



ACTION STORIES

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BROTHERS OF THE GUNSMOKE BRAND

A BLAZING BOOKLENGTH WESTERN NOVEL

by JACK BYRNE

GREEN HELL

A thousand treasure hunters had shed
their bones at Sheba's Jungle Shrine.

A Novelet

by TED ROSCOE

COLT-ANGEL OF RANCHO DIABLO

by WALT COBURN

STEEL-FISH STEW

by

GENE CUNNINGHAM

HIGHLINE LAWMAN

by

JOHN STARR

ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

GEORGE McDONALD

BART CASSIDY



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ACTION STORIES

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

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HOUSE MAGAZINE

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BROTHERS OF THE GUNSMOKE BRAND

A Booklength Western Novel

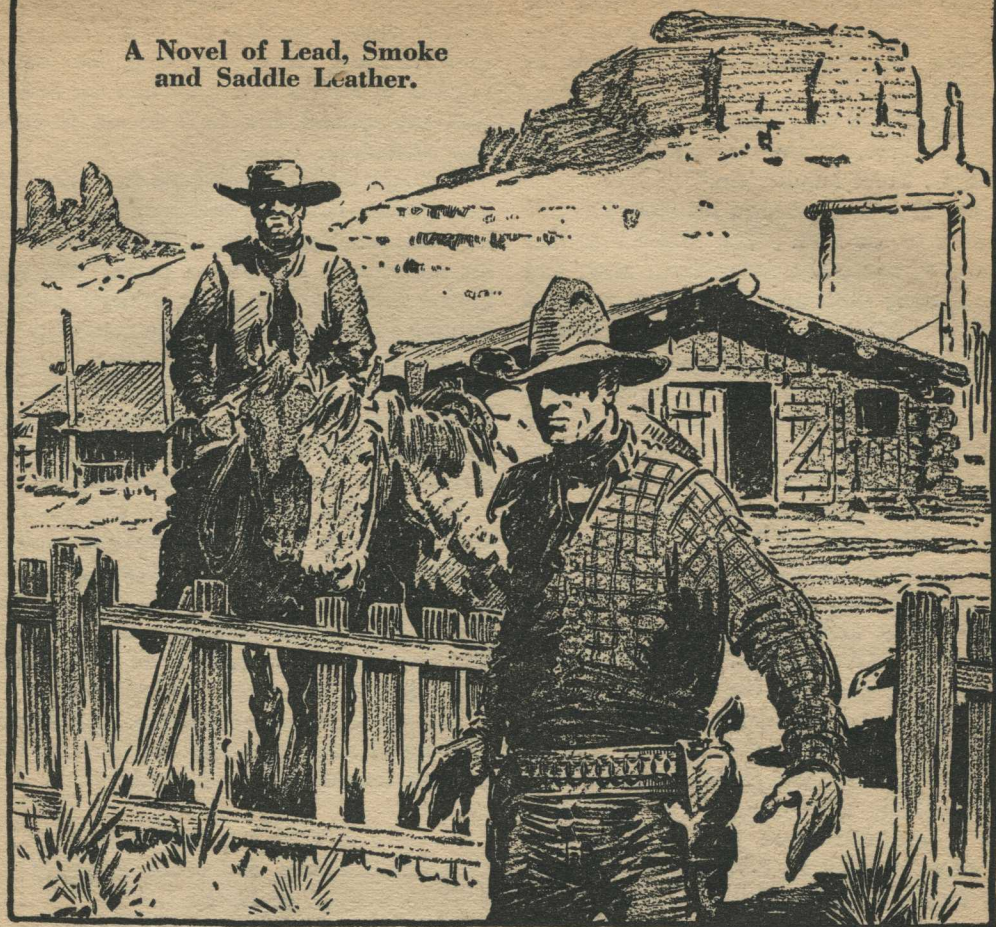


By JACK BYRNE



"Let him come, Blackie!" the woman said. "What harm is it? I wanna see what he looks like."

A Novel of Lead, Smoke
and Saddle Leather.



BROTHERS OF THE GUNSMOKE BRAND

By Jack Byrne

Blood is thicker than water . . . Link Howland galloped a thousand alkali miles to lift his brother's hang-rope—and jail him. And wolf-jawed Mark squared the fraternal debt—with the kiss of a .44!

LINK HOWLAND'S welcome to Canyon City was a six-gun slug that blurted past, scant inches overhead. He heard the three sounds of it almost simultaneously—the cough of explosion, the thin *whee-et* of the bullet, the hollow thump of the slug's impact against the wall of the stage-station behind him.

He was standing beside the Inter-Mountain coach, waiting for his valise to be handed down, and dodged automatically. He made a swift step backward, turning to face the gun-blast source, and his bootheel struck the edge of the board walk. He pawed for balance, found no handholds in the empty air, and was spilled awkwardly back upon his buttocks. His hat flopped beside him.

He sat there, ludicrous, staring toward the street beyond.

He was aware that laughter had erased the startle of alarm from the face of the tall girl who stood nearby. She lifted a gloved hand to cover her lips and her head was swiftly averted. The neat, big-shouldered man in black, his second companion of the stage trip from Fallsburg, had whipped out a snub-nosed revolver—

whether from hip or armpit Link could not say, so smoothly sudden was the draw—but now his gun-hand dropped again to his side.

"Confounded roughnecks!" he exclaimed. "It's all right, ma'am—there's Ben Gaines coming. He'll handle 'em."

Link Howland grabbed his store hat and climbed to his feet. The bullet that had missed so narrowly, he realized now, had been a stray shot, an accident. It resulted from the struggle of the two men who had staggered out from the batwing doors of the State Saloon across the street. They were locked in a furious embrace that had whirled them beyond the porch and into the dust of the highway where they rolled and thrashed like embattled cats.

A stocky man, his bullet head stubbled with bright red hair, came charging from the same saloon. He ran with a bearlike shuffle, long arms swinging, and hurled himself into the mill of the dust-fogged brawl. The gun that the wrestlers fought to possess was jerked from gripping hands, and the stocky man cast it aside in a glinting arc. He bent and grabbed and heaved, and suddenly the struggle was disrupted. The combatants were hauled apart, and the three seemed to bounce erect as one. The two taller men were separated by the grip that the stocky man had fastened in the clothing of each of them.

"That's Ben Gaines," the man in black repeated. "Just watch him!"

Ben Gaines had a deep, hoarse, bellying voice. The rumble of it echoed in the street. "I warned yuh!" he shouted. "I run a decent place, by Heaven, an' I told yuh both I'd have no ruckus started. You, McCusker—"

He released the grip of his right hand, balling it into a fist as he struck. His left hand pulled McCusker forward to meet the blow, and the drive of knuckles into the bearded face had a flat, splatting, beef-thwacked sound. The man fell forward, abruptly toppling, and Ben Gaines stepped nimbly over his sprawled form. That single brain-shocking punch had finished the bearded brawler.

"And you, Jim Bell—"

The second man was backing off, his arms crossed protectively before his face. He would outweigh stocky Ben Gaines by fifty-sixty pounds, Link Howland thought,

but he made no other move to defend himself, to counter the attack. With shoulders hunched and arms shielding he crab-crawled in retreat, and Link had the notion that any second now he'd be apt to turn and skedaddle.

But Ben Gaines moved too fast for that. The ground-covering speed of his stumpy legs was amazing. There was no grace in his movements but he got there. His fist buried itself in Jim Bell's midriff with a driving force that expelled the man's breath in an agonized grunt. As the fending arms instinctively lowered, the stocky saloon-keeper blasted a swinging right that drove Jim Bell backward three staggering, limp-legged paces before he collapsed.

Ben Gaines straightened. He glanced contemptuously from the senseless huddle of Jim Bell's body to the motionless sprawl of McCusker beyond. He rubbed his bloody knuckles on his sleeve, and his sloping shoulders shrugged as he turned his step toward his place of business.

The big sign above the porch, Link Howland noted, hardly seemed to jibe with the owner's temperament. It read:

STATE SALOON

*Light, Cowboy, and Make Yourself
at Home*

THE big man in neat black spoke reassuringly to the girl: "Canyon City doesn't go in for all this kind of excitement as a regular thing. We try to keep things tolerably peaceful here. I'm Arch Whitlow, ma'am, if I can be of any service."

"Thank you. You're very kind." She was standing on tiptoe, a slender figure in expensive gray ruffles, and Link revised his estimate of her age. Her face was younger than it had seemed in the dimness of the coach, and a dang sight prettier, too. She was tall for a girl, and mighty sure of herself, but she wouldn't be much older than twenty or so. Mebbe twenty-two.

"I'm staying with Mrs. Yarnell," she said, "and I thought I saw her yonder with one of the boys. Yes—yes, there she is at the edge of the crowd. Thank you, I'll be quite all right."

She looked at Link, and the corners of her lips were indrawn, withholding the smile. "I really didn't mean to laugh. I just—well, the way you looked there—"

"Why, that's all right, ma'am," he said. He grinned, and his long face lost most of its strong-boned plainness with the crinkle of his eyes and the cheerful relaxing of his mouth. "That bullet come so close it skittered me. I reckon I did cut a comical figger."

The driver pitched down his valise and Link moved along toward the street where a curious crowd was gathering. For a moment he stood indecisively, gazing along the line of buildings north and south, and Whitlow spoke again from close behind.

"Can I steer you somewhere, stranger?"

"Not exactly," Link said. "I'm supposed to meet a friend of mine."

"I could stand a drink on top of that ride," Whitlow said. "You in a hurry?"

"Why, no," Link grinned again. "But let's make it on me. A man ought to stand the drinks, I'd say, for bein' as clumsy as I was back yonder. If it *had* been somebody huntin' my scalp he sure would of caught me settin'."

They laughed together.

"That little banty-legged feller that licked them two—" Link said. "He used to prize-fight, didn't he?"

"Ben Gaines? I couldn't say myself, but that's what they claim. He's from the Gold Coast—'Frisco and thereabouts—and he's dabbled his finger in quite a few things in his time, if I'm any judge."

Whitlow led the way across the street. It was late afternoon but the sun was still bright-hot in the paleness of an empty sky that was a blue bowl of infinity set down upon the mountain ridges. Link could feel the bite of the sunrays on his neck, a crisp, dry heat rather than the late spring swelter to which he was accustomed. To his lowland lungs the air still had a thin taste when he breathed, and occasionally a tickling came into his nose as if he were about to sneeze. Made a man feel queer, but in another day or so he supposed he'd be used to it.

"We givin' the State Saloon our trade?" he asked. "That was quite a show he put on there. I'd like to see that Ben Gaines close up—he ain't within a foot of my height but I'll bet his arms are near as long as mine."

The man in black smiled. He was as tall as Link and maybe four or five years older. Call him thirty-two. There was

the faintest touch of gray in the black sideburns that ran far down his cheeks, and his features were cut too sharp and straight to be called handsome, which Link considered a point in his favor. He had a pair of dark eyes that were keen and watchful and wise.

"I was heading for the Elkhorn," he said. "Ben Gaines and myself don't see exactly eye to eye. Some time ago we agreed to disagree. By the way—I'm Archer Whitlow, County Attorney."

"I heard you speak your name back there," Link said. He put out his hand. "I'm—my name's Dave Harris, and I'm in the travelin' line. I mostly deal in hardware."

Which was partly true, if you looked at things a certain way. Link Howland had certainly traveled a far piece to get from his border stamping-grounds to Canyon City. And he did deal in hardware—though the tools he handled were mainly of Colonel Colt's design. There were plenty of men who claimed that Link Howland, that long, lean, grinning jigaroo, was the fastest hand at slapping holster-hide between the Heavenly Gates and Helldorado—or leastwise, anyway, between the Lone Star borders.

Back in Texas, Link Howland rode with a badge pinned on his shirt, with his six-gun rodding the authority of the law. But that was yesterday. He had come to Canyon City to break a man from jail, to steal a neck from a gallows' noose, and today marked his first long step in his new career as an outlaw.

II

THEY stood elbow to elbow at the long bar in a room that was quiet and shadow-cool. Whitlow lifted his drink.

"Good luck, Mr. Harris."

"Here's lookin' at you," Link replied.

"Is this your first trip into Canyon City?"

"Yep, that's right. First time into this country, in fact. Nice sized town you got here. Looks prosperous, too."

"We've managed to keep on growing from year to year," Whitlow said. "Of course, we're a little off the beaten track, but this section's bound to boom. There's real good grazing in the valleys, and they

haven't even scratched the surface of our mineral possibilities. You're from the south, I'd guess—Texas, maybe?"

"Born there," Link said, "and raised thereabouts."

Whitlow gave him a speculative glance, and again Link was conscious of the unaccustomed garb he wore. The narrow-brimmed, citified hat perched inadequately atop his inch-high ruff of chestnut hair. His dark coat robbed his arms of freedom, and his adam's-apple bobbed against the stiffness of his collar when he spoke. He missed the rattling tinkle of spur that usually accompanied the stride of his soft half-boots.

"You pack all your samples in that one valise?" the attorney asked.

"Not exactly," Link said. "My trunk will be freighted in."

Whitlow spoke to the barkeep: "What was all the ruckus about, over at the State, Sam?"

"About Mark Tarrant, the way I heard it. There'll be plenty more fights about him before he's hung, or else I miss my guess."

Link Howland took the makings from his pocket and centered his attention upon the pour of tobacco flakes. Tarrant was the maiden name of Link Howland's mother. Mark Tarrant—that name was the secret of his presence here.

"Jim Bell was blowin' off his lip," the barkeep continued. "He claimed it was a waste of time and money to bring a self-confessed, cold-blooded killer like Tarrant up for trial. A lynch-rope was Jim's idea, but McCusker held otherwise." He chuckled. "That Ben Gaines sure can hit a lick. They say he busted McCusker's nose flatter'n a flapjack."

Link was aware of the sudden straightening of Whitlow's body, a muscular jerk of alertness, and he turned his head slightly to look at the two men who had entered the place. They stood together just inside the doors, posed in curious watchfulness. Both wore belted guns, and a badge of law glinted on the vest of the older man.

He was lean, sad-eyed, his lined face split by a pointed white mustache, and despite his apparent age there was a cold, harsh assurance he had that was unmishtakable. His grinning companion had the

slight figure and fresh features of a half-grown boy.

"Hidee, Sher'f," the barkeep said.

The answering voice had a metallic rasp. "There's been a heap of loose-jawed talk around this town, Sam, and I'm spreadin' this notice all along the street. If any of yore customers start talkin' lynch law and jail-break, I want that man's name reported to me. Yuh savvy, Sam?"

"I shore do, Sher'f."

The mustached old hellion let his pale eyes rove over the scatter of drinkers. In the back-bar mirror Link Howland saw himself catalogued by that stare, and saw it center fixedly upon the averted head of Arch Whitlow.

"The law has come to stay in Canyon County," said the raspy voice. "Them that don't like the way it reads in the books will find it can talk just as loud another way—"

He slapped the butt of his holstered gun.

Whitlow spoke loudly when the two had gone, lifting his voice for all the room to hear: "Be sure and remember that, Sam. There's no law I ever heard of that says a man is compelled to be a stool-pigeon, but if Sheriff Matt Kelso passes the word, well, maybe that makes it so. You counter Sheriff Matt, Sam, and he's apt to turn his white-rat killer loose."

"Me, I'm a real good Injun," said the barkeep piously. "I try to manage to keep my fingers crossed."

LINK cast a sidelong glance at Whitlow. "Have you and the sheriff agreed to disagree? Or is that how the law works together in this section—like a couple strange pit-dogs?"

"Politics," the attorney said. "Matt Kelso's one generation and I'm another. He believes in shooting first and asking questions later. I like to see things handled in a civilized way."

Link put his glass upon the bar. "Well, I reckon I'll mosey." He grinned at Whitlow. "That is, if you ain't got any more little questions you'd mebbe like to ask?"

Whitlow smiled in return. "I didn't think I was fooling you much. The point is, you'll find the whole town interested in any stranger who happens around these

days. Since that mail-train robbery over beyond the divide we've all had our curiosity sharpened."

Link shook his head. "It's news to me."

"They held up a through special over near Vero Wells a while back. Eighty thousand gold aboard, as well as considerable currency. The trail led over in this direction, and then just faded out. Not a clue to who the robbers might be, though it's been established there were five of 'em."

His eyes met Link's frankly, and his lowered voice held sincerity. "We know that railroad detectives and government officers are working hereabouts, Mr. Harris. I admit I have a selfish purpose in seeking to cooperate with them. If the bandits should be nabbed, and if there's any local credit in the affair, I'd like to see it go to my office rather than have Matt Kelso hog the glory. Do you blame me?"

"Not me, mister. Those little things help out, in case a man might want to run for Congress or governor some day."

"That's how I figure it myself," Whitlow smiled. "Not that I have any such ambitions, of course, but—well, who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

Link put out his hand. "I sure would vote your ticket, mister, if I was ridin' any part of the law. Be seein' you—and the best of luck."

He went out to the street again, squinting into the sun for the sign of the Mountain House, the hotel where George Parry would be waiting. Canyon City nestled on a valley floor that was roughly triangular in shape, and he had marked the sprawl of it as the stagecoach descended the rimrock trail. The scatter of habitations ran from the trickle of river along the foothills east to the beginnings of the southward sierra notch. The chief activities of the town, however, seemed confined to the length of State Street. Here were stores, saloons, the imposing front of a two-story bank. Farther down he saw the tree-bordered square of the court house, the white spire of a church.

He went slowly along the walk, swinging his valise. He had covered no more than a few hundred feet when a gruff voice hailed:

"You, there, stranger! Step over here!"

Link halted, turning. The sign on the front of the narrow building read *Feed & Grain*, but it was the lean figure of Sheriff Matt Kelso that came down the steps there. He stood on the walk, jerked his head in command.

"Just step inside."

"You lost your dog, Sheriff?" Link asked mildly. "Is that what you're callin' to?"

"I don't want no fancy palaver," Kelso rasped. "It's you I mean, mister."

In the dimness of the doorway beyond Link glimpsed the slight form of the sheriff's boy-faced companion. The deputy leaned against the jamb now, and his fingers rested on the bone-handled butt of his holster-gun. He was grinning, squinting into the sun.

"I see you got the advantage of me," Link said. "I guess that means we better have it your way."

HIS anger was a furious boiling inside him. He could feel the rise of the hackle-hairs at his neck, and his teeth were clenched so hard that an ache came into his bulging jaw-muscles. By some miracle of control, however, he kept his wrath in restraint. Cap'n Spurlock of the Rangers used to say that when Link's dander was up he'd spit in the devil's eye, and many a time he'd been told that his hair-trigger temper would get him killed some day.

But not today. He got a good hold on himself and he gripped it tight. The importance of his mission here was a bigger thing than a pair of badge-proud lawmen. He even kept his voice soft and slow:

"Happy to accommodate you, gents. Anything you say."

He went into the long room that was stacked with bags and boxes. He let the valise slide from his hand, shrugging, and faced the queer duo of Canyon City's law.

"We got a gun-totin' ordinance here in town, stranger," Kelso said harshly. "You armed?"

Link shook his head. "I'm about the only man in town who ain't, though," he said, "from what I could see."

"Shuck him, Smiley," the sheriff snapped.

The deputy stepped forward, and Link's estimate of the man was instantly revised.

Smiley was no fresh-featured boy—not hardly. It was his flaxen paleness of brows and lashes, the tight-stretched rubber of his skin, that made him seem so. That grin of his, lips parted and teeth slightly bared, was an expression of habit rather than mirth. If there ever was a killer-weasel in human form, Link thought, then little Mr. Smiley was the man.

His hands felt over Link's clothes professionally. "Clean," he muttered.

"Take a look in his satchel."

Smiley squatted and rummaged. "Just shirts and stuff, Matt. Nothin' here."

Kelso glared up at Link from beneath the frostiness of heavy brows. "Just who are you, mister, and what's yore business here?"

"That's what I just explained to Mr. Whitlow," Link told him.

"And what's yore dealin's with *him*?" the sheriff grated. "I'm sick an' tired, by Heaven, of all this damn' slickness—"

"Easy, Matt!" said the deputy. His voice had a dead quality, an almost tonelessness. "I'd say we drew another deuce." He looked at Link with eyes that were pale blue circles on bulges of fishbelly white. "Just a long, lean, aimless drink of water, you're askin' me. I doubt he knows the time of day."

Link returned the stare thoughtfully.

"Well, dammit, I—" Kelso's face pinched up in exasperation, and he mumbled out a string of oaths. He waved his arm. "All right, dammit, let 'im go. Go on, stranger, git on your way!"

"Many thanks, gents," Link said. He pushed a shirt down in the valise, snapped the catch of it. He straightened, moving toward the door. At the top step, however, he hesitated and his face turned toward them. His expression was mild enough, but the glint in his eyes matched the determined jut of his long jaw.

"By the way, Sheriff," he said, "where does a man go to pick up a good gun around here?"

III

THE clerk at the Mountain House said that George Parry had checked out. He also said, being a gossip and knowing little man, that Mr. Parry had been living in a rented house out toward the north

of town for the past ten days or so, and that if Link didn't find him at the court house he'd likely come across him at the Stud Horse Bar.

Link found him at the court house, sitting at a table in a narrow room that had *Records & Assessments* marked on the door. He looked up blankly at Link, staring at him for an instant without recognition.

George Parry was a fat and ruddy man, his bald spot fringed with gray. When Link Howland was a youngster, a harum-scarum orphan kid, George Parry had found a job for him and given him a chance to grow up decent. Link owed a lot to Mr. George, and he hadn't forgotten it, despite the fact that their trails hadn't crossed much in the last five or six years.

Parry's business was mining properties, and he traveled the country north and south in pursuit of it. Which explained his presence here in Canyon City, and how he had come to find out about Mark. Link had received the word from him two weeks back, and had come on as fast as he could. He gripped the older man's hand now, and they eyed each other, briefly smiling.

"Let's step out in the hall," George Parry said. "We can't talk here."

In the hallway he gripped Link's arm, turning him. "I hardly knew you, boy. What's the matter? What in the world's been wrong?"

Link grinned faintly. "Mostly typhoid," he said. He removed his hat to show the stubble that had grown out since they shaved his head. "I was just gettin' over it, George, when I got your word. I'm all right now, the sawbones says, except I lost some weight and I'm still all paled up. Cap'n Spurlock claimed I wouldn't be no real use to him for a month or so, nohow, so he gave me leave. I got here as quick as I could jump."

"I swear I'd hardly know you, Link," George Parry marvelled.

"That's all the better, ain't it, George," Link said softly. "I'm usin' the name of Harris—Dave Harris." He cleared his throat. "It will sound a heap better, I reckon, than Ranger-Sergeant Lincoln Howland in the dirty kind of business it looks to be up here."

George Parry shook his head. "It sure is bad, boy. But I figured you ought to know."

"Hell, yes. He's my brother, no matter what—the only blood-kin I got. I'd never have another good night's rest as long as I live, George, unless I did what I could." He looked at the fat man with hope in his eyes. "There couldn't be no mistake, could there? You're absolutely sure it's him?"

"He's changed his name to Tarrant, and he wears a mustache now, but he's Mark Howland sure enough. I had a look at him the day the inquest was held, and Mark's face is one that I ain't apt to forget. He had that same fancy smirk on him, damn his worthless hide!"

Mark Howland had married George's daughter, years back, and George always maintained she died of the bad treatment Mark gave her. Looking back on it, Link had never been able to judge how right or wrong George might be. He'd been just a kid at the time, and kids never formed opinions of things like that. But he did know that Mark really went plumb brone right after Jennie died. Drinking, gambling, mixing into rustler-deals—

"Been ten years since I seen him," he said. "Who was it he killed?"

"Man named Cole Bixby—called Bix," George said. "Quiet fellow with a real handsome wife. He owned this Muleshoe Ranch, southwards from town, with Mark kind of ramroddin' the spread. Mark admits he shot him. He says they were drinkin' together, and a rumpus came up, and—well, self-defense. But the trouble is—"

"Go on," Link urged. "But what trouble?"

"Well, I guess you know how mean Mark can be with the brave-maker in 'im. The trouble is, the doctor that examined this Bix says he was shot twice, and that it was the bullet in the back that killed 'im."

Link blinked hard and drew his face into a wry ugliness. "That's why the town's full of lynch-talk, huh? What does Mark have to say to that?"

"He won't say a thing," George Parry rumbled. "The sheriff—the County Attorney—they can't get a word from him, yes or no. He's got himself some shyster

lawyer down town and they're both keepin' mum. I tell you, Link, it looks awful bad. The way I feel now, I wish I'd kept my long nose out of it. I never should have tolled you into this mess."

"He's my brother, ain't he?" Link said. His eyes were narrowed and his face graven in harsh lines. "I left my law-badge behind, George—maybe for good, I dunno. If Mark's innocent, I'm here to see he gets a square deal. If he's guilty—well, hell or high water, George, he's still my brother."

The fat man nodded. "Judge Parker sits in circuit court right here this comin' week. That's when they'll hold the trial."

"Then we still got three-four days," Link said. "That is to say, I got that much time. I know how you feel about Mark. Look, is there any way I could see him—talk to him—sort of on the sly?"

"By happenstance," George said, "the jailer is a friend of mine. That is, we've done some drinkin' together a time or so at the Stud Hoss Bar. We can button-hole 'im, anyway, and give 'er a try."

THE county calaboose was on the upper floor of the same building, and the jailer's office was a bare-walled cranny no more than twice the size of a loading pen. There was considerable around-the-bush talk before the buck-toothed jailer shifted his chaw from one cheek to the other and gave an unwilling nod.

"Matt Kelso wouldn't like it," he said, "but since you fellers are such old friends of Tarrant's—" He twitched his nose, sniffing, and moved a dog-eared book so that it covered the folded bank note which Link had placed casually on the battered table. "Nobody's usually around this time of day. I'll allow you five minutes."

"That's mighty decent of you, Lem."

"I'm glad to oblige, George. You fellers ain't armed, huh? Well, then, come on." He selected a key from a jangling ring at his belt and unlocked the heavily barred grille at the rear of his cubby-hole. "I'll have to come along, of course. That's orders."

The prisoner's section was a large, dingy enclosure that occupied a rear corner of the court house building. They entered a cleared space which fronted an ell of iron-barred cages along the exterior

walls. The prisoners were three in number.

A big-bodied man, chocolate-skinned, sat on one of the wall bunks with chin in hands. "Cava'ry deserter," said Lem, the jailer. "Carved a gambler up an' took a run fer it. We're holdin' 'im fer deliv'ry to Fort Logan."

"How soon we eat, man?" the negro muttered. "Ah tell yuh, Ah'm ha'f-stahved."

At the opposite end of the same long section a figure was huddled on a bunk. "Common drunk," said Lem, grinning. "He taken a punch at Matt Kelso, which shows what a fool a man can be."

The prisoner grunted, flopped, lifted a face which proved what a futile pastime it was to tangle with the high sheriff. His eyes were blackened, lips puffed, the gash of a wound ran down his cheek. He looked at them bleakly, then sank back to face the wall.

The third prisoner—

Link recognized him instantly, despite the stuffy dimness and the changes that the years had stamped upon his face. They had caged Mark Howland in the smaller cell that formed an angle with the other, and he had turned from the barred window above his bunk to face them as they entered. He had Link's height—all the Howland men were tall—but time had developed a beefiness of flesh and muscle on him that made Link seem bean-pole thin in comparison. Mark still wore his brown hair long, and his lip had sprouted a trim mustache. At thirty-six he was still a fine-looking man.

All this Link saw in an instant, and in the same instant he knew that Mark had recognized him. Mark's face stiffened, his brows drew down, and he stepped backward. He sat on the bunk, a big hand lifted to his chin, so that the shadow of the cell wall hid his features in faint obscurity.

"Friends of yores, Tarrant," the jailer said. "I given 'em five minnits as a special favor."

"Friends, hell!" Mark said harshly. "What rannikiboo you cooked up now? I never saw this pair before!"

Link pressed his lips together. So that was the way Mark wanted to play 'er, huh? Mark had always been a deep one.

Trying to figger him out was about as easy as guessing which way a horny toad might jump.

Anger mottled George Parry's face. He thrust himself closer to the bars. "I'd as soon do a good turn for a sidewinder," he said. "Mebbe you never had a wife, huh? Mebbe you never borrowed money from me?"

"Never set eyes on you, Fat Face," Mark said steadily. "Now git outa here—go peddle your tinware, see?"

"Easy, George." Link took the older man's arm. "If he don't want to talk, why it's no skin off our ears."

Parry shook his head, jerked around, then motioned to the jailer. "Look here a minnit, Lem. Let's you and me step over aside. Here's what I want to say—"

LINK took quick advantage of the diversion. He pushed his face against the bars and made his voice a whisper. "Mark—dammit, man, I come here special to help you out. Who shall I see? What can I do?"

Mark came to his feet, stepping forward. His face was grim, dour, and he grated out an oath. "You can git long gone from here," he muttered. "Did I send for you? Did I ask your help? I got my own friends to side me. You git the hell back to wherever you call your home, and keep your nose from my affairs. I know what I'm doin'. I'll handle this."

"But lissen, you fool—"

"You hark to me! You tuck your tail between your legs and hop back where you can hide behind your damned tin Ranger badge. This is man's country, and boys that meddle in git their ears trimmed short. I'll be outa here in a damn few days, and if I find you hangin' around I'll break your skinny damned neck myself, you hear me?"

Link swallowed hard and his fists were clenched so tight that his knuckles tingled. "You could of done it once," he said, "but I'd hate mighty bad to see you try now."

He went across to the others. "Come on, George. I see now we made a mistake. A man goes huntin' wolf and a polecat pops out of the brush."

He turned one fleeting backward glance, and had the impression that the man in

the nearby cell, the battered-face drunk, had ducked his head quickly. Mark's back was turned, a big-shouldered silhouette against the bar-cleft window.

Link did not speak to George Parry until they stood in the court house square, beneath the sundown shadow of a spreading oak. From childhood days Mark Howland had a talent for stirring his brother's temper. He knew the little mean ways of prodding Link into a tantrum, as now.

"He always had a nasty mouth," Link said.

"What do you make of it, boy?" George Parry asked. "I swear I never heard of such a thing!"

"There's two ways you can look at it," Link said thoughtfully. "You could say he was bein' proud and noble—he's in a bad mess with no way out, and he aims to carry the load alone. He turned a sharp tongue to us so that we wouldn't mix in, drivin' us off for our own advantage. You might figger it that way. On the other hand, George, I had the feelin'—well, I can't exactly name it. It was almost like Mark was scared of us, that he meant that talk about bustin' necks. I—I just don't know."

Parry eyed him sharply. "What you gonna do?"

Link wagged his head. "I never come all this way up here just to visit a spell and then turn tail and ride. I reckon I'll have to see what's to be done. That's hardly any jail at all they got there, George. You could bust a man out in a doggone few minnits."

"Yeah," said Parry. "Or a mob could bust *into* it."

A team of matched bays hauled a surrey past them. The tall and pretty girl, Link's companion of the Fallsburg stage, sat in the rear seat beside a bearded man.

"There he is, Link," George Parry said quickly. "I heard he'd come to town a few days ahead of time. That's Judge Joel Parker, boy—the Hangin' Judge, they call him. I guess that's his daughter he's been expectin'."

Link narrowed his eyes, shrugging. Life's a funny business sometimes, he thought. The same stage that had brought Mark Howland's brother to town had likewise carried the attorney who would

prosecute Mark for murder, and the daughter of the judge who most likely would sentence him to dance a jig on the gallows-tree.

That was to say, unless something happened quick and previous.

IV

THEY had a bite to eat and then walked out slowly toward George Parry's place. By now dusk had faded into evening with a sharp coolness that Link felt through his clothes. The stars had a chill glitter in a sky that seemed higher, more remote, than any other Link had seen.

Neither of them had much to say. It was coming time, Link felt, for doing rather than saying. But what *could* he do? Where could he start?

They came to the house, a two-room shack with a slattern porch. The fat mining man pointed along the straggly, weed-sided thoroughfare. Opposite was a large, sag-roofed structure, once a storehouse shed, perhaps, but now tipsy with abandonment. Light gleamed faintly at the windows of other scattered habitations.

"This is nicknamed Easy Street," George said. "It ain't so bad, though. I hire it cheap, and it's handy to town. I never been what you'd call choosy."

The porch creaked beneath his weight. He was reaching for the latch of the door when he drew back with a mutter. "That's funny," he said. "I'd swear I closed up good and tight."

"George—" Link called sharply. "Step back!"

His hand felt automatically for the thigh-holstered gun that wasn't there. His nostrils sniffed a pungence from within, the odor of fresh-burned tobacco.

A chair grated on the floor and a chuckle of laughter came from the dark interior. "They told me this here was the place," a deep voice said. "Don't shoot, boys! It's only me and my private tribe of Piute Injuns."

Link's breath expelled in a gasp. "Lord's sake!" he breathed. "Jick-Jack O'Bannon!"

"That's me, Sarge!" the voice rumbled. "Present an' accounted for—reportin' for duty." Out of the doorway blackness

came a huge dark shape, bellowing laughter, that reached for Link with bear-hug arms extended.

Link hit him a good hard poke in the stiff-muscled belly. "It's all right, George," he called. "He's just a half-brained friend of mine."

When the first friendly roughhouse was over, and George Parry was able to light the lamp inside, Jick-Jack O'Bannon sat on the stoutest chair in the room and grinned at them. "I missed you mighty close in a couple places, Link," he said. "I'd caught you in Fallsburg if you'd held up another half hour."

He was big. His height was well beyond six feet, but all his proportions were so well made that there was no gigantic look about him. He was twenty-four years of age—though he'd long pretended to be much older—and his broad Celtic face had never weathered brown, despite the border suns. There were few times Link could remember, in three years of campaigning with this big, friendly puppy-man, when Jick-Jack's bright blue eyes had lost their gleam of merriment.

Link shook his head now, looking at him. "Will you tell a man what in the devil you're doin' up here?"

"You didn't even wait to say so-long," O'Bannon said. "You left so fast, Sarge, you plumb fo'got your pistols. I reckoned you might need 'em, so I put 'em in my bedroll there."

Their eyes clashed and the grin was wiped from O'Bannon's face. His tongue licked the corner of his mouth and he shifted in his chair.

"Another thing," he went on, "Cap'n Spurlock said what use was I to him without a pardner to puzzle things out and to take my orders from. He also said you might be steppin' into a tight where two heads would be better'n one." He corrected that. "I mean, he said that four fists might be handier than two."

"You already had your leave," Link said sharply. "You fat-head fool, did you resign?"

"Well, I can sign on again. The Cap'n said as much."

"But damn it, Jick, you must of had some idea what kind of mess I was mixin' into. This is ugly business here, and it could mean jail or the hang-rope if some

little shennannigan should go wrong."

"So I understood," Jick said gravely. "That's why I thought, Link, you might need a hand you could trust here. That's why I dealt myself in."

THERE was a lump the size of his fist that choked Link's throat. He had a saltiness in his mouth, and a moisture stung the corners of his eyes, like tears. Yes, and it was tears. He felt the wet trickle upon his cheeks, and he was not ashamed to wipe it away.

Link Howland, the fast gun. Link Howland, with dead men written in red upon his record. He was counted as tough as most, yet he let the tears come unashamed with others watching.

This thing that Jick-Jack O'Bannon had done hit him with a flood of emotion he could not master. There had been little tenderness in his life before and the taste of it now was a bitter-sweet that called up a hundred things long forgotten. For an instant he held his mother's hand again, and he saw her standing on the steps, shading her eyes against the sun. That had been long ago. He was five then. It was the day the men came carrying the dead burden of his father from the corals.

He swallowed, and he opened his eyes again. George Parry and Jick were staring down at the floor.

It was one thing for Link Howland to make the journey here and face whatever risks might come. Mark was his brother, and there were certain loyalties that no man could shirk and still keep his self respect. That Jick O'Bannon should travel the same long trail, however—that he should toss aside the career he loved, and choose to cover his grin with an outlaw mask for friendship's sake.

"You big dumb ox you—" Link's voice choked.

He put his hand into the grip of Jick's great fist, and they looked at each other silently, and that was that. It was something that might never be spoken between them, but neither would it be forgotten. There are bonds men share which are forged of a reality too deep and subtle for expression.

Link sat down and rolled a cigarette, and in a little while the talk was flowing

free and easy again among the three. Link explained what little he could about Mark Howland's plight. He ended with a shrug.

Jick rubbed his hands together. "What's the next move? Where do we go from here?"

"That's what I don't know, boy." Link's forehead furrowed in a frown. "Mark's made it mighty hard, you see. If he ain't guilty, why, that's one thing. If it's the other way, well, all I thought was to set him free. I don't know why, but I figger I owe Mark that much, to give him a good start on a getaway. That needs some schemin' out. It calls for horses and trails and hide-outs—but how can I start to tally all that until I know?"

"One thing we *can* do," George Parry said, "is keep a finger on things in town. Mark's crowd from the Muleshoe is in and out, and we might get some ideas with the three of us sashayin' around."

Link nodded. "Anyway, it's a start." He saw O'Bannon grinning at him, and he reached up a finger to rip the stiff collar loose. "I did have some idea," he admitted, "of hidin' myself in this kind of get-out. But who'd know Link Howland in this country? No sir, to hell with it! I'm puttin' on a man's hat and a human shirt."

An old black hat of George Parry's made a fairish fit, and Link began to whistle as he stood before a cracked mirror and knotted the scarf at his throat. He looked better, felt better. Jick O'Bannon's coming here was a new strength in his bones.

"How you feelin' these days, Link?" Jick asked. "That was another reason I had to come—you bein' a half-sick man."

Link grinned. His fever-sapped strength was returning slowly, but every day pumped a little more of the old-time vigor into his blood. He had deliberately left his guns behind—part of his vague scheme of disguise—but as he buckled on his gun-belt now the slap of weight against his thigh was a fresh assurance. He laid his extra Colt's upon the table, and posed himself with feet slightly spread. He sucked in a steady breath.

His right hand moved. There was no flurry of gesture, no sudden twitch, but rather an effortless, practiced glide of mo-

tion that lifted the gun-butt from holster and leveled the barrel in the same arc of speed.

"You might be just a shade off," said Jick, "but it's only a mighty *little* shade."

"Ready?" George Parry asked. He blew out the lamp.

Link held the open door. "One thing, George, to watch out for with Jick—don't never lend him one red penny if he's in a gamblin' house. He fancies himself a card-sharp, and he makes up systems for roulette. But he always loses, any game he plays. He's a bearcat for setback, which is where he got his name."

George Parry laughed. It was the next to the last sound that the fat mining man would ever utter.

Link came to the edge of the narrow porch. The smell of the night had a cool, crisp tang, and again he marveled at the stars that seemed to hang suspended in space. The moon was newly risen, diffusing the blue dark with a hazy luminance. In the instant that he paused there, Death spanged at him from the semi-gloom.

For the second time that day, the breath of a bullet fanned his cheek. He saw the rifle-flash in the instant of its whang-slap sound, and his gun was in his fingers as he threw himself sidewise, shooting at the blurt of explosion while its echoes still rang.

He heard George Parry grunt behind him, a prolonged, inhuman gurgle, and the porch shuddered with the sodden thump of the fat man's collapse. Jick gave forth a bellow and lurched toward the shadow-shape of the sagging warehouse across the road. It was from a corner there that the bushwhack bullet had come.

"George—!" Link Howland cried.

He reached for him, crawling on his knees, speaking the shrill name again. His hand felt the stickiness of blood, and then he could see the ugly gush of the bullet-hole in George Parry's forehead.

V

FOR a space there, for a duration of throaty breaths, all Link Howland's border training was forgotten. In that thought-numbing interval the cold-brained

soldier of the law did not exist. He had no conscious thought. There was no decision in him. All he knew was the bump of his heart and the blind panic that gripped his windpipe.

The swift emotional impacts of the day had bludgeoned with cumulative force. His interviews with Mark—Jick-Jack's arrival—and now to top his frustrations and perplexities, his hopes and fears, came death's thunderbolt from nothingness to blast George Parry down.

Dull sound hammered at his mind's vagueness—the bellow of Jick's voice, the crash of his six-shooter, and the lesser noises of slamming doors and questioning voices along the straggly road. His head lifted with a jerk, and strength flowed in his body again.

He was up. He ran with a long-legged stride and the butt of the Colt's was warm in his fist.

George Parry was dead. Killed from ambush, murdered, and the murderer was still skulking free. There was no service he could render George back yonder, no sorrow now would cushion the bloody head. His duty to George lay beyond in the luminous night where the killer fled. Such was his logic. So read the practical code of the fighting man.

He scissored humpy ground, plowing knee-high brush toward the thrash of Jick's pursuit. He panted a yell of encouragement, and was unaware of what distance he ran.

Jick halted him, a towering scarecrow of darkness with arms outflung. He had stopped near a wagon yard, with the lights at the head of State Street glowing not far distant.

"Lost 'im—" he breathed. "He run like a rabbit. Mebbe I nicked 'im—hell of a shot."

"Could you recognize him, Jick?"

"I never got close enough. He had the start on me—medium sized, I'd say—dressed dark, and he run humped over. Funny way of runnin', Link but he cut 'er pretty swift. He plumb disappeared somewheres among the buildin's here."

They eyed each other. Jick wiped sweat from his broad face and holstered his hogleg.

"Caught George in the head," Link said dully, answering the unspoken question.

He snapped his fingers. "I reckon he died as quick as that."

"What's the move, Sarge?"

Link's voice had a burred edge: "I can't say exactly, but the direction's straight ahead there." He nodded toward State Street. "George Parry was a real good friend to me."

"But who'd want to kill 'im, Link?"

"That's the puzzle," Link said. "I was the clearest target there, and that slug fanned past me right close. I'd say George was downed by mistake, which narrows the ground. The one thing out of the way that I've done since I came to town is to talk with Mark. Who'd want to kill me on that account? Who'd even know about it?"

He counted on his fingers. "The jailer's harmless—not him. But that fox-faced sheriff might have wormed it out, and him and his deputy are hatchin' some devilment under their hats. Otherwise than that—"

He shook his head, but in his mind were further thoughts unspoken. He remembered the prisoner with the battered face—could sharp ears have overheard the words he passed with his brother? And he also considered Mark Howland himself. Between Mark and George Parry was a deep-seated grudge, a long enmity. Mark had boasted of his friends outside and had threatened broken necks for meddlers.

Suppose that Mark had passed the word!

"We'll take a little pasear," he said. "We're in a tight, boy. The odds are long and our chances damn' skinny, but mebbe it's time that our luck started runnin' the other way."

His words were prophetic. Minutes away, in the gloom of a narrow alley, a turn of fortune lay in wait. Luck, fate, circumstance—but whether it tended toward good or ill, to triumph or disaster, was a judgment that only the infinite stars might resolve.

THEY had walked the north side of State Street, peering in at restaurants, the barber shop, the somnolent hotels. It was shortly past nine o'clock. They had marched the length of gambling houses and saloons, trailing single file

and watchful for expression on the faces that turned to stare at them. Many a time they had paraded so, and for similar purpose, in the days when twin badges of the law adorned their vests. They were an eye-filling pair, and questioning whispers followed the track of their progress.

They crossed at the head of the street, and Link's shrug totaled the sum of their gleanings—nothing.

"I was just thinkin'," he said. "If somethin' happens—if the next bullet shouldn't miss me, let's say—I want it understood you don't owe a thing to Mark Howland. He's no concern of yours, not even a little, Jick."

"What kinda talk is that?" O'Bannon growled.

"I mean it," Link insisted. "If such a happenstance comes about, I want your promise to light a shuck away from here."

The big man frowned, but he nodded gravely. "Anythin' you say, Sarge."

They passed darkened store fronts, pacing slowly. Here and there along the walk other pedestrians moved. At various hitch-racks saddled horses were bunched, and occasionally they heard a tinkle of music, a shrill of laughter. They had reached the corner of a harness shop when the crucial incident occurred.

From the mouth of the dim alley that sided it the figure of a man came stepping forth in the moment of their approach. The jerk of his body at sight of them was betrayal. They glimpsed a pallid oblong of face, an upflung hand. He turned from them, scuttling.

Jick leaped forward with a roar. "That's him—that's how he run!"

He pawed out his gun, slammed a wild shot, plunged in down the narrow passage. Jick-Jack O'Bannon's fist was more adept at buffets than in marksmanship, and the eagerness of his charge was a handicap to Link, blocking any shot he might have made.

Link pelted after them, gaining on Jick with each stride. The alley was short and the chase twisted right at the end of it. Here was a clutter of trash, a jumble of tins and boxes in the shadow overhang from the rear of the buildings. Link glimpsed the hunched fugi-

tive ahead as he sprinted at O'Bannon's shoulder. He was cocking his wrist to shoot when Jick's lumbering hip bumped him from stride. He lurched ahead, his gun-muzzle probing for some flick of movement from the gloom.

"There's where he went," Jick gasped at his side. "That fence ahead blocked 'im off. He's somewheres there—he couldn't git away!"

"Cover me," Link ordered. "I'm goin' in."

They were at the blank rear of a wide building, a saloon by token of the kegs piled near the fence. Link's eyes were keyed to the darkness now, and he tracked among the shadows warily, pistol ready. In his mind was no thought of the danger that might lurk, the death that might spout from any black nook here. He was the trained man-hunter, his instincts tuned to sharpest pitch, a creature nerved with metal and veined with ice.

He found no quarry crouching there.

He signaled to Jick. His hand gestured to the oblong of an open door, and in the quiet they heard the rumble of voices from beyond. The doorway led to a dim storage room that held broken tables and shelved supplies and nothing more. They went to the inner portal that blocked off the light and noise. Link put his hand on the knob.

"Holster your gun," he said. "Easy is the way we play 'er. If I'm figgerin' right this here's the State Saloon, and the hairy-eared hombre that bosses it eats a pair like us for breakfast ever' mornin'."

THE bar ran along one wall, and the rest of the room was a spread of tables where men jawed and gambled and drank. Link estimated the number of customers at thirty-odd.

A solitary drinker stared up at them from a rear table, and Link turned on his grin, nodding pleasantly.

"You see which way my friend went—the man who just come in?"

The man shook his head. "I just now sat down here."

Link nodded twice to Jick-Jack—the old signal—and O'Bannon seated himself, a rear-guard to bottle up this possible exit. Link went slowly down the bar, eyeing the line of men. He had glimpsed

the killer's face for just an instant at the alley mouth, but the picture of it in his mind was one he would not forget. The barkeep stood at the head of his counter, near the door, and Link caught his glance.

"You know where my friend was head-in'—a feller just went out in such a pelt?"

"Not me, mister. I ain't seen no one leave the past half hour. Did any you boys see 'im."

Men at the bar turned vague faces toward Link, shaking their heads, and his instinct believed them. If George Parry's murderer had entered the place, then this room still held him. Link surveyed the card tables, and the fifth or sixth face he noted was the puffed and eye-blackened mask of the erstwhile prisoner who had occupied the cell next to Mark's that afternoon.

His was not the killer's face, and yet—

Link crossed to the table. As he approached, the battered man spread his cards and scooped the pot toward him. "This makes up the fine I paid," he chuckled, "and then some over."

"Never seen such doggone luck," another player grumbled. "He's held top hand in ever' decent pot the past two hours."

The words put a brake on Link. Two hours, eh? He studied the bruised features in the glow of light from above. A man of middle height, of middle age, most likely—and just where and how did he fit into the scheme of things? In the midst of Link's thought a pair of cold gray eyes lifted to meet his stare. They were steady eyes, clever eyes, and they recognized Link calmly.

A man to watch, Link thought.

HE canvassed the other tables without result. Despite all the indications, impossible as it seemed, George Parry's killer was not here. He met Jick's glance from the end of the room, shook his head slightly, and returned to the bar. He asked an idle question as the barkeep set out his glass:

"That man yonder with the stepped-on-face—ain't I seen him somewheres around? Montana, mebbe?"

"Couldn't say, mister. He's lately come

here from Kansas, Missouri, somewheres east is all I know. Name's Vinton, or some such like that. I sure hope he takes better aim next time he throws a punch at ol' Matt Kelso."

Link swallowed his drink in easy stages, keeping his ears alert to the buzz of talk around. Three men at his left were engaged in wordy argument, and he signaled for the bottle again, edging closer.

One of the three was dressed in puncher's garb. His eyes were blood-shot, and whiskey had filed his voice to bucksaw edge. For the second time he spoke the name of Mark Tarrant.

"Shore I'm a Muleshoe man," he said. "I work fer Mark Tarrant an' I'm proud of it. How you like that? I'll come right out an' say that them behind this lynchin' talk is a bunch of fools an' cowards."

"You better sing that wawwaw in some other bar," said the man beside him. "Ben Gaines wouldn't hardly like it."

"Hell with Ben Gaines! He'll change his tune when Mark's set free, which mebbe ain't such a long day off as some think. Ever'body knows Ben Gaines is behind all this move against Mark. He hates Mark's guts—he'd turn his hand to anythin'."

"Shut up, you fool!" the third man growled. "Now lissen here—"

The voices descended to a mumble.

Link stared into the bar mirror, eyes narrowed, and it was thus that his sight focused on a narrow door he had not noticed before. It was set in a shallow alcove angle of the far wall, and he thought he could discern a slit of yellow light at the bottom edge.

He addressed the barkeep: "Mr. Gaines anywheres around?"

"In his office yonder, mister." The man bobbed his head toward the alcove. "But he left word he couldn't be disturbed."

