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# FIVE-NOVELS

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MAGAZINE



## HIGHWAY TO MURDER

By EDWARD RONNS

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# FIVE-NOVELS MAGAZINE

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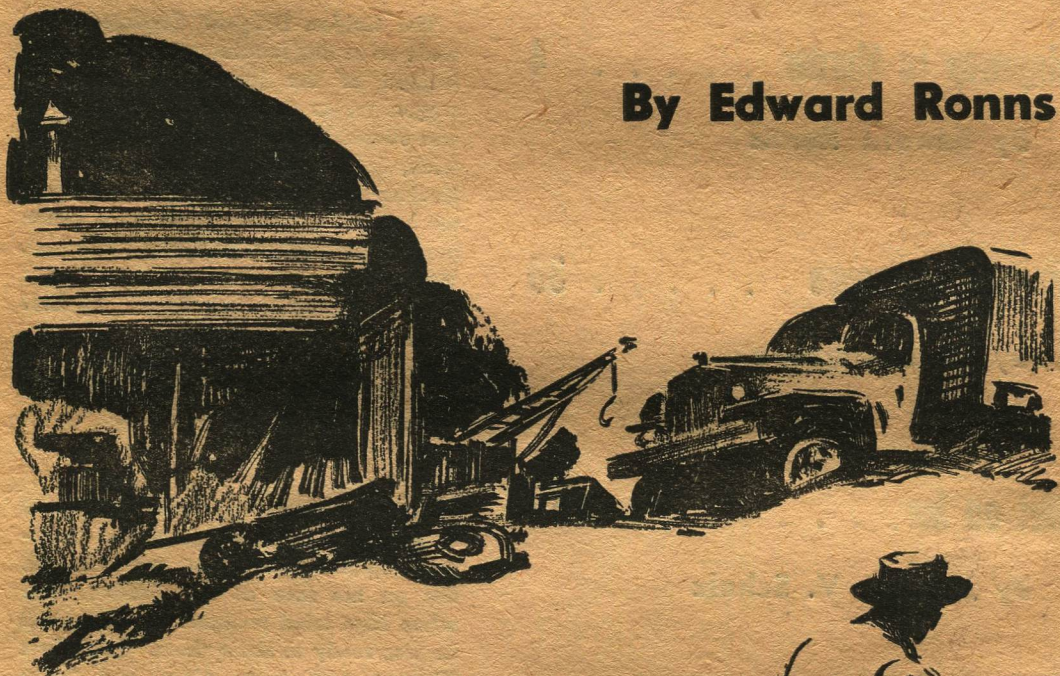
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# HIGHWAY TO MURDER

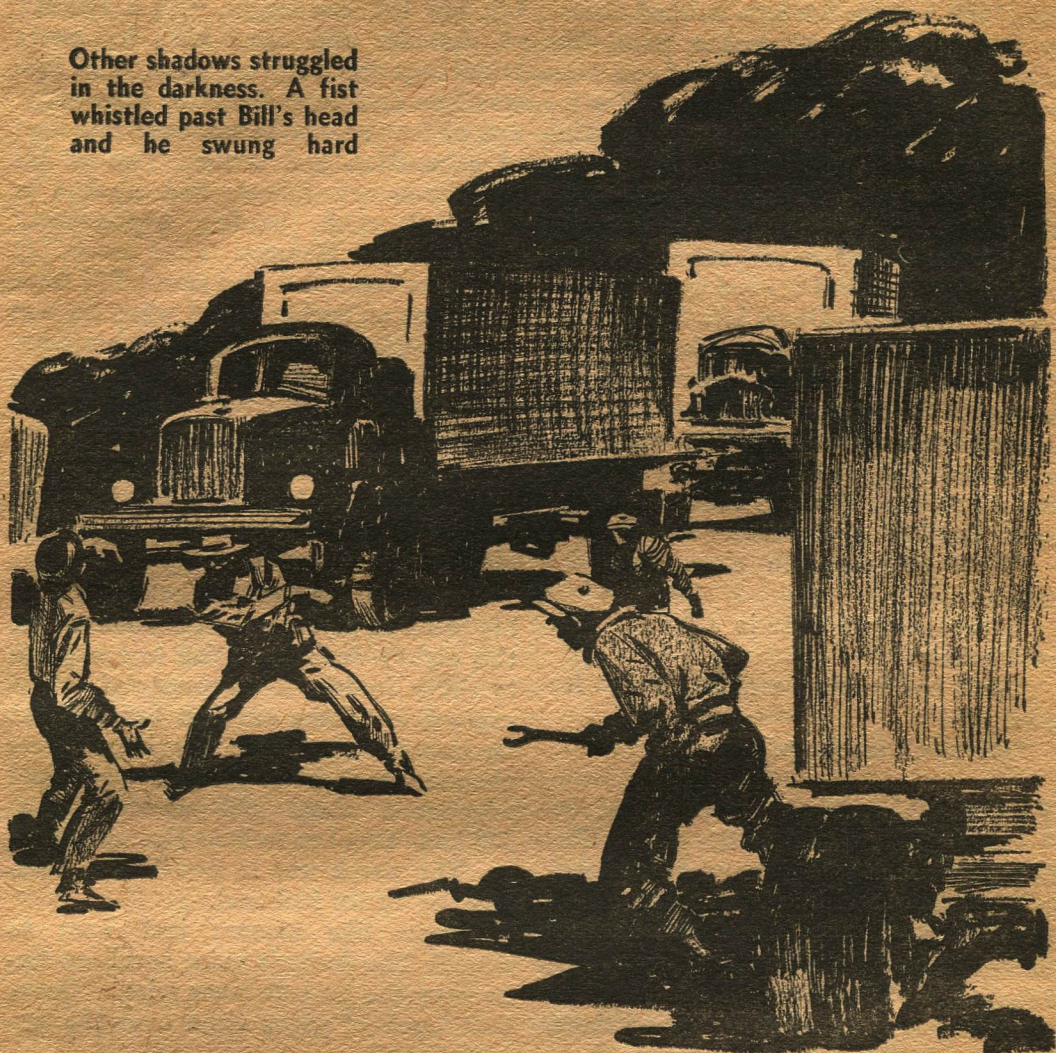
By Edward Ronns



**T**HE HIGHWAY undulated with the approach of the hills, unwinding like a bright ribbon out of the spool of darkness. Once clear of the heavy city traffic, Bill Thompson tooted the big Diesel along at fifty, pushing the heavy load ahead with expert manipulation of the fifteen forward speeds. Beside him, Mokey Johnson was already asleep, his head back on the leather seat cushions of the cab, his big homely face completely relaxed. Bill wished he could relax the same way. It was one of the penalties of trying to run a new trucking



Other shadows struggled in the darkness. A fist whistled past Bill's head and he swung hard



outfit, he reflected, that he was behind the wheel of the box, tense and tired, while Mokey slept the sleep of the undisturbed.

Then, without opening his eyes, Mokey said, "Watch the tachometer, Bill. Keep her revved up as high as she'll go."

"I thought you were getting some shut-eye," Bill said.

"Not until we get where we're going," Mokey grunted. His burly body jiggled with the vibration in the tractor cab.

"Don't forget, Petey Slocum is my pal."

"He'll be all right," Bill said.

"He'd better be."

"The report didn't say he was hurt. Just the box was smashed."

"We'll see when we get there," Mokey said, and lapsed into silence again. "Watch the tachometer, Bill. Keep that speed meter at maximum R.P.M."

He had the giant Diesel revved up to full power as they hit the Malibu Hills, roaring up over the rolling crests. All around them, darkness had settled in the



valleys and lowlands, and far behind the sun had surrendered to the bloody Pacific. Bill had his left arm hooked loosely through the wheel spokes, using his other hand, heavily gauntleted, to manipulate the two shifting levers. Twenty-two 11.00-by-20 tires pounded the highway relentlessly. Hauling 70,000 pounds of roaring tractor and van over the hilly road took all of Bill Thompson's attention for several moments. The tachometer touched the red warning line and he kicked the Diesel into free-wheeling as they started downgrade. The box descended at increasing speed, quieter now with the idling of the Diesel. Mokey opened his eyes and stared through the windshield at the highway swooping toward them at a faster, and even faster, rate. His eyes slid sidewise to Bill.

"We'll get there in time, Bill," he murmured.

"I thought you were in a hurry," Bill said grimly.

"Ain't one crackup a night enough for you, Bill?"

"We won't crack up."

**H**ALFWAY up the next slope, he flicked the motor to life again. The heavy truck hurtled forward with scarcely any decrease in speed. The white guard rails along the dark highway flicked by under the touch of the probing headlights. Traffic was thin. Another truck swooped downgrade toward them, its green, yellow and white lights like a Christmas tree. The signal lamp on the other's cab blinked once.

"Clear road," Bill murmured. "That's good."

He blinked his own signal lamp twice in Diesel talk, to indicate that traffic cops were patrolling the road behind him, and then the two vans thundered past each other to be swallowed in the darkness of the highway again. Overhead the night sky showed a sprinkling of stars. Bill checked the bank of gauges on the dashboard, listened to the smooth revolutions of the 200-horsepower Diesel, and settled back behind the wheel.

Even for the size of the cab, he seemed to crowd the place. Mokey Johnson was big, but Bill was bigger, with a breadth of shoulder and chest that he rarely found equaled in other men. His face was lean and burned almost mahogany, but under the weathering were fine lines of exhaustion and strain. Two of his half-dozen new Diesels had crashed in the past week, hauling high-priority freight out to Halcyon in the desert. It was a contract that had saved Bill from going out of business, just when he was struggling back to his feet after his years in the Navy. Now it looked as if his contract with the Harrison Construction Company was proving his nemesis. Unless he could get to the bottom of this plague of accidents. Unless he could stop them and deliver the goods to Arthur Harrison in Halcyon.

He pushed his battered hat back from his thick sandy hair and reflected that this night's work was going to cost plenty, both in frayed tempers and added expense in taking out this box without an ounce of payload. He hoped Pete Slocum wasn't hurt. A local doctor had telephoned about the accident, and Bill hadn't spoken to Pete Slocum directly. The wreck was in Sweetwater Canyon the doctor had said.

"Seems like Slocum just went to sleep." The doctor's voice had been tinny over the long-distance wire. "Drove that truck of yours clean over the embankment."

"None of my drivers go to sleep on the job," Bill snapped. "They pull over and rest if they need it."

"Well, this one went to sleep. He's still out," the doctor had said. "You'd better get out here."

Bill rubbed his eyes and concentrated on the road ahead. For fifty miles the highway was flat, offering no problems. Then they began a long climb upgrade, and he had to drop one gear at a time, the Diesel roaring with frustration. He passed several trucks laboring under payloads, tooling his own empty box up the inner lane at reckless speed. Yet the



grade began to tell, and he kept flicking the gear into lower ratios as the engine speed fell to around 2,000 R.P.M.'s.

OVER the top of the pass the country spread out rough and mountainous. By nine o'clock Mokey Johnson was snoring in his sleep, but tension was plainly visible in the awkward angles of his body. Forty miles farther on, after rambling through boom towns and the back streets of villages, it happened. They had just left a settled section behind and were pounding across the crest of Snake Hill. The road curved downward in crazy loops.

Bill could see the headlights of a passenger car moving out of the darkness at a diagonal to his road, coming at sixty from a crossroad on the ridge. The other car's lights flickered and vanished momentarily behind a farmhouse. The reflector buttons on a warning sign indicated the crossroad five hundred yards ahead. The passenger car had the right of way. Bill would have to slow down. He touched the air-brake pedal and felt a squeeze of horror as the rubber offered no resistance to his foot.

The Diesel was thundering at fifty-five. The other car, confident that the truck would yield, rocketed out of the darkness and across the road. Bill pumped the brake uselessly for another instant, then reached for the emergency. The lever was limp and ineffective on the mechanical brakes. Nothing grabbed. In desperation he swung the tractor cab out of the lane. The heavy tires rumbled on the graveled road shoulder, and the trailer behind made the cab sway crazily. Mokey Johnson sat bolt upright from his slouch. There was a wild blast of a horn from the passenger car, then it swerved on screaming tires and was gone, bolting across the brightness of Bill's headlights like a frightened rabbit. Bill fought the wheel to the left, his whole body tight as he got the Diesel back on the smooth concrete again.

Mokey Johnson cursed explosively. "What's the matter with you, Bill?"

Ahead of them, the road dipped in a series of twisting curves to the floor of the valley far below.

Bill said: "The brakes are gone, Mokey."

"The brakes—?"

"No air. The mechanical's shot, too. We can't stop."

Johnson's face went pale. His heavy, beetle-brows lowered. "You're kidding. We can't go down this grade without brakes!"

"We can't—but we've got to."

"But—"

"Shut up!"

THERE was no question of free-wheeling down this curving twisted slope. The darkness yawned all around them. To the left of the two-lane highway stretched a high forested shoulder of the hills, elbowing them implacably toward the other side of the road where there was a sharp drop-off of several hundred feet into the jagged rocky canyon floor that paralleled the highway. White guard rails suddenly flashed in warning, and Bill twisted the wheel. The heavy tractor groaned and took the curve, tires racketing. The cab rocked crazily. There was no loss in their juggernaut momentum. Out of the corner of his eye, Bill saw Mokey shove the cab door open, ready to leap.

"Don't," he said sharply. "That's crazy."

"You'll never get her down," Mokey whispered.

"Sit tight. We've got to get her down!"

He had a moment's respite as the road angled upward for a short distance over a spur of the hill. He kicked in the clutch and threw the gear shift into the next lower ratio. The Diesel bucked and pounded. The sudden compression of the engine jolted them both forward in their seats as the momentum was checked a little. They took the next curve by hugging the rocky left-hand side of the road. The empty van behind them acted like the tail end of a whip, sliding across the width of the highway before the massive



tires cut the skid. They straightened out for the next curve, several hundred feet closer to the valley floor.

Again Bill risked free-wheeling while he kicked out the clutch and dropped to a lower gear. Again the Diesel groaned and they bucked forward in their seats, trying to check their insane rush down the winding highway. Up the hill, groaning under a heavy payload, came another box. The white signal light on the other truck began to blink anxiously, warning them of their speed. Bill's mouth was grim as he tooled the Diesel downgrade toward the newcomer. There was a desperate blare of horns, a breathless rush of air, and they were past, squeezing between the other truck and the guard rail. To the right, the drop had lessened considerably. There was another level of flat, and then a long rise that headed for a small plateau. A glow of lights in the sky indicated an approach to the Midway.

**B**UT THE descent wasn't over yet. There was one more curve. Then another. The governor on the Diesel meant nothing against the weight of the truck catapulting downhill. The box behind the tractor whip-cracked from side to side, threatening momentarily to plunge them into the abyss. Another passing truck would be fatal. Bill's arms ached with the effort to control the wheel. The wind blatted against the ventilator shields, the motor began to rise to a new crescendo, and black Diesel smoke poured from the stack into the night of hills behind them.

Then they were on level ground with a slope ahead of them, thundering across a bridge and between massed woods that pushed the darkness into the road. The truck lost momentum steadily.

Mokey Johnson exhaled loudly and violently. "I was sayin' my prayers, Bill. I ain't done that in a long time."

"So was I," Bill admitted grimly. Now that they were comparatively safe, reaction set in all through his body. At the same time, a cold flame of anger

burned inside him. "I thought this box was checked before we left the terminal."

"It was," Mokey said. "I'm sure of it."

"What about Swifty's?" Swifty's was a way-stop on the road where they had paused, miles back, to check their gear and fuel. It was a truckers' rendezvous, isolated between towns and catering to the Diesel men. Bill said, "Everything was all right up to Swifty's."

"Aw," Mokey said, "Nobody'd deliberately do a thing like this, Bill. Not on purpose. Hell, we could have been killed. We would've been, if you wasn't doin' the driving."

Bill tried the air-brake pedal again. And again there was no reaction. The truck was crawling now, at little more than five miles an hour, up the slope to the Midway. Passenger cars flashed past them, then a bus, vanishing with red tail-lights winking into the night.

"Those brakes were all right until we checked into Swifty's," Bill said again. His voice was grim. "I don't think this just happened by itself. But we'll find out at the Midway."

**T**HE MIDWAY was a big sprawling establishment catering to the truckers who stopped for equipment repairs, food and rest. There was a vast graveled parking lot where the big boxes pulled off the road, fuel pumps, a restaurant, and barracks in the rear with free cots for weary haulers who could sleep easily, confident that they would be called in time to go on with their schedules. The place was ablaze with lights from dusk to dawn.

Bill eased the crippled truck off the highway into the parking lot and let it coast to a rumbling stop far beyond the normal position for servicing. Three uniformed attendants came trotting after them as they climbed wearily from the cab. Mokey and Bill waited in the semi-darkness until the first one, Velvet, crunched to a halt beside the big tractor.

"You got a cripple there, Thompson?" Velvet gasped.



"No brakes," Bill said. "I want her checked all over."

"We'll have to take her into the machine shop for that." The machine shop opposite them had a grease pit one hundred feet long and all the power tools necessary to repair almost anything. Velvet looked curiously at Bill's tall figure and at Mokey, bulking like a barrel beside him. "Where did they go out?"

"Snake Hill," Mokey said. "We're workin' now in the hereafter, if you know what I mean. Nobody else could've gotten that box down without brakes, except Bill."

Velvet whistled appreciatively. "I've got to see your brakes myself." He was a little monkeyish man, with slicked-back hair, a wizened face and magic hands when it came to tinkering with his beloved Diesels. Pop Ives, who operated the Midway, would have been lost without him. He all but vanished under the massive cab, and there came a metallic clanging and rasping sound. In a moment Velvet was squirming out, a smear of oil on his face and puzzlement in his dark eyes.

"Hell, your air was disconnected, Bill."

"Not broken?" Bill asked.

"Don't look it. Just disconnected. Same for the mechanical rod, too. How did it happen?"

Bill shook his head. "I wish I knew. I'm going to find out, anyway."

"I'd better check everything, don't you think?"

"All right. Is Sally Ives in?"

Velvet grinned. "Sure, but that won't do you any good."

"Who asked you?" Bill grinned in return.

He left the truck in Velvet's competent hands and strode to the Midway restaurant. Gaudy neon signs splashed the ground underfoot with waves of bright red, green and yellow. The sound of boisterous voices and the thumping rhythm of a juke box filled the cool mountain air. Bill pulled the swinging door open and went in with Mokey Johnson at his heels.

"Me for coffee," Mokey said, and straddled a stool at the crowded counter. Bill stood just inside the doorway, searching the smoky atmosphere for a glimpse of Sally Ives. The juke box throbbed through the babble of voices and the clink of dishes. Sally wasn't in sight. He was about to turn away when he was blocked by Russ Meecham.

"Hello, Thompson. Have they cut you down so badly that you're stuck with operating your own trucks?"

"Don't shed any tears," Bill said shortly.

**R**USS MEECHAM grinned. He was a big man, as big as Bill and heavier through the shoulders and chest. Where Bill was sandy-haired, Meecham was dark and smooth, with a small toothbrush mustache over glistening white teeth. Both men were well over six-feet-three, both had the physiques of football athletes. An observer might well have wondered what the result would be if the two ever came to a clash. Bill had often wondered himself. There was no love lost between them, although Bill would willingly have ignored Meecham, if the other had consented to things being that way. Unfortunately, Meecham's trucks ran on routes directly rivaling Thompson's. There had been more than one ugly brawl between Meecham's operators and Bill's, especially when Bill first started hitting the concrete with his Diesels. The man looked smooth and dapper in a blue business suit and topcoat, contrasting sharply with Bill's rumpled leather jacket and corduroy slacks.

"I ain't shedding tears over anything bad that happens to you," Russ Meecham said. His big hand blocked Bill's exit from the cafe. "I hear another of your boxes piled up tonight. Pete Slocum, down at Sweetwater Gap, wasn't it?"

"Vultures get all the bad news first," Bill said calmly.

Meecham was not offended. "Look, Bill, I asked you before. You're knocking your head against a wall, trying to



operate against me. You're a newcomer to this racket. You ought to throw in with me. I got a lot of contracts I could let out to you."

"I'll haul on my own contracts," Bill said. "I'll be hauling when every one of your vans is in the junk yard."

Meecham's lips parted in a mirthless smile. "Some day, Thompson, I'm going to take you apart. I figured you might give me just enough competition to make it enjoyable. There ain't many men I can tangle with. But you're my size. And some day we'll have it out, just between us."

"Let's have it out now," Bill said flatly. "Right now."

Meecham shook his head. "Uh-uh. Sally don't like brawling around the Midway. The time and place ain't now, Thompson."

"Name it when it suits you," Bill rapped.

"I will," Meecham nodded.

Bill pushed past him and out of the smoky restaurant, aware of a sudden renewal of voices that were hushed during his brush with Meecham. The cool night air soothed his anger as he crossed the highway to the Ives house. Mingled with the fury was a disturbing puzzlement. Russ Meecham was rarely on the road like this. It was odd that he should be here at the Midway on the very night of Pete's accident. Still thinking about Pete Slocum and the wrecked truck he had to reach, Bill mounted the Ives porch steps.

FROM the shadowed rocking chair Pop Ives said, "Ain't no use, Bill. She's with Hank Prudy tonight."

"Hello, Mr. Ives," Bill said. "I just wanted to see her for a minute, that's all."

The little white-haired man grunted and came out of the shadows. For all of his pretended annoyance, his eyes warmed to Bill's tall figure at the door. "Truckers! Bah! In my day it was railroaders, and any one railroad man highballing it over these here mountains

could've taken on ten of your stinkin' Diesel contraptions and whipped 'em to hell an' gone. Men ain't what they were in my day!"

Bill grinned tolerantly at the old man's prejudices. "I'm not going to argue with you tonight, Mr. Ives. I understand Hank Prudy's here."

"Yep. There's a sensible man, too. Handles this place like a slicked monkey. Good man. Dependable."

"No railroader," Bill said. "Not even a trucker."

"You fellers keep comin' back, don't you?" Pop cackled. "That cash register keeps takin' money outa your pockets and puttin' it into mine. That's what Hank Prudy's good for."

"How does Sally feel about it?" Bill asked.

"That ain't for me to say. Ask her yourself."

Bill nodded and pulled open the screen door and entered the house. It was cool and sweet and clean in here. Like Sally Ives. There was no one in the long California-style living room, and he pushed on into the kitchen, ducking his head under the door beam. Sally was pouring beer for Hank in the dining alcove.

Hank looked up at Bill's entry and frowned. He would have been tall by normal standards, but Bill's lanky height overshadowed him. He had a sharp alert face and dark restless eyes that reflected blunt displeasure at seeing Bill. Sally, in a cool gray dress that accented her blonde hair, looked up with a smile.

"Hello, Bill!" She looked at Hank Prudy and said, "We just got back from a movie in town."

"You're not engaged to Bill yet, Sally," Hank said. "You don't have to account for where we've been."

"I didn't ask," Bill said. "I just came in to find out about Pete Slocum and my truck."

"We heard about that," Hank nodded. "Tough luck. You've been having a lot of tough luck lately, haven't you, Bill?"

"Maybe it hasn't been just luck, good or bad," Bill said tightly. He was aware



of Sally's eyes widening. "I've had too many accidents to my boys, and I think you can help me, Hank. I want to know how he was when he left here."

"He was all right. Why?"

"Was his truck checked, too?"

"Velvet looked it over himself. Everything was fine."

"How was Pete? Was he tired?"

Hank shrugged. "There's bunks available if he wanted to sleep. But I don't go around coddling these Diesel jockeys, if that's what you mean. Maybe you ought to give them more time to sleep, Thompson."

Through tight lips Bill said, "My boys know they can pull over any time. They're supposed to rather than take any chances."

"All right, don't get sore," Hank said.

"I'm not sore."

"Yes, you are. Because Sally went out with me."

Bill said, "That's for Sally and me to decide."

**H**E TURNED on his heel and stalked out, barely remembering to duck his head under the doorway. He reached the porch before Sally came after him, alone, her high heels clicking hurriedly. Her face was soft and lovely in the moonlight.

"Bill!"

He turned, towering over her. "I was going to ask you for a date for next time I come through. But I didn't want to give Hank the satisfaction of hearing you turn me down."

"Well, I've been busy," she murmured.

"Sure. Going to the movies with a guy like Hank."

"He's nice and quiet, anyway," she retorted. "At least I'm sure I won't get into any brawls when I'm out with him."

"I—"

Bill's words were cut off by a sudden yell from across the highway. The shout came from the shadows among the parked trucks on the lot, between the restaurant and the machine shop.

"Bill! Help!"

It was Mokey Johnson. His words were smothered by the sharp sound of a blow. Scuffling noises followed, then the sound of running feet and the sudden clang of metal on metal. Bill forgot Sally in an instant. He vaulted the porch rail and hit the concrete highway, and charged on long legs down the lane of parked boxes.

He kept running through alternating pools of yellow, red and green lights that washed down between the trucks from the neon signs atop the restaurant. The thud of blows came from his right. He skidded on the gravel and turned that way, twisted between two big Diesel tractors and plunged into a deeper pool of shadow behind the machine shop.

Without warning, a body landed on his back, hurtling down from the back of a parked van. The shock drove Bill to his knees. The man went on over his head, sprawled with a scatter of stones and twisted, came up desperately for defense. Bill had never seen him before. He swung a quick left, then a right that slammed the man back against the truck tires.

Other shadows struggled in the darkness. A fist whistled past Bill's head and he ducked, swung hard. His knuckles sank deep into solid flesh. There came a grunt and his opponent fell away. Sidestepping another's catapult right, he fought through to a little clearing.

Mokey Johnson's voice gasped: "Over here, Bill!"

He had been giving a good account of himself, as the caution with which three or four men were circling him testified. Bill plunged without hesitation into Mokey's assailants, ignoring the whistling blows that came at him. His fists cracked hard and sure on one man's jaw, another's stomach. Someone tackled him from behind. He went down, the breath knocked out of him by the other's weight. In the dimness he made out a contorted face and glimpsed a spanner in the man's hand. Bill got his foot under him and shoved hard. The man went sailing into space. Mokey John-



son accounted for another, battling to Bill's side as he scrambled to his feet. The man with the spanner suddenly scooped it up again and hurled it viciously. The heavy wrench missed Bill by inches and clanged into a truck fender. Bill dived for the man and he turned tail, scurrying away into the dark alley between the vans.

**A**S SUDDENLY as it had begun the fight was over. Other shadows scuttled away, their feet grating on the gravel. From the direction of the restaurant came a babble of voices and the ever-present thumping of the juke box. Bill straightened his tousled hair and picked up his hat. Mokey was grinning at him in the dim light, his lips puffed and battered.

"You were a big help, Bill," he gasped. "Many thanks."

"What was it all about?"

Mokey pulled his leather jacket into shape over his burly shoulders. "They was Russ Meecham's men, I think. I ain't sure, though. Them drivers of his are more like hired goons."

"How did the fight start?"

"They started nosin' around Betty Lou here," Mokey said, gesturing toward their truck. "They didn't fade when I asked 'em to, and I was polite about it, at first."

Velvet, the mechanic, poked a cautious head out of the machine shop doors, saw that things were quiet and came over sadly.

"Was the truck damaged?" Bill rapped.

Velvet shook his head. "Naw. Mokey busted it up before they could get near it. Your box is okay now, Bill. You had three flats, and I changed 'em. Your brakes are okay, too. You won't have any more trouble."

"All right," Bill said. "Let's roll."

Mokey said, "Ain't you goin' to have it out with Meecham?"

"Not this time. We've got other things to do tonight."

He was conscious of Sally's pale angry

face as he tooled the tractor out through the parking lot to the concrete. She was standing by the highway, and evidently Hank Prudy had already relayed news of this latest brawl to her. Bill muttered to himself, not meeting the brief contemptuous glance she gave him. Maybe this would be the last straw with her, he thought bitterly. He had foresworn fighting several times in the past for her, and each time he'd been sincere. But he was fighting for the life of his outfit now, and if fists were needed he wasn't going to stop, not for Sally or anyone.

**I**T WAS after midnight when Bill reached Sweetwater Gap and found the scene of the wreck. Warning flashes from other passing vans told him when he was approaching it. The road at this point was on the flat floor of the canyon, steep rocky walls rising on either hand. A small mountain stream gurgled nearby. Bill rumbled over a bridge and pulled up amidst the glare of red lanterns and a spotlight from a state police car still posted in the area. The only visible signs of excitement now were two passenger cars that had paused out of morbid curiosity.

Mokey Johnson squinted into the glare of the trooper's spotlight. "Looks like a tough haulout," he muttered.

Thirty feet of the guard rail had been smashed to splinters where the truck had plunged off the road into the stream. The water here was fairly deep, almost covering the radiator of the giant tractor which was canted at a perilous angle. The trailer, with its heavy payload of construction material for the Halcyon project, was still coupled to the tractor, and the heavy rear axles were clear of water, the tires firm on the rocky river bank.

It was cold here in the mountains. The wind bit through Bill's leather jacket with icy teeth. He hopped down from the cab and strode through the scattered fragments of guard rail toward the cops who were waiting for him.

One of the troopers eyed him curiously



as he approached. "You Mr. Thompson?"

"That's right. This is my truck."

"You gave orders not to call a wreck-er?"

"I'll haul the box out myself," Bill said. "That stuff has to be delivered by morning."

"If you can do it," the trooper said dubiously.

"I've got to do it," Bill said. "Where's my driver?"

"Right here," said Pete Slocum. The dapper little operator came trotting up from the bank of the stream. Bill felt overwhelming relief at seeing him. He'd been afraid Pete was slated for several weeks in the hospital, judging from what the doctor had told him over the telephone, but Pete seemed little the worse for wear. There was an ugly bruise along the line of his jaw, but otherwise he seemed to be as natty as ever. The big diamond ring on his finger winked as he waved a hand at Mokey Johnson, then turned back to Bill.

"I don't know what to say, Bill." He knew how much the contract meant to Bill, and his eyes were apologetic. "This confounded thing just happened."

"Accidents don't just happen, Pete," Bill said.

"Well, I just don't know what hit me."

"Did you fall asleep at the wheel?"

**PETE SLOCUM'S** eyes were puzzled. "I guess I must've gone to sleep. But I wasn't tired. It hit me like a slug on the noggin. I don't remember anything until after I went through the guard rail."

Bill's face expressed dissatisfaction, but he said nothing more. He was thinking of Arthur Harrison's project out in the desert, the new town of Halcyon for which he had contracted to deliver construction supplies. Harrison was racing against time, struggling to complete the factory, veterans' housing and irrigation ditches in time to satisfy a government contract. Every hour was precious, and this was not the first delay Bill had suf-

fered on his delivery schedule. He turned suddenly, waded knee-deep into the icy stream and examined the tractor. It looked hopelessly waterlogged.

"It'll take hours to shift that load of steel bearings," Mokey said. "Maybe a full day. And we'll need a crew of men."

Bill clambered up on the tiny platform behind the cab and examined the couplings to the van. "We can unhook this box," he decided. "Get some hawser from our cab. We'll haul this mess back to the highway and couple the trailer to our Diesel."

It was back-breaking work, straining the massive 20-ton load back out of the stream. Once it seemed as if the whole box would tip as the wheels rose on a sloping boulder by the stream bank. For an instant the truck teetered perilously, and Bill, in the cab of his own tractor, flicked gears, easing pressure a moment, then suddenly reversing. The van behind his tractor swung sideways, paralleled the road and began to cut back across toward the guard rail. He had to back up, then shove forward, losing some precious ground he had gained, in order to manipulate both bulky awkward machines. Fortunately, the traction was good.

He kept his eye on the tachometer as the Diesel thundered and coughed in protest. Then, with a last and final effort, the bogged truck yielded to the implacable tug of the hawser and snaked slowly up the embankment. Mokey, at the wheel of the wrecked machine, maneuvered the unwieldy trailer until the wheels bit on concrete. Bill eased slowly backward, never slackening the tautness of the line, until a shout of triumph told him that both trucks were at last fully on the highway. Locking the brakes, he jumped to the ground, wringing wet with perspiration. The cold mountain air made him shiver.

"We'll swap boxes," he announced. "Another cab can haul that swamped Diesel back to the Midway for repairs."

Traffic began to swing past them now, several cars at a time, at the direction of



the troopers. There weren't many vehicles on the mountain road at this hour of the night. Bill was striding back to his machine when a long sedan pulled to a halt beside him.

"Hey, Thompson!"

**I**T WAS Russ Meecham behind the wheel of the sleek car. His big sun-burned face was smiling. He looked dapper and smart. Another man, stout, his breath wheezing, loomed dimly beside him. Bill came to a halt and stared.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Russ," he said. "No casualties."

"Don't take that attitude, Bill," said Meecham. "I was hoping to find you here. I want you to meet a friend of mine, Oliver Waggoner. He's building that housing project out in the San Felipe valley. Gives me a lot of hauling to do."

The fat man wheezed and looked sharply at Bill. Bill ignored the plump white hand that was thrust limply at him.

"I know all about San Felipe. Not many veterans can afford the price of real estate in that locality."

"Better than a dream town in the desert," Wagoner grunted.

"That remains to be seen."

"He'll never get water into that hoke town."

"He will if there's no interference," Bill snapped. "And there'll be decent houses and good jobs when the project is done."

Russ Meecham interrupted smoothly, "Now, now, let's take it easy. The reason we stopped was because we want to help you, Bill. I was telling Mr. Waggoner that you're really an ace truck man except for your recent bad luck. Mr. Waggoner can give you all the payloads your boxes can carry. Maybe your luck will change if you work for us instead of for that lunatic out in the desert."

"He's building good houses that vets can afford," Bill said.

"Maybe so," Waggoner snapped. "But

there's no water out there, no matter how much he figures on irrigation ditches and piping to bring it down from the hills. Maybe my houses cost more, but real estate in San Felipe Valley costs more, too."

"Harrison isn't trying to profiteer," Bill said stubbornly.

"That's not a nice word, Mr. Thompson."

"I don't mean to be nice," Bill said. "If that's all you stopped for, to get me to doublecross Harrison, you'd better be on your way. I've got work to do."

The fat man subsided, his face dark with anger. Meecham muttered something to him, then glanced up again at Bill.

"You and I still have that date, big fellow."

"Any time you say," Bill snapped.

He turned back to where the trucks were parked, the loaded van now coupled to his tractor. The big sedan slid smoothly away, vanishing up the dark highway. Bill frowned after it for several troubled moments before he turned back to the work at hand.

**D**ESERT heat and a noonday sun made Bill squint as he pulled into the construction camp. A sign by the highway read—

ARTHUR HARRISON CONSTRUCTIONS  
BUILDING BETTER HOMES FOR VETERANS

WELCOME TO HALCYON

*Where the Desert Blooms*

But Halcyon was still a sorry sight, Bill reflected as he swung down from the high cab. Dust hazed the bitter rays of the sun. Construction machinery and half-finished cottages were on surveyed streets still marked off by plumb lines and measuring strings. In the center were the white glazed walls of the factory which Harrison planned as the center of Halcyon's economy. And stretching out of sight across the sage and judas trees to the ridge of purple mountains were miles of irrigation ditches—dry as bone. Bill had a momentary doubt that the desert could ever be made to bloom here.



But one end of town was already completed, and here the new bungalows shone with bright walls and gay tiled roofs. Scores of discharged GPs and their families were walking hopefully around the lots, their parked jalopies scattered among the bulldozers and construction gangs. Huge crates of airconditioning units and garden tools were piled near the construction shack. Bill walked slowly through the heat to Harrison's office.

He had shed his leather jacket when they first came down from the hills, and now his shirt stuck to his wet back like plaster. The hot dusty air scratched his lungs. Inside the offices it was no better, like entering the dark maw of a furnace. Men sat about at drawing boards with flushed perspiring faces. Someone nodded toward Harrison's door as Bill came in, and he pushed inside.

Arthur Harrison was a slight little man with thin hair and the eyes of a dreamer. What saved him from looking too intellectual was the grim line of his jaw and the tight determination of his thin mouth. Shadowy patches of fatigue darkened his face, telling of sleepless nights. His handshake was firm as he greeted Bill.

"What held you up?"

**B**ILL told him in terse sentences. Harrison, staring from his chair into the blinding glare of the desert beyond the windows, didn't seem to be listening. The hand he rested on the desk trembled slightly. Bill realized the man was close to complete exhaustion. Finished, he waited until Harrison turned around.

"Don't get me wrong, Bill," Harrison said. "I'm in a nut-cracker here, and you promised to deliver on time. I needed your load at sunup this morning. The delay kept a whole crew of stiffies idle until now. Another day shot."

"I got here as soon as I could, Mr. Harrison."

"Not soon enough." Harrison shook his head with weariness. "The reservoir has to be operating before the rains start in

the hills. The place is a dead loss unless we get water. I'm trying to give the customers a fair shake here, for all the guys who served overseas for years and came home expecting a home for their families and decent jobs. Everything is right here if we can make it work. But the jobs depend on the factory, and the factory depends on a government contract. I've got to be rolling soon. A committee of inspectors is due here in two days. Every hour counts, Bill. And if you can't deliver on schedule—"

"It isn't that," Bill said. His heart went out to this tired little man. Harrison had not mentioned it but Bill knew he stood to lose his shirt on this apparently hopeless task. Quite suddenly, all of Bill's suspicions concerning sabotage came to the surface and crystalized. He told Harrison everything he knew about Meecham and Waggoner and the uncanny accidents that had been occurring to his trucks. Harrison heard him out again, and this time his attention didn't wander out the window.

"I know about Waggoner," Harrison nodded. "His reputation as a builder smells to high heaven. But we have no proof."

"Maybe I can get proof," Bill said grimly. "I'm being sabotaged, and so are you. He doesn't want you to be successful in this desert experiment. I don't know how they're wrecking my trucks, but whatever their method is I'm going to find it out and scotch it."

"There isn't much time," Harrison reminded him. "You've got some more equipment on the coast that must get here. We need water, and soon."

"It will get here," Bill said.

He spent an hour in Halcyon, lunching in the mess hall and going over the grounds. It was a dreamer's project, this idea of taking cheap desert land and turning it into a green paradise. But the more he saw of the work that had been accomplished, the more determined Bill became to see the thing through, at whatever cost. What was being done here was bigger than Harrison's success



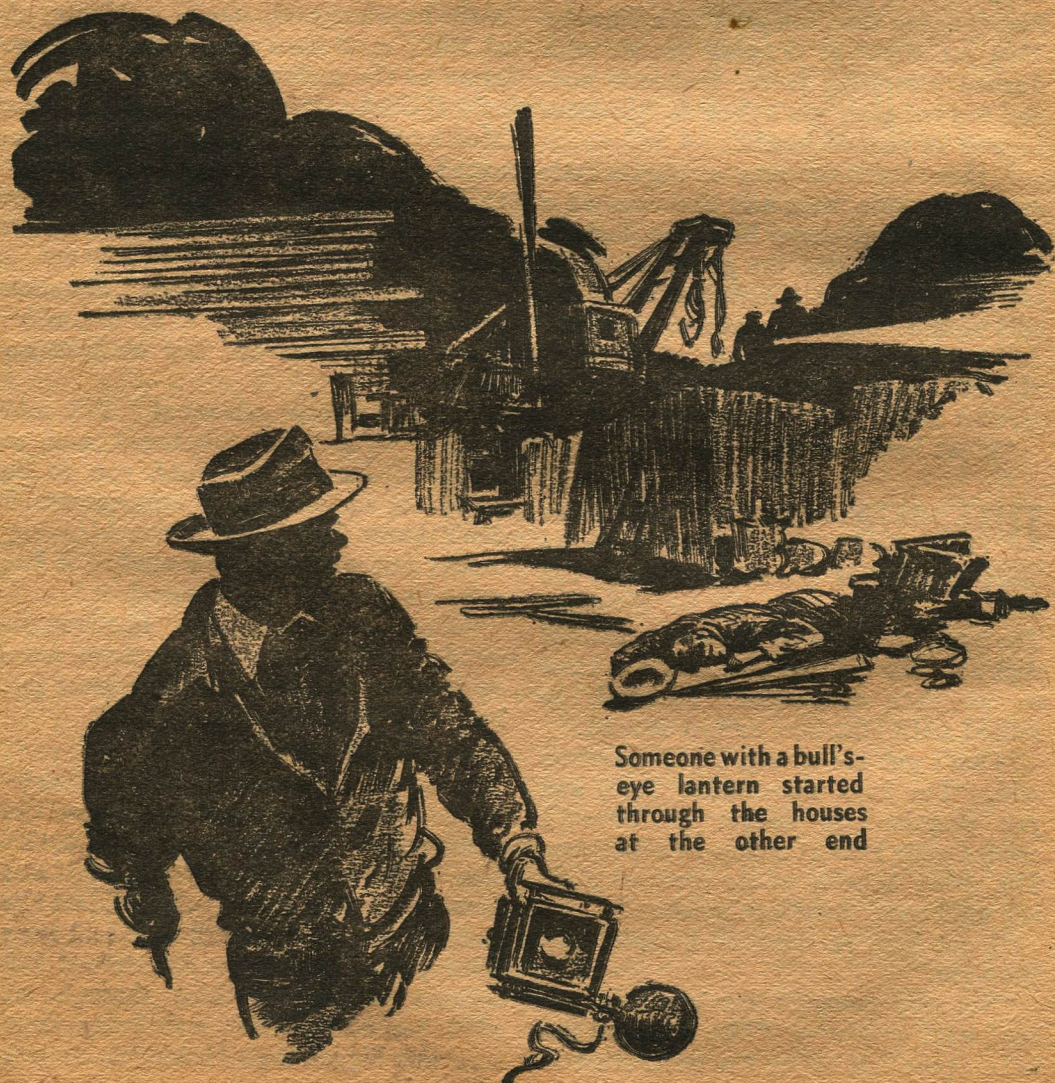
or his own. He couldn't fail to deliver the goods to these men working in the savage desert heat.

Before he left, he gave Mokey Johnson orders to take the truck back and meet him at the Midway. Then he borrowed one of Harrison's station wagons, a Speed Graphic camera and flashgun—much to Harrison's puzzlement—and hit the concrete back to the mountains.

**IT WAS** seven hours to San Felipe, even at the rate Bill pushed the station wagon. He had to stop once, high in the

hills, to pull over and sleep. He went to sleep easily and completely for half an hour, a trick he had learned in the service, and when he awoke he felt refreshed and invigorated by the crisp mountain air.

San Felipe Valley sprawled in peaceful darkness when he finally tooled the car down from the hills. He could smell the pungency of orange groves when he turned into the road bordered on one side by huge ranches and on the other by the artificial San Felipe Lake. Few lights were visible in the ranch houses at this hour. He watched for signs and then swung off into a narrow lane. A mile



Someone with a bull's-eye lantern started through the houses at the other end



down the new road, and he pulled over to the grassy shoulder to allow a Diesel to rumble by. He spotted the name on the side of the box, *Meecham's Transport*. His mouth went a little grimmer. Another quarter-mile, and then the lane ended in a wide clearing. The air was damp, soggy with moisture from a nearby bog. A sign read—

OLIVER WAGGONER  
VALLEY GROVE VILLAGE  
HOMES FOR VETERANS

Bill snapped off the headlights and went the rest of the way on foot, carrying the camera and flashgun with him.

Waggoner's ads in the city newspapers aimed for snap sales, sight unseen. They had advertised the place as within walking distance of the railroad station but had neglected to mention that it was a five-mile walk and that only two trains stopped daily at San Felipe.

Red lanterns winked in the warm darkness, guarding piles of construction supplies. There was a bigger house, built on a slight rise, evidently the original ranch house of this particular grove Waggoner had chosen for his trick real estate development. One of the ground-floor windows was alight. Bill gave it a wide berth, moving silently and carefully among the parked machinery and piled lumber.

There would be watchmen about. He moved with caution toward the row of ghostly skeleton houses looming through the darkness. Once he ran into a pile of shingles and the boards clattered to the ground with explosive noise. Bill ducked into deeper shadow and waited. But there was no alarm. He went on, climbing carefully among the unfinished joists and timbers.

It didn't take long to verify his original suspicions. The concrete basements, even before the houses were completed, were already crumbling to sand. He rubbed some between his fingers, raging inwardly at this wholesale swindle. The porch timbers were of green lumber, ready to warp in a matter of months, and to compensate for adequate fills, scrap

pieces of old lumber of any size and shape were jammed beneath the joists and timbers. Working swiftly in the darkness, Bill worked a bulb into the flashgun, set the camera, and stepped back to take his pictures. Released in the city newspapers, they should make a sensational story, exposing Waggoner with all the publicity this project deserved.

The flashgun went off, dazzling bright for an instant. He tried another angle, took a second shot, and then another. Each time he waited for signs of alarm from the watchmen, but nothing happened. He worked swiftly, exposing his film to record the slipshod workmanship in the row of houses. He had used almost all his film holders when a sudden creak of timber warned him.

FROM out of the darkness came a man's sharp voice,, "Who's there?"

Bill froze, camera in hand. There was another cautious footstep. Bill searched the gloom, selected a crevice in the wall, and posted the camera there out of harm's way.

"Come out of there!" the man called. "Or I'll shoot!"

Bill took two cautious steps sidewise, his body tense. The dim light enabled him to make out his surroundings—the concrete cellar floor, the ghostly timbers and beams of the house shell rising into the night. He took another step, and his shoe grated on a loose pebble. At the same moment, the watchman slid around a corner and leaped into the cellar foundation.

Light glinted on his gun as he leveled it. There was something on the ground, a small piece of two-by-four. He scooped it up and hurled it at the gun. The man grunted with pain as the wooden block slammed the gun out of his hand. By some miracle it didn't go off. It went clattering over the concrete, and they both dived for it in the darkness.

Bill kicked at it, and again it went skittering out of the man's range. He swung with a snarl, lashing at Bill's



figure with both fists. Bill stepped back, countering his blows. The watchman's breathing was heavy and raw in the stillness. Then he came on again, his heavy gnarled fists catching Bill on the jaw, the cheek, and over the heart. But only for a momentary flurry. Bill measured him with a long left, and as the man staggered back, followed up with two short jabs. Terror came into the man's face as he stumbled away.

"Help!" he yelled. "Help!"

**B**ILL gave him no opportunity to call again for reinforcements. One more right to the jaw flattened the man, sent him skidding across the rough basement floor. He didn't move after that. Bill stood over him, breathing quickly, the blood pumping through him. But the damage was done. Shouts of alarm came from across the tangled lots, then the sound of running feet. Bill spun to the crevice where he'd stowed the camera and hiked himself out of the cellar, flattening on the muddy ground as footsteps pounded close by. Someone with a bull's-eye lantern started through the houses at the other end of the row. Lights winked on all sides as they closed in on the watchman's cry for help. Bill cast about for a gap in the circle of men around him. The house on the knoll was the only way open. He headed that way, slipping from shadow to shadow. The confused shouts of the other watchmen echoed in the row of buildings he had quitted. It would be several minutes before they found the gorilla he'd knocked out. Enough for escape.

One quick dash across a moonlit lawn brought him under the shadow of the ranch house. He waited a moment, catching his breath, feeling the bruises on his neck where the watchman had all but snapped his spine. Light from the open window made a dim yellow rectangle on the ground nearby. It was then that he noticed the car parked under the trees at the edge of the lawn.

For a moment he couldn't believe it. But it was a long yellow convertible,

the license tags clearly visible in the light from the window. There was no doubt about it.

It was Hank Prudy's car. From the Midway. He'd seen it often enough, before.

That meant Hank was here, with Meecham and Oliver Waggoner. And that added up to the fact that he'd stumbled on the source of treachery and sabotage to his trucks. At that moment he became conscious of the sound of voices coming from the open window.

They were men's voices, and as Bill sidled closer along the wall of the house, he began to recognize them. He held his camera carefully out of harm's way as he pressed flat into the shadows.

Russ Meecham's deep resonant voice was saying, "Sure, he got the load through. We did all we could to stop it. You saw the cops there yourself, Mr. Waggoner!"

"But it mustn't happen again." Waggoner's tones were crisp, icy with calculation. "Harrison is hanging on the ropes now. A little more effort on your part and he'll be washed up. You've got to make that effort, Meecham."

"We're doing everything we can, short of murder," Meecham said. There was a meaningful pause. Then, "I won't stop at anything to keep my part of the bargain. I can use my share of this pie, too, you know. Anyway, we've got the Midway with us."

Hank Prudy's voice was thin and high-pitched with worry. "I don't like this talk about murder. I don't think—"

"Are you scared?" Meecham drawled.

"It isn't that. I just don't like it, that's all." Prudy sounded frightened but dogged. "I'm willing to do my share, too, as I explained to Russ when he asked for my help. I won't be sorry to have Thompson out my hair."

Russ laughed. "You mean out of Sally's mind."

"My reasons are personal," Hank persisted. "I want the Midway for my own, and Sally will give it to me if I marry her. But all I'm saying is that I went



in with you just to delay Bill Thompson's schedules. That was my understanding. I didn't expect what happened last night. Pete Slocum could have been killed."

**C**ROUCHED in the shadows, Bill puzzled over the remark, then listened again as Waggoner's cold precise voice spoke, "You are in it now, Mr. Prudy. It's too late for you to withdraw. The next two days are vital. Thompson's trucks must be stopped no matter what means are taken to do it. I have information that he will be given a rush shipment for Halcyon in the next twenty-four hours. And that shipment must not go through."

"It won't," Meecham said confidently. "You can count on—"

His words were cut off, unheard by Bill. For the past few minutes he had forgotten the chase that was after him. He was reminded violently of his dangerous position by a sudden shout of triumph. Then the blazing glare of a large flashlight pinned him like a fly to the wall.

There was no chance to think, to plan a course of action. They were on him the next instant, shouting curses. A club whistled through the air, visible just an instant before it would have brained him. Bill ducked, and the wood thumped brutally against the house. Someone else came at him with hardened fists, slashing at his head. Handicapped by the need to protect the Speed Graphic, Bill did little more than ward off the worst of the blows. His foot slipped in the soft loam, and he went down to one knee. The very eagerness of his opponents saved him. They jostled one another, anxious to get at him. One man hurtled headlong at him when he slipped, and presented a suitable target for Bill's right. He made it good. Another landed like a clawing panther on his back and went head over heels as Bill tossed him, limbs flailing, into the others. It gave him a moment's break. While they were disentangling them-

selves, he rammed his way into the open.

The alarm had spread to the inside of the house now. Waggoner and Meecham burst through the door to the front porch. They were both armed. Hank Prudy hesitated behind them. The appearance of the armed men gave Bill his final chance to escape. His first enemies drew back, evidently to give Meecham free play for his gun. But Meecham, coming out into the night from a lighted room, was momentarily blinded by the darkness. Bill dived for cover among the masses of tarpaulin-covered machinery nearby.

Drawing them away from the station wagon, he doubled back around a caterpillar crane, swung into a narrow alley between unfinished houses, and plunged headlong into the swampy woods surrounding the development. Behind him a gun cracked futilely, again and again, the slugs whining overhead. Then the guards on the place gave belated pursuit, after the failure of the gun. But Bill's start was too much for them. He drove through the underbrush, circling back to the station wagon, while his enemies stumbled and cursed and searched blindly through the unfinished houses for him.

No one was at the car when he reached the road. He had the motor started and backed all the way around before Meecham appeared, running swiftly toward him. His gun spat vicious flame, and the windshield shattered on the right-hand side. Bits of flying glass cut Bill's face, but he paid no attention. He slammed the powerful wagon into high and roared down the narrow rutted lane, jouncing wildly over the ruts.

The camera was safe beside him with its precious film to be mailed to the city newspapers at the first town he reached. More important, he had Hank Prudy properly labeled now, together with the source of all his difficulties. But there was no point in risking the camera, no matter what. Where he was going there would be more trouble—and this time he would stay to see it finished.



**F**OG CAME and settled over the mountains, creeping along the highways, filling the dense forests with streamers of mist. It didn't stop the Diesel men. The Midway was as busy as ever—the parking lot jammed with trucks, the restaurant going full blast with the ever-operating juke box sending jive music into the gray fog outside. The sun had already been up, invisible above the low ceiling, for four hours when Bill swung the station wagon into the square and came to a halt by the dormitory behind the cafe. He was rested by three hours' sleep in the car, on a side road where searchers would never think of seeking him. He was hungry but that could wait. He looked for Hank Prudy's car, but it wasn't in sight. The Diesel that Mokey Johnson had been told to bring here, however, was parked out in the mist behind the machine shop.

Mokey was snoring blissfully in the last bunk down the aisle when Bill found him. He came to all at once, with a wild snort, when Bill shook his shoulder.

"Up and at 'em, Mokey. We're going to roll."

Johnson scrambled out of bed, almost fully clothed. He grinned, said, "Hi, Bill," and rubbed a sandpaper jaw ruefully.

Bill said, "Don't bother making yourself pretty. Check Betty Lou and see that everything is on the level."

"Velvet checked her himself, last night," Mokey said.

"Never mind Velvet," Bill rapped. "Do it again, yourself."

Mokey shrugged. "You're the boss."

"I'll see you at the truck in ten minutes," Bill said and left.

He looked for Sally Ives in the restaurant, but she wasn't there. Neither was Pop or Hank Prudy. He turned to the pay telephone and dialed long distance to the Halcyon construction camp in the desert. Someone out there told him that Harrison was out in a truck inspecting the ditches and wouldn't be

back for several hours. Bill shrugged off mounting uneasiness and hung up.

The city newspapers wouldn't have his pictures yet. He turned toward the Ives house across the road. It was strangely silent as he mounted the porch. The mist painted the screen door with a thousand silvery drops of dew. There was no answer to his knock. He stepped inside and called, "Sally?"

**S**OMEONE groaned in the big living room opening out to the right from the center hallway. Alarm tingled along Bill's nerves. He went through the wide doorway, moving fast.

"Sally?"

"Tain't Sally. It's me."

