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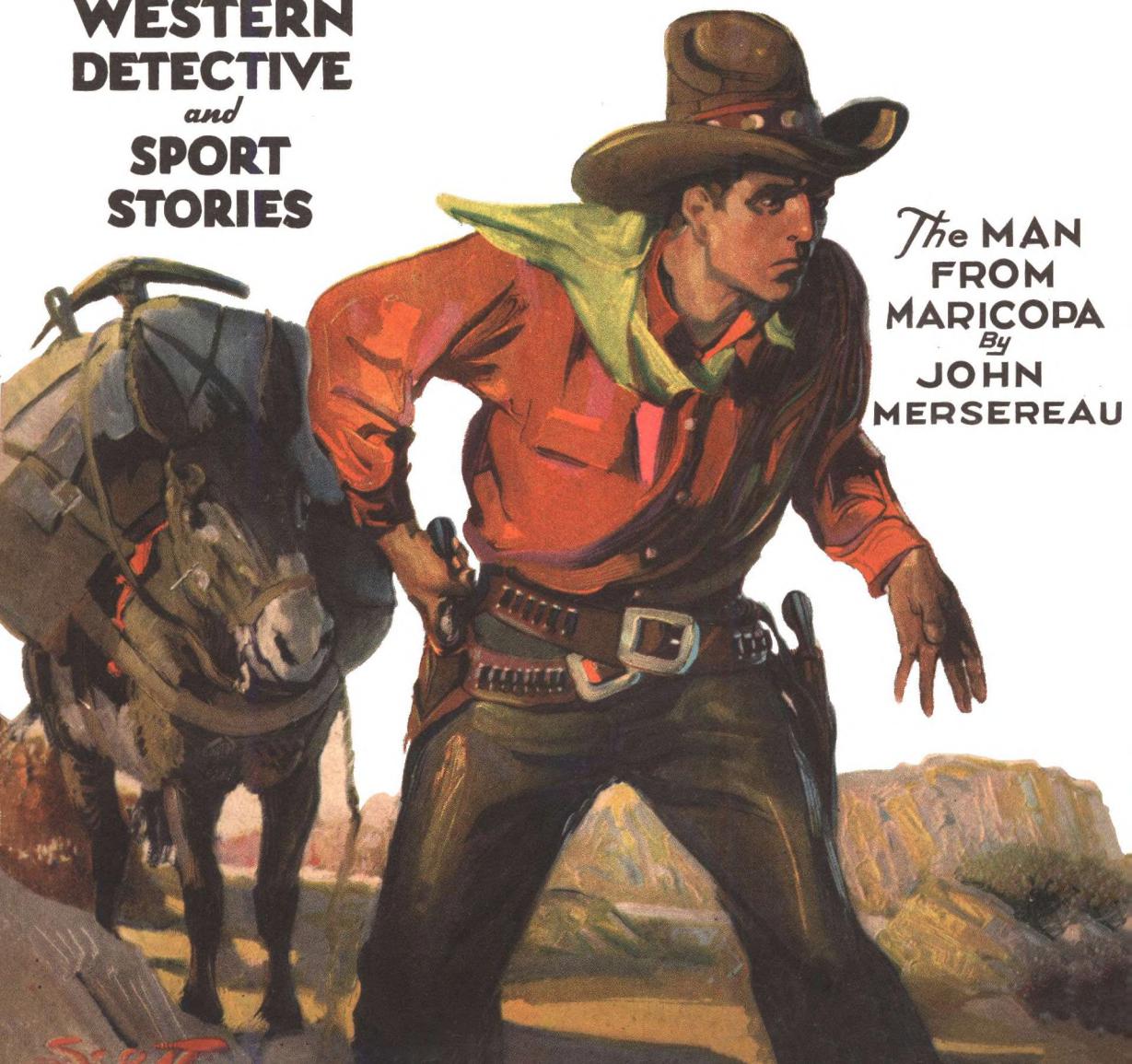
# Top-Notch\*

Magazine

OCT. 1st. NUMBER  
1931

TOP-NOTCH  
WESTERN  
DETECTIVE  
and  
SPORT  
STORIES

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FROM  
MARICOPA*  
By  
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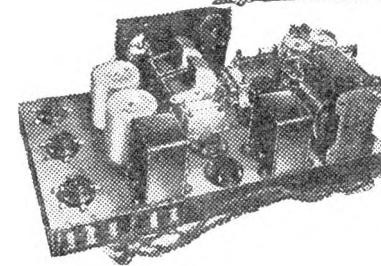
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Number 3

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## CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER 1st NUMBER, 1931

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Cover Picture—Scene from "The Man From Maricopa" . . . *H. W. Scott*

### TOP-NOTCH WESTERN FEATURE

|                                 |                                 |   |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| The Man From Maricopa . . . . . | <i>John Mersereau</i> . . . . . | 1 |
| A Three-part Story—Part One     |                                 |   |

### TOP-NOTCH SPORT NOVELETTE

|                               |                                |    |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----|
| Tame—Like Wild Cats . . . . . | <i>Seaburn Brown</i> . . . . . | 25 |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----|

### TOP-NOTCH DETECTIVE NOVELETTE

|                                   |                               |    |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----|
| The Clew in the Sawdust . . . . . | <i>Ralph Boston</i> . . . . . | 49 |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|----|

### TOP-NOTCH ADVENTURE NOVELETTE

|                                     |                               |    |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----|
| The Thin Flame Of Courage . . . . . | <i>Hugh B. Cave</i> . . . . . | 84 |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----|

### TOP-NOTCH SHORT STORIES

|                          |                                     |     |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----|
| New Lead . . . . .       | <i>Paul Jennings</i> . . . . .      | 17  |
| Timber Beast . . . . .   | <i>Vance Richardson</i> . . . . .   | 39  |
| Relief Pitcher . . . . . | <i>Herbert L. McNary</i> . . . . .  | 73  |
| Lucky Stone . . . . .    | <i>Don Cameron Shafer</i> . . . . . | 116 |

### TOP-NOTCH SERIAL

|                               |                                    |     |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----|
| Tiger Shark . . . . .         | <i>Albert M. Treynor</i> . . . . . | 103 |
| A Three-part Story—Part Three |                                    |     |

### TOP-NOTCH VERSE

|                   |                                 |    |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|----|
| Caboose . . . . . | <i>Emil J. Blacky</i> . . . . . | 83 |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|----|

### TOP-NOTCH TALK

|                               |  |     |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|
| Your Views—And Ours . . . . . |  | 126 |
|-------------------------------|--|-----|

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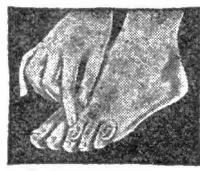
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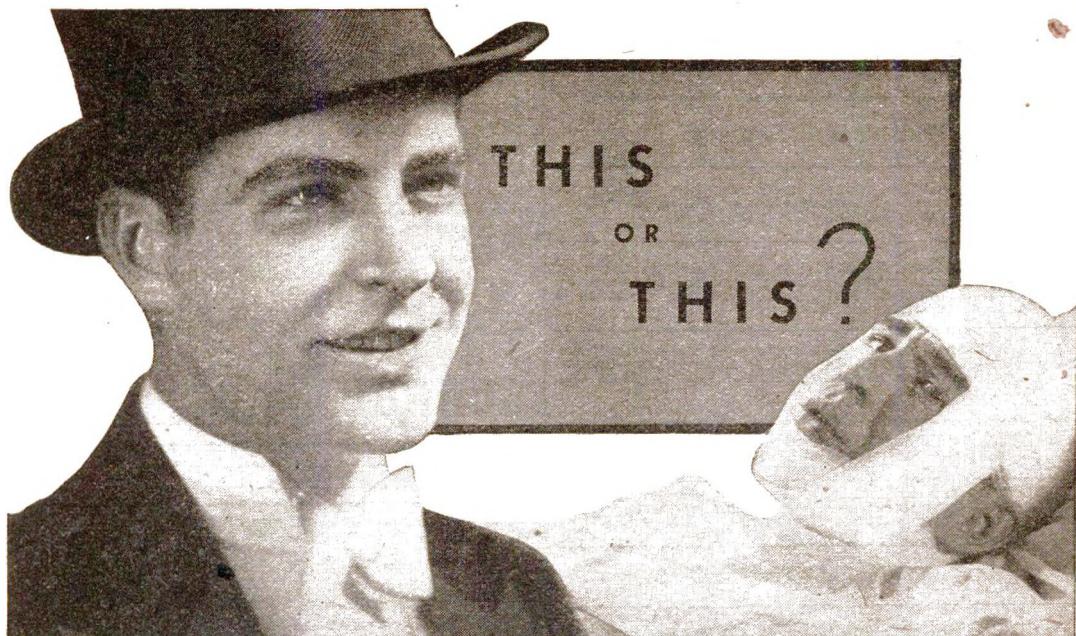
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# The Man From By John Mersereau Maricopa

A Three-part Novel—Part I.

## CHAPTER I.

THE MYSTERIOUS PROFESSOR.

**N**O one in Maricopa had ever heard of Professor Leonidas Hemingway before.

He arrived unheralded on the morning stage, a stranger to desert men and desert ways. But even while his modest traveling equipment was being unloaded from the stage hoot, he introduced himself and proceeded to make known his purposes to the boisterers gathered there before the Maricopa House.

**TN—1A**

He spoke in the round, cultured tones of a student. But in personal appearance he was no typical stoop-shouldered, absent-minded little bookworm. On the contrary, he was a big husky individual of about forty-five, bull-necked and broad of shoulder.

He did wear horn-rimmed glasses, though his greenish eyes revealed no hint of weakness. Actually, they were keen and penetrating; and, like his thin gash of a mouth, they were somewhat inclined to hardness.

"I have come to the Mojave Desert," he said, "from the faculty of the State

university, to authenticate a certain myth that we of the history department wish to include in our monumental work on American folklore. I trust that one of you gentlemen can aid me."

Hemingway paused, a little classroom trick of his, perhaps, used to focus attention on his point. "I am searching for a man who knows the full details of the story of the so-called 'Treasure Bell of Carcel Canyon.' I also wish to visit the canyon itself for local color."

As assuredly as if he were calling on some student to recite, the professor nodded to a tattered, weather-beaten little desert rat who had pressed to the forefront of the crowd.

"You, sir!" he commanded rather than asked. "I believe that an old-timer like you can help me, can you not?"

"I reckon," the little man admitted in a squeaky, nasal voice, shifting a quid from one bearded cheek to the other. "I been livin' here in the 'Jave goin' on thirty year. The hombre you want is Listenin' Joe Lackey. He's watchman fer a closed-down mine right thar in th' canyon—th' Golden Star."

"Excellent!" Hemingway exclaimed. And hidden in his greenish eyes was a satisfaction even greater than that which he expressed. "Excellent! You have good reason to be certain, I assume, that this—ah—Listening Joe is acquainted with the full story of the treasure bell?"

"Acquainted with it?" The desert rat nodded with an absolute certainty. "Hell, mister, he's heard th' bell!"

Something like a disapproving frown passed over the professor's heavy features.

"Please!" he requested. "This is not a subject for levity. We are discussing a serious matter, remember!"

"Waal—you talk t' him, then. He's heard it right enough." The desert rat shrugged doggedly, while his eyes took on a far-away, almost ecstatic look.

"Th' little lead burro's bell a-tinklin', an' Slater's lost outfit comin' down Careel Canyon with their kyacks bulged out with nuggets. Joe'll tell you! That's why he took th' job, so's he c'u'd—"

"Can you guide me there?" Hemingway cut in impatiently. Then, apologetically, he added: "I have only a short leave, you know. I must make every minute count."

"It's sixty-odd miles," the other explained, a shrewd look puckering his wizened face. "You savvy, I'll have t' charge you fer my time an' outfit."

"Of course! I believe I can safely leave that to your discretion. How soon can we set out? And, by the way—your name?"

"Folks hereabouts calls me Saltbrush Charlie," the desert rat confessed. "Accout of my beard. It is a mite scraggly, fer a fact—"

"I see. You say that we can start—when?"

"I didn't say," returned "Saltbrush Charlie"; "but we kin git movin' in a hour. I reckon."

"Splendid!" Hemingway turned briskly toward the stage and peered in through the open door. There was an expression both of indulgence and exasperation on his face. "Daughter!" he called. "Can you never hurry?"

There was a moment's pause. Then a girl appeared in the narrow doorway of the stage, a girl hardly more than nineteen, primly dressed, but with eyes the color of desert lupine and hair blue-black—like a desert raven's wing. She reached hardly to Hemingway's shoulder, after he had helped her to alight. And in one hand she carried, refusing his help, a cheap little traveling case.

"My daughter, Myrna," Hemingway announced. "She's going along. We have our own shelters and the usual adjuncts, of course."

"I wasn't hardly allowin' fer a—girl," Charlie faltered, staring at Hemingway's companion with a furtive in-

tensity. "Reckon I'll have t' figger on more grub now—an' hosses, too."

"Too?" Professor Hemingway barked. "Naturally, we'll take horses. How did you suppose we were to get there?"

"Waal," the desert rat confessed, "my idee was t' load up a jack an'-shag it. It's only sixty mile."

A silvery laugh rang out. But Hemingway himself was far from amused. Father and daughter were as unlike in manner as they were in appearance.

"Get the horses," he said, "or I'll employ some one else who can! And be back in an hour, sharp. That will give us ample time to lunch and change our clothes."

Saltbrush Charlie nodded vigorously.

"I'll be here with bells on," he promised, and shambled off down the dusty street that looked, at either end, away and away into the hazy, forbidding distances of the desert.

He was back promptly within the allotted time, too, but not before Hemingway was waiting there impatiently on the hotel porch.

The professor had changed his business suit for worn riding breeches and a flannel shirt. His bulging calves were incased in leather leggins. And something that might have been an automatic pistol ridged out his right hip pocket.

He observed the approaching outfit with a critical eye, from which he carefully veiled a genuine surprise. For the saddle horses, as any one could see, were well-bred animals; and the two pack mules were big and sleek.

Hemingway observed, too, and with even closer attention, that a lean-waisted, grinning young fellow rode beside Saltbrush Charlie and occasionally hazed the stock along with something of a proprietary air.

"Waal, here we be, professor," Charlie sang out a greeting. "An' meet up with Jimmy Todd, who's agoin' t' do the wranglin' fer us."

Hemingway ignored the introduction.

"I don't recall," he stated, with acid emphasis, "that I authorized any additions to our party. On the contrary I distinctly—"

"But we got t' work it that a way," the little man interposed. "Jimmy runs th' only real *de luxe* pack outfit in this man's town. An' besides, he knows almost as much about the story as Listenin' Joe does."

"Never mind what I know, Charlie," Todd cut in hastily. He shrugged his broad shoulders. "If this gentleman doesn't want my outfit, that's strictly up to him."

"It is your outfit, then?" the professor queried.

"Right down to the horseshoe nails," was the positive response, "and we rent out together or not at all."

"I see." Hemingway cleared his throat, nodding toward Saltbrush Charlie. "Then, perhaps, we could dispense with an extra man, inasmuch as you are familiar with the country."

Something like contempt showed fleetingly in Todd's straightforward gray eyes. But that infectious grin of his was on the job again when he replied.

"Why, we couldn't do without Charlie!" he protested. "Women cry like babies when they taste his biscuits. Just plain envy! Besides, we're buddies. Compared with us, pork and beans are strangers; and Damon and Pythias were mortal enemies, eh, Saltbrush?"

"Yes, yes!" the professor fumed. "I believe I am familiar with the classic friendships; and I suppose we shall have to let it go at that. But just one more point." His glance fixed with marked disfavor on the big Colts holstered low against Todd's thighs. "I shall have to ask you to leave your—ah—armament behind. I am opposed to weapons on general principles."

"Sorry!" Todd's lower jaw thrust out. For all his youth, there was some-

thing notably steadfast and inflexible about him. "I stick by my friends, professor, and these old cannons have pulled me out of some pretty tight corners—out there."

Professor Leonidas Hemingway narrowed his green eyes. His thick neck flushed an angry red. Perhaps the business of teaching had made him something of a bully. At any rate, it was apparent that he did not take kindly to being balked.

"You're pretty independent, aren't you," he suggested, "for a—packer?"

"Just like a hog on ice!" Jimmy Todd agreed complacently. "And here are my terms, not counting grub: eight dollars a day for the outfit, and five each for Charlie and me. That comes to eighteen dollars, if you want the bad news all in a bunch."

"I'll give you fifteen, my man."

"Saltbrush!" Todd requested. "Will you kindly convey my respects to the professor and tell him to go to—"

He paused, his brows pulling into a puzzled frown as he observed Charlie furtively jerking a thumb toward the hotel porch. And then, as balm to an open wound, he heard a voice.

He turned. On the dilapidated verandah of the Maricopa House stood a girl—and such a girl! was Jimny's instant thought—dressed for the trail.

She wore riding trousers and Cor-dovan boots, with the easy air of one used to the saddle; and a sleeveless jacket was buttoned loosely over an open-throated waist.

Todd made no note of the little vagabond hat, for his inspection stopped abruptly at Myrna Hemingway's eyes.

"What wonderful horses!" she was saying. "Are they for us—father?"

"That depends on this young man," Hemingway rasped. "He seems to regard us as legitimate prey for a hold-up."

"On the contrary," Todd retorted glibly, "I was just about to accept your

own terms, sir! After all, one should stand ready to make some sacrifice for the sciences, eh, Saltbrush?"

"It's jake with me," Charlie agreed, looking sourly at the professor. Then he turned purposefully toward his employer's daughter. "Miss Hemingway, shake hands with Jimmy Todd, th' best dag-gone—"

"Saltbrush!" Todd spoke sharply, but his Stetson had already whipped from off a shock of blond, unruly hair, and his lips took on a wistful droop. "Ladies don't customarily shake hands with—packers. Of course," he added, with a hopeful grin, "this is a big, unconventional country—"

Simply, without affectation, Myrna Hemingway offered him her hand. And as Jimmy Todd felt the firm clasp of her slender fingers, he looked steadily into her eyes. They were better eyes, much better, than those of Professor Hemingway.

"I'm—awfully glad to know you, ma'am," he faltered. "And I hope you'll like my desert—that is, mine and Charlie's."

"I already love it," she answered simply. "It's so—"

"Myrna!"

The girl started perceptibly as the impatient professor rasped out her name. A cloth purse, caught in one hand, dropped from her nervous fingers to the ground.

Todd bent down forthwith to pick it up. And since the chain and upper frame lay buried in the roadway dust, he grasped it about the base. His expression did not change. Nor did his voice betray his tumultuous thoughts as he returned the purse to Myrna Hemingway, whose eyes were wide with a sudden, fearful appeal.

"Saltbrush," he said, turning casually, "hitch the professor's duffel aboard Charmaine, will you, while I shorten up a pair of stirrups. Then we'll shove off."

But still he wondered, vaguely disturbed, about that look of fear that he had surprised in the girl's wide, blue eyes. And still more he wondered why she did not wish Hemingway to know about the tiny automatic pistol she carried secretly in her purse—though he had reason to doubt that the professor really was her father.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE GOLDEN STAR'S STORY.

WITH heavy kyacks, camp gear, and two full water casks hitched securely on the mules, Jimmy Todd finally gave the word to start.

Saltbrush Charlie and Hemingway took the lead. The little cavalcade swung slowly out into the desert east of Maricopa. Like a string of toiling ants they were, judged by the Mojave's vast horizons; and like ants they turned and twisted to avoid obstructions. There were no roads here, no trails—only distant landmarks known to adventurers like Todd and Charlie, who had gambled their lives to find the far and hidden places.

The sun beat almost straight down, molten, merciless. Each horse tramped in its rider's shadow. And below was the tawny earth, naked-ribbed and panting, a playground for the lusts of nature—and of men.

Even the scowling Panamints, miles away, were bare of timber where they gashed the sky; and they were cut by great, furrowed gorges, like wrinkles on an old and withered face.

There was a strange, starved beauty about it all, though a beauty that a few choice souls—a very few—might understand.

Jimmy Todd jogged along serenely behind the mules, his eyes lifted to the east. Young, shouldered like a prize fighter, footloose, he was a desert man. Outcast by choice to this lonesome land of barren rocks and blasting heat, he

rode with the spell of the Mojave in his eyes, lips parted, smiling. Nor was he aware that Myrna Hemingway had drawn rein to wait for him until she spoke.

"Do you mind if I—ride beside you?" she asked uncertainly. "I won't be intruding?"

"On the contrary!" said Todd. For a long moment he stared down at her, and there was something like pity in his glance. "It makes you sort of lonesome, I reckon, and maybe a little afraid—all this," he guessed.

"Lonesome, yes," she said, "but not afraid. I do love your desert, really. I'm not pretending."

Silently, Jimmy Todd guided his pony to the left. They were following a dry ravine now, thickly grown with Joshua trees and thorny brush. Grotesque, writhing arms reached out from every side, gnarled and stunted in the ceaseless struggle to survive. Souls lost they were, or so they seemed; and one clutching twig snagged suddenly and held in the girl's thin sleeve.

She pulled up short, eyes wide, but lips compressed.

"Please!" she said. "I'm caught. I'm afraid you'll have to get me free."

Todd reined over to her side and deftly loosed the thorn. He tried to laugh as they again set out.

"The old 'Jave's reaching out for you!" he warned. "Look out, or you'll be a rainbow chaser, too, before you're done—like Charlie and the rest of us. A lady desert rat!" There was a queer note trailing through his flippant words. "I wonder! What would the professor say—and do?"

"My father? He'd take me home, of course. He's a very forceful man!"

"So I've observed. Usually gets what he goes after, eh? Crashes through? But it seems sort of incongruous," Todd mused, "him collecting myths; a good deal like a prize fighter collecting butterflies!"

Myrna Henningway looked up resentfully.

"You're a fighting type, too," she interrupted sharply, "and well educated. That is quite obvious. What are you collecting here?"

The desert man straightened in his saddle. His jaw thrust out, and his eyes sought the distant ridges of the Panamints.

"Sunshine," he burst out, "and elbow room! That's what I fought for Over There. That's what I get out here. I'm free! I own a kingdom—ten thousand square miles or more with hardly a fence post or a house. I've seen things and places that no other man has ever seen. And I can look up at the stars at night and call my soul my own. Isn't that living? Isn't that worth while?" He turned away, ashamed of his vehement defense. "It's hard to explain—just with words."

"It's poetry!" murmured the professor's daughter. Her slender hands were caught to her breast. She, too, was looking toward the mountains. "Freedom! And peace——"

"I didn't say anything about peace," Todd interjected dryly. "Fact is, I've been fighting most all of the time——"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, I wasn't meaning you," Todd said contritely. "I was speaking of the mine. The Golden Star, you know," he rattled on, "out there in Carcel Canyon. They're lawing me for control. I've had to shut it down and leave Listenin' Joe on guard till matters are settled up in court." He paused. "I reckon, though, that you aren't interested in things like that."

"But I am!" The girl's lashes drooped to hide her eyes. "The Golden Star! Tell me about it, please."

Jimmy Todd eased over in his saddle, more than glad, apparently, for this opportunity to air his grievances.

"Well," he began, "you see, they've been trying to run me out——"

"They?"

"The parties of the first part, the plaintiffs—the minority stockholder, who has just come of age, and some cheap crook of a lawyer. I licked 'em on their first complaint, had it thrown out of court; but that's the sort of credit I'm getting for all my work! Without a single assessment, I developed the main ore chute four hundred feet, not countin' crosscuts. I did it by haulin' out little finds of high-grade on mule back. In another year or so, I figured, we'd have things opened up ready for low-grade milling. And, believe me, no mine pays steady dividends in any other way!"

"But," Todd continued grimly, "they got wind just lately that I'm holding out on them; and now they're yelling louder than ever for a divvy. My dad and his partner, old Jabe Stuart, originally found the Star, you see. They planned the development together, just as I've been carrying it out. And when old Jabe lay dying, he sold my dad a few shares for control and put the rest in trust. He was separated from his wife, one of those high-stepping, preflappers, I gathered, and——" The desert man stopped speaking, turning to look directly at Myrna Hemingway. "What did you say?" he asked.

"Nothing." The girl was staring straight ahead, the bridle rein clutched tightly in her hand. "Please go on."

"Well, Stuart loved that kid of his and wanted to provide in a big way for its future; and he had every confidence in the Star—and dad. That's why he passed over absolute control, so that the work could go on as they had planned. And that brings me to the big point."

Todd cast a quick glance toward Hemingway and Charlie, riding a good fifty yards ahead. The mules, broken to their work, were plodding patiently along.

Satisfied with his inspection, Todd resumed: "The point is that they had already tapped a small fortune, enough, they hoped, to pay some day for a mill. They had crosscut a pocket vein of fabulously rich ore, and they had timbered it up. That was to be the big stake when the right time came—or if things went smash. Meanwhile, Stuart's wife couldn't get her hands on his share to throw away. When Jabe died, the trust passed on to dad; and he passed it on to me."

The desert man's face was bleak and grim. His hands now were clenched.

"I'm keeping the secret and the trust," he said, "waiting for the time. No shyster lawyer is going to stampede me! They've run across the story—found it referred to somewhere in old Jabe's papers, I suppose—but the exact spot was never mapped. And law or no law, they'll never get to that cache! I'll just leave the Star closed and bring 'em to their knees."

"But the boy, the legatee!" Myrna Hemingway exclaimed. "He may be starving. And these are the best years of his life. Perhaps he'd rather have a few thousand now than a million dollars later on."

"Maybe he would," Todd smiled thinly, "although *he* happens to be a girl. But that wasn't Jabe Stuart's plan, and it was *his* sweat that made the Golden Star. Besides, I always send the girl one hundred a month—just what I draw—enough to take her through college in fine style. So why can't she be patient like me?"

"But you're a man. And, after all, you have the desert. That's what *you* want."

"There's plenty of room for one more," Todd pointed out unfeelingly. "And I'd think a lot better of her, too, if she'd come down here and fight in the open instead of sending a lawyer's clerk to file her briefs. Then she'd see that she hasn't got a chance."

The desert man chuckled optimistically. "The judge knows I'm square, and he knew Jabe Stuart; and he's old-fashioned enough to think that a hundred a month is a lot of money to get for nothing. Which it is! Why, I don't make that much packing pilgrims in to unearth myths and suchlike interesting things!"

The girl laughed despite herself.

"You're a funny man," she confided. "If you weren't so ruthless and selfish, I could almost like you."

"Me—selfish?" Todd exclaimed, aghast. "Why, I'd give any sand-dune Billy the shirt off my back if he needed it! Ask Saltbrush if I wouldn't."

"You would, if you liked the man," countered the professor's daughter. "But what if he didn't agree with you?"

"I'd probably give him a pair of boots instead!" the other admitted honestly. He shrugged, obviously annoyed by the implied criticism. "Anyway, that's the end of my sad story. I'm not ashamed of being a packer, but I don't want people to misunderstand."

"I see. You don't want to be considered queer and shiftless—like Saltbrush Charlie, for example."

"Charlie isn't anybody's fool, don't think that for a minute!" Jimmy Todd defended sharply. "And he's my friend."

Conversation lapsed for a long time after that. A barrier had risen somehow between them—and Jimmy Todd, for one, was willing to let it go at that.

Indeed, he deliberately hammered at the breach by humming the plaintive chorus of a song: "Tie Me to Your Apron Strings Again." Just because a girl was tired and upset, he told himself, didn't give her any license to pick on him!

The afternoon wore on, but the westerling sun in no wise lessened in its fierce attack. Walking, the horses were

lathered with dust and sweat. The mules grunted as they labored on. Even Saltbrush Charlie was a little wilted and subdued. But he still held to the lead, babbling incessantly to an attentive listener, Professor Leonidas Hemingway.

Over one low, rolling ridge after another led the way, with the Panamints ever holding distant and aloof; up dry washes, where rushing cloud-burst waters once had gouged a path; down long, gravelled slopes, where the stock left no prints of their clicking hoofs. Sand and scraggly brush and silence. Heat and aching desolation. Jimmy Todd's lost kingdom of the sands—ten thousand square miles or more, forgotten, shunned of men—the 'Jave!

But suddenly the desert landscape changed as the little cavalcade wound over a bald hog back. Below, less than a mile ahead, was a last outpost of stunted vegetation. Beyond were other miles level as a dancing floor, shuddering in the heat, a gigantic dry lake bed. And on it only two specks moved, breasting through the treacherous blue waters of mirage.

Jimmy Todd urged his pony up beside the girl's, and pointed to the moving dots.

"Two men," he announced after a long, keen glance. "And one of 'em is riding on a burro. And he's hurt."

"Injured? But surely you can't tell that from here!" Myrna Hemingway protested.

"Just the same, I know." Todd nodded positively toward the sun-tormented sink. "Men don't cross that, not in daytime, unless they're in a hurry. And they don't ride burros when they're in a hurry unless they have to—if you follow what I mean."

The girl shivered and looked away. It was all so unreal, that picture of two men barely moving, fighting for life itself, perhaps, down there below. And to Myrna Hemingway it seemed almost

in the nature of a warning, a warning to go back within the safe, commonplace frontiers whence she came. But, sensing that her companion's eyes were on her, probing, relentless, she turned stubbornly once more to face the east.

"You're not afraid of my desert—now?" he taunted.

"No!" she said.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE TREASURE BELL.

IT was characteristic of desert ways that neither Todd nor Saltbrush Charlie seemed particularly concerned about the distant men. They consulted for a moment in low tones, then let the subject drop, and traveled on. And when the last rise above the lake was reached, they quickly began to pitch a camp.

The mules were freed of the heavy packs and turned out, hobbled, to forage for themselves. An old-timer would have noted, however, that the horses were kept tethered close at hand, still saddled; and when they had cooled down a bit, Todd watered them and rationed out a short feed of grain.

Meanwhile, old Charlie got a fire going and set up a reflector oven to warm close by. As if by magic, a pot of spuds was swinging from a waagan stick. A can of beef was in the frying pan. Coffee was measured out with a prodigal hand. Then, artist that he was, Saltbrush dug into the flour sack!

Finished with his share of the work, Jimmy Todd sauntered up.

"Better keep an eye on this," he casually advised the girl who stood near by, anxious and perturbed. "You might learn a trick or two. Saltbrush stole the recipe from Rocky Mountain George himself!"

Old Charlie brandished a long, dough-laden spoon.

"That that's a consarned lie!" he roared. "I dreamt th' recipe, I did, one

night when I had a misery from eatin' George's dough cakes. He never learned me nothin'!"

"That's not his story, Charlie. George told me——"

Myrna Hemingway stepped suddenly between them. Her eyes were snapping. One small boot stamped in the yielding sand.

"How can you stand there, joking and bickering," she flamed, "when a man is out there hurt and suffering? Why don't you do something? Why don't you go and try to help? You're cruel and heartless——"

Jimmy Todd faced her, dumfounded.

"They saw our dust," he said, "and they're able enough to travel. If they want anything, they'll come this way. How do I know they crave help or a stranger buttin' in? Out here in the 'Jave,'" he added pointedly, "folks learn to tend to their own affairs—anyway, till they're invited to sit in."

"Then you won't go even to investigate?" The girl's voice held an utter scorn.

"No, I won't go. I'll keep an eye out, though——"

"Now, Myrna!" Professor Hemingway spoke sharply. "Todd is right. He knows the customs of the country. Apparently there is danger attached to the course you propose. Desert men have a queer code in matters of the sort, I understand. Moreover, at this time—ah—we can't afford to have Todd shot."

"No, we can't!" quickly agreed the younger man. "I haven't lived long enough yet to be worth even mentioning a myth." He turned away, shrugging. "Charlie, the bakin' powder's working in your dough. And you know what George always said!"

Cheeks glowing, trembling with resentment, Myrna Hemingway stood there staring at the broad back and shoulders of the packer. Deliberately, maliciously, he had made light of her

urgent plea. And she wondered if his indifferent, callous pose might not be a cloak to hide a still more unworthy trait of character than any she had laid bare—cowardice. Was he afraid?

The girl turned from the fire and walked slowly toward the horses. They had finished their feed now and stood, saddled and bridled, by a clump of brush. Her back to the camp, the professor's daughter reached out to scratch Todd's big mustang between the ears.

The whole maneuver was far easier accomplished than she had anticipated. Pampered always by Todd himself, the pony muzzled the girl's hand to beg for sugar. In one movement almost, she had latched in the loose bit. A second more and she was in the saddle. And the mustang, taught to wheel and step out as a foot struck the stirrup, was in full stride!

A commanding cry came from the camp behind—the professor's autocratic voice. But Jimmy Todd wasted no time in idle words. Lips compressed in a thin, straight line, he sprinted for the nearest horse!

Myrna Hemingway saw him thus once, running awkwardly but fast in his high-heeled cowboy boots. Then she dug in her own small heels and urged the mustang to stretch its stride.

Her rounded chin was jutting out—its contour more than a little reminiscent of the young packer's stubborn jaw. Her hair flew free. She rode as one with the big strawberry roan, eastward, straight as a homing pigeon across the dry lake bed!

Jimmy Todd pounded along well over a hundred yards behind. He was sore as two boils, he told himself—mad clean through. And he had a right to be. There *was* danger, real gripping danger, in busting up to unknown men at times like this. There were bad ones, desperate fugitives and worse, holed up in the near-by Panamints; and hurt or not, they didn't take kindly to spying. But

what was an hombre to do when a girl stole *his* best horse and went riding blindly into peril?

"Drat 'em all!" Todd booted over. "So help me, I'll never pack for one again!"

He spurred on at a reckless gallop, but even so the girl maintained her lead. She rode well—where had she picked that up?—Todd wondered—and she had the better mount. It was soon enough evident that Myrna Hemingway was not to be headed from her goal!

Night was settling fast on the Mojave now. The Panamint peaks were blood-red where the sun's last rays painted them with color. A purple haze flowed into the tremendous sink. It was a strange, primeval setting, a lost land of silence disturbed only by the drum of racing hoofs.

Todd's eyes strained on ahead, past the girl, to the strangers and the burro. The intervening distance had been quickly cut in half. It was not yet too dark to distinguish forms and faces. And presently, sighing with relief, Jimmy Todd pulled in his pony to a walk. He even grinned. Those two ragged, villainous-looking desert wanderers were friends of his!

No mistaking the brick-red beard of "Shorty" Gates; and Dan Burney's sun helmet was notorious from Beatty to Berdoo. Let Miss Myrna Hemingway just try to "rescue" that team of ancient sand blisters! In company—well, oysters would be talkative by comparison!

Todd rode up slowly, taking gleeful revenge out of the vivid pantomime that went on before his feasting eyes. He saw the professor's daughter dismount and hurry forward. He saw her stop, uncertainly. He saw her, finally, look back at him, baffled—while the wasteland rats shuffled their feet in agitation and stared dumbly at one another.

"Howdy!" the packer hailed, swinging down from the saddle. In one quick

glance he took in the clotted bandage on Burney's right shoulder and the pallor that underlay the man's leathery cheeks. "Drilled bad?"

Shorty Gates cleared a dry throat.

"Dan says it ain't so much."

"Clean hole?"

Gates nodded.

"Need anything?"

"Shorty thinks we might do with a little water, mebbe."

Todd jerked a commanding thumb toward the horses.

"Hit out for camp, both of you," he ordered. "Saltbrush has supper on; and you can make town before sunup if you kite it."

Burney shook his head decisively, staring at the girl.

"But that's why Miss Hemingway came," Todd explained. "She'll be hurt if you refuse. Won't you?" he demanded.

"I insist," she murmured.

"To please a lady!" cajoled the packer. "It isn't far. We'll be right along with your outfit."

Shorty Gates wet his lips, but compromised on a nod. Giving no sign of emotion, he and his injured partner pulled themselves wearily into the saddle. Without a back look, they rode into the gathering night toward the tiny point of fire flickering on the rise.

Todd turned to the girl with an exaggerated bow.

"The donkey," he explained dryly, "is a humble and unsatisfactory means of locomotion. It lacks speed and grace and inspiration. After your recent spectacular adventure, it comes as a regrettable anticlimax. However, the experience may have its moral—"

Myrna Hemingway bit her lip.

"It won't be my first experience," she said, "with donkeys."

"And I was almost beginning to feel sorry for you!" The packer mustered his most tantalizing chuckle. "Come along!"

Weary and completely out of sorts, they did not reach camp until Burney and Shorty Gates had almost finished with their supper. Totally impervious to the professor's barrage of questions, these last two ate and drank as famished men. The remains of their outfit had been limited to a pair of almost-dry canteens.

Todd watched them for a moment, then went to fill their canteens from a cask. But he had not completed this before the watchful professor came hurrying up.

"Do you think we can safely spare them water?" he queried anxiously.

"I think we're going to!" the younger man announced. "And a couple of horses, besides. Burney can't stand another day of sun——"

"I forbid it!" barked Hemingway. "This is my expedition, understand, my man——"

"And my horses!" amended Jimmy Todd. "But don't worry. You won't be put to any trouble or lose any time. Shorty'll bring the stock back up to the canyon just as soon as he possibly can. And if Saltbrush and I want to hoof it, that's none of your business!"

Hemingway wheeled in his tracks, giving every appearance of one outraged to the limits of his dignity. But hidden in the darkness, his greenish eyes were alight with a sinister and complete satisfaction. It was as if a thought, a most pleasing thought, had just occurred to him.

As he returned to the fireside, Shorty Gates rose stiffly from his supper place, followed like a shadow by his partner.

"Dan reckons we'd better be a-pullin' out," Shorty said.

"But won't he let me dress his shoulder first," begged Myrna Hemingway. "I've had some experience with bandaging."

"Leave it alone!" Todd's incisive voice came from the darkness. "It's better the way it is for traveling."

The girl clenched her small, slender hands; but before she could retort, Saltbrush Charlie interposed a word of low-voiced advice.

"Jimmy got shot, same place, in the war," he said. "Some greenhorn got t' workin' on him in th' field, an' he like t' of bled t' death. The boy knows what he's talkin' about, ma'am, I'm plumb shore o' that."

"That's just the trouble," she returned fiercely. "He knows *everything*!"

"Almost everything," Charlie admitted complacently. "I learned him the ropes myse'f."

Again the girl was robbed of a retort, this time by the approach of big Dan Burney. He loomed up before her suddenly, his eyes batting in an agony of self-consciousness. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down like a duck riding ruffled water.

"Thank'ee!" he burst out, and fled to his waiting horse.

Jimmy Todd held the animal while the desert rat clambered painfully astride.

"Good luck!" Todd said. Then, in the casual way of frontiersmen—so maddening to those who do not understand the nice etiquette governing such things—he put a simple question. "Anything new?"

Shorty Gates answered from his other side.

"Dan says t' tell yuh the Paxton gang's workin' this slope o' the ridge. They nicked him an' cleaned us out two days ago. That's all, I reckon, ain't it, Dan?"

He swung into the saddle and started off. But he pulled up again sharply for a final word. A shadowed form only, his cackling laughter sounded from beyond the firelight; and it was not the laugh of one who sees humor in his subject. "Oh, yeah—Dan says Listenin' Joe has heard Slater's treasure bell ag'in!"

## CHAPTER IV.

## AT CARCEL CANYON.

DAWN found the camp a place deserted, with Todd's pack train more than ten miles away. He had routed out his employer in the small hours after midnight; and not without argument, the party had set forth. But in accordance with his strict command, they were now climbing the eastern rim of the dry lake bed as the sun peered above the gashed ridge of the l'anamints.

The lower canyons of the great mountain range lay close at hand, black and unfathomable in the early light. Long, even-sloping fans of earth spread out from these, the wash of tremendous cloud-bursts through dim centuries of time. And it was up the mile-long sweep of such a fan, a stone's throw from the lake, that Todd and Saltbrush Charlie now led the way.

The old desert hobo trudged along with the easy, loose-kneed stride of one used to "hitting the grit" for long distances at a time.

Todd, on the contrary, favored a pair of blistered heels as best he could. Not that he was unaccustomed to such toil, but high-heeled cowboy boots were never devised for walking tours! Each step was an exquisite agony in itself.

None the less, the packer held grimly to a steady pace well in advance of Hemingway and the girl. He intended never to let them know what that effort cost him—to keep his promise of the night before that they should suffer no delay.

However, he had another motive, too, for they were drawing near the mouth of Carcel Canyon and the Golden Star. The grunts and trampling of the mules provided a sure protection from eavesdropping from behind. Accordingly, Todd seized the moment to compare notes with Saltbrush Charlie.

"You and Hemingway were palaver-

in' most all of yesterday," he accused the little man. "What was he trying to worm out of you?"

Charlie pulled at his sparse beard, a picture of ancient guilelessness. Strangers were apt to think of him in that pose and take too much for granted.

"Don't worry, boy," he said, as he grinned. "I'm like a old hoot owl, y' know; I make a lot o' noise without sayin' nothin' important. But the professor's goin' t' make me im-mortal in his book, so I was bound t' give him all the facts I knowed. About landmarks fer gettin' back t' Maricopa, an' about the canyon an' Listenin' Joe an' you."

"About me?"

"About you an' yore mine, Jinny. He was right interested in the Star. But when I told him about the high-grade you got hid, he jest laughed—like a coyote, showin' all his teeth. He said, though, that th' yarn would make fine backin' fer his myth, and he wants you t' show him through yore played-out mine before he goes."

"I'd oblige him gladly," Todd answered, with a narrow smile, "if the Star wasn't under padlock by court order!"

Saltbrush shrugged doubtfully. He was suddenly and completely serious.

"Have it yore own way, boy, but yo're a-playin' with fire—pretendin' he's fooled you complete by hirin' us out so open an' aboveboard. He's heeled, an' he's bad. Why cain't you lay off huntin' trouble onct in a while?"

"Don't be a kill-joy, Charlie!" appealed the younger man. "The professor is a gentleman and a scholar. Why, he paid me in advance for the trip last night! So we can't back out now. Besides, there's more to it all than you suspect. This trip," he concluded optimistically, "is going to pay dividends, big dividends, before we're through!"

The old desert rat was unconvinced.

"If yo're thinkin' of the girl," he put in sourly, "she's with him hand an' glove."

"She thinks she is, old-timer, that's just the point. But she's due for a sad awakening and a lot of grief. Dog-gone it, Charlie, I'm sorry for the kid! She's game as two pebbles, and I want to set her straight if I can."

"She'll lift yore back hair, that's what, one o' these days! You ain't had my experience with women, boy. Take warnin'! They're a deceivin' lot."

Jimmy Todd let it go at that. He was more disturbed than he would admit by Saltbrush's vehement attack. And it was all true, no doubt, if his theory of Hemingway's purpose was correct. On the other hand—well, how could one forget the girl's magnificent courage and quick concern for those in pain? Surely she could not be really bad!

They trudged on in silence, up and up along the steep canyon fan. The blowing mules had to be halted frequently to rest; and the packer was always glad for the excuse to stop.

Even Leonidas Hemingway made no complaint at these delays, riding though he was. The desert sun struck at him, too, wilting the clothes to his massive frame. Only the girl remained cool and fresh—like a bright cactus flower in a parched wilderness—so ran Todd's dangerous, if poetic, thought.

They stopped for a noon lunch within the narrowing jaws of Carcel Canyon. Above were the towering crags and immense gorges of the Panamints. Below lay outspread the tremendous sink, wavering again with heat and the illusive phantoms of mirage. It was an unreal world, this Mojave hinterland, the bleached skeleton of an earth long dead.

But, like all regions, however desolate, it had its jackals and its human beasts of prey. Heat and thirst and

physical exhaustion were not the only lurking danger of the desert trails. And Todd seized upon a chance opportunity, as he was eating, to remind Hemingway forcibly of that fact.

From where they sat in the shadow of a tilted rock, his moving finger held on a pygmy form far below, until the professor's poorer sight could make it out. A lone horseman rode down there, pressing rapidly and openly along the shore of the dry lake bed.

"But you told me that men do not travel there at this time of day!" Hemingway recalled accusingly.

"They don't, unless they have a special reason and are tough as nails," Jimmy Todd explained, with a cool shrug. "And that hombre, I take it from the way he's been actin' for the last half hour, is a scout for Paxton's gang. He didn't recognize my stock at first, I guess, with old Ronny and the little paint gone from the string. They leave *me* alone, you see." His jaw thrust out. "Not that they wouldn't like to catch me in a hole!"

Hemingway tore his hating, fascinated glance away from the great sink.

"You mean that they are an organized band of holdup men?"

"They are that! For over a year now, they've been raiding both sides of the divide. It's getting so a lone man hasn't got a bob-tail chance to take out his season's dust; and they've cleaned up on parties, too. Gates and Burney, for example, couldn't beat rifles with a pair of Colts. Outraged, see? They were downright fools to put up even the beginning of a fight."

"But they leave you alone, eh?" Hemingway was visibly impressed. "They know you, then?"