"I just wanted to ask him a question," Link said mildly. "Don't reckon he'd mind a little thing like that."

He turned away, smiling. For a moment he stood hesitant, and his fingers fumbled at his scarf and straightened his hat. In the signal-code that Ranger-Sergeant Link Howland had arranged with

Ranger-Private O'Bannon long ago these simple gestures flashed urgent warning: On your feet, they commanded. Loosen your cutter and set yourself, for hell is apt to pop!

VI

THERE was a small island of space fronting the alcove. Link was unnoticed as he idled past tables that were intent upon rattling chips and the slap of cards, and only Jick-Jack's watchfulness saw him approach the office door. His knuckles tapped the panel, and under cover of that sound his left hand gently twisted the knob.

Locked, as he had expected. But was it also barred or bolted?

There was a rustle of sound from within, a creak of chair, the snarl of a voice in exasperation: "I said I was busy, damn it! Rattle on away from here!"

Link's eyes had gauged the inward swing of the door, and the taut push of his muscles were testing the solidity of the lock. If it only wasn't barred, he thought. His feet were planted firmly, knees slightly bent, and all his sinewy power was coiled in anticipation of the next dynamic move.

"Mr. Gaines?" he said softly. "I only wanted to see you a minnit."

"Busy!" came the growl. "Beat it, you hear!"

The welling wound in George Parry's forehead was the vivid image in Link's mind. Behind this door, all his reason assured him, the murderer of the fat man had sought refuge, and his fingers cleared his gun from holster in the instant of his explosive lunge.

He slammed the flimsy portal with hunched shoulder and thrusting hip, battering with a canny distribution of impetus that had proved the weaknesses of many another iron lock and wooden barrier. He rammed with a fury that was strengthened in the vengeance-urge, and thin pine split and crackled as metal was sundered with a snap. The door sagged inward, yielding so suddenly that Link was staggered into the room. He was lurched down upon his knees, supported by a fending hand, but the swing of his gun-snout was death's black eye that searched the cramped interior.

It saw a single man—bullet-headed Ben Gaines.

It found no pale-masked killer hiding there.

In the unbelieving eye-wing of realization a picture of the room was sharply etched for Link. The sole egress was a single window high in the wall- and air-slit, rather, for it was too narrow by far to offer means of escape. Half-risen from a tilting chair was gorilla-chested Ben Gaines, his lumpy face a caricature of amazement. He had leaped back from a desk that was papered from edge to edge with a green-gold scatter of bank notes, and his red-stubbed head was lowered and his square fists professionally posed. Beside the desk was the opened door of a squat safe.

Link came to his feet with a barked command. "Don't try it, Gaines—!"

But the stumpy-legged saloon man was not reaching for the revolver there. He swept the currency into a heap with a wide move of his hand, and the lid of the desk slammed shut. He swiveled to face Link, and the lamplight shadowed the hammered line of his straight-drawn brows, the blob of mutilated ears, a thickness of lips that spoke without seeming movement.

"Was there somethin' you wanted?" His thickened tone held no emotion.

"I see I made a mistake, Gaines," Link said. "A man was shot—we hunted his killer into your place. He—that is, I thought—"

"You mean you're accusin' *me*."

"Not any, Gaines. We saw his face—wedge-nosed, light compected, thin sized—" An elusive resemblance came to his mind and he blurted it out: "You'd sort of say he favored that sheriff's deputy, though it wasn't Smiley. I—I reckon I called the wrong turn, Gaines, if that's any apology."

A red tip of tongue licked Ben Gaines' strain-shaped lip. "You might mean Smiley's brother," he intoned. "He'd fit that pitcher close enough. But you won't find him here, Howland. I aim to run a decent place, and common scum is barred. You savvy what I'm sayin', mister?"

Howland! Sly eyes spying from that cell next to Mark's. Sharp ears that had overheard. And already that clever Mr.

Vinton, whatever his dubious game might be, had blabbed his information out.

"I said I made a mistake," Link muttered. "I'll pay for what damage I done!"

"Damn right you will!" The thick chest bulged, and Ben Gaines lifted on his toes. His eyes flicked toward Link's gun. "You puttin' that cutter up or do you aim to use it?"

"I don't want trouble," Link said. "I already told you—"

The saloon man's surface calmness had been a mask for the towering, red-eyed rage he was generating. It blotched his face in pink and white, distended the cords of his thick neck, constricted his body into a semi-crouch. His half-clenched hands swayed in slow, inching passes, and a whitish bubble wet a corner of his mouth.

"Use it, damn you," he growled, "or fight if you got the guts! Either way, by the Lord, you're tromped on, mister!"

LINK HOWLAND did what best he could to make a battle of it. Credit him for that. His own temper was climbing hot, kindled by the blundering that had let George Parry's killer elude the net. He rammed the Colt's into its holster, and he poked a long, hard fist into the middle of Ben Gaines' bull-charge. He loosed his right in a round-house arc of power.

But something went wrong somewhere.

Perhaps the deceptive speed of the stumpy giant accounted for it. On tip-toes he bounced, an awkward jumping-jack, and Link's fist that sought his face found that target suddenly tilted aside. Link's roundhouse right was still in mid-swing when dynamite exploded in his face and slammed him back against the splintered door. He never even saw which fist it was that struck him, and the pile driver that blasted into his belly was likewise a big surprise. There was a white humming in his head and a numbing shock of pain that jolted the breath clean out of him.

The door at his back saved him from falling. The recoil of collision lunged him ahead with a flailing punch that skidded along a puffy ear. It also propped him for two trip-hammer blows that landed like mule-kicks. In more than thirty fist fights, boy and man, Link How-

land had never been knocked from his feet. Never until now. But now there was a detonation against his jaw that staggered him backward toward the door way, and a second one on top of that that picked him up and plopped him down.

He sat on the floor outside the alcove, and in a dizzy dream he saw the faces of crowding men, the walls revolving, and the sprawl of his own long legs that had no power of motion. And there was Ben Gaines hopping toward him with a fist the size of a water pail that was cocked to finish him.

But a big voice cut through the faint whirr of sound in his brain. "Stand back there!" it boomed. "Don't hit 'im again! Can't you pick a man who's got his full stren'th?"

An open hand pushed Ben Gaines sideways, pushed with such force that the sawed-off saloon man reeled against the wall. He spun to face Jick-Jack O'Bannon.

"Stand back, boys!" Gaines shouted. "This here's my private affair. Stand back, you hear, and leave him room to fall!"

Legs crowded past Link. He sat there, shaking his head, with a blurry helplessness fastening him. The best part of the real fight had already passed by the time he could wobble to his feet again and paw his gun from holster with fumbling fingers.

It was a fight that was watched by silent men, a fearsome epic in blood and brutality.

Ben Gaines laced home the first blow, a temple-high haymaker that would have ended it against a lesser man. He came prancing in at Jick-Jack, a weaving, bobbing ape in action, with milling fists extended from the crouch that placed his stubbled head at the level of the taller man's waist. He fainted at Jick's middle, circling in, and the lash of his long right sped so fast that the Ranger's fending hand was brushed aside. He was barely able to turn his head and take the smacking blow on the temple.

Jick's head was driven back and a shudder shook him. The second punch of the one-two shift slashed his cheek below the eye, and he retreated a single pace. Lifted

arms protected his face for an instant and he gave a bearlike shake of the head. His arms lowered, and he was *grinning*.

"You hit a good lick, little man," he said. "That's one for you. Now, let's start fightin'!"

THE saloon man glared at him. A drool of saliva was on his chin and his deep-set eyes had a feral shine. He rubbed the knuckles of his right hand and came stalking in again. Jick stood with feet spread wide, the rough-and-tumble pose, and pawed out his heavy hands.

They clashed in a flurry of punches. Ben Gaines whacked two fast blows into Jick's face, and the crimson flowed. He slugged a fist into the belt-line, and his arms shunted off the clumsier thumps that Jick gave in return. But strangely it was Ben Gaines who stepped back now. He rubbed his nose with his wrist, body swaying.

Jick spat blood. "You didn't hurt your hand none, did you? Some claim it's dangerous to hit a man above the ears."

The taunt lunged Ben Gaines forward, but it seemed that Jick had solved the secret of his erratic locomotion. When Gaines' right looped out of the rabbit-hop, Jick's shoulders were hunching. The fist aimed at his face smashed instead against his lowered head, and those who watched heard a snap of brittle sound. A spasm of pain contorted Ben Gaines' features, and his head did not jerk quite swiftly enough from the buffet that the taller man launched. The clumsy force of it slapped beside the saloon man's ear and knocked him down.

"Had enough?" Jick asked gravely.

He strode in quick attack now as snarling Ben Gaines rose. He waded into the flurry of fists that the stockier man hurled in frenzy, for the torture of broken bones had robbed them of menace. Ben Gaines' twisted features pinched in anguish as he ducked and sidled and jounced away. In a final desperation he lunged at Jick to grapple him.

Jick let him come. He met him with slapping, bear-like blows that rocked Gaines' bullet head on his shoulders. Five of them—six—and with each one Gaines was staggered. He stabbed out his fingers

toward Jick-Jack's eyes, and Jick pushed his arm aside. His own long arm reached out and grappled the saloon man's coat at the neck. He held him there, and Ben Gaines pawed futile, feeble swings at a half-seen target beyond his groping reach.

"You need a lesson, mister," Jick-Jack said.

With open palm he smacked the lumpy face, back and across, with his big arm swinging methodically, powerful, pounding unconsciousness into Ben Gaines' brain. Splat and whack and *splat*—and there were watching men who turned their eyes from the brutal sight of it. When Ben Gaines' head sagged forward and his knees gave way, Jick O'Bannon released the grip and let him drop. The body collapsed in a huddle and Jick stepped back. He turned his blood-smear look to the circle of faces around.

"Anybody don't like it?" he asked.

The barkeep had a bottle gripped in his fingers, and Ben Gaines had friends there who were wearing their artillery in sight, but none of them chose to object. Perhaps they were aware of Link Howland who was leaning against the bar with a six-shooter trained among them. Link was grinning just a little, his eyes were clear, and the Colt's had a rock-like steadiness in his hand.

"That's one I owe you, pardner," he called. "I reckon we better be amblin'."

Jick grabbed up his hat. They backed along the bar together, and the smear of blood did not subdue the wideness of Jick's grin. He'd rather gamble than eat, Cap'n Spurlock always said, and he'd rather fight than gamble.

He held the door for Link, and their heels thumped the boards of the outer walk in unison. "Left—" Link snapped, and he narrowed his eyes to search the street's semi-darkness. There was a queer lull of quiet that he sensed—

A dull voice droned through it: "Up!" it ordered. "Claw sky, damn yuh! Murder's the charge, and we'd just as leave blow yuh in half!"

Two men in the shadows there along the porch of the saloon. Two leveled weapons covering them, and they were wolves in a deadfall trap. That voice, Link knew, was the monotone of the weasel-deputy, the mirthless Smiley. And

backing Smiley's command was the leveled rifle of a crouching figure whose dim-seen features had an evil semblance to Smiley's own.

The ambush-brother—the scuttling prowler—the devil's finger from the night that had triggered George Parry down!

VII

"DON'T try to buck 'em, Jick," Link Howland said softly. "Rattle up your dew-claws, boy!"

So he spoke, the calm compliant words. But in the code that Jick-Jack knew he had telegraphed desperation. Meaning *Jump 'em!* Meaning *Fight or die!* Meaning *Our only chance is now!*

There was some deep instinct in him which recognized that these pallid brothers were armed for death. Their prisoners would reach no jail, he knew, for the purpose that steered them was to silence the lips of the men who might identify the murderer of George Parry. They had planned boldly, the strategy of the hunted who turns in flight to attack the huntsman's flank. They had the drop, the odds were theirs, but still Link's signal cried *Now!*

The dark had hidden the gun still gripped at his side, and he timed his own move to Jick-Jack's decoy leap. Jick's hands were lifting, he was making an aimless forward stride of submission—and suddenly he was flinging himself in a diving tackle toward the nearer of the brothers, the rifleman.

Link shot at Smiley simultaneously, tilting his Colt's and firing in a flirt of motion that merged his muzzle's explosion with the flame-spurt of the deputy's gun.

All his judgment told him that he had called a suicide command for Jick-Jack and himself in ordering attack against this double-drop. A miracle of marksmanship was needed to counter the odds, a desperation test of Link Howland's gun-hand speed and skill. In uncertain dark, against shifting targets, he must fire twice within a second's tick, and a miss on either shot would be fatality. Or even a half-miss. One bullet apiece must stop these men, or else it was Boot Hill graves for a pair of Texans.

So he knew in the flash of Smiley's

gun that blasted at him. Two detonations boomed as one. There was a sear of pain along Link's hip, and the rifle crashed as he shifted his aim and squeezed trigger a second time. He shot by instinct toward the rifle sound, into the humped confusion of Jick's lunge and the automatic backward spring of Smiley's killer-brother, and instantly he was twisting back again from his crouch toward the shadow-shape of the weasel-deputy.

He saw Smiley in mid-topple, both arms hugging his chest as he pitched down. He saw the brother staggering back along the walk, the rifle spilling from his hands, and mechanically Link shot him again. He had murdered George Parry, that skulking devil, and Link's bullet was a final weight of vengeance-lead to hurry him faster on the drop to Hell's hot pitch and brimstone.

"Jick—I!" he cried.

Jick's flying tackle had been the most dangerous hazard of the gamble. His leap had been the diversion that offered Link a tick of opportunity for his gun-play, and the sight of the dark form huddled on the walk was a momentary panic that clamped Link with strangle fingers. But the rifle hadn't downed him. His voice grunted reply to Link's shout and he lumbered up, shaking his head. Link gripped his arm and saw his smear-faced grin. He shoved him toward a narrow passage at the end of the building.

"Vamoose!" he breathed. "You hurt, boy?"

Jick made a negative sound. Link noted a slight unsteadiness as the big man ran, but he veered aside from the obstacles that loomed, seemingly aware that undue noise would be unhealthy for them. Again they came to the shadowed rear of State Saloon, and now Link knew the explanation of the hunted killer's escape from them. Here was the passage through which Smiley's scuttling brother had vanished.

Shouts and a mill of excitement echoed from State Street, and the remainder of a half-formed plan was clarified in Link's mind. The two dead men back yonder had represented Canyon City's law, and a posse would soon be hunting the strangers who had fogged them low. A posse that would shoot on sight and ask

for reasons later. In the face of this there was one single recourse Link knew—a long-shot gamble, but they had to make it.

"We're cuttin' back out yonder," he said. "Just trail on after me."

They traversed a weedy field, skirted dark buildings, and by a devious round-about came to the wagon yard where they had halted earlier. Two small tags of information were the basis of Link's plan and he had considered them dubiously as they prowled. In the restaurant where he had eaten with George Parry, a man remarked that Arch Whitlow was steppin' up in society. Eatin' supper with Judge Joel Parker, Arch was, up at Banker Yarnell's. Later George Parry had pointed out Yarnell's big white house.

"The way I see it," he said to Jick, "our one chance is to throw in with Whitlow. Or at least to make 'er look that way. He's hard to puzzle out, but he talks square enough. He's ambitious, too, and he don't jibe with Matt Kelso. We might convince 'im—"

He stared at O'Bannon. "Hey, you listenin'?"

They stood in deep shadow near a feed shed, and he had seen Jick sag slightly back against the wall. Even as his hand reached forth, Jick began to slide down the wall. He dropped in a sudden wilt that left him sitting limply there.

LINK knelt beside him, and for a fleeting moment his own body was a frozen lump without sensation. He felt Jick's face with fingers that seemed swollen in clumsiness, and he pawed beneath Jick's shirt with a growing dread pounding in his brain. He found no wound, no bloody ooze. Jick's heartbeat pound was strong and steady.

He called Jick's name in a panic whisper. He gripped the thick shoulders and shook them in a near frenzy that thumped Jick's head against the rattling boards. The limp figure droned out a great sighing moan, and suddenly strength seemed pumped back into it. Jick's head jolted up, and the sweep of his arms thrust Link aside. He lurched to his feet, hands extended in fighting pose, and he slapped at the empty dark like a hornet-stung

grizzly. He sighted Link, started to lunge toward him.

"Jick—!"

The sharp word halted him. He peered at Link, glanced vaguely about, and a deep sighing breath heaped out of him. He lifted hands to his face, rocked it gently to and fro, but his voice was sane and normal:

"I never saw it comin'," he said. "I'd swear no man his size could hit that hard. But I can lick 'im, Link! Just give me another chance at him—"

"Lick who?" Link gasped.

"That bullet-head—that damn' Ben Gaines. It was accident that first punch caught me."

There was a crazy wild laughter that mixed itself with a sharper, deeper emotion inside Link's head. He felt like that time when he'd climbed a tough bronc half full of whiskey.

"You mean you don't recall how you stood an' slapped his ears down? You don't recollect what happened outside the saloon there?" He thrust out Jick's hat, with a slash of crown gouged from it by the rifle blast. "You mean you don't know how *that* come about?"

Jick touched the tender bump at the side of his head. "When he hit me there," he said, "it was like somethin' exploded. You mean to say I—well, hell, I do seem to remember there was some funny business goin' on. But it was all fogged up, Link, just like a jag on loco-weed. Did I lick that little jigger, sure enough?"

The dryness in Link's throat choked the laughter back. "Boy," he said, "I don't believe there's no man livin' you can't handle. Come on along and I'll tell you about it."

They stopped at a rain barrel along the way and made minor repairs to their damages. Except for that one bump above his ear and the gash along his cheek, Jick-Jack said that he felt fine. He still muttered occasional wonder, though, at the deeds he had performed in semi-consciousness. Link's wound was a shallow six-inch furrow—painful rather than serious.

Twenty minutes later found them mounting the steps of a secluded white house, pillared and imposing. The girl

of the Fallsburg stage opened the door in answer to Link's insistent knock.

"Sorry to trouble you, ma'am, but I got to see Mr. Whitlow right away. Could you ask him, please, to step out a minnit."

She frowned in the half-light. "Why, you're the man who tripped—it's Mr. Harris, isn't it?"

"Mebbe you better tell him it's Mark Howland's brother," he said. "I—this is real important."

She disappeared down the lighted hall. In a moment Archer Whitlow came striding toward them. His glance shifted from Link to the loom of Jick-Jack O'Bannon in the near shadows.

"I suppose you know," he said. "that the law is looking for you. Neighbors found the body of a man named George Parry—"

"Yeah," Link said. "We know about that. Also about the shootin', just a while back, of that deputy, Smiley, and his brother. That's what we want to tell you about, Mr. Whitlow."

The attorney shrugged. "Why tell *me*, Howland?"

"Because I think we can he'p each other," Link said. "Of course, if you ain't interested—"

"I am very much interested," Whitlow said. "Step in. For the past hour I've been arguing the local situation with Judge Parker and Mr. Yarnell, and perhaps you can add some truths to what I've been saying."

VIII

FIVE men sat in Banker Yarnell's book-lined study. Jick-Jack O'Bannon, his long legs stretched comfortably and his eyes half-closed, just sat. The other three smoked thoughtfully, exchanging occasional glances and nodding as Link Howland talked.

Link told them almost everything. There was one mental reservation he had—the fact that, right or wrong, he intended to see that Mark had a chance at freedom. He had made up his mind long since on that particular score. It was a fixed idea that could not be shaken by any moral scruples. For this purpose he had come to Canyon City, risking the career he loved, chancing disgrace and

outlawry, gambling his present and future in response to the deep, instinctive appeal of brother-blood.

Some men are built that way. The feeling Link Howland had for Mark was not one-hundredth as strong as his affection for Jick-Jack, but Link refused to consider that. Mark had always been selfish, thick-skinned, none too decent—but Link rubbed those memories out of his mind. In order to be free to help Mark he needed backing now, a front for his operations. To gain that he was willing to join up with the Law.

Otherwise, however, he concealed nothing, eyeing them levelly as he spoke and spacing his words with slow sincerity. Archer Whitlow looked questioningly at the others when Link had finished.

"Well, gentlemen, what do you think? How does that fit in with what I've been trying to tell you tonight?"

Yarnell frowned. "But why should the deputy's brother murder Mr. Parry—or attempt to kill you, Howland, as you infer was the plan? Who could have been behind the plot, and what would have been the gain?"

"No savvy," Link said. "But I might find out, given time."

"What do you think, Judge?" asked Whitlow.

The gray-bearded jurist stared searchingly at Link. "I believe this young man is telling the truth," he said. "I think you can trust him, gentlemen."

Whitlow nodded. "Did you have some plan in mind when you came here, Howland? Why did you think I might help you, and exactly how could you be of service to Canyon City, through me?"

Link grinned faintly. "I'm spreadin' my cards on the table, gents. Your sheriff was ready to jail me—or worse—on a trumped-up charge of bein' mixed into George Parry's murder. He's probably huntin' us double hard now, with Smiley and his brother killed. I want his brother taken off Jick's and my necks so's that we can be some help to Mark." His expression was unchanged as he added a lying statement: "If Mark's guilty, as I said—well, I'll abide by the verdict. But if he's innocent, I reckon you gents would like to know it as well as I would."

Whitlow shrugged. "But why should I

be interested in that. I'm prosecutor, remember."

"Because I figger you're out for glory," Link said bluntly. "Because I know you don't cotton to Matt Kelso, who is up to some hokey-pokey that Jick and me might roust out. The same goes for Ben Gaines. My idea was, Mr. Whitlow, that now would be a right fine time for you to enlist a couple handy hombres on your side."

"Just how do you mean?"

"As your personal deputies, say, or investigators or whatever. You make our appointment public, and that put a spoke in Kelso's wheel. It's a scheme that's been worked before."

"But I have no authority—"

"Who can prove you ain't? You fix up some legal-lookin' papers and Jick and me will make 'em stand up."

The Hanging Judge was smiling. "I know of no ordinance that would empower you, Whitlow," he said, "but it would require at least a month in the courts to establish that fact, I imagine."

Red-faced Banker Yarnell thumped the table. "By Heaven, Whitlow, it's come time to do something. The decent people of this county will stand square behind you. Matt Kelso's whole administration has been a stink. Robberies, murders, lynch-talk all over town. You straighten things out, young fellow, and you'll be a made man."

The County Attorney stretched his hands in an easy gesture. "That, gentlemen, was what I was hoping to hear you say."

Link glanced around at Jick-Jack O'Bannon. "Wake up, boy! We're back on the old patrol again—runnin' the rats from town."

ARCHER WHITLOW ran a strong hand along a determined jaw. He had a familiar way of speaking but most of his words had the weight of thought behind them. He regarded Link steadily as he spoke:

"I won't conceal from you, Howland, that my presence here tonight is connected with your brother's case. Frankly, I don't think we can convict him. I don't like the evidence. I don't believe we can panel an unprejudiced jury. It's not ex-

actly usual to consult the man who will sit in judgment, but under the circumstances—"

"Your motives do you credit, Whitlow," Judge Parker said. "It was entirely proper to acquaint me with the problem here."

"Thank you, sir. In any event, I'll repeat the rough outline of the situation surrounding Cole Bixby's murder. Bixby was an Easterner—at least, he was not a cattleman. He came into the county some three years back and bought out the Muleshoe iron. Mark Tarrant—or Howland, as you say—accompanied him. Since the beginning Howland has managed the affairs of the ranch. Bixby paid the bills, but in all other respects his foreman was the boss. It's a curious fact that under the new management not a single local man has worked for the Muleshoe. Wandering punchers drift in there and drift out. I've had cattlemen tell me that they do not graze enough head by half to warrant the number of riding hands they keep on the payroll."

"Meanin' what?" Link asked sharply.

"Meaning that something queer might be going on out there. Meaning that the Muleshoe could stand investigation. Your brother admits he killed Bixby in a drunken fight. He says he doesn't recall how many shots he fired, and that a bullet might have struck Bixby's back as he fell. The doctor claims that's preposterous. None of the Muleshoe hands will admit he was near the house at the time of the fight, but from drunken hints they have let drop in town—well, you might believe that Bixby was killed before Howland rode in from the corrals that night. Another oddity is Mrs. Bixby's attitude. A most unusual woman, and she hasn't told one-tenth of what she knows."

"It looks to me," Link said softly, "that me and Jick head next out to the Muleshoe."

Whitlow shrugged. "I warn you, it's dangerous."

Yarnell made a growling sound. "But he's right! I've maintained all along that Matt Kelso should have 'em all in jail. It's a good ride out there, Howland. If you need horses, there's saddlers in my stable and plenty of gear. Just help yourself when you're ready to start."

"I reckon right now is as good a time as any," Link said. "We can give things a chance to quiet down here."

"There are a few more questions," Whitlow said. "We were also discussing the Vero Wells robbery before you came, and I pointed out the likelihood of local men being involved. The fact that the five bandits vanished so completely is evidence that they were familiar with this country. Nor do I believe it was coincidence that they held up the train with the gold shipment aboard. To me that spells careful planning, a clever brain directing the affair. What I want to know, Howland—that spread of currency you saw on Ben Gaines' desk, were the bills old or new?"

Link's brows knotted. "Well, I—some of both, I'd say."

"The point is," Whitlow said, "that the Vero Wells robbers grabbed some six thousand in currency as well as the gold. It was part of a bank shipment—fresh bills in tens and twenties—and warning has been issued to the authorities to watch for them."

"I did see some yellowbacks," Link said, "but I couldn't tell how many there were."

Whitlow shrugged. "It was just an idea. Incidentally, it was money that Ben Gaines and your brother had their fight about some ten days back. Mark put a gun in Gaines' back and lifted the roll from his pocket. He returned it minutes later, of course, explaining it was horseplay, but they had a real knock-down there before they were pulled apart."

"You any notion who that Vinton might be?" Link asked.

The attorney shook his head. "Obviously he's in with Kelso, and they arranged to throw him in jail to work as a spy. Also, from what you say, he peddles his information to Ben Gaines as well."

"He smells like a Wells-Fargo man to me," said Link, "or a Bankers' Association detective. Anyway—"

There was a tap at the door, and Judge Parker's pretty daughter thrust it open. "This man insists he must see you at once, Mr. Whitlow. He says you told him—"

A slight figure pushed past her from

the hall, a shabby, toothless oldster. "They's men an' hosses behind the co't house," he whined. "I seen 'em, an' there's hell afoot. You said I'd git five dollars, Mr. Whitlow—"

"Jail break—" Whitlow gasped, glaring at Link. "There's a short cut over the hill—come on!"

LINK hurried at the tall attorney's heels, with Jick-Jack floundering close behind them. They traveled rough footing, stumbling in the uncertain dark, and the bits of information that Whitlow had passed along were dried peas that rattled in the gourd of Link's head. He recalled the drunken remark of the Muleshoe hand in State Saloon—"When Mark's set free, which ain't so long off as some think"—and the thought pounded that here might be his own release. If Mark should escape—

Beyond that all his thoughts were jumbled, a chaos in his brain.

They descended a long slope, sped past houses, approaching the courthouse from the east. The rear of the place, Link remembered, looked down upon a bare yard fringed with trees. Now they could see the roof of the big building, and Archer Whitlow halted, extending his arms to check them there.

"You wouldn't double-cross me, would you, Howland?" he panted.

"Not me," Link said.

"You realize that escape now would be the worst move your brother could make, don't you?"

Link jerked his head. "You're bossin' the party tonight, Whitlow. You call the play and me and Jick will back 'er. Does that sound square?"

"We want to know who's staging this," Whitlow muttered. "There's something crazy here, and Kelso's in on it. They couldn't pull it this way unless—come on, here! We'll edge up easy-like. Quiet now."

They wormed ahead, and in a shadow patch at the break of the trees they crouched silently. Fifty yards beyond, in the wedge of gloom at the courthouse rear, they saw a move of mounted figures. Three horsemen and an extra mount, Link counted, though there may have been a fourth in the heavier shadow.

Apparently the jail-break scheme was well along in its workings, for even now a curl of rope came snaking from the prison floor above.

From the window of the cell that caged Mark Howland.

And the bars had been sawed or wrenched loose there, for the dark hump of a big figure appeared. A voice whispered some advice from below, and the prisoner let his long legs dangle, gripping the rope. Then he was a swaying monkey, pushing his feet against the wall as he descended hand-over-hand.

"Wait—" Archer Whitlow breathed. His fingers clenched Link's arm. "At the left there—see him moving now?"

The swinging figure was in mid-descent when a gruff command rasped the dark hush. It was the voice of Sheriff Matt Kelso, unmistakable, and its edge had the sharpness of pent-up emotion.

"Name of the law!" he shouted. "Don't move there—none of yuh! Hold steady, Howland!"

But he gave his escaping prisoner no chance to obey. The weapon jerked up in his hands, and he blasted its charge into the dark shape on the rope from a distance no more than twenty feet. The spouting roar of the riot gun seemed to slam the prisoner against the wall, and his arms jerked out in agony. He fell, a dead bird plummeting.

"Stand, damn you!" Kelso cried.

He switched the double-barreled muzzle toward the mill of shadowy horsemen, and its detonation blurted a second time in the wake of a bullet-jet from one of them. Buckshot hailed against the court house wall, and Matt Kelso fell sidewise. A horse reared, squealing, and hoofs rumbled thunder over the yard, thudding away.

From the dark mouth of the cell window above sounded a bitter laugh, a cackle of ugly mirth. Link Howland, running forth from the fringe of trees, stumbled and almost sprawled.

"Mark—" he croaked.

Sheriff Matt Kelso was already dead when they turned his grim face up to the moon. He had dropped not ten feet beyond the body that his riot-slugs had riddled—the chocolate-skinned cavalry trooper from far away Fort Logan.

IX

TWO horsemen rode from Canyon City an hour later, cantering the southward trail toward the sierra notch. From their saddle-boots a pair of carbines jutted, and the silvery moon would find them bedded under borrowed blankets miles away. In one of Link Howland's pockets a weight of extra cartridges sagged, and in another was a crackling paper of mock authority, signed with Archer Whitlow's name. This deal with the County Attorney was full of holes, Link knew, but it seemed the best arrangement the moment offered.

"With George dead back there and all the rest of it," he said, "I figgered it was best to ride right now. It's sure a mess, Jick."

Jick-Jack wagged his head. "You reckon Mark knew all along that Kelso was layin' for him? Did he send that big buck down on purpose?"

"You heard the laugh he gave," Link said dully. "Mark always liked to play things clever. He always aimed to let the next man risk the main chance. I recall one time when we was kids—" He shrugged. "It's hard to tell, Jick. I think myself that Kelso may have some deal with Mark. Then I come into the picture, and talked to Mark in his cell, and a little later you and me smoked Kelso's two deputies. Kelso suspicioned a double-cross, I suppose, and killin' Mark would have been the payoff for Smiley."

"You got any notions on what the big fuss is, and who's behind it, Sarge?"

"Some," said Link. "A few. There's no doubt it was Muleshoe hands that tried to break Mark free, and mebbe we'll savvy more when we ride back from there. The one thing is—well, I could be playin' the damn' fool, Jick. It might be horse sense to ride on out about our business. But I dunno. What would you do, Jick, if it was *your brother*?"

"All my brothers is three sisters," said Jick. "I'll tell you what I'd do, though, if *you* was in the same fix."

"Yeah." Link nodded. "It ain't so much what you *know* as it is the way you *feel*."

Dawn found them breakfasting on cold meat and spring water. They rode on

through a rugged, hilly terrain, following the landmarks of direction that skirted them along a wide green plateau. It was a good fat cattle country, Link thought, sliced by nature into small holdings. The early sun tinted it in wild majesty now, but his shoulders hunched as he pictured it in the white loneliness of the winter blows. He'd settle for Texas, he decided.

The sun was at eight o'clock height when they came to the mouth of a pocket valley and sighted the Muleshoe buildings beyond. Link repeated brief instructions as they rode slowly in, his narrowed eyes meanwhile surveying the layout before them. The two signs of life he noted were six-eight horses in the smaller corral and a blue wisp of smoke from the ranch house chimney. The whole outfit had a shabby look, weedy and weather-worn, wanting repair.

He dismounted at the edge of the yard, handing his reins to Jick, and walked slowly toward the house. He saw no human, heard no stir of industry, but he had a feeling that the empty windows watched him with suspicious eyes. Twenty feet from the porch he came to a sudden halt. He had glimpsed a flick of movement at the corner of the building.

Motionless, Link waited. His thumbs were hooked idly in the waist of his pants, but a swift drop of his right hand could reach the butt of his holstered Colt's, and the fingers of his left hand could almost touch the extra revolver he had tucked into his waist-band. He could feel the warning prickle that lifted the hair at the back of his neck.

Slow seconds ticked before the lurker chose to show himself. He stepped out with a jingle of spur, a hard-faced puncher, and confronted Link with a hostile stare.

"Lookin' fer somebody, stranger?"

"I come to see Miz Bixby," Link said. "You know if she's inside?"

"She ain't around right now, mister. Was there somethin' I could do?"

"Why, no," said Link. "I reckon I could wait. When will Miz Bixby be back?"

"She's gone from here," said the puncher. "She won't—"

The door of the house creaked open

and a woman laughed. She stood there, hands on hips, and Link's impression saw a shine of black silk, a pale face smiling, a fluff of pale-gold hair. But he did not shift his eyes too far from the hard-faced puncher.

"Let him come, Blackie!" the woman called. "What harm is it? I wanna see what he looks like."

The puncher's face pinched tight with anger. "The doc said yuh wasn't to have company, ma'am," he grated out. "Orders was to stay in yore room. I'll take care of this."

"Aw, forget it," said the woman. "I'm sick of orders. I wanna see what his brother looks like, see? Come in, mister, you and your friend out there."

"My friend's bashful," Link said, "but I'll step in, thank you kindly." He lifted his hat in politeness—which was also a sign of sharpest warning to Jick.

For it was obvious now that the woman was drunk. No other explanation for the queerness of her eyes, her loose-lipped way of smiling. It was obvious, too, that the Muleshoe had been forewarned of this visit, that they knew him as Mark's brother. The woman had betrayed it there.

"Cer'n'ly," she said. "Come in, boy, come in."

The animal sense of danger was an acid in Link Howland's blood, a muscle-straining apprehension, as he mounted the steps beside the hard-faced Blackie. The surety that he walked into a trap, that death was waiting beyond for him, was a coldness that gnawed in his brain. And ugliest, the bitterest bolus of all, was the inescapable thought that Mark might have ordered what was to happen.

HE had entered the house because of the certainty that unseen guns had been trained on him outside. The woman's drunken blundering had flummoxed the original scheme, he thought, and he had grasped at her invitation as a medium for delay. The squeeze would be tight, but at least he had warning of it. They would find him alert and his gun not slow. They would know there'd been a fight before they tallied him.

So he thought, stiffly perched on a horse-hair parlor chair. So he planned,

facing Blackie and Cole Bixby's widow in that formal, cluttered, dingy room.

He addressed himself to the hard-faced puncher. The woman was the weakness of this situation, he knew, and his purpose was to attack her obliquely, to make her force the issue, if possible. His method, therefore, was to ignore her.

"I see you know who I am," he said. "Link Howland's the name—Mark Tarrant's brother. I suckered the County Attorney into thinkin' I'd play on his side." He grinned crookedly. "Whitlow sent me out here to get the lowdown on how Bix was killed—ain't that a good 'un?"

"No," said Blackie shortly, "it ain't. Are you jiggerin' around to say Mark sent yuh, mebbe? Don't try it, mister—we know better. You'd been smarter if yuh high-tailed like Mark told yuh—you an' yore Ranger badge!"

"I left that behind," Link said. "I came to help Mark from his tight. If you Muleshoe boys are wise you'll hand me the lay of things. As soon as I'm sure Mark is safe I'll be long gone. But I gotta know—did he kill Bixby? How do you aim to snake him outa that?"

"Ask Mark!" Blackie growled. "He kin tell yuh."

"Lissen—" the woman said suddenly. "You lissen to me, Big Skinny. You don't look like Mark at all. Mark's good-lookin'—he's handsome. Whadda you ask these people how Bix was killed? They don't know, none of 'em know. Why don't you ask me? Ain't I gonna be the big star witness?"

Blackie came out of his chair, fists clenched. "Yuh drunken fool!" he grated. "By Lord, you'll shut yore trap, Stell, er I'll—"

"You'll what?" she taunted. "You'll lay a finger on me and get what Bix got. Shuddup, you! Siddown, you son—"

LINK sat with shoulders slumped, with all emotion wiped from his face, but his inner being knew a glow of exultation despite his sense of waiting doom. His little scheme had got results, taunting the woman into talk that no other pressure might have forced. Here might be the key to all this Muleshoe mystery, thrust into his hand by blind circumstance.

The key—if he lived to get away with it.

"What difference is it, Blackie?" the woman said. "Whadda we care if he knows? Bix was killed right here in this room, boy—how you like that? Yeah, and he deserved it. Ask me, I oughta know!"

Blackie glared at her. His murderous stare traveled to Link, to the open door, and back again to the woman.

She had lifted a knitting bag from her chair, and she held it now in her lap. Any way that you looked at her, she was a handsome woman. She was young enough, and her body was shaped as a woman's should be. The face beneath her pile of yellow hair was peaches and cream, but instead of softness she had a look of pale fire. The whiskey was burning behind her eyes, but she was not too drunk to know what she was doing. It was bravado that spoke in her. Her voice held cruelty and disdain, plus a queer, wild eagerness that Link could not classify.

"Bix got tough," she said. "That was the trouble, see? He started bossin' people around—do this, do that. Because he pulled off one good job, he got big mucky-muck ideas. He slapped my face when I told him that. He knocked me down on the rug there." She leaned back in her chair, laughing. She picked up her skirt to cross her silken legs, and clasped her hands at the lifted knee. "You wanta know what happened to Bix, Big Skinny. Lissen, Blackie, whadda you say we show 'im?"

There was some signal Blackie was waiting. He said to Link, "She's high, mister. Don't pay her no mind. You better go upstairs, Stell, an' sleep it off."

It was right advice at the wrong time. She sneered at him. "I'll show 'im how myself," she said. She straightened the black skirt, dropped her hands to the knitting bag. "It was like this—"

But Link already knew how it was. He knew that *she* had killed Cole Bixby, as certainly as he was sure that the murder gun was in her knitting bag. There was a blood-lust in her, the wild eagerness that sang in her voice. She had killed one man, and now she would notch another. She would show her Muleshoe

hardcases that she could play out a string in the toughest game.

She was oiled and primed, and now was the time.

"Stand up, boy," she said. "Step over close to Stella here."

X

LINK'S chair was placed against the wall. He sat with the opened hallway door at his right, facing Stella's rocker and the single front window. Blackie stood near the pot-bellied stove at Link's left, and on the wall beyond was a square, framed picture. The picture's dark glass gave Link a shadowy mirror in which he could watch the blot of the hallway entrance. Now he saw the dimness of a hulking figure there.

A three-way squeeze, and the woman the most dangerous because she was unpredictable. He grinned at her, shifting his feet and leaning forward in his chair. His thumbs inched apart along his belt. He was not a two-hand shot, and at the best he could count just an ace and a half against their three of a kind in this bullet showdown. But his brain had planned his moves, and now he made them.

"Why, certainly, ma'am," he said. He came to his feet, and he made a smiling step, and then he was charging fast straight toward her.

Midway in his rushing stride he heard the blast of heavy guns from outside as stalking marksmen potting at Jick O'Bannon, and he knew this sound was the go-ahead that the killers here had waited. Then a hundred sounds were rolled in one, for with his lunge the Muleshoe parlor was dynamited into pandemonium.

Stella screamed. Her drawn lips were a twisted scarlet oval in a hell-cat mask. She was clawing in her knitting bag, her slippered heels kicked up to fend attack, but she could not parry the force and speed of Link's onrush that smashed her backwards, the rocker upending, and somersaulted her up and over. The bullet or the gun-barrel slash that would have handled her easiest were withheld by some compunction Link had. It was the vicious sweep of his forearm that drove into her yowling face and spilled her.

And while her legs were still thrashing the air in upheaval, Link was twisting sidewise in a crouching turnabout. His guns were jutting, perking, shooting.

He shot at hard-faced Blackie and at the bearded jack-in-box attacker who had popped in through the hallway door. He shot as they shot back at him, and there was nothing in the room but three death-puppet figures in powdersmoke mist and a yammer-yammer gun roar.

Blackie had slapped his leather fast, and his hogleg whelped a bullet that would have parted Link's teeth if he had been standing tall. But he wasn't. His right-hand guns spoke from his crouch in the wake of Blackie's shot, and the hard face had three eyes to stare with—the blood-puckered one in the middle. Link's left-hand shot at the bearded man had pulled wide, and he pumped sidewise in the instant that this towering fellow's slug smashed the window behind him.

He triggered again, left hand, right hand, and he recognized the swollen face of McCusker, Ben Gaines' victim of yesterday, as the bearded man dropped his gun to paw at his belly and sag down.

Seconds ago there were three against Link Howland. Yet now miraculously he stood alone. There was some seventh sense that had gauged his moves with the cold precision of a machine, yet his forehead was beaded with sudden sweat and his eyes saw the work of his hands through a fog of disbelief.

And there was still the window and the open door—no telling how many Muleshoe men there might be—and the hell-cat Stella sprawling there, double dangerous. He sprang to put the wall at his back, trying to watch three menaces at once, while again the rifle-whacks from outside knifed into his consciousness, the sound of four quick shot-blurts in succession.

Jick—! was his thought. He was thinking *Jick* when Stella's shot gonged the wall beside his cheek. She fired again as he lurched himself across at her.

His neck felt the powder-burn. She was half-leaned against the wall, supporting herself with one spread hand, with her wide eyes insane and her mouth a shrill, wild screaming as she tilted a short-barreled pistol. He kicked her arm, the gun flew wide, and the rage that boiled

in him knew no recourse but cold steel against her temple. He slapped the side of the Colt's just above her ear, and that silenced the cougar-spit she was yowling.

"Jick—" he breathed, and he ran into the hallway.

A single rifle-shot boomed out as he jerked the outer door wide and crouched in the mouth of it.

ECHO waves. Then silence. Link had the queer sensation of a giant glass bowl clamped down around the Muleshoe, confining it in a vast hush. The whisper of his own breath, the creak of board underfoot—and beyond that was nothingness. Bright sun scorched the yard, grass tufts trembled, and there was a yawn of space where Jick had held the horses.

He breathed deep, his stomach constricting. Suddenly, as he stared, there was a flick of movement at his left. He switched the Colt's toward the bunkhouse corner where a figure was rising up.

His crooking finger suspended fire.

The figure gathered itself on hands and knees. Reaching fingers climbed slowly to grip the log wall above, to haul the haunched form into a slumped position of prayer. With a last staggering effort it was pulled partially erect, swaying and tottering in the final blind gropings of a death-stricken animal. Then strength faded from the hands and the limp body tumbled down.

Link Howland found his voice then. "Jick!" he shouted. "Jick—I!"

The sight of O'Bannon's big shape, scrambling up from a buckbrush patch, was a sharp sensation that Link Howland would not forget. Jick came at a trot, grinning, brandishing his carbine in small-boy glee. "On'y three of 'em, Sarge," he called. "One was nicked and crawled away. He rode off yonderly."

Link stepped out on the porch. "You hurt?"

"I never been much with a short gun," Jick said, "but you give me elbow-rest and I'll show you shootin'. It was you I was scared for. What was it all about, Link?"

"Our scalps was wanted," Link said grimly. "Certain parties would like to see us dead. The answers are in the parlor here—step in."

The Muleshoe was accounted for, he thought—three dead, one near to death, and the tally completed by Stella and the wounded man who rode away. Riding where? Link wondered, his jaw hard-set. He nodded as Jick-Jack spoke briefly. They had tried to bracket him, Jick explained, but long before they opened fire he had spotted two of them in their Injun skulk.

"Instead of them surprisin' me," he said, "they was the ones caught settin'. I notched me one man first shot from the box. That bunkhouse fellow was the tough 'un."

They went along to the parlor shambles. Stella lay with her head on outflung arm, and Link had the curious image of a smiling child, peacefully asleep. McCusker was doubled near the wall, one arm clamping his middle, and his blank eyes stared wide at them from a pain-contorted face. Link retrieved the revolver toward which the bearded man's fingers had been stretching.

"Tie her up," he ordered. "Loop her hard and fast, boy, and jam a gag between her teeth. She's a she-wolf, and mostly to blame for all this hell-mess."

He had found a whiskey bottle on a corner table and he uncorked it as he knelt beside McCusker. The man was dying, and he knew as well as Link that there was no hope to save him. The agony of his belly-wounds would finish him before any doctor could ride from town. Link pushed the gurgling bottle mouth against the bearded blue lips, the clenched teeth.

"Sorry, Mac," he said dully. "I didn't aim to pull so low. It wasn't your blame that things missed fire here. If we hadn't split up outside you'd have been able to fix our wagons easy. You might have, anyway, if Stell never stuck her oar in."

He took the bottle away. A growling sound came from McCusker's throat. His eyes closed tight, pain wrinkled, then widened again. "You want to spill it, Mac?" Link asked. "While there's still time? There's nothin' you got to lose. Your race is run."

"Her fault, damn her," McCusker breathed. "Her's an' Mark's. If he got rid of her—" The head rolled. "Swell-fork saddle in my bunk," he said. "Sewed mine in the flaps. We'd pulled it clean

if it wasn't for her. She killed Bix—she turned Mark soft. She's nothin' but a common—"

Link spoke to Jick over his shoulder. "See if there's a buggy in the barn. We're takin' her to town. Loose off your gun if you sight anybody." He bent closer to McCusker as Jick brushed past. "But what about the gold, Mac? Who'll hog the eighty thousand now, with the rest of you dead?"

McCusker's face had a gargoyle ugliness—the mashed lips, the swollen blob of nose, the mouthed blood that dribbled his bearded chin. "Mark—" he whispered. "Bix an' Mark, they hid it. Mark knows."

"Was it Mark that sent word we was headed here?" Link asked sharply. "Did he pass the orders to rub us out?"

McCusker grunted.

Link stared at him. "Then who did? Who's the other man—the one in town? The man who found out the gold would be aboard? What's his name, McCusker?"

The lips twisted, a mocking grimace between a snarl and a grin. Both arms were clamped at McCusker's midriff now, and his body shuddered in a sudden agony. "It's all afire," he panted. "I can't—my breath—" He glared up horribly. "Gimme a gun—a gun when you go—an' I'll trade."

Link nodded, a jerk of his head. No human aid could stay Death from him. A mercy bullet was his only pill of ease.

Clenched teeth hissed the name. "Gaines—" the weak voice panted. "Ben Gaines!"

JICK-JACK found a ramshackle buggy and a swayback dun that showed the marks of harness-gall. While Jick was hitching up, Link Howland went to the bunkhouse and used his claspknife on McCusker's saddle-flaps. The bearded man watched him with slitted eyes when he returned to the parlor again and crossed to the rolling, thumping bundle that was Stella's trussed figure.

Link lifted her to sitting position. "You make too much commotion," he said, "and I'll hand you another tap on the head." He picked her up, carried her jerks and struggles to the door. He paused at the opening, and his face was tightly drawn

as he dropped a revolver to the carpet. His boot kicked it across to the bearded man.

"I'm sorry it was low," he said again. "So long, Mac."

He heaved Stella into the buggy outside and climbed in beside her. She had abandoned her futile contortions, and when she looked at Link now her blue eyes had a taint of fear in them. The drunkenness was gone, and she was a woman in panic's grip. Jick-Jack was mounting the horse that had brought him here, Banker Yarnell's loan. He would pace the journey to Canyon City with the carbine held ready at his saddle-horn.

The buggy was creaking toward the edge of the yard when the hollow boom of a single shot sounded from the ranch house. Link turned fiercely to the blonde woman, his lips curved back from his teeth. "There's another to notch on your gun-butt, damn you," he said. "And mebbe a couple more to come before this jamboree is done!"

XI

JICK-JACK O'BANNON rode easily along, with the sun warm across his wide shoulders and the dust of their roundabout wagon-ruck tickling his nose. His hat sat awkwardly on his head, thanks to the bump Ben Gaines' fist had raised, but he hadn't any other troubles that a long, cool drink wouldn't wash away. That is, excepting Link.

Link always worried Jick-Jack when he was acting like this.

For himself, Jick O'Bannon never worried. He didn't believe in it. Just take things easy as they come, and the chances were that everything would shuffle out. Like all that business there at the Mule-shoe this morning.

As far as Jick was concerned it had been a damned good fight. It would make a real salty yarn to spin when they got back to Texas. He was aware, of course, that there was more than shooting to it, but what it all meant—the spit-fire woman, and the wounded man who shot himself, and Link's cutting open that saddle where the money was hid—well, he didn't even try to puzzle it out.

But Link had fitted all these details

in. Back in the buggy Link had probably settled the who and the how and the way. He could tell by the set of Link's jaw and the glint of his eyes that Link was working up one of those devil-black tempers of his. Which meant that somebody'd better watch out. For somebody it was going to be Boot Hill or burst.

Jick kept his eye watchful on the country ahead, and every now and then he would slap the carbine stock. Mighty handsome woman back there. Some right good shooting he'd done that morning, considering he handled a strange gun. He wiped shirtsleeve over his face and whistled a silent tune as he rode.

It was past noon when they came to the notch. With Canyon City in sight Jick pulled up his horse and waited the buggy's approach. Ranger-Private O'Bannon was ready to receive his orders.

"Climb up here and grab these reins," Link said. "Take her into town somewheres and lock her up—I don't care where so long as she's held safe. I'll take your horse and ride ahead."

