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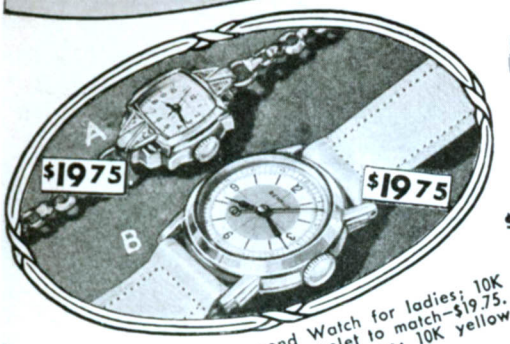

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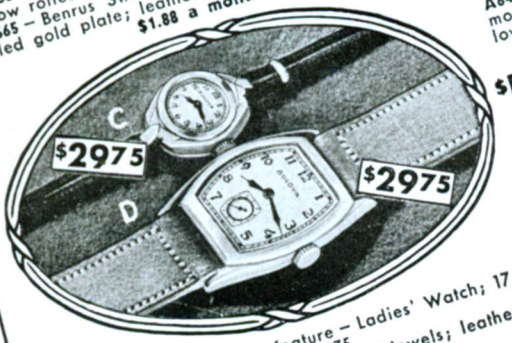

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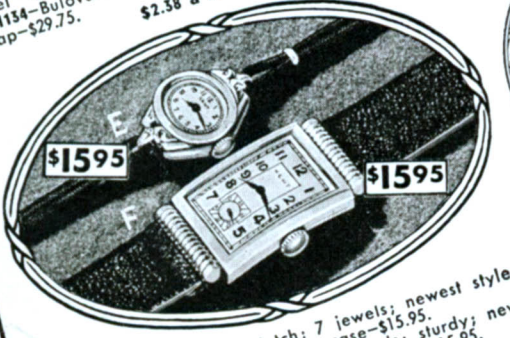

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ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

MALCOLM REISS, Editor

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I Jumped My Pay from $18 to $50 a Week!

Here's how I did it

by S. J. E.
(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

"I had an $18 a week job in a shoe factory." He'd probably be there today if he hadn't read about the opportunities in Radio and started training at home for them.

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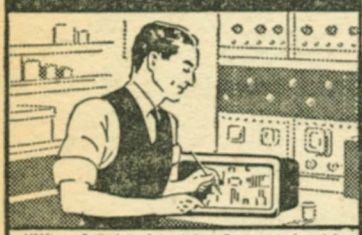

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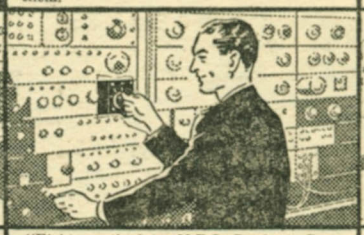

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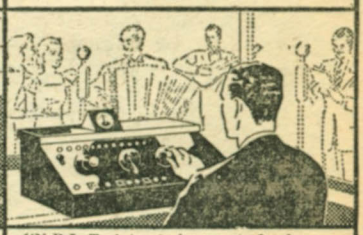

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GHOST-BRAND MAVERICK

BY JAY KARTH

The Devil held the dice when Flane, Colts on his hip and hell-song in his heart, rode to block the ghost-brand killer's last grim tally—bullet for bullet, cold steel for flaming lead.

THE big Concord rocked through the last low pass and dropped swiftly to the hot and dusty flat beyond. The gray, enduring sage seemed to flow up the steep side-slope, slowly gathering speed until it passed by with a whipping rush. Up ahead Seven Troughs sprawled loosely across the white ribbon that was the road,

its frame and 'dobe buildings scarred by sun and sand and storm. Yonder across Pahrump Basin the foothills of the Nightingale Mountains climbed gently into the Western sky, while farther on the twin spires of Kumiva Peak speared skyward through the blue haze of distance.

Ed Flane, facing forward in the stage, was probably the first of the four passengers to see the sprawling Nevada cowtown, since he knew when and where to look. Yet, even though the run from Elko had been a long and dustily tiring one, he did not evince the slightest pleasure at sight of journey's end. His pale, lean face remained inscrutably grim. The slanting rays of the early afternoon sun touched his high-boned cheeks briefly as the dusty stage followed the rough road around a great boulder before straightening out for the final dash into Seven Troughs. The fleeting illumination dispelled the brim shadows hiding his eyes; they were a deep blue, like the surface waters of a bottomless lake.

The dance-hall girl riding opposite Flane shivered as she felt the force of the flame lying deep in the blue eyes; shivered and spoke irritably.

"They should build a railroad through here, then a girl wouldn't have to ride with every Tom and Henry. She could choose her car—" She threw an angry glance at Flane.

"You may get your wish before you bargained for it, Ma'am." The drummer sitting on the girl's left nodded and spat through the open window. "There's rumors in Elko that maybe a short line'll build from Elko into Oregon, running through Pahrump Basin here."

The stage rolled past the first scattered shacks of the town. Flane ran his long fingers under the lapel of the ill-fitting gray coat, straightening it preparatory to disembarking. He knew where the stage would stop. Yonder in the middle of the block of false-fronted buildings the Wells Fargo office and Gus Albrecht's Silver Queen stood side by side. Drivers, no matter whether they were on the north or the south run, invariably brought the heavy Concords to a halt directly before the low wooden porch of the Silver Queen.

Flane stepped down, and immediately felt a warning chill shiver along his spine as he saw the pocked, ugly face of the ape-like man who blocked his way from the stage to the plank walk in front of the saloon.

Rick Pell. Here in Seven Troughs. Flane's glance flashed beyond Pell. He studied the faces of the crowd. A tensely expectant hush gripped the press of townsmen, and riders from the basin ranches, these people, with a sprinkling of red-shirted miners and prospectors from the Nightingales, had swarmed out of the Silver Queen and other buildings along the street to meet the stage. Flane sensed, instantly, that Pell had been talking, that this meeting was being staged for some definite, sinister purpose.

"CAREFUL, Flane," he whispered to himself. "Careful. This smells like a trap."

He came to a halt before Pell. "Well, Rick?" His cool, opaque blue eyes revealed none of the thoughts seething in his mind.

Rick Pell's trap mouth split in a thin-lipped grin. He glanced quickly at Flane's flat waist. His beady black eyes gleamed wickedly. For no gun-belt encircled Flane's waist, and his hands were empty.

There was a slight pause. The hush became more pronounced. The grin on Pell's face widened, became fixed. "Remember what you said, Flane, that day in Carson Prison? You said if you ever saw me again"—Pell's voice rose to a high pitch —"you'd kill me. You remember, Flane?"

"I want no trouble with you, Pell. Get out of my way."

Rick Pell sneered. "You don't want no trouble here because you know you'll be sent back to prison if you're not a good Injun. You want to wait 'til you can bushwhack me like you did your own paw. . . ." Pell made a jerky, upward motion with his right hand.

Flane, watching that hand, leaped forward. His clenched right fist arced upward, crashing with terrific force against Pell's jaw, under his left ear. The man went down, landing solidly against the hard surface of the street.

Flane reached down for the Colt in Pell's holster. Pell's left boot lashed out, landing in Flane's groin. His teeth snapped together and he went down, doubled in

agony. But he had the gun. Tossing it into the crowd, he struggled upward to meet Pell's snarling charge. Deathly sick, he barely felt Pell's vicious blows smash against his face. Warm blood ran down his right cheek, where Pell's hard fist split the skin.

Pell cursed him, and threw another left at his head.

Flane took the blow with his head bowed, so that it slid off his temple. With a tremendous effort of will he broke the awful, pain-induced paralysis gripping his body. His left arm went up to partially ward off another vicious, stabbing jab. Abdominal muscles screaming protest, his right fist cracked against Rick Pell's jaw.

Pell seemed to come apart. He fell on his face, fell loosely, his long chin rooting up the gray earth. He slid forward until his body was spreadeagled at Flane's feet.

Flane stared down at the motionless figure, his face a grim mask, behind which he suffered the torment of hell from the awful, shooting pains still needling through his body from his groin. And through the pain he felt the hostility of this crowd encircling him.

"They ought never to have let him out," the voice came from deep in the crowd.

Another voice joined the first. "The governor must be loco to pardon him only three months after he was sentenced, 'specially when it was his own paw he smoked down an' branded like he would brand a steer. . . ."

FLANE lifted his head slowly. His opaque glance traveled slowly around the circle of faces, studying each in turn with a detached exactness that made some men shift uneasily and draw back.

A tall, gaunt man broke through to Flane's side. This was Yuma Naylor, foreman of the Flane Box-19 spread. He took up position, standing shoulder to shoulder with Flane. His long hands straightened his gun belt, which had become twisted out of place as he pushed through the crowd. His two guns were loose in their holsters when he again hooked thumbs over his belt.

"We better git out o' here, Ed." The gaunt man's thumbs slid a trifle closer to the butts of his guns.

"Not yet, Yuma."

"I say they ought to have strung him up three months ago—" It was the man with the hoarse voice. His tone was insulting, deliberately provocative—"instead of sendin' him to prison so he could be pardoned out."

"I got hosses yonder at the stable, Ed." Yuma's low voice pleaded.

"Wait." Flane had singled out the man with the hoarse voice. His bearded face was vaguely familiar but Flane could not place the man. Now there came movement from two directions: two men appeared in the doorway of the saloon, one holding the bat-wings open for a moment as he stared intently into the street, while the other moved to the middle of the porch. Flane recognized both men. He had the feeling that they had been watching the action from the shadows beyond the bat-wings. One was Gus Albrecht, owner of the saloon; the other, a wide-shouldered, deep-chested man, was Duke Vestrade, owner of the Circle-V ranch, which spread over the north end of Pahrump. Flane's lips tightened as he saw Vestrade's sardonic face.

But his attention was pulled away from the two men on the saloon porch by the approach of a third man, carrying a black doctor's bag. This was Dr. Oakley Ulrich, Pahrump's one sawbones.

Ulrich knelt beside Pell's still figure.

Someone in the crowd said, "Pell ain't moved a finger. You don't reckon—"

The doctor looked up. "What happened here?" Then he seemed to see Flane for the first time. "Oh, it's you, Flane."

Flane nodded silently.

Yuma Naylor said, "Pell jumped Ed here, Doc, when he got off the stage. Ed had to fight. Hell, you can see Pell had a gun, while Ed didn't have nothin' but his fists."

Ulrich stood erect. He was a red-faced, heavy-jowled man. "Flane," he said heavily, "it is rumored about Seven Troughs that you and Pell were in prison together?"

"That's right," agreed Flane evenly.

"Did you know that Pell had a weak heart?"

The question smashed against the wall of tense silence like the thundering roar of a bucking buffalo gun.

"What are you drivin', at, Doc?"

"Pell is dead! That blow, coupled with a weak heart. . . ."

WHAT a clever plot! The thought flashed through Ed Flane's mind as he watched the doctor's face. Ed Flane, only three months ago sentenced to life imprisonment in Carson Prison for murdering his father, Tom Flane, then pardoned by the governor, who decreed the evidence insufficient. And now, almost before the earth of Pahrump was warm under his feet, he had been drawn into a fatal encounter with, of all people, Rick Pell.

"You mean you think I killed him deliberate?" Flane spoke slowly.

"I didn't say that. . . ."

"I do!" Duke Vestrade shouldered his way to the dead Pell's feet. His dark, hawkish features flooded with open animosity as his flashing black eyes speared against Flane's expressionless face. "You jumped Rick the minute you got out of the stage. He didn't have time to raise a hand. You must've knowed he had a weak ticker." Vestrade shot a quick glance toward Gus Albrecht, who had shouldered through the crowd with him, and now stood at his right.

"That's right," Albrecht confirmed.

Ed Flane thought that he detected a certain reluctance in the saloon-man's voice, yet the wide, flat-boned face lost its gambler's mask of inscrutability for a fleeting moment, and Flane saw greed and triumph shine forth before the mask dropped down.

"I thought you had a hand in this, Duke," said Flane softly. "You don't want me back in Pahrump—free—do you?"

Duke Vestrade's fingers curled at his sides. But he checked the motion when he saw Yuma Naylor's thumbs begin to inch along the top of his gun-belt.

"I got another gun inside my shirt, Ed," growled Yuma softly to Flane. "You want it?"

Flane shook his head impatiently. "That's what Duke wants, Yuma." He stared levelly at the owner of the Circle-V. "I think he knows I didn't kill Tom Flane. And I think, too, that maybe he knows who did—"

"Why, you . . ." Only sight of Yuma Naylor's gnarled fists hovering near the scarred butts of his guns held Vestrade back.

"He knows that if he can have me sent back to prison, or perhaps strung up to a Seven Troughs cottonwood, I'll never be able to run down Tom Flane's killer." Flane nodded, a quick, angry motion, toward Pell's dead body. "As it is, this may be enough to have my pardon revoked. Especially if the Doc here testifies as well as he did at the trial."

Ulrich flushed darkly. "I am a doctor, Flane. I merely gave a frank analysis of my findings relative to the death of your father."

Flane nodded. "I'll have to admit you did tell the truth."

"I'll testify this time." Duke Vestrade's eyes glittered. "Pell told me that you tried to kill him in Carson and that you threatened to finish the job if ever you had the chance."

"What is your interest in Pell, Duke?" asked Flane.

"Pell was my top hand."

"I THOUGHT so." Abruptly Flane turned away. He said, "Let's ride, Yuma," and felt the gaunt man at his side expel an explosive sigh of relief.

Without another glance at Duke Vestrade or Gus Albrecht, Flane strode toward the ring of hostile faces hemming him in. Miraculously a lane opened. He reached the plank walk, Yuma Naylor's gaunt figure at his side. They turned right toward Sexton's stable.

"Ed—" the voice came from the direction of the Wells Fargo office—"Ed Flane!"

Flane halted in his tracks. The girl stood in the door of the building, her firm breasts rising and falling rapidly. Her wide gray eyes were centered on his face. They swam with contradictory emotions: Flane's searching glance saw in them shock, gladness, fear, and he saw a warmth of womanly compassion that sent his heart leaping thunderingly.

"Marian King." He crossed to stand before her.

"I am happy to see you, Ed." She extended a soft, shapely hand, proudly ignoring staring, disapproving eyes.

Suddenly he felt her fingers stiffen

spasmodically. She stared at him, a strange light as of suddenly awakened doubt deep in her gray orbs. "Ed."

"Careful, Marian," he whispered warningly. "Careful. Everything is all right. You *must* believe in me."

II

MARIAN KING gasped, "Father! Don't!" Her fingers flew to her soft lips in quick alarm as she stared over Flane's shoulder.

"Flane!" The voice was filled with a hoarse passion.

Flane turned. Grizzled old Walt King, the girl's father, stood just across the plank walk, his two-inch heels buried in the dust drift packed against the edge of the walk. He stood planted on wide-spread legs. His face was congested with unreasoning anger. He wore a single gun far forward on his right thigh, and now his right hand hovered hungrily over the scarred butt.

"Yes, Walt?"

"You got a gun on you, Flane?"

"No."

"Get one."

"I've no fight with you, Walt."

"Get a gun!"

"Father!" Marian King threw her slender figure in front of Flane. "You don't know what you're doing."

"Get out of the way, Marian."

"No."

Flane said gently, "You better get back inside."

"No." She faced her father fearlessly. "Dad, get hold of yourself."

The grizzled rancher stared grimly at his daughter. His hands dropped.

"Flane," he ground out, "I warned you when you was convicted for killin' yore paw that if you ever spoke to my gal again I'd kill you. But I can't shoot an unarmed man, 'specially when he's hidin' behind a woman's skirts."

Someone laughed, deep in the crowd.

King went on, "You better be carrying a gun next time I see you, because I'm goin' to shoot you full of holes if yo're totin' hardware or not."

THE trail across Pahrump from Seven Troughs to the home ranch of the Box-19 turned northwest five miles from town, paralleling Storm Creek for another like distance, sometimes swinging close to the water, winding among the cottonwoods and willow clumps, and at other times swinging into the flats.

Darkness caught Flane and Yuma Naylor just as they forded Storm Creek. They were pushing through a willow clump when the first slug whined overhead, uncomfortably close. Flane saw orange flame spew from gun muzzles in the trees ahead. In a single motion he threw himself out of the leather and reached across, to his left, jerking Yuma's Winchester out of its saddle-boot. He saw Yuma's lank figure leave saddle, diving for shelter. He lost sight of the Box-19 foreman in the darkness.

Flane leaped to the right, under his mount's nose, and slid down a cut-bank into ankle-deep water. He jacked a shell into the chamber of the Winchester and sent a bullet whanging at a flash of orange light. Yuma's six-shooter roared. Flane pumped another shell into the chamber and settled solidly against the damp cut-bank. That firefly flash of orange flame winked up ahead. Flane pressed trigger. There came a sharp cry. Someone in the yonder darkness mouthed a bitter curse. A body threshed violently in the brush.

Other guns hammered now with increased intensity. Lead whined overhead. It spatted into tree trunks and bit chunks out of the bank behind which Flane crouched. Yuma's Colt crashed out twice, drawing an answering barrage from four guns in the darkness ahead. These guns stuttered fitfully, holding Flane and Yuma behind their hastily chosen shelters. The unknown marksman made no effort to flank them, seemingly content to keep enough lead cutting through the willows to hold them on the ground.

Time dragged on. Finally Flane heard a low whistle. The injured man dragged himself away. The firing died down. A few minutes later Flane heard the sound of running horses, headed west toward the Nightingales.

"Yuma," called Flane. "You stop any lead?"

Yuma snorted disdainfully. "Had my whiskers clipped once or twice, but they missed anything solid."

Flane pushed the Winchester ahead of

him and clambered up the bank. The two men moved together. As if by tacit agreement, they headed over their back-trail after their strayed mounts.

IT was near midnight when they reached the Box-19 buildings. Light still gleamed through the bunkhouse window which faced toward the road from Seven Troughs. The door opened as they walked their horses toward the barns, and a bow-legged figure was outlined in the slanting beams of yellow light.

"Who's out there?"

"It's all right, Laramie," called Yuma.

"Oh, it's you, Yuma." The door closed.

After tending to their horses, they returned to the bunkhouse. Before parting, Flane asked a question. "You got everything clear about seein' this roundup through if anything not in the cards happens to me?"

Yuma nodded. "Uh-huh," he grunted.

They talked together, low-voiced, for several minutes longer, then Flane turned toward the big house. An oddly remote figure, he moved across the wide yard with a half eager, half reluctant stride. Yuma Naylor watched him until deeper darkness under a cottonwood, fifty feet away, engulfed him. Then Yuma turned and entered the bunkhouse.

Flane walked slowly as he considered the events of the day. The night hemmed him in with an ominous finality. He had a feeling that the gray stone walls of Carson prison were reaching out to engulf him even here. He realized that he had been carrying an unlighted cigarette between his lips for the past thirty minutes. A match flared, cupped in his hands. The cigarette tip glowed. The match blaze was snuffed out.

Flane's footsteps lagged. It was there, in that night-cloaked building, that Tom Flane's body had been found, horribly mutilated, with a Box-19 branded deep into the flesh and bone of his forehead. And it was there, according to the testimony offered at the trial, that Ed Flane had been found, unconscious. There was every indication that father and son had engaged in a terrific struggle to the death, for their clothes had been soaked with blood, and the room a shambles, and Ed's unconscious fingers had gripped the death knife, while the branding iron lay under his body.

Dr. Oakley Ulrich had testified that the blood on Ed Flane's clothing and on the blade of the knife came from the elder Flane's body, and that the fingerprints on the haft of the murder blade were Ed's.

This testimony had been enough to convict. Neither judge, jury nor spectators believed Ed's story that he had gone to bed in the early evening, only to awaken in the death room surrounded by Bar-19 punchers and Duke Vestrade, owner of the Circle-V. Vestrade's story was that he had been riding to his home ranch from Seven Troughs, and wanted to see the elder Flane about Pahrump Basin roundup pool details. He had seen light in the bunkhouse and first stopped by there to ask if Tom Flane was at the ranch. He had been standing in front of the bunkhouse with Yuma Naylor when sounds of a commotion had reached their ears.

Yuma, at the trial, while forced to testify as to what he had witnessed upon entering the death room, had vowed to the last minute that Ed Flane was innocent. But his professed belief had not affected the decision of the jury. Ed was quickly sentenced to life imprisonment at Carson.

Flane reached the steps leading to the porch of the house. Sucking a mouthful of tobacco smoke into his lungs, he dropped the cigarette, grinding it underfoot. He placed his right foot on the lower step, then withdrew it, snapping his fingers. Tiny Jacklin! The hoarse-voiced, heavy-bearded man in the crowd at Seven Troughs was Tiny Jacklin, leader of a gang whose hideout was reputed to be in the deep vastness of the Nightingales, a mysterious figure suspected of everything from rustling to bank robbery, but against whom nothing had yet been proved. So Tiny Jacklin was mixed up in this grisly business!

Flane mounted the steps. Crossing the porch, he stepped inside. He was fumbling in the pocket of his coat for a match when he sensed movement in the darkness to his left. But before he could raise his hands a myriad of pain-filled, shooting stars seared across his brain.

The last thing he remembered was the nauseating stench of burned flesh.

IT seemed to Flane that he climbed an interminable distance before unconsciousness fled, leaving him with a splitting headache and a sticky something filling the palm of his right hand. He was in total darkness, yet he knew that his hand was filled with blood. He hoisted himself off his back onto his elbows. The hackles rose along the back of his neck—his right hand had touched a cold, wet object. It was a knife. Flane shuddered. He was in a room that had been long closed; the air was heavy with staleness, and something else. . . .

A horrible awareness swept over Flane. Death lay in this room; horrible, mutilated death. He knew this without light. He knew that a horrible scene had been re-enacted this night. And he was the central figure. For the heavy, stale air was still spiced strongly with that nauseating odor of burnt flesh; human flash!

Flane listened. There was no sound other than his own breathing. He found a big bump behind his left ear. He reckoned the blow must have glanced, or he would still be unconscious. This thought galvanized him into action. It must have been the intention of his attacker that he be found in this room with its other occupant. If that were the case, then there should be visitors due before very long.

He gained his feet. A match flared. He saw the legs first, jutting out toward him from the rest of the body, which was twisted behind a chair. Flane's glance flashed to the windows. They were covered. Looking back at the body on the floor, he shifted the chair. And clucked in amazement. He was looking down into the staring eyes of Walt King, Marian King's father.

The seamed face was rigid in death. A knife had been plunged repeatedly into his chest. Flane knelt beside the body. The match in his right fingers sputtered out. He scraped the head of another across the pine floor, and resumed his hurried but thorough study of the wounds. He lifted King's left arm; watched it drop. His glance traveled across the floor. Beside the fireplace he saw that for which he searched, a Box-19 branding iron. He looked back at the dead man's face, his glance traveling reluctantly upward toward the high forehead. The flesh had been seared to the bone, and the Box-19 stood out boldly.

SO this was why he and Yuma had been ambushed back on the trail from Seven Troughs. The delay had given Walt King's killer time enough to reach the Box-19 with his victim. Flane thought bitterly that his quarrel with King had given the murderer the opening he needed.

Flane blew the fire from the match stem with one gusty breath. He arose and moved to the door opening onto the porch. Here he listened for several minutes. Silence greeted him. Closing the door, he moved back into the room, striking another match. This time he continued through the house, searching until he found suitable clothing to replace the ill-fitting garb in which he was clothed. The old gray Stetson at first seemed a trifle loose on his closely clipped head, but otherwise the outfit fitted comfortably. He took a Colt .45 from a holster and shoved it into his waist-band, inside the gray flannel shirt. He left the second button above his waist unfastened, and filled the pockets of his Levis with shells. He returned to the death room. Here he took a Winchester .44-40 from the gun-rack and let himself out onto the porch. He cut across the yard to the corrals.

With the instinct of a man born to horses he singled out a rangy chestnut in the darkness of the corral. Saddled, he led the big horse behind the barn, tethering him to the wheel of a buckboard. Now he turned back to the house. His head throbbed only occasionally now.

He was at the side of the house when a faint, far-off change in the night sounds caused him to drop down and press his left ear to earth. He heard the faint thud of horses' hoofs. He estimated the distance at a half mile. Whoever it was, they were approaching the Box-19 buildings.

WINCHESTER in crook of arm, Flane drifted around the house, coming up close to the west wall. Here he had the bulk of the building between himself and the trail from Seven Troughs,

along which the night riders were approaching the buildings. At the same time, from this new position, he could better reach the barns without being observed. He hunkered down, waiting.

Several minutes dragged by. Then the group of riders loomed out of the night, a compact mass. There were no words spoken until they pulled up before the porch, their mounts blowing lightly.

"Looks like everything is all right, Sheriff." The low voice came from the mass of horsemen. No one had as yet dismounted. One horse shied nervously, then subsided.

"You sure, Miss King, that that Mex gave you the right information?"

That would be Sheriff Ike Hannah, Flane knew, and wondered how the officer had been drawn out of Seven Troughs so that he missed the stage arrival and the clash with Rick Pell.

Regret coursed through Flane as he heard the girl's voice. He thought of the horrible shock she would have to endure when they entered the house.

She said, "The Mexican said that Father was on his way to the Box-19 to settle with Ed Flane." Her voice trembled. "Father is so violent. I am afraid for him—"

Flane heard leather creak as a heavy bulk stood in stirrup, then swung to earth. This was the signal for the rest of the group to dismount. Reins slapped against the hard ground as riders ground-tied their mounts. A heavy figure placed weight on the steps, then crossed to the door.

"You be careful, Sheriff." It was Dr. Ulrich's voice.

"Tend to your doctorin', Doc," said Sheriff Hannah gruffly, "an' let me run my business. I don't know what you're doing out here anyway." He knocked on the door.

Ulrich's voice cut petulantly across the night. "Miss King asked me to come with her in the event—" his voice trailed off.

Marian King said, "That is correct, Sheriff. If Dad were hurt—" Her voice sounded remote, but much steadier.

Hannah knocked again. Receiving no response, he tried the knob. Flane heard him step inside. Others followed. Flane winced as he heard Marian cry out sharply. The sheriff cursed gustily. The remaining members of the party pushed inside. Flane faded toward the barn. The last voice he heard as he passed out of hearing was that of Oakley Ulrich, reaching out through a silence broken only by the sobbing of Marian King.

"Damn him," the doctor said, "he's done it again."

Ed Flane wondered if the medico was in love with Marian King.

As he reached the rear of the house and looked off toward the bunkhouse, Flane paused. Light pushed through two windows. He saw the door swing open. A figure stood framed there, looking toward the house, then stepped outside. Crouched low, Flane saw the man stride toward the house. He thought it was Yuma Naylor, but he could not be certain. The noise of the sheriff's arrival must have carried to the bunkhouse. The man disappeared.

Flane ran lightly toward the barn, taking advantage of the shelter offered by the two cottonwoods standing halfway between barn and house.

III

FROM a high shelf of rock Flane watched the lone rider climb slowly upward out of the basin. The winding trail carried horse and rider out of sight a number of times, but always they reappeared, growing ever larger. Once the rider pulled up, while yet a half mile below, ostensibly to let his horse blow. But Flane suspected that he was studying the trail for recent sign.

Finally the horse moved. They dropped out of sight again as the trail wound behind a high outthrust of earth and stone. When they reappeared they were only a few hundred yards below. The rider was Yuma Naylor. Flane grunted in satisfaction. Holding the Winchester low against the shelf of rock to prevent sharp eyes from catching a glimpse of reflected sun's rays, he slid back from the shelf rim and made his way down to the trail's edge. Here he waited until Yuma was abreast of him before speaking.

"Yuma—"

The Box-19 foreman's right hand flashed to gun butt as he stood in stir-

rups. The gun was half drawn when he saw Flane. He let out a sharply explosive breath. The gun slid back.

"An Injun must've scared you some time," he observed wryly.

Flane smiled. "What has Sheriff Hannah done about Walt King?"

"He's got a posse after you, but he figures you've already lit a shuck into Oregon."

"I know," said Flane. "I had to lay low for two days, but this mornin' they rode down out of the hills. I think they've gone back to Seven Troughs—"

"There's a thousand-dollar reward on your head, dead or alive. Most of Seven Troughs and Pahrump thinks you killed Tom Flane and Walt King—"

"What do you think, Yuma?" asked Flane softly.

Yuma stared at Flane strangely. "I could almost believe it myself," he said finally, "if—"

"I know," said Flane. He added, "It was cleverly planned."

"Duke Vestrade's been stabbed—in the hand and under his left arm. He says it happened the same night Walt was killed. He figures whoever it was wanted to slap a brand between his eyes, too."

"Did he recognize the man?"

"He said it could have been you."

Flane was silent, puzzling at this new turn. After a moment he said, "Has the sheriff located that Mex who told Marian that Walt was on his way to the Box-19 to see me?"

"Yeah. Dead. He'd been knifed, too. Sheriff found him in a shack on the edge of Seven Troughs."

"He was killed to close his mouth," mused Flane, "and that means that more than one hombre is mixed up in this, because I'll bet he was killed before the sheriff found Walt King's body—"

"Uh-huh—that's the way I figure."

Flane changed the subject. "You follow the trail of the hombres who ambushed us the other night?"

Yuma nodded. "Uh-huh. But I lost it. They rode due west till they hit Thunder Creek. I lost 'em there. Don't think they ever did come out of the water. Leastways, I don't know if they went up or down. I figure they was Tiny Jacklin's riders."

Flane sucked a mouthful of tobacco into his lungs, letting it out slowly. He flicked dead ash off the end of the cigarette and shifted the Winchester into the crook of his left arm. "You say the trail ended at Thunder Creek?"

"Yeah."

FLANE stared at the almost perpendicular wall in puzzlement. It presented a solid front, unbroken excepting for an occasional clinging juniper. His sharp glance dropped again to the rocky creek bank. The sign was faint but unmistakable: horses had passed up that bank toward the face of the cliff, fifty feet away.

Since leaving Yuma yesterday, Flane had covered both banks of Thunder Creek inch by inch. He had been about ready to admit defeat when he found the sign.

He turned his mount up the bank. Once out of the water, he dismounted, ground-tying the chestnut. He moved on foot toward the sheer wall.

He was no more than fifteen feet from the wall when a faint sound caused him to slide his right hand toward the gap left by the empty buttonhole in his shirt. He stood tensely, straining to pick up further sound. He could have sworn that he had heard saddle leather creak. But he saw no one ahead. He half turned, looking back toward his own horse. The big chestnut stood motionless, watching him. The only movement beyond was that of the water in the creek cascading whitely down toward Pahrump.

It was the sound of a shod hoof striking stone that sent Flane whirling back to face the wall. The shock of surprise at sight of the horse and rider there, seemingly materialized out of the very face of the cliff, nearly proved his finish.

Tiny Jacklin was clawing for his holstered gun as Flane whipped around. The outlaw's dark, heavily whiskered face was drawn up in a vicious snarl. He cursed as he recognized Flane. He had been riding with his great shoulders bent forward, but now they drew stiffly erect as the thick fingers of his right hand closed about the butt of his gun. The gun slid out of its holster. . . .

Flane's right hand flicked inside his shirt. The motion was somehow like the strike of a diamond-back rattler, it was so

swift. Hand and gun came out of the gap in the shirt with unbelievable swiftness. Flane dogged the hammer down. The muzzle flamed. . . .

THE slug tore into Tiny Jacklin's throat, ripping upward. Jacklin, although he had held the initial advantage, was sitting his horse so that he had to draw his gun and swing the muzzle around from the right side of his body and across in front of his thick waist before it was in firing line. Flane's slug hit him, slamming him out of the leather, before he completed this movement. His thick body slid to earth between horse and gray wall. Loose rein ends, slipping between his fingers, dropped down, effectively ground-tying his horse. The animal's flanks quivered, but otherwise he stood steady.

Looking around at his own horse, Flane stepped toward Tiny Jacklin's prone figure. He led the outlaw's animal to one side, then knelt beside the big man. Jacklin was dead.

Beyond the body Flane saw a sight that caused him to stare in sheer amazement. The cliff wall was not solid! But a person would have to be standing not more than four feet from the gray rock before this fact would be detected. At some time in the past a narrow fissure, no more than five feet from wall to wall, had been created. For the first forty feet this narrow break in an otherwise solid wall ran almost parallel with the face of the cliff, in a northerly direction; then it turned gradually west. The rock floor was covered, almost flush with the exit, with dry moss, probably taken from the creek bed, and intended to deaden the sound of the passage of horses moving in and out of the hideout to which the hidden trail must lead.

This, then, was how Jacklin's crew had been able to disappear when occasion demanded, without leaving sign. And it was true that Jacklin's men, perhaps Jacklin himself, had ambushed them the night they rode to the Box-19 from Seven Troughs, after the death of Rick Pell. This knowledge convinced Flane that Jacklin was mixed deeply in the grim game that had already caused the death of Tom Flane, Walt King, Rick Pell and Jacklin himself; and the wounding of Duke Vestrade. At thought of Vestrade, Flane's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Could there have been any question about the legitimacy of Vestrade's injury?

Flane's thoughts turned back to Jacklin. Could it have been the outlaw who killed Tom Flane and Walt King? And burned the Box-19 brand into their foreheads? Flane doubted it. If he had, it had been upon orders from someone else, because Jacklin had never been anything other than a small-time rustler, with perhaps a number of bank robberies and stage holdups to his credit. Flane did not believe that the outlaw could have conceived the elaborate plot that had already resulted in the deaths of Pahrump Basin's two largest ranchers, and reached into the State prison at Carson in an attempt to kill Tom Flane's heir. Flane thought again of Duke Vestrade, and of Gus Albrecht and Doctor Oakley Ulrich; and there was bafflement in his blue eyes as he looked back at Tiny Jacklin's dead body.

FLANE cursed softly under his breath. Alive, Tiny Jacklin might have proved the key to this puzzle. Dead? Flane snapped his fingers. Hell, maybe the outlaw, even though dead, would still show the way to the killer. And maybe he had been the one who had wielded the branding iron of death.

Flane arose and stepped across to Jacklin's horse. He grunted triumphantly when his swift search disclosed a branding iron concealed deep in the folds of the outlaw's cantle-roll. It was a Box-19 iron.

He turned back and stared at the narrow break in the wall of rock. After a moment he shook his head and murmured to himself, "We better find some other way."

Removing Jacklin's neckerchief from around the dead man's throat, Flane wiped blood, poured out of the throat wound, from the rock beneath the body. Before the final traces were removed he had to cross to the creek and rinse the cloth twice. This done to his satisfaction, he hoisted Jacklin's heavy body across the saddle, like a sack of grain. Catching up the chestnut now, he swung into the leather. Leaning down across his saddle-

horn, he caught up the reins of Jacklin's horse and turned both into the middle of the creek, heading upstream.

An hour later, after a long, circling climb, he reached a small clearing. Here he built a stingy fire. Taking the iron out of Jacklin's cantle-roll, he propped it in the coals. When it was white-hot he lifted it out of the fire and moved toward Jacklin's body, which he had placed on the ground, face up. He bent down. There came a sizzling sound. When Flane straightened up he almost retched. A Box-19 was branded in the center of Tiny Jacklin's receding forehead. The still air was heavy with the stifling odor of the cooked flesh.

Flane buried the branding iron and ground the bed of coals underfoot. Hoisting the outlaw's body back across saddle, Flane again mounted his chestnut and rode almost due south, remaining always just under the summit of the long ridge.

After pushing steadily southward for twenty minutes he dismounted. This time he tethered both horses in a clump of juniper. Sliding the Winchester from its boot, he moved forward on foot. The footing became rougher, until he stood on the rim of a deep, almost vertically walled canyon. He grunted with satisfaction. A hundred feet below, built close to the foot of the steep wall, stood three log cabins and a small pole corral. Just beyond the corral he saw a significant mound of earth. That would be the grave of the man Flane had shot that night on the trail from Seven Troughs. Whitish-gray smoke poured lazily from the chimneys of two cabins. Flane knew that he had found Tiny Jacklin's hideout. Off to the left he could see where the canyon narrowed as it bottle-necked toward the hidden entrance where he had killed Jacklin.

Leaving the Winchester on the rim, Flane returned to the horses. He led Jacklin's horse closer to the rim. Here he hoisted the outlaw's body across his right shoulder and carried it to a position directly above and between the two cabins in which fires burned.

Rolling Tiny Jacklin's body to the edge of the rim, he gave it a final shove and watched it plummet downward. He winced as the limp weight crashed against the floor of the narrow canyon, rolled once, briefly, and came to rest not ten feet from the door of the cabin nearest the hidden exit.

A DOOR opened. Two bareheaded Jacklin men, guns gripped in fists, surged outside. Both dropped beside Tiny Jacklin's body before they realized that the only place it could have come from was up. Their voices rolled up to Flane.

"It's Tiny—"

"He's been shot!"

"Look at his forehead!"

"Where'd he come—" One of the men swiveled to his feet and stared up toward the rim. "Look out, Tex! Tiny was throwed over the rim!" The speaker hammered three wild shots upward. One hit rim-rock. The others whined skyward without coming near their objective. Both men dodged behind the outer corner of the cabin from which they had emerged a moment ago. From this shelter they threw additional lead toward the rim, but Flane did not return the fire. It was his purpose to let them think that he had left the rim. If he had made the right play here, he thought, one or both of the men below would ride out of the hideout very soon now, and would head straight for Tiny Jacklin's boss. Flane's blue eyes hardened at the thought. Gun-play, with the draw fair and even, that was one thing; this savage bushwhacking with knife and branding iron, that was something else.

The firing died out. Flane, flat on his stomach, heard the murmur of voices, but did not catch the words. He ventured a look over the rim. The two men were in the corral, saddling mounts. Jacklin's body had disappeared. The two men mounted and rode toward the narrow, hidden mouth of the canyon.

IV

SHERIFF IKE HANNAH stomped into the shadowy confines of his jail office. He was muttering angrily to himself, almost drowning out the tinkling music of his spurs. The door slammed shut behind him.

He took two jerky, angry steps into the room and pulled up short, the muttering dying in his throat. His mouth

clamped shut, and his forehead puckered as he peered into the room. It was not yet sundown, yet the gloom of dusk shadowed him here, pressing in with an indescribable menace. He flicked a harried glance first to the right and then to the left. The window shutters were drawn!

"I've got you covered, Sheriff."

Ike Hannah shivered. That was Ed Flane's voice. Sweat beaded the sheriff's brow. Flane, who had killed his own father, and Walt King; who had finished Rick Pell off with a single blow, and attacked Duke Vestrade. What would he do now?

"Set your gun against the wall there, Sheriff," said Flane, "then draw the bolt on the door—from the inside—"

Hannah obeyed the command.

"Now move over here and light this lamp. We're goin' to pow-wow."

The sheriff moved toward the desk. A moment later he scraped the head of a match along the side of the desk. The light flared.

"Keep the wick low," warned Flane. His voice was cool, yet there was an air of strain about him, which communicated itself to the sheriff and only served to increase his nervousness. The lamp lit, Flane motioned toward the chair at the end of the old desk. "Sit down." His glance dropped to the sheriff's ample waist. "Maybe you'd better unbuckle that hardware first, and let it drop—gentle-like—on the floor."

"I thought—" The guns dropped to the floor.

"You thought I'd be in Oregon—that what you mean?"

Hannah nodded. Suddenly he leaned toward Flane. A puzzled light grew in his eyes as he stared at Flane's face.

"Take a good look, Sheriff—"

"You—you—"

"Go on—"

"You're not Ed Flane!"

"YOU'RE wrong," said Flane, "and right, at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said: I'm not the Ed Flane who was convicted for murderin' Tom Flane three months ago. He is dead—"

"Dead?"

"Yeah. Rick Pell stabbed him to death in the prison yard back at Carson."

"Then who are you?"

"My name is Ed Flane, too. But Tom Flane's boy was named Edwin, while I was called Edward. We were cousins. It sometimes happens that cousins look more alike than twins. Nobody recognized me but Marian King, and she didn't give me away." Flane dug his right hand into a Levi pocket. He pulled it out with a small gold star cupped in the palm. "I'm a deputy U. S. marshal, Sheriff. Can I put up my gun without takin' a chance of bein' shot?"

Hannah wiped his damp brow. "Yeah." He shook his head. "This knocks all my theories into a cocked hat."

"I can't blame you for figurin' it as you did," said Flane. "Every move pointed straight at me, no doubt about that." He leaned his elbows on the desk. "Sheriff," he said, a new urgency in his voice, "I was sayin' that Pell killed Tom Flane's boy. Pell didn't know for sure if he had killed him that day, because he didn't die right pronto. He died next day in the prison hospital. He never knew who stabbed him. For that matter, nobody knew who did it until I saw Pell here in Seven Troughs.

"Edwin Flane's deathbed story convinced the warden that he had been framed, and hadn't killed his paw after all. So the warden didn't release word of his death, but let the word get around that he was goin' to get well, but would be in the hospital for a spell.

"The warden knew about my resemblance to my cousin. So he got an idea: He got in touch with the governor and suggested that Flane be pardoned. I would take his place. The governor agreed and I was smuggled into the hospital.

"Before Edwin died he insisted that Yuma Naylor, the Box-19 foreman, was entirely dependable. So Yuma was called to Carson and told the truth about Edwin's dyin'. Through Yuma I learned enough about Pahrump, Seven Troughs and the people most likely to have a hand in Tom Flane's murder to ride in here and know who I was talkin' to, and why."

"Flane—" It was Yuma Naylor's voice —Flane."

"Let him in, Sheriff."

The sheriff opened the door. Yuma hurried inside.

"Vestrade's here." Yuma's eyes glowed with a fierce battle light.

Flane cursed softly. "We're gettin' close to the end of the trail," he said softly. He added, "Get your guns, Sheriff. Maybe you'll see the killer of Tom Flane in a few minutes." He slid his own gun free.

Darkness cloaked the street as the three men stepped outside. Flane said, "You hear from Elko yet, Yuma?" Yuma and the sheriff were hard pressed to remain abreast as Flane's long legs carried him swiftly and easily toward Albrecht's Nevada Queen.

"Gus Albrecht is the only one from Pahrump Basin—"

"What about Albrecht?" panted Hannah. Doubt lay heavy in his voice. "After all, I ought to know why I'm bein' drug into a fight."

Flane clipped his words. "Tom Flane and Walt King were killed, Sheriff, not for revenge, but because someone knew that a group of Eastern capitalists are planning on buildin' a railroad from Elko on the main Transcontinental route through Pahrump Basin into Oregon. If one man controlled the basin land by the time that group announce their intentions, he could dictate terms for a right-of-way, and control the price of acreage the full length of the basin, fifty-two miles. He would be rich. So—"

A shot crashed out. It came from inside the Nevada Queen, directly ahead. Although the bat-wings yawned no more than thirty feet ahead, the sound of the shot was muted, as by a wall. Now a second and third shot hammered from within the saloon and, after a slight break, a fourth.

Flane leaped for the porch of the saloon. "It worked, Yuma! You and the sheriff cover the back."

He crashed through the bat-wings and brought up ten feet inside the room with a cluck of amazement. Gus Albrecht stood at the far end of the long bar, staring toward a door in the rear of the big room. This was not right. The saloon-man should be beyond that door, behind one of those smoking guns Flane had heard just a moment ago. Now Albrecht was moving toward the door, his right hand sliding under his coat. The room was very still. Flane leaped toward the saloon-man, up-tilted Colt held ready.

"Albrecht!" he clipped.

Gus Albrecht whirled. "Flane!" he whispered, paling.

"Who's back there with Duke Vestrade?" Flane's boot-heels tapped dully in the sawdust as he moved toward Albrecht. "You got your men finishin' him off?"

Albrecht snarled. His right hand flashed from under his coat, a squat hideout flaming as it coughed its tiny but deadly pellet.

FLANE'S blue eyes flared coldly as he felt his own gun buck solidly in his fist. Through the smoke he watched the impact of the heavy slug swing Gus Albrecht halfway around as it smashed into his chest.

With one sweeping glance at the crowd and the two bartenders, Flane strode toward the door at the end of the room. As he passed Albrecht's prone figure he kicked the Derringer toward the wall.

He paused only for a moment at the door. Dogging back the hammer of his Colt, he grasped the doorknob with his left hand. With one swift motion he shot through the door, pushed it shut behind him, and flattened his lean body against the left-hand wall.

But there was no thundering roar of gun to meet him. All remained silent. Flane threw his hat into the darkness away from his body. It fell and slithered along the floor. Still no sound.

Grasping the gun more firmly in his right fist, he struck a match. As it flared he saw that he stood in a short hallway. The door at the other end of the hall stood open. Before he pinched the feeble glow from the match between his thumb and forefinger, he saw a pool of blood almost at his feet, and a trail of blood extending toward the door at the end of the hall. . . .

He called out, "Yuma. Hannah."

Yuma Naylor cursed in the yonder darkness. He said, "Looks like we got here too late, Flane."

"Anybody killed in there?" This was the sheriff's voice.

"Gus Albrecht is dead. I shot him.

But Duke Vestrade got away. And—" the three men came together just outside the door. "Yuma," said Flane, "did you hear from the warden at Carson?"

Yuma nodded in the darkness. "I sent him a telegram, like you told me, when I was in Elko findin' out about the railroad buildin' through Pahrump." Yuma felt in his pockets. "I got it here—"

"Don't bother about that," grunted Flane impatiently. "What did it say?"

"It said that Rick Pell's health was good when he was turned loose three weeks ago—"

Flane cursed. "I've been a blind fool," he whipped out. He whirled on Hannah. "Sheriff, get your men and follow me. I'm headin' for King's Flyin'-W. Yuma, you stay here in town—maybe Vestrade will try to hide out here. If you find him, kill him—"

"You mean you think Marian King is a killer?" cried Hannah. "Man, you're crazy!"

"Don't be a fool," snapped Flane. "The girl's life is in danger. She may die like Tom Flane and her father died!"

V

THE rangy, powerful chestnut ran with a sure-footed tirelessness that ate up the miles. Yet Flane rode with a gnawing fear that he would reach the Flying-W too late to aid Marian King, that he would come upon a scene of horror like that he had witnessed when Marian's father died, off yonder at Box-19.

As the chestnut hit the hard-packed earth of the Flying-W yard, a hundred yards from the long, low-roofed log house, Flane pulled up sharply. Leaping out of the leather he ran swiftly, on light feet, toward the porch. Sight of a second horse standing twenty feet from the steps gave his long legs wings.

The sight that met Flane's eyes as he crashed through the door into the long living-room of the King house sent a hot flame searing across his brain; Marian King lay motionless on a buffalo robe, in front of the great stone fireplace. Shoved deep into the glowing coals a branding iron glowed almost as redly. The hulking figure of a man knelt, back to the door, above the girl. He held a sharp-bladed skinning knife gripped in his right hand. The hand was raised high above Marian King's firm breasts—

The would-be murderer whirled with an animal snarl on his lips as he heard Flane crash through the door. Mad eyes glared hatred. Long, slender fingers clenched and unclenched about the haft of the skinning knife.

Flane voiced a silent prayer of thanksgiving. He had been in time to save the girl. At least for the moment.

"I'm counting three," Flane's voice was very soft. "You better have a gun in your hand, because I'm throwin' lead. One—two—"

The shining blade in the killer's hand arced back over his right shoulder in an amazingly swift motion, then whipped down again. The blade slipped through the air like a gleaming sliver of lethal light. . . .

Flane shifted like a professional fighter sliding outside of a straight left. He felt the tug of the blade against his clothing as the heavy knife whipped past, to bury itself in the wall beside the door. Then his gun was bucking in his fist, and he felt a soul-satisfying run of savage delight as he saw the heavy slugs pound home into the flesh of the man before him. And he felt an undercurrent of surprise, too, when the red-faced, heavy-jowled madman refused to go down, but dug a hand under his coat and brought it forth cradling a blunt-nosed, double-barreled Derringer.

Flane pulled trigger on the fifth and last shell in his gun just as the little gun in the other's fist coughed once sharply before dropping from suddenly nerveless fingers.

That mad, savage gleam still lay deep in Dr. Oakley Ulrich's eyes, under the surface glaze of death, as he slid stubbornly floorward. He was dead, and Flane knew that he was dead, before his bullet-riddled body came to rest beside that of Marian King.

It was not until now that Flane realized that he had been hit. And he knew at the same moment that Sheriff Ike Hannah was in the room. Through a growing haze he saw other men crowd in behind the sheriff; the haze turned into a dark, enveloping cloud. . . .

MARIAN KING had insisted that Flane remain at the Flying-W while his wound knit. He found this easy to do.

It was on the third day following Ulrich's death that the sheriff rode out from Seven Troughs to tell Flane that Vestrade's body had been found in the brush near Storm Creek, and to find out just how Flane had followed the trail to Oakley Ulrich.

"First of all, Sheriff," said Flane, "it was the railroad that started the whole thing. Doc Ulrich was the brains, him and Duke Vestrade. They hired, or I should say Duke hired Tiny Jacklin and his outfit to do the killin' of Tom Flane and Walt King. I doubt if Jacklin ever knew that Ulrich was behind Vestrade, anyway his men didn't.

"At first I think Doc Ulrich would've been satisfied with just the Box-19. Anyway, he had Tom Flane killed so it looked like Ed did it. This got rid of both of them. There was a note against Box-19 at the bank. Ulrich knew this and bought it up, not thinking there was any other kin.

"But when he thought Ed Flane had been pardoned he had to get busy all over again—incidentally, I figure it was the Doc's idea to have Pell knife Ed in Carson. He got Pell to drink a glass of poisoned whiskey just before the stage came that first day. When Pell jumped me he was already a goner. That's why Doc said he had a weak heart.

"The sheriff was out of town, and Yuma sided me, so we got out of town safe. But my argument with Walt King gave Doc another idea. Why not control *all* of Pahrump? Maybe marry Marian King in the bargain. So he had Walt killed in Seven Troughs and his body carried to the Box-19, where it was branded like Tom Flane's.

"Yuma and I were ambushed to slow us down and give Jacklin time enough to reach the ranch with Walt's body.

"Then a Mex was hired to tell Marian that her paw was goin' out to the Box-19. She did what she was figured to do, went straight to the sheriff."

