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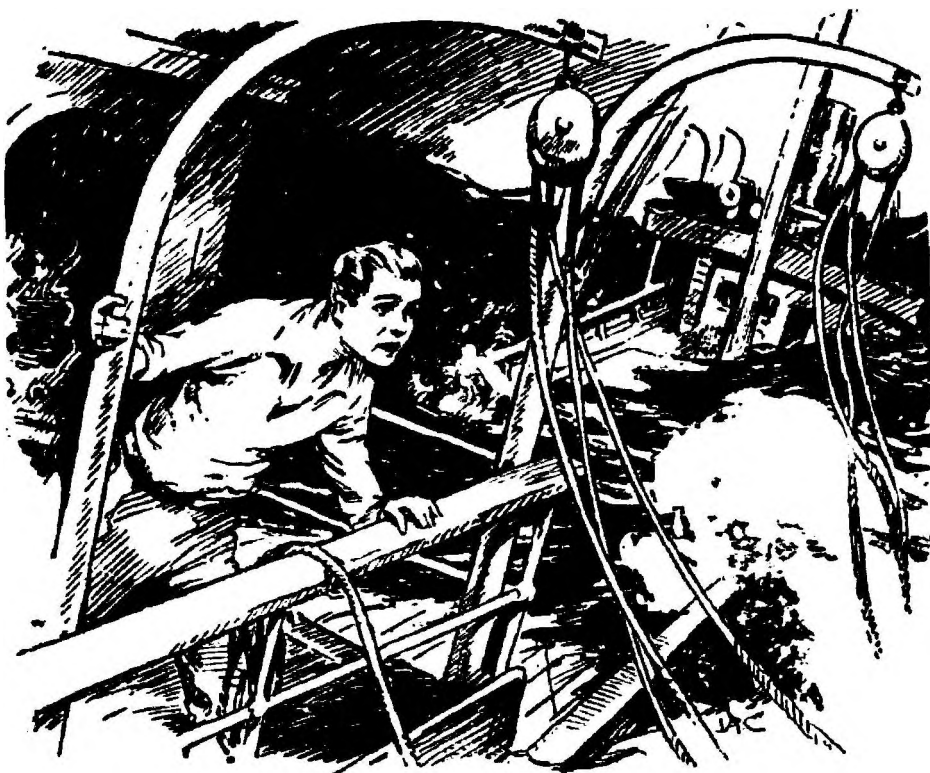


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When Wilbur Stetson kept books in his uncle's bank, he had never heard of a place called

Fandango Island

By Fred MacIsaac

A Three-part Serial—Part I.

CHAPTER I.

BROKEN CHAINS.

THE afternoon sun was pouring through the window of the auditing department of the First National Bank of Stoughton, New Hampshire. The sunlight was warm, golden, and intriguing, and Wilbur Stetson, having totaled a long column of figures for the third time,

TN—1

laid down his pen and gazed absently out of doors.

He was a big young man, with a long, lean, intelligent face, thick, yellowish-brown hair, and clear blue eyes.

Directly opposite was the white meetinghouse of the Congregational Society, flanked by the brick building of the county courts, and the hay-and-feed store of a rather distant cousin, Alfred Stetson.

Aside from a couple of loafers outside the wooden post-office building, there was nobody on Main Street. Stoutsville was a sleepy little town, prosperous in its way, but no place in which a fellow should spend his whole life.

For two years, Wilbur Stetson had been auditor of the First National. In another five years he might become assistant cashier. By the time he was thirty-five, he might be cashier. When he became fifty, he would have a chance to succeed his uncle as president of the bank.

Harleigh Stetson was fifty now. At eighty he might die or retire. If in the course of thirty years Wilbur never strayed from the straight and narrow path, Uncle Harleigh might leave him all his money. The prospect was so remote as to be negligible.

WHEN Wilbur had been graduated from high school, he was eager to go to college, but Uncle Harleigh had read that colleges bred dissipation. He told Wilbur he could come into the bank, where a steady job was assured, or the rich man would wash his hands of him. A college education was a hindrance, not a help to a man in business. When Wilbur had rebelled, his widowed mother had pleaded with him, and he had yielded.

For two years he had worked like a slave for a miserable salary, spent long hours in the evening listening to Uncle Harleigh lay down the law about everything under the sun, and yet he had carried on. But since his mother's death a year ago, he had been living under Harleigh's roof, and he had been at the breaking point.

Uncle Harleigh had a big house, musty with age, and poorly cared for by an elderly housekeeper, whose cooking would have been bad enough if the banker had not stinted her regarding

food materials. And Wilbur was twenty-one, and the sap of life was flowing fast in his veins. Common sense told him that the restrictions regarding his own time were unfair. Work wasn't all there was in life for a young man. He had a right to go to harmless parties and to slip into a movie, and to play a little penny ante with the boys in the back room of the drug store.

Why couldn't a fellow take a ride with a pretty girl if they both wanted to? Why did he have to pretend to go to bed at ten o'clock, when he should have been allowed to go out by the front door when he pleased, and have his own latchkey?

Wilbur didn't know how much money his uncle had, but, if it were a million, it was not worth the present martyrdom. He was going to have a good time, no matter what happened. And he was having it. Last night, he had rolled his uncle's Ford out of the garage, started it in the street, called for Dora Folsom, and had driven her out to the Slocum road house, where there was a jazz band and dancing.

Nothing wrong with that. In Stoutsville there were no speakeasies. Slocum's would have been closed tighter than a drum if a drink were ever sold there. Wilbur smiled. He and Dora had had a swell time, and hadn't got back until one in the morning. He had had to take a chance, in backing the Ford into the garage, that Uncle Harleigh would hear him, but nothing had been said at breakfast, so that seemed to be all right.

He wasn't in love with Dora, nor she with him. He didn't want to be in love. He wanted to live. The news reels in the movies pleased him more than the picture plays. The world was full of wonderful places; picturesque, exotic, wild, and exciting, but nothing had ever happened in Stoutsville, and nothing ever would.

When he inherited his uncle's fortune he would be too old to have any fun. At

fifty a man had one foot in the grave. He had rheumatism and whiskers. Wilbur sighed, and picked up his pen. He had not the slightest premonition that the world, as he knew it, would come to an end in a couple of minutes.

"Hey, Wilbur," called Uncle Harleigh's old-maid secretary. "He wants to see you."

"O. K., Miss Thrimm," he replied. Nothing to worry about. He was up in his work, and he rarely made an error. He rose and went into the private office.

UNCLE HARLEIGH sat behind his big desk, his hands folded on his paunch. He had a handkerchief over his bald head to keep off the flies. His jowls were heavy, and his nose was big, and his mouth was set in a thin straight line. While Mr. Stetson was a fat man, he was not the jovial type. He was a grim, ponderous Puritan, who rarely smiled and never laughed lest he disturb the angels who, presumably, were gathered round him approvingly.

"What's this I hear about you?" he said in a shrill querulous tone.

"Nothing, I hope, uncle," replied the dutiful nephew.

"Huh," grunted Uncle Harleigh. "Of course, you *hope* I haven't heard about your goings on."

"I don't know what you mean, sir," said Wilbur nervously.

Uncle Harleigh closed his right fist and thumped his desk. "You are a thief!" he roared.

Wilbur stiffened and grew white. He had a solid jaw, which he thrust forward. "That is not true, sir," he said stoutly. "I am not a thief, and who-ever told you so is a liar."

"Nobody told me. I know."

"I tell you again it is not true. My accounts are in perfect shape, Uncle Harleigh."

"Last night you stole my car out of my garage," accused the banker.

Wilbur's relief was so great that he laughed involuntarily—a mistake, because his uncle's wrath was increased.

"You laugh!" he roared. "You can laugh?"

"I returned your car, sir. I took it without permission, because I knew you would not give it."

"What was that except stealing it? Eh? And where did you go with it? You took a woman to a road house. You danced with her."

He pointed an accusing finger at his nephew. His tone was as though he had said: "You murdered her."

"All right, I did," Wilbur admitted sullenly. "What of it?"

"I have been checking up on you. You have been playing cards. You have been dissipating."

"I never took a drink in my life, Uncle Harleigh."

"You are going down the primrose path!" shouted the fanatic.

"My conscience is clean, sir."

His uncle regarded him ferociously. "This has got to stop," he said sourly. "Either you will give me your solemn word never again to dance, or touch a card, or go to a picture theater, or to run round with these shameless women, or——"

"I won't!" cried Wilbur Stetson. "I won't! Do you hear? I've suffered enough. I do my work. I put up with your tyranny, but I don't think the way you do, and I don't see why I should be bound by your opinions."

"My sister's son," mourned Uncle Harleigh. "A roisterer, a gambler——"

Wilbur thumped the desk with his fist in his righteous anger.

"Don't you dare call me those names," he bellowed. "You are an intolerant, bigoted, unreasonable old man."

Uncle Harleigh rose in his wrath. "Get out of my office. And out of my house. Don't let me ever see your face again," he thundered.

The boy recoiled. "You mean that,

uncle?" he muttered. His whole world was crashing around him. Even if he hadn't liked it, it was the only world he knew.

"I have been nursing a viper," mourned the relative. "Get out of my sight."

"I'm fired, I suppose," said Wilbur shakily.

"Do you suppose I would have a man of your character working in my bank?"

The boy faced him. "There is nothing the matter with my character. Suppose you give me my pay, and an accounting of my mother's estate, and I'll go. I'll—I'll leave Stoutsville. I'll go to New York."

"Sodom and Gomorrah! The flesh-pots of Egypt! Of course you would go there. Pack your things and be out of my house before I come home. In the morning the cashier will give you a statement and what little money is coming to you. I shall leave my property to some good and worthy charity."

"I don't care what you do with your filthy money," shouted the aggrieved young man, as he walked unsteadily from the office.

He was horrified, furious, shocked at the violence of the break-up of the old order of things. It wasn't time yet for him to be glad. At present he was homeless, jobless, and driven out of Stoutsville. Of course, he had to leave town. In an hour, the word would pass up and down the main street that Harleigh Stetson had disowned and discharged his nephew. The most likely rumor would be that he had embezzled a large sum from the bank.

WILBUR walked staggeringly down Main Street for a couple of blocks before it came upon him with the loveliness of a rainbow that he was free. The shackles were broken through no fault of his own. His promise to his dead mother

had been returned to him. No longer must he pretend to be all that Uncle Harleigh expected him to be. He could do as he pleased, go where he liked, be what he wished. He was his own man at last.

Even if he starved to death, it was worth it not to be under his uncle's thumb any more. Most likely he would starve. How could he get a job where he wasn't known? Anyhow, he was through with the bank. In a city of millions there must be some way for a willing, honest young man to earn a living. He'd get along. And maybe he would see the world.

He went into Grover's drug store and ordered a chocolate ice-cream soda.

"Bank ain't closed, be it?" asked Enoch Grover, as he served the refreshment.

"I've quit," replied Wilbur. "What do you think of that?"

"Humph," replied the druggist. "Got a better job?"

"I've something in view."

"I suppose Harleigh found out you played cards down here. I never told him, though."

"I know you didn't, Enoch. Why can't everybody be broad-minded like you?"

"Folks wondered how ye stood Harleigh," replied Grover. "He's a hard man, but a good man."

"I'm going to New York," said Wilbur in a burst of confidence.

"Well, well, I'll be sorry to see you go. Soda all right?"

"Perfect," he replied. "Hits the right spot on a warm day."

It did not take long for Wilbur to pack his trunk; it took longer to explain to the housekeeper that he was leaving for good. To his astonishment, she wept.

"You're a nice boy, Wilbur, and I'm sure you have a right to enjoy yourself while you're young. Mr. Stetson is an old skinflint. I'm going to quit this job

when I get time to go out and find a better one."

After leaving the house, he dropped in on Drew, the expressman, and told him to take the trunk to the station in the morning. By that time it was five thirty, and he decided to take a room at the Stoutsville Inn for the night, and have dinner there. In the morning he would have about eight hundred dollars—all that was left from the sale of his mother's house after the funeral. To Wilbur Stetson, at the age of twenty-one, eight hundred in cash seemed a lot of money, and eight hundred in hand worth more than a hundred thousand thirty years hence.

He spent the evening dropping in on his friends to tell them the exciting news of his departure from the town in which he had been born and brought up.

It hadn't taken him long to get over the alarm which the unexpected break with his uncle had caused him. He was jubilant now, and brimming with youthful assurance, which was not reduced by the envy that his trip to New York created among the fellows with whom he used to play penny ante. That night he hardly slept, and he was at the bank at ten sharp in the morning, to receive his statement and his inheritance from the cashier. He had a week's wages coming, eighteen dollars.

"You better look this over and see if it's all right," the cashier suggested.

Wilbur glanced at the statement, and his cheeks grew pink with anger and resentment. His uncle had informed him when he took him into his house that he wasn't to expect so much money from the bank, since a home was being provided. Mr. Stetson had deducted from Wilbur's eight hundred dollars the sum of ten dollars a week for board and lodging for fifty-one weeks. There was a cash balance of two hundred ninety dollars.

His disappointment was bitter; the injustice toward him of his own flesh and

blood cut him to the core. The cashier untactfully stated at that moment:

"Mr. Stetson says that if you want to go in to say good-by to him, you can."

"I never want to set eyes on that old cheat again as long as I live," Wilbur exclaimed in a voice which broke with the vigor of his emotion.

Thrusting the thin roll of bills into his trousers pocket, he rushed out of the First National Bank of Stoutsville, which he was not to see again for many years. He did not cast a backward glance at the three-story red brick building in which he had labored for three years under the delusion that some day it might be his property.

Going to the hotel, he checked out and walked as rapidly as possible to the station, where he bought a ticket for New York. His trunk was there. There would be a train in three quarters of an hour. He sat in the waiting room for a few minutes, and gradually calmed down. Finally he remembered something.

He went across to Flynn's, the florist's, and paid ten dollars for a huge wreath, called the town taxicab, and rode out to the little cemetery, where a small granite headstone marked the resting place of his father and mother. He laid the wreath upon the grave, his lips moved in prayer, and then, unable to control himself, he threw himself face downward upon the mound and sobbed like a child.

"Oh, mother, mother, mother!" he murmured.

After a while he picked himself up, looked furtively around to see if his display of emotion had been observed, and walked rapidly out of the cemetery. He was at the station when the train rolled in, swung aboard eagerly, and flopped into a chair in an empty day coach. The train whistled; the conductor called "All aboard," and that's the way Wilbur Stetson left Stoutsville, New Hampshire.

CHAPTER II.

THE RADIO MAN.

A STUMPY, rusty, grimy tramp steamer, flying the British flag, was wallowing in a head sea in the Gulf Stream. She was the *Mermaid*, New York to Trinidad and other ports farther south. She had a slight list to port, and she was down a little by the head, and her engine was unable to push her along at more than five knots against the head wind.

Half a dozen nondescript seamen loitered upon her dirty iron decks. An officer in a torn and faded blue uniform leaned upon the rail of her bridge. In a tiny cabin, abaft the chart house, sat a young man with radio headpieces over his ears, and a book open in front of him, the title of which was "Wireless Telegraphy." He had been sitting like this for hours, listening to the clicking of messages from vessels a hundred, two hundred, three hundred miles away.

At his open door appeared an unshaven man in overalls and without a coat. His once white shirt was smeared with grease, and his hands were black with it. He thrust a slip of paper at the wireless man.

"I sye, Bill," he commanded. "Get this off. Skipper's orders."

The wireless operator grasped it eagerly, and laboriously began to send the message. Wilbur Stetson was making his first voyage; he was far from being an expert wireless operator, but he was, at least, a willing worker.

Three months had passed since the boy from Stoutsville had arrived in New York. They had been three amazing months in a career which up to that time had had only blank pages. They included a month of futile search for employment, a period of hard labor as a shipping clerk, and the day when he had observed the advertisement of the Downing School of Wireless Telegraphy.

"Learn to be an operator, and see the world," was the advertising slogan of the Downing School. "We make you an expert operator for one hundred dollars. Open nights."

And Wilbur had found something which appealed to him. The deadly grind of office and shop in New York had not been even as pleasant an aspect as the bank in Stoutsville. To sit in the wireless room of an ocean liner, and take and receive messages from all parts of the world—that was the life for a live young man.

He had turned over his last hundred dollars to the Downing School. He had attended sessions for five nights a week during a period of a month, weary from nailing boxes and pushing about heavy cases of machinery. He had been given a diploma, but the school's promise of quick employment had been a delusion and a snare. There were no great liners looking for inexperienced operators. It had seemed as though no steamship captain wished to place the fate of his ship in the hands of a recent Downing graduate.

But just when he had made up his mind that he had wasted his time at school, a shipping agent offered him the berth of the *Mermaid* at thirty dollars a month, and Wilbur had signed his name to the articles without taking the precaution to have a look at the vessel. Not that it would have done him any good. He didn't know the difference between a lady liner and an unseaworthy old tramp. The *Mermaid* had looked like a lot of ship to him, though she was a miserable specimen of British tramp, and hardly two thousand tons burden.

A MAN has to be as young as Wilbur Stetson to be happy under the conditions he found on board. His cabin was filthy, the ship's food as bad as possible, the skipper was a red-nosed drunkard, and the officers a grumpy, surly, unpleasant set of cock-

neys. He didn't care. He was sailing one of the Seven Seas, and he was presiding at a magic instrument.

He loved the salt air that occasionally penetrated his ill-smelling cabin. He proved to be immune from seasickness, which was lucky, as the *Mermaid* rolled like a drunkard, even in comparatively smooth water. He couldn't eat the meats that were served by the ship's steward, and he couldn't drink the coffee, but he liked a soggy dough containing a few raisins, which was served daily to the officers' mess. As the cook explained to him, nobody could do much with the kind of food supplies the ship provided, but he had always been a great hand at "plum duff," which was so inexpensive an article that the skipper had no objection to its place on the menu.

The *Mermaid* carried only one wireless man, which meant that Wilbur's office hours were from six a. m., when he rolled out of his musty blankets, until ten or eleven at night, when he turned in. In his enthusiasm for his profession, he did not mind long hours, and spare time, which must be spent in the company of the crew, had no attraction for him. The cabin steward was not a bad sort. It was he who had suggested that he call himself Bill instead of Wilbur.

"It's less heffeminitelike," said the little Liverpool Englishman.

When the mates condescended to address him, they called him "Sparks."

The *Mermaid's* wireless equipment was ancient, out of date, and had a very small radius, and was little used—fortunately for Wilbur, who was still a slow sender. It picked up lots of sea talk, however, and after a few days of ardent listening in, he was able to understand a lot of it.

The ship was bound for Trinidad, Pernambuco, Rio, and Buenos Aires, and her officers and crew ardently hoped that at B. A. she would pick up a charter for England; their home, but not

Wilbur's. He didn't care. He thrilled when he thought that he was going to see so much of the world; far ports which he had visited only in dreams.

He wasn't homesick yet. There was no girl he loved back in Stoutsville—only a lot of fellows who would give everything to be in his shoes, and his Uncle Harleigh Stetson, whom he hoped he would never meet again in this life. Oh, he was happy! He didn't even mind that the *Mermaid* was a "stinkin' old tub," as the third officer called her. Anyway, the ocean was as beautiful as he had always imagined it to be—more so.

Of course, the ship burned coal. As she nosed into warmer latitude, the stokers, off duty, squatted on the deck abaft the wireless house, and expressed themselves, so to speak.

While Banker Stetson affected to believe that his nephew was a dissolute young man, Wilbur was singularly clean-minded, straightforward, and unsophisticated, and the snatches of the conversations of the coal passers which were wafted to his ears positively appalled him.

The profession of stoking is rapidly vanishing from the earth, which is a good thing, as its demands upon the human physique were outrageous, and those who practiced it were brawny brutes, with no brains, and little sense of decency. Many of those who go to sea as coal passers, nowadays, are the scum of the sea ports, and those who would take a job on a craft like the *Mermaid* were usually delivered unconscious from drink or dope, or both.

During their off hours, they told one another stories which made young Stetson's hair stand on end. Their language was profane when it wasn't obscene, and scores of times Wilbur was on the point of complaining of them to Captain Brown, but was restrained because he had heard the skipper addressing the man at the wheel on the first

day out in language almost as vile as that used by the stokers.

He tried to turn his ears inside out when he didn't have the ear pieces over them, and he ignored the ribald remarks addressed to Sparks occasionally by the ruffians outside his door.

BY the sixth day, Wilbur had learned to take a message with reasonable speed as the result of constantly writing down whatever was being said on the air within hearing radius. He was getting so that he could translate Morse and International code orally, when the big storm came up.

While some of the stokers had insisted that the "bleeding old wagon" wouldn't get by Cape Hatteras in safety, she had lurched past the Virginia Capes without disaster, and she was in Florida waters when the big wind came.

Wilbur had reported the storm warning—sent out by the United States government—of a heavy southeaster, to Captain Brown upon receipt of it.

"Tell me something I don't know," snarled the skipper. "The glass 'as been falling for three hours. Get back up there, and keep yer bloody ears open."

The crew had been moving swiftly about, making everything tight for a couple of hours before the sea began to rise, and the *Mermaid* began to lurch more drunkenly than ever.

Up on the top of the deck house, Wilbur heard the wind whistling in a most sinister manner, and shortly picked up a report from a ship a hundred miles to the south that it was blowing sixty or seventy miles an hour.

Very soon the *Mermaid* began to pitch. Being short and squat, a high head wind caused her to move like a rocking-horse, and, as the wind increased in violence, it would lift her bow out of water, and let it slap itself back on the surface with a crash which was terrifying. Following the crash of the

descending bow would be the awful rattle of the single screw when the stern rose out of the sea and caused the propeller to revolve in air.

Nor did her pitching interfere in any respect with her gift for rolling. She would roll to port as though she intended to turn over, and then she would roll to starboard in the same sinister manner. And despite the efforts of the crew, there were so many things still loose on board that there was a continual clanking of metal hitting against metal.

In short order the sea was running, in Wilbur's opinion, mountain high. Never having seen the ocean in a storm, he supposed that waves were great rollers many times higher than those which broke upon the beaches of southeastern New Hampshire in bad weather, and he was surprised to observe that ocean waves were shaped like pyramids of varying height.

Some of those pyramids were coming over the bow and sweeping the length of the ship, flooding the decks to a depth of five or six feet. When one of these waves from the bow happened to collide with a pyramid of water which came over the side, they broke against each other with a deafening roar, and sent spray fifty or sixty feet into the air.

He watched this natural phenomena from his radio house with growing apprehension. He knew that the *Mermaid* was fifty years old, and built of iron, and had been encountering gales and hurricanes all her life, and he was aware, from his instrument, that this was not a hurricane—only a heavy gale, which should be reassuring. There was no human being to encourage him in this thought. The crew was under cover. The captain and second officer were on the bridge, of which he had no view from his door, which faced aft.

And things were getting worse.

An hour passed. Two hours. Passengers on a great transatlantic liner in a

storm may recall the dreadful racket of the propellers when lifted out of the water, and the crash of the bow when she takes a wave on her bottom, but from their vantage point, thirty or forty feet above the sea, they can have no conception of how appalling the ship noises and the height of the waves appeared to this small-town youth on his first voyage on an ancient, wheezy, and insignificant tramp steamer.

It seemed to Wilbur that the *Mermaid* was rolling more deeply to port than to starboard. It finally came to the point that her port rail dipped away under each time she rolled that way, and that her starboard rail was offering more resistance to ocean boarders. The significance of this, however, did not occur to him, nor did he know until the second mate appeared at his door that her heavy list to port was filling the hearts of her officers with terror.

CHAPTER III.

THE END OF THE "MERMAID."

THE mate yelled hoarsely. "Send out an S O S. Tell 'em our cargo has shifted, and we're liable to turn turtle."

"You mean we might sink?" asked the horrified wireless man.

"Do as yer told, ye Yankee whelp!" snarled the officer. "Lemme hear your spark, damn you!"

Wilbur leaped to his key and began to pound it. From mast to mast, the electric current leaped eagerly.

"When you pick some one up, get his position," commanded the second officer. "Keep sending until somebody promises to come to us. Here's our position. Give it to 'em. Bring word to the skipper immediately."

Wilbur nodded, and hurled the pitiful appeal into the void. It was growing dark, night was coming on; the sea was running higher than ever, the wind howled more ferociously.

"S O S." Twenty times he sent the call—forty times. No answer came out of the ether. Steadily he sent out the signal of distress. According to the charts, the *Mermaid* was in a traveled steamer track, and there should have been half a dozen vessels within the narrow radius of the apparatus. Finally he received an answer. A shore station at Jacksonville. They asked his position and promised to relay his call to the coast-guard vessels cruising in those waters.

He rushed to the bridge with the glad tidings, and was met by curses.

"They'll never, never get here. They couldn't find their noses in the dark," cried the captain profanely. "Get back there and keep sending. We won't be afloat in five or six hours."

Wilbur rushed back to his instrument. In ten minutes he picked up a United Fruit steamer a hundred miles away, which assured him that she would make all speed to the scene of the disaster. "Carry on," signaled the operator of the fruit steamer.

The wind had gone down, but the sea was still running very high, the ship was making very heavy weather of it, and, when she rolled to port, she tipped almost to an angle of forty-five degrees, and it seemed each time as if she would not recover.

Thanks to a burly chief engineer who stood at the exit from the stoke hole with ready gun, the stokers continued to hurl coal into the ship's furnaces, and the engines continued to keep the propeller turning, so that she did not fall off into the trough of the sea, and come to a sudden end, but the cargo continued to shift, and there was nothing that the crew could do to prevent it.

HAD it not been for the heavy seas running, Captain Brown would have abandoned ship immediately. While he was a drunkard and ruffian, he knew the *Mermaid*, and

he was aware that her prospects of survival were slight.

Two hours had passed since the first S O S had been sent out. The ship lay almost on her side. The sea was very slowly moderating, but was buffeting the *Mermaid* plenty. Men were splashing through the deep water on the port side, provisioning the boats on that side, for those to starboard could not be launched because of the bulge of the ship.

A vessel in her position, when she decides to turn turtle, gives no warning, and Brown and his crew preferred their chances in stout lifeboats to being carried under in her final roll. Yet, while the engine-room and stoke-hole force carried on, there was always the possibility that a vessel near at hand might arrive in time.

Captain Brown was aware that freighters like his own keep careless watch in the radio room. At any moment Stetson might catch the attention of some steamer only a short distance away.

The skipper made his decision when, in a roll to port, the floor of the stoke hole was almost vertical, and the chief engineer lost his footing and fell in a heap.

In a second his gun was wrenched from his hand, and he was trampled upon in a rush of stokers to the ladder. Brown, on the bridge, knew that the time had come to abandon ship. He gave the word, and there was a scramble for the two lifeboats which had been provisioned, and could be launched very quickly.

When the ship rolled to port, the keels of these were in the water. It was only necessary to cut their lines at the proper moment and drift away.

The first boat was launched successfully. The chief officer and the captain were the last into the second boat. And, as the skipper climbed aboard, the chief grasped his arm.

"Oh, I say!" he exclaimed. "Where's Sparks?"

Captain Brown grinned sourly. He pointed to the aerial along which a spark was crashing.

"He still has juice," he replied. "He may pick up somebody. Now, men, cut those lines. Quick!"

The lines were cut. The boat drifted off on the crest of a retreating wave, and Wilbur Stetson, unaware that the ship had been abandoned, continued to work his key and to listen through his ear pieces for another quarter of an hour, when his instrument went dead on him.

Then, and only then, he crawled out of his cabin and worked his way to the bridge to report. The bridge lamp was burning. The masthead light twinkled, but there wasn't a living soul on the ship.

Intent on his job, he had ignored the shouts without, and the tramping of feet, the cursing, and the sharp commands which had accompanied the departure of the captain and crew.

For the sake of an extra quarter hour of service in the radio room, the skipper had sacrificed a human life. It was several minutes before the horrible truth that he was alone on the ship forced itself upon the boy's consciousness.

Even then dreadfulness of his situation was not clearly understood by him. Though the ship was wallowing soddenly and making sounds of agony which would have been unmistakable to a seaman, it seemed to him that he was in less danger on board than in a small boat tossed on the gigantic billows, nor could he understand why the crew and the officers had taken to flight.

The craven captain, of course, had abandoned him with the forlorn hope that he might communicate with a vessel so close at hand that she might pick up the boats after the ship had sunk with the wretched wireless man.

HER engines stopped, and her wheel unmanned, the *Mermaid* was now at the mercy of the seas, which, however, were no longer as tremendous as they had been a few hours before.

Nevertheless, each time she rolled to port, she rolled deeper and righted with more difficulty. A badly packed cargo which has shifted is a greater menace to a ship than icebergs or gales, and the *Mermaid* was on her beam ends, and likely to go completely over at any moment.

The decks were almost vertical, now, when she rolled to port, and did not become horizontal even when she recovered.

The boy clung to the bridge and stared into the black night, and wondered what would become of the boats, and what was going to happen to him. That he was doomed, he could not believe.

At twenty-one, a youth has so much vitality and hope that his extinction does not appear possible to him. Wilbur Stetson didn't think he was going to die, but the panic which had sent the ship's company to the boats gradually communicated itself to him. He said his prayers.

Water, pouring through the open engine room and stoke-hole hatches had put out the fires without exploding the boilers. The electric lights suddenly went out. When she rolled to port, now, her bridge almost touched the water, and he was compelled to cling to the railing to keep from falling overboard.

Even his inexperience yielded at last to the obvious fact that the *Mermaid* was going to sink, and he worked his way back to the radio room and put on the life preserver which had been stored under his bunk.

Nevertheless, hours passed, and the old vessel remained on the surface. The sea was less rough, and no longer crashed against her exposed starboard

side with such a sickening thump. The stars came out and, by and by, the moon shone. He gazed hopefully upon the waste of moonlit waters in hope of sighting a boat coming back for him. That he had been abandoned intentionally did not occur to him, because he did not believe human beings could be so wicked.

But the boats had been driven by the wind many miles from the hulk. There was nothing on the wide dark ocean within the short range of his eyes.

He was aware of a sucking, gurgling, sighing sound. The ship was at her last gasp. She was going down, and he was going down with her. Ardently he wished he had not quarreled with his uncle, and set forth to see the world. Life in Stoutsville seemed very sweet at that moment.

He gave himself up and prepared to meet his Maker. He grew impatient for the last moment. He climbed to the starboard side, and clung to the rail, because he thought he might live a few seconds longer that way. And still she did not sink.

It was not until dawn was fingering the eastern sky that she groaned, almost like a human being, rolled completely over and went to her watery grave. And Wilbur, whimpering like a child, climbed out on the starboard side of the ship and slid off it into the deep when she went down.

He was sucked a few feet beneath the surface, but his life preserver caused him to bob up again. He was struck in the face by the crests of big waves, blinded, and almost smothered. He had learned to swim in a river, and did not know how to handle himself in the sea, and he would have drowned on the surface had a life raft not floated his way. The crew had cut loose the fastenings of this raft before taking to the boats, because there was always a possibility that a boat would be swamped, and a floating raft might be a

refuge. It was a refuge for Wilbur Stetson.

He dragged himself upon it and lay flat, clinging with both hands to a line which was fastened to one corner of it. The waves were still rough enough to toss it about and, without that life line, he could not have remained on board of it.

He had no food, no water, and he was all alone in mid-ocean on a raft. In a book of adventure he had read of a man being in such a situation, and he had been thrilled, and considered it a romantic experience. To him, now, it was nothing but horror.

It seemed an interminable time before the sun came up, but when it was broad daylight, the sea became much smoother. He was able to stand and balance himself on the raft and peer into all quarters in search of a sail or a wisp of smoke. Nothing!

As a matter of fact, three vessels were cruising about in search of the *Mermaid*, but all of them were many miles distant. No matter how accurately a distressed vessel gives her position, wind, current, and variations make it inaccurate in a few hours. Wilbur sank down upon the raft and gave himself up for lost.

The motor craft *Vulture* was within a couple of miles of him before he was aware of it. The reason was that she was long, very low in the water, had no betraying streak of smoke, was painted a grayish blue, and traveled at thirty-two knots an hour. When he did become aware of her, he stood upon his raft and waved his arm, and danced in a frenzy of anxiety.

She saw him. She headed toward him, and she took him on board, and made it possible to continue the career of Wilbur Stetson. Had a coast-guard ship rescued him, or had the United Fruit steamer picked him up, he would have been landed in New York, cured

of his passion for adventure. He might have found a job in New York City. He might even have crawled back to Stoutsville and implored his uncle's forgiveness.

But Wilbur was rescued by the rum runner *Vulture*, which was returning empty, after landing a cargo of whisky in Florida, and whose master and crew were in a dour mood because they had profited very little by the enterprise.

The depression had hit the booze business. Prices had been cut in halves, and the rum runners were no longer reeking with ill-gotten gains. They had the decency to pick the shipwrecked youth off his life raft, force a stiff drink down his throat, toss him in a bunk, and cover him with blankets, and, a few hours later, landed him on a pier in Nassau, on the island of New Providence, without a penny in his pockets, and owning only the bedraggled clothes he was wearing when the *Mermaid* went down.

They had betrayed not the slightest interest in the details of his shipwreck, nor did they make an effort to find the two lifeboats which had put off from the sinking *Mermaid*.

When Wilbur timidly asked the captain of the *Vulture* what he should do, that worthy answered indifferently:

"Go find the American consul, and, if he ain't on the job, the British port authorities will send you back to the United States. We saved your life, and we've too many troubles of our own to bother any more about you, young fellow. Want a drink?"

"No, thanks," Wilbur replied.

"Then the hell with you," retorted the skipper. "We're tying up to the pier to take on some supplies, and you hop ashore as soon as we make fast."

"O. K."

He had learned the character of the ship which had rescued him, and he was eager to get away from her. And Nassau looked like a paradise to this youth

who had never seen a tropical island, and who so recently had been afloat on a raft in the open ocean.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BUCKET OF BLOOD.

STANDING on the deck of the *Vulture*, he had gazed in delight at the lovely harbor, the waters of which are as green as the finest emerald, and which contrast exquisitely with the gleaming white of the houses on the shore. He stared at the queer-shaped sponge-fishing vessels, and at the quaint ocean tramps which were tied up to the piers, and his eyes gleamed at the spectacle of waving palm trees on Hog Island to the left, and behind the little city at the right.

And then he spied the great pink hotel, the New Colonial, with its baroque architecture, and its spacious gardens, in which every type of tropic tree and plant blooms profusely. It was exactly like colored steamship posters he had seen during his sojourn in New York. It was worth the horrible experience of the preceding night to be here.

It was hot, but he didn't mind the heat, standing upon the deck of the rum runner. It was August, and Nassau, in August, is so nearly dead that it hardly breathes, but Wilbur didn't know that. This was the land of enchantment. This was everything he had dreamed when he added up long columns of figures away back in Stoutsville—the lovely fantastic foreign country that he had never hoped to set eyes upon.

The *Vulture* tied up at a pier, and Wilbur shouted a grateful good-by to the captain, his rescuer, who didn't deign to answer him. He stepped upon a paved dock where a dozen half-clad Negroes lay flat, sleeping like lizards in the sun, and walked toward a small, dusty public square which was also some sort of market place.

A score of black women, with baskets

arranged in front of them, squatted on their haunches and set up a hopeful yipping as the young man passed along. He came to the main street, and stared at the spectacle of a stalwart black policeman wearing a sun helmet, and directing traffic, although there was no traffic.

Wilbur crossed to the policeman.

"Can you tell me how to find the American consul's, please?" he asked.

The officer jerked his thumb to the left.

"Two blocks down," he said. "Anybody will tell you, sir."

The Negro talked with an English accent, which amused young Stetson.

He was hatless, and he became aware that the sun was terribly hot. The pavement burned his bare feet. He had kicked off his shoes in the water, and his indifferent rescuers had not offered to replace them.

Half of the stores and shops were closed tight. Nobody was on the sidewalks. By the curb were a few horse vehicles, whose drivers sprawled, sleeping, in their seats, and whose horses hung their heads in a manner of extreme dejection. The enthusiasm for Nassau, with which Wilbur had burned when he stepped ashore, oozed out of him. By the time he reached the little building which housed the consul, he was suffering frightfully from the heat.

THE consulate was closed. A Negro in a candy shop next door said that the consul was on a vacation in New York, and that he didn't know where his clerk had gone.

"You get sunstroke if you no wear a hat," he remarked in curious clipped English. "You can buy a sun hat for a shillin', sah."

"I haven't any money," admitted the shipwrecked mariner.

At this, the black man shrugged his shoulders and lost interest. Remembering the beautiful hotel and garden at the

other end of the street, Wilbur retraced his steps painfully. Never having gone without shoes and stockings, his feet hurt him, and he stubbed his toes on the hot, uneven paving. Eventually he reached the gate of the New Colonial, and ventured within.

Here was heaven. Everything was green and luxuriant. There were pretty walks and deep soft grass for sore feet, and wide-spreading trees to ward off the burning sun, and there was nobody to order him out of this paradise. The hotel was closed for the summer, and the gardeners were having their siesta.

Wilbur walked across the cool grass toward the harbor edge, and, finally, came to a spot where big trees gave perfect shade, and thick bushes afforded concealment, and the grass was thick and soft as moss. And he lay down and was sound asleep in a few minutes.

All night he had been without rest—he had slept only a couple of hours on the *l'ulture* before she made land—and he was suffering now from reaction to a terrific strain which only youth could sustain.

He slept all the afternoon and well into the evening, and only awoke when the cool night breeze from the harbor chilled his bare feet.

He sat up, confused and unable to think how he came to be here—in his dream he had been back on the *Mermaid*, and had gone down with her. He became aware of the *chug-chug* of a motor boat, and a bump as it collided gently with a landing only a little distance off.

He heard voices. Men leaped upon the landing and were coming toward him.

"You have it straight," said a harsh, grating voice. "Anything can happen in the 'Bucket of Blood.' You can strike and be away before these black cops find out what has happened. I'll be here with the launch until midnight. Get over the wall at the back of the hotel, streak it across the grounds. I'll have

you back on board ten minutes after you've stuck your knife into Carson."

"Suppose something happens? Suppose he don't go there?"

"You fool, he's got to go there! His sister wants to go. Get a table on the balcony, and keep out of sight until you get a break. Good luck!"

The two men separated. Wilbur heard one of them walk across the wooden boat landing. He could not hear the other, who was striding across the grass.

"The Bucket of Blood!" It sounded like a name out of a dime novel. And one of these men was going to stick a knife into Carson, whoever he was. A murderer. And the other fellow would wait for this killer in a launch to take him out to some vessel.

What was the Bucket of Blood? A place where there was a balcony and tables; it must be a restaurant or bar-room. And Carson's sister wanted to go there.

STETSON climbed upon his feet and moved softly away from the vicinity of the boat landing, the proximity of which he had not been aware when he laid down to rest. He got lost in the big garden, but eventually found the gate, which was open and unguarded, and he looked from it down the main street of Nassau, which had come to life with the nightfall. The sidewalks were thronged with colored natives, who were promenading—the women in white dresses, most of the black men in white suits. Lights blazed from the windows and doors of scores of grogshops. Free from winter tourists, the population of Nassau was spending an evening in its own way.

Wilbur wandered down the street, uncertain what to do. If he went to a policeman and told what he had heard, he was afraid he would not be believed, and he might be arrested as a vagrant because of his disreputable appearance.

Carson, of course, was a white man, who had a white woman with him. He ought easily be identified if Wilbur could find the café which the sister wanted to visit. He gazed eagerly at the signs of the saloons and restaurants.

"Dirty Dick's." That sounded almost as sinister as "Bucket of Blood." "Hairy Joe's." "Sing Lee Fu." "Hell's Kitchen." They certainly went in for vicious-sounding names in Nassau. However, he traversed the main street without seeing any evidence of the place he sought. Black girls jeered at him as he passed, and Negroes made remarks about his lack of shoes.

Finally he stopped a small boy who asked him for a penny.

"Is there a café called 'The Bucket of Blood'?" Wilbur demanded.

"Sure, meester. I show you," replied the urchin eagerly. This was a white man, even if he had neither hat nor shoes, and a white man, in the child's opinion, was always good for a few pence. He turned the next corner, winding in and out of a maze of back streets.

"Very hard to find," he informed Wilbur. After five minutes, he stopped before a tumble-down building with a low, wide door.

"Bucket of Blood," he said. "Give me money, meester."

What little cash Wilbur had possessed had gone down with the *Mermaid*, so he was compelled to cheat the boy out of his fee. Brushing him aside, he boldly entered the place. He walked through a dark passage, and suddenly found himself in a patio of exceeding picturesqueness.

It was Spanish in its arrangements, a balcony running about three sides of it upon which were wooden tables devoid of linen. Around the sides of the main floor were booths separated by lattice-work partitions. At the far end was a long bar. Near the entrance, an orchestra consisting of two guitars, a sax-

ophone, and a violin, was playing a local ditty entitled, "Mamma Don't Want No Peas Nor Rice Nor Coconut Oil." On the floor, dancing, were a dozen couples, all black and tan. Wilbur slid into an empty booth, and hid his shoeless feet under the table. A waiter immediately appeared.

"I'm waiting for somebody," Wilbur Stetson said boldly. "I'll order later."

It satisfied the man, who went away. Wilbur tried hard to discern who might be concealed in the other booths, but their purpose was concealment, and he had no success. Fifteen minutes passed, and then a man in whites and a girl in an orange chiffon dress came out of a booth some distance away, and began to dance. They were the only white people on the floor. It must be Carson and his sister.

WILBUR edged toward the exit from his booth, and waited for them to approach. As the girl came under the light from one of the few lanterns in the dimly illuminated place, he saw her face, and saw that she had yellow hair, and was very pretty and very young.

And suddenly a huge mulatto thrust a big arm between the girl and her partner, and swung her away from him.

"You dance with me, eh?" he growled.

"Frank! Oh, Frank!" screamed the young woman.

Carson, if that were he, didn't need an appeal. He swung at the Negro with a powerful arm, and struck him on the point of the chin. The man released the girl and staggered back from the force of the blow, and then swore vilely, and rushed upon the white man.

The colored women on the dance floor shrieked and rushed for the shelter of the booths. Waiters came running from all directions. Carson thrust his sister behind him and met the oncoming Negro with stiff lefts and hard

right hooks. The man went down. Carson was immediately floored by a blow on the back of the head from a big black dancer who came up behind him, but he was up like a flash. Miss Carson was standing three or four feet from Stetson's booth, screaming at the top of her lungs. Wilbur was beside her in two strides.

"In there, miss," he said sharply. She turned, saw that he was white.

"Help him! They're killing my brother!" she cried.

Wilbur pushed her into the booth, and plunged toward Carson. He was by no means a fighting man, but he was big and strong, and his blood was up.

Carson, however, was holding his own. He had picked up a chair which stood beside a table on the edge of the dance floor, and was clearing a path for himself, and the Negroes were not eager to be brained by it. Stetson dived through the mob, and reached the white man's side just as a mulatto dressed like a seaman leaped upon the table behind Carson, drew a long knife, and lifted it high in the air.

He aimed at the broad shoulders of the white man, and his blade would have been driven down to the heart, except for Wilbur Stetson. Wilbur thrust his side against the table, knocked it over, and sent the knife man headlong to the ground. Carson glanced over his shoulder, and took it all in like a flash.

"Good man!" he ejaculated. "Come on, now! Let's clean them all up!"

THE fellow with the knife was on his feet, crouching low and creeping in. "Look out!" exclaimed Wilbur, but Carson was slamming away with his chair.

The killer charged, but he was met by the bare right foot of Wilbur Stetson, which caught him full upon the jaw and sent him backward.

Wilbur followed up his kick by pouncing upon the would-be murderer

while he was recumbent, and tearing the knife from his hand. He rose with the vicious weapon, and that was plenty for the Nassau Negroes, who rushed for cover.

"Good man!" repeated Carson again. "But don't use that knife! These Blue-noses would send you up for a hundred years if you stuck one of their black pets."

"Your name Carson?" asked Stetson hoarsely.

"You bet."

"You've been framed. There was a plot to kill you. This fellow——" He turned, but the knife artist had scuttled out of sight, and they were surrounded by jabbering waiters.