Pop Ives was stretched out on the big green couch near the open windows. There was an Indian blanket over his thin wasted frame, and his wizened little face, with its mop of silvery hair, looked oddly shrunken. A glaze of pain shone in his eyes as he raised himself to glance at Bill's tall figure.

"Sally's all right. She's gone for the doctor. And a good thing she ain't here, Bill Thompson, or she'd have your heart out for fryin'!"

"What happened?" Bill rapped. "What are you talking about?"

There were big livid welts on the old man's jaw, and his mouth was puffed out of shape. A makeshift bandage was taped behind one ear. Pop indicated the lump on the back of his head and grimaced. "I got these last night in a free-for-all. If I was half the man I used to be, I'd have wiped up the lot of them punks of yours, Bill Thompson. I should think you'd be ashamed to show your face around here after last night."

Bill was bewildered. "Wait a minute. You say *my* men did this to you?"

"Your hearin' is correct, trucker. Now git!"

Bill said desperately, "But you're all wrong. None of my men have been on this highway since I passed through. My boys wouldn't touch you anyway, Mr. Ives. You know that."



"Well, they said they was your men, and they come rollin' in here in one of your trucks, looked like. They was drunker than skunks. I asked 'em nice and polite to take it easy, and then they just begun slappin' me around." The old man's voice was bitter. "Tossed me around like a medicine ball, 'till Sally made 'em stop. She took after them with a shotgun, but by then I wasn't much use to anybody."

"I don't believe it," Bill persisted. "It wasn't my men. What's more, there's something I want to have out with you, about Hank Prudy."

"Your boys had it out with me last night, Bill Thompson. Now git! I don't aim to waste my last breath talkin' to you." The old man avoided Bill's angry puzzled stare. "You better not be comin' back to the Midway, either. We don't want your trade around here any more."

"You know it wasn't my men," Bill said. Something in the old man's voice convinced him. "Maybe they said they were, but you didn't believe it, any more than I do."

"Well, Sally believes it, and she don't want you back here any more, either. No more than I."

"Why not, Pop?"

The old man twisted on the couch and shook a finger at Bill. "'Cause you're gonna get nothin' but trouble from this place. Now ain't that enough? I can't tell you no more. Use your head, that's all I'm sayin', son. And steer clear of the Midway. Them's my final words."

The old man meant what he said. He turned on his side, hunched down deep under the blanket with his back to Bill, and maintained stubborn silence. Bill waited, helpless before the old man's attitude, then turned on his heel and banged out of the house.

**MOKEY** had the truck parked by the restaurant, engine idling. The burly man was just coming down the cafe steps, a steaming container of coffee in his hand, when Bill swung up into the

cab. Mokey knew Bill well enough to be silent in the face of his scowl. He took the wheel without being told and silently handed the coffee to Bill before flicking the heavy Diesel into motion.

Snake Hill gave them no difficulty this time. Without speaking, they finished the pint of coffee and settled down to covering the miles to the coast. Mokey stayed at the wheel. Bill stared glumly through the windshield, watching the ribbon of road unwind before them.

Afterward, he wasn't certain how much time had passed since they left the Midway. Mokey kept the Diesel at a steady pace, eating up the miles. The fog kept step with them all through the mountains and across the valleys as well. It seemed to be getting thicker after a while. Bill blinked and rubbed moisture from the windshield and set the little air fan going to clear the cab. It didn't seem to help. He thought of advising Mokey to slow down a bit, since the highway was wreathed in mist before them, but he didn't want to interfere with the driving. He wanted to get to the city terminal as soon as possible, anyway. If what he had overheard last night meant anything, he had only hours in which to help Arthur Harrison from some unknown disaster. Settling back on the leather cab seat, he glumly watched the fog thicken.

It was strange about that fog. It moved along with them, crawling out of the woods and towns as they thundered through, creeping out across the guard rails and medial strips and even moving into the cab with him. It was as if it had a life of its own, implacable, patient, ever-thickening. Bill rubbed his eyes and looked at Mokey. The driver's face was patient and relaxed. He shook his head to clear it, and the fog left the cab momentarily.

But only for the moment. The next instant it was back, crawling persistently around Mokey and the instrument panel and around Bill, thick and stubborn, tenuous, blanketing his eyes, wrapping him in soft warm cotton wool, creeping



into his nose and ears and mouth, lulling him with the rhythmic thunder of the Diesel engine under them, making his eyes tired, heavy, easing him into soft, sweet sleep. . . .

"Mokey!"

He tried to call out, but only a croaking sound came from his lips. Mokey's eyes were glazed, his hands lax on the wheel. They were just on the outskirts of a small farming town then. Traffic was growing thicker. A farmer's truck came toward them, growing down the highway, looming out of the mist.

"Mokey!" Bill yelled.

It was like a nightmare in which danger rushed toward him and he was rooted helplessly to the spot. He saw Mokey's head loll forward, his eyes closed. The farmer's truck kept coming. Without guidance, the huge Diesel crept slowly across the white center line, encroaching on the opposite lane—

With a last conscious effort, Bill leaned over and grasped the wheel from Mokey's limp hands. He glimpsed the horrified face of the farmer in his little truck coming toward them, then he wrenched with all his strength, pulling the Diesel to the right.

He was conscious of a scraping of metal, a sharp cry, and then the bitter rending of the guard rail as the huge truck tore off the road, hurtling full-tilt into the ditch. The windshield came forward, there were splintering sounds of twisted metal, and then he was flying through space, soundlessly, with empty darkness all around him. . . .

**H**E BECAME aware of rain, beating with monotonous fingers on a gray window. He watched the water streaming down the glass pane in little, irregular rivulets. He listened to a drain spout gurgle and rattle. The daylight was drab, painting the room a dismal neutral color that even the bed-lamp failed to dispel.

Bill rolled over carefully, conscious of aches in every muscle of his big body. He was alone in the room. There was a

sign on the walnut door, and he squinted to read it. *City Hospital*, the sign said. So he was back on the coast. That was something. He was still alive. And that was something, too.

Then he sat bolt upright, conscious of precious time lost while he'd been here. He remembered nothing after pulling the Diesel off the road. There was an ugly taste in his mouth, and his head felt heavy. But when he threw off the blankets, he could find no serious injuries beyond a multitude of lumps and bruises. He looked at the rain on the window and thought of rain in the mountains. Then he thought of Arthur Hamilton's bone-dry irrigation ditches and unfinished reservoir in the desert.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and yelled, "Nurse!"

As if she had been waiting for him, the door opened and a tall, spindly, middle-aged nurse came in, smiling with horsey teeth.

"Well, I see you're with us again, Mr. Thompson. Welcome back to earth."

Bill said: "Listen, I've got to get out of here. Where are my clothes? What time is it?"

"Eleven a.m. of the next day, Mr. Thompson. And you can't get out yet—you'll have to rest for a while. Besides some people are waiting to see you."

"What people? Where is my driver? How is he?"

"Mr. Johnson came out of it an hour ago."

"But is he all right?"

"He's just fine."

**B**ILL rolled his tongue around the inside of his mouth, curious about the vile taste there. It was as if someone had swabbed his tongue with oily waste. The way his head ached, he felt as if he had the grand-daddy of all hangovers.

"What kind of stuff have you been feeding me?" he demanded.

The nurse said primly: "That is for you to explain. What kind of liquor had you two been drinking?"

"I don't drink. At least, not much."



"Well, you had a swell cocktail yesterday, Mr. Thompson. It certainly put you and your driver to sleep."

"Cocktail?"

"Chloral hydrate. Knockout drops to you, Mr. Thompson."

"Knockout—?" He paused abruptly, staring at the horsey nurse. "I don't understand."

"Neither do we. But if you and your driver weren't so lucky you would have really been hurt in that accident. I understand your truck was a total loss. It's a miracle you two weren't. You were thrown clear before the truck turned over."

Bill shuddered. "I've got to get out of here," he decided. "Get me my clothes, or I'll get them myself."

"You don't scare me," said the nurse. She grinned at him. "You'll have to stay in bed. Doctor's orders. The hospital can't be responsible for what will happen to you if you get up. It will probably take a few more hours for the after-effects of the drug to wear off. So just relax while Mr. Harrison comes in and talks to you."

"Is he here?" Bill asked.

"He's been waiting for you to snap out of it."

"He has? Look, nurse, I don't care who's responsible but I've got to get out of here, immediately. Either you walk out the door or you don't, I'm leaving!"

"Well," the nurse said dubiously, "The doctor won't like it, but if you insist you can sign yourself out. They can't stop you and it absolves the hospital in case anything happens."

"That's what I'll do," Bill said. "Would you ask Harrison to come in while I dress?"

The nurse went out and Bill went to the closet for his clothes. His legs felt curiously weak and trembling. His aching head didn't help, either. He got his pants on and then sank weakly into a chair by the rain-spattered window. What he'd heard the other night at Waggoner's in San Felipe was coming true, then. Harrison was on the ropes

and needed help. He thought irrationally of Hank Prudy and Sally Ives, of Meecham and Pop. Then the door opened and Arthur Harrison hurried in.

Harrison was pale under his desert tan. His large dreamer's eyes were haggard and desperate. His trenchcoat showed signs of having been out in the rain for hours.

"Thank heaven you're on your feet again, Bill. We heard you were killed, at first."

"Far from it," Bill said stoutly, trying to ignore the pounding in his head. He motioned to the windows. "Did the rain bring you?"

HARRISON nodded. "It's raining in the mountains, too. I flew in as soon as I located you here in the hospital. I'm at the end of my rope, Bill. A load of valves for the irrigation ditches has turned out to be the wrong size. Someone switched them on me. They're no good, they won't fit. I've got another load ready for delivery here in the city but they're got to reach Halcyon and be installed before the rain hits our system too heavily. Otherwise, the whole water system will just be useless decoration in the desert. The government inspectors are due tomorrow, and they want to see water in Halcyon. Otherwise, I'm licked, Bill."

Bill said, "You didn't have to wait for me, Mr. Harrison. It would have been all right if you got another trucker on the job."

Harrison's smile was wry. "Nobody is willing to truck for me. I seem to be poison. They're all afraid to touch the stuff."

"Meecham?"

"He has the other outfits in a bag. They're afraid to cross him. Evidently the word's gone around, and he has a lot of power. There's political pull behind him, too. The only man who can deliver that truck over the desert is you, Bill. You made a good try with those pictures of San Felipe, but the newspapers are holding up the pictures for your



sworn statements identifying them. In any case, they won't solve the issue now. Your trucks are my last chance. It won't be easy, Bill. They'll try to stop you by any means they can."

Bill's lean face was grim. But a spark of anticipation leaped to his gray eyes as he met Harrison's stare. The need to battle it out once and for all with Meecham's crowd made him forget his bruised and battered body, his aching head. He slipped into his shirt, ignoring the twinges of pain.

"They won't stop me," he said. "There are some things I must do first, though. I want the names and addresses of some of your ex-G. I. buyers here in town. I want about twenty of them rounded up, and the situation explained to them. The bigger they are, the better. Rangers would be best, if you have any among your buyers. And make sure they know their homes are at stake."

"That can be done," Harrison nodded. His eyes were puzzled. "Besides the valves, though, I'll need a bulldozer. I have one at the terminal, and if you get it across to Halcyon, it would be a big help."

Bill grinned. "We'll bring that, too." He found his hat and put it on. "First, I've got to get Mokey out of here. I'll explain on the way."

**THE NEXT** few hours were full of hectic activity, careful checking of trucks and equipment at the terminal, the slow gathering of puzzled vets who appeared at Bill's office with slips from Harrison demanding to be let in on the project. Bill explained the situation briefly.

"It depends on you fellows. If you want those homes in Halcyon, we're going to fight for them. We need help, every hand we can get. It won't be a pushover. There may be more than a few cracked skulls on this trip. Anyone who doesn't want his home badly enough to fight for it can drop out right now!"

Nobody dropped out. The bulldozer arrived and was rolled up into a van and

half of the men assigned to that Diesel. The big warehouse echoed with activity as the crates of valves were hustled into a second box and the rest of the men made comfortable inside. The afternoon, despite all their hurry, began to wane. The rain increased. It would be no easy roll across the mountains where cloud-bursts might cause roundabout detours. But by six o'clock everything was in readiness, both trucks ready to roll. Mokey Johnson, a patch of court plaster over one bruised and blackened eye, and Pete Slocum were assigned to the second cab. They knew their orders. Bill and Harrison shared the first Diesel. Two trucks, Bill reasoned, were better than one, in case something went wrong that they couldn't cope with.

He was about to swing into the cab when the dispatcher came running across the big, hollowly echoing terminal.

"Call for you, Bill! It's a dame! Says it's important."

Harrison murmured impatiently. Bill hesitated, then leaped down again. "I'll only be a minute."

He ran across the floor to the office and picked up the telephone. The receiver crackled with static from electrical storms in the mountains. It was a long distance call! Sally Ives!

"Bill? Bill, is that you?"

"Speaking," he said shortly. "What is it?"

"I've got to tell you something. I just heard you were going to try to push a truck through to the desert."

"That's right," Bill said.

"Don't try it, Bill. I've found out—they're waiting for you. They've got it all figured out. You'll never make it."

"I'll make it," Bill said. "What did you find out?"

"I can't tell you from here. They might hear me."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you. But don't stop here at the Midway, Bill. I know now that it wasn't your men who beat up Dad yesterday. I know a lot of things now.



Don't stop here, whatever you do."

"Why not?" he insisted. "If you know anything, Sally, tell me, please. Tell me now!"

"I can't. I'm afraid. I—"

The receiver crackled in Bill's ear. Her words were drowned out by the static. Bill shouted desperately into the mouthpiece. "Sally! Sally, can you hear me?"

The line went dead. There wasn't even a dial tone in the receiver. Bill jiggled the hook, then cradled the instrument and quit the office. His face was white as he swung back into the cab of the waiting Diesel. He waved a gloved hand at Mokey's truck, behind him.

"All right," he called. "Let's roll!"

**THE FIRST** fifty miles were covered without incident, pulling free of city traffic to the open highway. Long streamers of black Diesel smoke marked their route over the flatlands. The tractor rolled easily, coasting often on the momentum of its heavy payload. Bill listened to the steady rhythm of the Diesel, checked his instruments, and snapped on headlights as the rain yielded to the gathering darkness. Inside the cab, Harrison's face was a pale profile in the gloom. The headlights cut sharp swaths through the curtains of rain that billowed endlessly toward them.

Rolling downhill toward a small town, Bill kicked into freewheeling and coasted through the back streets at forty. The cop on the corner highballed him through. Mokey's truck, bringing up in the rear, coasted along behind them. Clear of the town, Bill stepped up the R.P.M.'s until the Diesel was thundering at fifty.

There was no sign of Russ Meecham yet. In the hills the rain grew heavier, and the concrete was slickly wet under the pounding tires. Bill didn't slacken speed. The towns flickered by. On the upgrades Bill settled down to his gears, fighting for each speed ratio, manipulating engine speed and the two gear levers

expertly and simultaneously. Harrison was silent for the most part. Bill glanced at his watch and spoke into the darkness without taking his eyes off the rain-lashed road ahead. "We'll pull in at Swifty's soon. We'll refuel and check equipment."

"Do we have to stop at all?" Harrison asked.

"This time, yes," Bill said grimly.

Swifty's, although smaller than the Midway, was normally just as crowded at this hour, with trucks lined up on both sides of the highway while the operators ate, slept, or just rested. Tonight, however, the restaurant was dark and there were no more than half a dozen boxes parked on the road shoulder. There was little of the usual activity. The machine shop was open, though, and men in red coveralls sauntered out into the rain as Bill pulled his Diesel off the concrete.

Swinging down from the cab, he faced the leader of the mechanics. He was a big, burly man whose insolent eyes measured Bill's height while he wiped his hands on a greasy rag. Bill had never seen him before. Nor were any of his assistants the regular men at Swifty's. In the rain, their faces were heavily anonymous. Their hands caught his attention—they were white, without the ingrained grease stains of the daily mechanics.

"Where's Swifty?" Bill demanded.

The first man spat into the rain. "Not here tonight."

"How come the restaurant is closed?"

"We ain't servin' tonight, is all."

**THE BURLY** man took a length of steel spring-leaf from an assistant and casually went around the cab, thumping tires. If one was flat, it would sound like an over-ripe watermelon. All of them sounded solid and resonant. The man came back and said blandly, "You got four flats. We'll have to change 'em. May take a little time."

Bill said, "How long have you been checking boxes?"



The burly man spat again, this time barely missing Bill's foot. "Since tonight. Why?"

Bill said: "I think I'll take over your equipment and check my trucks myself."

"That's what you think," the burly man said, and grinned.

"And drop that bar," Bill added.

"Why?"

"Drop it!"

"To hell with you."

Still grinning, the big man swung at Bill's chest. It was a murderous blow, the flat of the steel bar driven with speed enough to crush his ribs to splinters. But Bill wasn't there to receive it. He slid sidewise, caught the man's thick forearm and twisted sharply. The burly man howled with pain. The steel bar clanged to the ground. At the same moment the coveralled assistants closed in, weapons of all kinds suddenly springing to their hands.

It was the signal Mokey and the ex-G.I.'s in the trailers had been waiting for. They poured from their concealment in the trailers in a wild yelling wave and swarmed over Swifty's, fierce battle yells on their lips. Examples of judo and in-fighting which they'd learned in years of overseas combat were demonstrated on every hand.

For a moment Bill was caught in the swirl of action. One coveralled man dived for his legs, and Bill swung him upright, threw him overhead squarely into the ringleader of Meecham's hoodlums. He swung hard at another, felt his fist jar on solid bone, and the man flailed away, covering a smashed nose. It wasn't much of a battle, at that, he decided. Once disarmed of their wrenches and heavy tools, the coveralled gang was no match for the vets who cleaned up the parking lot with them.

Bill swung clear of the struggle. He filled the tank of his truck with oil and climbed back into the cab. Arthur Harrison's pale face bore the first makings of a grin.

"Nice tactics," he commented, as Bill threw in the clutch and the Diesel began

to roll. Then he looked back at the second truck. "Are you going to leave the others there?"

"Mokey will be along after they clean things up," Bill grinned. "He'll catch up."

"Those were Meecham's men, weren't they?"

Bill nodded. "Not the last of them, either. Our next stop is the Midway. I've got some unfinished business there, too."

"They'll be warned by the time we get there."

"I can't help that," Bill said. "It's a personal matter I've got to settle there."

"You're the skipper," Harrison said.

**MORE RAIN.** And darkness. And the road, winding endlessly into the hills, climbing higher, as midnight approached. The men in the trailers were sleeping now, sprawled on the crates of machinery. There was little traffic on the mountain roads. Mokey kept his Diesel at a respectful distance in the rear, ready for any kind of trouble. The tension was growing more unbearable with every passing mile. Every car was an object of suspicion, every oncoming truck was watched with anxious eyes until it was left safely behind. The wind was rising, adding to the difficulty in keeping the Diesel to the road. The irregular gusts hit the trailer like broadsides, and the force and pressure of the blasts provided a constant source of irregular skids and hazardous swaying. Driving took all of Bill's attention now, yet despite his skill he was forced to slacken speed again and again as a concession to the storm.

His mind was still on Sally, even while pondering the possibilities of Meecham's next move. He knew they weren't through yet in the need to sabotage the Halcyon project. The whole road was a series of booby traps. Constant alertness was his only defense. As yet they were only halfway to their destination, approaching the Midway.

Past Snake Hill, there was the same



long uphill pull that had broken their speed the other night on the runaway truck. Up above was the wooded plateau where the Midway was located. A glow of neon lights hazed the night sky half a mile away as Bill pushed the Diesel into the first of the uphill grade. On that slippery treacherous half mile he needed all the momentum he could save, yet the engine soon ground slower and slower and he had to turn his attention to the dual gear levers, dropping ratios as the grind began to tell.

He was halfway up when the other truck appeared over the crest of the hill. Headlights cut through the rainy sky, moving downward in a slow arc and pointing the way to a clash with Bill's as the truck started its descent. It seemed to be moving very slowly. Bill listened to his own Diesel, dropped another gear as the engine bucked and ground up to meet the other truck. He squinted to pierce the gloom up ahead. Glancing in the rear-vision mirror, he saw that Mokey's truck was a cautious quarter mile away, just at the foot of the rise. When he looked up again, he was startled to see the approaching vehicle bearing down with growing speed.

There was something wrong with it. It wasn't over in the proper lane for one thing. It seemed to straddle the center line, crowding the two-lane highway. At this point in the climb there was no safety shoulder to the road. There was a jagged descent on one hand and close-crouching timber on the other.

Bill felt Harrison stir nervously beside him. "That fellow up there is hogging the road."

**S**LOW apprehension clutched at Bill's middle. The other truck seemed to be coasting down that slippery, treacherous road, all lights blazing, gaining speed with every revolution of the ponderous wheels. He blinked his signal spot, but there was no answer. He blinked again, and came as close to the edge of the concrete strip as he dared. The oncoming truck clung to the center of the road,

bearing down on them like a juggernaut.

There was no sign of their mutual danger from the other driver. In fact, Bill realized with an icy shock, there was no sign of the other driver at all. The thought had no sooner occurred to him, than he knew the desperate truth.

It was an empty truck bearing down on them, wheel set with no hands to guide it and no earthly way to stop it on its insane rush down the slope. There was no chance to avoid it, either. It was a choice between dropping off the edge of the road to the canyon floor below, or meeting the other in a head-on crash. At his slow, uphill speed, Bill was utterly powerless to get out of the path of the onrushing tons of runaway steel.

"He's going to crash us!" Harrison suddenly yelled.

There were only seconds left. The headlights of the other vehicle were blinding, a maddening glare set at high level to deliberately dazzle Bill. He didn't stop to think. He lifted from his seat, grabbing for the company revolver that was always placed in the cab in a pocket over the windshield. At the same time he rolled down the window with his left hand, ignoring the wheel completely for the moment. Wild rain and cold rushing wind poured into the cab. Bill leaned far out, leveling the revolver, and fired.

There was no way to stop the thundering death truck, but to blow one of the front tires. It was the one vulnerable spot in the metallic monster. He squeezed the trigger again, but there was no sign that he had hit. The truck was almost on him now. Harrison had his door open, ready to jump, as Bill pumped bullets up the road.

One of the slugs met its mark at last.

The runaway truck, only fifty yards away now, seemed to waver suddenly. One headlight was shot askew where Bill had missed the tire. But its course was definitely changed. And while the gap closed with a sickening rush, the truck swerved entirely away from the canyon side, off the center line and into



the close-crouching trees that bordered the other side of the narrow highway.

**THE CRASH** was explosive. A screeching, ripping, grinding sound of tortured metal filled the air, drowning out the wild rhythm of the rain. Glass shattered and the cab of the other box smashed against a giant redwood as if crushed by a mammoth hand. One huge steel panel went hurtling end over end into the night sky, clattering on the highway only inches from Bill's cab. The trailer, torn loose from its couplings, rose on end and crashed crazily down the slope toward them. Bill yanked the wheel hard, felt his right front tire slip off the concrete and grind on the tiny shoulder next to the guard rail. It gave him only the slimmest margin of safety as the shattered twisted box slithered down the slope and paused beside his own Diesel.

The sound of rain returned, after the shattering noise. Flames were licking around the tractor jammed between the redwood trees across the road.

Arthur Harrison exhaled a long shuddering breath. His face was ghastly white in the dim glow from the instrument panel.

"That was close," he whispered.

"Almost too close," Bill said. He was shaking with relief.

Harrison went on hoarsely, "Those men are out-and-out murderers. We'd have been smashed flatter than—"

Bill peered upward through the windshield to the crest of the hill, outlined in the glow from the Midway's lights.

"Well, they know they missed out again," he said. "They can see we're all in one piece down here." He came to a sudden decision and elbowed the cab door open, leaped to the ground. In the glare of the fire from the wrecked truck he made out Mokey Johnson's Diesel grinding to a halt behind his own parked vehicle. He had the gun in his hand as Mokey ran up through the rain, followed by the men who'd been asleep in the trailers of both trucks. Their faces

tightened up as they realized the death they had escaped.

Bill's voice was crisp and sharp above the crackle of the flames and the hissing patter of the rain. "I'm going up there. I want half-a-dozen of you fellows with me. The rest can turn to and clear the wreck off the highway so we can get past without risking our necks on the drop-off."

Mokey said: "I'm going up with you, if there's going to be a fight. My knuckles just itch."

"There won't be any fight," Bill said. "They know our strength now. They'll be hauling out of there right now, without waiting for us to come up. But there's something else I've got to attend to in that place."

He wasted no more time but started up the sloping road at a quick trot. The rain soaked through his leather jacket. The wind snatched his sodden hat from his head, and his sandy hair was plastered flat. He paid no attention to personal discomfort as he jogged to the crest of the hill. He saved his wind and his strength in covering the quarter mile to the Midway.

**L**IKE Swifty's, the restaurant had been closed for the night and stood dark and deserted in the center of the huge parking lot, although the neon signs still blinked, forlorn and forgotten, on the roof. Instead of the usual bustle of activity and dozens of Diesels parked on the lot beside the machine shop, there was nothing but empty darkness. No one was in sight in all that wind-swept space.

The other men came panting up the hill to halt beside him as he examined the surroundings. Meecham's gang had done an efficient job of putting Pop Ives out of business for the night. Bill could imagine how it had happened. With Hank Prudy's help, the machine-shop hands would have been told to take the night off. The restaurant would merely have been closed on Hank's orders. With Pop Ives already beaten into helplessness,



ness, there was only Sally, a single girl, to oppose the plans of these ruthless men.

The thought of Sally made him spin toward the dark house across the road. No lights were visible here, either. An air of desolation hovered over the rambling place. Bill ran up the porch steps. With an oath he stumbled over a body sprawled in the rain. He spun back, dropped to his knees, and turned the man over. One of his men flicked a light in the other's face.

It was Velvet, Pop's chief mechanic. He had been badly beaten, his face almost unrecognizable after savage merciless blows. He was unconscious but not dead. A long jagged wound on the back of his head made it plain that he wouldn't be in any condition to talk for hours.

Bill said, "See what you can do for him," and took the porch steps in two strides. The screen door wasn't locked. He yanked it open and called, "Sally? Pop?"

There was no answer. He snapped on the lights as he went, gun in hand, to search the rooms. He was shaking with anxiety for the old man and Sally. It wasn't their battle they had fought here. It was for him that Velvet had chosen a beating instead of yielding to the scheme to wreck him.

"Sally!" he shouted.

Something stirred, scraping along the floor upstairs. The sound of it chilled his spine. He turned, went up the steps three at a time, turned on the light in the corridor.

Pop Ives was on the floor outside his bedroom, crawling on hands and knees toward him. The silvery-haired little man had been beaten again. His face was almost unrecognizable now, his shirt hung in tatters on his thin frame.

Bill dropped to his knees and held the old man's head in his arms.

"Pop! Pop, can you hear me?"

The old man nodded faintly. His whisper was almost inaudible. "I told you not to come back here, boy. They'll kill

you. They got a truck, they're gonna send her downhill when you show up—"

He was delirious, Bill realized. He said slowly, "Listen, Pop, they didn't make it. I'm here, don't you see? It didn't work. I want to know where they went, Pop. And where is Sally?"

"If I was young again," the old man muttered. "If I had my railroad crew again, I'd show those hoodlums—"

"Where is Sally, Pop?" Bill repeated.

THE OLD man sighed and opened his eyes at last. "With Hank Prudy, that rotten skunk. . ." He recognized Bill. Intelligence returned to his faded blue eyes. His hands clawed at Bill's arm. "Hank's got her. Hank and that Meecham feller. They got dynamite, too. They figured if you got through here, they'd stop you at—at—"

"Where, Pop?"

"They took Sally with 'em, too."

"Where?"

"Mountain cabin. Sweetwater Gap. They got dynamite. They mean to get you there. They're crazy mad to stop you, Bill. And they got Sally. Hank Prudy, that low-down skunk—"

Bill straightened as several sober-faced veterans came up the stairs after him. The old man lapsed again into unconsciousness. Bill scooped up his little figure in his arms and headed down the steps, the young men trailing him.

"One of you stay here and call a doctor. Take care of Pop and Velvet, and then get the state troopers. Tell them to meet us at Sweetwater Gap."

Satisfied that he had done all he could, Bill quit the house, reaching the road just as the Diesels muttered to a slow stop on the highway outside. Bill climbed into the cab of the first truck and Pete Slocum gave way, to rejoin Mokey in the following van. Arthur Harrison's pale face was set as Bill told him what had happened and what they had to expect.

"Maybe we'd better wait for the troopers. If they've got dynamite—"

Bill shook his head. "We need to get



this stuff there and then there's Sally. These boys with us aren't going to be scared out of their homes by a gang of hoodlums."

Harrison grinned. "You're right. Let's keep rolling."

**T**HEN there was the rain and the empty highway again, and the miles ticking off under the wheels. The minutes lengthened into grueling hours of battle with the slick highway and the mountain curves and growing exhaustion. Fear for Sally's safety made Bill push the Diesel ruthlessly, flesh and spirit whipping brute metal to a maximum of effort.

There was almost no traffic at all now. The few scattered towns they passed through were wrapped in darkness and the torrential rain. The Diesel gobbled up distance to Sweetwater, mile by mile. On the seat beside him Harrison began to doze, conserving energy for a day of bitter labor in Halcyon—if they ever got this load through to the desert. If. But it had to go through, Bill decided, and he spent the swiftly passing minutes in plans for the showdown he knew was coming at Sweetwater Gap.

He knew the place fairly well and had the steep walls, the stream, and the narrow highway clearly printed in his mind. Thickly timbered, it was a bottleneck on the road and was often subject to troublesome rock slides that kept the state highway crews busy. Rock slides, Bill thought—and dynamite! The two ideas clicked together in his mind and made a grim picture. At the same time he felt relief at glimpsing Meecham's plan. His thoughts jumped to Hank Prudy's mountain lodge on the north slope of Sweetwater. He had gone there once with Sally before his rivalry with Prudy had reached a point of open hostility. The lodge was a big log cabin affair perched high on the mountainside over the road. It could be reached only by a narrow dirt road that wound up the face of the wooded scarp.

Harrison woke up, consulted a road

map and checked the speedometer. His voice interrupted Bill's plans.

"We're only three miles to the gap now, Bill. Are you just going to try to bull our way through?"

"No, that won't work," Bill said. "They'll be sure to have the road blocked somehow. But we'd better stop here."

He eased the Diesel to a halt on the next level stretch and parked on the road shoulder. Water poured in lusty torrents from a nearby drainage ditch. The rain and darkness showed no signs of letup. In a moment Mokey Johnson's headlights appeared, and Bill flagged him to a halt.

"What's wrong now?" Mokey bel-  
lowed.

"Nothing. Just tell all hands to pile out."

**T**HE SCORE of men, huddling in slickers, gathered silently in the windy darkness. Bill offered few explanations. He set the men to shifting cargo from his truck to Mokey's. The work consumed a precious twenty minutes, but it was time well spent, Bill reflected. When the job was done, he ordered all the men who had been riding with him to pile into Mokey's truck. Then he turned to Arthur Harrison.

"You'd better get in the other cab with Mokey, too. If Meecham plans to blow us up with dynamite, he'll try for the first truck to make sure nothing at all gets through to Halcyon."

Harrison demurred. "You can't take this truck on ahead, all alone."

"I'm going to," Bill insisted. "You fellows will trail me by two hundred yards, just in case."

"Then I'm going to ride with you," Harrison said.

Bill shook his head. "I must insist. I'm ordering you to get in that other truck, Mr. Harrison. There's no point in your risking your neck with me."

And there was no point in further debate, Harrison could see. The transfers were completed in the next five minutes, and then Bill climbed back into the



empty cab, revved up the idling Diesel and pulled down the highway again.

He was alone this time, and he was aware of the difference. It wasn't pleasant to jockey 70,000 pounds of truck down a highway that might hit the sky at any moment. There was a wide sweeping curve to the road, and the mountain walls began to close in as the grade dropped to the canyon floor. Over the drumming of the Diesel he could hear the roar of a swollen mountain torrent, and he eased slowly over a bridge that crossed the racing stream. This was where Pete Slocum had cracked up, but the bridge was intact. That was another mistake for Meecham, Bill decided. There was a point up ahead in the canyon that was now the logical place for Meecham to establish his road block, but the bridge would have been the best obstacle. This fear over, he leaned forward with some anticipation for future events.

They weren't long in coming. The canyon walls drew closer and closer. Bill kept his headlights at full brightness in order to pierce the billowing curtains of rain that came at him. The cab seemed empty and lonely now without Harrison beside him. Mokey's truck was out of sight at a safe distance to the rear. Now he could hear the thrashing of the wind in the trees as the slopes pressed in on the highway, and up ahead was the little dirt cutoff that led up to Hank Prudy's lodge. Sally was up there. He watched the cutoff come toward him as he slowed down to a cautious twenty. He wanted to be able to make a quick stop when he needed to. The lane was abreast now, and then swimming to the rear in the darkness—

**H**E CAUGHT the red glare of the explosion out of the corner of his eye. The blast made a lurid savage flame among the dripping trees of the slope, just a little ahead of him. No sooner had its echoes traveled down the canyon, than it was followed by the ominous, rumbling, rolling thunder of raw earth and rock torn loose from its foundations,

catapulting down through empty space.

Bill slammed down savagely on the brake pedal. He was traveling slowly, but he had the implacable weight of the trailer behind him, driving the cab forward to the hell breaking loose up ahead. He could see the slide now, a jumbled mass of torn trees, boulders and loose earth pounding down the steep slope, spilling through the timber and leaving a raw gash in its trail. Something rattled on the cab roof as Bill hauled back on the emergency brake. A rock as big as one of the Diesel hub-caps slammed with a loud, metallic clang on the engine hood and ricocheted off into the darkness. The brakes squealed in torment, struggling with the enormous momentum of the vehicle. With the roaring of an earthquake, the slide hit the road ahead. The ground trembled with the impact. The truck jolted to a halt. More boulders, fragmentary scraps from the main slide, bounced like giant marbles out of the darkness. A residual hailstorm of loose earth, rock, and gravel clattered on the steel roof of the cab. Dust momentarily overcame the rain, rising in a cloud from the dark mass that blocked the highway ahead.

It was a full minute before the slide completely settled. Bill didn't dare get out of the cab until then. The dark slopes of the canyon were silent now. Evidently Meecham and his men were satisfied with the damage done by the one dynamite blast. No more followed.

He stepped from the cab into ominous silence, broken only by the steady drumming of rain and the rushing of the mountain stream nearby. He kept his gun ready, squinting up into the whispering timber that surrounded him. High up on the nearest slope a dim light from Hank Prudy's lodge gave the only sign of life.

The silence was broken soon enough. A man's shout came dimly through the sound of the rain. It was answered by another shout, and then the sound of men scrambling down through the underbrush to the road. To finish the job, Bill thought grimly. He swung around the



front of the truck, sliding over the debris of the rock slide, and looked anxiously down the dark road behind him. The dank smell of sagebrush filled the night.

**H** HE HEARD the drumming thunder of the Diesel before he saw it, zooming around the last bend in the canyon. Then he was bathed in the glare of Mokey Johnson's headlights as the big box squealed to a halt to one side of his stalled Diesel.

Their arrival was well timed. Simultaneously, there rose a murderous yell from the surrounding darkness. Meecham's men poured over the highway, in a wave of dark figures. At the same time the back ramp to Mokey's box dropped with a thud to the concrete and the men swarmed out in a counter-wave to meet them. All hell broke loose. From the shouts and curses of the struggling men, there arose a wild battle cry of "Geronimo!" as a huge ex-paratrooper cut a swath through Meecham's men with a lengthy two-by-four.

No tribe of wild Apaches could have been more effective or devastating in their attack. Brass knuckles, blackjacks, and lead pipes were met with judo, football tackles, and the tactics of trench and jungle warfare.

Bill had little time to judge the way things were going in those first wild minutes. He ducked under the vicious swing of a sap, and drove a fist into the man's face, seeing it vanish in a smear of glistening red.

All over the highway the struggle had resolved into knots of desperately battling men, their shadows grotesque and dark on the concrete. Russ Meecham's giant figure was not in sight anywhere. Bill worked free of his immediate opponents and slid around to the back of his van. He was in time to see Mokey Johnson go down under a blow from behind. The squat man's face was streaming blood. His assailant stood over him, heavily booted foot poised to kick the driver's ribs in. Bill tackled him in a long dive. They rolled over and over

the hard wet concrete in the glare of the headlights. Bill's fist kept smashing into the man's face until his body went limp under him. Rising, he saw that Mokey had rejoined the fray.

Someone was calling to him from above the tumult. "Bill! Over here!"

It was Arthur Harrison. He had given a good account of himself, to judge from the two men sprawled unconscious at his feet. He had taken temporary refuge near the rear wheels of Bill's van. There was a bloody gash on his pale forehead, but his eyes were alight with relief at coming to grips with the forces against him.

Bill worked his way toward him, and for a moment they stood apart from the struggle that raged on the highway. He had to shout to make himself understood by the little man.

"Open Mokey's van!" he yelled. "Soon as things settle, get that bulldozer out! Clear the highway!"

Harrison nodded and grinned to show he understood.

"What about you?" he shouted.

"I'm going after Sally," Bill answered grimly. He pointed up the slope to the light in Hank Prudy's lodge, far above. "Up there."

Meecham's men were too busy to pursue him when he cut across the highway, jogging through the rain. He hurdled the ditch that paralleled the road and was engulfed in the dripping whispering redwood trees.

**H**ANK PRUDY'S lodge was on a small plateau notched back in the face of the wooded scarp, overhanging the highway four hundred feet below. It was a long rambling house, with a railed veranda and low overhanging eaves. The lighted window faced west. Bill doused the flashlight he'd used on his climb up the road and stood for a moment under the dripping trees, watching the place.

He could see a vague shadow moving behind the lighted window. He pocketed the gun, sheltering it from the rain, and



considered ways and means of breaking inside. There were no signs of more of Meecham's hoodlums up here. Evidently he had dispatched them all in the assault on the highway. But Sally was somewhere inside the dim building.

He had just decided on a bold entry through the front door when light suddenly streamed across the veranda and Hank Prudy came out. The man hesitated, glanced anxiously over the rail down the cliff to the struggle on the road below. He was carrying a small box. His face was worried in the dim light. He paused, then plunged out into the rain, proceeding directly toward the shadows where Bill waited.

Halfway across the clearing he stopped again, and light squirted from a torch in his hand, settled on a broken crate on the soggy ground. Even from where Bill stood he could see the red lettering, the words, *Danger! Dynamite!* on the splint-ered box. He realized that Hank was gathering up the evidence of the blast and rockslide to burn it. Bill didn't wait any longer. He left his post under the dripping trees and sprinted across the clearing.

Hank didn't hear him until Bill left the ground in a long dive. The man half-turned, mouth open in surprise. Then Bill hit him above the knees in a clean tackle that swept him off his feet with a stunning jolt.

For a moment they rolled over and over on the muddy turf. But Bill had the advantage of surprise. Hank's fists flailed, surprisingly weak, pummeling Bill's chest and head. Bill rolled free of the punches and grabbed Hank's collar in one fist, yanking him to his feet. Hank wrenched back, and Bill ducked under a wild frantic blow that slid over his shoulder. At that moment Hank recognized him in the dim light coming from the doorway.

Up to now the man had been too surprised to call out in alarm. But with recognition of Bill, his face turned pasty gray, and fear glazed his eyes. He opened his mouth to shout a warning, and Bill

clamped a hand over his lips, cutting off the frightened yell. With his other hand, he twisted sharply and Hank's convulsive struggles ceased abruptly.

"I owe you something, rat," Bill said bitterly. "I ought to give you everything that's coming to you." Unintelligible, muffled sounds came from Hank Prudy. Bill rapped, "Is Sally here?"

**H**ANK'S fear, and added pressure from Bill's grip, dispelled all thoughts of lying. He nodded desperately, sweat mingling with the rainy wetness on his face.

"She's in there with Meecham and Waggoner?"

Again Hank nodded.

"Anybody else?"

A negative shake of the head.

Bill said, "You're the one who doped my drivers' coffee, aren't you? You got back from San Felipe in time to fix that container Mokey Johnson took out, too. That's what's been happening to my drivers, isn't it?"

Hesitation, then a nod. Hank's face gray with fear.

"Meecham had Swifty's place sewed up, too, didn't he? That's where they fixed my brakes the other day, isn't it? You were getting a split from Meecham on their crooked real estate deal in San Felipe, weren't you?"

Another silent nod.

"Who beat up Pop Ives? Was it you?"

Hank shook his head.

"Meecham?"

A quick, anxious nod.

Bill said, "I ought to take you apart. Or better still, hand you over to Pete Slocum and Mokey. They'd like to get their hands on you for what you did to their trucks."

Fear was too much for the man. It gave him for a moment a burst of strength. With a convulsive movement he tore loose from Bill's relaxed grip. A yell burst from his lips as he turned and fled streaking for the darkness of the woods. He was only halfway to the safety of its concealment when flame



suddenly spat from the shadowed veranda. The sharp flat report of a gun ripped through the drumming of the rain. Bill didn't move for a moment. Hank Prudy seemed to stagger, thrown off stride. The gunman on the porch fired again, and this time Hank's legs went out from under him and he fell flat on his face, skidding along on the mucky ground. He didn't get up. He didn't move. There was a limp emptiness about his figure that told the whole story. Hank Prudy would never get up again.

**B**RIGHT danger flared for Bill as the shadowy gunman turned his attention to him. Three shots whistled over his head as Bill ran crouching toward the porch. Bill hurdled the steps with one leap and was on the porch, diving at the stout figure crouched behind the nearest post.

It was Oliver Waggoner, his face livid with rage and panic. Seeing the showdown at hand, he had killed Hank Prudy to stop the mouth of the witness who could do him most damage. His terror made him like a madman. He wrestled with Bill tooth and nail, trying to bring his six-shooter, with its one last slug, into play.

The boards underfoot, slippery and soaked with rain, suddenly cracked and collapsed. Bill felt himself thrown backward, Waggoner on top of him. For a moment he lost his grip on the other's gun. Waggoner wriggled like a snake struggling to get free, and Bill lunged for him, got the fat man's wrist again and twisted. Waggoner's last cartridge exploded. The shot was muffled between their bodies. The muzzle blast seared through Bill's shirt with stinging pain. Waggoner, abruptly, jerked free, standing upright, an expression of utter amazement on his round features and then slumped to the ground.

Bill, gasping for breath, staggered to his feet. Not a sign of Meecham! No sound came from the house. Water dripped sullenly from the overhanging

eaves, tinkling in rainspouts, rustling in the trees overhead. The sound of struggle from the highway far below was muted, drawing to a close. He stood a moment, waiting, watching the doorway. Nothing happened. No one came out to challenge him. But Sally was in there.

He pulled open the porch door and stepped inside, his gun in hand. The place felt damp and cold. A kerosene hurricane lamp on the table in the rustic living room cast the only light. There were logs in the fireplace, but they were wet through. The hearth was littered with signs of an unsuccessful attempt to make a blaze. Bill moved silently across the room.

"Sally?" he called.

His voice echoed eerily in the big raftered room. The kerosene lamp cast a grotesque shadow of his figure on the rough paneled walls. He took his pocket flashlight in one hand and quickly crossed the Navajo rug to stand in the wide doorway in the rear. There was a little hall, dark with shadows. Other doorways opened into the sleeping quarters in the back of the house.

The rain rattled monotonously on the roof, shaking the windows. He turned into the kitchen, flicking his torch on the empty room, then the first bedroom, and finally another, to his right.

Sally was here.

She was thrown on the bed, bound hand and foot, and a gag was tied securely over her mouth. He took the gag from her mouth and kissed her before she could talk, then untied her.

"Bill! I thought you were killed—"

"It was two other fellows," he said grimly. "Are you all right? They didn't hurt you?"

"No. But Velvet and I put up a scrap, and they beat up Dad horribly, and then Hank Prudy and Meecham brought me here—"

"Where's Meecham?" Bill asked.

"He started down the hill to give his men a hand. They blew the dynamite, and then I heard the fighting start, and he began to get worried and left. But



he'll be back. He's dangerous, Bill—"

"I'm back already," said a deep voice from the doorway.

It was Russ Meecham.

**H**E STOOD in the exit to the bedroom, big, dark, powerful, his handsome face wet with rain, his eyes half-smiling as he measured Bill. His hands were empty. He had no gun. There was mud on his shoes, and his trenchcoat was ripped and tattered by his partial descent down the mountain.

"I heard the shots. I figured you were up here, Thompson. I told you some day we'd measure each other. You're the only man big enough to be interesting."

There was no thought of the gun or other weapons now. For a long moment, neither man moved. No sound came from Sally. She took a slight backward step, out of the way. Her face was white. Her eyes were haunted with fear, moving from Bill to Meecham's giant bulk. Rain rattled in a sudden gust against the windows. Bill put the flashlight and gun on the table.

"Like this," he said.

"That suits me," Meecham said.

He was silhouetted against the light from the kerosene lamp in the living room behind him. As if he had become aware of it, he stepped back, and Bill came forward a step. Meecham kept backing out of the close quarters of the bedroom, and then turned his back on Bill with supreme confidence and went into the living room. Bill followed through the doorway.

"Without warning, a blow like a sledgehammer blasted against his head. The shock would have broken an ordinary man's neck. Bill's size saved him. As it was, he went staggering off balance, crashed against a chair. His weight smashed the chair flat and for a moment he was entangled with the wooden legs. He cursed himself for not having foreseen Meecham's treachery. The big man had flattened against the wall just outside the doorway and waited for him to step unwarily through.

**H**E WAS still on his knees, shaking his head, when Meecham drove at him to press home the advantage. His heavy shoe lashed out in a vicious kick at Bill's face. Bill wriggled desperately aside, thrust out his leg. The other's impetuous rush tripped him, and he went stumbling across the room. Bill got to his feet, shaking the pain and ringing from his ears. His eyesight blurred for a moment and he paused to recover. Meecham came driving back, huge arms swinging like pistons. Bill stood his ground and met the shock of his attack. The room seemed to rock with the meeting. For a moment there was in-fighting, heavy, savage, brutal.

Russ Meecham was a fighter who knew all the tricks, clean and dirty. He tried them all in those close quarters. His heavy fists slammed savagely into Bill's middle, working on his body, bruising him, murderously vicious. Bill concentrated on Meecham's face, aware of the man's conceit over his good looks. He slammed home two good jabs, drove a right that crushed the big man's nose and made the blood spurt. Meecham gave a gasping sound and pulled back, snorting. Bill followed up his momentary advantage with a left hook that would have finished anyone else. Meecham's head snapped to one side with the impact, and his arms went out. He staggered momentarily and withdrew another step. Bill followed him up cautiously, watching for an opening as Meecham covered up. His own ribs ached with anguish from Meecham's pummeling. But he had damaged his opponent in return.

"I owe you something," Bill gasped.

"You're going to get it."

"You'll have to collect it first."

"That's what I'm doing," Bill said.

They each waited, recovering from the blows. The sound of their heavy breathing filled the big rustic living room.

Then Bill was on the big man again, driving him backward, smashing through the flimsy screen door and out into the open, rolling over and over on the wet



porch floor. Meecham's breath was deeper now, hoarse and rasping. His blood-smeared face was almost unrecognizable under the swellings. Bill felt blood stinging his own lips, and licked it away.

Meecham leaned back against the wall of the house, his arms limp at his sides. "You can't get your truck through that rock slide. My men will clean up your punks. You're licked, and you know it."

Bill was at the porch rail where there was almost a sheer drop down the face of the scarp to the highway far below. He risked a quick glance downward through the rainy darkness. What he saw made him grin.

"Maybe you ought to look for yourself, Meecham."

Distinctly above the drumming of the rain came the popping motor of the bulldozer as it began to take bites out of the slide. With each bite, the road was cleared a little more, the debris shoved to one side.

Meecham didn't come near the rail to look. "I still win," he said suddenly.

**HIS ARMS**, flat against the wall of the lodge, were suddenly galvanized into movement. There was a chinking sound, and then the glint of steel from the blade of an axe the big man snatched from its wall pegs. Bill hadn't known the axe was there. Before he could move, the big man hurled it with deadly strength. The heavy blade shot through the air. Bill had only time to move his head inches to one side. The axe flashed past him, the steel edge biting into the wall with a vicious *thunk!* The axe caught there, the handle quivering.

"Nice try," Bill said mockingly.

Meecham cursed and came forward in another rush. Perhaps he felt time was running out for him. The fact that he had resorted to a weapon encouraged Bill. He stepped away from the dangerous rail to meet this next assault solidly. Meecham tried to grapple, but Bill slid away, poked a long right at his face, came in again with a left to the body,

then moved off for another right to Meecham's jaw. The other spun with his back to the rail now. His eyes glistened in wicked little crescents in the gloom. He tried another rush, and again Bill met him with the solid impact of his fists. Meecham's blows were weaker now, but still powerful enough to hurt when they landed. Bill felt his own strength ebbing. He put all his remaining strength into the next two punches. His knuckles crashed through bone and cartilage and Meecham fell back. His big body lost balance, staggering toward the rail. At the last moment, he groped for support, his legs no longer holding him. His fingers clawed wildly at the air to stop his dangerous backward rush—and closed on the axe handle in the wall.

It was not as solid as the porch rail he sought. The blade slid from the notch it had cut, and with it, Meecham's ponderous body hit the barricade. There came a splintering sound, a rending noise as the porch rail crumpled like a matchstick under Meecham's weight. For just one instant, Meecham's startled face was visible in the gloom. Then he went helplessly backward, hurtling out into dark empty space. A wild yell went with him, a scream of mortal terror, rage and frustration. Bill stood frozen, sickened. The yell was cut off, and he could hear the sounds of Meecham's body, crashing down through the tree branches, hundreds of feet below.

**THEN** there was silence.

Sally's voice came shakily from the doorway, "He tried to kill you every way he could, Bill."

"I know," he said. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "But I didn't want it to happen this way."

"He brought it on himself when he threw the axe at you. You couldn't help it."

He shook himself, as if to dispel a nightmare vision before his eyes. Turning to the girl, he smiled wanly. Every muscle in his body was bruised and aflame with pain. He forgot it when he



saw her eyes, looking up at him.

"Everything's all right now, honey," he said.

"I know, Bill. I was so stupid! How could—"

"Don't talk about it," he said.

"But if I could have warned you before they got me, you could have gotten your trucks through."

He mustered a grin as he realized that she thought the highway was still blocked. "Don't worry about that, Sally. A bulldozer's clearing the slide. We'll be ready to roll in twenty minutes."

It took most of that time for them to scramble down the mountainside to the highway again, where Mokey Johnson was shouting orders. Those of Meecham's men who hadn't escaped in panic into the dark hills were hard at work with pick and shovel, clearing the concrete of the fragments overlooked by the snorting bulldozer. Already there was a clear lane through the rock slide, enough for the trucks to get through.

Arthur Harrison met him as he crossed the road. The little man's face glowed

warmly as Bill quickly told him of the cleanup at the lodge.

"Then there's nothing more to stop us," he said. "We'll be in Halcyon by dawn. I'll have to make a report to the state police when I get there, but I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. We've got enough evidence to have finished Prudy, Waggoner, and Meecham, anyway even if they hadn't ended the way they did." Harrison paused, looked at his wristwatch, and gave a shout. "Let's get these trucks rolling."

Somehow, by unspoken arrangement, Harrison gave up his seat in Bill's truck and joined Mokey Johnson's crew. When Bill finally swung up behind the wheel of his Diesel, ten minutes later, he found Sally already seated there, waiting for him in the close privacy of the cab.

Bill started the Diesel, listened to it rumble steadily as he checked the gauges on the dashboard, and then eased the motor expertly into low ratio. The heavy truck rumbled forward over the highway, slowly gathering momentum.

There were only clear roads ahead.

**STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933.**

Of FIVE NOVELS MAGAZINE, published Bi-Monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1946.

State of New York }  
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Helen Meyer, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that she is the Business Manager of the FIVE NOVELS MAGAZINE and that the following is, to the best of her knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, George T. Delacorte, Jr., 149 Madison Ave., New York 16, N. Y.; Editor, Kathleen Rafferty, 149 Madison Ave., New York 16, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, Helen Meyer, 149 Madison Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: Dell Publishing Company, Inc., 149 Madison Ave., New York 16, N. Y.; George T. Delacorte, Jr., 149 Madison Ave., New York 16, N. Y.; Margarita Delacorte, 149 Madison Ave., New York 16, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by her.

(Signed)

HELEN MEYER, Business Manager.

