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Short Stories

25c

Twice A Month

September 25th

JACKSON GREGORY — F. R. PIERCE — FRED MOORE

A Novelette of the Pearling Islands by

GORDON YOUNG

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Short

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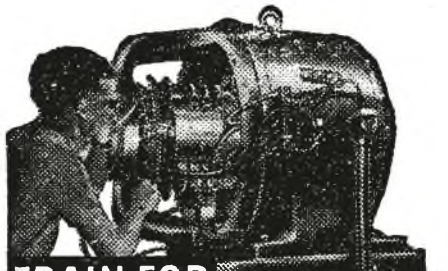

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31x5.25-21		3.25	1.15
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THE last Tuttle story we had in SHORT STORIES was "Straws in the Wind," which Mr. Tuttle himself said was a bit off trail for him, but, we felt, a jolly good story. In our next issue will be a story of our old friend Sad Sontag —and very much on his old trail. Sad and Swede Harrigan have been hellingaround for quite a long time now, and they never fail to get in on something worth while in the way of adventures, although they never admit to doing anything but working for tobacco and overalls. The new story about them is "Sontag and the Rider in Black," and is an extra long novelette by W. C. Tuttle.

* * * * *

Another favorite character with SHORT STORIES readers, one at the very opposite pole from Sad Sontag, is Kappie De Vries of the Dutch police in the East Indies, the very-damned policeman of the R. V. Gery stories. In his last tale of Kappie's doings Mr. Gery showed that the fiery Dutchman very nearly got married, and the new story shows that he finally did. And what better wife for a police official than the daughter of sea pirates of old, brave, fiery, and herself every bit as much of a fighter as her husband? It looks as if Micaela were going to be a very real asset to Kappie in his police business, but that alone time—and possibly the author—can tell. But in the meantime don't miss "The Dutchman Lays a Ghost" in the next SHORT STORIES.

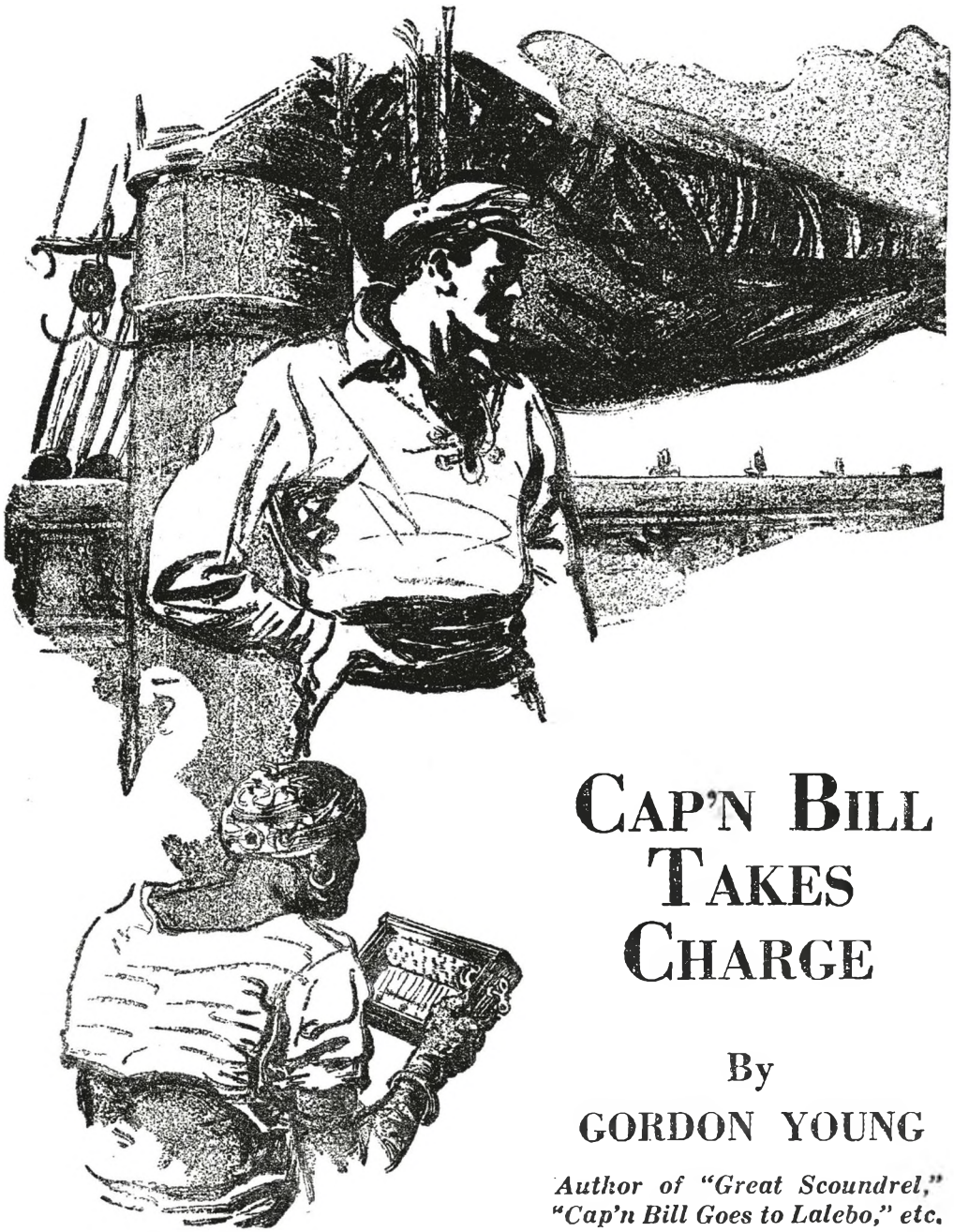
* * * * *

Ray Millholland has a story of early days in America in the next SHORT STORIES—of a time when the Colonies were at war with the mother country and, just as to-day, spies were at work back and forth across the lines. And, of course, counter spies had to get into the game as well. Mr. Millholland is a student of his country's history at that time, and much of his enthusiasm is reflected in the doings in "The Quaker Road to Princeton."

* * * * *

The geographer chasers ought to have a good time with the next number; Friel in Venezuela, Gery in the Dutch East Indies, Frank Leahy on the ocean's bed, Tuttle in the Southwest United States, Kenneth Perkins on the West Coast—and so it goes. All in all, a very good issue.

Coming up in the next issue



CAP'N BILL TAKES CHARGE

By

GORDON YOUNG

Author of "Great Scoundrel," "Cap'n Bill Goes to Lalebo," etc.

I

THE Karusian natives were a scrubby lot, but they liked Cap'n Bill Jones and they liked the fat German trader who had settled in the windward village after a hurricane had flattened his cocoa-nut plantation three or four years back over in the Kingsmill group; but they did not like Gorbin, the planter, who was a fierce mean man that walked with—not a limp exactly, but a drag to his leg.

In less than five years this Gorbin had three partners, all newcomers to the South

Red Heads Have a High Value among the Islanders; the Brains in 'em Rate High among the Traders.

Seas with a bit of cash and dreams of the idyllic life; and all were soon glad to get out and go their way. Gorbin was helped to this swindle by a fellow named Trasks over on Tarura where tourists and dreamers came; and now Gorbin had another new partner, a man with a wife and daughter and a bit of money.

Cap'n Bill came in with stores for the plantation and for his friend the trader who was one of the few Dutchmen that Bill liked. He let the village chief and some of the prettier girls—who were always his friends—on board while breaking out stores, but made the other natives, who swarmed about in canoes wanting to trade, stand off, not because he was afraid of them but because they cluttered up the deck, got in the way, were a nuisance.

On the whole they were a treacherous lot, but they did have a grateful memory of the time that Cap'n Bill, who carried a crew of wild mop-headed Malaita boys—the savagest of the savage Solomon Islanders—came in on his dirty little knockabout schooner when a French kidnapper for a Tahitian plantation, was going out with a dozen or so of Karusian natives that he had lured on board and clapped under the hatch. They were worth $20 a head at Tahiti and the Frenchman was a business man.

Cap'n Bill knew the Frenchman, knew his tricks, knew from the excitement on the beach and the frantic skimming about of the little bug-like outriggers, just about what had happened; so he simply let go his anchors in the channel, blocking the passage, then he tumbled his armed cannibals into a whaleboat, boarded the Frenchman, knocked off the hatch cover.

Cap'n Bill put the Frenchman into a scupper way with a smack of palm no harder than he often used to smack flies that bit his own hide; then he explained to the French skipper, who sat spitting strange oaths through his beard, that it was too much brandy and such that had misguided him into the kidnapping. Thereupon, to keep Monsieur from doing a thing like that again, Cap'n Bill transferred a few cases, or all he could find, of the Frenchman's choicer liquors to his own schooner; but he didn't take so much as one bottle of trade gin since that, in Bill's opinion, would have been stealing.

IT HAPPENED that Cap'n Bill had been born at sea in the South Seas, and had grown up on rolling decks and coral beaches. He didn't have the best name in the world, being very careless about what he owed, at times about what he borrowed; and he had strange ideas about honesty—so strange that he was sometimes called a "pirate."

In the early 1880's a man could do just about as he pleased in the South Seas as long as he didn't displease somebody that could lick him; and Cap'n Bill was a young reckless brawny fellow, usually half naked and nearly always barefooted, with touseled brick-red hair, child-like blue eyes, fists as hard as oak knots, and a love of women that was strangely tender and often got him into trouble.

His *Alice-Ann* was a dirty little schooner that he had got hold of a couple of years back down in Sydney; and, with much the same sort of wisdom that Solomon would have shown had he been a seafaring man, Bill eased the jealousy of two nice barmaids—at least Bill thought they were nice—by christening her the *Alice-Ann*.

So on the whole people who knew about Bill, and had never bumped into his fists, liked him; but strangers eyed him with suspicious uneasiness because he looked rather like a brute, was plain spoken with a puzzling good-humor, and an even more puzzling red-headed temper that made him extremely reckless.

II

A WHALEBOAT pushed through the canoes, came alongside, and Bill helped the fat trader on deck. Bonn was a thick-bodied, thick-headed Dutchman who looked rather like a walrus with a beard; but he knew more about the South Seas, about natives, about plantations than most people; but being a philosopher, he quit worrying about making money, drank too much and grew too fat. His young wife was a bit lacking in beauty, but he was too continuously drunk to notice a trifle like that. She loved her husband, for he was a mild old scoundrel, and she loved the brawny red-headed Cap'n Bill because her father had been one of the natives under the French kidnapper's hatch cover.

Bonn puffed and swore and mopped his face, and accused Bill of purposely spoiling his nap by coming in the middle of the afternoon; and he had a case of his beer opened then and there. The Dutchman's words were heavy with accent; "good" was "gudt," and many of the others were hazy grunts. "Too damn lazy to learn English," said Cap'n Bill. He was really fond of the Dutchman who was gentle, wise and honest.

The village chief was a withered crafty old fellow with deep-set hazy eyes and a monkey's way of sitting on his haunches. He squatted on the deck, fiddling with Cap'n Bill's gifts, among them a dinky music box that he would wind up and turn

over with solemn inspection while a tinny melody strummed. Bonn sat down beside him and they drank warm beer while Bonn's wife played with the music box and the Karusian girls scampered about the deck. They weren't very pretty, being black, kinky headed, flat-faced; but Cap'n Bill liked all the girls.

It was hot as the devil's oven with a feel in the air that meant storm. The Malaita boys worked with a kind of show-off energy and much shouting.

What Bonn said was one thing, but what he meant was, "You are bringing a lot of truck for that fellow up there," and sluggishly pointed toward the hill where the planter's new house, looking in the distance very like a tiny match box, sat on rising ground. Bonn puffed a time or two on his big pipe and grunted, unfavorably. He would have no dealings with the big mean Gorbin, and Gorbin's new partner was a lean aristocratic man who would have no dealings at all with boozy Bonn.

Cap'n Bill growled. He, too, would have no dealings with Gorbin, had never seen him except at a distance. And Cap'n Bill didn't like dealing with Trasks—whom he owed a thousand dollars. But because there was now a woman and a girl on the plantation, Trasks had been able to persuade Bill to bring stores.

The old chief guzzled the foamy warm beer, grimaced in pleasure, wrapped a ropy arm about Bonn's thick neck, clucked his friendliness. Bonn gave his big straw hat to his wife and told her to fan him, rewardingly gave her a sip from the bottle. "Bad," said Bonn, gesturing shoreward with the pipe stem. "Padt," he called it, gazing at the far-off new house.

Two horses came out of the jungle path that led to the beach, small wiry horses, and on one was a woman. A half dozen of the planter's blacks straggled out of the bush and went to the boat house in which the plantation's whaleboat was kept.

Old Joe, Cap'n Bill's mate, was a fuzzy-faced dried up wisp of a man with a temper like a wasp and a long double-edged knife in a sheath on his hip. What Old Joe lacked in size he made up in ferocity; and it pleased him to find fault garrulously with whatever Cap'n Bill did, for having sailed with Bill's father, he knew he could say what he pleased.

"White woman comin' to see you," said Joe. "Better go put on some clothes an' sarve tea!"

"If she's purty," said Bill.

"Bah!" said Old Joe who did not like women, especially did not like Bill's liking them.

THE girl came aboard with her nose in the air. It was a pretty nose. She was a pretty thing, eighteen to twenty, slender, aristocratic, and proud, with red hair hanging in curls. From the way she looked about her it was evident that she was new to the South Seas, and not pleased by what she saw on the island trader's deck.

"I'm Cap'n Bill." He put out his hand, grinned.

Kate Cramer drew herself up, stared at the bare-breasted, massive-shouldered sailor as if he had said something impolite. He was half naked, his shoulders were higher than her pretty head, his bony face was the color of weathered bronze.

No woman ever embarrassed Cap'n Bill and this one didn't.

"You're purty," he told her. "Red-headed, too. Over in the Solomons they 'specially like to get hold of our red-heads."

She looked as astounded as if face-to-face with a crazy man.

The Karusian girls came with a patter and staring eagerness at the white lady, huddled close to Bill, and one timidly reached out to finger the white girl's dress, curiously.

"Don't touch me!" Kate said with a kind of shudder, and raised the riding crop.

"You lay that on one of those kids,"

said Cap'n Bill, "an' you'll be the first girl I ever slapped. Anyhow," he added good humoredly, "the first purty one!"

That left the amazed Cramer girl simply breathless, and angered.

Cramer was slim and tall, with a too yellowish look to be merely sunburn. He had a thin well moulded face, a thin mustache, something of a military air and as formal an aloofness as an officer on parade.

"You make rather free with your language, Captain Jones," he said coldly.

"My ship. These native kids are my friends. They're curious little monkeys, and if the Miss here had been in the South Seas long, she'd know native girls want to finger what white women wear. And," Bill added, not angered at all but matter-of-fact, "anybody as don't want to meet my friends can stay ashore."

Cramer coolly looked at the half drunk old chief, at the boozy Bonn, fatly sprawled on the deck, his head in his wife's lap. "Friends? I see. Very well. But it happens that you have my stores on board. In the future, Captain, I shall not trouble you with them."

"And will save me plenty of trouble, Mister. Trasks there in Tarura—in case you don't know it yet—is a damn swab. Low enough to even try to hold out a dozen cases of your stuff. Said it was already sent aboard. I said I'd break his damn neck. So he said there'd been a mistake. It," Bill added carelessly, "is a mistake for anybody to do business with that fellow."

The slim planter stiffened. He had rather the proud look of a brave man surprised by danger. There wasn't any danger. He clipped the words sharply. "I find your comments rather out of place."

"Oh, do you?" said Bill. "Well, listen. From the look of this pretty daughter of yours, and the look of yourself, you don't know anything about the South Seas. You're the fourth pardner Gorbin has had in five years, and he made the others glad to pull out and leave what they'd sunk—then Trasks sells another stranger a half interest in the plantation. If it was only yourself, I wouldn't say a word—but there's two white women and—"

Cramer interrupted coolly. "Just get my stores ashore, Captain, if you please."

"Just give me ninety-two dollars."

Cramer flushed slightly. "I came off without money. But I shall send it down to you." He was very erect, seemed very much the proud gentleman, and the pretty daughter stared at Bill as if she hated him.

Cap'n Bill looked at her—and winked. Her cheeks grew as red as her hair, she pressed her lips tightly, and was glad to get into the boat and go ashore.

III

STORM was coming. Black clouds rolled over the hills like smoke from a wet wood fire. When stores were ashore and the cheery haggling with the natives finished, Cap'n Bill, with a care like tenderness, helped the beer-drunken old chief into a canoe, saw that the schooner was made snug, and went ashore with Trader Bonn for a game and some song.

Wind shook the bush with petulant blasts, then rain began. It poured down as if splashed from buckets, gurgled over the sandy ground. The fat Bonn and merry Cap'n Bill, snug under the thick thatch of the trader's house, with the light of a smelly kerosene lamp on their faces, ate fish and rice and drank gin. Bonn had a roaring voice, and now and then over the tin cup would say that Bill was "der pest tamn veller in der vorl'!"

Cap'n Bill cocked his head to listen. The sound was repeated—a voice came through the wash and pound of rain. He jumped to the open doorway, peered, and a streak of lightning showed a figure in oilskins and sou'wester lurching forward as if struggling.

Bill ran out, caught the man, helped him into the house. He was a long-nosed white

man, gasping for breath, with fear in his eyes.

He dropped heavily to the mat with water spilling about him and rubbed at a knee.

"The blacks—up yonder!" The man moved an arm vaguely.

Bonn nodded his shaggy head, rumbled, "I toldt you, Ritter. Ya!" Bonn grunted at Bill as he gave Ritter a sip of gin. All of Gorbin's blacks were kidnapped. Gorbin was a brute anyhow; and one of his tricks, so Bonn said, was to mistreat the natives until they made a clamorous row and that frightened his "partners," helped make them eager to abandon dreams of an island paradise, pull out. What he had told Ritter was that some day the blacks would get out of hand.

Bill eyed this man and wondered if Gorbin's other overseers were as weak-chinned. Ritter stared uneasily as if still afraid about something, rubbed at his knee and now and then seemed to remember to groan.

"Cramer sent me—help. He wants you to bring your crew and—his wife and daughter—he's afraid, Captain!"

"May be padt," said Bonn solemnly.

"My knee!" Ritter stroked it with both hands. "I wrenched it once before. Weeks before I could walk—" His frightened look pleaded with Bill. "They can keep my wages. Will you take me when you sail? I—I can't work and Gorbin is—is a devil!"

"If there's any danger," said Bill moodily, "I'd better go. Not wait for the crew. Be near an hour before they'd get ashore. Bonn, give me a lantern and shotgun. Roust out some natives to take this fellow to the schooner. You tell Old Joe to get ashore with the crew and come along up."

"I'll do it, Captain. I'll do it," said Ritter eagerly. "An'—an' can I stay on board —when you leave?"

Bill made no reply. He was thinking of plantations he had visited after the blacks had got out of hand; and women were on this one.

Bonn moved about with waddling haste and fetched a lantern, brought his double-barreled shotgun that he kept for pigeon shooting, and a small bag of shells.

"I would go along but—py Gott!" Bonn grunted and moved his hands to show that he was too fat and heavy to be on a slippery hillside trail in the rain.

"Even if ever'thing is all right," said Bill, "it's worth going. That fellow owes me ninety-two dollars. I'll just collect."

Lightning whipped through the jungle from time to time and a flood of rain followed the thunder, and the trail was so soaked with water that it was mushy. Cap'n Bill lurched on, the lantern dangling in one hand, the shotgun in the other.

He caught a winking glare of light through the tree tops. That meant fire, and fire in such a rain seemed to him to mean that the planter's house was burning; and as he hurried on he could hear yelling.

Bill stumbled out into the clearing, tossed the lantern aside and ran forward. The blacks' quarters only were on fire, and the thick thatch flung sizzling flames at the rain.

IV

CRAMER'S house was between Bill and the fire, and as he ran forward a man called sharply from a corner of the veranda.

"Almost potted you!" the man said in a way that sounded as if he wished that Cap'n Bill had been a black. "Why don't you wear clothes like a white man? In the light you looked like a nigger!"

That made Bill mad, but he didn't say anything because he was relieved to find that the fellow was not scared. He was wrapped in oilskins that swished as he took Bill along the veranda where people stood back from the splatter of rain and watched the fire.

Cramer came up with a quick stride in oilskins that rustled. There was a slim military briskness in his movement, the discourtesy of a superior officer in his, "It has taken you a long time to get here!"

"Has it? You might go down and run up to see how much quicker you can come!"

Cramer said, "I'm sorry," and put out a hand that Bill would not take. The hand touched Bill's shoulder apologetically. "We have been anxious. Gorbin says that it is just touch-and-go."

"Does he? Hm. Have they had liquor?"

"No."

"Have they got firearms?"

"No."

"How many are they?"

"Forty-two or three."

"Then," said Bill, "I wouldn't waste much time bein' scared. They're yellin' now, but will pipe down when the fire goes out. They're afraid of the dark and hate bein' out in the rain. They'll go huddle up in the sheds or wherever it's dry."

"Did Ritter come back with you?"

"He twisted his knee and can't walk. I was ashore and sent him to the schooner for the crew. Most likely they won't be along till they're good and ready—bein' afraid of the dark and not wantin' to get wet! I could've brought 'em, but would have lost near an hour. I grabbed this shotgun and come on. And," said Bill, "as far as any need of me, I might as well start back!"

Cramer spoke in a low tone. "Please, Captain, I wish that you would remain." His voice was not nervous, but it was earnest.

Two men, each with a rifle and rustle of black oilskins, came up out of the rain. "There are four of us," said Cramer, meaning four men. A group of women stood some steps away. "This is Gorbin. Gorbin, the captain doesn't think there is much danger."

"Oh he don't?" Gorbin snapped, resentfully. "'F he'd had to fight for his life as many times as I have up here—no danger, heh?"

GORBIN'S voice was hoarse and fierce. Against the dancing flames that roared and sizzled in the rain, Bill glimpsed the silhouette of a big man who had a hawk's beak for a nose. "A devil," the fagged out Ritter had said. Gorbin leaned forward, peering as if the better to see what sort of man would say there was no danger when the blacks were yelling out in the darkness beyond the fire, and capering shadows flitted through the light.

"An' I'll thank you to just keep your mouth shut!" said Gorbin fiercely. "I know what's what up here!"

"Some other people do, too," said Bill.

Gorbin hunched forward as if to ask just what Bill meant, but was perhaps afraid Bill might tell him. "Yes," said Gorbin, as if he had been asked how the trouble started, "I tore some patches off a cannibal's black hide this afternoon just to teach him a lesson!" He shifted his rifle and illustrated with sweep of arm how he had used the lash. "Nobody gets the best of me!" He seemed trying to convey a warning to Cap'n Bill.

"Trasks gets the best of ever'body!" said Cap'n Bill.

It was dark on the veranda, but he could tell that Gorbin turned his head in a quick look toward the slimly erect Cramer who was hearing all this.

"You," said Gorbin savagely, "ain't got such a good name yourself!"

And, as if that ended the argument to his satisfaction, he made a sound like laughter, said, "Come on, Durk," and walked away with the second man following. Bill noticed that Gorbin had a slight dragging limp as if his leg had been broken and not properly mended—or as if at sometime in his life he had dragged a ball and chain.

Cramer asked Bill very quietly if he would have coffee.

He led the way with rasping swish of oilskins into a room that was lined with books. A lamp hung in chains from the ceiling and another lamp with a yellow shade stood on the table where several books were lying, some open.

Cramer stripped his oilskins and laid them across a chair, straightened his straight shoulders as if being rigidly erect were a life-long habit. He looked at Cap'n Bill, meeting Bill's straight and not quite friendly stare, then pointed to a chair. "Sit down, Captain."

There was a stiffness about Mr. Cramer as if he did not know how to unbend even when he wanted to. His thin face had the look of having become rigidly expressionless from being on guard; and Cap'n Bill, who had grown up in a rough-and-tumble world, had an instinctive distrust of cool politeness. To him, who said what he thought and did what he pleased, "manners" seemed a tricky affectation.

Bill sat down and gave an incredulous look around at the books. When it came to reading, Cap'n Bill went slow, spelled out many of the words, mumbled to himself.

A native girl in a badly fitting and clamily wet calico gown came with a pot of coffee and tall cups. Bill eyed her, judging from her straight hair, pretty eyes, sweet expression that she was a Samoan; but he didn't say anything; and she went out with such a lingering backward stare at him as almost to bump against the woman who was entering.

"Laulii, my dear!" the woman exclaimed unreproachfully and smiled.

Cramer stood up. "My wife, Captain Jones."

Bill got up, thrust out his hand. Mrs. Cramer was a slender tired woman who must have been beautiful in her youth and was now attractive, though her face was lined and weary. There was a sweet gentleness about her that appealed to the burly Cap'n Bill as much, if not more, than any prettiness of feature. Her eyes had a furtively anxious look as some women's eyes do when they are deeply troubled and brave. The bottom of her dress was soaked by rain splatter, and even with a heavy plaid shawl over her shoulders she seemed chilled.

She showed definite hesitation about taking that out-thrust, tar-stained hand. He was big, half naked, his red hair was sopping, his body was darkly sun-burned and he had a bony face that needed shaving. If she had heard of him she had not heard much that was reassuring; but his blue eyes were as clear and direct as a child's. Mrs. Cramer smiled and gave him a delicate hand.

Bill held on to the hand. "A woman like you has no more business in the bush than I'd have in heaven." He said it simply.

Mrs. Cramer's first look was startled, then she forced a laugh and withdrew her hand. Her fingers were cold; his hand had been warm. "Perhaps the captain would like brandy in his coffee, Charles. Would you, Captain?"

"I would," said Bill.

Mrs. Cramer sat down and stared at Cap'n Bill, who took the bottle from Cramer, pulled the cork and sniffed. "Um," said Bill and half filled the cup, and drank without waiting for the coffee.

Cramer gave his wife a cup of coffee, then sat down. He did not seem to know just how to begin. "Captain, I understand that the black laborers here have all been—kidnapped."

"How else would you get boys to work under Gorbin?"

Mrs. Cramer glanced aside quickly at her husband and drew a slow breath, then she closed her eyes for a moment as if some kind of regrets troubled her. Bill thought that being in a place like this was enough regret for any woman.

Cramer tried to smile. "I believe that part of my irritation today on board your ship was because you—you told me the truth. I don't know much about planting. But I have gone into it and must—" He nodded faintly. Words weren't needed. He felt that he had to go through with it.

Cap'n Bill poured more brandy.

"Just what," Cramer asked earnestly, "is wrong?"

THAT took Cap'n Bill aback. It was unexpected, coming from the aloof Cramer; and Bill would have told him flatly enough, but he could not say things that would frighten and sadden this lovely woman. He had already told him that Trasks was a swindler and as much as said Gorbin was a scoundrel; but now under Mrs. Cramer's gently earnest look he felt uncomfortable.

"Oh, well, Trasks and me don't get on. For instance, he says I owe 'im a thousand dollars. I owed it to the old Island Company. Now he owns the company. I won't pay it to him. When I get it, I'll pay it to the manager of the old company. If he wants to give it to Trasks—all right. I won't. No."

"But this plantation, Captain. Oughtn't it to be profitable?" Mrs. Cramer asked. "We came here to—to retire from the world and—" She smiled wearily.

Cap'n Bill was like a man in a corner who did not want to fight his way out. He felt that they were suspicious of Trasks and distrustful of Gorbin. Had he said what he wanted to it would have been, "Pack up and get out. This plantation is just a hokus-swindle that Gorbin and Trasks play on newcomers from the States"; but he couldn't say that to Mrs. Cramer. It would have been too much like striking her in the face.

"I'm a trader—not a planter," said Bill. "And a trader has troubles—here and there. Take over in the Solomons. A red head like mine"—he ran his fingers through the wet red hair—"is worth more to a cannibal than other people's. So ever' so often somebody over there tries to take it away from me. And there's a fight. No hard feelings at all. They know beforehand the price they'll have to pay if they don't get my head. And I know how I'll feel if they do. So it's a sort of bargain. Why, many's the day I've had 'em try to cut off my schooner in the morning and be back to trade in the afternoon—some of 'em still bleedin' from the edge of my cutlass. I know when I go in that they'll get me if they can. So after they make their try, the sooner we settle down to trade, the better for all hands.

"Ho," Bill concluded, "plenty of whites try to cut my throat in the way of business. Some at the table over a bottle of whisky. Blacks are more open and aboveboard. And speakin' of business, by the way, you owe me ninety-two dollars."

"That is right," said Mr. Cramer calmly. He stood up, slimly erect, took a heavy key on a thong from his pocket, picked up the lamp from the table, then went to a narrow door between the ends of shelves, pushed it with his foot, and the door swung to behind him when he passed through.

CAP'N BILL heard a sound very much like that of a man surprised by a deadly blow. Mrs. Cramer jumped up with a look of terror, cried out, then seemed unable to move; but Bill leaped from the chair and jumped across the room, pushed through the door.

Cramer stood in the center of a large closet and stooped with the lamp out at arm's length.

Near the wall was a heavy iron-bound

chest with lid thrown back and it was empty. A few papers were scattered on the floor and among them was the shimmer of some gold coins that the thief had dropped.

Bill went near the chest and looked into it. A crowbar lay on the floor.

Mrs. Cramer stopped in the doorway. The shawl had slipped half off her shoulders and both hands were against her throat as if trying to choke back a cry. Cramer straightened and faced her, holding the lamp slightly above her head, and the glow fell on her face. The rain beat down on the roof, gurgled and splashed, and that was the only sound for some seconds.

Cramer slowly placed the lamp on a bracket. She stared at him and did not move as he put his arms about her. "We are—ruined," he said quietly. Her head trembled in little nods.

Cap'n Bill stood with his shoulders against the wall and scowled at Cramer. The scowl merely showed how hard he was thinking and how puzzled he felt. They so completely forgot him that when he spoke both turned as if they had been surprised by an intruder.

"Nobody can get off this island—at least not till another trader comes in. So whoever done it, ought to be easy caught."

Neither said anything. Tears came into Mrs. Cramer's eyes but she did not wipe them, and Cramer drew a deep breath that quivered. His thin face was tensely strained, but he stood as erect and appeared as calm as ever.

"How much?" Bill asked.

"I had about ten thousand dollars," Cramer said, looking toward the empty chest. "All that was left. I was told that it was best to have gold at hand."

Cap'n Bill nodded. Many shrewd planters kept what gold they could by them. The best bargains were made with traders and blackbirders that did not want to touch things like drafts and checks.

"I'd be damn suspicious of the first man that tries to get off the island." To Bill's way of thinking, Gorbin was the thief. Yet would Gorbin try to get off the island? Just set tight until the ruined Cramers had to leave.

V

WHEN Gorbin came into the room of books, Cap'n Bill had the first good look. He was a big man, but for all of his size there was a muscular leanness to Gorbin and a kind of ferocity in his face that made Bill think he whipped blacks more for his own pleasure than their punishment. The hawk beak of a nose may have got its shape from being broken, and it gave a fierce expression, but not more fierce than the sullen stare in the deep-set eyes. A scar somewhat longer than an inch curved above his right eye as if his forehead had been jaggedly cut. In healing, the skin had puckered in a way that lifted the eyebrow. The slight drag to his right leg reminded Bill of men who, he knew, had worn heavy irons.

Mrs. Cramer withdrew almost as soon as Gorbin came in, but he bowed to her respectfully, gave Bill a quick hard look, asked:

"You sent for me, Cramer?"

Gorbin went into the closet, looked at the broken strong box and began to swear and stamp. He raged about, swinging his arms, wondering who could have done it, when and how it could have been done.

"None of my men," he said, and glared at Cap'n Bill. He said, "That nearly ruins us—unless Trasks—" Then he shook his head as if he didn't want to go on. He took off his hat and threw it on the floor, then picked it up and put it on, rubbed his broken nose with his knuckles, thinking.

Cap'n Bill felt that Cramer had suspicions of Gorbin. Cramer stood quiet and erect with his mouth tightly shut, looking at Gorbin and listening.

Bill happened to look up toward the doorway and saw the Cramer girl standing

well back in the shadows. He could not see her clearly, but he knew how troubled she must be, and guessed that she disliked this Gorbin or otherwise she would have come into the room. It did not occur to Bill that perhaps she disliked him.

Gorbin dropped into a chair, swore dejectedly. "Terrible," he said. "And I can't imagine who—" Then, loudly, "But by God, we'll go on somehow. I like you, Cramer. In another year we ought to have the money rollin' in! We've got to hang on."

Gorbin put his hands to his face and bent over, thinking. He said, "Trasks'll have to let us have the money to hold on."

Cramer stood quietly at the table. He glanced down and absently turned the pages of an open book, then closed the book. His fingers were merely looking for something to do while he thought. At last he said quietly, "I do not like Trasks."

"But we've got to have money, Cramer." Gorbin looked up, and the scarred eyebrow gave his face a peculiarly sardonic expression.

"I do not trust him."

"Ah," Gorbin said softly, with something like the beginning of a smile on his strangely fierce face, "but this is different."

CRAMER had the look of a man wearing a tight-fitting mask, and through the peep-holes in that mask he looked directly at Gorbin.

"What else can we do, Cramer? Trasks is willing. You know he is willing to—well, anything. He has plenty of money and will let *you* have it."

"And you know at what price!" said Cramer coldly.

Then both of them stared at Cap'n Bill as if they had nearly disclosed a secret. Bill looked from one to the other, coolly emptied the brandy bottle into his coffee cup, drank it, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and got up without a word.

He walked out onto the dark veranda, paused, listening to the rain, and gradually became aware of another sound not far off.

A woman was sobbing softly.

Cap'n Bill moved along the veranda. The sound was much clearer when he came to a doorway, and he stopped, listening, wondering what to do. Then he put his head to the doorway and called in a low voice, "Mrs. Cramer?"

The sobbing stopped but there was the faint sound as if the woman was almost strangling herself to keep from making a sound.

Cap'n Bill spoke into the darkness. "I'm not fool enough to ask you what's the matter, 'cause I know." He paused, thinking perhaps she would say something. "But I'll tell you straight," he went on, low and earnestly, "I'll do most anything to—to help. I'm a sailor and a rough one, but—but—" then impulsively, "I feel like breakin' that damn Trasks' neck for—getting you into this!"

"Oh, and that Gorbin is worse! I am afraid of him!" And it wasn't Mrs. Cramer's voice at all. It was the girl's.

A surprised oath almost slipped by Cap'n Bill's lips. He bent forward in the doorway, peering, but the dead blackness of the room concealed all outlines. "Can't we have a light?"

"No."

"Well then," said Bill, trying hard to coax, which was a tone he did not often use, "tell me what's wrong?"

"Everything!" said the girl brokenly.

"You mean your father has lost all his money?"

"Money!" she said with fierce scorn. "Yes, we have lost our money b-but—" Her voice weakend, choked, there was a muffled sob or two. "It has been terrible—terrible! I can't stand it—I don't mean for myself. I," she told him with lift of voice, "can stand anything! But mother—and poor, poor papa!" Anguish broke down her pride and in the darkness she

flung her secrets to the rough seaman that she could not see and had hated.

"He was a major in the army and—and thrashed a superior officer. I mean thrashed him with a horse whip!" She was defiantly proud of it. "Over mother, of course! And he had to leave the army—and mother sold all her property and we came into these awful islands and bought this plantation to get away from—from *men!*"

Her voice broke and she sobbed again but was trying desperately not to; and Cap'n Bill knew that her body was being shaken, and he wanted to go into the room and put his arms around her, but the fierce disgust in the way she had uttered *"men"* kept even him in his tracks.

He called to her again as softly as he could. There was no answer, and when he tried to speak once more she snapped, "Oh go away! I don't know why I told you—I wish I hadn't—but—oh, please go away! *I—hate—men!"*

Cap'n Bill drew his breath in slowly and moved back. He walked over to the veranda railing, stared into the rainy darkness, and tried to think. He shook his head a time or two, not believing the thoughts that came.

He went along the veranda, turned a corner, and saw where lamplight fell through the doorway. He put his head there. Laulii and an old native woman were squatting on the floor, talking in low voices. They stared at Cap'n Bill, and he said in Samoan, "You are far, far from Upolu!"

Laulii's flat face brightened in astonishment. She jumped up, almost embraced him and poured out a lament for Upolu. The old woman looked on, not understanding a word. She was from the village down at the bay.

"How you know me?" the girl demanded, quite as if thinking Bill some kind of wizard.

He grinned at her and would not say, preferring the mystery. But when he heard Mrs. Cramer speak her name, he had recognized it as a village in Upolu; and only the children of important fathers could be named after the village in which they were born.

"Tell me, what is wrong here?" Bill asked.

Laulii's language was poetic but scornful; and she used all the hard words she knew to tell him how unlovely was this island of Karu. Her homesick heart poured out a rhythmic chant of detestation, and she loved Cap'n Bill simply because he understood her own tongue. She had come from Tarura with Mrs. Cramer to live here; and she loved Mrs. Cramer, liked Mr. Cramer, was sorry for Miss Cramer. So lonely. No friends. Only books. And the fat merchant-man wanted to marry her.

"Trasks?"

Laulii nodded.

"What of Gorbin?"

The girl drew her arms closely to her body and said, "Ooo," showing how she felt. "He make ever'body 'fraid—except," she whispered admiringly, "Mr. Cramer."

VI

CAP'N BILL watched daylight come through the dark rain. Laulii shivered in the clammy gown and held his hand. No one in the house had slept. All night Cramer paced to and fro in the room of books, quietly. He had left the room only when Old Joe and Bill's crew

of cannibals straggled up through the darkness and came on the veranda to be out of the rain. In the dawn Cramer's face had the expression of a man who suffered in stubborn silence, refusing to whimper.

Kate Cramer appeared, wrapped in a long cloak and her eyes were sunken from sleeplessness, red with crying. It was plain enough that she thought Cap'n Bill a low fellow who had made love to a native servant during the night, shamelessly held the servant's hand before people in the dawn. Miss Kate was too troubled to care what Bill did, but probably her disgust with men was once more confirmed.

Gorbin stood above the small Old Joe, swore, asking, "Where is that Ritter?"

"On board in a bunk with a leg he can't stand on!" Joe snapped.

"I'd make 'im stand on it!" Gorbin growled, and walked off, his right foot dragging slightly.

As soon as it was light some of the plantation's blacks could be seen, timidly keeping at a distance. They were hungry, cold, weary, after sleeping in copra sheds. If it had been a pleasant day they might have taken to the bush as runaways; but they wanted warm food.

"What is to be done now?" Cramer asked Gorbin, indicating the blacks.

Gorbin turned slowly, looking all about. He stared toward Cap'n Bill. "You," he said, "send your cannibals out there to round up them blacks!" Gorbin swung out his arm, pointing.

Cap'n Bill eyed him. That was a crazy sort of thing for Gorbin to want done; the worst thing that could be done. Long afterwards Bill guessed that Gorbin wanted to look big, give orders, show off. But after all, Gorbin wasn't a real South Seaman, and perhaps did not know what the Malaita boys would be like if turned loose to round up the unarmed blacks.

Cap'n Bill told him. "They'd turn it into a man-hunt. They'd run your blacks so far back in the bush you'd never see 'em again — and kill what they could. And," Bill added with a look and a tone that showed that he didn't think much of Gorbin's knowledge of blacks, "all you need to do to bring 'em in is to go out there and promise not to punish 'em. They *want* to come in!" Then Bill grinned, for he realized that Gorbin was in a bad corner. "Just go out there unarmed and talk to 'em. That's all you need to do!"

Bill was off-hand and careless about it. He knew that Gorbin wouldn't dare go. If he did, it would show that the blacks weren't as dangerous as he had been making out. Besides, there was the chance that the blacks, dispirited and bedraggled as they were, might pounce on Gorbin and kill him since they had such reasons for hating him.

"Sure," Bill repeated, glad to see Gorbin get angry and uncomfortable. "That's all. They *want* to come in. But you'll have to go unarmed—so they'll trust you!"

EVERYBODY was staring at Gorbin waiting for him to say something. His big sunburned face grew more red, and he tried to out-face Bill with a glare that was downright murderous. He was in a corner and knew it, for he had to go or back out; and Bill's grin made him furious.

"Well, go yourself then!" Gorbin shouted. "You know so much and are so damn ready to tell other people things. Let's see you go!"

"Right," said Bill. "And you'll see 'em come along with their tails draggin'. That is, if I can promise 'em they won't be punished."

"Well, go on. Why do you stand there? Let's see you do it!"

"You'll see right enough," said Bill and jumped over the veranda rail.

Mrs. Cramer leaned forward. "Oh, please do be careful, Captain!" She looked quite sick from sleeplessness and worry, but there was a lovely gentleness about her. Laulii spoke up proudly, "He won't be hurt!"

The plantation blacks withdrew as Cap'n

Bill went toward them. He was a stranger and they expected some kind of trickery. Bill moved on and on slowly, and they gradually let him get nearer when they felt that he was far enough from the house. They were suspicious of the Malaita boys they had seen about the house with rifles, and were distrustful of Bill. He squatted down in the rain and waited. It was now time for them to come toward him.

They shouted in pidgin English from a distance. They had been stolen from different villages on various islands, and Bill tried some of the dialects he knew. Soon they were swarming about him, and each in his own tongue or the worst of bad pidgin tried to explain. They showed their scarred backs, and one called Tuno, showed a back that was still raw.

A parley with the natives, even wet hungry natives could not be hurried; and assurances that they would not be punished had to be made over and over. Bill made them, patiently. Then they started back, Tuno beside Bill, who had convinced the poor devil that he would not be abused again.

Others straggled along or ran ahead, then fell back. They were too chilled and unhappy to be noisy, and stopped about the ruins of their burned barracks. It was forbidden them to go nearer the house.

"You come along up with me," said Bill, taking a friendly hold on Tuno's arm. He wanted Cramer to hear Gorbin's promise regarding the punishment.

Gorbin strode forward with slight drag of leg. He was furious that Bill had succeeded easily in bringing the blacks in, more furious because of the admiring comments of the people who watched.

Gorbin roared, "You know better'n to come beyond bounds! I'll teach you—" He swung up the butt of his rifle and hit Tuno alongside the head. Tuno went down as if shot; and the blacks near the ruins cried out and began to scamper.

A bitter oath flashed across Bill's lips as he reached out, caught the rifle, jerked it from Gorbin's surprised hands, flung it aside.

Bill put his full weight behind the fist that went to Gorbin's jaw, and Gorbin went down in the mud. What he called Gorbin was rich with sea-language.

Gorbin raised himself dizzily to hands and knees and glared at Bill. "I'll kill you—you—"

"Get up—peel them oilskins and do it!"

Cramer ran forward with the two overseers at his heels. He said, "No! No fighting!" The two overseers looked menacingly at Bill. Evidently they liked Gorbin, and the one called Durk yelled, "You'd hit a white man over a nigger!" as if he thought that some kind of foul betrayal.

There was the splattering rush of feet and the Malaita boys came up, jabbering fiercely, and Old Joe, who could not run as fast as they, yelled at them anxiously.

Cap'n Bill said to Cramer, "I promised Tuno he wouldn't be hurt. And you look here!" He pointed to the unconscious Tuno's raw back.

Gorbin got up. A muddy hand was fumbling under his oilskin. Cramer looked at Tuno, who lay there quite as if dead, put the back of his hand to his mouth and swallowed hard. He glanced toward Gorbin and cried, "Drop that!" as he jumped before Cap'n Bill. Gorbin had pulled a revolver from under his oilskins and pointed it.

THERE was a moment's confused shouting and menace. The Malaita savages were pointing their rifles at Gorbin and walking toward him. Old Joe screeched and Cap'n Bill pushed by Cramer and shouted for Gorbin to drop that revolver or the savage Malaita boys would start shooting. The revolver fell into the mud at Gorbin's feet, and Bill struck down the muzzles of rifles, pushed his boys back, swore at them.

"Now you, Gorbin!" Cap'n Bill planted himself before Gorbin. "I'm goin' to lick

you. I'm goin' to do it here. I'm goin' to do it—now! Peel them oilskins!"

Gorbin stepped back with mouth half open. He did not shed his oilskins but his fingers fumbled as if he meant to, and he glared at Bill. His eyes glistened as if so much anger and hate had made him a little insane. Old Joe called out jeeringly, and the overseer Durk replied with something foully spiteful — then lurched back in terror as Joe's long double-edged knife came out and up. "Then keep your mouth shut!" Joe told him.

Cramer pulled at Cap'n Bill's shoulder. "Please!" he said earnestly. "Don't. It will only make things harder for — my family."

Cap'n Bill said, "All right," in a reluctant mutter and yielded with backward steps to the pull of Cramer's hand.

"It will be better if you go," Cramer told him in a calm voice, but somehow not quite coldly. "I will manage this—I —I have to."

"And if you want advice, you'd better stick your pride in your pocket and go talk to old Bonn."

"I think I can manage—somehow."

"An' here," said Bill, looking down at Tuno. "I promised him he wouldn't be hurt—an' he was. I'm goin' to take him along. You—" Bill's tone was a little snappy—"can keep that ninety-two dollars."

He stooped and spoke to Tuno, moved the head, peered at the face. Tuno was dead.

Cap'n Bill straightened, looked straight at Cramer's steady eyes. "If you want to do the best thing, you'll shoot that Gorbin—now!"

"It will be best if you leave. With your men," said Cramer quietly.

Bill admired him for saying it, and could not refuse; but it was not to Bill's liking to go away when there was trouble —especially when women were being left.

He walked up to Gorbin who stood in his tracks, with the revolver still on the ground by his foot. The overseer Durk, who had a bad face, was at Gorbin's elbow. Both of them glared at Cap'n Bill with the sullen hatred that men show when they don't dare do anything more.

"You damned old lag," said Cap'n Bill to Gorbin—and Gorbin braced himself just as if he had been hit, and a look like fright crossed his face. "Lag" was an ex-convict, and Bill had guessed at what the dragging limp signified. "I'm goin'," Bill told him. "But I'll be back, Gorbin. And these people had better be here—and be glad to be here! — or you'll wish you wasn't!"

CAP'N BILL smacked fist to wet palm by way of emphasis, then he said good-by to Cramer who shook hands with no warmth, and had the look of a cool reserved man. His eyes were toward Gorbin, as if he had made up his mind to what he was going to say and do.

Laulii wept in saying good-by to Cap'n Bill and the aloof Kate Cramer looked as if she thought it was love. But when he poked out his hand at her, Miss Kate touched his hand gingerly and stared at him in a queer way, almost as if she did not dislike him as much as she felt that she ought to. For one thing, it had seemed brave to go out among the blacks as he had done; and for another, she had seen him drop Gorbin with a fist blow.

Mrs. Cramer was gently brave—or tried to be—in parting with Cap'n Bill; but anxieties showed in her face, and he had no way of knowing that it took much self control for her to keep from whispering, "Please don't leave us—yet." She thanked him for having come, and Cap'n Bill was warmed through and through by feeling that she really liked him. He patted her hand and tried to make her feel that he thought everything would be all right; and Mrs. Cramer, who was a lovely fastidious woman, let the burly half-naked seaman hold her hand and pat it, and her

eyes followed him as he went away. Bill carried the shotgun he had brought, and his crew straggled along not very happily, because they were wet, tired, hungry and disappointed that there had been no fight.

VII

THE trader Bonn waddled out into the rain to meet Cap'n Bill and he spluttered thick-voiced cuss-words at news of the robbery, then nodded his shaggy head in a wise way and said it was Gorbin's doings. Bill, without any feeling of giving away a secret, told him that Cramer was an army officer. "He's not like the others," said Cap'n Bill, meaning the other partners that Gorbin had worn out with fears and frightened off.

The schooner went out in the rain and well to sea before Cap'n Bill stepped below for a cup of gin which was to serve him instead of sleep; and he found Ritter stretched out in a bunk, asleep.

Under shake of Bill's hand he awakened with a cry and look of terror. "I — I thought you was Gorbin!"

"Well now that you know I'm not, you still look afraid."

"D-did they ask about me?"

"Not enough to seem to care whether they ever saw you again. How's the knee?"

"I can't stand on it." He gazed anxiously at Cap'n Bill.

He was a long-nosed weak-chinned fellow, with eyes that were almost watery; and Bill did not like him or his type, but was ready enough to carry him beyond reach of Gorbin.

Bill leaned against a bulkhead and, liking the fiery flavor, sipped gin. "How long did you work there?"

"About three months." Ritter added quickly, "and they can keep my wages. It was hell."

"Oh, was it?" said Cap'n Bill, with a feeling that this man would find any sort of work hell. "How'd you come to be there?"

"You know Cap Wall carries most of the stores for Gorbin and I come in with Wall, and Gorbin needed a man—" Ritter's voice trailed off but he watched Cap'n Bill uneasily.

Bill shook the gin about in his cup. "When was Trasks here last?"

Ritter drew his breath slowly and seemed trying to think so that he could be accurate. "About a month ago."

"Did everybody seem friendly?"

Ritter nodded and rubbed his knee. "I wrenched it once before an'—" He moaned a little. "I don't think I can stand on it even."

"Did Gorbin ever bother that girl up there?"

"Not that I know of. But she didn't like him. Nor Trasks." Ritter grinned in a sly uneasy way. "He wants to marry her. I heard him and Gorbin talking and—" He stopped short as if saying more than he meant to, moved his leg, grabbed his knee. "Ow—ow."

Cap'n Bill was looking at the bottom of his cup quite as if trying to read something. He laughed, not pleasantly, and said to Ritter, "If Gorbin stole their money, and they let Trasks marry the girl, then he would give them money so that they wouldn't be ruined?"

"Money?" said Ritter, popping his watery eyes and almost choking over the word.

"That's what!" Then, more as if talking to himself than explaining to this fellow, Cap'n Bill related what had happened, even to the death of the black. "And," said Bill, with a hard look at Ritter as if just daring him to find fault with the sentiment, "I like them."

Ritter mumbled a nervous agreement and rubbed his knee.

TWO days later the half caste cook overturned a kettle of boiling water on his leg; and Cap'n Bill dressed it with oil and tea leaves, then bounced down into the cabin, went to Ritter's berth.

"Come on. Get into the galley and bear a hand."

"Oh, w'y, Cap, I—I can't walk!"

"You don't scrub pots with a leg!"

Ritter shrank back on the bunk. Cap'n Bill caught hold of a far corner of the thin pad of a coir mattress to help stir the fellow out. Ritter cried out, "Oh, don't —don't I'll get up—don't!" in almost as frantic way as if begging to escape a beating; but Bill gave a jerk, spilling Ritter's legs over the side and uncovering some lumpy canvas bags that lay between the mattress and the bunk boards. They had been pushed up against the far side of the bunk so that the lumpiness would not interfere with Ritter's comfort.

"What the devil?" said Cap'n Bill and tumbled Ritter to the deck, flipped off the mattress, reached out. When he lifted a bag he knew, when he opened it he saw —gold.

Bill reached out, gripped Ritter's shoulder, banged him up against the bulkhead.

"Don't hit me! I didn't steal it! Gorbin stole it! I saw where he stowed it and—and when Cramer sent me down after you I—I carried it—it was heavy—and," his nervous voice rose in a kind wheedling whine, "we can divide it and be rich!"

"Oh, can we?" said Bill, glowering solemnly. "Divide and be damned to you! I could heave you over the side and keep it all if I'd a mind to steal any of it!"

He smacked Ritter with an open palm, bounced his head against the woodwork, and Ritter yelped and begged, and put his hands to his face; and though he was standing up there was no weakness in his knee.

"You heard me tell how Cramer jumped between me and Gorbin's gun! You heard me tell how bad I felt over Mrs. Cramer and that girl. You heard me cuss Trasks and their need of making a bargain with 'im—and all the time, pretendin' you was hurt, you laid on their gold to hide it—and now you offer me half!"

Cap'n Bill slapped him again and again and again, then took him by the scruff of the neck, hustled him up the ladder, gave him a fling that sent him skittering along the deck.

When Old Joe saw the gold he worked his nearly toothless jaws as if sucking something sweet, fingered the gold, fondled it, said, "We're rich, Bill!" He took up handsfull in his small fists, let it fall with clinking clatter.

"Come," said Bill, holding open a canvas sack. "Put it back."

When the money was in the sack, Cap'n Bill caught Old Joe, calmly went through his pockets, took out a dozen gold pieces, then locked the sacks in the sea chest.

"It's all right," Bill explained, "to get the best—however you can—of people you don't like. I like Mrs. Cramer!"

VIII

THE *Alice-Ann* slid into the harbor at Tarura with Cap'n Bill having an interested look about at the shipping. The anchor was no sooner down than a boat was alongside and three armed men came on deck, and one was Burnham, a kind of special officer. He was a short old fellow with crooked iron spectacles on his sunburned nose, a pompous air, a faithful-dog attitude toward his duties; and he waved a paper in Cap'n Bill's face.

He didn't like Bill anyhow, and knew him for a "bad un." Trasks had gone

through the necessary rigamarole to seize the schooner; and here Burnham was, and he meant to stay until the claim was settled. The amount due on the debt had been figured up to something over $1,400 because of incidental expenses for this and that. Cap'n Bill said he'd be damned if he paid it.

Old Joe nudged him and gestured downward with a thumb, as if $1,400 would scarcely be missed from the sea chest. Cap'n Bill swore at him and said there was only one way to treat thieves, and that was with a poke on the nose, that Joe would get one if he didn't shut up.

Burnham wheezed hoarsely, and, throwing back his shoulders, peered over his spectacles at Bill to say that Mr. Trasks was inclined to be reasonable, and had sent word for Bill to come to the club and see him.

"All right, I'll go," said Cap'n Bill. Then he told Joe to keep a sharp eye on that fellow Ritter, not to let him get ashore, "because, it may be we'll need 'im."

The Planters' Club was where idle men lolled through the afternoon in the dimness of lowered shades, dozed on long cane chairs or mumbled to one another with the weariness of invalids.

Trasks might have been thirty-five or fifty. He had a knobby red face, much as if swollen by insect bites, and his pinch-pointed nose was as sharp as if shaped for sticking into other people's business. He was tall as most men, heavier than most, with very little hair on his head, small fat-hidden eyes, a thick-lipped mouth that was usually set in a smile, meant deceptively.

His build was lumpish rather than fatly rounded, and his belly stuck out much as if he were trying to hide a melon under his shirt; but he thought he was a handsome fellow, dressed well, wore jewelry, and if a woman looked at him twice he couldn't imagine that she didn't admire him.

When Cap'n Bill, feeling awkward in his too-big shoes and perspiring under the unfamiliar warmth of a shirt, came upon the veranda where a *punkah* swayed to the pull of an unseen native, Trasks said, "Ah, hello there, Captain!" He spoke a bit loudly and with the sort of satisfaction a man like Trasks would feel at having got the better of a man like Cap'n Bill—who was pretty hard to get the best of, so people said. Men in sweat-moistened white duck stirred on their chairs, lifting their heads to see and listen.

"Ah, mustn't feel bad, Captain," said Trasks, trying to be hearty and sounding merely smug. "Business is business you know, ha ha! Set down, Captain. I've a plan that'll work out to the advantage of both of us."

Cap'n Bill sat gingerly on the edge of his chair, his cap between his fingers, scowled at Trasks' knobby red face and thought of the Cramers.

"You see," Trasks went on with the air of doing a favor, and waving a pudgy hand, "you can still have command of the *Alice-Ann*. You'll be *my* trader and recruiter." Trasks' puffy fat-hidden little eyes sparkled. He knew very well Cap'n Bill would refuse, but it pleased him to have brought Bill to the club, cap in hand, and—in a way of speaking—to rub some salt in the wound and in front of people.

Cap'n Bill stood up, glowered. Words came from deep in his throat. "I wouldn't trade for you. I wouldn't recruit for you. There's no trusting your word about anything. You're a damn swab, an ugly rotter, and I don't think you ever got hold of a dollar you didn't steal—or else," Bill added slowly, "had somebody steal for you!"

Trasks let out a sound like a bellow and jumped up, then almost fell in his hurry to sit down again because Bill swung up a fist.

"That," said Trasks with an angry abused tone, "is what I get for trying to do a man like you a favor!"

"The only favor you can ever do me,"

said Bill, "is to go swimmin'—where there is sharks!"

He slapped on his cap, turned and strode out.

A voice behind him drawled with malicious pleasure, "Well, Trasks, I am rather of the opinion that Captain Bill declines your employment."

IX

CAP'N BILL went back to the schooner and found Burnham and his two men on the forecastle under an awning they had rigged. He tried to explain to the pompous old officer that everything was arranged between him and Trasks, for Bill meant to slip the cable and go to sea. But Burnham was suspicious, sputtered in a hoarse wheezy way, said his orders were to keep possession of the schooner and do it he would until Mr. Trasks himself sent word—and so forth.

Cap'n Bill went down to the cabin for a nip out of the locker to help him think things over; and Ritter was there, held a prisoner of sorts by Old Joe who was making him play cribbage for entertainment.

Bill passed the gin and fell to talking; and between the warmth of the gin to loosen Ritter's tongue and the banging Bill's fist did on the table now and then, to illustrate what would happen to Ritter's nose if he didn't talk freely, Bill heard some interesting things.

"Yes, Captain," said Ritter swigging at the pannikin, "I was feeling a little sick that day, so I laid down in a dark place there in the stable, and I heard Gorbin and Trasks come in. Of course I had to lay still for that Gorbin is a devil and I was supposed to be out in the grove—"

"Could've told 'em your knee was sprained!" Old Joe snapped and peered at the cards he was shuffling so as to fix the fives for his hand.

An hour or so later Ritter was dead drunk, and Cap'n Bill dragged him off to a bunk and heaved him into it. Old Joe was as drunk but talkative, and abusive.

He was surprised, he said, that Bill would let a fellow like Trasks get the best of him. "Take your own ship right out from under your feet!" He was also amazed, he said, at Bill's stupidity. "Rich! Rich—an' wot you do? Keep it on your ship for Trasks to lay hold on! Now 'f you follored my advice you'd gone to Sydney an' opened a pub. Been a gent'men—"

Cap'n Bill smoked a pipe that purred, lay with his head back, blew smoke at a beam. Now and then he grinned.

That night a little after 12 o'clock, and somewhat less than two hours before tide-turn, Cap'n Bill with a lantern in his hand walked onto the veranda of Trasks' house just like a man with important business.

A sleepy native blinked up from his mats.

"Shake a leg," Bill told him. "Take me to Trasks."

The native got up. Two other servants stirred lumpishly on their pallets and mumbled inquiringly. Men occasionally came at odd hours to have a talk with Trasks. The house was large, square, one story; and Cap'n Bill, unsure of which was Trasks' room, did not want to be prowling about.

At the door of Trasks' room, Bill gave the native a dollar, told him to go back to sleep, and the native shuffled off.

The door was locked. Bill tapped lightly but Trasks did not awaken. Bill waited until the native had time to go to the back veranda and flop down on his mats; then Cap'n Bill turned the knob and hit the door with all of his weight. The inside slip-bolt gave way, and Bill stepped inside, swinging up the lantern.

Trasks lay abed heavy with food, wine, sleep, and roused up in alarmed drowsiness. The lantern was in his eyes and he could not recognize Cap'n Bill, but his hand made a fumbling grab under his pillow.

Cap'n Bill reached out, jerked the hand away, then groped under the pillow, took out a revolver and slipped it into his pocket.