"You leave," commanded a burly black who must have been the proprietor. "You start fight. Get out, quick."

Carson removed the knife from Wilbur's limp fingers.

"Give that back to its owner if you can find him," he said contemptuously.

He thrust his arm inside that of Wilbur, and led him toward the exit where his sister stood, white, trembling, and with tears rolling down her cheeks.

"You wanted excitement, and you got it, Clara," he said, laughing. "I hope you're satisfied."

"Oh, Frank!" she wailed. "That man was going to kill you. This gentleman saved you. I saw him take the knife away from the other man."

"Come on," replied Carson. "Step on it! We don't want to land in a British jug."

OUTSIDE in the street, approaching with extreme leisureliness, were two Nassau policemen.

With one arm inside Stetson's and the other around his sister, Carson led them toward the officers.

"Any trouble in there, sah?" asked one of the policemen.

"Nothing to speak of," said Carson coolly. "Lovely evening, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed, sah."

Wilbur looked the young man over with admiration. Carson was in his late twenties. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and lean. His head was rather small for his height, but it was carried proudly on a long neck. His features were straight and clean cut. He was blond, and he had blue eyes. He looked a little like his sister, who was the prettiest girl Wilbur had ever seen.

Carson had been sizing up the chance acquaintance.

"Do you go barefoot from choice or necessity?" he asked quizzically.

"I lost my shoes in a shipwreck last night," replied Stetson.

"Got any money?"

"No," Wilbur admitted in abasement.

"We'll remedy that. You were a very handy man back there."

"I'm taking money from no one," replied Stetson tartly. "I want to tell you something before I wish you good night."

"Aw, come on. The night is young. Let's have a drink and talk things over."

"I don't drink," said Wilbur.

"What a guy!" retorted Carson.

"Frank," said Miss Carson sharply, "this is a very nice American boy, and he saved your life, and if you don't change your tone, I'll disown you."

Carson laughed. "Sorry, old man. The way you said you didn't drink was a reproach to me. What do you want to say to me?"

"That fellow with the knife was sent there to murder you, Mr. Carson."

"Eh? What makes you think so?"

Very briefly Stetson told him of the conversation he had overheard in the garden of the New Colonial Hotel.

"It's a mystery to me," declared Carson. "I haven't got an enemy in the world. I don't know anybody who talks the way the fellow does whose voice you describe. Sure he mentioned my name?"

"How do you suppose I happened to

be in The Bucket of Blood? I haven't a nickel in my clothes."

"And you haven't had any lunch or dinner," declared the girl. "We'll go right into a restaurant this minute."

"I don't want charity, miss," said Wilbur, blushing crimson.

Carson slapped him on the back.

"You chump," he said. "We're under a million obligations to you. Take these five bucks and go into the first men's furnishings store we come to and buy yourself some shoes and a hat. We'll wait outside, and then we'll take you to dinner."

"Please don't be stupid about this!" pleaded the girl.

Wilbur nodded, and accepted the money. Half an hour later, he was making the best of a thick steak in a Chinese restaurant, while the Carsons watched him with satisfaction, and sipped glasses of beer.

CHAPTER V.

MYSTERY.

AS a result of shrewd questioning, it wasn't long before Carson had learned the story of Wilbur's life since leaving Stoutsville.

"It's a lucky thing you didn't go to the police here," he said. "By the time they reached the Bucket of Blood, I would have been a morgue case. Of course, the black fellow who grabbed Cora was hired to start a fight, and in the brawl, the fellow with the knife would have done his work. Now, Stetson, you've been through a hell of a lot for a kid who never had any excitement until a week ago. We're going to take you out to my yacht, and give you a stateroom, and make you comfortable, and in the morning I'm going to give you a job."

Wilbur, who was himself again after a full meal, laughed, and shook his head.

"You don't have to bother about me. If you want to loan me money enough

to get to New York, I promise to repay you."

"It begins to look as though we were going to need a two-fisted young man," said Carson. "It's like this, Stetson. A few weeks ago, in New York, I bought an island in the Bahamas. Cora and I are going down to look it over, and see what we need to make us comfortable there. We're going to take you along. There's a wireless outfit on the yacht, but nobody to operate it. I'll give you a decent salary. We may have some fun. Who knows?"

Wilbur hesitated.

"Do you want to go back to New York?" demanded the girl.

Wilbur shook his head. "I started out to see the world. I just don't want to have you make a job for me because I happened to be of service to you."

"You're hired," Frank Carson said. "Want anything else to eat?"

"I've had plenty, thanks."

"Let's go!"

They walked down to the pier at the foot of the little plaza, and found a small speed boat awaiting them, with a uniformed seaman snoozing in the stern.

IN ten minutes they ran alongside a trim white motor yacht, about seventy-five feet on the water line, which lay at anchor close to the Hog Island shore.

During the trip, Wilbur had hardly been able to keep his eyes off Cora Carson. She was not only the most beautiful, but the most dainty and graceful creature he had ever seen.

Her feet were incredibly small. Her hands were tiny. Her eyes were extraordinary; very large and very, very deep blue. Her nose was small, and tilted a little. Her teeth were small, and as regular as stringed pearls. She was a thoroughbred, that girl.

Some day Wilbur expected to fall in love and get married—when he was

about thirty, and had made a lot of money, and was fed up on travel and adventure. He hoped that a girl like Cora Carson would be around at that time, and would reciprocate his affection.

A man in white uniform with gold on cap and sleeves met them at the gangway, and helped Miss Carson on board. It was the first time in his life that Wilbur had ever stood upon the deck of a private yacht, and this was more splendid than he had supposed a yacht to be. Carson must be tremendously rich when he could own a yacht like this, and buy a whole island.

"Captain Smith," said Carson. "This is my friend, Wilbur Stetson. He knows how to run a wireless instrument, and he's going with us to Fandango Key."

"Very good, sir," said the captain politely, but he gave Wilbur a hard scrutiny. "The gentleman sleeps in the cabin, sir?"

"Didn't I say he was my friend?" asked Carson sharply. "Come on, young fellow."

He led Wilbur down into a combination salon and dining room, the walls of which were paneled in mahogany, while the buffet gleamed with the silver displayed upon it.

An English steward bobbed up from somewhere, and Carson called him over.

"Hobbs," he said, "take Mr. Stetson to No. 3."

"Yes, sir. Certainly, sir. Your bags, Mr. Stetson, sir?"

"Mr. Stetson was shipwrecked," said Cora Carson smoothly. "He'll get a new outfit to-morrow."

"You'll find me on deck when you're settled," Carson stated. "I want to have a talk with you, Stetson."

"Yes, sir."

Wilbur followed the steward who thrust open the door of a stateroom, and motioned to the shipwrecked youth to enter.

"Anything I can get you, sir?"

"I could use a pair of pajamas."

"I'll have them for you in a jiffy, sir."

When he had departed, Wilbur gazed at the room with delight. There was a bed instead of a berth, and its coverlet was of yellow satin. And the wall paper was a clever imitation of silk damask. He touched it. It wasn't paper. It was brocaded silk. On the floor was a yellow Chinese rug. There was hot and cold running water in the washstand, and a private bath.

The contrast between these quarters and the pestiferous radio room of the *Mermaid* was so vivid as to be incredible.

"Gosh," said Wilbur, "I'm in soft!"

As he had nothing to unpack, the business of settling took him less than a second, and he went on deck in search of his host. There was a wide space near the stern, where wicker chairs and divans were strewn about, and Wilbur waited comfortably here for five minutes before Carson appeared.

"Cigar?" he asked.

"I'll take a cigarette, sir."

CARSON produced a gold cigarette case, and after Wilbur had lighted an Egyptian, the owner of the yacht seated himself and laid a confidential hand on the younger man's knee.

"You strike me as being a straight shooter, youngster," he said. "In your own unhappy situation you would have been justified in paying no attention to the plot against a man you didn't know. You demonstrated in the Bucket of Blood that you're a scrapper. And it looks to me as though I needed you. So get it out of your head that you're an object of charity."

"I'm glad of that, sir."

"When I told you that I had bought an island, I didn't tell you why. Know anything about the Bahamas?"

"Only that they are a small group belonging to Great Britain."

Carson chuckled. "Small group," he repeated. "There are a thousand islands, and they stretch over an area of ocean about a thousand miles in one direction, and three or four hundred miles in another. My island is almost as far from Nassau as Nassau is from New York."

"I didn't realize——"

"Nobody does who hasn't investigated. I presume you think we are millionaires?"

"Well, this certainly is a fine yacht."

"It's worth a hundred thousand dollars. It is all that is left of a large fortune, Stetson. I continue to own it because a person who happened to be in possession of a big yacht when the depression hit us could neither sell or borrow on it. My sister had quite a lot of jewelry. We are financing this cruise upon the sale of her stuff. What does the world need more than anything else at present?"

"Well, a lot of things."

"It needs money. I am hoping to find gold at the end of my rainbow, Stetson."

"Treasure!" exclaimed the boy excitedly.

"Not exactly. The reason that I am telling you this is because it has occurred to me that the attempt on my life in the Bucket of Blood is connected with my ownership of Fandango Island."

Wilbur was silent.

"I arrived at that opinion by a process of elimination. I have no personal enemies. I am not important enough to attract cranks, but I have just acquired one of the Bahama islands. Somebody cabled that information from New York, and immediately somebody down here wished to stick a knife in me. Now, you heard the fellow who sent that assassin after me. Would you know his voice again?"

"I think so."

"Keep your ears open. If this fellow intended to take the knife man off in a launch, he may be living on some craft in the harbor. You and I will drift around Nassau together to-morrow on the off chance of running into him. I'm recording my ownership of Fandango Island at the Government House, taking on some supplies, and hope to pull out of here to-morrow night. Now you'd better turn in."

"Mr. Carson," said Wilbur with emotion. "I consider myself a lucky fellow to have met you."

"I may be the lucky one. Can you shoot?"

"I've done a little hunting in the woods round Stoutsville. I can use a shotgun."

"Well, you'll have plenty of chance for target practice with a rifle. Good night."

WHEN Stetson retired that night and sank into a soft mattress upon perfect springs, he was almost delirious with joy and excitement. Carson, he thought, was one of the finest men in the world, and to be privileged to be a member of an expedition in search of gold, was the sort of thing he had dreamed about back in Stoutsville, the sort of thing that every youth dreams about while buried in humdrum monotony at home.

His imagination was busy creating the details which Carson had failed to supply. It was cash, but not exactly treasure. There was danger. An attempt upon the yachtsman's life had been frustrated by none other than Wilbur Stetson, erstwhile bookkeeper back in Stoutsville.

He had a most delicious dream, and when he woke it was broad daylight, and the steward was shaking him by the shoulder and solicitously asking if he wished to get up for breakfast.

He sat down to a breakfast of grape-

fruit, golden toast, and crisp bacon. He ate rapidly and rushed on deck.

A stiff breeze was blowing in from the sea and ruffling the light-green surface of the harbor. The yacht was even more gorgeous than she had seemed the night before—her oak planking white as milk, her steel sides gleaming with white paint, her brass work shining like gold. She was very broad for her length, he thought—she happened to be the last word in modern power-yacht construction.

At the stern he saw the flutter of a white dress, and he walked rapidly aft. The captain was sitting in a chair on his little bridge, and bowed civilly to him. He was a stout man with gray hair and a red, lined face.

Miss Carson nodded cheerfully to him as he approached.

"Frank has gone ashore," she said. "He will be back in half an hour, and then we shall all go ashore together. Did you sleep well?"

"Perfectly."

"Now tell me all about your shipwreck. It sounded awfully thrilling."

"I guess it was pretty horrible," he replied. "I was so green that I didn't realize what danger we were in until I found the ship had been abandoned, and that I was alone on it."

"Begin at the beginning, and tell me everything," she commanded.

While Wilbur Stetson had never been mawkish over girls, and had reached the age of twenty-one without having had his heart broken, he was human, and Cora Carson was beautiful and sympathetic. With her gorgeous eyes upon him, he related the tale of his voyage upon the unfortunate *Mermaid*, and he can be pardoned if he softened his terror at being left alone upon a sinking ship, and permitted it to be surmised that a stern sense of duty had held him at his key, while the cowardly crew had launched the boats and made their escape.

Cora became so excited during the narrative that she twisted the bottom of her skirt with nervous fingers until it was in need of a hot iron to restore its smoothness.

"You are a very extraordinary young man," she exclaimed. "Why, you leap from one thrilling adventure to another! I'll never forget how you pushed me into that booth last night, and then charged to the rescue of my brother."

Wilbur blushed and looked embarrassed. His adventures had been thrust upon him more or less, but, looking back at them, they certainly loomed large.

"I can't understand why you went to such a place," he said gravely.

She laughed. "My fault. The name intrigued me. Bucket of Blood. And Frank inquired and was told it was a harmless place, a third-rate café frequented by natives and, during the tourist season, by the servants from the big hotels. Nassau is anything but a wild town, you know. And the natives are usually very mild people. The affair last night was stirred up because it was known that Frank and I were going there. He went ashore early to-day to take it up with the authorities."

"I guess he lets you do about as you please."

She nodded. "We're orphans, and he has to be good to me. Here comes our launch."

A couple of minutes later the motor boat ran alongside, and Frank Carson came aboard. He waved his hand to the pair at the stern, and disappeared into the cabin. Presently he came on deck and joined his sister and Wilbur Stetson.

"Morning, Stetson," he said cheerfully. "You're even more of a kid than I thought you were last night."

"I'll be twenty-two in a few months," Wilbur retorted resentfully.

Frank Carson laughed good-naturedly. "Sorry to hurt your feelings. I know

that you're a two-fisted warrior, and a quick thinker. Cora, I'm going to send you back to New York by the next steamer."

The girl grew pink, her blue eyes flamed, and she clenched her little fists and leaped to her feet.

"You are not!" she said furiously.

"Got to, old girl. We've stepped into something. You're free to quit, Stetson, if you like. You stand an excellent chance of a quick and violent death if you stick to me."

Wilbur glanced at Cora, hesitated a second, and then met Carson's eyes squarely.

"I stick," he said. "I think you are right in sending your sister home, if there is going to be trouble. This would be no place for her."

She whirled on him. "You do!" she cried. "You do? And who are you but a barefooted beach comber, who just happened to be of some slight service to my brother? How dare you stick in your oar? A young hick from New Hampshire. Nobody——"

"Quit that, Cora," said the brother sternly. "You have no right to insult our guest."

Wilbur turned very pale, and refrained from speaking with the greatest difficulty. He had been on the point of falling in love with Cora Carson. Now he hated her.

"Well, he had no right to interfere," she said sullenly.

"I admit that, and I apologize," Wilbur said stiffly.

Cora didn't even hear him. She turned like an infuriated wild cat upon her brother.

"Who owns the *Cora Carson*?" she demanded. "I do. Well, either I go along, or I'll order the captain to take the yacht back to New York."

Frank looked distressed. "But you know why I put it in your name."

"I'm not to be treated like a child," she declared. "I can shoot straighter

than you can, and swim faster, and I've twice as many brains, and you know it. I'm going to see the fun."

"Fun! Trouble, you mean."

Her mood changed, and she tucked her arm inside her brother's, and became very sweet and alluring. "Please, darling," she pleaded. "I'd die if I wasn't with you. And I'll be a help, not a hindrance. Besides, I've the whip hand."

"All right," he said with a sigh. "I didn't really hope to get rid of you. Please leave us alone. I've got to talk to Stetson."

She nodded curtly at Wilbur, and retreated with all the honors. Carson grinned apologetically at Stetson.

"Spoiled," he stated. "Until recently, Cora had everything in the world she wanted, and nobody ever dared to cross her. Underneath, she's a sweet kid, and she has the courage of a man. Terrible temper. She ought to be spanked for talking to you like that."

"I had it coming, I guess," said Wilbur.

"I've established title to my island," stated Carson. "I've ordered certain things we may need, and I'll get under way as soon as they are delivered. The police say that there never was trouble in the Bucket of Blood before, and they're going to shut the place up. Hello, a visitor!"

A small speed boat had arrived at the yacht's ladder, and a decidedly British voice announced that its owner wished to talk to Mr. Carson.

"Come on board," Carson called.

CHAPTER VI.

CARSON REFUSES AN OFFER.

THERE immediately arrived an Englishman in white drill and sun helmet. He was tall, with shoulders that were big, but stooped a trifle. He had a long, narrow face, with a jaw of the type often described as

lantern. He had pale-blue eyes, and wore a monocle in the left orb. He was tanned very brown. He removed his helmet and revealed a scanty crop of brown hair.

He smiled courteously at Carson, and showed teeth that were yellow and very irregular.

"Pardon my intrusion," he said in a deep voice of peculiar quality. "You're the new owner of Fandango Island, I am informed."

"Yes," said Carson curtly.

"I say, what on earth do you want with a barren coral key at the back of beyond?" asked the Englishman.

Carson stiffened and thrust out his solid chin. "That is my business, sir."

"No offense," observed the Englishman. "You bought the bally place from Jeffrey Johnstone in New York very recently, eh?"

"That is correct."

"For the sum of fifteen hundred pounds."

"You are well informed."

"Made it my business to be. It won't wash, Mr. Carson. I'll give you five thousand pounds for your title. Neat little profit, eh?"

"May I ask why you want Fandango Island?"

"Going to establish a health resort there," replied the stranger with a toothy grin.

"Not there," replied Carson. "You can find a lot of islands in this group for sale at bargain prices. Good morning, Mr.—er—"

"Bright. Sir Alfred Bright, at your service. Frankly, sir, no Yankee is going to meddle with this affair. Better accept my offer."

Carson stepped closer to his visitor. "I suggest you get into your boat," he said softly, "because, in about three seconds, I'm going to throw you into the harbor."

The Englishman's pale eyes gleamed viciously, and he forced a smile.

"You're demented," he observed. "I made you a business proposition——"

"You go to hell!" exclaimed the furious American.

Bright shrugged his shoulders, turned his back, and retreated to the ladder with a swagger.

"Kindly tie that for British impudence," requested Carson of his young employee.

"If he is a lord, as he claims to be, can't he make a lot of trouble for you?" asked Wilbur nervously.

Frank chuckled. "A lord! I never heard of him. If his title is authentic, he is at most a knight or a baronet, and they bestow those titles on trades-union leaders in England nowadays. But it means that what I supposed was my secret, isn't as much of a secret as I thought."

"Mr. Carson," said Wilbur slowly, "after the way your sister spoke to me, I don't think I ought to remain with you——"

Frank slapped him heartily on the back. "Pay no attention to her," he commanded. "Small teapot, soon hot. When that kid gets mad, she doesn't care what she says, but she repents at leisure. She was wild with me; you butted in, and she struck at you blindly."

"Exactly what is a beach comber?" demanded Wilbur stiffly.

Carson stared, and then laughed heartily. "I forgot you were a small-town kid," he said when he was through laughing. A beach comber is a chap who is broke in the tropics, and has to sleep on the beach."

Stetson's face cleared, and his slow grin appeared. "But that's exactly what I am," he declared. "I—I thought—I was afraid it was worse than that."

"Bet she'll apologize to you within an hour. I really need you, Stetson. You've proved that you're not afraid of a scrap, and I think I am in for trouble. I've a legal title to this island, but it is five hundred miles from any-

where; and, in the remote quarters of the world, might makes right. I wonder if this man Bright is the one who sent the mulatto after me with a knife."

"I don't think so. I would know that man's voice.

CARSON paced the deck for a moment, and appeared to make a decision.

"Bright made me an offer for my island, which means he suspects why I bought it. Somebody hired a guy to stick me like a pig. It's a cinch I won't be left in possession of Fandango undisturbed. I can depend upon the skipper, the steward, and the engineer. The other members of the crew are new men. I've a machine gun boxed up down below, and a dozen good rifles. I'd like you to join us, but it's not fair to ask you to come in blind. I'm going to cut you in on the prize money. Fifty thousand dollars if we find what I expect. How's that?"

"Prize money. Fifty thousand dollars," exclaimed Wilbur, dazzled and excited. "Is it treasure, Mr. Carson, Spanish gold?"

Frank grinned derisively. "No such bunk! Not gold, but its equivalent. Bank of England notes. And, in a way, this is a piratical enterprise. That is, there are certain interests who would call us pirates if we got away with it, but they would compromise quick enough on a division of the swag. My conscience isn't going to worry me, Stetson, if that is a matter of interest to you."

Wilbur gazed at him, and saw the twinkle in his eye.

"I know you're no crook, sir," he said earnestly, "so if you think this is all right, I'll trail along. Fifty thousand dollars. I didn't expect to save as much as that in a lifetime, Mr. Carson."

"If you get it, you'll earn it," replied the yachtsman very seriously.

Their conference was interrupted by

the return of Cora Carson, who had changed her dress, and her mood with it.

"All's right with the world," she declared brightly. "Mr. Stetson, I am sorry if I hurt your feelings. When do we get under way, Frank?"

"In a few hours. Stetson has enlisted with me for the war."

Cora offered the boy her hand. "That's fine," she said cordially. "Most likely you hate me."

Wilbur shook hands without enthusiasm. "Well," he drawled, "I don't like you as much as I did, but I realize now that I ought to have minded my own business."

Her eyes snapped, and she laughed with embarrassment, and then glared at her brother, who was chuckling.

"I've a temper," she retorted, "and when I'm annoyed, I claw like a cat, so don't ruffle my fur, Mr. Stetson."

"I'll try not to, Miss Carson," he replied stiffly.

From the bridge, Captain Smith hailed the owner.

"I say, Mr. Carson, the Munson Liner *Munargo* is coming in," he called.

Carson waved his hand. "Not interested," he answered. "I've some work to do below, Cora. Don't you kids quarrel. Stetson, when you're dealing with beautiful but swell-headed young women, try tact, if you know what that is."

"I don't quarrel with children," retorted Cora haughtily.

Wilbur flushed. "I'm older than you are," he exclaimed. "I'm nearly twenty-two."

"I'm twenty," she replied. "A girl of twenty is ten years older than a boy the same age. I'm not interested in a man unless he is at least twenty-six or seven."

"Oh, indeed," retorted the affronted young man. "Well, I'm not interested in girls at all."

She threw a resentful glance at him.

"You look as though you could be very mushy," she remarked scornfully.

"Is that so? He travels farthest who travels alone."

"I know the book you got that out of. I bet you've been in love already, and were an awful calf about it."

"No," he replied maliciously. "You see, I admire brunettes, and there were no good-looking ones in Stoutsville—only blondes."

Miss Carson rose and glared at him. She strode away, leaving Wilbur with the honors of war. He was young enough to congratulate himself, when he should have been trembling in his shoes. Miss Cora Carson, as her brother had stated, was a very spoiled young woman, and took a terrible revenge when she felt herself affronted.

While Wilbur was a good-looking youth, he was only a boy in the opinion of this New York society girl, and she would not have wasted any time on him if there had been older men available. But Cora was accustomed to subjugate whatever male happened to be in the vicinity, and Stetson deserved punishment.

She strolled up forward and watched the tender coming in from the *Munargo*, which presently tied up at a pier.

A few moments later a motor boat left the pier and headed for the *Cora Carson*. She caught a glimpse of a white dress in her stern, and stared at it with growing conviction. She gazed for a few seconds longer, and then vanished below.

A MOMENT later, Wilbur Stetson observed a launch at the yacht's side, and saw a sailor assist to the deck a young woman, who was followed by a thickset, short-legged man who smoked a pipe, and had a round, weather-beaten face with twinkling blue eyes.

The man had the homeliest face that Wilbur had ever seen, while the girl

looked exactly like a picture of a Spanish señorita he had admired on a Caribbean cruise posted in New York, except that she wore a white yachting costume instead of a Spanish shawl.

"Ahoy, below there!" bellowed the man. "Frank Carson, ahoy!"

He was a sailor, evidently, and an Irish sailor, for he contrived to make his hail mellow and racy.

Frank Carson bobbed up from below, followed by Cora.

"O'Malley," he exclaimed. "And Miss O'Malley. What on earth brought you down here?"

The girl gave him her hand, and laughed musically.

"Guilty," she declared. "I didn't see why we should stay in New York and let you have all the fun, so I made dad come down to join you."

"Gosh!" said Frank. "I'm glad to see you, but you shouldn't have come. Captain O'Malley, can you persuade her to go back?"

"Sure," agreed the sailor. "If you can persuade your sister to go with her. Pigs and gurr! A man can do nothin' with the craytures."

"Come below," said Frank cordially. "I'm glad to see you, Captain, but Miss O'Malley is a problem."

"So this is what you call a welcome," remarked the girl reproachfully. "Cora, darling, how are you?"

"Well enough," said Cora stiffly. "I thought it was understood that we would handle this end."

Miss O'Malley threw her arms around the little tigress, and lifted her off her feet? The Irish girl was three inches taller than Cora.

The young man who was not interested in women thought they were the two most beautiful girls in the world, and felt himself strangely excited. He was also bewildered because the new arrival looked exactly like a Spaniard, and her name was O'Malley. Wilbur was not aware that a few thousand ship-

wrecked mariners from the Spanish Armada had changed the complexion of people who live on the south coast of Ireland.

The quartet vanished below and left Wilbur on deck, marveling. Evidently this pair were going on the voyage. While Frank Carson welcomed them, Cora obviously was not glad to see them. Why?

The expedition worried him a little. It smacked of buccaneering. Yet perfectly respectable people went off in search of Spanish gold, though they rarely found it. And the money in sunken Spanish galleons belonged to some one, the descendants of those Spaniards who had lost it, though it never occurred to finders to search for the rightful owners. The principle of this quest for Bank of England notes was the same. After all, Carson owned Fandango Island, and, if he found treasure buried there, it was his.

Wilbur rose and strolled forward. Aft the bridge was a small deck house, over the entrance to which was a sign, "Wireless." The captain was leaning on the bridge above, and nodded when Wilbur asked permission to enter.

"Carson told me you were a wireless man," he said. "See what you can make of it."

THE late operator of the *Mermaid* entered a tiny cabin and inspected a small compact sending set which he saw at a glance was up to date, and far superior to the outfit on the sunken steamer.

He turned the switch and found that the instrument was alive. He put on the headpieces and listened in. There was a lot of talk in international code, and then some high-powered station drowned out distant ships. It was the shore station in Nassau, and it was calling a government vessel. Almost immediately a reply came from H. M. S. *Porpoise*.

With the curiosity of all wireless men, Wilbur listened, heard the warship give her position, and then heard the order from the Government House:

"Proceed at once to Fandango Island. Further orders will be radioed."

Wilbur was out of the deck house and running for the cabin companion entrance.

"Mr. Carson! Mr. Carson!"

Frank darted immediately on deck. Wilbur repeated what he had learned.

"The devil!" exclaimed the yachtsman. "I say, captain!"

"Aye, sir," called the skipper from the bridge.

"We won't wait for any supplies. Get out of here, immediately," commanded Frank excitedly. "You see, Stetson, you're earning your salary already."

"But what does it mean?"

"Darned if I know. You'll have to be on duty continuously until we find out what further orders will be radioed to the gunboat."

"But won't it be in cipher?"

"I doubt it. You see, they don't know we have a radio operator. That's why they used the international code to send the first order."

"But a warship?"

Carson laughed. "She's an ancient gunboat. We'll reach the island twenty-four hours ahead of her. They smell some kind of rat, though. My title to the island was graciously acknowledged, but they'd like to know what the deuce I want of the place. You're going to be a busy man, Stetson."

CHAPTER VII.

HER MAJESTY'S SHIP "PORPOISE."

BATHED in the gold-and-crimson radiance of the setting sun, Fandango Isle rose out of the ocean before the eyes of the adventurers about thirty hours after the yacht's hasty departure from the island of New Providence.

It was an island some four or five miles in extent, almost surrounded by a reef, which at once protected the island from the violence of the ocean, and made access to it a problem except to those who were acquainted with the passages through the coral wall.

To Wilbur Stetson, it was far more beautiful and romantic than New Providence had seemed when he first set eyes on it two days ago. It was dowered with mystery, and decorated with excitement. Thrusting their feathered crowns against the sky were platoons of tall coconut trees, fantastic in the sunset. While still miles away, he could discern a gold streak which the captain told him was a beach of yellow sand.

As the yacht approached, the sun dipped behind the horizon, and yellow and crimson deepened to purple, and finally faded, and the stars came out like lanterns suddenly hung in the sky, and the evening air seemed perfumed from the profusion of tropic plants on the still distant shore.

Captain O'Malley joined Captain Smith on the little bridge, and presently Frank Carson was standing beside them, while O'Malley pointed out to the yacht's skipper an opening in the great reef. The two girls, who now were apparently upon the most friendly terms, stood at the bow, spellbound. Wilbur was standing under the bridge, just forward of it.

Darkness blotted out everything just as the little vessel had slipped into smooth water, and the captain wisely ordered the men forward to let go the anchor.

"We'll go ashore in the morning," Wilbur heard Captain O'Malley say to the others. "How do we know what we might run into there?"

"It's our island," Carson replied. "And nobody is living on it."

"There may be fifty beach combers for all we know," retorted the Irishman.

"Well," replied Carson resignedly, "let's go down to dinner."

They descended from the bridge and vanished below. The two girls immediately walked aft, and followed them. Wilbur remained at his post. Of his own volition, he was taking his meals with the crew. He had definitely demoted himself from the post of friend to employee.

During the previous afternoon he had lunched in the little wireless house, and when Carson called him to dinner, he had requested permission to dine with the seamen.

"What's eating you?" Carson asked.

"Your sister doesn't like me, for one thing, and these new people don't know me, Mr. Carson. You've things to talk over without being bothered by a stranger."

"Rubbish!"

"Honestly, I'd feel better."

"Well, suit yourself," replied Carson.

"Cora is a spitfire, and you've hurt her feelings, but the thing to do is to carry on, and she'll get over being resentful."

"Please excuse me, sir."

"You're excused," replied Carson.

"But you're definitely joining the crew, old man. I didn't expect these guests, and I need your stateroom for Miss O'Malley. You'll have to sleep in a hammock. How will you like that?"

"It won't bother me at all."

Carson patted him on the back. "When we go ashore, you're one of us again," he promised. "I can see the way you look at things. From something Cora let drop, you're in wrong with her."

DURING the first day, Wilbur had heard several messages which sounded like gibberish, and which he assumed was the Government House at Nassau talking to the gunboat *Porpoise*, but it was not helpful to the owner of the yacht *Cora Carson*.

He slept very comfortably in a hammock that night, and breakfasted with the crew, which consisted of the engineer, the mate, and three seamen, who treated him in friendly fashion.

One of the seamen was a cockney, and two were Scandinavians. The engineer was an Irishman, and the mate was a close-mouthed Cape Cod man.

Right after breakfast, Wilbur went to his instrument, and remained there until lunch. The Carsons and the O'Malleys lounged aft in yachting clothes, and apparently had much to say to one another. It looked to Wilbur as though social relations with himself had been suspended, to say the least. Cora never came near the wireless room, and he had not yet met Miss O'Malley.

While this state of affairs was the result of his own attitude, Wilbur was human enough to resent it. He told himself that he was as good as they were, and that his Uncle Harleigh in Stoutsville could buy and sell the lot of them.

After the yacht had anchored that night, Wilbur leaned on the rail for a long time and looked into the black night, and thought about a lot of things. He was not really dissatisfied. He was burning with resentment against Cora Carson, and was determined to show her that he was just as well worth while as any man of twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and he was determined not to give her another chance to snub him. By declining to join the party in the cabin yesterday, he had shown her where she stood with him.

Where did she stand with him? Well, he really didn't know. She was the prettiest girl he had ever seen, and when a fellow is twenty-one, no matter how determined he may be about not getting mixed up with girls, there is something about a beautiful one which disturbs him terribly. And now there were two beautiful girls on the little yacht—one of them a brunette. He had lied to

Cora when he said that he preferred brunettes, but if the O'Malley girl wanted to become friendly with him, he would encourage her a little.

Wilbur had seen Miss O'Malley casting curious glances at him every now and then. It looked as though the beautiful dark girl wouldn't mind meeting Wilbur Stetson.

The members of the crew were eating up forward, and Wilbur was still standing by the rail. From the dining salon came girlish laughter and the clink of glass and crockery. He could be down there with them if he wanted to.

Finally he went forward and joined the seamen, who began to pump him about the intentions of those aft. How long were the owners going to stay on this forsaken island? Would they keep the yacht here, or send it back to New York or Nassau?

Stetson kept his mouth shut. The crew were either married or had sweethearts, and, being familiar with the tropics, didn't want any more of them than was absolutely necessary. They favored places which had subways and motion-picture shows.

About nine o'clock, Wilbur went to the wireless room and listened in for an hour or so. Then he came out on deck and leaned on the rail again. The yacht's riding lights supplied the only illumination in a wilderness of black, of which the island was only an inky shadow. Not a pin point of yellow anywhere ashore to indicate inhabitants, not a light at sea to reveal the presence of another vessel. One of the seamen had mentioned that the waters of this section of the Bahamas were less frequented than any part of the Atlantic.

THERE was a radio in the cabin, which was suddenly turned on, and a dance program from Havana burst loudly upon the silence of the lonely sea. The man on watch sat down near the companion entrance

to hear it better, but Wilbur walked away up to the bow to get away from it. He couldn't escape the music, however, and that is why he didn't hear the *chug-chug* of a motor craft until it was very close.

He strained his eyes to locate the boat, but the stars, though bright, seemed to shed no light upon the water, and there was no moon as yet. The motor craft passed swiftly and invisibly, and finally could not be heard, and then it occurred to Wilbur that it was curious that a launch should be moving about in this haven of Fandango Island, which was supposed not to be inhabited.

He went back and spoke to the Scandinavian on watch.

"You ban crazy. I hear noddin'," replied the sailor.

"How could you? You had your ears full of jazz," replied Wilbur. "You better report it."

"I tell the skipper you claim you heard it," agreed the Swede. He ventured down into the cabin. A moment later the captain, Carson, and O'Malley came rushing on deck, and the radio was turned off.

"Are you sure, Stetson?" demanded Carson.

"Absolutely, Mr. Carson."

"Is the lad given to seeing things?" Captain O'Malley inquired.

"If Wilbur claims he heard a motor boat, he heard a motor boat," Carson replied.

"In that case, ye'd better put a couple of men armed with rifles on watch all night, and we had better sleep on our arms," replied the Irishman. "Sure'n ye've poachers on yer preserves, me lad."

"They're a scary lot if they put to sea on sight of the yacht," commented Frank Carson. "Did it sound as though they were going seaward, Stetson?"

"Yes, sir. They seemed to be coming from the shore, and going away from it."

"Think they'd put to sea in a motor boat?" asked Carson of Captain O'Malley.

"Might. There are coral keys only ten or fifteen miles away."

"I'll ask you to arrange for armed watches, Captain Smith," said Frank. "I am to be called at the slightest alarm."

"Aye, sir."

"Much obliged, Wilbur," Frank said kindly. "Come down in the cabin and join us."

"I'd rather turn in, that is, if you don't mind, Mr. Carson," Wilbur said, in some embarrassment.

"Well, well, we'll all turn in soon. Wonder what the beggars were up to?"

O'Malley chuckled. "Same business as ourselves. Hope they haven't been having any luck."

Wilbur stood a four-hour watch between twelve and four, with a rifle at hand, but nothing happened to disturb his solitude, and morning dawned without anything happening to alarm the yachtsmen.

The sun came up in even more glory than that which accompanied its descent, but it revealed a black speck on the horizon to the north. This grew rapidly larger, and at breakfast time revealed itself to be a small vessel of war, a gunboat named the *Porpoise*, one of a very few armed craft patrolling the vast stretch of ocean which is dotted with the islands of the Bahama group.

By seven o'clock, she was close to the reef, but instead of entering the inner basin as the yacht had done, she lowered a launch which headed for the island, while the gunboat drifted about a mile away.

IT was a sublime morning. Everything—sky, sea, the island, the trim, graceful launch swiftly approaching—was beautiful, except the *Porpoise*, which, like most British vessels of war, had been designed strictly

for practical purposes, and with no thought of art.

Carson touched Stetson on the shoulder. "It seems that we overlooked introducing you to my friends," he said. "I told them last night how you came to my rescue in the Bucket of Blood."

Wilbur faced the smiling Miss O'Malley and the kindly gaze of her father.

Miss O'Malley, when she smiled, was absolutely radiant—her gleaming white teeth made more brilliant by contrast with her clear olive complexion and her jet-black hair. She had a figure like a goddess, that girl, and great black eyes, with unfathomable depths in them. Beside her, Cora was not so vivid, but she contrasted exquisitely with the Diana from Ireland. Venus and Diana, Wilbur thought. He was stricken with shyness in the presence of so much beauty.

Miss O'Malley offered him her hand. "Cora has been singing your praises," she stated.

Cora grew very red. "I said he had courage, I believe," she said coldly. "I didn't refer to his disposition—for reasons."

"Cat!" remarked Carson, laughing. "In case you are personally questioned, Stetson, you've been hired to work for me on the island, and you know nothing about me or my plans."

Wilbur nodded. Cora ostentatiously turned her back on him, but Miss O'Malley asked him questions about wireless telegraphy, and requested that he teach her how to send a message.

And then the launch was close at hand, and a slim, white-clad officer was standing at her stern, asking permission to come on board.

Carson waved his hand invitingly, and a minute later the British officer stood on the deck and introduced himself.

"Lieutenant Blake, ladies and gentlemen, of her majesty's gunboat *Porpoise*."

Carson offered his hand. "Delighted to know you, sir," he said cordially.

"Permit me to introduce my sister, her friend, Miss O'Malley, Captain Denis O'Malley, my sailing master, Captain Smith."

He did not introduce Wilbur Stetson, who stepped to one side, but not out of hearing.

Lieutenant Blake shook hands with Carson, bowed cordially to the ladies, and turned a cold eye on O'Malley.

"May I ask to what service your title refers?" he demanded.

"And why not?" replied O'Malley, grinning. "Irish Republican army, if you happen to have heard of it."

The naval officer nodded. "Released a year ago from Dartmoor prison, I believe," he said significantly.

"Proud of it, me lad," retorted O'Malley blandly. "Political offense. Held illegally in jail for years after Ireland won her freedom."

The officer did not unbend. "I believe you had held a commission in the Royal Naval Reserve, and had taken the oath of allegiance."

"The Easter-week massacre in Dublin absolved me from that oath, young man," declared O'Malley. "I'm pleased to have done whatever I could for my country."

"Isn't this inquisition uncalled for?" asked Carson angrily. "Kindly state your business, Mr. Blake. As an American, I honor Captain O'Malley for being a patriot."

Blake smiled. "I beg your pardon, sir, and that of the ladies," he said. "We were notified in Nassau that Captain O'Malley had come down from New York. Surprise at finding him on your yacht is responsible for my rudeness."

"I've done my time," said O'Malley. "There is no law against my setting foot on British territory, I believe."

Blake bowed acquiescence. "My busi-

ness, sir," he said, "is this: A band of Cuban malefactors recently broke jail, stole a fishing vessel, and are supposed to be in hiding on some of these islands. The Provincial Government has been asked by Cuba to apprehend them. Several are convicted murderers. You, Mr. Carson, recently purchased Fandango Key, and established your ownership at Nassau. I strongly advise against your landing here, especially with ladies, while these criminals are at large."

Frank smiled politely. "We can take care of ourselves, sir," he said. "Thanks for your advice, however."

Wilbur had walked to the rail on the shore side of the yacht, and was staring at the island, though he was not missing a word of the conversation. For the first time he discerned a house ashore. It was almost hidden by a clump of tall palms, but part of its red roof was visible. He saw white smoke curling skyward from an invisible chimney.

The officer noticed it at the same instant.

"I understood that the previous owner, Mr. Johnstone, was in New York, and that there was not even a caretaker ashore," he said.

"That's right," replied Frank, whose back was toward the land.

"Look! There is somebody living there."

Everybody whirled about and stared. The smoke stream grew in breadth, and turned from white to brown, and then to black.

"Look!" cried Wilbur. "The house is on fire!"

How does Wilbur Stetson make out on the tropical island? Does he get enough of adventure? Or maybe a little too much? Watch for the second installment of this thrilling serial by Fred Mac-Isaac, on the news stands December 16th.

Lazy Lucas Misses A Watch

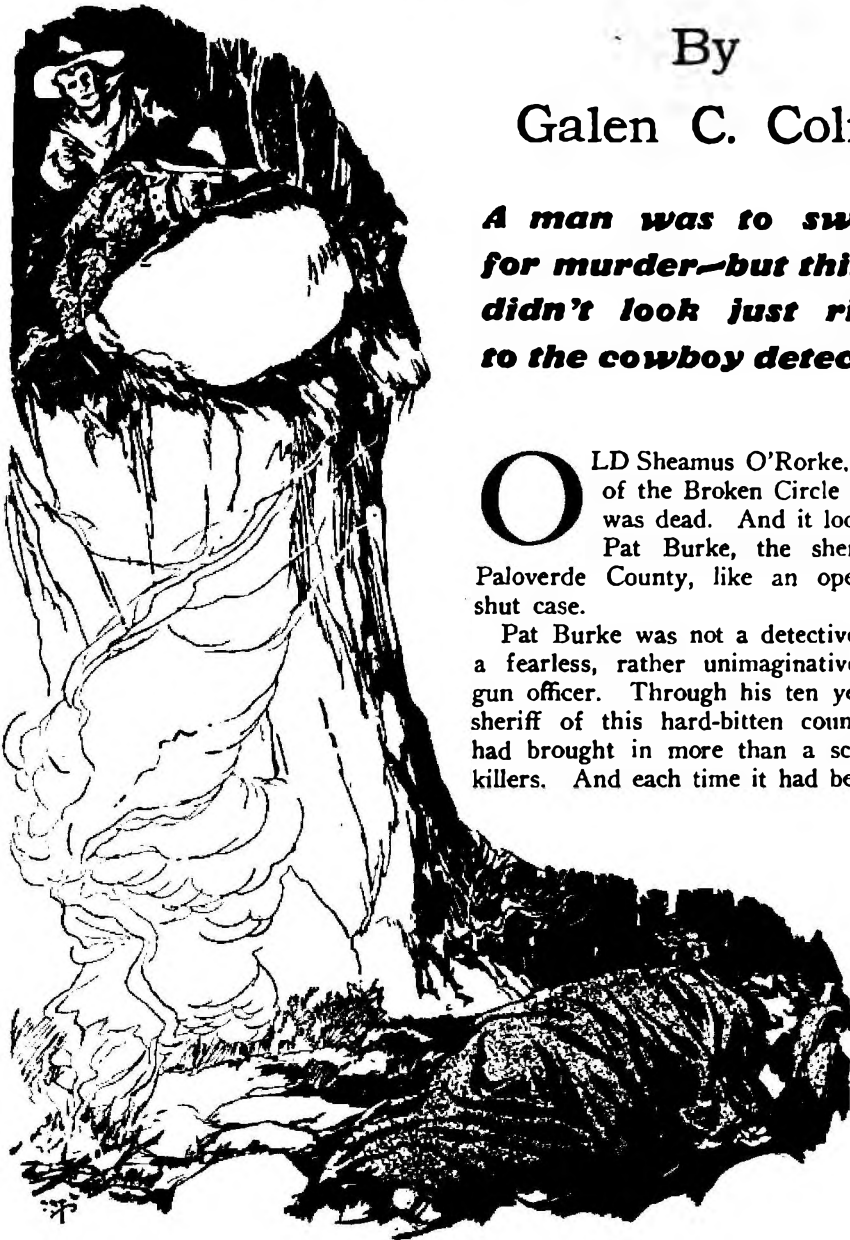
By

Galen C. Colin

*A man was to swing
for murder—but things
didn't look just right
to the cowboy detective*

OLD Sheamus O'Rorke, owner of the Broken Circle spread, was dead. And it looked to Pat Burke, the sheriff of Paloverde County, like an open-and-shut case.

Pat Burke was not a detective—just a fearless, rather unimaginative two-gun officer. Through his ten years as sheriff of this hard-bitten county, he had brought in more than a score of killers. And each time it had been but



a matter of finding the man, and placing him under arrest.