"We've met! I have a little German sniping carbine tucked in my camp roll there. Picked it up abroad, and the Paxtons were plumb surprised to find how far it carries. That's why we get along so well!"

"Interesting!" the professor murmured. "Most interesting!" And looking into the man's greenish, shallow eyes, Jimmy Todd felt an uneasy twinge run up his spine.

He wondered, indeed, if he had not made a serious blunder in the course of his tactful warning.

At least, the little German carbine had aroused more than the passing attention of Professor Leonidas Hemingway.

## CHAPTER V.

### A DECIDED RESEMBLANCE.

TODD made no effort that long afternoon to talk with the professor's daughter; nor did she speak to him. They remained at swords' points, unforgiving and apparently troubled by no regrets. He walked. She rode. Whenever he weakened in his resolve, the packer thought of that. Myrna Hemingway was willing enough to help some total stranger on a dry lake bed, but romance and sweet pity failed her when it came to considering a poor hobbling devil with a blister on his foot!

Each step upward now, brought the party appreciably nearer to trail's end. The fan narrowed; the cliffs steadily drew in. And in mid-afternoon, after more than twelve hours of necessarily slow and wearing travel, Carcel Canyon took an abrupt turn to the left.

Jimmy Todd paused instinctively at the bend, as he always did, to gaze on upward to the spot where he—and his dad and Jabe Stuart before him—had spent years of sweating labor. There, if anywhere, was home to him; his place of dreams.

First a rough cabin of native stone, roofed with corrugated iron, clinging to the edge of a tiny, fertile bench well up from the canyon's depths. A pair of gnarled, wind-blown apple trees grew outside the door that was trellised over with fragrant honeysuckle vines. And

there was a tiny vegetable and alfalfa patch, watered by the wastage from a spring.

But the packer pointed beyond that, to a squat bunk house and, still higher, to a great tailing pile.

"The mine," he said quietly, but with a slight catch in his voice. "The Golden Star!"

There was his dream, of a piece with the dream of every true desert man—to develop a successful mine. To eat like a savage from the Mojave's heart, to take by force the thing it promised, but so seldom gave.

It was this, far more than the reward of gold itself, that drove him on. He wanted to justify Jabe Stuart's toil, and his father's and his own. He wanted the Golden Star to rise and sparkle among the galaxy of famous desert strikes, like the Goldfields and Tonopahs and Rhyolites of other days. He wanted—above all else—to *win*!

And the stuff was there! Beyond the first cedars dotting the higher reaches of the gorge were the stumps of trees felled long ago. These were to be found now as rotten lagging in Slater's gutted drift near by, whence the Mojave's mystery man had taken to the last crumb a fortune in high-grade and pocket gold.

It was by no means all a myth, the story of this desert rat. Dead, he had left a rich man's ransom banked in San Berdo; and his safe-deposit box, opened by court order, was found stuffed with fat buckskin pokes of dust and nuggets. And Slater's old workings were now part of the Star claim, a mere scratch, so Jimmy Todd believed, on the surface of the Carcel Canyon treasure lode. Yes, the stuff was there!

But presently there came sounds from up above. The gorge, silent and seemingly deserted, echoed suddenly to the baying of a dog. There came a shout. Todd waved an arm and whistled shrilly. A big red hound appeared in the bunk-house doorway, followed, after

a cautious interval of inspection, by a white-haired man armed with a rifle. Waving in return, he began to pick a slow way downward along the rock-rimmed trail. But the dog, barking with delight, rushed on ahead to leap at Jimmy Todd.

The packer motioned his party to proceed; and halfway to the cabin on the bench, they met up with the watchman of the Golden Star. His jeans and shirt were all a-patch. His wrinkled skin had weathered to the neutral color of the desert. His shoulders stooped beneath the burden of his years. But his old eyes were fever-bright and, perhaps, a trifle wild. And as he came close, his querulous voice suddenly commanded the hound to silence.

"Listen!" he said, standing stock-still, every sense straining and quivering to the voices of the desert. "Listen!" Then, sighing, he shook his head. "No, Jimmy—it weren't them."

Jimmy Todd threw an affectionate arm across the old man's shoulders. But his warm smile faded as he turned first to the girl.

"Miss Hemingway," he said, "please meet my friend and the court's official watchman, deputized to keep me from entering my own mine—Listenin' Joe!"

The girl acknowledged the introduction with a smile.

"I'm right proud t' know you, ma'am," old Joe said gallantly. "Any friend of Jimmy's is a friend of mine."

"Now, Joe, leave me out of this!" Todd gave voice to an elaborate sigh. "I see you have embarrassed Miss Hemingway as well as me!"

The girl chose to ignore the interruption, however, except for a frigid and wholly unappreciative glance.

"And this is Professor Hemingway—my father," she addressed the watchman of the Star, reining aside so that the two might meet. "He has come here especially to interview you."

"Precisely!" Dismounting, Leonidas Hemingway stepped forward eagerly; but he came to an abrupt stop as Listenin' Joe's big hound rose up, bristling, beside its master. Indeed, the professor's artificial smile froze upon his lips. "Your dog," he said, "doesn't seem to take to strangers."

"No, he don't." Lackey ordered the hound down, while his eyes remained fixed on the other in a blinking, uneasy stare. "Leastwise, he don't take t' some."

"He'll doubtless get used to me." Hemingway shrugged irritably. "However, I dare say you'll keep him chained up while we are here—for my daughter's sake."

"But he likes *her*!" protested "Listenin' Joe."

"Better keep him tied, anyway," Todd interposed. The professor must not be annoyed in his research work."

"Excellent!" applauded Leonidas Hemingway.

"But, of course." Todd added glibly, "we'll turn him loose at night as usual to guard against the Paxtons. You could have no objections to that, professor!"

"Oh, none whatever," Hemingway agreed, after an almost imperceptible pause, "although I hardly relish the thought of having a vicious brute prowling about my tent."

Jimmy Todd nodded thoughtfully. Like Saltbrush, he had a guileless way with him.

"Then you might prefer to sleep in the mine bunk house, sir. There's a little separate room where you would be undisturbed by the rest of us." He paused. "I've been intending all along, of course, to offer Miss Hemingway the use of my cabin."

"I couldn't think of inconveniencing you!" Myrna Hemingway burst out. But the professor silenced her with a commanding gesture of his hand.

"A splendid idea!" he accepted

eagerly. "This has been a long and wearing day."

"So it has!" Todd agreed dryly, as he led on to the little honeysuckle-covered cabin. There he motioned Myrna Hemingway to dismount.

"Saltbrush will take care of you," he dismissed the professor with a curt nod.

A slight frown pulled at the professor's heavy brows, but he ventured no reply before following Listenin' Joe and Charlie up the trail. Todd turned to Myrna.

"My castle!" he said, throwing wide the cabin door. "Won't you come in?"

The girl stepped across the threshold—and there she paused. One slender hand lifted to her throat. Her eyes suddenly lost their half-doubtful look. She understood now why Jimmy Todd had gone to such obvious effort to show her this room alone. It was his sanctuary, the expression of his lonely soul.

One entire end of this largest room was filled with a massive fireplace, for winter does not spare the Panamints. There were easy-chairs and a deep-cushioned lounge; a pair of quaint old ship's lights and thick Navajo rugs. And books: hundreds and hundreds of them in fine editions were neatly shelved along the walls.

"Like it?" Todd asked eagerly.

"More than that! But your furnishings must have cost a great deal."

Todd caught the implication, or thought he did. His smile vanished. But he did not choose to explain how he had skimped and saved for years to fit out his "diggings." A perverse impulse seized him.

"It was expensive, but of course we occasionally run into a little high grade. And what my partner doesn't know won't hurt her!"

"But isn't that—stealing!"

"Oh, she'll never be able to prove anything!" Jimmy explained callously. With that he excused himself, abruptly, to gather a few things from the adjoin-

ing bedroom. But he paused in the doorway for the briefest moment. "By the way, that's her picture above the mantel there. She's the living image of old Jabe—though spoiled, of course, by my generosity!"

He closed the door after him, and only then permitted a real resentment to show itself on his face. So she could doubt *his* honesty, could she? Well, that cancelled the foolish qualms he had felt about the little surprise he had prepared for *her*. He worked rapidly and without ceremony, bundling clothes and shoes into an outspread blanket. Scarcely a minute had passed when, once more innocent of expression, he re-entered the living room.

The girl stood with her back to him. As he had rather anticipated, she was engrossed in the picture of Jabe Stuart's daughter.

"Interesting photograph, isn't it?" he remarked.

"Very!" Myrna Hemingway did not turn. Her voice was casual—too casual. "But I thought you told me that you and your partner were total strangers."

"I didn't say that," Todd denied, "although it happens to be true. And the picture was not a gift. I secured it by bribing the photographer for the last college yearbook, which, being a loyal alumnus, I subscribe to regularly." Todd sighed dolorously. "Poor child, if she weren't so unreasonable, she could be an inspiration to me!"

"Really!" Myrna Hemingway turned now, laughing lightly. She had herself under a magnificent control. "But haven't you noticed? There is a decided resemblance between Miss Stuart's photograph and me!"

The second installment of this serial novel of the desert will be in the next issue of Street & Smith's Top-Notch Magazine, on the news stands September 15th.

# New Lead

By Paul Jennings

**B**OB STEELE, who covered night police for the *Star*, entered the dingy portals of police headquarters on the stroke of seven, or exactly when he was supposed to.

This was most unethical. Police reporters are notorious failures at punching time clocks. That is why they are police reporters, instead of bookkeepers, or shipping clerks.

So, when Bob arrived on time to-night, it was a sign that a big story had broken. It was evident in his hurried stride.

Neither did he stop in the lobby at the desk marked "Information" to exchange gossip with old Freddy, as was his custom.

He had a soft spot in his heart for the gaunt, stooped figure humped over the desk.

Old Freddy had been a crackajack policeman until three years before. Then a filling-station bandit plugged him. The bullet did something to old Freddy's spine.

Only an indomitable will had kept him alive this long. He refused to be retired, preferring this inside job, poor substitute though it was for the glory of walking a beat. He was failing fast. Dawson, the police surgeon, said he had less than six months to live.

Bob took the steps to the press room on the second floor three at a time. The usual game of stud poker was in progress. The players included Murdock of the *Journal*, a couple of reporters on the day run who were now off duty, a police court lawyer and a bondsman or two.

**TN-2A**



The air was blue with smoke. Through the haze a bevy of movie queens smiled from the dirty walls.

"Here's the demon reporter, hot on the trail of a new lead for his first edition to-night," jeered Murdock.

He was a thorn in Bob's side, a hard-boiled, ruthless reporter on the opposition sheet. Each was happiest when scooping the other on a crime story. Friendly enemies, working together, sharing routine news, but deadly foes when working on a big story.

"What's the latest on the yarn?" Bob

asked Davis of the *News*, who had covered the story when it broke in the afternoon.

Davis was off duty now. In the morning he would pick up what Bob and Murdock had dug up during the night, and rewrite it for his own first edition. Having handled the story when it broke, he was relaxing from the strain by drinking gin and ginger ale.

"No more than we carried in our final edition," he replied to Bob's question. "Two bold bandits with very large gats stuck up the Central Trust Bank, helped themselves to twenty-two thousand dollars, gave the cashier a chunk of lead between the eyes for a receipt, and escaped. Just like that."

"It's a good yarn," conceded Bob. "That's quite a pile of jack for even a famous guy like Steve Larkin to borrow from the Central Trust without a meeting of the board of directors."

From the conversation it became clear that Steve Larkin was one of the bank robbers. Larkin was a very bad man to meet on a dark night if you carried much money. And Heaven help you if you didn't carry much money.

Larkin was wanted for a string of murders which sounded like a page from the telephone directory. He believed firmly in the adage that dead men make poor witnesses for the prosecution.

"Wish I had twenty-two thousand dollars," remarked Davis, mixing a fresh gin concoction. He had reached the glamorous state where imagination begins to function overtime.

"What would a police reporter do with that much money?" queried the police court lawyer.

"Well, I'd pay my debts and buy another bottle of this stuff," gravely returned Davis, after due contemplation of the proposition.

Bob was invited to sit in at the stud-poker game, but declined.

"I must have a new lead for the first

edition, and deadline is only two hours away," he explained.

"You're an optimist," retorted Murdock. "All you'll get will be a statement from our efficient police that they have found a clew and expect to have the robbers within twenty-four hours."

"Larkin's pal was shot by a bank guard," Davis volunteered. "Hit in the head, but it didn't stop him. The cops are watching all hospitals and doctors' offices. If he's hurt bad enough he may take a chance on getting medical attention without being nabbed."

Bob sat down to his battered telephone. Time to call rounds, the hourly check of hospitals, sheriff's office, coroner and other likely sources of crime news. He called City Hospital last.

Elsie, the pet little nurse on night duty in the emergency ward answered, as he hoped she would. Elsie was different from the average nurse. For one thing, she didn't despise police reporters, who were always wanting to talk with dying patients and otherwise disrupt hospital routine.

Elsie liked the police reporter for the *Star*, who called her at least a dozen times each night to learn if anything of interest was happening. To the nurse there was something romantic in the hazardous lives of police reporters, who accompany the police into dangerous situations with all the apparent boredom of persons attending a symphony concert. They carried guns, just like the police, and knew how to use them if necessity demanded.

"Hello, darlin'. Besides your own beautiful self is there anybody else at that butchery who needs my attention?" Bob asked.

"Not even a hardened police reporter brought in to-night to practice on, more's the pity," was the retort. "No suicides, murders, hit-and-run victims, or foolish persons who didn't know it was loaded."

"You haven't seen anything of a cer-

tain Mr. Steve Larkin, I suppose," bantered the reporter.

"Not yet. He hasn't finished counting that twenty-two thousand dollars. Looking for him, are you?"

"Yes. Maybe he'll split the swag with me, and then I can afford to marry some nice nurse."

"Huh! Intelligent girls prefer to get paid for nursing men," scoffed Elsie. "Wait a minute, Bob."

She left the telephone. In a minute she spoke again.

"Listen! Something funny just happened. Better come out."

"All right. Sorry you don't know anything of interest to readers of the *Star*," the reporter replied.

He hung up. His odd reply was for the benefit of Murdock. Something had just happened at City Hospital. He was not going to arouse Murdock's curiosity. The latter could smell a story a mile off.

Very casually he watched the stud game for a few minutes, then stood up.

"I'm going to get out of this smokehouse," he declared.

"Anything doing?" asked Murdock, looking up from his cards.

"A cutting at City Hospital. A two thousand damage at that stockyards fire," Bob replied without a tinge of conscience.

It was customary for them to exchange routine news items either found when calling rounds. Only on big stories did they try to mislead each other and thus secure a scoop.

Murdock grunted, and returned to the game.

## II.

BOB descended to the lobby. He stopped at old Freddy's desk for a few moments, in case Murdock might decide to follow. Old Freddy was more morose than usual.

"Hi there, feller," cheerfully greeted

Bob. "Seen anything of one Steve Larkin around here to-night?"

Old Freddy's eyes gleamed from their cavernous depths. His hand moved convulsively toward the .45 revolver in his shoulder holster.

"Before they—retire me, I'd like to see him," he quavered. "You know, Bob, it was Larkin that plugged me three years ago."

"I had almost forgotten about that," returned the reporter.

He knew the burning hatred in old Freddy's heart against the man whose bullet had brought him to this menial position in the police department.

Freddy wanted to die with his boots on, shooting it out with an underworld denizen in a dark alley some night. That way a fellow would get a story on the front pages of the papers. He would be a hero, a credit to the police force.

That would not happen to Freddy, thanks to the slug Larkin had planted in his back. He would die in bed, before his time. A paragraph or two buried in the inside pages would be all the mention his death would get. It was tough.

"I wish you knew where to find him," Bob said. "You sure owe that guy something."

He knew Freddy had no hope of being assigned to the case. Younger men, stalwart, with iron nerves and muscles of steel would track down Larkin. Freddy could hardly hold this information-desk job. He was done. The men who trapped Larkin had better be quick on the trigger. Larkin would not be taken alive so long as he had a gun in his hand.

Bob leaned over the desk and spoke in a low voice.

"I'm leaving for a few minutes. If anybody asks where I am, say I've gone to the corner for a cup of coffee."

Old Freddy nodded. He knew Bob referred to any questions which might

be asked by Murdock, in case he discovered the absence of the *Star* employee. Freddy had no love for the hard-bitten Murdock, who had no reverence for the police department.

Bob walked outside to his small coupe parked in front of police headquarters. Making sure his departure was unnoticed, he stepped on the starter and swung into traffic.

In twenty minutes he pulled up in the emergency-ward driveway at City Hospital. This was the entrance used by ambulances and police patrols when accident cases were brought in.

Elsie was in the little office off the operating room. She looked up at Bob's broad shoulders and smiling face framed in the doorway.

"Hello, big boy," she greeted.

Flecks of light illuminated the blue depths of her eyes. The dainty nurse's cap atop rebellious blond curls reached barely to the reporter's shoulder.

Bob thought it would be decidedly easy and pleasant to fall in love with this girl. He was about to put the idea into words, much as he would speak of the weather, when Elsie pulled him out of the office to the door of the corridor opening on the driveway. She spoke rapidly, and to the point.

"I left the phone when you called because a man was trying to open the door. He had driven up in an automobile. He was wounded in the head. I opened the door. He started in, staggering, but stopped at sight of a policeman who had brought a Negro to be sewed up. He stepped back, stumbled and his hat fell off. He picked it up, climbed back into his car and drove away. He must have dropped this from his hat."

Bob took the soiled piece of paper. He glanced with interest at the penciled words scrawled on it.

Bob read it quickly: "4453 Thoreau Street, second floor rear," it said.

He was glad that Elsie's nose for

news had sensed the possible significance of the incident.

Here might be a valuable tip. Larkin's pal had been wounded in the hold-up of the bank. Perhaps he was the man who had fled at sight of the policeman. If so, it was reasonable to believe the address on the paper dropped from his hat was where he would meet Larkin to divide the spoils of the robbery.

Bob knew the approximate location. It was a bad neighborhood, ideal for hiding purposes. A street of ramshackle boarding houses and vacant buildings, on the edge of the railroad yards.

"Thanks, *Sherlock Holmes*," he said. "I'll investigate this. Probably a false alarm, but it won't do any harm to check."

"Take a load of cops along," advised Elsie.

She spoke flippantly, but the blue eyes were serious. Some day, she thought, she might fall in love with this big reporter. And she didn't want him killed before she had a chance to make up her mind definitely on this important subject, she decided.

Bob hurried back to police headquarters. Here certainly was a new lead for the bulldog edition of the *Star* if his suspicions were correct.

He had a hunch Larkin could be found at the address on the slip of paper in his pocket. But how to prevent Murdock from getting the story? If Bob told the lieutenant on duty, a squad of detectives would rush to the address, and Murdock would go along. This story was too big to let Murdock in on.

"Anybody looking for me?" he asked old Freddy.

"No. Murdock went to a fire with the lieutenant."

"Fine," approved Bob. This was a break. He dashed to the press room and called his city editor.

"This is Steele. Send a man down to cover the beat. I'm going out for a while. Maybe I'll get you a new lead on the bank stick-up in time for the bulldog."

"Say, you must think I've got plenty of idle reporters," complained McClure on the other end of the wire. Nevertheless, he grudgingly consented. "And make it snappy. You may recall we have a deadline in about an hour," he ended sarcastically.

Bob grinned. He liked McClure, and was used to these frequently affected outbursts of city editors.

Still undecided on his course of action, he again descended to the lobby. He could wait until the lieutenant returned, but Murdock would return with him. And here was a chance to scoop the *Journal* on a hot story. Murdock apparently wasn't expecting any developments in the case to-night, since no trace of the bandits had been picked up at headquarters. The police were not noted for catching crooks within twenty-four hours after the crime was committed.

Old Freddy sensed that Bob was on the trail of something big. Bob could tell that by the nervous manner in which Freddy moved and the indecision in his face.

Freddy was too proud to ask what it was, but suspected it might be in connection with the whereabouts of Steve Larkin. There was a note of pleading in his voice as he locked the desk and prepared to go off duty.

"Guess I'll shove off. Gee, Bob, I'd like to get a crack at Larkin before—they retire me. That's all I'd want—one good crack."

The reporter stared at the old patrolman. He felt sorry for him. He knew how Freddy felt. It was tough to die without settling scores with the man who was responsible for his injury.

He thought a moment, then made a decision. Why not take Freddy with

him? It would please the old man even if nothing happened, to know that someone believed he was still capable of performing an officer's duties. If something did happen—well, both carried guns and knew how to use them. They wouldn't need to take undue risks. At least, this way would prevent Murdock of the rival newspaper from learning what was up.

"Say, Freddy, I want you to come with me. I've got a tip I know where Larkin is hiding out. These smart Aleck cops on the squad to-night might spoil the chance of getting him. They always bungle things. Will you help me?"

He was amply repaid by the happy light in old Freddy's eyes. The bent form made a pitiful effort to straighten.

"Sure, I'll help you. Anyhow, I'd like to settle my argument with that bird. Come on."

It was high time they left. Murdock might return at any moment. They hurried to the automobile and started just as the lieutenant's big police car turned in at the driveway. That was a close shave. Murdock couldn't follow now.

### III.

FOR the first time in three years Freddy hummed a little tune as they threaded through traffic. He slid his .45-caliber revolver from its holster and twirled the cylinder to see that it worked smoothly. It had been a long time since he had used it. Three years. Bob handed him his own .38-caliber automatic.

"See that this one is in condition, too," he asked, by way of humoring the old man. Freddy snorted as he examined the automatic.

"Huh! These new-fangled guns ain't safe. A .38 is too small in the first place, and automatics jam on a feller when he needs them most. I'll take a

.45 any day. They shoot straight, and when one of those slugs hit you it stops you in your tracks."

He made certain that Bob's weapon was in working order—Bob knew it was—and handed it back to the reporter.

In a few minutes they reached the street they were looking for. It was a dark, cheerless thoroughfare, minus street lights—an unhealthy place to visit at night.

A block from 4453 Thoreau Street Bob parked the car. They would resume the journey on foot. It wouldn't do to pull up directly in front of the place where two desperate criminals might be hiding—not if you valued life and wanted to see the ball game tomorrow.

Keeping in the shadows, they slid noiselessly down the street until 4453 was reached.

It was a forbidding-looking structure. At one time it had been a family mansion. That was years ago, before the residential section had fled to the suburbs on the approach of industry.

The lower floor was vacant. A dark stairway from the open front door led upward into darkness. It was an eerie place.

Bob looked at his watch. Forty minutes until deadline. He must have his story written by that time. Now that the adventure was at hand, he almost regretted his hasty decision to hunt a killer with only a broken-down old man to help. This was risky business. But the *Star* wanted a new lead, and if the *Journal* was scooped on it, so much the better.

Freddy tugged at his sleeve.

"Listen, Boh, I know Larkin, and he's bad. You let me keep ahead. I don't want you to get hurt on my account. I'll plug him if he tries any funny business. Come on, let's go."

Cautiously they groped their way through the door to the stairway. The steps creaked under their weight.

At each upward step they stopped and waited. Not a sound broke the silence.

Freddy muffled a curse as he reached the top step. He had stumbled over what seemed to be an empty garbage can. It fell with a crash like thunder. What idiot had left a can in such a place? Somebody might get hurt falling over it.

Bob froze to the wall of the upper hallway. He didn't like this. The can may have been placed deliberately to give warning of the approach of unwelcome visitors.

With straining ears they listened. All Bob heard was the wheeze of Freddy's breathing. The climb was too much for him.

Then there came a faint rustling sound, as if a mouse foraged for food. The noise caused Bob to start. He heard Freddy begin a stealthy advance to the rear of the corridor.

The inky blackness was transformed into blinding light with a suddenness that left Bob blinking.

Scarcely thirty feet distant stood Steve Larkin, disheveled and unshaven.

One hand was on the switch which turned on the lights. The other held a gun leveled at the intruders. He took his hand from the switch and, magically, another gun appeared.

"Get back, copper!" he snarled at old Freddy.

Freddy halted, his gun at his hip, hatred at sight of his mortal enemy making him contemptuous of danger.

"Remember me, Steve Larkin? You plugged me in the back three years ago. You cowardly rat! I'm going to get you, dead or alive makes no difference."

He moved to one side, getting between the bandit and Bob, who waited with narrowing eyes.

The silence was shattered as twin jets of flame spurted from the guns in Larkin's hands.

Simultaneous with the flash Freddy's .45 roared into action.

Jumping to one side, Bob squeezed the trigger of his automatic. The hall reverberated with the sharp cracks of revolvers. It all happened in two seconds.

Old Freddy collapsed with a groan, firing as he fell. Bob's magazine was empty just as Larkin dropped his blazing guns.

A look of ludicrous surprise twisted Larkin's face. He fell heavily to the floor and lay motionless, almost before Freddy's body had dropped.

Frantically the reporter leaned over Freddy.

"Are you hurt, old-timer?" he asked.

"He got me again, but I plugged him with my last shot," he exulted.

"Sure you got him. That was real shooting, Freddy," Bob applauded.

He darted into the room occupied by the dead bandit. No trace of the wounded man. But here was the money taken in the robbery, in unopened packages. Larkin had not removed it from the sack used when the money was scooped from the bank vault.

The reporter seized the sack, then returned to the hall. Larkin was dead, convincingly so. A bullet had struck him squarely between the eyes.

Bob helped Freddy to his feet and half carried him down the stairs to the street. He had to carry him bodily before they reached the parked car. He eased Freddy into the seat and slid under the wheel.

The old man was seriously wounded. City Hospital first, and then to the *Star* to write his story. Boy, what a yarn! And what a break for Freddy, whose dream had come true even though he might pay dearly for it.

#### IV.

ELSIE met Bob at the hospital door and helped him carry his burden into the emergency operating room.

Quickly old Freddy was stretched

on the operating table. The staff surgeon and two young internes examined the ugly wound in his chest.

The surgeon looked up after a moment and caught the question in Bob's eyes. He shook his head slightly. Old Freddy would sit no more at the desk marked "Information."

He was conscious, and in high spirits, despite his weakness.

"I told you a .45 will stop anything it hits," he boasted. "You'd better get rid of that popgun of yours before you get killed. Good thing I was on hand to-night, or you would have got hurt, young feller. I was afraid Larkin would hit you, too. I didn't want that—I knew you should have taken more help along. I appreciate what you did for me——" His voice trailed off.

Bob leaned over him.

"I'm going to the office now, Freddy, to write my story. I'll be back with the first copy off the press. Buck up, now, you're all right. I know you want to see the yarn."

At the door Bob whispered to the surgeon.

"How long has he got?"

"No more than an hour, if that long. Better make it snappy."

Bob piled into his car and dashed at breakneck speed for the newspaper office. Not only was he racing against a deadline, but against Death. Freddy would die happier if he saw the story of his heroism in print.

Bursting into the city room, Bob grabbed an idle typewriter. As he inserted a sheet of copy paper into the machine he yelled to McClure:

"Here's your new lead on that stick-up. It will take the page one streamer."

Furiously he began writing. He had ten minutes. McClure telephoned the composing room to hold the first page for a make-over.

The notorious career of Steve Larkin ended last night when Patrolman Fred Bartlett shot and killed the robber of the Central Trust

Bank in a desperate gun duel in the bandit's hiding place. Although himself seriously wounded, Patrolman Bartlett's blazing .45-caliber revolver dropped Larkin with a bullet in his brain.

On and on Bob wrote, flying fingers telling a colorful and thrilling tale of how old Freddy tracked down and rid the world of the man who had shot him three years ago. It was a stirring yarn.

When he had finished writing the story, he leaned back, sighed.

McClure dispatched it to the composing room.

"Good yarn, Bob. Say, you look white as a ghost. Sick?"

The reporter shook his head.

"Just a sort of shock, seeing old Freddy get plugged."

With a marvelous speed uncanny to the layman, his story sped through the intricate processes necessary for reproduction before the printed newspaper is delivered to the reader. From linotype to form, to mat, to cast, to press.

The mighty presses began to turn. Bob was waiting as the first newspaper was spewed forth by the monster, neatly folded, still damp with ink.

He piled into his car and drove madly for City Hospital.

## V.

WITH fast dimming eyes, old Freddy read the story of his last fight. Bob's arm supported him and held the newspaper close. There it was, in huge black headlines clear across page one.

Old Freddy read to the very last line. It was unbelievable that this could happen to him, after he had given up hope.

"Thanks, Bob. I'm glad—you didn't get hurt—thanks—"

He stiffened. Old Freddy was dead.

Bob stared dully as Elsie gently pulled a sheet over the still form. The little nurse pressed his arm in sympathy.

"I know—he was your friend," she murmured.

She looked up into his face, then a note of concern entered her voice.

"Say big boy, what's the matter? Are you sick?"

Bob walked to the telephone, sat down and called his office.

"Hello Mac; this is Steel. The *Journal* didn't have a line? Whoops! I'll bet Murdock is sore!"

He winked at Elsie, and spoke again into the transmitter.

"Say, Mac, here's a new lead for the next edition on that Larkin shooting. Old Freddy is dead. Also, the reporter who accompanied him to the bandit's lair was hit by one of Larkin's bullets. And listen, Mac, I made a little mistake in my first story. Fix it to read that it was a .38-caliber gun old Freddy used. That's the size bullet the coroner is going to find in Larkin when he performs the autopsy."

He hung up, and turned to Elsie.

From his coat pocket he pulled his .38 automatic and handed it to the girl without rising.

"Here darlin', put this gun in his holster, and give me his .45. Somehow we switched guns in the excitement out there."

Then Bob toppled quietly from his chair to the floor.

At Elsie's scream, the night surgeon came running.

Half an hour later she was calmer when told that the reporter wasn't dangerously wounded. The bullet had missed vital organs. He would be up and about inside of a month.

"The young fool lost a lot of blood when he went back to his office to write a story instead of staying here," the gruff professional man stated.

Methodically the little nurse went about making her patient comfortable. The little flecks of light sparkled and shimmered in the misty depths of the blue eyes.

She could fall in love with a guy like that.



# Tame—Like Wild Cats

## CHAPTER I.

A ROUGH, TOUGH PAIR.

**A** FEUD between Jim Burke and Rufe Shores became inevitable on the day they went to work for the same company, though their respective jobs separated them by quite a distance.

The Odell Lumber Company operated the large sawmill which was the industrial mainstay of the town of Burnton, some sixty miles north of Seattle. The mill was fed by the company's logging camps, scattered in the Cascade foothills.

Neither had heard of the other when Burke went to work in the woods at high-climbing—clearing tops and limbs from selected trees so that rigging could be attached for the hauling of logs—and Shores landed a resaw job at the mill.

Burke was sandy-haired. Shores was black-headed. Otherwise they were of a kidney. Each was of a mixture of Irish and other warlike bloods, including, likely, a dash of wild cat. Each was twenty; ruled by the fire of youth untempered by the moderation of maturity. Neither was big; both were gifted with the lightning coördination

of brain and muscle that differentiates the born athlete from the merely strong man.

When they met for the first time, in Burnton, on the Fourth of July, each bore a reputation with his own outfit as a fighting fool with a chip on his shoulder.

The log-rolling contest served as a medium for their maiden clash. Twenty men entered the event. The final found Burke and Shores on a slippery spinning stick. Experience as a boom man stood Shores in good stead, and he tumbled Burke into the cold water to the delight of the mill crew and the discomfiture of the camp loggers.

Burke turned the tables in the hundred-yard dash, leading his arch rival to the wire by a yard. On through the day they competed fiercely. Fortune was fickle. At evening honors were even, with no further official contests to be decided.

An unofficial finale was mutually proposed and agreed upon. To insure against interference by the town marshal, loggers and mill men, with Jim and Rufe in their midst, marched to a grassy pasture beyond the town limits.

They ranged in a great circle. Bare-fisted, Jim and Rufe ran—not walked—to combat in the center of the arena so formed.

It was a fight to be appreciated, and long remembered, by the spectators. No quarter asked—not given. Neither understood defense; either would have scorned to depend upon it. It was offense opposed to offense; toughness of body against blows that were quick and fierce, like the slashing blows of predatory beasts.

There were two breath-catching moments in the first five minutes. One, when a vicious upward punch, deadlier because he had the ill luck to duck into it, crushed Rufe Shores's mouth. He was knocked down—knocked half senseless. When he arose, his mashed lips

protruded grotesquely over the two-tooth gap in his lower jaw.

Again a climax loomed as the result of a drive to Jim Burke's body, under the heart. He did not know that the keen pain and stomach sickness were symptoms of a broken rib.

Jim was beaten to earth thrice before his fever of fury reduced the pain to a dull ache and he recuperated to the extent of fighting back, blow for blow.

Bets were being placed. The din increased. Word that Jim Burke and Rufe Shores were fighting to a finish spread through the town—and drew a steady stream of men and boys to thicken the ring of spellbound witnesses.

Among these was "Big Bill" Odell, president and owner of the Odell Company. Big Bill was popular with his crews. A path was opened to accord him a favored position in the circle.

A grizzled veteran of many a fist-and-boot brawl, a battler who had hewn a trail from the ranks to a place of measurable power in the lumber industry, Bill Odell loved a good fight. And he welcomed diversion—diversion of any sort; for the lumber market was in the doldrums temporarily, and he was fighting the fight of his own life to preserve his concern from bankruptcy.

Nearly half an hour passed. The action was slowing—a grudging concession of the spirit to the limitation of the flesh. Like two bloody-headed gamecocks, the battlers staggered to grips—fell apart when one got in a blow—staggered together again. They lunged wildly—wearily; reeled weakly from glancing swings that were little more than pushes.

Sensing that the first to land squarely would win, the ring closed in around them. Had the fight endured to its natural conclusion, it is probable that the story of the pair, still told of winter evenings in bunk house and mill-town hotel, would have ended at this point and been forgotten long since.

But, elbowing through the human wall, strode a man with a bold, upturned mustache and bolder eyes. Threatening yells of protests sent a precautionary hand to his left armpit, where its fingers closed on the butt of a police special.

"Gents," he declared loudly, "I got nothin' personal agin' a little set-to on this order. You know it. But some of the women in town has got wind of your fun, and is all boiled up, and has phoned the sheriff's office that some men has persuaded two innocent lads to kill each other, and has threatened to raise all kinds of hell if 'tain't stopped.

"The sheriff phoned me, as deputy on duty in this here vicinity, and says he's sorry, but I got to come out here and stop it. So here I am. Too bad. I reckon, though, judgin' by the looks of the boys, you've seen about all the fight there is in 'em for the present, anyhow."

The man's apologetic statement curbed the crowd's hostility, but their disappointment was not easily assuaged. To a lumberjack's taste, a fight is not a fight unless and until it is waged to a finish that definitely identifies the victor and the vanquished.

Dolefully the gang dispersed. Leaders of the mill and camp cliques took their respective heroes in tow, to bathe their wounds, praise them, and promise to back them to the limit in a return engagement "which we'll put on where they won't be nobody buttin' in."

The stalwart deputy sheriff returned to the town to meet, secretly, one Leo Cullen. Mr. Cullen, a fat, bald man, and somewhat cunning, ruled the ring game in Birmington, the county metropolis.

"You get there in time?" asked Cullen.

"Yeah," said the deputy. "They was still fightin'."

"Good!" Cullen beamed. "Here's

your twenty-five bucks. You sure earned it! Takes nerve to break in on that gang and take their fight away from 'em."

"Guys like you," the deputy said, impudently, "get by on the nerve of guys like me."

"I guess we do, Carl," Cullen concurred amiably. "Course, you have to admit that my brain thought up the job you showed your nerve doin'. The yarn about the women hollerin' and the sheriff givin' you orders go over aw-right?"

"Sure," said the deputy, adding reflectively: "Shame to spoil a good fight like that there."

"It ain't spoiled." Cullen's tone was defensive. "It's only preserved, so's somebody c'n make somethin' out of it. If one of 'em had licked the other—that'd be that. With the issue hangin' in the air, I can put them boys on for six rounds in the semifinal of my show on Labor Day, and clean up."

"Them kids'll add hundreds to the gate. Every man jack what works for Big Bill Odell will be there to whoop for the boy he likes. And, Carl, you and everybody you call 'buddy,' has got a free ringside ducat comin'."

"Uh-huh, thanks," responded Carl. "But, gee! that was too good a fight to stop."

## CHAPTER II.

### SNAITH CASHES IN.

MR. VIC SNAITH, manager of boxers and, now and then, of dice, elevated his small eyes from the sports section of an evening paper when Mr. "Snip" Ellis, a friend, approached him in the lobby of Snaith's hotel.

"Hello," Snaith said lazily. "Catch any fish? I hope they had a snappier Labor Day up in the sticks than we had here in Seattle."

"Listen, Vic!" Ellis bubbled with suppressed excitement. "I ran into

somethin' hot—and it wasn't no fish, brother! I got back to Birmington, kind of grouchy from bunn fishin', and, havin' nothin' to hurry back here for, I bummed a ducat off Leo Cullen for his boxin' show.

"I figured I'd go to sleep, Vic. I nearly did—till the semiwindup. Say! I never handled no fighters, but if I knowed the racket I'd clamp onto both of them babies. They had a lot o' guys from the woods yellin' for 'em from the start. By the time it was over, every guy in the house was smashin' his own hat and his neighbor's, believe me. Plain goin' crazy."

"Real boxers?"

"Naw! Not boxers, Vic. *Fighters*. And lemme tell you, Vic, them babies'll knock half the boxers you ever seen loose from their experience in half a round! They *fight*. They tear in, hittin' fast, and hittin' hard—goshamighty, how hard!—from bell to bell."

"Sounds like somethin'," Snaith acknowledged. "Still, I've heard such things before. Lots of bush-league champs turn out to be flops in fast company. Which one won? I may travel up the country and see him."

"It was a draw," said Ellis. "Couldn't call it nothin' else. To my notion, one called Burke is a bit the best prospect. A mite the more quiet and steady. The other one, Shores, strikes me as more snarly and less dependable, sort of. Still, I dunno."

Snaith chewed on his cigar.

That a man should come all the way from Seattle to interview him, quite confused Jim Burke; and he was dazzled no end by the fawn-hued double-breasted vest and brilliant suit which illuminated the person of Vic Snaith.

"You mean," Jim questioned, "you want to hire me just to fight? How could you 'a' heard of me!"

"I got ways of knowin' everything," Snaith asserted blandly. "Read this

here contract yourself. It says you're under my direction in all boxin' bouts for five years, and you get a whole half of all we make. And I got fifty dollars, right here in my pocket, which is a little present for you for signin'."

The money was brought forth. Jim signed.

"Now," said Snaith, "you get your duds, and meet me in Burnton to-night for the eight-fifteen Seattle train."

"Aw ri'," Jim promised dazedly. "I'll be there."

On his way back to the mill town, Snaith smiled inwardly. "Jim," he thought, "is gonna be a surprised young feller when he finds this Rufe Shores kid is his feller-traveler and stable mate. I'll sign both. Then I got a double chance of gettin' somewhere with one or tother. One of 'em may flop, an' I'll still have the other."

All went well in Snaith's discussion with Shores until, seeking to clinch the argument, the manager boasted: "Why, kid, I already got Jim Burke signed to box for me. You ain't lettin' him go into the big ring game ahead o' you, are you?"

"Mister," growled Rufe, "you and me don't do no business, if you've signed him. I may go into the ring game ahead of him, or behind him, or maybe I don't go at all. But I don't go *with* 'im."

"But—why?"

"Because," Snaith was enlightened, "I'll go, if I do, for one reason—to lick that false alarm of a Jim Burke. All I know about glove fightin' is that guys with the same manager don't fight each other. Burke's my meat."

"You've had two chances," Snaith said tartly.

"Bunk!" snarled the resaw man. "Once I had the bum licked when a deppity sheriff butted in. The second time, I'd 'a' tore his ears off if we could of fought another round."

Snaith turned on his heel.

Snaith sighed—and wondered whether he had picked the wrong horse, as Shores so blatantly averred.

In fact, at the last minute, Vic Snaith was in dire peril of returning to Seattle empty-handed. For, as he and Burke were boarding the train, Rufe Shores and a few satellites swaggered on the scene, and Rufe yelled:

"You better get outa town and learn somethin', Burke! I'd bust you in two if you stayed here. When you think you can lick me, come back and I'll smack you from under your hair."

Burke leaped from the steps of the moving car to the platform. "Come to it, you mutt!" he retorted. "I'll chop you down before I go."

Unceremoniously Mr. Snaith grabbed Jim's coat collar from behind and literally dragged him aboard.

"You got to learn," he snapped, "to steer clear of them street fights. No percentage in *them*."

"You heard what he said!" expostulated Burke.

"Sure, I did. But a fighter's got to look at fightin' as a business, or he won't get no place. Except guys are saps, they pass up fightin' out a grudge in the street, for nothin', in favor of fightin' it out in the ring for large dough. Is that sense, or ain't it?"

"It's sense," Burke admitted. "I ain't the goof to kick at makin' money out of fightin'. Only I want to say this plain, Mr. Snaith: I'm with you because by lickin' Shores in the ring I can show 'im up for the bum he is in front of more people. See? I'd rather lick him before a crowd."

"I want your promise that you'll get me a big fight with Shores, soon as you can. If you won't promise, I'm gettin' off the train at the next station, and I'm headin' back to camp."

"That'll be easy," Snaith assured him. "But, y'understand, Seattle fans never heard of you. You got to prove to them you can fight before they'll

turn out to see you, or see Rufe Shores, either."

"I'll attend to that, Mr. Snaith."

"O. K., kid. Show plenty of stuff, and then when you tangle with Shores the world'll be there."

Snaith's skepticism regarding Jim Burke's fistic potentialities was soon dissipated. In the gymnasium the green logger inspired respect in his sparring partners and admiration in the hangers-on. Ruggedness, aggressiveness, and a sleep punch in either hand left little to be desired, except experience.

Two weeks later, Jim collided with "Idaho Ike" Seams at the Crystal Pool. Seams had fought for five months, and had not been knocked off his feet. He fought Jim Burke for five minutes—and was knocked cold.

"You'll always be a tear-in, hammerin' fighter, kid," Snaith declared. "You ain't the type to lay back, foxy, and counterpunch. Your defense'll be to beat the other guy to the punch."

"Now, you don't want no regular boxin' stance. Don't stick your left mitt way out like you see other fighters do. You bend a bit, and face your man square, with your elbows low and your dukes just about six inches apart in front of you."

"That way, you're set to clout with either paw—slugger fashion. I'll teach you how to watch your man's feet. His feet'll put you wise to a fast shift quicker'n his hands will."

In Jim's second start he created a mild sensation by knocking out "Sailor" McCaskey in the first round. His picture made every newspaper in the city. One sporting editor embellished a two-column cut of the logger with a "color" story of his history as a two-fisted fighter in lumber-camp circles.

The publicity left Jim rather cold. "When," he questioned, "are you gonna get Rufe Shores down here for me?"

"That'll come, kid," Snaith answered

eviously. "No hurry. You wanna be sure of lickin' him proper."

"I don't want no advantage," flared Jim. "I could maul 'im when I didn't know no more'n he did. I want him to know as much as I do when I fight 'im."

"We'll worry about him later, kid. This here newspaper break has boosted us into a chance at Bucky Steele in the next show. Steele's as different from these oilcans you've fought as moonshine is from milk. No foolin'! He's a boxer, boy. He knows his cauliflowerers. And he can hit as hard as you can.

"They ain't one new beginner in a hundred would have any business in the same ring with that bird in this third start. Steele's been fightin' two years. But you'll learn somethin' from him. And listen: Beatin's don't do a man no good. If he's too much for you, I'll heave the sponge."

"Give me a full chance," Jim demanded, "before you heave it."

"I'm no sap, kid. I ain't hankerin' for no technical kayoes on your record."

In the first round of the Steele fight, Jim Burke discovered unpleasantly that professional boxing on the higher planes is an advanced science in contrast with the business of man-crippling as he had learned it in the woods.

Moving with the precision of a gymnast and the timing of a track sprinter, Steele administered a boxing lesson to the novice. The man seemed to have a dozen left hands. Jim was jabbed off balance continually; and his face was beef-red when he returned to his corner.

"Watch them lefts, Jim," Snaith warned. "He took that round off you by a mile."

"Keep your shirt on," Burke sniffed scornfully. "Ain't this a six-round fight?"

He rushed headlong into the blinding left-hand barrier. Through that round

—and the third round—it cut and bit Jim's face like the lash of a bull whip.

But once, in the third period, Jim broke through to bury two rights in the boxer's stomach; and Steele was glad to clinch and hold on till the bell sounded. Steele had never faced a foe so tireless and relentless in attack.

"Hittin' him," he panted to his manager, "is pie—but it's like punchin' a brick wall. And when he socks, he socks!"