"Would the jailhouse do?" Jick asked.

"Any place *but* the jail. And see that gag stays tight in her mouth. I loosened it so she could talk, about an hour back, and see there were she bit me. If you can cache her where she won't be found and can't snake loose—" his brows met in a frown—"Well, you might post outside the State Saloon and keep watch for Mr. Ben Gaines."

"Sure, Sarge," said Jick. "You leave it to me."

"I'll be either at the court house or the bank," Link said. He forked the saddle, kneed the horse around, set a steady lope for the town ahead. There were lines of strain on his face and he rubbed a hard hand across his eyes. The one good thing in this hellfire mess, he thought, was that it would soon be finished.

On the silent ride from the Muleshoe he had decided what must be done. There was bitter irony in the thought that he had come to this place to free Mark Howland from a murder charge, and that within a single day he had accomplished

his purpose. He would lift the noose from Mark's neck and drop it instead over the pale head of the hellcat woman Mark loved. He would walk Mark out of a murder cell and into another cell where Mark would serve his time for the Vero Wells robbery.

But that was how it had to be. No other way out of it.

He considered what lay ahead at Canyon City and his fingers touched the gun at his thigh. He checked the cylinder load as he rode, and his mind reviewed what he had had to say. He considered the best place to say it, and decided on the bank. At the head of State Street he slowed his pace. He was barely noticed as he fastened his reins at the rack in front of Yarnell's brick structure.

But Banker Yarnell was quick to read the urgency of the message in Link's grim face. He lead the way to his private office and nodded agreement as Link spoke there.

"Yes, yes—of course," he said. "We'll hold the meeting right here. Yes, I can see the importance of deciding swiftly what we must do. I'll send for judge Parker and Whitlow, of course, and what's the other name—yes, Vinton. It shouldn't take us so very long to find them."

AND so, in a little while, it was once again five men in a room. Once again four sat in tense-held silence while Link Howland talked to them. There was ruddy Banker Yarnell, his eyes shining as a small boy's shines at talk of ghosts and goblins. Arch Whitlow's intent look was knife-edge sharp, the Hanging Judge leaned forward to hear, and the battle-marked face of Vinton alone failed to show excitement.

Link spoke to Vinton first: "Are you ready to show your hand?" he asked. "I wanted you here as representative of the railroad or the Bank Association or whatever you are. You drawin' cards as that?"

Vinton nodded. "The railroad pays my freight. Go on, Howland, spread your bet."

"You'll come in handy," Link said, "to back up some guesses I had to make. Another thing, which is mainly important

to me, which do you want the worst, Vinton—the gold that was stole at Vero Wells or the men that stole it?”

The detective considered that, eyes on the table. “Both,” he said, “but the gold comes first. If that was recovered we’d be inclined to ease the prosecution, of course. We’d probably ask for a light sentence—you know how it goes.”

“All right,” Link said. “I don’t know where it’s hid, of course, but I might persuade the man who does. It’s his one chance left. Mebbe a little later, Vinton, you and me and him can cook a deal.”

He turned to the others then, speaking as he had planned. “I went out to the Muleshoe,” he said, “to find who killed Cole Bixby. Well, I did find out, and Mr. Whitlow here was plumb right—it wasn’t Mark Howland. I got the murderer tied and locked away right here in town. It was Cole Bixby’s wife.”

“Or, leastways,” he said, “the woman he called his wife. She claims she’s been Mark Howland’s girl for a year, but that’s no matter. The thing is, Bixby knocked her down one evenin’ and she shot him in the back. Killed him plenty dead. When Mark Howland rode back to the ranch he pumped another bullet into the body and gave himself up as the killer. It was ugly business all around, but Mark thought he had a scheme to handle it.”

“Bixby’s wife!” Arch Whitlow muttered. “It’s possible, yes. That would explain—”

“There was two reasons why Mark done it,” Link said. “He loved the woman I guess. But the bigger reason was what I found sewed in some saddle flaps in the Muleshoe bunkhouse.” He reached into his shirt and let a sheaf of crisp new banknotes, gold and green, spill down upon the table. “Here’s McCusker’s share of the currency they grabbed in the Vero Wells robbery.”

Banker Yarnell slammed the table with an oath. Judge Joel Parker straightened in his chair, and Whitlow stared at Link with a queer disbelief that widened his dark eyes.

“I see it don’t surprise you, Mr. Vinton,” Link said.

“We thought as much,” the detective said, “but that wasn’t proving it. That’s why I bribed Kelso to throw me in jail,

keeping an eye on your brother. All we had was a clue, of course—Ben Gaines’ statement that one of the Muleshoe hands passed a bill in his place one night that he thought might be part of the loot. You’re aware, I suppose, that clever Mr. Mark Howland covered up that blunder by putting a gun in Gaines’ ribs and lifting the day’s receipts from his pocket. A little poke, he claimed, but when the money was returned the suspicious bill was missing.”

“Ben Gaines—” Link said thoughtfully. “It’s a little later we come to him. About the Muleshoe—I’d say it was planned as a robbers’ roost from the start. They had bigger profits in mind than beef. When the Vero Wells robbery was pulled, the way I figger it, the gang split up. Mark and Bix packed off the gold to a cache they’d provided in advance. It was a heavy load, and they wouldn’t try to tote it far. The rest of ’em made a fake trail to draw the hunt in the wrong direction, all hands meetin’ later at the Muleshoe.

“I reckon they thought it safest,” he continued, “if Bix and Mark was the only two who knew for sure where the loot was hid. The currency was split among the rest, to keep ’em satisfied, though they savvied it couldn’t be passed for a year or more. That’s how things stood, all tidy and snug, when Stella spilled the fat in the fire by killin’ Bix.”

HE looked at the tense faces around the table. His throat was dry, and his own words were a meaningless drone in his ears. Circumstance had tricked him, had fuddled and twisted all the purposes that had brought him here. There was an eagerness driving him to end this buzz-buzz talk, to grapple the throat of the mystery and finish it now. The chief ambition he had was to get himself long gone from here.

But he kept his voice steady, his tones restrained: “The Muleshoe couldn’t afford to have the law snoopin’ there. Mark Howland couldn’t risk what might happen if Stella was hauled in to jail. She’s flighty, she talks too much. So he saddled himself with the blame. He was playin’ it safe, knowin’ he’d never get rattled whatever come up. Then Ben Gaines’ business made the situation mighty touchy, you see,

and Mark put himself in the spot where he could shoulder the heaviest load of it."

He turned to Vinton: "Ben Gaines passed his suspicions to you. Did you let Kelso in on 'em?"

The railroad operative shrugged. "Why not? I didn't trust the sheriff, no, but I had to make a deal to get into his jail. I gained damned little by it, unless you count overhearing his conversation with you."

"Yes, I was the one that balled things up," said Link. "No wonder Mark tried to run me from town. Kelso was workin' on Mark for a split of the gold. Mark was mebbe stringin' 'im along, hintin' that some deal might be arranged when the murder charge was fixed. Then I stepped in the picture. Kelso heard I'd talked to Mark, and who I was, and likely he smelled a double-cross. For all he knew, Mark might have slipped me word where the loot was cached so that I could git it out of the country. To show Mark he meant business, Kelso sent Smiley's brother gunnin' me. His bullet killed George Parry over my shoulder."

Link spread his hands, watching the four faces.

"That just about covers it," he said, "except one other little item. It's clear that the Muleshoe had some undercover help from here in town. They had somebody to tip 'em off when the gold shipment was comin' through. That somebody gave 'em wise advice and kept 'em posted on developments from hereabouts. On the surface, mebbe, this certain man made it look like the Muleshoe and Mark Howland was nothin' to him. He likely talked against 'em, time and again, but all the same he was in cahoots. He passed 'em notice, for instance, that me and Jick was on our way and that we might look some handsomer with posies in our hands."

"I always suspected Kelso!" snapped Banker Yarnell.

Arch Whitlow's narrow glance locked with Link's. "Is this where Mr. Ben Gaines comes in again?"

"Just about," Link told him softly. "Almost, but not quite. It might just be possible that Ben Gaines is on the square. He might mean that talk of his about runnin' a decent place and wantin' to scotch the crooks. A man like that, with a notion

stolen currency was floatin' around, might take it in his head to spread his day's receipts out on his desk and comb the bills for bugs."

HIS chair creaked as he leaned back. "A man Ben Gaines had licked tried to saddle Gaines with the blame in just about his dyin' breath. But it don't hardly jibe. I figger the Muleshoe spy in town was a more important and smarter man than Gaines. It was a man who knew for sure where me and Jick was headed last night. It was a fellow who made it his business to learn what every stranger was doin' in town. Mark Howland didn't have no use for the sheriff's help, because this secret friend of his was closer to the law—"

"Just a minute!" Archer Whitlow said harshly. He lifted the lapel of his coat. "I have a certain document here—"

He was fast, this dapper County Attorney. He was quick and tricky and keen. He came out of his chair with a push of thighs that lurched the heavy table against Link Howland, that caught Link unexpectedly in spite of his alertness, and jammed him for a split-hair instant in his tottering chair. Whitlow's hand was plunged inside his coat, snatching the shoulder-holstered weapon there, in that wink of time while Link was still cumbered between table and chair.

It was blind instinct that pawed Link's gun and leveled it. He was lurching backwards, fighting the teetering chair, and he saw the glint of Whitlow's revolver whipped free, the black muzzle jumping at him across the scant distance, and he squeezed his trigger in a desperation shot. A luck shot, hit or miss. He fired as he was sprawling, and his body began a twisting roll before he touched the floor, his whole being tensed with expectation of Whitlow's gun-blast.

But there was none.

Link rolled like a cat, flinging his arm around for a second shot from the floor, and abruptly his gun-hand sagged. Archer Whitlow's revolver boomed, but the explosive discharge was thudded into the floor. With the smash of Link's shot, the tall attorney had straightened. His spread left hand reached out, pushing against air, and his pistol arm fell to his side as he lifted slowly on tiptoe. His mouth gaped

open, and his dark eyes stared wide toward the end of the room.

A reflex jerk of his finger detonated his aimless weapon, and with that muffled boom of sound Archer Whitlow's body was shrunken. He fell to his knees, then plunged forward on his chest.

Link Howland faced the others. "He signed his own warrant," he said grimly. "It had to be him. He tried to play both ends against the middle."

Voices rose from outside the office. Fists hammered the locked door.

"Get away!" cried Yarnell. "An accident—"

But the pounding came once more. "Judge Parker—Mr. Yarnell—" The outer voice was a terrified shout. "Quick—it's happened—Mark Tarrant's broke from jail! Two men already been shot! He's loose and armed and he's grabbed the judge's daughter!"

XII

LINK HOWLAND pushed figures from his path. He was running half-blind up the aisle of the bank, shouting some breathless sound that was almost a moan. It had happened—the ugliness he feared, the dark dread that had haunted his brain. Mark escaped—running free—shooting out his wild anger, his defeat, his devilment and desperation!

And Link Howland had caused it. Link Howland was responsible.

That was the panic of his thought as he ran. If men were killed in the Canyon City streets today, their deaths would be Link Howland's blame. He had meddled in Mark's affairs and brought down this disaster.

Most of the time, on that long ride from the Muleshoe, he had pondered the strange situation he faced. He had come to Canyon City to slip Mark free of a murder noose, right or wrong. No matter the risks, no matter his own concerns, that had been his determination regardless. But to save Mark's neck from the gallows—to give him one more chance—that was one thing. To keep him from a robber's cell, to rescue him from a punishment he justly deserved—no, that was quite another.

The ethics of the situation were mud-

dled in Link's mind, but there was one realization that shone forth clear. Once that he knew Mark's life was not at stake, his general course was obvious. As a thief, Mark would have to stand his punishment. Let him serve his time and settle his debt with the law. Link might be able to ease the sentence, but otherwise he would not stand in the way. Some folks might not see it so, but Link did not question that such was the path of his duty.

He had intended to go straight from the bank to the jail. He would face his brother there and explain how things stood. He would endure Mark's abuse and fury, trying to make him see the only sensible course. That Link had been the unwitting cause of the collapse of Mark's schemes, the defeat of his lawless plans—well, maybe some day Mark might understand.

Such had been Link's thoughts, riding to town beside the hellcat woman who had been the second factor in Mark's downfall. They swirled through his brain again now as he sprang through the door of the bank to the shutting uproar of State Street.

But now it was too late for feeble talk, for horse-sense plans. Mark had clamped the bit in his teeth and nothing this side of hell would stop him.

Link Howland knew his brother. He could sense the red rage, the frustration, the rat-in-a-trap desperation that had spurred Mark into this neck-or-nothing gamble against the odds. Mark had the Howland temper, the reckless bravado, the stubbornness that would not admit defeat. He was a crack shot, steel-nerved ruthlessness. He would balk at nothing.

And Link remembered the cry of alarm back yonder. "Grabbed the judge's daughter!" was the shout. In the haze of his mind was a blurry picture of Mark's grim features, wrath-twisted, and the smiling face of that tall hostage girl.

At the entrance to buildings there were people who stood frozen. Armed men dodged along the walks. In mid-street, eighty yards beyond, was a wrecked surrey. One horse of the bay team was down, and the other struggled frantically against the weight of death that anchored the traces. As Link stared, the plunging horse broke free and lunged away.

"Where is he?" Link shouted.

"Harness shop!" a watcher cried. "He carried the girl as a shield an' they couldn't shoot. But by Lord they got 'im cornered now!"

Link's hand was on his gun-butt as he ran. The sweat on his face had the chill of ice and all his body seemed filled with a bitter bloat of emptiness.

From up the street he heard Jick-Jack O'Bannon's roaring shout. "Link—this way!" Behind Link trailed Judge Joel Parker, Vinton, Banker Yarnell with a sawed-off gun, following his running heels that puffed the dust of State Street.

MARK HOWLAND'S escape was simplicity—a gun jabbed into the jailer's belly, as quick and easy as that. The Muleshoe hand who carried Jick's bullet-gouge in his thigh had apparently fogged his horse straight for the jail. He persuaded Lem, the jail-keeper, to let him have a word with Mark. Next thing Lem knew a pistol snout was nudging his belly, his keys were snatched, he was stripped of gun and cartridge belt, and his whining protests ended with the barrel of a .45 that whacked his skull.

But the luck outside didn't run to smooth for the desperate jail-break pair.

Mark Howland and the limping Muleshoe Man would need fresh mounts for the getaway. They were grabbing two at the Stud Horse rack when they were spied. One man whose horse they tried to steal was pistoled by the wounded puncher when he attempted to drag the thief from the saddle. Other men came piling from the bar, and Mark Howland's horse was shot from under him. His companion was downed, and for a minute the shouting, wild-shooting group had Mark trapped in the street.

That was when the surrey blundered along. Mark sprang aboard and knocked the gray-haired driver from the seat. Judge Parker's daughter was riding alone, and he threatened her with his gun. Men held their fire on the girl's account, and Mark slashed speed into the bays. He might have made it out of town if a bullet hadn't upended one bay in a founder.

The girl was Mark's front of protection into the harness shop. He carried her there, one arm clamping her slender

waist, shooting back to scatter those who surged in pursuit. The startled harness-maker scuttled out at a bellowed command.

In the pressure of action Mark Howland had chosen a flimsy fort to protect his stand. The cluttered and dingy shop was little more than a shack, a narrow single room crammed between two larger structures. There was a blank wall at the rear however, no side windows to guard, and bold defense could make its capture costly. A short counter faced the lone front window and the opened door, and behind this bulwark Mark and the fear-faced girl crouched.

The noises from the street faded to a whisper. A triangle of street fronting the harness shop became an island of silence that shimmered in the golden glare of sun against the dust.

Link Howland halted at sidewalk's edge, and his hand was shaky upon the butt of his gun. Along the roadway, from every shelter and vantage, thirty weapons besieged the hideout. A voice announced that other men had posted themselves at the rear. Link saw townsmen with hasty-snatched rifles, weather-brown riders with revolvers poised. He noted Ben Gaines' lumpy scowl and the shotgun held by bandaged fists.

"What's the play, Sarge?" Jick-Jack called.

"Run 'im out!" Ben Gaines cried thickly. "Burn 'im out, by Heaven! Mark Tarrant's played hell in this town too long—"

"Shut up!" Link rasped. "It's the girl, you fool!" He turned to Judge Joel Parker behind him. "Will you leave this up to me? Will you let me see what I can do?"

The bearded face was pale with shock. "Alice—" he gasped. "Warn them—no, they mustn't shoot! We've got to get her out!" He glared at Link. "Do what you can, man. You're his brother. Don't let him harm my girl!"

Link's eyes moved to the other faces around and read the unspoken agreement. He drew a long breath that squared his shoulders, lifted his head. The wild, dark thoughts no longer were shuttering in his brain. He had built up a concentrated coolness now, a steadfast decision that is trained into those who wear the Lone Star

badge. He spoke to Jick in his sharp, crisp lawman's voice:

"I'm goin' in. Keep the street in charge. If any man tries to rush the play, shoot 'im like a dog!"

He stepped from the walk, lifting his right hand. "Mark!" he shouted. "I'm comin' yonder. I want five minnits to talk."

Mark's reply was a bullet that spewed dust over Link's boots. "There's a sample, damn you," his deep tones roared. "The rest of my shells will aim higher. You try to rush me, to sneak in close, and the girl's the first to die."

"Will you talk?" Link cried.

"Come on, you rat," the answer rumbled, "but I'll make you just one deal. Free Stella, you hear, and let her ride to the door with two spare horses. We'll take this girl along until we're sure there's no chase. Once we're clear with three hours' start, we'll turn our hostage loose."

Link glanced back at the gray face of the Hanging Judge where hope and doubt mingled. Yarnell frowned indecision. "No!" Ben Gaines grated. "Who'd trust his word? He's a killer, a thief."

Vinton sidled forward, touching Link's arm. "Be careful," he whispered. "We don't want him killed. He's the only man who knows where they hid that eighty thousand."

Link's fist smashed blindly into the crafty face, knocking the detective back and down. He jerked around, strode the rutted dust in deliberate pace. His hand was lifted, signing parley.

"Comin', Mark—" his steady voice announced.

HE mounted the single step of the harness shop, and Mark's bleak face loomed out of the dimness. Mark leaned across the counter, steady pistol trained on his brother's chest, and he was hardly handsome now. His mouth was a slit of inner torture and desperation had frozen his eyes.

"Out of the door," he said. "Stand over. I'm glad you came, boy—you're the one jigger I had to see."

His voice was measured, coldly deliberate. He peered at Link with inhuman intensity, his finger crooked at trigger. Near the end of the counter, facing the danger-

ous door, sat Alice Parker. Her captor had found time to bind her against escape. Link saw her white dress ripped at the throat, the drunken tangle of her hair, the terror that stared from her wide eyes.

"You can't get away with it, Mark," Link said. "Hand me your cutter and call it quits. That hold-up is all they got against you now. You turn back the gold and you'll face no more than an easy prison term. Be sensible."

"I told you to nose out," Mark said in a harsh whisper. "I warned you wide from my affairs. But you wouldn't listen, you bulled ahead." He pronounced names in a droning chant: "Stella—Blackie—Mac—Segundo—little Charley Plank—and me to add at the end of 'em. It's a big tally, boy. It's a real bright polish on your badge."

The buzz of his words in the room was death.

Link Howland sensed the doom that spoke. He read Mark's message crystal clear, and he summoned the dregs of his courage to face it. He had come here in a last gamble to save Mark's life, but now he knew that the gamble would cost his own.

"We'll agree to your deal," he said quickly. "Stella and the horses will stand outside ten minutes from now. You can ride out, Mark, but you'll never ride free. They'll hound you down. You'll run and hide, you'll suffer and starve, but at the end they'll smoke you. There's too much law, Mark. If you got a grain of sense you'll hand me over that gun."

"You're smart, boy," Mark said. "You're too damn' smart. If you want my gun—" his mouth conformed—"just step up here and get it!"

It was draw or die. It was a game that Mark Howland, aged fifteen, had smilingly taught to his six-year-old brother one time, and Heads-I-Win, Tails-You-Lose was the name of it.

Perhaps Mark realized that fugitive flight with Stella was merely a bitter postponing of Fate. Perhaps he had steeled his mind to that grim inevitability, and his purpose now was to shoot the moon. He had signed his ticket as a tough hand long ago, and his pride would not easily stomach the medicine of surrender and defeat.

"Come on—" he whispered. "Take it, Tin Badge!"

Link's hands were limp and senseless, dangling at his thighs. He was aware of the girl, and aware as well that no move of his would alter her fate. Mark Howland was a murder machine, wound tight, and there was no telling how many would die before his spring ran down.

"All right, Mark," his dull voice said. "If that's the way it's got to be."

He made his move. He jerked his body sidewise, toward the wall, trying to shrink himself into the smallest target. He thrust his hand in the fastest draw he had ever made, slapping the butt and whipping it free—

But it was not fast enough.

TWO explosions, twin thunderclaps, smashed at him as he dodged. A shattering pain hammered his arm and his Colt's was flipped from his fingers, spinning against the wall-boards. A second shock pounded his shoulder and slapped him down.

He had no sense of falling. A driving force struck him, and suddenly he was on the floor. He sat there, propped with one weak hand, while surges of pain racked his body and dizzied his brain. In hazy vision he saw Mark still leaned across the counter. Mark's body seemed to sway in his sight, the grimness of his face was enlarged to double proportion, but the snout of his pointing gun never wavered an instant its sinister steadiness.

"Back!" Mark shouted. "Stand fast there outside! First move I hear and the girl gits it!"

Link shook his head weakly, and once again he could see with clarity. He saw the white dress of the girl. She was squirming and twisting, frantic movements of fright it seemed, though it was curious that her voice had never lifted above a moaning, monotonous sob.

"My deal still stands," Mark shouted to the besiegers in the street. "Stella, and three horses at the door! But meantime I'm finishin' a skunk who tried to pull a hideout gun on me!"

His face was a smiling devil's mask. Raw emotions worked in it—mockery and lust and disdain and the uglier ones without name. He leaned deliberately, his

elbow steadied on the counter, and his pistol barrel was death's steel finger pointed at his brother's head.

"You son of a dog—" he breathed.

Gun-blast! Gun-blast and a woman's eerie scream.

It was Alice Parker who screamed, and her strap-looped hands held the gun that blasted. The panic that squirmed her along the floor had placed Link's pain-flung Colt's within her finger's reach. She had seized the weapon unobserved, she clapped it tight and thrust it out, and screamed her terror as she tugged the trigger.

She screamed and she shot straight up at Mark Howland's face from less than ten feet distant. Her arms shuddered with the smoky detonations, the echoing whip-lash whacks, the slam-slam-slam. She shot and shot in a blind frenzy. And even when his face had disappeared, when Mark Howland had sagged down behind the counter and the gun-hammer was clicking on empty cartridge shells, she kept on jerking the trigger. She triggered a loadless gun at nothingness, with her eyes staring wild and her mouth pulled wide with eerie, insane screaming.

Jick-Jack O'Bannon was first through the door. He clapped a hand across her lips to silence her.

SO it ended. In pain and confusion and death and a girl's hysteria the final grimness was set down. *Finis*—except for one curious statement that Link Howland was to offer.

The incident came about a short time later.

Link sat on a bed in a pleasant room, his arm in a sling and his shoulder heavily bandaged. His face was tired, wan, but his upturned glance was eager.

"Are things all fixed?" he said to Jick.

The big man shifted uneasily. "Well, sure, Sarge. We can make connections at two o'clock. But the doc says—"

"I tell you I'm all right!"

"You was damned lucky," Jick insisted. "If either of them slugs had hit a big-sized bone—"

"Where's my hat?" said Link. "You get our stuff together. I'm fit to travel, I tell you. If the shoulder acts up we can put up somewheres along the way."

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Jick-Jack shook his head. "It sure beats me. I been havin' just a fine time here in Canyon, Link, and you could, too. Why you want to rush away? There's men here in town who could do you a heap of good, big jobs and plenty money. Ever'-where I go they're talkin' your name, and still you hide here in the room like a sick bear. You been on your feet three days and you never even been outside for a breath of air. A visitor comes up and you're hardly even civil."

Link shrugged. "This high climate—I dunno—it gets in my nose. It tickles."

"The least you might do," said Jick, "is to stop around and say so-long to folks who treated you nice. Take the judge's girl—Alice—she's mighty regular, mister. She'd never have to make eyes twice at me. But you just set and look at the floor and grunt a couple answers when she calls around. I think she likes you, Link. And you know damn well if it hadn't been for her—"

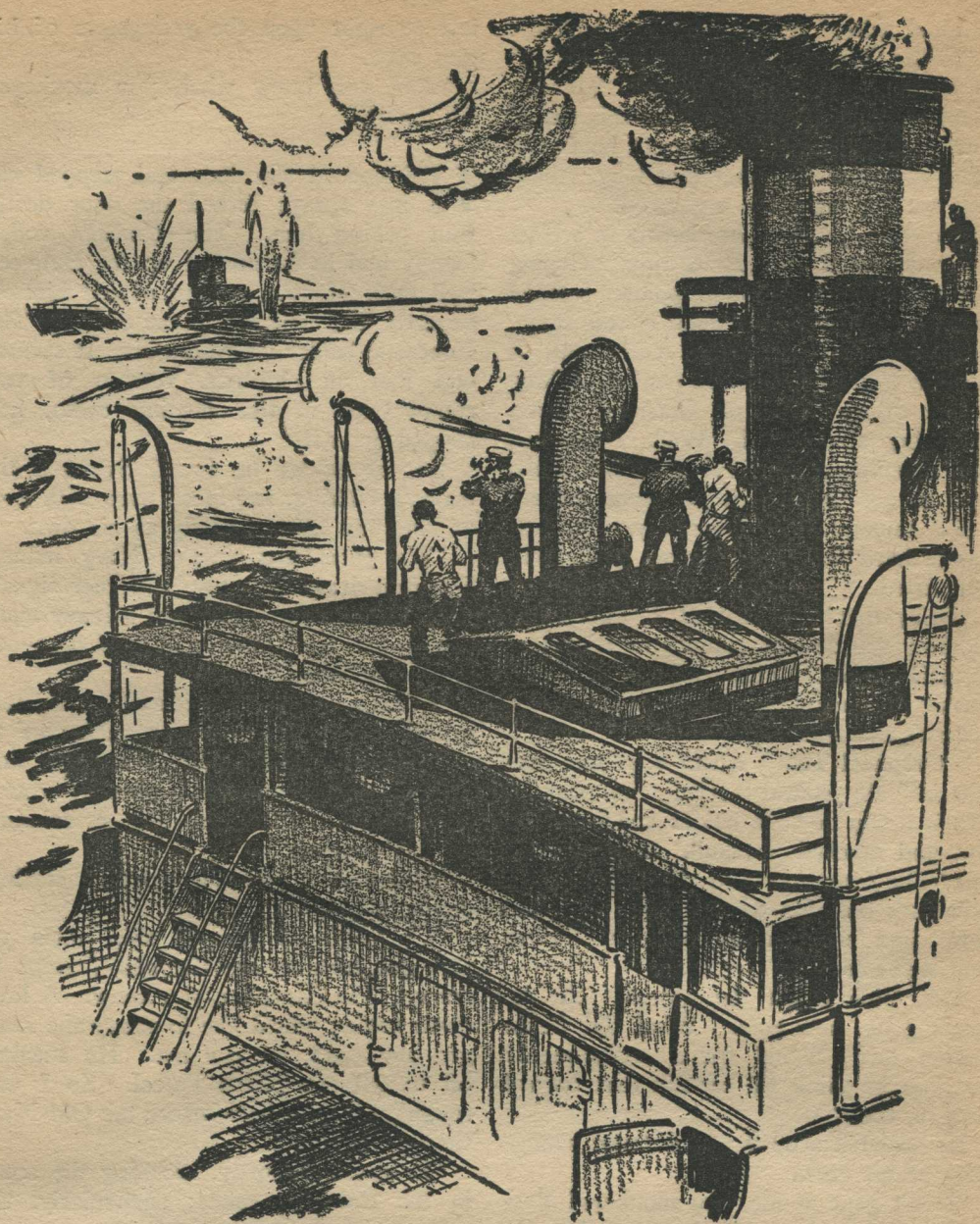
Link nodded slowly. He met Jick's stare, and by his look he tried to speak the queer emotions that churned within him. He could close his eyes and see Alice Parker. Not as she stood at the stage station, though, tall and pretty and masking a smile with her glove. He saw her kneeling, her hair wild and lips stretched wide, and a gun clasped tight in her hands.

He drew hard fingers across his eyes. "The queer thing is, Jick—I can't explain—" He shook his head slowly. "No matter what, he *was* my brother."



**THIS IS A FICTION HOUSE
MAGAZINE**





STEEL-FISH STEW

By Eugene Cunningham

The Nazi sharks slashed ferociously in the sea-lanes while aboard the wallowing S.S. Umballa spies traitored the old jinx-ship to her doom!

IN the armed guard deck house of the freighter *Umballa*, Masters looked grimly around at his gun crew. Outside, November squalls flailed the Halifax

anchorage. Icy winds shaved spindrift from the wave crests and flung it in sheets over the little vessel. The long, gray rollers slapped upon the *Umballa's* rust-

streaked sides. Masters listened sullenly.

"Well? Where's that other gun cap'n?" he demanded of his pointer. "Haven't laid eyes on him, yet. We take this damn' hooker out at dark, if the rust holds her paint and plates together that long. About time we got ourselves organized."

The door banged open, letting in a blast of wind-hurled spray. A tiny, stooping man slid inside. The young pointer jumped to help him force the door closed again.

"Forward gun's captain you want, is it?" the *Umballa's* steward panted, looking at the rating badge on Masters' sleeve. "Awsking about 'im? Well, I can tell you blooming quick, Nyvy: The *Umballa* jinx 'as got 'im, like it got some more!"

His fingers snapped sharply. Masters stared, hard blue eyes narrow, belligerent chin lifted.

"Belay that!" he snarled. "You're not peddling scuttle-butt rumors to Liverpool barmaids, now. This is His Majesty's Navy! Ne' mind the jinxes and hoodoos. Where's that gun cap'n?"

"'Orspital! That's where your gun captain is!" the steward cried triumphantly. "Took a slip down a ladder and broke 'is arm and cracked 'is skull. A good 'our ago. The fourth in four days, 'e is. The ballahou's not jinxed? Changing 'er nyme didn't jinx 'er? Fat lot you know! Four men we've lost."

"Ah, pipe down the gloom! If the man's gone, he's gone. What did Cap'n Verner do? Signal for a replacement? Or does he think I'll captain that for'ard poggun, too?"

He scowled around at the tense youngsters of his crew.

"Don't gape at me, you monkeys! Yesterday, I was first class boatswain's mate on a real ship—the *Raleigh*. Today, I'm second class on an old ark out of Rotten Row, and shepherd for a brand-new flock of lambs masquerading as gun crews! I'm supposed to chouse you around Davy Jones' locker and bring you back with no paint scratched. If a Nazi tin fish pops up, I'm to see that you smack him between wind and water. And with what? With a couple of Mark One, Modification Nothing, curios out of Francis Bannerman's collection of antique guns!"

He stood, a burly figure of middle height, to turn grim, weathered face from

left to right upon the youngsters of his gun crew.

"And you know what, you monkeys? I'll do it!"

HE opened the door and stepped out into spray; jerked the door deftly shut behind him. The *Umballa* rolled loggily and as he moved up the cluttered well deck Masters accommodated himself expertly, mechanically to the motion. The forecastle ladder interested him. It seemed odd that an oldtimer, veteran of two round trips in this floating coffin, had slipped upon it.

On the bridge he found Swenson the mate, a hulking, red-faced man with eyes as blue and hair as sandy as his own.

"We yoost gits anot'er Navy mans," Swenson drawled. "Cap'n Verner signals and yoost now we gits word a Navy mans comes for us. How you like her—our hoodoo ballahou?"

"What's the difference?" Masters grunted, staring across the anchorage to where the British cruisers *Raleigh* and *Chance* swung gray and ghostly around their hooks. "Besides, I'm a criminal serving sentence."

"Criminal?" Swenson repeated, staring, gaping slightly.

"Oh, yeh! I jumped ship when we first got here to see the girl I want to marry. I'm Canadian, you know. A low-down tattler, who'd like to marry the same girl and can't, he saw me. He sneaked off to tell our Shore Patrol. So I was caught and hauled up before the Old Man. On the *Raleigh*."

He laughed shortly, recalling the scene in the *Raleigh's* cabin; particularly, the skipper's dark, dyspeptic face.

"He's a generous soul. He admits it! Said he ought to send a veteran petty officer like me before a general court-martial, a court that could sentence me to be shot. But he was too kind-hearted. He just broke me from first class to second class, then shanghaied me to this coffin. Said it was probably just as fatal as a firing squad. And I was up for promotion to warrant officer!"

He thought of Furby's too-handsome face with the smile that always had something vaguely malicious about it, something crafty. He shrugged. "Oh, hell!

When I'm licked, I'm licked. I won't sneak to even up!"

He stopped short, to stare over the rail. A motor-sailing launch was making for the *Umballa*. At the tiller, bulking enormous in hooded windproof suit, was the familiar figure of Coxswain Benson, *Raleigh* man whom Masters had trained from ordinary seaman. A peacoated man huddled beside lashed bag and hammock at Benson's feet. A *Raleigh* man for gun captain? Masters wondered who it would be.

THE launch came smartly under the freighter's stern and along the lee side. Benson hailed the *Umballa*, bellowing for a sea ladder and a heaving line. Masters' grim face relaxed. From amazement, his expression boxed the compass to the grin of the fabled canary-gobbling cat. The passenger was standing, now, a tall, well-hated figure.

Swenson was bellowing to his watch. They came trotting out of shelter to lower a sea ladder and a heaving line. Up the ladder, climbing as neatly as he did most things, came Tol Furby, boatswain's mate first class. Benson's bow man bent the heaving line to Furby's bag and hammock. Furby turned to hoist them.

"Ah-h," Masters called to Benson. "What did this poor old hooker ever do to you? Bringing that white mouse!"

"We never had a mouse cage!" Benson answered. "But ain't it noble—him drawing the same tin can his snitching got you shanghaied to? Shove him down the slop-chute, will you? For the good of the Service?"

"It's going to be a flying fish trip, now!" Masters yelled back. "Don't know's I'd want to miss it. Don't forget us!"

He ran lightly down the ladder and went aft to the Armed Guard deckhouse. So he was sitting on his bunk, big hands locked behind his head, a cigarette drooping from one corner of his tight mouth, when Furby came in. Masters squinted at him.

"Some more of the Old Man's kind-heartedness?" he asked softly. "Afraid I'd be lonesome? Or one of his psychological experiments: Shoving you out into the dark to see what kind of child you really are on your own?"

"Thought even this can ought to have one real gun captain," Furby said airily. But his lightness seemed forced. "Now that I'm here, in charge—"

"In charge of the for'ard gun. Nothing else. Except, maybe, that pretty skin of yours and your usual carefulness about keeping it safe. Don't cross my bows, this trip. For you know and I know that even my fool trick of jumping ship wouldn't have hurt, except for your seeing me and running to the Patrol. You were the only one who saw me at Margery's; the only one who knew that I didn't rate liberty that night. So—"

Masters dropped his hands and leaned a little. Furby forced a tolerant grin, but he watched Masters fixedly, just as the puzzled gun crews watched.

"That's water under the stern, now. If your sneaking cost me a sword, I gave you the chance. The big thing, right now, and the thing that makes me laugh, is that the whole mess landed you in what's just about a suicide section! This hooker—"

"She's a jinxed ship!" Furby interrupted. "She's hoodooed. Alf Hawkins the steward says so. We're all hellbound in a wash-deck bucket! John Jonah himself is stowed away in the forehold! You know, I always did think you're sort of simple-minded, but to see you swallowing that!"

"This hooker transshipped the *Elinor Cain*'s ammunition cargo," Masters went on grimly. "And there's not a bit of certainty that the Nazis don't know it. Meaning that our description's probably posted in every U-boat conning tower. If we go a thousand miles without a sub' nosing up to pass the time of day— The time's coming, Furby, when all your sneaky cleverness won't help you a little bit. You're going to have to fight, and you'll have just about nothing to fight with. And if I go skyhigh I'll have the pleasure of watching you die a thousand times before the rest of us die once!"

SUPPER was eaten in the deckhouse. Furby said little during the meal, Masters spoke only to ask for something. After the meal, he got into the stiff canvas windproofs that were winter uniform on the North Atlantic, and went aft to his gun. He stared grimly at the *Raleigh's*

spray-dimmed lights. It seemed to him that the key to everything he wanted was there, across the black water. Presently, it would all be left far behind.

Full darkness now was about the *Umballa*. She tugged at her ground tackle, seemed to whine restlessly. It was only the ancient plates straining in her hull, only the wind thrumming in her old guys and stays. But to Masters it made her seem something alive. He looked forward. About time to go. As if the thought was the signal, he heard the clatter of the anchor chain.

He got out his silver boatswain's pipe and trilled a long call that brought his gun crew out and up to their stations. The clanking rattle of the anchor chain ceased. Without a light showing, the *Umballa* stole out of the anchorage and turned down the harbor with a stuttering throb of shaky engines.

Masters went forward to hunt Furby, who had manned his gun. In flat, grim voice he said:

"It's got to be watch-and-watch all the way. I don't care how we start, tonight. The dog-watches will even things up for both crews, of course, from now on. If you want to finish this first watch, I'll take the midwatch. All I want is to set the watches going, so they'll run themselves. Then I can stay to wind'ard of you and not smell you more than necessary. I tell you again: Don't—cross—my—bows!"

He turned away from the huddle of dark shapes, but when he had gone almost to the break of the forecastle Furby yelled:

"You take the midwatch. That's the way I'd arranged it!"

Masters laughed and went down the ladder.

The after crew shivered through the midwatch. At four of the black morning they left the gun. As they filed down the poop ladder, Masters in the rear, there was a startled grunt from the first man, then the soft thud of bodies tumbling from ice-coated ladder treads to the well deck. When the confusion was cleared, a sight-setter groaned with broken arm.

Masters and the *Umballa's* master set the boy's arm and gave him a sedative from the medicine chest. Alf the Cockney

steward, helping, looked ominously at Masters, but facing his belligerent expression, only shook his head.

In the deckhouse Masters looked furiously at his crew.

"Talk up, you monkeys!" he snarled. "What's this about a line trailing across that ladder?"

"That's what it was," the pointer told him. "Some nitwit left a line trailing across the ladder. Dees tripped on it and jerked the rest of us down. We all fell on him."

"A line! There was no line across when we climbed that ladder at midnight. Nobody went up or down during the watch . . . I wonder!"

But he could find no answer to the puzzle. Next morning, one of the *Umballa's* crew volunteered for service with the gun and Masters reorganized his men. The stolid, almost stupid-faced borrowed sailor, known only by his nickname of "Ditty Box Head," he drilled as rammerman.

DURING that day, Masters put the crew through such drilling as they had never suffered. In the afternoon empty boxes were dropped overboard for targets. Shooting, like spotting, was poor. But three days of instruction and drill brought large improvement. The after gun began to smash the boxes. They felt the swellings of pride, until Masters took over as pointer and scored three hits with as many shots.

Two more days dragged quietly past. Dees, the sight-setter, was fairly comfortable, but Captain Verner searched the gray and watery horizon for some ship to which he could transfer the invalid. But only distant smoke palls showed across the wintry sea and they disappeared before speaking was possible.

Passing of a thousand eventless miles worked a change in Furby's manner. Masters saw it—and understood it. He eyed his enemy with hard, contemptuous grin, as Furby's sulkiness and silence gave way to the swagger he had worn on the *Raleigh*. On a gray, wind-whipped morning, while Masters sweated his crew, a messenger came aft with an order from Furby to stand by for target practice. Swenson, the mate, and Alf Hawkins, the Cockney steward, were standing near

Masters. The enmity of the gun captains was well known to all the *Umballa* people. The two looked curiously at Masters. He only shook his head absently.

"Tell Mister Furby—" he hardly looked at the uneasy boy of the forward crew—"that on this business of rank I break down and admit that he's a lot ranker than *anybody* else. But I don't think that gun cap'ns have seniority in their midst. Anyway, I'm playing it that way. But, of course, if Mister Furby disagrees, he can come aft to discuss it with Admiralissimo Masters."

He turned, now, to beam upon the youngster.

"But if, somewhere in this big world, Mister Furby should have a friend, that friend ought to tell him not to come arguing unless he's certain-sure his clothes will stand the climate!"

"I t'ink Furby's not like it, t'e after guns always smacks t'e boxes, and his guns don't hits so much," Swenson drawled, grinning and nodding. "Your crews is t'e best, Masters!"

Alf Hawkins looked ominously out over the gray sea.

"I don't like it!" he whined. "Not a bleeding bit! Too quiet! Go orn—laugh! But don't think our jinx is off. The bloody thing's just wyting!"

Night brought pallid moonlight. Masters, mustering his crew at eight bells—eight o'clock of the sea's "first watch," thought that the *Umballa* could do very well without the moon. But the light grew stronger and he shook his head grimly.

Alf Hawkins brought up a big copper pot of coffee and corned beef sandwiches. The gun crew ate and drank and talked.

"Ditty Box," the borrowed *Umballa* man, now came loafing up to the gun, to grin at Masters, who glared at him.

"I just took a look around, Cap'n," the sailor reported cheerfully. "Fine night. Maybe we gits a fight."

"You stick to station on watch!" Masters snarled. "Keep that square head of yours against this popper."

But within thirty minutes "Ditty" was gone again. Masters, hunting angrily about, found him aft, huddled behind

the old hand-steering wheel. When Masters reached around the tarpaulined wheel and caught his shoulder, something dropped with metallic sound to the deck. Both reached, but Masters got it—a cylindrical electric torch.

"Looking for my tobacco can," Ditty explained.

"Hunted it with a flashlight?" Masters cried. "Turned that on up here? To advertise where we are?"

"Ah, no! T'e light's for belowdecks!"

SILENCE gripped the crew for a half-hour after that. The freighter plugged steadily ahead, blunt bows lifting on the long swells, dropping into the hollows, rising. Then, without warning, from somewhere over to starboard in the shiny hillocks of water, there came the measured, dull *pong! pong! pong!* of three shots. In the air over the *Umballa* were odd hissings and whistlings. Every head but Masters' retracted turtlewise.

"Swing her over!" Masters grunted. "Shake a leg! This is a fight, you monkeys! Around she goes!"

The spotter's long-drawn, melancholy wail brought range and deflection from high on the foremast. Masters swore wearily.

"Six thousand yards! Take it easy, you monkeys! Nothing for us to do. We can't even see him, much less hit him. But maybe he won't hit us, either. If he comes closer, we'll swing."

Shells continued to hiss like angry seagulls over the *Umballa*, with occasional variation when one landed in the water astern to raise a geyserlike splash. Masters watched grimly and talked to the youngsters to ease their tension.

Suddenly, without warning, Furby's gun burst into a staccato chattering. As fast as it could be loaded, Furby fired it. "The damn fool!" Masters cursed underbreath at the wastage of precious ammunition.

Then its barking was drowned by a tremendous, splintering crash forward. The foremast swayed, leaned to port, then went overside, carrying the spotter's barrel and one end of the wireless antenna. Masters looked over at the scurrying men in the well deck, then lifted his glasses to stare seaward again.

"Try three thousand," he grunted. "I'll try to spot from here. He's certainly walking in on us. I almost thought I saw his wake. Stand by for a shot and some fast work. Where's Ditty?"

He ran to the old hand-steering wheel, but the sailor was not there, so he ran back to the break of the poop for a look down onto the raffle of gear in the well deck. One long stare past the crew's deckhouse, and he took the ladder in sliding descent, arms stiff and hands upon the manropes. He landed like a cat and ran forward.

Ditty and Swenson the mate were beyond the deckhouse. But they were not occupied with the wreck of the foremast! Swenson was in Captain Verner's motor dory; Ditty was lowering the little boat. Already, it was level with the side.

"What do you monkeys think you're doing?" Masters roared.

Swenson leaned to stare at him. Then his hand came up; his arm straightened a little. The pistol was very plain to see and Masters' knees bent almost automatically. He dropped behind the hatch and tugged at his windproofs to get at the Service .45 he carried. As he drew it he heard Swenson's voice in guttural orders. English and Spanish were his only languages, but somehow he knew that Swenson's peremptory commands, Ditty's gasping replies, were spoken in German!

MASTERS worked cautiously to put automatic and head around the hatch. Instantly, there was a flat report from the dory. The slug sang on the hatch within inches of Masters' face and ricocheted whiningly away. Then Masters shot at Swenson twice and saw the capped head jerk. Swenson came to his knees and out of extended hand his pistol dropped to the *Umballa's* deck. Even in the hiss of shells overhead and the reports of Furby's gun, Masters thought that he heard the rap of it striking.

Swenson went downward, out of sight. Masters came to his knees, looking grimly for Ditty. Now, he understood that electric torch. It had been used in shelter of the sailor's jacket, for signaling. Under his very nose, on the poop. Night after night, doubtless. It had perhaps not located the darkened *Umballa* for that

sub', but it had surely identified her after she had been located. His arm stiffened with the thought and he began to move, hunting the sailor, ignoring the clamor of Furby's gun.

He had taken only a step when for the second time a metallic crash sounded forward. Bits of splintered wood and steel rained over the well deck. Masters' ears rang so that he could hear nothing. He guessed that a direct hit had been scored on the forward gun and at thought of the effects upon the crew he shook his head and snarled wordlessly. Then something touched his knit watchcap softly; something stung his arm waspishly. He went to the deck again and as his ears readjusted themselves to sounds he heard a pistol shot.

Backward to the hatch and around it, then he saw Ditty, leaning right and left, pistol ready. Grimly and surely, Masters fired twice. The sailor staggered, straightened, then as if his body were all joints he came down in a moveless huddle. A shrill voice yelled from the poop.

"Masters! We can see it! Got the sights set! Masters!"

Masters whirled and ran for the ladder, to plunge upward. The crew's white faces were all turned expectantly upon him. He growled at them, shouldered the pointer away and took his place. Through the telescope he made out a low-lying shape with hazy column rising from it; with bulbous black mass forward of the conning tower.

"Ready, you monkeys! Let her come up on the swell. . . . Now!"

With the *pom!* that black mass of figures at the sub's forward gun vanished. Masters heard the clatter of breech opening, the clang of cartridge case, the bang of breech closing. He fired his second shot at the conning tower.

He would have sworn that he saw his shell strike the conning tower. But the after gun became a thing of dark, flying fragments. Masters yelled savagely. The crew was yelling, too, and he had to bellow his orders to reload. They slammed in another load, and another.

Masters pounded the conning tower. He had always been an amazing pointer, outstanding even on trophy ships. Now, he had a toothless target—No, not quite!

He saw the white wake of the torpedo racing toward the *Umballa*, pulled away from the gun to run to the side and watch. Captain Verner was at his elbow. Silence had come so abruptly that Masters felt shaken by it. He swallowed again and again and at last heard the triumphant chorus from the crew behind him:

"She's sinking! She— Watch her tail go up!"

The big sub' was rising, aft, like a porpoise diving. It hung there for what seemed endless time, then slid greasily downward, and the sea was empty. The torpedo came on. The *Umballa's* engines throbbed stolidly. Masters clenched his fists and felt every muscle in arms and trunk iron-stiff with the strain. If he could only scream to the engineer to put on speed; one little spurt would carry them clear! Then the torpedo went under the stern and there was no sound.

"It— It's past believing!" Captain Verner gasped. His big hand lifted, shaking so that it fumbled with cap visor. "— We beat 'em. When your for'ard gun was wrecked, I gave up."

Masters drew a great, slow breath, turning— And it was as if the world exploded, then. A sullen roar was all about him as some enormous wind lifted him and whirled him in empty space. Then he was in water, but with no consciousness of having fallen. He went down until vaguely he thought that even here in mid-Atlantic depths his feet would touch the bottom. He began to fight desperately, maniacally. Suddenly, he could breathe again.

ALL the sky was filled with fluttering, twinkling bits of debris. Something huge hovered over him like a gigantic bird. It splashed into the water and sank, sending a wave that lashed his face. He wrestled out of his unfastened wind-proofs and worked off his shoes, then turned in the icy water to find support. There was a dark mass close by, but when he reached it he found only a tarpaulin and bit of scantling. He swam doggedly toward another segment of flotsam. Clothing weighed him down; he flailed the water with merest parody of his powerful crawl stroke.

This was a ragged section of the deck.

There was even an eyebolt in it. He fought against the numbing cold of the water, snarling angrily and impotently at his weakness.

Inch by inch, he worked up until he clung to the eyebolt, rolling as the wreckage lifted and fell with the waves. Convulsive shivering warned him and he worked arms and legs until the shadow of warmth came back to his rugged body. Thought of the explosion was possible, too. He raised on an elbow and tried to look around. There was no near sign in the paling moonlight of the luckless little freighter.

He got to his knees for a better look. Tiny pieces of the wreck floated all around. But he was a long time seeing a length of spar fifty yards away, with a man clinging to it. Minutes dragged and it came closer. He yelled and an arm came up in feeble acknowledgment.

Then the arm sagged, and the head vanished, also. Masters hesitated. Sight of the water, and memory of its iciness, made the bit of decking seem wide and secure as a battleship. Then he cursed himself disgustedly and dived over. He swam with enormous concentration on the movement of arms and legs, saying *left!* —*right!* over and over to himself. The thirty yards were like miles, but he saw the drowning man's head and the arm reaching for the spar.