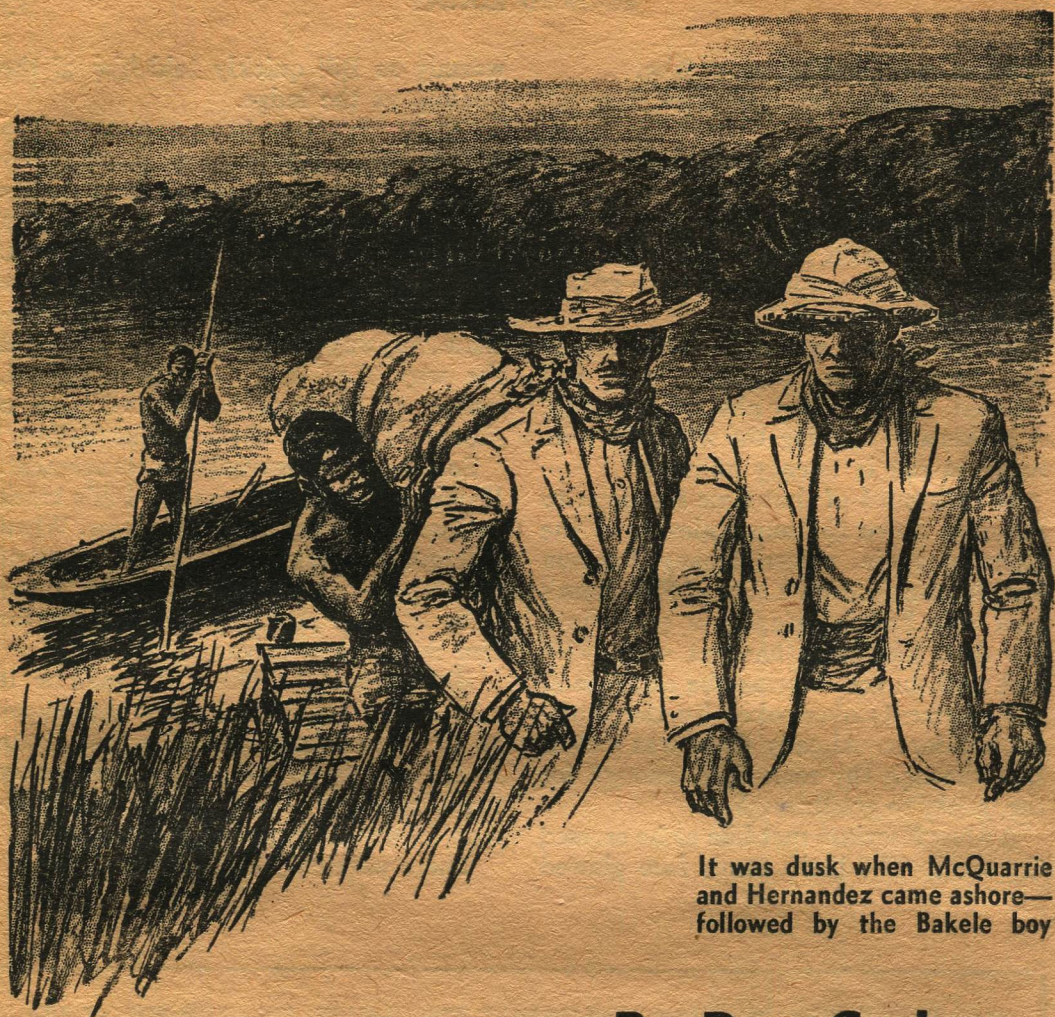
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 4th day of September, 1946.

JEANNETTE SMITH, Notary Public, Rockland County, Certificate filed in N. Y. Co. Clk's No. 1372.

[SEAL]

(My commission expires March 30, 1948.)





It was dusk when McQuarrie and Hernandez came ashore—followed by the Bakele boy

By Dan Cushman

# ROGUES' TREASURE

**I**T HAD been eight years since Oak-leg McQuarrie had seen this Congo town of Botamba, but apparently nothing had changed.

There on the knoll were the white buildings of the Belgian military cantonment with the dark wall of the jungle beyond. At his right were the rusting sheet-metal warehouses of Le Belge Commercialé smelling of palm nuts and crude

rubber. At his left the thatch and bamboo huts of Congo tribesmen staggered down to the water. Straight ahead was the town itself, half its buildings standing on stilts to raise them a few precious inches above the miasma of rainy season overflow.

It was all familiar, like a bad dream one has forgotten until he experiences it a second time. The town was perhaps a



little older, a little shabbier, a little closer to its inevitable destruction by the jungle's twin forces of cancerous growth and decay, but aside from that, all was the same.

McQuarrie clomped his artificial right foot heavily and let a contemptuous smile twist his large-featured, rather fiercely cut face. It was ridiculous. He, a man of culture, of education, driven by the forces of curiosity and poverty to this festering sump-hole town in the depths of the jungle.

"You are my friend," the letter had said. "You saved my life in Kenya, and I have not forgotten. You must come now before it is too late. It will profit you . . ." and so on for a half-coherent page and a half. Until the letter arrived five days before in Leopoldville he had almost forgotten that a jungle tramp by the name of George Benbow even existed.

McQuarrie motioned to his Bakele boy and limped across the sodden planks of the steamboat dock to an elevated sidewalk.

He was a large man, made to seem even larger by his wrinkled, and loose-fitting suit of whites. His age was forty perhaps forty-five—it was hard to tell. The tropics of three continents had been good to him. Once in a while you find a white man who thrives on quinine.

The elevated walk led him to a street of cobbles and mud. He passed a native gri-gri market, the stalls of noisy Hittites and silent Arabs selling French slum jewelry and shoddy cottons from the looms of Calcutta. He turned left, following a street to a wandering two-story building with a double verandah and the only tile roof closer than Leopoldville—the Hotel Bordeaux.

The Bordeaux had an ornate main entrance that was seldom used, a screened imitation of a Continental sidewalk cafe. Beyond that was the entrance to the hotel bar.

McQuarrie nodded to the Bakele boy to put down the uniform can and duffle-bag. The boy opened the insect-proof door for his *bwana*, not offering to follow.

There was still a late afternoon sun outside, so McQuarrie stood by the door for a while, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the dimness.

IT WAS a long room with a low ceiling. A couple of four-bladed electric fans turned wearily, stirring the tepid air. At one side was a bar of red okume wood, and a backbar with ornate leaded glass-work of a type fashionable in European places forty years before. Scattered here and there were a dozen tables, and twenty or thirty raffia chairs of local craftsmanship.

Five men were in the room. Two mulatto clerks in long white 'jaballas talked a hybrid variety of Bantu French over bottles of cheap Brazzaville beer. A Frenchman played *domino solitaire* over iced *café noir*, a massive Senegalese with tribal-notched ears watched with dull eyes, and behind the bar stood the proprietor, a large-beaked man of Mediterranean blood.

The proprietor lowered his newspaper and watched as Oakleg McQuarrie came forward, clomping heavily on his artificial right foot.

"*Senhor* McQuarrie!" the man cried. "You are McQuarrie?"

"Aye, sir. So I am." McQuarrie smiled. It is good to be remembered, even in such a sump-hole of the tropics as this. He came close and thrust his hand across the bar. "After all these years. But I must confess, sir. Your name— Pardon me."

"Caderosse."

"Ah, yes. Pablo Caderosse. I remember you well, but it's been so many years."

Caderosse shrugged his bony shoulders. "Indeed? For you, *Senhor*, they have been years. But for those of us who always stay in the Congo, years are like to run together like the hairs on a man's head.

"Well spoken. Well spoken, indeed."

McQuarrie drummed his thick fingers on the okume bar while his eyes roved the stock of liquor on the backbar.



"Your pleasure, *Senhor*?"

"My pleasure would call for whisky. The best Kentucky—what one would find in the wonderful city of San Francisco. But I'm a realist and I know better than to ask." McQuarrie clomped his artificial foot for emphasis. "Indeed, I would even settle for schnapps."

Caderosse lifted a hand regretfully. "Not even the schnapps. I have cognac. Not the French—a pity. Only the cognac of Morocco."

He set up a long-necked bottle and twisted off the cap.

"Stengah," said McQuarrie, naming the drink by its Malayan term.

Caderosse took a precious ice cube from the stock in a noisy little mechanical refrigerator and mixed the drink, pouring one neat for himself.

"Your health!" cried McQuarrie with sudden resonance, lifting the drink high.

Caderosse said, "McQuarrie, I thought I would never see you again. After your bout with the fever in those rooms upstairs, you told us all that the tropics had seen you for the last time. Do you love our city so much that you have returned?"

McQuarrie made a wry face over the vile Moroccan brandy and pulled himself to great height. "This visit is not of my choice. An old friend. You understand." He spread his thick hands and then drew from the pocket of his wrinkled white jacket a bit of paper which he did not unfold.

"A letter?"

"Aye, from George Benbow. I thought him dead."

"Benbow?"

"You find it strange?" asked McQuarrie, watching Caderosse's expression.

The man spread his hands in a Latin gesture that might signify anything.

"What about Benbow?" pursued McQuarrie.

**H**E HAD known George Benbow long ago. He remembered him as a short pale-eyed Englishman of middle years. Now he must be quite old. They had

gone north to prospect for diamonds in the Kenya country, and six months later McQuarrie had sailed for the East from Dar es Salaam. He had not thought of the man for years, and then the letter had come. Benbow wished to discuss something of "extreme profit," and as profit was perhaps the one thing that would lure McQuarrie back to Botamba, here he was.

Caderosse stroked his lean jaw for a while, his shiny black eyes shifting around the room.

"You would hardly know Benbow, *Senhor* McQuarrie."

"Why?"

"There are two things in the tropics that destroy men faster even than the egg which our mosquito lays in the blood. These two things are liquor and fear."

"Which is it in Benbow's case?"

"Both."

"What's he afraid of?"

Caderosse lifted his shoulders. "He has not said."

"Maybe you think that notch-eared Senegalese over there against the wall has something to do with it."

Caderosse shot him a surprised glance. "Perhaps!"

McQuarrie had guessed there was something wrong about the Senegalese. The manner in which Caderosse turned his head when he mentioned Benbow's name, as though he expected the Senegalese to read his lips.

"Who is he?" asked McQuarrie.

"The Senegalese? They call him Tovada. We do not serve him, *Senhor*. The regulations, you know. We do not violate them as many places do. But still he comes in and sits. All day, perhaps. He has a master—Romeau. You have heard of Romeau?"

McQuarrie shook his head. He knew no Romeau. There was something unreasonable about all this.

"Why should anybody be after Benbow? I'll wager he doesn't have a thousand francs to his name or he wouldn't be in this heathen sinkhole."



"Men are murdered for other reasons."

"Money and love. Those are the reasons."

"*Senhor* is a philosopher."

McQuarrie could have told him that "*Senhor*" was a damned fool or he wouldn't be here. He drank the brandy that remained in his glass and turned the conversation back to more practical consideration.

"Benbow. Where can I find him?"

Caderosse elevated a forefinger in a sign for patience. He walked from behind the bar, ignoring the Frenchman who was snapping the cover of his matchbox in a signal for more *café noir*, and passed from sight through a draped doorway leading to the hotel.

McQuarrie waited. Once such a situation would have appealed to his sense of the romantic. Now it merely irked him. From habit, his fingers reached inside his coat to the butt of his Mauser pistol. Not that he considered himself in danger. It was just that he had a certain way of life, and the pistol had become a part of it.

**THE HALF-CASTE** clerks finished their beer and left. The Senegalese, Tovada, stared at him with dull eyes. McQuarrie had seen eyes like his among the apes which are shipped in cages of Congo steamboats destined for the zoos of Europe and America.

From somewhere in the depths of the hotel came the sound of a wireless tuned to a Johannesburg jazz band, tinny trumpets mixing with intermittent machine-gun bursts of static.

Caderosse returned, walking silently as a leopard on his tennis shoes. He lifted a cloth and wiped his way up the bar. Pausing before McQuarrie he spoke, keeping one shoulder between his mouth and the Senegalese.

"He will come down the back way and wait for you in the private dining room. Go out the rear archway and turn right through the hall. The first door."

"Now?"

"After your drink, *Senhor*."

Caderosse mixed a second sundowner, and using both hands, he placed it before McQuarrie.

"Your health!" cried McQuarrie with an unexpected voice which caused the Frenchman to jump and overturn a domino. He drank.

There was a flat brass key under the glass. He palmed it without comment.

McQuarrie followed Caderosse's directions to the private dining room. Its door was locked as he had expected it would be. He fitted the key and worked it back and forth a few times, loosening the fungus-corroded tumblers. It opened, and he stepped inside.

It was a small room filled with lifeless air and the odor of stale liquor. The jalousies were closed, shutting out the light of late afternoon. A bare electric bulb was suspended on a fly-spotted cord over a table. At the far side of the table sat a man.

He held a small caliber, nickel-plated revolver in his hand, its octagonal barrel pointed at an off angle.

"Come inside and close the door," he said in a voice whose huskiness indicated the ravages of liquor on vocal cords.

McQuarrie did as he was told.

"Bolt it."

McQuarrie threw the bolt.

The man stood then, poking the revolver in the band of his crumpled white trousers, giving McQuarrie his first good look at him.

**HE HAD** expected Benbow, so McQuarrie recognized him, although there was not much about him that resembled the man he had known over in Kenya. The old Benbow was heavy-set and had a rugged manner to match. This man was skinny, enervated and old. He was hunched, his skin hung loosely over his sharp skeleton, his eyeballs were yellow from the prevailing tropic liver complaint.

"McQuarrie!" Benbow smiled and walked around the table extending a bony hand, his rope-soled shoes going slap-slap on the woven floor mattings.



"It's been a long time since the old days over around Elizabethville, McQuarrie."

"It has been a long time."

Ten years. In Benbow's case it had been the difference between youth and age. Indeed, that is a long time. McQuarrie shook his hand, noticing how hot and dry it was. He felt sorry for him—frightened and old, drinking out his last days in this rotten jungle town.

It occurred to McQuarrie how desperately a man needs friends, especially when he no longer has anything to offer and friends come hard. Take Benbow, here—he had played out his string and now he needed someone. He'd gone a long way back to find one, and it was himself, McQuarrie. Yet had their places been changed, he never would have sent for Benbow. He wondered how the man had learned he was in Leopoldville.

Maybe there was some mental telepathy involved, because about the time the question came to McQuarrie's mind, Benbow grinned with his betel-nut browned teeth and said, "I heard you on the wireless, you know. That piano—I wouldn't miss it anywhere. You could have been a Paderewski if you'd tried."

So that was it. A man's vices always find him out. Hernandez Riley, that worthless Don Juan from Vera Cruz, used to say the piano would be the death of him, and perhaps time would prove Hernandez right. McQuarrie had been entertaining himself at the keys of the piano on the terrace of the Hotel Vanderkirk, when an engineer of the local wireless station set up a microphone.

"Paderewski," repeated McQuarrie looking down at his strong hands with their long expressive fingers. "Aye. Perhaps. Who knows? You see, I too have my regrets."

"Drink?" asked Benbow, walking back around the table and shoving out the bottle and glass.

It was more of that imitation cognac from Morocco. McQuarrie poured a small one and followed it with a glass of tepid water from the pitcher. Like all water in these river towns, it reeked of

iodine and was a fitting accompaniment for the miserable brandy. Benbow poured a very large drink for himself—four ounces or so—and drank it slowly.

"I suppose you're wondering why I wrote to you," he remarked, putting back the glass.

McQuarrie nodded. "Your letter made some mention of friendship and some of profit. Either one would bring me, you understand."

Benbow nodded, becoming a little straighter for the big slug of liquor.

"You saved my life one time over in Uganda. That native, you remember—the one who tried to put the assagai spear in my back."

**I**T HAD been one of those emergencies that turn up—any man would have done it without thinking. The native sprang up behind Benbow with the copperheaded assagai, ready to impale him like a lamb on an Arab's spit. McQuarrie saw him, and it was merely reflex to flip out the gun and pull the trigger—he would have done it for any man, even an enemy. It seemed strange for Benbow to place so much weight on it after all these years.

McQuarrie answered, "It is what any man would do for his friend."

"You saved my life. You would do it again. But those others!" He gestured, taking in a whole lifetime of acquaintances. "I have given them money. I have fought with them. And now—" He did not finish his sentence, but his meaning was clear. "That is why I sent for you."

McQuarrie sat down in a lopsided rattan chair and waited.

"I haven't got long, McQuarrie."

There was no use disputing the point. A glance would show what thirty years of quinine and malaria had done to him. This cognac was only finishing the job. However, it took more than quinine and cognac to explain the locked door and the revolver.

To lead on to this point, McQuarrie remarked, "I take it, however, that you



will not go down without a fight."

"The gun, you mean!" Benbow jerked his head with a hoarse cackle of laughter. "I was merely saving myself for you, McQuarrie. I have something to tell you—something to give, and after that they can do their worst."

"Who? That notched-eared Senegalese?"

"Caderosse told you?"

"I have a certain discernment."

"Yes, the Senegalese. And his master, that oily Portuguese who calls himself Romeau. His real name is Alvarez, but he changed it to Romeau because he was Vichy French during the war." He glanced over his shoulder as though he expected someone to be listening outside the closed jealousies that covered the window. He lowered his voice, "You must not trust Caderosse either. He's half Portuguese, like Romeau, and those fellows always stick together."

Cadarousse was honest enough, to McQuarrie's way of thinking. The infusoria had gone to work on Benbow's nerve centers making him hypersuspicious. He'd seen men like that before.

"What do you have, Benbow, the secret to Captain Kidd's treasure?"

He meant it as a joke, but Benbow did not take it that way. He seemed to be considering the question seriously. He nodded.

"Yes, McQuarrie. A treasure as great, perhaps, as Captain Kidd's. A treasure in ivory and gold ingots, and maybe in placer diamonds too, if a man could be lucky enough to find them. I have known of it for a long time. Since before the old days up in Kenya. Since before you first left your native America."

McQuarrie had left America for the first time in 1916 to go to work for Chosen Consolidated, so Benbow's treasure must date a long way back. Perhaps it was one of those timeless things existing only in the dim malarial islands of his imagination.

McQuarrie, however, made no sign of doubting him. He waited for Benbow to go on.

"You have heard of the Marette?" asked Benbow.

The Marette! So it was that. For many years McQuarrie had heard adventurers sit around and talk about the Marette, and each year her treasure became more fabulous.

**T**O EXPLAIN the Marette, it must be remembered that before the first World War the Belgian Congo was filled with thieves who had fled Rhodesia. These men became fond of lurking along the banks of rivers, waiting to fall on any unprotected boat that chanced along. As a result of such depredations trading concerns commenced hoarding ivory, gems and other commodities of high value to be transported all at once and under heavy guard.

The Marette was a small sternwheeler owned by the old Union du Kongo, a Belgian charter backed by pounds sterling. She was loaded with ivory, valuable gems, and some said with diamonds and gold. Then, under the protection of an army craft, she started down the Lomela for Leopoldville on the Congo. Somehow, by connivance or accident, she became separated from her guard and what happened to her was never learned. She merely disappeared.

So the stories multiplied through the years until the Marette became an African counterpart of Eldorado.

McQuarrie said, "Yes, I suppose everyone has heard about the Marette."

"I was aboard her the night she sank."

McQuarrie was prepared for something like this, but the words jolted him just the same. He shot a glance across the table. Benbow was making no pretense at drama. He merely said the words in the flat tone of a man who has reached the end of his trail and has recognized the futility of his life's effort.

"You were aboard the Marette?"

"Yes. I was a lad of twenty-one. I had come from my home in the English midlands to make a fortune in the mines of Rhodesia. A year after my arrival, I went north and worked for Union du



Kongo at the old Portuguese post near Santa Isabel. The sternwheeler *Marette* called, and as was the custom each year, she was loaded with the most valuable trade goods that had been gathered during the season. Chiefly ivory—lots of it grade one scrivello, the soft variety, not the glassy tusk you generally find along these western provinces. And gold and gems too, as I said. We waited three weeks for the army boat to come. Finally she did. She was a new one, a fast screw-operated craft that should never have been sent farther than Coquilhatville. To make it worse, this one was commanded by a drunken lieutenant who had been disciplined to the colony after a court-martial.

"We started downriver, the army boat spending half her time on sandbars and the other half racing upriver to the next grogshop village, sometimes fifty or a hundred kilometers away.

"The river pirates were well organized. A Dutchman named Schlect who had been an officer in the Boer War had shipped as engineer. He did something to the engine. She drifted onto the shallows at the head end of an island, where a dozen of his accomplices boarded her.

"We fought them for a half hour. Schlect was killed. I don't know how many more. It was every man for himself, so there could be no surrender."

Benbow paused to roll up the sleeve of his shirt. An old scar ran across his forearm, from wrist almost to elbow, cutting in half the tattooed figure of a naked woman.

"That scar I have in memory of the *Marette* to prove I am not dreaming. The woman had been tattooed in Johannesburg the year before, and a bullet creased me and cut her in half. I was lying on the deck behind a fire barrel, trying to do nothing much but stay alive. It was then that it struck."

"The boilers exploded?"

"What happened I'll never know. Something struck me, and I came to in the water holding to a piece of deck timber. I swim for a long time with no

sight of the *Marette* anywhere. Only a white cloud hanging over the head of the island.

"I made it to shore and found two men. One of them was named Liddy Ross, the other LaFarge. They were both with the river pirates. We thought we were the only survivors."

**M**EMORY of the scene had brought a little feverish sparkle to Benbow's bilious eyes, and there was an almost youthful eagerness in his hand as he lifted the bottle and poured another drink.

"What could I do, McQuarrie? I was little more than a boy—alone. My life hung on a slim thread. You understand. Those men—Ross and LaFarge were not as evil as one might expect. We decided to say nothing of the sunken craft's whereabouts. Someday we could return and have its treasure for ourselves.

"Later we heard of another survivor. One of the pirates, Preston, an American who had been wanted for murder in Rhodesia. I never met him. LaFarge once told me that he went to America and was elected to Congress, but I suppose that was a lie."

"I suppose it was the truth," growled McQuarrie, pouring a short one for himself. "Why didn't you ever go back and get the cargo?"

"For three years it was impossible. The Union du Kongo kept searching. I have been trying for years to raise money. And it is a dangerous undertaking. Recovering it would take time, equipment. I understand that Liddy Ross went back with grappling tools but failed to find the island. He died the next year of knife-poisoning in Laurencio Marques."

"And LaFarge?"

"He is in Bentlouville. A grogshop proprietor. You will find him using the name Pierre Delus for reasons of his own."

McQuarrie sat for a long time, staring at Benbow beneath the light of the electric bulb. The secret of the *Marette* had



dominated the man's entire life, keeping him in these deep tropics, always scheming to go back, to take a fortune, and perhaps return like a lord to his native midlands.

And in the end here he was, dying of drink and fear and quinine, the dream he had lived by lying scattered and futile like confetti after the last dancing slipper has gone.

McQuarrie was a poet of sorts, and such things appealed to him. Omar the Tentmaker wrote a stanza that would fit well here—

He did not repeat it aloud, for Benbow was not the sort of person one quoted poetry to.

Of course, there was a good chance it was only a lie. Men sometimes dream things for so many years that they believe them themselves.

"You could find the island?"

"In one week, if I chose, I could drop a buoy within a hundred meters of the wreck of the *Marette*. But that is something I will never do. I will die here in this jungle city. From bullets, from cognac."

"What makes you think someone is trying to kill you?"

"They have already tried once to kill me."

"And you think it was because of the *Marette*?"

"Yes."

Ridiculous, of course. They might torture him for the secret, but what could be gained by killing him?

Benbow stood up, restlessly feeling the butt of the revolver in the band of his white trousers. "Wait here. I have a paper in my room. I'll go the back way. It would be difficult with you and your artificial foot. I'll be back—in five minutes."

McQUARRIE waved him away, watching as he unbolted the door and moved into the dark hallway with a whispering slap-slap of rope shoes against rattan mattings.

Yes, of course, it was ridiculous. Ben-

bow had dreamed it while delirium tremens was burning his brain. McQuarrie had made another in a long succession of fool's journeys.

He drew out his wallet, opened it and counted the thousand-franc notes it contained. Their total would scarcely make the equivalent of thirty pounds sterling.

Time passed. He could still hear the wireless popping and sounds of the Johannesburg jazz band coming through. He poured a small drink and tasted it. Benbow's five minutes were gone long ago.

He snapped off the electric bulb and lifted the jalousies. The sun had gone down, and it was already growing dark. He walked back to the bar. Four Belgian non-coms were doing a lot of bellowing and backslapping at a wall table. The Senegalese, Tovada, was in his accustomed place.

"Your business is finished, *Senhor*?" asked Caderosse.

"Where the devil is Benbow's room?"

"Ah—I have promised. You understand—"

"To hell with that, sir! He left me to be gone five minutes an hour ago. I'll not be kept waiting while he sleeps off his drunken stupor, locked in some secret room from a non-existent danger."

Caderosse lifted his hands in resignation, "Very well, *Senhor*. We have been friends the long time. I know you have been Benbow's friend, too. His room—there is no number. One reaches it by following the verandah to the north side of the building. It is the third door from the corner. It will be locked, and I doubt very much whether Benbow will open it—even for you."

McQuarrie stomped away through the street door, climbing an outside stairway which led to the verandah.

Thick twilight hung over the street. It was quite dark inside the verandah, for vines had grown wild among screens and shutters, making deep shade even during the sun of afternoon.

He walked, coming down heavily on his artificial foot so Benbow would be



advised of his approach. He turned the corner and found the door without difficulty. It was blank, the only unnumbered one on that side. Evidently it had once been used for a storeroom.

He rapped. There seemed to be someone shuffling around inside, but no answer came. He rapped again.

"Benbow. Open up, man. This is McQuarrie."

The shuffling sound had stopped.

"Open up, I say. Benbow!"

This was damned strange. For a few seconds he stared at the panels. He placed his shoulder against the door and leaned forward.

The door gave so unexpectedly it almost spilled him to the floor inside. He had not intended to break it down, only to test it, but the screws which held the bolt had rotted so that any heavy push would tear them out.

For a second he fought for balance. He steadied himself with one hand on the wall.

It was close, heavy with the stale of alcohol. Dark, with only a slight glow coming from the open door behind him.

"Benbow!" he repeated.

He walked forward, feeling his way with his feet, reaching aloft for the hanging cord. He couldn't find it. He drew a chemi-dry match box from his coat pocket, screwed off the top and struck a match.

**F**LAME burst up, building distorted shadows along the walls. Things were strewn in a mad disorder. The drawers of a commode had been pulled out and their contents spilled across the floor, the bed was upended, the mosquito curtain half torn down and strung across one side of the room.

There was another room beyond. A sort of tiny parlor, divided from the bedroom by a beaded drape. He stepped toward the drape, but the match flame sank and went out.

He located the light above on its hanging cord. He touched the bulb. It was still hot. It had been turned off only a

few seconds before. Whoever it was must have heard the sound of his heavy steps on the verandah.

He turned on the light. His eyes fell on something that made him step back, sucking breath with surprise.

A pair of feet, encased in rope-soled shoes, protruded from the upended bed.

He booted the bed to one side, knowing well enough what he would see. Benbow was sprawled there, face down, the woven palm mattings beneath his left arm soaked and blackened by blood.

He had been knifed under the left arm. His shirt was torn half off his shoulders, so there had evidently been a struggle. There was a red streak across his cheek, and blood where his temple had struck an iron washstand. His nickelplated pistol lay in the center of the room, with none of its loads discharged.

McQuarrie stood after his brief examination, listening. They had been there, searching the room, only a moment before. No one had left by way of the verandah, of course, but there was that other exit—through the archway and the tiny sitting room to the balcony overlooking a patio in the center of the building.

He took a step toward the drape. The drape was made of bits of colored bamboo, strung on silken threads, and it was responsive to slight movements. It moved now—a tremble, as though from a passage of air.

It was evident that the patio door of the room was open. McQuarrie stepped forward. His fingers reached to sweep the drape aside, then he hesitated, and some instinct made him swing his body to the protection of the archway.

A gun hammered the silence. It was so close that its concussion was like a blow on his chest. The bullet tore the drape, cutting two or three of its strands to the floor, sending slivers of bamboo that burned the back of his hand. It would have struck him chest-high had he gone through as he started.

His own gun was in his hand, by reflex



action. He stood with shoulders pressed to the wall, gun barrel angled toward the inner room, finger on the trigger, but resisting the pressure that would send a continuous stream of those Mauser bullets. He was thus for the tick of three sounds, then he swung the barrel in a high arc, shattering the light bulb.

The room was dark. Soon the outline of the verandah door became visible. He could feel the poorly supported floor weave under his feet, indicating that a man's weight was moving the back way. He lifted the edge of the drape. The door leading to the patio stood open. He hobbled to it with four long strides and paused on the tiny balcony.

**B**ELOW him he could see the disused patio overgrown with orchilla weeds—weeds which stood as high as a man's armpits. He could catch no movement—not the rustle of a single leaf.

On the opposite side of the hotel men were talking. Their feet shook the termite weakened structure as they ran along the verandah, attracted by the sound of shooting.

McQuarrie put back his gun and walked inside, groped his way through draperies and the cluttered bedroom.

"Ah, *Senhor*!" exclaimed Caderosse as they collided at the verandah door. "It is you."

"Yes. It is I."

A certain grimness in McQuarrie's tone made Caderosse step back and catch his breath.

"Then the shooting. It was . . ."

"The gun was meant for me. Benbow is in there with a knife wound in his heart."

News traveled fast, and within four or five minutes the verandah in front of the room was crowded with men who babbled in a half-dozen languages. A native gendarme in military cap, white shorts and little else elbowed his way inside and played the beam of an electric torch on Benbow's body. Excited at the opportunity of investigating the death of a white man, the gendarme commenced

questioning those who happened to be nearest without paying the slightest attention to what was told him. McQuarrie stomped back down the stairs and found a table at one side of the bar.

"Stengah, sir!" he shouted, beating his heavy fist on the table. "Even your vile Moroccan liquor is welcome to take the dry taste of death from my throat!"

**L**ATER that night, a gendarme took McQuarrie to the reception room of the colonial administrator. The administrator was a short paunchy man who did not bother to move from his rattan chair when McQuarrie entered.

"Pour yourself a drink," the administrator said in the Flemish tongue, waving a puffy hand at a bottle and a container of ice on the table beside him. The brandy was European and excellent. McQuarrie wished he had gone there in the first place.

"Dirty business, back at the hotel," the administrator remarked. "You didn't kill him, did you?"

"Indeed not! A dirty treacherous act—"

"No offense." The fellow wanted to get rid of the details as quickly as possible. If it had been some planter, or an official of the Commercial Soci  t  , his attitude would have been different, but a tramp like Benbow deserved somewhat less consideration than would have been accorded a native.

McQuarrie sipped his stengah, and drew a letter from his coat pocket.

"Proof, if you wish it. This letter shows I was on the friendliest of terms with poor Benbow. If you'll read it . . ."

The administrator waved it aside with his pink fingers. He sat in courteous silence waiting for McQuarrie to finish his drink. Then in a tone which indicated that the unpleasant business was settled, he said, "I hear that you play."

McQuarrie bowed and hobbled to an old grand piano which stood near the screened bay windows. He lowered the stool, sat and stared at the keys for a while as though re-finding an old



acquaintance. His hand fell solidly, awakening a major chord from the strings.

The piano was not new. Not "tropic-proof" like some of the recent models, and its strings had been corroded by the action of moisture and fungus so they were robbed of natural brilliance, but given a singing tone caused by their tiny oscillations from pitch.

McQuarrie familiarized himself with the instrument's touch, moving along in a series of arpeggios, then, recognizing the mood of his host, he played from memory a series of simple Chopin waltzes.

The administrator drank his tall brandy and listened while his eyes swam with weeping nostalgia. McQuarrie glimpsed the mood and smiled down as his strong fingers touched the keys. Indeed, a piano player must be suspect of more than murder to go to jail in the tropics.

It was near midnight when he returned to the Bordeaux. The place was filled with drunken non-coms from the cantonment, with clerks of the company, with the assorted flotsam of the jungle.

He wanted to ask concerning Romeau, but Caderosse was gone, several native boys in white coats having taken his place behind the bar. He ordered brandy, and stood without drinking it, looking through the haze of cigarette smoke which filled the room. The notched-eared Senegalese was at a table in the corner—but tonight he was not alone. With him was a rather handsome man of about thirty, smooth-shaven, with soft, naturally brown skin.

So that was his master, Romeau. He was something of a shock. McQuarrie had expected Romeau to look more like a cut-throat. It was foolish, of course. A man's soul cannot be read in his eyes, all generations of poets to the contrary.

Romeau's gaze met McQuarrie's, but there was no recognition, no sign of interest.

That night McQuarrie bolted both doors and slept with his Mauser pistol

on the floor beside his bed. No one bothered him. Nor did they the next night. About noon of the day following one of the big Androes Company stern-wheelers came, riding deep under a cargo of blister copper from the mines of the Uganda, and McQuarrie was taken aboard.

He would return to Leopoldville and forget the Murette. It was only a dream, a creation of Benbow's drink-embalmed mind. Indeed, Benbow had died violently as he had suggested, but McQuarrie was forty-five, and forty-five is the tropical age of Methuselah. Hereafter, for him the cool stengahs of the hotel terrace, the piano, and his dreams.

HE TOOK a shower and waited for his linens to be pressed by his Bakele boy. It was then time for tiffin. He found a small table beneath the awnings and was sipping pinkish-sweet papaya juice, waiting for his eggs and ashanti when a familiar voice shattered the polite murmuring of diners.

"McQuarrie, you evil-footed genius! I haven't seen you since the night we raided the moonstone concession at Palembang."

It was Hernandez Riley, of course. McQuarrie had been expecting to run onto him for months, but somehow the thought of his being on this boat from upriver never occurred to him.

Hernandez strode across the salon, weaving with tall grace among the tables. He slammed McQuarrie on the shoulder with a force that knocked him against the table and slopped the papaya juice.

"Indeed, Hernandez," cautioned McQuarrie, "I should think you would forget that Palembang thing. A bit of high spirits, despite all that *régisser* said in his report, but still you insist on making it sound like a foray of Henry Morgan."

Hernandez laughed with a toss of his dark hair and sat down.

He was half Irish, half Spanish, and in McQuarrie's opinion he had inherited the vices of both peoples. He was tall—



perhaps an inch taller than McQuarrie, although he lacked the elder man's heavy strength. His eyes were that peculiar shade of midnight blue one sometimes finds in the mingling of light and dark bloods. Although his upper lip and his Ronald Colman moustache were twisted a trifle out of shape by a shrapnel scar, it did not impair his ruggedly handsome face. Hernandez Riley was fond of telling how he got that shrapnel scar fighting the sons of Nippon, while holding them at bay on the rice paddies of North Singapore practically singlehanded, but McQuarrie knew it had come several years before in a much less glorious manner, when a Limey gunboat fired on him while his pearling lugger was working some crown shell by the dark of the moon.

"I say, McQuarrie, old top, you're a long way from Singapore, what?" said Hernandez playfully, making fun of the pukka Sahibs as he sometimes liked to do.

"Singapore!" McQuarrie made a wry face. "Federated Malay States are not the place for a white man they once were. We whites were once considered gods. It did our prestige no good when the natives saw the little brown fellows slapping us around."

"And so you came to the Congo where some vestige of white supremacy remains."

"That was a second consideration." McQuarrie moved around in his reed chair, clomping his foot for emphasis. "There was a venture, a mercantile venture in Dar es Salaam. A failure."

"I heard about it."

"Indeed!"

**MCQUARRIE** and five others had promoted a vessel, the Hsin Heng of the old Far East Forwarding and Dry Dock Company, to haul a thousand European refugees from Ostend, where they were loaded without the formal scrutiny of Belgian authorities, around Good Hope to Aquaba in south Trans-Jordan, thus placing them in the Holy

Land without offending the watchful British of Tel Aviv. Two things proved wrong with the scheme—the poverty of the refugees themselves, and those snooping port authorities of Capetown, where the Hsin Heng had stopped for repairs to her main drive. As a result the refugees were now an unwelcome addition to the port of Berbera in Portuguese Somaliland, the Hsin Heng was once more plying the Bay of Bengal and McQuarrie had wandered from Dar es Salaam to the deep Congo in search of the young man who now shared his table.

McQuarrie lifted his papaya juice, revolving the glass sadly in his supple fingers. "A crusade, Hernandez. A modern crusade in the name of justice and humanity, and yet those British would imprison me, if they could."

"I heard you were in Leopoldville," remarked Hernandez.

"I was called upriver—by a friend."

McQuarrie told briefly of Benbow. He did not glamorize, yet as he talked Hernandez Riley leaned forward with breathless attention.

"And now you are going to Bentlouvre to find LaFarge?"

"I am not. Bentlouvre is up the river, not down. I am returning to the ease of Leopoldville. To the devil with the dream treasure of the Marett!"

Hernandez reared back; he snorted and began rolling a native-tobacco cigarette. "Returning to Leopoldville! To sit on a hotel terrace, I suppose, and play a piano for the drinks that those Belgian loafers will buy you."

McQuarrie was beyond the point of taking offense at anything Hernandez Riley could say to him. He shrugged his heavy shoulders. "The drinks are cool in Leopoldville, no matter whose money buys them. The water does not taste of iodine, and one is not called upon to eat cassava three times a day." McQuarrie sat back and lighted a cigarette of his own. "It occurs to me, Hernandez, that I am growing old."

"It occurs to me you are a fool."

"So!"



"Yes, a damned fool, and don't put on that Omar Khayyam look. Anybody is a fool who looks for comfort on the Congo. The Congo is a place where one comes to make money and get out as damn well quick as he can. And here's a chance to make more money than you've ever seen in our lives simply by unearthing that sunken boat."

"You forget that we don't know where it is."

"But that other fellow, LaFarge or Delus or whatever he calls himself, must know."

"And it has been submerged just a few years."

"I dare say the waters of the Lomela haven't had too great an effect on ivory, gold and gems." Hernandez slammed his hand on the table so hard that the glassware danced, and people turned to look at him. "I say we go for it, McQuarrie, and the hell with your comfort."

McQUARRIE shrugged. There was no arguing with the boy. The mystery of Benbow's death had aroused his Irish imagination, and the Murette treasure had appealed to his Spanish cupidity, or vice-versa. Really this was what McQuarrie had intended to happen.

They finished tiffin and were ferried ashore late that afternoon at a little Mission town called Basanka. Basanka boasted a clean rest-house in connection with the Catholic hospital and some good cognac in possession of Dr. George Serios, French medico from Nice. Serios sent them upriver in the hospital powerboat as far as Bonde where they secured the services of a native crew and dugout which, after two monotonous days, placed them in Bentlouville, thirty or forty kilometers up that stagnant series of swamps generally referred to as the Gombe River.

Bentlouville had been a dismal trading-post stop where palm nuts and a little crude vine-rubber were gathered, but early in the current year a crew of oil drillers from the Haut Katanga unloaded and started sinking their casing

through the district's well-nigh bottomless mud. Although no sign of oil had yet stained the rotary tools, the drilling had created a mild boom, so that now a half-dozen new buildings of sheet metal and wood shone brightly in the clearing that had been the native cassava patch.

It was twilight when McQuarrie and Hernandez came ashore, followed by the Bakele boy. Across a disused compound grown waist-high with cane grass they could see the upper part of a thatched whitewashed building with a flagstaff set in front. It was evidently the rest-house.

It proved to be clean enough, although, like all such places, it had been allowed to run down during the war when Belgian resources were being expended elsewhere. It had a verandah running around three sides, drooping low like the bill of an Englishman's cap. The building itself stood on foot-high piles to give the bottom ventilation which, in theory at least, is safeguard against the black-water and a half-hundred other fevers of the tropics.

A houseboy in a red calico robe, with enormously enlarged earlobes showed them to clean quarters opening on a hallway which ran down the middle of the building.

After depositing their baggage, they left in search of the grogshop operator, LaFarge, alias Pierre Delus.

A fierce-looking Italian with gold earrings who presided over the bar in the dingy *Salon Delus* spread his hands helplessly on the bar, lifting his shoulders in an *opera bouffe* gesture of helplessness. "You are looking for Pierre Delus? Then you must travel farther than human has ever traveled before."

"What do you mean?" demanded McQuarrie, thumping his foot in exasperation over a race which insisted in dramatizing their most simple utterances.

The Italian turned and pointed to a small hole which centered a spiderweb of cracks in a rusty mirror behind him. "The first shot, *Signores*—it missed."

"Are you trying to tell us that Delus has been murdered?"



"Si. Murdered! Not twenty-four hours ago, and given to earth without sacrament, jungle conditions being as they are." With a ponderous motion the man crossed himself.

"In a brawl?" demanded McQuarrie knowing quite well what the answer would be.

"Ambushed by some dog of the devil who stood outside the door and fired two shots."

"He had enemies?"

"Obviously, *Signori*!"

It was dark now, and the petrol lamp over the bar cast a strong white light on McQuarrie's back. He glanced at the lamp and his eyes moved uneasily to his artificial foot and back again, his hand making its habitual gesture toward the Mauser automatic beneath his coat.

**H**ERNANDEZ smiled and fashioned a cigarette of strong native tobacco. "Steady! Remember, his first shot missed." He took a match from its moisture-proof can and struck it to flame on his fingernail. "Besides, this time he would want to get both of us."

McQuarrie struck the bar for emphasis, "I would much prefer in the future, that you do not tamper with my affairs. At this moment, had I followed my own judgment, I would be comfortably ensconced on the terrace of the Vanderkirk hotel in Leopoldville."

Hernandez smiled and spoke to the man across the bar, "No suspects, of course?"

The Italian made a wry face. "These colonial police—these black men! What do they know of the European, of our civilization, of why we kill? Is it not so, *Signores*?"

"There has been a man here named Romeau?" asked McQuarrie.

"I do not know him."

"He had a black—a Senegalese with tribal notches in his ears."

"A Senegalese? I heard the houseboy speak something of seeing a notch-eared man this evening. At the rest-house. These natives—they notice the strange

tribal marks." The Italian gestured his perplexity of all this. "A drink, *Signores*?"

"Aye, a drink! French Cognac. *French*, or I'll have your heart on my sword, sir."

Hernandez grinned, "Yes, Kentucky bourbon for *Monsieur d' Artagnon*."

"I have brandy from Rabat!" muttered the Italian truculently.

"Very well then, Brandy from Rabat."

One drink, and McQuarrie stomped to the front door. He stood in shadow beneath the tin awning looking across the grass-grown compound. A couple of lights glowed in the rest-house windows. "I would wager devalued francs against American silver dollars that Romeau and his notch-eared Senegalese are over there."

Hernandez gave him a grin that pulled his Ronald Colman moustache off kilter, "You have changed, McQuarrie. I recall a night you deliberately walked into an ambush set by that Dutch pig, Van Sheldt, and very nearly beat the life from him with your fists."

"An act of necessity. I have never been like you—a man who invites trouble."

"But still . . ."

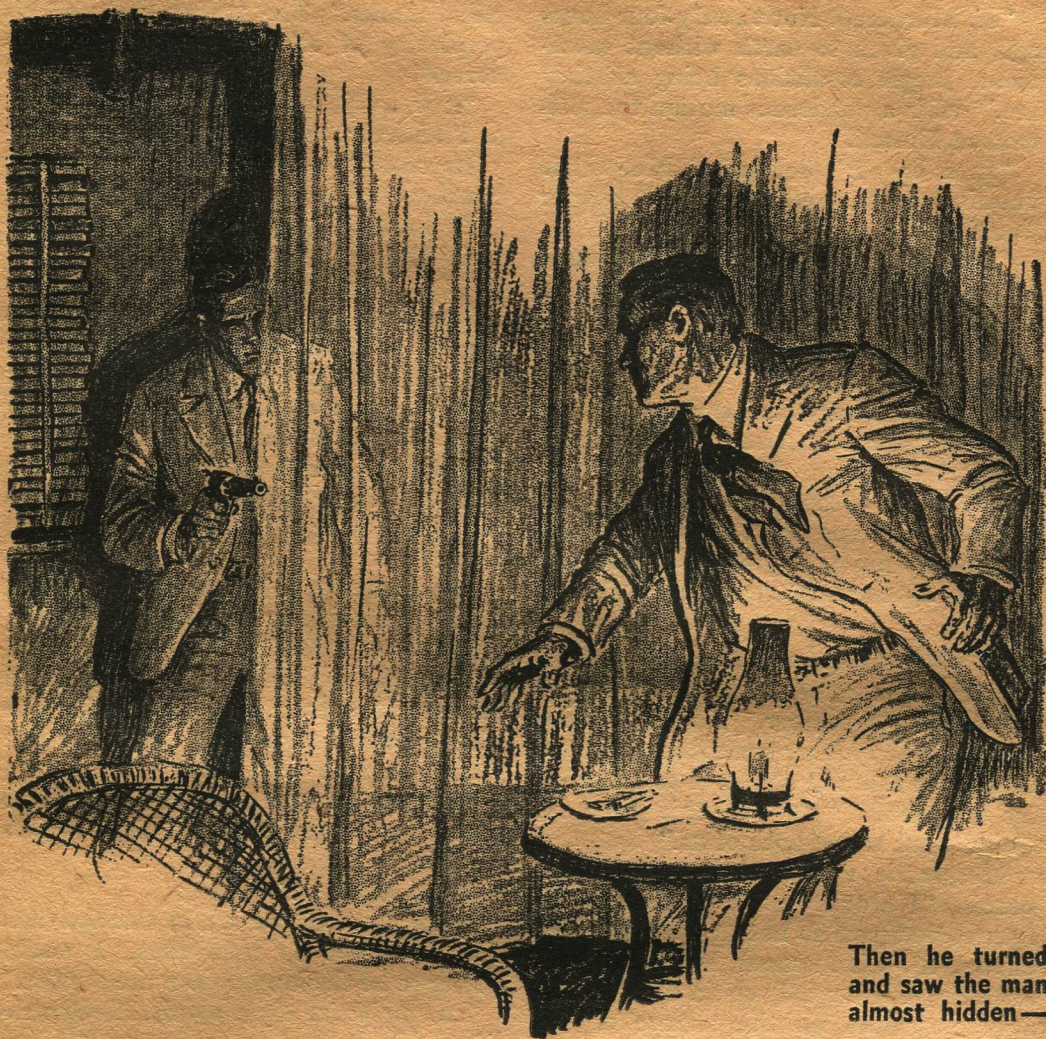
"Aye, but still we are in Bentlouville. We are beset by murderers. I would prefer to be the hunter than the hunted."

To emphasize these words, McQuarrie lifted his ugly, forward-heavy Mauser automatic and jammed it back in its armpit holster. He started away, Hernandez following, avoiding the path, skirting a yam field and the top-heavy thatch houses of the native village, approaching the rest-house in the deep night shade of a widely branching bokongu tree.

**C**ANDLELIGHT glowed in two of the windows, reflecting dimly against the vines and bamboo shutters which shaded the low-roofed verandah. McQuarrie paused beyond the fringe of light, trying to see inside the rooms.

A man was moving about in one of them. A short white man in linen trousers





Then he turned  
and saw the man  
almost hidden—

and a pink undershirt. Probably one of the traveling officials of the drilling company who preferred the old, bottom-ventilated rest-house to the new tin-roofed company buildings which held heat like so many cookstoves.

He looked in the other room. It had been curtained by many thicknesses of mosquito nettings so its interior was milky and indistinct.

"Oh, hell!" said Hernandez.

He walked to the verandah and sat in a canvas swing chair. McQuarrie followed him. They smoked and listened to the song of mosquitoes, to the distant throb of the tom-toms in the village.

It was peaceful with the heat gone and a slight breeze rustling among bamboo shutters and glossy-leaved *nichi* vines.

The short white man left, following the cobbled pathway through the old compound toward one of the grogshops. The native boy came, carrying bottled water and some tinned chicken.

McQuarrie stopped him, "Have you seen a native man of strange tribe with notched ears?"

"This afternoon, *bwana*."

"Where is he now?"

"I do not know."

"Who is inside?"

"Only the man from the mission school



at 'Nkoi. This is his supper, *bwana*."

McQuarrie handed the boy a copper franc-piece.

"You see," yawned Hernandez. "The killers have already gone. Why would they stay after their task was done?"

"To wait for us."

Hernandez was smiling in the dark. McQuarrie could tell that by the low modulation of his voice. "You are wrong. Even now, perhaps, they are on their way to look for you on that excellent terrace of the Hotel Vanderkirk in Leopardsville, *quien sabe?*"

McQuarrie smiled. "Indeed! Who knows?"

They smoked, listening to the rocking voice of the tom-tom, the closer half-melodious twang of a cora—the native guitar. His Bakele boy was probably over there, dancing himself into a trance of sensual ecstasy. Closer, in the white man's village, a couple of drillers were bellowing a bawdy French song.

McQuarrie felt his pockets for one of his Turkish cigarettes. He had none, but there were still a few packs in the uniform can inside. He couldn't endure vile native tobacco like Hernandez who had been raised on Mexican-made El Ropas.

"To bed?" asked Hernandez.

"Perhaps. First a decent smoke." He walked to the door. "Coming?" he asked.

"In a moment."

THE hallway was dark save for the moonlight which entered a distant screened door. McQuarrie walked slowly, guided by his sense of touch, by the echo of his artificial foot on the raised floor. His room was next to the end. He struck a match. The door was about four inches ajar—just as he had left it. He opened the door with his foot, carrying the match aloft, looking for the candle.

It was beneath a smoky chimney on a three-legged bamboo stand. He lighted it, replaced the chimney, crushed out the match against the woven-palm mattings of the floor. Then he turned and saw the

man who stood half-hidden among the bedraggled mosquito curtains that surrounded the bed.

The man was Romeau. He held a revolver, deadly level.

McQuarrie made a startled backward movement, then caught himself. He sucked in his breath. At last he spoke, "So we meet!"

Romeau was smiling. He was a handsome devil. Portuguese, perhaps, as Benbow had said, but with Arabian blood, too. His eyes were intensely dark, his skin dusky-smooth like the skin of a peach.

"Yes, we meet," he said, speaking English with a musical inflection. "I wait, and the world comes to me."

"You have things pretty well under control then."

Romeau shrugged, still smiling, showing his perfect white teeth, his lips pulled to a thin line.

McQuarrie spoke, "Well, aren't you going to pull the trigger?"

"Not—yet."

No, he wouldn't pull the trigger. He wouldn't kill McQuarrie and leave Hernandez alive. He would have to kill them both. Perhaps his helper, that notch-eared Senegalese, was waiting in Hernandez's room.

McQuarrie stood still, the light behind him, apparently reposed, even resigned. His eyes were steady, but his mind was like an imprisoned bird, darting for a means of liberation.

He dared not move closer to Romeau. The gun was cocked and aimed at his heart. The man didn't want to pull the trigger and warn Hernandez, but he would do it rather than let McQuarrie close with him. As for escape, both window and door were too far away.

McQuarrie spoke, rocking heavily on his artificial foot, "First it was Benbow. Then Pierre Delus. Now me. Do you kill like the leopard because of your love of the sport?"

"Of course not," Romeau smiled. He did not say why he killed. Instead he asked, "What was it Benbow told you



about the Murette?"

"Why should I tell you! You will kill me anyway."

"Perhaps I would reconsider."

"Do I look so much like a fool?"

Neither spoke for a moment. Through the flimsy walls came the regular *thum-ta-ta-thum-thum* of the tom-tom in the native village, the high-pitched "*ke-ke-ke*" shouts of the dancing warriors. Closer at hand McQuarrie could hear the movements of Hernandez out on the verandah.

In a moment Hernandez would open the door and enter the hall. The Senegalese would strike—with a knife perhaps. Even though he died himself, McQuarrie would have to warn him.

HE RETREATED a slow step, bringing his back against the three-legged bamboo stand where the candle burned beneath its glass chimney.

Romeau did not seem to suspect what was happening for he made no movement until the sudden swing of shadows told him the flame was tipping to the floor.

He muttered a sharp word in his native Portuguese. He swung his gun to keep McQuarrie covered. For the moment the room seemed like an elusive spinning thing with the light standing still and every other object on the move.

Romeau pulled the trigger. The muzzle of his revolver spat fire just as the chimney crashed. For a bare fraction of a second the candle flame fluttered upon the matings. Then it went out.

McQuarrie had already flung himself to back and elbows, head bent against the wall. His hand came from his shoulder holster with the heavy Mauser pistol. He paused a second, trying to locate Romeau. He'd lost his bearings in the flickering darkness.

He sensed a movement. Real or imagined. He squeezed the trigger and held it down. The Mauser was not like a Colt or a Luger in which each cartridge was discharged by an individual pull of the trigger. This gun hammered its

magazine dry, the bullets coming in a single machine-gun stream, sweeping the room in their deadly arc.

And of a sudden, the room was silent—a sort of ringing silence. The air was filled with stinging fragments of burned powder.

No way of knowing whether one of his blind bullets had struck home. A man was running outside on the verandah. Perhaps Hernandez. It might have been either Romeau or the Senegalese. McQuarrie dared not call for fear of revealing his position. There was a good chance Romeau was still over there, unharmed.

Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Shadow forms grew up. The mosquito curtain, the rattan chair, the little stand with its water bottle and wash basin.

"McQuarrie!" It was Hernandez coming through the hall at a trot. He had paused outside the room. "McQuarrie!"

McQuarrie inserted another charge in the magazine. "Be careful!"

It was not Hernandez' nature to be careful. He struck a match and walked in, holding it in one hand, his Luger pistol in the other. He saw McQuarrie lying on the floor.

"What the devil!" He came closer. "Are you wounded?"

"No. I like it down here."

McQuarrie made it to his feet. Romeau was gone. He must have been on the move to the door when he fired his shot. It had been his steps running down the hall. McQuarrie never yet had seen a killer who was not a coward at heart. A series of bullet holes lined the far wall about waist high. Hernandez examined them while his match burned to his fingers.

"That's a dirty way to shoot—at a man's digestive organs. Why don't you Irish ever aim for the head? Was there someone here? Or was it your artistic imagination?"

"Hell and damnation!" McQuarrie closed the home-made bamboo jalousies and picked up the candle to light it.



"This is an impudent way to speak to one who has just saved your life."

"My life?"

"The Senegalese—he was waiting in your room."

"I'd have shot him between the eyes," yawned Hernandez. "Right between the eyes!"

The bit of shooting at the guest-house caused no excitement in Bentlouville. Only the man from the mission school at 'Nkoi was alarmed, and Hernandez explained the shooting was merely an accidental discharge while McQuarrie was cleaning his pistol. There would be nothing gained by putting those native militiamen on the prowl.

THEY slept. In the morning McQuarrie placed a ten-franc note in the hands of the voodoo priest and learned that a certain *bwana* and his notch-eared black man had started downriver with a crew of paddlers from the native village, the agreed destination being Kombodo. Two days later at Kombodo McQuarrie was told that the same men had taken a missionary steamboat for some unannounced downriver destination.

In due course, McQuarrie and Hernandez reached Coquilhatville.