"Tough baby, you betcha," agreed the pilot. "You don't want that bimbo rarin' at you three more rounds. Better ease in and cuddle the old right cross on his beak and end it, Bucky. He's wide open—and you can punch some yourself."

So Steele ventured a resolute attack. He knew Burke would rush at the start. He stood his ground, taking a damaging body smash in order to tilt Jim's head with a vicious left, and cross his right to the chin.

The blow was high—on the cheek. The logger staggered. Instantly Steele was on him, jabbing to measure his man for the knock-out right.

Jim was in his element. His flailing fists levied heavy toll on Steele's sinewy midriff before the boxer maneuvered to gain the opportunity he was gambling for—the chance to set himself, flat-footed, and deliver his right with all his power behind it.

Jim dropped in his tracks, as though a bullet had severed the nerves of his legs. Steele backed into a neutral corner, a smile of vast relief on his face. He had scored with the hardest punch of his life. He had— The smile gave way to an expression of incredulity.

The counter was midway when the logger, shaking his head like a dog emerging from a stream, slowly rose.

"Get him!" roared a voice behind Steele. "He's hurt!"

Steele flung forward. He beat the

slightly muddled woodsman's heavy lunge with a sharp hook. Burke reeled, fell in an awkward heap. As he rolled over and drew his legs under him, Jim heard Snaith's shrill screech:

"Stay down! Wait'll nine!"

Deliberately Jim turned his head. He saw three Snaiths. "What for?" he grunted thickly, and got up.

Steele played his hand to the end. Crying out like an enraged and baffled animal, he hurtled into a slugging bee. Twice more Jim was knocked down: yet when the round was over he walked almost jauntily to his corner, while Steele plodded wearily.

"Kid," fumed Snaith, "whatsa idea poppin' up 'tout a rest when you're clipped that way? Take a count, next time! That's a sucker's game."

"I can't fight," Jim objected, "while I'm on the floor; and I like fightin' this guy—while he lasts. He ain't lastin' long, now."

Steele fought gamely and brilliantly. He tried to hold off the slugger; he failed. He tried the more hazardous method of crowding the lumberjack, with the aim of jabbing him off balance and so forestalling the endless series of rushes. In that, too, he failed.

At the end of the fifth, Steele was dragged to his corner. In the middle of the sixth, he was carried to his corner, semiconscious.

### CHAPTER III.

#### "GET RUFE SHORES."

**S**TOPPIN' Bucky Steele," Snaith rejoiced, "ain't no stunt to be yodeled to the tune of 'Everybody's Doin' It,' kiddo. That'll get us main-event dough in any man's fight town on this coast."

Jim frowned. "I don't—"

"We'll give Portland a treat next," went on Snaith. "I been guaranteed a thousand berries to meet Gene Clinton down there in case you got by Steele with a draw or better. I'll say it's bet-

ter! I betcha I can make 'em hoist the ante to twelve centuries. Eh, kid?"

"I don't want to fight Gene Clinton in Portland," Jim asserted firmly. "Not for any money. I told you, when I come down here, that I wanted a fightin' rep so's a crowd would come to see me murder Rufe Shores. I got it, ain't I? What we stallin' for? I ain't goin' to Portland. I'm goin' to fight Rufe Shores. If you can't fix it in a ring, I'll go out to Burnton to-morrow. I'll lick 'im there."

"Yah," jeered Snaith. "Fight him for *nothin'*."

"You said it," snapped Jim. "Fight 'im for *nothin'*, if I got to."

Vic Snaith's face went ugly. "Here's somethin', you bonehead," he rasped, "that you've got to learn: I can't get Rufe Shores for you, on account of no boxin' commission will allow a bout where both fighters are managed by the same manager."

"But you promised—"

"Sure, I promised! If I hadn't, I'd never've got you to Seattle. I figured the heavy sugar for ring fightin' would push them small-town notions out of your skull; thought you'd forget Shores."

"Oh!" Jim flushed. "Well, I never starved to death workin' in the woods. It ain't a bad life. And I reckon if I want to fight a certain guy I'll go where I—"

"Now, kid," Snaith smiled. "Now, kid. You know I ain't lettin' you go back to the woods. You know I ain't goin' back on no promises, neither. We'll fight Shores. I only meant to show you there's a difficulty in the way, and you got to be patient. I'll get around the manager rules somehow or other. I'll do it quick as I can. Ain't that fair enough?"

Jim shrugged.

A week later the pair were on a Portland-bound train.

"I ain't no fool lettin' a crackpot

pug beat me out o' large coin," Snaith congratulated himself. "We'll lick Clinton, and hit straight East. Before Jim sees Seattle again, he'll forget Rufe Shores ever existed."

Burke's knock-out victory over the formidable Bucky Steele was sufficient advertisement of his prowess to pack the hall with Portland fans for the Gene Clinton encounter. Clinton's style paralleled Steele's. He possessed Steele's speed and ring craft, but was minus his punch.

The outcome of the fight, therefore, was a startling upset. Jim was the favorite to win in an early round. The bout went the full distance of ten rounds. Clinton won handily on points.

Jim crowded the cleverer man earnestly enough, and slugged furiously; but the edge of tigerish fury that had dismayed and crushed Steele was missing.

Defeat stung Jim. "I don't know what was wrong," he reviewed the disaster. "I fought the best I could. I guess he was kind of too fast."

Vic Snaith knew what was wrong. At once his shrewd mind dismissed the scheme of an Eastern invasion. He was aware that the immediate prospect of a fight with Rufe Shores had inspired Burke in his previous bouts—aware that the dimming of that objective had denoted the whirlwind slugger to the ranks of mediocrity.

"It's all right, kid," Snaith said. "You can't win 'em all. We'll trek back to Seattle; and maybe soon I'll have a surprise for you that you'll like."

On the return trip, Vic Snaith sat in judgment on his numerous fight game acquaintances. One by one he rejected them, at last settling, despite a shadow of mistrust, on "Dopey" O'Cloud.

To O'Cloud, Snaith disclosed his problem with necessary frankness.

"I kept things to myself, Dopey, thinkin' that maybe Jim would flop. In that case I'd 'a' had a second chance

with Shores. But Jim ain't got the spirit to fight less'n he knows he's workin' up to lick Shores. Shores has got to start fightin'—or Burke'll quit.

"I'm givin' you a keen break, Dopey. Shores is a nifty piece of fightin' machinery. If he goes over, and interest can be steamed up to a scrap featurin' the two of 'em, we'll both make money."

"Sounds like honey," said Dopey. "I'll nab 'im. Thanks."

"Can the thanks," Snaith rejoined rawly. "You mind one thing: Don't pull no fast one on me, if Shores pans out."

"Why, Vic!" Dopey waxed indignant. "The idea! 'Magine a pal doin' me a turn like that, and me double-crossin' 'im."

"I ain't accusin' you, Dopey. Only remindin' you that nobody has crossed me and been particularly happy about it. That's the point."

"Certainly," said Dopey.

Rufe Shores's entry into the professional fight game reacted like an exhilarating tonic on Jim Burke. He was an intent observer—and Vic Snaith was a thoughtful and jealous one—of Shores's work in his initial Seattle try-out.

In two rounds the black-haired newcomer mauled and mashed Benny Ryan, a fair trial horse, into submission. And then Snaith wondered, uncomfortably, whether he would have exercised better judgment in signing Shores instead of Burke while the choice was his.

"He sure did bump Ryan off impressive," Snaith commented soberly.

"Who wouldn't?" Jim snorted contemptuously. "I'm glad he did, anyway. I hope he bats down everybody he fights in a round. The keener rep he gets, the more people'll turn out when he tackles me."

Snaith brightened.

"You said it, kid. You and him'll draw heavy money, for a fact!"

"If money was all," returned the logger. "I'd say to get me Shores next week. But I ain't givin' him no alibi that I was scared to wait till he had the experience fightin' good men that I've had."

"You're dead right," Snaith said promptly. "Let 'im fight a while. And you keep on fightin'. You don't want him crowin' over a record better'n yours. There's that Gene Clinton affair. Only bad mark against you. Only—"

"Get me Clinton!" Burke retorted hotly. "Any time. Any place. I'll knock him for a row of stop-watches."

"That's the talk, kid," Snaith said softly. "I'll fix it."

The second Burke-Clinton duel enthralled a capacity crowd. Jim reverted to type. He fought like a demon possessed. He sent the fans home satisfied, excepting the few who had mistakenly bet on Clinton. The referee stopped the slaughter in the fourth round, turning the beaten, delirious Clinton over to his frightened handlers.

"That," Jim announced harshly, "is a taste of what I'm savin' up for Rufe Shores."

Shores fought with a frequency that attested his tremendous vitality. Week by week he lengthened a sensational string of knock-outs.

He defeated several of the men Burke had bested, and he improved on his rival's showing. Boxers who had stayed four to six rounds with Jim, were disposed of by Rufe in two periods or less.

"Showin' off," Jim flouted this adverse evidence. "Just like 'im. What good'll that do 'im with me?"

Vic Snaith had no answer.

When the time was ripe, Clive Reynolds, Seattle leading promoter at the time, called Snaith and Dopey O'Cloud to his office.

"Boys," Reynolds proposed, "I'm

**TN-3A**

ready to go. I'll put your cave men on at the ball park. Should be a clean-up. Those boys are the subject of arguments in every lumber layout in western Washington. I'll guarantee you each thirty per cent of the gate."

"It's the shot I been wantin'," Snaith accepted.

"Second the motion," Dopey followed suit vigorously.

Outside Reynolds's office, Snaith pressed skinny fingers into Dopey's arm.

"Dopey, this fight's to be on the up and up, ain't it?"

Dopey jerked away.

"Vic," he remonstrated, "you do get the queerest notions. You insult a guy! It'll be on the level so far's I'm concerned."

Snaith's breath came fast. "That's all I ask, Dopey. All I want."

"Then—don't talk no more about it, Vic."

The matching of Jim Burke and Rufe Shores was acclaimed with delight by fans and newspapers. Betting was brisk, at even money, although a majority of the sports writers favored Shores. On his record, Shores was a quicker finisher of an opponent in distress, and more cunning and resourceful in the pinches.

Snaith, too, feared Shores. However, the assurance of at least five thousand dollars for his and Jim's end provided a silver lining for the manager's cloud of doubt.

Jim remained confident and supremely happy, until the evening preceding the battle, when a blow more cruel than any he might receive in the ring was dealt him.

He was alone, in his room. A small, low-voiced stranger knocked, and entered before Jim reached the door.

The man shoved a long envelope into the fighter's hand, whispered two words: "From Dopey!" Then he vanished.

In the envelope were two thousand

dollars in twenty-dollar bills, and a type-written, unsigned note.

The note ran:

Here is two grand. After Shores knocks you out in the *fourth round*, look for another envelope with twice this much in it.

## CHAPTER IV.

### DIRTY MONEY.

JIM sat down on his bed, stupidly staring at the money and rereading the note. He was sitting thus, many minutes later, when Vic Snaith came in.

"What's eatin' you, Jim? You look sick!"

Jim proffered the note.

"I am sick," he said. "I'm sick in my head. I wanted this fight more'n I ever wanted anything—more'n I'll ever want anything."

"Wha'd you mean, Jim? You got the fight, ain't you? You—"

"There won't be no fight," cut in Jim coldly. "I don't fight no rats. Such skunks and me don't do business. Vic, how'll I get this money back? The guy that gave it to me beat it before I understood, or I'd a' made him eat it."

Snaith's eyes were glittering like a reptile's.

"Them double-crossers," he burst out, "deserves we keep the money and lick Shores! They got it comin' to 'em."

Something menacing in Jim's manner as he sprang up impelled a hasty retraction on Snaith's part.

"No—kid! I don't mean we'd *do* it. I say they deserve it. That's different."

"It don't matter what you mean," Jim said listlessly. "I'm done. The fight's off. All fights are off—for me."

Snaith paled. Just when all was rosy, this had to happen! His mind grappled in panic with the problem.

"Kid," he said presently, "we'll do the square thing—the honest thing—and

stand or fall on it. To-morrow morning we'll go before the boxing commission, and have Reynolds, the promoter, there. We tell 'em our story and show 'em the dough and the note. Whatever they say'll be right, won't it?"

Lester Harriman, chairman of the State boxing commission, broke the silence that followed on Vic Snaith's recital of the attempt at bribery.

"Mr. Snaith," he said, "believes that the fans, and Mr. Reynolds, who has spent considerable money promoting this fight, are entitled to consideration. He proposes that the two thousand dollars be retained by the commission, to be used for charitable purposes, that the affair be kept secret until after tonight, and that the fight be fought on the square."

"Sure!" broke in Snaith. "Jim can tell Shores in the ring that he ain't gonna lay down. That'll make Shores fight. He'll know he's got to, if he hopes to win."

"My view," said the commissioner, "is that his solution is sensible. After all, it's a shame to disappoint thousands of fans and cause financial loss to an honest promoter, when we have the option of forcing an honest contest and working hardship only upon crooked gamblers who have attempted to fix the bout. I don't intend to let the culprits go unpunished. We can deal with them, after the fight, on the evidence we have and what further evidence we may be able to obtain."

"We know now why the betting odds, which have been practically even, have fluctuated strangely in the last few hours. Therefore, so long as no honest person is being injured, I favor letting the fight go on. What do you say, gentlemen?"

The affirmative vote was unanimous.

In his dressing room, a few minutes before the zero hour, Jim received first-

hand news of the home camp from a logger who had come to see the fight.

"Nothin' much new," the fellow rattled. "'ceptin' Big Bill Odell is said t' be badly needin' cash. Reckon he'll see the battle. He's in town to borrow dough. Heard the banks turned him down. By the way, Jim, thebettin's all crazylike. There's odds Rufe'll stop you. Some'sbettin' tother way. Huh?"

"I'll fight," Jim said through his teeth, "the best fight of my life."

And he recalled that now as he stood in his corner. Words were pouring into his ears from the eager lips of Vic Snaith. They seemed meaningless. Opposite was the hate-flushed face of Rufe Shores.

A new voice startled Jim. He looked down into the lined face of his old boss—the face of Big Bill Odell.

Odell was smiling his old smile.

"Fight your head off, Jim. Fight your best—nobody c'n ask more. I'mbettin' *that way*."

Jim's blood spurted. Big Bill had been turned down by the banks. He had to have money. It meant he'd taken the long chance of winning it by risking his business betting on him—on Jim!—to win.

Jim's bandaged hands clenched so tightly that they ached. He'd show Big Bill, the square-shootingest boss a man could have, that he hadn't misplaced his faith! He'd lick Shores if—

The bell rang.

Both rushed—so fiercely that they collided head-on before either could strike a blow. Jim plunged again, hurling his right—and yelled in insane delight as a tingle of shock shot up his arm and Shores sank to his knees.

Rufe was up without a count. Jim laced left and right to the body. The momentum of Rufe's return charge outweighed the force of Jim's punches. Rufe's head was against Jim's chest. He pumped leather to the logger's midriff.

Jim felt himself yielding—giving ground. He had never been hit so hard—so hard that no pain accompanied the attack. There was only a deadness, a paralysis of nerves.

Jim bent forward, as against a blasting wind. His fists ate into their feast, battering the rubbery body. A blow to his head sprayed pain through Jim's head. He was spun about, facing his own corner.

The bell rang.

"Wasn't that round short?" asked Jim. "I was hardly started."

"Short!" gasped Snaith. "Longest one I ever seen! Baby, the way you fools hit each other!"

## CHAPTER V.

### FIGHTING FOOLS.

THE bell!

Jim charged, swinging a high left. He missed. A stunning right upset him. Rufe backed away at the referee's command. Jim was up and at him. Rufe's looping right passed around Jim's body. They were at grips.

"I'm gonna kill you!" Jim screamed. "You hear me? I ain't layin' down in no round! Hear me? You dirty—"

Rufe's left glove drove Jim's lips between his teeth. Even as his knees gave way, Jim whipped a right to the stomach.

It was a double knockdown. They struggled up, to stand head to head, slugging.

The bell rang.

"Don't trade swings," pleaded Snaith. "Stand off. Clip 'im on his way in."

Jim neither replied nor obeyed. He leaned forward on his stool, as if the cord in the timekeeper's hand were a leash he strained against.

When the bell rang, he flew at the fistic tornado that was Rufe Shores. Blond head and black rocked in the blizzard of leather.

The mob roared, sure of a knock-out when a soggy fist knocked Shores groggy and Jim drove him to the ropes and beat him to his knees. The referee seized Jim's arm to escort him to a neutral corner; but Shores bounded to his feet, cursing.

Again—the crash of sweating bodies, the thud of glove on flesh. The bell sounded faint and far away to Jim, for he was lurching up from a half-finished count.

"Coast in the fourth!" Snaith bawled angrily. "You'll get knocked stiff, you fool!"

Unconsciously Jim did coast through the fourth period. His legs were too sluggish to cope with Rufe's speed. Rufe attacked in dashes—darting in to volley punches, drawing back to gain impetus for fresh plunges.

Jim countered venomously, scoring as Rufe weaved in. But the round—the first won by either man—was Rufe's.

"That's better," was Snaith's relieved comment. "Another round like that and you'll be the better man—fresher. Make 'im work this time. Save yourself, and I won't hold you back no longer. We'll stop 'im in the sixth."

Jim nodded. The strength was creeping back into his leaden legs from his virile body.

"Another round," he mumbled. "Yeah."

Jim's compliance with Snaith's plan gave the fifth round to Shores by a clear margin. Miscrediting his foe's defensive tactics to sheer weakness, the mill man forced the fighting savagely.

"Next is the round!" cried Snaith. "The sixth. He ain't expectin' it, see? He's kind of winded, too. He'll go down, kid. Tear into 'im. Don't let 'im get set. Right on 'im, Jim, all the way!"

Jim's legs trembled. He leaped with the bell.

Rufe was gliding at him. Jim saw Rufe's right drop—flash upward. Jim

swerved. The leather missile brushed his ear. Jim sank his left in the mill man's middle.

Jim felt the flesh give under the impact. Their heads were together. Rufe's breath was whistling in hot gasps in his ear. He sensed a relaxation in Shores's entire body.

Jim brought up a right uppercut to the face. Shores went back, his arms wide-flung, his features convulsed.

A flash of fear lest Shores should fall before he could reach him, maddened the logger. His leap and swing were synchronized more by the primitive instinct of hand-to-hand fighting than by acquired skill. His right, with all his splendid strength behind it, found the target of Rufe's unguarded jaw.

It was then that Jim Burke experienced a strange emotion—that of admiration for his sworn enemy—admiration for the defiance in the line of Rufe's drooling mouth, for the courage with which, after two feeble failures, the punch-drunk man pried his knees from the floor to escape the count of ten.

But there was no lessening of ferocity in Jim's attack. To defeat such a man would merely enhance the value of victory in the logger's soul.

A mighty left stretched Rufe a second time, half senseless. He rose on the stroke of nine, glassy-eyed, swaying. But he fought back. Jim slashed him frantically. The bell interrupted the one-sided rally.

The wrath of Vic Snaith was startling.

"The snakes!" he yelled. "I wish you'd 'a' killed 'im! So help me! The double-crossin' dog! You got to kill 'im, kid! You hear me, Jim? Knock 'im dead!"

The seventh was the earliest round Jim Burke had no lucid recollection of in after days. In the first exchange, a

fearful jolt to his head rendered his mind a blank.

When the mist lifted, Jim was on his stool. Snaith was ranting discordantly: "You got up four times, kid: A six-count and three nines. He's got three rounds to one on you, Jim—the rest even. Go get 'im! Knock the dog's head off!"

Jim's remembrance of the eighth and ninth rounds blended them as one. Jim saw Rufe's black head rise in his corner and waver toward him.

Thereafter the six minutes were a period of chaos, save for fleeting intervals—moments while the referee gestured over the writhing figure of Rufe, and Jim clung to the ropes to keep from falling—moments in which Jim's muscles labored to lift his prone body against what seemed to be a great weight pinning him down.

"Tenth round comin' up!" Snaith screamed hoarsely. "Last round, Jim. You've evened the fight! You took the last two. He's half out. They dragged 'im to his corner! A push'll send 'im down for the count. He's goofy! He's slug-nutty! He's—"

Jim heard a gong clang—miles away. How odd it was, to know you were up and moving and not feel your legs under you! Odd, too, how slowly Rufe Shores moved. Why—Rufe was tottering!

Jim hoped his nerveless legs would carry him on—closer to Rufe, so he could hit him—closer—closer.

Jim swung. He landed. Rufe was shuffling away—no, staggering! That punch had hurt!

Rufe turned. His hared teeth glistered in the glaring light. His hands were high. He drew back his right. Jim smiled. The telegraphed blow was simple to dodge. He'd dodge it, get inside, then he'd—

Jim was on the floor. Funny! He'd jerked his head—yet that punch had reached him! Must be getting slow.

Again he struggled upward against the weight of exhaustion.

Rufe was coming to him. Another funny thing: Rufe's eyes. One was shut—tight; the other looked like it didn't see anything. In range, Jim heaved a left. Shores sank down, like a ship slowly filling with water.

As an old man would rise, Shores lurched to his feet. Jim advanced, to strike, and miss. He fell against Rufe. Jim knew, somehow, that Shores was pounding his body, but he could not feel the blows. A roaring thunder from the mob swept over them like a wind.

Then a bell rang—the gong!

The referee parted the clinging men, handling them as if they were children.

Then he signaled the decision: The greatest fight any man in the audience had witnessed was fairly adjudged:

A draw.

The crowd bellowed approval.

## CHAPTER VI.

### FUNNY BUSINESS.

JIM'S senses swam. He remembered nothing more until he awoke in his dressing room. Clive Reynolds was there, and Lester Harriman, and others of the boxing commission. And Big Bill Odell! Odell's horny hand was resting on Jim's tousled head.

"Where," muttered Jim, "is Snaith?"

Harriman stepped to Jim's cot.

"I don't know, for sure, Burke," he said. "My guess is that he and Dopey O'Cloud are together, trying to concoct a defense. They're due for suspension in this State—and in every other State where boxing is controlled by commission.

"Here's what took place: Those two tried to double-cross each other. In the same hour that you receive two thousand dollars and an offer of four thousand more to quit to Shores in the fourth round, Rufe received from Snaith a sum of money and an offer

of more to quit to you in the *sixth* round.

"Shores knew nothing of the under-handed attempt of his management at corrupting you—as you were ignorant of Snaith's effort to buy off Shores.

"You and Shores were both honest. You wanted to fight on the square, or not at all. And each manager—crooks' minds run in the same sewer—conceived the bright idea of reporting dirty work on the *other side* to me, neither dreaming that the other was doing exactly the same thing! Shores and Dopey came to me and exposed Snaith before you came.

"That's why we commissioners let the fight go on. We knew that you and Rufe Shores were above trickery and would fight to the best of your ability. Your honesty protected the public, and we had the dope on your dishonest managers."

Jim stared.

"So that's why Snaith talked so much about savin' me for the *sixth*! He expected Rufe would lay down. And I reckon that's why he was so mad after the *sixth* and called Rufe a double-crosser."

"Exactly," said Harriman.

Jim fastened troubled eyes on Big Bill Odell.

"I'm awful sorry," he sighed, "I couldn't win—for you. I know you bet money you couldn't spare on me."

Odell's answer was delayed by a mild commotion at the door. The commotion presaged the appearance of a youthful individual whose countenance looked as though it might have come out second best in a dispute with an airplane propeller. Rufe Shores glanced uncertainly at Jim.

Odell led him to Jim's cot. With an effort the logger sat up.

"Got the low-down, Jim?" Rufe's swollen lips hampered speech. "I get it you thought I was dirty. I thought you

was. You told me you wasn't goin' to lay down—and I didn't know what you meant. I tried to tell you I wasn't goin' to quit to you—but you fought so hard I never got the chance. And, Jim, you sure can fight!"

"Hey—you plagued kids." Big Bill was speaking. "I got a new wrinkle to iron out in your fool heads. Just before the fight I told you both I wasbettin' the right way. And I was.

"I figured somethin' smelly was afoot from the bettin' queerness. Some—tipped by Dopey O'Cloud, no doubt—was bettin' on Rufe to win by a kayo. Some—tipped by Snaith—was bettin' on Jim the same way.

"I seen you kids tangle before. My simple notion was that you'd be so near a standoff that the best bet was on a draw. So I bet that way—bet enough to sink me if I lost, and to pull me out of the hole if I won.

"I ain't through talkin', boys. You nuts never had no interest in ring fightin' outside of lickin' each other. The flavor'll die out of it now that you've fought it out. You're tame now."

"Yeah, tame—like a pair o' young wild cats," grunted Harriman.

Big Bill ignored the interruption.

"I got an offer to make," he went on. "I've opened a new camp since the pair o' you left. There's a dispute over the boundary line, with the Beeson Company. The boys are tryin' to save the courts the trouble of settlin' it; and the Beeson bully boys are sort of runnin' mine out.

"I'd like a couple o' real fighters in that camp. I want loggers, who c'n fight logger fashion. And I'll make it plenty worth while for 'em. I want fighters who'll stand back to back, and fight with and for each other."

"Jim?"

"O. K., Rufe!"

Knuckles of the hands that clasped were broken. Yet the hands clasped tightly—very tightly.



# Timber Beast

(A "Zip Sawyer" Story.)

By Vance Richardson

**S**TOPPING the heavy bucking saw with which he was cutting a hundred-foot fallen tamarack log, "Zip" Sawyer glowered angrily at his hands.

Dragging the six-and-one-half-foot saw across the log had raised an entirely new set of blisters on Zip's hands, and the muscles of his back ached until he felt mad enough to swear. The harder he worked the less progress he seemed to make. The four-foot log seemed to take delight in pinching the saw; black flies took great pleasure in biting the back of the young sawyer's neck, and the mosquitoes buzzed around

his ears in what seemed like ever-increasing swarms.

"Darn Bull Corrigan, anyway!" exclaimed Zip, who had been christened Bill.

In sudden anger Zip yanked so hard on the handle of the saw that it came off and he fell flat on his back in a tangle of slashing. It was the last straw.

"I'll quit!" he yelled, scrambling to his feet in a fury.

Waving the saw handle in the air, he yelled again.

"I had a job I liked, fallin' timber, and that blasted Corrigan had to put me

at a job I don't like. I'll find another camp and get a job fallin' timber. I don't have to buck logs!"

Zip leaped upon the log and glared in every direction. Perspiration was streaming down his face, and his freckles stood out like rust spots against his tanned cheeks.

"What's wrong?" inquired the voice of the woods boss, who was making his morning rounds. "Did the handle come off?"

Zip swung around on "Bull" Corrigan, gray eyes blazing with anger. The young sawyer's lips curled back from his white teeth, as he slapped viciously at a swarm of black flies hovering around his head.

"Did the handle come off?" echoed Zip. "No, I pulled it off just for fun. Whatta you goin' to do about it, huh?"

"Want to quit?" asked Bull Corrigan grimly.

A moment before, Zip had wanted to quit, but something in the voice of the woods boss caused him to hesitate. Aware that McLeod & Johnson's Camp No. 1 was short-handed, he had expected Corrigan to try to calm him down. Yet that seemed to be the last thought in Bull Corrigan's mind.

"I don't like buckin' logs," mumbled the tall, gawky, red-haired young sawyer. "I'd rather work at fallin' standing timber."

Bull Corrigan laid a powerful hand on Zip's shoulder.

"There's more to bein' a timber beast than just fallin' timber," he said quietly. "And you'll have to learn all of it sooner or later. I was figurin' on shiftin' you around from job to job this summer, so's you'll get a chance to learn as much as you can. By next summer you'd ought to be able to tackle most any job in the woods."

Zip's face fell, and he poked at the ground with the toe of a steel-calked boot. Slowly he began to adjust and screw up the handle of the saw.

"I guess the flies and one thing and another sorta got under my skin for a minute," he mumbled.

"Well, quit your beefin', and get back to work," growled the woods boss as he turned away. "I ain't so hard up for men but what I can get along without you."

Ax on shoulder, Corrigan took a few steps, then he stopped and turned around.

"Say," he said. "There's been a feller named Slovin around lately, tryin' to stir up trouble among the men. Thought I'd just warn you that he may try and get you to quit."

Anger still smoldering in his gray eyes, Zip watched the bulky figure of the woods boss disappear in the timber. Then he seated himself on the log and lit a cigarette.

Faintly, from the other side of the ridge came the whistle of a donkey engine, and now and again the crash of a falling tree echoed through the sunshiny woods. Little by little, Zip's anger at Corrigan died and the peace of the woods settled on his soul.

After resting a few minutes, he went back to work.

*Zip, zip, zip,* sang the six-and-a-half-foot bucking saw as it bit into the heart of the tamarack log.

For an hour, Zip worked steadily. Then a soft gray hat arose above a tangle of slashing, and a pair of furtive eyes peered at the young sawyer, who, intent on his work, had not yet discovered that he was being watched. A heavily built man, wearing brown corduroys and high-topped, laced boots, strode up behind Zip and placed a hand on his shoulder.

## II.

"Howdy," greeted the newcomer. "Workin' hard?"

Zip stopped the saw and swung around in his tracks. He was bare-headed and his hair gleamed like mol-

ten copper in the blazing sunlight. Slowly his gray eyes traveled over the stranger, as he remembered Bull Corrigan's warning.

"What do you want?" asked Zip shortly. "Don't know as I ever saw you before."

The furtive black eyes looked Zip over a moment, then the stranger hauled a flat bottle from a back pocket.

"My name is Slovin," he said. "Have a drink? There's plenty more where this came from."

"Don't use it," said Zip more shortly than he had yet spoken. He continued to gaze coldly at the newcomer.

Slovin laughed sneeringly, as he uncorked the flask and tipped it to his lips. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and restored the flask to his pocket.

"You're a fine timber beast," he said. "Ain't been in the woods long, have you?"

"That any of your business?" asked Zip.

"I'm goin' to make it my business, kid," retorted Slovin. "Now, listen. There ain't no sense in a young feller like you workin' for three bucks a day when you could just as well be gettin' five."

"So that's the kind of a snake in the grass you are," Zip half shouted. "You get out of here while you are able," he added, "or I'll——"

"Yeah, you'll what?" challenged Slovin, who outweighed the young sawyer fifty pounds.

*Crack!* Zip's right fist hit him alongside the jaw and knocked him spinning. Tripping over a fallen branch, Slovin fell headlong. Picking himself up, he held a hand to his aching jaw and glared at the young timber beast.

"I'll get you for that," he snarled. "And I'll get you good!"

"Aw, heck!" retorted Zip. "You couldn't lick the cook's helper."

Muttering curses, Slovin slunk away

like a whipped cur; Zip turned back to his work.

"Seems like trouble has been on my trail ever since I came to the woods," he muttered. "First my partner gets hurt, then Corrigan puts me at a job I don't like, and now some discontented jasper threatens to get me just 'cause I wouldn't listen to his bellyachin'. Wonder what'll be the next thing to come up."

The next thing to come up was Bull Corrigan again. He approached so silently that Zip did not know he was there until he spoke.

"Where'd you get the liquor, lad?"

"Huh?" Zip let go of the handle of his saw and faced the woods boss with angry eyes. "What you talkin' about, Corrigan?" he spat out.

Corrigan's eyes narrowed, and his heavy lips drew together above his outthrust chin. Leaning forward he brought his face within two inches of Zip's. He sniffed suspiciously.

"You ain't got liquor on your breath, and that's a fact," he admitted. "But there's been liquor around here just the same. If you ain't been usin' it, who has?"

Zip was at the point of mentioning Slovin, but on second thought he decided not to tell tales. Unfortunately for his intention at that very moment a ray of sunlight reflected from a piece of broken glass lying among the underbrush caught the attention of the woods boss. Taking two steps, he stopped.

When he straightened up he held the corked neck of a bottle in his hand. Striking a stone, Slovin's flask of liquor had been shattered when the man fell.

"So you don't drink, huh?"

When Zip did not answer, the woods boss laid a hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eye.

"Listen," said Bull Corrigan. "I know all about it, so you don't need to think you're tattlin'. Some months ago I caught a feller peddlin' liquor among

the men while they were workin', so I kicked him off the works. 'Tain't none of my business what the boys do when they ain't workin', but no man can peddle booze in my camp while the men are at work. He's been here, ain't he, trying to sell you rotten booze?"

"You're doin' the talkin', Corrigan," said Zip.

"Natcherally, Slovin was sore," went on the woods boss, "so sore that he said he wouldn't stop at anything to get even with me. Now I want to know just what he told you."

"Not a thing," said Zip quietly. "When I wouldn't drink with him he got sassy, so I socked him. That's all."

"Urrgh!" growled Corrigan, pawing his heavy chin, and staring at the broken glass glittering in the sun.

Suddenly something else caught his eye. He picked up the stub of the cigarette Zip had laid on the log, and a frown gathered between his brows.

"Been smokin'?" asked Corrigan quietly.

"Sure."

"Don't you know that's a mighty dangerous thing to do when the woods are as dry as they are, lad?" asked the woods boss. "Didn't you ever hear of a forest fire?"

"I guess I just didn't think about it," admitted Zip. "Sorry."

"I'd ought to tie a can to you for that," said Corrigan. "I'd do it, too, if you wasn't a green hand who don't know nothing about the woods."

"Go to it," invited Zip. "I don't give a whoop!"

Corrigan pointed toward a round-topped mountain which, some miles to the north, rose high above the evergreen pine forest.

"That's Bald Eagle Peak," he said. "I got a kid up there who ain't strong enough for a timber beast. He's holdin' down the job of fire-lookout."

"You mean he's your son?" asked Zip in surprise.

"Yeah, Lance is my kid," said Corrigan. "He's all I've got since his ma died. Sorta weak in the chest, Lance is, so I got him the job of fire-lookout."

Zip looked curiously at the woods boss. Bull Corrigan was gazing toward the distant peak as though trying to communicate with his son. For a brief instant Zip thought the heavy features of the woods boss softened, then suddenly they grew iron-hard again.

"That liquor peddler knows Lance is up there alone," said Corrigan. "I wouldn't put it beyond Slovin to try and revenge himself on me through my kid. Can't leave the works myself, and can't spare an experienced man. So I'm going to send you up there, Zip, to see if my boy is all right."

"Can't you telephone?" asked Zip.

"Tried it," said Bull Corrigan shortly. "Can't get any answer. The wire has either been cut, or a tree has fallen across the line. You'll leave camp first thing in the morning and get back to-morrow night."

"O. K." said Zip. "I'll be on the job."

Corrigan's bulky figure disappeared among the timber, and Zip stood watching him with a feeling that perhaps, after all, deeper emotions than he had imagined lay hidden beneath the rough exteriors of the timber beasts of the big woods.

### III.

That evening after supper, Zip became conscious of a certain tenseness of atmosphere that pervaded the bunk house.

Instead of the joviality which as a rule took complete possession of the men after their day's work was ended, the men were rather quiet. Each eyed the other as though waiting for a cue before expressing his own opinion.

For Slovin, the trouble-maker, had managed to reach every man. With insidious logic and specious argument he

had sowed dissension among the timber beasts in an effort to convince them that they were being deprived of their just right to drink all the liquor they pleased, even when they were at work.

Early next morning when Zip was on the way to Bull Corrigan's office for the letter he was to take to Bald Eagle Mountain, he passed Tim Garrick, a faller, who was grinding an ax in front of the blacksmith shop. Garrick, a tall, black-mustached man of thirty glanced up.

"Are yuh goin' to quit?" he asked the younger man.

"Not so's you'd notice it," replied Zip. "I've got to take a note to Bull Corrigan's son."

"Why don't the boss phone?" asked the timber beast.

"Line's cut, or down," replied Zip. "Anyway, Corrigan can't get an answer."

Garrick laid his ax aside and glanced toward the woods. The tops of the tamarack were swaying to and fro with a moaning sound. The sun was half hidden behind a murky, yellow haze.

"Corrigan better get the phone line fixed if he knows what's good for him," said the faller. "Woods are as dry as tinder and the wind's risin' fast."

Zip reached the fire-lookout just before noon. A young fellow met him at the door. A narrow-chested, pale-faced, dark-haired boy of twenty, with the face of a dreamer, and long slender hands. Zip found it hard to believe that Lance Corrigan was the son of the burly woods boss of Camp No. 1.

Young Corrigan read the note from his father. Then he led the way into the big-windowed lookout. Under one of the windows stood a little table. In its center a glass jar filled with wild sunflowers gave color to a somewhat bare room. Beneath another window stood an extra table upon which, pinned down with thumb tacks, was a map of the timber holdings of the McLeod &

Johnson Lumber Company. A pair of binoculars lay handy.

Zip saw these things as a matter of routine, but his mind was on the boy who was busying himself at a tiny stove—Lance Corrigan with his slender build, dark hair and dreamy eyes.

While they ate, Lance Corrigan told Zip of the physical weakness which forbade him becoming a logger. Shadows of pain deepened in the young fellow's eyes when he spoke of the disappointment he had been to Bull Corrigan.

"Dad always had an idea that he and I would some time run our own timber holdings," he said. "Too bad that I've got weak lungs."

Zip thought of his own health and strength, and grinned boyishly.

"You and I are about the same age," he said. "Some day, when I've learned the ropes, I expect to become a lumberman myself."

"You've got the physique, all right," said Lance half enviously. Then as a sudden thought struck him, he added impulsively: "When you've learned the ways of the woods, we might get a start together. You furnish the physique to run the camp, and I'll furnish the brains to handle the financial end."

Solemnly, as beffited their youth and their dreams, they shook hands, not knowing whether or not those dreams would come true.

"I'm sure glad I met you, Lance," said Zip in parting. "Hope I see you again soon."

"If you don't get to see me, give me a call once in a while," said Lance Corrigan. "To-morrow I'll get to work looking for the break in the telephone line."

Standing outside the lookout, he watched Zip out of sight.

Six weeks of steady hot weather had left the woods dry as tinder, but Zip did not notice the crackle of the brown fir needles beneath his feet on his way back to camp. His mind was taken up

with the young fellow he had left behind him on Bald Eagle Peak.

So troublesome did Zip's thoughts become, that halfway down the mountain he seated himself upon a log, and for a time gave way to the dreams which had had their inception with the sudden friendship which had sprung up between himself and Bull Corrigan's son.

They were youthful and ambitious dreams which caused Zip to whistle as he arose from his log and headed back to his job at Camp No. 1.

Intent on getting back to camp, he failed to see the figure of a man slink out of sight among the timber; a man who, after Zip had passed, stole back into the trail and with many a backward glance slowly plodded toward the telephone wire which led to the summit of Bald Eagle Mountain.

#### IV.

Zip reached camp that evening to find the men in a surly mood. Here and there loggers were drinking openly as they sat on the "deacon seat" which reached the full length of the bunk house. As Zip entered, Tim Garrick glanced up and waved a half-filled bottle in his face.

"Have a—hic—drink," invited the timber beast. "Have—have two drinks."

"No thanks, Tim," said Zip, and tried to pass the half-drunk man. "I suppose that dirty sidewinder of a Slovin has been sneaking liquor into camp."

"No worry o' yours, kid," retorted Garrick. "Drink, or I'll ram it down your throat. Think you're better'n me, don't you? Boss's pet, that's what you are, yah!"

Leaping into the air Garrick clicked his heels together and came down with a thump. Eyes inflamed with bad liquor, in drunken rage he caught Zip by the shoulder and shoved the bottle under his nose.

"Drink, you yellow pup!" he howled.

Snatching the bottle out of Garrick's hand, Zip slammed it to the floor with a tinkle of shattered glass. The odor of bad whisky filled the bunk house, and a man yelled raucously as Garrick drove his fist at Zip's jaw.

Had the blow landed, the fight would have been over before it had fairly started, but it did not land. For Zip danced lightly backward on the balls of his feet; then as Garrick hurled himself forward with a drunken yell, Zip's left fist caught him squarely in the mouth and brought him up short in his tracks.

With crimson streaming from his crushed lips, the big logger stood shaking his head to clear his dazed brain, while, paying no more attention to him, Zip strode toward his bunk.

He had almost reached it when a sense of danger caused him to turn. He caught a glimpse of shining steel calks as Garrick kicked at him.

Maddened at the treachery, Zip dodged, and side-stepped. Doubling his right fist, he smashed the big timber beast full on the point of the jaw. Crashing to the floor, Garrick lay motionless.

Gray eyes blazing beneath a cluster of red hair which had fallen over his forehead, Zip glared at the astonished loggers. Tall and uncouth-looking in his blue woolen shirt and stagged pants, he forgot that he was only one against a crowd. Words tumbled from his lips in incoherent speech.

"Any more of you lookin' for trouble?" he snarled with lips drawn back from his white teeth. "You foul-fightin' hunch of roughnecks. I can whip any man in camp who thinks he can make me drink against my will."

It seemed very likely that Zip would have had to make good his boast, but at that moment the door opened, and Bull Corrigan strode into the bunk house.

One could have heard a needle drop as the boss looked from Zip to the unconscious form of Tim Garrick lying

amid the broken glass scattered on the floor.

Bull Corrigan seated himself at the bunk house table and took his time book and a check book from his pocket.

"So you think you can run this camp to suit yourselves, boys," he said quietly.

"Now, we'll settle that right here and now. Either you give up every drop of liquor in camp, or I'll fire the whole bunch."

Man looked at man in silence. Crawling to his feet, Tim Garrick seated himself with his head between his hands. Of all there, only Zip looked Bull Corrigan in the eye.

"You're a fine boss," said Zip quietly. "Why don't you run Slovin off instead of taking out your spite on these fellows? You ought to have better sense, Corrigan, than to let a low-down, dirty hound like Slovin run out as good a bunch of men as ever worked in the woods."

"Yeah?" growled Bull Corrigan. "And who might your royal highness be to tell me where to head in at? I was runnin' a loggin' camp twenty years afore you was hatched, you long-legged, ganglin' dude."

Roused to anger beyond his control, Zip took a step forward.

"Maybe you were," he said. "But you'll see the day when you'll come huntin' a job from me, even if I am only a dude."

"You and who else?" snarled the woods boss.

With the remnant of his daydreams still in his mind, Zip said boldly:

"Some day I'll be one of the biggest lumbermen in the Misabe Range."

Corrigan burst into a bull-throated roar of laughter that was echoed by the snickers of several of the listening timber beasts.

"Just for that, you can take your time," said the woods boss when at last he found words, "and go hunt yourself another job."

A sob rose in Zip's throat as he accepted the check Corrigan wrote out. And so his dream was ended. In the morning he would leave camp, and the friendship he had started with Bull Corrigan's son would die a natural death.

Corrigan paid off three men that night. The others gave up their liquor rather than lose their jobs. At last the burly woods boss arose from the table and turned toward the door.

Opening it, Corrigan glanced over his shoulder and spoke to the man Zip had whipped.

"Looks like we might have to lay off fallin' the big stuff in the mornin', Garrick," he said. "It's beginning to blow hard."

One by one the men began to go to bed. Zip, too, crawled into his bunk, but for some time he could not sleep. Corrigan's injustice in firing him lay heavy on his mind. Zip fell asleep with his mind made up that in the morning he would go to Bald Eagle Peak and bid farewell to Lance Corrigan. Perhaps in the years to come they two would meet again.

For a time the darkness in the bunk house was impenetrable, then slowly it began to lighten. Over in his bunk in one corner, Zip awoke and glanced at his watch, thinking that he must have overslept. Then he shook the watch violently and held it to his ear, for the hands only indicated three o'clock. The watch was still running. He sat up in his bunk and at what he saw, suddenly scrambled out of it. He threw open the bunk-house door, and stood in his underwear staring.

"Fire!" he yelled. "The woods are afire."

## V.

Zip's yell was echoed by the thumping of bare feet on the floor. Oaths crackled like musketry as the awakened loggers hurried into pants and shoes.

"Fire, fire, fire!" Forty men yelling at the top of their lungs burst out of the bunk house and awakened Bull Corrigan. He leaped for the phone. He called his son on Bald Eagle Mountain.

The phone was silent.

Clad only in his heavy red woolen underwear, Bull Corrigan stepped outside his office, and stared at the yellow glare that was rising above the treetops.

"The way the wind is blowin' we're going to have our hands full," he said quietly. "Let the camp go while we try and save the standing timber. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Tim Garrick, fully sober by now, glanced toward the burning woods.

"That'll be Slovin's work," growled the big timber beast.

"I don't see how the fire got such a start without the lookout having reported it."

"Wires are down, or cut," replied Bull Corrigan shortly. "By the way, one of you start for Bald Eagle Mountain right away. I wouldn't put murder beyond a man who would deliberately fire the woods, and that boy of mine is up on the mountain alone."

"That red-headed kid—Zip Sawyer—has started for Bald Eagle Mountain already, Corrigan," said Garrick. "He went tearing off like he was crazy as soon as he could get into his clothes."

