspey scowled.

"If a hyena comes prowling around my outspan at night," he growled, "I shoot the skellum."

"And that's very wise. Only, at the risk of appearing boastful, I must point out to you that I am not a hyena, and that you won't see me."

Vanderspey muttered inarticulate oaths. His face was white with fury and in his piggish eyes was a killing light. Yet the Major knew that the Boer would hesitate a long time before attempting any overt action.

"Well that's that!" he said, "S'long!" And rising to his feet he turned his back on Vanderspey and returned to his wagon.

Jim had inspanned the mules, and all was ready for the trek.

"Good-by, Miss Marjorie," the Major said. "I hope we shall meet again very soon."

"It is not likely," she replied coldly, then her eyes softened. "But I, too, wish it were possible. You have been very kind. I will take good care of your horse and, when this trek is over, will leave him for you at the livery stables at Steinberg. Good-by!"

She held out her well shaped, sun-bronzed hand, and took Major's in a firm cool grip.

"Good-by, Miss Marjorie," the Major said again and climbed into his wagon.

"Trek!" he called sharply to Jim; and the Hottentot shouting wildly, flourishing the long stocked driving whip, urged the mules into a gallop, and the wagon rolled swiftly away.

WITH her hand shading her eyes, the girl stared after them, until no sign of them was left save a swiftly moving cloud of dust. Then she turned slowly, a thoughtful expression on her face, and climbed up into her wagon.

CHAPTER VIII

THE GALLOPING TREK

AFTER leaving the water-hole inspan, the Major was very quiet and had no answer for the Hottentot's ceaseless banter and the rough homespun philosophy with which he sought to point out the folly of the Supreme Being in creating women. And at length, as they drove on, his Baas' silence infected him and he sat sullenly silent, applying the whip with unnecessary vigor.

The speed of the wagon increased, and it swayed perilously from side to side.

"This is folly, Jim," the Major said presently, reining in the mules. "Put away your whip. You are a wicked heathen, Jim. You rail against women, yet had there been no women there would have been no Jim!"

The Hottentot grunted disdainfully.

"As long, Baas," he said, "as women remember the one purpose for which they were made, I have no words of complaint to make against them. But when I see them taking to themselves the dress of man, and the work of man, then I say there is no evil so great. That Missy back there," he continued, warming to his theme, "should be at home in her hut, making beer, drying skins or preparing her man's food."

"She is a white woman, Jim, and has no hut and no man."

"Wo-we!" Jim exclaimed. "Then she must be a witch, for she is without doubt past the age when maidens are given in marriage. I say——"

"You have said enough," the Major interrupted abruptly. "There are some things which even you, wise one, do not understand; and it is folly to talk of what is not understood."

"I understand," Jim muttered sullenly, "that she is a woman, and has fascinated my Baas with her eyes."

Again there was silence, unbroken, until Jim viewed a horseman ahead of them. He looked slyly at his Baas, asking: "And can you see nothing Baas, or have your eyes been blinded as are the eyes of a love sick youth?"

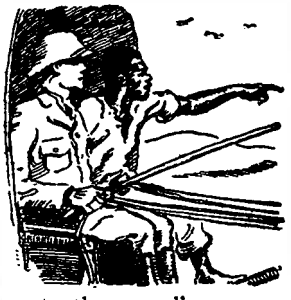
The Major roused himself.

"My eyes are open, Jim," he said. "They are not blinded, and I see—" he hesitated —"a buck ahead of us."

Jim chuckled.

"You are blind, Baas," he said. "That is no buck. It is a man on horseback. The horse is gray. It is lame in the off-fore. The man who rides it is small but, I think fat. He is a policeman." He paused looking triumphantly at the Major, noting the look of incredulity on that man's face. Then, "Shall I tell you more?" he added. "To prove how blind my Baas is?"

"Tell me more if you will, Jim," the Major replied. "But it will not prove me blind, but rather how wide open are your eyes—or how big a liar you are."



Jim laughed.

"I am no liar Baas. At least, I do not lie to you. I will tell you no more. You shall see for yourself when we have got up to the man."

AND half an hour later, when they had drawn rein beside a man on horseback, the Major found himself exchanging greetings with a short, rotund little man, dressed in the uniform of the mounted police. His horse limped slightly on its off-fore.

"What is your name, pardner?" the little man asked, and though his phrases were of the American West his accent was that of a London-bred man.

"Major. Aubrey St. John Major. And yours?"

"'Emmings. Trooper 'Emmings. And I am pleased to meetcha. Have you a drink you can offer a thirsty man?"

The Major nodded.

"Suppose you climb up into the wagon with us," he suggested, "and tie your horse

to the tailboard of the wagon. A little rest will do you both good."

"Blimey! Yes!" exclaimed the other, mopping his beet-red face with a white spotted, blue cotton handkerchief. "It's blamed 'ot ain't it?"

A few minutes later he was seated on the driver's seat between Jim and the Major.

He continued:

"This is an 'ell of a trip I am on. Got to go to a kraal way back of beyond of somewheres because there is a rumor that the niggers are giving trouble. My corporal, he is there already, and he sent a special messenger to me to hurry along and join him. I ought to have been there yesterday, but my blinking horse put its feet down an ant bear hole and sprained his fetlock, I couldn't ride him yesterday, had to walk, and by rights, I ought not to have been riding him today. Poor devil! And say, pard! Look here! There is a farm about ten miles on. I could get a horse there, if you will take me."

The Major nodded. "Charmed," he said. "I am always ready to do all I can to help the long arm of the Law. I hope," he added anxiously, "that you do not expect any great trouble with the natives of this district. You see I am on a hunting trip."

"Oh no!" The trooper re-assured him. "It won't be much, just a little trouble about some bloomin' superstition. Something to do with Devil's Kloof. Me and my corporal will soon be able to put them right. Nothing to worry about, nothing whatever."

The Major nodded.

"I'm very glad of that," he said. Then: "You will pardon me, I know, but sometimes you talk like a man who has lived most of his life within sound of the dear old Bow Bells, and yet, your figures of speech, if you get what I mean, are those of an American. How is it?"

THE trooper grinned somewhat sheepishly. "That is all my corporal's fault," he said. "He is a real, honest-to-God Westerner. I am ready to gamble that he can sit a horse, and ride and shoot, and knows the niggers of this country better than I does the palm of my hand. You ought to meet him Aubrey, if you will pardon me being familiar. It sure would be an education for you. And Blimey! You look as if you need one."

The Major laughed.

"I'd like to meet him, trooper," he said. "Maybe I will someday. I suppose being with the corporal so much, you have unconsciously, as it were, adopted his mannerisms?"

"There's no unconscious about it," replied the trooper flatly. "Corporal Greenway is wot I fink a man ought to be, so I tries to be as like 'im as possible, only—Blimey! it's blinking hard. He stands nearly six foot and he's as thin as a beanpole. And me! You can see for yourself wot I am!"

The Major sighed in sympathy for him. Then he remembered the girl he had just left at the water-hole.

"Look here," he said excitedly, "couldn't you give up this trek you are on and go back and look after a lady?"

The trooper shook his head.

"It ain't possible," he said. "I've got my orders and I've got to obey them; but 'oo is she and wot's the trouble?"

The Major told him, briefly, his fears for the girl.

"I don't see there's nothing I can do," Hemmings said, "though I sure'd like to take a hand and bash that blighter Vanderspey in the jaw. But I can't. But, say, wot's her name?"

"Miss Wallace, Marjorie Wallace."

"Wot?" Hemmings exclaimed excitedly. "Has she brown 'air, cropped short, with sort of curls about 'er 'ead, dresses like a boy, and eyes with a sort of 'I can take very good care of myself' about them?"

"You have described the girl exactly," the Major said, and continued, with a growing curiosity, "You know her?"

"Lumme!" Hemmings replied. "I should just say I do, and this 'ere is an 'ell of an 'ole I'm in! Look here, my corporal, I'm finking, is in love with this girl. He met her down at the last post where we were stationed at. You understand we have only been in this district a little while, and don't know it like we ought. Well, the corporal he meets this Miss Wallace and gets mighty interested in her, and she in him,

for the matter of that. The corporal he lets on to me that the only reason he is interested in her is because she is a Yankee, the same as 'im, but I know better. And as for Miss Yankee! It may have begun that way, but it ain't like that wiv 'er now, and Lumme! 'Ere's a 'ell of a mess for me. Here's the corporal's girl in a funny situation, and I feels as if I ought to go back. But I don't see how I can.

"It's 'ell! No matter wot I do, it'll be wrong. But this is wot I am going to do: I am going to push on as fast as I can to this farm and get another horse, and then ride like 'ell to the corporal and tell him all about it."

The Major nodded agreement with the idea, and tightening his grip on the reins said to Jim:

"We trek fast now!" The Hottentot grinned, flourished his whip and urged the mules into a frenzied gallop.

Chapter IX

JIM

IT WAS nearing sundown of the following day, when the contour of the ground over which the Major's wagon was traveling suddenly changed. Before it had been gentle and undulating, dotted with thick clumps of *mapani* bush and tall coarse grass. But now the ground ahead was as smooth as a billiard table, and totally devoid of vegetation. Directly ahead a low range of hills loomed up forbiddingly, looking, Jim said, "As if they marked the outer edge of the earth."

A little to their right the veld seemed to be scarred by a deep cut, which ran directly toward the hills.

"There," said the Hottentot, "is a river. Let us make for it and camp on its banks before the sun sets and darkness falls."

The Major laughed.

"True, oh wise one! There is a river, but there is no water in it!"

The Hottentot looked at his Baas with an expression of astonishment.

"The Baas has been here before?" he questioned.

The Major shook his head.

"But I know there is no water there," he said.

Jim looked at the sun, and then around the dreary plateau.

"Then where shall we camp, Baas?" he asked. "Remember that we have but little water with us."

"We camp on the other side of those hills," the Major stated.

The Hottentot looked at his Baas as if thinking he had gone a little mad.

"The sun has been very hot," he muttered, "and we have trekked far; undoubtedly the Baas is tired. How could we reach the other side of the hills by night? We cannot fly over them, having no wings; and to go around them means a day's, or maybe two days' trek."

The Major laughed.

"Therein it is shown, Hottentot," he said grandly, "that some things are hidden even from you."

As he spoke he turned the mules toward the river, and, reaching it, drove along its banks a little way until he had discovered a place where the banks were less steep and it was possible for him to drive the wagon down on to its firm, sandy bottom.

This dried-up river—it was now only a wide crack in the surface of the veld—was about forty feet wide, and the bed free from obstructions of any sort. It led straight toward the hills, with none of the twists so typical of African rivers.

The Major put his mules to a gallop.

AS THEY neared the black hills the banks became steeper, towering high above the top of the wagon, formed of black rock which glistened like marble.

Jim was frightened, and made no attempt to disguise his fear.

"Where do we go, Baas?" he asked, his teeth chattered. "I like not this place. It looks like the approach of the place of the dead."

"It is there we go, Jim," the Major replied, laughing.

"You mean, Baas?"

"I mean that we go to the Devil's Kloof;

the place guarded by the spirits of dead Zulu warriors; the place where, so goes the tale, great treasure is hidden."

Jim looked at his Baas with an expression of profound amazement.

"What a man!" he exclaimed softly. "There seems to be nothing hid from him, and yet I thought, in my folly, that he would have need of me; I thought I could teach him many things."

"As you have, and as you can, Jim," the Major replied earnestly. "The little I know about this place I have been told; there is no credit due to me."

"But, Baas," Jim said earnestly, "learn from me now. I say that it is folly to come to this place. Evil will come of it."

The Major shook his head.

"It comes to me," he said patiently, "that no harm can come to us, even supposing

that spirits live in that place. I think that they will be kindly disposed toward us, for look you, we are not Zulus, neither have we any evil designs in our hearts. And so, we go!"

Jim was silenced, his eyes were glued on a sandy stretch ahead of him. Presently it narrowed so much that there was very little margin on either side of the wagon and the Major drove more slowly.

"It is best that we turn back," Jim grumbled, "while there is yet time, for look, Baas, there the river ends and we can go no further."

He pointed ahead and it seemed as if the sheer sides of the hill completely blocked further passage. But on nearing, they saw that the river bed had turned sharply to the right, and then after a few hundred yards again to the left. And left again, passing through mountainous banks. Presently it opened out into a crater-like valley in the heart of the hills, where vegetation was luxurious.

"And there, Jim," the Major said, pointing to a rock-circled pool of water which gleamed blood red, reflecting the sunset glow of the sky, "there we will camp!"

Quickly they outspanned. In a very little while they had erected a bell-tent, and a fire was blazing, before which Jim was grilling a joint cut from the buck the Major had shot earlier in the day.

THE meal ended, the Major prepared for bed, and turned in. But owing to the excitement of the past two days and his relief at finding the Devil's Kloof, he could not sleep and, after an hour of restless tossing to and fro, he rose, donned a warm gown, lighted a cigarette and joined Jim, who, wrapped in a vivid red blanket, was walking up and down before an enormous fire, speaking soothingly, reasoningly, to the mules, which were tethered close by the fire.

"There is no need, Jim," said the Major, "to keep watch in this place. No one can get at us. Neither is there any need to tether the mules; they will not try to get out of here."

Jim chuckled grimly.

"Say you so, Baas?" And as he spoke he took a burning brand from the fire and threw it with angry curse out into the darkness beyond the circle of the fire-light. There was a loud rustling noise in the bushes, and a cat-like, spitting snarl. As the flaming log came to earth, the Major fancied he saw, silhouetted against its light, the skulking form of a leopard.

"By Jove, Jim!" he breathed softly, and went into his tent for a rifle. Emerging instantly, his eyes ablaze with the joy of the hunt, he asked hoarsely, "Where is it?"

Jim shrugged his shoulders.

"It?" he replied. "There—and there—and there—and there!" He pointed all about the camp. "There are hundreds of them, Baas."

The Major chuckled softly.

"Somewhat of an exaggeration," he drawled in English, adding in the vernacular incredulously, "Hundreds of them?"

"Truly, Baas," Jim replied gravely. "I think that they are inhabited by the souls

of the dead Zulus and have come to drive us away from this place of theirs." He put more wood on the fire, and threw another flaming log into the bush.

Again it was greeted by a spitting snarl of defiance and for a fraction of a second the Major saw another leopard, and on that instant he fired. A tawny black smeared shape leapt into the fire-light and dropped with a lifeless thud to the ground.

"The hundreds, Jim," the Major said gleefully, "are at least lessened by one."

"Yah," agreed Jim in alarmed tones. "But listen to the voices of the spirits demanding vengeance!"

The echo of the Major's shot was still reverberating back and forth between the high hills encompassing the valley, sounding like the rattle of distant machine-guns.

THE leopards' voices were answered by several others, and their spitting snarls, too, were multiplied by the echoes; and then, when all these sounds had died away, somewhere up in the hills a dog-ape barked, and his voice was the signal for a chorus of imprecations shouted by the apes which lived in the hills. Leopards screamed an answer to the challenge, and for a while the valley was a bedlam of howling noises, to which the mules added their raucus clamor.

"Well," said Jim grimly, "said I not, Baas, that this was an evil place?"

"This is no place for a bally Sunday School picnic! My word, no! But on the morrow we will go hunting. Sit down, Jim, and rest or sleep. I will keep watch!"

"The Baas said," Jim observed sarcastically, "there was no need to keep guard in this place. And I will not sleep. Together we will keep watch."

"Then, Jim," said the Major, "we must find a task for our hands or sleep will take us unawares."

He caught hold of the leopard he had shot and dragged it by the tail closer to the fire-light.

"This will be a good time," he said, "to teach me how to take the skin from a beast."

The Hottentot nodded approval and whetted his short-bladed bushman's knife on the sole of his foot.

"First, Baas"—stooping over the carcass of the leopard—"we make a cut here——"

For a time the two men forgot their surroundings; the Major closely following Jim's directions, questioning him, learning the anatomy of the beast, cutting and pulling until finally the skin had been removed with but few slits to show that it had been the work of a novice.

Jim nodded approval.

"The Baas will do better than that very soon. And now to remove this offal." When he came back from disposing of it he squatted down on his haunches close to the Major, who was proudly fingering the skin of the leopard.

"In the morning, Baas," he said, "we must peg it out, and I will show you how to preserve it."

Night wore on. Overhead the stars shone startlingly bright. In the clear air they seemed very near; looked, indeed, as if they were set in a black velvet ceiling, stretched across the top of the hills. Weird moaning shrieks presently filled the valley with an atmosphere of supernatural fear.

"More devils," Jim said, moving uneasily.

The Major listened intently, then laughed. "A wind is blowing, Jim," he explained. "It is blowing through the cracks in the hills."

Jim nodded. "Maybe, Baas," he said uneasily, "but I think they are evil spirits."

THE Major was silent for a moment, then said earnestly, "Now, listen, Jim. You have taught me many things, you will teach me many more things. Now I will teach you a little of the wisdom of the white man. I think the noise we now hear is the noise of an upspringing wind. But you in your folly say that it is the voice of devils. And if you say that, believing that, then it *is* the noise of devils, and you are afraid. Is that clear? Do you understand the road along which I desire to take you?"

Jim pondered on this for a moment, then chuckling, softly exclaimed, "Yah! I think I see, Baas. It is as if a witch doctor said to me that should I drink of such and such water, I should die, because it was *taboo*.

And if later I drank it, I know that I should die; but not because of the water, but because of the fear the witch doctor had planted in my mind concerning it. Is that what the Baas would teach me?"

The Major nodded assent.

Jim sighed.

"It is a big lesson, Baas. Some day, maybe, I will learn it, but now it is too hard for me, and"—he shivered—"I think the noises we hear are the voices of spirits."

He turned his back on the Major and muttered a charm, guaranteed by the witch doctor from whom he had purchased it, to preserve him from sorcery. "And now," he continued, turning again to his Baas, "I have no fear, for that is a powerful charm." The Major laughed.

"The charm was no other than the one I gave you. Think it over, Hottentot."

The wind died down, great clouds blotted out the stars; suddenly the air was heavily impregnated with moisture; thunder rolled continuously and lightning flashed, running along the tops of the hills, silhouetting them in an outline of fire. And then, after a devastating thunder clap, the clouds burst and spilled their contents. The fire went out with a sharp hiss, and though but a few yards away from the tent, the Major was saturated before he could gain its shelter.

Chapter X

Ghost of the Pit

THE morning broke swiftly, the rain had ceased, and a few clouds which were in existence dissolved rapidly before the rising sun.

Having broken their fast, the Major and Jim set their camp in better order, building a *scherm* in which to put their mules at night. That done, Jim carrying a spare gun and a belt of cartridges, they explored the valley.

It was, the Major decided, evidently of volcanic origin, and the fact that the hills had strong indications of iron-stone explained the intensity of the night's electric disturbances. The valley was almost circular in shape, and of a scant two miles in circumference.

Jim's keen eyes detected a faint trail leading up the steep slopes on one side, and, climbing this, their way challenged by apes, they reached the summit, and from there gained a wonderful view back across the country they had recently traveled.

Again it was Jim's keen eyes which detected, crawling sluggishly over the plain, the wagon drawn by sixteen oxen, of Miss Wallace.

"I think, Jim," the Major said gaily in English, "we will be proper explorers, and give names to anything that appeals to our fancy. And this we will call 'Look-out Point.' "

Jim nodded and grinned as if understanding what his Baas had said.

"Yah, Baas," he replied, parrot-like. "Golly! Dam, yes, no, if I don't see you so long, hallow!"

The Major looked at him in amazement.

"By Jove!" he chuckled, "the old lad has been hiding his light under a bushel. The beggar speaks English most fluently!"

Still chuckling, he led the way slowly down into the valley. As he was pushing his way through a patch of long grass the ground suddenly seemed to drop away from under his feet.

He threw out his arms just in time to save himself from falling down a deep pot hole. Clambering out with Jim's alarmed aid, he gazed down into the yawning chasm. He could not see the bottom. It was lost in total blackness. The sides of the hole were polished smooth, looked almost as if it had been bored by some gigantic drill.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed softly. "I had almost forgotten the business of my friend Soapy Richards. This must be the so celebrated pit. Funny that I should stumble on it in this way!"

He gave a few curt orders to Jim and then waited by the pit mouth until that man had been to the wagon and returned with a long, stout rope and a bundle of papers.

OF THE papers he made a sort of torch, lighted it and lowered it into the pit at the end of the rope. It flamed brightly until, about fifty feet down, it flickered as if caught by a strong cross-current of air. Then as it was lowered still further, it burned steadily again. At length just before the end of the rope was reached, the lighted paper came to rest on the bottom of the pit.

"I'm going down, Jim," the Major said.

"Wo-we!" Jim exclaimed. "That is folly. Undoubtedly this place is evil and at the bottom of this hole waits death."

The Major laughed, and, hauling up the rope—the torch had by now burned itself out—carefully knotted the end around his waist. The other end Jim, protesting worriedly, tied about the trunk of a nearby tree.

"Pay out the rope slowly, Jim," the Major ordered and disappeared into the darkness of the pit.

The diameter of the pit was so small that, by pressing out his knees and arms against the walls, he was able to lighten the strain on the rope and was enabled at times to light matches and by the feeble illumination they cast in the abysmal darkness of the place, examine the smooth, shining walls.

When he was about fifty feet down he shouted excitedly to Jim, his voice echoing hollowly:

"Hold fast, Jim!"

The Hottentot, his face dripping with the sweat of anxiety, took several hitches of the rope around the tree and gazing down into the darkness, broken by the little jets of flame as the Major lighted match after match, called hoarsely:

"What is it, Baas? Are you all right?"

"All right, Jim," the Major's voice boomed up reassuringly. "I have found a shaft leading off this one. I am going up it a little way. Let me have plenty of slack."

"But, Baas——" Jim started to protest.

"Obey!" the Major's curt order cut short Jim's expostulations and, with fear filled eyes, he loosened the rope.

Minutes, long minutes passed. It seemed to Jim that the earth had swallowed up his Baas. No sound came to him, no glimmer of light. His superstitious mind pictured nameless horrors which had taken his Baas.

He wanted to flee from the place, but loyalty held him fast.

"Baas!" he called despairingly and tugged gently on the rope. There was no resistance! He tugged it again, hauled up several feet. Still no answering tug. He pulled up more of the rope, his fears increasing, until it was obvious that his Baas was no longer fastened to the other end. And then misery completely possessed the Hottentot and throwing himself face downward on the ground he wailed his loss. He shouted curses, cursing the spirits who had taken his Baas from him; he swore vengeance upon them. Then, presently, regaining control of himself, his eyes shining with determination, he prepared to lower himself into the pit.

And then a voice called from the bushes just to the left of him.

"Jim!"

"It is his ghost," Jim muttered, looking fearfully in the direction of the voice.

And then the Major appeared, his clothing torn and soiled, carrying a large, iron box.

I AM no ghost, Jim," he exclaimed breathlessly, and continued swiftly, noting Jim's look of unbelief. "I went along that shaft, Jim, and I saw light ahead of me. So I undid the rope so that I could go forward unimpeded. And I found that the shaft opened into another pit, a very shallow pit, Jim. And out of that I climbed very easily. That is all."

"It is a lot, Baas," Jim said grumblingly. "I thought the spirits had taken you."

"And you were intending to come and take me from the spirits, Jim? You would dare the unknown for your unworthy Baas?"

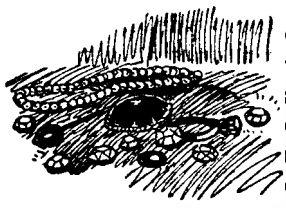
"There is nothing I would not dare, Baas——" Jim began, but broke off abruptly to ask, "And what is that which you carry?"

The Major put the box down on the ground.

"I do not know, yet, Jim. I found it in that shaft just where it opened out into the other pit. We shall see."

He opened it with difficulty and exposed

to the brilliant sunlight a shimmering array of jewels—rubies, sapphires and emeralds, gold crosses and rings of antique pattern, jeweled cameos of exquisite carving.



"By Jove!" he exclaimed softly, while Jim looked at him as if wondering that so many pieces of colored glass should so affect his Baas.

"I wonder," the Major continued in English, "how they came here? I imagine one of the early explorers—Spanish or Portuguese—must have got to this place somehow. Maybe he was chased by—er—natives and hid the treasure here, meaning to come back for it some day. Perhaps he was a priest—certainly they seem to be church jewels. But it's useless tryin' to form a theory as to how they got here. The fact is, here they are. And they're worth thousands—thousands! By Jove, yes! We're rich, Jim! Rich beyond the—er—dreams of avarice. Rich, Jim! You hear?"

"Golly, damme, yes, no," Jim replied stolidly. "If I don't see you, s'long, hullo!" Then in the native vernacular, "It is time we had skoff, Baas."

The Major laughed.

"You are a true philosopher, Jim," he said. "Of what use riches when the belly is empty? Lead on, then, and we will eat."

He closed the lid of the box, picked it up and led the way to the wagon, followed closely by Jim, who kept looking furtively behind him as if fearing that evil spirits would yet emerge from the pit and claim vengeance.

Chapter XI

DIAMONDS AND DEATH

THE midday meal over, the Major examined his find again, emptying the treasure into a large chamois leather bag, and sat dreamily in a chair endeavoring to reason out the circumstances which led to the jewels being secreted in such a place. He tried, too, to estimate Richards' claim to the treasure—and the girl's.

And so the long afternoon hours passed until Jim, who had been out collecting firewood and exploring the valley, came back with the information that he had found many more pits.

"Does the Baas want to go down them, too?" he asked.

The Major shook his head.

"No, Jim," he replied thoughtfully. "At least, not yet."

Jim grinned his relief, then held up his hand in a warning for silence.

"Some one comes, Baas," he said. "Someone rides a horse fast this way."

They quickly took up positions behind rocks which masked their presence from any one riding into the valley. Hardly had they done so when the girl, Marjorie Wallace, appeared riding furiously along the river bed, rounding the bend.

She rode almost up to the wagon before seeming aware of its presence, then reined in her horse with a startled exclamation, wheeled and rode as if intending to go back as fast as she had come.

The Major then stepped out from behind the rock, full in the course she would take and held up his hand, signalling her to halt.

She reined in her horse and looked at him contemptuously.

"So you are in Soapy Richards' pay after all," she said slowly.

"If it pleases you to think that," the Major drawled, "then, perhaps, I am. At any rate, I can't allow you to leave here."

"I'd like to see you stop me," she stormed, and drew her revolver, leveling it at him. "Out of my way!"

He smiled up at her, but did not budge.

"Out of my way," she demanded again, "or I will ride you down."

She spurred her horse forward and it seemed, for a moment, as if she would carry out her threat. But at the last moment she reined in suddenly, pulling her mount back on its haunches and, when it reared frantically, wheeled it with a masterly exhibition of horsemanship.

"That was quite cleverly done, Miss Marjorie," the Major drawled when, having calmed her horse, patting its arched neck, she sat there looking scornfully at the Major and Jim, who now joined his Baas.

Once again she pointed her revolver.

"I will give you one more warning," she

said. "Out of my way or I shall fire!"

I THINK not," the Major said gently. "It would be so much like murder, wouldn't it? And besides, why do you want to go from this place, considering the trouble you took to get here?"

She answered that with a look of contempt.

"And," continued the Major easily, "I think you will be much safer here, than back out there on the veld with Vanderspey."

She was silent for a moment, then, "How did you know of this place?"

"Who doesn't know of it?" he countered with a laugh. "Every one must have heard the story of Devil's Kloof."

"Yes, perhaps. But not every one knows where it is. Though many have looked for it, no one has succeeded in finding it—except my father."

"I am here," the Major pointed out. "Therefore I must have found it, and it is most extraordinary, I assure you, the way I did find it. We rode along the dried up river, looking for water, and found ourselves here. And here we are!"

"If I could believe that," she commenced, then checked herself. "But I cannot. You are lying, of course. You must be in Soapy Sam's pay. And because of that it is not safe for me to be where you are. I ought to shoot you." She sighed. "But I cannot. That, I suppose, is because I am a woman and too soft!"

"Will you accept my assurance," the Major then asked gently, "that I have not received one penny of Soapy Sam's money?"

She looked at him sharply. "And will not?" she demanded.

The Major hesitated.

"I think," he said slowly, "that under certain conditions, I can promise you that I will not."

"Conditions!" she stormed. "And what are they?"

"Simply," he said, "that if you can convince me that you have prior claim to this Devil's Kloof, I will place my services unreservedly at your disposal."

As he stood there, his monocle reflecting the rays of the lowering sun, his clothing immaculate, his pose that of an effete dandy, it seemed almost an impertinence that he should offer his assistance.

She suppressed a desire to laugh. Her womanly intuition told her that the foppishness, the attitude of inane boredom was merely a pose.

"Suppose," she said, relaxing slightly, sitting easily in the saddle, "suppose you tell me what you know."

HE NODDED, and in a few short pithy sentences outlined for her Richards' account of looking for Devil's Kloof, and his treatment by her father and the girl herself.

She laughed softly, a little sadly, when he had concluded.

"And you believed that?" she asked.

"No!" he admitted. "I am afraid that I consider Mr. Richards' story was not entirely free from—shall we say—inaccuracies. Suppose you tell me the truth."

A few minutes later they were both smoking, whilst Jim, having unsaddled and turned loose the girl's horse, cooked an extra batch of bread for the evening meal.

"The truth," the girl said suddenly, "is this. Many years ago, my father, Tom Wallace, found in an old, deserted Spanish mission in Old Mexico, a diary of one Brother Sebastian. The parchment was yellow with age and in places the spidery handwriting was faded so that a translation was impossible. What we could translate was mighty interesting.

"It told of the writer's adventures—he was a Jesuit—with Francisco Barreto, up the Zambesi Valley. That was in 1596. But the part that so greatly interested father was this—remember that I am condensing it:

"Fifteen men deserted from Barreto's force, taking with them an iron bound box containing church jewels. Brother Sebastian described the jewels very fully in his journal.

"Well, Barreto could not spare any sol-

diers to send after the deserters and Brother Sebastian—the responsibility of the jewels was his—appointed himself to track down the deserters and recover the property of the Holy Church.

"The account of his ensuing adventures is thrilling."

The Major nodded.

"Well, after many months of wandering through bush and jungle, in constant peril from savages, wild beasts and fever, Brother Sebastian caught up with the thieves. And it was here, at the Devil's Kloof.

"He found the thieves reduced to two, and they nearly dead.

"He took the jewels from them—and then killed them. He must have been a very terrible man.

"Before he could get away from the Kloof a party of natives appeared and he hid from them down one of the pits. During the night he succeeded in frightening them, playing on their superstitious fears, and they stampeded.

"On the morrow he started on his long journey back to join Barreto, hiding the box of jewels in a sort of tunnel which led off one of the pits. He explains that he thought that safest, doubting his strength to carry the box any great distance.

"And then there's a big break in the diary. Apparently Brother Sebastian's account was not believed by his superiors. But the rest is not of interest to us now.

"But what I have told you so took hold of father's imagination, that he sold out his holdings in California and we came to Africa to search for the treasure Brother Sebastian had hidden so long ago.

AT FIRST we wasted much time and nearly all our money, searching in Portuguese territory and the Zambesi Valley. You see Brother Sebastian was no geographer and had only the vaguest ideas of his directions. Then, by chance, we heard of the legend of Devil's Kloof and that immediately localized the search. We came south to Cape Town, arriving practically penniless.

"It was then that father met Sam Richards and got him to finance an expedition, promising him a third share.

"I wanted to go with them, but father would not let me. So he and Richards set off alone.

"All went well, father afterwards told me, until they came within sight of the kopjes which guard the Kloof here and which corresponded to Brother Sebastian's description.

"Then Richards pretended that he was discouraged, that father was but an optimistic dreamer, and insisted on going no further. He would return, he said, on the morrow.

"But circumstances ruled otherwise. That night their camp was surrounded by a band of natives, evidently out for mischief. And Richards, riding the only horse with the outfit, made his escape, leaving father to his fate. With the break of day, the natives rushed the camp. They burned the wagon and most of the provisions. Then, for some unknown reason, possibly because they suspected Richards had ridden off for help, vanished, leaving father stabbed through the thigh.

"I shall never know how father managed to come on to the Kloof here, lame as he was, taking what little provisions he could carry. But he did. And he satisfied himself as well as he could—you must remember he had no rope and could not investigate the pits—that the story told in Brother Sebastian's diary was true.

"For a few days he rested here at the Kloof, then set out for Steinberg. He was found, half-crazed with hunger and thirst and the pain of his wounded thigh, about twenty miles from here, by a corporal of the police. The corporal took care of him at his camp, and as soon as possible brought him south to me.

"But, before that, Richards had returned with the news that my father had been killed by some unknown savages; and that he himself, after nearly losing his own life in defence of father's, had barely managed to escape. He assured me, with tears in his eyes, that he had held father in his arms

when he died, and that he, too, would have been content to die with him, only father had begged him to make his escape and take care of me.

"Part of his scheme of protecting me"—she smiled rather bitterly—"was a constant endeavor to get from me the secret of the kloof; offering me, in exchange for the information, his honorable hand in marriage.

WHEN father returned, Richards was dumbfounded until he discovered that father could not live very long, and that he had a very vague recollection of things which happened up country.

"But father had a few lucid moments when he told me of all that he had discovered. And just before he died he summoned up enough strength to draw a map of Devil's Kloof, showing the location of it, and of one of the pot holes. That map Richards stole from me at the one moment in my life when I was completely off guard. It is rather difficult, you know, to be on guard against men like Richards at a time when you are first made conscious of the fact that the best pal you ever had has died."

The Major nodded with a sympathetic smile.

"Though the map was gone," the girl continued, "I knew that I could find that place and decided to come on as soon as possible, knowing that Richards would not be able to make a move himself at once; knowing, too, the fact that he was being closely watched by men of like kidney to himself. Richards was greedy. He has no intention of sharing the treasure with anyone, if he can possibly help it. So I went to Vanderspey, and tried to make a bargain with him. He agreed to bring me here. And," she shrugged her shoulders, "the rest you know."

Again the Major nodded. "But why go to a man like Vanderspey?" he questioned softly.