If Romeau planned an expedition up the Lomela in search of the sunken Marette, Coquilhatville was its logical starting point. But the trail had ended. No one in that jungle city had seen Romeau, nor had ever heard of a notch-eared Senegalese.

After three days of tropical heat, poor food, and worse liquor, Hernandez, who always vacillated between triumph and despair, was for giving up the search and taking the first steamboat downriver to Leopoldville. McQuarrie was of a different nature. Now that his teeth were set in the thing, now that he had met Romeau face to face and accepted his challenge, McQuarrie was determined to see it through.

He visited the records of Coquilhatville province to inquire whether a permit had been issued for a salvage

expedition. There he received an interesting bit of news. The matter of salvage was up to the original owner, but in Leopoldville a permit had been granted to a scientific expedition to Coquilhatville province. The scientists had stated that their purpose was a search for certain cities of antiquity along the middle Lomela.

The permit had been granted to Arthur Gilling, an American. The expedition and its chartered steamboat had been at the dock of Coquilhatville for these five weeks, making preparations for an extended absence.

"Lost cities be damned!" McQuarrie said to Hernandez on returning to the hotel. "Whoever heard of a lost city in that swamp-hole of the Lomela? Things there have been built of straw and bamboo since the beginning of time. That expedition permit is merely an excuse to dig. Didn't Benbow say one of the river pirates went to America? And here is something—if the matter of salvage is up to the original owner, then the Marette treasure still belongs to the successors of Union du Kongo. It would be up to this Gilling to do his digging on the quiet."

McQuarrie clomped to a table and sat with his brandy and bottled water giving thought to the situation.

Hernandez smiled. "Perhaps you've unearthed the American's secret. What will it be? Blackmail?"

"You are crude, Hernandez!"

"I am broke. And so are you."

"Union du Kongo," said McQuarrie thoughtfully, looking through the screened verandah of the hotel at the siesta-deserted street of the river town. "Bankrupt. Assets absorbed by Congo Belge Societé. That was during the worldwide depression. I'll wager the Marette means little enough to the resident director of the Societé in Leopoldville. I seem to recall him. A small fellow who was forever eating plantain and banana salads on the terrace of the Vanderkirk."

"You don't plan on *buying* the Marette!"



"Not with our assets! In a short time we'll be fortunate to be able to buy a good cigar. I would prefer the Société for a partner. Perhaps it can be arranged."

McQUARRIE instructed Hernandez to strike up an acquaintance with Arthur Gilling, and, using a good share of his remaining money, he took the plane to Leopoldville. There he once more sat on the terrace of the Hotel Vanderkirk, and when Edouard Daye, the resident director of the Société, arrived for his plantain and banana salad, McQuarrie introduced himself. Daye, as it happened, knew considerably less of the Marette than would most jungle tramps. He seemed a trifle amused at McQuarrie's request for a salvage lease, but nevertheless he read the contract carefully before signing and insisted on a one-third cut of the final net returns, if any, rather than the twenty percent that McQuarrie had suggested.

With this lease and salvage agreement tucked in his pocket, McQuarrie flew the return journey.

Hernandez was not at the plane dock when the pontoon ship was set down on the smooth surface of the Congo. Neither was he at the hotel, nor had he been seen for two days.

The fellow was amply able to care for himself, but still McQuarrie worried about him. It was a relief when a rap sounded on his door late that night, and Hernandez' voice sounded through the panels. "Get up, you of the oaken leg, and behold the Spanish Don who will guide the Gilling expedition to the lost cities of Cibolo!"

"You're drunk," muttered McQuarrie, doing a one-legged hop to the door.

"I am sober!"

Riley came in, puffing an extremely long Egyptian cigarette. Cigarettes of that quality cost in the neighborhood of seventy francs the package, so McQuarrie was more than mildly curious. "You must have received part of your fee in advance!"

"You look dull," remarked Hernandez with a touch of admiration. "But actually, your brain has a certain acuteness. How did you know I bulldozed them out of a portion of my fee?"

"Not only that! I also suspect the existence of a woman."

"Damn you, McQuarrie! Who have you been talking to?"

"No one. Merely that we have been acquainted a long time. I fail to remember a single conspicuous success of yours that did not have at least one woman involved."

Hernandez laughed, flattered by the observation. He was rather proud of the way he had with women. "You'll never forgive me for that little Siamese dancer, will you?"

"No. I will not."

"So, there is a woman. Young and quite beautiful, I might add."

"The millionaire's daughter. It fits like mosaic."

"You have a rough stone in your mosaic this time, McQuarrie." Hernandez inhaled deeply and with a certain regret. "She is not his daughter. She happens to be his wife."

"Mrs. Arthur Gilling?"

"I prefer to think of her as *Janet* Gilling."

"What does Arthur think of his wife's protégé?"

"Why, he's fascinated with me, McQuarrie. It happens that Gilling has spent weeks searching for a man who is familiar with certain areas of the Lomela river—especially an area at the head end of a certain island. I convinced him that I knew the names of the very crocodiles that live there."

"You've never been up the Lomela."

"But *you have*, McQuarrie, and you are my assistant." He asked, "Did you get the lease?"

McQuarrie patted his pocket. "We own a two-thirds interest in the Marette treasure for a period of five years, no matter who unearths it."

"And we're the guides of Gilling's expedition!" Hernandez lay on the bed,



blowing cigarette smoke. "McQuarrie, how does it happen we didn't become millionaires years and years ago?"

McQUARRIE had a habitual suspicion of easy conquests, and for that reason he was wary of Gilling. There was Romeau, for instance. It was strange the way Romeau had disappeared between Kombodo and Coquilhatville. So far there was no connection between Romeau and the American, but the interest both showed in the Marette was too great a coincidence to please him.

He met Arthur Gilling and his wife at tiffin the following noon. It was served beneath the bright new awnings on the deck of the *Cygne*, the little sternwheel steamboat that Gilling had chartered at Stanley Pool.

Gilling was a powerful man of forty or forty-five. He had an abrupt aggressive manner and was rather prone to bark at those who disagreed with him. Not the type, thought McQuarrie, who is generally interested in discovering lost cities for the sake of science. His wife was fifteen years his junior—a lovely quiet-voiced girl who had a habit of saying more with her eyes than with her tongue.

"I understand you know the rivers of the South Congo drainage the way most men know the palms of their hands!" Gilling said to McQuarrie.

"Indeed, those rivers are familiar to me."

"You're one-legged, aren't you?"

"I have not found it a handicap."

Gilling shrugged. "It merely seemed strange that a one-legged man would be familiar with some of the most inaccessible places on earth."

"I am an unusual man, all three-fourths of me," remarked McQuarrie and Gilling laughed, rocking the table with a forced jocularly.

Actually the Lomela was far from inaccessible, but McQuarrie let that pass. He did not want to undermine any of Hernandez' fictions. He tasted the sun-downer that the native boy brought and

was thankful for its American whisky. This boat would no doubt prove to be a deadfall, but its whisky would be one of its compensations.

As tiffin progressed he detected several things. He detected a coldness between Gilling and his wife. The man was suspicious of him and Hernandez. Gilling masked these things behind a manner of bluff cordiality, but they were there. You instinctively sensed them.

THERE was still a week of preparation in Coquilhatville, and finally, with the last of the provisions aboard, the *Cygne* fired her boilers preparatory to leaving in the cool hours before sunup.

It was evening, and McQuarrie sat beneath the awnings of the hurricane deck, watching lights come on along Coquilhatville's dingy business district. A lawn party was under way somewhere near the government buildings, and through the clear air of tropic evening he could hear native musicians playing European instruments and doing a spotty job of it.

Janet Gilling came and sat down across from him.

"Stengah?" he asked.

She nodded. He mixed the drink with half a shot of whisky and plenty of ice. He knew she preferred them that way. He asked, "Have you ever observed the custom that some jungle tribes have of marking their members? Head flattened, the distortion of lips, the notching of ears?" He seemed casual, pouring bottled water into the glass, but he was quick enough to see the little, startled movement she made when he mentioned the notching of ears.

He held out the drink. She did not notice it. She was staring at him with fixed eyes. "Why did you ask that?"

McQuarrie shrugged. He put down her drink and eased his heavy body back in the chair. Then he asked, "Have you ever seen a man with notched ears? A Senegalese, for example?"

"I will answer that, Mr. McQuarrie, if you tell me why you want to know."



McQuarrie did not need her answer. He knew that she had seen that Senegalese, Tovada, and no doubt Romeau as well. Furthermore, she must have suspected them.

He went on, "Two or three weeks ago I was visiting in the jungle town of Botamba. I had a friend there—named Benbow."

He could see the girl flinch at mention of the name.

"The name means *something* to you?" he asked.

She waved for him to proceed.

"Benbow. George Benbow. He was what you might call a soldier of fortune in America. Here we call them jungle tramps. Benbow was murdered. Ambushed, stabbed. There were two visitors in Botamba at the time. A man named Romeau, and a notch-eared Senegalese named Tovada."

McQuarrie paused, expecting her to make some comment. She didn't.

"Benbow was number one. In company with Hernandez I visited a Pierre Delus. You have heard of him?"

She shook her head.

"His real name was LaFarge."

She recognized that name all right. The girl was not skilled at hiding her emotions. She was twisting her tiny lace handkerchief into a ball no larger than her thumb.

"LaFarge, too, was murdered. Shot, for the sake of variety. And again the same men were there. Romeau and the Senegalese. Quite a startling coincidence, don't you think?"

"What does that mean to me—to us?" she asked with a sudden defiance.

"I will tell you of more coincidence. Both of these men, Benbow and LaFarge, were survivors of a certain boat called the Marette."

By now, her expression had a certain fixed agony, so it was impossible to tell whether that word "Marette" meant much.

"We followed those men downriver. In Coquilhatville I learned that the Gill- ing expedition was preparing to set out

for the land of the Marette to search for certain lost civilizations." A smile crossed his heavy lips.

"Ridiculous! Lost civilizations are found in the lands of desert and stone where things endure, not in this low-lying morass where the forces of decay and growth compete with insane voraciousness. Did you know that if Coquilhatville there were to be abandoned today, no single trace of it would exist one hundred years from now?"

"Then you think we are looking for the Marette?"

"I am certain of it."

HE WATCHED her as darkness settled lower over the broad brown waters of the Congo. The ancient tomtom drums of the native village throbbed to life, mixing with the sound of auto horns on Coquilhatville's streets. For five minutes the young woman had not spoken.

He said, "I have been honest with you. Is it too much to ask the same in return?"

She inhaled sharply and stood up. "I do not believe what you were telling me. If you think we are murderers—"

"I do not think you are a murderer."

She stamped her small foot. "If you think we are murderers you should not be aboard. Besides, isn't it true that you sneaked behind our backs and secured a lease on the Marette? What does that make you? Accepting our money while all the time you are trying to get the profit for yourself! There, I have warned you! You come now at your own foolish risk!"

"Who told you about a lease?"

Without answering she hurried away along the deck. McQuarrie watched her out of sight and went back to look for Hernandez. He was ashore somewhere. It was midnight when Hernandez came to his stateroom.

McQuarrie caught him by the collar of his white jacket and thrust him against the wall.

"Damn you, you bungling idiot! What



did you tell that woman?"

Hernandez struggled, rocking from side to side, attempting to free himself, but McQuarrie's massive strength held him as though he were a child. "I say what did you tell that woman?"

"The devil with you. Get your hands off my throat!"

"You told her about the lease I obtained on the Marette, didn't you?"

"Of course I didn't."

Hernandez walked to the mirror with a bruised expression to straighten the lapels of his coat.

"Well, she found out somewhere," said McQuarrie.

"Is this another of your dreams?"

"And here's something else—she practically admitted that Romeau and the Senegalese were aboard this boat."

"What do you mean, practically?"

With rich sarcasm, McQuarrie repeated in Spanish. Then he let his bulk drop to the rattan chair by the cot.

"A floating deathtrap!" he muttered. "She warned me, too, did I tell you that? They have ample reason to kill us now. I dare say Gilling is only waiting to get enough distance so a pistol shot won't be heard by the gendarmes before he butchers us and tosses us overboard. Indeed I should have taken my own council! I should now be at my ease in Leopoldville with—"

"Well, go to Leopoldville and play your piano like a beggar for drinks. You still have time to get your dunnage ashore."

"And leave you here like a rabbit in an owl's nest?" McQuarrie sighed heavily and unstrapped his artificial foot. "No indeed. We McQuarries may lack something of judgment, but we have our sense of duty. Thank God for that!"

McQUARRIE slept behind a bolted door, the Mauser pistol making a comfortable lump beneath his thin pillow. He awakened briefly with the first vibrations of the paddlewheel as the boat backed into the slow waters of the Congo. Then he went back to sleep, and

arose with Coquilhatville far behind.

He showered, shaved and stomped up the stairway for breakfast. A barefoot native boy in shorts and immaculate stengah-shifter was serving Janet Gilling the inevitable halved papaya.

McQuarrie paused, coming down heavily on his artificial foot. "Good morning! An excellent morning for travel, my dear."

She nodded. Her face was lovely and immobile. She did not invite him to sit down so he pulled a chair up to a table near the rail and waited his morning fritter in silence.

Arthur Gilling came, and looked at the two of them. "Aren't you on speaking terms?" he asked with the abruptness that was his habit.

McQuarrie stood. "Forgive me. The lady, I perceived, was expecting you. It is my belief that a man should monopolize his wife at least at the breakfast table."

"Yes, at least! At least then!"

McQuarrie hadn't meant it the way Gilling chose to take it. The man's manner in saying "At least then" was such a coarse insult to his wife that even the native boy must have noticed, but Janet did not flinch. She had grown used to her husband's cruel tongue.

"The papaya is good, Arthur," she said.

"I'll have whisky!" said Gilling.

He was probably suspicious of Hernandez, although that young man's actions had been a model of reserve. At least, they were so far as McQuarrie had observed. But you can never tell about a Spanish-Irish Romeo.

The girl was lovely, and the hurt which always lay deep in her eyes made her more so. He couldn't really blame Hernandez. Twenty years ago he himself—McQuarrie sighed and finished his fritter.

THE boat carried them along the broad Congo, then to the Lomela—a narrower stream, but essentially little different.



There is a sameness about all rivers. On each side there is the solid wall of green. Now and then one glimpses a native village—a few huts on tall stilts, dugout canoes paddling out with cargoes of plantain, banana, cassava. A small stream opens the wall like a tunnel—a vault of great trees and parasitic vines through which only a few stray shafts of yellow sunlight fall. And the inevitable smell of it—musty from ages of fungus and decay. This for uncounted hundreds of miles—the green heart of Africa.

McQuarrie sat beneath the awning, drinking his sundowners of American whisky, watchful for trouble. Days passed—bright morning, stultifying heat of meridian, siesta, and cool breeze of night. Five days and trouble did not materialize.

The Lomela was falling after the rains of March and May, and mudbars kept them at a zigzag pace. Here and there were long islands which cut the river in lagoonlike strips with the deep channel hard to find. The Marette's resting place was getting closer.

On that fifth night McQuarrie went to his stateroom and stretched out in his chair. He was barely comfortable when a rap sounded on the door.

"Come in!" he said, moving to one wall, his hand on the round butt of his Mauser.

The door opened. It was Janet Gilling. She must have been following him. She came in and closed the door behind her.

"Have you seen Hernandez?" she asked.

"Not for a half-hour."

She stood still, breathing rapidly from excitement.

He said, "You don't think—"

"I don't think anything has happened. Not yet. But I must warn you that you're not safe on this boat."

"Hold on, girl." McQuarrie laid a hand on her slight shoulder. She seemed very young then. Like a child. Fragile, alone in a land of men. It was getting to be too much for her.

"I have a drink here," he said.

"I don't need it. You'll have to find Hernandez."

"You mean Gilling is out for us?"

"Something will happen tonight. You must know *why*!"

"Get your wits about you! Here's a drink. A straight one. It will help."

"He wasn't always like that, Mr. McQuarrie. Arthur was fine once. Then there was a scandal, bribery. Something about the state legislature, and he went to jail. It was only for three months, but he was nearly bankrupt when he came out. He tried to win it back. There were lots of deals, some of them not so honest. And now this insane adventure in Africa—all starting with a piece he read in the Sunday supplement. Some story about a man named Preston who claimed to be a river pirate twenty or thirty years ago."

Certain things were becoming plain to McQuarrie. He encouraged her by patting her shoulder.

She went on, "Then he met that Portuguese, Romeau, or whatever his real name is. At Boma. And now they haven't stopped even at murder. I almost wish he were dead."

"But what in particular happened tonight?"

"You must know!"

"Believe me, child."

"Then it wasn't you who opened the strongbox in Arthur's office and took the maps?"

"Maps?"

"The maps! The one he got in America, and the other one that came from Benbow's room."

"We have taken no maps. I didn't even know he had them. I didn't know he had a strongbox."

"You're telling the truth?"

"Of course."

"Then it must have been Romeau. Romeau knew they were there."

"I thought perhaps Romeau would turn up before we were finished with this journey. And I'll wager that notch-eared Senegalese as well."



"I don't know what happened to the Senegalese. He—disappeared. Romeau said he was drowned."

"You mean, he got in the way of Romeau's trigger finger."

McQuarrie paced the room. He opened the door, walked to the companionway and thence to the deck. He collared a messboy, giving him a ten-franc note to find Hernandez. Someone was coming along the deck then, so McQuarrie hurried back to the stateroom.

JANET stood exactly as he had left her. She was a frightened kid, twelve thousand miles from home. It occurred to him what a hell of a spot she was in. A man could go over the side and get along through the jungle, but a girl just had to stay and take it.

"What are *you* going to do?" he asked. "Me?"

"Sure. You can't stay with him. Not after all this."

She shook her head. She had no idea what she would do.

"Don't worry, my dear!" McQuarrie thrust back his heavy shoulders, thumping his foot for emphasis. "Just stay close to me. I'll protect you from Gilling and Hernandez both."

"From Hernandez?"

"He is a vulture, my dear. No good can come from a Spanish-Irish pocket Romeo."

Someone tried the door. A voice, Hernandez—"Open up!"

McQuarrie drew his automatic. There was a chance that someone was standing behind Hernandez, making him talk. He threw the bolt. The fellow was alone.

"What the devil!" said Hernandez, looking from the pistol, to Janet, to McQuarrie.

"Trouble! Trouble enough to last the night out, I'll wager."

Janet said, "The strongbox—someone robbed it. They took the maps showing the position of the Marett. Arthur is convinced it is you—"

"What a gross idea!" Hernandez brushed his Ronald Colman moustache.

"Calling me a common thief."

McQuarrie confronted him, "Let me have those maps."

"Say—"

"I repeat, this is not the time to trifle."

Hernandez shrugged and reached inside his coat pocket. He drew out a manila envelope and tossed it on the table.

"There it is, McQuarrie."

"Hernandez, you have brought us to a dangerous brink by ransacking that strongbox."

"The trouble with you, McQuarrie, is that you didn't get the idea first."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed! Gilling is right under our thumbs as long as we have those maps. He won't dare knock us off. Dead men don't talk—or hadn't you heard?"

"There is a certain treatment known as the water cure."

Hernandez dismissed the water cure with a wave of his graceful brown fingers. He lighted an Egyptian cigarette and inhaled deeply. He stood, rocking on his toes, letting his midnight-blue eyes smile down on Janet.

"Why don't we ditch your husband? We can go over the side at the next native village. A crew of paddlers will take us back—"

"Hernandez! I have promised to protect this girl from Gilling—and from you!"

Hernandez laughed and sprawled his long form in the rattan chair. "McQuarrie, the protector of lovely women! Don't be fooled by the blarney tongue of him, Janet. In faith, he's the worst rascal this side of Baghdad."

JANET started to answer, but McQuarrie silenced her with an upraised finger. He once more drew the automatic, balancing it with barrel angled toward the ceiling. A man's steps were approaching along the companionway.

"You'll die with that thing in your hand," muttered Hernandez.

A glance of McQuarrie's fierce eyes put him to silence. It was very quiet inside, the steps coming closer. McQuar-



rie rather expected to have the steps pause at the second officer's room next door, but they didn't. They were outside, hesitating, the man's weight bringing little complaining sounds from the floor boards.

The latch rattled, but the bolt was on.

"Yes?" asked McQuarrie.

"It's me!—Gilling!" the man barked.

"What do you want?"

"Let me in."

McQuarrie motioned Hernandez and Janet out of sight. Gilling must not find out she was there and had warned him. Better for him not to know Hernandez was around, either. He replaced the automatic and opened the door, standing there to block the way.

"Sir, I was just planning to go to bed."

"Well now, isn't that just too damned bad!" Gilling had been drinking more than usual, and he was in a mean insulting mood. "Come down to the office. I'd like to have a few words with you."

McQuarrie would not have budged, only Janet was in the room. That left him no choice. He had to get Gilling away. He nodded and limped along at the man's side.

Gilling unlocked his office door. "You first!"

He followed McQuarrie, snapping on the light, but it was so flickering dim from the drain of the pilot's floodlights that he put a match to the petrol lamp instead.

McQuarrie took time to look around. He'd never been in the office before. There was a teakwood table at one side, ink-stained from long use, a stool, a couple of upholstered chairs. The room was cut in half by an arch. Beyond, he could see a bed, and a chair with man's clothing hanging over it. Evidently Gilling used the office for a bedroom.

"Well?" demanded McQuarrie.

GILLING didn't get to the subject right away. He went to the table and poured drinks in tall glasses. He added soda to one, left the other neat.

"Drink?"

McQuarrie hesitated and he smiled.

"Here, you take mine and I'll drink yours."

They drank. Gilling tossed his glass back on the table.

"Well, McQuarrie, you seem to have me where you want me."

"Indeed?"

"There's no use avoiding the issue, is there? We might as well deal the cards face up on the table. I knew you had that lease on the Marette. One of the colonial officials told me. It took a good amount of guts to ship with me on the journey so I could do your dredging for you, but you and that Spaniard were up to it. I must confess I rather admired you, even though I had planned to kill you as soon as your usefulness was over."

"That was understood."

"You knew I was going to knock you off?"

"You had not used much mercy on the others who might cause you trouble on the subject of ownership."

"One of those was an accident. Benbow came to his room at the wrong time. In the case of LaFarge—perhaps my man was carried too far by his enthusiasm."

"Let's not quibble."

"And so you came on board knowing I planned to get you!"

"I am not so childlike as to expect profit without risk."

Gilling looked in McQuarrie's eyes, and his lips twisted in a smile. "I must say I rather admire you."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Just to put the cards on the table. You took the maps from my strongbox tonight, didn't you?"

"Maps?"

"Yes, damn you, maps—and don't act surprised. I know you have them."

"Indeed, sir—you may search me—"

"I won't let you get away with them. You might as well give them up the easy way."

McQuarrie seemed to be considering. They were alone—or they seemed to be.



And the automatic was still in his armpit holster. It seemed strange that Gilling would call the play here, with no one to help him. Of course, someone might be cached in the inner room. If so, he wouldn't be much assistance.

"You don't think I'd be fool enough to carry the maps on my person."

"Now I suppose you would like to go for them."

"Do you know of a better way?"

"I wouldn't want to tire you, McQuarrie. Walking is rather difficult for you on that wooden leg. I'll call a nigger boy and send him, if you don't mind."

McQUARRIE turned, rocking heavily on his artificial foot. The door was closed but not bolted. Of course, there might be someone in the companion. At one side of the door stood an old fashioned Japanese silk screen. He was certain someone was planted there.

"I advise you to remember one thing!"

"And what's that?"

"If I should chance not to return from this expedition, it will require a bit of explaining to my partners, the Congo Belge Societé."

Gilling spread his fingers. "But that is just the point. Give me the maps and you will return."

McQuarrie knew he would be a dead man as soon as those maps were in Gilling's hands. He had little enough chance anyway. Hernandez had bungled by not coming as soon as they were removed from the strongbox. They could have gone over the side to safety, or at least to something that would look like safety when compared to this.

He took a couple of steps forward, placing Gilling in line with himself and the Jap-silk screen. He looked at the petrol lamp, recalling another deadfall—the one back in the rest-house at Bent-louville. There had been a candle that night. If Romeau was behind the screen, he would be watching for the trick. But would Gilling? And Gilling was in the line of fire.

"Has it ever occurred to you that we could go a long way together?" asked McQuarrie.

"We could?"

"There are fortunes to be made in the tropics. I know of a proposition in Nomaqualand that would make this sunken boat look like penny dominoes."

Gilling watched him intently—a trifle suspiciously. McQuarrie was big and slow moving, but he had a mind as quick as a pigmy's arrow.

McQuarrie felt in his pockets and found a Turkish cigarette. He hunted for a match. "Do you know much concerning the diamond combine?" he asked, leaning to light his cigarette from one of the double mantles of the lamp.

He came up, blowing a blue cloud of cigarette smoke. He turned, swung his left wrist, and swept the lamp crashing to the floor.

HE HAD never expected it to work so well. For perhaps two-fifths of a second there was no sound. No light, save for the little reddish gleam of the white-hot mantles that lay broken on the floor.

McQuarrie had rolled sidewise, agile as a jungle cat despite the handicap of his artificial foot. His Mauser pistol was in his hand.

It flashed in his mind that he was wrong about someone hiding behind the screen. Then a gun roared from that screen cutting the blackness.

McQuarrie was ready. He fired twice—instinct telling him the bullets had struck home. A man stumbled forward in the dark, crashing over a chair.

He spun on away. Only a couple of seconds had passed. The air was filled with the heavy odor of spilled petrol. A sheet of white flame leapt from the floor. The petrol had caught from a lingering spark of the shattered mantle.

McQuarrie hurled the table from his way. He hobbled toward the door. Briefly, by the white flame of burning petrol he glimpsed Romeau, spread full length.



He stepped over the body. Gas from the burning petrol was blinding him. He reached for the door, but there was only the blank wall and the overturned silk screen underfoot.

He found it—the little brass knob. He flung the door open. Afterward he remembered the flash of the gun, but he had no recollection of its concussion. Something struck him like a sledge, and he came to on hands and knees, dragging himself up against the far wall of the companionway.

There was no sensation along his right side. No feeling of movement in the leg. A second bullet tore splinters from the wood against the groping fingers of his left hand. He had presence of mind to fall face down.

He'd lost his gun somewhere. He groped along the floor, looking for it. His hand struck it and knocked it farther away. He dived, coming up with it pressed against his chest.

He found the trigger and staggered to his feet. Men were shouting from both directions, but fear of bullets kept the companionway deserted. He clumped away, holding the wall, watching the door as flames rolled out in successive waves, like puffs from a blacksmith's forge.

Suddenly, apparently from nowhere, Gilling came into the hall. There had been a second door leading to the inner room. Gilling fired once before McQuarrie could steady himself. Then, with feet planted and one shoulder resting against the wall, McQuarrie leveled the Mauser and squeezed hard on the trigger, hammering its full charge.

He couldn't see Gilling for smoke and spreading flame. He was down someplace. Dead with a half dozen of those screaming bullets through him.

McQuarrie saw that the wound was in his side. Through the lower ribs and out again. His shirt and linen coat were becoming stiff with blood.

A fire alarm bell was clanging, and men's running feet shook the deck. It was dry season, so the boat was in good

shape to burn. It wouldn't last long with her center going up.

Engine room bells clanged. She was headed full steam for somewhere. Probably for the closest shore.

McQuarrie made it to his stateroom. The door was unlocked. Dark inside and the electric light wouldn't work. The transmission lines must have burned. He lighted a match. Hernandez and Janet were gone as he expected they would be, but the manila envelope had been left on the table.

"Never trust a Spanish Irishman," he muttered, snatching the envelope, twisting it in a roll and jamming it inside his jacket pocket.

THE CYGNE was not a large boat and the fire had broken through her hurricane deck when McQuarrie made it outside. She was still moving, though the pilot had abandoned his post. She came to an abrupt stop, shivering, rolling sidewise, spilling McQuarrie face first across the deck.

A mudbar. The black jungle was a hundred meters away, a solid mass across shallow water.

Men were going over the side, splashing armpit-deep. McQuarrie half leaped, half fell over the rail. The wound had weakened him. He was dizzy and under water for a while. Then he came up with the mud of the bottom clinging to his feet.

A native, one of the black gang from the furnace room, had wrapped an arm around him and was half carrying him to shore.

"Not there, big *bwana*!" the black fellow kept repeating. "That's crocodile water, big *bwana*."

He was briefly conscious of lying on the hard earth of a footpath. It was morning after a million years of dreams. He was thirsty, and the black man was giving him water from a hollow shell.

His side pained him when he breathed. His tongue seemed thick and dry. It occurred to him that men do not live long in the jungle after stagnant water



has soaked and infected a wound.

Four natives with a tepoi carried him along a winding footpath to a village of pointed grass huts. He awoke a long time later, lying on a cot with a ceiling of plaited palm overhead. He was content to remain still and listen to the dull fly-drone of afternoon. Outside a woman was pounding cassava root between stones.

Someone had entered. A small negro in shorts and a freshly pipeclayed helmet was sterilizing a hypodermic syringe and filling it through the cork of a bottle.

"What the devil?" asked McQuarrie.

"You are now receiving the benefit of the Colonial Council's appropriation for the training of native physicians. At least I hope this proves a benefit," the fellow remarked, cleansing a spot with alcohol and inserting the needle.

**IT WAS** in the first days of the October rains. The hotel Champs-Elysée stood dismally in its rain-soaked white-wash just above the steamboat docks in the Congo town of Nouvell St. Cere.

Despite the rains, and although evening was on its way, the sheltered dining terrace of the Champs-Elysée was muggy with heat. A half-dozen old-style electric fans turned wearily, stirring the air above the few traders and colonials who sat at table, drinking their inevitable sundowners. Unexpectedly, one of them clapped his hands. Two or three others followed suit. They had been moved to this demonstration of enthusiasm by a large man in wrinkled whites who had limped through the door.

The man paused, eyes sweeping the room. Then, nodding in recognition of the small ovation, he hobbled to the piano, sat down and stared for a moment at the keys. A sundowner was brought through the courtesy of some guest. He drank it, nodded in thanks, and brought his hands down solidly in a major chord.

He was on Chopin when a tall young fellow, dressed immaculately in expensive linens, entered and strode to a table. The young man listened, smiling a little, occa-

sionally stroking his Ronald Colman moustache. When the étude was concluded, incongruously, with a series of Beethoven chords, he ordered a drink sent to the piano.

The big man turned, glass in hand, and their eyes met. "I should strangle you with these two hands!" he said, stomping over.

"Why, McQuarrie?"

"For leaving that empty manila envelope which you said contained the maps of the Marette!"

Hernandez Riley laughed, making his habitual movement of stroking his moustache. It was impossible not to see the monumental square-cut diamond, placer quality, that gleamed on his index finger.

The display of riches was sufficient to assure McQuarrie of the worst, and he banged a massive fist on the table. "So! It is true what the natives told me. I heard that you went upriver with a tug and diving barge and found that treasure. Let me warn you, Hernandez, that I have a lease—"

"We had a lease, McQuarrie. A privilege of dragging the river for a sunken wreck. However, through my own resourcefulness and at great expense, I located the Marette treasure. It was not in the river but on the right bank. Left high and dry after the Lomela changed its course. Therefore it is not salvage, but subject to the mining laws—"

"Mining laws be damned. I'll have your pants in court on that score, Hernandez, and you know it," McQuarrie shouted.

"Now listen, McQuarrie. We're just being silly. Old friends should get along. I want to play fair with you. Do you think I'd have hunted you out otherwise?"

McQuarrie calmed down a little, partly because of Hernandez' protestations of friendship, partly on account of the excellent French cognac which the waiter brought to the table. He cleared his throat and in a new voice—"Tell me, Hernandez, was it a great treasure?"



**H**ERNANDEZ' eyes brightened at the memory. "The ivory led us to it, you know. We found a couple of those tusks sticking out of the ground. And in fine condition, too, despite the years. We dug down and found the rest. The hull of the *Marette* had rotted and the gems were lost, but we recovered some after a couple weeks of sluicing. Diamonds, McQuarrie! Fifteen hundred carats of them, and mostly gem quality, too. I suppose we'd find more by getting equipment there to move the dirt."

"Ah! Then it is true that you have a fortune to divide with me, Hernandez."

"I might compromise on a small percentage."

McQuarrie slammed his fist to the table. "Let us not quibble! I'll have my share of that treasure—"

"Your share will be twenty percent."

"My share will be two-thirds, if I wish it, with the remaining third going to the *Société*."

"You're forgetting one thing, McQuarrie. You may be able to force me into giving you as much as fifty per cent, but—" He stopped abruptly, staring into the big man's eyes. What he saw there seemed to tell him the worst. "McQuarrie! You didn't make that trip to Leopoldville and name yourself for the full two thirds of that lease, leaving me out in the cold. You didn't—"

"Oh, didn't I? Did I not, indeed!"

"You scoundrel!" growled Hernandez. "You peg-legged thief! After all I've gone through for you. McQuarrie, does friendship mean nothing?"

"No more than it did to you." He poured a drink. "In other words, it doesn't mean more than twenty per cent."

"McQuarrie, you must know I was joking—"

"Hah!"

Hernandez rested his head on one hand. He nodded sadly. "You're serious. I can see it. You're hard to bend, McQuarrie. If you're determined on enforcing that lease, you'll do it."

"You know my nature well. Then twenty per cent it is."

"No matter. You're still my best friend, McQuarrie. You just outsmarted me, that's all. As you Americans say, easy come . . ."

McQuarrie sipped his cognac, savoring its bouquet like a connoisseur.

Hernandez went on, "That was why we put off our wedding—so you could be best man."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, Janet and I are going to be married. In fact, we would have been married long ago if only *you* had been here to be my best man, McQuarrie."

"Ah! That was thoughtful. Most thoughtful. A fine girl, Janet. She'll be a wonderful wife to you. I wish I could say as much for her fate in husbands. First Gilling, and now you. But perhaps you will change, Hernandez."

"My only ambition is to give her a home. A humble home, but heaven grant a good one! That was my reason for wanting the money. But you outwitted me, McQuarrie, and no hard feelings."

"Ah, Hernandez. My throat. Forgive me. I'm a sentimental man. It was fine that you thought of me. Best man at your wedding! Hernandez—a handkerchief. Thank you." He blew his nose with a low tuba sound.

"It wouldn't seem like my wedding without my best friend there," said Hernandez softly.

"Indeed." McQuarrie cleared his throat. "Ah. About the share. We have always been fifty-fifty. Of course, I was merely joking."

"No, McQuarrie, I won't take it. You outwitted me—"

"No quibbling. Half and half, the friendly bargain—"

"Would you sign your name to it, McQuarrie?"

"You doubt my word?"

"Just to show Janet, old man."

McQuarrie found paper and pencil, scrawled the agreement, and put his name to it.

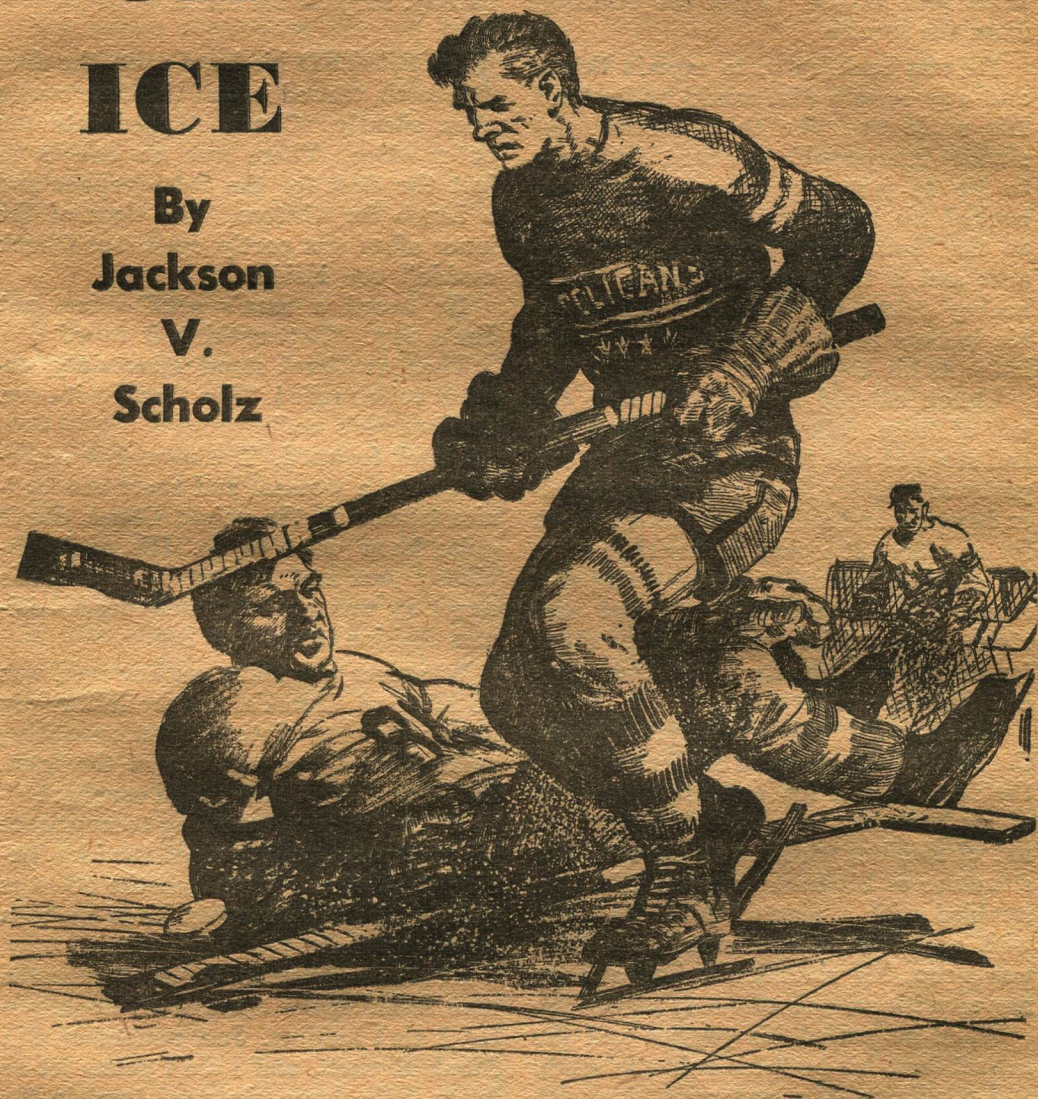
(Continued on page 93)



# HOT ON ICE

By  
Jackson  
V.  
Scholz

Jug threw a body block and got the worst of it. Chuck scrambled from the tangle and skated fast



**T**HE PRODIGAL'S return was not impressive. He came back on a battered motorcycle. He had dreamed of coming back to Paxton in a bright new car, a convertible preferably, with the top down. He returned, instead, astride a pile of junk, wearing a leather, oil-splotted jacket to protect him from the chill December wind.

Chuck Mercer looked about him through his goggles as he eased his motor bike through Main Street traffic. The small city hadn't changed. It was active with New England bustle, and the people looked about the same.

Chuck felt uneasy, slightly guilty, as he had a right to. He had stayed away too long and had maintained a silence



out of keeping with the obligations he owed old Jim Mercer, his only relative. He hadn't written to his uncle Jim for fourteen months, not since the government had handed Chuck his discharge from the service.

He was back, now, to explain things, and was certain Jim would understand. His uncle was like that, a swell guy, slightly irresponsible, it's true, but a man to tie to just the same, a man who backed his hunches and his friends up to the limit. He owned the local airport and a few small airplanes, and a hockey team, the Penguins. He made his income from the first and ran the latter as his hobby.

Chuck entered a side road near the end of town, followed it to a dead end and stopped at a rickety fence. The airport was a grassy field, a couple of wooden hangers, and a dingy unpainted shack for an office. It looked rattier than ever. He grinned, remembering his uncle as a man quite unimpressed by class and style. He'd used the same dingy shack for an office for many years, ever since he'd opened the airport.

Chuck racked his motoreycle against the fence, then stamped his feet to start the circulation in his legs. He was a man of medium height, about five-nine but not of medium width or thickness. The structure of his frame was solid but assembled with a nicety which did away with any hint of bulkiness. His chest was deep, his shoulders wide, and he moved with smooth economy of motion.

When he peeled his goggles and the helmet from his head his hair was sandy and rebellious. His eyes were blue with an electric quality, clear now, whereas a year ago they had been shaded with the opaque curtain of the things he'd seen and done in war. The features of his face were blunt, not handsome but not homely. They spoke of stubbornness, perhaps too much; also of pride, the stiff-necked sort which isn't always to be recommended.

He climbed the fence and walked to the shack which served as an office. He

stopped before the door. He waited for a moment while anticipation crowded through him. It would be great to see old Jim again. He decided to slip in quietly, surprise his uncle.

HE RESTED his hand upon the door knob, turned it, and the door swung open silently. Chuck stepped into the outer office. There was no one in it, just the desk for the stenographer and a bench for visitors. The door of the inner office was partly open, but Chuck couldn't see inside.

He heard a man's gruff voice, not Jim's, say. "Better think it over."

Then, as Chuck stood uncertainly, another voice replied, "I've thought it over. The answer's no."

Chuck frowned. The second voice belonged to a woman, and there was definite tension in the voice. Chuck didn't quite know what to do. His uncle obviously was not in just now, and his secretary was probably relaying a business decision to the man inside.

Whatever was going on, however, was no affair of Chuck's, and he felt mildly foolish, having tiptoed into something which didn't concern him in the least. He figured maybe he should cough, shuffle his feet or do something to announce his presence, but he vetoed the idea, deciding instead to ease from the office as quietly as he had come, then make a louder entrance.

He was halfway to the door when the man inside spoke up again. "Look, sister, I ain't kidding. Just remember, I'm Monk Hackett, and I ain't gonna let no fancy little dame like you stand in the way of what I want. No, sister, I ain't kidding."

The rough insolence of Hackett's tone stopped Chuck in his tracks again. Chuck couldn't see the jerk, but he knew he wouldn't like him. He turned slowly toward the partly open door.

The woman said, "I'm not interested. Get out!"

A short silence followed. Chuck could feel its tautness. Then Hackett spoke



again, his voice tuned down to what he probably believed was masculine allure.

"Look, babe, you're quite a chick. There ain't no reason for me and you to fight. We'd get along lots better if we took a little trouble to understand each other. Just take it easy, toots. I'm a right guy when you know me."

"Probably devastating. Now get out!"

"Yeah, devastating, babe. That's me. But I ain't leavin' till we get to know each other some. Gimme a chance, babe. I'm—"

"Stand back!"

"Oh look, babe, I ain't dangerous. I just—"

"Get back! I've warned you. This ashtray's made of stone."

Hackett laughed, but the laugh jammed in his throat when Chuck moved through the door and said, "Hi folks. Can I cut in?"

Hackett was leaning forward, his hairy meaty hands on the desk. Behind the desk a dark-haired girl was standing tensely, her color high, her beauty and her temper obvious. She was holding a heavy ashtray shoulder high, about to let it go at Hackett's head.

Chuck shot her but a glance, letting the weight of his attention rest on Hackett, a bulk of a man, hard-featured, lantern-jawed. His eyes were close-set mean little windows of grey quartz. They turned on Chuck and went a little meaner.

"Who're you?" demanded Hackett tonelessly. He stood erect, facing Chuck across a distance of six feet.

"You wouldn't know if I told you," Chuck said easily. "I heard you were about to leave and figured it was *my* turn to talk a little business with the lady."

"Your ears are too damn long," said Hackett. "And I'll leave when I get ready."

"You're ready now," Chuck told him gently. "I heard the young lady tell you so." He stepped aside, leaving a free path to the door. "So long, mister. This way out."

THE RED of anger rippled along Hackett's jowls. His eyes went ugly, then flattened into craftiness. Chuck watched him carefully, making his regard seem casual. Hackett shrugged his beefy shoulders, said, "Okay," and started for the door.

It was a poor masquerade to pull on anyone who'd been around as much as Chuck. He had his muscles loose, his feet well braced when Hackett came abreast of him. When Hackett threw his punch Chuck Mercer saw it coming. He tucked his chin aside and let the big fist blast against his shoulder.

Chuck's body swayed, absorbed the blow, then dropped into a swift half-crouch. Hackett's second blow with the other hand went whistling across Chuck's head. Chuck moved a shuffling step inside and ripped a right and left hook savagely to Hackett's middle. He felt his fists sink wrist-deep in the beer-fat area above Monk Hackett's belt. He heard the snort of wind from Hackett's lungs—then Hackett kicked at him.

It was a stinking trick, but Chuck had met a lot of men who knew more tricks than Hackett. Chuck's lightning motion was instinctive. He saw the kick before it gathered steam, and Chuck's own heel flashed up to crack against the other's shin. The big guy squawked in agony, but Chuck was really plenty peeved by now.

While Hackett teetered on one foot Chuck reached him with a looping right. It crashed against an unprotected jaw, and sounded like a butcher's cleaver on a pork chop. Monk Hackett's eyes went glassy and his muscles flaccid. He was out like a light but still on his feet. Chuck gave him a careful steering push which guided the inert body toward the door. When Hackett's legs gave way he toppled like an accurately felled tree, his body lurching through the doorway to collapse on the outer office floor. Chuck stepped across him, grabbed him by the collar, dragged him to the door and booted him outside. He left the big hulk sprawled there on the ground like



a stranded whale, then returned to the office, closing the door behind him.

**T**HE GIRL was still standing behind the desk. She had lowered the heavy ashtray, but held it dangling at her side with the obvious suggestion it was still a weapon. Her eyes were steady, unfraid, but definitely watchful.

Nice eyes, blue-grey, long-lashed. The flush of anger was still on her face, a face whose clean-cut contours were alive with all the things a man of nice perception might require. Chuck Mercer suddenly felt awkward and embarrassed. The feeling irked him, brought a gruffness to his voice.

"Maybe I shouldn't have butted in," he said.

She put the ashtray on the desk. The corners of her lips moved faintly toward a smile, a tentative acceptance of Chuck Mercer which her eyes did not confirm. They remained impersonal. She said, "I'm glad. I don't throw very straight."

"I'm Chuck Mercer."

"Yes, I know." Her voice contained no welcome.

"How could you know?" demanded Chuck.

"I'm Nancy Mercer."

"You—" Chuck started, then bogged down with sagging jaw. He stared at her in earnest now, and recognition gradually seeped in. He had known her as a gangling skinny kid five years ago, but none of these characteristics were apparent any more. His Uncle Jim and his Aunt Martha had adopted her from an orphanage. Later when Aunt Martha had died of pneumonia Nancy had taken over the household duties. She had been a quiet self-willed youngster, and Chuck had never paid her much attention. He made up for lost time now, feeling like a fool.

He managed, "Hello, Nancy," and felt more like a fool than ever.

"Hello, Chuck," she said impassively.

Chuck swallowed with some difficulty, and asked, "Where's Uncle Jim?"

"Dead."

The word came at him like a sledge, as it obviously was intended to. He swayed from the impact of the blow, then comprehension followed slowly.

"Dead?" he repeated dully.

"Eight months ago. Heart failure. Swift and painless. He went to bed and stayed asleep."

There was a chair beside the desk. Chuck sank into it numbly. He stared at the wall but didn't see it. He was seeing too many other things in his mind. He let them torture him for several moments then gradually pulled himself together, an accomplishment made easier by the fact that death was not a stranger to him. Men had to die, and some were luckier than others. Some died the hard way. Others, like his uncle Jim, checked out in bed without the agony of previous fear. Chuck hauled his breath in deeply.

His voice was steady when he said, "Of course I didn't know."

"Whose fault was that?" Her voice cut at him like a whip. "We tried to reach you everywhere we knew. Your uncle needed you, and you chose that time to drop completely from his life."

The words stemmed from a deep bitterness within her, and the bitterness, Chuck conceded, was just. It didn't anger him but made him feel, instead, the terrible necessity of making Nancy understand just what had happened to him. He felt that if the girl could understand, it might, in some vague way, explain the thing to Uncle Jim.

But how could Chuck tell Nancy what he'd seen and done while doing his duty as a Ranger in the service? How could he tell her what he'd brought away from war, the black depression, the morbid fear that he couldn't adjust himself to normal life? He hadn't dared to bring these things back home to Paxton, so of course he hadn't dared to bring himself, or even to risk communication till he'd satisfied himself he could be cured.

**H** E'D CURED himself by knocking about the country, working when



he had to eat, fighting when he had to fight, and loafing when the mood was on him. He had purged his system gradually of its accumulated hell, and when he'd finally judged himself amenable to ordinary living, he had headed home.

Now he tried to sum it up as carefully as he could in words. "I wasn't normal when I left the service. I had to get my balance before coming home."

The words seemed feeble in their scope. He didn't see how they could have appreciable effect on Nancy Mercer. He was surprised, therefore, at her considered answer.

"I'm glad you told me that," she said. "It was a thing your uncle would have understood. I believe I understand it too, and I'm sorry I accused you of deliberately mistreating Dad."

The words were honest, but her attitude was still antagonistic. There was a barrier between them which she obviously intended should remain. She had excused him for his months of silence, but held him clearly accountable for other things.

He knew the answer to that too, but the knowledge elicited no more than a mental shrug. Okay, he probably had been a young punk before he went to war. He had inherited a hardware store from his father, and instead of settling down as a humdrum local merchant, he had sold the store, gone to the city and spent the money like a sap.

Then he'd made the grade with a big league hockey team, the Leaders. He'd been hot stuff, had coined a lot more dough and had also booted *that* away. But he'd had his fun, and it was no business of Nancy Mercer's. She could think what she damned pleased, just so she was certain he had really loved his uncle.

He got up slowly, saying, "Jim, in my book, was one of the finest men who ever lived. Well, Nancy, nice to have seen you. I'll be moving on."

The girl said quietly, "Dad left a will."

"That's good," said Chuck. "He was

sometimes a little careless. I'm glad he got around to it."

"He left you half of everything he owned."

"What!" gasped Chuck, honestly astounded. The idea of an inheritance from his Uncle Jim had not occurred to him.

"He left the other half to me."

"You should have had it all. I'll stick around long enough to see a lawyer and sign my half over to you."

"I don't want it."

"Why?"

"Dad wanted *you* to have it. He thought that—that—" her voice trailed off.

"I see," Chuck put in dryly. "He figured I might be tempted to take hold of myself and settle down."

"Dad was an optimist."

A thread of irritation found its way into Chuck's thoughts. He hated to be needed, particularly by anyone possessing the disturbing qualities of Nancy Mercer. She had seated herself in the chair behind the desk. Chuck went back to the other chair. He pulled out his cigarettes. He offered one to Nancy. She shook her head. Chuck asked, "Mind if I do?"

"No."

Chuck lighted up and said, "Let's talk things over."

"There's very little left of Dad's estate," she told him briefly. "The airport is about to fold. The Penguins have forgotten what it's like to win a game. We're up to our ears in debt. Ira Stover, a local loan shark, holds our notes for six thousand dollars. They expire shortly, and he won't promise to renew."

CHUCK whistled softly. "Not so good. How did it all happen?"

"Dad's fault mostly. He was a swell person, but he had too much faith in his hockey team. He had to bet on them. He lost."

"But the airport *should* be doing well," said Chuck.

"It is but we lack equipment. The



hangars are about to fall apart, our repair equipment is old and junky. The banks, and even Stover, refuse further loans. I can't raise money anywhere. We have the only land suitable for an airport close to town but they started that Barth Airport a few miles out. Barth is a fair competitor but I can't compete much longer with our old planes and firetrap hangars. I had a hard job talking the city council into letting our permit run another year."

"Where does Hackett fit in."

"He owns two planes, has some political pull, and it's generally believed he deals in stolen goods and black market operations. He can't rent hangar space and he wants privacy for his operations. So Hackett wants to buy us out. He offered four thousand dollars, about a third of what the place is worth, even in its present condition."

"If he offered that much," said Chuck, "someone else might offer more. We could *still* sell out, redeem the notes and have a small profit."

"Which I'm sure you'd like to get your hands on."

Chuck flushed, but held his anger down. He also held his tongue.

The girl continued, her voice as brittle as thin ice, "The Penguins ought to be worth a little too, and you own half of them. It's your privilege, of course, to sell out any time you want to. Maybe Monk Hackett has come to by this time and would be willing to talk business with you."

Chuck hauled in a steadying breath, then asked quietly, "Your opinion of me is pretty low, isn't it Nancy?"

She answered with an uncompromising, "Yes."

Getting to his feet Chuck said, "And who am I to dispute the judgment of a woman of your wide experience and business training? I can't compete with oracles. So long, Nancy."

He started for the door. Her voice caught up with him. "Are you selling out?"

Turning briefly Chuck said, "An oracle

should know the answer to that one."

He left the office in a state of simmering anger, which, however, did not prevent his cautious exit from the outer door. He looked around assuring himself that Hackett was not in sight. He walked across the field, hopped over the fence and climbed aboard his motorcycle, still jittery with irritation.

A cold wind was sweeping down the side road which was devoid of traffic and pedestrians. No one was in sight from the field. A bulky old fashioned car was parked some twenty feet down the fence, but there was no one at the wheel. He started his noisy motor and let it warm a moment. He slid the gear lever into first, let out his clutch and started to make a turn.

Something warned him, probably instinct, or maybe he saw a surge of motion from the corner of his eye. At any rate, his head jerked around in time to see the big car coming at him, thundering in low gear.

CHUCK had no time to think. His actions from that point were purely reflex. A quick flip of his wrist opened the throttle wide. The motorcycle leaped beneath him and began to skid as he held it in its turn. He encouraged the skid, turned the front wheel sharply till the rear wheel tried to slither out from under him. He let it slide, jamming his foot against the pavement where the muscles of a powerful leg kept the machine from falling on its side.