Ike Hannah nodded.

"Duke Vestrade," Flane went on, "knifed himself in the hand and under the arm to make it look like I'd tried to get him, too.

"I had Yuma run over to Elko to find out about who might be interested in the railroad that's comin' through Pahrump; he learned that Gus Albrecht was the only hombre from the basin. And he also wired the warden at Carson askin' about Rick Pell's health.

"I found out, too, that Gus Albrecht had bought up a note that Walt King had at the bank, so I figured he was mixed in right deep, too.

"That's why I slapped a brand on Tiny Jacklin's head. I figured his men'd ride straight to whoever Jacklin'd been workin' for, then that one'd think he was bein' double-crossed and go after the hombre who was ramroddin' the show.

"When Vestrade headed for the Nevada Queen I was convinced that Albrecht was the one, until I saw him in the saloon. Then I knew that Vestrade was in the back with someone else, either Albrecht men, or someone I hadn't figured on before.

"But when Yuma told me that there wasn't nothin' wrong with Rick Pell's heart I knew it had to be Doc Ulrich. He's the only hombre in Pahrump who'd think of poisonin' anybody, and he'd lied when he said Rick had a bad heart, that first day.

"Soon as I realized this, I figured maybe he'd try to finish Marian off, too, before I was caught, so's it'd look like I killed them all. That would give him a clean hold on Pahrump—he got the note Albrecht'd bought up—the one against the King Flyin'-W—"

"I reckon as how you ought to be sheriff of this county." The sheriff shook his head.

"At least he should remain in Pahrump, Sheriff." Marian King stood in the doorway, soft lights in her gray eyes as she looked across at Flane, propped up in the bed. "Someone will have to look after the Box-19 now—and it seems that he is the legal heir—"

"Ma'am," murmured Flane, "that's just what I've been thinkin'. And the more I think about it, the more ranchin' appeals to me—"

Ike Hannah, a twinkle deep in his eyes, drifted out of the room.

EXILES OF THE DAWN WORLD

BY NELSON S. BOND

The truly startling story of a Twentieth Century Adam and Eve hurled back through the ages of Time to the noisome, steaming birth of the world.

WHEN they reached the edge of the clearing, Johnson stopped the car. They made no move to get out, but sat surveying with varying degrees of interest the midnight-cloaked terrain around them. A weed-gnarled road still lay open before them, winding its tortuous way through unkempt fields to the house which loomed like a sullen blot against the night sky, but Johnson made no effort to solve its meanderings. He let the motor idle; its thrum was a background for the querulous scrapings of small night things. He pushed back his hat and expelled his breath with an air of finality. Quite obviously the man was afraid. He said uncer-

tainly, "Well—there it is, Mr. McClary."

"Mmm," said Jeff. He stared at the house. A clean wind broomed cobwebs of cloud from the moon, and the sudden silver light etched slant roofs and hollow windows sharply, and the same light found a grin on Jeff's face. Not a handsome face, but an attractive one. Lean-jawed and hard, a large nose, eyes keen with a perpetual, amused curiosity. "That," he agreed, "is it. But why stop here, Sheriff? This road leads to the house, doesn't it?"

Johnson wriggled.

"It—it gits worse from here on."

"Looks all right to me."

"This ain't my car," said Johnson virtuously. "Got to pertect county propity. Besides—" Sudden inspiration descended on him. "—I got to git back to town to tell 'em you reached here all right. They'll be wonderin'."

"What the sheriff means," interrupted a bittersweet voice from the back seat, "is that he's scared spitless, and doesn't want to go any farther. Isn't that right, Sheriff?"

"Nothin' o' the sort!" Johnson scowled indignantly. "I'll thank you to be more respectful of the lawr, Miss! It just so happens I got duties to perform."

"And a wife," finished Jeff, "and two children. We understand, Sheriff. Well, I guess I go the rest of the way by shank's-mare." He stepped from the car. "See you folks later, then. Good-bye, Miss Anderson. Put lots of bogey-man atmosphere in your story."

"'Say, *"au revoir,"*'" said the girl sweetly, "'but not, "Good-bye!"'" Metal clanged and she was standing beside him in the darkness, her brushed-felt hat at the level of his lips, the scent of her outdoorsy perfume vaguely tantalizing his nostrils. "Or maybe you should just say, 'Hyah, Toots!' I'm not leaving, Maestro. I'm coming with. The *World-Times* readers are going to get an eye-witness account of this banshee brawl if I have to scribble my notes on a ouija board."

Jeff frowned. "No!" he said.

"Pardon Cagliostro?"

"I said," repeated Jeff, "'No!' 'N' as in 'Nuts!'; 'O' as in 'On you way, sister!' A ghost-busting expedition is no place for a hundred and twenty pounds of female fluff, even if said nuisance does have a typewriter for a brain and printer's ink in her arteries."

"Six," corrected Beth Anderson. "Not twenty. Not much of a ladies' man, are you?"

"I know when they're in the way. Now run along, or papa spank."

MOVEMENT in the dusk, and her swift anger rising as she spun to face him.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. McClary, that I'm free, white and twenty-one? It is my privilege to go and do as I see fit. I've suspected for some time that you were no gentleman. I was right. Now you might as well know my full opinion.

"In addition to being a stage 'magician,' a sleight-of-hand expert, you've won yourself a reputation as a ghost-layer. You gallivant about the country exorcising spooks in haunted houses—like this. For, of course, a consideration—and to the fanfare of reams of newsprint.

"In my judgment, your wraith-laying is as phony as your stage tricks. I firmly believe that your ventures into spiritualism—including this present job—are publicity stunts. I mean to verify that belief, and pass the facts on to the *World-Times* readers!"

"Listen, Miss Anderson—"

"*You* listen! There's no 'ghost' in that house, and you know it! Whatever manifestations the frightened natives may have seen or heard were carefully planted there. By you or your underlings."

"I have never," said Jeff solemnly, "seen this town or this house before."

"and it will give me the greatest pleasure," the girl continued inexorably, "to expose you to my readers. In other words—" She stopped for breath, glared at him. "In other words, Mr. McClary, I think you are a fake, a fraud, a quack, and a humbug!"

"I—" began Jeff. And stopped. "A fraud?"

"Definitely."

"Mmm. And a fake?"

"Beyond," scornfully, "a doubt!"

"I see," said Jeff thoughtfully. He stared at her, then at Johnson, who sat in open-mouthed wonder. "That will be all, Sheriff. You may go now."

Johnson jerked a thumb. "Her?"

"I'm staying," said Beth.

"She," agreed Jeff, "is staying. Oh—when you and Lafferty come back tomorrow, bring a vial of sal ammoniac."

"Smelling salts," said Beth Anderson sweetly. "For Mr. McClary. The shock of exposure will be dreadful."

"Oh?" said Johnson. The car backed and turned; its lights gnawing an ochre tunnel through the trees. The motor throbbed, and a fading tail-light winked and bobbed obeisance to the road. Then it was gone, and the sultry loneliness of night closed in about them. Jeff kicked a pebble savagely.

"Suppose I admit something, Miss Anderson? Suppose I confess that you are partly right; that in ninety-nine out of a hundred cases 'ghosts' are mere figments of the public imagination, conjured out of hallucination, embodied by mass hysteria—"

"Now it all comes out!"

"—but that one other time there are forces of which man has reason to be terrified? Frankly, I don't know what confronts us."

"Shall we," said Beth, "go to the house?"

Jeff stared at her long and angrily. Her shoulders were firm; it would be a pleasure to shake them—and her—until her teeth rattled, until the jarring of her gray cells knocked some sense into her head. It would be smart to send her on her way. But she had called him a quack. A humbug. . . .

"Very well!" he snapped. He turned on his heel. A thin breeze rustled in the darkling trees; her footsteps and his were a challenge to the warning night-sounds. Somewhere in the distance a dog howled piteously. And the intent eyes of unseen things seemed to follow them to the house.

THE house itself was like a vast, bland face. With covert eyes it studied their approach. Its sagging door was a mouth agape behind fanged colonnades.

Ever responsive to influences, Jeff felt a cold, an unearthly aura of evil emanating from this ancient dwelling. Despite her bravado, the girl must have felt it, too, for as he paused at the door, she shivered briefly. Jeff grinned.

"Something you et, no doubt?"

She was a ramrod of disdain. "The night is cold."

"Uh-huh. You're sure you want to go in?"

"I wouldn't miss it for worlds. What's supposed to happen here? Do white things with long, hairy claws hop out and yell, 'Boo!'?"

"If I couldn't be funnier than that," frowned Jeff, "I'd give up. No, sister, this business has the earmarks of the real thing. You've heard of poltergeists?"

"I've heard of the old malarkey."

"I wouldn't doubt it. Well, this isn't some. This is something that has petrified the localities for two years. And with good reason. Coupled with the 'manifestations' you seem to think I created have been a few sinister occurrences—including the disappearance of livestock and, on at least one occasion, the disappearance of a human being."

"The *what?* Impossible! They would have combed the house from top to bottom if they thought—"

"They *did* think! And they did comb; that's why I'm here. They found nothing but footprints. The footprints of the man who disappeared."

"I don't believe it!" declared Beth Anderson.

"That's okay by me. I can do without your charming trust. But there's one thing I will insist on having. Your obedience. We'll be here together all night; in the morning my assistant, Lafferty, will come for us. But until then, I shall expect and demand that you do as I say. Is that clear enough?"

Beth glanced at him derisively. A vagrant shaft of moonlight found her face; her lips were mocking.

"Clear," she gibed, "but not convincing, Maestro!" She turned suddenly and slipped into the house.

Jeff swore softly and followed her. That is how he was just in time to see that which had stopped Beth still in her tracks, just a few paces inside the portal. A glinting, narrowing, vanishing pencil of light on the floor of the hall before them. For an instant it was a ribbon gleaming golden on dusty oak; then it was gone.

Jeff sprang forward, a hand fumbling in his pocket, finding a flash.

"There! It came from that room on the right!" And with the girl behind him, he raced into what once had been a library, was now a high-lofted cavern ribbed with gaunt and empty shelves.

His flashlight stabbed the darkness, swung a circle about the room. There was no visible source for the light that had startled them. It was gone. The old house groaned and creaked, dust eddied beneath their feet and wove spirals in the firm, uncompromising glare of the flash-beam. Jeff's brow contracted.

"Perhaps you'll change your mind now? Or perhaps *I* caused that light?"

For a moment the girl's breath had been uneven, but it steadied now, and she laughed lightly.

"Tell me, Mr. Spook-chaser—is it usual for ghosts to leave footprints?"

"Footprints?"

"Shoe-prints, rather. On the floor before you—"

JEFF flashed his light downward. It was as she had said. Crossing the dusty floor were the well-defined tracks of feet shod in the modern fashion. From the hall to one of the bookcases ran the scuff-marks; at that point there was a confusion of prints—then nothing!

"I hate to appear difficult," murmured the girl demurely, "but if you did happen to have an accomplice in the house, Mr. McClary, and if there were a secret passage, say from that row of shelves to some hidden spot—"

Jeff's glare silenced her. But he nodded slowly.

"All right, sister. We'll see. Secret passageway, hey? You must be a detective story addict. The springs are generally concealed in the decorations, aren't they? Things like these fat cupids, for instance. I suppose if I were to press their chubby noses—like this!—a panel would swing out and—*Great guns!*"

He stepped back, shocked. For beneath the pressure of his fingers, the noses of the pudgy cherubs had given way and with a wheeze the entire book-panel was moving out!

Beth Anderson laughed at him triumphantly.

"Surprised, Maestro? You missed your vocation, I'm afraid. You should have been an actor. Let's go find your friend. Maybe he will have something to eat in his cubby-hole. Ah! There he is now!"

For the swinging case had stopped, exposing a long, dark corridor slanting downward. Off in the distance a tiny bell tinkled, and once again the darkness of the corridor and the library in which they stood was relieved by a flood of golden light as a door swung open at the end of the passageway. Footsteps pattered up the ramp. And as Jeff McClary's lips framed protests that were never spoken, a figure filled the opening before them.

A large man, broad of shoulder, deep of voice. And his words were an invitation.

"How do you do, my friends? This is an unexpected pleasure. May I welcome you to my little refuge?"

II

THE words Jeff finally found were not inspired. He goggled them at the stranger. And, "Who," he demanded, "are you?"

Beth smiled benevolently. "As if," she hinted, "he didn't know. So you're the ghost, eh? Well, I must say I'm disappointed."

"Don't mind her," said Jeff. "Who are you?"

The stranger stared at them, dubiously, in turn. A network of fine lines creased his forehead. Beneath beetling brows his eyes were keen and hard and shrewd. He said, "But this is no place for conversation, surely? Let us go below, to my laboratory. It will be more comfortable there."

"Laboratory?" said Jeff.

But the man did not answer. He turned, led the way down the sloping corridor. At a midway point he touched a button on the tunnel wall, the false door behind them closed softly. A few more paces and they entered a large, brightly illumined chamber, the sight of which brought a gasp to Jeff McClary's lips.

It was incredible, impossible, that here beneath an ancient, deserted farmhouse in the countryside of upper New York state, there should be a laboratory matching in

modernity, equipment and completeness those of wealthy research organizations, but it was so!

In sharp contrast to the fusty atmosphere above, it was fresh-aired, bright, and spotlessly clean here. One wall of the room was shelved to the ceiling with bottles of chemicals. Another was proud with neat, orderly rows of books and index files. Upon a central work-bench, Bunsens breathed and retorts bubbled. In a far corner of the room a weird-looking electrical appliance of indeterminate purpose hummed, whined and spat sparks of white fire. Jeff recognized a generator, a centrifuge, failed to identify a dozen other pieces of the research scientist's paraphernalia.

And the stranger was motioning them to chairs. "Be seated, *bitte.* This is an occasion. It is not often I have the pleasure of entertaining visitors. You are pleased with my little hideaway? Later I must show you the rest. I have also a comfortable bedroom and bath, a kitchen and study."

Beth was staring at Jeff, her eyes bewildered.

"I don't get it, Maestro. Why all this trouble just to give a few hicks duckbumpe?"

"Stubborn, aren't you?" sighed Jeff. "You're still barking up the wrong tree, sister. Don't ask me; better ask Mr.—Mr—?"

"Doctor," corrected their host quietly. "Dr. Franz von Torp." He bowed austerely. "At your service!"

"How do you do?" responded Jeff mechanically. "And I'm Geoffrey McClary. Professional magician, investigator of psychical phenomena, and—according to my companion, here—a first-class fake and humbug. The young lady is Miss Anderson, sob-sister on a metropolitan daily."

But Beth's eyes had widened. "Dr. von Torp?"

"That is correct, *fraulein.*" He smiled faintly.

"Not *the* Dr. von Torp? The professor who disappeared a few years ago after a row with the A.S.A.?"

A dark cloud swept suddenly across von Torp's brow; for a moment his eyes were sultry. But when he spoke, it was in a rich, creamy voice barely edged with bitterness.

"The same, *fraulein.* Unfortunately, the members of the American Scientists' Association saw reason to ridicule certain theories I placed before them. They took exception to my experiments in the field of time-travel; they also objected to several other purely scientific activities—"

"Time-travel!" interrupted Jeff. "Do you mean you really believe time-travel to be possible, Doctor?"

But the reporter in Beth Anderson had risen to the surface. Her pique at Jeff, her scoffing attitude, had completely disappeared. Her eyes were bright with excitement, her nostrils tense, as she scented story-stuff.

"Then Mr. McClary wasn't deceiving me? He really didn't know you were here? You built your laboratory out in this deserted countryside to get away from the world? Let, or caused, the natives to believe the house was haunted that you might be let alone—?"

There was a look of distaste in von Torp's eyes.

"In your very questions, *fraulein,* you should find answers to satisfy your curiosity. All that I have done has been done simply to avoid such interludes as this.

"My work is important. I have neither the time nor the inclination to devote precious hours to satisfying public curiosity. That is why I came to the country. The common people are stupid. By investigating, they could have learned that this deserted homestead had been sold to me. It would have been equally easy to learn that, periodically, I have supplies delivered here.

"But, no! They would rather accept the fantastic, supernatural explanation—which, I confess, I encouraged in mild fashion—that the house was 'haunted.' It is a humorous commentary on the human race that they should have solved the problem, finally, by paying a professional 'ghost-layer' to come here and track me down!"

Jeff laughed politely. "Doctor," he said quietly, "I'm interested in something you mentioned a moment ago. Your time-travel theories. Since coming here, have you discovered anything further?"

"Further?" Von Torp straightened

haughtily. "But of a certainty, sir! I have completed my task!"

"You—?"

"I have done that which my erstwhile colleagues derided as impossible! I have successfully bridged the chasms that lie between Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Behind you, my eager young friends, lies the evidence. The greatest invention ever achieved by man. My time machine!"

THERE was no denying the strangeness of the machine to which he pointed. It was unlike anything Jeff had ever seen before; if the crossing of time were not its reason for being, then surely, judging by its appearance, its purpose must be something equally unbelievable.

Its major elements were a large, circular platform, slightly raised above the floor-level; four upright metallic standards that, starting from equidistant points on the dais' perimeter and seemingly parallel, somehow succeeded in joining at the top in a twisting, helical formlessness that the eyes strained to untangle; and a dial-bedecked panel whereon were placed innumerable switches, contact buttons and levers.

Feeding it were two heavy cables, each as thick as a man's wrist. These were connected to the dynamos across the room. Jeff stepped nearer the machine. The dials, he noted, were at rest. Their purpose was undecipherable. Some seemed to be marked in meters, others in power units; a large one in the center was divided into quadrants ranging from zero to infinity.

"It works?" He turned eagerly to von Torp. "You're telling us the truth? It really works?"

"I have said so," said the scientist proudly. "But you wish proof. See, then!"

He moved swiftly to the machine. From his pocket he drew a penknife. This he placed on the platform. He adjusted the dials with infinite care, studied them, nodded.

"I have set the controls," he stated, "to project my knife two minutes into the future. A short time, merely that you may witness without boredom the operation of the machine. You comprehend that when I press the lever—*so!*—the knife will disappear—"

His hand thrust down a lever. Instantly there came a humming crescendo of sound from the generators. Blue mists crackled where the parallel uprights of the instrument met in weird embrace. A sheet of cold, white flame rippled across the gleaming platform.

"It's gone!" cried Beth.

"But naturally," nodded von Torp. "It has ceased to exist in our time. In the present. It has been projected into the future of two minutes hence." He released the lever and the current died away. "Now, if you will watch closely, you will see it return. Or, rather, it will stand still and we will catch up to it—"

Jeff stared, fascinated. As a boy, the question of time-translation had been one that intrigued his imagination; the coming of manhood, and the dedication of his life to the twin arts of prestidigitation and deception had strengthened, rather than diminished, his interest in the problem. The two minutes were like hours. He stood with bated breath, watching the platform. Beside him, even the girl was silent and intent.

SLOW seconds ticked away. Once Dr. von Torp made a slight movement; the scrape of his foot was thunderous loud. And then, suddenly—

"Th-there!" cried Beth. "There it is!"

Jeff's eyes leaped to the clock above the platform. Exactly two minutes had passed. And on the dais lay, shining and serene, von Torp's knife!

He spun to face the scientist. There was more than admiration in his eyes; there was awe and respect. "You've done it, Doctor! You've accomplished the miracle man has so long dreamed of! Congratulations, sir."

"Danke schoen!" said Dr. von Torp. His voice was soft, pleased, but there was a note to it that caused Jeff to look up suddenly. A note of dominant, gloating triumph. A softness with ominous overtones. "Your praise gratifies me, young man. You are one who understands. I know it will thrill you to be permitted to aid in this great work."

"Aid?" Jeff did not like that voice. Nor did the look in von Torp's

eyes please him. The shrewd intelligence was flavored, now, with something noisome. A weird, savage look; the crawling brightness of insanity.

"I shall grant you a great privilege," purred von Torp. "In thanks for your kindness, I shall let you select the era you wish to dwell in."

Even then, Jeff did not get it. It was too mad. But Beth Anderson was a woman. Logic toppled before the swift truth of her intuition.

"He means he's going to put *us* in that machine! We are to be his guinea pigs. Now I know what happened to that man who disappeared! He was used as an experiment. And I remember something else, too. The A.S.A. refused to listen to von Torp because a board of psychiatrists reported him to be mad—"

"That will do!"

Even before Beth's words could register on Jeff's stunned brain, von Torp's roar interrupted her. And the big man moved with amazing swiftness. His hand darted to a coat pocket, came out holding an ugly, snout-nosed Luger.

"You will step to the platform, and quickly! Both of you! *Ja,* I intend that you should become subjects for my experiment. The painstaking scientist never announces his results without many such. The *fraulein* is right; never was it my intention you should leave this room, except through the machine.

"You did not fool me with your fine words of praise. I know you came here to steal my invention, the fruits of my genius! But you have failed, hear? Into another time, you I will exile. No, don't move, Herr McClary! Else I shoot! On the platform. Quickly!"

His voice lifted, word by word. He was screaming, now, in a violent hysteria. And his finger was treacherously tense on the hair-triggered Luger. Thoughts whirled dizzily through Jeff's brain. There was no arguing with this insane genius. A countermove would spell swift death. Play up to him—that was the way. Pretend to obey, stall for time, try to find a propitious moment. . . .

"Very well, Doctor!" he said. "See, we are obeying. We are anxious to aid in your research work. It is a great honor to assist you. Tell us where to stand, what we must do—" And as the scientist, mollified, hesitated, "Move, you little idiot! I'll handle this!"

"What are you whispering?" demanded von Torp suspiciously.

"Nothing, sir. I'm just asking Miss Anderson not to delay. We're ready now, sir. Only we don't know just what we should do next. If you would be kind enough to advise us?"

There was a light of approbation in the scientist's eyes.

"You are an intelligent man, McClary. Maybe one day I shall recall you from your exile and have you report your findings. Now, let me see—does your interest lie more in that which has been, or that which lies before? Think before answering. The future holds more fascination, but the past offers the solution to many riddles."

Jeff said, "It's a difficult decision, Doctor. Had I a little more time— Couldn't we discuss it carefully? Lay a plan?"

"Ach, I have it! The very thing!" von Torp beamed suddenly. His hands flickered over the controls, made swift adjustment. "The dawn of intelligence, that is the era you should visit. The days of Earth's youth, when man was just creeping out of the morass of ignorance. I am good to you! It will be a glorious adventure."

Beth Anderson's breath broke sharply. "Do something. Before—"

Jeff silenced her. But his eyes, too, were tense. Time was growing short. He adopted a wheedling tone. "But that will be dangerous, Doctor. We go unprepared. We will need weapons. A pistol. . . . May I have yours?"

It almost worked. So intent was he on his project, that unconsciously von Torp nodded, started to pass the gun to Jeff. Almost their hands had met on the weapon when he divined Jeff's purpose. And he screamed in sudden fury.

"So! So you seek to trick me! Let go, young fool! Or I will—"

Then everything happened at once. For his hand was on the lever, but Jeff's leaping hand had gripped the Luger. Von Torp was the larger man, but Jeff's was the strength of desperation. For a breathless instant they hung poised in a battle of muscles and wills, while the girl clung,

tense and breathless, to Jeff's shoulder.

And then the gun, miraculously, was in Jeff's hand. But von Torp was scrambling after it like a maddened beast, charging onto the platform beside them. Back and forth they swayed, fighting tooth-and-claw for the weapon that meant life or death.

Neither won! For as Jeff strove to level the gun on his mad assailant, von Torp's hammerlike hand slashed across his wrist, jarred his arm away and upward. The automatic flew from his nerveless grasp. Just for an instant he glimpsed it soaring like a sullen, wingless bat across the room. Then it thudded into a nest of wiring there. Sparks flew. And a cold, white pain drove violently through his veins! His eyes were blinded by a swift effulgence. His body was twisted and wracked with innumerable needles of torment. There was a dull throbbing in his ears, the roaring cacaphony of bestial throats, a single, piercing scream, and the hoarse gasp of von Torp—

Then blackness. And silence.

III

BLACKNESS and silence. Then out of the blackness a growing light. A swirling, misty light that brightened with each passing moment. Out of the silence the birth of sound; distant at first, then nearing, swelling, threatening.

And Jeff opened his eyes.

He was lying, body wet and half submerged, in a bog that sprawled beneath a gigantic forest. Forest? A jungle, rather. And what a jungle! Surely no human eyes had looked ever before on a scene like this.

About and around him, like sky-groping columns, the thick and spongy trunks of massive ferns were a matted wall. Their mottled fronds were a webwork veiling the sky. Only a few wan fingers of sunlight filtered through that mossy fan.

From the bog rose a dank and steamy mist. Its odor was the stench of rotting flesh and vegetation. Jeff gagged at the sight and scent of it, seeing, as he now did, how the sluggish water was acrawl with foetid life. He staggered to his feet, dimly aware that beside him von Torp had awakened. He strode to Beth Anderson's side, lifted her limp figure.

Her eyes opened at his touch. For a mute moment an awe filled them. She stared about her in wild surmise.

"Where—" she whispered. "Where are we?"

"I don't know. But there's one damned sure thing I do know. We've got to get out of this swamp. It's a death-trap if ever I saw one."

And he took one slogging, mud-sucking step forward. But von Torp halted him with a cry.

"Stop!"

Jeff glared at the man savagely.

"Don't start anything now, von Torp. We'll settle our affair when we get out of this mess."

"Stand still, you young fool! Don't you understand what has happened? That gun shorted my machine. We've been hurled backward through time. Thousands of years. Into the garden of man's creation. And you're walking away from the gateway through which we entered. If we leave this spot, we lose forever our last hope of returning to our own time."

The mad scientist gnawed his nether lip. "Yet, you are right. It is impossible to stay here. Jungle fever would destroy us."

Jeff found it in him to marvel at von Torp's swift, cold logic. The man was assuredly mad, but he had the quick adaptability, the brain and reasoning-power of a genius. A look of concern deepened in his eyes.

"But what are we to do?"

"We must build a cairn to mark the spot on which we wakened. There should be rocks beneath this scum. Here—" He scooped the brackish depths with delving hands. "Just as I thought! Come now! If you would return to the earth you left behind, you must work."

Beth stirred in Jeff's arms. For the first time he realized the anomalous intimacy of their position. Her body was the only real and vibrant thing in a universe gone suddenly mad, unreal. She slipped from his grasp, bent to help find stones. He could almost read the nausea in her eyes as she thrust her arms into the noxious ooze, but she persisted.

"Earth?" she repeated. "You mean we are no longer on earth?"

"We're on earth," grimly. "But for our

knowledge of earthly conditions in this time, we might as well be on a distant planet. This is not the soft, tamed earth you knew. This is the wild, the savage morass of man's beginnings."

"You set the dials," said Jeff. "For what period?"

Von Torp stared at him levelly, a touch of mockery in his eyes.

"For a period I thought befitting your type, friend McClary. I had not anticipated becoming your companion in this adventure. But I thought it might be interesting to follow the progress of two such healthy, splendid young savages as you and Miss Anderson in a world unspoiled by civilization.

"However, now that I am here, we shall have an even more interesting experiment. We shall learn—"

"What period?" repeated Jeff.

"Look about you. Can't you tell by these ferns, the steaming fen, this crawling slime we wade through? I set my dials for that age when Nature's monstrous experiment in size and overlordship —the reptile—was dying from earth. When mammals were assuming control, and when an awkward, bi-pedal mammal was striving to gain supremacy over more powerful, but less intelligent, members of his phylum. When man, himself, was not one, but two or three or a half dozen species, each at war upon the other. For a period roughly a million years before the century in which we were born!"

IT was impossible, of course. Utterly mad and fantastic. Yet, looking about him, Jeff knew von Torp spoke the truth.

"What good will it do to build this cairn?" he asked. "We three, you say, were the only ones who knew of your laboratory. How are we ever to find our way back?"

"You forget, my young friend," said von Torp proudly, "that *I* build the time-machine. I can build another. I do not say it will be an easy task; it may be the labor of long years. But in the bowels of this young earth there are metals and I have the knowledge of their refining and casting.

"With your help, one day there shall be a means of returning to our time. But, mark you! I offer you eventual return, and my price for that gift is your wholehearted allegiance and labor. There must be no question of who is the master here!"

His words brought an instant, hot response to Jeff's lips. But the girl forestalled his reply.

"Yes, Doctor, but if our plan is to build a second machine, why need we mark this spot so carefully?"

"As security for ourselves. Over the ages, seas may rise and mountains topple. By sheer chance, we landed in a comparatively safe spot. We might just as easily have landed in the crater of a boiling volcano, fathoms deep in ocean waters, a quarter mile above earth."

"You mean—" gasped Jeff, "you mean you knew that? Yet you would have thrust us into the unknown, realizing the infinitely slim possibility of our surviving the passage?"

Von Torp shrugged petulantly.

"What would you have me do? The cause of science must be progressed. What is a human life—?"

"That's why your other victim—or was it victims—never returned! You damned, murdering madman! You want our help? Our obedience? I'd rather help a jackal find its carrion, obey the dictates of the devil—"

"Jeff!"

Jeff's anger faded. The girl's eyes were pleading for peace. Von Torp continued to doggedly heap stone upon stone, his face bland as if he had not heard the tirade. It occurred to Jeff McClary, suddenly, that for the second time since the beginning of this mad venture, Beth Anderson had called him by his given name. Which meant she must realize what he was now beginning to realize. That he and she were bonded together in this crisis against a common foe. A foe with whom, for the present, at least, expediency demanded they make armistice.

He said grudgingly, "All right! But remember, von Torp, this is a two-way agreement. Beth and I will barter our labor for your knowledge. But if you make any attempt to double-cross us—"

He let the threat die there, and bent to the job in hand. The cairn was growing slowly, but the sucking mud devoured stones like a hungry maw. It was a knee-high, truncated pyramid now, but the slow

ooze yielded fewer rocks to his scooping grasp.

He moved farther from the cairn each time he sought a new addition to the dolmen. It was back-breaking labor. Muggy heat surged up from the fen, the rank stench choked him, nauseated him. Once, as he chanced to glimpse his calves, he was surprised to see that the bottoms of his trousers already were frayed and torn. The cloth was stained with blood. He looked more closely, discovered with swift, sickening disgust that his legs were pendulous with bloated, loathsome leeches.

The jungle about him was alive with sound; the cries of unknown beasts and clamoring of birds merged shrilly with the insistent, sucking murmur of the swamp. Great, rasping, bladed ferns scraped drily above him. Once he started, hearing and feeling the mud beneath him quiver at the impact of some distant terror.

But he fought down his fears. All this was subordinate to the task confronting them. They must complete their cairn. Then they could seek higher, drier land.

From the swamp behind him came a piercing scream; a cry that whirled him about, sent him stumbling through mucky foulness on flying feet. A cry in a familiar voice. Beth's voice.

"Jeff! Jeff—help! This thing—!"

And von Torp's terror-stricken bellow. . . .

IV

IT was only rods to the small clearing wherein the others labored, but to Jeff it seemed miles. Snarled roots and matted fibers snared his feet, his steps foundered in a soft and yielding mire. But when finally he burst through the labyrinth of vines, it was to view a scene of horror.

Charging from the opposite end of the marsh came a weird, ungainly beast. A huge, elephantine monster, fully six feet in height at the withers, mottled flesh-and-gray in color. Its head was a vision from an evil dream. Long and ugly, with three pairs of hornlike eminences on the skull. One pair on the nose, another above the ruddy, porcine eyes, and again a pair where the head joined the body in swelling rolls of flesh.

These were the weapons with which, head lowered, it now threatened Beath and von Torp as it plunged toward them at express-train speed. Vicious, too, were its fangs. The canine teeth of its upper jaw, a pair of dagger-keen tusks, curving downward and outward from its dripping jowls.

As Jeff watched, the man and girl ended their terrified immobility. Behind Beth a massive tree, broad of bole, gnarly, offered easy footholds and safety. Jeff roared encouragement as she caught a low limb and clambered up.

Von Torp was close behind. Despite the grotesque monster's speed, it seemed as if there was ample time for both of them to escape its charge.

Then the beast bellowed! A coughing, irate snort hawked from its spume-white nostrils. And with that sound von Torp flew into weakling panic. He hurtled himself forward. Reckless of the girl's meager hold, thoughtless of everything except his own precious hide, like a gassed rat he clawed up the tree-trunk.

His weight and haste thrust the balance against the girl. For a dreadful moment Beth succeeded in maintaining a precarious hold. Then, with a tiny, choking cry, she fell!

It did not occur to Jeff that his next, instinctive action was gloriously foolhardy. There was no time to think things out, to measure consequences. There was only time to act.

As her slim figure toppled, he cried aloud, surged forward. In the back of his brain was one clear thought amid confusion. The beast's charge reminded him of something he had once seen enacted in a lazy Spanish town, a drama played before tiers of swarthy *afficionados*. That clumsy, lumbering beast . . . that lowered head . . . that blind, devastating charge . . . and the method of turning that charge.

Mud sucked and clung to his heels, but he ran. And as he ran he tore at the lining of his coat-sleeve; the deep, capacious lining of a professional magician's jacket. From it whipped a length of filmy silk, so fine that it could be drawn through a baby's finger-ring, but dazzlingly scarlet!

And as he ran, he cried aloud.

"Run, Beth! That way! To the higher ground!"

It was nip-and-tuck for a moment. The

girl dragged herself erect, turned without parley, fled in the direction designated. The dawn-beast thundered on, its great, splayed hoofs splashing, churning the fetid swamp. Its speed was greater than Jeff's, but Jeff was nearer the girl. And Jeff was angling between the creature and its prey, his crimson kerchief wide, unfolded, now. A bloody challenge against a background of drab.

THE beast recognized that challenge. Recognized and responded like the fighting bull of the twentieth century, the bull whose parent it might remotely be. Its tiny, bloodshot eyes rolled in their sockets. An instant it seemed to hesitate. Its body quivered in an agony of indecision. Then, with a second coughing snarl, it wheeled toward the flaming lure Jeff dangled before it.

Jeff's veins flowed with fire, but the sweat on his forehead was like the clammy kiss of death. Having tempted the charge, there was nothing left to do now but meet it. A swift glance after Beth. Each fleeting second offered her a greater margin of safety.

But himself?

The six-horned creature was perilously near. Jeff held the scarlet lure at arm's distance. This was like bull-baiting, but never had a matador faced a charging wall six feet in height. No time for gestures here, no opportunity for graceful swirls and curvetings. Yet he must hold his pose until the last possible moment.

Then its foul body-stench was in his nostrils, its splashing charge was drenching him with spray. Red, hateful eyes glared, not at him, but at the flaming cloth that antagonized it. And its hurtling body with within yards . . . feet!

Jeff roared, and fell away!

Just in time, for at that moment the swamp-thing's plated carcass splashed against his arms with bruising force. So close it brushed his shoulder that he glimpsed the stiff, tiny hairs of its nostrils, saw small things crawling in an old and unhealed wound in its foreleg.

And it bellowed again, for the kerchief, whipping from Jeff's grasp, was pierced and clutched by the monster's lethal horns! The damp, fine silk settled and clung before the creature's eyes like a veil, a masking, blinding and confusing hoodwink over its eyes.

Jeff tried to laugh, but the laughter choked in his throat. A chance in a million but it had worked! For the blinded beast was threshing farther and deeper into the gray swamp, bellowing, shaking its massive head in vain attempt to lose that swaddling mask.

He ran, then. He was not afterward sure how long or far he ran. All he knew was that he caught Beth, and they joined hands and fled like frightened children from the dim and evil marsh. Until the sluggish water thickened to mud, the mud turned coarse, became hard ground. Until they stood on the slope of rising hills, saw above them the clean, blue sky, and before them pasture-land waving shoulder-high with grasses.

It was not until, exhausted, they flung themselves to the ground in that cleaner, safer spot that they thought of their companion, of the coward who was the author of all their troubles. Beth looked at Jeff, and her eyes were anxious.

"Von Torp!" she said.

"VON TORP!" echoed Jeff. "Lord, yes! I forgot all about him. When that damned watchchamaycall it—"

"Dinoceras," said the girl unexpectedly.

"Huh? Dino which?"

"*Dinoceras ingens*. I did a Sunday feature once for the *World-Times*. On fossils. An amblyopod of the Cenozoic era. Which proves that von Torp was telling the truth. We have been hurled hundreds of thousands of years backward into time's secret ages."

"I never doubted him. That swamp we landed in was no Aquacade. But—" Jeff frowned. "We've lost him, damn his hide! I'm sure I couldn't find my way back to the cairn. But it serves him right. The skunk deliberately pushed you off that tree—"

"Which doesn't alter the fact," said Beth, "that we need his knowledge. We have to find him, Jeff. If we don't, we're going to spend our lifetimes playing caveman. And I, for one, don't know that I'd be such a great success—"

She stared ruefully at her clothing. Fifth Avenue exclusives, thought Jeff, had certainly proven themselves inadequate to

the exigencies of dawn-world life. In a hurry. His clothing was soaked, torn, ragged; hers was irreparably ruined.

Her tailored suit was out at the elbows, ripped up the seams, shredded in a hundred places by the thorn-fingers that had clutched at them as they plunged recklessly through the swamp. Her brushed-felt hat was gone. One shoe had lost its heel. Her hose were patches of fabric clotted to her legs by a network of cuts and scratches.

"And they were Nylon, too!" mourned Beth.

"If we live a million years," offered Jeff, "you can sue the DuPonts. One thing is sure, we can't go wallowing back into the damp-and-smelly 'til we've rigged up some new duds. Whether you like it or not, the only thing I can see to do is try playing caveman for a while. Find some safe place to set up light housekeeping. We know there are animals. If I can take a few hides and you can find a way to stitch 'em, maybe we can have a new, all-leather outfit—"

"—with mammoth-tusk buttons?" finished the girl. Jeff looked at her swiftly, admiringly. He had spoken with deliberate lightness of tone, hoping to lift her spirits with gaiety he, himself, did not feel. It was a revelation and a surprise to find that she had sporting-blood as ready as his own. Sporting-blood? Another word was better. Less pretty, perhaps, but more apt. This gal had guts!

He rose.

"Right, pal! And now, let's get going. See those hills over there? They look to me like they might be a good place to set up— What was that?"

Swift concern settled over the girl's face.

"Voices!" she faltered. "But surely—?"

"Look out!" Jeff yelled and moved at the same time. Out of the thick, high grass that towered above them like an ocean's green crest flew a dark object, a stone as large as a man's clenched fist. Only Jeff's hasty push saved Beth.

She fell, sprawling, the rock missing her by scant inches. But she was back on her feet in an instant.

"Wh-what is it, Jeff?"

"I don't know. Cut and run! For the hills!"

Another stone hurtled toward them. Another and yet another. And for the second time they fled, this time from a foe unseen. Through tall grass, sharp and high, they raced blindly, not knowing whether their headlong flight took them toward or away from their enemy. . . .

The storm of missiles thickened. Now there were not only rocks, but sticks as well. And once a forked stick, in the cleft of which a sharp stone had been rudely crammed, hummed menace as it whisked past Jeff's head. Even in that hurried moment, seeing it, Jeff's eyes opened in wonderment.

Such weapons were not the arms of beasts! And they had heard voices, too. Voices! That meant—

"Beth!" he gasped to the girl. "Beth—it's *men!*"

But there came no answer. For at that moment there sang through the air a whirling bludgeon. Its spinning edge glanced across Beth's temple, scored a welt there. Suddenly the girl's weight was heavy on his arm.

Jeff dropped beside her, horrified. His heart sank as he saw the bright blood burst from that deep gash, began to beat again as he saw that though her face had drained of color, her breast still rose and fell in measured cadence.

With a little cry, he took her into his arms, moved forward. He had taken no more than a half dozen steps when the grasses parted before him—and there, suddenly, he was face to face with his antagonists.

And they were men! Men as tall as himself, bearded and unkempt, savage creatures garbed in crude hides, bearing mean weapons of wood and stone, but—men!

Their leader raised his arm. To Jeff there came a sort of prescience. Some deep-rooted intuition warned him that if that arm were to fall, he and Beth would surely die. It must not fall! He lifted his voice in a great shout.

"No! No! We are friends!"

The creature before him could not possibly know the meaning of his words. But something in Jeff's voice stayed his arm. For a long moment he stood hesitant, brow furrowed in thought. Then he grunted short, unintelligible syllables. A host of followers swarmed in upon Jeff, pinned his arms to his side, wrenched the girl

from his grip. It was senseless to resist. The leader spoke again; Jeff was prodded forward. And the little caravanserai of dawn-folk moved toward the low hills, bearing with them two captives.

V

THEIR journey was not a long one. A half hour, maybe less; certainly not more.

It took them through the tangle of high grasses, up gravel-strewn slopes, into the very hills toward which they had striven. Beth was carried, but Jeff walked. From time to time one of his captors sidled up beside him, peered at him curiously. One gathered the courage to reach out, touch the cloth of Jeff's jacket. Jeff grinned encouragingly.

"Like it, bud? Latest thing out of *Esquire.*"

But at his words the warrior leaped back, startled; brawny hands tightening on a wicked-looking club. Jeff made no further overtures.

And as they walked, the afternoon dulled with storm clouds gathering in the west. The slow sun drowned in seas of gray, a wind keened from the hills and buried itself deep in the grassy moors. The world was young and strange and it whispered of things unknown.

Beth's eyes opened, dark with terror till they found Jeff. Then they lighted.

"Jeff! You're all right?"

"Yep. Take it easy, gal. They're humans, and they seem to be friendly enough."

"Humans! But—" Beth stared at the dawn-folk incredulously. "But that's impossible, Jeff! Von Torp said a million years. There were no true men a million years ago. Only ape-like creatures. The Java man, the Heidelberg man. These men look like the Cro-Magnon type. Intelligent. But that type didn't exist until 25,000 B.C."

"Then they must be mirages," grinned Jeff. "Shall I wipe my eyes and make 'em vanish?"

"But I read all about it. In—"

"You believe what you read, don't you? If it's all the same to you, I'll believe what I see. I always did say those paleontologists were a bunch of phonies. They dig up a molar, two ribs and a shin-bone, reconstruct the rest out of plaster and wire, and say, 'This is *homo whozis.* Period: April 7th, 547,862 B.C. Last seen riding a pterodactyl down Neolithic Boulevard.'

"Nope, it doesn't work that way, sugar. These guys are *men,* not monkeys. A little on the Tarzan side, perhaps, but still men. See that one over there? The one in the ox-hide G-string. He's laughing at us. Probably thinks we have a funny accent. Well, maybe he's right. But the fact is—he can think. And he can laugh. Man is the only animal with that ability. And," he added thoughtfully, "a good thing!"

Beth said dubiously, "Yes. Either that or von Torp made a mistake. His machine may not have been as efficient as he believed. But where are they taking us?"

"Home, I guess. To meet the Big Chief. The leader of this outfit seems to be puzzled by our appearance. We're a little something out of the ordinary, you know. And—I'm betting this is the metropolis now. Doesn't look much like Broadway, does it?"

THEY had rounded a sharp outcropping of rock. And before and slightly above them had appeared, suddenly, a row of lodgings centered about a small cleared space. Lodgings was a poor word. They were really caves in the rocky ledge, some large, capacious, some mere niches. They were alike in that entry was afforded each by crudely lashed wood ladders, that each was guarded by a huge boulder so placed that in an emergency it could be hastily moved to barricade the cavern, and that in the mouth of each dwelling-place now stood men, women and children of the dawn-world community.

At the mouth of the largest cave stood a huge man, more elaborately bedecked than his fellows. There was about him, in his looks and in his rich, full voice, an aura of authority. He cried a command to the incoming party, and that party's leader answered. Beth's bearers set her down. Jeff moved to her side, and together they stood silently awaiting the inspection of the clan's chieftain.

It was a long inspection. It began with questions; phrases Beth and Jeff knew

to be queries only by the rising inflection of the clan-father's voice. The words were unintelligible; the language was apparently a rudimentary tongue for the clicks and grunts that characterized it were monosyllables.

Jeff shook his head. "Sorry, friend. We don't get it. Sign-talk, maybe?" He tried to remember what little he knew of this means of converse. It wasn't much. A circular rubbing motion on the belly signified hunger—but a hell of a lot of good it did him to know that.

Beth cried, "Jeff!"

The leader had transferred his attention to her. A scowl creased his forehead. He spoke a few, excited words to a companion and pointed at Beth's legs. Then he called out, and from the back of the huddled throng shuffled an aged woman. The others gave way before her as she advanced, moving aside with swift, repellent gestures, avoiding her touch.

It was not hard to see why. Her face, her arms and body, particularly her legs, were scabbed and scrofulous. A network of ugly veins empurpled her limbs where the skin was peeling away.

The leader pointed at her, then at Beth. There was a look of loathing on his face. He spoke a command, and the tribespeople fell away from Beth. One man raised a pointed stick. . . .

Light dawned on Jeff.

"Beth," he said suddenly, "take off your stockings!"

"What?"

"Take them off. Don't you see—they think you've got the same disease as this old crone. Leprosy . . . scrofula . . . eczema. . . . I don't know what it is. You're taboo. They'll drive you away, probably. Take them off!"

The girl nodded, bent over swiftly. The hose were in shreds anyway; she stripped them off with a quick motion, tossed them away.

A concerted gasp broke from the lips of her watchers. The one nearest to whom the hose had fallen howled and fled. Even the chieftain took a backward step, his eyes wide. Then a new look came over his face. Fear, mingled with vengeance and hatred. He raised a quivering arm, pointed at Beth.

"Ngah!" he cried. *Ngah lu!"* Then broke into a perfect torrent of speech; voice hard and accusing.

"Ngah!" echoed the tribesmen. And as swiftly as they had retreated, they moved forward again. In an instant they had seized Beth, were hauling her forcibly toward the center of the clearing, where stood a squat stone fireplace. One man, at the leader's order, darted to the caves.

"Hey, wait a minute!" roared Jeff. "What is this?"

But no one paid him the slightest attention. Every eye was turned on Beth; every accusing mouth was hurling invective at her. Jeff's efforts to reach her side were met with angry shoves and glances. The messenger returned from the caverns. Dangling from his right fist was a long, limp object. At a word from the chieftain, he hurled this to the ground before Beth. And the cries redoubled in volume.

"Ngah! Ngah lu!"

And Jeff saw, at the same instant as the girl, what it was that the runner had brought from the caves. The body of a snake. Beth's voice rose shrill above the clamor of the tribe.

"Jeff—they think *I'm* a sort of snake, too! A—a snake-woman. When I took off my hose, they thought I peeled off my old skin, like a snake does. They—"

Their intention was plain. For suddenly the chieftain picked up the snake, whirled it thrice around his head, loosed a great, vengeful shout, and cast it into the baking coals of the fireplace. A brief, hissing crackle—and the snake was charred ash!

AND now a score of hands were eagerly heaping fuel on the central fire; making an altar, a pyre, of what usually must serve as a warmth- and cooking-place. Glowing embers kindled dry wood, dry wood spat bright tongues of flame; the pile grew higher and yet higher.

The blaze was fanning now. Soon it would be a red holocaust of flame. When it reached that point, Beth would share the slain snake's fate. Like it, she would be a sacrifice to the ignorance and fear of these aborigines.

Unless—

Jeff's mind worked at lightning speed. There was no sense in pitting his strength

against that of the dawn-men. Their weakest member would be more than a match for him. Nor could he, not knowing their language, argue with them.

Neither force nor reason, then, could stay them; a single hope remained. To play upon their fears. To somehow make them believe—Jeff started suddenly. He had it! His hands again sought the lining of his coat, the secret pocket in the increasingly valuable jacket of the professional man-of-magic. For a moment he could not find what he wanted; a fang of fear slashed through him. Had Lafferty forgotten—?

Then the pellets were in his palm. A half dozen or more of them. Small, gray-brown pellets of a chemical composition known to any Twentieth Century adult. Jeff used them when giving benefit performances to children. They created a spectacular, harmless display.

These creatures who, even now, were dragging Beth closer and closer to the pyre were adult in size—but children in mind and thought. Beth's head turned, her eyes found his, her voice wailed, "Jeff—stop them! They—"

Jeff cried aloud, and raised his arm. The eyes of the tribesfolk sought his face; no one noticed that he threw, or that tiny brown pellets left his hand, flew toward the altar. They heard his voice, and followed the pointing of his finger.

"Rise!" cried Jeff. "Rise, O spirit of the Serpent. Rise!" It did not matter that they could not understand his words. His intonation was thunderously hollow, and his eyes flamed. His hands directed their attention; the fine, swift hands of the prestidigitator. "Rise and come forth from the flame, O Serpent!"

And as at his command, something writhed in the red heart of the fire! Two . . . four . . . a half dozen gray, twisting bodies rolled and stretched and grew, began sliding from the flame that nourished them in thick, undulating curves.

A cry rose from the watchers. But hatred was gone from the cry, now. It was in sheer terror that they screamed. The chemical "serpents" grew, spread, seemed to crawl from the heart of the flame, wriggled over the altar; blind simulacra of life slithered across the ground.

THE cave-men fled. With fearful, awe-struck bleats they scurried to their ladders. Within seconds, Jeff and the girl stood alone, unguarded, in a deserted clearing. Above them, squealing figures scrambled for the cave-mouths. Beth sobbed a sigh of relief.

"I take back everything I ever said, Maestro. From now on, parlor magic is my favorite sport. Let's get out of here before these Chemcraft snakes blow up and float away."

She reached for his hand. But a new thought came to Jeff McClary. He stopped her.

"Hold it! I've got a better idea. We're two babes in the woods out there. We might as well feather our nests while we can. Make a few friends—"

"What do you mean?"

"Watch!"

Jeff stepped forward. Once again his cry drew the attention of the tribesmen. Awed eyes watched as he bent to seize the foremost of the brown "crawlers" in his bare hand.

"Abracadabra!" intoned Jeff magnificently. "Tenneseevalleyauthority! Yoicks and tally-ho! Scram, snakes!"

And he made a swift, grinding gesture. The powdery "serpent" crumbled, became a thin, dusty film. He picked up the next, and the next . . . strode forward and trampled the remainder, grinding them to ash beneath his heel. The snakes vanished.