Masters got to the spar and edged along it. He caught the man's collar and hauled him to the spar, trod water while he worked the limp body up and across it. His own raft showed on a crest, a black square that seemed a hundred yards away. He worried off his silk neckerchief and lashed the man's upper arm somehow to the spar, then moved to the end of the timber and began to swim, towing it toward the decking. Whenever he was near exhaustion and rested his still weight upon the spar, it sank until only his nose was clear of water. Time after time he had to rest so. Always, the decking seemed far away.

"*In—the water! In the water, there! Hold—on!*"

The long-drawn hail came from somewhere overhead. But also it penetrated Masters' dazed mind as if it came from some part of his own head—born of a

wish. He stopped swimming and the spar sank. This time, his face went under water. He tried to swim upward, lost the spar and began to go down. Then he was dragged up and dimly knew that he was being lifted high, let down upon a swaying floor.

AFTERWARD, for a time, he knew nothing at all—until whisky stung his mouth. He opened his eyes.

"You!" Serrels the pharmacist's mate cried, grinning. "Too tough for Davy Jones, even!"

Masters looked stupidly around the *Raleigh's* familiar sickbay, then more sensibly at Serrels. He was tired as he had never been; weak; he wanted only to lie here and rest.

"We heard the shooting. Left our convoy and tootled over," Serrels explained briskly. "But you blew up—looked like the world coming to an end; whole ocean and sky afire! Combed the whole area. Finally found one Navy man and one *Umballa* sailor. Both cashed in. Armed Guard boy had a leg off. Opened up the radio but no answer. Then we found you and Furby on that spar. Think nobody else survived. If a ship had picked up anybody, it would have answered our call."

"Just Masters and me?" Furby croaked from the bunk above Masters, as Masters stared incredulously at Serrels.

He rolled with squeaking of springs and his face appeared over the edge of the bunk. He looked fixedly at Serrels.

"Lend a hand, Serrels! I'm getting up. Feel all right."

Masters made one small shrugging motion, then closed his eyes, and fell asleep.

When he waked again it was because of gentle shaking. This time he looked up at the surgeon and commanding officer of the *Raleigh*. The Old Man's dark, square, dyspeptic face was without its usual sardonic veneer; he grinned cheerfully at Masters.

"Well, sailor! You've certainly occupied and enjoyed yourself with alarums and excursions, since you left us. Seems that I was only wrong in part, about time on the *Umballa* being much the same as a firing squad, what? That must have been a Class A dogfight! Too bad about the Armed Guard youngsters, and the *Um-*

balla crew. But that's War! The Nazi is a tough customer, in a sub'. But Furby tells me you got her, beyond doubt. And that's dam' fine!"

Masters nodded. His mind was still fuzzy, but he could feel mild surprise that Furby seemed to have been shocked into ordinary decency.

"Thank you," he mumbled. "It was luck—if anything."

"Luck?" the Old Man barked. "Well—I see what you mean, if I don't agree with you. A battle between those antique poppers and new Nazi four-inchers. But it seems to me to have been about as sweet gunnery and cold nerve as anybody's Navy could furnish. But what was the matter with you and your after gun? Furby says you didn't come to the party until the very last. He thought you were out of commission; that he had the war all to himself."

"No use shooting at something you couldn't even see, much less reach," Masters said almost indifferently. "Actually, if the sub' hadn't decided to come up close where his militiaman shooting could land, I wouldn't have had a Chinaman's chance at her."

"You wouldn't have had a chance?" the Old Man said softly.

Masters frowned at him. The Old Man was glaring!

"Why, no, sir! My first look at her through the telescope showed two gun crews ready. I'm a good shot, but I hardly expected to score with the first crack and wipe out the for'ard gun. Before she could open up with her after gun, I landed a lucky ricochet on her conning tower that smashed the gun and jammed something in the controls. Else she certainly would have submerged. I went on hammering her. She let go one torpedo, but it missed us. Then she hoisted her tail and sank."

"Masters!" the Old Man said thickly, furiously. "I thought I knew your faults and your good points. But it seems that my picture was wrong! That you'd try a cheap lie on me after a man risked his neck to save your life!"

"A lie?" Masters grunted, staring bewilderedly. "How? Why—do you mean that Furby told you *he* sank her? And—and saved *me* in the water?"

"Orderly!" the Old Man bellowed. "Get Furby here—*pronto!*"

HE went over to glare out of the sickbay air port. Masters, looking at the iron stiffness of that broad back, shook his head. How did Furby think he could get away with this? Then he remembered Furby's first question about other survivors. There were only the two of them! And Furby had a spotless record.

"You sent for me, sir?" Furby asked respectfully from the door, breaking the tense silence of minutes. He came inside.

"Furby!" the Old Man snarled, whirling at the port. "Masters claims that he killed those masquerading Germans, sank that sub' and, I gather, saved your life after the explosion!"

Furby's face was white. To Masters, it seemed to show the absolute of guilt. But Furby came a step forward to gape at Masters and shake his head. Suddenly, he wagged an accusing finger.

"So that's what you meant! After I dragged you to the spar! You told me that I wouldn't get a bit of credit! But I never would have believed it! You tried to get me on the *Umballa*, with your lines stretched across ladders to trip me. But that you'd lie like this, now, because nobody's alive to call you."

The Old Man was ominously calm, now; narrow-eyed.

"So that's how it was," he began quietly. "You told him—"

"Ship—ahoy! What ship—"

The ghostly hail came through the wreathing gray fog outside the open air port; apparently from the *Raleigh's* bridge.

"*Yorkshire Queen*—of Hull," a tiny voice answered out of immensity. "Bound for Liverpool. We have got—"

The rest of it was smothered by fog. The Old Man lunged out of the sickbay. Furby, after one furtive look about, slid after him. Serrels and the surgeon looked at Masters.

"Bent!" Serrels said quickly. "The ship's company knows, if the Old Man doesn't, the difference between you and that white mouse! You never lied or knifed anybody in the back."

"Stop it!" the surgeon commanded, if

with a shade of hesitation. "This is the commanding officer's affair. Keep out!"

Masters tried to think coherently, but he felt like a man trapped.

Automatically, sailor-wise, he had noted the stopping of engines, the patter of running feet on the deck above, the faint shrilling of boatswain's pipes, the passing of words. Mechanically, too, he heard without really hearing the throb when once more the *Raleigh* was underway. But he was thinking desperately, if dully. Abruptly, he asked Serrels:

"Did Furby have a neckerchief on, when he was picked up? Think hard and straight! For when I dragged him to the spar I used *my* neckerchief to lash his arm to it."

Before Serrels could do more than nod, heavy and deliberate footsteps came through the compartment outside the sickbay, with lighter steps behind. The Old Man stood, framed in the doorway, scowling grimly.

"Your neckerchief?" he growled. "But suppose that Furby swears he jerked off your neckerchief while saving you? No! That wouldn't be proof enough. But it's not necessary. The *Yorkshire Queen* picked up most of both gun crews and the *Umballa* company. So, here's your whole crew, Masters, some a little battered, but all able to navigate. Plus about half of the *Umballa* men and two gunners of Furby's. I think they all want to thank the man who sunk the sub'. Furby is a prisoner in the brig, naturally. I ought to tow him astern!"

He cleared his bull throat raspingly.

"Sorry I let a synthetically-spotless record influence me. But your long string of hard luck is run out. This business is Medal of Honor. And that carries with it automatic examination for warrant officer. You know that you can pass it! And it will be just a springboard to your commission. Congratulations!"

"Hi, Chief!" cried the young pointer of Masters' gun, unimpressed by the gold lace brushing past him. "How you feel?"

Masters grinned foolishly at the faces in the doorway.

"Fine, you monkeys! How d' you expect me to feel?"



Fighting with every ounce of power in his frame, Scarlet battled to break the grip of those terrible, boneless arms.



"Feel of this blade
And remember no more—
For the Green God of Sheba
Has knocked at your door—"

GREEN HELL

A SPINE-TINGLING NOVELET OF AFRICA'S HELL COAST

By Theodore Roscoe

Illustrated by M. LINCOLN LEE

THINGS happened when Peter Scarlet returned east of Suez and got off the boat at Terbera. The little American curio hunter had expected they would; and was servicing his Webley automatic as the *Red Sea Lady* slid into her berth dockside.

You could smell everything and trouble in Terbera. Sprawled on the Somaliland coast, its foreshore washed by the Gulf of Aden, the place was the garbage incinerator of the world. Knife-nosed Arabs, woolly Abyssinians, Greeks, Spaniards, Cockneys fresh out of the Dartmoor, na-



tives who looked like white men and white men who looked like natives crowded the wharf to greet the *Red Sea Lady*. She was a pretty tough dame, herself, and gave them the bird from her funnel siren as she came alongside.

Scarlet shook his head at the odorous yellow heat sizzling through his porthole and went on punching shells into his automatic. You could see by the way he snapped in the clip, flicked open the safety, that he was not unfamiliar with guns. Even if you couldn't see the four or five sharpshooter's medals rusting in a box of cast-off collar buttons back home.

Then he tucked the gun into the shoulder holster he hadn't used since the last time out this way, and strolled out on deck to survey the town. Colors vivid as parrots in the African twilight. Greens, reds, browns, and here and there the glint of gun metal or a half-concealed blade. Dock men hollered and bawled as the Arab sailors tossed out the shore lines and the boat's hull ground along the jetty. Scarlet leaned on a stanchion and sought through the surge of beachcomber faces, his sharpened eyes shadowed by the scooped brim of his sun helmet.

He frowned.

The man he wanted wasn't there. And he didn't like the looks of the crowd that was. He stuck a cigarette in his close-clipped, grizzled beard and guessed swiftly that there was trouble somewhere around the corner.

A hand touched his arm, and the little curio hunter turned swiftly. It was the ship's quartermaster: "Some bunch," the sailor grinned. "We make some weird ports on this run, but this Somali coast has 'em all beat. Goin' to stay here long, mister?"

"Not any longer than necessary," Scarlet grunted. "Just go ashore and look around, I guess. A little business. How long is the *Lady* tied up here?"

"Only overnight," the sailor growled. "Leave tomorrow dawn. We're unloadin' railroad irons, and as soon as those dock wallopers an' donkey engines get goin' there'll be a row to split your ear drums. Lord knows why they wanta build a railroad on this coast. There ain't no place to go. Just sand and them lousy red cliffs running off to nowhere. I've been up in

them sandstone crags, mister, an' believe me, I didn't stay long. Too much like walkin' along the forgotten end of the world."

"Is that all there is to the town?" Scarlet asked, gazing off.

"That's all. Nothin' but shacks, beachcombers an' honky tonks. Farther down, they say the coast ain't been explored. Once a year there's a big rush here on some fool treasure legend—King Solomon's mines—buried rubies—that sort of bunk. Then the thing dies out an' th' beach combers stay stranded and rot to death on this pier. It's a tough spot, all right. There ain't a tougher coast east of the canal."

"Hmmm," Peter Scarlet drawled absently. "Sounds interesting."

Interesting!

THE ship's engines had stopped. A donkey train chugged out on the pier dragging a string of clanking flatcars. A rusty crane, standing like iron bones against the crimson sky, moved a long, hooked arm over the ship's afterdeck. Stevedores lined up on the wharf, shouting a Babel of tongues, and loading machinery began to pound and thud. Yellow dust boiled up at the sky and seemed to thicken the heat. Scarlet mopped his face and fixed a grim scrutiny on the roof-tops and raffish buildings huddled together protectively on the ragged foreshore under limp gray palms.

Lamps began to wink yellow among the crooked lanes; and the little American curio hunter was uneasy. Those red cliffs swooping down behind the town, jagging along the coast of faded sand looked ancient and mysterious as veils. Silent crags and crinkled ravines, dark as valleys on the moon. The last of daylight lay on the beach dim as an old man's whiskers. It would have been a lot better if he'd gotten here in daytime.

"Yahooo!"

The yell sailed up from below, and Scarlet leaned over the rail. Down on the dock a wizened crone in rags was fishing on the sea wall, pulling in her line. The string came taut out of murky water under the ship's bow, and a wizardish object dangled on the hook. The crone hollered and men came running as she yanked in her catch.

A blob of squirming flesh plopped on the concrete. Watery legs writhed and flopped on the stone, and the thing shot a squirt of ink at the old woman's feet.

"Octopus," the quartermaster chewed at Scarlet. "Baby one. They come plenty big in these waters. Lie mostly in the deep coves. The natives eat 'em. Big delicacy."

The old woman was stamping on the big delicacy's coiling legs; and Scarlet blew a small oath through his beard. That was a hell of an object to come out of water that had been so blue. By the looks of it, there were a lot of its brothers walking around this place on two legs. He turned away, shoulders hunching.

Arc lights torched down on the pier, and the din gained momentum as Arabs swarmed aboard and began to heave iron rails overside. A half dozen fights broke out among the stevedores; a black man came running under the bridge-wing, his face gashed by a knife and a crimson thread dribbling from his mouth. An Arab cop hit a thin man over the head with a loaded club, and the business of moving the cargo went on. The iron rails made a crashing like cannon-fire.

Peter Scarlet was glad his gun was against his ribs. He didn't like Terbera. He didn't like his business in Somaliland. He didn't like any of it.

"There goes our gangway," the quartermaster shouted. "An' I wouldn't try to sleep aboard tonight, if I were you. The racket would wake the dead. There's a couple hotels in town, but if you go ashore I wouldn't walk them streets alone for a million dollars."

Peter Scarlet nodded and went down the gangway alone. He was turning up the pier when a yellow-faced dragoman wrapped in a dirty sheet stepped in front of him and held up his hand with a loud whisper.

"Pardon, my frien'. Thees ees Pefer Scarlet, the American?"

"Right."

"I have been watching for you, my frien'. A message."

He pressed a soiled bit of notepaper into Scarlet's palm. Standing under an arc light, the little curio hunter opened the note. It was penciled in English and in a hurry:

Scarlet—

Unable meet you at pier. You will understand. Have reserved room for you at Rhodesian Willy's Hotel, within walking distance of wharf. Wait there in your room until you hear from me. Keep absolute silence and lay low. All hell popping. In haste.

Joseph Perdu.

When Scarlet turned around the yellow dragoman had vanished.

II

THERE was no use hunting the fellow—like trying to find a handful of smoke in the dark—but Scarlet didn't like the way he had gone. All the faces and sheets around him looked the same; you couldn't hear yourself think in the uproar. The whole affair smelled worse by the minute, smelled of the underhanded, gave the little curio hunter the feeling he got by watching a moving curtain in a dark window. Why the devil hadn't Perdu given a few details? Why hadn't Perdu been able to meet the ship? What had happened to Doc? Easy enough to guess anything might have happened in this African backwater.

Scarlet hurried up to a native soldier leaning against a shed, carbine in armpit, cheroot in greasy teeth. He had to shout to make himself heard:

"You there! Where's Rhodesian Willy's Hotel?"

The Somali came out of a drugged doze. "Rhodesian Willy's? Down that street. You go thees way, then thees way. Across park. Huh."

Scarlet didn't like it. No taxicabs, cars, rickshaws in this town, and the cops looked doped. Once out of the lighted area of the wharf he was in a muddy lane of shadows where a few bug-plastered bulbs on shabby poles only served to exaggerate the night. The waterfront stank lustily of dead fish and damp weed and old mud. Most of the town seemed dockside where the *Red Sea Lady* lifted her spotty nose above the stench and din. Walking into abrupt night, Scarlet turned "thees way, then thees way" into a district of rat nests where tin pianos jingled and shapeless men brawled like sodden dummies over tables, and shriveled women with travesty faces cawed and beckoned from doorways.

He stumbled over a Negro that might

have been drunk or crucified in the middle of the alley; side-stepped a wagon drawn by tandem camels, and came to a park that looked like a deserted graveyard of white men's hopes abandoned to the darkness of Africa. Scarlet slapped mosquitoes and was skirting this deserted garden-spot, passing a wrecked poinsettia bush thick with flowers. He never saw where the weapon came from, but he heard it as it started.

Zaff!

The little song or a knife, whistling on its stroll somewhere through the air. Instinct, seventh sense, and the training of one used to the outposts of God, Allah and Buddha threw Scarlet to one side. Reflex. The blade razored a slice from his coat collar, soared out under a street lamp and dug itself, quivering and humming, into a palm bole.

Scarlet spun, hurled himself into the poinsettia, dived clean through the mass of blossoms and came out on the other side. But the bush was empty and the park slept undisturbed. In the radius of the mean street light no shadow moved, no sound echoed. A ghost must have launched that blade. A bead of perspiration traveled on Peter Scarlet's forehead. That had been a close thing. Cat-foot, he returned to the street and yanked the dagger from the palm trunk. There were curious inscriptions on the blue bone handle. Coptic writing.

The little curio hunter didn't dillydally to translate the verse just then, but he knew a good thing when he saw it and tucked the shivaree into his pocket. The blade, sharp and needle-narrow, looked poisonous; and from there on Scarlet took no chances. Bravery was all right in books, but his business at hand was stranger than any book, and walking blind into a strange port at night to pick up an unknown deal was something else again.

Right hand in the breast of his coat and eyes conning every shadow with a gaze as sharp as the thing in his pocket, he strode the middle of the street. The din on the waterfront faded out behind him and this end of town had buried itself in shacks and pulled down the blinds and was waiting for the embalmers. Scarlet thought of Joe Perdu and Doc O'Halley and the octopus spitting on the pier and the knife that had

just taken a few stitches out of his collar, and his jaw set into a hardened line.

There was murder afoot in this little suburb.

RHODESIAN WILLY'S looked like the nest for its hatching, and the skinny proprietor with the stained white clothing, the twitchy palm leaf fan, the camera-shutter blink to his pallid eyes and his face spotted with lavender pimples looked, when he came around from behind the desk, as if he'd just been sitting on the egg.

The so-called hotel lobby was deserted to decayed wicker chairs, dented spittoons, tables piled with empty bottles, potted palms and a motionless electric fan. Peter Scarlet had a good look at his host, saw the man was a Spaniard and knew there wouldn't be any Gideon Bibles in his hotel.

The man thrust out a hand, chill and moist as a monkey's.

"*Señor* Peter Scarlet. Americano gentleman he called in a while ago an' reserve for you Room Twenty-one. Thees man he said you would know."

"Right. I'll go right up."

"That will be twenty piasters for the night, *señor*."

Rhodesian Willy might have noticed his visitor's eyes narrow thoughtfully as he slapped the coins across the desk. The little American's voice was clipped, hard. "Send up a bottle of the best Hollands you've got. Right away."

"*Si, señor*."

Two flights up an Arab imitation of a bellhop led the way down a rambling hall, unlocked a door, bowed Scarlet into a musty room that boasted a washstand, a peeling chair, a white iron bed draped with mosquito netting, and a single electric bulb in the ceiling. Three windows looked out across a dismal court to a stone building with unlighted windows and a facade of rickety balconies. Scarlet threw open the windows to let escape a gaseous fust and pulled down the rattan blinds. The Arab disappeared and came back with bottle and tray. Scarlet got rid of him with a coin; put an ear to the bolted door and listened to retreating footsteps. Then he went to the wall telephone and lifted the receiver to make certain the thing worked. After

which he poured a stiff glass and took four fingers straight.

Scarlet felt uneasy.

He drew the automatic from his holster and placed it handy on the washstand. He shucked his damp linen coat and hung it on the back of the chair, cursing quietly at the scored collar. Then he drew two cablegrams from the inner pocket and sat down to read. He must have read them a hundred times on the mail boat down. Dated a month apart; the little curio hunter had received them in New York, back in the States. As he re-read them now the line of his jaw did not soften, and his diamond blue eyes receded under knitted brows.

The first one read:

PETER:

WE'VE STRUCK THE MINE. QUARTER MILLION AT LEAST. AMULETS, FIGURINES, JEWELLED PLATE, ANTEDATING EGYPT. COPTIC INSCRIPTIONS. DANGEROUS STUFF, TOO. SAY THERE'S A CURSE ON MAN WHO FINDS IT. KNIFE THROWN AT ME OTHER NIGHT. JOE WORRIED, BUT HE'S BEEN A BRICK. HOME SOON WITH MY SHARE AS LEAVING CAMP FOR TERBERA TONIGHT. RICH FOR BOTH OF US.
DOC.

The second cable letter said:

PETER:

FOR LORD'S SAKE COME TERBERA AT ONCE. SITUATION BAD. AFRAID SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED TO YOUR COUSIN. DOC HAS DISAPPEARED. NEED YOUR HELP. COME QUICKLY.
JOE PERDU.

Those were the letters that had brought Peter Scarlet from his quiet retirement in New York to Rhodesian Willy's Hotel in Terbera, Somaliland.

III

THEY had been together in the early days of the Spanish Civil War. Scarlet and his cousin, Doc O'Halley, and the Loyalist secret service man, Perdu. Scarlet had been American attaché and Doc had been patching them up in the field hospitals. Perdu had been in active service at Madrid—Fifth Column work. But an air raid had caught them together in a shattered café. Doc had crawled down a flaming stairway to save Perdu, flattened with bomb splinters in his side; and Scarlet had dragged the lot of them to cover. Touch and go, and Perdu would have died if Doc hadn't slaved six nights running with all his medical skill to save him.

"Doc," Perdu had told Peter Scarlet's comrade and cousin, "I owe you my life.

If we ever get out of this war you'll hear from me."

But Perdu had gotten out of Spain in a hurry (politics!) in the spring of '37, and they thought he had forgotten. Doc had gone to New York to resume his medical practice; Peter Scarlet had decided it was time to retire from the risky business of following the wars. Then, after a year's silent absence, Joe Perdu had turned up in America; charged into Doc's office with wild news.

"Doc, I've been in Africa and located something big. Treasure of the hottest kind. Man, did you ever hear of the Queen of Sheba? Did you ever hear of Solomon's temple and the forgotten mines? I got maps, everything—everything but dough. If you can stake the expedition—"

He went into details.

It would be like rolling off a log. Doc could take his medical kit along with him and pretend to be studying sleeping sickness or African physiology. Perdu would run the digging end of it. They'd have to work strictly sub-rosa—and would Peter Scarlet join the hunt?

"Not on your life," the little curio hunter had announced. "No more of these hare-brained out-trails for me. I'm through. Good luck to both of you. Joe, I don't care what you do, but take care of that sawbones cousin of mine."

"Doc will be safe with me," Perdu had laughed, "as in the Lord's pocket. This is big stuff, Peter. We're comin' back rich."

But what had come back were the two cabled letters—Doc's, then Perdu's. . . .

In the heat-stifed hotel room, while bugs burned and dropped from the overhead bulb, Peter Scarlet read the letters. again. Then he dragged from his pocket the note he'd been handed at the pier, and scrutinized the writing. Its broad scrawl was undoubtedly Perdu's with that flaring autograph. The little curio hunter remembered the hand from war correspondence in Madrid. And that was all he had to go on. The two cables, and the note at the pier. Doc had disappeared. Hell was popping. They'd uncovered the legendary treasure, and something was striking from behind the curtains.

"If I only had a hint," Scarlet snarled. "That knife in the park—"

HE picked the weapon from his coat; bent his eyes close to the oddly traced bone handle. With a pencil he outlined the faded hieroglyphics; the knife shook a little in his palm. This writing was older than cuneiform, old as dust fallen in the twilight of history. Any museum would give plenty for such a blade. Peering, Scarlet slowly spelled out the translation on the bone handle. As he read the words a mist came on his forehead and his voice muttered out in his beard:

Feel of this blade
And remember no more—
For the Green God of Sheba
Has knocked at your door—

Yes, and he'd come mighty close to "feeling" that blade and not remembering any more. The Green God of Sheba! The name blurted through his teeth. There weren't many people living who knew of the Green God of Sheba, but Scarlet had heard the ancient legend. The bumboat man at Jibuti had told him the story, and the bumboat man was black as the ace of clubs and turned pretty gray around the gills as he told it. King Solomon's thousand wives had prayed to the Green God, and the Queen of Sheba had piled her pearls at his shrine. Worse than the Green Goddess of Nepal was this ancient African deity of death. Eight arms he had, and a face no human could look upon, and it was said he rose from the sea at moon dark and feasted on eight victims at a time. Half man, half octopus. The god who guarded the lost mines of Solomon. Once he knocked on your door, said the bumboat man at Jibuti, you were a goner.

He'd come pretty close to knocking on Peter Scarlet's door, and the little American curio hunter put the knife away with a curse, sponged sweat from his throat and stood up, reaching for the gin bottle.

"By Heaven, if anything like that has happened to old Doc—"

Smash! A splintering crackle; a low whistling through the air. Bottle and contents burst to a glassy shower in Scarlet's hand. Something struck *thud!* in the wall beyond him, leaving a black worm-hole in the plaster. The little American curio hunter fell like a log, hitting the floor with a crash.

HE wasn't dead, though the fall bruised his left elbow and brought a shower of dust and brown lizards down from the ceiling. Fast as a panther, Scarlet slithered to the washstand, snatched the pistol, spun and sprang in a low crouch to the sill of the middle window.

The rattan blind had been punctured; the thin bamboo wood broken inward around a bullet-hole. The little American curio hunter let a soft oath through clenched teeth. He should have known his shadow would outline him on that window blind.

Flattened against the sill, he peered through the crack where screen touched window-side and sent a roving, slit-eyed gaze out across the dark court, searching over the face of the black building beyond. The whole building was swaddled in night; no shadow in the court moved. Peter Scarlet had fought like this before. Someone *was* over there. Pupils contracted, eyes pointed to needles, the little curio hunter detected the first movement on the roof of the building opposite. The black silhouette of a head cautiously upraised above the top balcony. Moonlight glinting darkly on the barrel of a long rifle.

Slam! Flash! Scarlet's automatic squirted white flame; the crash rebounded in the court like a thunderclap. The head wobbled, then sat still like a cabbage perched on the edge of the distant roof. Instantly Scarlet was sorry he'd killed the man. Should have winged him on the scalp, then dashed out to trail the blood. Out in the dark sounded the scurry of fleeing hoofs. That devil over there had an ally—which meant one down and one to go. Or maybe a hundred, from the racket outside Room Twenty-one.

Boots thumped and echoed in the long hallway. Voices cursed and called. With a quick, soundless stride Scarlet reached the wall, snapped out the overhead light, slid against the washstand and waited, fondling his gun. Knuckles began a hysterical hullabaloo on the door.

"Who's outside?" Scarlet hailed.

"Rhodesian Willy. I hear noise downstairs'. Theenk maybe it shots, big noise, somebody he fall. *Por Dios!*"

"There were two shots fired out there in that court," the curio hunter rasped, "and when the first one was fired I was in

bed. Knocked over my chair and a tray of glasses jumping up in the dark. Couldn't see anything. What's going on in this hell hole around here?"

It was dark as a whale hole in the room. Drugged in hot black thick as a hat. If anybody started shooting now, Scarlet whispered to himself, that Spaniard outside the door would get it right through the panels, his complexion ruined for good and questions asked afterwards. But the hotel keeper's voice was scared. His frantic words came whinnying through the stale wood.

"Sacred family, I know not what goes on. Those Somali soldiers. Drunk perhaps! *Bandido!* The town is overflowed weeth renegades!" The voice trailed away, chattering like an excited parrot. "I go to call the police—"

The rumpus in the hall was quieting. Somewhere doors banged. Scarlet dragged a cuff across a wet forehead, holstering the automatic, trying to think. Once the police got there, they might spot that corpse on the roof. Be the devil to pay. The little American paced the floor in a dark well of fury. Twice in two hours the reaper's scythe had shaved him close; his coming to Terbera was known and not wanted. Enemies a possibility from any quarter, death the game. Bandits after the fortune Doc and Joe had found? Foreign agents? Had they got Doc? Were they closing in on Perdu?

Stepping blind at night into a foreign port imbued with mystery and the enemy holding all the cards gave a man nothing to put his teeth into. Maybe he should call the police, himself. But the black police in these lands Back of Beyond were little better than thuggee gangs, and Perdu had warned him to lay low, told him to wait in the room until further word. A mouse rattled in the wall, and Scarlet whirled in a crouch, gun swinging.

THE phone's bell blurted shrill as an alarm, drilling the blue-blackness with sound. *Clllllaring!* Jumping for the wall, Scarlet snatched the receiver. The cry came faint and far away through fizzing wires.

"Peter! Peter Scarlett! Is that you?"

"Perdu!" His lips snarled close to the mouthpiece. "Joe!"

"Yes, yes! Lord, I'm glad to hear you—"

"Where's Doc?" Scarlet bit out. What's happened?"

Perdu's voice shook. "I wish to heaven I knew. Peter, he's vanished like I told you in my cable. Gone. He packed his share of the—the find and left camp and went to Terbera. I should have gone with him but I wasn't ready to leave. He went alone; said he'd be all right; anxious to get to the States. Nobody else knew about our discovery. Just the two of us working alone. He reached Terbera; sent a message and said he was sailing on the next boat. I went down to the town to see him off and he wasn't there. Couldn't find hide or hair of him. Nobody had seen him. I asked everywhere. Nobody could remember him or anything. His luggage, every sign of him, was gone."

"Did you look? Look?"

"I—I've hunted myself sick—"

"He said a knife had been thrown at him."

"So there was. One night. We never knew who did it. Now they're being thrown at me. Other things have happened. Strange things."

Scarlet's fist was sweating on the receiver. "Where are you now, Perdu?"

"At the temple—the Solomon temple. At our camp. I got to town this afternoon before your boat came in and had just time to smuggle you that message."

"I've been shot at," Scarlet swore. "Somebody flung a knife. If anything's happened to Doc I'll tear this town apart, Perdu."

"Damn! Then they know you're here—"

"Who's *they*? Speak up, Perdu. I can't hear you."

"Listen," Perdu was crying. "I'm in a telephone station. About two miles from camp. I can't talk to you, you understand? Get it? Can't talk. I'm going right back to our camp. Can you come right away?"

"Faster. How far? Where?"

"You've got to come quick or it may be too late. Hurry. Hurry, in Heaven's name. You can get a horse at the hotel. Take the highway south to Ras Harar. Only one road. Along the coast. Ten miles. Then into the red cliffs. Got it?"

"Right."

"Follow the sandstone road by the old Portuguese lighthouse. You go into crags and through a narrow divide by the sea. You can't miss. About five miles farther you come to a ravine—an ancient quarry. You'll see my horses there, Temple standing on the other side. You have to go on foot across a rope bridge. Tricky business."

"Rope bridge?"

"You'll see it swinging across the ravine. We've been camping in the ruined temple. You'll see. I'll be there waiting. Peter, you've got to reach me just as fast as you can. Ride like hell. I'm being shadowed right now. Hell, man! Did you ever hear of," the voice at the far end of the wire dropped low, "Peter, did you ever hear of the—the Green God of Sheba? Eight arms? No face? Monstrous green body! No, I'm not drunk! It—it's after me! You've got to get here! Our only chance to save Doc. Can't tell you more. Got to go! Hurry—"

The phone clicked. The little American curio hunter sprang for the door, snatching for his helmet and grabbing out his gun.

IV

AT the lower landing he stopped up short with an oath. Sudden shouting clamored in the night, boiled in echo around the hotel. The lobby doors burst open, spilling a batch of police, native *askaris* in khaki uniforms, black faces grinning under red tarbooshes, eyes wild. An English officer with a German military mustache plunged in the lead, brandishing a revolver. Rhodesian Willy came ratting around from behind his desk, hands semaphoring, pointing up the stairs and blurring a gibberish of broken English. The bobbies saw Scarlet and started a rush at the stairway. The Tommy officer pointed his pistol at the curio hunter.

"You, there! In the governor's name! Stand where you are!"

The little American curio hunter's mouth made a horizontal wrench in his beard. "The governor," he drawled quietly, "can go write his name on a wall."

He didn't stand where he was. Going sideways, he dropped over the banisters, vaulted a rubber plant, circled the lobby

desk in a bound. The *askaris* opened mouths like watermelons and piled at him across the floor. The Tommy captain bel-lowed orders. Rhodesian Willy stood against the newel post opening a jack-knife in quick, lemon-colored hands. Swinging from the floor, Scarlet tapped the hotel maestro a smart crack on the forehead. The Spaniard fell with another lavender bump in his facial repertoire.

The room shook with sound. An excitable native patrolman let fly with his carbine, put a bullet through the English officer's helmet and another in the wall clock behind the desk. Peter Scarlet saw the hour was ten, and he couldn't wait. Jaw clamped like a nutcracker, he mowed through the pile-up of policemen, clapping black faces with his pistol barrel, ducking teeth and blows. Hands grabbed as he spun through the bamboo doors, ripped his coat up the back seam. A soldier ran at him across the veranda. Scarlet kicked the fellow's bayonet and kept his foot going deep into a scrawny stomach, sending the black heels over head like an acrobatic toy. Somehow or other he was in the dark and dust of the street.

By the sound, all of Somaliland was after him; would have nailed him if it hadn't been for the motorcycle. An officer's machine parked at the curb. Scarlet hadn't seen one since Spain, but he'd handled them in those days and it was any horse in this race. A leap to straddle the machine. A fast kick at the starting pedal. The engine uncorked a roar. Twirling the handle-grips, Scarlet launched across the roadway, took a corner full gun, leg out stiff and boot ripping through earth to keep from capsizing, and whammed down the highway, jumping curbstones. Hotel and pandemonium made a fadeaway in the dust swirl behind.

Bent over the bars, the little curio hunter blasted a path through the night, took another corner on high, just missed amputating the foot from a stork-legged native squatting in a gutter. Slamming under a street arch, he switched on the headlamp just in time to discover a broad turnpike stretching off to starboard and a rickety signpost that pointed: *Ras Harar. 14 K. S.*

Touch and go skidding over ruts on this unfamiliar, night-blotted road that

might have been the path to Cerebus. Treacherous with sand holes and cartwheel grooves, the roadway curved like the back of a tortured snake into a night the thickest Scarlet had ever known, but he drove the machine to the last notch, racketing down a corridor of pitch with stars like pale holes and a thin Moslem moon sailing the indigo overhead and the town vanishing behind in gas fumes and dust.

"Hurry!" *Perdu* had cried. "Our last chance to save Doc!"

Above the staccato rataplan of the motorcycle exhaust the cry beat time through Peter Scarlet's head and held his fists sweating on the twisted grips. Two miles of steeplechase turns in almost as many minutes and he was topping a rise, able to glance back and see the town on the curve of the shoreline, the wink of clustered lamps, the miniature lights of the vessel loading on the waterfront and the endless sweep of the tropic gulf.

If the petrol held out he'd make it fast. The headlamp swung a white blaze around the turns, picking out sandstone cliffs, patches of beach where water creamed, incidental thatch-roofed huts. A glimpse of wattle walls, mud ovens like giant bee-hives, a monkey scampering for cover. Cats flashed green eyes vanishing in roadside thickets and the little curio hunter remembered he was in a country of lions. But he wasn't slowing.

TEN miles. . . . He roared through Ras Harar, a smell in the dark. Grass huts and a scattering handful of natives that fled, screaming, into mud lanes. A town that vanished as quickly as it had come. The headlight picked out a turn, there was a stretch of stony beach, a white shaft, tall as a monument, rearing suddenly and ghostly in the darkness. The Portuguese lighthouse, a token for mariners in the days of Prester John. On that African coast, its beacon long since blind of age, the thing was a wraith in stone. Nobody had been in that turret for a hundred years. The slamming echo of the motorcycle engine spattered up the lonely white wall.

Slam! Crack! Crack! That wasn't motorcycle explosions, and the wall wasn't so lonely. Fireflies danced on the deck of the lighthouse turret, squirts of pumpkin-col-

ored flame in the gloom. Balls of dust jumped in the road around Scarlet's machine. A lead bee whined by his ear and over his left shoulder another made a brief twang in the air like a picked mandolin string.

Speeding under the steep wall, Scarlet flattened on the handlebars, leaning far inward on a sharp bend. Hollering split the night; the swinging headlamp fell in a sweeping ray straight on a band of savages crowding the road from ditch to ditch.

Spears waving at the stars. Coal-shiny bodies capering behind lion-hide shields. Bird-like topknots of colored feathers waving above twisted faces streaked with diabolic smears of paint. Bullets from above and the savage crowd ahead. The mob jumping and hooting like monkeys yanked on invisible strings.

Swinging in saddle, Scarlet unlashed four shots at the high tower. A throaty scream sopranoed up from the turret, and a black shadow dived down from the sky, hitting the lighthouse base and bouncing a yard in the air. At the same time Scarlet's machine struck the traffic jam. Yells and spears sailed around his face in a pinwheel spin, and a dripping Somali savage somersaulted over the handlebars, turned in midair, lit in the dust behind the rear tire. Then the rumpus was gone as he cut the trail in clean wind through a narrow divide, his engine popping like a machine-gun, the exhaust puncturing the black with yellow flame.

Two miles farther, pounding through the velvet with a smell of salt and sea in his nostrils and the crags a jagged outline against the moon, he was riding down the rim of Nowhere, his engine smashing the silence for the first time.

The rind of moon slipped over a dim escarpment, silvering the landscape to the unreal quality of a faded photograph. The sea was invisible beyond a ridge of rock; perhaps the world ended there and the void began. Terbera and the lighthouse, policemen and ambush seemed a ten year's march away; this was the heart of Africa, the place where the universe began and was left unfinished. A man on a motorcycle was lonely in that spot of coastline, even if he clutched a heated Webley in his grip. The road was a warning against travelers. Stones and sand spurted from

the wheels of the machine; the road dived sharply between two mountainous boulders; Scarlet swayed on the turn, glimpsed a pair of horses grazing under a hunch-backed palm, saw the landscape fall away to vacancy under the racing wheel beneath his headlight.

With a strangled yell he tramped on the brake. The cycle bucked out from under him, spun roaring in the dirt, tumbled and banged into a ditch. The little American curio hunter went hurtling through a haze of smoke, sprawled flat, and landed, gasping a lungful of ice, on the rim of close death.

What he saw in that emptiness of moonlit space brought the sweat bubbling out on his forehead and an oath knotting his tongue.

V.

PETER SCARLET shouted a whisper. He yanked himself back, clawing the ground. He got to his overturned motorcycle, switched off the gas, then crawled forward for another look. A giant's scimitar had gashed that ravine from the landscape in the days when the dinosaurs walked. Another foot forward and he'd have gone down a straight drop of seventy-five feet, a wall as sheer, smooth and precipitous as black glass.

Moonbeams fell far down the wall and touched the surface of a deep pool, flat as a pond of ink. From above it was like staring down a well. Stars made a pattern of phantom twinkles on the black water, and the ravine walls were quarried out and undercut so that the water lay as in a bottomless and monstrous pitcher with glass-eous sides. Peter Scarlet didn't like that quarry. Heights made his sweat run. That canyon was too sheer, too lonely. From the shadowed depths far below came a subterranean gurgling, faint as the secret leaking of blood. But it was the bridge that brought an ache to the roots of the little curio hunter's hair. Seventy-five feet sheer that gash dropped, and the same distance across from rim to rim.

The rope bridge stretching across the gap looked insecure as a span of spider web; hempen strands moored to posts on either side. A Jacob's ladder with rope rungs that were nothing but stepping-

stones in space, sagging dangerously in the middle and a single hand-rope running along one side. Scarlet didn't like the looks of that bridge with the water far below.

Or the black ruin lifted against the sky on the opposite ledge. Stone steps and massive half-fallen pillars clothed in a drape of weeds. The ruptured masonry had toppled when the pyramids were new; a flight of crumpled steps led to a doorway that was forbidding and murky as the entrance to a catacomb. Behind this architectural wreckage grew fantastic sentinels, lofty eucalyptus trees like mast-heads under the sky. The place smelled of antiquity and a silence that got in the little curio hunter's hair. The sight of the ravine and the frail trestle made his teeth want to clack and a mist dampen his forehead.

Then, just as he was pulling his nerves together, a hollering banshee wail sailed out of the temple door and sent him jangling again.

"Help! Awwwwwww—"

"Perdu!" Scarlet shouted. "Joe! Joe—"

"Yaaaah!" That was Perdu's scream.

"Scarlet! I'm dying—"

A smash, as of falling tinware. Shadows came to life, jiggling in the temple entryway. A knife glinted sparks against stone, flew from the opening, bounded and rang on the gravelly steps. Echoes took up the outcry, and as Scarlet's wet hand jumped his gun from the holster a man's body lurched in the doorway, hung kicking, fighting, voicing strangled yells. Moonlight illumined the face above the plunging body.

Perdu!

His hair blowing about his eyes, his arm waving in frantic circles in a tattered sleeve and his boots a-dance. An arm, coming from behind the door in which he was silhouetted, had him by the throat. The breath left Scarlet. A green arm. Green as grass. Muscled, thick. And Perdu couldn't shake the fingers that were trap-teeth clamped on his neck; held him jumping in the temple door. His empurpled cheeks swelled for want of breath. His eyes rolled wildly at Scarlet, imploring, white as bird's eggs, popping in his contorted face.

The Green God of Sheba!

The little curio hunter wanted to shoot that bilious green arm jutting from behind the doorjamb, but in the uncertain moonlight he couldn't risk it. "Hang on!" he screamed at Perdu. "I'm coming!"

"Across the bridge!" Perdu managed to squall. "It's killing me!"

FOR the life of him Peter Scarlet didn't want to rush out over that ravine. Under his boots the rope rungs sagged sickeningly. The guide-rope wobbled in his fist like a rubber band. The whole span began to creak, sway and swing like a treacherous hammock. Sweat spilled down the sides of his nose. He did not look down. He couldn't look down; couldn't take his eyes from the scene in the doorway of that old temple. Perdu had sagged to his knees, and the clutching arm was shaking him like a pump handle. He was a big man, but he couldn't fight off that green appendage. In the middle of the rope bridge Scarlet balanced frantically; shouted.

"Hold on, Perdu, I'm—"

His cry yorked out in his beard. A ripping sound under his heels. Hemp snapped beneath his feet, his legs shot through, a split-second he dangled by an elbow in midair, his knees in an empty hole pumping space, his boots fighting for a foothold in black wind. In that fractured second he had time to see two broken strands of rope sail down and down into emptiness below. In that eyewink he had time to unlimber his body for the fall. His elbow lost hold on the guide-rope, his fingers tore loose; he was falling. . . .

The bridge made an arc above him. The moon shot like a wan scimitar thrown across the sky. Down the wind came a nail-rattle, wild inhuman laugh that might have started from the jaws of a beast. Then his boots smashed water and a geyser closed around him.

ONLY the jack-knife twist at the start, the instinctive limbering of muscles saved him. In the smothering water he sank deep and deeper, ears roaring, lungs bursting for air. He seemed to sink a thousand fathoms while pain daggered through every bone in his frame before his boots struck mud and he swam, half-conscious, for the surface in a black roil.

Spitting, gasping wind into exploding lungs, he floundered on the surface. The first thing he saw was the gun still clamped in his fist. Then the stars far above in the zenith. There was the bridge with the gap in the middle, the hole through which he had plunged—like a comb with the teeth missing—printed against the sky. That wasn't all. A phantom-gray shape, a spiderish figure was swinging out across the web-thin strands.

The little curio hunter's drowned howl echoed up the sheer glass cliffs of the ravine; but the spidery figure kept on going, jumped the hole where the rungs were missing, reached the rim where the motorcycle lay. A moment later Scarlet heard the popping cylinders, the revving of the engine. Then all sound died out. He was alone at the bottom of the world, treading water in that well-bottom pond. Turning on his back, he shook pain from his head and tried to think. The water was bitter salt in his cut mouth, but the stinging stemmed blood in his nose and the shock of the plunge was leaving him.

"Joe! Perdu! Perdu!"

The only answer was his own voice, a faint, frail, mimicry of echoes thrown back from crags overhead. Teeth clenched in his aching face, Scarlet turned a blinded gaze up the wall towering over him. No fly could have climbed that sheer embankment. The sides of this quarry might have been polished wax. Slowly he struck for mid-pond where the ghost of the moon lay reflected in a spectral mirror; the pool was some quarter-mile in circumference and might be shallow on the other side.

The water seemed shallow in mid-pond; looked as if there might be an island under the surface. A yellowish area underwater in moonlight. Appeared to be rising. Bubbles. . . .

Scarlet halted his easy armstrokes, tread water, stared. An island was rising; moving up out of the ink before his eyes. The surface broke in a shower of bubbles and froth. The little American curio hunter started a scream that became a lump of dough gagging his tongue. A vast, amorphous shape swelled up like a quivering nightmare in the moonlight in front of him.

Water founted.

The thing was rising like a balloon soar-

ing from pond-bottom weeds. In the gloom a monstrous blob of faceless, living flesh reared before Scarlet's popping stare, a huge and bulbous creature: a gas bag of inflating skin—a mouth like a gigantic parrot horn—tiny, lidless eyes like twin crystals set in the puffing skin, fixing the victim with a glare of hate that brought snow on his scalp.

As Scarlet watched in frozen horror, lumps and cornices appeared, vanished, reappeared on the bulging, puffing skin. A bivalve opened under the beak-like horn with a whistling sound. The skin changed color, flashing rainbow hues, shading liver-red, lavender, pink, yellow, turning finally a poisonous mottled sea-green. Water splashed and eddied around the vast green body and in a sudden wash of foam six great, snake-thick tentacles undersurfaced with leech-pads whipped underwater and whirled around Scarlet in a spine-snapping grab.

Arms crushed to his sides, Scarlet was unable to so much as pull the gun-trigger. Those tentacles were pythons squeezing the life from his chest. Those suckers were big as lily-pads glued to his sides, drawing the strength from his body like terrible drains, dragging him under. He screamed, kicking a flurry of froth. The beast heaved; a jet of inky fluid smeared the water to a ghastly roil. Quickly, sinewed with gigantic submarine strength, the octopus yanked Scarlet through the water with a succession of convulsive jerks.

The little curio hunter's veins flowed ice. Fighting with every ounce of power in his lamed frame, he battled to break the grip of those terrible, boneless arms that held him fast. Another tentacle, secreted underwater, slipped about his ankles. He broke the hold with a desperate kick; found his boots ploughing in mud.

In the shallows of that forgotten quarry pond overshadowed by a temple ancient as Solomon's glory, man and sea monster thrashed the water to fountains.

SICK, horror-frozen, helpless in the suction-grip of the giant tentacles, Scarlet was dragged into the shadow of the precipice, toward a cavernous undercut where the cliff was scalloped out like a mammoth clamshell; a recess filled with weedy moonlight. Sea snails and salt crystals

jeweled the scooped walls, water gurgled from crevices in the stone; here the octopus lay in its marine lair, a horrid, convulsing emerald in a Tiffany setting.

Two ghastly legs slithered like cobras up the wall to moor the creature in its cave like a dreadful fleshy parasite growing there; the body filled the cavern; the six free legs bound Scarlet in a clutch as foul as the suck of quicksand. Bound in a cocoon of gluey muscles, he was yanked, kicking, across the shallow ledge; drawn inch by inch toward the billowing, shapeless mound of body, toward the lidless stare of those salt-crustured eyes, toward that horn-like mouth.

He shrieked, but no sound issued from his lips. He struggled, stamping, flailing his boots. The contracting muscle-fish arms drew him nearer and nearer to the awful embrace. On the ledge the water lay scarcely two feet deep. The little curio hunter was being landed like a fish yanked ashore by six lines.

The lines played with him, tossed him against the wall. Battered, suffocating, he smashed a kick at the gas-bag body—like sinking his boot in a pillow. Air souged from the valve in the monster's side. Air whistled from Scarlet's pinched windpipe. A contortion of rage quivered through the sea giant's body, swelling its mass like a frog-belly to the bursting point. The shallows plunged, waved to a tiny tempest. Water spurted and founted at Scarlet's face. Sand and sea shells whirled around his head. The little cavern shivered with windy sounds. The beast was drowning him, banging him at the wall, crushing him, killing him. He was fainting.

In a last desperate explosion of energy, Scarlet pounded the sand with his boots, twisting, writhing, battling to get away. On his knees, kicking. Foam flying around his head. Boots punching and stabbing while the arms that held him shook him like a rat. Weeds and starfish, brought up from the bottom, whirled by his face. And something else, thrown to the surface by the whirlpool. Something that knotted Scarlet's throat in his neck and brought a yell from his slashed mouth.

A man's sun helmet!

A man's sun helmet, waterlogged and half filled with sand, bobbed past his eyes like an old bucket and sailed out to mid-

pond. An empty coat came up on the whirl and floated out of the cave, the vacant sleeves bobbing outstretched on the foaming water. And then, to wrench the last cry from the curio hunter's throat, a muddy black bag ducked by his head. A doctor's medicine case, soggy and battered, spinning around him in the foam.

Peter Scarlet recognized that doctor's kit. Not an inch from his chin the case floated, bobbed, sank again. Scarlet lashed out a kick and his flying boot struck the bag squarely on the handle, sent it whirling through froth straight at the sea monster's little eyes. Rotten leather burst to shreds.

And then the miracle happened.

A SHOWER of bottles scattered in the gloom, smashing in bright explosions of glass against the cavern wall. Pill boxes and packets and glass jars smashed in tiny shrapnel burst against wet stone. A rain of colored liquids, a shower of pills and powder filled the moonlight.

A streak of amber liquid and broken glass rippled between the staring sea devil's eyes. Where the pills struck, water bubbles rose. The water seemed to boil, steaming and hissing, a witch's cauldron. A film of smoke choked Scarlet's lungs. A smell of burning acids, raw poisons, seared flesh. The octopus writhed, flailed, contorted to a thousand shapes; yanked its mooring tentacles from the wall and lashed the water to a frenzy.