And he had no reason to think this case was any different. Every shred of evidence pointed toward "Bun" Holloway, young owner of the little H Bar spread. And Sheriff Pat Burke had promptly put Holloway behind the bars.

Pablo Ramirez, half-breed line-rider for the Ace of Spades outfit, had brought the news of Sheamus O'Rourke's passing. Sheriff Burke had followed the half-breed's directions, and found things as Pablo Ramirez had stated.

The old rancher's body huddled half erect against a great boulder on the rim of Breakneck Canyon, ten miles from the little county-seat town of Hidalgo.

The gnarled left hand clawed at the flat face of the rock, as if O'Rourke had tried desperately to remain on his feet, even after the bullet had pierced his heart.

The fingers of the right hand had stiffened on a .45 cartridge, held like a pencil. And on the gray rock two wavering lines of writing had been traced by the lead of the bullet.

Bun Holloway got me. Plugged me in the back.
SHEAMUS O'R.

There was no need of further waiting. There was no doubting the words of a dying man. Sheriff Burke emptied the old man's pockets of the few trinkets he carried—a jackknife, a few cents in change, a bit of string, a handful of assorted nails—nothing else.

He turned the body over to "Solemn" Todd, the undertaker, and headed for the H Bar, and Bun Holloway.

Of course Bun Holloway protested his arrest vehemently, denying any complicity in the crime. He declared that his differences with the old man had been settled satisfactorily—that he had paid Sheamus O'Rourke a thousand dollars for the water rights that had long been a bone of contention.

But he failed to show any papers

confirming the purchase. Sheriff Pat Burke shook his head solemnly.

"Sheamus O'Rourke done wrote on the rock thet yuh plugged him from the back. An' thet's documentary evidence of a dyin' man. I'm afraid yore statement that the ol' man shook hands with yuh on a thousand-dollar deal won't go with a jury."

TOM MATHEWS, Bun Holloway's only rider and closest friend, protested as bitterly as the young rancher himself—and with as little success. He rode to Hidalgo with the sheriff and his prisoner, arguing every step of the way.

Nor was the argument ended when they pulled up at the sheriff's little office and the old officer herded his prisoner inside.

It is doubtful if all the words would have done any good. But when "Ace" Calderwood, owner of the Ace of Spades spread, edged his huge bulk into the tiny room, he made a single statement that clinched Bun Holloway's guilt in the sheriff's mind.

"Holloway's lyin' to yuh, Burke. He didn't buy no water rights from Sheamus O'Rourke, like he says. Why? For the simple reason that I bought 'em two-three days ago—an' I've got the papers to prove it." He pulled a legal-appearing document from his pocket, and passed it to Sheriff Burke.

The old officer read it slowly, his lips pursed and a frown of concentration on his brow. Then he nodded solemnly.

"All shipshape an' in order," he grunted. "An' thet proves a motive. Likely Sheamus O'Rourke tol' Holloway thet he'd sold to yuh—an' Holloway flared up an' plugged him in the back. Probably got scared an' high-tailed, whilst the ol' man dragged himself to the boulder an' scribbled his dyin' message."

Tom Mathews, who had listened silently to this accusation, leaped to his

feet. His blue eyes blazed, and his voice trembled with rage.

"You're as thick-headed as a locoed dogie, Pat Burke! Can't yuh see thet Ace Calderwood—or some of his men—plugged Sheamus O'Rorke an' laid it onto Bun Holloway? Can't yuh figger out thet Ace Calderwood forged thet bill o' sale after he learned thet O'Rorke sold them water rights to Bun?"

The burly, beak-nosed rancher's face went black, and his hand streaked for his gun. "Blast yuh for a lyin'——"

But Sheriff Burke stepped between the huge man and the slim rider. "There'll be no more 'shootin', Ace Calderwood! Tom is excited, an' don't realize what he's sayin'. There ain't no evidence against yuh—an' plenty against Bun Holloway."

"All right, then!" rasped Tom Mathews. "If yuh refuse to listen, or to make any further investigation, I'm takin' it higher. I'm ridin' to Pyrite, an' puttin' the case before Barry Hildreth, secretary o' the Cattlemen's Association."

"Yuh're welcome, son," answered Pat Burke mildly. "An' I'd be plenty glad if he could prove that Bun ain't guilty. But I'm afear'd thet he is."

As Tom Mathews stormed out of the office, and swung into his saddle, Ace Calderwood cursed luridly. "If I was sheriff, they wouldn't no blasted C. A. man come snoopin' around!"

Pat Burke's eyes narrowed. "From yore talk, Ace, a waddy would think yuh was right interested in gettin' Bun Holloway hung."

"I'm interested in seein' every murderer stretch rope," growled the big rancher.

TWO days later, Barry Hildreth, secretary of the Cattlemen's Association with his offices at Pyrite, watched a dust-caked and thoroughly weary young puncher prod his mount up the rutted street.

TN—3

Barry Hildreth was silent, but a frown furrowed his brow, as Tom Mathews drew up before the little office. Then he turned toward a long, slouching figure in the big chair beside the desk.

He opened his mouth to speak, but his teeth clicked shut. For the sound of slow, even breathing proved all too plainly that the slouching man was sound asleep.

This indolent waddy was much younger than Barry Hildreth—probably no more than twenty-two or three. And from all outward appearance, he was about the laziest hombre on the range.

Well over six feet in height, and broad in proportion, he slumped in the big chair as if he did not have a bone in his body. His square, almost handsome face was as serene as a baby's. His wide gray Stetson was pushed well back on his head, revealing a thatch of crisp, sun-bleached blond hair.

"Lazy" Lucas was Barry Hildreth's shrewdest range detective—although he was far from looking the part. Only the old secretary, of all the men on the range, had recognized the lightning brain, the iron nerves, and the uncanny ability with six-guns that lurked behind Lazy Lucas's slothful exterior.

And even now, those who did not know Lazy's record, still laughed. Barry Hildreth, himself, was often more than a little put out at Lazy Lucas's perpetually indolent pose.

But when Tom Mathews stamped up on the slab porch of the office, Barry Hildreth strode to Lazy Lucas and shook the blond waddy impatiently. Lazy opened one eye a crack—then closed it again.

"Yuh been loafin' enough, Lucas! I've been thinkin' for a week thet yuh needed to be put to work. An' I reckon this stranger answers the problem. He's ridden far—an' there's a look o' desperation on his face."

Lazy Lucas sighed deeply, but he did not move, or open his eyes. "I knowed it wouldn't last. It was too good to be true."

But now Tom Mathews swung the door open. He looked first at the slouching figure in the big chair. Then his gaze turned to Barry Hildreth.

"Yuh're Hildreth? I'm Tom Mathews, from down nigh Hidalgo. Work for Bun Holloway—or did, afore he got jailed for murder."

"Bun Holloway of the H Bar spread. I know him from his letters, though I never seen him. Hidalgo's a right long drag. Give us all the facts. Who did he kill—an' why?"

"Thet's jest it—he didn't kill ol' Sheamus O'Rorke, though the evidence points to him!"

"Sheamus O'Rorke," said Harry Hildreth slowly. "So O'Rorke is dead. I knew him well, twenty year' ago. Tight-fisted ol' hoss trader—but squar' as they make 'em. He'd sell anything he owned—at his price—except thet ol' gold watch."

"I don't know nothin' about a watch—but the rest fits him," answered Tom Mathews.

"But they ain't no use gossipin' about a man thet's dead," broke in Barry Hildreth. "Tell us what yuh know about the killin', son."

IN words that fairly tumbled over each other, Tom Mathews related the details of the finding of old Sheamus O'Rorke's body, of the written message on the rock, of the arrest and jailing of Bun Holloway and the clinching argument of Ace Calderwood's possessing papers showing his purchase of the water rights.

Barry Hildreth listened, his eyes narrowed and a frown of concentration on his brow. When Tom Mathews ended, the old secretary nodded slowly.

"I'd be inclined to agree with Calderwood an' the sheriff, son. Seems like

a clear case, with plenty of evidence. Don't know what we can do."

"But yuh've got to do something, Hildreth! They'll hang Bun Holloway, if yuh don't! Can't yuh see thet Ace Calderwood easily could have plugged O'Rorke, an' laid it onto Bun?"

"He could—mebbe," agreed Barry Hildreth. "But yuh ain't got the tiniest bit of evidence thet he did."

"But Calderwood did it, Hildreth! I know he did! He'd always hated Bun, ever since he couldn't buy him out!"

For a long moment Barry Hildreth was silent. Then he turned to Lazy Lucas. The blond range detective was still slumped low in the chair, and his eyes were almost closed.

"Yuh heard the story, Lucas! What d'yuh think?"

Lazy Lucas opened his left eye. A sigh came from deep in his chest. Slowly, laboriously, he drew his spurred heels down from the desk, and straightened a bit in his chair.

"Evidence looks plain, Barry. But Tom Mathews talks plain, too. An' there's enough logic in his words to kinder cast a doubt."

Then Lazy Lucas turned slowly to Tom Mathews. "This here Sheamus O'Rorke—was he quarrelsome, mebbe? Have a lot of enemies?"

"He was short-spoken, but not proddy. Lots of folks didn't like him none too well. Ace Calderwood didn't get along with him—nor Art Braley—nor Clem Whitney—mebbe a half dozen more."

Lazy Lucas nodded indolently. "An' thet gold watch Barry was tellin' about. I'm kinda curious about it."

Tom Mathews shook his head. "I've never seen it—never even heard of it."

Barry Hildreth answered the question. "Sheamus was not talkative. Likely nobody down in Hidalgo knows about thet watch. Seems like it was a present from his father—who had it from some duke or lord or somethin'

back in Ireland. It's been twenty years since I've seen it—but I know nothin' could make Sheamus O'Rorke part with it."

"Then it must have kicked up a stir, when it was found on his body," said Lazy Lucas indolently.

"But it wasn't found," broke in Tom Mathews. "There was nothin' on Sheamus O'Rorke except a few trinkets an' a little small change."

"It don't exactly make sense," drawled Lazy Lucas. "A man with brains wouldn't have robbed the body of such a conspicuous gee-gaw—an' I reckon both Bun Holloway an' Ace Calderwood are smart enough."

Barry Hildreth drew a long breath. He knew from Lazy Lucas's tone that he was getting interested. He turned to Tom Mathews.

"Lazy Lucas will ride to Hidalgo with yuh. If Bun Holloway didn't kill Sheamus O'Rorke, he will clear him, an' find the guilty man."

Tom Mathews eyes opened wide. "Lazy Lucas? This here hombre? Then he's a—a——"

A grin flicked across Barry Hildreth's face. He nodded. "He don't look the part—but he's the best man I've got. I'd bank on his judgment an' his guns any day."

DURING the long ride back to Hidalgo, Tom Mathews saw nothing to make him think this drawling, indolent rider was the smart range detective that Barry Hildreth claimed he was.

Lazy Lucas talked little, preferring to ride with eyes almost closed, and one long leg curled about the saddle horn. And when he did talk, it was mostly gossip questions about the spreads about Hidalgo, and the citizens of the little cow town.

But he learned a lot from these innocent-appearing questions. For one thing, he knew that both Bun Holloway

and Ace Calderwood had a full supply of brains. And that made him a little doubtful that either had taken the gold watch from Sheamus O'Rorke's pocket.

On the other hand, the fact of the scribbled writing ascribed to Sheamus O'Rorke—always providing that Bun Holloway was not really the killer—proved more than average cunning on the murderer's part.

It was a puzzling tangle, and Lazy Lucas preferred to wait for further developments before guessing the outcome. Better to go into it with an open mind.

Tom Mathews had made the ride to Pyrite in two days. But the return was much slower. As the night of the second day settled in the hills, fifteen miles separated the two riders from Hidalgo.

Tom Mathews insisted that they continue in the darkness. But Lazy Lucas shook his head.

"Ridin' is hard work, an' I'm nigh tuckered out. Want to land in Hidalgo fresh an' chipper. We'll spread our bed rolls alongside o' this here crick. There ain't no hurry. They won't hang Bun Holloway afore the trial comes off."

But Lazy Lucas was not entirely truthful in his reason for wanting to stop. In spite of his indolent attitude, his keen eyes had ranged the tangled hills all afternoon. And they caught occasional glimpses of a rider who paralleled them at a distance.

He had not mentioned this strange rider to Tom Mathews. The young puncher would have wanted to investigate pronto. And that was not Lazy Lucas's way.

The cowboy-detective had a hunch about this prowler, and he wanted to follow it through.

And so, when the two riders halted for the night, Lazy Lucas chose the spot for their camp carefully. They built a tiny camp fire at the very foot of an abrupt, rocky slope, directly be-

neath a huge boulder that balanced precariously on the crest.

With the tiny fire still blazing brightly, Tom Mathews and Lazy Lucas crawled into their blankets. Mathews slept almost instantly. But Lazy Lucas did not close his eyes.

He waited until the even breathing of Tom Mathews told that he was asleep. Then the blond range detective slipped from the blankets. Almost instantly he faded into the darkness.

Twenty minutes later, he appeared for an instant on the crest of the slope—just an instant, to get his bearings. Then he crouched in the dense shadow of the balanced boulder.

For a full half hour he squatted silently. Patience was one of his greatest virtues. Then his vigilance was rewarded. Stealthy footsteps clicked on the rocks.

A shadowy figure detached itself from the gloom. It approached the boulder cautiously. For a long moment it was motionless. Then a grunt of satisfaction came from the darkness.

The stranger stooped, and thrust hands beneath the back edge of the boulder. He drew a long breath, to straighten and send the rock crashing down. But something hard and round prodded him in the ribs.

"If I was you, I'd sorter git away from thet rock, stranger," drawled Lazy Lucas. "Yuh might accidentally set it to rollin' down the slope—an' there's a waddy sleepin' down there. Wouldn't want to kill a man."

The strange man straightened with a curse. He half turned toward the blond range detective, but the prodding gun barrel stopped him. Swift fingers swept over his body, as if they searched for something. Then Lazy Lucas spoke again.

"I been watchin' yuh all afternoon, hombre. Sorter figgered yuh was layin' for us, but afraid to jump us in the daytime. Figgered I'd give yuh a good

chance to try yore cunning with thet boulder."

Now, with his left hand, Lazy Lucas struck a match. He held it to the stranger's face, and scrutinized it closely.

"Reckon mebbe we'll meet again, hombre—an' I want to be shore I know yuh."

Nor was Lazy Lucas likely to forget that face. For it was swarthy and deeply pocked. And the glittering black eyes fairly blazed with fear and hate. The man was a half-breed of the most wicked type.

"Me, I don't know, señor—an' I was not try to keel thees man. I was onlee try——"

"Shet yore face, an' high-tail it, hombre!" rasped Lazy Lucas. "The next time I see yuh, it'll be over a gun barrel."

The half-breed whirled, and sped away into the darkness. Then Lazy Lucas made his way back down the slope. The capture of this would-be killer had done little to clear up the problem. There was some connection, but it was still hazy.

He drew his boots off slowly, and crawled into his blankets. This time he slept soundly. And next morning he did not mention his encounter to Tom Mathews.

IT was mid-morning when Lazy Lucas and Tom Mathews rode into Hidalgo. And already the hitch-rack in front of the Maverick Bar was lined with saddle horses.

"Them's Ace o' Spades hosses," grunted Tom Mathews. "Seems kinder funny thet Ace Calderwood an' his men should be in town in the middle o' the week."

Lazy Lucas grunted absently as the pair rode on down the street to the sheriff's office.

As they dismounted and stepped to the slab porch, Sheriff Pat Burke met them.

"Sheriff, this here is Lazy Lucas, o' the Cattlemen's Association," said Tom Mathews shortly.

Pat Burke looked the indolent stranger over. Then he shook his head. "I'm glad to see yuh, hombre—although they ain't much yuh can do, I reckon. But the Ace o' Spades riders are gettin' proddy. They 'low they're goin' to string up Bun Holloway, unless the trial comes off right sudden."

"Yeah, they might," said Lazy Lucas softly. "But I reckon the trial is due afore long."

Lazy Lucas slouched into the little office, and slumped into the most comfortable chair. He hoisted his spurred heels to the desk, and drew a deep breath.

"Whew, I'm nigh tuckered out. I'd oughter talk to young Holloway, but I don't feel up to walkin' to the jail. D'yuh reckon yuh could bring him down here, without attractin' the attention of them Ace o' Spades riders?"

"Shore can, Lucas," grunted Pat Burke. "I can circle the Maverick Bar. Them hombres'll have their noses in their glasses, anyhow. Ace Calderwood ain't showed up—an' they won't start nothin' until he gets here."

The sheriff stamped out of the office, and headed for the little stone jail, two blocks down the street. As soon as he was gone, Lazy Lucas turned to Tom Mathews.

"Reckon we'll have to examine the writin' on thet rock, Tom—jest as a matter o' form. An' it'd be better if we had some of ol' Sheamus O'Rorke's scribblin' to compare with it. D'yuh think yuh could find some of his papers up to the courthouse—some with his signature onto them?"

Tom Mathews drew a long breath. "I don't know, Lucas. O'Rorke wasn't givin' to papers. 'Low'd a man's word was as good as any paper he could sign. But I'll try."

"His name'll be onto his deeds, any-

how," answered Lazy Lucas. "Jest get a tracin' o' the signature."

When Tom Mathews was gone on his errand, Lazy Lucas returned to the big chair, and slumped lazily into its depths. He closed his eyes, and his chin sunk to his chest.

Nor did he so much as move, when a rider whirled up to the hitch rack outside. Just one of his eyes opened the narrowest crack, when a burly, beak-nosed man stamped up on the porch. But it closed again as the door swung open.

For a moment there was tense silence. Then a deep voice barked a question. "Where's Pat Burke?"

Lazy's eyes opened slowly. He turned his head, as with an effort.

"Out on official business most like," he drawled.

"Official business? An' who might you be?"

"Me, I'm a waddy by the name of Lazy Lucas. Sorter meanderin' around for the Cattlemen's Association. An' yuh're Ace Calderwood, I'd jedge."

A hoarse, contemptuous laugh came from deep in Ace Calderwood's chest. "A C. A. man, huh? 'Pears like ol' Barry Hildreth don't doubt much thet Bun Holloway killed ol' Sheamus O'Rorke, else he'd sent a waddy with some get-up to him."

"Yeah, the evidence does seem to most all point to Bun Holloway," drawled Lazy Lucas indolently.

"All we're askin', here in Hidalgo, is thet yuh make yore report pronto. The boys are gettin' right impatient with Pat Burke. They figure he's holdin' the trial up too blasted long. Bun Holloway killed Sheamus O'Rorke—an' the sooner he hangs the better."

"Now, yuh shouldn't get so proddy, Calderwood," answered Lazy Lucas evenly. "What if he is guilty? A little wait won't hurt nothin'. I've got to do a little investigatin' an' checkin' up, but it won't take long."

"What yuh got to investigate——"
Ace Calderwood broke his words off short, and whirled to the door.

For Sheriff Pat Burke and manacled Bun Holloway were just entering the little office. The big rancher rasped a biting oath.

"What yuh doin' with thet hombre outer jail, Burke?" he snapped.

Pat Burke's face flushed. "Yuh'd better remember thet I'm still sheriff, Ace Calderwood. Bun Holloway is in my charge."

"They ain't no use of all that argu-in'," drawled Lazy Lucas, still slumped in his chair. "I asked Burke to bring his prisoner down here. I was too tuckered out to walk up to the jail. I want to hear the young waddy's story."

"It'll be a lie, from start to finish," rasped the big rancher.

"Yeah, most likely," answered Lazy Lucas. "But I've got to hear it."

As Sheriff Burke motioned Bun Holloway to a chair, Lazy Lucas surveyed the young puncher. Clean-cut and honest, Lazy Lucas tagged him. Likely had a fiery temper, and it might get away from him at times, though.

"If yuh don't mind, son, I'd like to hear what yuh know about the killin' of Sheamus O'Rorke."

"I don't know a thing," burst out Bun Holloway. "It's a frame-up, from start to finish!" He shot a fiery glance at Ace Calderwood as he spoke, and the big rancher returned the gaze with interest.

"Mebbe—but let's hear of your dealin's with O'Rorke, anyway," broke in Lazy Lucas.

"I met Sheamus O'Rorke on the day of his killin'. It was near Breakneck Canyon. We talked for a bit—then I paid him a thousand dollars for water rights. After I left him, I heard a shot. It must have been the one that killed him, although at the time I thought he was throwin' lead at a coyote."

"Thet's a blasted lie," snarled Ace Calderwood. "Here's the paper Sheamus O'Rorke signed, makin' out the water rights to me."

"Thet's right, Holloway," said Lazy Lucas. "An' then there's the writin' on the rock. It accuses yuh, too—of shootin' him in the back."

"It's a frame-up, I tell yuh! Ace Calderwood——"

Holloway broke his words off short, as the door burst open, and Tom Mathews hurried in. Excitement was written plainly on his face.

"I couldn't find no writin' of Sheamus O'Rorke's. His name wasn't signed on any papers to the courthouse. The clerk told me he——"

"Never mind now, son," broke in Lazy Lucas quickly. "We don't need it. Reckon we can compare Ace Calderwood's papers with the scribblin' on the rock."

"But I tell yuh, the clerk said——"

"I ain't interested in what the fool clerk said," snapped Lazy Lucas. But as he turned to Tom Mathews, his left lid dropped the merest trifle. Tom Mathews stilled his tongue.

And now, as Lazy Lucas shot a glance at Ace Calderwood, he thought he detected a faint smirk on the man's beak-nosed face.

Still slouching in his chair, Lazy Lucas drawled a question to the sheriff. But he kept his lazy-lidded gaze on Ace Calderwood's face. There was an answer to another question that he'd like to read.

"Yuh didn't find no thousand dollars, thet Holloway says he paid, on Sheamus O'Rorke's body, did yuh?"

"Hardly more than a dollar," grunted the sheriff.

"Nor yuh didn't, by any chance, run across a big gold watch onto him?"

"A watch?" gasped the sheriff. "Why, I never heard of him havin' one."

"Yeah, he had one—a watch that no

money on earth could buy. Reckon the killer took it off of him, after he was dead."

Lazy Lucas noted the look of amazement on Ace Calderwood's face. The man was not acting. He was ignorant of everything concerning the watch.

Now he shot a glance at Bun Holloway. The young prisoner was just as plainly puzzled as the others. But as Lazy Lucas let his glance drift back to Calderwood, he read a look of understanding on the rancher's face.

And with this look, something clicked in his brain. The explanation was clear. The annoying thought that had been knocking at his mind for admittance had finally come through.

"Likely the killer has got the watch hid somewheres, figurin' there wasn't nobody knew anything about it. Reckon I'll ride out to the H Bar to-morrer mornin' an' look for it. Looks like the case is complete now—but the watch'll add just a little more to the evidence."

He promptly closed his eyes, and settled lower in his chair. In a few moments his breath came slow and even, as if he slept.

Ace Calderwood was the first to go. He got to his feet, grumbling an oath, and strode for the door. Then Sheriff Pat Burke took his prisoner by the arm, and headed for the jail.

Tom Mathews waited until the last. That split-second wink plainly still had him puzzled. Then he turned to the door. Lazy's even voice stopped him.

"I knowed what yuh was goin' to say, Tom—guessed it some time back. But it'd never have done to spring it then."

"Yeah, I know," answered Tom Mathews. "But I was plumb excited."

"Yuh had reason to be, Tom. An' there's more excitement due right sudden. You an' me an' the sheriff are headin' for the H Bar as soon as it gets dark. Reckon I told 'em right—the evidence will be clear, if we find the watch."

THE night was dark as a pit, when Lazy Lucas, Tom Mathews and Sheriff Pat Burke guided their horses over the tangled hills toward Bun Holloway's spread.

They kept clear of the beaten trail, although Lazy Lucas was sure that their journey was unsuspected—sure that he had played his indolent, none-too-intelligent rôle well enough to mislead watchers in Hidalgo.

Tom Mathews knew every inch of the rough country, and he took the shortest path. It brought the three riders out to the H Bar clearing at the side opposite where the trail emerged.

They rode to within fifty yards of the house, then left their horses in a thicket of scrub spruce. The rest of the way they made afoot.

They entered by the back door. It opened silently. A musty, dry odor assailed their nostrils, as if the doors and windows had been tightly closed for several days. Lazy Lucas nodded his satisfaction.

"We're here first," he drawled. "But I hope our wait ain't too long."

"But yuh ain't told me who yuh're lookin' for—or why," broke in the puzzled sheriff.

"I ain't plumb shore who it'll be—yet," answered Lazy Lucas. "I got a good idea, but I don't like to guess."

The sheriff shook his head in the darkness, but did not question again. Tom Mathews led the way into the bedroom. By sense of touch and direction, he found the crude bunk against the north wall.

"Hide under the bunk, Tom. An' yuh, sheriff, kinder crouch down at the end. An' don't neither one o' yuh make a sound, unless I call for help. I want yuh jest to keep yore ears open."

And now Lazy Lucas concealed his tall form behind a curtain of burlap that cut off one corner of the room. There was nothing to do now but wait and hope.

A half hour passed. Doubts began to assail Lazy Lucas. Perhaps he had been guided by a hunch, instead of logical deduction.

Then he drew a sharp breath. Every nerve and muscle tensed. For the sound of cautious footsteps reached his ears. He hissed a soft warning to Tom Mathews and Sheriff Burke.

Now the prowlers—for Lazy Lucas had distinguished at least two sets of footsteps—inched across the front porch. The door opened with a faint squeak. Then the two men were making their slow way across the room.

"I'm scare' of thees place, boss," half whispered one of them.

Lazy Lucas had heard that voice only once before, but he recognized it as that of the half-breed who had attempted to murder him and Tom Mathews the night before.

"Yuh got a scare comin' to yuh!" growled a deeper voice. "If it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have to be here! Yuh had no business to take thet watch off ol' O'Rorke."

"But thees watch, she is worth much dinero. An' nobody know ol' O'Rorke have eet," protested the half-breed.

"Thet nitwit C. A. man knows it. An' if yuh'd have left it alone, he wouldn't be plannin' on ridin' down here a-huntin' it to-morrer—an' we wouldn't have to put it back."

"But how deed you know I have eet?" queried the half-breed plaintively.

"When thet sleepy-eyed hombre sprung the information about the watch, I knowed yuh was the only one thet had a chance to grab it."

"Eef onlee I have succeed in killing heem las' night, thees would not have happen," complained the half-breed.

"What's thet?" snapped the other.

"Nothing. I jus' talk to myself," grunted the half-breed.

Now the hidden prowlers made for the bedroom door. It opened, and they slipped inside. Lazy Lucas could make

out their shadowy forms in the gloom, as they passed the single window.

"Eet is too much dark," complained the half-breed. "Why not light the lamp?"

"Jest as well," grunted the other. "Nobody'll be prowlin' around to-night. An' we'd oughter get thet watch planted right."

A match scratched, and a tiny flame flared up. The lamp chimney clicked as it was lifted. Then the match touched the wick.

"Put the watch under the pillow, Pablo! Thet's the first place that lazy C. A. hombre'll look for it."

"Yuh're wrong, Ace Calderwood!"

Lazy Lucas's voice had lost its indolent drawl, and a thread of steel ran through it. "The first place I would have looked, right from the start, was in the pocket of some hombre with less brains than you or Bun Holloway, either. An' I'd most certainly have picked thet hombre from amongst yore friends!"

Ace Calderwood whirled as the startling voice came from behind him. A stream of lurid oaths came from his lips. His glittering eyes rested on the slouching, silent form of Lazy Lucas, who had stepped quietly from behind the curtain.

Lazy's thumbs were hooked indolently in his belt as he stood looking into Calderwood's eyes. The big rancher's gaze dropped for a split second. He seemed to sense a chance of beating Lazy Lucas to the draw.

"All right, yuh guessed I killed Sheamus O'Rorke!" grated Ace Calderwood. "But yuh'll never live to tell it to the sheriff!"

His fists streaked downward with the speed of light. They grasped the butts of his six-guns, and snatched them out.

But fast as he was, two sharp reports echoed back and forth in the room, before Calderwood's guns came up. The heavy weapons clattered to the floor,

and Ace Calderwood howled with the agony of a bullet through each wrist.

"I was kinder lookin' for thet, Calderwood," drawled Lazy Lucas, still standing in the same indolent position.

But during that tense fraction of a second, Pablo Ramirez, the half-breed, whirled and dived for the window.

A hand snaked out from beneath the bunk, and caught the half-breed's ankle. He went down in a screaming heap. And now Sheriff Burke arose from the end of the bunk.

"Yuh're under arrest, Ace Calderwood, for the murder of Sheamus O'Rorke! An' you, Pablo Ramirez, for aidin' in the crime!"

A HALF dozen hours later, Lazy Lucas was slumped again in the sheriff's easy-chair. Across the table, his craggy face ruddy in the light of the oil lamp, Pat Burke questioned the sleepy-lidded C. A. man.

"It wasn't so hard to figure out, Burke," drawled Lazy Lucas. "Right from the first, I kinder doubted that a waddy shot from behind—an' through the heart at thet—could drag himself up to a rock, an' write the name of the killer."

"But how'd yuh know thet the watch would——"

"Yeah, the fact thet the watch was missin' really started things. When thet half-breed tried to roll the rock down onto me, I was shore it was him. An' I knowed Bun Holloway didn't have no greaser friends."

Lazy grinned. "Then, when Tom Mathews come back from the court-

house, he tried to tell me thet Sheamus O'Rorke *couldn't write*—thet he could only make his mark for a signature."

"Gosh! Ace Calderwood 'most got away with it, didn't he?" Sheriff Burke said.

"Yeah, he kinder had me puzzled for a minute. He looked plenty astonished when I mentioned the watch. But I could see by his changin' expression thet he knew how the half-breed could 'a' got it. Thet's why I made the play about lookin' for it. I knowed Ace Calderwood was savvy enough to know thet if an ignorant, slow-witted waddy like me found it at the H Bar, he'd figure Bun Holloway hid it there."

The sheriff nodded, although it was plain to see that he still marveled. "An' thet statement of Bun Holloway's, about payin' a thousand dollars for water rights?"

Lazy Lucas grinned again. "Why, sheriff, money is mighty hard to trace. Ace Calderwood wouldn't have passed up a chance at it—especially when it would help his case. Reckon he overheard Bun an' Sheamus O'Rorke make the deal. Then he shot O'Rorke in the back, took the money, an' wrote the message on the rock. Them papers are in the same writin', I'd stake my life."

"Then yuh think Ace Calderwood has the money?"

"Uh-huh. Yuh'll most likely find it hid in his headquarters. But yuh can do the huntin'. It's been a hard day an' night, an' I'm right tuckered out."

Watch for a new "Lazy Lucas" story in an early issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch.





The Suspension Of Corporal Geary

"In the Mounted there are no excuses for failure—short of getting yourself killed," Geary was told

By Leslie McFarlane

Author of "Man Hunt," etc.

CHAPTER I.

THE HOLD-UP.

THE last twinkling lights of Eldorado Mines were blotted out by the wall of forest. The train rumbled along southward through the night. Corporal Tim Geary of the Mounted unsnapped the flap of his holster and sat down on a small

chest in the express car. Kerwin, a rawboned, cold-eyed guard from the Eldorado, crouched on the other chest, a rifle across his knees. Manse, the other guard, sprawled on the floor. There were two express messengers, each armed.

Gold to the amount of a quarter of a million dollars was on its way to the mint.

Above the sullen rumble of the train the men heard the rattle of a key in the lock of the door at the end of the car. The door opened and a man in the uniform of a trainman poked his head inside.

"Corporal!" he called in an agitated voice. "Come here a minute."

Geary strode to the end of the car, peering at the man in the shadows. "What's up?"

"Trouble up ahead. I wish you'd come and see what you can do."

Geary hesitated. His orders were strict. He was not to leave the express car until it reached Ottawa. But "trouble ahead" might mean anything—might mean a threat to the shipment.

He stepped out into the vestibule. And in the next instant he knew he had made a mistake.

The door crashed shut behind him. He had a glimpse of the trainman's face—a cruel, oldish face with green eyes—and he knew it was not the face of the trainman who had been on duty before they left Eldorado Mines. He had a fleeting glimpse of a revolver, and his left arm swung violently.

He slammed the gun to one side just as the weapon barked. A sudden lurch of the train flung him off balance as he groped for the man's wrist. A foot kicked his legs from under him and they went crashing to the floor.

A fist smashed into Geary's face. He tried to wrest his own revolver free, but it was jammed against the other man's body. A knee came up viciously and struck him in the groin. Another lurch of the train and they rolled perilously close to the edge of the platform. A violent wrench and Geary lost his grip on the fellow's wrist.

The revolver slammed down against his temple. His own weapon was out now and he fired point-blank, but the man had lunged swiftly, was struggling to gain his feet. Geary twisted around, fired again. The man plunged

into the shadows. A streak of flame. Geary ducked.

He did not realize he was so close to the platform edge. That involuntary movement, coupled with another jolt of the train that put him off balance, did the damage.

One foot shot out into space. He clawed the air, desperately trying to regain his footing. He stumbled backward down the steps, realized he was going. He thought of the deadly car wheels, grabbed at a rail that slipped smoothly away from his fingers.

The embankment, very luckily, sloped away from the track. He struck it with terrific force, went rolling and plunging into the sand, half stunned.

HE could see the lights of the train flashing past, could hear it rolling above. Bruised and shaken he tried to collect his senses, then crawled to his feet. His thought, however, was not for his own plight. The gold! A quarter of a million in the express car, plunging on into the night without him. And he was responsible.

Geary struggled up the bank, watching the swiftly moving mass of the train. Impossible to board it at that speed. He would be drawn under the wheels. The sandy bank was treacherous, and he was beneath the track level.

The red tail-light flashed by, glimmered ironically at him.

Geary struggled up onto the track. For a little distance he ran, obsessed by panic, as if he could hope to overtake the train. Then he faltered, came to a stop.

No use. Nothing for it but to trudge ingloriously back to Eldorado, reach the telegraph office, report and give warning.

The red light vanished as the train disappeared around the curve above Dead Moose Lake. He could hear the hoarse, long-drawn hoot of the whistle.

He turned back toward Eldorado

Mines. And then he heard the engine whistle again. This time, however, the note was sharp and urgent, a succession of frantic blasts. In the distance he heard a confusion of sounds. The jolting crash of coaches brought to a sudden stop. The squeal and shriek of brakes. And the sound of gunfire.

The hold-up had taken place already.

Geary broke into a run. His limbs were aching with pain as he stumbled down the right of way.

"Might be in time yet!" he muttered.

If he could only lay his hands on that bogus trainman.

Geary knew what had happened, as clearly as if he had planned the coup himself. The desperadoes were waiting at Moose Lake. The side doors of the express car were locked but the trainman had the key to the end door—also a gun, and the will to use it on the guards.

It seemed ages before he reached the rock cut, before he came in sight of the gleaming tail-light of the van. It was a mixed train that ran from Eldorado Mines. Men were crouching behind the van; he heard the occasional bark of a gun, saw the scarlet tongues of flame.

Revolver drawn, Geary ran down the track.

"Keep back, you fool!" some one yelled.

At the same instant, fire belched from the bushes beside the tracks and a bullet whined past Geary's head. He fired at the flash, heard a muffled yell.

A man ran toward him, shooting. Geary leaped into the shadow of the train, carefully picked off the advancing figure. The man plunged sprawling in the sand.

Geary crept along in the shelter of the passenger coach. To his surprise he could see no one near the express car. But some one, lying inside the car, was pumping shots toward the bush and these shots were being returned.

The bandits were making their getaway.

He scrambled up the embankment, threshed through the undergrowth and headed into the bush. Moose Lake was no more than a hundred yards from the right of way.

He heard the clattering roar of a power boat.

CHAPTER II.

THE WRECK.

HE tripped over a root, sprawled among the bushes, picked himself up, scratched his face on some branches, and plowed desperately through the entangling undergrowth.

"If I can reach the shore in time!" he thought, panting. "Stop their getaway——"

But he was still floundering in the bush when he heard the triumphant clamor of the engine that meant the boat was pulling out into the lake.

Then, at his very feet it seemed, another engine sprang into life.

He leaped through the last few yards of brush, came out on the rocks above a little cove. Beneath him he spied a long, dark shadow—the shadow of the other boat. Out in the bay the first craft was circling.

Geary sprang.

He landed in the boat with a jolt that almost knocked him breathless. There was a yell of alarm from a dark figure in the stern. Geary, sprawled on the bottom of the boat, managed to fling up his gun arm. He fired. The man in the stern uttered a second cry and toppled into the water.

A revolver barked explosively only a few feet away. Geary felt a tingling pain up his right arm. An invisible hand seemed to wrench his gun from his grasp and send it spinning over the side.

He sprang up, crouching, faced the man in the bow, took every chance on the second shot that rang out in the next

instant and tackled the fellow about the knees.

They went down with a crash. Geary groped for the man's gun, felt it crash down on his own head. They wrestled there for a moment, battering at one another. The antagonist of Geary rolled clear, crawled to his feet. Geary sprang at him. A swinging left to the body and the fellow doubled up with a cough; a vicious, chopping right to the head and the man went over the side with a splash.

The engine was running, the launch had already moved away from shore unguided. Geary sprang to the wheel, opened the throttle and felt the craft leap forward responsively. Away off against the blackness of the lake water he could see the white streak of foam that marked the wake of the other boat.

"Open her up!" he muttered. The boat was heavy, but the engine was powerful. The night wind swept Geary's face. He raced in pursuit.

So far he had acted on sheer impulse, seizing each opportunity that presented itself. Now he realized that he had no gun and that if he overtook the other craft he would be facing armed and desperate men who would not hesitate to shoot him down.

Undoubtedly they had already committed murder for the sake of that quarter of a million in gold—for only one man had been firing at the retreating raiders from the express car. And there had been murder in the eyes of the bogus trainman as he jammed the gun against Geary's ribs.

What to do? Ram the other boat? The gold would sink to the bottom of the lake and might never be recovered. It would, too, be a foolhardy and suicidal effort, for he would never live to capture any of the gang that might survive. No, the best plan would be to trail the men to their destination, then take his chance of recovering the gold single-handed.

In that, Geary realized, lay his only hope, for if he returned to Eldorado Mines and admitted to the sergeant that the raiders had been successful, his career in the Mounted would be over. He had disobeyed orders in leaving that express car.

THE engine hummed steadily as he sped across the lake. Foam drenched him as the bow cut into the waves, for there was a stiff wind off Pine Point. He peered into the inky blackness. The roar of his own motor drowned the sound from the other boat. For a moment he thought he had lost it. Then, to the north, he caught sight of that streaky whiteness again and brought the wheel around.

"Black as a cellar!"

There wasn't a star in the sky. The shore line had vanished. Complete and terrifying darkness, broken only by that tantalizing line of gray foam far ahead.

And then it disappeared again.

He was getting all possible speed out of his own boat and unless the other craft was far more powerful than ordinary he should at least be holding his own. He slowed down for a moment and the roar of the engine died to a purr. Then Geary listened.

Faint and distant he could hear the steady beat of the other engine far ahead.

Once again the motor broke out into a deafening roar as he opened the throttle and felt the boat leap beneath him. The exhilaration of speed and of the chase was in Geary's blood now.

"I'll chase those devils until the engine jumps loose!" he declared grimly.

He peered out over the upraised bow again. An involuntary cry of alarm broke from him.

A huge dark mass was rising dimly against the blackness of the water.

An island! It had been invisible until that moment, it was as if that

squat, tree-girt mound of rock had just that moment risen from the lake.

Geary bore down hard on the wheel. The speeding boat heeled violently over, but he had the satisfaction of seeing the formidable and gloomy mass slip by to the starboard. It flashed through his mind that this was why he had lost sight of the fugitives' track; the revealing streak of foam had been blotted out by the intervening island.

And in that instant, just as he sighed with relief in the thought that he had escaped this sudden peril, there came a violent and jarring shock.

The boat bumped and crashed with a vast splintering of wood, stopped stone-still in its headlong course as if it had butted into a wall. Geary was flung out with terrific force as though a giant hand had seized him and tossed him contemptuously aside.

He crashed into icy water. A white light seemed to explode in his brain. He sank into depths of darkness.

CHAPTER III.

SUSPENDED.

WHEN Tim Geary came to his senses, his mind hazy, his whole body wracked with pain, he found himself lying on a rocky shore. Perhaps it was the sharp slap of water in his face as the waves broke over him that brought him back to consciousness. Weakly he crawled up out of danger.

He had been flung into shallow water beyond the shoal on which the boat had wrecked, and the heavy waves had cast him up onto the beach. It was dawn before he could take stock of the situation.

The boat had disappeared. There was not a sign of it, beyond a few fragments of splintered wood washed ashore. It had plunged headlong onto the rocks and had sunk immediately in ten feet of water.

But with the misty light of morning Geary saw that he was on an island not more than four hundred yards from the mainland. Still weak and bruised from the battering and exposure, he stripped, made a bundle of his clothes and slung the bundle over his back, then dived into the water.

As he swam steadily toward the wooded shore of the mainland his thoughts were bitter. The gold was gone and the main gang of bandits had escaped. Perhaps they wondered why the other boat had not reached their hiding place; but at any rate they had the loot, and perhaps they were well-satisfied that some of their number had not appeared to demand a share.

And he—Corporal Tim Geary of the Mounted—would be held responsible, because he had disobeyed orders, left his post, allowed himself to be outwitted. Even had he been in the express car when the holdup took place, he might have failed to protect the treasure chests, but that would hold no weight with hard-bitten Sergeant McCoy. More than once he had heard the sergeant's dry, rasping voice:

"In the Mounted, me lad, there are no excuses for failure—short of gettin' yourself killed."

Swimming powerfully, Geary drew closer to the shore and at last felt bottom beneath his feet. There, as the sun rose, he dried his clothing on the rocks. Finally he set out along shore toward the railway—back to Eldorado Mines.

HIS reception was according to the gloomiest of his expectations. The town was in a fever of excitement over the events of the previous night. Sergeant McCoy eyed Geary coldly and gestured toward the private office.

"So!" he said. "You're back, eh? We thought you were dead."

Geary waited in the little office. Mc-

Coy was conferring with a number of mine officials.

"Ye can't carry a quarter of a million dollars' worth of gold around in your pockets," he was saying. "We'll get it back somehow. They'll find it hard to get it out of the country."

"But how," demanded one of the mine men, "did they get into that locked car in the first place?"

"The body of Trainman Larsen was found in the railway yards. One of the gang knocked him off and took his uniform and keys, dodged the conductor by stayin' in the vestibule between the express car and passenger coach. It was him who got the end door open. A fallen tree, chopped down by other men in the gang beyond the Dead Moose Lake curve, stopped the train. An express messenger and a guard were killed. The other two badly hurt. The crooks got away in the two motor boats, but they left four men behind, one dead and three hurt. We got *them* in jail."

"Can't they tell you where the bandits' hide-out is located?"

"We've been workin' on the three of 'em, but they claim they don't know. They won't talk much."

After a while McCoy came into the little office and slammed the door. He stared grimly at his corporal.

"Well?" he growled finally.

Geary told his story. McCoy listened in silence.

"Couldn't even steer a boat without runnin' smack into an island," he grunted at last.

Geary said nothing.

"You know what this means, eh?"

"I suppose so."

"I'm not sayin' you didn't do your best. But your orders were to stay in that car. You didn't stay in it."

The sergeant fumbled at a uniform button.

"Couldn't identify any of the men?"

"No, sir."

"Well—I hate to see you kicked out of the service, Tim—but you disobeyed an order. I've got to talk it over with the inspector when I get him on the phone. In the meantime, you're suspended."

Geary swallowed the bitter medicine.

"Yes, sir."

"Don't leave town."

"No, sir. But sergeant—if I can help—if there's anything I can do——"

"You're suspended."

"I see."

Geary slouched wretchedly from the office. He went to his room and took off the uniform, donned his civvies. He felt the disgrace keenly, and the disgrace seemed intensified by the knowledge that all his risks had been taken for nothing. He had done his best—outside of that one human error that he had been within an ace of retrieving. After a while he slept.

HIS landlady tapped on the door. By her sympathetic glance, when he admitted her, he knew that she had heard. "Telephone call for you, Mr. Geary."