It was the skid that saved his hide. Without it the front fender of the car would have tossed him like a matador on the horns of a fighting bull. The car missed him by a hair, roared past with a fraction of an inch to spare, swerved sharply in a right angle turn and took off down the road.

Chuck cursed with fury as he fought his machine to bring it under control. He finally kept it upright. He spun it around to chase the car, and then his common sense moved in to check his anger. He knew well enough who the



driver was, even though the features had been blurred through the windshield. Monk Hackett. The louse had been waiting for him, lying flat in the seat so the car would appear empty. His motor, of course, had been running all the time.

Catching Hackett at this time would do no good without the aid of witnesses who could swear that Monk had tried to run him down. There were no witnesses, the inner office windows faced the field. His accounting with Hackett would have to wait. Also, Hackett had tipped his hand by indicating how he chose to fight—dirty. A hard grin twisted Chuck Mercer's lips. It began to look as if his stay in Paxton, if he decided to stay, would not be uneventful.

If he decided to stay. Everything seemed to hinge on that right now, and slow resentment crept through Chuck at being faced with a decision of that magnitude. He was out of practice when it came to making up his mind. He had done what he wanted to for months on end. This was different. He'd been dragged into something which he felt was dangerously beyond his depth.

He checked in at a cheap hotel, went to his room, started to smoke, and tried to dope things out. It was hard. Every normal impulse in his system told him to get out from under while he still had time.

He didn't want to run a bankrupt airport. He didn't want to be partners with that self-opinionated little female, Nancy Mercer. Or did he? The thought brought him hard against a barrier because the picture of her in his mind was still too clear. He began to wonder how she'd look when smiling, how she'd treat a guy she really liked.

"Oh, cut it out!" he growled aloud. "She hates your guts."

She was a nervy kid, all right, battling against big odds and asking for no sympathy. She was stubborn too. Or was it merely loyalty to her foster father's memory. At any rate, Chuck knew she'd never sell out. She'd let it crash about her ears.

Okay, if she felt like that about it Chuck would see a lawyer next day, transfer his half of the inheritance to her and let the crash be a colossal one. Or would he? Why shouldn't he? He began to pace the room, battling his indecision, and not too proud of it.

MAYBE, he told himself, he could think better on a full stomach. It was dinner time and he was hungry. He hunted up a lunch wagon. He filled up on hamburger sandwiches, pie and coffee, and still found himself ignominiously on the fence.

He took a walk and wasn't too surprised to find his feet carrying him toward the Ice Arena, which had been his uncle's pride and joy. When he reached it, though, he got a jolt. It had never been much more than a glorified shed to start with, but had been presentable enough as Chuck remembered it.

But now it was a mess, scabrous from lack of paint, and drafty from cracked window panes which had not been replaced. It brought a twinge of unaccountable sadness to Chuck's heart. He had never considered himself a sentimental person, but it was tough to see the place in this condition.

There were lights inside. Chuck wondered why then got the answer promptly. Practice session, naturally. The season would soon get under way, and the Penguins, such as they were, were getting into shape.

Chuck started for the door. He shrugged and told himself, "Why not? I never owned half of a hockey team before, so I might as well see what the cripples look like."

He started for the door under the dimness of an overhang. The outside lights had not been turned on. He was reaching for the knob when he saw it turned from the inside. He stepped aside. He had not deliberately chosen his position, but when the door swung open Chuck Mercer was behind it. It made him feel a bit ridiculous, but the feeling was wiped away by the sound of a



familiar gravelly voice, Monk Hackett's. Hackett said, "Nice goin', Al. Just keep things movin' as they are."

"Yeah, Monk, you can count on it," the voice inside the door replied.

Monk Hackett moved away, not looking back. The door closed and Chuck stood for a long thoughtful moment, narrow eyed. Something stank, and it wasn't anything a man could smell. Who was Monk Hackett's buddy, Al? What was the tie-in with the hockey team? Chuck's interest in the team began to quicken.

He waited a little longer then let himself inside the building. The space near the door was empty, but Chuck could hear the ring and hiss of skates upon the ice. He stopped a moment and his head went up like an old fire horse smelling smoke. He hadn't heard that sound for many years, and it sent a tingling through his body.

He let the feeling pass, then settled his mind to the job at hand, even though he wasn't sure just what it was. He'd skated in this place many times, so he knew his way around. He climbed the stairs which took him to the upper section of the banked seats. It was dim up there, the lights focused on the rink. He sat on a bench, unnoticed, and let his eyes rest critically upon the scene below.

**I**T WAS familiar enough, at first, merely a hockey squad soaking up pre-season coaching. The coach was a man of middle age, small, round-faced, with his features crowded near the middle. He had a bellowing, aggressive attitude which Chuck guessed quickly served the purpose of disguising his meager knowledge of the game. The guy didn't seem to know a whole lot about hockey, or if he did, he wasn't putting it across. Chuck wondered who he was, and soon found out, in part at least. A player yelled across the rink:

"Hey, Al, what time is it?"

The coach glanced at his wrist watch and called back, "Eight-fifteen."

Chuck's head thrust forward. So the guy called Al was the Penguins' coach. It was a pertinent bit of information which moved Chuck's thoughts into high gear. Al and Hackett. What did it add up to? Nothing good.

Chuck watched the practice critically for another fifteen minutes, cataloguing his impressions accurately. There were some pretty good skaters on the ice and some fair puck handlers, but the talent, for the most part, was raw and undeveloped.

One player, a big defense man, looked as if he might have possibilities. The others called him Jug. He was built like the side of a barn, with arms like a gorilla. His facial characteristics were definitely neolithic, with a probable mentality of the same era. But he was fast, nicely coordinated and strong as a bull. He obeyed Al's orders to the letter.

Al was coaching the Penguins in defense, and as Chuck Mercer watched Al's work a smouldering indignation rose in him. Al wasn't teaching them the fine art of defense, he was schooling them in nasty little tricks of mayhem which might escape a referee. But not a smart referee. If the Penguins followed Al's instructions, the penalty box would be too small to hold them. It looked like deliberate sabotage to Chuck, and his indignation changed to anger.

He left his seat, walked down the aisle and leaned his elbows on the fence. He was there for several moments before one of the players noticed him. The player called, "Hey, Al, we got a visitor."

Al turned, spotted Chuck, and skated over to the fence.

"What're you doin' here?" he demanded.

"Just looking your team over," answered Chuck.

"Just lookin' 'em over, huh? Well, kid, get a load of this—when Al Jurgen wants anybody to look his team over, he invites 'em. See? Now scram outta here."

A perverse impulse needled Chuck into prolonging the situation. He didn't



know quite why, but he put on a dumb look and said, "Gosh, Mr. Jorgen, I didn't mean any harm. I just thought that—that" another crazy impulse took quick shape, "that you might need another hockey player. I thought maybe you might give me a chance to try out for your team."

"Where've you played?"

"Oh, here and there," Chuck told him vaguely.

**J**URGEN'S eyes narrowed speculatively.

Chuck tried to follow Jorgen's mental trail and came up with a hunch that satisfied him. Jorgen, he reasoned, cared nothing about Chuck's previous hockey experience, good or bad, because Jorgen already had a team he could handle as he wished, and he wanted no outsider on the squad who might gum things up. On the other hand he dared not openly refuse the chance to re-enforce the team, in which respect Chuck had just put him on the spot. So Jorgen asked, "Got your gear with you?"

"No."

Jorgen looked relieved. "Then come around some other time."

But Chuck had started something he had the perverse urge to finish. "You could loan me a pair of blades and a stick," he pointed out.

This was true enough. Jorgen hesitated then was swayed to a decision by one of the Penguins who suggested, "Let 'im on the ice, Al. We'll soon find out how good he is."

The other players seemed to like the idea too, so Jorgen said, "Okay. What size shoe?"

"Eight and a half."

Jorgen canvassed the lesser members of the squad, and one of them volunteered that he wore Chuck's size shoe. Jorgen took the shoes and gave them to Chuck. Chuck was wearing riding breeches and high-laced boots. He took off the boots and donned the skates. They fitted pretty well. Jorgen handed him a stick and a pair of padded gloves

"What position?" demanded Jorgen. "Center. Can I warm up a little?"

"Yeah."

Chuck stepped on the ice. This was the first time in five years he'd been on skates. He was a little jittery at first, but the feeling came back fast, much sooner than he'd believed it would. The blades were sharp. They cut in nicely. He tried a couple of fast stops, spraying ice-dust. His muscles tingled. It was great to be on skates again. It was still in his blood.

One of the Penguins flipped the puck to him. Chuck snared it, but not impressively. He tried a few short runs, finding the puck disobedient and agile. He was pretty rusty on his stickwork, but the rust was not too deep. It would scrape off easily. He was satisfied.

He could have used more time for practice, but Jorgen was impatient. He called, "Okay, bring it down the ice. Start from the neutral zone and see how close you can get the biscuit to the cage."

Jorgen gave orders to three Penguins. The goalie took his position before the net, and two guards moved into the defense zone between Chuck and the goal. One of the guards was the big guy, Jug. The other was a rangy blond kid whom Jorgen had addressed as Jack.

Jorgen yelled, "Get goin'!"

**C**HUCK snugged the puck against the blade of his stick, hauled in a deep breath and started down the middle of the ice. A quick elation surged in him, as if he had regained a thing of value he had lost years past. This, he told himself, was living.

He had a head of steam by the time he reached the blue line. He changed direction slightly, heading toward Jack on the right, deliberately picking him as the softest touch.

Jack edged toward him carefully, gathering himself for the block. Chuck swerved sharply, heading for the boards at his right. The turn was so abrupt he almost lost the puck. He let out an ex-



asperated grunt but managed to snare the rubber before he skated past it.

Jack broke into quick action, dashing in at an angle which, if both men held their lines, would force a collision near the fence. But Chuck refused the challenge. He slammed the puck low against the dasher, then flashed inside of Jack. Jack made a long stab for the puck, whereas an experienced defense man would have tried to stick to Chuck.

In other words, Jack fell for one of the corniest attack tricks in the game. While he was still regaining balance from his reach, the puck bounced off the boards and came out to Chuck again. He took it easily and flashed in toward the goal. Big Jug came lunging at him. Chuck was within shooting distance, but Jug was now between him and the goal.

Chuck swerved toward the middle of the ice. Jug plowed to a halt to keep him covered, and did so with surprising speed. But not quite fast enough. While Jug was digging in for another charge, Chuck turned again and bore in toward the goal. He made his try, a whistling shot two feet off the ice. The goalie slapped at it but missed. The puck ended in the net.

It was a nifty piece of work, impressive. Chuck got a big lift out of it, but he didn't try to kid himself too much. He'd had a lot of luck, both in handling the puck, and in the fact that he'd taken the Penguins by surprise. They'd played him for a chuck.

Chuck was reasonably certain he could not repeat his skillful run, not without more practice than he'd had tonight. He also knew that on the next attempt the two defense men would be on their toes.

The effect of the goal upon the Penguins was amusing. They stared slack-jawed at first, then began to mutter among themselves excitedly, as if already anticipating a strong addition to their team.

It was Jurgen's reaction, though, which captured Chuck's attention. He studied Jurgen with a series of quick glances and learned plenty. Jurgen's

first reaction was one of shocked alarm, as if Chuck were a liability rather than an asset, making it rather obvious that Jurgen didn't want a man as good as Chuck upon the Penguin squad. It was pretty raw.

Jurgen had sense enough to wipe the expression off at once, and to replace it with a dead pan. "Not bad," he admitted. "Pretty good, in fact. But you can't get through again."

"I guess not," said Chuck, faking humbleness. "I was pretty lucky, Mr. Jurgen."

"You're tellin' *me*. Okay, try it again."

CHUCK went up-ice and turned. He had to wait while Jurgen gave Jug some low-voiced instructions. Chuck's lips tightened in a mirthless smile. He didn't need a crystal ball to know what the coach was telling Jug. He saw Jug nod with solemn relish.

They ganged up on Chuck this time as they should have done the first time. They herded him against the fence, and Jug slammed in on him, battered him hard against the boards. Chuck had the quick dazed feeling of being caught between an elephant and a brick wall. When Jug bounced off of him Jug looked surprised to find Chuck still able to stand up.

Chuck kept his head. He was badly shaken up but far from out. He had the build and previous training to soak up punishment of that sort. His eyes were brittle, his anger deep inside and well controlled. He said to Jurgen, who had skated up, "Shall I go through again?"

"Why not?"

So Chuck went through again, grateful for the chance. If Jug and the coach wanted to play games, it suited Chuck. Particularly this sort of game.

He went in fast. He carried the puck against his stick, but the puck meant nothing now. It had no part in what was scheduled to happen.

Chuck drew a line on Jug and skated at him. Jug obviously expected Chuck to swerve because the big defense man



held his charge too long, giving Chuck the advantage of momentum. Jug threw a body block, and got the worst of it. Chuck's shoulder blasted hard against Jug's chest, and Jug went down with Chuck on top of him. Chuck scrambled from the tangle fast, figuring Jug for a sorehead who might want to finish the argument with his fists. Chuck didn't want it that way. He had other plans.

Jug reached his feet with anger and embarrassment equally divided in his wide flat face. He stared at Chuck like a peevish bear, and growled, "Come through again."

"Sure, Jug," said Chuck. "But don't forget it's your idea."

So Chuck came through again. He didn't swerve. Jug didn't either. This time Jug had his speed. They met like a pair of charging bulls in a primitive exhibition of pure savagery. The impact was a brutal thing which flesh and bones were not supposed to endure.

They bounced clear. Both men hit the ice. But Chuck was first on his feet. Jug climbed up shortly after, mad by now.

"Come through again," he rasped.

And Jurgen, mean-eyed, let them fight it out. It was obvious he couldn't believe that Chuck would last it out with Jug, who outweighed Chuck by twenty-five or thirty pounds.

But Chuck knew things about the game of hockey Jug had never learned. Chuck knew the science of a body block. He knew the secret of compactness, of centering his striking force into an area which distributed the shock throughout his body. He knew the fundamentals of swift leverage and exquisite timing.

He came through twice more. He took a beating, but Jug took a worse one. Jug weathered the first charge but not the second. Jug stayed down, fighting for wind like a big mackerel on a cake of ice. Chuck skated to the rinkside and leaned against the dasher, glad of its support. He was too done in just now even to wonder what was going to happen next.

A COUPLE of the men helped Jug to his feet. He wobbled at first, then steadied, looking dazed. Jurgen was across the rink, scratching his chin and thinking hard, obviously groping for an answer to the embarrassing problem Chuck had thrust on him.

Chuck was feeling better when Jug came skating slowly toward him. Jug still had his stick, so Chuck moved hastily from the wall into a position of more maneuverability. He got a jolt when Jug said meekly, "I ain't sore." He grinned to prove it.

Chuck managed a cautious grin of his own, scarcely daring to believe what he was seeing. There was no trace of animosity in Jug's eyes, which made him more of a man than Chuck had suspected. There was a respectfulness about the guy which did not lessen him in stature.

Chuck said, "Glad to hear it, Jug. I've had enough."

"How come a guy your size," asked Jug, "can push a guy like me around?"

"I know some tricks."

Jug brightened perceptibly. "Yeh," he said. "I figured it that way." Then hopefully. "Could I learn 'em?"

"Sure. I'll teach 'em to you. Glad to."

Al Jurgen skated up in time to hear Chuck's last remark. The coach said loudly, "You'll teach nothin'. I've got you spotted now. You're some ringer that dirty Hilton coach sent down here to cripple my men before the Hilton game. What's your name, fella. Talk fast!"

But Chuck didn't talk fast. He took his time, beginning to enjoy the situation.

"Speak up!" yelled Jurgen. "What's your name?"

Chuck let the silence hang another moment, then said quietly, "Chuck Mercer."

Al Jurgen's head snapped back as if a trick cigar had exploded in his face. His jaw flapped loose, a grunt came out, his eyes went slightly glassy. He forced his jaw up with an effort, ran a tongue



across his lips and blustered, "You're a liar! I don't believe it."

Chuck's hand flashed out and closed on the front of Jurgen's heavy sweater. He spun the coach about and pinned him hard against the sideboards. He thrust his face up close to Jurgen's and demanded softly, "Who am I, Al?"

Al Jurgen blurted hastily, "You're Mercer. Chu-Chuck Mercer."

Chuck suddenly released his hold. Deprived unexpectedly of the support, Al Jurgen's feet slid out from under him. He sat hard on the ice. Chuck hauled him to his feet and said, "You're fired. Get out and don't come back."

"You can't fire me. I got a contract."

"Which I can break," Chuck shot at him. "Because I just heard you teaching these kids illegal hockey. Beat it, jerk, before I lose my temper."

Al turned to the Penguins, pleading, "Are you lettin' him get by with this?"

**T**HE EXPRESSIONS of the men were varied, verging from uncertainty to plain indifference. Jurgen obviously did not rate very high with them. They needed a spokesman, and the goalie volunteered, "Yeah, Al, we're lettin' him get by with it because you are a jerk."

The others looked relieved. Chuck was relieved. He let his breath out slowly. "So long, Al," he said.

When Jurgen disappeared, Chuck Mercer found a hollow space inside him. Without intending to he'd stuck his neck out, and his neck, right now, seemed long as a giraffe's. He had acted upon impulse. It was the only alibi he had, and gradually he began to understand how wide a loop he'd thrown. The implications of his impulse were far-reaching, just how far Chuck was afraid to guess. It made him sweat to think of it. So he didn't think of it right now. He thrust the thought aside and played the cards he'd dealt himself.

He faced the Penguins who, for the most part, were eyeing him without expression. They were wondering what was coming next. So was Chuck. He

grinned and said, "Well, looks like the Penguins are going to need a new coach."

"Are you playing with us?" asked the goalie bluntly.

The question pinned Chuck down. He felt his palms go damp, knowing he had to come up with the right answer, the one the goalie wanted. Chuck filled his lungs, then burned his bridges behind him.

"Why sure," he said. "I'll play if you guys want me to."

The goalie said with satisfaction, "Now you're talking. Maybe we can have a team."

Jug said, "And you can coach us too."

"Who, me?"

"Why not? You've played big time. We've heard of you. You're good. You made a monkey out of me."

There was a muttering of assent from the other Penguins. Chuck finally saw he'd walked into a trap which would hold a grizzly bear, so he made the best of it, and said, "Okay fellas, it's a deal. I'll get some gear and go to work tomorrow. See you then."

He left the Arena feeling slightly giddy at the pace he'd traveled in the last half-hour. Things had happened fast, and his first reaction was he'd made a first class jackass of himself. He had been heading East with every chance of signing a nice fat contract with his old team, the Leaders. And what had happened to him? He'd fallen flat on his snoot. He'd committed himself to play with, and to coach a tanktown club of clucks. Was he nuts? Completely nuts?

He decided that he was. He waited, then, for the reaction to set in, for the strong wave of self-recrimination to sweep over him. But it didn't come. Another feeling came in place of it, a rather pleasant feeling which wavered between smug satisfaction and downright elation. He couldn't dope it out. It worried him. "What in thunder's happened to me?" he asked himself. "Go to bed, sucker. You'll feel different in the morning."



**B**UT HE didn't. He awoke with the stimulating feeling of a job to do, and a rather exciting job at that. He decided not to tamper with the feeling. He told himself it wouldn't last long anyway so he might as well enjoy it while he could. He sang discordantly while shaving.

While toweling his face he told himself he'd have to break the news to Nancy Mercer. The picture of her flashed across his mind. The towel stopped in the middle of a swipe. He felt as if he'd just dropped swiftly in an elevator. He sucked his breath in angrily and snarled aloud, "No, chump, no! Not that! For heaven's sake use your head!"

So he used his head by showing a care in dressing that he hadn't shown for months. He took his only suit to a tailor to be pressed. Meanwhile he bought a new tie, a conservative blue. Back in his room he stood before the mirror critically, and sneered, "Hi, meat-head. What's the score? You don't know, huh? Smart guy. Oh, very smart."

He left the hotel and started to his uncle's airport. Reaching his destination he climbed the fence and walked toward the office. He was strangely out of breath when he reached it. He stopped before the door, and his hand went automatically to his unaccustomed necktie to see if it were straight. He grunted angrily and jerked his hand away.

He opened the door and walked in. The outer office was empty, the door to the inner office closed. He rapped on the panel.

Nancy's voice called, "Come in."

Chuck went inside. The girl said, "Oh, it's you."

She was wearing slacks and a green sweater. She had been working on some papers on the desk. Her eyes were impersonal and steady.

A short circuit jammed Chuck's communicating system, but he managed gruffly, "Yeah, it's me."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"A business talk."

He took the chair beside the desk.

Nancy waited for him to speak. Chuck filled his lungs and said, "I've taken over the hockey team."

"Why?"

"Because it needed taking over." There was a challenge in his tone which she accepted.

"Why didn't you consult me?"

"It happened too fast."

"Is that any excuse?"

**C**HUCK felt his anger coming up, but he held it down. He lighted a cigarette, smoked a moment, then said quietly, "I guess we'd better get things straight. You haven't pulled any punches as to what you think of me. You're probably justified, so we'll let it go at that. But the point right now is, that I went off half-cocked and got myself in neck deep. I gave Al Jorgen the old heave-ho. He's out. I'm in. Now go ahead and start the fireworks."

"Later, maybe. Let's hear the rest of what you have to say."

"It's this. I've dealt myself a hand. You can sit back and trump my aces, or you can play ball with me. We're in the thing together, now, whether we like it or not, and it's up to you to make the rules. We can fight, or we can work together."

"How about the Penguins?" Nancy temporized.

"They're a mess, and Jorgen was a louse who was playing ball with Hackett. The Penguins are potential money-makers, but they've been mismanaged, tossed to the wolves. Somebody is responsible for it, and I assume it's you."

Nancy stiffened in her chair, then flared, "Now wait a minute! You can't —" She stopped abruptly, caught her lower lip between her teeth, and stared at the desk for several moments. When she raised her eyes they were still rebellious, but the rebellion faded gradually. She finally admitted with an effort, "Yes, you're right, of course. The Penguins were my responsibility, and I didn't accept it as I should have."

"Why?"



"Because I loathe hockey. I realize it's a poor excuse. I suppose I hate it because of the influence it had on Dad. It was responsible for everything that happened to him. It ruined him."

"Maybe," admitted Chuck. "But you can't begrudge him the pleasure he got out of it. All the thrills and the excitement."

"No," she conceded honestly. "I can't. It's just that I—well, I have a stupid prejudice against the sport. When dad's former coach resigned I hired the first man who applied for the job, Al Jurgen. I simply wanted to wash my hands of the team, and I'm not proud of the way I've acted toward it." She made another effort and admitted, "I—I'm glad you've taken over."

Chuck let his breath out slowly. "Then we work together?" he inquired.

"Yes," Her tone became impersonal again. "On a strictly business basis."

"Don't worry," Chuck said dryly. "It'll be just that."

She colored faintly. Her eyes heated swiftly, then cooled.

Chuck said, "Don't sell the Penguins short. They're the only chance we have to put us on our feet again. If we get the breaks we might clear off our debts and get the airport back in shape."

"I hope you're right," she said.

CHUCK hoped he was too, but his hopes began to teeter when he learned a few more facts. He learned them through a talk with Barney Chad that evening at the rink. Chad was the goalie and captain of the team. Chuck talked to him before the practice session. Chad was blocky, sandy-haired and button-nosed. He had a clear conception of the Penguins' plight.

"It's not good, Chuck," he said. "We began to go to pieces during the war when players were hard to get. The town lost interest in us, and we haven't made more than our bare expenses since. We manage to keep our freezing plant in shape, to pay taxes on the building, and to buy equipment. There's nothing left

after the players take their cut—which isn't much."

Chuck asked, "What are this year's prospects?"

Chad held his nose expressively. "Only one game, our first, against the Hilton Hawks will draw a gate worth counting. We've slipped so far none of the hot teams will play us. Even if we turn out to be Stanley Cup material, no one would want to see us play a bunch of hams."

"How about the Raytown Rams. They used to pack the place."

"Yeah," said Chad gloomily. "They were always a surefire sellout because the people of Paxton hate the people of Raytown. But the Rams haven't been on our schedule for four years."

"Maybe we could get 'em back if we show some class."

"Maybe," said Chad doubtfully. "But first we got to show the class."

"Let's get to work then," Chuck said pointedly.

They got to work. Chuck sized the Penguins up and found them willing. That was good. Chuck told them bluntly, "I'm going to drive you men like galley slaves, but I'll pile it on myself as well. We'll lick the Hawks, and after that we'll see what happens."

They were brave words, and Chuck soon began to believe they'd been too brave, because the first workout was pretty sad. Chuck Mercer's optimism took a licking, and the job ahead began to look colossal. Jurgen had laid a rickety foundation with deliberate care, and Chuck finally had to face the fact that most of the squad needed a complete overhauling, strict training from the ground up. The big defense man, Jug Steebo, and Barney Chad, the goalie, were the only ones who showed real promise. They formed the nucleus from which Chuck had to work. He needed wingmen, another good defense man and replacements.

When the workout finally ended, Chuck sent the weary Penguins home while he stayed behind to turn the



lights out and lock up. He, too, was dog-tired. He'd driven himself hard, and the unaccustomed skating muscles were rebelling now. They tightened on him as he walked.

The switch controlling the rink lights was near the entrance. Chuck threw the switch and started toward the door, above which a single bulb threw half-hearted light through its crust of dirt. Chuck reached for the cord to douse the light when he thought he heard a shuffle of steps outside.

**H**E FROZE to attention, letting instinct take complete control. Then his muscles loosened slowly as his sixth sense told him that the danger was not imminent, that it wasn't closing in on him. They must be waiting for him, probably just outside the door.

He told himself it was a case of nerves. His hand reached for the door knob, but something seemed to check his fingers in midair. It wasn't nerves, not aimless apprehension anyway. He'd conquered that disease since he'd been discharged. This was the real McCoy.

He backtracked slowly, circled the inside of the arena and stopped before a window near the rear. He released the catch and raised it gingerly. It squeaked softly but went up. He slid across the sill and eased himself to the ground. He closed the window as quietly as he could, then followed the building toward its front. He had to know if he'd guessed right, or whether his war nerves were on the march again.

He reached the corner of the building, peered around, then sucked in a breath of quick relief. Three men were waiting there. He was glad to see them as live proof his nerves were playing square with him.

Instead of waiting until his elation passed, then slipping quietly away, he did a stupid thing. His only possible excuse was that he needed further proof. He stepped from the corner of the building and asked sharply, "Looking for me, boys. I'm Chuck Mercer?"

A gritty voice rasped, "Get 'im!"

The voice belonged to Hackett, a fact Chuck didn't find surprising. The nearest man to Chuck flashed into action. He lunged at Chuck, arm raised, a short club or perhaps a blackjack in his hand.

Chuck's Ranger training hadn't dulled to any great extent. Instead of moving back or dodging, he moved in, but fast. He locked the other's arm and broke it neatly just above the wrist. The fellow squealed like a stuck pig, and another muscle-man got there about that time.

Chuck heaved the first one at him, and the pair collided. The second attacker got his feet tangled in the first. He started falling forward, but Chuck nailed him before he hit the ground. He slashed the edge of his open hand behind the other's ear and that was all for number two. He hit the ground out cold.

Chuck started for Hackett, but Hackett had started first—and not toward Chuck. He dived toward his waiting car like a scared groundhog for its hole. He scrambled behind the wheel, slammed it into gear and went hurtling down the street, the door still flapping open.

Chuck watched him go, then shrugged. He turned toward his two victims and shrugged again. He couldn't even think of a sound reason for calling the cops. The man with the broken arm was cursing steadily. Chuck wheeled and walked away.

But he wasn't fool enough to treat the incident indifferently. He'd been lucky to come out of it so well. Paxton was not a healthy place for him just now because Monk Hackett wouldn't rest until Chuck Mercer had been mauled about a bit. So Chuck decided not to be too careless.

**H**E WORKED the Penguins hard each night, trying not to forget that some of them had worked all day at other jobs. His progress was dishearteningly slow at first, and there were times when Chuck decided he was not a coach.

A week went by before the first en-



couraging symptoms came to light. Having mastered the fundamentals as Chuck taught them and having thrown off the bad effects of Jurgen's coaching, the men began to gather confidence and speed and smartness. Individuals began to stand out sharply from the others, as those of greater talent got their teeth in Chuck's instructions.

Jack Middleton, a defense man, was one of these who suddenly began to show improvement. He'd never be a great defense man, but he was a whole lot better now than when Chuck first met him on the ice.

Chuck also began to see hopes for Cotton Blain and Happy Berger, a couple of speedy husky kids who learned their lessons fast and showed up well in the wing positions. The Penguins' prospects were beginning to look up a bit. Jug Steebo was a first-rate man on the defense, and Barney Chad could plug a big important hole inside the crease.

Chuck was also greatly pleased with his own comeback. He had held the sneaking fear that his five-year layoff might have slowed him down. It did at first, but his speed came back, because he'd never let himself get out of shape. His stickwork needed touching up, but his old skill wasn't far beneath the surface. It came out gradually, and Chuck was quick to see its effect upon the Penguins. It was the sort of tonic they had needed for years past. It sparked their game and made them begin to believe they weren't the bums which folks had tried to make them think they were.

The team began to click, and the word passed through the town. The news didn't set the place afire or anything of that sort, but the deadened interest of the hockey fans began to show some sluggish signs of life. The local papers gave the Penguins several cautious boosts, allowing, with their fingers crossed, that Chuck Mercer might, just might, be making progress with the team, but added promptly that the Penguins wouldn't stand a prayer against the Hawks.

It served to bring Chuck somewhat in the public eye, however. He became a figure of importance. He renewed old acquaintances and began to believe, to his surprise, that Paxton wasn't such a bad place after all.

Nevertheless, he regarded all the citizens of Paxton in the light of prospective customers. It was the first time in his life he had ever been concerned with the clink of cash at a hockey turnstile, but now it was a matter of supreme importance. He had to have that dough. It was the only source of bouyancy which could save a sinking ship, a ship on which Chuck had taken passage, for better or for worse.

When the night of the game pulled around a reasonably large crowd turned out, but not as large a crowd as Chuck had hoped for. The arena could accommodate eight thousand, but scarcely more than half of the seats were filled. Chuck voiced his disappointment to the Penguins' captain.

Chad said, "Hell, Chuck, this is a mob compared to what we've drawn the past few years. Cripes, there are so many people out there now I'll probably have a case of stage fright."

It made Chuck feel a little better. It helped him turn his attention to the job at hand, and it dawned upon him suddenly it was quite a job, because the Penguins had the jumps. An epidemic of nerves broke out in the dressing room. The men were keyed to a high pitch. They wanted this game, and they wanted it bad, even though they weren't supposed to stand a prayer of winning. It was the first time since most of them could remember that the Penguins were sending a halfway decent team on the ice, and the men wanted desperately to prove they weren't a bunch of stumble bums. They weren't sure of themselves. The old tail-end complex was creeping in to haunt them.

**THE FEELING** was so strong it began to get its fingers into Chuck. He didn't like it. He wanted to win this




game more desperately than he had ever wanted to win a game before. But he knew he couldn't win it with a team which lacked the confidence to win.

He gave them a pep talk—just a lot of words which crumpled miserably against the Penguins' wall of nerves. He couldn't get through to them with words and knew it.

So he took them on the ice. The Paxton fans greeted them with tentative applause, making it clear the Penguins were on trial. The thumbs of the fans were figuratively suspended horizontally, ready on provocation to turn up or down.

The warmup of the Penguins didn't help their cause a lot. They were sloppy, tied in knots. The Hawks came on, began their warmup, and made the Penguins look like clucks. The Hawks were flashy, cocky and assured. Few of the Penguins had ever played against such talent. They kept shooting questioning looks at Chuck, and Chuck's lips got stiff from answering with reassuring grins.

The Hawks were also watching Chuck with critical attention. Sensing this, Chuck deliberately slowed his play, made blunders and tried to put across the idea that he was just a has-been. It was the only strategy he could think of at the moment, and when he saw the Hawks exchanging knowing looks, he knew he'd put the idea over. It gave him an ad-



Chuck moved in fast. He nailed the man, who hit the ground, out cold



vantage which he knew he'd need.

When the referee came on the ice to start the game, Chuck had his mind made up. He knew he'd have to gamble, take a long chance. If it paid off, swell. If it didn't—maybe he could think of something else.

He moved to the middle of the ice where Hogan, the rangy center for the Hawks was waiting. He regarded Chuck with no trace of awe, no obvious concern for Chuck's previous reputation. It suited Chuck. He wanted it that way.

The centers braced themselves in their positions. The referee checked the positions of the other players, then tossed the puck on the ice between the centers. Chuck Mercer had his senses and reflexes stretched wire-thin. He exploded into action with the violence of a hand grenade.

**I**T WAS more than Hogan had anticipated. When he made his first stab for the puck it wasn't there. Chuck frisked it out from under him with a lightning jab which sent the puck to Hogan's rear. Chuck pounced on it before the other had a chance to turn.

Chuck cradled it against his stick and started for the Hawk defense zone. He entered it before the Hawks recovered from the shock. The right defense, Barstow, came steaming in at him. The left defense held off, keeping an eye on Cotton Blain who had followed Chuck across the line.

Chuck drove hard at Barstow, showing every intention of skating right across him. He saw the other's eyes accept the challenge and saw Barstow brace himself for a savage body block.

Chuck let him throw the block before he swerved. It was a matter of the most exquisite timing, but Chuck took the chance and pulled it off. He flipped the puck between Barstow's legs, weathered the light brush of Barstow's lunging shoulder, then flashed around the Hawk to snag the puck behind him.

The left defense made a belated try to get across, but he might as well have

saved his strength. Chuck came at the goal line like a cyclone. He saw the astounded eyes and the bared teeth of the goalie. Chuck rifled the biscuit toward the cage from just outside the crease. The goalie made a wild stab at the puck and missed. The red light flashed, and the Penguins led, 1-0.

The Penguins fans were stunned at first. They had to pull themselves together, find their voices. Then the roar broke loose. Chuck scarcely heard it. He was watching his own men, studying them closely, wondering if his successful gamble, aided by a lot of luck, had achieved its end.

He believed it had. The Penguins were still bug-eyed, but another element, other than surprise, was creeping in. They stood a little straighter, carried themselves with more assurance, regarded the Hawks with less respect.

Chuck had shown them that the Hawks were vulnerable, even against a one-man rush, and that one man was a member of the Penguins. The Penguins would remember that, and Chuck hoped grimly that the memory would cure their case of nerves.

The Hawks were still suffering from the jolt when the puck was faced off again from the middle of the ice. The Hawks had misjudged Chuck badly, and the stiffness of their faces showed they wouldn't make the same mistake a second time.

They didn't make the same mistake, but made one almost equally as bad. Hogan did a better job on the face-off, but Chuck cleared the puck after a brief battle. He started another whirlwind rush up ice, and the Hawks, the memory of Chuck's first rush vivid in their minds, ganged up on him.

Their left defense left Cotton Blain uncovered. Barstow and Chuck crashed head-on, but before they met Chuck snapped the puck to Blain, a perfect pass which Blain took in his stride. He made connections just outside the crease and whammed the puck into the cage—another tally for the Penguins.



The Penguin fans went nuts this time, and Chuck didn't like to see their optimism soar so high. He had pegged the Hawks for a fast smart team which knew its way around. Chuck had fooled them at the start, but there was no reason to believe they'd stay fooled. They had experience which the Penguins lacked, and Chuck saw them go into a quick huddle before the next face-off.

**THE RESULT** of the huddle became quickly evident. Hogan was tougher on the face-off. Chuck finally cleared the puck. He started a rush which stalled against the Hawks' alertness. He got the puck to Happy Berger, but Berger was promptly pinned against the boards. He slammed a long pass to Blain, but a Hawk wing swooped in on it, and a four-man wave of Hawks bore down on the Penguin goal. Middleton and Steebo slowed down the attack, but the Hawk right wing got off an angle-shot for the Penguin goal. Chad blocked it with his pads, fell on the puck and cleared it, but the Hawks were showing their talons now.

They upped the tempo of the game, sent strike after strike at the Penguin goal, yet managed to keep a constant pair of men on Chuck. The Penguins' goalie, Barney Chad, weathered a barrage of shots and did heroic work. A pair of them got past him, though, and the count was evened at 2-2.

In the closing minutes of the first period, the Penguins staged another rush up the ice and cracked the Hawk defense. Chuck drew them in and cleared the puck to Berger who made a long try at the goal. The goalie stopped the rubber with his chest. It fell outside the crease. He tried to fall on it, but the blade of Chuck's stick scooped beneath his falling body, snared the puck and drove it in the net.

The period ended with a 3-2 score, but Chuck was thoughtful as he left the ice. Two of the Penguin points had been earned through strategy. Beyond that,

the Hawks had outplayed them. The Penguins had showed improvement, sure, and with the added experience of the game would show some more improvement. But—and the but was a big one—would the improvement be sufficient to offset the greater experience of the Hawks. Chuck didn't know, and couldn't guess. All he could do was hope.

The second period was a scorcher. Chuck drove himself mercilessly and managed to keep the Penguins geared up to a speed they had never shown in practice. Their game was not spectacular, but it was sound. They played clean hockey, a thing Chuck had drilled into them with every argument he knew. It paid off now, helping them keep their strength upon the ice, rather than in the penalty box. It permitted Chuck to use replacements cagily, saving the strength of his regulars.

The Hawks were not so smart in this respect. They began to rough things up a bit and weakened their team by frequent visits to the hoosegow. It permitted the Penguins to hang on. The Hawks caged only a single goal in the second period, which ended with the game tied up 3-3.

The Hawks dug hard for pay-dirt in the early stages of the final period. They battered the Penguins with everything they had, trying savagely for a break through. There were several heart-stopping moments, but Chuck pulled a five-man defense into the Hawk attacking zone which became a storm center of wild action.

But the Penguins held, and when the first fury of the Hawk attacks subsided the score was still 3-3. The Penguin fans were going crazy, yelling for the Penguins to lay siege to the Hawk goal. But Chuck had other ideas.

**WHEN** the Hawks expended their opening fury and eased up for a breathing spell, they obviously expected the Penguins to take advantage of the moment. Chuck led a rush or so but made his play look tentative, as if his



hopes for scoring were not great. He kept the Penguins, for the most part, definitely on the defensive. It was a good act, and the Hawks, studying his every move, soon fell for it.

Chuck saw conviction growing in them. They were beginning to think as Chuck wanted them to think, that the Penguins would be more than satisfied with a tie game, that they would consider it a virtual victory if they could keep the Hawks from scoring another point during the remainder of this period, and during the ten-minute extra period which would be allowed in case the third period ended in a tie.

It was asking the Hawks to believe a lot, but they accepted it with growing certainty as time went on. They regained their wind and began battering again at the Penguin five-man defense. The defense held doggedly. Tension began to grow in Chuck as the game sped into its final moments. He watched the Hawks like a cat at a mouse hole. He saw them getting careless as they drew their entire team closer and closer to the Penguin goal, bunching their men in a last desperate effort to cage a shot.

Chuck's nerves went ragged as he waited for an opening. He began to fear it wouldn't come. Then suddenly it happened. Hogan tried to reach one of his wings with a long pass. The puck flashed across the ice, then suddenly a hurricane was on it. The hurricane was Chuck. He came from nowhere in a blur of speed.

He stabbed for the puck one-handed. His blade cracked solidly against the disc and sent it skittering toward the center of the ice. Chuck followed it, uncorking everything he had.

A close-in Hawk came at him, lunged and missed. Chuck reached the puck, controlled it with his stick and went slamming down the ice—a clear path to the goal, with only the goalie ahead.

The furious out-guessed Hawks tried hard to catch him, but they might as well have chased a shooting star. Chuck held his lead, increased it.

The goalie lost his head. Instead of leaving the crease for a rush at Chuck, he tried to blow himself up six feet wide. He couldn't make it. Chuck feinted to the left. The goalie lunged in that direction, leaving an opening as broad as a barn door. Chuck drilled the puck into the net, and the Penguins took the lead, 4-3.

And what is more, they held it for the few remaining minutes of the game. They guarded their own goal in real earnest now, and the Hawks could not get through.

It was a big moment for the Penguins and the Penguin fans. It was also a big moment for Chuck Mercer, so he enjoyed it while he could, knowing full well it couldn't last.

Nor did it. The Penguins had a team, a pretty good one, but they were all dressed up with not a place to go. The remainder of their schedule was filled with teams which had been chosen for their weakness.

A FAIR crowd showed up for the second game, and a lot of them left before the game was over, although calling it a game was flattering it. The Penguins romped across the visitors with a 14-0 score. It wasn't hockey, it was slaughter, and the fans knew that the games to come would be as bad. They proved their knowledge by their absence, and they didn't miss a thing except lopsided scores. The gate receipts were pitiful.

Which hit Chuck where it hurt the most. He loved hockey, sure, but at the moment he loved money more. The irony was more intense, because his attitude toward money in the past had been contemptuous.

But now he wanted it and saw no chance of getting it. He wanted it to save his uncle's crumbling estate. He turned his own emotions inside out and came upon a startling truth. The urge to play and see the world had left him. He had done those things. He was ready now to settle down.



The thought was revolutionary. It scared him some but also offered him a strange contentment. And, associated closely with his future plans was Nancy Mercer. He finally had to face that fact, hopeless as it was.

He saw her often as he dared. The meetings always shook him up internally, but he kept relations strictly on a business basis. So did Nancy, though a puzzled look kept showing in her eyes with greater regularity. It came at times when Chuck's deep interest in the business could not be disputed. When he indicated without doubt that he was fighting with her, side by side.

He studied the airport carefully, and the things he learned were not encouraging. The Mercer planes and hangars were in bad shape. Chuck talked a lot with Marty Holt who tried to keep the planes in the air, ferrying passengers and freight. Holt was an honest rough-hewn man who had the business deep at heart. Chuck trusted him.

"I'm good with engines and machinery," Holt admitted. "But I don't know how much longer I can keep these heaps together. I need parts, need 'em bad. But I can't get what I need on credit. And that's the whole thing in a nut shell, Chuck."

Chuck made the rounds and tried to borrow money. Nothing doing. He failed as Nancy had. The Mercer outfit was too shaky for the banks or individuals to take a chance on. Chuck finally pinned his hopes on the hockey team, not this year but next. If the Mercer interests could squeeze through till then, Chuck knew he could book a playing schedule which would interest the fans, and also the banks.

It was a sound practical hope, but it exploded with atomic force. Chuck got his first warning of catastrophe from Monk Hackett. Chuck was heading for the airport when he almost bumped in to Hackett, who was coming out of a drug store. Both stopped and faced each other. Hackett stretched his lips into a grin of ugly smugness.

"I just been talkin' to your partner, Nancy on the phone," he said. "I gave 'er some good news. You'll like it, too."

"Okay. Let's hear it."

Hackett unloosed a chuckle, oily with satisfaction, "You'll hear it soon enough," he said and walked away.

Chuck hurried to the office. He found Nancy sitting rigidly at her desk. Her face was pale. Her eyes were red. She had been crying.

"We're through, Chuck," she said tonelessly. "All through."

"What happened?"

"Ira Stover sold Hackett our six thousand dollars worth of notes. He owns them now. They fall due in ten days, and he intends to call them then."

CHUCK felt the color draining from his own face. He sat down stiffly, then took time to pull himself together. He'd never weathered a punch like that before, had never known how one could hurt.

"We're through," repeated Nancy dully.

"Maybe not," said Chuck, as anger came to drive away his chill discouragement. "A sellout hockey game would almost bring enough to meet the note. We could raise the rest."

"A fine dream," said Nancy. "There's only one team which could pull a crowd like that, the Raytown Rams, and you've tried to get a game with them."

"Yes," said Chuck. "Their schedule's full. But there's just a chance their owner, Fox, might help us out. Maybe he's got a kind streak in him."

"That's not his reputation," Nancy said.

"I can still try."

Chuck rode to Raytown on his motor bike. He found Jed Fox and made his try. Fox was fat and amiable, but adamant.

"Sorry you're in such a jam," he said. "But I'm a business man. I can't take a chance of bunging my men up in a game with the Penguins. Our other games are too important."



Chuck started to leave when Fox said craftily, "I might reconsider under—ah—certain conditions."

"Which are?" Chuck asked suspiciously.

"Winner take all," Fox told him unctuously.

Chuck's muscles stiffened, but he held his anger down. "You know the Rams could lick the Penguins, don't you. We'd give 'em a good game but our chances to win would be about ten to one."

"Of course I know it," Fox admitted.

"You've got me over a barrel and you know that too."

"But certainly," smiled Fox.

"I've got to take you up on it," said Chuck.

"Fine, I'll have my secretary draw up an agreement. We'll play the night before your note falls due."

The news of the Penguin-Ram game hit Paxton like a small tornado. Whatever lagging interest there had been in hockey vanished promptly. The fans knew that their Penguins wouldn't have much chance to win, but the chance, though slender, was still there, and the game itself was bound to be a pip. The sellout was complete three days before the game.

The weight upon Chuck's shoulders was enormous. He'd never known a weight like that before, but he was satisfied to know it wouldn't crush him. If the stakes had not been so tremendous, there were times when the weight might actually have caused him satisfaction. He scarcely knew himself these days.

The Penguins accepted the coming game with a feverish intentness, and Chuck liked their attitudes. They weren't licked yet, far from it. They trained like demons, and they trained to win.

Chuck smoothed them out and brought them to their peak. It almost scared him to admit how good they really were. He knew the Rams were hot, although he'd never seen them play. On paper they looked better than the Penguins. Hockey experts seemed to

think they were. The wise ones picked the Rams to lick the Penguins by three points and that's the way the betting held.

**T**HE PENGUINS were holding practice session two nights before the game. Chuck was tapering them off, letting them take things fairly easy. He was about to knock off when he heard his name called.

"Chuck! Hey, Chuck!"

He turned and saw Marty Holt on the other side of the dasher. There was urgency in Holt's expression as well as in his voice. Chuck skated over to him hastily.

"What's wrong, Marty?" he demanded.

"Plenty, I'm afraid. I got lots of pals among the mechanics around town, and one of 'em just tipped me off that Hackett's bringin' some of his boys over to our place tonight. It sounds like a straight steer, Chuck, but I didn't want to call in the cops till I talked to you."

Holt's voice was unintentionally loud. Jug Steebo, standing near, moved up. Chuck was thinking hard and fast when Jug interrupted, "We're wastin' time, Chuck. Let's get over there." He didn't wait for Chuck's permission, but turned and yelled to the other Penguins, "Hey, men, come here! Chuck's got trouble."

The ice hissed under the Penguins' skates. Chuck turned on them and said, "It's my headache, not yours. There may be trouble and maybe not, but I can't take the chance of any of you guys getting battered up before the Ram game. Keep out of it."

"You're talkin' like a sap," growled Barney Chad. "If you're in a jam, we're in it too. You can't keep us out. How about it, men?"

The other Penguins left no doubt as to where they stood.

An involuntary tightness settled in Chuck's throat. He cleared it gruffly, and said, "Okay suckers, here's the dope. Marty got a good tip that Monk Hackett's bringing some hoodlums over to do



a little wrecking work in the hangars. It sounds possible because Hackett wants to run us out of business so he can move in. He knows that if we lick the Rams we can meet our debts, and he's not taking any chances. He's trying to sneak in a low punch, which is sure to ruin us. I'm certain of it, because that's the way a punk like him would reason. Let's go. Bring your sticks."

The Penguins kicked off their skates, and didn't waste time going for their shoes. Armed with their sticks they poured from the Arena. Some of them had come in cars, and the Penguins crowded into these, and soon reached the airport. The place was silent.

"I guess they haven't come yet," said Holt, relieved. "How about the cops?"

"Later maybe," said Chuck. "If we have customers for 'em."

They left the cars which the drivers parked up the road near some houses. They crossed the dark field to the two hangars, both dark. Chuck gave his orders briefly, "We'll divide. You four—" he motioned to four of the players, "go in that smaller hangar, the rest of us will take this one. I imagine they'll start on this one but we can't be sure.

"Hide in the planes and in the back. If they come let 'em get started with their work—for evidence. When I switch on the main lights, let 'em have it. You, Jug, station yourself by the light in the other hangar."

Chuck posted himself behind a plane near the switch. The wait began. The minutes dragged. The tension grew. Chuck could hear the restless stirring of his men.

**T**IME passed interminably. It finally reached the point where Chuck was certain someone had pulled a fast one on Marty Holt. Chuck was about to call the vigil off. Then his breath jammed swiftly in his throat. Someone was jimmying a window at the side of the hangar. He heard the lock snap, then the sound of the window being raised. Figures began climbing through. Chuck

counted six. He grunted with satisfaction at the sight of Monk Hackett who came in last.

Hackett gave the orders in his gritty voice. "The tires first," he told his men. "Slash 'em good. After that we'll take the fuselages."

It was hard for Chuck to discipline himself to further waiting. He managed, though, until Hackett's men had driven knives into two tires. Chuck heard the rush of escaping air—then turned the light switch.

The place leaped into brilliance. A war cry blasted from the Penguins' throats. Then Penguins began raining from the walls and planes, weird figures in their black and white jerseys, wild strangers from another planet—or so it must have seemed to Hackett's hoodlums. They stood in frozen terror for a moment.

Some recovered sooner than others. They tried to fight—with knives—but didn't stand a prayer against the long reach of the slashing hockey sticks.

The fight was short-lived. Chuck had to hurry to get in it. He picked Hackett, reaching him as he tried to climb out through the window. Chuck grabbed him by a leg and hauled him back, letting him bounce hard upon the floor. Hackett scrambled up in panic. He uncorked a wild haymaker at Chuck's head. Chuck ducked beneath it, braced his legs and nailed Monk with a thundering uppercut. It landed flush on Hackett's jaw, and Hackett bounced on the floor again. This time he stayed.

The Penguins were grumbling at the shortness of the brawl. Not one of them was scratched. Chuck told them briefly, "Thanks. Now we can call the cops."

The law arrived without delay. Chief Burke himself was there, and the situation seemed to please him.

"I've been gunning for this crumb Hackett for some time," he said. "I'd like to get him for a bigger rap than this, but this'll keep him out of circulation for a while. Thanks, Mercer. A nice job."



**T**HE INCIDENT brought Chuck a lot of satisfaction, but he knew it didn't solve his problem. Monk Hackett, in jail or out of jail, still held the Mercer notes and would call them the instant they were due. If the Penguins licked the Rams, Chuck could pay Monk Hackett off. If the Penguins lost, the Mercer interests were washed out. And that's the way it was.

The Penguins were as ready as they'd ever be when game time pulled around. Chuck sized them up in the dressing room before they took the ice. He found them taut, but not too taut, confident, but not cocky. He was satisfied with what he saw.

But he wasn't satisfied with himself. He was tied in knots, physical and mental, and no force of his own will seemed able to correct it. The pressure of the last few days was finally catching up to him. His legs and arms felt cramped and useless, and the feeling scared him as he tried without success to shake it off. He saw the men glancing at him worriedly, knowing he was not himself. The assistant referee came in and said, "Someone outside to see you, Mercer."

Chuck left the dressing room and stopped, surprised. Nancy was outside the door, and there was something in her bearing he had never seen before, a lack of self-assurance. She let her eyes meet his, and something funny happened deep inside him.

"I—I'm sorry to bother you at this time, Chuck, but—but—" She hesitated, flushed, then pulled herself together. She spoke carefully, measuring her words. "I know what this game means to both of us. So do you. But I had to tell you that, whether you win or lose it, I'm proud of what you've done and that I was badly mistaken in you at the start."

Chuck drew his breath in slowly, trying hard to understand the words he'd heard. And when he finally understood them, a great and lasting warmth spread through him. He tried to speak, and found it difficult.

"Thanks, Nancy," he said hoarsely.

"It was fine of you to tell me. You—you don't know what—I—I mean, you don't understand what—" He bogged down, ending feebly, "Well maybe you do."

She smiled at him and said, "I hope it means just what I think it does. I'm staying for the game, and I'll see you afterward. Good luck, Chuck."

He stood for a moment after she had gone. Then he whirled toward the locker room, burst in the door, and roared, "Come on, you bums! Shake out the lead! We've some work to do."

The Penguins stared at him, then grins began to split their faces. The room was filled with static as they finished with their dressing. It didn't take them long, and then they clumped out on their skate blades toward the ice.

**T**HE PENGUINS looked good in their warmup, and the fans gave them a big hand. The Rams looked formidable, too. Chuck watched them closely, particularly Bert Webber, a cube of a man, fast as an ice boat and strong as a buffalo. He was good, good enough for the Boston Blades who had signed him for the following season. Chuck studied him and found no flaws.

The referee's whistle shrilled to start the game. A tense silence settled on the fans. The players deployed to their places. Chuck started for the center of the ice, his muscles no longer tied in knots. They were loose, flexible and full of life. His mind was clear and accurate.

He shook hands with Webber, meeting the man's hard calculating eyes. Webber was on the upgrade, and he had a reputation to maintain. His eyes said he'd maintain it in spite of anything Chuck could do to stop him.

They braced themselves for the face-off. The referee tossed the puck accurately between their stick blades. Webber moved like lightning, almost, but not quite, stealing the puck on his first slash.

The two sticks crashed together. Chuck could feel the raw power flowing



downward from the other's arms. It took everything Chuck had to match it, but he did. Neither of them gained immediate control, and the puck finally skittered aimlessly from between their sticks.

By luck, the rubber went in front of Chuck, behind Bert Webber's back. Chuck drove at it and snared it with his blade. He started for the right-hand fence. A Ram wing stopped him with a body block, but not before Chuck had made a clean shot to the speeding Berger who carried the disc across the blue line into the Ram defense zone.

He was smothered promptly but managed to get the puck to Steebo who had hurried down to make a four-man wave. Steebo tried to rush the goal but was blocked by a defense man. The puck was free for a brief instant. Cotton Blain came in to pounce on it. He carried it behind the cage and came out with it on the other side, using his eye and brain.