It was a fact. At that moment Zip was traveling over the trail to the fire-lookout as fast as his legs could carry him. It was his first forest fire, and the sight of the flames shooting high above the treetops had filled his heart with terror—terror not for the big timber, not for himself, but for the life of Lance Corrigan.

With half-formed thoughts tumbling over each other in his mind, he raced up the smoky trail toward the summit of Bald Eagle Mountain.

At last, he had to pause for breath. Below him he could see the fire raging in the slashings. Tinder-dry branches

and tamarack tops burst into showers of sparks that, carried up the mountain by wind, started new fires here, there and everywhere. Snaky flames darted up the pitchy seams of dry snags. Donkey engines, like big, black, ugly idols, squatted here and there amid the flames indifferent to the roar and crackle of the fire.

Suddenly Zip felt a stabbing pain in his shoulder as a wind-borne cinder burned through his shirt. The air was filled with millions of embers hurrying up the mountain ahead of the wind. Less than a hundred feet from Zip, a dead fir crackled and roared into flame. Now the fire was racing from treetop to treetop up Bald Eagle Mountain. For the first time Zip felt fear for his own safety as the fire closed in.

In one hour, Zip had covered a distance which under ordinary circumstances would have taken him two hours, but still he was far from the line where the timber ceased. And then suddenly it occurred to him that the fire could not go beyond that line.

Completely surrounded by slopes of bare granite, Bald Eagle lookout was in no danger of destruction.

"Gee!" exclaimed Zip. "I've sure made a fool of myself for nothing at all."

But he had to go on, for his back trail had been cut off by the fire. Yet Zip did not know whether he could reach the safety of the lookout. While the fire in the tops of the trees already had raced onward, embers by thousands were falling on the dry needles, and hundreds of tiny fires were springing up among the underbrush.

The smoke was so thick that Zip could hardly breathe. Choking and gasping, he hurried upward, knowing that his only chance of life lay in reaching the lookout before the brush fire headed him off.

How Zip did it he never knew, but at last, with his shirt smoking in several

places, his hands and face blistered by the scorching heat, he fell forward against the door of the lookout.

"Lance!" he gasped. "Are you—all right?"

The only answer was the baffled roar of the pursuing flames as they were halted abruptly by the gray granite slopes below the lookout.

Groping for the catch of the door, Zip raised it and crawled into the room.

Lance Corrigan was gone!

Half blinded by the smoke, Zip rubbed his eyes, then exhaustion overcame him. When he regained consciousness he thought he had had a bad dream, for Lance Corrigan was bending over him.

Fearfully Zip caught the hand of Bull Corrigan's son.

"I thought," he whispered huskily, "I thought—that—you—were—out there."

"I was out there for a while," replied Lance. "I went down to try and find the break in the wires. There's a dozen sections of the line missing, Zip. Somebody must have cut the line."

Zip managed to gain his feet. Side by side, Bull Corrigan's son and Zip turned to one of the big windows, and stood gazing at the clouds of yellow smoke billowing above the big timber. And as he watched the woods burn, slowly two tears rolled down Zip's scorched cheeks.

"The trees; the pines and firs and tamaracks are burning," he choked. "If I ever meet the man who set fire to the woods, I'll kill him with my bare hands!"

Watching the burning forest, neither Zip nor Lance heard the door open. They did not know any one else was in the room until behind them they heard a voice croak hoarsely:

"Up with your hands!"

Turning, they saw a man whose hair had been singed off his head; a man whose eyebrows were gone, and whose

clothes hung about him in smoldering rags. In one hand he held an automatic pistol with which he covered them both. It was Slovin!

It was easy to see that the firebug was half mad with the pain of his burns, for the hand which held the pistol trembled, and his body was quivering in every muscle. And it was plain that he was bent on murder, as he took deliberate aim at Lance Corrigan's heart.

"Two of you where I only expected to find one," growled Slovin. "Well, it don't make no difference, for there's nine shots in this gun."

It was the first time Zip had ever faced an armed man bent on murder, and in spite of himself he knew he was trembling—not in fear of death, but for fear that Slovin would kill Lance Corrigan. And, seeing Zip's fear, the pain-crazed firebug laughed jeeringly.

"Yeah, I'm going to kill both of you," he snarled. "March out of that door. I'll teach Bull Corrigan a lesson he'll never forget. March out of that door down to the edge of the fire!"

Lance took a step forward with his hands held high, but Zip did not move.

"Why not kill us here, and be done with it?" he asked.

Slovin laughed hoarsely as he tried to control the trembling of the scorched muscles of the hand that held the pistol.

"'Cause I'm going to drive you into the fire and watch you sizzle," he mouthed. "Out that door!"

Shaking with fear of such a terrible death, Lance Corrigan hesitated and glanced appealingly at Zip.

"Can't you do something—anything—to stop him?" begged Bull Corrigan's son. "He can't mean he's going to burn us to death."

"I guess that is just what he does mean," said Zip. "Go ahead! We may as well look it in the face!"

Slowly Lance took another step and then another. Behind him, prodded in the back by the muzzle of Slovin's auto-

matic, Zip followed with his hands held high.

Confident that he held the upper hand, Slovin pressed harder against Zip's back with the muzzle of the automatic.

"Get a move on you!" he growled, as he kicked at Zip's legs.

And then, with sudden memory of how Tim Garrick had tried to calk him, Zip lifted his right foot and drove it backward in a terrific kick at the unsuspecting Slovin.

Struck in the pit of the stomach by the steel-calked logger's boot, Slovin unconsciously squeezed the trigger of his gun, but the bullet missed Zip's head by an inch.

The next instant he had hurled himself at the firebug and pinned him to the ground.

#### VI.

Two days later, Bull Corrigan was sitting in his office with his chin on his hand, staring out of the window at the desolation surrounding the camp. The door opened, and the woods boss glanced up. Clothes burned full of holes, hair scorched off their heads, and faces covered with raw, red burns, three men staggered into the office.

The man on the right was Zip, the man on the left was Bull Corrigan's son. Between them they supported the burned and battered wreck of the man called Slovin. His hands were tied behind his back.

"My kid!" Bull Corrigan's voice broke as he leaped to his feet. "I

thought the fire had got you, for when we reached the lookout you was gone."

"We had to come by a different trail, dad," said Lance, "and we came pretty near not getting through at all." And he told Bull Corrigan how Zip had saved his life.

Zip waited until Lance got through, then he held out his hand.

"So long, Lance," he said. "I'll see you again some time."

"Where you going?" bellowed Bull Corrigan.

"To hunt me another job," replied Zip.

"You are not!" snorted the woods boss. "Gimme back that check I wrote, or I'll take it away from you."

"Sorry, Corrigan, but I can't return it," said Zip. "A cinder dropped into my pocket and burned the check up."

"Urrgh!" growled Bull Corrigan. "And a good thing it did."

He put a hand on Zip's shoulder and led him to the window.

"See all that burned timber?" he asked.

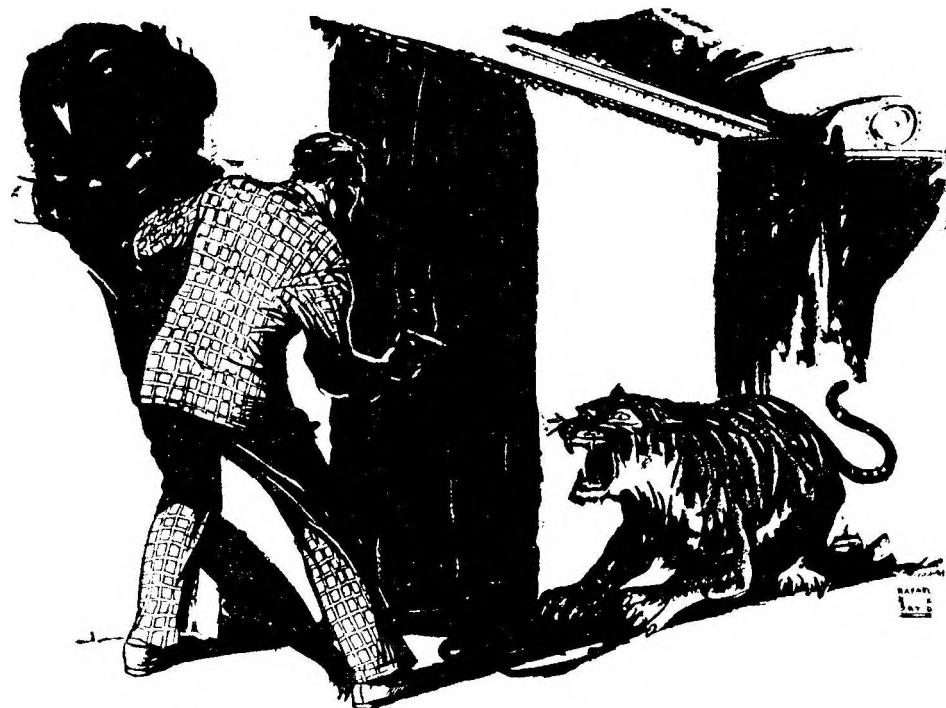
"Sure, I see it," replied Zip. "I ain't likely to forget it."

"Well, them trees has got to be felled afore the sap sours and spoils the lumber," said Bull Corrigan, "and bein' short of men, I'll have to put you on as head faller as soon as you're able to work. Yeah, Zip, I'll have to take a chance on you. You're still green, but you got some of the makin's of a real timber beast in you."



#### A GLACIAL AGE TORTOISE

PERHAPS the largest land tortoise that ever existed is on exhibition, in skeleton form, in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. It was found in the Siwalik Hills of northern India by the leader of a museum expedition. It required two years to reconstruct its several thousand fragments. Completed, it is found that this gigantic turtle (*Colossochelys Atlas*) must have weighed two thousand one hundred pounds when alive. In its skeleton form it is a little more than seven feet long and has a thickness through its center of three feet. In age it is believed to date from the Pleistocene or Glacial Age.



# The Clew in the Sawdust

By Ralph Boston

An "O. K. Polter" Novelette.

## CHAPTER I.

DANGER AHEAD!

**O**RVILLE KANE POLTER, private detective, sat in the Pullman smoking compartment while the Woodland Limited, northwest bound, tore its way through the night.

He was reading the latest edition of his favorite Chicago evening newspaper. And there was plenty of news: A New York judge had been investigated, and had been found to be honest. Two pairs of aviators had hopped off for Europe. Three or four pairs of racketeers in

various American cities had hopped off on even longer journeys—rival racketeers having seen to it that they got complete one-way passages.

Polter turned from the first page and found the sporting section. A leading pugilist announced his retirement from the ring. The New York Yankees had nosed out the Athletics. Ruth's homer poled over the fence in the ninth, with two on, had turned the trick.

Births, deaths; marriages, divorces; good news, bad news. The management of a big brokerage house announced the closing of its doors. The management of a big circus—the Carteret Wide

**TN-4A**

World Show—announced that its business through the Middle West was the biggest in the history of the organization.

Yes, plenty seemed to be happening, Polter decided. But just at the present, very little seemed to be happening for him.

Excitement grows on one, like tobacco or alcohol. And the life of a private detective is exciting—particularly when his reputation causes him to be retained in cases out of the average sleuth's sphere of activity.

Polter put aside the paper and yawned. He drew a small memorandum book from an inside pocket of his coat of black-and-gray summer plaid. He leafed through it. On the page dated July 4th was a red check mark.

That had been the date of the last exciting case in which he and his friend and aid "Dreamy" McVey, had been active. The pair had solved a knotty murder mystery in Forestville, Wisconsin. The unexpected case had climaxed an otherwise dull vacation.

The lean-faced detective stretched his long limbs and smiled reminiscently. Queer, what happened to a fellow sometimes. In the early part of that Forestville investigation he had suspected that a certain Major Stark had had something to do with the murder. And now, he and Dreamy McVey were slipping away from a record Chicago heat wave to be week-end guests of that same Major Stark. Yes, queer what things happened—sometimes.

Another yawn. It was a yawn of boredom rather than of fatigue. The hour was well after midnight. Dreamy McVey, who regarded the night—and often part of the day—as being for sleep, had long since gone to his berth. But Polter didn't feel like retiring. It would be hot in there, and, in fact, was rather stuffy in the small smoking compartment. He got up and walked out to the platform of the swaying car.

"Kin Ah see yuh a minute, suh?"

The detective turned. The Pullman porter was on the platform. His chocolate-colored face, high-lighted by the heat, showed concern.

"Ah'm goin' tuh ask yuh, boss, ef yuh'll he'p me out on sumpin'. Dat jemmen dat come abo'd de train wiv yuh—dat jemmen wiv de light-com-plexed hair an' mustache—he's—"

"Snoring?" Polter cut in.

"Dat's jest it, boss." The porter emitted a hearty African laugh, partly drowned by the roar of the train. "Ah 'specta yuh's trabeled wiv dat jemmen befo' now, an' 'specta yuh knows he sleeps noisy."

There were lights of amusement in Polter's piercing black eyes.

"Yes, I expect I have," he said. "And I expect I do. His snoring bothering anybody?"

"Yes, suh, dat's jest it. A lady in de next berf—she's a-kickin' all de time. She's de complain'est lady Ah ever did see." The porter's brow wrinkled again.

"Laws, Ah dunno jes' what to do. Ef Ah wakes de jemmen up, *he* gits mad, mebbe, an' ef Ah don' wake him up, *she* gits mad. Laws, bein' a Pullman po'tah's lak' bein' ambasaduh to Great Brittan, Ah reckon."

Polter turned in toward the sleeping car. "I'll do my best to fix things up," he promised.

He walked through the narrow passageway between the smoking compartment and the side of the car, then into the narrow aisle between the berths.

Already, he could hear the contented snoring of his assistant. The blondined head of a young woman was thrust out from the berth next to Dreamy's. The annoyance left the shallow blue eyes at the sight of the tall, slender figure with the lean, dark face, glossy-black hair, and the even teeth flashing in a smile of intense amusement.

"Sorry to bother *you* about it," the

young woman said in a low, throaty tone to Polter. She looked now as if she almost regretted her complaint. "I really wouldn't mind so much but I'm joining up with the Carteret Circus in Lake City. I have a difficult act and I have to get my sleep to keep my nerves right."

Polter nodded pleasantly. He reached over to the curtain draping Dreamy McVey's berth, and poked the snoring Dreamy in the ribs.

"Break it up, Dreamy, old boy," he said in a low tone.

The snoring continued. It sounded like a railroad whistle with the asthma. A few more gentle pokes from Polter, a grunt from within the berth, and the curtains parted. A tousled head of colorless blond hair was framed between them, then was elevated to show a face definitely homely—but good-humored, considering the conditions.

"Hello, O. K.," Dreamy McVey greeted. "Have I been thnorin' too loud?" He grinned. Under the mustard-colored mustache there was a gap in the front teeth. Dreamy had had several teeth knocked out while putting up a valiant fight in connection with the Forestville murder case. "I gueth I'll have to put a Mackthwell thilenthaler over my—— Confound thith lithp, anyhow!"

The head disappeared back of the curtains and reappeared in a few seconds. This time there was no gap in Dreamy's front teeth.

"I sure was sleepy," Dreamy continued. He did not lisp with his artificial teeth in. "But I guess I'll——"

The train gave a sharp lurch, slowed down with a terrible grinding of brakes, and stopped abruptly.

The effect was almost that of a ship striking an iceberg in a fog. There was a loud, hissing noise from the air-brake equipment.

"Ouch!" Dreamy's head was bumped against the berth above him.

The porter's ladder, leaning against an upper berth down the aisle, slammed to the floor. Only Polter's agility and presence of mind had kept him from being thrown from his feet. He grabbed hold of Dreamy's berth.

The blondined woman was out in the aisle now. It may have been real fright, or it may have been her desire to attract attention from the tall, good-looking man clinging to the next berth. She grabbed Polter's arm and squealed hysterically.

"There's really no cause to be alarmed," Polter told her. "Just some trouble ahead. The danger's all over now."

A moon-faced man poked out his head from an upper berth.

"What on earth's happenin'?" he sang out.

Polter peered through the screened window at the side of Dreamy's berth. Back a couple of car lengths he could see a lighted tower. A brakeman from the head end of the train was running toward it. He carried a lighted lantern.

There were three short blasts from the locomotive's whistle. The train started to back up jerkily, then stopped just as jerkily.

## CHAPTER II.

### GOLDFISH—PLUS.

JUST a few seconds before, Dreamy's snore-sonata had been the only loud noise in the car. Now the car was a bedlam.

Polter freed himself gently from the clinging blonde. "No cause to be alarmed at all," he repeated.

But the moon-faced man in the upper berth didn't think so. "Porter!" he yelled. "Bring that ladder! Let me out o' here!"

A small child began to whimper. Its mother was nervously trying to calm it. "There now, dear, everything's all right. Sh! There now——"

"Hustle up with that ladder!" boomed the moon-faced man.

"Yas, suh. Coinin', suh," the porter called out.

"Here! Let me down while you're passing. Let me down, d'you hear?"

Several others were equally noisy. Some, though, were surprisingly calm. A few even seemed amused at the abrupt stop, since no real harm had been done.

The Pullman conductor, a pompous, portly man with several small gold bars on his sleeve, entered the car from the rear.

"I don't know, madam," Polter heard him say crisply to some one. "I'll know in a few minutes. Nothing serious. Just had the block signal against us—had to stop in a hurry." He walked toward the front of the car. "Open this step up!" he called back to the porter.

The busy porter ran forward and let down the platform steps. The conductor descended them and began talking with two brakemen at the side of the track.

A couple of minutes later, the porter, who had also been off the car, climbed up the steps. He grinned at Polter, who was again standing out on the platform.

"'Tain't nothin', nohow, suh. We'll be steppin' right along d'rectly. It's de circus train—de Carteret circus train—jest ahaid of us. It was runnin' jest a few miles ahaid of us. Co'se it was on de freight track. Jest a little smash-up."

Polter turned to the closed side of the platform and looked out through the glass-covered part of the vestibule door. Two locomotives, running tenders first, were slowly pulling a section of the circus train southeastward along the freight track.

The caboose came first in the backing-up train, then a private car, some coaches, sleeping cars, and a string of flat cars on which were tarpaulin-cov-

ered wagons. Polter assumed that the circus train, or a section of it, was being reassembled and being switched over to a siding for the time being.

Through the dead night air now floated a distinctive, though not particularly unpleasant odor of animals. It was too dark to see the cages on the flat cars, but various jungle sounds cut through the labored *puff-puff* of the locomotives.

Elephants trumpeted. Lions and tigers roared, and there came the peculiar coughing half roar, half snarl of leopards. Polter believed that the wreck had jolted the cat animals particularly into a highly excited state. They were making plenty of noise.

The porter found the noises amusing. "Sho' kickin' up some rumpus, dem animalies," he observed.

Polter smiled. "Yes. Those lions seem like nice little playmates. How'd you like to be in there with 'em? Ever think of lion taming as a profession? Animal trainers make big money."

"*Lion tamin'?*" The porter rolled his eyes. "Boss, big money wouldn't mean nothin'—not a thing, no, suh—when it come to *lion tamin'* wiv me." Some humor in the thought appealed to the porter. He showed nearly all of his white teeth. "Yah! Yah! Yah! Boss, ef Ah ever go in a cage o' animals, de animals is goin' be o' mah own pickin'. Yes, suh! An' Ah'm sho' goin' tuh pick white mice an' canary birds—an' mebbe guinea pigs. Yah! Yah! Yah!"

His humor was infectious. Polter laughed heartily. "Your tastes as an animal trainer are very much like my own," he admitted. "I might be willing to add a couple of ferocious goldfish to my menagerie."

The lighted lunch car rolled by. Through the open window of the car, Polter could see several men sitting at a counter, talking and eating. Well, it seemed as if nobody had been hurt, any-how. He did not know that circus folk

—all show folk, in fact—have to carry on at all times, have to go through their routine even in the midst of tragedy.

One man stuck his head out through the window of the lunch car and yelled out to some one in the darkness:

"Any luck, Rex?"

The answer came in a pronounced Texan drawl:

"Luck? Yeah. It's dawg-gone bad luck!"

The blowing of a locomotive cut off some of the words.

Then the talk again became audible.

"Might 'a' moseyed down in thet thar gully. Thar's a hull passell o' folks stampedin' down thar. But I'm goin' tuh git me down in thet pasture, an' if he ain't got too much head start—"

The engine on the front end of the circus train puffed into view. Its hissing and blowing cut off the rest of the mysterious conversation.

But it was a conversation which had interested O. K. Polter. The detective walked quickly back to his lower berth and tried to hear the rest of it through his screened open window. The circus train, though, had backed out of the line of vision by that time.

Now, through his open berth window, Polter could see two men warily crossing the tracks and walking diagonally to circle the rear of the stalled passenger train.

A switch light picked them out as they passed just a few feet from the open window. One of the men was elderly. He wore loud clothes and had a luxuriant white mustache. And he was angry—that much was very evident.

He was tongue-lashing his companion, who carried a long Australian bull whip.

"You're sure one punk of an animal man!" he was saying cuttingly. "You acted *yellow*, Lafe. Why even the cage boy made a bigger effort than you did to—"

The man addressed as "Lafe" let out

a violent curse. "No man can call me yellah!" he cut in. "An' I'm callin' *you* on that, same as I'd call any one else. You can just apologize for that remark, colonel, or—"

The men had passed the open window. The words trailed off. Polter could not make them out, but he could still distinguish the angry tone of them.

He wondered who the men were. That evening in the Chicago newspaper he had read an interview with Colonel Carteret, head of the Carteret Circus. He was inclined to believe that the man addressed as "Colonel" was the owner of the show.

In some way the conversation had aroused the detective's curiosity, and once more he walked out to the platform, one side of which was still opened up.

A few minutes later, he saw one of the pair—the man with the bull whip—talking with the conductor and two brakemen at the off side of the passenger train. He looked about for the elderly, white-mustached man, but the latter seemed to have disappeared.

Polter was about to descend the steps and inquire if any one had been hurt in the circus-train wreck when the conductor turned from the group on the ground and ascended the train platform.

"Have to ask you to get inside the car, please," he said. "No passengers allowed to stand out here. See that sign?"

O. K. Polter was enjoying the air. A light breeze had sprung up. He could hear the faint baaing of sheep. He'd have preferred to linger on the platform.

But rules were rules, and he turned into the sleeping car. A few of the curtains were closed about berths. Some of the passengers had evidently decided to go back to sleep.

Among these was Dreamy McVey, who apparently had not put that Maxwell silencer over his snore. No one was complaining about the noise now,

though. Polter sat on the edge of his own berth and decided to retire.

He was about to kick off his black oxfords when he heard the conductor's voice:

"Porter! Get these steps up! Close up this platform again!"

Then came sudden shouts alongside the train.

The moon-faced man, with a bright dressing gown about his rotund figure, stood below his berth. "Between snorin' an' yellin', an' heat an' jerky stops," he mumbled, "this is about as good a place to sleep as a—"

The shouts outside the train came nearer, grew louder. The moon-faced man looked out the window and then started toward the platform to investigate.

There was the sound of a shot and some more yelling. It was loud now—very loud. Something exciting was happening.

Polter sat up. The porter, who had started out to close up the platform steps, came running back up the aisle. His eyes were rolling. The whites showed prominently.

"Boss," he said, stopping beside Polter, "some one says theah's a tigah loose out theah! Yes, suh! He done got loose when de train was wrecked."

"Oh, that seems hardly possible," said Polter. "I—"

"Ah don' know whethah it's possible or not," the porter broke in, "but dat's de word Ah heerd—tigah—yes, suh! Ef it wa'n't dat word, den Ah ain't no Pullman po'tah; Ah'm de president o' de United States."

As he talked the porter was peering through the window of an empty lower berth on the opposite side of the aisle. Polter heard more shouts outside, the report of a rifle shot—loud, sharp, distinct—then heard an angry roar.

"Good hebbens!" yelled the porter. "I ain't goin' out an' put up no steps, now. Boss, Ah'm leavin'!"

And he hurried along the car.

More shouts from outside the train. Another shot—a revolver shot this time. Excited yells. An angry voice called:

"Lay off that shootin'! He's worth a fortune. Fine hunch o' circus saps you bums are! Head 'im off, there! Fire yer blank! Yer blank! Where's Rex? Some one send for 'im quick—he's got the lasso. Nabob! Down, Nabob!"

Another voice called:

"I tell yuh, I'd better bring him down, boss. If he ever gits past us here—ever springs up in that thar car, he'll—Great Scott! He's—"

There was a chorus of unintelligible shouts; another shot.

Polter reached for his automatic and rushed for the platform of the car. A thought flashed through his mind—he was going to shut the door to that platform.

He turned from the aisle between the berths into the narrow passageway beside the smoking compartment.

And then he sprang back unconsciously.

A giant Bengal tiger was prowling along the narrow passageway—headed into the sleeping car.

### CHAPTER III.

#### THE MOST MURDEROUS ANIMAL

AT first the escaped beast seemed almost as startled as the human being in its path. It had been sniffing the curtains across the smoking-room door; then had looked up to find its greatest enemy—man—a few scant feet from it. It retreated just a foot or so, then opened its wide red mouth and snarled.

The instant of retreat was enough for O. K. Polter to make a decision. This ferocious beast must not get into the inhabited part of the sleeping car. Those helpless passengers, cut off from retreat, that little child who had been whimpering—

The detective made his stand. His brain was accustomed to working rapidly. Facing a tiger was a desperate thing at best. But he realized that the narrow alleyway was the most strategic place to block the beast.

He knew now the reason for that group of armed men crossing the tracks.

O. K. Polter had faced many dangers. But they were the dangers of his own craft. Experience had taught him how best to handle them.

He knew no more about tigers, however, than the average layman. Should he empty his clip at the beast? Would automatic bullets be sufficient to kill it instantly? Or would they only wound this royal animal, add to its ferocity, and perhaps cause it to charge through and run amuck in the sleeping car crowded with passengers?

He stood there transfixed, his hand on the butt of his automatic. The animal was half crouching, glaring at him, whipping its tail from one side to the other—halted for the instant.

Over the animal's back he could see the moon-faced man, ghastly pale, crouching at the far side of the platform upon which the animal had leaped. Some feline whim had caused the huge cat to pass up this ready victim, or possibly it had sensed that there on the open platform, it was a target for the guns at the side of the track.

"Get off the platform—quick!" Polter called. "Maybe I can force him back there and—"

The moon-faced man, his teeth rapping together like castanets, dived head-first down the platform steps. Polter heard him shouting, blubbering.

But the detective's mind was not on the moon-faced man now. The animal took a step forward. Polter would not have been human if he had not taken a step back, another step back. Something brushed against him—something hard.

He knew what it was—had seen it

there a moment before—the ladder used by passengers to climb into upper berths. It might—yes, it might possibly—

He reached behind him and gripped the ladder. His automatic was in his left hand now. With his right he maneuvered the ladder edgewise between himself and the outside wall of the car, then dropped his automatic in his pocket and got the ladder straightened out in a jiffy.

He had heard of trainers fending off attacks of lions or tigers with a simple kitchen chair, held legs foremost. The chair itself would be useless if the wild animal charged; but the four feet of the chair often managed to keep the animal at bay. In some way it bluffed the animal. Well, why wouldn't a ladder do likewise?

He had the ladder now so that its edges were horizontal. It barred a goodly width of the narrow passageway. The tiger could not walk along the passageway; Polter could hold it off with that ladder. If the beast sprang, the ladder might even throw it off balance, break up its first attack. A split second then would suffice to draw the automatic and try *that* way out.

The tiger, used to domination in its cage, did not relish this strange harrier an inch from its nose. It snarled, roared, whipped its tail—but it retreated a step. Polter's heart leaped. Maybe, after all—

But now another man came into view on the platform. He was a big man, paunchy, but tall and powerful. He was the man Polter had seen crossing the tracks and carrying the Australian bull whip. He had the whip in his left hand now. In his right hand was a vicious-looking Luger automatic.

This was a brave man, Polter decided. He had meant well. But his appearance in that spot could not have been timed more unfortunately. The retreating tiger looked over its shoulder, saw the way barred, and started for-

ward again with its low, catlike stride. It was most dangerous now—it sensed that it was trapped. It was crouching. Its body went lower—lower. Was it about to spring? O. K. Polter maneuvered his ladder as a lancer might maneuver his lance to take an attack.

The big man with the bull whip was talking now—talking in a low voice, quickly, calmly:

"That's it! Hold that if you can! I'll go round, get in on the rear platform, come through the car, an' help you. It'll be a cinch if you can hold him. Don't shoot 'less you have to! That cat cost a small fortune. Try an' hold it—won't be long!"

The big man disappeared from the platform. Polter maintained his difficult stance. The tiger opened its great red mouth again, exposed its saber-sharp teeth. It emitted a thunderous growl. It might have been a growl of defeat.

Polter was cooler now. He knew how much depended upon his coolness. He kept the end of the ladder a bare inch from the tiger's nose. The brute couldn't get past that ladder by walking. If the tiger couldn't be bluffed for the next few minutes—if it decided to spring—then Polter would draw his automatic and pump out shots while he was able.

He'd get clawed badly, though—he knew that well enough. Any physical encounter would mean death for him, or terrible injury. But in this mental contest—well, animal trainers depended ninety per cent upon bluff, mental domination. And they handled several animals at once, often dozens of them. Maybe he could hold off this one animal, with the contest limited to this narrow alleyway.

And so O. K. Polter who, a few minutes previously, had talked so flippantly about his willingness to train nothing more formidable than "ferocious goldfish" found himself the one barrier be-

tween the killer brute and possible wholesale slaughter within the car.

He could hear a terrible hubbub back in the car. The cries and yells were exciting the puzzled animal, too. It started to snoop forward and ran into that hard, metal-tipped ladder. It opened its mouth again then, snarled, and shook its head. Its mouth looked like a big red cave.

"Hold it! Hold it just a second!"

It was the booming voice of the man with the bull whip. It came from the other end of the car. The big man must have had the steps let down on the car's other platform; must have entered; must be coming to the rescue. A few seconds later, Polter heard his deep voice right back of him. The tiger saw him, snarled and spat, crouched as if to spring.

Somewhere the big man had got hold of an umbrella. He held it out over the ladder, held it out like a fishpole. His left hand shot out and opened the umbrella suddenly.

The ruse worked. The striped beast retreated a foot. It was afraid of the unknown—this thing which suddenly swelled out within an inch of its face, swelled out like a hooded cobra of its native jungles.

The big man passed the umbrella to Polter. "Hold it just that way. Don't move it—too narrow here."

The man stepped back of Polter and drew the bull whip from where it had been stuck in his belt. His arm went back. The lash flew over Polter's shoulder like an angry snake.

*Crack!* Its tip barely flecked the tiger on its sensitive nose. The tiger retreated a full two feet. *Crack!* *Crack!* Two more lashes—quick, loud, accurate, always on the nose. *Crack!* The tiger didn't relish it. It was steadily retreating. Now its tail was lashing through the small crosswise aisle at the end of the smoking room.

The circus man inched along between the ladder and the side of the passageway, Polter tilting the ladder to make more room for him. This man was experienced with wild animals, that much was patent. Better bow to his experience, then.

Now the circus man reversed his whip and held its stock forward in his left hand. In his right was the Luger automatic. He crept forward and discharged the gun into the open mouth of the tiger, it seemed.

The tiger blinked, recoiled, roared; but nothing happened. Polter realized now that the cartridges were blank—harmless except at the closest range, yet effective in bluffing an unruly animal.

The tiger was now on the platform, the circus man on the threshold of the platform. He was facing the tiger, but yelling out:

"You guys down there! Spread out from the platform. Give 'im a chance to get out, or he won't go. Have that net ready. All set—now!"

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Three more harmless but ear-splitting reports from the Luger. Polter could hear yells of excitement, fear, hysteria, back in the sleeping car. He saw the animal move toward the open platform, crouch and spring out to the ground.

In a fraction of a second, he himself was on the platform, looking after the tiger, which was making for a gully at the side of the track.

*Swish!* In the lights reflected from the train he could see a lariat whip through the air. He could not see whether it had roped the tiger or not. But he heard an exultant shout:

"Good work, Rex! Got 'im! Up with the net!"

It was too good a show to miss. O. K. Polter was out of the car now, on the ground beside the train and watching the performance at close range. A man in a cowboy's suit was

giving a rare exhibition of skill and courage. He had drawn the loop of his lariat taut. Now he was dashing in and out like a skillful boxer. The claws of the enraged beast missed him by much less than a foot on one occasion.

But the daring puncher was getting the better of the contest each time. He was getting several loops of the long rope around the beast. The man with the rifle stood by tensely. A young man in a polo shirt was talking with him.

"Up with the net!" the cowboy kept yelling. "We'll have 'im hawg-tied pronto."

The animal scrambled down the slope at the side of the track. Polter got the rest of the show more by the sense of sound than the sense of sight. Men with lanterns and flashlights were down in the little gully by the side of the track. There were shouts:

"Atta boy, Rex!" "Take another turn!" "Around the net—that's it!"

And then Polter heard the booming voice of the big man who had handled the Australian bull whip:

"Tell Doc to bring up the cage wagon. We'll build a ramp and pull 'im right into it."

"What's up?"

Polter looked over his shoulder. Dreamy McVey, wearing a faded-brown dressing gown, was standing behind him, in the midst of several more venturesome passengers who had left the car.

"Is this a nightmare, or what?" Dreamy asked. "I ain't sufferin' from insomnia. But I'll say this sure is a cure for snorin'."

While the train was delayed, O. K. Polter stood and smoked near the lowered steps of his sleeping car, and watched courageous and industrious circus men prove to Nabob, the tiger, that strength, claws, and teeth were small matters compared to human brains.

The lean-faced, fashionably dressed detective was the object of many profuse congratulations which somehow left him a little embarrassed. He was about to get back on the train and escape to his berth when a small, slight, dark-eyed man came up to him and extended his hand.

"My name is Morton, sir," he said, "Sigmund Morton. I'm half owner with Colonel Carteret of the Carteret Show and I want to thank you for what you did. Or, better yet, send your bill to the colonel or myself. You saved the show plenty in lawsuits."

"You don't owe me anything," Polter assured the grateful Morton. "Glad I met that brute in the passageway, since I had to meet him. And finding that ladder at the right second was a lucky break."

Morton took out his handkerchief and wiped beads of sweat from his brow.

"Whew! What a night *this was!* Train wrecked; cage knocked off the car; Nabob, one of our best cats, makin' a run for it!"

"Any one hurt in the wreck?"

"Not in the wreck—no. But Nabob stripped the muscles off a trainer's right arm, and clawed down a cage boy, and—"

"Say, Mr. Morton!" It was a drawling voice.

Polter turned and saw the tall cowboy who had roped the tiger. He looked a great deal more worried now than when he had been risking his life trying to rope the striped beast. "Dawg-gone' if I know whar the colonel went to, Mr. Morton. Seen him?"

"Ain't he around?" Morton asked, with a puzzled expression on his keen face.

"He shore ain't. Yuh remember he was with us when we was in the sheep pasture? Member how we spread out like? Waal, I reckon the colonel's plumb disappeared into thin air. Shore seems like he'd been aroun' heah when

we had all that excitement a-gittin' Nabob hawg-tied an' rounded up."

Morton let out a gasp of astonishment. "By golly! That's right, Rex! I ain't seen him since we spread out down there in the pasture. Do you—"

"We got some o' the boys lookin' aroun'," the cowboy cut in. He nodded toward the gully which sloped down from the side of the track. O. K. Polter could see several lights flashing down there.

"I reckon the colonel's safe enough," the cowboy said, though in a tone which indicated to Polter that he didn't reckon any such thing, "but I'm—"

There was a yell from down the gully. Polter could see a lighted lantern raised as if over a man's head—a signal of some sort. A voice called:

"Come on down here—quick! Come down! It's the colonel!"

Rex, the cowboy, and Morton looked meaningly at each other, and started down toward the gully as one man. Polter, Dreamy McVey, and the man in the blue polo shirt—one of the circus group, Polter assumed—followed in their wake.

As O. K. Polter approached the flashing lights in the gully, he could see that the men were holding the lanterns down toward something on the ground. He heard Morton say to Rex, the cowboy:

"You don't s'pose that damned cat ——" Morton stopped abruptly, as if afraid of voicing his thought.

"I was a-thinkin' that from the first," was Rex's remark. "But the colonel had his smoke pole on 'im. We'd heard a shot, anyhow. We'd—"

The cowboy lowered his voice reverently. The group had reached the men with the lights. The rays of the lights picked out the form of a man lying face down on the grass. The man's distinctive dress and his snow-white hair identified him to Polter at once as the elderly, mustached man he had seen crossing the tracks. And the man was dead.

—Polter's practiced eyes could see that at once.

"The colonel!" exclaimed Rex, the cowboy. "Thet murderin' cat got 'im!"

Morton had dropped to his knees beside the corpse. He turned away, his hands over his eyes.

"Who is the colonel?" Polter asked the cowboy.

The latter turned. "Who is he?" he repeated. "Ain't yuh never heerd o' Colonel Carteret, the big boss?"

Morton had recovered from his first shock. Now he took a lighted lantern from one of the group of men and held it directly over the body for closer examination.

The skull of Colonel Carteret was crushed in at the base.

Polter studied the wound very carefully—its type, size, shape, location, and angle. It had been made with some blunt instrument, brought down with terrific force.

The detective remained silent. He did not wish to make himself conspicuous by voicing any theory to this group, for in this group might be the murderer of Colonel Carteret.

A more searching examination would prove to these experienced circus men that Carteret's death had not been caused by the attack of a tiger. But Polter needed no more searching examination than he had already made.

A wealth of experience in connection with "slugger" homicide cases—cases in which the victims are struck over the head—told the young detective that this tragedy before him was the work of the most murderous animal of all—man!

#### CHAPTER IV. "ON THE SHOW."

O. K. POLTER looked furtively about the inner circle of the group of men surrounding the body—noticed the tense expressions on the faces of Morton and Rex, the cowboy.

He noticed, too, the pallor and the trembling lip of a mild-faced, red-haired young man in the group.

"This is terrible!" the red-haired youth said to the figure next to him, the young fellow in the blue polo shirt.

The latter shook his head. He seemed unable to speak. He swallowed hard, turned away, drew out a handkerchief, and appeared to dab at his eyes.

A second or two later, the red-headed lad knelt down and looked closely at the body.

"By golly! The colonel's rings! They seem to be gone. His left hand is bare! Unless he didn't wear 'em to-night——"

"He always wore 'em!" cut in Morton, and grasping the left hand of the colonel, brought it up toward the lantern. On all of the four brown fingers were narrow white ridges. Polter could see that rings had covered these fingers. Certain areas of skin on them had not tanned with the rest of the fingers.

Morton gasped. "Then if the rings are gone," he said, "I'll bet—— Say, turn the body over, some one."

The young man in the polo shirt and the mild-looking redhead turned the body face up.

"I thought so!" Morton exclaimed. He felt inside the pockets of the colonel's deerskin vest. "Watch gone, too! And he had a diamond-studded belt buckle——"

He stopped abruptly and unbuttoned the corpse's vest. There was no belt buckle, in fact, there was no belt.

But there were stains on the left side of the breast—stains caused by a deep knife thrust, Polter readily decided.

He got to his feet and motioned to Dreamy McVey, who had been standing at the outside of the ring of men. Dreamy sidled over to him.

"That train of ours is liable to pull out before long," Polter said in a low

voice. "They mentioned something about an unscheduled stop at a town a few miles ahead. Get aboard the train and wire Major Stark at the next station. Say that business detained us. The major'll understand. Then come back to Harbin. I'll be at the hotel there."

"I got yuh, O. K.," said Dreamy, and inconspicuously made for the train.

It was dawn when the first excitement was over. Circus folk had trooped back to the scene of the tragedy from the side-tracked circus train at Harbin, three miles away. A coroner's physician had made an examination of the body. The coroner had viewed it and ordered it removed back to Harbin for a formal inquest.

Members of Harbin's small police force, the editor of the Harbin semi-weekly newspaper, two deputies from the county sheriff's office, and a sectional correspondent for a Chicago newspaper had arrived upon the scene, asked innumerable questions, and departed. But a county detective proved to be a stickler; he remained after all the others, official and journalistic, had gone.

O. K. Polter stood in the group of men being questioned; was questioned himself, in fact. He simply answered that he had been a passenger on the Woodland Limited, had been drawn to the scene of the excitement, and had missed his train.

No one in the assemblage knew that Polter was a detective. That would be a decided advantage for him if he went on the case, and, furthermore, the answers being given to the county detective furnished Polter valuable information.

Mentally, he criticized the rural sleuth for not separating the principal witnesses—and yet, for his own purpose, he was glad that it was being done that way.

The grilling brought out many facts which O. K. Polter already knew: Colonel Carteret had obviously been waylaid in the dark pasture; had been slugged and knifed; had died instantly, whether from the blow over the head or from the knife thrust would be known after the inquest. Robbery was the obvious motive.

Sigmund Morton, part owner of the show; Rex Fanning, the cowboy, and the man whom Polter had seen carrying the whip—an attaché of the circus named Lafe Hamlin—were asked many questions by the county detective.

These three men had entered the dark sheep pasture with Colonel Carteret. Each claimed that the members of the party were spread out from one another when they were combing the pasture for the missing tiger. There were times when they couldn't see one another, they said.

In answer to the question as to whether they saw any one else in the vicinity where the body was found, Morton had spoken up for the three of them:

"Of course! Half the circus was out tryin' to locate Nabob. But we couldn't recognize any faces in the dark."

In the course of the grilling, O. K. Polter learned that Colonel Sam Carteret had not been a colonel at all. In the words of Sigmund Morton, who knew most about the colonel, he was a "colonel by courtesy."

He had adopted the title of "colonel" several years before, however, and had insisted upon being addressed that way. He had been an eccentric, hot-tempered, iron-willed man. Circus employees, from roustabouts to the big-top aristocracy—the highly paid performers—had been fired by him ruthlessly from time to time. Quite naturally, he had developed numerous enemies.

But the motive of greed seemed the strongest one for the murder.

"This Colonel Carteret," the county

detective said, "wasn't there somethin' in the newspapers about his bein' called Diamond Sam an' always carryin' a fortune in jewelry on him? Or was that," he asked with a smirk, "some publicity bunk planted because the circus was billed to play in this vicinity?"

Sigmund Morton shook his head sadly. "It was far from bunk," he said. "I wish it *had* been bunk; then probably there'd been no murder. I warned Sam Carteret time and again on that. He was a likable man in many ways, but a stubborn one. The three diamond rings he wore at all times must 'a' been worth up into the thousands. Another ring had the biggest real ruby I ever saw. His diamond-studded watch was worth another small fortune, an' he always carried a big roll o' bills in his wallet."

"And you think he had a large sum of cash on him to-night?"

"I'm practically sure of it. The colonel was a fearless man. He always packed a gun and said he could take care of himself in any situation."

Many more questions were asked. There was no direct evidence on which to detain any one formally. The county detective took numerous notes, made a new appointment for after the inquest, and finally departed.

O. K. Polter managed to squeeze into a circus auto going into Harbin and overheard Sigmund Morton say to Rex, the cowboy:

"I ain't got much faith in these hick gumshoes. Soon's I get to Harbin, I'm goin' to wire Chi or New York for a *regular* dick."

Which was the reason for O. K. Polter's meeting with the circus man as the latter was walking into the little railroad telegraph office at Harbin. Polter drew Morton aside.

"You said early this morning that you owed me something, Morton," he reminded him.

The circus man seemed a trifle im-

patient. "An' you're holdin' me to that at a time like this?" he retorted. "After what hap—"

"I don't want any money," Polter interrupted. "I'd like to have a private talk with you before you call in any one. This may interest you, Mr. Morton."

He handed the circus man a neat card reading:

ORVILLE K. POLTER  
National Detective Agency  
Chicago, Illinois

Morton's sharp eyes swept over the card.

"Come over to my private car, Mr. Polter," he said.

The detective accompanied Morton to the private car next to the caboose of the sidetracked circus train. Morton set out a decanter and offered a drink to Polter, who refused it.

"Take a shot yourself, Mr. Morton," he said. "Guess you need it. I don't use it."

"I need it, all right," Morton agreed.

He poured himself a stiff drink and gulped it. His heavy face showed deep feeling. "Sam Carteret an' I were associated in show business for twenty years," he said. "We were fifty-percent partners, although on account o' Sam's personality an' connections, we decided to let it go along as the Carteret Wide World Show."

He took another drink. Polter was studying him closely.

"In the early days we done everything to make ends meet. We done things circus owners don't generally do. Sam doubled plenty on the executive end. For a time, I saved salaries by doublin' in the acts. Sam an' I were closer than brothers. I want Sam's murderer brought to book. I don't care what your investigation costs, but I'm a business man, an' I'd like to know your fee in advance."