"He was the only man I knew rich enough to finance the expedition," she said. "And," she flushed in a somewhat shamefaced manner, "I am afraid I took advantage of him. You see I knew that he thought himself in love with me, and I used that knowledge. Otherwise he would not have come this trip, which he calls stupendous folly. I regret that now. I thought at first that he was a stupid, good natured giant of a man who would eventually consider himself well rewarded for his trouble and outlay of money with a share of the proceeds. Instead"—her voice wavered—"Instead I discovered him to be a beast, absolutely devoid of morals."

"And that is why you rode on ahead?" the Major asked.

She nodded.

"But surely," he expostulated, "it would have been wiser to have ridden for the nearest police post. There is one I believe not very far from here. Coming to the kloof you were running into a cul-de-sac, you would have been absolutely at Vanderspey's mercy."

She nodded agreement.

"I did not think," she admitted, but added in a lower voice, "I think at the back of my mind was the belief that I should find you here; and that you would not withhold your protection. Besides," she continued hurriedly, a look of determination on her face, "I had no intention of giving up all hope of finding the treasure just because a big, fat, hulking Boer dared to make love to me."

"Aren't you anxious to see the treasure?"

She looked at him sharply.

"You mean you have found it?"

HE NODDED, and going into the tent brought out the jewels he had discovered. He poured them from the chamois bag out into her lap, watching her with an indulgent air as she toyed with them, and uttered exclamations of delight, loading her slender fingers with the heavily jeweled rings.

He smiled at her and waited.

She hesitated a moment, and then giving him back the jewels, tearing the rings reluctantly from her fingers, said in hushed tones:

"Will you take care of these for me?"

He nodded, put them back in the bag and gazed with speculative eyes about the camp.

"They will be safest here, I think," he decided, and, taking the top off a small water barrel, dropped them into it. Then: "You must not forget that Jim has already sounded, in a manner of speaking, the warning to dress for dinner. Perhaps you would like to wash? The tent and everything in it is at your disposal."

He bowed, and walked away, making for the rear of the wagon, where, with Jim's expert aid, he quickly erected a shelter for himself.

The girl stood a few minutes gazing after him with dream-filled eyes. Then, rising, she went into the tent, exclaiming with delight at its luxurious fittings.

What chiefly appealed to her after the long dusty days of traveling, was the canvas tub, filled with water, which stood invitingly in the center of the tent.

"To judge from all this," she murmured, "one would say that he was soft. But who knows! Is it soft to desire cleanliness and comfort? Then I'm soft, myself."

They ate dinner that night—and dinner was the correct name. This was no crude bush travelers' repast.

The Major looked more like a leisured clubman than ever, wearing a dress suit, with starched shirt. Yet, somehow, he did not seem incongruous in that environment. And the girl, although at first astonished that he should so dress in the bush, realized intuitively that it was no senseless pose—that it was his way of keeping in touch with civilization.

As they ate, illuminated by the soft glow of candles, they talked animatedly, with the good-natured freedom of friends of long standing.

AND then, the meal over, they still sat for a while and talked, watching the flickering flames and the yellow gleam of eyes beyond the firelight, listening to the snarling of hungry beasts.

The soft soughing of the wind through the cracks in the hills made lullabys in place of yesternight's hideous shrieks. The air was filled with the good scent of mother earth and an atmosphere of rest pervaded the place.

Jim, his duties finished, was now squatting on his haunches before the fire, a blanket draped about him, singing one of the songs of his people.

The Major raised himself suddenly.

"Good night, Miss Marjorie," he said softly.

"It has been very pleasing, sitting here. I shall always remember."

He climbed up into his wagon and disappeared beneath its tented hood.

And the girl rose, too, and went into the tent.

Chapter XII

BESIEGED

BEFORE the rising of the morrow's sun the Major rose and having indulged in the luxury of a primitive shower bath—it consisted of Jim's throwing several buckets of icy cold water over him—toweled himself vigorously, dressed, and told Jim that after skoff they would trek. So that when the girl emerged from her tent, freshened from her night's sleep, most of the preparations were completed. The crisp morning air was filled with the appetizing smell of frying bacon, tinctured with the aroma of coffee.

"You slept well?" Major asked gently.

"Never better in my life," she replied. "You travel in great comfort."

"We will eat now," he chuckled, and escorting her to where the table was spread invitingly, seated her in a chair, and then sat down opposite her. "And after we have eaten," he continued, "we will trek."

She made a little gesture of expostulation.

"But why?" she queried. "Why be in such a hurry to get away from this very delightful, peaceful spot?"

"I would be quite willing to stay, but we have to consider so many things. The conventions, for one thing."

"I think we are both above considering them; and besides, what is the difference, my trekking with Vanderspey, or staying with you?"

He did not answer that, but continued. "And the second point is, that very soon Vanderspey will be along, and his pres-

ence is not desirable in this place. It might be awkward to handle him."

"I can handle Vanderspey all right," she assured him confidently.

"Are you so sure?" he asked. "Remember that you rode away from him yesterday."

She flushed, and bit her lip.

"And the third point," the Major continued, "is that I am not at all sure how soon our friend Richards will arrive on the spot. And I would much rather be away from here when he does come. It will save a lot of explanations."

"But," she objected, looking round the place, "we have no cause to fear anyone. We can easily keep Vanderspey out of the place if we wish. Why! We can hold it against an army!"

"Hardly," the Major objected. "But it is true that they can hold us in here, stop us from getting away, I mean, much more easily. So you see that it is best that we leave before anyone arrives to challenge our departure. Out there"—he waved his hand to the open veld—"we need fear no one. As a matter of fact, I am sorry that we did not trek out of here last night."

SHE opened her mouth as if intending to raise more objections to leaving the Kloof, then closed it firmly.

"I am ready to trek," she said suddenly, "as soon as you give the word."

"We'll go as soon as I have struck camp."

The meal finished, they arose, and helped Jim take down the tent and pack its contents onto the wagon. When this task was almost completed, the Major sent Jim up to "Look-out Point," in order, as he explained, to see that the coast was clear.

Jim departed on his errand, happy at the thought that they would soon be leaving the Devil's Kloof; grumbling because they were to be burdened by the presence of a woman; feeling that his Baas had been entrapped by a woman's smile, which would bring an end to the life of adventure they had planned to follow.

The Major and the girl, finding merriment in almost everything they did, completed the packing. And so engrossed were they in their task, so light hearted in each other's companionship, that they became oblivious to their surroundings and the passing of time.

They did not see a man appear around the angle of the terrain guarding the entrance to the Kloof; did not see him come forward eagerly, craftily, revolver in hand, dodging from tree to tree, taking advantage of every scrap of cover; moving softly, despite his big bulk and clumsy hobnailed boots. Indeed, the first indication they had of an interloper was when Vanderspey, emerging from behind a tree, not eight yards from where they were standing, snarled:

"Hands up!"

They wheeled quickly at that. The color fled from the girl's face, leaving it an ashen white, and a little gasp of dismay came from her lips.

The Major, an expression of helpless incredulity on his face, raised his eyebrows and let his monocle fall to the ground, where it smashed to pieces.

"But I say," he exclaimed, in tones of great consternation, "my bally eye-glass is broken, I shall be as blind as a bat! I must go and get another."

He turned as if meaning to climb up into his wagon, but halted at Vanderspey's order, raising his hands abjectly above his head.

"And so," the Dutchman continued easily, his face black with wrath, "it is to this you come, eh, missy? You leave my wagon. You laugh at the love of an honest burgher like me. You pretend to be insulted because I whispered of certain things to you. And you ride away pretending that my presence will soil you. Almighty! As if I did not know your *slim* cunning ways! You leave me and come to this *verdoemte roinek*. But I have got you like love birds caught. And now, knowing what I know, I shall know how to treat you. First I will kill this *verdoemte* dude! Almighty! Yes! And then no longer shall I talk of marriage to you!"

His voice was full of base insinuation, and the girl flushed. She looked at the Major, as if expecting that he would answer the Dutchman's implied accusations. At the same time she feared that he would, and would thus bring upon himself the Dutchman's insensate wrath.

Major's face was bland and as lacking in determination as a child's. If he expressed any emotion at all, it was one of regret for his broken eye-glass. Sighing a little, feeling somehow that she had placed her trust in a broken reed, she turned again to Vanderspey.

"You are mistaken, Van," she said winningly. "You jump to conclusions. And that is bad. As you see, my horse is saddled, and I was going to ride back and join you."

HE CLUMSILY turned this over in his mind, nodding his head as if in acceptance of her statement.

"Ja!" he said stolidly. "That may be so. But why did you play a trick on me yesterday? Why did you leave me?"

She shrugged her shoulders and held out her hands appealingly.

"I was afraid of you," she replied. "You are so big and strong. Your love making was"—she smiled in his face—"was so rough. And I have told you many times there must be no talk of love between us till this trip is over. Then, if it seems good to us, we can go to a predikant and be married as is proper. And you broke your promise. And so I rode away. And I came to this place not knowing that this gentleman"—she inclined her head toward the Major—"was here. I was planning to get the treasure, and then come back to join you."

She looked at him anxiously to see if he would accept this statement, sighing softly with relief when he once again nodded and the fierce scowl left his face.

But almost immediately it clouded over again and suspicion filled his black beady eyes.

"And you have found the treasure? Yes?" he queried.

She shook her head.

"Then maybe," he continued, "this dude has already found it? If he has, we will take it from him. Then I shall kill him."

"No!" she cried sharply. "He did not find it. My father was mistaken, Van. There is no treasure."

The Dutchman nodded, a grin of satisfaction spreading over his face.

"Then if there is no treasure," he said slowly, "how are you going to pay me for the use of my wagon and oxen? How will you pay me for the provisions that I bought so that you could come on this so foolish trip?"

"A way will be found," the girl replied.

"Almighty! Yes!" he bellowed. "I shall be paid and paid in the way I most greatly desire."

He grinned possessingly at her. Then once again his eyes lighted with suspicion as for the first time his slow-thinking brain took in the evidence of the Major's preparations for departure—noted the tethered mules and the loaded wagon.

"Almighty!" he roared. "You have been lying to me! From the beginning you have lied to me. You were getting ready to leave this place—you were going away with the *verdoemte roinek*, and I should have lost everything!"

HE PEERED about the place, craftily, yet keeping his revolver leveled at them, and asked with a sudden show of cunning: "But where is the Hottentot? Is he hiding somewhere or"—he leered—"did you send him away so that you could be alone?"

"You are quite wrong, dear lad," the Major drawled easily. "Jim is not hiding; I sent him a little while ago to spy out the land as it were! To see there were no hyenas and what-not to bite us as we left this place. I cannot for the life of us understand how he overlooked you and failed to give us warning. But doubtless that is explained because he expected to see you coming with your wagon. He could not have thought that you would come in on foot."

The Dutchman grinned.

"And so," he said, "in that way I showed how *slim* I am. The pace of the wagon is

very slow and so I came on foot. *Ja!* Through the night I traveled and before the rising of the sun I was close to the kloof, where no one would see me."

"You are wonderful," the Major drawled, "upon my soul, you are. You think of everything. Except there is one thing you have overlooked. If you will pardon me, your great weakness is a child-like credulity. You are so willing to believe the obvious.

"For instance, you put quite a wrong construction on Miss Wallace's coming here, though I admit it was an obvious one for a man of your type. But on the other hand you are too ready to believe Miss Wallace's statement that the treasure has not been found. That is where you make your big mistake."

The Dutchman looked at him, but vaguely understanding the Major's persiflage.

"Yes," the Major continued, "you are too, too credulous. Let me assure you that the treasure has been found. And a most wonderful treasure it is!"

The Dutchman looked swiftly at the girl and grinned knowingly at her facial expression.

"So," he said, answering the Major. "The treasure has been found? Eh? And you are willing to give me that treasure in return for your life."

"Naturally," the Major drawled. "I value my life far above rubies."

He glanced swiftly at the girl and sighed softly at her look of contempt.

"And where is this treasure?" Vanderspey demanded.

The Major chuckled.

"If you will allow me," he said, "I will show you."

"I do not allow you to go out of my sight," the Dutchman bellowed.

"No, of course not," the Major drawled. "And there is no need to do so. You see we racked our brains for the best place in which to hide them. And if you will kindly open the spigot of this water barrel"—he pointed to the water cask which had not yet been loaded onto the wagon—"and, when the water is drawn away, you will find at the bottom of it rubies and what-not without number."

IF THE Dutchman had doubted before, the girl's indignant cry of despair put all doubts on one side. Yet he had no intention to be caught off his guard.

The Major, noting his hesitation, continued, "If you wish, dear old thing, I myself will open the spigot and let the water drain off, or, if you wish, I will tilt the barrel over; maybe that will be quicker."

He lowered his hands as if intending to carry out his idea.

"No you don't!" Venderspey replied quickly. "You keep your hands up."

The Major shrugged his shoulders and obeyed. He looked again at the girl, as if wishing to take her into his confidence. But her immobile face and the cold glance of her eyes told him that she was not in the mood to receive whispered explanations.

The Dutchman walked slowly over to the barrel, ordering the two to step backward, keeping them always in line with his revolver. When he reached the barrel, he kicked it over and watched the water rush out. With the force of the flow came the chamois leather bag in which the Major had put the jewels the previous night. And as it lay on the muddy ground he looked at it wonderingly, doubt and belief struggling for mastery on his face.

The girl made a little rush forward, but stopped at the menace of his revolver, and the Major drawled easily, "Your self-control is amazing, my dear Vanderspey. You have the treasure of kings lying at your feet and yet you do not stoop to pick it up."

And then Vanderspey hesitated no longer. With a hoggish grin he stooped over, with difficulty because of the stupendout girth of his waist. One ham-like hand closed on the bag, and then a heavy weight hit him between the shoulders and sent him sprawling face downward on the muddy ground. Before he could recover, the Major had snatched the revolver from his hand, and Jim, the Hot-

tentot, emerged grinning from a clump of bushes.

The girl, shaken out of her calm by this sudden reversal of fortune, turned with a gesture of apology to the Major.

"I thought," she said falteringly, "that you were——"

He stopped her, a finger to his lips, and, as Vanderspey scrambled awkwardly to his feet, scowling malevolently, picked up the bag and righted the water-keg and tossed the bag carelessly into it.

"As I said once before, Van dear," he drawled, "you are too bally credulous. You are too ready to believe any little fairy story told you. I will admit that you showed great cleverness in creeping upon us unawares, as it were, but you were not clever enough to think that Jim might have seen you and would exercise great caution in coming here. But I was on the lookout for him, of course, and in order to distract your attention and so make it sure that he could get within striking distance, I told you the little story about the treasure. It was not difficult for Jim to pick up a large stone, quite a rock, in fact, and propel it in your direction. And now will you be a good boy or must we bind and gag you?"

VANDERSPEY'S vehement curses were answer enough and he was forced to submit to being bound and gagged by the Major's expert hands, aided by Jim's knowledge of intricate knots. And then they picked him up and carried him away and put him in the wagon.

Rejoining the girl the Major laughed pleasantly.

"And that's that," he said. "And now we can trek on at our leisure."

The girl nodded happily.

Jim was scurrying about, catching mules, harnessing them, working like one possessed; on his face an expression of great determination.

"O-he, Jim," the Major called banteringly. "The world does not end today. There is plenty of time; there is no need of haste."

"There is great need, Baas," Jim shouted back grimly, not slackening his efforts. "We have already wasted too much time. Had it not been for the Dutchman, I would have told you before."

Realizing from Jim's tone that some new danger was menacing them, the Major went over to him and under cover of helping him harness the mules questioned him in a low voice as to the need of haste.

"Baas," Jim said in reply, "as you know I climbed up the hill from which all the country around can be seen. At first I saw only the Dutchman's wagon and his oxen a day's trek distant. And I thought all was well. And then I saw a man riding on horseback, swiftly, along the bed of the river. Behind him, riding as if they sought to overtake him, were two other white men. All heading this way. And then toward the east I caught the sparkle of sunlight on the spear tips of warriors. And for a while that was all I could see, because my eyes were blinded by the sun. Then I saw, Baas, an *impi* hastening this way. And though, Baas, you may, without difficulty be able to deal with several white men, I do not think that you, as yet, have quite sufficient wisdom to defeat an army of Zulu warriors. Therefore, I say, you must make haste."

"But, Jim," the Major expostulated, "How do you know the warriors mean any evil toward us?"

"I do not know," Jim replied gravely. "But this I know: when Zulu warriors go on the warpath they have no friends and they kill without reason, grinding under their feet whoever may be in their path. Just as a bull elephant, gone mad, permits nothing to stand before him. And I think these warriors are angry because we have dared to come to this forbidden place.

The Major nodded gravely and returned to the girl.

"It must be stupid for you to hang about here," he said lightly, "while we are getting ready for the return journey. So I venture to suggest, Miss Marjorie, that you mount your horse and ride on ahead."

She shook her head, her eyes dancing with merriment.

"No," she said. "You will not get rid of me as easily as that."

BUT I must insist," he continued. "It is much better that you go now, and go quickly. You see we are likely to have

other visitors very soon. And I would like you to get away before it is too late."

"And who are these important visitors?" she asked banteringly.

"I rather fancy," he drawled, "that Soapy Richards is one. Who the other two are I have no idea."

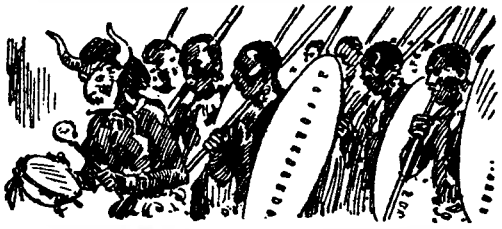
She laughed scornfully.

"We have nothing to fear from them—three white men. Why, you could handle them easily."

He bowed.

"Thanks for the compliment! But that is not all. Jim tells me that there is a Zulu *impi* heading this way. And while they may not know of our presence here, or harbor any evil intention toward us, yet I think it best to play safe. And I should feel much happier to know that you are safely out of the way. So please go!"

She shook her head determinedly.



"I will not go!" And her tone was final. "I go when you go and not a moment before. If it comes to a fight you will need my help. I can shoot as well as a man. You know that."

He nodded.

"I thought perhaps that you could ride for help."

She laughed.

"You know that you had no such thought in your mind at all. Besides what need for help, or what need for haste. For the matter of that, if the Zulus are on the war-path we are much better here than riding along between the high banks of the river, or out on the open plain beyond. We can defend this place easily. But out there they would surround us and in a little while all would be over."

The Major nodded agreement.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "You are right! Jim," he called to the Hottentot, "we have decided not to trek. Here we will be safe. We can hold this against the Zulus without difficulty. We have plenty of provisions, plenty of water. And to-day or tomorrow or the next week—what matter—help will come."

Jim considered this, and replied, "Maybe your plan is best, Baas. Had we trekked as soon as I first sighted the *impi* we could have got well away. But the affair with the Dutchman delayed us too long, and now perhaps it is too late. No, we will stay. And if you and the Missy will keep watch from that rock there"—he pointed to a large boulder overlooking the entrance to the valley—"no one could enter without first getting your permission. Yah! And we will roll down the rocks to close up the entrance so that the warriors can only come in by ones and twos. But how about the white men, shall we keep them out also?"

"No, Jim!" the Major replied decidedly. "They must enter."

"And that is folly!" Jim grumbled. "A man does not willingly pen up hyenas with his herd of goats."

"Nevertheless, Jim," the Major answered, "they must enter. Now we will free the Dutchman that he may help us in the work we must do."

A FEW minutes later, having freed Vanderspey and explained to him the threatened danger—and he, despite his wrath, was wise enough to see that for the time, at least, he must forget his own troubles—they made all possible preparations to meet the threatened attack.

Actually, there was little they could do to better their position; already it was practically impregnable unless attacked in great force. But, on Vanderspey's suggestion, they decided to make of the wagon a sort of fort. They filled up the water keg and loaded it on to the wagon, then got out all of the Major's firearms and opened the cases of ammunition.

"Unless," said Vanderspey, nodding sagely, "the niggers have guns themselves and do not charge—we are safe."

Chapter XIII

Divided Counsels

WHILST they were thus occupied, a horseman spurred frantically around the bend. And, so overcome with fear was

he, that he rode almost up to the wagon before he was aware of its presence.

Then he fell off his sweat-drenched horse with an exclamation of triumph.

"Good, Major," he panted as that man went forward to greet him, noting the preparation which had been made for defending the place. "We are ready for them and can give them hell!"

Lying down behind a rock he leveled his rifle and aimed down the bed of the river.

The Major's rifle was hanging from the ridge pole of the wagon. He took it now in his hands, loaded the magazine, pulled out the "cut-off."

"Yes, Mr.—er—Richards," he agreed. "I think we are ready for anyone who comes. But who do you expect?"

"Hewins and Demper, the swine!" Richards snarled. "They have been on my trail ever since I left Cape Town. But I can handle them now."

He toyed lovingly with the trigger of his rifle and, as two horsemen appeared in sight, fired. But his shot went astray, for the Major, stooping over quickly, had knocked the muzzle to one side. And then, before the newcomers could answer to the shot or Richards could fire again, he had run forward to meet them, waving a white handkerchief.

"You fool!" Richards screamed. "What in hell are you doing that for?"

"You'll know very soon, ma-an," Vanderspey replied. "Listen!"

He held up his hand for silence as he spoke.

And then they heard the wild chant of native warriors and the dull, hollow booming noise made by the beating of spear heads on bullock hide shields.

Richards blanched.

"My God!" he exclaimed. "What is that?"

The girl looked at him disdainfully.

"A Zulu *impi* is out on the warpath. They are coming to attack this place. That is why the Major is waving the white flag to those other two. We need all the defenders we can get. That is why we allowed you to come in. Otherwise we should have kept you out. As it is, I think it would have been just had we left you to the mercy of the warriors as you once left my father."

Richards growled some inarticulate retort then turned to watch the two men who had halted at his shot and had dismounted, seeking cover behind the boulders which were strewn in the water course at that point.

Then, suddenly, as the singing and the beating of shields ended in loud, exultant shouts, they mounted and spurred forward with frantic haste just in time to escape a shower of assegais rained on them from the heights above.

Coming to the wagon they dismounted and listened sullenly whilst the Major outlined the situation and appointed posts for each member of the tiny garrison.

"An' who the blinkin' 'ell do yer fink you are?" Hewins demanded. "Wot do yer mean by givin' hus orders. Me an' Demper knows 'ow to 'andle niggers, don't we, Demper?"

"Ja!" the Dutchman replied stolidly. "But I think the *roinek's* plan a good one, so we will do now what he says. Afterward, when this business with the niggers is finished we will deal with him. And, Almighty! How we will deal with him!"

"Me, also," Vanderspey, scowling malevolently, chimed in. "I, too, have something to say to the monocled dude—yes; and also to his *verdoemte* Hottentot. Ja! And to the girl!"

"You'll keep your hands off the girl," Richards snarled. "I'll take care of her, and don't you forget it, you big hunk of hog."

DON'T ferget," Hewins put in, "that me an' Demper'll 'ave somefink to say to you, Soapy; tryin' to give hus the slip like you did. Yus! An' I wants ter tork to the Major bloke, too."

The Major chuckled.

"And I may have something to say to all of you," he said. "So it would seem

that we are going to have a very pleasant little chat together. But, for the present, suppose you forget your little differences and—er—keep your eyes peeled. I think it would be best if we went up to the bend —you see there they cannot get at us from above, not if we keep a little this side of it. Then, if they prove too strong for us, we can retreat to the wagon."

Sullenly they agreed and moved slowly forward to take up position behind boulders commanding a view of the river bed beyond the first bend as far as the second.

Richards, walking by the Major's side, asked anxiously, "Have you found the diamonds yet?"

"Diamonds!" the Major exclaimed. "Positively no! I haven't even looked for diamonds. Things have been happening too fast here for me to think of anything like that. You see," he continued easily, "I did not get here until the day before yesterday at sundown. And the next day, of course, I was busy making camp. And then, in the evening, Miss Wallace appeared on the scene and I had my work cut out persuading her to stay. And this morning Vanderspey arrived and was quite violent in his language and actions. Oh, quite. He required very careful and diplomatic handling—very!

"Then you came, *and* your friends, *and* the howling savages. So you will understand that, far from searching for diamonds, my time has been occupied—very fully occupied—receiving guests, the bidden and the unbidden."

Richards looked at him keenly then nodded in complete satisfaction.

Confident that he had successfully gauged the Major's mental processes, he accepted that man's statement absolutely. He glanced quickly toward the rocks which sheltered Demper and Hewins.

"We will have trouble with them two," he said, turning again to the Major, "when this business is over. To hear them talk, you would think that they had been my partners; and that I had double-crossed them. When the truth of the matter is that they are well known criminals and have dogged my footsteps ever since they heard the rumor that I knew where the Devil's Kloof was."

"Beastly annoying for you," the Major drawled in reply. "And I can understand how you feel about it. I have met the gentlemen before. They came to see me in my hotel at Cape Town, shortly after your visit. They wanted me to go into partnership with them; but they seemed so very tired that I thought it best to put them to bed." He laughed pleasantly. "No doubt they will tell you about it sometime. But why are you here so soon? I did not expect you for another month at least. You told me, if you remember, that you intended to go north, Kimberley way, hoping to throw off your trail anyone who might be following you. Of course, under the circumstances, I am glad that you did not. Still I am interested to know why you changed your plans."

Richards scowled, but made no reply.

"And, oh, yes! the Major continued. "And how's our dear old friend Piet? Still in the land of the living, I hope?"

RICHARDS frowned thoughtfully. Then his face lighted, and with an affectation of good humor, he clapped the Major on the shoulder.

"You know he is alive!" he exclaimed. "And I will admit that I made a mistake in telling you that he was so near death. You see," he continued suavely, "I needed your help very badly in this business, and I thought that that was the best way to make sure of you. Once you were on the way, well away from Cape Town, I intended to send a messenger after you, telling you that Piet was all right. But Piet himself saved me the trouble. You saw him at Umbalose's kraal and gave him a thrashing he greatly deserved. He got another from me of a different sort when I heard that he had disobeyed my instructions. So there you are."

"I still do not see why you changed your plans."

"It is plain enough," Richards insisted. "I saw that Piet suspected that you were heading for the Kloof, and so I followed you, meaning to warn you to be on your guard."

"It is a soapy sort of reason," the Major drawled, "but I don't think that it quite washes. However, it is of no great mat-

ter. You are here, and I think very soon your marksmanship will be put to the test."

Richards looked worried.

"Do you really think," he stammered, "that the niggers will attack us."

"It is impossible to say." the Major replied lightly. "But if they do, we must be ready for them. So I suggest that you get to your post."

Richards hesitated a moment, and then went forward, but not to the boulder the Major had indicated as his station, but to one to the right, and slightly in the rear of Demper and Hewins.

"None of that," Hewins protested, wriggling uneasily. "I ain't going to have you behind me! You might get excited later on and think I was a nigger and put a bullet in my hide. So you just get up in the line with us. Or in front of us if you like. It would please me better. But you don't get behind me. Come on!"

And when Demper and Vanderspey added their voices to Hewins, Richards shrugged his shoulders and crawled forward to a point which was in line with the others.

"There is no need for you to carry on like this," he whined protestingly. "We are all white men here together; and we have got to stick to each other. I vote we forget our little quarrels, so that we can fight these blinking niggers without worrying about getting a bullet in our backs."

"Sounds all right," Hewins growled. "But what about afterwards?"

"Why afterwards!" Richards said smoothly, "We will still be partners, and share up equally."

"I don't share with no blinking dude and the girl," Hewins snarled. "Or with Vanderspey here. Wot 'as 'e got to do with it? And for the matter of that; I don't see why we should share with you Soapy! Me and Demper, 'ere, we're pals. We share and share alike. And I reckon we have got the casting vote in anything that goes on in this place."

AND that was the signal for a long, acrimonious debate between the men as to the proper division of the treasure. Partnerships were formed and broken. Promises and threats winged through the air with delightful abandon. And as the debate continued, the voices of the men grew hoarser; more fraught with murderous lust. Blows were exchanged. Revolvers levelled. And then the Major's voice, bitingly sarcastic, drawled out, putting an end to the argument.

"If you dear lads are not very careful, by tomorrow your bones will be bleaching in the sun. Look!" He pointed down the river bed, where they could see the natives climbing down the steep banks. Immediately the bickering ceased. The men returned to their posts and waited, looking to the Major for their orders.

Save for the first objections of Hewins they had all accepted, without question, his right of leadership.

"We do not fire," he said. "Until we are sure that they mean mischief. And then not until the range is good. They are too far away now; a chance hit or two might only serve to infuriate them to such an extent that an attack would be driven home, despite heavy losses. When they have reached that boulder—" he pointed to one about two hundred yards away—"we will retreat to the next bend—you going first, Miss Wallace, then you, Richards, then you Hewins, then Vanderspey, then Demper. The Hottentot and myself will bring up the rear. You understand?"

They scowled assent, and all watched the assembling of the warriors along the sandy bed of the river, about a quarter of a mile away.

"How many of them?" the Major asked, turning to the Hottentot.

"Five hundred at least, Baas, all fighting men."

The sunlight gleamed on the assegai tips of the warriors as they massed together in close formation. Before them capered their leader. His loud shouts of exultation were carried clearly to the ears of the whites.

When he came to an end of his harangue, the warriors beat loudly on their drum shields, finishing with one deafening

crash and a loud piercing yell.

Then they came forward, slowly, moving with the perfect rhythm of a machine. Silent, dour, ominous. Silhouetted against the white silver sand, their red shields making a fantastic splash of color against the walls which hemmed them in on either side.

With a nervous half-hysterical cry, Richards fired. And a warrior in the front rank pitched forward on his face. Swiftly the other men fired, the Major and the girl withholding their shots. Three other warriors fell. But the column of marching men did not check. The gaps in their ranks were filled up, and the rest came on at the same slow pace; as grimly implacable as a river in flood.

"By Jove!" the Major exclaimed softly. "They are magnificent. But it is too like murder."

He sprang to his feet and ran forward a little way toward the warriors.

AND whereas the bullets of the white men had failed to check the warriors, this strange action of the white man brought them to a bewildered halt.

Their leader came on alone to within a couple of hundred yards of the Major.

"Come back, you fool!" the men behind the Major shouted, withholding their fire.

"Come back, Baas!" Jim pleaded.

But he ignored them.

"What do you desire, warrior?" he asked. "Why do you come against us with an *impi?* Know you not that there is peace between the white man and the black?"

The other's reply came back clearly.

"With white men we are at peace, it is true. But there is no peace between us and those who dare to defile the place made sacred by the spirits of those warriors gone on before us."

"Then let us parley," the Major continued. "We have done no evil here. And are ready to leave this place to the spirits whose abode it is. By noon, I tell you, we will be gone from this place, forever."

"If you will promise that," the old warrior replied, "then all will be well, except —"he paused—"except some talk must still be made of those of my warriors you have killed."

As he spoke the *impi* behind him was moving slowly forward.

"Watch, Baas!" Jim shouted anxiously. "It is not wise to try to parley with a Zulu on the warpath. He has only one desire—and that to kill! He can only go one way—and that forward. As well try to reason with a striking snake."

The warriors were moving faster now and had almost drawn level with their leader.

"Stop them!" the Major shouted, "or we fire again and many of them will die."

"They only come nearer," was the reply, "in order that they may better hear the words that pass between us."

Then he yelled an order and several warriors in the front rank aimed their old muzle loaders and fired.

Jagged pieces of metal buzzed about the Major's head. One, it was so big that he could have watched its flight through the air, tore through his white helmet, grazing his scalp.

And then, shouting their war cries, the natives came on at a fast charge.

The Major turned and ran swiftly for the shelter of the rocks, wondering why only Jim and the girl were visible, wondering why only the girl's rifle should be attempting to check this mad charge.

"To the wagon, Baas," Jim shouted. "Those dogs have already gone there for their own safety."

The three of them, the girl, the Major and the Hottentot, ran swiftly and gained the shelter of the wagon and then looked back, wondering why the natives had halted, had not come around the bend into full sight.

The Major turned contemptuously on the other men.

"We obeyed horders like solgers, Major," Hewins said with a broad grin. "We waited until the niggers reached that 'ere boulder, like you said, and then we ran."

"I'm sure you did," the Major drawled. "But not, I think, in the correct order. You left Miss Wallace to—er—hold the

fort, as it were. And, I believe, you call yourselves men!"

"I told 'er to come on wiv us," Hewins growled sullenly. "An' she wouldn't come. Didn't expect me to carry 'er off, did yer?"

"Here they come, Baas!" Jim called.

As he spoke the head of the column of natives appeared round the bend.

A volley of shots checked them and they milled about aimlessly, shouting threats. They did not seem anxious to come forward to the attack. Neither could they regain, it seemed, the discipline which was theirs before their first mad charge.

The white men fired spasmodically, picking off any warrior who became overbold, keeping the rest seeking cover.

FOR a time it seemed as if the white men's marksmanship had taken the fighting spirit out of the warriors, and Hewins was crowing gleefully, boasting that the affair was finished.

And when the attack did materialize, it came in an unexpected guise. There was no wild rush forward, but something much more menacing, much harder to deal with.

The warriors had discovered a gutter like ridge in the bed of the river and, crawling along it on their bellies, had reached the place where the bed of the river was cluttered with boulders. In a very little while each boulder sheltered a warrior. And from those vantage points those who had guns fired at the defenders whilst the rest slept. Slugs tore their way through the canvas top of the wagon. And one smashed Vanderspey between the eyes, killing him instantly.

The Major looked grave and implored Marjorie to hide back in the valley, out of the zone of fire, gripping her hand and calling her a brick when she indignantly refused.

He looked around at the others; noting with disgust Richards' fear distorted face; smiling approval at the set, dour countenance of Demper, and Hewins' tense, tight lipped smile and eyes shining with determination to hold out no matter how great the odds might be.

He looked at Marjorie Wallace again. She evinced no sign of fear or anxiety; neither was her face lighted with a blood lust. She was not a killer; wholly feminine she detested bloodshed. But, being a thoroughbred, realizing that an unpleasant task had to be done, she stuck to her post, taking advantage of every inch of cover and firing coolly, methodically, whenever a target presented itself.

She personified the spirit of the pioneer women of all races, and of all ages since man's adventurous spirit first led him to essay the conquest of unknown lands.