He saw Chuck cutting in fast toward the goal. Blain passed. A honey! Chuck took it in his stride. He shot for the net just as a thunderbolt hit him from the side. The thunderbolt was Webber. Both men went down. Chuck skidded along the ice on his side, but kept his eye peeled, a fact which gave him one of the luckiest breaks he'd ever had.

**H**E SAW the goalie try to catch the scoring shot and saw the puck bounce from the goalie's hand just outside the crease. It hit the ice ahead of Chuck. Chuck couldn't have stopped sliding if he'd wanted to, which he didn't. His skid took him toward the puck. He whipped his stick in a flat half-circle on the ice. The stick slammed against the puck, and the puck slammed into the net—a freak shot but a good one just the same. The Penguins led, 1-0.

The Rams didn't like it, but they had to swallow it. They'd be dangerous, Chuck knew, till their anger cooled a bit. The next face-off was another fight, with no decision, between Chuck and Web-

ber. Once more the puck flew wild, recovered this time by a Ram wing.

He carried it up-ice, and he was fast. So were the other Rams. The Penguins closed in on the attack, but they met a brand of stickwork they had never met before. The puck flashed back and forth between the Rams' blades like a darting bat.

Chuck had a quick sharp fear that the speed of the attack might rattle his defense men. But it didn't. They geared their own speed up to meet it, or at least to slow it down.

A Ram wing made a wicked scoring shot, but Chad lunged fast and blocked it with his chest. It was a brilliant save. Jack Middleton recovered briefly, then teamed with Jug to hold the fort until the Penguin wings got up to form a five-man wall.

They broke up the attack, and, unimpressed by the reputations of the Rams, they stole the puck and started up the ice with it themselves. Chuck led the drive, but the Ram defense was solid this time. The drive got nowhere. The puck changed hands, and then changed hands again. The ice was a blur of flashing darting figures, first at one end, then the other. The bright surface of the rink was quickly dulled with ice-dust. The Penguin fans went wild to see a brand of hockey they'd never dreamed their men could show.

Chuck was proud of his Penguins, deeply proud. More so, because they were largely on their own. A colossal battle was developing between Chuck and Webber, and Chuck wasn't a great help to the team. Webber was a top-flight player, and he kept Chuck covered. Which was only half the story because Chuck kept Webber covered too. Each neutralized the efforts of the other, and Webber was first to get fed up with it.

He served notice by a bull-like charge when Chuck was carrying the puck. The block was unnecessarily hard—but legal. Both men went down. Chuck was momentarily dazed, but he shook his head



and cleared it promptly.

He said low-voiced to Webber, "So you want it that way, huh?"

And Webber answered, "That's the way I want it."

**A**ND THAT'S the way he got it. Chuck watched his chance. The next time Webber got the puck, Chuck Mercer went at him—all strictly legal. Chuck hit him with a concentrated force and felt as if he'd tangled with a concrete block. They were down again, but both got up. The fans saw how it was now and bellowed their approval. They liked this sort of stuff.

They battered each other for the remainder of the period, both keeping strictly to the rules, and neither drew a penalty. The Rams sneaked in a score while this was going on, and the period ended, 2-2.

Chuck felt as if he'd been pounded with a baseball bat, but the ten minute rest did lots to freshen him. The battle started in the second period where it had left off in the first. The Penguins and the Rams fought one fight, while Chuck and Webber fought another. Both fights were draws. The Penguins didn't score, but they arose to heights of dogged courage to keep the Rams from scoring either.

Chuck Mercer ached in every muscle of his body. He was wondering if he could last another period. But he knew he'd have to last. It had resolved itself into a matter of pure strategy, brutal strategy, but sound. Webber had named the game, and Chuck was playing Webber's game. He'd play it just as long as he could stand on his feet.

He took first crack at Webber in the final period. It was a thundering block which sent pain screaming through Chuck's body. He wanted to remain on the ice, but he forced himself to rise. He saw Webber come up slowly too, which Chuck was glad to see. He also noted that Webber's eyes were hot and ugly. Chuck was glad to see that too.

The game swirled on with Chuck and

Webber battling for brute supremacy. Their blocks were not so forceful now, but they were dogged and persistent. Both men were slowing down. It couldn't last.

It lasted, though, for the first ten minutes of the final scoreless period. Chuck's mind was dull, his thoughts congealed, his body one big throbbing mass of pain. He clung to one idea—keep Webber covered—give the big mug what he asked for.

Chuck had another chance, but he had slowed down badly and almost muffed it. Webber, skating groggily, blundered into a lucky spot before the Penguin cage. The puck came to him. He snagged it sloppily, but had an open shot for the cage. He didn't make the shot because Chuck reached him first. Just how, Chuck never knew, but he threw his block and saved an almost certain score.

Then Webber lost his head, forgot the rules, and did what Chuck had hoped he'd do. He cursed and raised his stick. He brought it down wickedly at Chuck's head, but Chuck got his own stick up in time to catch the blow on it. The Rams closed in about that time and hauled the raging Webber off to safer territory. Which turned out to be the penalty box when the referee bounced Webber off the ice for a five-minute cool off.

Chuck almost envied Webber at the moment, but he couldn't think of rest for some time yet. Things had worked out, to this point, as he had hoped. His strategy had panned out. It only remained for Chuck to find the strength to make the strategy pay off. He reached deep down inside himself and found a small reserve still left.

**A**S THE referee led the way toward the face-off mark, Chuck swept his eyes across the Penguins. A quick thrill shot through him as they met his glance and seemed to read his mind. They too were gathering themselves, ready for the final big explosion.



It is doubtful if the Rams, dazed by the temporary loss of Webber, quite knew what hit them. It is certain they were not prepared for the explosive rejuvenation of the Penguins, and they must have regarded Chuck's recovery as pure miracle.

Which it was. He led the wave when the Penguins grabbed the biscuit from the face-off. He moved as if the game were in its early moments, and the Penguins, fired by something only they could understand, were with him every instant, handling the puck like masters.

The drive was irresistible, and the Rams were crumpled by its fury. The puck flashed back and forth before them in a dizzy pattern. They couldn't flag it down. The Penguin passes were as true as rifle shots. Chuck Mercer made the final one, a whistling shot deep in the

corner of the net. The score was 3-2.

And the Penguins held their lead tenaciously. Chuck found more strength from somewhere and stuck with them. They held the lead by forcing the attack while the Rams were shorthanded.

Bert Webber joined the game five minutes before the end, but inactivity had left his battered muscles stiff and useless. The Rams threw everything they had against the Penguins, but they couldn't score. The final gun went off, and the count was still 3-2.

The crazy din of Penguin fans followed the team to the dressing room, the door of which could not shut out the noise. Chuck listened to it, grinning broadly, for it acted as a tonic to his aches. And then he thought of Nancy, and the weariness dropped from him, and he didn't ache at all.

## Rogues' Treasure

(Continued from page 66)

HE DID not notice the girl approaching until she was almost to the table. Then he stood, clomping his artificial foot. Janet, looking prettier than he had ever seen her, stood smiling at him. "My dear!" he said. "I suppose I will be calling you Mrs. Riley one of these days—"

"You may call me Mrs. Riley now. Hernandez and I were married a month ago."

McQuarrie stood very straight, his shoulders swelling to fit his cheap Cal-

cutta coat. Hernandez smiled cheerfully, patting the agreement he had finished folding.

Janet stared at McQuarrie. "I haven't said something—"

"Indeed not, my dear. Surprise only, I assure you. And Hernandez . . ." He grasped Hernandez's slim hand and bore down with his massive two hundred pounds of muscle, making the young man writhe from his chair on bent knees. "Allow me to congratulate you, Hernandez. My friend! My friend!"

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# BLOOD UNDER THE BRIDGE

By Curtiss T. Gardner



**H**AL BRENT lay in bed and cursed in a cold level monotone. He cursed the tiny hotel room, the corny jive music blaring from the skylight beneath his only window, the weird

distortion of the neon sign reflected in the mirror of his cheap dresser.

He cursed the unbearably oppressive humidity which made it impossible to shut out noise and glare by closing the





As he crawled up the weed-covered bank, the gunmen were shooting at him from the low concrete bridge

window and shade. He cursed the Branch Office responsible for these wretched accommodations. But above all, he cursed the uncanny workings of the grapevine telegraph which, by flashing ahead precise information of his confidential assignment, had robbed it of the secrecy Home Office expected.

His impotent rage reached its flash point when the banging on his flimsy door panel commenced. Forgetting momentarily the ache of his stiff knee, Brent slid his lanky frame from the too-short bed and strode to the door in bare feet and blood-red pajamas.

"I'm going to kill the next drunk who starts something," he asserted aloud, as he twisted the key, flung the door open.

It seemed, in the harsh light of naked overhead bulbs in the threadbare hall-

way, that the time for the promised slaughter was at hand. The young man at Brent's door was disheveled in appearance, unsteady on his feet.

"No, this isn't Maisie's room," Brent announced, grimly. 'Maisie doesn't live here any more. Now scram, brother, and if you bother me again—"

He checked himself as his keen grey-green eyes noted that his unwelcome visitor was not much more than a kid. About sixteen or seventeen. A turban of clean white bandages protruded beneath the brim of the boy's old felt hat. His right arm was in a sling. The lad was not drunk; he was injured.

"You're Hal Brent, aren't you?" the boy said. He crowded past Brent into the cramped bedroom and Brent didn't stop him. "You're head of Imperial



Casualty's *Gestapo*, aren't you?"

Brent's black eyebrows drew together. He knew, of course, that the work his private investigating agency did for the Imperial Casualty Company had caused it to be called the *Gestapo* by the insurance company's employees. It was natural enough, but Brent didn't like it. The implication was sinister, while Brent's work for his most important client had always been on the constructive side.

"I'm Brent," he said, shortly. "Who are you? Why root me out of bed this time of night?"

The boy shut the door, leaning against it heavily. In the garish green and yellow glare from the sign across the street the pallor of his face was corpse-like. Brent saw that his visitor was almost at the point of collapse.

"I'm Phil Adams," the lad said in a shaky voice. "I'm on the property damage desk in Imperial's office here. It was me who got you this room—"

Brent's anger surged back. "Then you're just the guy I wanted to see," he exploded. "Of all the crummy dumps—"

Phil Adams raised his one good hand entreatingly. "Please! Two conventions in town, everything's jammed. I ducked out of the hospital to tell you they're killing the Princess! You must stop them! I heard them say—"

**T**HE sharp vicious crack of a gun at the open window turned the boy's words into a thin scream. He clutched at his throat, toppled to the floor.

Brent dived as the gun blasted again. A bullet cracked like a whip above his head. Plaster puffed out in white spray from the wall. Heedless of his injured knee, Brent rolled violently toward the wall under the window. Two more slugs tore holes in the worn, faded carpet before he got there.

It was all over by the time Brent raised himself on his good knee. Silhouetted against the neon sign, a man was racing across the skylighted roof of the basement night club. Running feet

crunched on the tarred gravel.

Brent's automatic was in its shoulder holster hanging in the narrow clothes closet. He had it and was back at the window as the escaping gunman reached the edge of the roof. He snapped a shot from the window.

The man jerked to one side as though hit but did not stop.

Brent shrugged. The night club roof was also the bottom of the hotel's light and air court. Not more than five feet above sidewalk level. By this time the gunman would be ducking through alleys to a hiding place. Barefooted pursuit would be insanity.

The boy, Phil Adams, had crawled up from the floor. Red stains across the carpet traced his progress. He was sitting on the edge of Brent's bed. The thin cotton blankets were quickly turning red. Blood oozed from between the fingers the boy pressed to his throat. His lips were skinned back dreadfully against his teeth.

"She'll be dead in a little while if you don't help." The words were so faint and painful Brent had to bend close to understand them. "Princess . . . I love her . . ."

The words became completely unintelligible, changed to a rattle as blood and mucus clogged the boy's throat. His eyes opened very wide, staring. He tried to straighten, fell back on the bed lifeless.

It was then Brent discovered that Phil Adams was wearing coat and pants pulled over colorless hospital pajamas.

**J**UMPY with impatience, Brent fished his discarded evening paper from the wastebasket, passed it to the grizzled police veteran in charge of the homicide detail.

"It's all here," he told Lieutenant Gorsuch. "Slapped me right in the face as soon as I opened the paper. The only thing they forgot to print was the size of my fee from the insurance company for handling the job." His stubby forefinger tapped his own picture in Army uniform which appeared above the head-



ing. "I wonder if it's possible they weren't told about the fee," he added bitterly.

The silver-crested cop glanced at the 18-point bold-faced caption: "WAR HERO TO INVESTIGATE VANDALISM," he muttered aloud. He transferred his attention back to Brent. "What?"

Wearily Brent said, "Read it all!"

"*Captain C. Harold Brent,*" the cop read rapidly, "*head of the private detective agency of the same name in Boston, will arrive in Baltimore tonight on an investigation for the Imperial Casualty Company. It is understood that Captain Brent, who received the Congressional Medal and Purple Heart for action on Okinawa, will undertake to discover the identity of the person or persons responsible for the several recent attempts to destroy property of the Baltimore, Stockton and Ashley Railroad near Halton, Maryland.*"

The police lieutenant handed the paper back to Brent. "So you're a private eye, are you? And you landed in town last night? You didn't have nothin' to do with that party last night, did you? Where the insurance people got busted up in the auto wreck?"

Brent's black eyebrows lifted. "Party? Wreck?"

"Yeah. Seems like your insurance company is tryin' to keep us jumpin' all around town tonight. Two-three hours ago a car sideswiped a truck out near Ellicott City. One guy dead, two other guys and a girl in Leigh Hospital. They're all people who work for this Imperial Casualty outfit. Now with this shootin'—"

"Wait a minute!" Brent's thin nostrils quivered suddenly. "This kid. He'd been hurt. He said something about ducking out of a hospital. Maybe—"

The homicide cop was already on his way to a telephone. "I'll check. Seems screwy as hell."

"You can say that again, brother," Brent agreed heartily.

A few minutes on the phone brought

information that one of the injured in the car smash was named Adams. And that Adams was inexplicably missing from the hospital room where he had been placed after receiving first aid.

"Ask them if there was some foreign princess in that wreck," Brent prompted.

Lieutenant Gorsuch stayed on the wire a moment longer, then hung up with a grin at Brent. "The girl's not royalty. Her name is Princess Stevens. Ain't that a honey of a name? Like as not her folks named her after a race horse. This is a race fan's town, y'know."

"How badly is the girl hurt?" Brent demanded anxiously. "Phil Adams said she was being killed."

"The kid was probably slap-happy with the bangin' up he took," the big cop suggested. "Hospital says the girl will probably be all right. Shook up, but that's about all."

Brent stroked the thin black line of his mustache. "I wonder! That kid didn't sound goofy to me. But he was plenty urgent. And somebody was willing to kill in order to keep him from talking."

"There's lots of checkin' to do," the police lieutenant admitted. "First thing is to pick up this guy you say shot the kid. If the guy has a slug in him, like you think, that ought not to be too tough."

Brent pulled a rumpled pack of cigarettes from the pocket of the dressing robe in which he'd received his official visitors. "Smoke?" He flicked a match on his thumb nail, exhaled through his nostrils. "Now, Lieutenant, if you've finished with me I'd like to get dressed and get over to that hospital myself. Maybe I can learn something there."

Lieutenant Gorsuch nodded. "Go ahead if you want. The pic and print boys are on their way and I've lots to do. I'll keep your gun awhile. Your permit looks all right but we'll have to check."

"Sure. I understand."

"Just stick around town," the homicide dick ordered. "Don't be leavin' until I tell you it's okay."



"You can reach me care of Imperial Casualty's office," Brent told him. "One thing I'm sure of—I'm not going to spend even one more night in this dump if there's another hotel room in Baltimore."

**T**HERE were still a couple of hours before dawn when Hal Brent strode stiff-legged into the long tunnel-like corridors of Leigh Hospital. A grim-faced elderly woman was on duty at the night desk.

"Strictly against doctor's orders," she told Brent. "Dr. Porter himself took care of these people. He left word they were not to be disturbed under any circumstances."

"Doctors make mistakes, same as anyone else," Brent told her coolly. "This is one time Dr. Porter was mistaken. Because I intend to see his patients."

She shook her head decidedly. "Even without doctor's orders you'd have to wait until visiting hours."

Hal Brent leaned with one palm against the desk. "Look, lady," he said. "The people hurt in that wreck are all employees of Imperial Casualty. I represent the company's management. Now will you please call someone in authority and fix it with him so I can get upstairs?"

The woman hesitated, then reached reluctantly for the telephone, dialed a house number. "Dr. Fargo, the resident physician on duty tonight, will be down soon," she told Brent. She bent over her papers, lips pressed together tightly in silent disapproval.

Dr. Fargo, a young man in white, the inevitable stethoscope around his neck, appeared in five minutes.

"You're from the insurance company?" he said as he shook hands cordially. "Great shame about young Campbell, isn't it? A nice fellow. He used to come here often, for reports on Dr. Porter's cases. Dead on arrival tonight."

"Tough!" Brent agreed. "How about the others? Will they all pull through?"

"We think so," Dr. Fargo said. "Your Claims Manager, Mr. Linthicum, has a broken arm."

Brent whistled. "Was Paul Linthicum in the crash, too? I certainly want to talk to him. But I'll see the girl first, please."

The resident physician led the way down a marble-tiled hallway to a small automatic elevator. He pressed the button. As the red light flashed and the cage came humming down from somewhere above, a white-clad hospital attendant appeared from an intersecting corridor.

Dr. Fargo slid the elevator door open. Brent stepped forward. He was facing the night desk, the intersecting corridor at his back. Suddenly the young doctor gave Brent a violent shove.

"Watch out! Behind you!" he exclaimed sharply.

Brent's weight had been on his stiff leg at the moment he was pushed. Caught off balance, he staggered, fell forward, caught himself with his palms on the floor of the elevator. His eye caught the sweep of gleaming steel just above his head. The next instant a wicked, thin-bladed knife had struck the back of the elevator cage and clattered down near his hand.

For a man with a bad leg, Brent's speed was miraculous. He was up from the floor, had reached the corridor intersection in half a dozen bounds. But the long hallway, broken at frequent intervals by crisscross passages, stretched dim and empty. The white-clad attendant had completely vanished.

Dr. Fargo was still frozen with astonishment when Brent went back to the elevator. And the sour-faced woman at the night desk had turned to stare goggle-eyed.

The resident picked up the knife, testing the blade against the ball of his thumb. "Sharp as a scalpel," he remarked. "Why—someone tried to kill you!"

"It's been tried before," Brent said grimly. "I'm hard to kill."



**THE GIRL** in the tiny cubicle on the fourth floor was young and very pretty. Not more than nineteen she looked, with her gossamer-fine copper-colored hair braided by the hospital people into heavy strands thick as a man's wrist.

Her eyes were closed. The coverings over her breast moved slightly with her gentle regular breathing. She bore no marks of the accident except one large bruise along her jaw on the left side of her face.

"Dr. Porter gave her a hypo of morphine and atropine," the resident physician told Brent. "She'll sleep for hours. No broken bones and no apparent internal injuries."

Brent studied the young doctor with shrewd eyes. Fargo was a clean-cut chap, likable in appearance. Brent decided to take him at least partially into his confidence.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd arrange for a special nurse in this girl's room tonight," he said. "I have reason to believe, Doctor, that an attempt may be made against her life. I'm going to call the police before I leave and ask them to put a cop on guard as well."

The young doctor was thunderstruck. "What in heaven's name is going on, Mr. Brent?"

"I don't know . . . yet," Brent admitted. His jaw set in a stubborn line. "But," he promised, "it will be my business to find out."

**PAUL LINTHICUM**, lean thin-faced District Claims Manager, lay in a white-enameled iron bed in the room across the hall from Princess Stevens. His face was drawn with pain but he managed a grin as Brent's head appeared around the corner of the screen at the foot of the bed.

"As I live and breathe," he exclaimed, "if it isn't Hal Brent of the *Gestapol*! Don't tell me the company's heard about our accident already and sent you down by rocket ship to investigate us."

A sharp edge of irony lay beneath the

Claims Manager's kidding. Brent ignored it. Long ago he had learned to expect the inevitable resentment his job provoked among employees of Imperial Casualty. Nothing personal was intended. Some company people were, in fact, among Brent's best friends. But the idea of being subject to undercover checkup is never popular. Especially with older men in positions of responsibility.

"They tell me you've got a busted wing," he said, moving around the screen toward the bed where Linthicum lay. "How do you feel, Paul?"

The Claims Manager struggled to a sitting position, poking pillows behind him with his good hand. "Fortunately it's my left one," he said. "Won't keep me from my work. I intend to get out of here in the morning and go to the office as usual."

"Better take it easy," Brent warned. "How did it all happen?"

Linthicum shrugged. "An office party. Out at Bankton Gardens near Ellicott City. Strictly informal. Juke box music. Beer. Four of us were in Campbell's car on the way home. I don't think he even saw the truck we hit. I know I didn't. Too much beer, I guess. If we'd busted a company car you'd really be after our scalps. But it was Campbell's crate. Tough for him."

"He won't worry," Brent said, dryly. "You can't take it with you, you know."

"You don't mean—" Consternation grew in Linthicum's eyes. "Are you telling me that—"

Brent nodded grimly. "Yes. You'll need a replacement for Campbell if Home Office can give you one. Same applies to the Adams kid."

The Claims Manager's face was bleak. "I had no idea it was that bad. Guess I had a closer call, myself, than I realized. I must live right!"

"The Adams kid wasn't killed in the auto wreck," Brent said. He told the Claims Manager what had happened. Linthicum reacted the same as Lieutenant Gorsuch.



"The poor kid must have been out of his head. All mixed up subconsciously. You see he had a crush on this girl, Hal. Everyone in our office is wise to that. The Princess is pretty and she has plenty of appeal. Adams fell for her, but hard. He must have imagined someone would want to hurt her."

"He didn't say anyone was trying to hurt her," Brent corrected. "The word he used was *kill*. And one thing's sure," he pointed out, "it isn't a subconscious bullet the cops are busy digging out of Phil Adams."

Linthicum shrugged, winced as the movement hurt his broken arm. "Beats me, Hal!"

"Who is this Dr. Porter who seems such a big shot around Leigh Hospital?" Brent asked casually.

"Ridley Porter? Why he's probably the best known industrial accident specialist in this city. We send him a large percentage of our own Workmen's Compensation cases. Handles lots of work for other insurance carriers, too."

"Where's his office?"

"Lombard Street. Most complete lay-out I've ever seen for handling industrial cases. Like a private hospital. In fact, Porter lives on the top floor of his own clinic." The Claims Manager gave Brent a shrewd look. "What's cooking, Hal? You're a nice fellow but we never see you unless there's trouble. I hope Home Office doesn't think someone's been juggling our office funds!"

**B**RENT'S black eyebrows raised. "Are you kidding, Paul? If you don't know why I'm in town you're the only one in your office who doesn't. When I phoned in last evening to find out about my hotel reservation your switchboard operator knew. So did the Adams kid. In fact, it was even printed in the newspaper."

"You know how it is," Linthicum said lightly. "The boss is usually the last one in the joint to know what's really going on. I could use a smoke, Hal, if you don't mind."

Hal Brent shook a cigarette into the Claims Manager's good hand, held a match, while Linthicum got it going.

"Home Office wanted it kept cosy," Brent said. "But I guess there's no harm talking now. I'm down to look over the situation in respect to that jerkwater railroad."

"Oh. You mean the fidelity bond loss?"

"I don't know much about the bond loss, except that the company paid out a lot of money. The Underwriting Department has been griping about the loss ratio on the whole account. They want to get off the business. Sales Department feels differently."

"They would," Linthicum complained. "The Sales Department always does! Experience has been lousy on those railroad policies. Two hundred thousand on the bond loss. Five death claims under Workmen's Compensation when the shop building at Halton burned. Not to mention the licking our Fire Insurance Company took."

Brent said, "That's where I come into the picture. The bond loss was something that isn't likely to happen again. But the fire and these other queer doings at Halton might mean more big claims in the future. Home Office wants me to smell around and see if I can find what's behind it all."

"I don't envy you the job," Linthicum said flatly. "I wouldn't know how to start."

"And I wouldn't know how to go about settling a serious public liability claim," Brent pointed out. "The old story about one man's meat and the other man's poison. This kind of thing is the only work I know."

"I don't suppose I can of any help," Linthicum said. "But if I can, just sing out." His face brightened. "You'll like Baltimore. Know anything about our town?"

Hal Brent grinned. "Not much—and I'll probably be too busy to find out."

"Baltimore," Paul Linthicum said didactically, "is the most Northern of Southern cities, the most Southern of



Northern cities and the most Western of Eastern cities. It has a Shot Tower that dates back a hundred and twenty-five years and is said by the experts to be the finest specimen of brick masonry ever erected anywhere in the world. We have a street, The Fallway, which runs right through the heart of downtown with an underground stream beneath it. We have the first railroad station built in America. And our seafood! You really shouldn't miss our seafood, Hal."

Brent laughed. "How much does the Chamber of Commerce pay you for this? Well, all I want from your fair city is a decent place to sleep. And believe me, brother, that's something I do intend to find!"

Before leaving the hospital, Brent put in a call to police headquarters from a public telephone across the hall near the door of Princess Stevens' room. Lieutenant Gorsuch had nothing new to tell him. The gunman who had shot Phil Adams was still at large although the police hoped to find him quickly. The lieutenant was inclined to scoff at Brent's fears for the girl but finally agreed to station a man outside her door for the next twenty-four hours.

"By that time," Brent promised, "I'll know more about this affair than I do right now."

**F**IRST faint streaks of approaching dawn were turning the sable sky to grey as Brent emerged from the cheerless corridors of the big hospital. A lone taxi was parked at a stand across the street, driver dozing behind his wheel. Brent tapped the man on the shoulder, gave the name of his hotel.

The windows of the cab were closed. Although the humidity was lower than earlier in the night, it was still hot and sticky. Brent tried to lower the windows but they seemed immovable. He gave it up and relaxed against the worn upholstery, closing tired eyes as his mind grappled with a possible approach to his investigation.

He would visit the railroad offices, of

course. Probably make a trip to Halton. Before that, however, he would hunt up Dr. Ridley Porter. Perhaps the insurance doctor might be able to throw some light on the problem of Phil Adams.

With his own eyes Brent had seen that the Stevens girl was resting quietly. Before leaving the hospital he had glanced into her room again, noting with satisfaction that Dr. Fargo had complied with his request and placed a special nurse on duty with the girl.

Nevertheless, Brent's mind was not at ease. Unlike Linthicum or the police lieutenant, he could not attribute Phil Adams' cryptic warning to shock resulting from the auto crash. Someone had been anxious to prevent the boy from telling his full story. Anxious enough to murder.

Brent gave it up with a deep sigh. First, he would have something to eat. Then he would tackle the matter of hotel rooms. And after that—

The jouncing of the cab over cobblestones made Brent open his eyes. The taxi was speeding along a waterfront street. Dark hulks of small vessels berthed at their piers alternated with long wooden freight sheds in which scattered lights burned dimly in the coming dawn.

On the way from the hotel to the hospital Brent had not seen docks. He leaned forward and spoke to the taxi driver.

"Where are you taking me, bud? My hotel's enough of a dump but not quite so bad as a sailor's boardinghouse."

The cabbie turned his face backward briefly. An ugly beetle-browed man with a crooked nose which looked as if it might have been broken in some kind of a street brawl.

"I drive the cab, see," he told Brent insolently. "If you know your way around so good maybe you oughta be in the cab business yourself."

With that he pulled the sliding-glass partition shut behind his back, leaving Brent shuttered away from further conversation.



Muscles bunched in hard lumps at the corners of Brent's jawbones. He leaned forward again, attempting to shove back the glass. But almost at the same instant the taxi driver cut the wheels of the car sharply, opened the door beside him and leaped free of the cab.

THE car shot out on the wooden plank-  
ing of a freight wharf. Dark water rippled beyond the end of stringers a hundred feet ahead. Brent seized the door handle and twisted. The door was locked.

Swiftly he shifted to the other side. The door there was locked, too.

Brent took both hands to the door handle. Sweat popped out on his forehead. His lips curled back from his teeth with the effort. Just as the cab hit a timber bumper at the end of the pier, the handle let go. It turned freely, its spindle sheared inside. The door was still locked!

Jounced end over end by impact against the guard bumper, the taxi hit the water, radiator first. Brent's head struck the roof of the cab, his feet landed against the closed glass behind the empty driver's seat. The glass shattered, long jagged fragments raking Brent's legs. The blow against his stiff knee caused it to start throbbing again painfully.

Instinct made him draw a deep lungful of air before water poured into the cab. Habit made him keep his wits.

Quickly he kicked away the knifelike shards of glass which remained between him and the driver's seat. It took a full minute for him to crawl through the opening and then force the front taxi door open against the weight of water.

When he reached the scummy surface of the harbor, his lungs were nearly bursting and colored lights flickered before his eyes. With his last remaining strength he pulled himself over the splintery pier end, then lay panting on the boards.

His chest ached from holding his breath. Waves of pain shot along the

nerves of his injured leg. Hal Brent cursed aloud in an even lurid flow of language.

Someone, he knew, must be keeping close track of his moves. Close enough to have planted the fake taxi driver outside the hospital to wait for him. Was it the work of the firebugs who had burned the railroad shops at Halton he wondered? How did it tie in with the death of Phil Adams?

Brent knew he could congratulate himself for arranging police protection for the girl on the fourth floor of Leigh Hospital. That girl, he had a hunch, was a vital factor in what had happened the past few hours.

Another thing was increasingly evident. *Time* was of the essence! Brent decided he would modify his plans. Instead of waiting a conventional hour, he would make his call on Dr. Porter at once.

THE accident clinic occupied an entire three-story building on the fringe of the financial district. An old red brick structure formerly the offices of a tea importer, fresh white paint had brightened it. Wooden blinds on the second and third floors were a crisp lettuce green. Brent went through a glassed-in vestibule to an elaborately furnished reception room on the ground floor.

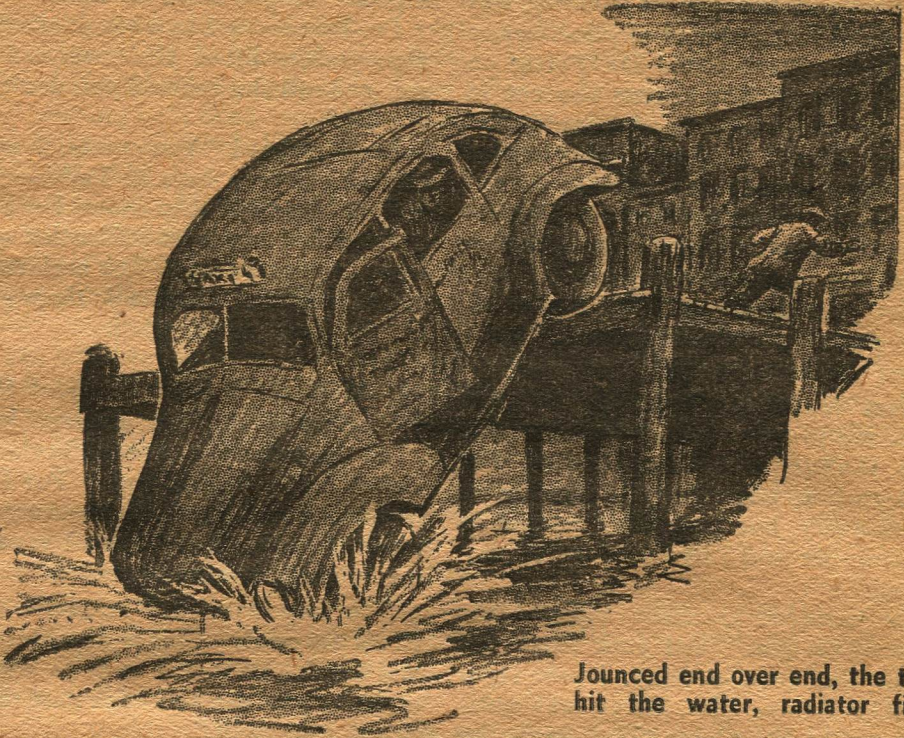
An angular woman in nurses' white was behind the receptionist's desk. She looked tired and bored after a night on duty. Her eyes, behind heavy horn-rimmed spectacles, were cold.

"Looks as if you've got yourself messed up with barbed wire," she observed pointedly, as she eyed Brent's tattered pants legs and his bleeding shins. "I'll call the police first and see what you've burglarized. After that I'll put dressings on those lacerations."

Brent said, "You'll call Dr. Porter first. After I've seen him I'll give you the privilege of patching me up."

The woman shook her head decidedly. "You can't see the doctor this hour in the morning. He was up during the





Jounced end over end, the taxi hit the water, radiator first

night on an emergency call. His hours are nine to eleven. And besides—"

"I haven't time to argue," Brent informed her. "I know Dr. Porter lives upstairs. I represent the management of the Imperial Casualty Company. I want to see him right now—even if it means getting him out of bed."

"You look like the manager of a big insurance company!" the night nurse scoffed.

Brent walked past the desk and opened a door at the end of the reception room. "Okay, sweetheart," he said, "I'll go find Porter myself."

The door led into a passageway which connected with a first-aid room and with Dr. Porter's large private office beyond. At the end of the passage was an elevator and beside the shaft a flight of stairs.

The woman called, "Sam! Oh, Sam!"

A giant in faded work overalls appeared almost instantly from the basement stairs. "Where you goin', mister?"

"To see Dr. Porter," Brent replied

quietly. "Unless the lady will phone and announce me as I asked."

"You can't go upstairs," Sam said and laid a huge hand against Brent's chest.

"Stand out of my way, Sam!" Brent advised and there was steel in his tone. "I don't want to hurt you, but I intend to see the doctor."

The janitor showed yellow tusks. "You gonna hurt who?" He gave Brent a violent push.

Brent took one step backward, brought his right fist up solidly. It caught the big man flush on the point of the jaw. Sam staggered, lost his footing and tumbled backward down the stairs. Wild clattering and banging from the basement indicated that he had landed in a nest of ash cans.

The night nurse picked up her telephone, said, "Emergency! Get me the police!"

"Ask for Lieutenant Gorsuch," Brent advised as he went up the stairs. "And tell him you're calling about Hal Brent."



THE second floor of the building was devoted to X-ray and physio-therapy equipment. Brent found Dr. Porter on the third floor. The doctor was not in bed. He had on pants and undershirt and one side of his heavy, pink-jowled face was covered with shaving lather. The doctor trained a .38-caliber Colt revolver on Brent as the private detective opened the door and walked in.

"Get your hands up!" Dr. Porter ordered sharply. "Who are you and what do you think you're doing?"

Brent stopped just inside the door, but he did not raise his hands. "Put the gun away, Doctor," he said impatiently. "I'm not a stick-up man. Sorry to burst in on you this way, but your nurse refused to announce me and I haven't time to play around."

The accident specialist waggled the snout of his gun. "Get your hands up, I said! You must be crazy. I have regular office hours. Mrs. Green was quite right not to disturb me this hour in the morning."

Hal Brent said, "Let's cut out the clowning, Doc. My name's Brent and I'm on a job for Imperial Casualty. I want to talk to you about that accident last night."

Dr. Porter had small pale-blue eyes. They regarded Brent narrowly. "I've never heard Mr. Linthicum mention anyone named Brent working for him." He glanced at Brent's legs. "And furthermore, your appearance . . ."

Brent made two quick strides forward and seized the doctor's wrist. He twisted sharply, caught the gun as it fell from Porter's fingers. "I'll take care of this. I'm sick and tired of having people make passes at me. Someone's likely to get hurt."

He snapped out the cylinder of the revolver, shook the six shells into the palm of his hand. "Get it straight this time, Doctor. I don't work for Paul Linthicum. I represent Linthicum's bosses at Home Office," He thrust the cartridges into his coat pocket, tossed the gun across the room into a chair. "Now,

suppose we get down to cases."

Dr. Porter went to a telephone on the night table, lifted the receiver. "I'm going to call the police if you don't leave at once."

Brent grinned. "You're late, Doc. Mrs. Greene's already done it. I advise you to look at these and then cancel her order."

He fished soggy identification papers from his wet clothes. The accident specialist hesitated, then took them gingerly. He hung up the phone.

A MOMENT later he lifted the receiver again. "Mrs. Greene," he said, "Tell the police they needn't bother. My visitor isn't a holdup man." For Brent's benefit he added, before he pronged the receiver again, "I can't say I appreciate my visitor's manner of calling."

"To hell with the etiquette stuff," Brent snapped. "This is a matter of life and death. Doctor, I want to know everything you can tell me about that accident last night."

The fingers on Porter's hands spread fanwise. "What is there to tell? The car crash was simply one of those unfortunate occurrences. Mr. Linthicum's injuries—"

"I'm particularly interested in the girl, Princess Stevens," Brent interrupted. "How badly is she hurt?"

The doctor's eyes shifted nervously. "She's had a severe shock. I've given her sedatives. I hope she'll pull through all right but it's too soon to make a definite prognosis."

Brent stroked the black line of moustache on his upper lip. "My company wants you to make very sure she does pull through okay," he told the doctor quietly. "And don't forget my company is one of your best clients."

The accident specialist flushed. "I don't quite understand your attitude, Mr. Brent. Do you by chance believe I can guarantee the girl to have no bad reactions? That I can vouch, for instance, for her heart?"

"I'm just stating facts," Brent said. "My company expects you to vouch for



the Stevens girl's heart. Yes, indeed! And—" he added with ominous inflection, "so do I personally! In my book this whole affair has a damned peculiar smell."

The doctor's heavy-jowled face was red. "Now look here, Brent, I don't know what you're driving at but—"

Brent grinned mirthlessly. "It's your town's much advertised southern hospitality that's getting me down, Doc. My arrival has been greeted with entirely too much celebration. Two attempts to knock me off since just last evening."

"An attempt to kill you!" Dr. Porter's shocked surprise sounded almost phony to Brent.

"It's been tried before," Brent said grimly. "But I'm hard to kill."

Dr. Porter's tone became conciliatory. "Of course I didn't know who you were, Mr. Brent. I keep my gun handy because I've received threatening letters lately."

"Indeed? Tell me about them."

But the doctor was frosty again. "Entirely a personal matter," he informed Brent. "Entirely personal!"

"Bad," Brent said. "Very bad! Well, Doc, I'll go down now and get Mrs. Greene to stick some plaster on my shins. You can finish shaving in peace." He turned with his hand on the door knob. "But don't forget what I told you about the Stevens girl."

As Brent went down the stairs he could hear Dr. Porter muttering something. The big janitor, Sam, was waiting at the bottom of the steps on the ground floor. Brent ducked under the giant's terrific haymaker. He put his right hand on the janitor's chest, gave a violent shove. Sam went down the basement stairs again, backward. The clang of ash cans floated upward from the cellar.

"You can put iodine on these scratches now," he told the nurse calmly. "Let's see if you really know your job."

**T**HE Baltimore, Stockton and Ashley was primarily a coal carrier. Its tracks connected mines in the mountains of

western Maryland with a big junction outside Baltimore. Most of its traffic was freight, but occasional local passenger trains served the scattered hamlets along the road's right-of-way.

That morning at ten-fifteen one of these locals dropped the private car of Glenn Ross, the road's general manager, at the tiny station of Halton, Maryland. A switch engine shunted the car onto a siding.

Hal Brent was feeling a bit complacent as he hoisted his stiff leg down from the rear platform to join Ross on the cinder path beside the track. There were good reasons for his complacency. He'd cleaned up from his involuntary bath in the harbor scum, fortified himself with wheat cakes and country sausage and, best of all, moved into a good downtown hotel.

"Well, there it is, Brent," Glenn Ross observed. The railroad man waved his hand toward the blackened shell of the old shop. "I haven't the faintest idea why anyone would have wanted to burn it. We were figuring on closing it anyhow and contracting out the repair of our rolling stock. "Your company paid us about what we'd have collected from sale of our equipment. Except for five experienced shop employees, working night shift, who lost their lives."

Brent said, "Both the fire company and Imperial Casualty took a beating. It hasn't helped the loss ratio on your account. Those death claims alone were two hundred percent of your year's premium. Add the loss on the paymaster who skipped with your payroll funds five years ago and the picture is a lot worse."

Glenn Ross held a gold monogrammed cigarette case toward Brent. "I know our experience has been terrible. It wouldn't be nearly as bad if your people had recovered that payroll money. Strange about that, wasn't it?"

"Two hundred grand, I understand. I'm not familiar with details of the loss. I was busy getting myself shot up at the time."



Ross said, "Our paymaster, Frank Dow. I wouldn't have dreamed Dow would do such a thing. One of our oldest and most trusted employees."

"It's always the old and trusted employee who gets away with the firm's surplus," Brent observed dryly. "That's an axiom in the bonding business. Only the trusted employee is in a position to get his hands on that much dough."

The two men walked along the ties, stopped in front of the sagging walls of the gutted shop building. "The bank was partly to blame," Ross went on. "They should have suspected something right away when Dow drew the money in thousand dollar bills. But he gave them some cock-and-bull story about paying for new construction work in Stockton. They did call us about it later that same morning but Dow had skipped by then. There wasn't a trace of him until he called your office."

Brent shot the railroad man a quick glance. "Dow called our office?"

"Why, yes. Just a few months ago. Offered to return the money if your people would agree not to prosecute him. But when your man Stevens went over, Dow shot Stevens and blew his own brains out. I've never understood it."

"Stevens!" Brent's gray-green eyes narrowed, thoughtfully. "That was Imperial Casualty's man?"

"Sure. One of their head adjusters. There was plenty of excitement about it."

"Something tells me I'll have to read the claims file on that loss," Brent said thoughtfully. "You're right, Mr. Ross. It's even queerer than you think!"

There was nothing to Halton except the railroad station, the burned shop and a general store at the point where the highway crossed the railroad tracks. Most of the men who had formerly worked in the shop had come from the city each day.

"What I can't understand," Ross complained, "is why anyone would try to sabotage our property way out here in the sticks. Unless it has some connection

with the uranium processing plant."

"Uranium!" Brent exclaimed. "Suppose you give me the whole picture."

But the facts, when Ross outlined them, gave Brent little to go on.

The uranium processing plant had been an empty factory building before the war. During the war it had been taken over by the Army with the greatest secrecy. Nobody knew what was going on there, the place was guarded by soldiers constantly, you couldn't go near it. Now that secrecy had been relaxed somewhat, people knew it was a uranium processing plant of some sort. However, it was still under military guard.

Connecting the plant with the main line of the railroad, a spur track ran through the woods about a mile. This line was not used by the plant now—their equipment and product were trucked in and out. Just beyond the town limits of Halton this spur ran through a twenty-foot cut and across a short iron bridge. A sentry was posted at the bridge day and night. It was here that the trouble appeared to have focused.

ONE night shortly before the shop burned, the sentry had heard what sounded like gunfire in the woods just beyond the railroad cut. Being a rookie, he had done the wrong thing. Instead of calling the sergeant of the guard, he ran in the direction of the sound. Fortunately, however, he did not go into the bushes, but turned back in time to see a man slide down from the top of the cut and go out onto the bridge. The sentry fired and the man ran off into the woods. Next day a handful of exploded firecrackers was found in the underbrush.

"A trick to get the sentry out of the way," Brent observed.

"Undoubtedly."

About a month later the shop building burned. All available men from the guard detail had been sent over by the officer in charge to help fight the flames. While they were away the other attempt at the bridge was made. A man slipped



up behind the sentry and attempted to club him. Aware of his danger in the nick of time, the sentry fired and missed. Again the attacker escaped.

"And here's one of the queerest things about the whole affair," Ross said. "The bridge has a footway, fenced for safety with a railing of cast-iron pipe. The club that was intended to smash the sentry's skull was a short section of the bridge handrail. Someone took time to unscrew the pipe before making the attempt on the sentry. Will you tell me why they didn't use a sap or a piece of two-by-four?"

Hal Brent fingered his hairline mustache thoughtfully. "Was any explosive found on the bridge?"

"Nothing. Apparently the idea was to silence the sentry first. The motive for the whole affair has me fogged. The fire was clearly of incendiary origin."

**PAUL LINTHICUM'S** office was a glassed-in space at the end of the big cluttered general office in the Bently building. It was just large enough to hold the Claims Manager's desk, a green steel file cabinet and a couple of chairs for visitors.

The Claims Manager was at his desk. Linthicum looked pale and shaky. His left arm was cradled in a sling of black silk knotted at the back of his neck. But he managed a cheerful grin when Hal Brent walked in.

Brent dropped loosely into one of the chairs. He felt whipped down. Gnawing worry about the girl at the hospital lay heavily upon his spirits. He made no attempt to disguise his state of mind.

"Why the hell didn't you tell me this girl with the race horse name had a brother working for you?" he pitched in to Linthicum angrily. "Why didn't you let me know her brother was killed working on that railroad bond loss?"

The Claims Manager's lips still smiled but a chill came into his voice. "Why the hell should I have told you? You didn't ask me. Strange as it seems I've been more interested in my busted wing

than in gossiping with visiting firemen about company employees."

"Then Stevens was actually her brother?"

"No," Linthicum snapped. "He wasn't. George Stevens was the Princess' husband."

"Hmmm." Brent modified his tone. "She looks mighty young to be a married woman."

"She's not such a baby as she looks. Southern girls usually marry young. Anyhow, the Princess isn't married."

"But you just said . . ."

Linthicum's grin returned. "I didn't. I said her husband's name was George Stevens. But she isn't married now. She's a widow."

Brent fished out his crumpled pack of cigarettes, held it toward the Claims Manager. "Smoke? You've developed a morbid sense of humor since you left the Home Office, haven't you, Paul?"

Linthicum looked contrite. "Sorry, Hal. Maybe you're right. George Stevens was a good boy."

"Maybe you'd better tell me all about the bond case," Brent suggested, letting smoke dribble through his nostrils. "That will save me from wading through what I imagine is a pretty thick file. I've already got part of it from Glenn Ross at the railroad."

Linthicum leaned back in his battered swivel chair and cocked his feet comfortably on the top edge of his desk. He winced as the movement jarred his injured arm. "There isn't a lot to tell, Hal. This embezzler, Dow, made a clean getaway with the payroll money. The police were looking for him over five years before he popped up suddenly right out of a clear sky. Right here in Baltimore. Dow called me on the phone, said he wanted to make a deal. He'd make full restitution if we'd agree to kill the criminal charges. Of course I had visions of saving dear old Imperial Casualty a potful of jack, so I sent George Stevens over to where Dow was holed up. I knew that the company—"

"On a thing involving two hundred



thousand bucks I'm surprised you didn't handle it yourself," Brent interrupted.

Linthicum flicked cigarette ash onto the faded green rug. "I was up to my ears in work. Anyhow, Stevens was quite capable. It was his job. I had him working as supervisor of general casualty claims. Lucky for me I didn't go to see Dow myself! I'd probably have a slab in the boneyard now."

Brent grunted. "Okay. Go ahead."

"Next thing I knew I had a call from Dr. Porter at the Leigh Hospital," Linthicum said. "Dow was dead and they'd brought in George with a bullet through his chest. Porter thought for a while he'd be able to save George but he didn't."

"Did Stevens say why Dow had shot him?"

"No. George died without saying a word."

"Do you have any ideas why Dow should have done it?"

Linthicum raised his good arm and made circles with the index finger in the region of his right temple. "Dow must have had a loose screw. It's all I can figure."

**H**AL BRENT leaned back in his chair and cursed. "Not a damned thing to give me a toehold." He blew a cloud of smoke ceilingward. "How about this Princess girl?" he went off abruptly on another tack. "What's her job in this office?"

"That's the one and only break I've had in the whole affair," Linthicum said earnestly. "The girl is efficient and that's saying plenty with things the way they are today. You see, Princess was George Stevens' assistant before they were married. She handled his office paper-work. Home Office couldn't give me an experienced replacement for George so I got approval to put the Princess on the job." He ground out his cigarette, grinned ruefully. "They'll have some dame in my own chair by the time another year rolls around."

Brent fingered his mustache thoughtfully. "There's only one thing in all

you've told me that offers a beginning in cracking this nut."

Linthicum gave a brittle laugh. "Frankly, Hal, if you can see even a beginning, you're one up on me. What is it?"

"Dr. Ridley Porter," Brent said quietly.

Genuine amazement showed in the Claims Manager's long lean face. "Dr. Porter! What the flaming hell has he got to do with it?"

"I don't know," Brent admitted. "I'm just thinking out loud." He leaned forward and tapped a forefinger against the desk. "But you said this doctor was with Stevens when Stevens died. Mightn't it just be possible Stevens did say something and the doctor never told you? Suppose Dow told Stevens where he'd hidden the payroll loot. Suppose Stevens told the doctor. Porter might have decided to get that dough himself."

The Claims Manager's face was a study as the thought soaked into his brain. "Hal! Maybe you do have something, after all! No wonder you're head of the *Gestapo*."

Brent ignored the wisecrack. "Figuring angles is my job," he said shortly. "I'll go a bit further. Was the princess at the hospital when her husband died?"

"Why, no," Linthicum was puzzled again. "It was all over before she knew anything about it. Why?"

"If she wasn't at the hospital the rest of my theory isn't any good," Brent said slowly. "I was just thinking that perhaps her husband said something to her about what Dow had done with the payroll money. That would make Porter anxious to get her out of the way, too. And the boy, Phil Adams, told me he heard someone at the hospital talk about killing the girl. I can't think of anyone he could have overheard except the doctor."

Linthicum took his feet down off the desk. "I think you're getting a little wild now, Hal. It sounds like a mince pie nightmare. This man Porter has a splendid reputation."



"Even doctors who specialize in insurance work can go money mad," Brent said. "The whole thing is a mince pie nightmare no matter how you look at it. The doctor told me he'd been receiving threatening letters. Got any idea who they could be from?"

"I'm way beyond my depth now," Linthicum admitted. "I don't know the first thing about Dr. Porter's private life."

Brent got up with an air of decision. "There's only one thing I can do, then. That's to get into the doctor's place on the QT and take a look through his things. I'll get busy on that right now. Incidentally, how about the use of a company car, Paul?"

"I'll write a note for you to the Reade Garage," Linthicum told him. The District Claims Manager pulled a sheet of scratch paper toward him. He wrote slowly in a neat, almost womanish hand. "Here you are, Hal. That ought to fix you up while you're in town."

**I**MPERIAL CASUALTY'S cars were kept on the fifth floor of the garage. Brent went up in an automatic elevator, tooled one of the company's black Ford sedans down the long spiral ramp. He braked to a stop at the garage entrance as traffic swished by in the street outside.

A man was loitering just outside the entrance. He opened the door of Brent's car suddenly and slid into the seat beside him.

"What the hell . . ." Brent started. Then he saw the gun in the man's fist.

The gun muzzle poked into Brent's right side. "Don't let out a yip," the man warned, "or I'll let you have it right now! Drive on. Right down Daley Street."

Brent drove. The gunman made him stop at the side of the Bently Building while they picked up another passenger. The second man was ugly, with black brows and a crooked nose. The fake taxi driver who had left Brent at the bottom of the harbor!

Brent's mind was working quickly. Ap-

parently, these men had constant knowledge of his whereabouts. They had known they could pick him up outside the office of Imperial Casualty. One of them must even have trailed him from there to the garage.

"You fellows are working hard on my account," Brent suggested coolly. "Why not relax? My company has a lot of money. They'll spend quite a wad if you'll tell me who you're working for."

The man in the front seat, a wiry runt with a stubble of brown whiskers, answered. "Save your breath, pal. You put a slug in one of our friends this morning. Besides, we ain't no doublecrossers."

"Ten grand?" Brent persisted.

"Shut up!" The man poked Brent viciously with the gun snout. Brent subsided.

Under orders Brent drove west. Through Chester and past Valleytown.

He got a hold on a grab iron on an end car, swung upward





When they got beyond Elks Falls the men made him take the U. S. Highway toward Middleberg.

No illusions were in his mind so far as he was concerned. This was strictly a one-way ride. He had to do something and do it quickly if he were to survive. These hoods were only waiting for the proper spot. Whoever was paying them didn't want another corpse too near his own doorstep.

A quick lunge against the man beside him might catch the hood off guard. Brent rejected the expedient. The crooked-nosed man in the rear seat would then split his skull with a gun butt or send a slug through the back of his head.

How about running the car into a ditch or a tree? That would be a double hazard. Involving too much luck. The crash would have to knock out both gunmen without hurting Brent. If he were stunned, even for a moment, it would probably be fatal.

Traffic had almost disappeared. From the corner of his eye Brent could see the man beside him looking around, trying to pick a suitable place for the work at hand.

**T**HE car rolled on. A quarter mile ahead a concrete bridge across a small stream came into view. The wiry runt saw it.

"Pull up by that bridge, pal," the man ordered. "We'll talk things over there."

No further time for planning. Whatever he could do to save himself must be done here and now.

Brent spoke to put the killers off guard. "Don't do it, fellows," he said in a pleading tone. "My company will pay whatever you ask. Only don't kill me."

He had his foot on the brake as he spoke, bringing the car to a gradual stop. They were almost at the bridge.

Suddenly he reached forward, jerked the hand throttle out as far as it would go. He held his stiff leg straight, his left hand near the door handle.

The light car sprang forward with a

jerk that sent both the unprepared gunmen lurching forward. Brent tore the door open at the same instant. He leaped out, catching himself on his good leg.

He hit the pavement running. Two bounds brought him across the pavement to the low bridge parapet. Brent went over the rail without pausing. Wondering if he would end with a broken neck on rocks or in shallow water.

The hoods in the company Ford were already in action. Even as Brent cleared the parapet a bullet chipped the stone near his head. Another, like a white-hot finger, touched his throat just below the jawbone. The next instant Brent hit water. It closed over his head.