The arms about Scarlet uncoiled like agonized whips; flinging him headlong from the shallow ledge.

If he lived to be a million he would never forget the sight of that monstrous beast puffing and swelling, whirling and deflating and hurling its bulk from side to side, its eight arms slashing air, water and walls like a hundred maddened pythons in a jar of chemicals. Blinded, burned, the monster raised a storm that lashed the whole pond with tidal waves. The little American curio hunter made the fastest swim of his life to mid-pool where an empty coat floated on the surface, its sleeves outspread. Through a mist of pain he snatched the garment in a white-fingered clasp; remembered the Webley automatic fastened in his fist; turned and fired twice at the thing in the cavern. Treading water, he waited, gasping, until silence filled the

cave. . . . Until the waters were black and still, a shadow bulged on the shelf like a rock and only a faint, acidulous steam wafted from the glooms.

"Doc!" he whispered.

Stroking slowly, with bruised arms, he made for the shallows, stood up, dripping like a weed, and turned his face to the sky. Rage and relief that shivered through him seemed to clear his mind. Leveling the automatic in his palm, he emptied bullets at the stars. On that side of the ravine where the temple loomed, ropes parted at their mooring posts. The bridge of hemp soared down like a broken hammock and hung, a shaky Jacob's ladder, on the south wall. The bottom rungs just reached the water.

To the little curio hunter it seemed hours before he had scaled that precipice, dragged his boots at last from the maw of that quarried ravine. On the way up, where the rungs were missing, he'd lost hold, almost fallen. Snatching to keep his grip on the coat he'd found, he came within an ace of dropping. It was then he saw the bit of soggy notepaper in the coat pocket.

When he got to the top where the horses were tethered, he knelt on the ground and spread the sopping paper across his knee and read the penciled message with his face going to chalk in the moonlight. He didn't look back at the ravine. He drew one breath through his teeth and made a lunge for the nearest mount. Africa made black wind through his hair, and the moon was a red sickle sinking in the heart of the sky.

VI

THE *Red Sea Lady's* quartermaster, who saw Peter Scarlet walk up the gangway and stumble to his corridor, shouted to the engineer at the rail alongside. "I guess that ain't the first passenger to come back aboard drunk an' beat up. Must of got rolled in some joint ashore. I told him not to walk in Terbera alone at night."

The Scotch engineer grunted. "Fools who go ashore an' spend all their money in dives. Huh. By damn, I wish they'd finish unloadin' them rails. Th' noise will deaf me. We sails in an hour, you say?"

It was, by the cracked dial of Peter Scarlett's wrist watch, four o'clock. In his stateroom he bathed, combed, jabbed adhesive plaster to one corner of his mouth, drank two glasses straight. The crash of falling iron shook the porthole frame. Africa's smells and yells trampled around the ship, and the little American curio hunter smiled bleakly in approval, servicing his Webley automatic. You saw by the way he punched in fresh shells and snapped the clip he was not unfamiliar with guns. Then he pulled a sun helmet over his welted forehead, left his stateroom and turned for Cabin A.

Only one witness saw him walk into Cabin A without knocking: the man at the washstand inside. This man turned with soap bubbles on his arm, and Scarlet closed the door swiftly behind him.

The little American curio hunter took a cigarette from his beard, pinched it out in his fingers, dropped it on the floor and ground it underheel. It was hot in that stateroom. Suffocating. Perspiration ran in freshets down the face of the man at the washstand where he stood stiff as a plank, pop-eyed with fright, his mouth framing a soundless O. But Peter Scarlett's face was dry. So was his voice. Dry as sand grinding between stones.

"I might have known," he said evenly, "when I found my room wasn't paid for at Rhodesian Willy's. Tight-fisted dealing. Miser complex. A rat who'd murder his own mother to keep from sharing anything with her. It's all over now. No more of that. I stopped at the Spaniard's on th' way back an' put a gun in his belly an' he told me where you were. First boat out you could get, of course."

"No! No, no, no!" the man whispered. "Wha—whaaaa—"

"I knew I was up against a scrooging rat who'd want to keep everything for himself. I was the only other one in on the big secret. I knew about the find. Idea was to get me down here and ambush me. Minute I step ashore I'm attacked. The knifer misses the mark so I'm planted in a hotel room to be a target for hired gunmen waiting across the street. The sniper gets sniped on the job and his henchmen get you word, and I'm led to the slaughter on that sea road to Ras Harar. And when

those jackals fail to stop me at the light-house, why there's the rope bridge with the rungs sawed in the middle—"

"Hey! You got me wrong. You don't believe Joe Perdu would—you don't think old Joe could be—"

"A pretty trap," Scarlet's words ground on relentlessly. "I'd fall down that ravine into the quarry pool. If I didn't break my neck, the octopus would get me anyway. How long do you suppose that rotten sea monster has been living in that pond? Maybe put there by the ancient priests, eh? Put there to play Green God of Sheba for tribal rituals. Nice way to sacrifice a victim," Scarlet snarled, "just as Doc was sacrificed. He fell through the bridge same as me and that filthy death got him. Yeah. I found his helmet, coat and—and medicine case in that monster's cave. Let me read you the note I found in his coat pocket—"

The man had to grip the washstand to support his legs. His lips were the color of grass. "Please! Lord's sake—"

"Here it is," Scarlet gritted. "It says: '*Doc: Come back to camp. Bring medicine and hurry. I'm dying of fever. Don't fail me.*' He must have been in Terbera waiting to catch the mail boat when he got this dirty message—"

"Stewards! Help!"

"And Doc hurried back to that rotten camp and the—the octopus got him. But he left a little boomerang in that trap, you rat. His medicine case. Ha! There were poisons in that kit. He always carried vitriol. And hydrofluoric acid. Enough to blind that devil fish—"

"Stewards! Help! In the name of—"

The voice rose to shrill crescendo.

"Go ahead, scream," Scarlet was shouting. "Scream like you did in the door of that temple, with your own filthy arm coming from behind the door pretending to strangle you. Just washing off the green ink, aren't you? Or maybe that's the color of your soul coming through. I've seen that trick before, but I— Scream. Sure. All you want. Look at this gun. Look at it, Joe Perdu. Remember, I'm a sharp-shooter. And scream your face off. They won't hear the shot. They say the noise out on that pier would wake the dead. Well, here's one dead man it won't!"



DEATH CANYON GUNS

By Bart Cassidy

Big Jim Stanton had a rendezvous. Somewhere, sometime, in some canyon of death, he would deal out vengeance to the Yaqui devil who had scarred his soul!

WHEN Big Jim Stanton realized what Pancho Hurley and his men planned to do to him, he went berserk, turned into a wild, fighting whirl-

wind. He lunged forward, jerking away from the vaqueros, who were no match for his great strength. He swung his two hands, manacled together, like a great club. With the added weight of the iron shackles, they crashed full into the face of a Mexican. The man went down silently, his head popping against a rock.

"All of you—get him!" Pancho Hurley's voice rose sharply in the night air. "No knives. Don't kill him!"

A laugh broke from Jim Stanton's tight lips. So they wanted him alive, did they, to tell what he knew?

Jim Stanton was still laughing harshly as the men went down before his terrible hammerlike blows, his wild kicks. Pancho Hurley had a dozen men—fighting, hard-eyed Mexicans and two half-clad, powerfully built Yaquis. In two minutes half of them were on the ground, some motionless, some writhing, sobbing with pain and fury as they struggled to trip the giant fellow who had beaten them down. They were piling all over Stanton, under his feet, leaping on his wide shoulders, as they battered at his head. But they could not down him.

To try and break that fighting circle, Jim Stanton suddenly surged forward with all the power of his strong legs. He swung his arms like a flail, beating at every man in reach. For a wild moment or two it seemed as if he might crash through. Then his foot tripped over someone. He staggered, started to fall. Three of them landed again on his shoulders and back, drove him down. Every man capable of movement was on him, clutching, grabbing, holding tight. Stanton threw some off, and they were back instantly. At last they had him stretched out flat, helpless under their weight—and Big Jim Stanton laughed again.

"Go ahead, Pancho," his voice came, strong and determined. "Try an' make me talk!"

Pancho Hurley answered smoothly, almost gently:

"You will talk, Jim Stanton, to tell me where that gold is hidden. You know. No one else knows. I will *make* you talk."

Jim Stanton could still laugh mockingly as he watched the two Yaquis heating a knife blade at the fire. He was still chuckling as the vaqueros tore off his right

boot and sock. The others were holding him helpless, motionless. Try and make him tell—that the hiding place was not two hundred yards away!

The mocking chuckle still sounded as the two Yaquis turned and walked up to Jim Stanton, helpless before them. Against the dark body of one the knife blade glowed. . . .

WHEN Pancho Hurley saw Jim Stanton collapse with closed eyes, he swore softly—but did not lose hope. He ordered the two Yaquis to return to the spot where Stanton's only companions, two partners, had been murdered. They were to efface all signs of what had really happened. Pancho Hurley wanted the world to think Jim Stanton had murdered his partners, fled with the long-sought treasure. He knew the two Yaquis could manage that, blotting out the tracks of Hurley and his men. No one would suspect what had really happened; that Jim Stanton was alive, held prisoner until he would talk. Pancho Hurley felt certain Jim Stanton would sooner or later reach the point where he would have to talk. And Hurley judged the lost treasure of the Tres Marias was well worth waiting for.

A fabulous treasure, that of the Tres Marias—until Big Jim Stanton had found the right canyon. For two centuries stories of it had been told, clues sought and found. But no one had ever been able to locate the proper canyon, among the countless thousands, to use those clues. Then Big Jim Stanton, running cattle in the Malpais Hills, had found it.

Backed by old Newt Payson with his last dollars, Stanton had gone with two partners and a pack train to get the gold—and fallen afoul of Pancho Hurley and his renegade band. The partners were dead now and Jim Stanton, in the hands of Pancho Hurley, was the only living man who knew the precise location of the missing gold. That was good!

Pancho Hurley laughed softly as he swung into the saddle with his men when the two Yaquis returned. He was taking Jim Stanton, limp, strapped to his saddle, across the border to Hurley's hidden rancho. And Pancho Hurley was quite certain that the two somber, silent Yaquis

would find a way to make Jim Stanton talk.

AT the end of two years as Pancho Hurley's prisoner, Jim Stanton could still laugh, mocking and jeering at his captors. They had almost broken his body, those two Yaquis, but never his spirit or will. He was gaunt, weak, old before his time, from what they had done to him. Though only thirty-five years old, Jim Stanton's face was seamed, his hair white.

But despite that: "Ten mule loads of gold, Pancho Hurley!" His voice rang strong, mocking. "Piled in a cave, bright, yellow bars of gold—but, Pancho, try an' get it!"

Stanton laughed at the look of fury on Pancho Hurley's face. His eyes, strange wells of cruelty, stared at Jim Stanton.

"I will give you your share," Hurley spoke a little wheedlingly, in his stilted English. "Why not take your share when the world thinks you have—"

Instead of finishing the sentence, Pancho Hurley paused, pointed to a square of paper tacked to the door of the hut where Stanton had been kept prisoner. It was a bit of cruel cunning, tacking the thing where Stanton would be forced to look at it, for it told what his friends thought of him now.

Wanted for murder, the reward bulletin said—the murder of his two partners. Signed, too, by Jim Stanton's best friend, the man who had financed the search with his last dollars, old Newt Payson himself. Sick, retiring as sheriff, Newt Payson had signed the reward notice as the last act of his term of office, signed it with a bitter loathing for the man he had trusted: Jim Stanton.

"Take your share!" purred Hurley.

But Jim Stanton was not fooled by the offer of a share if he talked. Pancho Hurley was not the type to do that. Once Pancho was sure of the long-sought treasure, Jim Stanton would be murdered at once. Stanton laughed mockingly, hiding the bitter hurt of knowing what the world thought of him. Old Newt Payson, sick, moneyless, needed his share of the gold. If it were ever found, Newt would get his share. No one else would, if it lay in Jim Stanton's power.

"I won't talk," came the determined

answer from him. "You can work on me till I die."

"But my men always stop before you die!" There was a peculiar, soft emphasis in Pancho Hurley's voice. "You are worth nothing to me dead!"

PANCHO HURLEY took his turn at laughing then in evil satisfaction. For he saw Big Jim Stanton shift his gaze to the two Yaquis, somber, silent, waiting. Four big Mexican vaqueros were there to hold Jim while the Yaquis were busy on him.

Through the doorway of the rude hut could be seen the big central square of Hurley's rancho, its buildings grouped against a high adobe wall. Occasional figures moved here and there about the fort-like place—peons, vaqueros, a few women and children. Near the hut a peon was digging a ditch for irrigating. As Jim Stanton saw the ditch digger and his shovel a sudden glow came into his eyes. It was veiled swiftly as Stanton heard Pancho Hurley give a sharp order. The two Yaquis stepped forward.

Stanton watched, eyes veiled.

One of the Yaquis had several long strips of green hide. The other held a long, slender knife in the coals of the fire. Pancho Hurley sat down beside the low door in a rude chair and began to smoke. His cruel eyes never left Jim Stanton's face. Stanton watched the preparations through half-closed eyes. So that was what was in store for him today!

The two Yaquis varied their tricks from time to time. All were bad, but the particular one dealing with green hide and a hot knife was the worst. Jim Stanton had nearly died under that once. His brain began to work rapidly as he watched the almost lazy preparations. They were deliberately giving him time to think. And he had done a lot of thinking in the past two years.

Pancho Hurley laughed softly as he saw Jim Stanton cringe a little. Was the fool at last weakening? His eyes lighted suddenly, eagerly, for Jim Stanton's lips were working.

"Don't!" Stanton spoke suddenly in a strange voice. Then the words began to tumble swiftly from his quivering lips. "I can't stand it again. Stop them, Pancho,

stop them! I'll—I'll show you where the gold is hidden."

Cringing, crouching, Big Jim Stanton suddenly whirled and walked straight out of the doorway. Pancho Hurley almost shouted with delight. After two years of waiting, of dreaming about making all that treasure his, the time had come. Ten mule loads of pure gold.

By the time Pancho Hurley was on his feet and outside the hut, Jim Stanton was already walking toward Hurley's rooms in the big main building. Hurley followed, swiftly. He would give Stanton paper, pencil to draw a map, then . . .

JIM STANTON walked straight ahead. The ditch digger was squarely in his path. He shoved the bewildered peon to one side. Suddenly, with the move, he jerked the shovel from the peon's unresisting fingers. Hurley's hand dropped to his knife, his cruel lips curling. Then he swore softly, for Jim Stanton walked a few steps to the right and began to dig.

"The fellow is digging in the wrong place," he said over his shoulder in that strange, almost croaking voice. "It's buried right under here, Pancho. You didn't suspect that, did you—Pancho? I fooled you, didn't I, Pancho? But I'll dig it up for you now, an' you'll let me go, won't you, Pancho?"

The voice broke into a queer, croaking laugh. Hurley's face darkened with fury, disappointment. He had thought the time had come. Instead:

"Crazy!"

The one word broke from Pancho Hurley's lips like an oath. In it was all his raging disappointment. His slender fingers curled tightly over the knife butt, hidden in his gaudy sash. Jim Stanton kept on swinging his shovel. His manacled hands hindered him, but he did not seem to mind. Pancho Hurley's hand slipped away from the knife. He turned to the two Yaquis who already were reaching out strong hands to seize Jim Stanton.

"Let him alone," he ordered curtly. "Let him do as he pleases and perhaps he will come out of it. Take the shackles off, so he can work. Watch him closely."

Jim Stanton seemed not to hear. He swung the shovel steadily, scarcely giving the two Yaquis time to take off the

shackles. He was intent only on the ground in which he was digging. Pancho Hurley turned and walked swiftly into his rooms. There smoking he stared out the doorway for a long time, watching, brooding.

He watched Jim Stanton dig.

At last he shrugged. He could wait. He had many ways of making money. No hurry. Give Jim Stanton time to come out of the crazy spell. Pancho Hurley's lips tightened a little. He knew there was a chance that Jim Stanton was tricking him. Well, tricks are for those who take the last one.

For two hours Jim Stanton labored in the broiling sun. Then weakened by his long imprisonment, he collapsed. The two Yaquis picked him up, carried him into the hut and tossed him into the bunk. Then, somber, silent, they sat in the doorway smoking.

For a long time Jim Stanton lay like a log, eyes closed. At last exhaustion left him. He shifted his position to a more comfortable one. His shoulders shook a very little. A soft laugh sounded, too low for the Yaquis to hear. Crazy, was he? Crazy—like a fox.

FOR two weeks Jim Stanton kept at his daily task of aimlessly digging about the big patio. He dug hole after hole, and filled up each one, only to start another. Always the two somber, silent Yaquis were at his heels, never relaxing their vigilance. Always he ignored them, his face seemingly void of expression, except for his dull eyes.

At night, alone in the darkness of his bunk, Jim Stanton flexed his steadily hardening muscles and laughed. The steady digging had turned his soft, flabby condition into what he had always been—a tremendously strong man. Iron, almost, those muscles. His fingers curled, tightened, as he dreamed of getting them about the throats of Hurley and his two Yaquis. Then they would relax, for there was more back of Stanton's scheming than the death of those three men.

Escape, clearing his name—that was the big thing. That, and getting the gold for poor old Newt Payson, who needed it so badly. Yet, despite his returned strength, escape seemed as far away as ever, until

one hot afternoon when the whole Hurley rancho seemed in siesta.

Jim Stanton was standing wiping his forehead when he heard the racing hoofs of two horses coming up to the hacienda gate. His hands tightened on the shovel. Shouted words, so jumbled he could not make them out, brought people pouring from many doorways. From the big building came others, with Pancho Hurley at their head. Jim Stanton felt every nerve in his body tingle as a wild shout rose.

"*Los rurales! Los rurales!*"

The whole place seethed, then, like a disturbed anthill. Hurley began to yell orders. Vaqueros and peons raced about to obey them. The front and rear gates were swung shut and barred. Men ran into the buildings, came out with rifles, bandoliers heavy with cartridges. A dozen women and children, wailing, sobbing, were finally pushed and kicked into an almost windowless hut. Some of the younger women, laughing, swearing like men, seized rifles and cartridges. In five minutes each vantage place on the walls, low roofs was occupied by someone well armed, rifle ready.

After the first wild thrill of excited hope, Jim Stanton began to swing his shovel. They must not suspect him now, for there was the chance of escape in the excitement of the coming battle. Then Hurley shouted an order. Two big vaqueros grabbed Stanton, ran with him to his usual hut.

"You will stay in here!" The vaquero was plainly excited. "Stay here or be killed, you understand?"

Without answer Jim Stanton sat down just inside the doorway. His big hands folded limply in his lap, he stared at the two vaqueros and nodded just once. They left him and climbed up on the roof of his hut. There they crouched, waiting the forthcoming attack, talking excitedly.

Jim Stanton, still masking his thoughts behind his vacant expression, caught enough of their words to know what had happened: at least half of Pancho Hurley's men, stealing cattle, had fallen in with a bunch of rurales. In the slaughter which followed, only two of the twenty or more vaqueros managed to get away. And they were closely followed by the hard riding rurales.

With eyes dancing excitedly, Jim Stanton lowered his gaze. No one must see that look of growing hope. If the rurales, those fighting fools of Mexico, at last were after Pancho Hurley, the end had come for the cruel outlaw leader. Of all those people at the Hurley rancho, not one would be left alive. That was the way of the rurales. Bothering with guilty people in courts was a senseless waste of time, for such people often got away, and that made more trouble for the rurales. Jim Stanton knew their bullet code, and realized that even his own life might be lost, if he were found there in the company of that crowd.

A SUDDEN rattle of rifle fire broke out among the rancho buildings. Outside, distantly, came a high-pitched yelping from many throats. It was like an Indian war cry, ominous, nerve racking, yet strangely stirring. The firing grew faster, steadier. It brought withering return fire from outside the walls.

Crouched in his doorway, Jim Stanton heard the uproar of shooting, saw the flashes of the rifles from the roof. Quick spurts of adobe dust and chips came from the walls. He could picture the fast riding, hard shooting rurales as they swept about the rancho walls. Picture them, gaily dressed, laughing, enjoying the battle as brave men do. Fighting men, picturesque, devil-may-care, laughing at the death which lurked just over their shoulders. That was the way of the rurales. Outnumbered? *Que importa?* Fight, and may the devil take those who die!

Once or twice in the hours of wild fighting that followed Jim Stanton caught glimpses of Pancho Hurley. The breed outlaw leader was racing about, cool, urging his men to wild endeavors. No one could have guessed from Pancho Hurley's laughing shouts of encouragement, that he knew the end had come. Even though his men outnumbered the attackers, were behind sheltering walls, it meant nothing. They could kill all that troop of rurales, and more would come—and more—until the thing was ended and all were dead.

Hurley knew he must scheme now, and swiftly. Darkness was about the rancho, deepening the distant hills to black bulks as he sought out the two Yaquis. The

rurales had been driven back, into a half dozen groups. The wounded had been taken away by their comrades. A few dead lay in queer huddles, their horses straying idly about in the darkness. But the rifle fire still kept up, steadily, flickering against the darkness. To Pancho Hurley that drawing off could mean only one thing. Reinforcements were expected soon.

The two Yaquis only nodded to Pancho Hurley's quick, whispered orders. Silent, they watched him leave and go to the rear wall of the enclosure about the rancho. It was the side nearest the rugged mountains back of the rancho. When Hurley disappeared in the darkness, the two Yaquis reloaded their rifles, turned, and became one with the deep shadows in the big patio.

As dusk had changed to black night, Jim Stanton knew his chance had come. It was going to be hard, leaving without killing Hurley and the torturing Yaquis, but he steeled himself to do it. Escape over the Border, a chance to square himself with old Newt Payson, get the gold—nothing must interfere with accomplishing those things.

NO one seemed to have eyes for the man they believed crazy, for all were too intent on fighting off the rurales. They fired at every flash about the walls, and the crackling of the rifle fire was constant, though not as heavy as before darkness. Like a great cat Jim Stanton stepped out of the hut and reached upwards, stretching to his full height. His hands clutched the top of the low roof. His muscles, hardened by the hours of labor with the shovel, tightened slowly. Silently, easily, he swung his big body up and over the low wall of the roof.

The two vaqueros who occupied the roof were stretched out on their stomachs, peering into the darkness beyond the walls. They were intent only on the battle. A long, plunging leap carried Jim Stanton onto them. As his weight struck them, they squealed like frightened pigs. Then Stanton's huge fists crashed down on their heads with all his strength. One moaned, sank limply. The other, trying to shout, to get at his pistol, writhed away. His gun flashed once. Stanton's great fist

drove full into his face. The Mexican moaned, went silent under another heavy blow.

Pausing only to seize a rifle, pistol, and bandolier of cartridges, Jim Stanton leaped the wall. In the dark shadows of the base, he crouched for a moment, listening to the shooting. He grinned a little. The outlaws were too busy fighting to think of him, now! In a crouching run, he slipped off into the darkness toward the distant hills.

Five minutes later Jim Stanton was taking more cartridges from one of the dead rurales. Another five minutes and he had captured a horse. The rest was a mad ride straight out toward the rugged mountains. Once among them, he could swing to the right, head straight north to freedom, and the gold!

BIG Jim Stanton rode through the wild, isolated country near the canyon of the lost treasure, free from worry. Not a mile away was an old adobe hut, long deserted. There he could make camp until either Newt Payson or his men arrived. At the Border he had sold a rifle and cartridges for food enough to last him a week, at least. By that time Newt or his friends would have arrived.

He had written Newt Payson at the Border, telling him only that he wanted to see him. Explanations could wait, Jim told himself.

A wisp of smoke curled from the hut Jim Stanton had thought to find unoccupied. A horse was grazing near it. For a moment Jim Stanton hesitated, then rode on. It was too soon for either Newt Payson, or anyone he would send, probably just some rider making a temporary stay. He decided, since he already was in the open, to ride on up, see who was there, then drift on a few miles to await Newt's arrival.

The door of the cabin was wide open, yet no one came out as Stanton rode up and dismounted. He called, and no answer came. Evidently whoever was camping there had left for the time being. Jim Stanton, hand close to his gun, stepped into the doorway—and stopped suddenly.

It was dark inside the old hut, and Stanton's eyes did not focus instantly from the glare of sunlight. But even in the

bad light he could see a crouching man in the center of the room. See, also, glaring eyes over a leveled gun—Newt Payson!

"I knowed you'd come back, Jim Stanton!" The voice was high-pitched, furious. "You couldn't take all the gold, when you killed Chuck an' Pete, could you? You double-crossin', murderin' skunk. I knowed you come back for the rest of it, some day—an' I waited to kill you, Jim Stanton!"

Newt Payson's words tumbled swiftly from his quivering lips, but his gun hand was steady. The old-timer, sick for years, had turned into a man obsessed with but one thought: vengeance on the man who had double-crossed his partner. For a year and a half he had lived alone in that desolate, isolated spot, brooding on the one thought. At first he had thought to find the treasure, or such of it as was left. That hope had died. Only the desire to kill the murderer who had double-crossed his partners was left. It was only natural for old Newt Payson to believe that a man who had murdered two men, would not hesitate at a third to protect himself.

"Wait, Newt!" Jim Stanton had at last recognized the old man: "Let me ex—"

"Wait? Hell!"

And old Newt Payson began to pull trigger with the words.

AS the first shot rang out Jim Stanton had already guessed what was coming. He might have drawn and fired, with a chance to get the break after the first hurried shot of Payson's. But even to save his own life he could not shoot his old friend. Stanton threw himself sideways, felt the sting of lead against his left arm. The gun-muzzle followed his quick move, spitting lead again.

Jim Stanton threw himself down in a plunging dive, straight toward the spitting gun muzzle. He felt his sombrero jerked from his head. The gun roared again. Lead hammered into the floor at his feet, but even as it did so, Jim Stanton locked his arms about old Newt Payson's wavering legs. The force of the sliding dive brought Newt Payson down with a crash. The old-timer's head struck Jim Stanton's boot heel. He groaned once, lay still.

Big Jim Stanton picked up old Newt and carried him like a baby to the bunk. He stared down a moment at the wrinkled, seamed old face, topped by snow-white hair. His own expression, hard with the excitement of the fight, softened suddenly. His big hands were gentle as a woman's as he pressed back the white hair and felt the spot where old Newt's head had crashed against his shoe. It was just a bruise. In a few moments old Newt Payson was sitting up, listening bewilderedly to Jim Stanton's explanations.

"You danged old scrappin' fool," said Jim Stanton, laughing at the old man. "Chuck, Pete, an' me found the cave an' saw the gold! We planned to get it out the next day, with our pack stock. That night Pancho Hurley an' his men jumped us. They killed Chuck an' Pete, and took me away with 'em—for two years. But maybe you think they made me tell where that cave was."

It was like Big Jim Stanton to gloss over what he had gone through in those two years, but Newt Payson knew enough about Pancho Hurley to guess the rest. Old Newt cursed as he saw the white hair topping Jim Stanton's young face, and the ugly scars on his bared chest and arms.

"Never mind, Newt. It's ended now," Stanton said. "I reckon the rurales killed all the Hurley gang, an' I'm square. All we got to do is get a pack outfit to carry the gold to the nearest bank."

"Let's go look at it, Jim." Old Newt sat up with glowing eyes. "Gawd, boy, think what that means to me! I been dreamin' about takin' it easy, seein' good doctors, for years. I got to see the stuff, Jim—now!"

Stanton laughed, for he could understand the feeling.

"I been savin' the best part o' the joke, Newt," Stanton said, nodding. "When Hurley and his devils took me away from camp and tried to make me talk, we wasn't two hundred yards from the white rock where the cave is hidden! It's half way up that bare cliff, with some chaparral coverin'—"

"THANKS, Jim Stanton. And now raise your hands—both of you!"

Pancho Hurley laughed as Jim Stanton whirled, hand dropping for his gun. But

in Stanton's struggle with old Newt, the gun had fallen to the floor, and Hurley had noted both men were unarmed. He and two Yaquis, drawn by the shooting, had slipped up to the hut, in the fear that Jim Stanton might be dying—before he could talk. And now Pancho Hurley could afford to laugh, for he had heard the precise location of the cave. Hurley had planned well. From the first he had doubted Jim Stanton's feigned madness. After fleeing from the besieged rancho to a hut in the mountains, he had waited until the two Yaquis came to him with the news that Jim Stanton had fled the rancho. Then Hurley had followed.

"Tie them both," said Hurley to the two Yaquis by his side. "We will take them to the cave. Once we have the gold, we can leave them in it. That will give us more time to escape, for it will be a long time before their bodies are found."

Standing tall, erect, tense, Jim Stanton saw the two Yaquis lay their rifles against the door, and step toward him.

Old Newt Payson sat on the edge of the bunk, white faced, lips bared in his fury of helplessness. In the doorway stood Pancho Hurley, a mocking grin twitching his cruel lips, his steady hands holding two guns. Jim Stanton stood with both hands raised above his head. His eyes shifted once, in those scant seconds, to the gun lying six feet away from him. They had him, now. Knew where the gold was hidden. Those two years in hell were wasted. Hurley would get the gold, leave Newt and Stanton behind him—dead. The world would never know.

The thoughts were too much for Jim Stanton. With Pancho Hurley's mocking laugh ringing in his brain, his arms dropped like huge, powerful snakes. The Yaquis had just reached his side. Each thick, black neck was caught in Jim Stanton's great arms, was jerked viciously inward.

Pancho Hurley's laugh turned to a screech of fury, then. He heard the dull sound of the two heads smacking together, saw the half dazed struggles of the Yaquis. Pancho Hurley snapped two swift shots at the struggling group, saw blood follow—on the shoulder of his own Yaqui.

JIM STANTON saw the flashes, heard the thud of one bullet—and laughed. A writhing, twisting heave, and he struck the floor with the two Yaquis still locked in his arms. For the moment they sheltered him. Ignoring their frantic struggles to reach their knives, he reached for the gun near him.

Pancho Hurley fired again and again, but afraid of killing his own men, his aim was bad. From the corners of his eyes he saw old Newt throw a chair, wildly, at him.

By the time Hurley recovered his balance, Jim Stanton had his gun in his hand. The Yaqui Hurley had wounded had collapsed, from loss of blood. The other, grinning venomously, had drawn his knife. He jabbed, viciously, with it. Jim Stanton felt the thing rip into his side. He twisted away. The heavy gun kicked back into his hand, once, twice. The Yaqui screamed, rolled over helplessly.

Big Jim Stanton swung his gun muzzle, then, on Pancho Hurley. The breed still stood in the doorway. As the gun swung on him, he slipped out, ducking behind the wall for shelter as he threw lead at the huddled figures on the floor. Even as the bullets hammered about him, Jim Stanton fired three times. Then, his gun clicked empty. Reloading swiftly, he heard strange, rustling sounds from outside. Pancho Hurley was escaping.

The thought jerked Stanton to his feet. He ran, staggering, to the open door. He saw a huddled figure, writhing, twisting along the ground not twenty feet away. His gun whipped up—then he lowered it, shivering a little. The shot was not needed.

Stepping back into the hut, Jim Stanton looked once at the two Yaquis.

"They ain't moved, Jim," came the voice of old Newt Payson. He was sitting up, holding his thumb against the artery of his left arm. He grinned admiringly. "Kind o' mad, weren't you?"

"I reckon I'm squared," he said simply. "Are you hurt bad, Newt?"

Old Newt Payson snorted his disgust.

"Hell, no! This little ruction has done me more good than six doctors. An' when we get that gold, I'll be plumb cured!"



X MARKS THE SPOT

By George McDonald

"X" marked the murder spot. But it was the double-X that shamus O'Rourke had to watch.

O'ROURKE fastened the last buckle on his second suitcase, and heaved it onto the bed beside the first. That was that! Now, come hell or high-water, he was going to scam out of this town. No more detours—no more sucker

plays. O'Rourke had money in his pocket, and a yen to go places.

"Gangway!" he said, and he grinned a little.

He looked at his strap watch. Seventy-three of a dour evening. J. D. Cady and

Pittsburgh Phil Fisher would be in around eight to get O'Rourke's final answer. He looked at the packed suitcases and shrugged. That was his answer. Wild Terry O'Rourke wanted no part of the night club racket.

He switched on the floor-lamp beside the biggest chair in the hotel room, and selected a cigaret from the silver case on the table. He had just finished reading the comic strips when three soft taps sounded at the door. O'Rourke glanced down at his watch.

"Come on in, early birds," he called without rising.

Two men—strangers—entered the room. The dark, thin man closed the door and leaned against it languidly. The tall blond came straight across to O'Rourke's chair, moving swiftly. He carried a brief case under his arm, and as he came he was talking:

"Mr. O'Rourke . . . ? So happy to find you here, Mr. O'Rourke." He put the brief case down on the table. "I have something here, sir, that will be of interest to you." His long fingers worked quickly with bronze buckles and leather straps.

"Take it away," O'Rourke growled. "I don't want any French post-cards or suppressed books. I've seen Paris and I've got a book. Take your shill—"

"Please, Mr. O'Rourke," the big blond said. His eyes twinkled as he reached into the brief case. "This little article is much more interesting, much more serviceable, than any publication. You will note—"

His hand emerged, and a .38 automatic jutted at O'Rourke chest. "Don't bother to get up," he said.

O'Rourke sank back into the big chair beneath the lamp. The thin, dark man at the door jammed his hands into his coat pockets and edged forward a little. The big blond was grinning like a yellow cat.

"What's the deal?" O'Rourke asked quietly. "Sit down, Blondy. Let's talk it over."

The big man said, "Thanks. I see your shoulder gat hanging on the bedpost. You haven't got a belly-gun inside your waistband, I hope. It would be just to bad if you have, O'Rourke."

"Why don't you sit down?" O'Rourke said again.

The big blond leaned back against the

table and balanced the .38 in his lap. He nodded toward the bed, and in his lazy voice was condenscension: "I see your bags are all packed, O'Rourke. You're leaving town tonight, eh? That's fine. You don't mind, I hope if we stick around and see that you get away all right? Bon voyage, and all that sort of stuff, old chappie?"

He laughed thinly.

O'Rourke eyed him speculatively, wondering what the build-up was. There were lots of birds in this town—including several foreign consulates—who would give three loud cheers and a couple grand in cash to know that O'Rourke's scalp was hung on the fence, and this big blond looked efficient. O'Rourke wasn't so sure now—

"What do you think of Notre Dame this year?" he asked conversationally.

The other shrugged. "What train are you taking, O'Rourke?"

O'Rourke lit a cigaret, and smoke trickled down through his nostrils. "What's it all about?" he asked. "I ain't decided what train I'm taking."

"I'll decide for you, O'Rourke," the blond man said promptly. "There's a nice rattler leaving Grand Central at 10:10. You're going to be on it."

"Why?" O'Rourke's voice was still unconcerned.

"Because there's some smart boys in this town that don't want you to open the Horizon Club for Cady and Fisher."

O'Rourke laughed softly. "Afraid of competition, eh?"

"Exactly, friend. Especially with you in the set-up."

O'Rourke's voice was speculative. "Just for the sake of argument, Blondy," he said, "Supposing—just supposing—I don't feel like taking that 10:10. What then?"

The big fellow patted the gun in his lap.

"You're blowing town tonight, O'Rourke," he said. "Either in a nice, soft Pullman berth—or on a one-way ticket to hell. It's your say-so."

O'Rourke slipped deeper in the chair. His long legs stretched out—until one toe was beneath the cord that connected the floor lamp.

"You make it pretty plain," O'Rourke drawled.

"Just as plain as your strawberry hair,"

the blond man grinned coldly. "Get moving, copper. We ain't got all night. Reservations and all that. And besides—you're expecting visitors around eight.—"

"Oh—yeah—" O'Rourke chuckled ominously. His foot jerked up, and the room was in darkness.

The blond man saw a dark form hurtling toward him. He pulled on the trigger. A streak of orange and blue flashed in the darkness. Then Blondy figured a steam roller had crashed him. O'Rourke's hundred and ninety pounds was all over him. Down to the floor they crashed.

O'Rourke had figured nicely. One hand clamped on Blondy's windpipe. The other ground the bones of the gunman's wrist, until his grip on the automatic loosened. O'Rourke rolled over, pulling the big fellow with him. He didn't want the young lad by the door to bust a toe on his jaw. There was a noise of a door slamming. Then the sound of footsteps hurrying down the hall. O'Rourke laughed grimly.

"Looks like your buddy did a fade-out, Blondy," he jeered. From then on O'Rourke had his hands full. The blond gunman knew a trick or two. He tried them both—and O'Rourke trumped both tricks. Splayed fingers, reaching for O'Rourke's eyes, got clamped between his teeth. A knee, whipped up fast, just grazed O'Rourke's groin. The Irishman discouraged Blondy's notion to sink his molars into an ear, by a couple of rattling left hooks to the chin.

All the time, O'Rourke's grip on the blond lad's windpipe was tightening. O'Rourke was pitched about like a chip on a rough ocean, but his grip lasted. Blondy's struggles grew weaker. His breath was now a gurgling gasp. O'Rourke squeezed harder and felt the man's body go limp. He crashed a left to the jaw to make sure; then got up and switched on the lights.

The blond man's face was still purpletinged. He breathed faintly. O'Rourke picked up the .38 and dropped it onto the table. He slid out the magazine and extracted the six bullets. He shot back the slide and ejected the one in the chamber. The seven soft-nose slugs were dropped into the waste-paper basket.

Then he got a pitcher of water from the bathroom and sloshed the unconscious face.

Blondy sat up, rubbing his throat and chin. His eyes roamed around the floor.

"On the table, Blondy," O'Rourke said.

The blond man spotted his cannon. Then he drew his knees up and wrapped his arms around them.

"Now what do we play?" he asked.

"Guessing games," O'Rourke grinned. "You're going to guess out loud. Who sent you? Why? That gambling racket stall don't hold water with me."

The blond shook his head. "No spigoty English," he said.

O'Rourke's hand lifted. His fingers crooked suggestively.

"Be kind to your Adam's apple, Blondy," O'Rourke advised softly. "I'm not a Fed any longer. There's nothing keeping me from—"

Blondy rubbed his throat again.

"I'm a glutton for punishment," he said. "I can take it—but what the hell—" He talked for five minutes. O'Rourke listened thoughtfully. "Okay, Blondy, me lad," he said. "Get goin'. Take this hardware with you. I'm expecting company."

Blondy picked up the rod. He looked at it, and then at O'Rourke. He sighed regretfully. The muzzle of the automatic turned toward O'Rourke.

"I'm afraid I talked too much, O'Rourke," he said. "Maybe you'd better come along with me."

O'Rourke scowled at him.

"You damn half-wit," he growled. "Get out of here before I slap you silly. Think I'd hand you a loaded gat? Tell your boss you did the job okay, and take the back stairs—I don't want you to meet my guests."

The door shut behind the blond man. O'Rourke picked up the floor lamp and straightened out the rug. His eyes rested on the suitcases on the bed.

"Just a great big, red-headed sucker. A fall guy for these tough babies to peg at—" he jeered. "But how the O'Rourkes can take it—"

He lit a smoke and sat down again in the big chair.

IT was after eight-thirty when the two promoters came in. J. D. Cady was mopping his bald head with a white silk handkerchief. The rotund little politician's moon face creased in a grin.

"My fault we're late, O'Rourke," he said. "A little meeting. Didn't get away as early as I figured on."

O'Rourke shook hands with Cady and spoke to Pittsburgh Phil Fisher. The gambler's lips framed a smile of apology. A plenty good looking lad, Phil was. Especially when his poker face relaxed in a smile.

"Grab a chair," O'Rourke said. "I'll get out a drink."

They talked trivialities until a bellboy brought cracked ice and seltzer. O'Rourke poured. "Here's to crime," he smiled. He saw Pittsburgh Phil eying him peculiarly, and grinned into the dark-eyed gambler's stare.

"If it's the necktie, Phil," he said, "I bought it at Macy's."

Fisher said: "No, it's the bump on the side of your head. Been out on the trail of crime since we saw you last?"

O'Rourke explored the side of his head. He wondered just which one of Blondy's clouts had raised that one. His eyes opened, wide and innocent.

"Now what do you think of that?" he said blandly. "I don't even remember getting it. This New York night life does things to a guy."

J. D. Cady chuckled.

"You're sure a hound for the dames, O'Rourke," he said. "Now if you'd change your mind about hooking up with the Horizon Club, we could show you some torrid tamales that really are hot."

"You sure know my weakness, J. D.," O'Rourke grinned.

Pittsburgh Phil nodded toward the suitcases.

"Looks like you're going places, O'Rourke," he said. "Have you finally made up your mind?"

O'Rourke's eyes fixed on the highball in his hand.

"I don't know, Phil," he said slowly. "A couple of hours ago I packed those bags and said to hell with Cady and Fisher. The proposition was out. Running a night club—even a swell one like you boys plan, with a swanky gambling salon—didn't look interesting enough to appeal to a guy who's always been a copper. But since then—maybe—"

The rotund little politician sat up in his chair. His moon face fairly beamed.

Pittsburgh Phil's poker face showed signs of pleasure.

"You mean that you'll hook up with us—" Cady asked eagerly.

O'Rourke nodded slowly.

"Yeah. Just like that. The world's No. 1 prize sucker—that's me—Terry O'Rourke."

Fisher's dark eyes gleamed.

"That's swell, O'Rourke," he said. "It's the real McCoy for us. But what made you change your mind?"

O'Rourke's smile was bland.

"Oh, I dunno, Phil," he replied. "Maybe it's because the whole deal sounds so screwy—you gents paying me two grand a week because you say my Federal rep is a drawing card for you. Probably I'm just goofy enough to want to stick around just to see whether or not it's as foolish as it seems."

They talked a few minutes longer. Cady and Fisher left. O'Rourke watched them and flipped his hand in a salute as they stepped into the cage and shot down. Then he went back to unpack his suitcases. He was humming softly—then he laughed ironically.

"A simple sucker—any old come-on gag—" O'Rourke chuckled audibly. He thought of the blonde cashier downstairs. Maybe she'd step out.

In the elevator J. D. Cady's brows lifted owlishly.

"Looks like it worked, Phil."

Phil Fisher nodded dubiously. "Yeah. Telling a tough egg like him that he can't do something is like waving a red flag in front of a bull. But don't forget . . . O'Rourke's old lady didn't raise any foolish kids. None that were christened Terry anyhow."

Cady poked a finger into his partner's ribs.

"Don't be such a pessimist, Phil," he said. "O'Rourke's with us. That's what counts."

II

O'Rourke walked west to Broadway and crossed Times Square at 47th. Two blocks east, he turned south on Fifth. He walked up the Avenue to the National Trust.

An express elevator shot him smoothly

and silently to the eighty-seventh floor. He stepped out and down the corridor to the partially decorated Horizon Club. Down three stairs, he headed back of the dais of the orchestra to the private offices. O'Rourke opened a door marked "*Private*" and stepped into J. D. Cady's office.

A brown-haired girl sat on Cady's flat-topped desk, swinging a pair of legs that rivaled Dietrich's. She had full red lips that looked like a scarlet gash against the creamy whiteness of her complexion. Her brown eyes widened as she looked at O'Rourke. She slid off the desk and walked toward the Irishman with outstretched hands.

"As I live and die," she said in a husky throaty voice. "God's gift to law and order—Terry O'Rourke himself."

O'Rourke's square face split in a grin.

"Hello, Dumont," he said. "Didn't know you were in town."

"Just wafted in on a breeze from the stockyards, O'Rourke," she told him. "Booked for the floor show these boys are inflicting on the long-suffering public. I take it you gents know each other."

"Everyone knows O'Rourke," Cady chuckled. Fisher was silent. The girl cocked her head sidewise. "Still making the front-pages, I see," she chirped. "How do you do it, Big Boy—with the war going on and all?"

"It's a gift, Dumont—I get a yen for a quiet visit in town and a gang of tough mugs try to feed me the works. Something like that always happens to me."

Dumont nodded sympathetically. "Just a poor, defenseless red-head," she cooed. "Always ready to be taken to the cleaners—and never get there. How's J. Edgar, big fellow? I heard you and him didn't get along so well. . . ."

O'Rourke shrugged. "I got tired of chasing down foreign agents who turned out to be a guy named Herman. I'm on my own now."

The girl jeered. "The story I heard was different. That book you wrote about the Karl Brink case didn't go over so good, did it, Mister G-man? Your superiors didn't like the idea of an ordinary Fed spilling all the State secrets. Somebody whispered in my ear that Mister O'Rourke resigned from the Secret Service—*by request!*"

"Have it your way," O'Rourke grunted. He grinned ironically. "So you've signed on the dotted line for the boys. That's swell. We'll be seeing a lot of each other."

Dumont lifted an eyebrow.

"Don't tell me you made that much money on your book, O'Rourke," she said. "Or that you've finally decided which side of the fence you're on—and gone crooked. It'll cost you plenty of dough to look at little Leona in this setting—I can see that now. You'll have to be a big shot to be able to afford it."

Cady butted into the conversation. "You're talking to your new boss, Dumont," he said. "O'Rourke's the manager of the Horizon Club."

THE girl looked at O'Rourke and then at the partners. Her eyes rested a fraction of a second on Pittsburgh Phil's dark, handsome face. The gambler smiled slowly.

"That's right, Leona," he said. "O'Rourke's going to run the works out front. Cady can't afford to—his political connections and all that. And I'm a professional gambler, which let's me out with Park Avenue swells."

Dumont whistled softly. "That I should live to see the day—" she said. Then she stuck out her hand. "But I'm damn glad to see you here, O'Rourke."

"Makes it kind of nice," Pittsburgh Phil said dryly. "You two can renew your old friendships—and everything."

Dumont's chin lifted.

"Don't get us wrong—*Mister Fisher*," she clipped. Then she grinned. "Guys have made that little error before, eh, Red-head?"

"Yeah." O'Rourke's blue eyes were guileless. "Dames get me into a lot of trouble, Dumont. That's why I'm off them for life."

"Oh, yeah!" Dumont jeered.

"Yeah!" O'Rourke replied quietly. "Far be it from me to spoil your act, Dumont, but if you're through why don't you look the town over? I want to discuss matters of vital importance with the boys here."

Dumont paused at the door. Her hand lifted in a military salute. Her thumb was perilously near the tip of her tilted nose. "I'm a lady that can take a hint," she said. "I'll be seeing you. Stick 'em for a good

share of the take, O'Rourke. You'll earn it."

III

REB HALLOWAY'S long, lean body shivered and his narrow shoulders shook, as his baton frantically cut the air. He spurred his Cotton Pickers to heights of rhythm. The eyes of Reb's dusky musicians rolled and flashed. The music rose to eerie heights; then died to a muted pianissimo.

Under the crimson spot, Dumont, perched on the corner of a piano in the middle of the dance floor, took up the refrain. Her vibrant, throaty contralto voice swung it:

*"Still longin' for the old plantation—
And for the old folks at home—"*

Dumont slid off the piano and took a bow. Applause roared from the crowded tables. Clackers and hammers rattled. The opening night throng at the Horizon Club pounded its approval. The singer kissed her finger tips to the audience. She ran across the floor toward the dressing rooms.

Then she was back under the spot, with O'Rourke. She held up a hand in a Joe Humphries gesture:

"Ladies and gentlemen—" Dumont was burlesquing the high-tenor voice of Jackie Marlin, the master of ceremonies. "I want you to give this big boy a great big hand. O'Rourke of the G-men—Wild Terry O'Rourke who ran Karl Brink to earth—and the new manager of the Horizon Club! Let him have it, folks—"

The introduction brought O'Rourke a crashing hand. His face was as red as his hair when he bowed. A big palm went up to quiet the racket.

"Thanks, folks," he said simply. "I haven't an act to put on. I'm glad to see you here—and hope you like our show. I can't promise anything except a fair run for your money. That's more than most of you expect—"

There was a ripple of amusement from the well-bred crowd.

O'Rourke went on.

"There's been some criticism about my resigning from the Federal Police. I can't go into that but I want to assure you that

while I'm in charge here I'll do my best to see that your wishes are cared for—and I hope all you folks will be friends of mine."

He walked off the floor with the girl, scowling. Under his breath he growled at Dumont: "What's the idea of that bright gag? Trying to make a crooner out of me?"

"Act your years, G-man. Fisher and J. D. told me to drag you out for a bow."

"The boys are too kind to me. Want me right out in front, don't they?"

She nodded.

"Sure. Why not? You're their big front. You're O'Rourke, the greatest copper in the country. Our praise-agent said so in all the papers. These yokels put their shekels on the line to get a look at that ugly mug of yours."

"Nuts, Dumont," O'Rourke grinned. "You know damn well all the men in town came here to see how much of that lovely hide of yours you were going to expose."

"You've got me mixed with two other gals, Red-head," the girl said. "By the way—a sandwich at Ruebens wouldn't be hard to take after the show."

"My doctor don't let me eat between meals," O'Rourke told her.

"Still shy, ain't you, feller?"

"Yeah. Scram, sister. You'll get pneumonia in that costume."

Dumont's eyes were inscrutable as she watched O'Rourke's broad shoulders move toward the gambling salon. She shrugged and walked back to the star's dressing room. She hummed softly: "I'll be glad—when you're dead—"

O'ROURKE circled in back of the orchestra and down the side aisle. A green damask door swung to admit him to a small lounge. At a press of a button, heavy walnut doors slid open. They closed behind him, shutting out the noise of the night club floor.