"Up and dress, Trasks! I've tried everything I know," he said, explaining without anger, "to get Burnham and his men off guard so I could slip the cable and go out. But they won't drink and they won't be friendly, and they won't let anybody get near 'em up in the bows. They say you've put 'em there to hold the schooner. So you're coming along to tell 'em to get to hell off. I'm goin' to sea, and if there's any blood spilled getting there—it'll be yours. Not theirs. Not my boys'. Out with you!"

Trasks sat up, stammered and stared. His jaw quivered a little and he held up his hands in feeble placating gesture. "Aw—all right, Captain. I'll—w-write an order," he said weakly.

"Order be damned. Burnham's a wise old beak and'll probably guess I poked your nose to get it. No. You'll have to come along and say it's all right, and tell 'em to get off, and if you don't do it like you meant it — why, Trasks, I'll take enough blubber right off your hide to pay that fourteen hundred dollars!"

Trasks protested as much as he dared, said they'd been some misunderstanding, and that he would "waive" the debt; but Cap'n Bill said "waiving" it would not do any good, that his mind was made up, and come along Trasks would.

So Trasks got out of bed and Cap'n Bill eyed his purple silk pajamas, but he didn't say much of anything.

When Trasks was dressed, Bill put out the lantern and took him by the arm and led the way to the beach.

Cap'n Bill "borrowed" a row boat off the beach; and as the boat came near the *Alice-Ann* the pompously alert Burnham hailed it, and wheezed in hoarse surprise as Trasks called, "It'll be all right, Burnham. I'm coming aboard."

Burnham puffed an apology of sorts in saying that he hadn't believed Cap'n Bill when he said everything was arranged satisfactorily with Mr. Trasks; and Burnham wheezily hoped that Mr. Trasks wouldn't hold it against him for being over-cautious.

ON DECK Bill stood close beside Trasks, gave him a nudge and Trasks remembered his lesson. "You and your men can go ashore, Burnham. I'm stopping aboard, for the captain and me have some business to take up. You just go on ashore." Trasks said it stiffly, a little as if trying to talk with a fish bone in his throat, but he said it.

"Take the boat that's alongside," Bill told Burnham. "I'll see that Trasks gets ashore all right."

When they had gone, Trasks said as quietly as he could so as not to start an argument and make Bill angry, "You know, of course, Captain, that if you take this schooner to sea it will be—be piracy."

"Ho, no it won't," Bill shouted with good nature. "If I'm not her owner, you are. And since when the hell is it piracy for an owner to take his ship to sea?"

"To-to sea?"

"You're going along!"

Trasks gulped, put fingertips to his cheek, stepped back, and waggled his jaw before he could get any words up and out. "Y-you are—me—kidnapping me?"

"That's right."

"Let me ashore! Let me ashore and we'll forget that debt. I swear to God, I'll never—"

"You bet you'll forget, Trasks. Before I'm through with you, you'll have more important things to worry about. We're going to Karu!"

"Karu? Karu! Why Karu?"

"Ho," said Bill. "They've been having trouble. At first I thought your friend Gorbin was up to his usual tricks of raising hell so as to make his new pardners damn glad to pull out—and you could sell the plantation again!"

X

THE *Alice -Ann* was ploughing through heavy seas when Cap'n Bill "invited" Trasks to breakfast. The breakfast was white pork, beans, biscuits that were as hard as pieces of deal, and coffee black as the heart of sin. Trasks had a bewildered anger, a slight sea-sickness, a dough-colored hue on his usually red face, and breakfast was something that he did not want.

Bill bit into a biscuit with a sound of chewing a pine knot, looked steadily at Trasks, kept on chewing. He drank some coffee to clear his mouth and nodded. "Gorbin whipped the blacks into a big row —started after dark—and while ever'body was excited and watching, he broke open Cramer's chest. But," Bill went on, taking up another biscuit and turning it over as if to see that it had the proper hardness, "you're not goin' to lend 'em back their money—as you planned."

Trasks rubbed at his forehead and tried to sound puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Bill sliced a piece of pork. "I mean that Cramer'll shoot you, like he's done Gorbin"—Bill meant to add, "if he followed my advice," but the pork slipped off his fork and Bill paused to stab it again. The pause seemed to end the sentence.

"Did he shoot Gorbin?" Trask shouted.

Bill filled his mouth with pork and beans and gazed at Trasks. "You don't look sorry."

"He was always threatening me. He was an escaped convict. The strongest man in the prison. He was dangerous. I was afraid of him."

"I don't believe you was afraid of him at all. You went on doing business with him. You sent a woman like Mrs. Cramer to Karu when you knew—"

"I just learned not two weeks ago who Gorbin was," Trasks began, then almost fell out of the chair as Bill hit the table suddenly and hard.

"You're a liar. You just say what comes into your head. You wasn't afraid of him at all. Escaped convict, you say? Then he was afraid of *you* because you knew who he was. And you want to marry that pretty Cramer girl. You had Gorbin steal that money so they'd not have a dollar—you thought you could buy her—ho, you just come over here! I'll show you something!"

Cap'n Bill unlocked the sea chest and made Trasks come and finger the gold.

"*You* stole it!" said Trasks, very nearly as if surprised that Bill was smarter than he had suspected.

"All you think about is stealing. One of the overseers heard you and Gorbin planning it. That rainy night when the blacks broke loose—well, he remembered how you and Gorbin had talked, and he watched. He saw where Gorbin, all in a hurry, flung the sacks. Then he hid them himself. When he was sent down to the village for me because Cramer didn't know how dangerous the blacks might be he tied the gold to him under his oilskins—then pretended his knee was wrenched so he wouldn't have to go back."

Cap'n Bill slammed down the chest lid, snapped the lock, straightened and looked queerly at Trasks; then laughed. "What Gorbin will do to you when he finds you told that he was an escaped lag!"

"B-but you said he was dead!"

"Now did I, huh?"

"You—you did!"

Trasks plumped down on the sea chest. Cap'n Bill cocked his head and looked at him curiously.

"H-he will kill me," Trasks groaned.

"Hope so," said Cap'n Bill and went on deck.

THREE days later and just after sundown the *Alice-Ann* felt her way through the channel off the village at Karu and Cap'n Bill recognized Ted Wall's schooner lying there. He was the captain who had let Ritter go as Gorbin's overseer, and did much business with Gorbin and Trasks.

"I'll just go over for a bit of a game, and find out what's in the wind."

Ted Wall, called Tubby, was an old-time ruffian who had fattened up and mellowed somewhat as he grew old. There wasn't much of anything in the way of making a dishonest dollar that he wouldn't lay his hand to; but he was jolly, good-natured, liked to laugh and told of the times he had got the worst of clever tricks with almost as much merriment as when he had won. He liked Cap'n Bill, or said he did, though much of the liking may have been because he knew how much trouble Bill made for people who didn't like him.

He hailed Bill with a friendly cussing, broke out a bottle of gin, and they sat on the deck, passing it back and forth.

"Bill, whatever did you do to Gorbin up there?" Wall asked, pointing toward the glimmer of light that showed far above the black bush.

"Bashed his jaw."

Wall chuckled in a way that made his belly shake. "Well, he's had enough. He's clearing out. Leaving with me tomorrow."

"Do you mean Cramer has made him want to get off?"

"Next to you, he hates Cramer most. With no love of Trasks, either. He said he'd been waiting for me to come in so he could leave. I've stayed in overnight to wait for 'im."

Bill wiped the bottle's mouth with his palm. "You can up anchor any time the tide serves. Gorbin is not leaving."

"Ho ho ho," Wall laughed, not loudly but as if amused. "How do you know?"

"I'm taking charge of him."

"Of Gorbin?" Wall sounded as if he thought that a pleasing joke.

"I'll tell you how it is," said Cap'n Bill, giving back the bottle. He told about Gorbin, and Ritter, and the gold; and, a little proudly, of how he had tricked Trasks—"who's over there on my schooner now. And I'm going up for a talk with Cramer tonight."

Wall laughed and slapped his leg and said that was the best he had heard in a long time. He took a drink and pushed the bottle at Bill. "Finish it off."

There wasn't much left, so Bill tipped it up and drank to the last drop, then gave a heave and the bottle went overboard.

"I'll get back now," Bill said and started to get up.

"Oh say, Bill. Before you go, I want to show you something. You are a clever fellow, and will laugh too. Just wait another minute."

WALL went into the deck house and came out with his hand behind him, and by the standing light on the side of the deck house, Bill could see the wide grin on Wall's fat bristly face. He put a revolver almost against Bill's head; and, just as goodnaturedly as if it were all a joke, he laughed:

"Ho ho ho! Now I'll have to play my little trick!"

Bill knew right away that Wall was after the gold he had been foolish enough to speak of.

"You understand," said Wall, with a grin like friendliness, "that this is too good a chance to overlook. And I don't know of anybody it would make me feel worse to shoot—so don't act the fool, Bill."

"You can't get on board the *Alice*. Not with Old Joe and my boys—"

"Now, now, Bill. Don't talk back. I've a few cases of gin, and if I send some over, saying you and me are making a

night of it and want them to have a good time too?"

Bill growled, "I'll break your damn neck!"

"That's right, Bill. You always did have a bad temper. But learn to control it. Just get up, Bill, and march right along into the trade room there. It'll teach you not to be such a fool as to return money that falls into your hands. Disgraceful, Bill. Disgraceful in a South Seaman. I swear it is!"

Bill got up.

"Turn around and move along, Bill!"

He poked the revolver close to Bill's belly by way of urging him to obey, and Bill's left hand swung out, striking the revolver aside as he lurched forward and knocked Tubby Wall down with a crack on the jaw that had the smack of a mallet on wet canvas. Wall's head hit the deck and his nearly tub-round body rolled over and brought up against the bulwark.

Bill picked up the revolver and called to his boys who were in the boat alongside. "On deck!" They clambered up the side like monkeys. Wall's half-caste mate came running. Cap'n Bill ordered him forward, and told him to keep his crew forward. Bill told his boys to empty the trade room —overboard. "Jump to it!" Bill shouted.

They jumped to it with the eagerness of pilferers, crowding in and rushing out with boxes, tins, bolts of cloth—scattering stuff along the deck as they hurried to the side.

Bill looked toward the tubby figure that lay unconscious, face up, as if peacefully asleep, with his gray head in the scupperway. "Damn old thief!" Then he called toward the mate who hung in the shadows about the mainmast, ready to dodge behind it if the revolver was pointed his way, "Tell old Tubby that I'll come back in the morning and throw him overboard if this rotten schooner doesn't get to sea!"

Cap'n Bill and his boys dropped over the side and rowed off, the blacks yammering in excitement. Before they were a hundred yards away a rifle popped with lance-flash of flame, then another. The mate had broken out guns. It was too dark to sight; the bullets did not come close enough even to be heard. Bill emptied the revolver in the general direction of Wall's schooner just by way of making some noise.

When he got alongside the *Alice-Ann*, Old Joe was waiting ready for trouble, with rifles in the hands of the rest of the crew.

"Wot happened, Bill?" When he learned, Joe snapped his toothless jaws, complained, "You're a softy, you are! "Heavin' good trade overboard! Wot's the sense in that? Why didn't you bring it on board? Allus gettin' into a rumpus an' makin' no profit out of it!"

"I'm goin' ashore," Bill told him. "You keep a sharp lookout. I'm taking that gold ashore with me—then I'll know where it is. So if you let anybody get aboard, they'll cut your throat—in disappointment!"

He turned and looked at the steady star-sized spot of light burning in the planter's house on the cleared hill that overlooked the sea.

XI

NATIVES had been attracted by the shooting and ventured out timidly in canoes. When Cap'n Bill hailed them they crowded about him and jabbered inquiringly; so before he got ashore he learned that Bonn was away, having gone in his cutter to a village on the other side of the island where there was much copra and no tobacco.

Cap'n Bill thought twice about stopping ashore, but he had started and he wanted to have a talk with Cramer, wanted to see the look on Mrs. Cramer's lovely face when she found the gold had been returned; and he was sure that the pretty Miss Kate wouldn't hate men so much—not all men. Gorbin and his overseers

would be in bed, for their work made them get up early, and he and Cramer could talk the night out and make plans.

It was a two-mile walk and Bill hurried, carrying some fifty pounds of gold in canvas sacks about as carelessly as if they were potatoes.

When he came out of the bush he saw that lights were burning in the front room, and he grinned in a pleased way to think how surprised the Cramers would be. He had, at various times in his up-and-down affairs, been worth more than ten thousand dollars if he counted ship and cargo; but he had never had so much money in his hands, and he had not felt the least impulse to keep it. Yet Cap'n Bill would have hooted at the idea that he was an "honest man." Many other people would have hooted too.

He saw a shadow pass across the light of a wide window. It was a big shadow and moved with a dragging halt. Bill started to run forward, but stopped for a moment, reflecting. After all, there was nothing so strange about Gorbin being up and in that room. He was leaving in the morning; naturally there would be matters to talk over and settle. Bill felt a warming admiration for Mr. Cramer who had made Gorbin glad to clear out.

"I'll make Bonn come up here as manager," Bill said to himself. The fat Dutchman knew as much about planting, and the handling of blacks, as any man, but had grown lazily sluggish and philosophically indifferent after the ruinous hurricane.

Bill approached the veranda, crouched like a thief as he went up the steps, bent low as he hugged the wall, set down his sacks noiselessly and put his eyes to a lower corner of the wide-open window which was covered with netting. From that position he could see only one side of the room and only a part of that side.

The girl was sitting stiffly upright in a high-backed chair. She was very pretty with her hair falling in short curls upon her shoulders; and very angry too, with face tensely set and her eyes in a fixed look across the room. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair as if she were about to fling herself out of it, and upon somebody, furiously.

Cap'n Bill could not see Gorbin, but knew that she must be looking at him. At first he thought they were alone. Nobody was speaking, then Mr. Cramer's voice said, "There is no way to prevent your doing what you say you are going to do, but—"

Bill knew that was Cramer's voice because the words were clear and slow-spoken, but it did not sound like Cramer's voice. It sounded like the tone of a desperate man who spoke slowly because of pain.

A husky voice mumbled, "Ow Gorbin, don't do it."

"Shut up, Matt. I will. What do I care? What do I care about anything!" Gorbin was fierce and bitter, his words had the sound of being growled.

"Then let's go." That was the voice of the Overseer Durk. It was weary, not urgent; and when Bill crouched lower and turned his eyes, he could see Durk and the other man standing together in an inner doorway. Durk slumped his shoulders against the jamb and Matt was slightly behind him. There was an uneasy look on both their faces.

"For five years—longer," Gorbin said, as if talking to himself, "I've lived in this blasted hell-hole—makin' money for Trasks. Lettin' him swindle fools and live like a king—always promisin' me I could have my share."

BILL edged a bit farther along under the window ledge and saw Gorbin standing with his broad back to the wall. His hawk-nosed face was downcast. He *was* talking to himself, gazing absently at the floor, and now repeating aloud what he had probably told himself over and over, bitterly. Trasks had been able to hold him like a fish on a hook through

the knowledge that he was an escaped convict, probably badly wanted.

Gorbin lifted his face, looking toward a far corner, not at the girl. His hand fingered a knife in a sheath that he wore on the front of his belt, but there was no menace in the movement. His fingers nervously searched for something to touch. The sunken eyes glowed and the scarred forehead lifted the brow of the right eye into a ferocious expression.

"I stole your money. Trasks put me up to it—thinking I'd give it to him and he could give it back to you—for her there." He pointed at the girl, and his staring eyes fastened on her face for a long moment. Then his look turned again toward the corner. "I was going to keep it—and go. Go any damn place. Be rich. That Ritter got it. I know he did." The names he called Ritter were vile. "Nothin' ever goes right with me. Never has before, but"—fiercely—"this will! Old Tubby Wall don't know what he's in for!" Evil glee glanced across Gorbin's features. "We'll seize his schooner and go—I know where. Where I'll never be heard from again." His look shifted. "And *you* are going with me."

He stared at the girl. She met his look with defiant hate.

"Damn you!" he shouted, angered because she would not flinch before a look that had frightened men. "I'm a man. Like other men. I'll treat you right if you—you with your damned cold airs as if I wasn't fit to wipe your feet on!"

"Ow don't do it," Matt mumbled from the doorway.

Gorbin walked toward her. "Get up, you! And come along like a proper woman with her man or I'll drag you by the hair!"

A swift shadow appeared before him, with hands out. "Oh please—please!" said Mrs. Cramer, brokenly. "In the name of God, please don't take—"

Gorbin struck her with backhanded swing of fist, and savagely, "You old fool, keep away from me!" Cramer's voice, piercingly shrill, threw curses; and even the evil-faced Durk made a sick groan as Mrs. Cramer, without a sound, fell. The girl sprang from her chair, hovered over her mother—and Cap'n Bill went straight through the netting of the window as if thrown. "I'll kill you!" roared from Bill's throat. He struck, knees-down, with a force and weight that made the room shake—knees-down, but with head up, both hands to the floor, steadingly; and one hand gripped a canvas bag at the loose neck.

Gorbin yelled and jerked his head sideways in amazed fright, then turned about with panicky jiggle of feet, drawing back, and staring as if the devil had come. Cap'n Bill's look had the devil's fierceness. Gorbin, with a fright-frozen stare, drew back to the wall, his hand jerking at the knife's handle.

Bill rose off the floor with the canvas bag dangling in a backward swing over his shoulder, and he threw it—and jumped forward. Gorbin dodged with far weave of body, and the bag struck the wall, where it seemed to explode and gold coins scattered in a clinking shower.

Cap'n Bill went across the room just about as a diver goes from a spring board. Gorbin's knife was out and up. Bill sprang with an arm swinging up in a fending gesture, and the other hand claw-like at Gorbin's throat. Bill was too infuriated to strike; that blow in the mother's face made him claw and tear.

Vague sounds gurgled in Gorbin's throat: he was furious, he was afraid, and in agony. Bill had a brute strength brute rage, and his powerful fingers clutched Gorbin's throat with almost the strangling force of knotted hemp. His sway of arm and body drove the back of Gorbin's head against the wall. It had the sound of a husked coconut being pounded. He struck claw-like at Bill's face, and writhed to wrench his knife-arm free. They twisted about, staggering, slipping on scattered gold, and the trample of their feet was near Mrs. Cramer's unconscious body.

Kate cried out, "Mother! Oh, my mother!" and tugged to lift her mother, draw her away. Cramer pled, but with echoes of command ringing in his voice, "Cut this rope! Name of God, let me loose!" He was bound to a chair and drenched with blood from the gash on his forehead where Gorbin, first pretending friendliness, had hit him.

Durk stood with open-mouthed amazement. It simply did not occur to him that Bill was alone. Matt stumbled in heavy boots to half drag, half carry the unconscious woman to the corner where her husband struggled to break the rope and yelled to be loosened.

Then breathless anxiety came suddenly upon them as the booted Gorbin skittered on the slippery coins, and his fall drew Bill down. They hit the floor in a tumbling thrash of arms and legs, and Gorbin's freed knife struck in haphazard ferocity, slicing out a deep red line across Bill's ribs. Kate screamed, then turned in urgent fury on the friendly Matt. "Help him! Help him! Why don't you help him?" Her small hands beat at the man, then Kate jumped aside with hands pressed to her face fearfully as Gorbin and Bill threshed across the floor in a tumbling flurry.

They fought with knees, elbows, fists and feet, growing weary but not pausing until they came to rest suddenly with Gorbin's belly trapped between the squeezing clamp of Bill's legs and both Bill's hands, in far out-reach of arms, closed vise-like on Gorbin's knife-hand.

"I'm goin' to kill you!" said Cap'n Bill solemnly, like a man who takes an oath.

Gorbin felt the pull of Bill's hands against his own hand that held the knife and Gorbin tried to cry out, but his windpipe seemed broken from the terrible wrenching Bill had given it; brutish sounds rattled, but words could not be articulated. Gorbin's deep-set, fierce eyes turned wild with terror, and his free hand beat frantically at Bill's head as he writhed to turn himself in the clamp of Bill's legs —and could not.

Bill's strong tar-stained fingers were meshed about Gorbin's extended hand, and the long knife blade, with the color of blood on it, vibrated in their tensely motionless hands. Gorbin could not let go of the knife; and slowly, powerfully, Cap'n Bill bent Gorbin's extended arm, drawing the knife-point nearer—nearer—nearer to Gorbin's throat.

The girl shuddered, cried out, looked away——

XII

THE next morning Cap'n Bill sat in a pillowed chair and peered out of a bruised, half-closed eye. The other eye was entirely closed. His face was raw with bruises. A white bandage, showing a stain of red, was about his breast. Every muscle in his body hurt and most of the bones seemed broken; but Cap'n Bill grinned.

Mrs. Cramer, with one side of her lovely face darkened from the blow of Gorbin's fist, sat by him and held one hand, and gazed at him with a tenderness that was very like adoration. Kate Cramer stood beside him and held the other hand squeezed it with all her strength, holding it up against her cheek.

Cramer came in, wearing a bandage

very like a turban. "A friend to see you, Bill."

"Who?"

"Captain Wall."

"Friend? That blasted pirate—I'll break his neck!"

Tubby Wall clucked reproachfully from the door. "Now Bill, my lad, w'y I come along to thank you for the good turn you done me and—"

"And put poison in my coffee!"

Wall walked in with a round-bodied waddle, hat in hand, and moving in jerky bows to the women. He beamed and chuckled. "When I learned what Gorbin meant to do to me—seize my ship and all—w'y Bill, you don't think I'd let a little crack over the head in good fun—you don't believe I wasn't having a little joke last night when I showed you my revolver?"

"Same as when I heaved your trade over the side!"

"And, Bill," said Tubby, with almost a pious look of friendliness, "just to show there was no hard feelin's, last night I did break out a case of gin and send it over to your ship."

"Knowin' I'd gone ashore! You got my boys drunk, then—"

"Then I went over for a look around, Bill, and—"

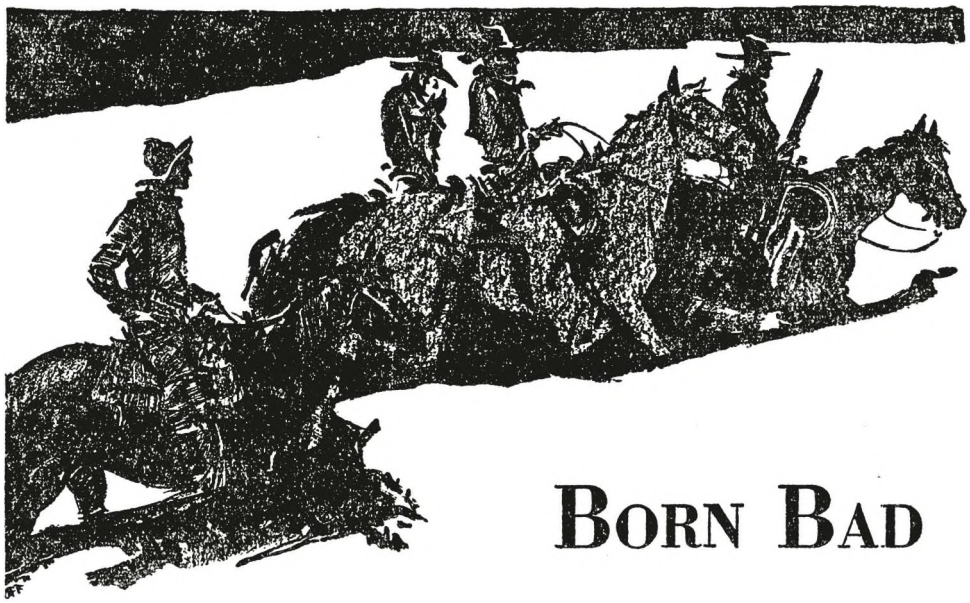
Bill cocked his nearly blind eye, peering ominously, almost ready to jump out of the chair. "If you threw trade of mine overboard, I'll—"

"Oh, no no, Bill." Tubby Wall and hand jiggling in protest. "Y too smart for me. You had gone ashore with the—um." He coughed discreetly, for he was not quite enough of a villain to admit before Mrs. Cramer that he had tried to steal her gold. "But Trasks made me some fine promises if I would take him off. So I did, Bill. So I did. It looked like a way to turn an honest penny. He was afraid of you, Bill. Almost as much afraid of you as he was of Gorbin. And, Bill, when he found out that Gorbin was due to come on board, he got terribly upset.

"He said you had tricked him into revealin' that Gorbin was an escaped lag—that you'd gone up to tell the Cramers, that Gorbin would kill you all, then he'd come down and when he found Trasks—why, Bill, I never in my life saw a man so frightened. Never! He said Gorbin would slice him to pieces an inch at a time. And Bill, it's God's truth." Tubby's voice dropped into a huskily solemn tone. "Bill, he drank off half bottle of straight gin—put a musket to his head, reached down and pressed the trigger with his thumb. Life's funny, Bill. And Gorbin was layin' up here—dead."

Tubby Wall put out his hand, and Bill purblindly groped a bit but took it.

"You Can't Compromise With a Rattlesnake!"



BORN BAD

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

Author of "Boss of the River," "When the River Rises," etc.

CHAPTER I

HONOR OF THE LAW BADGE

BLANEY WILCOX told himself that this big sweep of country between Paradise Valley and the Calico foothills had not changed at all in the six years he had been away. He had left it hurriedly and returned stealthily; but it was his home range, for all that.

Not wanting to be seen, he accomplished it easily enough, for he knew every inch of this big, mountain-desert country. In the late afternoon, when he crawled out on the rimrocks at Iron Point, he had a bird's-eye view of most of it. He could see for miles, and he located all the old spreads, the mines on Buckskin Mountain and at old National. But it wasn't sight of the old places so much as the fact that there were no new ranches, no new activities, no marching lines of telegraph poles nor trailing smoke of a railroad that interested him most.

This country was still wild and raw, and that was the way he had hoped to find it. For over a month now, he had been on the dodge, coming halfway across the country to get back to Nevada. The ghost of a smile touched his thin, hard mouth.

"I didn't make no mistake in headin' this way," he thought. "They never built that railroad they was talkin' about. No one will bother me here; the old man will take care of that."

His blue eyes narrowed in his young face, leaving it bleak and sinister at thought of Chad Wilcox. There was iron in old Chad. For twenty years he had been the sheriff of this county; a typical old-time frontier peace officer, sworn foe of the lawless, whose code permitted no exceptions, even in one whom he called son.

"Hell of a welcome I'll get from him," Blaney gritted. "But he'll play it my way —or wish he had! I ain't standin' for no nonsense from him."

He knew his appearance had changed greatly in the years he had been away. He had left this country as a boy; he was a

man now. It didn't occur to him that his way of life had had as much to do with his altered looks as the mere passing of years.

Lying there, he wondered if he might not be better off to stay clear of the old man; he could catch on at one of the ranches; he was a little rusty, but he knew how to handle stock. In this country people didn't ask a man too many questions; and there was little fear that he would be recognized.

"I needn't let anyone else know, but I'll have it out with the old man," he decided. "I'll let him know exactly where he stands with me. If the John Laws try to pick me off, it'll be through him. He can stop that before he even starts."

Far across the valley, in the shadow of Piute Summit, he located the green blur of poplars that cloaked the little town of Rye Patch. He'd ride down, in the cool of the evening.

NIGHT had fallen by the time that he reached town. He did not ride in boldly. An alley led him to a position opposite the little red brick building, around the corner from the courthouse, that served the county as combination jail and sheriff's office. Waiting there, he had a good look at Rye Patch. The only change he could discover was a new front on the Nevada Bar.

Two men turned the courthouse corner and stepped into the sheriff's office. One turned up the light, and Blaney recognized old Chad, his face thinner and more hawk-like than ever; the other was young Erling Stout, a deputy's badge pinned on his vest.

Erling had been a boy like himself, when Blaney had last seen him. He was a six-footer now, arrow-straight, his eyes keen and dark in his tanned face. Sight of him filled Blaney with a sudden hatred; and it was not just the instinctive hostility of the lawless for wearers of the law badge. Erling Stout, old Chad's chief deputy, was holding down a job that the other had once reckoned as bound to be his some day. It made no difference that he had long since passed the point where he would have taken it had it been offered to him on a silver platter.

The waiting man could not hear what was being said in the office, but when Erling stepped to the door and said good-night, he caught it plainly enough. It was nine o'clock by now. This side street was deserted. Blaney waited no longer. He could see old Chad seated at his desk, thumbing some papers. Boldly he struck across the dusty street. It was a silent approach, and not until Blaney's boot scraped on the doorsill was old Chad aware that he had a visitor.

THE sheriff did not look up at once; men were dropping into his office at all hours of the night. When at last he straightened and gazed at the man in the doorway, only the twitching of his throat muscles betrayed his surprise.

"Blaney—" he said quietly.

"So you know me, eh?" the other queried, a quiet mockery in his voice. "I was wonderin'."

"Yeh, I know you," old Chad murmured, his tone wooden. "I been seein' some pictures of you right recent. Anyone know you're here?"

"No—"

"Better close the door then. Slip the bolt." He reached across his desk and pulled down the shade. "Sit down."

"You don't sound very glad to see me," Blaney laughed contemptuously as he eased himself into a chair beside the desk.

"No," Chad Wilcox said soberly. "You couldn't expect me to be glad to see you, Blaney. That's a terrible thing for a man to have to say to his son; but it's true. I used to think maybe it was my fault that you got off on the wrong foot; that maybe I'd failed you some way." He shook his head slowly. "But that ain't so. You been away a long time; I've done a heap of thinkin' about you. Blaney, you was born

bad. You weren't right even as a kid. When you had to leave this country, I thought you might turn over a new leaf and amount to somethin'." He pulled out a desk drawer and got a can of tobacco. He did not close the drawer. The fact was intentional. "It didn't take you long to kill that hope."

"That's about enough of that," Blaney snapped. "I didn't come here to listen to your preachin'."

"You won't have to listen to much of it," said Chad. He filled his pipe carefully. "I've been able to keep a line on you, though you been gone six years. On the twenty-eighth of last month, you and three others broke out of the Moundsville, West Virginia Penitentiary. A guard was killed—"

He replaced the can of tobacco in the open drawer. Suddenly, he whipped a gun out of that drawer. His old face was grim. Too late, Blaney tried to reach for his own pistol.

"Get your hands up, Blaney, and forget about drawin' on me, or I'll kill you where you sit!" Chad rasped. "You're wanted, and I'm turnin' you in!"

Blaney hesitated for a moment and then

raised his hands. The old man handcuffed him and took his gun.

"I'll make you call your own hand," Blaney sneered. "You won't turn me in—not after you've had a chance to think things over. You ain't shamin' yourself and Francy that way."

"Shame?" Chad echoed miserably. "Do you think I waited until now to be ashamed? You're my own flesh and blood, but many a night I've sat here readin' the Eastern papers, or tearin' up police circulars about you, and prayed that some detective or sheriff would put a slug through you that would stop you forever. That's shame of a sort you'll never be able to understand, my boy."

"And I'll bet you was God-awful careful not to say anythin' to Francy about it."

OLD CHAD winced at the taunt.

"I've met up with outlaws in my time that I could honestly respect; and I've even found a decent streak in some rustlers. But you—you are just plain rat! To think of you, sittin' there, tellin' me to my face that you came back here thinkin' you could trade on our shame! Thank God, Francy is only your half sister. That will make it a little easier. As for me, it won't be the first time that I've been shamed. Your mother left me for another man. But I lived that down, and I'll live this down. You're goin' back to Moundsville, Blaney. Stand up; I'm puttin' you in a cell!"

"I ain't worryin' about goin' back to Moundsville," Blaney Wilcox boasted as the cell door closed on him. "This is a bluff, and I'll prove it to you."

Old Chad turned away without answering. A door separated the rear of the little building from the office. He closed the door and went back to his desk. Slumped down in his chair, he sat there a long while, determined to find courage with which to meet this situation.

His duty was plain enough. But that did not make it any easier. He wasn't thinking of Blaney; the boy had forfeited every claim on his sympathy and affection. Nor was he thinking of himself. What life did to him personally was no longer so important. But there was little Francy, barely nineteen now. His life revolved around her. It seemed incredible that one

so sweet and lovely could have a drop of the same blood in her that flowed in Blaney's veins. All that mattered was that she should not be hurt; that the boy should not put any stain on her.

A savage snarl rumbled in Chad's throat as he realized that this was exactly what Blaney had told him would be the case, when he had had time to think things over.

"But I've always done my duty, ever since the day that Charlie Gannett first pinned this law badge on me—and I'll continue to do it as long as I am the sheriff of this county."

FOOTSTEPS on the plank sidewalk caught his ear. He waited, hoping that whoever it was would go on. But they stopped at his door. A hand tried the knob, only to find the door bolted.

"Chad!" a voice called. "You in there?"

It was Erling Stout.

The old man got to his feet. "Just a minute," he answered.

"Funny, you having the door locked," said Erling. "Nothing wrong?"

"No," Chad declared. "I was just checking the money in the safe."

"That's one to tell on you," Erling laughed. "I never expected to find you getting skeery. I've seen you count your money a hundred times without bothering to lock yourself up."

"I thought you had gone home," said Chad.

"I met Francy down the street," Erling started to explain. "Here she is now."

Francy hurried in, looking as fresh and lovely as usual. Old Chad couldn't remember when he had ever seen her looking otherwise.

"Come on, Dad," she pleaded, "walk home with us. We stopped in Ruck's and bought a watermelon. It's been on the ice all afternoon. You're so fond of watermelon."

Chad flicked an anxious glance at the door that led to the cells in the rear. He knew Blaney could overhear every word. "You and Erling run along, Francy," he urged, hardly able to dissemble his anxiety. "You save me a piece of the melon; I'll be home directly. I got a little bookkeepin' to finish up first."

"It'll be midnight before you get home," Francy said. "I know you."

He got rid of them finally and stood at the door until he saw them turn the corner. Slowly then, his step leaden, he went back to his desk. Blaney's mocking laugh reached him as he sat down.

"Why didn't you tell 'em I was here?"

CHAD'S eyes narrowed under their hooded brows, and the cords in his neck stood out like ropes. Heretofore, though the provocation had warranted it, he had stopped short of hating this black sheep who bore his name. But Blaney went too far now. Chad Wilcox knew he hated him even as he loathed him, and the admission was like a knife in the pride and self-respect of the man. If there had been any doubt in his mind that he was dealing with a mad dog, who would stop at nothing, it was gone.

"There's one thing I can do," he decided at last. "It may be callin' my own hand, as he said, but I'm willin' to go even that far if it will keep this disgrace from touchin' Francy."

People in this western country remembered Blaney as a wild, reckless boy who had fallen into bad company, and who might, or might not, have had a hand in a rustling job that had sent two others to prison. He had good reason to believe, however, that folks had lost track of him and knew nothing about the string of grudges the law had against him. Otherwise, the step he was about to take would have been without meaning.

Reaching for a letterhead, he wrote out his resignation as sheriff. He stared at it a long time before he signed and sealed the letter. With a trembling hand he addressed it to the county commissioners. He could

have signed a warrant for his own death almost as easily.

"It comes hard, after all these years," he murmured chokingly. "It's the least I can do, though."

Leaving the connecting door open, he walked back to Blaney's cell.

"You been thinkin' things over, eh?" the latter gloated. "I told you you would."

"Shut up!" Chad snapped. "I'll do the talkin'. You can think you've called my hand or not, just as you please; it don't interest me. I've just written out my resignation as sheriff. In my safe, I've got a little better than five hundred dollars. If you'll clear out of this country tonight, the money is yours. It's more than enough to get you to South America."

"Not on your life!" Blaney sneered. "I didn't come back here to start runnin' all over again. This neck of the woods suits me.

"And you're goin' to keep on bein' the sheriff of this county. Don't make any mistake about that."

Old Chad shook his head. "No, I'm through, whether you go or stay. I never could wear the badge again after the proposition I made you. I'll arrange that. I warn you, Blaney, there's no nonsense about him."

"Don't scare me," the other jeered. "He's stuck on Francy, ain't he? That'll give him somethin' to think about."

"Yeh, and what he'll think about it will be just this: that the quicker you're put under the sod, the better. He'll ride you down and slap you full of lead. And I'll thank him for it."

CHAD had no more to say. His weathered face hard and set, he turned away. Blaney stopped him as he reached the door.

"Wait a minute," he called. "Maybe we can make a deal at that."

"You heard my proposition," Chad replied. "I haven't anythin' to add to it. If you're willing to get out of this country—get out of the United States—and stay out, I'll give you the money."

"All right, I'll take it. I'll go," Blaney ground out.

Chad got the money out of the safe. He pushed the shells out of Blaney's gun then and returned to the cell door.

"Where did you leave your horse?"

"In the alley across the street."

"You leave town that way," said Chad. "You'd better strike south through Ruby Valley and on down into Arizona. I wouldn't try to take a train at Winnemucca. You'll most likely be picked up if you do. Here's your money and your gun."

He unlocked the cell door. Blaney swaggered out.

"You can go without unbuttonin' your lip any further," Chad whipped out. "And don't kid yourself that you're just takin' my money and leavin' me holdin' the bag. You be awful sure to hold up your end of this bargain. If you ever show your face around here again, I'll kill you on sight. That's the only good-by I can give you, Blaney."

CHAPTER II

ALIAS THE POCATELLO KID

EVEN in a sparsely settled country news gets around in a few days. People shook their heads skeptically when they were told that Chad Wilcox had turned in his badge and that young Erling Stout was the new sheriff; they weren't being taken in by any fool story of that kind. Old Chad and taxes would go on forever, they said. In fact, it was not until they saw the new sheriff riding the range that they were convinced that the law-badge had changed hands.

It was true, they finally admitted, that Chad had begun to get a little starched with the years. But young Erling was all right; a good man had taught him his business. And then, too, it wasn't as though the job was passing out of the fam-

ily. Everyone knew that Erling would be marrying Francy Wilcox one of these days.

That seemed to make everything all right, and people began to forget about it. But not Francy. If her father's excuse that he wanted Erling to have his chance satisfied others, it did not satisfy her. She knew he was unselfish, but the job had meant too much to him for that. Something had aged him suddenly, and she could not believe that it was only because he was out of harness. Though he had time on his hands now, he was at home as little as usual. For years he had owned an interest in a small spread on Whispering Creek. He was often there, or claimed that he was. When he was in town, he spent hours loafing around his old office.

"There's something worrying him, Erling," she said one evening, early in July, as the two of them sat on the porch. Stout had been away for a day or two, looking for a young Basque who had used a knife on one of his friends in a Paradise saloon. This was not the first time Francy had spoken to him about her father. Heretofore Erling had professed to find nothing wrong with old Chad. Seeing the old man in the office, with his nose in a newspaper or studying the police dodgers that arrived almost daily, was just about what he expected him to do. Tonight, however, Erling surprised her by saying, "I'm begin-

ning to think you're right. He hasn't been going out to the ranch half as often as he pretends."

"What?" she exclaimed, her anxiety instantly apparent. "What do you mean by that, Erling?"

"I stopped there, day before yesterday. Dan Button and I talked for a while." Button was old Chad's partner. "I didn't let Dan know, but he said enough to convince me that Chad hasn't been out there more than three or four times lately. I wouldn't have thought so much of that by itself, but my business took me all the way through the Calicos to the Indian Meadows. That's a pretty wild country; if you see anyone it's pretty apt to be the man you're looking for."

"Well?" she prompted.

"Well just this, Francy: I wasn't alone over there. It didn't take me long to discover that I had someone ahead of me. I finally got a pair of glasses on him. It was Chad."

"But what reason could he have for being there?"

"I don't know," Erling said. "I watched him a long time. I know how he sits in a saddle when he's reading sign—hunched over, never looking up." He shook his head thoughtfully. "He sure was giving that country a good combing, looking for somebody. He had a rifle in his saddle boot."

HER father's strange behavior stunned Francy for a moment. She could find no explanation for it.

"Erling, do you suppose his mind is wandering?" she asked anxiously.

"No," Stout answered emphatically. "Chad is as bright as a dollar. You know, that used to be outlaw country. It's a natural hideout for a man on the dodge. Your father's taken some bad gents out of there in his time."

"But that's no longer his business," she protested.

"I know it," Erling murmured. "If he had any enemies, I might think he was out gunning for them. But he hasn't. It doesn't leave me even a guess."

It was not the last time that he reported having seen the old man on the prowl in the hills or out on lava beds. Nothing ever came of it, so they put it down as one of Chad's idiosyncrasies.

Johnnie Bell sold his mine on Buckskin to a San Francisco company, who ran up a new mill in a hurry and began to open up the mine in earnest. It brought in new people and made Rye Patch prosperous. Out on the range, the graze stayed good, thanks to an unlooked-for summer rain. Beef prices were climbing. As for the sheriff's office, it had little to do. All in all, it was the best summer northern Nevada had known for years.

Chad Wilcox was not away from home so much any more. Both Francy and Erling remarked it. A new peace of mind seemed to have come to the old man. And then one day the *Star* printed a story, brought north from Winnemucca by special messenger, that the bank had been robbed.

Three masked men had ridden into town at noon, killed the cashier and got away with several thousand dollars.

It was the first bank robbery that country had known since Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch had turned a similar trick in the long ago. Report had it that the wanted men were heading for Ruby Valley.

Chad Wilcox read the story with grave concern. The mere mention of Ruby Valley had a significance for him that was lost on others. Blaney had gone that way. Maybe he was in Mexico by now. Maybe he was not. One thing the old man knew for certain; hunted men would not stay long in Ruby Valley. That country could be worked too thoroughly by a posse. Also, men on the dodge could easily work north through the lava beds and the badlands into the Calico Hills.

This latter fact was equally plain to Erling Stout. He hastily swore in half a dozen deputies and was preparing to leave town, when old Chad walked into the office.

"Gettin' ready to ride," the old man observed.

"Yes, I'm going to try to close the trails north from the Valley," he said brusquely, impressed with his first man-hunt. "Would you like to ride with us, Chad?"

He rather expected the old man to jump at the chance. To his surprise, Chad said no.

"You're on your own now, Erling," the old man declared. "This will give you a chance to prove it to folks. If I tagged along it might look as though you wasn't quite as sure of yourself as you ought to be. Anyhow, I ain't up to a slashin' ride no more."

AND yet, an hour after the posse had dashed out of Rye Patch, Chad Wilcox saddled his favorite pony and said he was bound for Whispering Creek. Three miles out, however, he swung to the east and threw the long-legged dun into a distance-devouring gallop that was passing strange for a man who had so recently declared that his riding days were behind him. By late afternoon he caught sight of moving dust-clouds ahead of him and knew it was the posse. He altered his course slightly and swung south of Indian Meadows. When night fell, he was a full hour ahead of Stout and his deputies and well out in the tortuous mazes of the lava beds.

He did not stop there. It was not until he was well across the county line that he pulled up.

"If anyone tries to drift north out of Ruby Valley, they will have to come this way," he muttered with a deep sigh of satisfaction, weary as he was.

He pulled his saddle off the pony and hobbled the animal in a nest of rocks. Rifle in his hands, he climbed to the top of the outcropping and stretched out.

"The moon will be up early tonight," he told himself. "I'll be able to see a long ways. It may be that I'm campin' on the trail of the wrong party; but I aim to find out."

His vigil was for nothing. Several times during the night a coyote moved out in the malpais. That was all; he saw nothing

else. Five miles north of him Erling Stout and his men had no better luck. But when the morning mist blew away, three men, well hidden in a rocky cup, far up the face of Disaster Peak, passed a pair of glasses back and forth between them and laughed to themselves at sight of the posse, moving cautiously away through the windings and turnings of the barren, blackened lava beds.

"Goin' to be awful hot down there directly," one said, who answered to the name of Rip Smalley. "They won't hang around long. No trail down there for the John Laws to pick up."

"Thank the Kid for that," the oldest of the three muttered. "The Kid was awful smart, makin' it look like we was headin' back to Ruby Valley. We'd never got through if we tried to make it that way."

The Pocatello Kid—they knew him by no other name—said nothing. He was the leader of these men. His association with Rip Smalley and Rell Logan did not date back very far. They had been on the loose like himself. The several tricks they had turned, including the job at Winnemucca, had convinced the Kid that he hadn't made any mistake about them. His blue eyes were cold as he lowered the glasses and handed them to Logan.

"The gent on the gray horse is the sheriff," he said. "He won't make any trouble for us. I'll see to that."

"Then we stick here, eh?" Logan asked.

"That was the idea, wasn't it?" the Kid fired back. "We're safe, and we can find some easy pickin's if we play it right. You leave that to me."

"You sure sound as though you knew all about this neck of the woods," Logan observed, with a knowing grin. The Pocatello Kid was instantly on the prod.

"You askin' for information?" he said with fierce inflection.

"No," Rell muttered. "You're givin' the orders. We all got a price tag on us now. We're stickin' together, and that'll have to be okay."

PURSUIT came close several times in the following days, but they did not break cover. They were weary of being holed up in their nest on the bald face of Disaster Peak. They needed relaxation, and the Pocatello Kid was determined to know what the talk was about them. Accordingly, they drifted east to Stinking Creek, so called because it was rank with sulphur, and rode into Black Frank's Saloon at Frenchman's Ford. The saloon was the only building there. For years Frank Nazaire, and his father before him, had run the place, catering to the Basque herders and ever-changing crew that had one eye on the sheriff and the other on the hills.

Black Frank met them with an obscure interest, and asked no questions. If he recognized the Kid, it was his secret. The three men spent their money lavishly and got the information that they wanted. It seemed that the sheriff's office believed they had moved on across the state line into Idaho; only old Chad Wilcox was still ramming around in the Calicos. For what reason, Nazaire could not say.

"Don' mak' no meestake 'bout dat ole man," Black Frank warned. "He mak' me plentay trouble all ma life. Eef you feller goin' hang out here, don't breeng me no trouble wid him. I mean dat!" Old Chad had tagged him with knowing too much about more than one rustling job in the last ten years.

"Don't worry," the Kid told him. "Just keep your lip buttoned and you won't do bad at all. There'll be plenty dough comin' your way."

He expected only such allegiance as money could buy. It was enough for him. Logan and Smalley and he were often at Frenchman's Ford after that. When others were present, they used an upstairs room. And it wasn't only to do their drinking that they resorted there. They had been sifting through the hills, keeping their eyes open. The Kid knew that Chad Wilcox was no longer riding the dim trails. It was

all the Kid had been waiting for. Three days later, thirty head of V T steers were hazed into Idaho between midnight and dawn. Black Frank had a finger in it, at least to the extent that friends of his disposed of the rustled beef.

It happened again and again. But it was small game for the Kid. He turned his attention to Buckskin Mountain. A payroll went up there every two weeks. Taking it the first time was child's play. It was so easy that they tried it again. They had to kill a guard to get it that time. Before summer was gone, the road between Winnemucca and Rye Patch was not safe for a man with money on his person.

SHERIFF ERLING STOUT was learning what old Chad had known for years; namely that he had a county to police that was almost as large as some Eastern states, and most of it a wild tangle of hills and hidden canyons that took weeks to whip out. He was tireless, however, and he chased the Kid and his men out of the Disaster Peak country. For three days he had a running fight with them in the lava beds. He had another brush with them in the willow brakes on the Little Humboldt. He was keeping them on the move, but they were always slipping away from him.

The Pocatello Kid found it every bit as annoying as the sheriff. It led him to a step he had long planned to take. When Erling and Zeb Pike, his chief deputy, returned to the office one morning from an all-night ride, Erling found a note under his door. It said:

> "Mr. Sheriff it's about time we had a little powwow. You come to Frenchman's Ford this afternoon, and be damn sure you come alone."

It was signed "The Pocatello Kid."

Stout was by now no stranger to the name. He rolled the note into a wad and tossed it into the waste basket, pretending it was of no importance. He knew the political wolves were crying for his scalp; that if he was to have any chance of being nominated for another term that he had to put an end to the outlawry that was sweeping the county, and do it in a hurry. Whether it was a trap or not, his instant decision was to go to Frenchman's Ford. It was a long ride. He had breakfast. Telling Zeb Pike that he was going home to turn in for a few hours, he paused there only long enough to saddle a fresh horse.

He had not fooled Zeb for a minute. The latter had followed him part of the way home and, from a distance, seen him ride away. It had sent Zeb hurrying back to the office, where he found the note from the Pocatello Kid.

"Wal, the dang ijit!" Zeb burst out as he realized what was happening. He had served under old Chad for years, a tireless, faithful man, now on the wrong side of fifty. He liked Stout well enough, but first and last his loyalty was to Chad Wilcox. "The young fool is ridin' to his death! They'll bushwhack him as sure as they can crook a finger 'round a trigger!"

Habit was strong in him. Faced with an emergency that called for immediate action, he had always turned to Chad, and it was to him he turned now. His long legs kicking up the dust, he half ran to the ex-sheriff's home. Francy came to the door.

"Where's your paw?" he demanded, not

waiting to catch his breath. Francy didn't know; Chad had not been home all day. The signs of excitement on Zeb were unmistakable, however.

"Zeb, what is it?" she demanded anxiously. "I've never seen you so excited."

"Nuthin'," he declared. He couldn't tell her what was on his mind. "Jest like to ask Chad's advice," he mumbled. "When he gits in, you tell him I want to see him pronto."

He beat a hasty retreat, dreading her questions. Back at the office, he stewed in his own nervousness until the afternoon was half gone and the long shape of Chad Wilcox finally stood in the doorway.

"What's eatin' yuh?" Chad snapped. "You got Francy scared out of her wits. Where's Erling?"

"Gittin' his fool head blowed off, like as not!" Zeb screeched at him angrily. "Pity you can't stay to home once in a while so a man can git hold of you when he needs you. Gosh afired A'mighty, where you been?"

CHAD did not say. His travels had been wide, these past few days, for he had been interviewing men who had been robbed, and stockmen and cowboys who had suffered at the hands of the rustlers. He had armed himself with a police picture of Blaney. He had learned enough to almost convince him that the Pocatello Kid and Blaney Wilcox were one.

"Suppose you stop twitterin' like a magpie and tell me what's wrong," Chad rasped.

He finally managed to get a lucid story out of Zeb. There was no hiding his concern.

"You got that note?" he demanded.

Zeb handed it to him, and the old man put on his glasses. There was a wintry look on his lined face when he finished, and not because of anything new that he found in the note's contents; Zeb had quoted it correctly. But the writing! Chad told himself he would have recognized it at a glance.

"I'll keep this," he got out tonelessly. "You needn't say anythin' to Erling about it." He folded it carefully and placed it in his wallet. Without a word, he started for the door.

"But blast your ole hide, what are you agoin' to do about this?" Zeb shouted. "I been waitin' here all day to tell yuh!"

Chad just shook his head.

"I reckon there ain't nothin' to be done about it," he said woodenly. "He's there by now. We'll have to wait."

"I'm thinkin' we'll be waitin' a long time," Zeb prophesied gloomily. "He'll be back when we bring him."

"I'm thinkin' of that, too," Chad muttered. "If you hear anythin', let me know; I'll be at home."

He stepped out and left Zeb fuming furiously to himself. The latter's agitation was lost on him; his thoughts were at Frenchman's Ford. He asked himself why Stout had been so quick to keep the rendezvous. It was foolhardy of him to have gone. But Chad did not hold that against him. He knew that as a young sheriff he himself had done many things equally as rash. His luck had always held good. Maybe it would be that way with Erling. Another possibility struck him, and he could not dismiss it. Had Erling discovered that the Pocatello Kid was really Blaney and gone to meet him to offer some compromise that would keep the Wilcox name clean?

Remembering what he had done on that very score, Chad found it easy to believe. It put his mind in a torment.

"I hope he ain't makin' that mistake," he sighed. "What I did was bad enough. You can't compromise with a rattlesnake."

He had some of Blaney's old letters at home. He compared the Pocatello Kid's note with them. It left no question in his mind.

"I guess this puts it squarely up to me," he murmured soberly. "I warned him, and I wasn't bluffin'. This is one time my hand can't be called."

He had a chair under a tree out in the yard that was a favorite spot with

him, where he liked to sit and read the *Star*. He picked the paper up from the porch, where the Moore boy had thrown it, and walked slowly out into the yard. He sat there a long time today, never glancing at the newspaper. Later, he heard the gate open. Francy stood there, her face pale and worried-looking. He mustered a smile for her.

"Dad, there's something wrong," she said at once. "Erling, I mean! I'd only have to look at you to know it. Why did he go to Frenchman's Ford so suddenly?"

"Who said he did?" old Chad flared up.

"I made Zeb tell me," Francy answered.

"The dang fool! He's worse than an old woman! What's he blabbin' things like that for?" He realized that this was the wrong tack to take, of a sudden. "What's goin' to the Ford mean?" he asked, his tone mildly scoffing now. "It's a sheriff's business to be on the go."

Francy shook her young head. Her eyes were misting.

"First it was you—I was always afraid they'd be bringing you home dead to me," she murmured, her voice breaking. "Now it's—it's—"

"The man you love you've got to worry about," old Chad finished for her as he drew her head against his shoulder. "You needn't be embarrassed about sayin' it, honey. Your mother used to worry, too. But I always came home, Francy. Erling will be all right."

"But can't you do something to help him, Father? He's young—"

"Don't worry, Francy," he murmured thoughtfully. "I'm goin' to do somethin'."

Chapter III

SHOWDOWN FOR A SHERIFF

SIX HOURS of riding under a blazing sun had not dulled the curiosity that sent Erling Stout pressing on to his rendezvous with the Pocatello Kid. He had early dismissed the possibility that he was riding to his death. In the years he had served under Chad Wilcox he had learned too much about the ways of the lawless to believe that the Kid's request for a parley was only an invitation to a bushwhack death. He needed no better reason than the fact that he could have been shot down from ambush without bothering to decoy him to Stinking Creek. He knew these men were desperate; that with a hangnoose awaiting them, they had nothing to lose, whatever came of this meeting. The knowledge kept him alert and wary. Without knowing what the play was to be, he knew that if he made a mistake it was almost certain to be his last.

Crossing the Hardscrabble Flats, and knowing that from the top of the next rise he would have his first glimpse of Frenchman's Ford, and by the same token that the Pocatello Kid and his gang would have their first sight of him, the question that had never been out of his mind from the moment he read the outlaw's note assailed him with fresh insistence. What did the Kid hope to gain from this meeting? Was he sick, or wounded? Had his gang turned against him?

He had supplied a hundred answers, and none was more than wild surmise. As for his own end, he had a rather definite idea of what he hoped to gain. It was nothing so simple as starting a quick gunplay or trying to arrest anyone.

"I'd never get away with it," he warned himself. "I'll be satisfied to supply the answers to a few things he doesn't say. He invited me to this meeting. It'll be my turn next, and I won't bother to send out any invitations."

There was good cover almost down to the crossing, but Stout found it the part of wisdom to ride out in the open. The dilapidated building that had stood at Frenchman's Ford since the days when Fort McDermitt was an Army post had not changed since he had seen it last. No one was in sight, but he knew more than one pair of eyes watched him as he forded

Stinking Creek and walked his pony to the door.

Black Frank, a big, bulbous man, his round little eyes almost hidden in rolls of fat, was behind the bar. Two men sat at a table, pretending to have no interest in the man who had just walked in. The dark faces were too vacant to fool Erling. He knew a twitch of his hand would bring them to their feet.

Nazaire pushed a bottle and a glass across the bar at him. Stout pushed it back. Elbows resting on the bar, he said, "Pretty hard to teach an old dog new tricks, Frank. I thought Chad Wilcox had taught you your lesson."

Black Frank's drooping lower lip tightened and disappeared behind his scraggly mustache. His swarthy face expressionless, he jerked his head over his shoulder, indicating the back room.

"Okay," Stout murmured softly.

"A man pays for his drinks, I don't ask his beeziness," Nazaire observed as Stout opened the door. The latter smiled. Obviously, Black Frank was not burning all his bridges behind him.

THE back room had one window. A man stood before it, his back to Stout. He did not turn until he heard the door close. For seconds they stood there, regarding each other with a cold scrutiny, and the air of this little room was suddenly electric with tension.

"Well, you're here," said the man at the window. His sneering smile gave him away. Stout had thought he recognized him. Now he was certain. Surprise tightened his face and left it hard and flat.

"So you're the Pocatello Kid," he said quietly. "Some things are clear to me now, Blaney."

"Yeh? Sit down. Maybe I can make 'em even clearer."

Stout pushed a chair against the door with his foot and stood where he was.

He said, "I've always wondered why Chad Wilcox resigned." His tone was thin and bitter. "I reckon I know now. God!" he groaned. "Shows how you can be mistaken in a man! I'd have knocked the man down who tried to tell me that Chad would sell out to any man—even his son! He knew all about you. So did I. And I thought all his riding these past few weeks was because he was gunning for someone." He laughed derisively at himself. "No wonder I couldn't catch up with you, Blaney, with that old wolf tipping you off to what I was doing."

Blaney did not correct him. Stout had really suggested an angle that the other had missed. He was quick to take advantage of it.

He said, "Well, you're the sheriff. You didn't get such a bad break. You can thank me for that."

Stout came up to the table and looked across it at Blaney. Without inflection, he said, "I'll see you in hell for it. You've destroyed my faith in the finest man I ever knew. And you're dirtying the name of the girl I love. It's one or the other of us now. You'll get me, or I'll get you."

"Well, you're swingin' this conversation just around to where I want it," the Kid grinned. "You don't have to be stupid about this, Stout. I never liked you; you always was too damn righteous for any good use; but you're smart. You can figure things out. That's what the old man

did. He wasn't thinkin' of himself; he was thinkin' of Francy. Stout, do you begin to get my drift?"

The sparring was over, as far as he was concerned. Eyes slitted and hostile, he waited for Stout to answer. Impatiently

he added, "There's no need for Francy to know about me—"

Erling's lips straightened until they were white and thin. "Better keep Francy's name out of this," he said.

Blaney said, "On one condition, Stout. I've got my price, and so have you. I'm sick of bein' chased through these hills. Is that plain enough?"

Stout said, "Too plain to be healthy."

"Well, what's your answer?"

Erling Stout's face was a stony mask for a moment. The little back room of Nazaire's saloon knew a breathless stillness. Finally he said, "If you want my answer to that, put your gun on the table. I'll drop mine alongside it."

Thinking of the two men who waited outside the door the Pocatello Kid let a sneer part his lips. With a flourish he tossed his gun on the table.

"I owe you a lickin'!" he snarled. "I'll make it a good one."

STOUT slid his gun across the table to join the other. A white rage was boiling in him, but caution was not gone. There was a trick here, and he knew it. One moment his long arms were hanging at his side. The next, he had kicked over the table and leaped across the room before the two guns had clattered to the floor. They'd be harder to pick up now. That was what he intended.

Blaney got away from him before Stout could pin him to the wall. A step, and he whirled. His fist shot out and failed to find a target. It threw him off balance. Stout's long, looping right caught him on the jaw and dropped him. Blaney was up in a flash and rushed him, head lowered. Stout straightened him up with an uppercut that was thrown with such force that it wrung a grunt from him.

With blood trickling from his torn mouth Blaney backed away. Suddenly his hand fastened on the chair before the door. He swung it over his head and let it fly at Stout. The latter ducked, and the chair went crashing through the window. As the glass fell with a shivery sound, Rell Logan and Rip Smalley rushed into the room. Logan caught Stout from behind and knocked him to the floor. It gave Blaney time enough to scoop up his gun. Livid with rage, he whirled to send a slug into Erling. But the loose shape of Black Frank Nazaire filled the doorway. He shoved a gun, that looked small in his huge paw, at the three men.

"Drop dat gun, Kid!" he growled. "I tole you fellars no shootin' here! Eef you want to shoot, get outside!"