She met the Major's glance with a light flutter of her hands and an encouraging smile. It was sufficient to assure him that no matter what happened she would play her part thoroughly to the end. She patted the revolver in its holster which hung from a belt slung about her hips.

"If they get too close"—her lips noiselessly formed the words—"use your revolver—and save one for me."

He nodded, his face set stern.

"It won't come to that," he replied, and rising to his full height in order to get a bead on the warrior behind the nearest rock, fired.

"Down!" the girl cried in dismayed tones as the hidden warriors who possessed guns loosed their shots at the target he made.

"Down!" Jim grunted in the vernacular. "Down, Baas!" And diving forward he swept his Baas' feet from under him, so that he was once again behind the comparative security of the wagon.

Presently the fusillade of the shots died away and the defenders of the wagon held their fire, seeing no target to aim at.

The Major whispered to Demper and Hewins. They nodded and presently climbed out of the wagon, lifted out the body of Vanderspey and buried him under a pile of rocks.

RETURNING to their posts they sat down glumly, looking out through the slits they had cut in the canvas cover of the wagon. Nothing moved. The sun, reflected by the sandy bed of the river, blinded their eyes. The rocks loomed up black, ominous, each one seeming large enough to shelter a thousand warriors.

Here and there a warrior sprawled in full sight, his posture rigidly distorted as are the bodies of men who have died a sudden, violent death.

The heat, penned in, absorbed by the black hills, was intense; under the tented cover of the wagon it was suffocating. The clothes of the men were drenched with sweat; the naked body of the Hottentot looked as if he had just emerged from a swim. The girl's hair clung to her forehead in damp, sticky curls. For a little while all were silent, oppressed by the heat and the seriousness of their position.

The Major presently called a conference, endeavoring to determine on the best course to pursue.

"There's nothing we can do," Richards groaned. "We're caught like rats in a trap."

"Is there no other way out of this place, Major?" the girl asked.

The Major shook his head doubtfully.

"I have not had time to explore it thoroughly. It is possible to climb to the top at one place, but the descent to the other side of the veld is a sheer drop of hundreds of feet. I do not think it would be possible to get down even with a rope. No! The only way to get out is the way we got in. And, by Jove," he cried, his face lighting up with the inspiration of his thought, "that is the way we are going out."

"Tork sense, you bleeding fool!" Hewins growled. " 'Ow are we going out that way wiv 'undreds of blinking savages awaiting for us?"

"Wait a minute," the Major held up his hand. "I want to talk to Jim here a moment first."

He turned to the Hottentot and conversed with him for a time in the vernacular.

Then in English he asked the others, "And what do you think will happen if we stop here?"

It was Demper who replied, basing his knowledge on the many experiences of battle his people had waged against Zulu warriors.

"Almighty!" he growled. "That is easy to answer. The cunning devils are playing a waiting game now. They will not show themselves; not so much as an eyelash will they show. Then in the night's darkness they will creep up closer and closer and with the rising of the morrow's sun they will rush us. And though we killed hundreds, the rest would kill us. And Almighty! They are not gentle in the ways they choose to kill."

The Major nodded.

"Then what is your advice, Demper?"

"That we play their game. We, too, will be *slim*. When the darkness comes we will leave this place quickly, and go back into the valley, climbing up into the hills as high as we can go. Then when they rush the wagon they will find no one there to kill, and I think for a little while they will forget all about us in the joy of looting. And then, in the daylight, all crowded together as they'll be, we can kill enough of them, maybe, to make the rest sicken and go away."

The Major considered this thoughtfully.

"BESIDES," Hewins urged, "it'll give us more time even if they don't go away as Demper says. An' the longer we can 'old out the bigger chance of a rescue. Gord! You don't fink a lot of niggers like this can go on the warpath an' not 'ave the police after them afore you can say Jack Robinson? Unless," he added dubiously, "there's another rebellion on. If there is we might as well say our blinking prayers—especially you, Soapy."

That man snarled a blasphemous retort; then strongly urged the adoption of Demper's plan.

The Major shook his head slowly.

"I don't think it's feasible. You see in the first place it's almost impossible, save in one place, to climb the hills, and there it is very steep, offers no real foothold. And supposing we did, there's no shelter. We'd be easy targets, while the natives could take shelter in the bushes."

"Why shouldn't we hide in the bush,

then?" Richards asked in a quavering voice.

"Say, ducky!" Hewins answered him with a laugh of derision. "If you want to play 'iding-seek wiv five 'undred bloomin' niggers, a-searching for yer, why you're welcome. But don't ask me to play the game."

The Major laughed. "I think that answers Soapy very well, Hewins, old top. But to resume: another objection to taking to the hills, Demper, is that we could take very little provisions or water with us, and, if the natives decided to play a waiting game, they'd soon have us at their mercy."

Demper spat phlegmatically.

"*Ja!*" he exclaimed. "I am answered."

"Blimy! I should think so," Hewins echoed. "So what's your plan, Major?"

"I have two," that man replied. "Both rather desperate I am afraid. But then our situation is desperate. The longest we can hope to hold out for is until a little after sunrise tomorrow. If one could be certain that a rescue party was on the way and would be here by then we would, of course, hang on. But we have no reason for expecting that. And any move we make we must make before sunrise. After, will be too late.

"So, my first plan is this: there are a number of pits, shafts if you will, back there in the valley. My first suggestion is that we hide down them; we have plenty of time to store them with provisions; and I'm rather inclined to believe that the warriors are somewhat in awe of them and will not dare to explore them. Jim thinks so too. He thinks that they will then be content to take our wagon, mules and horses, willing to believe that the spirits have avenged themselves on us. At any rate, we can hide down the pits until our provisions give out; a week or more. And then——"

"We will have to crawl out of our holes and be killed," the girl finished quickly.

"Exactly," the Major nodded. "Unless the natives have departed; and I do think that a rescue party will appear on the scene by the end of the week."

"They might come and go an' we be none the wiser," Hewins objected.

"That's one of the risks my first plan contains."

"It's too full of risks," the Cockney replied gloomily. "Supposing the niggers ain't afraid of ghosties, supposing they takes it into their 'eads to explore them pits? Suppose—aw hell!"

"Yet it is a good plan, I tell you, man," Demper said thoughtfully. "Niggers do not like holes in the ground. That I know."

"But your other plan," the girl asked gently.

"That we carry the fight to them, as soon as we have made due preparations."

"What!" the three white men shouted in unison.

HAVE you gone mad!" Richards gasped. "There are only six of us all told, while the niggers number thousands."

"Hundreds," the Major corrected. "Hundreds, Soapy."

"Hundreds or thousands," Richards exclaimed, "they're too many for us. I like your first plan too well to want to hear any more of the other."

"I wants to 'ear it just the same," Hewins insisted. "We ain't got nothing else to do. Wait a minute, though." He peered through his peep hole. "There's a nigger getting careless. Ought to know better than to show his blooming carcase like that."

As he spoke he fired. His shot was greeted with a yell of pain, and the warrior he had shot at sprang erect, and then, collapsing in a heap to the ground, crawled painfully to better shelter before the little Cockney could fire again.

"Now go on, Major," Hewins grinned. "I——"

But a ragged discharge of the warriors' muzzle loaders kept each eye glued to its lookout hole. Hewins shot had awakened the drowsing natives and they fired blindly in the hope that a stray shot would find a billet.

"They couldn't hit a hay-stack," Hewins grunted contemptuously. "Not wiv good guns, let alone wiv them there pot-bellied things they've got."

Even as he spoke a slug broke through the canvas and hit him in the wind, doubling him up with a loud *Ouch!* of pain. Instantly the girl was over by him, sympathetic consternation on her face, ready to administer any aid he might be needing.

"I'm all right, Miss," he gasped. "Took —the wind away—that's all. Lucky it had to break through the canvas first. That stopped the—force of it. If it hadn't been for that—'ell! My belly ain't as tough as canvas!"

As he straightened up the slug which had hit him dropped to the floor of the wagon. He picked it up and examined it with a look of disgust.

"Well, I'm blowed!" he exclaimed: "If it ain't the leg of one of them 'ere cast iron cookin' pots. Lumme! To think of being knocked out by a blinkin' kettle. Carries me back to me early days, when I was a respectable 'appily married man! My Lizzie, she was decidedly partial to kettles, she was. And many a Saturday night she met me at the door wiv: 'Where's yer blinking wages?' an' if I didn't answer quick enough to please her, I 'ad to dodge the bloomin' kettle. Lumme!"

This little account of past domesticity helped to relieve the tension under which they were all laboring. Then presently they sobered, Hewins' mishap bringing home to them the narrow line between them and death.

"I'll be able to breathe better," Hewins gasped, "w'en I'm safe out of this 'ole. Let's 'ear your other plan Major. 'Ow do you reckon to carry the fight to the niggers?"

FIRST of all," he said thoughtfully, "we have got to consider that they're rotten shots, and that though by chance they might once in a while hit a stationary target, the odds against them hitting a moving one is infinitely greater. Admitted? Right! Then we must consider that they have nearly run out of ammunition. Perhaps, or perhaps not. You may have noticed that very few slugs pattered against the canvas at this last discharge of theirs. Neither did they keep up the firing so long."

The Dutchman nodded agreement.

"Yah! That is true," he said slowly. "A nigger who has a gun will always fire it as long as he has any powder left. *Ach sis!* They love to make a noise. I have seen them empty their guns again and again into the body of a buck which was, look you, dead already. So-a! I tell you that all those that had guns and ammunition fired a little while ago, and those whose ammunition had given out pretended to fire. Maybe they went *bang* with their mouths. *Ach sis!* In some ways they are very little children. But go on: what next will you say?"

"If all you say's true, Demper, then the next step will be easy. I want to draw their fire and exhaust their ammunition."

"That will be easy." Hewins chortled. "We'll stick Soapy up outside the wagon and——"

"It may be you we'll set up," Richards snapped.

The Major waved his hands soothingly. "We can't spare either of you, unfortunately. I think that if we stick a helmet on a stick, or rig up a dummy and make a lot of noise, that will be quite sufficient."

"And having drawn their ammunition, what then?"

"Why then they are reduced to assegais only, and——"

"Almighty!" Demper exclaimed. "Only assegais, he says. Ma-an! What do you think assegais are? Toys? I tell you they know how to use them. They can throw them——"

"But that's the point," the Major interrupted hastily. "Jim—I am trusting to his knowledge and keen eyesight —says they are armed with short stabbing assegais. They have none of the throwing ones with them, he says, otherwise they would have thrown them long before this, for they are well within range. And so——"

"You are talking like a fool," Richards interrupted snarlingly. "Here we are safe

and you would have us go within stabbing distance. A hell of a plan yours is!"

"I am afraid it is," the Major agreed. "It is hell if we go and hell if we stay; and for my part I would rather go."

"Then how do you plan to go?" the girl asked.

IT IS simplicity itself," the Major said. "First, as I have already suggested, we draw the natives' fire. Then we take most of the provisions out of the wagon in order to lighten it; and then we turn loose twelve of the mules and your horses. Harness the other four mules to the wagon, and then drive the other loose mules before us. We will drive out in the wagon. I think that the very unexpectedness of the maneuver will ensure success. You see," he continued earnestly, "the sudden rush of the loose animals will quite throw a disorder into the ranks of the natives, and then, when they see the wagon coming closely behind, with all of us firing rapidly, I am inclined to think they will be so bewildered that we will be able to pass through before they are aware of what is happening. And get through or not, we will have made an attempt; and if we are fated to fail, we will have at least died fighting."

This plan was received by a murmur of approval from Hewins and the girl; the latter saying enthusiastically. "I think that we should make an attempt late in the afternoon, an hour before sundown, say. That should give us plenty of time to unload the wagon and get everything ready. And here's another thing; we ought to reinforce the wagon. I mean we should make barricades along the sides and rear so that assegais could not pass through easily."

The Major nodded approval.

"And now," continued the girl, "I am going to make a dummy man, which we will stand out in front, hoping that it will draw their fire."

As she spoke she rummaged among the Major's equipment in order to find the wherewithal to carry out her intention.

"It is a crazy plan," Richards said testily. "As long as we are here we have a chance of living through, but your way is just like doing deliberate suicide. Not for me. I am going back into the valley and hide myself down one of them pits."

The Major turned to the Dutchman.

"And you, Demper?" he questioned.

"I am in two minds, ma-an," he replied stolidly. "Your plan is the plan of a youngster. Fifteen or maybe twenty years ago, I would have come with you. *Ja!* Maybe ten years ago I myself would have thought of such a plan. But now—" he shook his head —"I think not. It is too risky. It is a chance I will not take."

"Nor me," Richards echoed.

The Major shrugged his shoulders and turned to the girl and Hewins.

"That means, I suppose, we all have to stay here. I am sorry. I think we are passing up a good chance of escape."

"It don't mean nothing of the sort," Hewins said indignantly. "We agreed to follow your orders, an' them as won't come, do as they blame well please. But me, I am coming wiv you, and the young lady will, and the 'Ottentot. That puts us in the majority any'ow. I don't see that there's any call for us to remain be'ind just because these two skunks don't want to come. Tell you wot: put it to them to consider, either they come wiv us or they don't. If they come wiv us, start now getting ready. And if they don't come wiv us, they can start packing their stuff down into one of the pits and crawl into their 'ole like bloomin' worms."

The Major nodded.

"That seems fair enough," he said. "Well, Demper, Richards, what do you say?"

"I have said all I have got to say," Richards replied sullenly. "I stay here down one of the holes, whether I stay alone or not."

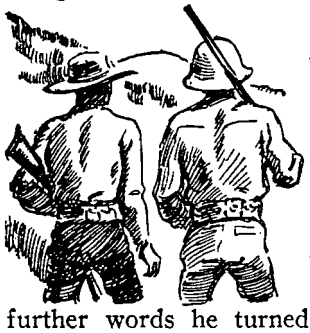
THERE was a crafty look in his eyes which did not pass unnoticed by the Major. He realized that Richards' thought was that after the wagon had been captured by the natives and its occupants killed, then the natives, believing that they had killed all who were not at the Kloof, would depart and leave him to search for the diamonds he believed to be hidden here, free of risk.

The Major laughed softly, bitterly. He

turned his back on Richards, and turned to Demper.

"And you?" he questioned.

The Dutchman's heavy features bore a lugubrious expression. Evidently he was torn by conflicting desires. Finally, with a shrug of his shoulders, he said, "Almighty! I would like to go with you, but I stay."



The Major nodded curtly. "Then that is settled," he said. "Four of us go, you two stay."

And without further words he turned to the task of unloading the wagon, assisted by the others.

They all worked in dour silence, carrying provisions out of the rear of the wagon, where they were safe from the natives' observations. Then when the wagon was emptied of all its heavier contents, they re-inforced the inside of its tent-topped cover with bundles of twigs, blankets and sacks.

Meanwhile the girl had succeeded in making a very life-like dummy of a suit of the Major's, stuffed with pillows, crowned by a large helmet. And putting this in the front of the wagon, she managed to impart movement to it by cunningly placed strings.

Kneeling down behind it, sheltered by the wagon seat, she levelled a rifle in such a way that the dummy seemed almost to be holding it, and fired spasmodically.

Her ruse had its effect and slugs pattered about the wagon from the guns of the natives.

But they were harmless, causing no damage, for their force was spent before they reached the wagon, indicating that the supply of powder was running short; by the time the men had finished their task, the firing had ceased altogether.

The Major beamed his approval at the girl, then he turned to Jim and Hewins and instructed them to help the two men who had desired to stay, to carry provisions to the pits.

Demper waited long enough to shake his hand and wish him "Good-luck," hesitated so long that it seemed as if he must be considering changing his mind and leaving with the wagon.

And this he probably would have done had not Richards called at the critical moment, "Come on, Demper. There ain't no time to waste!"

Then, nodding his head in farewell, he shouldered a store of provisions and plodded off silently in the wake of the others.

Chapter XIV

RAINING ASSEGAIS

THE afternoon sun sank lower, shadows lengthened, an atmosphere of peace pervaded the place. The Major and the girl, sitting close together, looked confidently out through the opening at the front of the wagon, trying to see what the future held in store for them, indulging in optimistic day dreams. Yet beneath it all they were fully conscious that this was a false security that they were now experiencing, realizing all that had to be done, all the obstacles that had to be overcome, before any of these dreams could be realized.

The girl sighed, and the Major taking her hand pressed it reassuringly.

"It's time," he said, "that Jim and Hewins returned."

"Perhaps," the girl said a little fearfully, "they will not come back. Perhaps they have decided to stop, too."

The Major shook his head confidently.

"No, there is no fear of that; they will both return if they are permitted to return. Demper and Richards may try to keep them by force, but——" He shook his head.

Again they were silent for a little while; the Major moving about uneasily; glancing up at the position of the sun; looking at the rock strewn watercourse where death lurked.

"And if they do not come?" the girl questioned so softly. "Shall we stay too?"

"I think we shall have to," he said with a sigh.

Then his face lighted as he heard the footsteps of the two returning men.

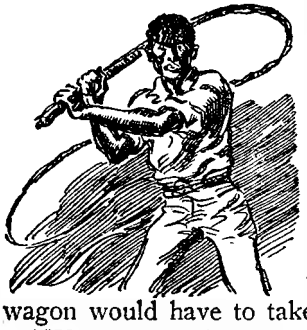
"Demper tried to hold us up," Hewins

chortled, explaining their long absence. " 'Im and Richards wanted us to stay wiv them, an' I reckon we would 'ave 'ad to if it 'adn't been for this nigger of yourn. 'E's a cunning devil all right. The way 'e pretended to lose 'is footin' and barged into old Soapy, knocking 'im down the blinkin' pit, was a fair caution. And that gave me a chance to get out of Demper's range, an' 'ere we are."

The Major looked questioningly at the Hottentot. Jim grinned reassuringly, and busied himself with the mules' harness.

"It is time we started, Baas," he said presently, and the Major agreeing, they harnessed four of the mules of the wagon.

Because they were not interrupted in this task, and there was no stir from the warriors beyond, they were tempted to hope that the warriors had departed; but Jim's keen eyes soon showed that in this they were mistaken. And following his pointed finger they could see where boulders were moving, seemingly of their own volition, directly in the path the wagon would have to take.



"We must work faster, Baas," Jim said, "or they will have closed the way. It is well that we are only harnessing four mules. It is better still that the warriors think we are going to inspan all of them. If they knew what we plan to do they would work more swiftly. As it is——"

HE BROUGHT the other animals, the twelve mules and the three horses, round to the front of the wagon. And stood there placidly, made lethargic by the heat, quite content to remain still in one place.

"Ready, Baas?" he asked.

The Major looked round at the girl and Hewins.

They nodded. The tension was great. The air seemed charged with suspense. Everything was very still.

The Major hesitated, doubting at this last moment as to the wisdom of the course he had persuaded these others to follow.

He looked at the girl. She was tying herself loosely to one of the struts supporting the tent-top of the wagon, so that she could keep to her post and not be thrown off her balance by the swinging of the wagon. Within reach of her hand was an arsenal of weapons, all loaded in chamber and magazine.

Hewins was similarly occupied on the opposite side of the wagon. And that, the Major thought, was a complete answer to his doubts.

"Yes, all ready," he called to Jim, climbing up into the driver's seat, the long lash and stock driving whip in his hand.

"Until we have started, Baas," Jim said grimly, "you hold the reins; then I will take them, and this day I will show you how to drive mules."

He stood erect, his legs apart, braced for a sudden jolt of the wagon.

He held the whip aloft; the lash hung down limply, not a breath of wind stirred it.

Again there was silence, an ominous silence, a silence which could almost be felt.

Then, with a loud blood curdling yell, Jim's whip became a live thing in his hands. With loud crackling reports it leaped over the heads of the loose animals; it bit into their flesh, stung them, goaded them to a mad panic.

Bunched together, they galloped swiftly down the watercourse and after them, at a speed equally as frenzied, Jim drove the wagon.

At the first sound of the stampede of the animals and the rattle of iron shod wheels, as the wagon lurched and swayed precariously along the boulder strewn ground, the warriors leapt to their feet and drew together as if they would form a living barrier to this living avalanche. But as the onrushing animals drew nearer, their courage faltered and with frightened yells they scrambled to the left and right; falling over each other in their eagerness to avoid being trampled under foot. A few made desperate lunges with their spears as the stampeding loose animals rushed by them; but not even the bravest waited for the wagon, and their retreat was hastened by the Major's shooting.

IN A few breathless moments the first line of the warriors had been passed, and now Jim was swinging the wagon round the first bend. The wagon tilted precariously on two wheels, seemed as if nothing could save it from capsizing. Jim swung the animals to the left to counter-balance the tilt; it righted itself and settled down with a sickening thud on four wheels.

Then on again, their pace increasing, the loose animals thundering before them, driven whenever they showed signs of slackening their speed, by Jim's voice and the vicious bites of his whip. And here the ground was comparatively free from boulders, the distance between the high black walls greater.

And no warriors were in sight!

Hewins and the girl were now firing out of the rear of the wagon, checking the onrush of the band of warriors they had just passed through and who, yelling fiercely, were running with incredible speed after the wagon.

"If we can get round the next corner, Jim," the Major said, "we are safe."

"So *you* say, Baas," Jim said gravely. "But *I* will not say that until many miles are between us and these cursed ones. It would be best that missy and the white man come now to the front of the wagon," he concluded.

The Major nodded, and by the time they had come to the next bend in the river, Hewins and the girl were kneeling at the back of the driver's seat.

Ahead of them they could hear shouts intermingled with cries of pain and panic. Then rounding the corner they saw their advance guard of animals galloping ahead of them, having apparently passed through a horde of natives, cleaving a path.

Evidently their onrush had been so unexpected that many of the natives had not been able to get out of the way, and the sandy bed of the river was dotted with black forms which moved painfully.

Here, where the banks of the river were not so steep, the natives were climbing up out of the river bed; and from vantage points thus gained threw down boulders. Several threw assegais, four of these feathering the off-leader, causing it to drop to the ground. The very impetus of the wagon's movement carried the poor beast forward some yards before Jim could rein in the others. Then he leapt down, knife in hand, intending to cut loose the wounded beast. The stoppage was the signal of a cry of exultation from the warriors.

Descending again to the river's bed, regardless of the rain of bullets from the wagon's defenders, the natives closed in on it, reinforced by the first party who were now coming up in the rear.

Swiftly, with an exhibition of generalship, and well executed tactics, they formed a ring around the wagon, a ring which gradually contracted.

These natives had throwing assegais, and presently the air was filled with them. Another mule dropped and then another. An assegai pricked the Major's arm, drawing blood. The ring was now much smaller, the warriors crawling forward, Assegais rattled continually against the wagon, tearing through the canvas cover.

"Blimey!" Hewins gasped. "I'm beginnin' to think we'd have been better down one of them 'ere pits." Then, quickly, to the Major, "But I ain't blamin' you, cully, not in the least. Don't you think I am. I followed you wiv me eyes open. I thought that your way was the best way, and I ain't agoing back on what I said."

"Thanks, Hewins," the Major said softly. "That is bally white of you."

HE TURNED to the girl. She was white faced, but her lips were set firmly, and her eyes held no look of fear, or reproach, as she looked at him and said:

"We will win through yet!"

As she spoke she fired at a fantastically dressed warrior who had crept dangerously close to the wagon.

"It is a pity," she said softly, "that all this killing should be necessary, and simply because we are greedy for treasure. I don't think I will be able to touch it even if we do manage to get safely out of

this. It has too much blood on it."

The Major held up a warning finger to his lips; he had intercepted a look of greed and cupidity on Hewin's face, and it seemed as if, for a moment, that man's vices had conquered his virtues.

"I'm afraid I've made rather a mess of things," the Major muttered. "We should have gone down the pits with the others."

The girl patted his hand encouragingly.

"You have nothing whatever to reproach yourself for," she assured him. Then: "Look! They are closing in on your right."

And for a while they had no further opportunity for speech, but fired as rapidly as possible, keeping the warriors from getting any closer.

Several times the Major shouted to them, hoping to bring an end to the bloodshed or, at least, to ensure the safety of the girl. But they would not listen to him, howling in derision at his promises and threats.

And then, it was very nearly sundown, a new danger threatened. Some of the warriors were now throwing spears to which lighted brands were attached. Most of them fell short, but one dropped on to the canvas tent of the wagon, smoldered a little while and then burst into a fierce flame, threatening a swift destruction to the wagon and its contents.

The natives greeted this with wild, exultant shouts.

"We will smoke you out, white men, defilers of the place of the spirits! As jackals are smoked out, so we will smoke you out!"

"Watch closely now, Baas," Jim warned. "Now is the time they are likely to charge."

The Major nodded and he and the girl fired with great rapidity, while Jim and Hewins attempted to beat out the spreading flame.

Hewins, taking down a canvas bucket from a peg driven into the upright support of the hood, filled it with water from the keg and threw it on the flames, working like one possessed until the flames were beaten.

"An' that's olright," he exclaimed, "as long as they don't start any more fireworks. If they do—we're done. They ain't no more water left."

As he spoke he tilted the keg, hoping to find a little water remaining. As he did so something rattled on the bottom of the keg and the chamois bag was exposed. With a furtive glance around to make sure he was not observed, he retrieved it and put it inside his shirt.

"An' wot now?" he asked, hearing a new note in the yells of the savages.

" 'Pon my soul, I'm not quite sure," the Major drawled—his back was to Hewins. "But the mules and the horses are coming back and"—he gave one final, hasty rub to the monocle he had been polishing, fixed it in his eye, and standing up on the wagon seat continued excitedly—"and the natives are retreating! My word! It's like a bally melodrama, what? Saved in the nick of time. Oh, quite!"

HIS arms were around the girl's shoulder, holding her close to his side. Hewins and the Hottentot stood close by, watching the return of the stampeding animals and the panic stricken retreat of the natives as they swarmed up the high banks, those below jabbing the ones above with their spears in order to induce better speed.

Some of the animals galloped swiftly past the wagon; the rest came to a halt beside it, their flanks wet with sweat.

And then those in the wagon heard shots and shouts of encouragement, saw horsemen riding along the tops of the banks, saw others, led by a tall, lanky man in uniform, riding fast along the bed of the river.

The girl released herself gently from the Major's hold; her eyes shone with expectant delight and, as the rescue party came to a halt, she jumped down from the wagon and ran forward with a glad shout.

The Major seemed to sag, seemed suddenly to have lost his morale as he watched the meeting of the girl and the corporal.

Jim was grinning happily, murmuring, "The Baas will soon forget."

And Hewins was milling about at the rear of the wagon. Apparently he was not over anxious to be seen by the rescue party.

The corporal of the mounted police dismounted, and, his arm about the girl's waist, came forward to greet the Major.

"Marjorie tells me," he said, drawling slightly, a nasal inflection in his voice, "I have a lot to thank you for. An' I'll thank you later. But now I've got to finish this bit of work, an' I must put Marjorie in your charge a while longer. Got to chase the natives back to where they belong an' read the riot act to them.

"You-all had better go back to the kloof an' wait there. I reckon I'll be able to join you by tomorrow sunrise, sure."

And with that he vaulted into the saddle, waved his hand in a farewell salute and led his hastily enlisted posse back along the bed of the watercourse to a place where they could ride their horses up the steep bank and take up the pursuit of the fleeing warriors.

Chapter XV

The Major Writes a Letter

"THE dear corporal would seem to be deucedly competent," the Major drawled.

The girl started, surprised out of the dreamy mood into which she had fallen.

"He is," she agreed softly. "Very! We —I had almost forgotten—had planned to marry as soon as he wins a commission. He—I ——" her voice faltered.

"Ah!" the Major murmured. Then, briskly, to Jim, "Inspan — we go back to the kloof."

"That is folly, Baas," the Hottentot protested.

"It is an order, Jim," the Major said sternly, and helped the Hottentot inspan the mules which had stopped at the wagon.

The girl, sitting on a nearby rock, watched him intently.

"Major," she began softly.

"Get up into the wagon," he said tersely, "and we will get back to the kloof. I want to make camp before darkness sets in."

She sighed and obeyed.

Then Hewins showed himself, carrying a small parcel of provisions.

"I ain't goin' to no bloomin' kloof," he asserted. "Me. I'm agoin' to ride me 'orse away—barebacked if I 'as to."

"You'll have to," the Major replied coldly. "But why this hurry to depart?"

"I don't want ter see Richards or Demper again—that's why, mister."

As he spoke he caught his horse which had stopped with the mules and put on it the bridle he had taken from the wagon.

"Just a minute, Hewins," the Major drawled, covering the man with his revolver. "Before you go I'd like that bag you took from the water keg. Quick, now!"

Hewins hesitated a moment, scowling fiercely, then, with a broad grin on his face he said, "It's a fair cop. But 'ow did yer know I 'ad it?"

"I was polishing my eye-glass at the time, dear lad, and saw you reflected in it. Quite simple. Now give me the bag."

Hewins fumbled inside his shirt, then tossed the bag to the Major. At the same time he leaped on his horse and galloped away.

"But I 'elped meself to some of the rings," he yelled back derisively.

He flourished his hands; the gems on his fingers glittered as they caught the rays of the setting sun.

The girl struck up the Major's hand just as he fired and the bullet sped harmlessly into the air.

The Major scowled, picked up the bag and climbed into the wagon; and a few minutes later they were driving back to the kloof.

Arrived at the camp she watched the two men prepare skoff.

When she suggested that Demper and Richards be apprised of the rescue and released from the pits where they had sought shelter, she was met with an angry refusal.

"Do you think," the Major stormed, "that I'm going to fight for my share of the treasure with those two blighters? Hardly. It'll be all easy sailing for me from now on, and I don't intend to go out of my way to seek squalls."

"Are you trying to make me think," she said merrily, "that you're in the same class as those two? Because, if you are, let me warn you, that you won't succeed. You see"—and her voice softened—"although

I've known you only a little while, I know you very well. I——"

He laughed bitterly.

"You do not know me at all well. Not half as well as the police. You see, my dear young lady, I am a man with a prison record. I have only just been released from a long sentence on the Breakwater for a very serious crime. Good-night. Jim will bring you your skoff. And if you hear noises in the night, do not be alarmed. It will simply be Jim and myself getting ready for a long trek."

He bowed curtly and left her.

FOR a long time sleep would not come to Marjorie Wallace that night, despite the fact that she was physically exhausted.

She tried to think of the corporal, the man she had promised to marry, and, instead, a vision of the Major always blotted him out of her thoughts.

And when sleep finally did come to her, it was broken at first by restless dreams. But, as the night wore on, these dreams gave place to restful ones of a life of peace lived with a man she thoroughly understood and who understood her.

She was awakened by the rays of an early morning sun pouring in through a vent in the tent.

Rising, wondering at the quiet of the place, she went to the opening and peered out.

The place was deserted; the Major, Jim, the wagon and mules had gone.

She went outside, greatly dispirited, disappointed, and saw, with a start of surprise, two men—Richards and Demper lying on the ground near by. They were both securely bound and gagged.

Bending over them she saw, pinned to Richards' coat, a letter addressed to herself.

Taking it off and opening it, she read:

Dear Miss Marjorie:

Jim has just signaled from Look-out Point that the gallant corporal and his men are on their way here. So I must hurry off. It would never do for me to give him a chance to question me too closely.

I am leaving Messrs. Demper and Richards to your tender mercies. I thought of taking them with me, but they were too impossible. But, if I were you, I would not release them. Let the corporal do that. They might be dangerous!

I had quite a job convincing them that there were no diamonds in this place—their minds seemed set on diamonds! They would have it that I had already discovered them, or that you had. They almost caught me in a nice little ambush, but failed; thanks to Jim.

But, as they were so keen on the matter, I showed them what I had discovered! Poor old Richards, he actually foamed at the mouth! So, to please him, I stuffed all the things in his pockets. I thought it was right that he should possess them for a little while—after all, he has put himself to so much trouble!

Of course, you or the corporal—I think it had better be the corporal—will be able to get them back from him without any difficulty. And then you won't have to wait for a commission, will you? And I don't approve of long engagements.

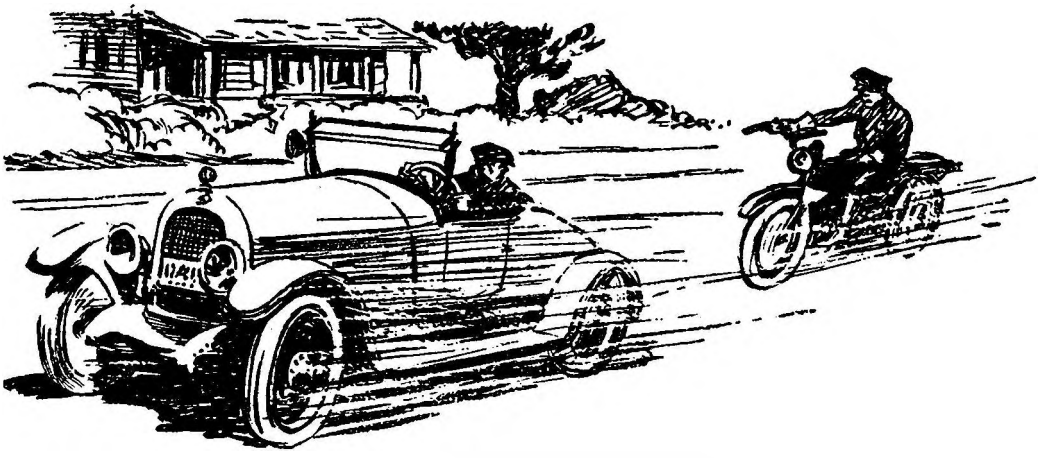
And now here comes Jim, grinning like a Barbary ape at the thought of being on trek again.

Good-by, dear Miss Marjorie. Think of me sometimes.

Yours devotedly,
The Major.

The girl folded the letter wistfully, patted it and then put it carefully into a pocket. And for a little while she sat gazing dreamily before her until, roused by the sound of swiftly approaching horsemen, she murmured, "I shall always remember, Major, and I understand."

Then, rising to her feet, she ran swiftly to meet her lover, knowing that nothing could spoil her memories of the man who had, for such a brief time, played such a big part in her life; knowing that those memories would not spoil the life of happiness she was destined to lead with the man she now ran to meet.



GRUBSTAKE

By ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Author of "Double Action," "The Back Trail," etc.