O. K. Polter shook his head.

"There'll be no fee," he said promptly, "unless I find the murderer. And now for just a few questions. Just what do you know about Lafe Hamlin?"

Briefly, he told Morton of the violent argument he had overheard between Hamlin and Colonel Carteret.

"Hamlin," said Morton, after a pause, "is a great old guy, far as I know. He has a temper, I'll admit that. He's clashed with the colonel at times, but deep down, I always thought he and the colonel were great admirers of each other. They'd known each other for years."

"What does he do with the show?"

"One o' the animal men. Not a trainer—he's too far along in years for that. But a good cat man outside the cage. In fact he's been about everything around a circus. Used to have a knife-throwin' act in the old days. Hands an' nerves are shot now—he's one o' those old guys that 'ud hear if you asked him to have a drink. But he taught our present knife thrower—that red-headed lad—plenty o' fine points."

"You don't mean that young red-headed chap who helped turn the colonel's body over—that mild-looking fellow who seemed scared to death? Mean to say he's a knife thrower?"

"Sure do," replied Morton. "Mild-lookin'—yes! What's that got to do with it? He's a gentle kid. But he could stand across the room an' dot an 'i' with a knife."

Polter was thoughtful for a few seconds. Then he said:

"Who was that nice-looking, strongly built fellow with him?"

"You mean the guy in the blue polo shirt? That's Gene Blaisdell. Nice fellow an' a good trouper. He's one o' the adagio trio featured in the show."

"What's an adagio trio?"

"Oh!" Morton smiled with an effort. "Mean to tell me you detectives don't know everything? Well, adagio is a type of dancing—like toe dancing—ex-

cept that almost all of it consists of acrobatic tricks gracefully done."

"Not generally seen in circuses, is it?"

"No, that's why we put it in. The colonel was a real showman—hot on any novelties. A fat act, that is. Two men an' a girl. We adapted it from the vaudeville stage—made it one of our aerial acts. The men throw the girl from one aerial platform to the other, catch her—all that business. One of our hottest attractions."

"Well, I'd like to hang around your circus for a while, Mr. Morton. Of course, I'll be licked before I start if it's known that I'm a detective. And yet I'll have to alibi my snooping around. Couldn't you spread word that you gave me some sort of a job in exchange for my help in recapturing the tiger? Then I believe that possibly I could do some effective work."

Morton took another drink. "So you want to go 'on the show,' as we call it, eh? That seems all right to me. Possibly you could pose as a privilege man or a publicity man, or—"

"A publicity man," Polter cut in. "That would be all right. I could bluff it. I was on a newspaper for a year when I was nineteen. Not a bad preliminary training for a detective, by the way."

He paused a moment. "That will put me in touch with the performers of the show," he continued. "And now for some one to keep in touch with the more humble element."

Briefly, he explained about his assistant, Dreamy McVey; told of Dreamy's courage, surprising keenness, and adaptability.

"I'll put him with the canvas men," Morton promised. "I'll speak to the boss canvas man, tell him to go a little easy with him."

And thus it was that O. K. Polter found himself and his assistant "on the show."

## CHAPTER V.

## THE SHOW MUST GO ON.

THE Carteret Wide World Show was playing the town of Silver Water, Wisconsin. O. K. Polter had been with the organization for ten days. Colonel Carteret had been buried for a week. The circus had stopped functioning for just two performances—matinée and night performances on the day of the funeral. Then its terrific overhead expenses forced Morton to business as usual. The tremendous cost of an idle circus would soon "eat it up." Polter got his first real understanding of that show-business axiom: "The show must go on."

He had made a quick trip to Chicago and back. He was leaving nothing undone to amass facts which might prove valuable. Members of the publicity staff "back with the show" often were missing from the organization for a few days, doubling in to assist the publicity manager and his second man—the pair who were "ahead of the show." He knew that various suspects on whom he was keeping an eye would find nothing odd in his absence from the circus organization.

Polter had breakfasted on the dinner of the Chicago train; had reached Silver Water early, and had immediately made for the circus lot.

Despite the early hour, the menagerie top was already up, the ticket wagon spotted, the electric-light plant almost in readiness. Certain wagons were still coming in from the runs; others were already in and unloaded. Canvas men were working hard, as usual. Polter smiled as he saw Dreamy McVey his colorless blond hair falling over his forehead, busy driving stakes and lacing canvas.

It was a thrown knife. Polter was convinced, that had killed the colonel. Some one had trailed the colonel into that dark sheep pasture—some one who

knew that the colonel, with his mind on the escaped tiger, would be unwary. Then that some one had hurled a knife at his breast, had felled him, slugged him to make sure; and then robbed him either for gain or for a blind.

When the afternoon performance started that day, O. K. Polter stood in the back yard where he could watch the performers hustle back and forth between the pad room and the big top.

He had watched them several times before, with no results. More than once, he had studied the mild-faced knife thrower, unknown to the latter. He had eavesdropped upon the red-headed lad, too.

What about that mild, boyish face, seemingly without guile? Was it really the index of a mild, gentle nature? Or was it a mask for villainy?

The knife thrower, Polter was forced to admit, was either all that he appeared to be, or else a far better than average actor. His daily routine was the routine of a straight, orderly young man, entirely taken up with his work. He practiced his act daily. During leisure hours he read surprisingly good books.

He drew a high salary for one so young. But even high-salaried men may get into financial difficulties. That is why O. K. Polter had taken that flying trip to Chicago—to investigate brokerage offices and learn if the mild-faced knife thrower had got into financial trouble through playing a treacherous stock market.

Polter was standing there against a wagon when the blue-eyed, blond-haired girl he had first met on the Woodland Limited came up to him and smiled coyly. The blond girl seemed to have fallen for Polter. The girl—Fifi la Rue by name—was considerable of a gossip, and—something highly unusual in circus women—a good deal of a flirt.

Often Polter had seen Fifi in flirtatious conversation with Gene and Alex,

Blaisdell, the two adagio dancers. Although Fifi had been with the show only a week, already there was said to be no love lost between Fifi and Mademoiselle Celeste Blaisdell, the third member of the adagio trio.

Fifi was at least reasonably young. Her figure was perfect. At present, she was one of the girls in the cloud-swing display, but ambitious to supplant Celeste Blaisdell in the adagio act.

"I have a story for you, Mr. Publicity Man," Fifi said smilingly to Polter.

Polter noticed the insincere eyes, the chemically blond hair, the perfect teeth. At least Fifi la Rue had perfect teeth, he decided. He nearly always looked at a person's teeth before seeing any other features.

Perhaps it was Fifi's perfect teeth which attracted Gene Blaisdell, the adagio dancer. Celeste Blaisdell's teeth were artificial, and quite obviously so. Her own teeth had been knocked out in a fall from a high trapeze years before.

"What's the story?" Polter inquired with forced heartiness.

"Sh! Can you keep a secret, Mr. Publicity Man?" Fifi was coy and kittenish. "Maybe li'l Fifi's going to get promoted. I may work with Gene and Alex Blaisdell in their adagio act."

"What's the matter with Mademoiselle Celeste?"

"Huh!" Fifi elevated her nose loftily. Then she lowered her voice. "Personally, I don't think she's got the nerve for this game. Or maybe she had it and lost it. Gene wants to work without a net, you know. It'd make a more spectacular act. But Celeste insists on the net."

Polter laughed. "I don't know that I blame her. Gene doesn't take the chances in the act, except for that one piece of trapeze work. *She's* the one who gets hurled between those platforms high up in the air. If she ever

dropped—without a net, that is—it'd be curtains."

Fifi shrugged her shoulders. "She's a headache, anyhow, that dame. She's a jealous cat, too. Sniffling all the time because Gene likes me."

"But aren't they married?" Polter asked.

Fifi laughed. "Of course, they are. Well, what of it? Don't be old-fashioned, my dear! You look like 1931, but you talk like 1890. Gene can't see Celeste since I've gone on the show. Well, remember! A secret's a secret!"

She smiled her attractive smile again, and hurried away to get ready for the cloud-display act.

O. K. Polter stood there thinking. Since *she'd* been on the show! What was there in a woman like Fifi la Rue for Gene Blaisdell to go crazy over? Circus husbands usually lead blameless lives. If Gene Blaisdell was an exception, there were several girls in the cloud-swing act far younger, far more winsome, far prettier, than Fifi la Rue. Of course, there was no accounting for tastes.

Since *she'd* been on the show! And she had been on the show for only a week—had joined up right after the colonel's death. Hm-m-m!

O. K. Polter looked at his watch, walked hastily over to the dressing room of Gene and Celeste Blaisdell, and called out. The girl's voice bade him enter.

Polter entered. The girl's eyes seemed red from weeping. She was alone.

"I'm working on a good story—a layout—for the adagio number," he said pleasantly. "Could I get three good pictures—straight—of the three Blaisdells?"

The girl was listless. She stared at him out of her red-rimmed eyes. There seemed to be fear in those eyes.

"I—oh, I don't know," she said indifferently. "I'll think it over."

"You'll think *what* over?" came a

masculine voice from behind a canvas flap, and Gene Blaisdell stepped out. His face was rather tense, but he smiled pleasantly at Polter.

"Hello, Mr. Pressman. Pictures? Sure. How about right in the set—a long shot showing the height? We could take the net away, too. Great stuff!"

Polter noticed the pale eyes, the glossy thatch of hair, the bulging muscles of Gene Blaisdell as he talked with him a few minutes.

Later, he wandered out into the back yard again, thinking. Very few show folk of any sort spurn publicity. It means dollars and cents to them. But Celeste Blaisdell had seemed indifferent about it. The girl was in a peculiarly nervous state, that much was certain.

Dreamy McVey was due to walk through the yard and appear to chat casually with his chief. Polter smoked a cigarette while waiting.

When Dreamy did come, he brought a piece of news which he seemed to regard as unimportant—but of which Polter thought otherwise.

"I was lacin' a flap to-day, O. K.," he said, "an' I heard them Blaisdells—Gene an' Celeste—arguin' in a low tone about something. I heard the colonel's name mentioned an' then I heard Blaisdell curse at her. Prob'ly means nothin'. Just thought I'd report, though."

"That's right. Report everything," was Polter's instruction. "You're off for a while now, aren't you, Dreamy?"

"Yeah, off," replied Dreamy with mild sarcasm. "But I got to help gilly this show to-night. I was thinkin' o' gettin' me some shut-eye. I'd like to sleep for a full week."

"Sorry, Dreamy," said Polter. "I want you to do something for me. Go downtown in Silver Water. Get in a telephone booth."

He noticed the Blaisdells passing from the pad room through to the big

top, and lowered his voice as he gave the rest of his instructions.

"Be sure you get Larry Wayne on the job. He's the best man in Chicago on that stuff. Don't let anybody else handle it. Have him ring you back—in the booth—as soon as possible."

When Dreamy, yawning, had gone, Polter walked over and peered into the big top. The Blaisdells' adagio act was on, high up in the air. The Blaisdells were still working with a net. For some reason Polter breathed more easily.

He watched the act for a moment or two, saw the girl and the two men strike various artistic poses; then saw the girl hurled by one man on one platform to the other man on the other platform. The audience applauded wildly.

There was a space of what seemed ten or twelve feet between the two platforms. And the act was a high one. It would be extremely dangerous without a net. Why did Gene Blaisdell want to work without a net?

## CHAPTER VI.

### TRAGEDY.

O. K. POLTER spent the afternoon in publicity duties—apparently. But he learned several things that he wanted to know. One thing was that the Blaisdells—Gene and Celeste—had lived like a pair of turtle doves until recently.

What had caused the change? He still could not believe that the artificial Fifi la Rue had caused it.

He met Dreamy by appointment in the downtown section of Silver Water, blew Dreamy to a hotel dinner in a private room—a dinner that was a treat to Dreamy after several days of canvas men's fare—and heard Dreamy's report of the afternoon.

When the two had finished their after-dinner smoke, O. K. Polter leaned back and said:

"It's on the right track, but it's not

enough. It's just one more item. But I may have to go to bat and bluff it through if that act works to-night without a net. It may be too premature, may gum up the case, but when that act goes on without a net—well, whether we're all set or not, I'm going to break the works to Morton."

Festive Silver Water citizens had finished looking over the strange animals in the menagerie. The hippodrome track had been almost cleared. The indoor band concert was over. The night performance was about to start.

O. K. Polter found a seat far up in the blues. He had a pair of opera glasses with him. He was a considerable distance away from most of the aerial acts, but he was more on a level with them there than if he had been seated in a more expensive section.

He looked on listlessly at the antics of clowns and of men who rode trick mules; looked listlessly on at turns either comic or thrilling. The cloud-swing display went on and off. A lion-tiger-leopard act—with Nabob in the featured rôle—drew thunderous applause.

And then O. K. Polter was conscious of a slight nervousness. It was a feeling more intuitive than logical. He knew that the Blaisdells were going on. Morton had assured him that the act would continue to work with a net. But—

The Blaisdells came on with a fanfare of music. Polter took a deep breath. They were working with a net.

The trio got a hand from the very outset. They worked very high. The big net below the two aerial platforms was carefully masked. The act was thrilling, breath-taking.

Celeste Blaisdell and her two partners executed a sensational adagio routine which frequently drew thunderous applause. At times, colored lights played upon the aerial platforms. At times, a

single spot outlined one platform and left the other platform in shadow. But when the girl was hurled from one platform to another, the spot followed her.

The act was half over. The spot outlined Gene and Celeste Blaisdell on the east platform. It picked out papier-mâché rocks and crags in the background. The girl pirouetted on her toes, then ran and leaped into Gene's arms.

He swung her giddily about and tossed her slight, almost boyish figure through the air. The spotlight followed her course through the air and picked her out as she came down on the other platform, in Alex Blaisdell's arms. It was all a deft piece of timing and distancing. The audience applauded wildly.

Celeste had short, wavy, blond hair that tossed about her head as she was flung about from one platform to the other, bridging a chasm of several feet. The theme of the dance seemed to be, Polter gathered, two gnomes of the mountains fighting for the possession of a nymph.

The white spotlight changed to amber. The girl posed daintily before Alex Blaisdell on the west platform; then suddenly she was seized by Alex. She appeared to leap, swanlike—although she was really thrown—and was caught by Gene on the other platform, who swung her over his shoulder in one continued, smooth movement.

O. K. Polter, inured by his profession to the sight of danger, tensed unconsciously when he saw her land in Gene's arms in the semidarkness of that amber spot. It seemed that her head must surely fly off, for it bent this way and that as the mountain nymph writhed in the clutches of her tormentor.

The incidental music grew louder and faster. Gene clutched the girl and whirled around and around the narrow east platform. A roll of drums accompanied this bit of business. Then—

Unexpectedly the girl was whirled

through the air. But there was a gasp from the audience. Gene Blaisdell had slipped! He had succeeded in catapulting the girl through space, but it was a diagonal path that her body took.

Alex Blaisdell leaped to the front of his platform to catch the girl. But he was just a fraction of a second too late. The slight body crashed against the solid pillar at the front of the platform. It fell heavily to the platform and lay there without movement.

A man's voice shouted sharply. The music collapsed. A motionless silence fell over the entire big top, and into that silence tore the shrill scream of a woman in the audience.

On their respective aerial platforms, the two Blaisdell brothers stood and looked vacantly at the still white figure near the pillar. Gene Blaisdell pressed his hands together nervously and ran his fingers through his blond hair. Then, by means of a trapeze equally distant from both platforms, he managed to get over to where the girl lay.

A wild hysterical babble now broke out in the audience, and O. K. Polter rose from his seat. His shocked mind filled with quick, hazy conjectures. Had trained muscles failed for once to answer the stern demands made upon them or—

Polter made his way down to the hipodrome somehow and got to Morton's little office. Celeste Blaisdell had already been brought there, and a doctor had arrived from some place, directing that the girl be taken out into the air.

Back-stage circus discipline was forgotten for the time being. Roughneck roustabouts rubbed shoulders with highly paid performers. An equestrienne and three girls from the cloud-swing act—Fifi la Rue among them—had given way to whining, hysterical sobs.

But these were acts not yet called, or else they had finished their turns. Outside, the band had struck up again.

Through an open runway, Polter could see a uniformed man putting a troupe of trained seals through their stunts. Once more he was having that show-business axiom pounded home: "The show must go on!"

Polter looked furtively about the group which had followed the men carrying the girl out into the open air. He found Gene and Alex Blaisdell among them. Gene's handsome face was grief-stricken.

"I'm sure she'll be all right," he was saying. "I'm sure she'll be all right. Just knocked out."

Bunch lights were hooked up. Their rays picked out dirty faces, powdered faces, pretty faces, sweaty faces—all with that same look of concern on them. Dim figures flickered back and forth in the shadows. Polter felt a light prod in the ribs. He turned. It was Dreamy McVey.

Polter whispered:

"Watch Gene Blaisdell. Watch the both of them if possible, but Gene, especially. Report everything he does."

Then he brushed his way through the crowd. "Keep away!" yelled Gene Blaisdell. "No one has a right here but me. Too many folks—"

Polter drew out his detective's card and held it under a bunch light. Gene's glance flashed over it. His face went ashen.

"I think I have a right here," said Polter calmly.

He saw that the girl was being carried back into the little temporary office again. Morton had placed a special officer at the entrance but signaled for Polter to enter as soon as he saw him.

The doctor's dry voice was announcing:

"It is more serious than I expected."

The girl had been placed on a tarpaulin against the left canvas wall. A pale-blue dressing gown had been thrown over her, covering her up to the

chin. Her head rested on a small canvas pillow. The lines of her body under the dressing gown, the strange position of the head and neck, told Polter everything. He did not have to hear the doctor's words:

"Yes—dead. Killed instantly."

A sob broke from Alex Blaisdell. He turned to the wall and did not move: Gene Blaisdell covered his eyes with his hands. Once more Polter noticed those overdeveloped biceps. With every movement, they crawled like serpents under the athlete's smooth skin.

Polter advanced to the still figure of the girl and stared down at the rather young face, ghastly white under the smudged make-up. He felt a surge of blind pity. The face looked tired, worn. O. K. Polter was not yet—nor would he ever be he thought—used to the spectacle of sudden death. He turned away in a jerky movement and drew a deep breath.

He was once more the professional detective, however, when the doctor approached the body again, lifted the head, and disclosed a bruise behind the left ear—low, nearly at the base of the skull.

That, he stated, was where the girl had come in violent contact with the solid pillar, with all the power of an athlete's strength behind her. The impact had thrown her head over with a sufficient jerk to break her neck in an instant.

O. K. Polter nodded. He looked at the sunken lips. The girl's artificial teeth had been jarred out.

He heard Gene Blaisdell saying:

"I'm through! First serious accident in my whole circus career. My nerve is gone, and my heart is broken."

But O. K. Polter was not at all certain of the truth of either of these statements. The man's eyes were still hard, bright. They did not reflect a broken heart. And the man was carrying himself with his usual swagger.

Was his grief all acting? After all, acting was his profession. And did Polter only imagine that in those hard, pale eyes there was a look of relief?

Polter walked out of the office. He saw Dreamy McVey standing at the entrance. Dreamy was obeying orders like a soldier, as usual.

The circus acts were being rushed through. The show was going on, but not with the regular spontaneity. Already, many of the seats were vacant, and the exits were choked with people.

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CLEW.

WHEN the rings were finally cleared, O. K. Polter walked leisurely but directly to the sawdust-covered space below the west platform which was the scene of the tragedy.

He was thinking of what he had seen there in the office—those sunken lips of that youthful, but lined, face.

He still did not have a complete case.

He thought of Alex Blaisdell. Alex Blaisdell was a weakling, for all his bulging muscles. Could he break Alex Blaisdell down, force him to inform on Gene Blaisdell? After all, the men were not really brothers. They simply appeared as brothers for professional reasons.

Alex Blaisdell was weak-chinned, nervous, irresolute in manner; dominated completely by the iron-nerved Gene. Could Alex be scared into informing? Would promise of leniency, which he had no right to give, make Alex Blaisdell inform?

O. K. Polter scraped his toes about in the sawdust-covered floor beneath the west platform. The nets did not extend that far. They extended only from the inner edge of one platform to the inner edge of the other. There was no necessity for their extending farther.

The detective could find nothing in

the sawdust. And yet those artificial teeth must have dropped out.

Disappointed in one sense, yet highly hopeful in another, O. K. Polter walked across and stood under the east platform. This was the platform from which Gene Blaisdell had thrown the unfortunate Celeste in that final, fatal movement.

Once more he scraped his toes about in the sawdust; then went down on his hands and knees and felt about.

Within a moment, his hands touched a hard substance. The detective picked it up. It was the artificial teeth—a lower plate—of the unfortunate Celeste Blaisdell.

He slipped the thing into his handkerchief and then into the pocket of his summer plaid coat.

For the next five minutes, he made a thorough search about the lot and finally found the man he was seeking. It was Rex Fanning, the cowboy lariat expert. He had come to know Fanning well.

The cowboy was in serious conversation with the red-headed knife thrower. The two were evidently talking over the accident. O. K. Polter drew Fanning aside.

"Rex," he said, "I've got to make this fast. Terrible accident to-night—yes. But I haven't time to talk about that now."

He produced a card and informed Rex Fanning of his real identity.

"This business of mine is partly taking chances—long shots, Rex," he informed the cowboy. "When you're right, you win. When you're wrong, you lose. It's like bluffing in a poker game. I'm going to ask you this: Will you do something for me—something that may seem irregular to you—if I tell you that you *may* be helping in catching Colonel Carteret's murderer to-night?"

Rex Fanning opened his wide mouth in astonishment. "Why sure—ah—"

Then his strong, tanned face went grim. "Yo're darned tootin' I will!" he said. "I'd 'a' herded woollies fo' a yeah fo' the colonel when he was alive—if he asted me to. I'd do anything to he'p ketch the c'yote as killed 'im."

"I thought so," said Polter. "I want you to go find Alex Blaisdell—*Alex* Blaisdell, mind you. I want you to get him away from Gene Blaisdell on any pretext, and I want you to keep him a prisoner until I call for him—if you have to rope him up like a steer and sit on his chest. I haven't the time to answer any questions, either. I'm in a hurry."

"Who asted yuh to answer any questions?" asked Rex Fanning. "I'll have my rope over that hombre in less'n no time a-tall."

O. K. Polter looked up Sigmund Morton hurriedly and drew the circus manager into his little office.

"I have the murderer of Colonel Carteret," he announced calmly.

"What's that?" gasped Morton.

Polter talked with the circus man for five minutes. "If you'll stand for it," he said finally, "I'm reasonably certain it'll work. You can send for him. You can say you want to talk with him about continuing the act with a new girl. He'll come, all right. He has no intention of quitting the game. He's money crazy."

For answer, Morton went to the entrance of the improvised little office, and motioned to some minor employee.

"Tell Mr. Gene Blaisdell I wish to see him," he said. "Tell him I said we can't do without that act, that I want to make some arrangement."

Within five minutes, Gene Blaisdell entered the little office. His pale eyes widened slightly when he saw O. K. Polter and Dreamy McVey standing beside Morton. Then, once more he was the perfect actor. He shook his head sadly and took the chair to which Morton pointed.

"I'm afraid I can never work that act again, Mr. Morton," he said.

"I'm afraid not, either, Mr. Blaisdell," said O. K. Polter. His piercing black eyes held the other's pale-blue ones. "You'll never work *any* act again, Blaisdell."

The adagio dancer stood up. His pale eyes flashed.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What are you doing here?" He turned to Dreamy McVey. "What's this roughneck sap doing here? I came here to talk professionally at Mr. Morton's request."

"At *my* request," Polter amended. "Blaisdell, the jig is up. Do you wish to make a confession why you killed Colonel Sam Carteret, and also why you killed your wife, Celeste Blaisdell, who knew of your former crime?"

The gymnast's face went white. He turned to Morton.

"Is this man a lunatic?" he asked. "I demand to know what all this means."

"I'll tell you what it means." It was Polter's voice answering him. The voice cold, grim. "It means that every man's nerve isn't as strong as yours. It means that, unknown to you, we got hold of Alex Blaisdell. He was like putty. You know how little real nerve he's got.

"He made a full confession. The confession is enough to lodge you in jail to-night. Later, through legal means, you will be given an opportunity to disprove anything that Alex Blaisdell may have told. I think personally, that you'll have quite a job."

O. K. Polter had faced many guilty men in his time. He knew that this man was guilty. But the acrobat's poise was remarkable.

"I must say that I still don't understand," Blaisdell said.

"Maybe what I am about to tell you will make you understand," was Polter's retort. The case was reconstructed in his own mind. He believed that he

knew what Alex Blaisdell *would* have said if there had been time to break him down.

Gene Blaisdell laughed. There was just a tinge of an hysterical note. "This is getting funny," the gymnast said. "But shoot."

"Very well, Blaisdell. I'll shoot. You haven't seen Alex Blaisdell for the past twenty minutes. I know that, and you know it. The reason is that Alex Blaisdell is afraid of you after what he's done—after what we forced him to do. We forced him to tell the truth."

"How do you know it's the truth?" asked Blaisdell.

The question seemed to indicate to Polter that he was desperate; that he was assuming that Alex had really talked.

"We *don't* know. We only know that he claimed that for many months past—since the latter part of 1929, to be exact, the time of the first market crash—you have been in financial difficulties, despite your satisfactory salary. You were caught in the crash. Your brokers were Harrison & Dawes, of Chicago."

O. K. Polter paused a moment to let this statement sink in. That was the information telephoned to Dreamy that afternoon by Larry Wayne of the National Detective Agency. Wayne was a wizard at looking up the stock dealings of suspects.

"Well?" asked Blaisdell. Once more he was calm, cold, steel-nerved.

"Well, about ten days ago you decided you needed money badly enough to kill one of your best friends to get it. The escape of Nabob, the tiger, gave you the opportunity. You followed Colonel Carteret into that dark sheep pasture near Harbin, Wisconsin, and threw a knife into his chest! When he dropped, you ran up on him and slugged him, to make sure. Then you robbed him of the money and valuable jewelry you knew him to possess."

"And would you tell me, please," asked Blaisdell, with a cool attempt at satire, "where I, a gyniast, an adagio dancer, learned this art of throwing knives so accurately?"

"Yes," said Polter, "I will. Alex claims that you were pretty expert at it. You worked as a knife thrower in the Harley Railroad Circus through the Middle West and South, eight years ago."

He paused and looked at Blaisdell triumphantly. During that day in Chicago, Polter had gone through the files of circus and theatrical agents for several years back. He had recognized Gene Blaisdell through a photograph in an obscure agency.

Blaisdell said nothing now. There seemed little to say. He sat there as if fully aware that he had made an error in strategy. He had as much as denied that he had ever been an experienced knife thrower.

Polter continued:

"Some of the statements which Alex Blaisdell made to us were a little hazy. I must admit that. Possibly when he repeats them before authorities, they will not be so hazy. But he gave us to understand that your wife, the late Celeste Blaisdell, learned of your dastardly act in killing Colonel Carteret."

He made this obvious guess. He paused to let the words sink in.

"Therefore," Polter continued, "it was up to you to silence Celeste Blaisdell—to murder her."

Once more Blaisdell stood up. "But that is ridiculous," he stated. "Thousands of people out there saw that accident. Why—"

"Yes," Polter said grimly. "That accident! You made a deal with Alex Blaisdell. You intimidated him into becoming an accessory after the fact. That's why he confessed. You murdered Celeste Blaisdell. As an accessory after the fact, Alex Blaisdell cannot be subjected to capital punishment.

That's why he talked—we could promise leniency for him.

"All he did was to appear to miss your throw—after you had broken her neck when you whirled her about. The amber spotlight was on you then. It did not disclose as much to the audience as the white spotlight would.

Gene Blaisdell had sat down, but once more he stood up. His face was distorted. "That rat!" he grated. "That weakling!"

And then Gene Blaisdell did a curious thing. He walked toward O. K. Polter, put out his hand, and smiled.

"You're too much for me," he said. "I always know an act I can't get over. I know when I'm licked. Tough break! But no hard feelings. Shake!"

Polter could see the treachery in the gymnast's pale eyes. But his business was a business of taking chances. The man might still repudiate what he had practically admitted, but had not confessed in so many words. If the gymnast would perform some incriminating act here before witnesses—

Polter knew the man was as strong as a bull, but he put his right hand in the hand of the other.

The next act in the drama was by no means a complete surprise to Polter. With a lightning movement, Blaisdell had wrenched him to the floor, and was handling him as a man would handle a small boy. Then his strong hands were about the detective's throat.

Through a sort of haze, Polter could see Morton dashing through the exit of the little office. A voice that seemed far away was yelling:

"Rex! Lafe! Help. In the office here! Help! Murder!"

Polter saw nothing but black before his eyes now. He was no match physically for this trained gymnast. He was going unconscious—sinking—

And then, after what seemed hours, he opened his eyes. Dreamy McVey,

his homely face wrung with agony, was bathing his temples with a wet cloth.

Sigmund Morton, a dead cigar in his mouth, was standing there, his face stern. Rex Fanning, the cowboy lariat expert, sat lazily in one of the three chairs that the office afforded. On the floor next to him was the roped form of Alex Blaisdell.

Polter looked about the room. Gene Blaisdell lay face up on the floor in a corner of the room.

"What—what happened, Dreamy?" Polter asked.

Dreamy McVey's mustard-colored mustache curled upward in a happy smile.

"Well, I'll tell you, O. K.," he said. "Every man to his trade. You're a gum-shoe, an' you done a darn good piece o' work. This guy was a gymnast an' professional strong man, an' he had his claws aroun' yer throat an' was sendin' you to where he's goin' soon."

The grinning Dreamy walked over to a small table and picked up a long club fashioned of hard wood.

"The special cops carry these for tough townies," he explained. "An' I don't believe in all the fine points o' sportsmanship when a guy that makes his livin' by his strength tussles with a guy that makes his livin' by his brains. So I just picked this up an' tapped our boy friend over the bean. He went out like a light. We've sent for the cops."

That night, as the show was being gilled, Sigmund Morton called on O. K. Polter in his comfortable suite in the Silver Water Hotel.

"You forgot to mention the fee, Polter," he said. "I'm just signing the check. You can fill it in. But I want to ask you just one question. How could you get those facts so accurately? How did you know, for instance, that Gene Blaisdell broke the girl's neck while he was whirling her around?"

"I'll tell you, Morton," he said. "It

was a clew in the sawdust. It told me something that finally broke down Blaisdell when I sprung it. He felt sure then that Alex Blaisdell had peached.

"You see, Blaisdell was maneuvering to work without a net. It would have been easy for him then. He'd apparently have misjudged the distance and let the girl fall. She'd have been killed. I'm not at all sure that we could have pinned the goods on him in that case."

"Well?" Morton demanded. "I don't quite get you yet."

"No, but you will," said Polter. "Gene Blaisdell simply couldn't afford to take chances on throwing the girl and having her hit the pillar. The impact might have killed her—but it might not. She might have lived long enough to testify."

The snoring of Dreamy McVey in the next room became a little too bothersome, and Polter got up and shut the connecting door.

"Gene," he said, "decided to break the girl's neck before he threw her. He had to make sure. He waited for that twirling scene under the amber light.

"I knew what happened as soon as I found that clew in the sawdust. If the artificial teeth had been found under the platform where she landed, her death could have been an accident. But I found the plate under the *east* platform—the platform that *Gene* stood on. Therefore I knew that he had broken her neck before he hurled her to Alex. Naturally, the lower plate dropped out when the girl's neck was broken. Really quite simple, if you think it over."

Sigmund Morton shook his head. "Simple?" he repeated. "Yes—now. But—well, I think I'll stick to the circus business. Now, about that check?"

Ralph Boston's "O. K. Polter" novelties are becoming big favorites with most Top-Notchers. How do you like them? Watch for another in an early issue.



# Relief Pitcher

By Herbert L. McNary

**T**OM KEATING, crouched behind the plate, thought that the Ramblers' batter was all set to lay into one of Jackman's well-known speed balls and to clean the bases--so he signed for a slow one. The big pitcher scowled. He was obviously of a mind to try to burn the ball across. But he obeyed Keating's signal.

The overanxious batter tapped the ball and it dribbled toward the shortstop who overran the ball. And the run scored and the fans booed.

The disappointed Keating retrieved his mask and cap. He was sore that his smart thinking had been gummed up, and sore that he had revealed his bald spot to the wisecracking fans. No ball

player likes to be reminded that he is growing old, and Keating was like the rest. Keating was a brainy catcher, but he had no chance to show it during his major-league career.

Jackman was cutting up on the mound and Keating resented that form of temperament.

"Get back in the box," he called, and cut the grand-stand stuff."

Jackman glowered. Wasn't he the Bruins' ace? And wasn't Keating some one picked up on waivers until the scouts could find a better catcher? Jackman accepted Keating's signal and crossed him with a curve that the unexpecting catcher barely knocked down. The fans booed him.

"Throw the ball I signal for!" shouted Keating. "Haven't you got brains enough to count on your fingers?"

The big pitcher waved Keating back to the plate. There was a scowl on his unintelligent features. He had small, closely set eyes, blotched skin and lips with shreds of tobacco showing at the corners—quite a contrast with the keen, intelligent features of Keating. Keating returned to the plate and the fans booed him. Sympathy was with the colorful Jackman.

Keating signed for a low ball and dropped to his knees in anticipation. He saw the ball come streaking head-high to the batter. He tried to reach it, but the ball sailed to the screen, and another run scored.

The game was suspended as Keating raced back to the plate, and Phelan came out of the Bruins' dugout. The infield gathered around Keating and Jackman. In the huddle Keating told Jackman what he thought of him in no uncertain words.

Instead of bawling out Jackman, Phelan took his part.

"It was just a misunderstanding," soothed Phelan.

"Sure, I was wrong." Keating snapped at the manager. He detested this evasiveness on the part of Phelan. A fine way to manage a team. No wonder the Bruins were in the second division.

Phelan flushed. "Who's runnin' this team?" he demanded of Keating.

"That's what I'd like to know," retorted Keating. He jerked his head in the direction of Jackman who, without a word from Phelan, had taken himself out of the game.

The fans cheered Jackman as he left the field and booed Phelan as the latter returned to the bench. Keating returned to the plate and a new pitcher came in. He was too late to help matters, and two innings later the game ended with another loss for the Bruins.

When Keating came into the locker building lugging his paraphernalia with him, he saw Jackman, now dressed, talking to the manager. He was alibiing himself, and Keating could see that Phelan was yessing him. Phelan was a dark-featured chap in his late thirties. He had been a star outfielder in his day. It doesn't necessarily follow that the best players make the best managers, but birds like Phelan always got the big chances. Keating threw his stuff down on the bench in disgust.

Keating had taken his shower and had started to dress. Phelan came over to him with Jackman lurking in the background for moral support. The other players gathered around. When Keating had come to the Bruins, one local sport writer had intimated that he would eventually replace Phelan as manager. As a matter of fact, Keating had welcomed the change because the Bruins needed catchers. It had shaped up as a chance for him to star before ending his big-league career.

But the local scribe's statement hadn't made for harmony on the Bruins. Phelan knew he wasn't making good, and scented Keating as a rival. Now the matter appeared to be coming to a head. Jackman was to be the issue.

"Jackman says you signaled for a high ball," declared Phelan, "on that one you let go to the stands."

"What difference does it make now?" demanded Keating, rubbing a towel over his loosely muscled torso. "But just to let that big stiff know he isn't gettin' away with anything, I called for a low ball. The trouble with him is he's had so much association with high balls that he can't think of any other kind."

"In other words, I'm a liar," declared the big pitcher, pushing the manager aside. Jackman had engaged in several clashes with other players and had come out on top. The big fellow's fistic prowess was respected. He had twenty pounds on Keating.

But Keating looked at him undismayed. "If one of us is a liar," he declared, "then it isn't me. Figure it out."

"Stand up and back that up," challenged Jackman.

"There's concrete on the floor here," stated Keating, "and even your thick skull might get a concussion. Wait until I get dressed, and we'll go under the stands."

## II.

On the cool soft loam beneath the stands, the two Bruins stripped to their undershirts and faced each other. The other players formed a ring while Phelan stood about, uncertain whether to exert his authority and stop the scrap or let it go through on the theory that it was the best method of settling the dispute. Keating disliked him for this uncertainty.

Without misgivings, Keating faced the man who outweighed him by more than twenty pounds. Keeping in physical trim in and out of season, he had picked up a fair knowledge of boxing which he counted upon to offset Jackman's strength.

As the big pitcher tore in, he met a stinging left jab that jolted his head back. His guard dropped, and Keating stepped in with panther quickness and slashed a right to the jaw. Jackman dropped to the dirt and shook his head in surprise. He climbed to his feet and let go with both fists, but Keating weaved aside and stepped in with a sharp uppercut and stiff jolt to the wind and then rained the big pitcher with several lightning smashes. The blows were stinging rather than hard smashes, for Keating realized his fingers were unprotected—and a catcher has to be careful of his digits. His hardest blows he sent to the midriff where the big fellow could least afford to take them.

Jackman retreated from the smashing attack with no heart left, once he realized he was up against a superior

fighter. Finally a crashing right to the stomach doubled the pitcher over and he fell to the ground.

"You—you fouled me," he protested. His hands clasped his stomach well above his belt.

"I guess you've had enough," stated Keating. "And the next time don't try to cross me up on signals." He looked at Phelan, but the latter avoided his gaze. To the manager the outcome of the bout was as disappointing as it was surprising.

The big pitcher, cowed and tractable, was right in the palm of Phelan's hand if he only realized it, but he backed Jackman when the latter refused to pitch with Keating catching.

Keating read the handwriting on the wall. Phelan would use the Jackman incident to get rid of him. Keating saw himself waived out of the league, his career ended without his having ever had the big chance. Until now he had been on teams that possessed better hitting catchers, and now a jealous manager and a resentful star were conspiring against him.

Jackman claimed to have been injured in the stomach, and "Toots" Phelan either fell for the argument or pretended to believe it to discredit Keating; but the irresponsible twirler took advantage of this managerial sympathy to obtain "medicine" for his ailing stomach and wound up on the wrong end of a stomach pump because of the rotgut he had consumed. Phelan stood a chance of getting in wrong with the owner and the fans, and in looking for an out he encouraged the story that an injury by Keating had put Jackman on the shelf.

The story never came out in the open; but like all rumors, it grew with the telling. It is these "whisperings" that a ball player desires to avoid. Baseball never demands court evidence. Suspicion is frequently enough for a man to be eased out of the big leagues.

Some one had to be the goat on the Bruins.

As a ten-year man, Keating got his unconditional release. He tried to catch on with other big league outfits, but without success. No manager would tell him, but he felt that the Jackman lie and the consequent reputation of his being a trouble maker stood between him and a job. However, it might be that no one really wanted him. He was getting along in years. He was smart, yes; but managers' jobs are precarious enough without taking on a rival.

Crayton of the Ramblers gave him the best advice. "Pop" had a young team, and was far from as well as he used to be. Keating thought he could be of help to him; but Pop told him to take a year in the minors. If his young catchers failed to click, there might be an opening for him next year.

So Keating went to the minors; and the story that went with him was that he had killed off Jackman before his time, for now that the big fellow had fallen from the water wagon he didn't find it easy climbing aboard. Later in the season he went on the block. The Wolverenes took a chance on him, and regretted it. He not only continued to kick over the traces, but he pulled the Wolverene's star first baseman with him. That winter Jackman was sold to the Grays. The next May he was given his unconditional release.

Keating, still a minor-league catcher, read the story that "Jackman has never been the same since his reported club-house fight with his former catcher, Tom Keating."

Then the account went on to intimate more than it stated. The good-natured, irresponsible slob, Jackman, was to be pitied. The real man to blame was Tom Keating. Keating crushed the paper and threw it on the floor.

The real man? The real man was Toots Phelan, now manager of the team that was supposed to win the pennant

this year. If there were only some way to get even. Keating paused in his angry pacing. He'd write that letter he had been contemplating. Crayton's catchers hadn't done so well. Maybe Pop meant his promise of the year before.

Keating expected a courteous refusal and excuses; but a few days after he mailed the letter he was called into the club's offices and told he had been bought by the Ramblers.

### III.

Keating's joy at reporting to Crayton was marred by the shock of surprise when he met the manager. Pop seemed to have aged a decade in the year since Keating had seen him. He couldn't tell Crayton he looked well. He politely made no mention, and Crayton seemed to understand.

"I've been banking a lot on a young catcher, Tom, that I've been forced to conclude is a year away. I've some great young pitchers, and with some one to get the most out of them we—might get anywhere this year."

"You can count on me workin' my heart out," stated Keating. "I owe it to you for bringin' me back." A look of understanding passed between them.

"One of my reasons for bringing you back, Tom, is to give you a chance to bury that Jackman story. From reports, he's pitching an occasional semi-pro game and drinking himself to death. Some day he'll be found floating in the river—and you'll be blamed. It's hard to change a reputation made in baseball. The smartest player can steal second with the bases filled, and ever after be known as a bonehead. But I'm giving you a chance. You're smart and game."

Keating proved of great assistance to the young pitchers, particularly to a kid named Woods. He instilled confidence in young Woods and then went behind the plate to catch him. Woods pitched

a two-hit game, and after that would pitch to no one but Keating. Other young members of the Ramblers' twirling staff demanded Keating also. Keating found that he could catch as well as ever, and still cut runners down. He had never been much of a batter; but he still possessed the faculty of getting his hits when they counted most.

The Ramblers started to climb. But they still lacked balance. Both Crayton and Keating sensed this lack before they discussed it.

"I need one more good pitcher," stated Crayton one day, "some old-timer whose still got enough stuff left in his arm to finish up games or to be a steady-ing influence on these kids when the going gets rough. I've gone over the rosters of every worth-while minor-league club. The statistics don't show me anything. I thought maybe in your sojourn with the minors you might have got a line on the man I mean."

Keating thought and shook his head. "Offhand I can't think of any one. Gi'me your lists, and to-night I'll go over 'em. Maybe I'll think of some one."

That night Keating studied the statistics, trying to think of some old-timer who might fill the bill. Holbein, Cotton, Jackson—Keating looked off into space. Jackson—Jackman.

Keating asked for a few days off to go on a scouting trip, and got it. He hit Jackman's trail. He found where he had been pitching semipro ball, and learned that in these games he had shown spells of brilliant pitching. But Keating failed to locate Jackman on the various city playgrounds. Instead, the trail led down toward the water front, through the slums, and finally into a dingy basement speakeasy.

There was a small bar presided over by a swarthy, mustached, probable violator of the immigration—not to mention other—laws. Outside the bar were several beer-ringed tables at which

were sprawled a number of disreputable-looking thugs who eyed Keating with unfriendly curiosity. He was better dressed than the usual run of the dive.

Keating's eyes became accustomed to the murky light, enough for him to make out faces and forms. It was Jackman's sprawled figure at one of the tables that he recognized. He crossed over and laid a hand on the hunched shoulder.

Jackman lifted his head. In the bloodshot eyes and bloated face, Keating saw the evidence of prolonged dissipation; but just now the man was not so drunk as his position had indicated. He recognized Keating with mingled surprise and animosity.

"What do you want?" he growled.

"I want to take you out of here," answered Keating. The talking in the dive had subsided. He was unpleasantly conscious of the interest of these unwelcome spectators.

"You're the man who put me here," growled Jackman. It was evident that he had given this alibi for his fall from grace so long that he had come to believe it himself. "I'd still be one of the best pitchers if it wasn't for—"

"Get up."

"Make me."

"Wot's he tryin' t' give yuh, Lefty?"

Keating looked up and found two gorillas edging on either side of him. Beyond, several others seemed to be spoiling for a fight or possibly for a chance to roll him. He realized now that it had been a mistake to come to this place dressed like ready money.

One of the men gave him a shoulder, bumping him into the other. This gorilla growled in protest and swung. But Keating had been expecting this part in the play. He ducked and stepped back quickly. The first gorilla lunged at him. Keating jabbed his head back with a left and let him have a right full on the jaw. The gangster went down. But the next instant his mates had sprung into action.

Keating closed in on them to bunch them, to give them as little play as possible while he countered their wild blows with short, telling jolts, each punch finding flesh. But they were ganging him. There was no thought of fairness, no sportsmanship here. They were out to get him, and when they got him, ruin him; give him the boots, just as they were kicking at his legs now to bring him to the floor. One gangster had a blackjack he was waiting to bring down on the right bobbing head. Keating saw that.

And now above the sounds of the fight Keating heard a roar. He saw Jackman leap for the fray. Inwardly Keating smiled bitterly. Jackman saw his chance to get even for the fight beneath the stands, to square accounts with the man he blamed for ruining his baseball career. The big fellow pulled the mob apart and then swung—but the blow was not aimed at Keating. The gangster with the blackjack went down in a heap.