"Thanks, Mrs. Maguire."

She hesitated.

"I'm awfully sorry, Mr. Geary."

He shrugged. "That's all right, Mrs. Maguire. My own fault, I guess."

"But—I'm sure it couldn't have been your fault—I'll wager you did the best you could against that murderin' crowd—if you could only catch them now, and get that gold back——"

He smiled wryly. "Easier said than done. And I'm not a Mounty just now."

He went downstairs to the telephone "Geary?"

"Speaking." He could not identify the voice.

"This is a friend. I heard about the jam you're in."

"I guess the whole town knows by now. Who's the friend?"

"Never mind. But I can give you a bit of information. It might help you."

Geary was suddenly tense. Perhaps this was his chance.

"What sort of information?"

The man ignored the question.

"You know Blavatsky's road house?"

"Just outside town. Yes."

"Can you get here within the next hour?"

"What's it all about?"

"I can't say anything over the telephone. I've got to be careful. And if I tell you anything, I want a guarantee that I'll be protected."

"Reward?"

"No—to hell with the reward. I mean I don't want my name messed up in it. Get that? You'll keep me out of it."

"Right."

"Within an hour, then. And come alone. I'll be watching for you."

Geary replaced the receiver thoughtfully. One of the robbers, perhaps? Ready to squeal. Or some one who had a hot tip and didn't want to get mixed up in the case directly.

He went upstairs for his hat. Then, before he left the room, he hesitated. He had lost his gun, but his army service revolver was in his trunk. He took it out, oiled and cleaned but a few days previously, loaded it and slipped extra shells into his pocket.

"If I'm going to get a tip on that gang," reflected Geary, "maybe I'll be needing this."

He slung the gun in a holster beneath his left armpit and left the house.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAP.

THE town of Eldorado Mines is deep in the Canadian north-land, but it is no backwoods village. It is a substantial place of five thousand people, with its own power plant, waterworks system, four hotels,

two theaters, three banks and a great many blind pigs.

Of the latter, Blavatsky's road house was perhaps the most pretentious. With a dance floor, a kitchen and an orchestra of sorts, it provided the metropolitan touch that gratified the natives. Built on the outskirts of the town, overlooking Indian Bay, it was just beyond the jurisdiction of the municipality. A night at Blavatsky's was synonymous with all the wickedness that Eldorado Mines could contrive in the way of gambling, liquor and other illicit entertainment.

Tim Geary followed the dirt road that led from Eldorado's long, straggling main street, up a hillside, flanked by a heavy stand of spruce, and came down on the slope that overlooked Indian Bay. Set among the green-clad hillsides the lake shimmered in the afternoon sun—part of that great lake chain, of which Dead Moose Lake was a link, that provided a waterway hundreds of miles into the wilderness to the north.

He went down the road to Blavatsky's, a straggling, ramshackle building that had begun as a log cabin and had been endowed with frame additions with successive stages of prosperity until it was now an architectural patchwork in bad need of paint.

There was no one in sight. He thrust open the door and entered.

Blavatsky, fat, squint-eyed, and oily-haired, came out from the kitchen.

"Yes, corporal?"

"A man asked me to meet him here."

Blavatsky frowned.

"A mistake, perhaps. It is early, corporal. There is no one here."

"That's strange. I was to meet him here at once."

Blavatsky rubbed his chin dubiously. Then he snapped his plump fingers.

"Ah—I forgot. There is a man. He has been here since last night. Perhaps it was him. I'll see."

He puffed his way up the stairs. In a few minutes he waddled back, smiling.

"My mistake, corporal. Upstairs. No. 8, to the right."

GEARY went upstairs. He found himself in a dimly lit corridor. The door of Room No. 8 was slightly ajar.

Unexpectedly, he was just about to walk into the room when he saw something that made his nerves leap. There was a cheap dresser in the room, the mirror facing the door. He saw the mirror first and in that mirror he had a glimpse of a man who stood rigid, pressed against the wall behind the half-open door, revolver poised.

He recognized the man instantly. The face was the same gray, oldish, green-eyed face of the bogus trainman who had battled with him on the gold train.

Everything happened at once. Geary's revolver was out and he was reaching for the doorknob just as the man in ambush, alarmed by the delay, glanced toward the mirror and realized the reason. The door slammed just as a bullet plowed through the woodwork and missed Geary's body by a hairbreadth.

A step sounded in the hall. Geary whirled. From a doorway down the corridor emerged a man, with revolver raised. Behind him darted another. He drilled two shots at them, sprang across the hall into an open doorway as the fusillade broke out. The narrow space rang with the roar of gunfire, stank with the odor of powder.

Geary shot the bolt of the door. *Crack!* The woodwork splintered. He heard a harsh voice: "No, you fools! Alive! We want him alive!"

"Try and get me," Geary muttered.

There was no more shots. Some one hurled himself against the door. Geary fired. The shot was followed by a yell.

"Outside! Guard that there window.

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Wing him if you have to, but we want him alive."

Geary was already at the open window, clambering over the sill. It overlooked the roof of a small shed about ten feet below. He sprang out and thudded onto the roof. He raced to the edge, lowered himself from the roof and dropped to the ground.

A door crashed open. Two men plunged out, dodging and weaving as they sighted Geary's drawn revolver. He was off balance from the force of his impact with the ground, and his first shot went wild. One of the men leaped, tackling Geary about the knees and they went down in a heap.

The other circled about, made an effort to seize Geary's gun, missed, and got a smashing blow in the mouth from the barrel of the weapon, for his pains. He uttered a howl of agony and clapped his hand to his jaw. Geary brought the gun down on the head of the man wrestling with him on the ground. Two more smashing blows came from Geary, and the fellow relaxed his grasp and rolled over, groaning.

Geary got to his feet, staggering. The man whom he had smashed over the mouth barred the entrance to the tiny alley; and that man, spitting teeth and blood, was unsteadily aiming his gun. Geary leaped back into the doorway.

THERE was a thud of footsteps on the stairs. Two men were surging down on him. One leaped like a tiger, catapulting through the air from halfway up the flight. His body struck Geary with the terrific impact of a sack of sand. Geary went to the floor with a jarring shock; the breath was knocked out of his body; he was half senseless.

But instinctively, he struggled, beat about him with the revolver, emptied the weapon in a succession of three barking shots. A fist crashed against

his jaw. Another cruelly cut the flesh beneath his eye. He tried to fling aside the weight of his attacker. He felt his wrist seized. The gun was torn from his grasp. He was dragged to his feet, his arms pinioned behind him by the second man, while the fellow who had plunged at him from the stairs crawled away.

"Got him!" snarled a voice at Geary's ear. He saw the other man snatch up his own weapon from the floor and cover him.

"Any more fight outa you, fella, and I'll drill you!" he snapped.

Geary shrugged submissively.

"Right!" he panted. "I'll come along. What's the idea?"

The fellow gestured with the gun.

"Never mind what the idea is. Upstairs!"

Geary spoke angrily to the man at his back.

"You don't need to break my arms. I'm not going to make any break with a gun pointed at me."

The man's grip relaxed.

"That's sensible," he grunted. "Come upstairs. We wanta talk to you."

The moment he felt the hold loosen, Geary whirled savagely. He knew that he had fired all the shots from the revolver pointed at him; he knew that instructions were that he was to be taken alive in any case. He had no fear of the gun bluff. He whirled, swinging, planted a vicious blow on the side of his captor's jaw. The man staggered back against the wall. He saw the other hoodlums crowding in from the alley; heard the hammer of the revolver click harmlessly; plunged toward the nearest door.

It was locked.

He turned, crouching, facing the enemy. Something whirled through the air, so swiftly, so accurately that he had no time to dodge. One of the hoodlum's revolvers crashed against his temple. He toppled to the floor.

CHAPTER V.

THE RIDDLE.

THE man with the oldish face and the green eyes was apparently the leader. He gestured curtly to two of his men.

"Come on, you guys. Carry him into the back room."

They dragged the limp form of Geary to his feet and half pushed, half carried him down a dark passage into a small, windowless room where they flung him upon a sagging cot.

"He's out cold, Kert," said one of the hoodlums, looking down at Geary.

"He'll come around," snapped the green-eyed man. He regarded his bruised and bleeding helpers scornfully. "A fine pack o' guys you are! Blazing away with guns. What were you trying to do? Knock him off? You know I said he was to be taken alive. How do you expect us to dig any information out of a corpse?"

"Damn it, chief," snarled one of the men, "he was shootin' at us. And it wasn't just to scare us, either. Lucky I wasn't killed."

"Small loss," retorted Kert. "Well, he's here, and when he comes around we'll go to work on him."

"D'you think he knows?"

"Of course he knows. He's the only man in the world who does know. I tell you, we've got to work fast." Kert went over and shook Geary roughly. "Come on, you," he growled. "Snap out of it. Wake up."

But Geary lay limp and motionless.

"Mebbe his skull is broke. He might be out for days," said one of the men. "Mebbe he'll die."

"He won't die," said Kert. "A crack like that wouldn't kill him."

The door opened. A girl stood on the threshold. She was young, with corn-colored hair; and although her full red lips and wide blue eyes gave her a certain prettiness, the eyes were hard

and her prettiness was of a metallic quality.

"Well," she drawled, "is all the shoot-in' over? Never in all my born days did I hear such a racket. Four of you tackling one lone cop and you'd think it was the World War busting loose all over again."

"Shut up, Alma," ordered Kert. "Beat it. This is no place for you."

"Oh, yeah? I just want a look at the guy that gave you all the trouble." She regarded Geary with interest. "Husky-looking boy, all right. But four of you—" She laughed harshly.

"Beat it, I tell you. If he wakes up and sees you here, you might as well leave town, Alma."

"Doesn't look to me as if he's going to wake up."

"Come on," growled one of the thugs. "Get outa here!"

Kert whirled on the man furiously.

"Keep your trap shut! I'll handle her. I don't want to hear any cracks out of you." He went over to Alma. "Look here, kid," he said in a placating tone, "it's for your own good. If this bird wakes up and gets a look at you, there'll be trouble, see? He doesn't know us, but you've been around the road house for quite a while. If he lamed you and made a get-away they'd drag you down to the police station and pound the daylight out of you, for information. And mebbe they'd get it."

"Not from me, they wouldn't, Kert. You know that," she replied steadily.

"Be a good kid, now, and run along."

"Well—if you put it that way." Her voice became suddenly hard. "But no funny business, Kert. I'm in on this."

"Right, Alma. As soon as we get the dough, you and me are goin' on a long trip."

The girl sauntered away.

One of the hoodlums said:

"When women gets mixed up in anything like this, look out for trouble."

Kert regarded him coldly.

"Yeah? And who asked for your opinion? I'm running this show, Blaze Dolan, and if I say my girl's in, she's in! Give that bird another shake. We can't hang around here all day. It's dangerous enough for us to be near Eldorado Mines as it is."

The yegg leaned over Geary and shook him roughly.

"Come out of it!" he snarled. "Wake up, damn yuh—"

He uttered a grunt of astonishment, feeling his arms held in a grip of steel, finding himself abruptly yanked off balance and dragged across Geary's body. A hand darted into his coat pocket and wrenched his revolver free.

PROTECTED by the body of the hoodlum, Geary swiftly covered the room before the others, taken by surprise, could reach their own weapons. He sat up on the cot, swung his feet over onto the floor.

"Keep 'em up!" he rasped, as they slowly raised their hands.

"So!" sneered Kert. "Playin' fox, eh? Awake all the time."

Kert had guessed right. Geary had never been completely unconscious from the blow on the head; realizing the futility of resistance he had let himself be carried to the room and there he had lain in a simulated coma, with his ears open as he tried to solve the riddle of the situation.

Why had he been lured to Blavatsky's place? Why was it essential that he be captured alive? How had the gold raiders learned of his return to Eldorado Mines and of his suspension? What did they want?

He had learned little from the talk he had overheard while lying on the cot—but enough to give him an inkling of the answer to the riddle.

He backed slowly toward the door. The four desperadoes were like tigers held in leash.

"What's the idea of this little party?" he snapped.

"Don't you know?" growled Kert.

"Haven't the faintest idea. What have you got against me? Throw me off a train last night and try to knock me off to-day."

"We're not trying to knock you off. Better sit down and talk it over. Maybe we can get together."

"Think I'll fall for that? Get myself knocked over the head again. Nothing doing." Geary's hand groped beneath the doorknob. He found the key, removed it from the lock, silently turned the knob. "If anybody steps out of here in the next five minutes he'll get plugged."

He flung open the door, then backed out into the corridor. The gun did not waver. Suddenly he slammed the door shut, turned the key and sped down the hall. He heard a crash of bodies against the door.

Geary knew the layout of Blavatsky's place. There was a door at the end of the passage, a door leading outside. But he went the other way, toward the large main room at the front entrance.

He just reached it as a crash told him that the door of the room had been broken down.

Blavatsky had conveniently absented himself, doubtless wishing to know nothing and hear nothing, although the shooting certainly could not have escaped his notice. That he was in the pay of the gang was obvious. The huge room was empty.

Geary wrenched open the front door, then ran back. There was a telephone booth against the wall at one side of the room. He sped toward it, ducked inside and crouched well beneath the glass front of the door.

There he waited.

A rush of thudding feet; a babble of excited voices.

"Outside!" yelled Kert. "Search the bush. He can't be far away."

They plunged out onto the wide veranda. Geary could hear Kert swearing, organizing the search.

He peeped through the glass. The thugs were scattering through the bush in front of the road house. The room was empty. Geary stood up, joggled the receiver of the telephone on the hook. Watching the doorway he quietly gave a number. He ducked low as Blavatsky scuttled out from the kitchen and ran out to the veranda. Blavatsky had not seen him, he felt certain of that.

Then:

"Hello! . . . Sergeant? . . . Geary. Listen——"

A minute later, he stepped out of the booth into the deserted room and sped toward the stairs just in time to escape the observation of Kert, who was wrathfully stamping back up onto the veranda.

"Watch the road!" Kert was ordering some one. "He can't get far away."

Geary sped lightly into the upper hall. He stole toward the rear stairs.

Then he spun around, hands upraised.

"Put 'em up, big boy!"

The girl Alma stood in an open doorway. She aimed a small automatic at him.

"Let's talk it over," muttered Geary, advancing toward her, his hands in the air.

"Talk, hell!" she snapped. Then she raised her voice shrilly:

"Kert!"

Geary heard Kert thumping up the stairway.

CHAPTER VI.

A BARGAIN.

KERT'S face was a study in amazed incredulity when he saw Geary standing at bay before the girl's automatic. His own gun was out in an instant and he strode forward, saying exultantly:

"Great stuff, Alma! You got him, eh?"

The girl shrugged.

"Didn't even know you'd lost him until I heard you all whooping and yelling outside. Took four of you to catch him and the whole four of you couldn't keep him. For Pete's sake, Kert, if he's so valuable to you I think it'd be a good idea if you put me on as guard."

Kert glared at Geary.

"Smart business, fella! You should have known you couldn't get away with it."

"Tell her to turn that gun the other way," retorted Geary. "I don't like women handling firearms."

Kert chuckled.

"You don't need to worry. Alma's just as handy with a rod as she is with a lipstick."

"Handier than those smart saps you've got working for you," she told Kert.

"That's right. That's right," he answered, placatingly. "It was good business, Alma, and I won't forget it."

"See that you don't. And, since I'm the one that caught him for you, I'm sitting right in on the meeting. I'm not risking any chance of you taking a run-out powder at this stage of the game."

"Aw, quit arguing," growled Geary. "My arms are tired. What's it all about, anyway? You tricked me into coming here, you chased me all over the place, shot at me, knocked me cold. Why? That's what I want to know. Why?"

Kert came toward him.

"Where's that gold?" he demanded.

"What gold?"

"The gold that was in that boat."

"What?" yelled Geary, violently. "In the boat? You got away with the gold. Either you or some of your men."

Kert nodded.

"That's what we thought," he said ruefully. "It turns out that the guys in the other boat planned a little double-

cross. One chest was to be put in each boat. They grabbed 'em both."

"And then I got their boat!" shouted Geary.

"You did."

"And the gold was in it! I never knew. The boat was wrecked. It was wrecked on——"

He checked himself.

"Where?" demanded Kert sharply.

"Ah!" said Geary. "So that's the game? That's why I was brought here."

"That's why."

Geary bit his lips in exasperation.

"And to think I didn't know that gold was in the boat! There, right at my feet, in ten feet of water——"

Kert's gun pressed against his stomach.

"Kick in!" snapped the bandit. "Where is it? Where did you wreck that boat? The stuff's still in it."

"Sure, the stuff's still in it. And not very deep, either. But I'm not telling you."

"No?" Kert's green eyes were remorseless. "You'll tell, and you'll tell in the next five seconds or I'll blow you to kingdom come."

Geary shook his head.

"No," he returned stubbornly, "I'm not telling. I'm a cop, and it's my duty to see that the gold gets back to the owners."

"A hell of a lot of credit you're going to get when you're dead. Hurry, now — One!"

Geary flinched, but he shook his head again. "No!"

"Two!"

The girl intervened.

"Go on, cop! Better tell him. Kert means what he says."

"Three!"

"I'm not telling."

"Four!"

"No!"

A long pause. Then:

"Five!"

KERT'S face was livid with anger. But he did not press the trigger. Geary knew the man wouldn't. He didn't dare. Not with Geary still in possession of the secret.

But Kert had other resources.

"What's the idea, cop? You know we'll get it out of you somehow. What's the idea? Figuring on grabbing it all for yourself?"

A shrewd expression crept into Geary's face.

"There's an idea," he said softly.

"You'll never get away with it. Never on this earth. We'll trail you, morning, noon and night," Kert warned him. "You can wait for years, but you'll never lay hands on that gold but what one of us will be on hand to take it away from you."

"I won't have to wait for years."

"Figure you can squeal on us and have us all pinched, eh? That won't work, either. You don't get out of here alive without telling us where that boat was wrecked. Or where you cached the gold. Somehow, I don't believe the boat was wrecked at all."

"I'm not letting it go," said Geary stubbornly, "without getting my share."

"Ah! Now you're talking," returned Kert swiftly. "What do you want?"

"Fifty-fifty!"

"Twenty-five per cent."

"No."

"Twenty-five, and that's a break for you. We can dig the truth out of you anyway, Geary. How'd you like me to turn my men loose on you down cellar and heat hell outa you? How'd you like to feel a red-hot iron? Think it over."

Geary shrugged.

"I'm the one who knows where it is. Fifty-fifty."

"Damn you!" snarled Kert. "You'll get nothing——"

He stopped, listening. They heard the clamorous uproar of a speeding motor cycle, the slither of automobile

tires upon the cinders outside. Then a startled yell, a shot, a rush of footsteps downstairs. One of the hoodlums pounded up into the hall.

"Beat it, chief!" he panted. "Cops!"

The girl, Alma, screamed in terror. They heard an exchange of shots in front of the road house, the crash of broken glass. Kert's eyes narrowed. He barked an order to the man at his side.

"The back way! And we'll take this baby with us."

Two guns thrust their noses against Geary's body. The hoodlum gave him a shove. He was forced down the corridor, into a room at the end of the hall. Kert wrenched open a door. Apparently it only led to a clothes closet, but Kert seized an iron ring in the floor and drew open a trapdoor. A flight of stairs led to darkness below.

The police were in the road house. They could hear Blavatsky's high-pitched voice: "Gentlemen! Gentlemen! There is no one here. It is a mistake!"

Some one was running up the back stairs.

"Down you go!" whispered Kert.

Resistance was futile. Geary knew that Kert was a killer, that the man would shoot him down in an instant in spite of the fact that he held the secret of the gold, rather than risk capture at this time. He obeyed. He descended the flight of stairs into the darkness. Kert followed. The thug came last, dropping the trapdoor above him.

Kert produced a flashlight, illuminating the way. The passage led to a landing, evidently on the ground floor, then continued into the cellar of the road house. A gloomy opening appeared at the bottom.

Kert's gun prodded his ribs. He stumbled on through the opening, into a tunnel beneath the earth. He was puzzled. Where were they going? To some secret hiding place where Kert and the

other man could torture him to reveal the secret. But the tunnel continued. It was wet underfoot. Obviously, it led toward the bay.

Then it rose to higher ground. They came to a low flight of steps, reached a wooden wall. Kert reached for a tiny latch that Geary had not seen. Then he hesitated.

"No," he said. "We'll wait till this blows over. What happened to the others, Blaze?"

"Nabbed," returned the yegg, laconically. "Three provincial cops in a car and a Mounty on a motor cycle. I guess it was Blavatsky tipped 'em off."

"Mebbe. And it might have been this baby here. Had 'em trail you, huh?" he snapped at Geary. "Well, there's goin' to be no more funny business. You're going to show us where you left that gold."

"You win," muttered Geary. "I'll split—twenty-five, seyenty-five."

"Right."

In the darkness, Kert's thin lips quirked in a cruel smile. He could afford to bargain with a man who never would live to collect.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ISLAND.

BY the steady lapping of water close by, Geary judged that they were near the shore of the bay, perhaps in a boathouse. And eventually they heard a door open. Footsteps. Voices beyond the partition.

"Not here. They must have beat it to the bush."

"Took Geary with them, too. We've got to work fast, boys. Scour the woods."

"Blavatsky and the girl are our best bets. We'll make 'em talk."

Kert's gun was jammed warningly against Geary's ribs. He knew that the slightest outcry would reveal their hiding place but that the rescuers would

find his dead body. He remained silent as the footsteps receded, as the door slammed shut again.

"What you goin' to do, chief?" asked Blaze Dolan, from the darkness.

"Make a run for it in the boat, sap," whispered the other. "There's only one boat here. If they search the bush it's ten chances to one they'll never see us."

They waited. After a while they heard the hum of an automobile. It was returning to town.

Kert opened the door.

They were in a small boathouse. A launch lay at rest in the slip. Kert tugged at a wooden bar at the end of the building and the doors slid open revealing the waters of the bay.

"In you get," he ordered Geary.

Blaze Dolan tinkered with the engine. Kert untied the ropes that held the craft in place and stepped away from the slip.

The engine sprang into life clamorously. Blaze threw in the clutch. The launch nosed its way out of the boathouse.

Kert anxiously scanned the shore line behind them. The road house was almost completely hidden by trees, but a patch of the approach road was visible. However, no one was in sight, and as the launch forged its way farther and farther from shore.

Their escape, evidently, had been unobserved.

The bow of the boat rose higher from the water as the speed increased. They raced far out into the bay, wind and spray whipping their faces.

Kert still held his gun in readiness. He turned to Geary.

"Now," he said. "Where did you wreck that boat?"

"Granite Island."

"Where's that?"

"You can't see it from here. It's about two miles from the place where the train was held up."

Kert nodded. "I know."

Geary had considered the advisability of lying about the location of the wreck. It was the obvious thing to do. But it would only stave off the inevitable a little while: Kert would soon know he had lied and the truth would be forced from him in the long run.

No, his best plan was to hold Kert to the belief that he was prepared to sell the secret for a share of the loot. Kert would regard that as an ace in the hole. Geary had, in effect, made himself an accomplice to the thieves and would never dare betray them to the police.

"Are you sure that's the truth?" snapped Kert suddenly, as if reading Geary's thoughts.

"Why should I lie? I'm as anxious to get the gold as you are. A quarter share of it is more than I'd earn in the Mounted in a lifetime."

"You're talkin' sense now. Besides, what do you owe to the Mounted? They kicked you out."

"Yes. They kicked me out."

Kert called out to Dolan:

"Do you know Granite Island?"

"We passed it on the way out last night."

"Right. That's where we're going now."

THE launch struck open water, where great rollers driven by a stiff north wind crashed suddenly against the speeding craft and sent it heeling over with each successive wave.

"Gettin' stormy," growled Kert. His green eyes scanned the white-capped expanse of water eagerly. Far off to the right they could see Eldorado Mines. Far ahead lay the Narrows, and beyond that was a widening of the lake where lay Granite Island and the sunken gold.

Geary's mind was busy. It would take time to recover the gold from ten feet of water. But if they recovered it without interference—what then? He knew exactly what was in Kert's mind.

Geary would either be left dead or marooned on the island while Kert and his henchmen would escape to some secret hide-out with the loot.

His only hope was that Sergeant McCoy had guessed the meaning of those incoherent words Geary had spoken over the telephone. "The gang's got me trapped—Blavatsky's road house—it's about the gold—they haven't got it—it was in the boat——"

And that was all he had time to tell McCoy. Would the sergeant understand? He had not told McCoy, that morning, the exact location of the wreck, but perhaps the sergeant would go out in search of it—if he did not delay too long questioning Blavatsky and the girl, or search too long for Geary in the bush.

Perhaps the police would already be on the island, waiting, assuming that Kert had forced him to reveal the location of the wreck.

Then his hopes were chilled as Kert said:

"I don't trust you yet, Geary."

"I've told you where the gold is. What more do you want?"

"How am I to know it ain't a trap?" Kert had become suddenly suspicious. "How am I to know that, eh?"

"You've got to take my word for it."

"I don't take your word for anything. But I'll tell you this, Geary. If it is a trap—if cops are waitin' for us on that island—I'll attend to you first. I'll blow the head off your shoulders. And the same goes if they come while we're getting that gold out of the water. Think *that* over."

It was, Geary realized, a bad situation. There was every possibility that wily old McCoy had put two and two together and had posted men on the island. The possibility was even greater that he would be out in a boat with searchers within the hour, seeking the location of the wreck.

"Nothing on earth," snarled Kert, "is

goin' to save you if we don't make a get-away with that stuff."

"And also," reflected Geary bitterly, "nothing will save me if you *do* make your get-away."

For he knew he was dealing with a callous, desperate criminal chief. Kert would, in all probability, kill him the moment the gold was found. Kert was not the man to stand by any agreement to divide the loot—with murder already on his soul.

Geary felt a touch of panic. The more he considered the situation the greater appeared his danger. He was unarmed and helpless, a captive of murderers, and death would be his lot no matter what happened.

HE speculated on the advisability of a surprise attack. Could he wrest that gun from Kert before Blaze Dolan could get into action? The chances were all against it. They knew the location of the wreck now. He was of no further use to them. This time, they would shoot to kill.

The risk was too great. There was no way out. At any rate, he told himself, he would not submit to cold-blooded execution without a struggle. He kept a wary eye on Kert's gun.

The speeding launch swept through the Narrows. Far to the right they could see the bush and the railway embankment beyond. In the rainy haze to the north lay the wilderness and the chain of lakes. And there, a dark smudge against the background of the eastern shore, lay Granite Island.

Kert was eagerly scanning the surface of the lake.

"No one in sight," he exclaimed. "Fine!"

A feverish anticipation gripped him. He licked his thin lips. But his grasp on the revolver did not relax for an instant.

The launch plunged on through the waves. There was not another craft in

sight on the whole expanse of tossing waters. Kert watched the island anxiously. No sign of life there. McCoy could not have men posted there by now. And there had been no sign of any boat setting out from Eldorado.

The island loomed darker in the gathering mists, dark with its crown of evergreen trees above the harsh rocks.

"We've got chains—hooks—ropes," muttered Kert. "It'll be a job getting those chests up. It'll be worth it, though! Worth it!"

Geary saw him eying Blaze Dolan's back. He knew what Kert was thinking. Let Blaze Dolan and Geary help him recover the gold—then what was to stop the man from escaping with all the loot for himself?

The launch swung around into the lee of the island. Blaze Dolan was looking for a landing place. He spied a sheltered cove among the rocks. The bow of the launch turned toward the shore.

And then Geary saw something that roused him to immediate, desperate action.

CHAPTER VIII.

FORESTALLED.

WHAT he had seen, unnoticed by Kert and Dolan who were intent on watching the rocks past which the launch was gliding, was the stern of another boat, just visible beyond a high rock on the eastern side of the island.

Instantly he assumed that the police had reached the place first. And when his keen eyes caught a movement in the bush, when he spied a lurking figure among the trees and saw the lean snout of a rifle projecting from among the leaves, he knew that it would be only a matter of minutes before the trap would be sprung.

He leaped to his feet. Kert swung toward him menacingly, revolver outflung.

"Look!" yelled Geary. "On shore!"

Kert hesitated, turned a startled glance toward the rocky beach. Geary's arm shot out, struck down the man's wrist. They grappled together just as Blaze Dolan, quickly alive to danger, flung the craft into reverse.

Three tongues of flame darted from among the trees as three weapons spoke. Blaze Dolan uttered a yell and threw himself down in the bottom of the launch as it backed away. Thrown off balance, Kert and Geary went down with a crash. There was a fusillade of shots from the island.

Geary struggled blindly, clinging in desperation to Kert's gun arm. They rolled and plunged, kicking and gouging, each battling for possession of the gun, aware of the bullets that whistled overhead. Bullets riddled the launch as it backed out of the cove. Dolan huddled in the shelter of the bow, whimpering with fear.

Kert wrenched his arm free for a moment and brought the gun down savagely over Geary's head. But Geary struggled to his knees and sprang at the bandit; they wrestled bitterly, panting, swaying to and fro in the plunging boat. The steady clatter of shots from the men in ambush on the island sounded above the heaving wash of waves.

Kert stumbled back. His gun was free again. He flung up the weapon and it blazed flame, but Geary sidestepped, ducked just in time. The movement, however, which came just as a wave smashed violently against the stern, sent him staggering. He tried to save himself as he stumbled against the gunwale—felt himself falling.

He crashed into the water just as another shot from Kert's gun roared in his ears. He held his breath and swam under water, trying to get farther and farther away from the launch.

At length when his lungs seemed on the point of bursting, he shot to the surface, drank in deep mouthfuls of air.

Geary found himself well out of the

cross-fire of barking guns and almost hidden from view of the launch by a reef of rock protruding from the surface of the waves. He swam along the side of the reef, cautiously making his way in toward shore. He was sure he had not been seen by the men on the island. They were too busily occupied with Kert and Blaze Dolan in the launch.

Geary crawled up onto the shore. He took refuge behind a clump of trees. By the shots he judged that there were three men on the island.

"Can't be police," he said to himself, puzzled. The fact that they had fired indiscriminately on the launch as it approached the island seemed to prove that. It was only by chance that he had escaped that hail of lead unharmed. But, if not the police, who were these men? How had they learned about the gold?

He caught sight of a man crouching, running from one clump of trees to a patch of undergrowth near the shore. There the fellow knelt, rifle to shoulder, aiming at the launch out in the cove. Geary could see Kert arguing with Blaze Dolan, telling him to fight.

The rifle spoke.

Blaze Dolan uttered a yell, straightened up, then pitched over the side of the launch into the water.

Geary knew that the men on the island were not police officers. He had never seen the marksman in the bushes before.

WITH no gun of his own he could only be a passive witness to the battle. However, he watched his chance, bolted from the shelter of the trees and gained refuge behind a great heap of boulders farther down the shore. No one had seen him.

He worked his way down the beach, around the northern end of the island, sheltered by rocks and trees. He was interested in that launch he had seen anchored off the east shore. If he

could only reach the launch unobserved and use it for a get-away!

He came in sight of the craft, anchored in deep water at the base of a steep rock. The shooting had died down. He could hear the laborious clamor of Kert's boat as the man maneuvered it back out of range.

Geary sped over the rocks, scrambled down in the launch. He worked feverishly, hauled up the anchor, seized an oar and thrust the boat away from the rocks. He leaped to the engine.

There was a frantic shout from the rocks above.

"Quick! Here! The boat!"

He looked up. A man had emerged from the thickets on the slope. He was gesturing to some one behind him.

The engine roared. The launch began to back away.

The man on the slope flung a rifle to his shoulder. Geary ducked as a bullet whined past him.

"The gold! He's got the gold!"

It was then that he noticed the two chests in the bow of the launch—the ropes and tackle that had been used to recover the gold from the wreckage of the other boat. His heart bounded with elation. How it had happened he did not know—but some one had forestalled Kert, some one had learned or guessed of the presence of the gold, and had been interrupted in the very act of escaping with it.

He was out in open water now. He spun the wheel, threw in the clutch. The launch slowly forged ahead.

He saw three running figures on the rocks now. Shot after shot rang out. Geary flung himself flat. He heard bullets whacking against the bow. But with every passing second the launch was racing farther out of range.

After a while he straightened up and peered over the side. He was well out of range now. He could see the three men on the rocks, marooned on the little island.

And then he heard the steady beat of a motor, the roar of the other launch bearing down on him.

He swung around. Kert had sensed the situation. At the wheel of the other craft, Kert was steering directly toward him. Geary's jaw tightened. He bore down on the wheel, altered his course, increased his speed. The maneuver tricked Kert for the moment; the other launch surged past his stern, through his wake. Then Geary leaned over the wheel, headed the nose of the craft toward the distant Narrows.

But Kert was not easily beaten.

He brought his own launch around in a wide arc, took up the chase again. The engine was powerful, capable of high speed, and Kert made the most of it.

Geary found that he was being overhauled.

The pursuing boat was at his stern now. He looked back, in time to see Kert's arm go up. He flung himself sideways as Kert's gun belched flame. The bullet bit a chunk out of the woodwork a few inches away. Geary juggled the wheel and the next shot went wide.

Kert's speedy launch was drawing up alongside now. Geary snatched up a heavy wrench that he found on the boat beside him. He poised in readiness. The swift-running boats bumped together with a jarring crash.

Kert jumped.

He landed in the boat with such force that the momentum almost sent him over the side. He staggered, steadied himself—brought up his gun again.

CHAPTER IX.

CLEARED.

GEARY now swung down sharply with the wrench. It struck the gun just as Kert pressed the trigger, knocking the barrel aside, sending the weapon spinning to the bottom of the boat.

Kert crouched, then sprang in with a snarl of fury. Geary struck out again but the other man came in under the blow, sent a jolting left to Geary's face.

The speeding launch, with the wheel untended, swerved sharply, running broadside to the waves. The lurch threw Geary off balance. He went down in a heap, but seized Kert's legs and yanked the man's feet from beneath him.

They rolled over, struggling, kicking, punching, gouging. It was a fight to the death and they knew it. Kert's only hope of saving that quarter of a million in gold lay in ridding himself of Geary and escaping alone in the launch. Already he had nearly lost the loot—had nearly lost it to three members of his own gang, who had left their hiding place on one of the inland lakes, had sought the location of the wreck and found it.

Blows rained on Geary's face. He tried to raise the wrench but his arm was pinned beneath Kert's knee. He caught a glimpse of the revolver, sliding toward them with another lunge of the boat. He saw Kert's arm flash out.

With a violent effort he twisted himself around, sent Kert sprawling. The man's outstretched hand missed the revolver by inches and the weapon went sliding toward the stern. Geary was halfway to his feet as Kert struggled up, wheeled about and came at him again. Geary blindly tried to fend off the attack but his footing was precarious and he was sent stumbling backward. Kert was at his throat. He was being thrust halfway over the side.

He struck out with the wrench again, but Kert seemed insensible to pain. Geary could see the man's desperate, maniacal eyes. Back—back—over the side. Waves dashed in his face. He kicked out suddenly. Kert uttered a gasp; his grip relaxed for a moment. Geary threw all his strength into a

mighty effort and managed to fling the man aside. Kert crashed against the steering wheel.

The boat lurched again. Geary felt the revolver slide against his foot. He bent swiftly to seize it for himself, and Kert sprang again. They crashed into the stern, over one of the seats. Geary felt the wrench slipping; it was torn from his grasp. He ducked just in time to avoid a murderous blow that would have cracked his skull like an eggshell.

He grabbed Kert's arm in time to turn a second blow away, then twisted back on the arm, throwing Kert off balance, lunged forward and they went over the seat again. He clung desperately to the opponent's arm. He realized only too well that one solid blow of the wrench would mean his finish.

But he was weakening, and Kert fought with all the insane fury of sheer desperation. A glancing blow of the wrench caught him on the side of the head, stunning him for the moment. Almost instinctively, however, Geary managed to close with the other man, gripping his arms.

RUNNING broadside to the big waves, the launch was careening crazily, taking water over the side. A tremendous lurch that sent the craft heeling over on its side sent both men stumbling back. Geary wrenched himself free. He saw Kert stagger and then he seized the fleeting chance, leaped in and swung.

His fist caught Kert full on the side of the jaw. The man's head shot back and he toppled over the side into the water.

As he stumbled to the wheel to bring the boat around he heard a shout. He looked up. Another launch was roaring toward him, and at the wheel was Sergeant McCoy.

"All right, lad!" roared the sergeant. "We'll get him."

There were two provincial officers in the boat with the sergeant. Their launch shot past, toward Kerr, who was plunging frantically in the water.

Geary righted his own craft and brought it around. He was just in time to witness the concluding act of the drama.

Two men hauled Kert out of the water. They dragged him over the side. So occupied were they with saving the man's life that they relaxed vigilance. And, quick as a striking snake, Kert made his last bid for freedom.

As the men were dragging him into the boat his arm shot out. He wrenched a revolver from a holster at the nearest officer's belt.

Geary saw the impending tragedy and he yelled a warning.

McCoy, at the wheel, swung around. His revolver flashed, spat flame.

Kert's finger never found the trigger. He tumbled to the bottom of the boat—dead.

And when Geary drew up alongside he knew that he had won. The gold had been recovered—and marooned on the little island were three crestfallen desperadoes, all that were left of Kert's gang. He explained the situation to McCoy in a few words. The launches headed toward the island.

"Good work, lad!" growled McCoy. "We've got the others in jail." He chuckled. "Kert's girl thought he had run out on her and she told us the gold was in the boat you wrecked. So we set out to explore."

The launches ran abreast toward the island. Suddenly the sergeant thought of something. He called across to Geary.

"By the way, your suspension is lifted corporal."

A SIMPLE SUGGESTION

By JAMES A. SANAKER

I'VE talked with rich and poor alike,
I've talked with men of fame;
I've asked each one about hard times,
But nobody's to blame.

I asked the banker and his clerks,
I asked the plumber, too;
I've asked the workers and the shirks
And bakers not a few.

I've asked each man who owned a mill,
They know depression came,
I've asked each man who ran a still,
But nobody's to blame.

So if no one's at fault in this
Unpleasant hard times chatter,
Let's get together and dismiss
The whole sad silly matter!



The Taming Of Smiling Smith

A "Zip Sawyer" Story

The timber beasts found it just as tough up in the Oregon woods as they did back on the Misabe Range

By Vance Richardson

Author of "Straw Boss," etc.

SEEN through the drizzling mist which enveloped the Oregon woods, the engine looked like a great, shiny, black monster, as it puffed its way up the logging railroad. Behind it came a train of twenty-seven empty flat cars, their floors battered and bruised and splintered from

contact with the loads of logs which daily were hauled to the mill at Astoria.

"Some different to the country back in the Misabe Range, ain't it, Marie?"

The speaker was a gray-eyed young fellow, who looked tall, even though he sat on the floor of a flat car, with his long legs dangling over the edge.

Water dripped from the brim of the little black hat cocked at an aggressive angle on his red head; mist silvered the rough surface of the black-and-red-checked mackinaw which covered his broad shoulders, and a drop of water hung ready to fall from the end of his nose as he grinned down at a black-bearded little French-Canadian, who squatted at his right hand.

"Eet's a strange contree, Zip, weeth strange timbaire and strange peoples," agreed Pierre Marie Cavignon, who had thrown in his lot with Zip Sawyer, and come to Oregon with him after the closing down of the logging camps where together they had worked back in the Misabe Range. "Me, I wish I was taking one beeg drink back in Cockeye Shanahan's saloon."

Seated on the floor of the flat car, at some distance from the two loggers, a hawk-featured, wide-shouldered young fellow jerked a sack of tobacco from the pocket of his gray flannel shirt. With fingers which had lost some of their deftness, owing to the wet and cold, he rolled a cigarette.

Failing to find a match in his pockets, he rose to his feet. With the peculiar, wide-legged gait of a man who has spent years in the saddle, he rolled toward Zip.

"Got a match, pardner?" he inquired.

Turning his head, Zip glanced up into a pair of ice-blue eyes set wide apart in a bronzed face, which was topped by a wide-brimmed Stetson hat, ornamented with a band made of red and blue beads.

As Zip handed over a match, he noticed that the stranger's feet were incased in high-heeled riding boots, which reached almost to his knees, and that around his slim waist he wore a cartridge belt which held a holstered six-gun.

"Bliged to yuh," said the stranger as he accepted the match. "My name is Shan Watters," he added. "Back where I come from, it never rains."

"That must be hell," said Zip.

"Yo're mistake, pardner," said Watters, grinning. "I'm speakin' of Arizona. Got sort o' fed up with ridin' and ropin', so I drifted North. figurin' to get me a job in the woods."

The engine whistled two short blasts, which were followed by the grinding of brakes. The long train came to a standstill between two rows of tar-paper shacks which had been built parallel with the railroad. Nailed to the front of the largest of the shacks was a sign, which read:

ILQUA RIVER LUMBER COMPANY
OFFICE

ZIP and Pierre Marie dropped to the ground, jerked their "turkeys" off the flat car, and shouldered them. Followed by Shan Watters, who had arrived without a bed roll, they made their way toward the office.

As they entered, a powerfully built man with curly, iron-gray hair, glanced up from his work at a desk. His eyes, steel-colored, and as keen as gimlet points, sized them up from head to foot.

"Well, boys, what can I do for you?" he inquired.

"Me and my partner shipped here from the ABC Employment Office in Astoria," replied Zip. "They said you needed men."

"Where'd you work last?"

Zip explained that he and Pierre Marie were just out from Minnesota.

"We've done most every kind o' work that is done in the woods," he said. "Tamarack mainly, and sugar pine."

"Small timber!" snorted the superintendent. "You'll find things different here. Report to Smiling Smith at Bunk House No. 3."

Shan Watters, taking it for granted that he was included in the order, started to follow his companions out of the office.

"Wait a minute," said the man behind the desk. "You, I mean, in the cowboy hat."

Shan Watters stopped, faced around. His eyes gleamed like blue ice in his lean face. His short upper lip had lifted slightly above his white teeth.

"Speakin' to me?" he drawled.

"I am," said the superintendent, with an edge to his voice which did not escape the notice of Zip and Pierre Marie. "You don't look to me like a logger. What in hell do those employment-office people mean by sending you up here?"

Teetering backward and forth on his high heels, Shan Watters grinned crookedly.

"I reck'n they needed the two bucks I paid 'em," he drawled.

Superintendent John Carmack tapped his desk with the end of a pencil, and stared thoughtfully at Shan Watters's high-heeled boots; then he raised his eyes inch by inch, until they came to rest on the holstered six-gun.

"Cowboy, aren't you?" he inquired.

"I've rode the range," admitted Shan Watters. "But that ain't no sin."

Without any thought of being disrespectful, he jerked the makings from his shirt pocket and began to roll a cigarette.

"Do I get the job I paid for?" he drawled. "Or have I got to high-tail it back to town and beat hell out o' them white collars who got my two bucks?"

The logging superintendent smiled slightly beneath his gray mustache.

"I'll give you a chance," he said rather grimly. "Report to Smiling Smith with your two friends. He'll put you to work."

THE bunk house in which the three companions soon found themselves was as different from those Zip and Pierre Marie remembered as it well could be.

Three tiers of steel bunks lined each wall of the building. Two long wooden benches faced each other across an aisle ten feet in width. At the end of it a small table covered with white oil cloth stood beneath a six-paned window.

Halfway down the aisle stood a shining stove, above which was a wooden rack, from which hung shirts, socks, and other clothing. Electric-light globes hung from the ceiling, and everything was spotlessly clean.

"Makes a man feel that he ought to be wearin' Sunday pants and slippers," said Zip, as he tossed his turkey into an empty bunk. "I'll bet the word 'timber beast' ain't never been heard in the camp."

Pierre Marie filled and lighted his pipe, and seated himself on one of the benches.

"A logger is a logger wherever he finds himself," said the little French Canadian. "Ze fine bunk house does not take ze 'air from ze 'og's ear."

"Makes me feel like a stray calf in an alfalfa patch," drawled Shan Watters, as he rolled a cigarette. "It looks too danged good to last."

Willing though both Zip and Pierre Marie were to be friendly, they could find nothing to say to the ex-cowboy, whose life had been so different to their own; so they made no reply to his remark. Seated side by side, they fell into conversation in which Shan Watters took no part.