The gambling salon was complete in every detail. Furnishings and appurtenances were calculated to appeal to a high-class clientele. Here was opportunity to joust with Fortune—at roulette, fan-tan, poker, black-jack, monte, baccarat—or what have you.

The roulette tables and the crap tables were getting a fair play when O'Rourke

walked in. Women in evening clothes and men in faultless dinner clothes staked thousands, and won or lost with well-bred nonchalance.

O'Rourke spoke to a couple of men at the crap tables. They were men whose tuxedos were expensively tailored, but whose eyes were hard and who talked very little.

With the finale of the midnight floor-show, the salon began to fill. O'Rourke circled the room, then returned to the club proper. The tiny dance floor was crowded.

O'Rourke found Mike Duffy backed up against the wall at the far end. Duffy was an ex-plainclothesman who had departed from the force during a change in commissioners. He had two assistants, and they did special police work around the club. Duffy had a camera eye that knew nearly every dip and prowler in town.

"Everything serene, Duffy?" O'Rourke asked. His eyes traveled over the tables and the dance floor.

"Sure. This job's going to be soft, Chief," Duffy grinned.

"Don't kid yourself. There's plenty of ice on the necks of some of them dames. And where ice is sported, there's chisellers to lift it."

"Anyway, it's a swell environment, as the book-fellers say," said Duffy. "My old lady's threatening to have the priest talk to me. She saw a picture of the chorus in *The Comet*."

"The good woman's got plenty in her think-box," O'Rourke told him. "I'm keeping you pegged myself."

Duffy said, "Speaking of dressing rooms, O'Rourke, la Dumont would have a word or two with you—at your leisure."

"I wonder if it's a raise—or a date?" O'Rourke muttered.

"Better lay off the dates with that one. Our Phillip might not like it."

"That makes it unanimous," O'Rourke said. "I'll break the sad news to that flock of curves right away."

DUMONT yelled, "Come in" when O'Rourke rapped at the dressing room door. She was dressed for the street. Her eyes were mocking as she looked at him.

"Still feel that way about taking me home?" she asked.

"Just that way," O'Rourke nodded. "I'm

laying off the Don Juan stuff these days."

"Turning me down cold, eh?" Her voice was flat and level. She walked up to him. Bare arms slipped around his neck. Soft curves pressed hard against him.

"Am I so hard to take, Big Feller?" she asked.

O'Rourke smiled.

"You don't make it at all easy, Baby," he said. He pulled her close. His head bent and his lips jammed hard against the scarlet gash that was her mouth. He could feel her teeth against his lips. Then he slapped her where the dress was tightest in the back.

"Shove off, Baby," he said. "You're too much dynamite." He pushed her away gently—laughing at the anger in her face.

A grim ironic little grimace twisted her lips.

"Getting kind of pure all of a sudden, ain't you, O'Rourke?" she flung back the words at him. "What's the matter—what's wrong with me?"

O'Rourke's voice was level. "Phil Fisher's name is on the check that your landlord gets each month, ain't it?" he asked.

"What does that make us?" she asked angrily.

"It makes us good pals—and that's all, Dumont. I've got a weakness for dolls but they've got to be free and unattached. And thank you very much."

He walked toward the door. Her dark eyes burned. She laughed a little bitterly.

"You big ape—Fisher knows about us anyhow. He said he already knew we were that way about each other when he hired us."

O'Rourke was out the door. He said over his shoulder: "What Fisher thinks is his affair. What he says—that's a horse in a different race. So long, Dumont."

O'Rourke turned down the corridor and saw Pittsburgh Phil staring at him. The gambler's dark eyes were slits in a pale face. O'Rourke said, "Looks like we went over with a bang, Phil."

Fisher's face tightened.

"Yeah—it looks that way, O'Rourke."

O'Rourke walked out to the club floor. His blue eyes were dancing with imps of perversity. He spoke aloud: "Every time they hook you for a sucker, O'Rourke. And every damn time it's a petticoat—"

IV

O'Rourke leaned his elbows on the parapet that flanked the open-air promenade running around three sides of the club. He looked over the roofs of darkened, shadowy buildings to the gleaming path of lights that was Broadway. The flickering incandescence of Times Square blazed up against the dark horizon. Gleaming letters chased each other along unseen paths, forming words for the ant-like figures crawling along the thoroughfare to read.

Above O'Rourke's head, flaming scarlet letters appeared in the black void. One by one they marched into line, until the huge whole spelled *H-o-r-i-z-o-n C-l-u-b*. O'Rourke's eyes followed the blood-red letters. His forehead was wrinkled in a deep frown; a vague unrest stirred him. He shrugged and decided he needed a drink. He was just about to go in for it, when a voice at his elbow halted him. It was a soft voice, with a trace of a lisp—a voice that stirred a memory within O'Rourke.

"Looking for blood on the moon, O'Rourke?"

The big Irishman's head turned slowly. He looked down at the slender young man at his side.

"Hello, Paul," he said. "Long time no see."

Paul Franzi's face, the face that one sob-sister had called, "the countenance of a choir-boy, masking the heart of a Frankenstein," grew thoughtful.

"Yeah—nearly a year," he said slowly.

O'Rourke grinned, a tight little grimace.

"Didn't expect to see you for some time yet, Paul. Get sprung ahead of time?"

"A friend of mine got elected to the Parole Board," Franzi explained. "He pulled a couple wires for me."

"So? That's too bad," O'Rourke said bluntly.

Paul Franzi's cherubic expression faded. He looked like a very evil young man.

"Bad for you and Dumont, you mean." His lisping voice was a snarl.

O'Rourke's jaw got lumpy. "Button your lip on that line, punk," he said flatly. "Get the idea out of that pretty head of yours that I ran you up the river because I wanted your babe. If I'd wanted Du-

mont I'd have taken her long before you went up the river for bushwhacking young Donovan."

"I suppose it's just a coincidence that you and Dumont are both on the billing here?"

"Just that, my lad," O'Rourke said. "And if you tailed her to New York, expecting to pull any of your Sicilian vendetta stuff it's just too bad. I saw you first, old son."

Franzi's eyebrows lifted. "You've got me all wrong, O'Rourke," he smiled. "A skirt is nothing in my young life."

"Pardon me, mister," O'Rourke mocked him. "And did you come to see our little show?"

Paul Franzi's smile was beguiling.

"I'm a high-water gambler, Mr. G-man," he said. "They tell me the sky's the limit at the Horizon Club—so there you are—" His narrow shoulders lifted and fell in a shrug. Franzi's eyes were mocking as he turned toward the gambling salon. "Be seeing you around, O'Rourke," he said.

O'Rourke said fervently: "I hope I see you first, Paul."

DUFFY stopped O'Rourke as he walked into the club. "We're entertaining some out-of-town talent tonight, O'Rourke," the ex-cop said.

O'Rourke eyes got bright. "Somebody you've pegged?" he asked.

"I don't make them," Duffy said slowly. "But they're heels, or I'm a Dutchman."

O'Rourke's eyes followed Duffy's glance to a side table where four men sat. "Strangers to me, too," he muttered half aloud. "But then they would be strangers. I suppose—"

"You talk like you was expecting them, Chief," Duffy said.

"Yeah. Maybe I did expect them."

O'Rourke turned on his heel and walked back to the office. He caught Dumont as she was finishing her twelve o'clock number. She was all over her ppeeve of the night before and greeted him with a profane salutation.

"Friend of yours is in town," O'Rourke said abruptly. "Seen him yet?"

"I've got a couple friends, Red-head," she replied pertly. "Just which one has joined us now?"

"Paul Franzi."

"Franzi—in New York?" Her voice was pitched low. The color fled from her cheeks, and her dark eyes opened wide. Then she looked hard. "Well, what do I care? We broke clean—before—"

"Before he went to the Big House—" O'Rourke smiled grimly. "I just thought you'd like to know."

Dumont's eyes were hot as she looked at him.

"That has all the earmarks of a nasty crack," she said slowly. "I don't care whether or not you think he trailed East with me. You're so clever you can take care of yourself, I guess."

She flashed past him to the dressing room. O'Rourke's brow was furrowed as he watched her go. Was it a frame? Was Paul Franzi trailing her? Or him? He shrugged. Whichever way it went, O'Rourke knew it would pay him to step carefully.

V

O'Rourke's eyes flew open. For a fraction of a second he lay still, trying to locate the slight noise that had roused him. He heard it again, the slight rasp of leather against metal. His eyes focused on the bedroom window that opened onto the fire-escape. His right hand slid under his pillow and wrapped around the butt of the automatic there.

He saw a faint blurred shadow; then an indistinct outline of head and shoulders showed above the window sill. The shadow seemed to elongate and the waning starlight showed a gleam of metal.

O'Rourke sat up, and lurched sideways out of bed. As he moved there was a muffled report. He threw a shot at the blurred figure.

A mocking laugh followed the shot, and then the noise of scuffling feet running down the iron steps. O'Rourke sprinted for the window, and lifted the automatic for another shot. He held his fire as windows along the side of the hotel flew open. A ricochet might plunk some goof craning to see what all the shooting was about.

O'Rourke watched the dark figure hit the alleyway, and sprint to the street. A cab was there, and the door was opened by a woman. O'Rourke frowned. He went

over slowly to answer the pounding on his door.

The house dick wanted to know what it was all about.

"Just a cat-burglar trying to bust in," O'Rourke said. "I tossed a shot at him to discourage him."

"Why didn't you let him get inside? We could have nailed him then."

"I never thought of that," O'Rourke said blandly. "I'll remember the next time."

He switched on a light and poured a drink for them. The hotel detective asked futile questions for five minutes and then gave it up. After the man had gone O'Rourke sat on the edge of the bed and studied his big, square hands.

Franzi and Dumont. . . . J. C. Cady and Pittsburgh Phil. . . . Where was the tie-up, and how did O'Rourke fit in?

He sat there for a long time, eyes blank, before a jerk of his thumb plunged the room into darkness again. And for a long time he rolled restlessly, sleepless.

HE scanned the crowd at the club that night until the group of hoods that Duffy had pointed out appeared. O'Rourke sized them up individually. Then he walked into the gambling salon where he found Paul Franzi tossing the ivory cubes. His thoughts were busy as he watched the cherub-faced killer manipulate the dice. Franzi felt O'Rourke's eyes on him. He showed his teeth in a smile.

"Feel lucky, Irish?" Franzi called softly. "Come on and fade me, I'm rolling 'em high, wide and handsome."

"Plenty of cash in the bank, Paul," O'Rourke smiled. "They'll cover all your dough. I don't fade any bets—in here."

The Sicilian smiled again and turned to the houseman that was running the game. O'Rourke walked back to his office.

On the way he stopped to rap at Dumont's door. She had just finished her make-up, was waiting for the cue for her first turn.

"Hello, Terry," she said. "Got something on your mind?"

"No. Nothing particular. Just wanted to know if you had my address."

"Don't be funny. I know you live at the Metropole, if that's what you mean." She eyed him shrewdly. "What's up now?"

"Nothing at all, Baby," he said. "I—"

"I'd like to believe you, feller," she said slowly. "Honest, I would. But something tells me that there's thoughts that are deep and dark in that strawberry head."

"The trouble with you, Baby, is that you've played with the wrong kind of men. That's why you don't trust me."

She reached up and patted his cheek.

"I don't trust any man. And least of all red-headed Feds."

O'Rourke smiled down at her.

"Maybe you don't trust me—but you don't exactly hate me, do you, Dumont?" he asked softly.

"I wish to hell I did," she said bitterly. Her arms went around his neck and she kissed him. "I'm an awful tramp for going nuts over a heel like you."

O'Rourke heard a door slam in back of them. He straightened. Both of them looked down the corridor toward the door to Pittsburgh Phil's private office. Then they grinned. Dumont hurried onto the floor. The orchestra crashed into her song. O'Rourke's eyes were bleak as he listened to her husky voice swing the old one. . . .

"I'll be glad—when—you're dead—"

O'Rourke's face was thoughtful as he walked onto the floor of the club. Dumont was deep—she had been nuts over Franzi—now Phil Fisher. . . . It just didn't tie up together.

He walked around the tables until he found Duffy.

Duffy nodded toward the table where the four tough birds were still sitting.

"The boys are entertaining nobility, I guess," Duffy said.

O'Rourke looked over. Paul Franzi was seated at the table, talking to the big, tow-headed lad who seemed to be the kingfish. O'Rourke scowled. That threw a little more mud into the mess. Just about when he'd figured differently.

"That kid looks like he was in bad company," Duffy pointed out.

O'Rourke laughed shortly.

"You're all wet, Duffy," he said. "It's the other four that are running out of their class. Keep your eye on that angel-faced baby. He's pure, dyed-in-the-wool tough—and I don't mean perhaphs."

ABOUT midnight O'Rourke blew out onto the promenade for a breath of air. He was so busy with his thoughts that he didn't hear the girl's first low scream of protest. But as he rounded a corner of the building he heard the sound of a solid slap. O'Rourke lifted an eyebrow as he looked toward the bunch of potted palms that threw that corner into shadows.

He walked by, whistling softly.

The girl's voice got louder. O'Rourke's steps slowed down.

"Help—O'Rourke—"

O'Rourke turned on his heel and started back. Even as he turned it flashed through his mind that it was an old gag for a frame-up. He hoped it was. Two weeks' inactivity at the Horizon Club had made him as tractable as a caged jaguar. The girl who paged him was struggling in the arms of a big man. She reached up and slapped him again—a resounding smack. Then she slipped from his grasp and ran along the promenade toward O'Rourke.

The Irishman watched the big fellow lumbering after her. The corners of his mouth lifted. The girl stopped beside O'Rourke.

"Keep traveling," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "I'll talk to the gentleman."

She slipped through the door to the club, and the man started to follow. He ran into O'Rourke's palm at the end of a stiff arm.

"Back up, mister," O'Rourke said softly. "Your style is too fast for the girl friend. Take it slower—you'll get there faster."

The man halted flat-footed. He stared at O'Rourke coldly, and O'Rourke's blood began to sing in his veins. It was the tow-headed Swede from the party of toughies.

"Who asked you to butt in, chiseler?" the Swede growled.

"I'm just sociable," grinned O'Rourke. "I don't wait for invitations. Come on—go into your act. No need to stall. I've been looking for you to show for two weeks."

The Swede's face looked puzzled. Then he whipped into action with deceptive speed. His big fist lifted in a perfectly timed uppercut. O'Rourke's head moved a fraction of an inch. Then the red-head

crossed his right; crashed it against the Swede's teeth. Lips split and puffed. The Swede backed off, cursing low and steadily. He fainted with his left and snapped a right hook. It landed high on O'Rourke's head.

O'Rourke sidestepped to get away from the Swede's rush. He turned to meet the tow-head, and saw, almost too late, that he had waltzed into trouble. A second thug, much smaller than the Swede, slid out of the shadowy corner. A leather sap dangled from his wrist. It lifted and swung. O'Rourke rolled his head; the blackjack grazed his temple, jolting him off balance.

The Swede contributed a pile-driver right that found O'Rourke's jaw. O'Rourke felt his knees buckling. He backed up to the parapet away from the little man with the blackjack.

The Swede rushed into two left jabs, but kept on coming. His big hands clamped around O'Rourke's neck. The Irishman tried to pry those fingers loose. It was like trying to bend steel bands. The little thug was dancing around, trying to get home a lullably with the blackjack. The big hands at O'Rourke's throat bent his head into the path, and the back of the Irishman's head felt as if it had caved. Stars rocketed in front of O'Rourke's eyes. He fought off the black haze that was settling.

O'Rourke heard the Swede speak. His voice sounded miles away.

"Okay, Shrimp. That's got him. Scram over to the door and do a lookout. I'll feed this lousy Fed to the sparrows."

O'Rourke felt the cement parapet scraping against his shoulders—then farther down his back. His dazed brain slowly grasped the fact. He was being lifted to the edge of the parapet. The big Swede was lifting him for a long drop—eighty-seven floors down to the Avenue.

The instinct to fight was still strong. It was that—more than conscious volition—that lifted O'Rourke's knee in a deadly blow, hard into the Swede's groin. There was a grunt and a moan of pain. O'Rourke dropped to the cement floor of the promenade like a sack of coal. The Swede doubled in agony.

O'Rourke rolled twice and lurched to his feet. He was weaving, but his hand had

flashed the automatic from its spring clip holster. O'Rourke lurched forward. The Swede saw him coming, and turned tail. He was still bent double in pain. Murderous rage was in O'Rourke's heart. He planted his feet wide apart; tried to steady the muzzle of the automatic. Then his knees caved suddenly and he went down on his hands and knees again.

He got up and shook his head. The dizziness passed. A splitting ache took its place. He shoved the gun back and made the door of the club. Both hoods had faded. O'Rourke went farther down the promenade to the door that led to the aisle in back of the orchestra dais.

DUFFY was there, just circling the orchestra platform. His eyes popped at the blood trickling down the side of O'Rourke's head. "Who in hell bopped you, Chief?"

"A little two-by-four punk," O'Rourke grated. "He was one of that gang of red-hots you spotted. Seen them lately?"

"Yeah. They just checked out. The biggest guy, the yaller-haired one, was hanging onto his belly. The little runt said he had an appendix attack. What was it—a hold-up?"

O'Rourke said: "I don't know whether it was a hold-up or a frame-up. But I'll find out plenty quick. Keep your eyes open for those heels. If they show here again—let me know."

In the men's room, he swabbed the bump with a wet towel. There was a small gash and a sizable bump. The attendant closed the cut with court-plaster.

O'Rourke headed for the office of the partners. Cady and Pittsburgh Phil were both in the office. O'Rourke eyed the dark-haired gambler grimly.

"What hit you, O'Rourke?" Cady asked with concern. "You ain't been doing a bouncer act? You ought to let Duffy handle the tough ones. That's his job."

O'Rourke's smile was bleak. "This was a kind of personal affair," he said. He turned again to Fisher. "Know anything about it, Phil?" he asked flatly.

The gambler's dark face turned darker. His eye got hot and burned into O'Rourke's stare.

"What do you mean by that, O'Rourke?" Fisher asked angrily. "What should I

know about your personal affairs, as you call them?"

O'Rourke's tone was level. "I just walked into a nice set-up," he said. "Two muggs tried to bop me, and heave me over the parapet. I'm just figuring who hated me enough to want to send me to hell on a hand-car."

Fisher's face was stolid again.

"I think you're screwy," he said shortly.

J. D. Cady stared at O'Rourke, then at Fisher. His round blue eyes were frosty as he said:

"Looks like you're still punch-drunk, O'Rourke," he said. "Phil and I are your friends—I think. We've tried to be, anyway. Now you come in here with a cokey dream, insinuating that Phil tried to give you the works. What's it all about? Let's put it on the line"

O'Rourke's eyes were still on Fisher's face. Fisher hadn't reacted the way O'Rourke figured. Maybe Phil hadn't been in on the job.

"I ain't saying Phil tried to give me the out," he said. "But he's been nursing a grouch for a week. Thinks I'm cutting in on his girl."

Cady looked at Fisher's angry face. He chuckled; then he laughed aloud. "Wouldn't you know it," he said. "Always, there's a dame at the bottom of trouble."

Fisher said: "Having a grouch about a woman—and trying to knock a feller off—there's a lot of territory in between."

O'Rourke admitted it. Somehow, Fisher's attitude weakened his belief that jealousy on the part of Fisher had promoted the job of work that had so nearly went across. O'Rourke nodded slowly.

"Maybe I am screwy," he said. "A blackjack kind of mixes a guy's brains up. The drinks are on me, Phil."

But Fisher's eyes were still hostile. He said: "While we're on the subject, O'Rourke, let's understand each other. Dumont's free and old enough to vote. But I don't like the idea of paying the—"

"Wait a minute, Fisher," O'Rourke's voice clipped. "Dumont and I are friends—nothing else. Get that, and get it right."

Fisher's dark eyes probed O'Rourke's face. Then he smiled, a thin lifting of the corner of his mouth. He stuck out his hand.

"That's okay by me, O'Rourke," he said. "There's guys that say you're crooked, running with a lot of undercover stuff—and there's those that say you're absolutely on the up and up. But I never heard anyone say that you were a liar."

J. D. Cady thumped his partner on the back.

"Spoken like a regular guy," he grinned. "Now—if you two lads are off each other's throats for good—let's talk business."

O'Rourke dragged up a chair, and Cady pulled the books of the Club from a drawer in his desk. He glanced at O'Rourke shrewdly.

"Know how much we're pulling down on this layout?" he asked.

O'Rourke said, "That's your headache, J. D. You make enough to hand me my two grand each week."

Cady showed him their profits. The amount was sizable. "We've got a good thing here—but I want it to be better," he said. "Phil and I have been talking it over. We want to put on a show that is a wow—something that will make them sit up in their seats and yell."

O'Rourke nodded slowly.

"I thought you had a pretty good show now," he said. "We get a good play as it is."

Cady chuckled. "Sure we do. The Club is new. But we've got to keep them interested. We've got a new program to go on Saturday night—so hot that we'll probably be raided—but we'll do a swell job promoting it."

O'Rourke had to grin at the little politician's enthusiasm. Cady seemed to regard the Club as a treasured pet. He seemed to get more kick out of it than he did putting over a political deal that would net him a lot more cash. O'Rourke turned to Fisher.

"What do you think about it, Phil? Is it as hot as J. D. thinks it is?"

Fisher nodded. "It's good, O'Rourke. And J. D. is right—we've got to keep moving ahead in this racket. Competition is pretty keen. There's plenty of guys wishing us luck—hard luck—and lots of it in this venture—" He paused as a thought struck him "Maybe those hoods that tried to rub you out were working along that line. Do you think so?"

O'Rourke shrugged. He thought of the attack the night before—of the bullet he had dug out of his pillow that morning. He said: "I dunno, Phil. There's plenty of guys running around who would like to put the skids under me."

VI

THE Horizon Club press agent had done a good job. On Saturday night every table was crowded. Extra tables had been jammed in. Finally they had to turn away patrons.

Cady and Fisher had suggested keeping the gambling salon closed until after the new show had gone on at midnight. O'Rourke roamed the place, and his lips tightened as he took in the array of jewels gleaming on the prominent bosoms of dowagers and against the white flesh of débutantes. The *Social Register* had been combed—the publicity staff of the Club had formally invited the 400 to take in the new show.

O'Rourke knew a gathering like this would be duck-soup for any high-class dip or gentleman finger. It bothered him when a close survey of the crowd failed to turn up a first-rate crook. He said as much to Duffy. Duffy grinned and said:

"You don't think I was asleep the whole eleven years I was on the Force, do you? Me and the boys have given at least a dozen of the smart money boys the office to scam."

"That's okay, boy," O'Rourke smiled. "Keep the old camera eye peeled tonight. Half the ice in town is on show here."

Just before midnight O'Rourke decided he needed a drink. He felt that something was going to bust tonight. Everything pointed to it. What the blond boy with the brief-case had told him. . . . Well, if it didn't fit into the picture tonight, someone was screwy.

He met Dumont in the aisle, heading for the dressing room. She stared at him impersonally. "What do you think about the new show?"

O'Rourke said: "I dunno, Dumont. I ain't seen them rehearse it. Do you go for it in a big way?"

Her eyes were inscrutable. She said: "No. It don't click much with me. Why didn't you see them rehearse it?"

"I was coming down this morning to look it over, but Cady called me downtown to his office on some other stuff."

The girl looked interested.

"Did he know you wanted to see the new bill?" she asked.

O'Rourke shrugged. "Yeah—I guess so. He said I'd like it better tonight for not seeing it."

O'Rourke's eyes were probing, despite his seemingly indifferent attitude. Dumont was still a mystery. He didn't know which side of the fence she was on. There had been the doll in the taxi, the night the fire-escape cannon nearly powdered him. It might have been La Dumont.

"You're looking kind of dragged out, Beautiful. Why don't you take a rest?"

"Trying to be funny, ain't you?" she jeered.

O'Rourke smiled thinly. He reached out and caught her by the two arms. "Come clean—" he said softly. "Tell little Oswald what's in that pretty head of yours?"

She knocked his hands down. Her mouth was twisted wryly.

"Lay off that stuff, O'Rourke," she said fiercely. "I'm no softie—for you to twist around your finger. You can't soft soap me, not even to save your precious hide."

O'Rourke turned her loose. His eyes were hard and frosty.

"That's swell, Baby," he said. "You and me—we're expecting the same thing tonight. And it's okay with me, too. So thanks for the ride."

Her hand reached out toward him, then fell to her side. Her chin went up and she walked into the dressing room, without a backward glance. O'Rourke said to himself:

"That's once you were the wrong kind of a sucker. You played that like a sandlotter."

He turned and started for his office. He poured himself a hooker of neat rye and tossed it down. He slipped the automatic from the holster under his left arm and tried its mechanism.

HIS strap watch told him it was 11:45. Almost time for the new show to go on. He stepped out to look it over—ready for anything except what happened. He looked for trouble—if any—to come from out front. He was caught flatfooted

when a voice cut into his thoughts as he passed the dressing room of the master of ceremonies. It wasn't the falsetto treble of Jack Marlin.

"Hold it, punk," the voice said. "Lift your arms. Lock your fingers in back of your neck." The sentence was punctuated by the jabbing of something hard against his ribs. O'Rourke looked down, and another voice, on the other side, said:

"Get 'em up, wise guy. You're covered two ways."

O'Rourke let his eyes move to the left and back, as his hands went up. The second speaker was the little hood who had handled the blackjack out on the parapet. Without looking, O'Rourke knew the gun against his ribs was in the big paw of the Swede.

O'Rourke poised on the balls of his feet, measuring his chances. His jaw was set in an ugly line. The shrimp was in front of him now.

"Back up slowly, punk," he snarled. "Don't make any smart moves either. I'd like to throw a slug in your gizzard. That's why there's a silencer on this roscoe—just hoping you'll try to start something."

O'Rourke moved backward, walking slow. The Swede let him go past. Then he stepped along beside the little hood. O'Rourke's eyes were slitted. He watched for the slightest kind of a break.

They herded him past the door of his own office. A door behind him opened. O'Rourke heard Fisher say:

"Bring him right in, boys."

They marched him backward—into Fisher's office. The dark-faced gambler was smiling at O'Rourke. "Take a chair, O'Rourke. We won't keep you long. Will we, boys?"

O'Rourke sat down. His hands dropped away from his head. As they did, the muzzle of the little gunman's automatic moved. O'Rourke could see his finger squeezing the trigger. He laughed shortly.

"Take it easy," O'Rourke said. "Don't get nervous."

Pittsburgh Phil moved across the room. He sat on the edge of the flat-topped desk. One foot rested on the floor; the other swung back and forth. His lips framed a smile, but his dark eyes were flecked with red.

"Well, Mister G-man O'Rourke," he

mocked. "It looks like it's the payoff for the big shot from the Feds."

O'Rourke's face was a mask of immobility. His eyes were hard and watchful. He said slowly, "I been looking for it, since the night I took the job. The blond guy told me it was you and Cady that hired him. You birds were too damn' anxious to get me on the spot here."

Fisher laughed softly. "And you've been wondering ever since, just what the build-up was, eh?"

"I knew it would be good, with you and Cady behind it," O'Rourke said dryly.

Fisher's hands rubbed slowly together. "It is good—so good that I can't resist telling you about it. We wanted a fall guy—and who better than O'Rourke, the guy that plays them so smart that nobody knows where he stands. There's going to be a swell job pulled here tonight. When it's done, you're going to be left holding the sack."

O'Rourke said: "I've been handed sacks before—but some other mugg usually winds up in them."

Fisher's voice got ugly. "Almost twelve, Swanson. Get the boys lined up for the act."

The Swede looked at Fisher, then at O'Rourke. "How about the dick? Want me to powder him first?"

Fisher smiled bleakly. "No, Swanson. I'm saving that pleasure for myself. You didn't show so hot the other night, when you tried."

Swanson nodded and walked out of the office. The little gunman moved closer to O'Rourke.

O'Rourke laughed softly. "I figured you right on that deal, Fisher," he said. "Sorry I had to disappoint you."

"You did me a favor," Fisher admitted. "I was screwy that night. You know how it is—about dolls—they get into a guy's hair sometimes." He glanced at his wrist watch. "Time to get going, Shrimp. Frisk him. I don't want to have a gat with a full magazine found in his pocket when the bulls pick him up."

THE little man moved forward on the balls of his feet. His gun was balanced carefully in his right hand; his left pawed out toward O'Rourke. Gingerly he reached for the gun under O'Rourke's

left armpit. His own automatic jammed hard against the Irishman's chest as he started to pull the gun out of the holster.

O'Rourke galvanized into action. He rolled sidewise in the chair; his vest buttons held long enough to lock the little hood's left hand tight. The move threw the Shrimp off balance, before he could squeeze the trigger. When he did jerk on it, O'Rourke's body had slid from under the muzzle. The bullet burned through the Irishman's tux, searing the flesh. It ploughed along his side, and buried in the chair.

O'Rourke's left fist whipped up, like a flicking lash. It crashed into the face of the diminutive gunman, knocking him flat.

Fisher's gun roared as soon as the Shrimp's body was out of the line of fire. O'Rourke was rising from the chair as Fisher shot, and the first bullet went wild. Fisher squeezed the trigger again as O'Rourke launched a diving tackle. The bullet ploughed through flesh but the impact couldn't stop that relentless advance. O'Rourke crashed Fisher with his shoulder, reaching toward the gun. Over the desk they toppled. O'Rourke felt his left shoulder crack as he landed on it—a broken collar bone. He gritted his teeth against the pain as his right hand ground the gambler's gun toward the floor.

Fisher was slender but wiry. His arms possessed unexpected strength. O'Rourke's left arm was useless. The gambler clawed at O'Rourke's eyes with his left hand, as he tried to force the right, holding the gun, toward O'Rourke's chest.

Slowly, relentlessly, O'Rourke's powerful right arm forced the gun over and down, until it was on the floor again. Then he started twisting the gambler's wrist. Fisher bent his head and sank his teeth into O'Rourke's hand. The pain was wicked, but O'Rourke kept forcing the hand forward in front of him.

A last desperate effort knotted the veins in Fisher's forehead. The gun moved up a bit toward O'Rourke. O'Rourke's right arm stiffened and he drove the gun back the other way, savagely grinding Fisher's wrist. There was a sound of crunching bone, and the roar of a gun mingled with Fisher's moan of pain. Acrid fumes of cordite bit at O'Rourke's eyes.

The gambler's body twitched.

The Irishman climbed to his feet. His shoulder ached like hell, was a white flame of pain as he felt the jagged edge of his shattered collar bone. His hand was wet when he took it down. Fisher's shot had passed just above the clavicle.

O'Rourke wanted to be sick, but he fought against the feeling. He looked around. The pint-sized gunman was trying to sit up. O'Rourke saw him through a red haze. He kicked him under the chin. Then he dragged him to a closet and threw him in.

There was a bottle of Scotch on Fisher's desk. O'Rourke pulled the cork with his teeth and took a stiff drink. He fished his flat automatic out. The butt plates were crimson. O'Rourke wiped the blood off with his handkerchief. Then with a grin that was sardonic he tossed the stained linen over Fisher's face. He stepped out into the corridor.

Duffy was looking for him. He told O'Rourke that the elevators had gone haywire. None of the three answered signals.

"Smart fellers," O'Rourke muttered, half aloud. "No exits—this crowd's lined up like sheep for a slaughter."

Duffy stared at the limp left arm; saw the trickle of crimson across the front of O'Rourke's dress shirt. "A heist—?" he panted.

O'Rourke nodded.

"Looks that way to me. Stick your two boys by the doors. Have them keep people inside—at their tables if possible. You stick back here by the private elevator. I'm looking for Cady to show. When he does, glom onto him. Don't let him loose—get it? Crack his conk if you have to, but keep him until I see him. Get going, Duffy."

Duffy got going.

O'Rourke walked around the end of the orchestra dais. Dumont was leaving the floor. The lights went low, and the adagio team started a number. They swung onto the floor, the girl wearing a diaphanous negligee. Her partner wore a pirate's costume. O'Rourke watched through slitted lids. He tried to figure which way the play would be made.

The girl broke away from her partner's grasp, leaving most of the slimsy negligee in his hands.

She cowered and backed away, trying to hide her nakedness. She had pulled a dirk from the pseudo-pirate's belt; she used it now, to drive him from her.

A souse in a ringside seat howled with admiration as the girl went past his table. The girl had plenty of curves, and was showing most of them. She was twisting and lashing at her partner. It was realistic—daring. The pirate stuck a whistle to his lips and piped a shrill blast.

The spotlight shifted from the pair on the floor. It lined down the aisle that had been left between two rows of tables. O'Rourke's body grew tense as his eyes flew down that glowing beam.

He picked up the five figures as they started their advance toward the center of the floor. They were dressed in dinner clothes—with variations. Each wore a mask and a Jolly Roger hat. Bright sashes were tied around their waists. Tucked into each sash was a gun; not a flint-lock but a modern automatic. They formed a wedge and came up the aisle in sinister crouches.

O'ROURKE'S eyes gleamed as he pegged the leader. It was Swanson, but the Swede wore a wig under his pirate hat. A red wig, that matched O'Rourke's own strawberry thatch to perfection. In height, breadth of shoulder and squareness of jaw the masked leader could very easily have been O'Rourke himself. The illusion was there.

And if—as Fisher had boasted—if O'Rourke had been found later, with a hole in his head, wearing a mask like that . . .

Swanson halted in his tracks as O'Rourke stepped out in front of the orchestra. He crouched and leaned forward, staring as if at a ghost. The gun in O'Rourke's hand lifted.

The audience was in breathless silence. This was a show! Even the great O'Rourke was in it!

"Back up, you heels," O'Rourke's voice rasped. "I'm ditching this act right now. Get me?" He moved a pace forward.

A curse ripped from the Swede's lips as the truth went home. O'Rourke had somehow gotten away from Fisher. He was blocking the deal. The Swede's hand flashed toward the automatic at his waist.

O'Rourke fired and the Swede sat down quick, clutching at his stomach. The masked man directly behind Swanson had his rod in action. O'Rourke felt a bullet graze his side and plunk into the supports of the orchestra platform.

There was a clashing of brass, a few muttered curses, and Reb Halloway's band took it on the lam. A scream from a woman at a ringside table echoed with O'Rourke's second shot. She had seen a round hole appear in the second gunman's forehead. She knew it was grim reality, and not a pageant, that she was witnessing. She fainted; crashed into a table. Other guests went crazy. Pandemonium ruled the Horizon Club. O'Rourke's voice roared above the din.

"Sit down—you fools—stay in your chairs!"

The other three backed away slowly, fighting like cornered rats. The red-headed Irishman had a charmed life. He advanced slowly but steadily, in the face of their fire. A third masked man hit the floor, and O'Rourke seemed to falter in his tracks.

From behind he heard the roar of a gun and the voice of Duffy, cursing softly.

"Get back—and look—for Cady," O'Rourke gasped.

Duffy's gun roared and the fourth man wavered, then dropped to his knees. The fifth man turned to flee, but one of Duffy's helpers charged in, swinging a blackjack. Then it was over.

O'Rourke said sharply: "Beat it, Mick. Cover up on Cady. He's the big money in this take. Get going." He planted his feet wide apart to keep from toppling, and shouted hoarsely for lights. A badly scared electrician finally fumbled the switch on. O'Rourke held up a hand, and the crowd eyed him goggle-eyed. Real or faked—they had been given their money's worth.

"Just squat in your seats," O'Rourke roared. "The shootin's over."

Folks at tables talked back and forth.

A columnist from one of the papers ran out onto the floor, shouting questions. Jackie Marlin, the master of ceremonies, tugged at O'Rourke's sleeve:

"Mister O'Rourke—puh-leeze—what'll we do?" he cried, his high-pitched voice breaking with excitement.

"Never mind what's happened, Violet,"

O'Rourke said grimly. "Get to work. Earn your dough for once. Get those smokes back to playing. Run Dumont out for a song—she won't be panicked by a little shooting."

O'Rourke left the throng on the floor partly quieted. He got hold of LeDuc, the manager of the gambling salon, and told him to throw open the doors. Then he hurried back to his office. His face was a hard, bitter mask. Beads of sweat dotted his forehead. His shoulder ached like the hammers of hell.

This party was about cleaned up.

VII

FROM Cady's office came groans and curses. O'Rourke opened the door and looked in. Duffy perched on the desk, a broad grin splitting his freckled face. Cady was sulking in a chair. In one corner, on the floor, Paul Franzl sat, his face chalk-white. He held a blood-stained handkerchief just above his heart. He cursed, between groans, in a dull, monotonous voice.

O'Rourke said, "What's wrong with Franzl? Who dusted him?" Duffy grinned. "Me. I forgot to tell you out there. When I was waiting to see if Cady was going to wake up, after I crowned him, I spotted this mugg gum-shoeing down the corridor with a gat in his hand. I threw Cady in the can, and stepped out. When I yelled at this lily of the valley, he turns fast and lifts his gat. So I let him have it. He was headed out toward you when I flagged him."

O'Rourke rested his narrowed eyes on Franzl.

"So—Paul?"

A sardonic grin showed on Franzl's pain-stricken face. He said: "That was where you slipped up, copper. I was going out to help you."

O'Rourke smiled grimly. He said: "My pal! Tell me the one about the fire-escape, Paul. I could believe it a lot easier."

"Yeah—" Franzl said slowly. "I could tell—that, too— But—I ain't saying—I chipped in—for your lousy—sake. I wanted you—myself." The brown eyes flamed; then the lids got heavy and closed. Paul Franzl was dead.

O'Rourke turned to meet the hostile glare of J. D. Cady. The politician was wrathful.

"I'll nail your hide to the fence for this, O'Rourke," he said. "You think you're a tin god—having your flatfoot muscle man strong-arm me. How do you get that way?"

O'Rourke's face was weary as he looked at Cady. He said in a tired voice: "Shut up, Cady. I want to figure what to do with you." He turned to Duffy. "Get Police Headquarters on the phone. Tell Sergeant Devlin to come up here. And have them send a black maria for these hoods that are wounded. Better have someone get the Superintendent of the building to fix up those elevators. And, Duffy—"

"Yes, sir?"

"Call this number," O'Rourke said. He gave a downtown exchange. "Tell the man who answers that O'Rourke wants him up here. Tell him the sucker bit."

Duffy whistled. "I know that number. So you're still—"

"Yeah," O'Rourke broke in. "Okay, get goin', fella."

Duffy left the room. O'Rourke narrowed his eyes on Cady's face.

"Well, Cady," he said slowly, "it didn't work out. Fisher's dead—Swanson's croaked—and O'Rourke ain't. What do you make of it?"

Cady tried to bluff it out.

"I think you're nuts, O'Rourke," he said. "Trying to frame a punk heist job onto me."

"Not a punk heist job," O'Rourke corrected him. "But murder—with O'Rourke for the goat."

Cady laughed aloud. "You ain't screwy enough to think you can make that stick are you?" he asked. "Don't be a sap all your life. You forget how much pull I've got in this burg."

"Yeah. I know. You got pull. But not enough to influence Uncle Sam, Cady."

"What do you mean?" The little man's eyes held a sudden look of fear.

"Meanin' that I'm hep to your little rub-out scheme. Meanin'—*this!*"

Cady took one look at the shining object which lay in O'Rourke's palm. "Then you ain't on your own. You're still working with the Feds?"

O'Rourke nodded. "Right, first guess. Now, Cady, suppose we let our hair down a little. Fisher didn't know it—he thought it was just a straight frame job—but your main concern was to follow out orders from this Consulate, wasn't it?" O'Rourke named a foreign Consulate. "I'd learned too much in the Karl Brink case to suit them. Such as their connection with some of the cheap politicians around town, hey, Cady?"

Some of the little politician's assurance faded. His little eyes got shrewd. "They tell me you're a smart guy, O'Rourke," he said. "How would you like about fifty grand—to forget what you know?"

O'Rourke said quietly: "I'd like to plant a slug in your guts, Cady."

Cady opened his mouth to speak. Then his lips shut in a tight line. O'Rourke grinned down at him. His hand braced against the table. The room was beginning to reel in front of O'Rourke's eyes. He didn't want Cady to know that. There was a bottle of whisky on a little table in the corner. O'Rourke walked over to it. He put his automatic on the table, picked up the bottle with his right hand, bent his head to pull the cork with his teeth. For a split-second his eyes were off Cady.

The fat little politician took it on the lam. His short legs streaked for the door. O'Rourke tilted the bottle and took a big drink. It made him feel better. Then he picked up the gun and started after Cady.

No need to hurry. . . .

J. D. halted for a second at the private elevator. Duffy had gone down in it. Cady looked over his shoulder and saw O'Rourke coming along the corridor. The gun in O'Rourke's hand chilled his blood. He legged it along the corridor and out a door to the promenade. O'Rourke lifted the gun. He could have winged Cady before he made the promenade, but more shooting would send the brass hats out front into another panic. O'Rourke stepped out onto the promenade as Cady crashed into the dead end wall at the end of it.

The little politician turned like a rat at bay. He could see just one finish. O'Rourke was hard and tough. He knew that Cady and Fisher had planned to give him the works—Fisher for motives of personal revenge; Cady for reasons that lay between him and a foreign power. Cady could almost feel O'Rourke's retaliating slug between his eyes. He turned and clawed like a cat at the top of the parapet. O'Rourke stopped short, and lifted his gun. Cady was screwy—a shot in the arm or leg would drop him.

But O'Rourke's gesture spelled death to Cady. The little politician climbed to the top of the wall, teetered a second and then screamed once more. His body arched and went out of O'Rourke's sight.

O'Rourke started to run to the wall. Then he stopped short. No need to look.

DUFFY was at O'Rourke's door with a quiet, well-dressed man. He smiled at O'Rourke pleasantly. "What have you got, O'Rourke?" he asked.

"A couple of ordinary gunmen," O'Rourke answered. "The other one—the one we were after—is down on the Avenue."

"Cady?"

O'Rourke nodded.

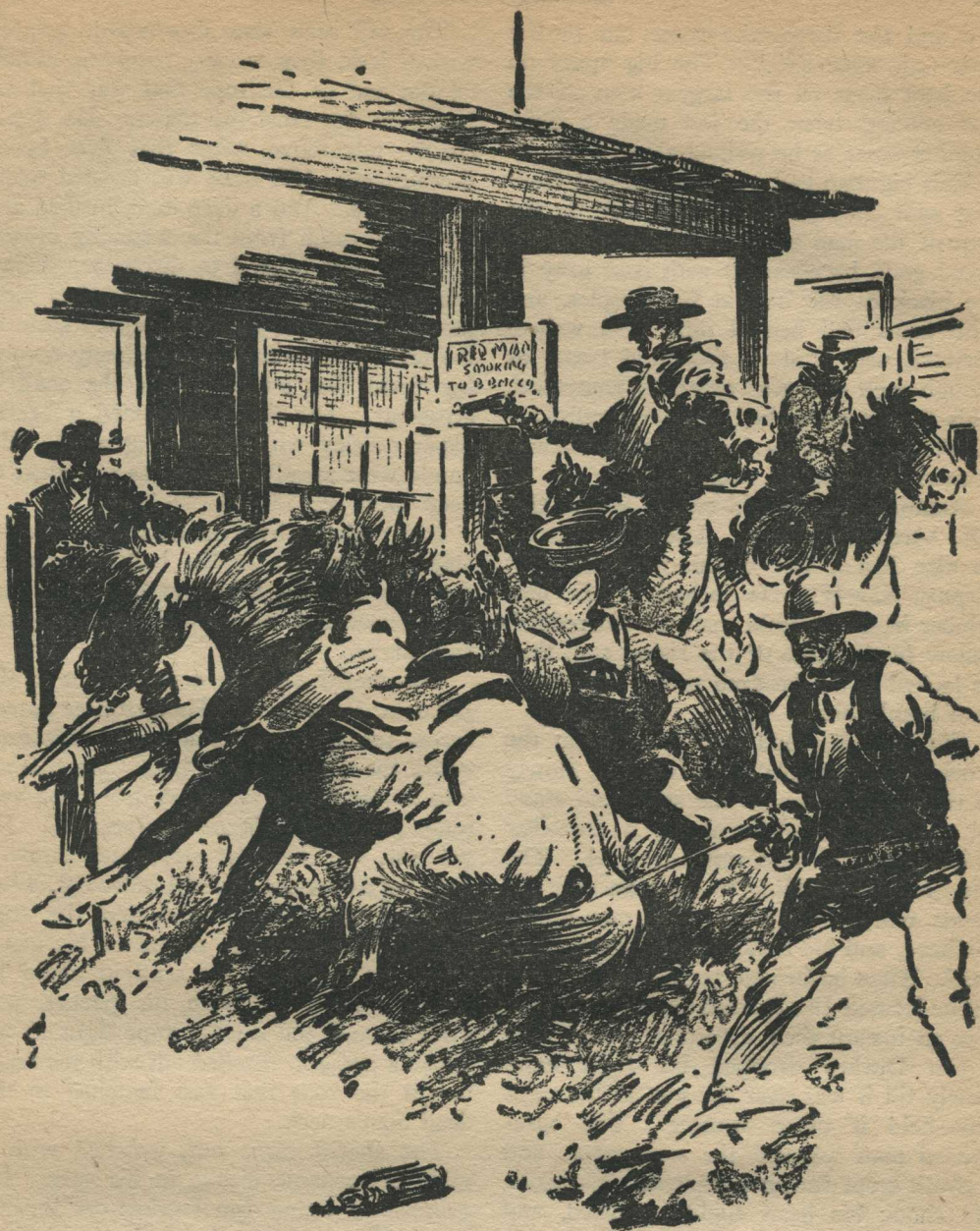
The man whistled softly. "That cracks things wide open, O'Rourke. We've got them where we want them now."

"Better than being cracked open myself," O'Rourke told him. "Cady wasn't geared up for murder—not high stuff like this—skyline stuff—"

O'Rourke's knees finally buckled. He sat down fast.

Duffy said solicitously, "You're all shot to hell, O'Rourke. You better climb into the wagon, too. You're due for a vacation in a hospital."

The corners of O'Rourke's mouth lifted. "Hell, Duffy," he said. "I'm just tired from running. Pour me a drink—then run along to Dumont's dressing room. Tell her I quit working for Fisher—about an hour ago—and I'd like a sandwich at Ruebens."



HIGHLINE LAWMAN

By John Starr

A hangnouse heritage dogged young Jim Durkee's hoof-prints—until he took to the highline trail to write his own law legacy.

YOUNG JIM DURKEE kept his black eyes away from the scaffold, built of new, yellow lumber, watching the three men who came through the

doors of the Coyote County jail. A lot of other people watched them, too. But nobody said anything. The crowd surrounding the roped-off scaffold—Jim Dur-

kee and the three who came out of the door—all were silent. The big spurs on the boot heels of the largest man of the trio coming from the jail made a loud, jingling noise as he walked along.

This big man had a star on his vest front that said *Sheriff* on it. He held to the arm of the man on his left; a tall, brown faced gent, bareheaded, with iron gray in the black of the hair at his temples, and with arms tied behind him. He walked forward with a slow, measured tread, as though each step was carefully controlled. This tall man watched the new scaffold—didn't take his eyes from it as he moved toward it beside the sheriff.

Another man walked on the left of this tall, bareheaded man. Like the sheriff, he also had a star on his vest, it read: *Deputy Sheriff*. He looked at the new lumber in the scaffold that showed reddish yellow in the haze of the rising sun, then he looked at the bronzed profile of the tall man beside him.

Jim Durkee stood well away from the crowd. He watched the trio walk slowly to the scaffold, mount the steps and stand on the platform, just under a cross-bar from which a new rope drooped. The sheriff started talking to the man with his hands tied behind him. The man shook his head, and his tight, mirthless grin widened. Then he turned, searched the crowd till he located Jim Durkee across the street. For an instant their eyes met, clung.

Jim Durkee dropped his right hand slowly till it was near the gun at his right hip—held it there, waiting. The bareheaded man watched the slow move, and warmth crept for an instant into his smile. He shook his head slightly, turned, and said something in a low voice to the sheriff. Young Durkee stiffened. His head jerked around. There was a swarthy faced man behind him holding a cocked gun. The gun was inches from Durkee's back. . . .

THE sheriff took the new rope and fitted a lopsided noose over the tall man's neck, pulled it tight, stepped back and said something again. The tall man shook his head slightly, looked at the sun. That was now a full red ball in the east. The sheriff shrugged—made a quick signal—and the floor seemed to drop from the scaffold.

The tall man shot downward, stopped with a jerk, then swung, revolving slowly on the end of the rope that was tied securely to the cross-bar above. He didn't twitch, nor move, after that first fierce, jarring jerk. His head was twisted oddly to one side. And a deep sigh, hushed and awesome, came from the watching crowd.

The crowd started to disperse. A few people peered at Jim Durkee as they went past him, but the youngster didn't seem to see them. He watched that slowly revolving form that swung under the scaffold cross-bar. His fingers fastened a brown paper quirley without looking at it. His hands were steady, but it was an effort to keep them so.

For perhaps five minutes Jim Durkee stayed motionless at the building corner, studying with his cold eyes that form that grew more and more distinct as the sun rose higher.