FEAR AND PANIC—TWO GREAT ALLIES OF THE LAW WHEN THEY ENTER INTO THE MIND OF A MAN, AND A KILLER. AND THE THIRD GREAT ALLY IS IGNORANCE OF TRAIL WISDOM

THE Killer left the cafe and sauntered to the stolen automobile. Sliding behind the wheel, he cursed the luck that had driven him to flight.

In the East the Killer had stood his ground. His philosophy had been summed up in two brief sentences: "Might makes right." and "Dead men tell no tales." He worked alone, with reckless daring, and he left no witnesses. He had never been arrested. Two officers had tried it and two officers had left widows.

The Killer strolled the streets, complacently read newspaper accounts of his ruthless crimes, his cool daring, and smiled, the smile of conscious superiority.

Then the fence had betrayed him. The police had found his lair, had secured his fingerprints, and some photographs. Bulletins had been issued to every peace officer in the country.

Leisurely, the Killer had left New York. It wasn't really necessary, but he didn't like to take chances. He had pulled a job or two in Chicago, had drifted into Seattle, killed a man in a holdup, gone on to San Francisco, stolen a car and started south. Winter was coming and he wanted the warmth of Southern California.

He was not fleeing. He was merely touring the country, still smiling that smile of complacent superiority. He fancied he was invincible. "I got too damn much guts for 'em," he muttered to himself at times, smirking his conceit.

AND then had come the nightmare, the impossible. It had been in a little town midway between San Francisco and Los Angeles. A constable with a white goatee and a tin star as big as the side of a coal-oil can had peered into his face, stopped, looked again, and reached clumsily for his hip.

"You're under arrest, my boy! You're that there Killer that they want in N'Yawk. I seen your picture in the sheriff's office yesterday."

For a long moment the Killer had done nothing. His incredulous ears refused to believe what they had heard. A pair of pedestrians stopped curious. Three more came running. A crowd collected.

Then the Killer acted. He flipped a well manicured hand under his left armpit. The hick constable was still tugging at the weapon which had been buttoned under his coat when the Killer's automatic ripped forth a stream of steel-jacket bullets.

IT HAD been a slack time for news. The city papers had made much of it. Bystanders had identified him from photo-

graphs. Some one offered a reward. The hick town was not accustomed to having constables killed. It was off of the beaten track, not abreast of modern developments in crime. What the hell did they think a self-respecting city crook was going to do? Let a rube constable arrest him?

The town had offered a reward. The county had swelled the offer. The Killer was in a strange country. He had no friends, knew no places of concealment. He had been forced to move on, and his tour had become flight.

Flight had brought that suggestion of panic which it always brings. Some men resist it more than others, but it always tells. Flight is a yielding to fear, and fear feeds upon recognition.

Strive as he might to regain his self-control, the Killer felt stark panic always at the back of his mind. He reached Los Angeles in safety. Prudence decreed that he stay there, mingling with the crowds. But he yielded to fear. Flight had gripped him with its cold hands. The killer couldn't remain. He fancied every policeman he met was staring at him with suspicion.

He stole another car and started east.

Now that he was in motion he felt better. But his foot rested heavily on the throttle. He knew that he mustn't be arrested for traffic violation but, try as he might he couldn't keep within the speed limit. A restless urge within only quieted when he saw the country flying past, heard the roar of the motor, the sing of the tires. Flight demanded physical obedience.

HE STOPPED for dinner in Riverside, striving to keep his self control but he felt uneasy as soon as he left the machine. Now as he came from the restaurant, slid in behind the wheel of the stolen car and lit a cigarette, he wore his old time smirk. Warm food restored his self confidence.

The flame from the match temporarily blinded him. When he lowered his cupped hands and shook out the flame he saw a man gazing with interest at the license number of the car. He had switched them, of course. The numbers fitted a Ford. The stolen car was a powerful, eight cylinder affair, guaranteed to do better than eighty miles an hour.

The man approached, bent over the better to read the number.

The killer lost his coolness which usually came to him in the face of danger. He could feel a sudden dampness upon the palms of his hands and on his forehead.

He switched on the lights and pressed the starter.

The headlights glittered on a star which the man wore.

"Hey you!" shouted the officer.

The Killer slammed in the gear, released the clutch pedal, and lost control of the car. It slammed a light car in front of it, glanced out into the street, sideswiped a passing automobile.

"Hey, you! Stop, you're under arrest!"

Fear entered the Killer's mind, made way for its brother, panic. The Killer stepped on the throttle and roared through the streets. A police whistle shrilled behind him.

Lights whizzed past on either side. The road emerged from the quiet city into a dark stretch of country, basking in the light of a full moon. Palm trees lined the drive. There was not a breath of wind stirring in the great leaves.

The speedometer climbed to sixty-seventy-eighty. It was a foolish thing to do. The Killer gradually forced panic from his mind, and lightened the pressure on the foot throttle.

The car slowed.

"Dam fool," muttered the Killer to himself. "I'll get stopped for speeding. Take it easy."

THE car slowed to a purring forty, and then the Killer caught a glint of something high, and to one side of the road. He raised his eyes above the silhouetted palm fronds and saw that the glitter came from burnished wires which stretched along the left-hand side of the road.

Panic which had been temporarily thrust from his mind came back with a rush.

The telephone!

They would telephone on ahead. In a

big city, lying in the midst of a territory crowded with other cities, that would hardly be practicable. But this was a dark and silent countryside. Orange groves lined the road. An occasional ranch-house gave a flash of ruddy light. The moon shone quietly down upon stretches of barren land covered with low sage, clustered with cacti.

Behind him there gleamed lights, bobbing up and down with the speed of the following motor. The sound of a siren, softened by distance, wailed above the quiet purr of his own motor.

The Killer pressed his foot upon the throttle until it pushed into the floor boards.

They were following! And they had telephoned ahead!

There was no chance to get off the main ribbon of gleaming cement which glittered in the moonlight. There was no tangle of traffic in which he could lose himself. Even the orange groves had given way to a flat expanse of desert. There were no trees, nothing but sagebrush. No concealment for an automobile, no place where he could go. The silent emptiness of the country stretched out mockingly. All of space was around him, and yet the very emptiness of that space gave him no shelter.

He drove wildly. Reason had left his mind. Flight was shrieking her commands in one ear, panic in the other.

Gradually he drew away from the glittering lights of the pursuing car. Once or twice he encountered a car coming toward him. At such times it was simply up to the approaching motorist to look out for himself. The Killer was going too fast to risk a skid. He held the center of the road and pressed on his horn.

Once or twice his escapes were merely a matter of inches. But panic cared naught for that. All that the Killer wanted was to flee, to feel the air rushing past, hear the roar of the motor, the shriek of tortured rubber on the road. Eighty-three miles an hour seemed slow.

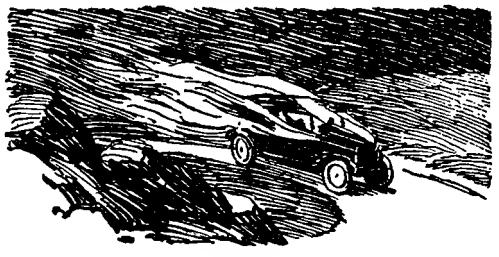
WHEN he encountered motorists driving in the same direction, the Killer had to slow slightly. At such times he cursed in a racked, rasping voice.

For an hour he roared through the night, slowing at times for turns, taking the straightaways with everything he had. The pursuing car was nowhere in sight. Traffic had thinned. He hadn't seen a car for fifteen miles. The ribbon of road stretched remorselessly out through the barren desert, beckoning him on toward the next town where he felt sure a posse would be waiting with a cable stretched across the road.

The gasoline gauge on the dash showed a warning. The motor did not give much gasoline economy at speeds above sixty miles an hour.

Cold sweat oozed from the skin across the Killer's forehead. He grew afraid to trust his rear view mirror, but courted disaster by turning his head to see if pursuing lights were behind him.

And then a diamond shaped patch of white loomed ahead, a road sign of the



Automobile Club of Southern California marking a cross road. The Killer slammed on the four wheel brakes. The car came to a stop, lurching and swaying.

He didn't bother to read the names on the sign. He looked only for the cross road. It was hardly more than a broad trail, winding up a sandy wash. The Killer whirled the steering wheel and again pressed on the throttle. The car lurched and swayed up a sandy wash. After the hurtling speed of the pavement, it seemed that he was barely crawling.

A sense of relief flooded his soul. He sensed that he had shaken off pursuit. No sane criminal would forsake the winged miles of the boulevard for the crawling pace of this desert road. And in that fact lay his biggest factor of safety.

The sweat dried from his forehead. His eye regained its cunning judgment of distance. He took the road at the highest speed compatible with safety, but safety

was the main issue. The road left the canyon and started winding up a long grade. The little gasoline which remained in the tank poured into the thirsty motor.

FROM the summit of the low hills could be seen vast miles of desert. The sagebrush was higher now interspersed with Joshua trees.

Just over the top of the ridge the motor gave a spasmodic cough and quit. The last drop of gasoline was gone. The Killer kicked out the clutch and coasted down the winding grade. A canyon lay to the right, filled with dark shadows. The Killer was more his old self now. The superior smile was on his face. It wouldn't do to abandon the car where it could be readily found.

He brought it to a stop, twisted the steering wheel and tied it with a bit of string, then stood on the running board while he released the emergency brake.

He had pointed the car with great care. It went on the road far enough to obtain some momentum, then leapt outward into space. A moment it hung, poised and gleaming, the streamliness of its graceful body, designed by a famous artist, reflecting the cold gold of the moonlight. Then it plunged into the shadow. There was a crash, the sound of twisting metal, a few rocks rattled downward, and the beautiful car became a mass of wreckage.

The Killer was smiling broadly now. He loved to destroy things. Wrecking the car had completely restored his nerve. "I got too much guts for 'em," he bragged in a hoarse whisper.

Through the cool of the desert night he walked on. There was a certain exhilaration about the vast silence, the quiet moonlight. The Killer seemed alone in the world. Pursuit worried him no longer.

After an hour's walk he caught the smell of wood smoke. Soon glowing embers arrested his gaze. Silently, he left the road and walked cautiously through the sand. The sound of a human voice, low-pitched, monotonous, came to his ears.

The Killer reached under his left armpit and drew out the automatic. Slowly he advanced. Once more he was the grim killer of the city pavements, the man who dealt out death with a superior smile.

HE MADE out the dark bulk of a man sitting before a glowing bed of embers. The man talked on, steadily. The Killer became even more cautious, seeking the location of the party to whom the man was talking. He could see no one.

"Let's have a little more fire," said the man, and, with the words, reached to a pile of twisted sage roots and flung a few on the fire.

As the blaze flickered up, the Killer made a discovery.

The man was alone! He was talking to himself.

A sneer twisting his lips, the Killer advanced, his automatic held in readiness for instant action.

"It's because I know yuh needed the money so blamed bad, Miss Halley, that I hate to come back. When yuh offered to grubstake me, I know why yuh did it. Yuh had the fifty dollars I needed for provisions, but yuh didn't have much more, an' the doctors said yuh had to take a year's rest. I'd heard about it. Fifty bucks wasn't no good at all. Yuh needed a thousand anyway. Yuh thought maybe a grubstake'd pan out. Yuh'd have made any old sort of a gamble right then. But I wouldn't 'a taken the money unless I'd felt sure I was goin' to find it this time. I still don't see how I missed it, but I sure did.

"Anyhow, I won't let yuh know I came back if I can get me another grubstake somewhere. I'll give yuh half o' my next half. I ain't goin' to see you lose nothin', not if I can help it——"

The voice droned on.

The Killer could see the man's features now. He was a dried up old mummy, a typical desert rat. A scraggly white beard covered his face. White hair protruded from beneath a greasy sombrero. His frame seemed nothing but leathery skin and wasted bones. years in the desert had dried the moisture from his system. He might have been sixty years of age, might have been eighty.

"Stick 'em up!" said the Killer.

The voice stopped. The man did not turn. For a moment he held rigid as though thinking. Then his gnarled hand shot up in the air.

The Killer took a step forward, raised

the automatic and crashed it down upon the top of the man's head. He slumped forward and to one side. The Killer heaped the rest of the fuel upon the fire and looked about him.

A STARTLED snort directed his attention to the horse.

The animal was looking at him with wide nostrils, ears cocked forward, eyes showing their whites. The head and neck caught the firelight. The rest of the animal was hidden in the shadows. The Killer advanced, saw that the horse's front legs were tied together with rope and sacks, a rough but effective hobble.

The horse snorted, lunged away, but could not travel fast with his front legs tied. The Killer reached a rope which dragged from the animal's neck and brought him close to the camp fire.

There was a rusted rifle standing against a clump of greasewood. A canteen stood at one side. Near by was a saddle and bridle. The Killer placed the rifle upon a rock. Hammered it with a big boulder until it was merely a mass of metal.

The Killer knew but little about horses. The bridle was adjusted after some trouble. The saddle proved more difficult. The Killer put no blankets under it and did not understand the mechanics of the cinch. He managed to get the leather strip through both rings and then tied it in a rude knot under the horse's belly. Then he cast loose the hobbles.

When he put his foot in the stirrup the saddle started to turn. No matter how he tried to tie the cinch the saddle turned.

Cursing, the Killer pulled off the saddle and threw it to one side. He was perspiring from his exertions, and felt strangely helpless.

He stood the horse close by a stone, placed one foot on the rock and scrambled to the animal's back. From this strange point of vantage he looked awkwardly around him at the camp, twisting his body carefully, trying to keep his balance on the smooth back.

He thought the old prospector moved his eyelids a trifle.

"Playing possum, eh?" sneered the Killer. "Well, I've got a way to cure that. I don't leave witnesses."

He raised his automatic and pulled the trigger.

As his arm came up, the horse winced. At the report of the weapon the animal whirled swiftly. The Killer fell forward on the horse's neck, holding on with every ounce of strength.

He looked back to see if his bullet had found its mark. He was a good shot with the automatic, but a hit was difficult under the circumstances. He thought he had better get off and finish the job.

But he was reassured at what he saw.

The prospector was writhing about on the ground, his hand over his stomach. As the Killer looked, the man twisted, straightened, bent backward, and then slumped into inanimate collapse, a dark blotch upon the moonlit sand.

The Killer nodded and shook the reins. The horse moved toward the road. The Killer pulled its head toward the hills which were at the head of a side canyon. The horse reluctantly turned and picked his way between clumps of sage.

THE Killer dismounted after two hours. His joints felt as though he had been on the rack. The horse drew back in alarm from the clumsy footed rider who jerked at the reins. The Killer muttered an oath and jerked the horse toward him. The more he jerked the reins the more the animal pulled back.

The Killer was not accustomed to self control. He started toward the horse. For a moment there was a little slack in the bridle reins. When the horse reared back and took up that slack with a jerk, the leather slipped through the outlaw's fingers.

The next moment he stood, half dazed, watching the black shape of the horse galloping down the canyon. The Killer dared not follow. Pursuit might be coming from that direction. He cursed the de-

parting horse with bitterness and fluency and then turned to continue his journey on foot.

The east grew gray, glittered with a brassy green hue, changed to light blue, then dawn flashed over the tumbled mass of waste country.

The Killer heaved a sigh and settled down to rest. It suddenly occurred to him that he was tired, hungry and thirsty. All about him glittered a wild, barren country. There was no sign of water. A rabbit scurried from a cactus patch and the Killer's automatic barked sharply. The rabbit kicked and squirmed.

IT WAS the first time the Killer had ever shot at other than human prey, and it gave him a thrill to pick up the little animal. Here was food, enough for one meal certainly, perhaps two or three.

He was awkward about skinning and cleaning the rabbit. He didn't understand that coals and not flames were made for cooking, but, after a fashion, he cooked the animal and worried down the burnt-raw pieces of tough meat. He kept part of the kill, covered over the ashes of his fire and sought rest in the shade of a greasewood bush.

Almost instantly he fell asleep. Two hours later he awoke, his muscles sore. The sun was beating down fiercely. Little flies hovered about his eyes, keeping just before the pupils. The Killer brushed them away, and they promptly returned. Finally he ceased to fight them, but stumbled on his way. There was nothing better to do.

He realized that he was very thirsty indeed. His mouth seemed dry, his saliva became like cotton. The veins of his eyes congested and became bloodshot. The heat grew more unbearable. A blister developed on his left heel and broke. The skin rubbed raw.

Stopping, the Killer raised his clenched fist and cursed the country. The futility of his own voice struck terror into his soul. His words sounded weak and empty there in the vast, limitless space.

In a moment of crashing realization, he sensed that interstellar space rested upon the surface of the desert. The very void which surrounded him went on up and up until it passed between the stars, continued going on and on forever.

He started to run.

JAKE PLOVER rolled under a bush as he heard the hoofs of his returning horse, but it took only a moment for his trained ears to convince him that the animal was riderless.

He stumbled out, called the horse to him and patted the animal's neck. Slowly, painfully, he put on blankets and saddle.

After that he picked up the canteen, mounted and started on the trail of the outlaw.

It was not the nature of Jake Plover to allow a man to crack him over the head, shoot at him, steal his horse and escape. The old prospector read trail, following the double tracks of the horse without difficulty. When he came to the place where the horse had broken away, he read and interpreted the signs in the ground correctly. After that he moved slower. It was harder to follow the tracks of the man.

He saw where the Killer had shot the rabbit, noticed the ashes of the fire, despite their covering of loose sand, and then he went slightly to one side. The tracks were getting very, very fresh.

The Killer heard him coming, and crouched in the shadow of a bush. The automatic was in his hand and a look of cruel ferocity upon his face.

But the prospector did not ride within range of that automatic. He circled above the place where the Killer lay in ambush, saw that the tracks of the Killer did not come that far, and waited for the Killer to show himself. While he waited he tilted the canteen to his lips for a deep drink.

The Killer saw the motion and fired a futile shell. The range was too great for any accuracy with the short barrelled automatic, but the whizzing bullet served to betray his exact location to the horseman.

THE rider withdrew another hundred yards and continued to wait. The Killer could not stand the strain of inactivity. The sun was blistering his skin. His foot throbbed. His muscles ached, and his

tongue seemed to fill every bit of his mouth.

He gripped the automatic and started toward the horseman, striving to keep out of sight, to seek the protection afforded by every clump of sagebrush. The Killer fancied he was making a perfect stalk, but he might as well have advanced in the open. When he had covered a hundred yards, the prospector wheeled the horse and withdrew another hundred yards up the hot canyon.

The Killer sobbed forth a curse and started on the run, his automatic gripped in his extended hand. He wanted that canteen, and he meant to have it. The mere sight of it sent wild thoughts racing through his fevered brain.

Jake Plover saw the man running. He turned, touched the horse with his spurs and cantered up the canyon, easily outdistancing the running outlaw.

The Killer checked his pace, threw up the gun and tried another long, ineffective shot. Then he plodded doggedly ahead. The horseman kept the distance between them, almost to a yard.

The Killer sat down to rest. Almost instantly he fell into a doze in which he dreamt of cool buckets of water in which he could plunge his head, quench his thirst. With a start he awoke to see the silhouette of the grim horseman waiting some five hundred yards away.

The Killer dared not sleep. The old prospector might sneak up on him if he slept. Yet he could not rest and remain awake. So he arose and stumbled on. The horseman moved also. All day they played their strange game of hide and seek. When darkness came the Killer flung himself into the shelter of a clump of greasewood,

emerged from the other side and sneaked back down the canyon. Here he snatched a few winks of sleep.

Then the moon came up and the horseman found his tracks. The night was a repetition of the day. The Killer tried to perfect an ambush by which he could lure his pursuer within pistol shot, but the prospector had an uncanny ability to detect these ambushes. The moon swung higher and the desert became almost as bright as day.

Toward midnight the Killer became less certain in his stride. By dawn he was staggering. At nine o'clock the prospector galloped up as the Killer flung his pistol to one side, ripped off his shirt and began a staggering run.

TWO hours later Undersheriff Bailord glanced up as he heard the sound of a horse's hoofs. The posse had located the tracks where the Killer had taken the side road. They had located the twisted mass of wreckage at the bottom of the canyon. Spreading out, the members of the posse were making an individual search.

Bailord looked carefully at the two men on the horse, saw the rope which bound the arms and legs of the Killer, then raised his rifle and fired twice in the air.

Jake rode toward him.

"Arrested—hoss stealin'," he said faintly.

Bailord laughed, a metallic laugh.

"Horse stealin' hell! That's the Killer. There's ten thousand reward out for him. Hell man, you're hit!"

Jake nodded.

"Yeah. He tried to kill me when I was playin' possum. The hoss jumped an' saved my life. Bullet just missed my lung."

"And you hunted him down, unarmed, wounded?" demanded the officer.

Jake did not directly answer the question.

"Half—reward—goes—Maude Halley—she grubstake. Give it all to her—if I cash in.

And, with that, he toppled from the horse, into the arms of the waiting deputy.

"God, if I'd only known sooner," muttered the cringing Killer, his nerve broken. "He couldn't have lasted long with that wound."

Bailord sneered as the handcuffs clicked. "That bird's got guts. He'd have lasted long enough to get you!"

THE PLATE CROWDER

By BILL BRANDT

Author of "Bases Full," "The Home Plate is Rubber," etc.

JAKE KRAUDER'S AVERAGE AT THE DINNER TABLE WAS AS BIG AS HIS BATTING AVERAGE—AND THAT WAS SAYING A MOUTHFUL. ALL OF WHICH, AFTER HE'D NEARLY EATEN HIMSELF OUT OF FAST COMPANY, LED TO HIS BEING THE ONLY STAR PLAYER THE PRESIDENT OF HIS TEAM NEVER SOLD

FIND me another "Babe" Ruth and I'll show you a second Ty Cobb. Then we'll both get arrested for witchcraft. Last spring we thought we had a fresh copy of old Hans Wagner working in our batting order, but I guess there's no more Wagners either.

The minute you set eyes on young Jake Krauder you thought of Wagner. Jake is built like a brick garage. His wide carcass is trimmed with gorilla arms, duck feet, and a face something like the full moon rising over Lake Michigan.

Jake can't dance you dizzy on his crooked pins like Wagner used to, but when it comes to slaughter, when you speak of whamming the ball with a bat, lambasting line drives far, wide and handsome, Krauder at first gave us the impression of Wagner all over.

Our ball club, for the past ten years, has been famous for selling its best players to the big leagues as fast as they get good. In olden times the club was called "The Bruins." Lately, we're "The Ruins." When not seventh or eighth, we generally finish sixth.

Krauder is considered the best natural hitter in our league, which is the fastest minor league in the United States. Our president, Borgman, would sell the clubhouse stove if a big league scout happened to like its looks. But he won't sell Jake Krauder. I thought you fans who have read about Krauder's tremendous slugging might be interested to know why he don't get a big league tryout.

We heard last winter how the Ruins had bought this big Dutch apple-crasher from the Deer Valley Association. Even in a class D League it takes ability to win a .439 batting average. By the way, I'm the veteran centerfielder, "String" Tucker by name, and when I stepped out on the field at the spring training camp our noble manager, Garry Hollawell, took me by the hand and said, "You're the one most interested, so take a look at this Krauder."

"Yes! Which is him?"

"Over there—and then you better run around the park nineteen times to start getting your limbs in shape for a tough summer."

Garry had each rookie taking a turn at home plate so he could see how they treated the ball with their bats. Krauder stood off by himself, with a thick, short

shillaly dangling from his big hands. He was partly clad in the largest last year's uniform they could find, but it was not enough. It looked as if all the buttons would pop off soon's he moved. His circular face was full of woe.

"He'll be playing right field," elucidated Garry, "and so will you. In other words, we seem to have picked up a million-dollar hitter with lazy legs. Your centerfield job this year will take in as much of right field as you can reach with your tongue out."

"Can he sure enough hit?"

MY QUESTION got answered almost immediately. Jake stepped up to take his swing. He perched himself on the front rim of the batter's box, leaning his chin out across home plate.

"He'll get killed," I exclaimed. "They can knock his face off with a strike!"

"Guess again," giggled Garry. "He's the original plate crowder. Krauder the Crowder. His name fits him as tight as that suit. He's an inside hitter, I mean, inside and high. Now watch this. Finnegan hasn't seen him work yet."

"Red" Finnegan, who came in the night before on the same train with me, was pitching to the youngsters. He waved the kid back. Krauder merely blinked. Red threw him a couple of bad ones, outside, which the kid ignored. Then Red got sore and hurled the next one pretty close to Krauder's big blue eyes.

Crash! That was the first one I ever saw Jake hit. The little fat bat met that ball like a sledge-hammer slapping its mate. The ball lined like a bird out against the left-field fence.

"Nineteen times around the lot for you," ordered Garry. "That great big right-handed murderer made the team the first twenty-seven times he crashed one of those bean balls for a goal. This is your busy season."

Round the festive board that night at the hotel sat Garry and me and Horace Wingstaff, the leading sports editor of our city.

"Look at that balloon going up," said Garry. "He's overweight now and if I don't put the muzzle on him he'll eat himself out of the league before he's in it."

Krauder was sitting by himself at a table in the corner, but he was not lonesome. Several plates which had once held food were stacked around him. His sad expression was gone.

"Crowds the dinner plate, too," I commented. "Natural hitter, natural eater."

"He saved our lives," cheered Wingstaff. "Gave us something cheerful to write home about. Say, the fans will go nuts about him. Fatter and funnier than anybody you ever saw. He's from Chicago. His old man keeps a delicatessen, but is not doing so well. Jake's the oldest and there's a flock of little Krauders rushing around. Imagine feeding six or eight food furnaces like this fellow! The old delicatess is mortgaged up to the limit. Honest, I'm sorry for the kid. He quit school to play with the stockyard semipros. Somebody saw him braining baseballs on a lot and signed him up for the Deer Valley Association. He sends all his money home to his dad. A real good kid, I mean."

"Must have joined them late in the season," mused Garry. "The averages quoted him only 47 games in that league."

"Well, he's going to be a big card," prophesied Wingstaff.

"I sure hope you're right," said Garry fervently. "After our noble president got through selling players last fall, about all we had left was the suits. The way the season looks from this end we'll just keep burrowing down deeper and deeper into that second division. Maybe if we run a side-show in rightfield, like this elephant, the bleachers wolves will let the rest of us alone."

OUR public was all steamed up for a look at Krauder, thanks to the heavy typewriter batting of Wingstaff and the other training camp reporters. Opening day in Bruins Bowl handed the fans their first sock on the snoot.

The season opened, the goodly crowd was there, but no Krauder. When we came north Wingstaff had taken Jake home and hired him a room in his own house. So it was Wingstaff who brought us the bad news before the game.

"Young Dutch Cleanser is sick with the indigestion," announced Garry, after talk-

ing to Wingstaff. "He won't clean up today for the dear old Ruins."

The fans took it very hard, but the newspapers gave out that Krauder had strained his side hitting home runs on the way up from the South. They promised he would be back in the game in a few days.

He debutted three days later, and the delay made him just that much more of a wow. It was the opening game of a series with the champion Pugs. We licked them, 7 to 2, and we did it because Jake Krauder crashed four hits in five times up. He had only one homer, which was when old Cy Smith, the Pug ace, fired one at his chin in the first inning. Cy caught the idea quick, and after that he didn't aim at Jake's head, although Cy just loves to do that when a batter cuddles too close to home plate.

Imagine those fans! The next day, Saturday, we had the biggest crowd in years. Jake socked two doubles to the end of centrefield, one of them with the bases filled. We won again, 6 to 4.

Sunday filled up the Bowl and we won again. In fact, we took four straight from the champs and for the entire following week Krauder's bat blazed like a volcano. He could hit outside pitches, too, and low ones, but he just loved them high and close. There's players who study hitting all their lives and never reach .300. Krauder is just one of those natural freaks, a born slugger, even if there wasn't much else he could do around a ball game.

The news about Jake spread all over the league. Garry got summoned downtown one morning to see Prexy Borgman, and they talked about Jake, too.

"Three guesses," said Garry to me in the clubhouse that noon. Me being a veteran, he tells me practically everything. "Who we are going to sell to the big leagues next. That's right! The Athletics just paid Borgman some down-money so as to keep the other clubs off. They want a month more to look Jake over before the big deal goes through."

"I can hear those wolves already," I replied, in part.

JAKE was in the game regular for about sixteen days that first time. We took one short trip, and the second day back home, Wingstaff came into the clubhouse before the game and whispered with Garry. Our noble manager went over and hung a used towel on the handle of Krauder locker.

"What's that? Crape?" whispered Wally Dunn to Wingstaff.

"Jake's got collywobbles again," answered Horace sadly. "Hit too many home runs at the dinner table last night. I guess he'll be all right tomorrow."

But it was Thursday before Jake showed up for active duty, feeling very bad about himself even before Garry pointed out the details. The manager pulled Jake and me into a corner.

"Now I see," he breathed, "why you played only 47 games last summer. From now on, String, you are appointed keeper of this white elephant we inherited. He'll move out of Wingstaff's and room with you. An army, Jake, meaning our club, travels no faster than its weakest stomach, and that means *you*. Now String, *your* job is to keep his eating toned down to somewhere near normal, because you're the main sufferer when his feet sink into the mud out there and the opposition is hitting to right."

He waved Krauder away.

"Borgman is worried," he buzzed to me. "Connie Mack don't fancy buying any invalids. Borgman is going to cut me in for 10 per cent of the heavy purchase money if you and me can keep Krauder well until the deal goes through. I'll split my dough with you."

With me in charge, Krauder stayed well just nine and a half days. Mike Drennan, the Athletics scout, was in town to watch him. I think Jake missed getting sold to the A's then and there by about one day. When I reported my boy sick in bed, Garry raved.

"The deal is supposed to be clinched today," he wailed. "Now they'll hold off on

it. What kind of a keeper are you, anyways?"

Mike Drennan left town without Jake. Garry told me the A's had extended their option 30 days.

"I hate it when I get sick," Jake told me when I got back to the room. "I hope Garry don't fire me oudt. Chee viz! My vahder's depenting on me that I should raise him the mogridges!"

"Well, you better wise up and put the harness on that appetite."

"But, chee viz, Strink, uf I don't eat, I don't hit! I'm veek! I don't try to get zick. I try to don't get zick. But I *get!*"

As soon as Jake could move, Garry, by Borgman's orders, took Jake to the biggest stomach doctors in town. They thumped him and pumped him, took X-rays, gave him the works. They all unanimously agreed that the only treatment for him was diet, and by orders from Garry and me, Jake tried that.

The kid had to stick to the menu drawn up by the most expensive specialist, who should have been a bird-doctor. Those meals might have kept a canary happy, but not a great big Dutch slugger.

I spoke to Garry, who pointed out a big number, such as 187 or 372, alongside of each article.

"That's the calories," explained Garry. "They's a whole slew of calories in one boiled egg, so what are you squawkin' about?"

FOR one solid week, Jake didn't get any kind of a hit. He stayed well, that is, he was not sick in bed. But Pete Shallcross threw one at his head Saturday afternoon and he popped it up to third base, instead of denting the left-field fence as he usually did when they pitched high-inside to him.

The wolves hooted Jake for that one. During the week we had flopped out of the first division due to his hitting slump. The wolves were beginning to figure him as a spring bloomer. The word was around that the pitchers had found his weakness. That night he sat around our apartment, glaring at me with blazing eyes. I tried to read a magazine, but I got mixed up in a cannibal island adventure, so I threw the magazine away and wrote a letter home.

After while Jake said he was going for a walk. I went to bed before he got back. Next morning the alarm clock didn't budge him. He was snoring loudly with a smile on his face.

"Dreaming of food," I figured, then I had to wake him up so he could inhale his morning bird-seed and hustle out to the park in time for practice.

Sunday afternoon he made five hits, one a triple. He went out for another walk that night and the next day he had a homer and two long singles. Garry slapped me on the back in the clubhouse.

"We don't always remember how lucky we are to be living today instead of fifty years ago," gloated our manager. "Them days Jake would of ett himself outa the league instead of being calorized into a great hitter. Took a little time for them calories to get organized, that's all. I'm wiring to Mike Drennan tonight he should come over and look at his boy now."

Jake had some more hits Monday and Tuesday. Wednesday morning when I blew in, there was Mike Drennan and Garry chatting. I mean Garry was making a speech. Mike was just listening in.

"Yep," Garry was saying. "You've got to be a regular harpy. Grab his food away when you think he's had enough."

"He sure can hit the ball when he's well," Mike agreed.

I was bad news around there, terrible. I excused myself to Mike, pulling Garry into the other room. I told him that Jake was crippled in his bread-basket again. What a noise our manager made!

"Don't blame me," I retorted. "I'm with him every hour. I made him stick to those calories like wall-paper sticks to the wall."

"He's sneaking food on the side," stormed Garry. "What moments of the 24 is he out of your sight?"

"None," I said. "Well, I admit he goes for a short stroll sometimes before retiring."

"That's it," yowled Garry. "He rabbits off to some ice-cream dive, or maybe beer! He's got that Dutch ancestral taint."

MIKE DRENNAN stayed around for two days, and even dropped in to see for himself whether Jake was really sick in bed. Mike was responsible whether or not the Athletics spent their important dough. If Mike bought Jake and Jake turned out to be a bust, Mike was to blame. If he didn't buy Jake and Jake turned out great, Mike was still to blame.

The fourth day Jake staggered to the ball park. Garry wouldn't even talk to him and kept him out of the lineup. Jake stayed home that night, but the next evening he gave a groan and went out.

By a pre-arrangement, Garry was lurking in the cigar-store at the corner. We followed Jake about eight blocks, till he turned into a place. The electric sign over the entrance sparkled with the message, "Otto's Steaks, the Best in Town."

"See what a viper we been nursing," growled Garry, hoarsely. "We'll wait outside about fifteen minutes, until his steak is right there on the table. Then we'll push in and surround him. Catch him redhanded and sock him."

When we went in, the restaurant was entirely empty except for a waiter. It was about 10 o'clock, too late for dinner and too early for the after-movies trade.

"He must be in here," I remarked. "He never came out."

"He spotted us and snuck out the rear," snarled Garry. "I told you to stand back further."

The waiter approached cautiously.

"We don't want food," barked Garry. "We're after—did you see anything of a square-headed, dish-faced, dumb-lookin' Dutch stevedore around here tonight?"