And Jeff stepped back, smiling triumphantly. Arms high, fists unclenched, he beckoned to the wide-eyed children of the dawn-world. And their leader read the right meaning into Jeff's gesture. He raised his own ham-like paws—and cautiously began to descend the ladder.

Those behind him took courage from his daring. One by one they deserted their perches. In the space of minutes, they were gathered before Jeff; a wide, semi-circle of awed, respectful humans. The chieftain moved nearer to Jeff. His lips were tense, but his manner purposeful. There was a sort of majesty to his movements; it was as if he offered himself as hostage for those he led. He muttered a word in pleading tones. Then his great knees bent—and he knelt in the dirt before Jeff.

Jeff moved to his side. A little moan

escaped the lips of the watchers. The chieftain did not stir, but there was perspiration on his brow and on his neck. And then—

Jeff placed a hand on the kneeling leader's elbow; gently raised him from his attitude of obeisance!

As he did so, breath returned to the onlookers like the rising of a swift breeze. Some tortured throat loosed a great cry of gladness; others took it up. Laughter rose and fell in cascades about them; loudest of all was the booming, shaken laughter of the reprieved chieftain.

With a joyful shout he charged forward. And before Jeff could stop him, the clan father was rubbing his broad, bearded face across Jeff's in an ecstasy of gratitude, friendship and abasement!

Jeff opened his mouth to protest, got a mouthful of coarse, sweaty hair, choked and pleaded, "Hey, cut that out! Beth—do something! Before he smothers me!"

But Beth was having troubles of her own. Like Jeff, she was the center of an admiring circle to each member of which the rubbing-of-faces seemed a paramount duty. Between gasps, "Don't look now," she cried hysterically, "but I think we've been elected honorary members of the tribe!"

VI

THUS Beth and Jeff, daughter and son of the Machine Age, became members of a Dawn World clan. And if their ways were a constant marvel to the cave-folk, no less strange were the ways of their new comrades to them.

Despite the apparent savagery of the cave community, its citizens had many refinements Beth and Jeff felt certain the Twentieth Century savants had not suspected. Light, for one thing. At nightfall, the two young adventurers were allotted sleeping space in a large, central cavern shared by a half dozen others; to their vast amazement they learned that the cave was kept dimly illumined by spluttering animal-fat candles! Poor, ill-shapen things, true—but candles, nevertheless.

"And that in itself," mused Jeff, "is proof of their intelligence. When you stop to consider that candles were a standard means of illumination as late as our 17th Century! And—and look, Beth! On the wall! Those paintings!"

They were dull and indistinct in the candle's gleam. But Beth nodded excitedly.

"I thought we'd find something like that. They've found paintings like those in a half hundred places. Man's artistic sense developed early. You see, those paintings are *colored,* Jeff! There's one thing we must learn to do—and quickly! We must learn their language. It *can't* be hard!"

But it was more difficult than they expected. Their first—and for a long time their only—means of communication with the clans-folk was by signs. To their ears, for a long while, the tongue of the Oonts (for such they eventually learned to be the name of the tribe) sounded like nothing but the grating of tree-boughs in the wind, or—as Jeff put it—"Like the hokey agony of a pair of pro wrestlers!"

The tribal father was no help to them. Having done his part in inducting the two strangers into the clan, he proceeded to forget, with aboriginal ingenuousness, the terror which had caused him to do so and, indeed, their very existence! They sought help elsewhere; found it finally in the persons of two younger members of the clan. A girl who was called Luuma; a young man, 'Aka.

From these two, by the tedious process of pointing at objects and listening carefully to the syllable by which the instructors designated it, Beth and Jeff painfully began to accumulate a vocabulary. The nouns were not too difficult to establish, but for some time the verbs defied them. Nor did it make their problem any the easier that neither of them had ever studied the basic theories of philology.

But it was Beth who, finally, made the great discovery that smoothed their path to understanding.

"I'm beginning to see now, Jeff! We've been trying too hard to find true verbs in their sentences. The truth of the matter is—there are none! Except for those few onomatopeic verbs we've already distinguished. Like *'tlap'*, for 'eat', and *'ongh'* for sleep—"

"Both," commented Jeff, "signs of good manners, no? If you don't smack your lips or snore like a hog—"

"They form their verbs," continued

Beth, "by putting two nouns together! For instance—you know their word for 'here'?"

"Umn."

"Yes. And 'there'?"

"Let's see. *'Nuk'*, isn't it?"

"That's right. Well—the verb 'to go' is *'umnuk'!* 'Here-there'. It also means 'to walk'. And 'to run' would be *'umnuk-ul'...'Here-there-wind'."*

"And the past tense?"

"'Umnuk-or'. 'Here-there-sun'. One day ago. And if they mean two days ago they say, *'umnuk-or-or'*. See?"

Jeff solemnly raised her right arm above her head. "The winnah," he proclaimed, "and Dawn World champeen! Beth, I think you've got something there. And now, if you'll pardon me, I'll be on my way. I've got to—er—*'umnuk-ga-li-rrg!'"*

"You—you've which?" repeated Beth. "'Here-there-eye-man-dog—'?"

"What a poor scholar!" Jeff shook his head. "Can't you understand plain Oont? I said I've got to see a man about a dog. . . ."

BUT Beth had found the key; it was not difficult now for the two young people to unlock the mysteries of the Oont language. And in doing so they won closer to the clans-folk than they had previously been able to do. They had been fed and housed as a matter of course; now, able to converse with their hosts, they entered directly into the life of the clan.

The tribe, they found, operated as a simple commune. Each man worked for the good of all. The men hunted, fished, made week-long voyages afield in search of edible fruits and grains; the women cooked, maintained a certain degree of sanitation about the caves, raised the children and tended a few domesticated animals. A lank-uddered creature with scrawny shanks and thick, shaggy hair in whose bony frame it was hard to envision the cow that would some day evolve. But it gave milk, a strong, curdy liquid that pleased the stomach even if it did not tempt the nostrils.

The women, too, scraped and tanned the pelts brought back from the hunt by their males. These they used as mats, as sleeping furs and clothing. Beth shrewdly bartered bits of her Twentieth Century clothing for these sturdier hides; a short time later she proudly presented Jeff with a garment similar to that worn by the other tribesmen.

Jeff put it on. When he strode from the cave, stood before Beth for inspection, he grinned ruefully, "How do I look?" he demanded. "As if I didn't know. And what do I use for pockets? Hell's bells—"

"You look," Beth told him frankly, "like Mr. Din. You know, G. Din, of Kipling fame? . . . 'nothin' much before, an' rather less than 'arf o' that be'ind.' But you'll get by. You *could* use a little more hair on the arms and legs. That seems to be fashionable around these parts. But these things will stand more wear and tear than the things we've been wearing. I forgot about pockets. I'll cut up your old coat and use the cloth."

"My old coat? Why not yours? Say, where is your old stuff, anyway? Not that you don't look O.K. in that fur ensemble, but—"

He stopped suddenly. Old Krua, one of the women with whom Beth had bartered, appeared from her cave. There was a proud smile on Krua's face; there was hauteur in her stride. She wore the expression of a woman who is wearing a Schiaparelli model—and knows it. She had a new decoration about her head. A headgear soft and colorful and filmy, and strangely out of keeping with harsh, primitive existence. A garment that billowed softly in the breeze as she walked. . . .

"Oh!" said Jeff. "Oh, I see!" And he grinned, no longer self-conscious in his abbreviated loin-clout. "Nice going, sugar. Still, you *might* have told her the right way to wear 'em."

"You," declared Beth stiffly, "are hateful!" And she blushed. It was, thought Jeff, a particularly attractive blush.

SO days sped by, and though they allowed themselves to be diverted by affairs of the clan, by the fulfilling of their own immediate needs, even by occasional periods of relaxation and amusement, Beth and Jeff never forgot the one important problem that confronted them. That of somehow returning to their own time.

"But to do that," said Jeff, "we must first locate von Torp. And so far we haven't been able to find hide nor hair of

him. Nor the cairn. 'Aka, you didn't have any luck today?"

The young warrior whom Jeff had enlisted in their cause shook his head. He spoke, as Beth and Jeff now quite fluently did, in the Oont tongue.

"The swamp is large, Snake-Killer. But we shall find the rocks-on-rocks some day. But the other No-Hair man—" He shook his head dubiously. "He is probably dead. None can live in there for long. None but they who talk with beasts."

"Who?" That was something new. "Who are they?"

'Aka rolled his eyes and spat. It was a sign Jeff recognized; the conventional action that bespoke something vile, unmentionable, distasteful to the Oonts.

"The little monkey-men, Snake-killer. Our enemies. The slant-heads. They are men-not-men. Being not-men they talk with the huge ones that scream."

Jeff stared at Beth curiously. "Double-talk?" he hazarded. "Men-not-men?"

But there was a light of understanding in the girl's eyes.

"Maybe I know what he means, Jeff Paleontologists say that the races of man did not follow each other in clean-cut succession; they overlapped. The primate evolved into the ape-man, a creature of rudimentary brain; this thing, in turn, gave way to a creature another short step higher in the scale of life—the Neanderthal man. Then, for thousands of years, the Neanderthal Man and the Cro-Magnon type waged war upon each other. The Cro-Magnon man, the true man, won out eventually because his was the greater intelligence. But it was a long and bitter and bloody period, because the Neanderthal man was the stronger and more bestial.

"These 'men-not-men' 'Aka speaks of may be the ape-like Neanderthaler. It is extremely likely that they should dwell in hidden, jungled places; quite possible they should speak the language of the reptiles—"

"But you said yourself—"

"I know. That the great reptiles should all have disappeared by now. But I was wrong, and the twentieth century students were wrong, too. They are not all dead. I've seen gigantic footprints in the ooze at the edge of the lowlands; we've all heard their screaming at nights. Some still live. Dying remnants of a gross experiment that failed. And those few, if 'Aka is right, may have intercourse with the man-things on a lower plane than ours."

Jeff scowled. "Then in that case—" He stopped.

"Yes?"

"Nothing." He did not want to tell her his thought. That if the jungle were peopled with creatures like these—monsters of an even earlier age, ape-things whose friends the monsters were—then there was little hope indeed that von Torp still lived. And if von Torp were dead, then they were forever trapped in this age.

Were she to stop and consider, she would realize it herself. But hope is a spark that needs much quenching. So long as she did not realize, he would not tell her.

But they must not give up without making one final, strong bid for the restoration of the world they had known. He turned to 'Aka.

"'Aka, the men are home from the hunt. Our clan is strong and fearless. Will the men follow me into the marsh tomorrow? To make one last and thorough search for the heap of rocks-on-rocks, or the lost No-Haired One?"

'Aka said dubiously, "They fear the swamp, O Snake-Killer."

"I will pay them," Jeff tempted them. "I will give them a night of great joy. I will make for them the pebbles to disappear. The shells will hide in their mouths and ears and noses. I will even cause the flowers to bloom from old Krua's hairless pate."

'Aka's eyes sparkled. This was indeed temptation. Jeff's magic was a constant source of delight to the Oonts. One of which they never wearied. A full night of magic. . . .

"I shall speak to them, Snake-Killer. If they dare, we shall hunt tomorrow at sun-up."

VII

AND at sun-up they stood, twoscore strong, on the low, flat plain where the rolling countryside met the steamy edge of the fen. Twoscore warriors of

the Oonts, armed for battle. Looking upon their weapons, Jeff felt oddly proud. For it was he who had brought to the tribesmen new inventions for the waging of war.

"Pretty good, eh?" he said to Beth. He slapped the stock of the weapon he bore. His fingers plucked a rawhide; it vibrated with a throaty, thrumming sound. "This ought to take care of any stray Neanderthalers, no?"

Beth sniffed disparagingly.

"You act as if you had invented it. After all, the cross-bow was in use as far back as the Tenth Century!"

"Which," pointed out Jeff, "won't come along for a million years, more or less. Interesting point there. Was I the original inventor of the cross-bow? If so, how come I learned about it in an age wherein it already existed when I was born? Which came first, the chicken or—?"

"Stop it. You're making me dizzy." Beth stared at their comrades-in-arms. "Are you sure they can handle those things? After all, they've only been using them for a day or so. Bows are tricky."

"Don't worry about that. These lads can handle anything that requires only strength and keenness of eye. 'Aka can crank this job, shaft it and lay an arrow into a bull's-eye before you can say *homo sapiens*. Well, it's light enough to get going. 'Aka!"

"Yes, Snake-Killer?"

"Divide the men. You take one party; I'll lead the other. We'll meet here when the hills swallow the sun. You know what to look for?"

"Yes, Snake-Killer."

"Good! Let's go, then."

The parties set off in opposite directions. Jeff's moved toward the lower part of the swamp. Dawn was still an echo, pale and distant, of the night it had vanquished. The sunlight dimmed as they entered the sucking fen; grim sounds of life rose about them; the Oont tribesmen glanced uneasily at the greasy waters, the massive, dripping ferns, clutched their new weapons tighter as for assurance. But they moved forward.

"I chose this direction," explained Jeff, "because I remember that when we ran from the swamp we were steadily moving uphill. It's all a matter of luck, of course. Luck, and persistence. There may be miles of this swamp. But we know that somewhere is that cairn. And somewhere near it is — must be, if he is alive — von Torp. He can't desert it. It's the gateway to our own time.

"We must find him. Now that we have allies, we can build a duplicate machine. Return to— *What was that?*"

"That" was a sound that sent swift shudders running up and down the girl's back. Nor was she alone in her fears. The tribesmen halted in their tracks; one or two of them retreated a pace to Jeff's side; others looked nervously about as if seeking a place of refuge.

The sound was that of a pack in full cry. Snarling howls, the rasping of angry throats, and from afar—coming nearer with each passing moment—the splash of many racing feet.

Toek, ordinarily least fearful of the clansmen, was beside Jeff. He fingered his bow, darted swift glances back the way they had come.

"We are not safe here, Snake-Killer. It is they-who-run-in-packs."

Jeff's jaw tightened.

"We are as safe here as anywhere. Form as I taught you. Prepare your bows. Fire when I give the word."

Toek stirred rebelliously.

"They are mighty fighters—"

"So am I." Jeff stared him down. "Do as I say!"

Toek's eyes fell. He shrugged and turned away. In another moment he had gathered the clansmen together, formed them into the double line Jeff had taught them to use. An adaptation of the "British square," wherein the front line knelt to fire, the second line fired over their heads from a standing position.

Jeff took his place in the line, bow taut and ready, arrow resting in its channel. These were crudely hewn arms, but better than anything the cave-folk had ever known before. Jeff could have given them the simple long-bow. But this was more accurate.

The baying was very near now. And above the splash of racing feet, above the snarling of the pack, Jeff heard a second sound—the snuffling snort of an animal fleeing in terror. The thick, wheezy gasp-

ing of a beast straining itself beyond endurance. This, then, was the pursued. What it was, or what its pursuers, Jeff could not guess.

THEN the full drama burst upon them! From the dank tangle burst a tank-like figure, a flesh-brown creature about the size of a small rhinoceros, and not unlike that animal in appearance save that it had no horn; its only weapons were flaring tusks something like those of a wild boar. Heavy, unwieldy, its great pads sank in the morass with every step; only fear gave it the strength to pull itself free and shamble on.

The howling grew more shrill, more menacing—and the fern fronds were suddenly parted in a dozen places. Dim brown shapes appeared. Two . . . a half dozen . . . a score! Jeff looked upon the beast that ran in packs . . . the ancestor of the wolf. Larger, heavier built, with a broad, prehensile head and dripping fangs; blood-red of eye and singularly intent on the kill.

Someone gasped at Jeff's shoulder, and it was Beth.

"*Dromocyon vorax!* But it should not be in here. It is a plains animal. According to the books—"

"Never mind the books! Which is the more dangerous? We don't want the winner turning on us."

"They are! The—the wolf-things. The other one is *coryphodon hamatus*. An herbivorous swamp-creature."

"Okay!" Jeff spun to his followers. "Let 'em have it! The furry things. All right—*now!*"

And with the command, a score of cross-bows *spanged!* as one.

Not vainly had Jeff boasted of the archery ability of his dawn-men. Twenty shafts sped through the gloom—and twenty shafts found their marks in one or another of the wolf-beasts. The foremost, logical target, leaped high, howling once terribly, and that tensing of his muscles was his last move. He was dead even before his bristling body dropped back into the roiled waters. A half dozen more dropped silently, suddenly, in their tracks, dead of arrows that had found their hearts. One beast tumbled, screaming with pain, gnawing at an arrow that pierced his thigh and tripped him as he would have fled. Another pawed, whimpering with strange, muted cries, at a shaft that locked his slavering jaws together; as he turned to run blindly from this weird foe, a second arrow bladed his breast. A bright circle of blood spilled from his clenched lips, he fell, kicked furiously for a moment, and lay still.

The grotesque amblyopod fled on, unknowing that its pursuers lay stricken with sudden death. A single furry cur raced after it; for a time the splash of feet echoed through the swamp, the baying of a lone wolf—then there was deathly silence.

Silence even from the Oont tribesmen. For a moment. Then the realization of what they had done burst upon them with shattering force. Jeff could see the dazed incredulity in their eyes turning to glad surprise . . . then to pride . . . and to joy.

They, weak bipeds who, heretofore armed only with crude sticks and stones, had ever fled for their very lives before the savage beasts of plain and jungle, had become the masters of all creation! New arms had been given them; long, shafted arms with which they could strike terror to all who defied them.

It was a heady knowledge. Toek opened his lips and shouted aloud. It was a shrill, a challenging cry. It was the cry of man, realizing, for the first time, that he is to rule the world. His fellows took up the shout. Pride there was in their rejoicing, pride and glory and daring. Their eyes were aglow, and a new, subtle lift had come into their shoulders.

No more did they skulk and face the swamp with dim, uncertain eyes. They gathered about Jeff, gesturing, clamoring, boasting. "Did you see, Snake-Killer? Three I slew!" "—one motion of my arm, O Snake-Killer, and—" "Let now the men-not-men approach us; we will show them—"

Jeff smiled. There was no longer reason to doubt the valor of his comrades-in-arms. Strength they had always had; with this new assurance to bolster it—

"Our search is not yet ended," he said, "nor even begun. Let us be on our way. Forward!"

And forward moved the march.

DAWN turned to morning, morning brightened to noon. The heat of the day came down to meet the stifling, rising sultriness of the swamp; the fen-stench thickened and sluggish creatures lazed in pools of turgid water.

Still the quest continued, but with each dragging hour Jeff's spirits fell another notch. Nowhere in all the miles they had covered had he seen anything, any sight, any scene, that reminded him of the spot wherein von Torp's time machine had first abandoned them.

Their march was not without incident. Once as they passed beneath a huge live-oak, a sinuous pseudo-branch uncoiled itself and slithered out, great pendulous head dripping toward the back of one of the unsuspecting warriors.

There was no time to cry out. Jeff had only time to raise his ready cross-bow, take hasty aim and loose the bolt. Even as the great snake opened its jaws, the arrow whirred to its mark. Thick ichor spurted from the thing's nostrils, the warrior screamed, leaped backward to safety; then the snake, its tiny brain pierced by the lethal arrow, flailed into motion like a gigantic, many-jointed scythe.

Its yards-long tail threshed through the ferns like the whip of doom, water churned and thick branches snapped before it, and the little band of searchers fled. How long it took to die, they did not know; it was still twisting and rolling in its death agony after the last of them had passed it by.

Again a giant turtle, its shell-plated carcass ten feet in diameter if an inch, attracted their attention. It was crawling with painful slowness from the soft mud to the waters; beneath its weight the mud shifted and gave, making its progress even slower. Toek tested his new weapon on it, but that armored back shattered the slim shaft, sent it ricocheting off into the underbrush. For a time, the others amused themselves by striving to place a shaft in one of the monster's few vulnerable spots; an eye, or the roll of soft flesh where its throat joined its nether shell. But at last the turtle, petulant at the tiny, jarring motes that rained upon it, withdrew into its shield and would not come forth. So they moved on.

And noon gave way to steamy afternoon; the rays of the sun struck pearls of rose and scarlet on the oily waters, then these and all colors began to dull as dusk gathered in the west. And Toek came to Jeff.

"It is time that we turn back, O Snake-Killer. It will soon be night. We must leave the swamp."

And Jeff sighed.

"I guess you're right. Lead the way, Toek. Up to higher ground. We'll return—"

"Jeff!"

"Yes?"

"Listen! Over there to the right. The sound of a voice. And—and hammering?"

She was right! New hope sprang suddenly into Jeff's eyes. "Wait here! I'll see!" He darted through a veil of heavy fern, fought clear of bull-briers that clustered at his shoulders, his legs, broke through a final barrier of green. And then—

And then he was once again in a spot he remembered! The clearing where they had lost von Torp. Lost him—and now found him again!

For as he struggled through the brush, a heavy figure turned to face him; a familiar face stared at him across open rods; surprised eyes appraised him with vast wonder. A glad cry leaped to Jeff's lips. He sprang forward. "You're safe, von Torp! Thank Heaven! We were afraid—"

Von Torp cried swifter warning. "Stand still, you fool! Another step and you will die!"

VIII

JEFF stared at the man. Then, eyes roving slowly, he saw that which, in his eagerness, he had not noticed before.

Von Torp was not alone in the marshy glen. He had companions. Scores of them. Squat, hairy, slant-browed creatures, ape-like, naked save for the fur that covered them from crown to heel. Long-armed, splay-fingered, with thumbs too short to be brought into apposition; bandy-legged.

As he watched, spell-bound, the silence shattered. From the throats of the mad scientist's companions broke a bedlam of squealing chatter. It was like the high and

nasal scolding of a Capuchin monkey, but there was something ominous about it, too. Evil, threatening, direful.

Then von Torp cried a syllable—and the chattering ceased! With it ended, at the same moment, the slow, sidling motion with which a half-score of the ape-creatures had been closing in on Jeff. They froze in their tracks, obedient to the German's command. And von Torp smiled. It was not nice to look upon, that smile.

"My acquaintances are zealous protectors. Were I not here to stop them, Herr McClary, they would tear you into bits."

Jeff gasped, "The—the Neanderthalers!"

"Ah, you recognize them? Your erudition amazes me, almost as much as your appearance. You appear—" Here his eyes studied Jeff's garb with covert amusement "—to have reverted to type. Crude garments. And a weapon! *Ach,* how we adopt ourselves, *nicht wahr?*"

Then his tone changed abruptly, a note of concern dominated his query.

"But the girl? Where is she?"

"She—" Jeff was on the verge of admitting Beth's presence, of telling von Torp about the band of Oonts waiting for him within earshot distance. But the bell of caution was ringing softly; he temporized. "She is safe. Why?"

"You must get her. You must bring her here."

"Why?"

"You must get her." Von Torp repeated the words in a thick monotone; Jeff noted with gathering amazement how his eyes seemed to have glazed, become hard and worried. And, as before, he realized suddenly how perilously close to violent insanity was the scientist's genius. "You must bring her to me."

"And," suggested Jeff, "if I don't?"

The dam burst. Von Torp's neck swelled, crimson suffused his broad features.

"But you will! Young fool, do you still not realize that I, von Torp, am master here? Behold, out of time's dawn I have conquered these ape-like savages, learned their tongue, made them obedient to my will! At my command, they will tear you to bits. They will—"

"You said that," Jeff told him grimly, "before. Now listen, von Torp. I came seeking you in peace and amity. You have the brains to get us out of this mess, and Beth and I understand that. We were quite willing to help; we even got laborers for you.

"But apparently you have other ideas. And I think I know what those ideas are . . . and why you're so damn' anxious to know where Beth is. Well, I don't like your ideas.

"So long. Much as we'd like to return to our world, we're not going to play patsy to you, lay ourselves open to the good old double-x again—"

"You have been warned!" roared von Torp. He lifted an arm; crisped guttural syllables to his followers. "Alone I shall find the *fraulein;* she shall share your fate—"

With his cry, the host of gnarly men came scrambling forward. But Jeff was not caught napping. Now he, too, lifted his voice in a great shout; words in the tongue of the Oont tribesmen spilled from his lips.

"Toek . . . Beth . . . my warriors! To me!"

It was as if the jungle had been awaiting his cry to spring to life. Instantly the fronded ferns rasped as bodies thrust boldly through them; water splashed; friendly voices shouted in reply; and where had been lush green, now were the figures of his comrades. Tall, strong figures, grim, erect, armed and ready.

The charging Neanderthalers whirled, startled. And seeing, thus limned at the jungle's rim, their traditional enemies, they forgot Jeff. Race hatred, wild and ravenous, seized them. With shrieks and howls they turned, broke toward the oncoming Cro-Magnons!

TOO late von Torp's intelligence foresaw the inevitable outcome. In vain he bellowed orders for their retreat. Blood-lust, the hatred of bestial near-man for his superior, blinded the hairy ones to everything save the desire to kill. Like a brown wave they flooded toward Jeff's followers.

And like the dwindling edge of the ebb-tide wave, wasting itself to nothingness on the adamant breast of the beach, they died! Toek's voice was hot and fierce as

he put the command. A score of arrows scraped as they slid back in a score of stocks. Full twenty bow-strings *spanged!* as one. And shafts of feathered death whirred unerringly to a score of hearts.

It was no battle; it was a rout, a slaughter! Once more Toek cried command; again deft fingers placed arrows in crossbows; again howling ape-men collapsed into the slimy waters of the swamp, clutching with lifeless paws at breasts from which slim shafts protruded. A single Neanderthal man managed to find his prey; Jeff saw then, and horribly sickened to see, why ever before the Oonts had dreaded the apemen. Clawed hands were flailing weapons; like a snarling cat the hairy man-thing hurled itself upon its opponent, ragged nails shredded the Oont tribesman's face, tore bloody sockets where his eyes had been. Blood-dappled claws dug lower, ripped at soft flesh, disemboweling the hapless Cro-Magnon.

He died, screaming like a stricken animal. But the Neanderthaler died with him. It was Jeff's arrow that thudded into the ape-man's back, transfixing him to swift death, smashing through his body into the suffering heart of the true man to bring both warriors down, locked in grim, loveless embrace.

But that was the Oonts' only casualty. Neanderthal hatred was great, but Neanderthal courage could not dare this new weapon, the whisperer-that-struck-from-afar. Their tone changed, their cries were suddenly no longer howls of rage but whimperings of terror. Wide-eyed and slavering, the remainder turned and fled. Prehensile arms, in this emergency, bespoke the beast ancestry. Scrambling on all fours, the Neanderthalers raced, splashing, from danger. Into the trees, into the thorny thickets, anywhere. . . .

Jeff lowered his bow. He brushed the hair back from his eyes, wiped sweat from a dripping forehead.

"You all right, Beth? Nice work, Toek! You showed 'em that time. Von Torp—he got away, did he?"

The others encircled him now.

"He was the first to run," Beth told him. "I could have shot him. Any of us could. But I stopped Toek. Everything happened so suddenly. I didn't know if he was friend or enemy or what I should do. And he's the only one who can get us back to our time. . . ."

"You should have killed him," said Jeff somberly. "He meant to kill you."

"What do you mean?"

JEFF drew a long breath. "I hate to tell you this, sugar. But you might as well know the truth. If von Torp was our last chance of ever getting home again—and he *was*—then we're stuck here forever!"

"For—" The word stuck in Beth's throat; it came out, finally, harsh and dry. "Forever?"

"Yes, Beth. Do you see that?"

He pointed to a crude wooden framework behind him. It was a sort of raised dais. It was vaguely reminiscent of—of something Beth Anderson had seen a long while ago. A raised dais with four uprights. She stared at it, puzzled. Then she gasped.

"His new time machine! He was trying to build one!"

And Jeff nodded unhappily.

"Yes. He was trying. But don't you see how pitifully inept his efforts were? When I saw that, Beth, I began to realize the truth. When von Torp spoke to me, I knew I was right. For his looks, his tone, his demands—"

"Yes?"

"He is completely mad," said Jeff simply. "It has been too great a strain for him. His genius has collapsed into a weird monomania. He did not—as he once said he would—organize his Neanderthal cohorts to find ore, refine the metals with which he might have some day, years hence, succeeded in constructing a new machine. No. In his madness he set about constructing a useless replica of his machine; a *wooden* one.

"Vestiges of his once-great mind remain. He earned the allegiance of the ape-men, how, I cannot guess. Perhaps he realized, in some dim corner of his mind, the fruitlessness of his efforts—"

Here a sudden, startling thought struck Jeff.

"Yes! Perhaps he realized that the machine was not ever destined to be finished. This framework in the jungle could be the throne from which he planned to rule his brutal subjects.

"And that would explain why he asked —insisted!—that I get you, bring you to him! Knowing he was doomed to finish the rest of his days as overlord of man-beasts, he intended to have a mate at his side. A woman. Yourself!"

"Jeff!"

Beth shuddered. Then the color flooded back into her cheeks.

"That spells the end of our hopes, then?"

"I'm afraid so, Beth. I—I'm sorry."

She forced a smile.

"There's nothing we can do about it. And Jeff—"

"Yes?"

A long moment of silence. Then her voice, strangely golden in the swiftly gathering dusk.

"I should be sorry, too. And in a way, of course, I am. But in another way —if this is the way things must be—I'm not altogether sorry."

Then Toek was at their sides, interrupting the first moment in weeks out of which Jeff McClary might have drawn a measure of sweetness. His mien was restless.

"We must go now, Snake-Killer. The black comes."

Jeff nodded. "Lead the way, Toek. We will return and fortify the town."

Beth stared at him wonderingly. "Fortify the town, Jeff? But why?"

"Von Torp is not yet dead. And I made the mistake of telling him our village was in the hills. Knowing him as I do, I am afraid we have not yet seen the last of him."

IX

OLD KRUA had let the fire go out again. It was getting to be a habit with her. In the old days, before Snake-Killer and his woman had come to join the clan, the chieftain would have punished her for letting the flame die. That was how her nose had become flattened.

But it was so easy for Snake-Killer to make a fire. He was magic, he was a god, like the light-that-flashes-in-the-rain, like the voice-that-repeats from the mountains. He used to make fires just by rubbing tiny twigs on stones. Now he had no more tiny twigs, but he had other ways.

He had even taught her a way, but it was a long and tedious one. But—she glanced up, saw Jeff coming down the trail—she had to pretend she was trying. Again she took the bow in her hands, scraped it laboriously back and forth across the spindling stick. It spun slowly, the end of the stick warming, charring, but not glowing. She continued to bend over the drill, whirling it with diligent unenthusiasm, until Jeff stopped beside her. Then she looked up.

"Greetings, O Snake-Killer!" Ruefully, "The flame will not awake. It is drowsy. It is lazy."

"*You* are lazy!" corrected Jeff. "I should beat you, Krua, for a worthless hag. But give it here!"

He took the bow-and-drill, spun it deftly. Spinning drill flaked a point of carmine into a nest of tinder. Jeff scooped up the tinder, whirled it briskly above his head till it burst into flame, tossed it beneath the heaped faggots on the fireplace. Twigs crackled and the fire grew.

"If you let the fire die again," scolded Jeff, "the chieftain will feed you dried bones and dung, O stupid one!"

Krua's ancient lips cracked in a toothless grin. A belly of thunder had Snake-Killer, but a heart of tallow. A little boy romped up to Jeff, tugged at his thigh. "Find a shell in my ear, O Snake-Killer? Find a shell in my ear?"

Jeff laughed, made motions of surprise, and found a shell in young Juba's ear. Young Juba raced away triumphantly to show his playmates his new acquisition. And Beth spoke from behind Jeff.

"So this is how you spend your time? Tending fires for Krua and doing tricks for the children?"

"The north gate is finished. We're going to start work on an aqueduct tomorrow. I've knocked off for the rest of the day. Union hours, sugar—even in the Dawn World!" Jeff pointed proudly at the barricade over which he and his helpers had been working for the past week. "But how's your garden coming along? Any results?"

Beth sighed in mock resignation.

"Luuma got up at dawn this morning to see how our vegetables were doing. She couldn't tell anything by the size of the shoots, so she pulled them all up—"

"That won't do!"

"I know. I scolded her. Told her that next time I would plant *her* with the seeds. It's a hard job, Jeff, trying to teach them. They're just like children. All their lives they've eaten whatever fruits, grains, vegetables, they found in abundance. When one section runs short of food they move to another. They haven't the faintest idea what animal husbandry is, or sowing of seeds, or crop-raising."

"We must teach them. It's our duty, Beth. We won't always be here to help them with these things. We must teach them all we can, hoping they'll remember a little— Oh, 'Aka? What did you find out?"

The young tribesman stopped before him, bowing soberly.

"It is not good, Snake-Killer. They are gathering. Many tribes of them."

"In the swamps, eh? I thought so. They'll raid us when von Torp has overcome their fears, and when he believes they're strong enough. Did you see the big No-Haired One?"

"No, Snake-Killer. But I saw the Mighty Ones."

"The Mighty Ones?"

"The screamers that walk like thunder. Many of them. The men-not-men have brought them in to help."

"What does he mean, Jeff?"

"Got me. Well, all right, 'Aka. Run along. I'll see you later." And as the warrior scout disappeared, "From now on, we've got to keep on our toes. Von Torp is planning to raid us, sure as shooting. If and when he does, get the women to the caves. I've got the men trained. They'll take the posts I set for them—I hope!"

"And what are you going to do with von Torp?"

Jeff said slowly, "Capture him if possible. Good food and treatment may some day restore his intelligence; we have to gamble on that. But if matters should ever reach a showdown, our lives against his, there's only one answer."

Beth nodded. The world in which she had been Beth Andreson, sob-sister, wise-cracker and iconoclast, the world in which this tall, bronzed leader had been a professional 'ghost-buster' was a far, forgotten memory. She moved into the shelter of his arm. He was Snake-Killer. And she was Snake-Killer's woman.

AND that night, as every night, there was a guard. That night and the next, and the next. But not then, nor any night, did the expected attack come.

Mad von Torp might be. But his madness was guileful and crafty. He chose the moment for his bid at the hour when his forces might least have been expected, when watchfulness was at its nadir. And the method of his coming, when he came, was more dreadful than the tribesmen had expected.

High noon was drowsing time. In this young world, where sun and earth were newer, nearer, warmer, the scalding heat of midday was siesta-time. Even the innumerable foes of warring nature called truce to their relentless battling when the sun ruled the zenith. The cave-beasts sought the cool depths of the hills, fish lay sluggish in shaded pools, even small insects halted their incessant scurrying.

At this hour the Oonts' vigilance was detailed to a handful of lethargic souls. Even Jeff saw no harm in this. Nothing moved at midday. It was illogical to believe von Torp would dare a blazing sun as well as a strong opponent.

Illogical, yes. But he did!

Into the darkness of the cave where Jeff lay napping came the first warning. There was peace and stillness, soft quiet—then suddenly there were none of these! There was a voice crying out, many voices taking up the cry, the trample of racing feet, and a strange and ominous quaking of the earth on which Jeff lay.

Then Gluk, one of those who had been stationed as a watchman, bursting into his cave.

"Swiftly, O Snake-Killer! They have come!"

Instantly, Jeff was awake and on his feet. His hand groped for and found his cross-bow; he cast swift words over his shoulder to Beth.

"Rouse the women; lead them to a safe place. Don't come outside! It won't take long. How many of them, Gluk?"

Gluk's eyes rolled fearfully.

"They are as the leaves on the trees, O Snake-Killer! And—and the little ones who-speak-with-beasts have brought with

them the Mighty Ones. The thunderers!"

"Thunderers?" There it was again. But Jeff had no time, now, to determine the meaning behind Gluk's fanciful speech. "Come!" he cried—and with Gluk following, he sped to the barrier he and the tribesmen had constructed. As he ran, other warriors, sleepy-eyed, sweating and cross, joined him. Jeff noted with approval that one and all had clenched in their fists their cross-bows. That alone should prove the deciding factor in the battle.

Unless, he thought suddenly, von Torp had provided his allies with the same weapon?

But that was a bootless fear. For one thing, the primate paws of the Neanderthalers were not adapted to a weapon requiring manual dexterity. Clubs and stones, teeth and nails, were their natural weapons. And, too, there was the barricade surrounding the Oont village.

"One thing remember!" Jeff warned his followers. "I want the big No-Haired one alive! Capture him; do not kill him!"

And then he was at the main gate; a high structure of cross-barred timbers locked across the rocky defile which faced the only approach from lower ground. He was climbing up the rough beams to a vantage point, staring down, viewing for the first time the attackers von Torp had organized, and his eyes leapt open with swift, sudden horror!

Ape-men there were, true! Not dozens of them, nor scores—but two hundred, possibly more! And with them was von Torp. But it was not the fierce, gloating smile on the mad scientist's face that touched Jeff's heart with dread; it was not the clamorous, blood-hungry howling of the Neanderthalers, it was not the sight of the weapons with which they menaced the breach.

It was something else. It was the sight of the weird, ungainly steeds on which the foremost attackers rode. Gigantic parodies of lizardom, fully forty-five feet in length, thrice as tall as a man, weirdly anthropomorphic as they raced forward on massive hind limbs, futile, tiny forelimbs dangling grotesquely before them, great tails crushing the earth over which they flailed.

It was on these monsters the Neanderthalers crouched, bandy legs tightly clenched to gross, reptilian withers. And as they rode they spoke in coarse and reedy voices—and the beasts answered in kind!

There was a stifled cry at Jeff's shoulder. Beth's voice in his ear.

"Tyrannosaurus! Jeff, the largest, the most powerful of all dinosaurs—!"

JEFF whirled. It was concern, not anger, that made his voice flaming hot, that caused his brow to darken and his thrust to be so violent.

"What are you doing here? I told you to—"

"I couldn't stay in the caves. I heard the screams; I knew—or guessed—what they had done. Jeff, don't you understand? We are destroyed! We—"

"Don't talk nonsense! They're in the open. We're protected. We still have our barricade."

"They'll crush it like a paper box! They—they're like huge, armored tanks, Jeff. Not even your weapons will stop them. Arrows are useless—"

Even as she spoke, Jeff's eyes found evidence that her words were true. The attackers were still far down the incline, at their mounts' lumbering pace it would take them many minutes to reach the wall, but one of the Oonts, unable to restrain himself longer, had grooved a shaft, let fly at the foremost dinosaur.

The slim arrow sped swift and true to its mark. It struck the horny pate of the onrushing lizard with blinding force and accuracy—and shattered! The dinosaur squealed fiercely, shook its massive head —and plunged on!

And Jeff's heart sank. The thunder of giant hoofs woke a fearful echo in his heart. Beth was right! Von Torp had gained a potent ally. Even this gate could not withstand the crushing impact of those tons of armored flesh. One blow would shake it to its foundations. A second and a third . . .

"The big cross-bow!" he thought, and leapt along the wall to where a huge cross-bow, operated by primitive windlass, stood in a natural embrasure in the cliff. Quickly he took aim at the neck of the nearest monster. With trembling fingers he pulled the pin that set the thick, rawhide bow-

string twanging. Even above the squealing of the ape-men Jeff could hear the *thuck* of the feathered shaft. His taut face lighted with hope, but the light faded. The thick shaft penetrated the horny hide perhaps an eighth of its length, but the hideous lizard plunged ahead.

Jeff opened his clenched fists in a gesture of despair. What more could he do? There was always something. . . . Think fast, McClary, he told himself.

"The riders!" he cried in a suddenly cracked voice. "Aim for them! The men-not-men!"

Now every warrior was busy with bow and shafts. And obedient to his command, eyes concentrated on the squat, hair-matted figures crouching on the dinosaurs' necks. Arrows impelled by mighty arms flew across the ever dwindling distance like a feathered rain. And found their marks! Ape-men cried their swift, astonished agony, and tumbled from their monstrous chargers like crimson-stemmed, writhing balls of fur. One fell beneath a lizard's descending foot; Jeff could not take his dreadly fascinated eyes from the spot where he had fallen. When the hoof left the earth again, that which it left behind was nauseous and grim.

And as if a judging hand had suddenly erased the chattering excrescences from the reptiles' armored throats, the ape-men were gone! Yet the host of tyrannosauri, fully a dozen of them, continued to obey their last command. Like mighty machines incontrollably set into motion, they charged forward. But a few hundred yards lay now between them and the barricade. Behind them, dancing impatiently, howling in desire to follow their fleshly tanks through the breach, the mob of ape-men waited.

Jeff's lips were white, his brow furrowed with the agony of fruitless thought. There was no way from this dilemma. Only in flight lay safety, but even in flight, many of his tribesmen and friends would find death. How to—?

And Beth was sobbing, tugging at his shoulder.

"Jeff, we can't stand up against them! We've got to run! Give the order. Tell the men to stop firing—"

"Firing!" The word slashed its way across the portals of Jeff's thought. *"Fire! That's it! Fire!* Toek . . . 'Aka . . . Gluk . . . to me!"

He wrenched himself from the girl's grasp. Her cry followed him as he clambered down the wall, leaped across the clearing.

He reached the altar-place where blazed the huge community fire of the tribe. A woman tended the fire, a woman proudly garbed in a thick, hairy cave-bear pelt. With ruthless hands Jeff seized the garment, ripped it from her back!

She screamed once in outraged anger, then saw that her accoster was Snake-Killer, and stopped screaming. Like Beth, on the gate above, she stood watching in mute astonishment as Jeff tore a strip from the pelt, wrapped it hastily about an arrow, thrust arrow and hairy wad into the flame.

It caught, glowed, blazed! Jeff thrust the burning shaft into his bow, tensed, loosed it! It arced over the barricade—and squarely into the face of the foremost dinosaur!

The dinosaur screamed!

XI

THE dinosaur screamed—and its tiny eyes glowed red and blood-shot fearful with the impact of that flaming mass! For the first time it faltered in its charge. It halted in its tracks, tiny forelegs waving impotently, scraping in sudden panic at its lowered head.

A second beast, behind it, stumbled into it, squealed and nipped at the rump of the beast before. The first one turned blindly, angrily, slashed with six-inch teeth at its comrade's slavering jowls!

And Beth understood! In an instant, she was leaping from the wall, hastening to Jeff's side. She took the hairy pelt from his hands, began tearing it into foot-long strips. 'Aka and Toek, a half dozen of the other warriors, had come to them now. Jeff grunted swift approval to Beth.

"Nice going! Get some women to help you. And get more furs. Form a fire-bucket line to pass 'em along. I'm going topside. Come on, men!"

Thus began the defense of the village. The bowsmen on the parapet, their women laboring below to supply them with the one ammunition which the lizard-creatures

dared not face. The licking tongue of flame!

Success came quicker and more overwhelmingly than they had dared hope. Blinded, hurt, bewildered by the flood of burning shafts that suddenly began raining down upon them, the riderless dinosaurs first hesitated, then fought amongst themselves—then fell back in complete rout!

Squealing shrill bleats of terror, they turned and fled down the path up which they had come. Not all fled, for as they ran they slashed at each other with tooth, claw and scything tails. The Oont tribesmen, jubilant, refused to let the fight die thus. With shouts of boastful triumph they swung open the great gate; it was Jeff who was first to pass through it, meet the confused ex-foe face to face. It was his final arrow, bright ribbon of flame flashing squarely into the snarling mouth of the last, defiant dinosaur, that completed the fray. The blazing brand found its mark in the fleshy palate of the beast; suddenly the tyrannosaurus went berserk with pain, charged through and past its brethren and down into the ranks of waiting ape-men!

Then there was bedlam indeed! For von Torp's most dreadful weapon turned Frankenstein, ten pain-torn, baffled juggernauts were turned loose amongst their own companions. Vainly the Neanderthalers cried commands in the beasts' own laborious tongue, vainly they turned and fled down the hill, into the fields, into trees and crevices and into whatever refuge they could find.

Pounding hoofs, hag-ridden, pressed their fleeing flesh to pulp. Screams of torment rent the air. And there still hailed down about the ape-men an unceasing storm of flaming shafts.

A mad savagery had gripped Jeff McClary. His thin veneer of civilization stripped away from him completely in this moment of victory. His cries were the wild ululations of his comrades as he pressed forward on the death-dealing pursuit, his arm was strong with the strength of a thousand hatreds as he loosed thin death into their breaking ranks.

Now the flight went far afield. Across the grassy plains, toward the swamps that lay, turgidly noisome, below. And it would have been sane to stop, but there was no sanity in Jeff McClary now. Because fleeing before him was a figure he recognized. A figure taller, sturdier, more erect than those of the shattered ape-men.

Von Torp! Somehow he had again escaped the punishment he so richly deserved. But not for long! Not if Jeff had to meter out that punishment with his bare hands.

And he would have to do just that. For his arrows were gone, now. His source of armaments lay far behind him; his fellow tribesmen, his comrades-at-arms, were broken into a score of pursuit parties. He tossed away his useless bow. He was alone. He would follow and find von Torp even if it meant scouring the swamp for him. He was alone.

No, not alone. For there—as ever when he needed help and courage—was Beth, coming up from behind him. A wild-eyed, dishevelled Beth, her own garment shredded where wads had been ripped from it to feed the bowsmen's needs.

She was crying, "Turn back, Jeff! We've won! Come back—"

But he shook his head.

"We'll never win until we finish him! If this must be our world forever, we'll make it a clean world. I've got to get him! Go back and wait for me."

But that she would not do. She followed. And down led the pursuit, into the mud-choked stream, out through the tangle of thorny-brush, into the swamp again.

VON TORP knew, now, that he was followed. He knew, too, his pusuers. And at the last, his mad brain must have worked like that of the hurt child, the wounded animal. He fled unerringly toward the spot that drew him like a magnet, the spot wherein they three had landed, the spot whereon he had built his futile dais—machine or throne?—and gained overlordship of a dying race that spoke with lower beasts.

And at the spot, like a trapped rat, he turned to face his followers for the last time. His face was a mask of frightened fury, there was no intelligence in his eyes. Only the baffled look of a man who looks on certain death.

Jeff burst into the clearing where he

waited. And the meeting of the two men was like the clashing of two wild beasts. Soundless. No word passed between them. No offer of peace or quarter, no plea, no challenge. But their two bodies tensed; something like a snarl broke from von Torp's gaping mouth, and Jeff's lips gave answer. Then they were rushing together, arms locking in deadly embrace.

Subconsciously, Jeff had always recognized von Torp to be a strong man. How strong, he had not known until the moment he felt the German's breath hot against his face, the madman's arms meeting his in ultimate conflict. Then, with the pressure of those powerful arms forcing his spine backward, feeling his knees buckle beneath him, Jeff McClary knew his blood-lust had led him, at last, to the battle which was the difference between life and death.

There was no form or no formality to that battle. With fists, with knees and fingernails they fought. With all the strength and technique and cunningness which either knew. Once Jeff thought he had his man; that was the time he forced von Torp's head into the slimy mud of the swamp, grim fingers tensed upon the madman's windpipe, determined to choke life forever from those treacherous lips.

But von Torp's knee in his groin was lightning and tempest and a white knife torturing the blood in his veins. He was doubled and helpless there for a long moment, and his life might have paid for that moment had not von Torp, too, been weakly gasping the water from his lungs.

And both were staggering as they returned to grips.

Back and forth swayed the pendulum of victory. It was Jeff's when he had his adversary pinned across the bole of a tree, but somehow von Torp's flailing hand found a rock, and Jeff fell back, stunned by a blow on the temple that almost crimsoned the gray-green scene before him. It was at that moment that von Torp might have won, had it not been for Beth. Her scream halted his hand descending for the second time, and before he could swing again, she was upon him, a blind, scratching, clawing Fury fighting for the life of her man.

And consciousness came back to Jeff. He came again to his feet, white with rage, and he spoke the first words of the conflict.

"So that," he said thickly, numbly, "so that's the way it's to be, eh? Well, two can play at that game—"

His delving fist found a weapon, a cudgel as thick around as a man's fist. He moved toward von Torp. And as if the sound of a voice had suddenly erased the clouds of insanity from the German's brain, his eyes leaped open in stark fear. He broke away from Beth, backed farther from Jeff.

"Nein!" he screamed. *"Kamerad! Kamerad!"*

But he found no mercy in Jeff's eyes. And finding none, the last vestige of his false courage fled. Crying in terror, he turned and fled again, splashing, stumbling into the dank depths of the swamp.

Jeff started after him. But he had not realized his own weakness. His knees trembled beneath him, he felt himself falling forward on his face. A vision flashed before his eyes . . . it was a vision of delirium or madness, for it seemed that suddenly the crude framework dais broke sharply into a thousand pieces, and in its place there was a vague and shadowy something that gathered solidarity with each passing moment.

He heard Beth's cry, and her voice spoke meaningless syllables into his ears. He felt her hands beneath his armpits, dragging his limpness across the sucking swamp; he remembered a moment of keen, stinging pain—then blackness. And in the ebon eternal his lips framed a name.

"Beth. . . ."

AEONS away a voice spoke. A remembered voice. It said, "—nk this!" And then there was something fiery in his throat. He gasped and spluttered and opened his eyes. A second voice spoke, saying, "He'll be all right now—"

It was delirium, of course. It could be nothing else. For before him was the face of Beth, radiantly smiling, and beyond Beth's face was the brilliance of an electric light, the gleam of light on *metal!*

It was delirium, or he had died. And this was the heaven of his dreaming; the world he had once known, had one time lived in and lost.

He struggled to sit up. And firm hands pressed on his shoulders.

"Take it easy, Chief! You'll be okay in a mo—"

That voice!

This time he would not be denied. He sat upright, staring about him with incredulous eyes. He gasped, "It—it's you! Lafferty! The laboratory! Von Torp's—"

Lafferty's face came into focus.

"That's right, Chief. It's me. You want another drink to settle your—?"

Jeff pushed the glass away, and his eyes sought and found Beth's.

"How?" he demanded simply.

"I don't know. He came—*like that!*" She snapped her fingers. "You were out on your feet. I had to drag you to the machine. He knows the rest, I guess."

Lafferty grinned.

"I don't know from nothin', Chief. It all sounds like a hay-smoker's dream to me. First of all, you and the gal pulled a fade-out—"

It all started to come back now. It was long ago and far away, but it started to come back. Jeff nodded.