Luck was with him for once. The water was not deep, but deep enough. Sand and pebbles slid against his palms at the bottom of the stream. He lunged forward with powerful strokes, kicking with his good leg while he let air dribble slowly through his mouth, conserving it as if he were trying for a new world's record under-water distance mark.

He didn't come up again until his straining lungs could carry him no further. Then he shot up just long enough to gulp another great lungful of life-giving oxygen. As he submerged he heard the crack of pistol shots somewhere above him.

The killers were on the bridge, he decided. But it was a matter of seconds only before they'd come after him along the bank. There was but one thing left for him to do. He must get to shore, take his chances of dodging their lead. With his game leg it was a gamble with the odds all against him.

He headed inshore. Momentarily his luck still held. As he scrambled dripping up the weed-covered bank, the gunmen were still shooting from the bridge. They seemed rattled. Their shots went wide. Brent plunged into the underbrush.

The scrubby bushes were neither dense nor tall. Brent stooped as he ran and he could hear the men behind him crashing through bushes in pursuit.

This was rolling country. Brent



reached the top of a gently rising slope, dashed down the other side. Halfway up the next hillock the bushes ended in a big open patch. He hesitated a bare instant, then raced across. Shouts and pistol shots came from behind.

As he ran, forcing his crippled knee to the utmost, Brent's hand explored the place where the bullet had touched his throat. His fingers were wet with blood. But it wasn't the carotid artery or a big vein. Brent knew he wouldn't have lasted this long otherwise.

Still, he was losing a lot of blood. His legs felt heavy, the stiff knee throbbed like fire. He knew he couldn't go much longer. Yet there was no place to hide in this scattered underbrush. Unarmed he could not hope to turn on his pursuers and make a stand.

He was tiring fast, losing his race, when he heard the train whistle. He staggered to the top of the next rise, found himself looking down into a railroad cut. Just around a sweeping curve a locomotive with a long string of boxcars was chuffing out of the cut.

For the third time Brent's luck held. The train was a heavy one, moving slowly. There was just time for him to half-slide, half-fall down the sandy slope of the cut before all the cars had passed.

He sprinted beside them with his last remaining strength, clutching for a handhold on a grab iron. He got it, on one of the end cars, held fast, swung upward.

On top of the boxcar, panting, pressing his water-soaked handkerchief against his bleeding neck, he saw two figures appear at the top of the embankment. The train rumbled out of the cut into open country.

Brent didn't move for several minutes as reserve strength flowed gradually into his tired muscles. His bad leg ached as if another bullet had been pumped into it. He was drenched with sweat in spite of his cold bath, for a brazen sun glared fiercely from the cloudless sky. It was the hottest time of day. The metal car roof radiated waves of heat as from an oven door.

**B**UT it wasn't physical pain and discomfort that made Brent curse aloud in icy rage. It was his complete and utter lack of progress on the job. He'd had little enough to go on before. Now the issue was more clouded than ever. And while he groped in the dark someone was making calm deliberate efforts to eliminate him altogether. Four tries, all of which had come close to success.

Vaguely, at the back of his mind, another thought nagged Brent. The girl lying in the hospital under the influence of drugs. In spite of the fact that a police guard was stationed outside Princess Stevens' door, Brent was afraid for her. One of the hospital attendants had thrown a knife at him. What good would the police guard be to the girl if a nurse—or a doctor—were determined she should die?

He sat up on his swaying perch, took the wet handkerchief from his neck. The fabric was stained a deep red, but cautious exploration with his fingers showed that bleeding had almost stopped. Brent's determination mounted. He must get back on his job. This train was taking him farther away from it with every turn of the wheels.

He'd wait until the first station the train reached, Brent decided. There he'd drop off, find some means of transportation back to the city. He was already feeling more buoyant, getting a grip on his thoughts, when the train swung onto a long stretch of track parallel to a highway. For a couple of miles in either direction the ribbon of concrete was free and clear of automobile traffic. All except one car. That one car was a black Ford sedan. Two men were in it.

Once more Hal Brent dropped flat against the catwalk of the freight car. The Ford sedan was too far away for him to be sure, but it had a familiar look. And it rolled so leisurely it seemed to be pacing the train.

The road curved away again and the Ford disappeared. But Brent's new cheerfulness went with it. Here was a



development he had not considered. The hoods stalking him were tenacious. If they were actually following him, if they should be waiting at the next station stop when the freight arrived, his goose would be cooked for sure.

His mind worked rapidly. Only one sensible thing to do. He must drop off the train when they passed the very next farmhouse. From there he could work out some way of getting back to the city. It might be difficult out here in the sticks. But it was the only way.

He was getting set to follow his new plan when he saw black smoke ahead. Another freight, eastbound. Brent changed his plans again in a hurry. This was more risky. But there simply was no time to play around. Not if he wanted to keep the Stevens girl from being murdered.

The two trains met in an echoing din of wheels. The eastbound freight consisted mostly of coal gondolas and oil tank cars. But near its end were a few boxcars. Brent got to his feet, began to run toward the end of his train. There were only a few cars in front of the caboose. A trainman appeared suddenly in the caboose, arms waving frantically.

Brent leaped the gap to the car behind, sprinting as fast as his bad knee would let him, in order to cut down the reverse momentum he would encounter in making his leap. He twisted his head to wait for the precise instant when the first boxcar on the other train caught up with him. He had almost reached the caboose on the westbound train.

At the final instant, as Brent jumped, his stiff knee failed him. For a sickening split second in midair Brent was sure he would not make it. Sausage meat! That's what he'd be under those grinding wheels beneath him.

He fell forward, face down. The car top smacked hard against his chest, knocking him breathless. At the same time reverse momentum, like a giant's hand, swept his body sidewise toward the car edge.

For a breathless instant Brent hung

on the verge of destruction. Then his clutching fingers caught the edge of the wooden catwalk. Splinters jabbed into his palms like probing needles. His hands slipped as the skin tore. He clung precariously, half off the side of the car.

He was drawing himself painfully to safety when the crew of the eastbound train erupted from their caboose and ran toward him across the car tops.

**H**AL BRENT approached Dr. Porter's clinic from the rear alley. Summer daylight still lingered although it was nearly nine. Brent would have welcomed darkness but a strong sense of urgency drove him to immediate action.

He moved an empty trash can, bottom up, under the end of the fire escape. The last rung of the ladder was six feet above his head. He made sure no one was within sight before he climbed on top of the can.

His stiff knee was another handicap. He wrenched it again in the process of reaching the fire escape. When this was all over, he thought sardonically, it would take at least a month to repair the damage of the past day.

When he reached the second floor windows he could see the length of a lighted corridor. A nurse was walking along the hallway, away from Brent. He waited until she disappeared into a side room before he went up higher.

There were no lights on the top floor. Brent lay flat while he peered cautiously through the window. In the fading daylight he could see that the room inside was the doctor's private bath.

A moment later he was inside, listening carefully at the door of the bathroom. The rooms beyond were silent and unlighted. Brent slipped from the bath into the physician's bedroom, from there to the sitting room where he had seen Dr. Porter early that morning.

Daylight was rapidly disappearing. He used his flashlight as he rooted swiftly through the desk, the books and papers on the table near the reading lamp, the bureau in the doctor's bed-



room. Finally he found what he had hoped for in the pocket of a pair of pants hanging over a chair back in the bedroom.

The note was written in rounded feminine characters: *I know now that George died of belladonna poisoning. Someone is going to pay.* It was signed, *Princess.*

Brent thrust the scrap of paper into his own pocket. He replaced the doctor's clothes on the chair where he had found them.

Vaguely, as he turned toward the window and the fire escape, he had a feeling that something was different in the bathroom. But he did not identify the change until too late.

The bath tub, shower curtains drawn, was behind him as he lifted the window sash. As he did so the tail of his eye caught the movement of an arm from behind the curtains. The shower curtains had not been drawn when he first entered the doctor's apartment.

Brent whirled, catlike. But not in time to avoid the sap which lashed out from behind the shower curtains. It caught him exactly where his hair was parted. The twilight gloom of the room seemed suddenly bright with whirling points of light.

**W**HAT happened afterward was like a fever dream. Intervals of darkness, broken by occasional lucid flashes. But flashes unreal, terrifying and with no thread of purpose to tie them into coherence.

First, the muffled hum of machinery somewhere beneath Brent's body. He was in total darkness. His aimlessly groping hand touched wood and leather that jounced away before he could comprehend. Then the raucous blare of an automobile horn tore at his senses and darkness came again.

Water in his face brought lucidity once more. This was the crux of the nightmare. But the feel of the water was real. Its chill drove some of the fog from his brain. The whole thing seemed real.

There was a high stone wall way above him. The lights of tall buildings way up over the grey wall. And trees and a terraced lawn, and up—way up like the face of a crazy, fever-ridden man-in-the-moon—the yellow dial of a clock tower floating high in the sky.

It was all blotted out suddenly again by the insistent darkness. And yet this darkness was not like the other. This was consciousness, yet with blackness at the same time. Maybe he was blind! Maybe—

His head submerged beneath rushing water. If this was a dream it was painfully real now. He was choking, strangling. Drowning!

Something bumped against him in the dark. His fingers clutched instinctively.

He still had mind enough to recognize the feel of slippery wet wood. An empty box floating in the water beside him. Brent pulled it closer, tucking it under his chin like a tired child cuddling up in bed with a wooden plaything. Then once more there was nothingness.

The fever dream ended with a sharp pain in the calf of Brent's stiff leg. Such a sudden unbearable pain that it brought him straight back from his mental borderline to realities.

His leg jerked with automatic reflex. The sharp pain ceased but a dull ache remained. He was still in perfect darkness. Still floating in water, chin propped on the empty box. And his head felt as if he had celebrated a full month of New Year's Eves, this being the morning after.

He put out his hand and touched hard cold stone. Was he actually blind? Brent felt a sudden surge of helpless panic. The he remembered the pencil flashlight.

It was still there. The clip clung stubbornly to the saturated lining of his inside pocket, then came loose suddenly. He almost lost it, fumbled, recovered it. His heart was pounding in his throat, sending waves of pain beating against the front of his skull, as he pressed the switch.

A thin line of radiance wavered across black water. Hal Brent let out his breath



in a deep sigh of heartfelt relief. Whatever else had happened to him, he wasn't blind.

He flashed the light around. He was in what seemed to be a tunnel filled with water. There were things floating around him in that water. Brent saw what the things were. His lips curled with disgust. A sewer! Apparently one of the main channels of a big city's waste disposal system.

For the first time he noticed gleaming spots of reddish light reflected back from the far end of the flashlight's beam. Spots that moved, disappeared and then re-appeared again. He whipped the narrow ray of brilliance suddenly toward the concrete wall beside him. The glistening spots were here, too.

*Eyes, watching him redly from ledges along the walls of the sewer.*

Sewer rats!

And he had floated against a side wall, legs trailing, thus attracting them to a feast. In spite of his case-hardened outlook on life Brent could not repress a shudder at the thought of being eaten alive by rats.

He thrust the light toward them and the scurrying of their small scaly feet filled the tunnel with a dry rustle of sound. But they did not go far. Brent could still see the eyes turned toward him from both sides of the sewer wall.

Firmly he controlled his mind, fighting down a moment of panic. Rats are cowardly animals as well as vicious. They would not attack him, even in a mass, so long as he retained consciousness. He must make a tremendous effort and escape this underground trap.

**T**HE WALL ledge was too small to climb up on. He clutched the slippery stone with one hand while he kept the light circling with the other so the rats would stay away.

Brent cursed aloud in cold futile rage. His words rumbled dully, echoing in the confined space. Now that he was helpless everything was so clear to him. With his own life in deadly peril, he under-

stood the source of the danger which menaced Princess Stevens.

But he must act swiftly, Brent knew, or both he and the girl would surely die. Abruptly he made his decision. He would try to fight back to the place where he had been thrown into the water. His remembrance of the tall buildings and the clock tower was too vivid to be a dream illusion.

He held the flashlight between his teeth and started to swim. He still felt sick and giddy from the head blow. And his strength was inadequate for him to cover a mile or more, if that should be



A thin line of radiance  
wavered across the water

necessary. Clinging to the ledge every so often, then forcing his tired muscles to take him forward another stretch, he progressed about a thousand feet.

Then his light started to give out. Its glow became dimmer, its beam shorter in length. As it died Brent's hope died with it. But he still struggled on.

The light was almost gone now, a reddish gleam reaching not more than ten feet into the blackness. Then Brent saw the ladder. Its bottom rungs ended three feet above the water surface, while its upper end disappeared into gloom which the burned-out flashlight could no longer penetrate.

Brent swam directly beneath the bottom rungs. Nearly submerged in the filthy stream, he sprang up from the



water as far as he could, grasping for the iron. His finger tips barely brushed the rung. He tried again.

Failure!

Treading water, he stripped off his pants. When he leaped again for the ladder he threw one leg of the garment over that bottom rung. In another moment he was climbing the improvised rope, up the ladder until he reached a manhole cover above.

Anyone chancing along Baltimore's deserted downtown streets between the Maryland Penitentiary and the Guilford Avenue elevated tracks during the wee small hours that morning would have witnessed an incredible sight. A figure rising, gnomelike, from the pavements under which Jones' Falls, prisoned, runs its course through the center of the city. A figure dripping, disheveled and pantless.

Staggering, bleeding, his sodden clothes coated with stinking slime, Hal Brent emerged from the manhole. He rubbed stubby fingers over his hairline black moustache and his unshaven, bristle-covered chin as he looked up toward the glow of an overhead street light and the street sign, *Fallsway*.

He lingered only long enough to struggle into his torn soaking trousers. Then he set off at a loping run for the red neon sign of the Reade Garage, visible a few blocks distant.

Lieutenant Gorsuch was not happy about being routed from his rest. "I was lookin' for you this afternoon, Brent. Where the hell've you been? We got the monkey you shot. I wanted—"

Brent cut the cop short. "Small fry," he told the homicide dick over the telephone from the booth in the garage. "But I'm going to hand you a multi-murderer. He'll chalk up another victim if you don't move fast. Get down to Leigh Hospital yourself right away. Don't let anyone go into the Stevens girl's room. No one! Understand?"

Gorsuch did not.

Brent said, "Just be at the hospital! I'll see you in a couple of hours and then

you'll get it all. Oh, another thing: give Paul Linthicum a ring and tell him to come to the hospital, too. Tell him I've recovered the railroad's bond loss. Keep your eye on the ball, Lieutenant! The girl's life is strictly in your hands."

He hung up, made another call. This time to Halton.

THE OFFICER of the guard was waiting at the outer gate of the Army-protected Processing Plant at Halton when Brent drove in by the side road branching from the highway. It was still night.

Captain Cutter eyed Brent curiously as the private dick climbed out of the company car, cutting off the headlights. "What's happened to you, fellow?" He caught a whiff of Brent's clothing. "Phew!"

"Yeah," Brent agreed. "You said it! Got the light and the Stillson wrench? Good!"

An enlisted man brought a gasoline lantern from behind a sentry box, adjusted the wick and touched a match.

Brent said, "Now I'll show you what's behind this destruction."

They went out together, Brent, the captain and three enlisted men. Down the ties of the railroad spur, toward the bridge across the creek.

"You can rest easy about the plant," Brent told the officer. "Everything's been aimed at the bridge. Even the fire at the shop buildings was only started to lure your sentry away from the bridge."

"But why?" Captain Cutter demanded.

"That's what I expect to show you," Brent did not explain until they reached the short span across the creek.

While an alert sentry, rifle in hand, looked on and the others crowded around, Brent took the Stillson wrench. "The night the shop was fired an attempt was made to club your sentry," Brent reminded the officer. "That, Captain, is the key to the whole matter."

The guard officer stared as Brent began to unscrew a section of the pipe



handrailing from the bridge footway. "This is what the saboteur used as a club."

The section of handrail was now off. Brent held the pipe toward the gasoline lantern, squinted through it as if through a telescope. "This isn't it," he said.

He put the Stillson wrench on the next section of pipe. He held it to the lantern, squinted.

"Success!" His voice rang out loudly. "Now if I can borrow that rifle a moment."

The sentry looked at Captain Cutter for permission, handed his gun over wonderingly. Brent took the rifle, inserted the muzzle in the section of pipe and pushed. The barrel seemed to meet some obstruction.

Brent shoved hard against the rifle butt. Suddenly a plug slipped from the end of the pipe, dropped to the bridge planking. As it fell the plug separated. In the glow of the hissing lantern a thick roll of thousand dollar bills scattered at the feet of the amazed army officer.

"You see," Hal Brent explained, "there was really never any idea of sabotage. The person who did all these things was only after this money. He knew it was hidden here but he couldn't get it because the sentry was always on the spot. So he tried to get the sentry out of the way. Once he was even successful to the extent of obtaining one section of railing. But *from the wrong end of the bridge*. If he'd been able to club the sentry he could have gone ahead and finished his search. But as it was . . ."

"How did this get here?" Captain Cutter asked, still bewildered.

"This," Brent said, "is money stolen from the railroad by the paymaster, Frank Dow. Dow concealed his plunder in the railing, intending to come after it later when the hue and cry for him had died. But that was before Pearl Harbor. During the war Dow couldn't get near the bridge. Then afterwards when Dow came back your sentries were still on the bridge; he couldn't get his loot."

"But Mr. Ross told me the embezzler

was dead," Captain Cutter complained. "Wasn't he shot?"

"Yes. After he found he couldn't get his hidden fortune Dow decided he'd reveal its hiding place in return for a promise of immunity. But his plans went wrong for the second time . . ."

Something struck a bridge girder with a metallic clang. There was a blinding white flash, a dull booming explosion. The enlisted man with the lantern shrieked. Hal Brent felt himself swept violently off his feet. Once again he was dimly aware of water closing over his head.

**L**EIGH HOSPITAL was hushed with that intense quiet that precedes the dawn. The men waiting in the chart room on the fourth floor had talked themselves out. They now sat in silence. On the wall the clock hands stood at four forty-five.

When the telephone buzzed the sound was not loud. But everyone's nerves were drawn so taut that it was startling. The nurse answered, passed the phone to Lieutenant Gorsuch.

After listening a moment the homicide cop exclaimed, "Hell!" The receiver crackled and then Gorsuch said, "Yes. I'll have to get in touch with the State Police." He laid the instrument on the breaker bar.

"That," he told the others, "was Mr. Glenn Ross. He's just received word that there's been another attempt to blow up the bridge. This time it's been successful! Brent and a number of army men were killed!"

The veteran cop's face looked drawn and weary. "It's beyond our jurisdiction now," he said. "I'm sorry about this fellow Brent . . ."

Paul Linthicum got to his feet. "It's terrible! I'll have to report to my company right away. I thought it would be too good to be true if Brent actually recovered that bond money." He looked at Dr. Porter. "I don't understand what Brent had in mind about Mrs. Stevens. What do you think?"



The doctor got up, too. "I'll give her another hypo to keep her quiet. I'm sure she'll be much better within another forty-eight hours."

Linthicum and the doctor walked together to the room where Princess Stevens lay. The nurse set a bottle filled with lead shot on the bedside table. A bent spoon was fastened to the bottle with adhesive tape. She filled the spoon with water and heated it with an alcohol lamp. When the water boiled she drew the glass syringe half full of liquid.

Dr. Porter took a small vial from his pocket, dropped a pellet into the spoon. The nurse finished preparing the hypodermic. She pulled back the girl's sleeve. Princess Stevens lay as if she had not stirred for hours.

The needle was poised over the flesh of the girl's arm when a dirty scorched figure in ragged clothing leaped suddenly into the room and struck the syringe from the nurse's hand. Behind the sudden unshaven Brent loomed the bulk of Lieutenant Gorsuch.

"Just barely in time," Brent said harshly. "This was probably belladonna!"

Linthicum exclaimed, "Hal! Say—I'm glad to see you! Glenn Ross just phoned us you'd been killed."

Brent said, "The reports of my death were greatly exaggerated. Ross got a garbled report. But it was a close call even so. Almost as close a call as this girl's had."

**H**E BENT and picked the syringe from the floor. The nurse appealed to Dr. Porter. "Is this man crazy? You told me to give her this morphine."

Dr. Porter drew himself erect. His cold blue eyes gleamed. "I've been trying to keep Mrs. Stevens quiet," he began indignantly. "I can't assume responsibility—"

"You've assumed plenty of responsibility," Brent said grimly. "This girl isn't all you've been keeping quiet. How about her husband? You haven't exactly been shouting from the housetops that

he didn't die from bullet wounds but from belladonna poisoning."

The doctor licked his lips. All the angry color had drained from his face. He looked suddenly old and tired. "That's a lie! No one can prove—"

"Oh, yes, I can!" Brent pressed home his attack. "I found a note in your apartment with this girl's name signed to it."

Ridley Porter crumbled. "It was a mistake! All a mistake! It isn't fair a man's whole career should be blasted for one slip."

Brent's eyes were hard as gun steel. "Yours needn't have been," he told the doctor severely. "But you've been more a fool than a knave, Dr. Porter. Because, you see, George Stevens died through no fault of your own."

The accident specialist's mouth fell open. It moved as if he were trying to speak but no words came out.

"That's right," Brent said. "You didn't poison George Stevens." His hand swung around and pointed inexorably to Paul Linthicum. "You haven't been here very long tonight, have you Linthicum?"

The Claims Manager stared. "Why, yes . . ."

The homicide cop said, "I called him right after you phoned me and that's more than two hours ago. He's been here less than half an hour."

"He was busy," Brent said. "Working fast trying to keep me from finding the bond money. He tried to blow us all up with a hand grenade. One soldier died. They pulled me out of the creek. Fortunately, no one else was seriously hurt."

"There's your real murderer, Lieutenant," Brent went on. "The man who shot Frank Dow to death and thought he'd killed George Stevens. He finished his botched job on Stevens here at the hospital with poison. And he used that telephone right out there in the hall to round up his hired killers for a try at me as soon as he learned Phil Adams had gone to me. He's only been waiting, of course, for a good opportunity to do away with this girl. I'll bet my entire fee from Imperial Casualty against



Linthicum's chance of living to be ninety that you'll find belladonna instead of morphine in that syringe. Another substitution, Doctor, and you'd never have known it. The Company's had a plenty slick Claims Manager in this town!"

**PAUL LINTHICUM** laughed harshly but his eyes flickered around the small hospital room like those of a cornered animal. "The nurse was right: he is insane!" His long, thin face grew threatening. "I shall have to inform the Home Office how their *Gestapo Chief* has blown his top and tried to disrupt the local office."

Brent paid no attention to the Claims Manager. "It's the old, old story," he went on. "A man who has worked for years on a small salary and sees a chance to get rich quick. The opportunity came to you, Linthicum, when the embezzler Dow called and offered to return the stolen railroad money. You knew he had it hidden and if you could find out where you could get it for yourself. But you couldn't just go over and shoot Dow yourself. Too obvious. So you decided to sacrifice your assistant, Stevens."

"A fairy story," Linthicum remarked coolly.

"Does sound like one," Brent admitted. "You sent Stevens to see Dow, slipped out of the office and joined Stevens after he'd started on his assignment. You waited until Dow revealed the place where the money was hidden, then you shot Dow to death and thought you'd killed Stevens, too. But that was your first slip. Stevens didn't die. He was brought here to the hospital in a critical condition. You were notified by Dr. Porter and rushed over here. While the doctor was preparing a morphine hypo to quiet Stevens you substituted a belladonna tablet. And when Stevens died in convulsions you accused Dr. Porter of criminal negligence." He turned to the insurance doctor. "Isn't that correct?"

There was a stricken look on Ridley

Porter's face. He said, "He threatened to make it public if I didn't do as he said. But I thought—"

"You thought of your career," Brent nodded. "And you thought of it again last night. You've come pretty close to making yourself an accessory to murder, Doctor."

He swung around again to face the lean Claims Manager. "As head of the local claims staff, Home Office must have advised you about my coming down here. I suppose you thought I might postpone my action if I found the whole story published in the newspaper. That would have given you time for another try after the concealed money. But the auto crash was a tough break for you.

"When the Princess gets over the effects of that drug you've kept her under, she'll be able to tell us exactly what happened. The way I figure it, you got knocked silly and talked out of turn. About things you wouldn't ever have talked about if you'd been in your right mind. And the girl wasn't hurt. She overheard. She probably accused you of being responsible for her husband's death. You had to do something, but quickly!"

Brent pointed to the purple bruise on the drugged girl's jaw. "So you slugged her! You wanted to scare Porter so he'd play into your hands. You know your way around the hospital, coming here often as you do in the course of your work. So you were able to get pen and ink quickly although you couldn't reach a typewriter. You wrote that note, trying to imitate the Princess' handwriting. Your own handwriting is rather feminine. I recognized the resemblance to that note you wrote for me to the garage."

**THE** doctor's tongue was suddenly loosened. "He told me he'd found the note on the girl in the wreck," Porter said. "He said she'd told him she was going to blackmail me. I kept her under morphine while he was figuring a way out for me."

"For you!" Brent laughed harshly.



"His own skin was all that worried him. The way out he intended was more murder. The Princess would probably be dead right now if that poor Adams kid hadn't overheard Linthicum and his hired trigger men talking it over."

Paul Linthicum was entirely cool. "A very interesting theory, Hal. Of course, you can't prove a thing and you know it. If the girl has hallucinations caused by being involved in the auto crash they won't stand in court."

Hal Brent moved the hypodermic syringe in his fingers. He laughed again but there was no mirth in the sound. "You're right. I can't prove a thing, Linthicum. But it has to be the way I said. That's the only way that makes sense. I was puzzled until I was slugged in Dr. Porter's apartment. I knew then it had to be you because you were the only one I'd told where I was going."

Linthicum's lips curled.

Brent grinned. "I won't need the Princess' testimony. You haven't forgotten the torpedo you sent to my hotel after you'd discovered the Adams kid had overheard your conversation with your hirelings? Well, the Lieutenant's men have picked him up, Linthicum. He's got a slug in his carcass but he'll get well. And to save his own neck he'll make it possible to stretch yours!"

The Claims Manager's teeth flashed in

a sudden snarl. His good hand darted to his coat, came out with a gun. He backed toward the door.

"I'll have to knock you *all* off now," he rasped. "I'll say Porter tried to blast his way out. You'll never take me . . ."

Hal Brent was almost beside the man as the gun's snout swung around. He brought up the hypodermic syringe, pointed at Linthicum's face. He pressed hard against the plunger. A thin needle-like jet of liquid spurted into Linthicum's eyes.

The gun blasted as Linthicum stumbled backward blindly. Powder seared Brent's cheek. But the lead tore harmless splinters from a window frame. One of Gorsuch's men reached around the door jamb, tapped the Claims Manager across the head with the barrel of a Police Positive.

Hal Brent set the syringe on the night table beside the bed of the sleeping Princess. He glanced down at the unconscious murderer at his feet, ruefully surveyed his own wet baggy clothing.

"I owed him one bath," Brent grinned. "He gave me three!" He yawned prodigiously. "Now, gentlemen, I intend to do some plain and fancy sleeping before I advise the Home Office they're in the market for a new Claims Manager. You know—I think I'll recommend the Princess!"

●

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Sam caught a glimpse of his  
prey on a straight stretch





# PLACER CITY EXPRESS

By Giff Cheshire





**P**LACER CITY was doomed, and each of the five men gathered in the office of Henry Adee, president of the Miners' and Drovers' Bank, knew it well. The shock of realization registered differently on each. The Trans-Western railroad was missing Placer City by a wide margin. The big westward-rushing railroad was going through the Yellow Fork pass instead.

The forelegs of Waldo Lockley's chair hit the floor with a bang. "Yeah, Gilmore! It was supposed to be a dead cinch. All we had to do was put up money for your Washington lobbyin', and the railroad'd run right down Plum Street." He turned to glare at the man who had called the meeting, who now stood before them, impeccably dressed and unruffled.

Henry Adee was getting old, and he took the news with a sudden slump of his shoulder, a slackening of the sharp jaw and a deepening of the pallor of his gaunt features. "That will break the whole town. There won't be a penny coming in here. Not a penny." To the right of his desk Jake Putman was slouched in a chair tilted against the wall. His beefy florid face wore a look of stunned disbelief as he absently cracked his knuckles.

But Sam Tugwell, who was much younger, was the only one who didn't look helpless as well as angry. He was big and solid with a mop of curly yellow hair. He was carefully dressed now but his skin, burnt darker than his hair, bespoke the outdoors. His was one of the oldest names in Placer City for it had been his father—old Jubilee Tugwell—who developed the famous and now exhausted Tugwell lode. He leaned forward in his chair, elbows on knees, his large smoldering eyes intent on Claude Gilmore. "Well, Gilmore, there ought to be an explanation to go with the news in the telegram you've got there."

Gilmore took the cigar from his lips, one hand sliding into his trouser pocket, pushing back his coat and revealing a gray brocaded vest. He let a bland glance

slide around the room, then smiled and cocked his head disarmingly.

"Is it going to get you anywhere to blame me for this? I never agreed to do anything more than try. I tried. It cost money. I failed." He shrugged as if dismissing the subject.

"Hell and damnation!" Lockley exploded. "What're we going to do now?"

"That's up to you gentlemen, and to Placer City. But I have a suggestion. Why throw good money after bad? Why depend on outside interests to build a railroad? Why don't we build our own spur line to join the Trans-Western at Ekton?"

Henry Adee came out of deep ruminations to widen an owlish eye. Jake Putman had been biting his lip, now his mouth opened and hung that way. Waldo Lockley jammed fists deep into his pockets and turned to look out the window.

**S**TRAIGHTENING in his chair, Sam Tugwell looked at Gilmore quizzically. "It's sixty miles to Ekton, mostly mountainous. To build a railroad, buy the equipment and meet the initial operating deficits would take three-quarters of a million dollars!"

"You're an engineer," Gilmore said. "You should know."

"You think a sum like that could be raised in Placer City?"

Gilmore shrugged. "If it wants a railroad bad enough. And it's got its choice between having a railroad or becoming a ghost town. I think it could be done." He smiled faintly. "I've had experience along that line. You men are the town leaders. If you approve, I'd like to undertake it."

Lockley whirled back from the window, his face still angry. "You had experience in lobbying, too!" he snapped. "That cost us fifty thousand dollars and the railroad went the other way!"

Blood stained Gilmore's cleanshaven white cheeks for an instant. Old Henry Adee cut in, "Quit bellyaching about it, Waldo! Gilmore warned us he couldn't



guarantee results when we hired him. That was a chance we took and we lost."

"What I'm proposing," Gilmore said, his eyes boring into Lockley's, "is that we quit relying on outsiders and work out our own salvation! After all, you people are the ones who're vitally concerned. The work you hired me for is finished. I failed and I regret it, but it wasn't my fault. Yet I'm interested in Placer City. The mining that made it is largely over but I think it's still got a future. *If* it gets a railroad! It's deader than a door nail if it doesn't!"

Old Adee's voice rumbled up from his thin chest. "No question about that. But we ain't used to starting million-dollar deals at the drop of a hat, Gilmore. How long you going to be around?"

"I'd meant to take the stagecoach this afternoon. But I'll wait a week or so, if you want to think it over."

"Wish you would. Looks like you just about described it. Placer City's got to have a railroad or be another cow town in fifteen years. Looks like we're throwing money down the well trying to persuade a big road to look our way. Maybe we'd ought to build it ourselves. If you'll wait until we can look into it maybe you get the job."

Satisfaction gleamed briefly in the promoter's eyes. Sam Tugwell noted this as he climbed to his feet, picking up his Stetson. He said, "Going my way, Waldo?," and Lockley turned and left the office with him. They moved across the lobby and out to the street.

"I don't like that jigger, Sam!" Lockley said.

"Me, either. I wonder just how hard he worked in Washington, and how much of that money he spent and how much he pocketed. You know, Waldo, he could've wanted to get us in this spot so he could sell the proposition of building a railroad ourselves."

"The same idea's been bothering me."

SAM let his gaze travel along the cobblestoned street. He had grown up in Placer City but had been away four

years earning an engineering degree in an eastern school. He had been back only a short while, planning to start doing construction work. Although he had not been welcome at the meeting of the town's bigwigs, his father's old friend, Waldo Lockley, had insisted on bringing him along. "I want you to get a slant on that setup, Sam! I don't like it!"

Lockley's surrey was tied to the hitch-rack in front of the bank. As he got in he asked: "Haul you home, Sam?"

"No thanks. Think I'll walk. I'll be in to see you in a day or two." He looked at the beefy old man and grinned. Lockley was probably his one remaining friend in Placer City. The one man still loyal to the memory of Jubilee Tugwell. . . .

As Lockley's rig pulled away, another drew into its place. Sam's eyes narrowed. For a moment panic was in him. Then he grinned again and removed his hat.

An ancient Negro was driving the Victoria. On the back seat was the girl. Sam felt the old stirring of his pulses. He noted that she was prettier than ever, and just as spirited and baffling as always. It was the first time he had seen Sheila Putman since he returned. He stepped to the curb.

"Hello."

"Hello, Sam." Her voice was cool, distant, and her black eyes searched the bank door as though she were anxious for her father to appear. She behaved as if she had last seen Sam yesterday instead of four years ago.

Sam's lips twisted. "You never forget, do you?"

"No. Never."

Sam replaced his hat and turned down the street, anger blotting out his embarrassment. He had not minded old Jake Putman's coldness back in Henry Adee's office. He certainly should not have been surprised at Sheila's, he told himself, for he had known it much of his life. Yet while he was away in the East he had allowed himself to think that now they were mature things might be different.



Sam Tugwell moved down Plum Tree Street, nodding abstractedly to acquaintances here and there. He was thinking about the Putmans. Not many were left who remembered the cause of their hatred for the Tugwells. It had begun so long ago. . . .

Fate plays strange tricks in its disposition of men in space and time. Thirty-two years earlier a much younger Jake Putman had led a pack burro up the meandering course of the untraveled Whitewater River looking for gold. It had been a profitless trip and he had prospected his way higher and higher on to the Sheep-horn plateaus. He had come out at last upon a wild unexplored plain. At a point that was soon to become the site of Placer City, he paused only briefly to examine a strange quartz formation characterizing the river bank and the big rolling hills south of it. Then he passed on.

**A** WEEK later Jake Putman met Jubilee Tugwell leading in an outfit from the other direction. It was the first time they had laid eyes on each other, but being lonely men, they pitched camp together. Around the fire that night Putman mentioned the strange color he had seen.

Jubilee Tugwell came to his feet. "Was it blue-black stuff?"

Putman nodded. "That was it, friend. What good is it?"

That men came to call it the Tugwell lode was the first thing Jake Putman had taken to heart against Jubilee Tugwell. Yet the naming was natural enough. Putman had discovered the silver lode but had not recognized it or made a claim, for he had been hunting gold. For days, while Tugwell made excited explorations, Putman had remained skeptical and pessimistic. He showed no sign of wanting to do anything about it himself for this was something new to him. He simply had not recognized his opportunity and perversely refused to acknowledge it at first.

Many a man was later to marvel that

Jubilee Tugwell did not force him out of it then and there, for he had the chance. But Tugwell took him into equal partnership. It was Tugwell who got the stuff analyzed, who protected them in the tremendous rush that followed publication of the find. It was Tugwell who eventually got backing and built reduction plants to turn the blue-black quartz Putman had considered useless into silver bullion. Jake Putman had neither aptitude nor initiative and these omissions were further handicapped by a deliberate hold-back stubbornness.

The inevitable break came. In two years Placer City rose from the wilderness and became a city of fifteen thousand souls. Eastern and Western capitalists flocked in. All the fever and rush had to do with holes being dug in and around the Tugwell lode where Jake Putman had seen nothing but queerly colored rock.

As time went on the town settled down. Permanent streets were laid out, permanent buildings erected. Luxurious hotels went up, fine restaurants and an opera house were built, schools and churches founded, and homes started. Fortunes were made and lost, and the bigger mines became institutions.

There Jubilee Tugwell broke with his hang-back partner. Jubilee loved the thing he had started and lived it with lusty relish. He wanted to go forward. He was forever planning and pushing. He paid off his backers and organized a company that belonged to himself and Putman alone. It made them rich. And every step of the way Jake Putman was a fretful worrying critic.

The crisis came. Hard and ruthless men had gathered here. In time high financing instead of mining seemed to be Placer City's chief industry. A group backed Jubilee Tugwell into a tight corner. Things looked bad. And Jake Putman began to holler.

Jubilee looked at him and said, "You never had the getup and gumption of a barn cat, Jake! You better get out. How much do you want?"



Without batting an eye, Jake Putman said, "Two million." He was ready to quit.

Jubilee bought him out. He beat off his attackers and in five years was worth ten million. Putman never forgave him for that, not even in the years that followed when Jubilee went broke. Putman still was a rich man, but he could not forget the fact that he might have been richer, nor that Jubilee had carried him as dead weight for sixteen years.

JUBILEE had been dead for six years but his memory was so vivid that Sam had only to shut his eyes and picture the thatch of white hair and matching mustache, the rosy cheeks and twinkling gray eyes. He could hear the booming voice roar, "Hey, you young Sam! I'm just the jigger as can take a fall outta you!" And they would be at it, wrestling on the floor of the stately living room of the Tugwell mansion, to the dismay of the servants but never of Sarah Tugwell. She was not above adding a bucket of water to the melee.

It shocked Sam sometimes to recall the really short span of years in which Jubilee Tugwell had risen from callus-footed prospector to mining tycoon. He had lost much of his first fortune, then regained it in a breathlessly short time. He had been like that, filled with ideas and the energies to translate them into being—a combination that for him seemed to cancel the limitations of time.

Jubilee's final financial ruin was caused by his abiding faith in his fellow man. By this time Placer City had a considerable financial circle of its own in which there were rivalries. Many there were who, for sundry reasons, were impelled to take pot shots at Jubilee Tugwell. He delighted in returning a charge of bird-shot for each such pellet.

The old Lucky Tiger mine had been something of a bone of contention—a mine that had been profitable until its extension into the seeps had begun to flood it with subterranean water. Since then a number of companies had tried to

operate it, to their eventual ruin. Then appeared a man, who claimed to be a geologist, with a scheme for driving a tunnel into the mountain, below the important lodes. This method, he claimed, would be certain to drain them and make their working profitable again. The man sought out Jubilee Tugwell, demonstrating his idea with a small scale model. It was too costly a proposition to test on a real scale, so Jubilee had been obliged to accept it on the strength of the model, as well as the man's enthusiasm and apparent knowledge of his business.

The chance to lick the hoodoo on the Lucky Tiger, where so many of his rivals had failed, was too much for Jubilee. He gave the scheme his backing. Since it entailed so much expense, he quietly organized a company of his friends, and the project was undertaken.

The work was pushed for nearly a year before Jubilee Tugwell began to doubt his judgment. The initial tunnel, driven into the earth far below the Lucky Tiger, failed to relieve the mountain of its impounded waters. Undaunted, Jubilee ordered another begun, and when it failed, another.

By this time most of his friends had dropped out, some with a grin and a lesson in prudence, some angrily outspoken about it.

This served only to set Jubilee in his determination. He fired the geologist, threw away the model and tried a number of experiments of his own. Meanwhile he had stretched himself thin in other properties and he began to feel a pinch. In an astonishingly short time he found himself in real financial trouble.

His stubborn chin set now, Jubilee began to sell common stock. In spite of the increasing ridicule of the Lucky Tiger experiment, his name still held magic in the town. For a time his troubles were eased. But he had too many enemies, sniping, undercutting, blocking him. The drain of the grand experiment had been too great. One morning he awoke to find himself ruined, the town up in arms against him.



Sam Tugwell doubted that Jubilee had been greatly troubled by this. He met it in his characteristic way. There was still a little property in his wife's name, the Tugwell mansion, a few business buildings, some small and scattered bank holdings. Jubilee refused to touch this and went on a prospecting trip. He returned from it only to die of pneumonia. The old body could no longer support the grand old heart.

AS HE left Plum Street and turned toward the rococo old Tugwell mansion on the hill above the town, Sam Tugwell reflected that Sheila Putman had never heard anything but her father's side of that story. Old Jake now honestly figured that he had been squeezed out, slickered by his partner. There were many in the town who had lost money in the Lucky Tiger venture. There had been a great deal of talk about Jubilee's lack of sound business sense. Some had labeled him an outright swindler. The Lucky Tiger affair was recent enough to be well remembered.

It was the Putman quarrel that mattered most to young Sam though he tried not to admit it. Until he was eight and Sheila was six—when the partnership broke up—they had been playmates. It had been natural for him to stay in love with her in the years that followed.

And he loved Placer City, not only because of its gauche and noisy past, its stirring memories of old Jubilee, but for what it was today. Except for a few small reduction concerns the mining was finished. Instead of the shovel the great plateau now felt the bite of the plough. Stockmen ran big herds there and in the uplands. Industry, supplying local markets, had risen in the town.

The transportation age had come. First the Union Pacific, then other roads had extended lines westward. High on her mountain plateau, Placer City found that she was being isolated. When the Tugwell lode played out it looked for a time as if she were destined to become a

ghost city. But a few tough-minded old builders were still around, men like Henry Adee and Waldo Lockley. Even Jake Putman, whose investments all were here, had a real interest in saving the town, in keeping it lusty and thriving.

Claude Gilmore was not a local product but his abilities in western promotion were widely known. When the Trans-Western had started across the Big Muddy, Gilmore had been hired to represent Placer City in an endeavor to bring it across the plateau. But, like other railroads, the Trans-Western had preferred the easier routes.

Sam's memories of old Jubilee were strong as he crossed the huge verandah of the old house. How the old man would have loved a situation like this! He would have snorted at the idea of bringing in an outsider to give the town what it needed. Sam could almost hear him addressing a meeting such as had just taken place down at Adee's bank. "Jumpin' Jehosaphat! What're you round-sidin' here about? Let's go build us a railroad."

THE OLD Tugwell mansion was in a bad state of repair. Sam saw this as he let himself through the front door. One of his first jobs would be to restore it. The big columns of the verandah were scaly and moss-grown. Some of the fancy trimming on the gables and eaves was missing; a few upstairs window shutters hung askew. Yet a foreign prince and a President had been entertained here.

In the hall, still glittering with tarnished gilt and big plate mirrors, he could see through the arch into the spacious room where his mother sat biting off an embroidery thread. Sarah Tugwell looked up and smiled as Sam walked toward her.

"Gilmore didn't get us our railroad, did he?" she said.

Sam shook his head. "He wants to build one."

"I don't like his looks, Sam."

"Adee likes him. Apparently so does



Jake Putman. Mother, how much cash could we raise?"

"I don't know exactly. The property and some cash that was in my name. You thinking of going into Putman's railroad?"

"No. I'm going to build one. Jubilee's blood's been boiling in me ever since I left that meeting. I want to try something as daring as he did in the Lucky Tiger and make it stick!"

Sarah Tugwell smiled. "You're so much like him, Sam. I've noticed it particularly since you got back from school. I like that. Go ahead, Sam! Frank Satterlee can tell you more about our finances than I can. I've left it up to him."

Sam's heart warmed as he looked at her. He did not wonder that old Jubilee had loved this woman he had married in his middle age. Sarah Tugwell was small, her hair was graying, but her skin was firm, her eyes clear and bright. She had never been afraid of anything.

Sam said, "When Jubilee was in the money he was the toast of the town. He was a man who did the things he thought ought to be done, and the town benefited by it. If it hadn't been for him the town would never have existed. They've forgotten that. They remember the Lucky Tiger and the money they lost. The Putmans consider him a cheat. I want to pull the town out of its hole. As a sort of monument to him!"

"You can, Sam. I don't understand those things but I do know this. Jubilee used to say a man on a tightrope was as safe as a man on the ground unless he stopped to remember he was on a tightrope. Go see Frank Satterlee. Tell him you're taking over."

FOR several days Sam was busy checking financial matters, experiencing alternate periods of determination and doubt. And all the while, as he learned from casual sources, Claude Gilmore made real progress with his own project. Sam dropped in at Waldo Lockley's mill.

"That slick son of a gun's putting it over, Sam! Adee and Putman're throw-

ing in with him but they don't want to put up too much of the money. They want to call a town meeting and get the little fellows in with the big one. Popular support."

"When's the meeting?"

"Three weeks or a month, yet. They want to do a lot of spade work before it comes up for a debate."

"How do you feel about it, Waldo?"

Lockley's saggy jowls relaxed. "God knows we've gotta have a railroad. But I don't trust Gilmore. That's a lot of money, boy! And are we sure we'll get a railroad, or that it'll pay off if we do get it?"

Sam grinned. "How about me, Waldo? Trust me?"

"How do you mean?"

"I'm going to build a railroad. Without all that fancy financing. You and I're going to put up the cash."

The old man bit the end off a cigar and rolled it in his lips, looking at Sam biliously. "You been drinking. I couldn't raise that much money to keep from hanging."

"It won't take that much. Nowhere near."

"Whatcha going to build it out of? Pipe smoke?"

"No. Wood."

"You *are* crazy."

"Maybe. I saw a wooden railroad operating, recently. Narrow-gage wood rails with an angle iron covering. Right-of-way and grading cost cut to half. We'll have some special, half-pint locomotives built in the east and shipped out. We'll buy wheels and build the runty cars ourselves. At a fraction of the cost of standard equipment. The same reduction in expense will apply to operating costs, once it's finished."

The old man shook his head. "Worse'n crazy," he mumbled. "You're a fool." Yet a tinge of excitement had crept into his voice.

Sam laughed, knowing he had captured the man's interest. "This is the point. With a comparatively small investment we can probably make money



from the start. We'll run down the Whitewater through Jonesburg and Three Corners and Brierville. As we can afford it we'll convert to standard construction and equipment. I think we can build Placer City its standard railroad without anybody but you and me risking a dime. We'll make it pay for itself!"

**W**ALDO LOCKLEY had not yet lighted his cigar, though he had flared three matches and let them burn his fingers before hastily waving them out.

"Sam, can you actually do that?"

Sam Tugwell looked at him for a long moment. "I've got to answer that the same way Claude Gilmore would, Waldo. I think I can. I can try. But that's all I can promise."

"Yeah. But you've gotta different smell to you, boy. You know, you remind me of your dad." He began to chuckle. "How soon can we get going?"

"We'll have to run a survey down the Whitewater and file the location before Gilmore suspects what we're up to. That'll force him to pick a harder and even more expensive route or face open competition. It'll probably ruin his chances of getting backing."

"If he's the man I think he is," Lockley said, "it'll probably get you and me into a kettle of hot water!"

"That's to be expected. I've already got the survey equipment, stuff I had shipped in here thinking I'd do a little contracting. I'll slip down to Ekton in the morning, hire a crew, and start running a line back this way. We'll try to keep it quiet, but if it gets around we can claim we're making our own estimate against Gilmore's figures. I think I can raise forty thousand, Waldo. I'll put up that and my efforts against sixty thousand from you and make it a fifty-fifty proposition. Do I get it?"

The answer was instant. "You've got it, boy!"

In the days that followed, Sam Tugwell had to remind himself several times

of the man his father had been. On the day following his agreement with Waldo Lockley he took the early stage for Ekton, sixty-odd miles down the river. To avoid arousing curiosity, Lockley sent one of the mill teamsters down with the survey equipment, dispatching him quietly. By the time the stuff had arrived, Sam had lined up rodmen, chainmen and axemen for a survey party. He started at once running a location line up the south bank of the river.

Halfway back to Placer City he realized that he had involved himself in a number of tough construction problems. Downstream there were tributaries and swamps to cross. Upriver were the rocky lifts in the foothills of the Sheephorn mountains, then the wild and rugged country that followed the savage watercourse upward onto the plateau. Yet they were problems simpler to solve in connection with a narrow-gage road than with a standard line. He could do it cheaper and faster than Claude Gilmore could.

One thing made the prospect look worse. Once his plans were known, a bitter fight with Gilmore and his backers and a race against time would likely develop. It was now late summer. He would have to have his materials and equipment shipped into Ekton, present railhead of the new Trans-Western, and so would be obliged to start construction on the Ekton end. Any way he figured it, winter would be setting in by the time he reached the worst part of the route—the twenty miles from Jonesburg through the mountains to Placer City. It was going to make for tough sledding.

**W**ITHIN three weeks Sam had completed the survey, filed the location, made rough profiles and was back in Placer City. It had been impossible to conceal the operations, and he knew they had aroused considerable curiosity. But he managed to avoid direct questioning, as did Waldo Lockley. Secreted in a back room of the flour mill, he fell to work on the detailed plans.



His first task was to write up specifications for the miniature locomotives he wanted built and to place the order with an eastern firm, then to order wheels and the other parts he needed to build the cutdown carriages. Assured that the trains would be on hand by the time he had completed his track, he placed a big order with a sawmill east of Ekton for bridge timbers, road ties and the wooden rails he proposed to introduce. He found that a foundry in Ekton could supply the iron facing for the rails. More precious weeks went by before he had accomplished this necessary preliminary work. In the meantime Claude Gilmore, backed by Henry Adee and Jake Putman, called the town meeting.

It was held in the opera house and Sam and Lockley attended. After being introduced by old Adee, Gilmore took charge and presided. He outlined the necessity for Placer City's constructing its own railroad, using much the same argument he had advanced that day in Adee's office. He proposed that, if possible, the money be raised strictly by local subscription to give the town complete control of the line. His talk was studied and reasonable. However, Sam Tugwell noted certain omissions, the exact cost and guarantee of completion and continued solvency after completion. In a subtle way he posed the proposition as a gamble of desperation, leaving himself a wide loophole for almost any eventuality.

Old Henry Adee spoke again and endorsed Gilmore's remarks. He was followed by Jake Putman and a string of lesser lights, all previously lined up by the faction. Then the meeting was thrown open to debate. Sam noticed with grim satisfaction that Placer City showed a hard-heeled intelligence on the subject. It wanted to know the details and it began to probe into Gilmore's pointed omissions. A man rose to inquire how much money Gilmore himself would be willing to put into it.

"Considerable," Gilmore replied. "And I can get more from the East if there's

a substantial local commitment."

Then Sam Tugwell was on his feet. He had one purpose—to prevent a landslide of enthusiasm for the Gilmore project. He was well aware that his own proposal would be ridiculed as inadequate and ineffectual. There would be many who remembered Jubilee Tugwell and the Lucky Tiger. He would have to create his innovation and make it a going concern before it would be accepted.

"Mr. Gilmore," he called. "Have you done anything about locating a route?"

THE question created a buzz in the audience for it tied in with Sam's own mysterious activities of recent weeks. On the stage, elegantly dressed as usual, Gilmore turned and looked at him.

"My young friend, we have to decide to build a railroad before we start work on it."

"But what is your proposed route?"

"There is one natural route to Ekton. Down Whitewater river."

"Have you an alternate route?"

"No. Not a feasible one."

"Then it looks like you're in trouble already," Sam said. "Because I've filed a route down the Whitewater. Unless you want two roads that way."

It created an uproar. Claude Gilmore turned a narrow gaze on Sam while he waited for the noise to subside. Then he said, "Probably, my friend, you'd better come up here and explain what you mean!"

Sam moved to the stage and turned to face the crowd. "Everyone's agreed we've got to have a railroad. The only argument's over the best way to get one. I'm heartily opposed to a community this size undertaking a financial effort as large as Mr. Gilmore suggests apparently with the backing of a couple of our own citizens. What I propose will be accomplished with private financing. It will be a railroad scaled down to the cheapest possible construction, with less expensive equipment and less costly operation. It won't be a standard route but it will be a vast step forward over our present sys-



tem of stagecoaches and freight wagons. It can be enlarged into a full-scale railroad as traffic justifies it. I fully believe it can be made to pay for itself as it builds. I'm telling you this now to give you pause. I don't need your permission or financial backing for the work's already started. When it's completed, however, I'll need your patronage and support. I ask you to wait. If my wooden railroad doesn't fill the bill you've still got time to take up Gilmore's proposition."

"I don't know about that!" Gilmore snapped, turning toward the audience. "I'm a busy man. I don't propose to wait around while this man conducts a silly experiment."

"There're other men capable of building a railroad!" Sam returned. "Since you're not a native, Gilmore, it seems to me that you're probably not promoting this scheme out of love for the town!" He turned and left the stage.

Sam was filled with quiet satisfaction as he rode home in Lockley's Victoria. Old Waldo Lockley sat beside him, silent but chuckling from time to time. The old man's parting remark was sobering, however. "You've dared the lightnin', son. He'd have shot you if he'd had a gun. Now he's either got to make good his threat and clear out, or admit he's out to clean up for himself by keeping on. I gotta hunch he'll be around quite a spell yet and that you'll see more of him before you've put wooden rails into Placer City!"

**T**HOUGH he drove himself to the limit, Sam Tugwell found he could not slow time. It was early October before he had completed his preliminary engineering and tied together the thousand and one loose ends of red tape involved in matters of right-of-way. By the time he had assembled and organized a construction outfit and got a grading crew started out of Ekton it was late in that month, with autumn rains turning the soil to sticky muck.

He had built a tent camp above Ekton

to serve as a base for that section. On a rainy afternoon he sat at a drawing board in the tent he used as office and quarters talking to Waldo Lockley. The old man had just come down on the Ekton stage, getting off at the camp, and he was patently excited.

The moment they were alone in Sam's tent he burst out, "Claude Gilmore's started running a survey down the north bank!"

Sam stared at him. "No!"

"It's a fact! Can he do that, after we've already located on the river?"

"I reckon so, if he wants to. There's no question of subsidies and land grants when we're only building spur lines. But they haven't gotten any subscription from the town. What's he using for money? I bet you Jake Putman's backing him out of spite!"

The old man grinned. "Claims he's starting the work at his own expense. Remember they forced him to commit himself for a piece of it the night of the hearing. You kind of put a crimp in his style that night. Folks've been sharp-shooting him ever since. He's trying hard to save the situation so he can go ahead with his scheme!"