And now Jackman turned on the others, swinging wildly. But there was over two hundred pounds behind the blows. And he cleared the press about Keating. He gave the latter chance to call his punches once more, to use his knowledge of boxing. Back and forth across the room the fight swept, overturning tables and chairs. Any minute now Keating expected gun play. He was near the door. Now he fell against it and kicked with his feet.

"The cops!" he yelled, simulating as best he could the gangsters' tones.

It worked. There was a concerted rush for the small door behind the bar. Keating pulled open the outside door and darted up the stone basement stairs with Jackman after him. They were not pursued, but even so they put distance between themselves and the speak-easy. Keating saw a taxi swinging under the elevated structure and hailed it. When they were safely settled on the

cushions, Keating turned to the big beer-scented outcast.

"Why did you stick with me?" he asked.

"That's what *I'm* tryin' to figure out," grunted Jackman, his face screwed up in laborious thought. "Maybe it's because you're a ball player an' I couldn't stand fer 'em gangin' yuh. But, here you're the guy what put me on the bum——"

"Like hell," snapped Keating. "Now, once and for all, get that boloney out of your system. That beatin' I gave you instead of puttin' you on the blink, should have made a top-notch star out of you. It's what you needed and what you'll get. The guy who put you on the bum was Toots Phelan for not followin' up my lead. You got me remembered as the guy who put you out of baseball before your time. Well, I'm goin' to be remembered from now on as the guy who brought you back."

"Brought me back?" exclaimed Jackman, surprise and hope lighting up the bloodshot eyes.

"Yeah, with the Ramblers. You're gonna have your chance to beat Toots out of the pennant. First, you're gonna have all that bum booze drained out of your system. You're goin' to a health farm run by an old-time boxer whose business it is to recondition bums like you."

"My arm ain't so bad," declared Jackman hopefully.

"Yeah, I know. When you use it the right way. The trouble is you've been liftin' the elbow too much. But them days are done, or, so help me—— Well, you know what I did to you before."

#### IV.

Keating said nothing to Crayton about Jackman for some time, but he kept informed of the progress the big pitcher was making at the health farm. Meanwhile the Ramblers were holding

their own at the head of the second division and threatening to break into the select group with a little more steadiness. Crayton bemoaned the absence of one more capable twirler.

"I've got him," declared Keating as they leaned over the dugout rail watching the team in its morning work-out. And then he told the facts about Jackman. Crayton shook his head.

"I can't stand for a playboy, Jackman would be bad influence to my young players."

"Don't worry about his influence," stated Keating. "He's reformed. He's all right at heart. He just needs a guardian. Well, I'm that guardian—and he knows it."

Jackman worked out several days in privacy with the Ramblers before Crayton would sign. There was no question but what the big fellow had most of his stuff, and he was trying with an earnestness new for him. The news that Jackman had been signed by the Ramblers occasioned great surprise. Most scribes took the view that Crayton was sicker than supposed; that he could hardly be in his right senses to have Keating and Jackman on the same team, for by now the Jackman-Keating feud had become a legend and had been magnified, as are most legends.

The Ramblers went on a swing around the circuit. Jackman was used to finish up several games and gave indication of proving just the tonic the Ramblers needed. That powerful arm and easy motion of his could toy with a batter, for a few innings at last. Meanwhile, with Keating catching him, young Woods pitched sensationaly. The public awoke to the fact that the Ramblers were coming.

But it took the Bruins' series to arouse the fans thoroughly. Phelan tried to razz Keating and Jackman before the first game, and offered to bet they wouldn't last a month. Keating came right back and countered by bet-

ting the Ramblers would finish ahead of the Bruins, and Jackman made the same offer. Toots had to accept or crawl. He accepted.

Keating begged Crayton to let him and Jackman start against the Bruins, and Crayton saw the psychology of upsetting Phelan and consented. The fans applauded Jackman's appearance and he responded by getting the first six men in order.

When Keating came to bat in the third, the Bruins razzed him. But he was thinking that the Bruins' pitcher, Casper, had a habit of sticking the first one over. Keating set himself for that first one and put everything he had behind it. He connected and the ball settled into the left-field bleachers for a home run. Jackman greeted Keating as he crossed the pan and slapped him on the back.

"Casper is stickin' the first one in there," Keating told him out of the side of his mouth. "Lean on it."

Jackman went to bat. He was that type of pitcher who took a healthy cut at the ball and who missed more often than he connected, but when he connected—well, he connected now and the ball rattled off the fence for two bases. These two hits were least expected, upset Casper, and before he could get back to earth, the Ramblers had pushed over three more runs.

The Ramblers got to the relief pitcher and piled up a nice lead. This lead gave Keating the idea of pulling out Jackman and saving him for another game. Crayton seconded the plan. The fans saw Jackman leave the game and gave him a nice hand, but put him down for a four or five-inning pitcher, a shadow of the old Jackman who had starred for these same Bruins.

But the fans and Bruins received a sad jolt when Jackman appeared in the box the next day and not only finished but won the game. The Ramblers had the Bruins on the run now, and Cray-

ton shot in Woods with Keating catching and steadyng the brilliant but flighty youngster. Woods shut the leaders out. Three out of four. Could the Ramblers take the Bruins for the whole series? If they did they would just about turn the race upside down.

This fourth game was anybody's battle until the Ramblers went ahead by a pair of runs in the seventh. Jackman came sauntering in from the bull pen to take the place of the chucker who had given way to a pinch hitter, and the big fellow held the lead.

These four victories put the Ramblers right in the race. The teams entered the grueling August days with the Bruins leading the Romans four games, the Grays six, and the Ramblers six and a half. But a jinx settled down on the Ramblers. Crayton had to leave the team to visit a famous clinic. In his absence Keating acted as manager.

And then one morning Keating was called to the club offices to find President Farnham and Crayton there and to learn that Crayton's life depended on his retiring immediately. The dazed Keating found himself being offered the management of a pennant contender.

Keating looked sadly at Crayton. "I don't want to—replace you."

Crayton smiled wearily. "We knew you'd feel that way. Do it as a favor to me. Even if I stayed on and defied the doctors I couldn't direct the team. It has a chance to win the pennant. The doctors say the way I am now I may not live three months. The best tonic I know of would be to see the team I developed, the youngsters I had faith in, come through and win. Do it for me, Tom."

Hard-boiled baseball men are not likely to show sentiment. Keating couldn't express his feelings, his sympathy for the sick leader. He gulped.

"I'll win," he stated. "And please let me tell it to the men—just before we play the Bruins this afternoon."

## V.

The Bruins had come to town for their final visit of the year. It was a series that would make or break the Ramblers' chances. If they could win all three games they would be within a game and a half of first place. But this was considered impossible. The odds were with the Bruins. It was known that Pop Crayton was a sick man, and although expected to be on the bench for this crucial series the uncertainty about him was bound to affect the young Ramblers.

Just before game time, Keating called the Ramblers to the bench.

Without any conscious attempt to be dramatic, merely expressing a feeling that was sincere, Keating pointed to the vacant spot on the bench always occupied by Crayton.

"Pop isn't going to be sitting there any more, except in spirit. His doctors told him he wouldn't live three months. Pop told me if you fellows went out and won the pennant for him he'd prove the doctors were mistaken. I can only manage you—you fellows have got to win the games."

The Ramblers heard in silence. More than one eye glistened, more than one throat gulped. Most of them were in their early twenties, the majority came to the big cities straight from isolated corners in the Carolinas or Dakotas, the Middle and Southwest. Cassen, the scrappy little shortstop, with fiery thatch and protruding jaw, broke the tension.

"We'll win the pennant," he exclaimed, "and we'll sink them Bruins t-day."

A moment later the squad ran out to their position like a pepped-up college football team returning for the second half.

There was no stopping the Ramblers that day. They played inspired ball, swung viciously with their bats and performed miracles in the field. Two

men remained cool. Jackman on the mound with his easy motion, and Keating, crouched keen-eyed behind the plate, with his crisp voice sounding constant encouragement, steered the Ramblers to victory.

Naturally the next day there was a let-down and reaction on the part of the young Ramblers. It revealed itself in the first inning, when with young Woods on the mound, two bad errors and a wretched decision prompted a wild streak. The Bruins got away to a four-run lead, and Keating ignored the insistence of the fans and kept Woods in. The kid southpaw settled down and had the Bruins popping up. Meanwhile the Ramblers kept pegging away, but luck wasn't with them. Hard hit balls went into fielders' hands at the wrong time.

The breaks shifted, though, for Woods got a lucky handle hit for two bases. A real double and a single followed for two runs. The Ramblers picked up another in the eighth and then staged a rally in the ninth that brought over the tying run. Keating came to bat with men on first and third, with one down.

"Watch me bring him in," Keating called to Phelan.

The pitcher tried to make Keating hit on the ground, but Keating stepped up and lifted a long fly to center that allowed the runner to score standing up. The Ramblers had two of the three games.

And on the following day it was the Bruins team that cracked. Jackman on the mound again, breezed along, only bearing down when men were on base. The Ramblers won 9 to 4 and jumped to second place.

The closing days of the pennant race were about the most hectic in baseball history. Bruins, Ramblers, Romans, and Grays swapped places daily. It was the sort of a finish in which young players could be expected to crack. The

Ramblers were young and had a substitute manager, but Keating kept them together. He had his chance, his big chance, and he meant to make the most of it. He saw fame and glory, and he went after it. He drove his men to victory; he made them forget their defeats. He kept a certain seat on the bench always vacant and made the young Ramblers realize that Pop Crayton was there in spirit. They were fighting for Pop, and gradually they sensed the drama enshrouding Keating—and they fought for him.

And the very hardest worker on the Ramblers was "Bugs" Jackman. He would have pitched every day if Keating had let him, and when not pitching he was working down in the bull pen, ever ready to save a game.

But it takes more than spirit to win a pennant. Sometimes it takes more than ability. Luck is bound to be a factor. The Bruins had ability, and it certainly looked as if Toots Phelan was Fortune's favored son. The Bruins got all the breaks, and when the Ramblers reached the Bruins' park for the final series of three games the Bruins were leading by two full games. The Ramblers had beaten the Bruins several straight games, and it seemed beyond reason that they could take three more on the Bruins' home grounds. And they needed all three to win.

Keating started Jackman in the first game, and went behind the bat. He had been forced to use Jackman out of turn during the hectic finish, but Jackman insisted he could pitch two of the three games.

But this was no ordinary game. It developed into the tightest of pitching battles. Jackman had to bear down all the way, but he turned back the Bruins.

The Ramblers had won the first game, but had used up Jackman in doing so. His arm was dead. Keating started Woods the next day, but he was shaky, and Keating had to yank him.

With the score two all in the fifth, the second Rambler pitcher started to go wild. Keating saw he had lost his stuff and pulled him. Both teams scored a run in the eighth, and in the ninth Keating sent in a pinch hitter for the pitcher. The man walked and later scored. How Keating would like to have had Jackman for the Bruins' ninth.

The first pitcher was as wild as a hawk, and after four straight balls, Keating chased him. The next proved just as nervous and with the fans howling to upset him he, too, went out of the box. The third Rambler pitcher came in. Cassen gave him the ball. Keating went out to encourage him.

"Act nervous and throw the first ball high and wide," Keating told the pitcher, and then added to Cassen, "when I walk out cut for second."

The pitcher took his warm ups and appeared nervous. He had reason to be. The park was a bedlam. The first ball he threw when the game began again almost got away from Keating. With the fans yelling, Keating ran out apparently bawling out the pitcher. Cassen cut back of second and the watching Keating snapped the ball. The runner was trapped. The park was suddenly still.

The pitcher bore down. The batter rapped to Cassen and a double play ended the game. The two teams were now tied for the lead with the pennant depending on the morrow's result.

Jackman pleaded to pitch that final game, but as he warmed up with Keating, the latter saw he didn't have all his stuff. His arm was still tired. With tears in his eyes, Jackman insisted he could blind the Bruins.

"I'd rather save you to finish the game, than risk you now," declared Keating.

## VI.

The final game started with Jackman on the bench. The Ramblers scored in

the fourth, but the Bruins tied the count in the seventh. Neither team scored in the eighth. Fans and players alike were tense now. A pennant depended on almost every move.

The first Rambler in the ninth died. Then Cassen drew a walk. Keating came to the bat, grim and determined. He swung at the first ball as if bent on putting it out of the park, but he gave the hit-and-run sign, and on the next pitch, as Cassen started for second and the second baseman moved over, Keating singled to right. Cassen pulled up at third. The park became tense again. Bruins crowded around their pitcher as Keating called for Bright to pinch hit. Bright connected with the second ball and drove out a long fly on which Cassen scored. The next man flied out.

Jackman came into pitch what Keating, with throbbing heart, hoped would be the last regular inning of the season. His big chance. The pennant was within his grasp. Jackman needed only to turn back the Bruins for this one inning.

Keating took the five warm-ups and threw down to second and then called with tense voice to Toots Phelan on the first-base line:

"Get that grand ready, Toots. We're collecting."

But Keating spoke out of turn. The oldest axiom in baseball is that a game is never won until the last man is out. Jackman tried hard, too hard. He cut the corners on his first two pitches. The umpire might have called them either way but proclaimed them both balls. Keating protested. Jackman grabbed. The fans were howling murder. No man in the park could be rational.

The batter walked. Keating soothed the nervous Jackman. The big pitcher forced the batter to foul twice, trying to sacrifice. The fans groaned. Then the next ball hit the batter. Keating

contended that the batter made little attempt to avoid being hit, but the Bruins went to first.

The next batter tried to bunt. Keating had called for a pitch out and he whipped the ball to second. Cassen had his man, but dropped the ball. The young Rainblers were cracking.

On the next pitch with the fans yelling so that no one could think rationally, the batter bunted in front of the plate. Keating chased it and started to throw to third. It would have been a force-out, but the third baseman failed to cover. Three on and none out. Forty thousand crazy fans. Jackman bearing down with all he had.

The batter hit the next ball. It shot toward the stand. Keating raced after it. It was right by the Bruins' dugout. A play flashed into Keating's head. It had come up in a semipro game and he and Jackman had discussed it. Would Jackman remember?

Keating caught the foul and then plunged on into the dugout wall. He fell in a heap, apparently unconscious, but holding the ball so that Phelan could see it. It was a caught foul fly. Phelan excitedly called the runner in with what would be the tying run. The runner, touching third, started to streak for the plate.

Good old Bugs Jackman! Keating saw him covering the plate, and Keating snapped out of his pretended daze. The runner, racing home from third, was but a few feet away from the plate when Keating snapped the ball to Jackman who tagged the surprised runner for a double play.

Keating ran out and hugged Jackman.

"Atta boy, Bugs! Now burn 'em over on this next bird before he comes to."

Three swift, successive strikes sped across the pan and the game was over. Keating and Bugs had won the pennant.



### CABOOSE

By EMIL J. BLACKY

She's reeking with smell of sweaty clothes,  
And the coal dust's thicker 'n sin.  
The stove is rusty; the door's broke off.  
And the lids are falling in.

A nail in the wall holds a dirty shirt,  
And tobacco juice flecks the floor.  
The windows ain't kept for seem' through  
And there ain't a lock on the door.

She rolls like a critter with colic pains,  
And she bucks like a wild West hoss,  
But there ain't a guy who would sneer at her  
From the brakey up to the boss.

She's the only home that follows a man,  
Whatever may be his fate.  
So here's a toast, as we roll along,  
To our old caboose on the freight.



# The Thin Flame Of Courage

By Hugh B. Cave

## CHAPTER I.

### THE BACK TRAIL.

**I**N one little minute, anything can happen! It's an old proverb in the East. It was lettered in Chinese characters on the dirty placard that hung from the wall of the saloon, in Sandakan. Under it, a lone white man lay sprawled over the table—drunk.

His hand, holding an empty glass, twitched convulsively. Three months of bad whisky had done that. And for the same reason, the color had ebbed out of his face. It was gaunt, haggard—with staring eyes. The kind of face that a man remembers for a long time, and pities.

And the kind of face that a stranger looks at, out of curiosity—for in spite of its degradation, it was still young.

Which explains why Captain Ralph Morgan, standing at the bar, was staring at it intently.

A moment before, Morgan had come quietly into the saloon, and had glanced indifferently at the limp figure sprawled over the table. Now, as he turned around, the boy's haggard face was directly in line with him. A bewildered frown crossed Morgan's lips.

"Who is that fellow?" he asked abruptly, turning to the barkeep.

The barkeep shrugged his shoulders.

"Him? Just another derelict, drifted in here to drink himself unconscious. Sandakan's full of 'em."

"You don't know his name?"

"They don't have any names, cap'n. They're tryin' to forget—not rememberer."

Morgan stepped forward quietly. The boy at the table did not look up. Not until Morgan's hand fell on his shoulder. Then he lifted his head wearily and stared into the captain's face.

That stare was sufficient. Morgan pulled back a chair and sat down, facing the derelict. His fingers closed over the boy's hand, and he leaned forward slowly.

"Creighton—don't you remember me?"

The boy's head came up with a start. His glazed eyes searched Morgan's face with an effort. A trace of color crept back into his tired face. He was trying hard to remember the solid, clean-cut features of the man before him.

"Think back, son," Morgan said very softly. "Afghanistan—the Khyber Pass."

The words had an abrupt effect—but not the right one. The boy cringed, as if Morgan had struck him. His face went whiter than before. He was staring as if he had come upon a ghost—and he was afraid.

Morgan drew him back, across the table.

"It's all right, old man. You're not in the Khyber Pass now. That's all over and done with."

"And you"—the boy's voice was only a whisper, tinged with fear—"you're not—the major?"

"No, I'm not the major. I'm Morgan, son. Ralph Morgan."

The boy's hand groped out, gripping Morgan's arm. He was a pathetic figure, leaning halfway across the table, clutching feebly at the man who sat opposite him. His clothes were ragged and dirty, but they had once been a British foreign-service uniform; and even now, on the breast of the coat, gleamed a little crescent-shaped medal—a sharp-

shooter's medal. And there was another one, an exact duplicate, on the coat of the man who faced him.

No wonder, then, that Morgan was sitting there. Any two men who have been through the Eastern circle together—from the land of Confucius to the country of the Gautama fanatics—must either love each other or hate each other. And there was no hate in Captain Morgan's eyes.

"Son, how long have you been—like this? Ever since—Afghanistan?"

Creighton nodded heavily.

"Still—afraid?" Morgan asked softly.

"I'll always be afraid."

The reply was abrupt, almost a sob. Morgan reached out quietly and pulled the bottle and empty glass out of the boy's reach. Then he shook his head.

"You won't be, son," he said. "You're coming with me, to find yourself again."

"Coming—with you?"

"With me. Ever hear of B'Nurma Post, old man? The last government outpost in the interior, at the headwaters of the Dyka? The dear old government is sending me up there, to relieve one of the regulars. And you're coming with me!"

The boy forced a smile—a tired, discouraged smile.

"I couldn't make it, Morgan," he said slowly. "I'm—through."

"A white man in the East is never through, until he is buried."

"No—I'm just a rotter."

Morgan pushed back his chair and got up. Deliberately he bent over the boy and lifted him to his feet. Then, with his arm around Creighton's shoulders, he turned to the door.

"You're coming with me to B'Nurma Post, son," he said simply. "You're sleeping to-night in a clean bunk, and you're getting a decent uniform. To-morrow me go upriver."

Creighton stood still and looked straight up at his comrade. Then, with

an effort, he squared his shoulders. His steps were a bit unsteady as he returned to the table, but he held himself defiantly erect. When he reached Morgan's side again, he held the half-empty bottle in his hand.

Outside, in the street, he flung the bottle savagely into the gutter. Then he turned quietly to Morgan.

"Guess I'm pretty low," he said bitterly. "But I'm still a white man, Morgan, and in Borneo that means something. If you're game enough to take a chance with me, after what happened in the Khyber Pass—I'm ready."

## CHAPTER II.

### UPRIVER.

B'NURMA POST, in the heart of the deep jungle region, is three days' slow travel upriver—three days of darkness, overhanging jungle, and leech-infested water, the very next thing to a journey through hell.

And at the end of the third day, with Creighton at his side, Captain Ralph Morgan—died!

It was not unusual. White men, traveling the river trails of Dyak jungles, disappear with regularity. And Morgan was just another white man. The only peculiar thing about it was the way it happened.

It happened at the edge of the B'Nurma Post territory. The sampan was moving slowly upriver, between shores that were nothing but irregular walls of shadow—too close for comfort.

In the bow, three pairs of black shoulders bent doggedly over the poles, keeping the clumsy boat in motion. In the stern, under the shadow of the cabin, young Creighton lay sprawled on the deck, half asleep.

Morgan stood upright, halfway between the bow and the stern, leaning against the cabin—seemingly indifferent to the jungle around him.

But he was watching, cautiously. For one thing, the sampan was entering the narrow stretch of river.

The banks were so close that low-banging creepers trailed over the deck. There, more than any other stretch of the Dyka, a white man had to be careful. It was mighty easy for black shadows to step suddenly out of the reeds, at the very side of the boat. And a native parang, hurled from that short distance, is deadly.

Morgan turned quickly to glance at his companion. He said nothing. Made no attempt to wake the boy. After all, young Creighton had been through plenty in the last few days. The boy was tired. In case of emergency—

Morgan was thinking of the Khyber Pass. He shook his head slowly, bitterly. In case of emergency, he knew, young Creighton was—no good.

The boy did not move. He was not asleep, not quite. His eyes were half open, staring at the left shore of the river—at the black jungle and the trailing creepers that scratched across the deck.

He was safe from unseen eyes, and knives. Natives, hidden in the reeds, would not know that there was a second white man lying under the cabin. They would see only one man—Morgan.

Once again Morgan turned, to call the boy to his side. There was danger, heavy danger, on both sides of the narrow river. One man, Morgan knew, could watch only one wall of jungle—not both. But once again the captain turned back without speaking. His lips were curved in a half smile of pity. After all, if it came to a positive emergency, he would be better off alone.

He was watching intently—staring at every suggestive patch of reeds. But he was watching—the wrong side of the river.

It was the boy, not Morgan, who saw those reeds break suddenly apart—saw

the glistening shoulders of a crouching native. Morgan, studying the right side of the river, did not see it.

The boy moved abruptly. His hand went to his belt—came up with a revolver. Strangely enough, as he wriggled forward, his sleeve caught on the little crescent medal that hung from his coat. The sharpshooter's medal!

But he was slow. His hand, holding the gun, came up like lead, and it was trembling. When he finally leveled the revolver at the black's head, his trigger finger groped blindly for the mark.

He lay there, one hand braced against the deck for support. His face was gray—grayer than the dirty tint of the native's sarong. A little fleck of white marked the line of his lips. Afraid—

And then, the sampan swung slowly against that deadly clump of reeds. The crouching native straightened up like a snake—and leaped to the deck. Creighton's warning sob was smothered in a triumphant yell as the native's knife arm descended—full on the back of the white man who was standing by the cabin.

Morgan had no time to turn. His first warning of danger was that ringing yell from the native's throat. And then it was too late. The white man groped up heavily, with a dull groan—and crumpled to the deck.

Creighton, lying on the boards, was staring—staring like a ghost, with all the color gone from his face. His fingers had stiffened, and let the revolver drop. Fear had taken his last bit of courage, and he was shivering.

He saw the black, standing over the white man who lay on the deck—saw the native bend over, and straighten up again. A thin trickle of blood ran down the blade of his parang.

And then the boy's hands twisted out and gripped the edge of the boat. Nothing but stark fear could have made him move.

In one move he had wriggled over the side of the sampan. There was a dull splash—and the native on deck whirled suddenly to peer at the river. But the water had closed silently over Creighton's head. And in the dark, the splash might have been caused by anything.

The native was bending over Morgan again, tearing a little crescent medal from the white man's coat. As he stood there, grinning down at it and fastening it to his dirty sarong, Creighton watched him—from the reeds.

It was a savage picture: A huge river native, standing on the deck with a bloody knife still in his hand, and grinning triumphantly, through the ugly, three-cornered scar that split his left cheek. The boy would not forget that picture for a long time to come.

And when it was over, he lay in the reeds, half in the shallow water—sobbing, and doing a lot of thinking about himself. The native was gone. The sampan, rocking lazily out there in the river, was deserted—for the blacks at the poles had vanished with the first sign of danger, into the river.

When Creighton got to his feet, almost an hour later, his lips were set tight and his eyes were burning, savagely. Back in Sandakan, he knew, there was no hope for him. He was a derelict, and the saloons would get him as they had done before. He was yellow—just about as yellow as a white man can become.

There was only one course open, then. B'Nurma Post—and the jungle trail upriver.

And the boy took it.

### CHAPTER III.

#### AT B'NURMA POST.

TWENTY hours later, Ronald Creighton stood in B'Nurma Post. Not the same Creighton. Twenty hours of jungle trails and darkness had brought

back some of the boy's courage—and removed the stare from his eyes.

He held himself erect as he stood at the table; and he was just another white man.

Before him, watching him with a keen, half-amused stare, sat the man who knew every shadow and every dark corridor of the house of B'Nurma as well as every death trail of the surrounding jungles—John Kerman, whose square, bronzed face was almost as young as Creighton's, but whose eyes, with their seemingly careless stare, had seen thousand times more experience!

"I tell you," Kerman was saying quietly, "I can't let you stay here. I'm alone, and I don't want bunglers. You're in B'Nurma Post, son. This place is a government death post, not a hotel resort."

"And you—refuse to let me stay here?"

"Look here, son," repeated Kerman. "For a week I'm going to be stuck up here alone. The major is in Peking, on leave, and the man who was sent up here to take his place has never come upriver. That little incident alone ought to tell you what to expect. No, you've got to clear out. B'Nurma Post is a place for men, not for raw kids."

Kerman's voice was soft enough, and kind enough, but the word "kids" brought a full flush to Creighton's face.

He stepped closer to the table, so that the flickering light played over him. The light revealed his face for the first time—with its set lips that spelled restless courage. And the boy's reply, spoken with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, harmonized with the face.

"If you can throw me out of here—go to it."

Kerman's mouth opened—and closed again with his curt reply still unspoken. A slow smile spread over his lips.

"They don't throw you out that way, son," he said bitterly. "They let you have it from the shadows, about three

inches of cold steel in the back—and you don't even turn around to see where it came from. You couldn't stand that sort of thing, Creighton."

For a moment the boy had no reply. Then, with a deliberate smile, he stepped to the table, picked up a revolver that lay there, and dropped it into his belt. His eyes swept the room quickly, and rested on the form of a tiny carved thing that lay against the farther wall. A cunning thing—a horribly conceived image of the Buddha—fashioned, probably, by the hands of some half-caste river native. A wooden shelf, about on a level with the boy's shoulders, supported it.

Without a word, Creighton crossed the room toward it, and as he went, his fingers groped in the pocket of his shirt. A match sputtered in his hand, revealing his face in sharp outline as he lit a cigarette between his lips. A single cloud of lazy smoke trailed to the ceiling; and then, leaning forward, the boy carefully placed his cigarette between the lips of the idol's dead face.

For a moment he stood quietly looking down at it. From the table at the opposite end of the room, John Kerman watched him in silence, waiting for the next move. And the next move, when it came, was well worth waiting for, Kerman decided.

The boy turned deliberately in his tracks. As he returned across the room, his hands hung at his sides, and his back was toward that tiny carved thing squatting on the shelf with a cigarette burning in its mouth.

Creighton did not hurry. Thirty paces separated the walls of the room, and it was in the shadow of the opposite wall, fully thirty yards from his target, that the boy whirled—whirled like a coiled snake.

Before his body had ceased its sudden motion, his right hand had dropped to the gun belt at his hip. A single rip of flame seared across the room.

The burning cigarette in the mouth of the idol was still in position—still stuck between the dead lips at a peculiarly comic angle—but the end of it—the end that had sent a lazy coil of smoke around the idol's squat head—was black and lifeless.

The hoy's bullet, shot from the hip on a whirling pivot, had clipped the glowing fire neatly out of position! No wonder that crescent medal hung on the breast of Creighton's coat!

The boy dropped his revolver back into its holster.

"Do I stay?" he asked softly, one hand resting on the table as he stared into Kerman's face. "Or—do I take the next sampan downriver?"

Kerman got to his feet slowly. His hand was outstretched, yet even behind the smile on his lips there was a trace of wonder. He noticed, too, that the boy had possessed no gun—that Creighton had deliberately taken the gun from the table, and kept it! White men do not come into Borneo jungles without a gun!

"You stay, son," he said. "Stay until they send you downriver under a blanket—and I warn you that's the usual way for a white man to leave B'Nurma Post. But, son"—Kerman's voice lowered—"a kid like you doesn't come into the jungle for the love of it, or for what a damned fool office clerk would call romance. He comes for a reason. Do you mind putting my curiosity at rest?"

Creighton's face hardened. Yes, there was a reason. The main reason was something that had happened in the Khyber Pass, a long time ago. He could have told Kerman what that something was—but then Kerman would have known he was yellow. It would mean a return trip downriver. Kerman wouldn't want a coward in B'Nurma Post.

Creighton's hand, still gripping the

older man's fingers, relaxed and fell to his side. He spoke slowly.

"You just told me that the man who was sent up here to relieve the major—didn't get here. He was murdered, by a native, down in the narrows. I was with him. He was my buddy. And I'm up here to find the man who killed him."

Kerman glared swiftly at the boy. His lips tightened a little, in surprise.

"Morgan—was murdered?" he repeated quietly. "And you were with him?"

"I was with him."

"And you're looking for the native who killed him?"

Kerman's hand went out and gripped the boy's shoulder.

"You're on the wrong trail, son," he said bitterly. "Looking for a native up here is like looking for a particular blade of grass in the jungle. They all look alike."

"This one is wearing a medal—a little crescent-shaped thing. Sharpshooter's."

Creighton's fingers fumbled with his coat. He stepped closer, turning so that the lamplight fell on his breast, revealing a small silver crescent.

"We were buddies in the service," he said simply, "and when I find the mate to that, with Morgan's initials scratched on the inside, I'll take it back with me."

He turned away deliberately. A moment later he stood in the open doorway, staring out across the veranda, where the water, underneath, beat a muffled tattoo against the piles.

He was standing in the same position, motionless, when John Kerman moved to his side and pointed out into the dark.

"Out there," said Kerman softly, "you'll find half the devils of hell waiting for a chance to commit murder. They're not always out there, son, but B'Nurma Post has come out on top

twice in the last three months, and they want revenge. The major is gone. The government sends a man to replace him, and that man never reaches B'Nurma. Do you know just why Morgan was killed?"

Creighton nodded.

"I can guess," he said quietly.

"Morgan was murdered," Kerman said bitterly, "because the blacks realize that this is the biggest chance they've ever had to wipe out B'Nurma Post. They think there is only one white man here. If they had expected you, too, you would never have reached B'Nurma. You were lucky. I don't see, even now, why they didn't get you, as well as Morgan."

The boy said nothing. He knew the reason why the natives had not found him. He had been hidden, like a yellow rat, under the cabin of the sampan. They had not even seen him, but he couldn't tell Kerman that.

"A knife in the back isn't even a novelty up here, son," Kerman said casually. "But if you can use that gun on living targets as well as you did on a dead one——"

He stopped abruptly. The boy beside him had started heavily. His lips were tight. His face had suddenly gone white.

Quietly Kerman drew him back into the room. The big man was smiling a little.

"Cold, son? Or is it just the realization of what you've walked into? Your room is back there, on the river side of the house. Take an old-timer's advice, and turn in."

The boy nodded. But he was still staring out over the river, and his face was still colorless.

"Easy, son," Kerman said quietly. "I'm not expecting them to rush us. They did that twice before, and they've learned a lesson."

Kerman's lips curved in a slow smile.

"No—they won't rush us. They think

I'm alone here, and they'll just sneak up near enough to throw a knife. Then they'll take possession of B'Nurma Post and raise hell with every white man who comes upriver."

Kerman's fingers closed firmly over the boy's arm. For a moment that grip brought a return of confidence to the lieutenant; and then the big man turned quickly and stepped back toward the veranda.

"Turn in," he said quietly. "When you wake up, come out and spell me. I'll be doing guard duty on the veranda—and I'll need a rest. Watching ghosts is no pleasant job."

This time, Creighton obeyed the order. He turned slowly and went across the dimly lighted room to the narrow corridor beyond. A moment later he was in his room, with the door closed.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### CRAWLING REEDS.

THE room was small. The British government is not overgood to its foreign service. The sleeping rooms of B'Nurma Post were little more than bare cells with a single window.

Creighton stood at that window, now, and studied the darkness outside. Below him ran the river, half hidden in reeds. Beyond the crawling thread of black water lay the jungle.

Creighton shuddered. Dismal place, B'Nurma Post. At night, especially, it was like living in a buried vault, hundreds of feet underground. The very trees, with their peculiar shapes, and the reeds, motionless as death, were sinister.

But were they motionless? Creighton's fingers clutched suddenly at the window sill, and he leaned forward intently. Something had moved out there—something in the reeds at the edge of the veranda.

The boy stood rigid, waiting. In the end, he saw it—a creeping, half-hidden

shape that moved through the reeds. Black shoulders, hunched forward—and an uplifted hand that gripped a knife.

Creighton's fingers closed over his revolver. There was no hurry—he had plenty of time to point the muzzle of his gun at that creeping shape, and pull the trigger. Twenty seconds, at least, before the native could crawl near enough to the veranda to hurl the knife.

But Creighton's fingers were leaden again. They were slow, horribly slow, in dragging the revolver out of its holster; and the boy's face had gone whiter than before.

It was the same situation—the same as the one in the sampan. There it had been Morgan's life at stake; now it was the life of the man who kept watch out there on the veranda.

Kerman would be standing in the open—a perfect target. He wouldn't see the shadow that crept toward him. He wouldn't see the native's arm fling back. He wouldn't see anything—until that whirling knife buried itself in his throat.

Once again, it was up to the second white man. And once again, that white man was young Creighton.

A sob came from the boy's lips. He had the gun out now, and on a level with the black form out there in the reeds, but his trigger finger was paralyzed. It groped for the trigger, and groped again, like the finger of a sick man. He was not standing upright; he had dropped heavily to his knees, with one shoulder leaning against the window sill.

The gun was resting on the sill, and the boy's finger was still fumbling for the trigger.

Then, with a sudden lurch, the black shadow outside jerked to its feet. The native's arm flung back, and a steel blade gleamed for an instant in the darkness. But in the lightning interval before the knife could leave the black's hand, three things happened.

A revolver barked from the veranda, splitting the silence of the river in a hundred echoes. The native in the reeds dropped his knife, clutched suddenly at his mouth with both hands, and crumpled forward on his face. And young Creighton, in the privacy of his own room, where no one could see him, let go his revolver and slumped to the floor in a heap—unconscious. There was no color in his face. Even his lips were a thin white line.

There, two minutes later, Kerman found him—still unconscious, still lying on the floor in a sprawled heap, with the revolver at his side, still white and afraid.

The big man came slowly across the room, bewildered. For a moment he stood over the boy, looking down; and then his glance turned to the window. He saw the marks of the boy's finger prints on the sill—and he knew Creighton's secret.

So the boy was yellow. Kerman smiled grimly. The boy was a hero in the target range, where he could shoot tin ducks and blow out candle-wicks; but when a live actual danger confronted him, he went under. Fainted! No wonder the kid had turned white at the mention of live targets!

Kerman picked him up quietly and shook him back to consciousness. Then, while Creighton stood upright, holding the window sill for support, Kerman picked up his gun and handed it to him.

"I was right, son," he said simply. "B'Nurma Post is no place for green kids. It was lucky, mighty lucky, that I saw that native before he reached the veranda."

Creighton put the revolver back into his belt with clumsy fingers. He was yellow; he knew that. And if Kerman hadn't seen that native, the horrible drama of the sampan would have been reenacted. Yes, he was yellow—but in spite of it, he looked Kerman straight in the face.

"You mean I'm through?"

"You're the best judge of that. I mean you're no good to me up here. I'd have to take care of you, and I haven't the time for it."

"Then—you're ordering me to go back downriver?"

Kerman glanced at the window, then at the boy. He was thinking of the native, and the knife. That was why he had come to the kid's room in the first place. Now that one savage had come through the reeds, there would be more—and more. It was safer—and wiser—for both white men to keep watch.

The big man shook his head.

"You can't go back now, son," he said. "You just wouldn't get there. You'll have to stay here until the major gets back."

Creighton's hands clenched bitterly. He knew the meaning behind Kerman's words, knew that Kerman was simply telling him that he was no good. He could remain in B'Nurma Post only on condition that he keep out of the way and stay under cover. He was a man without courage, and B'Nurma had no use for such men. No—Kerman hadn't said so in straight terms; but the significance was there. And coming from a man who had more courage than three ordinary adventurers, the significance was heavy.

Creighton said nothing. There was nothing for him to say. Kerman had seen the yellow streak in him; and Kerman was not the kind of man to ask questions or look for reasons. Any talking that was to be done would have to be done with actions, not with useless explanations.

When Kerman left the room, young Creighton followed him along the corridor, through the outer chamber, and out onto the veranda.

Kerman glanced at him quietly, and said nothing, and Creighton, taking his

place at the rail where he could watch the river, did not offer to break the grim silence.

He was a good mark for unseen knives, in case he failed to see the shadows that would come creeping through the reeds. He knew that. But his eyes were narrowed, and he intended to see those shadows before the knives came. If he didn't, well—it wouldn't matter much anyway. Kerman, Morgan, all the rest of them, thought he was a rotter.

Kerman was watching him intently, and wondering. He had seen the boy shoot, and knew that the little crescent sharpshooter's medal was not pinned to the boy's coat for nothing. And the boy had courage, or he would not have come upriver in the first place, on the trail of a native. Was it nervousness or fear that made him shrink in the face of danger?

Kerman's eyes shifted to the boy's clean face. No, it surely wasn't fear. That sort of face, with its deep eyes and firm mouth, spelled courage, not cowardice. There was something else—something that only Creighton knew the secret of.

"Come here a minute, son," Kerman said quietly.

Creighton obeyed. As he stood at the older man's side, Kerman pointed into the darkness toward the opposite shore of the river.

"You see that grass move?" he asked softly.

The boy stared. In a moment he did see it—a little patch of black reeds, with the tops moving in a peculiar, undulating movement that was caused by something underneath.

"That's a tiger, son," Kerman said. "Think you can hit it—from here?"

Creighton's lips broke into a smile of confidence. He took his revolver from his belt and toyed with it, twirling it on his finger.

"I can hit it," he promised. "I can't

kill it, you know—not with this pop-gun. This is only good for two-legged quarry."

Kerman could not repress a smile.

"From what I've seen, Creighton, it isn't much good for two-legged targets. Maybe you can hit a tiger. I don't know—but I'm willing to be shown."

The boy's face tightened under the taunt, and the smile vanished from his mouth. He lifted the gun suddenly and pulled the trigger, almost without taking aim. A stab of flame and sharp report split the darkness. The moving reeds on the opposite shore became abruptly still—nor did they move again.

Kerman turned slowly, and gripped the boy's arm.

"You've just killed a native, son," he said simply. As he said it, he watched the boy's face.

Creighton started. Once again that telltale whiteness crept over his mouth. The fingers that gripped his gun stiffened suddenly, and the revolver fell to the floor of the veranda.

"You mean—" he said heavily. But Kerman interrupted.

"Nothing, son, nothing. If you hadn't shot him, I'd have done it myself, before he got any nearer. But tell me—if I'd told you it was a native, instead of a tiger, would you have been such a good shot?"

Creighton did not reply. He was on his knees, picking up the revolver. It took him a long time, an incredibly long time, to replace the gun in his belt—and an even longer time to straighten up.

Kerman turned away before the boy stumbled up again. He knew, from Creighton's clumsy gesture, that the boy did not want to answer his question. But as he took his place again at the rail, Kerman's eyes bore a significant keen glance. He had stumbled halfway on the boy's secret. Creighton was a good shot—a mighty good shot—but for some reason he went into a yellow

funk whenever he had to use his gun on a human target.

It might be the sudden strain of emotion that did that. It might be the sickly fear that comes over some men when they have to kill. Or it might be—something else. Whatever it was, Kerman didn't want to know the rest of the boy's secret.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE YELLOW STREAK.

TWO nights later, in his diary, John Kerman wrote what he thought. No formalities or fine writing. No passages of long description or expectations of coming danger. Nothing but this:

In four days, the major will return. I hope he has forethought enough to come through the jungle, instead of upriver. Any sampan coming upriver at this time would be scuttled, before it reached B'Nurma. In the meantime, the natives are merely waiting. They will not close in—not after what happened on the last two occasions when they did so. They are afraid of our little machine guns and revolvers. They're waiting—I'm sure of it—until they can get me with a knife, with absolute security.

Young Creighton hasn't found himself yet. Twice to-day he spotted movements in the jungle—natives crawling through the reeds toward the house—but I notice that each time he called to me, instead of using his own revolver. I can't quite understand why the boy becomes so spineless in the face of danger. He is a wonderful shot, but when it comes to using his revolver on another man, he is worthless.

And the following night:

The boy would have gone under to-day. He was standing at the far end of the veranda, staring at the reeds, when one of those yellow devils crawled up within knife distance. The boy saw him, just as the native straightened up. But Creighton was slow, horribly slow, in getting his gun out. If I hadn't reached him and jerked him back just in time, the knife would have found his throat. I got the native myself. The boy was too white and scared to move.

Three days before Major Briggs returns. I hope he comes on time, or even before. The

natives are waiting only because they are afraid. Before long, their impatience will get the best of their fear—and then the government will be forced to erect a nice little bronze tablet (if I'm worth the price) to the memory of J. K. Lovely thoughts for a lonely night!

Three days later, Kerman stood beside young Creighton in the veranda doorway.

"Son," he said quietly, "you said you came up here after a native. Any idea what the fellow looks like?"

The boy looked up abruptly. The question was unexpected, and left him groping for a reply.

"No," he said slowly. "I don't remember him—except that he was built like a gorilla. Over six feet, with a snarling face."

Kerman nodded.

"They all have snarling faces," he replied casually. "But not many of them are big, son. Most of them are small, shriveled, and made of wire."

The big man looked away. He was thinking of the boy's description. Big, over six feet, built like a gorilla. And then he swung about with a sudden jerk.

"Was there a scar, son—a three-cornered scar on the left side of his face?"

The boy hesitated. Then the picture of the native, standing sullenly on the deck of the sampan, returned to him. He remembered.

"Yes," he said quickly, "there was."

"Creighton"—Kerman's lips pursed into a soft whistle—"there's only one native in this region that answers to that description. Ever hear of B'Nurka?"

Creighton shook his head. In his few years of jungle wandering, he had heard the name, but only as a whisper that carried no weight.

"B'Nurka is a river pirate," Kerman said quietly. "What's more, he is chief of one of the tribes in the district you're in. When the natives come, it's ten to one that he'll lead them."

"And you think—he's the man I'm after, this B'Nurka?"

"I'm sure of it. And the chances are good that you'll meet him before long. They won't wait much longer. But remember, son, 'B'Nurka' means 'Great Devil,' and the fellow has a murderer's reputation. For a long time, the government has tried to bring taps over the body of that particular savage. And before you face him, you'd better get a grip on yourself. You're not in condition."

The boy winced a little. But when he turned away, his lips were set in an expression that Kerman had not seen before.

The boy was fighting, and fighting hard, to "get a grip on himself." His shoulders were squared back, not from habit, but because he wanted them to go back. His head was up, too, because he held it up with an effort. Kerman noticed it with a smile.

For a long time the two men kept watch on the veranda. Kerman, in particular, was staring downriver toward the bend. If a sampan came nosing between those sinister shores, Kerman wanted to see it in a hurry. It might be the major. And if the major, unconscious of the situation at B'Nurma, directed his boatmen to pole the sampan across that last deadly stretch of water, the chances were not good that he would make it.

So Kerman watched intently. He stood at the rail in a seemingly careless position, with his eyes glued on the curve of the river where the sampan would first come into view.

It might be an all-day wait—might be only a matter of a few minutes—but it would mean life and death for the man who was coming back to B'Nurma Post.

And then it came. A black, clumsy shape, nosing slowly between the close-hanging shores. Three pairs of naked, gleaming shoulders, bent over the poles.

And a lone white man, with glistening pith helmet, standing erect in the shadow of the little cabin.

Almost before its whole length was visible, Kerman was at the boy's side, gripping his arm.

"Son, you've got to go downriver," he said abruptly. "Are you ready?"

Creighton looked up with a bewildered stare. Then, when he followed Kerman's outstretched, pointing hand, he understood.

"Slip over the veranda rail, into the reeds," Kerman said curtly. "Keep low, and keep your revolver in your hand. And don't be afraid to use it! Stick to the river trail and hurry."

Kerman's hands twisted into the boy's shoulders and swung him sharply around.