"We were ghost-hunting. In this house. And we found von Torp in this laboratory—"

"Von Torp? Oh, yeah—the cuckoo? Well, what I'm trying to tell you is, when I came to the house for you the next morning you weren't here. Nobody was here. Nothing was here but a bunch of footprints.

"So I started snooping. I found those footprints led to a blank wall. I pushed and pulled, and—" Lafferty shrugged. "Well, I got here. Found this dumb-looking machine, and couldn't make any sense out of it. But I used the old conk for a change. Didn't monkey with the dials until I had a look around.

"I found von Torp's notebook, explaining how the thing worked. Found the short and repaired it. Set it going, and—looked like I was just in time, too! Found you folks in a helluva looking mudhole, you flat on your puss, the gal weeping. How come? Where were you? And why?"

Jeff said, "How long did it take you to do all this, Lafferty?"

Lafferty frowned.

"Let's see. Oh, ten . . . twelve hours, maybe. It was early this morning we came to the house. They're raising an awful clamor back in town. But how about it, Chief? Where were you? And how—I mean, those crazy-looking duds—"

Jeff looked at Beth helplessly. He might succeed in explaining everything to Lafferty. Lafferty was his assistant, and a smart youngster. He might understand.

But how could he ever give this fantastic story to the world? How explain to them that he and Beth had lived for weeks—for almost two months—in a world that had died a million years ago, and had come back after twelve hours' lapse of time?

It was better to say nothing. Except, maybe, some day to Lafferty. They had the machine. It was theirs to experiment with further.

Jeff said, "I'll explain later, kid. Right now I need a bath and a shave and some clean clothes. And so does Beth—I mean, Miss Anderson. And, Lafferty, when you go into town to get the clothes, get me a ring, will you?"

"Ring?" The assistant looked puzzled. "What kind of ring, Chief?"

"Wedding, you dope! That is—" Jeff turned to the girl, and the grin crept back to his lips. "That is, unless Beth's still planning to 'expose' a certain fake and fraud and phony 'ghost-buster'?"

Beth smiled, too, ruefully. She looked at her garb, and there wasn't enough of it to conceal her blush. "I think there's been enough 'exposing' around here for one day. And I like that ring idea, Snake-Killer."

"Snake-Killer?" said Lafferty. "Fake? Ring? Hey, what's going on around here, anyway?"

"I'm Snake-Killer," said Jeff complacently. And he scowled suddenly. "And maybe you'd better get going before I pretend you're a snake! Now, scram, kid!"

Lafferty left. And with his departure, the house was silent and quite, quite deserted—as a haunted house should be—save for Snake-Killer and his mate.

It was, thought Snake-Killer, an ideal opportunity to celebrate by kissing the gal. But thoroughly. Snake-Killer's mate seemed to think so, too.

BOOTHILL BAIT

By TOM J. HOPKINS

Through steel and flaming lead he sought his chance to die. But Death lurked always in his long-barreled Colts with a one-way Boothill ticket for somebody else.

IT looked like a perfect opportunity to get killed, and that instantly, at the first false move. And since death was the one thing Joe Fergus desired above all others, he keyed up his nerves and muscles to face the sudden blotting out of life and memory.

Scarcely a minute before the loud,

angry report of a heavy pistol had sounded in the narrow, rock-ribbed defile through which the stage road wound. At the sound the off-leader of the stage team had gone down, screaming in his death agony. Instantly the three other horses were piled up in a kicking, fighting scramble, with the heavy stage careening up onto them. Fergus and four other passengers had been piled into a heap at the front end. Then, sharply, harshly, had come a threatening voice:

"Out in the road, you hombres, with your hands high."

For weeks Joe Fergus had sought death as the one thing to erase his bitter soul-scorching memories. And now, before him, only a fleeting second away, it waited.

As Fergus stepped out of the stage, broad shoulders filling the doorway, he saw two mounted men. They sat their horses, twenty feet from him, masked and with drawn guns aimed at the doorway. That was all Fergus waited to see.

As his hands dropped for his belted guns with swift, sure ease, a grim grin tore his lips apart and showed white teeth. His muscles hardened and his nerves tensed as he wondered what death would be like. Then his two guns flamed suddenly at the nearest of the two mounted bandits, who was already shooting furiously at Fergus.

Again and again the heavy six-shooters roared out their ominous message of death. And death came, swiftly, suddenly, as though always poised above each man ready to reach out with horny hand and flatten him to a useless hulk of flesh. But no man knows where the hand will strike, or when. And this Joe Fergus realized with angry, balked bitterness as he saw the nearest bandit pitch from his dying horse and crash to the ground.

The rattle of speeding hoofs through loose rocks made Joe Fergus turn swiftly. A hundred yards away, racing madly, went the second bandit, without having fired a shot!

"Damn him!" came from Fergus' lips, in hopeless bitterness at his lost opportunity: "Why didn't he stick—and kill me!"

He seemed oblivious to the gasp of surprise which came from the other passengers and driver. At first they thought they had misunderstood him—that he was cursing the fleeing man for a coward who refused to stay and shoot it out. But the look of somber hopelessness about Joe Fergus' face told them he meant what he had said—that he had sought death, and failed.

With light and easy strides, Fergus stepped across to the side of the dead man. As he stared down at the masked face, his lips moved in bitter, silent cursing. Not at the dead man, but at himself. Why had he been such a fool as to fight? Why hadn't he simply reached for his guns, and allowed the other man to go ahead and shoot him?

"KNOW him?" a voice broke sharply into Fergus' brooding, bitter thoughts.

"No!" he answered shortly. "Do you?"

He turned to face the stage driver, a burly, domineering type of man, with small, close-set eyes which now were peering keenly at Fergus. The driver shook his head.

"Nope," he answered, "but I sure as hell recognized the fellow on that paint horse!"

"Who was it?" came the quick, eager chorus from the passengers.

"Young Venables!" said Bob Eddins, the stage driver. "I seen him ridin' that paint just yesterday! And not only that, when he yelled and turned to run like a yeller dog, his mask slipped down!"

"I don't believe it!" came the curt voice of a cowman who stood beside Fergus, now. He was a lanky, mustached man of middle age but quite youthful in manner. "I've known young Venables since his kilt days. Like lots of people, he's a fool when he's drinking—but he's no coward!"

"I don't give a cracked centavo what you say, Carleton!" growled Eddins angrily. "It was Venables! He did run like a yeller coyote with his tail down! An' all your argufying can't make him any different!"

And with that flat statement Eddins turned to see what could be done about his team. Joe Fergus walked with him. The others helped to pick up the dead man and put his body in the stage. Then the cowman, Carleton, came to aid Fergus and Eddins.

"You might 'a chased that feller," said one of the men, as he, too, came over to help with the team and stopped beside Joe

Fergus, "if you hadn't killed the saddler, too."

Fergus shook his head, somberly:

"If he'd put up a fight, I might 've," he answered. His mind was still bitter, his thoughts tinged with hopelessness from his so recent failure to achieve his great desire. "But chasin' him is up to the law, not me!"

Carleton looked up from aiding Eddins to repair the broken pole with baling-wire wrappings.

"There's no law in our town, son, except a quick trigger finger!" Carleton's voice was curt, angry; his manner that of an honest man not afraid to speak the truth and take the consequences.

"There's some of us have tried to get things to run peaceable, but somehow, whoever tries to bring the law always manages to die—sudden! Maybe that's why they call the town The Graveyard!" Carleton's eyes shifted swiftly to Eddins. "But I'm thinkin' some day the law will win, and those as don't like it will end in—The Graveyard!"

Eddins looked up swiftly, his eyes beady. Then he shrugged and turned again to his work. But Joe Fergus did not see the by-play. His eyes were fixed on the distance. His voice was soft, low, as he said:

"The Graveyard!" There was such an odd ring in Fergus' voice that all eyes turned on him: "The Graveyard! Yes, I heard it was that kind of town—an' that's why I'm going there!"

The utter silence of death held for a moment. The group of hard, stern-faced men, long accustomed to facing death, stared at Joe Fergus and puzzled over his words. But more than the words, it was his expression that sobered them.

They saw the brooding, bitter look of a man who was walking straight toward his open grave, and welcoming the thought. His eyes, youthful yet singularly old, stared out over the rugged country toward the valley where the hell-town lay.

THE Graveyard gave no outward sign of deserving its reputation as the stage swung into the main street three hours later. In a lazy swerve, drawn by the three surviving horses, Eddins came to the crude hotel and pulled up. The unemotional stop, so different from the usual galloping race and sliding halt, brought some loungers out to see what the trouble was. In the small group were four cowboys from Carleton's ranch, a bartender, and several others. Joe Fergus looked them over keenly, as they listened to Eddins' story of his killing the bandit.

The cowboys from Carleton's ranch were lean-faced, trimly built range riders. Their guns swung low. Their eyes were cool and alert beneath their sombrero brims. Capable, dangerous men in a fight. And Fergus knew instantly that Carleton and his men would fight for, not against, the law.

Of the several loafers who had stepped out of the saloon, not one was unarmed. Fergus' eyes lingered last on the bartender, an evil-eyed, sullen-faced fellow. He alone was unarmed, Fergus saw, and his brain registered swiftly that the bartender was the type to use a sawed-off shotgun from behind the bar.

Others were joining the group now, as the dead bandit was lifted out of the stage. By the time the evil-eyed bartender had leaned over to examine the dead man, at least thirty people were about the stage.

"I know him," said the bartender, "Orton."

"Leastwise, I seen him last night in my bar, a-lickerin' up with young Venables!"

"There you are!" broke in Eddins curtly, turning to face Carleton and his cowboys.

But Carleton did not answer.

Eddins turned back to another man and said something in a low voice. The other man nodded and sent a swift, inquisitive glance at Joe Fergus. The man's small, grayish-green eyes seemed almost feline, and his smugly complacent manner somehow added to the impression of a sleek cat pretending unconcern as it watched the canary.

"My name is Bankert," the man said to Joe Fergus smoothly. "From what Eddins tells me, you ought to make a good marshal for this town. You started by killin' one of the road-agents, why not finish it by getting this fellow Venables?"

Fergus shook his head. He had no desire to chase a man who would not fight back.

"Eddins told me what you said about gettin' killed," Bankert persisted, and odd light in his eyes. "An' if you ain't lyin' about it, the marshal's job in The Graveyard looks like a hot chance to get bumped

off! We've had a couple of marshals and two deputy sheriffs from the county seat tryin' to run things here—and there ain't one of 'em lasted over two days!" He grinned wickedly: "So, unless you were just shootin' off your face to try an' scare us—here's your chance to get killed, hombre!"

Some of the circling crowd started to laugh, but the sound died suddenly as they saw Joe Fergus' expression. There was something in the somber, deep-set, brooding eyes which convinced them he spoke truly when he said:

"Hombre to you, Mister, an' I'll take that chance—gladly!"

Bankert's expression showed more relief and pleasure than seemed reasonable under the circumstances, but Joe Fergus was too wrought up to realize it.

"Gents, meet the new marshal," said Bankert loudly, almost mockingly. "Let's licker-up on me and guarantee him a grand planting in The Graveyard!"

THE crowd yelled joyful assent and followed Bankert into the nearby saloon. Fergus, still silent, though feeling strangely elated at the last words of Bankert, walked beside the cat-eyed man. Orton, the evil-eyed bartender, was busy shoving bottles and glasses out on the bar.

Joe Fergus drank sparingly. Whiskey, except for an occasional drink, had never appealed to him, and in his present mood of despondency seemed to mean even less. His thoughts were dominated by the one fixed idea of death, and had little room for anything else.

Only dimly was he conscious of the fact that a man, dust-covered, had slipped in between him and Bankert. He caught the mumble of a whispering voice for a moment or two, then Bankert turned to face him.

"You needn't worry about gettin' Venables," he said. "Slim, here, tells me he saw him a couple of hours ago, headin' that paint pony o' his for the border! He'll be in that hell-pot, Santa Rosalia by now, mixin' with those breed Indians and bandits, if he ain't dead already!"

Fergus nodded slowly. While he was from a distant part of the state, rumor had come of the evil dangers of Santa Rosalia. The haunt of border thieves and killers, it was a place of sudden death. Again Fergus nodded slowly.

"Somebody get me a horse," he said, "while I get my rig out of the stage."

Bankert's eyes lighted gleefully:

"Where you goin'?" he asked.

"Santa Rosalia," came the grim, determined answer as Fergus started for the door.

"Hell, man," blurted someone, "you can't get anybody out of that town! Your warrants ain't good in Mexico, or nothin'! And your chances of comin' back alive is a thousand against one!"

"That's why I'm goin'," was the only answer Fergus made as the door swung to behind him.

Bankert turned to a man near him and said curtly:

"Get him one of my saddlers. That roan is too good an animal—to lose to that fool's killer!"

The long-legged man he had spoken to nodded and went out of the room.

"Bankert, you're sendin' that man to certain death," said Carleton, slowly. "I'm wonderin' why."

"Carleton," was the mocking answer, "you can keep right on wonderin'!"

With a curt nod to Eddins and the cowboy he had called Slim, Bankert walked into a small room back of the main barroom.

"Venables told me what happened," Slim said. He was a lightly built blond fellow with a baby face and blue eyes. They made him look mild, but his reputation was of a different sort. Ready to murder from behind, or face odds of ten to one and die fighting, he was dangerous at all times. He was staring at Bankert now, puzzled. "But how come you're sendin' somebody after him?"

"This was his first job, an' he fell down," said Bankert coldly. "That's his death warrant. So we threw the blame on him an' Pete, which lets us out!"

"Fair enough," answered Slim. "But how come this new hombre to go an' get him? Why not me? I can use that hundred bucks you usually pay—"

"Because you're to follow this fellow Fergus, an' see that neither him nor Venables get back. Which makes two hundred for you! Eddins saw Fergus readin' a letter in the stage, and while he

couldn't see what the letter said, it come from the Ranger's Headquarters at the capital! We been runnin' this valley to suit ourselves, despite Carleton an' his kind! But it looks to me like they're aimin' to take a hand in our game—so we'd better get the first jump on 'em, an' teach 'em a lesson!"

For the next few minutes he gave Slim some very explicit directions. Then, when a glance out the window showed him Joe Fergus, heading down the road to the Mexican Border, he gave Slim some money and shoved him out. A few moments later Slim was mounted on a fresh horse and swinging out to the Southwest. He planned to ride a circle and cut Fergus' trail later on, an ominous, blue-eyed, baby-faced messenger of death.

IT was true that Eddins had seen a letter in Fergus' hand, true also that the letter was from the Rangers' Headquarters. But their suspicions were wrong that Fergus had come to The Graveyard with orders to clean it up. Joe Fergus was no longer a ranger, his last work for them had been completed a few short weeks before. The letter was an acceptance of his resignation, a hope that he would be able to find forgetfulness. Now he was a free agent, memory-haunted, grim-faced, seeking oblivion on the death trail.

It had all started so casually, from such a trivial, commonplace happening—the sort of thing that could happen to any man in those days. Yet, with stunning, heart-breaking suddenness, that trivial thing had developed into a scene of almost infinite tragedy. Only a few short weeks before Joe Fergus had ridden home to his wife, after turning over a prisoner to the sheriff.

Smiling, bright-eyed, Mary had met him at the door. Theirs was the love and affection of the years, increasing steadily as they lived together, growing finally to an utter dominance of both, until each seemed to think only with reference to the other.

"Joe," she had said, "there's a big coyote been prowling around the chicken yard since you left. He's killed five of those barred Plymouths—a plain murderer! So it's up to you, Mister Ranger, dignified law-enforcer, to catch the criminal!"

Joe Fergus had laughed and nodded. "If he shows up again," he said, "I'll bust him sideways with my rifle."

And promptly both put the thing out of their minds, blissfully unaware, in their happiness together, of what it was to mean to them.

The next morning, tired from four days in the saddle which had ended in a three-hour gun-battle with rustlers, Joe Fergus rose mentally fogged and hazy-eyed. He stood staring and yawning at the rising sun through his window. A hundred yards away was the chicken corral, and from it, suddenly, rose a chattering chorus of "hen-talk."

Dimly, Joe Fergus could see the chickens scurrying about, squawking at something dimly seen over a chicken coop. A tawny, huddled shape was there, and Joe Fergus' eyes focused swiftly as he saw it. His mind registered "coyote" as his hand went back to the nearby table where his rifle lay.

The moment Joe Fergus' hand touched the rifle, his eyes and brain seemed to clear. The old familiar feel of the walnut stock against his cheek brightened his eyes. They danced humorously as he thought of Mary and how surprised she would be to have him get that marauding murderer and chicken killer his first morning at home.

Joke him about being a ranger, would she! His cheek cuddled down, his finger curled back, and the big rifle bullet went hurtling on its errand of death.

A high-pitched scream was the answer to that shot. Joe Fergus stood like a statue, gripping the rifle as he heard the cry. He saw a human figure thrown out into plain sight from behind the chicken coop by the shock of the bullet. The scream was a voice he knew, the figure that of Mary, his wife.

Joe Fergus never knew how he reached Mary's side. He only knew she was dying, that he had killed her—accidentally, it was true—but none the less killed her.

"But Joe, darling," she whispered, "it wasn't your fault. My tan sweater, over the top of that coop—my asking you to kill the coyote—you mustn't feel that way!"

And still pleading with him, she had died.

TO Joe Fergus the desire to live had gone with Mary. Too brave a man to kill himself, he had resigned from the rangers and gone forth, riding the death trail. Before his brooding, haunted eyes, the scene there in the barnyard danced like a taunting Will-o'-the-Wisp, luring him on and on as he sought the oblivion only death could bring.

So Joe Fergus rode toward the hell-pot of Santa Rosalia, seeking forgetfulness. Brooding, haunted, somber-faced, he seemed content with the odds of a thousand to one against his returning alive. Had he known of the blue-eyed, baby-faced murderer who followed—the thousand and first chance against him—it would only have added to his content.

Santa Rosalia was giving all indications of living up to its evil reputation when Joe Fergus rode down its single dirty street late that night. From the scattered adobe hovels came dim rays of light, music, drunken shouts, and occasionally staggering figures, often fighting among themselves. As Fergus neared the center of the town, where the lights were brighter and the noises louder, a woman called something to him. He gave no sign of hearing, but rode on steadily, his eyes seeking a paint pony.

He saw first one, then another, at different places, but his eyes, well trained from years of range experience, told his brain each was not the one he sought.

Near the center of town was a larger building of adobe, and its walls were painted with lurid signs advertising *"Cerveza, Tequila, Aguardiente!"* There Joe Fergus pulled up his horse and sat for a moment. At the end of the line of tied horses was a paint pony. His eyes and brain automatically registered: "There is the horse—the man is inside." But before Fergus could more than get the thought, a raging shout rose high-pitched above the sound of ribald carousal:

"Muerte! Muerte al Gringo!" came the screaming cry. "Death! Death to the gringo!"

The words rang in Joe Fergus' ears and drew him out of the saddle with a lithe leap. He hit the ground with drawn guns, his lips curling to show white teeth in a fighting grin. Death, they were shouting in there! Pistol shots and wild curses rang out. A scream of pain, ending in a horrid gurgle of death. Death to someone —why not to him?

Even as the thought crashed into his brain, Joe Fergus was bursting through the open doorway with drawn guns, ready to meet the death he desired. He caught a swift picture of a smoky little room—of flashing knives and flaming pistols. Two men were down, out of the fight for good, but five others still shouted, swore, and shot at a crouched figure in the far corner of the room. The lone man who fought them all was ducking and weaving, as his six-guns blazed. His voice rose into a high-pitched shout of:

"Come on, you scum! You lousy 'breeds! Kill me—an' see if I care!"

A fighting fool! said Joe Fergus to himself. The one white man in the room!

"You an' me both, Cowboy!" he yelled. "Let's show the yellow 'breeds how to die!"

A FEW bullets spattered into the wall back of Fergus, or whispered off through the open door. A knife sang past his ear. Its thin blade snapped against the hard adobe, and the hilt slapped back against his head. But he did not feel it. Death was calling to him, then. His guns were booming a mad answer to the song of lead in the room.

Joe Fergus stood with braced, wide-spread legs, his hat gone, his eyes bright with the glory of the fight, his lips shouting curses and mockery at the five men who opposed the two fighting Americans.

Then, suddenly, swiftly as the fight had started, it ended. Headlong out of doors and windows bolted the remainder of the 'breeds. The room was as silent as before it had been noisy.

A few limp figures were huddled in the dim light. One moved once, moaned and lay still. Fergus cursed hopelessly under his breath. Death, oblivion, forgetfulness was in the room—but not for him. Would he never die?

Fergus turned to face the lone man in the corner, the American for whom he had fought. A crouching, cursing figure, the man was. As Fergus started to speak, he heard the other's voice in what was almost a moan:

"Why didn't they kill me, and end it that way?"

Before Fergus had time to reply, bullets began whining into the room at intervals, vainly seeking the two men.

"Watch out, Cowboy," Fergus cried. "They're still a-huntin' us! Get shelter. Let 'em come—an' let's go out fightin'!"

With quick strides, Fergus was behind the rude bar, crouching, reloading his two six-guns. The cowboy rose to follow him, then sank back suddenly. Powdered adobe burst from the wall behind where his head had been. A shot or two more thudded into the walls, then came silence.

As Joe Fergus crouched behind the bar, waiting, he had time to realize that the last few shots had been fired from one gun, probably a rifle. The spacing of shots had been even. There was something cold and mechanical about them, far different from the mad fury of the fight with the 'breeds. Someone had calmed down and was making a determined effort to kill them. He had succeeded, evidently, in killing the cowboy, whoever he was.

Fergus waited. Soon a rustling came from outside the door. Silence, then, for fleeting seconds, broken by a low voice:

"Venables!" it said. "Venables—are you alive?"

Fergus started slightly. Evidently the cowboy had been the very man he was seeking; but how different from the fleeing coward at the scene of the robbery! And, why? Time to ponder this also was lacking, for a man slipped into the doorway and crouched there, with drawn six-guns.

"Reckon I got him," murmured the man in the doorway.

Fergus caught only the intent in the words as he recognized the man as Slim, who had talked to Bankert in The Graveyard. Evidently the man had followed him to take a hand in capturing Venables. He rose to question Slim, but before he could speak he saw Slim's eyes widen, his gun muzzles spin to cover him and blaze lead.

Automatically, without thought on his part, Joe Fergus' guns answered those of Slim. As he realized the man had missed him, Fergus saw Slim crash back against the wall and drop heavily. He knew then his aim had been good, that Slim was down and would never rise. Again death had reached out—and missed him.

RISING, Fergus stepped to Slim's side, for he saw the man's eyes were still open and he breathed, though faintly. As Fergus passed the open door, not a shot was fired at him. Stooping over the dying Slim, he said curtly:

"You killed him, and tried to kill me! Why?"

A mocking look came to the dying man's face as he answered, weakly:

"Try—an' find—out!"

Sinking back, Slim coughed once. His lips were tinged with blood.

Joe Fergus stood staring down at the man, his brain working swiftly. Rapidly he wove together the threads. This man had seemed friendly with Bankert. Eddins, the stage-driver, had been whispering to Bankert before the latter had suggested Fergus take the job of marshal—and get killed. Bankert's leering, mocking face was a vivid memory. But why did they want Venables killed?

As he thought of Venables, Fergus turned toward the corner where the cowboy had dropped from Slim's shots. Then he swore, half in delight, for Venables was sitting up rubbing his head. The bullet had creased him high on the hard part of the skull.

"Then he didn't kill you!" said Fergus.

"No," was the forlorn, disgusted answer of Venables. "An' I started this ruction to get killed!"

Fergus laughed harshly:

"It's funny, ain't it, that a couple of fellows who really want to die—can't?"

Venables nodded glumly and rose to his feet. As his eyes cleared he started slightly.

"Say, you're the hombre who shot us up at the robbery!"

Fergus nodded. He was studying the young cowboy keenly and saw a rather likable, clean-cut face with haunted, brooding eyes. Eyes that seemed to match his own, he realized swiftly.

"An' you," Fergus replied, "are the fellow who ran, without fightin' back!"

As he had expected, Venables returned a straightforward answer:

"I couldn't shoot," he said honestly, bitterly. "It was the first time I ever done

a thing like that—an' when I saw Pete go down under your fire—when the time came when I was supposed to shoot back an' try to kill you, I just couldn't make myself do it!"

"An' now you're sorry," said Fergus. "An' you want to die 'cause you made a fool of yourself?"

VENABLES nodded. His face showed his thorough disgust with himself and what he had done. Fergus read this instantly. His brain was working rapidly, connecting more threads to the network he had laid when he puzzled over Slim's attempt to kill them. Instantly his plan was made. He suspected that he had been a catspaw for Bankert. Now was the time to try and prove it.

"You might as well know," he said, coolly, "that they made me marshal at The Graveyard, an' Bankert sent me down to bring you back!"

"Bankert!" Venables gasped the word in dismayed surprise.

"Then I'm right in thinkin' that Bankert, Eddins, this Slim hombre, and maybe a few more are doin' most of the robbin' an' crooked stuff that gets The Graveyard its name? An' you were fool enough to let 'em talk you straight into it, too?"

Venables nodded bitterly. His voice, when he spoke, had the tense fury of a man who has been tricked into branding himself a criminal.

"Yes, an' it's blithering fools like me who help them! Lord, if I could get my guns on him—before I die!"

Fergus' eyes blazed with a new light. "Let's do it—then, hombre! Let's go back—and clean out The Graveyard! If we get killed doin' it—that's what we both want, ain't it?"

Venables nodded, his expression changing as he thought of revenging himself on the men who had framed him, and tricked him.

"But—get this!" said Fergus, sternly. "The chances are we'll both get killed. But if we're alive when the thing is over—I'm the marshal an' you're my prisoner!"

"I see what you mean," said Venables, his face setting into grim lines of determination. "Let's go!"

THE stage was standing in front of Bankert's saloon, with a half-dozen men about it, when Fergus and Venables rode up the back way and stopped their horses. They were hidden from the group about the stage, and no one noticed them, seemingly. Without a word Fergus and Venables dismounted and left their horses. Slipping silently to the rear door of the saloon, Fergus peered in and saw two men standing at the bar, drinking with Orton, the bartender.

"You get Eddins," he whispered softly to Venables. "I'll take Bankert and Orton."

Venables nodded, his lips white. Silently the two men stepped through the door into the saloon and stopped two paces apart, to offer less mark for bullets.

"Bankert, I've come back," said Fergus sharply. His words brought the men whirling to face him. "An' I've brought Venables with me! We had a fight, down there in Santa Rosalia, an' I had to kill your friend, Slim! But, we're back!"

Bankert drew a deep breath, then smiled in sudden mockery. A cool, shrewd-minded man, he had already made his plan as Fergus spoke.

"Well, now!" came mockingly from Bankert's thin lips. "What a smart marshal you grew up to be!" Then, knowing the type of man Fergus was, he saved his own life by deliberately turning his back and walking to the door. "Boys!" he shouted to the men outside, "come in and see our new marshal, back from hell!"

Fergus cursed softly under his breath, for he realized the death-trap Bankert was setting. It was not death he dreaded, but the failure to kill these criminals first. As the six men filled the doorway, Bankert turned back, his thin lips drawn into a snarling grin.

"Back from hell!" he repeated. His thin, nervous hands slid down to his guns with the speed of a darting tarantula. Even as he fired he was shouting out: "But you won't come back—this time! Get 'em, boys!"

The room seemed instantly to fill with powder smoke, bullets and the crashing, echoing roar of guns. Fergus and Venables stood their ground, firing coolly. Lead hammered against the wall, throwing powdery dust to add to the smoky atmos-

phere. Joe Fergus was lost to all things but the wild desire to kill and then be killed. His guns, fired twice, had dropped the evil-eyed bartender, Orton, who had risen from behind the bar with a sawed-off shotgun.

Then, wheeling swiftly, Joe Fergus started walking steadily across the lead-swept saloon toward the door where Bankert stood his ground and fired at him. And as he walked, he was firing with steady, mechanical precision. Something seemed to jerk at his left arm. He knew he was hit, that he had dropped the gun from that hand—but he walked on, still shooting with his right.

It came to Fergus only as a dim thought, walking toward death and oblivion as he was, that Bankert was down, his gun silent forever. Nothing mattered now. He was walking toward the end of all things. Soon would come the crashing jar of a bullet to bring forgetfulness—to blot out the searing, haunting memory. He only saw the blazing guns from the crowded doorway, only realized death was there—why didn't it come to him?

Fergus' gun was empty, the hammer clicked on spent shells. Stooping, he picked up a gun from where some dying man had dropped it. This he emptied with a steady roll of shots at the group in the doorway. He seemed a great, stalking figure of death, grim-faced, eyes almost afire with the fury of the moment. Close behind him, half-walking, half-dragging a bullet-torn leg, came Venables, swearing like a madman as he shot at the men in the door.

The men in the doorway abruptly broke and scattered, unable to longer stand their ground before those two grimly advancing figures.

On through the doorway staggered the two death-hunters, and out into the open. Fergus shouted futile curses at the fleeing men who would not kill him. The gun he had picked up clicked emptily. He threw it down and stood weaponless, staring up and down the bare, deserted street of The Graveyard. His hands were clenched, his face twisted with emotion.

"Alive," he whispered hopelessly. "Why can't a fellow die—when he wants to?"

"Still alive," came a whispered echo from beside him.

FERGUS turned slowly and saw Venables crouched there, with blood oozing from his shoulder and leg. He realized then, that his own shirt was wet. His left arm felt strangely numb. Between them they had a dozen wounds—and still they lived.

Some men were coming around a corner, mounted, but making no move toward battle. As they rode up, Fergus recognized Carleton, the ranchman, and his cowboys. Carleton nodded curtly as he came up, his eyes going swiftly from Fergus to Venables and back.

"From what I hear," he said, "an' see around here—you've got the makin's of a good marshal! This town needs you! I'm backin' you, and you'll find a lot of the ranchers around here would rather have a lawful town than what we've had!"

"I—I—" Fergus stopped. He wanted to go on in the blind, unreasoning search for forgetfulness in death. It was on his tongue to say no, but something seemed to hold him back.

"—let me think it over," he finished.

"I came back with him," said Venables, determinedly, "to give myself up. I was a damn' fool, an' I'm goin' to face the music!"

Carleton nodded, a slight smile coming to his lips.

"You were a fool!" he agreed. "But havin' found it out before you did much damage, I reckon you'll find it mighty hard to get convicted in this neck of the woods!"

Joe Fergus was not listening to them. He was staring off into the distance toward the high mountains. But he did not see them. His eyes and brain could only see that tragic scene of Mary's death. It had sent him blindly, hopelessly seeking oblivion, yet death had not come to him. Was that a sign he must live, carrying always with him the thought that he had killed his wife, to play his part in life with all its bitter tragedy?

"No!" Joe Fergus tried to shout. "I want to die—to forget!"

But the words would not form in his throat. Instead his head and shoulders came up. He heard his voice say:

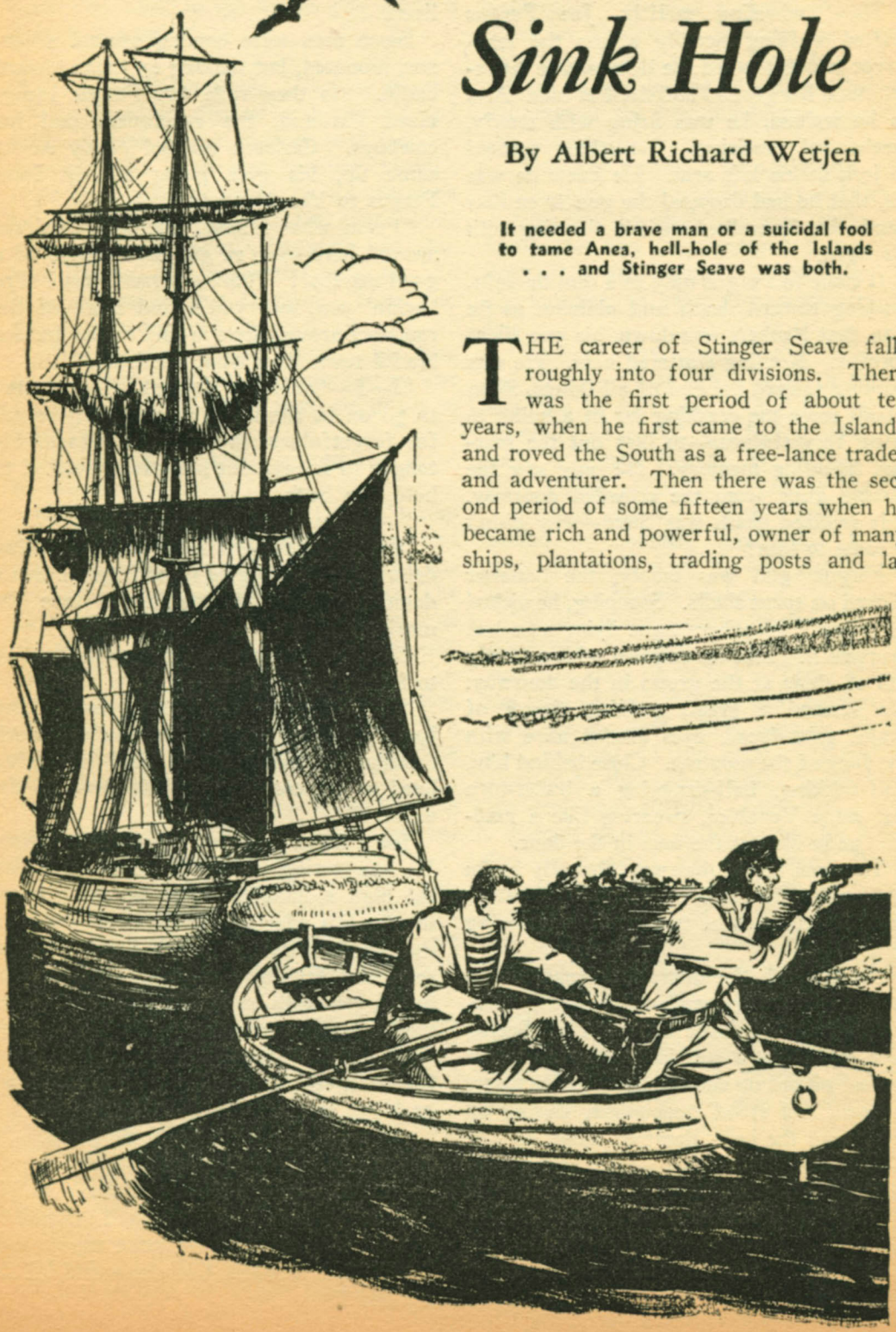
"I'll take that job, Carleton—and I'll do my best!"

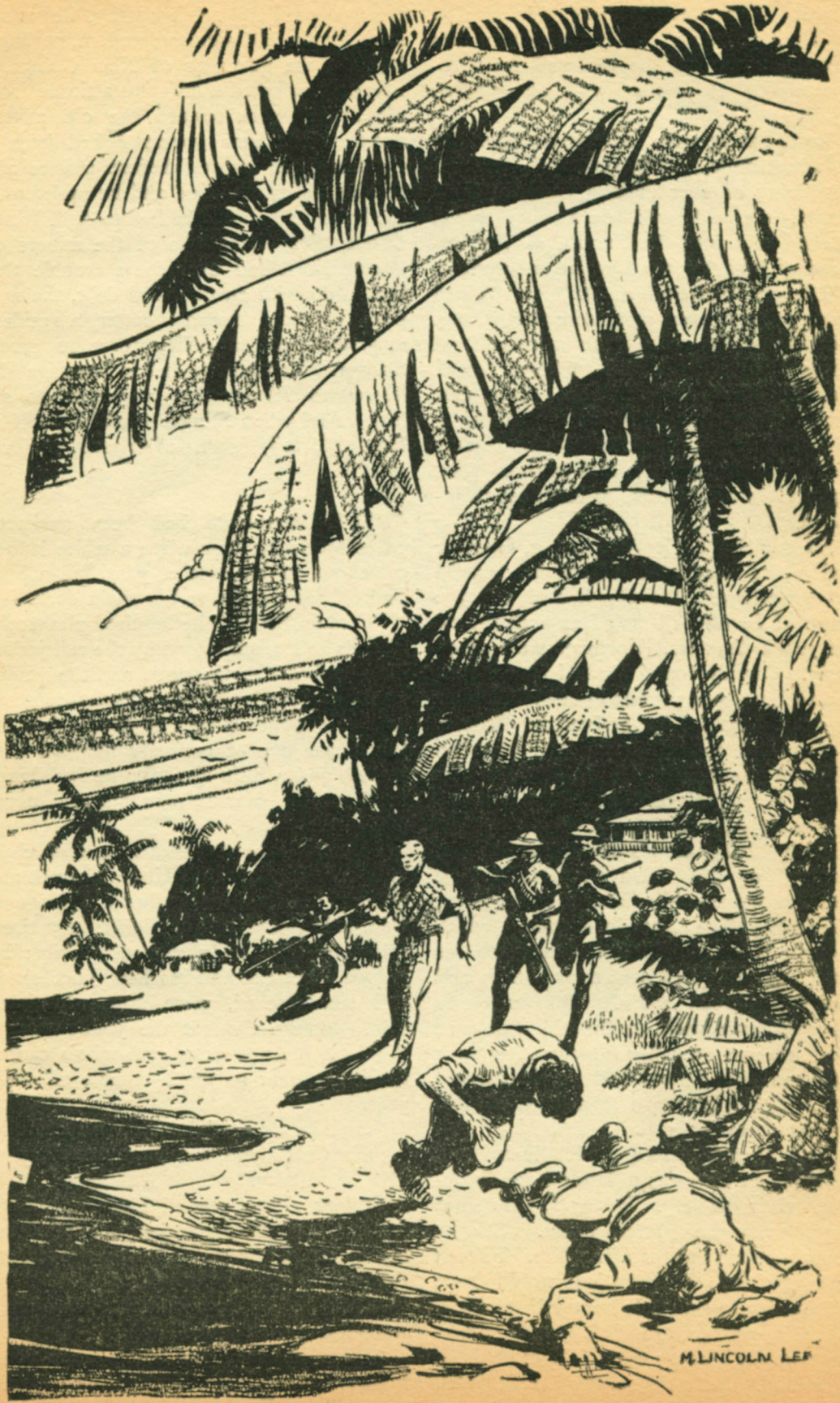
The DEVIL'S Sink Hole

By Albert Richard Wetjen

It needed a brave man or a suicidal fool to tame Anea, hell-hole of the Islands . . . and Stinger Seave was both.

THE career of Stinger Seave falls roughly into four divisions. There was the first period of about ten years, when he first came to the Islands and roved the South as a free-lance trader and adventurer. Then there was the second period of some fifteen years when he became rich and powerful, owner of many ships, plantations, trading posts and la-




M. LINCOLN LEE

goons. Then there was the third period which lasted about six years, when ruin fell upon him and he returned from respectability to roving and adventuring again.

Lastly, there were those years when the Administration, waxing powerful itself and despairing of ever making Stinger Seave realize the old wild days were gone, drafted him into the Service so that instead of breaking the Law he enforced it.

The year that Stinger Seave was ruined many other famous men were ruined, too. The Pacific was swept by an unprecedented series of hurricanes and typhoons which wrecked ships and sent fine plantations back to the desolation of the jungle. Dozens of planters, ship-owners and traders went into bankruptcy and had to start again from the bottom, or else shot themselves.

Stinger Seave, Cassidy, Chang, Gunther and others were hard hit but they would have weathered the storm had not the Bank of South Fiji failed as a climax to the year's disasters. Fortunes were swept away. Cassidy found himself an old man and thousands of pounds in debt. Gunther was cast penniless on the beach at Ponape. Chang had to sell even his beautiful schooner yacht, *The Middle Way,* to pay his bills and Stinger Seave was reduced to one ship, the schooner *Parramata.*

With Chang as his mate, the Stinger tramped up and down the Pacific once more, ruthless, cold, shooting and fighting his way. The Administration, which thought they had forever done with his breed, woke up and sent their cutters and gunboats abroad again. Not only was Stinger Seave back on the old trail once more but many another famous adventurer who had been retired and grown fat and lazy. Necessity drove them, and the old days came to life again.

Governments which had allowed old charges and warrants to lapse began to demand their delivery. Rewards, long since forgotten, were posted again. Stinger Seave went in danger of his life. Fifteen years before, the situation would have caused him to smile his wintry little smile, to laugh, perhaps, to stick his head deliberately in the lion's mouth and come back unscathed. But now he was a little tired, and there came a day when he didn't care.

Even so, despite his apathy, he would have fought and won to freedom, perhaps, had not the governor of New Guinea, a new man, adopted a different attitude from his predecessors toward the old adventurers. The new governor had been a Pacific trader himself before chance and politics had raised him, and he understood the breed with which he had to deal. When Stinger Seave shot two of the miners on Woodlark Island over some trouble that had to do with an unsettled debt, the new governor did not send a cutter, a resident magistrate and a police force to arrest Stinger. Instead, he had a message delivered to Stinger that he wished to see him. And when Stinger found himself in Port Moresby soon afterward, he responded.

THE *Parramata* had been anchored scarcely an hour when a white launch came out to her and a youthful, white-clad official climbed to her main deck.

"Captain Seave?" he inquired pleasantly. Seave's bo's'n, who stood by the rail jerked his thumb aft to the poop and the youthful official made for the nearest companion. He went up and stopped. His attitude was one of curiosity mingled with respect and a little awe, for he had heard much of the famous man but had never met him.

Stinger Seave sprawled in a cane chair under the awnings, smoking a cheroot and holding a drink in his hand. His eyes were half closed and he looked very tired. His frail little body sagged wearily; his ragged mustache and his hair, once sandy and sun-bleached, were now white and thin. Surely, thought the young official, this isn't the notorious man who's caused the department so much trouble all these years!

"Captain Seave!" he said respectfully. "I am Carruthers, assistant secretary to His Excellency."

Stinger Seave opened his eyes. They were clear blue, innocent-looking, but shadowed now with the deadly tiredness that oppressed Stinger.

"Well," said Seave quietly, "what am I wanted for this time?"

"His Excellency sent a request to you," hinted the secretary. Seave smiled his little wintry smile.

"I received it at Cape Nelson. It was rather unusual, the governor of the territory asking me to call." The blue eyes twinkled a bit and the thin lips curved in a light laugh. "I have never been to the Administration house . . . er . . . socially."

"Well, His Excellency requests that you call on him now at your earliest convenience."

"Why didn't he come with you?" inquired Stinger Seave.

The secretary's jaw dropped. He had never heard of such a thing! The captain of a small trading schooner wanting to know why His Excellency did not call on *him!* The secretary drew himself up stiffly and his voice was cold.

"His Excellency happens to have broken his leg and is confined to his room. Shall I tell him what you say?"

"Oh, no," drawled the Stinger softly. "I wouldn't want to hurt George's feelings. I guess he'd have come if he could . . . Will you wait for me?"

The secretary could only nod, quite astonished. George indeed! Calling the governor *George!* Stinger Seave rose from his chair, threw his cheroot away and went below to change his whites and get a clean sun-helmet. He reappeared after a while and followed the still amazed secretary down to the waiting launch.

II

HIS Excellency, Sir George Thomas, G.C.M.G., C.B., etc., etc., governor of British New Guinea, sat in a comfortable chair behind his great desk in the center of a cool dark room while a young, white-clad man stood before him reading a report. The governor's bandaged leg was stretched on another chair before him, he had discarded his tie and hung it over the inkwell, his thin face was furrowed in a scowl and he chewed savagely at the butt of a dead cigar.

The young man before him was resident magistrate for the worst district on the main island, about to depart on six months' leave after two years of fever and fighting and worry. The governor was glaring at him as if he were a native caught in the act of theft.

"The last half of the current year was quieter," the young man was reading from his report. "There was a murder at Awaiama; a man cut his wife's throat. We ran him down in four days and he was killed while offering resistance. I surveyed and bought land from the natives for the Mission at Cape Scott. Anderson, the trader at Trobriands, reported he was in trouble and I took the cutter there to straighten it out. No one was killed but I arrested a native named Mawa for attempted poisoning. A prospector named Fellowes shot a man at Ferguson Island. I arrested him. German Harry collected a lot of orphans at Dobu whom I mandated to the Mission at Cape Scott. Patten had trouble with natives at the south end of Goodenough Island which I straightened out. A man named Jonson started a coconut plantation on the east side of the island and violated some native taboos. I went and saw the thing arranged. I arrested a witch doctor named Kiraku for killing a man of the Mambare. Captain Brown of the schooner *Wirawira* was killed by natives while smuggling liquor off Cape Vogel. I left my assistant to run them down. . . ."

He droned on, an endless list of murders, captures, petty native wars, arrests, sieges, famines, fevers, sorceries, troubles between white men smuggling, quarrels over taboos and so on.

"That's about all, to make a rough survey," he finished, folding up the long report and laying it on the desk. His Excellency scowled and hammered on the desk with his fist.

"It's too much," he roared. "Your district's more damned trouble than it's worth. Six months' leave? You ought to be at work."

"Well, seeing I've had only twelve men and the operating expenses. . . ." suggested the R.M., smiling. He knew the governor of old.

"Don't give me any excuses!" His Excellency roared. "I know the pay's rotten, the grub's worse, the stores are inadequate and you ought to have five hundred men. But I expect results, not explanations. Fifteen murders in a year and five police killed! I'll have to take over the division myself."

"Yes, sir," said the R.M.—His Excellency simmered for a moment and then held out his hand.

"Well, have a good time. We've got to do the best we can with the money we're allowed. Don't get too drunk and don't get married." The R.M. saluted, turned on his heel and went out through the door. The assistant secretary came in. His Excellency looked up from the R.M.'s report and scowled.

"Captain Seave, sir" he said.

"Why didn't you send him in?" roared the governor. "How long has he been waiting?"

"About fifteen minutes, sir," said the amazed secretary. His Excellency groaned.

"It's a wonder he didn't turn round and go back. . . . Well, hurry him in."

Stinger Seave appeared in the doorway, his sun-helmet in his hand, blinking a little in the cool dimness. The secretary withdrew, rather stunned. Stinger Seave saw the lean figure in the comfortable chair and came forward.

"Can't get up," growled the governor. "Slipped downstairs yesterday and broke my leg. How are you?"

They shook hands. Seave sat down. His Excellency bit the end from a fresh cigar, lighted it and pushed the box across the desk.

"It's got to stop, Stinger," he growled at last. "I can't have half my force busy running after you. The old days are done. You can't run around shooting and smuggling and looting any more." His Excellency let his eyes wander to the R.M.'s report before him and he had the grace to blush. Then he roared, pounding the desk: "I tell you, we've *got* to have law and order! The Islands are settling down. You old fellows have got to face the new situation. . . . Stinger, I've got a stack of warrants and charges against you that'd fill my desk. I can have you arrested right now and give you a sentence that'd put you away for the rest of your days."

Stinger Seave smiled faintly and tapped the ash from his cigar.

"Well, go ahead," he suggested. His Excellency scowled.

"I don't want half a dozen men shot," he said. "Be sensible, Stinger. The Islands aren't what they used to be. Here we've got a few men, only a little money and few enough boats to rule all New Guinea. It takes all our energies to keep the natives quiet and protect what respectable whites there are. In a few years the politicians'll wake up and we'll have enough men to hold things down. But as it is, we have to make up in excellence of material what we lack in quantity. Thank God, the Service attracts the best! The pay's rotten, Stinger, the grub's worse, and there's a first class chance of getting killed. And yet the fine young men still come for the job."

"What's all this got to do with me?" murmured the Stinger.

"I'm trying to get you to stop being a nuisance," snapped the governor. "You and Cassidy and the rest don't seem to be able to settle down to honest trading or planting and you're too quick to get into trouble. Now, I seem to have read somewhere that in the old days of the American West it was the custom when a man got too bad to make him change sides. I'm offering you, Stinger, the toughest division in the territory. I'm offering to make you a resident magistrate, an officer of the Law. We need your kind. These young men are sound but they haven't the knowledge of the Islands your kind has, and mine."

FOR perhaps the first time in his life Stinger Seave laughed with all his body. He opened his mouth and shook. It was a superb joke as he saw it—Stinger Seave, the biggest thorn in the side of half a dozen Administrations, being asked to enforce the Law. His Excellency waited until he had finished, then leaned forward, tapping the desk edge with his forefinger.

"I'm serious, Stinger. You know me. I've got the toughest job a man ever had and I'm going to see it through. We'll have law and order in the Islands if it kills me. And I give you fair warning, if you don't come over to us I'll carry out the warrants. You'll get twenty-four hours' start from Port Moresby and if you show your nose anywhere in these waters hereafter you go to jail. You've had a good run. We've all been friends to you, fought beside you, even broken the Law with you in the old days. But that's done. We filed away warrants because we understood you, knew you were doing more to tame the Islands than any of us. But that's finished. I'm not threatening, Stinger, I know you too well to make idle threats. But I'm in dead earnest and I put the matter straight to you. You can do one of

three things—stick to straight trading or planting, take this R.M. job, or skip out!"

Stinger Seave brushed his hand across his eyes. He knew that what the governor said was largely true. The old days were gone. The Law was being enforced more and more every year. There were still islands and coasts where white men were unknown and the Law was still that of rifle and dynamite, but even if a man spent his energies there, there were times when he must come to some civilized port to outfit or sell his cargoes. And if the officials in the ports ceased to regard with a certain tolerance the free-traders, the old semi-pirates and adventurers, then, indeed, what was there left?

"Ten years ago, even five years ago," said the Stinger quietly, "such a flat ultimatum as you have just delivered would. . . ."

"Would have sent you out on some mad venture just to show us how good you were," agreed His Excellency. Then his voice dropped, softened and even grew a little pleading. "We're getting old, Stinger, you and I and Cassidy and Chang and the rest. It was fun dodging the Law when we were young and the Islands were pretty well wide open. But it isn't the same now. A man wants some peace. A man wants to settle down and be a bit respectable. I know you were on the road before the typhoon year came and the bank crash, and I'm not saying I blame you for going back to the old life to get some other fortune for your age.