Blaney stared at him incredulously. "Why you doublecrossin' skunk!" he said. "I'll blast you for this!"

"Drop dat gun!" Nazaire droned.

He had his way. Stout got to his feet. "Much obliged, Frank," he said. "I'll remember this."

"So will I," Blaney snapped viciously.

Nazaire said, "You git out of here now, Stout."

Erling went. He sent his horse across Stinking Creek and began climbing the far slope. Every step of the way he expected a slug to catch up with him. A few feet from the crest, the thin soprano scream of a bullet cut a slice out of the quiet afternoon. It missed him by a foot. A rifle cracked again. The marksman had the range this time.

CHAPTER IV

BLOOD ON THE SAGE

CHAD WILCOX sat on his front porch with Francy, the glowing end of his cigar a red orb in the darkness of the warm evening. It was almost ten o'clock. They were waiting, without admitting it; Erling would have to pass the house when he returned. "If" he returned Francy put it.

Three men walked up the street. Chad had known them all his life, and he recognized them even before the light reached them; Doc Bascom, Cal Hodges and old

Charlie Gannett, the county commissioners. Chad instantly surmised why they were there.

"Thought we'd like to have a little talk with you," old Charlie announced. He was always the spokesman.

Francy got up. In the past, these meetings at the house had been frequent. They were always a signal for her to retire. This evening, she could not go without asking a question.

"Mr. Gannett, have you heard anything from Erling?"

"Nary a word," old Charlie answered, his tone non-committal.

"She's worried about him," Chad explained. "He could hardly be gettin' in yet. He'll be all right," he added, voicing a conviction he was far from feeling.

Gannett was never a man to waste any words. He wasted none tonight. "The situation is pretty bad," he said. "Election is only a few months off. We gave Stout the appointment on your say-so, Chad. We'd like to hear what you think about it."

"Well, I don't know that he's made any mistakes," Chad answered unhesitatingly. "I couldn't have done any better."

"I don't know about that," Gannett returned. "We never had anythin' like this on our hands when you were runnin' the office. You used to call it Wilcox luck. I guess it was more than luck."

"I guess it was," Cal Hodges put in pointedly. "What's Stout's thinkin' of to go gallivantin' off to meet the gent that's made this county a robber's roost?"

"I would have gone, just as he did," said Chad.

"Chances are that he ain't gone to the Ford at all," Gannett declared cynically. "If he did, it'll be the first time he ever got within shootin' distance of that bunch."

The better part of an hour passed as they wrangled, with old Chad stoutly defending the man he had named to succeed himself. The meeting was about to break up when Gannett called the others' attention to a rider walking his horse into town.

"Why, that's Erling now!" Chad exclaimed with unconcealed excitement. "I don't like the way he sits that saddle. That ain't his style of ridin'."

Chad hurried to the gate and hailed the horseman. His call brought Francy running from the house.

"Father, he's hurt!" she cried. "Look at him!"

The others had come out into the street. Stout's horse stopped at the gate. By now, all could see the blackened blood that stained the sheriff's shirt and smeared the right side of his face. Chad lifted his arms and helped him out of his saddle. Francy had her arms about him instantly.

"Erling, are you badly hurt?" she demanded breathlessly.

Stout shook his head. "My head's spinning a little. I was all right until a mile or two out." Doc Bascom put an arm under the sheriff's shoulder. "I guess you'll find it's only a crease, Doc," Stout said.

"Let's get you in the house, and we'll see," Bascom advised.

"It appears that he got within shootin' distance of somebody," Chad muttered acidly.

"I take it back," Gannett snapped. "Not that gettin' himself shot is goin' to help matters any. What do you suppose happened?"

"I don't know," Chad said, stunned by the knowledge that Erling now shared his secret. That the truth could be held back much longer was impossible.

Erling's wound proved to be inconsequential. A little whiskey provided all the stimulation he needed to overcome the effects of the blood he had lost. His head bound up, he walked into the dining room where the others waited. There were matters on his mind that he was determined to dispose of at once.

"Before I say anything about this afternoon," he began, "I'm going to go back a few weeks."

The door bell rang as he was about to continue. It was an emergency call

for Doc Bascom. A cowboy had been brought in from the V L Ranch, with a broken leg.

"I'll be back, if I can make it," Bascom said as he hurried out.

Erling began again. "I never could understand why you resigned so suddenly, Chad," he said, his eyes on the old man. "I know why now." He found it difficult to go on for a moment. "You've been like a father to me. That makes it pretty hard for me to say what I think must be said."

Chad's face was gray and bloodless. The slightest nod of his head was the only sign he gave that he heard.

Stout turned to Francy. "I want you to understand, too, Francy. You promised to marry me this fall. I hope this isn't going to make you change your mind. I know I'd kill the man that tried to hurt you as I got to do. But there isn't any other way. I hope you'll come to understand that some time."

"Erling, what is it you are trying to say?" she demanded, her voice choking her.

"That's what I was askin' myself," Charlie Gannett rasped impatiently. "Come to the point, Erling!"

Stout's eyes had gone back to Chad, and they remained there.

He said, "Though you had another story to tell, I knew you were combing the brakes and the hills and sticking your nose into every hideout in the county. It had me fooled, but I know the answer now. Another thing I couldn't understand was how a gang of outlaws could slip away from me every time I had them pegged off. I've got the answer to it at last. I never figured that the man I thought was my best friend was tipping them off."

A pin-drop silence descended. Francy stared at Stout with eyes that said she wondered if his wound had affected his mind. Old Chad just sat frozen in his chair, numbed not so much by the inference that Erling had read into his actions as by the knowledge that the moment had come when he must speak. Somehow, he found courage to face them.

"Knowin' what you know, I see how you took that slant—that I sold you out," he said carefully. "I don't hold it against you. But it wasn't that way. I—I was just tryin' to take a job off your hands. That's why I was doin' all my ridin'." He turned to Charlie Gannett. "This is all a riddle to you, Charlie. I can make it plain in half a dozen words. Just try to understand that I didn't want my little girl smeared with shame. Charlie, the Pocatello Kid is really my boy, Blaney."

"What!" Gannett cried. "Chad, you don't mean it!"

Cal Hodges was too surprised to speak. As for Francy, she got up and ran to her father, her arms going about his neck.

"Oh, Dad," she murmured, "why didn't you tell me? How could Blaney do this to us?"

Old Chad patted her head fondly. "Don't cry, Francy," he pleaded, his voice unsteady. "He isn't worth it. He's killed every claim he ever had on us. Now that you know, I feel relieved. Some folks will point the finger at us. But we can stand it. We'll keep our heads up. Perhaps you'd better go upstairs now. We can talk everythin' over later."

STOUT had risen. His hand went out toward her impulsively. "Francy," he said humbly, "please don't hold what I said against me. You know what you and your father mean to me."

"Don't say any more, Erling," she pleaded. "I couldn't stand it tonight."

"How did all this begin?" Gannett asked when she had gone.

Chad told his story, starting with the night Blaney had come back. Old Charlie, Hodges and Stout heard him out without interruption, and in the end their respect for the man was greater than ever. Gannett voiced the thought of the others when he said, "You couldn't have done different, Chad. Killin's too good for that dirty pup.

Don't think of him as your son. He ain't never been no son to you."

"Killin' is what I promised him," Chad said stoically. "When I saw that note, I knew it was Blaney. But Erling had gone. I couldn't do anythin' but wait and hope. What happened, Erling?"

Stout gave them an account of his experience at Frenchman's Ford, up to the moment he had been wounded.

"The blood blinded me for a minute or two," he said. "It was all I could do to stick in the saddle until I'd crested the slope. I'd never have got that far but for Nazaire. I can't figure his stand at all. He's certainly been hand in glove with Blaney and the other two."

"Frank will steal, but he'll stop short of killin'," Chad told him. "I put the fear of God in him once or twice. He's perhaps rememberin' it. But that don't mean anythin' now. Chances are that Blaney and his pals are forted up in Nazaire's place. If they're not, they're no farther away than that cave I took the Denzler boys out of six years ago, in Stinkin' Creek Canyon."

He broke off and paced the length of the room once or twice. He stopped in front of Gannett.

"Charlie, when I turned in my badge I never thought I'd be askin' to wear one again. But Erling is in no shape to go after that bunch. It's my place anyhow. They'll shoot on sight now. That won't stop me. Make me deputy, or whatever you please. I'm goin' after 'em."

"You won't go alone," Stout said hastily. "I'm fit to ride. I'll swear in men enough to throw a cordon around Nazaire's place. If we leave here by midnight we'll be there before dawn breaks. I won't refuse you, Chad, but I don't think you should go. Dead or alive, I'm taking that bunch."

"I never could hold my head up again if I didn't go," Chad told him. "You don't have to spare my feelin's, Erling. When a dog goes mad, you kill him. There's no other way to figure this. I'll be on hand to be sworn in." He turned to Hodges. "Cal, did you have any fireworks left?" His store always had a supply on the Fourth.

"Why, yes," Hodges answered. "Why do you ask?"

"You get me some rockets—biggest you have—and a bottle of kerosene. No use of good men gettin' shot down tryin' to shoot that bunch of rats out of their hole. We'll set Nazaire's place afire and let it burn to the ground. It's harbored crooks enough in its time."

FIFTEEN strong, Stout led his posse out of Rye Patch at midnight. Old Chad rode at his side, silent, grim. Behind them, Charlie Gannett and Hodges rode with the others.

The moon had set and the black dark that comes just before dawn had fallen by the time they pulled up on the Hardscrabble Flats. Stout instructed his men. No one was to take an unnecessary chance. When they had thrown a circle around French Frank's saloon they were to wait for daylight and word from him before they closed in.

In the darkness, moving cautiously, Stout led half a dozen of his possemen over the crest and down through the scrub timber to the edge of the creek. Their ponies had been left behind. The far bank of the creek was deep enough to offer some protection. They crossed the stream and stretched out on the bank. The saloon was only a hundred yards away. Not a light burned in it.

Morning broke clear and cool. For an

hour the waiting men watched the building and found no sign of life.

"Looks like they had pulled out," Charlie Gannett remarked. "It was hopin' for too much that we'd find 'em here."

Across the flat, a posseman started across an open space between the trees. He had not taken two steps before a puff of smoke and the sharp flat crack of a rifle came from an upper window. The posseman went down, a slug in his hip.

"Reckon they're here, all right," Chad muttered. "That was Pat Evans who dropped. No need for him to take a chance like that. Doc will have some work to do when he gets here. Pat won't be the only one who'll be needin' him, I'm thinkin'."

"Suppose we throw a little lead into the building," said Stout. "They know we're here. Maybe we can show them there's enough of us to mean business."

The word passed along the circle. Presently guns were barking on every side of the saloon. It brought immediate response from the men cornered within.

Chad said, "The sun's burnt the dew off that roof. The old shingles are bone dry; they ought to catch easy."

Stout nodded. "See what you can do."

The latter fired four rockets before one fell on the roof. The oil-soaked rag tied to the shaft soon ignited the shingles. In a few minutes the blaze had spread until it was a yard wide and eating its way rapidly toward the ridge-pole. Gray, choking smoke began to curl downward. From inside, someone poked a hole through the shingles and tried to put the fire out with a bucket of water. The flames were beyond being put out now.

READY for the men to make a break from the saloon, the posse waited. But nothing happened. The roof was gone and the side walls burning well down into the upper story before Blaney's crowd began using their guns again. From three sides of the building they fired.

The front of the saloon faced the creek and the spot where Stout and Chad and three or four others waited. Suddenly from a side door two men ran out, their hands up, as they dashed for the trees. The glance they flung back over their shoulders said plainly enough that they were more afraid of being shot down from the saloon than by a posseman.

Chad and Erling worked around to where the two men—Logan and Smalley—were being held. Stout put the irons on them.

"How many are left in there?" he asked.

"Just the Kid," Logan snarled. "I hope he roasts! We wouldn't have been here if he listened to me!"

"Where's Nazaire?" the sheriff asked.

"You needn't worry about him," Smalley sneered. "The Kid finished him, the cheap double-crosser! The Frenchman made an awful mistake when he saved your hide, Mr. Sheriff!"

A small porch extended over the front door of the saloon. A door led out on it. Through the smoke the posse saw Blaney Wilcox push a heavy table through that door. He had it standing on end. He pushed it forward, using it as a breastworks, until his spitting rifle could sweep a wide semi-circle. It didn't take him long to discover the two possemen hidden behind an old wagon-box that had been dumped out in the yard. From his perch he had them at his mercy. Chad took the situation in at a glance.

"There's just no gettin' inside that buildin' to fetch him," he announced. "But he's got to be stopped. I can reach the back, all right. I'll work up along the side of the buildin' until I can see him."

"No," Stout said flatly. "I won't let you take that chance."

The old man was gone, however. Erling called to him, but Chad did not even look back. He reached the rear of the saloon quickly and began edging along the side. Blaney's rifle was barking. A dozen posse guns were answering his fire.

The two men behind the wagon-box had flattened out, hugging the ground for their lives.

Chad had only his six-gun. It was enough. He could see Blaney now. He had to steel himself for this black moment. There was no anger in him. His bloodless lips formed the words, "My son." It was a soundless farewell.

"Blaney!" he cried.

That call reached the man on the upper porch. He looked down, insensate rage distorting his face at sight of Chad. With the snarl of a savage beast, he whipped his rifle to his shoulder. Chad fired. His hand was steady. The rifle slid from Blaney's grasp, and for a moment he seemed to stand there, staring at the old man. The porch had no railing. When he tottered forward there was nothing to stop him. With the smoke and flames licking at him, he plunged to the ground.

Chad caught him by the arm and dragged him back from the fire. Men were running forward from all directions, Doc Bascom among them. A quick examination and Bascom got to his feet.

"He's dead," he said softly.

"Yeh," Chad echoed. The others were standing around staring at the body. "Can someone get somethin' and cover him up?" the old man asked huskily. "After all, he was my boy."

A man brought a blanket from the barn. Chad watched as Blaney was wrapped in it.

"I'll look after everything," Erling offered.

"Thank you," Chad murmured. He started to turn away, a weariness on him such as he had never known.

"Just a minute, Chad," Doc Bascom said to him. "There's something I want to say before you go. A doctor has some secrets intrusted to him that are sacred. I've had one for a long time. I feel free to speak now. Your first wife left you to run away with Bart Noble. That affair had been going on for some time. I delivered Blaney. I knew when he was born that you were not his father. There never was a drop of your blood in his worthless carcass. He bred true to the man and woman who were responsible for him."

There were hard men in that crowd, but they were touched as they gazed at Chad and saw him try to grasp the full meaning of Bascom's statement. There were tears in his old eyes.

"I don't know what to say," he murmured brokenly. "I—it changes everythin' for me. It takes a load off of me that I'm afraid I couldn't have borne."

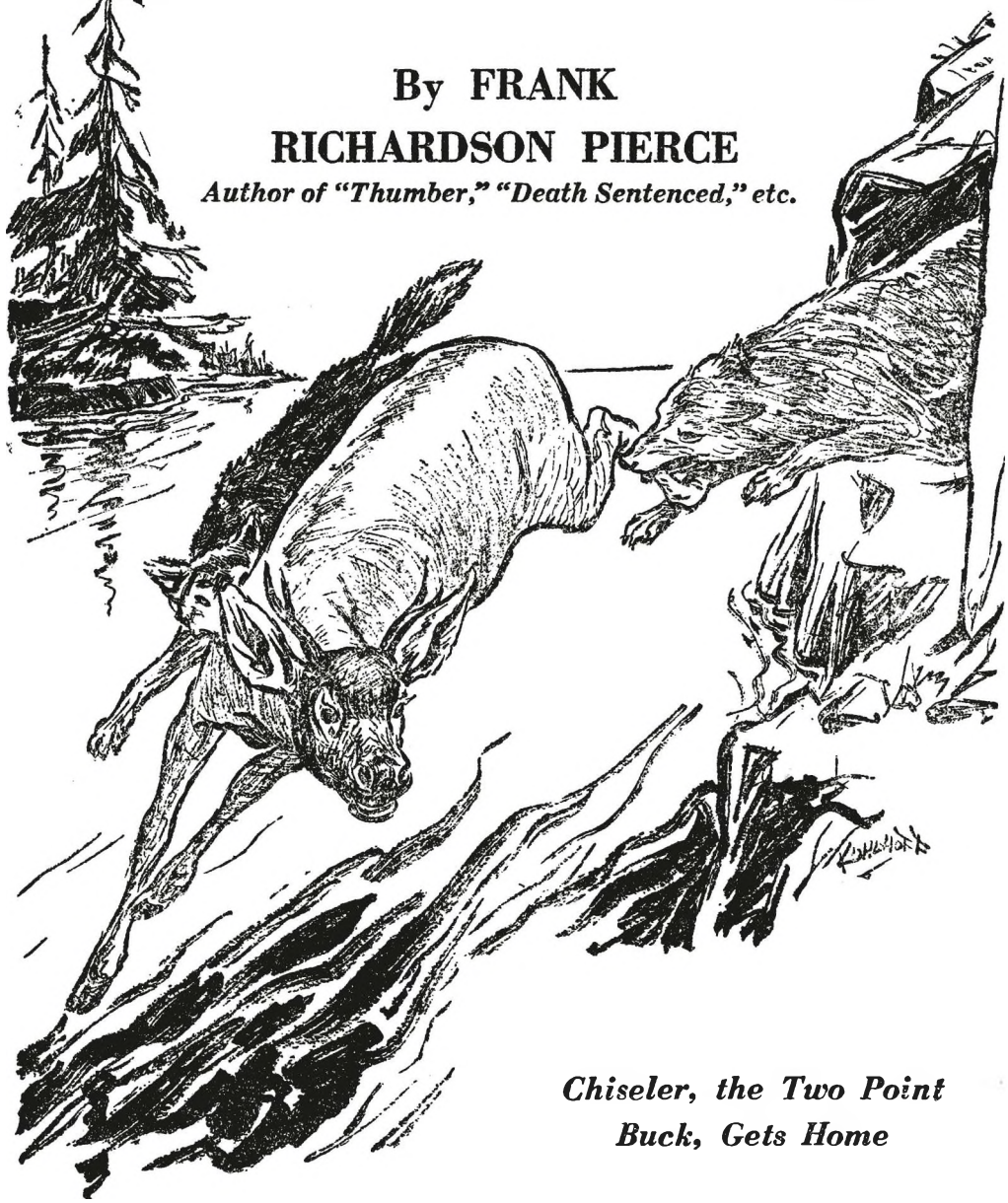
Erling took his arm. "I wouldn't try to say any more, Chad," he urged. "We all know how you feel. I'd like to take off my badge and pin it on you again."

"No," the old man protested. "My day is over; I've done my duty. But we'll keep that badge in the family, Erling. It'll be in good hands."

WILDERNESS PARTNERSHIP

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "Thumber," "Death Sentenced," etc.



Chiseler, the Two Point Buck, Gets Home

CHISELER, the Rainier Park's two spike buck was indignant—and just a little bit frightened. It was bad enough to be captured, loaded into a truck with Panhandle Pete and Old Lady Riley, and shifted to a strange country. But it was a thousand times worse to have a cougar scatter the party beyond all hope of reassembling.

The last Chiseler had seen of his father, Panhandle Pete, was when the buck vanished over a ridge with the cougar in hot pursuit. Old Lady Riley, the bear, had plunged into a stream and vanished. For all Chiseler knew, the bear might have

drowned and the buck supplied a meal for the cougar.

But one friend remained in the region, Noisy Nat, a bluejay that was always finding something to kick about. Chiseler could hear Noisy Nat scolding some forest intruder down the gulch. For that reason the young buck remained in a dense thicket. Young as he was, Chiseler had learned the bluejay is a very fair forest sentinel.

Occasionally he might go off half cocked, but usually when he sounded his fear warning, danger was definite. The jay's scolding increased in volume and presently Chiseler saw him—an animated splash of blue against the somber forest.

The jay flew to a snag that had once been a fir tree. Lightning had struck the fir, knocked the bark into a heap at the base, and set fire to the brush below. Nearly an acre of brush had burned, leaving an open area. Presently Chiseler saw a female cougar cross the area, and he understood then the reason of the jay's annoyance. The great cat was lean and hungry. She undoubtedly was feeding kittens in a nearby den.

Chiseler repressed the desire to speed away from the spot. Only the jay's warning had prevented the buck from walking into the cougar. The cat and jay disappeared over the ridge, but presently the jay returned. His alert eyes presently noted Chiseler. He flew down to a branch two feet above the buck's head and eyed him with approval.

Many a time the two had been fed by tourists at Longmire's. His manner indicated, "I've flown all over the country, Chiseler and can't locate Panhandle Pete or Old Lady Riley. It looks like the two of us will have to form a partnership if we're ever going to get out of this mess."

After a bluejay or buck has been fed by admiring tourists and enjoyed the fat of the land without effort, the thought of working for a living proves irksome.

Chiseler emerged from the thicket with extreme caution. His tail flipped nervously with alarm, his nostrils searched the air for danger scents. The jay viewed the buck's actions with approval.

Perhaps Noisy Nat even considered the buck somewhat dumb not to realize the coast was clear. He flew away a short distance and began rustling food. His resentment grew. Why didn't cars roll to a stop and people spill out with cameras to take pictures and offer a bird and a deer things to eat?

SOME of the things offered were strange indeed, but Noisy Nat took everything in his stride and rarely did his cast iron constitution object.

Chiseler ate his fill, climbed a ridge and sniffed about for a bed. A two-foot fir tree stood on the slope just below the crest of the ridge. Dirt had washed against it, fir needles had piled up to a depth of three inches. On this ideal bed the buck dozed the remainder of the day, while the jay stood guard.

Most forest creatures had relaxed. The meat hunters—bob cats, cougars, wolves and coyotes—were sleeping, also. An hour before sundown Noisy Nat awakened with a start. A coyote stood on the crest of the ridge, partially protected by huckleberry brush.

The animal's nostrils were picking up the scents the gentle breeze brought up from the lower country, and classifying them. As it stood there, a second coyote appeared. Neither made the slightest sound. It was as if a feather had blown through the brush and then stopped. Neither movement, nor the process of stopping was accompanied by the slightest sound.

Noisy Nat gave one warning note. A tenseness settled on the forest. Animals sleeping soundly were instantly awake, tense and ready for flight. Animals on the move froze momentarily, then slunk for the nearest cover.

The coyotes lifted their eyes to the jay and stared hatefully. Each well knew this

blue sentinel had cost them many a square meal. A third and fourth joined the pair. This was significant. Coyotes in the region were increasing to the point they ran in packs. This spelled the death of many a buck and doe, as well as hundreds of the lesser furbearers.

The desire for association among the coyotes was perhaps less than the desire to share in any kill another coyote might make. The animals worked most effectively in pairs, rather than in packs.

When a fifth and sixth joined the group Noisy Nat filled the forest with his warning. The coyotes now ignored the jay, but concentrated interest on the country below. They picked up the scent of several rabbits, a bear, a fox, and a buck's old scent.

Suddenly the wind shifted and the coyotes grew tense. Each shook with the nearness of big game and the prospect of warm blood. Fangs gleamed and grew frothy. A big male advanced. His mate circled, ready to aid in the attack. The pair was working together in spite of the presence of others.

Noisy Nat flew over them, screaming with protest, working himself up to a frenzy. He could look down on Chiseler and see the buck was tense and alert, but determined not to leave partial security until positive attack was certain.

As young as he was, Chiseler appreciated numbers reduced his safety factor. He found himself responding to strange reactions—responses bred from the very fact his kind had faced this peril countless times down through the ages. And these responses were his heritage from those that had survived.

He lifted his head slightly and noted the coyotes' positions. All six had located his approximate position and were closing in. While the buck's eyes were on those in front, two closing in from the rear saw him. Noisy Nat swooped down and screamed. Chiseler's nerves could endure no more. Something snapped. He sped toward the crest of the ridge. A huge male leaped at the buck's throat and missed. A sleek, powerful female slashed at the hamstring and missed by an inch. The buck's insolent heels kicked stones into her face.

Chiseler gained the crest of the ridge a hundred yards ahead of the nearest coyote. In a swift, comprehensive glance, Chiseler saw a deep canyon far below him where a stream lay like a broad, silver tape. The boom of a waterfall filled the buck's ears. Beyond that he saw a snow-covered bench. Beyond the bench stood a snow-capped mountain.

THE mountain was small, hardly a mile high, but in the distance mysterious in the haze of the lower levels towered Mount Rainier. This, to the young buck, was the landmark he had sought since being released from the truck that had brought him to this foreign land. He could not know of the mountains and valleys that lay between. But he did know that home lay at the foot of the great mountain.

The homing instinct took complete control. He headed toward the mountain and his course took him down the steep slope which ended in the brawling creek.

He covered the ground in a series of leaps which sent rocks flying and taxed his slim legs to the utmost. Noisy Nat set his wings and seemed to slide down an invisible groove. His slide ended in a swift upturn that landed him neatly on a leafless limb.

Frenzy gripped the jay as coyotes were coming in every direction and he could not fly over all of them at the same time. Chiseler pulled up suddenly on the bank of the creek. Instinct told him the stream was deep and dangerous. It was wide at this point and fast. It was studded with damp, mossy boulders that continued to the very brink of a waterfall.

The water dropped a sheer hundred feet, then narrowed as if piled through a

deep canyon. Chiseler, trapped by the stream, started to work upstream through the fringe of brush along the bank.

Noisy Nat's warning screech stopped the buck dead in his tracks. The male

coyote leaped at his throat. At the same instant the female went after the hamstring again. Her sharp fangs drew blood, but missed the vital muscle.

Chiseler whistled a mixture of rage and fear. He leaped backward and as he stopped, the big male shot from the brush and drove his fangs into the buck's shoulder. The deer staggered under the impact, almost went down, then got to his feet with strength born of desperation. He felt the female's fangs on his left rear leg. She was over eager and once more hadn't found the hamstring, which, severed, would leave the leg useless.

The young buck hurled himself over the creek bank and struck the stream with a splash. Both coyotes let go as Chiseler's body disappeared into a swirling pool. The buck came up instantly and his hoofs lodged in the rocks below the pool.

The snarls of the coyotes, the buck's whistling and the jay's screams made the waning day hideous. All six coyotes splashed about in the shallows, finding partial footing, leaping and falling back.

Again Chiseler's heritage of strategy against untold perils came to his aid. He retreated deeper into the water. This hampered his own movements, but it also slowed down the coyotes.

One of the bolder animals approached from upstream, swimming steadily as the current carried him toward the buck. As the coyote fastened his fangs near the buck's flank, the odor of flowing blood filled the air.

Every coyote in the pack surged toward the spot. Desperate, Chiseler staggered toward the center of the stream. The current tugged at his slender legs and beat against his ribs. His hind legs dropped into a pool. Swept off of his feet he smashed against a rock. The coyote's grip on his flank was broken. The animal began to swim. The current whipped his hindquarters around and with head upstream the coyote had to fight the current.

It was a hopeless fight. The current moved twice as fast as the coyote could swim. It vanished suddenly over the brink of the falls. The disappearance made no impression on the others. The blood scent was in their nostrils, and again they came. Again Chiseler retreated to deeper water.

The stream whipped him off of his feet. He moved perhaps ten feet before his hoofs lodged against the bottom. Three coyotes were disappearing over the falls when the buck looked about to determine the position of his enemies. Only the big, powerful male and his mate remained.

Suddenly the male plunged into the river again. His mate followed. Chiseler saw them coming, turned and struggled across the stream. Twice he went down, and once the current rolled him over. He struck rocks with a force that knocked the wind from his lungs, but he gained the opposite bank, climbed out and dropped in his tracks.

The coyotes, older and wiser than the others, crossed at an angle. They were washed onto the bank just above the falls. Half drowned and completely exhausted, they fell sodden and gasping to the damp

sand. Payment of the sheer physical toll exacted a momentary truce.

As long as the coyotes did not move, Chiseler himself made no effort to get up. And as long as the coyotes could watch their quarry they were content to build up their strength. Theirs was the confidence of many a long battle eventually won.

EVEN Noisy Nat felt the strain of the fight. He had screamed himself to a state of hoarseness and was on the verge of collapse. Nevertheless he flitted to a limb above the coyotes and cursed them roundly.

He could see the pool below the falls and the remains of their four companions moving slowly over the bottom. That meant many a furbearer in the region would live another year. Dead coyotes don't prey on living creatures.

Chiseler felt a stiffness stealing over him and rather than wait until this handicapped his movements the buck struggled to his feet. Instantly Noisy Nat screamed. The coyotes also had leaped up and shaken themselves.

The female trotted into the brush and the male began stalking the buck. The jay, following the female, informed the world of each move she made.

Chiseler, knowing her position, thanks to his blue-feathered partner, cut straight between the two animals. The buck was certain he couldn't move out of a slow trot in his exhausted condition, and yet when the coyotes swung in behind him, he began to bound up the steep slope ahead. The coyotes lost considerable ground but with the scent of the buck in their nostrils they kept steadily at it.

Each felt the buck had been badly wounded by their teeth and they knew from experience that wounded creatures lie down and grow too stiff to win their last fight. Above them moved the blue-jay, wearing his hoarse voice to shreds.

Night settled, the lower canyons filled with velvet darkness, the stillness was broken only by the boom of the waterfall and the occasional cry of a night bird. Chiseler hobbled up a ridge above and felt the crisp air from the snowfields cool his wounds. He looked across at the mountain, brooding in the light of a slowly rising moon. Its tip was flooded with silver, its lower levels growing lighter. Its base was lost in the blackness of deep canyon and foothills.

Yet it seemed nearer. Chiseler, sensing that the soft snow would protect him from the coyotes, moved slowly across the bench until the snow almost reached his belly. Then he found a rock protruding from the snowfield—flat and black. All day it had stood in the blazing sun and it retained much of its heat.

Chiseler climbed onto it and lay down to rest. He slept fitfully, conscious of the coyotes which were floundering around in the soft snow.

THE young buck awakened in the gray of dawn, still conscious of danger. It was cold, even around the rock which had retained stored heat for hours and melted the snow immediately adjoining.

The coyotes were advancing over the crust that had formed. Chiseler jumped to his feet and stamped with fury. As the stiffness left his joints he struggled through the snow, his hoofs smashing the crust and letting him down.

The coyotes held the advantage now. They were hungry and weary, but the closeness of their quarry lent them new strength. The young buck drove his body onward until his sides heaved with the pounding of his heart. He began to stumble. Then suddenly he turned. As the female coyote made a leap at his throat Chiseler pivoted on his hind legs and struck out with his forelegs. The coyote eluded the blow. The buck's hoofs broke the crust, leaving a ragged hole.

As the coyote turned to leap again, the impact as she kicked back with her hind legs, broke the crust. Thrown off her bal-

ance she missed the buck's throat by a good two feet and struck in the soft snow on her side.

Chiseler had once seen Panhandle Pete kill a half grown cougar with his front feet. Perhaps he remembered, but it is more likely that he responded to his instincts. Instantly he drove his front feet into the coyote's side.

The first blow knocked the wind from her lungs and half stunned her. The subsequent blows, broke the skin and drove the life from her body.

The buck stumbled on, hotly followed by the male The deer played desperately for time, seeking a ground of his own choosing for the final showdown. The coyote was equally determined to bring down the creature responsible for the depletion of his kind.

Again and again the buck turned toward the soft snow in the region of protruding rocks which had radiated stored heat.

Invariably the coyote broke through, floundered briefly and lost time while the buck pounded his way through the crust.

The coyote, shifting back and forth cornered Chiseler at last. The sun came over the ridge and with it came Noisy Nat. He fluttered to a rock and cursed the coyote with feeling. From time to time he dropped downward, pretending to attack.

Chiseler had learned a trick or two in his fight with the coyote's mate. Now he attacked as the coyote broke through crust disturbed by the buck's hoofs.

The first downward thrust of hoofs was backed up by stiff legs, plus the buck's weight.

The hoofs knocked the coyote backwards and momentarily drained the fight from the animal.

He retreated, sat down and waited, knowing the buck must pass his way or starve. In the meantime he could satisfy his own appetite from the smaller furbearers living along the edge of the snow line.

NOISY NAT broadcast a general warning. Smaller animals abroad to greet the sun slunk into their dens. A great eagle, hearing the uproar and understanding there were intruders, lifted himself from a nearby ledge. He circled low and his shadow raced across the dazzling white snow—a sinister herald of death from the sky.

The coyote raced for the nearest cover. Swiftly it skipped over a hard crust, then struck a spot the morning sun had softened. As it broke through the eagle dropped. Briefly its mighty wings beat the air, then slowly, ponderously, it began to climb, while the coyote writhed in its talons.

It disappeared beyond a ledge. The hush on the land was broken by a triumphant blast from Noisy Nat—a blast informing all forest creatures the danger was over. A blast, incidentally, that reserved full credit for the situation to himself.

Chiseler, weak and shaken from his long ordeal, stumbled through the snow field and stopped on the brink of a cliff. The Mountain, he knew, was closer. Below him he saw a friendlier land, with farms and people who kept the coyotes and cougars at bay.

He saw, immediately below, a tree behind which waited a bed of needles. And with Noisy Nat to stand guard, he could rest, regain his strength and prepare himself for the long trek to the Mountain.

Even as he watched, he saw the proof that he was headed for his land of promise. Smoke drifted up from a campfire. A sleepy man washed his face in the icy stream, a girl began combing her hair.

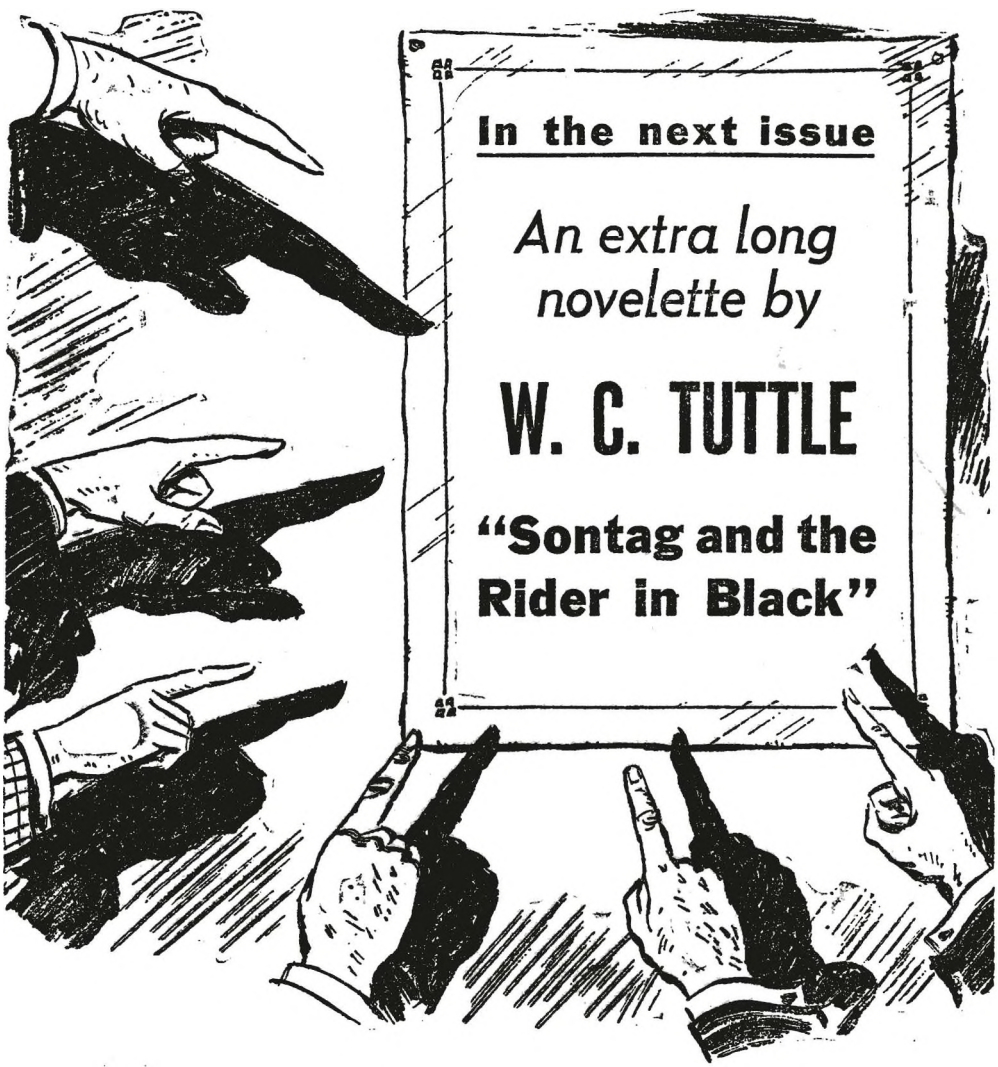
Chiseler saw their parked car, and tent. Tourists — tourists undoubtedly headed for the Mountain. He saw fire in front of the man's face and knew he had lighted a cigarette.

Chiseler felt he could go for a smoke and a little petting in a big way. He guessed he wouldn't sleep behind the tree after all. Throughout the night he had always found sufficient strength to do what he felt necessary. Again he plumbed the depths of his being and felt the response.

New life surged through his body as he crossed the icy stream and caught the odor of cigarette smoke. He heard the girl exclaim with delight, and suddenly she said, "Jim, I do believe that adorable buck is begging for a smoke."

"Damned if I don't believe you're right, Helen," Jim answered. "It looks as if he needed one, too. I'd say a coyote or cougar had been working on him. Here, old boy, have a cigarette."

From a limb overhead Noisy Naf screamed approval.



HIGH HAND AT ROCKY BEND

By JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "Marshal of Sundown," Dark Valley," etc.

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

STEVE HAVERIL, one of the Sundown Haverils, whom the Southwest had cradled and then made famous, and who, in their turn, had helped put the young Southwest on the map.

Rawhide Bill Jones, a desert rat, if ever there was one, who nearly died in Skeleton Flats and who took under his sinewy protection the man who had rescued him.

Aurelius Timothy Smith, elderly, retiring man of millions on his first trip to his vast Western holdings.

Could there be three more different characters made? Yet these three were drawn together in a corner of the mighty Southwest; Steve because he felt that Bruce Bayne, Smith's local manager, was playing unfairly with the King ranch and Lorraine King; Rawhide Bill because he took Atee Smith, a tenderfoot, under his wing; and Smith himself because he felt he was going to find out a lot of things he'd never known before in the Rocky Bend country. Smith learns how all the men of that part of the world hate Bruce Bayne and his almost mythical employer, and as no one knows who Smith himself is, he begins to realize that these people may be right in their estimates of Bayne's high-handedness. Smith hurts his leg alighting from Rawhide Bill's buckboard and it is Lorraine King who takes time to nurse him, though her thoughts are

PART II

"Private Property—Keep Out." "Like Hell," came the Full Throated Retort

straying to a foolhardy band of her friends who are riding into danger to try to hold their own against Bruce Bayne's tactics.

VI

STEVE HAVERIL knew that Lorraine was right. These men who followed the old Colonel tonight were but reckless and headlong riders pursuing a forlorn hope. If they got their hands on anything in the least tangible it could be nothing but the ashes of defeat. Yet there was nothing for him to do but pull his hat down over his wind-beaten brows and jingle his spurs and ride along. There come times when a man can't let his friends down.

But when a score of men ride together —Matt Carter had counted noses as they left Rocky Bend and there were twenty-two of them—there comes a rhythm and a swing and a lifting exultancy pounding upward from beneath pounding hoofs, a quickening of pulse throb and an eagerness for a brush with bright danger like that which blossoms when over an untried army flags fly and drums beat and martial music blares. Before these hard riding ranchers had flung the first mile behind them, Steve's bleak mood of bitterness and resentment was swallowed up in a new sense of power and a grim determination like that of his companions. Right then he wanted nothing in the world so much as to bring to any definite crisis this long, long contention with Bruce Bayne.

The hammering hoofs rang angry cadences in his brain. After a while they became the measured accompaniment to a refrain that he could seem to hear shouted above their drumming thunder: "There is Lorraine—and there is Bruce Bayne—and a girl can't marry a dead man."

He felt it in his bones that some day, before very long, some man was going to kill Bruce Bayne. The wonder was that that iron-handed oppressor had not already been shot down. He had it coming to him, as every man of these twenty-two contended, some of them stormily, some with a sort of serene and unruffled conviction. Bayne in his own time, in one way and another, had killed more than one of their fraternity—if not with the sword, then with a word of command to set cold and merciless iron wheels turning. If a man had blown his brains out because of Bayne, if a girl had gone to the devil first, then death and the devil again next, it was because Bruce Bayne had dictated and his dictates time and time again had spelled death and ruin. He constituted in himself and in his sweeping ambitions the newest juggernaut that had rolled into the West. And so, considering the type of men, hardy mountain and desert men, among whom he stalked, the wonder remained that he still lived.

The hammering hoofs kept rythmically accompanying the refrain beating in young Haveril's brain: "There is Lorraine—and there is Bruce Bayne—and a girl can't marry a dead man." He knew Lorraine to be as impetuous as a wild mountain torrent. Yes, if Bayne came to her at the proper moment, at the proper mood, she would marry him. Bayne was young and handsome and devil-may-care, and girls liked him. Men liked him, too, his own men; but all girls seemed to see attractions in his Norse blondness, is his bright, bold eyes, in his arrogant carriage, which caused them to preen before him. He was a masterful devil and he had his own kind of charm, and there was many a rancher's pretty daughter who, though her father and Bayne were dead set on cutting each other's throats, would have run Bayne-wards at the crook of his finger. They seemed fascinated by that humorous smile of his and by the cluster of blond curls over his brow and by the flash of his strong white teeth, and by something very much like a dimple set in the middle of his square and forceful chin. Yes, Lorraine at one of her wild-colt, runaway moments, might marry the man. And Bayne would

set any woman he married in a high place here in the West, like a young queen on a throne.

BUT some day Bruce Bayne was going to get what was coming to him. Some day—or some night. Tonight, maybe?

The hoofs kept hammering, but to a new refrain: "Tonight, tonight, maybe tonight—we two, by ourselves, with an even break." They had fought on the trail with their fists; they hated each other with a sturdy and green young hate; it seemed right that sooner or later one of them should go down before the other.

Colonel Matt and old Jesse Taylor, riding stirrup to stirrup, set the pace and led them. The others rode at times four abreast, at other times in pairs or single file when narrow trails afforded short cuts across the wide loops of the wagon road, and presently Steve Haveril found himself all but jogging elbows with young Ken Kendall.

Ken was pretty much of his own age and an old friend, a friend since the two, riding bareback through the sage, had gone to the Deer Valley school together. That time, however, seemed to belong to the long and long ago. Of late they had scarcely spoken when by chance they met. That, too, was because of Lorraine King.

For Ken, too, loved Lorraine and had loved her since those remote school days when she wore her hair in twin tails and flipped them so saucily. She had come to favor Steve, or so at least the whole countryside agreed, and an embittered Ken sulked and foreswore an old friendship. Tonight Steve had noticed him at the hotel bar; neither had spoken.

Now, however, finding young Kendall at his side, Steve said briefly, "Hello, Ken."

Ken laughed uncertainly, then reached out and clapped Steve on the shoulder.

"Hello, Kid," he said, and sounded for the first time in years like the Kenny of the bareback days, and of the swimming holes and first deer hunts. He sounded young and friendly and free. He said, "Me, Steve, I was a damn fool. You know what it was all about, I guess. Well, anyhow, I saw you and Lorraine together tonight—and I was glad you two get along. I was just—oh, just a damn fool, that's all."

Steve didn't say anything right away. There were riders just in front of them, riders close behind; they were in a crease of the mountains where a sinuous pass led among boulders and through gaunt black pines. Suddenly the sky burst upon them, filled with stars, and they seemed to be floating rather than riding, swimming through a blue emptiness studded with blazing bright pin pricks of light.

"There's a girl over at Fiddler's Gulch," Ken confided. "Her name is Elizabeth. She's awful pretty, Steve, with big blue eyes and gold hair, and arms that are white as milk and little warm hands—and we're going to get married. Soon. Maybe next month or anyhow the next after that."

They managed to shake hands while their horse's questing and nimble hoofs sought among scattered stones. The good old days came back then, all barriers swept away. Already Steve thought fondly of this new Elizabeth as of a little sister—though he was destined not even to meet her until she had left sweet sixteen some twenty winters behind her.

"There's hell to pay tonight, Steve," said Ken. "There's blood on the moon, huh, Kid? I'm sort of glad we're riding into it together, huh?"

"Same here, Kid," said Steve. And he asked, "Just what have those two old boys got up their sleeves, do you know? The Colonel and Jesse Taylor."

"They're a pair of old foxes," said Ken. "No, I don't know any more than you do."

Bruce Bayne, too, was a fox. Maybe there was a dash of wolf blood in him, coyote also, lion, too, if you like. But no jackass strain, and at crises the fox was predominant. As tonight.

Bayne, in his rock house that had once been the stronghold of those picturesque Western bandits, the Bedloes, was entertaining a guest. That guest would have been on his way long before now, but in one way and another Bayne had detained him for hours.

Sheriff Jim Bagley stood up and shook himself like an old bear. He knew that something was in the wind. He was a hard man to take down, he knew the difference between a saw and a knot hole, and he realized as fully as any man that to serve some hidden purpose of Bayne's, he had been pulled out of the saddle today. Still, wanting to find out what it was all about he had been all evening as docile as a kitten lapping cream. But at last it began to grow late and Jim Bagley, a man who liked early hours at both ends of the day, yawned.

Bayne sprang up and brought the jug.

"A drink is what we need, Sheriff," he said, and the jug gurgled into empty glasses.

"Going home, Bruce," said Bagley.

"You'll stay here over night?"

"Like hell," said the sheriff. "Thanks just the same."

THE old rockhouse of the Bedloes of aforetime squatted ramblingly on a rocky knoll. All around it were stony meadows. At the rear rose granite cliffs, five hundred feet steeply tall; on its flanks, beyond the meadow's rim, were thick black pine forests with precipitous mountainsides shutting them in; in front, an abrupt edge to the high table land, was a sheer drop down into Bedloe Gulch, a canyon made noisy even in late summer by the rocketing racket of White Cap River. The house itself was a monstrosity, architecturally speaking, of a score of rooms stuck on from time to time like additions made by an ambitious dirt dauber. There was a cavernous front room; the Bedloes used to stable their horses in it while they slept in their bunks along the walls. For there had been the times, many of them, when they wanted their horses so close at hand that they could leap up, full dressed, from their beds and straight into their saddles. Then there were other smaller, dark rooms branching off in all directions. A rabbit warren of a place.

"I'd like to have you stick around a little while longer," said Bayne.

"I know it," said Jim Bagley, and looked his host up and down with shrewd speculative eyes. What he saw was a big blond giant of a man, clean shaven and blunt-jawed and hard-eyed, a man who looked clean as though just now from the tub, whose boots had a hard gleam to them, a deep-chested, full-throated, forceful man with the stamp of authority on him.

"You'll stay then?" said Bayne.

"No. I'm going. Going now."

Bagley knew that he wasn't going, for he had read as much in Bayne's steady, frank gaze. But, wanting each thing put to proof, he spoke as though he meant what he said.

Bayne reached out toward a glass. There was nothing clumsy about him, yet he made a clumsy gesture. He swept a glass from the table; it fell to the crude rock floor and was shattered into tinkling bits. Sheriff Jim Bagley cocked up a questioning eye. He had his answer as quick as a flash. A dozen men poured into the room. Bagley knew most of them. He merely lifted his brows to give them a once over.

"Hello, boys," said Bayne. "Bagley's staying over with us for supper. Go tell the cook to spread himself."

"Sure," said Jim Bagley. "Me, I'm getting hungry, Bruce. Tell that cook of yours it don't matter so much how he cooks, just so he cooks plenty and shovels it out pronto."

Bruce Bayne laughed and Jim Bagley laughed with him. Then they settled back to wait. At that moment you couldn't have dragged Jim Bagley away with a span of mules and a log cabin.

Jim Bagley, had he been a dozen years younger, might have said, "Well something's all set to be pulled off tonight, huh? And you want me in on it." But now he just made himself comfortable and twirled his glass a few times and then downed it. And he said, "Prime licker, Bruce. One thing I'll say for you is that you know the trail to good licker."

Bruce Bayne went over to a little upright piano that had, once on a time, sailed round the horn. He began playing softly, and well; then he began singing. He loved the sentimental things. He sang, "When the Roses Bloom Again." Before he had done, Sheriff Jim Bagley had surreptitiously run a thumb knuckle across his eyes. And Bayne jumped up and began laughing.

"You damned old softie," he jibed good naturedly.

"Yeah," said Jim Bagley. "Sure. That's me. Only, when some day I start hanging you, don't you go to singing, Bruce. Promise me that."

BRUCE BAYNE said, "It's a promise, Jim," and kept on laughing.

"Now what?" asked Bagley, easing himself back in his chair.

"Supper. I've got a damn good cook, Jim. And after that?" He looked at the tall clock ticking away on the rock mantel over the fireplace. "Give me another two hours. That's all I ask."

"Two hours it is," said the sheriff. "Any longer than that and it'll get to be a case of less majesty, where you'll have to knock a sheriff off."

"It's closed season on sheriffs, Jim," said Bayne, "and that's another promise."

"Now I could eat," said Jim Bagley.

He looked like a man without a care in the world, but behind a poker face he was doing some shrewd thinking and was ill at ease. Bayne had tricked him out here and was now as good as detaining him by force —all for what? Jim Bagley would never have held on to his job as long as he had were he not astute enough to make facts stand in a line and point to something, and that something, nine times out of ten, wasn't far away from the bull's-eye he wanted to line his sights on. He thought now:

"First, something's about to happen, or anyhow Bayne thinks so. Second, he wants me in on it. So, with me representing the law, he's inside the law, same as usual. Something happening means some sort of trouble. That means somebody else besides Bayne and his crowd. Some sort of a show down, huh? And he figures, me being sheriff, I've got to horn in on his side!"

And with all his heart he wished he were anywhere but here. For Jim Bagley belonged heart and soul to the other faction, that represented by men, all his friends, like Colonel Matt and Jesse Taylor, like Steve Haveril and old Rawhide Bill Jones.

The stillness was disturbed by a metallic clangor, musical because of its import, the beating of the cook's triangle, an-

nouncing supper and inviting, "Come and get it." In an adjoining room there was a long table flanked by benches, and as they used to say of such repasts, the table groaned under its savory offerings. A haunch of venison, two wild turkey gobblers, fat and brown, red beans and baked potatoes, hot bread and deep, juicy pies—all these combined to assail the nostrils first, then seduce the eye. All Bruce Bayne's men came filing in, their faces shining, their hair plastered down, their sleeves rolled up, and looked as fresh and clean as little boys dolled-up for Sunday School. At the table conversation ceased; these were single-thoughted, purposeful men; beyond a curt, "Hand me this," or, "Pass me that," words were not only unnecessary but a nuisance.

Bayne sat at the head of the table, the sheriff at his right.

All was silent save for the sound of soup going its appointed way. Presently one of the men spoke, having first wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. He remarked to the table at large:

"Say, a feller was tellin' me about a new-fangled rig-a-ma-jig that you can fasten to a gun, so when you shoot it, it don't make so much noise. Hardly any sound a-tall. A silencer, they call it."

Again there was silence while his hearers pondered the matter. Then a young fellow demanded, "Well, what about it?"

"Might be a good idea if we get one," rejoined the other man. "Maybe we could make old Baldy wear it while he's a-eatin' his soup."

Baldy made a whistling sound as he put down his spoon and glared. A man or two laughed, Baldy merely snorted and supper went along.

They stacked the soup plates and the cook's helper came in, when yelled for, and carried them out. He returned promptly with a gallon coffee pot.

The sheriff remarked idly, while stirring four heaping spoonfuls of sugar into his black coffee:

"Must be you're setting a second table tonight, Bruce; I miss a couple of the boys. Say, that turkey does look good. Smells good, too." He sniffed and gestured with his knife.

"You mean Ike Fellowes and Randy?" said Bayne. He began carving. "They went down to the Pass with a couple of rifles draped over their arms. There's an old timber wolf that's been sneaking in on us of late, and Ike has a bet with Randy."

"And if we hear a couple shots," put in one of the men, a near-eyed looking, lean and leathery man named Flick Finch, "it'll most likely mean Ike has won his bet and nailed that old he-dog wolf what is known far and wide to be as big as a skinned mule and as ornery, and as mean as a barley sack full of wild cats."

"I sort of miss seeing Rass Quirk," said Bagley. "Him and Murde and some of the other boys."

"They went into town," said Bayne. "Don't forget it's Saturday night, Jim. Boys will be boys, you know. But Rass is bringing them back early; they ought to be here any minute now."

"Sure thing," said the sheriff. He heard, a faint sound against the back-drop of the outside silence, the far drumming of racing hoofs, the sound coming steadily clearer. All he said was, "That cook of yours sure knows his onions, Bruce. Take this turkey stuffing now; I never tasted it so good. It's got sage brush in it, ain't it?"

HE WAS the only man at the table who pretended not to be listening to the oncoming hoofbeats. Bayne looked with sharp significance at a man at the far end of the table; the man pulled his legs up over the bench and went out through a rear door.

A lone rider reined in at the side of the house, toward the back. "One of Bayne's scouts, bringing him some sort of word," speculated the sheriff while going serenely on with his supper.

A few indistinct words were spoken outside; then a voice called sharply:

"Bayne! You better come out. Get a move on!"

Bayne, unruffled, said, "Excuse me a minute, Jim," and got up and left the room. For a moment or two the sound of his boot heels on a rock floor came back to make the only inroad upon the silence that had shut down over the supper table. It was just then that the crack of a rifle at some considerable distance, as emphatic as a slap in the face, made every man who heard it as stiff as a ramrod.

After that first shot came another, as close as its own echo, then a score of shots and a clamor of shouting voices. Benches were shoved back and men came to their feet, eager and ready. The din of battle somewhere beyond the rim of the rocky meadow came abruptly to an end, and everything was more silent than before. Then Bruce Bayne came stalking back, his face grim and set and savage, yet his eyes bright with a light in them that looked to Sheriff Jim Bagley oddly like mockery or triumph. He spoke quite calmly as he said:

"Buckle your guns on, boys. We're being raided. There are twenty or thirty men breaking through the fence we strung up across Black Pine Gap. They started shooting the minute Ike and Randy asked what they wanted."

Bagley's face turned a dull, angry red. He understood now. It would be his own friends, goaded at last beyond endurance, who were raiding the old Bedloe place, bent on pulling Bruce Bayne down where he belonged. Yet, without doubt or quibble, those friends of his were putting themselves outside the law—and up here Jim Bagley was the law.

"Damn you, Bayne," he said, for the first time in many a moon letting his rage run away with him.

Bayne shrugged and then stepped to take a rifle down from its pegs over the fireplace.

VII

THE irate score of men storming along in the wake of the old Colonel came of necessity to a sudden stop in the narrow pass through the pines with the Bedloe place a mere rifle shot away. Since any man of them had come this way a high, barbed wire fence had been erected. More than that there was a big sign, crudely painted, sufficiently illuminated by two lanterns swung high on fence posts; it said succinctly: "Private Property. No Trespassing. Keep Out."

"Who's got a pair of wire cutters or pliers or any damn thing that will do quick business with a wire fence?" demanded Colonel Matt, and swung down from the saddle.

A voice called out to them from somewhere among the pines.

"The gate's padlocked," shouted the voice. "No visitors this time of night. Private property; keep out."

"Like hell!" roared Colonel Matt. And, swinging around to face the men who had followed him, he asked again, "Anybody got wire cutters?"

One of the men had, young Dick Bentley from the headwaters of Porcupine. He said so, and climbed down from his saddle, stepping forward to get to work.

Then the unseen man whose voice had commanded them to hold back fired a shot over their heads, just to make clear that he meant what he said. Most of the riders, with all things taken into consideration, were cool and steady-nerved, but

there was one among them, a fellow called Wild Willie Wilson, who was forever going off half-cocked. He saw a sput of orange-red flame in the thick of the pines where the sentinel set there at Bayne's orders was standing, and Wild Willie, as quick as thought, jerked up his rifle and blazed away at the spot where he judged the unseen marksman to be standing.

The man on the Bruce Bayne side of the fence had fired a single shot with double purpose: It was intended to back up his words of warning, and further, to advise those up at the rock house that company was coming. Thus far he had obeyed orders. But now that Wild Willie's rifle bullet came within inches of cutting him down, his gorge rose and his blood flamed hot and he lowered his sights, no longer shooting over men's heads.

"Down!" yelled old Colonel Matt. "Out of your saddles, dammit, and flat on your bellies until we get a line on these skunks. Down, every man of you, and—"

Wild Willie, having started something, kept on shooting; it was beyond him to help it. Also it was a stupid piece of business since he was but drawing a storm of bullets into the midst of his companions, and could see nothing of the Bruce Bayne man, Ike Fellowes. With men as raw-nerved as were these angry ranchers, a few bullets fanning their ears served the one purpose of touching off their already hot tempers to explosion. Their guns were ready and they, following Wild Willie's example, started shooting at their invisible target.

Ike Fellowes fired but one more shot and ran. Steve Haveril and his friend Ken Kendall were side by side then, just about to dismount. Steve heard the scream of the bullet and heard, too, its thudding impact. He took it for granted that it had embedded itself in a pine tree. Then in the dim light of the stars he noted something strange in the way Ken was coming down out of his saddle. He came down awkwardly, loosely, bending forward over his saddle horn, spilling headlong.

Steve, just in time, caught him in his arms.

"They've shot Ken," he said. "Here, somebody take care of our horses."

"I'm done for," groaned Ken, barely able to speak. "Oh, my God! I don't want to die. Not now—"

"You'll be all right, Kid," said Steve, and eased him down to the ground. "You're just tagged. One bullet can't do you in."

KEN stiffened in his arms as men crowded around, then of a sudden went lax all over. He didn't want to die; there was infinite pleading in his voice when he said, "Not now." Maybe he was thinking of a girl over at Fiddler's Gulch, feeling that he must see her at least once again—a girl who was awful pretty, Steve, with big blue eyes and gold hair and arms as white as milk, and little white hands, a girl named Elizabeth. He was going to marry her soon, this month or next. But young Ken Kendall was dead, shot close under the heart.

"He's dead," said Steve, and again took his friend up in his arms, carrying him a few steps to lay his quiet body under a pine, safely apart from trampling hoofs. "It's Ken Kendall, and he's dead."

When he straightened up, the man with the pliers had already cut a wide gap through the wire fence, all shooting had come to an end and men were remounting to ride on to the house.

They passed between the two lanterns hanging high on the two posts and straight on across the stony meadow toward the house. That sudden killing of young Kendall had both sobered and enraged them. They knew past argument that that first shot fired by Bruce Bayne's sentinel had gone singing away through the pine tops, never meant to do more than

give them pause; they knew that Wild Willie's return shot had been fired without reason, with deadly intent, and that those others who had followed his lead had been in the wrong. Altogether they were pretty much in the wrong in all that they were doing tonight, and they knew it. So they were a silent, hard-jawed score of men still following on where Colonel Matt led.

When they drew up in front of the house they realized that they had to do with a Bruce Bayne ready for them; despite the newly installed heavy window shades there were thin trickles of light here and there—several of the many rooms were lighted.

Colonel Matt leaned forward from his saddle and pounded on the door with his rifle butt.

"Bayne!" he called, throaty with anger. "You got company. It's Matt Carter and friends."