"You see that clump of reeds, almost at the bend of the river? You've got to get there, boy, before the sampan does. Then, when the boat comes opposite you, stand up and signal the major. Tell him to come the rest of the way on foot. *On foot*—do you understand? Tell him he can't make it in the sampan, and he'll have to reach the house over the river trail. Now—go to it!"

He pushed the boy to the rail. There was no time now for explanations. No time to tell the boy that he would have gone himself, if the kid hadn't been too yellow to defend the post alone. There would be time enough for that later.

Creighton's gun was in his hand as he dropped into the reeds. He stopped only long enough to be sure of his direction; and then he was creeping forward in the shadows of the house, bent almost to the ground where native eyes could not discern him.

A moment later he was alone, running through the reeds at the river shore, following a soggy, treacherous trail downriver.

So it was up to him. Kerman couldn't help. Kerman would have

enough to do, keeping the house clear of natives. It was up to Creighton, and Creighton alone. And the life of the major rested on him.

As he stumbled through the reeds, he found himself wondering, strangely, what the major looked like. Who was he? Kerman had always referred to him as simply "the major"—no other name. He would be an Englishman, of course, and a good one. Only a good man could have charge of an outpost as remote as B'Nurua Post.

Creighton gripped his gun tighter as he groped on. It was not far to the clump of reeds that Kerman had pointed out. He could make it before the sampan reached it, if some native knife didn't cut him down. It was dusk—growing dark quickly—and the shadows would help a lot. But in the dark would the major recognize him for a white man? Would the major shoot him down, thinking he was a savage?

There was no time now for useless wondering. He had reached the clump of heavy rushes, and was plunging through them. In another instant he stood ankle-deep in the water—stood upright, with both arms lifted. The long sampan was directly opposite him.

The boy called out. At the sound of his harsh voice, the white man, leaning on the low cabin, stiffened and turned.

A low command came from his lips, and the sampan came to an abrupt stop. Then another command, and a native boatman, throwing his weight on the pole, turned the nose of the clumsy craft deftly toward the shore. A moment later the wooden sides scraped in the reeds, and the major stepped quietly to Creighton's side.

"What is it?" he said evenly.

Creighton repeated what John Kerman had told him—with the same emphasis. But as he talked, he stared bluntly into the major's keen face—as if he remembered something and yet didn't dare to remember.

When he had finished speaking, the major turned quickly and spoke a sharp order to the men at the poles. Then, while the sampan nosed into the river again, and drifted down with the sluggish current, the major's hand closed over Creighton's arm.

"You're coming back with me, son?" he asked.

Creighton nodded. He was still staring into the older man's face—still struggling to remember. And then, abruptly, he gripped the major's hand.

"Tell me—tell me your name," he said slowly.

The major gaped, then grinned.

"My name? It's Briggs. Major Jack Briggs, of B'Nurua Post. Anything else?"

But Creighton was not listening. His fingers, still gripping Briggs's hand, were holding on as if they were clutching a ghost. He stood there in the reeds, facing the man before him.

"The same Jack Briggs who—who fought in the Khyber Pass two years ago?"

"The same, son. Why? What difference does it m—"

The major's words clipped off. He stumbled back, losing his balance as Creighton jerked him suddenly to one side. A dull whine of steel terminated his sentence; and a long, native-carved knife slashed through the high reeds in the space where his shoulders had been.

He turned on a pivot—turned just in time to see a shadowed form standing upright in the drifting sampan, twenty feet behind him.

There was something else, but the major did not see it. Only Creighton recognized that gorilla form and the huge shoulders—and the tiny crescent-shaped medal that glistened on the native's dirty sarong.

The boy's hand dropped to his belt with a single move. Came up again in a lightning arch, holding a revolver. But it was too late by a clipped second. The

sampan was empty. The big native, whose sarong bore that telltale crescent, was no longer there. Only a widening ring in the sluggish water marked the spot where he had slipped over the side into the river.

In spite of his surprise, the major noted the sudden gleam that had come into the boy's eyes. He smiled, and shook his head.

"You won't get him. He's gone into the river; and those fellows can swim a long way under water. Besides, there's plenty more where he came from!"

"Just where did he come from?" Creighton's words were almost rasping.

"That particular one? To tell you the truth, I don't know. I picked up my crew downriver, at the edge of civilization. He wasn't one of them—then. Must have slipped aboard with a knife, dropped one of the Negroes into the river, and taken the fellow's place. In the dark, you know, they all look pretty much alike."

Creighton turned abruptly. Evidently, then, the major had not looked closely into the big native's face, or he would have known the truth. He would have known that the savage was B'Nurka, and that the fellow had slipped aboard expressly for the purpose of committing a murder—with the major in the leading rôle. No, Major Briggs didn't know that!

"It seems that everything is coming at once, major," the boy said grimly. "First you—and then the man I'm looking for. I'm going to let you return alone to B'Nurua Post, and when you get there, just tell Kerman that I've gone to get the medal. He'll understand."

Creighton dropped his gun back into its holster. Before he stepped into the reeds, he turned his head for a last word:

"My name is Creighton, major. Ronald Creighton. Remember it?"

And then he was gone—and the major

stood alone in the reeds, staring after him in bewilderment.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE THIN FLAME.

BUT something had happened to Creighton. When he crawled out of the water on the opposite bank of the Dyka, there was a different glint to his eyes. He stood upright; and his fists were clenched. The furtiveness was gone. The shifty stare wasn't there.

From where he stood, ankle-deep in the mud and concealed by the high reeds of the shore, he could see B'Nurka Post. Just a shadow, squatting over the river like a huge, clumsy spider. And between him and the shadow lay a narrow thread of sinister water. The natives could swim, could they? Well—so could a white man!

The boy was transformed. His movements were quick now, not sluggish and heavy. They were almost quick enough to be careless; and it doesn't pay to be careless in the region of B'Nurka.

But Creighton didn't care. He had found his man—had followed his man through the waters of the river. It wouldn't be hard now to find the black's trail through the reeds and into the jungle. The reeds had a convenient habit of breaking when human feet passed through them; and it was easy to follow a path of broken reeds.

In the end, after following the river bank for a hundred yards, Creighton found the mark of native footprints. He trailed them with that same reckless carelessness, plunging upright through the broken reeds to the rim of the jungle. And there he kept on, straight into the most treacherous tract in the river district.

White men, unless they had a mighty good reason, didn't follow the jungle trails of the Dyka—especially on the side of the river opposite B'Nurka

Post. Even Kerman hadn't explored those trails—nor had the major. But Creighton had a reason; and the reason was a little crescent-shaped medal that had once adorned Morgan's uniform.

Even in the dark, the boy kept on. B'Nurka's footprints had led straight into a half-beaten trail that bore due west into the jungle. That trail was deadly, even in daylight. At night it would be suicide. But Creighton had a reason.

For an hour he picked his way through the dark. The night birds of the jungle were screaming in the black void above him. Once, not fifty yards distant, a lion coughed—and the boy shifted his revolver into his hand in case the cough came nearer.

Leeches clung to his boots. Lizards dropped down on his shoulders from the branches overhead—and he scraped them off mechanically. Mud—creepers—swamp—in endless succession. And Creighton pushed on.

Twice he sensed shadows on his trail, following him—and twice he turned abruptly, perked up his gun, fired, re-loaded, and went back to the business of stumbling through the jungle. They thought he couldn't shoot anything on two legs, did they? Well, they could think again!

And at the end of the second hour, in an open stretch of trail, he found the end of his search. There were four of them—four native ghosts—pacing the trail ahead of him as he broke savagely through a net of low-hanging creepers. He stopped quietly, and lifted his revolver.

He fired once—twice—three times—in quick succession. Three of the ghosts found a final resting place in the mud of the trail. The fourth—and the fourth was a huge fellow, built like a gorilla, with snarling face—turned like a scared elephant toward the unseen revolver that had mowed down his companions.

Creighton could have shot him; and B'Nurka would never have known where the shot came from. Those three shots had come so swiftly that even the river native did not know their location. He stood rigid, with a knife gripped in his hand, too surprised, too scared, to step aside into the protecting brush, where the white man's gun would have been useless.

Yes; Creighton could have shot him down. But instead, the boy stepped suddenly from his place of concealment, full in view of the huge black.

It was hard to see, in the dark; but for two hours the boy's eyes had been strained to pierce jungle gloom—and he saw the native's knife arm go back. He heard the whine of steel; and he smiled grimly as he stepped abruptly forward, so that the hurtling knife missed its mark. Then he moved forward slowly, like a cat. As he closed in, he pushed the revolver back into his belt. He wouldn't need that—now.

Only the jungle witnessed that battle. Too bad, because both Kerman and the major would have given a year of their lives to have watched it. Two shadows, two ghosts, advancing toward each other in the silence of the trail.

Unevenly matched—one of them fashioned like a bull ape, with enormous shoulders; the other only a boy. But one of them was already half frightened by the sight of his three slaughtered comrades. And the boy—

Well, Creighton had been waiting a long time for this chance, and his hands were twisted forward like the hands of a tarantula. Thirsty—for blood and revenge. And for the medal that gleamed on B'Nurka's sarong.

At ten paces, the black rushed him. Smashed in with jungle ferocity, and a tinge of fear. No technique. No style. Just a mad gorilla, hurling himself on a smaller antagonist.

The boy laughed as he stepped aside.

His right foot shot out—twisted between the native's swirling legs. The black sprawled headlong.

Creighton waited quietly until he stumbled up again. The boy's hands still hung at his sides. He hadn't used them yet—nor did he use them when the black rushed the second time.

Once again it was a jungle beast, hurtling down on a lone white man. And once again Creighton's leg twisted between B'Nurka's flying feet, to send the native to the ground. Once again the boy laughed.

It was a genuine laugh. He was fighting now, for the medal. They could say what they liked back there—call him yellow or turn their backs on him—but he was boss of this little party. And when he went back, Morgan's medal would go back with him.

The big savage was tiring. His rushes were slower, clumsier. He came in with more caution; but he had no knife now, and he knew only one style of combat. From ten paces, twenty paces, he crept in—but the final attack ended inevitably in that same mad rush. Seven times in succession the boy stepped lightly out of the way. Seven times B'Nurka sprawled headlong over Creighton's lightning outthrust foot.

And then, when the black stood upright in the middle of the narrow trail, heaving from his efforts, Creighton stepped into him. The boy's left arm was doubled, warding off the native's clawing arms.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, the big black straining and fighting to get past that bent arm to the boy's throat—and Creighton, like a wooden post, holding off his short rushes.

Then—it happened all in one movement. The boy's left arm straightened abruptly, tearing the black's arms down. His right came up like a battering-ram, square into the native's sweaty jowls. No two-legged creature could have stood up under the stroke.

The big native whirled backward, clutching for support. Three paces—five—he stumbled along the trail, while the boy stood quietly in the shadows and watched him. Then, with a sickening crash, B'Nurka lost balance and sprawled to the ground.

He was not unconscious—merely dazed by Creighton's terrific right hand. He was still wide enough awake to realize that he had fallen, by some queer twist of luck, on the knife that he had hurled at the very outset of the battle. And now, cunningly, he twisted over so that his fingers could grip the black hilt of it.

The boy did not see. He had forgotten the knife, hadn't thought of it again, after it had seared past his throat. To him, the treacherous savage was merely twisting about in agony, half concealed by the darkness of the jungle.

He waited calmly while B'Nurka groped up again and regained his feet. He did not notice that the black's right hand was hidden behind him—that the native's fingers were twined about the hilt of a murderous knife.

But he was watching intently, and he did see the big native's knife arm lurch back. Even in the dark he saw the dull glint of steel—and he knew the reason for it.

The river devil was fast, amazingly fast. But the boy, still half smiling with the lust of battle, was lightning. Knife and revolver came up at the same time. It was hard to tell which split the darkness first, the whining steel or the sudden spurt of flame from the boy's gun.

The blade struck home with sickening force in the boy's shoulder. A poor shot. B'Nurka had intended it for the throat, where it would have brought more satisfactory results.

But the boy ignored it. He was standing rigid in the middle of the trail, watching the big savage with a casual stare. And B'Nurka, gaping in the

sudden bewilderment that comes before death, faced him listlessly.

The black's arms had dropped to his sides, twitching spasmodically. The gorillalike shoulders sagged. The head hung low, like the head of a propped-up corpse. Then, with a low grunt, B'Nurka pitched headlong and lay still.

For a long time Creighton stood over him, smiling.

"Back there in B'Nurma Post," the boy said quietly, though there was no one to listen, "they think I'm yellow. They think I can't shoot a man—but they don't know the reason why. If you were alive, fellow, I'd send you back to tell them that they're wrong about it."

There was no answer.

Creighton's right hand groped up to the knife that still protruded from his shoulder. He gripped it suddenly and pulled it out. Then, in spite of the abrupt pain that crossed his face, he slipped the knife into his belt and looked down again.

"You know, fellow," he said softly, "I didn't really shoot a man—even this time. I was shooting at the little crescent thing on your sarong. Just target practice, only it was a bit too sudden for a good shot."

He dropped to his knees very quietly, and turned the black form over. His fingers twisted under the native's sarong, feeling for something. And then he laughed.

Only half of the crescent was there. The medal had been scored neatly through, just off center; and a jagged hole in B'Nurka's sarong showed where the bullet had continued on its way. Strangely enough, the second half of the medal lay almost under the boy's feet, where it had fallen. He picked it up carefully, and dropped both halves into his shirt pocket.

He straightened up slowly.

"I think I'll be getting back, B'Nurka," he said evenly. "It's real

dark now, and the major will be wondering what happened to me."

He turned away abruptly, without looking back. An instant later, the shadows of the trail concealed him.

## CHAPTER VII.

### SHARPSHOOTER.

FOUR times, on the return trip through that deadly stretch of river jungle, Creighton's revolver spun up and let loose a bullet.

Once, through the darkness, an unseen native spear clipped a neat slice out of the boy's shirt, just below the neck. After the boy's gun had returned the compliment, with better effect, Creighton wrapped a pair of soiled handkerchiefs, tied together in the middle, around his bleeding shoulder—and kept on.

Two hours it took him. Two hours of tiring effort, ripping aside creepers and black vines, sloshing through mud that covered his boots. And at the end of the second hour, he reached the river.

From there on, he followed the shore, keeping just back of the reeds. His pace was slower now, as he neared the familiar landmark on the opposite bank. There would be shadows in the reeds on both banks of the river—shadows who could throw a knife with uncanny accuracy. It was best to go carefully, and see them first before they saw him.

When he did stop, at last, B'Nurma Post lay directly across the river, looming out in the dark like a spider with long legs.

He could see movements on the low veranda. Kerman—and the major—keeping vigil. They wouldn't know, of course, that the chief of the river devils was dead. But, for that matter, the scattered shadows in the reeds would not know, either. The siege was over and yet it was not over. Not until

those few remaining ghosts were wiped out.

Creighton could see them. Just a chance form, now and then, worming through the reeds—worming closer, and closer, to B'Nurma Post. And if they got close enough—and the white men on the veranda failed to see them first—

Creighton pushed his way quietly through the high reeds. He went slowly, so that the dry stuff would not crackle with his weight; and it took him many minutes to reach a place of hiding near the edge of the water. There, with a grim smile on his lips, he dropped on one knee and tucked his finger around the trigger guard of his revolver. Once, not long past, he had been a pretty good sharpshooter.

"It's time," he said softly, "time I brushed up. I'll be getting stale without practice."

From his watch post, he could see the movements of the reeds near B'Nurma Post. Vague movements, as if a slight breeze had swayed the tops of the brush. But there was no slight breeze—and underneath each of those movements would be a crawling black form.

The boy's gun came up deliberately, and leveled into the dark. He pulled the trigger with the same casual pressure that he would have used in the target range. There was a bark—a sharp, spitting bark, and a single flash of red flame. And a certain clump of reeds on the opposite shore became motionless.

Creighton smiled. They thought he couldn't shoot anything human, did they? Well, maybe they were right. The things he was shooting at were not men; they were murdering rats, and they were crawling on all fours!

He emptied the gun slowly, methodically. Between shots he took time enough for a careful aim; and after each spit of flame, another patch of

moving reeds became still—and stayed still.

It was dirty business, shooting down these river rats, but one or the other had to survive, and B'Nurka Post had a reputation to keep up, the reputation of always coming out on top, no matter how heavy the odds.

Creighton could see the two white men, on the veranda of the house, moving about near the rail. Their movements were quicker now, and more confused. They were wondering, probably, about that deadly sharpshooter that was clearing the leeches out of the reeds with such cool-headed deliberation.

The boy smiled as he realized what their thoughts would be. Then, reloading his gun, he went back to work. Six more spurts of flame, with the same deadly results.

This time, after the second shot, a naked savage lurched to his feet on the farther shore, groped weakly at his groin, and crumpled. The others merely ceased to crawl.

But it was over then. The reeds had stopped moving, and a scant number of shadows stumbled upright in fear, running for the protection of the jungle. Even river natives, with their half ignorance of fear, haven't the courage to remain under cover while a white man's revolver picks them out one by one—and leaves them silent.

Creighton got to his feet quickly. Before he stepped into the river, he dropped his revolver into its holster and buttoned down the leather, waterproof cover. A moment later the warm, dirty water closed over him.

A layer of wet, slimy mud clung to him as he climbed heavily over the veranda rail of B'Nurka Post. In spite of it, he stood before John Kerman and grinned—and the grin was a genuine, youthful laugh of victory.

"I'm back," he said simply.

Kerman stared at him in wonder.

"Yes—I see you are." The big man's

words were full of admiration. "And something else is back with you, son. Up here we call it courage."

Creighton said nothing. His hand went silently into his pocket, and he dropped something into Kerman's outstretched palm. Kerman looked down—and saw a little crescent-shaped medal, broken in halves.

"I went to get—that," the boy said. "B'Nurka wouldn't give it to me, so I had to shoot it off him."

Kerman's lips tightened.

"You mean B'Nurka is dead?"

"Yes—very."

Creighton looked down sheepishly at the wet mud that covered him. Then his hand went out slowly, and he took the broken crescent from Kerman's fingers—and dropped it back into his pocket.

"I want it," he explained softly. "It belonged to my buddy."

He was smiling.

"I'll be turning in now," he said. "To-morrow I've got to go downriver. You ordered me to, you know; and I'm going—unless you want me to stay here."

Kerman watched him go through the door. The big man did not move, did not speak. But a strange light was there in his eyes. He turned to the veranda rail and stood there, staring out over the black river. There would be no more need to keep constant watch.

The chief of the river devils was dead, and the rats down there in the reeds were silent—forever. Creighton had done the work of a regiment of soldiers.

Kerman was still standing there when the major came through the low door and stepped to the rail. The major's eyes, too, were burning with that same strange light. Admiration, it might have been—or something more.

"John," he said quietly, "have I ever told you of the time I fought in the

Khyber Pass, two years back? You remember the time—when the government sent me out there from B'Nurma Post, for a short interval?"

Kerman turned, and shook his head. "No, Briggs, you haven't."

"There was a young lieutenant in my regiment, John," the major mused. "He was about as good a man as they come; but he had an unlucky break. He was a sharpshooter, and the captain—Captain Morgan—ordered him to take charge of one of the machine guns that guarded the post. The boy was a wonder. He could make that swivel gun do everything but pray."

The major was looking casually at the river, as he spoke. But his words were steady, and significant.

"The Afghans were causing trouble at the time," he said, "and we were stationed at Landi Kotal to keep them back. In the thick of the shooting, I had the infernal luck to step out from behind a shelf of rock—straight into the firing line of this young lieutenant's machine gun. He didn't have time to turn the thing aside, and it was spitting murder at the rate of two hundred a minute.

"My own fault, of course. I was clumsy enough to step in front of the muzzle, and I was simply mowed down like a row of weeds. But as I fell, with a line of lead through both thighs, I saw the young lieutenant's face. It was white with horror, John—absolutely white. The sort of horror that a man never gets over.

"Then, a moment later, the Afghans retreated; and the regiment moved on to follow them up. They left me lying there on the rocks, and the boy, of course, thought I was done for. Thought he had done for me. I'll never forget the poor chap's face."

Kerman was listening quietly, just as he had listened, on many another night, to one of the major's tales.

"I heard of the boy later," the major went on slowly, "but I never had the luck to meet him face to face. Seems that he never got over the horror of shooting me down. Went into a complete funk about it. Every time he lifted his gun on a man, white or black alike, he lost courage. After all, I don't wonder. You've heard of similar cases, with less reason."

"I have," Kerman said simply. "There was a white trader up this way not long ago, who shot down his black boy by mistake. He never lifted a gun again. He told me that every time his finger closed over the trigger, he had a vision of that helpless black boy crumpling up before him. Enough to take all the courage out of a chap. And another time—"

But the major interrupted softly.

"It doesn't matter, John," he murmured. "I simply thought you might like to know the reason for young Creighton's seeming yellowness. You see, when the boy recognized me as I got out of the sampan to-night, he knew then that his machine gun hadn't killed me. The courage was there, and the sight of me—alive—was enough to bring it back to him."

"You mean—"

"Creighton is the boy who shot me down at Landi Kotal, John."

For a moment Kerman said nothing. Then, abruptly, he turned away from the rail and stepped across the veranda to the open door.

"I'll be with you in a moment, major," he said quietly. "I owe the boy a mighty large apology. I want to ask him to stay here—in B'Nurma Post. We need men with courage!"





# Tiger Shark

By Albert M. Treynor

A Three-part Novel—Part III.

Read this condensed version of what happened in the previous installments of "Tiger Shark." Then you will be able to go right ahead and enjoy this exciting serial of love, hate, action, and adventure.

A FEW hours after the schooner yacht, *Dolphin*, was sighted, it disappeared from the seas, and with it Archer Tarrant, the owner, his daughter Diane, the latter's millionaire fiancé, and the entire crew.

Jorry Crippen was suspected of scuttling the pleasure boat for dark reasons of his own. Crippen was known all along the Florida keys as racketeer, hijacker, smuggler, pirate—and worse.

When Crippen's vessel was overhauled

by a patrol boat, Crippen chose to give battle rather than explain about the missing *Dolphin*. Two coast guardsmen were killed in the fight. Crippen himself was captured after a desperate struggle.

The search of Crippen's cruiser revealed nothing incriminating in the *Dolphin* case. But the killing of the government men was enough to bring a death sentence for Crippen.

But just as Jorry Crippen stood on the trap, with the hangman's noose about his neck, a mysterious man helped him to escape in a most sensational way.

Safe in the fastnesses of the Florida swamp country, Crippen's rescuer, John

Brand, told the criminal: "I did not take this chance for yon. I believe that you were holding some of the *Dolphin* party at ransom when you were captured. I demand that you lead me to Diane Tarrant—or be turned back to the law."

Crippen navigated the vessel of his grim rescuer to a remote islet among the Florida Keys. Brand found Diane there, and also her millionaire suitor, Vibert Carew.

Crippen, who had not previously known of Carew's great wealth, demanded fifty thousand dollars in gold from Carew. "And you," he said to John Brand, "will go to the mainland and get it. If you don't return with the gold in seven days, or if there is any treachery on your part, you'll never see this girl again."

Brand started toward the mainland in his boat—presumably to get the ransom. But under cover of night, he returned to the island, rescued Diane and Carew, and got them away. But he takes an extra chance in trying to get Crippen.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A DESPERATE ADVENTURE.

AS his head emerged in the churned wake of the moving cruiser, Brand shook the water from his eyes, got his bearings, and struck out for shore. Diane didn't know that he had left the boat, and by the time she found out, it would be too late for her to do anything about it. Carew had the wheel now, and he would take her to safety.

Brand was a bit fed up with this ferrying back and forth. But this probably was his last trip. Either he would kill Crippen and overpower Ombru and Florette, or else he himself would be killed.

In either case, he wouldn't have to do any more swimming in these shark-infested waters. If, by good luck, he

survived the night, he'd only have to sit quietly on the key and wait until Diane sent a rescue party after him.

But he would not let his thoughts dwell upon the future. He faced a most hazardous undertaking, in which the odds against him seemed almost hopeless. He only wanted to have it over with as quickly as possible.

He reached the beach, scrambled out of the water, and stood quietly, for a moment, listening. The well-cared-for engine of the cruiser made no sound to reach his ears. But he knew that Carew was driving her cautiously away from the key, and if he held to the navigable channels, Diane was out of harm's way.

Brand still had his knife and the crowbar, which he had tied to his belt. With these weapons he set forward to have his final reckoning with Jorry Crippen.

Instead of pushing his way blindly through the underbrush, he hunted along the beach until he located the opening of the path. Then, using his hands for guidance, he felt his way in toward the camp.

He moved slowly, taking the utmost care not to make a sound. Once or twice, he went astray in the darkness, but each time he succeeded in groping his way back to the path. And in the end he arrived at the edge of the clearing.

During his absence the fire had died to a fitful radiance that barely served to reveal the outlines of the two shacks and the stark shadows of the surrounding palms.

Brand lingered for a moment in grim contemplation. His recent visitation had not been discovered. That much he saw at a glance. He could just make out a dim human figure stretched out on the ground across the way. He could not see the man's face. But he knew that it must be Ombru, sunken into the deepest slumber.

For a moment longer Brand paused in doubt. To reach the sleeping breed, he would have to cross the clearing. And even if he put the man out with a blow, the sound was almost certain to arouse Crippen. A man accustomed to dangers and alarms would be on his feet with a gun in hand before Brand could spring back across the clearing. This would never do. Brand would be shot down before he could close in.

He decided to let Ombru continue to sleep and give his first attention to the more dangerous of two antagonists. If he could dispose of Crippen before the outlaw was fully awake, he might stand a chance later with Ombru.

Having settled on his plan of action, Brand lost no further time. Something might happen at any moment to interfere. He was certain that Crippen was asleep in the tin shack, and he edged over that direction, hugging the fringe of timber.

In a few moments he arrived before the doorway. And his stealthy movements so far were undetected.

The door of the shack stood half open. Brand pushed his head through the frame. It was impossible to see anything. He poised tensely, with the crowbar gripped in his fist, listening for some sound.

His senses told him of a faint, regular breathing somewhere within—a slow rhythm which he felt rather than heard. But he was not quite sure which corner of the chamber it came from.

Softly he stole across the threshold, trying desperately to locate the source of movement. Some one was sleeping there in the darkness. He was certain of that. It must be Crippen.

If he could only reach the man without awakening him, he would slug him without warning, without scruple. He would hit him as hard as he could.

If death resulted, he would feel no shame or remorse on that account. The decree of the law simply would be ful-

filled. And Brand would have one fewer enemy to deal with. But he mustn't make any mistake. The first blow must be the final blow.

It happened unexpectedly, with a terrible suddenness.

Brand was just starting to tiptoe across the room toward the darkened corner, when a breathing, savage weight pounced upon him from behind. It was like the swift, unannounced attack of a panther.

Frenzied fingers clawed at his flesh as a lean, lithe body attached itself to his back and stopped him in his tracks.

He was caught unawares, off his balance. Before he could brace himself to meet the shock, he was all but thrown off his feet. And then, as he struggled to recover himself, he was pulled backward through the doorway, dragged out into the clearing.

A panting, high-pitched voice fairly shrieked in his ear—a woman's voice. "Ombru—quick! Jorry Crippen! Kill him—kill him!"

Brand struggled wildly to shake off this terrible creature that scratched at his face and clung with a demoniacal fury. A woman—Florette, undoubtedly—she must have been asleep somewhere near the shack, and awakened just in time to see him slip through the open door.

He tried desperately to shake her loose, but he might as well have tried to rid himself of an enraged wild cat. He had never before known that the female of the species had such wicked possibilities in hand-to-hand combat.

The woman was shrieking at the top of her lungs, her sharp nails digging at his eyes, as though she were determined to maim him while she was pulling him to the ground.

Brand lost his knife in the first instinctive effort to save his vision. Without actually having time to see, he was aware that the figure on the farther

side of the clearing had sprung erect, and was gliding in to take a hand in the *nièlée*. In a fleeting second or two, Ombru—and Crippen, also—would lend their help in overpowering him.

With a sudden, despairing violence he attempted to free himself. He jabbed his elbow as hard as he could into the woman's ribs, and at the same time twisted away from the clutch of her arms.

The woman's breath left her, with a gasping sound, but before Brand could leap clear, she flung herself upon him again. And then Ombru closed in.

He was a smaller man than Brand, but he was tough and as vicious as a water moccasin. Brand was not quick enough to save himself. A pair of sinewy hands clutched his arms, jerked them backward and, for that moment, trussed them helplessly behind him.

The woman's hold was loosened by the violence of Ombru's attack as he plunged to her help. She stumbled backward, hoarsely breathing. "Hold him!" she panted. "I'll——"

Her eye fell upon the shining blade of the knife that Brand had dropped. With a smothered exclamation she pounced upon it.

Brand's arms were locked above the elbows, pinioned behind him by Ombru's implacable grip. He strained despairingly to break away, but it was no go. He had no more hope of saving himself than a sheep held for the slaughter.

And Florette was more than willing. It was too dark to see her eyes or the expression of her face, yet Brand was aware of the murderous impulse that had suddenly possessed the woman. The forewarning reached him even before she moved—the ominous, intuitive knowledge that death had caught up with him.

The woman was advancing upon him—not in the gust of passion that had shaken her for a moment—but quietly and deliberately merciless. He saw the

long-bladed knife in her hand as she came mincing forward, saw the flexing movement of her long, stringy arm.

A physical sickness for that instant seemed to rob him of coherent thought, of the power of further, futile resistance. His eyes closed instinctively to shut out the hateful scene.

And then he opened them again, in amazement, bewilderment. He had tried for the courage to take the shock of the sharpened steel plunging through the muscles of his throat, or grating between his ribs. But for some reason the stroke was delayed in that eternity of waiting. And then he heard a cry, the soft thud of something in the darkness, a struggling movement underfoot.

He stared, incredulous, transfixed with wonderment. Florette had fallen and was on her hands and knees, crazily reaching for something that had been knocked from her hand. And there was another—a slight, agile figure in white—sprawled beside the mulatto, gripping her wrist, fighting her furiously.

Brand looked down at the two desperately locked shapes, and the truth dawned upon him like a miraculous revelation.

The newcomer was a woman. He could hear her sobbing breath as she fought for the knife. Diane! It was Diane Tarrant.

As Brand stood there in stupefaction a blighting voice spoke up behind him.

"Hold everything, everybody. Stop it, Florette. Let him go, Ombru."

Brand turned his head to see Jorry Crippen standing in the doorway of the shack with a leveled pistol in his hand.

### CHAPTER XIII.

#### TRAPPED.

FLORETTE didn't hear, or else she simply would not heed. She turned and twisted in the embrace of her antagonist, madly striving to reach the knife. But Jorry Crippen was not a

man to be trifled with. He moved forward calmly and stepped on the mulatto woman's fingers.

"Stop it!" he growled. "Get up, you!"

Florette whimpered at the sudden pain and crawled away suddenly, holding her hand to her mouth.

Crippen turned with unconcern to Ombru.

"Didn't you hear me?" he inquired. "Let loose of him."

This time Ombru promptly obeyed, and stepped backward. Brand was left standing alone in the middle of the circle. He was looking vacantly at Diane Tarrant.

The girl had risen breathlessly to her feet. Slowly she turned to face him, a wet, bedraggled little figure in a sailor's shirt and pants, with her dripping hair plastered about her face.

"Diane!" gasped Brand, forgetting every one else in that tragic moment. "Why did you come? How did you get here? You're crazy. You're absolutely insane."

"What did you think?" panted the girl. She brushed her water-soaked hair away from her eyes and confronted him passionately. "Did you think I was going to let you come back into this alone——"

"But how did you know? How did you find out I'd left the boat?"

"Find out? Why, I came on deck to ask you where the matches were. And you were gone. And then I knew—I knew at once—without needing to ask a question."

"And so you jumped overboard! And swam ashore! Why did you do it? Why didn't Carew stop you? What was the matter with Carew?"

"Vibert Carew!" The girl spoke bitterly, fiercely. "Don't ever speak to me of him again. Please don't ever mention that man's name. I don't ever want to hear it, or think of it. That cowardly, selfish, complacent——" She

stopped with a sob in her voice as the words failed her.

Brand stared at her aghast.

"You mean that he let you dive overboard and come back here? After he had promised me to look after you."

"Let me?" the girl echoed scornfully. "How could he stop me? I'd have killed him if he tried it."

"But—after you left the boat?" demanded Brand incredulously. "You mean to say he went cruising on his way and abandoned you? He didn't turn back and drag you out of the water? You mean to say he's a guy like that?"

"I don't know what he did after I jumped over the rail, and I don't care. All I know is that it was dark, and I was swimming fast. Maybe he couldn't have found me, even if he'd tried. It didn't take me long to reach the beach. And I knew where to look for you. I knew what you were going to do. So I found the path and came here. And I saw that woman with the knife. Just as I got here, I saw her——"

"All right!" interrupted Jorry Crippen in an ugly voice. "We all know what happened then."

He glanced from the girl to Brand. "I take it that you tried to put it over on me," he mused. "Instead of going after the money, you sneaked back here while I was asleep, and got away again with Carew and Miss Tarrant."

He stood reflective for a moment. "Smart bird, ain't you? And plenty of guts. Yep. Well, that was one on me. I ought to have figured that one out for myself, instead of going to sleep and trusting any half-witted quarter breed to do my watching for me."

He swung around to Ombru.

"You!" he challenged sardonically. "Corked off, didn't you? Went to sleep and came near letting Brand ruin us. Do you know what I've a good mind to do to you?"

"But Jorry, I didn't——" Ombru

cut in in frightened protest. "I was sittin' over by the tree there, and my eyes was open. I couldn't been——"

"Shut up!" snarled the Tiger Shark. He was fingering his pistol as he watched Ombru meaningly. "I ought to let you have it," he remarked grimly. "And I would, except that I guess it was as much my fault as yours. I ought to have known better than to trust a scaly alligator from the swamps.

"All right!" Crippen threw up his head with a decisive movement. "Things have drifted back to just where they were before."

He heeled about to confront Brand again.

"After you had got the others aboard the cruiser, you swam back here again. You were going to make it a perfect job by cutting my throat? Have I got that right?"

"Why not?" answered Brand honestly. "I wouldn't have stopped at that, if it had worked out the way I planned."

"No, I guess you wouldn't," agreed the outlaw dispassionately. "O. K. I just wanted to know."

He laughed harshly, unhumorously. "Listen, Ombru! And you, too, Florette. I'm going to give you two another chance. I'm going down to the beach for a while, and you two are going to see that these two are still here when I get back. Get yourselves guns, and *stay awake!* *Sabe?*"

"Yessir, Mist' Crippum," assented Florette.

"Fine!" sneered the outlaw. "And if either of you go to sleep on me this time, I'll figure that that's what you like, and I'll put you that way for keeps!"

The Tiger Shark turned away with his easy, six-foot slouch, and disappeared soundlessly in the direction of the pathway.

Ombru and Florette were so wide awake by now, and so thoroughly

overawed by Crippen's threats, that there wasn't a chance of either relaxing vigilance during the remainder of the night. They wouldn't permit Brand and Diane to exchange any further conversation.

The fire was stirred up and replenished, and then Brand was forced to sit down on one side of the blaze, and the girl on the other. Ombru armed himself with a shotgun and Florette with a repeating rifle. Then they went on guard a short distance back from the camp fire. And from the restless way in which Florette prowled back and forth and fingered the hammer of her weapon, it was evident that she, for one, was only hoping that somebody would try to escape.

Had Brand been alone, he might have decided to make a break, with the chances a million to one against him. To be dropped dead in his tracks by Ombru's shotgun or Florette's rifle would be a milder and quicker way out, undoubtedly, than to wait for the deliberate, cold-blooded Crippen to settle with him. But if he were killed now, then Diane Tarrant would be left alone in a most frightful situation.

While the girl remained alive, Brand too, must hold to life as long as he could—remaining quiescent for the present, hoping against hope that tomorrow's miracle might yet intervene to save them.

He lay down upon the sand, and resignedly pillow'd his head upon his arm. He had not had a decent rest for three days and nights. During the last twenty-four hours he had lived under a terrific mental strain. The fact that this was probably his last night in the world somehow did not seem so dreadfully appalling. He was worn and numbed to the point of utter physical exhaustion. It was a relief to sink off into forgetfulness. Before he knew it, he had fallen into profound slumber.

It was the sound of voices that

aroused him at last. He lay quietly for a while, finding it difficult to shake off the torpor of sleep. But at length he opened his eyes and stared straight up to the sky.

The stars were beginning to grow dim, and a dirty gray streak of light was breaking across the horizon at the east. He realized suddenly that daylight was approaching.

He sat up with a start. He had slept the night through.

Fully awake now, he looked about him. Diane Tarrant was reclining on one elbow, stretched on the ground across from the smoldering fire.

Ombru and Florette were standing near by, and, just behind them, Crippen. And then Brand discovered an extra figure, drawn a little apart from the others, sitting dejectedly with his hands clasped across his knees.

Brand blinked in astonishment, not quite able to credit his own vision. But there could be no mistake. He looked again, and drew his breath sharply. The newcomer was Vibert Carew.

Crippen was explaining something to Ombru and Florette, and as Brand listened he began to gather the significance of the talk.

"He was stuck on the outer bar," Crippen was saying. "Not three hundred yards offshore."

"You been gone all this night, Mist' Crippum," Florette stated. "We dasn't go nowhere, an' we don't know whut was goin' on out there."

"The fool run the cruiser aground," said the Tiger Shark, and gave a vicious laugh. "And she was heading—which way do you think she was heading, Miss Tarrant?"

Diane did not deign to answer.

"She was heading away from this island," declared Crippen. "The boy friend was beating it out of here as fast as he could go."

Brand saw Diane Tarrant raised herself on her hand for a moment to gaze

witheringly at Carew. And then she dropped back again, and looked carefully away.

"I kind o' figured he'd strand," pursued Crippen. "So I took the dory and rowed out to see, and there he was. The tide was at full slack, so we had to wait till she was up again. And then I backed the cruiser off, and she's anchored outside now, waiting for us."

He stopped abruptly, turned about, and scowled down mordantly at Brand.

"So that's how it is, bo," he said. He spoke softly, with a slow drawl that was strangely like the sound of feline purring.

"You remember what I promised yesterday? Well, get ready. Stand up. You're going to find out what happens to people who try to shoot crooked with Jorry Crippen."

#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### TIGER SHARK.

THE outlaw would permit no one to bother about breakfast. He and Ombru and Florette could eat when they came back, he pointed out. As for the others—— He finished with a fatalistic shrug.

Brand was left to understand that he, at least, would be in no further need of nourishment after this morning.

"The tide is coming in to a full," said Crippen, "and this is the best time o' day for fishing—just before the sun is up. You, Ombru—fill up a bag of mullet, and bring along the chopping machine to grind 'em with. Boy, I'm going to show you some fishing like you never saw before."

Brand stood by hopelessly, watching the preparation. He realized now what was about to happen, and his heart went sick within him.

In the growing twilight of dawn, he could see Crippen's face, the fleshless, bony jaw, the thin, cruel line of the mouth, the small, lusterless eyes, deep

sunken in their sockets, as wicked and sinister as the unreadable, unfeeling eyes of those predatory monsters of the sea, from which he had borrowed his frightful nickname.

Jorry Crippen was one of those in-human anomalies of the race, a criminal by choice, a murderer by instinct, a warped and malformed being, capable of finding amusement in any grotesqueness of tragedy and horror. From such a creature it would be insanity to look for the faintest ray of mercy or humanity.

Obediently, Ombru was filling a bag with sun-dried mullet, the little, multitudinous fish that are born into the waters for the one purpose of being food for other fish. Crippen stood aside and motioned curtly with his thumb for Brand to take the path to the beach.

Diane Tarrant must have understood suddenly what horrid events were about to take place in that quiet and peaceful dawning. Her face was drawn and ghastly in the early morning light. She looked at Brand, and with a stricken sob she stumbled across the clearing, her hands faltering to him.

He caught her, and his arms went throbhingly about her.

"Diane!" he whispered, holding her close. "You know it, of course. I love you."

Her body trembled in his grasp, and then relaxed and clung tighter.

"John—my dear—it can't—he shan't—" Her voice broke, and her face buried itself against his shoulder in a storm of tears.

He forced her gently to lift her head. For an instant he looked deep into her brimming eyes, and then he bent and softly kissed her lips. "It's all right," he choked—"all right!" Then he released her and turned abruptly away.

"Any time, Crippen!" he said harshly. "Whenever you're ready, let's go."

The grim little procession started down for the beach—Brand first, with the tiger shark a pace behind, pistol in hand. Then followed Diane and Carew, with Ombru and Florette, both armed, bringing up the rear.

Brand strode along, keen-eyed and watchful, ready to take advantage of any momentary lapse of vigilance on the part of his captors. But Crippen moved remorselessly at his back, matching him step for step, alert and ready.

They reached the beach, where the little dory was drawn up in the sand. He motioned Brand to take his seat in the bow, while he himself crouched amidships. Ombru settled himself at the oars.

The little craft was too heavily weighted forward, but they had only a short distance to go, and the sea was fairly quiet. They reached the anchored cruiser. With a thrust of his pistol muzzle, the outlaw forced Brand to climb aboard. He followed, while Ombru rowed back for the rest of the party.

The others were transshipped to the cruiser without event, and then Ombru made a third trip for his bags of bait. Crippen, in the meanwhile, had started the engine. When the quarter breed finally came aboard, he hoisted the anchor, and then was intrusted with the wheel.

"Just cruise back and forth through the deep cuts," the outlaw instructed him. "That's all. Just keep her moving up and down through the long swells, where the trolling's good. A third speed, all the time."

It promised to be a clear and lovely day, growing warmer as the sun came up. A faint pinkish glow was beginning to show, off to the eastward.

As the daylight came across the sea, they could make out the grouping of little islands about them, and the open stretches of water, touched by the

faint aurora of morning, rumpled by the light, southerly breeze.

The sky above and the rippling channels about them were alive with movement, birds in clean, white plumage, swimming in the waves or rising free to soar overhead. But there was nothing else astir against the clearing horizon, neither sail nor twist of smoke. There was nothing anywhere to interfere with Jorry Crippen's sport.

Florette had bolted the fish chopper to the counter of the vessel—a machine like a butcher's meat grinder. She began feeding mullet into the hopper and turning the crank. A stream of greasy chum trickled out and fell into the water. Brand, bleakly watching, saw the ominous, oily slick form on the surface of the water, and spread and trail darkly in their wake.

Chumming is the most deadly method of fishing in these teeming waters. The great killers of the deep—swordfish, barracuda, and hungry, prowling sharks—have a way of scenting out the ground-up mullet and nosing their way to the source of supply.

Ombru was taking the cruiser slowly up the long channel, his eyes fixed somberly ahead. Here was the hunting ground for the great, hideous things of the sea, where the deep cuts curved along the inshore banks. He reached the shoaling ground at the end of the open channel, made his turn, and headed back into his own wake.

The greasy slick from the chopping machine formed a plainly defined pathway, into which he held the heaving cutwater. For those few moments no sound was heard except the lapping of the waves overside, the quiet drumming of the engine, and the squeak of the mullet grinder.

Diane Tarrant stood in the bow, her hands resting on the davits for support. Her face and lips were bloodless, her eyes congested with horror, her legs sagging with physical weakness, as

though she were ready at any moment to collapse on the deck.

At the port side of the deck house Vibert Carcw crouched against the rail. He was staring with glazed eyes at the waters ahead, a man lost to everything except his mounting terror, and perhaps, also, an underlying sense of shame. He had not looked anybody in the eye or spoken a word since Crippen had brought him off the grounded cruiser.

Brand was standing on the after deck, where the outlaw had driven him with a pistol against his spine. It was all he could do to fight off the temptation to turn suddenly and grapple for the gun, accepting the certainty of a clean, quick death.

But the sight of Diane's stricken figure always deterred him. It seemed cowardly somehow to take the easy way out, when Diane needed him so dreadfully. Even those last remaining moments belonged to her. He would not abandon her before his hour had struck.

Crippen was scanning the gray waters, right and left, while the vessel forged slowly ahead. But it was Florette who first discovered the thing for which he was so intently watching.

Off across the starboard quarter. The mulatto woman suddenly stopped turning the handle of the chumming machine. She peered sharply across the sea, and then pointed silently with a skinny forefinger.

Brand and Crippen caught sight of it at the same instant—a dark, crooked shape questing slowly through the water, circling in toward the cruiser—the fin of a tiger shark.

## CHAPTER XV.

### PROWLERS OF THE SEA.

FOR long moments Brand stood rigid, scarcely breathing, his gaze fixed with a cold and direful fascination upon that scimitar-bent object that came

cruising toward him, like a periscope, rising above the surface, to betray the presence of the sleek horror submerged beneath.

And as he watched, he saw a second wedge-like fin cutting the water, and a third and a fourth. The killers of the deep had caught the scent of the ground-up bait, and were closing in.