"But this is the better way. I'm asking you as a friend to consider the proposal. . . . It won't be that you'll just sit back and twiddle your thumbs, Stinger. I'll give you the toughest division we've got. You'll need all your old shooting skill and all your courage and brains. And you'll be working for the Islands and not against them. In the old days free-lance adventure, hard-shooting, hard-sailing, hard-drinking men were a necessity. But now that period has gone and we need those men with us. What do you say, Stinger?"

SEAVE was silent for a long time. His Excellency settled back with a sigh and smoked his cigar. Stinger Seave smoked, too. The secretary came in the room, paused a moment at the spectacle of the two old men immersed in thought, and then as silently departed again. Nearly an hour passed before Stinger Seave roused himself.

"I'm getting old," he admitted slowly. "And I'm tired, George. What you say is about right. There isn't the old kick left in running about. And I'm not the trader I was. The last two cruises were failures. I was down at Ysabel this time and fat old Kawara, the chief of the river tribes . . . you remember him? . . . came out in his canoe unarmed and ate with me. It's the first he's done it. He's always before tried an attack first, threw a few spears, took a few shots in reply before we settled down to business. We're all getting old. . . . I rather think I'll take you up!"

His Excellency tried to leap from his chair, groaned as his leg twinged, then hammered on the desk with his fist.

"This is the luckiest day the service ever had," he roared. "By thunder, Stinger, we'll tame the Island together! . . . Let's have a drink."

He raised his voice. The secretary came in with glasses and a bottle. The two old friends drank, to the good old days, the days of youth and fighting and adventure; and then another drink for the days to be, Stinger Seave, R.M.

And it was in this fashion that Stinger Seave entered on the three last magnificent years of his life and took over the toughest division of New Guinea, with headquarters on Anea.

III

ANEA had killed three previous magistrates. It was an island huddled in the delta of a great river and tapping the trade of hundreds of miles of unhealthy coast, not to mention that of a dozen other islands near by. It was almost the exact center of the last utterly wild portion of New Guinea and for this reason it gathered to its bosom every bad character that sailed those seas.

Men driven from the quickly taming Samoan Islands, from the already settled Fijis, from the Societys and the Paumotus, Borneo and Sumatra, all came to Anea sooner or later, or to that other island, as savage and as lawless, Manoa to the north.

But Anea at this time was the worst of the two places.

Stinger Seave anchored off the island in his own schooner late one afternoon. The Administration had had no cutter to offer him yet but they had come to an arrangement by which the *Parramata's* expenses were to be paid and she was to be used for government work only. His Excellency had sent with Stinger Seave just six native policemen, all Papuans who had been in the force some years and commanded by a trustworthy sergeant named Kiwi. As his assistant magistrate the Stinger had obtained Chang, his Chinese friend and once a famous pearl buyer.

The Stinger came to Anea unannounced, very quietly and unobtrusively and with the name of Captain Smith. Under that name he was entered in the Administration's books. The warrants were torn up. Stinger Seave was officially dead.

Anea as an Island city consisted of two large galvanized iron trading stores, three saloons, some half dozen palm-thatched residences, a large native village, a small bungalow for the resident magistrate's home and a still smaller jail. The bungalow and the jail were almost in ruins, for Anea had been left unpoliced for two years, ever since the last R.M. had died suddenly and his native police had mysteriously disappeared.

Stinger Seave, or Captain Smith, landed his men and supplies that night and took possession of the bungalow. The *Parramata* lay at anchor in the really excellent harbor, between a large German bark in from the Solomons and a small schooner from the Bismarcks. There were also several luggers, and one or two other schooners in port, for Anea was a busy place and ships did not necessarily stop there to trade or get supplies. Captains weary with six months or more of the sea dropped in to get drunk, to pick up the latest gossip and to find themselves a temporary sweetheart among the girls in the saloons.

Anea was wicked, very wicked. Many men every year were found pitched in the mangroves with knives between their shoulder blades. Many more simply disappeared altogether, Malays, Chinamen, Germans, Frenchmen, Americans, Englishmen, Australians, all gathered there. Gambling, drinking and other things were always in full swing. Girls: white girls, brown girls, yellow girls, half-castes and full-blooded natives, came from all over the Islands to help lighten the pockets of loot-choked adventurers. The toughest place in all the territory, as His Excellency had said, and too far from Port Moresby and Samarai for the Law really to reach. Stinger Seave felt quite cheerful when he surveyed it, for he had only been there once or twice before and never since its riotous days.

"I think we shall enjoy ourselves," he remarked gently. "I understand several of my old friends or enemies are gathered here."

"They have killed three magistrates," said Chang with a sigh. "One went out fishing and did not come back. One was found speared in the bush. The other died in a saloon riot. Will you never grow tired of fighting?"

The Stinger smiled.

"I shall die fighting," he remarked casually. "A wise woman once told me that. I shall die fighting and a friend will kill me."

"It is written also that I shall die with you," commented Chang. "We are growing old, my friend. Do you remember long ago when I told you that, that I shall die with you? I looked into the crystal and was eager to know the future. I am wiser now. Life should not be understood, nor the future of life. . . . Perhaps it is here we shall face the end together."

Seave did not answer. He only half believed his own prophecy but he knew that Chang wholly believed his. There was a time when Chang always consulted his crystal before going forth on a venture, though of late he had abandoned the practice. But what did it matter how or when they died? The Stinger was ready. He had faced death too many years now to be afraid of it.

THEY were sitting on the veranda of the tumble-down bungalow and smoking after dinner. The next day they would start work. The native police were camped around a fire a short distance away, for the barracks were in ruins and new ones must be built. The bungalow was set on a rise and, looking down the slope, once cleared of jungle but now overgrown with weeds

and vines and small saplings, they could see the bright lights of the small Island city, the fires in the native village with the dark figures passing back and forth, and the lights of the shipping in the harbor.

They could hear, coming up the hot wind, the shouts of laughter, the drunken cries, the noise of the tinny pianos in the saloons. Once there was a hubbub and the sound of breaking glass, followed by a shot. His Excellency had honored Stinger Seave, Chang thought, in sending him to Anea. Who else was there in all the South who would be expected to tame it with only six policemen? It was a job for a cruiser.

Presently up the slope from the town there came four or five dark figures, the leading one carrying a lantern. From the noisy talking and the occasional shouts of laughter it was evident some of them were drunk. Chang rose to his feet and folded his arms across his chest, his slant eyes glowing. Stinger Seave smoked unperturbed, though his right hand began slowly to stroke his throat.

RIGHT up to the veranda the strangers came and when the leader with the lantern caught sight of the two white-clad figures sitting in the semi-glow, he halted and put down his light on the cracked steps. The police, sitting round the fire, stood up and rested their carbines in the crooks of their arms and Sergeant Kiwi spoke to them in a low voice. Behind the leading stranger three other men had halted.

"We understand there's a new magistrate," declared the first man in an unpleasant voice. He was big and burly, darkly unshaven, with an out-thrust jaw and glittering cold blue eyes. He had his thumbs stuck in a sagging cartridge belt round his waist and a pearl-handled revolver glimmered in the lantern light. Seave tapped the ash from his cigar.

"You were correctly informed," he said gently.

"Stand up and let's look at you," said the man harshly. The Stinger obeyed, apparently goodnatured. He stood up, came down the steps until the light shone on him.

The other man began to laugh. His companions laughed.

"What d'you think you're going t' do?" he said at last. "There ain't enough of you t' put in my pocket."

"I am Captain Smith," answered the Stinger, still gently. "I have been sent by His Excellency to restore order to Anea. May I inquire who you are?"

"I own the *Mermaid,*" jerked the other insolently. "Name of Crossly. When I say jump, on Anea, everyone does, see? This's a sort of friendly visit, though. I'm warning you to walk soft and wide of us. You just stick to filling in reports, see? Don't bother us and you'll be left alone. The others they sent here had too many ideas about things and they . . . er . . . quit."

"Remarkable," sighed the Stinger. Then slowly his mild blue eyes changed color. They took on the cold, clear glint of ice and for some reason he could not fathom Crossly felt a chill run down his back and an uneasiness swept him.

"Now let me say something," snapped the Stinger, his voice crisp as a whip. "I represent the Law here. I propose to enforce it. Tonight you can have full reign. Tomorrow at noon Anea settles down."

Another man pushed forward, a slender, dark-haired, handsome man with a silky black mustache and bright black eyes. He was immaculately dressed in a fine suit of well-pressed whites, with a broad sash around his waist in which was stuck a neat Mauser.

"Captain Smith," he drawled, in a not unfriendly voice, "you are a brave man, yes. You must be, else they would not have sent you here. I am Charley the Greek and the Three Ships Hotel is mine. We wish no trouble with the Administration. We wish only to be left alone. You will walk softly, yes. You will make no arrests. Maybe then we shall be friends and you will grow rich."

Stinger Seave smiled thinly.

"I take no bribes," he said gently. "And I shall make no arrests."

"What're you driving at?" demanded Crossly roughly. Chang thought he resented Charley the Greek butting in.

"I mean," answered the Stinger, tapping ash from his cigar again, "I mean the jail is in need of repair, so I shall make no arrests. Just that."

"He means," whispered Charley the Greek, "that he will shoot to kill."

THERE was a brief silence. The four men from the town shifted uneasily on their feet. Then another of them, a short squat man with a scarred, evil face, pushed forward. He was very drunk but able to walk straight.

"You start anything like that and you'll get yours," he snarled. "Ain't you got any sense at all? I warn you. I run the Frigate Bird and if you shove your nose inside my joint you'll get lead between your eyes."

"That" whispered the Stinger, "remains to be seen."

The fourth man lurched into the lantern light and he was very drunk indeed, rocking back and forth on his feet. He was fat and moon-faced and his watery gray eyes blinked owlishly up at Seave.

"Cap'n Smith?" he hiccoughed. "Hell, what a name! Wait till Larsen of Singapore hears there's a new R.M. around. He'll send you packing." Stinger Seave started at that, as did Chang. Larsen of Singapore was an old foe. The Stinger and he had clashed many times. If Larsen of Singapore were financially interested in Anea, the task to clean it up would be much harder.

The very drunken fat man—his name was Collins, they later learned, and he was partner to Charley the Greek—stepped close and peered into the Stinger's face.

"Cap'n Smith?" he hiccoughed. "Hell, that ain't your name. I seen you somewheres afore . . . somewheres afore, I know." He shook his head sadly and Crossly pushed him aside with a sharp oath.

"I don't give a damn who he is," he croaked. "But get this straight, Smith. You walk soft and easy and mind your own business and maybe we'll make you rich. Start interfering and you'll go under. Is that clear?"

"Very clear," replied the Stinger gently. "And I hope you understand as clearly that after tomorrow noon Anea settles down."

"You are foolish, yes," sighed Charley the Greek, as if he regretted the whole affair. Crossly shrugged. He picked up his lantern and moved away, pausing only to throw back over his shoulder, "We'll stand for no fooling, remember that, Smith."

IV

THE four men straggled back down the slope. Chang and the Stinger could hear the drunken Collins protesting, "I tell you I've seen him somewhere and his name wasn't Smith. He's well known in the Islands. You'd better watch out."

Crossly only laughed. Charley the Greek said smoothly, "He is not like the others, Crossly. Not young and green and foolishly brave. He is a wise man, yes. I do not like his eyes . . . Who is it the Islands say has such eyes? . . . We must take care. The governor would not send a fool to Anea."

"What can he do against the bunch of us?" inquired the short squat man roughly, he who owned the Frigate Bird which was the lowest dive in town. It was said the only man he feared was Crossly, though it was noticeable he took good care to be polite also to Charley the Greek. Charley was perhaps the smoothest and best educated of them all, and, though he deferred to Crossly's greater strength and larger following, he had a way of speaking sometimes that made even Crossly wonder just how much he controlled the dark, slender man.

"What can he do?" inquired Charley the Greek softly. "Much or little. It depends on what he is. It would be well to walk softly until he shows us, yes, what he is made of."

"His name ain't Smith," hiccoughed Collins, wagging his heavy head. "I see 'im somewheres . . . Ponape? Brisbane? Moresby? Suva? Damned if I know."

They entered the little town back of the beach and parted to their respective resorts. Crossly went bellowing as to what he would do if any blankety-blank magistrate tried to sit on him. Collins swayed off mumbling about Captain Smith not being Captain Smith. The scarred, squat man repaired to the Frigate Bird and, calling his half-caste partner Lenaire, began to plan ways and means of eliminating the new R.M.

Charley the Greek reacted quite differently. He had a premonition that things were about to happen on Anea. His Excellency, it stood to reason, would not send any other but an exceptional man after three had already died. It was wisest to

see which way the wind would blow before taking things for granted as Crossly did. Charley called his men together, his white bartender, his two native houseboys, his girls.

"There is the Law come again," he said softly, smoking his cheroot and smiling at them. "Perhaps it will be only a jest as was the Law before. But there will be no fighting, no anger, no quarreling, not too much drinking until we know. I am clear, yes?"

They all grunted or nodded and went about their jobs. Charley ran the best place on Anea and kept his own peace with his Mauser. It was his boast that no man, not even a common sailor, was ever robbed or slugged or beaten in the Three Ships Hotel. He charged the highest prices, employed the newest girls and dealt quite impartially with all comers. Also he disliked Crossly and he looked forward to the day when he could expand his own place, when the Three Ships Hotel would be perhaps the only one on the Island, with Crossly and Barker and the rest forgotten or dead. Charley the Greek therefore did not wish to run foul of the Law if the Law showed the slightest signs of gaining the upper hand.

EXACTLY at noon the next day Stinger Seave came down the hill. He was immaculately dressed and was coolly smoking a cigar. He seemed unarmed. He seemed at peace with the world. He seemed merely a little elderly man taking a quiet walk before lunch. The native police he had left to build themselves a barracks. Chang he had left to superintend them, in spite of the Chinaman's heated protests.

"Anea is not a jest," Chang had insisted. "If you will not take the police on patrol, at least let me walk with you. Some one must watch your back."

"I have not anticipated so much fun since Larsen trapped me on Ysabel," returned the Stinger. "Let me be. If I should die you have my permission to burn the place to the ground." Chang had shrugged at that because it was hopeless to persuade Stinger Seave, once he had made up his mind.

So the frail little sailor walked calmly down the hill and entered the town, picking a delicate way between heaps of garbage and sleeping natives, through a pack of snarling nondescript dogs. The first place he came to was the Three Ships Hotel and he walked up on the broad veranda and stopped to survey the scene.

There were few about so early in the day. A mate from one of the schooners in the harbor dozed in a cane chair. Two dark-eyed native girls leaned outside the wide dark doorway and smiled invitingly. The Stinger's mild blue eyes passed over them and for some reason or other they withdrew in some confusion. The Stinger entered the hotel. Inside a few men, white and half-castes, were sitting at the tables drinking and talking. Several girls were gathered on the raised platform at the other end of the room where stood the battered old piano. When night came and the crowd gathered, the girls would dance, the piano would thump out long-outdated tunes and the noises of talk would rise with the thickening tobacco smoke.

Charley the Greek, who had been watching from the balcony upstairs, came smoothly down, as immaculate as the Stinger, smiling, pleasant.

"It is quiet here," he said deprecatingly. "Too early for the ship men to come, yes. Will you drink?"

The Stinger nodded and sat down. He saw no signs of natives drinking, nothing much at all that he could take exception to. He was no saint himself. He had not the slightest intention of ordering the girls to be discharged or any such thing as that. No R.M. in all the Islands bothered about such minor things. The main point was to keep the peace, to stop the selling of liquor to natives, to stop the fighting and killing, the running of guns, opium, women and so on—but, most of all, to keep the peace.

CHARLEY came with a bottle of his best whisky, serving the new magistrate himself. When the Stinger threw down a piece of gold Charley pushed it back with a smile.

"The drink is for you from me," he said.

"I buy my own," responded the Stinger quietly. "But perhaps you will drink with me?"

Charley the Greek bowed, seated himself, poured two drinks. The men finished

them in silence. Then Charley asked if he might be permitted to buy the next. This the Stinger agreed to after receiving the change from his gold. Then he rose and started for the door.

"I shall be back," he said. Charley bowed again, and was motionless for a long time, his eyes fixed on the doorway through which the little frail man had departed.

"I think," whispered Charley to himself. "I think my friend Crossly will have a great surprise, yes."

Stinger Seave's next stop was at the Frigate Bird and there he found things already in full swing. Outside the place, near the veranda steps, a native snored in drunken slumber, full in the blazing sun. His lips were puffed and there was a bruise under one eye. Stinger Seave grunted and entered the place.

Half a dozen men were singing uproariously round the old piano. Several natives were squatted against the walls swigging cheap trade gin from square-faced dark bottles. A card game was in full blast near the dirty short bar at one end and Barker, squat, ugly and scarred, was surveying the players with a grin for his house man was winning heavily. Barker was still in his pajamas but he had his gunbelt buckled round his waist and a cigar stuck out of his thick-lipped mouth. One of the many girls moving about called to him and he looked first at her inquiringly, then swung rapidly to face Stinger Seave. He scowled.

The Stinger walked right up to him and a sudden hush fell over the Frigate Bird. Barker rested a hand on his gun and waited. Stinger Seave put his right hand slowly to his throat and began rubbing it as if an insect had bitten him there.

"It is against the law to sell liquor to natives," he said gently. "You will please put those men outside and take away their bottles. You will also refrain from serving them in future."

"Yes?" said Barker. He laughed. One or two other men laughed, evidently his friends. They backed up behind him to see the fun. This must be the new R.M. come to enforce the Law on Anea. Quite a joke, eh?

"Suppose I say you can go to hell?" inquired Barker.

"I warn you this once," answered the Stinger. His blue eyes slowly changed until they glinted like ice. "You put those men out. If I find any others in here drinking you go to jail."

"Don't be funny," snarled the squat man. "And get to hell out of my place!"

"Put those natives out!" commanded the Stinger, his voice crisp as a whip.

Barker laughed again but a bit uncertainly because of the other's eyes.

A man said, "Aw, kick him out. Barker, like you did the last one."

Barker grinned and stepped forward.

"Stay where you are!" snapped the Stinger. "I'll shoot you dead if you try anything."

Barker stopped. He was thoughtful for a moment; then he sneered.

"A gunman, eh? I suppose His Excellency thought he'd try something funny. . . . Well, go for it, you swine!"

He was jerking his own gun clear even as he spoke, but before the last word was out there was a crashing roar and his weapon dropped heavily to the matting from his stinging hand.

Two men behind him whipped out their guns with a startled oath and the crashing explosions made the place echo. One man took three steps back with a broken arm; the other dropped his gun as Barker had done. Barker was looking, stupefied, at a bleeding furrow that creased the back of his right hand.

The cold, icy eyes of Stinger Seave swept the stunned onlookers, taking no heed of the girls who were screaming and running for the rear of the house.

"That will be enough for now," the Stinger said. "Put those natives out!"

"You go to hell!" choked Barker, red with rage and fear. "Who the hell are you, anyway?"

"I shall count three," whispered the Stinger, his frosty eyes boring into Barker's. "And then I shall shoot again."

For a moment there was a tense silence while the powder smoke went up in blue wisps. "One," said the Stinger. "Two. . . ."

Barker ripped out an oath and, walking to the nearest native, kicked him to his feet and propelled him toward the door. Stinger Seave backed against a wall until it was all done; then he smiled his little wintry smile.

"Thank you," he said gently. "I hope I never have to bother you again."

In a tense silence still he left the Frigate Bird and, though his back was turned, not a man dared to shoot. He passed out into the sunshine and it was not until a girl giggled hysterically that the tension broke. And then Barker's wrath was something to terrify men. He sent a houseboy to Crossly's place.

V

STINGER SEAVE made for the Mermaid saloon in a silence almost as tense as that in which he had left the Frigate Bird. The sound of shots seemed to have driven all life off the dusty street. He had seen the houseboy run from the rear of the Frigate Bird and he knew that Barker had warned Crossly what had happened.

But the Stinger did not hesitate. He had loaded his gun while he walked and just before reaching the Mermaid he took an abrupt turn to the left and walked straight into the coconut groves that were thick behind the rows of shacks and saloons. This move was entirely unexpected and the man who was watching the Stinger's approach from a window in the Mermaid uttered a cry of alarm and turned to tell Crossly what had happened.

Meanwhile the Stinger, once in the trees, quickened his walk until he was sure he was out of sight. Then he turned to the right and ran swiftly for perhaps a hundred yards. This took him well past the rear of the Mermaid and brought him behind a big trading store. The trees ran right up to this, as he had noticed when surveying the lie of the land early that morning through glasses from the magistrate's bungalow.

He walked boldly into the rear door of the store and found himself in a back room. A tall, lean man was leaning forward over a table and on the table lay a rifle and several boxes of ammunition. A native was fingering the weapon covetously with one hand while the other held a large bundle of bird-of-paradise skins.

"Pardon me," said the Stinger. "But an order in council forbids the sale of weapons to natives without possession of a special permit."

The lean man slowly turned, his jaw dropping, a look of utter astonishment on his face. The native backed off, gibbering, clutching his skins to him.

"And who the hell are you?" asked the lean man slowly.

"Captain Smith, resident magistrate on Anea," answered the Stinger.

The other relaxed then and laughed.

"Oh, you're the new man, eh? Well, don't be funny. If you know what's healthy for you, you'll shut up."

Seave looked at the native. The man turned and ran. The trader uttered an oath and reached for his hip pocket. The Stinger smiled frostily and watched him and the thin man produced a gun. He tapped with the barrel of it on the table and his eyes glittered.

"Listen, little boy," he said rather grimly. "You see this? Well, I'm giving you a start just to that door. . . . And if you bring back a file of police I'll give Crossly a yell and he'll settle with you."

"It's remarkable," said the Stinger, apparently irrelevantly.

"What's remarkable?"

"The way you seem to think you're all tough here," said Seave. "Now put that plaything away and talk sense. You'll walk inside the Law in future or you'll go to jail. Is that clear?"

The other shrugged and, lifting the gun he held, began to thumb the hammer.

"Beat it!" he snapped.

"Is that Crossly behind you?" asked the Stinger innocently. The thin man looked around. When he looked back again he changed color. He stared straight into a neat black muzzle and it was held with uncanny steadiness.

"You're not tough," said the Stinger contemptuously. "A child wouldn't fall for such an old trick."

There was the sound of shoes on the back porch. Seave moved swiftly aside. A rough-dressed and unshaven man burst in, very excited. He stopped when he saw the trader standing apparently idle at the table.

"Heard the latest, Andrews?" he commenced. "That damned new R.M. went into Barker's. . . . ." His word became a gurgle as he caught sight of Seave. And then like a flash his hand dropped to his side. The trader at the same instant ducked behind the table and shot upward.

There were exactly three explosions and

two came from Seave's gun. The man who had come to tell about Barker gave a howl and clasped his bleeding hand. The trader went sideways with a crash even as his bullet smashed into the wall several feet to one side of the Stinger. Seave waited a moment and then, breaking his gun, took out the two empty shells and replaced them.

"That man," he said mildly, waving the gun at the limp trader, "is dead. The next time you draw a gun on me you will die, too."

HE turned and walked not out of the back door but right into the big store, leaving the wounded man staring stupefied at the neat hole that was between the trader's eyes.

There were two half-caste clerks in the store but the Stinger ignored them. He made for the front of the place, approached a window, looked out, then paused. He could see a crowd of men issuing from the Mermaid by the rear way and hurrying toward the store, apparently to investigate the shots, possibly hoping to trap the new magistrate. The Stinger smiled, waited until they were well behind the store; then, stepping out, he walked calmly toward the front door of the Mermaid, keeping alert for any watchers who might take it into their heads to try and shoot at him.

He spotted one native gaping at him near the rear end of the Mermaid but the man after a moment's astonishment turned and fled into the groves behind him with a cry of alarm. Stinger Seave went up on the Mermaid's front veranda and stepping close to the house wall edged along until he could peer through the slits in a grass-slat curtain hung over one of the open front windows. He saw no one in immediate view and, apparently satisfied, walked boldly through the gloomy doorway, his gun ready in his hand and his eyes like ice.

The place was deserted except for a group of girls gathered at one window in the rear and staring toward the big store. A drunken man slept at a table.

A few natives were sitting with bottles. Crossly and his bullies had evidently all charged over to the nearby store. Stinger Seave smiled a little and sat down at a table, his back to the wall so he could command both front and rear of the place. He holstered his gun and slowly lighted a cheroot. Then he tapped gently on the table.

One of the girls turned and saw him and uttered a half-stifled cry. The rest turned.

"Whisky," said the Stinger. "The best you have."

As if fascinated, the girl who had first seen him went behind the bar, procured a whisky bottle and a tray and a glass and brought them to him. When the Stinger asked for water, that was brought, too, and he sipped reflectively at his mild drink amid tense silence. No one moved. The girls remained in a huddle to stare. The girl who had waited on him, a white girl, fair, blue-eyed, apparently not more than twenty-five or six, though she looked thirty, leaned on the table opposite him.

"You're the new R.M., aren't you?" she asked slowly.

Stinger Seave blinked at her and nodded.

"Well, it's nothing to me what happens to you, but you'd better beat it. Crossly's hopping mad because of what you did to Barker at the Frigate Bird and he'll finish you. Take my tip and leave him alone. He's finished three nice boys already."

"You are very kind," murmured the Stinger gently. "But there will be no more of that on Anea."

He coughed a little as if smoke had got into his throat. He eyed the girl keenly, then tapped the ash from his cheroot and leaned nearer to her.

"By the way, if you happen to know of any women being held here . . . er . . . against their wishes, I'll be glad to arrange for their transportation to Australia."

The girl looked at him with sombre, brooding eyes; then she laughed bitterly.

"The others said much about the same thing. But they never had a chance to clean these joints up. You don't think any white woman wants to stay here, do you?"

"No," admitted the Stinger frankly. "I don't. But then, some choose that sort of thing."

The girl struck the table fiercely with her fist.

"Well, I don't. Crossly brought me here from one of his trips to Brisbane. There's a few others in the same boat. Where the devil can we go? Most of the girls, especially the natives, don't mind the

life, but I'm not a native. Understand me, mister. I'm no lily-white saint. I was bad back . . . there . . . but I never had to stand being pawed by the sort of animals that come to Anea."

"We'll fix all that," murmured the Stinger. He was a hard man, a ruthless, cold man, but he stood for utter fair play. He had not the slightest objection to and not the slightest interest in any girl who wanted to follow the life she led, but he knew, all too well, that many of the Island dives were stocked with women who would have given their right arms to be back in Australia. And he intended seeing that such women went. For the rest, those who chose to remain, what did it matter?

The girl who faced the Stinger seemed about to say more but suddenly she drew erect, muttered a quiet, "Well, don't say I didn't warn you, mister," then backed off to the wall.

Crossly had returned.

THE big burly man came swaggering in by the rear door of the saloon, his thumbs stuck in his cartridge belt and his voice raised in bellowing scorn. His bullies followed him, laughing, sneering, agreeing with every word he said.

"Aw, he skipped for the woods," Crossly was asserting. "He knew he was lucky to get the drop on Barker and he was riding the luck pretty hard when he dropped into the store. But he won't come here. I'll take a bet on it. I'm Buck Crossly and I've got rid of three magistrates. If they figure on cleaning up Anea they'll have to send a cruiser, not a damned little shrimp . . ." One of the girls had drawn up to Crossly and said something to him.

He grew rigid, jerked his head around and saw the quiet figure seated at one of his tables. He was so astonished at the utter sheer nerve of it that he was silent and still for nearly a minute. Then he recovered himself, hitched his holsters around to the front, and laughed.

"Well, look who's here," he jeered. "The little boy's paid us a visit, after all."

The fat and moon-faced man, whose name was Collins, stood near Crossly and he plucked at the big man's jacket sleeve. Collins was still drunk but very nervous.

"You better listen to me, Crossly," he croaked with many hiccoughs. "He ain't Captain Smith. No such thing! I've seen him somewhere afore . . ." Crossly swept him aside and strode down the big room to where the Stinger sat calmly sipping his mild drink.

"You got a blasted nerve," said Crossly hoarsely. "I guess you figure, 'cause you got away with Barker and the rest, that I'm soft, eh? Well, get to hell out of my place as fast as yer legs'll carry yer. Savvy?"

"You are breaking the law," said the Stinger mildly, blinking up at the big man. "You must not sell liquor to natives. Put those men out."

Crossly rested his hands on his guns. He packed two of them, swung low on his thighs.

"I'll give you ten seconds," he replied coldly.

Stinger Seave nodded. He finished his drink, set down his glass and began to rub his throat. Crossly thought he was about to rise and leave. Instead, the little frail man's eyes turned to twin points of ice and he whispered, "Well, start counting."

Crossly was astonished. No man on Anea dared face him. He was a notorious shot. Not even the other magistrates had stood up to him in this fashion, brave men as they had been. And as Crossly was astonished, so were his bullies, his men, his hangers-on. They stood back to give him gun room and guffawed. It was funny. At least the other magistrates had been upstanding, big men, capable of holding their own, but this little old individual looked as if a good breath would send him outside.

"Chesty, eh?" grinned Crossly. "Well, all right. "I'll count. One, two, three. . . ." He went steadily on and the Stinger did not move. When he came to ten Crossly began slowly to draw his guns, his face threatening, expecting to see the other wilt and run.

Instead, the little man's hand snaked inside his jacket, appeared again and there was an explosion. Crossly rocked back, sagged at the knees and dropped. A trickle of blood appeared down his cheek. The Mermaid was deathly silent.

Stinger Seave rose, swept the place with his icy eyes, and the rest of the men wilted back, awed. Then the Stinger crossed to the natives in sight, kicked them up and

ordered them outside. That done, he turned to the wondering crowd.

"He's only creased," he said, waving a contemptuous hand at the huddled, limp Crossly. "When he comes round, tell him I'll be back tomorrow at this time." He quietly walked out. It was a long time before anyone ventured to Crossly's side.

The fair girl who had first spoken to the Stinger stood with wide, shining eyes and she whispered, "He'll do it! I believe he'll do it!"

Chang was anxiously waiting on the bungalow veranda when the Stinger returned.

"I heard firing," said the Chinaman uneasily. "There was a killing, eh?"

"A little," replied the Stinger. He took off his sun-helmet, laid it on a chair, sank to another, and reached for the gin bottle. Not until he had sipped half of the liquor did he speak again. "Do you know, Chang, the Islands aren't anything like what they used to be. Men were tough in my day and yours. Now they're only a joke. I can't understand why the governor thought Anea was bad."

Chang sighed and shook his head.

"You must remember, my friend, that those other magistrates were clean boys, brave, strong and willing but inexperienced. They did their best and they failed. But you . . . you are Stinger Seave."

"I am Captain Smith," said the Stinger gently. "Let us forget Stinger Seave, Chang. He was a bad man. Captain Smith from now on."

"It may be you would forget," answered Chang gently. "But how can the Islands? Stinger Seave you have lived here and Stinger Seave you will die."

The Stinger shrugged and they dropped the conversation.

VI

ANEA was in a turmoil. Only Charley the Greek preserved his composure, and he was the only man on whom the heavy hand of the new magistrate had not fallen. Crossly, his head bandaged, his temper villainous, called a meeting in the back room of the Mermaid that night to discuss ways and means to combat this sudden menace of the Law. They had talked the situation over, Barker, Charley the Greek, Crossly and one or two others who were interested, and they had reached no particular conclusion when Collins, the fat, moon-faced man, burst in, slightly more sober than usual.

"I've got it," the newcomer exclaimed. "I've got it, Charley!"

"Got what?" inquired Barker, with a scowl.

"That chap's name! I know who Captain Smith is."

"What is he?" choked Crossly. He ran off a long string of names. "That's what he is," he concluded.

"Maybe," insisted Collins. "But do you know his real name?"

"No, and I don't give a damn," snarled Crossly.

"I have guessed it," murmured Charley the Greek. "There is only one man in the Islands who could shoot that way, except perhaps Larsen of Singapore."

"Stinger Seave!" shouted Collins, quivering with excitement all over his fat body. There was a tense silence.

Crossly licked his lips and took an involuntary half step back. Barker nursed his wounded hand and muttered in an awed voice. Charley the Greek caressed his silky black mustache and nodded to himself. Collins gazed triumphantly from one to the other, and the rest of the men present went a little white.

"Stinger Seave?" inquired Crossly, with an uneasy look around.

"That explains it all," said Barker. There was another silence. Stinger Seave's name was known from the Pribiloffs to the Kermadecs. His gun play was almost a legend. If none of them had seen him, there was none who had not heard of him. His cold nerve, his ruthlessness, his exploits were the talk of the South. He was a survivor from the bad old days, companion adventurer to Cassidy of Apia, to Big Bill Gunther, to Black Len Carson and a dozen others who were almost legends themselves. Cold chills ran down the backbones of the listeners. Stinger Seave! Had they been trying to buck the Stinger? How was it any of them were left alive?

"Aw, that's a lie," declared Crossly at last, without much conviction. "What would the Stinger be doing here as resident magistrate? He's wanted himself."

"The new governor of New Guinea is an old-timer," murmured Charley the Greek. "The Stinger and he were old friends. It is natural he should be here. Also he has with him a Chinaman, and his mate is supposed to be Chang, the Chinese pearl-buyer of the old Paumotus days. I did not know who he was at first, but I told you, yes, to be careful. I did not like his eyes. We cannot fight Stinger Seave."

"The hell we can't!" choked Crossly. He glared around, his eyes flaming. "There's half a dozen of us, good men. He got us unawares this afternoon. We didn't know who he was, and we were careless. But from now on we'll deal with him."

"We can jump him in the bush some time," agreed Barker. "We've got to get rid of him or quit Anea. He'll be stopping the blackbirding trade next."

The rest looked uneasy, excepting Charley the Greek.

"Count me out," he said gently. "I wish to live longer. The Stinger he is too good, yes. Men do not make such names in the South without there is cause. I shall walk softly for a long time."

"Always thought you were yeller, anyway," sneered Crossly. "Stay out, Charley, and we'll get you after we've squared it with the Stinger. There's no room on Anea for two sides."

Charley the Greek bowed a little, but his dark eyes glittered.

"That is to be seen," he murmured. "But I will not fight Stinger Seave."

HE turned and left the room, Collins following him. He had hardly gone when a new step sounded and the door swung back to admit a tall, lean man with a grim, scarred face and graying kinky hair. He looked coldly round on the assembly and then snapped: "What's this I hear? A new R.M. scaring you all!"

Crossly heaved a sigh of something very close to relief. The newcomer was the owner of the Mermaid, half owner of the Frigate Bird, half owner of the big store, the clearing house for all the illegal trade of the island, the real ruler of Anea—Larsen of Singapore.

"Where did you blow from, Larsen?" growled Barker. "Well, never mind. We need some help here all right."

Larsen frowned and looked from man to man. He took in Crossly's bandaged head and then, catching sight of Barker's bandaged hand, he gave a violent start and with an involuntary motion rubbed a livid scar on the back of his own right hand.

"Word was sent me from Port Moresby that another R.M. had been appointed to Anea," he said slowly, licking his lips as if something had happened to disturb him. "A Captain Smith. I never heard of him. I left Singapore as soon as the news came and anchored here about two hours back. Felton of the *Leonora* met me on the beach and told me you'd had a run-in already."

"He shot us up," declared Crossly vehemently. "Got sore about us selling liquor to the natives. He got us unawares."

"Yes." Larsen smiled faintly. "How long has he been here?"

"Came in yesterday," growled Barker. "Do you know who he is?"

"No." The word came as if forced from Larsen's lips. He had a good idea, and something very much like fear was throbbing through him, but he dared not let these men suspect it.

"Stinger Seave!" jerked Barker moodily. In spite of the fact that he was prepared for the name. Larsen started violently and put his hand up to his mouth to hide the twitch of his lips. Stinger Seave! He had fought the man for nearly thirty years, ever since that distant day when the Stinger had brought "Bull" Nelson of Papeete to Singapore to confront Larsen about a broken contract.

THE feud had gone on intermittently through the years. If Larsen was the terror of the islands, Stinger Seave was the terror of Larsen. He bore a charmed life. Bullet, knife and poison failed against him. The very mention of his name was enough to cause Larsen's face to whiten even while it made him furiously angry and brought the oaths to his lips. Standing before his own creatures this night, Larsen pulled himself together and essayed a smile.

"So it's the Stinger, eh?" drawled Larsen. "Well, well!" He slipped a hand inside his jacket and caressed the gun he wore under his armpit, as the Stinger wore

his own gun. He looked speculatively around. The others waited for him to speak again.

"The Stinger is an old man," he said at last. "You are not a child, Crossly, nor you, Barker. Are you afraid?"

"He don't mean a thing to me," snarled Crossly. "He got the draw on me and creased me, and I'll kill him for it."

"It ain't that we're scared of him," Barker growled. "But we gotta go easylike, now we know who he is."

Larsen laughed. He was thinking rapidly. Stinger Seave on the high seas, the free-lance trader and adventurer, was one thing. But Stinger Seave ashore, a magistrate, was another. He could not run now after delivering his blows. He had to stick and carry them right through. It was an excellent chance to get rid of him to pay off old scores. But he must be very careful. Larsen of Singapore bore too many scars already from the Stinger's guns to take any chances.

"We'll try one or two things first," Larsen stated. "Have you a man you can trust, a native, Crossly? . . . Good! . . . If that fails we'll make a direct attack. I'll pay a thousand Straits dollars to the man who brings the Stinger down. But mind, not a word I'm in port. If anyone asks what my bark's doing here you can say my mate brought her in to pick up cargo. I'll live with you, Crossly. . . . There's no need for you others to feel afraid. The Stinger's nothing like what he's cracked up to be. He gets away with murder just because he looks so damned innocent and helpless no one's ready for him when he jumps. Savvy?"

They all nodded that they did, but somehow they retained still a little uneasy feeling that Larsen was not sincere.

VII

THE next day Seave made his quiet rounds of the saloons, but this time he came with his six policemen under Sergeant Kiwi. He was well aware that he might enter the saloons once and surprise men, but the second time would be taking too many chances. A rifleman could be hidden and waiting. Something could be slipped into his liquor if he chose to drink. A revolver might blaze from a window as he passed. And so the Stinger took precautions. Chang walked by his side, the police to his rear. They found nothing amiss, no natives drinking, no sign of any plain law violations.

When they had returned to the bungalow up the hill Chang said: "That was Larsen's bark in the harbor."

"I saw it," said the Stinger indifferently. "He's interested in Anea financially, I understand."

"If he has come," went on Chang gently, "it would be well to watch."

Stinger Seave nodded. No one better than he knew to what lengths Larsen would go to get rid of him, apart from anything to do with Anea.

After dinner that evening a nearly naked, fuzzy-haired savage trotted panting up to the veranda of the bungalow and delivered a note. Stinger opened it, as it was addressed to the resident magistrate. It said briefly in a shaking, scrawling hand:

Was taken sick this morning and fear poisoning. Witch doctor talking raiding in village. Fear attack before morning. Can you see me through? Bronson.

Now Bronson, according to the somewhat sketchy map of Anea that His Excellency had given the Stinger, was the resident manager for the fairly decent and straight-run Steinbloch's trading post the opposite side of the island from Larsen's holdings, a distance of about ten miles as the crow flies, but nearly treble that distance by water which was the only practical means of travel as the hinterland was all hills and jungle without any defined road across to the opposite coast.

"Be careful," warned Chang. "Larsen is here."

"He's keeping under cover then," commented the Stinger grimly. "But this may be genuine. Bronson works for Steinblochs and for all I know this is his handwriting. He's entitled to ask for protection."

"He has soon found out you are here," commented Chang, suspicious and always watchful for his friend's welfare. The Stinger shrugged.

"Drums, Chang. The drums have been pounding ever since we came."

It was true. The jungle telegraph had been at work ever since the *Parramata* had anchored. It was impossible that Bronson should not have heard that a new resident magistrate had come to Anea. But it was also queer that Bronson should send for aid so soon. Traders, especially independent traders on rough islands like Anea, usually were able to meet any situation themselves and seldom bothered the Administration, which, in turn, seldom bothered them. If Bronson had actually sent for help he needed it very badly. The Stinger called for the native to come closer and inspected him by the lamplight.

THE man was still panting as if he had run far. But there was not much dust on him. In reply to questions he declared he had come around the coast by canoe and run up from the beach. Yes, Bronson had sent him and Bronson was very sick. Also there was raiding talk in the nearest village. He was Bronson's head houseboy.

Chang called their own houseboys and questioned them. They agreed there was raiding talk. The drums had been saying that all afternoon, though it was strange, for there had been no such talk the previous day and raids are long in maturing, with many days of drum talk to precede them. But the houseboys were quite emphatic that trouble was afoot.

"Of course Larsen or Crossly could bribe the natives to use the drums," ventured Chang. The Stinger gestured impatiently.

"I begin to believe you're afraid of Larsen. You've got him on the brain, Chang."

"Your life and mine are not worth a dollar when he is around, my friend."

"True enough." The Stinger tugged at his mustache, then straightened in his chair. "I think you'd better go, Chang. Bronson may be in trouble, all right. Take three men and Sergeant Kiwi in the whaleboat. This native can tie his canoe behind the boat and show you the way. Better dish out ammunition and stores for three days. If there's no fight started, get what evidence you can and bring that witch doctor back here. Arrest him on a charge of disturbing the tribes or something. If there's a fight, kill him."

"You will watch yourself," insisted Chang. "I have a feeling this is a trap, whether for the man who goes or the man who stays I do not know. Perhaps for both."

"Run along," said the Stinger smiling. If he had not known that Chang loved him there were times when the yellow man's solicitations for his welfare would have annoyed him. But he owed his life to Chang, not once but many times, and he could forgive him much.

The Chinaman left in about an hour with Sergeant Kiwi and three men, the native who had brought the message leading the way. Stinger Seave called his three other policemen and ordered them to patrol around the bungalow, one man at a time in two hour watches.

Then, finishing a last cigar, he went to his room to get some sleep, a little uneasy though he would not admit it to himself, because on board his ship when there was danger about he could lock his door and screw down his port, but in this open bungalow no such security could be obtained.

The Stinger told himself he was getting nervous and old, and with a brief smile at his own foolishness he examined his gun to make sure it was loaded and in condition, thrust it back into his arm holster and laid down on his bed in his pajamas. He slept tranquilly as a child while the native policeman outside paced steadily around the house.

IT was some four or five hours later. The moon had gone, leaving the world to the starlight. The jungle was hushed. The noise of the surf on distant reefs was a mere whisper. Even the town on the beach had settled down, the piano tunes stopping, the lights going out. The last drunken sailors had departed to their ships or were asleep in the saloons. Deep quiet brooded over everything.

The native policeman paused in his pacing, grounded his carbine and rested his hands on the muzzle while he leaned a little forward and sank into a reverie that had to do with a tall, deep-bosomed woman of the Mambare who would come to his quarters as soon as he had won his corporal's stripes and retired from the police to be constable of his village.

He did not see the shadow that drifted

from the thickets covering the hill. If he heard the faintest of faint rustlings among the vines, bushman as he was, he was too sunken in his reveries to let it rouse him. His two companions slumbered by their fire near the half-finished barracks and he heaved a great sigh. He choked the sigh off half-way, for some sense of a warning seeped through him. He straightened and turned, lifting his gun; then an ax crashed into his brain and he fell with a little grunt, a huge black arm lowering him softly to the ground.

THERE was silence again then while savage eyes watched the sleepers by the fire. One of them stirred and rolled over restlessly, as if the sense of danger reached him even through his sleep. But he settled back, breathed deeply and after certain minutes there was a shadow treading softly up the worn and creaking veranda steps. They did not creak much this time, only making little noises as if the coolness of the night was straightening the warped boards. The shadow drifted to the mosquito netting that covered the doorway, drew it aside. A vagrant shaft of starlight glinted on a stained ax head.

And then a gentle voice said, "Stay where you are."

There came a sharp hiss of an indrawn breath, a low cry. The shadow lunged forward and there was an orange spurt of flame in the blackness, followed by a choking cry and a heavy fall. After that, silence again within the bungalow, though startled cries came from the wakened police by the fire and the vicious crack of a carbine was followed by a scream in the brush. Stinger Seave, who some men said never slept, stood up and lighted a lamp. Even as he did so there was a sharp whine and immediately afterward the dull *smack!* of a bullet in the top of the table, not an inch from his right side.

"Careless, careless!" murmured the Stinger, dropping like a flash. He must be getting old to make a target of himself by the light of the lamp. He crawled along the floor and inspected the dead savage who had tried to kill him, picked up the bloody ax and examined it. It was a cheap trade article, no clue at all. The Stinger crawled out to the veranda and found his two remaining policemen bending sorrowfully over their dead comrade.

"It would be well," said the Stinger calmly, "if you both watched until dawn. In the shadows, say, one behind the house and one before."

One of the men clucked angrily with his tongue.

"If I find the man who has done this, he will die horribly," he said.

"He *is* dead," said the Stinger shortly.

"And so is my brother," added the policeman sadly. Then he gripped his carbine, gritted his teeth and glided round the back of the house. The other man squatted on the veranda steps, his carbine acros his knees and his ears twitching as he picked up minute sounds from the night.

"They have gone," he announced suddenly. The Stinger nodded. No bushman would be mistaken about that. Seave stood up, stretched his limbs, brushed the dirt from his pajamas, then calmly walked back to his bedroom. He threw the dead native out on the back porch, rolled back into bed and went to sleep as if nothing had happened. Chang was back two hours after dawn. The native they had taken to guide them had dived overside when they were well down the coast and had escaped ashore.

VIII

"HE never sleeps," said Larsen moodily to Crossly and Barker as they sat at breakfast next morning in a back room of the Mermaid. "But I don't understand how you missed a clear shot with him outlined against the lamp."

"I wasn't expecting him t' do such a fool stunt," swore Crossly, "and I got excited. A couple of inches to one side and he'd have been shark meat."

"Well, what next?" inquired Barker, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand and reaching for the gin bottle to start his day's drinking.

"Can we get to his food?" asked Larsen thoughtfully.

"He has one of the police boys cooking," Barker growled. "No chance there. We might get one of the houseboys to put a snake in his bed."

"That's too old a trick to catch the Stinger," commented Larsen. "Still, he

was fool enough to stand against a light last night. We might try it. . . . But the best way will be to get him in the jungle and ambush him."

"Say," put in Crossly suddenly, "the girls've been talking about the Stinger getting chummy with Mamie—you know, that blonde I brought up from Brisbane. She's been squawking ever since and she got to telling the Stinger her yarn when he sat in my place drinking, with me over at the store. . . . Damn him! She told the girls afterward he promised that anyone who wanted to could go back to Aussy. He'd listen to her."

"Wouldn't she give him the tip?" said Larsen, his brow furrowed.

"She would if she knew what was going to happen, perhaps," admitted Crossly. "But we've got to think up something so she don't know. Make her think she's giving this Stinger Seave a straight tip, see?"

"Listen," said Larsen. "I've got it. How far's Bogege's village from the coast?"

"Three miles."

"The path there runs through some pretty thick country, doesn't it?"

"Thick enough. And there's a sort of small clearing this side of the gorge where that rattan bridge crosses." Crossly grew enthusiastic. "We could hide up in the groves and shoot 'em all down as they crossed the clearing."

"Well, listen," said Larsen and leaned forward to speak into Crossly's ear. Barker chuckled when he caught the drift of the plot.

SOON after dark that night one of the policemen brought a native girl to Stinger Seave.

"She came to the house and wished to see you," the man said. "I have searched her and she has no knife."

"What is it, little one?" said the Stinger, pinching the girl's cheek, for she could not have been much more than ten or eleven though well-developed, as are all native women at that age. The girl giggled and handed Seave a note.

"Two nights running is pretty thick," Chang protested. "Larsen must take us for fools."

But the note said:

Can you meet me by the big mango behind the store at twelve tonight?
Mamie.

"Who gave you this?" demanded the Stinger.

"She of the gold hair," answered the little girl.

Seave produced a silver coin and balanced it on the tip of his finger. The native's eyes glistened but she stuck to her story. She of the gold hair had given her the note. She had also given her warning not to be seen. Seave dismissed her, delighted with the silver, and handed the note to Chang.

"Another trap," said the Chinaman wearily.

"I don't think so," protested Seave. "This girl's the same, I take it, as the one who warned me when I first went into the Mermaid. I think she's on the level. Probably wants to put me wise to something."

"You mean you're going, then?" said Chang, incredulous.

Seave smiled his little frosty smile and nodded.

"I shall go, Chang. If it is a trap it is a challenge for me to walk into it and I never refused a challenge yet. But I think the girl's all right."

AT ten o'clock Stinger Seave changed his whites for a suit of thin dark serge and dark shoes. He wore, instead of his customary sun-helmet, a seaman's dark cap, and this outfit made him practically invisible in the jungle. Then, followed by Chang and two men, leaving Sergeant Kiwi in charge of the bungalow, the little sailor started up the hill behind the house.

Instead of walking straight up to the big mango behind the store, he took a wide circle right around the spot, gliding, silent as a ghost, through the jungle until he was positive there was no one hidden and waiting for him. Then at last he moved up to the mango.

A glance betrayed the dark figure of a woman waiting near the tree but he searched the branches closely before he stepped into view. A man hidden in a branch can do a good deal of damage before he is located. No one seemed to be around now at all though, so Stinger Seave

moved quietly over to the girl's side.

She gave a frightened gasp when he loomed beside her; then she clutched his arm.

"I mustn't stay long," she whispered. "Crossly'd kill me if he knew I was here and he'll miss me soon. But I had to see you. You must help us. Do you know what he's going to do? He's going to sell us to Bogege."

"I don't understand," murmured the Stinger gently.

"Bogege's a big chief about three miles up country," said the girl desperately. "He comes down sometimes for gin and trade goods. He's a filthy old cannibal. It's the rule here the natives mustn't touch white girls. Even Barker won't stand for that. But Bogege's taken a fancy to having white women in his harem and he's offered to fill a bucket full of gold if Crossly'll let him have us. There's three whites in the Mermaid. . . . Bogege's got some sort of a mine in the hills and he'll get the gold, all right. Crossly's taking the three of us up to the village the day after tomorrow. I heard him telling Barker about it. . . . Don't you see? You've got to do something."