Presently the loggers began to drift in—brawny, deep-chested men who wore the parafanned jackets and pants which are known in Oregon as "tin" pants. Paying no attention to the newcomers, the crew began to exchange their woods clothing for that which they wore while in camp.

The last man to enter was a brawny giant who stood more than six feet in height. One glance at him, and Zip and Pierre Marie leaped to their feet. Throwing themselves upon the logger,

they nearly bore him to the floor in their joy at meeting an old friend.

"Bear Cat!" shouted Zip. "You rip-roarin' old timber beast! You're the last man in the world we expected to meet here. How long is it since you left the Misabe Range?"

"I tol' you a logger could not change her spot," yelled Pierre Marie, as he wrung "Bear Cat" Rafferty's huge paw. "Ol' fren', I am so glad to see you I could eat her, by Gar!"

Hugging Zip and Pierre Marie between his mighty arms, Bear Cat Rafferty pushed them back onto the bench and seated himself between them, with an arm around each of them.

"I'm sure glad to see you, boys," he roared. "My partner was hurt bad today. Maybe the boss'll let you work with me."

"What kind of a boss is Smiling Smith?" asked Pierre Marie.

"Smiling Smith?" echoed Bear Cat. "Well, I'll tell you, Marie. He's all right if a man knows his work, but he sure is hell on a green hand."

"Yeah?"

Interrupted in what he was saying, Bear Cat Rafferty turned his head, and found himself looking into the ice-blue eyes of Shan Watters. Deliberately, the gaze of the huge logger swept the seated ex-cowboy from head to foot, taking in at a glance the wide-brimmed hat, the holstered six-gun, and the high-heeled riding boots on Shan Watters's feet.

"Friend o' yours, Zip?" asked Bear Cat Rafferty.

"He came up on the loggin' train with us," admitted Zip.

"Name o' Shan Watters," drawled the ex-cowboy. "From the land where it never rains. Mister, yuh was sayin' somethin' about the boss o' this camp bein' hard on green hands. Did I get yuh right?"

"You did," said Bear Cat. "What about it?"

TN-5

"Waal," drawled Shan Watters. "This Smilin' Smith will have his hands full, for I admire to admit I'm plenty green."

"If you wasn't, you'd have known enough to have ditched that hat and gun and them boots, before you came into a loggin' camp," said Bear Cat Rafferty very gently. "'Tween you and me and the deacon seat, you look like a plain damn fool."

Shan Watters's hand leaped to his gun, and it was out of its holster before he sprang to his feet; but quick though he was, Zip Sawyer was quicker.

Gripping Shan Watters's wrist with steel fingers, Zip forced his arm upward until the face of Shan Watters turned gray with pain, and the six-gun clattered to the floor from fingers grown useless and numb.

"You low-down, gun-totin' fool!" yelled Zip, as he held the would-be bad man fast in an iron grip. "What you tryin' to do? Commit murder?"

Releasing his hold on the struggling man, Zip stooped to pick up the gun; then the pointed toe of one of the cowboy's riding boots caught him behind the ear and laid him out cold.

SOMEBODY dashed a cup of water in Zip's face, and, opening his eyes, he struggled to his feet. Shan Watters was fighting desperately against a crowd of loggers who were literally tearing his clothing from his back. His hat had been ripped to ribbons, his boots wrenched from his feet, and his belt snapped into two pieces by a pair of husky woodsmen.

With his lips smashed to a pulp, one eye closed, and his face empurpled by the bruising fists of his attackers, he was fighting a game but losing fight when Zip hurled himself into the crowd.

"Cut it out!" yelled Zip. "He's had enough."

Too angered to know what he was doing, a burly logger swung a pile-driv-

ing blow at Zip's stomach, but, ducking beneath the man's fist, Zip came up between the flailing arms and shot an uppercut to the timber beast's jaw which staggered him.

"Bear Cat! Marie!" yelled Zip. "Gi' me a hand here, before there's murder done."

Rallying to Zip's call, Bear Cat Rafferty and Pierre Marie ranged themselves beside him in front of Shan Watters, who, still making a feeble attempt to fight, had sunk to his knees, incoherently begging that somebody would hand him his gun.

The Oregon loggers fell back for a moment before the savage onslaught of the three Misabe men; then, rallying, they charged forward, yelling with the joy of battle.

Overwhelmed by sheer weight in numbers, it was going mighty hard with Zip and his two friends when there came a sudden interruption which caused every man to drop his fists.

"What the hell's goin' on in here?" bellowed a great voice.

Standing in the open doorway of the bunk house was a man at least six feet five inches in height. His hairy chest, exposed by his unbuttoned shirt, looked like a coconut-fiber mat. The huge fingers of his long arms almost touched his knees. With his round, red face wreathed in a cherubic smile, which was belied by the hard light in his amber eyes, he stood looking from man to man.

"Smiling Smith," whispered Bear Cat Rafferty to Zip. "He's hell on wheels."

"I asked what is going on in here." Slowly, like the measured beats of a bass drum, the words dropped one by one from the lips of the giant.

"Just a bit o' rough-house, Smith," replied Bear Cat Rafferty in a voice which seemed to have become still and small. "That's all. Just a bit of a rough-house."

"Who started it?"

Uneasy glances passed from man to

man, but nobody replied. Quarrel and fight among themselves they might, and did, but when it came to letting any one man shoulder the blame, the loggers remained true to the code of the woods, which made them stand by each other to the bitter end.

And so the silence was broken only by the shuffling of booted feet on the floor, until up from that floor the wreck of Shan Watters rose in the wreck of his shirt and pants.

Hardly able to see out of the one eye that was not closed, with his body bruised by fist and boot, and his strength almost gone, he staggered half the length of the bunk house, and stopped in front of the man known as Smiling Smith.

"I started the scrap," he said. "An' I'm willin' to take my medicine."

It was the last thing in the world the loggers had expected Shan Watters to do, and they could not suppress grunts of admiration, which died to silence as Zip Sawyer strode forward and confronted the giant foreman.

"I'm just as much to blame as this man Watters is," said the red-headed young timber beast.

Pierre Marie Cavignon strutted forward and took a position beside Zip. With his black-bearded face tipped to one side, the little Frenchman grinned up at Smiling Smith.

"Me, too, start dose fight, m'sieu'," he said.

Not to be outdone, Bear Cat Rafferty lumbered forward. Tall and huge though he was, the big timber beast was dwarfed by the giant boss.

"Blame it onto me, Smith," he said. "I started the scrap."

Still smiling, the huge foreman doubled his fists and rested them on his hips. Slowly his amber gaze roved from face to face of the four men standing in front of him, until his eyes clashed with Zip's.

"You and your two partners just ar-

rived in camp, so Carmack told me," boomed the foreman.

"We did," said Zip.

"Well, listen," said Smiling Smith "This is a logging camp, and nothing else, and I don't allow fighting, drinking, nor gambling. Seeing that you are newcomers, I'm going to let you off this time. Report for work in the morning."

Still smiling, he left the bunk house, closing the door quietly behind him.

The silence which followed the departure of the big foreman was broken by one of the Oregon men.

"When Smiling Smith once gets down on anybody, he never lets up until he runs 'em out of camp. You new fellows might as well roll your turkeys."

"Do you mean that he'll fire us?" asked Zip.

"Fire hell!" The logger pursed his lips to spit, then changed his mind. "No," he said. "Smith is too damn smart to get the rep of firing men."

NEXT morning, after breakfast, Smiling Smith threw open the door of the bunk house. Bulking huge in the gray light of dawn, he watched the crew file past him into the drizzling mist.

Zip, Pierre Marie, and Shan Watters were last in line. When it came their turns to pass the foreman, he stopped them with a gesture. Holding a time book open in one hand, and a pencil in the other, he looked them over, entered their names in his book, closed it, and slipped it into his pocket.

"I suppose you fellows are loggers, or you wouldn't have shipped out to the camp," said Smiling Smith. "Where'd you work last?"

"Minnesota," replied Zip. "Tamarack mainly, and sugar pine."

"Hm-m-m!" Ever use springboards?"

"Sure," said Zip.

"All right," said Smiling Smith. "You

and——" His amber eyes rested a moment on Shan Watters, who had discarded his Stetson for a battered old hat given him by a friendly logger. "You and Watters come with me."

Turning to Bear Cat Rafferty, the foreman said: "The little Frenchman will work with you, Rafferty. Let's go."

A half hour later, Smiling Smith stopped at the edge of a cliff that dropped five hundred feet almost sheer into the white waters of the Ilqua River.

Growing here and there among the rocks of the cliff were a number of huge Douglas fir trees, any one of which was at least eight feet across the stump.

"There's your timber," said Smiling Smith. "Every man I've asked to fall those trees has refused to tackle 'em. You'll find tools lying at the base of the first tree you come to. And listen, boys: Don't break up any trees."

"Nice sociable bird, ain't he?" observed Shan Watters as the big foreman disappeared from sight.

Zip did not reply. With a frown puckering the flesh between his eyes, he was looking down over the edge of the cliff at the trees Smiling Smith had ordered them to fall.

"Shan," said Zip, suddenly whirling on the ex-cowboy, "this is no job for a green hand. You'd better go to camp."

"Who, me?" Shan Watters turned puzzled blue eyes on the tall young timber beast standing at his side. "Say, listen, pardner, I don't know anything about fallin' trees, but I ain't a quitter. Yuh go ahead and show me how, an' I'll do the best I can."

The eyes of the two men met and held a moment. Then Zip's gaze traveled down the lean, sinewy frame of the ex-cowboy and came to rest on his feet.

"You can't stand on a springboard in those high-heeled boots, Shan," he said.

"Like hell I can't!" Turning his back to Zip, Shan Watters began to clamber down the cliff toward a huge

dead-topped fir which towered to a height of two hundred and fifty feet. Picking up one of a pair of double-bitted axes which leaned against the tree, he turned to Zip, who by this time had joined him.

Under Zip's direction, Shan Watters clumsily cut in the trunk of the tree a notch in which to insert the steel-shod toe of a springboard. When at last the two men stood on the springboards, ready to saw out the undercut, they were twenty feet above the ground.

Somewhat pale around the lips, Shan Watters teetered nervously on the springboard in his high-heeled boots. Little beads of perspiration popped out on his lean face as he shot an uneasy glance at the jagged rocks, twenty feet below.

"All you've got to do is to keep your balance," said Zip encouragingly. "But be sure you do that, Watters. Now, then, let her go."

TO and fro, to and fro, the thin blade of the eight-foot falling saw began to move across the trunk of the great fir. Clumsily at first, then with more assurance, Shan Watters pulled on his end of the saw. Thin, golden ribbons of wood, hauled forth by the drag teeth, fell and clung to the tops of his high-heeled riding boots.

When the saw had penetrated the trunk of the tree to a depth of eighteen inches, they removed it and laid it across the springboards behind them. Then, facing each other, they swung their axes and began to chop the undercut in the tree.

"Hey, there! You in the high-heeled boots!"

Startled at the sudden shout, Shan Watters turned while his ax was still in mid-air. Flying out of his hands, it clattered to the rocks below.

Losing his balance, Shan Watters teetered a moment on his high heels, then one foot missed the springboard

entirely, and his body plunged downward.

As he fell, he threw up his hands, and by chance they closed around the edges of the springboard, leaving him swinging to and fro in the air, twenty feet above the rocks.

Standing on the other springboard, Zip stared at his partner with horrified eyes. Unable to be of any assistance, he expected to see Shan Watters dashed to death among the rocks as soon as his grip on the springboard gave way; but before Zip could clamber down, he saw Shan Watters release his grip.

Falling straight as a plummet, the ex-cowboy landed on his feet in a soft patch of ground between two boulders. Even at that, the impact was so great that he lost his balance and rolled over and over.

As he gained his feet, he found himself confronted by the towering figure of Smiling Smith.

"Whoever told you you were a logger?" roared the giant foreman. "You no-account, sawed-off, bowlegged little runt, what the hell do you mean by taking a job as a timber faller?"

Shan Watters brushed some dirt off the knees of his pants, and grinned up into the angry face of the giant towering over him.

"I ain't hurt, so there's no harm done," he said softly. "If yuh hadn't hollered, I wouldn't have lost my balance."

"Shut up your mouth and go to camp," ordered Smiling Smith. "I'll put you to work helping the cook."

"Oh, yeah?" drawled Shan Watters. "You and who else? I started to help Zip fall this tree, and I aim to finish the job; so what are yuh goin' to do about it?"

"Do? I'll show you!"

Gone now was the giant foreman's smile, as he doubled a huge fist and took a step forward.

S UDDENLY he stopped. With mouth slowly opening, and amber eyes wide with fear, he looked uncertainly into the muzzle of a six-gun which had appeared in the ex-cowboy's right hand.

"I don't like the way yuh talk," drawled Shan Watters. "And I don't like yore face or the way yo're actin' up. Climb up on that board and show me jest how a tree had ought to be felled."

"You wouldn't dare shoot!" exclaimed Smiling Smith.

"Not afore I've counted six," agreed Shan Watters. "If yuh ain't pullin' on the saw by then, I'll shore perforate yore hide, yuh big four-flushin' chunk o' beef."

"Cut it out, Shan," shouted Zip. "You can't use a gun in the woods."

"One," said Shan Watters. "Two—three——"

Exhibiting unexpected agility for so huge a man, Smiling Smith, who knew little about guns, scrambled from springboard to springboard, taking with him the ax which Shan Watters had made him pick up.

Seating himself some ten feet from the huge tree, the ex-cowboy kept the muzzle of his gun trained on the huge logger's stomach.

"Get a move on yuh," he shouted. "I aim to see how a tree should be felled."

It had been all of ten years since Smiling Smith had handled either saw or ax, and he was almost as clumsy as Shan Watters had been. Sweat came from his great round face, and oaths rattled from his lips as, puffing and panting, he helped Zip to fall the big fir.

O NCE on the springboard, Smiling Smith took command of things. Briefly he ordered Zip to chop out the undercut so that it would face more to the right.

"If we fall the tree the way you want

that undercut pointed, the log will break into several pieces when it hits the rocks," said Zip.

"Shut up," ordered Smiling Smith. "What do you know about falling big timber?"

"About as much as you know about guns, I guess," said Zip dryly. "Go ahead and have your way; Shan and I will lose our jobs anyway."

"You bet your boots you'll lose your jobs," grunted Smiling Smith. "What's more, I'll have that bow-legged little runt in jail before I'm a day older."

By this time the saw was eating steadily into the back of the tree. They were two thirds of the way through the huge butt, when a sudden shout caused them to stop work.

Bear Cat Rafferty and Pierre Marie Cavignon were clambering down the cliff with their tools on their shoulders. Catching sight of the foreman working with Zip, the two loggers sat down on a rock.

"We got through workin' where we was, and came over like you told us to," shouted Rafferty. Then, suddenly, he saw Shan Watters sitting, with his gun covering Smiling Smith.

"What the hell!" exclaimed Bear Cat.

"Get that fellow. He threatened to murder me," ordered Smiling Smith. "Take his gun away from him."

"Not for us," shouted back the little French Canadian. "We 'ave not lose any gun, by Gar!"

"You, Smilin' Smith, get busy," ordered Shan Watters. "My trigger finger's beginnin' to itch."

"I'll fire the whole bunch of you for this," roared Smiling Smith. "You can't hold me up in my own camp."

The click of a six-gun hammer settling back at full cock shut off his words, and he jerked viciously at the saw, almost throwing Zip off his springboard. To and fro, to and fro, the diamond-shaped steel teeth followed each other toward the heart of the tree.

Presently a loud crack advertised that it was beginning to fall. Another crack followed, and still another, and slowly the top of the huge fir began to sway toward the river, five hundred feet below.

"Get out o' there!" yelled the foreman to Shan Watters. "She's about to go."

Shan Watters rose to his feet. Still holding the six-gun in his hand, he gazed up at the wavering top of the huge fir; then, as it swayed toward him, suddenly seized with panic, he began to scramble down the cliff directly beneath the falling tree.

"Stop!" Zip's hoarse shout brought Shan Watters up short in his tracks, less than fifteen feet from where the huge fir was swaying on its stump.

"Down on your face, and lie still—quick!" yelled Zip. "It's your only chance!"

STILL Shan Watters stood there, too fear-stricken to move. With his right hand gripping his gun, and his head thrown back, he gazed with fascinated eyes at the top of the great fir that was slowly leaving its stump.

Crack! Crack! Crack! The sound of rending fibers echoed like pistol shots through the woods, and with gathering momentum the top of the great tree swept forward. Then, suddenly, a dead branch snapped off and hurtled downward. Hitting Smiling Smith on the shoulder, it knocked him off his springboard. Striking the ground close to the stump of the falling tree, the big foreman lay groaning, with his left arm doubled back into an unnatural position behind his head.

"Down, down on your face, Shan!" yelled Zip. "What's the matter with you? Flop down—quick!"

But for all the notice the ex-cowboy took, he might have been made of stone. Like a bird threatened by the weaving

head of a snake about to strike, Shan Watters stood incapable of sound or movement.

Fifty feet distant, Bear Cat Rafferty and Pierre Marie stood helpless to aid. With blanched faces, they watched the huge tree sweeping downward. Full well they realized that the head of Shan Watters would be swept off his shoulders by the slightest touch of those hurtling tons of wood. Zip knew it, too, and knowing it, he took a desperate chance.

Dropping to a crouch on his springboard, he leaped down onto the soft spot of ground which had received Shan Watters when he had fallen.

Scrambling to his feet, Zip ran beneath the falling tree, grabbed Shan Watters around the knees, and hurled him to the ground. The next instant, the giant fir left its stump.

With his arms locked around Shan Watters, covering the ex-cowboy's body with his own, Zip held him down flat on his back, in spite of his furious struggles.

And while they lay there, locked in each other's arms, above them the huge fir dived headlong from its stump, and like a gigantic feathered arrow, shot through the air above their recumbent form. Striking the rocks fifty feet beyond where they lay, the great tree smashed into a dozen pieces.

Bear Cat Rafferty and Pierre Marie rushed forward and hauled Zip and Shan Watters to their feet.

With the smile gone from his round face, his amber eyes blazing with rage, and his left arm hanging useless at his side, Smiling Smith joined the group. Lips writhing back from his teeth, the giant foreman who had ruled the camp so long with an iron hand, glared from man to man. Then, suddenly, he stooped and picked up the six-gun from the spot where Zip and the ex-cowboy had lain.

"Take Watters to camp, boys," or-

dered Smiling Smith. "I'm going to hand him over to the sheriff."

"What you goin' to do that for?" asked Zip quietly.

"For threatening to murder me," roared the huge boss. "I call all of you to witness that Watters menaced me with a loaded gun."

"Loaded?" echoed Zip, meeting the eyes of the giant with steady gaze.

Turning the weapon over and over in his huge hands, Smiling Smith suddenly broke open the cylinder. There was not a cartridge in the weapon!

"I—I—I thought——" mumbled the giant confusedly.

"Shore yuh did," cut in Shan Watters. "Yuh thought yuh could buffalo me the way yuh've had these loggers buffaloed. I wonder if yuh'll still be able to handle 'em when the camp learns that yuh was scairt pink by an empty gun."

"You are fired, you and Zip Sawyer both," roared Smiling Smith. "Fired for breaking up that fir——"

"Hold on, there, Smith," said Bear Cat Rafferty. "Marie and me both

heard you order Zip to change the line of the undercut. 'It's your own fault the tree broke, and we'll see that the supe hears about it."

The veins stood out purple on Smiling Smith's temples as he listened, for he knew that the four men could make him the laughingstock of the camp if they all told the same story.

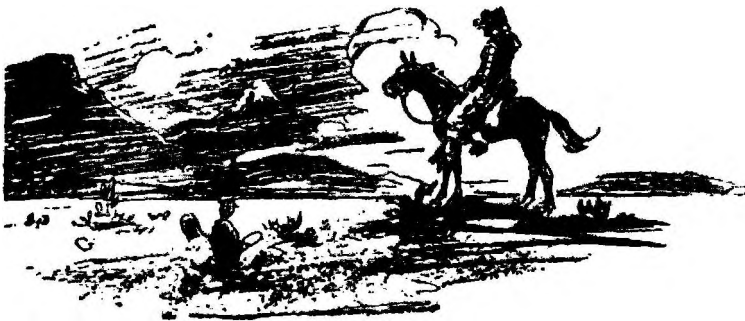
Face suffused with blood, and eyes gleaming like those of a cornered bear, he shuffled from foot to foot. Suddenly he tossed the empty six-gun at Shan Watters's feet, and turned on his heel.

"I got to get my arm 'tended to," he muttered.

Smiling Smith had hardly disappeared over the rim of the cliff when Shan Watters turned to Zip, with outstretched hand.

"Much obliged to yuh for unloadin' my gun while yuh was huggin' me," drawled Shan Watters. "Yuh shore took the smile out of Smilin' Smith."

Zip Sawyer's in a new type of country now. Follow his thrilling adventures in an early issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch.





Murder on the E Cross

Kid Buckaroo and his chunky pard, Tucky Williams, lope into plenty of mystery

By Tex Bradley

Author of "The Boss Of Piute," etc.

CHAPTER I.

MURDER.

A GHOSTLY, hissing sound came through the night. Then the high-pitched, wild scream of a mortally wounded man brought eighteen men tumbling out, yelling excitedly to each other as they rubbed sleep from their eyes and tugged on spurred boots. A peg-legged round-

up cook raked together a heap of dry mesquite branches, dumped a tomato can full of kerosene over the brush and threw a match into it.

"Chuck's hurt, boys!" came a frightened yell. "Come, gimme a hand, somebody!"

Half-clad cowboys were hurrying toward the spot from which the voice had come when the kerosene-soaked brush leaped into flames. Through the weird

red light, men scuttled, most of them gripping cocked six-guns. But before they could reach the now-visible man who had yelled for help, a booming voice halted them in their tracks.

A rawboned, bareheaded man hurried from somewhere near the chuck wagon, halted in the edge of the firelight to glance swiftly about. Then he strode briskly toward the knot of waiting punchers.

The firelight struck fully upon his bushy snow-white hair, threw into sharp relief his beaked nose, thin, hard mouth and square, fighting chin. Two rather hard gray eyes swung slowly over the somewhat rattled cowboys, and they moved back instinctively, almost cringing, it seemed.

"Well, what's the row?" the white-headed man snapped. "Who done the yellin'? Some o' you boxheads want to spook the herd because a scorpion snagged you?"

The cowboys muttered, still retreating slowly, backing away from the angry man before them. Bart Ewing, owner of the big E Cross spread, was a man to fear when aroused—and he was certainly aroused now.

White hair fairly bristling, cold eyes snapping fire, he took a threatening step toward the nearest of his punchers, his powerful hands balled into mighty fists. Bart Ewing was known as one of the hardest men along the border—a fighting man who had built a cattle empire in a land that men called wasted.

"A fine bunch, you rannies!" he belowered at his men now. "Fifteen hundred spooky critters just down the slope there—cattle that've been tryin' to curl their tails an' run all day. Now some curbstome cowpoke rolls on a scorpion, an' the whole bunch——"

"Scorpion, hell!" came an interruption from the puncher who had first yelled. "Chuck Luther is sprawled here at my feet, deadér'n a mackerel. I was sleepin' right beside him."

BART EWING whirled, strode to where a gangly, towsled-headed ranny stood shaking as if he had a chill. The peg-legged cook came clumping up with a lantern, and what its yellow rays revealed brought a gasp from the E Cross riders who had edged up behind their boss.

"Chuck" Luther, a chunky, freckle-faced young ranny who had been thoroughly liked by every one of the cowboys, lay sprawled there in his blankets, sightless eyes staring unwinkingly up at the stars.

There was a swiftly widening red spot on Chuck's white undershirt, a red spot that had as its center a thin, dark gash sliced through the cloth.

Bart Ewing squatted beside the dead puncher for a moment, then straightened, his hard eyes boring into the face of the fellow who had been sleeping beside Chuck.

"Slim Ford," Ewing rapped suddenly, "what does this mean? Where's the knife that finished Chuck?"

"I dunno any more than yuh do, boss," "Slim" Ford snapped. "All of a sudden I'm woke up by Chuck's yell. I let out a holler fer help——"

"What'd you do with the knife?" Ewing cut in. "You evidently pulled it out."

"Knife?" Slim echoed dazedly. "I I never seen a knife er nothin' else. All I know is that Chuck yelled. Then I was up, tryin' to find out what was wrong. I might 'a' heard what he was tryin' to say, too, if yuh hadn't been so damn worried over yore precious beeves that yuh had to go yellin' like a locoed Yaqui."

"Not so fast, you!" Bart Ewing snarled. "I take lip offn no——"

"Chuck was my pard, Ewing," Slim Ford croaked thickly. "He tried to whisper somethin' to me afore he cashed in. You an' yore loud-mouthed bawlin' made so much fuss I couldn't hear. Now——"

"Now," Bart Ewing rasped, leveling a pair of .45s that he had whisked from thonged-down holsters with magical speed. "maybe you'll talk sense, fella. Chuck was your pard—sure. But what you stallin' about that knife for? You pulled it out—couldn't have been any one else, because you're the only man that has been near Chuck. Look at that sand there behind you—not a track in it. Only yours and Chuck's tracks comin' in from this side. Better talk up, cowboy. *Why* did you murder Chuck Luther?"

Slim Ford staggered back as if he had been struck a sharp blow. Then his angular, sunburnt face went pale. He hunched half over, fingers instinctively curving toward his thighs, though his holstered guns and shell belts were piled on his chaps a yard behind him.

"Me murder Chuck?" he rasped. "Me poke a knife intuh the heart o' the squarest, whitest pard I ever had in my life? Ewing, yuh ner nobody else can tell me that an' git by with it."

Slim leaped, his brown fists balled and ready to deliver trip-hammer blows. But Bart Ewing was a wise and wary fighter. His mouth jerked into a hard grim line, he swayed his white head aside just enough to dodge Slim's first sizzling punch, then chopped down with the shiny barrel of his left-hand Colt. Slim staggered, groaned an oath, then sank to the sandy earth, shaking his head sharply to clear his numbed brain.

"Yuh hold—high cards—now," he panted. "But when my head clears I'll——"

Game to the core, Slim got to his feet, doubled up his fists, and stood glaring, waiting for the numbness to leave his muscles.

"Talk up, Ford," Bart Ewing clipped coldly. "Tell what you know about this murder."

"Still tryin' to say that I murdered my own pard, eh?" Slim snarled. "Waal, feller, yuh can't make 'er stick

like that. But while yuh're makin' so much fuss for some explainin' to be done, try some yoreself. How does it happen that yuh're the only man in camp who happens to be fully dressed? Where was *you* when Chuck got beefed?"

Bart Ewing snarled a string of oaths, leaped forward, and buried the muzzles of both cocked .45s in Slim's middle.

"Another crack like that, Ford, an' I'll blow you half in two!" he bellowed. "Now you march over to that ol' mine shack yonder—an' march like you was walkin' on eggs. I'll lock you up until daylight comes, then maybe we can figure this out. Move!"

CHAPTER II.

TUCKY HUNTS TROUBLE.

THE first light of a new day found a hard-eyed, tight-lipped crew of cowboys huddled about a blazing mesquite fire, sipping strong black coffee that a peg-legged cook poured into their cups from a large and blackened pot.

Rawhide and iron, those E Cross rannies. They had to be, else Bart Ewing would not have hired them. All a puncher had to do to draw top wages on any ranch within a radius of a hundred miles of the smelly little border town of Gillan was to mention that he had ridden herd a few months ago for the E Cross.

Work-shy cowpokes or men who were at outs with the law never lasted more than a few days on the E Cross, even if they succeeded, which they seldom did, in fooling Bart Ewing at the first. Those E Cross punchers were a hand-picked lot—hard men who took orders from a harder boss.

Folks claimed that Bart Ewing was honest as they came—and as hard. His word, once given, was never broken. Yet Bart Ewing knew not a single man

whom he could call a friend. Like a huge, white-maned lobo, he stalked among his fellow men, his hard eyes ever suspicious of those who tried to be friendly, a cynical smile twitching at the corners of his thin lips. A man who gave no quarter and asked none. A man thoroughly capable of managing his own affairs, and expecting other men to manage theirs.

This mid-summer roundup was a fair sample of Bart Ewing's methods. For months now, a drought had claimed the ranges, drying up water holes galore. Cattle, sick and dying from thirst, reeled across the burnt-up ranges, tongues swollen and black, eyes red from suffering. But none of those critters wore the E Cross, for Bart Ewing had plenty of water here in this range of hills to which he had rounded up and driven his cattle.

Other ranchers had come to him, begging that their stock might drink from the E Cross water holes—springs that never ran dry. But Bart Ewing had refused those ranchmen—told them none too kindly that he had not started them in the cattle business, and sourly advised that they solve their own problems. He had water—yes. But if he threw it open to every man who had thirsty stock, then the E Cross would be suffering too.

Help one or two of his closest neighbors? No, Bart Ewing would not do that. Since he could not help every one, he would play no favorites by helping only a few. A hard ultimatum, that. But, strangely enough, Ewing made more friends than enemies by it. Only yesterday a bunch of the harassed ranchmen had ridden out to the herd, begging Ewing for water. He had refused them as bluntly as he had before, yet as the men rode away they had said things about Bart Ewing being harder than nails, but honest—

Was Bart Ewing honest? That question pounded through the head of

every cowboy who sat hunched about the cook's fire. They had done much thinking since Chuck Luther's murder a few hours before, and now, as the paleness of dawn strengthened into daylight the E Cross riders looked into one another's drawn, tight-lipped faces.

NOT a word was spoken; no man so much as nodded his head. Yet each of them knew what the other was thinking. Why had the boss landed on Slim as he had? Why had he tried to make Slim admit killing Chuck Luther? To accuse Slim of that crime was about as sensible as pointing a finger at the brown, heat-warped desert and expecting it to turn into green meadows.

Bart Ewing knew that those two cowpokes had been closer to each other than most brothers ever get, yet he had accused Slim of the murder, had become almost abusive when the grief-stricken puncher denied it. And when Slim wanted to know how it happened that Ewing was the only man to be fully dressed, why had the E Cross owner blown up so suddenly, forced Slim off into that little old dobe mine shack yonder without answering?

"Riders a-comin'," the barrel-chested, peg-legged cook announced suddenly. "More o' them pore fellers huntin' water."

"Which'll do 'em no good," a heavy voice cut in. "We ain't peddlin' ary drap o' this water, aire we, pap?"

The cowboys about the fire jerked their heads around at the deep voice, then turned back to their coffee, more than one pair of lips curling scornfully.

Coming toward them was the powerfully built, silver-headed man they called boss, his face a cold mask, as usual. But what brought disgust into the eyes of the rawhide riders was sight of the flabby-bodied, moon-faced young fellow who lumbered along beside Bart Ewing.

That overfed jasper with whitish pig eyes and the silly grin smeared all over his big mug was Jack Ewing, a maverick Bart Ewing had adopted fifteen years back. Any cowpoke on the E Cross payroll would have told you that Jack Ewing was nothing but two hundred odd pounds of botheration—a sheep-brained nuisance addicted to threadbare jokes and clumsy pranks.

"Jack is too ornery lazy to holler 'sooie' if the hawks was eatin' him," more than one E Cross hand had remarked. But they were careful to keep such remarks from spilling out when Bart Ewing was close.

Bart had beaten a cowboy half to death once for giving Jack a well deserved punch in the nose. The E Cross owner had fired two punchers for merely razzing Jack when the big fat-head got piled off by a snorty cow pony.

Now Jack was waddling up to the cook's fire, cracking musty jokes and pointing toward the two horsemen who were approaching the salt sage and greasewood clumps from the west.

"Bet them two fellers offers us all their bony critters to-day, pap," he cackled, "jist fer the pleasure o' watchin' the sore-eyed things drink. Heh-heh! That reminds me o' the joke——"

"Them riders is strangers," the burly cook cut in. "Dumpy little hombre on a yaller hoss, an' a leanish hairpin forkin' a keen-lookin' red sorrel."

EVERY eye in the E Cross camp swung toward the two riders now. A beautiful red sorrel stallion pranced toward them, ridden by a broad-shouldered, lean-hipped young rider whose right hand lifted in a friendly salute.

The E Cross men returned the salute, though no one spoke as the rather tall stranger slid to the ground and walked toward them, spurs tinkling musically, tan batwing chaps flapping softly.

They were noticing things about this

stranger—noticing such things as the angle at which his holstered gun swung on his right thigh, the catlike, effortless way in which he stepped forward, the level sharpness of his dark eyes, and the blue trail left by a bullet that had sliced across his tanned left cheek some time ago.

"Howdy, thar, amigos," the stranger called out, even white teeth flashing in a friendly smile. "Thought I'd drop by an' ask the way to Gillan town. Me an' my pard are headin' that way, but sorta got off our course."

"Well hang me for a sheep thief!" a lanky puncher grinned suddenly. "If it ain't Kid——"

"Haw-haw-haw!" a raucous bellow cut the waddy's words short. "Jist lookit what this tall feller has let foller him up hyar. Lookit that hat—an' them suspenders! Haw-haw-haw! Take it away, afore I laffs myself to death."

Jack Ewing was doing that bawling and haw-hawing, all the while pointing a flabby hand toward the second stranger who had come clumping up.

This second man was a dumpy, moon-faced youngster, who wore flaring chaps and spurred cow boots. But the rest of the moon-faced waddy's apparel was out of keeping with the cowboy boots and chaps. Far back on his corn-colored hair rode a shapeless, almost brimless blue hat, its low crown perforated to make for better ventilation. And over the short hombre's thick shoulders stretched the wide elastic bands of a pair of suspenders.

Jack Ewing was fairly howling as he stumbled forward, reached out, and tried to grab the funny little blue hat. But grabbing that hat was poor business. The squatty stranger's popping blue eyes blazed suddenly, his round face turned the color of an overripe tomato, and his chubby hands balled into fists.

"Yo' big baboon!" he yelled. "Laff at mah clothes, will yo'? Take *that*!"

A pudgy fist whizzed out, and Jack Ewing screeched in sudden pain. Nose streaming, he began yelling for help, only to end in a choking gurgle as two waspish blows crashed into his midriff. But help was coming.

Bart Ewing, oaths ripping from his leathery throat, was leaping into the scrap, a mighty fist ready to crush the much smaller man who had jumped the thick-headed Jack.

The E Cross punchers groaned, swore beneath their breath. Ewing would beat that dumpy stranger to a pulp—beat him as he had beaten a man once before over the burro-headed Jack.

CHAPTER III.

"SLIM IS DEAD!"

BART EWING'S big, heavy fist swung, aimed squarely at the dumpy stranger's round jaw. But before that terrific blow could land, Bart Ewing felt himself yanked savagely aside, felt tapering fingers biting into the muscles of his arms with the strength of steel bands.

The big cattleman howled an angry oath, lunged in an attempt to free himself, then stopped struggling as the bones in his arms pained threateningly. Great beads of sweat popping out on his now-pale face, he twisted his head to look up into the slitted eyes of the tall, scar-faced stranger who had come into camp first.

The E Cross punchers had backed swiftly away, looks of blank surprise crossing their face. Never had they seen Bart Ewing handled with such ease—nor had they dreamed it could be done. That lean-hipped, broad-shouldered youngster had Bart Ewing's arms gripped just above each elbow. And Ewing was turning paler every minute, and his face twitched in a way that meant he was suffering plenty.

"Gosh!" a cowboy breathed. "That scar-faced hairpin must have a grip like

a grizzly. The way the boss is squirm-in', his arms must be nigh pinched in two. Wonder who that stranger is?"

"Who is he?" The lanky puncher who had been greeting the two strangers when Jack Ewing horned in with his haw-hawing chuckled. "That short waddy what smacked Jack in the smeller is Tucky Williams. An', gents, the hombre who's puttin' some sense into Bart Ewing's thick noggin right now is Kid Buckaroo!"

Gasps of genuine surprise greeted the E Cross waddy's words, and his pards turned on him, all asking questions at once.

Was he sure that the scar-faced ranny was the famous gunfighter and wanderer who gave his name as "Kid Buckaroo" and claimed to be from "no-whar?" But the lanky puncher who had given out the information growled his pards into silence, nodding toward Kid Buckaroo and Bart Ewing.

The E Cross owner's face had taken on a downright sickly look now, and his lips were quivering. He was breaking under the nerve-wrecking pain of muscles grinding against bone. At any moment now he would wilt, yell for mercy—cry out, whether he wanted to or not.

But Kid Buckaroo had no intention of punishing Ewing to that extent. A keen judge of men, the Kid had sized Ewing up as the hard type—a man who was used to being obeyed without question. That the white-haired ranchman would make a grab for his guns if released too soon, Kid Buckaroo knew very well. So he clamped his powerful fingers deep into the bulging muscles of the older man's arms, and gripped until he knew that those big hands would not snap toward Colt butts for several moments at least.

The Kid was watching Ewing's face, knew that the man was ready to cry out in pain. But he did not want that—did not intend to humiliate Bart Ewing be-

fore his punchers. Releasing the man's arms, the Kid stepped back suddenly, a smile on his lips.

"Glad yuh decided to calm down, fella," he said easily. "I thought mebbe yuh'd see sense if I sorta held onto yuh a while. Yuh wouldn't go punchin' my pard onless yuh was mighty riled, now would yuh?"

EWING opened his mouth to hurl a blistering reply, then changed his mind suddenly. Dropping his numbed arms to his sides, he looked at Kid Buckaroo with slowly dawning comprehension. This lean Kid was giving him a decent break—making it appear as if he, Bart Ewing, had dropped all hostilities of his own free will.

"Why—why yes, that's right," the E Cross owner finally gulped, trying desperately to grin. "I—I was a mite hasty, stranger. You an' your pard had breakfast yet?"

Bart Ewing was floundering badly, babbling whatever popped into his whirling mind. Hate wormed into his brain, shone in his slitted eyes. But he was trying to play up to this stranger's lead for the time being, desperately hoping that none of his punchers knew the truth—knew that his nerve had all but cracked a moment ago. He would stall now, wait until his hands were alive again. Then—

"Kid Buckaroo, yuh shore are gettin' snooty with yore friends. You an' Tucky Williams both. How are yuh, anyhow? It's a right big surprise to see yuh."

The speaker was the lanky puncher who had recognized the Kid at first sight. He came forward now, shook hands with the two saddle tramps, then turned to Bart Ewing, a wide grin on his face.

"Boss," he laughed, "yuh've heard me mention those two before. Shake hands with Kid Buckaroo and Tucky

Williams. This is Bart Ewing, boys, owner o' the E Cross."

Bart Ewing had given a start the moment he heard the Kid's name. He turned now, glared at the moon-faced Tucky, then at Kid Buckaroo. But he made no offer to shake hands.

"Yes," he gritted, "Lank Carson, here, has mentioned you two several times. And I've heard of you elsewhere. Seems like you two have a habit of bobbin' up wherever there is some sort o' trouble poppin'."

"Shucks, now," the Kid grinned easily, "somebody is always spoutin' off freelike. Me an' Tucky's a couple o' trouble-dodgin' hombres, Mr. Ewing."

"Well," Bart Ewing snapped, "you're running true to form, for there is trouble here. A man murdered in camp last night—an' the murderer locked in that ol' mine shack over yonder." Bart Ewing spun on one heel and strode away, growling unpleasant things deep in his throat.

"Lank" Carson told Kid Buckaroo and Tucky what had happened, and ended by hinting that the E Cross punchers were more than suspicious of their boss.

Lank also insisted on introducing the Kid and Tucky to the other punchers, and within half an hour, the lean Kid knew that he and his dumpy pard had blundered smack into a mixup that promised to develop some ugly angles.

Getting Tucky off to one side at last, the Kid frowned down at him, jerking a thumb toward their waiting horses.

"Why in heck did you have to fly off the handle an' take a poke at that big ox?" Kid Buckaroo gritted. "We better fork leather an' drift out o' here before we get mixed into this. Bart Ewing is a tough baby—an' these punchers o' his ain't so soft."

"But, pahd," Tucky protested quickly, "these fellahs claim Slim Ford nevah kilt that othah ranny. If we leave, po' Slim will likely get hung fo'—"

There came an excited yell from the little adobe mine building that sat near the mouth of a dark tunnel that burrowed into the base of a hill some two hundred yards away. Then the peg-legged cook staggered from the shack, beckoning the men near the fire.

"Come a-runnin', 'hombres," the cook yelled. "Slim is daider'n a door nail."

CHAPTER IV.

"GET A ROPE!"

SLIM FORD'S body was carried out into the early sunlight, stretched full-length on a clean tarp. The E Cross punchers formed a grim ring about the body, their eyes hot with anger, bronzed hands dropping close to gun butts. Bart Ewing, trapped there inside that grim ring, looked slowly from face to face, hard gray eyes snapping angrily, hands sweeping close to his own guns.

Kid Buckaroo was kneeling beside the dead man, studying the badly battered head and face.

"Slim was beat to death," Lank Carson rumbled thickly. "Beat on the head an' face with somethin' roundish—like the handle of a six-gun. You an' Slim didn't have another run-in after yuh took him down there to lock him up, did yuh, boss? Slim's cold, which means he's been dead 'bout ever since he was locked in that shack."

"Yeah?" Bart Ewing snarled. "You an' these others are thinkin' I finished Slim—think I mauled his head with the butt o' a gun, eh?"

"Nobody but a greenhorn would use the butt of a Colt as a club," Kid Buckaroo snapped, leaping to his feet as he saw trouble about to pop. "Yore boss is no shorthorn, Lank. If he wanted to gun-whip a man he'd do it with the barrel an' cylinder of his shootin' iron—same as you or me would. Besides, ranny, yuh're jumpin' at conclusions. Slim Ford was mauled to death by

somethin' besides a gun butt. His skull is caved in in three places, yet the skin is just broke through. A gun butt, landin' hard nuff to smash a skull, would do plenty cuttin'."

Lank Carson crimsoned, then looked apologetically at his boss. But before a word could be spoken by either, a runty, bow-legged little puncher shoved through the ring of bodies, a scarred leather glove in one hand. He passed the glove to Bart Ewing, then stepped back, whispered something to Lank Carson, who had evidently been elected spokesman for the crew.

"Huh?" Carson grunted. "Yuh say it was under one o' the winders, Shorty?"

"Shorty" nodded, glanced at Bart Ewing, and scuttled hastily back from view. Lank Carson swore a bitter oath, then faced his boss, eyes blazing.

"That's yore glove, ain't it, Ewing?" he snapped. "Yeah, I know it is—like every one o' these other E Cross punchers do. Shorty found it beneath the back winder o' this shack."

SHOD hoofs pounded, then some one shouted. The ring of cowboys about the body of Slim Ford split as men moved toward the chuck wagon. Two riders were coming toward them, grim-faced men who rode with hands on gun butts.

One of the newcomers, a big, barrel-chested hombre with tangled red beard and a pair of glinting blue eyes, yanked his lathered horse to a stop less than a yard from Bart Ewing.

"The red-whiskered feller is Reb Dewey, owner o' the 4D, which joins this E Cross jist above here," Lank Carson whispered in Kid Buckaroo's ear. "The black-eyed feller with Reb is his cousin, Joe Zeller. Plenty tough."

"Waal, Ewing," Reb Dewey was snarling, "which one o' you sidewinders was it? Refusin' me water was ornery nuff, but killin' off them six steers—"

Bart Ewing snorted like a longhorn, stepped clear of his punchers, and crouched over slightly, hands poised above gun butts.

"Whoever says I shot any steers is a liar," he yelled. "You brought your gun-tossin' cousin an' come huntin' trouble have you, Reb? Well, by gosh you can find it. An' you can swaller what you said!"

"All I want to know is who killed my six 4D steers, Bart," Reb Dewey snapped, his face paling just the least bit. "They're piled up at that mudhole which is right on our line, couple miles from here. I follered hoss tracks from there to within twenty yards o' yore chuck wagon. An' I found these layin' close to my dead steers."

From a chaps pocket, Dewey fished six big brass shells, tossed them down at Bart Ewing, who caught three of them from the air. He glanced at the spent cartridges, then a baffled, almost wild look crossed his face.