Inside the house Bruce Bayne cocked up a quizzical brow at the sheriff.

"Looks like hell was going to pop, Jim," he said coolly. "I sort of thought it might. I thought too it would be nice to have you along, you representing the law out here, me always playing my cards inside the law."

Jim Bagley's face was as red as a beet.

"What new devilment have you been up to, Bayne?" he demanded.

"None," said Bayne. "An accident happened, that's all. I've taken over some old mining claims at this end of Silver Lake.

We blasted into the cliffs where I hope to uncover a vein, and half the damn mountain fell down. It all but plugged up the source of Rustling River and poured the water down Dry Gully and—"

"And into Starvation Flats! And you've just bought up all that country and all of Dry Valley! And—why, damn you, you've left Matt Carter high and dry, all the water drained out of his valley lands!"

"Could I help it?" said Bayne mildly. "It just happened—just an accident, Jim—one of those things, you know!"

"You're damn right I know!"

"And now I've got callers," said Bayne. "Colonel Matt and his friends. Maybe they want me to run up there tonight, to take a dipper along and scoop the water all back where it used to be!"

"I hear somebody knocking," said Bagley dryly. "Maybe you better ask them."

BAYNE turned to look around. All his men had crowded into the room and were tense and restrained and on edge, yet ready for anything. He said to them curtly, "Keep your shirts on, you boys. We don't want trouble, you know."

Then he went to the door and opened it.

He stood there in the open doorway, in the full light of the room, his thumbs loose in his belt, his palms brushing the butts of the two guns he wore, seeing at first, and until his eyes grew accustomed to the outside dark, a mere dark group that meant men on horseback. They could have shot him down before his fingers could have curved to a more intimate meeting with his weapons. He knew that; they knew it. The arrogant way in which he carried himself, a man never afraid, was both an invitation and a defiance.

"Hello, boys," he said. "Colonel Carter and friends, is it? Well, what's on your minds?"

"You know what's on my mind!" the old colonel boomed back at him.

"I suppose I do," said Bayne. "You mean what happened up at Silver Lake. Well, all I was trying to do was open up a mining prospect. Those old cliffs were rotten and ready to go with any spring thaw. They choked up Rustling River and that turned the water down into the smaller creek. I'm sorry, but what can I

do about it? I sent a man over to tell you—"

"You can build a dam," said the colonel angrily. "You can plug up your new made creek and raise the water level and shoot the water back where it belongs. That's what you can do and are going to do—or else!"

Bayne laughed at him.

"It would cost half a million dollars, that dam," he retorted. "A million, maybe. And the Smith Realty Corporation would have to put up the money. Do you think they'd do it? Do you think Aurelius Timothy Smith is that kind of a business man?"

"What I think," said Colonel Matt, holding himself in check, "is that out here you are the Smith Corporation. What you think today, Smith thinks tomorrow or as soon as you send him a letter or telegram. If you tell him the thing to do is build that dam, he'll authorize you to build it. If it costs half a million or twice that, well, I guess he'll still have enough money left over to buy him a sandwich and a drink maybe to wash it down."

"You've made it pretty clear, Colonel, in case that it is what you set out to do, that you rode out here tonight to stir up trouble."

"Trouble?" said Colonel Matt. "Trouble! As if we've had anything but trouble since you, calling yourself Smith Incorporated, came into our country. Trouble? Out there by your new fence now young Ken Kendall is lying dead, shot down by one of your men at your orders."

AT THIS Bruce Bayne, who had been as cool as a cucumber, flew into a rage. His face flushed hot, his voice rose and he named Ike Fellowes all the evil names in the calendar of lost souls.

"I gave the fool his orders; he was to fire over your heads, a mile high as a sort of warning you'd better go slow and as a signal to me here at the house that you were coming. I told him—"

Ike Fellowes had already returned and was shoving his way through his crowded fellows, entering from a back room. He was lifting his voice in his own defense when he was stopped by the words the colonel was saying.

"Your man did like you told him," he said to Bayne, it being the colonel's way to speak the truth as he saw it without any oblique thought regarding consequences. "His first bullet must have sailed through the pine tops. One of our crowd lost his head and started trying to shoot him down. Then he poured his lead into us and it's a wonder young Kendall was the only one killed."

"You hear that, Bruce?" cried Fellowes. "You hear him?"

"Shut up, Ike," said Bayne, and again was coldly impassive, and there was a faint, scornful smile on his lips. To Matt Carter he said, mild again, "Well, Colonel? Can you blame my man? You fired on him first, a dozen or twenty of you; keep that in mind. I'm sorry about Kendall, but I'd say you boys are responsible for his death; I'm not. You are a fair man and you will agree with me for once."

"We're doing a lot of talking, Bayne—"

"What's more," cut in Bayne swiftly, "I'll do this. If you hold my man, Ike Fellowes, guilty of murder, I'll hand him over right now to the law for a fair trial. There's a friend of mine here—I think you know him, too. His name is James Bagley, and he's sheriff." He turned his head. "How about it, Jim?" he asked.

THEN Jim Bagley came forward, and the men outside saw him framed in the door, at Bruce Bayne's side.

Before anyone said anything there was the sound made by riders coming across the meadow; they were not far off, just breaking into a swinging gallop. Here came Rass Quirk, Bayne's foreman, with his men returning already from Rocky Bend. They saw the open door, the men sitting their horses in the full light stream-

ing out, and swerved to come to the house from the rear. A moment later they had dismounted and entered through a back door, crowding into a room already crowded.

Sheriff Bagley, never in too great a hurry to precipitate violence at a time like this, cleared his throat. He looked around to make out who the new arrivals were, though by now he had a pretty shrewd guess without looking.

"A man has just been shot to death, a man coming up here with Matt Carter and his friends," he said. "They say it's Ken Kendall, and that Ike Fellowes killed him. It's up to me whether I put Fellowes under arrest or not. What say, Bayne?"

Bruce Bayne shrugged.

"Do as you please; do your duty as you see it. You've already heard me. None of my men, not Ike himself, will lift a hand to stop you. We're for the law first, last and all the time."

"What say, Matt?" asked the sheriff. "Got a murder charge against Fellowes or anybody else?"

"Hell, no," snorted the old colonel promptly. "We'd all tell the truth, and there's not a jury in the world that would hold Fellowes guilty. Just the same he's not the only one of this outfit that ought to be strung up. It's just that the Smith Corporation, meaning Bruce Bayne, commits all its crimes inside the law."

"I've listened to enough of your doddering, damn fool talk tonight," said Bayne, and now his voice took on a thin, brittle edge, and he permitted both hands to clamp down on his guns. "If you came out here to start a gun fight—and I can't guess why else you came—start it. Here on our own stamping grounds, being raided by a lot of crazy hot-heads, we'll take you on if that's your wish."

He knew perfectly well, being no fool, that if a single man of his score of angry visitors started a gun fire a certain Bruce Bayne was bound to go down first with a dozen bullets in him. But it was like him to defy them that way. For he knew also what they must be thinking; they could undoubtedly bring him down but just as undoubtedly the thing would not end there. Within a handful of minutes there would be many men down, never to rise again. And most of them would be men who had ridden along with Matt Carter. The thick walls of the old rockhouse, with Bayne's men within, put the visitors at the greatest disadvantage.

And Bruce Bayne, fearless as he was, was no such fool as to overlook that fact.

JIM BAGLEY, saying to himself, "Well, I went to work to get myself elected sheriff and that's my job, and lots of times I wish to hell somebody else had it," squared his shoulders and stepped ahead of Bayne, shoving him back with an elbow.

"Matt," he said. "Matt and all the rest of you boys, you'd better pull in your horns and go home. If you start anything now there's going to be a lot of men killed —and I'm asking you, what good that will do anybody. You're all het up. That don't get you anywhere. You boys are starting the scrap; that's one thing against you. On top of that, you're raiders on Bruce Bayne territory; that don't help you any. Now, me, I'm for you and you know it; and Bayne here, who tricked me into being on the job, he knows it; but if you pull off a gun battle you're bound to get licked, even though you knock Bayne over, and on top of that the law court is going to hold you responsible. If you

listen to me, you better get out. Get out quick and damn fast and don't come back."

Steve Haveril had ridden with the foremost from the wire fence and now was at Matt Carter's elbow. He dismounted and stepped up to the door.

"Hello, Steve," said Bayne. They might have been friends, for any trace of antagonism in Bayne's voice. But again a faint smile, coming dangerously close to being a sneer, touched his lips; Steve stood in the full light and there was no missing the bruise under his eye.

For the moment he ignored Bayne. It was to the sheriff that he spoke.

"Hello, Jim," he said, and Bagley, eying him with intent watchfulness, said curtly, "Hello, Steve."

"Jim, I hear there's a warrant out for my arrest, that I'm charged with an attempt at murder, that Bayne swore that the other day I tried to kill him, missed and shot one of his men. How about it?"

"Well?" demanded Bagley, eying him harder than ever. "You know it."

"It happens," said Steve, "that as usual Bayne is a damned liar. At the time he says this thing happened I was with Johnny Free and Happy Collins; I was with them pretty much all day. They're here with us tonight. They can tell you." Then he called over his shoulder, "How about it, boys?"

BOTH Free and Collins spurred closer and both spoke up, giving Steve a clean bill of health. Bagley then stared stonily at Bayne.

"How about it, Bruce?" the sheriff demanded.

Bayne laughed.

"I know these two boys, Hap and Johnny," he said. "They're not on my side of any fence when trouble starts, but their word is good enough for me. I take back anything I said about it being Steve who tried to get my scalp. I just made a mistake, that's all. Let's forget it."

"You heard me name you a damned liar," said Steve.

Bayne laughed again; laughter tonight seemed to come easily to him.

"Them are supposed to be fightin' words, are they?" he said, full of mockery. Then, his grin broad for the first time, he demanded, "What's wrong with the eye, Steve? Looks like you'd run into somebody's fist. Elbow, maybe?"

"I've got another eye," Steve told him. "Want to try to fix it up for me?"

"After that," said Bayne, "all I can do is to ask you to come in. Or would you rather try it outside?"

"Suit yourself," said Steve.

"Come in and make yourself at home," said Bayne courteously.

A dozen men wanted to swarm in at Steve's heels, but Jim Bagley, still in the doorway, held them up. He said, speaking quietly yet with force, to Matt Carter whom he recognized as the leader of the restless men at Bruce Bayne's door:

"Matt, you better pull your men off, don't you think?"

Then Steve, losing his temper which he had promised himself he would hold in check, took another step forward and slapped Bruce Bayne's face with his open palm so that the smack of it was like a pistol shot, so that Bayne staggered backward and all but fell.

Bayne steadied himself and smoothed his own palm against his red hot jaw. Still he managed somehow, having his own standards, to speak with an outward semblance of courtesy. He said, as he had said before:

"Won't you come all the way in, Steve, and make yourself at home? Or shall I come outside where your side-kicks are?"

Steve stepped in.

The door stood open, so that those outside, craning their necks, could see. Within the big bare room, lighted by a dozen candles or so, were crowded some fifteen or twenty Bruce Bayne men. They ranged themselves along the walls.

Jim Bagley, the sheriff, kicked his bench back into a handy corner and sat down. He was thinking cannily, "If they just get out of this now with a good old-fashioned fist fight, I'm in luck. But I better watch, seeing they're both wearing guns."

"You might tell me," said Bayne to Steve, "just what you've got in mind?"

"I'm thinking maybe you've overstepped yourself this time, Bayne, with your play up at Silver Lake. Likewise I've got a feeling you're going to be run out of this country for good and all before you're much older. And last but not least, as the feller says, I'm going to knock hell out of you right now. With my hands—or you can go for your guns."

It was remarkable how Bruce Bayne had maintained his self control, how he kept it now and until the end of the episode. He said in an off-hand sort of way:

"If we started shooting we might make a mistake and pot one of the boys standing in. With our hands then? Oh, you can use your feet too, at a pinch. As for knocking hell out of me—do you happen to remember how things worked out when we met on the trail? When you were headed for the King ranch—and I had already been there!"

That innuendo of his was as good as returning Steve's slap.

Jim Bagley relaxed on his bench and sighed and began twiddling his thumbs. Nearly every one of the riders outside dismounted in order to crowd up to the door. Bayne's men, to be looked to for quiescence until some command from their employer set them going, watching stonily.

The two men confronting each other didn't take the trouble and didn't take out time to measure each other with an appraising eye; they had done that already and long ago. But every other man who, by crowding or craning his neck could see them, eyed them both with the shrewdest speculating eye.

They were young, they were hard, they hated each other with a green and abiding hate. Their hate was not merely that of two business antagonists. Anyone could see that there was something personal in it, something to make them see red as primitive men see red. Each wanted not only to put the other down, but to batter him into insensibility or insensibility's older brother, death.

Pretty nearly evenly matched, said most. Bruce Bayne was probably the bigger man by twenty pounds weight, but Steve was the taller by an inch and had the greater reach. Fires of a hoped-for victory burned in the eyes of both, neither man's brighter than the other's.

Matt Carter, with something to say, called out, "Steve!" And Steve turned his head to listen, as a man will, and Bruce Bayne took his advantage as he saw it and sprang forward, as light on his feet as a mountain cat, and lashed out for Steve's jaw. That one blow might have ended as well as started the fight. But Steve, as well as harkening to the old colonel, was thoughtful of the man who so few hours ago had knocked him cold on the trail. Even with his head turned he knew through some sixth sense what was afoot. He didn't see Bayne's nimble spring, didn't see his fist, but swerved to the side just enough to let the fist whizz by, merely grazing his cheek.

Bayne had however at the outset gained an advantage, small though it might be; he had caused his man to sway ever so slightly sidewise and thus ever so slightly off balance. And so he followed up his first blow with a second every whit as vicious, rushing Steve Haveril, perhaps seeing already a simple victory like that other on the trail. The result of his furious attack was that his superior weight hurled his antagonist backward. At Steve's back was the open crowded with men who hastily got out of the way—and Steve Haveril, taking the second blow in the upper chest, a couple of inches below the base of his throat, was catapulted into the outer night.

And a great roar of laughter rose from the throats of Bayne's men.

But that laughter was premature and short-lived. Steve came back through the doorway like something shot out of a gun, electric from head to foot with the finest rage of a lifetime. The few paces which he ran, charging headlong, gave him an impetus which there was no withstanding. He lashed out with his right fist, and Bruce Bayne reeled; he struck with his left, so that the thuds of the two blows sounded like one. He shot out his right fist again without feeling the blows an already toppling Bayne was raining on his body, and the crack of his knuckles against Bayne's jaw made men wonder if bones were breaking. Bayne took that third blow on the point of the chin and tossed out his arms wildly to save himself from falling —and Steve struck for the chin again and landed.

Bayne's powerful body sagged, all power going out of it; he dropped down on one of the benches that happened to be behind him; from that he seemed to melt so that he was spilling down to the floor when two of his men sprang forward and caught him up.

His face was dead white save for a bloody smear across mouth and cheek, there was a glassy look in his eyes and his legs were buckling beneath him. Still he found strength to set a hand to one of the guns at his belt and drag it up out of its leather.

But in an instant the sheriff was on him, gripping his wrist.

"No you don't, Bruce!" he said. "You're licked clean and fair and there's no call for shooting. There'd be a dozen men killed. Take your licking like a man, if you're man enough."

Bayne spoke then, finding difficulty keeping his voice under control. He spoke not to Jim Bagley, not to Steve, but to Matt Carter in the doorway.

"Take your men home," he said. "Take them damn quick, Carter. All of you get to hell out of here."

Matt Carter, standing just inside the doorway, stared a moment, then turned and went out, one brawny arm thrown about Steve's shoulders, drawing Steve with him.

"Come ahead, boys; let's go," he said.

They rode back silently to the wire fence where a quiet Ken Kendall was awaiting them so patiently, and from there with their burden back the way they had come. Jim Bagley overtook them and rode with Carter and Jesse Taylor, the three finding much to discuss.

VIII

"NOW, I've noticed," remarked Mr. William Hannibal Jones to a purposeful young woman whom he encountered in the dusky hallway of the Rocky Bend Hotel, "as how a woman always either drives a man to drink or leads him to it. That seems to be mostly her mundane occupation, so to speak. And I've got it figured out somehow that it's more fun to be led than to be drove."

"What *are* you talking about?" asked Lorraine loftily, though she knew perfectly well.

"I'm talking about Steve, and you know it. What makes you treat him like the dog he is?"

That might have stumped some young women, even older ones. As for Lorraine, she merely elevated her chin a few notches and asked innocently:

"Steve?" The way she said it she might as well have asked further, "What Steve? Who on earth is Steve?"

William Hannibal Jones, plain Rawhide Bill to his friends, snorted. Thereafter he regarded the comely young woman speculatively. She carried a basin of hot water in her hands, had a couple of towels draped over a shapely shoulder and carried a large bottle of mustang liniment tucked under one arm.

"You're going in to work some more on Atty, ain't you?" said Bill.

"Atty?" She lifted her high, fine brows so that they threatened to disappear under the curls that had dropped down over her forehead.

Rawhide Bill sighed, meaning to sound patient, in reality sounding like one of his old horses that had the heaves.

"My," he said gently, "but you're uppity tonight, ain't you, Lorrie? Yes, Atty, meaning my side-kick Atty Smith with the bum leg. Now let me tell you something. He'll ask you a lot of questions. Don't you answer nary a one of 'em, or leastwise don't you dare tell him the truth about anything. In the condition he's in, it's bound to upset his blood pressure."

She studied him, knowing him for the old reprobate he was. She asked in a voice like the snipping of a pair of scissors meant to cut off all silly nonsense:

"Just who is this Mr. Smith anyhow, Rawhide? Where does he come from, and why? And how is it that you and he are as thick as thieves?"

Rawhide flipped a brawny hand negligently.

"Oh, him? Just a sun-blistered tenderfoot from nowheres, headed the same place. Only, happens he stumbled on me when that damn old desert down yonder had me floored. Saved me my life, you might say. And in return I'm sort of hoping to save him some grief along life's dusty highway."

"I'm going to make it my business to find out all about him," said Lorraine. "In ten minutes I'll know everything that he knows."

Rawhide Bill Jones guffawed.

"Him, he don't even know which end he's standing on," he proclaimed, and stamped away.

Lorraine wrinkled her pert nose at his back, then went on her way, looking like a tender little nurse or an angel.

ATEE SMITH was in bed where Rawhide Bill and Elmer the inn-keeper had put him, incased in one of Elmer's flannel nightgowns which fitted him somewhat as a barley sack would fit an ear of corn. Atee was experiencing considerable pain, right knee and ankle were swollen out of shape and were growing an unhealthy looking purple. He had just been gingerly feeling his bared leg which was extended above the bed covers.

"Now," murmured Lorraine, and drenched him with her most beatific smile.

Atee, as bashful a man in the presence of the fair sex as he was timid anywhere, blushed and tried futilely to hide the indecency of his bared limb with the crazy quilt.

"But, my dear Miss—"

"My name is Lorraine, and I'm going to take care of you and I can't very well do it unless you let me, can I?"

"But— Oh, dear me! I—I never was—"

"I'm going to soak these towels in hot water," said Lorraine, very businesslike as she put her paraphernalia down on the old marble-topped walnut washstand.

"The—the door," suggested Atee hesitantly, yet withal bravely. "Hadn't we better have it open?"

Lorraine laughed softly. She knew what was in his mind, the poor old dear, though she pretended not to know. "You mean it's too warm in here?"

"It is a bit on the warm side, isn't it, Miss Lorraine?" asked Atee.

So she set the door ajar, though she didn't want to, for she felt pretty sure that Rawhide Bill would take the mean advantage and eavesdrop. Then she went to work with her hot towels.

"Mr. Smith," she said, not intending to

lose any time, "you are a man of mystery, aren't you?"

Smith jerked so violently that she said contritely, "Oh! Did I hurt your poor leg?"

"That's all right," said Atee. He took a deep breath. "A man of mystery?" He managed a sort of hollow laugh. "What do you mean, Miss Lorraine? Me a man of mystery!"

"But you are, aren't you?"

Aurelius Timothy Smith wasn't exactly a fool, though many of his minions had begun to suspect so, therefore to start in feathering their nests at his expense. While she wasn't looking straight at him, being for the moment concerned with his bruised and swollen knee, he regarded her narrowly. He told himself, "My friend Mr. Jones advised me to keep my mouth shut.

"He told me there would be folks prying. You wouldn't think that this sweet little thing would be one of them, but—"

"Really, I mean it," said Lorraine cooingly. "You are, aren't you?"

Atee Smith began to wish with all his heart that his one true friend—outside of Archie, and Archie was far away in New York—would come to the rescue. His wish came true instanter. Rawhide Bill Jones popped his old baldhead in at the door.

"Mr. Jones!" exclaimed Smith. "If you would do me a great favor— This young lady is quite overdoing any young lady's strength and—"

"Call me Mr. Jones just one more time," said Rawhide, and laid a horny old hand on his gun, "and it's a fighting matter."

"Bill!" pleaded Atee. "Bill!"

HE COULDN'T get any further; he didn't need to. Obligingly Rawhide invaded the room. Lorraine was of the proper mood to slap his face for intruding. Instead, she controlled herself and bestowed upon him one of those dimply smiles of hers that had been known to melt mere men to her will.

"Oh, Bill! I'm so glad you came," she said. "You're just in time to help. Now you hold this hot towel tight around Mr. Smith's knee, and this other one tight about his ankle, while I run and get two more."

Coming close to scalding both men she left them contending with the towels while she darted out of the room, *almost* closing the door behind her.

Rawhide Bill leaned close to the patient, muttering:

"You haven't done any talking to her, have you? Remember what I told you about folks trying to worm things out of you. And get it fixed in your head that the worst of the worming individuals is women. Young and pretty girls, most of all."

"Never a word, Bill, never a word. But look here; there's a lot that I want to know. You haven't told me—"

"Shush," admonished Bill. "Walls have got ears, as the feller says, and doors left kinda open are places for snoopers."

Lorraine came back then.

"I think we can get along with the two towels after all," she said, and came to the bedside to relieve Rawhide Bill of the towels he was applying haphazardly, both together making a soppy lumpish wad on Smith's calf. "Anyhow," said Lorraine soothingly, "you did get it on his leg, Bill, instead of his head."

"You've got to be always mothering something, even if it's a sick calf or an old desert rat like Atee," said Rawhide, and sat down on the sturdier looking of the two chairs the room boasted. "Now here's what I've noticed about mothering females; they're always either babying a feller or scolding him, and—"

"Does it begin to feel a little bit better now, Mr. Smith?" asked the solicitous Lorraine. And, "Never mind poor old Bill," she added, dropping her voice so as to make sure it sounded confidential and

yet reached the ears of the man of whom she spoke. "You know one of his donkeys kicked the poor old fellow in the head last year; Bill has never been the same since."

"Dear me," said Atee. "Oh my leg? Yes, Miss, it feels a lot better. In fact I think it is quite all right."

"Sure," said Rawhide. "In two shakes you can pry yourself loose from that bed, slide into your britches, and we'll be on our way."

"Why, Bill!" chided Lorraine. "Mr. Smith ought to rest here anyhow over night. He needs the mustang liniment applied at least twice."

BY NOW Aurelius Timothy was fidgeting all over the bed. He had had a good heart to heart talk with his new friend, William Hannibal Jones, yet he felt in his bones, right down to the marrow, that William Hannibal was holding out on him. This simple little country girl wouldn't know the meaning of deception. So he spoke up, saying:

"Miss Lorraine, you see I'm a stranger in your midst but somehow—oh, for a number of reasons—I'm tremendously interested in what is happening hereabouts. All those men—those strapping fellows out in the road when I fell out of Bill's wagon—they were going somewhere on a bit of urgent business, weren't they?"

"Were they?" asked the childlike Lorraine.

"I was rather upset at the moment," said Atee. Then confused, afraid that she might suspect him of trying to make a joke of his fall, some sort of pun, he explained hurriedly, "I mean that my mental faculties were for a time in disorder. But I gathered a rather queer impression, the feeling you know that there was some sort of trouble afoot."

"Trouble?" She lifted her fine brows as she had lifted them at old Rawhide out in the hall.

"Tell me—" began Atee.

"It's time for the liniment now," she said, and he had to wait. While he waited, Rawhide Bill Jones glared and glowered at him. Lorraine, turning with unexpected swiftness, caught the expression on Bill's face. Whereupon Bill Jones, knowing himself fairly caught, merely rubbed his leathery jaw and kept his tongue in his mouth.

Lorraine applied the mustard liniment; she slapped it on so generously that Rawhide, knowing what an overdose could do to a man, shuddered.

"You were about to ask me a question, Mr. Smith?"

Smith blurted out, "Do you know a man named Bayne, Bruce Bayne? What sort of a man is he? And did your friends have business with him tonight?"

Rawhide Bill, the most obvious man in the world, tried to send the girl a secret signal to refrain from talking. Already he had warned her against answering questions. Smith saw the head wagging and the screwing up of Rawhide's leathery countenance; Lorraine must have seen it, yet she gave no inkling of having done so.

"Those men out in the road," she said briskly, talking through Atee to come at Rawhide Bill, "are just a lot of crazy ranchers. They are always doing crazy things, but you can't blame them, poor dears, seeing how little sense they've got amongst the lot of them. And you want to know about Mr. Bayne?"

"I do! Oh, I am really more interested than— Well, I would like to know."

"Bruce Bayne," said Lorraine, like an oracle, "is a gentleman, Mr. Smith. He is a very fine man. The ranchers around here

don't quite appreciate him. He is a business man, he is hard because he is businesslike. I can say it all best this way; the girl who will some day be Mrs. Bruce Bayne is the luckiest girl in the world!"

"Oh, my God! groaned Rawhide Bill.

Smith, as he considered this information, looked puzzled. Well, he couldn't hope to get everything straight in a single day, and meantime he could ask another question or two. He reverted to the one he had already asked.

"But there is some sort of trouble in the air, isn't there? Those men that were out in the road—there's some sort of bad feeling between them and Bayne?"

Lorraine regarded him more penetratingly than before. He *was* a man of mystery, she felt sure of it. And his was more than merely a stranger's casual interest in affairs in and about Rocky Bend.

Now let's see just exactly what I know about him, Lorraine was saying swiftly to herself. He pretends to be what Bill calls him, an old desert rat, and he is nothing of the sort; he's all blistered and his nose is peeling and his skin is as white and soft as a baby's. He looks so innocent and guileless and simple that— Well, it might be just put on for the occasion. He calls himself Mr. Smith, too! I suppose a million men, not wishing to be known by their true names, have called themselves Smith.

"You know, Mr. Smith," she said, "that dad and I got into town just about a minute and a half before you did. So I couldn't know much more about tonight's doings than you do, could I? But if you smell trouble in the air, maybe you are right. One sure thing is that those men, the whole crowd of them, are exactly the sort to stir up trouble just for the fun of it."

"I noticed you talking with one of them. He was the young fellow who helped you to help me hobble over to the porch. Steve Haveril is his name. And I thought maybe—"

"So you know Steve Haveril? He never told me anything about you!"

She looked at him so piercingly, she managed to put such expression into her voice, that she caused Atee Smith to look as guilty as though some black secret was his and Steve's in common. He explained hastily.

"I hardly know the young man. I met him over at Bill's place."

She transferred her regard to Rawhide Bill.

"Better watch what you're doing, Lorrie," Rawhide said mildly. "In another moment you'll be plastering a half bottle liniment in Atty's right eye."

SHE passed over his remark with silent scorn; she scarcely paid his words attention enough to make him sure that she was being scornful. She was thinking along other lines, her brain clicking away undisturbed in the groove into which it had started moving a few minutes before. There was some secret, and the more carefully a secret is hidden, the darker it is; and both Rawhide and Steve were in on it. And this "Mr. *Smith!*" The thing was, so thought Lorraine, so obvious as to be downright silly—this mysterious "Mr. Smith," a perfect stranger, being so interested in everything going on that concerned Bayne and his various enemies.

A word almost shrieked itself into Lorraine's inner ear. "Detective!" Of course, that was what this simple-seeming "Mr. Smith" was. Hadn't she read her detective stories? Her father, Seth King, had a room full of books to read since his "accident" had made him next door to house-bound. And, as was to be expected from a rough-and-ready old-timer of an out doors man like him, he ran strongly to detective stories. And Lorraine had burned down many a candle and watched, wide-eyed, many a lamp wick sputter and die while, tucked to the chin in her bed clothes, as she had followed the devious

trails of sleuthdom. And was ever a detective what he seemed to others?

Certainly *not!* This innocuous "Mr. Smith," the old humbug, was exactly the sort of stuff of which detectives are made.

IX

ATEE SMITH clung tightly with both hands to the seat of the lurching buckboard, precariously balanced not only physically but mentally. He was as tense as drawn wire, not only through every muscle but all the way through his spiritual being.

For one thing he had fallen heels over head in love for the first time in his life, and a man of his age who has never loved before can love like the very deuce, and that love of his was given out to this country of splendid mountains, of breath-taking cliffs, of merry-mad streams and black forests and sparkling waterfalls, miles and miles of it, and he kept saying over and over to himself, "It's all mine! I dreamed a dream for years on top of years and my dream has come true!"

For another thing, he was scared stiff. At any instant during the last hour he expected the worst, envisaging himself and Rawhide Bill Jones and the buckboard and two horses all rattling down a mountainside together, mixing in a tangled mess a hundred or a thousand feet below.

But at last Rawhide Bill, as scornful of roads as Atee himself had ever been of financial barriers, had tooled his team to his objective, and that was the top of a dizzy cliff overshadowing the lower end of Silver Lake. Smith gasped, crawled down from his seat without falling, and gasped again.

"If they've got anything in heaven that beats this," he said in full reverence, "heaven must be quite a place."

"It's nice that you like it," said Rawhide, "seeing as how it's all yours. For it is yours, ain't it?"

"It's a dream fulfilled," breathed Atee.

Rawhide, not used to such ways of saying things, looked at him in such fashion that his eyes made one think of a pair of augers boring deep.

"Say it in American," said Rawhide.

"I've wanted something like this ever since I was a kid. I was raised in cities, but I read books about the West, about plains and deserts and mountains. I went places with Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill and Texas Jack. I wanted to be the king-pin rancher on the biggest ranch there was. I wanted a place of my own, a hundred miles long and pretty near a hundred miles wide.

And I just kept fooling along wanting it and never getting close to it, never truly knowing quite what it would be like. But I made plans and I figured in general what I wanted, and I sent a man out here to hunt around for six months or so and get it for me. And—"

"That was Jim Farnsworth, wasn't it? The man somebody killed. Well, he was a rat anyhow." Rawhide had not eased probing with his shrewd old eyes. "How comes, Atee, that you pick out rats like you do, to do your work for you? Sometimes, I swear, you almost make an old friend believe you're part rat yourself. Yes sirree. Though I ain't downright suspicious by nature and though you've told me a lot and though, on top of everything, you saved my life for me, still I get to wondering now and then."

A. T. SMITH looked as meek as a mouse.

"I can't blame you, Bill," he sighed. He sat down with his back to a pine tree and mopped his brow and gingerly scratched his shin. "But I never had the slightest doubt of Farnsworth's probity. You see, I have to have a good many men representing me in one position and another in the world; and I never was what they call a mixer; and I've just done my best to look into their credentials after I had had someone else hand them to me. I never

met Mr. Farnsworth face to face, just as I have never met Bruce Bayne; but—"

"I tell you, Farnsworth was a rat. And a bigger rat killed him."

"Yes. You've already said that Bayne killed him, just to get his place."

"Maybe just for that, maybe for something else too that we don't know about. I've had the sneaking notion a good many years that Farnsworth, crook that he was, found out that Bayne, working with him, was a bigger crook, doublecrossing him, and that Bayne found out he'd been caught, and plugged his boss. That way he'd have two darn good reasons for the job."

"But you yourself admit, Bill, that all this is just a notion you've got. And a man can't always be sure, because he suspects something or other, that there is really any solid basis for his suspicions."

"Me, I know!" snorted Rawhide. "Whenever I get me a notion, I just simply hang to it, and sooner or later my hunch comes true."

Smith was always ready to listen in all patience. Now he sat considering what his new friend had to say. But, while considering, his eyes drifted far afield. He looked down upon the glittering expanse of Silver Lake, and thought it the most

lovely expanse of laughing blue water he had ever seen. It talked with him; it called to him softly; it lured him so that everything that Rawhide Bill had to say became as thin and tenuous and inconsequential as moonbeams drowned in a mist.

Rawhide kept on talking. Atee kept on absorbing the world about him through worshipful eyes. He noted the mountains fading away into far blue distances; you would almost think that he was trying to count the trees that clothed them; he seemed to be penetrating the mystery of every deep-cleft ravine.

He marked how, nearby, the sentinel cliffs stood tall and awe inspiring; he saw how the lake poured its surplus waters off down a fresh waterway and how the cliffs opposite had crumbled so that huge boulders lay half submerged along the narrow strip of sandy shore.

He was spellbound. Not heeding Rawhide, he kept on thinking. "This is mine, all mine; mine as far as I can see! Farther, even. A hundred miles of it! From down on the rim of the desert where Bill's cabin is, far away across the mountains."

"Down yonder," said Rawhide, "you'll see what we come up here to see; how Bayne dynamited the cliffs to steal a river."

WHEN he got no answer he grunted and started rolling a cigarette. Thereafter there was a long silence during which he did his own thinking. Every now and then his eyes, over which the heavy lids had drooped so far as almost to hide them, drifted back to Smith's bemused face.

From that time on they didn't have much to say to each other for several hours.

They drove on and on, always northward, sometimes following a track which Atee suspected had been a wagon road once on a time, often taking short cuts where the wheels bumped over rocks, where Atee clung to the seat as a drowning man is said to clutch at a straw; it seemed to him from moment to moment that their conveyance would turn turtle and roll down hill until it brought up in

a battered heap against a big boled pine or a boulder.

During the afternoon about all that Atee said was, "Is all this still my place?"

A glum Rawhide got so that he just nodded.

They pitched camp as dusk was gathering in the loveliest green valley even A. T. Smith's wild dreamings had ever conjured up. There were deer, because he saw them, a buck and two does, gentle-eyed folk and timid, but not frightened. There were quail; there were trout leaping, breaking the water of the Gay Girl Creek so that tiny rainbows, etherial and evanescent, were bred. There was a whisper through the pines that was like no mere night wind blowing but like hushed breathing, and down along the quiet flow of air floated the tangy incense from the millions of trees which all day long had basked in the sunshine.

When they had dined over Bill's small fire decorated with his battered black pot and long handled skillet, and had rolled into their blankets under the stars, and Bill had lighted his good night cigarette and Mr. A. T. Smith had tried to get an emulative pipe going and then had given it up, they talked as even silent men will for a time.

ALREADY, back there at Rawhide's place on the rim of the desert, they had talked. Smith—or so Rawhide had believed at the moment, though now he was in very grave doubt—had come clean. He had told who he was; anyhow that was one thing to his credit. He had confessed that he, when you came right down to it, didn't in the least know what either Farnsworth or Bruce Bayne had done or how they had done it; he had explained how he was always pottering around in other places, in Europe more than in America; and he made not the least bones about admitting that he wasn't much of a business man.

He had inherited all his money to begin with; it had been hedged around with all sorts of legal safeguards which he never quite comprehended yet which he had to acknowledge were wise; he had been instructed to invest in government bonds and first mortgages; he had been glad to follow instructions.

He—or at least so he told Rawhide Bill Jones—had never got around to asking himself what happened to the man who mortgaged his property and then lost it—to A. T. Smith! That honest folk were thrown out of their homes so that his millions might breed fresh millions, that these folk might rub elbows with starvation or, in one way and another, go to the eternal bowwows, were facts, if facts they were, which had never dawned on him.

For his part, Rawhide was circumspect. He confided a number of salient facts and even shaded them by steeping the brush of intuition into the bubbling pot of imagination. Yet some other cogent facts he deemed well to withhold until he knew more at first hand of his new friend. He strove to pump Smith dry, yet not to give up everything he himself had. And, with caution jogging his elbow right along, he had striven to prevent Smith and Lorraine King from telling each other everything they knew.

What Rawhide intended was to be dead sure of the lay of the land in all directions before anyone else knew. Then, knowing what was what, he meant to see to it that matters went forward properly and with no monkey-business—for example, with no interference from an emotional girl.

The consideration chiefly actuating the circuitous Mr. William Hannibal Jones was this: he estimated that with A. T. Smith coming personally and actively into the picture out here, the props could very neatly be knocked out from under Mr. Bruce Bayne. But the canny old fellow, in nowise given to jumping hurdles until he got to them, said warningly to himself:

"Bayne is as foxy as all outdoors. May-

be he has taken chances, but he's done it knowing he was pretty safe from being called. Maybe he's crept out on a limb or two, but he's made sure the limb was stuck onto the tree pretty good and tight. If he gets a hunch that A. T. Smith is nosing into things, he'll cover up so a pack of hound dogs and ten men with shovels couldn't dig him out. So I got to make Atee lay low until we get the dead-wood on Bayne. It's me that's got to do it. Maybe that way I save Steve's scalp and old man King's and Colonel Matt's—and even, by Jingo, William Hannibal Jones'! It's worth taking time out to think about."

SO HE tucked Atee into the buckboard and took him traveling, first of all to Rocky Bend, then on here to Silver Lake, the scene of the latest Bruce Bayne devastation; and meant to go on to each of three county courthouses.

In Rocky Bend, as Rawhide figured, he had a narrow escape.

For he had not counted on running into anything like that score of angry men, hell-bent for a run-in with Bayne, and he was at some pains to keep Atee from learning too much of current activities. Further, he had not been able to pry his willing yet hesitant guest out of Rocky Bend before some of the riders came riding back; but Rawhide Bill, hearing hoofs, had been out in the road in front of the hotel before Smith, in bed, could get the hot compress off his leg; Rawhide had learned from Steve all that had happened, and had cursed himself blue in the jowls when he heard of young Ken Kendall's untimely end. Just the same he had taken the situation in hand and had successfully navigated Atee out of town without that gentleman's getting so much as a whiff of the tragedy.

"If he knew a man got killed tonight, and that he himself was pretty much to blame for it," thought Rawhide, "he'd most likely jump the traces and run wild. What he don't know now, I can tell him later—if advisable."

And now the two old fellows, rolled up like caterpillars in their blankets and tarps in the little valley at the head of Silver Lake, talked more and more desultorily, and knew their silent moments and kept watching the stars which slid slowly down into the west, and kept right on thinking. For A. T. Smith, like Rawhide Bill Jones, had matters to ponder upon.

"It seems to me," was the way in which Smith began, communing with himself and one particular star, "that this man, Mr. Jones, is a splendid man. I like him. I can learn a lot of things from a man like him. But— Ahem! Just how far can I trust him, fine old type of the genus homo that he is? At times, I think he lies to me. At other times, I have a queer sort of feeling that he is suppressing facts. And I can't very well help suspecting that he — well, that he juggles facts, twisting them this way and that. He— Hells bells, he treats me like a six year old!"

He used a stockinged heel to rub a tender ankle. He mused, "Maybe that's just what I am, only a six year old? All these men out here seem so much more grown up, and so much more smart and capable than I am. And what am I to do about it all?"

He sighed himself to sleep, wishing:

"If only Archie was here!"

But Archie was three thousand miles away, slumbering now, dreaming of little Gavrochs.

"It's all like a wonderful dream!" said Atee when, with the rising sun in his face, his eyes flew wide open.

RAWHIDE BILL grunted.

"It's a sort of nice country, if that's what you mean," he said, and flipped the bacon over in his grease encrusted pan above a tiny hot blaze. He cocked a cold eye toward the individual coming out of last night's cocoon. "And it's all yours,

if that's what you've got in mind," he said.

Smith wriggled and twisted and got all tangled up in his blankets, but at last, luck being with him, broke free and stood up, triumphant.

"Can you cook bacon?" Rawhide demanded, flinging the words at him.

"Bacon? Can I cook it? Why—I never tried, you know, Bill, but it shouldn't be hard to do."

"Make coffee?" asked Rawhide.

"Coffee?" Atee looked faintly worried. "Coffee? You know, Bill—"

"You're damn right I know! Can you, by any chance, build a fire?"

Atee laughed. It struck Rawhide that that was the first time he had ever heard Atee laugh.

"I know what you mean, Bill. I won't say that I have actually done the thing, but any man can build a fire. What's more, if you like, I'll prove to you—"

"Not now," said Bill. "We ain't got time. But some day, just for fun—on some holiday, say—you go build yourself a fire and cook yourself a pan of bacon and a pot of coffee. Come ahead; drag your britches and boots on, and we'll eat."

Smith obeyed, all silence and obedience. He saw how Rawhide squatted by the fire, and squatted likewise. Or at least as likewise as he could manage, though he came dangerously close toppling into the fire. Rawhide served breakfast in two tin plates and two tip cups; then rocking on his heels, he spoke.

"Me, I can tell you some interesting facts, if so be you're interested in interesting facts. Take that old pine over yonder; well, she's anyhow a good hundred-fifty years old. Take this here lake that's almost coming up into our laps, well, she's been here maybe anyhow seven hundred years and some say a million. Take them cliffs way down there at the fu'ther end; well, they been there a long time; more'n forty years anyhow, being as me, I've been here that long. Your pet rat, meaning Bruce Bayne, he blowed one of them cliffs clean to kingdom come. Why, says you? To plug up Rustling River and steal it away from old Matt Carter's lands and pour it down into Starvation Flats, long dry, which belongs of late to you—or to Bayne, I won't swear which. Well, on top of everything I can tell you a funny story. There's a place up on the plateau running back from the edge of those cliffs that used to belong to the Bedloe boys—"

"Bedloe?" said Smith, and wrinkled his brows. "I've heard that name, haven't I?"

"Most folks have. Seven of them there were, not all exactly Bedloes, one being Stett Wilson, another Clyde Devoe, cousins or something, but the whole gang was called Bedloes and the Bedloes were the sort of badmen we used to breed out this-a-way. Outlaws, some called them; bandits, others said; damn cold-blooded killers, always out for loot, is the right of it. The house Bayne lives in now was their headquarters and all round stronghold. But they had other places, and one was atop those cliffs. And, as the story goes round, somewhere or other, maybe on one of those two places, maybe higher up in the hills, the Bedloe boys buried their swag. And how much money do you guess they was supposed to have had buried when a sudden fatality, all smudged up with powder smoke, took the Bedloes off? Mind you, they'd been rustling stock and holding up banks and stages for a good many years."

ATEE pondered. Seven men busied at their profitable business for a good many years should have reaped a pretty substantial reward. He thought sizeable sums as A. T. Smith would, a man born with millions in his silver spoon.

"A million dollars?" he hazarded, and then misjudging the look on Rawhide's leathery visage, he corrected his estimate hurriedly. "A couple of millions?"

"Oh, my eye and Pete's red sow!" snorted Rawhide Bill Jones. "There never

was that much money all the way this side the Rockies. Come down to earth man, can you? But folks do say they had hid somewhere between fifty thousand and a hundred thousand dollars. All in twenty dollar gold pieces. The Bedloes was known for scorning anything less'n a gold twenty."

Atee, from his point of view, couldn't very well blame them for that. At this moment—and it was as well that Rawhide didn't suspect the fact, as he might have fainted dead away—he was carrying in the battered old wallet half popping out of a rear pants pocket some seven thousand dollars in green and yellow backs.

"The Bedloes, every damn one of them, came to a very sudden bad end when they raided the old Matt Carter ranch," said Rawhide. "Matt he gathered him a band of hard-riding, quick shooting cowboys, and they dug one grave big enough to plant seven men. And ever since then folks have been looking for the Bedloe treasure."

Smith laughed. He saw the humor of the thing.

"That is funny," he admitted. "That a whole countryside should spend years and years looking for a few thousand dollars! Just the lure of the idea of buried treasure, eh?"

Rawhide got as far as saying, "Oh, my eye and"—and then muttered, "Oh, what's the use?" and then remarked crisply: "Well, the Bedloes went to their long home back in '87, and folks have been looking for their gold ever since, just for fun, like you say; and Bayne has moved into the old Bedloe castle, and he has blowed the cliffs down where folks say there is a long cave somewhere, that late years have plugged up."

HE STOOD up, regarded his companion a moment as though across a vast distance, then took up his pot and pan, knives, forks and big spoon, and went down to the creek with them. When he came back he put out his fire, slashed water over coals and hot ashes, and made up his pack. All this was in silence. Smith did not offer to help; he didn't think of doing so, appearing profoundly thoughtful of other matters.

Rawhide harnessed the horses and hitched up, called out in a queer voice, "Well, Smith, coming along?" and they started. Two hours travel over bad roads or no roads at all brought them the shortest way to High Town, county seat. Rawhide went straight to the courthouse to spend some hours looking up records. He knew everybody, judge, sheriff, tax collector and county clerk, and they knew him and suspected nothing beyond the usual thing, that he was interested in some mining claim or other.

That afternoon, left for a time to his own devices, Aurelius Timothy Smith engaged in two pieces of queer business, the relative importance of which would have to be left to time to judge.

He pottered around the straggling mountain town for some twenty minutes, made a few purchases, and then with a bundle under his arm strolled along a crooked lane edged by buckeyes and laurel to a spot perhaps a hundred yards from the hardware store. He left the lane to creep through the trees to a small clearing ringed about by buck brush. Then he went to work on the first of his two projects.

He opened his bundles, bringing out a brand new frying pan and a similarly virgin coffee pot; thereafter he produced some sliced bacon. He gathered up scraps of dead wood and heaped them into a pile. He squatted down, exactly—or nearly exactly—as Rawhide Jones had. He started striking matches.

After a while he got a fire going, and a look of supreme and triumphant gladness suffused his sunburned face and set his mild blue eyes dancing. He pulled a bottle of water out of his pocket and emptied it into his coffee pot; he put enough coffee into it to make it good and muddy.

He put strips of bacon into his skillet—

Half an hour later, with a big blister on one hand and several black smudges on his face and that look of a conqueror still in his eyes, he showed up at the telegraph office in High Town. There he performed his second act.

He sent a long telegram which made the operator look at him questioningly over the top rims of his spectacles; this was the first time the operator had ever sent a message in code, and at first, arriving at the natural conclusion, he supposed that the little man was crazy. But he sent the message, being paid to do so.

A FEW hours later, Smith's factotum, friend, butler, cook and housemaid, none other than the indispensible Archie, decoded a message and sat with it propped up against a sturdy copy of Les Miserables. He read:

"I need ninety-seven thousand dollars, all in gold twenties, and all must be dated prior to the year 1887. I would like them as old and dirty looking as you can get them. If you hurry around to all my banks you ought to get what I want in a couple of days. Anyhow I will look for shipment here ten days from today. Maybe you had better label shipment as lead. If you want to send me a telegram, address me Atee Smith, here at High Town. I think I am going to have a grand time."

Having dispatched his message, Mr. Smith strolled back toward the hotel where he and Rawhide were to spend the night.

He was thinking about other things, so noted only absently that there seemed to be a sudden excitement in town. Presently, as the excitement grew, he came down to earth; at that moment he saw great clouds of smoke billowing up in the timber—about a hundred yards from the hardware store.

Men and boys and women, even, went scurrying with axes and shovels and buckets of water, with dripping sacks and old blankets, to fight the fire, to save their town from going up in a blaze.

Rawhide Bill, having glimpsed the cloud of smoke through a dusty courthouse window, was one of the first of the fire fighters.

That night, when he and Atee had tucked themselves in, sharing the same room in their two hammocky beds, Rawhide said through the dark just before both men drifted off to sleep:

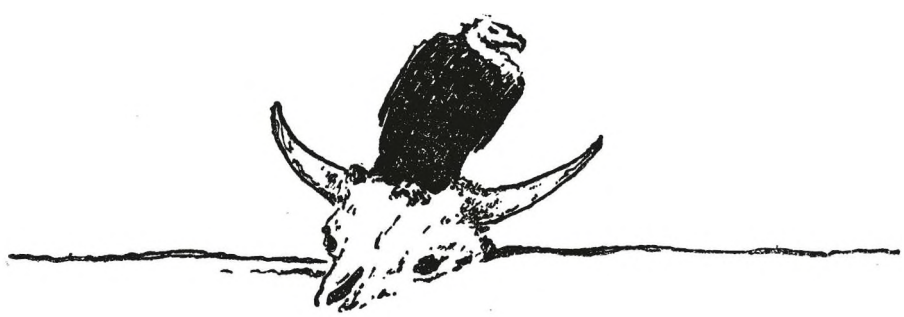
"Some damn fool made a fire out there, left his frying pan and coffee pot on the blaze, and went away without putting the fire out."

Aloud, Atee made no rejoinder. But he hugged himself under his blankets and communed with his soul.

"I did make a fire," he was saying within himself. "I made quite a fire! And I sent quite a telegram to Archie."

Then, gently and happily, he said aloud: "Good night, Bill."

(*Part III in the Next* SHORT STORIES)



When There Is Only One Man and Not a Gang After All, One Bullet Does It.

BOUGHT OFF WITH BULLETS

By HOWARD NOSTRAND

Author of "Steel Stitcher," "Night Circuit," etc.

THE town of Harkness was booming on account of the government land newly opened to homesteaders. The afternoon train was crowded. When it puffed to a stop at the station everybody stampeded for the doors.

All except Bill Kerry, that is. Bill had been sitting close to the center of the last car and it was a long distance to either end. Bill yawned, unfolded his skinny six-foot-one off the red plush and heaved his green carpetbag through the window.

And the way he went out of the window himself—why it was most graceful. Or it would have been except his toe caught on the sill. It was a lucky thing that Ab Cartwright was lying on the platform to break Bill's fall. It was a real big help. Ab Cartwright being fat.

Ab wasn't in the habit of lying on platforms. He was unconscious and not from liquor either. Bill had been carrying extra six-guns in his carpetbag and Ab happened to be standing in the way. That was all.

Bill pushed himself off Ab's stomach

and looked around for the green bag. Strangely enough it was under a homesteader's arm at the other end of the station and moving rapidly.

Bill glanced down at Ab. But Ab looked comfortable where he was, so Bill trotted after the whiskered homesteader.

"Excuse me," said Bill and poked a handful of fist right smack into the middle of the whiskers. Then he picked up his bag and went back to see what could be done about the fat man.

Ab was already sitting up, swaying a little on his rump and staring at the undercarriage of the train.

"Hurt?" Bill asked.

Ab considered for a moment. Then he said thoughtfully. "I been worse. Only trouble is I woke up with the wind knocked out of me. I can't figure it nohow. Because what flattened me was something that landed on my head." His pudgy hand explored his scalp and his eyes bulged. "Why doggone if there ain't a lump a-comin'!"

Bill's long face was very serious as he said, "Touch of sun maybe."

"This here lump ain't no symptom of sunstroke," said Ab indignantly. "I—" His eyes flicked past Bill. His hand in one quick motion was filled with six-gun. The weapon roared.

Bill spun around as a howl broke from someone behind him. It was the whiskered homesteader. He was hopping up and down and holding his wrist.

Ab was on his feet now. "Figured you wouldn't want your back carved," he said. "Feller had a awful long knife. Friend of yours?"

"I only saw him once," said Bill. "And it wasn't for long. Let's get some whiskey for that lump."

"The lump can take care of itself," Ab replied. "I'll take care of the whiskey."

TOGETHER they clomped along the duckboards to the Angels Haven Hall. Which was only named that way. It being neither a haven for angels nor a hall. Just an overgrown packing-case with three sides. The architect had let himself go on the false front and the lumber had given out before he got around to the back.

Probably the back wall would have been left off until cold weather set in if it hadn't been for the fact that numerous thirsty gentlemen had come right in from the prairie and lined up at the bar without getting off their horses. Canvas had been tacked up to discourage this.

Bill bought a few drinks and Ab bought a few drinks and they got real talkative.

"Been a pretty dry spring," said Bill.

"Yeah. Pretty."

"Kind of bad for cattlemen."

"Uh-huh."

Downright friendly—as if they were windmill salesmen afraid to tip each other off to any leads.

After a few more drinks Bill said, "I'm lookin' for a gent by the name of Abner Cartwright."

Ab hiccoughed genteelly behind his hand and said, "Nice feller. Where's he live?"

"Place called Harkness," Bill replied. "Somewhere around here."

"Nice town," said Ab. "I was there once." His lip quivered. "I had to leave. Woman trouble."

The bartender leaned confidentially across the mahogany bar—the one touch of luxury in town—and whispered to Bill, "He's Cartwright. And he never left. He married the gal."

"A lone rover," sobbed Ab. "Never to know the peace and—the peace, the—" He cuddled his head in his arms and muffled his grief in his sleeve.

Bill frowned down at the quaking back. "I can't carry him, but I could maybe drag him."

"Leave him be," said the bartender. "He's one of these here unhappy drinkers." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "It's five to four. By quarter after he'll be mighty sick, but he'll be all right by

four-thirty. We'll just set him on the bench outside till he spills."

They helped Ab to a seat. Bill came back inside and rested his elbows. He was not in the least drunk and he wanted to learn all he could about this town of Harkness. The Angels Haven was as good a place as any.

Bill had come right to Harkness from Chicago. He had superintended a cattle train into the windy city and when he found himself in the fleshpots with a double handful of greenbacks——

He sighed. There had been an awful lot of greenbacks. Only there were a lot of smart people in Chicago, so he didn't keep the money long.

And then when he was down to his last ten dollars a man had said, "The Bar V outfit is hiring. They're having nester trouble. But don't go unless you keep your six-guns oiled. The homesteaders down that way are the toughest bunch that ever fouled a waterhole. They even got a few trigger fanners among them."

So Bill had come to Harkness to find Abner Cartwright because Ab was the northern manager of the Bar V. And here Ab was a fat man who couldn't hold his liquor.

BILL frowned. Then he remembered the way Ab had handled a six-gun. He decided that it was unfair to judge a man who has received a lump on the head, a bump on the belly and numerous jolts of snake-juice under the belt.

Five men burst in and lined up at the bar. Out of the corner of his eye Bill recognized one by his whiskers. The homesteader again. Only now his nose was badly swollen and he was wearing a rag around his wrist.

Bill unbuttoned his coat and his vest and eased his hog-leg forward. He hooked his thumb in the cartridge belt just in case.

And kept his ears open.

Whoever the whiskered man was, the others seemed to think he was important.

It was "Sam this—" and "Sam that—" And they bought him drinks.

Suddenly Bill realized who Sam was. Samuel Tenty—Pecos Sam. He was no homesteader at all, but a renegade cattleman. A rustler and a killer with a record

of out-and-out murders in Texas that should have hanged him ten times over.

Sam was talking. "I know cattlemen. They'll bluff you if you let 'em. Don't take it."

"We figured on not takin' it," said one of the men. "That's why you're here. It's up to you to—"

"Shut up!" said another. "This ain't no place to make plans. Sam is comin' with me. I'll tell him all there is to tell. Let's high-tail."

Pecos Sam gulped his drink and turned. For the first time he noticed Bill. Sam's eyes narrowed to mere slits and he said, "I been lookin' for you." He addressed the others, "This is the buzzard who snatched my bag. That's it layin' there alongside of him."

Bill nudged it with his foot. "This was bought in Chicago. I ain't got a bill for it but it's mine. And I wouldn't advise anybody to claim it." He grinned. "Seems to me you've had enough misery over it, Pecos. I've heard you're pretty quick at takin' lives, but I never would have believed you'd sink to takin' carpetbags."

The bartender said, "Supposing I open her up and look inside. Each one tell me what he thinks is in it. Then I'll give it to the one that knows."

Bill nodded. "Fair enough."

Pecos Sam said, "He's had time to look the stuff over—"

"No," said Bill, "I haven't. And I'm

willing to let you go first. If you know what's inside you can have it."

One of the men growled, "Stranger, that's what *you're* willin' to do. That's only half a bargain. If Sam owns that bag you're goin' to see what the inside of a jail looks like."

"Go ahead, Pecos," said Bill confidently. "Tell the boys what's in it."

"My other shirt," said Sam. "A derringer—a new one with a name engraved on the side: 'My Friend the Knuckle Duster.' A pair of .36 caliber U. S. Navy irons—Prescott's with a box of rim-fire cartridges for same. Three packages of Old Slug eatin' tobacco. And a pair of hair pants rolled up and held that way by a Mex hair lariat."

EVERYBODY watched the bartender open the bag on the bar and shove his arm inside. Out came the derringer, the tobacco, everything just as Pecos Sam had described them.

Bill's eyes bulged. "Why—why—" He gulped. "Why that ain't my stuff."

He was so astonished that he forgot to keep his thumb hooked in his belt over his revolver. Immediately he was facing a battery of six-shooters

"Tar and feathers," said one man.

"Why waste time," said another. "We ain't got no place for cheap crooks in this town."

The bartender said, "Now gents, this may only be a misunderstanding. There is surely more than one green carpetbag in the world."

Pecos Sam was smiling mirthlessly. His teeth gleamed white. "Put away your guns, boys. This is my party. I been knocked down and shot at and I ain't takin' it." He picked up one of his revolvers from the bar and twirled the cylinder. "This buzzard ain't leavin' except feet first. I'm givin' him the chance to reach for his weapon. If he ain't got the guts to reach, why this iron is liable to go off accidently. I'm examinin' it to see if he hurt it durin' the time it was stolen." He stared at Bill. "Go on. I'm givin' you the chance to draw. I ain't goin' to stand here all day."

Bill was as good as dead. He knew it. The moment he moved a muscle that six-gun would roar. There was nothing he could do. But he would try. He might be able to take Pecos with him. A .36 doesn't have the punch of a .45. There was a—

"Wham!"

From the doorway a six-gun blazed into the narrow enclosure. Sam's gun flew out of his hand as if it had been jerked by an invisible string. It bounced across the bar, knocking over the half-filled whiskey bottle.

"Wham!"

One homesteader had reached for his gun. He was now bent double on the floor. The rest decided to go away and they didn't take any time at all to do it.

"Yippee!" shouted Ab, teetering in the entrance. "I'm a lone rover!"

Then the hammer clicked emptily and he frowned down. "Six-shooter," he said sadly, "you done failed me in my hour of need." He gazed around and found only Bill. "Where'd everybody go?"

Bill pointed to the place where the rear wall should have been. The canvas was torn from roof to floor. "They was in a hurry." He grinned. "I reckon the bartender is still here. He disappeared by fallin' behind the mahogany."

A slow smile spread over Ab's face and he shook his head. "Queer—that Pecos Sam feller was downright anxious to corral his carpetbag and he went away without it anyhow."

The bartender raised a white face from behind the bar.

Ab said, "'Sall right, son. Trouble is past. You can breathe again. Tend to that feller in the corner. I wasn't meanin' to give him a bellyache, but he was reachin' fast and I guess my aim wasn't all it might be."

Bill chuckled. "For a sick man you done right proud."

"Shucks!" said Ab modestly. "That was careless shootin'."

"I—" Bill shrugged. "I'd admire to equal it."

"Well," said Ab. "I'm too fat to run. A man has to protect himself in this God-fearin' community. Now come on and let's get out of here before they surround us with an army or somethin'. When these homesteaders get mad they don't play much with six-guns. They climb on top of a store a quarter-mile away and pepper you with rifles."

Bill said, "Where do we go?"

"To my place, I reckon," said Ab. "My stomach is nigh onto completely empty right now and I'm commencin' to feel hungry."

Bill stared at the fat man. "Are you tellin' me that you downed all that booze on an empty stomach?"