Crippen was looking off across the water with an ugly twist to his mouth, his eyes barely visible through the slits of his puckered eyelids. And then he stirred, and spoke in an undertone to Florette.

"All right," he said. "You've chummed 'em enough. You'll find a coil of harpoon line on one of the pegs of the cabin bulkhead. Bring it up here."

As Florette left the grinder and slouched off below, Crippen gave Brand a sardonic leer that might have been intended for a grin.

"I told you yesterday how it would be," he said. "You had your chance and went sour on me. And now I'm going to treat myself to a little fun."

Brand lifted his frozen glance, and Crippen met that silent look squarely, without a sign of embarrassment or flicker of compassion.

His stark brutality was not in the least affected by the accusing presence of the man whom he was about to subject to an ordeal of vicious cruelty that passed almost beyond the bounds of human imagination.

"I've heard of people being bit in two by sharks," he went on coolly, "but I've never seen it done. That's something I've wanted to see. And so—"

The arrival of Florette on deck checked his speech for a moment. The woman brought a coil of thin, almost unbreakable hempen line—two hundred yards of it, affixed to the eye of a barbed, steel-headed harpoon.

Crippen dropped the harpoon on deck, shook out the loose coils, and took the

free end in his hand. He kept his drawn pistol in readiness, and did not for a moment relax his vigilance. By laying the strand of line across his thigh, and using only one hand, he succeeded in tying a slip noose in the rope.

"The idea being to tighten this up around you just under the armpits," he told Brand coolly. "Then you go overboard to tow behind. And when those babies out there see you kickin' at the end of a long fish line— Well, this ought to be good. Oh, if you want to look at it from your end of the rope, just too bad!"

Brand did not answer. He was standing near the taffrail, his horror-stricken eyes hypnotized by the movement of the nearest, black fin that was creeping up slowly and remorselessly into the wake of the cruiser.

As he watched, he heard a faint, rippling sound overside, and saw a gliding, bluish shape, nearly as long as the vessel, that swerved shadowy almost under the counter.

Something else rolled in the water, so close and with such ponderous force, that the surge of the backwash could be felt along the hull of the little boat.

The sea on all sides was tenanted by these monstrous forms, called in by the blood scent, like things conjured out of a nightmare.

The sight of the voracious, prowling shapes, filled Brand with a loathing and hatred, like a violent fever, gushing through his blood and brain.

To be thrown overboard, alive, tied at the end of a rope—he could never submit unresistingly while this thing was done to him.

A sudden blinding repugnance assailed him, a suffocating horror that robbed him of every thought excepting the wild, maddened impulse to have it over with—now.

Crippen had dropped the harpoon on the deck near the rail, almost within reach. Without warning, Brand dropped

to his hands and knees, sprawled across the planking, caught up the sharpened weapon.

The unexpectedness of the action caught Crippen off his guard, for just that instant. Brand had seized the harpoon in his left hand. There was no time to shift it to his right. He tried to throw it as he was, half crouching, striking from the left side. Straight at Crippen's body, just below the ribs—he leveled the sharp-whetted head of steel.

A sharp, heavy explosion battered his ears and a streak of flame leaped at him.

Something struck him in the shoulder, a sledge-hammer blow that sent him reeling backward to the rail of the boat. He felt no pain, only the momentary shock of the leaden slug, plowing through muscle and sinew, smashing the shoulder bone.

Brand's left arm dropped, dangling and unseless. But even as the shaft of the harpoon fell from his convulsively opening fingers, some valiant instinct prompted him to snatch it with his other hand.

In a strange crimson haze he saw the outlaw confronting him with the pistol gripped in his fist.

"Oh, no!" taunted Crippen, with his diabolical laugh. "Drop it!"

He strode forward menacingly. "Let go that harpoon! I won't kill you—I'll just wing you again. The other side this time! Throw it away, I tell you!"

As Brand stared back at his enemy, he was aware of a movement in the water overside, a rippling, swishing sound: A vague consciousness, something impersonal, seemingly apart from himself, apprised him of the dark shape that glided past alongside the hull of the cruiser.

Brand never afterward could have accounted for the sudden clarifying of

his brain, the instantaneous quickening of his reflexes. It was as though another, higher, more active intelligence had flamed up within him for just that moment. He never before in his life had seen things more vividly, or reacted more spontaneously.

In advancing to the attack, Crippen had unwittingly stepped one foot into the loop of line that he had prepared for Brand. Brand saw that the outlaw was standing in the bight. He saw the shark turn in the water, barely submerged alongside the boat.

Without thought, without even the apparent preliminary of gathered movement, he turned to the rail and hurled the harpoon, driving the head downward into the water with all the strength he could muster.

He heard the sharp, tearing impact below as the head sank deep into living flesh. He saw the boiling upheaval of the great, stricken body thrashing suddenly above the surface, and he saw a white streak of spray and spume leaping away from the vessel in headlong flight.

There was just time to stand away, and then the harpoon line went whipping and twisting out across the rail in widening coils and loops and whorls. Fifty yards were gone before anybody could have drawn a breath, a hundred yards, two hundred—

For those few fateful seconds Crippen stood with fallen jaw, seeing the line paying itself out in the rising sunlight, like lightning flashes, and yet not quite understanding what was happening. Not soon enough. He could not have realized that his foot was planted in the bight of the line. And then it was out.

The last segment jerked taut, coiled up about his leg. The noose drew tight.

With a frantic suddenness he reached to free himself. But the terrible knot bit deeper. His gun went spinning from

his hand, across the deck, and then he was on his back, sliding along the deck, clutching and clawing at the bare planking, shrieking like a maniac.

He hit the after rail with a splintering crash. The stanchions gave way, and the next instant Jorry Crippen went sprawling across the counter, splashed into the sea, and kept on going.

In the nervous reaction, after that one stupendous moment in which he had seen the prostrate Crippen go careening along the deck, Brand kept enough of his wits about him to grab for the outlaw's gun.

But he need not have been apprehensive. Ombru and Florette were standing like sleep-walkers, too stunned by the amazing shift of events even to be dangerous.

Ombru had let go of the wheel, and the little vessel was cruising on her own for the time being, without any one to steer her. Every one was staring vacuously across the torn waters astern.

All they could see now was a disturbance along the surface of the waves, a bubbling spot, rapidly receding—a harpooned shark, towing a man, heading for the deep sea.

In a moment the streak vanished, was gone. Jorry Crippen was gone.

"Dragged under!" Brand heard himself saying in a shaken voice.

With an effort he steadied himself, turned to reach for the neglected wheel.

A tottering footstep sounded on the deck beside him.

"John!"

Diane Tarrant came to him, her stricken eyes seeking his.

"He shot you!" she gasped. "Oh—your shirt's all—your shoulder—"

He smiled at her wanly.

"Broken. And what of it. I could take a lot more than that, and like it. Diane! We're out of it! Do you realize? The tiger shark—no more! Finished!"

"John—I didn't see."

Diane was trembling so she scarcely could make herself understood.

"I hardly know myself," he declared. "It wasn't I. I threw the harpoon. But it was something beyond, behind me. Something big and all powerful that gave the opportunity, and acted. Well—simply the time had come when the Almighty could not permit Jorry Crippen to live any longer. That was all. That is how I see it."

He drew a long breath.

"All right, Diane. Steady. Do you want to take the wheel? Do you want to run her back to Toadstool Key? That's right. Fine."

Then he swung around with his pistol. "All right, you two. Up into the bow."

Ombru and Florette saw him advancing, and without a word they turned and slunk forward.

Brand kept them covered until Diane drove the vessel back into the shoal water off the little island. Then he pointed with his finger.

"Overboard—both of you! Swim for it!"

The two chastened passengers needed no second bidding. Florette went first, followed instantly by Ombru.

It was not far to the beach. Both swam in safely through the surf and landed. Then Brand turned aft again.

Ignoring Vibert Carew, who sat with bowed head on the roof of the deck house, he walked back to the girl at the wheel.

"Let's get out of here, please, while the tide's still high," he said to Diane.

"Don't you want to take your shirt off?" she asked. "I've got to do something about your shoulder."

He nodded absently.

"Sure. As soon as we get out of these passes. But just now you've got to steer."

He glanced back reflectively at Toad-

stool Key as his companion put the helm around.

"Here's our story," he said at length. "I was cruising among the Ten Thousand Islands, and there on one of the keys I stumbled upon you and Carew, did happen—without going into too marooned. See? That's what really many details."

"But what about Oinbru and Florette?" asked the girl. "They'll be picked up some day. Suppose they talk?"

"They won't," he asserted confidently. "Both of them are too deeply incriminated with Jorry Crippen. You can be dead certain they'll keep their mouths shut."

"There's no need for anybody ever to know that it was I who broke up the hanging party the other day," Brand pursued. "And my own conscience needn't bother me after this morning. The law doesn't know it, but the law, nevertheless, is satisfied. Jorry Crippen has disappeared off the face of the

earth. He'll never harm anybody again. We'll let it go at that."

"What about—" Diane glanced significantly toward the deck house.

"Vibert Carew?"

Brand picked up the sentence, and spoke loudly, so that the man would hear. "I don't think Carew will ever say a word—no more than Florette and Oinbru will. If he does, you and I will be forced to tell a few of the sensational things that have happened around here."

Brand shook his head serenely. "I'm sure he'll be very glad to back up the harmless little story we are about to tell."

He lowered his voice suddenly.

"So all you have to do is to head her for the mainland, and home."

"Home!" whispered Diane. Her face pressed itself against Brand's shoulder, and his good arm slipped softly about her.

"Home again," she breathed. "And—and—this time—with you."

THE END.



#### A BIG MUNICIPAL AIRPORT

AT Indianapolis, Indiana, is one of the largest and most complete municipal airports in the United States. The field is almost square, and consists of one thousand acres of ground. It is six and one-half miles from the heart of the city and is on the National Highway. The city spent seven hundred thousand dollars for the land and for the building of three concrete runways one hundred and four feet in width, and a combination hangar-administration building. Each of two of the runways is two thousand feet in length, and the third, which bisects one of the others, is one thousand one hundred feet in length. The hangar-administration building has a glass control tower, giving an unobstructed view of the field and the upper air regions. All lights are operated from this tower, and space on its roof is provided for the instruments of the United States weather bureau. The balloon room is there also, a balloon being used for making upper-air observations. This airport is for the use of the Transcontinental and Western Air Lines, the American Airways operating the Embry-Riddle Air Line, carrying passengers, mail, and express between Cincinnati and Chicago, and will also be used by various other passenger-carrying air transportation companies.



# Lucky Stone

By Don Cameron Shafer

**T**HENEY called Hoyt Kenyon the "Kid," for obvious reasons. He was still in his teens, and a bit too thin for his height.

He was strangely out of place as a member of the party, for the four other prospectors were rough, unprincipled drifters. But gold makes strange bedfellows.

Gold! That was what had brought Hoyt Kenyon into the North. That was why he had eaten, and worked, and bunked with that quartet of ne'er-do-wells and outcasts. They were men without respect for any law but the law of might, those four, and yet not especially dangerous under ordinary circumstances. But ordinary circumstances had been left behind now. They

had struck a pocket—and had panned out forty thousand dollars worth of gold.

Big Lem was a burly giant of a man who never talked of his past—a shaggy bear of a man who followed every new gold rush. His sallow-faced companion, familiarly called "Jaggie," was harmless enough unless he lacked funds to satisfy his thirst. Hite was a tall, raw-boned country man without scruple for money, which never remained long in his pockets. And the last of the four, "Pert"—an odd shortening of Pierre—was a mongrel mixture of many bloods.

And Hoyt Kenyon, better known as the "Kid," found himself studying this motley group more and more, now that the yellow devil—gold—was out of the

ground and in those heavy moose-skin pokes. Gold was the yellow devil that could destroy these men—yes, and himself, too, he realized. For now, with the gold in the pokes, he was of no further use to them. He was only a sharer of the gold, quite clearly the weakest physically, and, in their primitive, animal-like code, the first to be put out of the way.

He watched them as they sat about the small table in their cabin and discussed what they were going to buy with their gold when they got back.

"What you goin' to do with your share, Kid?" Big Lem asked. There was rough humor in his tone, and his companions greeted the question with noisy, significant laughter, which the Kid did not overlook.

"I'd give it all," said the lad, in a low voice, "if I was back in civilization."

"If there's any one else here who don't want his share," roared Lem, "let him speak right out."

Another loud roar of laughter greeted this absurdity.

"You fellows may as well know right now that if any accidents happen on the way out," added Lem, "there ain't goin' to be nothin' for widders an' orphans."

"His share goes to the survivors," agreed Hite.

"You bet it does!" put in Pert.

"Suits me," chuckled Jaggie. "I ain't got no heirs to quarrel over my estate."

"Your estate," laughed Lem, "ain't nothin' but a lot of empty bottles reachin' way back to the place where you was borned."

They roared again, all except the Kid, who was suddenly very quiet and thoughtful. Mentally these rough-and-ignorant frontiersmen were like children, betraying in action, voice, gesture and expression their secret inner thoughts and feelings. A better mind could read them like an open book. Hoyt knew right then that it was doubt-

ful if ever he would see his home again.

"I must save myself," he thought, "and save these men from each other."

It was his money that had made possible this long prospecting trip. He had come to the Far North, out of a large city, knowing nothing of outdoor life, fired with bookish enthusiasm for adventure, for hunting, outdoors, gold-seeking, the far places. With no one to advise or direct him, he had gone wholly unprepared into the wilds.

In Joyce Town, at the very edge of the Alaskan wilderness, he had met these prospectors who were broke after a hard winter, and desperate for any venture that promised relief. Hite knew where there was some good color, even if he had not discovered any bonanza. Big Lem had not gambled away his equipment. Pert was a good woodsman and meat hunter. Jaggie had a way of crowding in on anything promising, even though he never had any money longer than the time required to drink it up.

The Kid's small inheritance had gone for the "grubstake." The storekeeper at Joyce Town, who knew these men, advised the youth to protect himself with a signed agreement that he was to have one third of all profit in this venture for his work and the use of his money, and that the other four were to share alike in the balance. This document was left with the storekeeper.

It was all legal enough, except that Hoyt did not notice, what the others well knew, that his contract would be interpreted in any court to read that if any one of the party quit, or died, his share would go to the survivors.

## II.

In the yellow candlelight, studying these men, openly taunted and threatened, the Kid looked into the face of danger and could not run away. He

knew nothing about this great northern wilderness. He didn't even know where he was. His very life there depended upon the lives of his companions. If anything happened to them, he was lost. To save himself, he had to save them. He saw himself, in his thoughts, like an animal trainer in a cage with four big tigers, controlling, dominating them with a little whip, ruling with the mind alone.

"It's a long, hard pull out of here," said Lem, "an' much may happen on the way."

"A feller might get lost or somethin'," grinned Hite.

"He might," chuckled Lem. "Accidents will happen!"

This, in itself, was a threat, but these men must not know that the Kid had fear, though his voice shook just a little in the beginning when he spoke.

"I don't worry any about accidents," he smiled. "I've got a lucky stone."

"You got what?" cried Lem.

"A lucky stone."

His words made a deep impression on their ignorant and superstitious minds. All were firm believers in luck, in hunches, in simple things that would keep away bad luck or bring good. Every man there sensed a hidden threat. Every man there mistrusted his companions, and would welcome anything that promised good luck.

"Let's see that stone," demanded Lem.

The Kid passed it over. It was a rock crystal, roughly in the shape of a cross, of no value, but long considered an omen of good luck to the finder, or the owner.

The lucky stone went from hand to hand.

"I've been lucky ever since I had it," explained the Kid, "We'll get back all right."

"I wish I was sure about that!" said Pert.

"Well," grumbled Hite, "we need

somethin' more than a lucky stone to prevent accidents."

"I've got a first-class accident preventer here myself," Big Lem said grimly as he thrust forward a mighty fist for all to see. "Just let any one plan any accident for *me*, an' I'll bust him wide open."

"The same to you an' more of it!" retorted Hite, comforted by the weight of the big gun in his belt.

"We better be figurin' on how to get out of here," scolded Jaggie, "stead of worrying about the other feller's share of dust."

"I ain't tryin' to get nobody's share," denied Lem.

"I aim to take good care of mine," growled Hite.

"If we don't stick together, we won't get out of here at all," warned Pert.

"We can't go till we get some meat," said Lem. "Our grub is about shot."

"Then we'll go and shoot some more," chuckled Hite.

Though their quarreling ceased, and voices dropped, the Kid could see that his companions of the wilderness were in a dangerous mood, inspired by the yellow demon hidden in the moose-skin pokes. The strange madness of wilderness gold was upon them.

It was decided that Pert and Jaggie should do the hunting for the necessary meat while the others made ready for the back trail. Caribou were plentiful not so very far away. The pair started out at daylight the next morning.

"Let's borrow that lucky stone," said Jaggie. "I want to see if it's any good."

The Kid handed it over without hesitancy.

"You'll see. You'll have good luck on this hunt," he said confidently, because he knew that the caribou were drifting south with the winter and that Pert was an expert marksman, while Jaggie was a natural-born sneak and had no equal in stalking difficult game.

The two left the cabin together but Jaggie was both suspicious and cautious. He knew just how deadly a rifle was in the hands of his companion. He took no chance of walking ahead when a slip might mean a fatality, easily explained as an unfortunate hunting accident.

"I'll take the north ridge," said Jaggie, "and you take the south. With the valley between us we can cover a lot o' ground."

"Suits me," agreed Pert. "I prefer to do my huntin' alone."

They separated for the hunt, a mile apart, the wide valley between them.

Jaggie had the good fortune to discover game first. He worked his way within easy range of a band of caribou and began shooting. In a few minutes he had three of the animals down, and the bewildered herd had raced out of danger. Then, there being no longer need of concealment, he raised up out of hiding and made his way through the scattered brush toward his victims.

A mile away to his left, Pert heard this firing and ran to the top of the ridge in time to see Jaggie walking toward his kill. Pert's eyes grew suddenly brighter, cold as clear blue ice.

He slipped into a dry creek bed and, thus concealed, ran across the level bottom land to hide behind a huge rock less than two hundred yards from the dead caribou. The top of the rock formed a convenient rest for his rifle. He waited until Jaggie stooped over the first dead animal. Then three rifle shots, in measured succession, brought favorable comment from Jaggie's muttering lips:

"Pert's struck a bunch of deer."

Pert, from the vantage point of the big rock, with all his marksmanship, a rifle that never had failed at that range before, took more careful aim at Jaggie's breast and fired again.

"Which way did they go?" yelled Jaggie.

Pert's face was strangely red, as though he had run a long distance. His hands trembled, and he stared at the man before him as one would look at a spook. Jaggie had joined him now, and apparently had not been hit.

"They went that way," he answered vaguely. "I guess I missed."

"What?" sneered Jaggie. "An' you such a dead shot?"

"They was a long way off," Pert said, in an unnatural voice.

"I got just a snap shot at that bunch," he lied. "They sure was hittin' the dust."

Just then a young caribou, having lost the herd, circled back.

"There's a shot for you!" said Jaggie. "See if you can hit that one!"

Anxious to explain his previous shots, Pert threw up his rifle and fired twice, without even alarming the animal.

"Maybe there's something the matter with your gun," suggested Jaggie.

Pert looked the rifle over carefully. The sights were all right, the barrel was straight and true. He worked the action and threw out a shell from the magazine. He could find nothing wrong with the rifle.

He never thought to examine the empty shell closely, or he would have seen the marks of teeth where the soft copper had been crimped down over the powder after the bullet had been twisted out. And the Kid, who could have told him much about the matter, had slipped in a soft wadding in place of the lead. The Kid knew something of Pert's treacherous nature and efficient marksmanship.

### III.

When the two hunters got back to the cabin, Pert tried to mask his murderous act by accusing Lem of playing one of his practical jokes by fooling with his gun.

"I never touched your gun," denied Lem truthfully.

"Somebody monkeyed with it," said Pert, "an' I couldn't shoot nothin'."

Jaggie's face was set and pale, but he said nothing. He knew now in his own mind, that the lucky stone had saved him. He was one of those men who never forgive and never forget. Pert had failed to kill him to-day, but he would try it again to-morrow, or at the first opportunity on the outtrail. To save himself, he must strike first.

"This sure is a lucky stone," laughed Jaggie, without mirth, as he laid it on the table, "I got a nice bunch o' deer hung up."

Pert, noting the hollow laughter, the hard look in the man's small eyes, reached out a stealthy hand and took the stone.

The four sat down to the small table and began eating in silence. Heretofore their meals had been noisy, with gruff humor and loud laughter. Now, no word was said. The rattle of steel knives seemed to hold a hidden menace. Under lowered brows, watchful eyes glared suspiciously, searching for some hint of a threat, of danger, each suspecting the same evil thought in the others that lurked in his own dark brain.

The Kid, waiting upon them, tried to liven things up, to cheer them, but he was rebuffed and ordered gruffly to shut up.

Jaggie's mind was fired with the heat of vengeance. He was going to get the man who had tried to get him. That was the law of the frontier. Nor would he admit that this murderous thought was overshadowed by the fact that with Pert out of the way, there would remain but three to divide the gold!

Pert went to sleep well satisfied that he had successfully covered his evil purpose with the explanation of the misfit shells. He felt perfectly safe in the cabin. No one would dare start anything there, or the others would be upon him like wolves for their own safety.

For a long time Jaggie feigned sleep,

breathing heavily, venturing a snore or two, but wide-eyed and a-tremble with the momentous thing he was about to do.

When he could hear his companions breathing regularly, denoting heavy slumber, he swung out of his bunk and dropped lightly to the floor. He stood there in his stocking feet listening, making sure, then, like a dark and sinister shadow, he stole noiselessly across the room toward Pert's bunk, a long thin-bladed knife in his right fist.

Pert was sound asleep.

By the faint glow of the dying fire, as he bent over the sleeping man, Jaggie could see the rise and fall of the blanket indicating his mark. He struck downward, a swift and powerful blow, a little to the left of the breastbone. Noiselessly as a hunting cougar, he bounded across the hard-packed earthen floor to his own bunk. The creak of the bunk poles under his weight was drowned by the noise of Pert heaving up to a sitting position, amid a strange rattle of tin ware. And then his petulant voice:

"Who's throwin' things at me?"

Jaggie all but collapsed. His body took a violent and uncontrollable shaking. Though it was dark, he hid his eyes with his arm, lest he behold some hideous thing, such as a dead man speaking, a man walking about with a knife in his heart and not knowing that he was dead. Every second he expected to hear the gurgling, rasping throat rattle of a man dying.

"What's goin' on here?" called Big Lem.

"Somebody's throwin' things at me, that's what!" came the high-pitched voice of Pert. "I won't stand for no jokes when I need rest."

Jaggie shuddered. Would the man never die?

"Nobody throwed anything at you," said Lem. "You're just dreamin'."

"I say they did!"

A match flared, and then another, as Hite and Lem rolled out. The Kid scurried forward and lit the candle.

"I tell you somebody hit me," maintained Pert.

Jaggie knew that if he lingered there the others would be suspicious when Pert rolled over dead. Summoning all his strength, he got up surprised to see Pert standing there apparently unhurt, and the ivory haft of the knife was not sticking in his shirt front.

"Look at that," cried Pert. "What did I tell you!"

He kicked aside a heavy sheet-iron pot cover which all recognized as one used by the Kid in his cooking.

"Some one heaved that at me when I was asleep."

Hite's eyes, drawn to the floor, remained fixed there.

"What's that?" he asked.

Lem reached down and picked up the broken knife.

"It looks like an Eskimo knife," suggested Jaggie, thankful that no one ever had seen this secret knife he always carried under his left arm.

"It is an Eskimo knife," said Hite, examining the carved-ivory haft. "I've seen knives like this before. Eskimos always carry 'em."

"Some one was prowlin' 'round in here," said Pert. "It's lucky I waked up."

"Somebody may have got wise that we've got a lot of gold in here," suggested Lem.

"It's them murderous Eskimos," said Jaggie. "They're probably down this way now, huntin' caribou."

"It's lucky for us one of 'em stumbled over that kettle cover," said Hite, "or we all might have been knifed in our sleep."

"It's the lucky stone," smiled the Kid. "Pert had it in his shirt pocket."

He picked up the iron cover and put it back where it belonged, saying nothing about the great dent in the metal where

Jaggie's thin-bladed knife had struck and broken. And saying nothing, either, about the fact that he had planted that iron cover to save a murder in the camp.

#### IV.

"We'll get out of here," decided Big Lem. "If those Injuns are gettin' as intimate as all that, we better move."

They loaded the boat with their small supply of provisions, including the caribou meat, stowed the heavy pokes of gold dust aboard, and began the laborious task of rowing and hauling the heavy craft upstream. Where the swift water came tumbling down over black rocks, the boat had to be towed by main strength at the end of a long rope.

"The Kid can pack the guns for safety," decided Lem. "Hite can steer the boat while we haul her up."

"That ain't no safe job for me," said Hite.

"If you're scared," chuckled Lem, "you better take the lucky stone."

Hite was just superstitious enough to take it, because he could not swim a stroke and was deathly afraid of water. Big Lem took a double turn of the tow-line about his mighty trunk. Behind him, Pert and Jaggie hauled. Lem's shaggy head was twisted back over his shoulder, watching Hite jumping from rock to rock, shoving the boat clear, guiding its slow progress against the swift current.

"Slack away," yelled Hite.

"Slack all," repeated Lem.

The three men stopped to rest while Hite got the boat off a submerged rock. Jaggie and Pert stood there like a couple of tired canal mules, too tired to be interested, waiting orders, but Lem was watching.

Hite's task on the wet-and-slippery rocks was precarious to say the least. He stood on a flat rock, surrounded by deep and boiling water, cold as ice. In that moment, as Hite bent over to heave

the boat clear, Lem noted that the man's booted feet were upon the slack rope where it ran over the rock.

"Heave ahead," shouted Lem.

Obedient to orders, the other two heaved with him. The wet rope snapped taut, and Hite, caught off balance and unsuspecting, was tossed like a chip into the river, where he disappeared in a smother of white foam.

"Hite's fell in," said Lem, and his voice was strangely husky.

The black head of the drowning man suddenly appeared moving swiftly down into more dangerous water. Hite was gasping, screaming. His arms were fighting the flood, but his companions made no effort to help him.

Farther downstream, however, they saw the Kid running over the rocks like a goat, in his right hand a canvas duffel bag which, tied securely at the mouth, was practically waterproof.

With a swinging cast, he hurled it far out toward the drowning man and, fortunately, it fell within reach of his threshing arms. It made an excellent life preserver, keeping Hite afloat, and supporting him, half dead, to the quiet water below, where the Kid was ready to haul him out.

"I didn't think Hite'd ever make it," said Big Lem, his voice registering disappointment.

In a few minutes Hite came running back, just as mad now as he was scared a few minutes before.

"What'd you heave on that rope for?" he demanded.

"You yelled heave ahead, that's why," said Pert.

"I never did."

"Some one did," said Pert, looking strangely at Lem.

"It was just an accident," said Lem.

"Darned near a fatal accident for me!" growled Hite, beginning to wonder.

"You didn't need to worry none," grinned Lem, anxious to avoid any sus-

picion. "You had that lucky stone right in your pocket."

Lem's words came out a little too fast. His laughter held a certain false note, and Hite began to suspect that it was not altogether an accident. Whether Lem had done it just to be funny, as one of his horseplay jokes, or had tried to drown him, Hite did not know.

"You take this here lucky stone yourself," he growled, an open threat in his voice. "You may be the next one to need it!"

As a matter of fact, Lem *was* the next one to need it. That evening, Hite, growling something about his revolver being all wet from "that accidental ducking," decided to clean it. Lem was standing a few feet away, in the direct line of fire, when the revolver "accidentally" went off.

Hite alone knew that the bullet couldn't have possibly missed such a broad mark at that short range. And yet, somehow, it *had* missed.

His protest that the shot was an "accident" ended in a hoarse gurgle as Lem grabbed him by the throat, brushed the revolver to the ground, and proceeded to "learn him to be more careful with a gun."

When, finally, he threw the badly choked man from him in disgust, Hite searched for his weapon with bewilderment in his face. It was that darned lucky stone that had saved Lem's life.

It might have been that, or it might have been the foresight of the Kid. The latter had managed to insert the blanks in the weapon that afternoon. They were blanks that had been carried along for signals, to save wasting real bullets. And in the fight between Hite and Lem, the Kid had tossed the gun into the brush a few yards away from the camp fire.

Hite grumbled a while, and then looked suspiciously at every member of the party. But he said nothing.

He was silent and sullen when the

men broke camp next morning, and continued along the stream toward civilization.

When the stream, finally, became too small and rapid, the boat was abandoned. Bending under heavy packs, the men trekked through a seemingly endless forest. Great marshes intervened, mountains, lakes, deep streams, but Big Lem led them without a compass or a map, with all the instinct of a homing pigeon.

All the way the four men watched each other like starving wolves that do not hesitate to pull down and devour each other at the first sign of weakness. Each night the Kid could feel their eyes upon him. He was the last to sleep, and the first to waken. For he knew that every step nearer Joyce Town brought nearer the hour when these men must hand over to him one-third of their hard-won gold, and they were not the kind of men to do this if they could help it.

"Nothing but good luck will save me," sighed the Kid, "and I've got the lucky stone."

He couldn't run away. Winter already was stepping on their heels. In that wilderness, he would be hopelessly lost in an hour. He was unarmed, and could not defend himself if attacked. And every hour of their long and difficult journey, the tension increased. These men, Hoyt knew, would soon be fighting among themselves for the gold, and his own life was in immediate danger.

One evening he saw fresh ax cuttings floating on a stream.

"White men!" he cried with joy.

Lem looked at the chips in a puzzled way.

"There ain't no white men so far in as this. It's prob'bly just some Injun come up for the trappin' season."

"We can go and see," suggested the youth. "We're about out of grub."

"Some Injun starvin' to death on rabbits," sniffed Lem.

"We ain't got no time to bother with foolishness," added Jaggie.

"Come on," urged Pert.

Before those shaggy, sweat-wet, disheveled and ragged frontiersmen went to sleep that night Hoyt Kenton felt that the next day was to be his last. These men were so childishly simple that, inadvertently, they betrayed every emotion and never knew it.

"This long hike is pretty tough on you, Kid," said Big Lem. "To-morrow Hite'll carry what's left of the grub."

There wasn't much of anything left of the grub—a little rice, a few beans, a few pounds of flour. This was no burden to the youth, and when they decided to take it away from him he knew that the end was near. They were not the kind of men to have any sympathy for any one, not the kind to carry a pound more than they had to. Hoyt had known for some time that they never intended he should get back to Joyce Town to claim a third of their gold.

For a long time he lay there wide-eyed, staring up through green branches at the stars, and tried desperately to think of a way out.

The others had no fear of his running away. They knew that he would be hopelessly lost without them. He could not carry away the heavy gold, even if they gave it to him. He was unarmed.

There didn't seem to be any way out of it. The curse of gold was upon his companions. They were mad, gold mad. In this madness they dared not trust one another. Every night the heavy skin pokes of dust were turned over to the Kid to guard. He couldn't run away with it in the night.

## V.

"Lem! Lem!" called the Kid at daylight. "The gold is gone!"

All four of his murderous companions were instantly on their feet.

"Our gold is gone!"

Big Lem saw that the pokes were missing and, with a hoarse roar, he reached out and grabbed the Kid by the neck.

"You let some dirty sneak steal in here an' rob us!" he accused.

In his frantic haste to find the missing treasure, or overtake the thief, Big Lem didn't have time for murder. He tossed the youth aside, badly mauled, and dashed out into the woods, the other three behind him. Like a pack of hounds unleashed, the four began circling through the woods, their trained eyes upon the ground, searching for the trail of the thief. They knew that it would not be easy for any one to carry away that weight of gold without leaving behind some telltale sign.

In less than an hour they were back at the camp.

"Who's the little joker here?" cried Lem, his voice not good to hear as he glared from face to face. "Who thinks they're so funny?"

The words came snarling out, like the hissing, rumbling cat voice of an angry tiger robbed of its kill.

"Weil, it ain't me," said Pert.

"Nor me neither," added Jaggie.

"I ain't been up to no tricks," said Hite.

"I wouldn't believe any of you under oath," cried Lem. "One o' you took that gold."

"I'd like to know which one," said Pert.

"So would I," nodded Hite.

"One thing is certain," growled Lem. "That dust didn't go out of this piece of woods."

Nothing could be more certain than this, and all knew it. Beyond that patch of evergreens was more or less open tundra, covered with several inches of new snow, and there was not a single track on its unbroken surface.

"That gold is right here," said Lem, "and one of you has hid it out, thinkin'

that he can come back here next summer and get it all."

It never occurred to them to accuse the Kid. He sat there, his head in his hands, still a bit dazed from his rough handling, certain that he must die.

"If we don't find that gold in half an hour," said Lem, "some one'll pay dear for his fun."

They didn't find it.

The little patch of evergreen was quite dense, even though the trees were small, so that the light snow had not penetrated to the ground beneath. But this black wood dirt, covered with brown needles, had not been disturbed by man or beast.

A furious quarrel flared up like a flame in dry tinder. That could have but one ending, the death of the entire party. Hoyt saw that to save himself he must save these mad men from each other.

"Stop!" he shouted, standing between them. "I took that gold."

"You!" roared Lem.

As Pert's rifle raised, as Hite's big gun came out, the Kid hastily added:

"If you kill me, you never will find it. I, alone, know where it is hidden."

"Oh, you do!" cried Lem. "Then you'll mighty soon tell!"

"I never will tell," the Kid stated firmly.

"We'll see about that!" promised Lem.

"You can torture me, kill me, if you want to," said the youth, "but I never will tell you where the gold is hidden. I knew last night that you were planning to run away from me to-day. You intended to leave me here to die in the forest. I would rather be shot right now and have it over with. It will be some satisfaction to know that my death will cost you forty thousand dollars."

Big Lem, roaring like a wounded bear, lunged forward. For a few seconds the others watched this brutal beating and then they realized that, if Lem

killed the youth, their share of the gold was gone. As one, they jumped in and pulled Lem away.

"Let the Kid alone!"

"I'll skin him alive," cried Lem, "if he don't tell where that gold is hid!"

"I—will—never—tell," the Kid declared firmly.

"Killin' him won't do us no good," warned Pert.

"The Kid has outsmarted us," decided Jaggie, "an' we may as well admit it."

Big Lem thought he was very subtle and cunning.

"You win," he told the Kid, with every pretense of friendship. "It's a good joke on us. Show us where the gold is hid, an' we'll be on our way out of here, an' no hard feelin's."

But the desperate youth was not so easily beguiled. He knew that once the gold was in their possession again, his life wouldn't be worth a cent.

"Frankly, I don't trust any of you," he said. "I won't tell you anything about the gold. Go ahead and kill me if you want to. I expect to die anyway. You fellows never intended to go back to Joyce Town. For days you have been walking more east than south. I believe we are now in Canadian territory. On the headwaters of that stream we passed yesterday are white men. You didn't want to meet them. But now, if you want to save your share of the gold, you better take me back up there. If there is an officer there, we will come back here and get the gold without murder being done and men swinging for it."

Lem struck straight across over the ridge to the headwaters of the stream, where they found a new gold camp with more than a hundred prospectors washing out the gravel in the stream bed.

"They've struck this color since we came up," said Hite.

"Nothin' but wage dirt," sniffed Lem.

But any gravel that will pan out good day wages, in proportion to the cost of food and supplies, is worth while, and will attract sufficient hard-working men to take up all the available claims. Admittedly, Two Forks was not another Klondike. There was no store of gold at the grass roots. But the gravel offered good pay to those willing to work, and a small camp had mushroomed up during the months the four gold seekers had been farther north. It was only an outpost of civilization, and yet it was safety for the threatened youth. For here was a representative of the Dominion government to see that the Canadian mining laws were observed.

The Kid talked with the red-coated government representative. Here was a man to whom he could explain all the shadings of the situation.

Two days later, with this officer in charge, for there was a tax to collect, they went back after the gold. It was easily found. The Kid had merely raked out the fire hole and buried the gold under the ashes, renewing the fire above it.

"A thing is always best hid," laughed the redcoat, "when it's right before your eyes."

"Ain't it the truth?" laughed Lem.

Now that they were all safe, and the gold secure, they were ashamed of their previous evil thoughts and secretly glad that nothing had happened.

"We had a mighty lucky trip," said Hite.

"Next summer," began Pert, "we'll come back."

"Not me," answered the Kid. "I am going to take my money and start in business for myself back in the States."

"What kind of business?" asked Lem.

"Making lucky stones for gold miners," Hoyt answered.

# Top-Notch Talk

BY  
THE EDITOR

**W**E are getting so many letters from Top-Notch readers these days that we are giving an extra page in each issue to them.

They are always interesting to us, and we believe they are interesting to most of our readers, for, eventually, these letters shape the policy of the magazine.

An editor who has a big correspondence from readers is a fortunate editor. He can never get very far from pleasing his readers when he is constantly learning just what they like and what they don't like.

Send them on. If you think you have a message for other Top-Notch readers, try to make that message brief. In this way we can run your letter earlier than if you had made it long.

The leading story in the next issue of Top-Notch is something of a novelty. At least, we thought so. We'd call it a Western-Sport novelette, for it's about a cowboy pugilist, and his exciting adventures in the arenas of the range country.

It starts out with action, follows up with action, and ends with action. Samuel H. Nickels, who lives on a ranch in New Mexico, and knows the cow country as well as the fight game, wrote it. It's called "K. O. at Coyote Butte." And you'll find the K. O. in the story, as well as in the title.

"Hot bunts!"

Yes, that's what Boots Tobin usually exclaims when he gets excited. But this time it's more than just a phrase.

It's the title of a new "Brick and Boots" novelette, to be run in the next issue of Top-Notch.

Right now, with the old World Series rolling toward us so fast, you'll find it a real hot story, especially if you're a baseball fan.

Many of the letters from readers reflect a great deal of enthusiasm for the "Brick and Boots" novelettes by Burt L. Standish. And those who always look forward to a new story of this series won't be disappointed in "Hot Bunts!"

"The Hawk" will be with us again in the next issue. The title of John Paul Seabrooke's new novelette is "The Hawk and the Forty Thieves," and if you want to follow the exploits of a gentleman adventurer who has broken no law, and yet takes all the chances of a man *outside* the law, here's your chance.

There'll also be a long and exciting installment of John Mersereau's serial of the Mojave Desert, "The Man From Maricopa," a double-action yarn of the Big Woods, by Howard Rice Hill, whose work you have previously read in Top-Notch, and other outstanding features.

**JACK LAKE.**—Just finished your September 1st number, and thought it was very good. I think that's a fine idea, giving us a Western, a detective, and a sport story in every issue, especially as each one is a novelette. Since you've been doing this, I have not missed an issue of Top-Notch, and on two occasions this summer took a bus ride of over fifteen miles expressly to get my copy. My favorite in your latest issue was "The Fentriss Murder

Case." In fact, I am very fond of all of Mr. Boston's stories. "The Murder at Ten Thirty," in another issue was another of his good ones. "Tiger Shark" is starting out as a very good serial, and I hope it keeps up. I know a good deal about the sea myself, and believe this author has the right touch.

I have another object in writing you. From 1927 to 1929, I had a pal, another "Jack"—Jack Harrill, whom I met in Honolulu, and recent letters that I have sent him have been returned to me with the line "Not Known" stamped on the envelope. Now, if Jack is alive, I know he is reading old Top-Notch every issue, so would you mind running this letter? It might get us in touch with each other again.—*San Francisco, California.*

We have no regular department to locate missing persons, but if your pal sees this and writes us, it will certainly be a pleasure to bring a pair of Top-Notchers together again.—*Ed.*

**ROBERT BRYSON.**—"The Racket in Westboro" was all that you announced it would be. Shoot us some more of Mr. Boston's work. Your boxing and baseball stories are all right, too.—*Asheville, North Carolina.*

**HAROLD LEAPART.**—I have read Top-Notch so long that I feel right in the family, and while I did weaken a little when you were running theme songs and checker tournaments and shopping services, I think it's back where it belongs now, and I'm still going strong. Since I am a real old-timer—fourteen years as a steady reader except when I was on vacations in remote places where I could not always buy it—I am going to suggest that you have a contest for readers to tell their most popular Top-Notch authors. This should have a good effect. It would not take up any space in your magazine after the first announcement, and once you get the low-down on the authors that most of your readers like the best, you would be sure to please them by using those authors most. My own favorite Top-Notch writer is the author of the story on the top line of the inclosed ballot. He always put over a good, interesting story.—*Chicago, Illinois.*

**H. F. HADEN.**—Sure like the new Top-Notch Western and mystery stories, but can't see why you left out your interesting checker page. It was well worth the space devoted to it.—*Little Neck, Long Island.*

**T. R. BUCKHOLZ.**—I have just finished

reading the August 15th issue, and my mind returned to when I first read your magazine. It must have been sixteen or eighteen years ago, and the serial at that time, as I recall, was "Around the World in Thirty Days." This does not seem very fast now, with Post and Gatty doing it in nine, but it certainly was exciting in those days. I look forward to the arrival of Top-Notch, and believe you deserve congratulations on the class of stories printed. I have never missed an issue since I started reading it.—*Worthington, Ohio.*

**PATRICK STAFFORD.**—Liked the "Brick and Boots" novelette the best in your latest issue. Next best, "The Murder at Ten Thirty." My third choice was your serial. How about a few more checker lessons? I liked this department immensely.

**LEE CONWAY.**—I am one of your real Top-Notch boosters since you cut out all that country-store pastime, such as checkers, back-gammon, and long, tiresome articles by the old Commodore. What we want is good he-man stories, and now you're giving them to us. Why not a story some time on Miami? You editorial birds up there don't seem to know that this is one of the liveliest cities in the Union and that anything can happen here.—*Miami Beach, Florida.*

**THOMAS BELCHER.**—I am inclosing filled-out Top-Notch reader's ballot, and also a letter which I wish you would see gets into the hands of Mr. Boston, author of "The Murder at Ten Thirty." Keep his stories coming, I think they are great. Equally good stories of their kind are those about "Brick and Boots" and "The Hawk." I don't care much for the idea of giving us those articles by John Hampton. Just give us your usual good, red-hot he-man stories, and we'll worry along about how to succeed.—*Cleveland, Ohio.*

**VERNON C. PEASE.**—While cleaning out some junk in an odd room of a bungalow court apartment which I recently took here, I came across some old magazines, and there were several dusty copies of Top-Notch among them. There was one story, "The Clinging Clew," by Richard N. Donelson, which particularly appealed to me, and a few other good ones. This week while doing my regular shopping I bought a copy of the new Top-Notch, and thought "Joint Account" and "The Racket in Westboro" were great. I noticed that a letter from one of your correspondents in that issue stated that he had been reading the magazine for twenty years. Well, I'm just a newcomer; but I mean to become an

old-timer. Give us some more stories by Richard N. Donelson, Ralph Boston, Nell Martin, and Burt L. Standish.—*Los Angeles, California.*

DAVID OWENS.—Buy your mag twice a month. Like it. "The Racket in Westboro" was very thrilling. Tell Mr. Boston to get busy with some more. When you get a chance, I wish you'd run some Mounty stories, too. But keep up the regular detective stories.—*Syracuse, New York.*

R. R. HARMAN.—Why don't you give us a "Brick and Boots" novelette every issue during the baseball season, and every so often when the season closes? Those who can't see any more games will want to read about them then. Your sport stories are very good. They have a real story in them, not just a recital of a certain game or a certain fight. I'm with you double since you added stories of clean American sport to every issue of Top-Notch, which I have been reading about a year and a half. I have called the "Brick and Boots" stories to

the attention of several pals of mine who are also baseball fans.—*Detroit, Michigan.*

E. V. THOMAS.—Your big-shot story is "Brick and Boots" whenever you run it. You can't run too many baseball stories for me. I like them better than the prize-fight stories. My favorite authors are Burt L. Standish, who comes first, Tex Bradley and John Mersereau.—*Rochester, New York.*

GIL HYMAN.—I have been reading an old issue of your magazine. I liked "White Desert" (Claude Rister), "The Test Supreme" (W. E. Schutte) and "Just Pards" (Ralph Boston). The rest of the magazine was fine, too. I liked your Top-Notch readers' letters. Mr. Editor, I wonder if Bill McCritchie still reads your magazine. I knew him when I lived at Roma Glassop Street, Balmain, Sydney, and he and I used to play cowboys and Indians in White Horse and Elkington Parks with a gang of kids. Bill left New South Wales to go to the States in 1910. Best wishes from Australia.—*Bronte, New South Wales, Australia.*

## NEXT ISSUE!

(On the news stands September 15th)

*A Breezy, Double-action Sport-Western Novelette*

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By SAMUEL H. NICKELS

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