"I thought I was the only man around here that carried a .38-40 Winchester," he snapped. "But this proves somebody else owns one. My rifle is in the chuck wagon, ain't used it for days. Come on, I'll show you it ain't powder fouled, and you'll see that it hasn't been oiled recently, either."

Ewing led the way back to the chuck wagon, stepped up on a hub, and reached beneath the spring seat. He lifted out a long scabbard from which protruded the walnut stock of a rifle, then passed the gun down to Reb Dewey, not even bothering to unsheath it.

Reb Dewey drew the gun from the scabbard, pressed a thick finger tip over the muzzle—and swore raspingly. He held up his finger, and all eyes could see the big black circle, mute evidence that Bart Ewing's Winchester had been fired recently.

"What the——" the E Cross owner howled, then snatched the Winchester,

pointed it at the sky, and began working the lever. He counted the big brass cartridges as they jumped out, and as the last one appeared, a snarling oath hissed through Ewing's clenched teeth.

"Six gone," he roared. "My rifle was full up when I put it there in the wagon. Who took it? Who had my rifle yesterday? Peg, you see anybody foolin' with that gun?"

The cook, who answered to the name of "Peg" Willis, shook his head sharply from side to side.

"Ain't been nobody around the wagon as I know of," he rumbled. "An' I shore never taken yore long gun, ner drug this yere wooden leg two miles over rough hills jist to kill six thirsty steers. Besides——"

"Say," Bart Ewing cut in, swinging his eyes on Lank Carson, "who rode that section o' range yesterday? Who rode up toward the boundary?"

"Chuck Luther an' Slim Ford rode that a way yesterday," Lank Carson snapped. "Yuh ought to know—it was you told 'em to ride up there an' see that none o' Dewey's stock drifted down this way huntin' water."

There was an excited murmur from the closely grouped men, then they were moving slowly apart, eyes fixed accusingly on Bart Ewing's hard face. There was some semblance of sense showing through this jumble of events now.

Bart Ewing, more than one puncher was thinking, had sent Slim Ford and Chuck Luther up there to guard that boundary line, told them to see that no 4D cattle came onto E Cross range. Now Slim and Chuck were both dead—murdered. Had Bart Ewing slipped up after the two punchers, shot those 4D steers, and later murdered Chuck and Slim, figuring to shut the mouths of the punchers in case they had seen too much? Bart Ewing was a hard man, they knew that. But would he stoop to murder? *Had* he?

"I savvy what you fools are thinkin'," the E Cross owner snarled, bracing his legs against the wagon box. "But if you make a move——"

"If you make a move"—Joe Zeller spoke for the first time—"I'll let plenty daylight into you, Ewing. Lift 'em, mister, or I start snappin' caps!"

Bart Ewing swore a sizzling oath, dropped his hands swiftly, then stiffened as he found himself staring straight into the ugly snouts of a pair of cocked .45s.

Joe Zeller's thin face loomed behind those guns, his black eyes ominously slitted. Bart Ewing hesitated for a long moment, then lifted his hands shoulder high.

"Git a rope!" Lank Carson bawled. "I reckon we savvy now why pore Chuck an' Slim was murdered. Prop up that wagon tongue—an' git a rope!"

CHAPTER V.

"WHAT'S YOUR GAME?"

BART EWING'S cowboys slowly swarmed forward, dragged him from the wheel hub, stripped his guns, and tied his hands behind his back. Some one lifted the long wagon tongue high into the air, propped it there by placing the heavy doubletree underneath it. Another ranny came up bearing a coiled rope, the loop of which he dropped over Bart Ewing's shaggy white head.

"Listen, boys," the peg-legged cook called loudly, "yuh're all het up now, an' sorta goin' off half cocked. Better send to Gillan an' see if that deputy sheriff is still hangin' out thar."

"The deputy left two days ago, Peg," Reb Dewey spoke up. "No law in Gillan 'cept that new marshal."

Reb Dewey and his cousin, Joe Zeller, had been told of the two murders. The 4D men sat their horses off to one side, evidently too baffled by the swift turn of events to know just what to do or say. They whispered a moment, then

edged their horses farther away. Plainly, they were not mixing into this hanging business.

"All right, Bart Ewing," Lank Carson called loudly. "Yuh got anything to say? Want to confess afore we stretches yore neck?"

Bart Ewing had nothing to say. His face never changed from the hard lines, and his glinting eyes were unwavering as he looked slowly about. But inwardly, Bart Ewing was experiencing a strange feeling. For the first time in his life he was sincerely wishing that he might see a friendly face, see at least one man who would not be glaring.

A lonely, hurt feeling gripped the big cattleman, but he threw it off with a snarled oath. His eyes completed the circle of faces, then lifted to the up-reared tip of the wagon tongue.

"Where—where's Jack?" he asked thickly. "I'd like to see him a minute. He'll be owner o' this spread now."

"One o' the boys marched him off out o' sight," Lank Carson cut in harshly. "We didn't want that big baboon hornin' in—not that he's liable to exert himself much. But ne'mind that. Here comes the last hoss you'll ever set, Ewing."

A COW-PUNCHER rode up, leading a saddled cow pony. Bart Ewing was boosted none too gently into the empty saddle, then shunted over beneath the wagon tongue.

The mounted man beside Ewing took the coiled rope that was looped over the ranchman's neck, expertly flipped it over the wagon tongue, snapped two half hitches so that the rope would not slide down, then backed his pony away, taking dallies about his saddle horn.

"All right, fellers," he called. "Slap that hoss out from under him. We got to git this over with."

Lank Carson grabbed a stick from the ground, poised it for a blow and

stepped toward the horse. Bart Ewing saw the stick drawn back—saw it dart suddenly forward, aimed at the horse's hindquarter. Then—

Whang! The whiplike crack of a deflected rifle bullet, and the rope that was half-hitched over the end of the wagon tongue shivered, then came tumbling down about Bart Ewing's ears.

The E Cross punchers swore in alarm, grabbed for their guns, and whirled toward the spot from which the rifle bullet had come to spoil their hanging bee.

Not ten rods away Tucky Williams sat his yellow cayuse, grinning broadly at them over the sights of a long-barreled rifle that trickled wisps of smoke. Beside Tucky was Kid Buckaroo, mounted on Sunset, his beautiful red sorrel stallion. In the Kid's lean right hand was a long six-gun, spiked hammer rocked back to full cock. The Kid was grinning, but somehow that grin did not register much mirth.

"Easy, hombres," he called. "Lank, when you an' me smoked that bunch o' murderin' greasers offn the ol' Pot-hook spread down on the Rio two years ago, I tagged yuh as a right cool sort. But here yuh're actin' like a shorthorn, wantin' to hang a man without givin' him a chance to even explain. Pouch yore smokers, boys, an' le's act sensible."

Lank Carson's bony face flushed, but he pouched the gun he had drawn. Some of the other E Cross rannies were for arguing the point, but Lank growled them to silence, snapped orders that made them holster their guns. Kid Buckaroo holstered his weapon, slid to the ground, and walked up to the scowling punchers.

"Shoot, Kid," Lank Carson grunted. "Yuh've got idees, or yuh wouldn't 'a' horned in. Spill the hull yarn, an' we'll keep our ears pinned back."

"Yeah," Kid Buckaroo drawled, "I've

got idees, amigo. But they're too young an' wabble-kneed to be spilled yet. All I want now is to see yuh turn yore boss loose."

"Huh?" Lank Carson gulped. "We—we don't dast do that, Kid. Bart'd gun the hull bunch o' us shore as sin. If yuh won't let us hang him, we'll have to slope yonderly afore he gits a fist full o' shootin' material. He'd fire what of us he didn't kill, anyway."

"How 'bout it, Ewing?" Kid Buckaroo asked sharply, turning on the E Cross owner. "Yuh aimin' to run hawg-wild if I let yuh loose? Or will yuh forget what these rannies tried to do?"

Bart Ewing studied Kid Buckaroo's lean face for several seconds, then looked at his punchers. The ranchman's white head came up proudly, and his thin lips moved.

"I like men who don't stop for hell nor high water when they think they're right," he rasped. "Far as I'm concerned, these rannies are due to straddle their brons an' get out to that herd."

"But you, Kid Buckaroo," he almost snarled, eyes suddenly flaming, "what's your game? Why horn in an' stop these men from stretchin' me up? How do you know I'm not guilty?"

"Say, Kid," Lank Carson asked suddenly, "hadn't you better lock the boss up in that house down there—that ol' mine shack? What if he slopes on us when nobody's lookin'? We're willin' to let yuh have a try at whatever yuh've got up yore sleeve. But lettin' Bart Ewing run loose——"

"I'll be responsible for him," Kid Buckaroo cut in. "Yuh see, Lank, I've got to watch yore boss awful close anyway, 'cause he's the next one that's due to get murdered!"

"What?" a dozen punchers yelled at once. "Yuh gone loco?"

"Yeah, I'm loco—murder loco," Kid Buckaroo snapped. "Now you ran-

nies fan it, an' leave the rest up to me an' Tucky. I've already got a fair line on the jasper that killed those two boys last night."

Peg Willis and Lank Carson literally had to prod the now thoroughly excited cowboys away from the camp and toward the rope corral that held the cavvy.

Joe Zeller and Reb Dewey tried to ride toward Kid Buckaroo, but a sharp order from Tucky, who still sat his horse with drawn rifle, sent them backing up.

Bart Ewing watched until every one was out of earshot, then slid to the ground, facing Kid Buckaroo.

"Listen, you saddle bum!" he snarled. "Get that fat pard of yours and get out of this camp while you're able."

"I'll go," came the calm reply, "when I've hung me a murderer's hide on the fence. An' I reckon yuh know whose hide it'll be!"

CHAPTER VI.

DEATH WHISPERS.

AFTER sending the 4D men on their way with a promise to see that they got paid for the six steers, Kid Buckaroo left Bart Ewing sweating under the vigilant eye and gun of Tucky Williams. Then he went down to the little adobe mine shack to make a careful search.

This one-roomed, low-ceilinged building had evidently been used for storing valuable ore, for its walls were fully four feet thick and the two tiny windows were heavily barred.

The door, a massive work of eight-by-eight timbers, was swung on hand-forged iron "eye" hinges and fitted with a lock that would be hard to blast open.

The Kid had to stoop to pass through the low door, and even inside, he had to remove his high-crowned hat to keep it from rubbing the thick dirt and pole roof. The floor, he saw at a glance,

was nothing more than hard-packed dirt, smooth and clean.

He moved about the tiny room for several minutes, keen eyes missing nothing. Then suddenly he stopped, a look of surprise on his face. That floor was clean—too clean! Slim Ford had been found lying there not long ago, a battered, crimson-smeared corpse. Yet there was not the least trace of crimson on the dirt floor!

"Which means," Kid Buckaroo cried excitedly, "that Slim Ford was murdered outside some place, then lugged in here quite a while later."

Stepping quickly outside, the Kid began circling the adobe house, eyes glued to the brown earth. At the back, directly beneath one of the small windows, he found hunks of adobe, and saw at a glance that some one had tried gouging the iron bars loose.

That would be the place where Bart Ewing's glove had been found. But had Bart Ewing done that gouging at the bars? Having had the key to the massive lock on the door, why would the E Cross owner bother to dig loose window bars if he wished to get inside the little adobe building?

Muttering, the Kid left the window and continued his circling. Inch by inch he covered the ground, working with the patience of a bloodhound on a cold trail. It took him nearly two hours to work far enough away from the adobe building to be near the mine shaft, or tunnel, that led into the base of the hill. He was on the point of passing the tunnel by when a cool current of air struck his face—air that was heavily scented with tobacco smoke.

AQUICK, twisting leap carried the Kid on past the mouth of the mine tunnel. Flat against the hillside, he stood listening intently, hand creeping down to the butt of his gun. Some one, he told himself grimly, was crouching there in that tunnel—

some jasper who smoked cigarettes. Had he been watched?

The Kid felt that he had. He resolved then and there to find out who had been spying on him as he searched about the adobe shack and the ground around it. Inching over until he could feel the cool air coming from the tunnel again, he stood listening intently, ears straining to catch the slightest sound. After a minute or two he removed his hat, poked the brim cautiously around the edge of the tunnel, and waited tensely. Nothing happened.

"Well," the Kid gritted, "here's *one* way o' findin' out who's in there."

He stepped boldly into view, ducked his head and strode into the cool darkness of the tunnel. He saw a drift leading off to the right and was debating whether or not he should pass by that dark opening when his eyes fell upon an old lantern set on a keg.

The Kid stooped, shook the lantern, and grinned in relief when he heard the soft sloshing of kerosene in the tank. It was the work of a moment to scratch a match, lift the smoky globe, and light the wick.

"Now," he grunted as the globe squeaked down into place, "we'll just have us a look at—— Say! For the love o'——"

The Kid almost dropped his lantern as he staggered back, for there at his very toes lay the sprawled body of a man. A shudder passed down the Kid's spine as he caught sight of the badly beaten head and face. Bending over, he played the lantern light over the battered features, then a gasp of surprise passed his lips.

"Joe Zeller!" the Kid croaked a bit hoarsely. "Now how in seven kinds o' heck did he get drug in here an' murdered in the last few minutes?"

The Kid felt goose pimples humping the skin along his spine. He had the feeling that eyes were boring into his back, yet when he turned swiftly

there was only the square of bright light behind him that marked the entrance to the tunnel. He had a sudden desire to leave this gloomy place, get out into the hot sunlight beyond. Yet he set his lean jaws grimly, drew his gun and turned back to the grisly thing he had found.

A short examination showed roundish bruises on the face and head of Joe Zeller—the same sort of bruises that had been found on Slim Ford's face and skull.

Kid Buckaroo studied the dead man carefully, then got to his feet and stood looking about the dry floor of the tunnel. Again he had that unpleasant sensation that he was being watched, but he shoved it from his mind as speedily as possible.

What interested him most at the moment was the fact that Joe Zeller was securely bound hand and foot, and only near his bruised head was there the least sign of crimson stains. Plainly, Joe Zeller had met his fate some place besides here in this tunnel. But where? Who had killed the waspish little gunman? *Why* had he been killed?

KID BUCKAROO started on down the passageway, gun held ready, slitted eyes darting swift glances right and left. There was a chance that whoever had carried the dead Zeller into the tunnel was still there, hiding behind the sagging timbers or crouching in one of the several side drifts that the Kid could see. Or perhaps there would be more than one man——

Kid Buckaroo's lean body stiffened in mid-stride, and his cocked six-gun whipped down to hip level, ready to blaze. From somewhere ahead had come the unmistakable crunch of booted feet passing over the stony floor. The Kid swung the lighted lantern sharply, smashing it to bits against a jagged boulder that had crashed through the rotten ceiling timbers some time past.

Now, in pitchy blackness, he moved slowly forward, careful that his boots did not scrape. Somewhere ahead he heard that slight noise again. How close? He could not tell. But if he went carefully, made no sound himself, he might succeed in getting a chance at capturing whoever skulked in the tunnel where a murdered man had been dropped not long before.

Thirty or forty feet ahead, the Kid had seen the dark maw of a side tunnel just before he smashed the lantern. Before the light went out, he could see quite a distance down the main tunnel—far enough, he knew, to be able to locate whoever was within hearing distance in that direction.

So it stood to reason that whoever was making those stealthy sounds was there in the side tunnel, crouching perhaps, ready to spring upon the intruder. But Kid Buckaroo had no intention of getting within jumping distance of that danger spot.

Inching along as silently as a drifting shadow, he came within ten or twelve feet of the side tunnel, then stopped, eyes peering ahead. He could see fairly well now that his eyes had had a chance to become accustomed to the darkness. There could be no movement without his hearing or seeing it, he felt sure. Yet an uneasiness gripped him, pinched his throat until it hurt. More than ever now he felt that he was being watched, felt some unnamable danger approaching. But what could the danger be? How could—

Swish! Something shot past the Kid's head—a snaky, hissing something that quivered there before his eyes for a moment, then was gone. He felt something slither along his tensed left shoulder—an agile something that hissed slightly in passing. Shivering, the Kid spun quickly aside, eyes probing the darkness ahead, trigger finger curling to unleash leaden death.

There in the tunnel ahead was the

slightest of movements—a dark blob moving within darkness.

Kid Buckaroo's six-gun stabbed forward, then roared into blazing, bouncing life.

CHAPTER VII.

"HUNT COVER!"

SILENCE and darkness. The stench of powder fumes. Kid Buckaroo crouched there beneath a sagging mine timber, shoving fresh shells into his powder-warmed gun, sweat trickling down his tensed body.

The shell gate clicked shut under a side-swipe of his thumb. His nerves jangled at the scuff of his own boots as he unconsciously moved his feet. Yet that was the only sound in the smoky darkness.

The Kid dragged his left sleeve across his dripping face, backed slowly away. Whatever it was he had sent five screaming slugs at, he had not hit, for there had been only the roar of his Colt in the tunnel. To go prowling up there now would be sheer idiocy—not bravery.

Somewhere in or near the mouth of that side drift crouched a man who fought with a noiseless weapon—a weapon that had all but taken the life of Kid Buckaroo a moment earlier. That hidden man would know this old mine thoroughly, know every crook and turn in its many drifts and shafts. To stalk such an enemy under such conditions would be suicide.

"But I got a line on 'im!" the Kid gritted as he backed away. "I know what kind o' weapon the skunk uses. Seen such a rig-up down in Chihuahua once. Kill a man at twenty feet range."

The darkness paled, became grayish. The Kid turned, strode hastily to the square of light that showed ahead, and a moment later stood blinking in the bright sunlight outside. He sighed heavily, holstered his gun, then hurried back toward the adobe shack.

He was about to enter the little building again when he glanced toward the E Cross round-up wagon. The Kid exclaimed sharply, turned from the adobe, and hurried to where Tucky Williams sat hunched down in the shade of the wagon, his head hanging limply forward. Fear gripped the Kid's heart for one terrible moment—then he heard loud and very unmusical snores.

GROWLING low, Kid Buckaroo lifted a booted foot, carefully hooked his toe under Tucky's bent leg, and heaved. The snores stopped with a discordant grunt, then Tucky Williams tumbled sidewise, yelling wildly. His long rifle flew from his knees, and Tucky's button nose rooted dirt as he rolled.

"W-what yo' mean by that?" Tucky cried indignantly, bouncing to his feet almost instantly. "Mah face is full o' dirt, an'——"

"Did I tell yuh to sleep, or did I tell yuh to guard somebody?" the Kid snapped. "Yuh an' yore hot-headedness got us into this mess, now yuh're willin' to let me do all the work while yuh snooze. Where's Bart Ewing?"

There was a grunt from somewhere inside the wagon, then Bart Ewing's head and shoulders poked into view. Kid Buckaroo noticed that the cattleman's face was flushed and sweaty, and there was a smudge of dirt on his left shoulder.

"That youngster seemed right sleepy, so I crawled up here an' let him snooze," the E Cross owner gritted. "I reckon you found out a whole lot by your snoopin'?"

There was a sneer in Bart Ewing's voice that Kid Buckaroo did not miss. He eyed the older man a moment.

"Yeah, Mr. Ewing," he said quietly, "I did find out a few things. Joe Zeller has been murdered, is one thing I found out. Another thing is—— Don't try it!"

The Kid's last words came in a harsh voice, and his Colt seemed to leap into his hand. Bart Ewing swore hoarsely as he looked into the young saddle tramp's gun, then dropped the .38-40 Winchester he had tried to lift above the dashboard.

NOW the old rancher crawled from the covered part of the wagon, clambered to the ground, and sank wearily to the wagon tongue that had been lowered and swore.

Kid Buckaroo stepped back, holstered his gun, and ran his eyes over the ranchman's clothing.

"For an hombre who was supposed to be sleepin' or loafin' up in a dry wagon," he observed grimly, "yuh got yore clothes pretty much smeared with dirt, Mr. Ewing. Been out for a walk while Tucky snoozed?"

Bart Ewing turned bloodshot eyes on the lean Kid, then balled his bony hands into hard fists. He got slowly to his feet, a look of cold anger on his face.

"Kid Buckaroo," he snarled, "you've hit the end o' your rope. Get out o' my camp, you an' Williams both. You're a couple of thick-witted, meddlesome fools, hornin' in where you've got no business. But to show you I'm fair, I'll give you five hundred dollars apiece——"

"Yeah?" Kid Buckaroo drawled unpleasantly. "Mebbe me an' Tucky are sorta meddlin', Ewing. But we're gonna keep right on doin' it until a cowardly murderer's hide is stretched up. Don't try buyin' us off again, fella, 'cause it can't be done."

"Joe Zeller was nothin' but a killer!" Bart Ewing cried hoarsely. "I know the little hellbender's record from the time we ran a herd o' cattle together down in Chihuahua."

"Just the same," Kid Buckaroo said sharply, "Joe Zeller was murdered, mauled to death while his hands an' feet were tied. An' the two punchers

who got theirs last night—Slim Ford an' Chuck Luther—do yuh figure they deserved that sort o' thing?"

Bart Ewing groaned, staggered back, and sat down heavily on the wagon tongue. He glared straight at Kid Buckaroo. His face was a mask of hate.

"You think," he said flatly, "that I'm the one who has run amuck, started in murderin' men."

"It looks like yo' ah the guilty pahty, suh," Tucky Williams piped up. "Course, yo' ain't ketch'd yet, but give me an' muh pahd time an' we'll——"

"Get caught up on our sleep, mebbe," Kid Buckaroo snapped, and the dumpy little Kentuckian almost dropped the rifle he had been dusting off.

Tucky's round face turned a fiery red, and his popping eyes fairly snapped. But he had no comeback, for he knew very well that he should not have gone to sleep on the job. Tucky had seen the dirt stains on Bart Ewing's clothes, and realized that the ranchman had been some place besides up in that wagon. He was trying desperately to find an excuse to offer when the drum of hoofs caused him to look around.

"Heah comes Mistah Cahson," he announced, glad of the chance to change the subject, "an' some othahs. I reckon that——"

"I reckon," Kid Buckaroo finished grimly, "that some sort o' trouble has popped, judgin' from the way those rannies are ridin'. An' what do they mean by linin' their guns on us like that? I—— Tucky! Ewing! Hunt cover!"

CHAPTER VIII.

EWING GETS THE DROP.

LANK CARSON, riding in the van of the approaching horsemen, saw the three men at the chuck wagon duck suddenly for cover. Within twenty yards of the wagon now, Lank reined to a halt, his jaws sagging

in surprise. He halted the five men with him, started to say something, then laughed suddenly. He rammed the carbine he had carried in his hands back into leather, faced the wagon, and grinned broadly.

"Hey, Kid," he called. "I see yuh slantin' that smoker this a way. What's the idee o' rabbitin' when we shows up, then fillin' yore hand with that old cannon?"

"What did you an' yore friends expect us to do when yuh come rompin' up with Winchesters in yore hands?"

"Our mistake, Kid," Lank Carson grinned, as he motioned his followers to put away their guns. "We come a-gunnin' all right, but not for any o' yuh three. See Joe Zeller around here?"

Kid Buckaroo stepped out, Tucky and Bart Ewing at his heels. Lank Carson and the other E Cross riders came on up, bending glances that were none too friendly toward Bart Ewing.

"Huntin' Joe Zeller, eh?" the Kid parried. "What's he done, Lank?"

"What's he done?" Lank Carson howled. "The dirty little cuss took a sneak over that hill yonder, got up above one of our water holes, an' shot down four good beeves before we could get in sight o' him. Jack, the big fat stiff, was snoozin' in the shade right close to that water hole, an' when the shootin' started, Jack got skeered an' hit a lope out o' there. But Joe Zeller cracked down on him, an' Jack got a right healthy-lookin' gash acrost his right cheek. He's bunked under a cliff now, howlin' like sixty."

"How do yuh know Joe Zeller done the shootin'?" Kid Buckaroo asked. "Anybody see him plain?"

"Jack seen him plenty plain," Carson snapped. "An' the rest of us found his hat an' his hoss up in a nest o' rocks. The ornery little cuss must 'a' beat it afoot."

"It ain't nice," Kid Buckaroo ob-

served dryly, "to go sayin' harsh things 'bout a dead man."

HE explained what he meant by that, and Lank Carson nearly fell from the saddle in his haste to dismount. The other E Cross rannies were right at his heels, all streaking for the mouth of the tunnel that led into the hill.

Kid Buckaroo gave Tucky Williams some very pointed orders about guarding Bart Ewing, then overtook the excited punchers. He entered the tunnel, lighted matches while the punchers took a good look at the grisly thing that had been Joe Zeller, then led them back out into the bright sunlight.

"What do yuh make o' the whole thing, Kid?" Lank Carson asked pointedly. "I kin tell that you've got some notions, an' I'd shore like to know a few things."

"Lank," the Kid said, "do yuh happen to know whether any o' the hombres on this E Cross were ever in the Argentine?"

Lank Carson's jaws dropped open, and he eyed the lean Kid almost suspiciously. But there was no trace of humor in the Kid's face, and his brown eyes were serious. Lank frowned, pursed his lips, then snapped his fingers suddenly.

"Question sounds loco," he said bluntly. "But I see yuh ain't kiddin'. Yeah, Peg Willis, that grub-sp'ilin' cook of ours was in the Argentine for quite a spell. That's how he lost that leg, mixin' into some sort o' uprisin'."

"Keno!" Kid Buckaroo grinned thinly. "Now you hard-workin' cow-prods mosey on back to work— No, wait! Better carry the remains o' Chuck an' Slim up here to this cave where it's cooler."

The Kid spun on one heel, strode quickly away, leaving a bunch of muttering and somewhat bewildered cow-pokes behind.

"That ranny knows plenty, dang his tight-mouthed hide," Lank Carson gritted. "But we'll not learn a thing until he's ready to talk. Come on, we'll carry Chuck an' Slim up here, then hit back to the herd. I'm shore o' one thing—reckon Joe Zeller won't bother us no more."

Kid Buckaroo heard part of the muttering as he passed on down the hill, but he gave no heed. Striding up to where Tucky was guarding Bart Ewing, the Kid glanced about with narrowed eyes.

"Say, Tucky," he asked, "how long did yuh sleep on the job? Did yuh stay awake long nuff to see which way that one-legged grub-slinger went?"

Tucky flushed and began sputtering. Then his round chin poked out defiantly, and into his eyes crept an angry look.

"Yo' hadn't been gone to that shack yondah but a minnit when the cook pulled out, headin' fo' that hill ovah theah," he snapped. "Watchin' the po' fella walk with so much trouble made me tiahed, so-so——"

"Was Peg carryin' anything?" the Kid asked sharply. "Did he have a rope or anything?"

"No-o-o," Tucky answered. "All he had was a stout walkin' stick, pahd."

"What tomfoolery is this?" Bart Ewing sneered. "I suppose you think Peg Willis done all this killin'?"

"Peg Willis used to be in the Argentine, Ewing," Kid Buckaroo snapped. "An' I'm a heap interested in hombres who hail from there. Yuh see, whoever is pullin' these murders is usin' an Argentine weapon. I don't mind tellin' yuh, Mr. Ewing, that I've got a mighty strong hunch who the dirty killer is. If I'm right, I'll have him snagged before midnight."

"What you need, you meddlesome young whelp, is a bullet in the belly," Bart Ewing snarled. "I've ordered you out o' my camp an' tried buyin' you

out. Now I'm tellin' you to get out or I'll—I'll—— You'll get what three men already got!"

Kid Buckaroo's eyes slitted, and his mouth jerked into a hard line. He stepped close to Bart Ewing, leveled a finger at the snarling ranchman's chest, and spoke in a low, harsh voice.

"All right, Mr. Ewing," the Kid rasped, "I've heard yore threat—an' I'm still stayin'. But just keep this in yore noodle: The minnit me or Tucky get salted, yore own crew will h'ist up this wagon tongue again, an' yuh'll do a hemp dance from its high end. Do yuh think the game yuh're playin' is worth it? Now, jest think things over, Mr. Ewing."

Bart Ewing's hard-featured face flushed, then went paper-white. He growled an oath, got to his feet, and made as if to turn away. But in turning he lunged suddenly, shot a hard left to the Kid's ear, and grabbed the saddle tramp's holstered gun at the same time.

"Now, damn you!" he roared, leaping back with the Colt clutched in his right fist. "I've told you what to expect, so get ready to eat lead from your own iron. You meddlesome, snoopin' young fool, hōw's *this*?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE KID SAVVIES PLENTY.

KID BUCKAROO shot a swift look at Tucky, made a hasty motion with one hand, then turned to face Bart Ewing. The Kid's head rang like a bell from the blow he had received on the ear, and his breath came in short gasps. But his white teeth flashed in a smile.

"Yuh'd kill me, eh?" he chuckled. "Put that bullet in my belly like yuh promised, Ewing?"

The E Cross owner backed away, eyes narrowed in flaming, red slits. His lips twitched back from yellow teeth in

a snarl that could mean but one thing—near madness.

"Kill you?" he wheezed. "O' course I will. I'm pluggin' you——"

"Yuh tried that a minnit ago, an' the gun snapped," Kid Buckaroo laughed. "But mebbe that was just a bad shell. Aim to try again?"

A look of terror crossed Bart Ewing's face. He *had* pulled the trigger on the Kid's gun a moment before, although he had barely realized it. Now, some of the madness of white-hot anger passing from his brain, he looked down at the shiny weapon in his hand as if seeing it for the first time. He tilted the barrel up, glanced into the heavy cylinder.

Spat! A muscular hand landed edgewise across Bart Ewing's wrist. The Colt shot up into the air like a thing alive, smacked dully into the palm of Kid Buckaroo's hand. Bart Ewing swore almost feebly, then clamped his iron jaws and deliberately took his seat on the wagon tongue again.

"You—you tricked me," he croaked. "That gun was unloaded—not a shell in it."

"If it'd been loaded, señor, yuh wouldn't 'a' got hold of it in the first place," the Kid said, all humor gone from his face. "I did trick yuh, Mr. Ewing—wanted to see if yuh was the brand o' skunk that'd shoot down a helpless man. An' I reckon I shore found out."

"Mah goodness, pahd," Tucky gulped, as the Kid stood reloading his Colt, "Ah almos' drilled that fella. Yo' shouldn't go cuttin' sech monkeyshines without tellin' me."

Kid Buckaroo strode over to where his own horse, Sunset, and Tucky's yellow cayuse stood with trailing reins, and began unsaddling the animals so that they might graze.

He finished his work quickly, and then returned, carrying Tucky's lariat and his own.

Bart Ewing snarled oaths as he felt a loop slip over his head, then fought like a crazed maverick as Kid Buckaroo set about binding him.

Tucky leaned his rifle against the wagon, and rushed in just in time to get kicked in the paunch by the scrappy ranchman. But Tucky was up and coming back for more, and in a very few minutes Bart Ewing lay thoroughly trussed.

Kid Buckaroo took his own red neckerchief and wadded most of it into Bart Ewing's mouth. Then, using a gray silk neckerchief that he ripped from the E Cross owner's throat, the Kid finished the gag.

"Quick, Tucky," he panted. "Help me load this ol' buzz saw into the wagon. I want him out o' the picture when that cook gets back."

PUFFING and grunting, the two pards finally got Bart Ewing up into the wagon. They rolled him far back between two cases of tinned foods, then spread a tarp in such a fashion that it hid him.

"I never did see a gag that wouldn't let a man make some sort o' noise," Kid Buckaroo snapped, "but if yuh've got a grain o' sense, Ewing, yuh'll keep plenty quiet. Tucky an' me may have to go places about dark, an' it'll be just as well if yore men don't know where to find you. They *might* get rannicky notions again."

Bart Ewing mumbled through the gag, and kicked out viciously. Kid Buckaroo and Tucky dodged the flying boots, climbed back to the tail gate and then slid to the ground.

They had barely got their breath when the Kid muttered something, nodded his head toward a man who walked clumsily toward them from a little hill not far away. Tucky nodded at the Kid's muttered words, sauntered around the wagon and picked up his rifle, apparently paying no attention to

the barrel-chested, wooden-legged cook who was hobbling toward camp.

"Whar's Bart?" the cook asked, removing his floppy gray hat to rake stubby fingers through moist red hair. "Didn't let him git away, did yuh?"

"Ewing is around close some place," Kid Buckaroo answered easily. "Reckon he won't stray off. Yuh been out hunt-in'?"

The Kid jerked a thumb toward a flour sack that the cook carried. The sack seemed heavy, and its whiteness was marred by innumerable crimson smudges that were still moist. The cook shook the sack, a grin stretching his wide lips.

"As a sportsman I won't pass muster a-tall," he laughed, eyes shining, "but I get the game anyway. How's this?"

The cook upended the flour sack, shook it vigorously. Out onto the hard ground tumbled a mound of birds, all minus their heads.

"Blue quail," Kid Buckaroo smiled. "Man, they'll shore make a meal that is a meal. I don't see yore gun, Peg, but I ain't askin' questions. Yuh got the birds—an' plenty of 'em."

"I trap 'em," Peg explained. "Like I said, it ain't very sportin', but I'll guarantee it don't hurt the flavor o' the game a bit. It also ain't sportin' to ast a cowpoke to do anything except straddle a hoss," he went on after a short pause. "But I ain't a sportin' gent a-tall, so I'm wonderin', Kid, if yuh'd give me a hand on these quail? Two kin shuck 'em a heap faster'n one."

Would he give a hand? The Kid would—and gladly. In fact nothing could have pleased him more, for helping dress the birds would give him a chance to talk with the cook.

Before the birds were more than half finished, Kid Buckaroo, by listening carefully to what his guarded questions drew from Peg, knew the man who had murdered Chuck Luther, Slim Ford and Joe Zeller.

CHAPTER X.

A MURDERER CAUGHT.

IT was a little after noon when the E Cross hands came loping into camp, ready for their dinner, after a morning's work. The cattle had been broken into small bunches, driven to water holes for a drink, then permitted to graze in the hills. The steers required less watching now than they had the first few days, for they had become somewhat accustomed to this new range and the water holes.

"We won't have tuh round the critters up to-night like we have been," Lank Carson muttered as he trooped toward the cook's fire with the rest. "We'll watch 'em real close to-morrow, though. If we don't, some o' the crazy fools might try driftin' back to where we rounded 'em up from."

Several of the hungry punchers nodded, but no one spoke. Instead of laughing and joshing as they would have been only the day before, the E Cross waddies were glum and silent, their sun-bronzed faces set into grim lines.

Over yonder in that mine tunnel lay two of their saddle mates, stiff in death dealt by a cowardly murderer. And somewhere in camp was the man who had done that killing, the punchers were thinking. So they trooped to the fire without laughter, received their food in silence, and turned away to hunt shady spots.

Kid Buckaroo and Tucky leaned against the wagon, watching the silent cowboys file by with brief nods. Lank Carson stopped beside the Kid. Lank's eyes were narrowed, like the eyes of a man thinking shrewdly.

"Waal, cowboy," Lank almost whispered, "I hope yuh kin open up an' tell a few things before long. I've had me one tough job holdin' these rannies in check. They're gonna swing Bart Ewing to-night, or I miss a guess.

They're proddier than range bulls in fly time, Kid, an' I reckon I can't blanie 'em."

"When they finish eatin'," Kid Buckaroo said quietly, "I'll show 'em the gent that murdered their friends, Slim an' Chuck. But let 'em eat first, Lank. I want their tempers cooled a mite, 'cause there'll be no hangin', savvy?"

Lank did not savvy, and was saying so in strictly unprintable words when Jack Ewing waddled up, glancing fearfully at the much smaller Tucky.

"Where—where's pap?" Jack gulped, his flabby jowls wabbling at each word. "This here bullet hole in my cheek hurts turrible. I want pap to fix it up with salve fer me. Where is he?"

Kid Buckaroo looked at the deep groove along Jack Ewing's puffy cheek, then shook his head slowly.

"Bart Ewing is around close some place," he said quietly, "reckon he wouldn't be far away. Yuh go ahead an' get yore dinner, Jack. I'll fix up that slash after yuh've had chow. Trot along now, Lank an' me are busy."

Mumbling, his whitish eyes still rolling fearfully toward Tucky, Jack lumbered away. Lank Carson shook his head sadly, swore beneath his breath.

"Yaller!" he spat. "That kid's so danged yaller—— Say, ranny, where is Bart Ewing?"

"Go eat!" Kid Buckaroo snapped. "The longer yuh stall, the longer it'll be before yuh know who that murderer is."

SWEARING heartily, Lank Carson turned away, strode to the cook's fire, and had his plate filled. Peg Willis shot a swift glance at Lank's face, then turned his eyes to where Kid Buckaroo and Tucky were talking in guarded tones. The peg-legged cook growled something under his breath, sneaked a flask from under a dishpan, and treated himself to a hard jolt of

raw whisky. He didn't know that Kid Buckaroo had seen him.

"Tucky," the Kid asked in a low whisper, "did yuh find anything?"

Tucky nodded, tugged at the Kid's sleeve, and led the way around the wagon. While Kid Buckaroo and the cook had dressed quail, Tucky was busy up in the wagon, going through every bedroll there. The Kid had instructed him to do that, told him just what to look for.

Now the dumpy Kentuckian's round face beamed, and a grin spread his lips. Out of sight of the E Cross punchers, Tucky dived a pudgy fist inside his shirt, then drew it out, gripping sinewy coils of a finely tapered leather whip that would measure at least twenty feet in length.

Kid Buckaroo grabbed the whip, cramming it inside his own shirt, shoving the short wooden stock flat against his ribs.

Now Tucky fished carefully in his chaps pocket, held out the razor-keen blade of a handleless bowie knife and a roundish buckskin bag.

Kid Buckaroo grabbed the blade, shoved it into his own chaps pocket, then hefted the buckskin bag. He opened the draw string, then whistled softly.

"A hunk o' silver, weighs five or six ounces," he muttered. "An' this buckskin bag is stained—red. Did yuh find these in the hombre's bedroll that I said yuh would?"

Tucky nodded, started to speak. But the clatter of tin dishes being tossed into the dishpan warned them that the time had come to expose the murderer. Tight-lipped, eyes narrowed, Kid Buckaroo stepped around the wagon, striding toward the group of cowboys who were hanging around the cook's fire for a last sip of hot coffee and a final cigarette.

"Hombres," he spoke in a clear, hard voice, "I've got the goods on the man

who murdered Chuck Luther, Slim Ford an' Joe Zeller. That man is standin' where he can see an' hear me right now."

Tin cups rattled down, then a dead silence followed. Kid Buckaroo held the knife blade up between thumb and forefinger.

"This," he said, "is what finished Chuck Luther while he was sleepin'."

Another silence. Now Kid Buckaroo held up the buckskin bag by the stout strings that closed it.

"An' this," he explained, "holding a hunk o' silver that'll weigh several ounces, is what finished Slim Ford an' Zeller."

LIKE statues the punchers stood while Kid Buckaroo drew the snaky whip from his shirt and sent it writhing in the dirt with a twist of his wrist.

The lash whirled into the air, hissed back, and cracked with the noise of an exploding six-gun. Now the whip was in the dirt again, and Kid Buckaroo had picked up the leather that was the popper. In a moment he had the handleless bowie securely fastened to the end of the lash.

He whirled the whip aloft, then snapped it forward. A tin cup, accidentally dropped by one of the E Cross punchers, was skewered by that flashing blade so swiftly that two punchers leaped away in alarm.

"That," Kid Buckaroo grated, "is how Chuck Luther was killed in his sleep last night. The wielder o' this murderous thing simply yanked the knife out o' Chuck, by jerkin' on the whip, then vamosed. The killer was smart enough to stay offn that sand where Chuck was bedded down, so no tracks showed."

"An' this," Kid Buckaroo rushed on, swiftly changing the buckskin bag for the knife, "is how Slim Ford an' Joe Zeller got theirs!"

Again the whip swung, and the bottom was ripped from a tin pan with a noise that sent men jumping.

"In the Argentine they use these whips on bulls," Kid Buckaroo rasped. "But here on the E Cross a dirty skunk used this one to kill three men. That killer was afraid to meet any o' his victims in a fair fight, so he used this whip, like I showed yuh. Bart Ewing left the key in the lock on that adobe shack last night, or the killer never could 'a' got at Slim Ford. Thet's clear, ain't it?"

"What?" a grizzled cowboy gritted. "Yuh mean Bart ain't the killer?"

"Bart Ewing is as innocent as can be," Kid Buckaroo snapped. "Bart was framed. The cowardly cuss who really did those three murders framed Bart Ewing, hopin' that you rannies would lynch him—which yuh almost did. I think yore boss knows who done the killin's, or at least has some powerful strong hunches."

"Fer gosh sakes, Kid," Lank Carson yelled hoarsely, "if yuh ain't jist plain loco tell us *who* the murderin' skunk is."

"Look out!" Kid Buckaroo yelled suddenly. "Stop that hombre!"

The peg-legged cook leaped in among the dumfounded cowboys, a greasy iron skillet gripped in one powerful hand. Shouts of alarm—wild oaths as men churned the dry ground to billowing dust with scuffling boots. Then the sharp *splang* of an iron skillet striking flesh and bone.

"Hold it, gents!" Kid Buckaroo yelled, a cocked six-gun gripped in his fist. "Back up, pronto!"

The E Cross punchers stopped milling, then stared down at the quivering form of Jack Ewing. Peg Willis grinned at his old skillet, and hobbled to one side.

"Say," Lank Carson bawled, "what in seven kinds o' hell does this mean? How come yuh walloped Jack, Peg?"

"Jack Ewing," Kid Buckaroo said grimly, "is the gent who murdered three men with that whip there."

"Loco!" Lank Carson growled. "Yuh're crazier'n a bat, Kid. Jack never done that. Why should he? Tell me thet."

"If Bart Ewing got lynched for murderin' some o' his punchers," Kid Buckaroo snapped, "who would profit most at his death?"

A long silence greeted the Kid's question, then suddenly wild shouts went up as understanding came to the punchers.

"Hang me fer a sheep thief!" Lank Carson yelled. "I never would 'a' figgered Jack had the sand to pull sech a stunt."

"Me, neither," Peg Willis grinned, "if I hadn't got to thinkin' over a bunch o' fool-soundin' questions that Kid Buckaroo ast me while we cleaned quail. How did I like the Argentine? Did I happen to bring back one o' them fancy bull whips? An' did I ever try teachin' anybody else how to use that whip. He kept astin' me things like thet."

"An' I rattled off like a ol' woman at a sewin' bee," Peg went on. "Tol' the Kid how I'd learnt Jack to use the whip, knife blade an' silver bag throwed in."

Tucky Williams came loping up on his yellow cayuse, leading Sunset. The Kid swung up, gathered the reins, and brought the stallion over closer to the muttering cowboys.

"I still don't see it," Lank Carson frowned. "Mebbe Jack did kill Chuck an' Slim. But he couldn't 'a' kilt Joe Zeller, cause Joe plugged him in the jaw after beefin' them steers. That proves——"

"I put that bullet groove in Jack's cheek, Lank," Kid Buckaroo cut in, then explained about his trip into the mine.

"Tucky, here, was sleepin' on the

job," he finished, "so Jack had plenty time to sneak back to this wagon, hide his whip in his bedroll where Tucky found it later, then got back to the hills. He killed them E Cross steers hisself, drummed up that yarn about Zeller pluggin' him just to cover up. How else could he explain a bullet gash in his cheek? That overfed skunk had already finished Joe Zeller, figurin' on plantin' him some place about the range to-night an' leavin' evidence that'd point to Bart Ewing, hopin' that Bart an' Reb Dewey would tangle."

"But when yuh gashed his cheek he fixed up that other yarn—an' still had a fair chance o' stirrin' up trouble between the E Cross an' Reb Dewey's 4D bunch." Lank Carson nodded. "I savvy now, Kid, an' I reckon Bart Ewing will be thankin' yuh."

"Yeah," Kid Buckaroo grinned, "Bart'll thank me an' Tucky—with a

couple bullets if he gets the chance. What yuh aimin' to do with Jack when he wakes up?"

"Lug that fat sidewinder tuh Gillan an' turn him over to the marshal," Lank Carson growled. "We should stretch his danged neck for him—but it ain't our place, I reckon, to go hurtin' Bart Ewing any more than we have to."