"No." Abner shook his head. "I put down the liquor on a pretty good foundation of breakfast and lunch but—" He thought for a moment. "I reckon somethin' I et didn't agree with me."

"I'd be right glad to go with you," said Bill. "Seein' I plan to hit you up for a job. But first I got to go back to the station.

This carpetbag ain't mine, and I had one. I tossed it out of the window of the train. It must be lyin' around there yet if some buzzard ain't walked off with it."

AB'S eyes had a far-away look. "Somethin' green," he said slowly. "Somethin' green a-flyin' through the air—thump!" He gazed at Bill. "I reckon I know what keeled me over."

Bill nodded. "It might have been my bag."

"But I couldn't breathe," said Ab. "I woke up and couldn't breathe. What else happened?"

"Well," said Bill. "I was a mite busy and—"

"Yeah," Ab broke in. "You wouldn't know."

They headed for the station. The locomotive was still in sight. It had moved perhaps a hundred yards. Black smoke was billowing from the funnel-shaped stack and steam was hissing from numerous places.

"Funny," Ab said. "She should have pulled out long ago. I wonder what's up."

Then they noticed that the station had disappeared. It had collapsed and the rear car was sitting on top of the debris. A man came hurrying by with a crowbar and Bill called, "What happened?"

"Jumped the track," said the man breathlessly. "Some damn fool left a carpetbag on the rail under the last car. There was a couple of six-shooters in it and they sure fixed things."

"Anybody know who the feller was?" Ab asked.

"We don't know what he looks like," said the man. "But his name is Mister William Kerry, Esquire. He had a couple of letters in the bag. If I was him I'd climb on a horse and go away fast. There's a lot of folks on that train who was hopin' to get to Bolton's Junction before the land office closed today. If they find this esquire they will most likely take him apart and hang the pieces."

"Oh," said Bill. He glanced at Ab. "I guess we better be gettin' over to your place, Mister Cartwright."

"Yeah, Mister *Peabody*," Ab agreed. "I guess we better." He nodded to the man. "Thanks, friend. We was going to take that train. But seein' it's delayed, we'll transact a little more business." He took Bill's arm. "Come, Peabody. We'll clear up those few odds and ends."

The man trotted off with his crowbar.

Ab chuckled. "And, Mister William Kerry, Esquire, you better be Peabody from now on. I'm payin' sixty dollars a month for top hands who can shoot straight. I reckon if you have to pay for that station out of your wages you'll be

workin' for nothin' for about ten years—if you ain't taken apart and hung up."

After a supper out of cans—Mrs. Cartwright was visiting relatives back in Ohio —Ab told Bill his troubles. Harkness was the loading station for the Bar V and it lay at the northern end of a twenty-mile valley. The Slater Range lay to the west and Harkness Ridge to the east. Southward lay the open range.

UNFORTUNATELY the homesteaders were filling the valley and cutting off the movement of cattle to the railroad. The only other route from the south was through broken country beyond the mountains.

"So we been cuttin' fences," said Ab. "Next year we'll drift west with the railroad, but for the present our cattle are practically shipped. There's only two more herds to come. Naturally we ain't anxious to wear 'em down to skin and bone by loopin' all the way around Harkness Ridge."

"I should think the homesteaders would be willing to let you through," said Bill. "It don't seem sensible they'd hold you up. Not the way you tell it."

Ab shrugged. "They're willin' to let us through—for a price. Two dollars a head for the herd. So I told them what they could do. Then they began stringin' bobwire and killin' strays. Up to a month ago it was cheaper than payin' them, but now they've brought in some cattlewise hombres and we've been losin' considerable stock."

"What about the association?" Bill asked. "Nobody can sell stuff with your brand."

Ab laughed. "Bar V ain't a hard brand to alter. And with the demand for cattle the way it is and even range stock bringing thirty dollars a head at the railroad, there are plenty of dealers who don't look too close at markings."

"This Pecos Sam," said Bill thoughtfully, "he's quite a hand at brand altering. He's considerable of an ugly customer."

"I was down to the station," said Ab, "to see if I could buy him off. I heard he was comin'. But now I reckon I'll have tc buy him off with bullets."

Ab was anxious about the northernmost herd which was nearing the valley. So at daybreak he and Bill left Harkness on Bar V horses—heavy animals that Ab kept at the livery stable in town for his own use.

Bill said, "This critter's back is so wide I feel like I'm settin' atop a hogshead."

Ab chuckled. "I'm a mite weighty for range cayuse. These is draught horses that I brought in special from Ohio."

They passed a number of soddies. Everywhere men were breaking ground. But the cattle trail was as yet untouched by ploughs.

There were fences however. Four times in five miles Bill dismounted to clip wires with the nippers that Ab kept in a saddle holster.

The sun was high when they reached the valley's end. For a moment they stared south across the endless expanse of prairie.

Bill filled his lungs with sage scented air. "Chicago," he said. "Anybody that wants it can have it. I'll take this."

Ab was squinting at a far-off speck near the horizon. "That looks like a man." Unlimbering his Winchester he aimed it into the distance. "Yeah," he said after a time. "It's sure enough a man. And he's walkin'. He falls down every once in a while." He slid his rifle back into the holster. "C'mon, let's breeze over there. Somethin' must be wrong."

It was the Bar V wrangler. He was half dead from thirst and loss of blood. Ab and Bill had him lie down in the shade cast by the two horses. They nursed him along on watered whiskey and tied up a nasty gash in the fleshy part of his thigh.

He caught Ab's sleeve and whispered, "Boss, they got the herd."

Ab was kneeling beside him. "Take it easy, Pop. Save your strength."

"Never mind me," said the wrangler. "Get them buzzards." His voice was so low that Bill and Ab had to bend close to his lips to hear.

"What happened, Pop?" Ab asked.

"I had the remuda on the west side of a clump of cottonwoods about six-seven miles back——"

"Ketcham's Grove," said Ab. "Where was the herd?"

"A mite south and to the east. It was just before sunup. I could see the chuckwagon fire gettin' under way when I hear a shot. I didn't pay no attention because Joe, Tumbleweed and Slim Bob was ridin' herd. Them boys was forever pot-shootin'. In a little while there was another shot. Then another."

Ab frowned. "Where was the rest of the outfit?"

"I'm a-comin' to that," said the wrangler. "Then I hear shoutin' and more shootin' and the herd stampedes. So I ran over to the chuckwagon and cook is lyin' by it on his face. Dead."

"Shot?" asked Ab.

"Knifed," said the wrangler. "So I went to where the rest of the boys was bedded down and they was also dead."

Ab stared. "The whole eight of them?"

The wrangler nodded. "And I stumbled over the body of Tumbleweed when I started back for my horse. I figured to let you know."

Ab said, "But how come you're wounded and afoot?"

"One of the buzzards was still hangin' around. He shot me and he drove the horses off."

Bill's face was grim. "Cartwright, I'm borrowin' your rifle. Get Pop to town and scare up a posse. I'll just mosey down the line."

"You better come along," said Ab. "You ain't no wildcat that you can handle a dozen men by yourself."

Bill looked at him thoughtfully. "I don't reckon there was a dozen. I don't reckon there was more than one man."

"You're loco!" Ab exclaimed. "How could one man do all that?"

"Think a minute," Bill reasoned. "If it was a gang and they was stealin' the cattle they wouldn't stampede the herd. They might break it up and drift into broken land to give them time to alter brands—"

"They'd be plumb crazy to try that so near to town," said Ab.

Bill nodded. "I reckon so. There ain't nothin' they could do with your herd except stampede it. Why would they?"

Ab shrugged.

"I'll tell you why," said Bill. "There is one man who pulled this trick and he had two reasons at least. First, the homesteaders brought him here to scare you—I overheard that in the Angels Haven yesterday. Second, you made a monkey out of him at the station and in the saloon. This is Pecos Sam's way of getting revenge."

Ab got to his feet. He studied Bill's face for a long time. Then he said, "Sam *was* quick with a knife yesterday."

"Yeah," said Bill. "That's one more thing that points to him. Him alone. A knife doesn't make any noise. He sneaked into camp and stabbed the sleeping hands and the cook. Then he circled the herd and shot the other three. When he—"

"But the shoutin'," Ab interposed. "Pop says there was shoutin'."

THE wrangler was sitting up now, listening wide-eyed to the discussion. "It could of been one man," he said hoarsely.

"Sure," Bill agreed. "The herd was already milling and he shouted to set them off. Then he came back to the chuckwagon. I wouldn't be surprised if he was

lookin' for breakfast. A few dead men lyin' around wouldn't bother Pecos Sam. And when he spotted Pop here, he followed to see where he was going—"

"I was already mounting when he got me," said the wrangler. "And I lay right still. It was gettin' lighter then. I calc'late he could see me where I was flat on my face and he figgered I was also dead."

"What'd he look like?" Ab asked.

Pop grinned a toothless grin and shook his head. "I never lifted my nose out of the dust until he was out of earshot. I hope some day to die in bed with my boots off."

Bill said, "Let's have that rifle, Cartwright. This trouble is mostly my fault and I figure on squaring things. Get back with a posse as soon as you can. I may find Sam's trail, but I doubt if I'll be able to catch him. He enjoys bein' chased. He once gave the slip to a squad of Texas Rangers." Bill smiled. "And they wasn't mounted on no baby elephants neither."

But when Bill reached the chuckwagon he realized that the finding of a trail was a virtual impossibility. There were hoofmarks everywhere. All kinds.

Twenty men could have spent a day searching—he glanced at the sky—and sundown wasn't more than six hours away.

Nevertheless he made the attempt. Starting at the wagon he rode in a circle, widening it fifty feet each time he passed the body of one of the punchers—Tumbleweed's, he guessed.

It bothered him that the dead were unburied, but he felt that finding the killer was more important. He spent an hour searching. The cattle stampede was plainly marked. The herd had curved back toward the south. And there were plenty of hoof marks where horses had been galloped. A number of times he followed these only to find them returning toward the wagon which was now a toy in the center of his mile-wide circle.

Suddenly he brought his mount to a stop and stared hard at the ground beneath a clump of sage. The sun had glinted momentarily from something brightly metallic.

He slid off the animal's back and bent down. He had found the needle in the haystack! Someone had halted a horse and had reloaded two revolvers—rim-fire, .36 caliber.

It wasn't one of the dead punchers. They all had cap and ball Colts. Bill was proud of himself. He'd had the right idea and he was now absolutely sure that Pecos Sam had done the killing. And there was a trail to follow.

He drummed his heels on the broad sides of his horse and set off full tilt. The hoof marks were striking northeast—the direction of Harkness Ridge. Sam was going back to town the long way.

In a little while Bill was breathless from the ungainly gallop of the huge horse. He longed for his own paint that he hadn't seen for over a month. It was waiting for him down in Abilene where that shipment of cattle had loaded for Chicago.

AT LAST he spied a distant moving dot. It wasn't Sam, however. It was a riderless pony—already saddled. The mount of one of the dead cowhands. Bill studied the ground for a moment, thinking he had trailed all the way for nothing. Then he saw that the pony had been traveling parallel to the route Pecos Sam had taken.

Bill caught the animal easily. It seemed glad of company. Bill transferred his rifle and left the heavier horse tied to the ground. He grinned. It was big enough to spot easily from the cattle trail. It would serve as a guidepost for the posse.

He came to a place where Sam had stopped. There was a bit of paper on the ground, part of a chewing tobacco package. It had been crumpled but there were two letters: "Ol——" Bill nodded to himself—Old Shag.

He continued the pursuit. The ground

was getting hilly. There were boulders. Sam had traveled slowly. He had taken his time because he hadn't counted on anyone following.

But ambushes were Sam's favorite sport and the landscape was ideal for it. Bill decided he had better keep his eyes peeled.

He pulled his animal down to a walk. His shadow was long ahead of him and he began to think that the best thing to do would be to head back and meet the posse—or go directly to town.

He didn't relish the thought of returning to Harkness, however. He was uncertain in his mind about that railroad episode. Maybe there would be some trouble over the derailed car and the wrecked station.

No. Harkness was a very good place to avoid for a while.

"Whap!"

A bullet snapped by a few inches from his ear. Bill rolled off his horse.

"Thud!" A bullet hit the animal.

It collapsed. It would have dropped on Bill if he hadn't scrambled out of the way.

The horse trembled and was still. Bill lay behind it and waited. He almost wished he had kept the other animal. It would have made a much better bulwark. He longed for that broad back.

And his Winchester was underneath this one. He tried to slide it out of the holster.

"Thud!"

Another bullet. Too close for comfort. But this time he had seen the puff of smoke. Sam was in as fine a bit of natural fortification as a man could desire.

He was slightly above Bill and a little to the right behind a granite outcrop. Two feet to one side there was a huge boulder. If his ammunition held out he could withstand a siege.

As Bill tugged at the Winchester he began to realize that he had let himself in for something. Right then if he had been given his choice of positions he would have taken Sam's without a moment's hesitation.

At last the rifle came away. Bill slid it out over the warm flank of the dead horse and took a pot shot at the granite to get the range. There was no answering fire.

Taking careful aim at the very top edge of the rock he squeezed the trigger again. Immediately Sam blazed away furiously and Bill dropped flat on his stomach and waited for the storm to subside.

This, he told himself, will never do. Use your brains, Bill Kerry. You can't kill a man through a wall of rock. And you can't shoot around it.

SHOOT around it?

Well, maybe. That boulder at the side might do the trick. It would be like a banked shot in a game of billiards. If he could hit the edge of the big stone at just the right angle the ricochet would wind up in Sam's carcass.

Bill grinned. It was a hundred-to-one shot.

Sam was still firing from time to time, but Bill paid no attention. He was studying the rock and the boulder and trying to decide on the spot where he should aim. It would have to be a matter of experimentation—and all the luck in the world. At least he had a pocketful of cartridges.

The first slug didn't seem to bother Sam. Bullets came thick and fast. Bill didn't mind so much, now that he was not aiming directly at the granite. His rifle was resting in the hollow at the base of the horse's neck and the shoulders gave full protection.

He tilted the barrel a hair and fired again. Still no result. Sam had stopped shooting though. Probably to save his ammunition.

And on the next shot Bill saw a puff of earth far behind the boulder. He was aiming wrong.

He nodded grimly. "All right, Pecos. This is the time."

Sighting carefully at a point a couple of inches off the ground and almost the same

distance toward the middle of the boulder, he held his breath and squeezed the trigger. Immediately the body of the killer rolled into view.

Hastily Bill pumped lead until Sam lay still. Then he himself lay flat on his back and fought against the sickness in his stomach, the result of the suspense, the hard ride, and the picture that stayed in his mind of the jerking body by the boulder.

HOOVES were drumming somewhere near at hand. He sat up and stared wildly around.

Men were coming. Ab Cartwright was leading the dash, his fat body bouncing on his animal like a rolled-up mattress on a buckboard.

Bill stood up as they reined in.

"You hurt?" Ab asked breathlessly.

Bill shook his head.

"But he got your horse?"

Bill nodded.

"Where'd he go?"

"No place," said Bill. He flicked a thumb at the rock. "I weighted him down with lead so he'd stay put."

Ab looked around at the men. "Sorry, boys. There'll be no lynching after all. I brought you down for nothing."

"Oh, I don't know," said Bill thoughtfully. "So long as they're here they won't mind helping us locate that stampeded herd."

Ab smiled. "Supposing I leave the arrangements to you. I'll be needin' a new foreman and I figger you'll do."

"Why, thanks," said Bill.

"It pays a hundred and a quarter a month," said Ab.

"Why—" Bill looked down at his boots. "Why, thanks."

"'Sall right, son," said Ab. "Only you ain't a-goin' to get any money for a while. The conductor on that train was able to describe you and the bartender told the railroad detective that you was visiting me. The railroad wanted five hundred dollars for their station. I dickered them down to three seventy-five and paid. So you already owe me three months' work."

The Boy from the Bayou Country Knew How to Collect an Alibi All Right, and Make It Stick.

A GUN DON'T SHOOT SO WET

By

LAWRENCE TREAT

Author of "To Hive and to Hold," "Over the Hills and Fire Away," etc.

JULE CAMBRE was just a kid from the delta country, the broad flat marshlands at the mouth of the Mississippi River. When he got to the city, he stepped off the oyster boat and walked straight to the nearest garage.

You'd have thought he was Irish, perhaps, with his broad square face, his square chin and clear gray eyes. But if you'd asked him what he was doing here in New Orleans, you'd have known from his first words that you were wrong.

"I come fo' mak' fillin' station."

Cajan. A descendant of that band of French Canadians who, ejected from Nova Scotia by the English some century and three-quarters ago, had migrated to the rich lands of southern Louisiana where they'd kept their language, their traditions and their simplicity.

But Jule was crazy about cars. He'd thought them and dreamt them for years, while he paddled a pirogue down the narrow bayous. And he had an instinct for machinery, from the time he'd first begun to fiddle with Battiste's little outboard motor which he always had permission to borrow.

So Jule came to the city as the first step towards his great ambition of running a filling station. It took him a morning to learn that jobs weren't easy to find. Around noon he walked into The Barrel, over on Rampart Street. He'd noticed food piled up at one end of the bar. He

walked in, put one of his precious nickels on the counter and said, "I lak fo' to eat, non?"

Then Mike did something that changed the whole course of Jule Cambré's life. He said, "Sure," and handed him one of the famous New Orleans Poor Boy sandwiches, a half loaf of the long thin French bread sliced down the middle and filled with meat.

Jule munched hungrily. Not until he had finished did he see the sign over the bar. "Poor Boy Sandwich, 10c."

As soon as he'd left, a thin jumpy man approached the bar. "What'd you do that for, Mike?"

Mike scowled. "He needs his nickels, I guess."

The jumpy man stared at the mirror. "I could use a kid like that. The cops pick me up every time they don't know who done a job. I'm gettin' sick of it."

"How'd he help?"

The jumpy man shrugged. "I dunno. Just a hunch. The cops know me too much."

AS FOR Jule, he kept looking for work and learning. He learnt that if they didn't give you a job, you could take it. You could hang around a garage and make yourself useful. "I do dis, non?" he could say. There were tips to be had sometimes, and when they found out how handy he was, they might take him on regularly.

Meantime he ate daily at The Barrel, and daily the jumpy man watched him and did nothing. Watched, like a snake coiled lustrously in the sun, eyeing a future meal.

During the next few weeks, the jumpy man picked up some bits of information. Jule Cambré got five dollars a week at the garage. He could drive like a fool. He had rented a room down on St. Philip Street. He paid fifty cents a week for it. It was in reality an old shed at the back of a courtyard, and in the warm damp weather the big cockroaches came out of the cracks and crawled daintily across the walls. Half of the cubby hole was used to store wood, but Jule had a bed in the other half, and there was a water tap available under the two-story gingerbread balcony that tourists would have called quaint.

He lived there because Felicia lived a few doors away. He hadn't spoken to her, except a casual good morning and good evening, but she was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. She usually wore a trim gray and brown checkered skirt and a tight-fitting blouse. She had exciting brown eyes and dark curly hair, and when she smiled her quick red lips moved over the whiteness of small, perfect teeth.

On the nights when somebody took her out in a shiny new car, Jule was miserable and went to bed tired. But the nights when she too sat on her stoop and spoke to him, maybe one or two words, his heart sang and he lived in a palace. And his head was busy with plans.

He'd bought a wreck down at the garage for five dollars. He'd cleaned it and polished it and overhauled the engine and taken out the squeaks. He worked at nights, mostly, and he was proud of the result. Then came the great day when he drove his own car down St. Philip Street, parked in front of her door and called.

"You tak' a ride wit me?"

She turned angrily, snapped, "Get out, you fresh little—"

THEN she recognized him and stopped in the middle of her sentence. As she moved forward into the light, there was a slouching, scuffling sound back in the darkness of the corridor.

"You lak ma new car?" he asked.

"That thing? What makes you hope it'll go?"

He straightened his shoulders. "I fix her maself. She will go sixty, sev'dy miles h'an hour, like notin'. You mak' a try?"

She laughed then, sharply and with a calculating note. "Sure, I'll make a try. You wait here a minute." And she ran inside.

When she returned, there was a man with her, a slim jumpy man whom Jule had noticed once or twice at The Barrel. She introduced him as Al.

"I met him on my way downstairs," she explained. "He's going out to the country to visit a cousin. I told him we'd give him a lift."

As Jule reached the end of the street, a police squad car, with its siren wide open, sped past them. Turning to see where it was going, he noticed that Al was curled up out of sight on the floor.

Felicia said, quickly. "He's tired. He was working hard today. That's why he has to leave town, for a rest."

Just beyond the city limits, the girl said, "This is a good place for you, Al?"

Al woke up promptly. He glanced furtively through the windows, straightened up and opened the door. "Sure, this'll do," he said. "Thanks, pal." He walked away, holding one hand in the side pocket of his coat. But Jule gave him no thought. He was with Felicia.

She smiled at him. "How about a movie? One of the nice ones on Canal Street."

JULE said, "Sure," and hoped he'd have enough money. It was expensive, taking girls out. Next time he'd know better, but you had to learn.

He saw the sign at the booth outside the theatre. "Orchestra, 41c; Balcony, 26c." He took his place in the line and tried to count his change. Felicia walked into the lobby and powdered her nose.

To the ticket seller he said, "Two, non? In de balconee." Then he took out his money. It only came to forty-nine cents and seven tax tokens."

The ticket seller said, "Fifty-two cents, please. If you don't mind, people are waiting."

He stammered, "It's h'all I have." Then he blushed crimson, scooped up his change and spilt half on the pavement. He heard laughter behind him. Felicia stood over him and said, in a sharp biting tone that

made his heart beat slow and tired, "You poor little cheapskate!" And she walked off.

He followed quickly, not even bothering to pick up his money. He caught up to her at the corner where she was waiting for the traffic light to change. A tall man, well dressed and with a neat mustache, was speaking to her.

Jule pleaded, "Feleecia, you dond go widout I 'plain—"

She turned to the tall man. "Would you mind taking me away? That man is annoying me!"

The big man glared at Jule, took the girl's arm and strode off. Jule stood there, staring and trying to understand. Traffic roared by and he heard the noise of motors and the grinding of wheels. Mechanically he put his hand in his pocket and felt his two remaining coins. A quarter and a nickel. He gulped, turned slowly and trudged to where he'd parked his car. He saw it then for the old broken-down rattletrap that it was. He kicked savagely at the tire, and scuffed a slice of leather from his shoe. Money!

The next day was Sunday. He walked down to the river and sat on the wharf, with his feet hanging over the water, watching ships, until the sun dropped low over the flats to the west. He was thinking of nothing, but it hurt anyhow.

When he came home, he saw Felicia

talking to a crowd of boys. He crossed the street and hurried past.

He didn't speak to her again until the following evening, on his way home from work. She called from her doorway, "Jule!"

He halted, standing stiff and turning his neck slowly. She looked so beautiful that it made him sad.

"Jule, I'm sorry about the other night, but I was so ashamed I could have cried."

"I'm sorry too. I like fo' os have a ver' good time."

"I guess maybe you don't know any better. I been thinking. Maybe I can fix it so you can pick up a little extra money."

"Hein?" His clear gray eyes were earnest and deep.

"Then you could take me out again, sometime, maybe." And she disappeared in the doorway.

JULE stayed there a long time. After a while he thought he heard the sound of giggling, but he wasn't sure. He felt happy when he went on. There were more roaches than usual, but he didn't mind. He began planning what he'd do with extra money. He'd move out of here, upstairs, where he'd have a mirror and a water tap and no lumber piled next to his bed.

One evening towards the end of the week a slender, quick-moving man stepped out of an alley. "Hello," he said.

It was Al. Jule saw his face clearly, and he didn't like it. A sharp, nervous face, the forehead too high and the mouth too small, and a twitch to the nose.

Jule said, "Hello." Then a second man slunk out of the passageway. He was short and stocky, with a broad face and hardly any nose at all. Al said, "This is Jingo. Meet Jule, Jingo. A regular guy, all right. Eh, pal?"

Jule Cambré didn't like Jingo any more than he liked Al. He'd seen men like this at The Barrel and instinctively he'd avoided talking to them. Not that he knew what they were or that he was afraid of them. They just weren't his kind and wouldn't mix. He knew it.

Al said, from the corner of his mouth and with hardly a movement of his lips, as if his words were a secret, "How'd you like a little extra dough, pal?"

"I like fo' mak' some money, sure hones'," declared Jule.

"Sure, honest. You don't think we'd proposition you any other way, do you?" Al looked belligerent. "So don't make any cracks like that."

"I like fo' mak' some money, sure hones'," repeated Jule, interested only in making his meaning clear.

"All right, smart guy. Me and Jingo need somebody to drive us one of these nights. We heard you can handle a bus like nobody's business. Five bucks in it, see?"

"W'at I do, hein?"

"I just finished tellin' you, didn't I? You drive a car for us, a couple of hours."

"You dond drive?"

"Sure, but not like you. You see, this is how it is. A friend is lending us his car. It's brand new, and we wouldn't like to scratch it up. We'd feel responsible. And besides, we wouldn't want to leave it out in the street alone, so we thought we'd get a guy to drive us. 'Course, if you don't want the dough, that's your business."

"I jus' drive fo' wan evening, an' I mak' five dollar,"

"Sure, that's it. You drive us around one evening and you get five bucks. All there is to it, ain't it, Jingo?"

Jingo nodded. "Sure. Simple as that. We'll flag you on your way home, soon as we're ready."

JULE had vague misgivings, but there was nothing wrong about driving a car and he could skate figure-eights in anything that had wheels. He didn't have to like Al or Jingo. All he had to do was drive and collect five dollars. And be-

sides, Felicia wouldn't have suggested it if it hadn't been all right. He went to sleep thinking of her.

It was foggy the following Thursday evening. A mist crept up from the Gulf and blanketed New Orleans in a heavy opaque wetness. Al and Jingo seemed to emerge from nowhere and block his path. "Hello," said Al. He had one hand in his pocket, like the night Jule had first seen him. Even in the dark and the fog, it was obvious that he was nervous, tense, ready to jump a mile if you poked him in the back, for instance. Jule was tempted to try; he didn't.

He walked between Al and Jingo. Jule said, "I like fo' know w're we go tonight." Al snapped, "Shut up, sap!" so savagely that Jule was half inclined to give up the night's job.

They trudged silently through the fog, their feet making harsh dead clumps on the concrete. They headed for one of the residential districts and passed almost nobody. On one of the swell streets that Jule had never seen, stood a big white house with fluted columns supporting the porch. A black sedan was parked at the curb.

Jingo said, "There she is, waitin'."

Jule's heart filled with pride. To drive a car like this, all over town—that was something! As they approached it, he started for the door, but Al yanked at his arm. "Did I tell you to get in yet?" Jule frowned. They walked past the car without stopping, reached the corner and turned. Al said, "Looks okay," and Jingo said, "Yeah, looks okay." Then they headed for the car.

Al was more nervous than ever, and he smelled. Not of liquor and not of dirt, but of—Jule couldn't think of a word. Unhealthy, maybe. Like a drug store.

He bent towards Jule. "When you start her, don't make any more noise than you have to, see? And here's the keys."

"Hope they work," muttered Jingo, almost to himself.

Al turned on him fiercely. "They'll work," he growled. "Hey, you—what's the matter?"

Jule had stopped. "You sure it's h'all right? Why you say fo' mak' no noise?"

"His mother wouldn't like it if she knew he was lending us his new car. Come on, pal—you got the keys. Want to lose your five bucks?"

Jule didn't. He climbed into the driver's seat, turned the ignition key and pulled out the starter. The engine purred smoothly, with a powerful intake of air. He slipped the lever into gear and moved down the street as quietly as a dugout gliding along a bayou. Peculiar that he could think of swamps and bayous now.

AL GAVE directions, clipping his words and slapping them out in a hoarse, nasal voice. "To the left. Down as far as Napoleon. Then turn out to Claiborne. You know Claiborne, don't you? I want to stop at the Double-X gas station."

"She's full now," said Jule.

"Who the hell asked you? I want to see a guy there. You drivin' or arguin'?"

Jule leaned back and tried to give himself to the pleasure of driving, but he wasn't enjoying it. There was something wrong, and it bothered him.

A car was parked at one of the pumps of the Double-X filling station. Al snapped, "Keep going—don't turn, sap!"

Jule swung back into the down lane.

"Turn at the next corner and park." Jule obeyed. He didn't feel right. Something of Al's tension communicated itself to him.

His stomach felt jumpy and he wished he'd never come with the pair. He thought of getting out now. Then he thought of Felicia hearing about it. That he'd got scared? Of what? Of nothing.

The other car pulled away from the Double-X and Al snapped, "Let's go! Park in front of the office and keep your

motor running. I'll be a minute, see? And when I tell you to go, *go!*"

Jule slid into the highway, loafed a block and rolled into the gasoline station. The office was at his right. A service man came from the left and said, "Fill 'er up?" Then he halted suddenly and said, "Gee!" He was a couple of yards from Jule.

The rear doors of the sedan punched open simultaneously. Jingo got out on the left and Al on the right. Jingo cried hoarsely, "Stick 'em up, you!"

Jule turned. Jingo had a gun in his hand and was pointing it at the service man. Jule tried to swallow. He turned his head in the other direction. Al was in the office. He had a gun in his hand, too, and he had the cash drawer open and was scooping up paper currency. A couple of the bills slipped out of his fingers. His head jerked like a bird's. He stooped slowly to pick up the money he'd dropped. The man standing against the wall with his arms raised made a dive. Al straightened. Flame leapt twice from his muzzle and the roar of shots came thundering from the little office.

Jule reached for the door and started to open it to jump out on the left. The service station helper was still standing with his hands up. He had pleasant ruddy features and blue eyes that were more angry than scared.

Jingo fired once and the man's hands dropped slowly to his stomach. He fought for seconds to keep his balance. Then he gave it up and flopped.

Jule was still watching him. The car doors had slammed again, but Jule was looking at the back of the fallen man's head and wondering what he'd done and what the blue eyes thought about it.

The muzzle of Al's gun felt cold on Jule's cheek. "Get going, fast! Step on it, if you don't want to get paid off too!"

Jule didn't have to think. If he objected he'd be shot. But it wasn't until an hour later that he even formulated the thought. He acted automatically now, starting in second, rolling down to the avenue and roaring forward. He was making forty before he shifted.

He fled with the instinct of an animal escaping in the swamps. But the bayous were streets and instead of cleaving water he was cleaving the fog, watching like a hawk at the corners and traveling in zigzags, a winding trail that avoided the through streets and took the narrow ones. Lights that reflected in the mirror dropped away after the first couple of turns and didn't reappear.

Al kept saying, "Boy, can he drive—boy, can he drive—boy, can he drive!"

When there was no danger from the chase, Jingo spoke for the first time. "You shouldn't have done it, Al."

"Could I help it? He dives for the corner, behind the desk, and how do I know if he's got a gun there?"

"I gave it to the other guy. If you get one of 'em you got to get all of 'em. He seen me and he seen the kid."

"I croaked my guy all right. Right here." Al thumped his chest.

"I got mine in the stomach. Say, let's get away from this bus. Maybe they reported her."

Al barked, "Let us out, sap!"

Jule stopped, white-faced. Al waved a gun at him. "You'll keep your trap shut, see? You drove the car and if they get us they get you. Take it somewhere and ditch it. The car's hot."

Jule didn't answer. He saw the money clutched in Al's hand. "Ma five dollar?"

Al burst out laughing. "You're all right, pal. You're all right. Only keep your trap shut." He handed Jule a ten dollar bill. "Keep the change, sweetheart." Then he pocketed his gun and began wiping the back of the car and the door handles with a handkerchief.

NEXT morning Jule bought a newspaper. "One killed, one wounded in filling station holdup. Stolen car aban-

doned by killers. Condition of wounded man critical."

Jule kept thinking of the man with the blue eyes, fighting for his life in a bed at Charity Hospital. His name, according to the paper, was Greene, and he'd been married two months. Greene hadn't done anything except happen to be there. He'd said, "Fill 'er up?" then, "Gee!" and then he'd been shot. And if Jule told

about it, he'd be held as accountable as Al and Jingo. Unless Al and Jingo admitted that Jule hadn't known about the holdup ahead of time, and had driven away only under threat of death. But they weren't likely to admit that.

Jule had a ten dollar bill in his pocket and he didn't know where to find Al and Jingo. Maybe at Mike's. But if Jule took the morning off and went down to Mike's, maybe the police would suspect. He wondered whether his face looked any different. He hadn't seen a mirror.

His fingers felt clumsy in the garage and he kept forgetting things. He was tuning up a motor, but his trembling hands couldn't calibrate the points. Twenty minutes after he'd started, the timing still wasn't right.

He wiped his hands and walked toward the washroom in the back of the garage. Glancing casually towards the entrance, he stiffened and felt cold sweat fill his pores. Two policemen were talking to Ed. A moment later Ed called back, "Hay, Jule! Come here a minute."

Jule kept going. Through the back door to a wooden fence. Over the fence. Across an empty lot. Over another fence. Down a side street. Over to the avenue. The length of the avenue. Up the incline of the levee. To the docks. Down under the docks, where the muddy Mississippi lapped against the piles supporting the wharfs and where there was nothing but mud and garbage and echoes. And, at night, rats.

He stayed there until darkness fell and the muddy waters gleamed a restless murky black. Then he climbed up to the wharfs and made his way cautiously to St. Philip Street.

He did not risk going to his room via the courtyard. Instead, he approached from the rear, climbed the wall bounding one side of the area and looked over the top. In the dim reflected light from an upper story window he saw a man slouched against one of the wooden uprights of the balcony. Noiselessly, Jule dropped back to the ground.

He did not wonder how the police had traced him. Enough that they were looking for him and would arrest him on sight. All the habits and training of his boyhood in the swamps were aroused, the ability to move quietly, to stalk his prey and to exist in the open, eating little and making no other demands.

He circled the block, slunk into Felicia's house and hid under the stairway. He waited there patiently, poking out his head at each entrant. It was midnight before Felicia returned.

She didn't see him lurking in the shadows until he rose like a wisp of smoke and touched her arm. She halted abruptly, but made no outcry. "You!" she breathed. "They're looking for you—the police."

"Dond I know eet!" he answered.

"It's not safe for you. You have to beat it, understand? Get out of the state and stay out."

She had no apologies, no regrets that she had led him into the situation.

"I mus' find Al an' his frien'." he said. "Dat's h'all."

"You can't—you'd only endanger him."

"I'm in danger, too, hein?"

"You damn fool!" she shot out, and stopped herself.

"I mus' find Al," he repeated. "Me, I have somedings fo' him."

"What?"

"Dat is fo' him and me, non?"

"He's hiding—the police are after him, I tell you, you have to get away from here. If it's money you want—"

"I have money," he said quietly. "Good night."

And he disappeared into the dim, yellowish street.

He knew that St. Philip Street was unsafe for him in the daylight. Even if nobody was watching his room, everybody knew the police wanted him and anybody might report him. Felicia had failed, and there was no one he could trust. And so he waited until nightfall, each evening, before taking his post at the corner and watching the passers-by who emerged from the block. He watched for three nights, and on the fourth he saw Felicia, alone.

He did not speak to her this time. Instead, he waited till she had passed. Then he crossed the street and followed at a safe distance.

He was certain, as certain as if she herself had told him, that she was bound for Al's hideout. Jule merely followed, noted the house she entered and watched for a light to appear on the second floor. He sat down on a stoop and sighed.

It was late when she left. He entered the house as soon as she was out of sight, mounted to the second floor and knocked.

Al's voice cracked out, sharp and jumpy. "Who's there?"

"Me, Jule."

The door opened a crack. He saw the revolver before he saw Al, pale and unhealthy.

Al opened the door and pulled Jule in. "Well, what do you want? I told you to stay away, didn't I? I got no more money for you."

"I dond need money." Jule's hands could feel the familiar shape of the creased ten dollar bill that he hadn't spent, and didn't intend to spend.

"Then what in hell are you hanging around town for? And how'd you get here, anyhow?"

"De man dat Jingo shot—he's still h'alive, non?"

Al snorted. "Sure he's alive, and that's the whole damned trouble. He saw you and he saw me and he saw Jingo, so what are we going to do? We got to wait until he gets out of the hospital, and then—" Al stepped forward and grabbed Jule by the lapels. "Listen, when he gets out he's gonna have an accident, see? He's gonna get run over by some hit and run guy, and you know who's gonna be in that car? You are, pal!"

JULE shook his head. "Me, I never knew we was going fo' rob and kill. Maybe, by an' by, I tell dat to de police."

Al laughed. "Try it! Me and Jingo won't let you get away with a story like that, see? It'll be two against one. And then Felicia'll come along and back us up. Just go ahead and try it. I seen you at Mike's plenty, too—think anybody'll believe a guy when he's been hangin' out at Mike's? You stick around, fella, till we're ready for that hit and run business. There's gonna be real dough in that, too. No piker stuff. And then they won't be able to pin nothin' on any of us. No witnesses, see? They got nothin' on us now. They just want to check up, only I don't want 'em to check while this Greene guy is able to identify."

Jule saw then the overwhelming weight of the evidence that could be brought against him. A few days ago he'd have risked it, asserted his innocence and expected to be believed merely because he told the truth. But the boy from the swamp country had gone, and in his place stood a mature man, crafty, knowing something of the ways of the world and determined to take no chances. He was

as honest as the old Jule Cambré, but from now on he was nobody's fool.

He said, "You have me good. I wait, maybe, until Greene comes out of de hospital, an' den I see. I come around sometimes an' talk, an'way, hein?"

"Sure, come around and keep us company. I'm gettin' sick of Jingo, and he's gettin' pretty sick of me. That's why he went out tonight. But there's nobody else except Felicia, and she's got to be careful. Somebody might follow her."

Jule left shortly afterwards. He lived on the waterfront these days, sleeping under the piers, eating mostly garbage that was thrown overboard from the ships. The big passenger boats that went to Mexico discarded food that was only half eaten, and the current washed part of it under the wharfs. So he slept, ate what the gulls didn't grab, and brooded. And by and by he returned to the rooming house where Al and Jingo were living.

They were both home this time. Al opened the door cautiously as he had before, and when Jule slipped in, two guns were trained on him. Al's and Jingo's. They dropped their weapons and replaced them in their pockets as soon as Jule was inside and the door had closed behind him.

"He come up to keep us company," said Al. "That right, pal?"

"I come 'cause I ged sick off hiding h'all de time."

Al's lips twisted. "Oh, you do, do you? And what are you gonna do about it?"

"I t'ink maybe I go down de river, where I come from, and see de bayous again, and I t'ink maybe you like to go too, for a little change."

"That's a damn good idea!" said Jingo. "We can go huntin', huh? We take ourselves a vacation, Al, and nobody knows us down there and the kid can guide us."

"Sure," said Jule. "I go alone, maybe, bot I have no car an' no gun an' no money. We go h'all t'ree on de vacation."

Al stared thoughtfully. Then his face lit up and he clapped Jule on the shoulder. "Sure, pal. There's lots of cars just waitin' to take us, and I got that old shotgun that I never bothered to saw down. Gee, do I need a change!"

Thus it happened that the three of them took the river road south, through the Louisiana orange country, with the orange groves on their left and the broad embankment of the levee on their right. Jule hadn't been down here for months, and the sight and smell of the district excited him. The broad flat stretches of saw grass, the little clumps of cypress and the clean clusters of houses on stilts were familiar, but he wasn't ready to come back here. Not yet. Not even on an open visit.

He found Battiste's little outboard near the rickety log jetty where it had always been. The motor could be hinged up, once they were in the shallows, but it would take them down broader channels in much less time than if they had it to row or paddle.

Jule steered the little craft as if he knew precisely where he was going. "I tak' you where you fin' plenty duck," he announced. Heah, she is rotin'."

"You sure you can find your way back?" demanded Al.

Jule laughed. "I am raise heah. I am part off it." His eyes stared thoughtfully at the bulge in Al's pocket where he kept the .38 revolver. Jingo had an automatic on his hip, and besides the pistols, the men had a pair of shotguns.

After an hour of twisting and winding through narrow curving waterways that crossed open patches regularly, Jule lifted the light motor and began to pole. "We ged dare soon now," he said. You look dare—see dat t'ing dat look like a piece off wood? Alligator."

Al laughed nervously. Jingo said, "Let's shoot it." Jule merely remarked, "Wit a shotgun?" and Jingo dropped the idea.

Toward noon Jule found a hard little island of shells in the midst of the impenetrable waste of swampland. He nosed

the boat softly onto land and said, "We come heah. You be careful, non?"

"Careful of what?" demanded Al.

"Cottonmouth. She's de snake dat dond run away. Water moccasin bite is ver' ver' bad. So you be careful."

Al didn't get out of the boat. "I thought we was comin' down for the fun, pal. Snakes and alligators—where the hell's the fun in that?"

"Dey are h'all over. You dond t'ink I ax dem fo' go away just fo' today, hein?"

Al didn't answer. He rolled up his sleeve, took a hypodermic from his pocket and said, "Guess I'll have a shot." Jule knew then why Al always had that peculiar, unhealthy smell.

Jingo stood up in the boat and then sat down. "I don't like this place much. Let's go back."

"Yeah." Al put the empty hypodermic back in his pocket. "We'll ride around a little and then go back. If this is your beautiful country, pal, you can have it."

"You stay heah, den," said Jule. "Me, I'll hund." And he reached for the shotgun.

Al slapped his arm. "Keep your mitts offa that. I don't trust you, see?"

Jule began to feel excited, but he didn't show it. "Dat's funny, 'cause I dond trus' you, too."

"That makes us even, then, so come on and take us back."

"I tak' you back, but you do somet'in' fo' me firs'." Jule took a couple of sheets of paper and a pencil from his pocket. "You write out what happened, and den you both sign fo' me."

"Whadda you mean, sap?"

"You write oud what happened, de night we go fo' de filling station. You tell everytin', 'cep' maybe about Felicia. If you dond remember, I tell you what, 'cause I remember everytin'. Even de words you say."

Al whipped the revolver out of his pocket. "Take us back, or you'll get a couple of slugs in you."

"Den you never get back at h'all. You t'ink off dat?"

"So that's how it is!" snapped Al.

Jule said, "Yes, dat's how she is. Jus' how."

Then Jingo leaned forward and whispered something in Al's ear. Jule caught

the words *gun,* and *later,* but even if he hadn't, he could have guessed what the pair had in mind. Write out the paper, and as soon as they were in the main channels where they could make their own way back to the car, they wouldn't need Jule any more and they could recover the paper. Or maybe they'd shoot him just to be completely safe.

Jule said, "Well?" and Al said, "Okay, pal. I'll write it out."

"You pud in everytin', right from de beginning. I tell you whad fo' pud in."

Al wrote slowly. The promise that the evening's business would be completely honest, the assurance that the car would be legitimately borrowed, the statement that Jule had taken no part in the robbery, that he had driven them away only under threat of death and that he had received ten dollars for his pains. No more and no less.

WHEN they had both signed, Jule took the paper, read it and folded it. He put it in his pocket next to the ten dollar bill which he had received as his part for the night's work. Then he shoved the boat off the finger of land, dug his pole against the muddy bottom and started the journey home.

Maybe it was an accident. Maybe Jule

didn't see it under the bow of the little rowboat. There was no way of telling. All Al and Jingo were aware of was that the bow slid over a half-submerged log, tilted dangerously and then Jule, trying to right it, balanced the long way. The boat poised with the slow inevitable gunwale, pushed with the slow inevitable pull of gravity, and then dumped.

The water was only a couple of feet deep. They flopped in the mud and wet, staggered to their feet and began cursing Jule. He was full of apologies. He helped Jingo fish his automatic and the two shotguns out of the water, he dragged the boat into the soft squishy mud, turned it over and emptied it of water. Except for a wetting, they were no worse off. The wetting, and the damage to their guns.

Jule drawled, "I dond see dat log. She is de same color as de water. Look, you try an' fin' her now."

Al and Jingo didn't argue. They were sore, but they were sore chiefly because their guns were wet, and there was no sense letting *that* information percolate through the kid's head. So they took it grumbling and with suspicion in their eyes, and as soon as the boat was in water deep enough to use the motor again, they held a conference screened by the sound of the exhaust.

It was growing darker. Al examined his soaked gun furtively and kept whispering. Jule had that paper and so Jule mustn't reach New Orleans alive. But shooting isn't the only way to kill a man and they were two against one. While they were on the water they could play along. Later—

The conference ended shortly before night fell. Al said once, out of the pitch black, "You know your way, pal?" And Jule answered, "Sure, I come t'rough heah a hundred time when she is darker dan now."

"It don't look like the same way to me."

"I mak a short-cud," replied Jule stolidly.

He was leaning back in the stern, wearily, with the tiller caught in the crook of his armpit and his hand extended back as if to trail in the water. Only it wasn't touching the water.

The darkness hid the expression of his face, hid the clenched jaw, the taut cheek muscles, the staring eyeballs and the grimace of pain. Pain because the exhaust gases and the metal of the engine were burning hot and the skin was slowly pealing off the back of his hand. Pain because the sharp spirals of the half-inch bit were cutting into his working fingers.

He'd bought the bit yesterday, when he'd conceived of his plan and worked it out carefully, in the infinity of detail. He'd kept it in his pocket all day, waiting for the cover of darkness. And now, he pressed it against the hard metal of the gas tank, pressed and turned, pressed and turned. When the steel point had spiked through and the spiral knife had widened the hole, he withdrew the bit and stoppered the hole with his thumb. But nobody except Jule heard the light splash as the tool dropped into the water.

HE WAS perspiring freely, despite the gathering chill of the swamp night. A thin curling mist rose like steam in the faint light of the stars.

Al began grumbling. "Colder than an ice-box. This is a hell of a vacation you give us, pal. You know your way all right?"

"Sure t'ing."

"You better be sure. For two cents I'd—" he stopped short as Jingo pulled at his arm. "Aw, nerts," he finished. "After the trick he pulled, we ought to slam him one just for luck."

When Al struck a match, Jule saw he was holding his gun in one hand. Holding it club-like, by the barrel.

Jule began to feel scary. If they guessed his trick— If they took away his precious paper— If Alcide Batmanse weren't home— If—

The outboard swung sharply into the dark straight channel of a canal. Jule took his thumb from the hole in the gas tank and slipped his palm inside his shirt. The warmth of his own body felt good on the mutilated flesh of his hand.

Al turned suddenly. "Them houses! Listen, we didn't come out this way. There's houses on the bank down there, and boats."

The motor began to splutter, then coughed feebly and died.

"Smatter now?" snapped Al.

Jule made a pretense of examining the little engine. "I t'ink we got fo get mo' gas."

"I tink you'll row." Al's voice dripped sarcasm and suspicion, as if he sensed that something more than the lack of gas was wrong. "You'll row, you lousy little punk! I don't like these Cajans round here. They maybe pals to you, but they're a pain in the neck to me. Come on, you—row!"

Jule rose obediently. The houses were plenty dark, but maybe Alcide was back in the kitchen, and a lantern doesn't gleam brightly like an electric bulb. He picked up one of the oars and stood there, trying to make up his mind. One sudden slap with the long blade. And he could keep the pair of them at oar's length, while he yelled for help. It was now or never.

Al acted so swiftly that Jule didn't realize what was happening until he felt the hand ram out and shove him back in the boat.

He fell heavily; the impact jarred his spine and sent a stab of weakness down to his toes.

He shook his head clear and stood up. The boat was drifting, and he could see no lights on the shore. He began to pray, silently and with fervor. Then he leaned down and folded up the outboard engine so that it no longer dragged in the water.

"I feel bad, me," he said. "When I fall, I hit maself."

"Stop the belly-achin' and row," growled Jingo.

Then Jule did it. In a high piercing voice. In Cajan. He yelled.

"Eh la bas—Alcide! It's Jule, down from the city, wit' two thieves. Help!"

For a moment Al and Jingo were taken by surprise and did nothing. Then, realizing what Jule had done and what had happened, they laughed.

They laughed because there was no answer from shore. They laughed, and came slowly toward Jule, their guns clenched and ready to smash down, their eyes gleaming viciously.

IT DAWNED on Jule that he'd made his big play, done the thing on which he'd based all his plans and all his hopes. That he'd secured the paper which cleared him, that he had Al and Jingo in a boat without gas alongside the house of his old friend Sheriff Alcide Batmanse. And that nevertheless he'd failed. Because Alcide wasn't home.

Jule glanced at his two enemies. To leap in the water would have been all right for an expert swimmer, but Jule could merely paddle around, keep himself afloat for a few minutes while they maneuvered the boat into a position where they could bash out his brains. And besides, even if he managed to escape, he'd still be a fugitive with nothing to clear him except a piece of paper which he couldn't even prove wasn't a forgery.

He acted purely in defense. He scooped up the pillow from the stern seat and whipped it up to protect his head. Al's gun swiped savagely and thudded into the thick wadding of the cushion. At the same moment Jule let out a cry like an animal, and charged. Body low, he caught Al in the hip. Al, still off balance from the blow, staggered back, flailed his arms and went screaming into the water. Screaming, "I can't—swim!" And then his words were a blubber and he was threshing wildly in the dark waters of the canal.

But Jule didn't hear that. He heard instead the mashing echo of Jingo's gun

crashing on his own ribs. Then he had his fingers on Jingo's throat and he was squeezing the fattish neck and feeling his fingers digging in. Digging and constricting.

Jingo writhed like a fish out of water. His gun pummeled, hard bruising blows on Jule's flesh, and his free hand sought to tear apart Jule's fingers that clamped his windpipe.

Jule clung for his life, and kept kicking and thrusting and butting, with his feet and his knees and his head. Twice Jingo raised himself and almost tore loose, and twice Jule used his head like a hammer and banged Jingo's skull hard against the thwarts. And then suddenly Jingo was still, and his lolling tongue was warm and moist against Jule's cheek.

Jule stood up then, feeble and panting, and saw Al hauling himself into the boat. Jule's chest felt as if it were caving in. It hurt as he stooped and felt for one of the guns that had been dropped, it hurt as he encountered the long barrel of the shotgun and bent sideways to pick it up. But when Al drew himself to his knees and lunged, Jule stopped hurting. Because it was good to swing the long weight of the shotgun and feel it shudder as it collided squarely with the top of Al Ganarsi's skull.

It was about four a.m. when the sedan drew up in front of New Orleans Police Headquarters and Sheriff Alcide Batmanse shouted out, "Mah frien' the Capitaine Clancy—where he is? Tell him fo' I'm heah, and wid' me I have two beeg outlaws and wan hero. Clancy—where he is, queeck, hein?"

AND not much later Jule was handing a ten dollar bill and a crumpled sheet of penciled paper to the same Clancy and explaining what they meant. And Clancy was having trouble understanding, because Sheriff Alcide was also explaining other things at the same time, how he had come home late and found Jule was sitting by lantern light and glaring at two bound figures who were covered with Alcide's shotgun. And Alcide was laughing and saying the gun wasn't even loaded, and Jule was laughing and saying a gun—another gun—don't shoot so wet and that was why he'd dumped the pirogue in the bayou, and that he'd had to fight because Alcide wasn't home.

And slowly, in all the confusion, Clancy discovered that he had the two men guilty of the Double-X robbery and murder, with proof, and that Alcide and the boy Jule were responsible for it.

Clancy said, "Is it the two of you, then, that'll be splitting the reward money?" And Alcide pointed to Jule and yelled, "Heem! Heem, all by heemself!" And suddenly Jule, despite a bandaged hand and a couple of cracked ribs, realized what was occurring and became extremely practical, as a good Cajan should.

"How much de reward?" he demanded eagerly. "Enough, maybe, fo' mak' a fillin' station?"

WYATT'S CHINESE PUZZLE

By CAPTAIN FREDERICK MOORE

Author of "Pearls at Quarter Moon," "Guns for China," etc.

WYATT and Hesh stopped whispering as I arrived in the bar for breakfast. Wyatt owned the bamboo hotel on Singing Sands Island. A native of Cape Cod, his forty years in the tropics and his trading with wild natives had sharpened his natural shrewdness. As he turned to his zinc bar to avoid my glance his thin face suggested to me a man who was plotting to smother his grandmother for her earrings.

I sat at a table and faced Hesh. He suggested a gardener who had just taken a job as hangman and was not proud of the profession. He bent his head and sucked coffee from a saucer to avoid my gaze.

"Morning, Hesh."

The little cockney seemed startled. He pretended to be unaware of my arrival. His pale blue eyes wavered under my glance and a tremor passed over his thin sunburned face. He was a runaway sailor who caught turtles on shares for Wyatt.

"Good morning, sir. Nice morning, what?" He put the saucer to his lips again and sucked at the coffee with sounds that suggested a grampus coming out of breakers for a breath of air.

It was a nice morning. Birds twittered in the onion garden back of the hotel. They were in the palm grove at times, between hotel and the beach. The sun glinted on the blue water of the bay. There was a gentle breeze shaking the high mops of the palm tops.

I turned to Wyatt, who had gone to ground behind his bar. "How are you, Wyatt?" I demanded.

The skinny Cape Codder's face shook with a nervous spasm. "Me? Oh, I'm fair to middlin', thanks."

"Is your liver any better?"

"I guess that my liver'll do me for a spell yet. Ayah, I'm all right." Wyatt turned his back on me to polish the glasses on the shelf behind the bar.

I emptied the coffee pot into a cup.

At the Bamboo Hotel on Singing Sands Island, It Was "Customers at Their Own Risk."

There was a game on—and it had been going on for a week or more. That game was a mystery. It had something to do with Ching. Wyatt and Hesh were covertly watching the Chinese cook when he brought our meals from the cook shack. And I had sized Ching up as one slick Chink who would out-think both Wyatt and Hesh in any underhanded game.

As I drank my coffee some words which I had overheard as I came down the stairs returned to my mind. Hesh had said cautiously, "I tell you I seen 'im pinch it, so you watch 'im the next time 'e goes out the door." Then both Wyatt and Hesh clammed up on me.

Ching came in from the cookhouse. He brought a tray of hot biscuits and a tin of butter. His fat yellow face, spattered with a Chinese smile and his fun-lit little black eyes, with the Gulf Stream blue of his blouse, filled me with cheer.

"Ah, Ching! Good morning; Hot bis-uits, eh? Thank you!" I put it on a bit thick, and saw Wyatt wince at my effusiveness.

Ching put the tray before me, pulled his hands into the blouse sleeves, bowed, and shook hands with himself politely. "Goo' mo'nin', sar! Nice-ee piece-ee biskit, you like him, you catch him. Him nice fo' you."

Hesh snorted into a saucer of coffee. Wyatt slammed a bottle of square trade gin on a shelf. Ching was too popular with me to suit them. Ching turned and made for the doorway. The empty coffee pot was in his left hand. He walked with a peculiar lurching gait which made me wonder if he had been on a Chink bender with Wyatt's gin.

I LOOKED at Wyatt. He was suddenly on the alert. He leaned forward over the bar and watched the retreating Chink with eyes that all but bored into the cook's back.

At the doorway, Ching lurched to the right. He threw out a hand to the right as if to correct his balance as he passed the shelving near the open door. The shelves on the back wall were loaded with odds and ends and various trade goods that Wyatt carried in stock to increase his hotel profits. Ching straightened up and went out into the onion garden to the cookhouse to get me a pair of eggs from his own chickens.

Wyatt swung to Hesh. "What'd he git?"

"Could I see through 'im?" demanded Hesh irritably. "You should ha' seen wot 'e snagged, not me. It was 'is right 'and that done the job, and that's your side of 'im, Wyatt."

"He was too quick for me—it was that loose sleeve of his'n that turned the trick."

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Ching drunk?"

Wyatt shook his head in disgust. His leathery face twisted. He walked to the shelves at the far end of the bar, taking care not to be observed through the open back kajang which was toward the cookhouse. "To keep up with the heathen you got to have a yellow brain," he said, as he squinted along the top of a loaded shelf.

There were packages of gramophone needles which were bought by various schooners in those waters—traders, copra-carriers, pearlers and trepang boats.

"Anythink missin'?" asked Hesh.

"Hell's bells!" exclaimed Wyatt, as his fingers counted along a vacant space on the upper row of packages. "Gramophone needles, that's what he's stealin'! Five—six—seven packages!"

Hesh hastened to Wyatt's side. "Wot the blinkin' 'ell does 'e want needles for? 'E ain't got no grammyphone to play."

"No, he ain't," agreed Wyatt. "But he's got away with a dozen or so packages of needles in the last month. And what's he doing with needles in job lots?"

"Nothink, unless 'e picks 'is blinkin' teeth with 'em."

"Hell, Wyatt, you've got enough gramophone needles there to supply all the schooners between here and New Guinea for the next twenty years."

"They don't sell wuth a damn," said Wyatt, still peering at the shelf and counting packages.

"How'd you ever load up with such a stock? You ought to have more sense."

Hesh went back to his table, Wyatt went behind the bar, and squinted out through the kajang to make sure that Ching was not coming.

"Radio sets, them's what licked me," said Wyatt. "Of course, most natives are scared as hell of radio. They can't see any machinery go around, so they stick to grams, and I sell some needles now and then. It ain't the wuth of the needles that Ching's pinchin'. They cost me six cents wholesale a package. What beats me is what'n hell he does with 'em. It don't make no more sense than a doodle bug in an onion."

"Then lock up the needles and stop worrying."

Wyatt shook his head. "I won't lock 'em up. I'll take out of his pay what he steals. So he can steal 'em all. I got to learn what that Chink's up to. I learn a lot from Chinks."

"You won't learn nothink this time," said Hesh. "Ching'll 'op a schooner one of these days with a trunk full of your needles, so—" But Hesh checked his words. Ching was coming with my eggs.

And when Ching went out with the empty tray he got another package of needles. Wyatt swore, revealing an amazing vocabulary. Hesh snickered into his coffee. At tiffin-time, Ching gathered covertly another package, but at supper, which we had on the front veranda to give him a chance to add several packages to his collection, Ching did not bother to take any needles. We were thoroughly mystified.

THE next morning Wyatt looked worn out. "I ain't slept," he explained. "Been figgerin' on them needles. What'd Ching stop for, unless to puzzle me up. Sometimes I wish I was born with Chink blood into me."

"Wot makes 'im so modest?" demanded Hesh. "Been me, I'd ha' pinched the lot at supper and made a job of work of it."

"Them needles!" said Wyatt. "What does he do with 'em?"

"Leave it to Chinks to show a profit," I said.

Ching brought breakfast but stole no needles on his way out.

"Damn the Chinks!" exploded Wyatt. "They never do what you expect—or what you don't. But I'll bet he's got a schooner comin' in soon that'll take what he stole at a price half what I ask."

But we had the answer to the mystery before any schooner came. Hesh and I went out in a canoe that evening and paddled around in the moonlight for an hour. We landed a little above the hotel. As we walked up the slope at the far edge of the palms we passed a grove of pawpaw trees and a thicket of bamboos. Close to the heavy shadows of the trees while we were in dazzling moonlight I heard a sound that terrorized me.

Pun-n-g!

"Blowgun!" I yelled at Hesh. "Get out of here—quick!" Then I raced for the hotel veranda. Hesh was at my heels as I went up the steps.

Wyatt was in the darkness under the low eaves of thatch. "What'n time be

you two up to?" he cried. "See a ghost?"

"Headhunters!" I gasped.

"My word!" cried Hesh. "He was that close that I felt his breath when he blowed that arrer at us."

"Aw, hell! Don't you talk to me about gittin' shot at by headhunters around here. This island's safe, and don't you give my property a bad name."