Sam frowned. "With a rival road building down the other side of the river. . . ." He whistled and fell silent.

In spite of the chugging rain, old Waldo insisted on donning slicker and gum boots and visiting the job with Sam. The grading gang had already advanced beyond the camp and was nearly ten miles out of Ekton. With team-drawn fresnos and slips they cut through the high points and filled in the low, advancing one or two miles each day. Carpenter crews were already throwing up trestles over the creeks and marshes that had to be crossed, ahead of the grading crews. And behind came the tracklayers and ballasters, laying the crossties and iron-sheathed rails and setting the new track in a solid bed of gravel. Sam did not expect the first of the specially built engines until after the turn of the year but he had already received several ship-



ments of car parts. Cut-down little cars, drawn by horses, moved back and forth over the finished track hauling materials. Old Waldo's eyes began to shine.

"You're railroadin', son!"

Sam grinned. "We can make time down here and we have to. It'll be a different story when we get into the mountains, Waldo. Especially if we have a bad winter."

"And that," Lockley said, turning serious again, "we're likely to have. The sign's right for a stinkeroo."

**I**N ANOTHER ten days Claude Gilmore's survey outfit was working across the river from Sam. Now over twenty miles of the wooden railroad had been built; they had passed through the towns of Brierville and Three Corners. The carpenters were at work on depots in these towns, and as soon as he received a couple of locomotives Sam meant to establish test-tube service between them and Ekton. Not only was he anxious to prove the efficacy of his system to himself. Such operations would give Placer City a partial and tangible answer to the big question that was now keeping it from backing Claude Gilmore on the one hand and accepting Sam's half-pint railroad on the other.

Yet his progress was often broken by worrisome accidents. To get his equipment and materials strung out along the right-of-way at a considerable length and thus increase the efficiency of his crews, Sam first called upon Upton and Thursday, a wagon freighting concern moving up the river between Ekton and Placer City. Pete Upton, the Ekton manager, laughed at him.

"Think we're fools enough to help you hogtie us and cut our throats, Tugwell? No, siree! We ain't hauling any freight for you to build your blasted railroad. I don't figure the danged thing'll work but I'm not having any part of it anyhow!"

Sam had grinned at him and left, but it had disturbed him a little to realize the widespread resistance against his project. This was an angle he had not thought of.

The wagon freighters and the staging lines on the river route would be obsolete if he succeeded. Knowing that crusty hard-bitten pack, he did not doubt that they would throw chips of their own into the pot if given a chance.

So Sam was forced to use his own teams, which he could ill spare from the grading outfits, for his freighting. He had nearly forgotten the incident with Upton, as the work swirled on, until the day his camp foreman reported that the stage lines passing the camps had abruptly refused any further service between the towns and the construction camps. Men were hard enough to get and hold without this unwarranted imposition. Sam Tugwell swore in a manner befitting old Jubilee and headed for Ekton again.

He went directly to the office of the stage line and backed the manager into a corner. "If you don't intend for my men to come in for a little recreation once in a while, you better put some slab-muscled seven footers on your coaches, Andrews! I'm issuing orders to my men that they're to flag down your stages whenever they've a mind to and get on and ride!"

It was a morale builder for a time, as the laborers, some drawn from the bigger Trans-Western, others from cities near and distant, rose to the occasion with a whoop. And thereafter Tugwell men rode the coaches whenever they had a mind to, enjoying it even more if given an excuse to upset the stage or paste the driver before hand.

Sam had moved his construction camp to a new site above Three Corners. Gilmore had reversed Sam's method, running his survey down from Placer City. When Sam saw the fast-moving party across the river from his camp, he rode a work train back to Three Corners and caught a stagecoach to Placer City.

**H**E REACHED there around two in the afternoon. He had just left the stage depot and was standing on the sidewalk, preparing to cross the street,



when a Victoria came by, close to the curbing. Sam stared, then on abrupt impulse swung into it.

Sheila Putman looked at him coldly. "Well. The breed never dies. Placer City *does* have another aggressive Tugwell!"

Sam smiled, hiding the uncertainty within himself, and settled back into the seat. "I suppose it's natural for a couple to quarrel who've been married as long as we have."

The girl straightened. "Married? As long as we—?"

"Sure. Don't tell me you'd forget a thing like getting married, Sheila!"

"Sam Tugwell, they've been saying that you're crazy! Now I know it."

Sam sighed. "You were four and I was six. Skunky Davis was the preacher. Red Tripp was the best man and Rosie Adee was your bridesmaid. When I was eight and you were six our fathers quarreled. But I don't remember your divorcing me, Sheila!" He looked at her a little desperately, wanting to bring friendliness into her eyes if only for a little while.

She was smiling reluctantly and he knew that he had reached her. He looked at her, his eyes sober though his lips smiled. He had never once deceived himself in all the long years. Frilled and pretty and demure on the surface, she was something else underneath. Even as a child she had possessed that capacity for mingled tenderness and fierceness. There was a warm pulsing force there that set up a similar beat within himself. She was his natural mate, she had always been, and once she had acknowledged it.

At long last the girl said, "I haven't forgotten, Sam, but I thought you had."

He picked up her hand. She let him hold it a moment before drawing it away. "It's been so foolish, Sheila," Sam said. "We knew back there, and I've never changed my mind. Let me see you once in a while!"

"Dad wouldn't stand for that, Sam. He's terribly bitter. And as he gets older

he gets worse." She sighed. "I just don't know how I feel, Sam. You'd better get out now. I'm picking up Dad pretty soon."

"I'm not afraid of Jake Putman."

"I'm not questioning that. But he'd make a scene and I wouldn't like it."

"There'll be a scene unless you tell me when and where I can see you again."

She thought a moment. "Well—you still move in Placer City's best circles. I've noticed you've been too busy to pay attention to the social doings but stirring around that way a person does run into things."

SAM grinned and swung out of the moving carriage. He tipped his hat. Slowly she responded with a full warm smile. Sam turned down Plum Tree Street, heading toward Henry Adee's bank on the errand that had brought him to Placer City. He was suddenly happier than he had been in years.

Henry Adee looked at him biliously when Sam came into his private office. "Howdy, Sam."

At his gesture Sam took a chair. Henry Adee had never been an intimate of Jubilee Tugwell, even in the old days. He had been none too friendly since Sam's return to Placer City and now his rheumy old eyes looked actually chilly. So Sam got to his point immediately.

"Henry, do you know who's backing Claude Gilmore?"

The banker looked at him uncertainly. "Young man, folks just don't walk into my bank and ask questions like that."

Sam waved an impatient hand. "Let's skip the sparring, Henry. There are few financial deals in this town you don't know about. And I think you've got sense enough to know it's sheer idiocy starting a war over the Whitewater route. There can be only one outcome. I win or Claude Gilmore wins. Either way, a lot of construction work is wrecked. You know who's helping him. I think it's Jake Putman."

Henry Adee made a church steeple out of a pair of boney forefingers and looked



at them angrily. "You're the one who's wrecking Placer City's chance to get a railroad by raising all this doubt. A regulation railroad was already being talked about when you got this hare-brained scheme of yours. If you want to lose your shirt, nicking Waldo Lockley besides, that's your business. But you're discouraging Placer City from building a railroad we know will do us some good."

"You don't think my railroad'll do any good?"

"It's silly. A blasted toy. The Lucky Tiger Railroad!"

Sam got up, stung by the uncalled-for reference to his father. Yet he realized that was going to be a consideration, fair or not. "Very good, Henry. I just want you to remember that I preferred to be reasonable. I'll have my railroad in operation before Gilmore's half way. And I'll make it pay. Maybe you won't concede it, but I'll be able to realize a profit at tariffs that'd bust your regulation road. Somebody's risking an awful pile of money on a ticklish deal and it isn't Waldo Lockley and I! And since you want to be personal about it, it occurs to me that you have a lot of property in Free-ling on the north side of the river which Gilmore very cleverly proposes to serve and I'll miss." He nodded and left.

Gilmore's persistence in pushing the project removed Sam's last tenuous doubt that the promoter was in it for what he could get out of it for himself. Likely he had put up money of his own but that would only be bait for the trap. A clever and uncrupulous man managing so large a project and checked only by inexperienced men would find many chances for getting it back, lining his own pocket in addition.

**T**HERE were several ways Gilmore could foist a swindle on Placer City. He could do it through cheating on expense items. He could let costs mount and the construction bog down, milking the town for additional funds. The man had an ingenious way of suggesting much

while actually promising nothing. Sam had not forgotten how easily he had explained away his failure to influence the route of the big Trans-Western, though he had pocketed a large fee for that failure. Without doubt he had already plotted a way through the maze of hedging, stalling, dodging and excusing yet ahead.

In all this, one fact stood out clearly to Sam Tugwell. Gilmore's chances of putting through his big swindle would be much greater if the wooden railroad project could be put definitely out of the running. Sooner or later Sam knew he would discover who was with the man in this new undertaking. Until then the Tugwell-Lockley company would do well to keep its eyes open.

Yet Sam returned to camp in good spirits. Sheila Putman was never long out of his mind, and his mother, surprised at her son's strange new interest in such matters, had told him they were invited to Mrs. Jack Purdue's party on the following Saturday evening.

Bad weather broke that week. It turned cold, freezing the earth, then it warmed enough to snow. The grading was stopped, awaiting the thaw, yet Sam kept his track and bridge crews going. He stood this slowdown one day, then abruptly moved a sizable crew ahead on horseback to the first cut they had to make through sheer rock. There he set it to work with drills and dynamite, for no amount of freezing could make that cut any tougher.

The thaw did not come. By the end of the week intermittent snows had put an eighteen inch blanket over the landscape. It dawned on Sam slowly that winter had come, the raw, bitter winter that he had been dreading. It was possible that he could do no more grading until spring came and would have to devote the intervening time to the unending rocky canyons.

These would prove work enough. Again and again Sam had gone over a section called Hell Canyon. Nature had not built those reaches with any idea of



suiting them to a railroad grade. Much of the way would have to be blown out of the rock. Sheer cliffs would have to be faced with wooden trestles and on one short stretch slow expensive tunneling was the only answer.

Since the winter was just beginning in earnest, Sam could work on the rocky canyons now, but eventually snow would prove a greater handicap and menace here than down on the flats, for in the canyons it would bank deep.

Those were worries he would meet as they came up, Sam told himself resolutely. Meanwhile, he had a private matter to attend to. Late Saturday afternoon he rode out to the stage road, left his saddler with a settler, and caught a Concord for Placer City. There he shaved, bathed and dressed in his best bib-and-tucker. Sarah Tugwell, since Jubilee's death, rarely went out in the evening, so Sam had dinner with her, then set out happily for Mrs. Jack Purdue's party.

**S**HEILA was not there when he arrived. For nearly two hours Sam waited, enduring the parlor games and polite chitchat he privately detested, but still she did not come.

He was surprised to find himself the target of much crude and biting bantering. Most of these people were old childhood friends and schoolmates. Yet it seemed to be organized baiting, the way they kept it up. "Hey, Sam! When's your choo-choo going to be ready to play with?" "What I don't understand, Sam, is do you ride it with a saddle or bareback?" And there was a brittle moment that Sam let pass out of good breeding when somebody dared to call it "The Lucky Tiger Express." Outwardly Sam took it good-naturedly, finding light replies. But it began to rankle. He had just about decided to duck out when a ripple of interest ran across the big room. He let his gaze travel with it.

In the big archway stood Sheila Putman on the arm of Claude Gilmore.

The girl was beautiful—dark skin, up-

swept hair, low-cut billowing white gown. And the man was handsome and in evening dress, which was rarely seen in Placer City. Watching, Sam felt callow and clumsy for a brief moment. Sheila Putman looked cool and poised, almost indifferent. Her glance met his but she gave no sign of recognition.

An abrupt and unbridled anger boiled up in Sam Tugwell. He let his shoulder cut her from sight. For an instant he was tempted to leave as he had planned. Forcing himself to reasonableness he admitted it was a natural woman's trick to tempt him to one of these functions in order to flaunt her handsome conquest. It could be a favorable sign.

The reasoning did not stick. There had been something cold and nasty in her eyes when she had ignored him. He decided to stay and probe further into the matter.

Catching her alone was another question. Sheila Putman was highly popular in Placer City, in addition Claude Gilmore proved to be a jealous watchdog. At long last Sam saw Gilmore saunter toward the billiard room where the men were largely congregated. Sam disengaged himself from conversation with Effie Taskett and climbed to his feet.

Sheila nodded and smiled faintly as Sam approached. He said, "Come into Jack's library with me for a moment, Sheila. I've got something important."

She looked at him quizzically, then nodded. They moved under the huge staircase and around a corner. A fire had been lighted in the library but no one was there. Sam closed the door as Sheila watched him suspiciously.

"What've you got that's so important?"

"This." He caught her to him and kissed her, moved more by anger than tenderness.

**T**HE GIRL did not resist nor did she respond. When Sam stepped back, watching her with a look of mingled contrition and insolence, she said, "You know, I'm one person who fails to ad-



mire the Tugwell aggressiveness."

"The slow smooth stuff goes better, eh?"

She lifted her eyebrows. "If that was a clumsy dig at Claude Gilmore, the answer is yes."

"And you tricked me into coming here to show me!"

Anger spread slowly under her dark-skinned cheeks. "I think you showed yourself. Coming in here was your trick, you know!"

He could not hold back the brittle temper that was rising in him. "I meant coming to the party. The other day in the carriage—!"

Sheila whirled quickly. "Sam Tugwell, get this straight! You're effective enough! I couldn't help responding the other day but I regretted it. I think as a matter of fact that I detest you. You're just like old Jubilee! Conceited, high-handed and crude. And you're started on another Lucky Tiger!"

"Leave my father out of it!"

"He's in it. He's always been in it. Sneering at my father who gave him his start and finally casting him off! Do you think Jake Putman could ever forgive that? Do you really think I can shrug it off as lightly as you seem to want me to?"

Sam's eyes were cold. "Jake Putman didn't lose anything in the Lucky Tiger. The only thing he ever regretted was that he'd have made more money if he hadn't got scared and ratted out."

"Oh! But I expect that's the story Jubilee Tugwell always told you. And you aren't broad enough to concede that there might be another side to it. But you might find out yet, Sam Tugwell. The old Tugwell feeling of superiority might still get a jolt out of the Putmans."

"How do you mean?" He stared at her closely. "I had an idea Jake was the one backing Gilmore."

"It could be. Now I've had enough of this." Whirling, she jerked open the door and disappeared.

Sam stared after her for a long mo-

ment, then headed for the billiard room, feeling the need of a drink. The place was crowded with male guests. He made his way to the sideboard where an assortment of liquor had been set out. He poured himself a brandy and was sipping it when Alfie Dunbar said, "What're you going to do when you get to Hell Canyon, Sam?"

"He'll use the faith that moves mountains," a voice at Sam's elbow said. "That's what it'll take, and Sam's got a lot of it." Claude Gilmore looked at Sam and blandly smiled.

Sam set down the brandy and straightened. It all made sense now. Jake Putman had thrown in with this smooth number, motivated by a lust for revenge. Which made Gilmore feel awfully sure of himself. Sam said, "I've scheduled my road for completion in April, Gilmore. I've got ten thousand dollars that says it'll be running then."

Gilmore smiled. "By April you won't have ten cents. But just to make it interesting, you're on."

WHEN Sam got back to the job on Monday morning the camp was still inactive for additional snow had fallen during the night. He went to his tent and built a fire in the sheet iron stove. As soon as his fingers were thawed out he began to pore over his blueprints. He had done an angry and reckless thing when he laid money he didn't even have on the April date. In optimistic moments he had hoped to achieve that. In the cold realism of a bitter snow-swept Monday morning it looked impossible.

Lorne Teebow, the grading foreman, came in looking equally downcast. He was an old construction boss Sam had beguiled away from the Trans-Western "Creepers, Sam!" he exclaimed. "We're going to be stuck in these mountains all winter."

Sam whirled angrily on his stool. "We're not going to be stuck anywhere! We've got to develop new methods, that's all. Go worry somewhere else. I've got thinking to do."



By evening he had completely changed his procedure and the old excitement was stirring in him. Hell Canyon was the crux of the whole problem. Sam decided now to start a second outfit at Placer City, heading down. It could get across the plateau in almost any kind of weather. Meanwhile the present outfit would gnaw away at the lower canyons. They would melt the snow and thaw the ground with bonfires if they had to. If they could get the road finished, with the exception of Hell Canyon, by the end of February when winter would start breaking up, they would have a gambling chance of fair weather for the last and worst.

In the days that followed he translated the new procedure into action. He had to scour the countryside for miles around to find more teamsters and equipment but by late December he had a second outfit building down the Whitewater from Placer City. He became a virtual engine, pitting himself relentlessly against the weather and the calendar. When there was a short thaw he took advantage of it, working day and night. When the inevitable freeze came again he thawed the ground artificially so it could be worked. Every foot of timber for the upper end had to be freighted. High-wheeled wagons fought snow and mud on the mountain roads in a continual stream, and along the right of way men sweated, froze and swore.

Sam went home on Christmas Day, but he did not see Sheila Putman nor did his mother speak of her. Shortly after New Year's the first of the specially built locomotives arrived in Ekton. Sam had long since had freight, baggage and passenger cars built to the same scale, and as soon as the miniature engine was unloaded, he sent for old Waldo Lockley to come down and have a ride.

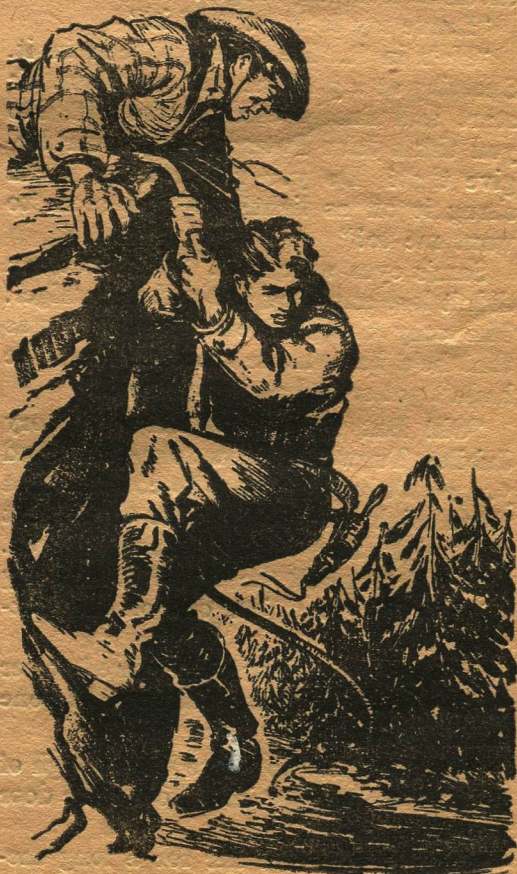
Sam needed the first engine for his work train, but when the second and third arrived within the next few weeks he established regular service from the railhead at Three Corners. Smarting by now over the widespread ridicule of his

enterprise, he refused to call attention to it but simply started the little trains running.

Meanwhile materials and equipment for the Gilmore road began to pile up in Ekton and a grading crew began working out of there. Sam noticed that they were not pushing for progress. Gilmore apparently preferred to wait for the spring thaws before moving in earnest.

**BY** THE end of February the upper crew had reached the edge of the plateau and were slugging slowly down the stretch of badlands approaching Hell Canyon. Simultaneously Sam brought his slow-creeping outfit to the lower end. Here he should have felt considerable elation, since he was on schedule so far, but the feeling failed to come. Hell Can-

Sam swung himself over the cliff,  
slid down the rope hand over hand





yon's two miles still were unscratched, and the weather showed no signs of moderating.

He had bet on the road's completion by April, which left him only four weeks. Sam's nerves clamped fiddle-tight. In his tent at the camp, now moved to a point just below Hell Canyon, he held council with Lorne Teebow and Waldo Lockley.

For the first time he told Lockley of his bet with Gilmore. "If I lose it, Waldo, I reckon you'll have to pay off. I've spent all my own money. For a long time I've been working on what you advance me."

The old man grinned. "Boy, that's my bet as much as yours. If we lose it I'll pay off. But we're ninety-seven per cent finished, Sam, and you've already done miracles. Ain't you got another one in your hat?"

Lorne Teebow shook his head sorrowfully. "I'd rather do the ninety-seven per cent over than the next three. We've got solid rock bluff ahead. We can blast a grade out of some of it. In places we'll have to tie a bridge onto the face of the cliff. We'll have to tunnel one place—maybe a hundred feet. In a month? It's impossible!"

Sam nodded glumly.

Waldo Lockley looked sober for the first time. "It's really throwing you, isn't it?"

"I'm no fool. I'm afraid it is insofar as winning the bet's concerned."

Lighting his big calabash pipe, Lockley gave Sam a penetrating scrutiny. "Sam, I ain't a damned bit scared of Hell Canyon. If we lose the ten thousand what of it? We've got our railroad almost built and we'll finish it come spring. But I *am* scared of one thing—and that's of you getting scared out!"

Suddenly Sam thumped the table. "Hank Lund's tapering off on the other side. Let's divide Hell Canyon into ten sections of a thousand feet apiece and put a crew on each strip. We'll offer each one a bonus if it finishes its stretch by the first of April!"

"Boy, you've got a idea!" Lockley said. "I'll pay the bonus out of my own pants."

"The bird that draws the tunnel will wish he'd been killed quick instead of slow!" Teebow said.

"You and I and some picked hands will tackle the tunnel."

In the big tent that served as a cook-house and mess hall Sam held a meeting that evening. He told the men frankly what they were up against and why he wanted to do what he proposed. In addition to a regular bonus he promised to split the ten thousand dollars Claude Gilmore had wagered if they helped him win it. A vote brought unanimous response. His spirits considerably elevated, Sam went into a huddle with Lorne Teebow and laid out the detailed plans.

THE next morning men were swung down from the top of the cliff on block and tackle along the entire two-mile stretch of Hell Canyon. They got temporary timbering toed to the face of the cliff at the railroad elevation, then stringers were run along it, giving access to the entire work. Stations were marked on the cliff, and the two big organizations broke up into smaller units and set to work, each with a thousand feet to conquer.

At the end of the first week it began to look promising. The foundation for a narrow-gage railroad began to take shape along that stretch of craggy rock, rising steep above the raging waters of the river.

Sam and Teebow, with as many men as could work without crowding, started the tunnel that was to pierce the one promontory that could not be circumvented. All day sledges rang on drills punctuated by the thundering of dynamite. At night they set up oil flares and worked on. A depression appeared in the rock at the end of a natural shelf Sam meant to utilize and gradually deepened into a black hole. Exact calculations showed they had one hundred twenty feet to go, a somewhat greater



distance than Sam had figured on.

Sam Tugwell had never known a push like that behind him now. In addition to the construction at Hell Canyon he was still concerned with the operation of his two trains. He had put each one under a good man but he had to ride the work train down to Jonesburg frequently to see for himself.

The wooden railroad was meeting a strange reception in the towns it served and in their drawing areas. Passengers and shippers tried it tentatively out of sheer curiosity, only to discover that it served them well. Yet openly there was still ridicule. They used it, they told each other, because it would do until Claude Gilmore got them a real railroad built.

Then came the day when the diminutive locomotive came shrieking through the defiles below Hell Canyon. Sam Tugwell heard it and was waiting worriedly on the track when it squealed to a stop at the camp. It had been uncoupled from its train. Ernie Woods, who served as combined brakeman and conductor, swung down from the tender. He strode toward Sam, his face bleak with worry and anger.

"Well, it's happened! Just what these jugheads around here've been predicting! We jumped the track and piled in the creek at Morgan Creek trestle."

Sam tensed, his cheeks going white. "Anybody hurt?"

"No, but only by a miracle. Rails on the trestle'd been loosened, Sam! You can tell it plain just by looking at it! You know how the track makes a gentle turn coming onto the trestle? Well, somebody figured we'd hit it fast and pile in the creek in kindling wood. I reckon Heaven took a hand in it! If we hadn't been having trouble with a hot journal and moving pretty slow, that's just what would have happened!"

"The passengers?" Sam groaned.

"They went in the ditch and got the daylight whanged outta them but nobody was bad hurt!"

Sam was grateful for that, but with a

sick sinking feeling he realized that the wooden railroad *was* hurt and seriously. A stock criticism had been that the scaled-down trains were so light that they would fly from the tracks with any speed. Now it had happened—it might be difficult to prove that the track had been tampered with.

SO SAM had to leave his immediate work and ride the engine back down to the Morgan Creek trestle, which was only a couple of miles below Jonesburg. The passengers, he discovered as they passed through the town, had already walked back to Jonesburg, and Sam paused there long enough to reap their furious abuse. Somebody had ridden down to Ekton to have special stage-coaches sent up to carry them on their journey. For the time being, at least, the Concords had triumphed over the railroad carriages. It took nearly a week to get the wrecked locomotive and shattered cars back on the track. They were going to be out of service for much longer than that. Somebody had scored.

Sam found plenty of evidence that the track had been tampered with but no clue as to who was responsible. His suspicions went to Gilmore but he admitted that it could have been the teamsters or the stage people. There was no telling which.

Sam kept his key men working through Sundays, but for the sake of efficiency he allowed those of the crew who could be spared to go into Placer City on Saturday nights. They all reported back one Monday morning with the exception of the locomotive engineer. The one lapse put Sam in a bad spot, for there was no one else at the camp fitted to run the dinky engine and the work train was badly needed for bringing up supplies.

Then curiously, just before noon, a man rode into camp on a saddle horse and hunted up Sam.

"Hear you're needing a locomotive man, mister!"

"Where did you hear that?"



The man looked rattled for a moment, then said hastily, "Placer City. This jigger said he'd been working for you but wasn't coming back."

"Can you handle it?"

"Mister, after them big fellows on the U.P. that little baby won't be no trick!"

Sam put him to work because he had to but he was puzzled. The man gave his name as Earl Jenks and vaguely intimated that he was a boomer and just drifting through the country. Old Waldo Lockley had insisted on remaining at the camp for the finish and Sam looked him up. He told him about Jenks.

Lockley lifted a shaggy white eyebrow. "Could be Gilmore bribed your regular man and planted this one, all right. Or the stage people. Or the devil himself!"

"Don't know what harm he can do," Sam said, "but we won't take any chances. Everyone knows you like to ride that engine, Waldo." He grinned.

The old man rose to his feet. "I get it. I'll keep my eye on him."

Yet Jenks proved to be a good engine man and he kept the work train moving. Sam breathed a sigh of relief, but now that he had a legitimate excuse for indulging his secret passion, old Waldo refused to quit the locomotive. "I'm firing for him and I like it. Besides, I still smell a rat and I'm going to keep my eye on the hole!"

**BY THAT** evening the tunnel had been cut and shored for better than five feet. As they gained experience the drillers made better time. By now Sam prowled the works continually. The crew on the farthest section up canyon had finished its work, having benefited by a natural rock ledge. Now it moved down to help the section below it. Tuesday morning section seven likewise finished up and moved to help a neighbor.

Sam's pulses began to run faster as he contemplated it. Nearly three weeks to go and they had already taken a big bite out of the thing. The odds were evening up!

Sam had been at the upper end of the canyon and was just heading back when he saw Lorne Teebow racing up the catwalk toward him. The instant he reached yelling distance Teebow shouted:

"Sam! The work train's gone into the river!"

Sam sagged limply against the safety railing while Teebow raced up. "Lockley!" he gasped. "Jenks!"

Teebow's face was hard bitten with fury as he came up. "Jenks got off. Jumped clear but hit some shoring. He busted his neck!"

"It was on purpose?"

"It had to be. I saw it. I warned Jenks yesterday about pushing out too far on that new grade. We didn't even have the track ballasted but he liked to show off. This time he didn't even try to stop before he hit it. Just kept coming, then jumped right at the last. Looks like he miscalculated and sailed right into that timbering. The engine and track and everything skidded off. From the looks of things that's what he wanted to happen. I seen the whole thing and it had that look to it."

"I think maybe you're right."

Sickness came into Sam's stomach as he raced toward the end of the canyon, disdainful of his own precarious footing on the catwalk. Presently he could see the wreckage, part of the work train splintered and strewn on the boulders at the base of the cliff, part of it submerged in the foaming water.

It was lucky that it had been only a work train, carrying mostly material and no passengers beyond an occasional workman catching a ride along the works. As he plunged forward Sam could not tell whether or not the locomotive was completely submerged. Already men had gathered and lowered ropes and some of them were dropping down to the rocks seventy feet below the grade.

A man was saying, "Old Lockley was in the cab and there was another jigger riding on the tender! I seen em as they passed the cook shack!" It was the cook,



still wearing his white apron, his face twisted with horror. Nearby lay Jenks, obviously dead.

Sam seized a rope and swung himself over the lip of the cliff, lowered himself swiftly. Soon his feet rested on the big broken boulders upthrusting from the heavy debris between the cliff and the water. He hung there precariously, getting a closer look at the situation.

**T**HE locomotive was under the water, together with the tender and the next two cars. The rest lay partly submerged, partly bent and shattered on the big rocks. Sam's heart sank with the realization that Waldo Lockley could not have survived, pinned in that cab. Being on the river side, he had lacked Jenks' opportunity to leap in the last few seconds before the outfit tumbled off.

Then from the grade above somebody was yelling: "Hey! There's somebody on the rocks there. A little below you, Sam."

Sam whirled, hope leaping within him, but could see nothing.

"There! About sixty feet to your left, Sam." Lorne Teebow called again.

Sam surged into action. He could not reach the point from where he was nor could he see the man. His instinctive hope was that it was Waldo Lockley, but even if it were the other man reported to have been riding the tender, it would be something. He went back up the rope hand over hand.

From the brink he could see the form that had excited the others, lying face down on a deposit of sand and rubble, the lower part of the body in the water. Sam recognized the clothing. It was Waldo Lockley. He must have tried to jump and been thrown free of the cab.

Sam had the rope secured again and in a matter of seconds was slipping down it. His feet contacted the bank, and securing a foothold he moved down to the water's edge.

It was Lockley, beyond doubt. He was badly mangled; Sam could not tell

if he still lived. He secured the rope tightly under the old man's armpits and gave the signal for those above to haul him up. Again he scanned the rocks, as the ones on the lip were searching them, but there was no other man in evidence. It would take a roll call to determine who the missing man had been. Right now Sam could think of nothing else but to see if anything could be done for his one true friend in this country. When the rope came down to him again he climbed back up to the lip.

They had placed Waldo Lockley on several hastily assembled coats. One leg and an arm sprawled grotesquely, his features were battered, but Lorne Teebow straightened up from him to say, "He's still alive. He's still got a little pulse."

Sam was thinking desperately. The locomotive that might have carried him to a doctor was smashed and submerged in the river. The only alternative was to get him in bed here in camp and bring a doctor. A tremendous strain mounted in Sam. Would there be time?

He whirled toward his men. "Anybody here a good horseman? The closest doctor's in Jonesburg. Somebody take my horse—he's fast—and kill him, if necessary, getting down there. If you can't locate the Jonesburg doctor keep going until you get one!" A man had already left the assemblage and was sprinting toward the camp stables.

**T**HEY carried Waldo Lockley to the tent the old man had shared with Sam and got him stretched out on the bunk. Sam undressed him, covered him with blankets and sent someone for hot stones to warm him and overcome the shock of the partial submersion. Then he applied crude splints to the fractured leg and arm. Beyond that there was nothing they could do until the doctor got there. Despite his desperate desire to the contrary, Sam could hardly believe that the old man would live that long. He seemed on the verge of death.

Meanwhile, there were pressing prac-



tical considerations. Sam took Lorne Teebow aside. "Lorne, we'll have to lay the crew off."

The foreman looked at him in surprise. "Lay 'em off! When we danged near got it licked? You ain't going to let this whip you?"

"I don't know how I can help it. I won't have money enough to meet the payroll Saturday. Knowing that, I can't work them any more. You see, for the last couple of months Waldo was advancing me cash as I asked for it. Neither of us expected anything like this to happen. He was going up to Placer City to get the payroll money tomorrow."

The foreman blinked his eyes. "But can't you borrow? Or Lockley's family—his wife!"

"His wife died a number of years ago and he had no children. He won't be able to take care of it Saturday or for a good many Saturdays, if he ever is! There isn't another man in this country who'd sink money into the Lucky Tiger Express! And I'm not known anywhere else."

"By dang!" Teebow blazed. "I'll put it up to the men! You been a fair boss and they like you! They'll take chits for their work until you can get it straightened out!"

Sam shook his head. "No, Lorne. I couldn't work it that way. If Waldo dies I'd never be able to pay them off. I couldn't raise the other money it'd take to keep going until I could get into full operation." His jaw clenched fiercely. "Somebody knew that, Lorne! Henry Adee knew how we've been working our finances—he's Waldo's banker. I still can't peg him as a man who'd want anything like this to happen but he must have spilled the beans to Claude Gilmore! Gilmore's responsible for this. Murder! One man drowned and maybe another to die. I'll get him yet."

Yet even the rage burning in Sam's heart could not tear him away from the construction camp until the doctor had reached there. He sat by Waldo Lock-

ley's bed, his heart a solid lump of ice. He was reassured from time to time, by the lifting of the great old chest and the feeble pulse yet in the strong old wrists, that Lockley still lived.

At dusk the rider came pounding back from Jonesburg, bringing the doctor. Sam stepped aside, scarcely daring to breathe while the physician made his examination and administered stimulants. He was a gaunt gray man whose years of frontier practice had leaned and toughened him. At last he rose from the stool beside the bunk.

"There isn't much hope. Besides the fractures, his ribs and chest're like jelly. But Waldo Lockley's always been a tough one. He may surprise us."

"Can't we move him down to the Ektion hospital?" Sam asked. "I could have the train come up."

"Not for a day or so, until the danger of internal hemorrhage has passed."

"Then will you stay here with him?"

"Yes. But I think the whole thing'll be decided before morning."

That night was the longest Sam Tugwell had ever endured. All night he and the doctor sat in the dimly lighted tent, Sam keeping the fire going and waiting in utter impotence between times. Several times the doctor stirred uneasily, examining Lockley and administering hypodermics. Yet through all those long tortured hours Waldo Lockley's stout heart kept beating. In the gray hours of dawn the doctor turned to Sam.

"I think he's got a chance but we'll keep him here a while yet."

Realizing he could do no good here, Sam got a saddle horse and hit the trail for Placer City, hate and fury seething within him against those responsible for this.

HE reached Placer City in the dawn, the spirit of old Jubilee Tugwell strong within him as he rode through the outskirts. He saw clearly now that he was only carrying on the career of that stout old warrior. The ghost of the Lucky Tiger still was in the town,



reincarnate now in the wooden railroad.

And he was moving as Jubilee would have moved, sure of his enemies, determined to exact their punishment. He reached the old mansion, stabled his horse and moved quickly inside. Sarah Tugwell was awake; she called to Sam as he passed her door on tiptoe, on his way to his own room.

"Sam! Is that you, Sam!"

He went into her bedroom, bent and kissed her. "What's the matter, Mother?" You look upset!"

"I knew you'd be here, I've been waiting for you! Word reached here yesterday about Waldo Lockley. Something terribly important has happened since then. Sam, old Jake Putman has accused Claude Gilmore of trying to murder Waldo!"

Sam stared at her. "He only beat me to it! But I wonder why *he* did it?"

"Charlie Logan stopped by to tell me last evening, hoping you'd be here. He's a close friend of Sid Munley in the sheriff's office. It seems Jake came to the sheriff quietly late yesterday to keep Gilmore from guessing what he meant to do."

"Have they arrested Gilmore yet?"

"Not as far as Charlie knew. But they will! Sheriff Townsend's an honest officer. He won't hesitate, no matter how big a man Claude Gilmore is supposed to be!"

Sam whirled, hurrying to his own room. He stripped off his sodden clothing and re-dressed. Alarm was in him. If word of what was up reached Gilmore it was a tossup whether the man would remain to stand trial or would resort to flight. If Putman had brought charges it would make damning evidence when linked with what Sam could tell about the man called Jenks. But there would be gaps in the case. Maybe Gilmore would prefer to take his chance on breaking through one of them in order to come free.

Rushing from the house, Sam decided upon a daring move of his own. He meant to make it impossible for Claude

Gilmore to avoid the punishment that was coming to him. He hurried downtown to the hotel where Gilmore was living.

"What's Gilmore's room number?" he demanded of the clerk.

The clerk, a timid pale young man, was hesitant about letting him up so early in the morning. "Why, uh, I'm not sure Mr. Gilmore wants to be disturbed. I think you'd—"

Furiously impatient, Sam grabbed the man, shook him back and forth until his teeth sounded like dice rattling in a dice-cup. "Now will you tell me the number of his room or do I have to beat you silly?"

Sam's persuasion made up the clerk's mind. "It's room twenty-nine," he said weakly.

Tugwell loped up the stairs two at a time.

When Gilmore did not answer Sam's knock for a few minutes Sam had the terrible feeling that he had fled. Then the door opened. Gilmore stood there, sleepy-eyed, surprised at seeing him but giving no sign of alarm. Sam breathed easier, sure that the man did not yet know what was afoot against him. He stepped inside without invitation.

Gilmore grinned coldly. "Well, Tugwell! What brings you?"

"Lucky for you your man Jenks was killed, Gilmore! Now there's no one but you who knows of the murder you have on your conscience!"

Gilmore closed the door and turned, his eyes suddenly icy. "What on earth are you talking about?" Yet there was something there, some flicker of apprehension, some twinge of guilt that briefly lived and passed. Sam knew he had hit the bull's-eye.

"Or don't you feel quite that secure, Gilmore?"

"What is this, Tugwell?"

"A precautionary measure to see that you don't wiggle your slippery way out of a hang noose, Gilmore! Are you sure there isn't just a little crack of doubt in your feeling of security? Was Jenks



the one you hired to tamper with the rails at my Morgan Creek trestle? Was it somebody else? Or did you do it yourself? But for a fluke that would have been mass murder, Gilmore! How about Henry Adee who tipped you off to an easy way to cut off my financing? How about old Jake Putman who must know or suspect a lot? When your luck clabbers, Gilmore, they'll fall over each other to get in their licks at you. I should know."

GILMORE straightened, sliding his hand into the pocket of his dressing gown. Sam had an idea that a small gun was concealed there. Nor was he at all sure that the man would hesitate to use it on him here in this downtown hotel.

"This is crazy talk!" Gilmore breathed, yet his voice had begun to register his inner apprehension.

"How well can you trust any of them, Gilmore? After what happened yesterday maybe at least one of them is shaking in his boots! Which one and what will he do?"

"What are you driving at? What brings you here with all of this?"

"The fact that I happen to know that the sheriff will be here pretty soon to arrest you!"

"On whose charges?"

"Wouldn't you like to know so you could fix him? It might even be me, Gilmore! I suspected you from the start. See what little chance you've got?"

The gun appeared in Gilmore's hand then. His handsome face turned into a frightened and snarling thing. "Yes, I see. You know more than I expected you to learn, Tugwell. I don't doubt what you say about the sheriff coming. I've been afraid of it ever since yesterday. Only he won't find me. Back into that closet!" There was deadly menace in his eyes. Sam obeyed him.

He waited there for several minutes, knowing that Claude Gilmore was dressing. When he heard the hall door close Sam heaved his shoulder against the door. He put all his strength behind it.

The flimsy wood held firm. Again Sam lunged against the door, all his weight focused on shoulder, elbow and knee. Again! Finally on the fourth try the wood cracked. One more good heave and the door was in splinters.

He dashed down the stairs and, stopping at the wide-eyed clerk's desk, said, "Tear over to the sheriff's office and tell them to get a ring around the town. Claude Gilmore's on the dodge."

There was no chance now of Gilmore's choosing to make a legal battle of it. He had incriminated himself by taking to his heels. Really, if he had stayed, he would probably have had a good chance of squirming out of the indictment on some legal technicality. But now, as Sam had hoped, Gilmore's goose was cooked. Sneaking out of town was a dead give-away.

From Gilmore's point of view, though, if he could make it, he had only to abandon a small financial stake and his hoped-for crooked gains to assure himself of freedom.

Sam raced for the livery stable a few blocks from the hotel and ordered a horse. Within another five minutes he was surging out of town, advised that Gilmore had also secured a horse only a few minutes ahead of him.

Sam was not relying upon the sheriff and his deputies to overtake the man. Knowing Gilmore, he doubted that the man would take the stage road to Ekton, an obvious course. There was a straighter safer route off the plateau and through the snow-locked mountains. One that Sam himself would have taken under the circumstances and Gilmore was engineer enough to know it—the new wooden railroad. Word would not have preceded him and Gilmore would be safe on it until he could reach some point on the Trans-Western.

Sam had borrowed a pistol from the liveryman whom he had known since boyhood. With it thrust into the pocket of his sheepskin coat, he had cleared the town and was racing along the right-of-way between the snow-blanketed wood-



en rails. About a mile out of town he knew that his hunch had been sound.

A RIDER had cut down the bank to the tracks and turned toward the mountains at a fast clip. Gilmore had been too crafty to let his tracks point openly in this direction. He had probably taken the stage road out of town, found a stream or some place where he could turn off without detection and cut across to the right-of-way. In his hour of adversity, Claude Gilmore was resorting to the railroad he had professed to despise.

Gilmore would be but a little way ahead. He would be watching for pursuit which placed Sam in a dangerous situation. Sam pressed his horse, growing warier as the miles clipped away. Then on a straight stretch he caught a glimpse of his prey as Gilmore disappeared around a far turn.

Sam felt a prickling in his spine now. Sooner or later, Gilmore would set a trap for him. It almost came sooner than he expected. He pounded around a turn and saw Gilmore ahead almost at the end of a straight stretch of track. Gilmore turned in his saddle, fired at him. But the range was too great. Evidently Gilmore did not want to mix at close range for he turned in the saddle and whipped his horse ahead.

Sam was gaining on Gilmore gradually, for the man punished his horse unnecessarily. There were a few times when Sam might have shot him but he did not propose to do that. He wanted him alive.

They were only a short distance from Hell Canyon now. Whether he realized it or not, Gilmore could not negotiate it with his horse. Afoot he would be a soft man. Sam figured he'd have little trouble overtaking him.

The mouth of the canyon loomed. Gilmore pressed into it to the end of the grade. He dismounted, staring at the catwalk that was the only passage around the cliffs above the raging river. He took it afoot.

Clattering up close behind him, Sam swung down and followed him cautiously along the twisting ledges. Sam knew the man must be exhausted. Once he got close enough to yell, "Keep going, Gilmore! Keep going until your lungs burst and your flabby legs cave in. Then I'm taking you back to hang!"

Gilmore stumbled and leaned panting against the rock wall. He made no move to go on. Sam came up towards him and barely noticed the movement of hand to side. Without thinking or reasoning Sam was crouching on the ground as a shot and then another whistled over his head.

With a leap of desperation and two steps Sam was on Gilmore trying to wrestle the gun out of his hand. Sam twisted the arm back and a shot went straight up. But Gilmore was maneuvering too. Suddenly Sam looked behind him. They were at the edge of the catwalk, Sam's back a bare foot from the ledge.

Gilmore was trying to bring his gun-hand down. Twisting his arm, Sam heard the crack of breaking bone. The gun clattered from Gilmore's limp hand. Gilmore thrust a knee into Sam's stomach trying to force him backward into the abyss. Excruciating waves of pain rolled across Sam, almost blotting out consciousness. But he forced Gilmore down on the catwalk, Sam's weight holding him there. They wrestled vainly a moment Gilmore using his knees and one arm only. The pain in Sam's stomach was excruciating now and Gilmore, taking advantage of the moment of weakness, scrambled out and reached with his left hand for the gun which had fallen almost at the edge of the catwalk.

Sam was up, too, now and attempted to grab Gilmore. The man stepped backward away from those long arms into space. There was a scream from below. Sam stood weakly for a moment, trying to gather his sense. Then he stepped to the edge of the catwalk.

A little way down, the wreckage of the work train was visible. Sam stared



at it for a long moment, then at the place in the surging waters that had closed forever over Claude Gilmore. He sighed and turned away.

SAM went on down to the camp and discovered that they had brought in his one remaining train. It was a little ahead of schedule, but the doctor told him, "He's bleeding inside, and since the train won't be too rough on him I think we'd better take him down at once."

"Is there anything I can do, doctor?"

The other shook his head. "There's little I can do, even. But we'll give him the best of care."

Nonetheless, Sam wanted to accompany Waldo Lockley to Ekton and to remain with him. But he was afraid his mother would be desperately worried. So he decided to return home first, reassure her and inform the sheriff of what had happened to Claude Gilmore.

He was back in Placer City by late afternoon. Her worry about him subsiding, Sarah Tugwell remembered to say, "Oh, by the way, Sam! Sheila Putman's been over here twice today, wanting to see you! It seems old Jake's had a stroke and keeps calling for you. I promised to send you over."

Sam scowled. "Jake Putman's got nothing to say that I care to hear!"

"He's an old man, Sam. I wish you'd go."

He cleaned up, refused the long-delayed food his mother tried to coax him to eat, and went reluctantly across town. Sheila seemed to have been waiting for him anxiously.

"Dad's terribly sick, Sam. The strain and excitement were too much for him. For my sake will you forget our quarrel and go up and talk to him for a little bit?"

"To hear his deathbed repentance?" Sam asked harshly.

"Listen to me for a moment, Sam! I'm not excusing my father but I can see his side of it. He didn't really care that Jubilee wanted him out of the company. It was the sense of failure it always

gave him. If he had never been a rich man nobody would ever have thought much about it, nor would he. His fortune aggravated the whole thing. There were those who said that Jubilee had practically given him the fortune. I think that deep in his heart Dad felt that way, too. He took it out in hate. He passed that hate on to me. All I can say is that I'm sorry and he's dying. Won't you please be kind to him?"

Sam could not refuse.

OLD Jake Putman was alone in a big upstairs bedroom, his once bulky figure now slack in the bed. His white hair was tousled over the pillow, his usually florid skin was an ashen gray. There seemed little doubt that he was in a bad way.

"This won't take me long, Sam. I gave Claude Gilmore the tip that's likely to cost Waldo Lockley his life. Henry Adece mentioned to me that Waldo was advancing you all the money you had to go on, that the partnership had no money you could draw on yourself. I never dreamed what that viper'd do with the information!"

"He was a smooth one, all right," Sam conceded.

"I'm not making out a case for myself, Sam. I'm dyin' and I know it. I knew about Gilmore's wrecking your train at the Morgan Creek trestle. He promised me they'd pick an empty one so nobody'd get hurt, and we figured it'd be too big a blow for your railroad to stand. That's why I knew how Waldo come to get hurt and the other killed. When I heard about it I jumped Gilmore. He was feeling pretty smart and told me I was in it up to my own ears, seeing I condoned that first wreck.

"I was almighty sore, and I went at him with my fists but he floored me. He warned me I'd hang with him if I got smart. I let him think he'd talked me out of it. But I figured that if I had a hanging coming I was willing to take it. But I guess I'll cheat that. The tussle and all brought this on."



Sam nodded thoughtfully. "Then it's not so surprising that he got scared when I went to work on him. He knew that if you did screw up nerve enough to talk you could convict him."

Jake Putman died that night. The next morning Sam returned by stage to Ekton. The next week he scarcely left Waldo Lockley's room in the little hospital there. It was three days before Lockley regained consciousness, then came the afternoon when he opened his eyes abruptly and groaned.

"Doggonit, Sam, I went and let that skunk run our engine in the creek!"

"It doesn't matter a hang as long as you're all right, Waldo. But don't try to talk."

After that the waiting was much easier. "Some of these old-timers have amazing constitutions," the doctor told Sam. "I wouldn't have laid a plugged

nickel on it a couple of weeks ago but now I think he's going to get well."

It was late in April when the excursion train made its first complete run over the new wooden railroad, leaving Placer City and proceeding with fanfare and ceremony all the way down to Ekton, where it met a transcontinental train. Town dignitaries were aboard from Placer City, Jonesburg, Three Corners, Brierville and Ekton, and they made all the speeches.

As the excursion train pulled into Ekton, Sam turned to Sheila. "A little gesture, honey, for a couple of jiggers we know." He drew her into his arms.

After a long moment Sheila answered. "Oh, Sam! It's always been this, hasn't it? Never, even in the worst of it, could I bring myself to divorce you. Not since I was six and you were eight."

## Mighty Mite

*(Continued from Inside Back Cover)*

may seem extravagant. Or maybe it sounds like sectional pride, because these laurel-passing coaches all operate in the East. But no, his fame and acclaim are nationwide.

First to spread his glory beyond the Hudson River was Valparaiso U., heavily favored in the Madison Square Garden opener against L.I.U. The altitudinous Valpos gaped at his magic, bowed in defeat and returned home to rave about the Goldsmith phenomenon. Next came the national champion Oklahoma Aggies, who won the game, but were won by Jackie's genius.

They were amazed at the sight of Goldsmith sinking about 30% of his heaves. That's a good average for even the simple lay-up shots, just under the basket. But about nine out of 10 Goldsmith tosses are from 30 feet out or more! "I don't come up for scrimmages under the basket," he explains, "because I might get lost or stepped on by those six-foot-sixers."

The mighty mite came up the hard way. He was raised in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Both his brothers were fine basketeers, captaining their high school teams. But that didn't help, because they were big fellows, while Jackie's growth was painfully slow. So he had to forage for his own answer to a burning basketball ambition.

From the time he was old enough to climb over the school playground gates, which were locked after 3 o'clock, Jackie embarked on a campaign of constant practice in shooting at a basket. Only 8 or 9 at the time, he kept peppering away from all angles—until his frantic mother or threaten-

ing brother would yell through the iron pickets for him to stop and come home.

Day after day, week after week, year after year up to his late teens, junior boy kept throwing the inflated leather at the distant target. He knew that he was doomed to have gangling opponents waving hands high in front of him for all his basketball life, so he practiced a long and arching shot. After a while, he got it down so pat that he was able to sink them from a sitting position. Just to prove what practice can do, he often attends basketball clinics with his coach, Clair Bee, and drops 'em in from a sitting position. His consecutive record for this trick is nine straight baskets.

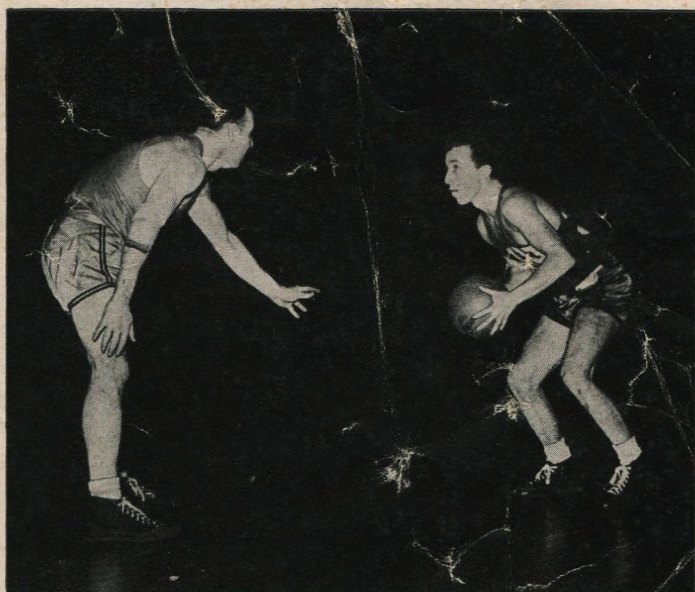
But it isn't all practice. Goldsmith has a God-given gift, a priceless combination of eyesight plus timing plus deft handwork that makes him "the biggest little man in the game."

Rather than ride on his brothers' coat-tails, Jackie enrolled at a different high school—and matched their record by rising to captain in his senior year. A mere 5' 7" and 135 pounds when reporting for basketball at L.I.U., he was told to "get off your knees and crawl out of that hole you're standing in." But he quickly made the cynics choke on their words. After a promising first season, the master's hand was not dulled despite more than three years of shore patrol work on a corvette in the North Atlantic. Back in school under the G.I. Bill of Rights last season, he merely broke the all-time metropolitan scoring record with 407 points. He says he'll do even better this season.



# mighty mite

By  
Hy Turkin  
New York  
Daily  
News



■ Mite is not right . except on special occasions.

In any physical match between a little and big fellow, the crowd sympathizes with the underdog—but sympathy plus 14c will buy you a loaf of bread. The fellow without the boarding house reach winds up hungry.

Yet since time immemorial, brain and skill have been able to overcome a disadvantage in pounds and inches. Little David would have been mincemeat for Goliath but for his surprise weapon: a 1,000 B.C. model slingshot. And today there is a modern David dominating the nation's college basketball scene. He's Jackie Goldsmith, 5-foot, 7-inch ex-Coast Guardsman who plays left forward for Long Island University. His weapon? A long-range set shot that has the accuracy of a bombsight and the goal-finding uncanniness of radar.

All-American last year in a sport that puts a high premium on height, pint-sized Goldsmith has been tabbed by his renowned coach, Clair Bee; by Nat Holman of Celtic fame (also known as "Prof. Basketball"); by Joe Lapchick, who molds a court colossus at St. John's year after year; by Honey Russell, pro and college player and coach for 27 years, and by many others as "The best set shot in the history of basketball."

Now, a lot of fellows have taken potshots at the overhead rim since Dr. James A. Naismith first hung a peach basket on the wall of the Springfield YMCA gym in 1891. And there have been legendary Dead-eye Dicks like Johnny Beckman of the all-conquering Celtics, Lou Bender of Columbia, Bobby McDermott of the Fort Wayne pros and Ernie Calverly of Rhode Island State. So the superlative for Little Jackie

(Continued on page 146)



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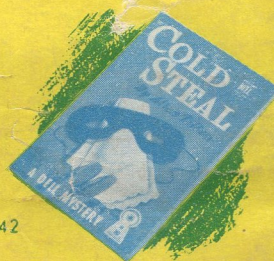
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