Seave tugged at his mustache and thought.

"Well," he said at last, "what time are you supposed to be taken to Bogege?"

"Day after tomorrow," the girl whispered. "We start at noon. The path strikes the beach between the Three Ships Hotel and the Frigate Bird and it leads straight to the village. What shall I do?"

"Just stop worrying," soothed the Stinger. "Go with Crossly and I'll meet him and you and the rest before you reach the village. Don't fret. Everything'll be all right and when this is over I'll send you back to Australia on my ship."

They had a little further conversation, the girl crying but apparently relieved, Stinger Seave coldly angry to think that any white man could contemplate such a sale. Then they parted, the girl to the Mermaid, Seave to where he had left the anxious Chang and the policemen. As the girl re-entered the Mermaid Larsen leaned across to Barker, who was standing with him near the bar.

"Here she comes," he whispered. "She swallowed it hook, line and sinker, and it's dollars to cents she's been to see Seave. The day after tomorrow we'll get him. . . . Now go and lock her up, or tell Crossly to, so she won't suspect anything. . . . She's not bad looking. I might take her to Singapore myself, once this is over."

Barker chuckled and moved away.

IT must be confessed that Stinger Seave owed his life this time to a woman, to the fair-haired Mamie who had unconsciously sent him out to his death. The Stinger started with Chang and all his police boys while the stars were still glowing bright before the false dawn, on the day on which Crossly was supposed to leave for Bogege's village.

Mamie had said Crossly would leave at noon and Seave figured that some eight hours' start was plenty for him to get settled in ambush, even if he traveled over unfamiliar ground and was forced to go slow for fear of wild natives. He had a police boy in the lead as a scout, came next himself with the other boys, leaving Chang to bring up the rear. As they progressed through apparently deserted thick jungle, drums began to boom either side and Seave cursed with an abrupt realization that Larsen and the rest back there in town would know exactly what he was doing. He called a halt and conferred with Chang.

"I forgot about the drums," confessed the Stinger. "Shall we go on? Crossly'll never make a start when he knows we're waiting for him. I'll bet the natives have been watching us since we first entered the jungle."

As a matter of fact, Crossly, Larsen, Barker and several other white men, lying already in ambush near the clearing, were growing profane over the drums themselves because they would warn the Stinger that his presence was known and make him at least cautious, more so than he would have been ordinarily. Crossly had sent runners out to his native friends, ordering them not to drum out the news of his own progress for fear the Stinger's houseboys would inform him. But he had forgotten to make the order a blanket one as regarded the movements of the magistrate.

"He'll never walk into a trap now," said Crossly savagely.

"Wait a while, wait a while," soothed

Larsen. "You don't know the Stinger. If he doesn't turn back, which I admit he might, he'll go on to Bogege's place and threaten the old cannibal with all sorts of curses if he tries to buy white women. We'll wait until sundown and if he doesn't come we'll go back. It's a fifty-fifty shot."

IT was just exactly that and the game swung into Larsen's hands when Seave halted in his striding up and down and said, "Well, we'll go on and see this Bogege. I'll put the fear of God into him and he'll get rid of any queer ideas he still has about white women. It's a good time, anyway, for us to examine the island's interior and get acquainted with the men we're supposed to keep under control."

Chang agreed with that and the march forward recommenced. It was halted half an hour later when one of the police boys flung up his head, listened, stopped, listened again and then jerked. "Someone he come, running." The party halted. A word from Seave and they faded into the jungle. Seave watched from behind a big *koa* tree his hand caressing his gun butt, and then he uttered an involuntary exclamation of astonishment. For there came into view down the narrow jungle-hemmed path not a man but a woman. Mamie of the fair hair.

"Larsen . . . Crossly . . . and the rest," she gasped, "left last night . . . for . . . Bogege's . . . I only heard this morning and I broke . . . through the thatched roof . . . the others helped me . . . and dropped down and ran to your place . . . but there was no one, so I came . . . along here . . . to stop you. I think . . . this was all . . . framed!"

Chang uttered a crisp oath. Stinger Seave helped the girl to her feet and said gravely, "I think you have saved my life, my child. I should have known that Larsen of Singapore would think of such a thing. I would have walked to my death . . . Sergeant Kiwi!"

The sergeant stepped forward and saluted.

"Escort this lady back to the coast. You will carry her if she cannot walk. You will take her to the magistrate's bungalow and you will guard her with your life. Do you understand?"

Sergeant Kiwi saluted, swung about and waited for Mamie. She was sobbing in deep-drawn breaths and Stinger Seave patted her shoulder encouragingly.

"Go back with the sergeant," he said.

"But what about you?" the girl protested. "Crossly and Larsen will kill you!"

"That," said the Stinger gently, "is humorous. . . . Now you run along." He snapped out a command to his police boys, swung in the lead and disappeared round a bend in the twisting path. Alone in the jungle with a stalwart sergeant in the brown kilt and bandolier and cocked hat of the police, Mamie started a slow way back to the coast, a strong brown arm under hers to help her over rough places.

"There's only one reasonable place to ambush anyone," Stinger Seave was saying back along the path. "And that's the spot we'd picked on, the stony clearing that comes before the gorge and the supposed bridge. If our information is correct and the clearing and bridge exist, that's where Larsen'll be. And seeing we don't know where we're going to come upon it, we'd better take to the jungle."

X

THEY fought their way through unbelievably thick growths after that. Seave was making a steady way toward the presumed gorge on a line some two hundred yards to one side of the path.

Abruptly the little party came to the lip of the gorge, breaking out of thinning jungle to a narrow ridge of barren rock that rose up, then suddenly dropped sheer down for a thousand feet. Seave surveyed the scene carefully but could find no trace of life. It might be that many eyes were watching him from across the gorge but he had to chance that. He judged he was about a quarter of a mile from the bridge and he sent his two best scouts to follow the gorge lip and survey the ground. Chang and Seave and the three remaining police followed slowly, well hidden in the jungle. The scouts returned.

There was a narrow, swaying rattan bridge, all right. There was a broad, rocky clearing on this side and around the clearing white men were posted. They hid in two parties, one each side of the bridge end, deep in the scrub so they could send a cross-fire across the clearing. They seemed to be at ease and were carefully watching

the opening in the jungle from which the path came. Seave grunted with satisfaction.

Silent as ghosts, the little party moved on, Chang and Seave in the center, the police spread out each side of them. After half an hour one of the natives hissed between his teeth and Seave, dropping to earth, wriggled forward and parted thick, leathery leaves that loomed before his face. Then he froze. Not a dozen paces before him stood a man in whites, leaning against a tree trunk and holding a rifle carelessly in one hand while he gazed through the jungle toward some point Seave could not see. The man shifted after a while and Seave saw his face, without recognizing him. Careful shifting gave the Stinger another view, of a man crouched behind a thick bush, and this man he recognized as Barker.

The Stinger looked back at Chang, who pointed and nodded, meaning he had located someone, too. A glance at the police showed them alert and ready, with knitted brows, savage eyes, guns ready, their attention fastened on someone. The Stinger sighed, slid his hand inside his jacket, aimed at Barker's back and shot him neatly in the base of the neck, just as he would have shot a mad dog.

THE crash of the explosion woke the jungle echoes and the next moment there was a blaze of firing.

From across the clearing came Crossly's voice, "Let 'em have it! The swine's got Barker in the rear!"

A shower of lead cut the trees over the attacking party's head and Seave motioned for them all to drop down and wriggle forward. While this was being accomplished the firing stopped for a moment and Crossly's bellow came from the brush as he crashed through.

"Come on," he was roaring to Larsen and his men and he burst into the stony clearing, his eyes snapping with rage and a gun in each hand. Four men followed him. Larsen was slipping from tree to tree, more careful than the others and trying to work around on Seave's flank. The police stood up abruptly with wild yells of excitement and exchanged shots almost breast to breast.

Stinger Seave stood up and stepped to sight, his smoking gun firmly in his hand.

"I call you, Larsen! Stand up and fight!"

Larsen laughed mockingly from the shelter of a tree. He had courage, great courage, but he was not fool enough to commit suicide.

"There's always another time, Stinger," he jeered. "And take that!"

He fired twice and the Stinger staggered as lead thudded into his left shoulder. Then his gun talked and the edge of Larsen's face peering around the tree trunk was cut with splinters as the bullets ploughed through the wood. He turned to jump into the jungle and a shot seared his side. Then he was gone, crashing clear, oaths dripping from his hate twisted lips.

BACK in the clearing Crossly was shooting from both guns. Everything had happened in a few seconds, the Stinger's call, Larsen's reply, the fusillade of lead. And now Crossly was in action once more. Had his gaze not been blurred he would have killed the Stinger, who was paying no attention to him but staring with all his icy eyes to catch another glimpse of the fleeing Larsen.

Crossly's first bullets went wide because he had lost a lot of blood and his hands were shaking. He steadied himself to aim for the Stinger's body and at that moment the icy eyes turned to face him and he pitched forward with a neat hole between his brows. The police and Chang disposed of the other men, and they all stood breathing hard and listening to the last faint rustling of Larsen's headlong flight.

Seave almost ordered the police after him but checked the words as they rose to his lips. To send the police after Larsen would be to send them to their death, for, after Seave, Larsen was the best living shot in the South and cunning as a Chinaman.

The boys hastily contrived a litter and put Seave on it, though he protested he was strong enough to walk. He actually was strong enough but Chang insisted that he rest and he complied with a sort of tired resignation.

The little party had not gone more than a hundred yards before the Stinger uttered a cry and sat up in the

litter. His command brought the police boys to a halt. He climbed out and stood upright, a little dizzy but firm enough. Chang's protests he brushed aside.

"I've just thought," he said thickly. "Chang, that girl! Larsen'll either kill her or take her with him. He'll find out she warned us."

"We can't hurry with you in the litter," Chang protested.

"Throw it away," snapped the Stinger. The police boys looked from him to Chang and the Chinaman shrugged helplessly. There was no use arguing with Seave when he spoke like that. The litter was tossed into the jungle and the Stinger set off at a shambling jig-trot for the coast.

The exhausted party burst out on the beach after what seemed aeons about the middle of the afternoon. The Stinger kept straight on, staggering up the hill toward his bungalow. A glance at the harbor had told him that Larsen's bark had not left yet, though there were men on her yards and she was evidently getting ready to sail.

As Seave neared his house he caught the whip-like crack of a police carbine followed by a fusillade of shots from what sounded like Winchesters.

Seave staggered up to the ruined jail, not yet rebuilt, rounded a corner of it and saw three or four men headed by Larsen rushing toward the house veranda on which stood Sergeant Kiwi shooting at them. Seave choked out a cry which went unheard above the noise; then, groping for his gun, he weaved forward.

Chang snapped an order to the police boys that followed him and they stopped, dropped on one knee and began to pick off the attackers. Two fell before Larsen realized it was not Sergeant Kiwi's shooting that had done it. Then the rush stopped.

Larsen swung around, and his jaw dropped. Seave was nearly upon him. Chang was not far behind.

"Damn you, Larsen!" grated the Stinger. "This is the last time you'll . . ."

He shot twice and at the same instant caught his foot in a vine and fell headlong. Larsen swung half around with a new wound in his side, lifted his gun to kill the helpless Stinger, then found Chang on top of him. He shifted his aim to save his own life and brought the Chinaman down with a crash across the prostrate Seave. Larsen hesitated then. He had two of his greatest foes at his feet and just two shells left in his gun. He could kill Seave and Chang or he could use his shells to fight his way through the police, who were closing in on him.

He hesitated so long, torn between two temptations, that a carbine bullet nicked his throat. Then, with a furious cry, he charged down the slope, his remaining man behind him and weaving from side to side. Larsen won through, killing a police boy and seriously wounding another. And then he was gone, pounding for the beach where his whaleboat waited.

Sergeant Kiwi took a long drooping shot from the veranda and brought Larsen to his knees, but, apparently not hit in a vital spot, the man crawled along until his men from the boat came running for him and carried him out of range. The whaleboat set out for the ship. In fifteen minutes the bark was shaking out her sails and heading for the open sea.

Chang was moaning and recovering from a bullet that had stunned him. Seave was cursing thickly and trying to throw the Chinaman's weight off his own body. As Chang began to crawl clear, the Stinger fainted. He came to just long enough to discover his head was in Mamie's lap, to give a string of weak orders to Sergeant Kiwi, to hear with a groan that Larsen had escaped; then he dropped into unconsciousness again.

But he knew, even as the world went black about him, that Anea was tamed.

FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES A Fiction House Magazine FICTION HOUSE MAGAZINES

THE RIDER OF LOST RANGE

By BART CASSIDY

When yuh set a Texican against his trail pard, be almighty careful to bury your own snake sign plenty deep.

BUCK BUCHANAN reined up his dun cowpony with a muttered curse. Angrily his boot soles slapped the hard-baked adobe earth. His gray eyes, snapping with fight, shifted from the newly cut top strands of his barb-wire fence to the clearly imprinted hoof marks of the horse that had stepped over the uncut bottom strand onto his range.

"Tom Rooney's buckskin hoss made them tracks, this mornin'," the broad-shouldered young cowboy-rancher decided promptly. "Dutch Henry was right. Tom Rooney's the buzzard that's been stealin' my cattle. An' this time, he ain't goin' to get away!"

An ugly light gleamed from Buck's narrowed eyes as he climbed up on his dun and hit the trail of the other horse. At last he was going to swing his loop over the man who had been systematically robbing him for the last two years.

As he fogged down the wide-open trail, Buck was free to admit that he had rather

Illustrations by George West

the man at the other end of the trail be anyone he knew other than Tom Rooney. Not that he feared the fight Rooney would surely put up. Buck was thinking of those reckless, carefree years when Tom Rooney and he had roamed the ranges together, punching cows first with one outfit, then another, until they had landed on the Cross-R in the Troublesome country of northwestern Colorado. Then, when a corner of Routt County had been thrown open to settlement, Tom and he had homesteaded two adjoining sections and begun running a few head of cattle under their own brands.

But it was all changed now. Tom was not the same man he used to be, had not been since about the time Buck began missing his calves. The cowboy shook his head as the trail dipped down the steep-cut bank of an arroyo.

"Yeh, Dutch Henry was right when he told me Tom has been stealin' his stuff, as well as other ranchers' 'round here," thought Buck. "I never would've believed him, though, if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. Broad daylight, too. Well, if it's got to come, Tom, the sooner the better."

The trail climbed out of the draw. In the meadow where his Herefords were grazing Buck saw a lone horseman riding

among the cattle. It was Tom Rooney.

A line of willows, bordering an irrigation ditch, came between him and the wire-cutter. Then, on climbing a low, sage-covered knoll, Buck sat his horse within a hundred feet of the man busily riding among the pure-breds, as if in preparation to cut some of them out.

"Hey!" Buck called. "What are *you* doin'?"

There was no spark of fear in the clear blue eyes Tom Rooney turned on the man coming toward him, in the reckless mouth and firmly chiseled chin no hint of cowardice.

"Lookin' for my calves you stole last night, if you wanter know," Rooney answered coolly.

A dead smile hung at the corners of Buck's mouth. "That bluff don't go with me, Rooney," he said quietly, riding closer. "You're lyin', an' you know it. I caught you tryin' to steal my cows."

"You lie yoreself, you dirty thief!"

For a long half-minute these two men, who had crossed the river together, dueled with slitted eyes. Then, as if with one accord, each dismounted and came toward the other with swinging stride and jangling rowels.

"I warn't lookin' for rustlers this mornin'," Buck said angrily. "I ain't wearin' no gun, though I wish I was."

Tom Rooney looked at him out of eyes as hard as bits of chipped steel. "You didn't have a gun this time," he said coldly. "Next time we meet, you better have one —rustler!" He turned on his heel and walked unsteadily toward his patiently waiting hors.e

Bitterly Buck gazed after the retreating figure of the man who had once been closer to him than a brother. "Gunnin' for me, is he? Shootin' me on sight. An' still tryin' to bluff me into thinkin' he was huntin' his cows I stole from him. Knows I done caught him stealin', that's all." He lifted his voice. "All right, Tom. I'm takin' chips in yore game. Next time our trails cross, I'll be ready for you."

AFTER counting his herd of Herefords and repairing the gap Rooney had cut in his fence, Buck pointed his dun toward the willow brakes of Hoot Owl Creek, four or five miles distant. He had some muskrat traps cached down there in the bottoms and intended to look them over to see if any needed repairing, against the coming winter.

The country extending from here north to the Lost Park Mountains was owned by some Eastern estate, which had not run a head of cattle on it since the collapse of the cattle boom in 1917. The vast range was as wild as the day Kit Carson and his band of fur trappers passed through it on their way to the Snake River country. It was a good range on which to turn cows loose, but it was a poor one on which to find them again.

The cowboy gigged his pony down sweet-scented pine slopes, through open glades studded with groves of stately aspen, giants in size. Skirting a large beaver pond, he came into the dense, almost impenetrable willow thicket that spread for a quarter mile on each side of Hoot Owl Creek. These willows were higher than a man on horseback. You couldn't see ten feet either side.

Buck was ploughing through his wilderness toward the creek, when a creepy sensation stole up his spine, passed behind his ears. By some subtle sense, he knew that somewhere in that leafy sea human eyes were watching him. He drew rein. Nerves a-tingle, every muscle taut as a lass rope with a thousand-pound steer going yonderly on the other end, he darted quick glances into thickly laced willows. Unconsciously his right hand dropped to where his gun usually hung. Buck frowned. Then he took fresh grip on himself, muttered that his nerves were getting the best of him. That fight with Tom Rooney. . . .

"Come on, feller," he urged the dun gently. The pony responded with a snort and swerved sharply sidewise, its pointed ears straight up, its nostrils distended.

The wall of willows parted, and a man rode into the clearing. A genial, red-faced, bush-whiskered, stockily built man of about fifty, the unmistakable stamp of the Teuton on his square-cut features and heavy jowls. His small hard eyes, steely-blue as the barrel of the rifle that slanted into its boot beneath his leg, regarded the cowboy with glance both shrewd and good-humored. It was Dutch Henry, once a nester, now the biggest brand owner in the county—and the best liked.

BUCK grinned. "Howdy, Dutch! Ain't seen hide nor hair of you for so long I figgered you must be puttin' in all yore time countin' yore million cows. What you doin' prowlin' 'round here in the crick bottoms?"

"Der same as you iss, maybe, mein friend Buck," returned Dutch Henry with a broad smile.

"Missed yore guess that time, I reckon," the cowboy laughed. "I aim to look over some muskrat traps I got cached over there a ways."

Dutch Henry shifted his heavy bulk in the saddle. "Nein, it ain't muskrat traps vot I'm lookin' for. It iss cow traps."

"Cow traps? Corrals, you mean?"

The German nodded. "I haf much cattle stoled dis veek," he explained heavily. "Forty head I count, from vun pasture. I t'ink, here in der brake vould be goot place to hide 'em." He paused, pushed the broad-brimmed hat from his forehead, then said hesitantly: "I don't vant to occuse nobody until I'm sure, Buck, especially a friend of yours, but . . ."

The cowboy looked away into the willows. "Reckon maybe you're right, Dutch, 'bout what you been tellin' me."

Dutch Henry looked sharply at the young rancher. "Ain't no doubt 'bout Rooney stealin' cattle," he said soberly, sorrowfully. "He's robbin' you und me und all his odder neighbors." The German smiled. "Dot's vy I vaited ven I hear your horse, Buck. I t'ink you are Rooney, und I votch."

The old cattleman lowered his voice, a habit of his when about to say something of unusual importance. "Listen, Buck. You know dot Mexican, Pablo, vot works for Rooney? Vell, dis mornin' I come up on him brandin' one o' mein calves in a dry gulch. Und ven I draw mein gun to kill him, der rascal tells me if I will spare his life he vill tell me somedings. Und vot he tells me iss dis: Rooney vill make a drive of his rustled stock tomorrow night. If I vass you, Buck, I'd keep a close votch on dose Herefords tomorrow night."

"Mebbeso I will," Buck answered. There was no change of expression on his face as he picked up the reins and straightened in the saddle. "So long, Dutch. Got to be locatin' them traps."

The cowboy's face was dark as the shadows beneath the willows that closed over him. He would lose no more of his cows. Seven long years of toil and hardship had it taken him to build up his herd to ninety head. Seven years of unending effort to acquire this handful of cattle and a partly fenced square mile of sagebrush, meadow and arroyo. And he owed the bank half the value of his herd of Herefords, the note being due this fall.

"Now, I ain't losin' no more cows," Buck told himself. "Dutch Henry's rich. He won't miss a hundred head, or two hundred. He owns so much land 'round here that's been given up because the owners was rustled clear out o' business, that he don't know hisself how much he's got. Dutch c'n stand it long as anybody. But not me. Tom Rooney's done stole his last cow from me."

IT was past midnight, and the wafer moon that rode the starlit sky had climbed its Zenith and slid far to the westward. From the top of the rounded, sage-covered knoll where he had been holding lonely vigil since early evening Buck rose and stretched himself. Across the desolate landscape he swept level gaze. Nothing moving out there except a pair of slinking coyotes dimly outlined against a distant hill, or a stark black cloud-shadow skimming across the moonlit waste. No sound save the eerie hoot of a prairie owl and the steady crunching of his cattle's sliding jaws as they peacefully chewed their cuds.

Buck smiled grimly as he strode toward his pony. "I know Dutch said tomorrow night, but I ain't takin' no chances. That Pablo might've been tryin' to fool him. Anyway, it won't be too. . . ."

A spear of ice seemed to plunge into his spine. Somebody was behind him! Cougar-quick he spun 'round. His gun leaped into his hand. A shadowy form sprang toward him, waving an arm. Up flew Buck's gun, back he thumbed the hammer. He never fired.

An impelling force jerked him forward on his face, dragged him choking along the ground. Even as he fell, Buck knew. He had been lassoed! Madly he dug his fingers into his neck, strove to loosen the strangling cord. No use. Blindly his hands shot out, grasped the lariat. Back he pulled, until the tendons in his arms

stood out like great steel cables. Wild hope flamed up in his constricted breast. He came up on one knee. Then his hold was jerked from the sudden taut lariat, he seemed to by flying along the ground. A moment of this, and Buck knew no more. On the other end of the lariat was a straining horse.

It was yet dark when Buck regained consciousness. He tried to lift a hand to his burning, throbbing, swollen throat. It took him a full minute to realize his hands were tied to his body. His feet, also, were tied. He lay still a while longer, gathering his strength, wondering why his assailant had not killed him.

Painfully he rolled toward a jagged stone. But the cruel labor of sawing through the riata was spared him. Much to his surprise, he had not been tightly tied. It required only a few minutes for one hand to be pulled through the coils. In fifteen minutes he was standing up, curiously examining the slender rawhide lariat, letting its supple length slip slowly through his fingers. At the cunningly fashioned *hondo* with its appended cracker he stopped.

"That's Tom Rooney's lariat," he said positively. "Ain't another seventy-five-foot six-plait rawhide in Routt County like that. I orter know, because I helped him make it. Well, Tom, I'm packin' this on my saddle, in the hopes of hanging you by the neck with it before you get much older."

The cowboy got on his horse and rounded up his scattered herd. Not a Hereford could be found. He had been swept clean. He trailed them to a gap in his fence, and down the rocky, jack-pine-studded slope toward Hoot Owl Creek. Scarcely had he gone half a mile, however, when the trail was hopelessly lost. In the tangle of brush and lava rock. In the uncertain light of the waning moon, even an expert trailer like Buck was powerless. He gave it up and rode straight for Tom Rooney's cabin.

"I don't expect to find him there," he muttered as the dun swung into a fast lope. "But if he is, there's goin' to be hell to pay."

Tom Rooney's chinked log house was dark. No one answered the loud, hollow thumping of Buck's gun butt against the slab door. From a sod-roofed outhouse near the corral a hinge creaked.

"Que es? Who is it?" challenged a Mexican woman's voice. Pablo's *señora.*

Toward this house Buck strode. "Manuela. Where's the *jefe?"*

As she recognized the speaker, Manuela came out to meet Buck. *"Señor Tomaso?* He no home?"

"No?" snapped Buck. "Where is he?"

Manuela spread her brown palms in helpless gesture. "Me no *sabe, Señor* Buck."

"Pablo gone, too?"

"Si, señor, Pablo go for keel wolves. *Señor Tomaso* tell him."

"Does Pablo hunt wolves very often?"

"Si, Señor Buck. Somebody, they pay him much *dinero* for that."

Buck sank steel into the sides of his pony, headed for the trail he had lost. "I'll down you, Rooney, before the sun's an hour high," he said savagely. "An' make Manuela a widow at the same time."

WHEN Buck reached the spot where the trail of his stolen herd had been lost, night was lifting out of the ravines and hollows. The echeloned pine ridges and the sage flats were softly gray, and the rocks glowed with faint life. A long, wide bar of light, lemon yellow in color, lay low in the east. One by one the stars faded from the velvety blue sky and the great dome lightened. Then the east became tinted with rose, and the red disk of the sun tipped its edge over the jagged horizon, slanted beams of golden fire into the lonely waste.

With the first light, Buck picked up the trail. It led, not into the willow bottoms of Hoot Owl Creek, but wound between a succession of foothills toward Lost Park Mountains. For perhaps an hour he twisted around the base of these darkly clad hills, until he came upon a dry stream bed. Here he sharply drew rein.

The tracks of a small bunch of cattle and of one horse came down this stream bed and merged with those of the herd he had been trailing. There were indications that his herd had been held here until the others came up.

Pablo brought that bunch down from a hide-out corral up there somewhere," Buck decided. "He met Rooney here with

my cows. I've got 'em both together now, anyhow."

Straighter became the banks of the creek as he passed swiftly along its rocky bed, more rugged the scenery. Ahead, hazy blue in the distance, loomed the peaks, domes and spires of Lost Park Mountains. The sun had not yet climbed the surrounding buttresses when the channel opened onto a deep, narrow, black-rock gorge that soon took on the proportions of a mighty canyon.

Seven hundred feet above him the sheer, colossal, drab-belted walls flung themselves into the sky in a rhapsody of rampart and gilded dome. Only a narrow ribbon of blue shone between those leaning, lilac-veiled walls of granite. Dwarfed into insignificance by this majestic sweep of age-old stone, feeling as though he were being swallowed up in the bowels of the earth, the cowboy urged his dun along the boulder-littered, spruce-studded canyon floor.

THIS was new country to Buck. He had hunted deer in the thickly forested foothills through which he had passed, but had never penetrated this wild, forbidding, uninhabited chaos of mountain and canyon. Almost with each step the gigantic ragged shaft grew more wild, more tortuous. Wind-carved caves, sunk in eternal shadow, the homes of hawks and eagles, indented the precipitous heights almost to the jagged battlements of the rimrocks. Gaping weather cracks, and now and then a pine-choked coulee, broke the solid rock face. But the trail of the rustlers drove straight ahead, into the very heart of Lost Park Mountains.

Buck hurried on, wondering, at each turn of the mighty stone channel, what lay ahead. Of one thing, however, he was certain. He was going to bring back his herd of pure-breds, and very probably, kill Tom Rooney. "A hound that'd steal from his old pard ain't got no right to live nohow," he thought bitterly. "Robbin' big brand owners like Dutch Henry is bad enough, but—Hi. What's that?"

The cowboy halted. A dull, muffled roar met his ears. With each step it grew louder, the hollow rumbling of its echoes tossed back and forth between the canyon jaws until it escaped among the peaks and spires of the rimrocks. Rounding a sharp angle, he came abruptly upon a crystal-clear stream that tumbled violently down the rocky bottom of a narrow gorge. Foaming, leaping, splashing, the stream dashed across the floor of the canyon and hurled itself into a resounding cavern on the other side.

The pony immediately buried its nose in the stream. Buck reached down, filled the cupped crown of his hat, drank long and deep of the pure, icy mountain water. The trail, instead of following the great canyon, turned into the gorge.

For a mile or more the rapid current tumbled and tossed down its rocky confines, gradually rising into a wild, forlorn wilderness of massive cliffs and beetling crags. The dwarf pines and cedars clinging tenaciously to infrequent crevices and growing out of handfuls of granite dust cupped within the rocks were the only living things in that dismal gorge—those and the lone buzzard sweeping in slow, majestic circle in the slit of dark blue sky.

Buck grinned when he saw the enterprising vulture. "Not yet, old timer," he said.

Faint rumbling now reached him, a low dull murmur. At first he judged it to be the roll of distant thunder, or the slipping of a weathered slope of rock. But the sound was incessant, and as he splashed against the foaming torrent, it broadened in volume and from a murmur grew into a soft roar.

"Sounds like fallin' water," said Buck, a puzzled frown tangling his brows.

AFTER a bewildering succession of zigzags, he saw the waterfall. At the back of the narrow canyon it burst from a wide rent in the cliff, and bounding down through a rock-ribbed portal, spread in a long white sheet, tinged with green, to shatter itself into flying spray against the stony floor.

Blank amazement spread over Buck's face. The trail of both cattle and horses led to the foot of the falls, and stopped. Quickly he searched the walls on each side of him. No crevices there, no fault between the rock faces. He swept puzzled eyes up the sides of the great gray cliffs. It would be hard work for a mountain goat to climb those herculean slabs of polished quartz and granite.

"Where did them cows go?" he asked himself over and over, as he again carefully surveyed every inch of the pocket. Then he grinned broadly. "They didn't go nowhere," he said aloud. "They went back the way they come. An' I used to think I could trail!"

A few minutes' examination of the creek bed, however, convinced him that no cow tracks pointed down stream. Buck straightened up, looked quizzically at the silvery sheet of falling water. "The only way left for them cows to go is through that waterfall. An' that's where I'm goin'. Come on, old feller."

But the pony refused to stick more than his nose into the falls. Buck tied him to the root of a scraggly cedar. He thrust one arm into the icy curtain, followed with his whole body. But a solid stone wall threw him back, half drowned. Again he plunged into the waterfall, and again, each time at a different spot, but always his desperately exploring fingers encountered only stone.

There came a time, however, when he passed through the falls and into a cavern. Tingling with excitement in spite of his soaked condition, he stumbled farther into the underground cave, guided only by a hand along the slippery wall. The tunnel slanted sharply upward. Over slippery rocks Buck climbed into the midnight dark chute, until at length a glimmer of light ahead apprised him of the tunnel's end.

"Boy, howdy," the cowboy whispered jubilantly. "I've run Tom Rooney into a hole now! But I never give him credit for havin' so much brains." He hurried back, got his horse, and in a few minutes was standing in the other end of the tunnel.

IT was a remarkable scene that lay before the cowboy. A vast expanse of bright green walled in by towering yellow cliffs, spired, serrated, inaccessible. At one side, suspended like a platinum ribbon against the mountains, a spruce-bordered cataract pitched, to fling itself into a jewel-like lake at its foot. Rustler's paradise!

Filled with wonder, Buck took a few steps into the lush, juicy-stemmed native grass that reached above his knees. He whistled quietly. "Lost Park," he exclaimed softly. "Sufferin' coyotes, what a place for a man to hole up! No wonder."

A hot wind fanned the waddy's cheek, an evil whine sang past his ear. The bullet splattered against a rock behind him. On his face Buck fell in the concealing grass, both guns out. But he was unable to locate the puff of rifle smoke, or tell from which direction the shot came. Cautiously, he crawled behind a rock. Then a silent curse burned the cowboy's lips. Over the ridge to his right he had caught a glimpse of a familiar figure before it disappeared among the jumble of rocks.

"Tom Rooney," he growled. "Walkin' the ridge. You'd orter took better aim, Tom. Mine ain't goin' to be that bad."

Made reckless by anger, Buck climbed on his horse. He had no sooner gathered the reins when again a rifle cracked. The dun pony shuddered as the slug plowed into its forehead. Its legs crumbled beneath it, and it sank to the ground, beating out its life in the tall grass. One swift glance of infinite pity Buck gave his horse, as he swept his rifle from its boot and flung himself behind a rock.

"The buzzard got you, old boy," he whispered, his face twisted with passion. "But I'm makin' him pay for it, plenty!"

Still, as Buck began dodging among the rocks toward the spot from which he judged the shot to have come, he realized that Rooney could not have fired it. Rooney was up there on the ridge. The shot that had killed the horse had come from one of the broken boulders scattered at the base of the ridge.

With the cunning and infinite patience of the born hunter, Buck snaked his body from one boulder to another. After every move he stopped, listened intently. Somewhere in that field of rock ahead of him, it might be only a few feet away, a man was waiting for his head to show—a man with cocked rifle. Buck crept another yard.

"Drop the gun, *señor!*" hissed a low voice above him, so close it sent an icy shiver along the waddy's backbone.

Buck laid down his rifle. He looked up, to see, crouched behind a boulder, Pablo.

"Put up the hands, *señor,*" the Mexican ordered quietly. "Now, plees to turn round."

"What the hell's the meanin' o' this,

greaser?" Buck demanded angrily. "I'll sure as hell kill you an' Rooney, both, for this!"

"Quien sabe?" Pablo jeered softly, coming closer. "Now, the *señor* will plees to unbuckle the gun belt. Then, we go."

Black despair seized the cowboy. He would be taken before Rooney. And Rooney would promptly do the only thing a man in his position could do: kill him. Better to have it out with this Mex right now. A half-formed plan leaped to his tortured brain. He had seen a drunken cowboy almost work the trick on a deputy marshal in Julesburg. . . .

SLOWLY Buck's fingers unfastened the wide buckle. He could feel Pablo's eyes boring into his back. One end only of the belt he dropped, the holstered end. As it fell, panther-quick he sprang sidewise and half around, swinging the belt as he came. The gun at his back roared, a sharp pain stabbed his side. The next split-instant, even as Pablo's finger was pressing the trigger, the holstered .45 crashed against his skull. The Mexican was lifted off his feet, slapped sprawling against the jabbed rocks. He lay still.

Buck bent over him. One swift look he gave the empty, staring eyes, and the backward sagging head. Pablo's neck was broken. He was dead.

Calmly the cowboy examined the ragged flesh wound in his side. It was not serious. He bandaged it tightly with Pablo's bandanna, buckled on his belt, picked up his Winchester, and set off up the meadow.

"Now for Tom Rooney!" he said grimly.

As he came around a jutting shoulder of the wall he was following, he halted in surprise. Squatting in a grove of pines and aspens, perhaps a quarter mile up the park, was a ranch house with its accompaniment of stable, stacks of hay and skinned aspen corrals. In one of the corrals he saw a bunch of Herefords. His cows. He could tell them from here.

In almost the same instant in which he saw the ranch house, a puff of smoke floated from the open stable door. Buck winced, darted back in the shelter of the rocks as a slug ploughed through the crown of his hat.

"Purty close to a man's brains," Buck grinned. "Long shot, too. But I seen the time, Tom, when you could've done better'n that."

Carefully he made his way along the edge of the rocks toward the ranch house. Whenever he exposed as much as one of the square checks on his shirt a bullet would come winging toward him. He was now about a hundred yards from the stable, as close as he could get by following the rocks. From this distance he could have swapped bullets with the rifleman in the stable. But the cowboy had no taste for such long-range shooting, and he had no bullets to waste.

"Now, if I c'n make that haystack over there, I'll smoke Rooney out in a hurry," he said, keenly observing the oblong stack of hay perhaps two-thirds of the distance between him and the stable. It was ticklish work, bellying through the grass, when any moment the waving tops might betray him. It was only when he was within six feet of the stack, and crossing a bare patch of earth, that he was discovered.

Slugs zoomed over him like angry hornets as he flung himself behind the haystack. Already his rifle was answering the sharpshooter in the stable, shot for shot. Chamber after chamber he emptied into the centers of the smoke puffs. It was blind shooting, and the odds against him were heavy. The thick pine logs stopped most of his bullets, but those of his enemy ploughed through the hay. Still, Buck was a good enough shot, and as Pablo had said, *Quien sabe?*

THE cowboy leveled another cartridge into the chamber of his Winchester, sighted along the hot barrel. A moment he hesitated, listening to what sounded like shots being fired from the other side of the stable, or perhaps from behind him. He had no time to puzzle over this. His nostrils suddenly filled with acrid smoke. The haystack was on fire!

"Might've knowed it," Buck muttered.

He dropped the rifle, filled both hands with black-butted .45's. A second he crouched at the far edge of the stack, getting his bearings. Then he sprang forward in a mighty bound, head down, legs pumping like hard-driven pistons.

He whirled half 'round as a bullet tore into his thigh. But on he came toward that square of blackness which was the

stable door. And he came a-foggin', both guns belching fire. Another bullet slammed into his shoulder like the kick of a Missouri mule. Buck stumbled, half fell. A savage shout rang triumphantly out from the stable.

"Ain't got—me—yet!" the cowboy gritted between clinched teeth.

He whipped two lightning shots at the blurred image just inside the door. Grinned. That was a hit. The next instant he was through the doorway. Again he stumbled. A flash of fire burned his face, blinded him, as he went down. The bullet intended for his brain singed his scalp. The fall had assuredly saved his life.

THE fighting ranny struggled to his knees, thumbing hammers. His heart died within him as the plungers clicked on empty cylinders. A stab of flame passed beneath his arm. Then Buck threw himself forward at the man's legs, with all the force left in his tortured body drove his head into the man's stomach. Like a stone his antagonist dropped, Buck on top of him.

Buck's hands strove desperately for an effective hold on the other's wiry, twisting body. But each time his adversary squirmed free, and his own arms tightened around Buck like bands of steel.

Breath coming in great whistling gasps, they rolled over and over. Then with a quick, unexpected movement, Buck heaved his body over, and managed to get astraddle the other's chest.

Down swooped Buck's gun barrel against the man's skull. He struck with such terrific force he could feel the blue-steel barrel give in his hand. Without a sound his adversary sank to the floor, brains oozing into the straw.

Blindly Buck pulled himself to his feet. He staggered toward the door, dragging his wounded body. "Had to do it, Tom," he whispered thickly.

A rectangle of light appeared for a moment at the back of the stable. Buck's anguished brain told him a door had been opened and closed. Another man was in the stable! Reeling against the side of a stall, the cowboy tightened his numbing fingers on his gun butt.

"One more?" he gasped.

NOISELESSLY he crept toward the sun-blinded man, dimly outlined against the wall. Now he was close enough! He held his breath. Slowly, surely his right arm went up, poised an instant above the unsuspecting man's head.

At the very instant the gun barrel started skullward, the haystack flared up, filling the stable with ruddy glow. Two startled oaths shattered the sinister silence.

"Tom Rooney!" shouted Buck, momentarily paralyzed.

"You!" cried Rooney, stepping back and whipping up his gun. "I thought . . ."

"Damn what you thought! Start shootin'!"

"Hold on!" yelled Rooney; bulging eyes fixed on the man huddled motionless on the floor. "Look at that! It's Dutch Henry!"

Like a man in a trance Buck stared at the crumpled figure. "I thought it was you I'd killed," he said wonderingly.

"An' I figgered it was you I was tryin' to smoke out o' here."

Buck looked at Tom with a flash of anger. "Because I caught up with you stealin' my cows, huh?"

"Naw. Because you was stealin' mine," Tom said levelly.

"Ain't this yore hide-out?"

Tom appeared as puzzled as Buck. "No. Ain't it yores?"

Both men turned and looked quizzically at the dead man. Then without a word they clasped each other's right hand.

"I shore been one fool," Tom said gravely. "You see, Dutch Henry had been hintin' to me for two years or better that you was rustlin' his stock. Then, when mine started to come up short, I—I thought you done it, Buck. Wouldn't o' thought it, if you hadn't shied away from me every time you saw me, like you was 'shamed to talk to me. An', last night when I found a big bunch o' my cows missin', I started out after 'em, thinkin' all the time I was trailin' you. I shore begs. . . ."

Buck raised his hand. "Don't say it, Tom. Let me. An' that's what you was doin' in my pasture yesterday. Thought I had some o' yore stock?"

Tom nodded, then his old reckless grin came back. "We both been trailin' Dutch Henry's lead ropes like a couple o' dogies, Buck. Even my Mex, Pablo, would've

knowed better'n to do a stunt like that." He laughed.

Buck was smiling to himself as he limped out of the door and slanted appraising glances over the vast green meadow. "No wonder Dutch Henry got rich so fast," he said. "This here is the purtiest piece o' range anybody ever seen. A man couldn't want a better layout than this, if he had a pardner that was able to tell a stockman from a rustler."

Tom laughed. "I was just gettin' ready to tell you that, you old mossy-horn. But how are we goin' to get our stock in here? The trail I follered run out again a waterfall. I had to go back a ways, leave my hoss, an' climb like a goat to get in here."

"I always knowed I was smarter'n you, Tom," Buck told him. "Let's amble over to Dutch's cabin, an' maybe we c'n flush some bandages an' a bottle o' red-eye. I'm goin' to give you a chance to prove you're a better hoss doctor than a cow detective."

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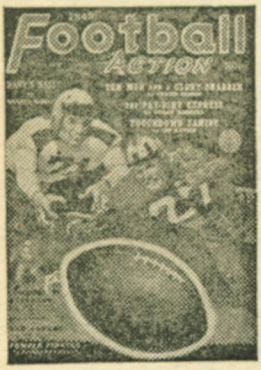

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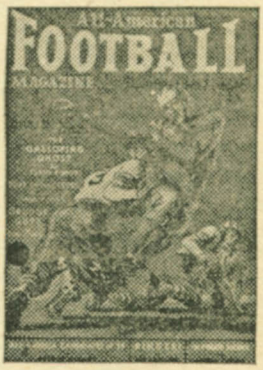

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MURDER SANDS

By JOHN STARR

Mike Donlin broke the Legion law. And a desert devil swore he'd pay in full—out where the shifting sands bury the murder sign.

THE Legion never forgot the blistering afternoon they broke Sergeant Mike Donlin. The entire regiment stood at *rapport*, a hollow square two ranks deep. Hardly a sign of breathing from the still, sweating ranks. No sound but the monotonous sing-song of the sergeant-major reading out the transfers and in-

valided men. The routine business ended.

"It's comin'," muttered Healy, a Dublin Irishman with a past of his own.

" 'E's shakin'." Cockney Orpen wet his upper lip with the tip of his tongue.

A burly negro from Alabama shivered. It was the heat, he'd have told you—but it was not.

"Sergeant Mike Donlin," barked the sergeant-major crisply.

An ordinary looking man, somewhat more freckled than Legion-tanned, stepped four paces from the ranks. No more about him to catch the eye than the last truck driver you saw. Lantern-jawed, short. Sturdy arms made for rolling hogsheads on a wharf. And, in their time, Donlin's arms had done just that.

He stood quiet as a wooden man. The sergeant-major ran through the preamble. Offender's past record of gallantry would mitigate his punishment. The Legion knew that meant the time he saved Colonel Gaspard's life in a Touareg ambush. Also, went on the sergeant-major, other circumstances made the offense less severe. The Legion grimaced at that. The offended one aroused very little sympathy, even from his fellow officers.

"But," wound up the sergeant-major, "punishment must be meted out to a soldier who strikes his superior officer." And no man, having seen it happen, ever would forget the action of Sergeant Mike Donlin's fist crashing home against Lieutenant Hans Hinderman's jaw.

The sergeant-major prepared to wind up. Both Colonel Gaspard and the culprit stood silently.

Colonel Gaspard was thinking of the court-martial that had heard out the case. Over and over, he heard the guilty man's sole defense:

"He called me a bad name. And I socked him."

In the end it was Colonel Gaspard's final word that saved Donlin from a worse fate than that decided upon. "Hinderman," the colonel argued over a cigaret, "is a desert devil. If he'd got one in the eye long ago he'd never have run that Italian through with a bayonet. Also you cannot overlook what this American did—oh, *all* those times."

"But, *mon pere,*" protested the young adjutant. He was a thin Frenchman who, for his own reasons, had been compelled to forsake an honored name and retire into the Legion with a beard. "But the example—"

"Of course. The example," Colonel Gaspard agreed wryly. And it had come to this blistering afternoon and the breaking of Sergeant Mike Donlin.

The sergeant-major read the sentence of a month's confinement in the guard-house. Colonel Gaspard did the rest. He extended his right hand sharply. The sergeant's stripes were torn from Donlin's sleeve. They didn't come off immediately. At the commandant's second jerking pull Donlin winced a bit—like a man having his skin peeled off.

A snappy military command. The rifles of the Legion went up. The rear ranks wheeled off. Ex-sergeant Donlin, escorted by four Lebel bearing Legionnaires, and Lieutenant Hinderman—bearing a split lip—went off.

In the barracks' quarters at Sidi-bel-abbes, the Legion discussed the fate of their comrade.

"Won't Hinderman be a sorehead now. Donlin coulda got ten years."

It's the old story that most men come to the Legion to escape their sins. The cases of Mike Donlin and Lieutenant Hans Hinderman, the Dutchman, were more interesting.

CURIOSITY brought Donlin, the American, to Sidi-bel-abbes, where the pink and yellow roofs look up at the glaring sky. The same curiosity that makes some follow Klondike trails and dim Congo routes, and others the sky from continent to continent.

Hinderman came to the Legion not so much to escape old sins as to find new ones. When old Colonel Gaspard said Lieutenant Hinderman was a desert devil, he said everything. At his work, Hinderman belonged out on the hot Sahara sands with the dry-rustling palms and weird tumpafa plants where a man hit by a bullet makes no sound when he falls. At his play, his place was in the steaming cafés where *bocha* is cheap.

In the desert an officer likes to think his sergeant looks up to him. But Donlin, who disliked Lieutenant Hinderman's fat face and spraying yellow mustache as

much as his bullying manner, did no looking up. He even made it sometimes obvious that he looked down on him.

Hinderman's sort broods on such matters. That particular night in the café he had stowed away too much cognac. With no introductory remarks, Hinderman leaned over to the next table where Donlin read a newspaper.

"You, for instance," Hinderman snarled, like a man who had been thinking it over, "are a bad soldier. You are an American, which is bad because that makes you a mongrel. You are too damned superior. Further, you are a—"

It ended as quickly as it had started. Donlin stood up automatically, turning. Likewise Lieutenant Hinderman, cursing madly. Donlin's arm shot out straight, swiftly. Next minute, mouth streaming blood, Hinderman fell over two tables and landed in a mess of broken glass. He was still trying to extricate himself from all of that when the military police led Donlin away.

Thirty days later when Donlin emerged from the guard-house, he considered the incident closed. But Lieutenant Hinderman, who did not relish compromises, thought differently.

"Thirty days for that insult!" he raged. "But I will get my revenge. I fear nothing but the desert itself. This fool will pay."

For his part, when his comrades warned him, Donlin remained unmoved. "I give him his, an' he give me mine. So far as I'm concerned, the party's over."

"He'll lay for you, feller."

"Leave him lay."

Three days later the Legion marched off to the south. The Touareg waited behind the palms with his long rifle, incited by the Nazis, who were fighting on every front. In the ranks, Mike Donlin's soul was at peace. On his horse, narrow eyes peering through the heat waves, Lieutenant Hinderman made his plans.

TWO days after the Legion reached Fort Haignon, which lies between sand hills upon the Sahara's bosom, orders came to march again. Men who had carried terrible packs and sweated blood to get there, cursed when once more they dropped the little sun protectors over their necks. Word, from a scouting *goum,* was that Touareg raiders had been sighted twenty miles away.

Colonel Gaspard told his adjutant: "If it's that rascal Barbouchi we'll cut his ears off just to prove the error of stealing honest Arabs' camels and burning their tents." One hour and forty-five minutes later the Legion, in two columns waited at the sally port for the march to begin.

Colonel Gaspard issued a supplementary order. One officer and four men were to remain behind, guarding the fort. "Not many," he admitted, "but enough if those five men will pass down the gallery, firing first from one embrasure then another. No Touareg'll possibly guess whether there are five men or—fifty. And he couldn't scale these walls if he did guess."

Nothing queer about this as a desert military maneuver. But as an example of fate it was striking. The officer left in charge was Lieutenant Hans Hinderman. One of the four men was Mike Donlin.

Behind at the fort Donlin did his simple duty, which was to watch the vast, empty reaches of sand through a firing aperture. But Lieutenant Hinderman was doing something else. He was sampling some of Colonel Gaspard's private stock. As the contents of his bottle ebbed, deviltry rose in his reddened eyes. He toyed with what he could do to Donlin now. When he got to unsteady legs a dozen vengeful schemes were in his mind.

Outside a rifle suddenly cracked on the still, molten air. One of the four men at the firing posts pitched backward on the floor.

"Les Arbis!"

Hinderman cursed irritably and flung himself out into the gallery. The sands below were swarming with Touaregs on their piebald camels. Pulling the beasts to their knees, they were firing waves of flame up at the fort. It was an attack of ominous intensity.

Down the gallery Hinderman staggered.

"Sight, fire—*bleu. Sacre Dieu,* fire."

The three remaining Legionnaires needed no urging. Firing coolly, his freckled face impassive, Donlin brought down two Arabs who were sharpshooting from palms. But a second Legionnaire suddenly fell backward with a gurgling sound and died.

Hinderman emptied his revolver, passing down the gallery. He was a good marksman, as were both Donlin and the third Legionnaire. By shooting from alternate apertures they had convinced the Arabs the fort was capable of stiff resistance. While the enemy fire became that of steady, unchanging siege attack there were no more rushes.

The sun sank, bringing no relief from the heat.

Back in the colonel's quarters, Hinderman considered. The Touaregs were not likely to scale the walls. If he was to revenge himself upon Donlin his chance was now. He lurched to his feet again, steadied himself and peered down the gallery. Three lifeless bodies lay on the floor. Whatever Hinderman did there would be no witnesses. In his heart he thanked his private gods for sparing Donlin for his own judgment.

Catlike, he crept along the gallery. At his step Donlin turned. Hinderman saw the sudden tightness about the American's lips. *He* knew they were alone.

"Eyes front," he snapped. Slowly Donlin obeyed. The man's powerful shoulder blades stiffened. How easy it would be to shoot him in the back. But Hinderman wiped away the impulse. He wanted to play with his prey, make Donlin suffer before he finished him.