The waiter shook his head.

"Let's go," said Garry. "Tomorrow night we'll tread right on his heels——"

Just then an argument broke out behind the scenes. Garry grabbed me and we charged back into the kitchen. Jake had his back to us. The other fellow, Otto himself, stopped bellowing and reached for a knife.

"Get your hat and put on your coat!" thundered Garry. Jake jumped as if a gun had gone off in his ear, then followed us out like a lamb. Otto was struck dumb. We left him standing there with his mouth hanging open and his eyebrows dancing.

If Jake was smart he could maybe have talked himself innocent, because we didn't catch him with the goods, exactly. But Garry third-degreed him and he confessed that he had noticed a sign how Otto needed an assistant cook for night duty. Being hungry, Jake decided he would take the job just to be near food, his fairy temptress, so to speak, and thus steel himself against the dread lure.

But he decided to have just one little nip of steak before retiring, and of course after that he skidded right into full steak suppers every evening. He had learned to wiggle a wicket skillet back home, and now he ranked high with Otto, so much so that they had fights every night on the best way to hash and brown potatoes and inside stuff like that.

NEXT day in the clubhouse, Garry proceeded to fry Jake in the presence of the entire cast, as follows: "Fined fifty bucks and suspended indefinitely for flagrant violations of discipline and breach of training rules, namely, staying out late at night and dissipating."

Jake didn't plead guilty, not guilty, or anything else. I took him out for a breath of air.

"If I was you," I stated, "I would jump to the outlaws. Garry says your suspension won't get lifted until Dr. Bufflight pronounces you cured. That bird doctor is so cagey, if I know anything about doctors, that he won't take a chance calling you well for about two years. And two years of that humming bird diet will make you fit for nothing but the grave-yard, if I know anything about Dutchmen. These outlaws will pay you good—not as much as this club, but pretty good—to hit home runs about twice a week, thus giving you leisure to eat yourself into a stupor every once in a while."

"Chee viz, I don't know. My old man he's got a payment on a mogridge next week after. My payday wuz going to do for it, but now I won't have no payday."

"Let your old man finance his own feed-store. You're in a jam and you got to take care of yourself."

"No. I kess I go home and help out arount the store. Help him move himself out in the street when they sell him over his head."

You can't argue with Jake.

"I'll fix your board for another week," I said. "Stick around and eat yourself happy before you go home."

That night the Ruins left town on a long trip. I didn't see Jake after the game. We had to rush right to the depot from the ball yard.

About ten days later, Garry got a letter from home with a clipping out of Horace Wingstaff's paper. The clipping was headlined:

JAKE KRAUDER NOW
'KRAUDING' PLATES

Suspended Home Run Slugger of Ruins Ekes Living in Uptown Cafe

VICTIM OF IRON HAND

Fence-buster Denies Charges of Dissipation

Painting Town Red, and other Alleged Offenses

The article stated that Jake indignantly denied reports that he had been drinking and carousing. It pictured the boy as a hero, persecuted by those higher up, probably because of jealousy. It quoted the hero as saying, "Garry fired me because I had to eat. If I didn't eat, I was weak and couldn't hit them. So what good was I? I had to have my strength, but Garry got mad and now I have to get another job, so I kept the one I had of cooking for Otto."

YOU should have heard Garry. Horace Wingstaff, back home writing up a golf tournament must have wondered why his ears were so red. Two weeks later we pulled into the home town depot. First thing we saw was a great big sign in the station, a billboard with nothing on it but letters a yard high, dark blue against a yellow background, proclaiming, "FOLLOW THE CROWD TO KRAUDER'S."

"That was never there before," said Wally Dunn.

"I'll bet that's Jake," I said.

"I *know* it's Horace Wingstaff," said Garry.

On the way home I saw other signs on billboards here and there, saying, "LET KRAUDER CROWD *YOUR* PLATE," "JAKE'S FOR STEAKS," EAT AT BIG JAKE'S," "KRAUDER BATS 300 STEAKS EVERY DAY."

My landlady had not seen Jake for about two weeks. The next sign I saw of him was in the ball park next morning—a great big portrait of Jake on the rightfield fence, just the way he used to grin when the opposition pitcher was fighting against the temptation to throw the ball down his throat. The artist had played up Jake's rosy cheeks and big blue eyes so strong that at first I thought it just another schoolgirl complexion ad.

Jake was dressed as a chef, with a round white hat. In his right hand he held up a frying pan with a thick red steak. The slogan read: "LET ME CROWD *YOUR* PLATE. I'LL SEE YOU TONIGHT AT THE SIGN OF THE KRAUDER PLATE."

Garry couldn't understand how Borgman allowed that in his ball park, but he found out. Seems that Wingstaff had bid for the advertising rights to that spot and Borgman thought it was for Horace's newspapers. Later he learned that Horace had signed up some big-money man to back Jake in this downtown restaurant venture, which was going great guns. Jake was turning them away. The big business men, also the medium-sized and the midgets, went there for lunch. In the evening it was a hang-out for fans who wanted to

talk and listen to the latest sports jabber.

Our first game home was the first unveiling of Jake's rightfield fence portrait to the public. Every time anybody struck out, the wolves all over the park yelled, "Put Krauder in!"

Garry and I went down to Jake's that evening. It was like a theatre. From your table you could see Jake toddling to and fro on the elevated stage at the back, prodding the steaks and chops. Those fans sure got a kick out of seeing the home run hero culinary-izing.

Garry wore a frown fit for a State steak inspector. Jake dropped his fork and came down to our table.

"Hello, Garry," he greeted. "Hello, Strink! Klad to see you."

WE SHOOK hands. Sensation all over the chowhouse. Fans' eyes popping and forks suspended in mid-air. Manager and outlaw confabbing!

"Ve're doing fine here," bubbled Jake, "Horace Vingstuff——"

"I know," said Garry. "See here, Jake, you're reinstated. Be out there tomorrow morning in uniform."

"Chee viz, I can't! the place is too busy here."

"Can't? Listen, bozo, if you're not out there to play against the Pugs tomorrow, I'll have Judge Landis bar you from baseball for life. Do you think I'm fooling?"

"Holy cat," I burst out. "Don't you want to play? I thought you was one Lithuanian that loved base hits almost as good as food."

Jake's face cleared up.

"I go out in the playgrounds every afternoon and hit some viss the Independents," he volunteered.

"That settles it," pronounced Garry, rising. "It was all right for you to do that if you were keeping in shape for reinstatement. But if you refuse to report, that counts as blacklist evidence, see? You'll be fired forever out of organized base ball."

Garry phoned around to the newspapers, including Wingstaff's, with the announcement of Jake's reinstatement. The peace conference met in the clubhouse next morning. Wingstaff surrendered. Jake's hold on the public was his role of wronged hero. If he should refuse to step up and hit home runs, especially with the Pugs in town, bang, went his hero title and probably his restaurant.

Wingstaff flung himself on Garry's mercy and hit a rock. He begged Garry to give the kid a week to get back into shape.

"We'll shape him," growled Garry. "Tonight he moves back to String's place. We got his diet list ready for him. He likewise goes to bed every night by 11 o'clock P. M. We'll get that lard off of him if it takes all summer."

Knowing baseball fans as I do, after sixteen years of baseball—three in the major leagues, and the rest down here—I was not surprised at the way the tide of sentiment turned against Jake. In the first place the fans were sick because we came home in the cellar. Starting our trip we were a bad fifth. Without Jake's base hits we were just a portable doormat all around the league. All the home teams wiped their feet on us and kicked us downstairs.

But the fans came out in numbers that afternoon just because we were playing the Pugs, and because Jake was going to be in the line-up again. Somehow we always gave the Pugs a better battle than we did the other clubs, and that's the main fun our fans have had in recent years.

So when Jake flopped, the howls of the wolves rose to high heaven. He struck out three times and it was one of those days when the important hits against us seemed to shoot to right field exclusively. Jake never could field, and with his 20 extra pounds, he went after the flies and grounders that day like a soused washerwoman trying to fight imaginary clothes-pins.

CY SMITH pitched for the Pugs, and I don't see yet how Jake missed getting killed. Cy hated Jake because Jake

was one batter in the league Cy could not pitch bean-balls to. Cy is a righthand cross-fire pitcher. His best bet is driving back the righthand hitters with skull-bullets. Since a bean-ball was Jake's groove, Cy had nursed animosity against him all season. Now he got even.

Cy knew Jake was out of shape, and after a few cautious tests, he threw Jake all the skull-splitting stuff he had. I held my breath every time Cy doubled up and fired that cannonball. Jake foul-tipped a lot of them and missed the rest. They all fortunately missed his chin, but I expected Jake to pull up with pneumonia from the draught.

Next day "Slapper" Corkran took Jake's place in the line-up, but Garry made Jake go out to rightfield with Slapper in fielding practice. The wolves in the bleachers back of the foul-line, of course, got after Jake.

"Hey, Slapper, what time does that balloon go up?"

"Git hit in the head with a fly, bean-belly!"

"Jake's a mistake!"

And such as that. Jake hid himself in a corner of the bench. The wolves forgot him when the game got good. We lost out in the eleventh, but we made them hustle. Next day the same performance except that we won the game, 3 to 1, Lefty Burger having a lovely afternoon teasing the Pug sluggers with slow stuff.

Jake was so weak he could hardly totter off the field after practice the morning of the last game. Tears came to my eyes as I watched him eating a sprig of lettuce and a raisin at lunch.

"Look here," I said, "I'm supposed to be your trainer and here is my orders. You go right upstairs and get a good long sleep this afternoon, see. Tonight, regardless of anything, you can have the biggest widest meal of steak and everything else. You need a friend and I'm it."

He went upstairs and I left for the ball-yard. Two hours later, in the third inning, there was Jake hunched back in a corner of our bench, in uniform, but keeping very quiet. He must have slid in while we were out in the field.

"Didn't I tell you to go to bed?" I demanded, in low tones, so Garry wouldn't hear. "I told Garry you fainted on the way to the park."

Jake started to stammer, but Garry looked around and froze him. It was my turn to hit, so I didn't get any answer until later. I forgot Jake, really. I was that kind of a game. The Pugs were neck and neck with the Owls for first place. They needed that game. Our fans and ourselves were bearing down hard, but going into the last of the ninth they had us beat, 2 to 0.

WE HAD made just four hits in eight innings off "Lefty" Jensen. Trimmer opened up the last ditch inning for us with our fifth hit, a pop-fly single to center. Our wolves bleated. It was our pitcher's turn to hit, which meant that a pinchhitter was the right move. Out of the dark corner came stumbling Jake Krauder.

"Let me hit vun, Carry, huh?"

"Get back there," snarled Garry. "You're through hitting in this league. You set us back plenty dough, you big ham! Wally, go up there and bat for Kilroy."

Wally Dunn always looked like a good hitter, even if his average didn't show it. Wildness was Lefty Jensen's main trouble, and after working a very steady game, he picked this minute to wobble. Wally received a base on balls.

That brought me up. The fans gave me a great reception. I pushed out my wishbone and tried to look as tough as Wally. But I guess I didn't fool Lefty. He gave me the first one right through the middle. I wanted a base on balls, too, but after I let that one go by I decided Lefty must have got back his control.

So I went after the next pitch. The Pugs expected me to bunt. Bill Hipple, their firstbaseman, came rushing in at me, intending to make a play to third base. I swung on the ball and punched it past him. If Hip had stayed back, that thing I hit would have been a perfect double play grounder.

As it was, Hip reached for it with his glove and knocked it to one side. Before he could go after it and get hold of it, I was safe on first base, Trimmer had

reached third and Wally Dunn was anchored at second.

That made it a real rally. Bases full. Nobody out. You should have heard those wolves. It looked sure enough, like our side snatching victory out of the jaws of defeat in the well known and justly celebrated manner. It took just a nice single, now, to tie the score. Two singles, or one long two-bagger, would be enough to win the game quick and neat.

Dugan, the Pug manager, came out of his hole and threw a life preserver to Lefty Jensen. Three Pug pitchers were warming up, but the one that picked up his sweater and came marching from the bullpen to save the day was nobody but Cy Smith, their ace.

Maybe you've seen Cy, with his terrific fireball which comes at the batter out of shortstop. Believe me he had his stuff with him for the pinch, too. From first base it was pitiful to watch Amos Debuck and Joe Sullivan backing away. Debuck struck out and Sullivan poked up a little foul fly to the catcher. Two out!

Every pitch made our fans die out loud. When Sullivan folded up, I kissed the game good-by, because Slapper Corkran, batting fourth, had not hit even a foul all afternoon and so far as I recollect he had not made a hit off Cy Smith all season.

I SAW some kind of an argument on our bench, over back of third base. Jake was standing in front of Garry waving fingers in the manager's face. Slapper was on his way to the plate with a bat. Garry barked and Slapper turned back willingly. Out came Jake, with his little black tomahawk under his arm.

"Murder!" I yelled to old Pete Parsons, who was coaching at first base. "Don't let that kid get up there. He's weak as a cat. Cy'll kill him. Go make Garry take him out."

Pete squirted some tobacco juice and turned his back on me. I raved at Garry for taking out his spite this way. Garry maybe had a right to be sore at the nice piece of Athletics' money he was not going to get, but there's a limit to what constitutes decent revenge.

The sight of Krauder brought a sound in that ball park I never heard before. I thought I had heard them all, too. The fans did not cheer and they did not exactly hoot. It was a sound as if this 20,000 headed monster was getting kidded, and knew it. Sounded like the monster was crouching and getting ready to surge out and swallow up everything in its way.

Hipple was over whispering with Cy. Cy laughed and held up the ball for Jake to see.

"Did you tell Cy the Dutchman's sick?" I demanded when Hipple came back to the bag. Hip merely grunted.

All I could think of to do was to howl and yell at Cy, so as maybe to distract his mind a little. He never looked over, just took his full wind-up and fired the ball like a cannon right square at Jake's head.

I froze stiff. In that hundredth of a second, as Cy turned loose that brain-bruiser, my mind's eye already saw Jake's head knocked around backwards. But with my real eyes I saw Jake's shoulders whirl with all the old power, and that little fat bat met the ball half-way, it seemed like.

What a shock it gave me, standing there expecting to see Jake go down spinning like a ten-pin. Right back at Cy shot that ball, twice as fast as it started for the plate. A regular Krauder clout, a low line drive.

Cy ducked, but the ball nicked his shoulder and gave him a good blister, I bet, before it streaked way out through right-centrefield. I galloped those three bases in nothing, flat. Trimmer and Wally Dunn scored standing up. I had to hit the dirt. My slide beat the throw, and when I spiked home plate, the score became 3 to 2, and the game automatically ended. Victory!

I JUMPED up and looked around for Jake. He was flat on his back along the baseline between first and second, flat but

flopping. From all directions the wolves were charging down on him. I got there just before they hoisted him up for his triumphal shoulder-ride to the clubhouse.

"You great big million-dollar assassin," I yelled, above the pandemonium, "Hurry up and get your breath. You got to guzzle 96,000,000 calories on one platter as soon as you can lift a fork."

As they hauled him away his face was tragic. I kept close to him for a few yards. He bleated:

"Chee viz, I'm zick, Strink. You said I was through, so I shust vent down by my place and ett myself full up. Now I ran myself sick again, now Carry maybe vill placklist me viss Landis."

The wolves set him down at the clubhouse door. I helped him to the rubbing table and stretched him out. In came Garry, with Mike Drennan one step behind. Garry was grinning as wide as the grand canyon.

"The deal is on," announced Garry. "You're sold to the Athletics, big fellow. Mike Drennan wants to talk to you."

"Assaledigs?" exclaimed Jake. "No I vant to stay viss the Pruins."

"Oh, no," said Mike. "Connie Mack needs you, even if you are only a part-time ballplayer. We'll get a team of mules and a rolling chair to haul you to home plate to get one of those hits when we need it. You're our pinchhitter from now on."

Jake blinked at Mike, then at Garry.

"I'm a part-time, yes," he sputtered, his words falling all over themselves in his anxiety to make himself understood. "See, I got me a guntract which I must stay by the restaround twelve munce of the years, exception that the guntract allows me time off from the restaround any time I vunt to go out and hit some for the Pruins here or ven ve take a drip outatown. See? It's a guntract signed up viss me and Horace Vingstuff viss a lawyer's office—fife years guntract. And say—" here he hoisted himself up from the table and waved his hands— "the cooking salary, mind, viss-out vot I get paid for baseball, batting the cook salary by himself in the guntract he lifts all my vahder's mogridges gradually completely up. So I gotta stay here."

No, Borgman won't sell Jake. He can't. So he lets Jake come out and bat for the Bruins any time Jake wants to, which, I fancy, will average about 60 days a season. And the only thing our fans are afraid of is that some year some big league club will need a part-time pinchhitter so bad that they'll pay a hundred thousand snorts just to padlock "The Crowded Plate" and kidnap the chief cook.

TOLL OF THE FOREST

By CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS

Author of "The Ridin' Fool," "The Bust-Up," etc.

WAS RANCHER WARE IN HIS RIGHT MIND WHEN HE REFUSED TO FIGHT A FOREST FIRE TO SAVE CATTLE? AND WHO SET THAT FIRE? WAS IT WARE? BEFORE THE ANSWER CAME, FIERY FURNACES OF DEATH HAD TO BE FACED. THE RAGING FLAMES, IN FACT, WERE MADE INTO ALLIES

Chapter I

FLAMES

AS COMPTON swung his horse up to the gate leading to the Bar A ranch-house, there was no one in sight. He glanced at the gate and found it was secured by a board thrust through its frame and into another frame attached to a post. Also wire was wound around the gate frame and the post. He didn't stop to wonder why the gate was so stoutly fastened.

He slipped down and went over the gate lightly. Then he began to run awkwardly toward the house. Before he came to it, he rounded a shed with an open front. The front was toward the house, so that a side wall had been presented to him as he ran. Glancing into the interior of the shed, he saw Ware sitting there. He stopped, for his haste had been caused by his wish to find Ware.

Compton opened his lips to speak, but when Ware suddenly looked up at him the words were checked. Compton and Ware were about the same age. They had been boys together on different ranches in Juniper Valley, but they had never got along together. They had been formed in different molds.

Compton was a mixer. The valley lay between two towns and in the heart of a national forest. Compton had friends all through the valley and in the two towns, even in that town which was now populated by descendants of miners. Ware stood well enough as a citizen, but Compton did not believe he had a real friend.

The two men had inherited ranches, Compton two thousand acres and Ware fifteen hundred. They ran their cattle in the national forest in summer, both having priority rights for a certain number of head.

Ware rarely smiled. Now he looked as if it would be impossible for a smile to come to his lips. Those lips were hard, and there was a sort of smoldering light in Ware's dark eyes. His hat lay beside him on a bench and in his lap was a bridle which he had been mending. Compton could not guess why Ware's right hand suddenly clutched the bridle so tightly that the knuckles turned white. The man looked as if he might break out in fury at slight provocation.

Excitement had been running lightly

through Compton when he had come here. It had made his blue eyes bluer than ever and had brought a deeper flush to his sunburned cheeks. The day was hot.

Compton had come here with a message for Ware, and of course he was going to deliver it. Compton was not a belligerent man but now he was conscious that he would rather enjoy a scrap with Ware.

Ware's glare was insolent enough, but his succeeding action was more so. He let his eyes rest on Compton's face for a minute, and then he turned them down to the bridle. He seemed to be dismissing Compton, as if Compton could have nothing important to say to him. Compton felt as if he were a small boy come into the presence of an important personage.

WELL, perhaps this fella Ware thought he would run along, dismissed by a scornful look. He wouldn't. He could stand there and regard Ware just as long as Ware could regard the bridle. Ware made no movement toward continuing his work on the bridle. He just sat there looking at it. That brought Compton's temper a degree higher.

Compton standing still, Ware sitting as he had been, even his fingers unmoving, the two men kept their positions for perhaps three minutes. At the end of that time Ware looked up.

"What do you want?" Ware asked.

His voice was low and a little thick. The frown between his eyes increased. A dark look settled over his entire face, making the face very unpleasant. Compton did not immediately answer. Ware's voice had not been the voice merely of an illtempered man. It had been the hard voice of a man stirred by something out of the ordinary.

"Why," Compton answered spiritedly, "I don't know as I want anything."

Ware permitted himself to smile at that. It was not, however, a pleasant smile. It was a mere twisting of his lips. It did not relieve the bleak look in his eyes. Compton took that smile as a personal thing. He thought he was being derided, and a lighthearted youngster is not fond of derision, especially from a man whom he dislikes.

"What are you doin' here then?" asked Ware.

Compton was sure that Ware was provoking him to a quarrel now. The ranches of the two men were only a short distance apart. Though the men did not get on together, they helped each other in busy seasons. Only recently Compton had been on this ranch to assist Ware in getting his hay into the stacks. Ware had similarly assisted him. This fall they would help each other drive their cattle to the shipping point. Those matters came within the scope of ranch routine. They were not to be avoided. But there the intercourse of the two men ceased. Compton had not been here socially since he had been a boy. Therefore Ware must know that he had come on business. Yet Ware could ask an insolent question, indicating that Compton had no reason to come here at all.

"Kennedy asked me to come," Compton stated.

Kennedy was in charge of the ranger station five miles away. Once or twice in a season, though he had a force of his own, he was compelled to call on the ranchmen for assistance in fighting fires. Since the ranchmen all ran cattle in the forest, the interests of the rangers and the ranchmen were tied up together. Therefore he thought his statement that Kennedy had sent him would be sufficient to enlist Ware. It was not!

"I know there is a fire up in the forest," Ware said. "I ain't blind. I seen the flames and the smoke last night."

Compton had seen the flames and the smoke, too, and he had hastened to get into touch with Kennedy. Kennedy had

said he was sure his men could hold the fire through the night, but he had asked Compton to notify a number of men in the valley, including Ware, to be on hand in the morning. Of these Ware was the last to be notified. Compton had supposed that he

and Ware would ride on to the fire together.

Ware must have known that Kennedy would need help. Yet here he was at home with nothing more important to do than to mend an old bridle! Compton was frankly puzzled. Ware was carrying his ill-temper further than he had ever carried it before. He was proving himself delinquent in the protection of common property.

"Kennedy expects you to come up there," Compton said.

"I know what Kennedy expects," Ware retorted. "I don't need to be told. I ain't goin'. If you want to fight fires, run right along."

"Oh, you want me to fight *your* battle for you, do you?"

"*My* battle? How do you figger it is *my* battle?"

COMPTON took off his hat and belatedly wiped his wet forehead with a red handkerchief. He was a puzzled young man. He wondered if Ware had lost his mind. Boy and man, he had always been a funny cuss. As funny cusses sometimes do, he had won the nicest girl Compton had ever met. They had been married that spring. For a while Ware had seemed more like a human being than he had ever seemed. Later, however, he had become moodier than ever. Now Compton questioned whether that moodiness had not grown into downright insanity.

Compton was wearing a gun, and he was glad of it. Men usually wore guns into the forest. In times of fire the wild animals had to scurry for their lives, and a fella couldn't tell when he might meet up with one. If Ware were crazy, Compton felt he might have to hold him at bay with a gun.

Compton shivered when he thought that Ware might harm his wife. If he didn't harm her, she would be bereaved by his insanity. Compton was a chivalrous youngster, and all of a sudden he forgot his animosity toward Ware. He thought only of Ware's wife.

Ware certainly had asked a crazy question. He had cattle in the forest. No man could tell how a fire might spread. Any number of cattle might be trapped, Ware's along with the rest.

"You might lose some cattle up there, Ware," Compton said patiently.

Ware did not immediately retort to that. He rose and cast the bridle on the bench. Then he walked to the front of the shed. He wore no hat, and the bright, near-autumn sunlight beat strongly on his face. Compton was shocked at what that sunlight revealed. There were lines in Ware's face, such lines as Compton would not have expected to see in the face of a man twice Ware's age.

"You sick, Ware?" he asked.

A sneer again twisted Ware's lips.

"Hell, no!" he answered. "Never felt better in my life. I ain't sick. And I ain't got no cattle in the forest."

Compton was more confused than ever. Ware had not answered his question as a crazy man would answer it. He had understood the question perfectly, and his answer had been direct. Yet he had cattle in the forest. He had taken advantage, that spring, of his priority right, to the limit. Compton knew that. He had helped drive the cattle from the winter pastures on the ranch up into the forest.

"I don't know what you are drivin' at, Ware," he said. "What's become of your cattle?"

"Sold 'em!"

YEAH, the man was out of his mind. Sold 'em? Why, that herd hadn't been made up of stuff that a man would sell. There were young cows in it and yearlings that Ware would not want to turn off yet. Compton didn't know what to say now. He wondered if he could coax Ware to take a ride with him. He might get him to town to a doctor.

"What do you say we take a little ride, Ware?" he said.

"Ride? I tell you I'm not goin' up into the forest. All the cattle I own are right out there around that haystack. I'm goin' to sell them, too. As a cowman, I am not!"

Compton, in amazement, looked out across the flat hayfield from which the hay, now in stacks, had been cut a while ago. There were perhaps fifty head of cattle out there grazing on the stubble. And those were all the cattle Ware owned, according to his statement. Compton felt sweat break

out anew under his hat. Gosh, he was going to have a time handling Ware. The man had forgotten what his belongings were. Any minute now he might become violent.

Compton then became aware that the house behind him had been very quiet all the time he had been here. Where was Ware's wife? Perhaps Ware had had a violent spell this morning. Perhaps he had harmed that fine young woman. That might already be a house of death. Compton shivered.

"You cold?" Ware asked.

Compton looked at him quickly. Ware was grinning now. It was a sickish grin, though. There was no mirth in it. A madman's grin, Compton feared.

"No," Compton answered. "Ware, is your wife in the house?"

"She ain't at home. She has gone away."

That, Compton decided, was just what a crazy man would say if he had harmed his wife. He would conceal what he had done.

"Gone away?"

"Gone to her home," Ware said impatiently. "She won't be home for a while."

"Ware, let's go to town."

Ware started now. He looked as if he thought Compton had gone a little off his head."

"Go to town?" he repeated. "Why, I thought you was goin' up to help fight that fire."

"Oh, I guess the fire will take care of itself. Let's go to town."

"Why?"

"Just for fun."

"Fun?" Ware breathed. "God, if there is any fun in this world, I dunno where it is."

Then as if he were ashamed of his outbreak, he turned abruptly and walked around the shed. Compton moved so that he could watch him, and he saw him enter the small barn. Compton stood stockstill. He was a puzzled young man. He did not know what to do about Ware. The man ought not to be left alone.

HE STOOD in thought for several minutes. Then there was a sound behind him. At first he did not know what it was. Then he decided that it was a footfall. It was too light a footfall for a man's. Then it must be Mrs. Ware's. So she was here? She hadn't left. Decidedly Ware was crazy, he didn't know where his wife of half a dozen months was.

Compton turned slowly. He wondered if Mrs. Ware would know what had happened to her husband. If she did, she would doubtless appeal to Compton for aid. He would have to take Ware prisoner. That might be a messy job.

He turned and looked straight into a pair of violet-gray eyes, such eyes exactly as Mrs. Ware had. But then his eyes went over the girl's face, and he knew she was not Mrs. Ware. She was, however, as like Mrs. Ware as a girl could be and still be someone else. No, she was younger. Why she couldn't be more than eighteen. And pretty! Gray eyes, brown, short, finely spun hair, high color, red mouth, straight little nose. Gosh, young Compton was bewildered and dazzled, and that is likely to leave almost any man speechless. It left Compton so. He even forgot to take off his hat. He just stood there and frankly stared.

Well, she had a good deal of composure. She did not smile. In fact her face was very grave.

"You are Mr. Compton?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I've heard Mr. Ware speak about you. I am Mrs. Ware's sister. My sister isn't at home."

Maybe Ware wasn't crazy after all. One statement he had made was founded on fact anyhow. The sister most decidedly was not at home. This girl knew what she was talking about.

"How bad is the forest fire?" she asked.

He looked off toward the west. The volume of smoke, gray-white, was about as it had been. There was now and then a leap of flame.

"Still burnin'," he said.

"Will it burn over a wide area?"

"You never can tell what a fire will do, ma'am."

"Are you goin' up there?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Wait a minute."

She walked over to the stable and disappeared within it. When she came out, she was mounted on one of Ware's horses. Ware came to the door behind her and merely stood there. Compton had a notion that he had not even asked her where she was going. She spurred the horse up to Compton.

"Where's your horse?" she asked.

Compton was looking up into her face. He was aware of the small white teeth back of her red lips, of her gray eyes, of her square chin. Gosh, yes, her chin was square. Very likely she was a fightin' girl. Well, her chin wasn't heavy. It was a neat little chin.

"Where's your horse?" she asked.

"Oh, outside the gate, ma'am."

"Come along then."

BEFORE he could say anything, she spurred the horse past him and swept up to the gate. He ran after her and opened the gate. He closed the gate and hopped his horse.

"What's that wire on the gate for?" he asked.

"Ware put it there," she said. "He said he was going to put up a sign, 'Bar A ranch closed'; but he didn't."

"Is he—er—all right, ma'am?"

"All right? Why, yes. But worried and sad."

"Has he sold his cattle except the few in that field?"

"Yes."

Compton asked no more questions along that line. He wouldn't have asked those except to establish whether Ware was crazy or not. Ware wasn't crazy.

They loped for a mile till they came to the main road. In one direction it led into the forest. In the other it wound its way over the hills to town. Compton expected the girl would turn toward town. He stopped his horse.

"Well, good-by, ma'am," he said.

"Good-by? Why, I'm going with you."

"You can't, ma'am. There is some danger in fightin' a forest fire."

"Somebody has got to turn out from the Bar A ranch," she said. "Ware won't do it. I will. Ride, Compton. Don't mind me. I'll be right with you!"

Compton looked at her in dismay. He knew he could turn her back only by the use of force. He couldn't use force. What'd he do? Well, he would take her as far as the ranger station. Then he might be able to turn her over to Mrs. Kennedy.

Secretly he applauded her. Spirited girl, pretty girl, game girl. No more could be required of any girl. Compton's heart fluttered as he rode with her. This here matter of fallin' in love, now——

CHAPTER II

STUBBORN

THEY crossed the head of the valley swiftly and came at once to the beginning of the mountains. The road shelved up and became a bench. They had to slow their horses. On one side of them was the mountain wall, growing higher and higher, and on the other was a drop which would presently become a canyon.

Compton now and then stole a look at the girl. She seemed oblivious of him, lost in her own thoughts.

After a while they came to a mountain meadow. Now there was a slight smell of smoke in the air. The odor was carried along by a faint breeze. Compton hoped the wind would not rise.

HE TURNED to the girl. There must have been something definite in his turning, for she instantly looked at him. There was a question in her eyes, and he felt, queerly, that the answer to the question was right behind it. However, he had to do what he could.

"The ranger station is just beyond us, ma'am," he said. "We will turn in there."

"Why lose time?" she asked.

"Well, mebbe Kennedy has sent some word there."

"Oh."

It was no use, he saw, to try to deceive her. She was not dumb. Of course that was an added attraction in her, but it was

inconvenient just now.

"Did Ware say anything about you comin' along?" he asked.

"No. I suppose he thought I was going for a ride. We are all rather restless at the Bar A now."

He could not ask the cause of their restlessness. They rode in silence and presently rounded a bend in the road. The ranger station stood among a cluster of pines to their left. Compton headed in toward it and the girl followed him.

Mrs. Kennedy came to the door. She said there was no word from Kennedy. She looked beyond Compton to the girl, but she made no comment on the girl's being there.

Compton went back to his horse. That smell of smoke was more definite now, and he was sure the breeze had freshened. There was nothing to prevent this being one of the worst fires the forest had known. He voiced that to the girl.

"Perhaps it will," she said. "In that case everybody will be needed. I may be able to do something. Anyhow I sha'n't get in your way."

"I didn't mean that, ma'am," he protested.

"My name is Grace Dwight," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

They followed the twisting road for three miles or so. Compton could see that it had been traveled that day. There were the marks of the cars which the forest men used, of other cars carrying ranchmen, and the hoofprints of a number of horses. It looked as if about everybody in the valley had gone up to the fire.

Ware was practically alone down there!

At the end of another mile the fire was opposite them. The smoke was definitely in the air now; they could smell it and see it. Sometimes it seemed merely to hang. Again it was eddied away by the breeze. That breeze, Compton was sure, was no stronger than it had been when they had been at the station.

"We will have to turn off here," he said.

He turned off and she quietly followed him. He saw that she was not disturbed by the nearness of the fire. Only her gray eyes lighted up a little. Gosh, she was as ready as any man for the battle.

THE going was flat for a while. The pines grew far apart, so that the sunlight streamed down on them. Now the breeze seemed to have died, and there was a kind of suffocating stillness in the air. They went on a little way and they could then hear the crackle of the flames.

"Near?" she asked.

"Not very," he answered. "It'll be hotter than this."

He hoped for any little sign of dismay, but there was none. Well, he would let her go on for another quarter of a mile and then he would see if he could not impress her with her danger. Before they had gone that distance the crackle of the fire had become a subdued roar. They could see the flames above the trees, and charred particles began to fall near them. In the next hundred yards there was a shower of these. The air was thick with gray-white smoke. It smarted Compton's own eyes, and he was sure it must smart hers more.

He reflected that he did not know where she had come from, except that it was in a southern part of the state. Ware had somehow met the girl he had married down there. This girl might live on the lower plains. A forest fire might be new to her. She might not realize how dangerous it could become. He spoke of that.

"I have never seen a forest fire," she said simply. "It makes no difference."

He stopped his horse.

"Ma'am," said Compton firmly, "you can't go no further."

"Who's to stop me from goin' no further?" she demanded.

Making fun of his speech, was she? Well, that didn't matter. He could stand for it, so long as he got her started back toward the ranger station.

"I am helpless, o' course, unless I can persuade you," he said. "But it is no place for a girl. I will just have to watch you."

"You won't have to watch me. What will there be to do?"

"I dunno. Diggin' some trenches mebbe.

Startin' backfires. Whippin' the blaze back any way we can, confinin' it to where it is till we get it licked."

"I can dig, start and whip," she said. "Let's get on."

"Ma'am," he said, "what are them fellas goin' to say to me when I bring a girl in there? I will be a joke for years to come."