The sheriff and the deputy went to the jail door, stood there. Then Durkee moved across the street. His step was measured—like the tall man's had been. He climbed into a buckboard seat and drove the two pinto ponies over beside the scaffold. He got out, mounted the steps and threw a light rope over the scaffold cross-bar. Then he went down again and tied the rope around the dead man, up under his arms. When he mounted the scaffold again he took a jack-knife from his pocket, and after he tied the smaller rope tight to the scaffold upright, reached out with the knife to cut the rope that was fastened to the dead man's neck.

The sheriff came out, watched with a glint of sardonic dislike in his eyes. He grinned as young Jim Durkee cut the big rope. The dead man dropped a few inches, then stopped again. Durkee got down, went under the scaffold and pulled on the loose end of the rope that fell near him. The dead man slumped. Durkee grabbed him about the middle, carried him to the buckboard and slid him up on the floor.

The sheriff came closer.

"You handle yore Dad real good," he said. "Been practicin'? In your line, maybe?"

Jim Durkee turned around, very slowly, as though he wanted to whirl, but restrained himself. He kept the thumb of his right hand hooked in his belt while he

looked deep into the sheriff's glinty eyes.

"I do a couple o' things real good, Bowen," he said softly. His black eyes bored more deeply into the sheriff's. "An I want t' do *one* of 'em right now."

A red flush crept up in the sheriff's dark face. His eyes wavered. He looked down at his boot toe, then over to the jail door where the deputy stood. His booted feet fidgeted and he moved away with short jerky steps.

Jim Durkee watched him go, kept his eyes fastened intently on the sheriff's back till the jail door closed. Then he sighed, his shoulders slumped a bit, and he climbed into the buckboard seat. He turned the pintos and drove slowly out of Palomas.

OUT in the shrub-studded lowlands, fifteen miles from Palomas, a low roofed 'dobe, deserted, apparently abandoned for some time, squatted alone, staring vacantly with its one dark window at the barren wastelands about. Fifty feet to the south of the 'dobe, a round-topped mound, rock covered, had a board slab at its head, on which, crudely carved, were these words:

JOHN DURKEE
MURDERED BY COYOTE COUNTY

The words showed dully in the dim glow of a round, silver moon that looked down stupidly upon a string of five riders who made their silent way past the deserted 'dobe. Their mounts' hoofs made slithering, crunchy sounds in the soft sand as they filed past, riding silently, dark, ominous figures in a black-and-silver world.

The cavalcade moved past the 'dobe, breasted the rock-covered mound with the board slab at its head. The leader of the cavalcade threw up his right hand. A low curse broke the stillness as the riders drew to a halt. The big leader dismounted, stomped to the rock-covered grave and cursed again as he tugged at the board slab at its head. There was nervous impatience in his movements as he threw the slab fiercely from him and splashed through the sand back to his brone again. The cavalcade moved forward no one speaking. The only sound was a growling curse from the big leader, rising above the crunch of horses' hoofs and the squeak of leather.

On, through the darkness, over rolling sand dunes, the five riders moved. They came to a cluster of squat, 'dobe buildings in a low *arroyo*, hid from view from the traveled trails, and totally dark except for one faint glimmer of light showing dull yellow under the crack of a closed door.

In front of this building they dismounted. They entered a long, dirt-floored, dim-lit room with a rough bar at one end. The wan light showed that all five riders wore black masks under the wide brims of their hats.

Behind the rough bar stood two dark-faced Mexicans, both masked. One of them was dandily dressed in velvet breeches of black, velvet jacket, a crimson sash about his middle, and a cream colored Stetson atop his black head. He smiled with a show of white teeth.

"Welcome back," he said softly with a slight Latin accent.

The other Mex behind the bar, older, white haired and hatless, reached back and slid a bottle on the bar top. The big leader of the five reached out, grabbed the liquor bottle and tilted it to his lips. He seemed excited.

His four followers watched him curiously. The big man set the bottle down, turned, and they all stepped a little away from the bar. There seemed to be a tenseness in the air. And the big man suddenly strode toward one of his masked followers, slight framed, black haired and black eyed.

His eyes on this young gent, the big man reached slowly down with his right hand and took a gun from his holster. The little fellow started to move his right hand, then stopped and watched the big fellow, a lot of puzzlement showing in his eyes through the slits in his mask.

The big man pointed the gun at the little fellow's middle.

"Black hair—black eyes—yore tongue always behind yore teeth," he grated. "Damn grave slabs always put up again. You look a lot like a fella I know, an' now I got y' spotted."

He finished shrilly, pulled the trigger of the gun, and through the smoke from its muzzle watched the young fellow double like a jack-knife, fall to the floor and lay still.

"Jim Durkee," he grated, "you thought

y' was smart. Y' found out somethin' an' got yoreself joined up with me. Y' played yore tricks—"

The big man stooped swiftly, tore the mask from the dead face, then stepped back with a curse.

"My Lord," he muttered. "That ain't—that ain't—"

"No," said one of the masked men mockingly, "that ain't Jim Durkee. An' what if it was? An' what if it ain't? Whose damn business is it anyway?" He took a step forward, stood directly before the big man. "Listen," he said. "We been operatin' fine. Nobody knows anybody else. I don't know you. You don't know me. I don't know who th' big boss is that hangs out th' signals, an' I don't give a damn. We see th' signal, we meet, come here an' do our stuff. We split, an' who is there t' squeal on anybody? Nobody, mister. It's a fine system. But all of a sudden you git het up over a gent called Jim Durkee an' you kill a man that *ain't* Jim Durkee." He shrugged, stepped back. "If that's th' kind of a *jefe* you're gonna be. . . ."

The big man showed his teeth in a crooked smile, and the gun in his hand raised again. Moving smoothly, like a slow moving cat, but with unusual speed, the slender Mexican came from behind the bar. His long-fingered hands were brushing the gun butts that swung at his hips.

"One moment," he said softly. "One man is dead. That is enough. Listen to me. I have a proposition—for all of you."

Slowly, the big man let his gun sink. He sheathed it. The others nodded, followed the Mexican to a table at the side of the room. The white Mex started to drag the dead man out.

The big man moved forward last and seated himself beside the Mexican.

"Shoot," he said. "What's yore proposition?"

"**T**ONIGHT," said the Mex dandy, tapping a lean finger on the table top, "you come as you do on other nights. You come on horses of one color. You leave on my coal black horses—fast ones—horses as fleet as the wind. You leave to rob a bank—a train—to steal cattle—or just to ride for pleasure. I do not know—I

do not care. I only collect my rent for my fast horses."

"High rent," said the big man.

"High, perhaps," the Mexican said, "but low for you. You ride them unbranded—all black, all the same. You come back here and get your own mounts. And you leave here different men. No questions asked. None answered. Is that good for you—or bad?"

The big man shrugged.

"Well," he said grudgingly, "it's worked fine for three months."

The Mexican smiled again.

"But now," he went on, "there are not so many who come for fast horses. You—and perhaps a few more." He shrugged slender shoulders. "Business is not so good. I need money. More money than I make in this business. Let me ride with you—my horses will be rent free. And in return I will offer you the way to blame all our crimes on one whose name was uttered here but a short time ago."

The big man, the other three, looked at one another. One, fat chin showing under his mask, shrugged.

"It's *bueno*," he said, "if th' *jefe* likes it."

The big man snarled.

"This gent," he asked. "Who is it that you c'n blame things on?"

The Mex smiled, put his hands, palm down, flat on the table top.

"Some months ago," he said, "a man came here. He needed a fast horse. He left a broken, crippled pony, and some of his personal things that might be lost and recognized. Then he left. I hear of a robbery—undoubtedly by him who got my horse. He escapes. But he does not bring my fast horse back to me—nor pay me for its use. He is a cheat. He did not play fair with me so I will not play fair with him. His name was—Jim Durkee."

The big man cursed, slapped a big palm down on the table.

"It's a bet," he snapped. "Git set. We're leavin' on a job now. The big boss gits two shares—we split th' rest even. That suit?"

"*Fino*," said the Mexican. "The horses are ready, as usual."

They all got up. The Mex hurried through a door at the end of the room and reappeared again in a moment attired

in solid black, and with a black instead of a white sombrero. And as they all went out the front door, the Mexican's eyes glowed with triumphant fire, and his hands brushed the guns at his slim hips.

THEY mounted five, big-muscled, black horses hitched to a rail outside. The other broncs, ridden by the five when they came, were gone.

They rode away, the Mexican directly behind the big man, the big, black horses moving like powerful, silent machines—carrying their graceful riders swiftly through the night. The moon rose high, sprayed the riders with silver. The big leader took a watch from his vest pocket, looked at its white face, then moved his right arm forward and they rode at a faster gait.

Miles more. The leader raised his arm. They all stopped, looked down from atop a rise at a tiny, square-built, white-painted building that stood at a road crossing below them. In black contrast on the white of the building, letters spelled *Wells-Fargo Express* over the door. The big man chuckled.

"It's twelve o'clock," he said. "The Coronado mine brings their bullion shipment here every thirtieth just after six. Th' express company signs for it. They keep a guard—mebby two. They have t' hold th' bullion here till th' stage comes from Dos Cabasos at twelve-thirty. We got thirty minutes—"

They all started forward again, the big man leading, the Mexican next, the two others following. The big man eased the gun in his holster.

"Whoever's there," he said softly, "we gotta kill. They won't give up." He turned, glanced at the Mexican behind him, "You got that plant for Kid Durkee?"

"Seguro," said the Mex. "Sure."

Fifty feet from the white building, a tiny gleam of light showed at a window edge, like a heavy curtain had been raised a bit. The big man rode faster, the others at his heels. The building door opened, framed a man with a rifle in his hands. The gun barrel glinted white in the moonlight.

The five riders came forward with a rush and a clatter of hoofs. The man in

the door called shrilly, threw the rifle to his shoulder. The big masked leader jerked up his gun-hand, and the man in the door fell as a pistol crashed. The window in the building front spewed outward with a tinkling crash of glass. A shotgun roared. A light showed inside the building for a moment, then was extinguished.

Pistols ripped, thundered, from the cavalcade of riders. The shotgun in the window roared again and the two riders behind the Mexican screamed in agony. The big man and the Mexican both leaped from their broncs, dashed to the building side, the big man firing his gun in a rattling tattoo. Near the door both crouched. Then the big man rushed inside, gun flaming before him, the Mexican at his heels. The roar of the shotgun greeted them as they leaped inside, throwing fire and thunder in their faces, lead into the wall.

But the big leader's gun spoke again and the clatter of a falling gun followed his pistol's voice.

There was darkness. A groan. A throaty, rattling whisper. Then a soft sigh, and silence.

A SCRATCHING sound—the flare of light . . . the big man stepped across the room and lit the lamp on the wall. A short, dark-faced, bareheaded man lay face downward on the floor, a red rivulet running from beneath him. The big man stirred him with a booted foot, grunted with satisfaction as he rolled limply.

At the far side of the room two boxes were stacked, iron bands about them, with big padlocks through bolted staples in their fronts. The big man glanced at the Mexican, then stared down at the dead man again. He grinned and stooped over.

"Through th' chest," he muttered, then looked up. "It worked once," he said, "mebbe it'll work again. An' it's sure."

He rose, stepped over to a counter, got a pencil from a rack. Took a sheet of paper from a pile at one side of the rack, then stooped again beside the dead man, talked as he placed the pencil in the dead man's fingers, and the sheet of paper under the pencil.

"Forget that stuff o' Jim Durkee," he said, without looking up. "This is better. We make this dead man write a note—just before he died, *sabe?*"

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He moved the pencil in a rough, irregular scrawl. He wrote:

There was three. Jim Durkee killed me. . . .

Then he moved the pencil across the paper in a straight line, laughed as he did it. "He died right there," he said harshly, "didn't have time t' sign his name."

He left the pencil near the dead man's fingers.

"That's better than just leavin' somethin' t' be recognized. That's th' dead-wood." He moved across the room toward the iron bound boxes. "In fact," he said, "that'll be th' *second* Durkee I got—just that same way. I—"

The Mexican stood just behind the big man. The straining muscles on his lean jaw showed plainly, his black eyes glittered. The gun in the Mexican's right hand came up slowly. . . .

Then a call—a clatter of hoofs from outside. The big man leaped forward, fanned out the light. The call came again. There was a thump inside the building. A groan. The thump of a falling body. Then a single slender form slipped away in the darkness, and the sound of galloping hoofs faded in the distance.

YOUNG Jim Durkee stood at a building corner in Palomas, leaning negligently against the building, and watched a scaffold built of new lumber that glinted yellow and red in the newly rising sun. There was a crowd of people about the scaffold but there wasn't much noise. When anybody spoke it was in subdued voice.

Two men stood in front of Jim Durkee. They talked in low tones.

"Talk about a surprised *hombre*," one said to the other. "When they sprung that one on th' sheriff about why he was sleepin' on th' floor of the express office with a bump on his head, a mask on his face, and his gun fired five times—" The fellow laughed softly. "He said he heard somebody was gonna rob th' express company, so he went there. They ask him why he had a mask on an' if he didn't think he outa have his badge an' his own horse with him when he went to arrest somebody. He jes give up—blubbered—refused t' talk."

The door of the jail opened and three

men came out. One was the former sheriff, Bowen. He walked slowly between two men with badges on their vest fronts. Bowen had his hands tied behind him. His face was pale and he watched the scaffold—didn't look at anything else.

The three mounted the scaffold platform. One of the officers said something to Bowen. The former sheriff shook his head. The officer took the noose of the new rope and adjusted it about Bowen's neck. Bowen looked wildly about the crowd.

Jim Durkee still leaned against the building corner. Watching Bowen he took a piece of pink paper from his pocket and unfolded it. It had a crude irregular scrawl upon it that ended with a straight dash. It read: "There was three. Jim Durkee killed me."

Bowen's eyes found the eyes of Young Jim Durkee, staring from his brown, expressionless face down to the paper in his hands. Bowen's mouth twisted with a soundless word and realization flashed into his eyes. He struggled to raise his hands that were bound behind him. A choked animal grunt bubbled from his throat. . . .

Then the floor seemed to drop from the scaffold. Bowen dropped downward, stopped, jerked violently, then spun slowly on the rope end.

The two men in front of Jim Durkee turned, looked inquiringly at Durkee, apparently puzzled by Bowen's startled cry and rage-filled eyes. Young Jim was nonchalantly lighting a cigarette from a folded, burning piece of pink paper. Recognition flashed into the men's faces.

"Hiyah, Jim," one said. "Long time no see. Where yu' been?"

"Mexico," said Jim Durkee. "Raisin' horses."

He dropped the burnt piece of pink paper, put his boot toe on the ashes and ground them into the earth.

"You darkened up a lot, ain't you?"

"Uh-huh," Jim Durkee said. "You git that way." There was no more expression in his voice than there was in his eyes.

"What kind o' bronses yu' raise, Jim?"

Jim Durkee smiled. He looked at the man hanging by his neck.

"Dark horses," he said softly.

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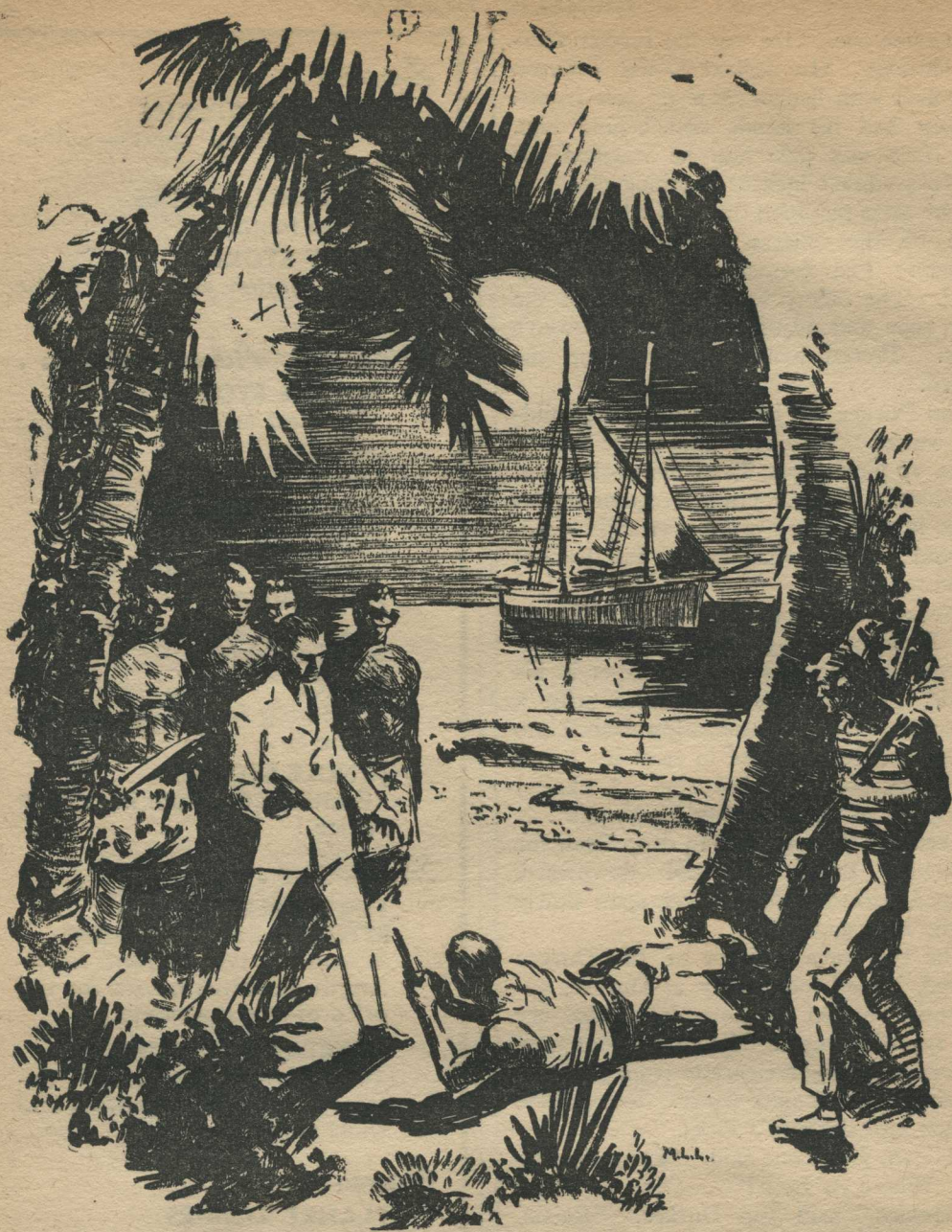
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ATOLL OF DEATH

By Albert Richard Wetjen

Three pounds, seven shillings and fourpence! A small sum to owe—but Stinger Seave crossed half a world to collect amid crashing guns on Death Atoll!

STINGER SEAVE was a peculiar man. Indeed, some thought he was hardly human. He would go in the face of a nation to aid a friend and he

had been known to cross half the world to take his vengeance on a foe. His word, once given, was better than a Bank of New Zealand draft, and he held to his own

peculiar code of ethics which insisted that everything be absolutely on the square and that an eye be given for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He was utterly ruthless, and a killer to his fingertips when the mood was upon him.

It was true that the years quelled him somewhat and he was less quick to draw and shoot than in his youth, but he never actually settled down to placidness as other notorious Island adventurers did.

One of the wildest and most daring exploits of his career was his collecting of a bill from Simon Demarest. The bill was for three pounds, seven shillings and four pence and to collect it men estimated it cost the Stinger over a thousand pounds.

But one thing the collecting established beyond all doubt: That it was wise to meet the Stinger on the level. It is significant that after his clash with Simon Demarest he was never bothered by petty thieves and no plantation or ship of his suffered looting, save always the exceptional episode of the Badger clan of pirates whom the Stinger wiped from the face of the earth.

The Demarest affair began when Simon on his schooner, the *Wayoway*, sailed into Funafuti Lagoon. Demarest was a big, bulking man with an evil reputation. He had suffered two terms in an Australian jail, was suspected of running slaves into South America, and was under suspicion of wiping out and looting the stores of lonely traders. Be that as it may, he went ashore at Funafuti, where Stinger Seave had established a small trading post, and professed to be in the need of tobacco and gin.

Seave's trader, a young man named Warwick he had picked up from the beach at Yokohama, was entirely ignorant of Demarest's reputation and gladly supplied the sailor with two cases of gin and some plug tobacco, charging him ten per cent over Sydney prices, as was just, and presenting him with a bill which, with a few incidentals, such as some forty-five shells and cotton singlets, amounted to exactly two pounds ten shillings.

Demarest showed no inclination to pay, but Warwick thought he would do so before he sailed. Demarest watered at the big spring near the trade store, accepted Warwick's invitation to eat with him sev-

eral times, created some trouble with the natives over women, then announced he was sailing with the morning tide.

Warwick went aboard the night before and asked for his payment and there was something of a scene. Demarest was drunk and laughed at Warwick's insistence. The young trader, who was unarmed, grew angry and when Demarest swore at him swung a stiff jolt to the big sailor's jaw, dropping him to the deck of the main cabin. Demarest sat up and shot Warwick through the arm and the trader was flung overside into his whaleboat by Demarest's grinning Fly River boys.

"And you tell that little squirt Seave from me I'll blow him apart if he tries any funny stuff!" Demarest roared from the rail.

Warwick was nearly fainting from pain by this time and did not answer. He rowed ashore, sent for the missionary-doctor twenty miles away and moodily sat on his veranda and watched the jaunty Demarest make sail.

Thereafter he sat down and wrote a short note to Seave in Apia, explaining the matter and offering to make good the loss out of his own pocket, as he took it very much to heart that he had been so easily swindled.

IT was, of course, several months before Seave received that note, along with other and more voluminous reports, and by that time except for a slightly rancorous feeling, young Warwick had almost forgotten the affair, save when his scarred arm pained him in wet weather. He was, therefore, astonished when Seave's schooner *Argosy* sailed into Funafuti one day and the little, frail man with the cold blue eyes and the wintry smile stepped from his whaleboat to the white sand beach.

Warwick shook hands. Seave went up to the house with him and they had a drink on the veranda. Warwick was busy for a while asking for news from outside and was extremely grateful when he learned that Seave had brought him all the latest Sydney and Island papers—latest, that is, as lateness counts in those wide waters. Eventually Seave leaned back, lighted a cigar and commenced abruptly:

"Demarest's bill was for two pounds ten, wasn't it?"

"Why, yes, sir," answered young Warwick. "I'm willing to make it up, as I think I wrote you."

Seave waved impatiently.

"Who fixed your wound?"

"Chalmers, the medical missionary from Kaola."

"Did you pay him for the trouble?"

"His expenses for coming over and what I thought the regular fee should be, though he wanted to refuse. But he wouldn't take the fee, only his expenses."

"Good. How much was that?"

"Seventeen shillings and fourpence."

"Making a bill of three pounds, seven shillings and fourpence. Captain Demarest shall pay it."

"Where is he, do you know?" asked young Warwick, a little surprised that a man he believed was already a millionaire should take so keen an interest in such a small sum.

"Trading in New Guinea," said Seave gently. "I have made it my business to locate him. I dropped in here just to ascertain the amount he owed."

Warwick's jaw dropped.

"You don't mean to say you came all the way up from Apia to find that out?"

"Of course. A debt's a debt."

"But for such a small sum, sir! You're not going to New Guinea just to collect that amount?"

"Certainly."

"Why, it'll cost you a fortune, and then perhaps he won't pay."

Seave smiled his little wintry smile and his blue eyes turned to the color of ice so that young Warwick, looking into them, felt a shiver run down his spine and his stomach seemed to turn to water. He was afraid for the first time in his life and he remembered with extreme vividness all the strange tales he had been told concerning this frail little man with the ragged mustache.

"He will pay," said Seave gently, and Warwick had the impression that there was not the slightest doubt about it. He was relieved when Seave left to go down to his whaleboat and to the ship. His visit had only lasted an hour or so and young Warwick was dazed for days afterward because he could not quite understand why

a millionaire should make such a fuss over three pounds, seven shillings and fourpence. But, of course, young Warwick did not understand Stinger Seave.

THE Stinger next appeared at Port Moresby, the leading city of New Guinea, and the Burns, Philip manager there, an acquaintance of his gave him some further information as to the whereabouts of Simon Demarest.

"The Administration's after him," said the manager grimly. "He flogged a native woman to death on Woodlark and then ran across to the mainland and hid up for a while in a small bay to the north of Cape Nelson. The R. M. at the Cape ferreted him out and chased him right up north as far as Cape Girgir. Demarest's packet was ripped open on a reef and they took him on board the cutter but he dived overside one night and reached the shore. He was due for hanging, you know. He got away with four of his men. That's all I know. Ask Tomlinson for the latest facts; he's just in from Cape Nelson."

"Thanks," said Seave politely and went to see Tomlinson. Tomlinson was a wizened, yellow-skinned New Guinea pioneer who ran the governor's cutter. It was said that everything that happened or was about to happen from Samarai to Three Cape Pena at the other end of the great island of Papua was known to him, and he met Seave's quiet inquiries with his shrewd gray eyes twinkling and his tobacco-stained teeth chewing at his grizzled mustache.

"What is it now, Seave? Demarest you want? Faith, man, he's finished, I should say. He was in Japanese waters when he got away and the R. M. figured he'd infringed on international rights enough as it was and didn't care to put a landing party after him. He worked up north after getting clear and fell in with a Malay pirate named Sringa, who has one of those big, swift praus.

"We brought a witch-doctor down from Caution Point—he's being held for child murder and inciting the tribes to revolt—and he claims Demarest and the Malay went up country to the Torricelli Mountains to look for a reported gold mine which the natives work in spasms. I've seen some of the nuggets supposed to have come from there and it's likely it exists,

all right. But the natives are head-hunters and cannibals, absolutely untamed. Demarest's head is smoking in some clubhouse now, you can bet."

"Well, I'd like to be sure," explained Seave, blinking a little and rubbing the butt of his gun under his left armpit with the palm of his right hand.

Tomlinson, who had once helped the Administration hunt Stinger Seave for an affair on the Louisades years back, smiled sleepily and chewed his mustache again. If any man did, he understood the Stinger's peculiar ideas.

"You're going up to see?" he said pleasantly.

"Of course."

"It's Japanese territory. You'll be outside the law."

Seave smiled. Tomlinson smiled. There was no need to comment on that. Tomlinson had only mentioned it as a matter of form. There was hardly a man from the governor down who had not at some time in his Island career walked outside the law. The Islands were not tamed by holding strictly to regulations and being fearful of international rights.

Seave rose to go, shaking hands.

"By the way," said Tomlinson, "what is it this time? Murder or looting or a broken contract? I remember what you did to Nelson of Papeete over that shell business."

"Merely a debt," explained Stinger gently. "Demarest owes me a bill. Three pounds, seven shillings and fourpence, to be exact."

"I see," said Tomlinson, who allowed nothing to disturb him. "I'll enter Demarest as definitely dead on the records."

"I wouldn't." The Stinger shook his head and blinked. "He only shot my trader Warwick down at Funafuti in the arm. And so, unless he becomes unpleasant—"

"I see." Tomlinson smiled and shook hands. "I'll leave the thing open, then, until I hear from you."

"Thanks," said the Stinger and left. Tomlinson walked to his sideboard, poured himself a stiff gin and murmured to the whitewashed wall, "Three pounds, seven shillings and fourpence. We ought to get him in the Service. He'd make a first-class Magistrate for the bad districts."

SEAVE resumed his voyage in search of Demarest after taking aboard some water and stores. He had with him his old tough crew of ex-jailbirds and hard-cases who had been with him for years and on whom he could utterly rely. He had them trained to the point where they rendered unquestioning obedience and held in their little, frail-seeming captain a faith that at times astonished men who did not understand just what Stinger Seave was.

The *Argosy* rounded South Cape, went up through the Ward Hunt Strait and passed Cape Cretin days later on the port beam. Still north she went, into seas only half charted, threading reefs and islands, a lone little craft of wood and canvas in a world entirely hostile in both elements and man—still north, past Dampier Island and Cape Girgir, day after day, through squalls, storms, calms, going to collect three pounds, seven shillings and fourpence from a man who was, in all probability, dead. It was a quest that only Seave would undertake.

Eventually the Stinger anchored off a spot on the savage coast beyond which the Torricelli Mountains rose, the peaks unnamed, unsurveyed. The very reefs in that vicinity were unknown, on the charts as they are to this day with the significant symbols beside them, E. D.—"existence doubtful."

This did not disturb the Stinger. He had that faculty of relentless determination, of absorbing himself utterly in the task in hand. Had he wished hard enough and been determined to reach the North Pole for any particular reason, he was the sort of man who would have reached it. It is no wonder that during the last half of his Island career men regarded him with awe and some terror and that the very mention of his name was more than enough to throw Kanaka braves into a cold sweat.

Once at anchor the Stinger left his vessel in charge of his mate, with orders to make for open sea in the event of a blow, as the anchorage afforded no protection. Then, with a well-equipped whaleboat and four men, he proceeded to comb the coast for signs of a Malay prau. If he failed to discover this he knew one of two things would have happened. Either those on

the prau had given up the hinterland adventures and gone away, concluding they were dead, or else Tomlinson's information, via an ignorant witch-doctor, was badly wrong. As it happened, Tomlinson was quite right and the native prau was found at the end of the second day's search.

The sinister craft was anchored securely inside a little inlet that formed a perfect harbor and was well guarded by a numerous crew. Seave's arrival threw them all into somewhat of a panic, though they made instant preparations to defend themselves, supposing probably that a Japanese warship had appeared and trapped them and was prepared to exact justice, for heaven alone knew what crimes.

SEAVE stood up in his boat and held a lengthy conversation with the chief in charge of the ship, a well-built Malay in a yellow silk *sarong* with a *kriss* thrust into the folds of the waist and boasting a pair of superb ruby earrings. This chief was named Kooloo and he was extremely relieved when Seave informed him he wanted to see Demarest, the white man, and had not the slightest interest in the business of the Malays.

He was allowed to board the prau, which he did quite confidently, remaining close to Kooloo and pleasantly assuring him that at the first sign of treachery he would blow out his brains.

But Kooloo was not thinking at all of treachery. He was, in fact, extremely perturbed because he had only that morning received a panting, wounded messenger from his hereditary chief Sringa, far up in the interior, with a plea for aid. The natives had trapped Sringa and Demarest and their dozen-odd men in a narrow ravine. They were entirely out of food, had plenty of water, but were low on ammunition. They had not, incidentally, found the gold mine yet, though the natives attacking them wore bangles and necklaces of beaten gold, proving the mine existed without a doubt.

Kooloo was wondering what he should do. He had with him about twenty men left on the prau. He needed at least that many to make up a rescue party for his chief, and yet he needed at least half that number to remain and guard the prau.

Armed as the Malays were with only knives, axes and a few ancient muskets, their defense had to rely on number, different from Seave's case with the *Argosy*, where his men could raise barbed wires along the rails and had dynamite and magazine carbines.

Seave saw his opportunity and he was no man to neglect any aid that came his way, especially when engaged on such a venture. He proposed that Kooloo and ten men join him and his four whites and leave the rest to watch the prau. He had to assure and reassure the suspicious Malay several times that he was not interested in Sringa before Kooloo at last, in desperation, consented.

So the party set out, Kooloo and Seave in the lead, the natives following and the four white seamen bringing up the rear, all hands being laden with provisions and ammunition.

There was a week of utter killing toil and hardships. Two of the Malays and one of the white men died. The party had to cut its way through thick, steaming jungles, having lost after the first day the original path followed by Demarest and Sringa. They had each night to suffer the torments of mosquitoes and countless biting flies and beetles. They had several brushes with the natives and three Malays were wounded as a consequence.

But they pushed on, Kooloo and the Malays because their hereditary chief had commanded it and was in danger, Seave because he had a bill to collect and it was his nature to dispose of one thing at a time.

AT the end of the week the party heard firing ahead. The messenger who had brought the news of Sringa's plight had led them with unerring sense of direction through the massive, impenetrable jungle and they stumbled right on to the ravine almost before they were aware of it. Naked savages fled before them, to come circling back and hurl spears.

They reached a small clearing of barren rock that led in an abrupt slope down to the mouth of the ravine that was backed by stark red rock cliffs. Natives far above were engaged in rolling rocks down into the opening and it was a wonder even to Seave that any of the defenders were alive

at all. He found later that they had hidden in caves near the foot of the ravine and only ventured cautiously out for water at night.

As soon as the firing of the rescue party was heard, the defenders staggered forth, half a dozen Malays, stupefied with the opium they had carried and which had been their meat and sleep for days; three white men hardly recognizable under a matting of unkempt beard and wearing ragged, dirty clothes but armed with fairly good rifles.

One of these latter, while the Malays were shouting greeting and clapping their hands for joy, staggered over toward Seave and his men with an oath.

"By heavens, you came in time!" he said thickly. "Give me some grog. And I haven't had a smoke for weeks, it seems."

Seave motioned curtly to the baggage, and the man who had spoken to him, whom he recognized as Demarest by his size, stumbled over to break open some cans of mutton and tongue. Together with his two companions, he then feasted and drank while the Malays cooked rice and fish under the watchful eyes of guards who stopped patrolling every now and then to take a quick pot-shot at some unwary native.

When Demarest had finished eating and had had a smoke he thought to ask, "Say, who *are* you, anyway?"

"I'm Seave," said the Stinger gently, rubbing his throat and standing over the big man, who lay on one elbow on the ground. The other white men had gathered near, sensing a coming conflict, though they knew not why. Demarest's two men under the watchful eyes of Seave's three.

"Seave!" gagged Demarest, sitting suddenly upright and his eyes popping. "Stinger Seave!"

"Of course," said the Stinger, smiling slightly.

Demarest scrambled to his feet with a sudden fear. He half lifted his rifle and thumbed the bolt.

"Well, I'm glad you came along . . . pulled me out of a hole. But how did you happen to link up with Kooloo?"

"I was looking for you," Seave explained gently, still rubbing his throat.

"Oh," Demarest became abruptly very calm and dangerous, remembering young Warwick and the threat he had hurled to that individual from the rail of his schooner as the trader was rowed ashore. "Oh, so you came looking for me? Well, what is it you want?"

Seave pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, a piece he had treasured carefully in a small metal case to keep it from the ants. It was a bill, quite correctly typed out.

"Three pounds, seven shillings and fourpence," he said calmly. "I would like cash."

Stupefied, Demarest took the bill and looked at it, quite dazed, hardly able to believe his ears. He scanned the correctly listed items, even down to the one for doctor's services, seventeen and fourpence. Then he choked.

"Do you mean to tell me you came all this way up in this God-forsaken country to get that much from me?"

"It seems that way," Seave admitted then.

"Well, you can get to hell back out of it!" the big sailor snarled. "You—you're crazy."

"I have been informed to that effect several times," Seave replied gently. "But I would like the cash. You see, I cannot allow any man to help himself to my stores and to shoot my traders without the correct recompense."

"You're crazy!" Demarest roared again and turned away with a gesture of contempt. Seave's voice halted him, made him turn. It had changed from a sleepy sort of quiet drawl to a whip-like crackling.

"Just a moment!"

"Well?"

"You will please settle."

DEMAREST laughed. He flung back his great head and roared with mirth and his two men joined him. It was excruciatingly funny. For Seave to come across half the world and into the depths of the New Guinea jungle merely to collect a small bill struck them all as a supreme joke.

"By gosh!" said Demarest at last, wiping the tears from his eyes. "I've a notion to pay you for your nerve."

"You'll pay because you owe it," snapped Seave. "And if I have to argue very much longer, I shall add to it the expense of collecting."

His icy tones sobered Demarest as a cold water shower might have done. He opened his eyes to swear, looked into the Stinger's chill eyes and shivered. Mutely, then, he slowly unbuckled a money belt from around his waist and under his shirt and brought forth four golden sovereigns. Very gravely and as coolly as if he was on the veranda of his own Apia house concluding a deal, Seave produced a small canvas bag of change and counted out what was due, dropping the gold into the bag.

"There is one other thing," he observed, mildly now. "But I shall defer that until we reach the coast."

The red blood was crawling in Demarest's face and his barely controlled fury made him choke. He knew the tale would run from Singapore to Melbourne and men would laugh when they saw him. He had paid for a lightly undertaken theft, and paid a man not a third of his size. He rumbled in his throat:

"I'll get you for this, Seave!"

"I never have been hard to find," answered the Stinger unperturbed and walked carelessly away. For a moment it seemed as if Demarest was going to shoot the little man in the back, but in time he recollected that three of Seave's seamen were watching him and he subsided with an oath. He dropped beside his own two remaining men and whispered something that made them grin. After that he seemed to recover his good humor, though his eyes followed Seave's every movement with an evil glitter.

The march back to the coast was a nightmare. The natives hung on the flanks of the little column, cutting off stragglers and making night attacks for the first two days. After that they returned to their jungles and were seen no more. But there remained in their place the flies, the beetles, the mosquitos, the ever-present threat of a fight within the party, for Demarest had enlisted on his side Sringa against Seave, though Kooloo seemed to support the little sailor.

For that matter, most of the Malays felt rather well disposed toward him, his

ruthless collecting of a debt, foolish in the eyes of other white men, appealing to their sense of honor and justice and fitness of things.

It so happened that no fight occurred until they reached the coast where the prau waited. Sringa and Demarest had determined to get reinforcements from somewhere and go in after the gold again and they seemed to think that Seave himself might have designs that way, though he assured them, quite truthfully, that he was not in the least interested.

WHEN the mangrove-studded muddy beach was reached, the two parties prepared to separate. Demarest and the Malays to go aboard the prau, Seave to haul his whaleboat from out a small inlet and return to the *Argosy*. Everyone was standing around, the Malays quiet and wondering what would happen next, Demarest sneering and threatening, Seave blinking a little and quite cool. He seemed to know what he wanted.

He walked up to the big sailor and commenced in a quiet, patient voice.

"There was one other thing, as I said, Captain Demarest. You have paid the bill. I have given you the receipt. However, you shot my trader in the arm and I feel I must reciprocate."

"You touch a gun and you're a dead man," shouted Demarest, and he laid a hand on a .45 he carried stuffed in his waistband. Seave smiled his wintry little smile and rubbed his throat.

"I think I should explain to our friend Sringa that this is a private quarrel," he said calmly, noting that the Malay chief was edging close and scowling. Kooloo stepped beside the chief and whispered something to him. Seave caught the words, "their guns will be ours," and understood that Kooloo was acting his friend as much as he dared. Sringa halted and his face cleared and he even smiled as he replied that what concerned the white men concerned them alone, as he quite understood.

Demarest in the meantime, abruptly aware that the Stinger was in earnest, was fidgeting about, his fingers opening and closing over his gun butt.

He drew suddenly, intending to catch the Stinger unawares, but a sudden sear-

ing pain went through his arm and he ripped out an oath and dropped his gun. He stared at Seave in astonishment, for the little sailor had no weapon in his hand, though there was a small spiral of acrid smoke that was still circling up before him.

"I heard you were fast," gasped Demarest, furious that he should have been beaten. "But never as fast as that. . . . Damn you!"

He stooped suddenly, picked up the gun and shot from where it had fallen to the ground. The Stinger drilled him through the left hand and he screamed with pain, even as Seave's cap, with a half circle clipped out of its edge, fell with a plop behind him.

There was an instant's tense silence, broken only by heavy breathing and the groaning of Demarest as he nursed his wounded hand and arm.

Then Seave said, quite pleasantly, "Don't come near my trading posts again, Captain." He turned to the somewhat subdued and curious Sringa and said, "Understand, I shall not give any information as to your presence here. As a matter of fact, I believe it is known. But it is none of my business."

The Malay nodded. He seemed undecided for a moment, obviously hesitating whether he should order his men to the attack or say nothing.

Kooloo solved the problem when he said aloud, "Ai, he is a man. He will keep his word. But for him I could not have saved thee."

Seave smiled. The tension was broken. The Malays smiled. Seave turned and calmly strode away, though his three men backed off, their carbines leveled at the Malays. Demarest cursed furiously from the ground.

"Kooloo saved our lives, I think," said Seave to his men when they were in the whaleboat and pulling for the spot where the *Argosy* was presumably waiting. "I had only that last shot left in my gun. I owe him a debt."

The Stinger sighed, thinking of a debt he had paid long ago when his friend Big Bill Gunther had been held captive on Ysabel. "It is a lot harder to pay a debt than to incur one!"

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COLT-ANGEL OF RANCHO DIABLO

By Walt Coburn

The Devil himself would have been proud to rod that busky band from Rancho Diablo. All but the skull-grinning, memory haunted rider called the Colt-Angel—*compadre*, even the Devil might well spook from crossin' his vengeance trail!

FIVE men were playing stud poker in a small log cabin hidden in the New Mexico badlands. The five men were Harry Wolcott, Frank Leach, Hugh and Bob Benner, and Pat Requa, and they were known to the cow country as the Rancho Diablo gang. When the sun dropped behind the broken skyline and the

light in the cabin became too dim to read the cards, these five men would ride into the gathering dusk. Meanwhile they squatted on the dirt floor, grouped around a sweaty saddle blanket, playing poker.

Pat Requa's dark-skinned face twisted in a queer smile. He straightened up suddenly. The others glanced at him quickly,

their hands jumping swiftly to their guns.

"Hear somethin'?" growled Wolcott, hunching his thick shoulders.

"Somebody," said Pat Requa, ignoring the question, "just walked across my grave."

The others stared at him. Harry Wolcott swore under his breath. The Benner brothers slid their drawn guns back in the holsters.

"Mebbyso, Requa," grinned the cold-eyed Frank Leach, "it was old Hub Culbertson."

They resumed the game, but without much enthusiasm. Pat Requa shivered a little and rolled a cigaret. He was a believer in omens and signs, this dark-skinned, black-eyed cowboy who came from no man knew where.

Big Harry Wolcott, blond, red-faced, with hard blue eyes that never smiled, quit the game as Frank Leach raked in the money.

"You give a man the jim-jams, Requa. After this keep yore fool superstitions to yoreself."

Frank Leach, a leathery faced, wiry man in his late forties, winked at the two Benners. He knew that Wolcott had been shaken by Pat Requa's grisly remark. Otherwise Wolcott would have played his hand out and won the ten or twelve dollars that was in the pot. Wolcott, for all his outward calm, was nervous this evening. Jumpy as a cat. And because Frank Leach hated the big man he got more than a little satisfaction from Wolcott's uneasiness of mind. Harry Wolcott was the boss of Rancho Diablo.

The two Benners, lanky, rawboned large featured men, did not quite share Leach's viewpoint. Because when Wolcott dropped into one of those surly, touchy moods, he was not exactly a pleasant companion. They eyed the big man now as he stalked outside, spurs jingling, his heavy yellow brows knitted in a scowl.

Requa, who was the youngest member of the lawless aggregation, shrugged his well built shoulders and smiled faintly.

"I do not think it was old Hub Culbertson who walked across my grave," he said gravely, "because, as we know, Culbertson is now in Fort Benton at the Stockmen's meeting. But somebody walked across my grave. It is a sign of death. My father

had the same sign one night down in Sonora. He had the same sign. One week later they killed him."

Harry Wolcott's big frame shadowed the doorway. "Rattle yore hocks, men. Time we got goin'."

THEY rode in silence along the trail that climbed up out of the canyon. Single file, Wolcott riding ahead. Behind him rode Leach, then the two Benners. Pat Requa brought up the rear, whistling softly as he followed the others. Shod hoofs scraped loose rocks. There was the creak of Hugh Benner's new saddle. The musical tinkle of spurs. The first shadows of night filled the canyons and a lone star twinkled against the blackening sky. By the time the moon rose they would be at the Natural Corral and the night's work of branding out fifty head of weaned calves would commence. Pat Requa whistled Some Mexican tune, a haunting, half forgotten tune filled with sadness.

"Quit that fool racket back there," growled Wolcott.

The whistling stopped. Pat Requa twisted the ends of his small black mustache. His white teeth showed in what might have been a smile. Frank Leach grinned at Wolcott's broad back.

As the moon came up they rode down a narrow, rocky trail into the black depths of a box canyon. It took nearly half an hour to get down the steep slant and up to the head of the canyon. Here the sheer rock walls rose on either side, made an entrance but a scant twenty feet across. There was a ten-wire fence and a pole gate. Beyond the gate the floor of the canyon widened. For half a mile they rode along a wide trail flanked on either side by grass that touched their stirrups. Then they came to the big log shed and corral where the big calves were penned. There was a water trough at one end of the square corral that was kept brimming full by a two-inch pipe that led to the spring at the head of the box canyon.

Bob Benner got the branding fire going and they sat around smoking while the irons got hot. Then Wolcott led his horse inside the corral and jerked the cinch tight. Wolcott would do the roping. Leach would do the branding and earmarking. Bob Benner and Pat Requa would do the

rassling. The calves would be branded with the Figure 5 which was the brand used by the Rancho Diablo gang.

The moonlight could not get down under the rocky roof of the box canyon, and beyond the rim of the firelight the big calves milled in the darkness. Wolcott built a loop and rode among the calves. Now he rode back to the fire, dragging a big white-faced calf. Pat Requa went down the taut rope and a moment later the calf was flanked. Bob Benner slid in behind the kicking critter. Frank Leach came running up with a cherry red iron. A stamp iron fashioned into a Figure 5. He was about to press the hot iron on the calf's side when he halted. He leaned over the calf, his gloved hand smoothing the coarse hair. The light was uncertain and he knelt on one knee. Then he straightened up. There was a twisted smile on his thin lipped mouth.

"Turn 'im loose, boys. Somebody's done beat us to it. This calf is wearin' Culbertson's Half-Circle-T."

Wolcott rode up again, dragging another calf. Pat Requa and Bob Brenner had turned loose their calf. Leach looked up at Wolcott who sat his horse with his weight in one stirrup.

Pat Requa turned the calf loose. Wolcott growled a curse.

"What's the idee in turnin' that calf loose, Requa?"

"These calves is already branded," said Leach. "They're in the Half-Circle-T iron." His voice was harsh, metallic.

BIG Harry Wolcott coiled up his rope and buckled it on his saddle. His square jawed face looked a little white. Every man of them hid his uneasiness, his fear, after his own fashion. Pat Requa whistled softly. Bob Benner fumbled with tobacco and cigaret paper. Leach smiled crookedly, his eyes narrowed. 'Wolcott swore under his breath.

"While we was roundsidin' all day at the cabin," Bob Benner mused aloud, "they slipped down here and branded out them calves. Looks like they done located the Natural Corral."

"Put out that fire," growled Wolcott, and his voice was a little unsteady. "No use makin' targets outa ourselves. I had a feelin' somethin' was goin' to happen. Had

a hunch. Put that fire out, then we'll drag it."

Dirt was thrown on the fire. Pat Requa opened the gate and propped it there with a rock. He still whistled softly.

"Quit that racket," snarled Wolcott.

Pat Requa stopped whistling.

Their hands on their guns, they rode out of the box canyon and up the steep trail. There was something about the branding of those calves that they could not understand. Who had found the box canyon that had served them so well for the past five years? Why had the branded calves been left in the corral? Was this meant to be a warning? Nerves pulled taut, they rode up the trail to where Hugh Benner was on guard. He greeted them with relief that he took no pains to hide.

"There's something spooky around here," he said, without asking them what brought them up the trail so soon. "I've bin watched ever since you left me here. Can't see nobody, can't hear nothin', but I'd bet my last dollar I've bin watched. I kep' my back to the rocks and my gun in my hand. There's somethin' shore spooky."

"Mebbyso," said Leach, and his voice grated unpleasantly, "it was Charlie Culbertson's ghost that was spyin' on yuh. It was under that pine tree yonder that they found what was left uh Charlie. I bet—"

Harry Wolcott turned on Leach with a snarling growl.

"Close yore trap, yuh fool!"

Leach laughed harshly. "Kinda spooky yoreself, ain't yuh, Wolcott? Ever see a ghost? I bet Pat Requa's seen 'em."

"Only one," replied the soft-voiced Requa, his white teeth showing. "It was the night my father said to me that he felt it inside him that somebody was walking across his gravme. It was not a real ghost, perhaps, for the man was not yet dead. But I saw his face in the dark with the blood oozing from a bullet hole between his eyes. One week later I had the great pleasure of seeing again that face. The same face with the blood on it. It was a bullet from my gun that made the blood. I had followed his trail from the spot where I found my murdered father, you understand. It had taken me a week to catch—"

Another snarling growl from Wolcott.

Requa smiled, shrugged his trim shoulders and rolled a cigaret. He fashioned them after the manner of the Mexican, without wetting the paper.

They rode back the way they had come, single file, taking care never to skylight themselves.

II

HUB CULBERTSON was a man of short stature with shoulders that had once been powerful. His hair was snowy white, as was his beard. His skin was bronzed, deeply lined. The eyes under his heavy brows were as blue as the New Mexico sky in summer. He had come to New Mexico in the early days and had gradually built up one of the biggest cattle ranches in the State. Stern in some ways, kindly in many other respects, he was liked and respected by honest men, feared and hated by the rustlers.

His wife had died when his only son Charlie was a small boy. Hub Culbertson had done his utmost to make a man of Charlie. But Charlie had a wild streak in him. No better cowpuncher in New Mexico than Wild Charlie Culbertson, but from the time he was in his 'teens he had been getting into one scrape after another. Quick tempered, fearless, ready for fun or a fight any time, he had been continually in hot water. On the ranch or out on the round-up he did the work of a half-dozen men. When he hit town he made up for the weeks of hard work by painting the town red. Bright red!