The heat made Hinderman's head swim, increasing the hold of the cognac upon his vengeance-crazed mind. A vicious jest occurred to him. Peering from round a corner in the gallery, he could just see Donlin's broad back. Slowly Hinderman raised the revolver, squeezed the trigger.

Less than a foot over Donlin's head the bullet buried itself.

Donlin changed position hurriedly, under the impression the Touareg aim was improving. It almost made Hinderman roar. Once more he raised his revolver. This time he experienced an almost uncontrollable desire to make his target that broad back. But he stifled his eagerness. Again the revolver sped its bullet.

This time it crashed home less than six inches from the base of Donlin's brain.

He saw the other man spit in sharp exasperation. His uneasiness set all Hinderman's desire afire. He raised the revolver this time with but one thought in mind—to kill. Carefully he aimed at the back of Donlin's head. His finger closed convulsively on the trigger.

Click!

Hinderman inspected the empty revolver disgustedly. His cartridge belt was likewise empty. Only one thing to do. He walked uncertainly back to Colonel Gaspard's office, where the ammunition was kept. He reassured himself that it was there, full belts by the dozens. Then the bottle on the table caught his eye, and he sat down for one drink more.

The cognac had no sooner passed his thick lips than Hinderman experienced overwhelming drowsiness. He nodded, eyes closing. When he opened them again it was with the disquieting conviction that he had been asleep.

Then he made an unnerving discovery. The spare cartridge belts had vanished from the room.

Cursing with rage, he stumbled out into the gallery. Then Hinderman saw Donlin still at his post, the cartridge belts stacked neatly round him. The American's grunt of greeting told Hinderman the truth. Guessing what was in his mind, Donlin was taking no chances.

Hinderman resolved to bluff it out. He took a step forward.

Then a level voice snapped warningly: "Keep off or I'll let you have it."

Hinderman halted, shivering in his fury. "What's the meaning of this?"

His answer was a Lebel barrel swung exactly in his path.

NO sound issued from the sands outside. If the Touaregs were there they kept quiet, waiting. It may have been the terrific heat or sheer madness that made Hinderman do what he next did. Without arms, his vengeance was impossible. Once Colonel Gaspard said he was a desert devil, a wild thing. He proved that now.

Directly under the parapet he glimpsed a still, sprawling figure. A Touareg who had paid the penalty for trying to scale these walls. It was the long gun at the dead man's side that held Hinderman's gaze. If he could get that gun. . . .

He considered the chances. If the enemy was still there they'd hardly expect a defender from the fort to come outside.

No, that part ought to be easy. But how about Donlin shooting him while he was out there?

Suddenly he stiffened with an idea. Stumbling, he made his way back to Colonel Gaspard's desk, found pencil and paper. Awkwardly, he wrote seven lines.

Getting to his feet, he stumbled out into the gallery. He stood at the head of the steps leading down to the sally port. It was in that instant that Donlin turned, saw the swaying, disheveled figure at the other end of the gallery. Then Hinderman's crazy babble reached his ears:

"I go out on inspection. But mark you well—shoot me from behind and you'll go to the firing squad for it. On my body I carry evidence that ruins you if I die."

Donlin gaped at the square of white paper fluttering in Hinderman's hand. He raised his rifle, then lowered it. He couldn't murder—even a mad dog. As he sprang forward Hinderman saw him coming. Like a flash Hinderman leaped down the steps, flung open the great gate. He was outside.

Behind the gate Donlin, listening, tensed. All was still out there on the desert sands. He prayed for that madman's safety.

Crack!

A single shot, then a choking cry.

"Hinderman. They got him—"

Abruptly Donlin ran down the steps, pushed open the barricade gate, raced across the sands. He bent over Hinderman's body, waiting for a Touareg bullet.

A single trumpet call rang on his ears. The advance guard of the returning Legion. Next instant, over the nearest sand dune, they swung into sight. He was seen now, bending over Hinderman's damning body.

Sweat dripped from him. Shakily, he extracted from the man's hand the single sheet of folded paper. He spread it open:

> If I die, I want it fully understood and known that the American Donlin is my killer. Donlin had nothing to do but shoot and get by with it. In spite of all my attempts to avoid disputes we have never got anywhere. Donlin hated deeply. The Arabs have gone. Donlin is pressing me hard.
>
> HINDERMAN.

His death warrant! But even as he started to tear it up, he felt the field glasses of the returning Legion on him. They all knew of this feud. He was in a damning position anyway. What he needed now was something to clear him of all suspicion. Instead, he had. . .

The paper blew sidewise in his hand, bending in two. Fascinatedly, Donlin's eyes returned to it. He stared wide-eyed with unbelief at what that visible half of the note told him.

Suddenly, as the advancing Legion drew nearer, he turned his back on it. Then Mike Donlin abruptly did a queer thing. He slipped his bayonet in the fold of the paper. From top to bottom, he slit Hinderman's letter in half.

Then, as he got to his feet, one half of that letter went into his mouth, was chokingly swallowed. The other half, in shaking hand, Donlin held onto like a drowning man clinging to a straw.

SEATED at the table, Colonel Gaspard listened to Donlin's story—the story he had stuck to unhesitatingly. Lieutenant Hinderman had simply walked out shortly before dawn into the desert and been killed.

Colonel Gaspard nodded his head thoughtfully.

"A queer man, Lieutenant Hinderman. And queerer still—his going out into the desert like that." He stared straight at Donlin.

"I don't mind telling you that but for this letter things would look pretty black for you, Donlin. As it happens, the letter clears you. Without it you might have been—well, suspected. After all, you two were known enemies. And it *was* queer, his going out that way." He stood up, waving toward Donlin the only half of Hinderman's letter that remained.

Donlin's face was expressionless as a mask, as he read what it now said:

> If I die I want it known that the American Donlin had nothing to do with it. In spite of all disputes we have never hated deeply. The Arabs pressing me hard.
>
> HINDERMAN.

"That letter," Colonel Gaspard was saying, "wipes out a lot of the lieutenant's bad deeds."

And Donlin smiled.

TEJANO!

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

"Two drops of blood for every drop spilled; two lives for every Sabine life!" Pizen Pete's code still blazed in the heart of the last of his *Tejano* clan.

A TRAVELING sky-pilot once took an hour to tell the Big Bend folks howcome ". . . he who taketh up the sword, by the sword shall he perish." And in light of subsequent happenings on that range, no little honor accrued to that circuit riding prophet.

According to Ranger Sergeant Byler, the Sabine boys were born gun wise, cut their teeth on a six-full smokepole and wore themselves poor as loco foundered dogies cuttin' notches on their gun grips. Buzz Byler had a habit of exaggerating that-a-way, but in the case of the Sabines, he was more than a little right.

Pizen Pete Sabine, head of the clan, built up the Cross-8 spread from nothing at all and his long tom rifle did its full part in running the Comanches off Big Bend range. His four boys grew up without the refining influence of a mother in the toughest corner of Texas. And a finer quartet of he-men you'd travel far to see. But early in their careers, having cast their faith in good artillery and ready gun hands, they furnished surprisingly ample evidence of the truth of the holy man's augury.

Take the case of Zack Sabine, the eldest son. While riding the breaks for boogery Cross-8 mosshorns, he stumbled plumb onto an impromptu round-up of Sabine beef critters by four tough honk-atonk cowboys. Alone at the time, Zack showed better judgment than the Sabines were given credit for. Instead of crossing guns with that hitched holster crowd. he turned tail and loped to one of Pizen Pete's line camps, where he cut out a pair of hard riding waddies. With their ears pinned back, those three lit out to deal the rustlers hell aplenty.

They didn't know until they topped the rise and looked over into the Chamisal Valley that the wide loopers had driven only this far and sold their ill-gotten gain to a big cattle buyer who was even then starting ten thousand moaning longhorns northword toward Belle Fourche in Wyoming.

When Zack saw the great herd winding snake-like up the valley, he was near loco with wrath. For it's a man's job to cut two-three hundred steers out of a trail herd, not to mention swapping lead with an unfriendly trail boss and his swift-trigger drovers.

As Zack fumed, turning in his mind crazy plans of stampeding the monster drive, one of his two waddies, a half-breed 'Pache, picked up sign where the four rustlers had cut southeast after making their deal. They were heading in a bee line across the Chisos Mountains toward Boquillas.

And it was only fourteen miles from the pleasure dumps of Boquillas that Zack ambushed those four. He left them there for the buzzards and rode leisurely homeward with the proceeds of the illicit cattle sale hard tied to his saddle horn.

THAT was as it should be—the code of the times. The rustlers were good riddance and the owner of the stolen cattle got the money for them. . . . Hardly.

Pizen Pete Sabine was the owner of those cows and what he got out of it was just exactly nothing minus his oldest son. For as Zack slept at their first camp, the half-breed puncher threw back to his Mescalero forebears, stabbed the Sabine through the heart and slipped from the camp with the commandeered coin.

When the loyal waddie toted Zack's body into Alamitos, the Sabine home ranch, there ensued a stiff argument as to just what vengeance action should be taken by the clan. While they argued, fifteen-year-old Till Sabine saddled his pinto, lifted a rifle and six-gun, and loped away to pick up the murderer's sign.

Nine days later Pizen Pete and the boys met up with him in a grass carpeted vega in the Rosillas Mountains. On his face was a cold, sly grin and at his belt hung a pair of dark-haired scalps. Yes, and tied to his saddle horn was a bloody shirt containing all of the money for which the half-breed had killed Zach. That was Till Sabine, later to be known from one corner of Texas to the other as a *Tejano* who would kill without qualm where the trampling of his rights was concerned.

Marfa Sabine, the second son, got his differently. He took it standing up in the Palace Saloon at El Rio. First and always, Marfa was a poker fiend, and he never lost a chance to take chips in a spirited game. Therein lay the trouble; some of the games were too spirited.

One night Blackie Barsh, ace card man of the Palace, played Marfa for a sucker, believing him more drunk than he actually was. The Sabine did get his pistol clear of leather, but it went unfired as two .41 derringer slugs tunneled his body. They picked him out a nice level plot in boot-hill and called it self-defense.

That killing happened when Till was seventeen. A month later this youngest of the Sabines walked into the Palace at its busiest hour, baited Blackie into going for his pistol, beat him to the draw and killed him as he tugged at the silken ribbon that fastened to his vest pocket knuckleduster. It was as pretty a killing as they rated in the district, and the onlookers so voted it. All but Frog Ponselle, the Palace proprietor.

Frog was notorious as a surly, disagreeable character, ever alert for gun action, and dangerous for that reason. In fairness to him it must be said that he was in his little office cubby when the shooting occurred, so didn't fairly understand what he was up against. But perhaps he deserved what he got, trying to lay hands upon a gun-locoed kid who had just avenged a brother. Some around El Rio tried to persuade Till to stay over for Frog's funeral. But his mission was complete and he was eager to return to Alamitos. So he passed up the festivities.

TAP SABINE, the third son, met death at a rope end. For years an incipient feud had smoldered beneath the hides of the Sabines and their nearest neighbors, the Hocketts of Valle Gato. The trouble had to do with the ownership of Dripping Springs, on the dry end common to both the Cross-8 and the Hockett's Rafter-H ranges.

Pizen Pete Sabine and wizened Hip Hockett, both of them blasphemous sons of guns always patched their differences in lurid conferences that at length drifted into star chamber sessions of a mutual admiration society. Two such accomplished profanists, each intent only upon outdoing the other, had little time to waste on feud matters, thirsty cows or physical violence.

But, as it happened, neither Pete nor Hip was present when Tap Sabine drove two-three dozen thirsty dogies over to Dripping Springs and found Happy Hockett, Hip's pride and joy, and another Rafter-H rider stringing three strands of bo'b wire around that precious seep. Tap saw red and said several things that get under the hide, pronto. Can't blame him exactly, because he looked at it as trespass and worse. On the other hand, one can't blame the Hocketts for fencing a spring that cattle were fouling.

The point that didn't come out in the ensuing argument was that the Rafter-H outfit was going to construct a long watering trough at their own expense. It didn't have a chance to come out, so fast did things happen.

Happy got the idea he could cuss Tap like Hip cussed Pizen Pete. He tried it, and drew from Tap a stinging torrent of names taboo on Big Bend range. Three men went for their hoglegs without delay, and when the smoke lifted the Rafter-H cowpoke was dead; Happy Hockett was bullet sick, hanging low over the withers as his cayuse split the breeze for home; and Tap Sabine was stuffing a dirty bandanna into an ugly shoulder wound.

Tap was unhurried as he watered his stock, for he knew that Happy had many miles to ride for help and that he'd probably hit the dirt inside of a mile. He was wrong in both surmises.

Happy passed from sight over the rise and ran plumb into old Hip Hockett and five of his punchers. One of them started back to the ranch with the wounded scion, and the rest fogged it for Dripping Springs. They caught Tap cold, hog-tied him and rode six miles before they found a tree large enough to hang him on.

This is not intended as a history of the fighting Sabines of Big Bend, Texas. But, in justice to Till, one must show the incidents, each a story in itself, that led to his being named Tejano. And no name ever fitted a man better. Not that he became a ruthless, yellow-eyed killer.

A whelp, sired by a wolf that had battled for all that life had given him, all that life had taken away, Till didn't even know the meaning of fear.

Till was so jealous of his right and the right of his kinsmen to live in their own way in their own bailiwick, that he did not think of consequences when he stepped out to avenge the taking of Sabine life or property. He had proved it double death to notch for a Sabine.

Men began to wager on how long he might last; on how soon the circuit rider's prophesy would be fulfilled.

PIZEN PETE and Till, last of the Sabines, were eating when word came by

moccasin telegraph that buzzards were picking flesh from a cadaver that twisted in the breeze; that bobbed and swayed grotesquely. Nothing more than that save the location; no details, no word as to those who might be held accountable.

When the Indian had gone, father and son looked long at one another. In their eyes was reflected a mixture of emotions, surprise, sorrow, anger. No word was spoken.

Pizen Pete rose, wiped his mouth upon the back of his hand. Painfully he straightened a form bent by years of hard work and incessant exposure. He was "pizen" no longer. He was aging, had failed perceptibly in the last few years, was obviously unfit for the rigors of the gun trail. One couldn't have told him that, however, as he ambled to the rock fireplace and lifted down his beloved long tom rifle. Locked in its mechanism was the law he had always appealed to, the law that had provided justice along a lawless frontier. Instinctively he turned to it now.

Till watched his father with an expression that changed from admiration to annoyance, and then to admiration again.

"Somebody," he drawled meaningly, "is goin' tuh stay with the spread. I don't admire none tuh ride back this-a-way an' find the Cross-8 as clean as a doggie's nose."

Pizen Pete flashed him a swift glance, half angered, half fearful.

"What yuh mean, Till?" he queried, passing the cleaner down a barrel worn smooth in action. "I wasn't aimin' tuh cheat yuh outa the fun uh watchin' yore ol' pap drill the skunk that slaughtered yore brother Tap. 'Tain't noways necessary. Bob Hunter kin rod the Cross-8 good as you or me. An' he's got three good waddies tuh back his plays. Hell, no, come on an' go."

TILL laughed coldly as he strapped on twin gun belts, adjusted the weighted holsters to his ample thighs and tied the thongs. As he worked his cold eyes never left the face of Pizen Pete nor did the chill smile fade from his angular face. The old man proceeded unhurriedly with preparations for leaving. The trusty rifle was well oiled, cartridges were transferred from their boxes to the pockets of his grimy jeans. When at last he was ready, he glanced up at Till.

"Till," he said speculatively, "yuh reckon I better ketch me up that red roany hawss or mebbeso that crotchetty bay devil yuh topped last fall?"

That drew a chuckle from the son. No happy fireside for this old he-wolf in his declining years. He'd swallow trail dust and slam hammers until somebody just a bit too tough planted him with boots on, like the sky pilot said. What Till said was:

"Don't be a fool, old man! That roan couldn't keep within gunshot uh me, an' the bay'd pile yuh fore yuh got molded tuh the saddle shape. Look after the Cross-8. That's yore chore. I'll be back inside of uh week expecting tuh rod yore beef-gather north tuh join the Rosillas Pool. *Adios,* Pete."

And Till was gone. Pizen Pete was so plumb flabbergasted that he couldn't think what to do or say until the youngster was a good half mile away and foggin' it west in a cloud of wind-blown dust. Pete laid the rifle down, watched the last of his sons dip into Sandy Creek, ride out upon the other bank and lope away into the sunset, jauntily quirting the scuffed leather of his bullhide chaparrejos. Not until then did he laugh uneasily, dash a bit of unwelcome moisture from his eyes and bite off a chew of plug.

"Him," he said proudly—"he'll do it up right, I betcha. He allers has. Tejano, eh? I'll tell a man!"

SOARING buzzards circled above their interrupted feast. They watched a lone human carry stones to cover all that was left of the grisly thing that had been Tap Sabine.

It was four in the afternoon when Till completed the cairn. Not until then did he realize that he was terribly weary and not a little sick. Staggering to a nearby spring, he filled himself with the sweet water and fell into a troubled sleep.

When the chill of descending night awoke him, Till was fit and coldly intent upon his deadly purpose. A study of the stony *malpais* told him nothing of the identity of the murderers. Horses had milled about the hangtree, but it was im-

possible to ferret out whence they had come or whither they had gone. Till had little doubt as to who had hung Tap. Failing to find evidence at the hangtree, he now rode toward Dripping Springs, where, according to his reasoning, the trouble must have started, if, indeed, the Hocketts were responsible.

While still some distance from the Springs, Till knew that all was not as it had been there. The pale light from the rising moon glinting along the wire strands puzzled him. When he made out the fence at last he reconstructed the trouble in a flash. So he was not surprised at finding the vulture-mutilated body of the Rafter-H puncher where Tap had dropped him.

Looking to the loads in his holster guns, Till mounted and loped swiftly for Valle Gato.

Ten miles to Valle Gato by buckboard road. Till chose to cut that in half by traveling a faint and little-known war trail along which the fierce Comanches had driven captive men and horses from Chihuahua in the days that were gone. At the summit of the hill range, Till paused to look down at the lights, the squat buildings hemmed by giant *alamos,* the far-flung corrals of the Rafter-H home ranch.

In his fancy the moonbathed scene changed to a barren hillside on which grew a single stunted tree. A ring of horsemen hemmed it, and a writhing figure swung from its main horizontal branch. It seemed to Till he heard Tap taunting, cursing, reviling those who were robbing him of his young life. That would be his way. It was like a Sabine, terrible.

The vision faded. An awful bitterness assailed Till, twisted his lips into a warped grin. Why should men kill each other for such things as springs and horses and cattle . . . and women? In his own philosophy, warped by the law of the fang, he had his answer. The guilt lay with him who had first killed. Those who had killed after him had only been true to themselves and their kin. What real man could do otherwise, lest he be known as a coward, a yellow-belly—term of approbrium far more ugly than . . . Tejano.

TILL gigged his pony down the steep hill that led into Valle Gato. The tawny moon hung low above the eastern horizon, and long shadows stretched grotesquely as the Sabine trailed his rein just outside the outbuildings where horses munched prairie hay, and the corrals from whence came the low moan of penned cattle.

Deliberately he removed and hung his long-shanked spurs over the saddle horn. In a smooth movement he drew his weapons, tested their heft to make sure there was no drag. This Tejano was a fool on the draw.

Briskly he stepped toward the rambling adobe the Hocketts called home. The door was open, that the evening air might cool the close interior. From within came the clatter of knives and plates as rangeland appetites were being satisfied. Supper was in full swing, and a buzz of conversation ran about the rough pine table. Happy Hockett was voicing a blasphemous complaint at the throbbing pain of his shoulder wound. That sign of weakness drew a sneer from his father.

"You make me sick, bawlin' like a windbellied calf." Wiry Hip Hockett laughed. "Yuh orta be glad yuh got off so easy. Lucky fer you that me an' the boys happened along or Tap'd uh caught yuh an' stretched yore hide on that new fence yuh was stringin'. As it is yore scratch is healin' fine, yo're eatin' prime Sabine beef an' the buzzards is fattenin' on the feller as shot yuh. What the hell more kin ary Hockett ask fer?"

They laughed with Hip, his three cowpunchers. But Happy was in no mood to join them.

"There's still two Sabines the buzzards ain't eatin'," he reminded them. "One of 'em is Till, the Tejano. He ain't no pilgrim, noticeable. He's a Mex screwworm bull an' an hydrafoby loafer wolf all rolled inter one hide, if yuh ask me. Ever think of that, Hip Hockett?"

The Rafter-H boss ripped out a lurid string of highly tinted profanity.

"Tejano!" he roared belligerently. "What the hell do I keer fer one uh them fellers? I'm a Tejano myownself. I was borned in a lobo's den, baptized by the Devil hisself an' riz up in the bowels of calamity. It shore rowels me right ringy

tuh think a son uh mine fears man, beast er hellandamnation. I've rid, et, bunked an' fought Injuns with Pizen Pete Sabine, an' kin handle a hull passel uh his stripe, an' that goes fer his welps.

"If this Tejano feels lucky an' wants pay fer this beef or that Sabine spawn that's rottin' yonderly, let 'im come an' ask fer it. He'll shore as hell git it!"

Again they laughed with Hip. Men always laughed at his sallies; it was expected. But abruptly the laughs froze in their throats.

TILL SABINE'S light step sounded just inside the doorway. His rebuke was low, chill, controlled, so vibrant it seemed fairly blatant in the close confines of the adobe walls. . . .

"In forty year," he reminded the Rafter-H boss, "no man has ever asked fer Cross-8 beef but what he got it. Not even a wuthless Injun. But in all that time no man ever stole said beef but what he paid right dear fer it, or mebbeso fogged it offen the range faster than Cross-8 broncs has learned tuh travel. Sabine cows come high, feller, when yuh steal 'em, but Sabine blood comes higher. A Sabine is cravin' pay fer both cows an' blood this night, an' he's askin' fer it now, like yuh said."

Five men surged to their feet to face him, stood there tense as marble statues. No one moved or spoke. In the painful silence the ear might have picked up the movement of a spider as he inched along the gossamer of his web.

The face of the invader was split with the grin of death, inhuman, horrible.

The blood drained from the seamed face of Hip Hockett, flamed back in a florid surge. He strove to speak, but words would not form. And as they waited for they knew not what, gun hands inched closer to pistols.

"Steady, hombres!" snapped the Tejano. "Them as keers tuh stay hide-whole will stick up their paws!"

His reputation was respected. The fact that his hands hung so loosely, so carelessly at his sides gave them no license to take liberties with his order. They all knuckled to this gun lobo and elevated—all but ringy old Hip Hockett. Stark anger was swiftly warping his better judgment. As he recovered his fighting poise, his tonge grew caustic.

"Turned owl-hoot, eh?" he sneered. "I've allers told yore pap yuh'd come tuh no good pass, wind up at a rope's end er swally a lawman's bullet. I've shore made worser guesses'n that un, eh, boys? But seein' as how yuh've got the drop, Tejano man, I 'low we'd best tuh shell out our dinero fer yh."

"Lift yore hands, Hip!" counseled the Tejano coolly. "I'm not after yore money, but I'd as soon kill yuh as look at yuh. Jest tuh show I'm a fair man, I'll make yuh a present of the beef yuh stole, call it paid fer. But most anybody on Big Bend range kin tell yuh Till Sabine's price fer a brother."

HIP HOCKETT'S cruel eyes flickered strangely.

"What yuh mean?" he asked uncertainly. "What in hell price yuh talkin' about?"

"My price fer a drop uh Sabine blood," explained Till patiently, "is two drops uh killer blood. Fer a Sabine life, two killer lives. That's been my price since I was fifteen; it's my price now, an' it'll be my price until they plant me six feet under."

As he talked, Till's eyes flashed from Hip to Happy and back again. The inference was plain, and Hip's face grew livid.

One of the punchers squirmed, cleared his throat nervously.

"Meanin' jest what?" he queried.

"Meaning that unless yuh've got guts tuh go fer yore smokepoles, one er all of yuh, I'm takin' Hip an' Happy out an' hangin' 'em to the same tree that swung by brother Tap."

The puncher laughed crookedly.

"Hell!" he ejaculated. "I ain't takin' chips in no rough game like that fer thirty an' beans. I'm nootral!"

"Me, too!"

"Yeah, and' me!"

The old cattleman glared his contempt of the welchers, spat vindictively. He was at bay, and from a glance into the Tejano's chill orbs he knew he could expect no mercy from that source. He suddenly remembered the circuit rider's words, ". . . he who taketh up the sword, by the sword shall he perish." To think

that a chicken-livered sky-pilot should have called the turn so accurately.

Well, nobody would ever say that Hip Hockett was yellow, that he meekly gave up his irons and walked to the gallows tree. Undaunted in the face of this cold killer, he would play out his string as he had ever lived it, behind smoking guns. If the Tejano was as all men rated him, he would carve a notch for one Hip Hockett. If not . . .

Grim-lipped, the old gun wolf tensed to meet the supreme challenge of the blood trail, fell back upon the only code he knew. As he marshaled his forces for the test of hurtling lead, he bared stained teeth in a hate-twisted snarl. Talon-like, his hands poised for the sudden stab that would start his mad play.

THE throb of pounding hoofs sounded outside, growing ever louder. A grin of vulpine cruelty raked the face of the grizzled Rafter-H boss. Visitors at Valle Gato meant friends of the Hocketts. It appeared that the Tejano's party was due for a little interruption.

Till Sabine listened to the drum of hoof beats, a quizzical look upon his face. He half turned his head the better to hear.

It happened then. Ever alert for a break, Hip Hockett went for his weapon, a triumphant growl rumbling through his unkempt beard. Lightning for his years, yet he was slow indeed when compared with the Tejano. Though he fired from the hip after the manner of all soon gunners and in the way that had earned him his sobriquet years before, still he was a fraction of a second late. Till Sabine's swift-flung lead spoiled his aim and, in spoiling it, took toll of his life.

Another gun roared and snuffed the light. In the gloom the three Rafter-H cowpunchers bolted with howls of fear. Till paid them no heed. In a pair of long bounds he found the side of fear-chained Happy Hockett, clamped him in a vise-like grip as a pair of hard-ridden broncs skittered to a stop outside the door.

Two riders, sitting their heaving mounts in the moonlight, stared curiously at the three frightened punchers who legged it toward the corrals and their mounts. In a single glance Till recognized the cadaverous face, walrus mustaches, flat black hat with chin strap, fringed buckskin jacket of the lead rider. Ranger Sergeant Buzz Byler, law-wolf of Big Bend ranger!

Sudden doubt struck Till. What was Buzz doing here at this time? Heretofore the ranger had kept hands off these range-land feuds until they involved cattle rustling, robbing of money or slaughter of innocents. Clapping his huge hands across Happy's mouth, Till listened to Byler's words.

"What the hell, Monte?" queried the lawman. "What yuh reckon them jaspers is runnin' from? Seemed like I heard shootin' a spell back, did you?"

"Shore did," returned Monte Fant, who with Dick Ware, Chris Conner and George Herold had rubbed out a rustler's den at Round Rock only the year before. "Somethin' dead wrong here, Buzz, or I never tasted coffin varnish. See that cabin door gapin' wide? You have a look-see in thar while I round up them three road-runners. This looks a heap like some uh Red River Steen's work."

Sticking steel to his mount, he clattered away in pursuit of the rabbit trio as Buzz Byler swung down, drew his pistol and moved slowly doorward. From within came the mysterious suggestion of movement. The ranger stopped, tensed.

"Hockett" he called guardedly. "Hip Hockett!"

HAPPY HOCKETT wriggled desperately in Till's grasp only to be gripped the tighter. In the struggle, the Rafter-H scion raised his leg, caught the table edge with his boot toe and hurled the board over in a mighty discordance of crashing dishes, pans and cutlery.

Buzz Byler darted into the darkened portal, gun weaving vicious circles before him, a match hissing between his fingers. The tiny torch flared up. And the most fearless lawman in the Big Bend stared into the widening orbs of a Tejano who had never experienced fear.

In the momentary flash before the match smoldered, Buzz saw the dead Rafter-H boss, saw Happy held in a grip of steel muscles, saw the black bore of a deadly .44 held unwaveringly upon his middle. It was like the figment of some wild nightmare. But in this case the ranger knew

he was not dreaming and wouldn't have bet a plugged 'dobe dollar on his chances. He was limned in the moonlight of the doorway and under the drop of a man he could not see—a Tejano.

Adjutant-General Jones of Houston once said of Buzz Byler, ". . . an' he's so dang cool he'd throw a chill in the fires uh hell. When the Devil come up tuh see what ailed him, he'd tear the barb outa the ol' feller's tail, stab him with it an' high-tail fer the pearly, pearly gates where he belonged from the first." Which was but one valiant warrior's way of saying that another couldn't be rattled in action, that he made the most of the least, and that he was first of all an upright man. And coming from the head of the Texas Rangers, that was indeed recognition.

Buzz lived up to his reputation for coolness now. Dropping into a handy chair, he holstered his weapon and drew out the makin's.

"That love knot you fellers is tied in ain't jest my idee uh comfort," he drawled as he rolled a smoke. "Best tuh set an' tell me howcome the ruckus while I inhale a few drags uh this querley."

For an instant, Till was minded to carry Happy to the door, drag him onto the officer's horse and make a run for his vengeance at Dripping Springs. Just then Buzz struck a match and Till looked again into those even gazing gray eyes. He changed his mind, slumped to a bench as he released his captive. Byler sighed as he inhaled the smoke.

"HOW'D salty ol' Hip come tuh git his?" Buzz Byler inquired casually.

Happy Hockett eagerly grasped his opportunity. "This . . . this danged skunk drilled him!" he gasped breathlessly. "An' he'll swing fer it if four witnesses count fer anything with yore law."

Till laughed stiffly. "You won't be here tuh watch me swing, Happy," he gritted. "Fer you'll be stretchin' rope before I do, like I promised."

"Did you kill Hip Hockett, Sabine?" asked the ranger.

"It was him or me," replied the Tejano. "Though I'm admittin' I figgered on hangin' him high, jest like I will this gutless whelp uh his."

"Why?"

"They hung my brother Tap fer waterin' Cross-8 stock at Drippin' Springs."

Happy Hockett entered swift denial. "Dad and the boys hung him after he killed Arch Stoner, one of our riders, an' sifted a slug through my shoulder. He got ornery 'cause we was fencin' the Springs an' puttin' up a stock trough. Them Sabines was . . ."

What he might have said further about Till's ancestors was cut off by a sudden rattle of shots, followed by the clatter of hoofs. Hanging low over the withers of their mounts, the three Rafter-H cowboys raced past the ranch house, throwing a blasting volley of shots doorward as they fled.

Buzz Byler's horse groaned and sank earthward.

Swift almost as the unexpected gun action, Byler and the Tejano were outside vainly fanning their weapon at three indistinct forms galloping into the moon fog. In a few seconds Monte Fant came running, spurs a-jingle. He was cursing softly.

"Good thing I never took up long-ridin', Buzz," he said philosophically. "I can't seem tuh hit a lick at night. Don't reckon I tetched one uh them jaspers with a six-full gun load uh lead. An' they kilt off my best trail bronc. Recognize them fellers, Buzz?"

"I never got a look at 'em," replied the ranger.

"The tall skinny one was Buck Raglan. The little squirt is Hen Dewees. I didn't read the third feller's brand. Them names mean anything to yuh?"

Buzz Byler ground out his smoke in the dust.

"Red River Steen," he muttered. "The Border County crowd is shore stagin' a purty cleanup this night."

Happy Hockett piped up: "Those ain't them fellers' names. Dad hired 'em three weeks ago fer the beef roundup. They come from over Devil's River way."

"Yeah?" Monte Fant laughed. "That's what they told yuh, likely. They're three uh Steen's gunmen from Border City with orders tuh make buzzard meat uh the Hocketts while their *compadres* wrangle ever' Rafter-H cow outa Valle Gato. Same thing goin' on over to the Cross-8."

"WHAT!" Till Sabine's voice cracked like a shot. "What the hell did you say, feller?"

"Heard of Red River Steen, have yuh?" asked Monte Fant.

"I know who he is," returned the Tejano stiffly. "What's he got tuh do with the Cross-8?"

"Well, the people uh Border County elected Red River sheriff because he was a gentleman gun wrangler with a smooth line uh lingo. He's made 'em a dang fine outlaw. He got so bad final' that certain big ranchers appealed to the Governor. Result—us rangers got word tuh watch him. That's howcome us tuh git wind uh the big rustlers' convention slated fer t'night."

"Steen's gun hirelings is raidin' ever' herd in the Bend 'tween now an' daylight, drivin' 'em to a holdin' ground near the Shawnee Hills, an' trailin' 'em up the Chisholm trail tuh Dodge. It's up to us tuh stop 'em, but we're spread out purty thin."

Till Sabine hitched up his guns. His eyes were terrible to behold in their ferocity.

"I hope the hell yuh do a better job uh stoppin' 'em than yuh have here," he said sarcastically. "Me, I'm slopin' fer the Cross-8, figgerin' that certain Steen polecats is ridin' fer Pizen Pete Sabine like they was fer Hip Hockett."

He turned upon his heel and strode toward his bronc.

"That's where I thought yuh'd be a-headin', cowboy," Buzz Byler called after him. "An' if yuh give me an' Monte time tuh twine uh pair uh mounts outa Happy's cavvy, we'll ride along an' th'ow in our irons fer what they're worth."

Without slackening his pace, Till made answer.

"An' I reckon this here's a free range. But if yuh foller me yuh'll shore learn something about the business uh forkin' broncs."

Buzz Byler snatched the saddle from his dead mount, broke into a run for the corrals, followed closely by Happy and Monte. By the time Till had found his pony, mounted and ridden back past the house, they were saddling up. Before the Sabine had passed out of their sight they were all spurring furiously after him.

WHAT a ride that was! Across a half mile of valley floor, into a narrow cattle lane threading a brush-screened *vega,* spuh raked cruelly to demand the last vestige of energy from the straining mounts. Up a canyon they thundered, streaked swiftly up a switch-back trail that rimmed a yawning chasm, plowed through hock-sheep sand on the first bench, then toiled up the long slope that led to the ridge. Topping the divide, they breathed the tuckered broncs for a brief moment, then sent them in a hell-bent lope down the boulder-strewn slope of a deep arroyo.

Here the trail hung upon the very brink of disaster. Above them loomed shadowy rock overhangs; below them gaped dark and dizzy depths. The hammering hoofs of the plunging ponies struck fire from a flinty track so narrow the riders must perforce string out in single file. For three miles they raced down the perilous and high-hung trail, then Till led them into the sandy bottom of a dry *cañoncito,* the horses pressed to the limit of their strength.

As they hit the plain with its harder and surer footing, the animals lengthened their strides. Once Till glanced up a flat hillside at a dwarfed tree that clung to the barren soil. From the twisted arms of that stunted plant, uplifted as if in prayer, a slender rope dangled black against the face of the moon.

Till chuckled. He and Happy had a tryst to keep at the root of that tree, but the matter was not exactly pressing. He had exacted half the toll for the life of Tap. Now, if what the rangers surmised was true, there would be the double toll to take for the killing of Pizen Pete Sabine.

As the riders swept about the long promontory that juts from the Coyote Hills, Till's pony commenced to falter. Happy and the two lawmen had little trouble keeping abreast now, for their mounts were the fresher. Into the bottom of Sandy Creek they dipped. A strange hum grew louder in their ears. Up the cut bank on the east side and the Cross-8 buildings were in sight. And what a sight it was!

Volleys of six-guns knifed the night

with crimson flashes. Thunder of exploding short guns. Blast of the long tom in the trained hand of forted Pizen Pete. And over all came the clatter of racing hoofs as the outlaws circled, Injun-like, and poured lead at the hoary defender of the Cross-8.

Cursing, Till stuck spurs into his pony's flank. The valiant beast answered with its last vestige of strength, of heart, of loyalty. But the effort cost it dear. Groaning after a few leaps, it sagged earthward, dead upon its feet. Till leaped free. Then he was racing fast as high heel boots could carry him after his spurring companions and toward the dogfight that milled about the Cross-8 ranch house.

EVEN as he ran, breath screaming from lungs unaccustomed to such punishment, Till noted the first tiny flame lick up where some night-crawling sidewinder had bellied up to the blind side of the house and torched it. Roaring impotent warnings to Pizen Pete, Till dashed madly toward the mêlée. The dry pine building flared swiftly into a giant pyre from which issued the measured roar of the long tom rifle.

Short guns flaming, the rangers and Happy Hockett lurched into battle, into a ring of whispering lead and blazing steel. Taken from behind, the renegade minions of Border County's outlaw sheriff beat a swift retreat into the gloom, firing desperately as they gave ground. At their first volley, Monte Fant pitched out of his saddle, mortally hit. As he crashed to earth, he rolled over to splash six shots at renegade targets before he sank back lifeless.

It was a hectic instant. Happy's cayuse took a bullet in a vital place, stumbled, throwing its rider over its head in an arcing parabola. Buzz Byler, hanging slaunched and firing over the withers after the manner of Comanche raiders, poured lead into the mounts of his retreating foes, aiming to set them afoot, and thus stage a wipeout. The fightin' fool. Guns empty, he swept a wide circle toward Till Sabine, who was now wheezing up into hurricane-lashed action.

The long tom was silent now. Pizen Pete did not appear. Till knew he was either dead or wounded. And right then Till knew fear for the first time, fear that his daddy would be cremated alive, truly an awful death. Redoubling his speed, he headed through the stream of lead directed toward him from the shadows and into the maelstrom of hissing fire and gushing smoke.

But Happy Hockett, who had likewise divined that all was not well with the forted Cross-8 boss, was before him. In long bounds, his wounded arm jerking grotesquely, Happy bounded to the cabin door, wrenched it open and recoiled as a tongue of flame licked out at him. Halting momentarily to jerk off his vest and wrap it about his face, he ducked low and dived into the maw of the raging holocaust.

A few strides behind Happy, Till too would have entered, but was balked by a sudden funnel of smoke and flame that drove him back. Three times he essayed to enter and three times he failed to force the blazing barrier. Then in the boiling smoke ogres within the portal was revealed a reeling shape and he was grasping Happy Hockett and dragging his tottering footsteps away from the fiery spit. When Till had dashed the acrid smoke tears from his eyes, he stared at the burden that rested on Happy's shoulders. That burden was Pizen Pete Sabine.

Blackened beyond recognition, gulping great draughts of life-giving air, Happy stumbled ahead as Till fought out the tiny blazes that licked at his clothes and those of the Cross-8 boss. Then in some way Buzz Byler was there beside them, jerking the lever of his carbine at sinister shapes that triggered at them from the bush covert.

It was a running fight that will live in men's memories as long as blood runs red, as long as true hearts pulse to the tale of hopeless odds and the indomitable fighting spirit. Burned, broken, all but senseless, Happy kept a tight grip upon Pizen Pete and tottered ahead. At one elbow stalked Tejano, filling, firing, loading his deadly six-guns as he took toll of the pack that bayed them. At the other strode Ranger Sergeant Buzz Byler, laughing, triggering, taunting his foes for the coyotes they were.

Bullets played about them. Yet as though those three were in the grip of forces greater than themselves or the

renegade horde that hemmed them, they passed through it all without once losing their feet. And behind and around them the ground was littered with the spawn of Cain.

THE time came at last when the remnant of Steen's hirelings decided the game was not worth the candle, quit the fight to join their *compadres* at the Shawnee Hills holding ground. Not until then did Happy's knees buckle. Struggling with a burden heavier than himself, he writhed slowly downward until he lay beside Pizen Pete Sabin—an inert huddle.

Till Sabine and Buzz Byler dropped there, too, weary, spent, perhaps a little loco from it all. Till sat there droning over a tally of the three unspent shells that still remained to him. Buzz dabbed at a bullet cut over his temple and grinned. Till rallied with the dawn, staggered to a trickle that moistened a nearby creek bottom, drank deeply and carried a hatful of the precious liquid back with him. The water revived Buzz, drew the fever from his eyes.

Together they examined the two silent men beside them. Pizen Pete was dead. A ball had dropped him at his gun wrangling and he had passed without ever having recovered consciousness.

Happy was groaning and slowly coming out of his stupor. His first conscious impression was of big Till Sabine astraddle him, tenderly bathing his face with a moistened bandanna and begging him piteously not to die. It was so really funny a thing for a Tejano to do to his enemy that it made Happy laugh. That drew a chortle from Buzz and in a moment they were all roaring, hysterically it's true, but still laughing. And that's a good sign.

When they had sobered somewhat, Till took Happy's feverish hand in his own huge one.

"I'm sorry, Happy," he said contritely. "I figgered I was a real man an' that you was somethin' a heap lower'n a snake's belly. It's the other way 'round. You're the man an' I'm a lousy killin' skunk—a Tejano. After I'd drilled yore old man it was big of you tuh dive inter that fire an' drag out mine, even if he was dead. You've learned me somethin', feller, an' I'm makin' it all up to yuh if it takes me the rest uh my life."

Happy choked and tears coursed their way down the grime of his cheeks, tears of pain, tears of something bigger than pain. "Aw . . . aw, hell, Till!" he mumbled. "Yo're plumb loco, talkin' that-a-way. Me, I ain't no fightin' man like my dad was an' I wanted a heap tuh do somethin' tuh show yuh I wanted tuh git along. Last few days has showed me life different, some way. Dad was ranicky an' got jest what was comin' tuh him. Le's be peaceable, me an' you. 'Member what the sky-pilot said that time there about him that taketh up the six-gun gittin' all leaded up . . .?"

They sat there staring into each other's eyes like a pair of moon-struck calves. Buzz Byler finally snapped them out of it.

"Hell!" He grinned. "Tuh hear yuh jaspers talk a feller'd think you was a pair uh pink tea johnnies 'stead of a couple iron-gutted battle hounds. Git yoreselfs together pronto, fer they's work tuh be did. Monte's dead an' he ain't the only ranger that met his Maker last night. There's vacancies tuh fill an' I'm seein' that Till Sabine an' Hap Hockett fills two of 'em!"

And he did.

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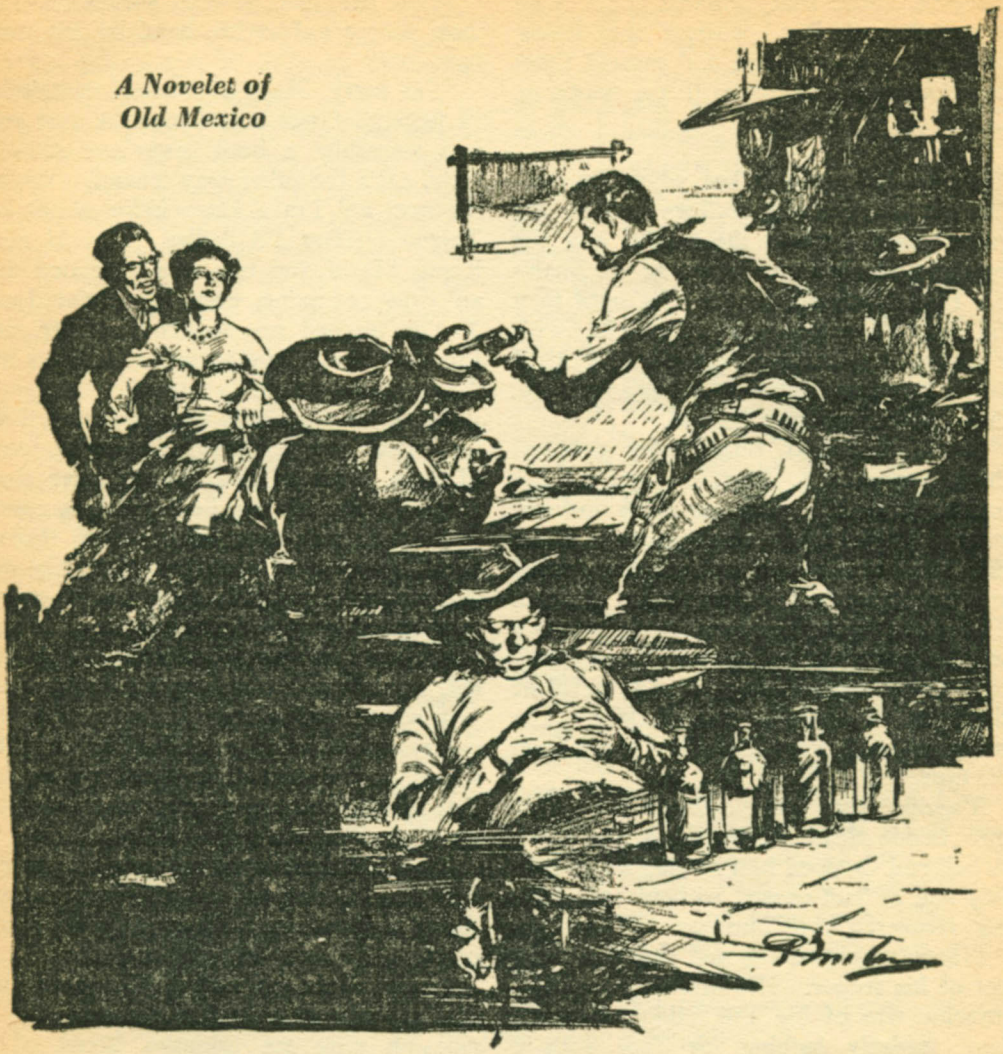

FATE FANS A .45

By WALT COBURN

"Rangers stay out!" Death triggers clicked grim warning in the Cantina of Hunted Men. . . . Until lawman Jack Badger split the sullen Rio to hobble that high-riding, night-raider crew.

ONE week after the San Marcos train robbery a tall cowpuncher stood in the office of the division superintendent. He was dressed in overalls and jumper, flannel shirt and shop-made boots. A well-made man with wide shoulders that slouched a little. His face was neither handsome nor homely. His hair was the color of new rope and his eyes were bright blue, puckered at the corners.

When he grinned his teeth showed white

and even. He was probably in his late twenties.

"Well, what can I do for you?" asked the railroad official abruptly. He was a small, nervous man who looked worried and harassed.

"I come in tuh auger some about that San Marcos train hold-up. I just got word about it."

"Hmmmm. Well, go on. What about it?"

"There was quite a lot uh money lost, so the papers said."

"Well, perhaps there was. My time is valuable. I'm not discussing the train robbery with anyone. There are other places in town where you can spend your time. Unless you have something of importance to say, I'll have to ask you to leave. I'm too busy to lose time in any idle gossip. Sorry to seem abrupt but my time is valuable."

"I shore savvy that, mister. Mine ain't worth much. Forty a month and beans. But I was just thinkin' and figgerin' how my time might run into a little more money than that forty per."

"If you are after a job, see the clerk in the other office. As I told you, my time is taken up."

The tall cowboy's eyes hardened just a little. He looked down at the older man who fussed around with the papers on his desk. There was nothing in the least embarrassed about the tall cowboy's attitude toward the little railroad official.

"The trouble is with gents like you," said the cowboy, "yuh git so doggoned wrapped up in yore own comical importance that yuh ain't got time tuh act human. Now yo're a-goin' tuh listen tuh me, even if I am just a common cowhand. And when I ask you ary questions, by the eternal tin-bellied lizards, yuh'll answer 'em and answer 'em absolutely straight, damn' quick. I want tuh know all about that train robbery and I don't want yuh tuh hold back anything. Yuh hold out on me and I'll take yuh and pull yuh apart and find out just what in hell yo're made of."

"Look here, you can't try any rough stuff like that. I'll arrest you. I'll have you . . ."

As the division superintendent reached for the buzzer, that well-kept hand was rapped across the knuckles with a six-shooter that now was pointed at the round paunch behind the desk.

"Look here, mister, I didn't aim tuh act rough. But I'll slap yuh around some if yuh don't tell me what I want tuh know. First question is this: how many men knew about that gold bullion that was bein' shipped from the Lost Barranca mine? You and who else knew that there was fifty thousand in gold on the train the night she was held up? Now you come clean, mister. You and who else?" The big six-shooter poked the other's little round paunch.

THE railroad man, pasty white now, stuttered and gasped. Never in his life had he ever been threatened with a cocked gun.

"The—the mine officials knew, and the bank at Phoenix knew. Perhaps the news leaked out somewhere."

"Perhaps it did, mister. You was in Nogales before that train stick-up. You was doin' considerable celebratin' with some more sports that was down there on a convention. And there was a feller down there that you spends better than half a day with at a Mex joint on the edge uh town. Do yuh want me to tell yuh that feller's name?"

"I spent a few hours with a man there. A gambler I had known in the East. He is married to a Mexican woman and they have a place where you can get good Mexican food and wine and see rooster fights and other things."

"What's this gent's name, mister?"

"Cal Furney."

"That wasn't the name he went under when he done time in Montana. The time he was mixed up in that murder at Great Falls. He was a piano player then at the old beer hall. Him and an ex-jockey was tangled up in a nasty killin' up there. Yuh knowed him then, didn't yuh? I want the truth."

"I knew Cal Furney in Montana when I was conductor up there running out of Great Falls."

"And yuh still know him. Mister, if you place any real value on that lily-white hide of your'n, yuh'll not mention to ary man, woman or child that I've bin here.

Yuh understand? What's yore name?"

"It's there on the door. John Manning."

"I asked you a question. If yuh don't come clean with an answer I'll shove the barrel uh this gun down yore silly throat and make yuh bite 'er off. What was yore name where yuh come from? What was yore name before you done ten years at Sing Sing?"

"Lord, man! Don't! I . . . That's behind me now. I have a position. A wife and children. They don't know. Nobody knew except Cal Furney! Furney knew. He ran into me at Nogales. Threatened me with that old past unless I did what he wanted me to do. He had some sort of connection with the Lost Barranca Mine. He knew that they were due to ship the bullion out soon. He threatened me, blackmailed me into giving him the shipping date. Lord, man, don't turn me up! Have mercy! My wife, my children! I'll do anything you say. I swear it. Anything you ask!"

"Bring back to life Bill Badger!"

"Bill Badger! The railroad detective who was killed the night of the train robbery? Old Bill Badger?"