"That's the ticket," Kid Buckaroo grinned. "Now, which way to this Gillan town? Me an' Tucky are pullin' out."

"Straight west. Yuh can't miss it," Peg Willis spoke up. "But yuh ain't told us whar the boss is yet. Whar is he?"

"In the wagon there, hawg tied an' muzzled," Kid Buckaroo answered. "But don't cut him loose for a few minutes yet, 'cause I've had trouble nuff for one day. Come on, Tucky, let's go see what Gillan looks like."

Statement of the Ownership, Management, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of Street & Smith's Top-Notch, published monthly, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1932.

State of New York, County of New York (ss.)

Before me, a Notary Public, in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared George C. Smith, Jr., who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is Vice President of the Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers of Street & Smith's Top-Notch, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in Section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publishers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *editor*, Ronald Oliphant, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *managing editors*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; *business managers*, Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owners are: Street & Smith Publications, Inc., 79-89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; a corporation composed of Ormond

G. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; George C. Smith, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; George C. Smith, Jr., 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Cora A. Gould, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Ormond V. Gould, 89 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

GEORGE C. SMITH, Jr., Vice President, Of Street & Smith Publications, Inc., publishers.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1932. De Witt C. Van Valkenburgh, Notary Public No. 32, New York County. (My commission expires March 30, 1934.)



Web of the Spider

By Ralph Boston

Author of the "O. K. Polter" Stories

Tommy Carey saw the killer holding the sombrero, and heard the man's voice:

"Who yuh got hid in here? Huh?"

If you missed the early installments of this adventure serial, read this condensed version below. Then you can go right on with the story.

TOMMY CAREY visited the café called El Molino de Viento in Tia Juana because he liked the name of it. He knew that the phrase meant "The Windmill" in English. And it certainly turned out

to be a windmill of action for Tommy Carey.

He had expected to "do" the gay Mexican border cabaret town in a few hours at the most. But things began to happen to him. He found that he had walked right into the arms of romance and adventure. When two murders were committed in El Molino de Viento, Tommy became involved in them. He

could have escaped during the excitement that followed the killings. But there was an American girl involved, too, and Tommy just couldn't walk out on her. He sensed that she was innocent of any share in the crimes, and he insisted on helping her to get over the border.

"You don't know what you're getting into," the girl told him. "You are pitting yourself against one of the most powerful criminals in Mexico—a man known as the Spider. I appreciate your help, but please leave me."

Tommy wouldn't do that, though. And in the next few hours he ran into more action, danger and excitement than he had experienced all during his life up to that time.

He was brought down by a shot from one of the girl's enemies, but Doctor Cestero, a friend of the girl's father, bundled his unconscious form into a motor car. When Tommy regained consciousness he was in a Mexican hut with the doctor and the girl. He learned that the girl's father had discovered radium deposits in Lower California and that the Spider was determined to find this source of wealth no matter how many murders he had to commit in order to do so.

Tommy and the doctor, helped out by Inez Reade, the girl, repulsed an attack on the hut, and decided to hide out in a cave which they believed unknown to the Spider's men. But while Tommy was away to a spring to get drinking water for the group, Inez and the doctor were captured and taken to the Spider's ranch—known in that part of the country as The Web of the Spider.

Tommy got hold of a horse and tried to get to the ranch house. Almost in the shadow of the house, he found his way barred by two gunmen, or sentries, stationed at the narrowest part of the pass. Here was a real problem. How to get by those two men. That seemed an utter impossibility.

CHAPTER XVI.

SHOW-DOWN.

FOR just a few seconds, Tommy Carey crouched there in the darkness, and peered at the two gunmen guarding the narrow and dangerous path. He wondered what he was waiting for; there was nothing he could do. That trail led to the Spider's ranch house, and there was no way around it.

On one side the cliff shot straight up—absolutely unscalable at this point; on the other side it seemed to drop almost sheerly into the dark and uncertain valley below.

Probably there were other trails leading to the Spider's headquarters. But it would be worse than silly to expect them to be unguarded. Zapater would not have gunmen guarding only one entrance. He would have gunmen guarding all of them. Moreover, it would take time—very much time—to find one of the other trails. And Tommy knew that he did not have a minute to spare.

His heart weighted him down like lead. It seemed to be a burden entirely outside of his body—some heavy burden that he was dragging along like a heavy gun or a pack. He had a sense of utter defeat.

Could he shoot it out with those two guards? He grimaced in bitter silence, and almost immediately his first mad impulse tapered off to more calm and cautious reasoning.

Shooting it out would mean certain death for him. His amateur ring career had made him realize, probably more than the average young man, the benefit of experience. He'd be a set-up for those two thugs. Murder was their profession. Guns were the tools of their trade.

Those men were crack shots; otherwise they wouldn't have been selected as guards. And as for himself—he almost laughed, though he felt far from mirth-

ful. He had never handled an automatic until that very day, and even then he had not acquitted himself any too well. No, he couldn't engage in any gun duel.

The element of fear had nothing to do with his decision. He was past feeling fear. He was thinking that tangling with those two hired killers would mean not only his own death, but the death of Inez Reade and Doctor Cestero.

He told himself what, many times, he had told himself when in trouble in the ring. He found himself mumbling the words: "Use your head! Figure some way out!"

But *what* way? This was a grimmer game than the fight racket. In the ring, you could "take one," and it didn't necessarily mean curtains. But if he "took one" here—if he stopped a single bullet—that was the final K. O., and there'd be no comeback.

There was only one thing to do. He shuddered when he thought of it. He had to get by those men. Possibly they constituted the only remaining barrier between himself and the ranch house. Well, why not use his head? Why not remove that barrier?

Fair play was all very well when there were two sides to it. But there was no fair play to these men. As soon as they saw him, they'd shoot him down as they'd shoot down an animal.

MORE and more, sheer desperation forced him into his new decision. He stood at the crossroads of fate right now. It was win or lose. He couldn't win by entering a gun duel against two expert marksmen. But he could take advantage of the element of surprise.

He could crouch in the shadow formed by the steep cliff. He could get a perfect bead on one of the men; could creep up, could make absolutely sure of getting him. And before the second guard knew exactly where the

shot had come from, he could do for him, too.

But he couldn't continue to think about it. He'd have to act first, think afterward. His automatic went up.

The larger of the two men was a perfect target. The soft, bluish moonlight that drifted over the low shoulder of the cliff near where he stood would make it easy. And he, Tommy, would be in shadow.

He had heard of gun fighters placing an enemy in the dark by a gun flash. But the backs of both of those men were turned to him now. The remaining man would not be able to see the flash. A perfect set-up. His finger pressed against the curve of the trigger.

And then, seemingly with no action on Tommy Carey's part—with no conscious effort of his will—the automatic was lowered. Tommy was trembling. He just couldn't do it.

No! It might be—it probably *was*—silly. But he couldn't shoot a man in the back. It would be tugging against every rule he had ever learned from his parents, back in those golden days when he had them; against everything that had been stamped into his soul, everything he had absorbed at school, high school, and college.

Even the "bad men" of the old West—men who doubtless had plied their trade of death not many miles from this very spot where he now crouched—did not shoot enemies in the back. There would have to be some other way.

AS he crouched there, he realized that he was very close to death. If the guards decided to proceed along the rocky trail toward him, there was no way for him to hide.

But wasn't there always some way out? Had those talks he had heard from profs, from football and other athletic coaches, been pure bunk?

They had never proved to be that in the past. Hadn't he seen his team top

Bronson Tech by a single point in the final eight seconds of the last quarter? The report of that game had been plastered all over the front pages of Eastern newspapers—victory snatched from defeat by a desperate try for field goal from a difficult angle.

Hadn't he himself got up from two nine counts to send over a wild K. O. in the toughest of all his collegiate fights?

Was there a purpose back of all those similar things he had seen—all those things that seemed to prove a man with nerve just couldn't be licked?

For a flickering instant, he all but forgot where he was. The old college "gym" floated before his eyes like a movie fade-in. He could see Dan Costello standing there—Dan Costello, the boxing coach, with his swollen right ear and his heavy jaw and his fighting blue eyes.

Dan could be as soft as mush, putting collodion on a cut or kneading a hand to see if a metacarpal bone had been damaged. But the sentimental light in those blue eyes changed to a contemptuous glitter when old Dan thought a man planned to take the easiest way out just because he was going up against tough opposition.

He could hear that West Side drawl of Dan's now:

"I guess you fellers never hoid of old Mike Donovan—huh? Well, he knew more about the game than *we'll* ever know, an' I'm *tellin'* yuh. They called him 'Professor' Donovan, an' they wasn't miscallin' him, what I mean! An' if I've hoid Mike say it once, I've hoid him say it a hundred times, that a man that's trained right—a guy wid a *heart*—a guy that just *detoimins* he won't be knocked out—simply *can't* be knocked out by a man of his own weight. That's all, boys. Good luck! An' don't fergit yuh got a left hand!"

Those days, those bright years, seemed very far away now. Tommy

Carey felt as if he might be in another world.

The humor that seldom left him caused his rather wide mouth to crinkle at the corners. Maybe in a few minutes more, he *would* be.

He'd go down swinging, though. And if he ever met Professor Mike Donovan or Dan Costello in the other world, he'd ask them about it—learn where he'd slipped up in getting K. O.'d when he had "detoimined" to win through.

HIS final decision was not of his own choosing. It was really the smaller of the two guards who made that final decision for him. "I am going to take a stroll a short distance down the path," Tommy heard him say in Spanish. "After all, some one who had no business here might have been riding that horse."

A cone of yellow cut through the darkness. The guard had snapped on his flashlight again. Tommy's heart pounded. That cone of yellow was moving—toward him!

Tommy edged farther down the slope at the side of the trail. He dug his toes into the loose shale. He heard a noise below him—the loose shale was sliding. Maybe the guard had heard it, too. This was no time for sticking around. Death might lurk for him in that black unknown beneath him. But there was no choice. Tommy abandoned his foothold and started to roll down the slope.

Here was the final show-down. One long, outside chance. Or quick death.

CHAPTER XVII.

SING FOON.

TOMMY had no idea how far it was to the bottom of the slope; no idea what the angle was, or whether there would be anything at all to break his fall on the way down—that is, at first. But a few sec-

onds after he started his forced descent, his body smacked against a boulder set in the side of the hill. He felt all the effects of a terrific solar-plexus punch.

He lay there, conscious, but almost paralyzed, trying to gulp a mouthful of air, and finding it the most difficult thing in the world to do. That boulder may have been the luckiest break in the life of Tommy Carey. But for a pair of painful, sickening moments, he could not realize it.

Vaguely he heard voices. They sounded as they might sound over a faulty telephone connection.

"Quien es?"

"Un hombre—sin duda alguna!"

Tommy tried to realize what they meant. He was gulping great breaths of air now, and his head was clearing. It came to him that the guards at the summit of the slope were shouting, questioning one another, wondering what had made that noise.

Tommy saw the flashlight moving cautiously down the slope toward him; saw it stop. Now the man who held the flash was near enough so that Tommy could hear him shout to the man above him: "No one seems to be down here. A rock must have become dislodged."

The ray of the flashlight played about the hillside, swiveled from side to side, came within about ten feet of Tommy's head. Then an impatient command from the top: "*Ea! Ea!* Don't be a fool, Ernesto! Come back up here! We cannot get excited and leave our posts every time a rock slides down the slope."

Tommy saw the flashlight bob—away from him this time—toward the summit of the hill. He was saved. Or was this just a stay of execution?

For he was as badly off as ever. He was only part way down the steep hill. He was losing time lying here. Sooner or later, he'd have to climb back up—meet those armed guards at the top—

or take a chance on getting the rest of the way down the hill.

Now, the bluish rays of the moonlight picked out big blurs of darkness here and there on the slope—boulders. If he could manage to slide from one to the other, these could serve to break his fall. He tried to forget his bodily pain, dragged himself to his feet like a man in a daze, and once more started the perilous descent.

Sometimes he found reasonable footing; at other times, the loose shale or gravel slid out from under him, and only by smacking against one of the large rocks—and once a thorny bush that pricked him like needles—was he able to arrest his progress.

He could not keep hold of that bush for more than one painful second. He let go, and fairly dived toward a great rock ten or twelve feet from him. He made it, twined his arms about the rock, pressed his body close to it. But the rock must have had a flimsy foundation; it went out from under him, crashed down the slope.

Tommy's hands went out to clutch something—anything—but he grabbed only air. And then his body seemed to go hurtling through space.

His head whirled. His ears rang. Then, before he knew it, he had been catapulted over a sheer shelf of rock and into the top of a tree. The twigs and branches scratched at his face like the claws of an animal. Tommy shut his eyes to protect his sight. He fell a couple of feet, grabbed frantically at a stout branch, swung back and forth like a pendulum.

Then he opened his eyes. Even with his head aching, with his face scratched and bleeding, with pains shooting through his hands, he could see that he was hanging perhaps twelve feet above fairly level ground. And almost under him—surely not more than a couple of yards away from the tree—stood a man. The rays of moonlight caught the up—

turned face of the man, who continued to stand there, as if hypnotized.

Tommy let go of the branch, fell to the ground, staggered, righted himself—and then, almost with the same motion, was on that man like an All-American tackle.

HIS thought—or was it instinct more than thought?—had been to grapple with the man before the latter had a chance to get into action; for beyond doubt every one of Zapater's men was armed.

In that he was successful. But this man, whoever he was, knew something about hand-to-hand fighting. Tommy lashed out in a vicious body blow. It should have brought results. But beneath some sort of thin, sateen coat, the torso of this strange antagonist felt as hard as steel; and before Tommy could shift his attack to the jaw, he felt his right hand gripped as in a vise.

It was a man-size job to subdue this fellow. Tommy realized this. And he could not put all his attention into the battle itself, either. He'd have to get his hand over this man's mouth, stifle an outcry. For already there were shouts from the guards at the top of the cliff. "What happens down there? What is the matter? Who has made all that noise?"

Tommy's left was free. It wasn't as powerful as his right, but it would have to do. He drew it back, prepared to drive over a hook. Then—so suddenly that it was over almost before he knew it—he felt his left hand and part of his forearm drawn over the shoulder of his unknown enemy. The next second, Tommy's hundred-and-fifty-pound body was hurtling through the air.

He struck the ground on his shoulders, turned a complete somersault, and, before he could sit up and find what it was all about, his assailant had an automatic pressed to his side.

Once more came the startled voices

from the top of the cliff: "Ola! Down there! What is the matter? What is that noise down there?"

The next development in this surprising drama was the most unexpected of all. Tommy had thought his captor would shout an alarm. Instead, the man in the sateen coat yelled toward the top of the cliff in broken English, as a Chinaman might talk:

"Nothing matter. Velly good. Big stone blake loose and come down cliff."

"That ees you, Sing Foon?" came the hail from the top of the cliff. It was in English now—English with a Mexican accent.

"This Sing Foon. Me walk 'long this way. Big stone come down. Almost hit Sing Foon. Evlything velly good, now."

Up at the top of the cliff, Tommy could see the flashlights of the guards. They looked like fireflies. Then he could hear a low laugh. It was clear that the guards up there had been worked up—worried—and that now they were amused and perhaps relieved that all their excitement had been caused by a dislodged rock rolling down the hillside.

But what was the idea? Tommy could see that the man who had the automatic pressed to his side was dressed in a tattered blouse, a soft black hat, and loose, flapping pantaloons. That and the man's accent indicated that he must be a Chinaman. But what was a Chinaman doing here? And why had he not given the alarm? Why had he lied? Why had he shouted up that everything was "velly good," and that the only excitement was that a big stone had broken loose and toppled down the slope?

TOMMY CAREY was little less than a "nut" on athletics. In college days he had boxed, wrestled, and had gone out for baseball, football, and track. And so, there in a position which might lead to death

or torture, his first low-voiced question to his captor was: "I think that was jujutsu you worked on me, wasn't it?"

"That's what it was, my friend," was the answer. "I have traveled in Japan. Jujutsu is at least one good thing that has come out of Japan."

The phrases seemed to come from another mouth, from another person. This Chinaman—as he now seemed to be—this strange man in the sateen coat and the flapping pantaloons, who had previously said "Velly good," and other phrases in pidgin English, was now speaking in the careful, cultivated accents of a Harvard professor.

Regardless of his tired, spent body, Tommy sat up jerkily. "What sort of man are you?" he asked. "Why did you talk so oddly just a moment ago, and now——"

"Wait!" his captor cut in. "We cannot talk here. I can be your friend. To prove that I mean you no evil, I will walk ahead of you—lead you to a place where we can go on with this discussion. You may keep your automatic. But remember what I said—that I can be your friend. Are you able to walk?"

"I—why—I guess so," replied the surprised Tommy.

"Very well. Follow me. Keep within two or three paces of me. When I veer to the side of the path, do you do likewise. Zapater had bear traps set along this path for any enemy who gets down that cliff alive. But we lose valuable time. Come!"

Tommy got to his feet, but hung back. "There's something wrong about this," he said. "You'll lead me to Zapater—get me tortured. I won't go with you. Shoot me right now—if you want to. But I refuse to be led into any torture trap."

The answering voice of the Chinaman was low, but eager and tense. "A logical thought on your part, perhaps. But you must take me on faith. Listen, my friend. I know who you are. I do not

know your name. That is unimportant. But it is quite evident that you were in the same party with Doctor Cestero and the girl."

"Yes! Where are they? Are they dead? Has Zapater——"

"Stop!" the Chinaman warned him again. "Do you wish to risk discovery here? Or do you want me to lead you to a place where we may confer in safety? Answering your question, the doctor and the girl are not dead—yet. If you act sanely, you may be able to help them. I, too, hate Zapater—doubtless much more than you do. We shall work together. And now, enough of this time-wasting nonsense. Follow me!"

Somehow, Tommy Carey found himself half believing this queer man in the tattered blouse and the flopping black hat. Chinaman or not, there was something about this man that inspired confidence. He had already proved that he was not a ruthless killer. He had already saved Tommy by lying to Zapater's guards at the top of the slope.

"All right. I guess I have no choice. Lead, and I'll follow," Tommy said. "If you are sincere—if you are the means of getting my friends and myself out of this—your fortune is made."

"I am interested in something greater than a fortune," was the rejoinder. "Follow me."

THE Chinaman turned without another word, and started down a narrow, winding path. Tommy followed close behind him, still wondering where he was going, and what he was going to find when he got there.

The path curved for perhaps a couple of hundred yards before it led to a narrow bridge over a shallow gully. The Chinaman motioned to a broken trail that led down into the rocks and scrub of the gully.

"We must avoid the bridge," he said. "When any one goes over this bridge,

the weight sets off an electric gong. Those powerful lights"—he pointed to a row of arcs set along the borders of the bridge—"leap into life then. I tell you these things, so that you will trust me. If you doubt me, cross by way of the bridge—and see what happens!"

"I don't doubt you," Tommy said. "Lead the way. I'll follow."

The Chinaman nodded, and led the way down into the gully. Tommy followed and, puffing a little, for he was dog tired and weak from hunger, reached the bank on the opposite side. "We have not far to go now," the yellow man urged.

Less than five minutes later, he led Tommy to a low, shedlike building, and slid back a corrugated-iron door. From the odor of it, this seemed to be a storehouse for food. There was a heavy smell of meat and vegetables, like the galley of a ship, and for the first time in hours Tommy Carey recalled that he was all but famished.

"We shall not be disturbed here," the Chinaman assured him. "This is my territory. I am cook here at the ranch." He led the way into the shedlike structure, scratched a match, and lit a candle, which he set upright on a rough table in its own grease. In the puny flame, Tommy noticed a ghost of a smile playing across the yellow man's face.

It was an unusual face, he now saw—much more aquiline in cast than the average Chinaman's.

The yellow man drew up a chair to the rough table, and without invitation Tommy flopped into it. He saw the Chinaman pick up the candle and carry it to a shelf above the stove, in such a way that the stovepipe masked most of the flame.

He could see some frijoles—red Mexican beans—bubbling in an iron pot on a corner of the stove, and without delay the Chinaman placed a deep earthen dish on the table, slopped a generous portion of the frijoles into it, and a mo-

ment later brought a gourd filled with a steaming, acrid-smelling liquid, and a hollow spoon known as a *bombilla*.

"This is *yerba maté*," he said. "We have some Argentine gauchos working here on the ranch. They prefer this to tea or coffee. Drink it. It will restore your strength."

Tommy did not need any urging. He wolfed down the warm, red beans and sucked up great gulps of the *maté*. Meanwhile, this odd Chinaman dragged a straight-back chair over near the table and sat on it. His jet-black eyes were trained on the open doorway. Just outside was a straight path which led to what looked like a blockhouse, about a hundred yards away.

"Now," the strange host said, "we can have time to talk. But if I should give the word, run back here past the stove." He pointed to the rear of the room. "There are great bins back there which hold potatoes, onions, and garlic. You can hide easily there. My name is Sing Foon, and your name does not matter for the present. You wish, naturally, to know about your friends. As I told you, they are not dead yet, though it is possible they are being put through a third degree."

"Then why are we waiting?" Tommy exploded. "If you really mean to help me——"

Sing Foon smiled. "You are young and impulsive," he said. "To try to rescue your friends now would mean both your death and theirs. You know little of the nature of this place. Be patient, and listen to me."

"But who are you, anyhow?" Tommy asked. "At times you convince me. At other times, it's hard for me to understand your place here."

"I am engaged as cook to Carlos Zapater," was the answer.

"Yet you say you hate Zapater. And if so, haven't you had chances to kill him? A little poison in the food you prepare for him——"

Sing Foon raised his hand as if to demand silence, and shook his head slowly. "You see things with the mind of the West, my young friend," he said. "I am of the Orient, and we have our own way. Death is no great punishment to any man. It is over too quickly."

"You mean that you'd want to torture Zapater?"

"Perhaps. But torture of the mind. It is far more cruel than torture of the body, especially to a vain man like Carlos Zapater, who believes himself so keen. I want to see Carlos Zapater, who now lives like an emperor, confined to a prison cell, where he will be treated worse than an animal—where he can have time to brood over his downfall. He will die a thousand deaths before he is finally led out to be executed."

SING FOON got up, went to the door, listened a moment, and then came back and seated himself again.

"You see me now dressed as a cook," he said. "Yet I have a degree from one of your American colleges, and I am an expert pilot. I flew for my country during the siege of Chapei. I speak three languages besides my own. One of them is Spanish. But not here. One can hear more with one's ears when he is not supposed to know the tongue of the conspirators for whom he works."

He got up again, removed the deep dish from which Tommy had emptied the frijoles, and also removed the *maté* gourd and the *bombilla*.

"My plan of revenge," he said, "has taken some time. But we of the East do not reckon time as you Occidentals do. I could have waited for years, if necessary. Dozens of my countrymen—one of them my own blood brother—rest beneath the waters of the Pacific, off Point Loma, as a result of Carlos Zapater's treachery. He drowned them in a scuttled ship so that United States

authorities would have no evidence against him. How I know all this is too long a story to tell here. The fact remains that I know it."

The jet-black, slanting eyes glowed in the subdued rays of the masked candle. "I maneuvered for months to get this job as cook. Zapater is no fool—far from it. He knows much. But he does not know my race. I have spied here, peered through keyholes, listened at locked doors. He has ceased to have the slightest suspicion of a supposed Chinese cook—presumably a coolie who knows no Spanish and who says 'Velly nice.' I know enough, can prove enough, to destroy Carlos Zapater."

"But why have you waited?" Tommy asked.

"I have waited for just such an occasion as this. Who would believe a yellow man against a powerful figure like Carlos Zapater? They will, however, believe you, and Doctor Cestero, and the young lady."

"But we are doing nothing to rescue the girl and Doctor Cestero," Tommy again insisted impatiently.

"No, because the moment for that has not come. I ought to know the routine of Zapater's ranch by now. At a special time like this, for instance, most of Zapater's men are out guarding the trails. But many of them still remain here in the outbuildings."

Once more Sing Foon went to the door and listened. "I can always tell when these men who are now here start out on their nightly business—the running of dope and liquor. You will hear the airplanes being warmed up in the field south of here, and the trucks being started in the sheds on the other side of the ranch house. There is one of Zapater's lieutenants, however, who has me worried. He will remain here. He always does. He is a machine gunner—the most murderous of them all. An American racketeer who left his country after a celebrated murder——"

For just the fractional part of a second, the Chinaman paused. He did not turn from the doorway. He was too keen for that. But it was all too evident that something important had developed outside. "Into the bin at the rear," Sing Foon warned Tommy in the same low, even tone. "I do not think he has seen you. Move fast! And be as quiet as possible."

Tommy sprang up, and slipped cautiously through the shadowed room, then into a large, oblong bin, odorous with vegetables. A second later, peering from the gloom of his hiding place, he could make out the bulk of a big man in the doorway, and heard a heavy, sneering voice: "Well, chink, watcha hatchin' up?"

The question was in English. The newcomer was without doubt the American gangster of whom Sing Foon had just been speaking.

"Me no can hatchee, boss," Sing Foon replied. "Chicken hatchee eggs. Sing Foon just waittee here 'cause big boss no likee at house now. Evlything velly nice. Velly nice."

"Yeah, baloney!" was the retort. "Who was yuh talkin' to?"

"Me talkee myself, boss. Me sing song, too. Velly happy!"

The big man pushed Sing Foon roughly aside and walked over to the stove. He took the candle from the shelf, and walked back and stuck it in its own grease on the table. "Don't like a hell of a lot o' light, do yuh, chink?"

From his hiding place, Tommy could see the newcomer's face, now that the candle was out from behind the stove-pipe. It was puffy and brick-red. Malicious little eyes peered out from folds of flesh in the fat cheeks. They bored into Sing Foon's face.

"Yuh know, chink, I ain't as much of a dumb-bell as some o' these spigs around here. I was raised on Doyers Street—New York's chink town. I know you bozos. An' I wouldn't trust

yuh as far's I could t'row a tommy gun."

"You no likee me?" Sing Foon asked, rather pathetically, as he crossed to a pan of potatoes, brought them back to the table, and calmly commenced to pare them.

"Baloney!" the gangster repeated again. "You ain't kiddin' me none. Yuh just seen a big rock slide down the hill back there acrost the bridge. Yuh didn't see no guy slide down there? Huh?"

He did not wait for an answer. Now, for the first time, Tommy saw him produce a sombrero—his sombrero—the one he had borrowed from Alfredo, the peon in the cave. He recalled now that it had been brushed from his head when he had fallen from the cliff into the top of the tree. And this man had undoubtedly found it, formed his suspicions, and sneaked up on the building where he and Sing Foon had been talking.

Now he heard the man's voice again. "Ever see that hat before, chink? *Who yuh got hid in here? Huh?*"

SING FOON made no answer—at least by speech.

It was all over in a second or two. Sing Foon had leaped like a panther. The thin, worn potato knife flashed in the candlelight. Its long, thin point struck the breast of the gangster like a lightning bolt.

There was a low but terrible gurgle, and the thud of an automatic on the floor. The gangster must have been game, at least—he had tried to unholster his gun. He gave a gasp, and sank to his knees.

And Tommy thought that no cat could be quicker leaping for a mouse than was Sing Foon as he sprang upon him. The blade went up, down; up down; up, down.

Then Sing Foon was back on his feet, and washing the blade in the potato water.

"You can come out now, my friend," he said in a low voice to Tommy.

Tommy scrambled out of the bin. He felt weak and dizzy. His speech was thick when he tried to talk. "You—you killed——" he started to say.

"We have no time for conversation," Sing Foon said in his even tones. "Help me move this body into the bin. Only one thing I regret, my friend—that this swine will defile good vegetables."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FROM TIA JUANA.

WITHIN three minutes, the stains had been mopped from the floor. The body of the gangster had been buried beneath the vegetables in the bin.

In anything less than this terrible emergency, Tommy Carey would have recoiled from such a task. Even now, he had little stomach for it. But Sing Foon was as cool as ever.

He blew out the candle, and the two sat in the dark room. Sing Foon seemed disinclined to talk now. Tommy's nerves were on edge. Finally he could stand the silence no longer.

"While we wait here," he complained, "Zapater may be killing or torturing Inez and Doctor Cestero."

"No," Sing Foon said. He lit a match cautiously, looked at a watch which he pulled from an inside pocket of his sateen coat. "No. You can be assured that nothing serious will happen in the ranch house until Zapater's chief lieutenant, Earico, returns from a mission to Tia Juana—a mission of murder."

"Murder? It seems rather a common thing here in the Web of the Spider."

Sing Foon gave a low laugh. "It is. Just an incident, that is all."

"But who is being murdered?"

"A hostess in El Molino de Viento, one of Zapater's Tia Juana dives. Her

death at this time would be a convenience for him. She will be found dead with a suicide note in her room. But Zapater dictated that suicide note. He does not know that I have the bottle of ink and the pen with which the note was written. That will be more evidence, when the time comes."

"But you did nothing to stop this murder?"

Tommy could see the Chinaman shrug his shoulders in the dark. "The death of a woman means nothing to me. I have bigger things to think of. In this humble-looking shack, hidden beneath those vegetables, I have many documents which will condemn the Spider. Once he is captured, several of his henchmen will testify against him. This Mexican government knows well, my friend, how to force testimony from persons under arrest. And if—— Ah!"

From the field to the south of the shack, Tommy heard the thunderous sound of an airplane engine being tuned up.

"That is what I have been waiting for," Sing Foon said. "Soon you will hear another plane being made ready, and shortly after that, another. Four, in all, are scheduled to take off to-night. In the old days they flew as a fleet. But now the Spider is more cautious. The airplanes, loaded with drugs and other embargo goods, take off at half-hour intervals."

Now, along the road beyond the field to the south of the building, came the sound of the chugging of trucks.

"That, also, is what we have been waiting for," Sing Foon explained. "Within fifteen minutes, the drivers of the trucks and the handlers will all be on the roads."

"And we can strike at the ranch house then?" Tommy asked eagerly.

"No. Be patient, my friend. Now, here is the plan: There are still men on call in a bunk house down the road from the ranch house. Some of them are the

men who brought in Doctor Cestero and the girl and Alfredo, the renegade peon, who, of course, was tortured to death. Zapater could call them in a second, by means of his private telephone. But the telephone line will be cut. You may be sure that I shall see to that. And there is one other thing we must wait for."

"What is that?"

"We must wait for Enrico to return from Tia Juana—which should be almost any time now. He will arrive in a roadster, driving it himself. He will leave the roadster in front of the ranch house while he reports to Zapater. That will be well—for we will need that car."

A disturbing thought occurred to Tommy. "But if the roads from the ranch are guarded, how can we escape in the car?"

"We cannot. But we can use the car to get to the plane down in the south field. We may have to move fast—very fast. The only possible way we could escape from the Spider's Web would be by plane. I believe that I told you I was an expert pilot."

Sing Foon went to the back of the shack, and returned with a pliers. Then, from a pocket of his sateen coat, he took a long-bladed knife.

"Now," he said, as one might talk to a child, "I must give you some advice. When we get into the ranch house, we cannot shoot off the automatics. We will have them with us. But remember—do not shoot. It will mean that none of us will ever leave this ranch alive. For the men at the bunk house will hear the shots."

"Then how," Tommy started to ask, "are we going to fight Zapater?" He clipped off the question abruptly. The answer had come to him, even before Sing Foon said: "With knives, my friend. Perhaps it makes your flesh crawl. I know something about the Anglo-Saxon. He can kill with fists, with clubs, with machine guns, even.

But he recoils from killing with a knife. Nevertheless, it must be knives to-night."

Tommy took the weapon. Sing Foon had been right, he thought. His flesh crawled at the thought of knifing a man. He wondered if he could go through with it. And then he thought of Inez Reade. He'd do anything for her. And yet fighting with knives—

Sing Foon put a hand on his sleeve. "Ah! Look, my friend!" he said.

A car was speeding along the road to the south of the flying field—speeding toward the ranch house. "I think it is Enrico," Sing Foon whispered. "And if it is— Yes! See, it has turned up into the drive!"

His voice was tense as he added: "This is the moment for which I have been waiting for months."

THE buildings of the Spider's Web were scattered over a great many acres, but the two largest ones—the ranch house in which Carlos Zapater lived, and the bunk house which sheltered many of his men—were within a couple of hundred yards of each other.

In the moonlight the buildings looked ghostlike. Men could be seen moving inside the lighted bunk house, and Tommy knew that there must be lights in the Spider's home. But Carlos Zapater was a man who believed in everything modern—in the way of house equipment, at least. Either special black-painted windows swung in to make the inside of the house invisible from the outside, or else some kind of specially patented shades were used.

Somewhere in that black, forbidding-looking house were Inez Reade and Doctor Cestero. The long trail of Tommy Carey's strange adventure was nearing its end. In a few short minutes—if everything broke right for him—he would be face to face with that czar of crime known as the Spider.

He didn't feel afraid; he felt eager.

His body was ready for a fight. And this would be a fight to the finish.

He followed Sing Foon up the winding little back trail that led from the storehouse. The Chinaman no longer shuffled along like a coolie. His step was quick, alert, but not nervous. His head was held up.

The great bulk of the ranch house became clearer to Tommy as Sing Foon left the shelter of some wooded ground and broke off across a level field.

For some minutes past, Tommy had seen the headlights of a car in front of what he had supposed was a house, and now he could see the form of the automobile. A moment or two later, he could make out a telephone pole looming darkly at one side of the drive. He could not see the wire from the house to the pole in that light, but he knew it must be there, and believed that Sing Foon would have little difficulty in cutting it with the pliers.

Sing Foon was wasting no words now. "Wait here!" he snapped at Tommy.

Tommy lurked in the darkness of the level expanse. He saw Sing Foon glide away into the darkness; then, a few seconds later, made out the Oriental's lithe form shinning up the pole with the agility of a monkey.

"Let Zapater try to call for help from his men now," he said grimly, as he rejoined Tommy. "And if he has men in the house with him besides Enrico, that is the chance we shall have to take. There is an old Chinese proverb which perhaps you do not know. It says: 'When in danger, go ye to the very heart of it. There will ye find safety.' And it is to the heart of danger that we go to-night, my friend."

TOMMY fidgeted impatiently. He feared that every second they waited out there might mean a second of torture for Inez and Doctor Cestero. "We'll take care of the men

in the ranch house," he said. "The thing to do is to *get* there."

"There is another proverb which comes from my country," Sing Foon replied. "Your people have adopted it. It says: 'Haste makes waste.' There may be three or four guards outside the ranch house. But I am hopeful of one thing."

"And that?" Tommy asked.

"Well, I assure you I know the reactions of the Spider. And I would wager a fortune that he told his most murderous guard—that he gave him explicit instructions—to be guarding his house to-night."

"The one who is now lying in the vegetable bin?" Tommy guessed.

"That is the one. With that man alive, I am afraid I would not be so confident. But now—silence. There will be a guard on the porch. Follow me closely and silently. We can make no noise. Guile will have to work for us now instead of bullets. Be close to me when I overpower him."

"I'm ready," Tommy said.

Sing Foon sprang out ahead, and now made for the crescent drive which wound up to the ranch house. He came within range of the car's headlights, and Tommy, still keeping to the shadows, could see that the Chinaman's gait had now changed to a shuffling walk. His hands were folded up under the large, flapping sleeves of his sateen coat. He was once more the humble Chinese cook.

Tommy crouched, keeping away from the beam of those headlights. He was about twenty feet behind Sing Foon when he heard the yellow man's cooing, harmless voice. Sing Foon was addressing the guard.

"Me makee tlip for big boss," Sing Foon was saying. "Big boss say he likee lefleshment——"

In the middle of his talk, he had swung. Tommy saw the guard topple, and somehow he knew that the man

had been slugged over the head with the heavy pair of pliers that Sing Foon carried. It wasn't strict Marquis of Queensberry, Tommy thought. But anything went to-night. Lives of brave, honorable persons hung in the balance.

He saw Sing Foon beckoning to him. From beneath the sateen blouse, the Chinaman had taken a long coil of rope, and with his long-bladed knife cut off a generous length of it. He and Tommy had the stunned guard trussed up in a moment, and gagged with the red cloth that Tommy had worn about his head. It was the work of another moment to search his pocket for keys, and drag his unconscious form over into the deep shadows.

"This is the one," Sing Foon whispered, taking a key of intricate design. "Remove your boots, and, from now on, walk like a cat."

Tommy removed his laced boots. Sing Foon kicked off his loose, flapping slippers. Already the Chinaman was inserting the key in the lock of the front door.

THE way led along a wide corridor, the floor of which was covered with matting. Then Sing Foon turned into another long passageway, and Tommy followed. The passageway was in darkness at this end, but far ahead Tommy could see, over the shoulder of the creeping Chinaman, a lighted room. He crept nearer—and then his body stiffened in horror.

Lashed to chairs were Inez and a man whom he knew must be Cestero, although the latter's head drooped on his chest, as if he might be unconscious.

Tommy crept nearer. He had all he could do to keep from springing into the room right then; but Sing Foon held out a detaining hand. The Chinaman was inching forward silently. Tommy followed. He could hear the thumping of his own heart.

Now, peering from the shadowed

passageway, he could see two other men in the big room. One of the men—a lean, muscular figure, handsome in a cruel sort of way—was sitting at a great trestle table, calmly sipping at a glass of wine. Although Tommy had never seen him in a good light before, he knew that this must be Carlos Zapater—the Spider.

The other man, a gorillalike figure with high, bunched shoulders, was kneeling before a glowing fireplace. He drew something out of the fire as Tommy watched. Tommy saw that it was a white-hot iron—some sort of branding iron, originally designed for cattle.

But this iron was to serve another purpose now.

"Is it ready?" Tommy heard Zapater ask.

The big, gorillalike man—Enrico, Tommy assumed—turned and grinned. "*Sí, señor*. When you say the word, *señor*."

Now Tommy saw the Spider lay down his wineglass and reach for something else on the big trestle table. It was an irregular-shaped piece of paper.

In the excitement of the past few hours, Tommy had forgotten all about the map. He did not know what the paper was until he heard Zapater say, as he turned to the chair in which the bound man sagged:

"Now, Cestero, here is the piece of the map which you will have to match." He shook the injured doctor viciously. "Here! Look alive. Mind what I am saying!"

Doctor Cestero looked up listlessly. His cheeks were an ashen gray. He jerked himself into full consciousness as he saw Enrico standing a few feet away from him with the white-hot branding iron. Inez tugged at her bonds and gave a low moan.

"You hear me!" the Spider was saying to Cestero. "I will give you just half a minute to tell me where the other part of the map is hidden. If you don't

—well, we'll see how brave you are when the branding iron bites it. Just half a minute, remember. Bring the iron over here, Enrico."

Tommy could stand it no longer. Never mind the coolly laid plans of Sing Foon now. He, Tommy Carey, was going to launch the attack before Doctor Cestero felt that iron. He braced his bare feet against the matting that covered the hallway. He gauged the position of Zapater in the room, noted the big, yellow-leather holster that swung at the Spider's left side. He saw Enrico come nearer to Cestero, raise the iron. Then Tommy sprang into the room.

HE hit Zapater like a tornado. The Spider fell across the big trestle table. The bottle of wine and a pair of glasses crashed to the floor.

Tommy felt something crash against his left cheek bone. It was the left fist of Zapater. The latter's right was reaching for his holster. But fighting in a frenzy, Tommy clutched the Mexican's wrist, twisted it sharply. The automatic clattered to the floor. Tommy kicked it beneath the table.

He heard a struggle back of him—a gasp of terror from Enrico, and then a clank as the branding iron fell to the floor.

Zapater drew on all his strength to twist Tommy back. Tommy was thrown off balance. As he righted himself, he saw the form of Enrico hurtling through the air. It was plain that Sing Foon had used jujutsu on him. Then, although struggling with Zapater, Tommy could not see the action, he knew that Sing Foon was plunging that long knife blade in Enrico's chest. He heard a gasp, a little squeal of terror from Inez. Then only the girl's low, hysterical sobbing.

It had all happened in a matter of seconds. And Tommy was finding

plenty to do. This Spider was no set-up. He was lashing out with his fists, drumming them into Tommy's face. Tommy reeled. This guy could *hit*!

He wrestled with the Spider, maneuvered him away from the big table. The Spider was fighting with cold fury. Out of the tail of his eye, Tommy could see Sing Foon gliding about the room. The heavy pliers were in the raised right hand of the Chinaman. The latter was weaving in and out in order to slug the Spider without injuring the man at grips with him.

"Let him alone!" Tommy yelled. "This is my fight!" He lashed out, gashed the Spider's cheek bone with a smoking right.

And still Sing Foon maneuvered about. He was balancing the heavy pliers in his hand.

"Let him alone!" Tommy yelled. "You don't want to kill him! I can fix him. This guy is my meat. Let him alone——"

A terrific left from the Spider ended the sentence abruptly. It stung Tommy to fury. He threw over a hard hook. A gush of crimson came from the nose of Zapater.

Sing Foon had lowered the pliers now. Probably the reminder that he might accidentally kill the man whom he wished to take alive had been more of an influence on him than any plea for fair play. There was a grim smile on the man's yellow face. Evidently he saw that Tommy was getting the upper hand.

And he was. The Spider turned now. His mouth was open to shout a cry of alarm. Tommy's right crashed against it. The Mexican's strong teeth cut a ridge in Tommy's knuckles. But now the ex-collegiate welter champ was feeling no pain at all. He seemed to have gone crazy. He was raining blows on the face and body of Spider. The Spider's knees were buckling. His body was sagging. And as he fell, Tommy

put all his remaining strength in one solid, up-from-the-floor, roundhouse right.

It connected with the point of the Spider's jaw. The Mexican fell like an animal shot through the heart. His head crashed against the underpinning of the trestle table. He lay there—completely out.

Now Sing Foon was gagging him, and from his blouse came that coil of rope again. "You have done well, my friend," Sing Foon was saying to Tommy. "Unbind the girl—"

But Tommy had needed no such instructions. Already, his long knife, which he had spurned to use in the attack on Zapater, was cutting the ropes which bound Inez.

The girl-got to her feet stiffly, crumpled in Tommy's arms. As he held her, he could see, over her shoulder, the form of Enrico lying over by the fireplace. A knife was in the left side of his chest.

"Carry the doctor!" Sing Foon was saying. "I will take care of Zapater. The girl can walk—as far as the car. Quick! We have not a second to lose. We must get to the field before the last plane takes off."

The command seemed to inject new life into Inez. "Yes!" she gasped. "I can make it, Tommy. Just lead the way!"

Tommy reached over to the trestle table, grabbed the piece of wine-stained map. He felt a little thrill of triumph. The other part of the map was safe in his pocket.

He saw Sing Foon struggling out through the doorway with the bound form of Zapater over his shoulder. Inez was following him. Tommy lashed at the bonds of the stupefied Cestero, picked up the doctor, and managed to get his limp form over his shoulder.

If they got the breaks now, his big adventure was about over—triumphantly over.

THE porch of the ranch house was clear when they got outside.

It was the work of a moment to toss Zapater across the let-down top of the roadster. Tommy sat on him, after laying Cestero gently on the right side of the roadster's seat. Sing Foon was at the left side, pressing the starter of the car, and Inez sat tensely in the middle. The engine sprang into life. The car started to glide ahead.

For a hundred yards or so, it speeded along. Tommy could hear the idling motor of a plane being warmed up. The noise grew louder, nearer.

Suddenly Sing Foon veered the car off the crescent drive, drove across a kind of lawn, and, with unabated speed, crashed through a spindly wooden fence. The noise of the plane was terrific now. Just ahead, Tommy could make out its wing lights, and he could see a man—probably the pilot of the plane—standing near it.

The pilot now whirled, looked up in bewilderment, and ran toward the roadster.

"*Hola!*" he yelled. "What is the——"

But the car leaped ahead, and swerved. The pilot jumped to one side—just a second too late. The fender of the car caught him and tumbled him several feet to the right.

Sing Foon was evidently taking no chances. Whether the pilot was killed or stunned, Tommy did not know. And somehow he could not care very much, under the circumstances.

With brakes crunching, Sing Foon brought the roadster to an abrupt stop. With a spring he was out of the car and up in a narrow seat at the front of the plane. Tommy saw him hurling several tin cans—cans of dope, Tommy assumed—out onto the hard-packed earth.