I dropped into a chair. "The hillmen are getting in close. Bad name or not, there are headhunters in your front yard. We were fired on by a native using a *sumpitan*—and I was on this island long before you showed up here. Don't try to kid me, Wyatt."

"Aw, that was a hill boy practisin'. He couldn't hit you in the dark, anyway. Mebbe come down to the beach to catch crabs and took a shot at you two so's he'd keep his hand in."

"We were in the moonlight, I tell you, and it's no fun to be—" I broke off and grabbed at my right shoulder. Something under my coat had bitten me.

"What's wrong?" asked Wyatt.

I slapped hard to kill the biter—and it bit harder. I tore off my coat in frantic haste, then my shirt. Insect bites are quickly fatal at times on Singing Sands Island.

Running a hand over my right shoulder, I yelled, "Get me a flashlight, Hesh!"

The cockney ran for a flash and brought it with a bottle of liniment. He looked at my shoulder. "It ain't no blinkin' bite," said Hesh. "A laundry left a pin in your shirt."

Wyatt burst into laughter. "Dude laundry, that's what, not headhunter arrers. That hill boy missed, but he didn't lose nothin'.

"They don't want heads that ain't got nothin' into 'em, so you're safe, even if we be near headhunters."

Hesh applied liniment. I picked up my shirt. No pin. I examined my coat. Then I had the shivers. "An arrow!" I yelled. "See that, Wyatt? A poisoned arrow hit me. I'll be dead in twenty minutes!"

I pointed to a tiny cylinder of wood pith. The pith fits the bore of the blowgun, acts as a cork at the rear end of the arrow point, and under pressure of air drives the arrow to the target. A thorn point with poison is always on the forward end of the pith cork.

BUT I saw no thorn point as I pulled the pith from the coat. What caught my sight was the glint of bright steel under the beam of light from Hesh's hand.

"Gramophone needle!" I yelped.

Wyatt bounded to his feet. "Grammyphone needle! Tradin' 'em to the natives for spear points! Gittin' rich with my needles and shuttin' me out of the profits. So that's the yeller hellion's game, while—"

"Get me a drink!" I bawled. "I'm shot with a poisoned arrow — and they're deadly. Damn you and your profits!"

"Strike me blind!" gasped Hesh. "Gold nuggets, that's wot 'e gits for needles, while I'm sloshin' around with crimson turtles tryin' to keep wrinkles from under my belt! There ain't no justice in—"

"Brandy! Gin! Load me with liquor —that's my only chance! Get going, Wyatt!" Sweat began running from my forehead into my eyes.

"Ayah. You need to be pickled to die pleasant around here. You start to pray. You got shot on my property so the drinks are on the house." Wyatt made for the bar while Hesh slopped liniment on my shoulder when I collapsed into a canvas chair.

"Gold nuggets," said Hesh. "That's wot nytives 'ere finds in the Mawa River, ain't it? And wot'd a nugget be worth?"

"Two or three hundred dollars, depending on the size," I told him.

Wyatt, in the bar filling a pint tumbler with gin, heard me. His voice was full of fury as he bawled to us, "Nuggets like

that for a package of needles that costs me six cents wholesale! Godfrey mighty! That Chink'll buy me out with the profits he makes on my pinched needles!" He came out and handed me the drink. "Here you be! Embalm yourself with this and before you die think up some way I can git in on the nugget tradin' goin' on around here—with my property."

I emptied the glass and had a shudder. "Whuff!" I remarked when I had my breath again. "That stuff would bring a bull out of the blind staggers."

"You give me a few p'inters before you're drunk or dead," said Wyatt. "How does Ching get a gold nugget from the headhunters with a package of my grammyphone needles?"

"Jim Sing," I said, "the chink who had the hotel here before the headhunters burned his hotel and took his head, used to take tin hatchets that he bought from a German trader for a dime, put them on a stump out in the jungle at night, and go back at daylight and find a nugget on the stump. Jim was a Chink, and maybe Ching knows where that stump is. One hatchet, one nugget, that was the business. Needles now instead of tin hatchets, I'd say."

"Me from Cape Cod—and money bein' made like that around here and me not in on it!" wailed Wyatt.

"And your customers getting shot with the poisoned arrows," I said.

"Customers at their own risk here. What I want from you is how can I git in on the tradin' game?"

"Watch Ching. I'll bet there's a package of needles on that jungle stump now—and he'll be going before long to collect his nugget."

"That's wot the bloke that shot the arrer at you was down this way for," said Hesh. "Come with a nugget for needles."

WYATT slapped his leg. "We've got to find that stump!"

"Get me another drink," I told him. "I'm beginning to see double, and that's one of the symptoms of arrow poison. Hurry!"

Wyatt snickered but got to his feet. "That gin of mine makes two men grow where only one was. Hell, we'll kill off that p'ison with gin. I need you to help me think."

"Look 'ere!" said Hesh. "From a corner kajang upstairs I can see between the cookhouse and the jungle. I'll watch and see if Ching slips out to go to that stump—and we'll foller 'im if he does."

I followed Wyatt into the bar and Hesh tailed along. We all examined the needle on the pith that had been taken from my duck coat. I could find no bluish stain on the steel. "Did you see a blue mark near the point where the needle pricked the skin of my shoulder, Hesh?"

"Nothink like that, no, sir."

"Then," I declared, "I'm safe. If the arrow had been a thorn, the thorn would have carried the poison through the cloth of coat and shirt. But the two layers of fabric took the poison off the steel of the needle before the point reached my skin."

"Fine!" said Wyatt. "Thar ain't nothin' the matter with you but the creepin' jitters. You near scared yourself to death." He thrust a second glass of gin at me. "Drink this to be on the safe side."

I drank it. "I'm going to live long enough, Wyatt, to see you with a poisoned arrow stuck in your pants and listen to you laugh it off."

"Shut up. You're drunk. Think of how I can git gold for needles."

So I shut up and went back to the veranda chair. Hesh went upstairs to watch the cookhouse to make sure that Ching would be seen when he sneaked into the jungle. Our game was to find the trading stump.

I was roused from a nap in my chair by Hesh coming hastily down the bamboo stairs. Wyatt was also napping in a chair on the veranda and he came awake as the cockney stepped into the light streaming out through the bar kajang.

Hesh whispered hoarsely, his eyes snapping, "Ching just popped to the jungle. Took the path that goes up the 'ill!"

Wyatt blinked. "Good! We've got to see where he goes for gold."

"Tell you wot," declared Hesh. "I knows a path that comes in from the side and crosses Ching's path. We could sneak up and see him come back, and we'd know what jungle trail leads to the stump." He began to button his shirt collar and then hitched up his belt.

Pulling my small automatic pistol, I said to Wyatt, "Quick! Put out that light in the bar. Make things look as if we've all gone to bed, and anyway we don't want to be watched from the cookhouse by Ching's helper."

"Git that big revolver of mine off the hook, Hesh," said Wyatt as he made for the bar. "And hit for that path of yourn. We'll be somewhere's ready to back you up if you git in a Ching fight."

HESH got the weapon and ran through the palms at the end of the hotel, keeping in the shadows of the palm tops. I saw him disappear into the deep hole made by the jungle's velvet blackness.

My watch told the time as after ten. Allowing five minutes since Hesh had seen Ching go, I would have some check on how long it took Ching to get to the stump and get back if he got back before Wyatt and I made for the jungle to stand by to protect Hesh.

Wyatt and I went to the dark back veranda, Wyatt with his shotgun. We watched a strip of brilliant moonlight between cookhouse and jungle. The other building was about thirty feet from us.

In that moonlight which made a sheen of powdered silver on everything, all objects stood out with amazing clarity—even black shadows. The open kajangs of Ching's building toward the beach were black holes in the wall. No lamp burned within the kitchen. We wondered if Chinese were watching.

High up there was a slight breeze. At intervals it rattled the palm tops and ruffled the roof of the jungle which rose from us sharply up the steep hillside. So the night was filled with the whispering of moving foliage, while from the beach there came the snoring of gentle breakers.

It was less than half an hour before we saw Ching's figure emerge from the lip of the jungle. I caught a flash of the pearl buttons on the front of his black blouse, saw distinctly the shape of his black cap and the white wrappings about his ankles that secured the bottoms of his loose black trousers.

Ching moved straight into the moonlight, then paused, and turned his head to listen for some sound in the jungle. He seemed to suspect that he had been followed. As he turned, I saw that there was a blade in his left hand. Moonlight glinted on the weapon. He crouched and lifted the knife as if he feared attack from the jungle.

It was then that I observed in his right hand an object that looked like a club. But that was not lifted. It was a thick cylinder, about two feet long, and about eight inches in diameter. Suddenly I recognized it as a dilly-bag woven from fibers, which is the bag headhunters use slung over their backs when they go after jungle produce —or on a raid for heads.

I whispered to Wyatt. "See that native bag? That's proof that he brought back gold from the stump."

Wyatt hissed greedily then, "The yeller hellion—and my needles!"

"Hesh has probably been following him —and Ching knows it."

The Chinese, apparently satisfied that nobody was coming from the jungle to make trouble, walked to the cookhouse and entered through a rear door.

"Damn Chinks! There goes my gold. And me payin' him wages to trade with my property that he's pinched. Somebody's goin' to git their fingers burnt in this game."

We sat in the dark and talked quietly, keeping a wary eye on the cookhouse. Before long we heard cautious feet in the dry stubble at the end of the hotel away from the cookhouse. Hesh came in on us, panting for breath, his face dripping with sweat when Wyatt shut a bar kajang and lit the lamp.

"What luck, Hesh? See any gold?" Wyatt demanded.

"Such a time I've 'ad," gasped Hesh. He clapped a hand over his heart and dropped into a chair.

I told Hesh, "Take your time. We saw Ching come back with a knife in one hand and a long native bag in the other."

Hesh stared at me. "Wot's that? Did 'e git the ruddy barsket with the gold—after I dropped it in the path?"

WYATT steamed up. "You had a bag of gold—and dropped it?"

"Open a bottle of beer for him, Wyatt, and slug it with some gin. Hesh needs a stimulant."

"I couldn't run with the blasted barsket," said Hesh. "Ching was after me in the trail—and 'e 'ad a knife that you could kill an elephant with if you just throwed it."

"Ching saw you?" Wyatt handed over the beer and gin.

Hesh nodded. "But 'e didn't know it was me. Tried to put a knife into me in the dark of the trail." Then he drank.

"Find that stump?" demanded Wyatt.

"Sure I found it. Chinks don't fool me none. And wot's more, I found the stump afore Ching got to it. And there was the barsket. So I 'ooked it and starts back—and blam-oh, I runs into Ching in the trail, and 'e all but smears me up when in a spot of light he seen the barsket in my 'and. So I drops it and cuts for 'ome. And you tells me that 'e brought the blinkin' barsket back with 'im."

Wyatt groaned. "Bang goes my nugget of gold! But I'll shake it out of the yellow hellion. Bought with my needles! That's my nugget!" He rose, reached for his shotgun, and looked toward the cookhouse through a peep hole in the back kajang.

"'Old your 'orses, Wyatt," said Hesh, as he finished off his gin-spiked beer. He stood, thrust a hand into a side pocket of his khaki jacket and struggled to bring forth something which stuck in the fabric.

"What've you got?" demanded Wyatt.

Hesh threw a gnarled and yellow object on the table—an irregular formation of gold with spidery sharp points, and half the size of a man's hand. "There you are, Wyatt! That's wot I got!"

Wyatt caught his breath. He stared, mouth open, face twitching, his eyes on the yellow metal. "Hesh! You got gold!"

"Did you expect me to leave the blinkin' stuff stay for the Chinkie to git. In the barsket, it was, but I takes it out, and was bringin' the barsket back. Ching can 'ave that—me, I got wot I went for, wot?"

"Damn me for a peddler!" exclaimed Wyatt. "Hesh, you lay off the turtle fishin' from now on, and run the gold department. Wait till I weigh that up on my stilyud." He hurried behind the bar for the steelyard.

"'Ow much?" asked Hesh, as the nugget balanced on the hook.

"Twelve ounces!" exclaimed Wyatt gleefully. "This ain't jeweler's weight, but it give an idee of value. I've enough needles in stock to make enough money to go to Paris, France, and eat French cookin'."

We spent an hour or more going over Hesh's triumph. He went over once more his encounter with Ching in the jungle trail. Then we had a round on Wyatt and went to bed.

CHING was just arriving with breakfast trays when I got down to the bar in the morning. We were all set to see the Chinese in a sullen mood. To our surprise he was in grinning good humor, his little black eyes untroubled, and his

hands steady. And he took special pains when serving Hesh—even holding the sugar bowl while the cockney ladled sugar into his coffee.

"'Ullo, Chinkie? 'Ow's tricks? Hit the pipe larst night, wot?"

Ching grinned down on Hesh. "You catch plenty sleep last night time?"

"Sure? I always sleep good. Wot you think I do? Sit up to look at the blinkin' scenery?"

"Scenery? What pidgin this?"

"Oh, nature, the crimson seashore—volcaners and trees—and—and—jungles and the like o' that. Nature just bustin' loose, Ching."

"Ayah," put in Wyatt as he snagged a biscuit. "Mermaids in moonlight and folks skitterin' around losin' their sleep so they burn the biscuits when they begin cookin' the next mornin'."

Ching turned a bland eye on Wyatt. "B'un him just one side on top."

Wyatt handed over the empty pot. "More coffee and less gab."

Ching took the pot. "Can do," he said. and waddled to the doorway. As he went out he slipped into his loose sleeve a quick hand that took with it a package of needles.

"More gold on that stump tonight," grinned Wyatt. "We got to git it ahead of the Chink, blast his yeller hide!"

So that night after dark Hesh took Wyatt's big revolver and made for the place where the two jungle paths met and crossed. Wyatt and I, with the kajangs at the back closed, kept watch on the cookhouse. We did not extinguish the lamp in the bar, reasoning that no light in the hotel early in the evening would make Ching suspicious of being watched.

Ching disappeared into the jungle a few minutes after nine. He was not back by midnight unless he had sneaked in by a route which kept the cookhouse in line with him as he returned.

But with Hesh still absent I reasoned that Ching was still in the jungle. Still, both Wyatt and I were worried.

"We ain't heard no shot," said Wyatt. "If Hesh was in a jam we'd ha' heard his gun talk."

"Unless Ching knifed him or the headhunters got Hesh with a quick spear."

Wyatt rose from his chair. "I better take my shotgun and pole up that path that Hesh took." He plucked the gun from its rack, filled his pants pockets with shells and put on a black cap with the visor to the back. Then I went along with him, taking my automatics.

By keeping in the deep shadows of palms and moving from tree to tree to avoid being seen from the cookhouse, we got into the trail Hesh had taken.

I let Wyatt lead the parade. That path was not open for casual wandering. It was only by the hard ground under our feet that we could feel our way, and we had to thrust ourselves forward through thick leaves.

After we had been moving slowly for about ten minutes, we had to take care that we did not cross the path that Ching was using. And there was danger of bumping into Hesh—and catching one of his bullets in our teeth.

WYATT finally found with his feet the cross path. He whispered a warning and flattened to the ground. I crawled close and got down alongside him. He pushed the muzzle of his shotgun forward into the trail.

"Hesh ought to be up the path to our left. Clearin' he spoke of that's got the stump must be that way. Cookhouse down to our right along the trail Ching uses."

"Keep quiet," I warned. "There are hillmen all around us, or I'm a Turk."

"Aw, shucks! You're just plumb nervous."

"I'm not, but the hair on the back of my neck is."

Wyatt got to his knees. "I'm goin' to find that stump." Then he pushed ahead to the left and I followed.

There were queer rustlings all around us. A tree toad called "Becky" but his Becky did not answer. I knew that hillmen had a system of talking by imitating the croaks of tree toads.

Wyatt turned reckless. He went blundering ahead, swearing in what he regarded as a conservative tone, but with the jungle full of crawling headhunters, I knew that our location was constantly checked by Wyatt's senseless remarks.

Presently the clearing revealed itself as a mesh of moonlight flecks seen through the dense wall of foliage ahead of us. Leaves were beginning to take outline just in front, for the open spot was swimming in moonlight.

When we were about ten yards from the rim of the clearing, Wyatt stopped. Something was crawling away from us to the right. We heard the leaves rustle faintly every time the crawler moved. A man was trying to get out of our path—or he had just cleared the path to let us pass him.

I could see Wyatt in vague shape, crouched and looking to the right. His shotgun was lifted to the ready. We listened. The sound of crawling stopped abruptly.

Wyatt bawled, "Where be ye, Hesh?"

There was no answer.

"Stop that!" I growled. "Headhunters all around us."

"Aw, mebbe they be. Like to see one. I'd blow a hole through him. Hey, Hesh! Where in Tophet be ye?"

Hesh bellowed from behind us, "Will you kindly shut your ruddy jawr?"

"Whyn't you come back home? Think I want to gallivant around in the woods all night to save your life?"

"Shut up and save it. I got my troubles."

"Whar's Ching?"

"I don't know. If I bloody well did, I'd shoot the beggar."

"What for?"

"Will you stop this blinkin' yellin' match?"

"Come where we be, you fool?"

"I'm the fool. Ching's tried to let a knife in me four times—but I got the blinkin' gold."

"Godfrey mighty! Whyn't ye git home with it?"

"This bush is full of 'ead'unters, that's one reason. I can't spit without 'ittin' one. And no more jawr, Wyatt. I'm signin' orf."

Wyatt growled, "We might as well go back. No profit here if Hesh's got more gold."

I threw myself against a tangle of vines to one side to let Wyatt pass to the back trail and keep the shotgun in front of us. "They're closing in on us," I warned, as he passed me. "Move slowly, and—"

Pung! Then three more blowgun shots. The muzzles of the *sumpitans* were so close that I could almost reach them if I put out a hand.

"Run!" I yelled to Wyatt. "Or if you don't want to run, get out of my way. I need trail room."

Wyatt hurried a little and I began climbing his heels. "They can't hit nothin'," he told me. "Just blowgunnin' to skeer us—and I ain't skeered wuth a damn."

THEN the whole jungle was shaken violently all around us for a minute. The commotion ceased as abruptly as it had begun. We listened for a minute. The blast of a pistol shot shook the heavy air.

I said, "Hesh has got Ching."

"That ain't my revolver. Sounds like a dude gun that Ching bought off a sailor for a dozen biscuits."

"Then Ching has got Hesh."

"No. Hesh'd blow him back to the cookhouse with my gun. Hey, Hesh!"

If Hesh heard the hail he did not reply to it.

Wyatt moved along, faster now, making along the trail toward the cookhouse, for he reasoned that Hesh had taken that shorter path to get out of the jungle near the hotel.

As I hurried along close on the heels of Wyatt, leaves swished near my head. I knew the sound of a spear moving swiftly through leaves. The spear had been thrown from my left. Another spear just missed me. The light bamboo shaft brushed the back of my head when vines altered the course of the spear point.

I dove forward with new speed, yelling, "Go it, Wyatt! They're throwing spears! We're right into a mess of headhunters!"

Stopping and turning, I fired three shots as I turned. One bullet went to the left, one to the left rear, and one straight back along the close trail. There was a chance that the reports would slow down the attack of the spearmen—and put Wyatt faster along the trail.

Wyatt began running. He swore as he went.

As I was close upon him he caught a foot in a vine and fell headlong. Both barrels of his shotgun discharged in a blinding flash along the trail before him. The roar almost deafened me. The smoke made me cough.

Wyatt struggled to his feet. His language was dreadful. "I can't stop to load. We got to git to hell out of here."

"Glad you've made up your mind about that," I told him, and fired three more shots just to keep the jungle nice and interesting. Then I tailed along after Wyatt, who was going as fast as he could—and that was fast.

Wyatt paused for breath just before we drew near to the edge of the jungle. As he panted, we heard somebody running as fast as we had been, tearing along and stumbling over vines that grew across the path.

"That's Hesh," I declared. "And he's got sense enough to keep his mouth shut."

Wyatt reloaded the shotgun. "Ayah. He's got sense enough to git home with gold. I'm glad that Ching didn't git him —and the gold."

"Get along yourself," I told him.

Wyatt moved ahead at an easy lope. Then he fell again. He seemed very slow in getting up again.

"Hurry!" I cried. "We're not out of danger yet."

"What'n hell was that I fell over?" demanded Wyatt. He was pawing around in the trail with a free hand, disturbing the vines, crawling on his knees. "Here 'tis! Why, Godfrey mighty! It's a basket —and it's full! I'd say by the heft that the gold's in it."

"Hesh must have lost it," I said. "Here, give me that shotgun and run along with the blasted basket. You can't stop now to fiddle around with gold in a basket in this blackness."

"Mebbe you're right. Take the gun—hammer's on the half cock, so full cock it if you want to shoot. We got to save this gold" Wyatt thrust the gun at me, struggled to his feet, and charged along the trail.

THERE was a faint crashing ahead of us in the direction of the cookhouse. In a few minutes we burst from the jungle into the moonlight just as a figure darted to the back veranda of the hotel. We had only a momentary glimpse of the man, for he was already in the shadow of the hotel when we saw him, and we heard, rather than saw, him bound up the steps to the back door of the bar. That door was secured with rattans, but the man we saw burst the door open.

We moved toward the hotel. A light flamed in the bar. We saw, outlined through the slivers of light in the braided rattan kajang, an indistinct figure reaching

up to a shelf as he pulled down a bottle.

"My best brandy," said Wyatt, with a chuckle. "Wa'l, for a basket with gold in it, fair enough for Hesh to have a snort of the most expensive stuff I've got."

Running to the back veranda, Wyatt beat me to the door of the bar. I paused to swing the shotgun astern to be sure no headhunters were coming out of the jungle, then hurried after Wyatt.

I ALL but fell over him, for Wyatt was standing inside the partly open door, his head thrust forward, and bent down while he stared in amazement—or terror—at what he saw.

Ching was on his back on the floor before the bar; feet kicking and hands waving. One hand held a bottle of brandy. The neck of the bottle had been knocked off, and as the Chinese flourished the bottle, brandy spattered on his face and the front of his black blouse. He was making desperate efforts to speak, his lips twisting in agony.

"What'n hell's the matter with him?" demanded Wyatt.

"Hit by a poisoned arrow!" I cried. "Get those heart tablets of yours—and get 'em quick or Ching's a dead man!"

I heard the grating of metal from the bottom of the thin dilly-bag basket as Wyatt threw it on a table. There were nuggets in that basket, I knew then for sure. I wrung the brandy bottle from Ching's hand, held his lips open, and poured brandy into him.

Wyatt brought his box of heart tablets. But Ching was in the convulsions which mark the final stages of being hit by a poisoned arrow. I saw a blue patch on one of his yellow cheeks, just under the right eye. In the center of the patch there was a bright glint of steel from a tiny object driven well into the soft flesh under the eye—a bad spot to be hit.

"What's he havin' a fit for?" asked Wyatt.

Before I could answer, Ching turned on his side and died abruptly.

"See that blue spot under the eye? One of your needles. Hit the skin with no fabric to clean off the poison."

Wyatt squinted in the lamplight. "For cat's sake! That's why he had to have brandy, but he didn't git to it quick enough. Why, it must've been him that was runnin' ahead of us."

I took a shot of brandy from the bar bottle Wyatt got for himself.

"Where the devil's Hesh, Wyatt?"

"He'll be along any minute. Must've took the longer path. I'm goin' to have a look at that gold in the native basket." He crossed to the table.

"There must be a hell of a lot of nuggets in that dilly-bag basket, all swelled up like that."

"Ayah. It was pretty heavy. Move that lamp so I can see better."

Wyatt thrust his hand into the long cylinder of a bag. Then he pulled out his hand and looked at it. I saw him stagger backward from the table staring at his fingers in horror. He lost his balance and thrust out a stained hand to keep from falling—and screamed.

"What's wrong?" I cried. But somehow, I knew the answer.

Wyatt raged in sharp yelps. "Damn Chinks! Damn gold—and damn the headhunters! I brung home Hesh!"

One Time When the Ballistics Expert Could Prove Almost Too Much.

THE CASUAL LOOKER-ON

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Midnight Rendezvous," "Pay-off," etc.

WHEN Ken Norman and his Lockheed touched in at Cariboo Lake on his way south to civilization Fat Morris and Cockeye McDonald climbed aboard.

"No," said Cockeye in answer to Ken's inquiry. "We ain't goin' out for no spree. Fact is, Fat's struck a likely-lookin' proposition up on Snare River and figgers he can bring him in a mine. He's goin' out to record her and organize a company to work her, and I'm goin' along to see he don't get gypped."

Ken nodded and gunned the motor. "We won't make it through tonight," he observed. "I got a radio message saying there's dirty weather ahead. We'll likely have to tie up at McKenzie Lake."

Fat Morris scowled, but Cockeye—to whom airplane travel was an ordeal—nodded in full agreement.

"Don't take no chances, young feller," he told Ken. "A day here nor there is nothin'. Anyhow, I ain't seen old Dave Morton for quite a while. I'm quite content to lay over and visit with him."

They reached McKenzie Lake; but the

dirty weather came before they got there. Gray clouds and a cold drizzle almost washed out visibility; the last ten miles were made with their toes dragging in the tree-tops. But once the plane was securely lashed, Ken said he would put up with the Mounted Policeman. Cockeye, with Fat Morris following him, headed for old Dave Morton's.

According to Cockeye, Dave Morton was one of the best rock-men in the country. Fifteen years before, Cockeye and he had spent two summers in the Woollaston Lake area. But for all his knowledge, Dave Morton had failed to make a really worthwhile strike. Now he had quit it all, and had turned his attention to silver foxes.

Cockeye remembered Dave's layout from a previous visit. He found it unchanged—a white-washed house of logs, an acre or two of hogwire fencing, and the shelters for the foxes themselves.

Dave Morton opened at their knock. He was a tall, grizzled man of fifty-five. He slapped Cockeye on the shoulder, hauled him in and wanted to know who Cockeye's sidekick might be.

"Fat Morris," supplied Cockeye. "A feller who's got something. You'll be seein' his name in the papers any day now."

Fat grinned and was waved to a chair, and Dave Morton produced three bottles of lager. Just then a girl and two men entered the house from the kitchen.

"C'm'ere, folks!" bawled old Dave. "Meet up with a sidekick o' mine!" He turned to the girl. "You remember Bill McDonald, Nell? Bill and me prospected this country when you was quite a kid."

"That's a fact!" beamed Cockeye. "If I remember right, you was about five years old at the time. Yeah; and cute—with yaller curls and big blue eyes. Purty near as cute," added Cockeye gallantly, "as you are right now!"

The girl laughed blushingly, and introduced her two companions. Frank Hays came first—a tall man, lean, with high cheekbones and thin lips. His eyes were blue, direct and almost truculently hard. The second man was short and sparely built. But for his prospector's clothing, he could have been a doctor, a lawyer, or any other professional man making his start in life. Nell Morton introduced him as Lo Webster.

AFTER a moment or so the girl excused herself on the grounds of having a batch of bread to set. Dave Morton dug out two more bottles, and the men sat around discussing generalities. At least, all did save Frank Hays. And Hays stared out of the window with a savage light in his truculent eyes.

To the others, his manner became almost embarrassing. Dave Morton turned to him.

"What's eatin' you, Frank? Still worryin' over that Consolidated job?"

Frank Hays turned slowly. He was holding a match in his sinewy fingers. He snapped the thing and shot the two ends across the room.

"No," he said in a cold voice. "There's nothin' more to worry about. Hardy took care of that."

Old Dave Morton shot a glance at Lo Webster. Webster nodded. And he turned to Frank Hays again.

"You mean—you lost out?"

"I lost out. Hardy queered me. Indian Joe Brown got the job."

Cockeye understood nothing of what was being said, but he felt it cast a decided chill across the room. Then Frank Hays was speaking again.

"But Hardy don't get away with this forever. He's hooked me twice now and I haven't lifted a hand. But now I'm gettin' him, see? And I'm gettin' him right!"

Old Dave shuffled uncomfortably. "Now, Frank; it won't do no good—"

"No good at all—if you mean preachin' at me. So you needn't bother." He got

up abruptly, turned to the door and went out.

With Hays' leaving, the awkwardness seemed to intensify. Cockeye heard the kitchen door close softly, and he had a glimpse of Nell Morton joining Hays and walking down the trail with him. It was the professional-looking Lo Webster who broke the silence.

"Frank's in a touchy mood," he remarked.

Old Dave nodded. "Too touchy fer my likin'." He caught the frown on Cockeye's face and spoke to him. "Frank's been givin' me a lot of worry these past weeks."

Cockeye stirred. "Too bad."

"Yeah."

A minute went by, and Cockeye waited. Gossip of any sort was his spice of life, and when no more seemed to be coming, he cast out a hint. "Likes his licker?"

"No-o," decided Dave Morton. "Nothin' to speak of. Somethin' more than that. Frank's just outa jail."

This time Cockeye gave a very audible grunt. "Outa jail, eh? That ain't so good. Or mebbe," he suggested diplomatically, "he got run in fer somep'n he never did."

"Oh, he did it, all right," admitted old Dave. "Bought a beaver-skin off a Nitchie in the close-season and got caught."

COCKEYE stared at him. "Well, fer cryin' out loud!" he whooped. "Shove everybody in jail who breaks a Game Law and the country'd go broke keepin' 'em there!"

"Sure. But lemme tell you what happened. Frank came in here four years ago and started to buck old Sam Hardy. You know Sam Hardy—the Hardy-Ward Tradin' Company. It took him quite some while to get a toe-hold—Sam's outfit bein' powerful like it is—but he finally made the grade. Then last year he bought a beaver-skin off an Injun and got caught. Besides bein' a big trader, Sam Hardy happens to be our J. P.; so he stuck it into Frank for a two-hundred-dollar fine. This spring, Frank does it ag'in. And Sam sends him up for three months."

"Not too good," grunted Cockeye. "But this Frank is either a blamed sap or a hog for punishment."

He's neither. He's just a feller with more heart than brains."

Cockeye glanced shrewdly at his old friend, sensing something behind his words.

"Yeah," Dave went on. "He's got too big a heart. The Nitchie come to him just before breakup this spring. He was up ag'inst it. His wife and kids was plumb destitute, and he'd killed the beaver for food. Frank had already given him all the debt he could pay; so the Nitchie asked him to buy the beaver so's he could get a bit of clothin' for his youngsters and some ammunition to go out and hunt. Frank bought it; and Sam Hardy got to hear of the happenin'. He swore out the warrant for Frank's arrest, had Corporal Miles run him in, and then tried the case himself."

"Handin' him three months."

"Sure. Mind you," went on old Dave, "Sam Hardy didn't give a whoop for the Game Act—he's drove a four-horse team through it himself, time an' ag'in—but this was an opportunity to use his authority and put a business-rival outa the way durin' the most important season. Frank had given out debt to the Injuns to the tune of three thousand dollars. It was charged up ag'inst their spring hunt—the rat- and beaver-hunt. And with Frank in the coop, old Sam cap'talized on it. He traded every skin in the country, and left Frank holdin' the bag."

Cockeye ruminated for some moments on Dave Morton's story. He finished his drink and set the empty bottle on the table. "Sam Hardy," he stated, "always was lower 'n the belly of a snake. It's the sorta thing he *would* do."

"You know him?" put in Fat Morris.

"Him, and his partner—Pete Ward. You'd pick Sam for a preacher and Pete for a breed, and you'd be wrong on both counts. They're just a couple of danged crooks who couldn't lay straight in bed."

"You've called 'em," agreed old Dave with a wintry smile. "And that's the pair Frank threatens to tangle with. I don't like it. Frank and Nell was goin' to get married this fall; but the way Frank's headin', I wouldn't want no gal of mine marryin' him."

"Well," observed Cockeye, "he did strike me as bein' a handful. But mebbe I'm wrong."

"You're not far wrong," laughed Lo Webster. "Frank's my pal, but I'll admit his shortcomings. He's hair-triggered any time, and hell-on-wheels when roused."

"You've known him quite a while?" suggested Cockeye.

"Since we were kids. We started mining-college together. He got fed-up with it, but I went through."

Cockeye turned to Dave Morton. "What was you sayin' about some Consolidated job?"

"For Frank? Well, his business bein' all washed-up, he tried to get on with a Consolidated field-party. They're openin' up a bunch of claims west of you fellers on Cariboo Lake. He figured he had the job cinched; but seems like Hardy queered him on that. Believe me," sighed old Dave, "when you get a gal of marryin' age comin' along, you sure got grief to handle."

SIX of them sat down to supper that night; and before the meal was very far advanced Cockeye knew that something was wrong. Frank Hays was more than usually silent, and the girl's attitude towards the man was curt. Old Dave noticed it too, for he looked from one to the other with a frown. Suddenly, "You youngsters bin scrappin' ag'in?" he suggested.

The girl's head came up. "There's been no scrappin' at all; but when a man promises to take me to a dance I don't expect him to renege."

Dave Norton nodded. "Knew somp'n was eatin' at you." He speared a slice of bread and explained things to Cockeye. "Big *moochigan* tonight. The Chief's son is gettin' married." Then he turned to Frank Hays. "Sure you'll go, Frank. It'll make you forget your worries and do you good."

"It won't do me any good," said Hays shortly. "Anyway, who wants to hoe-'er-down with a bunch of Nitchies?"

"Am I a Nitchie?" demanded Nell Morton.

"Not altogether," grinned Hays. "But a feller can't dance with one girl all night." He looked across the table at his friend. "Go on, Lo; you take her."

Cockeye, glancing from one man to the other, shrewdly suspected that Lo Webster would have needed no encouragement to fall in with Hays' idea; but, contrariwise, the man stuck by his friends.

"You're not making me the goat," he grinned. "Settle it between you."

"It's settled already," said Frank Hays. "I'm not going. D'you think I'd eat Sam Hardy's grub? Not on your life!"

"Sam Hardy?" The girl was frowning. "Where does he come in?"

"Hardy's payin' the bills. It's just another chance to get a stand-in with the Chief. If he throws a dance for the old feller's son, the Chief won't forget it. But there you are. I don't want to be awkward, but I'm not dancing tonight."

Nell Morton's lips tightened. "Very well. Then I'm not dancing either."

The meal ended on the note of discord; and after the table was cleared Cockeye

was glad when old Dave suggested an adjournment up to the Police detachment.

"When Ken hits the settlement, him and the Corporal and one 'r two more of us play a few hands of draw. There won't be many around tonight, but if us fellers went up there we could make up a game."

Cockeye approved heartily. So did Fat Morris. Old Dave suggested that Frank Hays go along with them, but Hays begged off and said he was tired.

Outside, they found it was still raining—a drizzle falling from lowering gray skies. Puddles of water filled the trail through the spruce, and between the trees they caught an occasional glimpse of the white-capped bosom of McKenzie Lake. At the Police detachment Hays left them, saying he was going home to bed. The other three turned in.

Ken Norman and Corporal Miles had finished supper and were engaged in a two-handed game of crib. Miles, tall, bland and athletic-looking, smiled up at Cockeye and Fat.

"Long time I no see you boys. When was it—winter before last, up at your camp?"

"That's when it was," nodded Cockeye.

The policeman reached for a package of cigarettes and handed them round. "Looks as though our dirty weather is going to keep up. But I guess you're in no hurry?"

Fat's face showed his feelings, but Cockeye merely smiled. "I'd rather stay here in comfort than get smeared over the side of some hill."

"And as the boys hafta stay," put in Dave Morton, "I suggested a little game of draw. How about it?"

Miles scooped crib-board, pegs and cards into his lap. "Any time you go looking for trouble, we're only too glad to oblige!" From a cupboard he produced another deck of cards and a box of chips; and in a few minutes the game was on.

Luck varied for the first hour or so, with Cockeye being the general winner. It was a friendly sort of game, more time spent in good-natured joshing than in downright play. Midnight came quickly, and the policeman brewed tea. Then cards again; till the door opened and a man walked in.

COCKEYE knew him at once. Spare-built but tall, almost Indian-black in his coloring, this was Pete Ward, old Sam Hardy's equally crooked partner.

Ward gave a smirking grin as he faced Miles across the table.

"Better take a mooch up to the Post with me, Corp. Got somethin' to show you."

The man had given no greeting or anything else. There was just the bare suggestion. Cockeye studied him frowningly. Frowning, too, was young Corporal Miles. "Something to 'show' me?"

"Yeah. Old Sam."

Miles was on his feet in the instant.

"What d'you mean? Is there anything wrong?"

Again Ward gave his thin grin.

"You might call it wrong. Someone"—and there was the barest emphasis on the "someone"—"drilled old Sam smack between the eyes."

Miles grabbed for hat and slicker. From a peg on the wall he reached down his sidearms and buckled them around him. Handcuffs and an electric torch went into his breeches pocket. When he hurried out, Cockeye, Fat Morris and Dave Morton followed.

Sloshing through the puddles, Miles asked questions.

"Who found Sam?"

"I did," answered Pete Ward.

"Anyone else in the house at the time?"

"No. Old Mary and the chore-boy was both over to the dance."

Nothing more was said, and they reached the Hardy buildings a few hundred yards beyond the village and on a rise overlooking the lake. A single light

burned in the front room; and as they passed the window to reach the door, Cockeye had a glimpse of a figure huddled queerly in a high-backed chair.

It was Sam Hardy, dead, with a trickle of congealed blood staining his forehead. Where the blood began was a bluish, round hole. As Pete Ward had stated, the hole was fairly between the eyes.

Miles, his brick-red face now grim, stood taking in every detail.

The lamp was lit and burning brightly on the table. A book lay beside Sam Hardy's chair, just beyond where a hand was hanging down. Apparently Hardy had been reading when death visited him.

Across the room was the window, opened six inches at the bottom. Miles looked at it; to the dead man; then he walked behind the dead man's chair. He pulled the flashlight from his pocket and shone it on the wall of smooth, squared logs. In line with the window and bedded into one of the logs was a spent bullet. Taking his penknife, Miles dug the thing out. He examined it closely for a moment, and slipped it into his pocket with the knife.

"Keep back, fellers," he ordered. "And touch nothing, till I give the word."

He went outside, but any search for tracks was fruitless. The window faced on the veranda, and the veranda was approached by a wooden walk from the store. Miles came in again, turning to Pete Ward.

"We'll leave everything as it is for the present. Got a key for this room? O.K. I'll lock it. And we'll nail the windows securely."

LEAVING the Post came the ring of fiddles, whooping the *thub-a-thub* of dancing feet. Miles spoke, his voice holding a touch of irony.

"'On with the dance; let joy be unconfined.'"

But old Dave Morton had an anxious question for him, however.

"What d'you make of things, Corp?"

"What do I make of things? Something I don't like. Sam," said Miles, "was killed by a bullet from a revolver. And how many men own revolvers around here?"

Dave's breath came in sharply. "You sure it was a revolver bullet?"

"Pretty sure. I'm not a ballistics expert, but I know a little. The slug that killed Sam Hardy was fired from a revolver. A .38."

In oppresive silence they held on until they came to the Mounted Police detachment. "All right, fellers," said Miles briefly. "Inside, till we have a talk."

They found seats, the policeman taking one at the table. He hauled a typewriter out, placed a sheet of foolscap in it; and while he asked questions he typed out his answers.

"I want this straight," he said to the swarthy Pete Ward. "Go ahead, and tell me what happened. All the facts, Pete. I'll sort 'em."

Pete Ward began. "Well; somebody up at the dance thought they heard a shot from the direction of the Post. They told me about it when I come in."

"When you came in," repeated Miles. "In from where?"

Ward shrugged, a deprecating smile on his lips. "You'll find out in time; so you might as well know right now. Fact is, old Jim Henderson had a crock down at his place. Between sets, I went down for a slug. That's where I was when the shootin' musta taken place."

"And how long did this slug take you?"

"Oh, I dunno. Mebbe ten minutes; mebbe quarter of an hour."

Miles set down these facts; spoke again. "And then you went over to the Post to satisfy yourself, I suppose?"

"That's correct. Couple of fellers told me about the shot; so I went on over. As you saw, the light was on and old Sam was dead in his chair."

"And you weren't a little bit—what

shall I say?—a little nervous about going over?"

Ward shrugged. "Some. But I went, anyways."

More typing; and Miles reached for a cigarette and lit it. Then he spoke for the general information of all.

"The bullet that killed Sam passed through his head, through the back of the chair and lodged where you saw me dig it out. A revolver bullet, as I mentioned."

Old Dave Morton, his seamed face lined and troubled, looked levelly at the young officer. "And you're thinking that Frank Hays is the only man around here to own such a gun."

"So far as I know," agreed Miles. "Which makes it look bad for him." He then asked Pete Ward a few more questions, typed for some minutes, and stood up. "I'm going for Frank."

As the policeman left the room, Pete Ward drew out his makings. With the cigarette half built, he spoke to old Dave.

"Do you know anyone else who owns a gun of that kind?"

Without speaking, old Dave shook his head. Fat Morris spoke up to point out the obvious.

"A revolver calls fer a permit. If a feller owned such a gun but no permit, he'd likely keep her out of sight."

Ward nodded.

COCKEYE sat combing his wispy beard and looking at the wall. He was taking no part in the conversation, and the fact registered with Fat Morris. Fat turned to him.

"Startin' in on a trance?" And when Cockeye ignored the suggestion, Fat turned to Dave Morton. "This ol' coot," he explained, "figgers he's some sorta Sherlock Holmes. There was two-three crimes up our way that needed explainin'. I did all that was necessary, but he took the credit when the guilty party was turned up."

Cockeye blinked. "Talkin' about me?"

"Sure. Once ag'in you happen to be on hand when the lightnin' struck. Nice, eh?"

"Dunno as there's anythin' nice about it," answered Cockeye shortly. "Just means trouble all round—"

"And you right there! But this time you don't have to work up no sweat about it. There's a cop handlin' the job. And cops don't want no amateur dicks shovin' their noses in. They're funny that way."

"They are, eh?" Cockeye glowered at his tormentor. "And I'm funny my way. And that is I don't need no advice from a punk like you. In this case, I ain't interferin' at all. I'm just the casual looker-on."

IN A FEW minutes Corporal Miles returned with Frank Hays. They came in and Miles took his seat at the table once more. Hays stood in the center of the room, frowning in apparent mystification.

"What's this?" he demanded. "Somebody got a crock?"

"No," said Miles bluntly. "Sam Hardy is dead. He was murdered within the past hour."

Frank Hays blinked. He looked from one man to the other. Then a harsh, bitter smile twisted his lips.

"The best news you could have told me! Are you sure it's right?"

"It's right enough," stated the policeman. "But get this—until we know who murdered him, several gents are going to be under suspicion. And you'll be one of them."

"Me?" Frank Hays frowned dangerously. "Me?" Then his bitter smile came again. "Sure I will! It's a job I'd have done myself if I'd had guts enough. Why shouldn't I be suspected?"

Cockeye noticed Miles' jaw set suddenly hard. "I can't," he told Hays, "warn you that what you say may be used at your trial, because you may never be arrested. But as a personal opinion, I think

you're a blamed fool to speak as you do."

"A fool?" jeered Hays. "Nothing of the sort! I can say what I like because I've nothing to worry about. Go ahead and try to hang this killing on me!"

Miles studied him closely. "Suppose I told you that Hardy was killed by a revolver bullet?"

"O. K. What of it?"

"Well, you own a revolver, don't you?"

"Sure. It's in my trunk."

"Then suppose," suggested the policeman, "we go down and get it."

"Fine! Come along."

This time when the policeman went out, the others followed him. Miles himself appeared to have no objections. They walked the hundred yards to Hays' buildings, and when the man unlocked the door they moved inside.

Hays lit a lamp. The place was furnished with Spartan-like simplicity; and in a corner of the main room stood a heavy trunk, secured by a padlock. Cockeye noticed that the padlock was of the turning-dial, combination variety that needed no key. Hays worked the combination, opened the lid and burrowed inside. In a moment he came up with a revolver. At a glance Cockeye could see it was different to the general pattern, being almost half as long again in the barrel as most.

"There she is!" said Hays.

Miles examined the thing deliberately. "Fully loaded," he remarked. And then—"Mind if I take a shot with it? Say into the wall?"

"Shoot anywhere you like," invited Hays. "Except at me."

Miles looked around him. Beside the cold heater stood a box with half-a-dozen split logs in it. He selected one of these, stood it against the wall; backed away and fired point-blank.

After the crash and while the acrid smoke still hung in the air, he crossed over to the log and picked it up. Beside the wood-box was a small hatchet. Miles split the log and extracted the spent bullet.

HE FACED Frank Hays. "Now here it is. I've also got the bullet that killed Sam Hardy. Shall we compare the two to see how they stack up?"

Looking closely at the man in the lamplight, Cockeye saw a momentary hesitation cross his hard features. But almost at once, it vanished again. Hays laughed.

"Hop to it! I've nothing to fear."

Miles laid the two bullets on the table and from his tunic pocket extracted a high-power prospector's lens. He studied the bullets for a long time, turning them this way and that. He laid them butt-to-butt, matching the grooves. And then he turned to Frank Hays.

"Too bad, Frank, but I'm arresting you for the murder of Sam Hardy. Anything you say may be used as evidence; so you needn't talk unless you want to."

Frank Hays' face darkened; a dangerous light gleamed in his eyes. "Say," he grated; "what's all this? Another frame-up?"

Miles shrugged. "Not so far as I'm concerned— Will you come peaceably—"

"I'm not coming at all!"

Head down, Hays suddenly charged. Miles sidestepped, stuck out a foot and tripped him as he went blundering past. There was a brief struggle. Miles yanked Hays' wrists behind him, drew the handcuffs from his pocket and snapped them on.

After that he aided Hays to his feet. The man still fought, but Miles herded him through the door and down to the detachment. A few minutes later, Hays was behind the bars in the detachment cell.

Cockeye and the others had followed along. Miles was closing the door connecting his living quarters with the one holding the cell when they stepped inside the place. With a short nod to them, he said, "Sorry, fellers, but you'll have to go. I'm taking a walk to Sam Hardy's, and I'm locking up behind me."

They went out; but as the others turned off on the side-trail to Dave Morton's, Cockeye addressed the policeman.

"Any objections to me taggin' along?"

The policeman stopped. "Dunno. Why?"

"I dunno, either. Only I'd like to see how you feliers go at things."

"Well, all right. But there may not be much to see."

They tramped down the trail together for some little distance, and Cockeye asked a question. "Figure Frank's yer man?"

Miles did not reply at once. "I don't know if he is my man, but he owns the gun that killed Sam Hardy."

"Yeah? Sure of that?"

"Absolutely. I took a course in ballistics in Regina."

Cockeye sighed. "Then you'd oughta know." After a few more paces he spoke again. "But takin' the angle it wasn't Frank who did the killin', who did?"

"Search me," grunted Miles.

"But it musta bin someone," persisted Cockeye. "Men," he argued, "don't bump other guys off just to see if a gun shoots straight. Find someone who had reason enough for killin' Sam Hardy, and yer job's half done."

Nothing further was said until they reached the Hardy post. Old Mary, the Indian cook, had apparently not yet returned, for the place was in darkness. But inside and with the lamp lit, Miles gave the murder-room another exhaustive scrutiny. He went over the floor, the walls, the furnishings; and at last suggested to Cockeye that Sam Hardy's body be placed on a sofa in the corner. This was done, the body being covered with a table-spread.

In the opposite corner to that occupied by the couch stood a writing-desk. Miles walked over to the thing and found it locked.

"Too bad," he growled. "I'd liked to have taken a run through Sam's personal papers. Something might give us a lead."

"Are his keys still on him?" asked Cockeye.

They were; and selecting one of a certain type, Miles was able to open the desk. Then he drew up a chair and went to work systematically.

THE search yielded little until they came to a steel deed-box. Unlocked, this contained amongst other things a copy of the partnership agreement between the dead man and Pete Ward. The partnership covered "trading, transportation, and all other business-ventures common to the country." By a balance-sheet of the year previous that Miles found, Pete Ward seemed to have stepped into a good thing when he joined up with Sam Hardy. But along with these papers was another paper that had Miles and Cockeye puzzled. It was headed, "Adv. P. W.," and bore amounts in figures totaling five hundred dollars; and at its foot was another notation, "Grubstake, $45."

Cockeye scowled over the policeman's shoulder. "So Pete Ward gets an 'advance', does he? Why?

The policeman couldn't say. "Unless," he hazarded, "Pete's in the hole on his share of the profits. But what about the grubstake?"

"Did Pete ever make any special trip for Sam?"

"He could have, and I wouldn't know it. But a grubstake could have been charged up in the regular post accounts. That is, of course, if it was given out for legitimate trading business."

"And if it wasn't, you somep'n to go to work on."

Miles replaced the papers at length, locked the desk and stood up. "Might as well be getting back," he decided.

Fat Morris was asleep in a bed made up on the floor of Dave Morton's front-room. Cockeye blew out the low-burning lamp and rolled in beside him. Daylight came, the sun rose; and Cockeye heard voices in the kitchen. They were those of Lo Webster, old Dave and Nell Morton. The girl was declaring the innocence of Frank Hays.

"He would never do a thing like this! I just know he wouldn't!"

"Of course he didn't," agreed Webster. "We all know that. But we've to prove it."

Talk went on, and Cockeye seized the opportunity to rouse Fat Morris and get dressed. Later, it was a gloomy breakfast to which the party sat down. Cockeye tried to radiate optimism by saying that Corporal Miles was not altogether assured that Frank Hays was the killer; and at length they arose.

Fat Morris noticed the sun was shining.

"Fine as silk!" he told Cockeye when they were apart from the others. "Now we can get outa this murderous dump. "Let's hunt up Ken."

They went out, Lo Webster with them. The conversation turned on Frank Hays and the position in which he found himself.

"That gun of his—" Cockeye began. "Does he use it?"

"Quite a little," answered Webster. "He's handy with the thing. Prefers it, for small game, to his .22."

"That handy, eh? Ever see him shoot?"

"Lots of times. Last fall, he put on an exhibition for the entertainment of the natives. Kept tin cans bouncing in the air and shot the pips off playing cards nailed to the flagpole in front of his house."

"Yeah? How far away?"

"Couldn't just tell you. The pole blew down one night and was cut up for fuel; but I'd suppose it was thirty feet from where Frank was standing on the veranda."

"On the veranda," echoed Cockeye. "And thirty feet off. Quite some shootin'. You live with Frank?"

"No. That's my tent you see down by the shore."

At the detachment, they found the policeman and Ken Norman concluding breakfast. Fat grinned at the pilot. "How about her? Ready to pull?"

"Just as soon as I can get away."

Cockeye, who seemed to have something on his mind, spoke to Miles.

"How'd it be, Corp, if I pow-wowed some with Frank?"

Miles looked steadily at Cockeye, and assented. "Go right ahead. If you can help him, you'll help me." He opened the connecting door, and Cockeye went through.

HAYS was sitting on his bunk, head down, a cold cigarette between his lips. Cockeye spoke to him, and the man looked up.

His truculent eyes were heavy, red-rimmed as though from lack of sleep. A stubble on his face made him seem leaner than ever. But Cockeye forced a grin.

"Now, feller; don't chuck up the sponge before the fight's begun. We're behind you, and we aim to see you through."

"Through what?" snarled Hays. "A frame-up like this?"

"Frame-up it may be," agreed Cockeye calmly. "And the man that framed you is the man we want. Tell me," he asked, "who could have pinched yer gun last night?"

"Nobody," snarled Hays. "Didn't you see the trunk it was in? There's a combination lock on that trunk that couldn't have been opened by anybody unless he knew how."

"U-huh. And when was the last time you seen this gun?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I was into the

trunk for a new pair of moccasins. It was there then. But who says my gun killed Hardy? Miles? What does he know about it?"

"Quite a lot, mebbe. He took a course in ballistics; and the way the Mounted Police is run nowadays, them fellers knows things. If he says that was the gun, it was."

"All right!" grunted Hays. "Now I'll ask *you* something. If Hardy was killed with that particular gun, who put it *back* in the trunk? I was in the shack all durin' the time Hardy was gettin' killed. Nobody come in; and yet the gun was in its place."

As he did when worried, Cockeye clawed at his goatish beard. "Well—" he suggested at length, "you was out for awhile. Remember; the first time the policeman brought you down?"

"And how long were we gone, till we come back? Five minutes? Ten? And look here—I got me a three-dollar night-latch on the door of the house, and I own the one and only key. The windows are covered with mosquito-cloth and the cloth's still there. You ain't tellin' me that any human bein' could get into the place, work the lock on the trunk and get out ag'in in five 'r ten minutes. You gotta do better 'n that!"

Frank Hays shook his head. "No; Miles is plumb crazy. My gun never killed Sam Hardy at all."

Cockeye went out and had another talk with the policeman. The policeman was more insistent than ever.

"Don't let him fool you! I know my ballistics; and last night I went over the two bullets again. They're identical; the same weight, grooves and everything. Sorry, old-timer. But if you want to put up a hundred bucks, just say so!"

COCKEYE gave a weak grin. "Any man that backs his opinions with cold cash knows what he's talkin' about." He sighed. "Looks like we're leavin' here, eh? Well, I'll see you when I get back from town."

With the plane warming up, Fat Morris was in vast good spirits.

"Well," he goaded Cockeye, "was you able to put the cop right on the finer points of the murder?" And when Cockeye refused to be drawn out, he chuckled heavily. "I'll bet this is breakin' yer heart! A nice juicy killin', and you ain't in on it!"

"It's all right," said Cockeye, calmly. "I ain't worryin'. I've seen all there is to see, and stickin' around here don't help none. On the other hand, the Lord equipped me with a full set o' brains. I aim to use 'em; and I wouldn't be a mite surprised if somethin' didn't happen."

"It'll happen," predicted Fat. "Them brains 'll explode on yuh!"

They embarked; and two hours later landed on the river in front of Norton. All the way down Cockeye was blind to the panorama of forest, muskeg and lake; and it took the thud of floats hitting water to rouse him to full consciousness. He piled out with Fat, went up to the Norton House, and registered. Fat lost no time in procuring some city finery, after which he proceeded to record the claims.

The clerk in the recording office made the necessary entries. "Things," he remarked, "seem to be breaking right."

Fat grinned. "Sure do. But a feller has to make his breaks. Take me, now," he said in his own expansive manner. "All I know about minerals I found out fer myself. And that's the way most finds have bin made. Oh, we get these minin'-college doods up there, but they never get nowheres. What I claim, a minin'-college education ain't worth a pound o' little green peas if a feller ain't got the rustle that goes with it!"

The clerk smiled. "On the other hand, Lo Webster is one of your mining-college dudes. And he made a strike."

"Webster?" Fat frowned. "You mean that pint-sized hummin'-bird from Mac-

kenzie Lake? He never made no strike!"

The clerk searched back through the record. "'Philo J. Webster.' He registered the 'Tough-spot' four weeks ago."

Fat grunted, but refused to become enthusiastic. "Well, his Tough-spot ain't no good. If it hadda been, he'd have blowed some about it. I figger he's that sort of a squirt."

They left the office, Fat in a breezy, jovial mood; Cockeye, silent and more thoughtful than ever. They passed the Bank of Commerce, and when Fat turned in, Cockeye made for the hotel and slumped in one of the rotunda chairs.

For an hour he held his position; then suddenly sprang up and made for the door. He almost bumped into Fat Morris.

"Where the Sam Hill you been?" began Fat. "Thought you was—"

"Outa m' way!" ordered Cockeye. "I'm goin' places!"

"Where?"

"Back North. I suddenly remembered somep'n."

"You're goin' loco!" said the big fellow and made a move to grab Cockeye by the arm. But he missed, and the next second Cockeye was definitely on his way.

Another Lockheed was warming up. Cockeye found it was heading for Silver River. A substantial bribe induced the pilot to take the fifty-mile swing out of his course and land at Mackenzie Lake; and at two in the afternoon Cockeye walked in on Corporal Miles.

The policeman frowned at him. "What's all this? Thought you were away on a three-weeks' spree?"

"I mighta been," admitted Cockeye; "only I blundered onto somep'n that'll curl your hair up 'n down. But how's Frank?"

The policeman's face sobered. He got up and closed the door leading into the other room. "After you left today, I picked six good men and fairly true for a coroner's inquest. They've just pinned Frank for the murder."

"Did, did they? Well, tune in on this—Remember us seein' a slip in Sam Hardy's desk about a grubstake to 'P. W.' and we figured it was Pete Ward? Well, we missed the point. 'P. W.' is 'Philo Webster.' Yeah; and he's the whoozit that drew the five hundred bucks."

"Philo Webster? P. W.?" The policeman repeated the name and initials to himself. "Maybe you're right? But what of it? Are you trying to say that Lo Webster killed old Sam to square a grubstake and five hundred dollars?"

"I ain't tryin' to say nothin'!" snapped Cockeye. "I'm sayin' it, and a lot more. Would you call minin' and prospectin' a 'business-venture common to the country'?"

"I guess I would— Why, that was in Sam Hardy's partnership agreement!"

"Sure it was. And without telling his partner Pete Ward, Sam Hardy grubstaked Lo Webster to go hunt a gold mine. Webster got five hundred dollars in cash for various expenses, and the grubstake on top. He went, and he made him a strike—and he double-crossed Sam Hardy just the same way that Sam Hardy double-crossed his partner, Pete Ward. Webster recorded the claim under the name of the 'Tough-spot' and kept his mouth shut about the whole thing."

MILES was studying Cockeye intently. "How did you discover this?"

"By luck." Cockeye detailed the visit to the recording office.

"I had that 'grubstake' in the back of m' mind all the time; and as soon as I heard Webster's real name was Philo, things began to click."

"D'you mean," asked Miles, "that Webster killed Sam Hardy so that he should never find out about the strike?"

"For that reason—and another one. Didja ever notice," asked Cockeye, "how Webster acts when Nell Morton is around?"

Miles wouldn't say definitely. "He

struck me as being rather fond of the girl, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I do mean. I noticed it last night, and I noticed it more 'n ever at the breakfast-table today. He's nuts over her; given the chance, he'd do anything to keep her from Frank Hays. And if he could pin a murder-rap on Frank, he's the old friend who'd stand by the gal in her hour of trial."

Miles stood up, walked the length of the detachment and came back again. His face was a mixture of emotions.

"If you're right, Mr. McDonald, all this is a reflection on me. I've had every chance you've had, and I've missed them all."

"Oh, I dunno," grinned Cockeye. "I'm one of those curious jiggers that wants to know the how-come of everything. Then, mebbe, livin' all my life in the bush, I've got to notice little details that the other feller misses. But fer all that, there's the most important point to be solved—and that's how Webster committed the murder."

"He used Frank's gun," stated Miles.

"Now, now!" chided Cockeye. "You know he didn't! Frank's gun was locked up all that day; and, like Frank says, if the gun was used, how did it get back

in the trunk ag'in when Frank was settin' in the room practic'ly all night?"

Miles' face held complete bafflement. "That's so. But good Lord, the bullet fitted Frank's gun! I'll swear to that!"

"I won't argue with you," agreed Cockeye. "Instead, I'll try to show you some-p'n. It's harebrained, it's wild, and mebbe it won't work. But it's the only solution layin' around. But in the first place, Corp, you gotta remember this—Webster ain't no fool, and when he goes out to do a neat job of murder, he don't leave nothin' to chance. He figgers the thing out, makes preparations, and lays his plans mebbe weeks or months ahead. And if this is the solution I think it is, it's just a tribute to the brains and the cunnin' of a smart killer."

"Of a cursed Judas!" rapped the policeman. "Webster has been posing as Frank's best friend ever since he came in here!"