"You know they won't say anything," she declared. "They will be too busy, for one thing; for another they wouldn't make fun of you about a girl. They would know you didn't *bring* me in."

"They will say I could have stopped you."

"Tell any of them to stop me."

SHE was stubborn and she was something else, just what he couldn't exactly say. She appeared to want action, for one thing. Perhaps there was something in her mind that she wanted to blot out of it for a while. Perhaps, again, that something was related to Ware's trouble.

"I'm askin' you: please go back, ma'am," he said.

"Compton, I can't. I am so ashamed—ashamed of what Ware did this morning in refusing to come here—ashamed of—of everything!"

Her big gray eyes were suddenly bright with tears. One shining drop rolled down her cheek. Compton thought he felt about as he would have felt if someone had plunged a knife into his heart. For the first time in his twenty-six years, he realized, he knew pain. Yet he could do nothing. He thought she would be better pleased if he did not seem to notice. So he gave her a minute or two.

At the end of that time she shook her head.

"Let's go on," she said in a muffled voice.

He put his horse ahead of hers and they went on. In five minutes the smoke was thick. He looked back at her. She had placed her handkerchief over her mouth and nose, but she nodded to him not to stop. They went on a little way more. Then the smoke suddenly lessened. They were very near the fire. The smoke had risen and then in the absence of breeze had dropped down like a gray-white curtain back there.

Their way led upward now. They came to a comparatively bald summit. The sound of the fire was below them. At a signal from Compton they dismounted.

They were walking side by side and they had not taken five steps before the girl edged up to Compton and took his hand. He had all he could do to keep a sudden startled breath from escaping his lips. He glanced at her, but she was not looking at him. Her eyes were on the edge of a ravine now revealed to them. He saw that her action had been involuntary. She seemed almost unaware that she was clasping his hand.

They took only a few more steps and were looking down into the ravine. It was a furnace. Just below them the fire was burning vigorously among the underbrush and the small trees. To their left, it seemed to have burned itself out. Fifty feet to their right, which was as far as they could see, the flames swept on. Compton knew that the fight should be taken up now at the right end of the ravine. Perhaps three hundred feet from where he and the girl stood the ravine ended in a slope to the level ground. Just there the trees were thicker. It was stalwart timber and the fire would rage if it got in among those trees. He wondered where Kennedy and the other men were.

THE girl stood as if fascinated by the sight of the fire below her. Her eyes were wide, but he believed they were not wide from alarm. She was only beholding a spectacle which she had not viewed before. The fire suddenly ate into new brush and trees at their right and there was a quick rising of that white-gray smoke; it enveloped the man and the girl. Compton drew the girl back, and his pressure on her hand seemed to make her aware that

the hand had been in his. She withdrew it, but without confusion.

Immediately there was a sound to their

left. Half a dozen men came into view, running. Their faces were black and sweating. They crossed the bald spot on a run. They paid little attention to Compton and the girl. He was sure they were so intent on their work that they did not realize that one of those two persons was a girl.

Compton saw that they had diagnosed the situation as he had done. The fire was being held to the left and they were hastening to the right to stop its progress in that direction. Doggone it, what should he do? That place over there might soon become an inferno. He couldn't drag this girl into it.

His question was answered by the sudden appearance of Kennedy from among the trees. Kennedy, as usual, had been in the forefront of the fire fighting, and his face was smudged. Rivulets of sweat were running down through the smudge. His shirt was open at the neck, revealing the beginning of a hairy chest. His overalls were torn, and there were holes in them where they had ignited and the fire had then been spatted out.

At sight of Compton and the girl Kennedy stopped. He addressed himself to Compton.

"Where's Ware? You see him?"

"He's—I think he'll be up after a while," Compton evaded.

"Did you see him?" Kennedy snapped.

"Yes."

"And he didn't come with you."

It was not a question. It was a statement and Compton felt that it was significant. Kennedy's lips hardened and his eyes narrowed. Compton saw that he was angry. He had something on his mind, something probably about Ware.

"There have been no campers in here in a long time," Kennedy said. "I have issued no fire permits for this section since the beginning of summer. I was through here three days ago and saw no signs of campers. You know, they won't clean up their camps, no matter how much you urge them to do it. Well, some of them anyhow. This fire got started somehow."

Finishing, he had turned his eyes on the girl. Recognition, succeeded by uncertainty, came into his eyes.

"You're not Mrs. Ware?" he asked.

"Her sister."

"Oh!"

Kennedy's eyes went back to Compton. His frown thickened.

"Come here, Compton," he said.

COMPTON followed him to one side. Kennedy demanded to know why Ware had not come up to the fire.

"I dunno," Compton answered. "He seems to have something on his mind."

"How'd you happen to bring that girl up here?" Kennedy demanded.

Compton could not put the girl in the light of a stubborn, curious child.

"I didn't know how bad the fire was," he answered.

Kennedy was an old hand, and he received that simple statement with a shrug of incredulity and a suspicious glance.

"Hell," he said, "you could see the fire above the trees. You've seen fires before. Well, let it go. You and Ware have never been particularly good friends, have you?"

"No. We never got along together."

"I want you to do two things," Kennedy said. "I want you to ride through the forest, diagonally to your right, and see if there are any cattle in there. If there are, drive them out ahead of you. Then go to the Bar A and keep Ware there till I see him."

"You goin' to try to make trouble for Ware account of him not comin' up here? Compton asked.

"I have men enough," Kennedy answered. "We can kill out this fire in the next few hours, I'm sure. I want Ware. I got to have him."

"I'd rather somebody else went down there," Compton said.

Kennedy gave him a hard look. Compton knew perfectly well what was passing in Kennedy's mind. Kennedy had seen the girl. He was confident that Compton was holding back because of her.

"You were slow in gettin' up here yourself, Compton," Kennedy declared. "You should have been here an hour ago, alone. This is no place for a girl, and you know it. The men who have been fighting the fire will want to rest when they get through. I'm not going to ask one of them to take that ride. I want you to do what I ask and do it right. That'll get the girl out of here,

too. Come on, now."

Compton saw that Ware might be safer in his hands than in the hands of someone else. Kennedy would not have been so urgent unless his need of knowing where Ware was had not been so great. Compton nodded.

"Very well," he said. "I'll get along."

KENNEDY started on a jog trot toward the end of the ravine. Compton returned to the girl. In spite of the smoke and the charred bits of wood which came up from the ravine, she was standing at the edge of it, looking down into it. Compton went up to her side. The fire had worked its way along for quite a little distance. There were glowing trees, glowing underbrush. Now and then a tree toppled down, with only a swishing sound because of its small size. Behind the fire were charred trees, some down, others, denuded, upright.

"Kennedy wants me to ride through the forest and see how the cattle are," Compton said. "We had better start."

"Did you arrange that because I was with you?" she flashed.

"I didn't. The idea was Kennedy's."

She moved toward her horse, and he followed her. Mounted, they set off through the trees. Within half a mile they came upon a bunch of cattle and Compton started them away from the fire. He noticed that some of them bore the Bar A brand.

"I thought Ware had sold all his stuff up here," he said.

"He did. To Schuyler."

Schuyler was one of the big cattle men. His operations were extensive. He had a hundred thousand acre ranch to the east, and some holdings in Juniper Valley. He was always ready to grab off another man's cows when the price was what he considered "right."

"Ware lost money on his stuff, then," Compton said.

"I don't know. He didn't say. My sister knows nothing about it. She had gone home before Ware sold."

The cattle were now moving forward without driving, and Compton was sure that, started, they would go on till they came to water, at a safe distance. He held in his horse while he considered the situation. He saw no reason for leaving this girl in the dark. She had proved that she had spirit and courage. She wouldn't make a scene when she found Ware was in difficulties.

So he told her what Kennedy had asked him to do. She had her own time of thoughtfulness.

"I can trust you, can't I?" she asked at last.

"Yes, ma'am! You couldn't do me no greater honor."

"I'll tell you what I know," she said.

"We will ride slow," Compton said. "I have got to get down to the Bar A."

"Ware has always been a good man, hasn't he?" she asked as they started their horses.

"Why, yes. I never heard nothing against him. The fact that him and me never got along don't mean nothin'. Lots of men don't hit it off."

"You would give him a square deal?" she asked.

"Absolutely!"

MY SISTER went home at Ware's request," the girl said. "I should have gone with her, I suppose, but I feared there was something wrong. I have not been spying on Ware, but I had to watch him a little. When did this fire start?"

"Toward daylight, far as I know."

"Ware went out last night after midnight," she said. "He came home in the morning twilight. I don't know where he was. Earlier in the night I heard him talking to himself. He was cursing Schuyler, cursing the circumstances that forced him to sell his cattle. And he was cursing someone else whom he didn't mention. I don't know where he was from midnight on."

Compton understood what she was hinting. Ware had had to sell his cattle. His mind had been perhaps a little unsettled by this blow. He *had* been queer. Might he

have planned a wild revenge? Might he have set the fire in the forest, thinking the cattle he had sold would be caught in it?

That, Compton was sure, was what Kennedy thought. And Kennedy must have something more than suspicion to go upon. Things looked pretty dark for Ware.

Chapter III

TALE OF DEATH

GRACE suddenly stopped her horse. Compton stopped his and looked at her. She sat rigid in the saddle and her hands were tight on the reins. Hands were motionless, face immobile, but her bosom rose and fell swiftly from some secret agitation. Compton gave her time, and presently she controlled herself.

"We'll have to stop here for a moment," she said. "I can't talk, riding."

While he waited for her, Compton made a resolution. He would protect her at any cost. Neither Kennedy nor any of the cowmen would be permitted to bring added grief to her, for Compton saw that she was grieving. He understood her more thoroughly than he had done before. He thought her grief explained why she had wanted to go up into the forest. He could understand how she would have craved action, change. Her sister was gone. Ware was queer. She was afraid Ware had done something while he had been absent in the night. It was all a pretty heavy load for a young girl to carry.

"Take your time, ma'am," he said gently. "We have all the time there is. Kennedy says he can handle the fire. That is his business. We may have to tell him to keep his fingers out of everything else."

She shot a grateful look at him, and her composure was measurably increased.

"I'll be as brief as I can," she said. "Ware was down in our country less than a year ago. My father had just died. He had made provision for my sister and me and our mother, and our ranch and the cattle went to my two brothers. Ware was looking for some stock. He came to our place and met my sister. We didn't know there was anything between them. He was there off and on for a month. We wondered why he stayed so long. Then he was gone for another month, and at the end of that time he returned and married my sister. We were all satisfied. He seemed prosperous enough to take care of her, and he was really a likable fellow then. My sister of course came up here with him.

"Well, my two brothers were different. One of them, the older one, was like my father. He wanted to carry on the ranch.

The younger one had been away from home a good deal. I'm afraid he was rather wild. There were stories about him. He wanted to sell the ranch and the cattle. He said he and my brother could live easy on what they would get. What was the use, he asked, of slaving on a ranch, taking chances, when the money might be safely in a bank?

IT SEEMS that when brothers quarrel they quarrel more fiercely than if they were not related. Though my father was just lately dead, my brothers quarreled from morning till night. There was no peace on the ranch. My younger brother at last said that my other brother could sell, could buy him out, or could settle the matter in court. He would wait a week for his answer.

"At the end of a week he came home. There was a furious scene. My older brother said he would not sell the ranch and he could not buy my younger brother's interest. He said that if my younger brother took the matter into court for settlement, he would——" She paused and took a hard, deep breath. "He said he would kill my younger brother," she finished.

She turned to look at Compton and her eyes were dilated with horror.

"Anger alone prompted those words," she went on. "My older brother was the gentlest of men usually, but he knew why my other brother wanted to sell out—to get the money to have a good time with. Well, my younger brother flung himself out of the house, saying that two could

play at the killing game. My older brother waited for a while, and then, to forget that scene, he went for a ride in a different direction from that my younger brother had taken.

"My younger brother was found dead in the road next morning, shot through the chest. My older brother said he had not seen him. A man went to the prosecutor and accused my older brother of the murder. He produced another man who made the same statement. They had actually seen the shooting, they said. My brother was arrested. He is still in jail."

"And you came up here to be with your sister after you had told her?" said Compton.

Grace nodded.

"Of course my brother isn't a murderer," she said.

"Ware sent your sister home," said Compton. "I shouldn't have thought he would do that."

"He suggested that we both go. I wouldn't. Ware had begun to act strangely. It seemed as if there were something wrong here and at home. Of course there could be no connection between the two situations, but—well, I don't know."

"Did your sister go without objectin'?" Compton asked.

YES, she wanted to go; but also she hadn't wanted to leave Ware. Perhaps she had noticed something in him, too. She didn't speak of it, and I didn't. I didn't want to add anything to what she was bearing. You see, she and my brother who is now in jail were older than my other brother and me, and naturally they were closer. She wanted to be near him."

"Does Ware know that you found out about him bein' away?" Compton asked.

"Oh, no! I was careful. I didn't like to watch him, but I felt I had to."

"Did he explain the sale of his cattle?"

"No."

"Has Schuyler paid him?"

"I don't know. He is secretive. He hasn't told me anything."

"Did he object to your staying here?"

"No. I don't know what's come over him, Mr. Compton. He has something on his mind. It seems to blot out everything else. You see, my sister has some money, and when I first came here, he was full of plans of making more money of his own. He made her put her money in the bank under an arrangement which will keep it there for a number of years unless something happens to him."

"He must have needed a big piece of money himself all of a sudden."

"He must have," she agreed. "That's what makes it so terrible."

Compton knew what she meant. Some ghost must have risen out of Ware's past to confront him. Compton had seen Ware and his wife together. Though he disliked the man, he had given Ware credit for complete devotion to his wife. As Compton looked back now, he saw that for a while Ware had been a changed man. He had been no longer grim. In fact he had seemed thoroughly happy. At that time Compton had not met this girl at his side, and he had been heart free. He recalled now that he had thought Ware rather funny in the rôle of devoted husband.

If something had risen out of Ware's past, that something had dealt him a terrible blow. By hard work he had improved his inheritance, so that he was well fixed in spite of the fact that cowmen had done none too well in recent years. Love had come into his life. He had had everything to look forward to. And then something had happened. What had it been?

Compton couldn't even guess at that. Ware had never been far from home. His trips, like that which had ended in his finding a bride, had been on business. There had never been a whisper against him. Gosh, it certainly was a puzzle. Equally certain Ware had something on his mind. Kennedy was so suspicious of him that Kennedy wanted him held.

COMPTON'S thoughts went to the girl at his side. She had faced grief, too. She had lost her father. One brother, wayward, impulsive, had been killed. Another brother was now in jail. Something sinister was hanging over her sister. Good Lord, she had faced, was facing more than Ware could possibly face. Yet she was keeping her head up. Compton was conscious of a sweeping wave of admiration.

Plucky, pretty, daring even to remain here when Ware had been acting as he had, she was one girl in—oh, the total of girls so far as Compton was concerned.

"Lemme fight for you, ma'am," said Compton in a low voice. "Lemme put everything I got into this thing, and we'll see where we come out."

"Will you?" she breathed. "I need someone. I need you!"

"Let's get down to Ware's," Compton said.

They started their horses. Perhaps hope, imagination, colored his feeling, but he believed she acted as if a weight had been taken from her shoulders.

Chapter IV

Ware's Gun

THEY came to the gate leading into the Bar A ranch-house. Leaving, Compton had not restored the wire which had been run about the gate end and the post. He had not understood why it was there. Now he found it in place again. He unfastened it and opened the gate. When he and Grace had gone inside, he closed the gate. Turning to his horse, he saw Ware approaching him.

He was conscious of a change in Ware. A kind of hardness seemed to have settled on the man. It was as if he were in the clutch of a defiant gaiety. He took hold of the wire and Compton thought he was going to twist it about the gate end and the post again. He did not. He pulled it out and coiled it, and then he tossed it down beside the post.

"That," he said, "was a sign that the Bar A was practically closed. It ain't closed no more. It is wide open. It will be wide open for whoever comes."

He turned abruptly and strode back toward the house. Compton and Grace exchanged glances. Ware was different, those glances said, but he certainly was still queer. If anything, in this sudden hardness, he was queerer than he had been earlier in the day.

"Shall I tell him what Kennedy said?" Compton asked.

"I wouldn't. I don't think he will leave."

"If he tries to leave, I'll have to keep him here," Compton said. "He isn't himself. I think it will be best for Kennedy to see him. Kennedy may be able to explain something."

"All right," she agreed. "We'll go up to the house. I'll get some food ready."

THEY went up to the house and while Compton took care of the horses, she went into the house. Ware had been standing in the front of the shed. He continued to stand there. He did not even look at Compton, so that Compton was able to study him by looking at him sidewise. Yes, a change had come over the man. Why, he was almost smiling. He no longer scowled. He looked like a man to whom a great resolution had come.

Compton thought Ware was not observant of the fact that he was studying him, but Ware suddenly proved that he was. He came about swiftly, so that he faced Compton.

"Fire out?" he asked.

Compton looked over toward the forest. Smoke no longer rose from where the fire had been.

"Guess they got it under control," he said.

"You didn't fight it none, did you?"

"No. I drove out some cows."

"I got my money from Schuyler," Ware said suddenly. "One of his men rode over to tell me that Schuyler had placed it to my credit in the bank in town. That's reg'lar, ain't it?"

"Why, I been told that any man can put money in a bank to the credit of another man," Compton answered.

"I am all fixed up then," Ware said. "You been wonderin' why I sold my cattle, haven't you, Compton?"

"Why, yes," Compton answered.

"Well," said Ware fiercely, "it is my business, and nobody else's."

"I'm not buttin' in, Ware."

"What the hell are you hangin' around here for, then—with a gun on you?"

"I came in the first place to ask you to go up in the forest," Compton answered patiently, for he believed he must humor Ware till Kennedy arrived. "I just came back with Miss Dwight."

"Your errand seems to be done."

"Miss Dwight asked me to stay and have something to eat."

Ware opened his lips to speak again, but he checked himself.

"I s'pose you can eat," he said after a moment.

It was a fine invitation. If circumstances had been other than they were, Compton would have got out of there, but he couldn't leave Grace now. He was more than ever convinced that Ware was crazy. He had heard that crazy people had peculiar streaks, and Ware was certainly streaky enough.

THEY stood in silence till Grace came to the door and summoned them inside. At the door the two men stopped to wash in the basin on a bench. When they had finished, Ware motioned Compton inside. Compton hesitated for a moment and then he stepped through the door. He was alert for an attack by Ware from behind, but Ware merely followed him.

"I ate a while ago, Grace," Ware said. "I don't want nothin' now."

"You'll drink a cup of coffee?" Grace pleaded.

"Sure, I'll drink a cup of coffee with you. Be with you in just a minute."

He walked steadily across the room and passed through a door at the end of it, his bedroom, Compton knew. Compton had a moment of perplexity. He didn't want to indulge in any gunplay in Grace's presence, and yet he was fearful of what Ware would do. He had a notion to draw his gun and go up to the side of the door. Ware gave him no time. He suddenly appeared in the doorway and leveled a gun at Compton. Compton cursed himself for debating, when he should have acted. He and Grace were at the mercy of this madman now.

He had a wild impulse to try to snake his own gun, but he knew he must not obey that impulse. Ware would surely shoot him, and then Grace would be here alone with the man. With Compton wounded or dead, there was no telling what Ware would do.

"Well, put 'em up!" Ware ordered, as if he were impatient with Compton for Compton's stupidity.

Compton raised his hands. He got slowly to his feet, facing Ware. He looked at Grace. He saw the girl's body go tense. He knew she was about to spring toward Ware.

"Grace," he cried, "don't! He isn't going to hurt me. Are you, Ware?"

"Course not!" Ware said, and his tone was so reasonable that Compton and Grace stared at him. "Don't be scared, Grace. I know you think I'm crazy, but I ain't. On'y I got a lot on my mind. I can't have nobody interferin' with me. I have to have Compton's gun."

"Oh!" Grace breathed.

"Why, you can have my gun, Ware," Compton said. "I'll put it on the table."

Ware smiled at that, the hard smile of a determined man.

"Don't be so obligin'," he said. "Just turn your back and I'll take care of the gun."

Compton turned his back and Ware came up behind him and took his gun. Ware stepped back and Compton turned and faced him.

"What's come over you, Ware?" he asked.

He was angry because he had been deprived of his gun in Grace's presence. He had aimed to protect her, and now he had permitted Ware to render him helpless. What must she think of him? What she thought of him she disclosed.

"Never mind, Mr. Compton," she said. "Ware is insane, and we will just have to put up with it."

WARE said nothing. Accusations against him seemed to slip from him. He went back to his room, and when he came out, he had both his own and

Compton's gun strapped on him.

"I'm ridin'," he announced.

"Where?" Grace asked.

"Sorry I can't tell you, Grace," he answered gently. "I got business to attend to, important business."

He moved to the door and turned.

"It may be," he said, almost as if he talked to himself, "that I won't come back. If I don't, you tell my wife that my last thought was of her. Tell her she gave me a little while of——"

He could go no further. His voice choked. His eyes seemed about to fill. He brushed his hand over them.

"Joe," Grace entreated, "tell us."

He made a sweeping gesture with his right hand. It was, to Compton, like a gesture of renunciation. He moved as if he were going through the door. He stopped. There was the sound of a car coming toward the house. Ware leaned and looked out.

"It's Kennedy," he said. "Leave him to me. I gotta ride. It is nearing sunset."

Chapter V

WARE RIDES

THE car came on, was stopped. Ware stepped through the door. Compton and Grace ran to it and looked outside. Kennedy still sat behind the wheel. Ware was facing him, on the ground, a gun held on a level with Kennedy's chest.

Kennedy seemed rendered motionless and speechless by astonishment. Compton and Grace left the doorway and walked toward Ware. He moved to one side, so that Compton should not be behind him. Then he was as motionless as Kennedy. He appeared to be waiting for the ranger to speak.

Compton, watching Kennedy, saw amazement leave the man and suspicion come in its stead. This, in turn, was succeeded by decision.

"Now I know you did it, Ware," Kennedy said.

Ware showed surprise. Then suspicion came to him also.

"Did what?" he asked guardedly.

"Started that fire in the forest."

Ware did not immediately answer. He seemed to be considering that statement in all its implications.

"What do you know about it, Kennedy?" he asked at last.

"You were up in the forest after midnight," Kennedy said bitterly. "The rider up there saw you, as you passed him. He was returning to his camp. You didn't see him. He knew you, of course, and he didn't suspect you. You went down into the ravine. The rider was awakened some hours later by the fire."

WARE'S voice was queer when he spoke again. Compton was sure he was seeking information. He wanted to get out of Kennedy all that Kennedy knew, without letting the ranger know he was curious.

"I s'pose me an' the rider was the on'y men up there last night?" he suggested.

"You were the only man the rider saw," Kennedy declared.

"That's good, very good!"

Compton had that sense of strangeness in Ware again. Gosh, the man could say the oddest things, do the oddest things. He

seemed glad that no one else had been seen in the forest. Why, if there had been someone else up there, that someone else might have cleared him of Kennedy's charge. He couldn't be guilty. He wouldn't start a forest fire.

But wait! Just suppose he had started the fire. Wouldn't he be glad that there were no other witnesses of his act? Yes, that was the solution. He had started the fire, and he was ready to pit his word against that of the rider. It would be one man's word against another man's word.

"The rider didn't see me start no fire," he declared, and that appeared to be confirmation of Compton's theory.

"He didn't see you," Kennedy snapped, "but I am accusin' you of it. Do you deny it?"

"I don't deny nothin'. I am too busy. Now, lemme see what I am goin' to do. I got to get out of here right away."

He eyed Kennedy's car. Compton guessed that he was thinking that if he started on a horse Kennedy could easily overtake him in the car.

"You got a gun, Kennedy?" he asked.

"No."

"Get out of the car."

"I don't take orders from you."

"You do! Get out of the car or I'll drag you out. I mean business, Kennedy. I got a lot on my mind."

"Yes, you got a lot on your mind," Kennedy rasped. "For some reason that nobody knows you sold your cattle to Schuyler. I hear you've got only a few head left. Well, you won't run cattle in the forest next year. You won't have 'em to run in there, and you know you will lose your rights unless you turn in the number of head you are entitled to."

"I know all about that," Ware assented.

"You will be busted. Your ranch will be no good without the forest for summer use."

"Oh, hell, quit tellin' me about my troubles. Get out of the car or I'll drag you out."

KENNEDY looked at Compton. Compton shook his head, to say that he could make nothing out of the way Ware was acting. With a scornful look on his blackened face, Kennedy descended from the car. Ware ordered him to turn about, and when he had done so, he searched him for a weapon. Finding none, he forced Kennedy to stand back while he searched the car.

"All right," he said, when he had finished. "Now, lemme tell you two fellas somethin'. I'm ridin'. I'm ridin' down the road. I got two guns on me. Neither of you is armed. If you attempt to follow me, I will put a bullet into each of you. That plain?"

"Suppose I follow you, Joe?" Grace asked.

"I will come back the minute I see you in the road, and I will kill both these men," Ware declared. "I gotta be free tonight."

"Have you got your money from Schuyler?" Kennedy asked.

"It's in the bank in town."

"You can't get it today."

"Oh, I'm not goin' to run away," Ware said. "I'm comin' back, if I live."

There was something sincere in that statement. The ranger stared speculatively at the cowman.

"Look here, Ware," he said. "Are you in trouble? If you are, why don't you say so? You can trust us."

"Yeah, I can trust you," Ware retorted acidly. "Compton and Grace think I'm crazy. You think I tried to burn up the forest. They would throw me into an asylum. You, Kennedy, would send me to jail."

"Are you crazy?" Kennedy asked.

"Mebbe I am, but I'm sane enough to go about my business. Now, remember, whoever follows me gets a bullet. I don't want any of you even to come to the gate. If you do, I'll throw a bullet, as long as a bullet will carry to you."

He turned and ran toward the stable. The two other men and the girl stood helplessly where they had been. Ware led a horse out of the stable and swung himself up. He spurred the horse and dashed past them. Kennedy, coming in in his car, had left the gate open. Ware sped through it and turned down the road. He immediately set his horse to a hard gallop.

Grace looked at Kennedy and Compton. Then she ran down toward the gate. Compton called to her to stop, but she ignored him. Compton ran after her, and Kennedy ran after him. Grace was in the middle of the road when they reached her. Ware was out of shooting distance. In silence they watched him till he came to a bend in the road. Then he was lost to their view.

"God only knows where he is headed for?" Kennedy said. "I'll get my car and go for some men. What're you going to do, Compton?"

"Miss Dwight would be here alone if I left," Compton answered.

"Well, look after her," Kennedy said. "You got a gun?"

"No."

"Gosh, we're a helpless pair. Well, you wait here, Compton. I'll be back. I'll bring you a gun. You had better start to town with Miss Dwight. This country ain't safe for her with Ware loose. He is crazy as a loon."

He ran back to his car, hopped into it, and started toward them. In the road, with a wave of his hand, he set off at what speed the ruts permitted.

"There isn't a weapon of any kind in the house?" Compton asked. "Ware had a rifle. What became of that?"

"I haven't seen it," she answered.

"Let's look for it."

They searched the house and the other buildings and at length Compton found the rifle. It was empty of shells. They searched high and low but they could find none. Apparently Ware had safely hidden them or thrown them away. It looked as if he had made sure that no weapon would remain when he had left.

"Miss Dwight," Compton said, "I think you and I had better start for town. Ware won't come up to the mountain road in that direction, I'm sure. I can have you safe shortly after dark."

"No," she said decidedly, "I must remain here. I must be here if Ware comes back. I can't desert him."

He knew that it would be useless to argue with her. She was a girl who made up her mind for herself.

"Will you go into the house?" he asked.

"I'd rather remain out here," she said. "It's stuffy in the house."

SHE sank down on the step and he leaned against the side of the house. Her face was averted from him as she kept her eyes on the road. He saw that her color had died out of her cheeks. But pallor did not rob her of her good looks. The beauty of sadness was in her face. A kind of reverence came to Compton. It was an emotion which he had not experienced before. He saw how easy his life had been, compared to her life lately. She stirred, looked at him, became aware that he was standing. She moved over on the step.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked.

He sat down beside her, taking off his hat and putting it on the ground. They were sitting so, in silence, when Kennedy drove up to the gate and called to Compton. Compton and Grace ran out to him. He handed a gun to Compton.

"Start for town right away," he ordered.

Compton nodded. He saw that four other cars, the cars of the men of the forest, were coming along the road. Before these reached the gate, Kennedy started his car and the others did not stop. The men in them gave only a glance at the girl standing beside Compton. The cars were a quarter of a mile down the road when a dozen riders appeared in the other direction. They dashed past Compton and Grace.

A sigh came from Grace's lips. She put a hand to her throat as if there were a choking sensation there.

"It's a manhunt, isn't it?" she asked.

"It's a manhunt," he answered. "Will you start for town with me now?"

"I can't. I must stay here till I hear about Ware. Those men are armed. Ware is armed. Something will happen—to somebody."

"We'll go back to the house," Compton said.

They resumed their seats on the step. Neither thought of food. The sun went down. There was the twilight and then the night.

"Cold?" Compton asked.

"No, oh, no!"

They did not speak again for a space. Then Compton was aware of a lessening of the dark. He thought idly that the moon was coming up. That would be well for the manhunters, not so good for Ware.

Beside him Grace stirred as if she had been startled. He was aware of her looking at him. He turned to her. He could see her face more clearly now, her wide, anxious eyes.

"That light," she whispered. "It isn't the moon. It's far too early for the moon. What is it?"

Compton knew what was in her mind, because instantly it was in his own. He looked at the buildings, at the two corrals. They were quite distinct now. Grace started to rise. He put a hand on her arm.

"Wait," he said.

HE GOT to his feet, and then he saw that he could not hold her back. She was insistent upon facing with him, side by side, whatever there was to be faced. She rose with him. Again her hand found his. They walked to the corner of the house. At once they saw what had caused that filtering of light through the night. To the east, over at the edge of the valley, the forest was on fire. Flames were shooting up dimly, and Compton knew that they were obscured by a cloud of smoke.

Grace withdrew her hand from his and she suddenly leaned back against the side of the house. She began to sob. Compton turned to her and put his hands on her shoulders.

"Don't," he begged.

Her tears were running down her cheeks. She did not wipe them away. She raised her tear stained face to his.

"These aren't for myself," she said. "They are for my sister. Ware must have started that fire, too. He *is* insane. He *must* be insane. And my sister loves him so. It will break her heart."

She sobbed on for a moment more, but then she lifted her bent head and fiercely swept the tears away with her handkerchief.

"Get our horses," she commanded. "We must find Ware. Those men will kill him if they come upon him. You can see how he will be. He held himself in here, but he will be wild over there—watching that fire —an insane man—gloating——"

He feared she was going to be hysterical. He drew her up to him and held her as if she had been a little girl.

"You can get yourself together, Grace," he said.

"Yes," she whispered. "I'm all right now."

She drew back from him, and he let her go. She did not lean weakly against the house as he had expected she would do. She stood up, straight.

"Get the horses," she said.

"But——"

"You are helpless," she told him. "I can have my own way. If you don't get our horses and go with me, I'll get mine and go alone. There is no way you can stop me. You wouldn't use force with me."

No, he wouldn't use force with her. He would get the horses. They would ride

across the flat till they came to the forest. Then he would hold her back till Kennedy and those other men got into action. By now they must be hurrying toward the fire. He would have to abandon Ware to them. He must protect Grace somehow.

He got the horses and in a moment they were riding across the flat toward the fire. Twice they had to stop to open gates in Ware's wire fences. At last they came up against the farthest fence. This was a quarter of a mile from the fire. Beyond them there was a stony rise. At the end of that the trees began. The fire was working among these trees, and it was eating its way back into the forest.

"Will you stay right here?" Compton asked. "I'll have to get to work in there."

"You think that's best?"

"I do."

"I'll stay right here unless the fire drives me back," she promised.

HE LEFT her and rode down to a gate through which he passed. He could feel the heat of the fire on his face now. He rode along the edge of the forest for a little way and then turned his horse into it. He had no intention of leaving Grace alone for long. He wanted, just now, merely to see how far the fire had worked its way.

He had gone but a little distance when there was a sound above the crackling of the flames. He could not make out what it was, and then it resolved itself into the beat of a horse's hoofs. A horse dashed out from among the trees. Compton recognized it as the horse which Ware had ridden down the road.

The animal was wild with excitement, went past him, in and out among the trees, and then headed for the open. Compton knew that its instinct was leading it toward home.

It was no sooner gone than that sound, intensified, was repeated. Three more riderless horses dashed out. Compton decided

at once that they were animals strange to the country. They dashed aimlessly, while the first horse had seemed to have a sense of direction. In a moment these were gone among the trees.

Swiftly Compton was able to reconstruct what had happened. Four men had dismounted from their horses. The horses had been "tied" with dropped reins. These had held them for a while, but when the fire had broken out, the animals, in fear, had forgotten that a trailing rein meant a secured horse. They had started to run.

Where then were Ware and the three men who had dismounted from the other horses? And who were those other men? Why had Ware, as he surely must have done, gone out to meet them? What mystery lay within other mysteries here?

A partial answer to that came quickly. Three men, hatless, apparently wild with excitement, too, ran toward Compton. They were strangers to him, and this confirmed him in his belief that the horses were alien to this place. Catching sight of him, the men sped toward him. Before they reached him, Ware came into view. All of the men were clearly to be seen in the glow from the fire.

Ware, too, was hatless, and he held a gun in each hand. He looked as if he were crazier than he had been up at the house. Compton could feel the excitement that was running through the men. And yet he was different. Where before he had seemed merely "queer," he now seemed to know what he was doing. He was grimly pursuing these three men, running them down.

The three men came up under Compton's horse and stopped.

"Gun," one of them panted. "Gimme a gun."

Compton drew his gun, but he did not, of course, hand it down to the man. He held it on him. Ware came up.

"It's all right, Compton," Ware said. "You thought I had lost my mind, but I hadn't. I knowed what I was doin'. I know what I'm doin' now. Just leave this to me."

COMPTON'S relief was so great that he could find no question to ask. He believed also that he could safely leave these men to Ware. Ware certainly was sane now. Ware proved that.

"Work has got to be done on this fire, Compton," he said. "Where's Kennedy and the other men?"