"Yes. When there should have been a half dozen guards there was only one in that express car. That man, that lone man, was a man who had been a peace officer for forty years. An old Ranger captain. A man as honest as any living man. As game as any man that ever stood in boots. And it was through your orders that he was alone that night when the train was held up at San Marcos. I seen a copy uh the letter. A copy of the orders that put Bill Badger tuh guard the bullion that was tuh be robbed. Mister, I've a mind tuh kill yuh where yuh set. Why shouldn't I kill a white, pot-bellied worm like you? A dirty, lousy ex-convict that tries tuh hide behind his wife and kids. A white-livered coward. But I ain't ready to kill yuh, mister. Not till I git a few chores done that needs doin'."

"Don't—don't kill me!"

"Where is Cal Furney?"

"I don't know. I swear I don't know. He left Nogales. Went south into Mexico."

"Where is Art Slocum?"

"I don't know. I don't want to know. Lord, man, I haven't eaten or slept decently since that job. I didn't get a dollar out of it. They told me they'd kill me unless I gave them the information on that bullion. Art Slocum and Cal Furney did it. Who are you? A law officer? A railroad dick?"

"No. My name is Jack Badger. Bill Badger was my father. I'm just a cowboy. But he always confided in me a-plenty. And it was him that told me about yore prison record and about Cal Furney and how Furney was thick with Art Slocum."

"Bill Badger knew about me?"

"Look me square in the eye, you white-livered coyote, and tell me that yuh didn't know he suspected yuh. Yuh can't cut 'er. You suspicioned that Bill Badger knowed yore record. Yuh wanted him killed. Well, mister, before I'm done, I'll know the truth and all uh the truth. Yo're stayin' right here on the job. Try tuh rabbit and yuh'll land in jail. Try tuh tip off any uh that outlaw pack and I'll see yuh hang. I'm leavin' you here tuh sweat some. Every letter yuh write, every wire yuh send, every move yuh make will be watched. I'm goin' after you coyotes and I'm hangin' yore hides on the fence. I got yore number. No use in you tryin' tuh dodge out. Every move yuh make is watched from now on by men that'd be proud tuh pump lead into yore belly. So sit tight, mister. I'll see yuh later."'

JACK BADGER shoved his six-shooter back in its holster and left the office. In the outer office he stopped for a moment at a desk where a black-haired, brown-eyed girl sat typing.

"I made him give up head, Jane. Watch every letter."

"You bet I will, Jack. Which way, cowboy?"

"The sign says Mexico. I won't dare write. Just hang and rattle, old kid. You've been a real standby. The sheriff will see that this human coyote don't hurt yuh. Just the same, keep yore eyes open. And I'll see you git an invite to Slocum's and Furney's hangin' party. Play the game, Jane. Good luck."

"And the same to you, Jack," smiled Jane Andrews, her brown eyes soft and starry as she looked up at the tall, bronzed

cowboy who was taking up the game where Bill Badger had left off.

There remained with her the memory of his grin, the tinkle of his silver-mounted spurs, the faint odor of hand-rolled cigaret tobacco.

The buzzer summoned her from her smiling reverie. Notebook and pencil in hand, she went demurely into the Division Superintendent's office to take his hurried dictation.

Meanwhile Jack Badger was leaving town, headed for the Mexican border. His eyes were hard, his lips pulled to a grim, straight line. The loss of his father had hurt far more than anyone knew. They had been close together, Bill Badger and his son Jack, though few men knew of their relationship. Time and again Jack had worked with his father on cases. More than several times it was the younger Badger who was instrumental in bringing criminals to justice.

Now Jack Badger was working alone. Working on the most difficult case he had ever tried. Working with a heart that was heavy with grief, but with a determination to wipe out the outlaw gang who had murdered as game and fine a law officer as ever wore a badge. Death to Cal Furney and Art Slocum. Death to their gang that were like a pack of wild dogs that herd with wolves.

Sunset found Jack Badger across the border. Whatever grief was in his heart he hid well under a cloak of swaggering bravado as he entered the cantina.

The music of stringed instruments. Voices jabbering. A drunken Mexican singing. The odor of heavy tobacco. Cheap perfume. Red slippers and spurred boots. The odor of horse sweat and hair tonic. Dark eyes flashing invitations to those men whose pockets held money. In a corner, alone at a table, a drunken gringo. Sleek haired bartenders serving drinks. A keno game in full swing. Poker and monte. Small, ragged urchins selling Mexican cigarettes, and candy made of cactus, and gardenias.

Into the Cantina Mejicano swaggered the tall cowboy. His spurs jingled, his gun was in a low-tied holster, his buckskin colored Stetson slanted across one eye. To all appearances he was half drunk.

II

IT is said of the Cantina Mejicano that if a man sits at one of the tables for all the days that make a month he will see every renegade in the State of Sonora and many more from Chihuahua, to say nothing of the less bronco scum from the borderland of Jaja California. Perhaps. Again, perhaps not. Many things were said of the Cantina Mejicano. Some of them undoubtedly true, many just the fanciful tales of men who had taken on too much tequila. The border is like that.

No doubting the fact, however, that the Cantina Mejicano harbored strange men and strange women whose records were unsavory.

Now, as Jack Badger leaned against the bar, watching the dancers on the polished floor, watching the groups at the tables, the men and women who patronized the gambling games, he saw more than a few faces he knew as belonging to wanted men. Men who used Mexico and the Cantina Mejicano as a refuge.

The bartender barely nodded to the tall cowboy but their eyes had met in a swift, mute greeting. Barely perceptible, that shake of the Mexican bartender's sleek black head.

"Tequila," said Jack Badger.

From under the bar came the long bottle marked tequila. In a small dish was a slice of lemon. Beside it a tall salt shaker. And after the approved manner of the tequila drinker, Jack Badger tossed off his drink with its lemon and dash of salt. He paid for the drink with a silver dollar and let his change lie there on the bar. He rolled and lit a cigaret and leaned with his back to the bar, braced on one denim-covered elbow. From under the slanted hat brim his puckered blue eyes missed nothing of what was going on.

A group of Americans came in through the swing-doors. A half dozen men and women in the group. To the initiated this group was easily marked as coming from some nearby dude ranch. They were in tow of a tall, good looking, swaggering cowboy whose fancy garb marked him as a professional dude wrangler. His shirt was too loud, his neck scarf of a gaudy purple, his whole get-up costumed not ac-

cording to the standard of the cattle country but a perfect ensemble of what most eastern tourists expect the well dressed cowboy to wear.

Jack Badger eyed the big dude wrangler with interest. Then his attention was focused on a man who, instead of riding breeches or the newly acquired cowboy garb of the dude guest, wore a neatly pressed linen suit, silk shirt and white Panama. The man was tanned, of medium build, and carried himself with the assurance that is the carriage of the average successful business man. The eyes behind his tortoise rimmed glasses were light gray, searching, cold. Under his left armpit was a bulge that told of a gun in its spring holster.

The Mexican bartender approached Jack Badger. His voice was low pitched, so low that nobody but the one man whose ears were meant for the message, could hear.

"The man in the Panama ees Gearhing."

"And the dude wrangler?"

"The dude wrangler ees Gearhing's spy, sometimes the bodyguard. The others are dudes from the Gearhing rancho below the Lost Barranca Mine. Gearhing, like you know, ees superintendent of thees Los Barranca Mine."

THE music of an orchestra imported from the City of Mexico. Lights dimmed by the layers of tobacco smoke that hung heavily in the badly ventilated Cantina Mejicano. The sounds of many voices speaking many languages. Men and women tourists dressed in clothes from London, Paris, New York. A little group of movie people who were down in Mexico on location. Cowboys from both sides of the line. Mexicans of all descriptions. A motley gathering there in the most notorious cantina between Juarez and Tijuana. And for this odd gathering the girl Gringito danced. Danced like some bit of blown thistledown. Elusive, exotic, unreal as a being from another world.

A sordid setting for a thing so beautiful as the golden haired Gringito and her dance.

Gringito, a pink and white and golden flower. Some of the most wealthy and prominent men in Mexico had sought her hand in marriage. But to all men she was delicately aloof. She gave her faintest smiles to a select few. She was never seen in the company of any man. She lived with the stern eyed, black garbed woman. Fair as the fairest orchid, her hair was the color of white gold, her dancing was like some exquisite dream. Who she was, why she was here in Mexico, no man knew. No man save perhaps one That one was the man who named himself Lon Gearhing.

So thought Jack Badger as he leaned against the bar, drinking his fake tequilas, watching, waiting, listening. Now, as the girl danced alone on that floor that had grown a little gritty from the dust and dirt of countless feet, he wondered why she was here, why she so prostituted her gift of dancing before this mixed mob of people who watched her with hungry eyes. To Jack Badger she was the most beautiful, most marvelous creature he had ever seen. He watched, spellbound by the beauty of her as she danced.

Somehow he had failed to notice that a message had been delivered to her a little while before. A written message that came from the table at which sat Lon Gearhing and his party. A note which was promptly destroyed under the hard, watching eyes of the black garbed "mother." Jack's attention had been carried somewhere else at the moment. He had been watching the dude wrangler called Wyoming who had, on some pretext, come to the bar. And so he had not seen that note delivered and destroyed. But he had seen the bright gray eyes of Gringito looking at him. He thought she smiled. He was positive now, as she danced, that she smiled directly at him.

Now she was out in the middle of the dance floor. The place was hushed, save for that music. And somehow the beauty and grace of the dancing girl had transformed all the sordidness. As if by some strange trick of magic the Cantina Mejicano became a place of beauty. Jack Badger watched like a man hypnotized.

Now that setting of beauty was shattered. There, across the floor, there lurched a man. He was dressed in the garb of a cowboy. A cowboy whose fancy ran to white-handled guns, heavy silver

mounted spurs, breeches foxed with buckskin. A tall, heavy shouldered man. Swarthy, clean shaven except for a black mustache. In spite of the fact that he had been drinking, he moved with a lithe swiftness.

Before any of the dazed audience could gather their wits, the big cowboy had picked the startled Gringito in his arms. Roughly, brutally, he held her. His heavy lips sought hers. His bloodshot eyes, black, menacing, hungry, looked down at the helpless, breathless, delicate girl. He laughed at her helplessness. Laughed, his hot breath, liquor fumed, in her face.

Jack Badger was across the floor with the speed of a leaping panther. His two hands gripped the thick throat of the man, flinging him to the floor.

The bigger man, with a muttered oath, jerked his gun. Jack's boot heel sent the gun spinning across the floor. He reached down, pulled the big man to his feet, smashed his face with two terrific blows that made the blood spurt. The next moment the two were in a tangle on the floor.

Again and again the bigger man rallied to take more punishment from Jack Badger's fists. He pulled a knife that Jack twisted from his grip and, with a grin, flung aside as he knocked the big man down for the last time. He kicked the inert form none too gently in the ribs. Then he turned to the Mexican policeman who had tried to separate the fighting pair.

"He's yours, now. Lock him up till he gets sober. I reckon I should uh killed him."

Turning abruptly Jack Badger shoved through the crowd and back to the washroom. In the confusion nobody noticed that Lon Gearhing had followed him.

JACK BADGER was washing the blood from his hands and face when he saw Gearhing enter the washroom. One of Jack's wet hands held a gun. That gun was covering Lon Gearhing. The latter's hands spread out in an open gesture. He smiled faintly, the gray eyes behind the tortoise rimmed spectacles were hard, unfathomable.

"Don't mistake my motive," said Gearhing abruptly, his voice low pitched, tainted with a foreign accent, "I did not follow you here for trouble. Just to tell you that I am not so ungrateful for a favor you have done for me tonight."

"For you?"

"Indirectly, yes. For me. You know who was that man you beat up so efficiently?"

"Yes."

"What becomes of him, now?"

"That," drawled Jack Badger, wiping his face with the towel in his left hand, "depends on several things. He'll get a little rest in the *cuartel,* anyhow. Perhaps, mister, he'll stand with his back against the wall tuh give some uh the 'dobe soldiers target practice. The last 'un I seen shot had tuh be finished by the sergeant's Luger. These firin' squads ain't always so sober. But how come you say I did you a favor when I whupped a *compadre* of yours? You know and I know that the drunken bum is a friend uh yourn. His name is Art Slocum. Explain what yuh mean when yuh say I done you a favor by takin' him to a cleanin'. And explain it right."

"Later, perhaps, I can explain. Not now. But I will tell you this much, no more. Art Slocum made that drunken play to trap me. He would like to kill me. When he was holding the lady you call Gringito, his eyes watched me. He planned to use her body as a shield while he shot me down when I came to her aid."

"What is Gringito to you, Gearhing?"

"The time has not yet come for me to tell you that. Perhaps you never will know. Be content with the knowledge that what you did has saved your life tonight."

"Lay yore cards on the table, mister."

"No. That is not my way. Only fools tip their hands."

"Then I'm a fool, Gearhing, because I'm just now tippin' mine. I got you covered. You make a move for that gun yuh pack and I'll kill yuh where yuh stand. You and that railroad supe and Art Slocum and Cal Furney and the Wyoming gun toter pulled off a nice deal when yuh robbed the train and killed my dad. But the deal ain't finished, mister. Not till I'm laid away in a pine box and the dirt throwed in on top uh me. I'm gettin' everyone uh you snakes, Gearhing. And I'll git yuh in my own way. And if you

or ary other son tries tuh hurt that Gringito girl, yore finish will come all the quicker. I'm one tuh git you snakes. I'll take all uh yuh in a bunch or I'll take yuh one at a time. But I'll git yuh."

"That's a large contract, my friend."

"Don't call me by the name of friend, yuh snake. Take 'er back and take 'er back fast."

"My mistake."

"Don't never make that mistake again."

"I won't. So you are out for blood, are you? I warn you now, then, to be careful. Perhaps it will be your blood that gets spilled. Had your father listened to reason he would today be alive. But no, he would not listen. So he paid the price of his folly. You are young. Life lies ahead of you. Do not throw away that life, then, for the foolish and childish ideals. Listen to Lon Gearhing and you will soon be rich and happy. I have good use for such a man as you. Before you do anything rash think over what I say."

JACK BADGER wiped his face dry. His eyes were narrowed, puckered to slits of blue fire. His face was drawn, a shade pale. When he spoke his voice shook a little.

"You'd buy me? You damned snake, you'd buy the son of the man you and yore dirty gang murdered? Gearhing, yo're standin' so damned close tuh hell now that yuh'd orter be able tuh smell th' fire an' brimstone. If you was half way game, I'd make yuh fight here an' now. I'm shovin' my gun back in its holster, Gearhing. I'm givin' you a chance tuh go for yore hardware. But I don't think yuh got enough guts tuh fight a man fair."

Jack Badger slid his gun back into its holster. He stood there on widespread legs, glaring at the cold eyed, calculating, keen brained mining man.

"Why don't yuh call me, Gearhing?" he asked coolly.

"Because that is not my way of doing things. Not because I am afraid. I am not afraid of any man. But I do not choose just now to trade shots with you. I have something else in mind. Something much more genteel. I am sorry that you take that attitude. You are a man of courage and also brains. I shall greatly regret the fact that one with so much promise should die so young."

"There'll be no regrets on my part when you stretch rope, mister," gritted Jack Badger. "Git out before I git mad an' shoot yuh like I'd orter."

Lon Gearhing backed toward the washroom door. As he opened it, his bodyguard, the dude wrangling Wyoming stood there, a gun in his hand. There was a crooked smile on Wyoming's mouth and his eyes glittered dangerously.

Jack Badger knew that he faced death. He was covered. If he made a move toward his holstered gun that big, dark complexioned killer would shoot. Crouched a little, every nerve and muscle taut, Jack stood there. Split seconds seemed minutes.

It was now that Lon Gearhing's cold voice cut the tense silence of the place.

"Put up your gun, Wyoming. I didn't tell you to follow me in here. Go back to the table. Always you must play the buffoon, the idiot. Damn you, do what I say!"

Wyoming, his face black with rage, obeyed. Now Gearhing smiled faintly and bowed to the astonished cowboy.

"I forgot to deliver a very important message, Mr. Jack Badger. I was to tell you that the Señorita Gringito desires your company at her table." And with that he closed the door, leaving the astounded Jack Badger alone in the washroom.

III

A MEXICAN swamper had wiped the blood from the dance floor. Again the stringed orchestra played while all manner of women and men danced. Save for perhaps less than a score of persons, the fight between Jack Badger and Art Slocum was forgotten.

Among those who remembered were the Mexican bartender, a few policemen, Gearhing and his bodyguard, and the tourists who would have a yarn of color to take back to their humdrum existence north of Mexico.

But only the Mexican bartender, the policeman and the commandante at the *cuartel* knew of the gold badge he carried in his pocket. And even those few did not know what certain men at Wash-

ington knew. That Jack Badger was one of the smartest, gamest secret service men in the game. Recognized by both governments on either side of the Mexican border, he played his dangerous game alone. His life was in constant danger from at least a hundred desperate border crooks.

Jack Badger knew that when he returned to the cantina from the washroom. He looked toward the isolated table where sat Gringito and her black garbed "mother." At her nod and smile he approached the table. She motioned him to a third chair and held out a slender, beautiful ringless hand. Flawless, that tiny hand.

"I have you to thank," she said simply. "Won't you sit down?"

Jack Badger did not fail to notice that she did not make any attempt to introduce either herself or the hard eyed, black clad woman. The golden haired dancer seemed intensely nervous. It was with no little difficulty that she controlled her pent up emotions. Always her violet-gray eyes shifted covertly toward the table where Lon Gearhing, Wyoming, and their dude guests were laughing and talking over their champagne.

Jack Badger felt oddly out of place, uncomfortable. He covered his feelings with a grin and a few words.

"Sorry I kicked up such a scene. But I couldn't stand back and just do nothing and let that big cuss manhandle yuh thataway."

"It is not the first time he has become insulting," said the girl called Gringito. Jack saw that she was braving the cold eyed, silent warning of the black clad "mother."

"You know him," asked Jack.

"Only from here."

"You don't belong here," said Jack bluntly. "This is one of the toughest joints south of the border. It's owned and run by the worst kind uh men. A man's life or a woman's honor isn't worth the price of a cheap drink of tequila. Why do you work here? Why don't you get out? Get out now, tonight, before it's too late?"

For a moment their eyes met. Again he read that message of fear that seemed to numb her heart.

THE eyes of the black clad woman watched the pair. The girl laughed shortly and lifted her tiny glass of colorless liqueur.

"Here is music and life," she said lightly, that look of tragedy still shadowing her eyes. "One must live. See, already I have ordered your drink. I must drink to you, you who proved himself a true cavalier. To your happiness!"

"Thanks," said Jack Badger, lifting the small glass that held a colorless drink, "Right back at yuh, ma'am. Tuh yore happiness!"

Even as he lifted the glass he saw terror in the violet-gray eyes of the girl. Half way to his lips the glass was knocked suddenly from his hand, spilling its contents, shattering the glass on the floor.

"A thousand pardons, señor," said the Mexican bartender who, on his way somewhere with a tray laden with drinks, had jostled his elbow. "One moment and I shall replace the drink. I hope that the señor weel not theenk I am too clumsy."

"Clumsy enough," frowned Jack Badger, interpreting the quickly flashed message in the Mexican bartender's eyes.

"I shall breeng you another dreenk, señor." He set the laden tray down on an empty table. A few moments and he was back with a fresh drink. It was the same color as the other drink. Only the odor differed. The second drink lacked that faint odor of almonds.

That odor had already warned Jack Badger who had, when he detected it, decided to somehow clumsily spill the contents of the glass that held some strange liqueur. A liqueur spiked with deadly prussic acid.

He looked from the hard eyed woman whose face was a parchment mask, to the girl who was white as chalk. Even her coral hued lips were bloodless. When she reached across the table for her glass Jack noticed that the palm of her hand was bleeding a little where her manicured nails had bitten into the tender flesh.

Now, as Jack lifted his new drink that had only the odor of licorice, his eyes shot a sidelong glance toward the table where Lon Gearhing sat with his party. Gearhing's face was set in a tense, slit-eyed scowl. The girl flinched a little under that scowl, then her head lifted a little

defiantly. A defiance that was half terror.

"To happiness," she said in a low tone. They drank. The black clad "mother" resumed the reading of a book in her broad lap.

Now the orchestra struck up a waltz.

"I'd be mighty proud if you'd dance with me, ma'am."

"It will be a great pleasure, señor."

They had danced but a few steps when the girl whispered in his ear.

"In Heaven's name, leave here! They tried to poison you. I warned the bartender to upset your drink. They have another plot now. They are trying to kill you. Please leave me at the table. Pretend you are ill or something. Already they suspect me of warning you."

"In which case," grinned Jack Badger, "we'll play the game out together. And Lord help the man that tries tuh harm you, lady!"

NO use now to keep up that pretence of tipsiness. Jack Badger had tipped his hand. His enemies were forewarned. Perhaps they knew why he was here. Perhaps Lon Gearhing suspected that the son of the murdered railroad detective had heard, by some rustling of the leaves, that here tonight, at the Cantina Mejicano, the loot from the train robbery was to be divided among the participants.

Jack's information had come by underground channel. A mysterious tip of unknown origin, passed on by the bartender who was a member of the Mexican secret service. That tip had brought Jack Badger here tonight on his dangerous mission. Twice, within an hour, they had made two attempts to kill him. Now this strangely beautiful girl was hinting of another plot.

Who was she? What was her connection with the cold blooded Lon Gearhing? Who was that black clad "mother" with the eye and mouth of a murderess? Now, as they danced, Jack looked closely at the girl in his arms. He made a most startling discovery. Instead of the young girl he had thought her to be, she was a woman somewhere in her thirties. Her blondeness, her slenderness, her perfect pink and white complexion hid her age well. But now, in this moment of almost panic, she looked old, a little haggard. Dark circles showed under her violet-gray eyes. There were hard penciled lines that had been hidden by her make-up. Now Jack asked an abrupt, rather rude question.

"Why are you so scared of Lon Gearhing?"

"That is something that I cannot say. Be content with the warning I gave you. Get out of this place before they kill you. I am afraid that I cannot do more than that to prevent a murder."

They were waltzing slowly in time to the soft music. The lights had been dimmed so that the dancers were like moving shadows. How many enemies Jack had on the dance floor, he could only guess. He had seen Wyoming and a yellow haired, red lipped young blonde leave their table to dance. In this dim light a knife could strike unseen. A swift, sure blow of a sharp pointed steel blade between a man's shoulders. Confusion. The murderer could never be identified.

Someone almost collided with them. Jack and his partner sheered off. He recognized Wyoming and the yellow haired flapper. In the dim light he caught the tense, strained look on Wyoming's face. And he thought he had glimpsed a thin bladed knife in the dude wrangler's right hand. But he could not make entirely certain.

Jack felt the slender form of Gringito shiver a little. She knew, then, how death was supposed to come to him during that moonlight waltz. Jack laughed recklessly as they danced on.

"Your friend Wyoming is kinda clumsy with his pig sticker." Now they were near the table where Lon Gearhing sat with his dude guests. Suddenly the girl Gringito went limp in his arms. She had fainted.

But a few steps to her table. Jack picked her up in his arms and carried her there. The black garbed "mother" gave a short, startled cry.

"What's wrong with her now?"

"Fainted, I reckon, lady. Better not let her dance any more. Git some water. She's sick. Hurry up, can't yuh?"

JACK BADGER spoke sharply, gruffly. The woman obeyed sullenly. Jack, supporting the limp Gringito in her chair, felt her shudder a little. He knew that her eyes were open, that she watched Gear-

hing's table from underneath lowered lids, through thick black lashes.

"Tell the bartender," she spoke to Jack in a whisper, "that Gringito has a message for him. That she sends this message by you. Here, quick, before that black buzzard comes back. Watch Lon Gearhing while you put this paper in your pocket. He is watching us. Pretend you are holding a glass to my mouth. That's it. Here."

A small cylinder of thin paper was thrust into Jack's hand. He had barely time to hide it when the "mother" returned with a tall glass of cold water.

A few moments and the supposedly unconscious Gringito returned to life. As superb a bit of acting as could be expected from a professional. The older woman stood beside the chair, glaring at her with hard, half suspicious eyes.

"I reckon I better be goin'," said Jack, as the music halted and the lights came on again. "Anything I kin git yuh, ma'am?"

"If you'll tell the man at the bar that I would like a sour lemonade, please, with lots of ice in it."

Jack nodded. A moment later he delivered the order for the drink. The bartender accepted the crumpled banknote and rang it up in the cash register. But as he unfolded it, his back to the bar, he palmed the small cylinder of thin paper that carried the message from Gringito.

"Tequila, señor?" he asked Jack as he handed back change for five dollars.

"Tequila, yeah." Now Jack turned to Wyoming who had just swaggered up to the bar.

"Have a drink, mister? Yuh look like a stiff 'un would do yuh some good."

"Whiskey. Double Scotch. And listen, barman, I want the real McCoy. No cut stuff."

The bartender set out glasses and bottles. He fixed the lemonade and ice and sent it away with a waiter.

"So far," said Jack Badger to the dude wrangler, "you and Lon Gearhing has played in bad luck. When you git back to yore table, tell him this: that it takes more than a renegade Russian convict and a petty larceny mail order dude wrangler tuh lick me. While yo're at it, add this much: that if him or you or any other one uh yore dirty gang tries tuh leave this place tonight, they'll be shot when they step out. For every man you got in this place, I got one coverin' him. And when that money gits here that you coyotes are waitin' for, I'm in on the deal. Mister, before I'm done yuh all will hang er be shot. I come here to git yuh. I'm a-goin' to git yuh. But I'll play my game in the open, not sneakin' like you do. Watch yore step, you and Gearhing. Yo're both covered. And when my men shoot, they shoot straight. Drink yore whiskey, mister fancy cowboy, yuh need 'er."

"A RASH move, señor," said the Mexican bartender, when Wyoming, his handsome face a study in fear and hatred, had left the bar. "Now you have laid the cards on the table too much, I am afraid. Already you have played too much een the open. *Dios,* there is but you and me and the few stupid policemen. They are many. You have lay too many cards on the table, I am afraid, señor."

"Bluff," said Jack Badger, "is sometimes the best way tuh play. I tell 'em what I aim tuh do, or anyhow I give 'em a good idea what she's all about. I got them jaspers plenty nervous right now. What word from the *cuartel?*"

"That ees what I want to tell you. Thees Art Slocum, on the way to the *cuartel,* keels the guard and get away."

"The hell he did!"

"The rurales hont heem now!"

"Aw, hell! That ain't so good. They'll monkey around and let him git plumb gone. If he gits away, he'll head off that slick gent that's due here with the money they got for the bullion. Our money. U. S. money and Mexican money paid 'em by the men we had planted. If Cal Furney is goin' tuh be here tonight, he's due mighty soon with that money. But if Art Slocum got away and headed off Furney, then we're licked. Not only that but we'll likely git killed off before mornin'. They've made two-three tries now at me. Say, who is Gringito?"

"She ees wife of the man who calls himself Lon Gearhing."

"Gearhing's wife? Then what is her connection with you? What was that message she sent you?"

"That, señor, ees notheeng to cause you

alarm. The paper you breeng me from Gringito ees a confession that weel, in your country or mine, hang Lon Gearhing. She ees like their prisoner. Once, per'aps, she love that hombre Gearhing. But no longer. She hate heem. But she ees also afraid of heem. Like heem, she ees Russian. The Russian ballet has known her. Even as thees Russia has known Lon Gearhing under many names. When he breeng her here to Mexico like a man breeng a slave, she manages to get the word to Mexican officials about how he ees treat her. How he use her to find out information about gold and dope. So I use her to find out from her that which I let you know about many times. She does not know you represent your government. But still she ees woman enough to tell me that the black buzzard puts prussic acid een the dreenk that waits for you. As if I did not know. She send me thees confession because she ees afraid that tonight they keel her. The lemonade was the signal. The ice she wanted means that there ees planty danger. I am afraid, señor, that tonight ees the last night on earth for her."

"Not while I kin handle a gun," said Jack Badger grimly.

"Nor while I can also assist," came the soft reply from the man behind the bar. "But *madre de Dios,* to me eet looks like we shall perhaps all be dead at sunrise."

JACK BADGER grinned and shook his head. "Look at Gearhing and his killer Wyoming. They look about as comfortable as two flies stuck on a sheet uh flypaper. They don't dare leave, because they don't know how many men I got. They're waitin' for Cal Furney to show up with that money from the bullion sale. They know that Art Slocum got away."

"No. Net yet, señor. But who can say when the news weel trickle out? *Santa Maria,* our Gringito has paid her penalty! Look you toward her table. Her back to the crowd. She faces that black buzzard of a woman who ees an evil spirit straight from hell! See you how our little Gringito sits een her chair. May the *Señor Dios* have mercy on her soul!"

"Yuh mean that she devil killed her?" Jack snapped.

"No. I mean, my friend, that the poor little Gringito has take' her own life. Once, like I tell you, she love that man who call heemself Lon Gearhing. She ees the kind of woman who loves but one time. When that love ees crushed and beaten and cut into slivers, then what more does life hold for her whose heart ees always a lump like lead? Gringito ees dead. Before she ees die she do that favor for you, señor, that per'aps save your life. And before the sun rise, my friend, I promise you that her suffering and torture at the hands of that Russian who call heemself Lon Gearhing weel be revenge. That hombre, I now make you the promise, shall be taken care of een the proper manner."

Now the orchestra struck up a quick tune. The floodlight slid like a white moonbeam across the floor. The cue for the next solo dance for the mysterious Gringito.

But Gringito would never again dance. She sat, a pitiful, gossamer, fairylike thing, slumped in her chair.

IV

THERE in the Cantina Mejicano something of a sinister, deadly tenseness gripped those who knew of the night's forecast of dangers and tragedy. As if by some soundless, mysterious source a warning had come that those dangers were at hand.

Jack Badger, leaning against the bar, watched through narrowed eyes that table where sat the dead dancer and her black clad "mother" of the venomous eyes. That trafficker in poison who acted as guard for the dead girl.

The woman had given some signal to Lon Gearhing who relayed it swiftly to the orchestra. But the orchestra struck up a tango. Their voices proclaimed that desire in no uncertain manner.

"Gringito! Gringito!" they were shouting. "We want Gringito!" And only a few couples were on the dance floor taking advantage of the Mexican tango.

The bartender suddenly whispered in the listening ear of the tall Jack Badger.

"Oviso! In the name of the saints, señor, be on guard. Sometheeng ees goin' to happen pronto! Tonight Cal Furney was supposed to be here weeth that money.

He just now has come een the door."

Jack Badger looked quickly toward the door. There stood a thin, yellow faced man dressed in severe black. His white shirt and black string tie, and the cut of his black coat, gave the man a funereal aspect. His face was long, thin lipped, hawk nosed. His jaw was too long for the rest of his face. His eyes were small, greenish. His thin hair was a rusty gray under the wide brim of a black Stetson. About his middle sagged a heavy cartridge belt and he wore his six-shooter in a tied holster. Slowly Cal Furney, gambler, honkeytonk piano thumper, hophead and all around crook, walked toward the bar. His gimlet eyes missed no face there.

The place was filled with the tipsy shouting of the tourists and Mexicans who wanted Gringito.

The black clad woman left her chair. Gearhing sent a waiter scurrying toward her. Now, as some of the bolder tourists were leaving their chairs to ask the beloved Gringito to dance, even as money began sliding across the floor, the waiter and the black clad duenna carried the dead girl away.

The orchestra leader stepped into the breach. In broken English he attempted to explain that Gringito was indisposed. That she would soon be back.

But that unspoken, that unseen note of sinister danger and tragedy was gripping the crowd. The more sober men were taking their wives or sweethearts or daughters away as quickly as possible. The others stood by their tables in groups. The gaiety of the place seemed to have suddenly gone dead. They spoke in whispers. Something about that limp, huddled figure of Gringito in her chair had frightened them. Now word was whispered that Gringito was dead. Murdered!

Gearhing's face was a study in grimness and baffled hatred. He whispered something to Wyoming who nodded and left the table. The man Wyoming approached the bar where stood the newly arrived Cal Furney. Furney scowled at him with plain dislike. Nor was there any smile of greeting on Wyoming's blanch face.

In passing, Wyoming had shot Jack Badger a quick glance of hatred. The

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latter's face did not change expression. The Mexican bartender timed his movement perfectly to take Cal Furney's order just as Wyoming addressed him.

"The chief wants you, Cal. And he's in a hell of a humor. He's on the warpath."

"So am I, rat!"

"Just what do you mean, 'rat'?"

"You know damned well what I mean. So does Lon Gearhing. The next time he wants me killed, he'd better send out a faster, smarter gent than Mister Art Slocum."

"Art Slocum?"

"The name sounds familiar, rat?" sneered the parchment faced Cal Furney. "Ever heard of the late Art Slocum? When I say late I mean it in every sense of the word. First he was late on the draw. Secondly he was several years late in hell. I had the pleasure of sending him there on a one-way ticket. I have two more such tickets made out that will take care of you and Gearhing. I'll teach such tramps as you to double-cross me. Why don't you go for your popgun, rat? Why don't you make a play before I stand here and call you every damned fighting name that I can lay tongue to. Why don't you play your hand out, Mister Rat Wyoming?"

"Shut up, Cal, you must be full of hop. Art's in the *cuartel*. We're all in a tight spot. Old Badger's son is here and he's playin' it high, wide and handsome. He cleaned three of the chief's Mex tough boys. He beat Art up and had him sloughed in the cooler. And he's asking for more trouble. Art's in the can, I tell yuh!"

"Wrong, rat. You've never been anything but wrong. I was the last man to see Art Slocum. Back along the trail. Before he started on his journey to hell he told me Gearhing had sent him out to bushwhack me. He was croakin' when he said it. Croakin' guys don't lie. So the chief wants to see me, does he? Well, here I am. If he's shortsighted he can leave his dudes and step closer. He'll get both eyes full of Cal Furney. Go back to your master, rat, and tell him that if he wants Cal Furney, he can come for him. But he'd better come shootin'. I've

got a nice little wad of jack in my kick, brother. I'm going to freeze onto that kale. Tell him that Art Slocum is somewhere between Sonora and hell and he ain't comin' back."

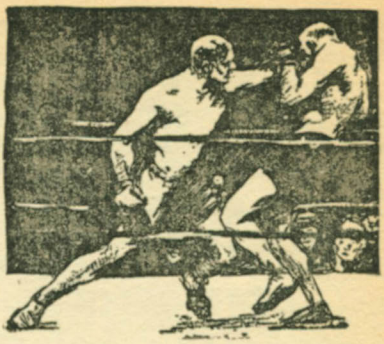
Wyoming backed away, fear stamped on his face. He looked cheap and clownish in his fancy cowboy rigging as he cringed under the hard, beady stare of the black clad Cal Furney whose right hand with its long, nicotine-stained fingers, rested on the gun in its low tied holster.

Even as Wyoming backed away from the bar most of the frightened tourists were leaving the place in a haste that hinted of real panic. They smelled trouble. The evening had held a little too much action even for those who had crossed the border seeking thrills in Mexico. Gearhing's party was also leaving. Lon Gearhing sat alone at his table. His two hands were hidden from sight. His cold eyes watched Wyoming and Cal Furney and Jack Badger. A thin, sneering smile flickered across his mouth, then left it pulled thin.

A WHISPERED warning from the Mexican bartender. Jack Badger nodded slightly. The crowd was thinning now. Most of the tables were empty. The orchestra kept playing but their music was mechanical and their faces were tinged with sadness. That waiter had let them know that their Gringito was dead. That she lay there on her couch in her dressing room, a crumpled, lifeless corpse. The old black clad duenna was now in the *cuartel*. Why? *Quien sabe?* Who knew? Who, indeed, but the Mexican bartender who had quietly, unobtrusively ordered her arrest. She had fought with the strength and ferocity of a tigress and in the end had tried to swallow poison but the husky policeman who had made the arrest had been capable of handling the job. The woman was now locked up in a small, dark cell.

Jack Badger knew that the crisis was fast approaching. Each second, each minute brought it closer. In a low, barely audible voice he spoke to the Mexican bartender whose white coat and apron cloaked one of Mexico's bravest and most intelligent secret service men.

"Handle Cal Furney and the money,



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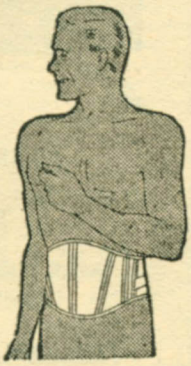

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amigo," whispered Jack. "I'm takin' on Gearhing for the last round. He's my meat. It was his gun that killed my old dad."

"But, my friend," came the soft reply, "it was not Gearhing who used the gon. Of them all, Cal Furney ees the killer."

"Then I'll tackle Furney. Watch the other two, old *compadre."*

"They are watched," came the soft reply.

Cal Furney, sipping a rye highball, eyed the tall cowboy who came slowly toward him. He had seen this cowboy before along the border and he knew him to be the son of the murdered old Bill Badger, railroad detective.

Jack moved toward the outlaw with that cool precision of a man whose muscles and mind coordinate perfectly.

Even as the two faced one another, the Mexican bartender, carrying an empty tray, approached the table where sat Lon Gearhing and Wyoming. The latter was talking excitedly, the other man listening. Behind the pair stood a stolid faced, black eyed Mexican policeman.

"H'are yuh, Furney?" asked Jack Badger when he was within a few feet of the man he wanted.

"Alive," Cal Furney's thin lips shut down on that lone word like a trap.

"That's good, Furney. I wanted tuh see yuh alive. You know who I am. Yuh know what I'm here for. Who killed my dad, Furney?"

"I did. Why not? He wouldn't play marbles with us, so the only thing to do was bump him off. I had a gat I'd won off Gearhing in a stud game. Gearhing was the main gaffer of the outfit. I gets the gun off him so that, if there's a kill, I can throw the weight on him, see? I tell you this now, Badger, because you won't never live to pass on the information to the law. I killed Art Slocum tonight. I come here to croak Gearhing and maybe this Wyoming false alarm. I've got the dough from that job in my sock. I tell you this because in one part of a small little second I'm going to put a bullet where it belongs. And there'll be one more smart dick gone to hell on the—"

Jack Badger's left hand, that had been holding a filled glass of some-

thing, twisted swiftly. The stinging stuff in the glass shot into Cal Furney's beady eyes. Even as the outlaw's gun roared, Jack had dropped to the floor. With a sudden, powerful lurch of his falling body he upset the other. And as Furney jerked the trigger of his gun while the two men rolled on the floor, Jack Badger's six-shooter landed on the head of the man he wanted. He felt Cal Furney go limp in his grip. At the same time he felt a terrific pain in his shoulder.

Without even thinking, acting automatically, he shot at the man who had drilled his shoulder with a .45 slug. Dimly, dazedly, he saw that man drop and recognized his face. The face of Lon Gearhing. It was a face gone mad with terrible rage. Then, even as Gearhing fell in a heap, his two hands clutching at his belly, the mining man's face lost that twisted expression of rage. Death slapped its mask on. Gearhing was dead when he hit the floor.

Badly wounded, the Mexican bartender covered the cowering Wyoming while the stolid faced policeman, one arm hanging limp and bloody, snapped handcuffs on the gringo outlaw.

The commandante from the *cuartel* and a squad of soldiers burst into the Cantina Mejicano. The handful of terrified tourists and Mexican patrons stood in huddled groups, well out of range.

"Handcuff Cal Furney," snapped Jack Badger. "He's wanted for murder. He'll hang when I take him across in the morning." He grinned at the bartender who was swearing fervently at a smashed leg that was bleeding badly.

"How goes it, *compadre?*"

"*Bueño, señor. Dios,* that Gearhing hombre can use the gons fast. Almost, except for you, he keel me." The man sighed.

"And almost, old timer, except that I'm barricaded behind Furney, he'd likewise have killed yours truly. As it was he nicked me some. We got 'em all, *compadre.* And a neat night's work. What we need now is a doctor and a drink of real tequila, now?"

* * *

It was a week later when Jack Badger and his Mexican partner in the man hunt-

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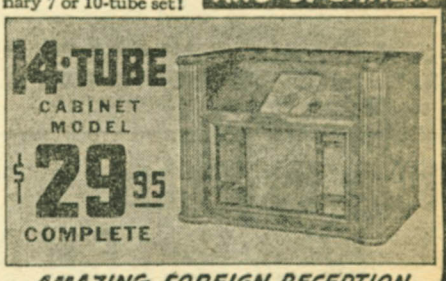

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ing game brought their prisoners across the border. Two men, Wyoming and Cal Furney. That the jury would bring in a verdict that would hang them was a foregone conclusion. The other two prisoners were dead. One was a woman. A woman who, even in death, retained that hard, sinister, cruel look. She wore a black dress. Her lips were seared by the acid she had taken in the *cuartel*. Who or what she was the world would never know. She would find an unmarked grave in the prison cemetery. The same cemetery that would hold the body of the man known only as Lon Gearhing, there where he died.

In the hospital at the border where Jack Badger called to have his shoulder dressed, he met a girl who smiled wistfully at him.

"How goes it, cowboy?"

"Great, Jane. Listen, pardner, get hold of a sky pilot while I turn over my prisoners to the law boys. We'll have just about time to ketch that midnight train for a month's honeymoon. Game, Jane?"

Jane Andrews kissed him impulsively and smiled through tears of happiness.

"Always game, cowboy. Got a license?"

"Do we need one uh them fool things?"

"Other folks do. I'll manage to dig up the sky pilot. You get the license. I'll meet you at the hotel in an hour. But before we forget it, Jack, can't you do something to help John Manning, that poor, driven man who has tried to go straight until those others got hold of him."

"I reckon so, Jane. He was just their hired man. Phone him that it's all right."

"I did. I did already, Jack."

"Mmmm. So that's the kind of a wife yo're goin' to be, is it? Knowed I'd weaken, did yuh?"

"I wouldn't call that weakening, Jack. And listen, cowboy, I know you'll forget it if I don't tell you. A girl likes flowers when she's married."

"So I figgered, Jane. There's some violets on tap at the flower store. The last flowers they have. Me and a Mexican *compadre* uh mine done bought all they had, except them violets, to send down across the line to put on the grave of a little woman. A little woman they called Gringito."

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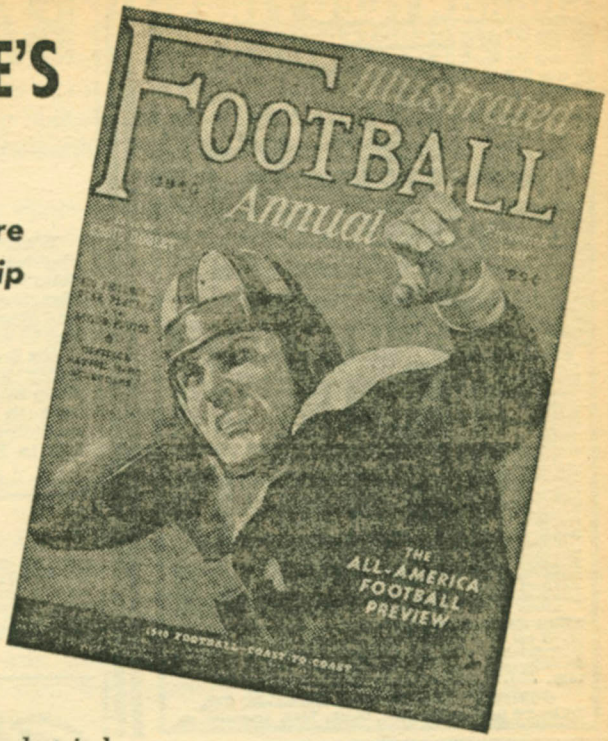

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30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
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33x6.00-21	3.65	1.55
32x6.50-20	3.75	1.75
6.00-16	3.75	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$2.35	$0.95
31x4	2.95	1.25
32x4	2.95	1.25
33x4	2.95	1.25
34x4	3.25	1.35
32x4½	3.35	1.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.45	$1.45
34x4½	3.45	1.45
30x5	3.65	1.65
33x5	3.75	1.75
35x5	3.95	1.75

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

[High Pressure]

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$4.25	$1.95
32x5	3.95	1.75
34x5	4.25	2.25
32x6	7.95	2.95
30x8	9.95	4.45

Size	Tires	Tubes
24x7	$10.95	$4.65
28x7	10.95	4.65
36x8	11.45	4.95
40x8	13.25	4.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.75	$1.65
6.50-20	4.45	1.95
7.00-20	5.95	2.95

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$6.95	$3.75
8.25-20	8.95	4.95
9.00-20	10.95	5.65
9.75-20	13.95	6.45

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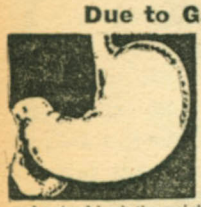

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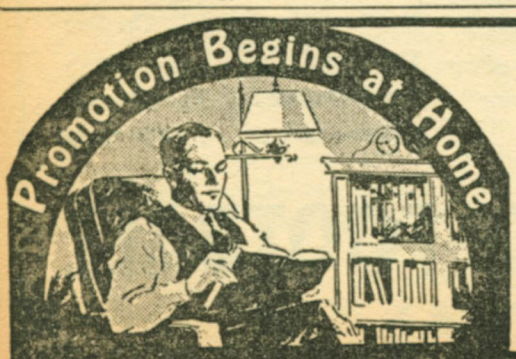

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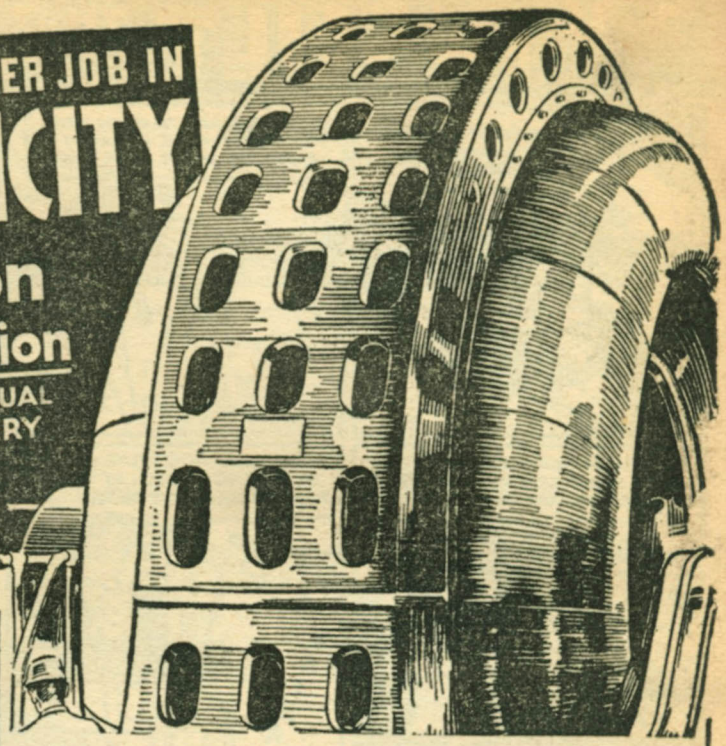

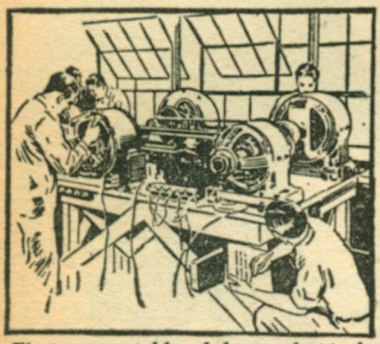

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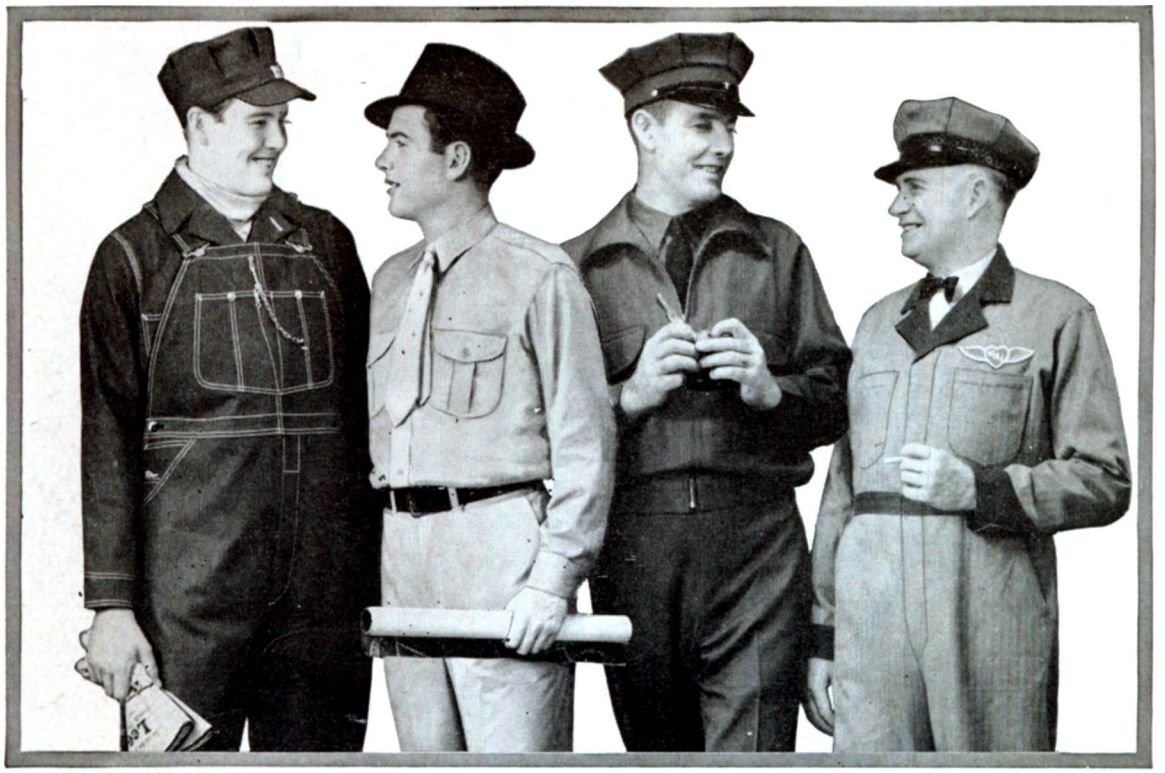

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