Men still talked of his fight with big Harry Wolcott. That fight had lasted over an hour. Bare fists and no rules. Both had taken a terrific beating and when it was over Charlie Culbertson was on his feet, standing over the still quivering shape that lay in the blood-flecked sawdust in front of the bar. When Wolcott finally regained his senses he told Wild Charlie that their next fight would be with guns.

"Guns it'll be then, you cow thievin' son. I'll be fixed for yuh."

Much against old Hub's advice, Wild Charlie Culbertson took to riding down into the badlands. He would go alone. Sometimes he would not show up at the home ranch for a week. And one No-

vember day he had saddled up, headed out, and he had never returned. The day after he pulled out a sudden blizzard swept across the country. The storm lasted three days and nights. Then Charlie's horse showed up at the ranch with an empty saddle that was stained crimson with frozen blood.

The Half-Circle-T cowboys rode the hill in vain. It was over a week later that they came upon the dead body of a man under a tall pine tree in the badlands. The wolves had gotten there first. There was little save the boots and spurs and six-shooter to identify the body as that of Wild Charlie Culbertson. There were four empty shells in the six-shooter.

HUB CULBERTSON took it better than the cow country figured he would, for they knew that the little old cattleman loved his only son, for all Charlie's wild ways. But Hub was of pioneer stock and was not of the breed that parades sorrow and grief.

Naturally big Harry Wolcott was arrested and brought to trial. But there was little evidence, save that one threat, to hang on the big rustler. He was turned loose.

That was nearly a year ago. Big Harry Wolcott and his partners still rode the open range. They made trips to town and did their share of drinking and celebrating. Because, so far, the law had never been able to collect strong enough proof to convict any of the five men who were known as the Rancho Diablo gang. Sheriffs and stock detectives spent many weary hours in the saddle. Always they were forced to admit defeat. And during all that time cattle were being rustled, horses run out of the country. And there were a few bank robberies and train hold-ups in Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho and Utah that might easily have been pulled off by the Rancho Diablo gang.

The grass grew on the grave marked by the marble slab that bore the name of Charlie Culbertson. Cattlemen and cowboys forgot the many wild scrapes Charlie had been mixed up in and remembered only that he was big hearted and fun-loving and as square in his dealings as old Hub. And the reward on his scalp of the man who had killed Charlie Culbertson

mounted until it became a small fortune.

Something like ten months had gone past since that November day when Wild Charlie Culbertson had ridden away from the Half-Circle-T ranch, never to return. And the other members of Rancho Diablo could not help but notice the gradual change that was coming over big Harry Wolcott.

Before that fight with Charlie Culbertson, Wolcott had been a great hand to josh and play practical jokes and sing ribald songs. But after the terrific beating he had taken, he had changed. And after his brief trial for the killing of Wild Charlie, he had turned sullen and morose. He never rode anywhere alone. He hated darkness with a hatred akin to fear. His nerves seemed to be always rubbed raw and he watched the others with a sort of covert suspicion. He would fly into quick rages for trivial reasons. And it was more than apparent that the continual baiting by the thin-lipped, cold-eyed Leach was not helping the big rustler's temper.

"Some day, Leach," he snarled, "I'm a-goin' to kill yuh."

"I'm always watchin', Wolcott. Seems like that was what you told Charlie Culbertson. I've always wondered if you didn't shoot Wild Charlie in the back. Pat Requa says if you shoot a man in the back, he'll shore come back to haunt yuh. There was four empty shells in Charlie's gun but I've always wondered if they wasn't fired after Charlie was dead. Yeah, that's always kinda bothered my mind. You ain't ever told us about how the play come up."

"I'll stop that blabbin' mouth uh yourn with a bullet some day, Leach. Then I'll take a butcher knife and cut that grin off yore face."

"Any time you feel lucky, Wolcott," was Leach's brief reply.

"WHEN we smash the Rancho Diablo gang," Hub Culbertson told the assembled cattlemen at the meeting of the Stockmen's Association, "we'll be bustin' the back of the worst gang of organized rustlers that's ever operated in New Mexico. And, gentlemen, I'm a-goin' to smash 'em."

"We're behind yuh, Hub, all the way," spoke a man who had been one of the

Vigilantes who had hung Henry Plummer, George Ives and other badmen.

"What this country needs right now is a few good hangin's. The law courts can't seem tuh handle these rustlers. A smart lawyer kin get 'em off, every time. A hung jury, two, three postponements, and the case peters out. Time we found a good cottonwood tree and a rope. Hunt 'em down like they was wolves and plumb exterminate 'em."

"Why not put in half a dozen good stock detectives and ketch those rustlers red handed? Try 'em in this county and send 'em over the road. Stringin' men up has gone outa style," spoke another man who had also been one of the Vigilantes.

"Better yet," volunteered another cattlemen, "if we could plant a man or two with the rustler outfit. Let 'em work right along with Wolcott and his gang. He could collect enough evidence to send 'em over the road fer a long stretch."

Now another cowman spoke up. He was a tall, soft-spoken old-timer who had come to New Mexico from Texas years ago.

"I know one man that'd be better than a whole army uh stock detectives. Give that man a badge and let him work it his own way and he'll make bunch quitters outa them that don't fill graves."

Hub Culbertson leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes bright, the leathery skin at their corners puckering.

"Is this feller's name Laredo Foxen?"

"That's the gent, Hub. Know him?"

"He's bin on the job about twelve months now," was old Hub Culbertson's quiet reply. "I hired him just about a year ago, before my boy Charlie got into it with Wolcott up in town."

"Laredo gittin' yuh ary results?"

"Some. Here's a list uh some uh the cattle and horses that's bin rustled. Laredo made 'er out for me to fetch along. It gives the dates and how much each outfit has lost to Rancho Diablo. Every big outfit in this section of the State has lost stuff."

"We know that, Hub, but what we want is cold proof and some law action on them wolves. Lists like that only gives a man the headache. Can't this Laredo Foxen git the goods on 'em?"

"Laredo Foxen," drawled the big

Texan, "works a heap different from yore average stock detective. I've knowed him fer years. He's busted up rustlin' gangs in Texas and Arizona and when I say busted I mean plumb busted. I didn't know he was in this country, 'Hub."

"Seems like he follered some gent up here. He didn't say who but I took it fer granted that the man he's trailin' is a member of Rancho Diablo. He rode up one evenin' and we had a long medicine talk. I staked him to a pack outfit and he drifted into the badlands. Said he didn't want no pay. Just a string uh top horses and plenty leeway. He said not to say anything to anybody about him bein' in the country. Which, up till now, I ain't mentioned. I'm expectin' you gents to keep it to yoreselves. I wouldn't uh mentioned it only I don't want a pack uh boneheads goin' in there and messin' around. I got a heap uh faith in Laredo Foxen. I'd shore hate to be the men he's after, that's all."

The tall Texan grinned and nodded. "Laredo Foxen is the fastest man with a rope or a gun that I ever seen and, misters, I've seen a-plenty of 'em between here and Texas. Like Hub says, leave the deal to Foxen and keep our traps shut."

When the meeting was over, the big Texan called Hub Culbertson to one side.

"Hub, I'm afraid yuh made a bad mistake mentionin' Laredo Foxen's name thataway. There's one cowman at this meetin' that's buyin' stuff from the Rancho. That same feller used to wear another name over in Texas, and he's got good cause to hate Laredo Foxen. I'm afraid, Hub, that yuh run off at the head too much."

"Yo're referrin', I reckon, to Jeff Ross."

"Yeah. Jeff Ross, over on Snake Crick at the head uh the brakes. He's as crooked as the crick where his ranch is located."

"So Laredo Foxen told me. It was Foxen's idee that I say what I said."

"Which, in that case, makes 'er plumb different. Jeff Ross' real name is Jeff Mann. He was one uh the gang Foxen run outa Texas some years back. Foxen wants him to know, then. He's got his own ways uh workin'. No man could ever figger him. I reckon that's why he's still alive, though he's bin shot up half a dozen times. When yuh see him,

Hub, tell him that Triangle Ben Holt sends his best regards."

Now the big Texan's New Mexico name was not Ben Holt, but Hub Culbertson showed no surprise or curiosity. He just nodded. If a man wanted to change names, that was his own affair.

III

LAREDO FOXEN turned to his bearded companion as they hazed the freshly branded weaned calves into a bunch of Half-Circle-T cattle.

"I don't reckon, pardner," he said, "that two cowboys ever earned a day's pay by harder work. Brandin' out fifty head of big calves, then trailin' 'em up outa that canyon ain't what a man might call child's play. When did we eat last?"

The tall, wide-shouldered man whose face was hidden by a heavy black beard, grinned and slapped his stomach.

"Some time last year, near as I remember, Laredo."

It was a little after sunrise when they turned loose the branded calves, then rode back into the heart of the badlands. Their horses were gaunt flanked, leg weary. The two men looked worn out. It was still a long ride to their camp. Yet they voiced no complaint.

Laredo Foxen was a small man whose every movement was quick, sure. His black hair was generously sprinkled with white. Lean of face, with a hawk-like nose and opaque black eyes and a tight-lipped mouth that seldom smiled, there was a sinister, predatory look about him. Yet the man was good company, after a fashion. He never told the same tale twice, and when in the mood, he would relate incidents that had color and a dry touch of humor. Around camp he was as neat as a woman. He was an excellent camp cook and because he knew when not to talk, he was an ideal camp mate.

He broke an hour's silence now with a soft chuckle. "Wolcott is shore gittin' boogery. Him and Leach is likely to have 'er out almost any time now. And if he gits Leach, which, however, ain't likely, he'll have Pat Requa to fight. And Requa is almighty fast with a six-shooter. For all his easy ways and his grinnin' teeth and his whistlin', Pat Requa is a bad hom-

bre to tangle with. I seen him one night down in Chihuahua when six Mexicans jumped him. It was in one uh them flea-bitten cantinas where the only likker is tequila and the scum uh the border hang out. When the smoke cleared away there was four dead Mexicans and Pat Requa was ridin' away on a stolen horse, whistlin' soft, like he'd just rode away from visitin' some señorita. He was a major then, under Pancho Villa. I was runnin' guns for Pancho at the time." Laredo Foxen smiled thinly as if recalling somethin' amusing.

"You never told me why Leach and Wolcott hate one another."

"No," said Laredo Foxen, without glancing at his companion, "I never told yuh."

The bearded man looked uncomfortable. "My mistake. I didn't aim to be nosey."

"No harm done." Foxen spoke quietly, almost as if to himself. His opaque black eyes were watching the sunrise.

LAREDO FOXEN, so his companion had learned months ago, always watched the sunrise and sunset. At such times he was always silent. His face, masklike, never changed expression and his eyes seemed to stare straight into the heart of the sun. What the man thought of at those hours no man could tell, save Foxen himself. Foxen, who was of the killer breed, survivor of many gun-fights. A man of mystery, Laredo Foxen, whose name was legendary along the Mexican border.

Not until they had reached camp and had finished eating did either man speak. Then it was Foxen who voiced the first words.

"They're all gittin' spooky. Even Leach. Seein' them branded calves shore give 'em a jolt. And when they find out from Jeff Ross that I'm here in the country, they'll all be sleepin' with their guns in their hands. And Jeff Ross is goin' to be bothered with chills and fever. He's as yellow as an inbred cur dawg. The only killin' he ever done he done from the brush. Them Benners is from the same breed. Cousins or somethin' to Jeff. But they ain't as cowardly as Jeff. Hugh and Bob Benner will put up a fight if they have

tuh, they'd a heap sooner do their killin' from the brush."

"I'd figure Leach was the most dangerous."

"And you'd figger right. Frank Leach ain't afraid of man, beast or the devil hisse'f. I knowed him before he went bad. He run a big outfit down yonder. Had a tail holt on the world and then let it kick loose. And all on account of a woman . . . and Harry Wolcott. Some day, Charlie, when things is all settled up here and you kin shave off that brush on yore face and go back to yore ol' daddy, I might git in the right frame uh mind to tell you a story about Leach and Harry Wolcott and Pat Requa and me. It ain't a purty story but it'll be worth hearin'. Now we better bed down and ketch up on some sleep. You sleep the first two hours, then I call yuh."

"Let me stand first guard, Laredo. I ain't sleepy."

Foxen shook his head. "I got some figgerin' to do, Charlie."

And so Wild Charlie Culbertson, whom the cow country, with the exception of old Hub Culbertson and Laredo Foxen, thought dead, pulled off his boots and crawled under his tarp and blankets. He was asleep in a few minutes.

Foxen sat beside the graying coals of the campfire, his black eyes staring into space, a faint smile on his grim-lipped mouth.

BIG Harry Wolcott would have laughed at the man who said that he believed in ghosts. Not even did Wolcott admit to himself that a dead man was haunting him. Or rather, a man who would not stay dead. That man was Wild Charlie Culbertson.

Harry Wolcott had carefully planned the murder of Charlie Culbertson. He had worked out his plans without consulting the other members of Rancho Diablo. The only man he had taken into his confidence was the Texan he had hired to do the actual killing. This Texan, who was Wolcott's step brother, had escaped from the Arizona State Prison last year and was hiding out. The man wanted enough money to take him to South America. So he had written to Harry Wolcott. And Wolcott, who was not in the habit of

making gifts, decided that this step-brother of his should earn that South America stake. The two had met in the badlands and Wolcott had made his proposition.

"Kill Charlie Culbertson and the money's yours. I'll tip you off when Culbertson comes down into the brakes. Do a good job. When you kill him, I'll pay you a thousand dollars cash money."

"Lay the dough on the line now, Harry. I'll do the job. After I bump off this Charlie Culbertson I can't lose time hangin' around waitin' for my money. Pay me now."

"And let you quit the country without keepin' the bargain?"

"You know better than that, Harry. I never yet double-crossed you. I'll do the job, and do it right. But I got to be paid in advance because before Charlie Culbertson's body gits cold, I'll be on my way."

"There won't be no special rush," argued Wolcott, loath to pay out that much money without seeing the job well done.

"I'll tell yuh why I'm wantin' that money in advance, Harry. There's another gent camped in the badlands. Two, three times lately I've had tuh dodge fast to give him the slip. He might be some lone renegade like me. On the other hand, he might be a law officer on my trail. I can't be takin' chances. If he keeps tryin' to foller me, I'll have tuh take a pot shot at him. Git this Charlie Culbertson down here and I'll do the rest. But I got to have that money now."

So Wolcott had paid in advance. And Wild Charlie Culbertson had ridden toward the murder trap. Wolcott's step-brother, as cold-blooded a killer as had ever escaped the gallows, lay in wait for the cowboy. Harry Wolcott, when he saw that Charlie Culbertson was riding into the badlands, had tipped off his step-brother, then had ridden hard for the Jeff Ross ranch to establish an alibi.

But it was Laredo Foxen, not Charlie Culbertson, who blundered into the trap. Foxen's quick shooting had spoiled the plot. And when Charlie Culbertson, attracted by the gunfire, had ridden up, Laredo Foxen had ordered him to change clothes with the dead man. Char-

lie's saddle had been smeared with blood and the horse led back through the blizzard to the Half-Circle-T ranch. Laredo Foxen had talked to old Hub Culbertson. And in due time the dead man was found and identified as being the body of Wild Charlie. Harry Wolcott had been arrested, tried, and turned free. And for perhaps a month the big rustler had felt vastly pleased with himself.

THEN things began to happen. Little things that gnawed at Wolcott's mind. For one thing, his bushwhacking step-brother had promised to write, but no letter had come. And now and then he would run across signs that told him a man was prowling around in the badlands. Twice, when he and the others had returned to their camp after a long day's ride, Wolcott had made the discovery that somebody had been going through his bed and his war sack. And he had found a cartridge wrapped in paper. On the sheet of paper was written a brief message.

"At midnight tonight," one message read, "you will hear the wolf howl. It is the voice of Wild Charlie Culbertson."

And at midnight he had heard the mournful howl of a wolf.

Another message read: "Charlie Culbertson's blood is on this money."

There was a bloodstained ten-dollar bill wrapped around an empty .45 shell. That was all.

Wolcott had not shown the notes to his companions. He had not told them about hiring his step-brother to do the killing.

Now, with the passing of weeks and months he became obsessed with the disquieting fear that he was being watched night and day. A scowl had replaced his usual grin and his temper was sharp, uncertain. He suspected his companions of all sorts of things.

The branding of those calves at Natural Corral had unnerved him. And a few days later Jeff Ross rode into their hidden camp with the news that Laredo Foxen was in that part of the country and was working for Hub Culbertson himself.

The news was like the explosion of a charge of dynamite. Even the smiling

Pat Requa and the vitriolic Leach were visibly upset. But Wolcott heaved a sigh of relief. He figured it was Laredo Foxen, not the ghost of Charlie Culbertson, who had left those messages. And that night Wolcott got very drunk. He laughed and joshed the others because they feared Laredo Foxen. He sneered at Leach and Pat Requa and cursed the uneasy Jeff Ross for being a coward.

Leach was visibly worried but the coldness of his eyes forbade any hoorawing on the part of the loud-mouthed Wolcott. And Pat Requa squatted with his back to a wide tree trunk, his dark eyes staring beyond the firelight into the black shadows. Requa's right hand never got more than a few inches from his six-shooter. The Benners were silent, sharing something of Jeff Ross' fear.

"I'd be proud," boasted Wolcott, more than half drunk, "to meet up with Foxen. I would, for a fact." Swaying on wide-spread legs, he drained the jug and threw it away. Then, lurching a little, he started for another jug. They kept their moonshine whiskey cached about a hundred yards down the creek, hidden under a rocky shelf on the creek bank. He struck a match as he got down on all fours, groping under the sandstone shelf. He was quite drunk now and his movements were uncertain, fumbling.

Now, from the thick black shadows of the night there came the sound of a man's chuckling laugh. Only one man ever laughed like that. That man was Wild Charlie Culbertson.

WITH a hoarse, choked cry Wolcott straightened. His head struck the sandstone shelf, throwing him off balance. As he jerked his gun he lost his equilibrium and fell over the edge of the bank into the water some five or six feet below. His gun roared as he fell, hitting the water with a splash. Now that chuckling, mocking laugh filled his ears.

The sound of that shot sent the men around the campfire back into the shadows, guns in their hands. There sounded the thudding of shod hoofs as someone rode away into the night. Then the wild-eyed, dripping Wolcott showed up, breathing hard, his face gray. He was sober enough now.

"Who did that shootin'?" snarled Leach. "Was it you, Wolcott?"

Big Harry Wolcott nodded dazedly. He was fighting hard to regain his self-composure. The others watched him from the darkness.

"Who'd you shoot at?"

Wolcott choked back the name he had been about to utter. No use telling them he had heard dead Charlie Culbertson laugh. They'd say he was crazy drunk.

"It musta bin Laredo Foxen," he muttered thickly. "He got away."

"How come yo're soppin' wet?"

"I stumbled and fell in the crick." Now he felt cold. He shivered as he stood near the fire. He wanted a drink of whiskey. It would warm his blood and steady his nerves.

"Fetch a jug, one uh you," he said, his teeth gritting to keep them from chattering.

"Nobody but you wants a drink," said Leach, moving back into the firelight, "go git it yoresef. We ain't yore servants, Wolcott."

But Wolcott had no intention of going alone after a jug, much as he craved whiskey.

Pat Requa, smiling softly, rolled a cigaret. "Perhaps you were just spooky, Wolcott."

But they had all heard someone ride away in the darkness. Leach smiled faintly.

"We'd better take a look around. Pat, you come along with me. Jeff and Wolcott go together. Hugh and Bob Benner take a look at the horses. If anybody moves out there, shoot 'em. Come on."

They were back at the fire in a half hour. Wolcott, taking courage from the companionship of the badly frightened Jeff Ross, had summoned the courage to revisit the ledge and get a fresh jug.

"Anybody see anything?" he asked, something of his lost courage regained by the strong whiskey.

"The sign of one man who rode away. I reckon Laredo Foxen was the man."

They sat around the campfire until dawn, then turned in, leaving one man on guard. The one man was Wolcott. Half drunk, encouraged by the daylight, he went back to the sandstone ledge. On top of the ledge was a bit of wadded paper.

He unfolded it and a .45 cartridge dropped into his hand. A few words were written on the paper.

"You are afraid of Charlie Culbertson," he read.

With shaking fingers he tore the message into bits. He did not know that Leach's cold, hard eyes were watching him from the brush. Nor did he know that Leach had found and read the note, then had left it the way he had found it wrapped around the .45 cartridge.

As Wolcott wiped beads of cold sweat from his face, the hidden watcher smiled thinly, then slipped quietly back to his blankets.

IV

FRANK LEACH rode alone, following the dim sign of a shod horse. He kept his gun within easy reach and never for an instant did he relax his vigilance. Now, where another track joined the one he was following, he got off his horse and spent quite a long time looking around. The sign told him that here behind the rocks and brush a man and horse had waited for some time. Long enough for the man to smoke four cigarets. Leach nodded to himself and kept on. It was no easy matter to follow the sign now as the going was rocky and the two riders followed no trail. He had ridden several miles and had followed the sign into a steep gully choked with brush and scrub pine. Now a rough voice halted him.

"Don't claw for a gun, Leach. I've got you covered."

With a crooked grin Leach raised his arms in the air. "I didn't follow you to start a shootin' match, Foxen. Just wanted to have a little pow-wow. Peaceful as a preacher, that's Frank Leach."

Laredo Foxen, a gun in his hand, stepped from the brush. He motioned toward a boulder.

"Step down, Leach, and take it easy. And no monkeyshines or you'll run into some hard luck. What's on yore mind?"

"Bin a long time since we cut one another's sign, Foxen."

"Eight years." Foxen's tone was hard, unfriendly.

"Seems longer than that. Sometimes

it seems more like eighty years since you claimed me for a friend."

"No use goin' into that," was the cold reply. "I'm out to git you and the coyote pack you run with. I won't quit till every last one of you is either dead or in the pen where yuh all belong."

Leach grinned before answering.

"Ain't you tryin' to fill an almighty big contract?"

"Perhaps. It would be easy enough if I used the coyote ways that is used by the Rancho Diablo gang. But bushwhackin' ain't my style."

"Ner it ain't mine, Foxen, if that's what yo're drivin' at."

"Kin you say as much for the rest of the coyote pack you run with?"

"You'd better ask them, not me."

"I'll ask 'em when the sign comes right. Leach, I knowed you'd be trailin' me when Jeff Ross spilled it that I was here in this part uh the country. I figgered you'd foller me today. So I waited here. I wanted to talk to yuh. Fact is, I want to give you and Pat Requa the chance to haul yore freight before I close in on Rancho Diablo. You and Pat Requa once did me a good turn. I haven't forgot. I want you tuh quit the country. Quit it sudden."

"Yuh want us to rabbit on Wolcott and the Benners and Jeff Ross? You want me and Pat to show yellow? Yuh know the answer to that, don't yuh, Foxen?"

"You put it wrong, Leach. Why should you stick to a snake like Wolcott? You can't tell me you don't hate him. And you can't tell me that Pat Requa has the kind of memory that forgets quick. You both hate Harry Wolcott. You can't deny it."

"I'm not tryin' to deny it. Sure we hate him. Did it ever occur to you that that's the reason we're here with him and Jeff Ross?"

"Yo're swimmin' too deep for me. I don't savvy the idea."

"And I'm not explainin'. Wolcott's a snake. Jeff Ross is a yellow coyote. The Benners would give their last dollar to see me or Pat Requa dead, but none of 'em want to risk tacklin' the job uh killin' us. Foxen, if you'd just join the Rancho the picture would be complete, no? As it is you got Wolcott so boogery that he jumps

every time he sights his own shadow. You and Charlie Culbertson orter be ashamed uh yorese'ves, scarin' big Harry thataway. And with Pat talkin' about his grave bein' walked acrost and so on, Wolcott's got so he won't go no place alone. And last night he like to plumb died. He looks sick. He actually figgers it's Charlie Culbertson's ghost."

"When did you git wise?"

"Long time ago. I happened to find that dead gent before the wolves and lions got at him. He wore Charlie Culbertson's clothes but I knowed his face. It was Wolcott's step-brother Ed White. Pat Requa's wise. But don't worry, we ain't spoilin' the show. Fact is, Foxen, we've bin he'pin' things along."

"You and Pat Requa won't pull out?" Foxen asked.

LEACH shook his head.

"No can do, Foxen. We bought chips in Wolcott's game and we're playin' our hands out. And it'll take more than the Culbertsons and you to run us outa the country. You had no call to mess up with this business. If it's war yo're declarin', war is what you'll git. You've got no business in New Mexico."

"I've got business wherever you and Requa and Harry Wolcott are workin'. I made Texas too hot for you three gents. Because you and Requa had once bin my friends, I didn't kill yuh when I had the chance. After you three had gone I found out that you'd killed my uncle and run off his cattle and horses. Wolcott had talked my cousin into marrying him secret, then quit her when she needed him most. When she was goin' to have a baby and had to own up to her father that she'd married Harry Wolcott. Her father, who was my uncle, left the ranch to find Wolcott. He was found the next mornin' with the back of his head shot away. Wolcott had run off his stock and sold the cattle and horses in Mexico. You and Requa turned up missin'. The two Benners had also quit the country. You'd all pulled out like coyotes.

"I trailed yuh all over the country and finally located the coyote pack here in New Mexico. I'm goin' to make every last one of yuh pay for what you did down in Texas. I reckon the news got to Wol-

cott that my cousin died when her baby was born. The baby died. Wolcott will hang for killin' my uncle. The Benners will likewise stretch rope. You and Requa and Jeff Ross will be dead or in the pen. I'm bustin' yore Rancho Diablo wide open. Now drag it, Leach, before I forget we was once friends and this gun goes off."

"Hold on, mister. I'm talkin' some. If you figger I had any part in the killin' of Sally Foxen's father, you kin start shootin'. I reckon you know how I felt about Sally. I thought too much of her to ask her to marry a renegade like me. Pat Requa loved her as much as I did but he felt the same as I did about tellin' her. We never knowed until a long time after she died that anything had happened to her. And it was a long time after that when we learned she had married Harry Wolcott. Pat Requa and I had no part in the killin' of her father or the stealin' of his stock. Wolcott and the Benners and Jeff Ross did the job.

"Pat and I was on a boat headed for South America when Wolcott killed Bill Foxen and stole the cattle and horses. We'd bin sellin' wet cattle to Bill Foxen. We'd made our South America stake handlin' wet cattle and runnin' guns into Mexico. And me and Pat was located nice and purty in the Argentine when we got word about Sally Foxen and Wolcott and how Sally's father had bin bushwhacked. We sold out our ranch in the Argentine and come back to the States. We was huntin' down Harry Wolcott. We located him here in New Mexico. Instead uh killin' him we just moved in on his game.

"We've never let on we knowed about him marryin' Sally. Never let on a thing. But there ain't an hour uh the day or night that he feels easy in his mind. And the Benners feel the same way. So does Jeff Ross. They'd give a purty penny to see me and Pat Requa laid out dead. That's the reason I'm here in New Mexico. That's the reason Pat Requa is here. We're torturin' Wolcott and them others. Some day Wolcott and the Benners will start a gun play and hell will bust loose. Better th'ow in with us, Laredo. It'll be fun watchin' Wolcott twist and squirm. If you think I've bin lyin' about things, go ahead and shoot me. You'll never git a better chance."

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"I never knowed you to lie," said Laredo Foxen, putting away his gun. "What you tell me sort of changes my plans. I'd always tried to make myse'f believe that you and Pat was all right. But the evidence was all against you."

"Wolcott fixed it that away, I reckon. Yuh joinin' Rancho Diablo, Laredo?"

"I'll talk it over with Hub Culbertson and Charlie. Might be I'll th'ow in with you boys. How many in the gang, all told?"

"Five of us and Jeff Ross as a sort of fence. He buys what we steal. He's got about ten men workin' for him. They're a tough layout. Mostly kinfolks uh his. Cousins and so on. A snaky bunch. They'll fight if they git crowded. You'd be safer with me and Pat and you are playin' a lone hand. They'll be after yore scalp."

"I'll let yuh know after I've talked it over with Charlie and old Hub. I'll kinda keep in touch with yuh." He held out his hand and Frank Leach gripped it.

"I'd got the word, Laredo, that you was out to git me and Pat Requa along with Wolcott and the others. I'm almighty glad we talked 'er over thisaway. I'll tell Pat. He'll be plumb tickled. Pat Requa thinks a heap uh you."

"Tell Pat howdy for me."

And so they parted, these two grim lipped, hard eyed men. Leach rode back to camp. Laredo Foxen joined Charlie Culbertson at their hidden camp in the badlands.

"I reckon, Charlie, it's about time you shaved off that brush. But stay hid out for a spell. Stay hid out till I git word to yuh. I had a medicine talk with Frank Leach. It's kinda changed my workin' plans. Since I left Leach I bin doin' some thinkin'."

"Yo're leavin' me, Laredo?"

Laredo Foxen nodded, smiling faintly. He rolled and lit a cigaret before he spoke.

"I'm joinin' Rancho Diablo tonight."

V

THERE was a storm coming up. Black clouds rolled up over the ragged edges of the badlands, blotting out the setting sun. There was the distant growling of

(Continued on P. 120)

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30x5.00-20	2.40	1.05	
8.25-17	2.45	1.15	
28x5.25-18	2.45	1.15	
28x5.25-19	2.50	1.15	
30x5.25-20	2.50	1.15	
31x5.25-21	2.60	1.15	
6.50-17	2.75	1.15	
28x5.50-18	2.75	1.15	
28x5.50-19	2.75	1.15	
6.00-16	3.15	1.45	
6.00-17	3.15	1.45	
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thunder. Dusk came quickly. As darkness gathered with the black threat of the coming storm, the campfire threw strange shadows into the cottonwoods that were half bare of leaves. It was October and the day had been unusually hot. Now the air was still, charged with that breathless calm that precedes an electric storm. Lightning played in the distant black sky and thunder rolled down into the broken country.

Leach was the first man to notice Laredo Foxen, standing there by the big cottonwood at the edge of the firelight. Leach nudged Pat Requa and nodded toward the motionless Foxen who stood there, his hands on his six-shooter. Wolcott, the Benners, and Jeff Ross were wolfing their grub, their backs turned to the uninvited visitor.

"Evenin', men!"

Wolcott dropped his cup of black coffee, his hand sliding toward his gun.

"Steady, there," said Leach. "Steady, Wolcott, or you'll be in hell for breakfast."

The Benners sat there on the ground, a stunned expression on their lean-jawed faces. Jeff Ross was white, frozen with terror. Wolcott smiled in a sickly fashion.

"Any objection, gents," said Laredo Foxen, his voice a trifle too soft, "to my joinin' the Rancho?"

"You're shore welcome, Foxen," grinned Leach.

"Just in time for supper," added Pat Requa. "Long time no see you, Laredo."

"And we'll be needin' a good cowhand before the night's over," said Leach. "There's a storm a-comin' and Wolcott has decided that tonight is the time to move a bunch of cattle across the river. Ain't that right, Harry?"

Big Harry Wolcott eyed Leach and Requa with suspicion and sullen anger.

"Wolcott," said Pat Requa, "is the ramrod here. He jiggers the spread. Jeff sort of backs his play. You remember Jeff. And the two Benners. You'll meet the other boys later. They're holdin' the cattle down below near the river. Seems natural to see you, Laredo. Reminds a man of the old days along the border. We got word you were in the country.

Hub Culbertson spilled the beans at the Stockmen's meeting and Jeff brought the news that you'd hired out to Culbertson and promised to smash the Rancho. News travels fast, even on the range. Got a posse with yuh, Laredo?"

LAREDO FOXEN eyed the speaker sharply. Pat Requa's white-toothed smile might mean anything. Leach's grin was unpleasant. Now the quick thought stabbed Foxen's brain that he might be stepping into a dangerous trap. There was no friendliness in Leach's twisted, thin-lipped grin, nor was there any way of reading Requa's face. Wolcott was grinning widely now, his bloodshot eyes glittering. The two Benners watched him craftily. Even the cowardly Jeff Ross seemed to regain his courage.

"Drink, Foxen?" grinned Wolcott, feeling that they were all united against a common enemy. He jerked a thumb toward the jug.

"Don't mind if I do."

"Where's the posse?" inquired Jeff Ross.

"I left 'em at home playin' tiddley-winks. I come here alone. I'm joinin' the Rancho. Anybody got any objections?"

Wolcott looked at Leach. Leach winked, grinning crookedly. Pat Requa whistled softly, his black eyes watching the lightning that played across the black sky.

"No reason why Foxen shouldn't join us," said Leach, after a short silence. "Any objections, Wolcott?"

"None as I know of, except that he made the crack he was goin' to bust us."

"Don't believe all that yore ears listen to," said Laredo Foxen.

"Does he come in, then?" inquired Leach.

"Why not?" smiled Requa. "He's one against all of us. And even Laredo Foxen would not buck such big odds. Eh, Laredo?"

Laredo Foxen lifted the jug. "Only a crazy man would buck odds like that."

The jug went the rounds. Then Pat Requa's voice broke the rather awkward silence. He spoke to Wolcott.

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have decided that it must be the ghost of Wild Charlie Culbertson who crossed my grave. When a man is shot in the back, his ghost stays on earth until the man who killed him is dead."

"Damn you and yore grave," snarled Wolcott.

"It is very bad luck," smiled Pat Requa, "to curse a man's grave. It is a sign of death."

Wolcott growled something and drank from the jug. Lightning ripped the black sky and the thunder rolled.

"Time we got goin'," said Leach.

H EAVY drops of rain came out of the black sky. The Rancho bunch pulled on their slickers. They had reached the herd that was being held there in the wide bottomland along the bank of the Pecos. When the lightning flashed the riders could be seen circling the restless cattle. Then the storm struck them. A terrific blast of wind that drove the heavy rain into their faces. Lightning snapped, striking nearby. Thunder rolled and crashed.

Leach rode alongside Laredo Foxen. Then Pat Requa joined them.

"Watch careful," Leach warned Foxen. "Wolcott's after yore hide. He's likewise plannin' to git me and Pat. We better stick close together."

Foxen nodded. "I'll be watchin' out. Them steers is goin' to bust loose directly."

"It's the only way they'll ever take to the river tonight. They're stolen cattle, mostly Culbertson stuff. Wolcott's scared to keep 'em any longer, so he's crossin' 'em over to Jeff's place, yonder side uh the river. Not over fifty feet uh swimmin' water but that old river is swift and as cold as a corpse's heart. Man, you shore give Wolcott a scare. Yonder he rides with the two Benners. Now they've split up and Wolcott's alone. No, there's a rider. Feller on a gray horse. Ain't that the big gray that Wild Charlie Culbertson won the steer ropin' on last Fourth?"

"And it's Wild Charlie ridin'," grinned Foxen. "He's comin' up behind Wolcott. Watch when the lightnin' flashes again.

Now a terrific crash. The world was a blinding white glare.

A forked bolt of lightning struck a giant

cottonwood. The herd broke loose. Steers went down, bawling with fear and pain as they were tromped under the cloven hoofs of the stampeding steers behind. Now a horse and rider fell. A man's hoarse scream added to the bedlam. And Foxen pointed.

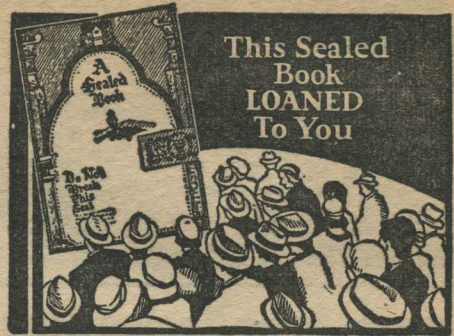
Wolcott, riding hard, heard a man's wild laugh. Charlie Culbertson's laugh. He whirled, groping for his gun. Then he caught a glimpse of Wild Charlie's face. In the rain, above the yellow slicker, the face of young Culbertson looked white as chalk. Out of that deathlike face his eyes glittered strangely.

With a hoarse scream, Wolcott jerked his gun. But the flash of lightning was gone, leaving only the thick, rain-filled blackness. When the next flash came Wild Charlie Culbertson had vanished. Wolcott, shaken, nerves jerking, cursed thickly and spurred on to overtake the two Beners. The next moment the running steers were all around him and it was now a matter of life and death to keep his horse from being thrown.

Charlie Culbertson's laugh came through the thunder of the running cattle. Wolcott, gripping his six-shooter, was yelling hoarsely for help. Now he was shooting the cattle down, hoping in his grim desperation, to make a path to safety. He emptied his gun and his fumbling fingers tried clumsily to shove fresh cartridges into the empty chambers. He kept screaming hoarsely as he and his horse were carried along by the stampede.

Now, when the lightning flashed, he saw the strip of muddy water beyond, not a hundred yards away. He saw the other riders pulling off, quirting and spurring to avoid the running cattle. Wolcott was trapped.

DARKNESS once more. The spurts of fire from six-shooters. Wild Charlie Culbertson's reckless laughter, ghoulish in the darkness. Big Harry Wolcott, the fear of death in his blood-shot, staring eyes, was now screaming like a madman. His horse was having a tough time keeping its feet in that jam of tossing horns and packed mass of racing beef steers. Wild Charlie's laugh, somewhere behind. Wolcott dared not look back.



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Foxen, Pat Requa and Leach were having their own troubles. The two Benners and half a dozen of Jeff Ross' renegades were shooting at them. Pat Requa, whistling through set, grinning teeth, thumbed the hammer of his gun. Leach dropped Bob Benner. Foxen, his gun spitting fire, smashed Hugh Benner's right shoulder with a bullet, then shot again.

Two of Jeff Ross' men were shot out of their saddles. Now, as the others of the renegade pack scattered, Requa shot twice at the quirt, spurring Jeff Ross. Ross pitched sideways out of his saddle. Then a leaden slug ripped the gun from Requa's hand. His left hand groped under his torn slicker for the other gun he always packed. Foxen and Leach, fighting side by side, put the last of the renegades to flight. All this in a few quick moments. Then Foxen, with a hoarse cry, pointed ahead.

There, as the vivid flash of lightning showed every minute detail, they saw Charlie Culbertson overtaking Wolcott. The leaders of the herd were dropping from sight over the cutbank, dropping ten feet into the muddy current below. Wolcott was screaming with fear. They could hear Wild Charlie's mad laughter that sounded horribly clear through the din of crashing horns. But a few feet now separated the two men who were being carried with the stampede toward the ten-foot cutbank.

Foxen shoved his gun back in its holster and swung around the drags of the stampede, jerking his catch rope free as he rode.

A white flash showed Wolcott and his horse pitch crazily over the bank and disappear in that swimming mass of steers below. The next moment Charlie Culbertson's big gray took the same plunge. Just as Laredo Foxen and Leach spurred into the water on the down current side, their ropes ready. Darkness again.

The steers were swimming, blowing hard. The next flash of lightning showed the head and neck of Wolcott's swimming horse. But there was no trace of Wolcott. The flash of lightning was brief. In the darkness that followed there sounded the choked scream of a man. Then that grisly

(Continued on P. 126)

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laugh of Charlie Culbertson's. And down current showed the swimming gray gelding, Charlie still in the saddle, a six-shooter in his hand. Wolcott's horse turned on its side and floated downstream.

"Yonder's Wolcott!" cried Leach, and tried to get close enough to throw his rope. Wolcott's fear-stricken face showed whitely against the muddy water. He was clinging desperately to the tail of a big white-faced steer.

"Stay with him, Wolcott!" yelled Leach, "Hang on. I want you, yuh murderin' snake!"

Doubtless if Wolcott heard, for he was crazy with fear. His terrified eyes were staring at the laughing Charlie Culbertson who had managed to turn his big gray gelding upstream, slapping water with his hat to turn the big horse that was swimming high in the water. His wild laugh sounded again and again. He held his six-shooter high, thumb on the hammer.

"Hang on, Wolcott! Hang on, man!"

Then the steers behind caught up, forelegs pawing as they climbed one another in their terror. Darkness once more. Wild Charlie's, mocking laughter. A gurgling, choked scream in the inky blackness. And when the next flash of lightning appeared, there was no longer any sign of the terrified Harry Wolcott. Leach, Foxen and Charlie Culbertson landed on the other bank of the river.

"Don't look like Wolcott made 'er," said Leach as the three watched the cattle lunge ashore.

"Wolcott," said Laredo Foxen, his voice an edge unsteady, "couldn't swim."

IN the silence that followed, the last of the steers waded ashore. With the tail end of the herd came the wounded Pat Requa. He was whistling through set teeth.

A flash of lightning showed Wolcott's horse standing on the bank fifty yards below on the sandbar. But there was no sign of Harry Wolcott.

"Wolcott," said Charlie Culbertson slowly, "has crossed the Big River. Nor he didn't have no sky pilot to show him an easy crossin'. They claim that a drownin' man thinks of all the orneriness he's done."

Laredo Foxen was trying to roll a cigaret with damp tobacco and wet paper.

"Wolcott had a-plenty to think about. At that, it was better than bein' hung. I seen him let go a-purpose. He knowed he'd hang."

A WEEK later Wild Charlie Culbertson sat in the living-room of the big log house at the Half-Circle-T home ranch. It was getting dusk and with the dusk came the first snow of the year.

"I reckon, Dad," he told old Hub Culbertson, "that I got my belly full uh travelin' wild. I learned a heap from Laredo Foxen."

"Too bad Foxen couldn't stay here."

"Foxen, Requa and Leach pulled out for the Argentine. They'll never come back. They're a queer bunch, them three. Laredo said that after Rancho Diablo was busted up, he might tell me a story about him and Requa and Leach and Wolcott. But he never got around to tellin' it. All I know is that they all used to handle wet cattle down along the Mexican border."

"Laredo Foxen," said old Hub, sucking on his pipe, "was the leader of the Rancho Diablo gang down there. And a good thing for us, Charlie, that he wasn't workin' with 'em up here. He's the only man that could ever have busted up Rancho Diablo."

Wild Charlie Culbertson nodded. "We got a heap to thank him for. I wish there was somethin' we could do for him."

Old Hub Culbertson took a legal looking paper from his pocket and handed it to his son. It was a bench warrant for the arrest of Laredo Foxen who was wanted for cattle rustling and the killing of some men in Texas.

"Where'd yuh git that?" Charlie asked.

"I taken it off the sheriff a few weeks ago," said old Hub. "Burn it up, son. It'll help a little to'rd payin' off Laredo Foxen. Laredo Foxen, who was the head uh the Rancho Diablo gang down along the border. Fill up the glasses, son, and we'll drink to his good luck down in the South America country."

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IS YOUR Rupture GETTING Worse?

It is a terrible thing to feel that your rupture is getting worse, growing larger and larger, without your *seeming* to be able to do anything about it! Haunting fear destroys mental poise and makes many *despondent*. Inability to be active takes the *physical joys* out of life.

Yes, it is terrible . . . but far more a tragedy when it is all *so absolutely needless!* Now please—and again please—do not think that this is an attempt to capitalize on your misfortune in an effort to just sell you something. We simply have information for you that has brought deliverance and joy to about 3,000,000 persons: men, women and children . . . facts that have satisfied thousands of doctors . . . facts we want you to consider, to your everlasting good!

STOP IT, STOP IT! Be Yourself Again!

As sure as you live and breathe, you can *stop your rupture worries* and once again find the world, your work, your pleasures so full of joy and happiness that you will be an utterly new person . . . alive, vivid, energetic and happy past all the old nightmare fears that have been making your existence a bad dream.

THE FAMOUS BROOKS AUTOMATIC AIR-CUSHION APPLIANCE WILL SET YOU FREE!

There is no claptrap magic about the famous Brooks Air-Cushion Rupture Appliance. It isn't something experimental. It has been used and improved for years. Over 9000 doctors (who know about rupture) wear the BROOKS, or recommend it to many, many thousands of patients.

What is the Patented Automatic Air-Cushion? Just this. It is the part of the BROOKS Appliance that holds back your rupture—the most important part of any truss. It is a yielding, air-filled rubber chamber designed to a shape that clings, that holds with complete security *without gouging in*. Understand that—*without gouging in!* Ill-fitting, incorrectly designed trusses, as you know all too well, *do gouge in*.

Now here is what happens. The Brooks Air-Cushion *avoids* spreading the rupture opening and making it larger, the way some trusses do. Well, when the BROOKS permits the edges of the rupture opening to remain as close together as possible, Nature has the best chance to, step in and close the opening. Mind you, we don't guarantee this. But if you have reducible rupture, the BROOKS is designed to work with nature. And thousands of BROOKS users have reported the abandonment of any truss.

YOU CAN BE SURE OF NEW, BLESSED FREEDOM FROM WORRY AND RESTRICTED ACTIVITY!

The very day you put on a BROOKS Patented Air-Cushion, you feel that you



X Where's YOUR Rupture?

have been reborn to the full joys of life! Men, women and children can know this indescribable thrill. Now why—why does the BROOKS give you such exceptional results? Why is it so often most outstanding in its accomplishments?

Because the cling of the Air-Cushion makes it hold as nothing else can . . . because the wearer speedily comes to realize that there can be no slipping to let the rupture down . . . that while the BROOKS protects, the dreaded specter of strangulation is banished . . . because the wearer can indulge in every normal activity . . . because physical tasks can be resumed . . . because common sense says, that everything humanly possible is being accomplished to improve the rupture condition.

And here is another "because," a tremendous one to those who have suffered and suffered with the miseries of a hard, gouging, burning, galling pad that never lets up, never is forgotten. Your BROOKS will have no springs, no metal girdle, no agonizing pressure devices. Instead there is the utterly comfortable Air-Cushion and a velvet soft body band. It is so absolutely comfortable that you'll hardly know the truss is there at all. To thousands upon thousands, such relief alone is a paradise.

AND A BROOKS WILL BE SENT ON A NO MONEY RISK TRIAL!

That's one of the best parts of all. You don't have to risk your money to find out just what joy and happiness a BROOKS CAN BRING YOU! You simply try it, and if not satisfied the *trial costs you nothing!* And anyone can afford a BROOKS. It costs no more than ordinary trusses. Every BROOKS is made to individual requirements, made especially to fit *your case*. Therefore it is *never sold in stores*. Guard against imitations. Now then: Don't send a penny right now. But DO SEND THE COUPON AT ONCE. We'll prove every statement in this advertisement, under an ironclad, money back guarantee. DO YOURSELF THE BIGGEST FAVOR IN THE WORLD. MAIL THE COUPON!

BROOKS APPLIANCE CO.

452-F State Street . . . Marshall, Mich.

WRONG

Hard pad gouging in keeps Rupture open and prevents natural healing.

RIGHT

BROOKS Air-Cushion does not spread rupture opening. Gives nature a real opportunity!

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

Brooks Appliance Co.
452-F State St., Marshall, Mich.

In PLAIN ENVELOPE, please send your FREE BOOK on Rupture, PROOF of Results, and TRIAL OFFER. No one is to call on me personally about my rupture.

Name

Street

City State

State whether for Man ☐, Woman ☐, or Child ☐.

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HE LOOKS
AND ACTS LIKE
A DIFFERENT
MAN!



"One Day I Was Watching my husband, Mac, and his brother, Tom, working. I noticed that Tom's smart appearance made Mac look almost shabby—



"Then It Dashed On Me! Tom had told us how his Lee Overalls gave extra fit, comfort and good looks. I decided to buy Mac Lee Overalls, too!



"Sure I Loved It When Mac gave me credit for making a new man out of him! His Lee Overalls give extra working comfort. And do they wear!"

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Slip into a pair of *tailored-size* Lee Overalls!... You've never felt anything like it! Lee gives you perfect fit in waist, bib height, leg length. It can't bind or bag! And it's Sanforized-Shrunk*, too, so it'll *always* fit! And *only* Lee makes your overalls with tough Jelt Denim—for longer wear, or your money back! See your Lee Dealer now!

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(The above figures represent the amount of insurance provided by the policy on a typical average family of five persons)

\$2,844⁰⁰

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For Travel Accidental Death

Insures Men, Women, Children—Ages 1-75

If aching hearts and unbearable grief were all that accompanied death . . . the burden would still be great. But added to that grief and despair are the huge expenses that always follow the footsteps of tragedy. You'll need ready cash to see you through, and unless you carry insurance on each member of your family, some time you're going to have to face these financial burdens.

Computed on Legal Reserve Basis

The Guarantee Reserve Policy is brand new . . . it is actuarially sound . . . figured out by leading insurance experts without using the many misleading or confusing "trick clauses" and "hidden phrases" that are contained in so many low cost policies. Seeing is believing . . . that's why we want you to see the policy before you decide to keep it. We want to prove that this is the Policy you should have for your family's protection.

**Parents, Children (Married or Unmarried), Brothers,
Sisters, Grandparents, In-Laws, Included**

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION

QUESTIONS YOU WILL WANT ANSWERED!

1. Q. Does the death of one or more members of the insured family cancel the Policy?
A. No. The policy remains in effect, insuring the balance of the insured family, as long as premiums are paid.
2. Q. How are premiums paid?
A. Pay your \$1.00 premium monthly. You will receive a receipt and premium notice each month. NO collectors will ever call on or bother you.
3. Q. In what States are policies issued by Guarantee Reserve Life Insurance Company?
A. Guarantee Reserve Life Insurance Company is legally entitled to do business by mail in every State in the Union. It is incorporated under Indiana Insurance laws.
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A. No. But any members of your family who are not in good health cannot be insured.

Selling by mail saves agents' commissions, branch offices, expenses, collection expenses . . . that's why from 2 to 6 members of your family, including relatives, may be included in your **Guarantee Reserve Family Policy** for a total cost of only \$1.00 a month. You be the judge . . . decide for yourself without agents to

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