"They're around here some place," Compton answered. "They ought to be here before long."

"Pull your horse back," Ware ordered.

Compton withdrew his horse. The three men tried to follow the animal as if they thought it might afford them protection somehow. Ware ran in between horse and men, and he poked his guns at the men.

"Line up!" he roared, and in that roar Compton found sanity; it was the roar of a man who was bringing to a climax something which he had definitely planned.

The men retreated before those outthrust guns.

"Lemme see your backs," Ware ordered.

The men had to turn their backs.

"March!" said Ware.

They were facing the fire. If they marched, they would go straight into it. One of them turned piteous eyes to Compton, but Compton only shook his head. The man turned away.

"March!" Ware repeated.

The men went forward slowly. Ware urged them on with thrusts of his gun. Compton followed on his horse. They came so close to the fire that its heat fanned their faces. One of the men screamed. Ware pushed him with a gun in the small of his back. The man stumbled and fell on his face. He was up almost as soon as he struck. Ware mercilessly forced him and the others forward.

Compton stopped his horse. He gathered up the reins. He believed he would have to dash in there and pull Ware out. Ware was sane, all right, but he was so intent upon what he was doing that he did not realize how great the heat was becoming. Compton had heard of men ignoring physical pain in a time of great mental stress.

Now the three men began to scream curses in unison. They shielded their faces with their hands. They were close to the beginning of the flames. Ware held up his head with a kind of fierceness in his manner.

Suddenly one of the men wheeled about.

He flung himself on his own knees and his arms went about Ware's.

"I'll tell you anything, everything," he screamed. "On'y don't drive me into that hell."

"Get up," Ware yelled kicking him away.

THE man struggled to his feet. Ware holstered one gun. With his free hand he pushed the man and the man stumbled forward into a tangle of blazing brush and vines. Before the two other men, their faces still shielded, could move, Ware was upon them. He pushed them on top of their companion. Compton saw the three struggle there for a moment, and then they rose and dashed back, alternately spatting at their clothing and rubbing their faces.

"Again," Ware yelled, and he started toward the nearest man.

"Before Gawd, I will tell you everything," a man screamed, and he was not the one who had spoken first.

Ware stepped back. The men crowded in on him. Ware retreated a few more steps and the men came with him.

"Ware!" Compton cried.

Compton had seen a tall tree suddenly waver. He had looked up it and had found it dead. It had been ready for the first autumn wind to lay it low, and the fire had apparently eaten through its rotted trunk. It was coming down!

Ware, Compton saw, was intent on the men. That man who had spoken last was babbling. Ware was drinking in his words.

Compton spurred his horse straight toward the group. He reached down and seized Ware by the coat collar and dragged him with him as the horse went on.

The tree crashed down.

CHAPTER VI

BROKEN

A NUMBER of things happened immediately. Compton saw that the tree had caught one man. He was pinned beneath its hot trunk. The two others had started to run. And there were yells behind Compton. He knew the manhunters were coming. In a moment Kennedy burst through the trees.

Compton ran after the two men and collared them. He dragged them away from the fire. And then through the trees came Grace. He was glad she had come.

"Ware's all right," he said. "I think everything is going to be all right. Take my gun. Keep it on these fellas. You can, can't you?"

She was pale but composed.

"Of course," she said.

He gave her the heavy gun.

Compton ran back to Ware and Kennedy. The two men were trying to get the pinioned man from beneath the tree. He lay motionless on his face, the tree on his back. Compton had a notion that his back was broken.

Kennedy joined Ware, and they took hold of the tree at its upper end. Even there it was hot to the touch, but they lifted it. Ware dragged the injured man's body out. Compton ran to them and he and Ware carried the man to where Grace and the two other men were. Compton took back his gun from Grace.

ONE of the two other men edged up to Ware. He grinned a sickly grin. Ware only regarded him steadily.

"I'll tell you all you want to know, if you——" the man said.

"If I nothing!" said Ware. "You will talk before I get through with you, but I prefer to get the story from this man, unless he dies before he comes to."

"But——"

"Keep still."

Compton looked at the three men. The injured man was the oldest of the trio. He was perhaps forty, and even as he lay there with closed eyes, he was exceedingly ugly. His face was waxen under a two or three days' beard.

The man who had not spoken turned to Ware.

"Briggs was back of the hull thing."

"Wait," Ware ordered.

The man at his feet was stirring. Ware and Compton knelt beside him. He opened

his eyes, and at first those eyes were cloudy. Memory seemed to have deserted the man. Then that cloudiness was dispelled by pain, the man's eyes became alive with it.

"Tree got you, Briggs," Ware said coldly. "Guess your back is broken. It's all up with you."

"I'm busted," the man moaned.

"You got anything to say?"

"Am I dyin'?"

"I don't know. Looks like it."

"Where are them other fellas."

"Right here. They are ready to talk. They blame you."

"Oh, they do?"

Briggs closed his eyes and lay back as if collecting himself.

"We don't want these fellas to agree on any story, whatever the story is to be, Ware," Compton whispered. "You take this fella and let me take one of the others and Kennedy the third."

"Good idea," Ware said. "Explain to them that if their stories don't agree, they'll have no chance. Tell them that there are twenty or thirty cowmen and rangers fighting this fire. They will beat it back pretty soon. It didn't get much of a start. Then they will be free. They been fightin' fire for quite a while now, and they won't be in no pleasant mood."

KENNEDY nodded to one of the men to follow him. Compton led the other away a few paces.

"Stay here," Compton said.

He returned to Ware.

"Will he tell a story that it'll be all right for Miss Dwight to hear?" he asked.

"If he tells it straight, it will be a big relief to her," Ware answered.

Compton turned back to the man and caught Grace's eyes. He smiled and nodded, and she followed him and the man.

They went far enough away from the fire, so that the coolness of the night was a relief. Compton made a place for Grace to sit at the base of a tree. He leaned back against the tree. The man stood opposite them. Compton had a notion that he might have to wear the fellow down, but the man suddenly broke out: "I ain't in nothin' very bad. If you will agree——"

"To nothing," Compton stated. "This is Ware's business."

The man looked at the ground. He seemed to have difficulty in deciding where to start. Beyond the three the fire was still burning. Now and then the hoarse shouts of the fire fighters came to them.

"Well, I never done nothin' crooked till I got mixed up with Briggs," the man suddenly declared. "He is an ol' hand. He has been in prison. Me, I ain't never been in prison."

He looked at Grace.

"Let's see," he said. "You are the sister of that fella that is in jail down South, ain't you, that fella that is charged with killin' his younger brother?"

"Yes," Grace whispered.

"Briggs killed your brother," the man said.

CHAPTER VII

BLACK SHEEP

"THEN my other brother is innocent?" Grace asked.

"Shore! But, gosh, Briggs had him framed nice, if he hadn't lost his nerve."

"Tell us about it all," Grace said.

Compton stood a little closer to her. He had found courage in her before, but he found a finer courage in her now. Emotion was running strongly within her. Compton had seen various fights of various kinds, but he had never seen a gamer fight for self-mastery than this.

The man told his story.

EARLY in the recital one thing stood out clearly: The younger brother had been a black sheep. He had become entangled with Briggs through gambling and other diversions. He was in Briggs' debt. Briggs had been a wanderer. He had been in many strange places, from Old Mexico up into Canada. That had appealed to the wanderlust in the boy. Briggs, Compton gathered, had had a kind of fascination for young Dwight.

After the two brothers had quarreled about the sale of the ranch, Dwight had met Briggs and these two men in the road, some distance from the Dwight ranch. The man described Dwight as boiling over. He had told Briggs what the trouble with him was. Briggs had at first hinted and then he had come out with a concrete proposal that Dwight, himself, and the two other men "get" the older brother.

Here the man squatted down, pulled a blade of dry grass, and chewed on it. He had apparently come to a point which puzzled him. He knew men of a certain kind, it seemed, men like Briggs, but he did not know men like young Dwight. Briggs and his sort were totally abandoned. His idea appeared to be that all men were totally abandoned, if they were abandoned at all.

"I never seen a man change so quick as that young fella did," he said. "He had been boilin' inside him before, but now he boiled over. He cussed Briggs somethin' awful. He said he might be wild, but he wasn't no brother-killer. Briggs was s'prised at first, and then he begun to do some cussin' himself. One word led to another and the young fella went for his gun. It happened that Briggs went for his a fraction of a second sooner. Briggs, old as he is and kinda wore out, is still fast. He plugged that young fella, and the young fella dropped into the road. Well, me and my sidekicker was some scared. Briggs wasn't scared. He begun to figger fast what we should do."

The man wandered again among inconsequential detail. Briggs' final idea, he got around to say, was that they could all make some money out of this. They were to meet frequently, and Briggs would tell them what was going on.

They started down the road. Briggs stopped them.

"We will unload this on that other brother," he said. "First we gotta see where that fella was when I plugged this un."

"Briggs figgered and figgered. Then he said that I must go to the Dwight home. If we could fasten the crime on the older brother, I was to be counted out of any other work than this. I was scared, but Briggs insisted."

THE man went to the house. Mrs. Dwight answered his knock. He asked for the brother. The mother said her son had gone away on his horse, back over the ranch, an hour ago. The man left.

"It fitted in," the man went on. "Briggs and my sidekicker rode into town and told the state's lawyer they had seen the older brother kill the younger. They had been excited and had rode in, leavin' the body layin' in the road. Well, there was a big fuss. The sheriff skimmed out there in his car. He found the body, o' course, and he went to the Dwight ranch. The older brother had come home. The sheriff asked him where the younger brother was.

" 'I dunno,' the older brother said, "An' I don't give a damn. I hope he never comes home.'

"Fitted in pretty good, didn't it? The sheriff took the other brother to town and a murder charge was laid. The prisoner wasn't one to cover up. He said he had had a fight with his brother and had threatened him. Course we picked this up piecemeal. Leastways Briggs did. I was layin' low in the hills.

"Well, we all met in them hills a few days later. Briggs wasn't so excited about himself as he had been. He had saw the prisoner in jail. The sheriff down there is an ol' time Westerner, and Briggs had gone to him and said he had been sweatin' blood because he had got a man in bad. The sheriff could understand that, and he let Briggs go in to tell Dwight he hadn't meant to do him no dirt.

"Briggs done more'n that. He hinted every which way that he might fail to identify Dwight when the case come up. He could fix it up with the other witness. I expect Dwight was so mixed up in his mind that he didn't tumble. He on'y told Briggs to get the heck out of there, ma'am. Well, Briggs said we would have to figger somethin' else.

"Briggs don't figger none too fast, but he did finally cook up somethin'. He remembered that this here Ware had mar-

ried a sister of the man in jail. We could come up here and go after Ware. We would be out of Dwight's country and we could work more open. To clinch that, when Briggs went to town, he was tol' the state's lawyer wanted to see him. That scared Briggs. Him and my sidekicker lit out for this country that night. I stayed, still hidin' out. Well, I learnt that the lawyer didn't want nothin' special of Briggs. On'y wanted to keep in touch with him because Briggs was the chief witness.

"Them two had been gone for a week or so when I got a hurry-up call from Briggs. I had begun to circulate some, seein' the coast was clear. I come up here. Briggs said that everything was framed, but Ware had been hard to deal with. He was ready to sell his cattle and put up the money that would send us to heck an' gone out of there. That would leave no witnesses against Dwight.

"But this here fella Ware is keen. He got Briggs and my sidekicker up in the forest one night, and he got a gun on them. Briggs said he was a terror when he got to goin'. Briggs thought he was goin' to kill both of them.

WELL, Ware said there would be abs'lutely nothin' doin' unless I come up here, too. Briggs sent for me, like I said. I come up an' Ware sold his cattle. We know he sold them and got the money, because he had arranged that the money was to be sent to him by one of Schuyler's riders. That rider went to the Bar A today. We thought everything was set.

"Ware met us over in the mountains where that first fire was, last night, and he come right in on us with no gun on him. He seemed nervous. He apologized for not bein' ready to do business, but he said he would be ready tonight. He said we could watch for that rider from Schuyler's today, and he would meet us here tonight. He seemed more anxious than we was to get the thing done.

"Well, he come up here tonight, but he didn't come with no gun on him. Hell—beggin' your pardon, ma'am—he wasn't satisfied to have one gun on him. He had two. We had just got a fire nicely started when he exploded on us. Gosh, he was a wild man. He had a gun in each hand, and he was ready to let 'em pop. You can tell when a man means business an' when he don't. He said the money for his cattle was safe in the bank. He had gone through with the deal because he thought if he tried to fourflush we might find out about it.

"He said he was goin' to burn us up. He said then there wouldn't be no witnesses against Dwight. He started to drive us into the fire. Oh, he was wild. We run, an' he was after us when you come up, fella. I reckon that's all."

"Do you mean you started the forest fires?" Compton asked.

"Not the one last night—that was an accident—got goin' good from a fire of ours before we knew what was doin'. But Briggs started tonight's fire. We got wind there was considerable danger of Ware's bein' taken in charge by Kennedy on suspicion of his havin' started last night's fire. So Briggs thought it would be a good job to keep everybody turned out busy on another fire-fightin' job till he had completed his deal with Ware tonight."

"You will swear my brother-in-law had nothing to do with the fires!" Grace asked.

"Ma'am, I ain't in this thing so deep," the man answered. "I will swear to anything that will get me out of it. I reckon I can make some kind of a deal with the law. Briggs done the killin'; he started tonight's fire; he tried to blackmail Dwight and Ware. I only stood by. Briggs was the chief cook an' bottle washer. But Ware, he was wild. He acted like a crazy man."

"He did all of that," Compton agreed.

CHAPTER VIII

"And Ridin' Fast!"

THEY went back to Briggs. Ware was kneeling beside him. Briggs seemed to have been speaking in a faint voice, but as Compton bent over Ware's shoulders, Briggs closed his eyes. Then they flew

open. A tremor ran through the man. Compton knew he was dead.

Ware rose just as Kennedy came up with the other man. Compton, Ware and Kennedy compared notes. They found that the stories of the three men, separately told, agreed except in some unimportant details.

"I apologize to you for what I said, Ware," Kennedy offered.

"It's all right," said Ware. "I did act peculiar. I was half out of my mind account of havin' to sell my cattle. Course I might have pulled a phoney deal, but it seemed to me everything had to be real in that matter. I didn't want to take even Schuyler into my confidence. Anyhow sellin' them cattle keyed me up."

"Why didn't you nab them three fellas before?" Compton asked.

"I had to be sure," Ware answered. "You see, accordin' to Briggs' story, there was three men in the deal. The third man wasn't here at first. Then he showed up. How'd I know he was the right one? He might have been somebody they rung in. I couldn't have any man hangin' back to appear later on. I had to bag everybody.

"That's why my wife's away. Soon as I told her the story, she said she would go down home and find out if this was the man. You remember that fella come to the house and asked Mrs. Dwight where her son was. I had to get a report from my wife. She and her mother checked up on that fella and found he had left there on the train. They sent a good description of that fella, and I arranged with Schuyler to phone to town to get the telegram. My wife wrote it so it wouldn't tell too much to a stranger. Schuyler's rider brought a copy of it over here this mornin'. Then I was sure."

"I hope you an' me can get along better from now on, Ware," Compton said.

"Sure we can," Ware said. "I ain't got no stomach for *little* scraps no more."

WELL, I reckon I better get over and see what these fire fighters are doin'," said Kennedy. "Looks as if they had fought the fire back all right. I will see you later, Ware."

"Well, I'll tell you," Ware laughed. "It's about time I got in on this fire-fightin' game. There will be some more work to do before she is all out. Le's take these two men over there and give them a taste of it, too."

Taking the two men with them, they went away among the trees. Compton and Grace were left alone. Compton put himself between her and the dead man. They went out to where they had left their horses. Just before they reached the animals, Compton found Grace's hand in his. He did not know who had taken the initiative. He thought maybe those hands had just come together. Anyhow hers was not in his absently now. She knew it was there. He could somehow tell that.

"You goin' to where your sister is?" he asked. "Or will she come here?"

"I must go there," Grace answered. "I shall wire her to wait for me. I want to see my sister and my brother."

"I gotta stay here for a while," Compton regretted. "I got a campaign to carry on. This fella Schuyler has never let go of anything he has got hold of. This is once he changed his rule. He will have to sell Ware's cattle back to him for what he paid Ware. Ware will lose his forest rights if he hasn't got the proper number of cattle to turn in there next spring. I will straighten out that matter. Every man in the valley will get behind me. Course I won't be able to let Ware know what is goin' on."

"The valley will all get together, then," she said. "That will be fine."

"You bet!"

"I suppose you will be busy all fall."

"I will find two-three days," he declared. "What'll you do with them?"

"Me, I will head south."

"Why," she murmured, as if she were mightily surprised, "you will be headed toward where I am."

"Not toward where you are," he asserted. "Right straight to where you are. And will be ridin' fast!"

THE DEMANDS OF STRAWFOOT BILL

By BARRY SCOBEE

Author of "The Rodeo Shirt," "The Phantom Horse," etc.

STRAWFOOT BILL WAS CERTAINLY IN A POSITION TO MAKE DEMANDS AFTER HE HAD MADE THE GOLD STRIKE AT THAT DRIED-UP WATER-HOLE, AND EVERYONE WANTED TO KNOW ITS LOCATION. BUT IN THE END BILL GOT SO TANGLED UP IN HIS OWN DEMANDS THAT HE WAS PRETTY NEARLY READY TO GO BACK TO HIS FIRST PREDICAMENT—THAT OF A MAN WHO HAD BEEN DISCOVERED WITH THE HIDES OF SEVERAL RUSTLED CATTLE

STRAIN his gaze as he would through the noontime haze, Strawfoot Bill could see no sign of the posse that was pursuing him. Not even a pillar of dust by day to tell him how near or how far they might be.

"I'll have time," he muttered mysteriously. "Hawss is got to have water."

He turned from his straight course and reined his jaded horse up a flat bed of a dry wash. Seven years before when fleeing through this region from a band of Indians he had watered at a pool in this wet-weather creek.

Presently he came to the very hole where he had quenched his parched throat on that momentous occasion. He recognized it, because at that time he had gone off in a hurry and left a good red flannel shirt weighted down on a rocky ledge. It was still there. He dismounted and examined it tentatively. It was dry-rotted and full of dust.

The pool was dry too. Strawfoot squatted and dug in the sand with his hunting knife for a sign of moisture. He accidentally scratched a pebble and a gleam of yellow caught his eye. He snatched the pebble up. He cracked it with his knife handle. It showed threads of yellow lightning in its broken parts.

"M'gosh!" he croaked. "Gold!"

He clawed at other pebbles, scratched them, cracked them like pecans. Most of them showed the precious color. He found two or three as heavy as lead. They all scratched yellow.

Strawfoot Bill's glance jumped around. The dry pool was paved with the stuff! He pawed with both hands like a dog after a gopher. The golden rubble was six inches deep at the bottom of the hole.

STRAWFOOT hadn't prospected half his life without learning something. He knew that this float had washed down from higher up. He hot-footed it up the shallow course. Every little pool had broken quartz lumps heavy with the magic metal. He kept on, panting, sweating, the posse quite forgotten.

Up the slope he came to a patch of rocky outcroppings. Here and there he found faint threads of gold in the weathered surfaces.

"I'm a made man," thought Strawfoot Bill. "Now I can get married and settle down to a life of ease on a store mattress. An' a little Saturday night redeye won't be so hard to come by."

He remembered the posse. He peered under his hand far off across the wastes. A rag of dust could be seen.

"I got no time to squander," he told himself. "Minutes is golden."

He took out his plug and worried off a chew. He could do his best thinking in the first stages of masticating tobacco. It was always a peaceful moment. By the time he had the cud wet down a plan had come to him, rough and ready but full of merit.

He went above the outcroppings a short way and gathered stones for a corner monument. Not much of a monument when finished, just enough to show that it had been laid by human hands. He had no pencil or paper to write "Strawfoot Bill his claim." But his wits were swift and he did the next best thing.

There had been a discussion recently as to whether a jackrabbitt's or a cottontail's foot was the proper thing to carry for luck. To play safe Strawfoot had both. He took the cottontail's foot and, finding a bunch of dry grass, plucked a few straws and wrapped them around the hairy paw.

"Any lummox," he told himself, "will know that stands f'r Strawfoot Bill."

HE PLACED it on the monument and weighted it down with a flat stone.

He ran along the hillside for a hundred paces. There was no time to go farther. He stopped and laid another corner monument. Then he ran down hill pell mell. He was entitled to fifteen hundred feet in one direction, but when he came abreast of his horse he halted and built another cornerstone, wrapping straw around the jackrabbit foot this time and leaving it. Then he galloped off at right angles one hundred steps and built his fourth monument.

"A claim one hun'rd leaps and bounds by two hund'rd and sixty-nine leaps and bounds, all neat and accordin' to law," he triumphed as he made for his horse.

He mounted and rode back down to the point where he had turned into the rocky wash. He rode out on the opposite side. Then he dismounted carefully and laid rocks on three or four marks his shod horse had left in the wash. Back in the saddle he surveyed his task.

"Nary one of them purps a chasin' me can ever tell I turned off," he decided with satisfaction.

He heeled his weary mount and pushed on, two miles, five miles, swinging on a long curve back toward Puddle Springs, whence he had fled at daybreak. A lone cottonwood tree stood far out on the flats at another dry-wash. He regarded it as being a safe distance from his strike. When he reached its shade he unsaddled and lay down for a rest. Might's well take it easy till the posse ketched up.

THE next thing that Strawfoot knew a rough voice was shouting at him.

"Hi, you, Strawfoot, stand up and git hung."

Strawfoot Bill sat up sharply. The posse was all around him. A loop fell around his neck. Strawfoot did not lift it off. He had made up his mind to a course of non-resistance.

"Look it!" exclaimed one of the men. "He been sure 'nough sleepin'."

"How could you sleep, Strawfoot?"

"Got a clear conscience, that's how," retorted the fugitive.

"Watch him, men," warned Walrus Ike, who got his name from his drooping mustache, wrinkled face and scanty beard. "That kind of talk shows he's up to tricks of some kind. Stand up, Strawfoot."

Strawfoot arose. He yawned.

"Take up the slack, men," directed Walrus Ike.

Seven men backed off, tightening the rope that had been slung over a limb and cutting Strawfoot's yawn off in the middle. Strawfoot was unconcerned. He knew the technique of these things, having been chairman at a couple of rope-end affairs himself.

"Strawfoot Bill," began Walrus Ike solemnly, "we hates to do this. It hurts me worse'n it do you. I've knowed ye ever since ye was teamin' for the Q.M. at the old fort, where they give yuh the name of Strawfoot on account you associatin' with them 'hayfoot, strawfoot, sojers. But you done went wrong, Strawfoot. You've took to killin' our livestock for beef. We've settled down to cattle raisin', and prospectin' on the side, and a little honest brandin' of mavericks. We're law-abidin', Strawfoot. But here you come down amongst us and go to rustlin'. Three branded hides under your shack, Strawfoot, is evidence in plenty."

"Coyotes dragged 'em under," declared Strawfoot stubbornly. "Er the breeze blowed 'em under."

"Don't be contrary, Strawfoot. Listen, Strawfoot Bill, you're a standing on the front stoop of eternity. You got anything to say final as regards why you shouldn't swing, Strawfoot?"

This was the proper etiquette. This was the moment that Strawfoot had been waiting for so patiently.

"I got this to say," he replied.

HE REACHED to his right-hand pants pocket and held out an object on his palm. Walrus bent close. He gasped. He snatched the object up and bit it. The other men let the rope go slack and crowded around. Strawfoot passed out two or three more nuggets to reaching hands.

"Gold!" cried Walrus. "Whoopee! Strawfoot, whar'd you git this? Speak, man, 'fore you're swung with the secret."

"This rope," said Strawfoot significantly, "is kindy choky for a man willin' to talk."

Five hands lifted the noose off.

"Where'd you git this yaller boy, Strawfoot?"

"Got it whar theh's plenty more," answered Strawfoot evasively.

"How much?"

"Wash tubs full."

"Where 'bouts, Strawfoot Bill? Don't be contrary."

Strawfoot regarded them with cunning in his slitty eyes.

"I'll dicker," he said.

"What you want, Strawfoot?" asked Walrus doubtfully.

"I wants extenooation from this here hangin'."

The posse searched one another's faces.

"Don't look like we oughta hang a man that knows where gold's at," ventured a man called Thrifty McDuff.

"Now you're preachin'!" spat jovial Red Horse, who was vice-chairman of the necktie party. "I never did think Strawfoot was guilty of hidin' them hides under his shack."

"Coyotes could of," murmured Walrus charitably.

"Er the breeze," volunteered another. "I seed a cyclone up in Missoury onct, after night. Hit took and blowed a cubboard with a lit lamp on top endways out of the kitchen and set hit up in the yard. And hit never blowed the light out!"

"Ain't nat'r grand!" exclaimed Walrus with relief. "That proves the wind slid them hides under his shack. You're cleared, Strawfoot. Ain't he, feller citizens?"

"Shore! You bet!" cried the men. "Cleared unanimous."

A great load lifted from Strawfoot's shoulders. He wasn't to be hanged! It had been easier than he expected.

"Now lead us to this hyar strike of your'n, Strawfoot," commanded Walrus.

SOMETHING whispered to Strawfoot not to be in a hurry. He was cautious by nature. Why not make another demand or two? His cunning deepened.

"Don't shove me, boys," he requested. "I got another p'int to settle."

"Whut air it?"

"I done got monuments set up at the corners of my discovery claim. I shore got a itching for you gents to holp me hold that claim agin all comers. 'Pears like to me I'm entitled to that."

"You is, Strawfoot. You bet!" came the ready agreements. "We'll see yuh git to keep that." But the man Thrifty McDuff

made a canny addendum, "Pervidin' you ain't fenced off all the gold."

"Plenty more on both sides and below me," avowed the discoverer.

"That settles it, Strawfoot," vouchsafed Walrus Ike. "We uphold your claim."

Elation mounted in Strawfoot Bill. They was eatin' out of his hand.

"Climb up and lead us to it, Strawfoot," urged Walrus. "I hunkers to stake me out a rich claim."

Some one had saddled Strawfoot's horse. The reins were thrust into his hands.

"Don't shove me!" protested Strawfoot testily. "Maybe theh's some other p'ints oughter be settled. Gimme time."

"You sho' makin' a heap of demands," allowed Walrus.

"Tell yuh," said Strawfoot, ignoring their restlessness. "I done rid hard and fur today, owin' to cuccumstances. I'm drawed, and my hawss is drier'n popcorn. I make a motion we all ride back to Puddle Springs for feed and water."

"But, Strawfoot," countered Walrus, "that'll give all the men of Puddle a eq'al chance with us."

Strawfoot's sense of power mounted.

"Don't let that bother yuh," he said broadly. "Me, I'll look out for you boys. In fact, I garntee yuh here and now a fust chance at the diggin'."

"You garntee——" bellowed Walrus disgustedly. "You can't garntee nothing."

"Cain't I?" sneered Strawfoot. "We jist won't say nothin' about the strike when we git to Puddle. You watch me."

"Won't say nothin'!" Walrus fumed. "The news'll be there 'fore we air. You know good and well a gold strike never was kept secret."

"Can't holp it," said Strawfoot stubbornly. "It's one of my p'ints that we ride here and now to Puddle Springs. I demand it."

THE posse protested bitterly. They pleaded. They threatened to hang Strawfoot regardless. But Strawfoot only became the firmer.

"But 'sposin' you git kilt with your secret," argued Thrifty McDuff. "Where'd we be?"

"You all can be my life-guard," conceded Strawfoot. "Nobody won't dassen check me out."

With that Strawfoot dropped the subject. He mounted and set out. There wasn't any reasonable thing to do but follow, and they were reasonable men.

"Doggone his hide," muttered Walrus. "We got to be careful of him."

So grudgingly they surrounded him to keep off the dangers of the desert. They chose an easy path, lest his horse stumble and break his neck. They plied him with drinks of water from their canteens lest he perish of thirst. And Strawfoot Bill basked and expanded under these ministrations, and ondered new p'ints to present.

"I got a idee," he announced after two or three miles.

"Fine, Strawfoot." They tried to appear enthusiastic. "What air it?"

"A stampede is going to set in to my new gold field when the news becomes ginerally known."

"Shore. That's why you should let your special friends in on it fust."

"Theh'll be a town spring up," Strawfoot went on. "An' I done thought up a name for it—Rabbitsfoot."

"Fine!" they hailed. "First-class name. Lucky too."

"An' that brings me up to another p'int," Strawfoot confessed with a touch of shyness.

"Spit it out, Strawfoot," Red Horse invited.

"Boys, I got a hankerin' to be the fust mayor of Rabbitsfoot."

"Hooray!" shouted Walrus Ike soberly. "If that's all ye want we'll elect yuh right now. Ever'body in favor of Strawfoot for mayor of Rabbitsfoot signify same by firin' off you' gun onct."

GUNS were whipped out amid a great shouting of gladness, like at the coronation of a king, and they all fired six

to twelve shots. A startled coyote jumped from a greasewood clump and stretched himself across the desert, as if to pony express the glad tidings.

"You elected unanimous and all legal and proper," said Walrus. "Now lead us to your strike, Mayor."

"Don't shove me," admonished Strawfoot. "I aim to think up some more p'ints while ridin' to Puddle."

TOWARD sunset of that day the citizens of Puddle Springs, all male, were gathered in and around Tom's 2 Chance Restaurant—first and last chance—which was next door to the Double Chance Saloon, likewise first and last.

Every man of the little camp knew about the gold strike. The secret had not lasted long, because the other posses, that had returned empty handed from the hunt for Strawfoot, insisted on a hanging. They had even strode forth with a rope as soon as Strawfoot rode in with Walrus and the seven men of Walrus' party.

"Ain't going to be no hanging," Walrus announced.

"Why not?" queried a big man in a checked shirt who was called Blackbeard owing to his thicket of whiskers.

"Because we've forgive Strawfoot, that's why."

"Forgive nothing!" snorted Blackbeard.

Blackbeard and his men had been insistent, even rough, and when they got so far along as to toss a noose around Strawfoot's neck, Strawfoot had shown them a palmful of nuggets.

So now at the hour of the day when the weary ploughman was supposed to homeward wend his way, every man in Puddle Springs was packed and ready to set out in Strawfoot's wake whenever he should deign to start. Some had pack burros, some had back-packs and their own good legs, some saddle horses; and three or four wagons were being loaded with wet goods, gambling devices and food supplies for the Big Rush.

In the restaurant Strawfoot pushed back his plate of beans only half consumed.

"Full up, Strawfoot?" solicitously inquired Blackbeard, who was sticking to Strawfoot like a brother. "Ready to start for the gold strike now, Strawfoot?"

"No, I ain't," asserted Strawfoot petulantly, and loud enough to be heard by all the men in the room. "I'm a-weary, an' I been thinkin'. Gents, I got another p'int in mind."

"Another p'int!" wailed Walrus. "We won't never git to the gold field."

"Another p'int," repeated Strawfoot succinctly. "And I demand it."

"Whut is it?"

"I wants you boys to honor me with a banquet."

"A banquet!" shrieked Walrus, while the restaurant fell silent and still.

"Why, Strawfoot," exclaimed the astonished Blackbeard, "you just et two plates of beans and flapjacks."

STRAWFOOT made a gesture of disdain.

"Beans is coarse feed," he said.

"What kind of a banquet you want?" asked Walrus.

"A barbecue banquet."

"Where'd we git a goat at?" sneered Walrus.

"Who wants goat meat?" Strawfoot sneered back. "I ain't fond of barbecued goat. I can taste the smell. Me, I demand a fat young heifer."

"'Demand, demand!'" mimicked Walrus, his hanging mustache twitching in exasperation. "We won't git started for the gold field 'fore midnight."

"Fat young heifer," reiterated Strawfoot stubbornly.

"An' you shall have it, Mister Mayor," spoke up Blackbeard unctiously. "In view of and considerin' the many things you have done for this new town of Rabbitsfoot and us pore sinners, you entitled to a banquet. You shore entitled to a fatted heifer if ever a great man was."

"Shore. That's right," noisily agreed numerous citizens who had not been nagged and balked by half a day's sequence of Strawfoot's finickiness. "Let's feed him so's we can get started to the diggin's."

"Thanky kindly," said Strawfoot.

"I'll attend to ever'thing, Mister Mayor," Blackbeard assured. "I'll have the boys round up one of Walrus Ike's heifers. He's been brandin' a sight of stuff

lately. I'll have a crew dig the barbecue pit. I'll have tables set up. An' in the meantime you go and get some rest, Mayor I expect you're tired."

"Am, b'gosh," declared Strawfoot. "And hongry too. You boys hurry up with that feed."

"And when we've et," said Blackbeard, smiling ingratiatingly and slapping Strawfoot on the back, "we'll hit out for the gold field, eh, Mayor? Ha-ha-ha!"

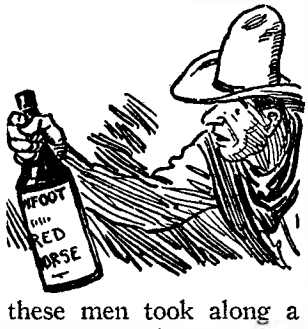
To which Strawfoot deigned no reply whatever.

SO THEY made a banquet for Strawfoot Bill. They dug the roasting pit in the middle of the street, and it was hard and rocky digging. They lifted the doors of the town and laid them on barrels for a table by the sweet spring of water, under a mighty cottonwood tree that spread its branches alike over the just and the unjust. And they suspended from a limb of the tree the big lamp from Tom's 2 Chance Restaurant to light the festive scene.

Everybody pitched in and helped. For the sooner they got the thing over with the sooner they could hit for the diggings and stake out a rich claim, couldn't they?

The Mayor of Rabbitsfoot snoozed restfully in a nearby shack. He slept on the only mattress in camp, the property of Swede Henry the saloon keeper. Strawfoot had demanded it, as one of his p'ints.

A lamp burned low in the room. Now and then as men found their hands idle for a moment they tiptoed up to the shack to see if Strawfoot was all right—and still there. Some of these men took along a quart of redeye and set the bottles down by the sleeper's cot—with their names written plainly on the labels so that Strawfoot would know who his friends were. And once Walrus Ike slipped in and hooked a scrawled note to the front of Strawfoot's red shirt with a bent pin.