Without being told, Tommy was also busy. He could see that the ship was a good-sized, six-place biplane. He lifted the bound form of Zapater and

shoved him roughly into the rearmost seat. Then he was back to the roadster, and as tenderly as speed would permit, was carrying Doctor Cestero over to the plane.

The doctor seemed fully conscious now. "Heaven be praised!" he was saying. "But the other part of the map is——"

"I have it!" Tommy cut in. "We have everything. Sit here in this seat with Inez, doctor. That's it. In a few minutes we'll be out of all this. That's right, Inez. Get settled there beside the doctor——"

He whirled. A gun cracked behind them, and Tommy saw a flash back by the spindly wooden fence which the roadster had crashed through. The bullet whined over his head. He heard the engine of the plane grow louder—a great, deafening roar. The plane lurched, was gliding along the ground. Another sharp, crackling report cut through the sound of the motor. Tommy looked back.

Men—there must have been close to a dozen of them—were running madly along the field toward the plane. Guns flashed; a bullet snicked into the plane's right wing. Tommy's heart sank as

he realized what even one bullet could do if it hit a vital part of the machine.

But the ground was a little below them now. The plane was nosing up, higher and higher. The shouts of the men, the reports of their guns, sounded feebler, farther away. Then Tommy lurched back in his seat as Sing Foon leveled off the plane and headed north.

He settled back. Suddenly he felt tired, spent. But it was a pleasant feeling—the feeling a man has when the cares of the day are over, and he is just slipping off to easeful slumber.

He saw Inez turn. In the moonlight he could see tears running down her cheeks. Her arm came over the seat, and her hand reached Tommy's.

"You did it!" she yelled through the powerful sky song of the airplane motor. "Tommy! You did it!"

Tommy patted the girl's hand.

"And we have the map!" Inez said.

Tommy nodded. "I have more than the map," he replied. "And say, teacher! Maybe you don't know it. But you're never going back to that classroom of yours."

Inez smiled at him, and the plane glided like a great white bird through the soft, starlit night.

THE END.





"Come and get me alone!" the half-breed taunted, so Sheriff Bill Grimm made it a

One-man Posse

By Kenneth Gilbert

L YING helpless in the sagging bunk of the long-abandoned trapper's cabin, Sheriff Bill Grimm pondered the fact that the cards were stacked against him; he was willing to admit, too, that he was a fool, and that he had played blindly into the hands of his enemies.

The night was peaceful, with a honey-colored moon peering through the interlaced screen of the great conifers. Objects in the brush-choked clearing about the cabin stood revealed as in the light of day.

The ruffles of the near-by creek murmured sleepily as the little stream wound its tortuous way through tangles of devil club and vine maple, yet there was no peace in Grimm's heart. He realized that death might be closer than he knew, either through starvation, or at the hands of the man he was seeking.

It was a good forty miles out of the Cascade wilderness before he could strike even a ranger trail, and Grimm knew that he couldn't make it, even though he'd probably have to try. His right ankle was twisted, possibly broken,

when he had slipped while walking a windfall. Knowing something of the mishaps which may overtake a man in the woods, he surmised that the injury was what surgeons call a Pott's fracture, which meant that he must use the ankle but little until the break was healed—or he'd probably be crippled for life. Yet as a choice between that and possible death here, he'd have to take the risk soon.

He might pull through in some manner, after all, assuming that Johnny Buck, the half-breed killer whom he was after, didn't ambush and murder him. Grimm considered what a vain-glorious fool he had been, after all, to come into these wilds alone, instead of at the head of a posse.

Still, there was the breed's challenge: "Come alone and get me, if you are man enough." And Dade Plummer, Grimm's enemy, had put the issue squarely up to the sheriff.

Plummer was out to discredit Grimm; he was already campaigning against him, with the election but a few weeks off. It mattered little that Grimm had given the best twenty years of his life in maintaining law and order in this mountain country; Dade Plummer, who, Grimm was convinced, was allied with the outlaw element of timber thieves, poachers, elk killers, and the like, was crowding him. Johnny Buck's challenge might have been inspired by Plummer. Still, Grimm reflected now, there was no excuse for himself playing the fool.

But in twenty years' service as the upholder of justice, as the Nemesis of man-killer and their ilk, with the courage to face any and all odds, Grimm knew that his own nature would have prevented him taking any other course. He couldn't lose face with himself by refusing to heed the defiance of Johnny Buck.

The man whom Buck had killed, Jed Long, was an old friend of Grimm's. Many a night they had slept by the same

camp fire. That he had been waylaid and murdered at the door of his own cabin because of a sackful of supposed nuggets, was enough of a cold-blooded crime to call for swift vengeance, but the fact that old Jed was Grimm's friend made the sheriff doubly determined. Now it was probable that he had failed, after all, and Plummer would make political capital of the fact.

Grimm felt that he had less than a chance in a thousand to succeed now; probably one chance in a hundred to live. Yet he was counting upon one trait in the half-breed's nature of which Johnny Buck himself could not have been aware.

"He's an Injun," reasoned Grimm. "A white man would beat it out of the country, once he got clear. But that wouldn't be an Injun's way. He'll stick here maybe just for the chance to gloat over me, hoping he'll get a chance to kill me." And Grimm, strangely enough, was satisfied that it should be so, for without this characteristic of the breed, there was little hope of ever overtaking him.

PEEERING out of the window, cautiously enough so as not to expose too much of his face, for something told him that the breed was not far off and possibly watching, Grimm contemplated the picturesque wildness of his surroundings—the little glade where some long-dead trapper who had built this cabin had felled the trees which went into the structure, the salal thickets, aglisten with silvery moisture as the moonlight fell upon them, the dense clumps of salmon-berry canes, the tall, rank grass which grew in profusion. An easy opportunity, reasoned Grimm, for Johnny Buck to slip up unseen to the cabin and murder its occupant while the latter slept.

Still, Grimm was not yet dead. He could hobble painfully to the creek for water. At the same time the little

stream offered a food supply, for it abounded with trout. They knew nothing of man-made lures, and with a twisted thread raveled from his shirt, a bent piece of fine snare wire which he found in the cabin, and a red berry for bait, he caught fish readily.

He realized that these finny inhabitants of the wilderness were his saviors, after his scanty supply of grub had run out. By the same token he knew that he must husband them carefully, if he would survive. For, he could travel only a short distance at a time, and even then he risked hopelessly crippling himself. Therefore, he could fish only the pools near the cabin.

If he caught fish recklessly, cleaned out these near pools, he would be compelled to fight his way up or downstream through thick brush, a task which was impossible in his present condition. But if he took only a few fish at a time, the pools would continue to restock themselves, and all would be well.

With all this in mind, he peered out of the window, then involuntarily reached for his gun as he saw an opaque shadow sweep across the face of the moon.

What he saw was an enemy who could prove as deadly as the hunted outlaw. Yet the thing he saw was no more than a great bird, wide-winged and long-necked, which flew with seeming laborious strokes of its pinions, then, with set wings, sailed downward and came to rest beside the creek not far from the cabin. Although the bird had a long, spearlike beak, Grimm knew the thing was ordinarily harmless. But just now it had taken on the proportions of a foe.

Painfully he got out from the bunk, and hobbled toward the door, six-gun still in hand, his face set with determination. But as he reached the door, intending to stalk the enemy, the bird rose heavily from the creek. This time

something silvery writhed and twisted in its beak.

Grimm groaned, as the bird vanished.

"Got another trout," he muttered. "That's the third one from the same hole since morning. And yesterday he got two more, and four others the day before that, the blue devil!" He shook his fist vainly in the direction the bird had gone.

THE great blue heron, all unconscious of the part he was playing in a desperate life or death man hunt, winged on, pausing only when he came to the snag where his nest, like an armload of jumbled sticks, rested in a crotch of a dead tree.

There he tore apart the trout while it still squirmed with life, and tossed it to the three hungry fledglings which welcomed his appearance with appealing yelps. When younger, they had been fed by regurgitation, but now they were almost ready to leave the nest, and the father heron was too hard-pressed for time to see that they were cared for in the usual way.

As a matter of fact, the responsibilities of caring for these young ones rested heavily upon him. Three weeks before, the mother heron had been killed in mid-air by the plummetlike drop of a bald eagle. Ordinarily the eagle ignored the long-legged herons, preferring tastier food, but he was hungry and the killing urge was strong within him. Thereafter, the father heron was compelled to fish not only for himself but for the fledglings as well.

The little lake where the snag with the nest leaned out over the water had become poor hunting ground, so the heron had taken to the creek which fed it.

As well as any human fisherman, he knew that trout lurked in the pools, and it was natural, too, that he chose the location by the old cabin, for here the forest was more open.

It was difficult to manipulate his great wings among thick-growing trees, and likewise his long legs, which he thrust straight out behind him when he flew, were also awkward under such circumstances. Therefore, ignoring the man who lived in the cabin, the heron fished these pools all unwitting of the fact that he was jeopardizing not only Grimm's life, but his own as well. For, Grimm had resolved that the big bird must die.

Yet, although the man kept watch the remainder of the night, the heron did not reappear. Perhaps the bird sensed danger in the air; at any rate, Grimm felt the menace, but he knew the meaning in a different way. Johnny Buck was still in the country, watching and biding his time.

When dawn came, Grimm managed to catch two very small trout. He knew by this sign that most of the big fellows had vanished, else these fingerlings would not have dared make their appearance. It meant that the end of his food supply was in sight.

THROUGHOUT the day, the heron sought frogs and small fish in the lake. Then it was that he did most of his napping. It was his practice to stand motionless on a log overlooking some likely spot, one foot drawn up close to his body, his spearlike beak tilted toward the sky, his eyes apparently closed.

In this fashion he camouflaged himself until he appeared to be part of the log on which he stood; at least there was no movement to betray him to the fish cruising about below. But, let one of them come within reach, and he awakened with astonishing alacrity.

His coiled neck would straighten, and in the same motion he would drive his spear downward, quicker than the eye could follow, and usually too quick for the hapless fish who had come too close. Sometimes he ate them, but the bulk

of his catch went to the fledglings. When night came, and the moon rose, he winged his way to the pools.

Sometimes he saw things on earth, as he beat over the tops of the big trees, which disturbed him, and he would utter a harsh, warning "*kr-rk!*" It might be that the thing which he saw was merely a bear gorging himself on huckleberries, which he raked into his capacious mouth with a skilled paw. Or, again it might be the tawny form of a cougar, crouched on a limb overlooking a deer trail.

Always he voiced warning when he saw his old rival, the big mink who haunted the watercourse. Between the heron and the mink was mutual hatred kept alive by the fact that both sought the same prey—fish. Yet this night, as the heron took off from the nest when the fledglings had quieted and gone to sleep, he saw nothing suspicious as he sailed over the roof of the forest. As usual, he pitched down in one of the pools near the cabin.

And, as he did so, the mink, who had just dragged a fourteen-inch cutthroat trout from the water, and was preparing to feed royally, saw the shadow of the heron over him. Quickness of wit and action had allowed the mink to live on unscathed when many of his brethren had fallen victims to winged night hunters; therefore, dropping the trout, he sprang wildly for cover.

He did not do so because he was afraid of the heron, but because the bird shadow cast by the moon might foretell the coming of a ferocious horned owl. It was only when the heron alighted on the sand close to the trout that the mink was partly reassured.

Moreover, he was fighting mad. With a shrill snarl he sprang from his covert, his target the heron's body where, under the left wing, an artery runs close to the surface, as the mink well knew. Once let the mink fasten his fangs in the artery, and old scores would be

wiped out promptly. The only flaw in his plan was that the heron saw him coming.

The bird had been pleasantly surprised at sight of the fat trout lying on the sand bar, and was in the act of seizing it, when the mink leaped. Instantly, then, the blue spearman went into action.

He seemed to grow to twice his natural size, as each feather stood on end, and he spread his wings threateningly. Indeed, it might have occurred too late to the mink that he had made a mistake. Nevertheless, he was a vicious fighter, and the fish belonged to him. Like a brown lance, he shot through the air, but as quickly the heron dodged, and the mink's leap fell short. Thereupon, fate overtook him swiftly.

Of a sudden he was being flailed by mighty wings, which half blinded him, yet he struck again and again, trying to get under the heron's body and beneath the left wing. Indeed, he almost reached his mark, time after time, but always the heron evaded him. Changing his tactics swiftly, then, the mink struck for the bird's throat—and the error cost him his life.

For, like the downthrust of a sharp poniard, the long beak of the heron struck his attacker squarely, impaled him, even as it had done many a tough-scaled fish. Fighting there, the mink died. Then, victorious, though still ruffled, the heron calmly seized the fish and winged off.

FROM his hiding place beside the creek, Grimm watched the battle with the intense interest of a woodsman who witnesses a curious thing.

The range was short, and the moonlight strong enough so that he could make out the fighters easily, but so rapid were their movements that he could not have held the gun steady on either of them. Besides, he realized that it

was a battle to the death, and the outcome either way would suit him.

He had believed from the first that the mink would kill the heron, and was astonished when the fight ended as it did. For an instant then, he held the gun on the bird, but something stayed his trigger finger.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that he had seen a brave bird win against odds, and he was loath to shoot. Yet the heron must die in order that Grimm might live. Nevertheless, the sight of the struggle so engrossed him that he hesitated, and when he finally came to realization, it was too late, for the winged fisherman was gone.

Thereupon Grimm berated himself for having lost an opportunity. But he sensed that his chance would come again, for the heron, now that the mink was dead, would surely return. The next time the bird appeared, Grimm vowed that it would die.

So it was that by nightfall he had again taken up his post.

But he did so with the eerie feeling that all was not well. For one thing, it seemed to his wilderness-trained ears that the woods were too quiet. Something was abroad which put fear in the hearts of the forest dwellers, and they were shy and silent. Only the distant hooting of a horned owl, a lugubrious hunting cry, disturbed the quiet.

Then it occurred to him that he might be the thing which had made the wild folk wary. But at the same time he knew that by keeping moveless, as he was doing, they would quickly become reassured, and would go about their usual nightly prowlings. Yet this did not happen; they continued to remain hidden, and still Grimm had that feeling of uneasiness. But he waited on for the heron.

For one thing, he had caught only two small trout that day, and he had been compelled to labor painfully upstream to get them. The mink and the

heron had made the bigger fish scarce, and the man was feeling the pinch of real hunger.

However, hope had not died in him. He had been gone three weeks now, and it might be that after such prolonged absence, a posse might be organized to search for him. Still, he had given explicit orders that he be left alone.

Even now he was torn between the desire for aid and the dislike of having to admit he had failed. But a man has only one life, and it might be better to escape with it and defy the taunts of Plummer and the latter's gang, rather than to perish miserably here.

Still, if he could kill the heron and other big trout would come to the pools, he might live on here until his ankle was healed. He felt that the matter had been brought to a climax. He was already weak from the straight diet of fish, and if he didn't outwit the bird this night, he might be too far gone to fight his way up or downstream tomorrow, in search of food. It seemed that he had been hungry for ages, but never hungrier than to-night. The tasteless salmon-berries which he gathered, had little or no sustenance.

Minutes passed, as the moon continued to climb until it was well above the treetops, and its pale, unearthly light, sifting through the screening branches, made the creek flash and sparkle where the stream broke over stones. Still no heron appeared, and the patience of the starving man waned.

Now and then he heard noises in the woods which might have escaped ears less sensitive than his. That feeling of dread persisted, too, as though he was being scrutinized by baleful eyes. He began to wonder at last if some wandering cougar hadn't located him and was watching in curiosity and hatred.

Grimm, woodsman that he was, knew that there is some mysterious, mesmeric power in the eyes of a great cat, some faculty of conveying deadly intent that

is second only to that possessed by a human being in whose soul is the thought of murder. But he fancied himself well hidden; and, besides, he was armed. Yet he was watchful, alert.

At last there came through the treetops a muted, whispering sound, then a rushing of great wings, and the heron appeared. For a moment the bird checked itself in mid-air, and settled toward the edge of a pool, its broad wings delivering powerful back strokes, the long legs dangling. Yet almost in the act of alighting, the heron did a curious thing.

It fairly shot up into the air, then dived, the great beak drawn back for a daggerlike stroke. Apparently an awkward, ungainly bird under most circumstances, its movements now were lightninglike. For it had seemingly spied a foe, and struck swiftly, with a result which even Bill Grimm could not have foreseen. But only for an instant was the man dumfounded; then he was on his feet, gun in hand, and what happened after that was action of a different sort than he had counted upon.

AFTER that battle with the mink, the heron had been less inclined to do his fishing in the creek. Doubtless, the place was haunted by other furred killers, and perhaps he realized that the big fish were growing scarce. But the fishing was so poor in the lake that, when the moon had risen, he once more sailed off over the trees.

Nor did he see anything to cause alarm. All was quiet on earth, ominously so. Yet habit had made him confident, and once more he slanted down to his favored fishing spot.

But as he did so, a movement in the brush at the edge of the shore caught his attention. Probably he reasoned that another mink was lying in wait for him; and if this was the case, the heron, victor in that other battle, would strike first this time.

All he caught sight of was something furry which showed indistinctly through the thicket. But it was enough for him, and he dived.

Yet at the instant he did so, he realized he made a mistake, for instead of the mink supposedly hiding there, a man rose with a startled yell, while the fur-tipped cap he had been wearing, fell from his head, impaled on the heron's beak. With the same cry, the man fired blindly, without aim, at the great bird who for a moment hung over him, broad wings fanning his face.

But from the opposite side of the creek there came a harsh command, then guns blazed back and forth across the small stream. As the heron, wings beating frantically in an effort to escape, rose to safety through the trees, he saw the man he had struck turn oddly and fall.

Then, from the brush on the other side of the stream, hobbled another man, whom the heron had never suspected was there. This much he saw as he uttered his harsh warning and went sailing back toward his nest, disturbed and frightened.

BY dawn, Grimm, jubilant at last, was ready to leave. In one corner of the cabin lay Johnny Buck, hands manacled behind his back. His right shoulder was bandaged with strips torn from his own shirt, for in the light of the moon, uncertain though it was for shooting, not all of the sheriff's bullets had missed, even though the breed had opened the firing and had emptied his gun.

Moreover, there was a look as of contentment on Grimm's face, as he regarded the breed whose beady black eyes stared at him sullenly, like those of a cornered animal.

For the first time in many days, Grimm had tasted real food. In the light pack which the breed carried were several pounds of dried venison and a

quantity of bannock. New strength had come to Grimm.

"We'll hit the trail together, Johnny," he announced. "You've got two good legs, and I have one. But if I strap this bum ankle of mine to one of your good legs, I reckon we can hobble on after a fashion until we meet up with somebody."

"I'm going to lean on you with one hand, and in the other hand is going to be this gun. I'd admire to bring you in alive, but if you try to make a break, I'll comfort myself with the thought that Jed Long was my friend, and you murdered him in cold blood. So, it's up to you, whether you go in alive or dead. Me, I don't care a rap either way, except that I'd like to show you to Plummer."

"You played the game as I figured you would; you hung around, and tried to ambush me down there by the creek. And if an enemy of mine hadn't turned out to be a friend, I reckon you might have made good!"

The breed did not reply. Yet he offered no resistance when Grimm made him get up and submit to having one leg bound to the sheriff's injured limb. As they stepped forth from the cabin at last, the eastern sky was whitening with the false dawn.

Grimm paused for an instant as he heard what had become a familiar sound. It was a hoarse "*kr-rk!*" and through the trees sailed a great bird on set pinions. The heron, his fright forgotten, had come back for more fishing, for the demands of his young ones were pressing.

As he slanted downward, he offered an easy target for the six-gun in Grimm's hand. But the sheriff merely grinned, and waved greeting to the long-legged bird who was no longer a foe but a friend.

"Eat your fill," Grimm adjured him, "because I never aim to eat another fish as long as I live. I've had my fill!"



How short can a story be—and still be a story? This is the question which the Editor of Top-Notch is trying to answer in this section of the magazine.

The highest art of story-telling is to be brief, and yet to present in that brief compass, a whole act of drama, comedy, tragedy, or melodrama.

It is the purpose of this Corner of Top-Notch to present a group of short short stories of outstanding merit—one-act tales that will grip, thrill, or amuse.

Rotten Money

By Tom J. Hopkins

BILL GILLARD, occasionally known as "Dirty Gil," had just committed his first murder—and gained only a roll of counterfeit money. His dark, sullen face twisted in a mask of rage as he stared at the bills. Worthless, rotten money!

He slammed the roll of bills down on the man's body, aimed a vicious kick at him. Murder, his first murder, done through pure greed, had gained him nothing but the danger of the noose.

Thought of the noose came with the whining creak of brakes from the long, dusty grade a mile away. Bill Gillard choked, felt a queer, cold wave run up and down his spine—the chill of premonition, death; the sickening realization that men would now know what had already been suspected. They would know that Gillard was crooked; crooked as the twisted trunks of the mesquite on the brown hills about him.

Gillard almost whimpered with the shock, then pulled himself together. No

chance to run—the tracks were too plain there in the sandy soil.

As he calmed down, his cunning brain went to work. It had enabled him to put over many tricky deals that should have jailed him, but had not. The roll of counterfeit bills, now! Bad money had been circulating for some months. That fellow, face down in the dirt, Gillard's bullet through his heart—the counterfeit money—

By the time Gillard had turned and waved to the lone occupant of the approaching buckboard, his face showed deep satisfaction. He had concocted his story rapidly, sensed it was good. No one had seen the actual murder, for he had scanned the stage road and the hills before approaching the man. Now he was grinning openly. Instead of hanging, there might be money in the thing.

The huge, lazy-looking man in the buckboard gaped as he came close enough to see the body at Gillard's feet. A deputy sheriff's badge glittered on

"Elephant" Jones's huge chest. Men snickered openly at him, said he wore the badge only because he was the sheriff's brother-in-law.

They saw him as a lazy-bodied, lazier-minded man who never bothered to carry a pistol; a shotgun only when the hunting was good. His only work seemed to be serving papers, a job the real, fighting deputies avoided.

PULLING up his team near Gillard, Elephant Jones heaved his huge body out of the seat and into the road. The clumsy move knocked his shotgun into the dusty road. He paused, stared down through deep-set eyes in mild annoyance at the now dusty gun.

"Ain't that just like a fool scatter-gun?" Jones grumbled in his heavy, slow voice. "Now I'll have to pick it up an' clean it—later on."

Without troubling even to lift the shotgun from the dust, Jones waddled over to Gillard. He stared, blinked at the prone dead man.

"How come?" he said slowly, almost disinterestedly.

Bill Gillard's expression was openly amused, mocking. Elephant Jones, the fat-head, never even carried a gun!

"Got to talkin' with this here stranger," Gillard said, easily. "He took a likin' to my pet gelding. Wanted to buy it, so he did. Offered the money, so danged much money that I got s'picious. I figured he knew my gelding was fast, wanted to get out o' the county in a hurry. So I did me some fast thinkin'. I ain't so bad at that, you know!"

Gillard paused. Elephant Jones nodded slowly, enviously.

"You sure ain't, Gil," said Jones. "Wish I could think."

"Well, I asked to see the money," Gillard went on coolly. "Soon as he showed it I knowed he was one o' them counterfeiters that's been passin' the

stuff around here. I reached for my gun, he drewed, too. But I beat him!"

Gillard grinned easily. He could see Jones swallowing the whole story. And why not? It was a good story, quite worthy of Bill Gillard's cunning, greedy brain.

"Sure now!" Elephant Jones's voice and expression held only admiration for a quick-thinking and fast-shooting man. "Right smart of you, Gil."

Jones waddled to the dead man, stooped over him. Slowly, ponderously, he crouched. First he glanced at the counterfeit bills and nodded. Then he turned the dead man face up. He studied the features in silence, face expressionless. His eyes shifted swiftly about. Shot through the heart, from the front. No other tracks but those of Gillard and his victim!

Elephant Jones straightened up, waddled back to Gillard.

"Gil, you've done somethin' big!" he said, deep admiration in his voice and expression. "Biggest thing that's happened in this county in years! Yes, sir; it's big, Gil! The government pays big rewards for these things!"

Gillard's eyes glittered greedily.

"How much?"

Jones scratched his chin with a huge, hairy finger:

"Thousand, mebbe more! Quite a piece o' money, Gil!"

Gillard moistened his lips. Not only had he made his story good, but he stood to gain by the killing.

"Yes, sir!" Elephant Jones went on: "I'm sure o' this. You know, Gil, there's been talk about you. People sort of hintin' you ain't straight. Why, gosh! I almost got to believin' them stories myself! But now I know you for what you really are, Gil. I want to be the first to congratulate you. To shake the hand that killed this man!"

Elephant Jones moved a step closer, stuck out his huge, hairy hand. Gillard grinned, reached out his own right

hand to grip the big paw extended toward him.

On it Elephant Jones's hand closed like a steel trap—closed and gripped hard.

Gillard squealed with pain, and suddenly realized there was something in Elephant Jones's eyes that frightened him. The painful grip tightened again, and Gillard writhed.

Elephant Jones's next moves were made with a speed and deftness that was astounding in so big a man. He jerked Gillard against his own body. His left hand snapped downward, jerked Gillard's gun from the holster. He dropped it, yanked out a pair of handcuffs and snapped them on Gillard's wrists. Then he stepped back, pushed Gillard away.

Picking up Gillard's gun, Jones sniffed the muzzle, glanced at the single exploded shell. He shook his big head almost sadly at the gulping, amazed expression on Gillard.

"Just been fired, all right," Jones said. "No fresh tracks here but yours an' his. You killed him, for sure!"

"Of course I killed him! What the hell is eatin' you, you fat-headed fool?" Gillard roared angrily. Then his greedy brain shoved an explanation at him. "I know what you're up to! You're goin' to frame me—pretend I'm

one o' them counterfeiters! Then you'll steal the reward that belongs to me for killin' that man!"

He lurched forward. Jones shoved him back.

Gillard still raged:

"You're tryin' to steal the reward for that counterfeiter!"

"Them counterfeiters is all in jail, Gil," said Jones, heavily. "They'll maybe get ten years for counterfeitin'—but you'll hang!"

A dull roaring sound came into Gillard's bewildered brain. Something wrong, something horribly wrong. His dark, stubble-bearded jaws began to work, soundlessly. He wanted to talk, but could not. Heavily, through the roaring sound in his brain, he heard more words:

"It was a right good story you told, Gil, till I saw the man's face. I knew him, was to meet him here," Jones went on. "What really happened was this, Gil. While he was waitin' for me, he maybe got to foolin' with that roll of rotten money. You saw it, murdered him for it. You're just that kind o' greedy killer, Gil! When you found it was counterfeit you made up a good story. Just one thing wrong with it. That man you murdered was the fellow who ran down the counterfeiters—a deputy U. S. marshal!"

Gunman's Gesture

By Victor Blaine Wright

ONE road meant death. That branched to the left. The other—well, the other would mean nothing in particular; nothing, that is, but a broken promise. And through the forty dark years of his life, "Silver" Lucas had never broken a promise.

He sat motionless there at the forks, a looming and sinister figure astride a great black horse. Far to the west, dull storm clouds swirled heavily about the tall peaks of the Jicarillas, gathering strength and volume for the attack they would soon hurl upon the canyon country. Somehow, perhaps in their mood,

they seemed akin to the silent rider; certainly there was an air of brooding threat in both. The horse shifted uneasily, and a spur rang flatly upon the dead air.

Beneath the brim of the black sombrero, Silver's eyes gleamed with somber lights from the shadowed face. They were the eyes of a man who had known himself and found the knowledge bad. They rested moodily upon that left-hand road. Death, yes; but not for him.

It could not be. No man lived who could best him in fair fight with rifle or six-gun. The lean figure stiffened slightly in the saddle. This day would be the last for Joel Lincoln—Joel Lincoln, the one friend Silver Lucas had ever known.

But that had been long ago. Fifteen years is time enough for affection to die—and less than that when men take different trails.

Lucas might have chosen differently. And yet, perhaps it was the joke of some mocking destiny that Silver Lucas could have been only what he was—a human wolf preying upon his own kind, leaving behind him a trail of dead men and mounting reward notices; a killer who sold his guns to the highest bidder.

How different from Joel Lincoln! Joel, the honest and loyal and courageous, the thrice-elected sheriff of Redondo County—the man who would die to-day.

If Silver Lucas had not come back to the canyon country, if he had not sent the Caroline stage racking toward with a lifeless guard and an empty express box, this day might never have come.

Joel Lincoln would not have called him down to Gila Gulch to settle for all time another of the quarrels of the law with the lawless. And Lucas would not have given his word. But he had, and now nothing could change it. The man who carries the star and the man

who defies it always clash, until at last no more men defy the star.

A sickly light glowed momentarily through the mixing mass of clouds. The whole sky grew gray. Lucas tore his brooding eyes from the road and looked at that other, to the right. His hand strayed to a saddlebag, caressed the bulge made by fifty thousand dollars in bills. Enough money, that, to take a man to the Argentine and set him up in the cattle business. His face became harder, darker.

With deadly decision, Lucas touched spur to the horse's flank and reined viciously to the left. The great stallion lunged forward down the sloping clay road, unshod hoofs beating a roaring tattoo of echoes from the canyon walls. Lucas rode madly, as though speed and whipping wind could clear his mind of the thing he was about to do. The sooner it could be finished, the better.

This road he traveled was the stage route between Blanco and Tovar City, and as the minutes passed, the walls which closed it in modified until they became rock-and-brush-strewn slopes. Abruptly the outlaw reined the horse to a trot, and shortly thereafter to a deliberate walk.

Thunder roared behind him, and he turned and saw the clouds, red-traced with lightning, sweeping in swift and deadly advance down from the Jicarillas and over the lower country.

Lucas drew a heavy rifle from the saddle boot and rested it across the pommel. He was nearing the appointed spot. All feeling of indecision or remorse drained quickly away, leaving a cold and merciless mechanism of destruction.

The storm center veered abruptly and bore down upon Maverick Buttes, slashing veils of rain sweeping gustily before it.

And as though it had been a signal, a shot burst the silence, the slug spurting dust beside the horse.

THAT was a warning. Lucas swung from the saddle. The bullet had come from the left slope, and the outlaw sprinted to the right, flinging himself down behind a boulder. He tried a snapshot at the thinning cloud of smoke a hundred yards away.

Instantly he found that Lincoln had changed position, for in the unnatural dusk he saw flame lick out beside a rock thirty feet from the vanishing smoke. He heard the weird shriek of the slug as it ricocheted from his protecting stone.

Crouching low, Lucas leaped from shelter and darted farther up the hillside. He flattened in a water-worn gully and listened as slugs crackled through the air six inches above him.

Eight shots. He gambled on the magazine capacity of the sheriff's Winchester. On hands and knees he dashed for the spot he had marked from the road, and arrived unscathed. Two three-foot boulders lay against one another, broadside to the sheriff's position. Manzanita had sprung up about them and provided a dozen loopholes.

The outlaw grinned thinly, satisfied. He shifted, and inadvertently exposed his foot through a gap in the brush. The rifle across the gully spat and the heel disappeared from the boot.

Lucas shifted position again and cautiously began to dig dead leaves from between the two rocks. The cold wolf grin settled upon his lips. This was his game. It was a waiting game, and Lucas knew the quality of his patience. He knew, too, that Lincoln had always been an impatient man. The moment would come when Joel would show his forehead. And that, Lucas realized grimly, would be the end.

His careful hands had opened a small hole. The outlaw squirmed slightly backward and aligned the rifle through the space. He could see the stones behind which his enemy lay. He could

almost tell the spot where the head would appear. Lucas's smile broadened slightly. At that range he could clip the ears from a jack rabbit.

He fixed his eyes unwaveringly upon the slight hollow at the end of the sheriff's barrier.

HALF an hour passed. An hour. Another followed without a shot being fired. The third dragged wearily through to its end.

No slightest breeze stirred the tops of the bushes. The air was thick and heavy, filled with threat. In the distance the storm growled, but the dull blanket of gray above the waiting men lay still and lifeless.

Then, silently, a rift in the clouds spilled watery light upon the road. A sudden gust of wind fluttered something gray and dry against Lucas's cheek. Looking around, startled, he saw a torn shred of newspaper. Some stage passenger, probably, had thrown it away.

The outlaw stared, almost turned away, and then became suddenly rigid. There was a picture on the paper. The picture was of Joel Lincoln, and there were others in it. Vaguely Lucas noted that there was little change in the man who had been his friend. A little older and heavier, that was all. His eye traveled to the caption beneath the photograph. He brushed away dust with his finger.

"Joel Lincoln," it read, "Redondo County's recently re-elected sheriff, with his wife and children."

Wife and children! Wife and children! Yes, a lot can happen in fifteen years. The kids looked to be eight or nine years old, the girl odder than the boy. The mother's face stopped short of beauty and became kind, showing lines of care. The wife of a peace officer in this country had cause for worry.

Lucas looked at that smeared picture for a long time. His rifle lay un-

noticed. The outlaw was in the grip of unfamiliar emotions. He was seeing another picture in his mind. A strange one, it was, for a man such as he.

He saw Joel Lincoln coming home, saw this boy and girl running to meet him. Lucky man, Joel was! It seemed for a moment as though the hard lines of Lucas's face softened. And then he was seeing another picture, one that clouded his face again. He looked at this for a long moment, and when a slug whined from the rock he did not hear it.

Then, abruptly, the eyes hardened and the bitter smile twisted his lips. He let the paper flutter from his fingers and gazed through the loophole.

There was movement out there, above his rifle sights. Joel Lincoln's head showed, and his leveled gun.

The outlaw's fingers tightened, the sights settled.

And then he did a strange and terrible thing. He released his grip on the rifle. He raised head and shoulders above the barricade. It was very deliberate, and the bitter smile was there still.

Lincoln's bullet left an oozing blue hole between those somber eyes.

With a final crashing of thunder the distant storm broke and thinned. A misted sun spread thin gold upon the canyons.

After all, a man may live badly and still die rather well.

In The Interest Of Science

By David Redstone

DOCTOR HOGAN thought, as he entered the lawyer's stuffy little anteroom, what a fine crowd of hypocrites they were—these mourning relatives of his late friend, old Marcy Blighton. It gave him satisfaction to know that little, if any, of Blighton's money would pass into their hands.

It amused him to behold their sniffing faces and to reflect that in a very few minutes their mournfulness would be genuine indeed.

Genially smiling, Doctor Hogan took the only chair left vacant, and found himself seated between two burly, middle-aged men. These, in contrast with the score of other persons in the room, wore no variety of the conventional mourning insignia. Distant relatives, perhaps, Doctor Hogan surmised, or maybe servants whom he had never seen.

The entrance of the white-haired old lawyer served as a signal for a general

display of black-bordered kerchiefs, a choked sob or two, and the adjusting of cr pe embellishments.

A few rewarded the advent of the lawyer with pained smiles, as if too much cordiality were unseemly. But the bent figure saw none of them as he moved slowly toward the desk, his ivory hands idling absently with the unfolded document—the last will and testament of Marcy Blighton.

Doctor Hogan's fingers strayed to his fine mustache. "And how is our good friend Mr. Clarke, this morning? I hope, well?"

"Well as can be expected," the aged lawyer replied. "This—this is a sad occasion for me. Marcy Blighton and I were associated for years—a great many years." There was no false note in the voice of the kindly old man.

"Yes. Yes, indeed," Doctor Hogan stared pensively at a bookcase. "Yes, we all feel the loss. But—we must carry on, you know." He turned a

benevolent smile on the burly man at his left.

After a quiet minute, the lawyer, having adjusted glasses on his slender nose, began the reading of the will.

Small sums were bequeathed to relatives. At the sound of her name, a niece, Mrs. Mary Smythe-Wilson, her statuesque form draped in deep mourning, sobbed with no restraint to her profound emotion. This in no way impaired her hearing. A pinched young man at her side offered a palliative bottle of lavender salts.

"Mary Smythe-Wilson, the sum of one hundred dollars," the old lawyer read, whereupon grief overpowered the lady completely, and she covered her face with both hands in order to hide her intense chagrin.

Doctor Hogan's sympathy and fine mustache did much to console a few of the other ladies whose fates were much similar to that of Mrs. Mary Smythe-Wilson, and when he heard his own name read he was more successful than they had been in concealing his interest in the proceedings.

The aged Mr. Clarke's voice broke once or twice in the ensuing paragraph, the pitch and tremolo increasing with the evident nervousness in his manner.

"—the sum of two million dollars to be consigned to the aforesaid Doctor Leonard Hogan. I direct that this fund shall be used by Doctor Hogan as he sees fit in the furtherance of his scientific endeavors and research for the prevention and cure of cancer."

THE reading of the will was over, and an awkward silence descended upon the group. The lawyer sat back in his chair, shrunken and exhausted. The disappointed relatives did not wish to depart too hastily for fear of betraying their attitude in the light of Marcy Blighton's ingratitude to them.

Doctor Hogan tried to fill the hiatus.

"I knew, of course," he confided, "that he'd always been keenly interested in the work I was doing—and in me. I rather felt that he was desirous to help further my work. Of course, that it should be to the extent of practically his entire fortune—well, I feel stunned. All my hopes and dreams realized. He always wished to be a benefactor to mankind, and he aims to be so through me. The very scope of his——"

A cough interrupted the laudation. Mr. Clarke started to speak—paused, and took a sip of water from a glass on his desk. "There's something more," he said. "Marcy Blighton's interest in science went even further. Apart from the will I have just read. The Haskell Institute of Medicine has a document which Mr. Blighton put into their hands some weeks before he died. The Institute has already taken advantage of the privilege it offered. You will be interested to know about it, Doctor Hogan. In this document Marcy Blighton bequeathed his brain to that scientific organization for the purpose of research."

Amazement seized upon the features of Doctor Hogan. "What's that you say?" he demanded.

"Willed his brain to science," the old lawyer interpreted.

Unobtrusively the two burly men who had been seated on either side of the doctor now arose.

"We're from Center Street, Doctor Hogan—homicide division," one of them explained.

"Keep your hands off me!" The doctor tried to shout, but his throat was parched and his voice cracked.

He was handcuffed in an instant.

"You almost got away with murder, friend," said the second of the two detectives, "but for the dead man's great desire to serve science. It's apparent you never counted on that, knowing that chloroform leaves traces on brain tissue."



At The Top-Notch Mike

ONCE again, ladies and gentlemen, you are listening to Station WTN, located on the fifth floor of Street & Smith's building, the home of good fiction, at 79 Seventh Avenue, New York City.

It's been some time, folks, since you've heard of Valentine Wood, author of the "Kr-om" stories, and it is my pleasure this evening to announce that a big, whopping, thrilling, unusual novelette from Mr. Wood's pen will appear in the January number of Top-Notch, on the news stands Friday, December 16th.

The novelette is called "Ozar, the Aztec," and all in all it's one of the most satisfactory stories I have read this season—and I've read plenty of stories, you may guess that.

There's a touch of the fantastic in the yarn—just enough to make it novel and a little weird. I liked it so much, in

fact, that I decided to make it the opener of a series having to do with the hair-raising exploits of the central character.

Here's something, folks, that I think you have been waiting for. So don't fail to let me hear from you on this. At least, let me know if I have been right or wrong in feeling as I did.

You'll find some other cracking good stories in the January issue, too—the second installment of Fred MacIsaac's new adventure serial, a double-action Western novelette by that Top-Notch favorite, George C. Henderson, short stories, short short stories, and verse.

When a fellow's wrong, it's a pretty good thing to admit it. In announcing the new reduced price of Top-Notch, I claimed that this was the first time that Top-Notch ever sold for less than fifteen cents. I was wrong. It was the first time in a great many years that the

magazine sold at that price, but my claim was not entirely correct, and I am pleased to read you the note of William Gedig, of Minneapolis, Minnesota, who sets us all right on this. Mr. Gedig writes:

"In your August 15, 1932, issue, you state that this is the first time that Top-Notch ever sold for less than fifteen cents per copy. I don't believe I've missed a half dozen copies in over twenty years, but I'll say that I remember buying T-N for ten cents per copy when it first was printed three times per month. I intend to keep on reading T-N as long as I can get it, and haven't any suggestions to make for its improvement. If I'm not mistaken, please let me know about this."

I want the writers of the following letters to know that I appreciate them highly, and I wish I had time to read more than just these few which are on the top of the pile:

WILLIAM H. WINIE.—The new cover on Top-Notch looks fine. I never expected to

one is just as good. Here's hoping you'll have him as a regular contributor. Also let's have other stories by Cliff Farrell.—*Jackson Heights, New York.*

THOMAS EVANS.—Your serials are better than ever. "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef," by Ben Conlon, was great, and "Rogue of the Highway," by Johnston McCulley, shows every sign of being just as good. J. Allan Dunn's stories are great. I was off you once for not running Kroom, but now like the mag very much.—*Erie, Pennsylvania.*

TOM SEEDS.—I have been wanting to read another Zip Sawyer story in Top-Notch. They are the best stories of the woods I have ever read, and I ought to know something about it, as I worked in the logging camps for five years. Please get Mr. Richardson to write some more of them. A friend of mine who was once a logger, but is now a gunner on the cruiser *Pensacola*, also wants to read some more of the stories.—*Los Angeles, California.*

ARA H. WHITE, JR.—Inclosed with this letter you will find my Reader's Ballot. Not satisfied with the ballot, I am also writing a letter. I wish that more of the Hawk stories would appear, and a Ralph Boston detective story. Yes, I am in favor of having a Pinto Martin story to finish up the series. I only hope that some of them would come

HELP EDIT YOUR TOP-NOTCH! READERS' BALLOT

Best story in this issue

Next best.....

Best "short short" story.....

Who are your favorite Top-Notch authors?

Remarks and suggestions.....

Name and address.....

get it for ten cents, but now there is no excuse for buying another magazine. I like your new feature—the short shorts, and was glad you had one by G. M. Cox. I read the other story he had in about a month ago, and this

back. I, with about ten or fifteen other young readers of Watertown, wish that you would put Frank Merriwell back. In your latest issue, best story, "Lazy Lucas Plays Solitaire." Next best, "Son of the Wolf." Best short

short story, "Salvage." Best series now running, "Rubies of Wreckers' Reef." Favorite authors, J. Allan Dunn, Ralph Boston, John Paul Seabrooke.—*Watertown, New York.*

GEORGE PETRICK.—I have read Top-Notch for a long time. I have two of your magazines that are eighteen years old. One was printed in June, 1914, and the other in September, 1914. In one of them is a story by the late Sir Conan Doyle—"The Fox Hunt." I believe a good many Top-Notch readers would like to read them if they were reprinted.—*Branchdale, Pennsylvania.*

Top-Notch never reprints stories. It runs only the best new fiction obtainable.—Ed.

FRED DAVIES.—Why not some more stories by J. Allan Dunn, Ben Conlon, and James B. Hendryx, and Allan R. Bosworth? This answers my question as to who are my favorite authors. No favorites in issue just finished. I haven't read all of them yet. Those by John Mersereau and Leslie McFarlane good.—*Troy, New York.*

Time's up, folks. Listen in again on December 16th. Don't forget that tip-off about the Valentine Wood novelette, "Ozar, the Aztec." Your announcer is Top-Notch Mike, who wishes you all a very pleasant

Good Night!

NEXT ISSUE!

(January Number—Published December 16th)

The Opening Novelette of a New Series by
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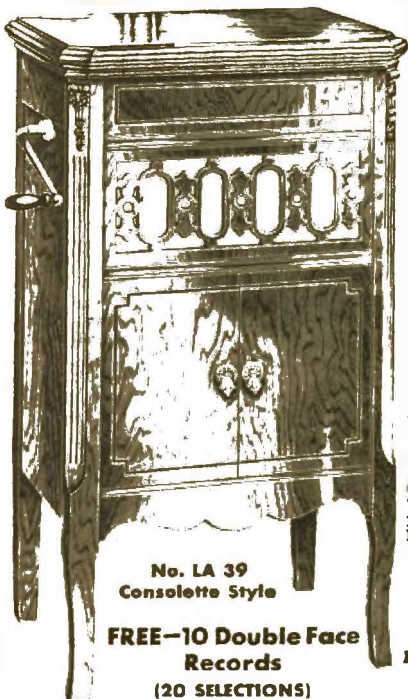
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