"Sure," agreed Cockeye. "Like the original Judas was another man's friend several centuries ago. But anyways," he said, "if I'm goin' to prove my point, it means one more trip down to Sam's."

AT SIX that evening, Webster passed the detachment on his way to Dave Morton's. Corporal Miles said that he was going there for supper and that he—Miles—had heard the man making the arrangements. No sooner was he out of sight along the trail, than Miles slipped down to the tent that Webster had vacated. He came back with the man's .38-55 rifle under his arm.

"Now for the test!" he said.

He closed the detachment door, had Cockeye lower the windows, and set a billet of wood against the wall. Then he pumped a shell into the chamber of the rifle, fired at the billet and laid down the gun.

An axe produced the bullet. As he had done on a previous occasion, Miles took out his prospector's glass and compared the slug with another he held in his hand. Then he put the glass away and grinned thinly at Cockeye.

"Duck-soup! We've got him cold!"

Miles set about preparing supper a few minutes later. The two ate, after offering a portion to Frank Hays in the next room. But Hays refused to eat. Raw-eyed, he

glared through the bars of his cage at the corporal.

"Feed me, will you! Then turn me over in good shape to the hangman! Keep it. I'll starve before I hang!"

Miles came into the main room and closed the door again. "Wish I could tell him," he said. "But he'll know soon enough."

They were washing the dishes when a knock came on the door. The corporal answered it, and Nell Morton and Webster came in. Both shot Cockeye a look of surprise, but neither made comment.

The girl was pale, but she put up a brave face. Webster nodded smugly to Miles. "Can we have a talk with Frank?"

Cockeye knew that Miles had to fight himself to give the casual nod he did.

"All right," he said. "I'll show you in."

He opened the door, went through with them, and Cockeye tagged along. The girl walked up to the bars of the cage, clenched them till her knuckles showed white.

"Frank!" she said softly. "Frank, dear! It's me."

Hays was face down on his cot, but at the sound of the girl's voice he sat up.

"Hullo, Nell," he began; then gritted his teeth at the policeman and Cockeye. "Why all the escort? Scared I'll make a break?"

"Frank!" said the girl again. "Don't be bitter, please. I know you're innocent, and I think that even Corporal Miles thinks so too."

The corporal, who had jockeyed himself between Webster and the door, nodded.

"He more than thinks it. He *knows* it."

Hays frowned. The girl and Webster turned to stare at him.

"What d'you mean?" demanded Webster. "Have you some fresh information?"

The policeman shrugged. "Ask Mr. McDonald."

Cockeye was waiting to hear what the corporal would say, but with the limelight switched on himself he felt embarrassed.

"It's up to the Corp," he hedged. "He can tell you. Like I said to Fat, I'm just the casual looker-on."

"No," said Miles flatly. "The story's yours. Tell it."

Cockeye sighed. "Well, she goes somep'n like this— The corporal here ain't so easy as he looks. He arrested Frank, but he never thought for a minute that Frank was the guilty party. He had an idea; and tonight he walks me down to Sam Hardy's post. He had a four-inch nail in his hand, and when we come into the room where Sam was killed he says to me, 'Cockeye,' he says, 'take this nail and ram 'er into that hole in the wall where I dug the bullet out.' I obliged; and, dang me, I could drive the nail in only about an inch! Somep'n was stoppin' it—and what d'you folks think it was? Another bullet!"

COCKEYE, who had a nice sense of the dramatic, paused for effect. Webster was drilling him with eyes agate-hard. The girl and Frank Hays were motionless.

"Yes, sir!" Cockeye went on. "You wouldn't believe it, but that's what happened. Somebody killed Sam with a rifle bullet, then rammed a revolver bullet of Frank's into the hole so's the Corp would find it. The killer," hazarded Cockeye, "figured to come down later and dig his bullet out, but he was fooled when he found the doors and winders locked. But anyways, and you can take the Corp's word for it, that's just what happened."

Webster was now the one who was motionless. His eyes were those of a cobra set to strike. But Cockeye ignored him; for the girl was speaking.

"And, Corporal, you dug out this other bullet and identified it?"

"Dunno about identifyin' it," broke in Cockeye. "But it was a .38-55."

"And how many men," asked the corporal, "own such a rifle as that?"

Webster wetted his lips. "Are you sure about the bore—a .38-55?"

"I'm as sure of that," said the policeman slowly, "as I'm sure you double-crossed old Sam on the Tough-spot Claim."

There was a tenseness, as though Time itself were standing still. The girl frowned in puzzlement, but Frank Hays was frowning through the bars at his friend Lo Webster. Webster glared at Miles. "Who gave you all this?"

"Never mind," said Miles. "During the last hour I borrowed your gun and fired a shell from it. I compared that shell with the other we dug from the wall—"

He got no further. Webster sprang at him, teeth set and snarling. His first blow landed, but Miles' arms went out to pin him and crash with him to the floor.

Webster was small in stature, but he had the desperation of madness to give him strength. Nell Morton backed away, covering her face with her hands.

Miles was yelling, "Keys, on the table! Open the cell!"

Cockeye made a run for them; and in a few seconds Frank Hays was liberated and the fighting Webster rushed inside.

Over against the wall was Nell Morton. Frank Hays held her. "Nothin' to be worried about!" he said soothingly. "But let's get out of here."

"I can't believe it! It's so impossible, so fantastic."

"But yet so true," pointed out Cockeye. "Webster knew the game was up, and that's why he went off the deep end."

Frank Hays, who should have been the most concerned, now was the most calm.

"Tell me one thing," he demanded. "If Lo shoved a bullet of mine in the hole in the wall, where did he get it from?"

Cockeye told him. "Remember one day last fall you gave a shootin' act? Didn't you fire a bunch of shots into your flagpole?

"And didn't the wind come along later and blow the flagpole down? You remember, eh? And I suppose the flagpole bein' a nice, dry stick you cut her up for firewood and Mr. Webster got some? Well, figure it out for yourself."

Frank Hays was frowning. "But you weren't there!"

"I wasn't," grinned Cockeye. "But your friend Lo Webster was!"

LATER, Frank Hays stepped through the door of the detachment with Nell Morton.

"Sorry, Frank," Corporal Miles told him, "but you're still under arrest. But it won't be too tough for you," he smiled. "And it won't be for long."

He gave Hays temporary liberty, however, and then turned on Cockeye. "You darned old liar!" he said dispassionately. "When you were telling the story of all that happened, why didn't you tell the truth?"

Cockeyed blinked. "Well, didn't I?"

"You know darned well you didn't! By your account, I was superhuman. I found out about the claim Webster staked, I doped out that second bullet, and I was responsible for most everything. But the truth is, all the glory is coming to you!"

"Glory," stated Cockeye, "ain't no use to me. But in your line o' business, it might help considerable. And regardin' Frank—you won't have no trouble clearin' him?"

"None at all."

And Corporal Miles was correct. For a few days later he and Frank Hays and Lo Webster went to town on Ken Norman's plane. He and Hays came back, and they brought Fat Morris with them. Fat was arrayed in all his city finery, which included a green fedora and a pair of yellow shoes.

"I'm on m' way," explained Fat, "to harvest a million! I got me a company organized, and right now I'm pickin' up a crew o' Nitchies to do the prelim'nary strippin' on the property." Fat had embarked from the plane, and was addressing Dave Morton, Nell Morton, a crowd of grinning Indians and even Cockeye

himself. He handed out cigars and grubbed in a pocket for a match. "The Corp has told me pretty well what's what about the murder and he pays quite a tribute to a certain Cockeye McDonald. That part don't worry me—knowin' Cockeye fer the four-flusher he is. But what concerns me mostly, Frank, is you."

His glance centered on Frank Hays, who stood grinning at him with his arm about the slim shoulders of Nell Morton.

"Seems like you're all washed-up in the tradin' game and you sorta fell down on the Consolidated proposition. But mebbe I got somep'n to interest you. You see," Fat went on, "I ain't no whirlwind fer work; and it pains me to see anybody else hafta do it. Fer that reason I want a straw-boss; a feller that I can trust not t' frisk me outa m' jeans but who'll prod the other feller along. The job'll carry a hundred and fifty a month with it, and, Frank, she's yours fer the takin'."

Frank Hays blinked. He looked from Nell Morton to the expansive Fat Morris.

"Do you mean that, or is it something tc kid me along?"

"I don't kid nobody along; and I ain't givin' you no handout," stated Fat. "I'll expect dollar-fer-dollar value from you; but I'll sure be tickled to have you accept."

A smile broke over Frank Hays' features and his hard eyes softened. "By gosh, Fat, you're on!"

Cockeye gave a sour grunt. "That fat coot," he muttered to himself, "has sure come a long way since I first knew him. Cripes, what a line!"

But Fat was still speaking. "Mebbe I shoulda told you there's two strings to the offer. One is that I aim to hire me a married man. Oh, I'll tend to the accommodation. There's a load of furniture comin' in and I'm puttin' up a real shack fer the straw-boss' quarters. But he's gotta be a married man!"

Nell Morton's face went scarlet. Cockeye watched her, but for all the blush her fingers tightened on Frank Hays' arm. Hays himself gave a sheepish smile.

"Mebbe that can be arranged. But what's the other string to the offer?"

"That you'll put up with that old critter around." Fat was looking at Cockeye as he spoke; and before Cockeye could splutter a suitable retort, Fat went on to explain. "He's ornery as a bear with lice, 'count of him growin' old. He's got his own hangout and he won't live in it. And now I'm goin' to work on this new location, I won't get shut of him at all. He'll be tellin' me how to do this thing and that, and he'll get in m' hair no end. But you got to look after him—and that goes with the job."

Cockeye grew red in the face. His beard stiffened at a belligerent angle. He wanted to say a lot of things but he couldn't trust himself to speak. But Nell Morton spoke for him.

There was sincerity in the girl's tones. There was something in them that warmed Cockeye's heart. She said, with shining eyes:

"Don't worry about that. Mr. McDonald's happiness will always be mine. For without him—and in spite of what he says—there'd have been no happiness at all for me."

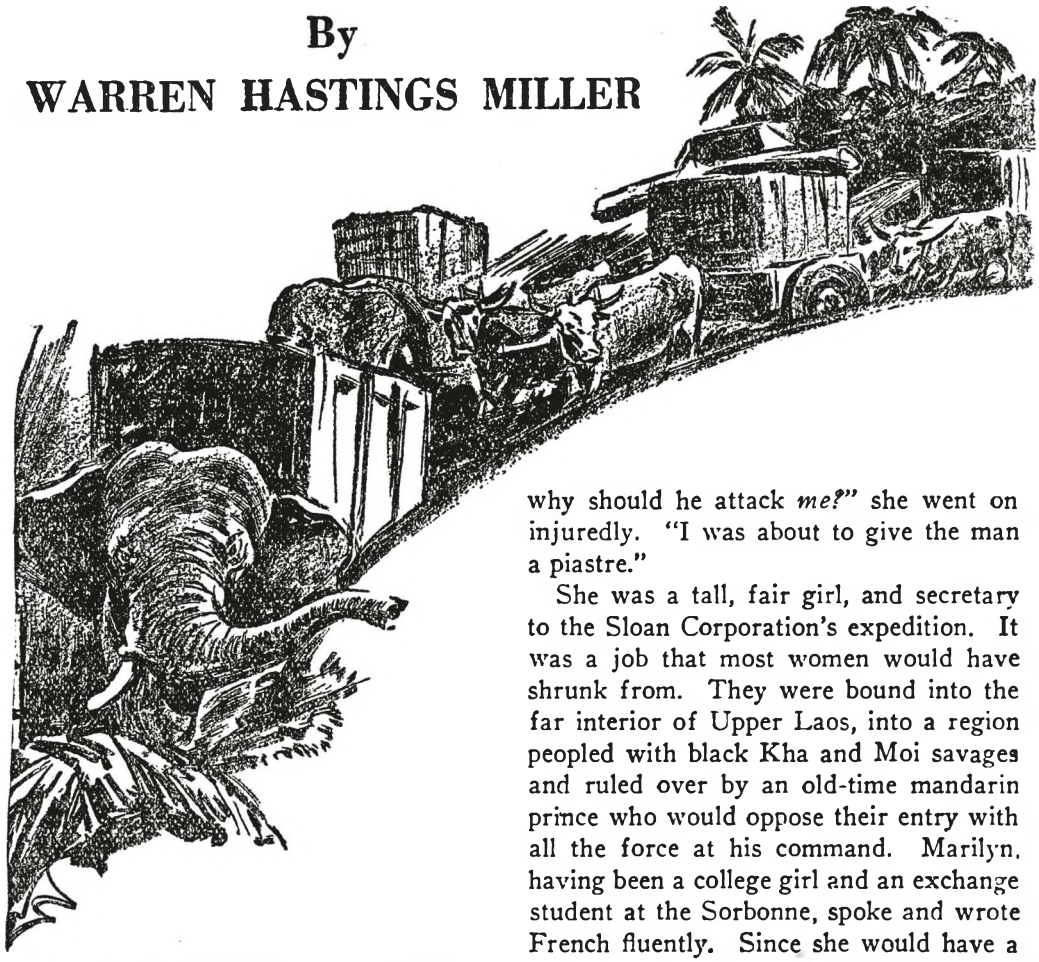
North Along The Mekong

THEY were two hundred miles above Thakhek on the Mekong and not far from Ventiane, the famous temple city of Laos in Indo-China, when the assassin struck at Marilyn Brown. A Tonkinese coolie he was, whining and begging at her stirrup—then that sudden glare of Asiatic ferocity in his eyes and the upward rip of a long curved dagger. She screamed and slashed at him with her riding whip.

George Pickett, transportation manager of the Sloan Corporation's brigade, was so surprised that for an instant or two he did nothing. He was riding on the off side

Adventure Trails the Engineers Who Bring American Smelters to the Very Heart of Indo-China.

By
WARREN HASTINGS MILLER



from Marilyn, and over her shoulder he glimpsed the black-clad, lean figure of the coolie leaping for the shelter of the teak forest that lined the roadside. He was late with the furious tug at his holstered revolver, but Abdulhadi was not. From Marilyn's giant Pathan bodyguard flashed out the bright streak of a heavy throwing knife. It caught the flying coolie square between the shoulder blades and buried itself to the hilt. The man fell with a coughing screech into the teak underbrush.

Abdulhadi turned in his saddle and grinned in his beard upon them. "Hoo! May the pelted devil possess him!" he said composedly. "Art much hurt, Memsahib?"

Marilyn was holding the bleeding gash in her thigh with both thumbs pressing it closed. "It's just a deep cut," she said. "Let's have your first-aid kit, George. But why should he attack *me?*" she went on injuredly. "I was about to give the man a piastre."

She was a tall, fair girl, and secretary to the Sloan Corporation's expedition. It was a job that most women would have shrunk from. They were bound into the far interior of Upper Laos, into a region peopled with black Kha and Moi savages and ruled over by an old-time mandarin prince who would oppose their entry with all the force at his command. Marilyn, having been a college girl and an exchange student at the Sorbonne, spoke and wrote French fluently. Since she would have a voluminous correspondence in both French and English to handle, besides doing the expedition's accounting, President Sloan had engaged her as something of a find. For her part, this launching of a big Oriental industry, with its assured hardships and dangers, had appealed as really getting out and doing things, instead of enduring the humdrum existence of a job in a city office.

GEORGE set to work with the first-aid tape, shaking his head and mystified over this attack. Roadside beggars were frequent in Laos, humble villagers mostly, who trotted by the caravan awhile and gave thanks for the couper sou that got rid of them. But this coolie was quite evidently a city chap, and not poor if one could judge from the black silk gown and round rope turban—such a man as you

would see behind any counter in Hanoi or Haiphong. He now lay sprawled in the teak, with his turban fallen off and the dagger arm doubled under him. Abdulhadi had dismounted and gone over there to recover his throw-knife, that formidable Afghan weapon. He came back bringing the dagger.

"A souvenir for thee, Mem," he said cheerfully. "Yea, these beggars be very insolent persons. But for such my little knife hath a searching blade!"

It did not contribute much to the mystery, and the dagger itself only deepened it. It was long, thin, curved; had a bronze hilt, and on it was deeply engraved a Chinese character in gold. George examined it curiously. He was a large, brawny, and slow-moving young man; the steady and energetic manager type, who could keep things going and get them done. His serious brown eyes, in a freckled face under the sun helmet, studied the character sign with puzzlement.

"Possibly some tong in Hanoi," he said. "But just why should he slash at you, Marilyn? An inch or two higher and it would have been fatal, at that. We'd better wait for Major Foanes to come up."

The head of the corporation's expedition came around a bend in the river road a few minutes later. Great gray elephants led it, a procession of twenty, and all buried under loads of crates—the castings of a Scott furnace for the reduction of mercury ore, all in transportable sections. After them filed creaking bullock carts, carrying huge spools of wire cable, tramway tip-buckets, a donkey engine and windlass, anchorage bolts, nuts and plates for the cable, tools and tackle no end. A brigade of Annamese coolies marched with carts. This material had already come a long way from the foundries and shops in America. Across the Pacific to Vinh on the Indo-China seacoast; up the King's new railroad to Thakhek on the Mekong; then up the Mekong in pirogues towed by steam launches. At this season, the Mekong was in flood; but, even then, at each of its more formidable rapids the entire outfit had to be landed and carried by elephant and bullock cart along the road built for that express purpose by the King's government.

The expedition's objective was still two hundred miles away, seventy of them in mountainous country with no roads at all. Back in there on the Laos side of the Mekong, Major Sir Giles Foanes had discovered a mountain having a broad red stratum of cinnabar crossing it in a stripe like a layer cake. It contained millions of tons of red sulphide of mercury that only wanted a reducing furnace and an aerial tramway to get the ore down to render the mountain useful to man. But to get that material in there promised such enormous difficulties that few engineering concerns would have attempted it. Inaccessible, the French engineers had pronounced Cinnabar Mountain, as Foanes had named it.

His Majesty King Sisavang Vong of Laos had, however, no intention of letting stand idle such a prodigal gift of nature as this deposit of mercury ore. With the Spanish mines shut down and the California ones working overtime, the price of quicksilver had gone up out of sight. It constituted the principal base for primers in ammunition of all sorts. All the world was now busy storing up cartridges and cannon shells; in China, Japan, and Spain the demand was very active and continuous. Correspondence, therefore, between Foanes and President Sloan had obtained the concession for the Corporation, and its expedition was now well on its way.

MAJOR FOANES, seeing his advance party stopped in the road, came spurring out toward them. He was not at all the big forceful giant Marilyn had imagined when she had read his book on exploring for rhodium in the jungles of Siam. The famous F. R. G. S., K. C. B. I., D. S. O., and all the rest of the alphabet after his name, was a smallish, wiry man

about sixty, hard as nails, sunburned leathery in complexion, cool and phlegmatic in temperament, matter-of-fact in speaking voice, however exciting the situation. It was not till she had met him face to face that she understood. His eyes were extraordinary, commanding, impetuous. They burned like living blue sapphires, with choler, with a suppressed fire even when just calmly smoking and at peace with all the world. The blazing soul of the man shone out of those eyes. They warned the stranger that Major Foanes was likely to do something sudden and extremely unpleasant if trifled with. George had heard that all natives except the Shans were frankly afraid of him. Abdulhadi, who had been with him for years, vowed he possessed the Evil Eye, and with Mohammedan piety made a surreptitious warding sign with his thumb whenever spoken to.

Marilyn held out the dagger as the Major reined in with his stern eyes all inquiry over this stoppage of the caravan. "A coolie beggar struck at me with this, Major Foanes," she said. "Abdulhadi killed him as he ran for—"

"Hum!" It was a rasping explosion, that interruption. Foanes' eyes stared at George like the round, threatening muzzles of twin revolvers. "More serious than it looks, Pickett!" he said. "The King happens to be at Ventiane today, conducting some religious ceremony or other. That gold character"—his eyes glanced once at the dagger hilt and returned—"is the tong-mark of Prince Phu Nyang's clan of assassins. The fellow has turned up

again in Hanoi evidently. He sends them out, vowed to kill the King and any and all his foreigners. It's happened twice before since I've been out here."

"You think there are more of them about, then?" George asked.

"Quite. About thirty of the blighters came to Luang Frabang last time. We had quite a session with them, I promise you! Y'see," he explained, "when the old king died, the French put Sisavang Vong on the throne in preference to his two elder brothers, both of them reactionaries of the old mandarin type. They hate all this modern progress under the French protectorate. The oldest, Prince Hong Peng, retired to that barren mountainous province where we are going. It would take a brigade of troops to route him out, so the King leaves him alone. The other chap, this Prince Phu Nyang, turns up periodically in Hanoi and starts these assassination plots, till the French Sureté finds and deports him. I'd say that our first duty now is to ride into Ventiane and warn His Majesty. We'll look up De Aalborg that Danish captain of his Household Guards."

"May I go, Major?" Marilyn asked eagerly. Her wound was nothing. She had been looking forward to seeing all the strange temples of Ventiane. To meet, also, King Sisavang Vong, that young Oriental potentate of whom she had heard so much, would be thrilling!

FOANES shook his head. "It's going to be a dangerous ride, Miss Brown," he said. "I take it these tong chaps came up by bus to Chieng Huang and are cutting across through the teak to Ventiane. There will likely be a large band of them. Besides"—he put his tongue to the dagger blade and spat—"thought so! Some slow poison, no doubt. You'd best retire to the tonga cart," he advised Marilyn. "Treat that wound with the strongest antiseptics we have."

Her eyes rounded with fright. "P-poisoned?" she quavered.

"Right. I'd lose no time if I were you."

The impersonal and merciless East was looking at her through Foanes' eyes. There was nothing much that you could do to help any of Asia's victims. George gripped his lip with vexation. He had been in love with Marilyn Brown for over a year, without much success, and had tried to dissuade her from coming on this expedition. She was at least safe in the New York publishing house, where she had read manuscripts—a house that specialized in geographical and exploration books. She had heard of this job through George, but his efforts to keep her from applying for it had only made her angry with him.

Foanes said, "Sorry that there is nothing we can do for you, Miss Brown. And we, also, have no time to lose. These tong chaps can reach Ventiane through the teak before we'll ever get there. Come along, Pickett!"

"Please, sir!" George protested. "Someone ought to stand by her. Does it need all three of us for Ventiane?"

Foanes tugged at his white mustache. "Perhaps. We may meet the whole tong on the road; but it's not likely. Like snakes in the timber is the way they will come to Ventiane. A lone foreigner or two on the road would be too attractive to escape their attention, I've no doubt. Three of us would be much better." He turned to Marilyn. "The King's life, Miss Brown, happens to be the most important thing in the world to all us foreign concessionaires. You see how it is, the French would have no choice but to let either one of those two elder brothers ascend the throne, should anything happen to Sisavang Vong."

Marilyn bowed. She had already turned her pony around to ride for the tonga cart in all haste. "Don't mind me, Major," she said. "I'm not important."

George grumbled mutinously. He was about to speak out and tell Foanes that she was the most important thing in all the world to him, when the Major said:

"I have it! There is a dak bungalow about five miles north of here. It is about the same distance from Ventiane. We'll keep together that far. If no considerable number of these assassins show themselves, we can conclude that they are keeping to the teak. You stop there, Pickett, till the caravan comes along. If Miss Brown's wound proves dangerous, you can put her up there and ride on in to Ventiane for a French doctor. They understand these native poisons."

GEORGE had to be content with it. Marilyn had ridden off instantly, and Abdulhadi was spurring his hardy Shan pony to a fast trot. George rode by the Major. They said little; eyes busy searching the teak underbrush on both sides of the road. Abdulhadi kept his heavy throwing-knife poised in the palm of his right fist. The jungle peace and silence of noon-day lay over all the forest. Nothing rewarded their keen scrutiny as the miles lessened under their steady trot. Once George thought he saw a lean black apparition back there in the teak, but it had vanished behind a trunk before he could reach for his gun. It was a long-barreled officer's model .38, and George was extremely good with it at all ranges up to a hundred yards. It had rid him of the cumbersomeness of a rifle in jungle work.

The Major, however, preferred an American repeater, and always had one in his saddle scabbard. He depended on the hand-gun only for close work.

"Behind you, Huzoor!" That sudden yelp from Abdulhadi startled George out of his thoughts. The throwing-knife flashed by him as he whirled about in the saddle, tugging at his holstered revolver. At the same time Foanes had whirled, drawn and fired, all in one swift motion. When the smoke cleared, George saw another of these black-clad Tonkinese stretched on the road, with a bullet hole in his forehead. The man's dagger had

slithered on across the macadam and struck a hoof of the Major's pony.

"Told you so!" he said cheerfully. "We must be nearing that bungalow. Take a good look all around its veranda, Pickett, before you enter. It's probably watched for travelers by at least a few of them."

Abdulhadi had dismounted, recovered his knife, and thrown the body unceremoniously into the teak. They rode on warily to the bungalow. It was the usual thatch dwelling on piles by the roadside. George made a complete tour of its veranda before entering. The surrounding teak forest, that enclosed it on three sides, was silent, enigmatical. It told him nothing. The clearing had a vegetable garden, a bamboo hennery, some planted pawpaws and bananas supplying the bungalow. George holstered his revolver and entered.

He was greeted by a stout Frenchman, in tropical whites and hunting boots, who said, from where seated at the table, "Won't you join me, Monsieur, in this bottle of excellent Barsac? My name is Leblanc. And yours?"

"George Pickett, Monsieur. I have very bad French."

"That's quite all right; we'll converse in your language, then," Leblanc said in English. He pointed to a heavy double rifle standing in the corner. His topee was hanging from its muzzles by its chin-strap. "I have been following a tiger spoor through the teak. The poor *estomac,* she complained," he said with a comical grimace. He patted the stomach and poured a glass of wine for George.

"To Laos, Monsieur!" he said, raising his own.

"Right!" George said with enthusiasm. "She is opportunity for us all—like Burma on the English side."

"Ah, yes; Burma," Leblanc agreed. "But we have not done so badly either, Monsieur. The Hin Boun Tin Mines; the gold stamp-mills of Tchepone; our great teak industry; our cattle and hides; our new tea plantings."

"And soon you'll be supplying the world's mercury," George said proudly. "What with the Spanish mines shut down, and our California ones working overtime, the price of it has gone out of sight. You'll see our organization go by presently."

THE Chinese chowkedar set out chicken curry and rice. George fell to ravenously. Leblanc seemed to have an astonishing familiarity with all the developments going on in Laos. He knew Major Foanes. He had heard of Cinnabar Mountain, and knew something of the correspondence between Foanes and the Sloan Engineering Corporation in America that had brought on the development of the concession. They had been talking perhaps an hour when the tinkle of bamboo bells announced the arrival of the caravan. George led Leblanc out on the veranda to watch them go by. As each gray brute, laden with stout wooden crates, passed the veranda, it tossed its trunk in salute.

"That's our Scott reducing furnace, all in cast-iron sections, sir," George explained. "The carts are bringing wire cable on spools, tip-buckets, trolley-hooks, a donkey engine in sections, ore cars, track, what-not! They've come a long way, Monsieur!" George added, pointing to a crate stenciled: SLOAN ENG. CORP. N. Y. "We've three hundred miles yet to go, the last seventy of it through mountainous country with no roads at all."

"Difficulté énorme!" Leblanc murmured, shaking his head. "Inaccessible, our French engineers call your Cinnabar Mountain. But you Americans stick at nothing!"

"We manage, somehow!" George said with pride. He was looking at the parade of bullock carts with a growing anxiety. So far, not a sign of Marilyn Brown on her pony.

The tonga cart at last came abreast, and tied to it were the bridle-reins of Marilyn's pony. George said hurriedly "Excuse me, Monsieur," and jumped down the veranda

steps. He peered under the thatch hood and was greeted by a very flushed Marilyn, who said:

"It's poisoned, George. This wound hurts like fire."

He stopped the cart, lifted Marilyn out, and carried her up the steps in his arms. The Frenchman greeted them with concern.

"The lady is hurt, no?" he said. "Let me see. I know something of medicine."

George carried her into the bungalow and laid her on its canvas cot. Leblanc stooped over to examine the wound; then he gave a start as his eyes fell on that tong dagger in her belt. "How did you come by this, Mademoiselle?" he asked sternly. "But no; the wound, first!"

It looked red and angry as the first-aid tape came off. Leblanc put his tongue to it.

"Ha! Poison!" he said, spitting it out. "Permanganate, boric acid—they will not do, my friend! But I have something here."

OUT of the hip pocket of his white trousers that were tucked into the hunting boots he drew a small silver case. From it he took a pellet and dropped it into a glass of water. George had been preparing a fresh bandage from his own kit. Monsieur's brown eyes twinkled as he dipped this in the glass.

"We have many curious poisons in Laos, but our *médecins* are quick at discovering antidotes. That goes better, Mademoiselle, no?"

"What a relief!" Marilyn murmured. "The ache seems to be going, Monsieur. It feels all cool. Thank you, sir. Ever so much!"

"Now the tape, Monsieur," Leblanc said benignly. "But it is to rest. Two hours, three hours; better the night, if you can stay. And now this sinister weapon—?" he said, resuming his air of stern inquiry.

"A coolie in a black silk robe, like one of these city Tonkinese, attacked her with it some way down the road," George explained. "We had trouble with more of them in coming here. The Major rode on to Ventiane to warn the King. It seems to be some tong of assassins hired by the King's elder brother, whom the French deposed ten years ago. He shows up again in Hanoi, just the same, I've heard."

"Until our Sureté Générale finds and deports him," Leblanc added gravely. "It has happened twice before. We French must keep Sisavang Vong on the throne at all costs. He is enlightened and progressive. He was educated at our Ecole Coloniale in Paris. Prince Phu Nyang is one of the old reactionary type, who wants nothing but a mandarin gown and a red button in his cap and a palace full of concubines. He hates all this modern progress. So does the other elder brother, Prince Hong Peng. He rules up in that barren mountainous country where you are going, my friend. This dagger," he thumbed the gold tong-mark on its hilt, "has Phu Nyang's character on it. You say that Major Foanes has gone to warn His Majesty?"

"Yes, Monsieur. I was to stay here and bring along Miss Brown and the caravan. We begin loading the pirogues at Ventiane tomorrow morning."

Leblanc sat with his hands on his knees, considering. His strong countenance was troubled as he glanced out through the screens of the dak bungalow. The sun had westered so far that the tall teaks across the road already shadowed the bungalow.

"I, too, should be active," he said. "The Sureté Générale at Hanoi should be wired. I hope, this time, that they sentence Phu Nyang to exile on Réunion. Captain De Aalborg at Ventiane should have his squadron guarding the King."

"You are welcome to my pony, Monsieur," Marilyn said.

He pursed his lips. "The road is not safe to lone foreigners now. This tong attacks them on sight. No; I shall simply

hunt my way back. It is the hour when tigers will be out. There's one now!"

GEORGE stared out a window facing the dim forest while Leblanc sat cocking his ear. Then they heard a very faint *Aoumm!* come ringing through the teak. It was a petulant and hungry roar, cavernous and reverberating. Leblanc shrugged his shoulders and cracked a humorous grin. "Not too safe in the teak, either!" he said. "One is stalked while peacefully hunting. But it is safer than the road."

"Hadn't you better stay right here, Monsieur?" George offered. "That tong must be in or around Ventiane by now. I should think that a man had small chance in that thick teak underbrush with a tiger on the loose. I can assure you that Major Foanes will have attended to the gendarmes and wired the Sureté. He said he was going to."

Monsieur Leblanc arose decisively, strapped on his topee, and picked up his heavy double rifle. "No; I must go," he said. "I happen to know that His Majesty is *not* in Ventiane tonight. He left, after the religious ceremonies, to go off on one of those incognito pranks of his. He likes to be alone and away from the cares of state, occasionally." He puffed out his lips and slipped two naval-gun-sized cartridges into the rifle. Snapping the gun shut he said:

"With this tong about, you will comprehend that it is necessary for me to join His Majesty as soon as I can find him. If Major Foanes returns, tell him that I am hunting toward Ventiane through the teak. You hear a tiger yowling, that's where I will be!"

He became urbane, paying the usual polite Frenchman's adieux. "You will apply another of those bandages, soaked in the solution, to her wound, Mr. Pickett," he said to George. "As soon as it begins irritating her again—"

"Yiee—look!" That sudden yelp came from Marilyn on the couch. "Did you see *that?"* she asked, her eyes wide with fright. She pointed at the window. "A head *was* there!" she insisted. "Just the top of a black turban and a pair of eyes; then it was gone! No; I'm sure of it, George."

Leblanc looked down at her grimly. He stepped over and drew the long-barreled .32 from the holster on her hip and put it in her hand.

"There, Mademoiselle!" he said. "Don't hesitate about using it. You might have that tong dagger in your other hand—so."

He had thrust it into her free hand; then he stood up regarding George. "Draw your gun, and help me pull this cot away from the window—*vite!"* he ordered peremptorily. "That tong is *here!"*

GEORGE dragged at the cot. It slid three feet toward the center of the room and Leblanc said:

"Turn over, Mademoiselle, and watch the window. You, Monsieur, the opposite one. I'll guard the door."

There was not a sound outside. It had grown dusky. Tropical darkness would be upon them within ten minutes. George listened tensely for any creak in the veranda boards, but its teak puncheons were too stout for that. He looked over his shoulder nervously at the door leading to the kitchen. Leblanc noticed it and backed toward him.

"The table!" he said. "Move it quietly."

Together they shoved till it came to a scraping stop against the door.

"Poor chowkedar!" Leblanc whispered. "But he probably decamped at the first sign of them!"

"How many, do you think?" George asked in low tones.

Leblanc shrugged. "Twenty. Maybe thirty. Fanatics who would destroy a flourishing kingdom—the miserable fools!"

The silent minutes passed. Then a string of Tonkinese ran around the veranda like a whip-lash. The screens were suddenly plastered with yellow faces. Curved knives ripped through the netting—then the room became a din of lurid explosions as George and Marilyn fired as fast as they could aim. Leblanc swung right and left, the enormous bellows of his tiger rifle blasting away turbanned heads that were bursting through the screens. He had just time to reload when the front door crashed inward and a tangle of muscular, striking arms was upon him, stabbing with the curved talons of daggers. He met them with a double blast from his muzzles and then was holding the doorway with sturdy punches ramming home the barrels into black chests.

George had no time to be aware of more. In spite of him, two of the assassins had leaped through the screen. They dashed with raised knives, not for him but for Leblanc. George followed with savage chops of his empty gun that struck them both to the floor. He stopped behind Leblanc for a hasty flip-open of the chamber. He had just got two fresh cartridges in when the scream, *"Stop him!"* from Marilyn whirled him about. George flicked the chamber shut and fired at a third man jumping for Leblanc. She was down under two of them on the cot. One squalled and doubled over her as George drove lead into the uplifted shoulder of the other. The knife dropped on the matting. He jumped to get it.

He had need of it. The window on that side was black with bodies crowding in, diabolical faces, hooking knives. George yanked the assassins off Marilyn, swept his dagger arm around her waist, and retreated toward Leblanc. His flailing gun warded off his assailants. The room was full of them now. They had poured in through both windows and were massing in the murky gloom for the final rush that would end it for all of them.

Leblanc turned his head over his shoulder an instant and gasped hoarsely, "Get her between us! I'm going out! Follow close!"

George heard his rifle snap shut. He had managed to get in two more cartridges while holding those at the door. Leblanc wasted not a second more but fired from the hip. The two blasts opened a lane into the yelling and stabbing mass outside. George held the doorway for a moment against the rush on him; then it melted away and he knew what they were about. Dim bodies were leaping back through the screen to join those out on the veranda. He had a few seconds to reload. He could hear the thud of Leblanc's barrels outside, Marilyn's "Hurry, George," then shot after shot was ringing out from the road, the sharp whips of a repeating rifle. With them came the stamp of heavy feet and Abdulhadi's Arabic curses, *"Upon ye, rats! Drink that, thou grandson of a flea!"*

GEORGE whirled about and fired point-blank into a shoulder whose arm was slashing down a dagger for Leblanc's right shoulder. The knife kept on convulsively, ripped open his shoulder-blade. Blood spurted darkly. Leblanc paid it no attention but went on thrusting with his powerful lunges. Then Abdulhadi's flashing tulwar blade parted through the black mass of assailants and he was with them and laying about him with blows like a scythe in wheat. The shots from the road continued. There was a sudden wavering of the tongmen—then they were scampering like monkeys, vaulting over the veranda rails, vanishing into the darkness.

The rifle stopped mowing them down. Major Foanes was coming up the steps. He stopped and bowed low before the

Frenchman George had been calling Leblanc.

"Your Majesty!" he said. "You're not badly hurt?" He was breathing heavily with exertion. The rifle yet smoked. "These jolly little American repeaters, Pickett!" he said, tapping it. "You can't beat 'em in a tight place!"

The King said, "Thanks for the timely help, Giles. I believe I have a slash of some sort—up here somewhere." His left hand slid up over his shoulder and encountered Marilyn's fingers.

"It's only a light cut, sir," she said. "I can pull it together with tape."

"My turn for our little anti-venom solution, *Hein?*" His Majesty gave her a merry grin and turned to Foanes. "My so charming elder brother nearly succeeded this time! I am desolate that I brought your young people into so much jeopardy. I should have taken to the teak as soon as I saw mademoiselle's dagger with the tong mark of my esteemed brother on it."

"You should have done nothing of the sort, Your Majesty," Foanes said huffily. His eyes burned with severity upon the king as if he were a boy guilty of truancy. "Captain de Aalborg of your Household Guards is out scouring the forest with his troopers for you. I beg that you consider how much your life means to us all, sir!"

He commenced shoving fresh cartridges into the tubular receiver of his rifle. George had been collecting his wits after that discovery that his stout Frenchman was really King Sisavang Vong of Laos. He was all for him. A sturdy fighter, who kept his head in a tight place. They had been lost without his leadership. He said:

"I'm mighty glad that Marilyn and I happened to be here, sir. There were a whole lot too many of them for one man, if you ask me."

Abdulhadi came back from a prowl about the verandas. "There be eleven of these sons of noseless mothers that lie dead, Huzoor," he reported to Foanes. "A few were crawling wounded in the garden, but thy servant took their heads. What do we now?"

"We stay right here," Foanes said with a peremptory snap. "You'll pardon me, Your Majesty, but there are at least a dozen of your brother's assassins still at large. You'll be good enough not to take the risk. De Aalborg will be here shortly."

The King shrugged his thick shoulders with a comical air of resignation. "My people grudge me even one poor tiger-hunt, it seems," he said. *"Eh bien?* There is more of the good Barsac in this dyak bungalow. It is excellent for the nerves, gentlemen. And now, Mademoiselle, the bandage, please. My cut begins to irritate."

MARILYN took charge of him while the others were lighting lamps and clearing up the bungalow. The chowkedar reappeared and was sent for bottles. Clouds of mosquitoes surged in, but they were merry regardless. The King raised his glass:

"To Cinnabar Mountain, Sir Giles," he toasted. "May she really prove to be a possession of Laos!"

"What?" Foanes asked, astonished.

"It all depends on the Mekong, Giles," the King explained. "You know that Burma, China, and Laos all join their frontiers up there. The Mekong was agreed on as the international boundary."

"But I never crossed it, sir!" Foanes insisted. "I was chased out of there by a mob of Kha blighters, armed with crossbows and nasty-looking implements bristling with prongs. But I never crossed the river."

"Nevertheless, the English have put in a claim for it," the King said drily. "I fancy you will have considerable diplomatic correspondence over it, Mademoiselle Brown," he said to Marilyn.

It was a complication that the engineering company had not dreamed of or

President Sloan would never have ventured its capital on a clouded title. George listened disturbedly. His managerial mind was urging an exploration trip to clear this up, before anything further was done. The Major, however, brushed it aside.

"Cheerio!" he said, raising his glass. "It's dogged as does it, sir! My benighted country always claims anything of value that anyone else discovers, if there's a ghost of a chance. You Americans," he beamed on George and Marilyn, "are famed for bluff; but you really ought to take a look at our precious crew in Downing Street!"

The King drank with a gay abandon. Having shifted another care of State—onto the capable shoulders of Sir Giles Foanes this time—he was enjoying the holiday. The bottles were low when the clatter of cavalry trotting up the road announced De Aalborg. The King arose to receive him. Like a guilty schoolboy he listened to further scoldings from the resplendent Dane, and then laughed.

"I was so bored that I well had to give you the slip, Captain," he said. "We had a little unpleasantness with the tong and there are eleven dead. It's all over now."

"Indeed, it's not, sir," De Aalborg growled. "My men took four more in the teak. The rest will be watching for you in Ventiane. Permit me to escort you up to Luang Prabang immediately, sir!"

"*Prut!* To ride all night after the—er—exercise we have been taking! One must attend to *la fatigue,* Captain."

"It's not safe here, sir," De Aalborg said brusquely. "And it will be still less safe in Ventiane. They can put you up at Saidpou. It's only twenty kilometers up the river."

Foanes said, "I have it, Your Majesty; you can go aboard one of our steam launches. Pickett and I will be with you. You don't mind staying up on guard for half the night, George?"

"Certainly not. We have plenty of army cots. And someone has to dress wounds for both the King and Marilyn, hasn't he?"

The King nodded pleasantly. "Excellent, Foanes. Let them swim out for me if they really must!"

II

THE temple city of Ventiane clanged with bells and gongs as the mists cleared over the river early next morning. George sat with a rifle across his knees, contemplating the fantastic Buddhist temples of Sisaket, Pya Wat, and Pra Keo dominating the river bank with their slender spires. Parades of yellow-robed priests were marching along their cloistered arcades, chanting the morning lauds to the Buddha. Rows of seated stone images of him passed them in review. Behind the temples rose the modern French office building that would presently be a hive of administration clerks to the Resident General. The Indo-China government, when under the wise and benign administration of Paul Doumer, had established its seat here instead of at Luang Prabang. It left the King, tacitly, the management of his own province without his appearing too much under French leading-strings.

His Majesty Sisavang Vong, who alone of all the native rulers had earned that honor, stirred in his cot, yawned, and cocked an eye at George.

"I like this boat," he said. "Never was such a sleep! Did any of my tong friends pay us a call?"

"Not ary one, sir!" George grinned cheerfully. "Last place they would think of looking for you, I should say."

"Exactly. And I have paid my courtesy call on the Resident General; so now I am going to play hookey some more," said the King with decision. He put a hand up over his shoulder bandage. "She is stiff. I seem to have wrenched some joints in ramming and parrying those villains with my rifle barrel. One knows when one has

a good thing and is comfortable. I shall stay here and go on up to Luang Prabang with you."

George thought of the dangerous rapids of Pak La, but said nothing about them. People were forever opposing the King's wishes. Always there was this and that for him to attend to, or some imaginary danger that he should not risk—though he had more common sense than any of his advisors. Certainly he would be in less danger in the Corporation's fleet than anywhere else. And George could not help but like him.

"I'm sure that Major Foanes would be glad to have you with us," George said cordially. "Things are stirring over at the camp right now, sir."

"Do get this boat going first, Monsieur Pickett," the King said with a comical anxiety. "Before De Aalborg or any of them can come for me."

GEORGE quietly awakened the Portuguese engineer. The Major was still sound asleep on his cot. Ashore, Abdulhadi was routing out the coolies with large and loud oaths. He appeared brandishing a wire-rope switch and shouting at the sleeping sampan men. These came out from under the hoods of their pirogues moored alongshore. The boats were over thirty feet long, with bows and sterns sweeping up in graceful curves, and they

would carry about a ton of stores each. Their semi-naked crews were now steadying them with the oars and poles while Abdulhadi's army of coolies moved down waist-deep into the water with all sorts of small supplies hung on bamboo carrying-poles. Then came the elephants in pairs, to take station beside a pirogue and lift aboard heavy castings, wire spools, and sheet-iron tip-buckets, with the nicety of steam derricks. The bullock carts rolled on as fast as unloaded. They would have to do it all over again if the rapids of Pak La proved too strong for the steam launches.

The medley of noise and shouting woke Foanes. He arose and threw off the cotton sheet in one motion, as if never asleep. George marveled at the indestructibility of Englishmen as he saw that splendid nude body, all corded muscle and sinew; the body of a boy, though Foanes must be at least sixty.

"Your Majesty slept well, I trust?" he said. "Any visitors, George?" The Major looked distastefully at the muddy Mekong. "Hardly do for the bawth, what? I say, chappie, a little of your boiler water, if you don't mind," he said to the Portuguese. "A cupful will answer."

He sponged himself with it and applied a towel with vigor while the King was announcing his decision to stay right on the launch up to Luang Prabang.

"Do that!" Foanes said cordially. "Have Abdulhadi look over our coolies carefully, Pickett, to see that we have no tongmen along as passengers. Otherwise it's quite all right with us, Your Majesty."

"Can't we go now?" the King urged with an anxious grin. "I really must steal a march on the excellent De Aalborg."

"Right ho! In a jiff we'll be ready, sir."

CLOUDS of smoke were pouring from the launch's funnel. Abdulhadi, ashore, was brandishing his wire whip and belaboring knots of struggling coolies grouped around the sampans. Presently a boat came out, dropping coils of coir tow rope behind it as it made for the launch. George went back in it. He and Abdulhadi searched the six sampans that were nearly ready to shove off. Their own fa-

miliar rivermen were at the sweeps on all.

"Let be, then!" said Abdulhadi. "Ho, ye children of sin, may all your days come to harm! Shove off! Allah loves not sloth!"

The six pirogues swung out into the current in tandem. George watched the launch get under way. Slowly it breasted the strong current upstream. It was doing its usual four knots against that swift torrent, which was about the speed of their elephants on land.

He found Marilyn perched on a donkey-engine crate and checking off the list for the next set of six sampans. Her long arms and legs were a sunburned brown that accentuated the cool whiteness of her shorts and jacket and topee. George's heart did its usual flutter as he met the merry gaze of her eyes.

"You're going up in the last launch, Marilyn," he told her after morning greetings. "No pony today."

She made a face at him. "I'm bored with the river, George," she said. "And I've no correspondence to do. Besides, I simply must see this Sisaket temple when my check list is finished."

She waved an arm toward the bizarre temple, a stone forest of intricately carved pagoda spires. It had a court that was famous for its statues of the Buddha. George smiled.

"You couldn't pick anything more dangerous! There are a dozen baffled tongmen in Ventiane.

"They'll be hanging around the temples, hoping to get a chance at the King—or you and me. You haven't forgotten about yesterday?"

She looked at the bandage lump under the shorts on her thigh. "It's all well now, I can walk and ride. Tourists spend thousands, George, to see Ventiane, and we're right here. Why can't you take me into Sisaket, at least, before the elephants start?"

George grinned. "If you don't mind entering barefoot," he said. "It's the law here. There's plenty of hookworm and leprosy for your bare feet to pick up."

She went on checking off the list of trolleys and buckets for this particular fleet of sampans. George gathered that she did not mind tongmen, but rosy and tender bare feet treading where a leper had just camped was quite another thing.

Abdulhadi came up to report. "Lo, the loading is finished, Sahib. Is it an order that these owls of Bengalis form their elephants for the march?"

"You've searched all the sampans for stowaways, Abdulhadi?"

"Yea, verily. As well milk a he-goat into a sieve as find aught in them now but our own people!"

Marilyn laughed. "I'm riding with you, George," she announced. "We'll cut out the temples; but it's so much more fun by the road."

George grinned cynically. "Sure is!" he said. "Sharpen up your tulwar, Abdulhadi! The Mem-sahib is going with us, she says."

Abdulhadi beamed and smote his weapon with a horny palm. "Welcome are thou as the roses in summer, Shirin," he said. "I like not yon boiling of mud myself."

HE HAD no use for the river. But he was superb on a horse. George and Marilyn mounted their Shan ponies while he was riding along the line of bullock carts, shouting directions at their slant-eyed Annamese drivers. The Corporation's brigade moved out along the river road, avoiding passing through the city. Before they had reached the fork where the northern highway began cutting across the great bend in the Mekong they were overtaken by De Aalborg and his troop.

"The King!" he demanded excitedly of George. "Where is he?"

"He played truant on you, Captain," George laughed. "He decided to stay on one of our steam launches."

"The devil!" Captain De Aalborg bit

his lip. "One of his substitutes, poor man, was murdered last night in Ventiane. In spite of a close watch by my men. Is Foanes with him?"

"Yes, Captain. You'll pick him up at Pak La rapids. We'll have to unload all the stuff there."

De Aalborg looked relieved. "He seems to be safe for the present," he said. "His Majesty is a trial, I assure you, Pickett! Once I get him back to Luang Prabang, I have but to guard the palace. With a regiment of infantry, if need be, till this is over. But it will be most difficult keeping him in seclusion."

He rode with them across the bend. The empty caravan moved fast, its bullocks trotting steadily, the elephants swaying with ponderous strides. When they reached the Mekong, a great rocky gorge stretched below for miles. Dynamite blasting-work, by the King's navigation department, was carried on here during the winter low-water, but there was no sign of it now. The swollen Mekong poured down the gorge, bank-full to the cliffs on either side. George estimated its speed as at least eight miles an hour. He doubted if the launches could make it.

They waited two hours before the first of them appeared through a narrow opening between the cliffs. It was followed by a second and third launch, the smoke streaming from all their funnels as they swerved and rolled in the current. Then came a string of nine sampans towing behind the three like an unruly tail.

"Someone's bright idea!" George cried out. "They're towing in tandem, since one alone could not make it. We'll be here for some time, Captain."

"I don't think they will stop at all," Marilyn said. "If they can do that, why not keep on up the river till the water gets quieter?"

"Maybe." George looked calculatingly upstream. The gorge there was even narrower, and over the side of the ledges that made the Pak La falls were crested white-capped waves that stayed in one place, enormous, menacing, difficult for any boat to live through.

"I can't allow it!" De Aalborg said agitatedly. "His Majesty must not take such risks."

George thought that he would love it if he knew the King. But it would be the part of wisdom to land everything here and track the pirogues up by rope and man-power, while the launches breasted those waves alone. He went down to the bank with De Aalborg and joined in his shouts as slowly the three launches came abreast.

MARILYN thrilled at that sight of men battling against the resistless jungle river. These spectacular doings were what she had come for. Under a hot sun, the brawny natives swung their glistening brown shoulders in tugging at the long steering oars. The sampans veered and careened wildly, were checked and straightened by herculean strength. On the leading launch, the trim, taut figure of Major Foanes could be seen waving at them and pointing at the rapids ahead. He was at the same time conning the boat with gestures of his left hand. Behind him the King sat crouched and tense, paying no attention to De Aalborg's shouted entreaties—save to turn once and crack at them a happy grin. Quite evidently they were going to try it.

"Better land, sir!" George shouted. "We can't afford to swamp a single sampan."

"And you, sir!" De Aalborg joined in. "I beg! I implore!"

Major Foanes looked annoyed. "I say," he called at them in grim tones, "it just wants a bit of doing, y'know!"

De Aalborg shrugged. "*Two* daredevils! Now I ask you!"

George himself felt rebuked. Fascinatedly he watched the three launches breasting the current sturdily and nearing the series of waves. Foanes steered the

leader around the end of the first; then it made an abrupt turn across the river and disappeared behind the foaming stationary crest. The others followed; after them the sampans like a kite's tail. De Aalborg pressed a sweating hand to his forehead. "Lost! They'll never live through it," he groaned. "Poor Laos! We foreigners will all be sent packing if Phu Nyang becomes king."

George laughed reassuringly. "They'll make it, Captain. I wouldn't have risked it myself; but it's just another case of the Major's cool daring. Those waves are each over a ledge that shoots up a tall crest, you see. On each side is good water. You have but to steer carefully around them."

Marilyn had ridden up to high ground. They saw her peering eagerly; then her arm shot up. "They're through!" she called. "Come up here!"

"I just *knew* he could do it," she said exultingly as they rode up. "Look there!" Her rapt gaze made George envious. Oh, to win admiration like that! George was of the steady, careful type. He could imagine himself doing something spectacular, but he knew that he'd be sure to weigh the risks at the last moment and not do it. Marilyn was, alas, romantic. He really would have to wave the flag in a charge or something if she was ever to look at him!

THE launches were now up in a smooth straight bight that stretched up the Mekong for miles. The sampans, cast off, were rowing for shore to rest and bail out. As they watched, the three launches turned and came shooting down the river at full speed. Again they were wallowing and turning through the series of waves; then the Major headed for their landing.

"Wet work, Pickett!" he called out cheerfully as the launch slowed down. "But we'd have been a week tracking the pirogues up. You may as well march the caravan direct for Luang Prabang now."

He and the King were wet from topee to boots. The latter's eyes sparkled with zest. He displayed no intention of coming ashore. De Aalborg said, "I insist, sir, that you join our escort up to the city. You've no right to take these risks."

The King shot out a lower lip. "Pouff, De Aalborg! Overruled! I'm enjoying myself thoroughly, thank you. Besides, my little friends with the daggers find the swimming *bien* poor, it seems."

Foanes chortled. "He's safer with us, really, old chap," he told De Aalborg. "And it was His Majesty who thought of running Pak La with our launches in tandem. Dashed good idea, that."

"But you handled them superbly, Major!" Marilyn cried out. "You've no idea how thrilling it looked from here."

He shrugged. "Nothing in it, Miss Brown. One just manages with the tricks of the river as they come along. Well, we'll be off for the second lot. Cheerio!"

They were five days on the road up to Luang Prabang. It went through great forests of pine and teak, uphill and down dale, and passing through numerous native villages. Abdulhadi and George took turns at guarding the bungalows by night. The yowl of tigers and scream of leopards could be heard every night, but their sense of security from the tongmen grew as nothing was seen of them. Their thoughts and talk were on the job ahead. One more rapids, a long one of thirteen miles above Luang Prabang, to transport around, and then they would be heading into mountain country where there were no roads at all and the streams were impassable for canoes. Seventy miles of it to Cinnabar Mountain. It looked formidable enough, even without a hostile prince opposing them with all the savages at his command!

On the last night out from Luang Prabang, the chowkedar put too much spice in the curry and Marilyn could not get to sleep. She had gotten used to the gecko lizards cheeping all night in the roof

thatch, and scurryings across the floor that meant a wood-rat pursued by the bungalow snake, but this night all these noises made her jumpy and nervous. For long spells she lay on one elbow, with her head just over the window screen and her eyes watching idly the empty and silent road. Its metalled surface was barely distinguishable in the darkness from the wall of pine trunks opposite. And then, of a sudden, she was shocked wide awake, and was studying the gloom intently. She could not be sure of it, but something black and formless was drifting by, silently passing up the road like a cloud of smoke. It was too long for any animal, and all of a height, about six feet.

"Abdulhadi!" she called softly.

"Here, Mem!" He came striding down the veranda. "Art awake at this hour? Lo, Allah made sleep, but the devil devised wakefulness—"

"Peace! I saw something go up the road just now, Abdulhadi. It looked like men in black."

"Ho! The people of the tong, belike?" He laid hand on his tulwar hilt. "It is in my mind to go after them."

"Just what I think," she said. "I'll wake Pickett Sahib."

She shook George awake. He groaned complainingly and then rubbed his eyes and yawned.

"Put on your boots and get your gun," she whispered. "The tong has just gone up the road."

George considered. "Well—it's too late to do anything about it. They'd be into the woods in no time."

"George! They're going to murder the King! Aren't you going to do *anything?* You can ride after them."

HE SAT up. "But just what can we accomplish?" he demanded. "They'd hear us coming and scatter. Then it would be Abdulhadi and I against the lot. That's hardly good business for the Company, is it?"

"All right. Just as you say," she said coldly. "Abdulhadi and I will go if you won't."

"Indeed you'll not!" George said fiercely; but she had already left him to pick up her revolver belt and go out on the veranda.

George tugged on his boots angrily. Confound her! She *would* get them into a mess like this! He felt very low. This habit of his, of looking all around a thing before he went into it, had finished him with her. Confound her again, he thought, as he heard her go down the steps to join Abdulhadi. Any normal girl would have hidden under the bed, with an assassin tong anywhere about! She knew what they were like—more deadly than so many cobras at close quarters. She was incurably romantic and sentimental, he thought huffily as he finished lacing and went after them.

Abdulhadi had left his pony tied to a veranda post. George walked the animal along the soft turf of the roadside and soon caught up with them. "You go back, Marilyn," he ordered. "This is no work for a woman."

She shrugged. "Major Foanes would not have hung back! The King's life is at stake."

George saw that she was shivering violently and said, "Turn back! You ought to know what these people are."

"I'm scared to death really, George," she turned to confess with chattering teeth. "But I'd be much more scared to go back alone than to stay with you and Abdulhadi—"

"Quiet, Mem! Yon they be!" Abdulhadi whispered and pointed. Some fifty yards ahead, the white road ended in a dark and formless blotch. A faint gabble

of Tonkinese floated back from it to their ears.

Abdulhadi dismounted. "Thy servant will hasten through the pines and come abreast of them," he said to George. "Do thou and the Mem ride on slowly. When ye hear the thud of my little knife, fire heartily upon them with the hand-guns. Go to, let's make an end!"

HE WAS gone across the road into the pines before Marilyn could protest. George noted that she was not shivering now, but steady and peering interestedly ahead, her gun ready. He aimed experimentally the long-barreled .38. A 45-degree flat, filed on its front sight, made a small mirror that reflected the night sky enough to make a whitish patch in the gloom. With ponies halted they waited, listening for Abdulhadi's attack.

A sudden whirr and thud, followed by a mortal scream threw the tong into a confused huddle. Marilyn began firing at once. The mass dissolved into running black figures scurrying for the cover of the pines. George spurred his pony toward a group clustered on Abdulhadi's side. The .38 bellowed into it once, twice; then he was close up and they scattered and vanished, with Abdulhadi following. He whirled about to watch Marilyn's side—was just in time to catch one of them jumping up out of the ditch behind her. The revolver streaked red flame and tumbled him face forward. She fired once more, a snapshot into the dense tree trunks, and then came over to him.

"Thanks, George," she said. "I think I got two."

"I know I did," he said. The thrash of violence sounded in the undergrowth, followed by a fierce, *"Ha!"* from Abdulhadi. He came out presently. His teeth gleamed whitely in his beard as he held up three fingers.

"One to my little knife, Sahib," he said. "Two to the tulwar. May the Brand of the Dog be upon them all!"

"How many were there?" George asked.

"Ya Allah! Who could count, Sahib? But verily there were not more than ten." He stopped to search the bodies on the road for his knife.

"We got seven altogether," George announced after counting. "This will be good news for De Aalborg, Marilyn!"

"It's time they learnt that others can kill besides themselves," she said vengefully. "He's such a brave jolly King, George!"

The capital was *en fête* when the corporation's caravan arrived. It was a curious town, built mostly on piles along the banks of the Mekong on the Nam Khan, which flowed in there. It maintained a lively commerce with Annam, Burma, and China; but at present all its population were engaged in setting off giant fusils eighteen feet long, preparatory to a great parade of the royal elephants escorting those of the Corporation up from the river to the palace Court of Honor. They found Captain De Aalborg on the wharf with Foanes. The Dane looked worried, nervous, his eyes anxious and haunted by his weight of responsibility.

"I've been waiting for you," he told George and Marilyn. "The King has been escorted under close guard up to the palace. His Majesty insists on holding the ceremony of the Bassie tonight. It is a courtesy that he extends to all distinguished foreigners and is a public function. I like it not!" His hand rose jerkily to his chin. "Did you see anything of the assassin tong while coming up the road? They should arrive here about the same time as we."