"Dere Strawfoot," said the missive. *"Don't forget you promised me and my posse you would give us a first chance at the diggins. Signed Walrus."*

THE banquet was served at midnight. Every man stood ready to start at the last mouthful, or at whatever signal should be given. Those who must depend on Shank's ponies were stripped to their underwear and shoes. The gathering was on tiptoe.

The guest of honor stood at the head of the table. He ate his meat from a rib and section of backbone. Men crowded around him proffering bottles or slapping his back good naturally when they could get close enough. And finally the meal was finished.

Strawfoot pounded on the table with his rib.

"House come to order," he said peremptorily. The diners fell breathless. "Gents," Strawfoot proceeded, "I thanky for this feed. I'm full up. Now I got a couple more p'ints to present for your earnest consideration."

"Roll 'em out, Mayor!" boomed Red Horse.

"Anything we can do is yours, Mayor," chimed Blackbeard. "An' the sooner you ask it and we give it the sooner we can be goin', eh?"

"Don't shove me, boys," admonished Strawfoot once more. "The fust thing on the program is, I want you all to promise to build me a house at Rabbitsfoot soon's you get your claims staked off."

"A house!" ejaculated Walrus.

"A house!" chorused a dozen men in accents of unbelief and amazement.

"What kind of a house, Strawfoot?" questioned Walrus. "Won't nobody have time to build a house in a gold rush."

"A rock house," replied Strawfoot. "Plenty of rock right on the ground handy. A settin' room and a kitchen. Just the minute you get your claims staked off."

"What you want a house for?" Walrus pursued. "Can't you live in a tent like us men? Er air ye too delicate?"

"I'm mayor of Rabbitsfoot, ain't I?" demanded Strawfoot. "I got to have a executive mansion, ain't I?"

THE restless men muttered, they argued, they protested, the while Strawfoot unconcernedly picked tidbits of barbecue from a dishpan and munched them epicureanly.

"A executive mansion," he murmured in a moment of silence. "It's one of my p'inted demands."

He chose another morsel and chewed it thoughtfully.

Blackbeard looked down the length of the table to Walrus.

"It ain't going to delay us before the rush," he said significantly.

"You're right," said Walrus. "Might's well promise. Anything to get started."

So as they glanced eagerly around at their saddled horses and waiting packs they voted to build Strawfoot a house the first thing after their claims were staked.

"All right," summed up Blackbeard, "you git a house, Strawfoot. Now let's hit the trail."

"Don't shove me," said Strawfoot. "I got another p'int."

An air of diffidence came over Strawfoot Bill. He squirmed with embarrassment. He laughed apologetically. Then he cleared his throat with a mighty blast—ahmmmm!

"Gents——" he began hesitatingly, then all at once blurted out like pulling a stopper. "Gents, I wants you should git me a woman."

There were no outcries and ejaculations now. Strawfoot's audience was stunned. They stood motionless like men carved from stone. They gradually altered and they became men aghast. At last Walrus found a remnant of his voice, a wee small thing.

"A woman, Strawfoot?"

"I'm aimin' to git married and settle down," confessed Strawfoot frankly, even expandingly now that the plunge was over. "I wants me a woman for a banker to holp me save my money."

"But they ain't no wimmen in the country!" shrilled Walrus, bursting out in high crescendo.

"Oh yes, they is," Strawfoot contradicted. "I hear the boys sayin' they's a waitress and a old-maid school marm over to the Junction. And a stout warsh-lady back at Beanburg."

"But it'd take a day or two to git 'em here."

"Ride fast hawsses," said Strawfoot succinctly, "an' yuh can git back tomorr' afternoon."

HE FISHED around casually in the dishpan and found another scrap of barbecue, which he smacked over with satisfaction.

Men glared at him with red hate in their eyes. But they were wordless men, for the situation was beyond words. Strawfoot became aware of their nasty looks.

"No use to hum and haw, gents," he said with abrupt decisiveness, brushing his hands together to knock off the beef crumbs. "A woman. Nothin' less. It's my main demand, what I been maneuverin' for. But I'll promise yuh this: Soon's you get her here and we're married, I'll lead yuh to the gold strike, and not before."

Tongues loosened. The men exploded in a furore of talk and epithets. Strawfoot's reply was calmly to start picking his teeth with his deer-shank toothpick. The men fell abruptly silent again, nonplussed, beaten. All but Walrus, who spoke with all the venom of the day and night concentrated in him.

"These hyar demands of your'n!" he cried. "Strawfoot Bill, you've went too far. We'll try to git ye a woman. But if ye ever git in a tight place henceforth and in the future, don't expect no mercy from us. *Don't—expect—no—mercy,* Strawfoot Bill!"

SO THEY organized to get a woman for Strawfoot. They sent one posse on the fastest horses to the Junction, and another posse to Beanburg, with instructions to bring back at least one woman at any cost.

There was little sleep in Puddle Springs for the remainder of the night. Some drank in the Double Chance saloon to

drown their disappointment at the delay, others drank to celebrate the discovery of gold, still others drank simply because they had the opportunity; and the residue of the population kept an eye on Strawfoot Bill, where he slept in a nearby shack, to see that he did not fade away.

The following morning Strawfoot was up betimes. He shaved and donned a clean red flannel shirt for the expected wedding. And the whole population groomed a quiet and decent man called Holy Mike, an erstwhile preacher and justice of the peace from Arkansaw, in readiness to perform the ceremony. A gambler loaned him a long black coat, the saloon keeper loaned him a cravat, and somebody else dug up a pair of white cotton gloves.

Strawfoot remembered in the course of the day to announce that since Walrus Ike and his posse had been the cause of his finding the gold and had saved him from hanging they must have a three mile start of the rest of the town in the race for the new diggin's. The justice of this appealed to everybody and they agreed with only an hour's argument on the subject.

Soon after dinner the eyes of the waiting town began to search the desert for the return of the posses with a woman, or women. But it was not until beyond the middle of the afternoon that horsemen were finally seen in a cloud of dust. Shortly after this the other posse was observed, and Puddle Springs stood itself in its main thoroughfare to wait.

The two sets of foragers for a bride came together at the edge of town; and presently there came to the ears of the waiting men the faint sound of female chatter.

"They're sure fetchin' the captives!" triumphed a citizen in relief. "We'll soon be headin' for the gold field."

" 'Pears like one woman's doin' all that jabber," said another, as a twittering voice was heard inquiring which Mr. Strawfoot was.

AS THE united posses came nearer it was observed that the empty saddles of the spare horses were filled, and through the haze of dust stirred up by the weary mounts the breathless watchers made out three women in the party. And as another oddity, one of the cowboy riders had a bird-cage up on his saddle horn.

"Hi!" came the piratical bellow of Blackbeard to the eager men of Puddle Springs. "We got 'em! Bring that 'ere Strawfoot over to the spring."

Everybody instantly swept toward the spring under the cottonwood tree, shouting and shooting. Strawfoot strode forward like a Saxon king. Holy Mike at his side, their hats in their hands. By the time they got to the spot, Blackbeard had handed down the ladies graciously and stood them in a row.

"Ladies," said he, "I wantcha should meet Strawfoot Bill, your future husband. Strawfoot, this here is Mrs. Flannagan the warsh-lady of Beanburg, so they tell me; and this one is Tessie the waitress, that I gotten over to the Junction. And this'n with the bird-cage is Miss Bedelia the school marm. Take y'r ch'ice, Strawfoot. They be willin', seein' you've struck it rich."

"Oh, howdy-dew, Mr. Strawfoot," twittered Miss Bedelia, looking coy and flustered. "Oh dear me, I must look a fright. Travel is so dusty. I'm not myself at all in looks, Mr. Strawfoot. And you are *so* distinguished looking. Te-hee! Ain't he, Tessie and Mrs. Flannagan?"

The ladies looked down their noses and reserved their opinions.

Tessie was a buxom young thing with white teeth and an entrancing smile. But that smile was not for Strawfoot. She dismissed him with a glance and shot her blue eyes lingeringly at the gallant figure of Red Horse.

Mrs. Flannagan, on the other hand, stood reared back with her ample arms akimbo on ample hips, appraising and defying Strawfoot. She sniffed. She sniffed again. And turned her back and smiled at Blackbeard.

STRAWFOOT heard his fellow citizens snicker. Some of the wind went out of his sails and he bloomed a painful red. He looked again at Miss Bedelia.

"Oh, Mr. Strawfoot," she burst out, with a blighting glance at the other wo-

men, "I think you were taking such chances in permitting your friends to select a life-long companion for you. I'm so glad I came. Have you ancestors, Mr. Strawfoot? But it really doesn't make any difference, does it? All I ask in a husband is that he shall look distinguished and be kind and tender and loyal and true and not chew and spit. Oh, look at my poor 'ittle Dickey bird, so dusty and droopy in his cage. Tweety-tweet, Dicky! Dew you love little birdies, Mr. Strawfoot? Dickey sings adorably. Did your mother call you Willyum? Oh dear, I dew believe you chew and spit. I see a fleck of tobacco on your shirt."

A pause, in which Strawfoot, pop-eyed with dread and horror, began to inch backward and away.

"But after all it doesn't matter," Bedelia gushed forgivingly. Plainly her objective was a man. "Tobacco can be overcome if a man goes to church regularly and doesn't drink. Don't you think so? You go to church regularly, don't you, Mr. Strawfoot? Why, what are you backing off for, Mr. Strawfoot?"

"Listen, lady," gasped Strawfoot, looking over his shoulders desperately for an avenue of escape. "Listen, I—I got to go saddle my horse. I——"

"Ten minutes off for refreshments!" bellowed Blackbeard. "Ladies, you're dusty and dry. You go in Red Horse's shack there and bresh and warsh yo' hands and faces. Red Horse, you pack 'em a bucket of water. Ten minutes, ladies."

Blackbeard and his riders forthwith headed for the saloon, while the other men scattered to look after their mounts, their packs and their wagons, in a last minute preparation for the big rush to the gold field.

NINE minutes later, when the denizens of Puddle Springs and their lady guests reassembled at the cottonwood tree a startling fact broke on them. Strawfoot Bill was not there nor his horse. They scanned the rocky hillside above them and the floor of the desert in the opposite direction. Somehow, in the flurry of activity, he had disappeared.

"Blast it!" scolded Walrus Ike. "I should of kept my eye on him."

"I've knowed all the time," declared an old graybeard disgustedly, "that this hyar gold strike of his'n was just a piece of sparrin' so's he could slip away when he got a chance."

"Well, he's gone."

"Search the buildings!" shouted Walrus. "Everybody buzz. Look in that wagon load of likker."

The men hurried this way and that, glancing in at doors, looking under tarpaulins, kicking bedrolls. They even peered into the spring to see if he had drowned himself.

"Oh dear," wailed Miss Bedelia. "He was so shy, so distinguished."

Some of the searchers mounted up the hillside to look behind the great boulders and the scattered shacks. And presently there came a triumphant halloo from the remotest shanty on the hill.

"Hyar's the varmint!"

Most of the mob charged on the house. Strawfoot's horse was tethered behind it out of sight from below, and Strawfoot was sitting inside on a box of dynamite.

"Come on, Strawfoot Bill, and git married!" roared Walrus Ike. "What's ailin' ye?"

"Go 'way," said Strawfoot despondently. "I ain't goin' to git married."

"Don't be contrary, Strawfoot," admonished Walrus.

"Tessie won't have me," said Strawfoot sulkily.

"She shore won't," declared Red Horse. "I done perposed myself and she's seen the light."

"And Mrs. Flannagan's goin' to wed me soon's you're hitched, Strawfoot," announced Blackbeard. "Now you come on and stand up like a man by Miss Bedelia."

"That woman!" wailed Strawfoot. "She'd talk my years off. And that there dinky bird. Nossir, I've done changed my mind. I don't aim to git married."

There was something exceedingly exasperating about Strawfoot's set mouth. It was infuriating. It made them want to be mean to Strawfoot.

"Looky here, Strawfoot," said Walrus grimly, "we've had about enough of you. You're goin' to git married an' yuh'r goin' to git married right now."

"You sure air!" declaimed Blackbeard, suddenly seizing Strawfoot and jerking him to his feet. "Grab holt, Walrus, so's he can't git his gun."

"Keep your hands off of me!" cried the Mayor of Rabbitsfoot, kicking out viciously.

A dozen men sprang in and pinioned him.

"Lay off!" commanded Strawfoot in a smothered voice. "Don't shove me. I got another p'int."

"You done run them p'ints in the ground," retorted Walrus. "Come on now, plague take your hide."

THEY gave him the bum's rush through the door and started him down the hill, some pulling, some pushing.

"Hi, Holy Mike, Reverend!" Blackbeard called as he clung grimly to Strawfoot's collar. "Make ready down there. Ketch the bride. The groom's a comin'."

Strawfoot's outcries became smothered in the racket of the bridal posse rushing down hill, pell mell over rocks and bushes leaving a cloud of dust behind like the tail of a comet.

Holy Mike appeared in the middle of the street, very slow and dignified in his long coat and white gloves, the bride leaning on his arm. Catching sight of them Strawfoot broke out afresh.

"Lemme loose! I got another p'int—I demand you hang me! Hang me, d'y hear? Lemme loose!"

"Hang nothin'!" snorted Walrus. "Hangin's too good fur ye. You're goin' to be married."

They presently arrived at the foot of the hill, on the street level, and in a moment were face to face with the other half of the wedding party.

"Git your words ready, Holy," commanded Blackbeard above the scuffle and shuffle. "Step up hyar, Strawfoot, dog-gone ye!"

"Wait—lissen——" gurgled Strawfoot.

Blackbeard seized Strawfoot's hand and drew it out to the bride.

"Hook on to his hand, Miss Bedelia," he directed. "Hold it in both of your'n. Ain't nothin' wrong. He's jist bashful."

"Wait," pleaded Strawfoot in calm desperation.

For the first time silence fell. Every man all at once stood tense.

"Listen, men," repeated Strawfoot. "You—you got to swing me. I demand it. I—I stole them cows. I shoved them hides under my shack."

"No you didn't neither," panted Walrus. "It's done been proven the wind blow 'em under. Go ahead, Holy."

"Do you, Strawfoot Bill," demanded Holy Mike loudly, "take this here woman to be your lawful and legal wedded wife?"

Strawfoot rolled his eyes and swallowed.

"Say 'I do,'" ordered Blackbeard, prodding Strawfoot in the back. "Say 'I do,' carnsarn you."

"I—I do," murmured Strawfoot.

"Hooray!" shouted the populace, and fired its guns.

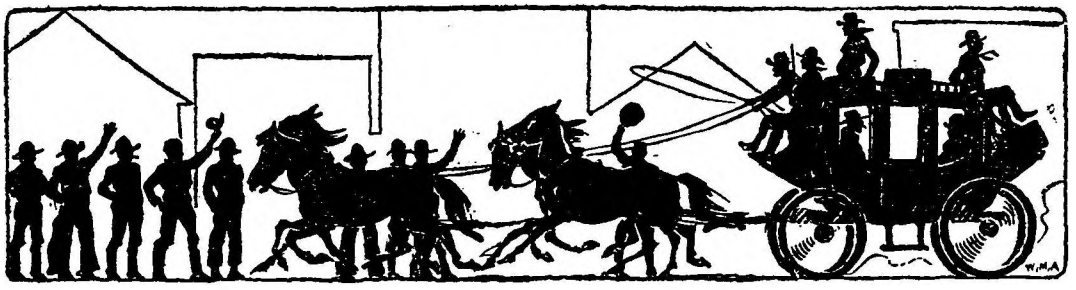
NOW," said Walrus, "we start for the diggin's. Your p'ints is all took care of, Strawfoot Bill, and this is *your las' chance.*"

"Yes, go along, Willyum," twittered Bedelia. "I'll be so glad of a chance to get the house cleaned up. You'll likely have to take your boots off outside when you come back. Tee-hee-hee," she giggled.

A wild gleam entered the eye of Strawfoot Bill. "Come on," he shouted, making for his horse.

"To the claim!" roared the inhabitants of Puddle Springs.

"Well, that'll be the first stop," said Strawfoot Bill to himself.



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

RUSTLERS RIDE AGAIN

IN the last issue Ernest Haycox arose to make some true talk regarding the faithfulness of certain fiction stories to conditions of the old West. This time we give you a little testimony about conditions in the cattle country today. There's hardly a week goes by but what letters come from readers in widely separated parts of the West saying they recognize some story as being laid in their section, or calling attention to the similarity between recent happenings on their home range and the action in some yarn in SHORT STORIES. Just now, for example, there seems to be an epidemic of cattle rustling, and in some cases along very much the same lines as of old. Down in the Big Bend country of Texas, along the Rio Grande, cattle by large bunches are being driven across the river by Mexican and American rustlers.

A Cheyenne cattleman reports that fifteen per cent of his herds are lost annually to rustlers. Reports from Colorado indicate that rustling is as rife there as in the old days—and with all the dodges of the old days in use. And quite frequently, the rustlers are taken by the heels amid a flurry of six-guns. From Chicago, Kansas City, and Omaha brand inspectors report that more retouched brands come into the yards than ever before in the history of the period in which the stock associations have maintained inspectors there. And when the rustlers begin to heat their runnin' irons, the cowpokes begin to grease up their shootin' irons, and the party is all ready to begin.

One of our readers, Dr. C. A. Warner, sends us a clipping, that has such close bearing on the matter we are speaking of that we are going to quote it. "It is a practical synopsis," says Dr. Warner, "of a story in the February 25th SHORT STORIES by Barry Scobee, called 'The Phantom Horse.' This goes to show that the stories in your magazine are not exaggerations of somebody's mind, but are real happenings." Here is the clipping from the Baltimore *Evening Sun.*

COWBOYS GUNS AGAIN RULE ON NEVADA RANGES—HERDS NOW GRAZING UNDER HEAVY GUARD

MORE RAIDS AND BATTLES LOOM AS SPRING ROUNDUP NEARS

Tonopah, Nev., Feb. 29—The high price of beef has revived the wild days of the turbulent West when cattlemen and cattle rustlers battled over steers. Blazing six-guns again rule the ranges of Central Nevada, from the new lands project of the Arizona line, as watchmen guard the herds against rustlers intent upon driving off scattered bands.

The situation was alarming at the fall roundup. It promises to be more serious when the herds are rounded up for the spring drives. The rustlers now use automobiles and motor trucks in addition to their splendid horses. They swoop down on small herds on isolated ranges, whisk their loot to markets, often hundreds of miles from the scenes of their raids, and then strike suddenly in some unexpected quarter.

HEAVY LOSSES REPORTED

Alluring rewards have been offered by the Cattlemen's Association, but despite this Tonopan officials estimate that stockmen in this territory have sustained losses ranging from $50,000 to $80,000 during the last two years. Efforts of peace officers have been insufficient and large companies have hired armed men to protect their herds.

It is said the raiders generally are renegade cowboys with a sprinkling of Mexicans and half breed Indians.

Of course there is rustling today, and there always will be so long as the West has beef cattle on its ranges. The number

of beef cattle in the United States today is well over thirty million head, and as long as that much money on four legs runs around loose on the ranges, it's only human nature that someone will try to get part of it for themselves. And that, waddies, is where the six-guns are goin' to come in!

MESQUITE JENKINS, TRACKER

The art of tracking is an obvious necessity for the mountaineer or trapper, but a considerable knowledge thereof is also highly desirable in the cowboy, particularly the desert cowboy. Mesquite Jenkins, Hopalong Cassidy's remarkable side-kick, in the serial of that name by Clarence E. Mulford which begins in this issue, shows a skill at tracking that makes him not only a successful cowman but a very efficient man-hunter.

Mesquite Jenkins grew up among the Indians, and what they didn't teach him about reading sign wasn't worth knowing. Later on, Hopalong Cassidy sort of adopted the youngster, and it was the great Hopalong himself who taught young Mesquite how to throw a gun just a little bit better than the best of them. But when it came to tracking, Hopalong himself admitted that, wise to the signs of the range as he was, he simply wasn't in it with Mesquite. "That boy," Hopalong was once heard to say, "could track a ghost in broad daylight with a high wind blowing."

However that may be, it is certain that there is no form of tracking which requires as much skill as tracking a man who does not want to be tracked. In such cases every scratch on the smooth surface of a rock, every bent or broken twig, every little unnatural disturbance, whether of animal or bush, means volumes to the successful tracker. His eyes must be trained so that they miss nothing; and his brain must be alive to the significance of everything.

Such a man is Mesquite Jenkins; careful, methodical, sure, the superlative of trackers.

The average person, who has never followed the trail left by some animal, does not realize the amount of general information which is required of the good tracker. To be even a fair tracker a man must have, besides being familiar with the prints left by all animals in the neighborhood, a thorough knowledge of the habits and characteristics of the particular class of animals he would follow. He must have a superlatively keenly developed sense of observation so that he may note the peculiarities of the track left by the individual animal. And finally he must have a general knowledge of the rocks and plants of the locality in order that he may catch any irregularity which might have been caused by the passing quarry.

A freshly fallen snow makes for the most ideal tracking conditions, but even in snow the inexperienced hunter may easily go wrong. A whitetail deer, for instance, when startled will travel in great leaps with all four feet coming down in the same spot, so that the track looks as though it were merely where snow had fallen from the overhanging trees. Also there are any number of tricks used by the man, and sometimes the animal, who is actually trying to confuse the tracker. Wading in water, where tracking is obviously impossible is one such; doubling back is another. This latter is done by walking backwards in one's own tracks, then leaping wide of the trail and starting off in a new direction.

But when there is no snow it takes real skill to follow even the simplest trail, yet this is what is required of the desert cowboy. On hard or broken ground it is impossible to track any but the heavy animals, such as horses and cows, and even horses, if unshod, can and often do get away from the trailer. In such cases, if the animals are loose and not being driven, the cowboy will guess, from any little part of their trail he may find, just where they are headed and by riding directly there will often find his quarry. Naturally for him to guess with any degree of accuracy he must be thoroughly familiar with the habits of the animals and the country in which they are traveling.

LOOT!

Pat Greene needs no introduction to our readers, but he sends along a mighty interesting letter about how he came to write

"Devil's Kloof," his splendid story of the Major in this issue of SHORT STORIES. And if any of you foot-loose hombres want to take a shot at lost gold, Pat Greene's letter tells you a good place to start in!

"Devil's Kloof" was written chiefly because I was curious to know what sort of man the Major was in the days before his reputation was made, and it seemed that the best adventure on which to embark him was a treasure hunt: specially as South Africa is a fertile field for treasure seekers. The explanation given in the story of how the treasure was hidden in "Devil's Kloof" is, of course, purely imaginary although it is based upon probability. One of the old Portuguese historians—I think it was Diogo Do Couto—relates the desertion of soldiers from Barreto's Expedition which traveled far up the Zambesi in 1569. These men took with them Church jewels. A Jesuit priest followed them and after extraordinary adventures succeeded in recovering the stolen property. That story must be written some day.

"And, speaking of treasures, in the early days of the Portuguese occupation of South East Africa, many of their ships homeward bound, treasure laden from India were wrecked on the South East coast. In a number of cases the crews managed to reach shore in safety and carried with them all the treasure they possibly could. These men were then faced with a perilous journey through unknown country before they could reach the white settlements. And as only a very few of them survived the ordeal, it is quite fair to assume, I think, that the treasure was cached somewhere en route. Especially does this seem feasible when one considers that the survivors reached the settlements practically naked and without equipment of any sort whatsoever.

"Undoubtedly, much of this treasure fell into the hands of natives. It is creditably reported that a Transvaal farmer purchased from a native a gun of antique pattern with a barrel over six feet in length, the stock and butt of which was inlaid with 'beautiful red stones,' probably rubies. Another article which he is reported to have purchased was an elaborately carved, yellow wooden box, about eighteen inches square set with 'blue, white and red stones.' This box is said to have contained also a jeweled crucifix.

"There have been many organized efforts to recover the treasure believed to be in the holds of some fifty known wrecks that dot the South African coast from Port Shepstone to Cape Agulhas, but so far the results have not been encouraging."

COMIN' THROUGH!

Out on the ranges spring round-up's over an' done with, and right now the herds are stringin' out along the trail! They're comin', hombres, they're comin'! Dust rollin' out under 'em like cannon smoke, horns a-bobbin' and glitterin' in the sunlight—they're comin', hombres, point swing an drag of 'em. Red River's high, an' the raiders are out in the Territory, but the trail herds are comin' through! An' right up in the lead, same as always, comes that big Double S spread, swingin' through to you in spite of hell'n high water. First to round up in the Spring, first to hit the trail, leading the field straight across the finish to the markets an' landin' their prime steers in A-1 condition. That's the Double S! It gets the pick of the ranges—an' here's what's in store for you waddies in the next bunch of yarns comin' up the trail:

Right up at the head of the herd, with a big iron bell round its neck, is a r'arin', t'arin', snortin' headliner—THE HIGH NOTE BANDIT, by William West Winter—with fast action popping in every paragraph. A complete novel that no one who likes to see a red-blooded hero forkin' wild ones and slingin' lead with a salty gang will want to miss. An' right on its heels comes Part II of Clarence Mulford's great serial about Hopalong Cassidy's pal, MESQUITE JENKINS. In this installment Mesquite is ridin' hard on the murderer's heels—don't miss it, folks!

Those are the big rannihan leaders of the herd, and they are as good as they come. But right after 'em as splendid a lot of dogie-shorts are kickin' dust as you ever laid eyes on. CORPORAL DOWNEY DISMISSES A CASE, by James B. Hendryx—a fine tale of the Canadian Mounted; DUTY, by H. C. Wire—the story of a man who wasn't his brother's keeper, except in line of duty; and THE GOLD BRICK CATTLE COMPANY, a laughing, crackling, suspenseful rodeo yarn by Stephen Payne—these are just a few of the big bunch of fast steppers that are COMIN' THROUGH to make you waddies lick your chops over the June 10th issue of SHORT STORIES. And say—better reserve your copies now!

A DOLLAR IN NOME—A QUARTER HERE!

Folks, this time the $25 prize in the SHORT STORIES letter contest goes to a comrade whose feet are trail-wise and

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

whose hands know the feel of a miner's pick. A mighty interesting letter, Mr. Geddes, and in the lingo of the Solid South:

"You gwine ter git suthin' that you don' expec',
It ain't no letter but it am a check!"

If you don't believe it—look in the mail box!

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
Dear Sir:

I camped one night in a cave in the mountains of Sonora, old Mexico, and discovered there a SHORT STORIES magazine. It was the first copy I had seen and, I read every word and letter of it and left it there for the next prospector who came that way. The second copy I came across many months later in a little old log cabin tucked away on a hillside back of Leesburg, a deserted placer mining camp up in Idaho, and since that time I have seldom missed a copy and have paid as high as five dollars for one. No, not intentionally. The camp flunky took a five dollar bill of mine to get me a magazine, got the SHORT STORIES all right but got soused on the rest and I never did get any change back. But if he enjoyed the jag as much as I did the book, we're even. You'll pay four bits to a dollar a piece for them up around Nome, Alaska.

Two Swedes, a Norwegian, myself (Scotch) and Greasie the cook (pedigree unknown) were up in that country a couple of years ago and as none of them could read English without asking me how to pronounce many words and what they meant, I took to reading aloud in self defense of an evening. They would gather around while I read "Bar 20 Rides Again," often by the light of the midnight sun, and in that stirring tale we forgot the sting of the "no see 'ems" (little black flies that came in swarms and stung like the devil). More than once some one of us has made that seventy mile trip for nothing else on earth but the magazine so we could, as the Swede used to say, "hair soom more about "Yump again Kas-se-e-d-ity"; and the other one "square head" would say "Aye tank dese Tex bane brutter in law to Pol Bonyun."

I wonder where those four boys are tonight, four as square shootin' pardners as ever donned a parka. As I sit here writing I can see the light of the observatory on Mt. Wilson and looking out over the San Gabriel Valley count the lights of a dozen trains and I wonder if the call of the wide places will again prove stronger than the lure of my Southern California home and again set my feet to the dim trails and waterways. The smell of wood smoke, the crack of a rifle, the crash of a falling tree, the lurch of a canoe, and after all else the taste of camp grub, are bait hard indeed to resist. SHORT STORIES doesn't tend to lessen the temptation, for in it I can see again and at times live over once more countr., manners, and happenings so true to life as I have seen it that it is hard to realize they are only tales. Some of the authors make some rather odd mistakes, it is true, but then that's all right with me; never a kick have I so long as the writer knows his stuff in the main, and believe me, they all do.

With best wishes for the long life of SHORT STORIES and my thanks to yourself and the rest of the staff, I am

Yours truly,
Charles Geddes,
813 Mooney Drive,
Monterey Park, Cal.

These women know

Women who are sophisticated in their beauty-lore choose complexion soap for one essential quality—its *purity*.

They know that soap and water can do the one all-important thing needed to keep their skins lovely—cleanse them safely and gently. But the soap must be as pure as soap can be.

And being *very* fastidious, such women are likely to prefer a fine *white* soap, honestly made, carefully blended, with a fresh, clean, unobtrusive fragrance which never makes itself known above the perfumes they use.

This is why Ivory is the toilet soap of millions of discerning women. They know it *is* as pure as a soap can be—carefully blended. Its fresh lather is smooth, clear, bubbly and rinses off completely leaving their faces cool, smooth, refreshed . . . . Ivory cannot promise new faces for old, or eternal youth. But Ivory does give to the most delicate complexions perfect, gentle cleansing. And this gift makes it as fine a beauty-soap as you can find.

PROCTER & GAMBLE

IVORY SOAP

KIND TO EVERYTHING IT TOUCHES

99 44/100 % pure · It floats

"World's Champion Candy—HOME-MADE"

That's what folks think of Oh Henry!—absolute knock-out. 'Cause it's made the home-made way—made of the very things, the choice, quality things that come out of your own pantry. And we don't care who knows it. That's why we tell just how we make Oh Henry!

So if you are one of the millions who know how good home-made candy can be, just ask for Oh-Henry! at any candy counter.

look!

FUDGE CENTER: 1½ cups pure cane sugar; ½ teaspoon creamery butter; 1 cup rich, full cream milk; 1 cup corn syrup; white of one egg.

CARAMEL LAYER: 4 teaspoons creamery butter; 1¼ cups corn syrup; 3 cups rich, full cream milk; ¼ teaspoon salt.

PEANUT LAYER: 3 cups prime No. 1 Spanish whole nuts, roasted in oil (hulls removed).

CHOCOLATE COATING: Melt one pound pure milk chocolate.

Oh Henry!

Now in both 5¢ and 10¢ size

Dandruff? Not a trace!

If you, or any member of your family have the slightest evidence of dandruff, we urge you to try this treatment, which has benefited thousands:—

Simply douse Listerine, full strength, on the hair. Vigorously massage the scalp forward, backward, up and down. Keep up this treatment systematically for several days, using a little olive oil in case your hair is excessively dry.

You will be amazed at the speed and thoroughness with which Listerine gets rid of dandruff. Even severe cases that costly so-called "cures" have failed to improve, have responded to the Listerine method. We have the unsolicited word of many to this effect.

The moment you discover dandruff, use Listerine at once—and repeatedly.

LISTERINE

—the safe antiseptic

LAMBERT PHARMACAL COMPANY

St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

You'll like it

Listerine Tooth Paste is as refreshing as it is effective, and but 25c a large tube.

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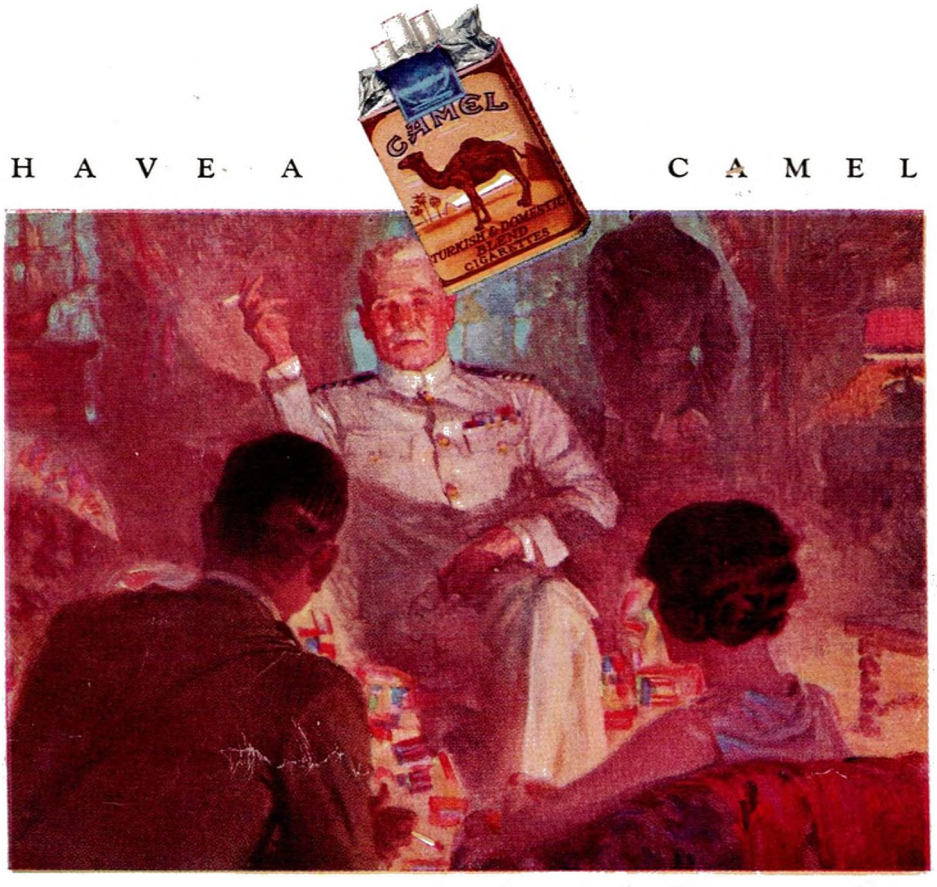

The cigarette that's liked for itself

It is sheer enjoyment of smoking that has made Camel the most popular cigarette of all time. Nothing takes the place of fragrant, mellow tobaccos.

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