George grinned. "We sure did, sir! Mar—Miss Brown happened to be awake when the whole tong passed our bungalow. About two in the morning it was. She thought we ought to do what we could, for the King's sake, so we went after them."

"Good girl! Major Foanes beamed on her. "Our duty; quite. I hope you didn't go, too?"

"To tell the truth I was scared pink," Marilyn laughed. "But it had to be done, hadn't it? Abdulhadi and George and I dressed and rode up the road after them. They were so close together that you couldn't miss when we opened fire." She gave a few details. "We got seven altogether."

Foanes shook his head at George. "You really ought to get you a rifle, old chap. Might have bagged the lot."

George said nothing. The Major had no idea of how efficient a long-barreled revolver could be in the hands of a really good shot. Some day he hoped to show him. De Aalborg faced them gloomily and said:

"Our spies in Hanoi report that there were twenty in this band. That leaves three still at large. One is enough. I must do my best; and you gentlemen will please keep your weapons on you. If you note any suspicious person at the Court, signal me—or shoot him down yourself, if need be. Any such attack on the King will be sudden, if at all."

Abdulhadi grinned at him reassuringly, with a flash of white teeth in his beard. "Ho, Captain-Sahib, my little knife, too, is sudden!" he said. "'Tis a good King, and we want no assassin prince. Lo, it is folly to anoint a rat's head with oil of jasmine!"

HE RODE swaggering behind Foanes and George and Marilyn, ogling all the little Laotian ladies as they went up toward the palace under De Aalborg's escort. The parade moved toward a prodigious décor of palace and pagoda spires, up a road that was lined on both sides with singing girls, flower-crowned. Queues of yellow-robed priests joined in; then followed a double file of fantastic monsters representing the Ancestral Laotians, those ancient gods that were here before the Buddha's religion reached them—and that was two centuries before Christ. The night was illumined with candles, torches, Chinese lanterns of every hue. It was gay with the laughing chatter of a happy populace. As they approached the Court of Honor, an orchestra of rhaneks and bamboo flute-organs and twanging khenes struck up a rhythmic medley of sound like a combination of xylophones, pipes, and nasal guitars.

HIS MAJESTY, Sisavang Vong, sat on a tall, rectangular golden throne at the far end of the hall. His sword of state lay across his lap, and his crown was Buddhist, richly jewelled, and rising in a slender pagoda spire of gold for some two feet above his head. Except for the modern medals of various orders on his breast, and the broad ribbon of the Legion of Honor over his right shoulder, he might have been some Oriental potentate in the embroidered mandarin gown of regimes that were ancient before the first Europeans ever voyaged to the East.

He looked benignly over his people as Foanes' party advanced, escorted by Captain De Aalborg. George found himself admiring the broad-minded versatility of the man. Tonight he was a potentate of the old regime, conducting an ancient ceremony; tomorrow he would be in European whites and busy in a modern office, with file-clerks and typewriters, superintending a hundred different business enterprises in the development of his kingdom —among them their own.

Amid the perfume of lilac and frangipani blossoms, incense tapers were lighted as Foanes stopped before the throne and bowed. Two elderly priests prostrated themselves at the King's feet. A long double file of yellow-robes was chanting a litany of invocation. Behind them were ranged dignitaries of the court, dancers in saffron veils, resplendent elephant drivers and minor functionaries; then De Aalborg's soldiers. These latter were in French-colonial khaki with blue facings, conical straw hats with a rakish tassel atop. They carried their Lébel rifles at

the porte. George thought that the good Dane had been rather obtuse in placing them at the extreme rear. They would be the first to intercept any assassin trying to get in—but suppose one of the tongmen was already here? Those guards would have been stationed immediately behind the priests if George had had the management of it.

THE invocation chant concluded and the ceremony of the Bassie began. The two elderly priests arose and the King extended his wrists. About them the priests tied thin cotton cords as bracelets; then they bowed to Foanes to advance and hold out his hands.

"The cord is the Bassie, or good-will carrier," De Aalborg explained to Marilyn and George. "Whoever wears it is sealed with the King's special favor and commands the loyalty of all his subjects. You are not to take it off till it wears out and falls off of itself. You're next, Miss Brown."

George had time to glance furtively along the line of priests on both sides of them.

They were—like priests the world over—some benign of countenance, some stupid, others fanatical, and cruel in features as rattlesnakes. It did not seem probable, but it was possible that one of these might be a tongman in disguise. He could have joined the queue without being especially noted by the others, all of them with their minds on the ceremony.

After George had received the decoration of the Bassie, the orchestra burst into music, the chanting recommenced, and the King arose to make a brief speech requiring the good will of his subjects to these foreigners who were bringing yet more riches to Laos. They retired, facing him. George kept his eye on the line of priests. Their backs were to him in long straight lines, and their shoulders heaving as they poured out a vigorous and repeated refrain to the Buddha in their strong male voices. The King continued to stand before his throne, smiling at them affectionately.

Foanes' party had reached the gate of the court, and Abdulhadi was already leading in their ponies, when George noted that one of the priests had stepped out of the line and gone down on all fours. He grasped De Aalborg's arm.

"Is that all right, Captain?"

"It's unusual, but the fellow has probably a petition to make," De Aalborg said, unconcerned. "The King allows it after a Bassie."

They watched a moment while the priest crept forward in the humble crawl of a petitioner approaching the Throne.

"Well, maybe; but I'm taking no chances," George said and whipped out the long .38.

The Major turned on him angrily. "Here! What in the world are you doing, Pickett? *Ha!*"

He snatched hastily for his own revolver, for at that instant the petitioner had suddenly leaped to his feet and was dashing for the King with upraised dagger.

George leveled the gun on him. One second; his front sight wavered, covering now the King, now the assassin. They were in a direct line from him, the King slightly above. Two seconds; the King had flashed out the glittering sword of state. The man was not six feet from him now. George felt the familiar locking of his arm muscles and saw the front sight snuggle down steady into the rear sight notch. Three seconds; his trigger released. The gun flamed out a leaden punch that pitched the assassin headlong as if hit by a sledge. George saw the King dodge a whirring dagger that stuck point foremost into the gilded woodwork of the throne behind him—and then everything went black for an instant before his eyes, and his heart stopped its beat for what seemed an age. Those three seconds of intense concentration, *the* most crucial seconds in all his experience, had drained the very life from him. Then he straightened up. The King

stood there, unhurt and smiling, with his sword raised in salute.

III

FOR bucking a man up, nothing can equal a difficult feat of arms successfully done. George, still trembling from that ordeal that had come upon him all of an instant, found Major Foanes' eyes fairly blazing on him with cordiality and respect, Marilyn looking at him happily, and Abdulhadi smiting him on the back with a hand like a ham.

"By the light of God!" he roared. "Art matchless with a hand-gun, Sahib! In truth, it was too far for my little knife, Huzoor," he told Foanes apologetically.

He was sheathing that formidable throwing weapon as the Major found breath to say, "Nervy work, Pickett! I'd not have dared it in a million, 'pon my word!"

"As a matter of fact, I was scared to death of seeing too much front sight!" George laughed. Then the King was with them and shaking his hand, his eyes full of gratitude.

"You will all stay at the palace while in Luang Prabang," he commanded. "Your expedition, Major, must rest awhile and enjoy the hospitality of my capital."

Foanes cracked an experienced smile at him. "One day only, sir. Two, and we'd have so many drunken coolies that we'd have to cart the lot out of town!"

The glamor of that shot stayed with George through the toilsome two weeks of river and road that followed. It gave him a quiet serenity that wiped out those distressing memories of the times when Foanes, Abdulhadi, and Marilyn took the lead and he merely seconded. And, in their eyes, he was no longer the plodding manager, a good man for routine only, but one who could be depended on to do something in a tight place. Marilyn kept on encouraging him while the caravan passed through the miles of rubber plantations west of Luang Prabang, transshipped the entire load around the long Ba Kok rapids, and once at Keng Lé. The river above there bordered on Siam's share of the Shan States and was filled with teak traffic. The long rafts, manned by hard-faced Shan lumbermen, were passing down as the launches breasted the stream upward. Came the town of Chieng Sen and the head of navigable water. On both the Burma and Laos sides, the outrageously steep Shan mountains, six thousand feet to their summits, lay to the northward with not the semblance of a road in their valleys. George and Foanes scratched their heads after the entire Scott furnace and all the small stuff had been loaded on elephants and bullocks. There remained on the carts four spools of wire cable that weighed a ton each. How to move them for seventy miles in to Cinnabar Mountain was something of a poser.

George was urging rolling them by manpower as best they could, and Foanes was all for building a sketchy road, when Abdulhadi rubbed his bulbous nose and said:

"Yea, verily, there is nothing fit for wheels; but we have two hundred pairs of legs, Huzoor. Let the ropes walk in on their own feet. As it were a centipede—"

Foanes guffawed. "Topping, Abdulhadi! Space the coolies ten feet apart along the cable and we have it. Chain-gang, what?"

"Let be, then! Ho, ye owls! Ye cut-off ones! Ye grand-children of frogs!" Abdulhadi addressed his army. "Lay hold on this rope. And stumble not lest the wrath of my switch fall upon ye!"

He had wrenched out the staple on the first spool. The wire rope ran out as it

uncoiled. Soon fifty pairs of legs were walking off with it into the hills. George, amused, sat his pony, watching the other spools move off. Marilyn had been busy paying off the carts. She now joined him and they reined in side by side, looking up their valley of the Pou Kas range. It bobbed with gray elephants in single file, the train of lumbering bullocks, the long files of marching coolies—all heading into the wildest region of wild and backward Laos.

"Isn't it all priceless!" She sighed happily. "To think that *I* should have the luck to be on an expedition like this! Picturesque and Oriental as can be, isn't it?"

"Picturesque—but vulnerable," George said. "This is the province of Prince Hong Peng, that other reactionary brother of the King's. We haven't seen any of his hillmen yet, but——"

She laughed. "You're always looking ahead for trouble, George. Why not enjoy what we have till it comes? What am I supposed to do when we get there, anyway?"

"Check up on everything; then you'll be issuing tools and supplies," George said. "You'll have a shack of your own. The coolies will have to sign a chit for everything they take, and you see that it is returned at the day's end or we'll soon run out of tools."

THEY were not molested during the four days of the trek. A few Kha and Moi came into camp, demanding tobacco. They were armed with cross-bows having an ironwood stock and a bow six feet long and two inches thick. The Moi carried long-bows and spears. Both tribes had throw-sticks with razor-sharp blades set in the heads like shuttlecocks. They wore little save a loin-cloth and a circlet of cowrie shells that dangled a small silver bell over one ear.

On the evening of the fourth day in, the goal of all this effort, of the collection of all this material in far America, its shipment across the Pacific, its rail haul from Vinh on the sea-coast up to Thakhek on the Mekong by the King's brand-new railroad, its transportation up three hundred miles of river and seventy of mountains, came in sight—Cinnabar Mountain.

It rose majestic among its fellows, with the high cone of Pou Kas for neighbor. Of light yellow limestone, the feature of it that had made men venture eagerly their capital, their time and their toil was a stratum of deep red ore that looked narrow, but was in reality more than a hundred feet thick. It contained millions of tons of mercury ore that wanted only an aerial tramway to get it down and a reducing furnace to render the mercury into liquid and transportable form.

George sat and looked at the mountain joyously. Already he had picked an anchorage for the tramway cable—a precipice some distance below the ore stripe. It would roll down by gravity to that point; then be collected and shoveled into the tip-buckets. George knew that there was considerable cinnabar ore in those mountains of Chinese Yunnan to the north. It trickled into Bhamo in Burma by Shan pack-train; but this prodigality of Nature in bestowing upon Laos a whole moutain of it fairly took his breath away. They would start work on it tomorrow, if he was any driver of men! He could envisage their brigade of coolies marching the cable up the hill as their first step.

Major Foanes had ridden back to join him and Marilyn. "Quite up to my correspondence with your President Sloan, what?" he inquired with an explorer's pride. "This was as far as I got last time, y'know. The air was blue with cross-bow bolts, I promise you! Abdulhadi and I rode hell-for-leather back down the valley. Kha and Moi blighters no end, up there."

He pointed up at the barren and scrubby ridges of red laterite on both sides of them. Abdulhadi grunted.

"In truth they loved us not, Sahib," he

told George. "There came certain heathen down the mountain bearing sacks, and I said, 'Ho! Here's gold!' and did smite one with my tulbar. But pish, the man had naught but red stones—"

"Aye, prime cinnabar, assaying thirty percent liquid mercury, if you don't mind!" Foanes interrupted proudly and beamed at George.

"Yea, but is it worth a man's bones, Huzoor?" Abdulhadi protested. "Gold, yes. Rubies, yes. But yonder red dirt—Ptu!"

Foanes laughed. "There are millions of good silver rupees up in that dirt, my prince of horse-thieves! Thou and I and Pickett Sahib are here to take them out."

"They were mining it already, I gather," George said. "If you were attacked, it means that this prince gets a revenue from it and keeps the mountain guarded."

"No doubt. I fancy it goes over into Bhamo, where there is a market for it," Foanes said unconcernedly. "If this prince chap does not visit us in a few days, I shall have to go exploring for him. Always keep an eye on your enemy, y'know!"

THE work started with a rush next morning. Gangs of coolies commenced felling timber for an elephant stockade and cutting ironwood for charcoal. George and Abdulhadi led their wire cable brigade up the slopes and then scaled the precipice together to locate an anchorage for the tramway. Above them the steep slope rose on a grand scale up to the glistening stripe of crystalline red cinnabar. George noted small caves at the base of the ore. Evidently they had been dug out by the natives.

After finding a cleft into which the great anchorage bolt could be secured, George went up there exploring. The caves were deserted. Primitive picks left in them, of Shan make, told him who the miners were. A pony pack-trail led off westward along the base of the ore.

They would be back some day, he thought, and they were stout people to deal with—fighters and workers of the best. Either he could hire them to work for the Corporation, or, if loyal to Prince Hong Peng, they would have to be bribed or talked out of it. They would be formidable enemies if allowed to dig in up here. They had no end of artillery, in these countless boulders of all sizes that could be set rolling down the slope. Guarded by a force of cross-bow men, they would be most difficult to dislodge.

George returned to the brink, to find Abdulhadi joined by a group of coolies and hauling up the anchorage bolt and an end of the wire cable. Down below, on a small flat, Major Foanes had started erecting his especial pride and care, that Scott furnace. Its cast iron bed-plates were in place, and the lower ring of circular castings was being bolted up as fast as uncrated. A pair of elephants were carrying and placing these. It would stand about thirty feet high when erected. The ore was dumped in through a hopper at the top; below, charcoal and a blast roasted the ore till liquid mercury ran out of it through a spout that led from its iron basin.

George looked apprehensively up the slope and estimated how vulnerable their furnace would be to a bombardment of boulders. Its distance from the cliff was less than eight hundred feet. A huge one, bounding off from the brink, would just about make that, and——

Abdulhadi had finished bolting on the clamps of their tramway cable and was rigging the big pulley for the hauling-rope. Men on the slope below were splicing up the four lengths of wire. It was time for George to be attending to the lower anchorage and the trolley engine. He gave a few directions and climbed down.

"We'd better establish a guard up there, the first thing we do, sir," he reported to Foanes. "Those miners are Shans. They've probably gone to Bhamo with a pony-train of ore. But they may be back any

day. I'd say to block off their trail at some good strategic point."

"Quite. Possession's nine points of the law, y'know. I'm sending up our own miners directly. Let's see; whom have we intelligent enough to pick a good place of defense?"

HE WAS reluctant to leave the furnace, and George was obviously wanted down there. George suggested Abdulhadi.

"No good! That Pathan of mine would pick the broadest spot in the trail so he'd have room to swing his tulwar!" Foanes laughed.

"I'll go," said Marilyn. "I've finished paying off the bullock men."

She had come over from the tent where the pay chests of silver piasters were kept. The elephants would now be plenty for the job. Some of them were on their way back to Chieng Sen for hay and supplies, others at work on the stockade and furnace, and some clearing a site for the coolie lines. Later they would pack out the mercury in loads of stone jars—a ton to each elephant.

"Smart girl!" Foanes said. "You know what's wanted; pick two narrow spots on each side of our diggings, and have them build out a wing wall. A good one; high as you are."

George scratched his chin. "All right," he agreed. "But take Abdulhadi with you, Marilyn. I insist on that. He's up there now."

She nodded at him saucily. "Nice of you, George! But I'm going to be foreman on my own, for once. Shall I bring our miners up with me, Sir Giles?"

"Do that," Foanes said. "She's as good as a man, really, Pickett."

He went back absorbedly to his furnace while Marilyn mustered her gang of pick-and-shovel coolies, hard-faced and brawny hillmen from the King's graphite mines of Lo Kay. George went on with his own work, uneasy and disturbed. He was worried that she was now so far beyond his own protection. She had led her coolies up the rocky talus at the base of the cliff, ascended the steep trail in the gash, and was now climbing those precarious slopes up to the ore. She was a thousand feet away from him in an air line; half an hour of arduous climbing away in point of time.

George set about mending that with an anxious energy. The big lower anchorage bolt was sunk deep into a cleft in the limestone and secured by plates and nuts. Coolies pulled and hauled at tackle-boots clamped to the tramway cable. It rose slowly in a long catenary, extending up to the brink of the cliff above, and was made fast. He felt better then. Men could be sent up, four at a time, in the tip-bucket for reinforcements, in case of emergency.

It wanted only the donkey engine. This small steam windlass, of some five-horse capacity, had been assembled and was now being pushed and rolled into place by coolies toiling at crow-bars. George sent more of them up with fat coils of running-rope to be laid out and spliced as they climbed the talus to the foot of the cliff. Abdulhadi let them down a hand-line. Presently the end of it had been hauled up, rove through the large pulley sheave, and was coming back downhill to George. He fastened it to the ring of their first tip-bucket trolley. The coolies took up slack in a dozen turns around the windlass and the free end was tied to the lower ring of the trolley. George turned the windlass by hand. Slowly the big trolley rolled up the wire till a tip-bucket could be hung on it.

Remained only to raise steam. George looked over the job, considerably more at ease, while wood-smoke was pouring from the funnel of the small boiler. Their workers were scattered all over the landscape and were still highly vulnerable to native attack. He was suspicious of all this peace. Not a sign of molestation in five days. Prince Hong Peng would surely defend this mountain from which he de-

rived his principal revenue. He had but to summon his wild hillmen and attack; if now, the conditions could not be better for springing some vast trap on them.

GEORGE eyed the scrubby ridges on both sides of their valley with disfavor. Down it flowed, into the Mekong, a little stream called the Nam Ma, their sole water supply. The whole valley invited an ambush from those ridges. He called over to Foanes:

"Hadn't we better post lookouts up there, Major? I don't like this being totally unguarded."

"Oh? Er—quite!" Foanes was absorbed in his furnace. Its second ring of castings was being bolted on. Masons were inside laying the fire-brick brought all the way up from Thakhek. He glanced up at the ridges and said:

"Two good shikaris on each ridge will do, I fancy."

George picked four of their best hunters and sent them up into the scrub. The gauge of his donkey boiler was rising steadily. Up on Cinnabar Mountain he could see that Marilyn had set a line of her miners to clearing out a chute down to the trolley. She was now engaged with another group in piling up a wall across the west end of the pony trail. More of her people were already at work in the caves, and Abdulhadi was waiting at the upper pulley to see their first tip-bucket come up safely.

Forty pounds. George opened the petcocks and let the water drain out of the cylinders till steam spurted. It was about four o'clock and their first day's work on the concession had made grand progress, but—it was also the hour for trouble. With the abundant tigers and leopards of this region, if nothing worse.

George glanced up at the silent ridges, already under the great shadow of Pou Kas to the west. He turned open the throttle valve. He expected to do no more than send up the first tip-bucket and bring down an experimental load of ore, to see if the cable needed more taking up—and then a sudden shout from Abdulhadi made him shut off steam. He looked up to where the Pathan's arm was pointing. His nerves were lurching with the alarm in that shout. Up on Cinnabar Mountain he saw that a long line of Shan ponies was now halted on the trail where nothing but that wall of red ore had been. They had come around the east flank of the mountain. They had gained some distance before being discovered by anyone. The black straws of their carbines jutted up behind their conical hats. These guns they were unlimbering swiftly as George stared. Could it be worse, he thought. Marilyn was up there, defenseless save for her gun and Abdulhadi's tulwar. Her coolies would already be diving into the caves like so many rats.

Major Foanes had dropped work and snatched up his rifle. "Range is four hundred yards, I make it," he called over. "Get a rifle quick, Pickett! We can't wait with those chaps."

"No. I'm going up," George said. He flung an arm up toward Marilyn trying to rally the coolies around her and Abdulhadi, who was scorching up the slope to her as fast as he could jump. Already the Shans had opened fire. He turned to call an Annamese mechanic to the throttle—and gave the reckless laugh of a man facing utter disaster. Behind them the whole valley was now in wild confusion under a shower of cross-bow bolts whistling down from both ridges. Their elephants were squealing and trumpeting, the mahouts blubbering and wringing their hands. The coolies were scuttling for cover into the

rocks of the stream, the bushes—anywhere to escape that storm of buzzing ironwood bolts that struck men down like bullets. And, if he could believe his eyes, King Sisavang Vong sat his pony some distance back there on the valley trail. He was dressed in his usual whites and topee when traveling incognito, and was eying the bolts with composure, now and then leaning back to let one pass him.

"For God's sake!" George muttered in angry amazement. It seemed to him that, not only the Corporation's concession, but all Laos was done for now. His Majesty could not have picked a better time to walk right into Prince Hong Peng's clutches.

IV

MAJOR FOANES had stopped firing to shove fresh cartridges into the receiver. He glanced over at George and said harshly, "Well, get on with it, if you're going up there!" Immediately he was facing the hill again, rifle poised, a hand finishing with the loading.

George's habit of thinking around a thing had possessed him after that shock of surprise at finding the King there. It made him slower to act than other men, but sometimes he was sounder than quick thinkers like Foanes. He saw that the Shan had not been able to pass the Major's shooting. The best cartridge in the world, the 1906 U. S. Government thirty-calibre, had piled up a heap of kicking ponies, blocking the trail completely. Their riders were now moving from boulder to boulder along the slope; most of them had dug in, afraid to expose themselves to that deadly fire. He saw that Abdulhadi was down, but the Pathan was crawling toward Marilyn, though still under fire from the Shans. She had taken refuge behind the wing wall. A group of their Laotian miners was with her. It seemed to George that the King was their first care now.

"The King's here, Major," he said.

"What!" Foanes whirled about and saw him. His eyes smoked with blue fury. "You, sir! Get down off that horse instantly, you damned fool!"

The King laughed. "With pleasure, Major!" He swung a leg leisurely and dismounted; then he was tugging at his rifle scabbard. A Lébel bolt-action sporter was in his hand as he came toward them.

"Recruits welcome for your war, no?" he inquired, grinning.

Foanes glared at him. "If Hong Peng discovers that Your Majesty is here, I'll not answer for anything," he growled. "Would you be good enough to get into that furnace and stay there?" he added with an angry gesture at its fire-door.

"Not I!" said the King cheerfully. He surveyed it and the aerial tramway pleasedly. "Fine progress you've been making with the cinnabar!" he declared. Then his face went glum. "But it's all no use. I came up here from Chieng Sen because there is very bad news from England——"

"Mark!" Foanes commenced firing immediately. George saw the hillside covered with scrambling and leaping Shans. More of them were running along the trail under the ore. Some stopped to fire into the caves; the rest were converging on Marilyn's barricade in spite of Foanes' rifle, now joined by the King's. George left them to climb hastily into the tip-bucket and gesture to his mechanic. It started upward. It had not gone ten feet before barbarous whoops like those of the Burma gibbon burst out from the ridge above him and a storm of whistling bolts were pelting all around. George ducked low as one struck the topee from his head and two more rang like hammers on the sheet-iron of the bucket. He saw Foanes turn around in the hail of them and grab the King and shove him unceremoniously through the fire-door of the furnace, following him immediately.

George kept his feet precariously and looked down as the bucket swayed giddily and the new cable above him sagged

and swung. All his coolies had bolted for cover, save the mechanic. He had taken refuge behind the donkey boiler. George shouted encouragement at him. All he had to do was to stay there and reach out a hand to the throttle at the right time. The faithful engine was turning steadily.

OVER the rim of the furnace he saw the heads and shoulders of the King and Foanes emerge. They commenced firing almost horizontally up the ravine. The bush-men had made a clean sweep there. They now had possession of the only trail back to civilization. They seemed driving in the attack from there, and presently George saw the King's helmet go flying off like a football with a bolt through it. Immediately an excited gabble of shouts floated out from the ridge top.

George was above that level now. He was halfway up to the cliff, and due for a fatal fall if either of the new anchorages pulled out. But he had now no thought for himself. Over there on the ridge crest stood a tall individual in a black silk gown, who was pointing and gesticulating furiously at the group of warriors around him. There was no doubt that he was Prince Hong Peng and had recognized his younger brother, the King, and was ordering them all to a massacre.

George fingered the holster of his revolver. Distance, at least three hundred yards, and this bucket was swaying like a balloon as the trolley above him rolled upward. He would have to leave Hong Peng and his followers to the Major. After all, he and the King were in an iron fort that was as good as a machine-gun pill-box.

His eyes turned upward. At once his hands were gripping the iron with impatience. Affairs had turned much for the worse up there. A group of the Shans were dug in close around Marilyn's eyrie at the wing wall. The pops of her revolver mingled with the spanks of their carbines. Occasionally there would be the flash of a steel tulwar and a glisten of wielded picks as the more daring of the miners tried close quarters with the nearest Shans.

THEN other Shans along the ore wall discovered him. Shouts, heavings, a cannonade of rocks large and small came rolling and bounding down the slope, pelting by his ears and hammering on the bucket with force enough to stop it dead. It moved on upward jerkily. George reached up to disengage a stone lodged in the trolley sheave. A boulder the size of a dog-kennel went sizzling by; the small stuff was lacing him unmercifully. And then, twenty feet from the cliff face, the bucket stopped.

George froze for an instant, waiting for that sickening descent of the haul-rope breaking.

Then he gathered his wits.

"Steam's out, I guess," he said. "Here goes!"

He climbed up on the trolley and then crawled the remaining distance hand over hand. Across a rolling field of stones he jumped and dodged; then was climbing up in comparative safety. The buzz and spang of bullets splintering rock were all around him. George located their direction as coming from the Shans around Marilyn's lair. The rest were moving along the ore trail to get abreast of him and start rolling more stones.

He gained distance, across and upwards, in brief rushes to the next rocky cover. The range was not over seventy yards now. Above him a head rose cautiously for a shot at Marilyn. George nailed it with the front sight and fired. The Shan jumped convulsively, with his shoulders sprawled over the boulder in plain sight. Guttural curses whipped across the hillside—then half a dozen vengeful heads rose recklessly and sunlight flashed on rifle barrels. George flattened close under the thrash of that fusillade. Through it he heard three sharp reports from Marilyn's

.32 and a shrill shout from her: *"Look below, George!"*

He turned and scanned the valley. Smoke was pouring in clouds from jungle fires set at the base of the ridge, near the Scott furnace. It drifted in white billows over it, totally obscuring the shooting vision of Foanes and the King. And, massed a short distance up the ravine, was a group of their own elephants, their saddles now clustered with Kha warriors and bristling with the curved arcs of their cross-bows.

GEORGE whistled in rueful admiration of Prince Hong Peng's tactics. In a few minutes more those elephants would be charging through the smoke. Their height was such that the bowmen would be level with the furnace rim. Foanes and the King would be overwhelmed in that desperate encounter.

He groaned. The tip-bucket was his only means of getting down there in time, and it hung immobile. It would remain so—unless Foanes found time for a sudden dash out to release the windlass. Even then it would mean a pell-mell descent that would land him with a probably fatal crash.

"Stay where you are! We're coming down!" Marilyn called out.

It was her answer to the situation, but George could not imagine what she was driving at. He stood up to draw all their fire. A dozen heads rose with barrels aimed down at him, with humped brown shoulders exposed in that temptation. George picked marks and fired as rapidly as he could cock and aim. An avalanche of rolling stones was bounding toward him in a flood—he did not wait for it, but jumped upwards toward them as fast as he could climb. He saw the flash of Abdulhadi's throwing-knife and then the giant Pathan came out in great hobbling jumps downhill, his tulwar gleaming in the sun. Behind him Marilyn with blazing gun, the miners wielding their picks.

George crouched and reserved his last two shots. He had been knocked down twice by lead slugs, and was ragged and bleeding, and his right knee was numb with a stone-bruise, but he could still move. Twice he cleared the path for Abdulhadi of Shans rising to shoot him down point-blank; then they were together and Marilyn was pointing left eagerly.

"The cleft, George! Hurry!" she gasped.

They raced over to it through the scattering fusillade from above. They climbed and fell down its steep trail somehow, jumped and hobbled down the rocky talus. Still below them, the furnace crackled with rapid fire and the white murk around it bobbed with great gray shapes closing in on it from three sides. Leveled crossbows on them shot their bolts in flashing black straws that pierced the fog and vanished. A din of shots, yells, and trumpetings came to them out of the smoke.

"They're alive yet!" George panted. "Shoot for the elephants, Marilyn!"

He had managed, one by one, to reload the chamber cartridges during that mad downward scramble. At that range their bullets could do no more than smack the tough hide, but they would make astonishing whips. Squalls of rage bawled out as he and Marilyn opened fire again. They saw the elephants rising on their hind legs, pawing and trumpeting with rage. The Kha crossbow-men were falling off them like monkeys.

"Now!" said George." Into 'em!"

THE three charged into the smoke. Fierce brown savages, dimly seen in the murk, hurled throw-sticks at them and were gone. They dodged the maddened elephants, and fired at twanging cross-

bows whose bolts whistled by, but no one could see ten feet ahead in this fog. Presently the dim bulk of the furnace loomed close above them and from it came Foanes' voice:

"I say, Pickett; put out that beastly fire so we can see to shoot!"

George laughed with relief. The Major seemed entirely cheerful! He took Marilyn's arm and together they groped onward toward the scrub at the foot of the ridge. They could just see Abdulhadi ahead, his busy arm wielding the tulwar and his assailants going over backward as if hit with a pole-axe.

The heat increased. Ahead, yellowish brown flames were dancing in a brown murk. A continuous popping came from the young bamboo shoots being exploded and consumed as the fire ate its way onward. George stumbled on an abandoned shovel and with it commenced beating at the flames. Further up the ravine he could hear a similar crackle and popping. He shook his head. Baffled with the attack on the furnace, he guessed that Prince Hong Peng and his hillmen were now firing their whole ravine. It would do no good to fight this particular fire.

Marilyn leaned over to him, coughing. "Sounds—like—rifles—to me—George," she said.

He listened more carefully. Those distant pops were faint and continuous, but they had a peculiar whip to them that differed from the explosive pop of green bamboo.

"De Aalborg!" he said. A flood of relief surged over him. It seemed the logical answer. The Dane and his Household Guard, having missed the King at Cheing Sen, would make inquiries and follow him. They had only just arrived. They had immediately attacked Hong Peng and his hillmen, causing that sudden cessation of the shooting around the furnace.

George went on beating out the brush fire. As the smoke cleared somewhat, he and Marilyn saw the heads of horses up in the ravine developing out of the fog like a photographic plate. De Aalborg and a few of his cavalrymen were trying to force their mounts down the ravine toward the fire.

They came forward as George wielded the shovel. De Aalborg saluted him briefly and then rode on a few paces further toward the furnace.

"Sir," George heard him say reproachfully, "it was only by the merest chance that we were able to follow you here—"

"Stop gabbling, De Aalborg, and go get him! Hong Peng—I want him, dead or alive. Go!"

George turned about. The King stood there. He had come out of the furnace, followed by Foanes. His eyes blazed with fury. It was a revelation to George, a usually jolly and good humored man in anger.

"I'm sick of these brothers!" the King went on passionately. "You'll capture Hong Peng this time, De Aalborg if you value your further services with me!"

"I have, sir!" De Aalborg said proudly. "My men are holding him, some distance back there up the ravine. He's pretty badly wounded, sir. Also we have had a wire from Hanoi that the French have discovered and arrested Prince Phu Nyang. What is your pleasure regarding them, sir?"

THE King shrugged his thick shoulders. "Let them be sent to Réunion Isle to join Abd el Krim and the other malcontents," he said. "I'm tired of them both!" George noted that his frown of discontent remained. He now turned to Foanes with a sort of gloomy desperation in his eyes. "I've done what I could for modern progress in Laos, Giles," he said. "And I do wish that this concession of yours could go on! But as a matter of fact, I came here to stop all work on it. This battle we have had has been of no use, save to perhaps save your own lives

and capture my reactionary elder brother —thanks to De Aalborg's arrival."

"What in the world are you talking about, Your Majesty?" Foanes inquired huffily.

"England," the King said tragically. "She is powerful, and my Laos but a poor little dependence of the French Republic. And France would be only too glad to accommodate England on such a small matter as this mercury mountain. Our latest diplomatic correspondence threatens an entire new survey of this region," he told Foanes gloomily. "You know what that means when England wants anything."

Foanes chuckled. "My sainted country! Of all the magnificent bluffs! Look here, Your Majesty; over there in those mountains lies Burmese Keng Tung. Between there and Laos flows the Mekong. It's the international boundary, and no survey can change that, can it? Well, then, none of us has yet crossed the Mekong, has he? Therefore it simply *must* lie west of Cinnabar Mountain, and it's yours, sir! You have but to stand fast on the boundary treaty and let them threaten surveys all they please."

The King looked pleased as a child with a new toy." *Eh bien?"* he said vivaciously. "That is good news, Foanes! And now that I am here," he glanced at the furnace, "might I see it work?"

It was an innocently childish request, with all the work they had yet to do, but George eyed Foanes eagerly.

"All it wants, sir, is the iron basin in place. We might do him a few buckets of ore."

MARILYN seconded him eagerly. She wanted to do this bang-up and send the King back with a sample of their product, if it could possibly be done.

Foanes frowned and turned to Cinnabar Mountain. It was all orange lights and blue shadows up there as the setting sun lowered between it and the peak of Pou Kas. The ore stripe was dark as dried blood. Below it on the rim the Shans were gathered, some barricading the cleft, others grouped around the trolley anchorage and gesticulating over its mechanism.

"Except that we haven't any ore," Foanes growled. "However, I speak Tai. I might go up there and talk some sense into 'em. Do you raise steam in the donkey boiler, Pickett."

De Aalborg protested. "There is no sense in risking your life in any parley, Major, when my men can sweep those people away for you with a few volleys. May I order them up, sir?"

The King stayed him. "A show of force, if you like, Captain," he said. "But let's have no more bloodshed. I want those Shans to be working for us."

De Aalborg sent his lieutenant galloping back up the ravine. George set about firing up the boiler while coolies were set at uncrating the largest casting of all, that big flat basin in which the melted mercury collected. They all watched the spectacular job of four elephants lifting this piece by chain loops, raising it up over the rim, and lowering it till it settled with a clank on the fire-brick ledge inside. No crane could have done it better.

"Steam's up, sir," George announced. The coolie mechanics started bolting up the basin nozzle that led outside. His windlass was now ready to operate the tip-bucket up there near the rim.

A file of dismounted Laotian cavalrymen had come down the ravine. On a gruff order from De Aalborg they spread out in open skirmish order and commenced advancing toward the talus. Foanes did not like it. He shook his head and said:

"This wants some doing, sir. Once your chaps begin shooting, those Shans will get out of hand and we lose so many good miners. I'd rather go up in the tip-bucket and talk to 'em."

THE King demurred. "They might shoot you, Giles."

"Not half they won't! Tell your people

not to fire till I wave my topee, De Aalborg. Lower away, Pickett!"

They could all hear the gabble of wonderment up on the cliff rim as the bucket started downward. George could see grins on some of their faces and fancied that they were getting the idea of the contraption and were pleased at seeing it work. Marilyn had come over to the boiler.

"You're not going up with him, George," she said. "I—I can't allow you to."

"Why, Marilyn!" he said. "Of course I'm going up! He's my chief, isn't he? Whatever risks he takes, I take."

"It's all right for him, George," she whispered. "He talks their language. But you have fought with them. You'd only start them shooting all over again. One dangerous trip in that crazy bucket is enough, George."

"Would you care?" he asked her tensely.

Her breath came short. "I'd care a lot, George," she said.

Her eyes met his for a moment, then looked away. Tears stood in them. George glanced around. The boiler was between them and the rest of the group. Foanes was busy talking with the King and De Aalborg. So he took her in his arms—

The Major, rifle in hand, came over, shortly after. The tip-bucket had come to a halt at the lower end of the cable. George was still ready to go up with him, if so ordered, but Foanes settled it for him.

"This wants a bit of doing, Pickett," he said. "Show of force, what? And a word or two of common sense. It's to their interest to work the mine peaceably with our own Laotians. Do you stand by the throttle. Stop me at good talking range. De Aalborg's chaps are advancing under me. If it's no go and they won't listen to reason, bring me down like the devil."

He stepped into the tip-bucket. George started the engine. They all watched their intrepid little chief going up, either to his doom or to success, depending on the mood of those Shan miners. They were the most hardened of all the peoples of the East, and their ancestors had conquered all Indo-China and a good half of Siam and Burma. But they did admire boldness. The King watched with both hands poising his Lébel for instant shooting; De Aalborg with a doubtful frown and his breath held for a shout to open rapid-fire; George with a silent prayer that it would occur to none of those Shans to cut the hauling rope as it ran quietly over the big pulley sheave up there.

Foanes raised a hand to stop. He began shouting at them in a three-toned dialect that sounded familiarly like the Annamese gabble of their own coolies. The colloquy took some time. George saw rifles being lowered uncertainly, heads together in groups, gesticulation, pointings at the trolley mechanism. Then Foanes signaled for him to send him on up!

Marilyn gripped his arm as he opened the throttle. "I call that magnificent!" she cried. "Why, he hasn't a chance, if they prove treacherous!"

"No fear!" George grinned at her. "Those eyes of his. Trust the Shans to know a real man when they see one!"

"Just the same"—she still clung to him—"I'm utterly glad it's not *you* up there, my dear," she said.

"It's all over, really, honey," he told her reassuringly. "We'll be getting some ore soon."

THEY did. The Major could be seen leading a group of Shans up that chute that Marilyn had dug and spacing them along it. Some of their own Laotian miners appeared at the cave mouth above it. Presently red chunks of ore came rolling down the chute as Foanes pointed and superintended the work. George lowered the first bucket. The trough over to the furnace was not even begun yet, but they had something almost as good—an elephant. The giant animal lifted the bucket off its hook and tipped it over the furnace rim with all the surety of a crane.

All night the flames roared under the melting basin. Later they would use charcoal, but this night dry wood, fed by coolies would serve to gratify the King's wish. He came yawning and rubbing his eyes out of the tent next morning, to find something of a ceremony prepared for him. Under the nozzle of the furnace had been placed a standard quicksilver flask of seventy-six pounds—the world's standard of measurement for that metal. It was not too large to be carried on one of De Aalborg's horses, so that the King could take it back to Luang Prabang with him as a sample product of his new concession.

George stood ready with an iron to prod loose the clay lute that stopped off the basin from its nozzle. De Aalborg's troopers had been drawn up in line a short distance from the furnace; beyond them, in a wide semi-circle on each side, were the Sloan Corporation's elephants, Shan and Laotian miners, Annamese coolies. To Marilyn, who stood beside George, it made a satisfying picture of what a great Oriental industry should be like. And its background was superb — that massive cone of Cinnabar Mountain towering above them, with its prodigal gift of millions of tons of red mercury ore crossing it in a stripe.

The troopers snapped to salute and the elephants tossed their trunks and reared up on their hind legs as the King rode out, escorted by Foanes and De Aalborg.

"Our first product of your mountain, sir," Foanes said briefly. "Ready, Pickett!"

George smote the hard lump of clay lute. Hot liquid quicksilver trickled out, rippled down the spout, fell in a rapid cascade of drops into the stone flask. The King cracked a happy smile.

"Liquid gold, gentlemen—*hein?*" he named it.

George laughed. "Pretty near, sir! The last quotation I saw on it in Luang Prabang was ninety-eight dollars a flask!"

Out of the Jaws of the Yukon

I AM a pioneer sourdough of Alaska and the "Olden Golden Klondike." In 1896 when only seventeen years of age I left Montana, and landed in Juneau, Alaska. I back-packed and sledded my outfit over the Chilkoot Pass in April, 1897. At Lake Bennett I whip sawed lumber from trees to build my row-boat, shot Miles Canyon, Squaw and White Horse Rapids down the mighty Yukon River to Dawson City. I got there June 3, 1897, having just turned eighteen years of age.

For thirty-six years I made my home in the Northland, I mushed the long dim Yukon passes in the 90's behind dog sleds at 50, 60 and 70 degrees below zero, and sought the hidden streams for a golden pay streak, risking life, limb and fortune.

One adventure of mine stands out, one which nearly cost me my life. It was middle September, 1903; fall had come to the Yukon, and ice floes from the hill streams were pouring their burden of ice into the Yukon River. I threw a thousand pounds of grub into a flat bottom row-boat and pushed out from Circle City to drift with the stream two hundred miles to a gold prospect I had uncovered the past summer. Eighty miles from Circle City I passed Fort Yukon and the Porcupine River. Ice floes were getting thicker and bigger. Finally, I passed the Chandliar River and ice chunks surrounded me on all sides. I became afraid and tried to make shore, but this I could not do for the shore ice was slushy and the current of the river ran so swiftly that any try at landing would have cost me my life.

So I sat in my boat and let her drift down stream. Then suddenly my heart seemed to stop for some moments, for ahead of me the ice had jammed and here I was going right into it with my boat. The tons and tons of ice behind me would soon sweep over me. I had to think fast! I piled all my outfit in the back of my boat and then sat down to wait my doom. Would I go under the jam or would the ice behind me push me on top of it?

Luck seemed to be with me, for when I hit the jam the prow of my boat slid along on the top of it and for the time being my life was spared. Here I sat in my boat all night. I couldn't walk on the ice jam, because the slush ice covering it would have prevented me from reaching the shore.

All night long the ice would snap and boom like a cannon, it was inky dark and I didn't know at what moment the jam would break loose and crush me and my boat. To make life even more

lonely, intermittently I could hear a wolf howl and an owl hoot.

It was eleven next morning when the jam started to float down the river, and I was on top of it in my boat. I drifted this way for about fifteen miles, then the jam reached a bend in the river. Here it split up, leaving me on a big cake of ice with my boat. I was still floating fast and finally got out on this cake of ice and paddled it toward shore. The ice along the shore had frozen during the night so I was given a chance to save my life. I was so excited I jumped out on the shore ice—and it held me up. I had lost my boat and outfit, but I was ashore.

I was fifty miles from a house, however, and now it started to snow. I had saved no food, no bedding, no anything. Life had seemed more precious to me, and I let everything else go with the boat. I walked along the shore line till dark, built a campfire and lay there till daylight, then walked again. The snow was getting deeper and walking very tedious. Just before dark on this second day I came to a trapper's cabin and it was sure welcome. My feet were sore and the old trapper had me soak them in hot water and salt. On the little Yukon stove he had a pot full of moose stew with rice and canned tomatoes in it. I never tasted anything so good in my life. I remained four days with the trapper, then mushed on a hundred miles to Rampart City, where I sank a hole to bedrock on Hunter Creek—which had been my destination.

James Raymond Little.

Head-hunting

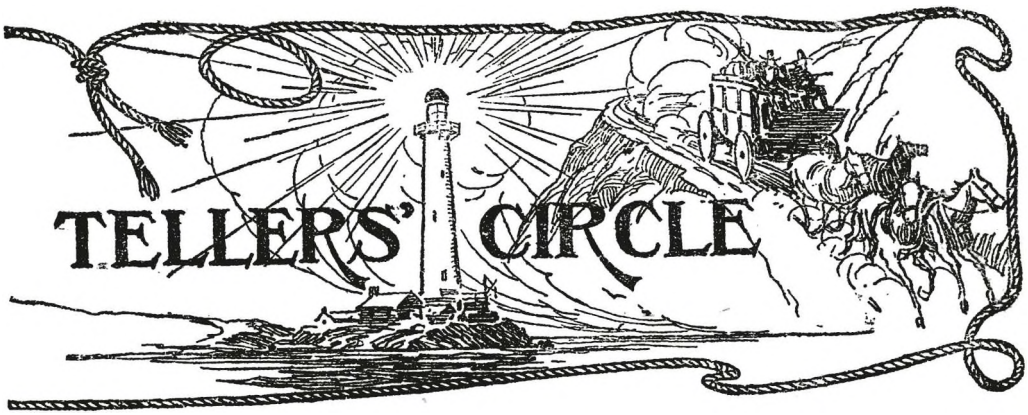
CAP'N BILL of the Gordon Young novelette in this issue remarked that red heads were valuable to the head-hunters, and it is a fact that while head-hunting is tabooed by the authorities it is, nevertheless, carried on clandestinely by the savages in almost every "unadministered" territory of tropical countries from South America to Asia, not excepting such islands as that in Young's stories, where its flagrancy reigns unleashed. But as agriculture and other civilized pursuits are fast replacing this phase of barbarianism, the art of preserving the coveted heads is passing into the discard. However, the few remaining "old masters" among the head-curers still take great pride in their work, displaying a remarkable skill handed down to them by their forebears.

In the Pacific Islands the curing process begins with soaking the head in a chemical mixture of native concoction which is supposed to contain hardening qualities. Then it is smeared with clay which acts as a fireproof coating and the hair carefully included. For days the head is slowly turned on a spit and smoked over the embers of a smoldering fire. When this "barbecuing" is finished, that is, when the fat has been rendered and the tissues properly shriveled, the hair is taken from its clay mold and dressed. Shells are inserted in the eye sockets, and the face frequently streaked in gruesome colors. A similar but more tedious operation is employed when an entire body is mummified. An extra heavy clay coat is applied which serves to prevent the members from falling off. The smoking continues at intervals for many days until the cadaver is thoroughly treated, then it is bedecked with a rag turban, loincloth and necklace or any other trinkets to be found at hand. Native islanders waste nothing but time.

Head-curing is an ancient art in Brazil, and still survives among the Indians of the upper Amazon River region. When the heads are cut from the fallen enemies, they are embalmed and decorated. The trophies are then embellished with feathers, pendants and other ornamentation. In lieu of glass eyes the cavities are filled with the incisors of a large amphibian rodent. Long thongs are hung from the mouth which are intended to form a gag, and serves to prevent the soul of the departed victim from opening his lips to insult or curse his victor.

Solomon Islanders, Maoris and New Hebrideans are addicted to head-hunting, and the local head-curer plays an important rôle in the lives of the natives. Although these islanders are not head-hunters in the strict sense of the word, they do not go on head-hunting raids as do the cannibals of Borneo and the Philippines, still the heads of their slain victims are cured and placed about their huts to frighten off evil spirits.

Slain enemies are not worthy of this painstaking embalming process, being rather rudely and hastily finished off, so



to speak, but after the fashion of the ancient Egyptians, every precaution is given to the preservation of relatives, witch-doctors or ancestral chiefs. Their bodies are cured in a scientific manner, for these mummies are cherished, being placed in the family "portrait gallery." Almost every hut has its embalmed heads and denuded skulls in a frieze along the thatched roof. Often the whole bodies of their victims or relatives are mummified and then arranged in specially constructed galleries like rude catacombs. The few travelers who have penetrated the islands have a horrible aversion to these ever-present mummies and cured heads which leer down from poles, but the savage cherishes his trophies and the "family album" grows yearly and is retained for generations.

Ricochets

"THERE are many tales about bullets which went round corners," writes Howard Nostrand in connection with Bill Kerry's shootings in his story in this issue. "Naturally most of these are exceedingly tall because no marksman when he is serious will admit to hitting something other than his target. However——

"A friend of mine owns a gun that he claims will send a slug ten miles and then throw rocks. It is a breech-loading flintlock rifle that was manufactured for use in the Seminole War and is the invention of a certain Colonel John H. Hall who lived in North Yarmouth, Massachusetts, back in 1811. It is a very beautiful weapon with a peculiar brownish tint to the barrel and is in excellent condition despite its age.

"When I questioned the truthfulness of my friend's statement, he pulled up his sleeve and showed me a long scar on his forearm. 'There,' he said, 'is proof of the rock-throwing.'

"'It happened this way,' he went on. 'Ansel Koegler, a sourdough friend of mine, owned a shack in the northern part of Idaho in the wildest little canyon that I ever hope to see. He and I went there for a couple of weeks. This was in 1924, or thereabouts, so we made the journey in a Model T Ford loaded with bedding, food, gasoline, firearms, skid-chains and shovels. There was also a mandolin, I recall, which I spoiled one night by sitting on it. Anyhow we ran our faithful Lizzy over unbelieveable terrain and eventually found the shack. Game was plentiful and tame, and my Remington had plenty of exercise. Ansel had a Springfield Sporter, but he claimed that it wasn't fair to such friendly critters to use a repeater, so he borrowed the flintlock and went out with powderhorn, patches, a pocketful of slugs and various other odds-and-ends of the early nineteenth century sharpshooter.

"'One morning we were following a dry water course when Ansel stopped suddenly and pointed. Angling off up the slope were the padmarks of a catamount.

"'Fresh,' he whispered. 'And damn big. Let's go!'

"'We climbed for a couple of hours.

Lunch time passed. We kept on climbing. That animal could have been in Canada for all we knew, but we kept on. And then when the sun was beginning to think about quitting for another day, we saw our cat. He was on a rocky rise about three hundred yards to the north and slightly above us.

"'Get him, Ansel,' I whispered.

"'Listen,' he said. 'If I miss I'm done. Get over by those junipers and back up my shot.'

"'Old catamount paid no attention. Just lay there on his belly and waited to be killed. I crawled off across the slope and waited too. Minutes passed. I could just see the top of Ansel's head.

"'Suddenly the gun roared. The cat disappeared with one tremendous leap and I jumped up and down and held my arm. I thought I was bleeding to death. A rock fragment sharp as a razor had raked me from wrist to elbow.

"'After calming down a bit, we became curious and tried to piece together what had happened. It amounted almost to a right-angle ricochet. The slug from the old flintlock had been deflected by a flat rock face, had clipped an outcrop at least fifteen feet from where I stood and one of the flying fragments had got me.'

"'Did you get the catamount?' I asked.

"My friend shook his head. 'Nope. And we didn't find the slug either.' "He thought for a moment, then added, 'But we had a damn late supper.'

"Well, his yarn set me to thinking about ricochets and I began talking about them to men who handle rifles. Numerous windy discussions resulted. 'Bought off with Bullets' grew from one of them."

Prizes for Letters about SHORT STORIES

AS WE announced in our last issue we want you to tell us what you think of SS, which stories you like best, which authors most take your fancy—and everything that comes into your head that will help us to make SHORT STORIES the magazine you can't get along without.

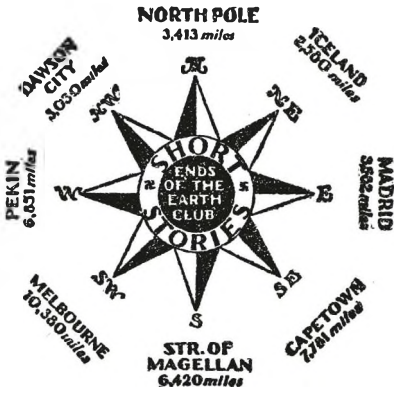
Here are the stories in this issue listed in order for your convenience:

CAP'N BILL TAKES CHARGE
BORN BAD
WILDERNESS PARTNERSHIP
HIGH HAND AT ROCKY BEND
BOUGHT OFF WITH BULLETS
A GUN DON'T SHOOT SO WET
WYATT'S CHINESE PUZZLE
THE CASUAL LOOKER-ON
NORTH ALONG THE MEKONG

For the best letter of not over four hundred words, telling us which of these stories you like best and why, SHORT STORIES will pay $10.00; for the second best $5.00.

What we want is help in our own discussions of what the readers like, what we like, which stories will be most popular and which sort of stories will sell more SHORT STORIES. So sharpen up your pencils, pens and typewriters and let us hear from you. This issue will be on sale from September 10th to September 25th and your letter about it must reach us by September 30th to be considered for a prize. The letters will appear in the "Sez You!" section of the Story Tellers' Circle.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

From one anticipating a trip to Venezuela—can you give him any information?

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member of the Ends of the Earth Club. I have been reading your magazine for a number of years and like it immensely.

I have traveled throughout England and the United States and would be glad to give out any information possible, concerning these countries.

I am eager to correspond with residents of Venezuela, as I intend to go there within a few months.

Yours truly,

Percy J. Collings

1144 Acoma St.,
Apartment 306,
Denver, Colorado.

It's getting to be an even race between the stamp collectors and the snapshot fans.

Dear Secretary:

We have been readers for some time of your splendid SHORT STORIES and can hardly wait for each new issue to appear, and feel that we owe your publication many thanks for the splendid stories it is putting out.

For some time too we have been interested in the Ends of the Earth Club, and am venturing to ask you to enroll two lonesome folks on your list. It's not that we are lonely for people so much, but more that we have a desire to hear from far away places. About their desires and ambitions and views on life in general. We promise to be good buddies, to exchange letters, post cards and snaps and also souvenirs if desired. We are also both stamp collectors and will exchange stamps also. And—anything else that we can do to make our correspondence of interest to those that write us.

Sincerely,

Kara Terroll

611 N. Benton Way,
Los Angeles, Calif.

Berne Reynolds

7504 Eggleston Ave.,
Chicago, Illinois.

Here's another chap who is interested in photography.

Dear Secretary:

I will very much appreciate your enrolling me as a member of your Ends of the Earth Club.

Corresponding with pen pals, together with photography, are two of my most enjoyable hobbies. While I would like to hear from friends interested in free lance press photography, I will welcome correspondence from any who desire to write me. Would also like to exchange snaps with other members, especially those living in foreign countries.

Thanking you very kindly, I am,

Most sincerely,

Frank A. Costanzo

Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania.

Will some of the younger members write this young man?

Dear Secretary:

I am writing to the Ends of the Earth Club because I have never seen a boy's name in the column under eighteen years of age. I am sixteen years old and I know that there are plenty of boys that old, or even younger that hesitate to write to someone that would make a good pen pal, because they can't find any one their own age.

I hope you will print this so that I can find a boy my own age to write to.

Yours,

Robert Dunwiddie

809 Broadway,
Jefferson City, Missouri.

SAVE THESE LISTS!

WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy* SHORT STORIES *because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Save these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.

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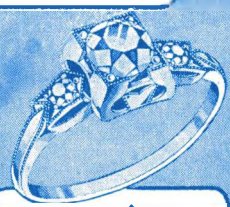

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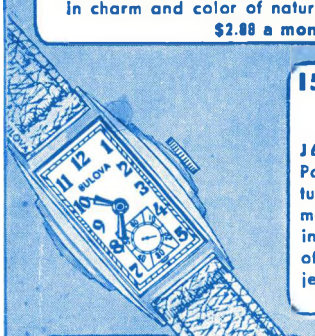

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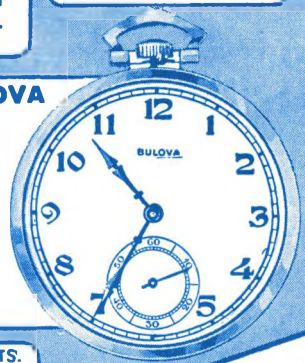

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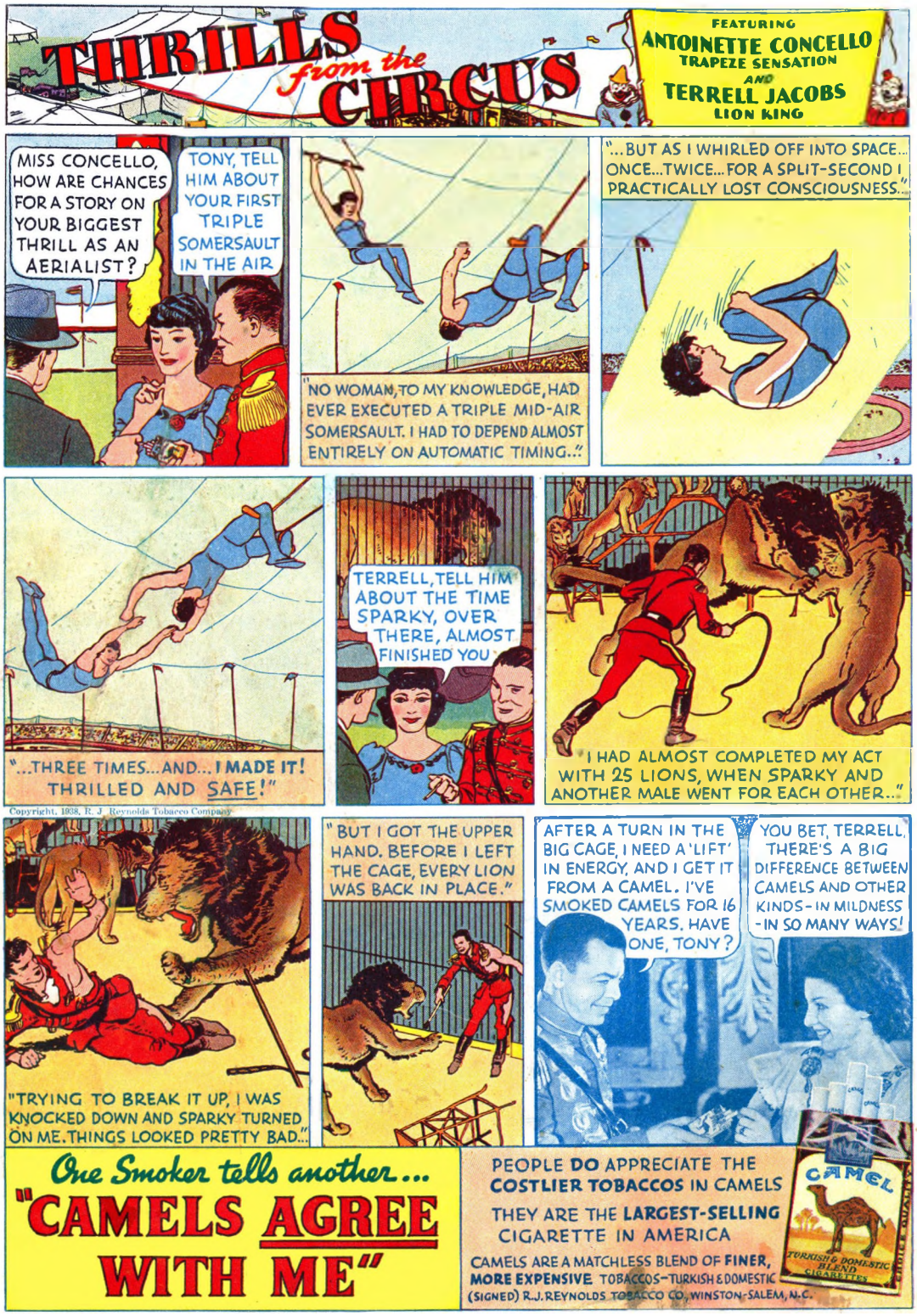
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"I HAD ALMOST COMPLETED MY ACT WITH 25 LIONS, WHEN SPARKY AND ANOTHER MALE WENT FOR EACH OTHER..."
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"BUT I GOT THE UPPER HAND. BEFORE I LEFT THE CAGE, EVERY LION WAS BACK IN PLACE."
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